



Singapore Council of Women's Organisations

NGO SHADOW REPORT

For the

Review of Singapore's 6th Periodic Report

At the

**88th CEDAW Session
May 2024**



GLOSSARY

ACWO	ASEAN Confederation of Women's Organisations
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CBD	Council for Board Diversity
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
Constitution	Constitution of the Republic of Singapore
CPF	Central Provident Fund (Singapore)
DEI	Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
DMA	Divorce by Mutual Agreement
FWA	Flexible Work Arrangements
Government	Government of the Republic of Singapore
HR	Human Resources
IPC	Institution of Public Character
MOE	Ministry of Education (Singapore)
MOM	Ministry of Manpower (Singapore)
MRSS	Matched Retirement Savings Scheme by the CPF
MSF	Ministry of Social and Family Development (Singapore)
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
OCHA	Online Criminal Harms Act
OWD	Office for Women's Development
POHA	Protection from Harassment Act
PPO	Personal Protection Order
SCWO	Singapore Council of Women's Organisations
SCWO's Conversations	SCWO's Report on the Conversations on Singapore Women's Development ¹
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals

¹ <https://www.scwo.org.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/18SepConversations-on-Singapore-Womens-Development-SCWOS-Report.pdf>

SGX	Singapore Exchange
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
SWD	Strategy and Women's Development
SWHF	Singapore Women's Hall of Fame ²
White Paper	White Paper on Singapore Women's Development
WHO	World Health Organisation

² <https://www.swhf.sg/>

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report follows the written submission by SCWO for the 85th CEDAW Pre-Sessional Working Group in 2022. The content in this report is framed by the research and views gathered by SCWO through dialogues, focus group discussions and surveys, with guidance from the SCWO Research Committee. A summary of our key recommendations:

Article 2

- Improve the collection of data, disaggregated by sex, make it publicly available to women's NGOs.

Article 3

- Provide more support to SCWO and organisations with established beneficiaries in the community.

Article 5

- Equalise maternity and paternity leaves and introduce paid family care leave.
- Name roads after trailblazing Singapore women.

Article 7

- Greater representation of women on boards.
- Expose younger women to take up board work starting at university.

Article 8

- SDG 5 as the Driving Force for Progress.
- Government Representative for Women's Rights on ACWC.

Article 10

- Responsibility of adults in educating children on gender roles.
- Inspiring boys and girls with women's success stories to encourage them to take up non-traditional fields of study.

Article 11

- Emotional support to employees for cases of workplace discrimination & harassment.
- Legislate right to request flexible work arrangements for all companies in Singapore.

Article 13

- Accommodate changing needs of future cohort of ageing in workplaces and mental wellness.
- Support and awareness for women experiencing financial abuse/difficulties.

Article 15

- More regular mandatory counselling sessions for both perpetrator and victim.
- Sensitivity training for police officers attending online harassment cases.
- Educate the public on active bystander prevention.

Article 16

- Increase awareness of community-based support networks for vulnerable women in underrepresented groups.
- Reduce the minimum bar of 3 years of marriage before filing for divorce to 2 years, in cases of violence.
- Intervention by police and authorities to track maintenance payment evaders.

ARTICLE 2

A. National Machinery for the Advancement of Women

The OWD, now the SWD, serves under MSF as the national focal point on issues related to women's development and empowerment, and for international cooperation pertaining to women. SCWO affirms that there have been positive developments in the evolution of the national machinery for the advancement of women.

B. Gender-Disaggregated Data

SCWO reiterates the CEDAW committee's recommendation to improve the collection of gender-disaggregated data, especially to identify specific areas where women continue to be underrepresented or disadvantaged and to assess the impact of the measures adopted. These include the average amount of CPF savings³ to compare retirement adequacy and preparedness, cases of workplace discrimination, and issues related to ageing and caregiving.

The Government should make this data publicly available to provide women's NGOs with adequate statistics to monitor and report on Singapore's international human rights obligations.

ARTICLE 3

A. SCWO as an Independent Women's Rights Institution

As the independent national coordinating body of women's organisations in Singapore, SCWO is actively playing the role of an independent women's rights institution that works primarily on the development of the status of women in the country.

With a network of over 60 member organisations from different sectors in society, SCWO provides them a platform to engage in conversation directly with the Government to have their concerns addressed. Its large membership base enables it to receive feedback from the ground as it comprises women from many walks of life. This allows for efficient rollouts of initiatives and a greater chance for the community to access and support them.

The government could continue to provide more resources such as funding, research expertise and support in capability building to SCWO and organisations that have established beneficiaries in the sector and communities to effectively promote and protect women's rights and gender equality.

³ <https://www cpf gov sg/member/growing-your-savings>

ARTICLE 5

A. Men as Caregivers

Greater emphasis should be placed on the recognition of shared responsibilities and the shared purpose in caring for the children and elderly in the family. There must be a mindset shift for men to take on an equal role as caregivers.

Mothers to newborns are currently entitled to sixteen weeks⁴, and four of them can be shared with their husbands through a shared parental leave⁵. Fathers are entitled to another four weeks of paid paternity leave, totalling only eight weeks. To encourage fathers to play a greater caregiving role, they should be able to be at home as often as the mother. Companies should proactively support and encourage fathers to utilise their paternity and childcare leave. Almost half of respondents are in support of equal parental leave as revealed by a survey by Indeed in 2023.⁶

Given the rapidly increasing ageing population in Singapore, parents are also finding themselves sandwiched in caring for their aged parents at the same time. Paid family care leave should be introduced to support the caregiving needs of the family, covering both children and the elderly.

B. Women as Leaders and Role Models

The Reykjavik Index for Leadership⁷ conducted for the first time in Singapore in 2022 cited that women are still seen to be better suited for leadership in stereotypically feminine/female-dominated industries – namely childcare, fashion and beauty.

For women who have been making waves in male-dominated sectors, there is a lack of visibility and recognition for their accomplishments.

The proposal in SCWO's Conversations⁸ report to establish a garden in Singapore dedicated to women to recognise their contributions to the nation was endorsed by the Prime Minister and will include elements of the Singapore Women's Hall of Fame. The SWHF is Singapore's premier award for women who have made an impact on our nation and bring their stories to the forefront, debunking the myth that women are not suitable for leadership and success.

We recommend the Government consider SCWO's proposal from the same report to also name roads after trailblazing Singapore women. There are, reportedly, some 540 roads in Singapore named after men, but only about 40 named after women. There are many more women who have contributed in significant ways to Singapore's development. We now have 192 women inducted in the SWHF representing different areas of society.

⁴ <https://www.mom.gov.sg/employment-practices/leave/maternity-leave/eligibility-and-entitlement>

⁵ <https://www.mom.gov.sg/employment-practices/leave/shared-parental-leave>

⁶ <https://sbr.com.sg/hr-education/news/almost-half-singaporean-workers-support-equal-parental-leave>

⁷ <https://www.kantarpublic.com/inspiration/thought-leadership/singapore-the-reykjavik-index-for-leadership>

⁸ See Glossary

ARTICLE 7

A. Women on Boards

We acknowledge the progress of women in leadership and the action plans proposed in the White Paper⁹. However, more can be done to encourage collaboration and partnership amongst private and public organisations to accelerate the momentum of women's representation on boards everywhere – an issue that concerted efforts by programmes such as SCWO's BoardAgender¹⁰ aims to support.

It is crucial to build a sustainable pipeline of next-generation board-ready women. The state should look into initiatives such as mandating gender diversity disclosures by requiring all companies over a specific size (e.g., More than 100 staff) to disclose gender pipeline information to the government.

There has been a significant improvement in the representation of women on boards of the 100 primary-listed companies since 2018¹¹. However, the growth of that on boards of the top 100 IPCs is declining, an increase of only 2% since 2018. The SCWO hopes to collaborate closely with the CBD to support this movement.

Younger women should also be encouraged and exposed to take up committee and board work starting at university - such as student unions - and continuing whilst at work. Encouraging aspiring female directors to step up is also instrumental, such as by awarding scholarships to aspiring women directors to financially support them in director training.

B. Women in Politics

There should also be a larger representation of women politicians in the parliament. Our current 31% women representation in the parliament¹² is an improvement that can further accelerate the momentum by enhancing the role of women in the larger eco-system of society.

ARTICLE 8

A. SDG 5 as the Driving Force for Progress

For each of the SDGs – such as health and well-being, education, climate action sustainability – gender equality closely interlinks them in their own respective ways. With 2030 being only 6 years away, we hope to continue working with the Government to support its efforts in achieving SDG 5 and, in turn, the rest of the goals.

B. Membership in ACWO

SCWO is a member of ACWO, an institutional framework established to bring together women's voluntary organisations in the ASEAN region to work in concerted efforts towards the full integration of women in development.

⁹ <https://www.scwo.org.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/White-Paper-on-Singapore-Womens-Development.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://boardagender.org/>

¹¹ <https://www.councilforboarddiversity.sg/resources/latest-statistics/>

¹² <https://www.councilforboarddiversity.sg/resources/latest-statistics/>

The ACWO 2025 Vision: Way Forward¹³ aids in aligning ASEAN with the SDGs, especially those concerning gender equality and women empowerment.

C. Government Representative for Women's Rights on ACWC

MSF has appointed SCWO President, Ms Junie Foo as the Singapore Government's new Representative for Women's Rights on the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC). Her term of appointment will be for three years with effect from 7 October 2023.¹⁴

ARTICLE 10

To bring about mindset shifts and break entrenched gender stereotypes, efforts must be directed towards educating the younger generation.

A. The Responsibility of Adults

Parents should be educated about the importance of gender equality and gender roles within families and recognise their unconscious biases to avoid entrenching stereotypes onto their children. Early childhood educators should be trained to use gender-neutral language to avoid unconsciously entrenching stereotypes onto their students.

B. Inspiring Boys and Girls with Success Stories

Children in school should be educated on the successes of women in various career paths and encourage them to take an interest in non-traditional fields of study. The Government should provide more support and awareness to schools, teachers, and parents for existing programmes such as SCWO's Project Awesome, which brings the stories of the women in SWHF to schools to inspire young Singaporeans, especially girls – to dream big, aim high, and live to their fullest potential. SCWO recommends that these programmes be institutionalised in the education system through the Character and Citizenship Education¹⁵ curriculum on DEI.

Project Awesome hopes to reach out to young boys and girls in more underprivileged communities, mixed-gendered schools and even early childhood education centres. SCWO would like MOE to endorse the initiative for it to be widely accepted and undertaken by more schools in the nation.

¹³ <https://acwo.asia/2023/05/22/elementor-1535/>

¹⁴ <https://www.msf.gov.sg/media-room/article/new-government-representative-for-women's-rights-on-asean-commission>

¹⁵ <https://www.moe.gov.sg/-/media/files/secondary/syllabuses/cce/2021-character-and-citizenship-education-syllabus-secondary.pdf>

ARTICLE 11

A. Workplace Discrimination & Harassment

The Workplace Fairness Act¹⁶ will offer protection for women in the workplace against gender discrimination. However, the act does not include workplace harassment and there is currently no legislation that addresses an explicit obligation for the employer to seriously act on cases of workplace harassment.

Emotions such as the shock from discrimination and harassment, betrayal, confusion about what one should do next or where one should go, and fear of the repercussions if one decides to step up and speak out affect the victims' mental well-being during the process of reporting.

While the requirement for companies to put in place proper grievance handling procedures would help to address workplace harassment cases, employers – especially SMEs and non-profit organisations – should be equipped to deal with discrimination and harassment cases holistically, including emotional support through counselling, or providing easy access to social services for their employees – to encourage victims to be comfortable in sharing their experiences and heal.

B. Flexible Work Arrangements

In 2023, there were more than 680,000 women outside the workforce, and 194,400 of them were women between the ages of 25 to 59¹⁷. Among them, 68% cited housework or caregiving as main reason for not working.

With the impending Tripartite Guidelines on FWA, more companies should offer FWAs so that both women and men need not choose between work and caregiving. As the retirement and re-employment age is extended¹⁸, older women may be keen to continue their employment if given the flexibility especially for them to attend to their healthcare needs and caregiving responsibilities.

SCWO hopes that these guidelines will eventually be legislated.

ARTICLE 13

A. The Future Cohort of Ageing in Singapore

Support needs to be given to accommodate the changing needs of the future cohort of the ageing population – including financial literacy to prepare for retirement as well as maintaining mental wellness as more end up living alone¹⁹.

i. *Retirement Adequacy*

For women to achieve retirement adequacy, there should be a push for women to start planning for their retirement early to give them enough time to gather enough savings to live their desired lifestyle as they

¹⁶ <https://www.mom.gov.sg/newsroom/press-releases/2023/0804-government-accepts-tripartite-committee-final-recommendations-for-wfa>

¹⁷ Labour Force in Singapore 2023, Table L7: Residents Outside the Labour Force Aged Fifteen Years and Over by Main Reason for Not Working, Age and Sex 2023

¹⁸ <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/national-day-rally-2019-retirement-age-to-go-up-to-65-older-workers-cpf-rates-to-be-raised>

¹⁹ <https://www.scwo.org.sg/tomorrows-new-old-singapores-future-cohort-of-ageing/>

age. About half of the respondents who did not want to retire just yet were found to not have enough savings for retirement in an online survey²⁰ conducted by SCWO in June 2022.

Taking time away from full-time work to assume the role of caregiver is a contributing factor to the gender pay gap and in part the cause of the savings gap reflected in the lower CPF balances²¹ for women. The CPF MRSS aims to boost the monthly payouts in retirement and will be enhanced from 2025 to raise the matching grant cap to \$2000 annually subject to a lifetime cap of \$20000²². Still, the effectiveness of the scheme can be limited as eligibility is restricted to CPF members above 55 years old. The qualifying age for MRSS should be lowered to allow more runway for women to build up their savings.

Furthermore, women who are unemployed rely mostly on family members to do the top-ups. To encourage more voluntary top-ups, the incentive of tax relief for making the cash top-up to CPF accounts of loved ones should be extended.

ii. Physical & Mental Health

The Government can partner stakeholders like SCWO to encourage women to embrace more holistic management of health with already existing initiatives such as HealthierSG²³.

The protection of older women's mental wellness is also an important conversation to address. As more of them end up living on their own, it often leads to social isolation²⁴. Older women are also prone to being abused physically and financially, especially by their family members and caregivers²⁵.

iii. Stereotypes

Dignity in growing old should be an important area of advocacy for an ageing society like Singapore. More awareness should be given to the success of older women in public life and how it is indeed possible to achieve success even in the later stages of life.

More support should be invested in research to better understand the impact of stereotyping of women across their life course, and to develop and improve policies that are consistent with the WHO framework on Healthy Ageing²⁶ and Active Ageing²⁷.

B. Financial Abuse against Women

From consultations with SCWO members, it was shared that women lose access to Government subsidies once they are employed, posing a problem for job sustainability as they would have to leave employment to re-qualify for subsidies that provide the same amount of income at the end of the day. There needs to be a holistic method of incentivising and empowering women to return to the workforce.

²⁰ https://www.scwo.org.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/SCWO_Tomorrows-New-Old_Report.pdf

²¹ According to CPF Board's 2022 data, among those aged 50 to 65 years old, women's total CPF balances are 13 per cent lower than men.

²² [annexf1.pdf \(mof.gov.sg\)](https://www.mof.gov.sg/)

²³ <https://www.healthiersg.gov.sg/>

²⁴ <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/commentary/senior-loneliness-mortality-risk-ageing-public-health-crisis-3615171#:~:text=This%20is%20worrying%20given%20that,cardiovascular%20disease%20and%20decreased%20im>
munity.

²⁵ <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/slight-rise-in-elder-abuse-cases-caregiver-stress-is-a-common-factor-behind-abuse>

²⁶ <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/186463>

²⁷ https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/67215/WHO_NMH_NPH_02.8.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

In a survey²⁸ by SCWO's Maintenance Support Central²⁹, close to half of clients are not divorced but are in conflictual or unhappy marriages, where they are not receiving child/ren or spousal maintenance to support themselves or their child/ren. Abusers withhold and control finances to assert power and control over victims.

While financial abuse is a form of emotional and psychological abuse that has been defined as forms of family violence in the recent amendment of the Women's Charter, we propose that the definition can be more explicit by listing financial abuse as a form of family/domestic violence.

ARTICLE 15

A. Domestic Violence

i. Personal Protection Order (PPO)

We propose that every PPO invoked against a perpetrator should also come with a mandatory counselling order for both the perpetrator and the victim. Counselling sessions should be held more frequently to ensure consistency and efficacy. The 6 months of court-mandated counselling sessions should be increased in frequency from once a month to fortnightly at a minimum. Enforcement of penalties if one breaches the order should be stiffer.

ii. Protection and Support in the Workplace

Both public and private sector organisations should have formal domestic violence response policies and provide domestic violence response training for their employees.

SCWO proposes to introduce a leave type dedicated to supporting victims of domestic violence. This would allow victims to take time off work to carry out the necessary legal actions required of them by the court or without sacrificing their annual leave.

B. Online Harms

To support and bring more awareness to online harms, the Government can increase collaboration with social media and technology companies to co-develop online guidelines and policies to ensure and enhance protections for girls and women from technology-facilitated harassment, abuse, or violence.

Police officers should go through sensitivity training in managing expectations and providing moral and emotional support for the victim. They should also be aware of the available resources victims can be referred to for additional social support, such as SHECARES@SCWO³⁰, Singapore's first one-stop support centre for victims or survivors of online harms, located at the SCWO Centre.

Clients from SHECARES@SCWO have shared that not enough is being done to tackle the issue of anonymous online perpetrators due to the limited reach that the court has on those accounts. There needs

²⁸ [https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/i-didn't-have-friends-i-could-talk-to-foreign-spouse-recounts-financial-abuse-by-ex-husband](https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/i-didn-t-have-friends-i-could-talk-to-foreign-spouse-recounts-financial-abuse-by-ex-husband)

²⁹ Drop-in centre providing spousal and/or child maintenance support.

³⁰ <https://www.scwo.org.sg/what-we-do/services/shecaresscwo/>

to be a stricter verification system for users to reduce such cases, making sure that they are identifiable in these situations.

C. Bystander Prevention

Awareness is the first step to addressing the underreporting of cases of violence against women. A nationwide campaign must be organised to educate the public on active bystander prevention and equip them with the skills and courage to interrupt and prevent violence in any situation.

It is also pertinent to continue educating and engaging the community to reduce the stigma of reporting cases of violence so victims to step out and speak up without the fear of being ostracised.

ARTICLE 16

A. Divorce

SCWO recommends increasing awareness of community-based support networks for vulnerable women in underrepresented groups, namely single mothers, divorcees, and caregivers, especially from low-income families.

Additionally, parties must have passed the time bar where they must be married for at least three years before filing for divorce unless they can prove “exceptional hardship or depravity”³¹. SCWO recommends this bar be reduced to a year or a maximum of two years to avoid making the divorce process painful and even unsafe.

B. Maintenance Enforcement Process

SCWO commends Parliament for passing the Family Justice Reform Bill³² in 2023. However, there are situations where the court is unable to proceed with the application for fresh maintenance order as the respondent cannot be reached via any known address. SCWO proposes the need for the police of relevant authorities to intervene in cases where the court cannot track down the respondent’s address.

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<https://www.singaporedivorcelawyer.com.sg/can-you-divorce/#:~:text=Parties%20must%20have%20passed%20the%20E2%80%9C3%2Dyear%20marriage%20bar%E2%80%9D&text=Additionally%2C%20you%20must%20have%20been,%E2%80%9D%20or%20%E2%80%9Cexceptional%20hardship%E2%80%9D.>

³² <https://www.mlaw.gov.sg/news/press-releases/2023-04-20-family-justice-reform-bill/>

ABOUT SCWO

The Singapore Council of Women's Organisations (SCWO) is the national coordinating body of women's organisations in Singapore. Established in March 1980, the SCWO serves to unite over 60 women's organisations, clubs, committees, groups, representing over 600,000 women in different sectors of society, working in accordance with its mission and vision of *Equal Space, Equal Voice, Equal Worth*.

Equal Space: Women should feel safe wherever they are, free to live their lives as they choose without any danger of discrimination, harassment, sexual assault, and violence.

Equal Voice: Women should be equally represented in political, corporate, and community leadership. Policymaking will benefit from the perspectives they bring to the discussions and decisions.

Equal Worth: Women should be fully recognised and valued for their contributions to society, family, and the workplace, where there should be no gender wage gap for work of equal value.

The SCWO is represented on various government and inter-ministry committees where we contribute our views in the areas of women and family issues. We are involved in feedback and consultation sessions organised by the Singapore government ministries on various policy developments and amendments.

The SCWO is also active in regional and international bodies, where it contributes views in the areas of family, women, and gender equality. We hold membership in the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Confederation of Women's Organisations (ACWO), the Asian Network of Women Shelters (ANWS) and the Global Network of Women's Shelters (GNWS).

Additionally, the SCWO has been in Special Consultative Status with the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) since 2014, and in Consultative Relationship with the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) since 2016.