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**SPEECH BY MRS YU-FOO YEE SHOON, MINISTER OF
STATE FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT, YOUTH AND
SPORTS, AT THE ASEAN WOMEN LEADERS FORUM, ON
15 DECEMBER 2009,
AT THE FULLERTON HOTEL BALLROOM
“EXPANDING POSSIBILITIES, SCALING NEW HEIGHTS”**

**Special Luncheon Forum, 12.45 pm:
“Women in Government – Challenges Faced”**

Her Excellency Senator Shahrizat Abdul Jalil, Minister of
Women, Family and Community Development, Malaysia

Dato’ Dr Jannie Tay, President, ASEAN Business Forum
and Women’s Business Connection

Distinguished guests, Ladies and gentlemen,

Good afternoon.

INTRODUCTION

1. Thank you, Jannie, for the kind introduction. I am
delighted to be here this afternoon to discuss a topic
close to my heart, that is, the progress of women, the
successes as well as the challenges we face.

ASIA PACIFIC ECONOMIC COOPERATION (APEC)

2. This year, Singapore hosted APEC. My Ministry was honoured to organise the 14th APEC Women Leaders Network Meeting (or WLN). There was an unprecedented number of participants despite the economic downturn and H1N1 swine-flu concerns. We had more than 600 guests and delegates from 24 economies. I thank Minister Shahrizat from Malaysia, our closest neighbour, for sending 60 delegates from the private sector. I appreciate the tremendous support from all the APEC economies toward the APEC Meetings.

3. The APEC Economic Leaders have endorsed enhancing women's access to education, training, financing, technology and infrastructure to maximise women's economic opportunities. They welcomed continued outreach to women entrepreneurs to grow the positive multiplier effect that women's economic engagement can have on productivity and sustained growth.

CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN

4. In an increasingly globalised world, women today have become more educated and well-travelled. They have higher expectations, and aspire to greater achievements. With more exposure, women have better employment prospects and opportunities to shine and reach their fullest potential.

5. More women are now contributing to the economic development of our nation. Last year, the female labour force participation rate in Singapore was 55.6%, up from 49.4% a decade ago.

6. In a digitalised world, women can harness technology, such as telecommuting and teleconferencing, to harmonise family and career. With increased employment, more women can gain financial independence and stability.

7. Now, I shall list some of the trends and challenges faced by women:

a. **Globalisation of families.** Globalisation and the available of economic opportunities across borders can

lead to family members living in different countries. This affects the family structure and brings about societal changes;

b. **Shift from lifelong employment to shorter and many career stints in their lifetime.** Although giving greater mobility and flexibility, people tend to spend lesser time in a given job. There is a need to adapt to a new environment quickly.

c. **Shorter knowledge and product life cycle,** especially in the IT industry where new and better products and services are developed so quickly, that what you bought last year may already be obsolete now. We need to keep up-to-date with global trends, and constantly upgrade ourselves through lifelong learning.

d. **More women choose to marry late or remain single.** This contributes to a lower total fertility rate. They put their career and financial security as their priorities before committing to starting a family. However, the longer they put off marriage, the slimmer are their chances of settling down.

e. **Challenges of old age.** Women live longer than men. There will be more and more older women in a rapidly graying population. There is a need to plan early for retirement and to address key concerns such as financial security and healthcare.

f. **Widening income gap.** Along with the rest of the world, income at various levels of society are stretching out, due to globalisation, technology and competition for talent.

Changing Mindsets

8. Another big challenge faced by women is changing mindsets. We have to work doubly hard to prove that we are as good as the men, if not better. Mindsets and stereotypes take time to change but I am glad women in Singapore have come a long way. Men have begun to see women as equals and as partners. Women must continue to prove ourselves and not be seen as mere objects for display (摆美). We must continue to make lifelong learning a part of life's journey.

9. To raise public awareness on important family issues, my Ministry had invited a film-maker, the late Yasmin Ahmad, to produce and direct two groundbreaking campaign TV commercials, “Red Shoes” and “Funeral”. These productions have inspired many Singaporeans, as well as people beyond Singapore via the Internet. We will continue with such public education to reinforce the message that family comes first.

Total Environment Approach

10. Under the total environment approach, my Ministry has set up, or worked closely with other agencies, on many initiatives which adopt the “Many Helping Hands” approach. This involves the public, private and people sectors, or 3Ps, to support and empower women to be the best that they can be. Some of these initiatives include:

a. **National Family Council (NFC).** We have set up the people-sector led National Family Council which is supported by the government. It organises programmes such as parenting, marriage preparation and enrichment,

inter-generational bonding and counseling, which includes financial literacy.

b. **Fathering Movement.** People-sector organisations such as the Fathering Movement, the Centre for Fathering (CFF) and the Association of Devoted and Active Family Men (ADAM) encourage men to share family and parenting responsibilities with their wives. This helps to change the mindset of men.

c. **Marriage Central.** It is an initiative by the NFC which hopes to offer a holistic approach to strengthening the institution of marriage by addressing the needs of a person in critical life stages, from singlehood to the various stages in married life.

d. **Work-Life Harmony.** The promotion of work-life harmony in Singapore is spearheaded by the Tripartite Committee on Work-Life Strategy, which comprises key stakeholders such as employers, unions, human resource institutions and the government. To assist organisations implement work-life measures, the Ministry of Manpower introduced a special fund called “Work-life Works” or WoW! Fund, which provides a grant

to organisations to help defray costs. The Singapore Civil Service, as the biggest employer, leads by example by appointing a Work-Life Advocate and Work-Life Ambassador for every Ministry to drive and promote the initiatives.

e. **Pro-Family Business Initiative.** My Ministry also supports businesses which are pro-family. Businesses are encouraged to adopt the Pro-Family Business Pledge, which signifies their commitment to provide good service and infrastructure to welcome families, such as family friendly shopping malls. Businesses that pledge to be pro-family, and those which meet the accreditation criteria display the Pro-Family Business logos in their premises.

f. **Singapore Workforce Development Agency (WDA).** We must develop the culture of lifelong learning and strive to constantly improve. In partnership with WDA, women can undergo various training and remain in the workforce for their lifetime of employment.

g. **Family-Friendly Work Practices.** More organisations are putting in place work-life programmes

infrastructure, such as instituting a work-life culture and work-life plans.

h. **Marriage and Parenthood Package.** The Enhanced M&P Package was announced in August 2008, to support both parents, especially working mothers. The measures, such as 16 weeks maternity leave and Baby Bonus, were deemed by many to be women-friendly because they address key challenges Singaporean women face by facilitating better work-life balance through longer paid maternity and childcare leave for both parents, providing quality, affordable and accessible centre-based childcare options, and providing financial support for parents to raise and care for their children.

i. **Civic organisations.** The Women's Desk in my Ministry works closely with three apex organisations to enhance the family and help address women's issues. They are the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations, Women Integration Network under the People's Association, and National Trades Union Congress Women's Development Secretariat. These

civic organisations actively organise events and raise funds to help women in need.

11. These are just some examples of what can be achieved through a strong partnership among the people, private and public sectors. Regardless of whether we are from the people, private or public sector, we women are united in our common goal to improve the lives of our families, our communities and our countries.

12. The total environment also involves the provision of accessible, quality and affordable public amenities and services such as childcare, eldercare and sports facilities, supportive workplace practices such as flexible and part-time work.

ACHIEVEMENTS OF WOMEN IN SINGAPORE

Singapore's Commitments

13. Our government policies are based on meritocracy and equal opportunity for all, regardless of gender. We adopt a whole of government approach to ensure gender equality and to empower women.

14. On the international front, the Government of Singapore remains committed to achieving the goals set out in the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

15. As signatory to the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (or CEDAW), we continue to monitor and effect our obligations under the Convention through an Inter-Ministry Committee.

16. In recognition of our commitment to equal remuneration and treatment for work of equal value, Singapore ratified a key International Labour Organisation (or ILO) Convention. The Tripartite Declaration on Equal Remuneration for Men and Women Performing Work of Equal Value further affirmed Singapore's commitment.

Women in the Singapore Civil Service

17. Today, women constitute 57% of the 66,000-strong civil service. Women form 63% of the officers in Division I and Superscale grades, which are the top two

categories of officers in the civil service. In the Superscale category, women make up 41% of the total number of officers. This is a significant increase from 28.5% in 2000. At the top leadership level, six out of 20 Permanent Secretaries are female. This is a great improvement because ten years ago, there was only one female Permanent Secretary.

Women in Political and Public Life

18. Another significant area of improvement was the participation of women in politics. As at 31 May 2009, Singapore is ranked 39 out of 187 countries in terms of the percentage of women in the Lower or Single House. Singapore's 24% of women in Parliament currently exceeds Inter-Parliamentary Union (or IPU)'s world average of 18.4% (both Houses combined).

Other Key Achievements by or for Women

19. We have also made significant progress in other areas concerning women. For example, the Constitution of Singapore was amended in 2004 so that a child born

overseas can become a citizen by descent if the child's mother or father is a Singaporean. Prior to the amendment, the child could only acquire citizenship by descent if the father was a Singaporean. In 2005, we equalised medical benefits for civil servants; female officers, like their male counterparts, can now claim medical benefits for their spouses and unmarried children below the age of 18 years. We are also looking into how to improve the enforcement of maintenance payments to the wife and children after divorce.

CONCLUSION

20. The video which you have just watched brings the key message that, "What was once impossible, now happens every day." While we have come a long way, and climbed many mountains, including conquering Mount Everest. There are many more mountains we can conquer. I hope those who share the same passion can and will contribute towards further progress for women going forward.

21. I look forward to a fruitful exchange of ideas. Thank you.