

13/10/1997

Role of First Ladies in eradicating poverty

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sun. - First Ladies in the Asia-Pacific have the potential to play a greater role in eradicating poverty, especially among the region's rural women, Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali said tonight.

Dr Siti Hasmah, the chairman of the Regional Steering Committee for the Economic Advancement of Rural and Island Women in the Asia-Pacific, said the RSC-AP's first meeting, beginning tomorrow, would give them the confidence and insight to further develop poverty eradication efforts in their own countries.

"In fact, in earlier discussions with First Ladies of member countries, we found that many of them already have projects offering small-scale loans, resembling micro-credit programmes.

"The meeting will allow us to reinforce these efforts by compiling a report of countries which do not have micro-credit institutions and which have institutions with aspects that need improvement," she said.

Dr Siti Hasmah, who is also the wife of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, said this to reporters after attending a dinner for the participants and the First Ladies of the member countries at Hotel Nikko.

The dinner was hosted by National Unity and Social Development Minister Datin Paduka Zaleha Ismail, whose ministry currently houses the RSC-AP Secretariat.

Malaysia is hosting the committee's first meeting from tomorrow to Thursday.

Themed "Eradication of Poverty Through Micro Credit Programmes for Poor Rural Women", the meeting is also aimed at increasing awareness and commitment to the programme which provides adequate financing for them.

Dr Siti Hasmah said RSC-AP was not confined to First Ladies by virtue of their position, adding that it was more important to have active participation of high-ranking women in eradicating poverty.

This, she said, was seen from the fact that the First Ladies of several member countries had sent envoys to the meeting.

The managing director of Bangladesh's Grameen Bank, Prof Muhammad Yunus, said the First Ladies had the "moral responsibility" and potential to influence policies towards eradicating poverty, which mainly affected women.

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