**MSF INTERVENTION ON ‘SUPPORTING VULNERABLE GROUPS IN SINGAPORE’**

**(Women, Children, LGBTs, Persons with Disabilities and Older Persons)**

**DGSW Ang Bee Lian**

**Singapore’s 3rd Universal Periodic Review (UPR) on 12 May 2021**

Madam President,

1. I am Ang Bee Lian, the Director-General of Social Welfare in Singapore. I will speak on supporting women and children, persons with disabilities, the elderly, and other vulnerable groups in Singapore.

**Providing every child with a good start**

1. We are doing our utmost to give every child a good start in life.
	1. In the next few years, my government will spend more than US$1.52 billion annually to increase access to quality and affordable preschools. This is more than 5 times what we spent in 2012.
	2. For children from less privileged background, we provide upstream support, through the KidSTART program. The program gives parents the know-how to nurture their children’s physical and psycho-socio-emotional health.
2. We also ensure that no child is left behind because no child is denied access to education.
	1. Children below 7 years old with developmental needs get early intervention through government-funded programs, within their preschools or in specialised intervention setting. We now spend about US$45 million a year to make this affordable.
	2. In 2019, we extended the Compulsory Education Act to include children with moderate to severe special needs.

**Protecting and supporting our children who are vulnerable**

1. We regularly review our laws to ensure adequate protection for our children. In 2019, we amended the Penal Code to better protect children and youths against sexual exploitation. New offences were introduced to criminalise certain activities.
2. In 2019, we amended the Children and Young Persons Act to expand protection for abused or neglected children from below 16 years old to below 18 years old. We also provide coordinated support for youths with complex family circumstances or those who show at-risk behaviour.

**Enabling our Persons with Disabilities and Older Persons for independent living**

1. We have regular five-year plans called Enabling Masterplans. Developed together with persons with disabilities and stakeholders, they institute measures on how to build a more inclusive society.
	1. We have increased support for the employment of persons with disabilities through wage support, job placements, training, and recognition for employers.
	2. Persons with disabilities can access healthcare and use public transport, move about outside their homes and participate in leisure, sports and digital facilities.
	3. In 2018, we enacted the Vulnerable Adults Act to protect persons 18 years and above, who are unable to protect themselves from abuse, neglect, and self-neglect due to physical or mental disability.
	4. We will empower persons with disabilities to fulfil their aspirations in life and strengthen support for their families and caregivers.
2. For older persons, we support them to live independently in the community.
	1. We now have a variety of care services to meet their needs. We introduced new housing options or assisted living to enable them to age in place with supported care services.
	2. Outside the home environment, we made our roads and our public transport system almost completely barrier-free. Public buses are wheelchair-accessible. Likewise for our subway system. Our Code on Accessibility in the built environment has also been refined to have universal design concepts.

**Protecting our women against violence**

1. We have strengthened protection for our women against violence, enhanced support for survivors of violence, and shifted mindsets around reporting violence.
	1. In 2019, we amended the Women’s Charter, which is our law, to take strong action against online vice-syndicates who exploit women and girls.
	2. We amended the Penal Code in the same year. We repealed marital immunity for rape. We increased by up to two times the penalties for offences, including those committed against victims in an intimate relationship with the offender.

* 1. Last year, we formed an Inter-agency Taskforce on Family Violence, which includes members from the government, judiciary and civil society. The Taskforce is looking into various recommendations, to:
		1. Increase awareness and strengthen attitudes against violence;
		2. Making it easier for victims to get help;
		3. Protecting victims to reduce their risk of being harmed again;
		4. Holding perpetrators accountable for their actions.
	2. More recently, we reviewed the sentencing framework for sexual and hurt offences. We will raise penalties to better deter crimes such as outrage of modesty, and deal with egregious cases more severely.

**Empowering our women**

1. You have heard from our Head of Delegation about the ground-up conversations on Singapore women’s development. To-date, we have conducted more than *100* conversations with thousands of Singaporeans from all walks of life. What has emerged is a need for societal mindset changes on gender stereotypes, strengthened protection of women and girls, and support for women in achieving their career goals. Our goal is to achieve greater equality between men and women. The feedback and ideas will help us to review our policies and present a White Paper for debate in Parliament. We will work with various community and civil society partners to create and implement new solutions. Giving better protection, care and support for our women is a shared objective among Singaporeans.

**Support for Other Groups, including LGBT Persons**

1. My government also supports women in the context of the family.
	1. Benefits for the development of children, which include subsidies in education, healthcare, childcare, infant care and even foreign domestic worker levy concessions, are given regardless of the marital status of their parents.
	2. In 2016 and 2017, we extended support to **unwed** parents, including Government-Paid Maternity Leave, and Child Development Account benefits that have grants to support the child’s educational and healthcare expenses.
2. LGBT persons are valuable members of our society. Please allow me to assure delegates from Germany, Sweden and Spain who asked about the protection of LGBT persons, that just like other Singaporeans, LGBT persons have equal access to opportunities and support such as in education, jobs, and healthcare. Social services are accessible to all, without discrimination. We oppose violence, abuse, discrimination and harassment of all individuals, including those who are LGBT. Laws are in place to protect victims from domestic violence, regardless of their sexual orientation.

**Conclusion**

1. Madam President, we will continue to provide equal opportunities for all Singaporeans to flourish in their chosen field. Thank you.

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