

**SPEECH BY MS INDRANEE RAJAH (SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE, MINISTRY OF LAW AND MINISTRY OF EDUCATION) AT NATIONAL YOUNG LEADERS' DAY WOMEN'S EDITION, 9 MARCH 2013 AT KALLANG THEATRE**

Mr Martin Tan, Co-Founder and Executive Director, Halogen Foundation Singapore

Mrs Laura Hwang, President, Singapore Council of Women's Organisations

Ms Selina Gan, General Manager, Singapore Council of Women's Organisations

Educators and

Young ladies,

Good morning.

- 1 I am very glad to be here at National Young Leaders' Day, especially for young women like yourselves. The theme for today's event is "Free to be". Freedom. What is it? According to the Oxford Dictionary, it is the power or right to act, speak, or think as one wants. It is also the state of not being imprisoned or enslaved. When you think of yourself as a young woman, do you think women today are truly free? How about when you think about women in other countries?
  
- 2 This week, women are celebrating worldwide International Women's Day. Through the years, women have gained much freedom. Compared to the past where the majority of women were expected to stay home and take care of children, we now have access to education, we can earn our own income by taking on male-exclusive jobs, and even wear pants! However, upon looking closer, we still see imprisonment and slavery. In China, many female foetuses in the rural areas are aborted because with the one child policy, many families prefer males to females. In Africa, female genital mutilation is still practiced. In rural India, widows are expected to be put to death at their husband's funeral. Earlier this year, we were shocked by the New Dehli rape incident. Worldwide, many women are still denied of opportunities for education, jobs and positions.

3 What about us in Singapore? As evidenced by the four speakers you will get to hear from later, Singaporean women are indeed free to be. Today, you will get to meet Gina Romero, an entrepreneur and Head of Athena Network, Singapore; Janice Wong Founder of 2am:dessertbar; Singapore Woman Award 2012 recipient Cassandra Chiu and Award winning journalist Pamela Ho. For myself, I am both a lawyer and a politician. You will hear stories of how these women are free to be, free to choose, and free to explore. All of them have taken challenging, non-conventional paths and some of them have broke into male dominated industries.

4 (We would like to invite Ms Indranee to share her own journey and story as we find that life stories resonate with young people)

5 For everything that we enjoy, often, there is hard work behind it. The freedom that you and I enjoy today is not cheap. Before us and alongside us are many women who have braved many storms to pave the way. One such woman is my colleague, Madam Halimah Yacob, who is Singapore's first female Speaker of Parliament. She spent many years in the labour movement fighting injustices, standing up for the rights of the workers and giving a voice to those who were voiceless. Many others have gone ahead of us, fighting for equal rights for education, fair treatment and opportunities at the workplace, fair legal rights to protect women. In Singapore, one key factor that has liberated women is education. With equal opportunities for education, women can freely learn and attain the highest qualifications that they can possibly achieve. With education, we can decide what to do with our lives. We can earn our own income, own our home, save for our retirement. We don't have to sit back and wait for people to do things; we can use our education, talents and passions to make a difference. As you go back to school next week, remember to relish the opportunity you have now.

6 This freedom we enjoy is yours to protect and advance. How will you guard this freedom and not take it for granted? What will you do with the freedom that has been fought for you? How can you use this freedom wisely to dream,

create and grow? Will you waste this freedom or would you use it to build your community? Will you extend this privilege and help other women globally?

- 7 All of you have more influence than you think you have. Do not be afraid to speak up. You matter. I see you as leaders now. With an increased influence as you grow, your impact in this world will be even greater. When I meet you 20 years down the road, I would love to see you flourishing, blooming, and leading well. I believe many of you will lead yourselves well; many of you will be excellent leaders in your families as sisters, daughters, mothers, sisters-in-law, mothers-in-law and eventually even grandmothers; many of you will be wonderful and impactful leaders in a wide variety of fields and even be involved in ground-breaking work.
- 8 As Helen Keller, the famed blind American author said, “It is a terrible thing to see and have no vision.” My hope is that today, you will see things you have never seen, and beyond that, develop a vision that will guide your path.
- 9 **To Halogen Foundation Singapore and Singapore Council of Women’s Organisations,** thank you for inviting me today. Thank you for championing these young women and creating such an opportunity for them.

Thank you.