

**SMS KOH POH KOON OPENING REMARKS AT
OPSG-IPS COMMUNITY LEADERS CONFERENCE
28 MAY, 11AM – 1230PM**

Good morning.

1. I am heartened to be here at the third Community Leaders' Conference. I see familiar faces among the crowd. Thank you for inviting me to be part of this important discussion on embracing diversity and inclusion in the workplace.

Importance of race and religious harmony in Singapore

2. Race and religious harmony have been fundamental to Singapore's identity since the very beginning of our nation. We are a multi-racial, multi-cultural and multi-religious country. But as you will all know from history, our harmony does not come naturally, and we need to make efforts to build trust and acceptance between different races and religions and protect the common spaces we have.
3. You can look back at our history. In the beginning of our nationhood, racial riots were common. It took us many generations to reach where we are today, where we can actually sit down and talk openly about race and religion.
4. As pointed out by Minister Lawrence Wong at the IPS-RISIS Forum on Race and Racism last June, Singapore did not set out to achieve racial harmony by creating a monolithic society. Our multi-racialism does not require any community to give up its heritage or traditions.
 - i. We invite each other to the different religious festivals and traditional events.
 - ii. Singapore's system has worked because of the mutual understanding and trust forged between our communities.
 - iii. Be it at work or in play, we must not waver in our commitment to promote harmony among all races and ensure that all Singaporeans enjoy full and equal opportunities in life. I think that is something that we all aspire to, and we should continue to work on.
5. Racial and religious harmony is vital for Singapore's social cohesion. We do not tolerate any form of racial or religious discrimination, as it sows discord amongst and between different communities, and threatens the harmony that we have worked so hard, over many generations to build up. We want the bonds that bind our different communities to keep growing from strength to strength.

Diversity and Inclusion in the Workplace

6. This year's Conference, themed "Keeping Harmony@Work", is a very useful and important conference for us to talk about how we can bring ideas of religious and racial harmony into our workspaces.

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7. Fundamentally, we must believe that every one of us deserves a fair opportunity to contribute and thrive at work. Building a diverse and inclusive workforce is key to ensuring Singapore's economic vitality, so that businesses can access the manpower needed for their growth and our people can take on good job opportunities.
8. To help Singaporeans build the relevant skillsets to seize these opportunities, we invest heavily in Singaporeans in many ways. Some examples are:
 - i. The SGUnited Jobs and Skills Package provides jobs, traineeships, attachments, and training opportunities for workers and jobseekers, for them to gain industry-relevant skills and experiences, so that they can become more employable and sought after by industry.
 - ii. WSG's Career Conversion Programmes helps mid-career individuals transit into new roles, so that they are able to access more exciting career opportunities.
 - iii. During the COVID crisis, we rolled out the Jobs Growth Incentive scheme, which provides support to employers hiring locals, with higher support for mature workers aged 40 and above, persons with disabilities and ex-offenders.
9. Through all these different measures, we want to ensure that Singaporeans of different abilities, continue to have a fair shot in seeking good job opportunities.

Enshrining Tripartite Guidelines on Fair Employment Practices (TGFEF) into law

10. At the same time, we want to strengthen workplace fairness to ensure that our workers are treated fairly at the workplace.
11. Over two decades of education and enforcement, we have seen the standards of workplace fairness improve over time.
 - i. In March, I shared the latest findings from MOM's Fair Employment Practices survey at a dialogue organised by REACH.
 - a) There was a significant decline in resident job applicants who experienced discrimination during their job search, from 43% in 2018 to 25% in 2021.
 - b) 8% of the resident workforce had experienced workplace discrimination in the past year.
12. That said, **more can still be done** to tackle the incidences of discrimination at the workplace happening today. But I must also say that, workplace discrimination or perceptions of workplace discrimination, is not unique to Singapore. A survey in United Kingdom (UK) done in 2021, showed that 36% of job seekers in the UK experienced some form of perceived discrimination, with 1 in 10 feeling discriminated due to age, and 1 in 25 feeling so due to gender.

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13. This is a problem that is not unique to Singapore. It will be something that we must continuously work on together, with each generation building understanding, trust, and knowledge to take this forward and expand the common space.
14. Between 2014 and 1H 2021, the Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices (TAFEP) received an average of 379 workplace discrimination complaints each year. Nationality, age and gender formed the most common grounds of discrimination in Singapore.
- i. Discrimination on grounds of disability as well as **race and religion** were less common.
 - ii. While reported cases of discrimination on grounds of race and religion are less common, in our multi-racial, multi-religious and multi-cultural society, one case is one case too many as that could be the one to trigger very emotive responses from different groups.
 - iii. Dr Mathews shared in his presentation this morning that minorities continue to feel that they are treated differently at the workplace. There are also racial preferences when it comes to employment, including who we are open to hire.
15. There is a need to put in place a strong and robust system to uphold fairness at the workplace and address anxieties that might emerge in the long term. At the National Day Rally last year, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced that we will enshrine the Tripartite Guidelines on Fair Employment Practices (TGFE) in law.
- i. This is a significant move and will send a strong signal that Singapore does not tolerate any form of workplace discrimination.
 - ii. The Tripartite Committee on Workplace Fairness, co-chaired by Minister for Manpower, Dr Tan See Leng, SNEF President Dr Robert Yap and Secretary-General of NTUC Mr Ng Chee Meng, is currently deliberating on the scope and design of legislation, including consulting widely for a good representation of views from different segments of society.
16. However, while legislation will give us more teeth, it is not a panacea.
- i. We want to avoid creating a litigious culture, and preserve the common space at the workplace whilst ensuring that discrimination in any form is not tolerated.
 - ii. Therefore, tripartite partners will continue to prioritise:
 - a) Engaging and educating employers to shape the right mindsets and practices, and

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- b) Resolving reported cases through mediation as far as possible and also, to use mediation as a platform to educating and helping people be more conscious of what constitutes discrimination.

Conclusion

- 17. The Tripartite Committee will have to balance across different issues, interests and suggestions raised during our engagements with stakeholders.
- 18. Your views and feedback will go a long way in assisting the Tripartite Committee to come up with recommendations that benefit Singapore and Singaporeans.
- 19. On this note, I look forward to a lively discussion with all of you.
- 20. Thank you.