

UNITED NATIONS



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Office of the Resident Coordinator Of The United Nations  
System's Operational Activities For Development in Malaysia

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**WELCOMING REMARKS  
INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY**

“Towards Women's Health and Rights: Leaving no one behind”

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**8 MARCH 2018  
KUALA LUMPUR, MALAYSIA**

Dr David M. Malone, Rector of the United Nations University and United Nations Under-Secretary-General

Your Excellency Ms. Maria-Castillo Fernandez, Ambassador and Head of Delegation of the European Union to Malaysia

Excellencies,

Colleagues from the United Nations Country Team,

Our friends from the media,

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

Good morning and thank you for joining us as we commemorate International Women's Day here in Kuala Lumpur - for standing in solidarity with millions around the world for the equal rights of half of the population of the world – an aspiration that we struggle to achieve, despite living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century marked by its unprecedented technological advancements and seamless connectivity across borders.

The UN Country Team through its Gender Theme Group, led by Ms. Marcela Suazo of UNFPA, has been pleased to organize this forum on the theme "*Towards Women's Health and Rights: Leaving no one behind*" together with the UN University's International Institute for Global Health and the European Commission – in the presence of UN Under-Secretary and Rector of the UN University, Dr. David Malone, who we feel very privileged to have join us today.

## Historical movement

Being Austrian, I am proud to recall that long before the United Nations decided in 1975, for International Women's Day to be celebrated on the 8<sup>th</sup> of March, it was first marked in a major way in 1911 with more than one million Austrians, Germans and Swiss women and men rallying around women's right to vote and hold public office as well as women's rights to work, vocational training and to ending discrimination at the workplace.

## Normative:

More than 30 years later, in 1945, the equal rights of men and women was written into the Charter of the United Nations – leading to the UN's efforts to develop strategies, standards, goals and key instruments such as the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (or CEDAW) in 1979.

The CEDAW, which Malaysia ratified in 1995, is also often seen as an “international bill of rights for women”. By acceding to this Convention, countries commit themselves to undertaking measures to establish the principle of equality of men and women in their legal system, abolish all discriminatory laws and adopt laws that prohibit discrimination against women, and establish systems and institutions to effectively protect and ensure the elimination of all acts of discrimination against women by any and all parties.

At the turn of the millennium, we had the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment featured prominently in the Millennium Development Goals. And this was reinforced in 2015, when world leaders of 193 countries pledged their commitment to

gender equality and women's empowerment under the banner of the 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Gender equality goes beyond SDG 5. It is a cross cutting imperative of our shared and common goals for the future. The SDGs will not be achieved if the 50 percent of our world's population are not equally empowered.

### Present day status

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This is the normative framework, but after more than a hundred years of the women's movement, and many international commitments and pronouncements, where are we, when it comes to achieving gender equality in all spheres of personal and public life?

The World Economic Forum's 2017 Gender Gap Report that assesses gender equality across the pillars of *Economic Participation and Opportunity, Educational Attainment, Health and Survival, and Political Empowerment* - estimates that it would take us 100 years to close the overall global gender gap in 106 countries covered by the Report; and 217 years to close the gender gaps in the economic and health dimensions.

Hence, I am sure that you all agree with me on how critical it is that we begin accelerating our efforts now. Forums such as this substantive one that we are convening today, on women's health and rights, are an important step in that direction.

The UN Secretary-General in his message for International Day of Women today, makes it clear that “Achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls is the unfinished business of our time, and the greatest human rights challenge in our world.”

Mr. Antonio Guterres, admirably began his tenure leading by example. And as a result, which I am happy to announce - the UN has for the first time in its history, achieved gender parity in its senior management team!

And in 2017, the UN partnered with the European Commission on the “Spotlight” Initiative to focus on the elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls, a key target under the SDGs. It is therefore, significant that we have with us today, Her Excellency Ms. Maria-Castillo Fernandez, Ambassador and Head of Delegation of the European Union to Malaysia, as we discuss this important agenda.

### Malaysia – 2018 Year for Women’s Empowerment

Ladies and gentlemen,

Malaysia has done well on many fronts in relation to women’s empowerment as evidenced by the prominence, confidence and stature of its women in public life and business. However, Malaysia’s recent review by the CEDAW Committee highlights certain difficult challenges that need to be addressed. Bridging cultural beliefs and universal norms is not easy but it is possible, as has been demonstrated by a number of countries in similar contexts. Sharing of good practices and providing a safe space for discourse toward practical solutions is important.

We therefore, welcome Malaysia's designation of 2018 as *Women's Empowerment Year*, which aims among others, to require 30% women participation as board of directors in government likened corporations; to increase maternity leave; to provide training and entrepreneurship programmes; and incentives for women to return to the workforce.

The UN works closely with Malaysia on the SDGs, and there is a good plan of action on the part of Government to achieve Goal 5 to *Achieve Gender Equality and Empower All Women and Girls*. The components of SDG 5 go beyond economic empowerment, and include violence against women, harmful practices such as early marriage, female genital mutilation, women's participation in political and public life, sound policies and legislation for the promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women and girls at all levels.

Hence, we hope to see, in conjunction with the Empowerment of Women year, the passing of the Gender Equality Law. The UN system stands ready to continue its support to this and all other efforts for the women's empowerment and equality.

### Initiatives and campaigns

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Our commemoration today, comes on the heels of the unprecedented global movement for women's rights, equality and justice over the past year. We are encouraged by the many renewed global calls to action. The **#metoo** and **#timeisnow** (for a gender equal

world) movements have brought to light some of the most appalling abuses of women and their rights. But they also reflect how long and windy the journey actually is.

Gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, is pivotal to ensuring sustainable development as well as justice and human rights.

**And the time is now to accelerate progress!**

I wish you a productive forum.

Thank you.