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Parliament screengrab Nominated Member of Parliament and Paralympic swimmer Yip Pin Xiu called for national sports associations here to include disabled athletes in their programmes, noting that she has yet to be recognised by the Singapore Swimming Association.

SINGAPORE — Three-time Paralympics gold medallist Yip Pin Xiu called for more inclusion in the Singapore sports system on Friday (March 8), as the Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP) delivered an impassioned speech to thumps of support from the Parliament floor.

Ms Yip noted that despite “inclusion” becoming a buzzword in recent times, there continues to be a lack of opportunities for the disabled.

“We hear about inclusion every other day. But out of close to 100 swimming clubs in Singapore today, I can count in five seconds the number that have opened their doors to persons with disabilities.”

Ms Yip, 27, was speaking at the parliamentary debate on the budget of the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY).

The swimmer, who has muscular dystrophy — a condition where the muscles weaken progressively with age — pointed out that while there are “boundless” opportunities for able-bodied people, it is “a different story altogether” for the disabled.

Ms Yip began swimming competitively at the age of 12 after she was spotted by a volunteer from the Singapore Disability Sports Council (SDSC) during a weekly pool session with her family. “Not every child has been as fortunate as me to meet a coach that brave. Not many will be, if we do not set out to make changes,” she added.

LACK OF INTEGRATION

Over the years, national sports governing body Sport Singapore (SportSG) has supported disabled athletes through schemes such as SpexCarding and the SpexScholarship. The schemes provide financial help and other forms of support to able-bodied and disabled athletes.

However, Ms Yip, who holds two world records in the 50m and 100m backstroke S2, said that she has yet to be recognised as an athlete by the Singapore Swimming Association, which is the national body that governs swimming here.

Instead, all disabled athletes, regardless of sport, continued to be represented by the SDSC.

Calling for greater integration, Ms Yip said: “So here, I voice my dream of a Singapore where sports is a united front for Singaporeans, not separated into disability or able-bodied sports.

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"It is a dream that already has (gathered) ground globally and one that I hope Singapore will join in."

Ms Yip said that there are several benefits to integrating sporting models for disabled and able-bodied athletes.

For instance, hosting the Olympics and Paralympics in the same city allowed the latter to benefit from the infrastructure and planning of the Olympics, which are usually held a few weeks before the Paralympic Games. At the same time, the Olympics benefited from the inspirational stories generated by the Paralympics and its participants.

In the United Kingdom, extra funding is extended to national sporting associations that incorporate a disability sport.

Bringing able-bodied and disabled athletes together also allows both groups to share knowledge and expertise, as well as develop understanding and respect for one another.

"The means might be different, but the spirit is the same. In spite of the different events we compete in, we share commonalities," Ms Yip added.

RECOGNISING DISABLED SPORTS AS NSAS

Calling for national sports associations (NSAs) to integrate disability sports into their models, she said: "By representing all athletes with disabilities through the SDSC instead of the sports they play, are we not putting the disability before the ability?"

Ms Yip added that a "systemic transformation" would motivate the disabled and that the system should be ready to support NSAs that are ready for such a change. "If an NSA is not ready, then let's see how we can build an environment to better that probability," she said.

Highlighting efforts by disability sports to include able-bodied individuals, Ms Yip called for disability sports to be recognised as NSAs in their own right.

Using the examples of boccia for those with severe cerebral palsy and goalball, which is played by individuals with visual impairment, she said that these sports were well-received by able-bodied people.

Ms Yip then asked if Singapore's systems are "ready to accept them (boccia and goalball)" as NSAs if they meet the criteria.

Responding to Ms Yip, Mr Baey Yam Keng, Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Culture, Community and Youth, said that while some NSAs such as cycling and sailing oversee the development of disabled athletes, others prefer to develop sports for the two groups of athletes separately.

"While integrating able-bodied and para sports in a single NSA has its benefits, we understand there might be concerns from the disability sports fraternity that doing so may dilute attention on para sports," he said.

He also stressed that NSAs are independent and that it will be up to them to decide if they want to oversee both able-bodied and disability sports.

Backing Ms Yip's suggestion, Ms Denise Phua, Member of Parliament for Jalan Besar Group Representation Constituency, also called for the ministry — which funds the NSAs — to "strongly suggest" to the associations to consider including disabled athletes in their programmes.

Ms Grace Fu, Minister for Culture, Community and Youth, responded that although the ministry funds the NSAs through SportSG, there are limitations to how much they can be influenced.

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“As we have seen in many cases, (persuasion through funding) can only do so much. NSAs are independent bodies. They can also decide how they want to run the sport,” she added.

NSAs may also lack the capabilities to serve disabled athletes, and greater integration could only occur at a pace and direction accepted by all stakeholders, Ms Fu said.

Ms Yip also asked if the SDSC could receive more funding since it oversees more than 20 sports. In response, Mr Baey said that SportSG considers the achievement of athletes and the promotion of a sport — in terms of mass participation — when disbursing funds.

“We know that SDSC has a very full plate with different sports, and we will give them our best support to help our para athletes to achieve their dreams,” he added.