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DATIN SERI DR. SITI HASMAH BTE HAJI MOHD ALI  
AT THE CLOSING OF THE PAN PACIFIC AND SOUTH-EAST ASIA  
WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION (PPSEAWA) CONFERENCE  
AT THE HILTON HOTEL, KUALA LUMPUR  
ON TUESDAY, 2 SEPTEMBER 1997  
AT 11.30 A.M

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Women : The Way Forward

I am very happy and honoured to be invited here this morning to deliver this closing address to the distinguished delegates of the 20th Pan-Pacific and South-East Asia Women's Association (PPSEAWA) International Conference. I wish to take this opportunity to welcome all of you, especially PPSEAWA sisters from overseas, who have graced us with your presence in Malaysia and hope your stay here has been enjoyable and fruitful.

2. As Patron of PPSEAWA Malaysia and President of the International Steering Committee on the Economic Advancement of Rural and Island Women the subject of women's commitment and participation in extending a willing and supportive hand to our less fortunate and needy sisters and children throughout the world is one which is closest to me. My heartfelt gratitude and appreciation therefore goes to each and everyone of the 400 delegates from twenty-two countries of the Asia-Pacific Region who have gathered here to deliberate on issues focusing on a matter of immense global and timely concern, that is, fostering equality, peace and international understanding for a better world. More importantly, you have translated some of these visions into reality. The PPSEAWA International Plan of Action is reflective of the aspirations of women around the world and reaffirms the views and concerns of the international conferences held over the last few years. As I attach great importance to the issues you have been discussing, I have followed your

developments closely. At the same time, I also hope you have had some time to look around the shops and sights of Kuala Lumpur in between the tight conference schedules.

3. The theme selected for this conference, "strengthening alliances for a better world towards the 21st century" is an excellent choice, not only in terms of its priority in the PPSEAWA agenda but also from the perspective of its global importance as we move towards the threshold of the next millennium. This theme is also relevant in the perspective of shaping and consolidating a meaningful and achievable developmental agenda for women, children and families while pursuing the encompassing objectives of equality, development and peace. I believe that these are exciting and challenging times for women, especially those of us who are fortunate enough to have the opportunity of voicing our thoughts, ideas and suggestions to bring hope and happiness to more women and families.

4. I am happy to see that the PPSEAWA Plan of Action you have recommended includes some innovative strategies, programmes and activities which will foster peace for a better world, strengthen alliances within and between our countries and chapters, and uphold the rights and integrity of women into the 21st century. I believe that it is only with a clear vision, positive mission, strong determination and unity that we will be successful in our endeavours.

5. Let me share with you some of the basic facts and concerns facing women in the world today. Although women represent more than half the world's population, they comprise a disproportionate number of the world's poor and illiterate. Yet globally, women are still denied access to education, health care, credit and political and legal rights. Violence against women, discrimination, exploitation and increased exposure to ill health and suffering is also a universal threat.

6. Women earn one tenth of the world's income and constitute nearly 60 percent of the world's one billion rural poor, own less than one tenth of the world's property though they grow half of the world's food and form nearly half of the world's labour force. Each year about 580,000 women die from complications due to pregnancy and childbirth, while another two hundred thousand die due to unsafe abortions. Today, women constitute 40 percent of HIV infected adults; and by the year 2000, more than 14 million women may become infected with the virus of whom about four million may die.

7. Women and children together make up three-quarters of the world population. Therefore, women have the added responsibility and opportunity to shape three-quarters of the world population and its future generations. The empowerment of women and the betterment of our children is not something that just happens. We must make it happen. We must change our mindset and reprogram ourselves to move beyond our traditional roles and explore our full potential as we approach the next millennium. Women's realisation of their full potential as human beings as daughters, mothers, wives, workers and contributors to the development of their communities and the nation is of extreme importance, especially in developing countries. Attitudinal changes related to the environment, eliminating harmful traditional and cultural practices, and the impeding attitudes of women themselves which are influenced by the community as a whole, are often slow to take effect. This is one of the" major obstacles to women's progress and development and this paradigm change must begin with us.

8. We must first change the way women are perceived in society; and in societies where women are devalued or undermined, we must work to change them. It cannot happen overnight. We all know that, but we do have to start. We have to take one step at a time, as quoted by the Chinese philosopher, Lao Tze, "A Journey of a 1,000 Miles Begins With One First Step."

9. In the course of progress and development, the responsibilities of women have changed but their basic functions as wife, mother and breadwinner are still the same and are not duly recognised. This situation illustrates the constraints on a women worker of her biologically-dictated and socially - ascribed parental responsibilities, that is, giving birth to children, and feeding and rearing them. When, how much, how long, and how she can engage in income earning activity is basically determined by this parenting role, which traditionally has been regarded as her \*primary' function.

10. The rapid increase of dual career families poses new challenges today as women balance delicately their work and family responsibilities. Due to the costs of living and strive for a better quality of life, the vast majority of married working women opt to stay on in their jobs even after having children. Therefore, governments are urged to be supportive through facilitating family-friendly and employment-friendly policies such as flexitime, healthcare benefits and childcare facilities which will improve the productivity and well-being of both women and men.

11. In this rapidly changing world, progress is not made by taking pride in our present achievements but by critically examining these situations, setting higher targets and attempting to achieve them. We need to constantly" challenge ourselves, our ideas, our methods and our results. We must be realistic in facing both the weaknesses and strengths of our approaches and learn the lessons that will help change our future for the better.

12. This is perhaps an opportune time to remember the dedication and sincere efforts of group of women from the Pacific Region who founded PPSEAWA in 1928, in the aftermath of the First World War. It was the suffering of women and children in the war that built the roots PPSEAWA's objective for peace, cooperation, goodwill and understanding among nations.

13. While we are participating in this conference amidst peace and harmony among us in Kuala Lumpur, hundreds of thousands of women and children are facing the perils of survival due to civil war, strife and conflict, or are facing acute malnutrition and starvation due to natural mishaps or adversity. At any one time, a third of the world is involved in some kind of struggle or war. Political and civil upheaval have been tearing whole countries apart - from Bosnia and Herzegovina to Iraq and Rwanda. Entire generations have grown up in the midst of brutal armed conflicts while children are educated' in the art of weaponry. Permit me to quote from the 1996 diary of a 10 year old Bosnian girl who said "No film can adequately depict the suffering, the fear and the terror that my people are experiencing. Sarajevo is awash in blood, and graves are appearing everywhere. I beg you in the name of Bosnian children never to allow this to happen to you or to people anywhere else."

14. The waves of violence that have swept across the world in recent years have uprooted an enormous number of people, most of whom are innocent women and children. Husbands and young sons are forced to fight while women fend for themselves and their young children. Total number of uprooted people is currently around 53 million; one out of every 115 people on earth has been forced into flight. In Somalia, during 1992, half or more of all the children under the age of five on 1st January were dead by 31st December. The psychological effects of war are painful and life-long.

15 . The former United Nations Secretary-general Boutros Boutros-Ghali in his address to the delegates of the Association for Women in Development Forum in Washington DC, in September 1996, noted that "women are a strong force for peace and called for the greater involvement of women in the prevention of conflict." Let us as the PPSEAWA family continue to spread this message for peace and non-violence across our frontiers in every possible way.

16. It has been said that "a society which neglects the education of its women does so at its own peril" for without female education, progress can only be transmitted to each generation either very slowly or not at all. Education is one of the most critical areas of empowerment for women as both the Cairo and Beijing Conferences affirmed. The empowerment of women through education, equal employment opportunities, access to health care and changes in legal systems is among the goals set forth in the programme of action adopted at the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo in 1994. It is also an area that offers some of the clearest examples of discrimination that women suffer. While progress has been made in terms of women's access to education, women still comprise two-thirds of people who cannot read or write. Girls constitute the majority of the 130 million children who have no access to primary school education.

17. There are more than humanitarian reasons for investing in women. Where women remain illiterate, democratic institutions are more fragile and the environment less well-managed. Experience proves that investing in girls' education goes hand-in-hand with economic opportunity. Studies from a number of countries suggest that an extra year of schooling will increase a woman's future earnings by about 15 percent, compared with 11 percent for a man. When women are empowered, they not only transform their own lives, but the lives of their families and communities as well. Governments and NGOs can only help to empower women by providing the necessary facilities and opportunities. Ultimately, it is the women who can and must empower herself and pull herself out from a position of marginalisation or oppression to one of self-reliance, pride, confidence and determination.

18. In parts of the world where the status of women has been duly recognised there is generally a higher quality of life. Therefore, I feel that it is extremely important for us to

continue to learn, change, and grow. I think for women in the Asia-Pacific, all women in fact, learning will help transport us to newer and heightened levels of awareness and enlightenment. Greater education opportunities and training will improve women's capacity to face challenges and obstacles, to think for themselves and to take rational and informed decisions. Today, only but a few outstanding women have emerged as focal points for major social reforms, development and governance while many more women continue to face a life of basic daily survival. Our role in development is not to compete with men but to be at their side, to be at the same pace and with equal footing and opportunity. We must first develop ourselves psychologically, sociologically and economically if we are to enjoy equal rights, opportunities and responsibilities; and we need to continually re-examine and re-assess our role in the light of changing conditions.

19. The Fourth World Conference For Women, held in September 1995, in Beijing was the culmination of a series of international conferences that have addressed issues of concern to women as well as men. At the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio, women were recognised as environmental managers and key to sustainable development; at the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, governments acknowledged that women's rights are human rights; in Cairo, in 1994, women's health and rights were recognised as central to effective population and development policy; and at the 1995 Social Summit in Copenhagen, women's empowerment was seen as essential to gender equity and equality.

20. In Beijing, the nations of the world adopted a comprehensive Platform for Action, focusing on 12 "critical areas of concern" identified as obstacles to the advancement of women. These include : poverty, inequality in education; lack of access to health care, employment and economic participation; environmental degradation; inequality in sharing of power and decision-making; negative images of women in the mass media; women's human rights violation; and violence against women. It also recognised that

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23. More than one billion people in the world today, the great majority of whom are women, live in unacceptable conditions of poverty. In the spirit of humanity, we must look for urgent ways to make a difference. The International Steering Committee (ISC) founded in 1992 under the patronage of Her Majesty Queen Fabiola of Belgium is an advocacy group consisting of 16 committed First Ladies and wives of Heads of Government who have dedicated their energy and time working towards poverty alleviation among rural and island women. In my present capacity as President of the ISC, I will endeavour to promote programmes to further enhance the development of women and their families. I believe that one such programme is the micro-credit or micro-financing scheme. This initiative is a powerful tool to help move such women out of the grips of the vicious poverty cycle and allow them to utilise and fulfil their untapped potential. It also gives women a sense of self-reliance, achievement, self-confidence, self-esteem and respect.

24. At the Micro-Credit Summit in Washington DC, in February 1997, the ISC endorsed Plan of Action was to strengthen and expand micro-credit programmes to meet the Summit's campaign to reach 100 million women and their families living in destitution, by the year 2005. Earlier this month, Malaysia hosted a Regional Steering Group Workshop For The Asia and Pacific to develop further the implementation of this scheme to improve the lives of the poorest of rural and island women in the region.

25. In the fast-changing societies in the Asia-Pacific and definitely in Malaysia, while we are experiencing accelerated economic growth, we have to be aware of newer forms of oppression and discrimination that may arise to marginalise women. Feminisation of poverty, rise in female headed households and women infected and affected by HIV/AIDS are such examples. In Malaysia, the Poverty Eradication Programme, the Amanah Ikhtiar or micro-credit scheme, the Cabinet Committee on Social Ills and specific NGOs groups continue to create awareness and formulate appropriate intervention strategies.

26. At the homefront, women in Malaysia are fortunate because there are no constitutional barriers to women's participation in politics and decision-making. They have the basic right to vote, to participate in all spheres of development and have equal access to education, health and social services. These are some of the factors that have contributed to the economic and social advancement of Malaysian women.

27. Since independence, the National Socio-Economic Development Plans have focused on promoting peace, harmony and unity within a multi-ethnic country with emphasis on rural development, eradication of poverty and provision of basic social services to the whole population without any discrimination of minority groups. The education infrastructure has enabled 99 percent of primary school enrolment with equal girl enrolment, while health services are available to more than 90 percent of women and children. As a result of intensive strategies and programmes to uplift the health and social status of the population, the maternal mortality rate has declined to 0.2 per 1,000 live births in 1995, while infant mortality to 10 per 1,000 live births. The average female life expectancy has improved to 74 years in 1995 and female literacy to 80 percent in 1993.

28. In 1995, female workers made up about 47 percent of the paid labour force with progressive increase in the tertiary sector. Recognising the vital role of women in development and their increasing participation in the labour force, future policies will focus on ensuring wider employment opportunities for women. As stated in the Seventh Malaysia Plan (1996-2000) "The Government will continue to promote a higher level of female participation in the labour market. Measures that will have to be implemented include the setting up of creches as well as the provision of housing and transportation facilities between the home and place of work."

29. As we move into the next millennium, Malaysia's industrialisation programmes, the onset of globalisation and the

Multimedia Super Corridor, which has been described as the link between Malaysia's industrial age and the coming information age, is set to revolutionise our lives. These are among the challenges that Malaysian women and men have to take on with great confidence and optimism. While pursuing industrialisation, we must take urgent remedial measures to prevent the emergent trend in social problems such as drug addiction, child abuse, domestic violence, juvenile delinquency, unhealthy lifestyles and HIV/AIDS. Vision 2020 (a forward looking strategy to develop Malaysia into an industrialised country) has recognised nine central strategic challenges, among them, the challenge to "Establish a fully caring society and a caring culture, a social system in which society will come before self, in which the welfare of the people will revolve not around the state or the individual but around a strong and resilient family system and to establish a moral, ethical, mature, liberal and tolerant society."

30. In addition, we have taken proactive steps in our commitment to improve the status of our women. The Chapter on Women in Development in the Seventh Malaysia Plan (1996 -2000) "will continue with ongoing efforts to provide the enabling environment for women to participate more effectively as partners in development." The strategic thrusts for the further advancement of Malaysian women during this period include : promoting greater female participation in the labour market; improving further the health status of women; reviewing laws and regulations that inhibit the advancement of women in the economy, and forging closer linkages at the international level through effective participation at international fora and implementation of commitments for the advancement of women.

31. Women have come a long way but our journey continues and is never ending. As individuals, in groups, as members of organisations or in international networking we have to seek to realise our vision for the future in equal partnership with men. We must know what we can do collectively; what we can do

individually; and we must have the strength to strive for what is best for us.

32. There are many different ways in which NGOs, and PPSEAWA in particular, can actively take part in ensuring women's development. These include disseminating of information on international agreements; convening workshops and conferences, identifying priority areas for advocacy, finding ways to increase resources for NGOs, and supporting implementation of programmes. NGOs have always excelled in their initiating and pioneering spirit, and this drive must continue.

33. PPSEAWA sisters across chapters must have a shared mission and commitment as we move into the next century. I congratulate you on your success at this 20th Conference in materialising the PPSEAWA International Plan of Action which will be our common framework for increased dedication towards peace, goodwill and harmony in and among nations.

34. My dear sisters, ladies and gentlemen, let us strive for a more compassionate, a more humane and a more sustainable future. Let us reject the violence, discrimination and abuse which has caused so much suffering and untold misery. Let us work together for a society where there is economic and social growth, peace and harmony, balanced with equality and human dignity. The future of the Asia-Pacific is in the hands of its women. Let us rise to the challenge of our times. To be brave, proactive, strong, patient, modest, caring resilient, and honourable is neither a womanly or manly attribute. It is a humane attribute.

35. I would like to close this address by congratulating all of you who have contributed to the success of the 20th PPSEAWA International Conference. In particular, the PPSEAWA delegations, the organisers, the various committees and resource personnel who have so ably managed the fruitful running of the conference. My thanks also to the government, NGOs, the private sector and individuals for their valuable time and support. I

would also like to extend my congratulations to the newly elected PPSEAWA International Council and my appreciation to the outgoing Council for your hard work.

36. I bid you a safe journey home, a pleasant reunion with your families and wish you every success in your future endeavours. Let us pledge our commitment and dedication to the realisation of our resolutions arising from the conference and evaluate our results at the 21st Conference in Cook Islands.

37. In conclusion, I would like to quote from the UNICEF State of the World's Children Report 1996:

"The day will come when the progress of nations will be judged not by their military or economic strength, nor by the splendour of their capital cities and public buildings, but by the well-being of their peoples : by their levels of health, nutrition and education; by their opportunities to earn a fair reward for their labours; by their ability to participate in the decisions that affect their lives; by the respect that is shown for their civil and political liberties; by the provision that is made for those who are vulnerable and disadvantaged; and by the protection that is afforded to the growing minds and bodies of their children".

38. A women's activist, Alice Walker, wrote in her book titled 'Anything We Love Can be saved' that "the world is easier to change than we think because change begins with each of us saying to ourselves and meaning it: I will not harm anyone or anything in this moment.' On this note and with much confidence in PPSEAWA, it gives me great pleasure to declare the 20th PPSEAWA International Conference closed." May Almighty bless and guide us all.

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