



**Convention on the Elimination
of All Forms of Discrimination
against Women**

Distr.: General
7 September 2001

Original: English

**Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination
against Women
Twenty-fifth session**

Summary record of the 514th meeting

Held at Headquarters, New York, on Monday, 9 July 2001, at 10.30 a.m.

Chairperson: Ms. Abaka

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The meeting was called to order at 10.35 a.m.

Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under article 18 of the Convention (continued)

Initial and second periodic reports of Singapore (CEDAW/C/SGP/1 and 2)

1. *At the invitation of the Chairperson, the members of the delegation of Singapore took places at the Committee table.*

2. *A film showing the situation of women in Singapore was projected.*

3. **Ms. Yu-Foo** (Singapore), introducing the initial and second periodic reports of Singapore (CEDAW/C/SGP/1 and 2), said that, since Singapore had gained independence in 1965, the Government had sought to achieve progress for all Singaporeans, irrespective of race, language or religion. The ratification of the Convention and the subsequent establishment of an inter-ministerial committee to monitor its implementation had put the focus on the issue of gender equality. The initial and second periodic reports reflected the input of women's groups, who had been encouraged to prepare their own comments on the content.

4. While significant progress had been made in enhancing the status of women over the past 36 years, it had been achieved on the basis of four guiding principles: meritocracy and equal opportunities for all; human resources development; treatment of women as part of the mainstream; and social capital-building.

5. Singapore was a small nation without natural resources. People were its only resource. It was a pluralistic society in which many races, languages and religions coexisted. It therefore could not afford either to waste human potential or to allow unequal access to opportunities to erode social harmony.

6. Education had proved to be the key to Singapore's progress, opening up opportunities for women and changing expectations about their role and status, while the policy of treating women as part of the mainstream, rather than as a special interest group, had instilled in women confidence in their intrinsic value and capabilities. Building social capital was important because, in a society in which men and women were viewed in terms of their relation to others, in the context of the family and the community, stronger

relations between people supported and enriched the life of the individual.

7. The aforementioned guiding principles, together with good governance and rapid economic development, had brought about substantial social and economic progress. Thus, in 2000, Singapore had ranked twenty-fourth out of 174 countries in the Human Development Index, reflecting the improvements made in respect of life expectancy, educational attainment and real income. The disparities between the indicators for males and females had narrowed considerably.

8. The rule of law prevailed in Singapore, and there was strong public confidence in the legal system. At the same time, Singaporeans' desire to preserve cultural values, support the family and promote social cohesion played as important a role as the country's laws in protecting the rights and dignity of the individual. While there was no specific legislation prohibiting discrimination on grounds of gender, the principle of the equality of all persons before the law was enshrined in the Constitution, and any person whose rights had been infringed could bring an action in the local courts. Those persons who could not afford a lawyer were entitled to legal aid.

9. The Women's Charter enacted in 1961 safeguarded women's rights during marriage and upon divorce and contained provisions on such matters as the enforcement of orders for the maintenance and custody of children and the legality of marriages. The Charter had been amended in 1996 to recognize the role of homemakers, whether male or female, in the division of matrimonial assets and to provide greater protection to family members from domestic violence. A family court had been established in 1995. Subsequently, a family justice centre had been set up to coordinate court services and programmes for families and family disputants and to provide counselling and mediation.

10. In the case of Muslim women, personal rights were governed by the Administration of Muslim Law Act of 1966. Under the Act, special courts had been established to issue rulings on disputes to which the parties were Muslims and which related to such matters as marriage, nullity of marriage and divorce.

11. Her Government had adopted a multidisciplinary, inter-agency approach to the problem of domestic violence, establishing an island-wide network to help

victims gain access to the appropriate services. There were mandatory and non-mandatory counselling programmes aimed at rehabilitating perpetrators and providing support to victims and their children. Public education programmes had been launched to raise awareness of the issue.

12. The Penal Code afforded women protection against a range of sexual crimes, as described in paragraphs 6.10 to 6.13 of the initial report. It should be noted that women were not subject to corporal punishment. Pornography was prohibited, pornographic web sites were blocked and the Code of Advertising Practice provided that no advertisement should, by claim or implication, unfairly discriminate against, cast in a poor light or denigrate any race, religion or sex. Citizens committees acted as media watchdogs.

13. Advances in health care had led to vast improvements in health indicators, particularly for women. Thus, in 1999, female life expectancy at birth had reached 80 years, the infant mortality rate had declined to 3.3 per 1,000 resident live births compared with 8.0 in 1980 and the maternal mortality rate had been 0.1 per 1,000 live and still births, which was one of the lowest in the world. A national committee on women's health had been established in 1997 to examine areas of concern and propose programmes to fill existing gaps in women's health care.

14. One area of concern was the provision of health care for Singapore's rapidly ageing population, the majority of whom were women. The level of educational attainment of women aged 65 and older was considerably lower than that of their male counterparts and they also had lower savings, meaning that they were more likely to rely on their children for financial support. Her Government would continue to study the issues facing older women and to consider how best to meet their various needs.

15. In Singapore, great emphasis was placed on education, training and lifelong learning to prepare citizens for the knowledge-based economy. Over the past 35 years, the literacy rate had increased by 20 per cent for men and 46 per cent for women. Women currently constituted 50 per cent of university students and 46 per cent of polytechnic students. Following the entry into force of the Compulsory Education Bill in January 2003, primary education in national schools would become compulsory. In practice, enrolment in primary and secondary schools was already virtually

universal. The proportion of girls and boys enrolled was roughly equal. The drop-out rate had averaged 0.3 per cent from 1997 to 1999, with girls accounting for some 45 per cent of the total.

16. In the labour force, the participation rate for women had increased from 20 per cent in 1965 to 56 per cent in 2000. In addition, women were now better represented among higher paid workers and in fields traditionally regarded as male preserves, including information technology. They were acting as managing directors and chief executive officers in service sector companies. The main concern in the area of employment was the situation of older workers, particularly older women, who, because of their lower level of education, were being replaced by younger workers. Her Government had launched a number of training and retraining programmes to address that problem. It had also set up a lifelong learning endowment fund to upgrade skills at all levels of the workforce and to promote a culture of lifelong learning. While women were not required to perform national service, they could seek regular employment with the armed forces, which provided them with equal opportunities for training and development.

17. Her Government's commitment to the principle of equal remuneration for men and women workers for work of equal value was demonstrated by its decision to ratify the relevant convention of the International Labour Organization. In fact, that principle had long been practised in Singapore, the pay gap between men and women being attributable to the lower level of education of older women workers and women's desire to put family before career. Surveys showed that a substantial proportion of women would still be prepared to give up their careers to raise a family.

18. Her Government believed that it did not do justice to women to impose quotas. In political and public life, for example, the fact that there were only 6 women members of Parliament out of 92 represented an improvement over the situation 14 years earlier when there had been no women members. As long as she did not have a criminal record, there was no obstacle preventing any woman from entering politics, forming a political party or standing as a candidate. On the other hand, the issue of women's political representation did need to be addressed. There was currently only one woman Permanent Secretary in the civil service out of a total of 16, but 25 per cent of Deputy Secretaries were female as were 42 per cent of

judges in the subordinate courts and 11 per cent of those in the High Court. Her Government's ambassador to Washington, D.C., was also a woman.

19. In Singapore, good family values and extended families ranked above economic conditions and a robust legislative framework in promoting the well-being of men and women, ahead of the community and the State. The Government had been reviewing policies and programmes to strengthen the family and particularly to help women balance work and family commitments and had recently announced and implemented several pro-family measures. The civil service itself had implemented several initiatives in October 2000, such as paid marriage and paternity leave, teleworking and flexible working hours. In addition there were several schemes to help working mothers, including tax incentives and funding of childcare centres.

20. The Minister for Community Development and Sports had appointed a Public Education Committee on the Family, which gave high priority to joint responsibility for the household between husbands and wives. Boys and girls now studied home economics at school and there was an increased awareness of the importance of fathers' involvement in the upbringing of children. The Centre for Fathering (Singapore), a non-profit company, had been working to equip fathers with parenting skills. An inter-ministerial committee on the Convention had been set up in July 1996 to monitor its implementation and to encourage all ministries to keep policies affecting women constantly under review.

21. Singapore took a consultative approach to women's issues by arranging dialogues with women's organizations, non-affiliates and other non-governmental organizations and government agencies. There were multiple channels of communication for women to express their views on policies affecting them, including their views on the Convention, including parliamentary debates.

22. On the question of reservations to the Convention, she said that it was her Government's practice, before acceding to any international convention, to ensure that it was able to comply fully with the obligations it prescribed. Accordingly, it had entered such reservations to the Convention as would enable Singapore to accede. In preparing its second periodic report, her Government had very carefully

considered the possibility of withdrawing its reservations; however, in the context of existing laws, values and practices, it had proved necessary to retain them for the time being.

23. While Singapore had to a large extent complied with the requirement stated in articles 2 and 16 of the Convention, its Constitution guaranteed the freedom of minorities to practise their personal and religious laws. Those constitutional provisions were absolutely necessary to maintain the delicate balance in Singapore's multiracial and multicultural society with its four dominant cultures: Chinese, Malay, Indian and Eurasian. Consequently since certain provisions of the Administration of Muslim Law Act might not be entirely consistent with the Convention, her Government considered it necessary to maintain its reservations relating to the aforementioned articles in order to respect the right of Muslim citizens to observe their personal and religious laws. Furthermore, article 12 (2) of the Constitution expressly provided for non-discrimination in certain specific areas of public and private life on grounds of religion, race, descent or place of birth.

24. As for the nationality issue according to origin, she noted that article 122 (1) of the Constitution accorded citizenship by descent to a child born outside Singapore if his or her father was a Singaporean by birth or registration, provided the birth was registered within one year. A child born outside Singapore of a Singaporean mother and non-citizen father had to apply for citizenship by registration. A key reason for that was to allow the non-citizen father the first opportunity to register his son or daughter as a citizen of his own country. Singapore did not recognize dual nationality and its prevailing social values and norms considered it primarily the father's duty to provide for the child. Hence, her Government had found it necessary to maintain that reservation.

25. Singapore's Employment Act excluded persons in managerial, executive and confidential positions, seamen and domestic workers from its coverage. While that exclusion was not based on gender and was therefore not discriminatory against female workers, it might give the impression that Singapore had not complied fully with article 11 of the Convention. Although there was no legislation specifically to cover workers falling outside the scope of the Employment Act, an employee who was aggrieved by unfair employment practices could obtain

help from the Ministry of Manpower or seek redress through the civil courts.

26. Article 29 (1) of the Convention required States parties to submit for arbitration any dispute concerning the interpretation of the Convention which could not be settled by negotiation. Singapore had entered a reservation to that article, as was expressly permitted by article 29 (2), to reassert Singapore's right to its domestic policies. Her Government had made similar reservations to other conventions to which it had acceded. Those reservations had not hindered the overall advancement of women in Singapore, and they were periodically reviewed by her Government.

27. On the whole, Singapore's policies and laws were gender-neutral. There were, however, differences in the treatment of males and females, such as obligations relating to national service and possible changes in laws, policies and practices in response to the needs of society. The situation of women could be improved by increased participation in political and community life, greater sharing of household responsibilities and female enrolment in male-dominated courses of study.

28. Her Government would also continue to review existing legislation to protect women and girls and ensure their equal rights as citizens. Younger women were currently even better educated than their male counterparts; fewer of them dropped out of school and more of them pursued higher degrees. While older women might remember the attitudes and practices of the past, gender equality was largely a non-issue for younger women.

29. Noting that the future was bright for women in Singapore she stressed that as the society evolved, both within and outside the country, so would its laws and policies. She added that she would be truly honoured if the members of the Committee would visit Singapore and observe for themselves the condition and status of women; they would find that men and women could attest to the fact that the ideals of the Convention were a reality in their lives.

30. **The Chairperson** commended the reporting State for the quality of the reports before the Committee, for having taken steps to mainstream women's issues in a number of ministries, for the high levels of education and life expectancy attained by women in Singapore, and for having successfully eliminated the country's external debt. However, she had serious concerns relating to the Government's reservations to the

Convention, which gave the impression that the advancement of women in Singapore was being implemented in a welfare framework rather than a human rights framework.

31. **Ms. Gabr** congratulated the reporting State for the quality of its reports and its oral presentation. Singapore had achieved a high level of human development, but it should be borne in mind that advancing the status of women was an essential ingredient in such development, and much remained to be done.

32. She expressed support for the Chairperson's remarks concerning reservations and urged the Government to reconsider the matter. Speaking as a Muslim and a national of a Muslim State, she pointed out that Islam did not require such reservations. In particular, she did not understand why the Government had found it necessary to enter a reservation in respect of article 11 of the Convention.

33. **Ms. Livingstone Raday** expressed great satisfaction in acknowledging the economic and social development achieved by Singapore, but could not see why similar progress could not be made in the area of women's rights; in particular, she wondered why discrimination on grounds of sex should not be covered by the constitutional prohibition of discrimination or why there could not be a general constitutional guarantee of equality for women. The Government's reservations to the Convention were inappropriate for such an advanced country and the members of the delegation should urge their Government to withdraw them. For example, women belonging to minority communities should benefit from the same legal guarantees as all others, and the idea that men were considered as the heads of households was a relic of the country's patriarchal past.

34. **Ms. Schöpp-Schilling** also urged the Government of Singapore to reconsider its numerous reservations to the Convention, as well as to incorporate specific provisions against gender-based discrimination in the Constitution. It was essential that the Committee be provided with comprehensive sex-disaggregated statistics on all sectors of Singaporean society as a means of comparing the true situation of men and women. Recalling the notions of intentional and de facto discrimination contained in article 1 of the Convention, she wondered whether the Government and the judiciary in Singapore truly understood those

concepts and whether the Government was making any effort to uncover and eliminate indirect discrimination and hidden barriers to true equality for women. Better statistical information might help identify cases of indirect discrimination, for example, whether or not the domestic workers exempted from the application of the Employment Act were mostly women, and would be helpful in general with regard to all the articles of the Convention.

35. **Ms. Achmad** also expressed concern about Singapore's reservations to the Convention, urged it to withdraw its reservation based on religious considerations, noted the increasing number of women heads of household and stressed the need for constitutional guarantees of gender equality. The approach adopted by the Government of Singapore placed too much emphasis on the family and the woman in the wife/caretaker role; instead, what was needed was to change the power relationship between men and women and, rather than simply helping women bear an extra burden, move towards genuine partnership and equality and do away with traditional and cultural stereotypes.

36. **Ms. Shin** noted that the major stumbling block to further progress towards equality for women seemed to be Singapore's adherence to what it had defined as Asian values, in particular the importance of the family unit and the notion of the man as head of household and primary provider. That concept was incompatible with the definition of discrimination as set out in article 1 of the Convention and, despite greater emphasis on a sharing of responsibilities between men and women, Singapore must completely abandon the notion of the woman bearing the primary responsibility within the family for raising children and performing household tasks. She also urged the Government to reflect on the definitions of discrimination contained in article 1 and withdraw its reservations to articles 2, 9 and 11, which were core articles of the Convention.

37. **Ms. Manalo** said that ratification of the Convention implied acceptance of its objectives, namely, the elimination of discrimination against women. The reservations made by the State party seemed inconsistent with those objectives. Ratification also implied a willingness to remove traditional and cultural barriers such as the patriarchal concept of family and society, yet in the Constitution there was no specific legislation on gender discrimination. Issues relating to gender equality always appeared to be of

secondary importance and she therefore urged that they be made a priority in legislation and policy. To that end, the State party should move quickly to withdraw its reservations to articles 2, 9, 11, 16 and 29 inasmuch as their effect was to nullify many of its obligations under the Convention. She also wondered how the notion of gender mainstreaming was being accommodated in Singaporean society as a whole.

38. **Mr. Melander** noted that Singapore's restrictions on the entry, stay, employment and departure of non-citizens implied some discrimination in the area of immigration and wondered whether there was any discrimination against women in that area in law or in fact.

39. **Ms. Corti** also deplored the lack of constitutional protection against gender-based discrimination. Noting the stress placed on the importance of the family unit, she said that given the important role played by women within the family, it was all the more essential to ensure that women's rights were emphasized and protected. She regretted Singapore's reservation to article 2 of the Convention and, with regard to the principles of equality and meritocracy, wondered whether any rules, laws or criteria existed for evaluating the relative merit of individuals and whether the latter was truly gender-neutral.

40. **Ms. Taya** said that although the Constitution guaranteed equality of all persons before the law, there was no real legal framework which defined or prevented discrimination, including indirect discrimination, in accordance with the Convention. Although the family unit was certainly important, as more women entered the workforce and given the ageing of the population and a relatively low fertility rate, it was all the more important that the roles of men and women in the family be based on a true partnership, as stipulated in the Women's Charter. It was also important that definitions of discrimination as well as the provisions of the Convention be incorporated into domestic law.

41. **Ms. Goonesekere** noted that absent from the Constitution were not only specific provisions against gender discrimination, but enforcement mechanisms to ensure compliance with the equality provisions it did contain. Meritocracy implied equal opportunity and she wondered whether a woman from a low-income family, or a woman in a managerial position who was denied maternity leave, could appeal to the courts on

constitutional grounds, whether the constitutionality of legislation about discrimination was reviewed and whether a law would be struck down if it was found to be unconstitutional. Although she realized that the Convention was not directly applicable in Singapore, she wondered whether the courts could make reference to it in their decisions. Finally, with regard to Singapore's reservation to article 29, citing its right to maintain its domestic policies, she stressed that ratification implied acceptance of internationally agreed upon standards, and domestic policies could not legitimately be invoked to justify non-compliance.

42. **Ms. Gaspard** also expressed profound regret about the State party's reservation to article 2 of the Convention, and concern that the administration of Muslim law could engender double discrimination — towards women, and between women of various religions. She wondered whether, under articles 2, 5 and 16 of the Convention, campaigns were in motion by either the Government, or by non-governmental organizations with Government assistance, to deal with the discriminatory effects of the application of Muslim law. She noted that some Muslim countries had adopted family codes which prohibited or limited polygamy and strictly regulated the repudiation of a wife allowed under certain interpretations of the Koran.

43. **Mr. Melander** enquired whether the State party had any intention of abolishing the punishment of caning, which was discriminatory towards Singaporean men. Traditional Asian values could not be invoked to justify that inhuman and degrading practice, which was most likely a remnant of British colonialism. It was relevant to raise the issue under the Convention, since it was one of the very few human rights instruments which Singapore had ratified.

44. **Ms. Achmad** welcomed the involvement of non-governmental organizations in the elaboration of the State Party's report and hoped that they would also help convince the Government to withdraw its reservations to the Convention. Within the meaning of discrimination contained in article 1 of the Convention, a meritocracy would guarantee equality only if all persons competing for a post started out at the same level and in equal conditions. She was not at all sure that that was the case of Singaporean men and women. Moreover, national measures should not be aimed exclusively at women — for example, the government policies and programmes to strengthen and help the family, and particularly women, to cope with work and

family commitments (CEDAW/C/SGP/2, para. 7) — but also at enabling men to share in household responsibilities beyond parental care. She disagreed with the State party that gender mainstreaming was not necessary.

45. She welcomed the initiative of the Singapore Broadcasting Authority in addressing the stereotyping of women and girls and commercialism of sex and violence against women and girls (CEDAW/C/SGP/2, para. 2.3), but she cautioned that it would be effective only if monitored by the Government and other entities concerned with gender equality. The Muslim Family Campaign 2000, which had focused on the role of the son, should be complemented by a study on the girl child and follow-up studies on women at the various stages of their lives, such as marriage, motherhood or ageing. Such specific insights would be useful input towards the elimination of stereotyping.

46. **Ms. Ferrer Gómez**, referring to the role of the Ministry of Community Development and Sports and its Committee on the Family (CEDAW/C/SGP/1), expressed concern that there was no specific mechanism for achieving gender equality, which was crucial to improving women's participation in economic, political, cultural and social life. As other Committee members had indicated, it was disappointing that the Government did not view gender mainstreaming as a major issue.

47. She wondered why the State party's reports made no mention of any specific plan of action to follow up the Fourth World Conference on Women and implement the twelve critical areas of concern outlined in the Beijing Platform for Action. If such a follow-up strategy actually existed, a description of its content and control and evaluation mechanisms would be useful.

48. She would also appreciate additional information on the tenor, and monitoring, of the Declaration on the Advancement of Women in the ASEAN Region, signed in 1988 by Singapore and its neighbours in the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN).

49. The State party should indicate how the Ministry of Community Development and Sports coordinated, monitored and evaluated the activities of other ministries responsible for specific aspects of women's issues and of non-governmental entities. She would appreciate more information on the outcome of the working session with non-governmental organizations

sponsored by the Singaporean Government to discuss the State party's initial report.

50. **Ms. Feng Cui** welcomed the work accomplished by the world-renowned Singapore Council of Women's Organizations. She would appreciate clarification about the extent to which the Ministry of Community Development and Sports addressed women's issues, since it had not been specifically created for that purpose. She also requested details on its interaction with the newly established inter-ministerial committee, which did focus exclusively on women's issues, and on the composition of that committee. The State party should describe the inter-ministerial committee's mechanisms for monitoring implementation of the Convention as well as its status and accountability in the overall scheme of government. Information on machinery in place for filing complaints of gender discrimination could also be useful.

51. **Ms. Schöpp-Schilling**, referring to article 4, paragraph 1, of the Convention, questioned the Singaporean Government's assertion that there was no need for temporary special measures to accelerate de facto equality and stressed that such measures were not considered discriminatory. The level of female representation in political life and the situation of women in the areas of employment and education also indicated that the contrary was true. Even if there really was no direct discrimination against women in Singaporean society, past discrimination embedded in tradition, cultural values and colonial rule had yet to be overcome. Temporary special measures did not necessarily have to be extreme (e.g., quotas); there were a host of gradual measures, including targets or training and support programmes for women entering politics, that could be implemented. The effectiveness of such measures had been demonstrated in European countries which had also been reluctant to apply them at the outset. She urged the State party to explore areas where it might be necessary to accelerate de facto equality and to take appropriate action.

52. **Ms. Livingstone Raday** expressed support for Ms. Schöpp-Schilling's remarks and said that the delegation should provide figures to substantiate its claim that there was no discrimination against women in Singapore. In particular, it would be useful to have a breakdown by rank of the large percentage of women in civil service posts, and information on their educational background in order to determine whether or not the obstruction of women's promotion was

related to their educational achievements. She would also appreciate statistics on the number of women in university faculty positions ranging from lecturers up to the highest professorial level.

53. **Ms. Myakayaka-Manzini** welcomed Singapore's progress in dealing with issues of poverty and other inequalities which plagued most developing countries. As Ms. Schöpp-Schilling had said, temporary special measures taken under article 4, paragraph 1, of the Convention would be effective in dealing with historical inequalities between men and women and would in no way be considered discriminatory. She recommended taking such measures inter alia, in the fields of education, politics and sports, where there were gross inequalities between men and women. Temporary special measures would not interfere with a meritocracy system but rather would complement it.

54. **Ms. Corti** welcomed the State party's progress in eliminating sexual stereotypes of women in the media and its enforcement of a censorship law to prevent the portrayal of stereotypes for commercial purposes or the import of pornographic materials. She would appreciate clarification of the powers of intervention of the Ministry of Information and the Arts under that law, which apparently did not extend to the advertising industry.

The meeting rose at 1.05 p.m.