

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, MR. LEE KUAN YEW,  
AT THE NTUC'S INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S YEAR  
SEMINAR CUM EXHIBITION AT THE DBS AUDITORIUM ON  
MONDAY, 1 SEPTEMBER, 1975

-----

Comrade Chairman and Comrades,

The role of women in industrial societies has radically changed in the last 100 years. Industrialisation required women workers. This led to the education of women. This, in turn, led to demand for political equality, the right to vote, equal rights, before and after marriage, in the ownership of property. Now, the trend is to eliminate every bias, prejudice and discrimination in opportunities for education, jobs and promotions.

## National Archives of Singapore

The role of women in agricultural societies has been to work in the fields, to bring up children and to perform the household duties. This still prevails in large parts of Asia where the economy is based on agriculture. But it has changed with industrialisation, in Japan, China, India and the urbanised parts of Southeast Asia.

In Singapore, a quiet revolution has been taking place. In 1957, women formed 18% of the workforce. In 1974, they reached a peak of 32%. In May 1975, because of retrenchment in the electronic, textiles and garments factories, it dropped to 30%. (See Appendix 1). In America, 46% of the labour force are women. It is only a matter of time before women nearly equal men in employment.

The key is education. Old-fashioned attitudes of teaching women enough to be literate and useful wives have undergone profound changes in the last 20 years. This is reflected most in university education. In 1955, in the University of Singapore, 18.9% of the students were women. In 1975, 44%. In Nanyang University, 1956, 21.4%; 1975, 43.4%. (See Appendix 2).

The only differences between men and women workers are the physical and biological ones. Women are equal to men in intellectual capacity. With more jobs open to them, and separate income tax for married women, the status of women in our society has been changed. However, with economic independence, the dependent position of wives must also change. This is reflected in higher divorce rates, and all the social problems of broken homes for children. On the whole, we have been fortunate in educating our women,

opening up jobs for them, and having them more independent, without too great an upset in traditional family relationships.

There has been no vociferous women's liberation movement in Singapore. It has been government policy to encourage the education of women to their fullest ability and their employment commensurate with their abilities. Parents have also changed their attitudes and now send their daughters for secondary and tertiary education as they would their sons.

Our problem, as they have found in the West, is that women have to break their careers, for 4-6 years, to bring up two or three children, and then resume their careers. This break in their careers can be minimised if we can organise new social institutions and organisations to help married women look after their children whilst they are at work. Well-run creches and kindergartens, near factories or homes, staffed by well-trained workers, should be part of our new social institutions.

However, what has not yet taken place in traditional male-dominant Asian societies is the helping in household work by husbands -- the marketing, cooking, cleaning up. This change in social attitudes cannot come by legislation. Such adjustments should be allowed to develop naturally. Our primary concern is

to ensure that, whilst all our women become equal to men in education, getting employment and promotions, the family framework in bringing up the next generation does not suffer as a result of high divorce rates, or, equally damaging, neglect of the children, with both parents working. But lower birth rates, with a 2-child family as the norm, will help to make this less likely.

Societies which do not educate and use half their potential because they are women, are those which will be the worse off. Those that do, and face up to problems of new social and family relationships and new social institutions to help working wives to bring up the next generation, are those most likely to provide better lives for their people. We cannot not educate and use the energy and ability of our women.

National Archives of Singapore

APPENDIX 1FEMALE WORKFORCE

YEAR	TOTAL ACTIVE WORKFORCE	TOTAL FEMALES	PERCENTAGE
1957 <sup>1/</sup>	480,000	86,000	18.0%
1966 <sup>2/</sup>	577,000	133,000	23.0%
1974 <sup>3/</sup>	858,000	276,000	32.0%
1975 <sup>4/</sup>	872,000	263,000	30.0%

SOURCE:

1/ Census of Population, 1957

2/ Sample Household Survey, 1966

3/ Labour Force Survey, 1974

4/ Labour Force Survey, 1975

National Archives of Singapore

APPENDIX 2BREAKDOWN OF ENROLMENT IN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS OF  
EDUCATION

	Year	Males	Females	Total
University of Singapore	1955	990 (81.15%)	230 (18.85%)	1220
	1965	2035 (70.91%)	835 (29.09%)	2870
	1975	3348 (56.07%)	2624 (43.93%)	5972
Nanyang University	1956	459 (78.60%)	125 (21.40%)	584
	1965	1559 (73.34%)	567 (26.66%)	2126
	1975	1372 (56.65%)	1050 (43.35%)	2422

National Archives of Singapore