



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
9 December 2014

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women

Fifty-ninth session

9-20 March 2015

Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”

Statement submitted by Singapore Council of Women’s Organisations, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

As the national coordinating council of 56 women's organisations, the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations draws the attention of the Commission on the Status of Women to challenges faced by women in a comparatively advanced economy such as Singapore.

Critical Area A: Women and Poverty

The Central Provident Fund scheme was introduced by the Singapore government to address the retirement needs of the Singapore population: fixed percentages of monthly employee income and employer's contributions are channelled into a compulsory savings account.

A report put together by the Tsao Foundation in 2011 found that the scheme has been inadequate in providing old-age security to 75 per cent of women aged 60 and above (as against 43 per cent of men in this age category).

Women are more likely to take up part-time or informal work than are men. This is viewed as a practical option that minimises the immediate trade-offs that come with balancing the dual responsibilities of domestic and workforce participation. However, they face significant long-term trade-offs including inadequate retirement savings, job insecurity and an exclusion from full-time employment benefits. While it has become more acceptable for women to delegate domestic responsibilities to foreign domestic helpers, this is not an option for women from lower-income families.

Critical Area B: Education and Training of Women

Education in Singapore, underpinned by a principle of meritocracy, has contributed to gender-inclusive education. The Compulsory Education Act mandates families to enrol their children, male or female, in primary school. Financial aid is also extended to low income families regardless of gender.

Singapore has achieved high literacy for women: 94.6 per cent for resident females aged 15 years and above (2013) and gender parity in higher education. Women are well-represented in traditionally male-dominated subjects, such as the natural, physical and mathematical science courses, architecture and building.

Gender-segregation

Female enrolment in disciplines of Engineering Sciences and Information Technology has remained low: 30 per cent and 32.8 per cent respectively in 2013. These numbers reflect the persistence of gendered cultural expectations on choice and pursuit of educational pathways, despite the opportunities created by principles of meritocracy and non-discrimination.

Positive Developments

The Singapore Committee for United Nations Women launched the "Women in STEM" campaign in April 2014 to help young girls make informed educational choices and condition them to accept Science Technology Engineering and

Mathematics pathways as real possibilities through exposure to successful female role-models.

In 2013, The Singapore Workforce Development Agency launched WorkPro, a programme to reintegrate back-to-work women into the workforce through job-preparation workshops, skills training and the creation of flexible jobs in progressive work environments.

Critical Area C: Women and Health

In 2000, the World Health Organization ranked Singapore 6th out of 191 countries on overall health system performance. In respect of fairness in financial distribution, Singapore was ranked 101-102. This stark difference in ranking between overall health performance and equity in healthcare reveals a serious challenge to healthcare. In 2012, only 4.7 per cent of Singapore's Gross Domestic Product was allocated for healthcare.

Access and affordability of healthcare

Women with little or no Central Provident Fund Board and related Medisave savings are particularly vulnerable to the unequal financing of healthcare in Singapore. As highlighted in the 2005 AWARE-Tsao Foundation report *Beyond Youth: Women Growing Older and Poorer*, older women have the least income security, and women aged 60 and above are most vulnerable as they have the least Central Provident Fund savings during a lifetime of unpaid care-giving and homemaking, as well as irregular work histories.

Retired housewives in particular are likely to have insufficient savings to cover their healthcare needs, and need to rely on their spouses' or children's savings or other family members for financial support.

Breast Cancer Awareness

Fewer women are going for preventive health screening for breast cancer. It was reported in 2010 that 3 in 5 women aged 50-69 years are not current with their screenings. This is alarming as breast cancer is the most common and most fatal cancer amongst women in Singapore, accounting for 30 per cent of all cancer diagnoses in women.

Positive Developments

The Singapore government has committed to higher national spending on healthcare and introduced the Healthcare 2013 plan in 2012 to enhance the accessibility and affordability of Singapore's healthcare model.

The Women's Health Advisory Committee was set up in May 2012 to develop national initiatives to make health services and information more accessible to women. These include fully-subsidised breast cancer screening offered to lower income women and educational initiatives such as Holistic Women's Health to equip women with knowledge and skills to care for their health and adopt healthy lifestyles.

Critical Areas D and I: Violence against Women and Human Rights

Marital rape in Singapore has still not been fully criminalised.

An International Women's Rights Action Watch Study on Violence against Women in Singapore revealed that less than a quarter of victims reported the most recent incident of violence to the police. Yet, half of the women abused by their current partner were injured and 44.4 per cent feared for their lives.

A January 2014 study by Sallie Yea based on data collected from in-depth interviews with 87 migrant women revealed findings on the vulnerabilities of migrant women in Singapore's sex and nightlife and entertainment industry.

Trafficking in Persons

Victim-centricity in Trafficking in Persons strategies is an important step to recognise exploitation faced by migrant women workers and guide efforts towards building robust victim-care and support networks.

A Singapore Inter-Agency Taskforce on Trafficking in Persons was set up in 2011, followed by a National Plan of Action setting out steps to combat trafficking. Protection of victims is one of its strategic "4P's" (Prevention, Protection, Prosecution, Partnerships) limbs. A private member's Prevention of Human Trafficking Bill has been tabled in Parliament to provide a legal framework to criminalise traffickers and protect victims. However, it is currently facing criticisms of being too prevention-centric and not going far enough to protect victims.

Positive Developments

In 2011, section 157(d) of our Evidence Act which permitted the credit of a rape victim to be impeached by proof that she is of a "generally immoral" character, was deleted.

The Protection against Harassment Act was passed in Parliament in March 2014. The Act provides a hitherto lacking framework to criminalise instances of non-direct forms of violence.

Critical Area F: Women and the Economy

Labour Force Participation Rate

While the female participation in labour force has risen over the years, it is still lower than in many developed countries. Only 58.1 per cent of women (75.8 per cent men) in Singapore are economically active compared to Denmark, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom (with 70 per cent and more). Singapore was ranked 75th (out of 136 countries) for labour force participation on Global Gender Gap index 2013 by the World Economic Forum.

Entrepreneurship

Singapore was the only country in the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor where women outnumbered men in early-stage entrepreneurship rate (7.2 per cent for women against 6.0 per cent for men). However, established business ownership among women has been found to be low to insignificant.

Harmonisation of work and family responsibilities: the burden of unpaid care work

As in most regions, women remain responsible for the unpaid workforce that sustains their families, including childcare, caring for the sick and elderly, and domestic activities such as food preparation and production. Singapore also sees a large number of migrant women who take on jobs here as domestic foreign workers or nurses who fill the unmet need for care services here, while leaving their families at home to reorganise tasks and care responsibilities in their absence.

Critical Area G: Women in Power and Decision-Making

Singapore was ranked 53 out of 151 countries in Inter-Parliamentary Union Statistics based on its current female representation in parliament of 25.3 per cent (with the highest female representation being in Rwanda, 63.8 per cent). Six out of the 32 office-holders in the Parliament are now women.

Women in Singapore have comparatively low representation in boardrooms. According to Singapore Board Diversity Report 2013 by Singapore Council of Women's Organisations initiative BoardAgender and Centre for Governance, Institutions & Organisations of National University of Singapore, female representation on the boards of Singapore Exchange listed companies increased from 7.3 per cent in 2012 to 7.9 per cent in 2013.
