

**SPEECH OF MRS. GURSHARAN KAUR  
ON THE OCCASION OF WORLD DAY AGAINST CHILD LABOUR  
12<sup>th</sup> JUNE, 2009**

Smt. Shanta ji, Ms. Leyla Reddy, Ms. Hulshof, Ms. Nandita and friends,

As we gather here today, we know that our children, or in my case - grandchildren, are safe in school or at home. Through studies and through games; through interacting with teachers, parents, friends, and relatives, our children are learning lessons that will help them go far in life.

We also know that millions of children in India are not so fortunate. We see these children every day. Little girls selling magazines at a traffic signal. Small boys serving food in a roadside dhaba. Children working in factories and workshops. Or in homes as domestic help, taking care of other people's children. There are those who are forced into crime and prostitution. And there are also children working in fields, and working in their own homes.

These are terrible violations of the rights of our children. We cannot hope to build a just society and a strong nation, as long as our children are subjected to such physical, mental, and moral harm.

This year, the focus of the World Day Against Child Labour is on the girl child. I believe that this is an important step. Young girls tend to face additional constraints in the family, in the community, and in society.

Every now and then, through the media we come to know about cases of physical, mental, or sexual abuse of a working children. We

commend the NGOs and police for rescuing the victims, and hope that the employers who have an eye for cheap labour are severely punished. However, I believe that it is equally important to deal with the *root* causes of child labour, particularly those that affect young girls.

Even today, *gender biases* are strong in our society. In many areas, discrimination against the girl child begins even before she is born. If she survives, she is often denied the opportunities available to her brothers. She is likely to be less fed, and less cared for. She is less likely to enroll in school, and more likely to drop out. Her work at home is likely to be under valued. She is less likely to be taught livelihood skills. These biases help to keep young girls out of school, and push them into unsuitable work.

We all know that *poverty* is a major reason for child labour. Parents who have secure livelihoods are more likely to educate their children, than to put them to work.

*Displacement* due to natural disasters, major projects, and social conflict, disrupts lives of the affected people. In such cases, children are the most vulnerable of all. Without a suitable support system, such children may drift away from their families.

In recent years, there have been major improvements in primary *education*. Enrollment has gone up, and the dropout rate has come down. However, girl students still lag behind boys in both matters. Apart from this, the situation of secondary education needs urgent attention. Further, the quality of school education needs to be far better, so that children learn to become self-confident and self-reliant.

Clearly, it is an enormous task to give every child a decent childhood. This is a task that must involve both government and non-government organizations.

We need to correct gender imbalances in society.

We need to create sustainable livelihoods in villages and in cities.

We need to strengthen our education system.

We need social service organisations that deal with children's problems in a sensitive way.

And we need a vigilant and caring system of juvenile justice and law enforcement.

I am a mother of three daughters. I did my best to give them a childhood free from worry. My daughters went to good schools and colleges. They chose their professions on their own, and are happy with their choices. I am sure that every one in this Bhavan have had the same experience as myself, because we belong to a privileged class of society. We must be sensitive to the needs of the poor. I do hope that there comes a time, *very soon*, when every child, especially every girl child, has the same opportunities that my children or your children had. We have long way to go, but we will succeed provided we keep trying.

Thank you.