

**SPEECH BY
YAB DATO' SERI ABDULLAH BIN HAJI AHMAD BADAWI
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AT HOTEL EQUATORIAL, KUALA LUMPUR
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Allow me to first thank the organisers for inviting me to officiate at the opening of this very important conference which commemorates the United Nations' International Women's Day. I regret that I cannot be with you today due to an urgent engagement in Pahang attending to the plight of the Felda settlers who have been adversely affected by low commodity prices.

1. I especially wanted to attend the opening of your conference because of the importance of the topic which is 'Infusing change into the new globalised economy'. I believe that it is a particularly apt theme because in communities all around the world women have acted as change agents for time immemorial. Even during the days prior to women's suffrage movements and political empowerment, women have played an active role in shaping communities through involvement in education, healthcare and other social issues.

2. Today, with increasing participation of women in the workforce and in policy making positions, I believe that you are well positioned to be key change agents in the globalised new world economy. In Malaysia, it is a well known fact that our female students are consistently outperforming their male counterparts at the varsities. There have been many success stories of women scientists and researchers winning our national science awards. And, of course, we boast of having women in many high level positions from the bench to the central bank.

3. Admittedly, our society is not yet immune to gender bias. When key appointments are made and the appointee is a woman, rather than focusing on the professional qualities of the individual, the first reaction from the public is an acknowledgment that she is a woman. I can assure you that the government needs to fill in no quota for women. The successes of our prominent women leaders and decision makers are not due to gender quotas. The increasing number of women who have succeeded in their profession is entirely due to their own capabilities. I hope the next time a key appointment is made and the person happens to be a woman, the public will exclusively focus on her exemplary credentials and track record.

Ladies and gentlemen,

4. The government of Malaysia takes seriously the issue of women's affairs. I have time and again called for an end to discrimination against women. We are looking into a whole range of key issues affecting women, including domestic violence and legislation that are not gender sensitive. It is for this reason that we have created a ministry for the development of women and family. I hope that this ministry will be able to be a focal point for the advancement of women's issues in Malaysia to ensure an end to discrimination and to empower women in contributing to nation building whether as professionals, individuals or as mothers.

5. Globalisation brings with it many challenges. We are faced with increasing pressure to open up our markets and liberalise sectors of our economy. This reality

compels us to become more competitive, dynamic and innovative. We must accelerate the nation's transition into a knowledge based economy. We must discard old methods, disabuse closed-minded thinking and prepare ourselves to be active participants in a globalised world.

6. The impact of these changes on our society will be pronounced. And the success or failure of our nation in this new world will depend entirely on how we manage these changes. And a large part of managing this change will depend on the role of women in this new global economy.

7. First and foremost, women are spearheading changes in corporations and businesses. Your presence in new economy sectors are also encouraging. Indeed the chairman of our communications and multimedia commission happens to be a woman. I believe that the future is even brighter when the number of female graduates flood the job market with qualifications and skills far superior to men.

8. Secondly, women will continue to play a key role in the development of the institution of the family. I believe that preparation for a more competitive globalised world starts at home. Children must be taught at home important values that will guide them through their formative educational years. They must be guided from an early age to be inquisitive. These are all building blocks for a more innovative and competitive workforce.

9. Women will also contribute through strengthening communities. We do not want to see the breakdown of our community structure which has given support and stability to 'kampung' and cities alike. Without the involvement of women, the community structure may cease to be important and this may lead to social degeneration in particular areas.

Ladies and gentlemen,

10. While it is important to highlight the importance of professional women in contributing to Malaysia's success in a globalised economy, we must also consider how we can harness the skills of other women in our national development.

11. Information and Communications Technology (ICT) has enabled hitherto marginalised sectors of our economy to participate in the mainstream by offering access to data and for them to market their products. Similarly, through various programmes we are empowering women through the use of ICT, whether it is to codify localised knowledge, or create direct marketing opportunities or to enable them to educate themselves. The demonstrator application grant scheme which comes under the Strategic Thrusts Implementation Committee (STIC) for ICT that I chair has benefited 600,000 women, thereby forming the largest beneficiary group of the programme. I believe that through initiatives such as this we can empower women by giving them the skills, training and opportunities that are necessary to become a value-added sector of our economy.

Ladies and gentlemen,

12. There is much that needs to be done to enhance the participation of women in our economy. I hope that today's conference will be able to touch on the problems that are still facing women both at the work place and at home.

13. I have always thought that the best preparation for competition in a globalised world is by empowering your own people. Without removing discrimination, artificial barriers, glass ceilings and all other obstacles to equal quality opportunities, we will not be able to maximise the potential of our people. And if we fail to mobilise and empower our people, we are directly marginalising our greatest asset.

14. I hope your discussions are both fruitful and constructive and I look forward to hearing some of the salient consensuses that emerge from your deliberations. It gives me great pleasure to open the National Women's Executive Conference 2001.

Thank you.