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**INDUSTRIALISATION AND WOMEN'S HEALTH
A REGIONAL WORKSHOP FOR THE ASEAN COUNTRIES
22 - 25 APRIL 1992**

**OPENING ADDRESS BY DR ONG CHIT CHUNG
Parliamentary Secretary (Labour & Home Affairs)**

On Wed., 22 April 1992, Ballroom of Amara Hotel, 9 am.

Madam Chairperson, Singapore Council of Women's Organisations (SCWO);

Madam Chairperson, Association of Women for Action & Research (AWARE);

Distinguished guests;

Ladies and Gentlemen

I would like to congratulate the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations and the Association of Women for Action and Research for organising this ASEAN workshop to discuss this important issue of "Industrialisation and Women's Health".

It is indeed a relevant theme as our countries are experiencing industrialisation and growth. It is important for us to address issues that our workforce would face as a result of industrialisation, compare notes and bring our minds to bear upon possible solutions or ways of overcoming problems.

In the context of economic development, it is a good sign to see more and more women joining the workforce. In fact, they are a contributory factor to the economic well-being of Singapore, especially in the midst of a tight labour market.

In 1970, the female labour force participation rate in Singapore was 29.5%. The participation rate increased to 50.5% in 1991. This compares well with the female participation rate of 50% in Japan, 56% in the US and 50% in the United Kingdom. We have no discrimination against female workers in Singapore laws. The female labour force participation rate in Singapore will probably continue to increase further as more and more women attain higher education and are encouraged to enter the labour force. However, because many women marry and leave the workforce, our rate is low for women in the 30 to 59 years age group. We

therefore need to encourage the economically inactive housewives to rejoin the labour force.

The government has adopted a number of measures. These include developing affordable childcare services such as childcare centres. The National Trades Union Congress runs a number of childcare centres. More private sector companies should come forth to establish and run childcare centres for their staff.

The Government gives a childcare subsidy to working mothers at the rate of \$100 per child per month for full day and \$50

for half day care in the centres. Married women also get a special tax relief equivalent to twice the annual levy paid in respect of one foreign maid employed.

The Civil Service has set a lead by providing a generous package to working mothers. These include flexible work arrangements like part-time work, paid leave to look after a sick child under 6 years old, and no-pay maternity leave for up to 4 years. In the case of no-pay maternity leave, the job would be retained for the mother who could return to the job with no loss of seniority, service and pay. More can be done in the

private sector in terms of flexi-hours and part-time work, for mothers who do not wish to work full-time. Companies should think of new ways to tap this large pool of available manpower, I mean womanpower.

Over the next few years, with rapid social and economic development of the ASEAN region, we can expect the female labour force participation rate in our countries to move towards that of the developed countries. Our women will be playing an increasingly important role in our economies.

It is therefore most appropriate to

organise a workshop such as this, bringing together researchers in this area of Women's Health from all the ASEAN countries, and addressing issues such as:-

- . the implication of the changing roles of women with industrialisation;
- . how women's health can be safeguarded; and
- . health education and facilities for working women

I would leave it to the experts to deliberate on these issues, but would mention

in passing that some of the jobs which women are entering into were previously male-dominated jobs. When we knock on the door of a CEO, we may now find a woman CEO, perhaps with a male secretary. Ten years ago, when we boarded a bus, we always expected to see a male driver. Today, the driver may be a female. Have the workstations of these male-dominated jobs been modified to fit the physically smaller size female worker? If not, what would be the consequence? What can we do about it?

The importance of ergonomics is thus becoming increasingly realised. This is the

science of adapting work and the workplace to suit the worker, taking into consideration varying anatomic (structural) and psychosocial considerations. Employers and managements should be aware of the importance of this in order to minimise any ill-effects on the comfort or health of the workers. Ergonomics also contributes to productivity because a healthy worker working without stress would be able to perform better.

I would therefore like to call for a joint effort by employers, unions and women organisations to work together to improve the work environment of all women workers.

This workshop is a good start as there are participants from unions, women's organisations and government bodies. The workshop provides a good opportunity for researchers from the different ASEAN countries to come together to discuss this increasingly important issue of industrialisation and women's health, and perhaps formulate some strategies to meet the challenges ahead.

I am pleased to see the ASEAN spirit of co-operation and goodwill extending to this very important area.