

## **SPEECH BY PROFESSOR TOMMY KOH**

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### Salutation

1. President and Mrs Tan, the Speaker of Parliament, Halimah Yacob, Minister Grace Fu, SMS Amy Khor, Parl Sec Low Yen Ling, Members of Parliament, Your Excellencies, Laura Hwang and other Leaders of the SCWO, Honorees and members of their families and friends.

### Selection Panel

2. I would like to thank the President of SCWO for giving me the privilege of chairing the selection panel. I would also like to thank the other members of the panel, namely, Dr Kevin Tan, Ambassador Jaya Mohideen, Elaine Ng and Laura Hwang. The panel was able to complete its task expeditiously because of the good work done by Margaret Thomas and Selina Gan.

3. Please join me in showing them our appreciation.

### Longest Campaign

4. Human history is replete with stories of peoples fighting against discrimination and fighting for justice and equality. The longest struggle is that by women. Women want the law to treat them and men as equals. Women want the right to education, employment, inheritance, political participation, security of person, love and marry whosoever she chooses, equal rights in a marriage, etc. One of our honorees, Dr Noeleen Heyzer, is the former head of the UNFund for Women or UNIFEM. I am sure that Dr Heyzer will agree with me that, in many parts of the world, including Asia, women are still discriminated against and do not enjoy justice and equality. The struggle must therefore continue.

### Women in Singapore

5. In Singapore, women and men are treated as equals before the law. This was not always the case. It is therefore right for us to remember and honour the pioneers who opened schools for girls, pioneers who made family planning available, pioneers who campaigned against polygamy and for equal rights for women and pioneers who broke many glass ceilings impeding the rise of women to the top.

### Women's Charter

6. The Women's Charter of 1961 is the Magna Carta for the women of Singapore. In recent years, further progress has been made. Let me refer to some of them. In 2003, the quota restricting the intake of women into the Faculty of Medicine of NUS was abolished. In 2004, the Singapore constitution was amended to accord the same citizenship rights to the children of Singaporean women as for men. In 2005, female civil servants were granted the same medical benefits as male civil servants. The Penal Code and the Evidence Act were amended in 2007 and

2011, respectively, to make marital rape a crime and to make the sexual history of an alleged victim of a sexual assault not relevant and admissible in a prosecution for sexual crimes.

Best in Asia

7. We have done well but there is still room for improvement. For example, women are still under-represented in senior management, on boards of directors and in politics. The UNDP has ranked Singapore No. 13 in the 2012 Gender Inequality Index. We are the best in Asia and Singapore is one of the best places for a girl to be born in.

Conclusion

8. Let me conclude by quoting the following lines from the poem, New Country, written by one of our honorees, Lee Tzu Pheng:

We have borne each other's cries  
long enough to have hope  
neither race nor creed could sever  
the bond between us, sisters

Thus out of darkness shared,  
grown strong from hidden seeds,  
we rejoice as many-hued blooms  
to claim this precious earth;  
make real a hard-won vision.

For no less than boundless life  
is our workplace, playground, home.  
We re-draw the maps for our children,  
daughters and sons, that this island-  
nation may be a new country  
far larger than boundaries show:  
truly free, in being truly human.

9. Thank you very much.

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