

Legislation is not a silver bullet to promote gender equality but it sends an important signal to society: He Ting Ru

Shanmugam said that legislation shouldn't be ruled out as a way to encourage gender equality but there needs to be a change in underlying values and mindsets as well.

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In the closing dialogue of the Institute of Policy Studies' Women's Conference on Thursday (Jun. 3), Minister for Home Affairs and Law K Shanmugam and Workers' Party Member of Parliament He Ting Ru discussed the changes that must be made — in terms of both policy and people's mindsets — to achieve a more gender equal society.

During the course of the 1.5 hour virtual dialogue moderated by President of Singapore Management University Professor Lily Kong, Shanmugam and He Ting Ru gave their thoughts on issues such as the involvement of men in achieving equality for women, how to create mindset shifts, policy trade-offs, and the role that media plays in reinforcing gendered stereotypes.

Importance of an anti-discrimination legislation

During the dialogue, He Ting Ru advocated for the government implementing more anti-discrimination legislation, in order to protect women in the workplace.

She cited a recent survey conducted by the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SCCCI) on gender issues in the workplace, which found that four in ten women have encountered gender-based discrimination in the workplace, compared to only one in ten men.

He Ting Ru spoke of discriminatory comments made toward women about taking maternity leave and inappropriate questions asked to women about their relationship status and plans to have children in the hiring process, and called for more protection to be implemented.

In response to He Ting Ru, Shanmugam pointed out that employers may take into a variety of reasons in making decisions such as promotions and it will not be an easy exercise for affected employees to prove their case in court.

He Ting Ru acknowledged that passing an anti-discrimination legislation is not a silver bullet, but said that it is important to do, because it sends a signal to the rest of society:

"The legislation is there to say that these are the values that we have as a society; we don't stand for objectification of women, we don't stand for all these crass and horrible comments being made with about women's appearance, about their ability to do their job, so on and so forth."

Potential trade-offs when implementing legislation

When answering questions in relation to using legislation to promote gender equality, Shanmugam also spoke about the "serious trade-offs" to take into account when considering policy changes.

He gave the example of giving parental leave for both parents; while it works well for some Scandinavian countries, he said, Singapore's economy is structured very differently, so the government would need to consider whether doing so would affect Singapore's competitiveness for foreign investments.

He Ting Ru, however, disagreed:

"I'm not so sure that it's an equality-versus-financial-cost [issue.] From what I understand, diversity actually helps performance overall and it helps everybody — it helps businesses, it helps families, it also helps men and women.

So I think it's a bit of a false dichotomy here."

However, Shanmugam also said at the dialogue that legislation shouldn't be ruled out as a way to encourage gender equality, noting that the government has decided to increase the penalties for [certain sexual offences](#).

He also agreed that rampant sexist remarks online are a problem, and recognised that steps can be taken to address them:

"I think the platforms have a significant role and responsibility to take steps, and I think government has got to work with them and do more."

Changing mindsets

Besides the possibility of implementing legislation, the panel also discussed about how there needs to be a change in underlying values and mindsets as well.

So how exactly do people's mindsets get changed? This was another question asked by a participant in the dialogue.

Shanmugam and He Ting Ru both agreed that much of the shift must happen through education, both in schools and at home.

"It's not going to be done overnight," Shanmugam acknowledged, but stressed the importance of educating the public.

"The idea of equality between men and women, boys and girls, has to be hard coded from young and imprinted deeply into our collective consciousness."

He Ting Ru stated that to move toward full equality, misogynistic attitudes and biases towards women must be removed.

"While we agree that there are vulnerable groups of women who do require better protection, the narrative needs to move from seeing women in general as victims or needing special help, to one where we are able to equip women with the correct tools to stand up for ourselves and have laws that enshrine our absolute right to be free from harassment and discrimination by virtue of our gender."

One way to impart this education is through targeted education for boys in Singapore, she said, to undo some of the toxic mindsets that they may be developing from a young age.

She gave the example of charities in the United Kingdom that focus on tackling the problem of toxic masculinity among school-aged boys, and suggested that Singapore consider doing something similar.

Involving men in the journey toward gender equality

Another question asked about how to get men involved in advocating for gender equality, since it is a societal issue.

"Every man has a serious role," Shanmugam acknowledged.

But as for the question about how to get men onboard? "If you have ideas, please tell us," he said.

"Because in the conversations that we've been having, we have tried to get men onboard. It's been encouraging but I'll be frank — 75 per cent were women, 25 per cent were men. And we need to change that balance to 50/50. We need to get more men into it."

He Ting Ru added on, saying that it is "probably worth looking into" why only 25 per cent of the participants were men — whether it is because men think that the issue is not important, or if they think it isn't their place to speak.

"We can't force people to attend!" Shanmugam interjected, laughing.

He Ting Ru acknowledged the importance of men playing their part in the conversation, and said that including male voices should be encouraged.

However, she added:

"We just need to be conscious of the fact that we don't end up in situations where the male voices or the traditionally male way of looking at things doesn't end up drowning out the voices of women out there.

I think it's just a balance that we have to be mindful of as we carry on the conversation."