

Penyampai : DATIN SERI DR. SITI HASMAH BINTI HAJI MOHD. ALI
Tajuk : THE REGIONAL STEERING COMMITTEE ASIA-PACIFIC EXPERT GROUP MEETING
ON THE PLAN OF ACTION FOR RURAL AND ISLAND WOMEN
Lokasi : HOLIDAY INN CITY CENTRE, KUALA LUMPUR
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1. Firstly, I would like to welcome all foreign participants to Malaysia and hope that at the end of this meeting they will bring home with them fond memories of Malaysia. I am indeed honoured to be here this morning to officiate the opening of the Expert Group Meeting On the Plan Of Action For Rural and Island Women.

2. Today's meeting is a follow-up of the First Meeting of the Regional Steering Committee for Rural and Island Women of Asia-Pacific. The Committee was established on 5 September, 1995 in Beijing. The Regional Steering Committee, also known as the 'RSC' -- is one of the follow-up activities of the Geneva Declaration for rural women, which was endorsed at the Geneva summit for economic advancement of rural women, held in 1992.

Following the summit, the international steering committee, consisting of 15 first ladies from three countries in each of the five continents, was formed. At the regional levels, active and effective participation of First Ladies from other member countries within the region, is envisaged. Hence, the formation of the Regional Steering Committee for Asia Pacific, consisting of 15 countries that each of you are representing today.

3.. Among the main responsibilities of members of the RSC and ISC are, to monitor the progress of the implementation of the Geneva Declaration and to support national and regional initiatives for the advancement of rural women. Together, the members of the RSC-Asia Pacific could help pool the resources and mobilise our energy to ensure that rural and island women are beneficiaries of our development programmes and projects, particularly those relating to poverty alleviation and improvement in the quality of rural family life.

The role and responsibilities of each and everyone of the RSC member is further increased with the endorsement of the Beijing Platform for Action, 1995.

4. The RSC-Asia Pacific encompasses nations that range from the most populous countries such as China, India and Indonesia to the less populated island nations; from countries enjoying high economic growth in South East Asia and the Far East to countries burdened with poverty as in South Asian Sub-Continent, and nations struggling to recover from the ravages and ruins of war as in Cambodia and Afghanistan.

5. According to the latest Human Development Report 1995, about 300 million people in South Asia do not have enough food to eat. Women and Children suffer the most with figures showing 80 percent of pregnant women suffering from anaemia; and one-third of new-born babies are underweight. South Asia is the only sub-region in the world in which countries like Bangladesh, Maldives and Nepal have shorter female life expectancy than male life expectancy.

6. In East and South-East Asia, nearly 170 million people live in poverty in 1990, and more than two million people have been infected with HIV. In South-east Asia and the Pacific, rural access to safe water and basic sanitation lack behind two- thirds of urban access to the same facilities. The maternal mortality rate in South-East Asia and the Pacific, at 295 per 100,000 live births, is more than three times that in East Asia, at 92 per 100,000 live births.

7. However, despite the presence of insurmountable problems linked to poverty, population pressures, continuing low economic growth in certain countries, and at times, faced with destructive natural calamities such as typhoons, tidal waves, earthquakes, innumerable efforts and intervention programmes to alleviate poverty have been implemented by government and non-government organisations. Among the programmes and projects implemented in various countries, the successful ones indicate one

common factor -- the inclusion of women as target groups in the project. In the Asia Pacific region, we have successful programmes on micro credit for the poor such as The Grameen Bank, and its replication in Malaysia, The Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia, as well as CAHSHPOR for South-East Asian Region. We have other programmes targetting on rural women such as Food-for-Work Programme, CATER (Credit and Training for Economic Development, Sri Lanka) and MAGIC (Marketing Association of Groups Involved in Communities) from the Phillipines. Such innovative projects offer a package of assistance which include financial/micro credit and technical assistance targeting especially the rural women.

8. What is evident here, is the indisputable fact that women are bankable -- when included in development programmes, they participate actively as agents for change and benefit from such programmes and these are enjoyed by their family members.

9. At the Fourth World Conference in Beijing last year more than 40,000 women congregate to show solidarity in our struggle for equality of opportunities, peace and development. The ISC was there to represent the voice of the rural women, to draw the world's attention specifically to the plight faced by the rural poor women and their families, and to pledge our commitment to help mobilise the political will and resources for the advancement of rural women.

10. In the spirit of Geneva and the Beijing Declarations, the RSC-Asia Pacific accepts as our mandate the need to help improve the living conditions, the status and the quality of life of rural and island women and their families.

11. Women constitute about 50 percent of the world population. In terms of achievements, women have made many inroads into important fields, such the legislative, politics, business etc. Women, the world over are a strong force to be reckoned with. The old power and social structures are now crumbling and giving way to new ones. Women's achievements in all these areas can contribute significantly to the advancement of women worldwide. Thus, despite the numerous problems of poverty, illiteracy etc, related to women, women must play this important role in helping to mobilise their expertise, experiences, etc for the good of mankind generally, and for the poor and unfortunate women, specifically. Their potentials must be tapped to the fullest if women are to equitably share the fruits of development.

12. This is the premise of the Expert Group Meeting today. On behalf of the RSC--Asia Pacific, Malaysia, as secretariat of the organisation, invites experts on rural development to discuss and prioritise the areas of concern affecting rural and island women according to sub-regions. We hope to share and exchange experiences of success stories as well as failures in taking initiatives to influence development policies and to implement intervention programmes. We welcome your recommendations on strategies for the RSC-Asia Pacific to undertake, based on the Beijing Platform for Action and the objectives of Geneva Declaration. The output of the expert group meeting, in the form of regional and sub regional plan of action and programmes, will be forwarded to the meeting of personal representatives of the First Ladies for further action.

13. In the context of this meeting your input is crucial. The RSC-ASIA Pacific will help promote activities for rural women and act as the intermediary between the Government, the NGOs, the International Development Agencies and donor institutions. Members of the RSC-Asia Pacific will play the advocacy role on behalf of the rural women to ensure that : * Rural and Island women are acknowledged and valued as active development participants; * Rural and Island women are the beneficiaries of development; * Rural and Island Women have equal opportunities to access and control over productive resources; hence the need for gender awareness and gender sensitive development planning programmes; * Rural and Island Women are incorporated in mainstream development, and * Rural and Island women are empowered with resources that will enhance the development of their potentials, thereby improve the quality of family life.

14. The task ahead of us is very challenging.

Within the next two to three days, you are going to chart the programmes, the strategies, the economic and human resources that need to be mobilised at regional and sub-regional levels so that the RSC- Asia

Pacific could embark on programmes to improve the living conditions and the enhancement of the rural and Island women, from 1996 to year 2000. It is my hope that the meeting will provide participants, local and foreign, avenues for the exchange of strategies, transfer of technologies, sharing of resources and expertise, and renewed commitment to work and prepare the rural and Island Women with skills and resources relevant to the 21st century.

15. Let us work together to ensure that gender inequalities that hinder rural women's access to resources and to development are removed. Gender sensitives development policies, planning and programmes are important prerequisites for all member nations to embark on. This is the message we need to send to the world that Rural Women issues and concerns are development issues.

16. On that note I am delighted to officially declare open this First Meeting of the Expert Group.

I wish you great success in your deliberations.