

Celebrating the 100th Anniversary of International Women's Day
Creating the Future – Women in Society, Economy & Government

Speech for IWD Celebration Dinner

Mr Robin Teo

Best Speaker, SCWO-SMU Debating Tournament

Guest-of-Honour, Mrs S. R. Nathan, Minister Mrs Lim Hwee Hua, Minister of State, Mrs Yu-Foo Yee Shoon, Member of Parliament, Mrs Josephine Teo, Distinguished Ambassadors and High Commissioners, President of SCWO, Mrs Laura Hwang Directors, Member organisations of SCWO, Ladies and gentlemen,

Good evening.

I would like to first like to thank the SCWO for granting me this opportunity to speak briefly before you today.

However, one thing did about this event did disappoint me. When I told my friends that I was speaking before an audience at a women's rights event, the reaction was near universal – a laughter or a snigger, then an incredulous “What do YOU have to do with women's rights?” It was funny at first, but by the 5th time I heard it, I began to think there's something about me.

And indeed, I am up here only because of a combination of luck and happenstance. I participated in the inaugural SCWO-SMU Debating Championship and fortuitously finished top of the pile in terms of individual rankings. And it is that event that I am tasked to talk about.

Like any trained debater, I shall elaborate on my experience by expounding on three discrete points.

First, it was exceedingly well-organized. Credit must go to the SCWO for making the whole thing possible. And, as much as it pains the NUS student in me to admit this, equal credit must go to the SMU Debating society for running a splendidly run tournament. Lastly, credit must also go to Satya, Andrea and Neha for the breadth and depth of interesting and intellectually vigorous motions they came up with.

Second, it made me and my teammates think rather deeply about women's rights. Competitive debating is hardly the most deliberative arena – it is combative, partisan and didactic. Kind of like Fox News but smarter. However, through the sheer breadth of topics we had to debate on, the various participants had to place themselves in the shoes – or heels, if you will – of a very diverse range of actors in the international struggle for women's rights. This ranged from the Afghan woman living in the villages outside Kabul to the chauvinistic boss who unknowingly sexually harasses a female subordinate. Indeed, it was a surreal cognitive experience to go from fighting for the right of women in the developing world to an education, to fighting to protect the rights of a sexual harasser to not face criminal liability.

One may question the value of such moral relativity. But I believe that this intellectual exercise is critical to a deeper understanding of the global women's rights struggle. If there's any insight that I have gleaned from this tournament, it is that the concerns of women are both universal and yet not monolithic. And that women make for bloody good debaters. I consider it an honour to be able to take part in the inaugural SCWO

Debating Championships, and hope it will become an annual event that attracts even more student participation.

Lastly, since today is meant to be a celebration of womenkind, I am happy that my endeavors in this competition would benefit one particular woman. The Australian High Commission has generously offered me 2 tickets Down Under as a prize. And surprisingly, quite a number of women have generously offered to be my plus one. This includes my esteemed teammate Sadhana sitting right there, AND my ex girlfriend. However, I decided that the main beneficiary of the prize will be my mother. She's never been outside Asia before, and I think of all the women I have infuriated in my life she indisputably ranks first. So I am glad that on International Woman's Day, the most important woman in my life will get to reap the rewards.

Thanks for your indulgence. And happy International Woman's Day.