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Micro-credit scheme can be enhanced, says Siti Hasmah

PENANG, Thurs. - Malaysia's micro-credit scheme which has served as a model for developing countries, especially in South Africa, is one which can be further enhanced via the integration of health programmes, Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali said today.

Describing micro-credit programmes as an effective means in "bringing people and families together", the Prime Minister's wife also said the outreach for micro-financing schemes could be further extended to special interest groups such as single mothers.

"Micro-credit systems," she noted, "are one way of alleviating poverty, especially among women in rural areas," she said after being conferred an honorary Doctor of Philosophy by Universiti Sains Malaysia today in conjunction with the university's 32nd convocation.

Dr Siti Hasmah was conferred the honorary degree by USM chancellor Raja Permaisuri Agong Tuanku Fauziah for her contributions to society, notably in spearheading the promotion of micro-credit.

Present at the ceremony were Penang Yang di-Pertua Negeri Tun Abdul Rahman Abbas, his wife Toh Puan Majimor Shariff, Chief Minister Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon and wife Puan Sri Chui Kah Peng and Dr Siti Hasmah's daughter Datuk Paduka Marina Mahathir.

Invited foreign guests were Bosnia-Herzegovina Ambassador to Malaysia Hajrudin Somun and Fiji High Commissioner Adi Samanunu Talakuli Cakobau.

Also present at the ceremony this morning where 538 others received their scrolls, were USM board chairman Tan Sri Ani Arope, USM pro-chancellor Tan Sri Dr Lin See-Yan and the university's vice-chancellor Professor Datuk Dzulkifli Abdul Razak.

In conjunction with the award conferred on Dr Siti Hasmah, a special exhibition was opened by the Queen at USM's Fine Arts Centre gallery.

A total of 40 images are on exhibit, as a tribute to Dr Siti Hasmah, and these highlight her career developments and contributions to society.

Dr Siti Hasmah, who said she was honoured and privileged to receive the award from USM described herself as "speechless, as I never dreamt of receiving such an honour".

Dr Siti Hasmah, who was former chairwoman of the Regional Steering Committee On the Advancement of Rural and Island Movement for Asia Pasific (RSC-AP) - a committee comprising First Ladies in the region - said that since 1997, the First Ladies in the region had held training workshops and seminars on poverty reduction through micro-credit programmes and scaling-up of women's micro-enterprises into small and medium-scale enterprises.

She said efforts in expanding the micro-credit scheme to include health issues, had seen the Malaysian AIDS Council (whose president is Marina) introduce micro-credit schemes to People Living With HIV/AIDS (PLWHA).

"The programme has been successful," said Dr Siti Hasmah, "as it helps the PLWHAs in getting their medication and to continue going on with their daily lives."

When accepting the honorary doctorate earlier, Dr Siti Hasmah in her speech, called on intellectuals and academicians to play a more effective role in overcoming social ills such as annual increases in HIV/AIDS, dis-integration of families through divorce and other issues, along with cases of the elderly being abandoned.

"Studies should be carried out on the causes of these problems."