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SPEECH BY MRS YU-FOO YEE SHOON, SENIOR PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY, MINISTRY OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AT THE LAUNCH OF SCWO'S "MILLENIUM COMMUNITY SYMPOSIUM : A SOCIAL CHALLENGE" GRAND BALLROOM, RITZ CARLTON MILLENNIA SATURDAY, 21 AUGUST 99 AT 9AM

Good morning,

Mrs Anamah Tan, President of Singapore Council of Women's Organisations

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

I congratulate the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations for being among the first to organise a public symposium on how we should build the five pillars of the Singapore 21 vision. I am pleased to note that the backbone of today's discussions is on building strong families.

This theme of building families may seem to be too frequently repeated. It is important that as we stand poised to enter the new millennium, we should look at the values we want to take with us into the next century to ensure that we build the kind of family and community we want. This requires us to ask ourselves some fundamental questions.

Changing Trends and Expectations

What kind of social norms do we want in our future society?

We always talk about changing times and trends. Let me give you examples of some trends: today divorce rate has gone up from 5 persons per 1000 to 6.7 persons per 1000. The singlehood rate for females has gone up from 21.9% in 1980 to 25% in 1997. For males it has gone up from 33.1% in 1980 to 37.5% in 1997. The fertility rate for

women between 15-44 years has dropped from 3 per 1000 women in 1970 to 1.637 per 1000 women in 1997. Statistics also shows that the age of females at first birth has gone up from 28 years in 1987, to 29.5 years in 1997. I am told that the most fertile period of a woman's life is between the ages of 18 and 25 years.

Of course some trends are good, such as people are better educated but some trends must be arrested.

Do we allow the less desirable trends to develop to a stage that it becomes the new social norm? Or do we examine our social health from time to time, not because we avoid change but because we want to check that our family foundations are strong for us to move on confidently. While we accept that change in mindset is unavoidable, there are some fundamentals which do not change. One of this is the family. It is an institution which has stood the test of time, and has lasted for centuries. There is no reason to change this institution, unless mankind can think of a better alternative to replace it.

In the past we have certain expectations. What expectations do we have of our children today?

Our parents expected that we grow up to be good persons, to hold a responsible position, to get married and raise a good family. Parents took this responsibility seriously and did not feel that their life's work was done and their duty executed until they had seen to it that all their children were married. These expectations become our responsibilities, and in turn the responsibilities establish the social norm. What about ourselves? What expectations do we have of our children and ourselves? Do we see our responsibilities the way our parents saw theirs? What do the majority of us, men and women want from life and what do the majority of us parents expect of our children today?

Family the strongest pillar of social norm

The strongest pillar of our social norm is the family and setting up of families. If the family is strong in its values, it can weather many storms. Within the ambit of a strong family, many wonderful things are happening, which we are not aware of or take for granted: husband and wife provide mutual support and share the ups and downs of life; childbearing carrying on the family name is prided upon; children are treasured, properly taken care of and brought up to be good people; elders are valued, respected and taken care of; grandparents look after grandchildren while their parents work, moral values are transmitted from one generation to another; siblings are included in the network of family support. This is the norm and should continue to be the norm.

Another important question to ask is, have we changed our perception of marriage?

Do we still place as much emphasis on marriage and childbearing? According to a recent feedback from a survey conducted among working women on the conditions before

they start a family - financial stability, establishing a career or owning a flat, and lastly forming a family. This reflects a shift in the perception of marriage. One result is the increase in the number of singles.

What is our perception of marriage today? Is marriage just for companionship or have we chosen to ignore the time-honoured importance of having children in marriage. These decisions affect our society. I agree that one way to solve the problems associated with the decline of birth rate is the liberalization of immigration policy to attract more talent. However, we also need to build up a pool of our own human resources and talent.

So how do we arrest this trend of increasing singlehood or avoiding parenthood?

Stable Marriage and Stable Family

Marriage is the starting point in the formation of a family. If we take families to be the building block of society, then surely we must pay attention to the first step of the process, that is, marriage.

Currently, only a small proportion of couples considering marriage receive any formal guidance or marriage preparation.   I am pleased to announce that MCD is working with community groups and voluntary welfare organisations to introduce a series of marriage preparation specials next month.

It is important that both partners understand that they are taking on a long-term commitment to each other and to society. A strong and loving relationship between husband and wife, where there is commitment, open communication and mutual respect, is an important source of stability for our children in a rapidly changing world. Stability in a marriage means happy couple, happy children, stable family and stable society.

Families are the primary building blocks for safe and sustainable communities. They teach right from wrong. They pass down both cultural and moral values. They are the first line of defence against anti-social behaviour. According to a recent feedback report on Singapore families, some people were concerned about the widening gap between parents and children. The breakdown of family life and discipline in the home damages the fabric of our society. In this regard, parents have the primary responsibility for the well being and the moral development of their children. Schools and community-based facilities can only support child rearing. They cannot be primarily responsible for imparting values that are important to us. This is the role and duty of parents.

Recent surveys indicate that the number of families where both parents work is on the increase. In 1980, 27% of married couples were dual career couples. In 1995, the number rose to 40%. 45% of married women were working in 1989, and the number rose to 56% in 1998. I am sure that it is much higher today. Since Singapore lacks resources, it is the family's decision for dual incomes.

We must have both the hardware and software infrastructure to support such a situation of rising dual income families. The hardware consists of school programmes, student care centres, childcare, family service centres, and family-friendly work organisations. The software would consist of family life education and other programmes which support working parents and help them strengthen their bonds with their children while they are young. The Committee on the Family has set up workgroups to study the important areas of parenting and work stress on the family and I am sure the findings will help identify areas of needs and recommend the infrastructure to deal with these needs.

We must be creative about community initiatives to support and strengthen the family. Perhaps we should focus on a holistic child development programme, on the principle that if we focus on the child, all other efforts will fall into place. Such a programme would have to be inter-ministry in approach and involve organisations such as the CDCs.

Conclusion

I have asked a lot of questions and not given answers to all. I think that at different points in our private life and societal life, we all should take a step back to evaluate what we have achieved and reflect on the value of our achievements. We should not only congratulate ourselves on our achievements but also ask ourselves how much we have lost along the way. We should go back to the basics and constantly check our foundations as we move onwards towards the new millennium.

Later today, you will be hearing what our distinguished speakers have to say about shaping the families of the next millennium. I commend all of you for rising to the challenge and striving to formulate new directions for our community based on the Singapore 21 vision.

I wish you an interesting and fruitful symposium.

Thank you