

16 OCT 1995  
**PRESS RELEASE**

Release No: 17/SEPTEMBER

04-1/95/09/06

95 - AT - 42

**STATEMENT BY MR ABDULLAH TARMUGI  
ACTING MINISTER FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT  
AT THE FOURTH UNITED NATIONS WORLD CONFERENCE ON WOMEN  
BEIJING, PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA,  
4 - 15 SEPTEMBER 1995  
(delivered at the Plenary session  
at 8.00 pm on 6 September 1995)**

Let me first extend my heartiest congratulations to Your Excellency, Madam Chen Muhua for being elected to the Chair. On behalf of members of my delegation, I would also like to thank the government and people of the People's Republic of China for the warm welcome and hospitality accorded to us. I bring to you and to all present at the Conference warm greetings from the people of Singapore.

I may be one of the few male voices at this 4th UN World Conference on Women, but I am no less passionate about the issues which are of concern at this august gathering. I am, after all a husband, father, brother, uncle. I, too, am concerned that my wife, daughter, sisters or nieces should not suffer the injustices and indignities that others of their gender do in many parts of the world.

I empathise with your concerns. I assure you that many men too share your anger for the shame and pain inflicted on our sisters in some countries which justify rape and violence against women in the name of war. Or violence in the home by thoughtless husbands. Let us not perceive these issues simplistically as men versus women. Rather, it is hate, bigotry, ignorance and prejudice that we should all be united against. We from Singapore have

come here to learn from those gathered here. We would also like to humbly share our experiences with you in the hope that they could be of some benefit to you.

#### OUR FOUNDATIONS

For a country without natural resources and as dependent as we are on the efforts of our people we are deeply committed to develop every citizen, man and woman, to his or her fullest potential. Singapore strongly believes in providing equal opportunity to both sexes in all sectors and endeavours based on the principle of meritocracy. This policy underlies our planning and implementation of Government policies and programmes.

We have a unique legislation called the Women's Charter which was introduced in 1961. It offers women and girls protection, inter alia, against domestic violence and sexual and physical offences against them. Together with its subsequent amendments in 1967 and 1980, it provides the legal basis for equality between men and women. Under this law, women have the same legal rights, duties and liabilities as men, whether married or single. It also embodies a wide range of provisions for women and the family. Among these are:-

- recognising the wife's right to a different domicile from her husband
- giving equal rights and responsibilities to both husband and wife in the management of the home and children
- making it obligatory for a husband to maintain his wife and children during marriage and even after divorce
- entitling the divorced wife to a share of the matrimonial property even if she did not contribute financially to the purchase of

the property

enabling a battered wife to seek court injunction to prevent her husband from assaulting her or her children, and for the husband to leave the matrimonial home even if he is the legal owner of their house.

#### **OUR COMMITMENT**

We believe in and recognise the importance of active participation and integration of women in development. Cognizant of the multiple roles women have to undertake and the challenges faced by them in development, the Singapore Government is deeply committed to their advancement. This commitment has been reinforced when we:-

- a) signed the "ASEAN Declaration on the Advancement of Women" in 1988 together with our ASEAN neighbours;
- b) endorsed the Commonwealth Plan of Action on Women and Development in 1987;
- c) endorsed the 7-point Plan of Action contained in the Ottawa Declaration on Women and Structural Adjustment of October 1990; and
- d) endorsed the 11-point Jakarta Declaration on Women in Development of June 1994.

Singapore is also now working towards acceding to the Convention on the Elimination Of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

#### **PROGRESS IN THE LAST DECADE**

We have made further progress in the last decade. Our achievements in life expectancy, educational and income attainment have been ranked 28th in the Gender-related Development Index (GDI) in the Human Development Report of

1995.

In the same report Singapore was ranked 35th in the Gender Empowerment Measure. Singapore is second among the ASEAN countries.

## **OUR CONTINUED EMPHASIS**

### **Education and Literacy**

Singapore's education policy provides for equal opportunities for both sexes in schools and tertiary institutions. The literacy rate of Singapore women aged 15 years and above has increased from 73 per cent in 1980 to 86 per cent in 1994. This policy has ensured parity between the sexes in the enrolment of primary and secondary schools and has led to an increase in the number of girls entering tertiary institutions.

The enrolment of females in tertiary institutions has therefore continued to increase over the years to a ratio of 76:100 in 1994. Singapore women are also entering disciplines which were previously dominated by men.

A conscious effort is made not to gender-type roles in the instructional materials for all subjects of the school curriculum. By 1997, when all secondary schools have built up adequate physical facilities, Home Economics and Technical Studies will be offered to both male and female lower secondary pupils. This would contribute to the development of healthy attitudes towards shared responsibilities and family roles.

### **Health**

Singapore has attained parity with the advanced industrialised countries in the health status of its population. Female life expectancy at birth has now reached 78.5 years. Women have equal access to nutrition and health programmes in Singapore. At the national level, there has been increasing budgetary allocation for the preventive aspects of reproductive health.

### **Economic Activities**

Our Employment Act ensures the protection of women employees. Under the law, women cannot be discriminated in recruitment, promotion and terms of employment. Women enjoy the same remuneration as men for equal work in both the public and private sectors. Special provisions in the Act ensures the protection of women in employment such as the provision of maternity leave and the prohibition of the dismissal of women on grounds of pregnancy and maternity leave. Married women can opt to be separately assessed for income tax purposes.

The Female Labour Force Participation Rate has increased steadily over the years from 45.8 per cent in 1984 to 50.9 per cent in June 1994.

### **Politics and Community Service**

Women participate actively as members and leaders in the community, in grassroots and community service organisations, women's organisations, trade unions and in public affairs. Women's membership in the Trade Unions make up 44 per cent of the total union membership strength. The Assistant Secretary General of the Singapore National Trades Union Congress is a woman.

Women's position in the community was boosted by the entrance of women in politics in 1984. We have women in Parliament and in Cabinet. The launching of the Women's Wing in the ruling political party in Singapore in July 1989 marked a significant milestone in the involvement of women in community and public service.

### **Strengthening Families**

Singapore places importance in the preservation of the family unit. It also recognises the importance of women in development. In support of these, several programmes have been implemented. These include a child care centre development programme, child care subsidies, special tax incentives for working mothers, a range of community-based

services for dependent elderly, people with disabilities and part-time work schemes.

For most men and women, work and the family are equally important. The challenge for most families is how to balance work and family life. The Government will continue to take steps to promote marriage preparation and encourage employers to support family life programmes at the work place.

It will take the combined and persistent efforts of both men and women in every position of influence to enable men and women to balance their responsibilities so that they can enjoy fulfilment from both work and family life. Workers, employers, community leaders and policy makers will continue to play their roles to provide support to working mothers. Women themselves can then make the choice and decide whether the benefits outweigh the cost and efforts required in a particular situation and stage in their life cycle. In the final analysis, all of society will benefit from women's realised potentials.

Singapore believes that education and training is the key to widen women's role and improve their status in society. Family life education programmes are introduced to the young in schools and to the general public to create awareness of changing values and expectations and to promote the concept of shared responsibility of both sexes.

#### **CONCLUSION**

The advancement of women is symbiotic with the advancement of society. In Singapore we are committed to managing and supporting the advancement of women, both within our own country and internationally. The Singapore Government will continue to do so.

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