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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

The Singapore Council of Women's Organisations (SCWO) would like to call to attention the challenges faced by older women in the labour force, as well as the prevalence of violence against women in Singapore.

There is a need to look at the current legislation, fundamental values and existing social and gender norms in society today that significantly affect women's careers, and the way they are viewed and treated at home, workplaces and in the community. Gender equality is a fundamental value and there needs to be gender mainstreaming in policies, if not women's opportunities for growth and abilities to develop their full potential are limited.

Older Women and the Labour Force

For women over the age of 65 in Singapore who are in the labour force, about 40 per cent of them are presently cleaners, labourers and in related occupations, as found in the 2019 Labour Force Report by the Ministry of Manpower. The profile of ageing women in the labour force is changing with more women being educated and joining the workforce.

There is a need to address ageism and to redefine what it means to be an older woman in today's context. It is also imperative to address the inequality in attitudes that still persist in society. A gender and life course approach needs to be adopted to enable older women to continue being meaningfully employed, even in their old age.

The Singapore workforce is ageing rapidly and employees over age 50 are the fastest growing demographic. By 2030, it is projected that there will be a 55 per cent increase in employees over age 50 accounting for 40 per cent of the workforce, as reported by consultancy group Mercer. While the government recognised that a growing pool of older workers is a precious resource to tap and is looking at ways to encourage productive longevity in the labour force, more needs to be done to support older women with employability and job security.

Although initiatives like the SkillsFuture Mid-Career Support Package, which includes hiring incentives and reskilling programmes, have been rolled out by the Government to support the hiring of older Singaporeans and create more career transition opportunities, they do not consider the persistent gendered and ageist mindsets.

Due to women's caregiving responsibilities in their earlier years, career breaks already limit women's ability to progress in their careers; re-entering the workforce is a challenge because hiring managers perceive women with caregiving responsibilities as less committed to their work. Companies are reluctant to hire women with caregiving responsibilities and those absent from the workforce for a significant period of time.

The traditional view that women are responsible to meet the burgeoning caregiving needs in the family remains widespread in Singapore. Many women who return to the workforce often switch to part-time positions or informal sector because it enables them to juggle their caregiving responsibilities. Despite women entering higher skilled and income jobs due to their higher education level, they still are unable to catch up with men in terms of salary parity.

The predominant social narrative portrays ageing as a period of physical and cognitive decline, increased dependency and disempowerment. Women already face barriers in employment and job security because of gender stereotypes and caregiving

responsibilities, coupled with ageism, older women will face even greater discrimination.

Caregiving should not solely fall on women's shoulders; more should be done to support men to share caregiving responsibilities with female family members so that women do not have to take a backseat with their careers, which greatly affect women's source of income and ability to save, consequently implicating their future financial security.

There is also a need to redefine ageing especially what it means to a woman in Singapore today. Women are living longer and staying in employment longer, thus, the narrative associated with ageing should not be one of social liability, loss of productivity and increased dependency. Older women are valuable and skilled workers who can contribute to society, and the changing profiles of older women must be considered. Gainful employment of older women not only provides financial independence, it also brings about a sense of fulfilment and purpose.

While the Government pursues their vision of productive longevity, the structural inequalities faced by women at workplace and the inequality surrounding gender and age need to be addressed too. Social, cultural norms and stereotypes are hardest to change and will take time because they are deeply entrenched in society. Family and workplace policies must also support gender equality, including the division of roles at home, incentivizing firms to hire older workers, and redesigning workplaces to build age-friendly environments.

Violence Against Women

In a 2010 International Violence Against Women survey, it was found that 1 in 10 women in Singapore experience physical violence in their lifetime and in recent years, sexual harassment, voyeurism and outrage of modesty cases have increased. There is also a growing number of cases involving psychological and emotional abuse compared to physical violence, which was more predominant previously.

Violence against women is still prevalent and remains a high concern in Singapore. During the COVID-19 outbreak lockdown period, Singapore experienced an increase in violence against women. One month after lockdown measures were implemented, there was a 22 per cent increase in police reports related to family violence compared with the monthly average of 389 for such cases before the lockdown period. The acts of violence reported include causing hurt, using criminal force, assault, criminal intimidation and wrongful confinement.

Live-in foreign domestic workers (FDWs) also experienced greater abusive and exploitative conditions during the lockdown period. For instance, FDWs are working longer hours with inadequate rest due to increase in household and caregiving duties, experiencing greater verbal abuse because of increase proximity between employers and FDWs, and faced with delayed payment of salaries or substantial pay cut due to changes in employers' financial circumstances brought about by COVID-19.

The government has made progress to protect women from sexual abuse and harassment through the implementation of stricter laws - repealing marital immunity for rape and criminalising sexual offences brought about by advances in technology like voyeurism and "cyberflashing". While criminalising such sexual offences sends a strong signal against such behaviours, it does not deal with the issues surrounding violence against women such as the poor understanding of what constitutes violence against women and more importantly, the prevailing gender norms in society that ultimately leads to gender inequality, the issue of power and control, and violence against women. The changes in law may act as deterrence only.

There is a disconnect between Singaporeans' understanding of domestic violence and the standard definition of domestic violence. In a 2019 report by United Women Singapore and Ipsos, it was found that 84 per cent of Singaporeans consider hitting a spouse and leaving a physical wound domestic abuse, but it drops to 75 per cent if hitting does not leave any physical wound. Furthermore, about half of Singaporeans do not consider any action causing a spouse to have lower self-esteem (44 per cent), restricting spouse's access to healthcare (45 per cent) or financial freedom (52 per cent) as domestic abuse. The poor understanding Singaporeans have of domestic violence clearly highlights the need for greater awareness and education on violence against women.

Ultimately, violence against women is a deep violation of fundamental values. It boils down to our values, the lack of respect and prevailing gender stereotypes that shape and influence our social norms and everyday actions. Apart from the need for greater awareness and knowledge on violence against women, gender inequality and a fundamental change in mindset regarding gender norms and stereotypes must be addressed to eliminate violence against women, and this process must involve both males and females.

Conclusion

We hope to draw attention and find solutions to the challenges and inequalities surrounding older women in the labour force, and the lack of gender respect and knowledge on violence against women. The norms, values and mores in our society need to be reflected and gender must always be considered. Gender-based barriers need to be removed to achieve gender equality in Singapore. The issue of gender equality cannot be dependent on changing mindsets only, governmental legislation must also support gender equality. They cannot be gendered. This is a multi-pronged approach requiring the collaborative and collective efforts of individuals, employers, institutions, community, and government to fully address the structural and social inequalities at homes, workplaces and society at large.
