

TRANSCRIPT OF SPEECH BY MS RAHAYU MAHZAM, PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY FOR HEALTH AND COMMUNICATIONS AND INFORMATION, AT THE MOTION ON SINGAPORE WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT ON 5 APRIL 2022

Caring for Caregivers of Seniors and Victims of Online Harms

Mr Speaker Sir

Introduction

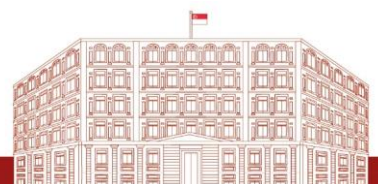
1. For a woman in Singapore to be truly unencumbered to pursue her aspirations and make real choices in her life, we need to address challenges that many women still face today and facilitate the path for her to seek opportunities. I join this debate to speak on two salient challenges; coping with caregiving duties and seeking a safe digital space.
2. Caregivers are the cornerstones of our families. Their contribution is part of what makes Singapore a thriving and caring society. I am encouraged to see many men share caregiving responsibilities at home – as husbands, sons, and fathers. However, some stereotypes remain, and women continue to take on a higher load. During the Conversations on Women's Development, many women shared that they struggled with balancing what they were traditionally expected to do as caregivers against achieving their aspirations, and often had to choose one over the other. They hoped men and women could take on a more equal share of caregiving duties.
3. Caregiving is a shared responsibility. I am glad to hear the calls made by my colleagues in this House for men and women to partner each other as equals. Each family should find their own balance, with family members pitching in to care for loved ones and giving each other real choices to pursue their aspirations regardless of gender. This is a vision we must continue to work towards.

Supporting Caregivers of Seniors

4. The Government understands that caregiving can be a heavy load to shoulder alone. We need to provide more support to caregivers – both men and women alike – so that they can find that balance between caregiving and pursuing their aspirations. Some may choose to dedicate more time to caregiving. Greater support will help them to manage the load better.
5. Minister Masagos earlier shared about efforts to support families with young children. Allow me to share more about our plans to strengthen support for caregivers of seniors. We are proud to be a society where children feel an innate sense of responsibility to care for their elderly parents, but this duty can be challenging.
6. In 2019, MOH launched the Caregiver Support Action Plan to support caregiving for seniors. We will build on these efforts to recognise and empower caregivers.

Ease caregiving load

7. Firstly, we will enhance the options for respite care to ease the caregiving load. Caregiving can be a long journey – a marathon, rather than a sprint.
8. Crystal Lee is one example of a caregiver who has had a long caregiving journey.



- a. She started at the young age of 13, caring for her father, who suffered from various cancers. Later on, she also took care of her mother who suffered from a stroke. More than 20 years later, Crystal continues to care for her mother. Her father has since passed on.
- b. Crystal shared that her mother goes to the nearby day care centre, giving Crystal time to rest and recharge. She also taps on the Home Caregiving Grant (HCG) to help her reduce her care costs.
- c. These alternative care arrangements have given Crystal space to pursue her hobbies and continue working as a part-time nurse.

9. Today, we have a range of eldercare and respite care services that help to ease the caregiving load of caregivers like Crystal, allowing them to rest and pursue other goals, with a peace of mind that their loved ones are well cared for. MOM recently announced plans to broaden the Household Services Scheme to provide basic elder-minding and childminding services. This provides another option for caregivers to tap on to take a break.

10. Nonetheless, some caregivers shared during the Conversations that they were unaware of the respite options available. Others hoped to access respite care more readily. I would like to assure Mr Gerald Giam that MOH is reviewing the respite care landscape to better meet the needs of caregivers, and make respite care more accessible, affordable, and available. We will share more details in due course.

Enhancing our care ecosystem

11. Secondly, MOH will continue to explore ways to enhance our care ecosystem. Over the years, we have expanded the capacity and range of eldercare services to meet the care needs of our seniors. Many seniors and their caregivers have benefitted from these services.

12. Mr Sharael Taha and Mr Gerald Giam have asked whether our care infrastructure will continue to be sufficient. Indeed, as our population ages, the caregiving load on families will grow. Household sizes are also shrinking, with fewer members to share caregiving responsibilities. Some may turn to nursing homes to provide care. However, nursing homes should be reserved for those with the highest care needs and no family support. Many of our seniors also prefer to age-in-place at home. We want to continue to fulfil their aspirations.

13. To do so, we need to build on the range of services and support structure in place today, to better care for seniors at home. Some seniors may be less mobile and need more help with activities of daily living throughout the day. Others may need support beyond the typical service hours of their nearby day care centres.

14. MOH is therefore exploring further future support to enhance the care ecosystem. Together with the various initiatives announced in the White Paper, we aspire to provide wraparound care for seniors residing within the community, even for those with higher care needs. This way, our caregivers can continue caring for their elderly loved ones in the community, instead of in nursing homes.

Provide more financial support

15. Another area of concern is financial support for caregivers. I thank members for the various suggestions raised during this Debate. Our caregivers care for their children and elderly



parents out of love and not for hope of reward. This value of family support and filial piety is something we should continue to treasure and uphold.

16. Nonetheless, caregivers shared that they feel the financial strain of caring for their loved ones at home, in spending on care options and daily necessities. More financial support can go a long way to help caregivers obtain the help they need to ease their caregiving journey.

17. In 2019, the Government rolled out the HCG to defray caregiving costs. The grant has since supported more than 39,000 beneficiaries. In Feb 2022, we also rolled out an expanded Seniors' Mobility and Enabling Fund, which is expected to benefit more than 38,000 seniors in 2022.

18. Since then, we have reviewed the HCG and enhanced it to recognise caregivers' contributions and further reduce caregiving costs. The grant will be increased from \$200 per month to up to \$400 per month, with more help provided to lower-income families.

19. Members of the House have expressed their support for this enhancement, and rightly so. The enhanced HCG builds on multiple layers of financial support provided today to defray the costs of care for those living at home. As a start, the Government already provides generous means-tested subsidies of up to 80% for centre- and home-based eldercare services. A care recipient using these community care services may benefit from subsidies of more than \$8,000 per year. Other support includes grants and insurance schemes like CareShield Life and ElderShield. Together, these go a long way in helping to lighten the financial load on caregivers. Some members have made suggestions calling for even more financial support. These are not new propositions requiring paradigm shifts. We have and will continue to study these carefully. However, we must recognise that any additional support comes at a cost, and will raise our long-term healthcare expenditure and impose pressure on our fiscal resources.

Supporting caregivers' retirement adequacy

20. Beyond helping caregivers afford the help they need today in their caregiving journey, we also need to ensure they are cared for, especially in their old age. Those who have cared for their loved ones for most of their life may have lower savings for their own retirement.

21. The Government has put in place various initiatives to help build up the retirement adequacy of Singaporeans, including older caregivers. The Silver Support Scheme provides quarterly payouts to seniors who had low incomes during their working years and now have less in retirement. Families can also play a part by topping up the CPF accounts of their loved ones. We will support you with tax incentives and matching grants for eligible seniors.

Improve care navigation

22. I would like to assure Mr Sharael Taha that we will also continue our efforts to make it easier for caregivers to access the support they need throughout their caregiving journey, including preparing for the end-of-life. Caregivers of seniors and those with mental health conditions can look to AIC as a one-stop resource, be it for referrals to care services, applying to financial schemes, or tapping on respite care options. MOH and AIC will also build on existing caregiver support networks and outreach teams to provide more sustained support. To improve visibility of these efforts, AIC and MOH will launch a publicity campaign starting this year, to raise awareness of available resources and where to seek help.

Family and community support

23. This is a journey we need to embark on together to support our caregivers. Family



members can share caregiving responsibilities. Employers can be more understanding towards caregivers who need flexible work arrangements because of their caregiving commitments.

24. Peers can also make a difference. When like-minded caregivers are brought together, they can provide a listening ear, share experiences, and even lend a helping hand. MOS Low Yen Ling will share more about the Government's plans to form community-based peer support networks for caregivers. Together, as a community, we can lighten the load for all caregivers.

Support for Malay Muslim Women

25. Mr Speaker, allow me to say a few words in Malay.

26. Saya berterima kasih kepada rakan-rakan sekerja saya kerana berkongsi pandangan mereka tentang perlunya menyokong para wanita Melayu/Islam. Sememangnya, kita telah mendapatkan perspektif daripada pelbagai lapisan masyarakat Singapura dan merentasi pelbagai kumpulan, termasuk masyarakat Melayu Islam. Oleh itu, kita telah juga melibatkan kumpulan-kumpulan seperti PPIS dan Forum Belia Muslim dalam perbincangan ini.

27. Selain inisiatif Pemerintah untuk menyokong pembangunan wanita Singapura, usaha-usaha kemasyarakatan melalui agensi-agensi M3 dan pertubuhan Melayu/Islam kita telah memperkukuhkan lagi sokongan untuk wanita dalam aspek perkahwinan dan keibubapaan, pekerjaan dan lain-lain. Contohnya, dalam bidang pekerjaan, kita mengukuhkan sokongan untuk wanita kembali bekerja melalui program Wanita Kembali Bekerja kelolaan Mendaki, yang menyediakan peluang untuk wanita mendapatkan kemahiran baru dan pekerjaan yang sesuai.

28. Ramai wanita punya semangat yang kuat dan mampu untuk meningkatkan dirinya jika diberi peluang. Maka itu, kita lihat lebih ramai wanita dilantik sebagai pemimpin, termasuk juga di institusi-institusi agama dan badan-badan masyarakat Melayu/Islam. Untuk menjawab soalan Dr Wan Rizal sekarang ada 122 anggota wanita yang kini menganggotai Lembaga Pentadbir Masjid (MMB). Mahkamah Syariah (SYC) kini dipimpin oleh Presiden Kanan wanita yang pertama, dan beliau disokong oleh golongan profesional undang-undang wanita lain seperti Presiden (Hakim), pendaftar serta penolong pendaftar di mana kaum wanita membentuk 66 peratus daripada kepimpinan Mahkamah Syariah. Pada 2019, buat pertama kalinya, seorang wanita, Ustazah Dr Rohana Ithnin, telah dilantik sebagai salah satu daripada empat anggota penuh dalam Jawatankuasa Fatwa Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura.

29. Pencapaian kaum wanita boleh dibanggakan. Namun, kita akan terus mempertingkatkan dan membina usaha-usaha memperkasa wanita Melayu/Islam untuk mencapai aspirasi mereka.

Supporting women who are victims of online harms

30. Mr Speaker, I would now like to address the issue of enabling all women to navigate the digital world confidently and safely.

31. Singapore's digitalisation journey has benefitted many women by unlocking new employment opportunities, such as in cybersecurity and technology sectors. Digitalisation has also enabled many women to better manage their responsibilities at home and work. However, as more of us go "digital", some have unfortunately fallen victim to online harms. SMS Sim Ann explained how women have been particularly impacted by this phenomenon.



Need for whole-of-society effort

32. The Government seeks to build a digital society where everyone can have a positive digital experience. However, we cannot do this alone. Whole-of-society efforts like the Digital for Life movement, which brings together partners from the People, Private and Public sectors, are needed to nurture a safe digital space for all.

33. The Sunlight Alliance for Action (AfA), which I co-chair with SMS Sim Ann, was launched in support of the Digital for Life movement. To-date, the AfA's work covers Public Education, Victim Support, Youth Engagement, Research and Volunteerism. SMS Sim Ann elaborated earlier on the importance of creating a supportive environment for all women online, as we do in the real world, and how the community has worked together through the AfA to ensure women and girls benefit from our increasingly digitalised society. Apart from the Sunlight AfA, we have also seen various community partners contribute to the ecosystem to tackle online harms. This includes the Defence Guild SG, which was launched in June 2021 by a group of lawyers, following an offensive online poll sexualising women asatizah. MP Zhulkarnain Rahim is part of this effort.

Enhancing online safety through legislation

34. In addition to initiatives by the community, legislation is also needed to enhance online safety. Many countries such as Germany, Australia, and the UK, have introduced or are looking into new regulations to tackle harmful online content.

35. Closer to home, the desire for enhanced measures to protect users from online harms is strong. A baseline study commissioned by the Sunlight AfA in January 2022 found that 43% of respondents considered stricter enforcement of relevant laws to be the most effective solution to reduce gender-based online harms. In addition, respondents felt that companies and platforms have the most room for improvement in tackling the issue.

36. In line with global trends and citizens' desire for stronger safeguards in the digital space, MCI recently announced the introduction of Codes of Practice to raise the baseline standard for online safety so as to:

- Minimise exposure to harmful content;
- Empower users to report and prevent the further spread of harmful content; and
- Ensure online platforms remain accountable on their measures and processes to keep users safe.

37. Moving forward, the Sunlight AfA will also be developing a research roadmap to inform future research priorities and measures to address online harms. Given the fast-evolving digital landscape, continued research will be critical in generating insights to help us protect our people in online spaces. As MCI develops these Codes of Practice, we will consult community stakeholders, including AfA members, to ensure efforts to nurture a safe online environment are tailored to meet the needs of Singaporeans.

Conclusion

38. Mr Speaker, Singapore has made significant progress over the years in shifting societal norms between men and women, from one based on patriarchal values to one based on respect and partnership. However, some stereotypes and challenges remain that impede our progress in creating a fairer and equal society. As we mature as a society, our mindsets need to change collectively. Everyone has a part to play, be it in caregiving or in ensuring a safe





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digital space for all. Let us walk together on this journey and empower all Singaporeans – men and women alike – to pursue their aspirations freely and to the fullest.

