

Penyampai : DATO SERI DR. SITI HASMAH BT HJ MOHD ALI
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WOMEN, PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT

Women, peace and development are three interlocking factors in a nation's march to progress.

Women constitute half the population, and in some countries, especially those involved with armed conflict, women comprise more than half of the population. Although Muslims make up about one-fifth of humankind, most of them are concentrated in three Muslim nations with low levels of progress in human development. Two thirds of the Arab States have populations below 10 million. The majority of Sub Saharan countries are below ten million and are also being decimated by HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases. In a globalised world where Muslims nations are at a critical stage of industrial expansion, progress would be seriously jeopardized unless steps are taken to bring every man and woman into the mainstream of sustainable development and in the pursuit of lasting peace and equity.

2. Women have always assumed productive functions, in addition to their traditional reproductive role as homemakers and care givers in the family. Their productive functions, very often unaccounted in national productivity statistics, are now being increasingly recognised and acknowledged as being crucial for the family's survival and well being. In modern society many families depend on dual breadwinners. Experiences of many countries show that when women's productive role is harnessed in tandem with their reproductive role and done in ways that protect and promote their human rights as well as eliminate any gender-based discrimination in the distribution of resources, it will lead to the desired development for the nation, family and women. Such considerations enhance women's condition and equal status and do not deteriorate their condition and position by burdening them with added workloads and extra responsibilities in addition to their reproductive roles.

3. The importance of women in development has to be acknowledged at the highest level of commitment. It has to appear in major development plans as well as budgetary allocation. Within this context I take the opportunity to quote Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad when he delivered the speech on the Supply Bill 2004 in Parliament on 12 September 2003.

"The role of women in moulding happy families and their contribution in national economic and social development has always been recognized. The success of women in balancing this dual role cannot be denied and is indeed admirable. There are some who restrict the contribution of women in development by only allowing them to become teachers and welfare officers and preventing them from becoming judges, Government administrators or joining the security forces. For the Barisan Nasional Government, women stand equal with men in the mainstream of development. The female workforce has increased to more than 45 percent... In the history of Islam women had fought alongside Prophet Mohammad in war, while in business, Saidatina Khadijah was involved in cross border trade. Remember heaven lies beneath the mother's feet. The hand that rocks the cradle shakes the world".

4. The third pre-requisite for progress is Peace.

Peace is essential if development is to take place.

Peace, within the country, between two nations or among many gives us a feeling of friendliness and safety. In this state we feel secure to go on with our daily lives, in the understanding that nobody will blast the roof over our heads that we have safe water to drink and food to eat. With Peace our children can go to school and play safely out of doors. Peace means that we have basic health care to prevent and cure illnesses, we have markets to sell our wares and services, we have the freedom to move and express our views and we are guaranteed justice when seeking protection of our human rights.

5. As much as women desire peace and the opportunity to actively participate in development, the reality

in many Muslim countries today, is that peace is elusive, women are yet to take their rightful place in society and development is haltingly slow.

6. Many OIC member nations are in a state of war or under threat of war. After September 11, the most powerful country in the world claims a right to take military action pre-emptively and unilaterally in the name of self-defence, and many others with military might are also taking on the same posture. Even the United Nations is rendered impotent as we saw in the unjustifiable strike against Iraq and the recent attack upon Syria by the Israeli regime. Despite having a high expenditure on defence, almost all Muslim nations are vulnerable to pre-emptive attacks at any time and any place.

7. Whether it is conventional warfare or war against terrorism, the consequences are nevertheless grim and harsh. In war and conflicts, infrastructure is destroyed, essential services break down and development is interrupted or even halted. Whole societies are displaced and deprived of their basic human rights to a decent standard of living. Civilians account for 90 percent of deaths, half of which are children. The constant fear and daily loss of innocent lives sow more terror, hatred, suffering, bloodshed and more enemies. Such a state of violence, confusion, fear and anxiety is extremely dangerous and begets more violence. It diverts away energy from much needed development.

8. Despite having some 70 percent of the world's oil and gas and at least one-quarter of the natural resources, 90 percent of OIC countries do not belong to the high development group and in some sub-Saharan countries development has halted or even regressed.

These countries face income poverty, hunger, under-five mortality, illiteracy, poor access to safe water and inadequate sanitation. Women are more adversely affected. Even in the richer states there is a persistent wide gap between incomes and other aspects of human development.

9. With regards to health and compared to developing countries as a whole, most OIC Member States have shorter life expectancy, more undernourished infants and children and higher maternal, infant and under five mortality rates. The data for people living with HIV/AIDS are not readily available but Muslim countries are certainly not spared of this deadly disease, with increasing incidence amongst women. Admirably at least one Muslim country has reversed the incidence. Malaria and tuberculosis are still prevalent.

10. With regards to education, the average adult literacy rate of OIC nations (65 percent) is even lower than the 75 percent for developing countries* with women's literacy rates being much lower than that of men. The education status for the younger population is more promising but still lower than developing countries as a whole. More than three-quarters of youth are literate. About three-quarters of children who should be in school are enrolled and more than 80 percent reach grade five. However enrolment in secondary school shows a drop, resulting in very low enrolment in higher education, with less than 5 percent in some countries. No Muslim nation has more than 50 percent of its eligible population in tertiary education, compared to developed countries which have 70 percent or more. Where women have access to tertiary education, their enrolment appears to be increasing compared to men.

11. The scientific and technological capability of OIC countries is also poor. Because of the low investment in Science and Technology OIC countries are utterly dependent on others for their scientific and technological needs because they lack the critical numbers of scientists and engineers for scientific research and the diffusion and application of scientific knowledge for social effects.

12. With regards to the participation of women in the economy, only Malaysia and Turkey have data about their distribution according to sector. In Turkey, women dominate the agricultural sector whilst in Malaysia they are the predominant force in the services industry. The income disparity between male and females is very wide.

13. The participation in political democracy is nil in four Muslim countries. The percentage of elected women representatives in parliament is around or below 10 percent except in countries which practise a quota system. Very few women are in the position of senior officials and managers with the best being

recorded by Malaysia at 20 percent.

14. Some Muslim countries have not ratified the United Nations Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women. The Quran advocates equality between women and men both as regards responsibilities and before the law, but certain Muslim countries are slow with the implementation or they misinterpret the Islamic principles. They use the veil of Islamic modesty to oppress and deny women their human rights.

15. In most of these countries there is a "decline in civilization", which is independent of religion that is the real cause of the backwardness of women in relation to men in their societies. Unfortunately they give a bad name to Islam because women's participation in development is a sine qua non for instituting a real social contract for the advent of sustainable human development*. Women do not constitute a minority and they play a fundamental role in the generation and application of knowledge for various aspects of development. Women have played an important role in Muslim cultural life and many women Muslim scholars preceded the advancement of women in other civilizations. Women's suffrage was introduced fourteen centuries ago.

16. The Muslim world is part of a globalised world. In this new world knowledge is a strategic resource. Those who are able to generate knowledge, have access to knowledge and are able to use knowledge in creative and unique ways to innovate and add value or improve ways of doing things, or more importantly, to make radical new discoveries to gain competitive advantage over others in the same industry or business.

17. Thus the survival of OIC Member States depends on whether we are able to imagine dramatically different ways of doing things. If we look around us we will see that many radical changes are made when Information and Communication Technology or commonly known as ICT, is integrated with the core knowledge and technological know-how of industries, enterprises and governments.

18. E-learning is fast capturing the education market because it is a more flexible and cheaper way of attaining education and qualifications from well-known institutions. Some virtual campuses are larger than the conventional universities.

19. The Muslim world cannot be a passive member of this new world. It must be connected to the networks that almost instantaneously communicate, circulate and share ideas freely. In fact ICT is the means by which Muslim countries can leap frog into the knowledge economy and society.

20. It must be accepted that poverty reduction must be the prime goal. It is not impossible to achieve an annual growth rate of 1.4 - 2.9 percent to halve poverty by 2015 if countries put in place comprehensive conditions and policies for growth that include opportunities for work, income generation, education and health because these are related in a virtuous cycle. Better-nourished and educated people have wider and better opportunities for work, and they attract foreign investment. Where structural obstacles exist, richer Muslim nations should form a compact to help poorer countries with aid and access to markets to help them escape the poverty trap.

21. It is therefore imperative that the Muslim world reduces their military budgets and invests massively in education, in particular to increase their scientific and technological capability. We need science for every facet of our lives, including our own security and defence. We have been left out of the exciting discoveries, mainly from the laboratories of the west that are transforming health, agriculture, engineering, transportation and communication that are generating vast economic rewards for countries that had the vision to make science and technology a significant part of their development programmes.

22. To redress the problem OIC countries need to urgently expand advanced scientific education and training to large numbers of young peoples. The quality of education and the ability of the people to use knowledge creatively for socio-economic development are the true wealth of a nation.

23. Where women have not achieved equality as advocated in the Quran, Governments should establish

institutional mechanisms that foster gender equality by assessing the impact of policies and programmes on both men and women and taking actions to reduce or eliminate social and cultural obstacles that work against to women to ensure equitable distribution of wealth.

Governments should also encourage the mass media, schools and higher institutions of learning as well as other social institutions to correct the wrong interpretations of Islam and to promote a culture of gender equality and empowerment.

24. OIC countries must end conflict, violence and terrorism. Muslims are so powerless that they have to resort to suicide bombings. The enemy retaliates with sophisticated firepower, resulting in more loss of lives, erosion of basic human rights and more anger, misery and despair. What do we achieve with violence? Bombs and missiles cannot be the solution because the terror is in human hearts. The misunderstanding, intolerance, hatred, revenge, greed and hopelessness that take control of human hearts cannot be removed by striking at another human life because it will only sow more terror, hatred, suffering, bloodshed and more enemies. To strike against the real cause or the root of terror we must work hard to build and maintain peace in our countries, between nations and among nations.

People make peace. People are the ones who sow the seeds of peace in their communities and in their children. We must hence equip the next generation with the tools to end violence and to continue building peace when they become the leaders of tomorrow.

25. Let us build the capacity for peace by teaching our children to develop trust, empathy and compassion for one another as well as to respect and celebrate their differences. We can do this by making our children learn to live together through activities that make them eat together, play together; learn about each other's religion, traditions and cultural heritage.

These will nurture lasting friendships that become the basis for mutual understanding, honesty and respect.

International organizations and States should also seek women's views, their concerns, initiatives, experiences and equal participation in conflict prevention, peace building, peacekeeping, and rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts.

26. The Muslim world is characterized by both wealth and poverty. At the same time we are vulnerable to terror attacks, war and pre-emptive strikes. We have to get together, men and women, in unity, to find lasting solutions for the problems that are squarely staring us in the face. Women have a big role to play. We not only can forcefully articulate our views on equality in Islam, development and peace building on both the national and international stages but we can actively participate in the efforts.

27. Today we have a chance of sharing our ideas about investing in Women, Peace and Development. In a world where it is so easy to kindle violence, terrorism, and mutual distrust, let us reflect deeply for our insight to reveal and identify root causes of the problems besetting the Muslim Ummah. We must insist that neither the rule of law nor civil and human rights be sacrificed at the altar of misguided concepts of security and religious beliefs. Let us listen to each other to see how intolerance, hatred, revenge and greed can be dissolved and transformed, with compassion and understanding. Let us see how collectively we can use our wealth to stem the tide of economic inequity and lack of social justice among the vast majority of the Ummah. Let us cut the resources spent on warfare that deprives people of developmental rights and opportunities in health, education, social welfare and basic human needs.

28. Let me conclude by saying that we should display the light of our collective awakening and offer it so that the world will not sink into total darkness. The seed of awakening in our hearts can touch others so they in turn have the courage to speak out. Real security for the world can be achieved only when we achieve equality for women, peace and development.