

**SPEECH FOR DPM LAWRENCE WONG AT PAP WOMEN'S WING  
INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY COMMEMORATION (4 MAR 2023)**

PAP WW Chairperson SMS Sim Ann

Organising cochairs MOS Sun Xueling and Ms Hany Soh

Comrades and distinguished guests,

1. I am very happy to join you at this PAP Women's Wing event to commemorate International Women's Day. I am glad that in our midst I see not just women activists, (but also) male MPs, activists, and our brothers and sister from the Union. Thank you for joining us too.

2. We all know that there is no limit to what women can do and achieve. Today, on this occasion of International Women's Day, we gather together to recognise women for their achievements across all fields, and also to thank all our women in Singapore for your pursuit of excellence, and your many contributions to our economy and to our society. Thank you, all of you!

3. Throughout Singapore's history, women have played an outsized role in our society – raising our next generation, imparting values, and anchoring family life.

- a. Women are often the pillar of strength in our families, and our earliest role models in life
  - b. But despite this, despite your many contributions over the decades, in Singapore and around the world, women have had to struggle against all sorts of gender stereotypes and prejudices
4. That's why from the very beginning since the PAP was elected into office in Singapore, the Party has been pushing for the ideal of equality
5. In fact, back in 1959, when the PAP was campaigning in an election, part of its election campaign said *"women who form nearly half of our population have an important part to play in our national construction...we shall foster the principle, if necessary by legislation, that there shall be equality of women with men in all spheres, and we shall encourage them to come forward to play a leading role in politics, administration, business and industry, education and in other spheres"* .

This was in 1959. It was a very progressive statement, made by a very progressive party – the PAP.

6. And we delivered on that promise. In 1961, we passed the Women's Charter, and laid the foundation for women to progress, and cemented the equal standing of women and men in marriage.

7. Over the years, the Party leadership and generations of PAP women activists, as well as the PAP Women's Wing, have continued to work hard to bring us ever closer to our ideals.

a. Through all our hard work and collective efforts, attitudes and mindsets have shifted over the years. We can see this in many ways.

b. Women have achieved good education outcomes and achievements comparable to men in Singapore.

c. More women are making their mark in areas that had been traditionally associated with men – for example, in areas of Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics, or even succeeding as entrepreneurs.

d. And of course, we see more women taking up leadership positions across all fields

8. More and more, step by step, we are internalising the norms and the values of equality between men and women in Singapore. But we also know we still have some way to go in deeply entrenching this culture of equality.

9. That is why we made a push in 2020 for women's development, and organised a nationwide Conversations on Singapore Women's Development.

10. All of you were part of this. The PAP Women's Wing was actively involved in this, and through your efforts, we now have a White Paper which sets out a roadmap for the next decade on how we as a society can better support all our women in Singapore to fulfil their aspirations and potential.

11. The White Paper provides guide-posts for some broad areas to work on. For example, we want to

- a. Reinforce a culture of equal respect for men and women; so that women can feel safe, be it at home or at the workplace
- b. Provide greater protection to women and girls from violence and harm, especially amongst the more vulnerable groups

- c. Ensure equal opportunities for women to realise their career aspirations, and tackle discrimination at the workplace.
- d. Foster a more equal balance in caregiving, especially with the raising of children, but also for the looking after of seniors, so that women can participate more fully in society.

12. These are some areas that we have identified, clear areas that I think many Singaporeans have expressed concerns and shared aspirations for, and we have identified as goals we want to achieve. But it's not just articulating the goals, because we are also taking concrete action towards them. For example

- a. We've just rolled out the enhanced Home Caregiving Grant (effective 1 Mar 2023), which was one of the recommendations of the White Paper. This is a gesture to recognise the contributions of caregivers, many of whom are women who have left their jobs to care for their loved ones.
- b. We will soon introduce new legislation on workplace fairness - this is coming up in Parliament. It will be a significant step to

protect women and provide them with the assurance that discrimination in the workplace will not be tolerated

- c. In this Budget, I just announced a doubling of paid paternity leave from next year onwards, and we hope this will enable and encourage fathers to be more involved in raising their children.

13. In the Budget, when I talked about increasing the paid Paternity Leave, I shared that when we introduced this back in 2013, take up rates were very low among fathers. Ten years have passed, now the take up rate is slightly above 50%. It's not bad!

In preparing for the budget, I did a survey in my own ministry – I asked the young officers who are either fathers or fathers-to-be. I asked them ‘do you (take paternity leave)?’, and they were very enthusiastic, they said yes! Some not only take the full paternity leave, but they take additional leave on their own to spend more time with their children. So that is very encouraging, mindsets are shifting. I'm not sure if the sample is very representative – after all, if nationwide more than 50% have taken up paternity leave, it means nearly another half of working fathers don't take paternity leave. We've got to ask – what's happening? Why aren't they? It's very easy to go into “dad-shaming”.

Let's restrain ourselves from being quick to judge, because every family is different, everyone has different circumstances. There may be unique reasons why the fathers chose not to take leave – including sometimes mothers themselves preferring that they be the main caregiver, for whatever reason. So let's not be quick to judge.

14. But the bottom line is that I think we can still do better as a society. While mindsets are progressively changing, especially amongst the younger men, I think far too often, women are still much more likely to be pigeonholed into the role of being a caregiver. We hope that with this latest move, we will be able to encourage and nudge more working fathers to take leave to spend time with their children and family. Of course employers must do their part too - it's not just the individuals, not just the fathers or mothers for that matter - but employers must do their part to create a pro-family workplace.

For now, the additional paternity leave is voluntary. It's what we did when we first introduced paternity leave as well. We took two years – from 2015 to 2017, before we made it mandatory. This time, similarly, the increase in paternity leave will start out on a voluntary basis, but we intend to make it mandatory at some point in time; preferably sooner rather than later. So I would urge all employers to

move as soon as possible; don't wait until the government makes it mandatory before you move. Start offering additional paternity leave now. It's not just good for your employee – in fact, it should be good for your organisation too. When employees and staff can see that their bosses are enlightened and are offering good benefits, you are more likely to be able to retain and attract your staff. So from a pro-business point of view, I think all employers should seriously consider moving on this additional paternity leave.

15. The bottom line here is that we must all do our part, it's not just the government alone but all of us must come together to do our part, to reset the narrative and make paternal involvement the norm in our society. That's why beyond government support, we really need a whole-of-society effort to tackle gender stereotypes and make Singapore a place where every girl and woman can achieve her full potential.

16. One aspect of this involves understanding our own unconscious bias and how it can lead to potentially discriminatory behaviour. All of us are all, sometimes without knowing it, guilty of such biases. I think it is really important for us to start young at both our schools and our homes – to teach every child that men and women are to be treated

equally, and with equal respect. At workplaces too, employers can do more to empower and support women. Typically, across many organisations, you find the higher up you go in the organisation hierarchy, you see fewer women. It's true not just in Singapore but around the world. It is changing, but still, across many organisations, when you move up the hierarchy you see fewer women. Really that shouldn't be the case, because we know that women are good managers and leaders; there's no reason why women would be less suitable than men, to be a manager or to be a leader. In fact, survey after survey done around the world would show that in terms of competencies and skills, women have a lot to offer. Women are more inclined to make decisions based on consensus building, compassion and focus on long-term sustainability. You could say that women are often trusted to make more sensible decisions. So we believe women ought to be able to excel and succeed on their own merit.

17. What employers and organisations can do, and should do, is to give women more equal opportunities, more exposure. And again, very often, these are the unconscious things that people are not aware of. For example, who do you identify to be the team leader? Who do you identify to make a presentation to the board? Sometimes instinctively, they just go to the men for whatever reasons. All of us can learn to

think this through a little bit more, and find more opportunities for women to excel and contribute, across all fields, and also support them with mentors and role models.

18. So there is still much we can do to advance and support women's development in Singapore. One important aspect of this is to ensure that women are part of the conversation – you are part of our ongoing efforts to build a better and more inclusive Singapore.

19. That is why under Forward Singapore which we are now undertaking, we are continuing to engage a broad spectrum of Singaporeans – men and women – from diverse backgrounds, and I am glad that the PAP Women's Wing has been contributing to these conversations as well. Not just contributing with ideas, but as you can see from the Digital Collection that we just launched, you are contributing through your actions too.

- a. You have been engaging women and, ensuring that women's needs, voices and perspectives are heard and are reflected.

- b. Beyond that, you continue to support initiatives which help women to partner with the Government and others in our community on causes that you are passionate about.
  
- c. The Digital Collection we launched just now showcases the many exciting and meaningful programmes across all our PAP Branches
  
- d. Just to mention a few:
  - i. “Every Step Matters Programme” in MacPherson, which aims to help stay-at-home mothers, or women who have retired, transit back to the workforce with the support of life skills and career coaches.
  
  - ii. In Serangoon you have a campaign called “Take Action for Sustainability”, where our activists work with volunteers from the community, reaching out and engaging residents with suggestions on simple ways to incorporate sustainable living into their everyday tasks.

- iii. And the PAP, working together with NTUC's Women Supporting Women Mentorship Programme, are making progress. We have women leaders with professional experiences from the PAP Women's Wing now serving as mentors and role models for young women under this programme.
  
- e. These are just a few examples. They show the wide variety of work that the PAP Women's Wing and all our women activists do, passionately, across the entire island. I hope all of you enjoy browsing the Digital Collection, and give your fullest efforts to these initiatives. This is not to say we have completed the work; this is just the beginning of the work. We hope to add more activities, programmes, get more branches involved. For a start, you will see that all of the branches being showcased are branches led by female Branch Chairs – but there is no reason to limit this to women! After all if we are about equality, the men should be involved too. We can certainly scale up, expand these efforts across all our Branches.

20. To conclude, I would like to congratulate once again the PAP Women's Wing on the good work that you have been doing all these

many years and decades. Your efforts have helped contribute to the tremendous progress in women's development in Singapore over the years.

Let me also acknowledge the presence of our stakeholders and partners who are here. We truly appreciate your partnership on this journey to advance women's development in Singapore, and we look forward to working even more closely with all of you.

- a. Let's continue to stand side by side to strengthen women's development, and get women involved in building the Singapore we want to see: a Singapore that fully values the perspectives and viewpoints of women; a Singapore that has more women in positions of leadership, in the private sector, in the public sector, including in politics; it is a Singapore where all women can live their life to the fullest.
- b. Working together, I am confident we can achieve these goals, and build a better, fairer and more inclusive Singapore.