

## International Day for the Remembrance of Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade



My dear sweet children,

Today is 25 March, the day the UN honours and solemnly remembers all who came enslaved across the Atlantic from Africa over 400 years ago to the Western hemisphere and whose descendants have perished tragically over generations to this day as victims of inhumane ownership and control. We also pay homage to the millions trapped in other unpleasant and abhorrent forms of modern-day slavery, which we must all condemn as an affront to human dignity and freedom everywhere.

The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights prohibited slavery in no uncertain terms. Despite the progress made since then, today after 75 years we collectively share the tragedy and accountability for these deprivations of human justice. To be silent is to be complicit.

As we stand today at the moral and ethical crossroads, we must ask why we have failed and allowed poverty, deep social stratification, oppression and systemic injustices, or even fortune or greed to flourish over human bondage. If we are on the spiritual path, we must engage in real soul-

searching with a wake-up call for humanity. We must commit to ensure that no person or child is subjected to the barbaric practices of i) human trafficking for cheap labour, sexual purposes and organ transplants for lucrative profits; ii) of ancestral debt bondage; iii) bonded or forced labour; iv) domestic servitude and v) the unlawful recruitment of child soldiers.

Today is the time, we should address also the silent and even more brutal threats to human security emerging from new and illegitimate business models of a dangerous nature; large-scale migration, or state or governmental fragility, crisis, and conflict, where violence against women is used as a weapon of war, or societal destabilization resorts to hate crimes and speech. These are monumental challenges. We must thus be committed with the United Nations to abolish modern slavery which is Sustainable Development Goal 8, by 2030. We can do so only by a collaborative or integrated effort to implement the other SDGs of fighting poverty, reducing hunger, promoting education, women's empowerment and food, water and energy security. This is exactly what the SMVA Trust is striving to achieve through its special schools, income generation programme, water purification plants, housing and green economy and stable institutions, secure family and peaceful conflict-free societies as the means to guarantee our common safety as a public good.

For this reason, **we must insist that all our governments not only sign and ratify all conventions and treaties related to women and children,** human trafficking, transnational crime, migrants and refugees, and ending forced labour but also implement them rigorously. Buses cannot be eliminated through criminal law enforcement alone and ending impunity. Rather, a broad-based approach is needed, with a strong emphasis on addressing root causes and prevention, and on the protection of victims. We thus must insist on good national development plans to strengthen the vast array of forces – economic, social, cultural, and legal – that contribute to vulnerability and enable abuses. Stronger social protection measures and social welfare services, with extending labour rights, especially in the informal economy – where modern slavery is most likely to occur, are

essential. However, the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented upheavals worldwide, and primarily in our region which has the largest number of victims (71%).

Consequently, new historical levels of underemployment or unemployment, loss of livelihoods and uncertain economic perspectives have hit the most vulnerable, the hardest of all in the population. We must ensure that the underprivileged are not pushed further into bonded or forced labour or other slavery traps for survival. In our society we not only need laws and but also strict enforcement of labour and security regulations, followed by inspections of factories and work sites to ensure safety of workers in the informal sector, and in small and medium businesses. Hence, spreading awareness at source areas of human trafficking is necessary, with registration of unorganized workers to safeguard them from being lured by profit make predators. We need funding for rehabilitation of bonded labour, a debt forgiveness programme, or cancelling debts by Government and thus free people of decades of years of bondage.

Given that a large share of modern slavery can be traced to migration, it is vitally important to have improved national, regional and global migration governance, stricter border controls, training of border police to detect victims of trafficking, and so prevent forced labour. Gender and age must be taken into account in developing policy responses, since 71 % of all victims are women, and one in every four victims is a child. Similarly, improved victim identification is critical to extending protection to the vast majority of modern slavery victims, who are currently unidentified or unattended.

UN data indicates that that some 40 million people are caught in modern slavery, of whom 25 million are in forced labour and 15 million in forced marriage. However, these are only estimates. Their exact numbers are often higher, because it is hard to identify many new subtle and covert types of modern enslavement. Thus, we must have improved measurement, research and data collection of modern slavery, as it is

affecting women, children, as well as men and boys. Only with exact numbers and the nature of circumstance in which they are held captive, will we be able to more effectively project and capture specific sub-populations to guide national policies and design services.

Equally important are measures for both witness and victim protection of women and girls, as well as, men and boys. They must be protected by the harm of perpetrators. Currently, we know that there is a huge gap existing between the total number of victims and those receiving protection or assistance.

What is needed is solidarity with the victim's hidden pain and suffering. For example, we hardly see the children as shadows working constantly on much that we enjoy eating, wearing or are using - the famous branded-multinational produce or goods. These all apparently appear legal processes but children suffer work-related injuries, cuts from using sharp tools, permanent eye damage, lung conditions, or stunted growth, deformed spines and aches and pains. Malnutrition is made worse by the force-feeding of stimulants. Some children may actually be sold by their parents to pay surmounting bills and thus be permanently separated from their families, denied of education, and given minimum or no pay at all. They also suffering much physical or verbal abuse. Children inherit the debts of their parents and work for their creditors for life. Due to the long hours, children may get sick, often with no treatment available, and even die. It is time we act!

So, we need to work with the business sector to stop abuses, and other anti-slavery organizations to set up several hot lines and remedial services for women and girls. Equally vital is to work with the mass and social media, human rights defenders and citizens groups for advocacy and recovery measures. We as volunteers can be source of support by setting several hotlines to report suspicious actions or perpetrators that may indicate trafficking. We all need to focus on educating people to detect exploitation and teach the channels available to report crimes or seek advice.

Equally important are steps to work with local communities, their elders and religious leaders to fight old crusted traditions, and change stereotypes and biases against victims.

**Therefore, sweet children our task is to ensure dignity, liberty and prosperity for all.**