

**KEY NOTE SPEECH AT  
INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY  
EVENT (2018)  
'PRESS FOR PROGRESS'**

**BY  
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ATTORNEY GENERAL**

**ON  
8<sup>TH</sup> MARCH 2018  
AT  
CAE MULTI-PURPOSE TRAINING CENTRE**

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Alhamdulillah Rabbil 'Alamin Wassalatu Wassalamu 'Ala-  
Asyarafil Mursalin Saidina Muhammadin Wa'ala Alihi  
Wasahbihi Ajma'in

السَّلَامُ عَلَيْكُمْ وَرَحْمَةُ اللَّهِ وَبَرَكَاتُهُ

And Good Morning

Your Excellency, Caterina Ventura, High Commissioner of  
Canada

Your Excellencies, Ladies and (the few gentlemen brave  
enough to be present this morning) !

Let me begin by conveying my sincere thanks and  
appreciation to Her Excellency, Caterina Ventura and the  
High Commission of Canada with the support of High  
Commission of Australia and UK, for inviting me to attend  
and to deliver the Opening Key Note at this event. Most of

all, thank you for highlighting the sometimes, under publicised progress and accomplishment of us; Brunei women.

It is a great honor to be here. Frankly, it has been a while. I have told “my story, my journey” for so many times throughout my career spanning more than 35 years! and some of you here may have already heard my story before. (I can see some of you calculating my AGE!!!) However, Her Excellency, Caterina accosted me (hope that’s a diplomatically correct word) after my Opening of the Legal Year speech and in her words ‘you are a source of inspiration for many women in the country. Can you come and share you story!!! I said I will try my best. Her Excellency wrote to me immediately after and in her letter, she had asked me to highlight the achievement and contribution of women in Brunei and to share some advise for other women and the young generation of women. How can I refuse? (see, how persistent women can be if they want to be!)

So, here I am!! On a serious note, Thank you Your Excellency, It always feels rewarding when some girls (and some boys) and their parents approach me to say my

'journey' had been a source of inspiration for them/their daughters (and sons). Just last week, 2 lady prosecutors had told me that too!. It does make me feel that I must have done something good because that happens to be my personal motto 'to inspire and be inspired!! and I urge the various accomplished speakers and women present today will also share their journey, and continue to inspire others especially the younger generation.

### **The theme: PRESS FOR PROGRESS**

The theme for International Women's Day 2018 ( is Press For Progress. 'Progress' can be defined and measured differently according to different societies and different culture.

The theme takes me back to sometime; 1986/1987 where about 10 rather vocal, assertive ladies gathered in the small, humble barely furnished lounge of our rented house in Jerudong. We sat on the floor, with the 'mission' to discuss a few issues (commonly called 'women issues' ranging from certain provisions in the General Order and other Regulation that 'discriminated' women in particular, those working as government servants and those whose

husbands did not work in Government (yours truly included). I guess I was 'inducted' as the group 'Lawyer' to ensure that we comply with the law. ( Mind you, I only started work in 1981, led about 1000 women in the National Day celebration in February 1984 and got married about a month later and had my first baby in December 1985! Yes, I got it all planned!

To cut the story short, after a long (sometimes heated) discussion we all agreed to write a 'polite letter' signed off by about 15-20 women to convey our concerns. It took a few meetings afterwards to finalise it. I cautioned the group not to title the letter as a 'petition' and we took great caution to use a more suitable word for 'discrimination' and not to appear overly concerned on the financial perspective but as a matter of fairness and principle.

We finally signed the letter and sent it off. My name, as the most junior officer, right at the end. I got a reply sometime later which was addressed; To "Dayang Hayati and rakan-rakan" (Dayang Hayati and friends).

So, it seems, despite signing off right at the bottom, someone believed I was the 'culprit'!!

After that, we continue to send reminders. The issues were thankfully followed up by many women senior officers at that time, especially Datin Hjh Azizah, Datin Hjh Adina, Datin Hjh Apsah amongst others. And I must mention we had many 'male' Ministers /SUTs supporting us too. Alhamdulillah, many of the issues we raised in the letter with the gracious consent of His Majesty, The Sultan and Yang Di-Pertuan Negara Brunei Darussalam were subsequently changed or abolished. We are first and foremost grateful to the wise Leadership of His Majesty The Sultan and Yang Di-Pertuan Negara Brunei Darussalam, who understood and heard us; as long as the issues don't contravene the law, our religion and culture. Thank you to everyone, man and woman who understood and supported us!

My reason for telling this story is not just to give those concerned credit but to demonstrate as an example of how just by getting together; discussing the issues, putting our mutual concerns; putting our head together (not literally) and using our voices, assertively, passionately, not necessarily aggressively can lead us to 'progress' and 'progress' we did and so much we have!!

I am first and foremost grateful to Allah Subhanahu Wataala for the blessing!! There are many others to thank. I will not mention everyone (at the risk of being equalled to a Grammy Award speech)!! But that is indeed the common trait that you will hear from us “Brunei Women” here today! that we are grateful for the much needed support from family, colleagues and the likes.

What’s it like to be a woman of many firsts? The inevitable question posed to me many a times throughout my life, by both men and women, boys and girls. Nothing wrong or impolite about the question though as I was indeed blessed and destined to be the first Brunei Malay woman to be called to the English Bar in 1980 (thanks to Brunei Government Scholarship) and subsequently appointed by His Majesty the Sultan and yang Di-Pertuan of Brunei Darussalam as the first woman Magistrate, Chief Magistrate, Chief Registrar/Intermediate Court Judge and then the first woman High court Judge in 2001, and the first woman Attorney General on 4 August 2009. The position was elevated to Ministerial level in 2011. Alhamdulillah.

I never dreamed that I would end up where I am. All I know was that the job would be a tremendous undertaking. On every appointment, I began with the hope and commitment to utilise my basic ability and to develop the skills not only to do the job but to do it well not only for Brunei women but for everyone especially His Majesty the Sultan and Yang Di-Pertuan of Brunei Darussalam who had entrusted me with such an honourable and heavy responsibility. In other words, I want to leave a trail – a trailblazer of sorts! The greater challenge that comes with being 'the first' is that, you must do well for your fellow women so that you will not be the first and the last!

With the progress of Brunei women now, I am confident that I will not be the last! Insya Allah.

### **Then and now:**

Some parts of my story would not be relevant now but I guess it's still worth sharing.



When I joined the Attorney General Chambers in 1981 there were only 3 women. When I first moved to the Judiciary and appointed as first lady Magistrate in 1984. I was the only lady magistrate.

When I was appointed as the first woman ICJ, along one male judge, Borneo Bulletin described me as 'Beauty on the Bench'. Not surprisingly, the male judge who sat on the bench besides me, was not pleased because it seem to imply that since I was described as the beauty, he was the Beast. When I left the judiciary in 2009, there was one woman ICJ and more than 80% women Registrars/Magistrates. Currently, there is one woman Judicial Commissioner of the Supreme Court.

When I returned to Chambers in August 2009 as the Attorney General (after having been 'away' for more than 20 years), I found myself (happily) surrounded by more than 80% women lawyers! JACK MA founder of Ali Baba was quoted to say one of the 'secret sauce of ALIBABA's success is to 'employ as many women as you can and to pay attention to women. If Jack MA is right, the AGC is on the right track to become (AGC) – All Girls Chambers.

Even now, more than 80% of lawyers in Chambers are women. You will agree with me that is significant progress indeed.

Am I seen as a trailblazer? Hopefully, If I am accredited in a small way, to have contributed to this encouraging development. I would like to think I must have done something right.

### **The Journey**

Justice Sandra Day O Connor (retired) – the first woman to serve as United States Supreme Court Justice eloquently stated “The power I exert on the Court depends on the power of my arguments, not on my gender”. She gave me confidence when some men and women seems to think a woman is too ‘emotional’ to be on the bench or to lead.

Dr Madeline Albright – former US Secretary of State, advice “work hard and get education first”. Beyond that “women have to learn to interrupt”. She came up with the concept after attending plenty of male- dominated meetings which she wanted to speak but decided her

point wasn't smart enough. Then some men says it and everyone thinks they are brilliant and you're so mad at yourself. But, must exercise 'active listening'; 'women and people in general, need to understand that if they are going to interrupt, they need to know what they are talking about. Listen closely, 'speak up' often. The world has room for mediocre men, it has no room for mediocre women. (Hear, Hear)

Ralph Waldo Emerson - 'Do not go where the path may lead, Go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.

So ladies, whether I am the trail blazer is really not important. All through my long career, the most rewarding moments are when parents and girls (and boys) came to see me or sent me notes to say that I had inspired them to work and follow their dreams, not just in the legal/judicial sector. I am no role model but, if I have indeed inspired them, I hope they will continue our 'journey'. Many of us have come a long way indeed but we still have far to go because unfortunately, statistics all over the world still shows that even though more women break/crack the glass ceiling - leadership roles remain elusive.

**Ladies,**

No doubt we are most fortunate and grateful that the Government of His Majesty the Sultan and Yang Di-Pertuan of Brunei Darussalam had given girls equal right in education, training, health care, equal pay, job and business opportunity and the likes. In Brunei Darussalam's national vision 2035, it is recognized that there will be equal opportunities in the workforce for women and their contribution to nation building is acknowledged. Your journey may therefore be easier than mine and our pioneers.

We must remember that millions of girls and women in many parts of the world are not as fortunate as us. So, in our quest for progress and while celebrating our success, we must never forget those stay-at-home mothers; like my late mother who was a full-time housewife but never fails to encourage me and my sisters to go out to pursue our dreams. Also those vulnerable women and children who needs our protection.

Therefore, Brunei Darussalam had ratified some relevant:

- **International Commitments**, such as convention of the Elimination of Violence against Women and Children.
- **We have Legislations**, such as :
  - Islamic Family Law Act (Cap 127)
  - Married Women Act (Cap 190)
  - Women and Girls Protection Act (Cap 120)
  - Amendments to the Penal Code

(for details: go to [www.agc.gov.bn](http://www.agc.gov.bn))

### **Leaders born or made?**

It remains a debate. However, a few tips that I have learned /picked up along the way to share. Warning: (Try it at your own risk)

- You cannot lead from the crowd, otherwise there would be no need for leaders (late Margaret Thatcher);
- Stop selling yourself short;
- Stop playing safe;

- You've got to ask for what you want. People can't know what you want just by looking at you! (practice it when you asked for that handbag you eyed for so long, from your husband);
- Women must not let themselves be intimidated. (Debbie Kissire, Vice Chair/Managing Partner of Ernst & Young);
- Embrace vision and opportunity.

Hilary Clinton, 2008 – concession speech in the Democratic National Convention “highest and hardest glass ceiling had 18 million cracks in it. The light is shining through and the path will be easier next time”.

Had it been a smooth journey for me? Of course NOT! The vicissitudes of Leadership is not for the faint hearted. Its a challenge for both men and women (and more so for women). Thick face required at times!! (believe me). Don't take all things personally, for example when no male talks to you in a male dominated meetings or leave the chair next to you empty. (pretend that they are just shy!) or check your body odour when you go home. Learn when to 'switch off!!' (for example, when the males have their male jokes). Don't fret over small things. You may also

have to calm down your better half not to sweat over small stuff such as, when you receive invitations that reads Yang Mulia Dayang .... 'and spouse' or 'dan suami' and he decides not to attend (it's an ego or cultural thing). Assure him. "don't worry dear! even though your name is not there, you are still head of the family and you will still pay the BILLS!" Respect your colleagues, males or females. An Only woman Board member in USA who was always punctual but for Board meetings she said she purposely come 10 minutes late to allow the males to have their 'male jokes' without her. [Try it!]. Another one suggested to shock them by telling 'male jokes' yourself. [Don't try it!]

Global Statistics indicate that women are still under-represented in leadership position despite having more education than men.

Rafidah Aziz – previous Minister of International Trade and Industry of Malaysia– “if women have to work twice as hard as men – they should have two salaries”.

In all fairness, leadership is hard for everybody, but more so for women, 'you can have it all, but you are not

going to sleep very well'. Some women politicians heard to have said.

Tips from Cortes Vanquez – first woman Secretary of state USA.

- Be bold and courageous, which is not reckless, but fully conscious of consequences;
- Arm yourself with information if you can combat them with information;
- You have to be your word.

Support and understanding is crucial. Most of us here, I am sure, have gone through all those 'mummy/wifey guilty' syndrome Alhamdulillah I have support all the way, parents, husband, children, family, bosses, colleagues, friends (men and women), domestic helpers. [if you don't have a supporting husband, you have to find or train one]. I am pleased to say that Brunei Darussalam have a lot of such good men. Believe me. When I mooted the idea of having women members of Legislative Council in an open forum in 2006 in the presence of His Majesty the Sultan and Yang Di-Pertuan of Brunei Darussalam, I am proud to say that it was the male audience who applauded first and



loudest. I observed that most women present, shyly applauded softly, but I got many SMS later from women friends /relatives who said they cheered loudly at home, when they saw it on tv much to the dismay of their other half!

From early on in my career, I know I will never get an award for best wife/mother but I know in their eyes I am! (if they mean what they said in my birthday cards, Mother's Day card etc). (I hope I get another one in 2 days time) In my speech in 2016, I said the next challenge is to get a 'best grandma' card from my grandchildren, Alhamdulillah, got that too (3 grandchildren and counting!) Despite my success, at home, I am still a wife, a mother and a grandma. I am still a daughter, a sister and a friend.

In conclusion, as individuals (man or woman), we can inspire and be inspired. Don't stop believing. 'Today's leaders inspires tomorrow's'. We must help other women up the ladder. Don't push them instead or take the ladder away! (I say that because some said, the worse enemy of women are women themselves) I hope that's not true.

Hellen Keller – “one can never consent to creep, when one feels an impulse to soar”.

Despite all the talk of breaking glass ceiling, women empowerment, womens rights, the question is ‘what are you going to do about your own future? Are you resilient enough to pursue your dream and help other fellow women to pursue theirs?’

His Majesty graciously acknowledge in his titah at the Global Leaders Summit on Gender Equality and Empowerment at the United Nation Headquarter / New York, USA (September 2015) ‘With women making up of almost half of Brunei Darussalam’s population, their contribution to the national development is of great significance’.

Let us all do our part.

I wish you all the best in your journey to break that leadership glass ceiling (if it's still there). I will hold the ladder for you as long as I can. But don't take too long. I am getting older!

وبالله التوفيق والهداية والسلام عليكم ورحمة الله وبركاته

Thank You all for listening.  
(if you were)