



**Asia-Pacific
Economic Cooperation**

2015/PPWE2/DIA1/004

Speech of the President of the Philippines

Submitted by: Philippines



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PHILIPPINES
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**Public Private Dialogue on Women and the
Economy
Manila, Philippines
17 September 2015**

Speech
of
His Excellency Benigno S. Aquino III
President of the Philippines
at the APEC Women and the Economy 2015: Public-Private Dialogue on Women and the Economy

[Delivered at the Philippine International Convention Center, Pasay City, on September 17, 2015]

Good morning.

Secretary Greg Domingo, other members of the cabinet present, Excellency, Heads of Delegations, and participants to the APEC Women and the Economy 2015 Fora. Undersecretary Nora Terrado, Ms. Emmeline Verzosa, Ms. Ma. Aurora Geotina-Garcia, the Chair, the very energetic Doris Magsaysay-Ho, fellow representatives from the government, honored guests, ladies and gentlemen, again, good morning.

I am no stranger to the strength of women. Countless stories of their fortitude, resilience, and love for country can be found in the pages of our history books. There is Gabriela Silang, one of our nation's most renowned heroes, who led the revolt against our colonizers after her husband's assassination. There is Tandang Sora, who put up a refuge for wounded soldiers during yet another revolution against the Spanish occupation. Of course, a more recent—and much more personal—example is my mother, who I watched firsthand as she courageously took a stand against a vicious dictator, and led the country in reclaiming our democracy.

Make no mistake: The willpower of these Filipinas showed is not a rare trait; it is something we see every day. For instance, back in 1984, when my mother was leading the movement against the dictator, there was this woman in Cebu who always joined our rallies in Cebu. We knew her to be so passionate in the struggle against the dictatorship that, when everyone was clamoring for the dictator to resign, she was literally calling for his head. Another thing that set her apart was that she always carried a basket with her, containing clean underwear, a toothbrush, some instant coffee, and other essential items. It led me to ask her, why do you bring all of these to a political rally? Her answer: She was ready to be arrested anytime. [Laughter] That woman's dedication has burned itself into my memory as one of the clearest examples of conviction for one's beliefs.

Of course, in the modern era, we have no shortage of excellent women leaders, no less dedicated to uplifting the lives of others. One of those who comes to mind is Marife Zamora [applause], a crucial member of the leadership of a well-known IT-BPM firm. When my term started, she offered to join government to help with our reform efforts, and I said that maybe she can help

even more by staying in her sector and aiding the economy by expanding their workforce. At the time they had around 20,000 employees, and my request was to increase it to 30,000 before our term ends. Five years into our term, their company is providing—not 30,000 jobs—but 60,000 jobs to all other Filipinos. [Applause] In fact, I was told recently that the only limiting factor to the jobs they can provide is the amount of office space available on EDSA, which is Metro Manila's main thoroughfare. Her company's performance makes me very glad that I declined her offer to move to government.

With so many women that are—more often than not—more strong-willed and capable than men, is it any surprise that the common Filipino male never questions the authority of Filipinas? [Laughter] I believe it is intrinsic to our society: We see women as superior in many aspects, including prudent budgeting, and focusing on the advancement of the family as a whole. I am certain that all Filipinos have their own examples in mind—of women who serve as role models and heroes. That is precisely why we are here: to express our collective belief that harnessing the talents and potential of all women can bring about inclusive progress sooner, rather than later.

Our administration is an excellent example of this belief put into action. Over the course of our term, we have appointed a good number of women of unquestionable moral standing to key positions in government, so that they may enact much needed reforms in the various sectors. There is Ombudsman Conchita Carpio-Morales, Secretary Leila de Lima of the Department of Justice, Secretary Dinky Soliman of the Department of Social Welfare and Development, Secretary Janette Garin of the Department of Health, Secretary Lilia de Lima of the Philippine Economic Zone Authority, Commissioner Kim Henares of the Bureau of Internal Revenue, former head of the Commission on Audit Grace Pulido-Tan, amongst many others. Over the last five years, these women have bullishly pursued necessary reforms and have refused to back down, even in the face of those with great power and influence, and deeply-entrenched interests. They are pillars of our administration's reform agenda, and they are living proof to young people who wish to enter public service that they will not be defined by their gender, but rather, by their integrity, their work ethic, and their willingness to serve.

The contributions of women to Philippine society have, of course, gone beyond the public sector and have helped spur our remarkable economic growth these past few years. According to the Department of Trade and Industry, 54 percent of all registered trade names are owned by women. The Asian Institute of Management also conducted a survey that revealed that about 63 percent of managers and owners of businesses are women. One major sector they are all involved in are micro, small, and medium enterprises, which accounts for 63.7 percent of our total employment. Seeing these numbers, one has to wonder, myself included, if perhaps in ten years time, gender equality in the Philippines will be about men's emancipation, and no longer women's emancipation. [Applause] Actually some of our married brethren are telling me that it will not happen in 10 years, but it's actually a goal that should be reached now. [Laughter]

Our goal is to have an inclusive economy, and if it is clear that women are the better partners towards having inclusive growth, then it behooves government to provide them even more opportunities to women entrepreneurs. Take, for example, our Technical Education and Skills Development Authority's partnership with Coca-Cola for the TESDA-STAR program, which stands for the Sari-Sari Store Training and Access to Resources Program. Sari-sari stores are very small, neighborhood retail stores in the Philippines. Through this initiative, we are training women sari-sari store owners in bookkeeping, inventory management, accounting, and other disciplines—essentially helping them to professionalize and formalize their approach towards typically informal enterprises. Even better: We are also teaching them already how to maximize the utility of their profits. From December of 2011 to June of this year, this program has produced 33,315 graduates, with the goal of eventually training around 200,000 Filipinas.

We are already hearing of so many success stories. For instance, there was one owner who used to earn just P800 a day. After going through the program, her daily earnings reached P4,000. This is in fact equivalent to my salary before all the necessary deductions, and I assume that she earns it with considerably less stress. [Laughter]

Congress has also passed laws that expand the horizon of opportunities for women. Most prominently, in 2011, we repealed antiquated provisions of the Labor Code that prohibit women from working at night.

It comes as no surprise, then, that according to the World Economic Forum, the Philippines is the only Asian country in the top ten in terms of closing the gender gap. [Applause] But make no mistake: Our performance in this index will not stop us from pursuing even more progress. Women still face a number of pressing issues, and the issue of gender equality calls for continuous reflection and corresponding action. For this reason, we must always approach our jobs, and even our smallest interactions with people, with the empathy, consideration, and respect necessary to create a truly inclusive society. Rest assured, the Philippines will remain your partner in expanding opportunities for women, and I am hopeful that your discussions today will continue to move us closer to a world where no one is left behind.

Thank you. Good day.