

Status of Women—the Sri Lanka Situation

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(Extracts from the address, as Head of the Sri Lanka delegation, at the World Conference of the United Nations Decade for Women, in Copenhagen, held from July 14—30, 1980).

In 1975, coinciding with the International Womens Year, the World Plan of Action for the Decade of Women (1976 - 1985), setting guide lines for national and international action directed towards improving the status of women, was adopted. This plan gave urgency, focussed attention and sensitised the international community towards universally improving the status of women. The Decade there-

fore represents a step in the right direction. The lapse of five years makes it timely to review and evaluate the global and regional progress of the World Plan; also the opportunity to draw up an action plan for the next five years against the background of the achievements in the past.

As a result of keen awareness and conscious raising after 1975, the non-Governmental organisations in Sri Lanka have been able to act as a pressure group to activate the Government to create a national machinery in the Government, which can serve as a focal point for women's affairs. Accordingly, the Women's Bureau of Sri Lanka was established in November, 1978 in the Ministry of Plan Implementation, whose

Minister is His Excellency, The President of Sri Lanka. This acts as a co-ordinating body and continuously reveals and evaluates the extent to which women are being integrated into the economic and social life of the country on a basis of equality with men. The Bureau makes recommendations from time to time to the Government with a view to ensuring that equality is enjoyed de facto and not merely de jure and that rights enshrined in the Constitution are realities and not merely pious legalities, in relation to females.

His Excellency, the President, has also requested all state institutions to ensure adequate representation of women on all Boards of Management and Advisory Boards. This measure will help women to be

a part of the decision making process in the country.

A quota system which restricted the access of women into administrative, clerical, shroffs and accountants services has been removed with the Constitution of 1978. Consequently, equal opportunities of employment in all spheres of the Public Service are now available to women.

In recent years, women have ventured into and have been accepted in non-traditional areas of employment. As a result, we see today, women masons, carpenters, bus - conductresses, surveyors, draughtsmen and also women in the Armed Services.

In Sri Lanka integrated rural development programmes are being carried out on a district basis. Care has been taken to ensure that women's programmes are a component of these District Plans.

The Government of Sri Lanka accepts the Convnetion on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women. I was authorised as Head of the Sri Lanka Delegation, to ratify it on behalf of my Government — a duty which I was privileged to fulfil last evening.

All through the five year period, conscious-raising programmes on Women and Development in the form of workshops and seminars have been organised by the Women's Bureau and the Non-Governmental organisations. A fair amount of research and publications on women-related issues have also materialised. In many of these activities, we have received financial support and co-operation from several international and bi-lateral funding agencies. In this context, we are concerned that the Women's Programme of the new Asian and

Pacific Development Centre will receive the continued financial and political support of the countries and the U.N. system.

Despite these achievements, we have innumerable problems to overcome in order to improve the status of all women in our country. Besides the poverty and unemployment that affect the lives of the masses of women, cultural attitudes and sex stereo-types still operate as a barrier to progress.

I am optimistic and even confident that over the next five years, Sri Lanka Womenhood will make meaningful progress in overcoming the remaining problems stemming primarily from the economics of poverty and age-old socio-cultural prejudices, so that in the fullness of time, they will contribute in equal measure as their men-fold towards national development.