

**IPS Women's Conference 2021**  
**Gender Equality in Singapore: An Action Plan for Progress (Closing Dialogue)**  
**Speech by Mr K Shanmugam,**  
**Minister for Home Affairs & Law,**  
**3 June 2021, 4.00pm - 5.30pm**

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Professor Lily Kong,  
President of SMU

Ms He Ting Ru,  
MP for Sengkang GRC,

Mr Janadas Devan,  
Director of IPS,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

## I. INTRODUCTION

1. A very good afternoon to all of you.
2. As you heard, 9 months ago, we started these Conversations on Singapore Women's Development, to look at how we can better deal with the issues that women, old and young, face.
3. Since then, we have held more than 100 conversations. Several thousands of women have taken part, men too, and they have shared their views candidly.
4. This IPS conference is a continuation of the conversation.
5. I thank IPS for organising this inaugural Women's Conference, and for inviting me, and the others.
6. It is a real privilege to be here.

## II. CONVERSATIONS ON WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT

7. I will start with this question: What is the position of women today in our society? I would say the glass is maybe two-thirds full, maybe a bit more. And that isn't enough. We need to do more.
8. Some areas, we have done very well. Take women's education. About 50% of our graduates were women in 2019. Literacy rate for women – 96.1%.
9. If you look at the 2020 UN Human Development Report, Singapore is ranked 12<sup>th</sup> out of 162 countries for equality between men and women. That is ahead of developed countries like the US, UK, New Zealand and Canada.

10. But in that context, why did we start on these conversations? And, having started on it, what should we focus on?

11. Why did we start? Some of you will recall the case involving a dentistry student, earlier last year, and the series of voyeurism cases, in our universities.

12. And you heard Monica earlier on her own experiences.

13. There was much discussion then, on the penalties the defendants should face, and the relevance of factors like, "Oh, the defendant has a bright future", "it was a moment of folly" and so on, and how much these should count in mitigation. It set us thinking, about the framework on how you approach this, there has got to be a more philosophical, fundamental way of thinking about these issues.

14. The punishment for crime is important, don't get me wrong. Making the penalties stiffer, creating new offences, reviewing the sentencing framework, all that is important, and we have done all of that, and for law enforcement agencies, to take these issues very seriously. But that's the relatively easier part.

15. As I said, we need a philosophical approach. What I meant is, we also need a mindset change, beyond looking at this as a crime and punishment issue. Such acts of voyeurism, similar conduct, may have to be viewed as an affront to what we stand for, and against our most deeply held beliefs. The idea of equality between men and women, boys and girls, has to be hardcoded from young and imprinted deeply into our collective consciousness.

16. So, we decided, we will do a thorough review – Look at related issues, structural issues, affecting women, affecting their ability to achieve their full potential.

### III. ISSUES RAISED

17. And as I said earlier, we have had hundreds of conversations.

18. Let me briefly touch on some of the issues that came up during the Conversations. Many of them have been discussed in the morning too. So, I am not going to go through all of them, I'll just give you a sense.

19. First, what came out repeatedly – workplace. The hurdles and issues that women face and the impact on their career, their progress – These are often linked back to their situation at home. Going on maternity leave, coming back to the job, making sure that they are treated fairly when they come back. Women often take a larger share of the household work, and also caregiving, whether it's family, children, elderly parents, parents-in-law.

20. So, there's been a fair amount of feedback for more support, to fulfil both career and family aspirations. And basically, just fair and equal treatment at the workplace.

21. Many also agreed with the need for mindset shifts across the whole of society.

22. Other issues that came up, another illustration – women’s representation on boards of public companies.

23. If you look at the Council for Board Diversity’s target, it was 20% by 2020, 25% by 2025, and 30% by 2030, for women’s representation on boards of SGX-listed companies.

24. So far, it’s 17.6% representation in the top 100-listed companies in Singapore, in 2020, from 7.5% in 2014. This is on the low side; it needs to be dealt with.

25. Another area, important area, which came up repeatedly, enhancing protection and safety of women for hurt and sexual offences.

26. As I’ve indicated earlier, we have further increased the penalties for those who commit sexual offences, hurt offences, against vulnerable victims. They face enhanced penalties. And this would include victims in intimate or close relationships, even if they are not married, with the offender. Girlfriends, live-in partners. We’ve also increased the penalties for harassment of persons in an intimate relationship with the offender, and for repeated breaches of Protection Orders. And many of you would know, there was a new Protection from Harassment Court that was set up and it has now come into force. The Act was passed in 2019.

27. We have also created new offences to specifically make criminal, acts like voyeurism, dissemination of intimate images without consent. These have all become more prevalent with technology. And as I said in Parliament, you know, when it comes up in mitigation, that “this boy has a very bright future”. really – serve your sentence first for the offence, then go and pursue the bright future that you have.

28. The starting point has got to be: No excuses, it should never have happened. And, we have to teach that to our boys and girls from school – Mutual respect, equality and autonomy.

#### IV. LOOKING AHEAD

29. A wide range of topics have been discussed in the Conversations. As I have said, I haven’t listed everything, just a few issues to give you a sense. And today’s Conference is an important platform to continue the conversation.

30. The panellists in the earlier sessions and participants have raised important points on caregiving and work-family trade-offs, the division of domestic labour, protection from sexual crimes.

31. I hope people with views will make their views known. This has to be a whole-of-nation, whole-of-society effort.

32. We then intend to table a White Paper that takes in the relevant ideas, and table it in Parliament.

33. So, I look forward to the discussion later.

34. Thank you.