



**PERMANENT MISSION OF SINGAPORE
TO THE UNITED NATIONS**

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**STATEMENT BY MDM HALIMAH YACOB, MINISTER OF STATE FOR
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT, YOUTH AND SPORTS AND LEADER
OF THE SINGAPORE DELEGATION TO THE 49TH CEDAW SESSION**

Friday, 22 July 2011, 10.00am, UN Headquarters, New York

Madam Chairperson,

Distinguished Members of the CEDAW Committee,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Good morning.

INTRODUCTION

I am honoured to present Singapore's Fourth Periodic Report to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). My name is Halimah Yacob and I am the Minister of State for Community Development, Youth and Sports. My delegation and I are pleased to have this opportunity to share key legislative, policy and other measures that our Government has taken to implement Singapore's commitments under the CEDAW during the period under review.

2. In particular, we will highlight the progress that we have achieved since the last report to this Committee in 2007. I want to reiterate at this point that we take our obligations under CEDAW very seriously, not just because we ratified the Convention, but more importantly, because we believe in gender equality as a way of achieving progress in our society.



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Madam Chair,

3. Singapore has made good progress over the years. Our rapid economic and social development is the result of our forward-looking policies. Over the years, we had invested in education, upgraded our infrastructure and workforce, and progressively moved up the economic value chain. Our economy has grown strongly, with GDP growth of 14.5% in 2010. Unemployment was low at 1.9% in March 2011. Our economic growth has provided a wealth of opportunities for women.

4. The Singapore Government is committed to the principles of gender equality and non-discrimination embodied in CEDAW. With people as our only natural resource, it follows that investing in, developing and maximising the full potential of every individual, male or female, is a priority. Through gender equality, we are able to achieve our vision of having an informed, involved and vibrant community of women, who can participate and contribute fully and equally to the socio-economic development of Singapore.

5. I have with me today senior officials from key government agencies represented on the Inter-Ministry Committee responsible for monitoring compliance with CEDAW.

6. Let me first introduce members of my delegation which includes our Permanent Representative to the UN – New York, Ambassador Vanu Gopala Menon, and key members of the Inter-Ministry Committee, or IMC for short, Ms Ong Toon Hui, who is the Chair of the IMC, and officials from the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports; the Ministry of Manpower; the Ministry of Home Affairs; the Ministry of Health; the Islamic Religious Council; and the Attorney-General's Chambers.

7. Singapore recognises that enhancing the well-being and status of women is an ongoing process requiring ownership by all stakeholders. Besides government agencies, businesses, unions and employers, my Ministry works closely with civil society. I note that the Committee has received several shadow reports from civil



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society organisations on Singapore, and I am pleased that some of their representatives are here today.

SINGAPORE'S LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND APPROACH TO CEDAW

8. Let me begin by contextualising Singapore's legal system as this bears on how CEDAW is implemented in Singapore.

9. Singapore is a parliamentary republic with a written Constitution, which guarantees the principles of equality and non-discrimination. The Constitution is the supreme law of Singapore. The Singapore constitutional guarantees are similar to those found in other Commonwealth constitutions.

10. Apart from the Constitution, Singapore's CEDAW obligations are realised through Acts of Parliament, subsidiary legislation, policies and programmes. All of these are reviewed regularly to ensure that they remain progressive and relevant to the needs of our society. This constitutional and legal framework also provides the avenues for individual women to pursue gender equality.

Madam Chair,

11. In Singapore, we take a "whole-of-government" approach in advancing the interests of women to achieve gender equality, as we realise the limitation of confining this important task to only one Ministry or government department, thus relieving the other parts of the Government from focusing their minds on this important goal. However, to ensure better coordination in the adoption of legislative and non-legislative measures in the implementation of CEDAW, we had established the IMC on CEDAW. The members of the IMC comprise senior officials of all key agencies responsible for areas relevant to CEDAW.

12. The IMC on CEDAW is supported by the Office for Women's Development in the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, formerly known as the Women's Desk. We are pleased to inform the Committee that to better reflect



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the standing, role and function of the Desk, as the national focal point on women and champion of gender equality and the empowerment of women, the Women's Desk was re-designated as the Office for Women's Development on 1 July 2011. This change in designation also reflects the growing importance and recognition of women's role in our society.

PROGRESS OF THE SINGAPORE WOMAN

Madam Chair,

13. Aided by good governance and socio-economic development, women in Singapore have come a long way. Singapore was ranked 10th out of 138 countries on the UN Gender Inequality Index indicating that our women enjoy the same educational, economic and political opportunities as well as healthcare standards as our men. The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index has Singapore rising almost 30 places from 84th in 2009 to 56th out of 134 countries in 2010.

14. We have an excellent healthcare system. It was ranked by the World Health Organisation (in 2000) as the best in Asia and 6th in the world. The life expectancy at birth of women in Singapore is 84 years. This was ranked by the World Health Organisation's (WHO) World Health Statistics 2011 report as being on par with Australia, Italy and Switzerland, and among the top ten globally (joint 7th to 10th). The World Health Statistics 2011 report also ranked Singapore's under-five mortality for girls 2nd lowest in the world, and our adult mortality for women 3rd lowest. Our maternal mortality rate is among the lowest in the world at 2.6 per 100,000 live and still-births in 2010 and zero in 2009.

15. Singapore has a high literacy rate for women at 93.8%. Female students make up more than half the full-time intake at local universities and are now well-represented in traditionally male-dominated subjects.

16. With more educational opportunities, many of our women are choosing to work thus allowing them greater career options and financial independence. As a



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result, stereotypes of women's roles are disappearing and women today are no longer confined to homemaker roles. The female labour force participation rate in Singapore has increased from below 30% in the 1970s to 56.5% in 2010.

17. Women in Singapore enjoy training opportunities to equip them with the relevant skills to remain and progress in the workforce. In 2010, women made up half of the 270,000 workers trained under the Workforce Skills Qualification system. In the same year, 30% of female residents aged 15 to 64 years in the labour force had engaged in job-related structured training or educational activities¹, as compared to 28% of male residents. In fact over the last ten years, the percentage of training incidence for economically active women has been higher than men.

18. The Singapore Government is committed to helping our people remain gainfully employed and fulfil their career aspirations. Our concerted efforts have resulted in an increasing number of companies adopting work-life integration initiatives such as the "Work-Life Works (WoW!) Fund" and "Flexi-Works!" to help employers kick-start their implementation of flexible work arrangements. As at March 2011, more than S\$11 million has been disbursed under the "WoW! Fund" and 605 companies have benefited from the grant. More than 265 companies have come onboard the "Flexi-Works!" scheme and 2,900 workers have been recruited on flexible work arrangements since the inception of the scheme.

19. To support working mothers, the Singapore Government has significantly enhanced the means-tested subsidies for childcare and kindergarten. As a result, more working women are able to benefit from these subsidies. Since the enhancement, 34% more women have applied to enjoy the subsidies for childcare and more than 160% more for kindergarten.

20. Women are also climbing up the ranks in the workforce. They make up an increasing proportion of employers in Singapore – 25.3% in 2010, up from 16.8% in 1999. Women constitute 56% of the Civil Service and 59% of the top two

¹ Job-related structured training or education refers to training that is related to a current or future job. It includes classroom training, private lessons, correspondence courses, workshops, seminars, structured on-the-job training and apprentices training.



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categories of officers. Six of the 22 top civil service posts are occupied by women. More than half of the judicial officers in the Subordinate Courts and just under 20% of the Judges of the Supreme Court are women.

Madam Chair,

21. While we have made much progress, we recognise that there remain many challenges and other areas in which we can continue to improve. Among these immediate challenges are: First, in a highly competitive and globalised world, ensuring that women's skills remain relevant and up-to-date to meet the demands of new technology, so that they can continue to take advantage of the good employment opportunities that are created. Second, supporting women to achieve work-life integration so that they can lead meaningful and fulfilling lives. Third, putting in place the infrastructure and measures to support elderly women as our society is ageing rapidly. We will also continue to enhance the protection and welfare of women migrant workers, and sustain the fight against trafficking in persons. I have touched on some of these challenges earlier and I will elaborate on the steps taken to address some of the other issues later in my presentation.

**COMMITMENT TO INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS
OBLIGATIONS**

Madam Chair,

22. The Singapore Government is fully committed to the promotion and protection of human rights, in particular the rights of women. We take our treaty obligations very seriously. To underscore our ongoing commitment to the valuable work of this Committee, I am pleased to report that on 30 August 2010, Singapore ratified the amendment to article 20, paragraph 1 of CEDAW.

23. On the regional front, Singapore is a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and is represented on the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) as well as on the ASEAN Commission on



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the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC). In April 2010, Dr Aline Wong, a former Senior Minister of State for Education and Health, was appointed as Singapore's representative for women's rights on the ACWC.

Madam Chair,

24. Since Singapore was last examined by this Committee in 2007, we have given serious and careful consideration to the Committee's concluding comments and have taken significant measures to enhance compliance with our CEDAW obligations. We have also consulted with many stakeholders outside Government including civil society and women Members of Parliament.

MUSLIM FAMILY AND PERSONAL LAWS

25. My delegation is pleased to report significant developments in the practice of *sharia* law in Singapore. These developments are the result of considerable effort and commitment on the part of the agencies responsible for this policy area, including the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (or "MUIS"). Working in close partnership with other stakeholders, including the Singapore Muslim community, local women's groups, MUIS and other agencies undertook a robust process of comparative legal study and law reform.

26. Arising from these efforts, I am pleased to report that the Singapore Government has partially withdrawn the reservation against articles 2 and 16 of CEDAW. The instrument has since been deposited with the UN Office of Legal Affairs and a copy has also been circulated to the Committee.

27. For us, ensuring that the *sharia* remains dynamic and responsive to the interests of Muslim women in Singapore is an ongoing process. To date, this process has produced the following specific developments:



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a. The Administration of Muslim Law Act (or “AMLA”) was amended in 2008 to raise the minimum age of Muslim marriages for both parties from 16 to 18 years old, aligned with the provision for civil marriages under the Women’s Charter.

b. The MUIS *Fatwa* Legal Committee has also in recent years issued religious edicts (or *fatwas*) to secure the financial welfare of Muslim women and their dependants under the Muslim inheritance law (or *faraidh*). These are:

i. A new *fatwa* on joint tenancy was issued in 2008 to recognise the surviving spouse as the legal owner of the property held jointly with the deceased spouse if a nuzriah (or *inter vivos* gift) document has been drawn up by either spouse during their lifetime. Previously, the surviving spouse could only serve as the trustee of the deceased’s share, and this share was required under Muslim inheritance law to be distributed to the legal beneficiaries.

ii. The *fatwa* on Central Provident Fund (CPF), the national social security savings plan, was updated in 2010. The amendment enables Muslim CPF account holders to nominate their spouses or dependants to receive their CPF monies as a valid *inter vivos* gift. Previously, the nominee was obliged to distribute the CPF monies received according to the *faraidh*.

Madam Chair,

28. My Government considers it necessary to continue to maintain a reservation against specific elements of articles 2 and 16 of CEDAW. There is general acceptance in our country, including our civil society, on the need for the Muslim minority community to practice their family and personal laws. We also recognise that the delicate balance of our multi-cultural, multi-religious society is not a given. It has to be actively maintained, and this is also a continuing endeavour on the part of my Government. However, we assure the Committee that we will continue to



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review our CEDAW reservations taking into consideration the needs of our society and our obligations.

WOMEN IN THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SPHERES

Madam Chair,

29. I now move on to women's participation in the public and private spheres. When Singapore last addressed this Committee in 2007, only 18 out of 85 or 21.2% of Members of Parliament were women. Following our General Elections in May this year, 22.2% or 20 out of 90 Members of Parliament are women, exceeding the Inter-Parliamentary Union's world average of 19.3%. Based on the Union's data, Singapore was ranked 46th out of 187 countries in terms of the percentage of women in the Lower or Single House. The Singapore Government consciously and continually encourages women's political participation by using various platforms to engage women from all walks of life and from all sectors of the economy. We are heartened that despite the perennial challenge of balancing work and family, many women have come forward to take up public office. With better education and professional opportunities as well as a growing acceptance of women in public office, we are optimistic that we will see more women entering politics.

30. Singapore recognises women's contributions and encourages them to remain in the workforce. In 2008, significant enhancements were made to the maternity benefits through the Marriage and Parenthood Package. These included extending paid maternity leave from 12 to 16 weeks, shortening the eligibility period for paid maternity leave from 180 to 90 days and improving the protection of pregnant employees against unfair dismissal and retrenchment. We also extended childcare and infant care leave for both parents, enhanced infant and childcare universal subsidies, and financial support for the family. These measures help many women to continue working and strike a better balance between work and family life.

31. We also have tax reliefs to support working mothers and caregivers. The Income Tax Act was amended with effect from Year of Assessment 2010, to allow



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tax-paying wives who are breadwinners to claim a tax relief for their husbands. This is similar to the scheme for husbands. Accordingly, 'wife relief' has been renamed as 'spouse relief'. The amendment is in recognition of the increasing number of female breadwinners in Singaporean households.

Madam Chair,

32. The Singapore Government continues to focus on encouraging shared care-giving responsibilities through national and community efforts and public education. One of these is the national 'Dads for Life' movement launched in November 2009 to mobilise and involve fathers in their children's lives. Part of the movement's premise is that active fathering not only benefits the child, but also the mother, by relieving some of the stresses that come with parenting.

33. Through such efforts, we have seen real progress in the attitudes of men towards parenting and sharing domestic responsibilities. In 2009, one year after we introduced enhanced paid childcare leave for parents with young children, 30% of fathers took more than three days of paid childcare leave, compared to 46% of mothers. One of our partners, the National Trades Union Congress Women's Development Secretariat, also launched a programme called "Little Ones@Work", where we see many fathers bringing their children to work to promote bonding and a better appreciation of their parents' work.

MEASURES TO PROTECT VULNERABLE WOMEN

Madam Chair,

34. We recognise that there are certain groups of women and girls in our society who are in vulnerable positions or have special needs. For such groups, we have taken measures to protect their welfare and well-being. I will now share some of these recent developments.



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Penal Code

35. We have enhanced our laws to protect young women and girls against exploitation for commercial sex in Singapore and in other countries. The amendments to the Penal Code came into force on 1 February 2008 and, inter alia, made it an offence for a person to purchase sexual services from a minor under 18 either in Singapore or overseas. It was also made an offence to organise child sex tours or print, publish or distribute any information that is intended to promote commercial sexual exploitation of minors under 18.

Women's Charter

36. The Women's Charter, which provides the legal basis for the rights and duties of husband and wife and women's rights in marriage and divorce-related matters, was amended in January this year. The amendments serve to strengthen the enforcement of maintenance procedures and mitigate the impact of divorces on women. For example, in addition to existing penalties against ex-spouses who default on maintenance payments, the Courts are now empowered to impose new types of sanctions, including ordering them to perform community service, attend financial counselling or set up banker's guarantees against future defaults.

Children and Young Persons Act

37. Let me now move to the Children and Young Persons Act which was first enacted in 1949 to provide for the welfare, care, protection and rehabilitation of children and young persons. This Act was amended in January this year to enhance the care of girls and boys placed in Children and Young Persons Homes and the management of child protection cases. Besides formalising the licensing standards, the penalties for offences such as sexual exploitation were aligned with penalties against similar offences in the Women's Charter to ensure equal protection to both boys and girls. Serious child sexual abuse cases may now be prosecuted under the Penal Code which carries tougher penalties.



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Measures to Combat Trafficking in Persons

Madam Chair,

38. The Singapore Government is fully committed to the suppression of all forms of trafficking in persons, including the exploitation of women victims. Since our last appearance before the Committee in 2007, we are pleased to report that additional measures have been taken to strengthen the fight against trafficking in persons. In March 2011, the Singapore Government has formed an inter-agency Taskforce on Trafficking in Persons. The Taskforce coordinates decision-making and policy alignment between key policy and enforcement agencies. The two lead agencies co-chairing this Taskforce, the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Ministry of Manpower, are also key members of the IMC on CEDAW, thus ensuring good information flow and synergy between the two inter-ministry committees. In addition, the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports is also a key member of this Taskforce.

39. Singapore's strategy to combat trafficking in persons consists of a 4P approach, namely prevention, prosecution, protection and partnerships. It is a comprehensive approach which emphasises cooperation with other countries, civil society organisations and the private sector to encourage victim reporting, information sharing and proactive safeguards for victims. In addition, Singapore has adopted the definition of trafficking in the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime. Moreover, while Singapore is already a State Party to the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, we are also studying the possibility of Singapore's accession to the Trafficking in Persons Protocol. Singapore is also committed to the Global Plan of Action to Combat Human Trafficking, which was adopted by the UN General Assembly last year.



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Welfare of Foreign Domestic Workers

Madam Chair,

40. Singapore has a comprehensive set of legislative, administrative and educational measures to protect Foreign Domestic Workers. The Government reviews these measures on a regular basis to ensure that they remain robust. Foreign Domestic Workers' well-being and basic rights are protected by laws which are effectively enforced. In particular, Foreign Domestic Workers are protected under the Employment of Foreign Manpower Act which imposes legally binding Work Permit conditions on employers to look after the well-being of their Foreign Domestic Workers.

41. The Government reviews these measures on a regular basis. On 1 January 2010, the Ministry of Manpower raised the minimum medical insurance coverage which employers of all foreign workers (including Foreign Domestic Workers) are required to purchase from S\$5,000 a year to S\$15,000 a year. This amount will cover 98% of hospital bills incurred by foreign workers.

42. The Ministry of Manpower introduced a new employment agency regulatory framework under the Employment Agencies Act in April 2011 to raise the standard of recruitment practices in Singapore and minimise abuses and malpractices. With the enactment of the Act in place, errant employment agencies which exploit Foreign Domestic Workers now face much stiffer penalties. Changes included a cap on recruitment fees paid by the foreign worker to Singapore employment agencies and a fee refund mechanism, as well as a mandatory certification and registration requirement for relevant employment agency personnel. This is an important development as almost all the Foreign Domestic Workers are brought to Singapore through the employment agencies. Hence, tighter laws to control and regulate these agencies would provide better protection to our Foreign Domestic Workers. However, the Government will also need to work closely with labour-



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sending countries to tackle issues faced by Foreign Domestic Workers at the source country, such as reducing their debt burdens, prior to coming to Singapore to work.

Measures to Protect the Elderly

43. The Government recognises the challenges of an ageing population, including those faced by elderly women. The Ministerial Committee on Ageing was set up in 2007 to provide for “Successful Ageing for Singapore”.

44. To promote healthy ageing, we have enhanced health promotion, preventive health and primary care services. For example, the national programmes for breast and cervical cancer screenings are heavily subsidised by the Government. The Health Promotion Board’s Holistic Healthy Ageing programme aims to empower older persons to achieve and maintain optimal physical and mental well-being so as to remain functionally independent.

45. In yet another development favourable to the elderly, the Retirement and Re-employment Act was enacted earlier this year to take effect from 1 January 2012 to enable more people to continue working beyond the current statutory retirement age of 62, up to 65 in the first instance and, later, up to 67. The Ministry of Manpower has put in place schemes to incentivise companies to modify job specifications or redesign work for older employees.

46. The Central Provident Fund (CPF) LIFE, a lifelong annuity scheme which took effect in September 2009, was introduced to provide members of the Fund with an affordable, flexible and fair way to have an income for life.

47. We also have the Maintenance of Parents Act, which provides recourse for needy elderly to obtain financial maintenance from their children. The Act was amended in November last year to enhance effectiveness of conciliation, improve payment and enforcement of maintenance orders, and streamline processes.



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CONCLUSION

Madam Chair and members of the CEDAW Committee,

48. I have attempted to give a brief overview of the progress that we have made in enhancing gender equality in Singapore. Let me reiterate that Singapore is committed to ensuring the progress of women and to the full and practical realisation of our CEDAW obligations. We thank you members of the Committee for your efforts in examining our Fourth Report as reflected in your detailed list of questions and keen interest. My delegation and I look forward to a fruitful and constructive exchange with your Committee today on how we are doing and where we can progress further.

49. Thank you.

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