

**Statement by Mrs Yu-Foo Yee Shoon
Minister-of-State of the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and
Sports and
Leader of the Singapore Delegation to the
39th Session of UN CEDAW
New York, 1 August 2007**

Madam Chairperson

Distinguished Members of the Committee

Ladies and gentlemen

Introduction

I am honoured to be here to present Singapore's third report to the UN Committee on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

2. As this is the 25th Anniversary of the Convention, I congratulate the CEDAW Committee on its efforts and achievements in eliminating discrimination against women. Singapore is privileged to be part of this endeavour, by having a Singaporean, Dr Anamah Tan (Illustration 1), on the current Committee.

Illustration 1: Dr Anamah Tan



3. Allow me to introduce to you the key members of my delegation.
- Mr Chew Hock Yong, Chair of Singapore's Inter-Ministry Committee on CEDAW. The Inter-Ministry Committee was set up in 1996 to monitor Singapore's implementation of CEDAW. Mr Chew is also the Deputy

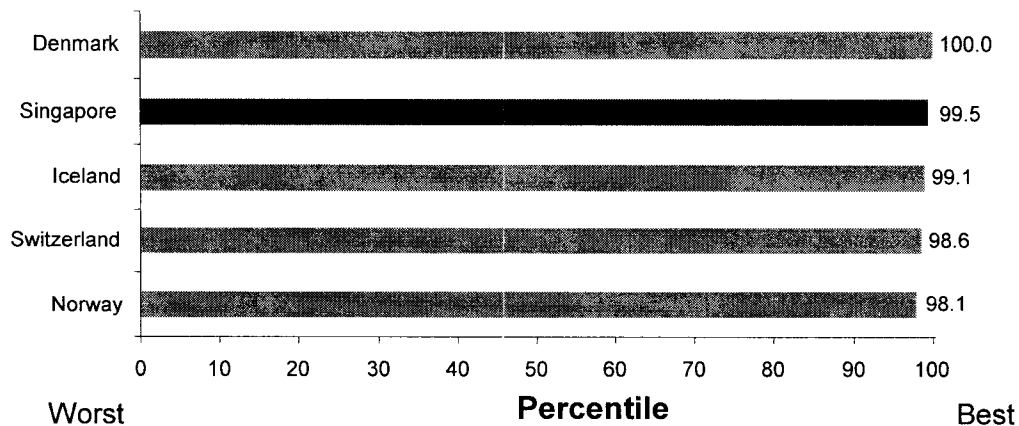
Secretary of the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports.

- Mdm Halimah Yacob, Member of Parliament, Assistant Secretary-General of the National Trades Union Congress, and Member of the International Labour Organisation's Governing Board.
- Ms Animah Gani, the first woman Registrar of the Syariah Court.
- Mrs Tan Hwee Seh and Mr Richard Tan from the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports.
- Mr Tai Wei Shyong from the Ministry of Manpower.
- Mr Keok Tong San from the Ministry of Home Affairs.
- Ms Deena Bajrai from the Attorney-General's Chambers.
- Our UN Permanent Representative, Mr Menon and representatives from our NGOs, Mrs Wee Wan Joo, Mrs Tisa Ng and Ms Braema Mathi have also joined us here today.

Guiding Principles – Meritocracy and Equal Opportunity

4. Singapore is a small country with no natural resources. People are our only resource. Since our independence 42 years ago, our public policies have been based on meritocracy and equal opportunity. Investing in and developing the full potential of every individual, male or female, is a priority. A recent World Bank report on "Governance Matters 2007" placed Singapore amongst the best in the area of Government effectiveness (Chart 1).

Chart 1: Government Effectiveness (Top 5 countries)



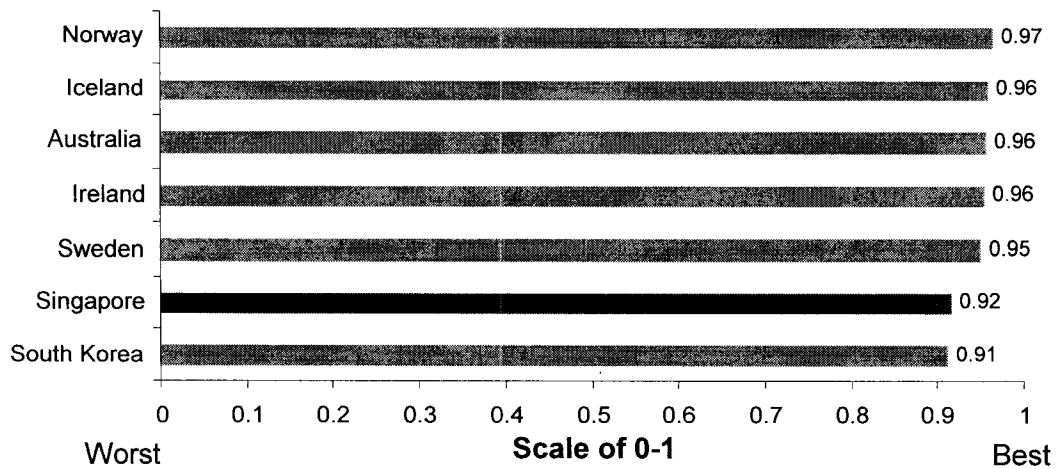
Source: World Bank – "Governance Matters 2007"

Progress of the Singapore Woman

5. Madam Chairperson, aided by good governance and rapid economic development, women in Singapore have come a long way. The 2006 UN Human Development Index ranked Singapore 25th out of 177 countries, indicating that we

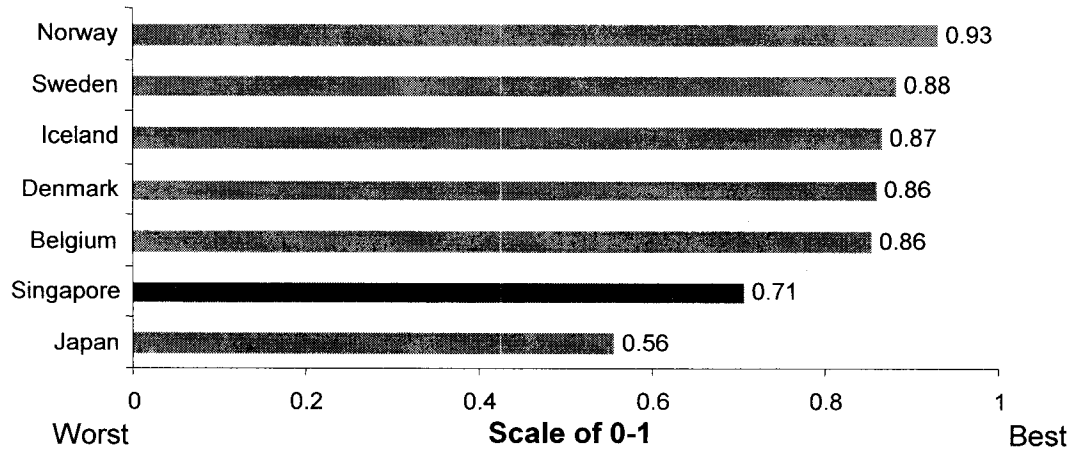
have achieved much in the area of life expectancy, educational attainment and real income (Chart 2). In addition, the Gender Empowerment Measure ranked Singapore 18th out of 175 countries, indicating that our women have economic and political opportunities comparable with that of our men (Chart 3). Let me share some of our progress since our last presentation.

Chart 2: UN Human Development Index



Source: UNDP Human Development Report, 2006

Chart 3: Gender Empowerment Measure



Source: UNDP Human Development Report, 2006

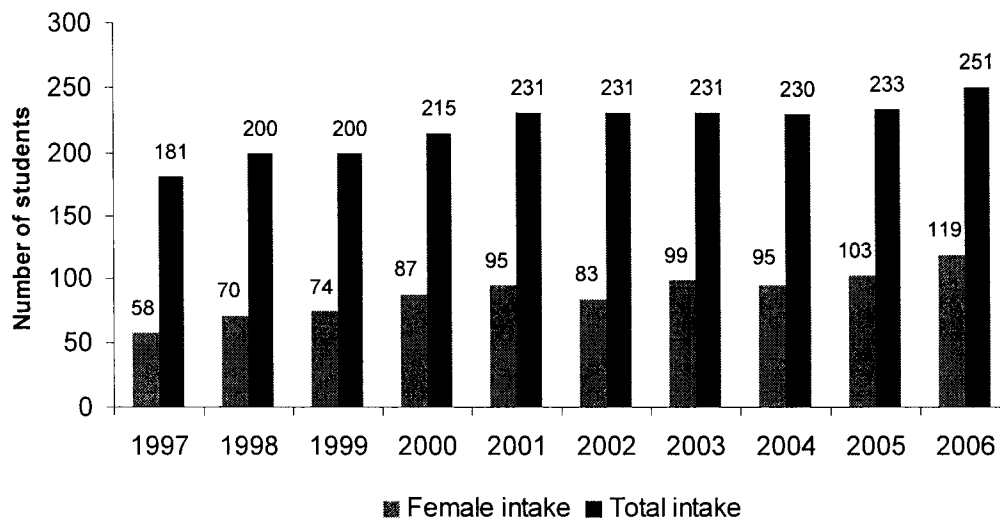
Progress – Withdrawal of Reservation to Article 9

6. I am happy to announce that Singapore has withdrawn our reservation to Article 9. At the time of our last presentation, a child born overseas could only acquire citizenship by descent if the father was a Singaporean. Since then, we have amended Article 122 of our Constitution. A child born overseas can now be a citizen by descent as long as the child's mother or father is a Singaporean.

Progress – Intake Quota for Female Medical Students Removed

7. More women can now study medicine. In 2003, the one-third quota on the intake of female students to the National University of Singapore's medical faculty was removed ([Chart 4](#)).

Chart 4: Intake of Female Medical Students



Source: Ministry of Education

Progress – Equalising Civil Servants' Medical Benefits

8. Since 2005, we have put in place equal medical benefits for civil servants. This required a change to certain Public Service staff benefit rules which have been in place for the last 40 years. Female officers can now claim medical benefits for their spouse and their unmarried children below the age of 18 years.

Retaining Reservations to Articles 2, 11 and 16

9. Madam Chairperson, this Committee had previously raised concerns about our reservations to Articles 2 and 16. After careful consideration of our laws, policies and practices, we have concluded that Singapore should continue to maintain our reservations to these Articles for now.

10. Our reservations to Articles 2 and 16 are necessary in view of our Constitution which provides for freedom of religion and protects the rights of our indigenous population in our multi-cultural society.

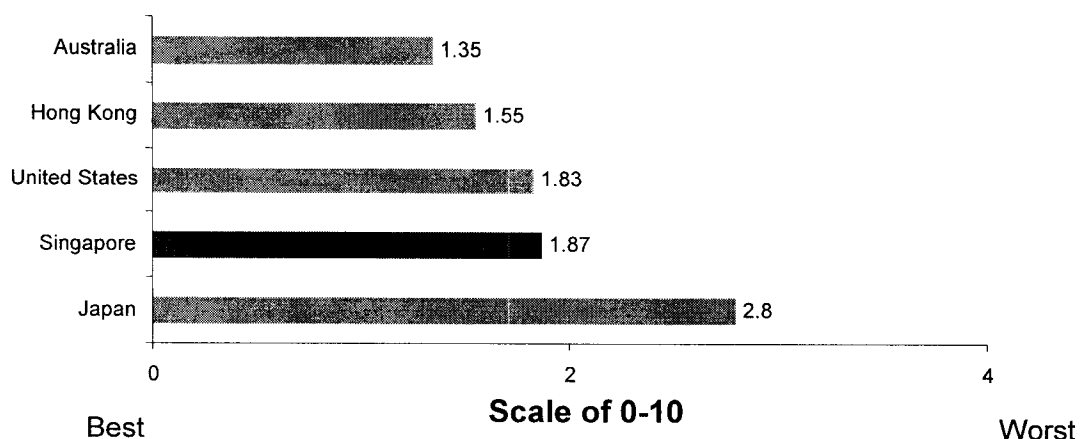
11. Under Article 152 of our Constitution, the special rights of the Malays, the indigenous people of Singapore, are recognised and the Government has to protect and support their interests. As required by Article 153 of our Constitution, the Administration of Muslim Law Act regulates Muslim religious affairs on matters relating to family and inheritance law. Some provisions under this Act are inconsistent with Articles 2 and 16 of the Convention. Hence the reason for our reservations to both these articles.

12. We are retaining our reservation to Article 11 as our policy on recruitment in our armed forces excludes women from certain combat duties. In addition, our Employment Act, which stipulates the basic terms and conditions of employment, does not apply to all workers. It excludes certain occupational groups due to the nature of their work. The interests of these groups of workers are nonetheless safeguarded by other legislations and administrative measures, such as the Tripartite Alliance for Fair Employment Practices.

Legal Framework and Protection

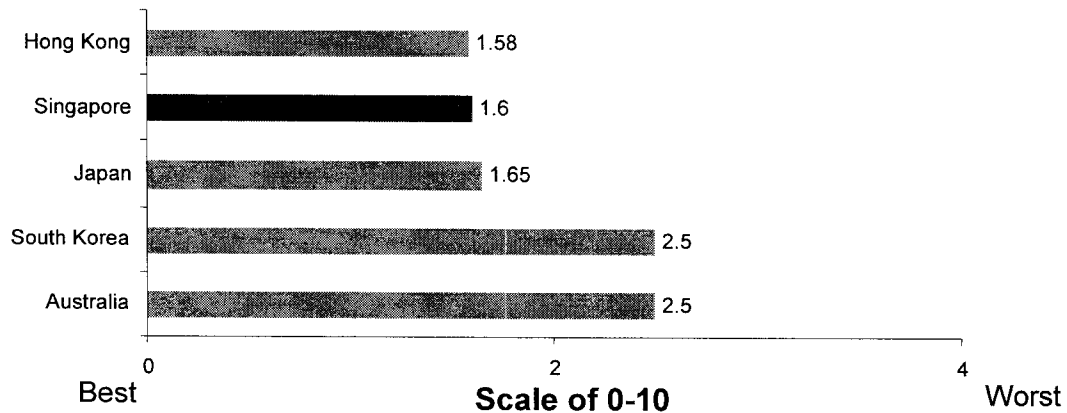
13. Singapore is a society where the rule of law prevails. Public confidence in our legal system is strong. Our criminal justice and legal systems have consistently fared very well in international surveys ([Chart 5](#)). Efforts by Singapore's authorities in maintaining law and order have been recognised by independent assessment ([Chart 6](#)).

Chart 5: Confidence in the Judicial System



Source: Political and Economic Risk Consultancy Ltd, 2006

Chart 6: Personal Security Concerns



Source: Political and Economic Risk Consultancy Ltd, 2006

14. While Singapore does not have any specific anti-gender discrimination laws, our Constitution nonetheless states that, “All persons are equal before the law and entitled to equal protection of the law”. This is a fundamental right of all Singaporeans. Besides the Constitution, the rights of women are also protected by other legislation, such as the Employment Act, the Penal Code, and the Women’s Charter.

15. The Women’s Charter is a landmark legislation that provides the legal basis for equality between husband and wife. It safeguards women’s rights in matters relating to marriage and upon divorce. For Muslim women, their rights are protected under Muslim or Syariah Law, under the Administration of Muslim Law Act. Non-compliance with its orders is an offence which can be enforced in the Civil Court.

16. We have also advertising codes and censorship laws that prevent women from being exploited and stereotyped as sex objects. Pornography is prohibited in recognition that these materials degrade the dignity of women and, in some cases, men.

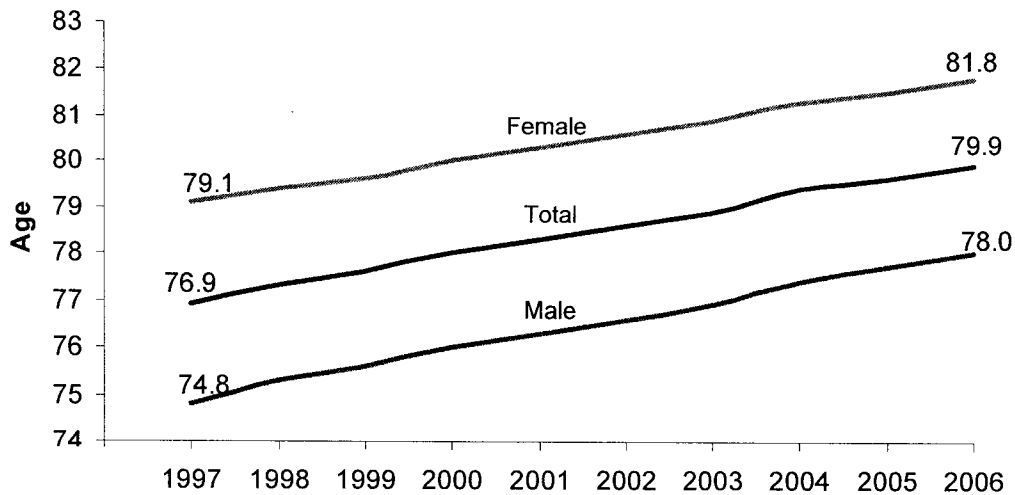
Retaining Reservation to Article 29

17. Singapore, like many other parties to the Convention, has entered a reservation to Article 29, as permitted under Article 29(2). We are confident that our sound legislative and judicial framework provides the necessary safeguards to ensure there is recourse for women whose rights have been infringed.

Health

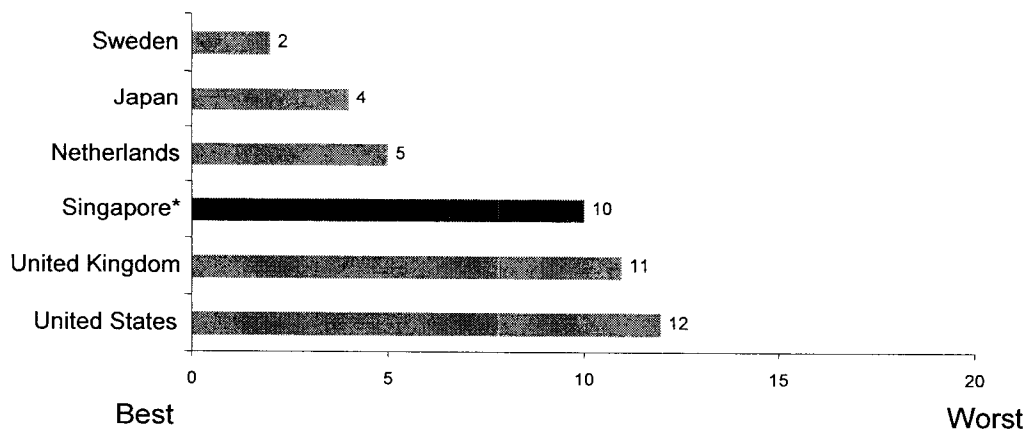
18. Advancements in healthcare have led to vast improvements in our health indicators (Charts 7 and 8). Our healthcare system ensures that women are cared for, and caters to their specific needs with respect to the primary diseases afflicting them. Various health education programmes are targeted specifically at women. For example, our Health Promotion Board has a “Fresh Air for Women” programme to curb the rising trend of young female smokers (Illustration 2).

Chart 7: Life Expectancy at Birth



Source: Department of Statistics

Chart 8: Maternal Mortality Rate (Per 100,000 live and still-births)



* Statistics are at 2006

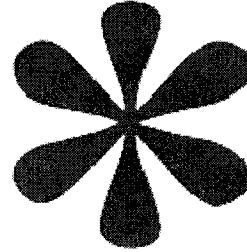
Source for Singapore Data: Immigration and Checkpoints Authority

Illustration 2: Health Initiatives for Women

**National Breast Cancer
Screening**



**National Quit Smoking
Campaign**



'Fresh Air For Women'

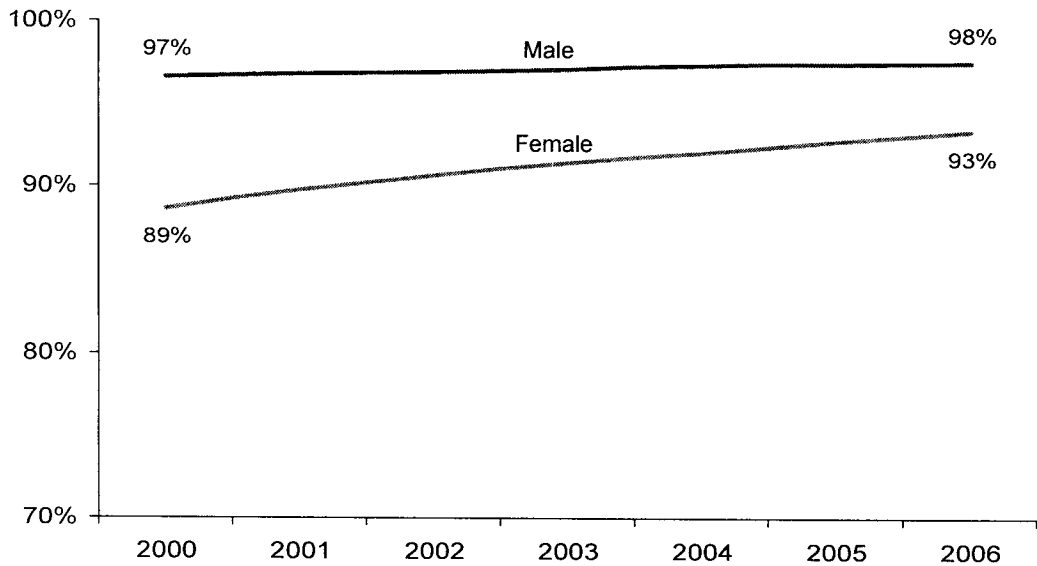
Women Sports Campaign



Education

19. Education presents the most sustainable solution to level the playing field between different groups in society. In 2003, Singapore made the six-year primary education compulsory. In doing so, we have implemented Goal 2 of the UN Millennium Development Goals, which is to achieve universal primary education for boys and girls. The literacy rate of our women is high (Chart 9), and they make up close to half our student population in tertiary education.

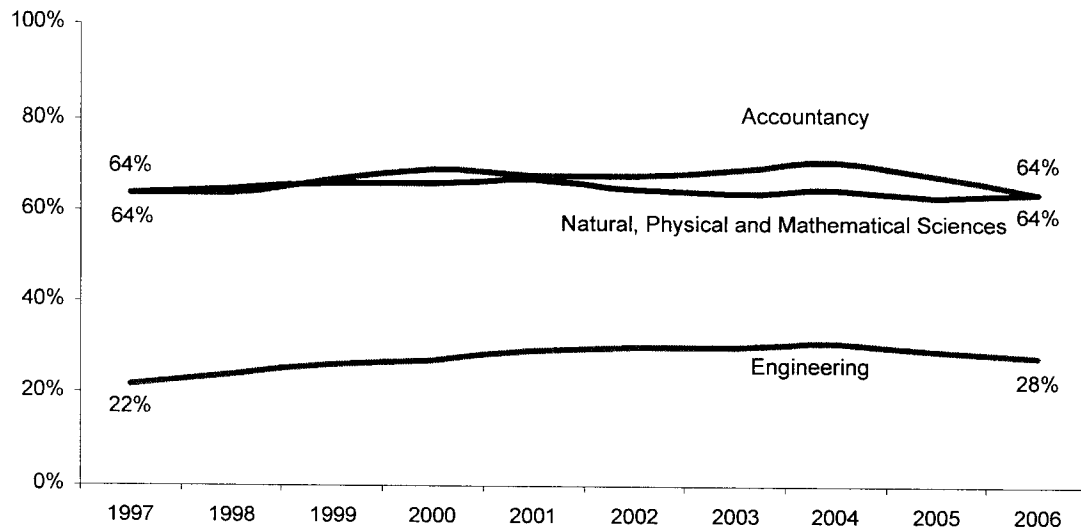
Chart 9: Literacy Rate



Source: Department of Statistics

20. Our young women are increasingly pursuing subjects of their interest rather than conforming to gender stereotypes (Chart 10). They are well-represented in traditionally male-dominated subjects in school.

Chart 10: Female Enrolment in University (By faculties)

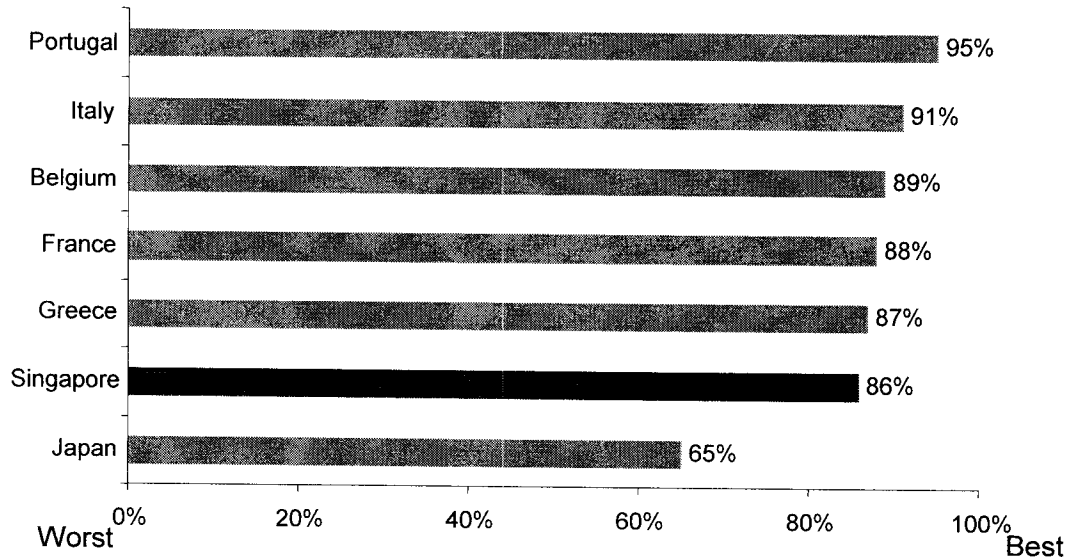


Source: Ministry of Education

Employment and Income

21. Our female Labour Force Participation Rate at 54% and the gender wage gap at 86%, are comparable with international trends (Chart 11). In fact, our gender wage gap has improved from 83% a decade ago.

Chart 11: Gender Wage Gap (By countries)



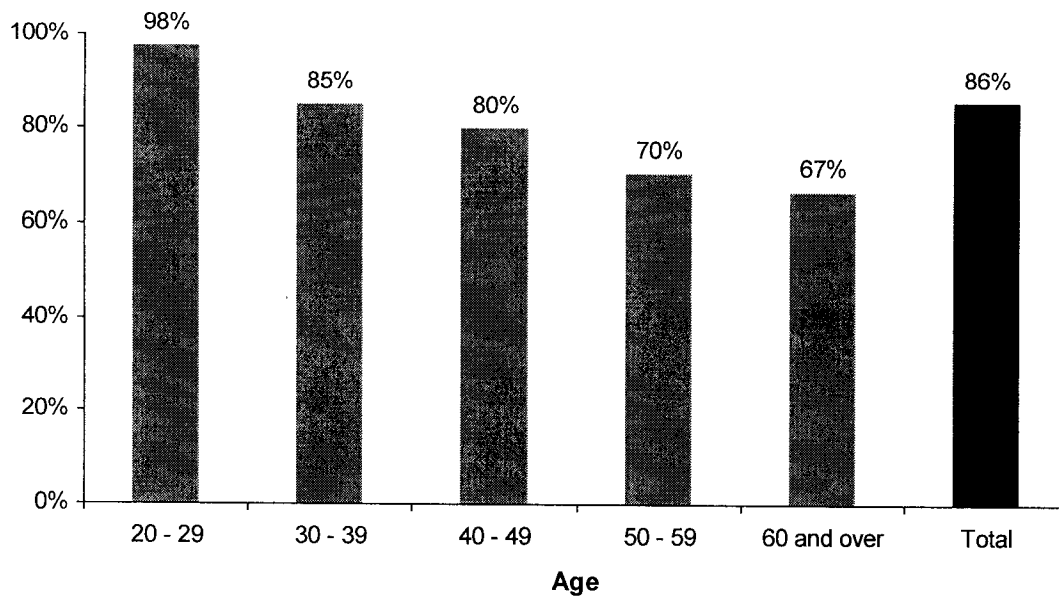
* Singapore 's statistics are at 2006

Source for Singapore Data: Ministry of Manpower

22. We hold the view that women and men should be paid the same wage for the same job. Singapore ratified the International Labour Organisation Convention 100 on Equal Remuneration in 2002. Following this, the Ministry of Manpower, together with employers and unions are promoting the incorporation of an “equal remuneration clause” in collective agreements.

23. The difference in wages between men and women is mostly because women in the older age groups tend to be less educated and because they tend to place family before career. But, our younger and better-educated women are earning wages comparable to their male counterparts (Chart 12). Women are also making inroads into traditionally male-dominated occupations. They now make up 38% of managers, senior officials and professionals; and 33% of IT professionals.

Chart 12: Gender Wage Gap (By age groups)



Source: Ministry of Manpower

Women and an Ageing Society

24. The ageing population is a primary concern. More so because our women live longer than men. A key thrust identified by the Ministerial Committee on Ageing, set up this year, was the enhancement of employability and financial security of the elderly. Our National Trades Union Congress set up a "Women Back to Work" Tripartite Committee to help women overcome the barriers faced in returning to the workforce.

25. In 2006, the Employment Rate for women aged 55 to 59 stood at 43%, up from 28% 10 years ago. The corresponding figure for the 60 to 64 age group was 25%, up from 14% a decade ago. However, more can be done in this area.

Housing

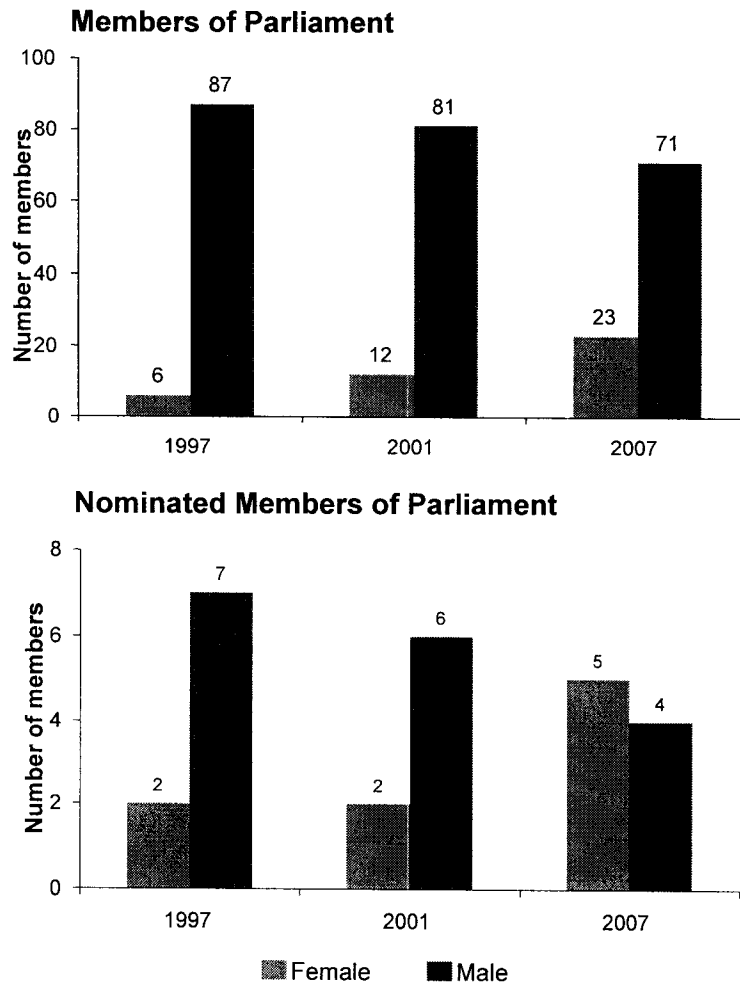
26. For most Singaporeans, owning a house or apartment is an aspiration. 90% of Singaporeans live in public housing, of which 87% are now owned or co-owned by a woman.

Public Life

27. Madam Chairperson, when I last addressed this Committee in 2001, only 12 out of 93 Members of Parliament were women (Chart 13). In fact, if I go further back, when I was elected in 1984, I was only one of three women MPs. I am proud to say that following last year's General Elections, 24% or 23 out of 94

MPs are women. With more higher-educated and professional women, we are optimistic that we will see more women entering politics in the near future.

Chart 13: Women's Participation in Politics



Source: Parliament of Singapore

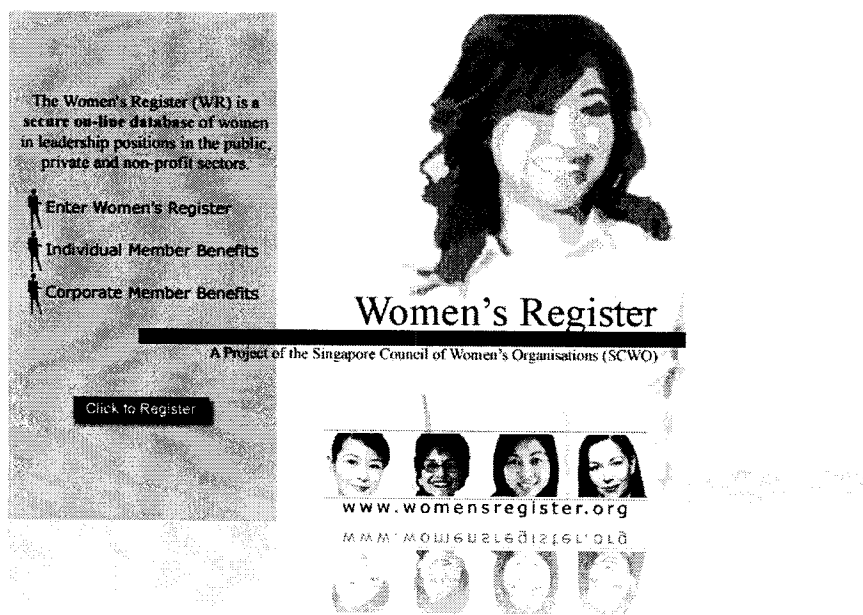
Women in Decision-Making Positions

28. We have an honest and efficient Public Service, made possible by a meritocratic and transparent selection process. Currently, within the Public Service, four out of 18 Permanent Secretaries are female. In 2001, there was only one. In the Judiciary, more than half of the judges in the Subordinate Courts and a quarter of those in the High Court are women. We now have eight female Heads of Mission and an equal number of men and women working in the UN Secretariat. We are proud that a Singaporean, Ms Noeleen Heyzer, has been appointed the Executive Secretary of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific.

29. Back home, we understand that for the first time a woman will be appointed to the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore. This is the highest Islamic authority in-charge of Muslim affairs. It is a positive development as women's perspective will now be better reflected in the Council's policy making.

30. Our Government actively supports the initiatives of women's groups in encouraging women's participation in decision-making positions. A project funded by the Government recently was the establishment of the Women's Register by the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations (Illustration 3). The Register is an online database that encourages women to volunteer their service to the community, and to be identified for leadership positions in the public, private and non-profit sectors.

Illustration 3: Women's Register



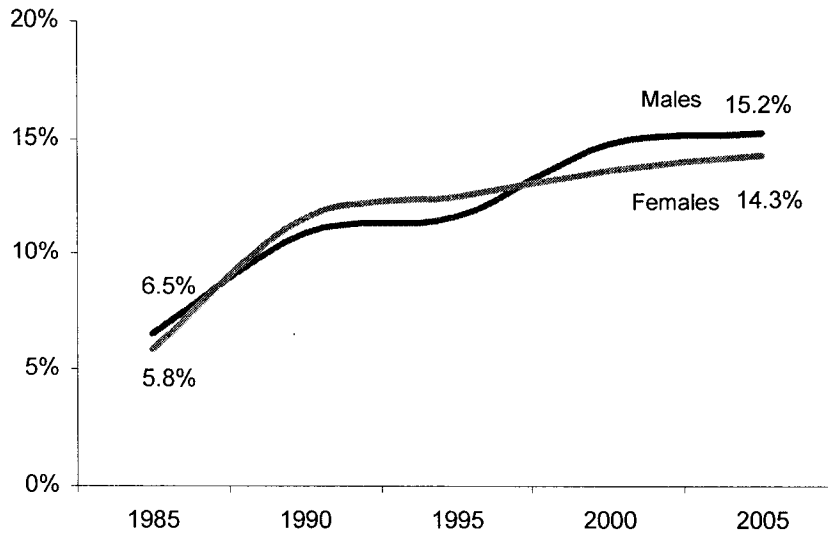
www.womensregister.com

Family

31. 44% of our married couples today have dual-careers, which is lower than most Western countries. Our Government encourages husbands and wives to share equal responsibilities in the home. Our Government also partners NGOs such as the Centre for Fathering to raise awareness on the importance of fathers' involvement in the upbringing of the young. In a recent local survey, younger married female respondents said that their spouses spend more time on household chores, as compared to their older counterparts. This is a good development.

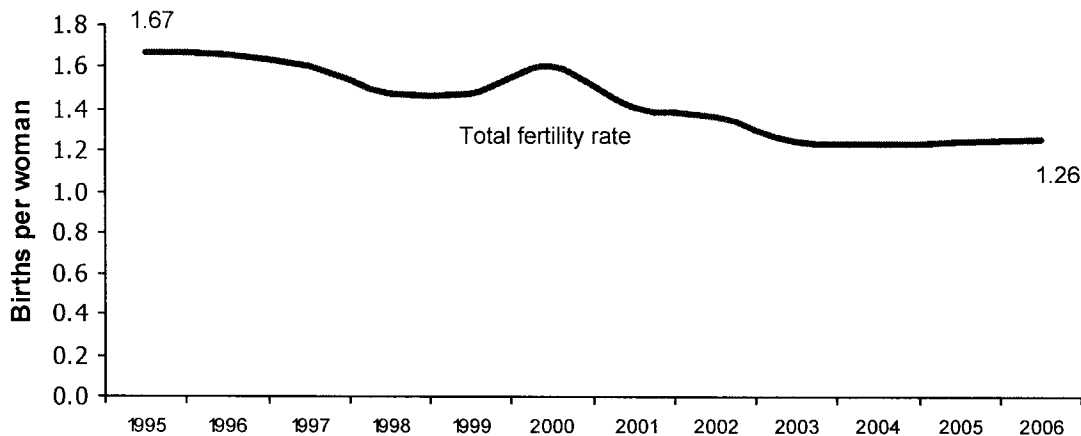
32. Another recent survey found that most women want to work and have children. However, the reality is that more of our women are staying single (Chart 14), marrying later and having less children (Chart 15).

Chart 14: Singlehood Rate (Age 40 – 44)



Source: Department of Statistics

Chart 15: Total Fertility Rate



33. The Government has set up an inter-ministerial Committee, chaired by a Deputy Prime Minister, to encourage marriage and parenthood for our young working parents. The Committee strives to enable women to manage work and family, and to encourage more women to return to, and remain in the workforce by promoting work-life harmony practices. In 2005, our Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports was conferred the Work-Life Innovative Excellence Award by the US-based Alliance for Work-Life Progress. Our

Government also ensures that child and infant care centres are affordable, readily available and of high quality.

Singapore's Approach to UN CEDAW

34. Women's NGOs such as the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations, the National Trades Union Congress Women's Committees and the People's Association Women Executive Committees are valuable partners in the promotion of the status and wellbeing of women. These apex organisations represent more than 90% of women's groups.

35. A series of dialogue sessions on CEDAW has been organised since 2000 by the Government and the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations (Illustration 4). In addition, many channels of communications are in place for women to provide their views on policies affecting them. They write to the Government feedback unit, to the local media and to our political leaders. Our MPs hold regular dialogue sessions with women's groups.

Illustration 4: Dialogue Session with Women's Groups



36. Issues concerning women are openly debated in Parliament. In May this year, the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports provided Parliament with a progress report on our efforts to eliminate discrimination against women. Our Periodic Reports are also presented to Cabinet, our highest political decision-making body, for adoption, before submission to the CEDAW Committee. These Reports are circulated to women's groups and published on the Internet.

Possible Improvements in Future

37. Madam Chairperson, Singapore takes a stakeholder approach to formulating our policies and laws. Yes, there are differences in the treatment of men and women in some areas. However, I would like to stress that our society is dynamic and our laws, policies and practices will evolve accordingly. There are, of course, areas that we would like to see improvements.

38. First, we hope to see more women in politics. Hopefully, the next time we present our CEDAW report to the Committee, we would be able to report that we have women Ministers in Cabinet, our highest political decision-making body, for adoption.

39. Second, we hope to see the gender wage gap narrow further and more women in the workforce.

40. Third, we hope to see greater sharing of household responsibilities between husband and wife to better enable young parents to reconcile work and family.

41. Fourth, we will continue to review our reservations with the view to withdrawing them, if not fully, then partially.

Conclusion

42. Madam Chairperson and members of the CEDAW Committee, Singapore is committed to ensuring the progress of our women and to our obligations under the CEDAW. We recognise that a holistic approach must be taken, and that the empowerment of women requires more than legislation. It involves changing social norms and mindsets. Singapore will continue in our endeavour to bring about such changes.

43. My delegation and I look forward to a fruitful and constructive exchange with this Committee today.

44. Thank you.