

POOL STRENGTH TO ATTAIN EQUITABLE PARTICIPATION, ASEAN WOMEN TOLD.

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SINGAPORE, June 5 (Bernama) - Asean should combine their intelligence, passion and political strategy to promote and implement the equitable and effective participation of women in all fields, including politics.

Chairperson of United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) Singapore, Dr Kanwaljit Soin said in many Asean countries, female representatives in public bodies, national councils and leadership positions were lacking and thus, there was no ready pipeline to feed women candidates into the political arena.

"If we look at the number of women in Parliaments and the rate of progress, it will take us 50 to 100 years to reach equal representation," she said in her working paper on "Leadership in the 21st Century - Women and Politics" at the Asean Women Leaders' Convention here today.

Dr Kanwaljit stressed that women need to act now to get the balance right as the 50:50 balance campaign endorsed by more than 70 organisations in 52 countries has been designed to confront the structural and cultural barriers that impede women's access to decision-making and leadership positions.

Dr Kanwaljit said the 50:50 campaign had set 30 per cent representation of women in government, legislatures and local government by 2003 and equal representation by 2005. She said women in South Africa and India had pushed quotas so successfully that a critical mass women had flowed into the political system and forever changed notions about women's capacity for leadership.

Yet, in all Asean countries the percentage of women in politics was shamefully low and this statistics had hardly changed, thus, "we saw that masculinism pervades politics in Asean," she said.

According to her, the world average for women in the single or Lower House of Parliaments was 13.5 per cent last year. The Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Cambodia, Thailand and Singapore are all below this low world average, she said.

Politics in Asean, as many as other places is defined as public activity dominated by men requiring typically male attributes and characteristics and there is a perception that women who enter the political arena are unfeminine and less desirable and worthy as women, she said.

"Too often we fail to recognise women as potential leaders because the barriers to women's leadership are deeply rooted in our society, cultural institutions and in women themselves," she said.

Dr Kanwaljit said promoting women in the governance does not only mean having women in "political" institution at decision-making level, but it requires attention to promote links and dialogue within the society to build authority and influence for women's visions and thoughts.

"If we women want to transform mainstream politics (which we see as male dominated and possibly "dirty"), then, we have no choice but to participate in politics," she said.

Meanwhile, President of Indonesian Business Women Association (IWAPI) Suryani Sidik Motik said cooperation between countries with advanced information technologies (IT) with ones that have no advanced IT will be a great help to empower and strengthen women organisations in facing the new economy.

"The key to overcome the challenges and enlarge the opportunities at the same time is

education, formal as well as informal education that will be able to build up women human resources quality and will innovate the women behaviour to meet the job market requirement," she said in her paper titled "Creating Opportunities Out of Today's Challenges: Women in Business and Management".

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