



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

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

Summary record of the 522nd meeting

Held at Headquarters, New York, on Friday, 13 July 2001, at 10.15 a.m.

Chairperson: Ms. Abaka

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The meeting was called to order at 10.15 a.m.

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

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

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

2. **Ms. Yu-Foo** (Singapore) thanked the Committee for its encouragement, constructive comments and suggestions, particularly concerning the usefulness of more comprehensive statistics disaggregated by sex. More and better data were vital for tracking de facto advances in the status of Singaporean women. She undertook to provide more statistics in the coming weeks and would endeavour to address that need in Singapore's next report to the Committee.

3. She took note of the serious concerns expressed by some members of the Committee. Her country had progressed partly because of its readiness to learn from others and its openness to discussion about international norms. At the same time, Singaporean laws and policies had to reflect the country's particular economic, social and geopolitical situation. While Singapore's approach might differ, however, the ends sought were the same: advancing the de facto status of Singaporean women and ensuring their equality with men. It was in that spirit that Singapore had ratified the Convention.

4. Many members of the Committee had asked about the absence of specific constitutional or legal provisions on gender equality in Singapore. Her Government believed that article 12 (1) of the Constitution, enshrining the principle of equality of all persons before the law, provided a sufficient guarantee of equality to all Singaporeans, men and women. The provisions of article 12 (2) prohibiting discrimination on grounds of race, religion, place of birth and descent had to be seen in the context of Singapore's history and its multiracial, multireligious society. While discrimination against women was not specifically defined in any Singaporean legislation, the Government sought to address both intentional discrimination and discrimination in effect. While specific policies, laws or practices might not be fully consistent with the Convention and would continue to

be subject to periodic review, the reasons for them could often be found in the country's specific constraints or its broader national interests and they explained Singapore's current reservations to the Convention.

5. The principle of meritocracy, about which some members had enquired, was so deeply ingrained in the Singaporean psyche that it did not need to be formulated explicitly in the country's laws. To level the playing field — failing which a meritocracy could be discriminatory — her Government ensured equal and universal access to free education. Subsidies for low-income families enabled children to get a head start in childcare programmes, and free tuition schemes helped children from disadvantaged homes to level up. There was a roughly equal proportion of girls and boys in school, and boys outnumbered girls among the tiny fraction of children who dropped out from primary and secondary education. In January 2003, six years of primary education in national schools would become compulsory. For older Singaporean women, a huge investment was being made in skills retraining and lifelong education.

6. The key question was whether meritocracy had resulted in better opportunities for women. Statistics mentioned in her introductory statement had shown that the gender gap was closing in many important areas. In the *Save the Children* report for 2001, Singapore had ranked ninth and sixteenth, respectively, among 140 countries on the Girls' Investment Index and the Mothers' Index. Singapore's education system had enabled many women from humble backgrounds to rise to the top on their own merit.

7. While the State and the community provided financial assistance and the legal system provided justice and redress, the family was the first line of care and support for individuals of all ages and either sex. Healthy relationships, particularly within the family, were vital for negotiating fair and equitable treatment in people's daily lives. That included the sharing of responsibilities for parenting, housework, sustaining the marriage and providing for the family's needs. Social attitudes in Singapore were changing: in a recent survey, more than 90 per cent of men had said that they would be willing to take care of babies and feed and change them at night.

8. The childcare subsidy and the child sick leave for women, rather than trapping women in the role of

homemaker and caregiver, was intended to help them break out of that stereotype and enter the workforce. Those policies had worked, with women accounting for 56 per cent of the workforce in 2000 as compared with 20 per cent in 1965. Women's employment cycle was beginning to reflect that of men, and the wage gap was closing. The Government would also be reviewing a proposal to extend to fathers the policy of granting child sick leave to mothers in the civil service.

9. Some Committee members had commented on women's low level of political representation and had suggested the adoption of temporary special measures. Her own political party had a women's wing which helped to identify and mentor promising women candidates. Women members of parliament also provided positive role models. Despite those measures, however, many women still chose not to enter public life, for reasons that would have to be analysed. There were no quotas for women in Parliament, but it was important to see what other countries had done to encourage more women to participate in politics.

10. When her delegation spoke of women being a part of the social mainstream, that meant that women were treated as equal partners in Singaporean society and not as a marginalized or disadvantaged group. That was why laws and policies did not differentiate between men and women except when there were good reasons for doing so, for instance, when requiring only men to do military service. Universal education, ongoing opportunities for skills upgrading and the meritocratic system, combined with a holistic, multidisciplinary approach to women's progress, would help Singaporean women close the gender gap in areas where they lagged behind. Singaporean girls did not have a chip on their shoulder because equality was part of their mental model: they started out assuming that they were equal with boys and expected to be given the same opportunities.

11. **Ms. Yeow** (Singapore), responding to comments about the lack of a specific prohibition against gender discrimination in the Constitution, said that her Government's view was that article 12 (1) of the Constitution necessarily encompassed the concept of non-discrimination against women. While that issue had not arisen in Singapore's courts, courts in other Commonwealth countries with which Singapore shared a similar legal heritage had taken the view that constitutional provisions similar to article 12 (1) encompassed that concept. The constitutional

prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, descent or place of birth enshrined in article 12 (2) was the result of the historical and geopolitical circumstances in which Singapore had achieved independence following its separation from the Malaysian Federation.

12. Singapore took a multidisciplinary, integrated approach in its general law to providing relief for the violation of rights. Under the Penal Code, for instance, a woman, or a person acting on her behalf, could make a complaint to the relevant authorities or lodge a police report about acts of violence. That would initiate investigation and prosecution, where appropriate. Violence against women, whether inside or outside the family, was punishable under a variety of penal provisions, covering offences ranging from simple to grievous hurt, culpable homicide, murder and criminal force or assault. The Penal Code provided harsher penalties, including custodial sentences, for certain offences committed by an employer against a domestic maid and for assaults against children, spouses and domestic maids.

13. Article 4 of the Constitution stated that any law inconsistent with the Constitution would, to the extent of that inconsistency, be void. Through the process of judicial review, legislative enactments and decisions of the executive branch had been successfully challenged and struck down. Even before legislation was enacted, the Attorney-General's Chambers, as legal adviser to the Government, had responsibility for overseeing its drafting. Once passed by Parliament, a law could be studied and challenged by any affected party, or by academics and professional law bodies. Together, those were the mechanisms by which legislation was monitored for discriminatory provisions. In addition to legal remedies, women could invoke administrative remedies such as those in force in the gender-neutral Singapore Civil Service or use ministries' public complaints channels.

14. There were no known ongoing legal studies of practices which were discriminatory in effect and indeed there was no evidence of such practices, which the Government would certainly view with concern and address.

15. With regard to the use of ratified international instruments such as the Convention to interpret domestic laws, an international convention could not be invoked as part of Singapore's domestic law unless

it had been incorporated therein and implemented by the Government. If a domestic statute had been enacted with the intention of implementing or legislating about such a convention, the courts could examine the convention for the purpose of interpreting the statute. However, she did not know of any case where a party had sought to interpret a domestic law by reference to an international convention when the law had not been enacted for that purpose. Like other common law countries, Singapore's courts would apply customary rules of international law where that was not contradicted by local legislation or case-law.

16. **Ms. Yeoh** (Singapore) said that before acceding to any international convention, her Government examined the instrument with due care to ensure that it was able to comply fully with its provisions and, where necessary, entered reservations that would make accession possible.

17. Singapore's reservations to article 2 and article 16 of the Convention were necessary to maintain the delicate balance of Singapore's multicultural society. The Administration of Muslim Law Act governed marriage, the family, religious affairs and inheritance rights; for example, it authorized Muslim men to have up to four wives. Her Government had consulted the Muslim Religious Council and had concluded that it could not comply fully with the obligation "to take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to modify or abolish existing laws, regulations, customs and practices which constitute discrimination against women" (article 2 (f) of the Convention).

18. With regard to the reservation to article 9 (1), like other countries, Singapore had adopted laws governing the employment, stay and departure of aliens; those laws did not constitute discrimination and, in any case, were gender-neutral. An explanation of Singapore's reservation to article 9 (2) would be given later in the meeting.

19. The reservation to article 11 (1) was necessary to protect women and their unborn children from certain hazardous occupations, such as combat roles in the armed forces, and was therefore consistent with article 11 (1) (f). That was particularly important in the light of the nation's small population and low birth rate. The Employment Act did not extend the protection required under article 11 (2) to certain categories of persons in executive, managerial or confidential positions, seamen or domestic workers; however, the exclusion was not

gender-based and employees could lodge complaints against unfair employment practices with the Ministry of Manpower or the civil courts.

20. Lastly, Singapore had, like many other countries, entered a reservation to article 29 (1), as was expressly permitted by article 29 (2). While it would periodically review all its reservations to the Convention, it considered it necessary to retain them for the time being.

21. **Ms. Tan** (Singapore) said that Singapore was a party to the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Declaration on the Advancement of Women in the ASEAN Region, the implementation of which was monitored at the Association's highest decision-making level. Progress reports on the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action were submitted to the ASEAN Subcommittee on Women and to other regional and international bodies such as the Commonwealth, the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women.

22. Singapore had provided regular updates on its implementation of the Platform for Action, including to the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century". The Singapore Council of Women's Organizations (SCWO) was active in the ASEAN Confederation of Women's Organizations, which monitored member countries' progress in implementing the Platform for Action. In March 2000, dialogue sessions with women's groups had been organized in conjunction with the Council to obtain feedback on Singapore's initial report to the Committee and provide clarification on the work of the interministerial committee on the Convention. As a result of that dialogue, the Government had reviewed its reservations to the Convention but had decided to retain them; it had also decided to ratify International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention No. 100 (Equal Remuneration Convention).

23. Women's issues were a cross-cutting theme for all Government ministries; however, a special section of the Ministry of Community Development and Sports served as the national focal point for policy matters and international cooperation pertaining to women. It also provided secretariat support for the

interministerial committee, which was responsible for reviewing and formulating policy and for coordinating and monitoring the implementation of obligations under the Convention; monitoring the relevant ministries' views on the Committee's recommendations; preparing Singapore's periodic reports under the Convention; and organizing its participation at relevant regional and international forums.

24. The interministerial committee included representatives of a number of ministries, the Public Service Division of the Prime Minister's Office, the Attorney-General's Chambers, the Muslim Religious Council and the People's Association and cooperated with government agencies, SCWO, the Women's Executive Committees of the People's Association and the National Trades Union Congress Women's Committee. Its members were appointed by, and reported to, the Minister for Community Development and Sports and its reports were reviewed by the Cabinet, Singapore's highest political decision-making body. The Ministry's research division compiled statistics on the advancement of women and its annual report included a section on women's social indicators.

25. Women and women's groups could lodge complaints or make comments through the formal channels established in each ministry or government agency. A feedback unit organized regular dialogue sessions, tea sessions and policy forums to seek the public's views on policies and legislative changes. Members of Parliament also held regular dialogue sessions with women's groups. Women's issues were debated in Parliament and women civil servants could lodge complaints of unfair treatment with the independent Public Service Commission.

26. Various Committee members had expressed concern that Singapore's emphasis on the family might reinforce gender stereotyping in the workplace and at home. However, the concept of family in Singaporean society was an all-inclusive one: everyone belonged to an extended family. Strong families were vital to the well-being of both men and women and responsibilities should be shared in all areas of family life. Moreover, Singapore was not a Chinese city. It was a multiracial, multicultural and multireligious country whose shared national values were: nation before community and society before self; the family as the basic unit of society; community support and respect for the individual; consensus, not conflict; and racial and

religious harmony. Its five gender-neutral family values were love, care and concern; mutual respect; commitment; filial responsibility; and communication.

27. Singapore was a nation in transition: while some older women found fulfilment as homemakers, younger women were better educated and sought equality with men in the workplace. The 1999 Study on the Singapore Family had revealed that families, while strong, needed help in coping with the demands of daily life. Support services were not intended to reinforce women's role as caregivers; rather, facilities such as before- and after-school care were a response to working women's needs.

28. In September 1999, the Work-Life Unit had been established to raise awareness and promote the implementation of flexible and part-time work arrangements so that family members could meet individual, family and work commitments throughout the various stages of their lives. Older persons could continue to work and younger family members could balance their time between personal pursuits and their careers.

29. Efforts were being made to encourage the sharing of domestic roles. Nappy-changing facilities were being included in men's toilets, grass-roots organizations were organizing cooking classes for men and family life campaigns depicted men and women as equal partners at work and in the home. On 21 July 2001, a conference on the balance between work and family life would be held under the auspices of various governmental and non-governmental bodies.

30. Childbirth incentives were available to all citizens, not just the well educated. The Government provided assistance to couples who wanted to have children; it did not force those who were not ready to have them. Employers were required to cover the cost of maternity leave only for an employee's first two children; the third such leave was financed by the State. Flexible work arrangements made it easier for young parents to return to full-time employment when their children were older. Family matters were private; the Government's role was to educate and inform and to provide a range of options and support services so that men and women could make viable life choices.

31. Although there was no specific legislation to prevent gender stereotyping by the media, general regulations and the codes of practice of the Singapore Broadcasting Authority addressed those concerns. The

media accepted that they must operate within the boundaries of decency and good taste and respect the values and diversity of Singaporean society. Censorship helped create a balance between a morally wholesome, cohesive society and an economically dynamic, culturally vibrant nation characterized by diversity and freedom of expression.

32. Like television programmes, films and print articles, the content of advertisements was subject to legal regulation according to the mode of transmission. Advertisements deemed offensive to good taste or decency could be withdrawn. Codes of practice were issued by the Advertising Standards Authority of Singapore. Citizens' committees also acted as media watchdogs and had effectively deterred the industry from promoting the depiction and exploitation of women as sex objects.

33. The media were mainly concerned about transparency and clarity in the corresponding regulations and guidelines and the existence of formal appeals mechanisms. Their appeals were usually considered by citizens' committees, which advised the regulatory authorities on the disposition of appeals and played a key role in drawing up codes of conduct.

34. Under the Registered Importers Scheme, introduced in 1997, some 90 per cent of publications importers registered with the Films and Publications Department and were issued a set of operating guidelines. They exercised self-censorship and only 5 per cent of all imports were deemed controversial and submitted for examination. Imports were not covered by the Code of Advertising Practice, but the Penal Code and the Undesirable Publications Act made it a criminal offence to import certain materials.

35. As at 10 July 2001, there were 224 women assistant, associate and full professors at the National University of Singapore, compared with 1,051 men, and 109 at the Nanyang Technological University, compared with 706 men.

36. Home economics and technical studies were compulsory during the first two years of secondary school and elective thereafter. In 2000, 1.95 per cent of boys had taken home economics as an O-level subject, while 3.26 per cent of girls had taken technical studies; that represented increases of 1.26 per cent and 2.16 per cent, respectively, over the percentages for 1999. School textbooks did not foster gender stereotypes since in Singapore it was common for both parents to

work; married couples were depicted as sharing family responsibilities and the elderly were depicted as active members of society. In 1989, only 35 per cent of all married couples had been dual-earners; by 2000, that number had risen to 43 per cent.

37. The Sexuality Education programme of the Ministry of Education took a broad approach: it provided young people with information on human sexuality and the consequences of sexual activity; taught them problem-solving, decision-making and communication skills; and inculcated positive values in keeping with the national commitment to the family as the basic unit of society.

38. Her Government was unable to provide information on the qualifications of women in high-level posts in the civil service but would do so at a later date.

39. **Ms. Yeow** (Singapore), in response to a question about the decline in successful prosecutions and convictions of sex offenders, said that the decline in the number prosecutions and convictions of sexual offenders had taken place in the context of an overall decline in the crime rate. Enforcement had not been relaxed and there were tough laws to deter and punish sexual crimes against women. Once a decision was made to initiate prosecution, the process was conducted diligently and thoroughly, but conviction ensued only if the offender's guilt was proved beyond all reasonable doubt.

40. **Ms. Sng** (Singapore) stressed that her Government took a tough stance on immigration offences. In that context, the Women's Charter provided for imprisonment of up to five years and a fine of up to S\$ 10,000 for trafficking in women and girls, whether or not for purposes of prostitution. Under the Children and Young Persons Act, trafficking in children carried a penalty of up to four years in prison and/or a fine of up to S\$ 10,000; sexual exploitation of a child was punishable by up to two years' imprisonment and/or a fine of up to S\$ 5,000. Under the Penal Code, employing a woman for the purpose of prostitution was punishable by up to 10 years' imprisonment, a fine and/or, for male offenders only, caning.

41. In response to a question on the rights of illegal immigrants, she recalled that Singapore was a small, densely populated country. Illegal immigrants put a strain on the social system and led to law and order

problems. Unlawful entry was punishable by up to six months in jail for first-time offenders and one and three years in jail for repeat offenders, along with a fine of up to S\$ 6,000; male offenders also received at least three strokes of the cane. Traffickers were liable to between two and five years in jail and a fine and male traffickers also received at least three strokes of the cane. Between January and November 2000, only 6.6 per cent of illegal immigrants had been women or children. Illegal immigrants were provided with shelter and health care, where necessary, until they returned to their country of origin, and were accorded due process of law, including the services of interpreters and lawyers; normally, a hearing was held within 48 hours of arrest.

42. With regard to protection for foreign witnesses testifying in cases of trafficking, the court might order that all proceedings be dealt with in camera; that was mandatory when the victim was under 16 years of age. The media were prohibited from revealing any information which might lead to the identification of a witness or victim, and witnesses under the age of 16 years could give evidence through a live-video or live-television link to lessen their trauma. Police protection could be provided to witnesses upon request, although that was unusual in the case of sexual crimes. Foreign police witnesses were provided with temporary special passes to stay in Singapore if they so wished.

43. In response to a question regarding allegations of corruption and the use of Singapore as a transit point for trafficking in women and children, she noted that document checks were carried out at several points in Changi airport and police patrolled the airport, as well as the transit area, to check on suspicious passengers and their travel documents. Corruption on the part of officials was not tolerated and was severely punished, and she requested members of the Committee to provide any reliable information which they might have concerning corrupt practices on the part of Singaporean public servants. Singapore participated in regional and global forums on transnational organized crime, had signed the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, was active on such issues within ASEAN and cooperated with neighbouring countries by exchanging visits and organizing training seminars. She regretted that no statistics were available on convictions of prostitutes or those who exploited them, and clarified that it was not

Singapore's general practice to prosecute prostitutes unless they engaged in public solicitation.

44. **Mr. Tan** (Singapore), referring to the rights of foreign domestic workers, said that although the Employment Act did not apply to domestic workers, most foreign domestic workers drew up employment contracts with their employers with the help of their employment agent and, in some cases, their embassy. A domestic worker had the right to lodge a complaint with the Ministry of Manpower and he noted that in 1999 and 2000, all claims, of which there had been 482, had been amicably resolved through conciliation. Foreign domestic workers were also entitled to equal protection under the various employment laws, including the Workmen's Compensation Act. They had free access to public recreational and community facilities, subsidized medical care and, since March 1997, their employers were required to take out a personal accident insurance policy in their name for a minimum of S\$ 10,000.

45. The Penal Code had been amended in May 1998 to increase the penalties for offences committed against foreign domestic workers by their employer or members of the employer's household. A Foreign Workers' Unit had been created in the Labour Relations Department in 1997 to provide a free conciliation service; the unit received about 20 requests per month for assistance in solving disputes, mostly salary-related, with employers, and virtually all were amicably resolved. There was also a foreign domestic worker helpline which received about 150 inquiries per month. In cases of repeated complaints against an employer, the employer could be barred by the Ministry of Manpower from employing foreign workers.

46. The Ministry of Manpower had produced an information kit for employers of foreign domestic workers. The kit included a guide spelling out their responsibilities and ways to manage their working relationship with the employee, listing proposed guidelines for a written agreement and highlighting relevant work permit regulations. The kit also included a training checklist and a cultural guidebook on the norms and languages of workers from the three largest source countries, Indonesia, the Philippines and Sri Lanka. An advisory was also issued to all foreign workers, including foreign domestic workers, coming to work in Singapore for the first time. It explained their rights and obligations and provided useful

telephone numbers to call in an emergency or if they required help. It was available in English and nine other languages. A video had also been produced in April 1998 to help newly arrived foreign domestic workers adjust to working conditions in Singapore; it was available in four languages and was distributed free to all employment agencies and foreign embassies and was also available on the Ministry of Manpower's Web page.

47. With regard to the prohibition on foreign domestic workers marrying local men and the requirement that they take a pregnancy test every six months, he reiterated that Singapore was a small, densely populated country and that all foreign workers were fully aware of their status as transient workers and the conditions under which their work permits were issued. He noted that, although work permits were tied to a specific employer, a foreign domestic worker could apply for a transfer to work for another employer, with the consent of the current employer. If a domestic worker had been repatriated, she could also reapply to work in Singapore.

48. With regard to the time it took for complaints made by female domestic workers to be resolved by the courts, there was no undue or unreasonable delay in the investigation and prosecution of complaints of criminal conduct, which were taken seriously by the authorities. The judiciary had strict time schedules for the disposal of cases which did not allow for unwarranted delay: district arrest cases could be heard within two to four weeks from the time when the parties indicated that they were ready for trial, and cases involving foreign witnesses could be expedited. There was no backlog of cases.

49. Concerns had been expressed about the exclusion of managerial and executive personnel from the Employment Act, but such employees were better educated and informed and capable of negotiating employment terms and conditions over and above the minimum standards provided for in the Employment Act, which was what generally occurred. They could also join unions for collective bargaining and representation purposes. The Ministry of Manpower provided assistance to non-unionized executives in their salary claims against employers and an administrative procedure existed to help such employees: conciliation meetings were arranged to seek an amicable settlement and, in recent years, some 60 per cent of claims had been so resolved. Employees

could also seek redress through the courts. Civil service employees were not covered by the Employment Act; their working terms and conditions were governed by instruction manuals which in fact provided better terms and benefits than those in the Act. Employment standards for part-time workers were guaranteed by the regulations on part-time employment with part-time employees generally enjoying prorated benefits.

50. With regard to Singapore's decision to ratify ILO Convention No. 100, he reiterated that there was no gender discrimination with regard to pay in Singapore. The implementation requirements under ILO Convention No. 100 were being worked out in partnership with unions and employers and formal ratification would occur when the Government felt that it was ready and able to fulfil its obligations.

51. With regard to the status of workers in export promotion zones, he said that all local and foreign workers, including contractual workers, were covered by the Employment Act unless their jobs were not covered by the Act. Foreign workers in the manufacturing and other sectors could also join unions for collective bargaining purposes. Lastly, tables containing employment statistics had been provided to the Secretariat for distribution; further statistics would be communication to the Secretariat as soon as possible.

52. **Ms. Chan** (Singapore), responding to the question whether there were media or other programmes on women's representation in civil society, politics, foreign affairs and trade unions, said that the Government had no specific programmes or policies to showcase the involvement of women in public life, although non-governmental organizations might have such programmes. In accordance with the policy of meritocracy, men and women were referred to in media and educational programmes on the basis of their individual achievements. She noted that statistics on female employment in the foreign service had been provided for distribution to the Committee. Currently, only two heads of diplomatic mission were women.

53. Responding to questions regarding corporal punishment, she said that her Government currently had no plans to eliminate caning.

54. **Ms. Sng** (Singapore), responding to questions about Singapore's reservation to article 9 (2) and suggestions that the Constitution should be amended to

allow children born abroad to Singaporean mothers and foreign fathers to be granted citizenship, said that only children born overseas to Singaporean fathers were currently eligible for citizenship by descent, and even that was not automatic. The birth must be registered within one year; if the father was a citizen by descent, rather than by birth or registration, or if the child acquired citizenship of another country through birth and the father was a Singaporean citizen by registration, the child had no right to Singaporean citizenship. Children born abroad to Singaporean mothers could become citizens by registration. Singapore did not recognize dual citizenship. To the best of her knowledge, there had been no legal challenge to those provisions, which were enshrined in the Constitution. Foreign spouses of Singaporean citizens or permanent residents were eligible to apply for either citizenship or permanent residence, sponsored by their spouse. The status of foreign spouses and their children granted citizenship or permanent residence were not affected by divorce. Men and women who had worked in Singapore for some time on a valid employment pass could apply for permanent residence, and permanent residents could, after a time, apply for citizenship. Citizenship could be lost after a continuous absence of 10 years without a valid Singapore travel document, but only after a lengthy formal procedure, which included the right to appeal to an independent committee of inquiry. Lastly, there were currently no refugees or asylum-seekers in Singapore.

55. **Ms. Yeoh** (Singapore), replying to the question concerning quotas for women entering medical school, said that equal access to education was one of the cardinal principles of Singapore's educational system. In the 2000-2001 intake, women had accounted for 54 per cent of the local university population. Equal access did not, however, mean that every student had a free choice as to the type of course he or she might pursue. That depended on the number of places available for each course, which in turn depended on such considerations as national needs and the economic cost of providing the course in question.

56. With respect to medical education, Singapore's economic and human resources did not allow it the luxury of providing a medical education to all those who wished to pursue it for its own sake. A consistently higher proportion of women doctors than men doctors worked on a part-time basis or not at all. A

higher proportion of women doctors also preferred to work in positions that did not involve irregular working hours, and such positions were very few in the country's health institutions. The cost of training medical students was five times higher than for other disciplines and represented a big investment by taxpayers, making it necessary to minimize the number of trained doctors who left the workforce prematurely or worked only on a part-time basis. Accepting a higher proportion of male medical students would ensure that more doctors remained in the workforce on a full-time basis to meet the projected demand for medical services. Without a quota for female students, the intake into medical school would have to be increased, leaving less talent for other sectors of the economy. The quota policy was not considered to be a violation of Singapore's obligations under the Convention, for a number of reasons: there was no quota for qualified women doctors wishing to practise medicine in Singapore; there was no discrimination against women doctors in health-care organizations; and it was necessary to ensure that Singaporeans had sufficient doctors to attend to their health-care needs.

57. On the question of exemption from compulsory education, the Government placed a very high premium on the education of Singaporeans, and attendance at national primary and secondary schools was almost universal. Education was not currently compulsory, but legislation had recently been passed to make the six-year primary education cycle compulsory with effect from January 2003. However, pupils of "madrasahs" (Muslim schools) and of the San Yu Adventist School, home-schooled children and children with special needs, who would attend special education schools, would be exempted from receiving their primary education in the national school system.

58. The "madrasah" played an important role in producing religious scholars and teachers for the Muslim community, but there was some concern that "madrasah" graduates who did not become religious teachers or scholars might not be properly equipped for jobs in the knowledge-based economy. After much discussion with the Muslim community, it had been decided that children who received their primary education in "madrasahs" must achieve a minimum level of academic attainment at the end of the six-year cycle. The total annual intake into the first year of primary education at the six full-time "madrasahs" was capped at 400 pupils.

59. The historical contribution of the San Yu Adventist School to education in Singapore was widely recognized. Like the “madrasahs”, however, it was required to meet a certain minimum standard in the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) and its annual intake into the first year of primary education was capped at 10.

60. A small number of parents chose to educate their children at home, using curricula designed abroad for home-schooled students. However, they had to satisfy the Ministry of Education that the key objectives of compulsory education could be achieved for their children. Home-schooled students also had to take periodic tests and the PSLE. The Ministry of Education reserved the right to withdraw its approval for exemption from compulsory education at any stage.

61. Children with mild disabilities attended mainstream schools, which had the appropriate facilities and resources, while those with profound disabilities were educated in special education schools that had been established by voluntary welfare organizations with the help of the Ministry of Education and the National Council of Social Service. Home-based programmes were also available for such children.

62. With regard to the impact of giving national servicemen bonus points for university admission, the recommendation was still under review by the Ministries of Defence and Education and had not been implemented.

63. It had been asked why more scholarships were awarded to male students than to female students. The Public Service Commission (PSC) administered various scholarship schemes, which were open to all students and were awarded on the basis of individual merit. However, it usually received twice as many applications from male students as from female students. Furthermore, a number of PSC scholarships were awarded to meet the manpower needs for specialist jobs in such services as national defence, police, civil defence, prisons and narcotics control, which were less attractive to females.

64. **Ms. Mo** (Singapore), referring to the incidence of legal abortion in Singapore, said that an average of 14,000 abortions had been performed each year between 1995 and 1999, more than 60 per cent of them on married woman. Of these, only 7 per cent had aborted for medical reasons or because of

contraceptive failure; the remainder had cited reasons such as not being able to afford another child, not being ready to start a family or becoming pregnant too soon after the previous pregnancy. While the decision to abort was a private one, the Termination of Pregnancy Act required women to attend counselling conducted by trained counsellors, the aim being to help those who wanted to continue their pregnancy but were unable to do so for economic or other reasons. Practical help was provided for such women, while those who aborted received psychological support and were taught effective contraception to prevent future pregnancies.

65. On the question of tobacco consumption, the proportion of young women who smoked regularly was rising, but the overall smoking rate among women was still relatively low by international standards. The increase in smoking among younger women was cause for concern and the Ministries of Health and Community Development and Sports worked with other government agencies, volunteers, community groups and the juvenile justice system to help vulnerable youths avoid anti-social behaviour, including smoking and drinking. Singapore was also a member of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Body on the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control.

66. With regard to alcohol consumption, 0.5 per cent of young women aged 18 to 29 years consumed alcohol regularly. Additional data would be submitted to the Committee at a later date.

67. Drug and substance abuse among women and girls was not a serious problem in Singapore. In fact, the number of female abusers had decreased from 513 in 1994 to 358 in 2000 as a result of intensive drug enforcement, high-profile preventive education programmes and a system of through-care introduced in 1994. The Central Narcotics Bureau worked closely with schools at all levels, as well as with self-help groups and voluntary welfare organizations, to educate young people about the dangers of drug and substance abuse. Enforcement efforts and preventive education programmes were gender-neutral.

68. Sexual transmission (through heterosexual contact with commercial sex workers in Singapore and overseas) was the main mode of transmission of HIV infection among Singaporeans. Males accounted for 88 per cent of all HIV-infected Singaporeans, while 66 per cent of HIV-infected women were married. Statistics

on HIV/AIDS disaggregated by ethnic group would be forwarded to the Committee as soon as possible. Women had equal access to all components of the National AIDS Control Programme, including public education, education of high-risk groups, legislation and measures to protect the national blood supply. The National AIDS Education Programme had helped keep HIV rates low in Singapore.

69. Turning to the question of taxation, she explained that the provision under which a wife's income was deemed to be that of her husband was an administrative procedure in cases where the couple opted for joint assessment of their combined incomes for tax purposes. It did not have the effect of depriving women of their legal capacity, and married women could opt to be assessed and taxed separately. The tax relief granted to married couples was consistent with the State's philosophy that the family was the foundation of society; such forms of relief as the foreign maid allowance, enhanced child relief and the procreation tax rebate were therefore given only to married women. Single men and single women were treated alike under the Income Tax Act.

70. **Ms. Yeow** (Singapore), referring to the application of Muslim law in Singapore, said that, with the exception of matters that fell within the purview of the Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA), Muslims in Singapore enjoyed the same rights and status and were subject to the same obligations as non-Muslims. The Act governed matters pertaining to Muslim religious affairs, the Shariah Court, marriage and divorce, property, and certain prescribed offences. A dual system existed in which a Shariah Court order could be registered with a civil court, whereupon it was deemed to be an order of the district court for purposes of enforcement. Except for a limited number of prescribed offences that applied only to Muslims, such as the unlawful solemnization or registration of marriage, Muslims were subject to the same penal regime as non-Muslims. Amendments made to the Act in 1999 provided for instances in which non-compliance with Shariah Court orders was a criminal offence. Those related to orders for the payment of maintenance, *emas kahwin* and consolatory gifts or *mutaah* to the wife; orders with respect to the custody, maintenance and education of minor children; and orders for the disposition or division of property upon divorce or annulment of marriage. Individuals did not apply to be registered under either set of laws. The

determination as to which system of law governed the individual depended on the application provision contained in the relevant legislation and on the circumstances of the case.

71. Civil law applied equally to all Muslims. Muslim women had the same capacity as non-Muslims to bring actions, hold property in their own right, sign civil documents and be judged in civil courts. AMLA specifically provided that married Muslim women could dispose of their own property by will, with or without the concurrence of their husbands.

72. A number of bodies, such as the Young Women's Muslim Association, worked with the Muslim community. Some were actively involved in providing legal counselling to Muslim women and various groups had participated in the consultations which had taken place during the preparation of Singapore's report to the Committee.

73. Adultery was not considered an offence under Singapore's general penal laws. Although it was an offence under Islam, it had not been proscribed as an offence under the Administration of Muslim Law Act. When a Muslim wife filed for divorce, an enquiry had to be conducted to establish whether she was entitled to a divorce. Encouraging the husband to grant the divorce by *talaq* removed that obligation and expedited the process. Notwithstanding the nature of the divorce, the Muslim wife was entitled to be maintained for three months subsequent to the divorce and to the payment of a consolatory gift.

74. There were no restrictions on the rights of Muslim women, married or single, to travel or to hold their own passports. There were also no restrictions on their right to choose and practise any vocation, save for religious appointments.

75. Polygamy was prohibited for civil marriages but was permitted, although not widespread, under AMLA. Provisions were in place to ensure that that right was not abused. A polygamous marriage could be solemnized only by or with the written consent of a *qadi* or registrar of Muslim marriages and an aggrieved first wife could appeal to an appeals board against the *qadi*'s decision or seek a divorce. Polygamous marriages accounted for less than 1 per cent of all marriages in any given year.

76. Under civil law, the minimum age of marriage in Singapore was 18 years. No consent was required

where the parties were aged 21 years or above. Where either party was aged over 18 years but under 21, the consent of the appropriate person provided for in the Women's Charter was required. Where either party was aged under 18 years, a special marriage licence was required. As a matter of administrative policy, no special licences were granted where either party was aged under 16 years. For marriages solemnized under AMLA, the minimum age of marriage was 16 years. In special circumstances, however, a *qadi* could solemnize the marriage of a girl who was the age of 16 years but had reached puberty and had received the consent of her guardian.

77. **Ms. Lim** (Singapore) commenting on the role of the Singapore Council of Women's Organizations (SCWO) in the implementation of the Convention in Singapore, said that the Council was the official umbrella body of women's organizations in Singapore, with a membership of over 100,000 women and 45 affiliated groups representing all sectors and professions. In addition to providing education and training and legal counselling for women and running a crisis shelter, the Council worked closely with government agencies, corporations and other non-governmental organizations to address women's concerns in relation to the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and was affiliated with a number of national, regional and international organizations. The synergy which it had developed with the Government over the years enabled it to participate actively in policy-making bodies on a variety of issues related to women. Its areas of priority included globalization and the economic empowerment of women; women in science and technology, including information technology; personal security and social protection; education and training; family and working life concerns; and women and leadership.

78. **Ms. Tan** (Singapore) commenting on the ASEAN Confederation of Women's Organizations, said that the Confederation brought together the national councils of women of the 10 ASEAN member countries. It implemented at least one project a year. It had organized a workshop on information and communication technologies in Jakarta in April 2001 and a regional workshop on mentoring and leadership training in Malaysia in May. It was affiliated with a number of regional and international organizations, including the ASEAN Sub-Committee on Women, the Women Leaders Network of the Asia-Pacific Economic

Cooperation forum (APEC), the International Council of Women and the Pan-Pacific and South-East Asian Women's Association.

79. **The Chairperson** said that the Singapore delegation's comprehensive replies had clarified many of the issues on which the Committee had sought further information. She looked forward to receiving the additional information that had been promised. The Committee took note of the explanations given for Singapore's reservations to articles 2, 9, 11 and 16 of the Convention, but remained concerned that those reservations were incompatible with the spirit and the intent of the Convention. She hoped that the Government would review the conclusions and recommendations in the Committee's concluding comments and amend its domestic legislation, where appropriate, so that all Singaporeans could enjoy equal rights under the law. Lastly, she urged the Government of Singapore to ratify the amendment to article 21 of the Convention.

The meeting rose at 1.05 p.m.