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SPEECH BY DR TAY ENG SOON, SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE FOR EDUCATION, AT THE ASIAN REGIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR HOME ECONOMICS BIENNIAL CONFERENCE - "HOME ECONOMICS - A CATALYST FOR CHANGE" AT MANDARIN HOTEL ON THURSDAY, 27 JULY 1989 AT 11.00 AM

I have much pleasure in being present at the opening of this 5th Biennial Conference of the Asian Regional Association for Home Economics. It is particularly my pleasure to welcome the 320 delegates and participants who have come from 16 countries. For those of you who are from overseas, may I wish you a very pleasant and enjoyable stay in Singapore. This is the first time that your Conference is being hosted in Singapore. We are honoured that we have been chosen as a venue for your Conference.

Women Joining the Workforce

Your theme "Home Economics - A Catalyst for Change" is most appropriate for our present time. Great changes indeed are taking place in many areas of life on a global scale. One of the most significant in my view is the fact that for the first time in human history, more women than ever before are going out to work on a full-time basis. Women, just as men, have always worked. But until recent times, they have done so mainly in the context of the home. They were home-makers. But in the last 20 years, across many countries, especially the developed countries, women have joined the workforce in growing numbers. Allow me to quote some figures from the Singapore experience to illustrate this.

In 1970, for all women above the age of 15, 29 per cent were employed in the workforce. By 1980, this figure had gone up to 44 per cent. Last year, 48 per cent or nearly half of all women were involved in the workforce. If the participation rate for women in the developed countries can be used as a guide, the rate in Singapore is likely to go higher in future years. For comparison, Sweden, which has one of the highest participation rates for women, has over 80 per cent of their womenfolk in the workforce.

Reasons for the Trend

There appears to be two reasons for this trend. The first is an economic reason. Women need to work in order to contribute to the family income. This is particularly true for the lower income families. The cost of living as well as the desire for a higher standard of living have made it necessary for women to work in order to supplement the income of the family. Previously, it was possible for a family to live simply on the income of the breadwinner, usually the husband. But two incomes are normal nowadays.

The second reason is personal and social. Women feel the need to achieve self-fulfillment through work and careers. This meets a personal need. As more women work, there is also a peer pressure to work. With rising educational levels, the desire to work is natural. Short of something unexpected such as a world economic depression, the trend of more women joining the workforce is likely to continue.

In Singapore's labour shortage context, the participation of women is welcomed by most employers who look to them as a valuable pool of workers. In 1988, overall, 63 per cent of all Singaporeans above the age of 15 were working. This is not high compared with 74 per cent in the UK, Canada and the US and 81 per cent in Sweden. As this percentage increases, we can expect more women also to join the workforce.

Implications for Children, Marriage and the Family

Given the trend which I have just described, what are the implications for the future? Of particular concern would be implications for bringing up of children, for marriage and for the integrity of the family itself.

Sociologists have pointed out several trends which may be directly or indirectly related to the massive move of women from the home to the work place. The actual reasons may be much more complicated and not due to this fact alone. But sociologists cite three trends. First, when the wife works, it becomes more difficult to look after the children. As a result, the working couple usually decides to keep their family small. In many cases, they decide to postpone having any children or even not to have any at all. The impact of women working on family size is far more profound than all the other factors related to family planning.

Sociologists also believe that the rise in the divorce rate is related to women working. Financial independence makes it easier for a woman faced with an unsatisfactory marriage to seek divorce. To that extent, the marriage bond may also be weakened. Financial independence may also be the reason for the growth in singlehood amongst more women.

Impact on Child Care

Perhaps the area of greatest concern is related to the children and how they will be brought up as this will affect the next generation. There is no conclusive evidence that just because a mother is working, her children will suffer in their upbringing. It is possible for a working mother to give quality attention to her children just as it is possible for a non-working mother to neglect her

children. Nevertheless, the additional strain on the working mother is real. To be effective with her children, she has to be more efficient in her use of time. The stress can be exhausting. That is why some women wisely decide to stop working for a period of time while their children are young in order to give them their full attention.

What I have just described seems to have become the norm today. The need and the wish of women to work is a reality. The effect of this on marriage, child-bearing and child-rearing and the family itself cannot be avoided. The question is how can we cope better with this new situation?

Response to the New Situation

I suggest that there are two ways to respond. First of all, men must recognise that their wives are subjected to a double burden when they go out to work - the work itself and caring for their children. Having recognised this, they must change their attitudes and habits and turn around to help their wives in every way possible. They must realise that this will help their marriage and the future of their children and that they have a major role to play. The attitude that their role is simply to go out and earn the income and they can leave everything else, including bringing up the children, to their working wives is simply not good enough anymore. They have to help around the house and be involved with their children. In short, in this new situation of working women and working wives, men must change their attitudes towards their spouses, the home and the bringing up of their children.

Some Obstacles

Secondly, we must also recognise that there are deep-seated cultural or habitual obstacles working against this change. It is necessary to discuss them openly if

change is to occur. For example, many men nowadays do help in the house, but some do not want to do so because they fear criticism by their mothers. Or they are reluctant to do so because in their upbringing, they never had to help in the house. The mother, being usually of an older tradition, expects her daughter-in-law to do everything in the house. This was what she had to do in her time. In the triangular relationship, she has considerable pull on her son. His parents have subtle ways of reminding him that he must be filial to them and loyal to their way of doing things. On the other hand, his wife has her needs especially if there are children and she is working. He is thus torn between her and his sense of filial piety towards his parents. But he must realise that he can be filial, and, still be able to help the woman whom he has married. There is no fundamental contradiction in this dilemma. I am sorry to spend so much time on this detail of the family relationships. But I can assure you that this is at the heart of the problem in many Asian families in the present stage of transition. Young couples have to sort this out if they are both going to work, and, at the same time succeed in their marriage and in bringing up their children. The parents and parents-in-law also have to change. While they should expect their children to be filial towards them, they must realise that priority must be given to encouraging the new family in the making.

What I have just described is at the crucial level of family formation and well-being. Beyond that, support services in the community in the form of child-care centres, nurseries, domestic help if available, are all useful and helpful. These services can and are being made available on a growing scale within Singapore. They complement but cannot substitute for what the husband and wife must do together for their marriage, their home and their children.

I have no doubt that during the next three days, you will be discussing this and many other topics concerning the important question of home-making and family life. May I conclude and wish all of you a stimulating conference.

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