

# Gender, early childhood education and development in Singapore

## Ministry of Community, Youth and Sports, Singapore

Singapore is a small city-state with an open economy. To remain competitive, its people have to continuously upgrade themselves. Singapore's economic vision is to have a highly skilled people and an innovative economy and to develop into a distinctive global city. The Government aims to build an inclusive society and a stronger Singapore where everyone counts. There are equal opportunities for all based on meritocracy. Fundamental resources such as education and healthcare are available for all citizens. Women have played a significant role and have made rapid progress. Singapore was ranked 8th out of 146 ranked countries on the Gender Inequality Index of the 2011 UN Human Development Report (UNDP, 2011).<sup>1</sup>

### Girls' and women's education and training

In Singapore, education is a key enabler in harnessing the potential of women and driving innovative economic development. The Government provides all Singaporean children with equal access to quality education. Compulsory education was implemented in 2003 to make the first six years of primary education compulsory. In 2011, Singapore achieved a high literacy rate of 94 per cent for resident females aged 15 years and over (Department of Statistics, 2012). Women make up more than half of the student population at local universities, and are well-represented in subjects that were traditionally viewed as male domains: in 2010, 59 per cent of Singapore universities' enrolment in natural, physical and mathematical sciences were women (Ministry of Education, 2011).

Singapore women have also made significant contributions in scientific research and development. There are now more female research scientists and engineers: 27 per cent in 2010, compared to 24 per cent in 2005 (A\*STAR, 2011). Of significance, since 2005, the rate of increase in the number of female research scientists and engineers has consistently outgrown that of males. Between 2009 and 2010, the number of female research scientists and engineers grew at 10 per cent compared to males at 5 per cent. Some illustrious examples are Professor Jackie Ying, a nanotechnology scientist who has established new frontiers in nanotechnology research, and Dr Lisa Ng, a virologist credited for developing diagnostic kits to detect the SARS-coronavirus, which causes Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), as well as the Avian Influenza H5N1 virus. Dr Ng's research was especially crucial during the 2003 SARS crisis that affected Asia.

Women who are in the workforce are also doing very well in skills upgrading and training programmes. In 2011 30 per cent of women aged 15 to 64 years had undergone job-related training compared to 24 per cent of males. Last year, more than 250,000 workers were

trained under the Workforce Skills Qualification (WSQ) system, about half of whom were women. The WSQ is a national skills certification system to train and certify key job competencies.

### Promoting work-life balance

The promotion of work-life balance is a key thrust of the Singapore Government to empower women. In 2011, 57 per cent of women in Singapore were in the labour force,<sup>2</sup> which is an improvement, but it still lags behind other developed economies. One of the key reasons cited for women's economic inactivity in the country is family responsibilities (Ministry of Manpower, 2011).<sup>3</sup> The provision of good, affordable and accessible childcare so that women can go to work with peace of mind is critical to work-life balance. The early childhood care and education (ECCE) programmes, collectively known as 'pre-school', are divided into 'childcare' (ages 2–6), regulated by the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports and 'kindergarten' (ages 4–6), regulated by the Ministry of Education.

There are close to 1,000 child care centres providing 80,000 places in Singapore. Over the next five years, the Government will facilitate the setting up of more new centres, to provide sufficient child care places and options for parents. It also highly subsidises child care fees, especially for low-income families, to keep child care affordable. The Government has also invested huge resources in order to improve the quality of child care in Singapore. Highly subsidised teacher training to improve capabilities and skills is one major initiative to enhance quality. From 2013, 75 per cent of all teachers for the kindergarten ages must have at least a diploma in early childhood.

To support women in balancing work and family especially to help women benefit from having greater flexibility at work, the Tripartite Committee on Work-Life Strategy (TriCom) was formed in 2000 with representatives from the Government, unions and employers as well as business associations and human resource practitioners. The role of the Tripartite Committee is to formulate and drive initiatives that facilitate the implementation of Work-Life strategies.

One initiative is the Work-Life Works! (or WoW!) Fund, which was introduced in 2004 to help companies implement work-life strategies by providing grants of up to SGD20,000 (almost USD16,000) per company. The Fund also subsidises work-life training and consultancy. One of the strategies of the Committee is to 'use CEOs to convince CEOs' because business leaders tend to be most convinced by the actions of their own peers. The Committee funds the Employer Alliance, a group of like-minded CEOs from best practice companies from a wide range of industries who promote work-life harmony to their peers. In 2010, 35 per

cent of companies had work-life arrangements, an improvement from 25 per cent in 2007 (Ministry of Manpower, 2010).

In 2007 the Government also partnered with the labour movement to introduce a programme called 'Back2Work With U' with the aim of helping mothers to return to the workforce. Under this programme, 12,000 mothers have so far been assisted to return to work.

## Developing infocomm capability and knowledge

Under the iN2015 Education and Learning plan, the Government aims to meet the diverse needs of learners in Singapore through the innovative use of infocomm.<sup>4</sup> This includes raising the levels of information and communication technology (ICT) usage for learning and teaching in all schools by embedding ICT into the curriculum and assessment. Singapore places great emphasis on developing infocomm capability and knowledge in our people, and 30 per cent of our IT professionals are women.<sup>5</sup> Singapore had a mobile penetration rate of 150 per cent in 2011. According to market research conducted in 2010, 72 per cent of mobile phones are smartphones – the 3rd highest smartphones penetration rate in the world. In addition, 82 per cent of our households and 80 per cent of businesses have broadband Internet access (Kang, 2011).

Yet another initiative is the effort of the Infocomm Development Authority of Singapore (IDA) in partnering companies to conduct pilots on home-based work and Smart Work Centres, which is also a very new project. The deployment of an ultra high-speed broadband network is underway. This would make it easier and more beneficial for companies to allow women to work from home or at Smart Work Centres. Home-based work benefits stay-at-home mothers and other caregivers.

## Singapore's commitment to the UNCRC

Singapore is committed to meeting its obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). In designing our policies and services for children, we are guided by its principles. For instance, the interests of the child are a paramount consideration. We also believe in empowering the child to achieve his or her full potential. Our commitment is also evident in the following key areas: having comprehensive legislative provisions to safeguard children's interests and welfare, strong inter-agency cooperation, promotion and provision of high standard health care, quality education and a safe environment for our children.

In Singapore, we also strongly believe in creating opportunities for youth to be actively involved in the community and to have a sense of ownership of societal issues. Two such initiatives are the Young ChangeMakers and the Youth Expedition Project (YEP). The Young ChangeMakers provides funding for youth to initiate projects which will benefit the local community, while the YEP provides youths with avenues to take part in community projects at international levels.

## Strengthening the social safety net

The Community Care Endowment Fund, or ComCare for short, was set up in 2005 to help needy Singaporeans and their families. Over the years, the Government has also progressively increased

the Fund, which has grown from the initial endowment of \$0.5 billion to \$1.5 billion today.

In March 2012, the Minister of State for Community Development, Youth and Sports visited Australia to understand how counterparts there provide people-centric social, health and welfare services. Although the context and social security systems in Australia and Singapore differ, there are aspects that can be adapted and applied in Singapore.

The ministry works with various community partners, grassroots leaders, and those in the neighbourhoods – teachers, doctors, shopkeepers, hawkers and others who are the vital links on the ground. It is through the spirit of community care and the partnership of the people, public and private sectors that the Government can shape an inclusive society with a heart for the less fortunate, giving them hope for their future and build a home where everyone belongs.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The Gender Inequality Index is a composite index that measures the inequality between female and male achievements in three dimensions: reproductive health, empowerment and labour market. It ranges from 0, which indicates that women and men fare equally, to 1, which indicates that women fare as poorly as possible in all measured dimensions. Singapore's score was 0.086. The highest-ranked country, Sweden, scored 0.049.

<sup>2</sup> See: <http://www.singstat.gov.sg/stats/keyind.html#emp>

<sup>3</sup> Family responsibilities refer to housework, childcare or caregiving to families/relatives.

<sup>4</sup> See: <http://www.ida.gov.sg/Sector%20Development/20060413170949.aspx>

<sup>5</sup> See: <http://www.ida.gov.sg/Publications/20070822122857.aspx#manpower3>