

**REPORT ON CEDAW AND
THE REPUBLIC OF SINGAPORE**

**Shadow Report by the Association of Women for
Action and Research (AWARE)**

FOR THE 88TH CEDAW SESSION

GLOSSARY

CSE: Comprehensive sexuality education

DV: Domestic violence

FME: Forensic medical examination

HDB: Housing Development Board

LTVP/+: Long-Term Visit Pass (Plus)

MCI: Ministry of Communications and Information

MEO: Maintenance Enforcement Officer

MOE: Ministry of Education

PPO: Personal Protection Order

PR: Permanent Residency

TFSV: Technology-facilitated sexual violence

WHDA: Workplace Harassment and Discrimination Advisory (run by AWARE)

WFL: Workplace Fairness Legislation

WSH: Workplace sexual harassment

Executive Summary

This shadow report has been prepared by AWARE, Singapore's leading women's rights and gender equality advocacy group. We aim to supplement the State's response to the Committee's List of Issues based on our research and experience working with vulnerable groups, including migrant spouses, single parents and victim-survivors of sexual violence and DV.

As stated in Parliament, the government's 2022 White Paper on Singapore Women's Development serves as a "guidepost" rather than an "endpoint".¹ Yet, it remains unclear how the efforts to tackle gender inequality will continue without clear timelines and specific targets for each action plan.

Primarily, AWARE calls for the explicit inclusion of gender in our Constitution and the enactment of an anti-discrimination legislation by extending the upcoming WFL to encompass all domains of society. CSE should be introduced to tackle the root causes of gender-based violence and gender inequality. Financial support and workplace policies, such as paid leave, must be enhanced to support all family caregivers' immediate and long-term needs, including in retirement. Protection for DV victim-survivors and other vulnerable groups needs to be strengthened, such as by providing access to stable housing and necessary support, to address the complex challenges that they face. Greater clarity on what constitutes "reasonable excuse" to not file a police report is needed to enable victim-survivors of sexual violence to access the necessary support without fearing that a report will be made without their consent. These victim-survivors should also be allowed access to FMEs without first having to make a police report.

Our other key recommendations are:

- Reservations: Withdraw all reservations to Articles 2, 11 and 16 of the Convention.
- Article 3: Establish an independent national human rights institution.
- Article 11: Establish wage monitoring and regulatory mechanisms. Develop a labour framework on non-standard workers' rights and benefits. Increase the supply and/or accessibility of night-time childcare services. Protect against congenital or acquired disability, sexual orientation, and gender identity and expression in the WFL; also cover indirect discrimination and denial of reasonable accommodations. Adopt ILO Convention No. 190.
- Article 15: Expand the DV definition to include financial abuse as a distinct category. Expand the definition of "family member" to include unmarried intimate partners.
- Article 16: Abolish the concept of illegitimacy. Expand the "family nucleus" definition. Lower minimum age criteria for public rental housing to 18 years old. Equalise child-related benefits

¹ "Motion on Singapore Women's Development - Speech by Mr K Shanmugam, Minister for Home Affairs and Minister for Law", Ministry of Home Affairs, 5 April 2022, <https://www.mha.gov.sg/mediaroom/parliamentary/motion-on-singapore-women-development/>

regardless of parents' marital status. Publish clear and transparent eligibility criteria for LTVP+, PR and citizenship. Establish clear, timed access to PR and citizenship for migrant spouses. Establish an independent agency to facilitate maintenance enforcement, oversee MEOs' work and handle other related matters.

- Article 24: Train investigating officers and medical professionals in trauma-informed and survivor-centred investigative strategies. Remove polygraph tests from the investigation process. Under MCI's Code of Practice for Online Safety, include all non-consensual intimate content under the "sexual content" category; clearly explain take-down process and ensure easy access; specify timeframe for compliance with take-down orders.

ARTICLE 1: DISCRIMINATION

The State contends that Article 12(1) protects women from unfair discrimination and refers to statements from two Court of Appeal cases.² In 2014, the Court of Appeal clarified that Article 12(1) should not be interpreted broadly to prohibit every ground of discrimination, as that would render Article 12(2) redundant.³ Article 12(2) prohibits discrimination only on the grounds of religion, race, descent or place of birth, and the Court held that this did not include gender, sex or sexual orientation.⁴ In fact, the Court suggested that the government should consider amending Article 12(2) to include the above as prohibited grounds.⁵ The 2022 case merely discussed *obiter* how to determine if a discriminatory law was unconstitutional; it did not state that Article 12(1) protected women against unfair discrimination.⁶

Recommendation: Include gender as a prohibited basis of discrimination in Article 12(2) of the Singapore Constitution.

ARTICLE 3: GUARANTEE OF BASIC HUMAN RIGHTS AND FUNDAMENTAL FREEDOMS

The State argues that it adopts a decentralised approach to protect human rights.⁷ However, recent efforts to tackle gender issues have been limited. The 2022 White Paper on Singapore Women's Development, while being positioned as "an important marker on [the] road to equality for women", lacked clear timelines and targets.⁸ The subsequent 2023 Forward SG report also did not include gender equality as an explicit goal.⁹

Recommendation: Establish an independent national human rights institution to promote and protect women's rights and gender equality e.g. through the collection of gender-, age-, ethnicity-, nationality-disaggregated data.

² Singapore Government, *Replies of Singapore to the list of issues and questions in relation to its sixth periodic report* (Geneva: Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, 2023), 13.

³ The Court of Appeal in *Lim Meng Suang and anor vs AG* [2014] SGCA 53 at [93]

⁴ *Ibid*, at [92] and [185].

⁵ *Ibid*, at [185].

⁶ The Court of Appeal in *Tan Seng Kee v AG* [2022] SGCA 16 at [300] - [329]

⁷ *Ibid*, 6.

⁸ "Motion on Singapore Women's Development".

⁹ Forward SG was a government-led nationwide exercise to chart the country's road map for the next decade.

ARTICLE 10: EDUCATION

According to MOE's website, sexuality education is anchored on "prevailing family values" and continues to promote abstinence before marriage.¹⁰

MOE has stated that there would be greater emphasis on the understanding of consent in Character & Citizenship Education yet the term "consent" is not explicitly mentioned in the syllabus; instead, there is an emphasis on "respect".¹¹ While "respect" might be helpful as an overarching framework, consent education is key in helping young persons build healthy relationships by teaching them both to communicate giving and refusing consent and recognise consent or the lack thereof, including in the context of sexual relationships.¹² Moreover, the absence of consent is the basis of sexual crimes in Singapore.

There is clear public interest in the inclusion of consent in the curriculum: In a 2022 national survey, 55% of respondents wanted sex education to cover sexual consent, making it the third most voted topic.¹³ Another survey found that 86% of parents felt that sexual consent was the most important topic to cover in sex education.¹⁴

Meanwhile, it appears that the introduction to the concepts of gender and gender role stereotyping has been delayed from Primary 5 to Secondary 2 as mentions of these concepts no longer feature in the updated Primary 5 curriculum (see Annex for details). Broaching these topics at a later age can limit the effectiveness of such education as it is arguably too late to adequately tackle such stereotypes and their effects.

Recommendation: Reference UNESCO's International Technical Guidance to implement CSE that covers consent, gender stereotypes, GBV and gender inequality.

¹⁰ "Sexuality Education: Scope and teaching approach", Ministry of Education, 7 February 2023, <https://www.moe.gov.sg/education-in-sg/our-programmes/sexuality-education/scope-and-teaching-approach>.

¹¹ Chen Kee Tan, "Forum: Sexuality education current and in step with societal trends", The Straits Times, Singapore Press Holdings Ltd. Co., 13 March 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/forum/sexuality-education-current-and-in-step-with-societal-trends>; "Sexuality Education: Scope".

¹² UNESCO, UNAIDS, UNFPA, UNICEF, UN Women and WHO, *International technical guidance on sexuality education* (Geneva: UNESCO, 2018), 56, <https://cdn.who.int/media/docs/default-source/reproductive-health/sexual-health/international-technical-guidance-on-sexuality-education.pdf>.

¹³ "Breaking the Silence on Sex in Singapore", Milieu Insight, 9 May 2022, <https://www.mili.eu/insights/breaking-the-silence-on-sex-in-singapore>

¹⁴ "Only half of parents are comfortable talking to their kids about sex ed, while most prefer school programmes to focus on consent over abstinence: AWARE-Blackbox survey", AWARE, 1 July 2020, <https://www.aware.org.sg/2020/07/parents-comfortable-sex-ed-consent-abstinence-aware-blackbox-survey/>

ARTICLE 11: EMPLOYMENT

A. Gender Wage Gap

In 2023, the unadjusted wage gap was 14.3% while the adjusted figure was 6.0%.¹⁵ Overall, two top sectors in which women were over-represented were among the lowest paying ones in Singapore in 2023.¹⁶ Within female-dominated sectors, women's median gross monthly income was \$87-1,867 less than that of men.¹⁷

Moreover, while the decrease in both wage gap figures is encouraging, these numbers exclude workers engaged in part-time work, of which 62% are women.¹⁸ In 2023, the median monthly income of part-time workers was \$1,170¹⁹. The reason cited most often by women for working part time rather than full time was family and personal commitments (60%).²⁰ Women also constituted 57% of all casual/on-call workers in 2023.²¹

Balancing work and care is particularly challenging for low-income women due to barriers in accessing childcare. One such challenge is that few formal childcare services operate outside of working hours which leaves limited options for parents who work irregular hours. As of February 2021, only 3% of all childcare centres operate beyond 7pm on weekdays.²² The newly announced childminding pilot will also only be available only during weekdays and working hours.²³ Further, due to low demand, childcare centres will no longer be required to operate on Saturdays from 2025.²⁴

Recommendations:

- Require employers to publish gender-disaggregated salary and bonus data.
- Establish wage monitoring and regulatory mechanisms.
- Develop a labour framework on non-standard workers' rights and benefits.

¹⁵ "Infographic: Update on Singapore's Adjusted Gender Pay Gap", Ministry of Manpower, 4 March 2024, <https://stats.mom.gov.sg/Pages/Update-on-Singapores-Adjusted-Gender-Pay-Gap.aspx>

¹⁶ Ministry of Manpower, *Labour Force in Singapore 2023* (Singapore: Ministry of Manpower, 2024), Tables C5 and D13, <https://stats.mom.gov.sg/Pages/Labour-Force-In-Singapore-2023.aspx>

¹⁷ Cited figures are inclusive of employer Central Provident Fund (CPF) contributions. Ibid.

¹⁸ MOM, *Labour Force 2023*, Table D4.

¹⁹ Around 25% that of full-timers (\$4,680). MOM, *Labour Force 2023*, Table C8.

²⁰ Compared to 29% of male part-timers. MOM, *Labour Force 2023*, Table E11.

²¹ Those who worked these jobs full-time earned a median monthly income of \$1,755; part-time workers earned \$860 monthly. MOM, *Labour Force 2023*, Tables I1 and C8.

²² "Study On Demand And Need For Night-Time Childcare Services", *Singapore Parliamentary Debates, Official Report*, 25 February 2021, <https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/fullreport?sittingdate=25-2-2021>

²³ Nikki Yeo, "The Big Read: Good and affordable babysitters are hard to find – will MSF's childminding services pilot be the answer?", *Channel NewsAsia*, Mediacorp Pte Ltd., 18 March 2024, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/msf-childminding-services-pilot-will-it-be-answer-big-read-4199951>

²⁴ "Preschools To Move To Five-Day Work Week In Next Phase Of Early Childhood Sector Transformation", Ministry of Social and Family Development, 12 July 2023, <https://www.msf.gov.sg/media-room/article/preschools-to-move-to-five-day-work-week-in-next-phase-of-early-childhood-sector-transformation>

- Increase the supply and/or accessibility of childcare services outside standard operating hours.

B. Workplace Discrimination

AWARE's 2022 national survey found that 58% of women had experienced at least one type of discrimination in the last five years.²⁵ A 2023 study found that women aged 55 and above experienced workplace ageism such as having fewer promotion opportunities and being negatively stereotyped.²⁶ Working mothers also face biases: In a 2020 national survey, 49% of Singaporeans agreed that women are less committed to work after childbirth.²⁷ Relatedly, maternity discrimination is the most common form of discrimination seen by AWARE's WHDA.²⁸

While the Tripartite Committee's recommendations for the upcoming WFL signals a positive shift, the proposed definition of discrimination is restricted to direct discrimination and the list of protected characteristics remains limited.²⁹

Recommendation: Ensure that the WFL also protects against congenital or acquired disability, sexual orientation, and gender identity and expression. This law should also protect against indirect discrimination and denial of reasonable accommodations.

²⁵ Compared to 53% of men. The top three grounds of discrimination were race (41%), age (35%) and gender (23%).

"1 in 2 experienced workplace discrimination in Singapore over the past five years, with race, age and gender discrimination most common", AWARE, AWARE, 20 September 2022,

<https://www.aware.org.sg/2022/09/1-in-2-experienced-workplace-discrimination-aware-milieu-survey/>

²⁶ Singapore Alliance for Women in Ageing, *Older Women's Responses to the White Paper on Singapore Women's Development* (Singapore: Singapore Alliance for Women in Ageing, 2023), 6-7,

https://www.aware.org.sg/wp-content/uploads/SAWA_Older-Womens-Responses-on-White-Paper-on-Singapore-Womens-Development_2023.pdf

²⁷ AWARE, *An Omnibus on Gender Equality* (Singapore: AWARE, 2021), 6,

<https://www.aware.org.sg/wp-content/uploads/AWARE-Report-July-2021-An-Omnibus-on-Gender-Equality.pdf>

²⁸ Such cases made up 85% of the 108 discrimination cases seen at WHDA in 2022. Examples include receiving pay cuts after becoming mothers, or being demoted without prior constructive conversation with their employers.

²⁹ Tripartite Committee on Workplace Fairness, *Building Fairer & More Harmonious Workplaces—Tripartite Committee on Workplace Fairness Final Report* (Singapore: Ministry of Manpower, 2023), 16-17, <https://www.mom.gov.sg/-/media/mom/documents/press-releases/2023/tripartite-committee-on-workplace-fairness-final-report.pdf>

C. WSH

AWARE's 2020 national survey found that two in five workers had experienced WSH in the previous five years.³⁰ Between January and September 2021, the police handled 378 WSH cases.³¹ At WHDA, WSH cases make up around 25% of the annual caseload.³²

Notably, AWARE's survey found a gap in the understanding of what constitutes WSH: When asked directly if they had experienced WSH, only one in five respondents said yes.³³ However, when given specific examples, two in five indicated having experienced at least one harassing behaviour.³⁴

Further, 70% of victim-survivors did not report their experience, largely due to the fear of retaliation and the absence of an HR department.³⁵

The Tripartite Advisory on Managing Workplace Harassment, first issued in 2015, is not legally enforceable. The Penal Code and Protection from Harassment Act criminalise offences committed in workplaces, but do not impose legal duties on employers to prevent and address harassment.

Recommendations:

- Adopt ILO Convention No. 190.
- Ensure that the WFL covers WSH and imposes a duty on employers to prevent and address such harassment.

³⁰ AWARE and Ipsos, *Workplace Sexual Harassment in Singapore* (Singapore: Ipsos, 2021), 8, https://www.aware.org.sg/wp-content/uploads/Workplace-Sexual-Harassment_AWARE-Singapore_Report-14-Jan-2021.pdf

³¹ "Written Answer to PQ on Cases of Workplace Sexual Harassment and Actions Taken", Ministry of Manpower, Government of Singapore, 15 February 2022, <https://www.mom.gov.sg/newsroom/parliament-questions-and-replies/2022/0214-written-answer-to-pq-on-cases-of-workplace-sexual-harassment-and-actions-taken>

³² "Fighting Violence and Discrimination", AWARE Annual Report 2022, 6 May 2023, <https://aware.org.sg/report2022/fighting-violence-and-discrimination/#Advocacy>

³³ AWARE and Ipsos, *Workplace Sexual Harassment*, 7-8.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

D. Retirement Adequacy

Compared to men, women consistently have more difficulties setting aside the Basic Retirement Sum to receive monthly retirement payouts that cover basic living expenses.³⁶ This likely results from factors including workplace discrimination and unequal distribution of caregiving responsibilities within families, which interfere with women's ability to work.

State policies continue to reinforce gender role stereotypes: While companies are encouraged to offer additional two weeks of government-paid paternity leave on top of the mandatory two weeks, working fathers' leave quantum remains a quarter that of mothers.³⁷ In 2023, women constituted 95% of all persons outside the labour force due to family responsibilities.³⁸

Women aged 25-54 with children have been found to have the lowest labour force participation rate and incomes compared to men and childless women.³⁹ The Home Caregiving Grant, the only scheme aimed at alleviating care-related costs, remains insufficient.⁴⁰ Hence, family caregivers must largely rely on their own savings to finance their caregiving expenses—particularly detrimental for those who are older and/or not working.⁴¹

Meanwhile, healthcare subsidy packages for older persons, though welcome, remain limited in their effectiveness as they are targeted at specific cohorts.

Ultimately, being less able to participate in the labourforce coupled with their hefty caregiving expenses impedes women's accumulation of retirement savings and increases their vulnerability to old-age poverty.

³⁶ "Written Answer by Mrs Josephine Teo, Minister for Manpower, to Parliamentary Question on CPF Basic Retirement Sum", (Ministry of Manpower, Ministry of Manpower), 1 April 2019, <https://www.mom.gov.sg/newsroom/parliament-questions-and-replies/2019/0401-%20written-answer-by-mrs-josephine-teo-minister-for-manpower-to-parliamentary-question-on-cpf-basic-retirement-sum>; "Written Answer to PQ on Retirement Adequacy", Minister for Manpower, Government of Singapore, 3 October 2023, <https://www.mom.gov.sg/newsroom/parliament-questions-and-replies/2023/1003-written-answer-to-pq-on-retirement-adequacy>

³⁷ It remains unclear when the updated paternity leave policy will be made mandatory. Amelia Teng, "Budget 2023: Paid paternity leave doubled to 4 weeks, unpaid infant care leave from 6 to 12 days", The Straits Times, Singapore Press Holdings Ltd. Co., 20 February 2023, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/budget-2023-govt-doubles-paid-paternity-leave-from-two-to-four-weeks-unpaid-infant-care-leave-from-six-to-12-days>

³⁸ Defined as housework, childcare and caregiving for other family members.

³⁹ Eileen Lin, Grace Gan and Jessica Pan, Singapore's Adjusted Gender Pay Gap (Singapore: Ministry of Manpower, 2020), 23, https://stats.mom.gov.sg/iMAS_PdfLibrary/mrsd-Singapores-Adjusted-Gender-Pay-Gap.pdf

⁴⁰ Though the monthly cash payout was increased to up to \$400 in 2023, AWARE's 2019 study found that family caregivers whose employment status changed suffered an average 63% (or around \$56,877) loss in income. AWARE, *Make Care Count*, (Singapore: AWARE, 2019), 21, https://www.aware.org.sg/wp-content/uploads/Aware_Eldercare-Research-Report-8-10-19.pdf

⁴¹ AWARE, *Make Care Count*, 25; Singapore Alliance for Women in Ageing, *Older Women's Responses*, 8-9.

Recommendations:

- Equalise maternity and paternity leave.
- Introduce paid eldercare leave.
- Legislate the right to request flexible work arrangements.
- Introduce a Caregiver Support Grant⁴².
- Expand the professional care economy.
- Expand the Pioneer Generation Package⁴³ to all persons upon reaching age 65
- Make CareShield Life premiums gender-neutral

ARTICLE 15: LAW

A. Women's Charter

The 2023 Women's Charter amendments included the expansion of the definition of DV to cover sexual and emotional or psychological abuse, with an example of financial abuse included in an illustration of the latter.⁴⁴

The new Act also grants appointed protectors the power to apply for PPOs on behalf of victim-survivors, even without their consent. While this is aimed at ensuring victim-survivors' physical safety, this overriding of their autonomy can potentially exacerbate their trauma.

Recommendations:

- Expand the DV definition to include financial abuse as a distinct category with relevant illustrations.
- Expand the definition of "family member" to include unmarried intimate partners.
- Train protectors to intervene in a trauma-informed, survivor-centric manner.

B. Criminal Procedure Code

Section 424 is intended to ensure prompt reporting of serious crimes unless there is a "reasonable excuse" not to do so, yet it remains unclear what constitutes "reasonable excuse". The current

⁴² To help offset family caregivers' caregiving expenses, enable them to accumulate retirement savings and recognise the work they are doing.

⁴³ Though the Majulah Package announced in 2024 is aimed at boosting the retirement savings of eligible Singapore Citizens born in 1973 or earlier, the Pioneer Generation Package has more comprehensive coverage including outpatient care subsidies and cash payouts for older persons with disabilities. "Pioneer Generation Package", Ministry of Health, 18 January 2024, <https://www.moh.gov.sg/healthcare-schemes-subsidies/pioneer-generation-package>; Ministry of Finance, *Annex F-2: Majulah Package* (Singapore: Ministry of Finance, 2024), <https://www.mof.gov.sg/docs/librariesprovider3/budget2024/download/pdf/annexf2.pdf>

⁴⁴ The example was "X threatens to stop giving Y a monthly allowance if Y contacts Y's family or friends or seeks help."

"Women's Charter (Family Violence and Other Matters) (Amendment) Bill", Singapore Statutes Online, 9 May 2023, <https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Bills-Supp/18-2023/Published/20230509?DocDate=20230509>

provision is problematic where it relates to sexual offences. After sexual assault, one key element of trauma healing is regaining a sense of control, including exercising agency in deciding whether to report one's case. It is arguably unethical for trauma-informed, survivor-centric support service providers to file reports on behalf of victim-survivors who are unwilling to do so.⁴⁵ Ultimately, the obligation to report can result in retraumatisation of victim-survivors and even deter them from accessing support.

Recommendation: Clarify what constitutes “reasonable excuse” to not file a police report, with consideration to professionals providing services to victim-survivors.⁴⁶

ARTICLE 16: MARRIAGE AND FAMILY LIFE

A. *Single Parents*

(I) *Illegitimacy*

Policy and legal distinctions between “legitimate” and “illegitimate” children remain.⁴⁷

(II) *Child benefits*

Unwed parents remain ineligible for the Baby Bonus Cash Gift and tax reliefs⁴⁸ granted to married parents. Missing out on this substantial assistance further penalises unwed parents who already struggle financially as sole breadwinners and caregivers.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Outside of exceptional situations e.g. when a client is in imminent danger, or is a minor.

⁴⁶ For example, there is “reasonable excuse” where relevant professionals supporting a vulnerable group determine that: (i) it is necessary to maintain client trust and confidentiality with respect to information that would otherwise trigger a S424 duty, to effectively provide that assistance; and (ii) the risk of prospective danger to the client or another person is not sufficiently clear or significant as to outweigh the need for trust and confidentiality. (The fact that an assailant has not been identified or apprehended should not by itself be taken to establish such a risk.)

⁴⁷ Any child born outside of marriage is deemed “illegitimate”.

⁴⁸ Including the Parenthood Tax Rebate, Working Mother's Child Relief and Handicapped Child Relief.

⁴⁹ In 2022, the median monthly income of single unwed citizen mothers under 35 years old was \$1,100 while that of unwed mothers over 35 was \$5,400. This is significantly lower than the national median monthly household income of \$10,099. The average monthly income of unwed mothers under 35 (\$2,600) was only slightly higher than that of the bottom 10% of Singapore households then (i.e. \$2,314) Singapore Department of Statistics, *Key Household Income Trends, 2022* (Singapore: Singapore Department of Statistics, 2023), 5, <https://www.singstat.gov.sg/-/media/files/publications/households/pp-s29.ashx>; “Average Monthly Household Income from Work (Including Employer CPF Contributions) Among Resident Employed Households”, Singapore Department of Statistics, 7 February 2024, <https://tablebuilder.singstat.gov.sg/table/CT/17880>; “Annual Median and Average Monthly Income of Single Unwed Parents”, *Singapore Parliamentary Debates, Official Report*, 4 March 2024, <https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/fullreport?sittingdate=04-03-2024>

(III) Housing

The policy definition of a “family nucleus” excludes unwed mothers and their children, making them ineligible for priority housing schemes.⁵⁰

From mid 2024, unwed mothers from age 35 will be able to purchase new two-room flats in any estate; applications by younger mothers will be assessed on a case-by-case basis.⁵¹ HDB currently adopts a similar approach in assessing public rental flat applications by those under 21.⁵²

Separately, divorced parents with shared care and control of under-21 children have to decide which spouse can list their children in flat applications and require their ex-spouse’s written agreement for this.⁵³ This can be difficult in many instances, including in cases of domestic violence and acrimonious divorce; more importantly, it is contrary to the principle of shared care and control.

Further, housing grant amounts for second-timer applicants are markedly lower than those for first-timers.⁵⁴ Though selling a matrimonial flat may yield a profit, proceeds typically go towards paying off divorce-related legal fees, and supporting children.

Recommendations:

- Abolish the concept of illegitimacy.
- Equalise child-related benefits regardless of parents’ marital status.
- Implement a programme to provide unwed single mothers and DV victim-survivors with stable housing for at least two years, alongside support services.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ E.g. Parenthood Priority Scheme (PPS), Third Child Priority Scheme (TCPS)

⁵¹ <https://www.hdb.gov.sg/cs/infoweb/National-Day-Rally-2023-Housing-Announcements>

“Speech by Minister Lawrence Wong at the Committee of Supply Debate 2020 - Building our Future City and Home”, Ministry of National Development, 4 March 2020,

<https://www.mnd.gov.sg/newsroom/speeches/view/speech-by-minister-lawrence-wong-at-the-committee-of-supply-debate-2020---building-our-future-city-and-home>

⁵² HDB practises case-by-case flexibility with such applications, but their assessment criteria remains opaque. “Helping Single Parent Households,” Housing Development Board, Government of Singapore, accessed on 28 June 2022, <https://www.hdb.gov.sg/about-us/news-and-publications/publications/hdbspeaks/helping-singleparent-households>

⁵³ “Requirement For Divorce Rulings That Award Shared Care And Control To State Which Party Is Allowed To List Child As An Essential Occupier In Their Application To Buy A Subsidised HDB Flat”, Ministry of Social and Family Development, Government of Singapore, 1 November 2021, <https://www.msf.gov.sg/media-room/article/Requirement-for-Divorce-Rulings-that-Award-Shared-Care-and-Control-to-State-Which-Party-is-Allowed-to-List-Child-as-an-Essential-Occupier-in-Their-Application-to-Buy-a-Subsidised-HDB-Flat>

⁵⁴ E.g. the Enhanced CPF Housing Grant (EHG) for first-timers is dependent on their income tiers, with the highest grant amount amounting to \$80,000. The Step-Up CPF Housing Grant for second-timers is set at \$15,000. AWARE, *Omnibus*, 103.

⁵⁵ AWARE, *Why Stable Housing Matters: Outcomes Of The S.H.E. Project For Single-Mother Families* (Singapore: AWARE, 2022), 21, <https://www.aware.org.sg/wp-content/uploads/AWARE-S.H.E-Project-Report-Why-Stable-Housing-Matters-May-2022.pdf>

- Expand the “family nucleus” definition.
- Lower minimum age criteria for public rental housing to 18 years old.
- Allow divorced parents with shared care and control to both list their children in flat applications
- Allow divorced single parents to receive HDB loans and levy waivers regardless of previous reception.

B. Migrant Spouses

In 2022, 33% of all citizen marriages involved transnational couples.⁵⁶ Almost 7 in 10 non-citizen spouses are women.

(I) Immigration status

The State argues that the practice of not publicising detailed criteria for LTVP/+, PR and citizenship application or reasons for rejection is consistent with “immigration authorities across the world”.⁵⁷ Even then, Singapore's criteria is considerably vague: The Immigrations and Checkpoints Authority’s website only lists “factors for consideration”⁵⁸ without indicating how each is measured. Though the State has argued that this is to prevent “gaming and abuse of the system”, the practice should be balanced against transnational families’ need for stability.⁵⁹

(II) Domestic violence

In 2016, 203 PPO applications⁶⁰ were filed by migrant wives. AWARE Helpline data suggests that migrant spouses are particularly vulnerable to spousal abuse: From 2016 to 2018, 27.5% of migrant spouse callers—compared to 13% of Singaporean callers—experienced DV.⁶¹

⁵⁶ National Population and Talent Division, Strategy Group, Prime Minister’s Office, *Population in Brief 2023* (Singapore: NPTD, 2023), 13, <https://www.population.gov.sg/files/media-centre/publications/population-in-brief-2023.pdf>

⁵⁷ Singapore Government, *Sixth periodic report of Singapore* (Geneva: Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, 2021), 40.

⁵⁸ Including family ties to Singaporeans, economic contributions, qualifications, age, family profile and length of residency.

“Becoming a Singapore Citizen”, Immigration & Checkpoints Authority, Government of Singapore, 6 March 2024, <https://www.ica.gov.sg/reside/citizenship/apply>

⁵⁹ Brenda Tham, “Help available for foreign spouses of Singaporeans”, *The Straits Times*, Singapore Press Holdings Ltd. Co., 28 May 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/forum/letters-in-print/help-available-for-foreign-spouses-of-singaporeans>

⁶⁰ Constituted 7% of all PPO applications in 2016.

“Percentage of Requests For Personal Protection Orders Made By Foreign Spouses Against Their Husbands In Past Three Years”, *Singapore Parliamentary Debates, Official Report*, 6 January 2020, <https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/fullreport?sittingdate=6-01-2020>

⁶¹ Migrant spouses are likely more vulnerable because they depend on their spouses to apply for and renew their LTVP/+ as long as they are married. They cannot be sponsored by other Singapore citizens.

(III) Employment

Migrant spouses are not automatically granted the right to work.⁶² LTVP/+ holders with a Letter of Consent cannot have more than one employer at a time, and cannot do ad-hoc, app-based work⁶³. This disadvantages mothers in particular, who often need flexibility to juggle work and caregiving.

(IV) Housing

Citizens married to non-residents are treated as singles during flat purchase grant applications. To apply for rental housing, transnational couples must make an appeal to HDB.⁶⁴

Migrant spouses cannot be co-owners and thus cannot automatically inherit their matrimonial homes in the event of their Singaporean spouses' deaths.⁶⁵

Recommendations:

- Grant all migrant spouses LTVP+ if they qualify; publish clear and transparent eligibility criteria for LTVP/+, PR and citizenship.
- Allow abused migrant spouses to renew LTVP/+ independently of citizen spouses.
- Grant automatic right to work; lift LTVP/+ holders' employment restrictions.
- Ease housing access with clear, timed routes to PR status.

C. Divorce

The 2023 Family Justice Reform Act introduced measures to strengthen Singapore's maintenance enforcement regime, including empowering a new unit of MEOs appointed by the Law Minister to proactively seek defaulters' financial information.⁶⁶ This is a positive move that will assist claimants in obtaining evidence and enable the Courts to differentiate between those who refuse to and cannot pay.

Nonetheless, embedding maintenance enforcement within the legal system can be resource intensive for the Courts and may continue to pose challenges to women—particularly those who are time-poor and of low income—who will still need to go to court to enforce their orders.

⁶² Those on a Short-Term Visit Pass are not eligible for LOC and thus do not have the right to work. AWARE, *Omnibus*, 75-77 & 86.

⁶³ Including food delivery and private hire driving.

⁶⁴ "Eligibility Criteria and Schemes", Housing Development Board, Government of Singapore, 18 January 2024, <https://www.hdb.gov.sg/residential/renting-a-flat/renting-from-hdb/public-rental-scheme/eligibility>

⁶⁵ AWARE has encountered cases where the flat ownership went to another Singaporean family member, e.g. an in-law, who may have been a joint-owner.

⁶⁶ "Family Justice Reform Bill", *Singapore Parliamentary Debates, Official Report*, 8 May 2023, <https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/#/fullreport?sittingdate=08-05-2023>

MEOs will also hold conciliation sessions between the spouses to establish a sustainable maintenance arrangement. This approach, however, may not be suitable where DV has occurred as being in close proximity to the perpetrator can often be distressing to survivors.

Recommendations

- Establish an independent agency to facilitate maintenance enforcement, oversee MEOs' work and handle other related matters.
- Train MEOs to carry out their duties in a trauma-informed, survivor-centred manner.
- Introduce alternative dispute resolution processes for cases involving DV victim-survivors.

ARTICLE 24: COMMITMENT OF STATE PARTIES

A. Procedural issues faced in reporting sexual violence

Between 2019 and 2022, 9,629 reports of sexual assault were made.⁶⁷ However, under-reporting remains a problem: 70% of AWARE's Sexual Assault Care Centre clients do not file formal reports, often due to their fear of being disbelieved and worry about family and/or friends' reactions.⁶⁸ In our experience, another reason for under-reporting is victim-survivors' fear of undergoing a polygraph test.⁶⁹

FME access is also only granted upon filing a police report and under-21 victim-survivors require parental consent to undergo the examination.

Recommendations:

- Train investigating officers and medical professionals in trauma-informed and survivor-centred investigative strategies, before assigning them sexual violence cases.⁷⁰
- Allow all victim-survivors to undergo FME (i) regardless of the filing of a police report; and (ii) without parental consent.
- Remove polygraph tests from the police investigation process.

⁶⁷ These cases included rape, sexual assault by penetration, outrage of modesty and sexual offences involving children and vulnerable victims.

Jasmine Ong, "Police unveil new measures to make reporting of sex crimes safer, give victims priority and privacy", TODAY, Mediacorp Pte Ltd., 18 April 2023, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/police-new-measures-sex-crime-victims-priority-privacy-2151231>

⁶⁸ AWARE, *Omnibus*, 132.

⁶⁹ Case examples can be found on pages 216-217 of AWARE's *Omnibus* report.

⁷⁰ Refresher courses and evaluations should be conducted regularly. AWARE, *Omnibus*, 225-227.

B. TFSV

A Telegram group chat titled “SG Nasi Lemak”, in which explicit and non-consensually obtained and/or distributed images were shared, surfaced in 2018.⁷¹ At its peak, it comprised over 44,000 members, yet only four arrests were made in relation to this. In 2021 and 2023, similar group chats resurfaced.⁷²

Since 2016, AWARE has seen a consistently high proportion of TFSV cases.⁷³ A 2022 poll also found that 31% of respondents experienced and/or witnessed gender-based online harms.⁷⁴

Recommendations: Under MCI’s Code of Practice for Online Safety,⁷⁵

- Include all non-consensually obtained and/or distributed intimate content under the “sexual content” category.
- Clearly explain take-down process and ensure easy access.
- Specify the timeframe (ideally 24 hours) for compliance with take-down orders.

⁷¹ Clement Yong, “Police investigating Telegram chat group suspected of sharing obscene videos, photos of girls”, *The Straits Times*, Singapore Press Holdings Ltd. Co., 4 October 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/courts-crime/police-investigating-telegram-chat-group-suspected-of-sharing-obscene-videos>

⁷² Charlotte Chong, “Chat groups circulating obscene images of women in S’pore re-emerge on Telegram”, *The Straits Times*, Singapore Press Holdings Ltd. Co., 5 October 2021, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/chat-groups-circulating-obscene-images-of-women-in-singapore-re-emerge-on-telegram>; “Response to Telegram channels offering explicit videos”, AWARE, 26 October 2023, <https://www.aware.org.sg/2023/10/response-to-telegram-channels-offering-explicit-videos/>

⁷³ AWARE began tracking TFSV cases seen at SACC in 2016. These cases constitute 20% of SACC cases on average.

⁷⁴ “Sunlight AfA Releases Topline Findings from Poll on Online Harms at Webinar”, Ministry of Communications and Information, Government of Singapore, 25 March 2022, <https://www.mci.gov.sg/media-centre/press-releases/sunlight-afa-releases-topline-findings-from-poll-online-harms/>

⁷⁵ “Online Safety (Miscellaneous Amendments) Act Takes Effect on 1 February 2023”, Ministry of Communications and Information, 31 January 2023, <https://www.mci.gov.sg/media-centre/press-releases/online-safety-act-takes-effect-on-1-february-2023/>