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TEXT OF SPEECH BY INCHE RAHIM ISHAK, MINISTER OF STATE FOR EDUCATION, AT A JOINT CHINESE NEW YEAR/HARI RAYA PUASA TEA PARTY AND PROGRAMME OF ENTERTAINMENT ORGANISED BY THE SIGLAP WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION AND THE SIGLAP COMMUNITY CENTRE ON SUNDAY, JANUARY 30, AT 2.30 P.M.

Firstly, I must say how very happy I am to be here with you to celebrate your joint Chinese New Year and Hari Raya Aidilfitri tea party and also to witness your programme of entertainment.

The Persatuan Wanita Siglap is a new organisation for women with definite objectives. One of your objects is to encourage intellectual physical development and the promotion of self-confidence amongst women by the organisation of educational and recreational activities. A second aim is to promote friendship and understanding among its members irrespective of race, religion or creed. Others include the fostering of the quality of self-reliance, co-operation and good citizenship. Yet another is aimed to stimulate interest and activity in handicraft and other vocational training. These are indeed noble and worthwhile objectives which, if properly planned and successfully implemented, will bring about immense benefit to womenhood in general in this area.

Today I do not wish to dwell on these aims and objects of your association, because I feel that your committee and members are quite capable of planning out a programme of activities in pursuit of these aims. What I wish to touch upon today is the subject of the social status, the struggle and the moral and legal gains that have been achieved by and for women in this country.

Largely because of the smooth and non-violent road open to us in this country to the attainment of political independence based on the democratic type of Government, political and human rights have been achieved without the spilling of blood. For example, voting rights were granted to women at the same time as they were conceded to the men folks. Women were not debarred from holding political office. For as long as we can remember women have played their part in the administration of the country. Although their numbers were small, they were to be found in almost all the professions, trade and industry.

And yet we in Singapore cannot really claim that the emancipation of women is complete and a hundred per cent successful. Many customs and traditions among the various races in this country somehow make the position of women less secure than it should be. These customs, traditions and in many cases prejudices and superstitions are undergoing a gradual transformation which many of us would like to hasten. The different races, religions and cultures in Singapore reveal, in part, the non-uniform patterns of social behaviour among the different racial, cultural and religious groups.

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In the 20th century society we have come to accept that women are no longer considered by men to be accessories and possessions that could be bought, sold and inherited. That would only be a subject for our historians. On the other hand, for the first time in the history of Singapore, the P.A.P. Government passed the Women's Charter in 1961 by which women are no longer handicapped, because of political, economic and religious factors. The Women's Charter in fact recognised women as an independent being and gave her a liberal bill of rights and responsibilities. Such drastic and swift changes in women's legal, economic and social rights are indeed revolutionary social changes.

You will remember the more important provisions of the Women's Charter. One of them provided that the minimum age of marriage for men and women is 18 years. This law was passed because it was thought that our women should not ordinarily marry until they are physically, educationally and economically ready for matrimony. Another major reform found in the Women's Charter is the abolution of polygamy. Yet another important provision in the Women's Charter is the one which permits divorce on grounds which are common to the husband and to the wife. You will also remember that with the passing of the Women's Charter the Government made into a reality the principle that women should receive equal pay for equal work.

While the various provisions in the Women's Charter are undoubtedly beneficial to womenhood generally, some of the provisions do not apply to Muslims, particularly Muslim women. However, Muslim and Malay women in Singapore need not despair because there is at the moment a Bill called the Administration of Muslim Law Bill which has been tabled for the second reading in the Singapore Parliament and which has been submitted to a Select Committee. This Bill will in many ways help Muslim women. The provisions in the Bill particularly those affecting Muslim women are indeed praiseworthy and deserve the support of the people.

The Administration of Muslim Law Bill will, among other things, regulate Muslim religious affairs and register Muslim marriages and divorces. It will set up a Majlis Ugama Islam or a Council of Religion to advise the President of the Republic of Singapore in matters relating to the Muslim religion. Many of the provisions in the Bill have been taken from the Muslim Ordinance of 1957 and some are amendments to the provisions of the Muslim Ordinance 1957. However, there are some new provisions which undoubtedly are very good for the protection of Muslim women. Muslim women in Singapore would have benefited tremendously with the passage of this Bill.

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I say the provisions in the Women's Charter and the Administration of Muslim Law Bill are positively good because when taken as a whole particular problems, for example, like the problem of educational backwardness cannot be dealt with in isolation. It is in fact closely linked up with other social problems of early marriages, unstable homes, unplanned families, poor health, lack of creches and other related social problems.

We are living in a modern 20th century world where it is the responsibility of the State and the Government to provide laws which are beneficial to the citizens in our society. Our laws which we bring about must be designed to improve the welfare of all our citizens, whether they are Chinese, Malays, Indians, Eurasians or whether they are Christians, Muslims, Buddhists or Hindus. The Government will continue to do whatever it can for the people, and it is hoped that the people on their part will respond by seeing that the provisions, regardless of whether it is in the Women's Charter or the Administration of Muslim Law, will be carried out as intended for the material and spiritual advancement of the people.

With those few thoughts, may I thank the organisers of today's tea party for having invited me here to say a few words and may I also congratulate them for their initiative in organising today's function.

JANUARY 30, 1966.