

CONCERNS AT UN REVIEW OF SINGAPORE'S GENDER EQUALITY

Gender equality experts from the CEDAW Committee asked more than 100 questions during an intense, five-hour Constructive Dialogue with Singapore's State delegates at the [49th CEDAW session](#) on 22 July 2011, in the New York headquarters of the United Nations.

2. The *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW) is an international human rights treaty which Singapore signed in 1995. State signatories are obliged by a comprehensive bill of rights to guarantee women's equality and freedom from discrimination in public and private life, as well as to report periodically on their progress.

3. Singapore's civil society was represented at the session by four organisations who had submitted reports and made representations to the Committee:

- Association of Women for Action and Research (**AWARE**),
- Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (**HOME**),
- **Sayoni** and
- the Singapore Council of Women's Organisation (**SCWO**),

Notably, this is the first time that HOME and Sayoni participated.

4. Minister of State for Community, Youth and Sports, Madam Halimah Yacob, delivered a comprehensive [statement](#) on Singapore's progress with gender equality and the State's decision to partially ratify two Articles (2 and 16) of the Convention. She affirmed the State's "full commitment to the promotion and protection of human rights, in particular the rights of women".

5. Civil society representatives are pleased that the CEDAW Committee recognised critical impediments to gender equality in Singapore and raised their concerns with the State in a Constructive Dialogue, as well as in the [Concluding Observations](#). While some organisations are disappointed with the State's stock responses, all believe that the State is committed to fulfilling its treaty obligations and welcome future progress.

6. Statements from each organisation follow:

AWARE

AWARE is encouraged the State has removed blanket reservations to Article 16 and Article 2 of the convention. We also commend the State's repeated declaration of its full commitment to gender equality and its commitment to working towards the ratification of the UN Protocol on Trafficking.

But, we remain concerned about the State's reticence on its obligations to institutionalise CEDAW across the board including in Parliament, the judiciary and law enforcement agencies, schools and the media. AWARE is also troubled that the State's avowed approach to meritocracy and Equal Opportunity is unconcerned with the other core CEDAW principles for Substantive Equality which are: Equal Access and Equal Outcomes.

Several members of the CEDAW Committee have also asked for national mechanisms such as a Human Rights Institution or Anti-discrimination law. AWARE is deeply concerned with the systemic discrimination of marginalised women in Singapore namely the sexual minority, the "foreign wife" and "foreign domestic workers" and, women with disabilities in the absence of a clear anti-discrimination mechanism. In this respect, we urge all relevant Ministries, especially MCYS, to include in public policy consultations all the Civil Society Organisations listed in this media release. We also urge the State to make the Office of Women's Development (OWD) independent of the Family Division at the MCYS and to set aside a dedicated budget for mainstreaming CEDAW through committed public education, improved data collection and temporary special measures.

Visit www.aware.org.sg for more information. For enquiries, please contact Nadzirah Samsudin: 67797137 or nadzirah@aware.org.sg and Halijah Mohd: 9617 7547 or halijah@halijahmohd.com.sg

HOME

HOME welcomes the Concluding Observations of the CEDAW Committee supporting the raised concern that migrant women domestic workers in Singapore do not enjoy equality before the law and in practice. They are excluded from the Employment Act and are not entitled to a mandatory rest day like other workers and are subject to mandatory deportation on grounds of pregnancy and HIV infection. HOME urges the State be fully committed to the implementation of international labour standards for migrant women domestic workers under the ILO Convention Decent Work for Domestic Workers.

In view of the increasing numbers of victims of trafficking in the region, HOME is hopeful that the State will not further delay the ratification of the Palermo Protocol and would enact an Anti-Human Trafficking law to provide comprehensive Victim Protection Assistance and an Inter-Agency monitoring and evaluation body which provides for multi-sectoral representation including CSO partners.

Visit www.home.org.sg for more information. For enquiries, please contact w para bridgett.home@gmail.com.

SAYONI

Sayoni was heartened that the Committee's experts studied information from diverse sources and recognised the wide range of direct and *indirect* discrimination that women face as sexual minorities (e.g. lesbian, transgender). In this regard, the Committee raised questions with the State about:

- Awareness of direct and indirect discrimination
- Inclusion in interpretation of non-discrimination
- Anti-discrimination law
- De-criminalisation of homosexuality
- Media censorship
- Access for women in same-sex partnerships to public health and family planning services
- Provision in family law and domestic violence
- Shared property and inheritance rights
- Encouragement to participate in political and public life
- Consultation in policy-making
- Added vulnerability to sexual harassment at the workplace
- Grievance mechanisms

The State's response since 2007 that there is no *deliberate* discrimination and its evasion of specific questions reflects weak knowledge and understanding of how discrimination is *different* and *worse* for sexual minority women. However, this creates a valuable opportunity for new perspectives. To this end, Sayoni invites constructive dialogue with the State, the media and the public.

Visit www.sayoni.com for more information. For enquiries, please contact kelly@sayoni.com and jean@sayoni.com.

SCWO

SCWO was pleased to note that progress has been made on many fronts, including the elevation of the Women's Desk to the Office for Women's Development, which we see as being better resourced and focused to advance our nation's progress to **Equal Voice, Equal Space and Equal Worth** for women.

In our reporting to the CEDAW Committee, SCWO highlighted the areas where we would like to see greater progress.

With our generally ageing population, and the longer life-expectancy of women, Singapore is facing the **feminisation of ageing**. We must therefore put in place measures to improve the protection of older women from social and economic marginalization, including addressing gender disparity in retirement incomes by looking at the cause and effect of existing income disparity in the workforce.

90% of women over 60 years of age have less than Secondary 4 education, and 80% will be widowed by the age of 80. Improved healthcare for women at different stages of life, health infrastructure for women with disability, and skills upgrading and training with targeted interventions for disadvantaged groups, will enable these women to keep pace with the information age and maintain their health,

independence and functionality. **Education for reintegration** of women who have left the workforce must also be a priority.

SCWO recommended the **acceleration of the promotion of female parliamentarians** to ministerial appointments and to enable more **gender diversity in high level positions** in government, boards of public organisations and public companies.

For details of the SCWO CEDAW Oral Submission, Executive Summary & Shadow Report & photo-editorial, please visit www.scwo.org.sg. Contact person: Selina Gan via phone 6837-0611, via email selina@scwo.org.sg.