

EMBARGOED TILL 5PM, 18 APRIL 2015

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CHAIRMAN, PAP WOMEN'S WING AT THE PAP WOMEN'S WING
ANNUAL CONFERENCE, 18 APRIL 2015**

“Maximising Women’s Potential, Building on 50 Years of Progress”

Women’s Wing Advisors and EXCO members;

Women Members of Parliament;

Party Activists and Guests

Introduction

1. Good morning. I would like to thank the organising committee for putting together this year’s annual conference.

2. We mark 50 years of Singapore’s independence this year, a remarkable milestone for our nation and our people. While we celebrate SG50, our observances are tinged with sadness as we remember Mr Lee Kuan Yew, whose foresight and wisdom have benefitted generations of Singaporeans, including Singaporean women. Mr Lee saw women’s development as being crucial to Singapore’s development and success. He said, and I quote, “Societies which do not educate and use half their potential because they are women, are those which will be the worse off. Those that do, and face up to problems of new social and

family relationships...to help working wives to bring up the next generation, are those most likely to provide better lives for their people. We cannot not educate and use the energy and ability of our women.”¹

3. Mr Lee, together with other pioneering leaders, laid a strong foundation to protect the rights and welfare of women in Singapore, creating a nurturing environment for women to fulfil their potential. The landmark Women’s Charter was passed in 1961, even before Singapore’s independence, to give women the right to property, to be treated fairly in a marriage and to be protected from family violence. Our pioneering generation and leaders laid the foundation for all Singaporeans, including women, to have the opportunities to realise our dreams, and the privilege of choosing our own destiny – to be educated, to pursue a career, to build a family.

Progress in the Lives of Women in Singapore

4. It is timely for us to take stock of the progress made in the lives of women since the early days of Singapore’s independence. When I was born in 1964, our lives were very different. A young Singaporean woman was more than likely to share her home with other families, with common baths and poor sanitation. She was unlikely to have the opportunity to attend school or to work. She would almost certainly be expected to marry and be a housewife, doing housework and raising more than four children on average. Healthcare was an issue then - out of 100 births, as

¹ From Mr Lee Kuan Yew’s speech at the NTUC’s International Women’s Day Seminar, 1975. <http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/lky19750901.pdf>.

many as three babies would not survive. As many as 22 mothers died in child birth in 1965.²

5. Today, the life of a young Singaporean woman is vastly different. The doors of education, healthcare and opportunity are wide open to her. She is far more likely to pursue an education and career of her choice, meet her professional aspirations and raise children at the same time. She will have peace of mind delivering her children in public healthcare facilities of high standards, and live to enjoy watching her children grow up to have children of their own. The Singapore she has the good fortune to grow up in now has one of the lowest maternal and infant mortality rates in the world. Our maternal mortality rate has fallen from 40 per 100,000 births in 1965 to three per 100,000 in 2013. Our infant mortality rate has decreased ten-fold from 26 per thousand births in 1965 to two per thousand live births in 2013.³ Women also enjoy longer lives today - female life expectancy has increased by nearly 20 years, from 67 years old in 1965 to 85 years in 2013.

6. In the area of education, women have made significant progress. The majority of women are now literate – 95% in 2014 as compared to 43% five decades ago. Among women in the economically active age groups of 25-64, half (49%) had post-secondary or better education in 2013, a considerable increase from just 6% in 1980. In fact, there are now more women than men entering universities – women made up more than half (51%) of the local university intake in 2013. This is

² Source: ICA Report on Registration of Births and Deaths, 2011.

³ Maternal and infant mortality rate data for 1965 from Singh et al, “Balance in family planning”, World Health Forum report 1989. [http://whqlibdoc.who.int/whf/1989/vol10-no3-4/WHF_1989_10\(3-4\)_p344-349.pdf](http://whqlibdoc.who.int/whf/1989/vol10-no3-4/WHF_1989_10(3-4)_p344-349.pdf). 2013 data from MOH website.

significant considering that there were three men for every woman enrolled in university 50 years ago.

7. This has provided women with more opportunities compared to their grandmothers, enabling them to pursue their aspirations and dreams. You can see this from the fact that women are contributing more in the labour force and making their mark in various professions in Singapore, and on the international stage. Six in ten (59%) women above the age of 15 work, compared to only one in four women in 1965. Women are increasingly entering professional fields of employment. Compared to a decade ago, 43% of lawyers in Singapore are women, up from 38%, and 37% of doctors are female, up from 32%.⁴ We have women entrepreneurs, scientists, and artists, who have put Singapore on the world map. To name a few, Dr Lisa Ng, a Principal Investigator at A*STAR, developed diagnostic kits for SARS coronavirus and H5N1. Ms Olivia Lum of Hyflux built a company from little more than a dream into one of Asia's leading water and fluid treatment companies. Ms Han Sai Por is one of the most renowned sculptors in South East Asia and won the Cultural Medallion in 1995.

8. Women also contribute to keeping Singapore safe and secure, serving as pilots in the Republic of Singapore Air Force, peace-keepers in our overseas peacekeeping missions, and fire-fighters in the Singapore Civil Defence Force. One trailblazer was Ms Karen Tan, who joined the SAF in 1981 and worked her way up to become the first

⁴ Data on female lawyers as at 2005 and 2013, from the Law Society. "Gender in Justice – Women in the Law in Singapore", <http://www.lawgazette.com.sg/2005-10/Oct05-feature3.htm> and <http://www.lawsociety.org.sg/AboutUs/GeneralStatistics.aspx>. Data on Singapore citizen female doctors from MOH.

woman to earn the rank of full Colonel in 2005.⁵ Ms Khoo Teh Lynn, Singapore's first female jet fighter pilot, had planned our relief missions to New Zealand and Thailand when they were struck by natural disasters.⁶ Ms Joanne Lee joined the SCDF with a passion to save lives, and became the first female Hazardous Material Fire Station Commander in 2011, and the second-ever female to command a Fire Station.⁷ Just recently, on 28 March, Mr and Mrs Kor Leong Chai, who were critically injured in an early morning car accident at Changi, had two female SCDF Officers to thank for saving their lives. Lieutenant Chelsea Lim and Second Warrant Officer Quek Zuoyi were their heroes, or heroines to be precise. They could have lost their lives if not for these two women officers.⁸ Many Singaporeans have been saved by these two and many more women who are serving in SCDF. Singapore would have been poorer if the potential of women had not been developed fully. Singaporean women have come very far indeed in the last 50 years.

Maximising Women's Potential, Fulfilling Women's Aspirations

9. We must continue to build upon the legacy we have been given, and enhance opportunities for women to maximise their potential. Since the PAP Women's Wing was set up in 1989, the proportion of women Members of Parliament has increased from 5% in 1989 (four out of 84) to 25% (24 out of 98) today. In 2012, we decided to place a greater

⁵ From Ms Indranee Rajah's speech on "Women in the SAF" on 4 Jun 2007, http://www.mindef.gov.sg/imindef/press_room/official_releases/nr/2007/jun/04jun07_nr2/04jun07_speech.print.img.html

⁶ From MINDEF's Cyberpioneer magazine, "With wings on her back", 11 Apr 2012 http://www.mindef.gov.sg/imindef/resourcelibrary/cyberpioneer/topics/articles/features/2012/apr12_fs2.html#.VR5TS_yUdic

⁷ From Hometeam's website, "When Women first joined the Singapore Civil Defence Force", 16 Dec 2013, http://www.hometeam.sg/article.aspx?news_sid=20131210UWLF5qPfNkra

⁸ From Straits Times article on 13 April 2015 "Victim, rescuers recount horrific crash", Home Page B6.

focus on advocacy, to help ensure that the voices of women from all walks of life are heard. We submitted three Position Papers to the Government in the past three years with proposals for improvements at every stage of a woman's life. I would like to show you this video, which gives a brief overview of the PAP Women's Wing's advocacy efforts and achievements since 2012.

10. I am proud that a number of the policy recommendations we developed have borne fruit. We advocated for greater support for marriage and parenthood and for women in the workplace through our position papers in 2012 and 2013. We called for housing policies to help young couples start their families earlier. The Government took up our suggestion with the increase in supply of public housing and the introduction of new priority schemes for those with young children. We also called for the introduction of shared parental leave to encourage men to take on a greater share of parental responsibilities and better support women in managing their work and family commitments. The Government took up our suggestion and introduced paternity leave in addition to shared parental leave to support greater shared parental responsibility.

11. Last year we focused on the needs of seniors, many of whom are women. We called for bolder incentives for employers to hire elderly job seekers, who need more help in remaining employed. In 2014 and 2015, the Ministry of Manpower enhanced the Special Employment Credit for mature workers, to encourage employers to re-employ them.⁹ There have been encouraging signs – the labour force participation rate, or

⁹ Info on SEC enhancements from SEC website. <https://www.sec.gov.sg/Pages/More-Information-on-SEC.aspx>

LFPR, of older workers (aged 55 to 64) has increased from 61% to 68% over the past five years. The increase was even greater for female workers in this age group, with their LFPR rising from 42% to 54% over this period.¹⁰ We had also called for the Government to improve respite care for care-givers of the elderly, most of whom are the daughters of these seniors. They too need time away from care-giving to rest. The Government subsequently enhanced respite care by introducing centre-based weekend respite care services, on top of existing nursing home respite care services.

12. These examples are a testament to the efforts of many of you in the PAP Women's Wing, who have worked tirelessly to advocate for change. We are greatly encouraged by the progress we have achieved. Thank you for your dedication.

Looking Ahead

13. As we celebrate our progress and achievements, we need to remain attuned to the changing needs and aspirations of the different groups of women today. Looking ahead, we should do more in three key areas: 1) Improving the well-being of women in need, 2) supporting women to fulfil their career and family aspirations, and 3) helping women plan for their retirement.

14. First, we need to improve the well-being of women in need of more support. We need to remain attuned to the needs of low-income women and their families. About one-third of our households in rental flats are

¹⁰ Data from MOM's website, <http://stats.mom.gov.sg/Pages/LabourForceParticipationandEmploymentrate.aspx>

headed by a woman. Many of these women struggle on a daily basis to take care of their family. It is important to empower them, and focus on how we can help strengthen early intervention measures for at-risk families, to complement social assistance available through ComCare and the Family Service Centres. Single parents, many of whom are single due to divorce, also need more support. Their extended families and members of their communities are important sources of help. At the same time, we should also look into the areas where they might require greater support, such as obtaining maintenance from their ex-husbands, and becoming financially independent through employment.

15. Second, there should be more support for women to realise their career and family aspirations. Our society's ability to support women in their aspirations to contribute in the workforce and raise a family at the same time is critical to Singapore's economic and demographic sustainability. Yet many women still feel they either have to scale back or leave work completely to care for their families. The vast majority (83%) of economically inactive residents in the prime working age groups (age 25-54) are women, and eight in ten of them said they were not in the labour force due to family responsibilities.¹¹ We can do more to help women manage their multiple roles in the workplace and family.

- a. We need to encourage men to step up to share more parental responsibilities at home, just as women are stepping up to contribute more in the workplace. There is now more leave support for men to do so.

¹¹ Data from Labour Force in Singapore 2014 report by MOM, pg 41 and 42, <http://stats.mom.gov.sg/Pages/Labour-Force-In-Singapore-2014.aspx>

- b. We should continue to urge employers to recognise that progressive work practices such as flexible work arrangements not only make good business sense, but are critical given fundamental shifts in how today's generation of employees live and work. Measures that better allow employees to manage their work and family responsibilities will support talent attraction and retention, especially in a tight labour market.

- c. We need to push for more improvements to the affordability, accessibility and quality of our child care system, which is essential to supporting working mothers.

16. We also need to champion for women to have greater representation in leadership positions – women are currently under-represented in top management positions. While a recent report has shown that the number of women directors has risen by 10% last year, only 8.8% of directorships in listed companies are women.¹² This would help us to better leverage the breadth and depth of talent available in Singapore to retain our competitive advantage and better position ourselves in the global economy. It makes business sense to do so. Women make up half of our population, and are an important talent pool. Companies need to demonstrate that they are serious about tapping this talent pool by actively grooming women for leadership roles, and appointing more women to Board positions.

¹² From Singapore's Diversity Action Committee (DAC)'s news release on 16 Apr 2015, available at <http://www.diversityaction.sg/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/20150416-DAC-News-Rel-Improvement-in-no-of-women-directors-on-SGX-listcos.pdf>

17. Lastly, more can be done to help women prepare for retirement.

The Women's Wing has been advocating for stronger support for homemakers to return to the workforce if they should wish to do so, and to achieve retirement adequacy. The SkillsFuture initiative is a game changer, as it empowers women to take charge of their own skills development and ease their future re-entry to the workforce. Women's Wing should actively reach out to the homemakers and encourage them to take full advantage of the programme.

18. Another area that homemakers have concerns is in retirement adequacy. Enhancements to the CPF schemes were announced recently. The increase in contribution rates and higher interest rate on CPF balances for older Singaporeans help to build up savings for retirement faster. The greater flexibility on payouts from CPF Life and the option to withdraw savings above the retirement sum draw our attention to the need to plan financially for retirement. CPF Life pools our individual risks and gives us a continuous stream of annuity for as long as we live. Flexibility in using CPF savings to top-up the account of our lower-balance or non-working family members enables us to give our loved ones the peace of mind, of annuity payouts from CPF Life even if they were to outlive us, and this will be the best gift we could give them. These are important changes with many potential benefits for women, particularly those who have not been in active employment for some time (e.g. caregivers for children, elderly parents). The changes could not be more timely, given that Singaporean working women still face a wage gap of 17%, compared to men's median monthly income. We have to step up our communication efforts to educate all women in Singapore on retirement adequacy and encourage their spouses and children to top up their CPF. On this note, I am pleased to announce an initiative of the

PAP Women's Wing on public education to improve financial literacy and retirement adequacy. It is called Top Up with Love, or 加加示爱 in Chinese. I would like to invite PAP Women's Wing Vice Chairman Dr Amy Khor to share more details.

19. Thank you, Dr Amy Khor. Our new financial planning programme is just one example of the PAP Women's Wing's many efforts to improve the lives of our fellow Singaporean women across the different life stages.

Conclusion

20. Singaporean women have made great strides over the past 50 years. We have equal opportunities for education, support to pursue our career and family aspirations, and we enjoy peace and security so that we and our daughters can walk home safely at night. We have contributed to all aspects of Singapore's development – at home, in businesses, science and the arts, and in the security of our nation, and will continue to do so in the years ahead.

21. However, there is more to be done. As members of the PAP Women's Wing, we play a crucial role in mobilising women to help other Singaporean women reach their full potential. A strong Singapore needs a strong Singaporean core. We women make decisions on having children, and affect the formation, upbringing and nurturing of Singaporean families. We will also be the majority of the silver population because of our longer life expectancy. Women therefore will continue to exert a critical influence on the well-being of our nation. And in so doing, we should be guided by the PAP's core values of honesty,

meritocracy, self-reliance and multi-racialism, to build a fair and just society for all Singaporeans.

22. Mr Lee Kuan Yew's life-long dedication to the betterment of Singapore inspires and re-energises us to step up our efforts to improve the lives of current and future generations of Singaporeans. Let us continue to forge the path forward to maximise opportunities for women, ensure their perspectives are heard, and leverage their unique talents to build an even better Singapore.

23. Thank you.