

**SPEECH BY MDM HALIMAH YACOB, MINISTER OF STATE FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT, YOUTH & SPORTS, AT SINGAPORE COUNCIL OF WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY GALA DINNER
20 MARCH 2012, 8:00 PM AT GOODWOOD PARK HOTEL**

Mrs Mary Tan, Guest-of-Honour and Patron of SCWO

Mrs Laura Hwang, President of SCWO

Ms Grace Fu, Senior Minister of State for Information, Communications & the Arts and the Environment and Water Resources

Excellencies

Parliamentary colleagues

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

Good evening. This year is the 101st year of International Women's Day. Worldwide, women celebrate the progress made by women and what women have achieved in society, in corporations and in Governments. Recognition of women's contributions has gained much traction, with some countries achieving more progress than others. Singapore embraces the global commitment for gender equality, based on our principle of meritocracy with equal opportunities for both men and women.

2 So, what have women in Singapore achieved? Today, Singaporean women are better educated. The literacy rate of resident^[1] females aged 15 years and over, was 94.1% in 2011^[2]. Ten years ago, it was 89.2%^[3]. Last year, 57% of our resident female population aged 15 and over were in the labour force^[4], up from 51.6% for females in 2001^[5]. Following the General Elections in May last year, more women are in Parliament today. The percentage has increased from 22.3% to 24.2%^[6], exceeding the Inter-Parliamentary Union's world average of 19.8%^[7]. For judicial appointments, as at end of last year, women made up 49% of Subordinate Court judges and 17.7% of Supreme Court judges. In comparison, a 2010 European Commission report^[8] revealed that judges of Supreme Courts in all EU countries comprised 31% women and 69% men. In the business sector, 6.9% of all boardroom positions in SGX-listed companies were held by women in 2010. Although the number is not high, I am confident that this percentage will increase.

3 I see many familiar faces in the audience and know many of you have set aside time to serve as volunteers on boards and committees despite your busy schedules. Not that men do not volunteer, they certainly do! However, women have long realised the importance of selfless service to their families and community. There are many exemplary women, such as Florence Nightingale and Mother Teresa, who made significant contributions to their community and the world. We need not aspire to be another Florence Nightingale or Mother Teresa, but we can lend a helping hand as

volunteers. In this increasingly high tech and low touch world, a personal touch can go a long way to make our society warmer and more caring. I am happy to share from the 2010 NVPC survey that the percentage of women in Singapore volunteering has increased from 19% in 2008^[9] to 22% in 2010.

4 Moving to the international arena, Singaporean women are also making an impact. Just to name a few, these women include **Dr Noeleen Heyzer**, who is serving as Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP); **Professor Chan Heng Chee**, Singapore's Ambassador to the United States of America; **Ms Karen Tan**, High Commissioner to India and non-resident High Commissioner to Nepal and Bhutan; **Ms Tan Yee Woan**, Permanent Representative to the United Nations in Geneva; and **Mrs Chua Siew San**, Singapore's recently appointed Ambassador to the Kingdom of Thailand.

5 Undoubtedly, women in Singapore have made tremendous strides in almost every sector of the economy. However, we are not resting on our laurels. More can be done, such as encouraging more women to join the workforce, supporting working women, and empowering women, especially older women, to take better control of their health and finances. More can be done in terms of better work-life balance. In a recent survey by Accenture which was highlighted in Business Times on 15 March, only 55% of Singapore respondents claimed to have work-life balance most or all of the time, as compared to 71% of respondents globally. Almost half, 48%, of Singapore respondents reported that they had to sacrifice family time for job success, while 42% said career demands had a negative impact on family life. This trend is apparent across Asia. In contrast, employees from Europe, notably, 84% of Dutch respondents, stated that they did not have to sacrifice family time to be successful at work. As work life is a business strategy to attract and retain talent, enhance productivity and profitability, Singapore companies can certainly learn from these countries on how we can enable and empower staff to harmonise their family and work commitments by mutually responsible and agreed flexible work arrangements.

6 As you already know, Singapore's 2012 budget is the Government's commitment to build an inclusive society and stronger Singapore for all. But budget allocations alone will not create an inclusive society. For our society to be truly inclusive, we require everyone's effort. It is a shared responsibility amongst citizens, Government and the community at large.

7 SCWO's International Women's Day theme of "Connecting for Success" resonates well with the spirit of nurturing a shared responsibility to foster an inclusive society. Women's issues are multi-faceted and we need to tap the unique strengths and resources of every women organisation. Hence, networking - building new networks, strengthening existing ones and linking one agency to another - is the key for collaborations and success in advancing women's issues. Personally, I have seen many positive outcomes through various networking interactions. The connections are all out there for us, if we but see and build on them.

8 Last year, the Office for Women's Development in MCYS had the privilege of bringing the People's Association Women's Integration Network Council, or PA WIN for short, and Tsao Foundation together for a collaborative effort on a Financial Education Programme for Mature Women. This Programme empowers women 40 years and above by teaching them to better manage their expenses and savings. Under this collaboration, Tsao Foundation runs a 'Train-the-Trainers' programme for PA WIN's Women Executive Committee members. This in turn empowers the Committee members to run more such classes for mature women at the constituency level. I am happy to know that PA WIN Council will roll out this initiative to all Community Clubs. This perfect match by the Office for Women's Development is possible because of the networking and outreach

strengths of the Women Executive Committees and the women-friendly programme by the Tsao Foundation.

9 As many of you already know, SCWO's **BoardAgender** encourages and enables more women to take on senior leadership roles. It is a conscious and concerted initiative to promote inclusive and gender-balanced businesses. One year into its inception, BoardAgender has already recruited an impressive number of champions from various backgrounds, ranging from MNCs, private sector entrepreneurs, private and public sector leaders and corporations.

10 The **Women's Register**, *an initiative* by SCWO, offers yet another networking avenue for mentorship and internship opportunities. Through online media, dialogue sessions and volunteer events, **Women's Register** also increases women's community involvement. It currently has 44 mentors and 216 mentees, and has organized events, including dialogue sessions, talks and career clinics.

11 Women in Singapore today are better educated and better informed than previous generations. We are valued contributors to our communities, the corporate world and society at large. We have equal access as men to work, education and healthcare. Imagine how much further we would go if we learn to successfully create and sustain positive connections throughout our lives.

12 With these thoughts, I wish you a pleasant evening.

13 Thank you.

[1] Resident population comprises Singapore citizens and permanent residents.

[2] <http://www.singstat.gov.sg/stats/themes/people/gender.pdf>

[3] 98.1% in 2011 and 96.7% in 2001 for men.

[4] Employment statistics from <http://www.singstat.gov.sg/stats/keyind.html#keyind>

[5] <http://www.singstat.gov.sg/stats/themes/economy/hist/labour.html>

[6] These figures include our elected Members of Parliament (MPs), Non-Constituency Members of Parliament (NCMPs) and Nominated Members of Parliament (NMPs).

[7] Both houses combined as at 30 November 2011 (<http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>)

[8] Page 7 of "More Women in Senior Positions: Key to Economic Stability and Growth", published in 2010 by the European Commission.

[9] http://www.nvpc.org.sg/Library/Documents/ResearchReports/NVPC_IGS_2010_media_updated_16Nov2010.pdf

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