



**Convention on the Elimination
of All Forms of Discrimination
against Women**

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**Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination
against Women**
Thirty-ninth session

Summary record of the 804th meeting (Chamber A)

Held at Headquarters, New York, on Wednesday, 1 August 2007, at 3 p.m.

Chairperson: Ms. Gabr (Vice-Chairperson)

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In the absence of Ms. Šimonović, Ms. Gabr, Vice-Chairperson, took the chair.

The meeting was called to order at 3 p.m.

Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under article 18 of the Convention *(continued)*

Third periodic report of Singapore (continued)
(CEDAW/C/SGP/3, CEDAW/C/SGP/Q/3 and Add.1)

1. *At the invitation of the Chairperson, the delegation of Singapore took places at the Committee table.*

Articles 7 to 9

2. **Ms. Yu-Foo Yee Shoon** (Singapore), responding to questions asked at the previous meeting, said that there was more than one way to achieve the goals of the Convention. Political parties would continue to identify potential women candidates and groom them for high office. Women had also done well in the private sector, where several had become chief executive officers of large companies. Currently there were only eight women ambassadors in the diplomatic service, but because of equal opportunity in education and employment, more progress was expected in that area. Singapore's rate of 24 per cent women members of Parliament compared favourably with the global average of 17 per cent, and she was optimistic that further change would be seen by the time the next report was submitted.

3. **Ms. Deena** (Singapore) said that the use of the pronoun "he" in legislation and other official documents was interpreted to include "she" as well. The masculine pronoun was used for historical reasons and was not meant to imply any gender discrimination.

Articles 10 to 14

4. **Ms. Chutikul** said that she would like to know whether school curricula at all levels included human rights education and gender sensitivity training, including for teachers. She was also interested to hear about any parenting education classes available and whether there were affordable early childhood centres for working mothers. More information on women's studies and gender studies courses at university level would also be helpful. The Committee wondered if the laws on sexual harassment also covered sex abuse in

schools and would appreciate information on the outcome of any such cases. Finally, she would like to hear about the Government's role in encouraging visibility for the women's and children's mechanisms within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

5. **Ms. Pimentel**, while acknowledging the significant improvements in women's health, asked for more information about the high incidence of mental illness among women and the financial problems facing elderly women in Singapore.

6. **Ms. Patten** said that the exclusion of foreign domestic workers from coverage by the Employment Act was still a concern, and she was not convinced by the rationale given for the Employment of Foreign Workers Act since it would have been easy to extend equal protection to those workers under Part VII of the Employment Act. Although the law was gender-neutral, its main impact was on women. She noted that article 12 of the Constitution did not contain any provisions specifically prohibiting gender discrimination, and wondered if there were any plans to add such a provision. With regard to the Tripartite Declaration on Equal Remuneration for Men and Women Performing Work of Equal Value, she asked about the mechanisms in place for monitoring the Code of Responsible Employment Practices and whether there were any plans to review the wage structure in female-dominated fields.

7. **Ms. Simms** observed that poverty in their home countries drove many foreign women to seek domestic work in Singapore, and it was understandable that, as research showed, many did not wish to return home, not because of the excellent working conditions that they encountered, but because they did not wish to return to poverty. She drew attention to the situation of foreign women brought into the country as brides for Singaporean men, who were not given citizenship. That could appear to be a form of ethnic discrimination; the Government should approach such exclusionary tactics with care.

8. **Ms. Yu-Foo Yee Shoon** (Singapore) said that boys and girls were taught about family responsibility and life skills on the basis of the same curriculum. More progress was needed in providing early childhood education, and an inter-ministerial committee was looking into that area with the Ministry of Education.

9. **Mr. Keok Tong San** (Singapore) said that Singapore did not recognize sexual harassment as a separate offence, but the Penal Code contained provisions covering insults to the modesty of a woman. The schools were especially strict in that area, and such behaviour was not condoned. Sexual offences against minors were harshly punished. As for offences by employers, there was a reporting structure for employees in the Ministry of Manpower, although such cases were not very common.

10. **Mr. Menon** (Singapore) said that sexual offences that went beyond words to touching were punishable by a two-year prison sentence or caning. Moreover, teachers were screened for a criminal record before being hired.

11. **Mr. Keok Tong San** (Singapore), turning to the subject of foreign domestic workers, said that he agreed that the system could appear complex, as it contained elements inherited from the British colonial period. The protections offered in the Employment of Foreign Workers Act were more comprehensive than those in the Employment Act and were intended to ensure generally decent working conditions and an enforceable standard contract which included such features as rest days and agreed working hours.

12. The gender wage gap had improved over the past two years with the rapid expansion of the economy, which had led many women to re-enter the workforce. The most important factor was the improvement in women's educational performance, which led them to be optimistic about their futures. Over half of graduates from polytechnic schools were women; the percentage rose to 76 per cent in humanities. In order to reflect that in the workforce, efforts were being made to level the playing field. Singapore was a signatory of International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention No. 100 on equal remuneration. The monitoring mechanism included the Industrial Arbitration Court, which was hearing an increasing number of cases as unions recognized the importance of collective bargaining agreements.

13. The Tripartite Alliance for Fair Employment Practices had published guidelines for fair hiring practices to prevent non-relevant information (age, religion, etc.) from being requested on applications and during interviews. The Alliance was setting up a centre to accept public feedback on employment practices

encountered. An active strategy to make wages flexible and performance-based would help to eliminate bias.

14. Foreign domestic workers, though driven to come to Singapore by economic need, were by and large living under very good conditions and had integrated well into the society and the families in which they worked. The few complaints of mistreatment were taken very seriously by the Government, which prosecuted the culprits and imposed penalties or administrative measures.

15. **Ms. Halimah** (Singapore) observed that when her Government had ratified ILO Convention No. 100 in 2002, the understanding had been that there was no need to incorporate its provisions into law, but that the Tripartite Declaration (report, para. 11.2) sufficed to commit the Government, employers and workers to the principle of equal pay for equal work. The practical mechanism for implementing the Declaration was collective bargaining. Her National Trades Union Congress, which represented 50,000 workers, 85 per cent of them women, and worked with over 100 companies, ensured that an equal-pay clause was included in any collective agreement negotiated, and it monitored compliance, also as regarded agreed wages and working conditions.

16. The Code of Responsible Employment Practices had now been subsumed into the new guidelines under the Tripartite Alliance on Fair Employment Practices. The guidelines were more than basic standards; they had a visionary and progressive view of what employment practices should be and had proved very successful in maintaining standards. Some of the guidelines included benchmarks, and others regulated gender-neutral advertisements for jobs and the kind of questions that could be asked in job interviews.

17. **Mr. Charles Chew** (Singapore) said that his Government was participating in the ongoing negotiations, within a task force of 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), on the establishment of a human rights commission, and a decision should be adopted at the ASEAN Summit in November.

18. **Mr. Chew Hock Yong** (Singapore) said that the Government was seeking to have a balanced gender image conveyed in all textbooks and educational materials, in the educational curriculum and in teacher-training institutions, as well as in the wider media, to which it had recently issued a guideline against

stereotyping and discriminatory or offensive references on the basis of gender.

19. The Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports licensed all pre-school child-care operators and ensured that they met strict standards, and also kept a close eye on the quality of kindergartens. Fees were affordable, with social assistance available for poorer families. The Health Promotion Board of the Ministry of Health oversaw mental health activities and, working with partners like the Women's Initiative on Ageing Successfully, the People's Association or the Women's and Children's Hospital, it conducted programmes to ensure the mental health of women in all walks of life. It also worked with schools and other ministries to help elderly men and women keep active and avoid mental stress.

20. **Ms. Yu-Foo Yee Shoon** (Singapore) said that a number of more educated women over 40 were still single, as were less educated men, who did, however, get wives from neighbouring countries. Most such unions worked well, and society welcomed the foreign wives, who were now more aware of their rights, more well-integrated and took advantage of assistance offered by women's organizations.

21. **Ms. Tan Hwee Seh** (Singapore) said that since March all matchmaking agencies had to comply with government guidelines, and the Government distributed pamphlets in the various languages to the embassies of the countries involved. Foreign wives enjoyed all the protection available to Singaporean women under the Women's Charter. Furthermore, there were victims' services available specifically for women and children who were exploited or abused, including a hotline and crisis shelters; and foreign women were welcome to use the services of all agencies providing women's services.

Articles 15 and 16

22. **Ms. Begum** asked, now that Singapore had withdrawn its reservation to article 9, whether foreign wives could become citizens and receive work permits and if the procedure was lengthy; what custody rights women had after divorce; what housing and other benefits were available to single mothers; and whether the Government planned to raise the minimum age for marriage from 15 years to 16 for Muslim women.

23. **Ms. Maiolo** asked if there were any statistics on how often the sharia courts had approved requests by

Muslim couples who had received a sharia divorce to be allowed to start civil proceedings regarding post-divorce rights like custody or inheritance.

24. **The Chairperson**, speaking in her capacity as a Committee member, said that the situation of Muslim women in Singapore was a continuing cause of concern. While it was necessary to respect the Muslim faith, the Muslim world was changing on the question on the rights of women, and that had to be taken into account. She wondered if the Government had any contacts with other moderate countries on issues like divorce or inheritance and if the Muslim clergy were being given any particular training in that regard and, if so, by whom. Of course, some reservations to article 16 would need to be lifted for changes to be introduced.

25. **Ms. Yu-Foo Yee Shoon** (Singapore), agreeing that Muslim societies could not live in isolation, said that Singapore had organized seminars attended by forward-looking scholars from other Muslim countries on the progressive interpretation of sharia law. Ms. Halimah, a member of the delegation, was working on the matter. Another member, Ms. Animah, was the first woman ever to sit on a sharia court in the country. Other prominent women had been appointed to the prestigious Muslim Council.

26. **Ms. Deena** (Singapore) said that the reservations to article 2 and article 16 were linked. The Government was giving thought to the possibility of lifting them but, since a number of Muslim practices, such as polygamy or the differences between the rights of men and women in matters of divorce and inheritance, could be considered discriminatory by courts that used the definition of discrimination under article 1 of the Convention, Singapore would have to maintain its reservation to most of article 16.

27. **Ms. Animah** (Singapore) said that sharia law was practiced in Singapore mainly in the areas of family law, especially governing marriage and divorce, and inheritance law. Muslim divorce law did not discriminate against women. Almost 70 per cent of divorces in 2000, for instance, had been initiated by women. The sharia court determined the validity of the grounds for divorce and required counselling of the couple for possible reconciliation and an effort at amicable settlement of issues such as custody of children and disposition of property, before granting a divorce. In awarding custody, the primary

consideration of the sharia court was the welfare of the children.

28. Sharia court orders could be registered also with a civil court, thus allowing district courts to enforce them. Muslim women, like all others, could seek redress and protection from the civil courts, obtaining protection orders and maintenance or alimony orders. The Administration of Muslim Law Act was periodically updated to keep it relevant: the 1999 amendment had been significant in that it allowed couples to seek leave to be heard in civil court on matters involving the custody of children and the disposition of property. If both husband and wife agreed to apply to the civil court, leave from the sharia court was not required.

29. Polygamy was allowed under sharia law, but with stringent controls. Approval of a polygamous marriage required a decision by a *cadi*, an expert registrar of Muslim marriages, with the written consent of the *wali*, or guardian, of the woman to be married. The *cadi* heard all parties involved, and determined if there were just and necessary grounds and equal treatment guarantees. *Cadi* decisions could be appealed, and the first wife could apply to a sharia court for a divorce. Polygamous marriages were not widespread, representing only 0.16 per cent of all marriages in Singapore.

30. The consent of the woman's *wali* was required in any Muslim marriage, and the role of the *wali* was an example of the importance Islam placed on kinship ties between the two families that would be related after the marriage. It safeguarded the interest of the woman, who was free to choose her own prospective spouse before seeking the consent of her *wali*. An unreasonable objection by a *wali* could be overruled by a *cadi* and the *cadi*'s decision could be appealed.

31. Regarding the disposition of property and inheritance rights, a woman could will one third of her property, while two thirds was distributed according to sharia law, with sons receiving twice as much property as daughters, and parents or charity receiving a portion. Sharia law might seem to be treating women unequally, but it was fair in terms of the greater responsibilities of the male members for the support of female members of their families.

32. The Muslim community in her country was committed to a progressive practice of Islam and the development of sharia law in the context of social

realities, as part of its religious identity in Singapore. There was a fatwa committee of independent Muslim scholars appointed by the Islamic Religious Council to discuss issues affecting the Muslim community and monitor the application of sharia law in other countries. Changes to practices in Singapore would only be contemplated if they were deemed suitable and relevant for the Muslims of Singapore.

33. **Ms. Deena** (Singapore) explained that the amendment to raise the marriage age from 16 to 18 had been proposed but not adopted. It was undergoing legal review prior to consideration and adoption by Parliament.

34. **Ms. Halimah** (Singapore) said that Muslim clerics in Singapore were now being encouraged to have a sound knowledge of secular law as well as religious law. Frequent exchanges and visits by Muslim leaders had been arranged with other Muslim countries that were often interested in how Singapore's Muslim community had managed to reconcile full integration in Singaporean society with its strong Islamic values.

35. **Mr. Menon** (Singapore), referring to the status of foreign wives, said that marriage to a Singaporean citizen did not guarantee permanent residency status because such status conferred considerable privileges and benefits, and the authorities did not wish to encourage marriages of convenience. Applications for permanent residency status by foreign spouses, whether men or women, were reviewed on a case-by-case basis, and 60 per cent were approved. If rejected, the foreign spouses could apply for long-term social visit passes; 85 per cent of those applications were granted. The process was completely gender-neutral.

36. **Ms. Tan Hwee Seh** (Singapore) said that unmarried mothers and their children did not suffer from any form of discrimination. Single mothers benefited from the same maternity and childcare leave as married women, and their children received the same access to schooling, grants and other benefits. Single mothers could apply for an apartment from the Housing Development Board, provided that they were over 35. Some benefits such as the baby bonus, applied only to married couples, however, as part of the Government's efforts to encourage couples to have children. With regard to abuse victims, women could seek assistance at one of the country's 36 family service centres. Social workers at those centres performed assessments, provided orientation and made

referrals. All women, including foreign women, could apply for temporary protection orders from the family court and would be provided emergency accommodation if needed.

37. **Ms. Pimentel** said that the measure of a great democracy was not only its respect for the majority, but also its respect for the rights of minorities, and she urged the reporting State to revise all discriminatory laws in Singapore, including the legislation on homosexuality. Also, specific legal provisions should be drafted on sexual harassment to ensure that women's rights were guaranteed in the workplace.

38. **Ms. Shin** said that establishing harsh penalties for lawbreakers was not enough. Surveys were needed to determine the real situation of foreign workers, for example, or the amount of sexual harassment in schools. Singapore needed to be more proactive and find a way to remove the sexist language in its legislation and adopt new laws, including sharia laws. It could be a pioneer in that field. Lastly, she pointed out that gender-neutral rules on marriages or any matter that affected a disproportionate number of women did constitute discrimination.

39. **Ms. Yu-Foo Yee Shoon** (Singapore) said that because of the multiracial and multicultural nature of Singaporean society, a holistic approach to government had been adopted, and flexible mechanisms encouraging collective bargaining and public ownership were used in policy design. A network of mechanisms enabled citizens to voice their concerns and public ministries to gain a thorough understanding of the real situation in Singapore. Every 20-block sector had its own residents' committee, which reported to a consultative committee and ultimately to the member of Parliament for that area.

40. "Meet the people" sessions were held regularly. Citizens could also channel their ideas through the press and Internet websites. The Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports had a feedback unit which contacted professional associations and grass-roots organizations specifically to discuss women's issues. Singapore was an open, transparent society, and a recent comment by one minister that homosexuality was an inborn trait had sparked considerable public debate in the country, as had other issues.

41. The Government worked well thanks to the humane approach and the meritocracy of the system.

Women needed to participate more, especially in politics, but coordinated efforts were being made to apply the Convention. With regard to issues affecting certain groups such as school dropouts and young single mothers, a truly proactive approach had been taken, in which specific targets were set and problems were tackled upstream.

42. **The Chairperson** commended Singapore for the withdrawal of its reservations to article 9, the raising of the marriage age from 16 to 18, and the progress made regarding health care and elderly women. She hoped that greater efforts would be undertaken to reduce the wage gap and to eliminate discrimination against women in employment. Singapore projected itself as a developed country that enjoyed harmonious relations among the multitude of races and ethnic groups that made up its society. It now had to ensure that the rights of migrant workers and mixed marriages were respected. She urged the Government to withdraw Singapore's reservations to articles 2 and 16 and to consider acceding to the Optional Protocol.

43. **Ms. Yu-Foo Yee Shoon** (Singapore) said that her delegation had taken note of the Committee's concerns regarding the participation of women in politics, the protection of women in the workplace, domestic violence, trafficking, and discrimination under sharia law. The Government would continue to work to eliminate discrimination against women in those and other areas, and she hoped that Singapore would withdraw totally, or at least partially, its reservations to the Convention in the near future.

The meeting rose at 5 p.m.