

Report on IPS Closed-Door Discussion CEDAW Report 2011 on Singapore: “Addressing Violence Against Women”

5 March 2012

1. The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) and the Society Against Family Violence (SAFV) co-organised a closed-door discussion on the issue of family violence in Singapore. This issue was cited in the [Concluding Observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women \(CEDAW, 16 January 2012\)](#), in response to [Singapore’s Fourth Periodic Report \(2008\)](#) as one area Singapore should make greater progress in.
2. Participants were representatives from the government and civil society organisations working on the issue of eradicating violence against women.
3. The discussion centred on a proposal for a three-stage roadmap for achieving greater progress in addressing family violence – a one-year holistic review of policies and procedures, a coordinated national public education campaign and a well-aligned suite of capacity building efforts to help those dealing with reporting and treating victims of family violence do so more effectively .

Opening Remarks

4. IPS Director Mr Janadas Devan noted the positive strides Singapore has taken in addressing family violence since the third periodic review that was concluded in August 2007.
5. On the issue of marital rape for instance, the law was changed in February 2008 to criminalise forced sex if the victim has received a Personal Protection Order (PPO) from the offending spouse or is in divorce proceedings.¹ In February 2012, the prospect that wives could be afforded more legal protection was raised when Law Minister Mr K Shanmugam said that he had been persuaded by arguments presented to him by the non-government group, No To Rape. In the same month, Parliament repealed Section 157(d) of the Evidence Act thereby disallowing a woman’s sexual history to be used against her in a rape case.

¹ A Personal Protection Order serves to restrain a person from committing acts of family violence against the individual who has successfully applied for it. One option under the PPO is the Domestic Exclusion Order (DEO), which grants the right of exclusive occupation of the shared residence or a specified part of the shared residence to the protected person.

From the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, 2009, ‘Protecting Families from Violence: The Singapore Experience’

<http://app1.mcls.gov.sg/Portals/0/Summary/research/Protecting%20Families%20from%20Violence_The%20Singapore%20Experience_2009.pdf> (accessed on 28 March 2012).

6. Mr Devan spoke of the need to review the concept of family violence. This notion of 'family violence' should take into account new social trends which includes the impact of the Internet. Also, intentional financial deprivation could be construed as domestic violence. The speakers proceeded to discuss how to bring about greater progress in dealing with domestic violence.

Presentation by Ms Braema Mathi, AWARE and Mr Benny Bong, SAFV

7. A joint presentation by Ms Braema Mathi, Chair of the AWARE CEDAW Committee and Mr Benny Bong, President of Society Against Family Violence (SAFV) first outlined the key issues pertaining to violence against women in the family. Ms Mathi discussed [General Recommendation 19 \(GR19\)](#), the chapter of AWARE's CEDAW Shadow Report that specifically addressed violence against women, and Mr Bong highlighted findings of a [2008 study on 'Singapore's Response to Family Violence \(1997-2007\)'](#) and the [2010 International Violence Against Women Survey \(IVAWS, field work from February to May 2009\)](#).

8. Some key areas that need to be addressed are:

- i. **Updating and expanding of the definition of family violence*** to recognise psychological abuse, financial deprivation and cyber-stalking, as well as to recognise domestic violence between same-sex partners. The definition should also address violence against women in the home even if the victims are not part of the family, for instance, foreign domestic workers (FDWs).
- ii. **Improve coordination among agencies working on family violence.*** Cases fall through the cracks when one voluntary welfare agency feels that certain cases are more properly in the domain of another under the sector's 'many helping hands' approach. Also while the agencies deliver care professionally, there is no consistent standard of treatment or care across the sector. The Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS) may issue newsletters and organise annual family symposiums, but stakeholders want an exchange of higher quality information, data and knowledge. While the combined leadership of MCYS and the Singapore Police Force through the Family Violence Dialogue Group gives teeth to the issue of family violence, it would be better that one agency takes the lead, direction and ultimate responsibility.
- iii. **Collation of data should be conducted in a more consistent, coordinated way.***
- iv. **Change social norms that lead to underreporting and perpetuation of family violence.*** Society's view is that family violence is a private matter, which causes victims to remain silent.
- v. **Address abuse that has been taking place among the elderly, foreign wives and foreign domestic workers.*** Social workers speculate that psychological and financial abuse of the elderly is underreported. According to the research and experience of AWARE and the Archdiocesan Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People (ACMI), foreign wives too are deterred from reporting abuse because of their dependence on their husbands to secure

their long-term stay in Singapore. FDWs in similar states of dependence and who fear the cancellation of their employment contracts are deterred from reporting abuse.

- vi. Update the legal framework concerning family abuse.** While it was good that certain sections of the Evidence Act (as mentioned in the opening remarks) had been repealed, recognition for the rights of wives are only recognised when there is a PPO. The policing of sexual harassment is currently carried out through a plethora of laws, as it is not recognised as a form of violence on its own.
- vii. Provide more resources to address family violence.** This would range from the availability of shelters, as well as professionals and medical social workers with the right language competencies at the different organisations that victims might approach for help.
- viii. Address the lack of public awareness on the issue of family violence.** It is best not to leave this to the initiative of the six Regional Family Violence Networking Groups to launch local campaigns alone.

Roadmap For Review

9. The speakers outlined a **roadmap** to achieve greater traction in dealing with this host of issues.

- i. First, a comprehensive and national review of policies and procedures relating to family violence.** Such a review should be conducted by a committee comprising representatives from the government, specialists and some representatives of voluntary agencies. The committee could perhaps take a year to report its progress. The United Kingdom (UK) had conducted a similar review, culminating in the [Call to End Violence Against Women and Girls: Action Plan \(2011\)](#). This initiative could contain some lessons for Singapore.
- ii. Second, launch a coordinated, multi-pronged public education campaign after the review is completed.** The definition, laws, resources and programmes would have been aligned to be ready to receive and deal with cases more effectively.
- iii. Third, develop a capacity-building system in line with the recommendations from the review.** Manuals, training programmes, reporting and treatment protocols, and other resources should also be aligned and made available to those on the frontline of receiving reports from victims right up to judges, and lawyers. There is the need to standardise the manner in which cases are recorded. The inclusion of more female officers for frontline work would benefit female victims of abuse. Finally, personnel at the agencies that victims would approach for help should be able to speak in languages other than Singapore's official languages. They should be trained to use the right terms in communication to victims' needs effectively.

Discussion

10. Session chair Dr Gillian Koh, Senior Research Fellow at IPS invited participants to comment on the three steps in the proposed roadmap.

REVIEW OF POLICIES AND PROCEDURES**Redefining Violence**

11. Participants agreed that a re-examination of the definition of 'family violence' was a good starting point for a comprehensive review. One participant suggested that the term 'domestic violence' be used instead to include all living within the household including FDWs, and not just blood relatives. Another participant said that 'sexual violence' should be included to ensure that vulnerable groups are protected. The review should also consider whether to include persons in long-term same-sex relationships where the partners view each other as 'family'.

12. It was noted too that Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Home Affairs Mr Teo Chee Hean had said that his ministry would review how Internet-based problems should be treated.

13. A participant said that this process should start from a rights-based perspective. For instance, it was suggested that FDWs be given an equal priority if they are subjected to abuse?

Helping Foreign Wives, Foreign Domestic Workers and Foreign Labour

14. Participants spoke of how low income foreign wives with little education are were often dependent on their husbands for remaining in the country. They are usually on a social visit or long term visit pass, and would not be inclined to get help for fear of deportation. They raised suggestions on how the current legal and social welfare framework could be tweaked to address such trends and concerns.

15. A participant said that Britain had moved beyond that sort of tenuous situation where previously, the decision of whether a foreign wife could remain in the country after a marriage had broken down was primarily in the hands of the Home Secretary. The law had been modified in response to public campaigns and in recognition that these women needed the assurance about their immigration status before they would seek help.

16. Another participant shared how one foreign wife had to put up with her husband's affairs because her lack of education prevented her from applying for permanent residency by herself, and she also feared losing custody of her child. She eventually signed up for and obtained a diploma in order to stay in Singapore in her own right before proceeding with a divorce.

17. One participant said that matchmaking agencies should be better regulated to root out instances of exploitation where men married foreign spouses and consummated the marriage only to send them back to their countries within a 'guarantee period'. Foreign wives too should be advised on what recourse they might have in the face of abuse.

18. The discussion turned next to FDWs and low wage foreign workers. One participant suggested that the concept of psychological violence should be explored in the regime relating to FDWs, some of whom could be abused on a day-to-day basis.

19. Overall, a few participants emphasised the need to take a victim-centred approach to recognise potential barriers to getting help. It is important to keep the objective in focus -- to help these women feel secure and rebuild their lives. For instance, even as the process of prosecution was intended to prevent future cases of abuse, the pressure of being put on the stand in a court of law might deter victims from coming forward.

20. There was agreement about the need to address the language gap in those providing social services, as the ability to converse with foreign victims in their native language had a significant impact on the likelihood of picking up signs of abuse, the ability to make a proper report, and to counsel foreign victims.

Determining the Parameters of Policy Review

21. One participant raised the question of where the boundaries for such a policy review should be set to best allocate limited resources and time. Which were the most vulnerable groups that needed protection? This view was echoed by two other participants who said that prioritising areas of focus would help policy-makers. Gaps in the protection of those who needed help, like foreign wives had been discussed over many years now. Another participant took a different view – that help should be accorded as long as there was one person hurt. This participant added that society should be sensitised to what family violence is and educated on how to detect signs of abuse.

Collecting Data to Reflect the Situation of Violence

22. In response to the invitation to prioritise areas of focus in addressing family violence, some participants said they would only be able to judge if they had the relevant data. For instance, ready figures on numbers of foreign brides, cases of violence grouped by ethnicity, number of PPOs breached, numbers of prosecutions and convictions on domestic violence would be useful. A review of data would be one way to proceed in this policy review exercise. Another participant said that Singapore had not provided prevalence data to the United Nations on domestic violence and it would be good for the government to conduct a definitive national survey and create the necessary data if it does not already exist.

Broadening and Reviewing Legislation

23. One participant suggested that Singapore could broaden parts of the Women's Charter pertaining to domestic violence to establish a more inclusive domestic violence protection regime through the creation of a Family Charter.

24. Another participant asked if someone other than the victim could apply for a PPO on his or her behalf. She cited a case where a woman reported that her mother had been abused for more than forty years, but that she could not do anything on her mother's behalf, like apply for a PPO.

25. Another participant proposed that the courts should issue Domestic Exclusion Orders (DEOs) at the first instance where appropriate. Currently, there was reluctance on the part of

the courts to do this, and there had to be proof of recalcitrance on the part of the perpetrator to issue a DEO. The UK government's *Call to End Violence Against Women and Girls: Action Plan* advocated the removal of the perpetrator from the environment of the victim, and the issuance of a DEO where appropriate.

Practicality of Current Measures

26. Participants shared anecdotes from the ground on the effectiveness of current measures on family violence.

27. One participant cited how Community Development Councils and other agencies insisted that wives approaching them for help had to produce the income slip of their husbands, which made it difficult for them to report abuse. There is a need to review service delivery efforts to ensure that there are no unnecessary barriers to victims accessing aid and the opportunity to escape the effects of family violence.

28. Another participant shared her impression that only some 50 per cent of those who undergo the mandatory counselling process say it is useful. There is the need to survey the underlying factors on why the scheme has not been useful for some. What is the benchmark of efficacy? Should a scheme be deemed as less useful because of repeat offences? Recommendations should not just address the situation only after victims go forward to seek counselling, as there are structural factors which inhibit people from going forward in the first place.

Suitability and Chronology of Timeframe

29. Several participants said that it might be too ambitious to complete a review in a year. Ms Mathi clarified that the intention was to start on the review and do a progress report at a similar platform in a year after it is launched.

30. One participant said that although the stages of review were laid out first as a policy review, before capacity building and public education take place, her view was that these stages could happen concurrently. Change has to start somewhere, and social change does not necessarily have to happen before legal change. For instance, the extent of public education needed would be clear with the availability of more data.

CAPACITY BUILDING

Bridging the Language Gap

31. One participant spoke of the scarcity of individuals proficient in languages of migrants in Singapore today and able to help victims of abuse who were not be conversant in Singapore's official languages. Help hotlines need to be manned by those who could speak such languages, it was suggested. Participants suggested that a central database of individuals conversant in such languages could be pooled together either through the effort of non-government organisations or even the National Volunteer Philanthropic Centre (NVPC). One participant said that the state should play a bigger role in providing training and funding for these services. Another possibility is to tap technology – such as video-conferencing software like Skype – such that persons skilled in the non-official languages

could provide assistance virtually. Another participant disagreed with this approach, and said that the personal face-to-face communication was critical for very sensitive cases.

Training and Retention of Effective Frontline Staff

32. Participants also spoke of the need to equip social workers with a good understanding of the trauma of victimisation. They said that social workers sometimes were reluctant to administer help to victims of domestic violence for fear of tearing the family apart, and emphasised the necessity of taking the perspective of a victim-centric approach. The objective of training social workers would be to put them in a position where they would know how to respond in the different situations that surfaced.

33. Others raised instances where frontline staff showed a lack of sensitivity in dealing with victims of violence. It was, as an example, inappropriate for a (male) police officer to ask a female victim what she had been wearing when she was sexually abused. Another participant added that not all workers in the field had that kind of sensitivity, and that those that did should be nurtured and incentivised to stay on in such public service.

Adequacy of Resources

34. Some participants proposed the review of funding allotted to self-help and social service organisations. While volunteers should get a small sum to cover meals and transport, it is not easy for such groups to afford that. Others spoke of the inadequacy of space in shelters and that victims often had to be turned away.

Empowering Survivors

35. One participant spoke of the need to empower victims of abuse, so that they would be able to help each other.

PUBLIC EDUCATION

Addressing Socio-cultural Norms

36. Public communications is essential for changing social attitudes to ensure help is afforded to victims of family violence. One participant said that cultural norms like patriarchal attitudes were difficult to change, but it was important to do so to improve the situation of family violence. A whole-of-village approach should be taken to sensitise those living in close proximity to victims (like neighbours) to picking up signs of abuse.

Public Communications Strategy

37. While it seemed like there had been no nation-wide family violence campaign in the past 10 years, a participant said that this was not, in fact, the case. The public might have been led to this view because MCYS had stopped using its logo on public campaign efforts. The most recent campaign on child abuse took place last year, targeting schools, and involved a widely attended roadshow. However, public campaigns like that one proceeded with the use of the National Family Violence Networking Symposium (NFVNS) logo instead of the MCYS logo to reflect the work of family violence as a collaborative effort amongst agencies. In addition, brochures on forms of family violence were provided for free to anyone running events. Videos on family violence had also been sent to social service

Report on Closed-Door Discussion on CEDAW Report 2011 on Singapore: "Addressing Violence Against Women, *IPS Update*, April 2012

sector organisations to run in waiting areas. Some participants felt however that the use of logos of the police force and government agencies would cause these public campaigns to be taken more seriously by Singaporeans. This was important for such a crucial issue like domestic violence.

38. A participant commented that campaigns at the working group level were very events-based, lacked central direction and would benefit from better coordination. Another participant pointed out that FDWs did not appear to be factored into public communications efforts on domestic violence.

Written Comments

39. At the suggestion of the Chairperson, participants wrote brief notes with their suggestions on the roadmap of review. Several key themes emerged.

40. Participants agreed that a new definition replacing 'family violence' should take into account in new forms of violence (like the psychological) and those occurring within the geographical space of a domestic unit, rather than just between blood relatives. Foreign wives might come under a separate category, as this concerned immigration law. A couple of participants felt domestic violence should include situations of cohabitation and dating.

41. Participants agreed that the current legislation framework should be reviewed. Some participants mentioned the creation of a 'Family Charter'. Participants also suggested that the DEOs be issued at the first instance so that perpetrators could be removed from the home setting.

42. Data should be collected to form a comprehensive picture of the situation on violence currently, as well as to evaluate the effectiveness of current schemes, like the PPO. Suggested categories include data on domestic violence, number of foreign wives and divorce cases by race and citizenship, and country of origin of migrants. Some participants felt that data should be collected by speaking to those with ground experience, which include the specialist agencies dealing with domestic violence issues.

43. Some suggested that frontline workers should be trained to adopt an objective, victim-centric strategy, and not allow their own perceptions of the victim prejudice the help the person would get. One participant had the idea of champions and support groups for vulnerable populations, and asked if funds collected from the maid levy could be channelled to the support of such a cause.

44. Several participants said that public education should clearly disseminate the message that family or domestic violence is a crime, as well as advertise the channels of help that victims can turn to. Some participants spoke of the need to address attitudes of gender and power imbalances for its hand in contributing to the prevalence of family violence. Schools are a good platform for public education as well. Some participants said that public education should take place strategically at a national, rather than regional level. Three participants said that MCYS and other governmental logos should be used, while one cautioned that the use of logos and graphics should be adapted to various target communities, as some were more trusting of the government, while others were not.

If you have comments or feedback, please email ips.eneews@nus.edu.sg



© Copyright 2011 National University of Singapore. All Rights Reserved.

You are welcome to reproduce this material for non-commercial purposes and please ensure you cite the source when doing so.