

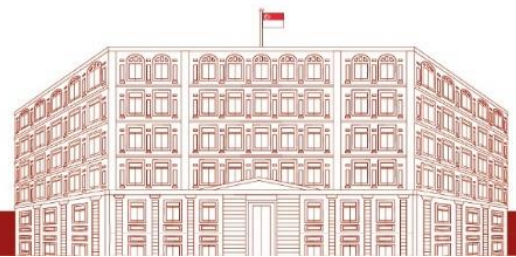
## Sitting on 3 Aug 2021

### Transcript of Parliamentary Secretary for Communications and Information Rahayu Mahzam's Response to Motion on Empowering Women

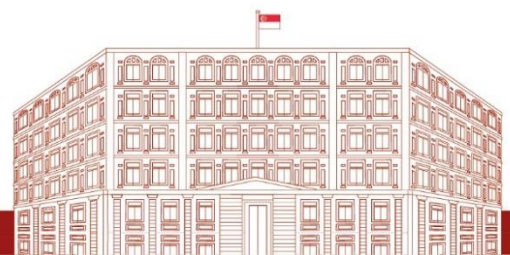
1. Thank you Madam Deputy Speaker.
2. It is heartening to see many members speak very passionately about various aspects of women's development. We are clearly united by our common desire to see issues facing women being addressed; and for women to be truly empowered to realise their aspirations. This topic is not new. It is indeed encouraging to see the evolution and development of efforts to empower, support and protect women over the years – through the relentless pursuit by Members of Parliament to build on existing policies, the advocacy and community groups who continue to champion for women and the Government that is willing to listen, consider views and make changes where appropriate.
3. I have had the opportunity to walk this journey, with PPIS before I became MP, working on several papers with the PAP Women's Wing, participating in debates as a backbencher and now, working together with MOS Sun Xueling and MOS Low Yen Ling on the Conversations on Women's Development.
4. I would like to take this opportunity to highlight a few examples of the wide-ranging efforts that reflect the evolving developments in this ongoing endeavour. I would refer to three themes – to Empower, Support & Protect women.

#### **EMPOWERING WOMEN AT WORK**

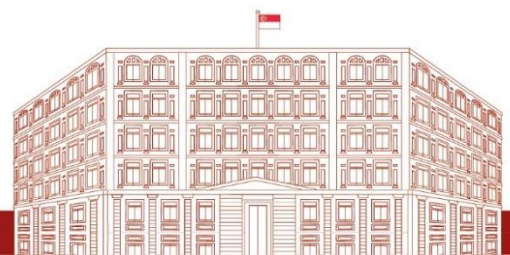
5. We begin with the efforts to empower women to thrive at work and have equal opportunities as men. In Parliament, Ms Tin Pei Ling had asked about gender wage gap and often called for digital fluency among women as this could open up new career opportunities for them in the digital age. Ms Tin, Ms Jessica Tan and Ms Cheryl Chan had raised concerns about the representation of women in the STEM sectors. Ms Jessica Tan and former MP Dr Intan Azura have long called for women to be viewed as valuable resources and for employers to leverage on this talent pool.



6. The Government supports the diverse career aspirations of women. We encourage women to enter occupations of their choice, including in industries that are traditionally male-dominated.
7. Women now make up 41% of the tech workforce in Singapore. This is well above the global average of 28%. But there are still plenty of opportunities available in the tech sector, and we want more women to benefit from them and take on leadership roles. By entering such growth sectors, women can achieve better career and pay prospects, to further close the wage gap.
8. One meaningful development in creating opportunities for women in the digital sector is the SG Women in Tech initiative, which IMDA launched in 2019 with community and industry partners. The initiative enhances support for women in tech; and attracts more of them to the sector. Through mentorship, leadership development, sponsorship, and networking opportunities, the initiative has reached out to more than 117,000 people.
9. Other MPs like Ms Cheryl Chan, Mr Darryl David, and Er Dr Lee Bee Wah, have made suggestions over the past years on introducing customised packages to help women update their skills and facilitate their return to the workforce after marriage or childbirth. More recently, Ms Poh Li San and Ms Yeo Wan Ling have spoken about challenges women face in caring for their families and pursuing their careers.
10. The Government, working in collaboration with different agencies, has responded to such calls over the years. We have continued to develop and enhance programmes to support career mobility and help ease the transition for women back into the workforce.
11. Workforce Singapore (WSG)'s employment facilitation programmes and services provide support to women looking to return to the workforce after a period of absence. They can tap on personalised career coaching and various programmes to facilitate their re-entry. In the last three years, WSG has collectively placed more than 48,000 women across their programmes and services.



12. Madam Deputy Speaker, in Malay please. Ada banyak program yang telah dilakarkan di peringkat nasional untuk menyokong dan membantu wanita terus bekerja dan mencapai aspirasi mereka. Ini penting juga untuk masyarakat kita. Walaupun masih wujud stereotaip dalam kalangan sesetengah pihak bahawa wanita itu tempatnya di dapur atau di rumah, ramai yang juga mahu wanita diberi peluang dan pilihan. Masyarakat dan perusahaan akan dapat banyak manfaat daripada sumbangan bermakna wanita Melayu. Ramai wanita Melayu daripada golongan muda juga mahukan masa depan yang berbeza, yang penuh dengan peluang untuk berjaya. Tambahan pula, dengan adanya dua sumber pendapatan dalam setiap keluarga Melayu, kestabilan kewangan mereka akan bertambah kukuh.
13. Selain inisiatif-inisiatif untuk menggalakkan latihan semula dan pengambilan bekerja di peringkat nasional, agensi-agensi M3 juga menyediakan program-program yang disesuaikan dengan keperluan wanita Melayu. Satu contoh adalah program Wanita Kembali Bekerja, atau Back-to-Work Women, kelolaan Mendaki SENSE. Ia membantu mempersiapkan wanita Melayu untuk kembali menyertai tenaga kerja, dan menghubungkan mereka dengan para majikan yang sedang mencari pekerja.
14. Saya harap kaum wanita Melayu akan sentiasa disokong dalam mengejar impian mereka. Ini sememangnya, satu usaha yang berterusan.
15. Saya dengar tadi isu-isu yang telah dikemukakan oleh Puan Raeesah Khan. Beliau menyebut tentang isu sunat perempuan, tudung, dan juga poligami. Apa yang telah beliau sebutkan sama dengan rekomendasi-rekomendasi yang kita dapat lihat dalam laporan Lepak Conversations yang telah juga kami terima. Saya pernah berbual sebenarnya dengan aktivis-aktivis yang telah menimbulkan isu-isu ini, dan saya sememangnya bangga dengan mereka yang merupakan anak-anak muda, yang mahu berdiri menegakkan sesuatu yang mereka rasakan penting. Tapi mereka juga faham tentang betapa rumitnya isu-isu ini dalam masyarakat kita.
16. Isu tentang sunat perempuan, misalnya. Pemerintah sememangnya tidak menyokong amalan yang boleh membawa bahaya kepada wanita atau kanak-kanak perempuan.



MUIS juga berpendapat sedemikian dan telah menjelaskan bahawa agama Islam tidak menyokong apa-apa prosedur yang akan memudaratkan individu. Namun hakikatnya, ada pendapat yang berbeza dalam masyarakat kita. Jadi hal ini harus kita selesaikan bukan sahaja dengan meletakkan peraturan tetapi dengan memahami, dan berbual, dan berbincang dalam masyarakat kita.

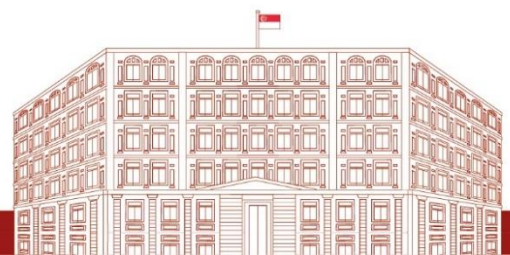
17. Isu poligami juga yang telah dibincangkan. Ini adalah sesuatu yang telahpun diberi perhatian oleh ROMM, dan sebenarnya ada peraturan yang sangat ketat. Ini telah menyebabkan jumlah peratusan jatuh daripada, pada 2010, 0.4%; kepada 0.07% perkahwinan yang berpoligami. Jadi ini menunjukkan adanya keberkesanan dalam usaha ROMM.

18. Selainnya pada itu, isu tudung. Isu tudung bukan perkara yang baharu. Ini adalah sesuatu yang bukan sahaja ditimbulkan oleh Encik Faisal Manap, tetapi juga oleh AP-AP PAP juga. Encik Zaqy pernah menimbulkan isu ini, Dr Intan, Encik Zainal, Presiden kita sendiri telahpun menyebutkan tentang isu ini semasa beliau di Parlimen. Saya juga pernah menimbulkan hal ini. Pemerintah akur dan faham tentang keinginan jururawat Melayu/Islam untuk memakai tudung dalam pekerjaan mereka. Ini adalah sesuatu yang telah dibincangkan dan akan diberi perhatian. Ini bukannya sesuatu yang mudah. Kita harus mengadakan pembincangan dengan pelbagai lapisan masyarakat, bukan sahaja dalam masyarakat Islam. Dan ini mengambil masa. Tetapi Perdana Menteri telahpun menyatakan bahawa beliau akan memberikan pengumuman tentang hal ini, pada Rapat Umum Hari Kebangsaan yang akan datang.

19. Jadi isu-isu ini yang ditimbulkan sememangnya isu yang mungkin telah diperkatakan. Tetapi untuk benar-benar menyelesaikan isu ini, saya rasa kita perlu betul-betul faham dan kenal dengan masyarakat kita, untuk menyelesaikan isu ini. Dan kita harus sama-sama mengajar mereka, mendidik semua, dengan mengajar kepada anjakan paradigma dengan cara yang cukup berhemah.

## **SUPPORT WOMEN WITH CAREGIVING RESPONSIBILITIES**

20. For women to pursue their aspirations unencumbered, women need to be supported with their caregiving responsibilities. Men can be caregivers too and the Government



also supports them in this area. Yet, women are still the primary caregivers in most instances.

21. There are many reasons for this – including gender bias, stereotypes, and pervasive socio-cultural expectations. Many women dedicate their lives to caring for their families; and may thus feel compelled to give up formal employment.

22. To address this, the Government encourages men to share the caregiving load.

23. We have enhanced parental leave schemes and introduced flexibility for fathers to share a portion of their wives' maternity leave. We also work with community partners such as Families for Life and the Centre for Fathering, which drives the DADs for Life movement, to promote active fatherhood.

24. Many men are stepping up proactively, and we applaud their contributions towards building more supportive and resilient families.

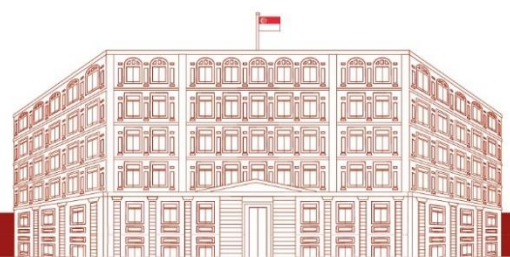
25. Over the past years, Members have actively flagged the difficulties which some women caregivers experience and called for stronger support for them.

26. In 2020, Ms Carrie Tan urged the Government to consider valuing the unpaid care work of women, and legislating workplace policies to support working caregivers.

27. And since 2017, Mr Louis Ng has been a strong advocate for greater support for single parents, amongst the many things he champions.

28. Responding to the diverse challenges faced by women caregivers, the Government has made significant efforts to relieve the load they experience.

- a. For childcare, the Government has expanded preschool places and ensured its affordability. Regardless of their working status, all parents of Singapore Citizen children also receive basic subsidies for childcare and infant care services.
- b. For eldercare, the Government has been growing the capacity of community care services and making them more accessible, to better meet the needs of



our seniors and their caregivers. In 2019, MOH also launched the Caregiver Support Action Plan to strengthen support for senior caregiving in the community. Its measures cover aspects like care navigation, respite care, financial support, workplace support, and caregiver empowerment and training.

- c. To support retirement adequacy of those who had low incomes during their working years and now have less in retirement, the Government introduced the Silver Support Scheme. About two-thirds of Silver Support recipients are women, many of whom were probably caregivers. This is one of the many schemes which help to safeguard the continued financial stability and well-being of women as they age.
- d. We will continue to grow such efforts to support women caregivers, no matter the circumstances they face.

29. As part of this process, we constantly review feedback from Members and the public, to propose further action to support women in their caregiving responsibilities.

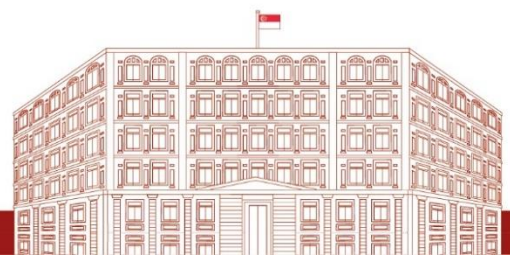
## PROTECT THE VULNERABLE

30. The issue that had initially sparked off the national discussion on women's development was the concern about violence against women. At that juncture, in July 2020, the PAP Women's Wing, immediately came up with a statement strongly denouncing violence against women and shared concerns about the sentencing in that matter with the Minister for Home Affairs. Following that, the Review of the Sentencing Framework for Sexual and Hurt Offences was conducted and consequently, there were *inter alia* increase in the penalties for specific sexual offences.

31. We continue to face new and emerging challenges that affect disproportionately women. One such emerging issue is Online Harms.

32. Technology has caused the proliferation of sexual violence in cyberspace.

- a. Many women must deal with unwanted sexual messages and calls, non-



consensual sharing of intimate images, voyeurism, sexual harassment, and objectification.

b. This has gotten worse with COVID-19 as people spend more time online.

c. Such behaviour negatively impacts the physical and mental well-being of victims; and this is unacceptable.

33.As with many past issues affecting women, the complex task of tackling online harms also requires solutions that extend beyond new legislation from the Government.

34.During MCI's 2021 COS Debate, SMS Sim Ann shared how the Government was collaborating with community partners interested to shape a safe cyberspace for women and girls. We have since followed up with real action.

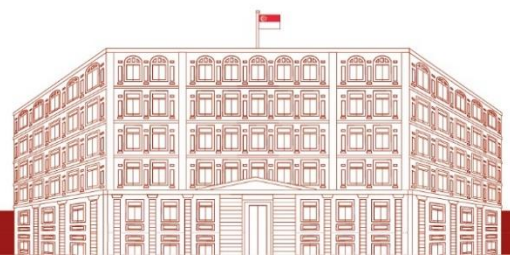
35.As MOS Sun Xueling earlier mentioned, MCI has formed a Singapore Together Alliance for Action to Tackle Online Harms, especially those targeted at women and girls. Dr Shahira Abdullah also made reference to this.

36.We are fortunate to tap on the expertise of 48 members who come from across the people, public, and private sectors – exemplifying the importance of a partnership approach.

37.For instance, under this AfA, MCI is collaborating with DBS and the Singapore Judiciary on a community hackathon to generate solutions for safer and kinder online spaces.

38.As one of its Co-Chairs, I see the AfA as an important way to rally Singaporeans and spark more initiatives to foster a better digital culture. We must ensure that women and girls enjoy the same freedom and confidence online, that they experience in real life.

39.The Government's work on online harms is an example of how we are working with



partners, to defend the progress achieved by women amidst nascent threats.

## CONCLUSION

40. Singapore has consistently ranked well in the UN's Gender Inequality and Gender Development Indices.

41. Our women have continued to break barriers and achieve new heights across various social indicators – including in literacy, employment rates, and leadership in many professional domains.

42. Our engagements have created space for all stakeholders to share their concerns frankly. And amidst this careful and sensitive approach, Singapore women have achieved significant progress. However, we are not stopping there.

43. The Government will continue to reach out to women, represent their voices, and champion their progress. Many of the points which Members raised today echo the Government's ongoing efforts to uplift Singapore women. In particular, we can all look forward to the White Paper which will set out the Government's action plan. I believe there will be a robust debate on the specific plans to move things forward. I am therefore supportive of the amendment proposed by Mr Vikram Nair, as that reflects the spirit of having concrete action to support our efforts.

44. In conclusion, I wish to take the opportunity to thank all those who have worked with us to champion and advocate for women. We continue in this endeavour for we are not just speaking up for women, we are speaking up for the future generation. We are speaking today, not because women are weak. We are speaking because men and women together are strong and can change the tide of time, challenge unfairness and take action that can meaningfully change lives of future generations.

45. Madam Deputy Speaker, I stand in support of the amended motion.

END

