

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY 2015

SPEECH BY MDM HALIMAH YACOB, SPEAKER OF PARLIAMENT AND MP FOR JURONG GRC AT THE INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY GALA DINNER 2015 CELEBRATION ORGANISED BY SCWO ON 27 MARCH 2015 AT 7 PM.

My heartfelt greetings to all present this evening. My special thanks to SCWO and the Singapore Women's Hall of Fame (SWHF) Selection panel for the effort in bringing us together to celebrate International Women's Day. Today, we celebrate women by honouring the second ever batch of Singapore Women's Hall of Fame (SWHF) inductees who have contributed, not just in their respective spheres of work, but also, in community service.

I am also very happy to find an apt occasion like today to highlight what makes 2015 a momentous year for women in Singapore. This year, we celebrate the 20th anniversary of Singapore's accession to the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and also 20 years since Singapore adopted the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BDPA). More significantly, we celebrate how far we have come in the past twenty years as a nation that supports the advancement of men and women alike.

In the midst of our celebrations today, our nation is also mourning the loss of our Founding Father and First Prime Minister of Singapore, Mr Lee Kuan Yew. Mr Lee passed away on 23 March 2015 and the nation is grieving over this loss. I have often said, and certainly not in jest, that if a woman has the choice of where to be born, she should choose Singapore. In just a period of fifty years, women's achievements in Singapore have been outstanding. To a significant extent, the rights that we now enjoy are due to the contributions of Mr Lee Kuan Yew, who had set the tone for how women should be treated after we became independent in 1965.

Unlike many countries, we did not have to fight for the right to vote, something which even women in the US had to fight for before it was given to them. We could vote and decide for ourselves what kind of government we want and, therefore, what kind of a future we will have for ourselves and our children. In giving us that right, Mr Lee Kuan Yew's message to Singaporeans and the whole world was loud and clear. Women are equal to men and will be treated as such in this country.

Mr Lee's greatest legacy for women, was to give us equal access to education. Mr Lee said in 1975 that "the key is education. Old-fashioned attitudes of teaching women enough to be literate and useful wives have

undergone profound changes in the last 20 years. Societies which do not educate and use half their potential because they are women are those which will be worse off.” Mr Lee uttered those words forty years ago. Since then, women’s educational status have increased by leaps and bounds, even in the science and engineering subjects. Before 1971 only 6.1%, of women study Engineering but this figure increased to 20.6% in 2010. In the Natural, Physical, Chemical and Mathematical Sciences , before 1971 26.8% of the students were women but in 2010 it increased to 56.2%.

Although he did not set out to target women specifically, by making education a cornerstone of his policy to uplift the lives of Singaporeans, women became one of the main beneficiaries. Imagine, in just one generation we had moved from the Chinese women with bound feet to women who are tonight being honoured by this Hall of Fame. To break such deep seated and entrenched social barriers and prejudices was not an easy task, as in those days girls were treated differently from boys. If families with very limited resources had to choose, they would send their sons to school and keep their daughters at home. Only someone with Mr Lee's convictions, strength and foresight could have changed mind sets and transformed the lives of our women. Mr Lee knew that if women were denied a good education, it would have disastrous consequences

for the nation and the family, as we would be running with only half the engine. As Mr Lee himself acknowledged in 1988, “if we don’t educate women, then we cannot modernise as quickly as we could”.

The second great legacy of Mr Lee's was his strong support for working women. I believe that this was partly due to the influence of his wife, Mdm Kwa Geok Choo, who was equal to him in both intellect and capability. Mrs Lee had continued with her own career even after her children were born, and Mr Lee had on many occasions acknowledged the role that she had played in supporting him and the family whilst he was busy fighting for independence and building a nation. With his own wife a career woman, Mr Lee knew the struggles that women faced in balancing work and family.

So, as early as 1968 when the Employment Act was passed, women in Singapore had legislated paid maternity leave. This was no mean task as there was a cost to employers at a time when Singapore was faced with the grave challenge of creating jobs for thousands of school leavers and the large number of unemployed, when the British pulled out their bases. Since then, we have increased this benefit, by adding paid child care leave and supporting employers through the WorkPro scheme, to provide better work life balance for our working women. More and better

child care facilities and higher subsidies for working mothers have also made it possible for us to achieve one of the highest female employment rate since independence.

As the Prime Minister, Mr Lee again set the tone when the government decided in 1961 to extend equal pay to women in the civil service. This is a policy that is way ahead of its time, as not even many advanced countries at that time adopted this policy. With the adoption of this policy in the nascent stage of our development, the government was sending a clear signal that as an employer, it would not discriminate against women. Today, the civil service employs a significant number of women. The civil service, is also one of the leading employers in providing family friendly benefits. Women with families are given additional paid leave to take care of their children and their elderly parents.

The third legacy of Mr Lee is surely the Women's Charter. The Charter was a promise made by Mr Lee Kuan Yew before he was elected as Prime Minister and in 1960 our Parliament passed the Charter. Many may not know this, but Mrs Lee Kuan Yew had publicly championed women's issues at that time. In 1959 in a broadcast over Radio Malaya, she said, "Our society is still built on the assumption that women are the

social, political and economic inferiors of men. This myth has been made the excuse for the exploitation of female labour. Many women do the same kind of work as men but do not get the same pay ...women and their families must be protected against.....husbands who treat their wives as chattels and abandon their children and families without any thought for their future....We believe that women can make a valuable contribution to our political life. We believe that they can work with men in helping to remould the political future of our country.”

The Women’s Charter protected women against physical abuse, provided them with financial protection in divorce and provided monogamous marriages for non-Muslims. This Charter, won through the dedication of pioneer women activists like Madam Kwa, provides the legal basis for equality between husband and wife, that the Singaporean women enjoy today.

Today, as we celebrate the successes of our women let us also acknowledge the significant contributions that our Founding Prime Minister Mr Lee Kuan Yew had made to raise the status of women in Singapore . With this strong foundation, we are able to scale even greater heights and there are now many successful women in all the

sectors of the economy. Thank you, Mr Lee, for all that you have done for women in Singapore.

Finally, this year, the SWHF honours a very special group of women. They are fervent and committed leaders from the different sectors. I would like to applaud all the SWHF honourees for their meaningful and valuable contributions. I am sure that you would continue with your wonderful work, particularly to the community, and remain an inspiration to other women in our society.

On this note, I wish everyone a very pleasant evening.