

The Opening Ceremony Of The Second Meeting Of The Regional Steering Committee On The Advancement Of Rural And Island Women-Asia Pacific Region (RSC-AP)

Mandarin Oriental Hotel, Kuala Lumpur 26 September 2000

I would like to congratulate members of the Regional Steering Committee on the Advancement of Rural and Island Women Asia Pacific (RSC-AP), for coming together to express their concerns on issues faced by rural and island women in the region. Your presence here today is evidence of your commitment towards achieving the objectives of the RSC-AP as well as to enhance your advocacy role on behalf of the rural and island women.

2. RSC-AP is a unique association of prominent First Ladies who have strategically utilised their position as wives of Heads of State or Government to extend helping hand as well as lend their voices to raise critical issues on behalf of the poor, marginalised and disadvantaged rural and island women. Your exemplary work is evident in the report of the RSC-AP. I am sure national Governments, regional and international communities will continue to give their financial and technical support for poverty eradication and empowerment programmes for the rural women of the world, of which 550 million are the poorest of the poor.

3. In this regard RSC-AP could act as a catalyst for change and poverty eradication. First Ladies should continue their advocacy role to leverage political and financial support for rural and island women from a range of stakeholders, especially your own national Governments. Your role as a 'catalyst' should also include 'bridging partnerships' between Governments, NGOs, civil society, the business community as well as international development and donor agencies, so that immediate results in matching resources to the needs of rural women could be achieved. Your access to high-level decision-makers could facilitate and help expedite input towards policy formulation and programme planning from gender perspectives, targeting for the economic advancement of women, rural as well as non-rural.

4. Since 1992, the International Steering Committee as well as the Regional Steering Committee for the Advancement of Rural and Island Women have put in special efforts calling for political commitment of national Governments, to target rural women in poverty eradication programmes. I believe most Governments in the region are aware and appreciative of the fact that poor rural women are among the key targets of poverty eradication. This is evident from the increase in the number of micro-credit institutions found in most countries

in our region. According to the data on the follow-up of Micro-credit summit in 1997, worldwide, 14 million of the world's poorest families are being reached by 1065 micro-credit institutions compared to eight million in 1997. Rural women have gained an international reputation as a 'good credit risk', with high repayment rates. Such reputation have made them a priority for poverty -- oriented credit programme.

5. However, on the part of the Government, we have the responsibility not only in providing macro-economic development policies and programmes for poverty eradication but we also have a commitment to remove any barriers that further contribute to the feminisation of poverty. The success of micro- credit programmes is a showcase of the success of removing the barrier to rural women's access to credit. Concerted efforts are needed to ensure the removal of barriers to women's access to land, health delivery systems and services, especially reproductive health and socio-communicable diseases such as STDs, HIV and AIDS. Access to non-formal skills development and entrepreneurial training transfer of appropriate farm and non-farm technology and targeting the poor rural women are vital to the success of any poverty programmes. Once the barriers are removed, rural women's role as prime movers of change and development can be enhanced and realised much sooner.

6. In recent years, a new development terminology has emerged -- that is, the term 'gender'. This term is associated with policies, development planning and programmes. We hear terminologies such as gender-sensitive policies, gender-responsive development planning and programmes. One of the critical barriers to gender-equality, and a major contributor to the increasing and persistent phenomenon of 'feminisation of poverty' is gender-insensitivity on the part of the Government, the policy-makers, planners, implementers and the society at large.

7. Gender does not refer to sex -- male or female. It refers to the 'mind-set' of a community or society, on what is perceived as 'appropriate and acceptable with regard to the role and behaviour of men and women'. In a conservative culture or communities, 'gender' refers to traditional roles of men as bread winners and women as home makers. In a progressive culture or society, the gender concept changes according to the needs of society -- it refers to the role that men and women are required to assume, in the home, in society and in nation- building. It is based on individual capabilities, skills, competencies as needed by the job market, the corporate sectors, the Government, as well as for family and community development. The traditional mindset,

i.e. our beliefs, attitude and biasness towards women's 'perceived' capabilities, unfortunately overrides our logic, knowledge and observation of women's actual capabilities and competencies. At the work place, women workers are often seen as "a wife, a mother, a sister, a marginal worker, and a sex object". In promotion exercises, or in policy formulation and programme planning, we assume that opportunities are given 'equally' to all, men and women.

8. Policy planners and decision-makers in both the public and private sectors, are said to be 'gender-blind', and 'gender-insensitive', for assuming that men and women are the same -- whereas, according to gender experts, men and women are different -- they have different needs, they behave differently. Psychologically and emotionally, they are different. Verbally, they may express the same terms but they must be interpreted differently; according to their perspectives and experiences.

9. Men and women have different attributes, strengths and weaknesses. Allah has ordained attributes of men and women to complement each other, to perform tasks and duties equitably, with fairness and justice. Unfortunately, women get discriminated against because of the differences. To be different does not mean to be unequal; yet, women get unequal treatment because they are different from men -- because they think, feel, behave differently from men. Hence the call for gender -- sensitivity awareness training programmes, specifically targeting policy makers, economic planners, decision-makers in Government and the private sectors; so as to remind us to incorporate the needs of women when we formulate policies and design development programmes and strategies.

10. I believe such policies and programmes have been formulated in member countries' Plan of Action for Women. In some countries they have been rigorously implemented. In others, they are a little slow but it is never too late. It should be one of the highest priorities for action on the national agenda for gender and development. I am sure no Government would reject such initiatives if the outcome will enhance the productivity of women and men, especially when poverty could be reduced significantly. In promoting gender awareness, strategic alliances with economic planners and advisers throughout the Government administrative mechanism should be established. It is therefore timely that Governments in the Asia Pacific put the rhetorics on Gender Perspectives in Development Planning into effective practice, in ways that will benefit the poor, rural and urban women. Gender sensitive policies and programmes will ensure the inclusion of women, not only in poverty reduction, but also

in other economic activities which will ultimately help the Government by increasing economic growth.

11. In Malaysia, the Government has taken steps to ensure the removal of gender obstacles. The success of The Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia, with financial allocation of 200 million Ringgit as on-lending loan, is an example of our sensitivity to the role and needs of rural women. Government allocation of 50 million Ringgit to implement smart partnership projects on women with women NGOs is another case in point. Further efforts must be undertaken to ensure gender mainstreaming, of which gender budgeting will be our top priority.

12. The world has acknowledged the vital role of rural women in poverty alleviation. With micro-credit facility, women have access to money at entry points. This will lead to their capability not only to lift their families out of poverty, but to achieve economic and political empowerment within their homes, their villages and their communities. However, there is increasing evidence from the Asia Pacific region that indicates the over-riding influence of gender ideology on the lives of rural women borrowers, despite their access to credit. Studies from four micro-credit programmes in Bangladesh showed that on average 39 per cent of women clients had little or no control over the use of their loans. There are cases whereby women apply for loans on behalf of their husbands and end up paying the debt! This is one example of the power of 'gender' at work. Perhaps, a solution would be to include husbands as co-participants, after undergoing a compulsory 'gender sensitisation' programme, so that together, the wife-and-husband team could scale up the micro enterprise as family enterprises, with equitable share of tasks and responsibilities in decision-making.

13. I have been made to understand that at today's conference you will discuss issues on rural women, poverty and empowerment. As such it is crucial for you to emphasise issues that could inculcate and enhance rural women's empowerment -- to enable women to make decisions, seek resources, grab opportunities and calculate risks. But above all, they need to increase their self-confidence.

14. I believe there are many existing empowerment programmes for women available today. We may not have to re-invent the wheel! Through our South-South Cooperation, the sharing of successful experiences, networking, and the sharing of resources as well as exchanging technical expertise among member countries, programmes acknowledged as 'best practice' could be modified to suit the local situation and then replicated in other countries.

15. Effective empowerment calls for increased knowledge and skills, particularly the technical, communication and managerial skills. Access to technology, including the Information Communication Technology (ICT) is an important prerequisite to the development of the K-economy and empowerment of the individual. In the era of information technology, special strategies are needed to include rural women and especially young rural girls in computer literacy and skills training on how to use the ICT. Otherwise, the digital divide will threaten to increase the inequities between the urban-rural and between the sexes. The cost of exclusion is too high. If excluded, rural women will not be able to enjoy the benefits of the enormous potential of the use of ICT such as linking remote communities to the global markets, making telemedicine and telework available to communities in need and ensuring accessibility to distance learning for rural women and young girls.

16. The challenge of including rural women, especially the poor, is formidable but not impossible to realise. The Grameen Bank of Bangladesh, as a well established and leading micro- credit institution, has once again led the way to empower rural poor women with the use of ICT. The Grameen Bank has provided basic communication infrastructure facilities such as the Grameen solar powered telephones and Grameen Internet. In Malaysia, two pilot projects on computer literacy / internet use, have been launched to educate rural women borrowers of our micro-credit institution, the Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia. The Government is encouraging families to own computers, including rural families. The initial step to narrow the urban-rural digital gap has been undertaken by the Ministry of Rural Development, Malaysia, by launching a programme on one computer one village. This is in addition to the school computer programmes of the Ministry of Education.

17. To enhance knowledge of rural and island women, RSC-AP member countries could contribute to the development of the content to be disseminated and utilised. In this regard, experts from RSC-AP member countries could network to produce and exchange content, using the sub-regional lingua franca such as Hindi, Indonesian/Malaysian language, Chinese etc. The materials should also be translated into vernacular languages.

18. The RSC-AP, as a non-political entity, has an enormous potential, as a catalyst to bring positive changes for the well- being of rural women and their families, through their advocacy efforts and bridging partnerships between and amongst Governments, NGOs, international donors and development agencies. Much can be achieved through smart partnership between organisations of rural women and the

relevant sectors, especially in mobilising resources to the needy. As the First Ladies represent the voices of the rural poor and destitute women at international fora, issues raised will certainly be well received by the international communities and national Governments. Their position allows them to work hand-in-hand with the rural and island women and side-by-side with the highest decision-makers in their respective countries.

19. I have only admiration for their efforts and commitment. I wish the RSC-AP the best in their future endeavour and hope the poor rural and island women will be able to reap the benefits of the work of the First Ladies.

20. On this note, I have great pleasure in declaring the second Regional Steering Committee Meeting for the Advancement of Rural and Island Women-Asia Pacific officially open.