

S'pore women still face 'glass ceilings' at work, bear the bulk of caregiving responsibilities: President Halimah

She also said after stepping down as President, she would continue to champion causes close to her heart.

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"It's a problem not just in Singapore, but all over the world, it's the same problem. Women go into management ranks, but never reach the top," President Halimah Yacob said, at a dialogue conducted during the Institute of Policy Studies' (IPS) 35th anniversary gala dinner on Jun. 26, 2023.

This was in response to a question on how women can balance their work and family responsibilities, and what can be done to retain women in the workforce.

President Halimah elaborated that many women in Singapore are hampered in their career by heavy caregiving responsibilities, especially in an ageing society.

She also alluded to systemic and structural issues that prevent capable women in the workforce from reaching top leadership positions.

Women still bear the burden of caregiving responsibilities

President Halimah noted that based on prevailing research, women still take on the bulk of caregiving responsibilities.

And in an ageing society like Singapore, this would include caring for elderly parents as well as children.

For women who leave their jobs to juggle caregiving responsibilities, she said, this could create problems when they reach retirement age, as they would lack the retirement income to provide for their personal and medical needs.

She added that many women suffer from caregiver burnout as well.

While President Halimah acknowledged that the government has provided support for women by developing childcare centres, and upgrading the quality of childcare teachers and curriculum, she said that when it comes to eldercare, "we have a lot of scope to grow".

While there are facilities like senior activity centres, more could be done to plan holistically for an ageing society.

Women face systemic, structural obstacles in taking on leadership roles

While caregiving responsibilities could hamper women in their careers, President Halimah pointed out that other systemic and structural factors could also affect their career development.

Referencing the "glass ceiling" effect, she said that sometimes, suitable women candidates with the requisite experience and capabilities get overlooked for top leadership positions.

"Perhaps that never crossed their mind," she said, adding a light-hearted comment that she had "never sat on a board" before.

President Halimah also noted that women with careers in diplomacy and politics, even capable leaders in key decision-making positions, tend to have shorter tenures.

"So I think leadership at the senior level is still quite a challenge for women in Singapore," she said.

Will continue to champion causes close to her heart

In the dialogue moderated by former interim CEO of SPH Media Trust Patrick Daniel, President Halimah also addressed questions on a range of issues, such as her concerns for low-wage workers and the causes she is passionate about.

She affirmed that raising awareness about mental health, especially for youths, and enabling people with disabilities, are two issues that remain close to her heart.

When Daniel asked her to give a "short answer" about her plans going forward, President Halimah, who will be stepping down from her position later this year, quipped, "I'm retiring".

On a more serious note, though, she acknowledged that it would not be easy to let go of some of the causes that she is championing.

Instead, she said that she would continue to do so in different capacities. "If I can lend my voice, I will do that," she said.