

Speech by Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong at the PAP Women's Wing Conference 2022 on Saturday, 10 Sept 2022 at Sands Expo & Convention Centre

1. I am very happy to join you for this annual Women's Wing Conference.
 - a. It's a Women's Wing conference but I'm so happy that there are many men in our midst as well. We should do more to take action for her!
2. Of course it is also good to see so many of us gathering together after such a long break away from large gatherings these past two and a half years.
 - a. This could not have come at a better time, because first of all, today also happens to be Mid-Autumn Festival. It is traditionally a time for family and reunion. So I think having a conference today also is a very special timing. And let me just wish everyone 中秋节快乐.
 - b. Another reason why your timing is so good because we have recently eased our measures about a week or so ago. We said that mask indoors is optional and I'm very happy to see that around this room. In fact, many people have their mask off already! It's optional, so if you happen to wear a mask, please do not feel uneasy or conform to the majority. It's okay, if you are like me – Covid naïve – and then you want to take more precautions, by all means, wear masks!
 - c. If you happen to have a little bit of a sniffle, you really should wear a mask. But actually if you're not feeling well, you really shouldn't be here. We have always been saying let's do take personal and social responsibility, do the right thing, continue to keep ourselves safe as we learn to live with the virus
 - d. I know it's not been easy for everyone these past two and a half years, going through ups and downs in our COVID journey, experiencing all sorts of different restrictions and we've had our share of setbacks as well.
 - e. But it's been a journey where we were able to overcome and be in a much better place today compared to before only because of everyone's contributions, everyone sacrifices. So I are also want to say a big thank you to all of you for contributing to our fight against COVID-19.
3. From the very start, the PAP has been a champion for women's development. As all of you know, we believed that women are the equal half of our society. And so we set about protecting the basic rights and interests of women and building a fairer and more equal society in Singapore. Through all these efforts over the decades, we certainly have come a long way in advancing the cause of women in Singapore.

4. It didn't used to be the case in the past. Certainly, it was much more difficult for women in decades past.
 - a. I recall what my mother had to go through – she is 82 now and part of the Pioneer Generation.
 - b. But when she was growing up, my grandfather - her father - like many in his time, took the view that only boys needed an education. So my mum was asked So my mum was asked to do the housework at home and at just nine years old, she had to look after the younger children in the extended family, because they all stayed in the kampong. And then she even had to look after the other babies in the kampong to earn extra income for the family.
 - c. But my mother was a feminist even before the feminist movement. So, bless her soul, she decided that she could not stand for such unequal treatment and she created such a fuss that my grandfather had no choice but to relent. By then, my mum was already 2 years behind her peers in school. But she was determined to do well. She studied hard while working at the same time. She got a double promotion in primary school and she eventually caught up with the people of her age.
 - d. The biggest irony of it all is that her brothers who were given the chance to study, did not complete primary school. Whereas my mother, who nearly missed out on an education, went on to secondary school, and later became a school teacher.
5. It's a salutary reminder that women can do things better than men!
6. Nowadays, we also say a lot about enabling women to embrace both work and family. Again, my mum did it all because before she retired, she was literally a superwoman managing a teaching load, raising the family and taking care of the household chores, all without domestic help. My late father unfortunately wasn't so good at this. So, she trained me and my brother to help her.
7. I had a vivid impression of how effective my mum was when I was about 10 years old. I've told this story before, but it bears retelling again.
 - a. There was a burglary in our HDB flat and the thieves took all the valuables in our home. We called the police but they weren't able to go very far with their investigations.
 - b. So my mother decided to take matters into her own hands. She called up her brother and got in touch with his childhood friend in the kampung. It so happened that he was a gangster – not any gangster, he literally is the chief

gangster in charge of the entire East Coast area, from Marine Parade to Bedok. So she arranged to meet him in the market, and brought me along.

- c. Till today, I remember seeing her talking to this gangster chief like he was one of her students – lecturing him, asking if one of his gang members had committed the crime and demanding justice. In the end, we did not find the culprit unfortunately, but I learnt early in life an important life lesson: women are capable of amazing things.
8. Singapore society today is of course very different from what it used to be in the 50s and 60s. The journey that my mother and women of her generation went through is thankfully no longer experienced by young girls today. Instead, they have full and equal opportunities to a good education. Women are doing well across all segments of our society – in the public and private sectors, as well as in business, science, arts, and sports.
 9. Women are taking up their places, even in areas that are traditionally dominated by men.
 - a. I see this in my own Ministry – of course we have more and more women taking up leadership roles. Within my ministry itself, I have my second Minister Indranee. I have two very capable Permanent Secretaries, both of whom are women, and that is just MOF. You see this across all ministries and public sector.
 - b. In the NDP this year – we had female Red Lion parachutists and our first female commander of an RSAF fighter squadron.
 - c. In the private sector, we see more and more women taking leadership roles. Singapore consistently ranks amongst the highest in Asia in terms of the proportion of women in leadership positions.
 10. Societal attitudes are also changing.
 - a. If you talk to the older folks, sometimes they will still say “I prefer a boy to a girl”. But it is changing. 10 or maybe 11 years ago when I first joined politics, you go knocking on doors and you see your ah gong ah ma, your grandparents. And then you see them with a little kid and you ask them is this your grandchild? And you ask them in Mandarin “你有几个孙? How many grandchildren do you have?” And they say “我有两个。 I have two and 还有两个是外孙”, as though the 外孙, the children from the daughters, are outside the family, don't count. This is mine and 外孙 is outside.
 - b. So, they have those mindsets, understandably for the older folks, but I see these mindsets changing. I don't see a lot of that nowadays. When I visit homes, people consider daughters to be no different from sons. And

certainly, if your daughter gives birth to a grandchild, you consider them a grandchild just as much as a grandchild from the son. So, I think these attitudes over time will change.

11. And we had to thank everyone in the PAP Women's Wing for all the hard work that you have done over these years for advancing the cause of women and to change attitudes. Many women, pioneering leaders of the PAP have been doing so. Many of you as activists have been playing your part and making a difference. So thank you. Once again, every one of you together with our many partners.

- a. Of course, more recently, we had launched a year-long conversation on Women's Development. It was led by MOSes Xue Ling and Yen Ling and SPS Rahayu, together with all our PAP MPs, our partners and our many activists.
- b. We engaged thousands of Singaporeans from all walks of life. We got your ideas, feedback and all these culminated, as Minister Teo said just now, in the White Paper on Women's Development which was debated extensively in Parliament, which had support from all sides, and we are now in the midst of implementing very specific action plans.

12. So, we have made progress and we should be proud of the progress we have made, but we should also recognise that the situation is not perfect.

- a. Gender gaps still exist in our society and
- b. there is still much scope for improvement.

13. To be candid, I could never quite understand fully when I was young, why we still had these gender gaps. Because I grew up in a family with my brother and my mother is the role model - she did everything. So, I thought, well, how bad can it be?

- a. I thought women already have equal opportunities in school; in fact, many do better than men in academic attainment so we should be able to progress just as well.
- b. But it was only later in life, through the interactions with my friends and colleagues, with my wife and certainly my better half, that I realise that these gaps do exist and how persistent and insidious some of these gaps are.

14. And we can only close these gaps if we get to the heart of the matter – which is to confront the fundamental causes of the disparities that remain with us.

15. One major challenge is gender stereotypes.

- a. Now the debate about the differences between men and women have gone on since time immemorial. I do not wish to go on at length on this because we can go on forever.
 - b. There are of course differences between men and women – it is deeply rooted in human nature and human physiology
 - c. We see these differences expressed in almost every area of life, how we express our emotions, how we talk about feelings, our abilities, our natural inclinations.
 - d. And these differences should be affirmed and celebrated. In fact when I have women in my team, I often find that they bring different perspectives, which I greatly value, and that helps in better decision making.
16. But sometimes, the differences can lead to unhelpful stereotypes and labels, especially when they are reinforced by cultural and popular media.
- a. Some of you would recall a book that was published some time ago – It was about ‘Men are from Mars; Women are from Venus’, as though we are from different planets. It was quite a popular book. I think it's still popular today.
 - b. Perhaps many have found it to be a helpful guide to navigate their personal relationships, but it also perpetuates a certain mindset about men and women and the roles that they play.
17. We have all heard what some of these stereotypes are.
- a. For example, people will say women are better at communication and expressing their feelings than men. But they are not as good as men when it comes to Mathematics, Science and Technology. You hear this, right? Not that you agree with that, but you hear these stereotypes.
 - b. Or you often hear the perception that women lack the ability to negotiate, especially when it comes to tough negotiations, because women tend to be peacemakers, they tend to be too nice or too cooperative; and they are not aggressive enough.
18. Now, we may laugh at these stereotypes and think they do no real harm; but it also entrenches a certain mindset of our women and how they are judged.
- a. Perhaps that they are too cautious to take risks, or not aggressive enough to be effective leaders.
 - b. And the problem is that these stereotypes become self-fulfilling prophecies that inhibit and dissuade women – dissuade them from making their voices heard and dissuade them from making the career choices to which they are entitled, and from which our societies can benefit.

- c. It is perhaps one reason why you see women shying away from certain careers and professions. This is not just in Singapore; it's true everywhere around the world – why we continue to see more men than women in the tech industry, for example?
- d. Even the stereotype that women are more nurturing than men - inherently more nurturing because of maternal instincts and are better at looking after children than men can be unhelpful if taken to an extreme.
- e. Because the men will say “There you go, you're so good at it. So in the interest of division of labour, why not you spend more time caring for the children and families while I focus on my career”
- f. And that's completely unhelpful because we all know the reality is that caregiving roles, as was mentioned by Jo and Carrie just now, caregiving roles should not be a domain only for women. Men can and must do our part too.
- g. Men must be involved in raising children and looking after elderly parents. I certainly have no choice because I had no sisters.

19. Gender stereotypes take new forms as our modern world evolves too.

- a. The online space is a very challenging domain because whatever we see online can be multiplied, and can reinforce these stereotypes
- b. Young girls growing up, for example, are at risk of feeling a lot of pressure to look a certain way, to get more likes on social media, to follow a certain mould. And if they don't conform, it can easily impact their self-esteem and cause them to restrict their own activities or choices in life.
- c. Or for that matter, young boys growing up exposed to sexualised images of women online, can easily influence their attitudes and mindsets as they grow up. They start to objectify women, or they fail to show respect for women, and they don't realise where the boundaries are, and all these can make it more difficult for them to have healthy positive relationships with the opposite sex in future.
- d. And you say, well this has been around for ages, so what's the harm? But social media turbocharges these stereotypes. And we know that these stereotypes are often the precursor to more extreme sexist attitudes, even hate speech or worse, bullying, harassment, and even sexual abuse and violence.

20. And that's why we must continue to pay attention to this important subject. We must continue to step up efforts, whether it is

- a. Education against stereotypes in schools;

- b. Improving safeguards and protections for women against violence and harm, especially online;
 - c. Protection for women against discrimination or unfair treatment at the workplace; or for that matter, as was talked about just now,
 - d. Improving our broader support infrastructure and eco-system for childcare, infant care, as well as senior care.
 - e. And we must continue to get employers to do their part – providing more flexible work arrangements, so that employees, both men and women, can better balance their work and family responsibilities.
 - f. Ultimately, we must try to shape more progressive family norms, to encourage more shared parental responsibilities and a more balanced sharing of family caregiving responsibilities too.
21. If we can do all that, then I'm sure we can see more women thrive, excel, and advance in leadership roles in both the public and private sectors; and they will do so on their own merit and not through some special scheme or treatment, because you do not need that.
22. All this means that our work of advancing women's development is never finished – we must keep at it, and we must continue to push the agenda along.
- a. Because the bottom line is that Singapore women are equally capable as men
 - b. And we will give you equal opportunities to prove yourselves and reach your fullest potential. We will not allow our prejudices to become obstacles to women's progress in Singapore.
23. The conversation on Singapore's Women Development is over. But we are embarking on a new national conversation called Forward Singapore.
- a. It's one of the first priorities I decided to embark on after taking on my new responsibilities because I think it's important that we engage one another, understand better what our expectations are of each other, whether it's the government, employers, businesses, workers.
 - b. How can we think about renewed expectations that we may have, but also the responsibilities and obligations we would like to have of each other.
24. And that's important for us to maintain Singapore as a high trust society.
- a. We have all seen over the last two and a half years why trust is so important.
 - b. Trust between the government and the people, but importantly, trust amongst our fellow citizens in Singapore.

- c. And we must do everything we can to maintain that high level of trust and strengthen that sense of solidarity and unity in Singapore, especially as we embark on our next bound of development in a more uncertain and volatile world.

25. So that's what Forward Singapore is about. That's what we hope to achieve - to refresh and update our social compact, to review what changes we need to make in order to put Singapore on a sounder, firmer footing for the next bound of development.

- a. We will build on the conversations we've had over the past year, including on women's issues.
- b. We will continue taking your feedback, your suggestions and ideas on what more we can do to take our society forward and set out a roadmap for Singapore's development over the coming decade and beyond.

26. And through this exercise, we hope we can come together to imagine the kind of society we want for our children and our grandchildren. A society

- a. Where men and women can stand as equals;
- b. Where we recognise the intrinsic value of women in Singapore; and
- c. Where every citizen is empowered to fulfil their aspirations and dreams.

27. It's been two months since we launched Forward Singapore. We have already received many useful suggestions. We intend to take a whole year to complete the exercise and so we will be ramping up our engagements moving forward

- a. I welcome and encourage all of you to participate actively – give us your suggestions, inputs, but importantly, come alongside us, join us as partners in co-creating our new compact.

28. Together, let us work towards our vision of a fairer, more inclusive and more big-hearted society – where we can all move away from outdated stereotypes, at home, at work and in society

- a. Where we can strive for equality for everyone
- b. Where we can ensure every Singaporean – man and woman, daughter and son – will always have a place in our society, to thrive, succeed and achieve their fullest potential in life.

29. Thank you very much.