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WELCOMING SPEECH BY  
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DATIN SERI DR. SITI HASMAH BTE HAJI MOHD ALI  
AT THE OPENING CEREMONY OF THE FIRST LADIES RSC-AP MEETING  
AT THE HOTEL NIKKO, KUALA LUMPUR, MALAYSIA  
ON MONDAY, 13 OCTOBER 1997  
AT 8.45 A.M.

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As Chairperson of The Steering Committee on the Economic Advancement of Rural and Island Women in the Asia Pacific Region (RSC-AP) and as President of the International Steering Committee (ISC), I am very happy to be given this opportunity to extend a very warm welcome to each and everyone of you. I thank you most sincerely for being here especially those of you who have come as far north as Mongolia to as far south east as Tonga to be with us today.

2. Malaysia is indeed fortunate to have this opportunity to host this meeting. A meeting such as this will hopefully not only resolve some of the common issues of poverty but also, through close networking, foster equality, peace and mutual understanding among us all, consistent with the objectives of the ISC.

3. As most of you are aware, the International Steering Committee (ISC) was set up in 1992 following the Geneva Summit under the patronage of Her Majesty Queen Fabiola of Belgium. It is essentially an advocacy group consisting of 16 First Ladies and Wives of Heads of Government. It was agreed that as members of the ISC, Malaysia, Sri Lanka then and Tonga would take the lead in implementing strategies and plans of action for the Economic Advancement of Rural and Island Women in the Asia Pacific Region.

4. Subsequently, to ensure effective follow-up of the ISC objectives, the Regional Steering Committee for Asia Pacific was established and formalised on 5 September 1995 in Beijing. The

RSC-Asia Pacific is divided into three sub-regions: the South Central and West Asia, South East Asia and Far East, and the Oceania and the Pacific. Representation of members is distributed based on the size of population per sub-region. Accordingly, 6 members of the sub-region of South, West and Central Asia, currently under the Vice-Chairmanship of Iran who replaced Sri Lanka, 4 members of the sub-region of South East Asia and Far East under the Chairmanship of Malaysia and 2 members of the Oceania and the Pacific under the Vice Chairmanship of Tonga was adopted as an accepted formula for membership distribution. Altogether, the RSC-Asia Pacific membership consists of 15 First Ladies/Wives of Heads of State or Government. The RSC-Asia Pacific, since its establishment, has prioritised the objective of monitoring the progress of implementation of the Geneva Declaration and to support national and regional initiatives for the advancement of rural women. Together, the members of the RSC-Asia Pacific are committed to help mobilise the resources to ensure that rural and island women are participants as well as beneficiaries of development programmes and projects, particularly those relating to poverty alleviation and improvement of the quality of rural family life. In this regard, the responsibilities of the RSC-AP include that of preparing the regional plans of action and monitoring the progress of its implementation. Other activities include the preparation for and implementation of specific regional and subregional activities of different aspects. The role and responsibilities of the RSC-Asia Pacific members have further increased following the endorsement of the Beijing Platform of Action, 1995.

5. The theme of this meeting 'Poverty Eradication Through Micro Credit For Rural Women' is indeed timely and relevant reflecting the need for governments and NGOs to recognise women as an important force in economic development. Poverty eradication through micro credit is an alternative to improving the lives of the rural poor.

6. We know that the causes of poverty are multi-faceted ranging from on-going economic crisis, political instability, lack of basic infrastructure, and population pressures to psychological factors at community and individual levels for rural women. The impact of poverty is further aggravated by numerous gender-specific obstacles, the causes of which are deeply rooted in our social and cultural beliefs, attitudes, and prejudices towards women. Such barriers are most often reflected in gender-insensitive development policies and programmes which consequently ignore the participation and contribution of rural women. Such barriers contribute to the lack of support for women's economic activities, due to lack of access to productive resources, lack of access to training and skills development.

7. Let us therefore work together, to extend that small loan through Micro Finance Institutions, to give the poverty stricken women, specifically the rural women, the opportunity to develop and enhance their skills, to improve their levels of living through increased income from self-employment. Let us invest our time and money for a society where there is economic and social growth, justice, peace and harmony, balanced with equality and human dignity. The rural women can no longer be ignored, nor be alienated. They represent a force to reduce rural poverty in our region. Insyah Allah, concerted efforts from members of RSC-AP, Governments and the people themselves will help to materialise the objective of our presence here today.

8. *I thank you once again for your gracious presence.*

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