

Singapore – NGO Oral Statement
Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE)

Thank you Madam Chair for the opportunity to address the
CEDAW Committee

I am Ms Braema Mathiaparanam Past President of AWARE, and
Transient Workers Count Too. I framed and coordinated AWARE
Shadow Report.

From November last year we had consultations with three NGOs that dealt with migrant
women and the parent body, the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations. In June
we shared the Report with the State and the public.

Singapore takes its commitment to International Treaties very
seriously. Since the CEDAW Committee's last Concluding
Remarks, the State has put in place many initiatives.

Thus it is with such hope that I highlight four issues here based on
the State's responses to CEDAW Committee's questions.

The Shadow Report has been circulated earlier. The Executive Summary and this Oral
Statement are being circulated.

1. Firstly – Constitutional Amendments to include 'Gender' and
'Status' in Clause 12(2).
 - The State has argued that it is limited in this process as it has
to protect the rights of minorities - our Muslim sisters under
the Administration of the Muslim Law Act(ADMLA). Hence
the blanket reservations on Articles 2 and 16.
Please see Art 2, pg 11-12, points 2.3 – 2.8
Please see Art 16, pg 98

We argue that it is possible to return a partial reservation
namely to Article 2(f) and to Article 16 1(a) and (c) and not
compromise the position of Muslim sisters and also pave the
way for constitutional amendments in due course. In fact the
status quo and protection of our Muslim sisters will continue

to be maintained both under ADMLA and the Women's Charter. We hope the CEDAW Committee can also enlighten all of us in this process of blanket and partial reservations.

- The Government states that is adequate legislation to protect women via the Women's Charter, Penal Code and the Employment Act. We argue that these legislative frameworks have their own limitations, exclusions and limited enforcements. This means that certain groups, example wives who face spousal rape, are left with limited protection or not at all.

Eg the Penal Code Amendments on Marital Rape (please see Art 16, pg 128, points 16.151 and Appendix 16.6) already have limitations. And this has yet to be tabled in Parliament.

Eg The Employment Act leaves executives, confidential secretaries and foreign domestic workers out (please see Art 11, page 74-76, points 11.16-11.22)

Eg Provisions for Trafficking of Women and Children under the Women's Charter (Section 353; 140-141) yet most trafficked persons are seen as immigration offenders.

- We ask for Constitutional Amendments to have a stronger structure to deal with discrimination based on gender, ethnicity or status. Currently there is no legislative provision to deal with sexual harassment or discrimination based on status which has impacted single unmarried mothers or foreign women married to Singapore men.

Please see Art 2, page 12, points 2.11-2.19

Please see Art 11, page 70, Footnote 13

Please see Article 11, page 77, point 11.24

Please see Article 11, page 80, point 11.31

Please see Article 11, page 85, point 11.45

2. Secondly – There is a need to strengthen the National Machinery for Women. The hard-working Women's Desk supported by an Inter-Ministerial Committee cast from various Ministries is not visible enough in terms of policy-creation or implementation.

Eg - this would cover the lack of adequate education on CEDAW or materials that are appropriate for the layperson to understand

- For a developed country like Singapore where its men and women are relatively well-educated and face the constant challenge of maintaining a work-life balance, it makes sense for the State to steer discussions very clearly and consistently towards Gender Equality.
 - We suggest setting a Gender Equality Department.
Functions - to study all policies for Gender Impact Assessments, to mainstream gender, to produce gender disaggregated data, to ensure that gender sensitization programmes is a norm across schools and at the workplace and that Gender budgets are reflected (Please see Art 1-4; page 5; points 1.8 – 1.12).
3. **Worklife balance** – there are many initiatives to promote work-life balance but without legislative frameworks much is still dependent on goodwill and incentives. We urge the State to review its position on the blanket reservation to Article 11 so that women can be protected in all areas - recruitment, promotion, provision of benefits, pregnancies. Incentives are inadequate (Please see Article 11, page 71; points 11.38-11.41) for flexible work arrangements to become a norm. Absence of policies at the National level - for example on provisions for unpaid paternal leave or across-board paternity leave – only serve to entrench the ‘men as heads of household’ stereotype.
 4. **Temporary Special Measures** – We ask for two temporary special measures to rev up numbers of women in leadership and to have a more cohesive co-coordinated approach to protect foreign women in Singapore.

4.1 More women in Leadership Positions – we still do not have a full Minister and the statistics show that too few women are at the top. (Please see Article 7, page 45; points 7.3-7.7) Most of our women are highly educated (53 per cent are graduates). We acknowledge the efforts made by the State. Even the latest instrument of the Women’s Registry is struggling to make its presence felt. **A quota system may not work in Singapore. Instead measures can include training programmers across all schools, more open critical discussions on politics from classrooms to boardrooms, more single constituencies for elections so that women have choices of entering Politics through Political Parties or as independent candidates.**

4.2. Foreign women - Foreign Brides, Foreign Women Workers(Migrant Labour) and Foreign Women in the Sex Industry. They all have limited protection under the Law, limited access to the under-funded Social Services, are caught in cross-border issues and run the risk of being classified too often as immigration offenders.

- This cross-cutting team will need to review all local measures, International Treaties, regional mechanisms as a co-coordinated body so that adequate protection can be offered in a concerted manner to foreign women who have come into Singapore by legitimate means or who have been trafficked into Singapore.

In particular the Foreign Domestic Workers in spite of the many improvements are still without a mandatory Day Off or that their wages will be banked into their accounts. Guidelines are still not good enough.

Please see Article 6, page 37, point 6.29

Please see Article 6, page 32, point 6.13

Please see Article 6, page 31, footnote 11-14

Please see Article 6, page 34, point 6.20

Please see Article 11, page 74-76, point 11.16 -11.22

Conclusion

We urge the CEDAW Committee to include in its concluding remarks that the State lifts its blanket reservations on Articles 2, 11 and 16 and work towards Constitutional Amendments. I am proud of Singapore as we take our treaties seriously. There is hope.