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SPEECH BY PRESIDENT C V DEVAN NAIR AT THE OPENING OF THE NATIONAL EMPLOYERS SYMPOSIUM ON WORKING PARENTS : WORK AND FAMILY RESPONSIBILITIES - THE ROLE OF EMPLOYERS - AT THE MANDARIN HOTEL ON MONDAY, 1 OCTOBER 1984 AT 10.00 AM

In the days of our mothers and grandmothers, people talked only about manpower resources. Womanpower was required only in the home. They were not terribly keen about educating the daughters in the family either. Family resources were expended mainly on the sons. The girls were largely trained to become wives and mothers. They had to be good cooks, because the theory was that the easiest way to a man's heart was through his stomach.

Modern society has changed all that. A good number of daughters-in-law these days, my own included, have dubious credentials as cooks. Nonetheless, they have managed to land and keep control of the affections of our boys. And girls today have the same access as boys to education. Indeed, the majority of our teachers are women. Practically all the nurses are women. And there are more women students in our university than men.

As a consequence of radical social changes proceeding from the modernisation process, the term "manpower resources" has become a misnomer. The operative words today are "human resources", which naturally include the mobilisation of womanpower.

Increasing reliance on womanpower is not unique to Singapore. It is a feature of all modern and modernising societies, in which women are better educated, and have freed themselves from the social constraints and

restrictions of the past. In the process, "the male chauvinist pigs" of western societies have taken a well deserved drubbing. This was necessary, for women cannot take to careers if men are not educated to stop regarding marriage as a one-way traffic, in which the wife only gives, and the husband only receives. Fathering progeny and being only a provider, is clearly no longer enough for men. Women in the modern world quite rightly expect marriage to be a genuine partnership, in more senses than one.

By and large, western men have adapted themselves to the new demands of marriage. We cannot yet say the same about the generality of men in Singapore. But they will learn in good time to adjust and adapt, for the good reason that there is no alternative. We may be unwilling to change, but social change will nonetheless force itself upon us.

I am optimistic. My sons have learned to live with working wives who are quite unlike their mother. But they seem to think that their wives, like their mother, are also jewels, although of quite a different cut. The edges are more cutting, I mean. Serve the chaps right. Their mother had spoiled them thoroughly. It has taken their wives to put them right.

The situation today is radically different from the past. We had rampant unemployment then. Today we have rampant employment instead. A more enviable problem, certainly, compared to the economies of Europe and many developing countries, where they continue to grapple with problems of massive unemployment. Experts believe that the spectre of unemployment will continue to haunt these societies for the rest of this decade. But in Singapore, the serious scarcity of labour is the spectre which we have to exercise.

It is of vital importance to the future of Singapore for all concerned to recognise that reliance on foreign workers is no solution. Indeed, we import social, political and cultural powder kegs, which will blow up in our faces one day, if we resort to massive and indiscriminate imports of foreign labour. Other countries have been plagued with similar explosions because they chose not to be self-reliant in labour resources.

We have good reason to be even more cautious than other societies. Our dimensions are anything but continental. The stark fact that we are a small island-state, willy-nilly imposes equally stark limitations on our range of social and cultural choices. The social and cultural costs of flooding Singapore with tens upon tens of thousands of guest workers, from a variety of sources, are nightmarish to contemplate. Hence the Government's declared policy of curtailing over-reliance on guest workers. We would be out of our minds to deliberately set out to destabilise the Singapore of the future.

Employers must therefore come to terms with tighter controls on the intake of foreign work permit holders. We cannot rely ad infinitum on cheap labour to fuel our economic growth. There is no alternative to moving up the ladder of technology. There are no options in the matter. It is a Hobson's choice.

And what does self-reliance in the sphere of human resources mean? Change our work attitude and social attitudes. Be more productive. Encourage our women to come out and work, and provide them with the necessary incentives and rewards. This is precisely what I trust this symposium will be about.

Female participation in the labour force has traditionally been low in Singapore and, based on past trends, will continue to be so over the next ten years or so. In 1980, the proportion of economically active women in the female population was 44.3 per cent compared to 52.1 per cent in the United States and 47.6 per cent in Japan. Unless concerted efforts are made, the Ministry of Labour estimates that our female participation rate will increase only slightly by 1995. But it is clear from the statistics that our women form a very important pool of potential labour.

The low participation rate of our women arises mainly because of the large number of economically inactive married women. After marriage, many of them withdraw from the labour force to concentrate on house-keeping and child-upbringing. By 1990, only 38 per cent of married women will remain in the labour force. This means that some 320,000 married women will remain outside the work-force. How should we go about tapping this large pool of economically inactive married women?

First, the factors which inhibit so many married women from being economically active must command the attention of society as a whole. For the issues involved are not only economic. They are also social and moral. The problems of married women are not merely women's problems. They are society's problems, and the problems of men as well. These need to be clearly faced, if satisfactory solutions are to be found. I hope this symposium will deal in some depth with this subject. I can do no more than suggest a few pointers.

The contribution of the woman to society is two-fold. There is her contribution in her role as wife and mother. Next, we would also like her to play an economically active role. The pertinent question to ask

is whether society can help women to embrace and reconcile these two apparently conflicting roles, without detriment either to the family or to her job.

We have all heard about latchkey children. How can we persuade married women that if they take employment, their children will not end up as latchkey children. This is not merely the working mother's worry. It must be society's worry as well. We need to remember that a social problem calls for a social response. In short, it should be the joint concern of employers, trade unions and Government.

There are other aspects to consider. There is, for example, the very genuine and legitimate fear entertained by many people that the large-scale integration of women into the labour force will lead to a general deterioration of the quality of family life, and hence of the very fabric of our society. There must be credible and sound reassurance on this score too.

Solutions to problems facing the families of working women must necessarily involve the husbands. There is validity in the contention that working mothers open up opportunities of parenting and housekeeping to men - opportunities which give fresh meaning and value to the father's role. It can be argued that the involvement of both parents in the care of children can only consolidate, and not threaten family values and relations. Individual and social attitudes to the institution of marriage need to change. In any case, practical arrangements must be sought and society, by and large, must be convinced that long cherished family values will not degenerate with increased female participation in the work-force.

The standard and quality of child-care arrangements need greater attention. Many of these, at present,

are Government-initiated. But this is not only the responsibility of Government. The private sector, the employers who need labour most, have as much interest in creating conditions conducive to attracting women into the labour force. If need be, employers should be prepared to incur additional costs in attracting married women and mothers back into the labour market. They could participate jointly with the Government in day-care schemes, pay better wages, improve conditions of work, and provide training schemes where necessary. They could also set up creches within factory grounds, so that mothers can visit their children occasionally, as well as to adjust working hours and shifts to allow mothers time for their children.

Employers should open up new avenues and challenges for our women, apart from traditional occupations like teaching, nursing and social work. Women are also concentrated in labour-intensive occupations, or those requiring meticulous detailed work, care and manual dexterity in repetitive dead-end tasks. In all jobs, industries and professions, women generally occupy the lower echelons. The picture has begun to change somewhat in recent years.

Allow me to round off by reiterating the point that any comprehensive solution to the problem of attracting married women into the labour market must necessarily involve a genuine change of attitude on the part of all concerned - men, women, employers and society at large. Employers, in particular, must appreciate the problems and dilemmas that working mother face, as well as be convinced of the vital need to attract women into the labour force, before they can adopt new policies and programme.

I wish you all success in your deliberations.

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