

**SPEECH BY THE HON TUN DR MAHATHIR BIN MOHAMAD AT SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC
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“Women in business”

Firstly, I would like to thank the first lady and the organisers of this forum on “women in business” for this invitation to speak. I am not at all that well-versed on this subject. What I know about it is what I have observed in my country and elsewhere. Accordingly my remarks are not professional or academic. They are really those of a layman who job involves dealing with and about what we used to call the fairer sex. Today’s world is a very competitive world. To win, or even merely to sustain ourselves, we need to use all the resources at our disposal and of these resources, the most important and the one that can give us a decisive competitive edge is human resource. That is why human resource development is so much talked about now. Since the human community is made up of men and women, it is important that members of both sexes contribute towards the strength and competitiveness of the community. What is more, women make up 50% of the people in any community. We cannot discount 50% of our human resource without undermining our strength.

Women may be physically weaker but their intellectual capacities have shown to be no less than the men. We are seeing this in our universities today where more than half the student population are women. Even if we believe in the intellectual superiority of men, without education they would not be able to contribute. Since women appear more keen to acquire knowledge, it would be a waste if we do not use their talents. In Malaysia we have a multi-racial and multi-religious population divided further because of disparities in their economic wealth. If we are not going to have racial conflicts and violence, it is important that we eliminate the economic disparities between the races. The more advance and wealthier communities in Malaysia is the Buddhist Chinese, followed by the Hindu Indians. These communities have no problem about the participation of their women in public life, including in business, Unless the Muslim Malays use all the resources at their disposal, including of course their women, they are going to lose out. If this happens then there would be conflicts between the rich Chinese and Indians and the poor Muslim Malays.

Malaysia cannot afford such conflicts. It would destabilise the country and prevent its growth. And so, without breaching the injunctions of Islam, the Muslim Malays have permitted women to play a role in the effort to achieve parity with the other races and to contribute to national development. If we take the world scene we would see a parallel between the inter-racial competition between the Muslim Malays and the Chinese and Indians in Malaysia, and the competition between the Muslim countries and the non-Muslim countries. If the Muslim countries are to achieve parity with the non-Muslim countries it is important that the Muslims mobilise all their resources and that means the participation of their women in all fields of endeavour where they have competence and are not against the injunctions of Islam.

But we are seeing today almost total collapse of morality in the ethnic European countries as women enter the fields which were once dominated by men. Their cry for equality has reached the stage where, there is no more respect for the institutions of marriage and family in these countries. Women no longer want to settle down, marry and raise families. We Muslims cannot accept this level of freedom and participation by our women. While we should allow them to participate in the affairs of our communities, it must not be allowed to lead to the excesses that we see in the ethnic European countries.

We are being pressured all the time by the ethnic Europeans to give equal rights to our women but we should not accept absolute equality. There must be some limit and the injunctions of our religion must be respected. What is a fact however that is in the Muslim world there are many interpretations of what Islam requires of our women. I will not go into the rights and wrongs of these interpretations but the one thing that one must uphold is that Muslims must have the capacity to defend the Ummah and the religion. If in order to do this successfully we have to give a role to the women, then within the moral codes of Islam we must do so. In Malaysia we have discovered that women make skilful politicians, administrators and business managers.

We had been under colonial rule for 450 years. During that period we and our religion were at the mercy of the colonialists. While they did not forcibly convert us as they did too many other indigenous people, nevertheless we felt that we and our religion were not treated with respect nor did they help us to acquire the knowledge to develop ourselves. We remained neglected. The education system was designed to serve the needs of the colonialists for low-grade support staff only and women were not encouraged to get a good education. Nevertheless a few women managed to reach secondary level of education. As a result when the struggle for independence began they were able to take a very active part. Because the Malay Muslim society was conservative, and men could not approach women directly, the few educated women were effective in explaining politics to the village women. As a result in the elections which were to determine Malaysian independence, support from the women ensured that nearly all the seats were won by the pro-independence party. The British had to give independence to Malaysia. In fact the date for independence was pushed forward by two years because of the strong showing of the pro-independent party.

From then on the role of women in politics was unstoppable. Very early the main political parties set up women's wings. Leaders emerged from out of nowhere to organise women, instructed them on the political system and the workings of democracy, and the contributions that women could make. The women leaders gained stature and were selected as candidates for elections. The first woman minister was appointed to the second cabinet of independent Malaysia in 1964. Although some orthodox Muslims had formed a so-called Islamic party and condemned the participation and election of women as leaders, their party had eventually to acknowledge the role and power of women voters, and they too had to set up a women's wing. Nevertheless for a long time they maintained that women could not be leaders in Islam. In the end they were forced to admit that they should have a woman vice-president because they need the support of women. There is now no more objections to the leadership role of Muslim women in politics in Malaysia. The peoples of Malaysia had always placed high premium on education. Numerous schools and universities were set up after independence and the parents and the government made sure that girls as well as boys attend primary school at least.

Very soon it was noticed that the girls were much more serious about being educated than the boys. Today the universities have more female students than male students. They also do very well. We cannot very well educate the women and then relegate them to the kitchen. We need these Muslim women to help to compete with the other races. Many were taken into government service. Soon they were filling increasingly senior posts in the government. The rest began to work in the private sectors, in the business companies. With the increase in the number of educated young people there came a change in attitude. There were rising expectations for a better quality of life from having personal incomes rather than subsistence living provided by parents and families. Unless the government could create jobs, there would be a lot of unemployment. The educated girls increase the unemployment rate as they too wanted to have their own income.

It is for this reason that Malaysia decided to industrialise and to concentrate on labour intensive industries. The high cost of manual labour in the developed countries was making their electric and electronic products very costly. Malaysia offered to provide low cost labour and other incentives for industries which could create jobs for its unemployed work force, both male and female. It turned out that the electronic industry was most suitable for Asian women workers. Their small fingers enabled them to assemble small electronic circuitry very quickly. They are better than the male workers. Soon factories sprout out employing tens of thousands of women workers. Today out of some 100 billion us dollars worth of Malaysian exports yearly, 82% are made up of electronic products produced by Malaysian women, mostly Muslim girls, who before would have been staying with their parents in the villages, earning no income. The number of university educated women was also increasing. In the government they were able to hold the highest posts, including as principal secretaries in the ministries and agencies still there were more women than the government can absorb. It is natural therefore for them to move into the business sector. Women business executives became more prominent, competing successfully with the men for senior executive posts in the big firms, both locally owned and foreign. They are especially good at personnel management and accountancy. Many joined banks and other financial institutions.

From there the women began to set up their own businesses, in partnership with men or on their own. They became investment advisers and consultants. They also go into manufacturing and retailing and into foreign trade. To strengthen their role and create new opportunities they set up their own business chambers. One of the most prominent is called "Peniagawati" or women traders. It has been instrumental in helping new entrepreneurs from among its members. It is also a channel for bringing up women business problems to the attention of the authorities. Surprisingly the number of women among business executives in Malaysia is, as a percentage of the population, bigger than is found in the ethnic European countries. Certainly it is much bigger than in Japan or other successful East Asian countries. The opportunities for Muslim women in Malaysia are actually better than in most countries where women are supposed to be more free and equal.

After 450 years of colonial rule, Malaysians as a whole had lost their self-confidence. They believed they could not do what the ethnic Europeans could do whether as administrators, politicians or business managers. Independent Malaysia cannot afford an inferiority complex. If we are going to develop and catch up with the developed countries, our people, both men and women, must have confidence in their own abilities. To change the mindset of our people the government set up special training camps where executives and potential executives in the government and the private sectors are given courses on developing the character and personal values that can build confidence and contribute to success. Here the personal and racial weaknesses are identified, discussed and corrected. Good values which can contribute to success are implanted. A new breed of people, men and women, has been produced by these training camps. The courses are repeated in order to be more effective.

Another approach to changing values and culture so as to instil confidence and be capable of competing successfully is to encourage Malaysians to accomplish challenging tasks. A Malaysian man sailed alone around the world. Several climbed Mount Everest, the highest mountain in the world. A swimmer swam across the English Channel and recently a Malaysian woman Para-sailed on skis alone for 1100 km from the South Pole to one of the research stations in Antarctica.

These intrepid Malaysian men and women have proven that they can undertake extremely challenging tasks and succeed. To undertake these adventures, they trained hard, learnt all that they need to know about the hazards they had to face and the real possibility that they would be killed in their attempt. They were all much disciplined. They pray to Allah s.w.t. to help them in achieving success but they never fail to put in all the physical and mental efforts necessary to accomplish their objective. They believe in the Quran injunction that Allah only helps those who help themselves. The woman who crossed solo 1100 km of Antarctic ice covering the distance in only 22 days underwent two years of rigorous training. There is no snow in Malaysia and the lowest temperature is 20 degrees Celsius. She did the crossing in tough icy condition with temperatures of under -57 degrees Celsius and she did not fail to perform her prayers.

All these people upon their return are required to give talks to young people, male and female, Muslim and non-Muslim. They have been able to shape the minds of Malaysian youths so that they now have faith and confidence in their own abilities. They are also more prepared to discipline themselves and to face dangers and trials in their daily life. This new breed of Malaysian men and women are more ready to serve their country and to compete with other countries, as well as to achieve personal success in whatever they may be doing. However all these strategies to ensure that Malaysians, including the Muslim women can compete carry certain social risk. I have already mentioned that among the ethnic Europeans, freedom for their women has resulted in the collapse of their moral values. While loudly protesting against sexual discrimination they flout their sexual attributes unashamedly. Their dress gets more and more skimpy and revealing yet they condemn men who suggest that this lead to what they term as sexual harassment. We don't need to have this degree of personal freedom for our women to contribute to the development of our people and country. We want our women to be women, to be feminine. We still want them to marry and raise families. If possible we would like to preserve our extended families, but if we cannot we must preserve at least the nuclear family.

The reason why we want to develop our country is because we know we would suffer from being undeveloped, from being underdeveloped, from being poor and weak. These fear and sense of shame motivate us. These things make us want to change, to absorb new ideas, new knowledge and new values which can contribute towards delivering us from our present unfortunate situation. Worldly success for Muslims is the most effective form of Dakwah. However we must always remember that when we succeed our environment would change. A prosperous Muslim community or nation would lose the motivation to strive for improvement as the pressure on us would be gone. Without this motivation and pressure we would want to lie back and enjoy ourselves. When we do this we would lose strength and the character that would make us face challenges successfully. That is why success is often followed by failure of the next generation.

We are seeing these already beginning to appear in Malaysia. The urban married couple, both working to earn better income, are often not able to raise their children properly. Quality time with the children would be much reduced. To compensate for this they would give more pocket money to children and allow them to come and go as they please. Unsupervised by the parents the children may not study and may take up smoking and drinking. They may even take to drugs. It is very likely that the character and the values of these children would not make them suitable to face the challenges of life as their parents did. If this becomes widespread then it would certainly augur badly for the future of the country.

In Malaysia we note that the Muslim children are more likely to become spoilt than the non-Muslim children. Under the same circumstances, the nuclear Muslim family is less able to bring up their children well than the nuclear non-Muslim family. Although the Muslim girls are better behaved than the Muslim boys, the non-Muslims are less prone to misbehaviour, are more serious about their education and training. There may be a reason for this. But whatever may be the reason, we must be careful that the role given to our Muslim women would not result in the deterioration of the moral character of the next generation of Muslims.

Changes in human society have a way of going wrong. The attempt to correct an unacceptable situation often leads to situations which may be better but are accompanied by side effects which over time would destroy the original benefits from the change. Giving a more active role for women in society also carries this risk. Women's lib that we are seeing today started off in the late 19th century with a simple demand for the right to vote in national elections. But the demand did not stop after this right was granted. It went on to identify more and more inequalities which needed to be corrected. In the ethnic European countries where these demands are strongest, it has now become almost impossible to distinguish men from women. We see this picture of an American woman soldier holding a leash tied to the neck of naked Iraqi prisoner, of her obvious enjoyment watching a pyramid made up of naked Iraqi soldiers and this began with the simple demand for the right to vote unsupervised and uncontrolled this is what can happen.

We need women to strengthen us but not by making men of them. We need them to do work which is suitable for them. A certain degree of modesty must be maintained. In Malaysia we have women soldiers and women pilots in the air-force. In the navy they do shore duties only. They are properly dressed and they are not exposed to situations which may result in their being harassed or dishonoured. It is the same in the administration, in politics, in business and in social work properly regulated the women can contribute much to the capacity-building and well-being of the society. Certainly they can add strength to their community. In this highly competitive world the role of the women cannot be neglected. Half of our people are women of the 1.3 billion Muslim in this world 650 million are women. If they are not allowed to use their considerable intellectual and other capacities to enhance our competitive edge, than, knowing our competitors are fully utilising the capacities of their womenfolk, we are going to lose by default. There are risks and dangers but greater risk will come from our losing the competition and becoming dominated by others. When others dominate us they are going to force upon us their value systems and when they do this they will interpret our religion for us and that is not going to be good.

We must determine the role of our women and we must utilise their skills and intellectual capacities to the full but we must not ape the ethnic Europeans in everything without losing our moral values and our submission to our religion we can still succeed.

You may notice that the government of Malaysia had set out deliberately to involve its women power in the development of the country. This is extremely important. If the government is not committed to giving a role for women and committed also to the development of the country, then nothing would happen. Malaysia has adopted what is known as the Malaysia incorporated concept. We regard the nation as a national corporation in which the government works closely with the private sector to develop the country. Government is always supportive of the private sector because when the private sector is successful and profitable, government revenue would increase. It is to ensure that both the government and the private sector have sufficient and well-trained human resource that we co-opt our women into our workforce. This actually is the secret of Malaysia's rapid growth.

I thank you.