



# Convention on the Rights of the Child

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## Committee on the Rights of the Child Fifty-sixth session

### Summary record of the 1591st meeting

Held at the Palais Wilson, Geneva, on Thursday, 20 January 2011, at 3 p.m.

*Chairperson:* Ms. Lee

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*The meeting was called to order at 3.05 p.m.*

**Consideration of reports of States parties** (continued)

*Second and third periodic reports of Singapore* (continued) (CRC/C/SGP/2-3; CRC/C/SPQ/Q/2-3 and Add.1)

1. *At the invitation of the Chairperson, the members of the delegation of Singapore took places at the Committee table.*
2. **Ms. Ong** Toon Hui (Singapore) said that there was no independent monitoring mechanism for children's issues but that children could file complaints with the relevant services by telephone or e-mail. All children living in institutions were informed that they could complain to the children's and juvenile homes inspectorate, whose members carried out regular home inspections. A telephone hotline was also available for anyone wishing to report acts of ill-treatment or neglect.
3. Marriage between Muslims was regulated by legislation on the administration of Koranic law. The minimum age for religious marriage between Muslims had been raised from 16 to 18 years of age, the same as for civil marriages.
4. As a result of the 2004 amendment to the Employment Act, the minimum age for employment had been raised from 14 to 15 years, while the minimum age at which children could perform light work had risen from 12 to 13 years of age. No child was permitted to do dangerous jobs. Children aged between 13 and 16 enjoyed special protection measures with regard to working hours and the kinds of work they could perform.
5. In 2010, Singapore had acceded to the Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction, which was due to enter into force in the State party in March 2011.
6. **Ms. Aidoo** (Country Rapporteur) asked if the provision in the Employment Act that allowed children older than 13 years of age to perform light forms of work was not contrary to the obligation placed on children that they should attend school until the age of 15.
7. **Ms. Ong** Toon Hui (Singapore) explained that the first six years of primary school were mandatory but that, in fact, approximately 98 per cent of children attended school for 10 years, around 93 per cent of them continuing to study after secondary school or learning a trade. Children performing light work generally worked part-time or during the holidays.
8. **The Chairperson** said she had understood that the figures provided by the delegation on school enrolment referred to children of Singaporean nationality. Given that around 30 per cent of the population was not Singaporean, she would appreciate more details on the situation of foreign children.
9. **Mr. Balakrishnan** (Singapore) said that, of a current population of 5 million, 3.2 million were Singaporeans whose children were taught in national schools, half a million were permanent residents whose children also attended national schools, and 1.3 million were foreign temporary workers who were not accompanied by their children. The very high enrolment figures that had been provided therefore referred to all children resident in Singapore.
10. **Ms. Ghoh** (Singapore) said that the Government had implemented numerous education programmes, such as the Positive Parenting Programme, aimed at developing parents' competencies. The State party also had 37 Family Service Centres that provided advice and support to parents.
11. Among the various initiatives aimed at the early detection of children potentially at risk were training programmes for teachers and inter-professional training sessions that brought together police, child protection officials, health-care professionals and social

workers. Doctors were obliged by law to report suspected cases of ill-treatment to the social services.

12. **Ms. Goh** (Singapore) said that girls were probably more often singled out than boys for procedures regarding children beyond parental control because parents were more protective towards girls.

13. **Ms. Aidoo** strongly recommended that the State party should carry out a thorough study of the issue, with statistics disaggregated by sex, in order to base its policies and measures on the most comprehensive information possible.

14. **The Chairperson** said that the matter underscored the need for an independent monitoring mechanism. If parents could contact the authorities in order to place their child in an institution, to whom could children file complaints?

15. **Mr. Balakrishnan** (Singapore) pointed out that parents could not simply approach courts whenever they wished to request that their child should be institutionalized. Numerous safeguards were in place and various procedures had to be completed before the courts could be approached. All requests were first considered by the Singapore Children's Society, an independent body that tried to solve the problem through mediation. Parents and children were then steered towards an information and counselling service. Those two steps allowed for an independent assessment of the situation and a more precise identification of the problems involved. Only when those steps had failed to produce a resolution did the courts intervene. It should also be borne in mind that the Singaporean justice system was independent. Family Court judges made sure that they were in possession of all the necessary information, such as reports by the social services; interviewed the children concerned; investigated the truth of parents' claims; and made their decisions in the best interests of the child.

16. **Mr. Lau** (Singapore) said that the Central Narcotics Bureau, which led efforts to combat drug abuse, organized regular prevention campaigns in schools. The National Council on Drug Abuse mobilized resources to raise awareness among young people of the harmful effects of drug abuse. The number of drug addicts had fallen over the previous 10 years.

17. Although domestic security laws contained no provision that put children beyond their reach, no child had ever been arrested under that legislation.

18. **Ms. Bhalla Ajay** (Singapore) said that female genital mutilation, forced feeding of women and gender selection of children were not issues in Singapore.

19. The breastfeeding rate up to six months, currently at 22 per cent, was rising. All maternity wards had a specialized counsellor who worked closely with young mothers and whom they could consult even after leaving hospital. The Government was also working on suitable breastfeeding facilities in the workplace and in shops. Maternity leave was four months.

20. Adolescents were increasingly seen as a distinct group of children with problems peculiar to them that required specific solutions. Health studies on adolescents were carried out in schools. In 2006, a consultative committee had been set up to identify the main problems and shortcomings related to adolescent health. Its findings had led to numerous measures aimed at improving adolescent health care.

21. **Ms. El-Ashwamy** asked if the State party had clinics adapted to the needs of adolescents, mobile clinics, specialized counselling services for adolescents and telephone hotlines.

22. **Ms. Bhalla Ajay** (Singapore) said that all of those services were available in the country.

23. Since 2004, all pregnant women were tested for HIV, a measure that had completely eliminated the risk of mother-child transmission of the virus.
24. Awareness-raising of the issue of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) was built into curricula from primary school onwards. Programmes like “Breaking Down Barriers” had been put in place to overcome taboos and alert children in a playful and interactive fashion to the risks of unprotected sex. Efforts had also been made to include more marginalized young people in those awareness-raising measures, such as the 3 per cent who dropped out of school.
25. **The Chairperson** requested further information on the criminalization of risk behaviour in young people with psychological problems, who would be better served by therapeutic care.
26. **Mr. Lau** (Singapore) said that the primary goal of the Women’s Charter was to protect girls and women. Under the Charter, a girl and boy under the age of 16 who engaged in consensual sexual relations were breaking the law. As a rule, however, no charges were ever brought against such young people. On the other hand, an adult man who had sexual relations with a young girl, even if consensual, would be prosecuted.
27. Suicide itself was not an offence, but attempted suicide was. In the vast majority of cases, no charges were brought and the person concerned received appropriate treatment as part of general care of which punishment was not a part.
28. **Ms. Aidoo** said that protecting women was laudable but it would be interesting to know how the State protected boys. The Committee, whose goal was to protect the rights of all children, found it difficult to accept the approach adopted in the Women’s Charter, which did not take boys into account.
29. **Mr. Balakrishnan** (Singapore) underscored that the Women’s Charter had been adopted 50 years before. The age of sexual consent was 16 years. Paid sexual relations were illegal, even if the young woman involved was over 16 years of age. That provision aimed at shielding minors from prostitution. Provisions on sex offences in the Criminal Code had recently been amended in order to protect boys as well.
30. **Ms. Bhalla Ajay** (Singapore) said that the adolescent suicide rate fluctuated from year to year but remained relatively low. That having been said, the Government, aware that it must make greater efforts in the area of mental health, had set up a national working group on mental health in 2006 to carry out a thorough study of the mental well-being of children and adolescents, foster young people’s resilience and help them deal with the difficulties of approaching adulthood. The working group had concentrated on education and prevention, along with the early detection and treatment of mental health problems, and was committed to coordination and monitoring progress. Programmes had been in place for several years to help children handle stress and negative emotions from an early age and boost their self-esteem.
31. Awareness-raising and training programmes on adolescent mental health issues had also been implemented for parents and teachers, along with an online peer-group support forum, known as “Audible Hearts”, in which adolescents could discuss their problems and swap advice confidentially.
32. **The Chairperson** asked how much ODA the State party contributed.
33. **Ms. Tan** (Singapore) said that the State party made regular voluntary contributions to the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and offered ad hoc financial assistance to countries facing humanitarian crises caused by natural disasters, such as the drought that had recently struck Djibouti.

34. **Ms. Maurás Pérez** asked what percentage of GDP the State party allocated to ODA in general and whether figures were available on the portion specifically allocated to child issues. The Committee was trying to establish how much assistance was allocated by more developed countries to less developed ones for implementation of the Convention. It would also be interesting to know if Singapore had drafted any kind of white paper for companies on the rights of the child.

35. **Mr. Balakrishnan** (Singapore) said that he saw no reference to ODA in the articles of the Convention.

36. **Ms. Aidoo** said that, under article 4 of the Convention, States parties should undertake all appropriate measures for the exercise of children's economic, social and cultural rights, "to the maximum extent of their available resources and, where needed, within the framework of international cooperation". That meant that States able to do so should lend assistance to States that lacked the human, material and financial resources necessary for implementation of the Convention.

37. She recalled that on 21 September 2007 the Committee had held a day of general discussion entitled "Resources for the Rights of the Child – States' Responsibility", which had brought together the representatives of governments, NGOs and experts and had made recommendations on how to release resources for the implementation of the Convention, for example through international cooperation. That could be seen in connection with the United Nations' appeal to States to allocate 0.7 per cent of GDP to ODA.

38. **Ms. Tan** (Singapore) said that while the State party had no natural resources, it did have considerable human resources. For that reason, its ODA concentrated largely on the development of human resources. Thus, teams of Singaporean doctors regularly went abroad to teach local doctors and perform operations on children in both private and Government initiatives. The State party had never refused to assist when asked.

39. **Mr. Balakrishnan** (Singapore) said that the State party's reservations to articles 7, 9, 10 and 22 of the Convention reflected the fact that Singapore was a very small and densely populated State, with 7,000 inhabitants per square kilometre. The Government therefore had to be particularly careful about any commitments that could lead to an obligation to receive more people than the country could accommodate. Therefore, despite progress in several areas in recent years, especially the amendment to the Constitution allowing the granting of Singaporean nationality to children born of Singaporean mothers, it was still not possible to lift those reservations.

40. Likewise, since Singapore was unable to provide free education to all the foreign children resident in its territory, it was not in a position to lift its reservations to article 28 of the Convention.

41. Singapore had brought its legislation into line with the International Labour Organization Conventions concerning Minimum Age for Admission to Employment (C138) and the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour (C182). However, given the current regulations and practices in the area of child and adolescent labour, the Government considered it wiser to maintain its reservation to article 32 of the Convention for the time being.

42. **Mr. Kotrane** commented that the Singaporean Government's declarations concerning articles 12 to 17 of the Convention were highly restrictive and impinged on children's exercise of civil rights and liberties. Any comments from the delegation on those declarations would be welcome.

43. **Ms. Maurás Pérez**, noting that, according to the delegation's figures, 1.3 million of the 5 million inhabitants of Singapore were foreign workers, asked how their minor children living with them were treated.

44. **Mr. Balakrishnan** (Singapore) pointed out that the State party had formulated declarations, not reservations, with regard to articles 12 to 17 of the Convention, and that they were justified, in the country's multiracial and multicultural context, by the fact that the Convention could be applied by means other than those set forth in its provisions. That said, the Government of Singapore shared the aims of the Convention.

45. **Mr. Filali** asked what extrajudicial means the State party used in cases of minor offences, what sentences were passed on minors aged 10 to 18 years who committed serious crimes and if the absence of local magistrates in the juvenile justice system undermined the protection of children's rights.

46. **Ms. Ortiz**, in the belief that Singaporean families had bought Chinese children and that some foreign children resident in Singapore had been adopted by North American families, asked whether the State party was planning to join the Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Cooperation in respect of Intercountry Adoption and the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography.

47. With reference to paragraph 481 of the report, she wished to know whether the multimedia and printed matter used in the annual campaign to combat drug abuse were sensitive to children's cultures and whether they were translated into all pupils' mother tongues.

48. The delegation might also say how the State party ensured equal access by children of all the country's cultural and linguistic communities to cultural life; whether specific measures had been taken for children with special needs, such as those with disabilities, in isolation or from minorities; and what priority was assigned to play and sport, which were essential for children to develop and flourish.

49. **Mr. Citarella**, regretting that the minimum age of criminal responsibility was 7 years and that children could be sentenced to life imprisonment, asked whether such sentences could be reviewed and, if so, under what procedure. He would like to know why juvenile justice was so severe and why children over 17 years of age were considered adults in the eyes of the law, which was contrary to the provisions of the Convention.

50. **Mr. Kotrane**, noting that the ILO Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations had in 2009 expressed regret that employment legislation on the definition of the minimum age for admission to employment was applied only to children with a written work contract, asked why all working children did not have such contracts, given that those without had no social protection.

51. He wondered whether it was true that the legal minimum age for domestic work was 15 years, whether domestic workers were entitled to days off and whether such jobs were reserved for young foreigners. It would be useful to know whether the State party, in compliance with ILO Convention No. 138, was considering increasing the minimum age to 18 years for admission to any employment that, by its nature or because of the conditions in which it was carried out, could harm the employee's health, security or morals.

52. He would also like to know if the State party planned to protect all minors, not just those below 16 years of age, against any activities that could harm their morals, as set forth in ILO Convention No. 182.

53. **Ms. El-Ashwamy**, regretting that so little had been done to combat the sexual exploitation of children, especially of street children, asked whether a code of ethics had been drafted to protect children from sex tourism. She would also like to know if those responsible for child prostitution were prosecuted and what measures had been taken to end impunity, enforce the laws in place and pass new legislation.

54. It would be interesting to learn if the State party had a mechanism for collecting data on child prostitution, and an independent coordinating body to protect the rights of child victims of human trafficking or sale, and whether it had attempted to step up cooperation with its international partners to combat the sale of children for prostitution, in particular by concluding new relevant bilateral and multilateral agreements.
55. Had the State party established a mechanism to report cases of ill-treatment and exploitation of children and did it intend to ratify the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime?
56. **Mr. Koompraphant** asked how the State party monitored children's living and working conditions, what type of work was done by children under 15 years of age and whether they had welfare cover.
57. **Mr. Zermatten**, noting that no children in the 7–10 age group had been sentenced for their offences, asked why the State party did not raise the age of criminal responsibility and replace its repressive system with a system of protection. He would also be interested to learn how Singapore could justify the State-sanctioned violence against children that was caning.
58. **Ms. Aidoo** (Alternate Country Rapporteur) asked whether the highly selective nature of Singapore's school system made for excessive stress on pupils, leading to behavioural problems or even suicide. She would like to know whether remedial classes were organized for Malay students who achieved poorer results than their Chinese classmates, and whether language policy implemented in the national education system took account of the diversity of pupils' mother tongues.
59. **Mr. Cheong** (Singapore) said that education counsellors and social workers in all schools throughout the country provided psychological support to pupils suffering from stress and the problems associated with adolescence in order to boost their self-confidence, making them into responsible adults when they had completed their secondary education. The focus was therefore on personal development, empowerment and civic and moral education.
60. Children with learning difficulties or those who had failed their Primary School Leaving Examinations now had the option of enrolling in more practical, artistic or sports courses.
61. Given the hot and humid climate in Singapore, all schools had sports halls where children could engage in physical activities, the weather notwithstanding.
62. Many parents had said that they would like preschool education to be made compulsory but the Government had no immediate plans to do so.
63. Children had to learn English, the lingua franca that bridged all the language communities, as well as their mother tongue; bilingualism helped maintain the country's enormous cultural and linguistic diversity.
64. Various measures were in place to help primary school pupils with learning difficulties, such as remedial classes in mathematics and English, teaching in the mother tongue adapted to the pupils' level, and peer assistance. Those measures had borne fruit, as the education level of pupils of Malay origin, once been quite low, had improved markedly over the years.
65. **The Chairperson** asked how disabled children fitted into the education system in Singapore.

66. **Mr. Cheong** (Singapore) said that, under the Compulsory Education Act, all children had to be enrolled in mainstream schools. Actually, an exception was made for children whose disabilities made that impossible. They were enrolled in specialized schools with strict quality criteria established by the Ministry of Education in conjunction with the National Council of Social Service. The budget of those establishments needed to be increased in order to train new teaching aides to support specialized teaching staff. Depending on the child's disability and personal situation, parents had the option of having their child taught at home, thanks to a range of educational services in place in close cooperation with volunteer welfare organizations. Education for all was, therefore, a reality in Singapore.

67. **Ms. Ong Su Min** (Singapore) said that the juvenile justice system focused on protection and rehabilitation. Sentences varied greatly and were proportionate to the seriousness of the offence. Parents could be asked to agree to exercise their parental authority or be involved in their child's psychological help programmes. A minor could receive a probationary sentence not exceeding 3 years, be sentenced to do community work, be sentenced to a prison term not exceeding 6 months, be placed in a recognized school for up to 3 years, be fined or be sent to a training and correctional centre. Prison terms were a last resort after all other possibilities had been exhausted. Children aged under 10 could not be deprived of their liberty.

68. The Community Court, established in 2006, heard cases involving young people aged 16–21, while juvenile courts heard those involving children under 16 years of age.

69. **Mr. Citarella** asked if children aged 7–12 involved in a criminal case were entitled to the services of a lawyer.

70. **Mr. Cheong** (Singapore) said that the age of criminal responsibility had been set at 7 years of age to help the authorities' early detection of potential criminal behaviour in children and take the appropriate educational measures, as well as prevent adults from involving children in crime. The Criminal Code made it clear that children in the 7–12 age group could not be held responsible for their acts if it had been recognized that they were immature or incapable of discernment.

71. **Ms. Aidoo** (Country Rapporteur) welcomed the constructive dialogue with the delegation, which had made it possible to take stock of the situation of the rights of the child in Singapore. She also welcomed the State party's determination to implement the Convention, as demonstrated by the positive outcomes in the areas of health care and education. However, the State party needed to ensure that certain, albeit laudable, principles, such as the concern with maintaining social and family cohesion, did not become an obstacle to the full realization of the rights of the child.

72. The Committee was aware that the State party faced certain constraints, such as the limited area of its territory, high population density and a lack of natural resources, but encouraged it nonetheless to pursue its efforts to implement all of the provisions of the Convention, since it had the financial, human and logistical means to do so. In its concluding observations, the Committee would certainly urge the State party to lift its remaining reservations, especially since it already met almost all of the requirements set forth in the provisions of the articles concerned.

73. The Committee was concerned that the age of full legal capacity was not clearly defined and that there was no uniform definition of the child. It therefore urged the State party to align its legislation with article 1 of the Convention. The State party should also adopt a comprehensive policy on adolescents that focused on their health, social and education needs. The Committee encouraged the State party to take a more serious view of the rights of foreign children living in its territory.

74. **Mr. Balakrishnan** (Singapore) said that, with regard to the reservations, the Committee would doubtless agree that Singapore basically respected the substance of the Convention and that the overall situation regarding children was satisfactory, even if foreign children did not quite benefit from all the advantages and assistance enjoyed by Singaporean children.

*The meeting rose at 6.05 p.m.*