

SPEECH BY DATIN SERI DR. SITI HASMAH BINTI HAJI MOHD. ALI
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Your Excellencies; Distinguished Guests; Ladies and Gentlemen, It is indeed an honour and a privilege for me to be given the opportunity to deliver this keynote address at this conference on Women and Development in Asia. To all our friends, guests and participants from overseas, I bid you a very warm "Selamat Datang" to Malaysia.

2. First and foremost I would like to extend my hearty congratulations to the Department of Southeast Asian Studies, University of Malaya and the Information and Resource Centre, Singapore for organizing this international seminar which is made possible through a generous grant provided by the Hanns-Siedel Foundation, Republic of Germany.

3. This seminar could not have come at a better time. The role of women in the development process has gained wide recognition by many national governments. The sheer number of women in the world today is something that nobody can over-look.... not even the most chauvinistic of men. Indeed, women have played an important part in politics, the economy, education, medical sciences, the arts and whatever field there is to categories.

4. The democratisation of the educational process and the equal opportunity in employment has markedly increased the participation of women in the development process. Women have not only participated but more importantly, they have assumed lead roles as decision makers in their respective fields. Today, women have definitely challenged the tradition-bound definitions of women being mothers and housekeepers. Despite such inroads, a nagging question concerns the effects of change on the well-being of women, especially those in developing countries.

5. Industrialization, urbanization and the expansion of state bureaucracy have undoubtedly created openings for most women in the labour market. From the professionals, to the skilled, semi-skilled and the unskilled, women labour are quick to take opportunities of the job openings. While the professionals make a career out of their jobs, those at the lower echelon are often content to get that extra dollar to supplement the family's income.

6. Young girls who lack the necessary educational qualifications take up employment to lessen the economic burden of their families and if opportunity arises, to secure better-paying and more permanent jobs. Women as workers, span the remotest of plantations to the most urban multinational premises in the cities.

7. Even though women have been actively involved in the job market, their entry into

the man-dominated world is not without problems, the most notable and complex of all concerns the inevitable collision of values and attitudes often resulting in perilous problems for women in the work place.

8. In addition to the problem of attitude there appears to be the emergent problem of sexual harassment by male bosses on their female subordinates. Often, the dilemma of losing a job and a source of income has forced many women to tolerate the situation and behaviour of their male superiors. A lot more cases are just not reported for fear of dismissal or outright embarrassment. Sexual double standards unfortunately still pervade the work place.

9. Another consequence of rapid urbanization and accelerated development is the issue of exploitation of the women folk. The wage and salary differential between men and women performing identical jobs in the labour force is a real case of gender discrimination. This is particularly true in factories where maximum profits are the order of the day. Cutting on salaries and wages and other basic worker benefits such as the Employees Provident Fund contributions, sick and maternity leave are only a few of the tactics used by unscrupulous employers to exploit the women labour force. I have no doubt that participants of this seminar will take time to address and deliberate on the above issues and will come up with an agenda for implementation. Since the process of development around the world is dynamic, it is vital for us to determine the negative impacts of such developments so that policies could be adjusted to ensure the wellbeing of women.

Ladies and gentlemen,

10. The most serious of all these unintended effects of development is the problem of prostitution. Prostitution constitutes a social ill that plagues almost all countries in this region. It is a moral problem that every law abiding citizen must take time to ponder. Although it is a problem that is viewed quite differently in many countries, it is unfortunately the women's problem. Prostitution stands as a stark contradiction to the rapid pace of development and modernization. Even though many academic studies have seriously dealt with the issue and many recommendations made, there appears to be no end to the problem. Labelled as "the oldest profession in the world" prostitution seems to have a stronger footing unaffected by the ravages of time. Apart from being a social issue, the problem of prostitution has taken on a very critical dimension lately. It is one of the ways whereby the dreaded disease AIDS is being spread. In view of the complexity of the prostitution problem, it is imperative that we devote some time to understanding the underlying factors contributing towards the rise of prostitution.

11. In understanding the root of the prostitution problem poverty has always been cited as one of the biggest influences that have lured the girls into the flesh trade. Girls from the rural and even urban areas whose families are afflicted by poverty usually take the easy way out. The lure of the city bright lights is another factor. This problem is further aggravated by the lack of education of this group thereby, resulting in limited employment opportunities.

Ladies and gentlemen,

12. What we have discussed so far is only the tip of the iceberg. In most countries women are tied to their traditional role as housewives and mothers. I am certainly not against such noble roles but it should be emphasized the need for women to undertake more significant roles other than those of housewives and mothers.

13. As development accelerates, women must take on a more dynamic role in contributing towards their economy. In this respect, the private sector must work together with the government to create more opportunities so as to tap the potential of this important resource in the development of the country. It is a challenging job for the private sector but not something that is insurmountable. The political and economic will must be there in order to get things moving. Much more than that, the society must be ready for such a transformation. Adjustments and realignments at the family level with regards to household chores will have to be made.

14. Values and attitudes of men, notably husbands, regarding working women, or rather working wives, must be changed to accommodate changing situations. The challenge is not on the women alone but also the men and children. As for mother and children relationship, the important thing to stress is not on the long hours spent with the children, rather the quality of such relationships. Shorter hours of contact among mothers and children but on a more meaningful level are definitely preferable and meaningful for both.

Ladies and gentlemen,

15. In discussing the roles of women in the development process at the regional level one cannot help but notice the limited amount of interaction between women of one country and another. Ironically this state of affairs happened when we share common boundaries with one another. Apart from occasional seminars and conferences that address women's issues, other levels of relationship have been limited and at times non-existent. Apart from female academics who have been active in championing women's issues through their seminar and conference circuits, women, whatever their fields of endeavor very rarely have the chance to do so.

16. This seminar, therefore is, in more ways than one, different from those previously held. It is a forum where women practitioners from the various professional fields and countries in the region have the opportunity to sit down and share common experiences. This, to me, is a very encouraging start for a more meaningful and more lasting relationships among women in this region.

17. In addressing and understanding the dynamic roles of women in a fast changing world, one must be sensitive and come to grips with concrete historical experiences. Our present civilization would not have been possible without the efforts expended by women. The study of any of the ancient civilizations -- in the Middle East, China, India,

Europe -- bears evidence that the people who toiled at home and in the work place invariably included women. Unfortunately though, historians have seldom recorded this fact. But we can be sure that without women it is impossible for these civilizations to flourish.

18. To turn closer to our own region and in our own time, the participation of women in most Southeast Asian countries has been most promising and encouraging. There appears to be a lot of potential sector which offer great opportunities for women to try their talents.

19. One promising area is in the field of culture. Dancers and prima donnas, from the traditional courts to the modern theatre, have been the forte of women. Cultural development, we must remember, is part and parcel of the bigger development process. The opening up and expansion of the tourist industry have cut another dimension to the role of women as artistes. Through their profound artistic expression, women are the cultural flag-bearers of a nation.

20. The participation of women in the marketplace, it must be admitted, is not a new phenomenon. Women have traditionally been active as simple traders, and they still are. What is new however is their entry into the modern business sector and the corporate world. In what used to be a male dominated world, the corporate world is fast changing its image. The number of women professionals, such as accountants, lawyers, secretaries are increasing with the passage of time. Many have managed to break the barriers to become owners of their own business outlets.

21. The moment has arrived for women in this region to chart their developmental path for a more meaningful participation in the development process. It is incumbent on policy makers and extension agents to study the implications of the development process on the well being of women. Women cannot afford to be inward looking. The experiences of our sisters notably from the Southeast Asian region must be made available and shared for comparison. By comparing experiences we will be in a better position to chart the developmental path.

22. In expediting the process of understanding, more women organizations and groups from the various countries must reach out to their fellow sisters in another country. The broader framework of ASEAN, for instance, is already available for women to take advantage of. Also, it is the profound duty of female academicians, especially in the social sciences, to address more women issues. Their responsibility does not end with the conclusion of a study, rather, they should go beyond and provide feasible recommendations for implementation.

23. The primary challenge confronting the people of Southeast Asia today is how best to foster a better relationship with one another. It is perhaps timely that we consider the setting up of a women's volunteer development corps for the Southeast Asian region. Under this concept, not unlike the American peace corps of the 1960s, interested women from a Southeast Asian country could be given the opportunity to spend a year

or two in another country to help, experience and share knowledge with their sisters in another country. Non-governmental organisations (NGO's) may want to consider this proposal seriously.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

24. Lastly, I wish all speakers and participants of this seminar every success and hope that your deliberations will yield innovative yet practical suggestions for the consideration of those involved in planning and policy formulation.

25. I have now great pleasure in declaring open the conference on Women and Development in Asia. Thank you.