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INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE THE CHANGING WORLD: OUR HERITAGE AND OUR FUTURE
FOSTERING UNDERSTANDING AND PEACE OUR HERITAGE AND PRESENT CHALLENGES
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The responsibility for preserving and enriching our heritage has always been accepted as an unwritten law for any given generation of mankind so that it can pass on this heritage as a legacy to successive generations. Thereby, human beings progress and civilizations grow. This heritage is by no means limited to the arts or "culture" as the term is popularly understood. Our heritage today is our Planet Earth itself -- the way we want it to continue to be so that it can be shared by all mankind living in peace, harmony and well-being, now as well as in the future.

This precious heritage -- our planet Earth -- its natural and physical dimensions, its diverse peoples, their histories and cultures, and all the accumulated knowledge and wisdom -- from the sciences and the humanistic disciplines -- more than ever before appears to be in jeopardy. This is the main reason why this Conference has chosen the theme "The Changing World: Our Heritage and Our Future". It is, in my view, the duty of each and every one of us to fulfill our responsibility to preserve this heritage. In Islam, as in other great religions, Man is regarded as the appointed custodian of the Almighty's creation for mankind, which is, Earth. In this appointed role, man is exhorted to seek knowledge and to be guided in all our activities by moral values and virtues.

To seek enlightenment in this noble role PPSEAWA Malaysia held a series of talks by eminent personalities who share with us this concern about mankind's future in the next millennium. The themes cover issues and concerns pertaining to our natural, cultural, historical and social (family life) heritage. Allow me to recapitulate, in brief, the salient points that have been made.

(a) The Natural Heritage Man has been treating the earth as some people do to rented cars. Instead of caring for the planet, man has run it so hard and recklessly that it is falling apart before our very eyes. When we destroy nature, we destroy biological diversity. Put simply, biological diversity means the wealth of life forms found on earth; the millions of plants and animals and micro-organisms, the genes they contain and the intricate ecosystems they help build into the living environment. Our heritage of biological diversity is the end result of four billion years of evolution.

Years of scientific exploration and endeavours have provided clear evidence that forests are a storehouse of an immense variety of natural genetic resources. In addition to timber and other commercial products, the economic potential of other forest resources are now evident.

Scientists have to date identified over 1,333 plant species of potential pharmaceutical significance. These plants could well provide many chemical blue prints for the development of lifesaving medicinal products of the future.

To cite a few examples, a steroid extracted from a Mexican Yam enable "the pill" to be developed as a mass birth control agent. Quinine, an alkaloid from the bark of the cinchona tree was very successful for the treatment of malaria. The aspirin is a classic example. Salicin extracted from white willow when taken orally was found to be a pain killer. A similar compound isolated from meadow sweet, known as salicylic acid when mixed with acetic acid was found to be a more effective pain killer. This new compound a cetylsalicylic acid was named "aspirin" -- the most widely known medicine in the world.

Besides providing these benefits to man, forests offer a wide range of ecological services. They play a very important role in mediation of water cycles and the protection of catchment areas. They help to maintain environmental stability as in the case of the management of heat fluxes by absorbing and converting solar energy through plant growth. The removal of excess carbon dioxide during photosynthesis prevents the accumulation of greenhouse effects, and the forest cover protects the soil from being degraded and eroded.

Mindless deforestation and mismanagement can destroy this unique heritage. As an example to ensure its preservation a National Forest Policy has been enacted in Malaysia in 1984 with the following objectives: (i) to ensure sound climatic and physical conditions of the country, the safeguarding of water supplies, soil fertility and environmental quality and the minimization of damage by flood and erosion to rivers and agricultural land.

(ii) to ensure the supply in perpetuity at reasonable rates of all forms of forest produce which can be economically produced within the country for agricultural, domestic and industrial purposes and for export.

(iii) to ensure the conservation of adequate forest areas for recreation, education, research and the protection of the nation's unique flora and fauna.

(b) The Cultural Heritage: History and the Arts History, like heritage, is about the past, but it provides an important link between the past and the future.

There are aspects of the past which a nation would like particularly to preserve because they help shape and determine future traits and characteristics. This involves a process of selection and decision making which cannot be carried out meaningfully without a profound knowledge of history. How often have we heard the saying that 'history repeats itself'. Perhaps, some things need repeating because we have failed to learn from the past. The important thing now is that we cannot afford to keep on failing as time is fast running out.

A recurrence of a World War must at all costs be avoided. There are ample warning signs in history, and yet madness still prevail. A nuclear holocaust should not be the legacy for our future generation. Hence the importance of understanding human history, national history as well as global history, in shaping our future -- what lessons we can learn, what we wish to see repeated, and what we wish to avoid and prevent from repeating.

Let us look into the past for the future. There is a need to preserve our national heritage which is the accumulation of our history, our beliefs, our customs and our traditions. We have today the responsibility to ensure that the collective memory of our people -- their ideals and values -- does not fade away and diminish. Only by guarding and developing our heritage can the cultural spirit of our nation grow and blossom. Only then can we hope to promote national identity and a sense of belonging which forms the basis of national unity. Only then can we hope to unite the different political factions to work towards the nations' progress and to eliminate wasteful petty bickerings.

When we look into the past for the future, it is values that we should first look at, values that we would like to preserve and transmit to our children. Their propagation, as such, is a special duty that devolves upon women because women are "first teachers" as mothers of their children.

Uppermost in the list of values is PEACE. History shows us that it is in periods of peace that the greatest intellectual and cultural achievements are made. King Asoka, the famous Buddhist Emperor of Ancient India, was only able to concentrate upon the intellectual and cultural development of his subjects after he had laid the foundations of peace for his kingdom. From this came the flowering of art, architecture, literature that have endured and remained a wonderment until this day.

Peace is not just the absence of war or something that is based upon political and economic considerations. More importantly, it has a cultural dimension -- a dimension that transcends narrow egotism and parochialism. It nourishes those basic affinities through which peoples everywhere, regardless of race, religion and creed, acknowledge one another as belonging to the human race and who are jointly responsible for a common future. This cultural empathy is a strong bond that can contribute not only to the enrichment of all cultures, but also to the fostering of world peace and global unity.

This global outlook should not be confined to national governmental institutions dedicated to the preservation of the cultural heritage. Many non-governmental organisations, notably women's organisations, also work towards fostering this global outlook. They serve as free agents and fora for the exchange of information and experience, and as a mechanism for networking between individuals and between groups, transcending national boundaries. Women's organisations, such as PPSEAWA, which neither recognize distinctions of race nor colour, political sectarianism nor jingoistic citizenship, evince a sense of solidarity and world mindedness that has enabled them to build bridges of understanding between the different cultures of the world.

The military drumbeats have been echoing through the corridors of history for far too long. But the women's movement has all along been marching to a different rhythm.

Women's involvement in the cause of peace is not something new. In a world torn apart by war, women have in the past forged a bond of human solidarity by setting in existence a network of international services in the cause of justice, health and well being, learning and scholarship and many other supreme values which constitute the common goal of our human heritage. Let us continue to work towards this preservation for the sake of our future generations.

(c) The Social Heritage One of the greatest challenges that faces us today is the erosion of the family unit as the foundation of social systems. The family as the cradle of our cherished values, as the nursery of ideas and cultural flowering is being threatened by inflexible economic systems aimed at the maximization of profits regardless of its costs on human life and values. Single parent families are becoming the trend in some localities where formerly the extended family, then the nuclear family was the norm. Family life has deteriorated and alienation exists even among the closest of kins. We must bring back again all those values that bond us together in love and relationships, of respect for our elders, and of filial responsibility for the protection and guidance of the young. Harmony must begin in the home.

Sharing and caring must be nurtured in all citizens irrespective of gender.

The global menace in the form of pervasive drug abuse must be halted. It is indeed tragic to see the pride and flower of our nationhood -- the youthful citizens -- falling victims to drug addiction and becoming entrapped in the clutches of unscrupulous and avaricious drug merchants and traffickers. Another major threat that has been linked to the drug menace is that of AIDS. So far medical science has not yet found a cure or an immunization process against this dreaded disease which has infected not only drug addicts and sexual deviants but also innocent babies and family members.

While we decry the building up of weaponry as a potential threat to human life we tend to be comparatively silent on this equally catastrophic phenomena which threatens our future. As a generation we should be ashamed to pass this as legacy to our future generation. Our social heritage should be drug-free and AIDS-safe.

To build happy families we need today a firm commitment on the part of every person to do his or her bit. It is fallacious to blame any particular gender for the deterioration of quality family life. Women have contributed and will continue to contribute in their role as mothers, wives and daughters and in the complex world of today, as professionals, employees and income contributors for the socio-economic well being of their families. But this should not be their burden alone. For, to create a truly happy family we need the cooperation of, and the sharing of responsibilities by fathers, husbands and sons.

VISIONS OF A BETTER WORLD Following the UN International Year of Peace 1987, a world wide campaign was launched in 1988 to involve ordinary people to think positively of peace as a way of life. The Million Minutes of Peace campaign was participated by over 80 different countries and Malaysia is proud to be ranked number 10 for having collected the most number of minutes dedicated to peace. As a follow-up of this sensitizing effort, the 'Global Cooperation for a Better World Movement' was launched in 1989. Participating individuals and groups were asked to create "Visions" of the world they desire. I would like, on this occasion, to share with you some of the visions which have been submitted.

From a housewife "A world as intended by our Lord, a world free from pestilence, war, inequalities and hatred. A society that has a soul, where everyone takes the time and effort to smile and greet one another everyday in a spontaneous manner".

From a woman leader "A world that works together towards greater openness, a more liberal and tolerant society .. Let us direct all our efforts towards global peace The global vision is attainable if we have the unity of mind and purpose for a better world and sustained by a supportive community attitude".

"What we need is a situation where people from lesser developed countries can benefit from the flow of information from the more developed ones, and peoples are exposed to the ideas, aspirations and realities of others. We need to know more about each other in order to understand better and to remove the "blinkers" that have existed".

From a student "Where everybody has the sense of responsibility caring for others, willing to help each other any time, anywhere.

Where we regard mankind as one great big family. I see myself in a new image, assisting people, being helpful and understanding the needs of others".

From working women "A world of friendly people, those who share their smiles and share thoughts, especially peaceful and beautiful thoughts".

"A society which is open and friendly, ready to help each other in need, ready to share its success. A society which is people oriented rather than materialistically inclined".

"Cooperative, compassionate, caring and action oriented world where progress is measured in the stability of the human mind and not in terms of dollars and cents".

"A world free from pollution, deforestation and excessive mining, an educated world. A world where there is no poverty, where everyone can find work, where the cost of food, shelter and clothing is affordable, and everyone has a roof above his head. A society of people who are sincere, honest, helpful and positive".

These visions come from the heart, and they do not ask for the moon. It is the same the whole world over and it is not unattainable. Nor do we need to fight wars to achieve this. Yet there is conflict, suffering, poverty, hunger and deprivation, exploitation and violence, destruction and oppression. The agenda is indeed long. We have to start now before it is too late. Let us find courage and wisdom in the following: "No soul that aspires can ever fail to rise; no heart that loves can ever be abandoned. Difficulties exist only that in overcoming them that we may grow stronger and better".

THE ROLE OF NGO'S: WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTIONS Friends, fellow citizens of EARTH: We are gathered in this historic meeting to secure a better future for ourselves and for our unborn generations. We meet to further the objectives of PPSEAWA which is stated as follows: * To strengthen the bonds of peace by fostering better understanding and friendship among the women of all Pacific and Southeast Asian areas; * To initiate and promote cooperation among the women of these regions for the study and improvement of existing conditions.

Tan Sri Zain Azraai in his presentation on 'Arts and Patronage: Issues of the 21st Century' had quoted the poet Laureate Wordsworth: "the Child is father of the man" in emphasizing the importance of the right kind of education in our schools. We may add to this quotation "and woman is mother of the Child". The education of women and mothers is not to be overlooked. Because women as mothers are "first teachers" besides being perpetrators of human life. They play an important role in the shaping of public opinion and in the inculcation of human values. Therefore, the first item on our agenda for action is to sensitise and educate our women on the importance of preserving our heritage -- in all its dimensions -- and the need to foster in all our children the values that we cherish as global citizens.

Women need not only be educated as mothers, but in the context of the contemporary world, women are also partners in all fields of human endeavour -- as economic producers, as professionals, as contributors to the national culture, as decision makers and leaders, and as scholars and researchers -- and need also to be educated as such. They need to be involved in the major issues confronting our heritage -- to contribute their thinking, their perspectives in seeking solutions to these problems. Women seek to be equal partners and to be actively involved on all development activities both as planner as well as implementors, as resources as well as beneficiaries. In Malaysia, a 'National Policy on Women in Development' has been passed by the Government in December 1989. This policy sets out some of the guiding principles to all concerned so as to ensure that equity, justice and partnership would not be overlooked or compromised.

The 21st century is a mere nine short years away. In some ways we are already into the next millennium looking at the quantum leap in communication technology. The fax machine, the television dish, not to mention computers, have made the wide world into a global village. This poses important implications not only in matters of transnational communication for survival, but also in the health and preservation of individual national cultures. Governmental efforts alone will not suffice whether this be in the advancement of culture, sports, the arts, history or science, or in the campaign to stamp out drug addiction, AIDS, crime or violence. The private sector and the NGO's cannot but be involved. But more importantly they must cooperate and work in tandem and in cooperation as well as complement and supplement governmental efforts. On this point let me emphasize that the private sector contribution has not been lacking; however, it is sometimes the unwillingness on the part of some in the governmental sector to involve the nongovernmental agencies that has been the limiting factor. Let us try to remove these obstacles or barriers to progress.

I am also concerned about sex stereotyping. Many women's organisations, consciously or unconsciously, tend to perpetuate the stereotype, e.g. women as preserver of culture and traditions, as the comforter and supporter, but seldom the leader or initiator. We can be pioneers in many new endeavours. Women can contribute to global peace as "peace ambassadors" as well as initiate international round table talks to seek solution to world problems. It is indeed sad to note that initiatives for peace in continental Southeast Asia have not included the participation of the women in the regions concerned. They continue to bear the brunt of hardships created by the warring factions.

Womens organisations should take up seriously the mission that was entrusted to UNESCO as embodied in the Preamble to its Charter of 1945. It states categorically that "since wars are created in the minds of men, it is in the minds of people that the foundations of peace must be constructed". If we are to judge by events unfolding in the Middle East, Africa, and in Central America, the foundations of peace have failed to take root in people's minds. It is incongruous, in my woman's mind, to think how peace can be achieved by amassing arms and war equipment in the area. To compound the complexity, the denial of food to innocents has been given overwhelming support as a strategy. Humanitarian values have indeed been sacrificed and sidelined by nonhumanitarian "principles".

PROLOGUE This Conference has indeed chosen a weighty theme for its deliberations. I wish to congratulate you on your courage and determination to forge ahead in the interest of fostering global understanding and peace. I have attempted to highlight some of the areas that this Conference could focus its attention on and I hope that as a result of your deliberations you will come up with a firm action-oriented plan which can be adopted by member countries. May the Almighty God grant you His blessings and guide you in your deliberations. I am confident that the Pan Pacific and South east Asia can be a better region through PPSEAWA's initiative and our concerted efforts and cooperation.