

**SPEECH BY SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE FOR COMMUNICATIONS AND
INFORMATION, MR TAN KIAT HOW, AT THE INTERNATIONAL WOMEN IN
STEM & MEDICINE SYMPOSIUM 2024**

“Inspiring the Next Generation of Women in STEM and Medicine”

25 MARCH 2024

A very good morning to Professor Tan Eng Chye, President of National University of Singapore.

Professor Joseph Sung, Dean of the Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine, Nanyang Technological University

and the many distinguished guests, speakers and brilliant minds in STEM and Medicine fields gathered here today.

1. I'm very delighted to join all of you to celebrate International Women's Day. Today, we celebrate the remarkable achievements of women in the fields of Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Medicine – disciplines that are shaping the future of the world.
2. Singapore's success story is one that is intricately linked to innovation and the resourcefulness of our people. As we strive to be a key player in the knowledge economy and the digital economy, we need to harness the full potential of our men and women alike.
3. In fact, I'm very proud to share that the Singapore Government is one of the earliest champions for women's development.
4. In 1961 – more than 60 years ago when Singapore wasn't even independent then - the Women's Charter was enacted in Singapore. It was a progressive piece of legislation that protected women against physical abuse, provided them with financial protection in divorce and required monogamous marriages for non-Muslims. This

came at a time when women could not own properties, were not as educated, and polygamous marriages were common.

5. The Charter was a promise made by our Founding Father of Singapore, the first Prime Minister of Singapore, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, before he was elected as Prime Minister. Many of you may not know this, but Mrs. Lee Kuan Yew was one of the strongest advocates for women's rights. In fact, Mrs Lee was the one who championed the Women's Charter in her first and only political speech in her life, where she advocated for equal pay for women and for monogamous marriages.

6. The Women's Charter of 1961 was therefore a powerful statement by the Government then, that women were equal partners of men.

7. In fact, there's a Chinese saying: “女人能顶半边天”. Translated: “Women can hold up at least half the sky”. Since then, the Government has championed education for all, ensuring girls had the same opportunities as boys. Compared to the year 2000, the proportion of females aged 25-34 years old with a university qualification has nearly tripled to 64% in 2021. Education is a powerful tool for women's empowerment in Singapore, paving the way for a brighter future filled with opportunities.

8. Singapore has also moved to empower women to achieve their career aspirations, while recognising the multiple roles they play in our society.

9. In 1968 when the Employment Act was passed, women in Singapore had legislated paid maternity leave. This was not an easy move then as there was a high cost to employers. At that time, Singapore was just three years into our independence and was facing high unemployment; majority of the workforce then was also lowly-educated. But that was the commitment made by the government in recognising the rights of women.

10. We have increased this benefit by adding paid childcare leave and supporting employers to provide better work life balance for our working women. More and better childcare facilities and higher subsidies for working mothers have enabled women to transition back to the workforce, if they wish to do so.

11. The Government is committed to continue building on existing efforts in advancing women's development.

12. First, the Government will **introduce the Workplace Fairness Legislation** to strengthen Singapore's harmonious workplace culture while providing protection and redress to workers who experience discrimination. Drafting of the legislation is aimed to be ready in the second half of this year.

13. As part of the Workplace Fairness Legislation, it will strengthen protections against discrimination and provide assurance to workers that they can come forward to report without fear of retaliation. It will also ensure that employees and jobseekers, men and women, have fair access to job opportunities. As part of the whole legislation, one area where we protect against discrimination is against discrimination based on sex.

14. Second, we are **facilitating greater women representation in leadership roles**. The percentage of women on boards of Singapore's Top 100 listed companies increased from 7.5% in 2014, to 20.8% in 2022. A remarkable achievement in a short period of time. And we want to do more. The revised Singapore Exchange Listing Rules require companies to disclose their board diversity policy, a significant move to secure listed companies' commitment to appoint more women on boards.

15. Third, recognising that women still tend to shoulder greater caregiving responsibilities, **we will continue to encourage and enhance ways for women and their families to juggle both work and caregiving responsibilities at the same time**.

16. The Government will be launching a set of Tripartite Guidelines on Flexible Work Arrangements this year. The Guidelines will set norms and expectations on how requests for Flexible Work Arrangements should be properly considered by employers, but also used responsibly by employees.

17. Of course, we also encourage fathers to bear an equal share in parenting responsibilities. But I must say that as a father of two young kids, I always tell my wife that it is never fair, it is never equal. Women and wives bear certainly a much larger share of caregiving duties. While we can never ensure that it is absolutely fair and equal, I think fathers should always play an active role and always be there to support our wives. And one example is the Shared Parental Leave that we have introduced in Singapore, which allows couples to split parental leave entitlements. We hope that such initiatives will encourage fathers to take a more active role in childcare.

18. We are seeing some encouraging results. For example, our employment rate for women aged 25-64 has increased over the last five years, from 72% in 2018 to 77% in 2023. The gender pay gap has also further narrowed and was 6% lower in 2023 as compared to 2018.

19. As we continue to build an inclusive workforce with equal opportunities for all, I would like to acknowledge that the STEM and Medicine fields offer a multitude of exciting challenges and opportunities for our women to make a real difference in the world.

20. In Singapore, we now have one of the highest proportions globally of women in our tech workforce. This was 41% in 2020, well above the global average of 28%.

21. To groom our next generation, the Government has been taking steps to empower young girls to embrace and excel in these exciting fields.

22. From a young age, girls in schools are exposed to STEM. A Microsoft study done in 2015 found that 74% of female students in Singapore wanted to learn more about coding. We ignite their curiosity through engaging initiatives such as the Code for Fun programme in primary school, to equip our students with computational thinking skills.

23. Fostering interest is just the first step. Initiatives such as the Promotion of Women in Engineering, Research and Science (POWERS) programme offer invaluable support through mentorship, research, and skills training. It also creates a network where women can connect, share experiences, and inspire one another.

24. Another example is the SG Digital Scholarship for infocomm and media-related studies at the polytechnic, undergraduate and postgraduate levels. I am very glad to share that, in 2021, 31% of our Scholarship recipients were women, with many of them pursuing courses in STEM.

25. With support and guidance, these initiatives aim to spark interest and provide opportunities for women to establish meaningful careers in these fields.

26. Lastly, the Government's efforts alone are not sufficient. We need the support of employers, associations, industry leaders and mentors, both men and women, in continuing to cultivate a STEM and Medicine community that is inclusive.

27. Efforts such as today's International Women in STEM & Medicine Symposium are important in bringing together the community, to celebrate the achievements of women in these fields, and inspire more women to step up.

28. Similarly, the SG Women in Tech movement by the Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA) brings together the tech community and industry partners to celebrate women in our tech industry. It has reached more than 120,000 people and provides networking and mentorship opportunities to motivate more women to pursue tech careers.

29. We also started the SG Women in Tech Corporate Pledge to encourage companies to create better support systems for women in the workplace, especially for younger women pursuing a career in tech. In 2021 alone, 53 companies, including big MNCs like Amazon, Microsoft, Razer and Shopee, have come onboard with concrete measures to support women, such as coaching and mentorship programmes in their organisations, as well as their commitment to fair hiring practices.

30. Collectively, these partnerships and platforms can pave the way for a more inclusive and diverse workforce for STEM and Medicine in Singapore.

31. In conclusion, I am very happy to note that we have made good progress in empowering women over the decades. We have seen a significant rise in the number of women attaining higher education and their workforce participation, with more women taking on leadership roles in the various domains. However, this is a never-ending journey, and we cannot rest on our laurels. In line with our broader Forward Singapore agenda, the Government will continue to work together with our partners, both in academia, corporate and the community to nurture an environment that empowers women and provide opportunities for all.

32. Let me once again congratulate all the remarkable women here today for making waves in STEM and Medicine. I am confident that your achievements will inspire the next generation of women and girls to embrace the challenges and boundless opportunities ahead.

33. So, on this International Women's Day, let us recommit to building a future where women are not just at the table but leading the charge in shaping a better tomorrow, for Singapore and around the world.

34. Thank you very much and wishing all of you a fruitful symposium.