

**OPENING STATEMENT BY SUN XUELING**  
**MINISTER OF STATE, MINISTRY OF SOCIAL AND FAMILY DEVELOPMENT AND**  
**MINISTRY OF HOME AFFAIRS**

**THURSDAY, 16 MAY 2024, 1000 HRS, UN OFFICE, GENEVA**

**Introduction**

Madam Chair,

Distinguished Members of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women,  
and observers from civil society and non-government organisations.

Ladies and gentlemen,

1. I am Sun Xueling, Minister of State at the Ministry of Social and Family Development and the Ministry of Home Affairs of Singapore. It gives me great pleasure to be here today in front of the CEDAW Committee. Just last night, Singapore time, our 4<sup>th</sup> Prime Minister since the independence of Singapore was sworn in and I was re-appointed to my Ministry portfolio, so this is my first assignment. I suspect his first executive decision was to grant my overseas leave application so that I can be here in person, which goes to show our commitment and the level of importance that we accord to CEDAW. With me today is Ms Ong Ai Hua, Chair of the Inter-Ministry Committee on CEDAW, which oversees the implementation of CEDAW in Singapore, and over 20 officials from 9 agencies, with many more agencies providing whole-of-government support from Singapore. We are also pleased to have with us Ambassador Umej Bhatia, our Permanent Representative to the UN Office in Geneva. This year, we also have the biggest Singapore NGO delegation ever in attendance, reflecting the good engagement and interest in the work and expertise of the Committee.
2. I am honoured to present Singapore's sixth periodic report and to share the progress made by the Singapore Government in implementing our CEDAW commitments.

## **Whole-of-Society Effort to Advance Women's Development and Human Rights**

3. Singapore is fully committed to the protection and promotion of the human rights of our citizens, while reflecting our unique context, culture and history.
4. Through our outcomes-based approach, we have sought the fulfilment of human rights effectively. We will continue to focus on delivering good socio-economic outcomes through pragmatic public policies as it is the best guarantee of fulfilment of human rights, including gender equality and empowerment.
5. We have made significant strides in building a fairer and more equal society, where women and girls live freely and have the resources and opportunities required to reach their full potential. Today, more women have entered the workforce, assumed leadership positions, and risen to the highest levels in public service, the corporate world, and society. The latest Human Development Report's Gender Inequality Index ranks Singapore amongst the top 10 countries globally for gender equality.
6. Such progress would not have been possible if not for strong political will and consistent government action, including through public education and engagement with our civil society organisations. We have also continuously reviewed and strengthened our laws to ensure that women are supported and protected in our society.
7. Since our CEDAW dialogue in 2017, we have amended existing laws that further protect women from violence and harm. We also implemented national strategies to rally Singaporeans' support for the advancement of women's rights. I will elaborate later.
8. In preparing for the periodic report and today's constructive dialogue, we consulted women's groups and parliamentarians. We will continue to work with them to advance our shared commitment to protect and empower women in Singapore, in line with our CEDAW obligations.
9. These efforts help lay the groundwork for a fairer society where women's voices can be heard.
10. We look forward to hearing the Committee's recommendations on how Singapore can continue to improve our policies.

Madam Chair,

11. Four years ago, the world went through a pandemic that led to widespread disruption and stress to people's lives. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the

discrepancies in gender roles, with women shouldering a disproportionately higher caregiving load.

12. To signal Singapore's firm commitment to place women's well-being at the centre of our policies, the Government held a year-long nationwide Conversations on Singapore Women's Development in 2020 amidst the pandemic, where we consulted and gathered views from 6,000 Singaporeans.
13. We received valuable feedback and published the White Paper on Singapore Women's Development in 2022, which sets out 25 concrete action plans in areas most salient to women, such as Equal Opportunities in the Workplace, Protection from Violence, Support for Caregivers and Vulnerable Women, and Mindset Shifts. This White Paper was unanimously endorsed by the Singapore Parliament.

### **Overcoming COVID-19**

14. To address livelihood concerns and income loss brought about by the pandemic, the Government introduced various support measures for Singaporean women and men to cope with everyday living expenses. Close to half the recipients of our COVID-19 Recovery Grant were female. Temporary financial support was provided to lower- to middle-income employees and self-employed persons who lost their jobs or sources of income.
15. We also introduced a Jobs Support Scheme to help cushion the impact of the pandemic on women and men who may face higher risk of being retrenched during times of economic uncertainty. We were glad to see our employment rate for women aged 25 to 64 actually rise during the pandemic from 73.2 per cent in 2020 to 76.6 per cent in 2023.
16. Flexible work arrangements also helped people continue working while managing family responsibilities. At the height of the pandemic, schools pivoted to full Home-Based Learning to ensure continuity of education. Computing devices were loaned to students who lacked access, and schools remained open for students without care arrangements. This ensured that working mothers, particularly single parents, could continue to work and care for their families during the pandemic.

### **Building a Safe and Secure Place where All can Pursue their Aspirations Freely**

Madam Chair,

17. Singapore does not tolerate violence against persons, regardless of their sex, religion, race, marital status, sexual orientation, gender identity, or nationality. We continually review our legal framework to strengthen our protection of persons against violence.

18. In 2019, in line with the Committee's recommendation, we fully repealed marital immunity for rape. This year, for the first time, we convicted a man for the sexual assault of his wife. We also enhanced penalties for offences against vulnerable victims.
19. We enhanced the Protection from Harassment Act to make it easier for victims of harassment to obtain relief. We established the Protection from Harassment Court in 2021 which hears applications for Expedited Protection Orders within 2 to 3 working days from the date of application and within 24 hours where there is a risk of violence or actual violence. Victims of violence, including unmarried women who are victims of intimate partner violence, can obtain protection under the Protection from Harassment Act through a Protection Order, or, in urgent cases, an Expedited Protection Order.
20. The Women's Charter was amended in 2023 to empower victim-survivors to better protect themselves, strengthen the Government's ability to intervene in family violence cases, and empower the Courts to make additional rehabilitative orders. The penalties for breaches of court orders in family violence cases were also raised. The legislative amendments clarified that the definition of family violence covers physical, sexual, and emotional or psychological abuse. Egregious coercive control behaviours that constitute emotional or psychological abuse are also covered in the updated definition. With the legislative changes, the Courts can issue a Stay Away Order or a No Contact Order to prevent harassment in the form of stalking or threats via text messages, i.e. online means.
21. A 24-hour Domestic Violence Emergency Response Team was also launched in 2023. Social service professionals respond jointly with the Police to family violence cases with immediate safety risks to the victim-survivor.
22. One area that Singapore seeks to do better in is protecting women and girls from online harms. The Broadcasting Act was amended in 2023 to empower the Government to issue directions to providers of Online Communication Services to disable access to egregious online content by Singapore users, such as, content that advocates physical or sexual violence. We also passed the Online Criminal Harms Act, which allows the Government to require designated online service providers to proactively disrupt malicious cyber activities affecting people in Singapore, as well as direct the service provider to implement specific measures to reduce the risk of such activities, which can include crimes such as the communication of voyeuristic materials in Singapore and online child sexual exploitation.

## **Providing Real Choices for our Women**

### Equal Opportunities in the Workplace

Madam Chair,

23. We have made progress towards fostering fairer and more inclusive workplaces, in which women can participate more fully and be empowered to remain and thrive, and attain leadership positions.
24. We encourage the adoption of family-friendly workplace practices such as flexible work arrangements. 8 in 10 employees who require such arrangements had access to them in 2022. This year, we introduced the Tripartite Guidelines on Flexible Work Arrangement Requests to guide employers to properly consider such requests.
25. To address the Committee's recommendation to adopt legislation that prohibits discrimination against women in employment, we will introduce legislation this year to prohibit workplace discrimination, including on the basis of sex, age, race, religion, nationality, disability, marital status, pregnancy and caregiving responsibilities. The law will also require employers to put in place grievance-handling procedures, protect the confidentiality of persons who report workplace discrimination or harassment, and prohibit retaliation. Such measures help ensure that women are protected against workplace discrimination.
26. More women are now in decision-making roles in the private, public and people sectors. For example, in the diplomatic service, half our foreign service officers are women and the proportion of women in senior leadership positions has doubled since 2010. As of 2022, women also take up close to half of senior management positions in the public service. According to a 2021 report by Deloitte, Singapore has the highest percentage of women CEOs globally.
27. However, this is not our end point. The Government has been looking at durable ways to increase women's representation on boards. For example, we revised the Singapore Exchange Listing Rules in 2022 to require companies to disclose their gender diversity policy. To encourage board renewal, a nine-year cap on the tenure of independent directors was introduced last year. This opens up opportunities for board-ready women.
28. The Council for Board Diversity has time-bound, measurable targets to increase women's representation on the boards of top 100 companies listed on the Singapore Exchange to 25 per cent by 2025 and 30 per cent by 2030. Singapore has shown encouraging progress in meeting our targets. This is one example of how Singapore has used Temporary Special Measures to

complement our other efforts to empower more women to be represented on boards.

### Caregiving and Family Support

Madam Chair,

29. For women to remain and thrive at work, we recognise that more support for caregiving must be given to the family. We have increased the number of full day preschool places, and there are sufficient places to accommodate every resident child aged three and above. Children from lower-income households also receive priority enrolment into government-supported preschools, which cost as low as USD \$2 per month for full day childcare after subsidies. We will pilot a new childminding scheme to provide an additional caregiving option for families with infants later this year.
30. As Singapore's ageing population grows, so will our caregiving needs and challenges. Women today still shoulder a disproportionate share of caregiving responsibilities in their homes. As we work towards changing mindsets and societal norms, we have taken heed of the Committee's call for us to strengthen the availability of professional caregiver services.
31. Under the Caregiver Support Action Plan, we have enhanced respite care options, including night respite. Caregivers can also tap on home, day care and residential care services. Last year, we launched Age Well Singapore which weaves together social and health services in local communities around our seniors, to proactively care for their needs and pre-empt social isolation and decline.

### Support for Older Women

Madam Chair,

32. The life expectancy of a woman in Singapore is among the highest in the world, at 85.2 years.
33. We have taken steps to support older women in various domains including retirement adequacy, health, social support, and digital literacy.
34. To support seniors' participation in the workforce, we raised the retirement and re-employment ages and provided incentives for employers to hire seniors, including older women, through the Senior Employment Credit and Part-Time Re-Employment Grant. We are also providing greater support for mature, mid-career Singaporeans to reskill and upskill amidst the rapidly changing economy with emerging trends like AI.

35. We have also put in place measures to uplift older women who may have less savings for retirement. Apart from our mandatory social security savings scheme, called the Central Provident Fund, we also have other support measures for seniors who need more help such as the Silver Support Scheme, of which two thirds of the recipients are women. Last year, we announced the Majulah Package to support “Young Seniors” in their 50s and 60s.

Madam Chair,

36. To support older women’s health needs, the new Healthier Singapore (Healthier SG) initiative encourages preventive care. Screenings for cardiovascular risks and breast and cervical cancers are also heavily subsidised.
37. The recently launched National Mental Health and Well-Being Strategy strengthens support for mental health across the population. Many older women also attend active ageing centres where they can socialise, build networks and participate in lifestyle activities. Around two-thirds of participants are women.
38. In this age of continually advancing technology, helping seniors stay digitally connected is also important. Through initiatives such as the Seniors Go Digital programme, our seniors, including older women, are equipped with the knowledge and skills to participate and transact digitally.

## **Support for Vulnerable Women**

### Migrant Domestic Workers

Madam Chair,

39. For our migrant domestic workers, we recognise the importance of safeguarding their well-being.
40. Today, migrant domestic workers are protected under the Employment of Foreign Manpower Act which includes comprehensive protection in areas such as the provision of medical care, proper accommodation, adequate food and rest, a safe working environment, and timely payment of salaries.
41. It is important for migrant domestic workers to work in an environment that is free from violence. Singapore had further enhanced penalties in 2020 for employers and employment agents who commit offences against migrant workers.
42. To better protect migrant domestic workers from abuse, Singapore has also taken proactive steps, including making random house visits and interviewing

all newly-arrived migrant domestic workers to enhance touchpoints to better detect abuse and employment issues.

43. We continue to maintain our reservation to Article 11, paragraph 2. We recognise that there is room for further progress. I hope that the committee can take into account Singapore's unique circumstances and constraints. Work permit holders make up close to 30 per cent of Singapore's workforce, which includes about 300,000 migrant domestic workers. We are unable to support large numbers of foreign workers starting families in Singapore. We appreciate the contributions that work permit holders have made to Singapore and treat them fairly within our laws, and we have been very transparent from the onset on their work permit conditions.

### Foreign Spouses

44. Efforts are also made to help foreign spouses integrate better in Singapore.
45. Currently, about 1 in 4 citizen marriages is between a Singaporean and a foreign spouse. Singapore, like most countries, does not automatically grant permanent residency to every foreign spouse of a citizen. Singapore is a small country with limited resources and our immigration policy needs to be carefully calibrated.
46. We acknowledge the needs of foreign spouses and their families. Every application for permanent residency is evaluated holistically on a range of criteria to ensure that the Singaporean spouse is able to support the family and that the marriage is stable. Foreign spouses who do not qualify for Permanent Resident status may apply for a Long-Term Visit Pass, which will allow them to remain in Singapore for the long-term with their families. Those who have citizen children or are in stable marriages may be granted the Long-Term Visit Pass Plus. Foreign spouses on these passes are generally allowed to work in Singapore without their employers being subjected to migrant worker levies or quotas. Spouses on Long-Term Visit Pass Plus received similar benefits as Permanent Residents and are eligible for education and training subsidies to help them become more employable.

Madam Chair,

### Access to Justice

47. Singapore remains committed to ensuring that all persons, including vulnerable persons, have access to justice. Our judicial, prosecutorial and law enforcement personnel are trained to be sensitive towards issues faced by vulnerable persons in their work, including those related to gender. There is strong partnership between the Government, private sector, the legal fraternity and civil society which strengthens the legal aid system. It provides an



ecosystem of support to vulnerable women, including foreign spouses and migrant domestic workers.

## **Shifting Mindsets to Enable Change**

Madam Chair,

48. We fully understand that to further women's progress and to achieve gender equality, we must address the root of the issue which is gender stereotypes, and work to change mindsets.
49. We have made progress in creating the conditions necessary for women's development and representation in traditionally male-dominated fields since our last review. For example, women today occupy about 20 per cent of the senior leadership positions in the police force. We appointed our first female Deputy Commissioner of Police in 2018. Representation of women working in the courts has also increased. Singapore is a global technology hub – we ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> globally in the 2023 Institute for Management Development's World Digital Competitiveness ranking. We also have one of the highest proportions globally of women in our tech workforce, at about 40 per cent, higher than the global average of 28 per cent.
50. However, we acknowledge that gender stereotypes hinder women's progress in Singapore, which is why it requires a whole-of-society effort to change mindsets.
51. And it starts at home, with the family. Families are the bedrock of our society and parents are children's first role models. Their behaviour can be a reflection of equitable and supportive relationships. This also aligns with the 2023 ASEAN Declaration on Gender Equality and Family Development which underscores the importance of the family institution in fostering equal partnership between men and women.
52. Fathers especially, play an important role in supporting women. The Committee has recommended that Singapore extend the length of paternity leave, and we have taken that on board. From 2024, Government-Paid Paternity Leave was increased from two to four weeks on a voluntary basis, to encourage greater paternal involvement. We aim to make the additional two weeks of Government-Paid Paternity Leave mandatory as soon as possible. We will consider how paid parental leave can be further increased to better support parents' needs.
53. Through efforts to promote active fathering at home, workplaces and the community, we hope to encourage greater sharing of the caregiving load.

54. In schools, the Government has enhanced the Character and Citizenship Education curriculum to address gender stereotypes. Students learn from a young age that boys and girls are to be treated equally, and very importantly, with respect.
55. The Committee has also recommended for Singapore to encourage girls to choose non-traditional fields of study and career paths.
56. Close to 4 in 10 students studying STEM courses at our Institutes of Higher Learning are female. The number of female students in subjects like environmental science outnumbers males; and this bodes well for female representation in environmental stewardship in Singapore. The Government works with industry partners to drive the Women in Tech Movement initiative, to nurture female talent and leadership in tech. This is especially pertinent as having more women leaders in tech will help mitigate risks of gender biases being entrenched in new technology like AI. To guard against AI gender biases, Singapore recently proposed a new Model AI Governance Framework for Generative AI at the World Economic Forum to tackle such risks.
57. The Government will continue to encourage girls to consider the full range of study and career paths through Education and Career Guidance in our schools and Institutes of Higher Learning.

### Muslim Law

Madam Chair,

58. Mindsets on gender norms take time to change and take time to shift. Having the involvement and acceptance of the community is important, including on issues pertaining to religious law and cultural practices.
59. In Singapore's multi-racial and multi-religious context, the Government must balance the needs of different groups to maintain social harmony. We have introduced policies and programmes to ensure that each community has the space to pursue their cultural and religious practices. This approach has been foundational to the social cohesion we treasure in Singapore, where different racial and religious groups are able to live, work and play in peace and harmony together.
60. Our minority Muslim community is able to practise and observe their religious beliefs, including entering into marriages according to Muslim family law, through the Administration of Muslim Law Act. This Act is regularly reviewed by the Government and the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore or MUIS to address the evolving needs of the community and was most recently amended earlier this year.

61. Since our last Constructive Dialogue, we have seen much progress, which our delegation will elaborate more on during the dialogue.
62. However, we recognise that there is room for improvement. We are mindful that this will take time and must be done in consideration of the community's religious needs and preferences. In the meantime, we will continue to review Muslim law, and introduce enhanced religious guidance as well as pursue community engagement and public education initiatives.
63. We have for example, taken measures to reduce the number of Muslim marriages amongst minors, which constitute only 0.08 per cent of Muslim marriages registered in 2022.
64. While allowed under Muslim law, there are very few polygamous marriages in Singapore. Such marriages have steadily declined from 0.38 per cent of Muslim marriages registered in 2011 to 0.13 per cent in 2022.
65. With continued public education, we are confident that further progress can be made on issues like marriages amongst minors and polygamy. However, until such time when Singapore is able to legally prohibit such practices without exception, we are unable to lift our reservations to Articles 2 and 16. We will continue to work to ensure that the rights of Muslim women and girls in Singapore are protected, and we look forward to sharing our updates with the committee periodically on the progress that we are making on this front.
66. And indeed, Malay/Muslim women in Singapore have progressed and made great strides as leaders in the community. Notable Malay/Muslim women leaders include Former President Mdm Halimah Yacob, a prime example, and Ms Guy Ghazali, who leads the Syariah Court Singapore as Senior President and Ms Zuraidah Abdullah, the first woman Senior Assistant Commissioner of Police. Women comprise 30 per cent of the MUIS Council and 20 per cent of the Fatwa Committee, which issues religious guidance to Muslims in Singapore. We have female principals of Islamic religious schools, madrasahs, in Singapore. PERGAS, an NGO dedicated to raising the quality of Islamic education and welfare of Islamic religious teachers, asatizah, recently for the first time, appointed a woman, Ustazah Nurdiana Hanim, as its CEO. The proportion of Malay/Muslim women who are members and leaders of mosque committees has also been increasing.

Madam Chair,

## **Conclusion**

67. In conclusion, next year marks the 30th anniversary of Singapore's ratification of CEDAW. For a relatively young nation of only 59 years this year, we have in fact been party to the Convention for over half of our existence. This ongoing conversation we have with the CEDAW Committee during our review process, as well as with our domestic stakeholders at the national level on advancing women's rights, have very much been part of our country's development story over the past few decades. As we prepared for this Dialogue and shared with you our journey, it has never been clearer to us that women and girls are the backbone of our society. Their contribution has and will help to build a stronger nation. Gender inequality and discrimination against women are one of the greatest injustices of our time. If we do not take steps to address such inequality and discrimination, we would not be able to progress as a nation. I am hopeful that through constant action and conversations, including the one we are having today, we will one day achieve a fair and inclusive world, where all women and men can stand in equal partnership. Thank you.