

**THE INCOMING PRESIDENT’S ADDRESS BY**  
**THE RIGHT HONOURABLE THE CHIEF JUSTICE OF MALAYSIA,**  
**TUN TENGKU MAIMUN TUAN MAT**  
**CUM PRESIDENT, ASEAN LAW ASSOCIATION (ALA)**  
**AT THE**  
**14<sup>TH</sup> ASEAN LAW ASSOCIATION GENERAL ASSEMBLY**  
**“ASEAN TAPESTRY: OUR PRIDE”**  
**21 OCTOBER 2023**

**SALUTATIONS**

- (1) The Honourable The Chief Justice of Singapore and Immediate Past President of ALA, Sundaresh Menon;
- (2) Honourable Chief Justices and Heads of Delegation of the Council of ASEAN Chief Justices (CACJ) and ALA;
- (3) Madam Bharti Seth,  
Secretary-General of ALA;
- (4) Judge Paul Quan,  
The outgoing Secretary-General of ALA;
- (5) YBhg Dato Mah Weng Kwai,  
Chairman of the ALA General Assembly and Asean Law Conference  
Organising Committee;

Honourable Judges, Judicial Officers, Your Excellencies, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

Assalamualaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuhu and good afternoon.

## INTRODUCTION

[1] I must start this speech by saying that it is a distinct honour to take the seat of President. That said, seeing the tremendous amount of work that has been dedicated to ALA, especially by my immediate past predecessor, Chief Justice Sundaresh, I have big shoes to fill.

[2] Speaking of my learned brother Chief Justice, Sundaresh Menon, I would like to say a few words about him – words I am sure, cannot do him justice.

[3] Chief Justice Menon, it is with utmost gratitude and profound respect that we acknowledge the significant contributions you have made during your tenure as president. Your leadership of the organisation was truly exemplary, marked by steadiness, assurance, and practicality, especially in the face of the exceptional challenges posed by the global pandemic. You navigated us through the storm with remarkable fortitude and unwavering commitment.

[4] Your visionary approach, geared towards fostering a stronger, better organization, and enhancing governance, has set a high benchmark. You possessed an astute understanding of the times and demonstrated a clear vision for ALA that perfectly suited the challenges and opportunities of our era. Your foresight and strategic thinking have indelibly shaped the trajectory of ALA, helping us evolve into a more resilient and future-ready organisation.

[5] It is our fervent hope that you will continue to share your wisdom, insights, and innovative ideas to further enrich ALA in the coming years. Your continued participation would certainly further strengthen our organization.

[6] I must also thank our outgoing Secretary-General, Judge Paul Quan for his intense dedication and commitment to the association over the past five years.

[7] Allow me to express, for the record, the deep appreciation of the General Assembly and the Governing Council of ALA, to both Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon and Judge Paul Quan for their dedicated service and please join me in giving them a well-deserved round of applause for their outstanding contributions.

[8] The momentous task now awaits the new Governing Council. I am deeply honoured and humbled to helm ALA, an organisation with a proud past and without a doubt an exciting future. I take note of the suggestion by my immediate predecessor, Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon to reinvent ALA. For now, permit me to state the following.

[9] ASEAN has an incredible diversity and a large part of this diversity includes women. I am myself a woman but I cannot confirm this – it is often said that most women are distinguished by their meticulous attention to detail, unwavering resilience, boundless compassion, and exceptional leadership qualities — traits that significantly enhance the multifaceted nature of ASEAN tapestry.

[10] Given this backdrop, I would like to speak on the following points:

- a. Firstly, the remarkable role of ASEAN women in law;
- b. Secondly, the challenges faced by ASEAN Women in the legal sphere; and
- c. Thirdly, initiatives to be undertaken by ALA as regards women.

## **(A) THE REMARKABLE ROLE OF ASEAN WOMEN IN LAW**

[11] The role of women in the legal profession is crucial and cannot be overlooked. They have not only made substantial contributions as attorneys but have also excelled as judges. Their influence extends beyond the individual cases they handle; they shape the legal landscape, pushing boundaries and challenging conventions, thereby enriching the profession as a whole.

[12] In the ASEAN region, there are numerous examples of exceptional women who have gone against societal norms, and set new precedents.

[13] It may be hard to believe, but there was a time when it was forbidden for a woman to be accepted into the Bar of the Straits Settlements and the Federated Malay States.<sup>1</sup> It was B.H Oon who bravely tackled this issue in court, finally earning recognition as the first female lawyer in Malaya in the 1920s.<sup>2</sup> Her historic victory paved the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.innertemple.org.uk/women-in-law/our-women/lim-beng-hong/>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

way for others, including Singapore's Teo Soon Kim, who became the first woman admitted to the Straits Settlements Bar.<sup>3</sup>

[14] Meanwhile, in the Philippines, Maria del Pilar Francisco de Villacerna was admitted to the Philippine Bar as early as 1911, and Ma Pwa Mee of Myanmar achieved the same feat in 1928, remarkably without any opposition. Thailand welcomed its first female lawyer in 1930, and Indonesia followed suit in the early 1950s, marking significant milestones in the pursuit of gender equality in the legal profession.<sup>4</sup>

## **(2) THE CHALLENGES FACED BY ASEAN WOMEN IN LAW**

[15] Whilst we are proud of history because women fought to gain the basic right to be at Bar table just as a man can, we realise that equality means much more than that. And so, as times change, new challenges arise.

[16] What are some of these issues faced by modern women lawyers?

[17] Unconscious and subconscious gender bias and discrimination persist, affecting everything from hiring decisions to career progression. Stereotypes and traditional expectations often undermine women's credibility and authority in courtrooms and legal boardrooms. In addition to these biases, work-life balance remains a formidable challenge for many ASEAN women in law. The demanding nature of legal work, long hours, and frequent travel can be especially burdensome for women

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.innertemple.org.uk/women-in-law/our-women/teo-soon-kim/>.

<sup>4</sup> Ani Abas Manoppo (1952).

who are often expected to shoulder a significant share of family responsibilities.

[18] I am fortunate to have a very understanding and supportive husband and family, but this basic understanding that I have in my family is not available for all ASEAN women in law. Thus, achieving equilibrium between their professional and personal lives becomes an intricate juggling act, leading some talented and able ASEAN women to opt out of the legal profession altogether.

[19] Other challenges include sexual harassment at the workplace. Women are still in many cases objectified and seen as lesser individuals. There is no justification for this and it must stop.

[20] Addressing these challenges is not only a matter of gender equality but also critical for harnessing the full potential of ASEAN's legal community. Moreover, it is high time for ALA to respond to the global call for gender equality and increased women's representation in public institutions, aligning our efforts with the United Nations Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the ASEAN Declaration on Gender Equality and Family Development.

### **(3) PROPOSALS AS ALA PRESIDENT**

[21] In addressing challenges faced by women in the legal field, I would like to propose the establishment of a new Standing Committee for Women in Law within the ASEAN Law Association (ALA), which will provide a platform to promote advocacy, fostering dialogue, and facilitating collaboration. This will ensure the voices, experiences, and

perspectives of women embedded within the legal profession are not only heard but amplified, addressed, and integrated into our broader strategies and approaches.

[22] Additionally, the formation of this committee will allow us to build stronger bridges with the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC). By synergizing our efforts, we can provide more focused and effective legal assistance, contributing to the broader mission of gender equality and children's rights protection.

[23] As a secondary measure, inspired by the remarkably successful “Women in Law Pledge” initiated by the UK Law Society, I foresee the ALA, facilitated by the newly formed Women in Law Standing Committee, crafting a unique set of guidelines.<sup>5</sup> It is a roadmap that guides institutions towards a future where the scales of justice are balanced not just in the courtroom, but also in the offices where our legal professionals work. These directives, which ASEAN legal entities, governmental agencies, and assorted stakeholders can readily adopt, would bolster gender equality within their ranks.<sup>6</sup> Our aspiration is to craft a blueprint for gender equality in legal practice, promoting an environment where opportunities and recognition are afforded based on merit and devoid of gender-based limitations.<sup>7</sup>

[24] It is paramount to emphasize that our vision for gender equality within the legal profession does not seek to isolate or diminish any gender's role. Quite the opposite; it aspires to create an inclusive legal

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.lawsociety.org.uk/en/campaigns/women-in-leadership-in-law/tools/the-women-in-law-pledge>

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/oxlaw/women-in-law-pledge-guidance\\_1.pdf](https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/oxlaw/women-in-law-pledge-guidance_1.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> [https://nysba.org/app/uploads/2020/05/ComFed\\_-WomensInitiatives\\_Report-Cover\\_5.28-merged.pdf](https://nysba.org/app/uploads/2020/05/ComFed_-WomensInitiatives_Report-Cover_5.28-merged.pdf)

landscape where individuals thrive based on merit, unburdened by gender-based constraints.

[25] Moving on, I propose that we channel our efforts into several key areas to build upon the remarkable progress we have achieved thus far. Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon, during his previous tenure as ALA president, wisely emphasized two crucial focal points: the need to fortify ALA's objective to sustain and develop relationships and enhancing ALA's role as a dynamic think tank. I firmly believe these should continue to be our steadfast commitments.

[26] To further nurture and solidify ALA's position as a frontier think tank, I propose that we formulate a robust strategy for continuing legal education, leadership development, and capacity building. I would suggest that we take Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon's concept of exposing lawyers to training, attachments, and internships within law firms in another ALA Member States, a step further. That is, by establishing an exchange program or secondment initiative for judicial and legal officers of ALA Member States. This programme aims to engage the middle management of these institutions to elevate their legal perspectives and honed administrative skills. Such an initiative not only benefits the participants but also nurtures invaluable understanding of each other's legal system.

[27] Last but not least, I suggest the initiation of an ALA Talk Series that could be organised quarterly in a year on a rotational basis between all ALA Member States. The setting need not be confined to physical setting, but it could be remote or a hybrid of both physical and online format. We can collaborate with esteemed organizations such as ASEAN to delve



into pressing ASEAN legal issues or partner with various NGOs to host a talk series on a wide range of legal topics pertinent to ASEAN and even international organisations, bar associations and other legal networks. These topics could span from environmental concerns to women's empowerment and beyond. I believe that a structured series of talks like this would be immensely beneficial for all ALA members, helping us expand our knowledge and awareness of the current legal issues in our region.

## **CONCLUSION**

[28] To conclude, I want to extend my deepest gratitude once again to each and every one of you for your loyal support and active participation in the noble mission of ALA. On my part, I pledge to devote my utmost effort and dedication to the role of leading this esteemed organisation.

[29] Thank you and I look forward to meet all of you again at the Gala Dinner.