

## **PM's Speech at PAP Women's Wing Conference, 31 Aug 2024**

PAP Women's Wing Chairperson SMS Sim Ann

Organising person Ms Rachel Ong

Comrades

Ladies and Gentlemen

### **Introduction**

1. Good afternoon and I am very happy to join you at this year's Women's Wing Conference. I'm especially glad that we are coming together to mark the 35th anniversary of the Women's Wing. Also good to see so many friends and partners present today – our former women MPs and office holders, community partners, and our brothers and sisters from the unions. Welcome all of you!

2. I delivered my National Day Rally two weeks ago.

- a. At that speech, I spoke about major resets that are needed for a refreshed Singapore dream – a Singapore where we thrive on our own terms, embrace different definitions of success, where we thrive and flourish on our own terms and become the best possible versions of ourselves.

- b. This is not just what I hope to see for the future.
- c. It's what many Singaporeans want, because we've engaged them, we've listened to them, and they've shared with us their hopes and dreams in the Forward Singapore exercise.
- d. So this is truly the new ambitions we have for Singapore. We must now work together to realise our shared ambitions for our fellow citizens and our country.

3. It is therefore timely that this year's Women's Wing Conference focuses on celebrating women across all seasons and all stages of life.

- a. Because everyone is different. Women will have many different and diverse aspirations – what success looks like to one may not be the same for another.
- b. We must continue to support our women to thrive wherever they are, whatever circumstances they are in.

## **Advancing Women's Development**

4. The PAP has always been a steadfast champion for women's development in Singapore.

- a. The circumstances faced by women in the past were vastly different from today.
  - i. We used to be a highly patriarchal society. Even polygamy was common. Parents would favour their sons and would focus their resources on sons, compared to daughters
  - ii. I've shared before the story of my mother growing up in the late 1940s. She nearly didn't have the chance to go to school. Her father – my grandfather – then took the view that only boys needed to study. Daughters only needed to stay at home.
  - iii. I'm sure this was the case not just in my family, but across Singapore. So women generally had far fewer opportunities at that time.

iv. There were also inadequate laws to protect women's rights, especially on matters of marriage. So when marriages broke down, they faced difficulties securing divorces, child custody, or their share of matrimonial assets.

5. That was the situation back then, but it was the PAP – precursor to the Women's Wing, the then-Women's League in the PAP – which helped to push for change.

- a. The efforts led to the enactment of the Women's Charter in 1961, which gave women greater legal protection, especially in marriages, and laid the foundation for women in Singapore to progress.
- b. And over the decades, we have come a long way in advancing the cause of women in Singapore. We believe that women are the equal half of our society. Women have full and equal opportunities in education; they contribute and excel across all segments of our society. We have made it happen, thanks to all of your efforts!

6. But we didn't just stop there, even though progress has been made. We are never content with the status quo, because we believe there's always room to improve.

7. That's why the PAP and the PAP Women's Wing have continually sought to advance the cause of women in Singapore.

a. For example, we had the engagements on Women's Development some years back, which culminated in a White Paper, debated extensively in Parliament.

b. This gave rise to policy changes in several areas, including:

i. Increased Home Caregiving Grant for caregivers.

ii. Workplace Fairness Legislation to better protect women and other groups against discrimination in the workplace.

iii. And last year, we amended the Women's Charter to better protect victims – both men and women – of family violence. The

contributions of everyone in the Women's Wing is not just linked to championing women issues. All of you have also been actively involved in Party work, you are key pillars in our Branches and HQ, you help lead and drive many initiatives and events under the RefreshPAP movement.

8. This afternoon, I would like to place on record my deepest appreciation to everyone in the PAP Women's Wing – our office-holders, MPs, activists and fellow comrades – thank you all for your many contributions and hard work.

9. Of course, I am also glad that there are many other groups who are working with the PAP to strengthen gender equality and strengthen families across a wide range of different areas.

- a. Many of you are here today at this conference.
- b. Thank you for working alongside the PAP to advance and uplift women in Singapore. Let's acknowledge all of you.

10. At the NDR, I said that the work we do to refresh Singapore is not just about policy changes. It is also about changes in our attitudes and mindsets.

- a. That's something we must also all work on together.
- b. It's good that many old attitudes towards girls and women have changed.
- c. But we know that there are still unhelpful gender stereotypes and labels.
- d. Some of it is reinforced by cultural and popular media.
  - i. Think about the drama series and movies we watch: the roles that lead actors and actresses play, sometimes they reinforce this stereotype. Or in Western movies, how Asian actors and actresses are often characterised in a certain mould.
  - ii. Things are getting better in popular culture and the media; but the stereotypes exist.

11. So there's still work for us to do – to push back against these labels, to build a more inclusive society, where everyone has the space to explore and experiment, to pursue their own chosen paths; and to realise their own dreams.

12. To be clear, when we advance the cause for gender equality in Singapore, we must never see this as a zero-sum issue.

- a. Equality for women does not mean that the men get less.
- b. Gains that women make in society does not mean that the men will inevitably lose out.
- c. I'm glad that the Women's Wing does not take this approach – you've always involved men in your discussions and gatherings (and there are many of men here today this afternoon!).

13. As SMS Sim Ann said earlier just now, we are striving to make things better not just for women, but also for men. We do see in some countries a growing divergence in views between men and women.



- a. What's happening in these places is that boys and young men are struggling too – they face their own share of challenges on various fronts like education, jobs and mental health.
- b. If they feel their concerns are not adequately addressed, men and young boys then out of a sense of insecurity, some may see the movement for equality for women as a movement against men.
- c. And we must never let that happen here.

14. The fact is that we are all in this together. Men and women have to work together (not men vs women). We have to learn together; get married, form families, and raise children together. We have to rise together, and move forward together.

15. That's why I spent some time on this issue at the NDR on how we can strengthen families.

- a. E.g. we will be mandating 4 weeks of paternity leave.
  - i. I hope this will encourage fathers to play a larger role in their families.

- ii. Obviously this means men have to do their part.
    - iii. But women can lean forward to encourage your husbands, find ways to make it easier for them to contribute at home.
  - b. We have introduced a new Shared Parental Leave scheme.
    - i. Under the current shared leave arrangement, when husbands take more, women end up with less – I thought that wasn't ideal.
    - ii. That's why we decided to have 10 additional weeks of leave for parents to share amongst themselves– so the couple can decide amongst themselves how to split the leave, and I hope by doing so, both will be able to find a better balance between their work and parenting responsibilities.

16. The point is that roles are changing for both men and women in society. We all have to help one another adapt to these changes, and work together to support each other, to support marriages and parenthood and strengthen families in Singapore.

## **Conclusion**

17. Let me go back to something I said just now about how women in Singapore have seen so much progress in so many areas. Throughout my working life, I have benefited from working with men and women who bring a wider range of perspectives and help contribute to better solutions.

- a. To me, having that diversity in the team is very useful.
- b. So as a party, we will continue to ensure our candidates and our MPs cover a broad range, so that the PAP will always remain a party for all Singaporeans.
- c. Where women are concerned over the years, the number of women PAP MPs has increased.
- d. As Ann said, in the 1970s to the early 1980s, all PAP MPs were men. Today, close to one-third of our PAP MPs are

women. The number of female Political Office Holders have also increased.

18. I will strive to give this a further push. In the coming election I hope to be able to field more women candidates. When we do so, please support them! Help me to increase our women representation in Parliament. Of course there will be male candidates too and they are also deserving of your support!

19. When the Women's Charter Bill was debated in the Legislative Assembly in 1961, our pioneering MP Mdm Chan Choy Siong spoke passionately about how it would herald a new way. She said that the enactment of the Women's Charter will "[act] as a lighthouse on the road to build a good society. It will make all of us work harder to attain a better society."

20. Our work towards a better society and a better Singapore continues even today. So together, let us build a Singapore where every citizen, man and woman, daughter and son, can feel included and respected, can flourish and thrive, and where we can all be the best possible version of ourselves.