

**SPEECH BY  
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Firstly, allow me to thank the Science and Technology Commission of the National Council for Women's Organisation (NCWO) for kindly inviting me this morning. I am pleased to be here to launch this international forum on "Women In the New ICT Era: Challenges and Opportunities". I believe that this is an important area of concern for societies around the world. As economies embrace the digital revolution, we need to ask ourselves who is benefiting from advances in new technologies?

2. Information and communications technologies are powerful tools to empower societies and segments within societies. But without access, networking and skills, there are those who many be left behind. I believe that this forum can address the key issue of how women can utilise the opportunities of ICT to ensure that the process of empowering women the world over can benefit from the spread of these new technologies. This forum has the benefit of building on the foundations laid by the Women's Forum of the Global Knowledge II Conference which produced a comprehensive action plan that all of you are aware of. I hope you spend the newt two days revisiting this action plan and formulating new strategies that can promote access and empowerment for women through ICT.

Ladies and gentlemen,

1. The proliferation of ICT has brought with it great benefits in terms of dissemination of information, creation of knowledge, building more efficient business models and reaching out to people who hitherto have been marginalised from the information mainstream. From Silicon Valley to the villages in Bangladesh where microcredit has enabled mobile phone kiosks to connect people with no telephony access of their own; and from the software engineers of Bangalore to Bario in Sarawak, where we are implementing a pilot e- community project, the world is becoming increasingly networked. Internet penetration in many countries are estimated to increase substantially in the near future. In Malaysia, for example, we estimate 1.3 million internet subscribers by this year compared to under 700,000 last year.

2. There have also been concerted efforts by governments to harness the potential of ICT by promoting investments into the sector and outlining strategic blueprints for moving towards a knowledge- based economy. Malaysia has taken the lead in articulating the importance of ICT, multimedia and science and technology for the sustained development and competitiveness of our economy. We continue to prioritise the implementation of the Multimedia Super Corridor which is envisioned as the regional epicentre for creativity and innovation; and we are in the final stages of preparing a k-economy masterplan that will provide public policy decision making with guidelines and benchmarks to increase the knowledge content in all sectors of the economy.

3. However, amid all these developments we are witnessing an ominous trend. The digital divide which is polarising those with access to ICT and those without, has emerged as a critical issue of our time. I feel that if this problem is not addressed immediately, the benefits of ICT will be beyond many people's reach for some time to come. It is a great irony that technologies designed to spread knowledge, network communities and democratise decision-making are elusive to an increasing number of people around the world.

4. In Malaysia, we have noted the digital divide, and we have factored it into our decision-making to prevent our strategic push towards becoming a k-economy from exacerbating the gap. We have rolled out community- based ICT programs and are incorporating ICT with education from the primary level. While we believe that the k-economy will be an increasingly meritocratic system, we cannot afford to leave people behind. Malaysian economic development has traditionally been guided by the maxim "growth with equity" and we will not depart from this strategy as we move towards a k- economy.

5. We believe that without equitable access to opportunities and infrastructure, a county fails to empower the majority of its citizens. Without equity and access to quality opportunities, a country risks societal dislocation and demographic disruption. The case is particularly relevant in view of the power of information and communication technologies. If ICT can be used to improve the quality of life of those who have previously been denied the opportunities, the benefits accrued are great. But equally, if the marginalised continue to be marginalised by the digital revolution, the net effect on society can be devastating.

Ladies and gentlemen,

6. It is in our interests to close all forms of digital divide. Whether the divide drives cleavages between the developed and developing countries, or whether it divides the urban with the rural, or the rich and the poor, all forms of inequity must be eliminated. The potential benefits of ICT are too valuable for it to just be the domain of the privileged.

7. In this regard, we must ensure that there is equitable participation among women in the ICT era. It is for forums such as this to explore how women can play a prominent role in k-economies the world over. We must also view female participation not just in terms of the utilisation of ICT, but also in terms of their participation as knowledge workers. Women's presence in content and applications development is vital in ensuring that software development is gender sensitive and responsive. It will also facilitate the codification of women's knowledge of genetic resources, farming and other community-based information. It is encouraging that we are now seeing the establishment of more websites designed for and by women that enhances the sharing of knowledge and the pooling of information for active female participation in the new economy.

8. ICT represents more than just a means of communications for women. It is also a medium for networking and can create new business opportunities. Where women have traditionally come up against all manners of discrimination, glass ceilings and parochial attitudes towards gender equality, developments in information and communication technology promises to be the great leveller between sexes in times to come.

9. But the path to equitable female participation in the knowledge economy is still long. In Malaysia, women currently constitute less than 20 per cent of computer programmers. And of this, many are at the low value-added end and not in technical or managerial roles. Female internet penetration is also said to be between 15 to 20 per cent. The case for female participation in the ICT sector in the rest of the world, developed or developing, is similar. But notwithstanding the current rates of participation, I believe that there are reasons to be optimistic.

10. As countries move towards realising knowledge- based economies, the nature of work itself is changing. In industrialised countries this process began in the late 1970s, when as a result of international competition, deregulation and technological change, many high-skill jobs were created and many low-skill jobs started to disappear. Even in many developing countries today, increased automation and systems-based supply chain management has meant that work is becoming less physically demanding. Indeed a k-economy will substitute mental for physical labour, and therefore I believe that women will have a much larger role to play.

11. In Malaysia, our institutes of higher learning have a higher enrolment of women to men, and women have consistently outperformed men in academic excellence. Often after university, female graduates fall behind their male counterparts because of their role in their family and because of a male-dominated workplace. I believe that much more can be done to ensure that these women who perform well in universities are absorbed effectively into the economy. To have them play secondary roles because of their sex is to promote an economic inefficiency and denies women the chance to empower themselves further with quality career opportunities.

12. We know that because of their child-bearing role, women have sometimes been forced to settle for less challenging occupations, or positions where the prospect of career advancement is dim. With ICT, new modes of working such as teleworking enables women to continue with their careers while balancing their familial responsibilities. Governments, together with the private sector and NGOs, must facilitate the involvement of women in the informal sectors of economy to play a greater role in business. E-commerce through teleworking can only succeed if there is a tri-sectoral commitment to increase market information, to develop business skills and to provide hardware and software.

Ladies and gentlemen,

13. Formulating policy to engage women in the knowledge economy does not stop with facilitating the participating of educated and qualified women. Among the most disadvantaged are women in rural areas, women with disabilities and women whose educational level leaves large gaps that require special bridging programmes to enable them to continue lifelong learning. I hope that this forum will be able to recommend effective intervention projects to overcome these problems, especially through the use of ICT.

14. All over the world, large numbers women with the potential to benefit from further and higher education still do not have easy access to continue their education. Although there is wide-spread demand for employees who are competent in the use of new technology and its applications to their work, many adults already in employment, especially women, find it difficult to take up opportunities for training and re- training because of the constraints of conventional academic locations and calendars.

15. We need to, therefore, pay more attention to providing women with no education or training access to knowledge and technology. ICT has the potential not only to furnish these women with information but facilitate distance learning educational opportunities. ICT can also open up markets for rural women to engage in business and commerce. We hear of many success stories where ICT has empowered rural women by providing them with a channel to market their local products and knowledge. From a k-economy perspective, the availability of ICT to rural women can turn a previously less productive sector into a productive and competitive sector of the economy. This is in addition to the various benefits that it can bring to the local community in terms of enhancing education and providing vital information on health and sanitation for the benefit of families.

Ladies and gentlemen,

16. We must remember that ICT needs to benefit us all. Without proactive intervention by the government, support from the private sector and continued advocacy by the NGOs, we will not be able to harness the benefits of ICT for ordinary people. As I have said earlier, it is imperative that knowledge societies are also civil societies, where concerns of equity and equal participation are paramount in policy-making.

17. I wish to take this opportunity to acknowledge the work of the NCWO and its Science and Technology Commission, the Department of Women's Affairs in the Prime Minister's Department (HAWA), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and other sponsors in organising this forum and in setting up the networking women's project.

18. I wish the conference and the project every success in their aims to increase awareness among women on the use and benefits of ICT, to provide access to information on available services provided by the different women's organisations, and to provide women with opportunities to be involved with ICT. I also hope that concerned parties succeed in translating the recommendations made at this forum into tangible projects that would benefit the disadvantaged groups through the use of ICT. On this note, it is with great pleasure that I officially declare the "International Forum on Women and ICT" open.