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Opening Remarks by

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- Yang Berbahagia Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir
- Dr Anuradha Rajivan, Regional Programme Coordinator, Human Development Report Unit, UNDP Regional Centre for Asia Pacific, Colombo
- Distinguished guests, members of the media, ladies and gentlemen

Good afternoon to you all.

It is my great pleasure to welcome you to the launch of the 2010 UNDP Asia-Pacific Human Development Report on Gender which is appropriately entitled ***Power, Voice and Rights: A Turning Point for Gender Equality in Asia and the Pacific***. Thank you for taking the time this afternoon to be part of the discussion on the status of gender empowerment in the Asia-Pacific region, and Malaysia in particular.

I would especially like to thank Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir for being with us today. Datin Paduka Marina at my request, made a special contribution to this Report titled *“Caught in Between: The Dilemma of Muslim Women in Malaysia”*. This is featured in Chapter 4, *Advancing Legal Rights*, of the Report. Datin Paduka Marina was also present at the global and Asia-Pacific launch of the Report in New Delhi in March, and was an active participant in the panel discussions on that occasion. We look forward to her keynote address today and her Malaysia specific insights in particular.

I would also like to thank Dr. Anuradha Rajivan, team leader and coordinator of this report, for kindly agreeing to come to Malaysia to share its key findings with us today.

Distinguished guests,

The Report, in its Preface, correctly argues that “gender equality is a right, gender equality is good economics, and gender equality promotes democracy. The ways of translating these into concrete pathways are through building economic power, promoting political voice and advancing legal rights.”

Indeed, gender equality and women's empowerment are core human rights that lie at the heart of development and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Overcoming gender inequalities and meeting MDG targets are not possible if disparities between women and men, or boys and girls, are not overcome in all areas such as health status, educational attainment, marriage and property rights, and employment opportunities.

While the discussion on gender equality is being increasingly approached from a human rights perspective, growing evidence indicates that gender equality is good economics as well. For example, over the last 10 years, the increasing role of women in the workforce in developed countries is estimated to have contributed more to global growth than China’s astonishing and unprecedented economic growth. On the

other hand, the Report points out that lack of women's participation in the workforce across the Asia-Pacific costs the region an estimated US\$89 billion every year.

Gender equality will also support long-term social stability if it is grounded in equal rights that confer dignity, foster freedom and provide opportunities for people of both genders. It is also a good platform from which sources of injustice and oppressive traditions can be reduced or, better still, eradicated.

Globally, there is a great deal to celebrate in terms of progress on gender equality, and this is true of the Asia-Pacific region and Malaysia as well. Access to education has increased for girls at all levels; the gap in labour force participation is narrowing, and in many countries, discriminatory laws have been removed and national policies developed to advance gender equality. Despite the notable progress in many areas, too many aspects and features of gender inequality still remain entrenched in all regions and countries.

The tremendous economic growth and rapid development which the Asia-Pacific region has witnessed in recent decades has, unfortunately, not been adequately translated into progress on gender equality, as evident from the findings of the Report which we are launching today. While having made some progress on gender equality, the Asia-Pacific region still lags behind developing regions of the world in many aspects, with women in many Asia-Pacific, countries including Malaysia, continuing to face severe deficits in power, voice and rights.

It is useful to note that the Asia-Pacific as a region is also divergent in its gender equality achievements. For example, South Asia still ranks at the lower end of the world, even lower than Sub-Saharan Africa on some basic issues such as protecting women from violence or upholding their rights to property, not to mention its low indicators in key areas such as nutrition, health, education, employment and political participation. On the other hand, East Asia has made significant advances, including having the highest average rates of women's economic participation in the world. These rates vary markedly within the sub-region, however, while both the quality and rights associated with much of that employment are questionable.

Ladies and gentlemen.

Malaysia's experience is similarly divergent, since its strong progress and achievements in certain gender areas contrasts markedly with the current situation in other areas, with noticeable gaps and even some reversals in critical aspects of gender equality.

Over the years, Malaysia has consistently shown its commitment, at least at a normative level, to achieving gender equality. As recently as the 16th Asean Summit in Hanoi, Vietnam last week, Malaysia strongly committed itself to playing an active role in the new Asean Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of

Women and Children, which is heartening. It has also ratified two very important and related core human rights conventions, specifically the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), although with several reservations, some of which I have been informed will be withdrawn through an announcement at the UN in New York later this week. Nevertheless, important reservations to both the CEDAW and the CRC will remain even after this welcome forthcoming announcement and the UN in Malaysia continues to strongly advocate for the withdrawal of all of Malaysia's reservations to these two important and core human rights conventions as soon as possible.

Also noteworthy is the Minister of Women, Family and Community Development's recent push for granting citizenship to children of Malaysian women married to foreigners, in order to create gender equality for all Malaysian citizens. This is long overdue. We welcome such developments and hope that the recent announcement of the Home Minister in this regard will also result in the Malaysian Government eliminating the current CEDAW reservation related to this issue. Malaysia should also ensure legal reforms which result in the elimination or at least reduction in the number of contradictions that currently exist between the dual civil and syariah legal systems of the country because these hamper progress on substantive gender equality achievement in the country.

Women's issues have formally been a part of the national development agenda since the Sixth Malaysia Plan, which was launched in 1991. In 2001 Malaysia amended Article 8(2) of its constitution to prohibit any form of gender discrimination, while in August 2009, it launched both the (second) National Policy on Women and the related Women's Development Action Plan. This national policy is a revised and updated version of the 1989 National Policy on Women.

The Ministry for Women, Family and Community Development has also made several important attempts to put in place mechanisms to review and monitor the application and implementation of such laws and policies. Malaysia also joined the international community in giving its commitment to achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015, with poverty reduction at the aggregate level and educational attainment being the areas where Malaysia has shown the most progress.

While these are welcome developments, there are important gender related areas in which Malaysia still lags behind. The Ninth Malaysia Plan spelt out a policy objective of achieving at least 30 percent women in decision making. In 2007, the UNDP and the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development commissioned a comprehensive policy research study on this issue with a view to recommending strategies for a plan of action to reach this goal by 2015 since studies had revealed that women's participation in high level decision making positions was nowhere near the 30 percent mark. Although a Plan of Action to fast track this agenda was completed in 2008, it is still pending Cabinet approval. Without the implementation of

such a Plan of Action, little can be achieved in this area in which Malaysia lags behind many other countries. In this context, it should be noted that the representation of women in decision making positions in both the public and private sectors in Malaysia averaged a mere 14% in 2009.

On the political front, Malaysia has made only relatively modest progress in increasing the number of women in high-level decision making positions. Considering that 2.9% of those elected to Parliament in 1959 were women, the figure of 10.8 percent in 2008, 50 years on, is modest at best.

While I must commend the Minister of Women, Family and Community Development, Dato' Sri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil, for her recent commitment to increasing the number of women in high-level decision-making positions, stated during the March 9 seminar jointly organized by her Ministry with UNDP and the Government of Norway on the occasion of the visit of the Crown Prince and Princess of Norway to Malaysia, we hope that her commitment will quickly yield the desired results in this critical area.

More specifically, UNDP hopes that the Government of Malaysia will prioritize its approval of the 30% Plan of Action as a concrete demonstration of its commitment to, and recognition of, the importance of ensuring women's participation in high-level decision-making positions. We stand ready to help with its implementation once it has been approved by the Malaysian Cabinet.

On the economic front, Malaysia pursued export-led industrialisation as a key development strategy since the late 70s and during the 80s. This brought a wave of women workers into the labour force. As a result, the participation rate of women in the labour force increased from 37.2 percent in 1970 to 44.7 percent in 1995 and 46.7 percent in 2000. But rather than increasing further, this actually dropped to 46.4 percent in 2007, seven years later. Indeed, since the late 1980s, women's participation in the labour force has remained more or less stagnant through the years, hovering slightly below the 47% percent mark. These figures are particularly low when compared with the high participation rate of men in the Malaysian labour force which reached a peak of 85.3 percent in 1995 before dipping to 79.5 percent in 2007.

In social terms, there still remains a disparity between the rights of Muslim women and non-Muslim women under the dual legal systems of syariah and civil law in Malaysia at both the Federal and State level – this includes issues such as the minimum age of marriage, divorce, custody, inheritance and even punishment, as we have recently witnessed. These disparities merely perpetuate discriminatory gender norms and hinder the progress of gender equality in Malaysia. A consistent legal system which supports gender equality, justice and human development must be enacted and consistently implemented so that the rights of all women, regardless of race, culture or religion, in all spheres – be they constitutional, civil, criminal, public or private – are guaranteed.

At the global level, Malaysia's performance has also consistently slipped over the last few years. According to the Global Gender Gap Index, Malaysia fell in its ranking from 2006 when it ranked 72, to 92 in 2007, and 101 in 2009.

Ladies and gentlemen.

In view of the significant role that women's participation in the labour force plays in a country's economic growth, and in view of the economic transformation Malaysia hopes to achieve with its recently announced New Economic Model, it is imperative that Malaysia finds ways to encourage more women's participation at all levels of its workforce. A key finding of the Report is that Malaysia will enjoy GDP gains of 2.9% annually if its women's labor market participation rate was raised to the current level of women's labour market participation in the United States – which is a little over 70%.

However, as mentioned earlier, women's participation in the labour force in Malaysia has stagnated over a long period of time when compared with the participation rate of men. At less than 50% currently, such an increase is a tall order, indeed.

A 2008 national survey showed that women's child bearing and rearing roles had a major influence on their ability to participate in the workforce, with about 68% of women citing household responsibilities as the main reason behind their non-participation in the labour force, despite many of them having completed at least secondary education.

The gender wage gap by occupation in Malaysia is also of concern, with 2007 wage differentials for the same job ranging as high as RM1,774 a month for senior officials and managers.

If Malaysia aims to become a high-value added economy by moving up the economic ladder, it is urgent that policy makers design and implement strategies which remove barriers to women's employment, thereby also allowing more women to meaningfully contribute to the country's development.

It is heartening to note Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak's recent statement on women's empowerment being integral to the country's successful economic transformation. Nevertheless, we look forward both to hearing more details about the pro-gender and pro-women policies planned in the NEM and then their full implementation.

Distinguished guests,

It is evident that Malaysia has acknowledged in many of its national policies, including its national development plan, that the empowerment of women and the

improvement of their social, educational, economic and political status are vital for sustainable development.

Nevertheless, much more can be done to empower Malaysian women politically, economically and legally. This should also contribute to economic growth and help achieve the country's aspiration of becoming a developed nation by 2020. The empowerment of women is clearly smart economics. Involving them in all aspects of public life will not only significantly increase Malaysia's GDP but contribute to wealth creation by tapping into the multiple facets of their potential. In this context, achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women should be seen as a core economic strategy for Malaysia if it is to become a fully developed nation.

UNDP hopes that Malaysia will give due consideration to the recommendations in its Asia-Pacific Human Development Report which we are launching today. We sincerely believe that if the Malaysian Government adopts these recommendations, it will be able to more quickly, consistently and simultaneously advance gender equality in three critical spheres – political, economic and social – within the Vision 2020 timeframe.

Adopting the recommendations would also enable Malaysia to make its international CEDAW commitments a full reality; craft economic policies to support gender equality; collect better data leading to a stronger capacity for gender analysis; boost the political participation of women; design gender equitable laws; foster new public attitudes and close gaps between its laws and legal practices.

This adds up to a lot of benefits for Malaysia and its citizens, especially women, with relatively little downside.

Ladies and Gentlemen.

UNDP and the UN Country Team's Gender Theme Group stand ready to support Malaysia's efforts to significantly progress gender equality by the MDG achievement target year of 2015.

Thank you.