

Penyampai : DATO SERI DR SITI HASMAH BINTI HAJI MOHD ALI
Tajuk : MAJLIS PERASMIAN "THE ASEAN CONFEDERATION OF WOMEN'S ORGANISATION (ACWO)"
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Terlebih dahulu marilah kita bersama-sama mengucapkan syukur Alhamdulillah ke-hadrat Ilahi kerana dengan limpah kurnia-Nya sahaja kita berkumpul di sini dengan keadaan selamat dan aman damai untuk menyempurnakan tugas-tugas kita demi kesejahteraan dan kebaikan kita bersama dalam rantau ini. Semoga Allah Subhanahu wa Ta'ala memberkati perjumpaan ACWO ini, insya-Allah.

2. In the Name of Allah, the Benevolent and Most Merciful. May His Blessings of Peace be upon us and a very good morning to you.

3. Let me take this opportunity to wish you all "Selamat Datang" and our nation's greetings "Salam Muhibbah". Welcome to Malaysia, especially to our fascinating city of Kuching in the State of Sarawak. I hope that the salubrious and friendly atmosphere of Sarawak will provide the enabling environment for the ACWO Conference to proceed smoothly and to generate fresh ideas not only for women's advancement, but also for our continuing dialogue and cooperation in all matters - in the ASEAN way.

4. It is indeed a great honour for me to have this opportunity to address this assembly of women leaders and potential leaders from the member countries of ASEAN. More so, because this is the first meeting of ASEAN women in this new millennium. As you all know in this millennium, we are confronted with so many challenges - both the old and the new - and which I believe, call for a stronger solidarity, cooperation and mutual assistance among our nations, not only by our Governments, but also among all components of the civil society, namely, men and women working as equal partners, the NGOs - notably the women NGOs, the private sectors, and also our youth.

5. In this age of progressive and rapid globalisation in all aspects of human endeavour - accelerated and made more complicated or simplified, depending on how it is viewed by advances in the information technology - we must recognise and accord high priority to the meeting of human minds and the getting together of people, so that the human element and interrelationships are not overlooked or neglected. We must strive to find new meanings and understandings to human relationships and problems; we must have a better perspective to view human wants and human destiny; and most important of all, we must strive to maintain and sustain contact with one another and to work together for better harmonisation within our families, within our nation, and within our region.

6. The countries of ASEAN occupy a strategic location in the globalisation process, not only for the Asian continent, but also for the North - South axis, and within the Pacific Rim. I, for one, believe that APEC, or any regional grouping for that matter, would be meaningless without the participation of the Southeast Asian nations.

7. As most of you are well aware, the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing was a milestone and a historic occasion for women in the global community. For many years before the Beijing Conference, the goal of women's advancement has been directed towards the achievement of "Equality, Development and Peace". That this theme was reiterated and reinforced in Beijing was doubly significant. We are certainly committed to the achievement of peace, - nationally, regionally and globally. But sad to say, we have barely scratched the surface toward achieving this goal of peace among nations.

8. We seek also to achieve a sustainable and equitable development for all our nations, but the gap between the haves and have nots, the rich and the poor, the developed and the underdeveloped - is ever widening, and often global events beyond our control, such as the recent economic and currency crisis, serve to undo and destroy whatever progress that we have achieved. To achieve sustainable growth and development we need to stress the importance of mutual respect for our respective sovereignty, the full participation of men and women, as equal partners, and the need to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women, simply on the basis of biological difference, - so that women who comprise approximately

50% of our respective populations can rightly contribute their energies and resources, their capabilities, their potentials and their expertise, to the future development of our nations, and to benefit therefrom.

9. Speaking of development, I want to share with you my feelings about the plight of the people in Iraq today, especially the women, - the mothers, - and the children. The comprehensive economic sanctions imposed by the United Nations Security Council, which have been in force for a decade now, have caused undue sufferings of misery on the ordinary people. They have to bear, yet with pride, anger, and dignity, many forms of deprivations. But what I found to be most inhumane is the impact on children - due to the lack of essential medicines, vitamins and medical treatment, and the effects of both the aftermath of the war and the sanctions. These have resulted in increasing rates of infant and child mortality, malnutrition and deformities. The long suffering mothers can only give their motherly human comfort while waiting for a beloved child to die inevitably. I believe that it is wrong to deny a nation or its peoples the right to development and to live with dignity. If the economic sanctions are intended to deny this right, then I think that the world community, and the champions of human rights, must strongly condemn these sanctions, and call for their immediate removal. I urge you to please do so, in the name of humanity in the name of justice and in the name of brotherhood and sisterhood of humankind.

10. In Beijing in 1995, we pledged to advance the status of women when we adopted the Beijing Platform for Action. Although there were certain reservations expressed on specific issues, the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action was however unanimous. We expressed commitment to remove, or lessen all the obstacles in the way of women's advancement in all spheres - political, social, economic, human rights and decision-making. A manifestation of this commitment is the formulation and adoption of our national Plans of Action to implement the recommendations of the Beijing Platform for Action.

11. It is now five years after Beijing and, with the start of the new millennium, it is a time for stock taking.

12. I am given to understand that this Conference ACWO 2000, will focus on assessing and reviewing the achievements made, especially by NGOs, in the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, and will try to formulate a draft agenda for future actions at all levels, - including the regional level. I am hopeful that this Conference will achieve its intended outcomes. I also hope that your recommendations will also be brought to the ASEAN Sub Committee on Women, which is the Governmental counterpart of ACWO. I would also like to see more NGO representations be appointed to serve on this ASEAN Sub Committee as they are the people in the forefront in the cause of women's advancement, and therefore are more knowledgeable about women's issues and concerns and of the obstacles we face.

13. On this matter, I would like the Conference, if possible, to deliberate also on the UN Secretary General's Report to the Commission on the Status of Women, with regard to the proposed framework for further actions and initiatives to be taken in 2000. I believe that this framework will be considered during the Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly entitled : "Women 2000: Gender Equality, Development and Peace" to be held in the early part of June, 2000 in New York. I am sure that the ASEAN region will be represented by both your official country delegations as well as by the various NGOs in the parallel NGO Forum.

14. I understand that the proposed framework for further actions and initiatives touched on the following areas: a. The political will and the commitment to create an enabling environment; b. Capacity building for advancement of women and gender-mainstreaming; c. Accountability for, and assessment of implementation strategies and actions in the Platform for Action; d. Cooperation and Partnership for implementing the Platform; e. Assistance to women and girls subject to discrimination and disadvantage.

15. The draft framework has also identified a number of important cross-cutting themes in future actions and initiatives. These include: a. Globalisation and the economic empowerment of women, especially of poor women; b. Women, science and technology and the new information age; c. Women's leadership; and d. Women security and social protection.

16. I see that you have before you quite a big plateful for you to digest and deliberate upon. I wish you

much success in your undertaking. Even if you are not able to deal as fully as you would like to, due to time constraints, due to the diversities we have in the region, and of course, the need to take the opportunity to see as much as possible the wonders of Sarawak, I hope that the effort will help to prepare you and your delegation when they go to New York in June for the Beijing Plus Five Special Assembly.