

**SPECIAL ADDRESS BY YANG AMAT BERBAHAGIA
DATIN SERI DR SITI HASMAH BINTI HAJI MOHD ALI
CHAIRPERSON OF RSC-AP
AT THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE
SECOND MEETING OF THE RSC-AP
AT THE HOTEL MANDARIN ORIENTAL, KUALA LUMPUR
ON TUESDAY, 26 SEPTEMBER 2000
AT 9.50 A.M.**

Allow me to extend to all of you a very warm welcome to Malaysia and to the Second RSC-AP meeting. I am sure our esteemed delegates are looking forward to a very meaningful meeting. At the same time, I hope you have some time to visit interesting and beautiful places around Kuala Lumpur.

2. The theme of the second RSC-AP meeting is "Poverty and Empowerment". At this meeting, their Excellencies the First Ladies who are wives of Heads of State or Government in the region of Asia and the Pacific, will raise issues of immense global concern, that is poverty, gender-specific barriers to poverty eradication faced by rural women, and the need for women, especially the poor, to be empowered. As poverty is complex and interrelated, we will also explore issues on the health of rural women, particularly regarding their access to health information, counselling and care services on communicable diseases such as STDs, HIV and AIDS. In addition issues on women's representation at high-level decision-making positions will be discussed and strategies to enhance rural women's capacities to function effectively in power-sharing and decision-making positions, will be identified for immediate implementation

3. Allow me at this juncture to give a brief background of the Regional Steering Committee for the Advancement of Rural and Island Women Asia Pacific, also known as RSC-AP. This committee was set up in response to the call by The International Steering Committee for the Economic Advancement of Rural Women, the ISC which was established immediately as a follow-up to the Geneva Summit for Rural Women in

1992. Membership is open to countries whose First Ladies are concerned and interested to contribute to the advancement of women and children, especially poor women in the rural areas. To date, RSC-AP members comprise some sixteen First Ladies. We hope to expand membership to other countries throughout the region, especially to those who share our concerns in pursuing our cause.

4. The uniqueness of the Geneva Summit is that it was initiated by a group of five dynamic First Ladies from five regions of the world, who, under the auspices of Her Majesty Queen Fabiola of Belgium, called upon the UN - International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), to organise the summit. The Geneva Summit was attended by sixty First Ladies in addition to other international dignitaries. They were accompanied by high ranking officials from their respective countries. The success of the Geneva Summit is testimony to the genuine concerns and sensitivity of this special group of First Ladies towards the poor living conditions of the marginalised, disadvantaged and the poorest of the poor, rural women world-wide.

5. Here today, together with us in this conference are the First Ladies in the Asia Pacific region who have committed their time and energy, to help monitor the implementation of the follow-up objectives of the Geneva Declaration, with emphasis on alleviation of poverty amongst rural women.

6. The RSC-AP carries the mandate of the ISC, to advocate on behalf of the rural women for political commitment at the highest level of national and international governance. The members shall continue to highlight the critical issues affecting rural and island women, and urging national Governments for speedy implementation of affirmative action programmes for the poor women. We shall also urge relevant bodies to observe and fulfill obligations as most of our countries are signatories to world conferences and conventions such as the Fourth World Conference on Women 1995, the Micro Summit of 1997; the Geneva Summit of 1992 and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms Of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW - Article 14 on rural women).

As members, the First Ladies of RSC-AP will also advocate for:

- The mobilisation of public opinion throughout the Asia Pacific region by highlighting the economic contributions made by rural and island women;
- Change the stereotyping of rural women as passive recipients of welfare and instead work towards ensuring that they are the prime movers of development;
- Maximum utilisation of the untapped potentials of rural women for targeting poverty eradication and as active players for socio-economic development;
- the mobilisation of resources between Governments, NGOs, the business communities in the private sector, as well as international development and donor agencies, so that immediate results in matching resources to the needs of rural women could be achieved.

7. The Regional Steering Committee for the Advancement of Rural and Island Women in Asia Pacific is a non-political committee of First Ladies who come from diverse background. Our primary concern is to improve the lives of the unfortunate, the exploited, the hard-to reach and often forgotten groups of society i.e. the poor rural and island women. As an advocacy group, members of the RSC-AP, stand above any differences in politics, economic, ethnicity, religion, ideological and cultural values. We stand united as a caring group, sensitive to the needs of the needy, wherever they might be - from the smallest islands in the Pacific; to the harsh deserts of Mongolia; the hazardous mountain region of Pakistan; the parched, infertile farms of India; the flood-ravaged lowlands of Bangladesh, among the ruins of war-torn Cambodia; as well as reaching out to the remote interiors of the equatorial rainforest of South East Asia.

8. This is reflected in activities carried out for the rural and island women by member countries. As regional activities, the RSC-AP secretariat in Malaysia has

successfully organised consultative meetings with experts on rural development, gender and women in development from member countries, international and regional development agencies, to implement activities for the region. Three critical areas of concerns for the region were prioritised and offered as regional training programmes.

9. In response to the call for poverty eradication amongst rural women, the RSC-AP had organised jointly with the Islamic Republic of Iran, a Seminar on the Alleviation of Poverty through Micro Credit held in Iran in April 1997. This was followed by a nine day intensive training on "Micro Finance Management Development Training Workshop" held in Malaysia in August 1997. This workshop was sponsored by the Government of Malaysia and funds were raised from sponsors in the corporate sector.

10. With resources from international development agencies, such as grants awarded by the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA) and Japan International Cultural Affairs (JICA), RSC-AP was able to launch two types of training of trainers programme, for the benefit of rural and island women in the region. Under the sponsorship of JICA and the Government of Malaysia, a "Third Country Training on Economic Enhancement through Scaling up of Women Micro Enterprise to Small Scale Enterprise" was offered from 1997 to 1999. The RSC-AP encourages smart-partnership between Government and non-government agencies, as a strategy to reach out to the poor.

11. For UNFPA funded projects, which cover the period between 1997 to 2000, a training - cum - pilot project was designed and implemented in one of the states in the east coast of Malaysia. The project was entitled "Enhancing Family Health through the promotion of Gender-sensitive healthy living Practices".

12. For the second phase, several gender-responsive programmes were designed and implemented by the trained personnel. An integrated "Health Camps" were organised as means to disseminate health information and services; Smart-partnership

programmes on training on **Scaling-up** of women micro enterprises, and "IQ Stimulation Programme for Preschoolers" as a Family development project, were also conducted.

13. For phase 3, the objective was to share the gender perspectives of family health modules and pilot site experiences with participants from member countries. In this workshop, participants focused their discussion on Gender and HIV/AIDS. The workshop was attended by some thirty three participants from twenty two countries in the Asia Pacific region.

14. For future activities, the RSC-AP members are expected to conduct sub-regional activities on topics of importance affecting the rural and island women of their sub-regions. For South-East Asia, JICA has continued their financial support for another three years, for the **scaling-up** of women micro-enterprise projects. We also hope the participants who have had training offered by the RSC-AP would follow up by replicating the programmes in their own countries. Financial resources can be mobilised and expertise shared through active advocacy of the First ladies of RSC-AP. We must ensure that all programmes reach our target, namely the poor women in the villages.

15. My term of tenure as chairperson of the RSC-AP will end in the year 2001. I would very much like to see more activities be initiated in the sub-regions and member countries where the benefits could directly reach the rural and island women. With the support of our national Governments, donor agencies and the corporate sector, I am optimistic that the RSC-AP will continue to be a catalyst to bring change into the lives of the poorest of the poor, i.e. the rural and island women.
