

Penyampai : DATIN SERI DR. SITI HASMAH BINTI HAJI MOHD. ALI
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Mr Chairman; Your Majesty Queen Fabiola, Patron of the International Steering Committee; Your Majesty Queen Paola, Queen of the Belgians; Your Excellencies; Distinguished Guests; Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is indeed a pleasure and an honour for me to be here today, to speak on behalf of my friends in the Asia-Pacific region on the progress we have achieved since the Geneva Summit two years ago. I am very sure that the Summit, at the very least, has heightened much awareness in the world for actions to promote the general well-being of rural women and their families.

2. Malaysia and other countries in the Asia and Pacific region, following the Geneva Declaration, have initiated special programmes through their respective national steering committees, or in some cases, using existing national bodies, in attempts to reduce the plight of rural women. Regionally, Malaysia had also hosted a meeting with Tonga and Sri Lanka, who are ISC members representing Asia and the Pacific, in order to chart out specific strategies and formulate necessary follow-up actions in implementing the Geneva Declaration. In addition, a regional workshop on Micro-enterprises and Entrepreneurial Development was held from 2 - 4 December 1993 in Kuala Lumpur, followed by a meeting of Representatives of the First Ladies. At this meeting, discussions were held to prepare a Regional Report.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

3. I would like to take this opportunity to share with you an overview of the status of work done by countries in Asia and the Pacific Region, in terms of efforts to further advance the economic status of Rural and Island Women.

4. Although Asia is a continent of great diversity, in terms of its peoples, cultures, religion, climate, resources and political systems, there are some commonalities shared by these countries. These include the fact that they are generally agricultural in nature and highly populous, particularly in the rural areas but have a strong commitment to upgrade living standards of the population, especially those of the rural population where women usually predominate.

5. That there prevails a high incidence of rural poverty within Asian countries is an important factor worth considerable attention. While half a billion of the Asian population live in poverty it is also true that the poorest of the poor are usually rural women. We know for a fact that one of the underlying causes of poverty in Asia is landlessness and a large number of women belong to the hardcore poor who are tenants of landless households. Other contributing factors include social and cultural barriers or traditional socio-cultural norms; access to and control over resources; illiteracy or low levels of education which almost inevitably lead to lack of knowledge and awareness of available and accessible resources; and of course lack of credit and requisite skills.

6. Despite these and other problems linked to poverty, such as population pressures, continuing low growth and natural calamities, one cannot deny the fact that numerous efforts are made to alleviate poverty and some have indeed proven to be successful. The Grameen Bank in Bangladesh and the IKHTIAR Rural Credit Scheme in Malaysia are examples of successful credit programmes for women. In these projects small interest-free loans are provided to women. The Credit and Training for Economic Development (CATER) project in rural Sri Lanka, the Marketing Association of Groups Involved in Communities (MAGIC) in the Philippines are also success stories reflecting the fact that rural women are bankable if given the opportunity.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

7. In so far as policies on Rural Women are concerned, most countries in Asia have general national

policies or Five-Year Development Plans which have incorporated rural women as part of their target groups. Some countries also have specific national policies on women (e.g. Papua New Guinea, Malaysia) and specific national development plans for women (e.g. The Philippines Development Plans for Women, 1989-1992; Japan's "New Domestic Action Plan Towards The Year 2000" which focuses on rural women; Thailand's Twenty Year Long-Term Women's Development Plan (1982-2001) which caters to the various groups of women with Women in Agriculture heading the list; and the Indian National Perspective Plan for Women, 1988-2000). Other countries like Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Maldives and Malaysia, have specific chapters on women in their respective Five Year Development Plans.

8. Although rural women are not mentioned as a priority sector in many National Development Policies, they are nonetheless included in rural development projects as beneficiaries. Countries like Bangladesh and Cambodia, with low growth and human development index, give priority to the development of physical infrastructure for the improvement of the delivery system of basic needs, health and education which benefit women. At the same time Bangladesh incorporates women in its mainstream development, specifically in the construction sector, the water resources sector and in forest development programmes.

9. Generally, these policies and plans of action call for equal partnership and emphasise the incorporation of multi-level and multi-sectoral gender awareness training programmes, in addition to stressing the need for increasing income-generating activities, skills enhancement, entrepreneurship development and collection of gender-disaggregated data.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

10. Institutionally, most governments have tried to articulate specific policies through the creation of ministries, special bureaus and portfolio desks in different ministries or agencies on women. Similarly, non-governmental organisations (NGOS) and grassroot support groups have also played catalytic roles in promoting the socio-economic status of rural women. Some have succeeded in mobilising rural women and as a result outputs have increased.

11. Commitment by the respective governments of the Asia and the Pacific countries to improve the status of rural women is reflected in the various on-going programmes implemented by both government agencies and NGOs. In India, the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) implemented prior to 1989 is one effort which has contributed to the advancement of rural women. IRDP is implemented in most of the districts where women make up about 40 percent of the beneficiaries. An off-shoot of this programme is the Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas which seeks to improve the status of women by increasing their access to employment, skills training, credit and other support services. India's National Perspective Plan for Women (NPP) has been integrated into National Development Plans and this has seen a shift in their approach towards women; from one of development to that of empowerment. Also the Constitution of India has been amended in 1992 to ensure that 30 percent of seats in all elected offices in local bodies are reserved for women.

12. Fiji's fishing project in Vanuabalavu where the Fisheries Division of the Ministry of Primary Industries provide financial assistance to local fisherwomen, is another success story. Through this project, Island women not only supply food for their families but also run successful income-earning enterprises.

13. Other successful projects include the Lao Women's Pilot Textile Centre; the Central Cordillera Agricultural Programme and the Second Palawan Integrated Development Project of the Philippines. Besides these, there is also the Production Credit for Rural Women programme of the Women's Development Section of the Ministry of Panchayat and Local Government in Nepal. It exemplifies government success in mobilising rural women into mainstream development through an innovative and effective approach.

This programme is participated by landless women, migrant women, female-headed households, socially and ethnically disadvantaged women, and women from sub-subsistence households. In Papua New Guinea, the Women's Association, together with the government, carry out intensive awareness

programmes for the villages. It incorporates an approach different from the traditional agricultural method by teaching site-stable gardening so that people will continuously produce food. This also reflects success in extension services.

14. One important policy implication of the above findings is the need to ensure project sustainability. It is imperative that the Asia and Pacific countries not only continue their efforts with the same or greater spirit of commitment, dynamism and intensity but more importantly, we should take measures to ensure that there is continuity in our efforts. In other words we must ensure that these project or programmes do not fizzle out. Towards this end, a vision and a mission are critical.

15. Secondly, an important pre-requisite to success is the need for a national policy which is gender sensitive and which is conducive to Government and NGO partnership.

Women can develop and progress economically in an environment that is both conducive and nondiscriminating to them. Our deliberations and discussions also showed that successful NGOs are those which enjoy a supportive policy environment and act in partnership with the government towards achieving a common mission, i.e. to improve the socio-economic conditions of the rural poor, particularly rural women.

16. One of the most powerful mechanisms utilised by most of the successful programmes and projects organised by government or non-government agencies is the full-participatory approach, especially for community-based projects. The participatory approach in the rural areas is highly acclaimed as an innovative methodology that ensures commitment and incorporates the needs of clientele at grass-root levels. The underlying assumption here is that the poor have innate capabilities and attitudes and can excel, if given the opportunity. Recognising this fact, it is crucial, therefore, that we develop creative methods so that the economic potentials of these women are fully tapped.

17. Equally important is the group dynamism approach as adopted by the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) and Grameen Bank to mobilise and empower rural women. In these cases functional groups of five members are set up, thus empowering women to approve the loans of their members.

The process of establishing these groups produces a multiplier effect, leading to greater grass-roots mobilisation. BRAC empowers the rural women through its village organisation programmes.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

18. As mentioned earlier we need to include "gender conscientisation" and human development programmes in our country's development plan of action. It has been universally acknowledged that a strong factor that hinders women's economic participation is gender insensitivity. It has been proven that a well-planned gender conscientisation process can result in both social and economic development of the rural poor. Greater opportunities will be created, especially for women, when gender sensitive planning and programmes take into account women as productive resources.

19. All the above point to the imperatives of a multi-disciplinary and integrated approach to reach women from different socio-economic backgrounds and needs. A participatory approach based on group dynamism/functional group, grafted into projects that offer a package of assistance and services, especially credit, have proven to be successful and should be replicated and modified wherever possible.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

20. I believe that with a clear vision, positive mission, and a strong determination supported with great resolve from all, we will be able to achieve success in our efforts to help elevate the socio-economic status of our rural sisters.

Thank you.
