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It is a pleasure and an honour for me to be here this morning at this august gathering on the occasion of the 19th Pan Pacific and South-East Asia Women's Association (PPSEAWA) International Tri-Annual Conference in Tonga. I wish to take this opportunity to express my sincere appreciation to Her Royal Majesty the Queen of Tonga for the honour accorded to me to deliver this address. I am deeply touched by the invitation by Her Majesty, who is also the patron of PPSEAWA. I hope that my presence at this Conference will contribute in some small way to the progress of women in this region.

2. I also wish to take this opportunity to bring you warm greetings from the people of Malaysia, in particular from the women of Malaysia. The Malaysian delegation and I wish to thank the organisers for the kind hospitality and we are most happy to be here in this beautiful and fast-developing state of Tonga. I am confident that in the next few days you will be vigorously engaged in the exchange of ideas, experiences and thoughts while attempting at the same time to develop positive networking among members of PPSEAWA. I have no doubt that at the end of the day we will all be able to pool our expertise together and collaborate towards achieving our mission to promote the well-being of women in this region.

3. The theme of this Conference, i.e. "Women of Wisdom As Pillars of Nations" is most appropriate and timely given the world-wide interest and efforts to promote the status of women in the process of development. Such a theme implies two very important aspects; namely, women's potentiality to contribute to the progress of her nation, in other words her leadership abilities, and secondly, women's natural instinct to protect, nurture and care for her family. The theme also highlights the universality in the application of the concept of wisdom. Women, even from the most impoverished sectors, do continue to make major contributions to their respective nations.

4. From time immemorial women have been, through their wisdom, humankind's greatest strength. History and events today have clearly shown that women have weathered the changing vicissitudes and other disasters of life with a fortitude found rarely in the same magnitude as in men.

Women, regardless of their status, have worked against great odds to bring progress to their families and nations.

5. Women indeed have made remarkable progress throughout the world. For the first time in our history, women are visible in every profession -- we are bankers, writers, lawyers, doctors, dentists, accountants, teachers, etc.

Today our women are not only competent, but they are also achievement-oriented, positive, dynamic and ambitious.

Today, there is an increasing pool of women in the male-preserve areas as well.

6. The corporate world is a case in point. It has witnessed a marked increase in the number of women gaining prominence. Throughout Asia, the number of women moving into the corporate world has increased. In Hong Kong, the number of women in the administration and management increased from less than 7 percent in 1971 to 20 percent in 1991. In Japan, long regarded as no paradise for corporate women, women comprised only 1.5 percent of section heads in companies in 1981, but today this figure stands at 2.9 percent. Although this does not represent a big increase, it nonetheless reflects changing trends in the corporate sector. The vast number of women contributing to their country's economic and social development remain nameless and faceless. Some have assumed the mantle of power and guided the destiny of their countries -- Cory Aquino, Benazir Bhutto, Indira Gandhi-- while others like Mother Theresa and Vimla Sunderlal have lived for others.

7. A wise man once paid tribute to women when he stated that next to life the most precious gift to mankind is the mother. The family, which is the most basic and integral unit, is the bedrock of society and is as old as humanity.

When referring to the family one immediately recognises the pivotal role of women, for she is basically the main pillar of the family. In all the many faceted responsibilities and tasks undertaken by men and women in the pioneering days of any nation, the drive and crusading spirit of women were acknowledged. The well-being of the family demands that individuals sometimes make sacrifices and invariably it is the mother who does this. She gives priority to the material and physical needs, social as well as spiritual, so that families are able to cope and survive. Since 1994 is the International Year of the Family, it is perhaps appropriate that we emphasise here at this conference the importance of the family. We need to foster awareness of the significance of family life and to encourage actions that will ensure a more supportive environment for the family unit. It is for the women to further family life and give love in a home where all the members can find warmth, security, togetherness, tolerance and a spirit of caring for each other.

8. At this point, I wish to state that the Conference theme which emphasises the role of women of wisdom must be understood that in no way does it detract from the fact that women must maximise every opportunity to meet the more sophisticated challenges of the present scientific and technological age. Women must recognise that as life becomes more complex in the fast changing and modern world, the greater is the necessity to keep abreast with the times and to meet the challenges of the last decade of the twentieth century and prepare for the twenty- first century.

9. We also know that a large share of the work, particularly in young developing countries, are undertaken by women, either individually or collectively. To prepare women for this onerous responsibility it has rightly been stated that there has to be a major transformation of the social structures as well as in terms of availability or accessibility of women to basic education. Literacy is the right of the individual in a free and democratic society.

Fortunately, over the last two decades, since the early 1970s, the illiteracy rate among females aged 15-24 has declined remarkably; correspondingly, the proportions of women enrolled in primary education have gone up.

10. Now, with modernisation and industrialisation a growing proportion of women are found in manufacturing and the modern commercial and financial sectors. The proportions of women professional and technical workers, administrators and managers are also increasing. Self-employment is a major form of work and livelihood for a great proportion of the population. Women form a significant proportion of these self-employed workers. Some 25-30 percent of employers and own-account workers in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand are women. Outside of agriculture, they are concentrated in manufacturing and trade, restaurants and hotels. In fact, with only some exceptions, women constitute over half of those owning businesses in these areas in most of these countries.

11. Women must have the wisdom to understand that to continue to fulfil their role as the pillars of the nation it is imperative that they avail themselves of existing opportunities and to press on with strong conviction, unquestioned courage, tenacity and purposefulness for necessary reforms and for more equitable rights and justice for all. Some of the pertinent questions we need to ask ourselves are:- Are we constructive innovators? Do we have the courage of our convictions to make a stand, even when ours is the one lone voice, for the rights of others? Are we going to take the line of least resistance and continue to permit or to ignore, wrong, ignoble and even evil trends to become firmly and deeply entrenched in our nations? These questions must be faced and decisions must be made.

12. Women must therefore prepare themselves for greater participation both in the national and international fields so that their potentiality can be utilised for the dignity, welfare and progress of all our peoples, irrespective of countries and for the world at large. I am confident that strong equal partnership between men and women will augur well for the advancement of our nations. Our togetherness must mean more than sharing experiences. It must mean our being catalysts for change, for unity, justice, democracy and equality for all men, women and children.

13. I would like to congratulate the organising committee for selecting such well-thought out sub-themes as a basis for discussions. The subtheme, 'Women in Leadership - The pillars of Nation' is most apt and relevant to the current upsurge in women's political power around the world, which is a recognition of the fact that women can and do make significant contributions to the country's progress provided their potential qualities are harnessed. The shaping of a genuine New World Order is in the making if positive traits of men and women are fused into a partnership which is reflective of society's social structures.

14. The second subtheme "Our People - The strength of Nations" implies the significance of developing the potentials of our people as they are the nation's important resources. As they are the nation's greatest assets, efforts should therefore be made to provide them with necessary education, training and skills development and access to land. This also implies that constructive strategies are necessary to bring about institutional, attitudinal, educational, administrative and organisational changes to enhance human resources development.

15. The subtheme 'The Future of Nations - Our Environment' suggests the vital role women can play in the management of the environment, particularly in sustainable development which is well reflected in the various charters and sections in the United Nations World Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). Women's groups had made an impact in the development of Agenda 21, emphasising "Global Action for Women Towards Sustainable and Equitable Development." It is now for us to maintain that momentum. Women in developing countries are experienced in the management of the natural resources, especially land and in the conservation of energy. I do hope that greater attention is given to this subtheme in order to strengthen women's organisations in environmental management, pollution, prevention, etc. which will promote sustainable and equitable development.

16. Lastly, the subtheme 'The Potentials of Nations - Women in Development' could not have been more appropriate. It must be remembered that women together with their menfolk walked side by side along the pioneer trails and gave their lives, their labour and energy and were in the vanguard of development. Heavy demands were made of women in those early years of pioneering. In Malaysia our Malay sisters laboured in the padi fields, our Chinese sisters in the tin mines and our Indian sisters in the rubber estates and in the building of our roads and railways. This is the heritage we are proud of and this pattern of pioneering is duplicated the world over. These pioneers were simple women whose responsibilities entailed the never-ending vital functions of the home, the child bearing and rearing of children and in numberless and countless ways they carried the burden of ensuring the happy family life even in the midst of perennial poverty and deprivation. These were the women of wisdom who brought the orchestra of the life of their respective societies to a full crescendo by their pioneering efforts. These were the courageous mothers who laid the foundation on which we today continue to build and consolidate. Often in abject poverty facing almost insurmountable hardships and grave injustices perpetrated by society, these women courageously and valiantly forged ahead for the development of nations.

17. If we, who are here today, are to consider ourselves as the pillars of our nations, then it is important that we evaluate the position of the vast numbers of hundreds of millions of women who continue to be discriminated against.

Development and the raising of the quality of life are basically a question of justice. Women can never hope to develop their full potential if they and their families are forced to live in squalor deprived of their basic rights of proper shelter, sufficient food, clean water, mental and physical well-being and proper nourishment. These disadvantages mean that a PPSEAWA Plan of Action is necessary and imperative. Women in our position must be the 'voice' for the millions of voiceless women. Our advocacy in raising the conscience and awareness of the public and private sectors, the NGOs and Corporate Organisations, will effectively result in major long sought-after changes for women and their families. If the Plan of Action at national, regional and international levels and the international networking mechanisms are undertaken, and with such unflagging dedication and commitment, then the benefits arising from such programmes and reforms will become a reality. PPSEAWA organisations must initiate on-going programmes which will bring in new and more challenging era for women in which a good quality of life and human dignity for each individual is ensured. In our efforts towards this mission let us remember that

mothers and women have been regarded as the greatest source of a country's strength and inspiration.

18. The Decade for Women in 1985 held in Nairobi, Kenya, witnessed energetic participation by governments and NGOs, resulting in evaluation and in strategies being recommended to achieve the objectives and concerns enunciated in 1975. Similarly, the 1995 World Conference On Women will witness Governments and NGOs forwarding recommendations on the actual implementation of A Plan of Action.

19. It is hoped that this Conference will be just as effective and useful in contributing not only towards the advancement of women throughout the world but also ensure that their potentials are realised.

20. On that note I have great pleasure in declaring open this 19th Pan Pacific and South-East Asia Women's Association International Conference.
