

Sila semak semasa dilafazkan

**OPENING SPEECH BY
YANG AMAT BERBAHAGIA
DATIN SERI DR SITI HASMAH BT HAJI MOHD ALI
AT THE WORKSHOP ON ISLAM, REPRODUCTIVE
HEALTH AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS
AT THE CONCORD HOTEL, KUALA LUMPUR
ON THURSDAY, 20 AUGUST 1998
AT 9.30 AM**

I am honoured to be invited to be with you this morning to address this auspicious regional gathering of experts and participants. To our guests from overseas, I wish you a warm welcome to Malaysia and SELAMAT DATANG.

2. The theme chosen for this workshop — Reproductive Health and Women's Rights is important and timely — important because these two issues have been the most heatedly debated and controversial ones during the ICPD in Cairo 1994 and 4th. World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995; and timely because the quinquennial review of ICPD will be held next year. This forum will give us an opportunity to exchange experiences, disseminate information, and to articulate concrete recommendations for further action.

3. The debate on Reproductive Health and Women's Rights must necessarily include that of corresponding responsibilities. In the context of Islam, this is a crucial consideration as individual and collective actions or deeds should be beneficial to the ummah and not inflict any suffering, harm, injury, discrimination or alienation to anyone. At Cairo and Beijing we witnessed differences of views within the perspective of religious, social and cultural beliefs. I am told that this debate continued during the recent meeting in March of the Asia Pacific Review of the Implementation of ICPD and the Bali Declaration. It is important therefore for countries with Muslim populations to come together to obtain a consensus or at least a collective view on Reproductive Health and

Women's Rights. I urge this meeting to consider discussions from the broad perspective of current and emerging needs and problems of girls, women and men so that your views could be reflected towards consensus building based on true Islamic principles and teachings. In this regard, I would like to commend Ford Foundation for sponsoring workshops on this theme across regions to enable views and voices especially of women to be heard on matters concerning their basic survival and well-being.

4. Islam has placed men and women as equal in the right to attain a healthy and productive quality of life. It is therefore imperative that boys and girls, men and women, be treated the same, justly and fairly, and be given equal access to education and health care, food and nutrition, employment and income, safety and security, and faith and religion. Why is it that this fundamental right of girls and women not realised in many Muslim countries and communities? This question should be studied seriously — whether it is Islam that is the constraint or the interpretation of Islam? Often teachings of Islam are intertwined with cultural, traditional or social beliefs which lead to incorrect interpretation, confusion and prejudice. The controversy of Cairo must be unveiled and we must not allow conservative or extremist views to impede the rights and justice for Muslim girls, women and families.

5 Both Cairo and Beijing laid emphasis on "advancing gender equality and equity, empowerment of women, elimination of all kinds of violence against women, ensuring women's ability to control their own fertility". The importance of education of girls and young women. for universal access to quality health services, and for equal land, credit and employment access to women was reiterated at the World Summit for Social Development in 1995. Are these basic human principles against the teachings of Islam? The reality of the situation in many Muslim communities today is that girls are still denied schooling; women's sexual and reproductive health needs are widely neglected; women still lack the right to own land, to inherit property or to have access to credit; they face job discrimination and have a low social status. Within the home, women usually have the primary responsibility for child care and household chores and are not able to make decisions on their family size. In more unfortunate societies, gender discrimination begins very early

in life, sometimes even before the baby is born. Deep rooted traditions and cultural beliefs for son preference can result in neglect of the girl child.

6. Let us ponder at some of these current realities! Why is genital mutilation of girls and women which leads to serious health consequences, still practised among Muslim communities in East and West Africa and parts of the Arabian Peninsular? Why are almost 46 percent of girls in India married between the ages of 15 to 19; or as early as 10 or 11 years of age. and made to endure the severe risk of early pregnancies when their bodies and mind are not yet ready? Why are girls in Afghanistan prevented from going to schools and only 30 percent of girls in Pakistan enrolled for primary schools? Why are reproductive health services such as family planning, health care during pregnancy and delivery by trained personnel not accessible to many women in the developing world including countries in this region? These questions are but a few to reflect the marked differences that exist between the way boys and girls are treated even as we approach the threshold of a new century.

7. It is time that we seek to remove all traditional, cultural, or legal constraints and barriers that inhibit girl's and women's access to development especially education, health care, employment and inheritance. We must not use Islam as the reason or excuse for these basic denials or inequalities, rather we must use Islam to promote the removal of these man-made barriers. We know the value of education for girls and women and we must strive to empower them.

8. It is not easy to talk about reproductive health as it touches on the most sensitive and intimate part of our lives and are considered as private and family matters. Such is the case of sexual abuse and violence, and transmission of life debilitating infections such as STD's and HIV/AIDS. This issue is a serious and increasing one and merits concerted comprehensive interventions for prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation. Commercial sex is rife, luring an estimated 2 million girls between the ages of 5 and 15 years, also involving trafficking of minor girls. Violence in the home is extremely common, girls and women are subjected to unwanted pregnancies, and women including wives are unable to negotiate for safe sex with their spouses thus facing the risk of being

infected with STD, HIV/AIDS. The time has come for us to speak about these issues openly and frankly; to provide girls and women with the necessary information, education, counselling and services; and to create a more favourable and enabling environment for human development. We must change the way we think, behave and act and we must remove all obstacles, superstitions, prejudices and stereotypes.

9. Let us share and learn from our experiences, and carve a strategy that will lead to prompt and decisive action for the betterment of the Muslim Ummah. We have the necessary knowledge and technology, so let us put them into action within the true context of Islam. By the year 2000, it is estimated that 13 million women world wide will have been infected with HIV, of whom more than 4 million women will die. We have to act now and put minor differences or disagreements aside. Preventing unnecessary suffering and burdens of disease and ill health are noble needs in Islam as emulated by Prophet Mohamad S.A.W.

10. In South East Asia, we are more fortunate than our sisters in South Asia or Sub Saharan Africa. We continue to enjoy better health and an increased life expectancy. Nevertheless many urgent problems remain to be addressed. In some of our countries, maternal mortality remains high, access to basic health care, and family planning is still lacking; and innocent girls and women are highly vulnerable to HIV/AIDS infection and discrimination. Women in Malaysia are fortunate as there are no constitutional nor policy barriers to women's participation. Women have equal access to education, health and social services. Our educational system has enabled 99 percent primary school enrollment with equal girl participation and more than 90 percent of mothers and children have access to basic health care. The Amanah Ikhtiar Programme, an NGO self help micro credit financing scheme, has enabled more than 45,000 rural and poor women to improve their livelihood and personal confidence.

11. We know we still have room for improvement; to improve acceptance of modern methods of contraception especially for high risk and multifarious women, and further reduce our maternal mortality from 39 per 100,000 to 20 per 100,000 as obtained through the new system of Confidential

Maternal Death Enquiry. We have also started handling the issue of reproductive health and sexuality of adolescents and youth to enable them to make responsible and informed decisions and choices. We are concerned with the increase in HIV/AIDS in women, children and youths and is addressed through a partnership between the government, NGO's and the civil society.

12. I am happy to see that this forum has a good representation of Muslim women scholars, scientists, professionals and policy makers in addition to theologians. This I hope would seek to remove the traditional notion that Islamic laws are in favour of the perspective of men rather than the concerns of women. It will also seek to reduce the much attention given to issues such as rights of men in polygamy and the interpretation of 'nusu' rather than of a harmonious and balanced marital relationship.

13. We have to break our communication barriers and work collectively to improve the quality of the Muslim ummah. We must advocate strongly for the removal of all forms of oppression, discrimination, coercion and violence against Muslim girls and women. Your workshop is a test to this challenge and I look forward to your recommendations.

14. We are facing difficult times in the economies of countries of our region. Let this not negate or hinder our strength, dedication and progress. Our Sisters and Brothers stricken by poverty; displaced by crisis, conflict situations, and economic sanctions; or inflicted with violence, abuse or infection, depend on us as their leaders and guardians. Let us give them the love, compassion, care and justice as our religion Islam asks of each of us.
