

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER AT THE  
OPENING OF THE INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF WOMEN LAWYERS AT DEWAN SRI  
PINANG, PENANG ON 9TH JULY, 1973

Mrs Ooi, President Federation of Women Lawyers, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

When I was first approached to declare open this Convention, I was naturally surprised and even felt a bit flattered at the idea. I am sure all men present here would agree with me that it needs a real courage for a man to face so many women. In my life, I am used to facing only one woman and that is my own wife. Even that I never had the last say.

Although I normally like to dictate to women as I have a lady stenographer, I would not like to disappoint them particularly in this instance the ladies were my college mates some thirty years ago and also contemporaries in my student days in London after the war.

I consider this both an honour and privilege, since this is the first Convention of the Federation of Women Lawyers to be held in Malaysia. Needless to say, Penang is most happy to be the venue for the Convention besides the fact that the President is herself from Penang.

I would like to join her in bidding a warm welcome to our guests from so many friendly countries. I sincerely hope you will enjoy your stay in Penang and, especially, to those who are here for the first time, I would recommend you to meet the Hon'ble the Chief Minister, Dr Lim Chong Eu, who will only be too glad to inform you about the Island's economic progress and potentials. This indeed is an excellent opportunity for him to "sell" Penang.

I also understand most of you will proceed to Jakarta for the Lawasia Conference which I had occasion to declare open when it was held in Kuala Lumpur some two years ago. It is our hope that you will take with you not only pleasant memories of your visit here but a knowledge and understanding about our country, Malaysia, especially the Government's efforts to give our people a better life in the context of a new, just and modern society.

Distinguished Delegates,

Your Organisation has been in existence for more than three decades and has contributed immensely both to the legal profession and the upliftment of the status of women in an apparently men's world.

As I understand it, women were only admitted into the legal profession about fifty years ago and we are indeed proud that the first Malaysian woman was admitted to the Inns of Court ten years after the first English woman was called to the Bar. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to this woman pioneer who made the first break into what was considered to be a men's preserve in the person of your President.

Thus Malaysia was not far behind in spite of the fact that it was an insignificant British colony. And when we consider the role our Malaysian Women play in the various professions today including politics, it seems almost incredible that opportunities in the legal world were open to them only recently.

In the strict sense of the word, the first women lawyers were admitted to the English Bar at the beginning of the century. Yet the great English playwright and poet, William Shakespeare, could endow the gentle Portia in all forensic glory some centuries earlier when she confronted shylock in the "Merchant of Venice". It would seem to me that, despite the latter day claimants, Shakespeare was almost the forerunner of Women's Liberation in the field of law.

Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

We in Malaysia are extremely proud of the fact that an increasing number of our women lawyers have entered the legal world as lawyers and magistrates, as advisers to institutions and there is at least one politician in the making who is the Vice President of Pergerakan Wanita UMNO—the women section of our party.

I can well envisage the day, with the ever growing number of women lawyers we have today, when we shall have a lady on the Bench. This would undoubtedly cause some confusion to the practitioners who are all accustomed to address the Judges as My Lord or Your Lordship. I am not sure how we shall address a

lady Judge. Perhap this is food for thought for my friend who writes regularly delivering his wittisms in the PONDER column in the Straits Times!

However, the majority of our women lawyers are of the younger generation and I trust they would serve as a precious link between our women society and the Government. They are placed in an ideal position of having to explain what laws exist that discriminate against women and how in fact these laws may be appropriately amended for the common good.

Also, I am pleased to state that we have a woman member in the Cabinet—in fact she is the second to hold the post. We also have a woman lawyer who is presently our Ambassador to Yugoslavia.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I think I can say without fear of contradiction that we have always shown keen interest in understanding problems affecting women and to resolve them. One of my early acts on assuming Premiership was to recommend the setting up of a Royal Commission to examine our Laws of Marriage and Divorce under the Chairmanship of our Chief Justice. The Commission has sat for two years receiving written and oral representation from organisations and bodies as well as individuals interested in the reform of our divorce laws.

In fact, a bill has just been gazetted for public information and is now before Parliament for its first reading. As procedure requires on such an important matter, a Select Committee has been appointed by Parliament to receive and hear representations made to them. I am sure the Select Committee would be pleased to receive representations from members of your Federation in this country. In fact, there is no reason why the Federation itself should not submit its views on this important issue which affects every woman.

Distinguished Delegates,

I note from your Convention Agenda that you will be discussing Family Law and Family Courts. This, I feel, is a most meaningful aspect of legislation. Happiness, like charity, can only begin at home and the laws of matrimonial causes, succession and property

are matters that must engage the constant attention of all members of the society with a view to relieving them of discrimination and iniquities.

I hope your convention will enable you to benefit immensely from the knowledge and experience of each other's system of Family Law, among other things. The presence of so many distinguished jurists and prominent academicians including our Dean of Law School, who is an authority on Muslim Jurisprudence, will, I am sure, enhance your discussion and deliberation.

Madam President,

Finally, in saying how pleased I am to be here with all of you today, I have pleasure in declaring this Convention open and to wish your Convention great success.