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2009 World Population Day:

**“Responding to the Economic Crisis: Investing in
Women is a Smart Choice”**

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**17 July 2009
Kuala Lumpur**

Your Royal Highness, Tuanku Muhriz
Yang DiPertuan Besar Negeri Sembilan

Your Royal Highness, Tuanku Aishah Rohani
Tuanku Ampuan Besar Negeri Sembilan

Yang Berbahagia Tan Sri Dato Napsiah Omar
Chairperson, WIM

Yang Berbahagia Dato Dr. Nellie Tan-Wong
Organising Chairperson

Excellencies

Distinguished guests, members of the media, ladies and gentlemen

“Ampun Tuanku”

A very good morning to you all. I am honoured to be here today in the gracious presence of His Royal Highness Tuanku Muhriz and Her Royal Highness Tuanku Aishah Rohani. I would like to thank the Women’s Institute of Management (WIM) and Dato Dr. Nellie Tan-Wong in particular, for organizing today’s event in conjunction with World Population Day. This year marks the 20th anniversary of World Population Day which is held annually on the 11th of July each year.

The theme for the 2009 World Population Day is: “**Responding to the Economic Crisis: Investing in Women is a Smart Choice**”. In line with this theme, WIM is organising a special three-day basic entrepreneurial course for single mothers. This workshop is part of its ongoing collaboration with UNFPA and seeks to empower marginalized women in order to protect them from violence and other related problems. Besides single mothers, this project also covers 4 other groups of marginalized women: indigenous women, women who are victims of violence, pre-release women prisoners and women living with HIV. A better quality of life is the main focus of this project; and considering the fact that WIM has the expertise and the network to work on economic empowerment of these women, their partnership with UNFPA will go a long way to equip the women involved in the project with the knowledge and skills to protect themselves from violence and related problems.

Coming back to the theme for this year’s World Population Day which is related to the global economic crisis, I would like to share with you a few thoughts on the occasion of today’s event. No one still really knows what the full long-term impact of this global financial and economic crisis will be. There is, now widespread consensus, however, that the crisis is likely to be deeper and more protracted than any crisis since the Great Depression 80 years ago. This crisis is quite different from the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997/98 and it originated at the centre of our

financial world, the United States. Given its scale and depth, it is having a much greater social and economic impact throughout the world and recovery in this region of the world will be slower than in the aftermath of the Asian Financial Crisis 10 years ago. This is primarily because the main instruments of recovery that were available to Southeast Asian countries 10 years ago (external demand for their exports) are the very ones that are the most visible casualties of the current crisis. It is increasingly evident that Southeast Asia, which includes Malaysia, has been amongst the most vulnerable regions of the world and that growth in the region will decelerate significantly as a result of the crisis, given its high trade dependence on the United States, Japan and Europe. It is estimated that the number of unemployed in the region could reach 94 million in 2009, while according to some estimates 60 million more people in the region are likely to be pushed into poverty this year. The current crisis, in addition to the recent food and fuel price volatility, which continues to affect the poor in developing countries, will also have serious and long term gender-related consequences for women and their families in the region.

We know that women and children in developing countries will bear the brunt of the impact. Unfortunately, we also know that this will have consequences way beyond the direct impact on women. In the words of UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon: "The global financial crisis is forcing all of us to save and cut costs where we can. But our work for the women of the world must continue undiminished. When you empower a woman, you empower a family. When you empower a woman, you change the world."

Why the focus on women, you may ask? In addition to the profound reasons which are explicit in the UN Secretary-General's words, the World Bank reported in March 2009 that the crisis could lead to increases in infant and maternal deaths and female dropout rates, and violence against women and girls. If left unchecked, these effects will reverse progress in women's empowerment and in meeting key Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Our collective efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals must, therefore, remain a global priority, with MDG5 (maternal health) and its target of universal access to reproductive health accorded the highest importance.

Progress in women's empowerment and in meeting the MDGs will be reversed if the root causes of the economic crisis are not addressed. Measures to advance gender equality and equity and the empowerment of women are, moreover, as much a matter of human rights as of development. Not only do they have positive impacts on people's well-being, but they are also an expression of the rights of the individual and of a significant group in all societies. In a number of cases, women now represent the majority of a country's population.

In a recent public lecture in Malaysia, Dr. Noeleen Heyzer, Under-Secretary General and executive secretary of UN-ESCAP described the vulnerability of women as a common denominator across Asia. She indicated that a lesson learnt

from past crises was that the poor, women and children are the hardest hit in economic downturns.

Distinguished guests,

While we are facing both a global and national economic crisis, this can also be viewed as an opportunity. It is the decisions we make today as policy makers at national, regional and international levels that will determine how deep and long the present crisis will be and how resilient our future global, regional and national institutions will be to prevent and withstand future economic and financial crises. We will hold in our hands the keys that can open the doors to a future of sustainable and equitable growth, if we use the crisis as an opportunity which recognizes that at their core, financial and monetary arrangements should serve the purposes of development rather than be an end in themselves.

The multiple threats of the financial and economic, food and climate change crises have an unequal and differential impact on males and females because of gender inequalities in labour markets, prevailing patterns of gender discrimination as well as norms about the different roles of women and men in the economy and society.

In terms of our response to the crisis, there are at least three reasons why it is critical to treat women and men equally: Women play a critical role in decision-making on how household income is spent, regardless of the level of family income. Moreover, the male breadwinner-female caregiver model no longer fits reality even in an increasing number of developing country contexts. More and more households now depend on women as income earners. In times of hardship, women tend to increase their time in paid work, even if this means a more onerous 'triple burden' of paid work, unpaid family care and household responsibilities. Thirdly, low-income households are especially reliant on unpaid care work which is predominantly provided by women. This means that in hard times, their time will be stretched between paid work and unpaid care work at the cost of the welfare of young children and their own personal health. Recent gains in gender equality, through the expansion of women's access to paid work and their control over their own income, are likely to be lost with long-term negative consequences, unless equality of opportunity between the sexes guides policy responses to the crisis.

The United Nations is committed to making gender equality a reality, not only because it is a moral imperative, but because it is a way to promote the prosperity and wellbeing of all. The relative status of women and men, the interaction between gender and race, class and ethnicity, and questions of rights, control, ownership, power and voice – all of these have a critical impact on the success and sustainability of every development intervention.

I would like to take this opportunity to emphasize that UNFPA, given its mandate, has committed itself to focus on women as the most effective economic agents of change on the occasion of 2009 World Population Day. We wish to highlight that

policy makers need to protect and enhance women's abilities to earn income, keep their daughters in school and provide them with easy access to reproductive health information and services, including on family planning. These are the factors that can make or break a family's future. Without immediate rights-based action, today's economic crisis could trigger a downward spiral into more entrenched poverty that could last for at least a generation.

I wish you all a fruitful and enriching workshop and I commend the heroic efforts of single mothers in supporting the aspiration and hopes of their families in addition to taking charge of their reproductive rights. It is, perhaps appropriate, for me to conclude with the remarks of UNFPA Executive Director, Thoraya Ahmed Obaid: "There is no smarter investment, with such high economic and social returns, than investing in the health and rights of adolescent girls and women."

Thank you.

"Ampun Tuanku"