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DATIN SERI DR SITI HASMAH BTE HAJI MOHD ALI
ON "WOMEN AND THE MEDIA: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR
ASIA IN THE NEXT MILLENNIUM"
AT THE HOTEL EQUATORIAL, BANGI, SELANGOR DARUL EHSAN
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AT 9.30 A.M.

First of all I would like to thank the organisers for inviting me to officiate at this conference and to deliver the keynote speech. As leader of the Malaysian delegation to the UN 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, I believe that a seminar which examines the challenges and opportunities for Women and the Media in Asia is very timely in preparing us for the next millennium. During the past decade, advances in information technology have facilitated a global communication network that transcends national boundaries. The impact on public policy, private attitudes and behaviour, especially of children and young adults has been tremendous. Everywhere the potential exists for the media to make greater contribution to the advancement of women.

2. To our foreign guests I bid you a warm welcome. For those of you who are visiting us for the first time, we hope you will have time to enjoy not only the physical beauty of our country but to experience for yourselves the warmth of our people. Much publicity has been given in the media about the haze and smog that blanketed our region in the past few weeks. But I can see, from your presence here that the media did not have a deterrent effect on you. For those of you who have been here before, welcome back to the land of sunshine and grace.

3. When the International Year of Women was declared in 1975 by the United Nations, women's active participation in the media process was clearly enunciated. In the Forward Looking Strategies of the 3rd United Nations Conference on Women in Nairobi in 1985, a recommendation relating to communications and information called for enhancing the participation of women at decision-making levels. The aim was to eliminate 'stereotyped images of women and to provide women with easier access to information'. The preparatory meeting on Women in the Media held in Canada and the 4th Conference in Beijing reiterated the importance of the media in enhancing the status of women. Section J of the Beijing Platform for Action, had two main strategic objectives with about 31 actions to be taken individually and collaboratively by governments, national and international media systems, non governmental organisations, media professional organisations and the private sector. The section addresses the inequality in women's access to and participation in all communication system, especially the media, and their insufficient mobilisation to promote women's contribution to society and their responsibility for the impact of their content on women. The Beijing Platform calls for two strategies; the first is to increase the participation and enhance the access of women to expression and decision-making in and through the media and new technologies of communication; and the second calls for a positive, balanced and non stereotyped portrayal of women in the media.

4. The Beijing Platform for Action is an excellent blueprint. It outlines specific actions for media managers to seriously participate in the efforts to accelerate the representation of women in media management and decision-making. The Platform express strong objections to the stereotyping of women in the media. Although the call is made repeatedly, we still witness the exposure of society, especially in Third World, to the distorted images of women through various means, particularly TV and the magazines.

5. That is why I am thankful that UKM, the Ministry of Education and UNESCO, in particular Mr Bentley, have taken the initiative to organise this meeting. I congratulate them for including well thought-out topics for discussion. The seminar will not only keep us abreast with new developments in the media environment and its impact on women but will also produce practical recommendations that will guide policy-makers and media organisations to take actions that will significantly make a difference to women in general and women media practitioners in particular.

6. The issue of women's position and role in society is not new. It has been debated as early as the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. as exemplified by the platonic-Aristotelian debate on the role of women in society at that time. In the sixth century A.D. the issue of women's rights was brought to the fore in the Islamic world by Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) . Today Western and Eastern Societies, have been engaged in addressing the same issue of women's rights within the expanding concept of democracy.

7. With specific reference to women, democracy includes the valuing and practice of women's right, roles and status in the domestic domain, as well as equality in the workplace. This is a very basic principle of democracy. Therefore every human being has the right to achieve her dreams, to pursue her ambitions, to protect herself and her family from social injustice and exploitation by any form of power, be it an institution or individuals.

8. To the democratic societies, mass media is a symbol of freedom. The mass media is expected to perform its functions democratically. To do this it must free itself from stereotype values, prejudices, and acts of discrimination against any one on the basis of colour, race or gender. Therefore, in referring to the democratisation of the media, everybody must have the same

right to participate in the media process as well as to be equally presented in its messages.

S. The question before us is : how serious are we in pursuing the noble aims of balanced participation of women in the media? What are the factors we should address? Is there a time frame for achieving the objectives and how do we monitor the progress?

10. We need a systematic approach to realise the objectives in the Platform for Action.

11. Firstly, let us study the issue of the portrayal of women in the media. The continued projection of negative and degrading images of women in media communications - electronic, print, visual and audio - must be changed. Print and electronic media in most countries do not provide a balanced picture of women's diverse lives and contributions to society in a changing world. In addition, violent and degrading or pornographic media products are also negatively affecting women and their participation in society. Programmes that reinforce women's traditional roles can also be equally limiting. The world-wide trend towards consumerism has created a climate in which advertisements and commercial messages often portray women primarily as consumers and target girls and women of all ages inappropriately.

12. This practice of negative portrayal is most unfortunate to say the least, because the mass media is a power by itself. The media reflect, cultivate and reinforce social images and perceptions. Having control of the mass media means having the power to influence. The mass media transmits beliefs, cultural practices and aspirations to the receivers. In this regard, the person who controls and who decides what is to be transmitted is powerful because whatever is portrayed is a representation of the values and culture of the decision maker. This is critical. Those who control the media can control the mind of the audience. Studies have shown that those who control the media do not

necessarily have enlightened views or attitudes with regards to women, having been brought up to believe in the traditional sex-stereotypes in society. Indeed the cumulative findings of many studies on the portrayal of sex roles in the media confirm that the depiction of sex roles in the media corresponds to the pattern set by traditional sex-role stereotypes in societies.

13. With regards to the impact of mass-mediated images of women on the public, especially through the visual media, surveys and other studies have concluded that those who watch more television, in other words heavy media consumers, especially children and adolescents, are more likely to adopt and express sexist attitudes towards men and women. Recent literature also provides evidence of the media's role in shaping women's view of herself and in controlling female behaviour by setting agendas for the female world.

14. In Malaysia, although there have not been many studies on the impact of the portrayal of women in the media, the observations so far, tend to make one conclude that there is some form of impact already on the minds of the masses, especially in their attitude towards sex roles. Most of the impact is through the visual media, film and television. Therefore it is disturbing to know that the Malaysian audience is exposed to between 4 - 6 hours of television programmes daily. This is indeed an alarming figure. Women in particular, are among the heaviest media consumers, for both electronic and printed media. In fact in electronic media, women see and watch more programmes compared to men.

15. Ascribing to the cultivation effect theory in communication, the long term effect of extensive mass media exposure on attitude formation and behaviour, will be to sustain the existing attitude and behaviour of society towards women. What kind of attitudes are we sustaining? Studies have shown that Malaysian movies constantly portray women as weak, hysterical, slow, fussy, highly

emotional, immoral, and male chasers. There are also many instances where women are portrayed as the cause of family problems, child abuse, including abandoned babies. Woman, directly or indirectly, have been frequently blamed for immoral behaviour committed by men. If we go by these findings, then the expected long term effect will be disastrous because these negative values may be sustained and worse, new ones may even develop. By constant portrayal of this type of images of women in the media, the audience tend to believe that women are inferior and should not be involved actively in the whole process of nation building. With constant reminders, inferiority becomes habitual and familiar and even detrimental desirable. Unfortunately some women have also come to believe that certain jobs, especially those in the top echelons are not suitable for women. The men continue to believe that women are not able to function effectively in certain jobs.

16. A second issue which is related to the portrayal of women is the rapid speed of change in the media system, in favour of private media systems. This has created an increase in demand for more programmes. The demand is so high that rapid mass production occurs at the expense of quality. In the process of audience hunting, the media owners tend to select programmes that have sensational elements particularly those relating to women. This is compounded by the fact that most scripts and reports are written by men who are not gender sensitive, the consequence being low-taste programmes.

17. Once again I would like to stress that by repeating the same negative images of women in the media the cycle of misconceptions and discrimination against women will be passed from generation to generation. On top of that we will never be able to uplift the spirit and the confidence of women in facing the challenges in the next millennium.

18. I urge media organisations and training institutions such as departments of mass communication to provide gender-sensitive training for media professionals and to encourage the creation and use of non-stereotyped, balanced and diverse images of women in the media. The media should also refrain from presenting women as inferior beings and exploiting them as sexual objects and commodities. Instead the media should concentrate on presenting women as creative human beings, key actors and contributors to and beneficiaries of the process of development. One way of doing this is to provide role models, especially to young women, by producing and disseminating materials on women leaders who bring to their positions of leadership many different life experiences. Another way is to promote media campaigns that emphasise gender equality and non-stereotyped gender roles of women and men within the family. Such campaigns will also eliminate spousal and child abuse and all forms of violence against women. Media organisations also need to develop professional guidelines and codes of conduct and other forms of self regulation that promote the presentation of non-stereotype images of women as well as address violent, degrading and pornographic materials concerning women in the media, including advertising.

19. The third issue concerns the media's role in empowering women by enhancing their skills, knowledge and access to information technology. This will strengthen their ability to combat negative portrayals and to challenge the abuse of power of an increasingly important industry. Women do take easily to technology. According to Jupiter Communication and Intelliquests surveys, women form between 40 - 47% of the Internet population and it is estimated that by Year 2000 half the cyberspace will be women. Women find IT empowering, convenient and fun. Currently users are in the upper middle class aged about 40 years. We need to expand the accessibility to all women regardless of socioeconomic position. Most women, especially in the developing countries are not able to access effectively the

expanding electronic information highway and therefore cannot establish networks that will provide them with alternative sources of information. The media should be able to play a leading role in enriching women especially those who are at home to a more refreshing and progressive content. In order to do this we need to support women's education, training and employment that promote and ensure women's equal access to all areas and levels of media, including management, programming, education, training and research.

20. The fourth issue concerns women media practitioners. Although more women are involved in careers in the communication sector, few have attained positions at the decision-making level or serve on governing boards and bodies that influence media policy. Only between 10 to 30 percent of decision making level jobs are handled by women in many parts of the world. Even in countries such as Canada where many women have progressed more or less rapidly through the ranks in the newsroom, the top jobs still elude them. In Malaysia only 10 to 35 percent of women are at the decision making level in media organisations. The number that is given the opportunity to deal with economic and political issues is still small. Men journalists or broadcasters are still being assigned to cover serious events. I myself have observed that most of the time men are the ones given the assignment to cover events involving Malaysian leaders abroad.

21. However we are beginning to make in-roads. The Women Journalist Association or PERTAMA reported that the number of women occupying key positions in the mass media has increased compared to ten or twenty years ago. Though the number is not significant we are beginning to see women editors, women film producers, directors, scriptwriters, photo journalist, broadcast journalist, broadcast controllers and so on. The number of female students majoring in the communication field is equal to if not more than their male counterparts. But the situation is not the same for all developing countries. Efforts must be

carried out to examine the real situation of women's participation in media education. The last regional survey in Asia, was carried out about seven years ago and another should be initiated again.

22. I urge media policy-makers and managers to support the education and training of women that will ensure their equal access to all areas and levels of the media. They should also undertake research to define the areas needing attention, including policies that will help in integrating a gender perspective in programmes and gender balance in appointments. Woman media practitioners should form a strong network and compile a directory of experts.

23. As we approach the new millennium we are seeing different kinds of challenges, especially when the world is going through tremendous social, cultural, and economic changes. As we become more globalised we get more digitalised and space assumes a new entity. Distance vanishes with communication technology.

24. The globalisation of the mass media is now taking place actively even in the third world countries. With satellite communication, societies of the world are exposed to contents which do not originate from their indigenous culture. Children from different parts of the world are growing up exposed to a dominant culture through the media. They understand each other better than do people from their own culture but of a different generation. The need to teach our children values and to make decisions and choices based on those values cannot be more pressing. It is self-censorship based on moral and ethical considerations that will be the hallmark of the information age. The role of men and women as parents and the exercise of parental responsibility are not only vital but exceedingly crucial for us to survive the onslaught of information gushing down every communication channel.

25. An area I see as most promising is the fact that with information technology, parents can now combine their multiple roles more effectively. Both men and women are liberated from the need to be at the workplace as we understand it today and thus can combine reproductive and productive responsibilities creatively. I envisage a future where men and women will be more confident in dealing with life around them, in full control of their family, and the workplace.

26. Women, more and more will be called upon to play their rightful role in society where knowledge is the basis of the new industries. In this regard women are our shining assets. They are the brains in the work force, as well as the teachers and trainers in shaping our future human resources. The mass media and its newer technologies and wide criss-crossing networks can play a most effective role in providing a more friendly environment for women to perform their roles.

27. The future ahead is exciting and challenging. What is the role of the media and how can women's advancement be enhanced? These are big questions which necessarily must be broken into smaller ones in the search for answers. As you ponder on them during the Seminar, I have no doubt at all that the product of your discussion will provide practical solutions in the direction of eradicating the remnants of discrimination against women and in recommending actions for advancing women in and through the media.

28. I wish you every success for a fruitful seminar. To all our foreign delegates, once again, thank you for coming to share your experiences with us. In the name of Allah——Bismillahir rahmanir rahim, I declare this Seminar on "Women and the Media: Challenges and Opportunities for Asia in the Next Millennium" officially open.

Thank you.
