

## ARTICLE 7

### WOMEN IN POLITICAL AND PUBLIC LIFE

*State Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life of the country and, in particular, shall ensure women, on equal terms with men, the right:*

*(b) To participate in the formulation of government policy and implementation thereof and to hold public office and perform all public functions at all levels of government;*

### AREAS OF CONCERN

#### Representation

- 7.1 Women make up 50.59 percent of the population<sup>1</sup>, represent 43.6 percent of the labour force<sup>2</sup> and constitute 51.4 percent of university graduates in Singapore<sup>3</sup>. However, in spite of impressive progress in recent years in terms of their presence in the workforce and academic qualifications, women continue to be underrepresented in public life, particularly in positions of leadership or decision-making within Parliament, the judiciary and public bodies.
- 7.2 AWARE congratulates the State on the marked improvement in female representation in Parliament seen at the last election in May 2006. Percentage representation improved from 16.3% in the previous Parliament to 20.2 percent, with 17 elected female Members of Parliament (MPs) out of a total of 84 seats. Additionally, there was also one female Non-Constituency MP and four females out of total of nine Nominated MPs<sup>4</sup>. As of March 2011, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) ranked Singapore 43 out of 186 countries<sup>5</sup>. However, in the most recent elections held in May 2011, AWARE is concerned that two female MPs were asked to step down - one a Senior Minister of State and State representative of women voices, Mdm Yu-Foo Yee Shoon<sup>6</sup> and MP Madam Ho

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<sup>1</sup> Extrapolated from data set out by the Singapore Department of Statistics in Table 3.4 of its 'Yearbook of Statistics, Singapore 2010' <http://www.singstat.gov.sg/pubn/reference.html#yos> ... accessed 2 April 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Extrapolated from the employment data set out by MOM in Table 29 of its 'Report on Labour Force in Singapore 2010' [http://www.mom.gov.sg/Publications/mrsd\\_singapore\\_workforce\\_2010.pdf](http://www.mom.gov.sg/Publications/mrsd_singapore_workforce_2010.pdf) ... accessed 2 April 2011.

<sup>3</sup> <http://app1.mcys.gov.sg/ResearchRoom/ResearchStatistics/GraduatesfromUniversitiesbyGender.aspx> ... accessed 2 April 2011.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.parliament.gov.sg/AboutUs/Org-MP-currentMP.htm> ... accessed 23 February 2011.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm> ... accessed 23 February 2011.

<sup>6</sup> 'GE: Yu-Foo Yee Shoon steps down', *Channelnewsasia*, 9 April 2011.

Geok Choo<sup>7</sup>. In the highly contested elections, a full woman minister Mdm Lim Hwee Hua also lost her position<sup>8</sup> along with MP Cynthia Phua<sup>9</sup>. Though overall we have more women representation in 2011 - 21.84 percent – this figure still falls far short of the 30-35 percent that the United Nations deems necessary for women to make an impact in policies<sup>10</sup>.

- 7.3 While welcoming the improvement in representation, AWARE remains disappointed by the low number of women in higher levels of government. This is in spite of calls by the CEDAW Committee to the State “to intensify its efforts towards strengthening women’s representation in leadership roles, including elected and appointed positions”<sup>11</sup>. In the past, there was only one female minister (Mrs Lim Hwee Hua, a Minister in the Prime Minister’s Office) who held no portfolio and was not in charge of any full ministry<sup>12</sup>, three ministers for state and one senior parliamentary secretary. While the state claims to follow a “principle of gender-neutral meritocracy”<sup>13</sup>, it seems surprising that there are no female representative at the ministerial level, bearing in mind the equal opportunities offered in terms of education and experience in public service. Other Asian countries, including India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Japan and Malaysia, with their strong cultural and religious values, have a strong history of women in high levels of government and have done better than Singapore in this regard. AWARE hopes that in the new cabinet line up that is to be announced, more women will be made full ministers as there are capable female candidates.
- 7.4 A review of the political parties’ manifestos in the recent elections showed that there were gender based objectives with regards to wanting to enhance facilities for caregiving of the young and the elderly and there was also an emphasis on offering more monetary benefits to help women stay in the workforce. While this gender-based focus is welcomed, AWARE also notes that only one party – Worker’s Party - made a call for equal opportunities legislation which would also look into issues of gender-based discrimination<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> ‘GE: West Coast MP to step down’, *Channelnewsasia*, 2 April 2011.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Lim Hwee Hua will not contest next election’, *The Straits Times*, 11 May 2011.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Cynthia Phua: Ready to fight in Aljunied again’, translated from *Lianhe Wanbao*, 14 May 2011.

<sup>10</sup> UN’s 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing.

<sup>11</sup> CEDAW Committee 39<sup>th</sup> Session Concluding Comments: Singapore 2007, pp.4 para 19.

<sup>12</sup> Mrs Lim was appointed with effect from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2009. See [http://www.cabinet.gov.sg/content/cabinet/appointments/mrs\\_lim\\_hwee\\_hua.html](http://www.cabinet.gov.sg/content/cabinet/appointments/mrs_lim_hwee_hua.html)

<sup>13</sup> CEDAW Committee 39<sup>th</sup> Session Concluding Comments: Singapore 2007 pp.4 para 19.

<sup>14</sup> See <http://www.ge.sg/stories/elections2/view/1081392/1/GE-PAP-unveils-manifesto> for People’s Action Party’s Manifesto 2011; <http://ge2011.yoursdp.org/solutions> for Singapore Democratic Party’s Manifesto 2011; <http://thereformparty.net/voting-rp/election-manifesto/> for Reform Party’s Manifesto 2011; <http://wp.sg/manifesto/> for Workers’ Party Manifesto 2011; <http://www.scribd.com/doc/53562332/National-Solidarity-Party-Manifesto-2011> for National Solidarity Party’s Manifesto 2011; <http://www.sgda.org.sg/>

- 7.5 Singapore ranks below other Asian countries such as Sri Lanka and the Philippines on the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index. In the latest report for 2010<sup>15</sup>, Singapore had improved its position to 56<sup>th</sup> place out of 134 countries. However, a close look at the figures reveals that while Singapore scored well on the economic participation measure, ranking 20<sup>th</sup>, it came in a poor 79<sup>th</sup> on political participation.
- 7.6 Women continue to be under-represented in policy-making roles in other spheres of public life. The central committee of the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC), for example, has only four female members out of 21 (19%)<sup>16</sup>, and this, despite the fact that women make up more than 43.6 percent of the work force. The picture is not much better on the Board of the People's Association with only one female member out of 14 members<sup>17</sup>; 28.5 percent (four females out of 14 board members) at the National Community Leadership Institute<sup>18</sup> and 22 percent (four females out of 18 members) at the National Youth Council<sup>19</sup> to name but a few. While AWARE recognises the work of organisations which have set up separate women sections to focus on issues affecting women, it is concerned that this should not be at the expense of including fewer women on the main policy-making boards. One example is the ruling People's Action Party (PAP), who has separate Women's Wing but includes only two women on a central executive committee of 18<sup>20</sup>.
- 7.7 In terms of the judiciary, women are reasonably well represented in the Subordinate Court Division with 45.2 percent female district judges<sup>21</sup>. Out of the seven senior district judges, only two are women. At Supreme Court level, however, only three out of 18 judges are women, or 16.6 percent<sup>22</sup>.
- 7.8 Women make up a large proportion of teachers (72.8%) in primary and secondary schools and junior colleges. However, compared to the number of teachers, a smaller

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for Singapore Democratic Alliance's Manifesto 2011; <http://www.spp.org.sg/an-invitation-to-dialogue-ge-2011/> for Singapore People's Party's Manifesto 2011.

<sup>15</sup> [http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GenderGap\\_Report\\_2010.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GenderGap_Report_2010.pdf)... accessed 23 February 2011.

<sup>16</sup> 'An Inclusive NTUC Central Committee Voted In' by Jansen Yeo, *NTUC This Week* 27 November 2007.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.pa.gov.sg/about-us/organisation-chart.html>... accessed 23 February 2011.

<sup>18</sup> [http://www.nacli.pa.gov.sg/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=7&Itemid=22](http://www.nacli.pa.gov.sg/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=7&Itemid=22)... accessed 23 February 2011.

<sup>19</sup> [http://www.nyc.pa.gov.sg/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=4&Itemid=10](http://www.nyc.pa.gov.sg/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4&Itemid=10)... accessed 23 February 2011.

<sup>20</sup> 'Mah Bow Tan notable absentee in PAP's latest CEC,' *Channelnewsasia*, 16 December 2010.

<sup>21</sup> <http://app.subcourts.gov.sg/data/html/judges-staff.html>... accessed 23 February 2011.

<sup>22</sup> <http://app.supremecourt.gov.sg/default.aspx?pgID=40>... accessed 23 February 2011.

proportion of women are principals (61.5 %) and vice-principals (64.6%)<sup>23</sup>. The numbers seem to imply that more male teachers advance further compared to their female counterparts. The mechanism for career advancement is not open to public scrutiny and sexual discrimination cannot be totally ruled out

- 7.9 AWARE welcomes the establishment by the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations (SCWO) of the Women's Register<sup>24</sup> a secure on-line database of women in leadership positions in the public, private and non-profit sectors. The database aims to find opportunities for women to speak in public, mentor, volunteer or find board positions. While a useful networking forum for women, in its current form the Register is not reaching a wide enough audience to publicize the successes of women or to influence the views of men.
- 7.10 Following the 2011 General Election, the PAP Women's Wing has announced six new focus areas: promoting work-life balance; being pro-active in policy discussion; tracking marriage and parenthood trends; reaching out to the poor; active ageing; and raising leadership representation of women<sup>25</sup>.

### **Marginalisation of Women's Issues**

- 7.11 The CEDAW Committee has praised the State for the setting up of an Inter-Ministry Committee (IMC) on CEDAW to coordinate policies within different ministries. However, it is concerned about the lack of resources and capacity of the Women's Desk "to ensure that gender equality policies are properly developed and fully implemented throughout the work of all ministries and government offices"<sup>26</sup> (see also Articles 1-4).

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Representation**

- 7.12 AWARE urges the State to continue to ensure that more women enter political life by actively addressing the social barriers and prejudices that prevent women from participating in politics and educating the public about the important roles of women in politics. AWARE urges the ruling PAP to take the lead in this by continuing the existing good work through the Women's Wing, whilst at the same time improving the representation of women within its policy-making body, the central executive committee.

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<sup>23</sup> See Appendix 7.1. Education Statistic Digest 2010.

<sup>24</sup> See Appendix 7.2. SCWO Women's Register.

<sup>25</sup> 'PAP Women's Wing unveils new focus area', by Cassandra Chew, *The Straits Times*, 24 April 2011.

<sup>26</sup> CEDAW Committee 39th Session Concluding Comments: Singapore 2007

- 7.13 Outside Parliament, the State needs to re-examine why more women are not reaching the top jobs in public life despite the numbers of women present in lower-ranking positions and the equal opportunities in education that have been available for some time. AWARE urges the State to ensure that the legislation in place to prevent discrimination is being applied consistently and across the board. In cases of perceived discrimination, the State should be ready to open mechanisms for career advancement to public scrutiny. At the same time, AWARE urges the State to go further in promoting equal opportunities by establishing policies that encourage couples to share family obligations (childcare, care for the elderly, housework, etc.) so that women are not unnecessarily prejudiced in their career advancement by being the sole or lead house “manager”.

### **Gender Sensitisation**

- 7.14 The Women’s Register should be publicised widely, not just amongst women, but amongst men too. AWARE recommends that the women registered be used as role models for school and undergraduate students to help encourage young girls to aim high and to reinforce the message of gender equality amongst the male population from an early age.

### **Marginalisation of Women’s Issues**

- 7.15 AWARE urges the Singapore Government to set up a fully functional women’s policy unit, with the budget, staffing and political will to develop policies and programmes to improve the status and development of women in Singapore.