

Keynote Speech for Women's Forum, Brunei

Marina Mahathir,

Empire Hotel, August 5 2010

Women are Central, Not Marginal

Thank you for your kind invitation for me to come and speak at your conference. It has been a long time since I came to Brunei so it is nice to have the opportunity once again.

I am speaking today on a subject that I am sure you all know already, that women are central to the development of any nation and not marginal. But I thought, given the many problems that we as women still face over all these years that I would reiterate some of the points we know and perhaps give some new information and ideas which may help us persuade our leaders in our own countries of these facts, if they are not already.

Ladies and gentlemen, in March this year the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) released its annual Human Development Report. Entitled *Power, Voice and Rights: A Turning Point for Gender Equality in Asia and the Pacific*, it is a comprehensive report on where women stand in every aspect of life in our region today and what more needs to be done to improve our situation. While there is much that still needs to be done before women are fully recognized as human beings with rights, still some truths emerge.

For one thing, our participation in the workforce is today essential to our 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 Gross Domestic Product would increase by up to 2-4% annually if women's employment rates were raised to 70%, closer to the rate of many developed countries."

Now, since men often understand numbers more than anything, this should be a statement that should hit them between the eyes. Otherwise we would get more statements such as the one from the male president of the civil service union in Malaysia who said that because there were so many women in high positions in the civil service, this would cause Malaysia's economic development to deteriorate. Considering that we are now suffering from the effects of a global recession just like everyone else, caused by a lot of male financiers and bank executives, I do wonder what he reads every day.

But this man is typical of men in many of our countries today who feel very threatened by the position of women, mainly because we are taking over many positions that used to be male preserves. This is not surprising. In East and Southeast Asia, the ratio of male and female enrolment in secondary schools are at par which means that as a result, women are as literate and educated as men. In our universities, we have seen also a universal phenomenon where there are more female undergraduates than male ones. In Malaysia for example, female students make up 60% of undergraduates.

This of course means that the pool of talent that any employer, including the government has to choose from is made of 60% women. Consequently, they will

gradually move up the ranks until there is no choice but to reach the top. Thus, although there has been much resistance for a very long time, we finally had our first women Vice-Chancellors not long ago and many Directors-General and Secretaries-General in the Civil Service are women, which is what prompted the union leader to complain. He must not have taken the trouble to look at his own members.

In Malaysia too, recently we announced the appointment of our first two female Syariah Court judges. This also was a long time coming, despite calls from the women's groups because of the many problems that women face in the syariah courts. Finally these two young women were appointed, ostensibly to ease the backlog of cases in the syariah courts. But it has to be said that even in the Islamic court system in Malaysia, most of their personnel are women including those qualified in syariah law. Hence, at some point, as has just happened, there are simply no more male candidates to select from and they have no choice but to appoint women.

I will not go into why there is this gender imbalance in the education systems; it seems that everyone is reluctant to really study why it happens. Suffice to say that in many cases, boys are forced to drop out to earn money to support their families and in some cases, boys sometimes feel that being male alone entitles them to jobs and privilege and hence a degree is not really necessary.

While education is certainly key to transformation of our societies, let me bring in a word of caution against too much optimism. Social transformation really involves power. If we believe that women can transform our societies into one

that is more humane, more just and compassionate than the one we currently have, then we need to have power. But this is yet to be forthcoming.

Gender, power and politics

As we all know, to change anything we need power. In all our societies, power is defined and determined by economic and political power. Once upon a time, power was determined also by physical power. Thus, women are described as 'the fairer sex' or the 'gentler sex' as a way of underscoring our lesser physical power, and therefore any power we might have in society in general.

Men in turn have consolidated their physical, economic and political power in many ways. They have passed laws that ensured the society remains at status quo, that is, privileging men. Once upon a time in Victorian England, if a woman gets married, all her property becomes her husband's. While things may have changed in England today, we still have similar laws in many of our countries, where women are forced to pay dowries to marry, thus impoverishing their families and themselves. In some countries, women are not allowed to own land if they marry foreigners, while men have no such restriction. And as those statistics show, generally throughout the region, women own very little land despite being numerous in working the land itself.

The excuse many societies often give in enforcing male domination or patriarchy is religion. Our societies say that it is our religions that decreed that men should have this power but not women, supposedly, because women have the power to give birth to children, and control the home. While that may be so, if men control everything else, this cannot be said to be gender equality.

In actual fact, religions do not discriminate against women as many believe. But interpretations of religion, traditionally controlled by men, have been biased against women because of social norms of their time and their own prejudices. Many of these interpretations came from a time when women were rarely educated, let alone had their own careers.

Enforcing this gender inequality is done not just through using religion but also through sheer brute force. Nothing illustrates gender inequality more than violence against women, where men believe that their 'superior' position allows them to brutalise women, even in some cases, killing them. And sometimes they even believe that their religions allow them to, because women are their property. Hence, the very few Domestic Violence Acts in the countries in our region.

Power is having the capability to make the economic, legal and political decisions in our society. Despite our numbers and despite our education, women still do not have any of these powers. As the UNDP notes, "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 inequalities to go unchallenged."

For instance, although a total of 67% of women in East Asia are in the labour force, above the global average of 53%, a majority of them are in 'vulnerable' employment, such as in the informal economy or low-end self-employment. Many women, for instance, work in factories and are subject to the vagaries of the world markets. More than 40% of female employment is in agriculture yet women in the Asia-Pacific region head only 7% of farms, compared to 20% in other parts of the world.

Generally women in Asia Pacific countries earn less than men, between 54-90% of what men earn. But when given a chance to have their own businesses, women grab at it and thus the flow of women into business in Asia-Pacific is steady with up to 35% of small or medium enterprises in the region headed by women. Also Asia has the largest number of microcredit borrowers and the highest percentage of poor women borrowers. 98% of microcredit borrowers in Asia in 2006 were women, compared with 66% in Africa and 62% in Latin America.

Higher up the economic scale however, there are less and less women. Even though there are more female rather than male university graduates, this does not necessarily translate into more females in private sector executive and management positions. This is partly because the courses girls take at university still tends to be in the arts and social sciences and not necessarily what the market requires. Then once they start working, they become entrapped in the perennial work-home balance problem and as often happens, just as they have become well-trained and ready to move more rapidly up the ladder, they get married, have children and succumb to the pressures to be a good mother and stay home. Meanwhile their male counterparts stay at work and overtake them up the ranks.

Thus we find that at the top of companies, especially at Board levels, there are extremely few women. Yet this is where real power lies, in the ability to make decisions that would affect not only the companies they work for but their workforce, communities and countries. Some countries have taken note of this situation and have actively sought to redress the situation. Norway for instance enacted a law that required companies to reserve 40% of their Board seats to women or face closure of their companies. Forced to comply, the Norwegian companies found that their businesses did not collapse but instead grew and profited. Seeing the success of the Norwegian example, Spain and Germany are following suit. Perhaps this is something our countries need to look at as well.

The recognition that women are equal citizens and also have political power is what lies behind the Norwegian government's move to demand gender balance in the Boardroom. That recognition in turn also comes from having more women in politics. In this, our region is pitiful. The Asia-Pacific region contains the second-lowest percentages of women parliamentarians in the world, the lowest

being the Arab countries. Even Asian countries with much higher levels of development like Japan and the Republic of Korea have just 10% and 14% in their national legislatures, while the Pacific sub-region alone has four of the six countries in the world with no women legislators at all.

No doubt our region has also had a good number of women heads of government. But this has not translated into more political power for women. Only one-third of Asia-Pacific countries have a gender quota in place for Parliament and only last March India passed a law which requires that 33% of all electoral candidates at all levels be reserved for women. This is not actually anything to be surprised at; after all, India, like many of our countries is a signatory to the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which, among other things, requires that countries reserve 30% of decisionmaking positions for women. Few, including mine, have acted upon this hence the still low numbers. However some Asia Pacific countries emerging from conflict such as Afghanistan, Nepal and Timor Leste have used the opportunity to significantly enlarge women's political representation. Thus women's parliamentary representation is about 33% in Nepal and 29% in Timor Leste.

Why do we need more women in positions of political decisionmaking and lawmaking? Here are some reasons. According to UNDP, 'discrimination in economic and social rights against women edged upward in developing countries across Asia-Pacific between 2004 and 2007. In East Asia and the Pacific, the percentage of countries with high economic discrimination increased from zero in 2004 to over 7% in 2007.'

One-third of countries in East Asia have land inheritance laws which favour men while more than half of the countries in South Asia have such discriminatory laws. In the Pacific, the rates are even higher: about 2 out of 3 countries have customary and formal laws on asset inheritance that discriminate against women.

One of the most important indicators of discrimination against women, if not the most important, is the issue of violence against women. Violence most often happens in countries where women have very low status and have very little power to change their situation. In very patriarchal countries where men hold all the reins of power, violence against women accepted as the norm by society but men feel little need to enact laws to protect women. Assaults by their male partners are reported by more than one-tenth of women in Asia and the Pacific. Yet nearly half of the countries in South Asia and more than 60% of those in the Pacific have no laws on domestic violence.

In Southeast Asia, Malaysia was the first, and the first Muslim country, to enact a Domestic Violence Act in 1994. But this law took six years to get through Parliament and even when it was passed, took another two years to be gazetted and then implemented. This lengthy passage was due to objections by many men, particularly Muslim men, who believed that such violence is a private matter or that it was acceptable in religion. (And for the record, it is not.)

Despite its difficult passage, the Domestic Violence Act has encouraged many women to report such violence because they now know that it is a crime. However we still face problems from some members of the police and in society who discourage women from reporting. Women's groups are now advocating for

some amendments to be made to improve the DVA, given the long experience we have now had in seeing it implemented. At the same time, we are now debating provisions to prosecute anyone for sexual harassment in the workplace to be included in amendments to the Employment Act.

Therefore in the face of this dire situation for many women around the region, we need not only much civil society action to advocate for these changes but also women to champion these issues at the top levels of the political and legal arena in our countries. We cannot expect men in power to spontaneously make these changes because they often do not see a need for it. And it is important to have enough women in power to make these differences.

For instance, in my country, Malaysia, there are 29 Ministers in the Cabinet out of which only two are women. It is therefore not possible to garner enough support for any women's issue unless the two women Ministers work together and with women's groups to strategically advocate for these. It is for this reason that the proposal made by the Minister for Women, Family and Community Development to increase women's representation in decisionmaking bodies to 30%, as required by CEDAW, has not progressed at all.

How and Why Should We Make Women Central and not Marginal?

The case for gender equality is often pitched as a human rights or social justice argument. We should do it because women are human beings and make up half our populations and do more than contribute to our societies by caring for families and others in need.

But as always such arguments, although made for at least the past 100 years, even longer if we consider what the Quran said about women, gain no ground because attitudes about women are very entrenched. And where notions of women's inequality become embedded and solidified, they become a steep barrier to change, often despite public policy measures and commitments.

However the argument that always tends to win the day is the economic one and there is a growing body of evidence that shows that gender equality is good economics as well. For instance, over the last 10 years, the increase in women workers in developed countries is estimated to have contributed more to global growth than has China's remarkable economic record. To some of the more enlightened male CEOs, this makes perfect sense.

Carlos Ghosn, the CEO of Nissan Motors, likes to tell the story of how he changed the gender balance of his company in Japan after he learnt that all decisions to buy cars in that country are made by women. Yet car showrooms only have male salespeople. So he recruited female salespeople for the showrooms and before long, Nissan car sales rose dramatically.

10 years ago, when my partner Lina Tan and I first decided to do our TV programme *3R-Respect, Relax, Respond*, we were very concerned that advertisers did not contradict the progressive messages we were projecting in the show. We did not want the usual soap, household cleaners and cosmetics advertisers. So we went to mobile phone companies, banks, car and computer companies and persuaded them to acknowledge a fact that they had always

ignored before, that a large number of their customers were female. And that's how Siemens mobile phones gained a frontpage story in the Asian Wall Street Journal headlined, "Why does Siemens advertise in a woman's programme?" Great PR for them!

So I believe that women should use the economic power they have in order to change their societies to a more gender-balanced one. It is not easy because we would have to shift thousands of years of entrenched beliefs and traditions, some of which are upheld by women themselves. We should do it not simply to gain something for ourselves but also because it is good for society as a whole. We are not barriers to progress; we are contributors and facilitators. We are not burdens on society; we help to alleviate much of the burden, if only we looked at our roles differently. We promote peace and harmony among our people, if only we're allowed to participate in peacemaking.

And contrary to many beliefs, gender equality does not mean that women gain and men lose. This would only be true if we had a very narrow understanding of gender equality. If we however take a more inclusive approach, men would also stand to benefit from investigating the gender norms that govern their lives. Should men, for instance, always be the sole providers for their families when women are also working? Indeed, if men are more suited to staying home and caring for their families, should they not be allowed to do so without having their masculinity questioned? Should men always have to do dirty and dangerous jobs? These questions also impact women, such as the stereotypes that declare that men should know about sex while women don't. And indeed, it is painfully obvious today, with the HIV pandemic, that these norms are as dangerous for men as they are for women.

Indeed, women ourselves need to believe ourselves that we are central and not marginal to our countries. Our time may well be coming now. In a recent article in the Atlantic magazine in the United States entitled *The End of Men*, Hanna Rosin argues, with evidence from many recent studies, that the post-industrial society is in fact better suited to women because it relies more on the skills that women have, rather than men's physical dominance. As Rosin says, "As thinking and communicating have come to eclipse physical strength and stamina as the keys to economic success, those societies that take advantage of the talents of all their adults, not just half of them, have pulled away from the rest."

And while women with greater economic power also have greater political power, the reverse is also true. In 2006, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development devised the Gender, Institutions and Development Database, which measures the economic and political power of women in 162 countries. With few exceptions, the greater the power of women, the greater the country's economic success.

Hanna Rosin's article makes it very clear that in the post-industrial society, it is men who have to adapt or else it will be they who will get left behind. For those of us in developing countries, we may yet be a long way from this scenario as the UNDP Human Development Report makes clear. But given the numbers of girls in schools and universities today, often more than boys; given the many advances in technology today where we can work, play and connect with the entire world from our own homes; given the many disastrous wars that men have wrought leading to gains for so few and misery for so many, we may well arrive at that stage far faster than the developed world.

All we need now is to be ready to take our place, centrestage.

Thank you.