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SPEECH BY MR A RAHIM ISHAK, SENIOR MINISTER OF
STATE (FOREIGN AFFAIRS) AT THE ASIAN WOMEN'S
WELFARE ASSOCIATION CHRISTMAS GALA DINNER,
14TH DECEMBER 1977 AT 8.00 P.M. AT TROPICANA

The Christmas message "Peace on Earth and Goodwill to All Men" seems to have left women out in the cold. However, I am assured that this biblical quotation has referred to "men" in the plural form. I am positive it was not intended to exclude women, let alone in the cold.

In what we call developing countries, the status of women with regard to their emancipation has never and will never be absolute. Their position in the community would vary from country to country, from era to era and from society to society. The degree of autonomy of women like that of men will be dictated as they have been dictated in the past, by political, economic and cultural factors. Indeed, even in so-called advanced societies where women are supposed to have been liberated, the degree of freedom women enjoy is relative to local conditions. Otherwise, women's lib movements would not have started in these "advanced" countries.

In Singapore, Asian traditions plus Western concepts have helped women achieve a high degree of emancipation although the term "emancipation" itself would imply a previous position of having been inferior or having been dominated. Today, women's rights are enshrined and protected in our Women's Charter. This Act safeguards women with regard to marriage by enforcing monogamy and by granting married women the right for maintenance for themselves and for their children. In the public service it also guarantees, among other things, equal pay for equal work, equal opportunities for employment and their right to remain on the permanent staff after their marriage. But even before the passing of the Women's Charter in 1961, such rights and privileges were in some cases already guaranteed and probably taken for granted. With legislation, they have been perpetuated.

Today in Singapore, there is no discrimination of sexes in employment. Even what we call the "physical jobs" are open to ladies. My wife and I often have lady caddies for golf and I hear some of our better bus drivers are women.

In the mid 1960's, the percentage of women in our work force was merely 15 percent. Today, it is more than 40 percent which puts us ahead of most West European countries where on the average, women constitute only 34 percent of the work force. Women's ability to join the labour force have been facilitated, indirectly by the family planning programme and by the Government's policy of building creches to help working mothers.

In the 1950's and 60's, the main reason why there were less women in our work force was more because of family constraints rather than because of inequality of opportunities. Parents gave their children, sons and daughters alike, equal educational opportunities. Somehow, the traditional view was that the girls should leave the professions to the boys while the girls were themselves guided and imparted with the training of how to look after the family, especially the men! It was a harmonious relationship because men liked to be loved and pampered in the house. It has been said that when a man plays a fiddle, the result is not music but when a woman plays second fiddle, it is sweet music.

In Singapore, therefore, there are no female eunuchs and there should be no place for full-time feminists like a Simone de Beauvoir, a Germaine Greer, or a Kate Millett. Nonetheless, I believe there have been some complaints that certain exclusive clubs have discriminated against women. However, the fact that membership of all clubs in Singapore is open to men and women alike would demolish the immemorial supposition that our clubs are male-dominated and have a patriarchal bias. In providing for the ladies, I think the HDB is very forward looking. HDB flats are now open to application from spinsters; and I hear that the unconfirmed and confirmed bachelors are not very happy because they are excluded. Should they mount a concerted campaign against this obvious inequality, I am sure they will succeed in putting the ladies on the carpet. Then probably the HDB would agree to open their doors to triumphant single males.

In conclusion, I would like to commend the Asian Women's Welfare Association under the presidentship of Mrs Dolly Sinha for its tireless efforts in promoting welfare to all women, men, children, the aged, the physically disabled, irrespective of cast, creed, race or religion. It is an excellent example that all of you have come together to help not only your kind but to help others. As the records show, your Association has lived up to its motto: "A Helping Hand", - a hand with ladies' fingers as it were. There is no case, therefore, to set up an "Asian Men's Welfare Association" because women will eternally look after the welfare of men in the same way that men will eternally look after and love women.

I wish all present here tonight a Merry Christmas and a Happy and Prosperous New Year.
