

Speech by Minister Grace Fu, at the book launch of "Our Lives to Live: Putting a Woman's Face to Change in Singapore"

Government Will Continue to Support Women's Progress

Dr Kanwaljit Soin,
Ms Margaret Thomas,

Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Introduction

Good evening. I am happy to join you for the book launch of "Our Lives to Live: Putting a Woman's Face to Change in Singapore". The book shares the diverse stories and views of Singaporean women from all walks of life, and celebrates Singaporean women's progress and achievements.

Women's achievements

We have come a long way since Singapore's independence. In the early years, most Singaporean women followed one path – they got married, stayed home to do the housework and took care of the children. Not many had the opportunity to maximise their potential in school or in the workforce. Today, women's lives have changed dramatically. In the words of Mrs Eliza Choo who wrote to the Straits Times last week,

"Our country is a land of equal opportunity for both men and women.

Women here are well educated and have choices in life.

We do not have to think of ourselves as being at the mercy of employers; neither do we have to always resort to taking litigious action.

We are women of value both at home and in the marketplace."

Indeed, Singaporean women have achieved success in various fields, taking up top posts in the public and private sectors, in sports and in the arts, to name a few. Many of these inspiring women are here with us today.

Professor Chan Heng Chee was Singapore's first female ambassador, and served as ambassador to the United States from 1996 to 2012. Ms Elim Chew has grown "77th Street" into a global business. Former national swimmer Ms Patricia Chan was Singapore's first "Golden Girl" for winning gold in every one of the 39 events that she competed in at the Southeast Asian Peninsula Games between 1965 and 1973. Women keep Singapore safe and secure, serving in the Singapore Armed Forces and the Singapore Civil Defence Force. Singaporean women have seized opportunities, stepped up, and succeeded through merit and sheer hard work. We should be proud of our achievements.

Government support for women's family and career aspirations

Singapore's social and economic circumstances have changed significantly since independence.

Our policies have evolved with the times to suit the changing needs of Singaporean women, and marriage and parenthood policy is a good example.

We have invested significant resources to support Singaporeans in their aspirations to marry and have children. We introduced the Marriage and Parenthood Package in 2001, and have enhanced it over the years, investing \$2.5 billion annually on marriage and parenthood measures.

We have increased the supply of HDB flats so that young couples can get affordable public housing more easily. We are also improving access to affordable and good quality childcare. At the workplace, employers play an important role in helping employees manage their work and family commitments. The Government encourages employers to do their part through grants and tripartite guidelines on best practices. I am heartened to learn that in 2014, the number of firms offering flexi-work benefits rose to 47%, from 38% in 2013.

The community plays a significant role in enhancing the family-friendly environment in Singapore. The SG50 Baby Jubilee Gift is a good example of a government-supported community initiative which has generated significant excitement, sparking ground-up initiatives celebrating family. We are seeing positive signs, with more couples marrying and having children in 2014. There were some 24,000 marriages involving at least one Singaporean in 2014, the highest since 1997. TFR increased to 1.25 in 2014 from 1.19 in 2013. We are encouraged by these positive developments and remain committed to supporting Singaporean women, and men, in achieving their family aspirations.

Aspirations of women – young and old

We must continue to be attuned to the changing aspirations and needs of Singaporean women, young and old. Young Singaporean women aspire to combine work and family. Yet, many feel that they have to make difficult choices between family and work. In fact, women make up the vast majority (83%) of economically inactive residents in the prime working age groups (age 25-54), with the majority (80%) not working due to family responsibilities.

We need to do more to reduce the work-family trade-off that women face. Fathers are stepping up to share greater responsibility in caring for children. They can now do so with more leave support, introduced in the 2013 Marriage and Parenthood Package. Employers need to recognise that it makes good business sense to support their employees in managing their work and family responsibilities. Implementing progressive work practices such as flexible work arrangements will help talent attraction and retention, and we hope that we will see even more employers do so over time. A key success factor is to nurture a supportive work culture where there is mutual trust and understanding between colleagues and supervisors – that it is the quality of work that matters, and not “face-time”.

With support from family members, employers, and the community, I hope more women can find fulfilment at work and at home. Ms Emmeline Yong, a mother of two, and co-founder of the Objectifs Centre for Photography and Film, is able to balance her time between building her business and taking care of her children, because of the strong support that she receives from her husband and her colleagues.

We must also focus on the needs of Singaporean women who are seeking to re-enter the workforce, or to achieve retirement adequacy. The SkillsFuture initiative will empower women to take charge of their own professional development, and obtain the requisite skills and confidence to take on desired jobs. One inspiring example is that of Ms Ang Chin Choo, a part-time cleaner who decided to return to the workforce full-time after her children had grown up. She attended training courses under the Workfare Skill-Up Programme and is now working as a full-time

childcare centre teaching assistant.

We will also help older women have greater peace of mind in saving for retirement. They stand to benefit from recent enhancements to the CPF. The increase in contribution rates and interest rates on CPF balances for older Singaporeans will help them build up their retirement savings more quickly. There is also more flexibility to use CPF savings to top up the account of other family members, including spouses who are homemakers and elderly parents.

Conclusion

Singaporean women, young and old, are contributing to the nation in important ways – as businesswomen, entrepreneurs, artistes, sportswomen, firewomen – I could go on. We welcome the ideas, energy and commitment of Singaporean women, to build upon the legacy of the women who have paved the way for us. The range of views in “Our Lives to Live” reflects the diversity, depth and strength of women in Singapore. We can be truly proud of the tremendous progress that we have made in the last fifty years, and look forward with confidence to a Singapore that offers an even brighter future for our daughters and granddaughters.