

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

by

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Brunei Darusalam**

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Thank you, Madame Chairperson...and thank you for the warm welcome and hospitality we have received.

I would also like to express my appreciation for your excellent keynote address and my admiration for your commitment in promoting gender equality in our region.

We have also heard some inspiring words from Dr. Kim Hak-Su this morning and I much appreciate the encouragement he has given us.

Madame Chairperson and distinguished Colleagues,

It is widely accepted that increasing gender equalities help foster development. We also acknowledge that economic growth and development provide broad opportunities for women and hence, contribute towards improving gender equality.

According to our provisional statistics of 2005, women make up 47% of our population and about 59% of them are economically active. With about 40% of the employed population comprising women who work for pay, profit or family gain, Brunei Darussalam fully acknowledges their important role in the socio-economic development of the country. The Government of His Majesty in collaboration with the private sector is making continuous efforts in the pursuit of a better quality of life for all Bruneians regardless of race, creed or gender.

Providing universal access to education has been a fundamental objective of our national policy. Over 90% of girls are literate and numerate and, in fact, girls significantly outnumber boys in tertiary education. They also enjoy equal benefits such as monthly transport and educational allowances in vocational and tertiary levels. Women's educational achievement has enabled them to take up employment opportunities in various specialized professions. An increasing number of them are holding senior positions and also involved in policy and decision-making.

In Brunei Darussalam, the small and medium enterprises (SMEs) contribute 92% of the employment opportunities in the private sector and more than half of them are owned by women. Moreover, the annual growth rate of economically active women is double the growth of the female population of working ages. Supportive measures by the Government include the financial assistance schemes through commercial banks. They are the Enterprise Facilitation Scheme, the Micro-Credit Financing Scheme and the Working Capital Credit Fund and nearly two-thirds of the beneficiaries of the Scheme are women.

Our private sector also provides entrepreneurship development programmes, such as the Live Wire Brunei launched in 2001 by the Brunei Shell Petroleum Company, targeting those between the ages of 18 and 30 years.

To promote the development of women's businesses and to coordinate activities like seminars, workshops, trade fairs, business matching and global networking, the Brunei Women Business Council was established in the year 2000.

Our mass media, in fact, has played a major role in promoting and increasing awareness on the effective involvement of women in the country's development and the impact they have on modern economic life.

Our women in Brunei Darussalam have equal opportunities to land and housing ownership. It is our national long-term goal that every individual, regardless of gender, will have proper accommodation and all citizens to have their own houses.

Affordable and equal access to healthcare is highly emphasized and has led to women achieving life expectancy of 77.5 years and a maternal mortality rate of 0.3 per thousand live births.

I am pleased our Government's continuous efforts have placed our country in the thirty-third position out of 177 nations on the latest UNDP's Human Development Index.

Madame Chairperson,

Institutionally, the Department of Community Development in the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports is the focal agency for women's affairs. Its functions range from protecting, counseling women and girls, providing welfare allowances and emergency relief. The Department's programmes are strongly supported by other Government Agencies and the private sector. The Department is also strongly supported by the Women's Council of Brunei Darussalam which is a non-governmental organization affiliated to the ASEAN Council of Women's Organisations.

On the international front, Brunei Darussalam is a signatory to the United Nations Millennium Declaration and I am pleased that we have achieved almost all of the Millennium Development Goals. We have also acceded into the Convention on the Elimination of All Discriminations against Women and committed to the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and other regional and international declarations on gender issues.

Domestically, we have several legislations in place aimed at protecting women and girls against sexual exploitation, trafficking, abuse and violence. The National Registration and Immigration Act allows children of women citizens married to foreign nationals to be accorded Brunei citizenship upon application.

Madam Chairperson,

An area of concern to us is a rise in social problems, among which has been an increase in domestic violence and abuse against women. This would demand more work on our National Committee for Handling Social Issues, set up in the year 2000. This Committee has implemented programmes which among others, include protection and rehabilitation of women and girls; public awareness campaigns on family harmony; and counseling services. Another legal provision called the Domestic Violence Order is currently being drafted to ensure that women and children are protected.

I would now like to emphasize on the collection of quality data. Our 2001 Population Census and the 2002 Economic Census have a substantial collection of sex-disaggregated data. However, we do need to continuously

make more efforts in acquiring up-to-date data and adequate indicators. Data is vital for any study to be made as well as to reflect the status of women's contribution to the country's development.

I also see the need to conduct more research and analysis on gender issues in Brunei Darussalam to allow for more effective policy formulation. This is an area where we require to build our capacities.

Madame Chairperson,

Each society has its own particular strengths and weaknesses. What is common to us all, however, is the universal condition of women and our commitment should be to ensure an improvement in the quality of their life and the elimination of discrimination and inequity.

This is where I see the importance of gatherings such as this, especially in a room here called, "Harmony". It augurs well for a conducive environment for us all to join hand harmoniously to further promote regional efforts and implement best practices to bring about gender equality and women empowerment. It is indeed a positive first step for us the East Asian nations to move forward collectively to ensure that our goals and objectives are achieved.

Thank you.