

**TRANSCRIPT OF OPENING SPEECH BY MRS JOSEPHINE TEO, MINISTER OF COMMUNICATIONS AND INFORMATION, AT THE MOTION ON SINGAPORE WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT, ON TUESDAY 5 APRIL 2022**

**OUR COLLECTIVE MISSION**

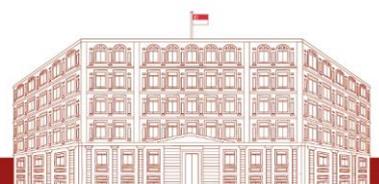
Mr Speaker Sir

**Introduction**

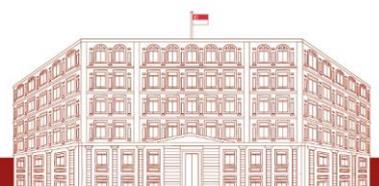
1. I beg to move, “That this House endorses Paper Cmd. 15 of 2022 on “White Paper on Singapore Women’s Development” as our Whole-of-Nation plan of action to collectively advance Singapore women’s development to build a fairer and more inclusive society, where women and men partnering each other as equals can pursue their aspirations freely and to the fullest.”
2. This is the first time that the Government has presented a White Paper on Women’s Development for Parliament to debate. This fact alone is significant.
3. But more than that, before embarking on this Paper, the Government had initiated a year-long series of nation-wide Conversations on Women’s Development involving Singaporeans from all walks of life.
4. It did so even as our nation battled a formidable virus which precipitated the worst recession since Independence. This fact is also significant.
5. The White Paper may have been prepared by the Government, but it speaks with the voices of Singaporeans who care deeply about women.
6. At the start of our debate, I would like to thank the many partners who have journeyed with us in the past year and a half. They include:
  - Singapore Council of Women’s Organisations (SCWO)
  - NTUC Women and Family Unit
  - PA Women’s Integration Network
  - Organisations like Daughters of Tomorrow and Dads for Life.
7. Some of our partners are here today. May I invite honourable colleagues to join me in showing them our sincere appreciation.
8. We thank each and every one of the participants in the Conversations. You shared your views candidly, in the spirit of advancing women’s interest. You spoke from your hearts.
9. The Government listened and we heard you. In response, we have put together the first-ever White Paper on Singapore Women’s Development, which Parliament will now debate.
10. How shall we proceed? Where do we begin?

**Historical Context / Looking back**

11. We must begin by recognising that **Singapore women have already triumphed over great adversity and made significant progress in so many ways.**



12. Up till a hundred years ago, women were mostly confined to domesticity. Sons had priority for education and parents decided on their children's marriages. Some women suffered the indignity of being traded like property.
13. As a teenager living in 1930s Singapore, my paternal grandmother, my Popo, bore witness to the early winds of change.
14. For example, about 700 brothels were closed, after the Women and Girls Protection Ordinance was passed by the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlement.
15. In 1932, the same Council banned the sale of young girls to rich families as 'mui tsais'. Women could no longer be deemed chattel, to be bought and sold.
16. During the war, many brave and enterprising women did their utmost to help their families and friends survive the cruel ravages of war: rape and murder, persecution and hunger, and untold personal tragedies.
17. There were many heroes – and heroines too, including Elizabeth Choy. After the war, women contributed to the rehabilitation efforts, setting up associations and mutual help groups.
18. Soon after we attained self-government, the women of Singapore achieved **a historic triumph. On assuming office, almost the first thing the new PAP Government did was to pass the Women's Charter in 1961.**
19. The Charter institutionalised the rights and responsibilities of men and women in marriage, and ensured the protection and welfare of women in Singapore.
  - a. It also paved the way for greater protection from dangers like family violence and sexual offences.
  - b. More importantly, it changed the perception of how women should be treated in society and at home.
  - c. It gave women more autonomy in the roles they took up, fundamentally altering the social compact of its day.
20. Back then, only one in three women were literate.
21. But schools for girls established by missionaries, activists, businessmen and intellectuals had already shown what women could do if only we educated them as well as we did men. The trailblazers included:
  - a. Aisha Akbar, who in 1950 won a scholarship to enter the Trinity College of Music in England. She was only 20 then, and the first in Singapore to be awarded a music scholarship without having already qualified as a music teacher.
  - b. Ruth Wong, the first woman principal of the Teachers' Training College who later became the founding director of the present-day National Institute of Education (NIE). She helped to transform the teaching profession and uplifted the education system, benefiting generations of girls and boys.



22. Free primary education starting in 1960 helped many more **Singapore women triumph through education**, achieving far more than basic literacy. Today, for every young man enrolled in university, there is a young woman.

23. In education alone, we women hold up half the sky. We also proved that with education we could triumph at the workplace and impact the lives of many others.

24. Take for example, Sudha Nair who studied social work in NUS. Her education led her to start Singapore's first family violence specialist centre, the Centre for Promoting Alternatives to Violence (PAVE). Even today, PAVE offers valuable services in counselling, public education, research and advocacy.

25. Then, there is Juliana Chan, a Singaporean scientist who holds four US patents. Driven by her passion to enhance science communications, Juliana founded the Wildtype Media Group, which has become Asia's leading STEM-focused media company, behind publications such as the Asian Scientist Magazine and Supercomputing Asia.

26. We also have Huda Hamid, a businesswoman and social entrepreneur, who has helped single mothers and women from low-income households become financially independent. Huda was one of six winners of the 2020 Young Social Entrepreneurs Global Programme.

27. More women have now taken on jobs previously dominated by men and stepped up to leadership roles. Like Sudha, Juliana and Huda, they have proven themselves the equal of their male colleagues.

28. Mr Speaker, Sir, I hope you will agree that the women in this chamber – on both sides of the aisle, the Government as well as the Opposition – have shown the same too. Never before in our history have we had so many women in Parliament as we do now – and I sincerely believe Parliament is the better for it.

### **Progress in the past decade**

29. In the past decade, we have continued to make good progress for Singapore women.

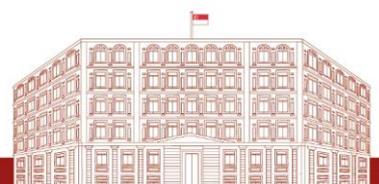
a. **Women are now better protected against harms and sexual offences**, through the Protection from Harassment Act and Penal Code.

b. **Women are now better recognised for their contributions in the economy**. Our adjusted gender pay gap has further narrowed, halving to around 4 per cent over two decades. Among chief executive officers, women remain a minority, but we are encouraged that Singapore has more than double the global average.

c. **Caregivers of the elderly and children, majority of whom are women, are now better supported**. More facilities and higher subsidies have been made available. Schemes like Silver Support and the matching of CPF top-ups help them in retirement.

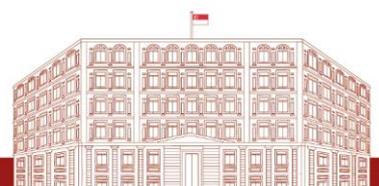
d. **Women are living even longer than before**. By 2020, Singapore women's life expectancy had reached 86, surpassed only by two countries, Switzerland and Japan.

30. And of course, we now have a woman as our President. As many people noted in the recently released SPH Media book on Singapore's battle against COVID-19, President Halimah has been a pillar of strength throughout this crisis. She stayed on top of things and struck a balance on difficult decisions such as tapping into our national reserves.



### Singapore Women's development is an ongoing conversation

31. By any measure, Singapore women's development has reached a very high base.
32. As a result, we may have felt no urgency to further strengthen the position of women in our society. This Government, however, thought otherwise.
33. As I mentioned earlier, almost the first thing the PAP did when it first formed the Government was to pass the Women's Charter.
34. Last year was the 60th anniversary of the Women's Charter. We believed it was timely to renew the pledge our founding leaders made so many years ago, to further elevate the position of women in Singapore.
35. This is because, even as we were fighting hard to battle the pandemic, we remembered the daily battles women may still face.
- The battle with time to fulfil multiple roles and responsibilities.
  - The battle for recognition of the challenges women and girls face, much more than men and boys.
  - The battle with sexual predators who, having been tamed in analogue Singapore, now rear their ugly heads in our digital world.
  - The battle with social expectations on what work we do, what chores we share, what words we say, and even what clothes we wear.
  - The battle within ourselves as to how much of "us" to give and how much to save for self-care.
36. To help women advance, we must not shy away from dealing with these battles.
37. On the contrary, we must always see the progress of women as a journey without end, where every achievement is a foundation to aim for new highs.
38. In every generation, we have a duty to find new ways to uplift women. If half of humanity does not progress, how can the rest of humanity?
39. But where should the weight of our efforts now lie?
40. Speaker Sir, I would like to advance a proposal for members to focus the debate on two key elements of the motion:
- How to further catalyse collective actions; and
  - How to further promote equal partnership between women and men.
41. In all likelihood, these two lines of effort are the most challenging. Yet they are also where we have best hope to really move the needle for our women.
42. I believe this from the bottom of my heart. Let me explain why, in Mandarin.



43. 和绝大多数的在职母亲一样，我也有过许多愧疚和挣扎的时刻。孩子在我出差时生病了，如果有什么三长两短，我能原谅自己吗？孩子在学习上如果落在人后，或是因为长期缺乏母亲的引导误入歧途，我真的能原谅自己吗？

44. 与此同时，上司是否认为我当上了妈妈以后，对工作不再像以前付出所有？当机会来临时，他们是否会因此认为我对新挑战不再感兴趣，或无法胜任？

45. 去年，当82岁的父亲摔跤入院时，我年近80岁的母亲成了他唯一的看护者。如果母亲缺少了我的帮忙，精疲力竭自己也病倒了，我还能原谅自己吗？

46. 这些忧虑，并非是我才面对的。几乎所有的女性同胞，都会在人生的不同阶段觉得家庭和事业之间难以平衡。

47. 解决方案的一部分在于立法，制定更多的保障措施，以打造一个更公平；更具包容性；更亲家庭的职场。针对这一点，白皮书作出了承诺。

48. 解决方案的另一部分在于为看护者提供更强有力的支持。针对这一点，白皮书也作出了承诺。

49. 但任何法律或指导原则都不能完全锁定每个家庭之内的规范，或每个工作场所里的详细作业方式。

50. 如果当年我的丈夫没有挺身而出，帮忙照顾孩子；如果当时我的弟弟们没有伸出援手协助母亲照料父亲；如果我的父亲和家翁没有抛开传统，对我的从政表达支持，我是不可能安心地继续工作，更别说全心投入公共服务。

51. 在我整个职业生涯中，有幸遇到多位了解我的理想和包容我的处境的上司，如林瑞生和杨烈国。二十几年前，双胞胎出生后的几个月里，前老板李奕贤就允许我在家办公，当时企业对居家办公的接受程度以及相关的电信基础设施根本还没成熟。对于上司们的信任，精神和实际上的支持，我铭记于心。

**[Para 43 to 51, translated in English]**

43. Like many young working mothers, I struggled with guilt. How could I forgive myself if my child became sicker while I was away on a work trip? How could I forgive myself if my children fell far behind in school or became delinquent because I was not around often enough to guide them?

44. At the same time, I also wondered if my boss would notice my divided attentions? Would opportunities be redirected because it was assumed I was no longer interested or up to the challenge?





45. When my 82-year-old father suffered a fall last year and was hospitalised, my mother, herself nearly 80 became his sole caregiver. How could I forgive myself if she too became ill from exhaustion?

46. Questions like these trouble women all the time. I am in no way unique.

47. Part of the answer lies in additional legislative safeguards to uphold fairness at the workplace. The White Paper promises that.

48. Part of the solution lies in providing better support to caregivers. The White Paper promises that too.

49. But these efforts taken by the Government can only go so far. No law or tripartite guideline can dictate the norms in a family, or the detailed practices of workplaces.

50. Had my husband not stepped up as an involved father, had my brothers not stepped in to provide relief to my mother, I could not have continued to work with relative peace of mind. Had my father and father-in-law not given their blessings, I could not have stepped into public life with a degree of confidence.

51. In the months following the birth of my twins, my former boss Lee Yi Shyan gave permission for me to work from home, long before telecommuting became a formalised policy and telecommunications infrastructure was mature. Throughout my working life, bosses like Lim Swee Say and Philip Yeo made room to accommodate personal passions and circumstances.

52. Sir, this is why I firmly believe men's support for equal partnership with women is so important.

53. It is also why I firmly believe collective action, beyond what the Government will do, is essential.

a. We can put in place legislation on workplace fairness. But the lived experiences of working women depend on the understanding and support of employers and colleagues.

b. While many Singapore women are empowered by caregiver support, some will continue to be constrained by cultural preferences held by society and even themselves.

54. Therefore, more than being a comprehensive plan of action by the Government, the White Paper is a clarion call.

a. For each and every one of us to take action;

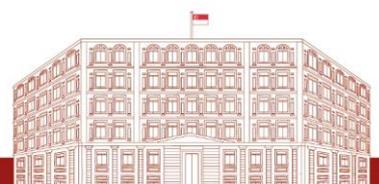
b. Take action in your homes, your workplaces, your community, your relationships;

c. Take action to recognise women's achievements as society's achievements;

d. Take action to pursue women's progress as part of society's progress.

### **Conclusion**

55. Mr Speaker, I have spoken about the many triumphs for women in Singapore.



56. Standing in chamber today, these triumphs ring louder than ever.
57. In December 1965, when the Parliament of independent Singapore first sat, there were only two active women out of 64 members.
58. Today, women occupy 30 out 103 seats, a nine-fold increase in percentage terms.
59. Just as our predecessors have laid the foundations for women to succeed, we too must build new scaffolding for future generations of women to thrive.
60. This White Paper reaffirms our shared vision of a fairer and more inclusive society.
61. This will only happen when men and women partner each other as equals in every domain.
- a. It depends on how we, as family members, share in caregiving, and act as role models for our children.
  - b. It depends on how we, as a community, signal our protection and respect for our women.
  - c. It depends on how we, as employers, empower women colleagues to dream bigger and fly higher.
62. Women in Singapore can continue to triumph, not through *our* words, but *our* deeds.
63. This is *our* collective mission.
64. For this reason, I call on everyone to give it *our* fullest attention and support.
65. Mr Speaker, I beg to move.

