

The Women's Forum  
5<sup>th</sup> August 2010 @ the Empire Hotel & Country Club

### Summary

#### **Forum Opening Address: "Moving Forward - Women of Brunei Darussalam"**

by **Yang Mulia Datin Hjh Adina binti Othman**, Deputy Minister of Culture, Youth and Sports, Brunei Darussalam

#### **Key highlights:**

- Gender issues have become increasingly the focus of international attention linking the advancement of women to the effective solution of today's global problems - globalization and poverty, violence against women, gender gap in political and decision making position and etc.
- Despite various efforts made by international bodies, gender inequalities continue to exist which jeopardize efforts to bring about sustainable development and world peace.
- Various efforts by individual countries to enact legislation on women's rights and economic rights have contributed to the significant progress in the development of women.
- In recognizing the importance of women in nation building, the government of Brunei has stressed on equal opportunities for women in the workforce which is reflected in the Brunei Darussalam Vision 2035.
- Women in Brunei currently enjoy equal rights in education, training, healthcare, employment, business, ownership of assets, benefits and citizenships among others.
- The challenge ahead is to go beyond the basic level - which is in increasing the quality of the services and nature of development for women. In recognition of this, the Ministerial level National Council on Social Issues has identified women issues as one of the central issues to be addressed.
- Other challenges include the decline in fertility rate, increase in divorce rates, violence against women, teenage pregnancies and abandoned babies.
- Women in Brunei have progressed significantly and these achievements reflect the capabilities of Bruneian women to permeate into practically all fields of work including previously male-dominated professions.

## **Session 1- Keynote Address: “Women are Central, Not Marginal: the Case for Women Leaders”**

In conversation with **Datin Paduka Marina Tun Mahathir**, blogger and women’s rights advocate, Malaysia

and **Dato Paduka Timothy Ong**, Acting Chairman, The Brunei Economic Development Board

- Women’s participation in the workforce is essential to development. According to the UNDP, the lack of women’s participation in the workforce costs the region billions of dollars every year. In countries such as India, Indonesia and Malaysia, conservative estimates show that GDP would increase by 2-4% annually if women’s employment rates were increased to 70% of the rate of many developed countries.
- Men still feel threatened by the position of women as more and more women are taking over positions that used to be male preserves. Malaysia for example recently saw women rising through the ranks to positions such as vice chancellors, Sharia Court judges, directors-general and secretaries-general in the civil service, which prompted a male union leader to complain (an interesting position to take as Datin Marina commented that the majority of his members would be women).
- There is gender imbalance in the education system. Education is certainly key to gender transformation in our societies, but social transformation requires power and this is not yet forthcoming (it was noted that in all our societies, power is defined by political and economic power). Power was once determined by physical power thus women are described as the fairer or gentler sex. Men have consolidated their physical, political and economic power in many ways, passing laws that ensured that society retained its status quo – a position that privileged men.
- In some countries women are not allowed to own land if they marry foreigners while men have no such restrictions. UNDP statistics show that women own very little land.
- The excuse societies have given in enforcing male domination is religion. In fact, religions do not discriminate against women, but interpretations of religion (which have been traditionally controlled by men) have been biased against women because of social norms of their time and prejudices when women were uneducated.
- Women’s chronic under-representation in economic, political and legal institutions across the region has produced deficits in power and voice, which in turn allow inequality to go unchallenged.
- The issue of violence against women is very important. Violence against women most often happens in countries where women have very little status or very little power – especially in patriarchal countries where most men hold all the reins of power. Often violence against women is accepted as a norm by society and men feel little need to enact laws to protect women.

Datin Marina concluded that in the face of this dire situation of many women around the region, we need not only increase civil society action to advocate for these changes, but women should also champion these issues at the top levels of political and legal arenas. Women cannot expect men in power to spontaneously make these changes because they often do not see a need to do –therefore, it is really important to have enough women in power to make these differences.

## Session 2: “Women Rising in Business”

- **Ms Frances Lo**, Director, LVK Group of Companies
- **Dk Dina Omarali**, Account Manager, Stakeholder Relations Division, BEDB and Member of Youth Development Resources
- **Dyg Norizmah Ahmad Morshidi**, Manager, Ideal Food Industries Sdn Bhd

Moderated by **Dr Habrizah Hussin**, Expert in Entrepreneurship & SME Development, University Brunei Darussalam

The session started off with two panels sharing their experience as women entrepreneurs who took over their family business upon their return from extensive studies overseas. It was complimented by another panelist who represented BEDB’s single mothers’ initiatives and shared the experiences of the business ventures of their grant recipients.

Highlights of the session include:

- While it may be true that starting one’s business from scratch is very challenging, taking over a family business is equally testing as there are various expectations to be met and working with family members are often more difficult than working with someone who does not have family connections – especially when a conflict in the business arises.
- Discrimination against women entrepreneurs often happens, however, it occurs more when dealing with overseas individuals or business people rather than Bruneians. This chauvinism becomes more apparent and tougher when one is in male dominated industries. However, in the past few years the glass ceiling has been cracking as more women are getting into these industries and more men are realising that women are capable of performing as well as, and often, better than men.
- Entrepreneurship is a form of female empowerment. This is evident in the initiatives of the BEDB – where about 45 grants under the Youth Development Resources were awarded to the less privileged. At least 70% of the grant recipients were women and the grant enabled them to establish a business on the micro scale, which has opened up doors for these women to be financially self sufficient.
- Important criteria in managing or leading a business are to be objective and independent in decision making and to avoid being emotionally attached to the business. It is also very important to be very committed to work and to constantly strive for quality.
- The typical challenge often faced by women managing their own business is in managing family and business, which can involve significant sacrifices on both sides. If one becomes too immersed in one’s business, one may stray from her family commitment and vice versa.

- While women are very emotional, they tend to be more resilient when it comes to facing issues and challenges in life or business. Women should not be afraid of making mistakes as when a mistake is made; there is always a lesson to be learned.
- Advice for aspiring entrepreneurs: be passionate about your cause and strive to achieve your best, always be honest in your business dealings and be very open when communicating about your business with family.

### **Session 3- Luncheon Address: “Making a Difference: One Woman’s Quest for a Better World”**

by **Ms Veronica Colondam**, CEO, Loving the Nation’s Children Foundation, Indonesia

Moderated by **Mr Andrew Dy**, Asia Inc Forum

Veronica Colondam shared about how her social foundation – YCAB began 13 years ago and is the product of her spiritual journey and self-contemplation in her search of the meaning and purpose in life. She viewed that human beings must be governed by 4 dimensions: eternity, morality, accountability and charity. Therefore, with the intent of leaving a legacy behind and realizing that the prevention or intervention of drug abuse was close to non-existent while the incidence of drug abuse amongst the youth in Indonesia was increasing at an alarming rate, Veronica decided to establish a foundation that addresses this issue. Realizing that there were more youths out of school than in school, and at least 160,000 school aged children were on the streets instead of in school, the foundation focuses on drug prevention in schools and communities.

Since then, YCAB has through trial and error designed effective drug prevention programs across the country through various channels, including: counseling, mass campaigns, skills training and mentoring on three basic fronts of: building a healthy lifestyle, livelihood and communities. These programs have been successful in creating awareness, education and community development and the success is complemented by providing research-based programs that demonstrate concrete outcomes. YCAB believes that school-based programs are more effective in making an impact than community-based drug education. If young children can be educated about the potential harms associated with drug use, they are more likely to be persuaded to approach drugs with more caution. However, such methodology will only be effective when this approach incorporates training on building relationships and social-emotional skills as part of the school curriculum.

Veronica also highlighted that there is a clear link between poverty and drug abuse. Therefore, providing subsidized education and vocational training to out-of-school youth has become an important component of YCAB’s primary prevention strategy. This approach has been proven to be successful in reducing the likelihood of involvement in high risk behavior and drug-using environments.

Apart from that, YCAB today has expended to promote sustainable, income generating development programs in poor and disaster stricken areas of Indonesia – programs that contribute to the improved health and livelihood of those communities. YCAB’s sustainable development programs promote human capital, tri-sector collaboration, and social entrepreneurship.

#### **Session 4: “Women Managing Money”**

- **Dyg Nurul Jafriah Abdullah**, Manager, Wealth Management Unit, Investment Banking Division, BIBD
- **Dyg Nurul Ain Jaafar**, Senior Account Manager, Local Business Development Unit, BEDB
- **Ms Azizah Ali**, Country Manager, Microsoft (B) Sdn Bhd

Moderated by **Ms Olivia Ng**, Marketing Officer, Sungai Liang Authority

The session began with Carol Yip’s presentation on managing money for women where she discussed the concept of managing money and the psychological aspect to it. Carol said that making sense about managing money and building financial wealth is about being logical, wise and financially literate. Often financial decisions are influenced by past experience, knowledge, upbringing, peer pressure, value or belief system, objectives and goals in life, emotions and many others. Carol highlighted that a lot of people do not want to be confronted with financial problems; therefore they tend to run away from it. However, when people run away from money problems they often do things that cause more financial damage.

Carol’s philosophy is to always check one’s finances and get started at the very basic – cashflow, net worth, net values, net assets and liabilities. A person needs to find out why her savings are low, get clarification on debts (i.e. loans that one currently bears) and evaluate one’s lifestyle and shopping habits. It is also important to find out one’s negative addiction that creates money leakages. Carol emphasized that once a person knows her financial health, she will then be able to figure out what she can do or implement immediately. However, Carol also mentioned that there are no quick fixes to a financial problem.

Carol spoke about the importance of retirement planning from an early age and believes that saving money should be an automatic habit. Savings should be regularly reviewed as life stage changes, such as when a person gets married or when a person becomes a parent or gets divorced, will often affect one’s savings and habits. Carol highlighted that being financially empowered, coupled with financial literacy often results in financial success.

The session was then followed by an open forum discussion on the experiences of women managing and coping with household budgets, the impact of the credit card regulations as well as sharing and exchanging strategies to increase savings.

Among the highlights of the session were:

- There is a varied reaction to the recent implementation of the credit card directive and one often hears people complaining about it – an indication that many people are having problems with their finances.
- The key step to having better finances is to list down where your money is coming in and where it is going out. One should also learn to budget expenses.

- One of the collective solutions for knowing how to manage finances is for individuals to have a goal when saving their money and have that goal or aim written down. Financial plans should be specific and measurable, achievable and realistic.
- Saving \$50 a month can go a long way. It was stressed that people tend to set aside money for savings only where there is money left over. However, there is a need to change this mind set and to look at savings the other way round – i.e. to analyse one's salary, then set aside how much to save, and finally look at what is left to spend.
- Financial planning has to start from a very young age. It is believed that personal finance should be a subject that is taught in schools and is something that should be implemented in Brunei.