

**SPEECH BY DATO SERI DR SITI HASMAH BINTI HAJI MOHD ALI
MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA
FIRST LADY OF MALAYSIA AND CHAIR OF RSC-AP ASIA PACIFIC
MINISTERIAL MEETING
09 OCTOBER 2001**

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak before you today. I speak as chair of the Regional Steering Committee for the Economic Advancement of Rural and Island Women, Asia Pacific, an advocacy group of First Ladies from all over Asia and the Pacific, some of whom are also here today.

2. The mission of the RSC-AP is to raise public awareness and generate political commitment at the highest level for the advancement of rural and island women in Asia Pacific. Its mandate is to monitor the implementation of the Geneva Summit Declaration for Rural Women 1992 focusing on the eradication of poverty among rural women thereby ensuring the well being of women and their families. Poverty, women's access to health as well as access to decision - making and power sharing positions are the critical areas of concern prioritised by RSC-AP for the region.

3. Over the years, we have become increasingly concerned with the vulnerability of rural and island women to HIV/AIDS and the impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic on them. HIV/AIDS thrives in poverty and deepens it, affecting women, their families and communities in many ways. Our mission as RSC-AP therefore cannot be achieved without talking about HIV/AIDS.

4. To this end we have convened here in Melbourne to discuss what we can contribute as First Ladies in the national, regional and international responses to HIV/AIDS. On Saturday October 6th we met with several experts to discuss prevention, treatment, care and support issues related to rural and island women. Based on this discussion, we have issued a statement of our commitment to reducing the HIV vulnerability of rural and island women at a session of the 6th International Congress on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific (ICAAP) on October 7 and I am happy to extend a copy of that statement to you today.

5. When the RSC-AP was given the opportunity to present today, we realised that this was an ideal opportunity to take the first step in realising the commitments in our statement. We have agreed to raise the issue of HIV/AIDS as it affects rural and island women at every possible opportunity. Thus, I, on behalf of the RSC-AP, would like to present our comments on your draft statement on HIV/AIDS.

6. We commend the ministers of Asia and the Pacific for an excellent statement geared to move forward the political will and leadership needed for more effective responses to HIV/AIDS in our region. While it is a comprehensive statement, we note however that there is no mention in it of the special vulnerability of women and young girls to HIV infection in general and of rural and island women in particular. As you are aware, women are becoming increasingly infected and affected

by HIV/AIDS due to many factors including their social and economic status in their countries. Rural and island women who have little access to information, education and communication about HIV/AIDS are even more vulnerable.

7. Therefore we ask that in your deliberations and in your commitments, you pay special attention to HIV/AIDS issues as related to women and younggirls in our countries. In most countries, women make up half the population and contribute significantly to the development of those countries. Many are rural women but without them, there cannot be development. The impact of HIV/AIDS on women therefore will therefore have adverse effects on the social and economic situations of our countries. As mentioned in the UNGASS Declaratio of Commitment, gender inequalities are barriers to effective prevention, treatment, care and support and therefore there is a great need to address these inequalities in every action plan to combat HIV/AIDS, including yours today.

8. Therefore we hope you will consider including in your statement a commitment to support the RSC-AP Statement of Commitment which specifically addresses the impact of HIV/AIDS on rural and island women and acknowledge that the empowerment of women is essential in reducing their vulnerability to HIV/AIDS.

9. I thank you once again for inviting us and wish you all the best in your deliberations today.