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**PARKROYAL HOTEL, KUALA LUMPUR**  
**THE OPENING OF THE SEMINAR ON AIDS AND THE ASEAN WOMAN -**  
**CHALLENGES FOR THE 21ST CENTURY**  
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As one of the patrons of the ASEAN Confederation of Women's Organisations (ACWO) I have great pleasure in welcoming all participants to this very important seminar. To our foreign guests, I bid you a very special welcome and hope you will have a very pleasant stay in our country.

2. I am glad that ACWO has identified AIDS as a very important agenda for further discussion and joint action by women organisations in the region. The HIV/AIDS epidemic is posing an unprecedented challenge to communities, nations and the international community: a challenge to human survival, human rights and human development. The immense impact of the psychological, social and economic consequences of the epidemic is already being experienced in communities throughout the world. Families have been scattered, villages abandoned, food production diminished, enterprises forced to close and public and private health care systems overwhelmed. The impact of AIDS is observable in both the personal sufferings of those affected, especially as they become too ill to work, and the reaction of panic and fear from co-workers and members of the public with whom they come into contact.

3. As of June last year the World Health Organisation (WHO) reported 501, 272 cases of full blown AIDS from 168 countries. But we know that this is not the true picture of the global situation. WHO estimates the actual number to be nearer to 2 million cases with about 12-18 million carriers. Of these, 54% are males, 38% females and 8% children. By the year 2000, it is estimated that 30-40 million people would have been infected, with 90% of them coming from the developing countries, i.e. Asia and Africa. In Asia it is estimated that India will be the worst hit, followed by Thailand and Myanmar.

4. Previously the ratio of infection between males and females is 4:1. But now the trend has dramatically changed to nearly 1:1. This indicates the high rate of heterosexual spread. Estimates indicate that 4.9 million women have already been infected and each week 15,000 are newly infected worldwide. The total number of infected children is estimated to be 1 million and half of them would have developed AIDS or would have died. Some countries may still be in the stage where transmission is highest in certain groups, such as intravenous drug users (IVDUs) and homosexuals. However we must not be lulled into complacency because heterosexual spread is fast becoming the main mode of transmission. Millions of people will be exposed to the infection through indiscretions of their partners. Someone you know may soon get AIDS.

5. I am pleased that NCWO Malaysia is organising the seminar. The NCWO has

been in the forefront of NGO activities in AIDS prevention and control in this country. The NCWO launched a national awareness campaign amongst women in July 1990 and since then has not ceased their educational programmes which go right down to the grassroot level. The NCWO is also an initiator and founder member of the Malaysian Council of NGOs on AIDS, an umbrella body of 17 organisations involved in AIDS prevention activities. In appreciation of the work of NCWO the government has also invited them to be a member of the National Task Force on AIDS.

6. The NCWO utilises innovative strategies in its campaign. Last year it collaborated with the business sector to raise funds for AIDS prevention activities through a golf competition. However, it was not just a mere fund raising activity. NCWO used the fund raising activity as well as the golf competition itself to interest the business community in HIV/AIDS prevention by disseminating information on issues related to AIDS at the work place, socioeconomic impact of AIDS and HIV/AIDS related personnel policies.

7. The time has now come for us to discuss this dreadful problem that is common to all of us, and to think of actions that we can take jointly at the ASEAN level. Indeed our efforts will be greater together than if we were to work by ourselves in our own countries. The debilitating effects of HIV/AIDS transcend international borders. Hence we should dismantle the boundaries in our efforts to curb the spread of this deadly disease which is threatening women, men and children, our communities and our nations.

8. The impact of HIV/AIDS is particularly great on women. Firstly, HIV/AIDS have been associated with certain stereotypes. This has meant that women are either blamed for their spread or not recognised as potential patients with the disease.

9. Secondly, various factors related indirectly to gender, have also placed women at increased risk of exposure to HIV infection.

10. Thirdly, women's social position also makes it difficult for them to undertake preventive measures.

11. Fourthly, the psychological and social burdens of caring for people with HIV/AIDS are also greater for women because of the view that caring is a 'natural' role of women thus not needing support.

12. Women therefore have special needs in addition to the general need to understand the illness, its mode of transmission and prevention.

- a) Women need to know not only how to protect themselves but also how to empower themselves. The socio culturally sanctioned freedom of men allows them to infect their wives and families. It is therefore imperative in this HIV/AIDS campaign that women gain assertiveness and be able to refuse activities that would bring harm to themselves.

b) Women who are HIV positive or who are living with people who are AID/HIV positive need psychological, social, economic and legal protection which are vital for patients as well as care-givers, during illness and after death. They need support to live positively, to counter stigmatisation, discrimination and powerlessness. There will be loss of income and inability to contribute productively. Most of them would also have no insurance. These women need access to medical care and treatment as well as counselling, to enable them to make informed decisions on reproduction.

13. We must also not forget the socio-economic impact of HIV/AIDS on our nations. In our region, women make up 50% of the population and represent a substantial portion of the workforce.

14. Lost of labour force both in the formal sector, such as nurses, teachers, factory workers, as well as in the informal sector, such as petty-traders, agricultural workers, will take a drastic toll on our economy.

15. There will also be an additional cost of care for orphaned survivors, cost to the health system, as well as economic and emotional consequences of the breakdown of family unit.

16. I have touched only on a few crucial issues with regards to women and AIDS. I hope you will give them serious consideration in your deliberations. We can no longer sit back and say that AIDS is someone else's problem and that it will not touch us. The time to act is now.

17. Once again I wish to congratulate the Executive Council of ACWO for initiating this very important seminar and NCWO Malaysia for organising it. I hope your deliberations will result in meaningful actions not only within your respective organisations but also in your countries and jointly at the ASEAN Confederation of Women's Organisations. I wish you all success in your discussion.

18. With Bismillahirrahmanirrahim, I declare open the seminar on "AIDS and the ASEAN Woman - Challenges for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century".