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AT THE ASEAN CONFEDERATION OF WOMEN'S  
ORGANISATIONS SECOND ASSEMBLY AND SEMINAR  
AT MING COURT HOTEL, KUALA LUMPUR  
ON SATURDAY, 25TH. JANUARY, 1986  
AT 9.30 A.M.

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THEME: PROFESSIONALISATION OF ASEAN WOMEN  
IN NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS  
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Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would, at the outset like to thank the ASEAN Confederation of Women's Organisations for the kind invitation to be present and to declare open this Second ACWO Assembly and Seminar. The theme of the Seminar is 'Professionalisation of ASEAN Women in Non-Governmental Organisations'.

2. It is with a certain amount of perplexity that one initially considers the theme. Professionalisation of Women in non governmental organisations? Why? These are the few questions that arise.

3. The long accepted concept about Non-Governmental Organisations or NGOs, and women who belong to and make up these organisations, place emphasis on a rather laissez faire affiliation. Often there were some important and other not so important tasks to be undertaken and women joined one or the other organisation thus giving only a little time to a few programmes. Society in general looked upon the NGOs and women who made up the membership, at times

with interest, at other times with an element of irritation and at most times with a fair amount of amusement.

4. Most of us who are here today must have often heard statements referring to our participation in NGOs as either a means of escapism or sessions when women got together for their most enjoyable passtime gossip. The umbrage women experienced at cynical snide remarks has not been unknown. Whilst we contend that these notions held and expressed were unjust and unkind in the extreme, we recognise that perhaps the manner in which women played their parts in these organisations did give rise to doubts and occasionally to severe criticism.

5. It is true that in the past, a large number of NGOs geared themselves to programmes which attracted either the blue stocking, or the 'do gooder' or society's snob or social climber. NGOs drew largely on the more affluent women for their membership. These women came together and carried out charitable welfare services for the less privileged and the more economically depressed groups. Service rendered took the form of distribution of food, clothing and cash.

6. At this point it is important to recognise that despite these limitations, the few NGOs that existed in that era, did in fact lay the foundation for what is today women's more active and well thought out participation in NGOs. Many unselfish, dedicated and deeply committed women sacrificed time and effort, their personal comfort of a leisured life, faced severe criticism by leaving the sheltered home and the normal pursuits of polite society, to work to establish the few NGO's that existed. Let no woman of this present era be over critical or decry the efforts of these women among whom were some of the most outstanding women who contributed to what is now the present structure of NGOs.

7. Women in the ASEAN region have witnessed in the past 50 years vast changes in life. Their perennial role of mother, wife and homemaker has seen dramatic evolution giving rise to present day women undertaking tremendous additional responsibilities.

8. It is necessary to recognise that in most ASEAN countries NGOs are essentially a post World War II feature.

9. The NGOs have extended their role to cater for the needs of vast numbers of women. No longer are NGOs the monopoly and domain of only high society affluent ladies who give out of their largess and work on the basic principles of charity.

10. Women in NGOs today have evolved with nation building and national development and have moved into all spheres of life. The essential contribution of women in the total life of any nation is indisputable. The demands made upon women have, as I stated earlier, increased. There has consequently arisen the urgent need to prepare women for not merely this last 15 years of the twentieth century but more importantly for the twenty first century. How best can this be done?

11. In countries with totalitarian governments, the strategy is for the governments to take over totally all arrangements and dictate as they feel and think fit. Organisations are rigidly controlled.

12. In countries such as ours, in the ASEAN region, our peoples function and live under political philosophies which aim not only at the maintenance but the development of democracy as well. Here there is scope and opportunity to plan, to work together, to critically appraise, to debate, to register objection and to forward differing and different opinions. It is here that NGOs play a vital role.

13. Numerous NGOs today aim for the full participation of women in every sphere - the home, the professions, business and economic sectors, social and civic life and in the political field. For such a full participation to be effective it is essential that NGOs play an even more meaningful and positive role.

14. NGOs have in this past UN Decade for Women come to the deep realisation of the urgent need to depart from the older philosophy prevalent among NGOs of charity work, however useful this may have been. For the greater majority of these organisations, the basic philosophy today is the self development of a person, and the self-reliance and dignity which comes with this development.

15. NGOs and their membership have reached a stage where their programmes encompass a variety of activities both within the specific organisations and vis-a-vis their interaction within the community, country and nations. Accepting this changed role of NGOs it becomes clear that there is an essential need for the professionalisation of women in NGOs.

16. Let us glance at ACWO's sub themes or the major areas of action wherein women through NGOs find themselves required to play a role.

#### Women As Complete Homemakers

17. From time immemorial women have been the mainstay of the basic entity in any society - the family. They have shouldered responsibilities from the performance of household and house-keeping chores to being the teacher, medical practitioner, nurse, arbitrator and the spiritual guide. In simple terms she is the most vital stabilising factor in any family.

18. Many still hold the false premise that this role of homemaker, mother and wife held by a woman from the beginning of time meant that the women be strictly confined to the four walls of the home. She was fit only for the chores assigned to her by men in particular and society in general.

19. However, closer investigation will reveal that alongside her active life within the home, the women worked outside in the fields alongside her husband and assisted in home-bound minor industry which brought in income, however small, to the family.

20. Today, the NGOs catering for women and housewives are making a firm stand on the principle that the Housewife -- the Homemaker carrying onerous duties -- be given the recognition due to her. What is at issue is the total lack of real recognition for the vital time consuming daily household management. Recognition in real terms is required to make the work of the homemaker accountable and estimatable in more tangible forms. This recognition of the important efforts of the housewife is inseparable from the dignity which must be accorded to the women.

21. The present day situation with the ever increasing responsibilities the homemaker has to accept has given rise to the increasing need for women to oft times combine her position as homemaker with the tasks, which she decides or is forced by serious financial constraints to take upon herself in the field of gainful employment.

22. At the last Seminar for the National Council of Women's Organisations, Malaysia, held to assess the work accomplished in the period of the UN Decade of Women, it is interesting to note an important paragraph in the Report, pertaining to the present day woman as a homemaker:

"Many existing social problems such as moral decay, drug addiction, disintegration of large families or extended families for which women have been made the scape goat need the joint partnership role of men and women for sound family life, shared responsibility and for the solution of these problems. There is no denying that the multiple roles women have to play calls for a reservoir of resilience and preparation to help alleviate the stress and strain of present day life".

23. There is great truth in this statement. Each and every woman therefore has to be aware of the tremendously increased responsibilities she shoulders today. Society, the nation and the world demands the active participation of women in all development programmes and in international affairs. What is oft times confusing and conflicting is that the woman is regarded as being totally responsible for the well-being of the family. The correction of this erroneous idea demands that the man, the husband and father be called upon to fulfil his essential role in the family in full partnership with the woman, his wife.

24. I have been informed that in recognition of the fact that the homemaker, the housewife requires a status commensurate with her heavy duties, the NCWO has taken the step to call on the Government to give recognition so that such work be given monetary value by conducting a study to determine how a housewife, if not engaged in gainful employment as we understand this, can enjoy an allocation from or percentage of her husband's income and be eligible for separate tax assessment. This is but one step towards what may be regarded as the professionalisation aspects of the homemaker.

25. For the homemaker to experience all that life has to offer her, in other words to be a complete homemaker, there emerges the need for a certain degree of professional skills to be acquired by her. Time consuming tasks have to be undertaken in a more scientific manner so that the woman be freed to participate in the excitement of active everyday life. Some of the new vistas must become a part of her life and she experiences that fulfilment which results from being an individual with rights and privileges accruing to her.

Women In Professions, Management And  
As Community Volunteers.

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26. Women have entered into professions, management and community voluntary work. They need to recognise that their positions can only be enhanced by accepting the fact that in any job or sector of employment, professionalism is an inextricable feature and therefore they should work towards this goal.

27. From the highly qualified professional and the executive in management to the women on the assembly line of a factory, the innate dignity of the individual has to be established. It should be a normal part of a company's policy to provide training facilities and opportunities to all workers so as to enable them to become qualified and skilled personnel v/ith adequate opportunities for promotion.

Trade Unions and Professionalism.

28. It is imperative that women in employment at every level be part of the organised trade union movement. There was a period when trade unions existed as bands of workers of a certain category only to establish the case for better emoluments and terms of service. Trade unions in our country have rendered great service to all sectors they

served. The unity of purpose of workers strengthened their position and many improvements were brought in.

29. Today, trade unionism has in the vast majority of cases adopted other roles so essential to the well-being of their members as well as becoming an acknowledged partner for national development. Courses and specific training for key members with the aim of raising the status of the workers, giving them a sense of pride in the work they are engaged in and a recognition of their own worth - their self image, have become a part of the on-going programme of trade unions.

30. If these changes have been brought in, it becomes imperative that women achieve leadership roles in the top decision making bodies of trade unions and bring into focus their points of view and thus make their contribution at every level of the trade union movement.

31. Professionalism, it must be accepted, demands a deep understanding of ethics, accountability, credibility, integrity and responsibility and efficiency. These are principles which are acknowledged as essential for any government or group which seeks to serve the nation - the people. For this type of professionalism women by their very nature are most suited to become pioneers and form the vanguard for.

#### Professionalism And Women In Trade.

32. A study of the ASEAN region will reveal that in certain areas of our individual countries women have for centuries engaged in trade. Petty market trade and trade in handicraft executed by women in their homes have been accepted activities of our women. Sale of agricultural produce and handicraft was not organised in any major way. The normal practice of exploitation of these

producers by the middle-man was rampant. The lack of an organisation to prevent this exploitation made the position of the woman engaged in trade even more critical. It therefore became evident that some form of NGO or quasi government organisation was necessary to stem the malpractices of exploitation. Here the co-operative movement played a significant role enabling action to be taken in the right direction.

33. Women engaged in trade have now moved further afield. We have examples of successful development of skills and acquirement of expertise in this sector. Professional skills pertaining to the know-how of the trade banking facilities being made available, women taking on sales promotion, ascertaining marketing requirements, assessing the consumers acceptability of the products and maintaining quality control have increasingly become recognised.

34. NGOs such as the Women's Institutes in Malaysia, must be given the credit for entering into this area. The courses run by Women's Institutes have sharpened the acumen of simple village women and enabled these women to progress and develop skills until then not thought possible. These achievements must in turn spur NGOs to move even more vigorously to greater efforts and to widen the scope of activity to embrace much larger numbers of women.

#### Women And the Imperatives of Professionalism in Politics

35. Imperatives of Professionalism in Politics does touch on a variation from the generally accepted norm. It is in the first instance imperative for women and men to acknowledge that fifty percent of the adult population consists of women. This automatically means that women, their views, their aspirations and their needs must be given serious consideration.

36. It is accepted that every adult must have an interest in politics. Life - almost every phase of it, is influenced by politics. Therefore the citizen has a primary duty to take interest in politics and what governments do, how governments function and what they plan to do.

37. Be that as it may, there appears to be more demands of women. Women need to recognise that their views must not only be heard but given consideration. For centuries women were deprived of a share in government. Time have changed and today women have in the vast majority of the countries in the world come into their own. By law these rights exist and often are enshrined in constitutions of countries. The questions which surfaces are whether women have taken advantage of the opportunities afforded them? Do archaic male concepts of women's unsuitability for politics still exist? Are the allocations given to women leaders of proven ability, who have been and continue to be active in politics commensurate with the vast numbers of women in our countries? These are vital questions.

38. The professional imperatives in politics must mean that it has become necessary for politicians to take on almost a full time basis their responsibilities in this field.

39. It may be useful for NGOs to identify women who have the potential and to seek the approval of the decision making body of political parties for these women leaders to stand for elections.

40. It is imperative also that these recognised women political leaders be given the opportunity to develop their ability via the provision of being involved in election strategies and the party machinery. They must also take steps to develop even further their confidence in themselves.

41. Professionalisation of women in politics is clearly-apparent in the few women politicians we have in our various countries. In this Seminar, I am sure, the delegates will discuss in greater depth one or two recommendations made by NCWO. Malaysia which calls for women's organisations to undertake, with the assistance of academically qualified women, studies and research regarding women's position in politics and other areas. This recommendation should be pursued even further in order that action in the right direction may be taken.

Conclusion.

42. The period of UN Decade for Women has been officially extended till the year 2000. This is not too far off. Many of us who are present here will in all probability still be around. It is our hope that many of the recommendations made at the end of the Women's Decade will be realised. NGOs have a specially vital role to play in these affairs.

43. With modernisation and new opportunities opened, women have ventured into newer fields in industries and the services. Women have become more involved in economic development resulting in a discernible level of improvement in their socio-economic position.

44. Let us remember also that in our race for materialistic progress the nations should not forget the qualitative aspects of life. We also need spiritual advancement, health, education, harmony, freedom and a healthy environment. Equality and development will not be meaningful if there is no unity and peace among our people. Therefore we must together work for these objectives as well.

Thank you.