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SPEECH BY THE MINISTER OF STATE FOR LABOUR, MR. SIA  
KAH HUI, AT THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE TWARO ASEAN  
AND OCEANIC WOMEN SEMINAR AT THE REGIONAL LANGUAGE  
CENTRE ON MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 11, 1978, AT 10.15 A.M.

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With half of 1978 already behind us, the international global situation remains uncertain. OECD forecasts for the 24-member countries a growth rate of about  $4\frac{1}{2}$  per cent for 1978. It will be realistic for us to hope for the world economy to grow at modest rates. The comparatively higher growth rates experienced before the quadrupling of oil prices in 1973 has become a thing of the past. The impact of scientific discoveries and rapid technological developments has slowed down. So the economies of developed countries face low growth rates, and high unemployment, fearing at the same time, the recurrence of inflation.

On the other hand, the economies of the developing countries of the ESCAP region registered an annual average growth rate of five per cent in the 1960s and 5.6 per cent in the first half of this decade. These achievements regrettably had been negated by the high population growth and the sheer burden of unemployment and under-employment. In 1975 there were 18 million unemployed and 168 million under-employed in the developing countries of Asia. The figure constituted a frightening 40 per cent of the total labour force which is expected to grow at 2.7 per cent annually over the next 25 years.

A new international social and economic order for the good of both developed and developing countries is required. However, this will be a long-term solution given the difficult problems that have emerged during the North-South dialogue. In the meanwhile the difficult road to progress for the developing countries in the Third World must be to generate economic growth at rates adequate to create jobs for all and the promotion of free world trade and liberal transfer of capital and technology from developed to developing countries. Accompanying this must be the development of a

programme to ....2/-

programme to educate the population, check its spiralling growth and to provide the people with basic necessities of life.

The developing countries have recognised the significance of an educated population and family planning as well as the importance to provide basic needs for their people. But unsettling trends are appearing in the industrialised countries, with the emergence of growing protectionism. The recent demand of the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers' Union (ACTWU) on the US Treasury to impose taxes on imported textile and garment is another manifestation of the undesirable trend. The imposition of taxes or quota will not help the poor developing economies of the Asean and Oceanic region. It will also not assist those who press for protectionist measures. Protectionist measures in the West, aimed at blocking imports from developing countries will only serve to reduce industrialised nations' exports to these developing countries. The sale of simple products such as textile and garment from developing countries is one way to keep the balance of payment deficits in check and in turn makes it possible for these countries to import more goods which only technologically advanced countries can supply. The short circuiting of this trade flow is a step backward and there can be no winners, only losers, since our world, as one of the radio programmes has it "This is a small world!"

The massive task of finding employment and meeting the basic needs of the people of the developing world would be greatly facilitated if developed countries freely allow natural and manufactured products of developing countries into their markets and in return allow the flow of investments, science and technology to the Third World. A more developed Third World would contribute to the continued growth of developed countries.

With independence and efforts to achieve economic development, there was increasing participation of female workers in many facets of social and economic activities in developing countries. It is, therefore, my pleasure to be here to share with you some of the experiences of Singapore in the field of women employment.

In Singapore .....3/-

In Singapore women are provided with equal opportunities for full economic participation. Education and assistance in the form of scholarships and bursaries and remission of school fees are open to girls as well as boys. In addition the government in 1962 implemented a policy of "equal work, equal pay" in the civil service for its women officers. Although it did not become a mandatory feature, the private sector quickly followed by pursuing a recruitment policy based on the suitability, meritocracy and efficiency of the employee rather than on sex.

In 1970, of the total labour force of 726,676, there were 153,612 or 21.1 per cent employed females. In 1977, the number of employed females increased to 287,653. This represented 30.6 per cent of the total labour force of 940,796. An analysis of the profile of employed females showed a skewed curve towards the younger age groups. There were 136,760 or 47.5 per cent of employed females in the age group of 20 to 29. After peaking at this age group, there was a sharp decline in the number of employed females, clearly indicating the attrition rate as a result of marriage and motherhood. It is also interesting to note that employed females are concentrated in two particular sectors in the industry - the manufacturing accounts for 97,873 (34 per cent) and the commercial sectors 69,867 (24.3 per cent) of the total employed females.

Notwithstanding the rapid increase in the number of employed females, a number of problems still confront developing countries, including Singapore, in respect of the employment of females. Although developed communities also experienced a sharp drop in female participation after passing the age group of 20 to 29, many return to the labour market soon thereafter. This is evidenced in countries such as Japan, United States, Denmark, France which have relatively high female labour force participation in the age groups from 30 to 44 years. In Singapore, the massive withdrawal from the labour force after the age group of 20 to 29 is of great economic significance. Various measures have been implemented to encourage greater female labour force participation. Better income tax relief for working professional women is being granted.

Similar tax .....4/-

Similar tax relief is being given for those whose dependent parents or grandparents are living with them. Light industries are sited in housing estates. We in the Republic would be interested to find out how we can increase our female labour force participation while not jeopardising the proper upbringing of our young.

With more females joining the labour force, it is not unexpected to witness a parallel increase in the participation of women in union activities. The total female membership in the 53 trade unions affiliated to the Singapore National Trades Union Congress has increased significantly, showing the influence they are now exerting in the once male-dominated labour movement. There is now a broad representation of women unionists at all levels. The trade unions, in Singapore, have gone beyond the narrow scope of merely acting as collective bargaining bodies. The challenge today is to provide for plans and programmes which cater not only to the workers but also their families. The trade union movement here has set up co-operatives in areas like supermarkets to combat the detrimental effects of inflation and in activities like insurance to provide better coverage for our workers. The running of creches and kindergartens to help children of working mothers has also been undertaken. These are only some of the many activities of unions in the Republic in which the female workers can contribute.

I have no doubt, in the next few days of discussion, participants will exchange valuable information and experience to help promote the greater participation of women in productive economic activities. I wish you success in your deliberations and for our foreign trade unionists a very pleasant stay in our city.

It is now my pleasure to declare open the TWARO Asean and Oceanic Women Seminar.

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