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Tan See Leng makes personal contribution of \$1m to support women pursuing Stem careers



Manpower Minister Tan See Leng's endowment will support scholarships for women pursuing Stem degrees at NTU. ST PHOTO: CHONG JUN LIANG



Ang Qing

UPDATED 7 HOURS AGO ▾

SINGAPORE - Women pursuing careers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (Stem) will get a boost with a \$1 million gift from Manpower Minister Tan See Leng.

He said the endowment was inspired by knowing and working with many talented and capable women from fields such as medicine, pharmacy and chemical engineering, in announcing the personal contribution on Thursday (April 7) at Nanyang Technological University (NTU).

"Growing up, I had the privilege of being taught by many inspiring female teachers and as a medical student, continued to be mentored and tutored by some of the finest minds who are accomplished women clinicians as well," added Dr Tan, who has more than 30 years of experience in the healthcare sector.

He launched the endowment to advance women in Stem careers at a forum commemorating the first anniversary of NTU's Promotion of Women in Engineering, Research, and Science (Powers) programme, which aims to close the gender gap in these fields.

Named after Dr Tan's late father Tan Seow Chiap, the endowment will support scholarships worth up to \$50,000 annually for women pursuing Stem degrees at NTU. It will also help fund annual mentoring programmes by leading Stem experts for female undergraduates and an incubation programme awarding a \$1,000 grant.

Noting that several colleagues had asked why the endowment fund was named after his father instead of his mother, Dr Tan said gender equality is not a women's issue.

"For Singapore to become a truly fair and inclusive society, we require a whole-of-society effort to shift mindsets on gender roles, challenge biases and break barriers that limit women's potential and contributions," he said.

Speaking at the forum on challenges and solutions to close the gender gap in Stem fields, Dr Tan said his desire to curb discrimination in any form, particularly against women, was shaped by his mother.

He said: "She was chronically sick and notwithstanding that, I think it's with a great perseverance (that) she continued to work part-time to try and provide for the family itself.

"I think that is, in a way, also guided by resolve and my determination to try to see how we can level the playing field for everyone."

Dr Tan is an only child and in a previous interview with The Straits Times, said his mother sold Tupperware, gave tuition and baked cookies to sell at Chinese New Year to help support the family. His father was a bus timekeeper.

Previous donations by ministers in their personal capacity include Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's donation to charity of damages from defamation suits against individuals such as The Online Citizen editor Terry Xu and blogger Roy Ngerng.

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Other panellists at the forum included representatives from tech giants Dell and HP.

Among them was chairman and managing director of ExxonMobil Asia Pacific Geraldine Chin, who told the forum how she had nearly missed out on a pivotal role in her career after giving birth to her first child because her bosses thought the job would be tough.

Their intentions were well-meaning because the role involved travelling extensively and they knew that she had just returned from maternity leave, she added.

But before they made a decision without her opinion, a manager had suggested that she be consulted.

Ms Chin said: "Let's not assume that young mothers will not take up the challenge of a job that will take them away from home because each individual is different".

She and the rest of the panellists called on stakeholders - education, corporate and government agencies - to build a supportive ecosystem for women pursuing Stem careers.

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NTU student Nirvi Badyal, chairman of campus group HeForShe NTU, said: "The challenge is to make everyone realise that if we uplift women, it uplifts humanity."

The panellists' appeal comes after a Powers' study published last month found that half of the women in the Stem industry believe it is harder to get a job and progress in their career due to their gender.

The study also indicated that women are significantly less likely to work in these fields, despite a sizeable proportion of them being keen on jobs that require such skills.

To address the gap, Powers launched its first mentorship programme, developed in collaboration with HP Singapore, on Thursday.

From May, selected NTU female students from the College of Engineering and the College of Science will be mentored by experienced women professionals from the tech company over three months.

The programme will include job-shadowing, networking and workshops to develop skills such as understanding basic finance.

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