

Lawrence Wong tackles issues on older S'poreans working longer & anti-discrimination employment laws

Wong also said that the government was codifying an anti-discrimination employment act that encompasses "sex, race, religion and age."

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While there is a limit to how long Singaporeans can work, it is important to recognise with rising longevity, people are living longer lifespans, Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong said on Jan. 16.

In addition, the majority of Singaporeans surveyed do want to work longer so long as they are healthy, he noted.

Wong, who is also Finance Minister, was speaking as the keynote speaker at the Institute of Policy Studies' (IPS) flagship Singapore Perspectives 2023 conference, titled "Work".

He added, "A lot of people recognise that the minute they stop working, that's when their health deteriorate very quickly."

Work therefore is more than just a source of income; it also provides "dignity and purpose", the minister pointed out.

Wong also acknowledged that the "nature of work" may change as one grows older.

Responding to a question about providing support to Singaporeans once age catches up

Wong was responding to a question posed by Paul Tambyah, Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) chairman and infectious diseases consultant from National University Hospital (NUH).

Tambyah had asked the minister about the possibility of making the Silver Support Package — a scheme that provides a quarterly cash supplement to low-income seniors — a "little bit more universal" in a "risk-pooling" manner to ensure there is no "substantial" drop in income or quality of life for Singaporeans who are unable to work due to their advanced age.

Tambyah further posed the following question, "Would anyone actually want to be operated on by a 70-year-old neurosurgeon? Or ride in a bus driven by a 70-year-old bus driver?"

He added, "The basis of this question is the narrative seems to be that we need to keep working and if we are unable to do a particular job, we've got to retrain."

Working consistently doesn't mean having to be at work 100 per cent of the time

Wong further highlighted that the government has already begun raising the retirement age to 65 by 2030.

The government has also put in place a system for re-employment, with the re-employment age expected to reach 70 by 2030.

This led to Wong's next point that with such a system in place, a person who enters the workforce and works consistently does not necessarily mean that one must be at work "100 per cent of the time."

"Consistently means at least you have a stable job. There may be occasions when you are out of work, in between jobs but so long as you work consistently, with Workfare, with progressive wages, with what we are doing in the labour market...we want to be able to say if you are a new entrant, a young adult entering the workforce working consistently...whatever job you do, you can be assured of a basic retirement sum."

Wong added, "That is how we want to design our CPF (Central Provident Fund) system."

There are already schemes in place to help the older folks

Wong also acknowledged that for older people who are already either retired or close to retirement, they will not be able to benefit from Workfare as much due to a limited runway.

This is where schemes such as CPF top-ups and Silver Support come into play.

"We will work out what more we can do in order to make sure we take care of them: our pioneers, our Merdeka generation...those who are in their 50s and 60s. So that's how we are thinking about strengthening our retirement system and giving everyone peace of mind all the time."

Government is codifying anti-discrimination employment laws including "sex, race, religion and age"

Wong also replied to a question that was raised about what the government is doing to encourage companies to move away from discriminatory workforce policies against the LGBTQ+ community, and implement more inclusive policies.

The question highlighted comments made by the President of the Singapore Human Resources Institute, Low Peck Kem, who described such anti-LGBTQ+ discriminatory policies as "stupid", at the Diversity and Inclusion in the Workplace Symposium 2023 on Jan. 12, according to Today.

Here, Wong responded by saying:

"A few national day rallies ago (in 2021), the Prime Minister talked about codifying some of these provisions into law — basically an anti-discrimination act, which will require employers to make sure their employment practices do not discriminate, be it sex, race, religion, or even age."

In noting that discrimination could take many forms, the minister added:

"We want every employer to make sure that when they hire, when they promote, when they appraise their staff, it's purely on the basis of work and merit, which ought to be the case. So we are taking actions with regard to legislation."

When further asked by the Executive Director of the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE), Corinna Lim, if sexual orientation and gender identity will be included "in one of the categories" that will be protected by the anti-discrimination act, Wong reiterated that the act will cover "sex", race, religion and age.

"That was something MOM (the Ministry of Manpower) has put out and in due course we will have a debate on this parliament when the act is tabled," he said.