

Singapore Perspectives 2023: Work Panel 9: The New Social Compact and Policy Implications for Work

By Gabriel Lim and Hazim Zulfadhli

The Institute of Policy Studies' annual flagship conference, Singapore Perspectives, seeks each year to engage thinking Singaporeans in a lively debate on the country's policy challenges. The theme for this year was "Work", with discussions focusing on how disruptions and trends in technology, socio-economic developments and Singapore's demographics would shape the future of work.

One of the key tenets of the new (refreshed) social compact is a more compassionate meritocracy. How do we embrace talents from more diverse fields and encourage acceptance of credentials and credibility beyond academic achievements? How can we mitigate entrenchment of privilege across generations? What role can organisations and employers play? This blue-skies panel explores impactful ideas and thinking that can shape the future of work that Singaporeans want.

The panel featured Mr Rajeev Peshawaria, CEO of Stewardship Asia Centre; Dr Intan Mokhtar, Associate Professor at the Business, Communication and Design Cluster & Deputy Director of the Community Leadership and Social Innovation Centre at Singapore Institute of Technology; and Ms Yeo Wan Ling, Director, U SME and Women & Family Unit, National Trades Union Congress. The panel moderator was Dr Gillian Koh, Deputy Director (Research) and Senior Research Fellow at IPS.



Caption for photo: Ms Yeo Wan Ling (left), Dr Intan Mokhtar, Mr Rajeev Peshawaria and Dr Gillian Koh discussing the new social compact and policy implications for work.

New Social Compact and Policy Implications for Work

Dr Koh introduced the panel by outlining the five key trends that will need to be addressed as Singapore refreshes its social compact: digitalisation, demographics, income inequality, de-globalisation and de-carbonisation. Preparing workers for these trends, persuading them to understand and accept national strategies as well as implementing policy and social changes to encourage institutions and individuals to invest in the future workforce are issues that all societies are grappling with.

Specifically in Singapore, gig economy and platform workers need to better be taken care of. What was supposed to be a transitional occupation has now become the main source of income for many Singaporeans who struggle with the uncertain, mundane work that offers little to no career progression. Addressing the macro trends while ensuring good and dignified work for specific segments will be crucial in improving the working lives of Singaporeans.

Industrial Relations and the Corporate Sector's Role in Inclusivity

New corporate leaders must be more stewardship-based if they want to remain relevant and socially responsible, said Mr Rajeev. He listed four stewardship values that all companies must strive towards: interdependence between employees and employers; long-term view; ownership mentality; and creative resilience.

He also spoke about how diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) still need addressing while institutions around the world respond to the structural problems in the labour landscape. He explained that DEI is not just about racial and gender inclusion, but also about people being engaged equitably in the workplace. Employees are diverse and treating them all the same is neither feasible nor sensible.

Mr Rajeev cited research showing that within companies, the top 20 per cent of people generate 80 per cent of the results/product/service that a business provides. As such, many companies promote mediocrity without even knowing it. By having the same expectations for all their employees, they limit their “true” potential and encourage the same results from everyone — even if some of their employees could be far more beneficial to a business.

He proposed a radical solution, which is to let employees choose how much or how little they want to contribute to a company and compensate them for their desired contributions. Productivity will go up because people understand that freedom means responsibility and this allows employees to take responsibility for their own jobs and be self-motivated. In other words, each worker becomes a business “owner” within the business. While many companies will resist this, Mr Rajeev observed that the “gig-like” environment is inescapable in today’s digital economy and a key measure would be to educate managers to be more flexible to the emerging “gig-like” approach to work.

Meritocracy

Meritocracy can entrench privilege and inequality, said Dr Intan, who also spoke about why a path to a more inclusive or representative meritocracy is necessary. One’s abilities, resources, training and group traits (among others) are key influencers of one’s progress in life. These factors are not always determined by meritocracy. One’s start in life and other factors beyond their control can influence these outcomes as well.

Dr Intan explained how affirmative action is tokenism and is completely different from a representative meritocracy which takes into consideration the external conditions of people’s

lives and how that determines their life trajectory. According to Dr Intan, rewarding people based on their academic achievements alone can unintentionally reward them for their circumstances, such as their social connections and capital. She spoke about the need to mitigate privilege and entitlements in life and reduce the notion of a golden ticket that denotes superiority, like scholarship awards in Singapore.

Addressing inequality is closely linked with mitigating the effects of “entrenched meritocracy” and raising the status and pay for low-wage workers is important. At the workplace, managing performance evaluation in the workplace needs to be much more holistic. Along with more holistic performance measures, internships and “returnships” should not just be for young people, but for transitioning and returning workers. This is to accommodate greater numbers of older workers who tend to be the victims of job displacement and thus need to upskill or reskill.

Women and Family

Ms Yeo Wan Ling spoke about how the social compact of the family will also need to be addressed in the pursuit of a more equitable and inclusive workplace. If this is not addressed, we will allow an underclass of people who cannot participate in the workforce to grow. Currently, 260,000 women of working age in Singapore are not participating in the workforce due to caregiving responsibilities. This is even more prominent in dual income families, where women are five times more likely to not participate in the workforce. Although gender equity is an area of concern amongst Singaporeans, the reality for women remains stark. In an Ipsos and United Women Singapore study, nine in 10 think household chores should be shared equally, but the reality is very different.

Considering the needs of women can be a big win-win for companies and workers, said Ms Yeo. On flexi-work arrangements, she said if we can tap this labour pool of women returners and provide jobs with flexible hours that can attract women, this would go a long way in solving the labour crunch that many businesses are facing now. Another could be lactation spaces that are catered to mothers, which would be extremely helpful in this endeavour.

These initiatives can help to cultivate a well-motivated and loyal workforce that is incentivised to perform well and will also help businesses retain experienced workers.

Question-and-Answer Session

Q: Much of what the speakers are saying requires mindset changes and cultural shifts. How do we bring about the transition to that change?

A: Mr Rajeev replied that one of the ways to change behaviour is through policy and regulations, but he does not believe that is the most effective way to enact change. Rules and regulations provide a floor where, if you fall below, there will be consequences. However, it does not encourage behaviour at the highest level to address the needs of today’s evolving workplace. For that we need education and values-based leadership. He said he believes that values-based leadership will bring higher productivity and higher employee engagement.

Dr Intan concurred, adding that we need both regulation and education — essentially, the three Es: enactment of policy and regulation, enforcement, and education. That said, in workplace and organisations, it is always easier to look at quantitative measures; but we also

need to look at the qualitative measures — conversations with employees rather than just looking at what the employee has attained on paper. Those ongoing conversations are important so we cannot afford to focus on just one facet, and will need to try and understand what the employee has gone through and their circumstances to appraise them more equitably.

Ms Yeo added that there were two philosophies here: being pragmatic and the tripartite partnership. Regarding pragmatism, given the job crunch situation now, many companies are looking to redefine what it is to work for their companies. And this could involve flexible-work arrangements (FWA) or part-timing. Pragmatism is a big motivator for change especially for many SMEs who are looking to retain and attract talent. On the tripartite partnership, looking at cultural changes is something the partnership can support companies through. There are many different tools out there to help companies should they decide to embark on this cultural change. She said that all this sharing and how tripartite partnerships listen to these will enable us to come up with good policies.

Q: Could you elaborate on how you think the scholarship system should be revamped or relooked? What is the motivation to work past mediocrity towards excellence, if it is not just a very bright orange carrot at the end?

A: Dr Intan said there is increasing recognition beyond academic scores for government scholarships. There is the recognition of wanting a more diverse pool for PSC scholars, not just those who come from elite or brand name schools. However, she also cautioned against going down the route of mediocrity. Those who hold positions of authority and are responsible for making decisions should have basic abilities and competencies. Additionally, there should be instances where they are able to groom others and build others up. Individuals who are not just “head smart”, but are those who are strong in terms of “heart work” and are grounded. This poses a greater challenge than monitoring quantitative benchmarks, but it is increasingly making them more diverse.

Ms Yeo noted that there is a very important role that scholarships and bursaries play. Under the Edusave there is a programme called Eagles Award, which rewards young people who have exhibited good leadership skills and who want to give back to the community. She believes there is a big role in bursaries and scholarships to encourage students to do well, but it is also important that the criteria for these awards are widened to fully represent people and families who are in that position.

Q: How do you think businesses are going to respond to what we have been saying? As for leaders — if they are not born, how are they made?

A: For Mr Rajeev, there are different kinds of leaderships beyond academic grades. There is a lot of talk about emotional development and emotional intelligence, he said, but sometimes we over-emphasise this idea. It depends on what we are preparing people for. If we are preparing people for scientific pursuit, it does not matter if they are socially inept. But if we are preparing the next prime minister or president of a university, they will need to know how to work with people. He noted that we need to be careful about how we frame such matters.

Dr Intan offered to challenge this framing. For the example of scientists in laboratories working in their ivory towers based on their understanding and research, there will still be a certain deficit if they do not go down on the ground and understand the different needs of the people

Singapore Perspectives 2023: Work | Panel 9: The New Social Compact and Policy Implications for Work, Gabriel Lim and Hazim Zufadhli, *IPS Update*, April 2023

and their communities. Increasingly, the best solutions that we see are not by individuals but by those who work in diverse teams. Mr Rajeev concluded that they were not in disagreement, but that his point was about being more practical about how we develop people.

Q: Socialisation of gender roles is still deeply engrained in society where women are expected to care for their children and ageing parents. How do you incorporate change in the mindsets of people to ensure women of the future workforce will not face the same problems as women in the workforce today?

A: Ms Yeo said this was not something that could be changed quickly. She described how the NTUC's Women and Family Unit has made good progress trying to close the gender pay gap, where it takes a pragmatic approach by always listening to the ground. For instance, NTUC was the first large-scale childcare provider, which is now known as My First Skool, beginning in the 1970s. Solutions like this help bring women back to the workplace and also release some of the burden of care. But caregiving should not be in the realm of women, she said, and men should also be equal stakeholders. At the labour movement, they are advocating for several things. The first is looking at some form of parity when it comes to caregiving leave. She elaborated that they are looking at paternity leave that is comparable to maternity leave. Another encouraging development is the number of civil societies that are talking about fathers and celebrating fatherhood and the importance they play in the life of a child.

Q: There is still the persistent wage gap between men and women, often framed as the need to remunerate men for their two years in National Service. How can we bridge that gap?

A: Ms Yeo replied that people are aware of the difference in pay for the different ranks of jobs in Singapore, and the labour movement is continually bringing this to light. However, a pragmatic consideration, when we look at the structure of the female career vis-a-vis the male career, is that this is not as linear. She explained that family and caregiving needs have resulted in this gap. The real question is not about balancing the wage gap but ensuring that when a woman decides to come back to the workforce after a long hiatus, she is supported through the entire process and not discriminated against. One issue is the skills gap. There are many training programmes out there that allows one to upgrade. The bigger problem is a lack of confidence. That is where a series of mentorships may help, said Ms Yeo. It is about women supporting women. The third gap is about employers. When a woman returns to the workplace, the caregiving duty may not be alleviated. It is important to think about how employers can restructure jobs for women, so women feel comfortable with and trust the employer.

Q: We are promoting a society that focuses on individuals and individuals pursuing their interests. When we have a greater focus on individuals, do you think it will take the focus away from collective issues that we face as a society such as climate change and sustainability?

A: Mr Rajeev disagreed with the view presented. The basics of steward leadership is in the belief of interdependence, which is the belief that we cannot be successful until we make others successful. It also includes the idea of having a long-term view and taking ownership to collectively solve these issues.

Dr Intan added that we are not looking at individual achievements alone. In appraising and evaluating the performance of an individual, we are looking at how well they are able to work with others. Likewise, it is not just about the wage gap alone, but also the opportunities provided to women. She said we need to allow women to step up and be in positions of leadership and decision-making. She added that we should groom others who are young to create a more diverse leadership.

Q: Participation in care work is often economically devalued, and performance in the workplace is affected by the different burdens of care work an individual has. How can we make care work more visible and increase recognition for it in the public sphere and can we integrate that into how we appraise an individual's performance?

A: Dr Intan reiterated that we need to look beyond a person's academic attainment. By having conversations in the workplace with our employees, we can understand what they have gone through and the circumstances they face compared with others. It becomes more grey, she said, because it is not so linear and structured. She believes that is where having regular conversations can come into play. Although this might mean more work for HR and employers, it creates a more inclusive and objective way of appraising individuals.

For Mr Rajeev, he said that employers will also have to redefine what performance looks like. They have to allow people to contribute at the level they want to contribute, and not stigmatise their decisions.

Ms Yeo replied that as a society, we are beginning to have a discourse on recognising the work of caregivers. There is a group of women out there who have no CPF funds because they spend their whole life caregiving. She is happy to see that the CPF has started its top-up scheme for caregivers. She said it is important to start the discussion on how we reward caregivers fairly and to create safety nets for caregivers when they eventually require caregiving themselves.

Q: Why are we not increasing the number of days of paternity leave? There are not many levers to promote gender equality in society, and the adequacy of paternity leave has been shown to work in many Scandinavian countries. Could we start to push from two weeks to three weeks to four weeks as a start, and gradually equalise this?

A: Ms Yeo shared that this is a question the union asks its members, and the feedback is actually split down the middle. There are those that say they want to be enabled and empowered to help their wives during that period. She believes we should simply look at it as childcare leave, instead of paternal or maternal leave; everyone should share it. She also elaborated that families have different dynamics, and some men do share the caregiving burden.

Q: We started by recognising the disruptions to the world of work. What are one or two things that need to be done to refresh and strengthen the social compact we have, from workers to businesses to communities and families and society?

A: Ms Yeo suggested the need to ride the tailwinds of COVID-19, with the introduction of flexible work arrangements. We need to ensure that it is sustainable and fairly operationalised.

She said that fully embracing flexible work arrangements will be the kicker in transforming Singapore's workplace and economy.

Dr Intan added that one approach is being oriented towards a more compassionate meritocracy. This means including people from various different backgrounds and changing the way we evaluate performance and appraise workers, bearing in mind the different circumstances and social capital that they have. The second is going beyond policies and frameworks, such as what we do within our homes and families and how we demonstrate diversity, equity and equality. We can have policies and legislation, but what also matters is what we do from home because our children grow up doing what they observe from the family first.

For Mr Rajeev, compassionate meritocracy is allowing people to choose where they want to be on the performance bell curve and paying them accordingly. It is not going to be achieved by doing the same thing again and again every year and hoping for a different result, which according to Einstein is the definition of insanity. The bell curve needs to be legitimised and people should be able to choose how much they want to contribute and pay accordingly. Also, tariffs cannot simply be imposed on businesses; there is a limit to how much we impose. There needs to be a win-win for both businesses and society. He concluded by asserting that giving people freedom can increase productivity.

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