

Penyampai : DATIN SERI DR. SITI HASMAH BINTI HAJI MOHD. ALI
Tajuk : THE OPENING OF THE FOURTH MEETING OF THE ASEAN WOMEN
Lokasi : MING COURT HOTEL, KUALA LUMPUR
Tarikh : 15-04-1985

The Chairman of the ASEAN Women's Programme; Honourable Ministers and Deputy Ministers;

Excellencies;

Distinguished delegates;

Ladies and gentlemen.

I would like to thank the organisers of the Fourth Meeting of the ASEAN Women's Programme for giving me the honour of addressing you this morning. It is my pleasure to welcome all delegates to this Meeting, in particular those from the other ASEAN countries. I hope that you will find this Meeting beneficial and your stay in Malaysia enjoyable.

Distinguished delegates and guests,

2. To most of us the twentieth century will be remembered as the Century of Women -- a century in which women have gained their rightful place in society. This movement links every continent and every country, transcending the many divides of the human condition. It carries with it the hopes and aspirations of half the world's population. The direction which it takes and the degree of its achievements will mould the future and the quality of not only the lives of the women but also their participation in development. We should be grateful that we are successful in effecting changes and this must be recognised by all, particularly the women themselves.

3. Closer to home, the ASEAN region has seen dramatic changes in the status of women over the last four decades.

There has been a remarkable increase in the number of women joining the workforce. A substantial number has joined the ranks of entrepreneurs, academicians, researchers and the professionals. With industrialisation there has been a significant change in the pattern of the labour force. More and more women particularly from rural areas have been absorbed into industry. The attainment of independence for some countries has witnessed the emergence of women in public life and holding public office. Equally important is the substantial increase in the number of non-governmental women's organisations involved in social, economic, political, religious and sports activities.

4. In 1980, the population of the ASEAN countries was 270 million of which half are women. Approximately 100 million of them live in rural areas, and for generations have been contributing to the economy through agricultural pursuits.

Generally, the status of the ASEAN women is relatively high as most of our ASEAN societies accord a high degree of freedom and respect to their female members. Studies have confirmed that an ASEAN woman is an active and resourceful manager of her family, and more often than not, plays the more active role in the life of the community. The woman is a partner in the process of nation-building. She is articulate and capable of mobilising resources to achieve her objectives. Proof of this can be seen in the establishment of the ASEAN Women's Programme or AWP, under the ASEAN Committee on Social Development and its counterpart the ASEAN Confederation of Women Organisation, to promote the total advancement of women.

5. Within the ASEAN region, we have many similarities. We have many common problems as a result of being a society in transition. Industrialisation as a process has brought about changes affecting the state and the family, in terms of direction and policy-making. The development of social policies with regard to health, education, the family, youth and drug abuse reflect the concern of governments over matters

affecting the well-being of the community.

6. We are fortunate that in this region we have the opportunity of sharing and exchanging each other's experiences in nation-building. Furthermore, the need to co-operate regionally will no doubt provide us with the platform for identifying the issues and problems regarding economic, social and cultural matters. I understand, the AWP had already addressed itself to some aspects of these issues and problems.

7. The recognition of the role of women in the development process has led, in the case of Malaysia, to an increasing number of women who are combining careers with the traditional role as wives and mothers. With women constituting a large percentage of the labour force and with the benefit of equal pay in certain sectors, particularly at the management and professional level, women will continue to be a work force to be reckoned with.

8. However, a substantial number of our women live in the rural areas. The effort of finding the means of generating, as well as increasing income, thus becomes crucial. The situation becomes even more demanding where the women in seasonal occupations need to be engaged in income-generating activities for off-season employment. In these circumstances, the additional income is necessary to meet the needs of family life.

9. Traditionally, craft-making is identified as the activity for meeting this need. In this respect, there is a vast potential for the development of the cottage industry as a means of providing income for the rural sector. This can be done by providing marketing outlets with the relevant support facilities. An assistance programme providing for new and improved designs as well as upgrading of skills with the use of appropriate technology and technical know-how, stringent quality control, a steady, regular and reliable output and a competitive pricing structure are necessary for the success of the cottage industry. I believe this is an area of development which is common to us all and an experience which we can share.

Distinguished delegates and guests,

10. The importance of developing women cannot be over-emphasised because their socio-economic conditions have a profound effect not only on their own health and well-being but also on that of their children, their families and subsequent generations. This is more so in the ASEAN region where it is the woman who makes most health-care decisions at the family level. It is she who provides most of the informal health-care in the family, and she who looks after the sick and aging, determines diet, and maintains the immediate home environment. In short it is the woman's rather than the man's education and time, which determine the health and nutritional status of the family.

11. Yet the health status of particularly the rural ASEAN woman remains far from satisfactory. The maternal mortality rate is comparatively high. Some of its causes are bleeding, post delivery infection, septic abortions, high blood pressure and fits during pregnancy. In some ASEAN countries child mortality, particularly in the most vulnerable group of below one year, is still high. These deaths are preventable and could be substantially reduced if women were more informed.

12. When developing effective prevention programmes, the prevalent health conditions and their related contributory factors should be taken into consideration. The health status of the family can be improved through primary health care supported by related measures such as improved living standards, education, nutrition and sanitation, supply of potable water and sound health practices. The mental health and well-being of women is equally important in the maintenance of a healthy and happy family. This should be given due emphasis, bearing in mind that rapid economic development in our region could lead to increased mental and emotional stress and strains.

13. It is encouraging to note the keen interest and enthusiasm among ASEAN Countries to seek and find practical solutions suited to their own cultures, environment and resources. However, it is important to ensure that women, particularly those living in rural areas, appreciate these advantages and fully utilise these programmes. They should be monitored and regular studies should be made to ascertain progress.

14. Education is another significant factor which enables women to play their relevant role in national development.

It is perhaps the single most important factor that has changed the entire self-concept, image and social status of women in ASEAN region in the last few decades. In Malaysia alone the literacy rate among women rose by about 35 percent over the last fifteen years. The increase in number of those attending institutions of higher learning has been more than 300 per cent. Our Malaysian women are entering fields of vocation like engineering, business, accountancy, the civil service, computer technology and even the army, which forty years ago were as good as forbidden territory to them. Indeed the educational policy of this country and in this respect the ASEAN region offers equal opportunities for men and women to pursue their education to the highest possible level.

15. Equally remarkable in this country, and in the ASEAN region, has been the increased opportunities and improved infrastructure for vocational education and vocational training for women. Hence the need to improve and diversify their training has become more urgent. Despite the improvement made in the areas of education and vocational training, we still have a long way to go to realise our relevant role and contribution towards national development.

We need to change our attitude, and upgrade knowledge and skills in our various fields of endeavour.

Distinguished guests and delegates;

16. It is a credit to women that they are generally more sensitive to social issues. This attitude is prevalent particularly among ASEAN women who over the last four decades have taken up the advancement of women as a national issue. For achieving this objective it is essential not only to mobilise women, but also to ensure the ready availability of reliable data.

17. Appropriate policy and strategy formulation and an effective programme planning on women by policy-makers and planners, require a continuous, adequate and updated base of information. As such, research and data-collection become important activities. Their findings are important not only for identifying needs and formulating effective programmes, but also for indicating priority areas in order to achieve maximum benefits. We in ASEAN share many common characteristics. As such a more intensified programme of exchange of information on women will bring added benefits, reduce duplication and optimise the use of available resources. This concept of 'resource sharing' is not a new phenomenon among ASEAN member countries, and the sharing of research finding is but another aspect of regional cooperation.

18. I understand that the AWP has made great progress in this respect through the 'Network of Clearinghouses on Women in Development', a project which was established to assist ASEAN member countries improve their respective information services, and encourage the sharing and exchange of information on women in development. This is done in the spirit of achieving a better understanding of the present position and potentials of women. I would like to congratulate the AWP, in particular those involved directly in the Clearing house project, on their enthusiasm and dedication, and to wish them success. I believe that it will also assist ASEAN member countries in the development of our National Clearing houses with the purpose of improving information services capabilities.

19. The achievements many countries had made over the last four decades, in upgrading the status of women in all spheres of life, are generally limited to those living in the cities and large towns. Significant disparities still exist across the region. Therefore we should concern ourselves with the large rural women population. They are the vulnerable group who require urgent and serious attention. I do realise that the extent of development differ from country to country. But I am confident that the ASEAN Women's Programme will focus discussion on the development of this large and vulnerable group and when addressing international forums, you will speak with one voice.

Distinguished guests and delegates;

20. One matter that needs our constant and serious attention is the manace posed by drug abuse. As we are aware the drug problem is international or global in character and knows no national boundaries. Thus no country can handle this problem single-handedly. It requires serious and concerted effort at the international level by all countries and agencies concerned. The present level of cooperation, even in the ASEAN region has not achieved much.

There are many reasons for this, of which the lack of commitment and coordination is a major factor.

21. It should be noted that the drug problem not only brings with it criminal implications, but if left unchecked can weaken and eventually destroy the social and cultural fabrics of our societies. It also has security ramifications that can threaten the very survival of a nation. It is for this reason that ASEAN women and all related organisations should undertake every possible effort to curb this disease before it becomes a plague.

22. This year marks the end of the UN Decade for Women. I am sure that most countries are in the process of preparing your evaluation report to the 'World Conference to review and Appraise the Achievements of the UN Decade for Women' to be held in Nairobi, Kenya in July this year. In your review, there is a need to evaluate with frankness both the achievements and shortcomings, and recognising that the world economic situation is not likely to show marked improvements in the near future, carefully identify practical strategies which will ensure that women are better off by the end of the century. It is essential to ensure that we derive maximum benefits from available resources, and develop creative approaches.

Distinguished guests and delegates;

23. It is imperative that consistent efforts be made toward developing ASEAN women's potentials to its optimum level.

Although in every country there are various training agencies, they are not in a position to cater for the needs of this vast population. Hence there should be consideration for the setting-up of an ASEAN Women's Education Centre which could coordinate and promote activities conducted by public agencies as well as non- governmental organisations. This Centre could also pool all resources and expertise for the benefit of the region.

24. Finally, I hope you will have good discussions and deliberations during the next few days and achieve the objectives of this meeting with success. With this hope, I now have great pleasure in declaring this Meeting officially open.

Thank you.