Empower Rural Women Through Agri-business, Says Rosmah
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By Hafizah Kamaruddin

NEW YORK, March 2 (Bernama) -- Datin Seri Rosmah Mansor, wife of the Malaysian prime minister, said agri-business is another avenue besides education to empower rural women.

She said there is a need to expand cottage industries producing food products and handicraft through encouragement and assistance, besides establishing a complete and efficient supply chain, including marketing of quality products, which will benefit them and assist them in securing fair prices.

There is also a need to provide rural women with resources to generate sustainable income that will increase their savings and enable them to start their own businesses, hence giving them economic independence, she said in a luncheon address on the occasion of the current sitting of the United Nations' 56th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) here Friday.

The talk was based on CSW's theme this year of "Empowerment of Rural Women and Their Role in Poverty and Hunger Eradication: Development and Current Challenges", and was attended by United Nations secretary-general Ban Ki-moon and UN executive director Michelle Bachelet, who is also the UN under secretary-general, and more than 150 representatives from UN member countries and agencies.

Improving access to bank loans and micro-financing can perhaps be a public-private venture, Rosmah said, adding that today it is seen to be driven by governments.

"Innovative delivery channels and social networks can reduce costs and make financial services more readily available to rural women," she said.

She said that to fully capitalise on the financing facilities, rural women must be equipped with the right knowledge, and they must be taught business-making skills, marketing, basic accounts and how to deal with customers.

Governments and the private sector need to jointly invest in labour-saving and productivity-enhancing technologies and infrastructure to increase participation of women in rural areas, she said.

Rosmah said half of the more than 3.4 billion people living in rural areas today are women, and they also comprise 43 per cent of the agricultural labour force in developing countries, while in East and Southeast Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, women form almost 50 per cent of the agricultural workers.

Although agriculture is a means of economic empowerment for these rural women, they often work as unpaid family workers or farm help and even when in wage employment, they are more likely to be in part-time, seasonal or low-paying jobs, she said.

Touching on Malaysia, she said the country's experience has enabled it to make headway in

not only empowering women in rural areas, but also eradicating poverty.

"Although we have been successful in elevating the well-being and status of rural women, our task is far from complete. In fact, there is still a lot more to be done. Measuring poverty by the level of income alone is insufficient," she said.

Rosmah said the scope of welfare in Malaysia is being broadened from just a measure of income to include health, education, nutrition and quality of life.

In addition, other constraints are also being dismantled to optimise women's contribution to agriculture and the rural sector, she said.

She said that in 2010, the Malaysian government launched its Government Transformation Programme with one of the areas of focus being raising the living standard of low-income households.

The Malaysian government has targeted 4,000 new women entrepreneurs, including from the rural areas.

"In modernising rural transformation, the government has made available Rural Transformation Centres (RTCs), which provide facilities that would link rural development to urban growth, In other words, it provides market access to rural businesses," she said.

She said rural folk, especially those in the agriculture industry, will be able to improve their business opportunities and, subsequently, their income through this newly introduced RTCs by cutting through the age-old problem of middle persons.

Thus, the economic empowerment of rural women serves as an important step for a broader social development of a just, balanced and equitable society, she added.

Rosmah is here on a four-day working visit in conjunction with the CSW session.

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