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Singapore Government

PRESS RELEASE

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**SPEECH BY MRS YU-FOO YEE SHOON, SENIOR PARLIAMENTARY
SECRETARY FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT, AT THE SEMINAR
ON "THE GREAT EXPECTATION IN THE MILLENNIUM" ON
SUNDAY, 12 MARCH 2000 AT 9.00AM AT THE MANDARIN HOTEL
BALLROOM, NO.333, ORCHARD ROAD, SINGAPORE 238867**

A good morning to

Mrs Joanna Wong Quee Heng (Chairperson for People's Association Women's
Executive Committee Co-ordinating Council)

Nominated Member of Parliament Dr Jennifer Lee and all ladies present.

I want to congratulate the People's Association Women's Executive
Committee Co-ordinating Council for organising this timely discussion on what
the great expectation facing women is in the new millennium.

Status of Women

2 Looking back, I am proud of the progress that Singaporean women have made. We have come a long way. So much has been achieved that I would bore you if I were to rattle off the long list. Let me just cite the key indices to illustrate this point. In education and employment, women have made the greatest strides. The literacy rate of Singaporean women 15 years and above is among the highest in the world. It was 89% in 1997 against 73% in 1980. Since 1995, more than 50% of university intake has been women. The female intakes into the polytechnics also hover around 50%. Every year, we are seeing girls and women among the top scorers in our national examinations.

3 In tandem with these educational attainments, more women are working and staying longer in the labour force. The coming of the IT age has opened up even greater opportunities, both challenging and exciting, for young women. It has narrowed the differences between men and women as physical strength or brawn is no longer an advantage in many re-engineered jobs. On the basis of intelligence, determination and abilities, our bright young women are able to match even the best of the men.

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4 We are seeing evidence of this in the number of women occupying senior managerial and technical positions. In 1990, 20% of women were legislators, senior officials, managers, professionals, technicians and associate professionals. Today, 10 years later, this figure stands at 33%. Over the same period, the percentage of women employed as production craftsmen, plant and machine operators, cleaners and labourers dropped from 37% to 25%. It is a most encouraging trend, which I see continuing in the new millennium.

5 The future is bright for our young women. More will take on leadership positions and gain recognition for their contributions to society. There is much to look forward to. Even as we rejoice in this development, we remember also that women are achieving all these and at the same time satisfying their greater calling. We and only we can ensure that there is a next generation. I am not saying men don't count in this most important of life processes, but it is women who have been specially blessed and gifted.

Challenges of the new Millennium

6 It has been said many times that Singapore's only resource is her people. It bears repeating especially when we are talking about procreation. The average Singaporean man marries at 30 and the average Singaporean woman, 27. They are prepared to put parenthood on hold, while they pursue their careers, financial security and home ownership. This means that by the time they try for their first child, they are already in their 30s. Some feel that with longer life expectancies of 79 years for women and 75 for men, it is all right to postpone marriage and childbearing. It is true that an older couple may be financially better off and are more patient with the children, but it is equally true that fertility rate declines with age and that the most fertile period of a woman's life is 18-25. Becoming a mother is a special kind of achievement, and I hope that our young women will not wait too late to enjoy the satisfaction of this achievement.

7 So, my "great expectation" for this new millennium is for Singapore to regain our total fertility rate of 2.1 births per woman. This rate has not been seen since 1975. Our present rate is 1.5 births per woman. We are simply not replacing ourselves and unless we do something we are decimating ourselves. Women, let's do our part and fulfil the role that Mother Nature had bestowed on us.

Role of Government

8 But what part can the Government play to help us perform our role?

9 I believe that the Government has a role to play in building an environment supportive of family and work. Much of this lies in reaching out to women in the

heartlands with information on parenting skills, social and sexual awareness, family life, familial responsibilities, and so forth. To succeed, it will have to be a multi-Ministry, total integrated approach involving the People's sector. The Ministry of Community Development will take the lead role. It will, together with social service and family life education experts, identify trends affecting families and best practices of families, and build up a wide repertoire of family life education resources and materials to support families. But we cannot succeed without the active participation of the People's sector – organisations such as PA WEC, NTUC Women's Wing, SNEF, CDCs, self-help groups and religious organisations. They will be invited to take part as our Family Life Ambassadors. Together, we can achieve a better outreach to families and individuals at venues and times convenient to them. Through these Family Life Ambassadors, we will be able to reach the unconverted, that is, parents who otherwise have no time to attend formal parenting programmes. Your discussions today on how Government can help women and families meet their various responsibilities will provide valuable feedback to the Ministry.

Families Must Network for Support

10 The Government can, however, do that much. To balance the dual roles of worker-parent, families need support and they must learn to network to get this support. This network will provide not only the moral support but also actual assistance when you need help. Increasingly, we are forgetting that one of the privileges of being part of a family, is the right to call upon our brothers and sisters and their families for help when the occasion necessitates. With more families breaking up into smaller nuclear units and maintaining fewer contacts or offers of assistance with each other, this network of support is shrinking to our own detriment. We need to reverse this tendency to isolate ourselves, and instead forge stronger bonds with our family members.

11 Another way of networking is what Dr Lai Ah Eng and her neighbours had done. The young families in their Family Support Group pool their resources and become one big family for all intents and purposes.

Concerns of Young Women

12 The young women of today have very different aspirations and concerns from the previous generations. Ms Melissa Kwee, a young woman leader from

Project Access, whom I met recently, told me that among her cohort, many of them are not interested in gender issues like human rights and equality. Instead, they are interested in issues nearer to their hearts. Issues like health, personal safety, financial management and personal development – in short, the am-I-the-best-that-I-can-be questions.

13 To address Melissa's feedback that young women today expect to be better informed of various health issues concerning them, I am pleased to announce the launch of the Mammography Bus Programme which is jointly organised by various women's organisations such as the Breast Cancer Foundation, PA WEC Co-ordinating Council and other self-help organisations.

Conclusion

14 PA WEC is an effective woman's group that reaches out to women in all age groups and a wide range of occupations. It is in a unique position to hold dialogues with both graduates and non-graduates, single and married women; to understand the changing expectations of women and to encourage all women to fulfil their aspirations to be good mothers, aunties and daughters or daughters-in-law. I don't have the answers myself to the many challenges facing young women today. I can only encourage you to discuss these issues thoroughly. Hopefully, at the end of the day, we will arrive at a consensus on what is the best approach to the challenges facing women in the new millennium.

Thank you.

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