

**STATEMENT BY AMBASSADOR H.S. PURI, PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE  
OF INDIA TO THE UNITED NATIONS ON INTERNATIONAL WIDOWS DAY  
AT THE PANEL ON SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CHALLENGES FACED BY  
WIDOWS ON JUNE 23, 2011**

Madam Sylvia Bongo Ondimba, The First Lady of Gabon,  
Madam Michelle Bachelet,  
Madam Cherie Blair,  
Madam Ban,  
Dr. Hartmann,  
And my dear distinguished colleague from Morocco,

The term terrific was used to describe the panel so I am hoping we can live up to that expectation.

Let me start by saying that I am very pleased to participate as a panelist in today's discussion on "the social and economic challenges faced by widows" on the occasion of the first International Widow's Day at the United Nations.

Last year, the General Assembly adopted Resolution 65/189, which declared June 23 as "International Widow's Day". India was one of the many countries that co-sponsored that resolution.

GA resolution 65/189 has succeeded in initiating a process, and this function is an evidence of that, that will focus the attention of the international community, in a comprehensive manner, on the plight of widows and their children through the United Nations system.

I would like to join others in commending H.E Madam Ondimba and her delegation in New York for taking this significant initiative at the United Nations.

It is a matter also of great satisfaction that Madam Bachelet and UN Women have agreed to take charge of this issue within the UN system.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century German philosopher Hegel said genius lies in identifying with a principle.

When people in public office take up a cause and agree to associate their names with a worthy cause, the potential benefit can be considerable.

Through this effort, the first Lady of Gabon has been able to focus international attention not only on the plight of widows in Gabon but hopefully, in Africa and in other countries around the world.

This has been a long and difficult journey. I have personally witnessed the Loomba Foundation working tirelessly to focus the spotlight on the plight of widows when I was Deputy High Commissioner in London from 1999 to 2002.

Today, there is much greater recognition that the challenges faced by widows are multifaceted. The socio-economic dimension is but one part of the whole troubling picture. It is, nevertheless, a critical part.

Women in general are at the receiving end in the socio-economic life of most, except the most highly developed societies. This makes the life of a widow just that much more difficult.

The difficulties widows face are not always easy to document. The trauma they suffer, the alienation that societies impose on them, lead to silent suffering.

Widows continue to struggle in most parts of the developing world with extreme poverty, social alienation, discrimination, physical, mental and social violence, and violation of their fundamental freedoms and human rights.

India recognized this very early, well before we became an independent country. The plight of widows has been of great concern to various social and political reformers in India.

The abhorrent practice of Sati was banned in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Raja Ram Mohan Roy campaigned for the rights of women including the right for widows to remarry and the right to hold property. This was many many years ago.

Mahatma Jyotiba Phule led the pioneering effort of social integration of widows in society. He arranged the first widow- remarriage in India in 1864 which was a revolutionary act at that point of time.

Mahatma Gandhi, too, had strong views against the discrimination of widows. He was extremely disturbed by the condition of widows, especially child widows.

He urged the youth of the country to marry widows, essentially as a way of re-integrating them back into the society.

Even though the social and family institutions of the extended family provide support and aid for the extended family members in societies like India, cultural and social

mindsets constitute barriers that need to be overcome to provide the necessary protection and support to widows.

Despite efforts by the government and various landmark Supreme (Apex) Court judgments in favour of widows, most of them, continue to have only limited access to inheritance and land tenure, limited access to employment, social programmes and facilities, healthcare and education as well as social integration. I cannot but agree with Dr. Hartmann's prescription on education, education and education.

All this has a direct effect on the lives of the children of widows.

In view of the availability of very limited interventions and programmes for the welfare of widows such as old age homes, short stay homes, women's hostel, Nari Niketan, etc, in July 1995, the Government of India started the 'Swadhar' programme which caters to the needs of women in difficult circumstances, including widows.

Swadhar in Sanskrit means "self-reliance". The goal of this programme is to make widows independent in spirit, in thought, in action, and to have full control over their lives rather than be the victims of other's actions.

This programme is designed to address the specific vulnerability of widows by adopting a home-based holistic and integrated approach.

Civil Society in India has been playing a critical role in ensuring protection and empowerment of widows.

The media has played an equally significant role in raising awareness about the plight of widows and advocating the end of stigmatization and discrimination against them.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me conclude by saying that while individuals can initiate a process, in the United Nations, such commendable initiatives can only be sustained by evoking strong interest from all Member States. And it is my expectation that the process which we have formally launched today will receive the overwhelming support of all Member States.

Now that we have intergovernmental support as well as the support of the UN Women, we will need to work together to ensure that our actions in the United Nations do make a difference in the lives of widows in each and every country.

This event should not be reduced to a mere symbolic commemorative international day, instead it should be a day to mobilize international political will to recognize the plight of widows, to work in a concerted fashion to integrate them in society, and give them their rightful place in society.

We should aim at the creation of a society where no widow will feel that her existence is a curse.

Thank you very much.

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