

Key Messages:

- The Government is constantly reviewing laws and policies.
- A whole-of-society effort is required in order to effect positive change on societal norms and practices to support our women.
- The Government has worked with civil society and citizens to engage in robust discourse about key women's issues.

**OPENING ADDRESS BY PRESIDENT HALIMAH YACOB
AT THE INSTITUTE OF POLICY STUDIES WOMEN'S CONFERENCE
ON THURSDAY, 3 JUNE 2021**

Professor Tan Eng Chye, President of NUS

Professor Danny Quah, Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy

Mr Janadas Devan, Director of IPS

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen

Good morning

1. I am pleased to join you today to open the Institute of Policy Studies' Women's Conference. The Ministry of Social and Family Development has dedicated 2021 as the Year of Celebrating SG Women. This is a timely recognition. Singapore women have made great strides in terms of education, career achievements and participation in the community. Society has also accorded greater emphasis and acknowledgement to the contributions and achievements by our women. Even then, there is always room for improvement as progress is an ongoing effort.

2. Since September last year, the Singapore Government, together with partners from civil society, businesses, community, and others, has been holding a series of Conversations on Singapore Women's Development, to connect with Singaporeans –

women and men – to understand their aspirations for Singapore women. So far, more than 100 conversations involving more than 3,300 participants have been conducted.

3. Today's Conference is an example of such a conversation. It aims to identify the issues faced by women in the 21st Century and discuss new ideas and best practices. The intention is not to look at only the tried and tested ways, but to invite fresh thoughts and new insights on issues some of which have been with us for a long time.

4. These conversations provide the Government with an avenue to hear concerned voices from all sectors of our society on how we could achieve greater gender equality. All views will be considered, and the Government will be presenting a White Paper on recommendations as well as a roadmap for implementation.

5. Incidentally, this year is also the 60th anniversary of the Women's Charter. The Charter was passed in May 1961 in the Legislative Assembly and was groundbreaking for its time. It protected the position of women in Singapore by codifying marriage and divorce laws, discarding unfair and outdated practices of the past. The Charter also gave women a legal status that was then unmatched in many countries. Married women had the right to use their own surname and personal name to sign contracts and own property.

6. Pioneering female politicians, such as Chan Choy Siong, played key roles in the passage of the Women's Charter. Not all within the Assembly were initially supportive of the Women's Charter as it was a major departure from the *status quo* at

that time. We owe a great debt to Chan Choy Siong and other women who came before us for blazing the trail towards equality between women and men.

7. It is crucial to remember that the Women's Charter is not a static document. Amendments have been made several times in our country's history to better protect and support women. Steps were taken in 2011 to enhance the enforcement of maintenance orders, ensuring that women and children continued to be supported after divorce. In February 2016, an amendment bill was passed to enhance protections for vulnerable women, better support them in family violence and crisis situations, and strengthen law enforcement against online vice. In recognition of parity with men, the bill also allowed for incapacitated husbands and ex-husbands to apply for spousal maintenance from their female spouses where there is a clear need.

8. As we take stock of the progress of our women in this Year of Celebrating SG Women, it is also important to review existing policies and social norms to adequately respond to changing attitudes and challenges pertaining to equality between women and men.

9. The Penal Code was amended in 2019 to enhance protection of women and girls, such as through repealing marital immunity for rape and enhancing punishments for those who commit intimate partner violence. The Protection from Harassment Act, or POHA, was amended in 2019 to strengthen protection for victims of harassment and stalking. Most recently, in March this year, the Ministerial Statement on the Review of the Sentencing Framework for Sexual and Hurt Offences set out the Government's

philosophy towards such offences, where deterrence and proportionate punishment will generally take precedence over rehabilitation for adult offenders.

10. Singapore has pledged its commitment to equality between women and men on a global stage. In 1995, we acceded to the United Nation's Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. To ensure continued progress as a nation, it is imperative we invest, develop, and maximise the full potential of every individual and support them in achieving their aspirations, regardless of whether they are women or men. We must make it a priority for women who hold up "half the sky" to be able to participate and contribute fully, and equally, to Singapore's development.

11. Nevertheless, we aspire for even more progress for our women across various domains. Women, especially those with caregiving responsibilities, continue to face barriers in their pursuit of progress in the workplace. A 2020 study by the Ministry of Manpower and the National University of Singapore revealed that Singapore's adjusted gender pay gap was 6% in 2018. Women's propensity to undertake caregiving responsibilities at home was one of the key contributing factors to the gender pay gap. The need to take time off work leads to lags in work experience and career progression, and consequently earnings. Employers and family members therefore need to be more understanding and encouraging by giving them greater support.

12. With the rise of remote work arrangements, more opportunities are available to women which I hope will continue even after the pandemic. On the flipside, however,

women may find themselves disproportionately taking on more unpaid care work, such as being involved in their children's home-based learning and other domestic and childcare duties, even when both spouses work from home. I encourage fathers to step up and play a more active role in caregiving, and employers to provide more family-friendly workplaces.

13. As society evolves, we constantly face new challenges to achieve equality between women and men. One such example is the digital realm. Social media is now a potential space for women to be harassed and bullied, sometimes by anonymous trolls. The media has also reported, in recent months, about a number of cases of technology-facilitated sexual violence. Singapore continues to ensure its legal system and law enforcement are robust enough to bring these perpetrators to justice. The POHA makes it possible for victims to obtain protection orders against acts of harassment, including online harassment, cyberbullying, and stalking. But more important, as a society, Singaporeans must send a strong signal that we condemn such behaviours, because no woman is safe from such abuses including our own female family members.

14. While technology has opened new avenues for harassment and violence against women, the attitudes that gave rise to these anti-social behaviours in the first place have been with us for much longer. All of us have a duty to call out sexist speech and behaviour around us. Schools and workplaces also need to take sexual harassment seriously so that women will feel safe and protected. Our penal code has been updated to reflect stiffer penalties for such offences.

15. The change must also take place upstream. Intervening after a woman has been harmed is much too late. Young men need to be taught from an early age that women are their equals and are to be respected. This is where families, peers, and institutions such as schools can play a part in educating boys and girls about gender stereotypes of careers and parenting roles. We need to signal that there is zero tolerance for the degradation of girls and women in our society, and that they are valued for their contributions in the family, in the workplace, and in our society.

16. A whole-of-society effort is needed to effect positive change on societal norms and practices to support our women. All of us are in a position of influence to do so. With respect as the cornerstone of the rapport between women and men, we can create a society where every woman and man can achieve their aspirations and fullest potential. This is not just an issue of rights for our women, but because they deserve our respect and appreciation for their contributions and sacrifices.

17. Over the years, the Government has worked with civil society and citizens to build a more equal and diverse Singapore. Apart from the Government's ongoing Conversations, conferences like this one provide us with the opportunity to hear from speakers from diverse areas of expertise and to engage in robust discourse about key women's issues.

18. The Conference is timely in bringing together a range of talented female and male allies to contribute to this important discussion about the future of gender equality in Singapore.

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19. I wish everyone a fruitful and meaningful conference. Thank you.
