Speech By Nur Aida Poh Binte Muhammad Aizat Poh On Behalf of 2026 Postgraduate Scholars

Good evening, everybody.

Congratulations to everyone here. I'm sure it took a great deal of hard work and sacrifice for each of us to be where we are today.

As an aspiring ethnographer, I appreciate that although we are all here as recipients of scholarships from the Tan Kah Kee Foundation, each of us comes from a vastly different background and has our own unique story of the path that brought us here.

Looking back at my own journey, I often describe my background as coming from a first-generation tertiary-educated, low-income, mixed-race family. I am the child of a deaf father whom I barely saw growing up, because my parents and I had to live in separate households to provide housing for my sick grandmother, who has since passed. Those experiences, I've always felt, thankfully, made me the independent and self-driven person I am today. But as I grew older, and as I did more research on families and households in Singapore, I found that this description no longer fully captured my story.

My research at the Institute of Policy Studies has focused on two areas.

Together with Dr Kalpana Vignehsa, Dr Tan Poh Lin, and Mr Christopher Gee, I am currently studying how households and relationships are evolving in Singapore, as well as how we can better account for and value the often unseen work of informal care and housework through the National Time Transfer Accounts project.

I'd like to share two observations from this research.

First, it still takes a village to raise a child. Healthy support systems, whether emotional, financial, or physical, including the unglamorous work of caregiving, cooking, and cleaning, are not incidental. They are what determine whether a person survives, or truly thrives.

Second, despite being essential to our families and a foundational driver of our economy, unpaid informal care work and housework remain largely unseen and undervalued. According to the International Labour Organization, they account for an estimated 9% of global GDP, which is around an astounding US$11 trillion.

These findings made me reflect on my own story and examine my own privilege. I began to wonder: if I had been the one carrying the responsibilities that my family once did, would I be standing here today?

If I, like my grandmother, had to give up school to raise her six younger siblings; or like my mother, at an age not much older than mine, had to care for her sick mother while working full-time and raising a young daughter; or like my father, had to give up his own home and comforts, and cross the Causeway every single day and night to provide for his family – would I have had the same time, opportunities, and resources to pursue my education, or to choose my own career, or to volunteer in my community?

I struggle to see how.

It was through this research that I began to understand my own story differently. For much of my life, I told my story through the lens of overcoming scarcity. But interviewing people from all walks of life taught me something I hadn't fully appreciated before. Hardship was real, and often immense, but again and again I saw that people endured because they did not endure alone. They leaned on family, friends, mentors, colleagues, communities, and one another. Their resilience was sustained by relationships and acts of care. In time, I began to see my own life through that same lens. I realised that the story I once thought was mine could never be complete without acknowledging the people, relationships, and conditions that had shaped it.

I learnt that our achievements are made possible by the countless visible and invisible contributions of others, and by a society that creates the conditions for us to flourish; from the safety we often take for granted in our country to the public infrastructure that supports our everyday lives. One by one, the people around me removed obstacles from my path so that I could become the person I aspire to be. And I suspect that if each of us reflected on our own lives, we would see that our stories have been shaped by far more people than we often realise.

So today, alongside my fellow postgraduate scholars, I would like to give our proverbial flowers to those who have supported us on our journey: those who prepared the arable land for us to grow, those who watered us with love, care, and support, those who made the unseen and unacknowledged sacrifices that allow us to do good beyond ourselves. We are beneficiaries of that care.

Today, we also honour the generosity and vision embodied by the Tan Kah Kee Foundation, the Tan Ean Kiam Foundation, the Li Siong Tay Foundation, and Mdm Doreen Liu. Their enduring commitment to education has made a reverberating impact on society, and their legacy reminds us that excellence becomes meaningful only when it creates opportunities for others.

My hope is that we continue this legacy; that we, too, become arable land, offering the fruits of what has been entrusted to us: our time, our knowledge, our privilege, so that others, too, may one day stand where we stand tonight. Thank you.