

Singapore hosts Industrialization and Women's Health Regional Workshop

by Dominga Anosan and Eliz Reyes-Martinez

Fifty participants, composed primarily of Singaporean women from the Ministry of Labor, Health and the academe attended the Industrialization and Women's Health Regional Workshop for ASEAN countries held at the Amara Hotel in Singapore last April 21 to 26, 1992. Invited as resource speakers were health experts from both government and non-government organizations and the academe in the ASEAN region.

This workshop brought together researchers in the field of women's health and industrialization to report their findings and to propose actions for the promotion and improvement of women's health. Some of the NGOs represented were Isis International Manila, Solidaritas Perempuan (Women Solidarity) in Indonesia, All Women's Action Society (AWAM) in Malaysia and the Asia Monitor Resource Center in Hong Kong.

The workshop was jointly organized by the Singapore Council of Women's Organizations (SCWO) and Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE). It was the outcome of a resolution passed during the 4th General Assembly of the ASEAN Confederation of Women's Organizations (ACWO) in January 1990 in Bangkok, Thailand. This resolution called upon ASEAN women's organizations to work together on environmental and occupational hazards to women by coordinating research efforts, establishing contacts, sharing information and experiences and organizing a regional workshop.

Dominga Anosan, Isis International health networking project associate, participated as a resource speaker and presented a paper on the conference topic: *Medicine and society: health education and facilities for working women.*

The other three conference topics were: *the health implications of the changing roles of women in industrialization; the effects of industrialization on reproduction; and the impact of industrial work regime on women's health.* These were discussed through 26 paper presentations from Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand.

In addition, public forums were held on *sexual*



Isis presenter Doms Anosan

harassment: its legal and political implications; and health hazards to women at work: the right to know.

A wide range of issues was raised and discussed during the three-day conference. Some highlights from the presentations were:

- With regard to the health implications of the changing roles of women in industrialization, it was a general observation that the number of women in the labor force has increased. It was also noted that women play twin or triple roles as mother, homemaker and wage earner. Some questions raised were: Does the entry of women in the labor market bring about improvement in their health and welfare? And does women's participation in wage work in fact create more demands on their time and energies causing their health to

suffer?

In her paper, Chung Yuen Kay states that "Housework and childcare remain firmly entrenched as the concern and responsibility of women even when it has been delegated, because it is delegated to other women--these women are usually mothers and other relatives and hired maids who are expatriates."

In her conclusion, she says that real alternatives to solving problems on the sexual division of labor which places household chore and childcare as the sole responsibility of women will come about only when real gender-related questions are raised with accompanying real shifts in perspectives on what constitutes work--in particular, the work women do, which must include housework. Real structural and attitudinal reorientations must be worked out. At the everyday level, this would mean that shared parenting and shared domestic management will have to become more of a reality than it presently is.

- In the discussions on the effects of industrialization on reproduction, Dr. David Koh in his paper on *Reproductive Toxicology* says that "the study of the effects of environmental exposures on the reproductive system has undergone rapid growth in the past few decades. Its development is due in part to several reasons, including 1) the recognition of numerous potential environmental toxins,

many of which have been introduced through the process of industrialization; 2) the progressive rise in the participation of women of reproductive age in the industrial work force; and 3) the increasing importance of reproduction in many of the industrial countries which have declining birth rates. Reproductive processes in both men and women may be adversely affected by some environmental and occupational agents. All stages of reproduction are potentially at risk.

Unfortunately, the extent of the problem of adverse reproductive outcomes from work exposure is presently unknown. Much of the available information originate from laboratory studies on animals which may not always be extrapolated to humans.

In the final analysis, there is a need to balance the moral duty to protect the unborn from environmental and workplace toxins, against the danger of exaggerating the potential risks based on current information.

- Six papers were presented to discuss the impact of the industrial work regime on women's health which raised a wide range of work related health issues such as the effects of shiftwork and visual display terminals (VDT) and other types of emerging new technologies on women's health and ergonomics and legislation for workers' protection.

Ergonomics was defined by Halimathun Mohd Khalid as the study of human abilities and characteristics which affect the design of equipment, systems and jobs...and its aim is to improve efficiency, safety and well being (Clark and Corlett 1984:2). It is an approach of taking into account workers in the design and organization of things. Furthermore, it is a listing of objectives or criteria which includes jobs, systems or products that are comfortable, safe, effective and satisfying.

- The issues raised by the topic, *Medicine and society: health education and*

facilities for working women, included the availability of information about occupational hazards to women working in industries; extent of affordable health care provided by industry, government and other organizations to factory women; the percentage of working class women's income available for her health over and above her subsistence needs and contributions to her family; medical care and financial compensations provided by industry, government and other organizations in the event of industrial accidents.

Except for Singapore where health education and health facilities are readily available to working women, majority of working women in the other ASEAN countries experience a general dearth of all these health facilities and benefits. Among women in particular, middle class working women are generally better informed and can afford better health care than working class women who have to work a "double day", bear and nurse children, earn a living and give medical priority to other family members.

From the workshop discussions, it became evident that researches and studies on the effects of industrialization to women's health and reproduction were lacking. On the positive side, the workshop became the venue for Singaporean women to see the realities of working women in the other ASEAN countries.

Built into the conference schedule was a factory tour which allowed participants to take a first hand look at an actual work station.

Future plans include holding another regional workshop in 1994. The Women and Health Committee in Singapore will continue as the Secretariat for the next workshop. For more information about the conference, write: AWARE, 64 A/B Race Course Road, Singapore 0821.



Conference participants