

# **Promoting Work-life Balance for Women's Economic Empowerment in the Context of ASEAN Integration**

## **Proceedings from the Women's Empowerment Track**

### **1<sup>st</sup> BREAKOUT SESSION: STEPPING UP**

#### **Work-Life Balance: A Privilege or A Right?**

Facilitated by Jason Lim, Senior Development Manager, Ludher Consultancy, an international organization that focuses on assisting businesses to expand in the ASEAN region, the first breakout session of the Women's Empowerment track raised the questions about the relation between WLB and human rights. Jason Lim led the discussion on what has been done in ASEAN by individuals, communities, and institutions towards the promotion of WLB as a right or a privilege.

Speaker: Dr. Siti Musdah Mulia

Dr. Siti Musdah Mulia is distinguished as the first woman to obtain a Ph.D. in the field of Islamic Political Thought from the State Islamic University of Syarif Hidayatullah, Jakarta (1997). She was also the first woman to be inaugurated as a Research Professor by The Indonesian Institute of Sciences (1999). She shared her experience as a Muslimah reformist especially in bringing about change in her Islamic environment and an advocate for peace and reconciliation.

She spoke about the existing gender inequalities and discriminating laws against women. She has spoken against laws intentionally interpreted in favour of men and advocated a progressive, humanist and egalitarian Islamic interpretation.

For Muslim women to achieve work-life balance, there has to be a paradigm shift in the thinking of both men and women through education about gender equality. Religious leaders can play a key role in educating their congregations. Inter-faith dialogue has helped in bringing about awareness of human rights and gender issues besides forging peaceful co-existence with each other. These

efforts provide a safe and friendly environment for family living beside empowering women to overcome personal and gender obstacles. When women have more confidence, they make work and living decisions that move towards achieving work-life balance.

Speaker: Mr. Miguel L. de la Rama

Mr. Miguel L. de la Rama is the Executive Assistant, Provincial Government of Albay, Philippines. He spoke about the need to view men and women as agents of transformation. Men need to be involved in the work-life balance processes too and not see such social change as a feminine domain.

He was asked what has been done for marginalized groups like LGBT, "rural farmworkers," natives and others. Mr. de la Rama believed that WLB as human rights was not an issue of sexual orientation. He shared that in the Philippines, there is a law that prohibits any form of discrimination and it is punishable by law. Rural women farmers face more obstacles in life than male farmers in ASEAN because of land ownership, inheritance laws, and natural resource constraints. Listening to voices from the indigenous population will help policy makers address climate change and environmental protection. Therefore, holistic development plans must meet the needs of rural women farmers and indigenous communities.

The question on empowerment of individuals from all segments of society to fight for WLB as a human right and what needs to be done to be able to empower the women, the speakers agreed that spaces need to be created in the region for discussion at all levels of society. This ASEAN WLB Conference, which included different levels of stakeholder populations to voice their input into policy making, was a good step in the right direction of drawing grassroots forces together in the region into a concerted policy platform. The speakers hoped that governments in ASEAN would take the Proceedings and Recommendations from the Conference seriously.

## **2<sup>nd</sup> BREAKOUT SESSION: LOCKING IN**

### **Of Women, Entrepreneurs and Communities**

Chaired by Daphne Granfil, Host Anchor, “On the Corporate World”, Global News Network Philippines. The second breakout session shared the perspective of women entrepreneurs on work-life balance and the expectation of fulfilling a particularly demanding role at home and work.

Speaker: Dato’ Beatrice Nirmala

Dato’ Beatrice Nirmala Adaikalaraj is the co-founder, Managing Director and Executive Director of the Adaikalaraj Media Group (AMG). She narrated her journey from helming editorial and production of one magazine of AMG International Holdings to a multi-dimensional organisation publishing 21 publications.

From her experience of assisting to enhance the employability skills of the graduates of her alumni, University of Malaya, Dato' Beatrice shared her advice and counsel to the graduates to develop a positive attitude and confidence as well as willingness to work hard and excel. She spoke about the importance of the leadership strategies women professionals should prepare to climb the corporate leader.

She spoke about her conviction in having a high personal standard of work and how it had driven her to create some of the most innovative English-language magazines in Malaysia, recognised for their high-quality editorial and design.

Speaker: Datin Dr. Hasnorliza Abu Hassan

Another well-established entrepreneur who generously shared her views about work-life balance was Datin Dr. Hasnorliza Abu Hassan, who preferred to be known as Datin Leez Hassan. She was the Founder of SPARKLEEN, a premier brand in dry cleaning and laundry franchisor chain of outlets in Malaysia. She had documented the growth of the laundry and dry cleaning business in Malaysia in her doctoral thesis.

She spoke about the working women's challenge in achieving work-life balance because of their domestic responsibilities. She shared her deep insight as a mother of six in struggling for work-life balance. She foresaw the changing trend of a larger number of professional women joining the workforce. She saw it as an opportunity to start a business that catered to this need. Her setting up of the laundry chain was to assist women in catering for this need to dress well for work.

She shared the struggle of an entrepreneur which she described as 3S – starting, scaling, and sustaining. Due to her desire to help others to be empowered economically, she has set up a new project—Advisory Development Learning Achievement (ADLA), a school for entrepreneurs. ADLA's vision is to accelerate 50 unknown individuals within ASEAN countries to achieve a total of RM50million of business turnover collectively by Nov 2017.

To her, success in work-life balance can be achieved through discipline, passion, dedication, and doing the best one can while keeping a level-headed attitude.

### **3<sup>rd</sup> BREAKOUT SESSION: THINKING OUT**

#### **Striking the Right Balance between Women and ICT**

Chaired by Dr. Azma Abd Hamid, Content Capital Sdn. Bhd, Malaysia, the 3rd breakout session reviewed working practices in the light of technological, social and global change and how it is essential to support high performance, health, and happiness.

Speaker: Ms. Martha Simanjuntak

As the CEO of the Indonesian Women IT Awareness (IWITA) Business Consulting, Ms. Martha Simanjuntak, said that more than half of Internet users in Indonesia are female. In Jakarta, 73% of Internet users are dominated by women. With Internet users reaching 88.1 million in Indonesia, going online is no longer an option but has become a necessity for businesses to survive and thrive in today's era.

Women's economic empowerment would mean a more productive life besides raising and educating their children. Women, be they activists, students, career women, homemakers,

entrepreneurs/business women, need Internet connection although the functional use of the social media may be different regarding content. She spoke of the use of blogging and other social media platforms for business and networking.

She spoke of the need for government and other stakeholders to focus on the development of IT industry and help women to use IT in a wider and more comprehensive manner in business development. The current perception is that ICT is a man's zone and too difficult to learn for a woman. Family culture often limits the learning ability. These challenges can be overcome through education especially in rural areas so that women can be economically independent. These opportunities can contribute to work-life balance.

Speaker: Ms. Wanda Gabai

Ms. Wanda Gabai is an international consultant at The Research Center of Communication and Development Knowledge Management (CCDKM) based at Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University in Thailand.

She illustrated sustainable initiative, Indigo, which aims to empower artisans from tribes and marginalized groups in rural areas in Thailand. It enhances the capacities of these groups to use ICTs, new media, and entrepreneurial skills needed in the Digital Economy. ICT is used to promote and conserve their cultural heritage, arts, and crafts.

The INDIGO Project also aimed to promote sustainable tourism in Sakon Nakhon. It involved Thai locals and communities in tourism development around natural and cultural heritage sites. It uses ICT to establish business linkages between local communities, tourism enterprises, and visitors. It created opportunities for income generation for local artisans to sell their products offline and online. It trained local guides and community leaders on the use of ICT to promote their local experiences online.

ICT is a source of knowledge for innovative income generation. Using ICT can lead to new business solutions for marginalized groups to overcome the digital divide and promote socio-

economic wellbeing. It creates a new condition for all segments of the Thai society to work and live life with integrity and productivity

To her, the INDIGO project is an example of an initiative to help women strike a work-life balance for women's economic empowerment.

#### **4<sup>th</sup> BREAKOUT SESSION: BREAKING OUT**

##### **Women Who Found Work-Life Balance: Tales of Success and Failure**

Chaired by Ms. Andleen Razaq, National Association of Women Entrepreneurs Malaysia, this session focused on how women faced particular challenges about work-life balance – and successfully brought unique resourcefulness and perspective to come up on top.

Speaker: Dayang Lily Maznah Abang Muas

Ms. Lily Muas' motto of "purpose, passion, perseverance, pillars of strength, paying it forward" guided her life travails. To her, life is worth living when there is work-life balance. She switched her career from an engineer to being an entrepreneur to integrate work and family life. When she was not able to find good Islamic education and books for her children, she decided to start her own business, an online bookshop at [www.UmmikuSayang.com](http://www.UmmikuSayang.com). She later expanded to start ALIMKids, an Islamic educational programme for children.

To help other women and youths to achieve work-life balance, Ms. Muas networks with others forming an extensive network of contacts. Capacity has to be built in women in integrating business and life to achieve work-life balance.

Speaker: Ms. Roziana Rashid

Ms. Roziana Rashid began her talk, stating that there is no full stop to work-life balance. Family is one's pillar of strength, and it matters the most. For work-life balance, she feels there must be time allocated for family bonding and time out with friends and relatives.

She is passionate about her work as the principal consultant trainer of her own business, Naziq Skills Training, which she established in 2003. She believes her a very approachable and warm personality is essential for connecting with people especially youths. She leverages on her customer service experiences, communication skills as well as her confidence in conversing in English in running the business.

Having a learning mode and passion for life-long learning is another important factor for a healthy work-life balance. She loves to read and scribble her thoughts on paper daily and aspires to publish her scribbles one day.

Besides training, she is a low-profile home baker with her brand called '*Aprons Not Attached.*' It is another way she combines passion and work. It is the joy of doing it. She added that "*Always make sure whatever product or service you are going to use as your core business must always be something you are always personally passionate about.*"

Health and green-living are another equation in work-life balance. She is also into eco-friendly initiatives making her household cleaning enzymes and probiotic tea drinks. She exercises and is careful of her diet to ensure a healthy living.

Speaker: Ms. Katharine Yip

Keeping work-life balance is indeed a challenge for a busy person like Ms. Katharine Yip, who is a managing partner of K. Yip Associates Sdn Bhd. Her company provides language services including translation, copywriting and editing.

To integrate and maintain work-life balance she operates from home. She combines productive and reproductive work efficiently. In her home-based operations, she allocates enough time and resources to delivers work that is relevant to the needs and meets the requirement of local and overseas clients.

She appreciates the services of her staff and helper including a trusted domestic helper who supports and enables her to attend to her duty as a professional and a homemaker. She ensures she spends enough time with her husband and two daughters.

Learning is another important way to enhance work-life balance. She has pursued art- and culture-related projects, including a two-year research position in Chinese tea culture of the Zhangzhou College of Science and Technology, China. She is also a trainee with the Department of Museums, Malaysia.

The three panelists concluded that starting their homebased businesses was the first step towards achieving the level of satisfying work-life balance they are enjoying now. After almost fifteen to twenty years of home-entrepreneurship, they have become superb managers of life and living. All three advised women to think positively and never, never, never give up.

## **5<sup>th</sup> BREAKOUT SESSION: CARRYING ON**

### **Portrait of Perseverance: Keeping Work-Life Balance Going**

Chaired by Ms. Shanthi Dairiam from NCWO, a strong advocate for women's empowerment. Finding a balance between demands of work and family is the most important discussion point among working women no matter at which level of the career she is in. In this session, the speakers share their experiences with achieving the elusive work-life balance, how to address work-life conflicts and advance in their respective fields.

Speaker: Ms. Jenny Ee

Ms. Jenny Ee, representing patients with acute and chronic illnesses, spoke about her personal crisis and the victories she has gained because of the support of her family - her current husband and three daughters, two from her first marriage and one from the second marriage. Her dogs are her faithful friends and an added joy to her life.

She could empathize with those rejected by family or society as she, herself was rejected from birth because her father preferred 'boys.' She grew up in a dysfunctional family as her father has two wives and her mother was the second wife. As she grew, she was seeking for love but received none from her family.



She thought she would receive love from marriage but was mentally abused. She was traumatized. She finally focused on God and found the peace she was seeking. She was blessed with a happy second marriage and a stable family.

However, she discovered she had a brain tumor but recovered. She felt the right attitude to life is imperative. Perseverance too was essential to pulling through any personal crisis. Her husband and her manage to cook and entertain family and friends in their house regularly despite working in offices. They create joys for others in the foods they cook and the social setting they create for the neighborhood and their friends and acquaintances. Any one is welcome to relax, eat and confide in others in their home.

Her experiences were recorded in her book called '*You Matter.*' She soon started a ministry to reach out to women of unstable mental condition and share the joy with this group through regular tea sessions. Her Motto in life is '*It's a Blessing to be able to bless and to love others who do not know how to love.*'

Speaker: Francis Oliver Sison

Mr. Francis Oliver Sison is a multitasker - he juggles his various roles as a father, husband, entrepreneur and social agent of change simultaneously. He is a father to Zac, a 4-year old wonder boy; a loving husband to his beautiful wife, Mai; owner of Fotographico photo booth services; a supervisor to his 8-member team from diverse backgrounds and sexuality dealing with HIV and AIDS; a News Stringer for Philippines' leading TV station; a student who has just finished his online certificate course; a volunteer at E-Homemakers, the NGO behind this conference; a Church leader at a local Christian church in Kuala Lumpur and an aspiring entrepreneur, public speaker and author. He shared his experiences of wasting his youth to drugs and alcohol and how he overcame his addictions to better the lives of others. Now, he is enjoying life in its truest sense – equipping himself with everything he needs and maximizing his full potential to perform his varied roles and continuing to serve his purpose in life – to serve God and the needy. He shared his work with 'A Cradle for the Marginalised'.

Francis Sison is a staunch supporter for transgenders and people living with HIV. He believes that patients with chronic illnesses and anyone, regardless of sexual orientation, deserve the rights to achieve work-life balance especially in health care and employment. Discrimination against them must be eliminated in national policies if ASEAN were to achieve total development for all people of ASEAN. His work gives him tremendous satisfaction, adding to the passion he has for his life.

Speaker: Dr. Kamolrat Intaratat

Dr. Kamolrat Intaratat, an Assoc. Professor under the Faculty of Communication, Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (People University), Bangkok, Thailand is a very accomplished lady. She spoke of her experience as the Chair of the APTN (Asia Pacific Telecentre Network: 2012-currently: [www.APTN.asia](http://www.APTN.asia)), Director of the Expertise Centre: CCDKM (Research Centre of Communication and Development Knowledge Management: [www.CCDKM.org](http://www.CCDKM.org)).

In her work with Development Communication, especially in the Community-based Communication in her previous 13 years in Kasetsart (Agriculture) University has helped her empathized with those in the rural areas and their need to come out of poverty.

This led her to work with media especially the ICT 4 D (ICT for Development) and focus the work of ICT4 D for all marginal ones both local and global. She spoke of CCDKM's field work of sex workers and how handphones with SMS messages have given them safety protection by calling trusted taxi cabs. To them, part of work-life balance is also about 'safety' at work and after work. She has dedicated her life to empowering marginalized communities in Thailand and disadvantaged groups through Communication and ICT such as ICT and Sustainable Agriculture/ Smart Farmer, Women and Technology, ICT and disability, e-Commerce, Online Learning, Web Development, social media for development, among others. The network of telecenters provides learning and income-generation through e-businesses, allowing younger women and more matured women (who haven't mastered computers) to work together to create income and acquire knowledge together.

Her advice was to align one's choices with those things that are essential to one's life so that one can enjoy a sense of satisfaction from the choices made. To her, work-life balance is more than

time spent at work or outside of work. It includes feeling good about one's level of involvement in both work and non-work roles.

To her, the internet is a source of knowledge and great opportunity for income-generation. It enables access to information, opportunities, and mutual support. The Internet is also the tool to achieve work-life balance, especially for marginalized women. And any one doing work to help the marginalized gains personal peace in the spiritual sense, and inner peace is a state of work-life balance.