

Keynote address by Dato Seri Dr. Wan Azizah on "Women, Corruption and Their Role in Fighting It"

11 Feb 2020



Assalamualaikum and a very good morning

Thank you Madam Chair for your generous introduction.

In the course of preparing for today, I struggled to balance the areas which I should deliberate on this morning.

Having been in active politics, not by design but by default for the last two decades, I have witnessed and experienced a whole discourse of women and the need for our empowerment to fight corrupt regimes and practices.

This said, the role of women in fighting corruption is often a muted subject, not much discussed nor promoted much.

The reasons for these are many, some of which I will go through today but the deeper question that needs to be asked is have we done enough to ensure women from all walks of lives have the ability to be at the forefront and centre in our societies to fight corruption.

From the corridors of power to boardrooms, from kitchen tables to classrooms, from factories to vendors, big and small, women in all spheres and stratum of our societies must be agents of change and agents of beating corruption.

On that note, allow me to first thank the Anti-Corruption and Transparency Experts Working Group (ACTWG), for inviting me to this Symposium through its Chair Ms. Latheefa Koya who is also the Chief Commissioner of the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC).

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

PEOPLE WHO WERE JUST DOING THEIR JOBS

On 16 October 2017, Dafne Anne Caruana Galizia, a Maltese journalist, died close to her home when a car bomb was detonated inside her vehicle.

Dafne focused on investigative journalism, reporting on government corruption, nepotism, patronage and allegations of money laundering.

In 2016, Dafne broke a story about a string of secret Panama-based companies tied to Maltese politicians on her blog.

Her work laid the foundation for the publication first of the Paradise Papers and later the Panama Papers by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists.

Her family are convinced she was murdered for her bravery and exposure. I

n 2006, when Alayne Fleischmann began working at JPMorgan Chase, she noticed that the bank was purchasing loans it knew people could not pay back.

This is called mortgage-backed securities — investment products made out of home mortgages that were bundled and resold.

When she raised it with her boss, she was told to stop all communication with him.

Alayne went to the federal prosecutors and gave them evidence of the mortgage-securities wrongdoing.

JPMorgan Chase paid a 9 billion dollar fine.

The case has been described as one of the most significant white-collar crime cases in U.S. history.

In 2002, Cynthia Cooper an American accountant who formerly served as the [Vice President](#) of [Internal Audit](#) at [WorldCom](#) and her team of auditors worked together and often at night and in secret to investigate and unearth a 3.8 billion dollar worth fraud at [WorldCom](#).

At that time, this was the largest incident of accounting fraud in U.S. history.

From accounting fraud to graft, to plain daylight corruption, it simply takes you and I, no matter the ranks we serve in our jobs, to highlight cases of non-alignments and misdemeanours.

The challenge for us all in this room and in our societies is to build an ecosystem that simply does not tolerate any form of graft and corruption.

With this in mind, I would like to deliberate on the following three areas today:

- First, to present the devastating impact of corruption on women;

- Second, how women can play an active role in fighting corruption in societies; and
- Third, APEC's role to boost women's empowerment in fighting corruption.

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

GENDER BIASES AND THE CORRESPONDING EFFECTS OF CORRUPTION

Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany, in an interview once spoke of her own personal experience as a female politician and she said, *"It's no problem at all for a man to wear a dark blue suit a hundred days in a row, but if I wear the same blazer four times within two weeks, the letters start pouring in."*

Gender biases and parity exist in labour forces all over the world from time immemorial - ranging from over 10 percent in the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) economies to 50 per cent in the Middle East and North Africa.

Globally, women tend to be locked out of leadership positions, where gender seems to matter more than ability.

Women make up only 5 per cent of Fortune 500 CEOs.

The World Economic Forum shows that countries with greater gender equality are those countries that have established strong democratic institutions.

Hence countries that have greater freedom, an established democracy and support gender equality show better results in corruption indices.

The core values of democracy and gender equality are therefore fundamental in reducing corruption.

Globally, over 2.7 billion women are legally restricted from having the same choice of jobs as men.

This is real and it is not a myth.

Of 189 economies assessed in 2018, 104 economies still have laws preventing women from working in specific jobs, 59 economies have no laws on sexual harassment in the workplace, and in 18 countries husbands can legally prevent their wives from working.

The labour force participation rate for women aged between 25 and 54 is 63% compared to 94% for men.

In 2017, global unemployment rates for men and women stood at 5.5 per cent and 6.2 per cent respectively and these numbers are projected to remain relatively unchanged through to 2021.

Women are often over-represented in insecure, informal and vulnerable employment even though women are more than twice as likely as men to be contributing family workers.

As primary caretakers of homes and communities, women can experience corruption in many forms.

A woman's definition and experience of corruption may be different to what many of us may know and that definition may differ in the societies they reside.

It can come in the form of payments required to enrol their children in certain schools, participating in programmes by the government, participating in electoral processes, in denouncing physical and sexual abuse at home and/or at work, and in the areas of law enforcement.

Women generally interface with public agencies for two reasons; to access basic services for themselves and their families and/or to access services which have a significant impact on their quality of life.

It is at these points where they may face corruption.

Women also experience corruption when seeking employment and when running businesses in both the formal and informal sectors of the economy.

They face roadblocks when obtaining documentation on proof of identity and residence such as birth, death, marriage certificates, and passports.

In many societies, women still have issues accessing this information.

When there is corruption in getting basic access to documentation on self-verification, women are invariably impeded from accessing other forms of services and opportunities.

One other area often quoted as a consistent point of corruption is from enforcement bodies.

Law enforcement officials demand bribes in multiple facets of women's day-to-day lives because women are often seen as the weaker gender.

In some communities, women continue to face extortion when exercising their land and property rights during transactions.

Corruption also exists when women try to participate in elections and politics where votes can be bought in exchange for money or gifts.

Let me also state that women can also be the one who is corrupt and may be the one who is offering or giving bribes for something in return.

This why integrity is of the utmost importance and should be an integral part of every person, man or woman.

This is something the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission constantly emphasises on and what we, as individuals, must instil in ourselves and our families.

Most of you may be familiar with the infamous 1MDB scandal that plagued our nation during the previous regime.

Under the new Pakatan Harapan government, we are committed to eradicate corruption and I am proud to say that we have yielded some results.

Malaysia's ranking in the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) 2019 jumped 10 places to 51 compared to the previous year.

We scored 53 points compared to 47 points in the 2018 index.

Anything above 3 points is considered a significant improvement.

In Malaysia we are also reforming our electoral system and one key improvement we have introduced is to allow all men and women above 18 years of age to register and vote.

This legislation has been passed.

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

WOMEN FIGHTING CORRUPTION

The first panacea to fighting any form of corruption is in building an ecosystem of the public's rights and access to information; freedom of speech; legal protection; existence of mechanisms to report corruption, register grievances; and the existence of anti-corruption laws to name but a few.

In this context we need to first identify where there are a lack of proper anti-corruption laws and/or infrastructure and/or lack of sufficient public awareness of existing laws and measures to address corruption faced by women as I just briefly highlighted above.

Whilst there are several commendable efforts to strengthen legal and institutional frameworks for accountable and transparent governments, some of these efforts may not have the depth and bandwidth to reach regional, state and local decision-making structures and institutions due to lack of women participation.

Education, I would argue is key to building an eco-system that does not tolerate corruption.

What is also crucial is the context and content of this education, advocacy programmes and how we customise this for the various stratum of women in our societies.

It must also include building capacity through awareness programmes about the different impact of bribery on women's everyday lives by using all available mediums.

Customising the messages to suit the audience is equally significant.

In addition to education, understanding the rights and existence of laws is central to fighting corruption.

This can be done through establishing support networks.

I would urge us all to involve grassroots women in national anti-corruption programmes and policy development that would greatly benefit from invaluable real life experiences.

As policy and law makers we often miss this point and develop programmes in the absence of their input and then find these programmes to be obsolete and ineffective.

We could also establish monitoring and audit tools through a variety of mechanisms which are gender sensitive.

Establishment of clear lines of whistleblowing and safe spaces for women to report corruption with clear channels for redressing incidents is central to this effort and initiative.

Further a free, responsible and independent press must be allowed to investigate, report, and publish on corruption.

Malaysia has made positive strides in our press freedom and we are in the midst of drafting a bill for the formation of a National Media Council to further strengthen the integrity and independence of our media.

The committee in charge of this is made up media industry players and stakeholders.

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

WOMEN IN POLITICS AND BUSINESS

A misnomer we must address is, having women in senior and management positions is not a true reflection of the tapestry of their involvement in our economy.

The World Economic Forum's (WEF) latest report has revealed that Malaysia has one of the biggest gender gaps in South-East Asia.

We rank ninth (9th) in the region although we are still higher than other Asian countries such as South Korea, China, and Japan.

Admittedly, we need to improve in political and business empowerment for women at all levels.

The Government is fully cognisant of this and we are working towards at least 30 per cent political representation in the state and federal government as per our GE14 Manifesto.

This said, the proportion of women in the federal parliament has improved from 10.8 per cent after the previous election in 2013 to 14.9 per cent currently.

As of 2019, there are 33 women in the federal parliament, five female Ministers, and four female Deputy Ministers.

Our roles as lawmakers and executives is to drive more pro-female, pro-family, approaches and policies.

Much of the research since the financial crisis of 2008 showed that if banks and financial supervisors increased the share of women in senior positions, the banking sector would be more stable.

According to an IMF (International Monetary Fund) Study entitled "Women in Finance: an economic case for gender equality" -- companies where women are most strongly represented at board and top-management levels are also those companies that perform best.

In Malaysia I am proud to share that we have three exemplary women whistle-blowers from the Auditor-General's Office.

They include the former Auditor General herself, Tan Sri Dr. Madinah Mohamad, former Audit Performance Director, Ms. Saadatul Nafisah and the Audit Director, Datuk Nor Salwani Muhammad who whistleblowed on the alleged tampering of the 2016 final audit report on 1Malaysia Development Bhd (1MDB).

These women are key witnesses for the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) on a case that is being heard in our courts currently.

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

THE ROLE OF MALAYSIA AND APEC IN THESE UNCERTAIN TIMES

Madam Christine Lagarde, the former International Monetary Fund (IMF) Managing Director, and now the President of the European Central Bank, said, *“What we have observed is that when there are more women, the banks’ capital buffers are larger, the number of non-performing loans is smaller and the risk indices are lower. It is not causality but it is a strong correlation”*.

Research on the role of women in fighting corruption still needs a lot more work.

We need to step up efforts to have accountable systems that will not only empower women at all levels but also create the structures to fight corruption effectively both in the public and private sectors.

Changing laws and institutions alone cannot fix everything.

We need the right attitudes to move away from a male-dominated and the boys-club culture, to one that looks at contribution as contribution, regardless of gender.

The tone from the top is absolutely key when fighting corruption.

This Government is committed to fighting corruption of all natures.

One of the first initiatives launched by our Prime Minister, YAB Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad post GE14 was the establishment of the National Centre for Governance, Integrity and Anti-Corruption (GIACC) to assist the government in developing strategies and policies to effectively fight corruption.

On the 29th of January 2019, we launched the National Anti-Corruption Plan (NACP) which comprises 115 initiatives to fight corruption across all strata of society.

In addition to all these initiatives, this government has appointed a woman to lead the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission, as you can well see a very capable lady in Ms. Latheefa Koya, leading our fight on corruption.

At the APEC level we could advocate for the inclusion of more grassroots women leaders in drafting committees of anti-corruption treaties and national legislation.

We could also encourage international peer exchanges among women groups to enable cross-fertilisation and capacity building.

I would argue, for us to have an effective plan to fight corruption faced by women, we need an intensive bottom up approach of engaging women from various stratum of societies.

Engage in community mapping in order to generate and analyse information on the causes of corruption and ways of addressing it in public agencies.

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I cannot end today without delving on the invaluable hand that rocks the cradle.

The hand that rocks the cradle is the hand that rules the world.

As mothers, daughters, sisters, wives, mothers and daughters-in-law, granddaughters, aunties and nieces we must do our part in nurturing our families with a value system that abhors corruption of all kinds.

It is at these levels of the family unit that we each have the ultimate responsibility to inculcate a system of good governance.

Good governance starts with a good value system and every one of us has a moral duty as human beings to set wrongs in our spheres of responsibilities right.

Fighting corruption does not have to involve grandeur schemes.

The most effective scheme involves building family units that are morally sound.

That is where each and every one of us in this room can discharge our duties not just to our societies and countries, but mostly to our own souls.

The women who have made history in whistleblowing sacrificed their lives and reputations.

They sacrificed all they worked for and their own livelihoods.

I pray for an environment where this is no longer required.

That we know not to take what is not ours!

And that impunity is eradicated in our societies.

Rigoberta Menchú, Nobel Prize laureate said that *“Without strong watchdog institutions, impunity becomes the very foundation upon which systems of corruption are built. And if impunity is not demolished, all efforts to bring an end to corruption are in vain.”*

As Oscar Wilde famously said, “I can resist anything except temptation.”

But resist we must.

On that note Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, my special thanks to the APEC Secretariat and APEC Policy Partnership on Women and the Economy (PPW) for providing the necessary support and assistance which enabled ACTWG Malaysia to host this Symposium for the benefit of all.

I thank you for your patience.

Wabillahhi taufiq wassalamualaikum warahmatullah wabarakatuh.

-- BERNAMA

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