

SPEECH BY MDM HALIMAH YACOB, SPEAKER OF PARLIAMENT  
AT THE SCWO INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY FUNDRAISING  
CELEBRATION DINNER ON 30 MARCH 2013  
AT MANDARIN ORCHARD HOTEL

Our Guest of Honour, Mrs Mary Tan, Patron of SCWO, Mrs Laura Huang President of SCWO, Minister Grace Fu, Minister Chan Chun Sing, my parliamentary colleagues, excellencies and distinguished guests,

I would first like to wish all our wonderful women a Happy International Women's Day. I thank SCWO for inviting me and I congratulate SCWO on your anniversary celebrations.

It is truly fitting that once a year, the whole world celebrates women in recognition of the vast contributions that women have made. Indeed, women have made their mark. In Singapore too, we have seen women making steady progress in many fields. Even in the fields hitherto considered as more attractive to men, such as the sciences and engineering, more women can now be found. It will not be farfetched for me to say that if you choose to be born a woman, and have the choice of where to be born, Singapore is not a bad place for you. We don't need to look at the statistics to know that the lives of women in Singapore have indeed improved. We just need to compare our mothers' generation with that of our own, and our generation with that of our daughters' generation. Each successive generation of women in Singapore are doing much better than the generations before them.

Let me share with you the inspiring stories of three Singaporean women.

My first story is about Dr Juliana Maria Chan Su Ping, a Singaporean scientist who is a Post-Doctoral Researcher at A\*STAR's Molecular Engineering Lab, Science and Engineering Institutes. She was one of two Singaporean women, who won the 2011 L'Oreal For Women

in Science National Fellowships. Dr Juliana Chan's doctorate research resulted in her designing a new type of nanoparticle, which can carry pharmaceutical drugs within them with the potential to deliver any drug to any part of the body that requires it most.

My second story is probably known to most of you. It is about 33 year old equestrian Laurentia Tan, who overcame tremendous odds to become our most famous paralympian and was ST's 2012 athlete of the year, beating three other able bodied nominees. Laurentia suffers from cerebral palsy and profound deafness since young but that has not prevented her from winning many awards including doing Singapore proud by winning a bronze in the Individual Championship and a silver in the Freestyle to Music at last year's Paralympic Games in London.

My third inspiring story is about 24 year old Zahirah Zainordin, the third in a family of six children who lives in a shelter run by New Hope for homeless Singaporeans. Last January, Zahirah graduated with a degree in Hospitality Management from the University of Nevada, offered through the Singapore Institute of Technology, one of the first batch of graduates. Zahirah told Berita Harian how she could only study late at night because she had to do several part time jobs daily due to financial difficulties and reached home only at 11pm. However, even if she had wanted to study in the daytime, there was no space as the shelter was shared with two other families and the only table she could use was fully occupied by the other families for taking their meals and other activities. She is now working as an assistant director in a company.

Three different women with three different success stories to share with us. So we have much to celebrate. Opportunities are now more abundant and women too can aspire to be whatever they want to be. However, before we go over the moon, we also have to

acknowledge that much more remains to be done. Although more women have entered the workforce and quite a number too have risen to the top, women continue to receive conflicting signals over their role in our society. On the one hand, women are encouraged to work and we even have programmes to support their reintegration into the workforce. On the other hand, women are still expected to carry most of the responsibilities at home. And this is a global issue. International Labour Organisation Reports show that globally working women perform more hours of housework per week compared to male workers. The distribution of work at home is still uneven despite whatever progress women may have made. Perceptions about the roles of men and women at home need to change, otherwise more women will suffer from burnout and work life balance will further decline. So, our efforts to encourage marriage and parenthood, cannot just focus on providing incentives and enhancing schemes to help families to have more babies. We also need to encourage a cultural shift so that co-sharing of responsibilities at home becomes a social norm. Anecdotally, we can see that more men are doing housework and taking care of the children but we need to see a bigger shift. So, I welcome efforts by Dads for Life and Center for Fathering, among others, to promote active parenthood among fathers. Hopefully, over time, we will no longer need to talk about this as it is a given in our society.

Also, even as women pursue their careers, some do face obstacles and need champions to open doors and break down barriers. This requires a change not only in the types of employee schemes and benefits that are offered by companies. It is equally important to change the corporate culture to be more supportive of women. One MNC that I know of has programmes to help identify, groom and support women into leadership positions. They do this through a mentorship programme as they realize that there are insufficient women in senior management positions, which does not augur well for their policy on equal opportunities. And we also know that despite all our progress, the number of women on the

boards of public listed companies are still very dismal at a mere 6.9%, a point which I had raised many times in the past.

About two years ago, I visited Shell Bukom to officiate the opening of mothers' rooms at the refinery. A refinery has a strong image of being places only for men but the greater use of technology and automation, have enabled more women to work there. In order to attract and retain women technicians, Shell has had to change its culture. By providing mothers' rooms for their women technician in the refinery, they are not only catering to the needs of breastfeeding mothers who need to express their milk and now have a conducive place to do so. What is more important is the signal that they are sending to talented and capable women who would otherwise skip Shell as a career option, that it is an equal opportunity employer and is open to all talents. I hope that there will be many more employers like Shell who do not regard women employee's caregiving functions as an impediment but instead proactively make adjustments to embrace and support them.

Let me conclude by saying how glad I am to have many VWOs like SCWO working with the government to help uplift the lives of our women. SCWO runs a shelter for women who are victims of family violence. They also launched Maintenance Support Central to help women pursue their maintenance claims more easily. SCWO is a well regarded women's organisation with a dedicated leadership, that has done much to advance the cause of women in Singapore.

Sisters, let me leave you with these words from our paralympian Laurentia Tan as you dine. "Sometimes opportunities and dreams may come in disguise and everyone should grab whatever opportunities that come along - Carpe Diem! You never know where things may

lead, so go ahead and follow your dreams.....persevere! Focus on the things you enjoy and make you happy, life is too short to be otherwise. Shoot for the moon; even if you miss, you'll land among the stars."

Congratulations SCWO on your anniversary, and I wish everyone a wonderful evening.