

Bringing a Women's Perspective to the Singapore Budget

A submission by AWARE to Singapore's policy-makers, Feb 2011

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. INTRODUCTION

AWARE has for 25 years sought to bring to the attention of policy-makers and the public issues related to gender matters. Our goal is a society without inequalities, one where gender is in no way a limiting factor in an individual's life choices and opportunities for a full and fulfilling life.

The Singapore Budget is an important part of the policy making process. This annual allocation of funds to government entities and national projects reflects the country's needs and priorities as identified by the policy-makers.

AWARE believes it is important to bring a women's perspective to policy making. Women make up half the population. Women's issues are the nation's issues, and every step taken to deal with these issues and to ensure the development of women will mean better outcomes for families and for society generally.

We are therefore submitting these proposals for discussion and consideration by the policy-makers in the shaping of the Budget and formulation and implementation of programmes.

2. AREAS OF CONCERN

Women have a role to play in all aspects of a nation's development. In this, our initial submission regarding the Singapore Budget, we are however focusing on six areas. They are:

1. Transparency of data
2. Families with children
3. Caregiving
4. People in financial distress
5. Women's health
6. Women and employment.

Apart from our proposals, listed below, in these six areas, AWARE also urges the government to consider the following:

- a) Start a gender sensitization programme at the Civil Service College so that policy-makers will better understand gender issues and the impact of gender-biased assumptions and attitudes.
- b) Form a multi-agency taskforce to study Singapore's caregiving needs and formulate policies and programmes that will better meet these needs. With Singapore's ageing population, this is an area of growing concern to many.
- c) Adopt median income as the standard yardstick for eligibility for all assistance schemes. Currently the eligibility criterion varies from scheme to scheme, or is not made clear.
- d) Ensure that information about assistance schemes and services is made known to anyone in possible need of them. Currently this information is not always brought to the attention of possible recipients.

- e) Look into the issue of income disparities in a concerted manner, aiming to develop sustainable programmes to help distressed families move up from the lowest rungs of the socio-economic ladder.

3. PROPOSALS

3.1 Transparency Of Data

Researchers and others attempting to understand Singapore society and identify needs are sometimes stymied by the lack of sufficiently detailed and consistent data.

- a) We urge the government to be consistent in how information is collected and made available for public use. In particular we would like to have data that is disaggregated by sex, age and citizenship.
- b) We would like to see, starting with Budget 2011, a clearer delineation of budget allocations by the communities that need caregiving assistance, with a breakdown of these communities by sex, age and citizenship.
- c) We also hope that, starting with Budget 2011, there will be a standard way by which allocations for ministries are itemised as Operational or Development Expenditure.

3.2 Families With Children

A major concern in recent years has been Singapore's declining birth rate. While there are many reasons for this, an important consideration for many prospective parents is adequate childcare facilities. AWARE also believes that policies to support gender equality are needed.

- a) AWARE urges the government to invest in more and better centres to care for infants, children and youths.
- b) These centres will need to be adequately staffed, so appropriate recruitment and training programmes should be initiated and better wage structures put in place.
- c) The eligibility criteria for subsidies for childcare and kindergarten should be pegged to the prevailing median income.
- d) More incentives should be made available for employers to offer flexible work arrangements and parental leave.
- e) Paid paternity leave of two weeks should be made mandatory, and single fathers with dependent children should qualify for the same tax reliefs on the levy they pay for employing foreign domestic workers, a perk enjoyed by women with children.
- f) One month of the current four month maternity leave should be converted to parental leave to be taken by either spouses; families where the father takes the one month parenting leave to be rewarded with the one time payment of a parenting present of \$4000.
- g) Unwed mothers should be extended the same motherhood and childcare benefits as married mothers.

3.3 Caregiving

Much has been said about Singapore's ageing population but not enough is being done to understand and support the needs of those who must care for aged and other dependent relatives. AWARE believes the following measures are needed:

- a) Increase the number of day-care centres and nursing homes for the elderly and other adults with special needs. This increase should be matched by the recruitment and training of adequate numbers of staff.
- b) Increase the subsidies for women and men who care for dependent relatives (i.e. physically disabled or mentally ill children and siblings; elderly parents or grandparents), and peg the eligibility criteria to the prevailing median income.
- c) Convert the currently mandated 6 days of paid childcare leave into dependent's leave that any employed person can claim.
- d) Offer the elderly and the disabled free and unconditional access to public transport. Expand or create new schemes, with appropriate subsidies, to meet the transportation needs of those for whom buses and trains are not a viable option. As an interim measure, consider subsidies for access to private vehicles for such individuals and their caregivers.
- e) Ensure that all pavements and other public areas are truly barrier-free and friendly to the disabled and the infirm, and speed up the Lift Upgrading Programme so that all blocks of flats are barrier-free for the elderly and the infirm.
- f) Offer subsidies for the purchase of physiotherapeutic equipment for the elderly and the disabled, with eligibility criteria pegged to the median income.
- g) Offer more shelter space for women in distress and families on the move because of upheavals in home ownership

3.4 People in Financial Distress

AWARE welcomes the Intensive Case Management approach of the government in dealing with those caught in the poverty trap. This is the kind of sustainable solution that is needed.

- a) While the Intensive Case Management approach is to be lauded, its success will depend on there being sufficient resources to engage quality professionals and train more workers so that more families can be helped.
- b) The government should review the efficacy of the Many-Helping-Hands approach in meeting the needs of those in distress, and consider extending cash transfers to them for longer periods so they have more time to find their feet.
- c) It should take a more flexible approach with those on Public Assistance who own a flat but who are cash-strapped. Often these are elderly or otherwise incapacitated people unable to earn a living.
- d) The government should consider extending token cash transfers (i.e. small sums of pocket money) to those living in homes for the destitute to help them meet personal needs. Even the destitute deserve dignity.
- e) Where foreign wives (of Singaporeans) are in distress, financial assistance should be extended to them.

3.5 Women's Health

- a) AWARE would like to see transparency on the Medifund criteria and a breakdown by sex and age of its impact on women.
- b) We also ask for information on the costs incurred by women with regard to hospital admissions, medication and treatment programmes, especially for the top five killer diseases of women.

3.6 Women And Employment

- a) We would like to see a greater effort made to:
 - Retain women in the workforce
 - Eliminate discrimination against women at the workplace, including any form of sexual harassment
 - Put in place programmes that motivate and support capable women to aspire to and reach management and leadership positions.
- b) We ask for incentives for employers to retain women in the formal workforce in the same manner that employers have been incentivised to retain older workers.
- c) AWARE would like to see the Continuing Education Training programmes reach greater numbers of women, and asks for information on the response so far to these programmes.
- d) We would also like to see the Workfare Training Supplement schemes be inclusive of women and ask for information and the success rates of the scheme.