

PARLIAMENTARY FORUM ON CHILDREN  
&  
BUREAU OF PARLIAMENTARY STUDIES AND  
TRAINING

LECTURE SERIES FOR MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT

LECTURE ON "CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT:  
CHALLENGES FACING INDIA"

BY

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ON

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AT 0930  
HOURS

IN

BPST COMMITTEE HALL 'MAIN', FIRST FLOOR,  
PARLIAMENTARY LIBRARY BUILDING

(a/0935/rs)

HON. SPEAKER: Friends, hon. Members of Parliament, hon. Ministers, Secretary-General, Lok Sabha, Ms. Ann M. Veneman, Executive Director, UNICEF, Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is indeed my pleasure to join you this morning at this Lecture on a theme of very topical concern for all of us, "Children's Development: Challenges Facing India" in the Lecture Series being organised for the Members of Parliament. As you would recall, we had initiated this Lecture Series in August this year with a view to providing the parliamentarians a forum for a more informal and closer interaction with experts and subject specialists on a wide range of issues. We have already had three Lectures in this Series and the results have really been encouraging.

This morning, we have with us Ms. Ann Veneman, Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund, to speak to us about the challenges facing children's development. Ms. Veneman has been an articulate leader in international trade and development and has championed programmes to reduce world hunger and strengthen the food-producing capacity of developing nations before she was entrusted with the onerous task of leading the UNICEF. With its network in 157 countries across the globe, the UNICEF has indeed been the pioneer in activities relating to children's welfare. The UNICEF's avowed mission to advance the Millennium Development Goals by supporting child health and nutrition, by providing quality basic education for all boys and girls, by enabling access to clean water and sanitation, and by protecting children from violence, exploitation and AIDS, speaks volumes of its commitment to make the world a better place for our children to grow up and realise their full potential. Under your leadership, Ms. Veneman, we trust that the UNICEF would help realise the Millennium Development Goals insofar as our children are concerned, so that all children have the right to actualise their potential, in all situations, all the time, and everywhere.

Friends, India is home to 427 million children who are the wealth of our nation, and indeed our most important asset and human resource. Our Constitution guarantees several rights to the children, including equality before law, free and compulsory primary education, and prohibition of trafficking and forced labour and employment of children below the age of 14 years in factories, mines or hazardous occupations. The National Policy of Children," which we adopted in 1974, has been the basis for many of our schemes and programmes for children's welfare. Our Parliament has played a pivotal role by enacting several legislation to ensure the protection of our children's rights and for their fuller development. We are also a party to the UN Convention on the rights of the Child.

However, we all agree that much more remains to be done. The indicators on child development in our country are not to our satisfaction. Child labour which deprives children of their childhood and their dignity and which is detrimental to their health, education and more importantly, in developing their capabilities, is an issue which requires to be addressed by us more earnestly. Poverty, hunger, various forms of abuse, exploitation and maltreatment are matters of serious concern.

The National Plan of Action for Children, 2005 provides a road map for steps to be taken for the improvement of the conditions of our children. We are also in the process of setting up a National Commission as well as State Commissions for Children for proper enforcement of their rights and for the effective implementation of laws relating to them. The Commission for the Protection of Child Rights Bill to give effect to these measures is already before Parliament. This Bill, introduced in the Lok Sabha, has come through the Standing Committee of the Ministry of Human Resource Development only recently. The Bill is likely to be taken soon for being enacted into a law.

However, as we know, legislation alone is not enough in addressing such issues. Some issues are linked to the levels of economic developments, to poverty, to certain social attitudes, etc. Along with legislation, it is important to help

change the attitude of the society at large through education. The society has to have, as among its larger concern, the need to protect children's rights and interests. We have to ensure that plans and policies for children's welfare are implemented within a specified and acceptable time-frame.

Realising the importance of adequate inputs from the legislators, we have decided to constitute a Parliamentary Forum on Children with the hope that it will facilitate particular attention to come from the parliamentarians and through them of the society as a whole towards critical issues affected our children's well-being. This, we believe, will help the Members of Parliament in highlighting children's issues, and in fostering effective strategic partnerships with all stakeholders, including the civil society, in addressing the challenges in child development.

We cannot see the child protection issues in isolation. First and foremost, the world should be united in addressing the developmental concerns of the less developed countries and thus empower them to deal with country-specific problems among which issues affecting children occupy an important place. To my mind, most of the issues affecting children and other disadvantageously placed could be addressed by focusing on developmental problems as such which should be the collective responsibility of the whole world. This challenge is to be jointly faced by all of us - parliamentarians, decisions makers, the civil society, and more importantly, the UNICEF.

Friends, we have gathered here today with a commitment to our children, the human resource of tomorrow. Needless to say, there is no issue more vital to humanity and its future than the full development of our children. (bl/0945/mmn)

The needs and the rights of the children all around the world must be accorded top priority in all developmental efforts.

With these words, I invite Ms. Ann M. Veneman to share her views and experiences on the subject. Thank you.

SHRIMATI MARGARET ALVA: Hon. Members, today's lecture is being jointly organised by the BPST and the Parliamentary Forum on Children. Ms. Ann M. Veneman is undoubtedly the most appropriate choice for delivering the lecture as her entire life has been devoted to the cause of the underprivileged. For a major part of her life, she has worked on child nutrition, public health, and alleviation of hunger, and has taken major initiatives to help fight malnutrition around the world. It is but natural that she has assumed the leadership of the UNICEF since May 2005 which is undoubtedly a recognition of her matchless contribution in these areas.

I, therefore, on behalf of all of us welcome you. I am sure that all of us will benefit greatly from the experiences which Ms. Ann M. Veneman is going to share with us today in the crucial area of children's development with special reference to challenges facing our country. We look forward to your continued support to our future programmes as well. Thank you very much.

MS. ANN M. VENEMAN: Hon. Speaker, Excellencies Members of Parliament, colleagues, good morning. It is truly an honour to be here with you today and I am especially pleased on my first trip to your country to join the representatives of the Indian people in the heart of the world's largest democracy. UNICEF is proud of its long and growing partnership with India. I am grateful for this opportunity to address you.

We salute all of you who have worked so hard to establish a Parliamentary Forum for Children. This new body provides a clear example of the kind of leadership that is needed by Parliament round the clock and UNICEF is proud to work with you as a valued partner.

This event marks a major step in placing Indian children at the centre of the national agenda and policies. All of us here are aware of India's ever increasing role in the global economy and world affairs. Along this journey of growth, India has made substantial contributions to the lives and well being of its children and women. India has developed forward-looking policies with regard to children such

as the ambitious targets laid out in the Tenth Five-Year Plan and the Common Minimum Programme.

India's National Rural Health Mission recognises the value of community-based approaches to providing health care services. You have put back in place the ban on non-iodised salt which is critical for children's proper development and learning. Changes in the Hindu Succession Act by the Parliament will promote women's property rights, which is a key to achieving Millennium Development Goals related to gender parity. But India also continues to face challenges to the survival, development and protection of children. This country is home to one in every five of the world's children.

Reductions in infant and child mortality over the past decades have been slow and shallow. Routine immunisation coverage against the major vaccine-preventable diseases is not reaching enough children with 67 per cent in 2003 for measles, 70 per cent for DPT-3 and polio, and major disparities exist across the country.

The problems of HIV/AIDS remain relatively more but the actual number of cases in India trail only South Africa. Our goal must be an AIDS free generation. Sanitation is also a major issue with the use of toilets in the rural areas of the country estimated at only about 25 per cent. Gender inequality exists in crucial human development indicators such as life expectancy, health and employment. Education indicators have shown improvement but here too disparities exist across the States. Too many of India's children, especially girls remain vulnerable to violence, abuse and exploitation.

The importance of the work before you cannot be overstated. Those of you in this room know better than almost anybody what is needed. Major reductions in the number of infant children and mothers who die of preventable causes, ensuring that children can attend and complete school, closing the gender gap in literacy and raising over all literacy level are the promises India has made to its children

along with other basic things for life such as food, shelter, safe water and adequate sanitary system.

All of us have the power to transform the lives of millions of children. It is up to you as law makers to help make the vision a reality, a vision to reach and serve those on the margins of this country's unprecedented economic leap forward and to bring into the fold the deprived and the invisible and a vision to produce real measurable results for the children of this country. UNICEF believes that a number of things are necessary to achieve these results and to ensure that they are sustainable.

First, integrated approaches to safest delivery have proved to be particularly effective. When I spoke to the World Health Assembly in May, I described child's survival like a dam. In the past we have plugged individual leaks only to find new ones springing up. We must address the entire foundation of that dam, that is, we must provide for a continuum of care for mothers and their children with a wide range of interventions that include immunisation, nutrition, education, access to clean water and other preventative health measures.

A child who is immunised against the major vaccine-preventable diseases but suffers from a lack of iodine is a child we have failed. A child who was well-fed and nourished but falls victim to polio because she was never immunised is also a child we have failed. I say 'we' because another key to sustainable development is strong partnership. The issues facing children are too great for anyone, for any organisation to address single-handedly. When we work together we can maximise the resources and draw upon each other's relative strength. That is the idea behind the new partnership laid by WHO and UNICEF. In this the Government of India plays a prominent role which brought together a number of partners that have previously worked separately. That partnership is meant to support the continuum of care approach to the health of mothers and children that I mentioned earlier.

In a similar way, the UNICEF and UN AIDS joined in October to launch, 'Unite for Children, Unite against AIDS'. This new global campaign is meant to put up a child's face on a pandemic disease that has been with us for a quarter of a century. Around the world, only a small fraction of the mothers and children infected by HIV/AIDS, who need basic services, get the basic services such as paediatrics aids, treatment, prevention of mother to child transmission or protection and care for orphans and vulnerable children. Unite for children, unite against AIDS is meant to change that, to marshal resources and to produce meaningful results for children. (cl/0955/rsg)

UNICEF is grateful to the Government of India and to your President for hosting a country launch of this critical initiative. It speaks volumes about your commitment to addressing the impact of HIV/AIDS on children. It is an issue we would continue to rely on in the future. The disease is not merely an issue of health. This is an issue of humanity. On this issue and others, UNICEF believes in the power of lawmakers to effect critical changes.

Laws are the glue that bind our society together and provide the environment in which sustainable development could occur. Laws at a country level could mean a crucial difference between success and failure of development efforts. Having served for several years in government, I know firsthand the importance of good laws and good legislators. Effective laws mean effective programmes but weak and unclear laws lead to conflict and gridlock. Parliamentarians can and should be champions for children. You have incredible powers at your disposal. Establishing strong laws is only the most obvious of these.

Parliamentarians also have the power of inquiry. You could lead and alter attitudes simply by asking tough questions and demanding answers. As representatives of the people, your voices have a unique resonance. Without active leadership, change comes slowly; but with it, great leaps forward are possible.



India is a country of vast and increasing opportunities. It is still a notion that challenges and efforts for focussing on children might not always be easy among great number of priorities but there is at least one compelling reason to do so because anything that is good for your nation begins with what is good for your children. Again, success depends upon an integrated approach to delivering services, partnerships that maximise resources and a continuing focus on achieving measurable lasting results.

Every day, when I go to work at UMCEF in New York City, there is a quote on the wall that I pass by and I conclude with it this morning. It says: "The world was not left to us by our parents. It was lent to us by our children." I hope, those words could inspire our work or deeds and our thoughts.

Thank you very much.

SECRETARY-GENERAL, LOK SABHA: Hon. Speaker, Sir; hon. Members of Parliament; hon. Honorary Adviser, Bureau of Parliamentary Studies and Training, Shrimati Margaret Alva; Ms. Ann. M. Venemen, Executive Director, UNICEF; ladies and gentlemen, it is indeed my privilege and honour to extend a vote of thanks to all the dignitaries who have made it convenient to attend the Lecture on 'Children's Development: Challenges facing India' by Ms. Ann M. Venemen, Executive Director, UNICEF, who has made a remarkable contribution to the cause of children's development.

Sir, we are extremely grateful to you for your kind presence at this function. This lecture series is a remarkable initiative taken by you to facilitate a purposive and meaningful exchange of views on diverse issues of topical concern between Members of Parliament and civil society. Despite your extremely busy schedule, you have kindly agreed to share your views with us. As a part of your initiative to sensitise Parliamentarians about issues which are central to the development of our country, the Parliamentary Forum on Children has been constituted, which would provide a useful platform for discussing the issues relating to the children. Your presence in this Forum would ensure that the

children's problems are given the kind of attention they deserve. I am sure, the Forum and the hon. Members would greatly benefit from your insights. We are deeply grateful for your enlightening introductory remarks and for sharing your profound thoughts and concerns about the children and their future.

I am happy to express my sincere thanks to Ms. Ann M. Veneman, Executive Director, UNICEF, for a wonderful lecture on children's issues. Her whole career focussed on children and thus she has gained tremendous insights into the problems of children. Her lecture this morning reflects a deep concern for the children who become unfortunate victims of exploitation. It also shows her deep understanding of the entire situation in terms of the problems the Indian children face. I take this opportunity to sincerely thank her and wish her all success in her work.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank all the hon. Members of Parliament who have attended this lecture. It is reflective of their concern on this issue.

I also wish to extend our gratitude to the Honorary Adviser, BPST, Shrimati Margaret Alva, who has addressed us today, also for her wonderful guidance of the BPST.

I also thank the officers and Staff of the BPST and the Cell on Parliamentary Forums of the Lok Sabha Secretariat.

Thank you very much.

(ADJOURNED)