

## Report on the IPS Forum on Corporate Policies & Culture Changemaker Series — Reimagining Singapore 2030

By R Avinash

### Key Takeaways

Ongoing and emerging trends:

- Singapore's ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) is a signal that the government is deeply invested in creating a more inclusive society.
- The government is providing grants, subsidies, and other incentives to encourage inclusive hiring practices. Non-government organisations are also conducting their advocacy work. As such, companies are hiring more underprivileged and disabled people.
- Female representation in the general workforce has grown significantly in the last few decades but it is slower in the case of gender diversity in boardrooms.

On changemaking:

- A culture of non-discrimination and fairness can only be fostered with good leadership and the right value system.
- Organisations have to change their work culture so that all their employees are prepared to integrate people with disability, special needs, or challenging backgrounds. This requires patience, exposure, consistency, and diversity training.

### Event Summary

On 31 August 2021, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) hosted a forum on Corporate Policies and Culture, the last of three in the Changemaker Forum Series. The session was streamed on Facebook Live.

This series is part of the larger [Reimagining Singapore 2030 project](#), a scenario-planning exercise that explores how we can achieve happiness, prosperity and progress for our nation in 2030 and beyond.

The session's panellists were Ms Carrie Tan, founder and strategic advisor of Daughters of Tomorrow (DOT) and a Member of Parliament from Nee Soon GRC; Ms Chia Yong Yong, a member of the board advisory panel and former president of the Society for the Physically Disabled (SPD), as well a board member of SG Enable; Ms Junie Foo, President of the

Singapore Council of Women's Organisations (SCWO); and Mr Sandy Monteiro, the founder of Rebel Gurl. The session was moderated by Dr Gillian Koh, Deputy Director and Senior Research Fellow at IPS.

During the session, the speakers shared their experiences with promoting inclusive and sustainable employment. This included discussions about the promotion of non-discriminatory policies in corporate spheres, creating career pathways for the disabled, and helping ex-offenders find their footing in life. It was also about providing employees with a sense of empowerment and engagement.



*Dr Gillian Koh, Senior Research Fellow at IPS (top left), opens the forum on Corporate Policies & Culture*

### **What has been done, what has changed**

To kick off the session, Dr Koh asked each panellist to share about the work they do, and what changes they have observed in their respective domains.

#### Employment for Underprivileged (Disadvantaged) Women and Children

Ms Tan explained how DOT helps underprivileged women find jobs that they could juggle with childcare and other domestic responsibilities.

In 2018, DOT realised that certain barriers prevented women from entering sectors such as food and beverage (F&B), retail, hospitality, and the services line. Despite their eligibility, they could not fit in due to the shift nature of these industries. Since working hours were in flux, these women experienced difficulties making arrangements for their domestic needs.

DOT's main objective was to influence their employer partners to adopt "core and stable scheduling". This mainly involved the allocation of *fixed* shifts for employees. This meant that they could plan their care arrangements on the home front.

While there was initial resistance, some employers committed to the scheduling so that its beneficiaries could hold down jobs in sectors where rotating shift work was the norm. This includes companies like Sephora and Vanguard Healthcare as well as some F&B chains. Ms Tan continues to plug herself into the HR community in order to propagate progressive workplace practices.

### Advocacy for People with Disabilities and Low-Wage Disadvantaged Women

Lawyer and wheelchair-user Ms Chia recalled how difficult it was for her to get a job upon graduation decades ago. This was a result of biases as well as barriers in the physical infrastructure. However, her pupillage-master helped her to secure her first job. Since then, she has been inspired to pay that act of kindness forward. Ms Chia shared how SPD and SG Enable train people with disabilities and help them find work. They are provided with job placements, support, and benefits that would enable them to fulfil their potential.

Ms Chia observed how Singapore had come a long way over the past 30 to 40 years. She broke the good news that on 27 August, 88 companies were awarded the inaugural Enabling Mark by President Halimah Yacob. It is the first national accreditation that benchmarks and recognises organisations with practices that foster disability inclusive employment. This event was important because it signalled that more employers were coming forward. It also indicated that conditions in Singapore are changing.

An ecosystem of support for inclusive employment is being created. This is being reflected in increased public education efforts, physical and transport accessibility, and greater access to education for children with disabilities. Disabled and disadvantaged people can now enjoy internship and job placement opportunities.

Furthermore, significant national milestones have been achieved. In 2005, Enabling Masterplan was implemented. This happened even before the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) was launched. Singapore signed the convention in July 2013. These things have greatly impacted the local employment landscape for the better.

### Greater Representation of Women in Boardrooms.

Ms Foo shared the advocacy work she does through SCWO and in particular through BoardAgender, an initiative established by the Council in 2011. Its core mission has been to promote female representation on boards in the corporate sector. Ms Foo also touched on the desire to retain talent and provide them with the necessary support required to succeed. The end goal is to create a solid pipeline for senior women to take up decision-making positions. It is based on the belief and evidence that female representation changes the dynamics of boardrooms. Female representation also adds more perspectives that usually result in greater inclusion in the organisation.

Ms Foo stated that female representation in the workforce had grown from strength to strength. However, this only amounted to about 6.4 per cent on corporate boards at the time BoardAgender was launched. As of 2021, while 33 per cent of senior management positions

in organisations are occupied by women, only 18 per cent of board positions have been taken up by women.

Ms Foo explained how companies in Singapore were slowly recognising the need for greater female representation in boardrooms but more work needed to be done.

### Entrepreneurial Platform for Young People

Mr Monteiro recalled his younger days working as a dishwasher in a restaurant in Sydney. He shared how someone saw potential in him and gave him a chance to do well. This motivated him to start Rebel Gurl. Rebel is a restaurant franchise that provides young people with entrepreneurial opportunities. It strives for fairness by creating a programme that would help them participate in brand ownership. It also provides them with a platform to fulfil their aspirations for career progression. Rebel employs a stakeholder business model that treats employees, investors, and suppliers under one umbrella. This would incentivise people to make the franchise succeed. The goal is to increase employee participation in ways that negate the often-unbalanced nature of the F&B industry.

### **Tokenism**

The panellists responded to questions about whether the current level of inclusion is mere tokenism or how to overcome such a problem. Ms Chia argued that it was imperative to work closely with employers so that a culture of fairness could be created throughout the organisation; that the provisions and accommodations are available to all employees than just, say, people with disabilities.

They could benefit from a greater awareness of the policies and incentives that are available to facilitate that integration. It was also about reassuring them that they were not walking this journey alone.

Ms Foo stressed that the main aim was always to hire on merit; to hire the best person for the job. It was not about hiring someone for the sake of it. It was about giving someone a chance despite their disability. If someone were hiring, they should do so fairly. This would help capable people get a break in life. Companies and organisations had to learn how to create career pathways around their employees' lives.

Mr Monteiro chimed in that this went both ways. If employees felt they were being treated as tokens, they would behave as tokens. Hunger is required from both the employers and employees. A mutually beneficial working relationship could be fostered if both sides had the desire to make things work.

### **Looking Past Employees' Disabilities**

The speakers tackled a question regarding managers and leader looking past their employees' disabilities. The concern was that a culture of acceptance was hard to create if disabilities stuck out like a sore thumb. Ms Tan argued that the solution was to look *at* instead of looking past disabilities. It was also about recognising their limitations and planning contingencies so that employers could work around their limitations.

Ms Chia posited that the employment of someone was a value statement made by a company. The hiring practices of a company often painted a clear picture of how it treated its employees. Ms Monteiro agreed with Ms Chia and reiterated the need to accept disabilities instead of ignoring them. If this was to happen, substantive job pathways could be created for disabled employees. Ms Foo added that this was about empowering people as well.

Mr Monteiro stressed the need for good leadership. This often determined how a company treated its employees. Employers were responsible for creating a culture of acceptance. It was also important to treat all employees equally in order to reduce the risk of jealousy. This had to be enshrined in a good philosophy that employees could accept.

### **Academic Qualifications**

A compelling question regarding hiring based on academic achievements was raised. Ms Tan proposed the idea of HR staff being trained with business awareness across different business units. This would help them understand the needs of each industry. It would also aid them in assessing a candidate beyond the credentials. She said HR departments had a tremendous part to play in changing trends. This was due to Singapore's culture of stress. Specifically, HR staff could play the role of advocates for individuals including pitching people to hiring managers. Ultimately, it was about empowering rather than forcing them to be mere pencil pushers.

Ms Chia answered that it was important to recognise that the purpose of work is to achieve certain outcomes. Work evolves and changes. The needs of corporate culture also change over time. Hence, employers have to learn how to harness the talent a person has and motivate him or her. She proposed that HR should redesign work according to the abilities of the team.

Ms Foo concurred with the rest by encouraging employers to look at their workers as talent. They could do more in terms of talent assessment and talent acquisition. Instead of just looking at grades, employers should consider how hungry potential employees are.

Mr Monteiro made the point that HR is often under pressure. This is a culture of people trying to cover their own positions. As a result, ticking the academic box is regarded as the surest and simplest way of doing their jobs. He observed that really talented and motivated young people can do really badly in school. Hence, it is about giving people opportunities to show how good they are. He suggested there should be mechanisms where HR officers vet CVs based on metrics that look beyond academic scores.

### **Ex-Offenders**

The panellists proceeded to tackle a question regarding the integration of ex-offenders in the workplace. Ms Tan stated that DOT helps ex-offenders find their feet. Ultimately, employers have a responsibility to employees who happen to be ex-offenders. This includes displaying the willingness to be patient and show "unconditional love". This would be incredibly fulfilling for both employer and employee.

Ms Foo mentioned that BoardAgender hires ex-offenders in its organisation to give them a second chance. She suggested a balanced approach in the sense that a person must not be discriminated against or given a job that will tempt them to fall into their old ways. To this, HR has an important part to play in fostering a healthy and ideal environment.

Mr Monteiro echoed these sentiments by stressing that ex-offenders who wish to achieve something should be given a fresh start. He called upon employers to create a process of trust that would enable working relationships devoid of suspicion.

### **Discrimination**

A final question was posed regarding the issue of discrimination in the workplace. All four speakers affirmed their commitment to non-discrimination and equality.

Ms Tan re-emphasised DOT's zero tolerance for discrimination of any kind. Ms Chia expanded this by stating Singapore's stance against discriminatory policies as we can all be subjected to them. In essence, it is about legislation and enforcement. Tokenism has to be rejected in favour of value-adding practices by employers, employees, and companies. Ms Chia noted Singapore's ratification of the UNCRD as proof of this national goal. Ms Foo added that equality is good for business and creates stakeholders in the local community. This would strengthen bonds between citizens and forge a more united society.

### **Hopes for Singapore in 2030**

Thinking about the broader Reimagining Singapore 2030 project, Dr Koh asked the panellists to share some key trends that are on the horizon, their hopes for Singapore in 2030, and how we might work towards these.

Ms Tan stated that Singapore is an ageing society. This presented a challenge to older women. Women of the "sandwich" generation often face conflicts between their career and the need to provide care. Most women are expected to show up at work and for their families. This creates intense demands on them. Solutions include "ungendering care", to get men to do care work could help to address the problem. She stressed how Singapore has an economic system that views workers as cogs in a machine. She hoped this paradigm would change over the course of the next decade. She wished that the value of people would be determined by who they were rather than what they produced. This would allow Singapore to unleash more capital and human potential.

Ms Chia added that the companies she liaised with adopted innovative methods to make use of the talent of their disabled employees. They used apps and other innovative technological developments to help facilitate their employees' work. Furthermore, many employers were willing to give their disabled employees supervisory roles in a show of trust. This was because they had a vision and mission for their workers. On top of this, it made perfect business sense.

Mr Monteiro noted how Rebel had been launched at the time of a pre-COVID business boom. It was incredibly difficult to hire staff. The people he eventually picked had no experience in the F&B industry. However, they were willing to work and made Rebel one of the top sandwich shops in Singapore. This is a position it has held for the past three years. Mr Monteiro agreed

with Ms Tan's point of recognising workers' worth as humans, not digits. He has seen the power of this line of thinking.

Overall, the panellists recognised that progress had been made towards inclusive and sustainable employment, but that there seemed to be a long way to go still. There was reason to be optimistic. More companies across various sectors are invested in greater representation for underprivileged women and disabled people. There has been a shift in society and culture. The themes of greater inclusivity have been gaining ground. The panellists hoped these themes and scenarios continue to find traction as Singapore moves into the unfolding decade.

[R.Avinash](#) is a Research Assistant at IPS.

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