

SPEECH BY DATO SERI DR. SITI HASMAH BT HJ MOHD ALI
PARK PLAZA HOTEL, KUALA LUMPUR
THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE REGIONAL WORKSHOP ON POVERTY
ALLEVIATION FOR NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS AND
WOMEN ORGANISATIONS FROM SOUTH EAST ASIA AND SOUTH ASIA
14 OCTOBER 2002

In the Name of Allah, the Compassionate, and the Merciful, may I extend a very warm welcome to our distinguished participants, who have come from abroad as well as our local participants, to the "Regional Workshop on Poverty Eradication For Non-Governmental Organisations and Women Organisations from South and South East Asia".

2. I understand that this is a special workshop for women organisations and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) who are already involved or are interested in starting poverty reduction programmes for Muslim communities. My thanks and appreciation to the Islamic Development Bank (IDB), for taking the initiative to co-sponsor this Workshop, thereby providing a platform for women organisations and other NGOs, to learn and exchange ideas, experiences and best practices on poverty eradication programmes.

3. Indeed, the Islamic Development Bank, as a financial institution from the private sector, has shown an exemplary effort by taking an interest to mobilise women organisations and other NGOs to focus on poverty reduction programmes for impoverished Muslim communities in both the member Islamic countries and non-Islamic countries in the South and South-East Asian sub-region.

4. This workshop is also a recognition by international communities and IDB, on the significant role and contribution of NGOs in reaching out to the poorest of the poor, to help break the cycle of poverty.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

5. Despite many developmental gains in the last two decades, the incidence of poverty in the world persists and continues to increase, particularly among women. Statistics show that out of 1.5 billion people living under US one dollar a day, 900 million are women, out of which 70 per cent are from the rural areas. When compared to men, women's poverty is more severe. Mention has been made on the feminisation of poverty which is the result of gender-based inequality.

6. Worldwide, there is evidence that show women earn on average, slightly more than 50 per cent of what men earn. In terms of literacy, out of 900 million illiterate adults in the world, two thirds are women. Such conditions limit their access to productive resources for income generation - resources such as land, credit, skills training and transfer of technology in farming, food processing and other non-farm

products.

7. Women also lack the ability to access social goods and services, such as child and maternal health services, family planning, as well as food and nutrition programmes. These result in ill health, anaemia and malnutrition that affect both women and children. Hence, the vicious cycle of poverty continues, taking its toll over women's and children's health and productivity. With poor health, women's productivity is reduced; under nourished children could not continue schooling beyond five years of education; the number of drop outs and unemployed amongst women and the youths escalate.

8. According to the United Nations Development Programme, the concept of "human poverty" refers to the denial of opportunities and choices most basic for human development i.e. to lead a long, healthy, creative life and to enjoy a decent standard of living, freedom, dignity and self-esteem. To address poverty we need to consider a whole range of issues such as access to education, productive resources and economic opportunities. It is, therefore, imperative for countries to unite to eliminate poverty.

9. In the international arena there is growing recognition on the importance of the empowerment of women as a strategy for addressing poverty. During the Twenty-Third Session of the General Assembly entitled Women 2000: Gender Equality, Development and Peace in the Twenty-first Century, the issue of women empowerment and poverty eradication was highlighted. In the session's outcome document, Governments were called upon to reduce the disproportionate presence of women living in poverty by implementing national eradication programmes with focus on gender perspectives and the empowerment of women. This appeal was reaffirmed in the United Nations Millennium Declaration and recently in the Johannesburg Implementation Plan, where Governments committed to free men, women and children from the abject and dehumanising conditions of extreme poverty. It was resolved that by the year 2015, the population of the world's people with income less than US one dollar a day will be reduced by half.

10. Poverty is multidimensional in nature. It therefore requires anti-poverty programmes that are gender-responsive, multi-pronged and integrative, at various levels. Let me share with you, Malaysia's experience in formulating poverty eradication programmes.

11. In Malaysia, since independence, the Government has given top priority to poverty eradication programmes, through a series of 5 year development plans, providing basic infrastructure, economic and social programmes to address poverty in rural and urban areas. Education and health programmes, especially family planning, and maternal - child health services, are accessible nation wide, to all members of the population. The Integrated Agriculture Development Programme, called IADP, offers cross-sectoral services to improve income and strengthen the human capabilities of the poor. The programme includes adult functional literacy, farm and non-farm

training, free text books for hard-core poor school children, free school-uniforms and other accessories, food and nutrition programmes, especially targeted for school children and women who are the hard-core poor. At the recent Budget speech for 2003, the Government announced compulsory elementary schooling, and allocated RM 100 million financial assistance to enable hard-core poor children to attend schools.

12. Since the early 1990s, the Government has implemented a special programme for rural women aimed at improving the quality of life of the rural community. Through Women's Extension Group, programmes were organised to increase the income of women, entrepreneurial skills. Currently, there are 1,324 Women's Extension Groups all over Malaysia with a membership of 33,121 women. The members are involved in economic activities such as food processing, food production, crafts and services such as catering and tailoring.

13. Recognising the importance for women to gain access to credit to start micro enterprises a special programme was provided through Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia. From the late 1980's and until today, the Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia micro finance programme complements Government's effort by reaching out to the poor in remote, inaccessible areas.

14. The success of the Government's poverty eradication programme, is evidenced by the drastic reduction of overall poverty from 52.4 per cent in 1970 to 7.5 per cent in 1999. The Government has set a target of reducing poverty further to 0.5 per cent by the end of 2005.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

15. NGOs can play a vital and crucial role in helping communities to mobilise and organise themselves to achieve their goals. There are "development" NGOs that are directly involved in their operations at the grass-root, especially those helping the poor to build livelihoods that are viable and sustainable. There are also NGOs that specifically carry out advocacy functions on behalf of the poor, at national and international levels. The Regional Islamic Dakwah Council of South East Asia and the Pacific (RISEAP) has been very active as a development and advocacy Islamic NGO in our region. There are also NGOs that carry out the functions of monitoring and evaluating the success and impact of programmes and projects for the poor.

16. At this workshop, I notice that among the resource persons invited to present papers and share their experiences, are representatives from prominent and successful NGOs that have focused their programmes on helping the poor move out of poverty. The sharing of experiences with such resources will be most invaluable.

17. I am sure that participants of the workshop will not only benefit from acquiring new information and strategies in carrying out your work, but could also focus on a

range of poverty eradication projects that best fit the mission of your organisations and the needs of your respective communities. You could explore the feasibility of starting micro-finance programmes for women in your communities. Your organisation could also design programmes to complement the income generating activities of the poor, by implementing projects such as functional literacy for illiterate women and girls, hot-lunch programmes for under-nourished pre-schoolers or school children, disseminate educational materials and information on maternal and child health including family planning and HIV/AIDS.

18. NGOs should also take up the challenge to provide special reproductive health information and educational services and projects targeting men as your clients. Men should also be included in family life education programmes.

19. The challenge is to produce a total and comprehensive training and educational package that addresses the needs of the poor in Muslim communities. The poverty eradication package should include gender-sensitive programmes, specifically to change the mind set of Muslim men and women, especially the hard-core poor, to practise gender equality in the home, according to the teaching of Islam, where women's right to learning and wealth creation has been enshrined in the Al-Quran. The teaching of Islam ensures justice to men and women; therefore gender biases and inequity should be removed.

Distinguished Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen,

20. This workshop challenges you and your organisation to focus all efforts to reach out to the poor, especially the poor Muslim communities in your countries. I understand that the Islamic Development Bank, as a donor financial institution, is offering financial resources, to facilitate your involvement in poverty reduction programmes. This is an opportunity for you to gather as much information, resources, methodologies, strategies, to network and produce creative yet practical proposals, that could be handed over to IDB at the end of the workshop. Towards this end, I wish you all the best and may you have a very productive workshop.

21. In the Name of Allah, the Compassionate, and the Merciful, I hereby declare open the Regional Workshop on Poverty Eradication for NGOs and Women Organisations from South and South-East-Asia.

Wassalamu'alaikum.