

OPENING ADDRESS BY MS JUNIE FOO, PRESIDENT, SCWO AT THE FIRST CONVERSATION ON SINGAPORE WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT ORGANISED BY SCWO ON SATURDAY, 31 OCTOBER 2020, 2PM

A very good afternoon to everyone. Thank you for taking the time off from your Saturday to be here with us. For those who may not know, my name is Junie Foo and I am the current President of the SCWO. It is with the greatest pleasure that I am here today to open this inaugural National Conversation on Singapore Women's Development organised by the SCWO.

SCWO and Conversations on Women's Development

SCWO is honoured, as the national coordinating body for women's organisations in Singapore, to be a part of this ground-breaking effort to improve the lives and conditions of not just women but the people of Singapore as a whole.

This will be the start of many such sessions on Singapore Women's Development -- a topic that is, finally, being addressed, not just by the government but also by the people.

As the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations, we believe that it is important for Singaporean women to be able to have conversations such as this as it aligns with everything that we stand for, which is to empower women to strive for the ideals of Equal Space, Equal Voice and Equal Worth in every aspect of their lives.

Women's Development and Gender Equality

But the idea of Women's Development isn't new. Neither is the issue of gender equality. In fact, such issues have already been brought up in a previous dialogue session.

I know some of us would like this national conversation to be about gender equality, as referred to by Minister Shanmugam in his earlier speeches, and not about women's development which implies that the issues have to do only with women.

I am also aware that some of us are of the view that the conversation should be about women's development because for centuries women have been brought up and conditioned to think and to feel that they are not equal to men. Indeed some mothers are still quite traditional in bringing up their daughters. We need therefore to provide equal opportunity, ie the equal space needed for women to take their rightful place in society, equal to men.

But I hope our discussions will not be a debate on what this series of conversations should be about or should be called. It is because there are many issues of deep concern to Singapore women. So let's allow all issues to be raised and all perspectives on various issues to be discussed.

Identifying Issues from All Perspectives

With these conversations, we hope to identify the key issues that affect Singaporean women, specifically within the spheres of the home, the workplace, schools, and the community.

And not just from one group of people. We hope by the end of this series, we would have received feedback on issues from every possible perspective regardless of race, religion or gender. Yes, including men, because it is important that we consider how these issues and the subsequent changes will affect society as a whole.

It is also a good opportunity, I feel, for us to bring men into the fold of these discussions and, in a way, inform them about the concerns of our women. Especially when it comes to responsibilities that can just as easily be carried out by men as by women.

A Roadmap to Chart the Way Forward

Our people are our greatest resource, and we should do everything possible to ensure that each and every Singaporean, regardless of gender or any other attribute, has an equal opportunity to develop their full potential.

With feedback from the conversations, we hope to collectively, as one nation, craft a Roadmap on Singapore Women's Development to chart the way forward.

Controversial Issues and Consensus

Some issues raised during the conversations will be controversial. Or even inconvenient truth. It will make some of us uncomfortable. But let's not disengage anyone. Let's talk. But in ways that will not be divisive as we want to achieve greater and more common understanding, even if we end up without any consensus.

But I am confident there will be issues where we will have consensus on what we need to do as a society and as a nation for women in our country. And let these issues unite and strengthen our resolve to collaborate and work together in our journey ahead.

Shaping a More Respectful Society for Singaporean Women

For SCWO, our journey began many years ago. But this series of conversations is a major milestone in the history of our country since the enactment of the Women Charter in 1961. The fact that it is initiated by the govt should give us confidence that there is commitment at the national level to address issues of concern to Singapore women.

I therefore call upon all women and women organisations and all men and male organisations not to miss this opportunity to help shape a more respectful society for all Singaporean women. A society that instinctively respects and recognises women for who we are, as singles, as spouses, as co-workers, as mothers, sisters etc. Beyond biological differences, we are equal to men in many respects.

Shifting the Singaporean Mindset

The status and stature of women have been largely determined by men and socio cultural factors that stem from practices and beliefs already ingrained in the psyche of many Singaporeans. Although Singapore women have progressed by leaps and bounds, a lot still needs to be done to ensure that women command the respect they deserve at work, at home and in schools and the community.

As Minister for Home Affairs and Law K Shanmugam said when he launched this conversation series, in order for true gender equality to be achieved we have to first “shift the Singaporean mindset on gender equality and respect for women.”

Thank you for joining us today. I look forward to a fruitful conversation with all of you.