

**Speech**  
**YABhg Datin Paduka Seri Rosmah Mansor**  
**Wife of the Prime Minister of Malaysia**  
**For ASEAN WOMEN LEADERS FORUM**  
**“Women Leadership in a New Era”**  
**15 December 2009 at 9.10 a.m**  
**At Grand Ballroom, Fullerton Hotel, Singapore**

---

Bismillahi rahmani rahim

**Madam Ho Ching**

Wife of the Hon. Prime Minister of Singapore

**Hon. Mrs Lim Hwee Hua**

Minister, in Prime Minister's Office and Second Minister for Finance and Transport, Singapore

**Hon. Senator Datuk Shahrizat Abdul Jalil**

Minister of Women, Family and Community Development, Malaysia

Distinguish participants

Ladies and Gentlemen

1. First and foremost let me begin by expressing my heartfelt thanks to the organizers – the Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute and ASEAN Business Forum for inviting me to participate in this ASEAN Women Leaders Forum themed, “Expanding Possibilities, Scaling New Heights”. I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate the organizers in convening this Forum successfully for the third edition.

2. It is indeed very encouraging to see so many women from different backgrounds, different age groups and diverse sectors coming together to exchange their views and ideas at this important Forum. The platform will enable the women to share and learn from one another’s insights and initiatives towards capacity building and the advancement of women in our community. I feel privileged to have been invited as the keynote speaker before such a distinguished audience and it is with great pleasure that I now share my thoughts on “Women Leadership in the New Era”.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

3. Leadership by women is certainly not a new phenomenon. Women had changed the course of history since ancient times. If we were to look back into early history of Southeast Asia, women were noted leaders and had yielded strong influence. In the 10th century, Javanese village women already negotiated contracts, took an active part in ceremonies connected to the granting of land and were involved in important community decisions. The Minangkabau tribe of Sumatera, Indonesia practiced a very strong matriarchal culture that emphasized female dominance in family law, and the culture is still practiced today in some parts of Malaysia and Indonesia. Ancient stone engravings in Thailand as well as inscriptions in Vietnam and Cambodia similarly shed further insights into women's power having existed since time immemorial.

4. In the contemporary political sphere, it is remarkable to note that women have taken leadership roles all around the world. Even in the more conservative region of Southeast Asia, women have beaten the odds to emerge as Heads of Governments. Corazon C. Aquino, blazed the trail with her People Power revolution in 1987 and became the first female President in the region whereas later Gloria Macapagal Arroyo and Megawati Sukarnoputri were both voted into the highest political office in their respective countries. On top of these luminaries, we have personalities such as Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi who continues to lead a popular pro-democracy movement in Myanmar even under house arrest.

5. I found it so inspiring to learn that in spite of the patriarchal institutions, cultural inhibitions and repression, women still triumphed over these numerous challenges and managed to infiltrate the male dominated political, governmental and corporate arena. In fact, even in cases where the top level of leaders are men, more often than not, in the second tier, or in the circle surrounding the leader, there will be a woman or two who play pivotal roles in making that male leader excel.

6. Many factors may have contributed to this achievement, but I believe that access and opportunities to education was the most significant element that catapulted women to the fore. Education leads to intellectual growth, skills development and confidence enhancement, to enable women to go well beyond the boundaries that limit them in their traditional roles. Education is also the route for economic empowerment and social advancement for women. With a sound education as a base, women are able to project their own capabilities and their brand of leadership which may be different but equally, if not more, effective than that of their male counterparts.

7. A 2005 study identified a number of characteristics that is inherent in women leadership qualities. Women leaders are said to be more persuasive

than men. They demonstrate an inclusive, team-building leadership style of problem-solving and decision making which is less common in men. Women are naturally resilient and we have the potential to bounce back from setbacks and adversities and press on until the objectives or tasks are achieved. Our short history is littered with stories of women who have been knocked down but got up almost instantaneously and fought tooth and nail for everything they believed in.

8. Studies also reveal that when women occupy one third of the seats at power tables either in senior management or on the corporate boards of directors, profits tend to increase as do returns on investment, sales and productivity. It is no surprise therefore that many observers have begun to wonder whether the world would have been in the global financial crisis if there were more women who are prudent in financial management on corporate boards and the top echelons of power, be it in financial institutions, corporations or public offices.

9. Similarly other types of studies show that women have the uncanny gift to read situations accurately, simply because they are more empathetic and flexible, with better interpersonal skills. They are able to bring others around to their points of view, thus making the people they lead feel more understood, supported and valued. Women are also known for their willingness to take a fresh look at archaic rules, their ability to promote their visions and their steely determination to turn challenges into opportunities.

10. These intrinsic leadership qualities have evolved out of women's roles as mothers, daughters and care givers. In fact, Margaret Thatcher once said "Any woman who understands the problems of running a home will be nearer to understanding the problems of running a country." However these qualities have been largely invisible and gone unrecognized simply because they were so routinely performed in our everyday lives and within the private spheres of common households that they were not perceived as leadership.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

11. In this new world of open societies, a dominant leadership style is becoming less and less popular. Increasingly, there is a new appreciation for traits that women typically have to offer as leaders such as keeping families together, caring, networking and uniting communities in their everyday lives. These qualities of shared leadership and nurturance are sought after nowadays as they are needed to make a difference to the world.

12. In what is decidedly still a man's world, women bring enrichment by way of diversity in thoughts, perspectives and approaches. Women in leadership thus would have a significant impact in shaping our nation and our world. For

ASEAN this is an opportune time to tap into the immense potential that woman leaders can bring to the establishment of an ASEAN Community by year 2015.

13. What are the challenges that confront us as women in nations that are fast undergoing globalization? The world is now recovering from unprecedented global changes and the main challenges to my mind are as much social as economic upheavals. Countries wishing to earn decent incomes will have to rely on skills and ingenuity more than ever before. As the nature of work, the worker and the workplace have been irrevocably impacted, women must be better equipped and prepared to work harder, smarter and be more flexible in order to survive.

14. As the expectations on women, particularly women leaders, are quite high, the key question is how can those expectations be met? In this case, I believe every individual woman who aspires to be a leader must strive to improve herself as a person and strengthen her capacities. In order to increase their competencies, women need to be better educated and we must improve our skills as well as upgrade our capacities especially in disciplines unfamiliar to us.

15. We have to be mindful not only of globalization, but the change of emphasis from knowledge society to innovation economy. The innovation economy is built on intellectual capital and the capacity to transform ideas into new technologies, products and services. To participate in this kind of economy, it is important for women not only to be technologically literate but also to be able to master information communication technology (ICT). As ICT has revolutionized the way we interact and do business, it is essential then that women harness the power of ICT to gain more knowledge and to communicate across borders.

16. Having access to technologies as well as being cognizant of the innovation economy and taking steps to remain current and relevant in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics would enable them to become innovation drivers and innovative leaders. To lead in this modern age, not only do women have to think outside the box, but more importantly, they must be thought leaders, always on the pulse with the latest developments and constantly setting trends in their field of expertise.

17. It is simply not enough for women to just participate. Instead we must insist to be treated as equal or, more to the point, we must aspire to lead and to succeed. Therefore we must stop waiting for opportunities to fall on our laps. We have to seize opportunities with our own hard work, ideas and drive. Women must be the masters of their own destiny. It is time for women to show that they really mean business.

18. But of course the role of women is not just about moving ahead at the work place. Being a wife and a mother myself, I strongly believe that we cannot neglect the fundamental role of women at home and in the social sphere. Social stability which is now more essential than ever before can only be guaranteed by the presence of women in our homes, schools and work places. It has often been said that we are pillars of our societies as we provide the continuity of our social values and universal virtues.

Distinguish Participants,

19. At this juncture I would like to share with you the experience of Malaysian women in leadership roles. Malaysian women have always played a critical role in both the political movements that brought the independence of the country and subsequently the growth and development of the nation. Today, with a population of 28.3 million of which 49.1% of them are women, we are indeed an important component of the human capital of the country. I am sure women will continue to be as important, if not even more vital, for our growth and development.

20. Malaysian women are where we are today because our Government never lost sight of the importance of women. The Government had strategically planned the progress of women in a commendable and structured manner. It constantly endeavours to provide an enabling environment through reforming its mechanisms and reviewing its laws, policies and regulations in order to address any gender disparities and inequalities. In designing these plans the voices of women have always been heard by the Malaysian government.

21. Various measures have been taken to create a supportive and stimulating environment for the advancement of women through the formulation and implementation of pro-women policies and programmes.

Training programmes to prepare women to become leaders, including those at the grassroots, are being held by both the public and private sectors. Female students in institutions of higher learning and new graduates are trained in soft skills such as communication, presentation competence as well as other managerial skills while women already in the work force are mentored and groomed to become leaders through courses and trainings, both local and international, on management and other skills and competencies needed in leadership.

22. As a result, we have made significant progress in various fields, such as in education, health and economic sectors. In fact in Malaysia today, nearly 70% of students in universities are young women pursuing various courses from social sciences to medical studies and petroleum engineering. These young women are the leaders of tomorrow. On top of that the Malaysian government in 2001 established a Ministry dedicated to the development of women which was known as the Women's Affairs Ministry and later evolved to become what

is known today as the Ministry for Women, Family and Community Development.

23. In essence, Malaysian women have made inroads and are leading in all areas of development and spheres of life. The result of this change has liberated women and provided them with many more opportunities for careers and self-fulfillment. Apart from the usual professional fields and in corporate offices, women are also coming to the forefront even in provincial and rural areas. It is well known for example, that the women from Malaysia's east coast state of Kelantan are very active in business and dominate the market places and shops throughout the state. Such is the heartening progress of women in Malaysia, and today, they are poised and ready to become significant contributors to the development of the country and carry out their multifarious roles effectively.

24. Nevertheless, like their other ASEAN sisters, the future for women in Malaysia remains fraught with challenges. Malaysian society now, and I'm sure in the future, expects women to contribute equally to the family, community, and the country. Women leaders are expected to be able to balance between these roles so that neither one of them will be compromised. Achieving that delicate balance between two spheres of responsibility that are equally important and equally challenging is the ultimate burden for women to bear. Often, and most unfortunately however, it becomes a question of one or the other, a complicated choice between two separate demands each with their own sets of challenges. Career development or family life? Personal growth or domestic fulfillment? In actual fact women need not be put in such a dilemma.

25. In order to assist women employees to effectively balance their work and family roles, new work structures and "family-friendly" policies should be introduced. These plans include child care centres at the workplace, flexi-time, job sharing, parental leave and work-from-home policies. After all, the definition of the 'work place' has changed radically. Far from being confined to just a physical office, the work place of today may well be any place at all, including the home, where work can be done just as effectively with the use of ICT facilities like e-mail, teleconferencing and video conferencing.

26. Changing the value system of the workplace so that giving priority to one's family is viewed as positive behaviour in both women and men will go a long way in supporting women's leadership aspirations. Encouraging men to avail themselves of the benefits of parental leave will avoid the perception that women will be more troublesome as employees because they have family commitments and it will assist in bringing about work culture which positively values family experience and responsibilities.

27. Meanwhile, in order to increase the number of woman leaders in organizations, much more need to be done. As we all know cultural and

structural factors pose barriers to women's advancement in their pursuit of leadership roles. The principle of inequality between men and women perpetuates itself because it is internalized through social perceptions. We must get rid of the proverbial "glass ceilings" so that women can be measured equally with men. Changing these perceptions is not an easy task, as stereotypes and negative assumptions towards women are complex and have their roots in both historical and cultural processes. If a woman works hard to succeed, she is often labeled as pushy and bossy. But the same characteristic in a man, is called determination and drive. Hence, attempts to change perceptions of women should include actions that can help to eliminate the prejudices in the family, schools, universities and organizations.

28. Changing the employment policies, so that they enable the development of women's skills and potential, will help achieve this goal. In this regard, a shift in organizational values and culture, including stereotypical assumptions and behavioral styles of its personnel, particularly top managers and decision-makers will be of fundamental importance, resulting in a culture that values the concept of gender equality in employment. Consequently, there will be change in the negative attitudes towards women and a change in the mind-set of the policy makers, implementers, and civil service personnel. Gender awareness should be introduced and strengthened at all levels thus creating a gender-positive environment in the organization.

Distinguish Participants,

29. Before I end my speech, let me urge all women not to be discouraged with the many challenges that you have to face in your path to leadership. Remember that these challenges will ultimately make women better, wiser and stronger leaders. Women must develop networks and cooperate, share insights, knowledge, resources and experiences in order for us to progress. We have all heard the platitude that women are each other's worst enemies. Unfortunately this is true in so many cases, particularly at the workplace. There is a Malay proverb that describes the behaviour of crabs in a basket pulling each other down in trying to climb up and out of the basket. Women must cease and desist in similar behaviour and instead of pulling each other down, we should be helping each other up.

30. Therefore, there ought to be more solidarity amongst us and women in leadership positions too should be willing to be role models and mentor their younger women subordinates. Women must learn to accept other women in leadership positions, support one another and widen our network. It is time for us to make ourselves be heard and seen as one voice, one vision and one mission.

31. It is in this light that I have called for a summit of first Ladies on "Nurturing Women Leaders of Tomorrow" to discuss and propose ways in which these noble and important goals can be achieved. Through this summit, and with the participation of the wives of leaders from all over the world, I believe real change can be affected to improve the lot of women everywhere.

32. I have often alluded to the view that as a wife of the top leader in the country, one is privileged to be able to accomplish many things for the benefit of the society at large, because apart from being a wife, a First Lady is also in many ways a leader herself. Therefore I am certain that First Ladies and spouses of leaders working together will be able to make a big difference towards a better future for women.

Ladies and gentlemen,

33. I am optimistic that women everywhere and at every level of society are awakening to the reality that life can offer so much more for them if they are ready to seize the opportunities and face the challenges that come their way. Women everywhere must be ready to work hard, and more importantly to work closer with one another to ensure that the future brings them what they so richly deserve. If we put our heads together and stand shoulder to shoulder as one powerful force, nothing is impossible and no barrier is insurmountable. I am sure we can accomplish great things if we work together in the common cause of overcoming the challenges of women in a new age of human progress. This new era may well become the era of women, but it will only be so, if women really and truly work for it. So ladies, the future is actually in our own hands. Change must begin with us, and it must begin, now.

Thank You.

---

Untuk sebarang pertanyaan sila hubungi:

**Encik Rizal bin Mansor**

Penolong Pegawai Khas Kepada

Y.A.B. Perdana Menteri

Tel: 603-88888015 / Fax: 603-88883424 / Mobile: 012-2580040