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MALAYSIAN WOMEN'S CONCERNS AND CHALLENGES FOR THE NEXT
MILLENNIUM
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1. It is an honour for me to address this gathering of distinguished civil servants of this country. This meeting of great minds on an important topic such as this augurs well for all Malaysians, especially the women. Your taking time off your busy schedule to be here today reflects your interest and concern towards the development of family and raising the quality of life of Malaysians.

2. The next millennium will be an age very different from where and how the world began in the early years of this century. Life for women has changed radically by the many inventions, access to education, the different world-views, entry into professions once exclusively reserved for men, and the development of the world and others. Even the Administrative and Diplomatic Service was once a man's domain. I am glad now we even have one woman Secretary General. Let us hope this is only the beginning for a more wider entry of women into the high ranks of the service.

3. Our country has undergone great progress and is now held with high regard as a model to many developing economies. We cannot deny that our industrialisation programmes, the onset of globalisation, and the permeation of the cyberspace have affected our lives and left profound changes. These are some of the challenges that Malaysian women, and men, have to take on with great strength and optimism.

4. The Prime Minister has given this country a vision that by the year 2020 Malaysia will be a united nation, with a confident Malaysian society, infused with strong, moral and ethical values, living in a society that is democratic, liberal and tolerant, caring, economically just and equitable, progressive and prosperous, and in full possession of an economy that is competitive, dynamic, robust and resilient. This can be achieved if we can overcome the nine central strategic challenges. These challenges must be confronted as we move into the next millennium.

5. Women around the world and to a lesser extent in Malaysia have, however, additional challenges that they must learn to overcome as well.

6. Let me share with you some of the basic facts about the situation of women in the world today. Women earn one tenth of the world's income, own less than one tenth of the world's property though they grow half of the world's food and form nearly half of the world's labour force. Two thirds of the world's illiterate are women. While progress has been made in terms of women's access to education, women still comprise two-thirds of people who cannot read or write. Women still represent 60 percent of more than one billion adults who have no access to basic education. Girls constitute the majority of the 130 million children with no access to primary school; worldwide,

girls currently attend school 55 percent as much as boys do. Only 10 percent of parliamentary seats and six percent of cabinet positions are occupied by women.

7. At the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, it was recognised that the goals for the advancement of women and equality between men and women, set 10 years ago at the Nairobi Conference in 1985, have not been achieved. Unequal relations between men and women, and prejudicial attitudes toward women and girls, unfortunately still remain. Women continue to be marginalised from mainstream development. At the same time, political, economic and ecological crises, have led to wars and armed conflicts; civil strife and terrorism still persist.

8. In Beijing, twelve critical areas of concern were analysed and prioritised for the action of Governments, international agencies, non-governmental organisations and the private sector. They were called upon to take strategic actions to address the critical areas of concern. The outcome of the conference is the Platform for Action which delineates strategic actions to address the critical areas of concern, with full respect for religious and ethical values, cultural backgrounds and philosophical convictions and in conformity with all human rights and fundamental freedom.

9. The 12 critical areas of concern are in reality not women's issues, but development issues. These issues encompass economic aspects - such as the persistent and increasing burden of poverty, unequal access to economic and technological resources, the impact of environment on women; the social development aspects - such as health, education and training, violation of human rights, violence against women, women and the media; legal and political aspects - of wars and the sharing of power at all levels. These issues reflect the problems that women all over the world are experiencing today, problems which are largely due to the unequal relationship between man and woman that gives rise to prejudices based on gender. They are the manifestation of women's subordination, lack of education and skills and lack of voice in decision-making. They also reflect the fact that women are the weaker sex, the victims of development due to the practices and manifestation of inequalities. These are concerns that constitute important challenges to both men and women if the objectives of Equality, Peace and Development are to be achieved.

10. However, the priorities for action differ from country to country, and from region to region.

11. For Malaysia, the farsightedness of our leaders, since independence, have put education, health and poverty on top of our development agenda. Today, we have emerged as a dynamic and successful nation in terms of economic, social and technological advancement. Poverty, the most critical concern faced by women, especially the rural women in our neighbouring states in the region and other parts of the world, is no longer the critical concern to us. Social indicators have shown that health services, training and education are accessible to men and women. Our maternal and child health services have been acknowledged as among the best health care delivery systems in the world. The New Economic Policy that emphasises the

restructuring of society has provided education to both sexes, from kindergarten to the university levels. In fact, examination results since the last 10 years have shown a trend of an increase in the percentage of girl students outperforming the boys in their academic achievements. You will agree with me that Malaysian women, at this juncture, have no problem of getting employment outside the home due to the acute shortage of labour. We are proud to tell the world that women employees in the public sector have enjoyed equal pay for equal work. If that is so then what are the critical concerns faced by our Malaysian women?

12. Before we do self-diagnoses regarding the above issues, I would like to highlight here the underlying factor that links the impact of development to the critical areas of women's concern, that is, Gender and Inequality. These two concepts need to be clarified and understood to implement the strategies in the Beijing Platform for Action. There are different versions of the definition of the above concepts. What I would like to share with you today is the meaning of Equality and Gender acceptable to us in Malaysia and our sisters in Asia and the rest of the developing world.

13. The two concepts are closely inter-linked. We begin by acknowledging that men and women are made by Allah to be different. Men and women are ordained by Allah with special attributes, role and responsibilities, that complement each other. There are biological differences that we acknowledge. If women are different from men in this area, then it becomes impossible to treat them exactly the same. For example, when a working woman gives birth, she may have to take time off to nurse the baby and to recover her health. In this instance, women cannot be treated exactly the same as men: but it also does not mean that women no longer have a right to equality. To be different does not necessarily mean to be unequal.

14. Sometimes, ensuring equality may require that people be treated differently; that women are treated differently from men, so that the end result is equality. This means that equality cannot be defined merely in terms of treatment, but should also be defined in terms of the result. We in Malaysia have put into practice the concept that to be equal may demand very unequal treatment in favour of the disadvantaged with regard to the privileges or affirmative actions given to the Bumiputra in the New Economic Policy. The question that arises now is - are women in Malaysia disadvantaged?

15. Normally women occupy an unequal position. Therefore, special measures should be taken to redress the situation to achieve equality. Intervention programmes offered should be able to empower women, being the target group, to be self-reliant, independent and resourceful, so that they could enjoy equal benefits and resources with men. Thus equality that women in Malaysia wish to fight for is the equality of opportunity to participate, to contribute and develop their potentials, the equal access to resources so that the end result would be one where women could improve their conditions.

16. However, the concept of gender difference need further clarification as, too often,

the same point of gender difference could be used to reinforce inequality and discrimination against women. For instance, child bearing and nursing babies, as exclusive roles and functions of mothers, could also be used as considerations for employers not to hire women for demanding jobs requiring out-station assignments, or long hours of work etc. Such instances demonstrate gender-based discrimination, using a protectionist approach, in prohibiting certain form of employment for women on the ground that women are unsuitable for them. Thus, sometimes gender differences need to be taken into account and sometimes not, when determining the ways in which equality can be achieved.

17. The concept of gender differences becomes very complex when differences between men and women go beyond biological difference. The concept of gender itself refers to the social construct that determine roles, activities and responsibilities between men and women. In most countries, division of labour between gender is strongly influenced by culture that perceives women as subordinate, unequal to men. It is culture that determines women's roles and responsibilities be confined to the unpaid reproductive activities in the private domain; while men are assigned roles and responsibilities in paid activities, outside the home. We, the Muslims in Malaysia, fail to practise the high ideals of equality and social justice according to the teachings of Islam, or to follow the exemplary role of Nabi Muhamad (s.a.w) as a husband, father, family man and leader. Unconsciously, our thoughts, behaviour, decisions made within and for the family, community and at the work place, are strongly influenced by the social norms based on culture rather than the high ideals of Islam.

18. We are very concerned with the consequences of traditional gender based influences on the daily practices and decisions made at all levels, from within the family, community, at the work places, and especially at national planning and policy making levels. The cultural norms of what is right and appropriate for men and women have been entrenched in the minds of our fore-fathers for decades - it is embedded in our psyche; it controls our thinking, our actions and behaviour. It exists in the minds of every individual in the society-from the laymen to the high echelons in our governmental structures. We are concerned because the consequences can produce devastating effects on men, women and the girl children as we strive to achieve family and national development goals. Researchers and development practitioners have observed that gender and sexual division of labour have produced a number of negative consequences such as:

- ❖ an unequal and increasing burden of work load for women who are involved in both the productive activities in the home and the work place.
- ❖ inhibit men's and son's participation in carrying out family maintenance, child raising and domestic tasks and activities, which society considered as women's responsibilities.
- ❖ women are looked upon as marginal workers, who are hired when shortage of labour occurs, and first to be fired when recession sets in.
- ❖ unequal access to productive resources such as land, credit, technology and skills training.

19. Let us now look at the situation of women in Malaysia and our areas of concern.

20. I would like to draw your attention to the statistics of our labour force participation. Malaysian women are highly visible as contributors to the nation's economic development. We are proud to acknowledge that almost 47 percent of Malaysian women are economically active in the formal sector. But, unfortunately the majority of our sisters are employed in lower paid, dead end jobs, with no prospects for enhancement or up-grading their skills. The 1991 figures indicate that 11.9 percent are employed in the service sector and 25.9 percent in the manufacturing sector, mostly engaged as production workers. Only 12.9 percent are qualified in the professional and technical categories, employed mostly as teachers and nurses. A mere 1.4 percent occupied the managerial and administrative position. At this juncture, one wonders what happened to the women students who have excelled in their studies in colleges and universities. Are they absorbed in female jobs such as teaching, nursing, secretarial services? Are they stagnant in lower ranking administrative positions? The critical concern here is the quality of women's contribution, which is in line with our Vision 2020 that emphasise the quality of human resources. As we develop strategies to build and upgrade the skills of our labour force, it is imperative that we include women as target groups to reach out and incorporate in our human resource planning. Policy makers and planners need to open up opportunities for women to enter the non-traditional employment.

21. An important development thrust of the 1990s in preparation for the next millennium is human resource development planning. Human resource development is viewed as critical for Malaysia's success in achieving competitiveness, high productivity, innovativeness and capability in the management of new technologies in this age of globalization and industrialization. Thus the Second Outline Perspective Plan (OPP2) has ushered in a paradigm shift towards a people centred development strategy. This is also reflected in our rural development policy, which identifies family unit as an important component of development.

22. The paradigm shift towards people-centred development planning will have to incorporate individuals and families as core units to set the foundation of human resource development. The nurturing and educative functions of families in an enabling societal environment will foster the development of human potentials of family members, from the early formative stage of infants, through out the childhood, adolescent and adult years. Within the families, values such as diligence, discipline, honesty and competence, spirit of competitiveness, creativity, innovativeness are inculcated. A new mind set is required to acknowledge that husbands and wives, or fathers and mothers, need to share their roles, responsibilities.

23. To institutionalise gender equality in the family requires long term strategy for social transformation. Family gender sensitisation programme is an effective tool for such transformation.

24. Another area of great challenge is the problem of balancing work and family, due to the rapid increase of dual worker and dual career families. The vast majority of married working women are staying on in their job even after having children. Dual worker families need employment friendly policies which can improve productivity, staff morale, and commitment, thus reducing the turnover of both women and men employees.

25. Employers should also address the issue of work-family conflict among talented dual career male and female executives in their organisations. The executives are committed and wish to excel in their career. At the same time, they wish to be exemplary fathers and mothers, in meeting family responsibilities. Stress from work-family conflict may be manifested in reduced job satisfaction, marital discord, lower mental health, reduced life satisfaction, thereby affecting quality of family life, absenteeism and ultimately, decreased productivity. As we enter the information technology era, creative solution to reduce work-family conflict such as flexi-work and flexitime, home based work, steelwork, should be explored, and put into practice whenever appropriate and needed.

26. In order to facilitate this paradigm shift towards the well-being of our nation, we may need to review gender-neutral laws. These ostensibly gender neutral standards of the equal treatment model are not neutral at all; rather, these are based on male standards. If these standards, biased in favour of men are applied to women, then women will be penalised for this difference, and the underlying inequalities between men and women will simply be reinforced. In a world where gender differences are still relevant, the law cannot ignore this difference.

27. As President of the International Steering Committee for the Advancement of Rural Women and the Chairperson of the Regional Steering Committee for the Economic Advancement of Rural and Island Women for Asia Pacific, it is my hope that Malaysia will take a leading role in this area of advancement of rural women with special attention for more training for rural women as well as research and exchange of information on rural women.

28. The liberation of women is the liberation of men- it is freedom for both of us. So long as women are unable to meet their challenges and attain their full potential, men too will not be able to achieve the greatness that might be theirs. Together men and women will have to work to achieve the best for our nation, our future.