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to the twenty-third 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 58 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 in Power and Decision-Making

While women make up more than 58.6 per cent of the workforce in 2014 and have equal opportunities in education, women in Singapore are still under-represented at the highest levels of government and corporations.

Women in Politics

As of September 2015, Singapore ranked 50 out of 190 countries with 25.3 per cent of parliament represented by women in the Inter Parliamentary Union Statistics based on May 2011 General Election and Punggol-East Bi election 2013 results. Despite that Ms Grace Fu had been appointed as the first woman to head a ministry on her own since the election in 2015, the number of women in ministerial positions still remains low. The percentage of women occupying cabinet office positions has fallen from 18.8 per cent since the 2011 elections to 16.2 per cent at the most recent elections in 2015.

Women in Judiciary

Female representation in the Subordinate Court saw a fall from 51.3 per cent of judicial positions represented by female judges in 2012 to 43.2 per cent in 2015; only 25 per cent of judges at the Supreme Court are women.

Women in armed forces

The number of women in armed forces is low and in 2013 women accounted for about 7.5 per cent of Singapore Armed Forces regulars. The Singapore Armed Forces has, however, broadened its policy of inclusiveness and is currently trying to attract more women to join the military as career soldiers and increase the female representation to 10 per cent by 2018. In 2015, Colonel Gan Siow Huang became the first female general in the Singapore Armed Forces.

Women in Boards

Singapore still lags behind other industrial nations considerably with only a small percentage of board positions held by women. According to Singapore Board Diversity Report 2014, presented by the Centre for Governance, Institutions and Organisations, together with an initiative of Singapore Council of Women's Organisations, BoardAgender, female representation on the boards of Singapore Exchange listed companies in 2014 was at 8.3 per cent. While female representation has marginally increased over the past few years, Singapore remains behind its peers in the region and at about half of the percentages seen in the European Union, United States and Australia, states the report.

Critical Area B: Women and Economy

Labour Force Participation Rate and Gender Wage Gap

While the female participation in labour force has risen significantly over the years, it is still lower than in many developed countries. In Singapore, 58.6 per cent of women are economically active compared to Denmark, Iceland, Finland and the United Kingdom with 70 per cent and more. Singapore ranked 72nd (out of 142 countries) for labour force participation on Global Gender Gap index 2014 by World Economic Forum. Singaporean women are more likely to drop out of the labour force after marriage and childbirth, and those women who leave the workplace do not often re-enter as full-time workers.

According to Singapore's 2014 Labour Force Statistics, women earn less than men in all occupational categories except clerical and support. In most occupational categories, the difference is more than 10 per cent.

Positive Development

Declining birth rates and labour force needs have, however, prompted the government of Singapore to institute various pro-family policies and incentives to encourage family formation, help families to better balance work and family, and encourage women to join the labour force. Besides monetary incentives, the government has introduced measures such as work-life grants and funding schemes for employers, more generous government-paid maternity and paternity leave, as well as shared parental leave to encourage more equalitarian child-rearing.

Critical Area C: Violence against Women

Sexual Harassment in the Workplace

According to a study by Singaporean non-governmental organisation, Association for Women for Action and Research, in 2008, 58.6 per cent of women are reported to have experienced sexual harassment in their workplace, the majority experiencing it more than once. With only 66 per cent of respondents having high levels of awareness for sexual harassment, it is highly likely that many sexual harassment cases in the workplace go unreported. Currently, employers in Singapore are not obliged to address workplace harassment or institute policies against it.

Positive Development

To tackle sexual harassment and provide more protection for victims, the government of Singapore passed the Protection from Harassment Act in March 2014. This legislation, which applies to both — physical and online worlds — provides more protection to victims, civil remedies and criminal sanctions to protect against harassment and related anti-social behaviour, such as stalking. Singapore Council of Women's Organisations took part in providing comments to the Tripartite Advisory on Managing Workplace Harassment in May 2015.

Positive Development in Human Trafficking

Singapore has taken a lot of positive steps in recent years to combat trafficking in persons. To deter trafficking and support rehabilitation of victims, the Singapore government passed the Protection from Human Trafficking Act in November 2014.

The Act defines offences of trafficking and provides law enforcement officers powers to allow them to act against different forms of human trafficking. Since the implementation of the law, 33 victims of trafficking have been identified, and 11 traffickers prosecuted. However, no trafficker has been convicted in Singapore under the new legislation. While the Protection from Human Trafficking Act contains special provisions addressing victim protection and assistance, it has, however, been criticised for being weak in these provisions and for its lack of victim-centric approach.

To further demonstrate Singapore's commitment in combating human trafficking, the government of Singapore recently acceded to the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, also known as the Palermo Protocol. It is hoped that with the accession to the Palermo Protocol, the provision of care to victims of trafficking will be enhanced.

Critical Area D: Migrant Spouses

The number of marriages between Singapore Citizens and foreigners has been rising in recent years, and in the past decade, more than 50,000 Singaporeans have married non-resident brides. Over 95 per cent of foreign spouses are from Asian countries, most commonly from China, Indonesia, India, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam who migrate to Singapore to marry.

Immigrant women from less developed countries who marry Singapore citizens are largely regarded as dependents — i.e. non-working wives — of their Singaporean husbands, which means that they have to rely on their husbands for resources (i.e. financial) and to negotiate their rights to residency and work.

Foreigners married to Singaporeans are usually issued with a Long-Term Visit Pass, but many apply for permanent residency or citizenship to enjoy healthcare, education and housing subsidies. As of the end of 2012, 11,736 foreign spouses of Singapore citizens were on long-term visit passes, and more than a third of them had lived here for more than three years. Simultaneously, only 4,100 foreign spouses were awarded permanent residency and 4,100 awarded citizenship yearly between 2008 and 2013. During the same period, about half of the applications for permanent residency were rejected.

While the government of Singapore has recently introduced new rules to give more temporary rights to non-citizen spouses, foreign spouses are still not given the majority of rights that permanent residents receive, such as subsidies for education, housing, employment and childcare benefits, as well as access to institutional assistance.

Positive Developments

The Immigration & Checkpoints Authority of Singapore recently introduced new measures, which allow Singaporean-foreigner couples to start the process of applying for the spouses' Long Term Visit Pass prior to marriage. The renewed process now allows the couple to know whether the foreign spouse can qualify for long term stay in Singapore before they tie the knot based on the circumstances of the couple at the time of application.

The application process also provides greater clarity as it requires both sides to furnish information such as on past marriages, whether there are children from these marriages, their educational background, and criminal records, if any. Both applicants will get a copy of the form.

Also from 2015 onwards, migrant wives holding a Long-Term Visit Pass are eligible to work in Singapore with their employer's attainment of Letter of Consent from the Ministry of Manpower. This measure helps migrant wives to become more self-sufficient and reduce dependency on their Singaporean spouses.
