

**SPEECH BY DATIN SERI DR. SITI HASMAH BINTI HAJI MOHD. ALI  
AT THE ASIAN AND PACIFIC DEVELOPMENT CENTRE, K.L  
THE OPENING CEREMONY OF THE CONSULTATION ON THE ECONOMIC  
ADVANCEMENT OF RURAL WOMEN IN THE ASIA AND PACIFIC REGION  
15 SEPTEMBER 1991**

Madam Chairperson;

The Hon. Dato' Napsiah Omar, Minister of National Unity and Social Development, Malaysia; Mr. Idriss Jazairy, President of IFAD; Dato' Mohd. Sheriff Mohd. Kassim, Secretary General, Ministry of Finance Malaysia, cum Governor IFAD; Prof. Suk Bum Yoon, Director APDC; Mr. S. Saigal, Director Asia Division, IFAD; Your Excellencies, Distinguished guests, Delegates, Ladies and gentlemen.

It is an honour and a privilege for me to be here this afternoon to officiate the opening of the Consultation for the Economic Advancement of Rural Women in Asia and the Pacific Region. To all our guests and delegates from overseas I bid you "Selamat Datang" to Malaysia.

2. The ceremony to-day is the fourth and last regional consultation devoted to economic enhancement of rural women. We are indeed honoured that IFAD, together with APDC have decided to hold this consultation in Malaysia. As host, we will do our utmost to make your stay here most memorable and fruitful.

3. Since this is the last of the regional meetings before the International Consultation in October which will draw up the guidelines for action to promote the economic advancement of rural women, I do hope your deliberations will yield useful and practical recommendations which could form part of the Declaration and Guidelines for Action to be endorsed by the First Ladies at the Summit in February 1992. I also believe that our commitment to the Summit is one step forward in preparation for the 4th World Conference on Women in 1995.

4. I would like to congratulate IFAD and especially the President for organising these series of consultations; for its efforts in pursuing its mandate to reach the rural poor and the disadvantaged by assisting them to come out of poverty through increased productivity and focusing on women as an important target. IFAD's approach in channeling scarce resources into segments of the rural population, formerly considered marginal or outside the reach of financial assistance, is very strategic, considering that the rural poor are frequently constrained by factors which are mainly structural in nature. Indeed, IFAD has led many international organisations in recognizing that aiding women by making resources accessible is not only an issue of equity but that of efficiency. The problems and issues related to rural women are by no means new; indeed they have been debated at length over the past two decades in many for a at national, regional and international levels. Such discussions have resulted in numerous recommendations, some of which have been implemented. Although we hear

of successful projects in various countries, basically, however the same problems have persisted.

5. As we all know, most of the poor live in developing countries and in rural areas. Although tremendous strides have been made towards human development in the past 40 years, one billion people still live in absolute poverty, over half of them in South Asia. This is so despite the relatively high growth rates achieved in many parts of the region as a whole during this period. There is wide disparity between urban and rural areas with many countries in Asia and the Pacific having more than 50 per cent of the rural population below the poverty line and more than half of these consisting of women. Towards this end numerous programmes have been developed and billions of dollars have been allocated for poverty alleviation programmes especially for the rural sector. Success has not been spectacular although valuable experiences have been acquired from a number of projects and programmes.

6. In most of these programmes, however, it has often been assumed that the conditions of poor women will automatically be improved once the needs of the poor are addressed. However, we must recognise that women face all kinds of economic, social, legal, religious and cultural barriers which are not usually faced by poor men. In this context there is increasing evidence that women do not automatically benefit from anti-poverty strategies and that many anti-poverty and growth strategies may impact negatively on some women while increasing the opportunities of others.

7. In South-East Asian countries for instance, mechanisation has invariably resulted in intensification of agricultural work for women, at the early and middle stages of the green revolution. However, at the advanced stage of mechanisation, displacement of labour takes place. Women from the middle income groups withdrew themselves from the field to become full-time homemakers, totally dependent on their husbands. On the other hand, the very poor are driven off farm work to perform other non-farm activities. Again, mechanisation has not resulted in reduced workloads for the very poor, but rather intensified their struggle to make ends meet.

8. In our attempts to assist rural women we must ensure that resources are made available and accessible to them, and more importantly such resources must be controlled by women. Productivity of rural women can be increased and enhanced if resources such as technology, skills, credit, land and other financial resources are made available. Governments must be committed to reach out to the rural women, seek them, address their needs and empower them so that they can utilize available resources effectively.

9. The economic role of rural Asian and Pacific women as food producers and income earners has been widely recognized today and well documented. However, much of their contributions are unremunerated. As wage earners, their rewards are less, their work are time-consuming and more tedious than men. In addition, their responsibilities and roles are multiple, especially among the women-headed households.

10. In most of these developing countries rapid industrialisation and urbanisation have encouraged male migration to urban centers, thus creating another category of women farmers among the migrating households. The needs of these women are often overlooked by development planners and implementers due to social and cultural barriers. Special efforts are therefore needed to address gender inequity, which limit women's access to development resources such as land, credit, technology, training and skills development as well as opportunities.

11. Such barriers can only be removed by sensitising both men and women on gender issues and differences, as failure to do this will result in the continued perpetuation of the old problems related to inequity between the sexes.

12. Ladies and gentlemen, as late as 1970s, poverty was rampant in Malaysia, especially in the rural areas. As a medical doctor, I have seen women struggling beside their husbands to earn income that was critical to the welfare and survival of their families. The poorest of the poor were usually the landless who worked as seasonal workers in padi farming or daily-waged, casual labourers in the villages. Many of the landless were also engaged as share-croppers in padi cultivation and rubber small-holdings. These women worked longer hours to earn meager income and usually at the expense of their health.

13. Today, through the unrelenting efforts of the Malaysian Government, poverty in the rural areas has been reduced from 42% in 1980 to 18% in 1990.

14. One of Malaysia's poverty programmes is the Ikhtiar Project that attempts to reach out to the hardcore poor and provide credit with technical support. Very often, credit facilities, technical services and training are provided by development agencies for the needy rural women but then there is the usual problem of lack of takers. It is important to have not only outreach programmes which involve women from the poor households if poverty eradication is to be of foremost priority but more importantly to investigate underlying problems which apparently discourage the needy rural women from participating in such programmes. Whether this is a case of structural factors or that of attitude is for us to find out. Poverty will be perpetuated if rural women are left out of development planning.

15. In the Malaysian context while the agricultural sector accounts for a large number of women workers the percentage of women involved in agriculture has been reduced from 66.8% in 1970 to 28.1% in 1990. The poor are either the landless or those with tiny fragments of landholdings, who are faced with problems of low productivity, minimal skills, accessibility to training, credit and financial services, as well as inappropriate technology. They continue to work as unpaid family helpers, casual daily-waged labourers, petty traders marketing farm produce as well as selling snacks and cakes, while at the same time, assuming responsibilities in several multiple roles, especially in the domestic sector.

16. In recent years Malaysia has placed great importance on women as a human resource and is committed to the decision taken at the World Conference of the UN Decade for Women held in Nairobi in 1985, identifying the rural women as one of the sectors for special concern. This is reflected in the support given to the various government departments dealing with women farmers. A national advisory machinery, the National Advisory Council on Integration of Women in Development (NACIWID) was established in 1976 to translate the World Plan of Action into national priorities.

17. In 1983 the Secretariat for Women's Affairs (HAWA) was established with the functions of monitoring and evaluating projects and services for women undertaken by government and NGOs. In December 1989, the government passed the National Women's Policy, which aims to ensure that men and women have equal access to resources, information and opportunities to participate in national development in all sectors of the economy according to their needs and abilities, with the view of improving the overall quality of life in the country.

18. During 1989 and 1990, HAWA as the Secretariat for Women's Affairs, together with the Women in Development Programme of APDC, held a series of gender sensitization sessions for agricultural and rural development policy makers, implementors and extension workers to ensure that gender considerations are taken into account in development planning and implementation. Such a beginning is laudable but we need continuous concerted efforts to sensitize men and women farmers who are the recipients and beneficiaries of rural development projects.

19. In our efforts to assist rural women, it is vital to make them realize and take pride in their roles as economic contributors to the family and nation. These rural women must be motivated to take the opportunity available to improve their productivity. Women themselves undergrade their role due perhaps to tradition and social norms -- the result possibly of social conditioning that attributes men's position as the main breadwinner of the family. In this context women must realize that they are important partners in development and they are already active participants. The onus therefore is on gender-sensitized change agents to make rural women aware that they are important contributors to the family and national economy.

20. I have no doubt that during your deliberations, you will examine these issues as well as other related problems. I do hope you will come up with practical, innovative and effective recommendations which could form part of the Declaration and Guidelines for Action to be endorsed by the Summit on the Economic Advancement of Rural Women.

21. As I have mentioned earlier, considerable research, meetings and dialogues have been held on women and agriculture and the basic problems and barriers have been identified and known for over a decade. Although the situation, has slightly improved, much more need to be done. This innovative strategy of IFAD to take this up to the highest level, I believe, will strengthen the political will and commitment to mobilize effective national and international follow-up. On my part, I will do my utmost to

ensure Malaysia's commitment and persuade our sister nations in Asia and the Pacific to come together in our endeavours for the economic advancement of rural women.

22. I am confident that you will have a fruitful discussion during your six-day consultation. Although the programme seems tight, I am told there will be ample time for interaction and social activities. I understand you will be making a field trip to one of our development projects. The time spent in informal discussions will no doubt seal friendship and further strengthen the bond between us.

23. Finally I wish you all every success in your deliberations and I have great pleasure in declaring open the Consultation for the Economic Advancement of Rural Women in Asia and the Pacific Region.