



# NCWO QUARTERLY

Newsletter of the  
**National Council of Women's Organisations**  
*Majlis Kebangsaan Pertubuhan-Pertubuhan Wanita Malaysia*

A quarterly publication to promote the advancement of women and the exchange of ideas between NGOs and like-minded people

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## NCWO Microsoft Unlimited Potential Programme

In the year 2006, NCWO received a grant in the form of software and cash from Microsoft through its Unlimited Potential (UP) Programme. Microsoft works in partnership with NCWO to provide computer technology skills training and guidance to help women in particular discover what computer technology can do for them and what they can do with computer technology.

During the first phase of the project, 2 centres were established at NCWO, Petaling Jaya and YWCA, Kuala Lumpur. With the help of the Volunteer Trainers a total of 280 people including women from the underserved and marginalized background and also youths from the estates were given an opportunity to learn technology related skills.

Microsoft extended another grant to NCWO in 2007 for the setting up of 2 more centres under Persatuan Wanita Sabah (PEWASA) in Kota Kinabalu and Kunak. Through these centres many rural and indigenous women would not be left behind by modern technology.

This year (2008) thanks to Microsoft again, we will see the setting up of six more centres through our affiliates in Perlis, Kedah, Kelantan, Terengganu, Pahang and Sarawak. Many of the target groups for these centres consist of people especially women who do not have the opportunity to receive computer technology education. The teaching and coaching which Microsoft UP makes possible, enables these communities to grasp opportunities which would otherwise remain beyond their reach.

*Sandra Simon*  
NCWO Microsoft UP Coordinator



Trainees glued to the computers at NCWO Training Centre. )

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# UNDP Malaysia: Investing in Women and Girls

**Achieving gender equality and empowering women is a goal in itself. It is also a condition for building healthier, better educated, more peaceful and more prosperous societies. When women are fully empowered and engaged, all of society benefits. Only in this way can we successfully take on the enormous challenges confronting our world — from conflict resolution and peacebuilding to fighting AIDS and reaching all the other Millennium Development Goals.**

*- United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon*

Gender equality, equity and the empowerment of women are fundamental to social justice and human development. They are basic human rights, as well as being important ends in themselves. They are also essential to the achievement of social, economic, and political development.

Reflecting progressively increased political will, successive Malaysian development plans have placed greater emphasis on mainstreaming women in national development through affirmative multi-sectoral policies and programmes. The efforts of government have been complemented by the active advocacy and programmes of the country's women's NGO movement. Special social, economic and training programmes have also been implemented to reduce poverty rates among women, especially single mothers. The progress has been tremendous.

For example, in 1957, twice as many males as compared with females aged 10 and over were literate. In that year, less than one in every three females was literate, compared with two in every three males. After Independence, there was a growing awareness, supported by extensive campaigns, about the importance of education for both girls and boys. As participation in primary school education expanded rapidly, education enrolments began to rise sharply for both sexes, and the gap between female and male literacy levels began to progressively narrow. In 1980, among young female adults aged 20 to 24, some 90 per cent were literate, compared with just 47 per cent in 1957. By 2000, practically all young females of these ages were literate and the gender gap had completely closed.

To document progress in gender disparities between women and men over the generation since 1980, UNDP, in partnership with the Ministry of Women, Family and



Community Development (MWFCD) have developed a new Malaysian Gender Gap Index (MGGI) using Malaysia's extensive sex-disaggregated data. Major improvements in the MGGI have occurred over time, especially in relation to the health status of women, increased enrolments of girls in upper secondary and higher education, and modern sector employment.

Investments in girl's education and women's health have led to high returns in a broad range of sectors that contribute towards Malaysia's development. However, eliminating gender disparities in education and health is a necessary but not sufficient condition for eliminating other gender inequalities.

While Malaysia has made significant progress in reducing gender inequalities, the current level of gender inequality is still high compared to some of the highly human developed countries. Gender inequalities are quite similar in health and education, but Malaysian gender inequalities are considerably higher in economic activity and the empowerment of women.

Further institutional changes are required to help the promotion of women's rights in public and political life. New measures need to be taken to encourage higher levels of labour market participation and to reduce wage disparities.

A survey among Asian countries conducted in 2007 projected that if Malaysia's female labour force participation were to match the level of the United States, for example, where 86 percent of women are employed, the economic growth rate would increase by 0.77% while Malaysia's GDP would grow by 2.88%. A vibrant female labour force is crucial to the nation's economic engine.

Female labour force participation can be expected to increase in the future since Malaysian women seeking first time employment are more educated than in the past. And the Ninth Malaysia Plan (2006-2010) proposals to introduce measures that will encourage family-friendly workplace practices, including flexible working arrangements, community childcare and nursery centers, and retraining opportunities, should help boost women's labour force participation as women can better balance their work, childcare and household duties.

A balanced representation of both sexes in leadership positions is also an important step in fostering an environment that is free of discrimination. Malaysian women's share of elected parliamentarians at 9.6 per cent is low, and far from the target of 30 per cent, which is considered a critical level before women can make an impact in political decision-making. Here, UNDP is partnering with MWFCDD to develop an action plan towards achieving at least 30 per cent participation of women at decision-making levels in Malaysia.





UNDP and MWFCF are also addressing the increasing feminization of poverty among female-headed households through a recently initiated project to develop a plan of action for empowering single mothers in Malaysia.

In sum, development is about improving the lives of all human beings. The right to development is a right for women, as well as for men. Parliamentarians, civil society and NGOs will continue to have an important role in advocating the causes of social justice and women's rights. On this International Women's Day 2008, let us celebrate and recognize women's achievements and rededicate ourselves to improving gender equality, equity and women's empowerment in Malaysia

*Jointly written by Richard Leete, UNDP Resident Representative for Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei and Mrs Trudy Tan, UNDP Programme Manager.*

“Behaviour within the concept of integrity includes: honesty, sincerely, truthfulness, keeping one's word and agreements, punctuality, ethics, fairness and justice. It is said of integrity that, “It is better to have an enemy who keeps his word, than a friend who does not”

*An initiative by the UNDP-IIM  
Capacity Building Project*

## Editorial

From 1957 to 2007, Malaysians remained in the corner complaining, grumbling and sulking and did little to use the democratic tools to change the political culture.

But at the general elections on March 8<sup>th</sup> 2008 they came out in force to vote and the election results showed that they understood the power of democracy, were politically conscious of their rights and how to influence their fate.

What actions are we looking for now from our newly elected state representatives and parliamentarians?

Firstly and most importantly they should debate the bills intelligently with justice in their minds. Secondly they should continuously keep the ministers on their toes about implementation of their various policies and projects. This way the ministers will be made to realise that they are to be constantly examined on their role.

For the whole system to work efficiently, this is an opportune time for the participation of concerned citizens, the general public and the non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and women in particular, who believe and value democracy to continue to be involved in that process.

For democracy to function well, we must keep a close watch on politicians, all State and Federal Governments that they fulfil their promises made to the nation.

For successful, effective and serious participation we need the qualities of commitment, an enlightened mind, a sense of purpose, patriotism and a great interest and concern for the welfare of our country. If we have a strong will, we can achieve these.

Datin Zaharah Alatas

Editor.

### Quotations:

1. William Fulbright former senator talks about the arrogance of power. Many great empires in the past have collapsed because their leaders did not have the wisdom and the good judgement to use their power wisely.
2. Corruption results in bad decisions about public goods. Corruption causes poor quality of public goods and services. Corruption depletes national wealth. Corruption undermines the social, democratic and moral fabric of our society. Corruption is a cancer. Let's all join hands to fight it.

*An Initiative by the UNDP-IIM  
Capacity Building Project.*

# The Migrant and Italian Woman

By Masturah Alatas

The mention of 'migrant woman' probably conjures up several images in the average Italian mind: domestic helper, prostitute, wife, mother, sister or daughter of a criminal and victim of absolute male domination. And of course seductress, the one who is stealing all those eligible Italian males that the Italian females do not seem to be able to conquer.

There is of course, always some degree of truth in any stereotype. But the point is never to make generalizations based on that morsel of truth. Some women, whether migrant or not and whether we like it or not, are domestic helpers, prostitutes, related to criminals, submitted to male authority and seductresses. What is troubling, though, is when people are able to see only the negative traits in even the most glaring of exceptions.

Take Afef Njifen, for example, one of the most privileged immigrant women in Italy. Afef is a very beautiful 44-year-old Tunisian ex-model, television personality and daughter of a former minister. She also happens to be the wife of Marco Tronchetti Provera, one of the richest managers (Telecom, Pirelli) in Italy. Needless to say, both Afef and Tronchetti Provera are household names. But it is one thing to accept migrant women with open arms if they enter Italian homes through television, and it is another if they enter through the front door. The bells of 'foreign invasion' and 'immigrant takeover' inevitably start ringing.

"We are all going to end up with Filipinas in our kitchen and Tunisians in our bed" was just one slur made against Afef. Her reaction? In a recent interview (11 February 2008) given to the newspaper *La Stampa* she said: "I can be a good cook and also be good in bed. I can be both Filipina and Tunisian at the same time. To be good in bed is a very beautiful thing. Whoever made that remark has actually paid me a compliment". It may be a good strategy to fight idiocy with irony, but it is always easier for an immigrant woman to ironise about bawdy remarks passed against her when she herself occupies a very privileged position in society.

It is not only the effects of her womanly attributes that Afef is aware of but also her cultural background. "I know that some Italians are thinking: what have I got to do with such a big entrepreneur like Marco?. Plus I am Arab and Muslim, they can't help but pick on me".

So, for some people, it does not matter what a woman's ethnicity is. What matters is how rich and successful she is and what social position she occupies. Yet others still find it difficult to swallow the bitter pill of a women's ethnic origins no matter what her success or class background is. This is perceived not only by Afef but also by Fiona May, the first athlete of British-Jamaican origins to represent Italy and win in long jump gold medals in the Gothenburg (1995) and Edmonton (2001) world championships and silver medals in the Atlanta (1996) and Sydney (2000) Olympics. Now married to an Italian, retired from sport, a mother and a successful television actress where she has played the role of Nigerian woman and the difficulties and prejudices she faced integrating into Italian society, Fiona May says: "I hope Italian society will learn to accept cultural diversity as a wealth, not a danger" (*La Repubblica*, 4 December 2006).

And of course we hope that people will learn not to consider wealth or power as a condition to accept cultural and gender diversity. In an age of Afef Njifens, Hilary Clintons and Sonia Gandhis, women are recognizing that they continue to be exploited and ridiculed, as one of my Italian students pointed out in her English composition on the image of women in the media. "We don't find as many examples where male bodies are being objectified in a similar way as female bodies. And as is the costume (custom) in our society, women are exploited in stupid programmes or beauty contests where they do not do anything. Smiles, low necklines and scanty dresses. That's all". Another student, it happens observes: "The commercialization of the female body from the use of nudity for the promotion of products to the exhibition of their own bodies to achieve success, often hides the sexual blackmail that women still suffer by men"

It happens that the migrant and the Italian woman have a lot more in common than they realize.

Masturah Alatas  
Macerata, February 2008

Masturah Alatas is a university lecturer and writer based in Italy. She teaches English and has written about issues of immigration and integration. She has also worked as a cultural mediator for various international organizations.

## Report on the Training Programme—The Gender Perspective: The empowered way to move forward

On 18 and 19 February 2008, with the morning sun shining upon the 1926 Heritage Hotel in Macalister Road, Penang, a mixed group of about 20 women and men, their ages ranging from early 20s to 76, gathered for a training programme, *Gender Indicators for Monitoring and Evaluation* organised by SUSDEN (Sustainable Development Network) Malaysia.

Convinced that the gender dimension is of utmost importance in sustainable development policies and practices Ms Regina Bruno, representing PACOS Trust, Sabah, left her eight children in the care of her husband to attend this training programme.

A confident and effective spokeswoman, as a result of her involvement with her community, Regina said that her husband understood and supported her work.

“As long as my husband is informed of my activities and the times when I would be away from home, ahead of time, we are able to plan and manage our household matters quite well,” said Regina.

Other participants included representatives from organizations such as CAP, NCWO, AWAM, KANITA (Women’s Development Research Centre, Universiti Sains Malaysia), Sarawak’s Building Initiative in Indigenous Heritage, SERI (Socio-economic & Environmental Research Institute). Also present was a doctoral candidate from Universiti Sains Malaysia.

Focusing on the gender dimension, the training programme aimed to:

- Develop a shared understanding among all stakeholders (MENGOs, other NGOs, government and civil society) on “What is gender?”
- Develop indicators to monitor the implementation of gender-balanced programmes
- Learn from regional experiences as well as from the experiences amongst MENGOs.

As part of the sharing process of how the gender perspective could be incorporated in the various programmes, participants were shown an inspirational video, “Alice Lives Here,” which documented a young woman’s determination to save her village, Broga, from a project, to build a waste incinerator, which would have polluted a nearby water catchment area. The viewers followed Alice’s steps from the village to the courtroom where Alice and her supporters stood their ground. Ultimately, they won their case.

The participants also heard cases where the gender perspective was not taken into consideration whenever a project was implemented. As a result, the women of the community suffered a lot of hardship. One such case was the hydroelectric dam in Batang Ai, Sarawak. The project disrupted the Iban women’s role as the custodians of the padi planting tradition.

Another case shared was from Ethiopia on the “Women Fuel Wood Carriers”. The government which owns the forests in an effort to rehabilitate and manage them causes hardship on the women whose chore was to collect firewood for home consumption as well as for sale in the urban areas. The authority’s initiative robbed the women of their source of income as well as their social standing in the community.

One other experience shared was the Community Composting Project for Taman Duku Residential Area, Juru, presented by Khor Hung Teik. In this case, the women in the residential area were shown as actively involved in the decision-making processes.

The resource person for the two-day training programme was Associate Professor Dr. Kyoko Kusakabe, a specialist in Gender and Development Studies, School of Environment, Resources & Development, Institute of Technology, Thailand.

At the end of the programme, Dr. Kusakabe presented some of the gender indicators for monitoring and evaluation. Measurement of change was an important consideration. Dr. Kusakabe also discussed what was meant as a “gender-sensitive indicator”.

Participants also heard Dr. Ratna Malar Selvaratnam, Founder of Peacecafe, deliver a talk on “Creating Peaceful Ecologies: an approach to gender mainstreaming.”

For the overview, Ms. Sunitha Bisan Gunasegaran, President of SUSDEN, spoke on “Integrating Gender in Biodiversity and Natural Resource Management.”

The two-day training programme was a step towards the implementation of “The Civil Society Sub-Component” under the Environmental Co-operation Programme between Malaysia and Denmark.

*Dr. Hamima Dona Mustafa*  
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## NCWO CONFERENCE ROOM

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## Q & A and INVITATION TO WRITE

### 1. Questions & Answers :

Do send in your questions regarding women and health which should be brief and clear and we shall do our best to answer them.

We would very much appreciate news and events and activities your organisation is involved in. You may write in Bahasa Malaysia as well.

### 2. Write In :

We would like our readers to write their comments on any current issue or those raised by NCWO Quarterly.

**Do send your articles and rejoinders of not more than 500-600 words to be included in the next NCWO Quarterly (April-June 2008) latest by 15th May 2008.**

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## What is NCWO ?

The National Council of Women's Organisations (NCWO) Malaysia was formed in 1963. It is a non-political, non-religious consultative and advisory body for women's organisations affiliated to it. The council promotes the development and advancement of women. Its purpose is to eliminate the major disadvantages, inequalities and discrimination affecting women.

## NCWO VISION

A just society free from discrimination in which women at all levels enjoy equality through the promotion of their human rights. NCWO continues to be the leading advocate of women's human rights in the sustainable development and advancement of society.