

Speech at The Raffles Policy Dialogue, Raffles Girls School (Secondary), 27 October 2014

Mrs Poh Mun See, Principal of Raffles Girls School, Colonel Alfred Fox, Captain Penelope Chia, distinguished guests and friends, a good morning to all. It is my honour to be invited to The Raffles Policy Dialogue and it is my privilege to share with you my perspectives on National Service, or NS, otherwise also known as conscription in other parts of the world.

In the tradition of IPS scholars, I shall keep my speech brief and restrict myself to making no more than three points. For simplicity's sake, I shall label the three points as (i) NS landscape; (ii) NS barriers, and (iii) NS purpose.

I should add a caveat at this point to say that I am using the term NS somewhat loosely to imply all kinds of military defence. I do recognise that we now have a Voluntary Corps Scheme that incorporates a limited type of military training, although strictly speaking, that is not part of our enlistment policy. For the benefit of the audience today, I shall not dwell on the technicalities. We can discuss the nuances during the Question and Answer session.

NS landscape

The first batch of NS servicemen was enlisted in 1967. All 18-year old, abled-bodied male citizens are obliged to serve two years in a uniformed group. This policy was implemented in the 1960s in response to the external threats that Singapore faced post-independence.

As a small and young nation in Southeast Asia, Singapore was, and still is, a vulnerable target in the region. Back in the 1960s, Singapore

had to cope with a double whammy in national security. In the north, we were in the shadow of the communist threat from China. Down south, we were faced with political confrontation with Indonesia, our largest Muslim neighbour.

We are not alone in maintaining a pool of citizen soldiers. More than 80 countries have, at some point in their history, conscripted young men to serve in the military.

When the Cold War ended in the 1990s, many countries no longer saw the need for enlistment. Between 2000 and 2014, more than 20 European countries abolished national service; these countries include France, Germany, Italy, Spain and Sweden.

The world unfortunately is not a safer place despite the collapse of the former Soviet empire. Religious extremism, cross-border terrorism, and ethnic and nationalist skirmishes remain a serious threat to security, sovereignty, and social stability. Countries that have abolished compulsory military service now find it hard to meet their defence obligations. Just a few weeks ago, Norway, passed a bill to conscript women into their military.

I don't think Singapore needs to enlist women for the armed forces but I believe we should keep the option, at least on a voluntary basis.

In Singapore, NS remains a critical pillar for the prosperity and security of the city-state. The region remains unpredictable even as we enjoy a long period of peace and respectable economic growth. In recent times, NS is not just an instrument that meets our defence imperatives but a critical institution that promotes social bonding between Singaporeans from all walks of life – that includes new immigrants and people from different races and social-economic classes.

In the Institute of Policy Studies survey that I conducted last year, commissioned by the Committee to Strengthen National Service, many of the respondents view NS as an embodiment of our values. It is a rite of passage for all Singaporean men AND for their families who support them while they fulfill their duties. NS is a family affair.

Women can fulfill a greater role in defence, whether in a military set up or otherwise. From our survey, 9% of all female respondents said that given the option they would consider serving in the armed forces – that's about 1 in every 10 women – and that includes your mum! Among the younger women below the age of 30, 13% said they would do so – that includes people like yourself.

Of course it is easier said than done. I don't think 10% of our female population will serve in the military but I do believe that if we have the right policies and attitudes, more women will step forward to contribute to defence in various capacities.

What are the obstacles for women? This brings me to the next point.

NS barriers

What are the barriers and limitations for women to take part in the military? Instead of telling you about the obstacles, maybe it is easier for me to tell you what I think is not.

I do not think there is a social stigma against women serving in the military. Our surveys support that.

I do not think there is a glass ceiling for your career progression.

I do not think the chance of sexual harassment is any higher in the military than in the corporate sector.

In fact, at the individual level, I do not think you will be worse off in any way.

But at the operational level however, I am not sure if we are ready to treat women as combat soldiers in the same way as their male counterparts. In non-combat vocations, I believe women can perform just as well and both Singapore and the Singapore armed forces will benefit as whole with more diverse perspectives.

But in combat vocations, are Singaporeans ready to embrace women as equals? In the event of a war, will the morale of our soldiers and the nation be affected when the enemies capture our women? Are we prepared to see women prisoners of war paraded around and not feel emotionally affected?

These are some of the inconvenient topics that we need think about if we plan to engage more women in the military.

I have just spoken on two key points related to the enlistment policy, namely NS landscape and NS barriers. Now let me address the third one, the elephant in the room. What is the purpose of NS for you – more precisely, why should you serve, what do you get out of this? This is the hard truth in human psychology; we all want something in return. There is no free lunch.

NS purpose

Students of RGS, all of you who are seated here today, I'd like you to turn around to look at your fellow schoolmate seated on your left. Now, look at the one seated on your right.

RGS is one of the elite schools in Singapore. Chances are, almost all of you will earn a place in the top universities, be that local or foreign. By the time you complete your degree, many of you would have

earned various scholarships and prizes. Another one-third of you will likely go further to obtain some form of postgraduate education.

You are among the elite in Singapore. But the trouble is, you are not alone. You are not extra-ordinary. There are 7 billion people in the world and some of the top talents will come to Singapore and you will have to compete with them. Even among Singaporeans, possibly half of people in your age cohort will do just as well. By 2020, 3,000 additional places will have been created in Singapore's publicly-funded universities to offer 40% of each cohort a chance to receive a degree education, not to mention the 10% of each cohort expected to receive a degree education through publicly-funded part-time places. And this is just local government-subsidized education.

Those who do not make it to the top schools will find other ways to stand out. They will excel in other areas, with other skills and competencies. Intellectual achievement is no longer the only yardstick in measuring success.

If you look at the admission criteria for graduate schools in the top US universities, you will realise that good grades alone no longer guarantee you a place in Ivy League universities. The reason is simple. Almost everyone who applies for admission to Harvard, Yale, Princeton or MIT will have a perfect or near-perfect score for their A levels, SAT, GRE or International Baccalaureate.

Admission officers are increasingly looking for people with conviction – a belief that they can make a difference for the broader community, be that for the environment, animal rights, gender equality, or the fight against poverty.

Prospective students are recruited for having strength of character. The same can also be said about the workplace. Employers are no

longer just hiring graduates with unblemished academic records or job experience. Increasingly they are looking for people who know what they stand for, who are passionate about upholding their values and beliefs. It matters because those who know who they are and what they stand for will go into a task giving nothing but their best.

Now, I am not here to recruit you young women here today to join the army – for that, I leave it to Colonel Fox, the next speaker. But consider this:

If you truly wish to stand out and be counted, do something for the larger good. Military service – especially in a voluntary capacity – is an honour. It is not just a way to get noticed but it is definitely one of the few things you can do to make a difference to the people around you, and for yourself.

The level and duration of military involvement will vary depending on the scheme that you sign up for – the SAF Volunteer Corps has a shorter cycle, whereas you will spend a few years in the military if you sign up as a professional soldier. It doesn't matter which one you take up. The key is in knowing what you will defend.

Thank you.