

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

Putting Our Values into Action for Women

Mr Speaker Sir

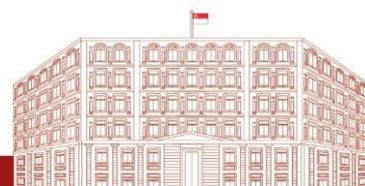
Introduction

1. Let me start by thanking honourable Members for their active participation and suggestions.
2. It has been a marathon debate – feels almost like childbirth, but with epidural – so quite painless. Because, fortunately, support for the motion is unanimous – whether from PAP or the opposition members. I want to thank the Workers' Party, the PSP, for speaking their thoughts. We may not agree on everything, but this is surely a good outcome for women and for Singapore.
3. In my opening speech, I encouraged members to focus on two key elements of the Motion being debated:
 - a. How to catalyse further collective action; and
 - b. How to realise greater equality of partnership between women and men.
4. I appreciate all members who spoke and for contributing your suggestions.
5. On catalysing collective action, MPs like **Ms Yeo Wan Ling** and **Mr Abdul Samad** highlighted the importance of tripartism. **Ms Poh Li San** emphasised the media's role in shifting mindsets. And **Mr Darryl David** underscored the need for a whole-of-society approach to uplift women.
6. On realising more equal partnerships, MPs like **Ms Nadia Samdin**, **Mr Louis Ng** and **Mr Louis Chua** highlighted the role of men in caregiving and how institutional arrangements must encourage it.
7. My colleagues in government have also responded to specific comments by members.
8. On workplaces, the Tripartite Guidelines on Flexible Working Arrangements (FWAs) will be implemented about two years from now.
 - a. To suggestions by **Dr Wan Rizal**, **Mr Gan Thiam Poh**, **Ms Jessica Tan** and **Mr Melvin Yong** to bring it forward, **MOS Gan Siow Huang** has highlighted that, in fact MOM will promote greater adoption of the existing tripartite standards, to boost momentum for the eventual implementation of the guidelines. So things are moving.
9. On protection against violence and harms,
 - a. **Ms Sylvia Lim** made suggestions concerning family violence. **Minister Shanmugam** has outlined the holistic response that MHA is taking.





- b. Responding to **Ms Hany Soh** and **Mr Zhulkarnain Abdul Rahim**, **SMS Sim Ann** has elaborated on how the Sunlight Alliance for Action will promote greater awareness of online harms, and provide more holistic support to advocates in the community, as well as victims.
10. On support for caregivers, many members such as **Ms Rachel Ong** and **Mr Vikram Nair** have welcomed the enhancement of the Home Caregiving Grant.
 - a. **Ms Joan Pereira**, **Mr Sharael Taha** and **Ms Tin Pei Ling** called on the Government to increase the capacity for respite care. In response, **Parl Sec Rahayu** shared the Health Ministry's commitment to make it more accessible and affordable.
 - b. To **Mr Yip Hon Weng's** suggestion, **MOS Low Yen Ling** shared how the Government is working with community partners to strengthen peer support networks to better support caregivers.
11. On changing mindsets, we absolutely agree with **Ms Ng Ling Ling**, **Mr Seah Kian Peng**, **Ms He Ting Ru**, **Mr Leon Perera**, **Dr Shahira Abdullah** and **Ms Carrie Tan** that it is foundational. We also agree with **Ms Janet Ang** and **Assoc Prof Jamus Lim** that more women are ready today for leadership roles.
12. **Minister Masagos** has declared his support and his Ministry's active interventions on this front. At the same time, **Minister Ong Ye Kung** underscored society's collective duty.
13. Sir, even with extensive consultations and wide-ranging engagements, no White Paper or parliamentary debate on women's development can claim to have addressed all pertinent issues that Singaporeans care about.
14. Some questions take time to consider, like those raised by **Ms Hazel Poa** on mandating CPF top-ups for caregivers by their spouses, or those by **Ms Rachel Ong** and **Mr Gerald Giam** on legislating parental or family care leave.
15. Other questions have no simple answers. For example, should paternity and maternity leave benefits be equalised, to better reflect the desire for equal sharing of responsibilities between fathers and mothers in caring for their newborns?
 - a. But as **MOS Sun Xueling** has pointed out, societal norms constrain men from fully utilising existing leave provisions.
 - b. More leave provided does not automatically lead to more leave taken. At which point would mindsets have shifted sufficiently, such that the equal provision of parental leave would in fact result in the equal sharing of responsibilities?
16. Questions like these should not be forgotten. Every now and then, we should revisit them. And even if we don't, Mr Louis Ng will make sure that we do.
17. Like the subject of elective egg freezing which **Ms Cheng Li Hui** championed for years, it takes time to develop deeper understanding and to build consensus on what is right for our women and society.
18. Likewise, for workplace fairness which labour MPs have actively championed and worked on the ground to achieve for years, new legislation builds on the steady gains we have already made to boost female employment in every age group.



19. So, Sir, by any measure, this White Paper and its 25 recommendations are a major milestone for our whole-of-nation approach to Singapore women’s development.

20. In fact, the White Paper distills the views of Singaporeans over the year-long Conversations. As early as September last year, Prime Minister Lee had outlined its key recommendations.

21. So this makes me a little puzzled to hear **Ms He Ting Ru** say there isn’t sufficient time to consider them. It also seems contrary to calls on the Government to move faster, not on recommendations but on implementation.

22. This is because when fully implemented, the White Paper promises to realise more closely our vision of a fairer and more inclusive society, where men and women partner each other as equals, and can pursue their aspirations freely and to the fullest.

23. In truth, advancing the cause of women is a journey without end. In every generation, we must find new ways to elevate women. We cross each new milestone in the hopes of going further to reach the next.

24. As we commit ourselves to action, it is also worth asking what today’s debate has achieved.

25. I suggest to members that its **greatest contribution is in upholding the values we hold dear as a society**, and which will serve as our north star as we seek out the next milestones in women’s development.

26. What are these values?

Values underpinning Singapore women’s development

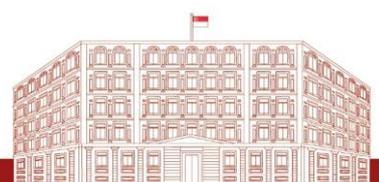
27. The first and foremost has to be the **equality of women and men**.

28. History is replete with examples of women being subjugated by men.

- a. In ancient Athens, widely regarded as the birthplace of democracy, women received little education. They lived in their own quarters separate from men, and were confined to household duties. Not that these were unimportant, but women were otherwise excluded in society.
- b. Even towards the end of the European age of Enlightenment, French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued that women did not need to be educated to the same extent as men, since their main duty in life was to please their husband and educate their sons.
- c. Similar attitudes permeated Eastern tradition. Confucius had a famous saying “女子无才便是德”, meaning the lack of talent in a woman is a virtue.

29. It is clear from this debate that here in modern-day Singapore, we firmly reject such narrow-mindedness towards women. Instead, we reaffirm the value of equality between women and men.

30. No one is left in doubt that Singapore **women should have equal opportunities to pursue their aspirations, as much as men**.



31. The tone of this debate has also upheld the value of **partnership**. **Women should be regarded as equal partners of men, not only at work but also at home.**

32. We believe that more for girls and women does not mean less for boys and men. Workplace fairness, flexible work arrangements and caregiver support benefit women as well as men.

33. We aim to ensure that advances for one do not diminish the other. Instead, it strengthens boys and men when our mothers, sisters, wives and daughters are uplifted.

34. In a true partnership, both gain from each other's growth. This is the only sustainable way forward.

35. In the same way, the partnership between the Government and the community at large has helped to bring about positive change for Singapore women.

36. A third and essential value underpinning equality and partnership is that of **mutual respect between men and women**.

37. As a society, we should respect women's place in it and honour their contributions.

38. Equally, we respect men's choice and ability to support women in their capacities as fathers, husbands, brothers, bosses, colleagues and friends.

39. Mutual respect shapes our attitudes and beliefs about women and men.

- a. They reach the corners of our minds that laws, regulations, guidelines and practices will never fully reach.
- b. They determine the culture and norms within which we all live.
- c. They move our hearts and spur us to action, so that supporting women is a "want to do", rather than "have to do".

40. At its core, respect means that:

- a. Women should not be exploited;
- b. Women should not be sidelined;
- c. Women should not be stereotyped.

Rather,

- a. Women deserve to be recognised for their contributions;
- b. Women deserve to be empowered to succeed;
- c. Women deserve to be respected as equal partners in society.

41. These core values of **equality**, **partnership** and **mutual respect** must endure with every step we take in advancing women's interests. It is now up to us to put our values once again into action.



Conclusion

42. Sir, I would like to bring this debate to a close by returning to its core significance.
43. More than anything else, this White Paper is **about honouring Singapore women, recognising their place in society, and committing to achieve further progress for women.**
44. Let me explain why, in Mandarin.
45. 我国历代的女性同胞，都在她们各自的领域中取得非凡的成就。因此，我们也要通过这份白皮书，表扬女性同胞，并认同她们在社会中扮演的重要角色。
- 我们要表扬她们不屈不挠的精神，为了在社会里发出宏亮有力的声音，为了获得更大的尊重和认同，她们不畏挑战，克服重重困难，取得各种胜利。我们要表扬她们努力不懈开创新河，帮助她们身边的其他女性也取得成功。
 - 白皮书的可贵之处，不单是法律或政策方面的调整。它也带动全民正视及进一步推动新加坡女性的发展，把我们珍惜的价值观付诸于行动。
 - 其核心精神在于，打造一个更平等、更具包容性的社会。我们的同胞们 - 不论性别，不分男女 - 都能获得尊重及公平的对待，让所有国人，包括女性在内，都能自由、自信地追逐和实现她们的梦想。

English translation of paragraph 44:

Over the past decades, Singapore women have achieved exceptional progress in various fields. This White Paper is therefore about honouring Singapore women and recognising their place in society.

- We honour them for fighting the battles to be seen and heard, to be recognised and valued. We honour them for their unyielding spirit, that has led to many triumphs over adversity. We honour them for their unwavering commitment to blazing a trail, and paving the way for other women to succeed.
- The value of the White Paper goes beyond legislative and policy changes. Through a whole-of-nation plan of action, it aims to achieve further progress for Singapore women, by putting the values we hold dear into action.
- At its core, the White Paper seeks to build a fairer and more inclusive society – where Singapore women, partnering men as equals, with mutual respect, can pursue and fulfill their aspirations freely and fully.

46. Sir, at the start of the debate, I described my own struggles as a working woman, highlighting the men who were my staunchest allies – my husband, my father and father-in-law, my brothers, my bosses and colleagues.
47. Equally, many women in my life have been instrumental.



48. My popo, a widow from the time she was in her late 30s, began to educate me well before I started school. Riding on a little trishaw in Joo Chiat to visit her former midwife and relatives, Popo pointed to all the signboards on shops we passed by, to teach me to recognise Chinese characters.
49. Thanks to Popo's spirit of adventure, I served as her English-speaking travel guide on trips abroad and cultivated my own curiosity about the world. I remember filling all the immigration forms – that's how you learn English; not too bad a way.
50. My mother, a former police officer, held court at work and at home. She is not one to easily take no for an answer, nor will she ever retreat to helplessness in any situation.
51. Because of mum, I learnt how to juggle my studies, my passion for basketball, as well as preparing meals daily for my younger brothers.
52. My mother-in-law, who had raised seven children on a shoestring and cared for half a dozen more grandchildren, graciously helped with our late additions when they arrived. Without her support in those critical first years, I would easily have given up.
53. My twin daughters whose wide-eyed wonder and joyful encouragement inspired mummy to finally get a drivers' licence.
54. My reliable helper of 23 years whom I have always introduced as “the children's real mother”, Carmen, won her 10-year fight against breast cancer and is still with us.
55. Khoo Seok Lin, Director of Planning in EDB in the 1990s, who stuck her neck out to recommend a scholarship for me, because she believed there was room in the organisation for both me and the only other scholarship recipient that year, a man.
56. Shirley Chen and Anna Chan who, as my bosses, showed how women can assert our views with conviction and grace.
57. My PAs and security officers at different times, Patricia, Alice, Wendy, Chris, Jeya, Alicia, Eunice, Iris, Jocelyn, Silver and Charlene. I am so blessed to have them in my life, because they make every day so much better for me.
58. My best-friends-forever since childhood, my newfound sisters in the labour movement and PAP Women's Wing, with whom I share laughter and tears.
59. Sir, at its core, the White Paper is about **enabling all the women around us to be the best that they can be, so we in turn empower each other, as role models, as teachers and mentors, as advocates and champions, as helpers and supporters.**
60. Years later when we look back, it is the fact of so many more stories to tell, so many more women to honour, that we know today's efforts have borne fruit.
61. Years later when we look back, it is the fact of so many more collective actions, so many more ground-up initiatives, that we see the power of alignment in hearts and minds towards the common cause of women's development.
62. Years later when we look back, this must be a moment to celebrate, because we leaned forward to achieve greater progress for Singapore women, we put our values into action once again, and jointly ushered in a new dawn, leading to a fairer and more inclusive society, where more women partner men as equals, fulfil more of our aspirations freely and fully!



63. Sir, I beg to move.

