

**REMARKS BY AMBASSADOR KAREN TAN,
PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF SINGAPORE
TO THE UNITED NATIONS
AT THE UN WOMEN STAKEHOLDERS FORUM
PANEL I: SETTING THE STAGE:
CHALLENGES FOR ACHIEVING THE MILLENIUM
DEVELOPMENT GOALS FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS,
1000 HRS ON 4 DECEMBER 2013**

Distinguished Moderator and
Panellists,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to be here this morning as a panellist at the UN Women Stakeholders Forum. And I would like to thank UN-Women, ASG Puri and her team for organising the meeting. To quote Jane Austen, one of my favourite authors in her book *Northanger Abbey*, “*A woman, especially if she has the misfortune of knowing anything, should conceal it as well as she can.*” I am glad that we are well past that stage! As a stakeholder, I look forward to exchanging views and lesson learnt with you and am sure I will benefit from the discussions over the next two days.

Twin challenges of achieving the MDGs

2 As we countdown to the expiration of the MDGs in 2015, it is useful to not only take stock of the achievements, but also to reflect on the remaining challenges we face. This is timely and relevant in light of the ongoing discussions on the post-2015 development agenda. Due to continued discrimination and the lack of empowerment, women and girls continue to have fewer economic opportunities and access to resources than men and as a result, disproportionately affected by extreme poverty and hunger (MDG 1). While MDG 2 on achieving universal primary education has been met, only two out of 130 countries have reached the target of gender parity in all levels of education. Significant challenges remain on MDG 4 on Reducing Child Mortality and MDG 5 on Improving Maternal Mortality. As for MDG 6, although new HIV infections continue to decline in most regions, HIV and AIDS is the leading cause of deaths worldwide for women aged 15-49. Taken as a whole, the overall picture is that much remains to be done to meet MDG

3, the important goal of promoting gender equality and women's empowerment.

3 From my perspective, there are two key reasons why these challenges persist. First, the lack of capacity. Good governance is a prerequisite for putting in place sound policies that will prioritise the needs of women and girls. Unfortunately, many governments do not have the necessary resources, whether economic resources, human resources, technology or skills to implement policies that improve the well-being of women and girls. Often, women and girls are also more disadvantaged when there are implementation gaps across all policies. For example, 2.5 billion people do not have proper sanitation. Without access to toilets, many women and girls relieve themselves in the dark, increasing their vulnerability to sexual violence. The lack of separate toilets for girls has also been proven to negatively impact their school attendance rate.

4 Second and more importantly, gender discrimination. Gender discrimination remains pervasive across all regions, whether developing or developed, regardless of cultural norms, traditions or values. There remain entrenched stereotypical views and attitudes of the roles of women and men, an unfortunate result of the unequal power relations between them. This inequality manifests itself in different ways, whether in exclusion from the formal economy and lack of resources, sexual exploitation of women, unequal pay for equal work, sexual harassment in the workplace, or even, increasingly, cyber bullying and eating disorders. A top-down effort from the government and a bottom-up movement from civil society are needed to correct such flawed views of gender stereotypes. Our women and girls should be valued for their inherent worth and made to feel as equals in the societies in which they belong.

Singapore's experience in achieving the MDGs

5 Every country must find the best way of achieving gender equality and women's empowerment. For Singapore, a small country with no natural resources except our people, we recognized at the early stages of our independence in 1965, that excluding women from the workforce was not an option. Gender equality and women's empowerment were key to the promotion and protection of the human rights of our citizens. Women were, and are, an asset rather than a liability for our nation and society. Women are

equal before the law, and given the same educational, employment and career opportunities as men. The literacy rate of women has risen to 94.4 percent in 2012. In fact, in our local universities, enrolment amongst women exceeds men! To tackle negative attitudes against women from an early age, our school curriculum is gender-sensitive and addresses gender-based violence and bullying in schools.

6 We are happy to see that the UN's 2013 Human Development Report ranked Singapore 13th out of 148 countries in terms of gender equality, the highest level of gender equality in the Asia-Pacific region. But more important than a statistic, we want to ensure that girls and women in Singapore are well looked-after and empowered to make important choices in their lives. More can still be done in this regard, for example in improving women's representation in certain sectors of our economy and society and addressing persistent income and wage disparities.

58th Commission on the Status of Women (CSW)

7 The 58th CSW will be a pivotal session that will contribute to shaping the international discourse on gender equality and women's empowerment, including in the post-2015 development agenda. The Agreed Conclusions for this session should be comprehensive and forward-looking.

8 In particular, as a city-state, Singapore is of the view that the needs of women in cities should be given special consideration. By 2050, about 70 percent of the world's population is projected to live in urban areas. 60 percent of the area expected to be urban in 2030 has yet to be built. Already, close to one billion people, or 33 percent of the urban population in developing countries, live in slums. To manage the current challenges and in view of further rural-urban migration, governments need to implement sustainable urban planning policies. The socio-economic needs of women and girls living in cities need to be borne in mind, as they are disproportionately affected by poor living conditions and are at greater risk of crime. They should also be given access to economic opportunities. Gender-sensitive policies that cater to women from all backgrounds should be put in place, for example, in providing decent transportation, affordable housing, creating a safe living and working environment for women, providing education and job retraining opportunities, maternity benefits and childcare policies.

9 Greater attention to this issue is welcomed. Singapore has observed that the income security of women is generally inferior to that of men due to their longer life expectancy, shorter economic life and interrupted careers. Working in the city makes this more challenging given the higher cost of living. Our government is striving to address these problems through a range of policies. We are looking into helping urban women balance work and family commitments, and have introduced measures to promote work-life harmony and flexible work arrangements. These measures, for example, WorkPro, a one-stop tripartite programme, help women re-enter/remain in the labour force after having children, improving their employability in the long term. Providing early childhood care is also integral in supporting child development and enabling women to balance their family and career. Singapore will provide 20,000 more child care places by the end of 2017 and increase childcare subsidies to support working mothers.

10 Our discussion today will raise awareness of the importance of making gender equality and women's empowerment a reality. Singapore's experience has confirmed that gender equality and women's empowerment is an essential and powerful driver to foster economic and social growth and inclusion. We must remain committed to continuing the work of the MDGs in this regard, including in the post-2015 development agenda.

11 Thank you.

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