

Call to enshrine gender equality in Constitution, pledge

Tham Yuen-C

The Straits Times, 30 April 2021

A strong women's movement is necessary to push for gender equality in Singapore, but is not sufficient on its own, and it is commitment from the Government that will truly move the needle on the issue, said veteran women's rights activist Corinna Lim yesterday.

To this end, the ongoing review on women's issues can help people recognise gender equality as a fundamental value, she added.

She suggested adding gender equality into the Constitution and the national pledge, which she described as the most authoritative expressions of Singapore's values.

"The time has come for gender equality in Singapore. Society wants this, and the Government has responded by initiating the gender equality review," she said.

"The road to equality is long and arduous, but it curves in the right direction."

Ms Lim, who is the executive director of the Association of Women for Action and Research (Aware), was speaking at the Institute of Policy Studies-Nathan lecture as the 8th S R Nathan Fellow for the Study of Singapore.

In the first of her three lectures, she looked at the role of activists in the development of women's rights and gender equality in Singapore.

Throughout Singapore's modern history, she said, these groups have helped women make big leaps. She cited the Singapore Council of Women (SCW), led by a group of women activists, and the People's Action Party Women's League, that had pushed for polygamy to be outlawed through the passage of the Women's Charter in the 1960s.

The practice was rife, with men setting up multiple families they could not support, and the SCW lobbied the Government and community groups on the issue for years.

Among political parties, the PAP made the strongest stand on the issue, noted Ms Lim, with its activists relentlessly pushing the agenda within the party and in Government. This same pattern - of women's rights groups identifying an issue and activists and political actors pushing for change - was repeated in the strengthening of the laws against family violence in the 1990s, noted Ms Lim, who was involved in the process. But these short bursts of progress were followed by long periods of lull, she said, exposing the drawbacks of depending on a few brave activists to raise individual issues.

Relying on sustained advocacy alone is not ideal, she added, saying: "What we need for more consistent progress is an explicit commitment by the Government to gender equality. A commitment with accountability."

Singapore's ratification of the United Nations Convention to End All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (Cedaw) in 1995 had been a step in this direction, said Ms Lim. She added Singapore had done it to "fit in" with the two-thirds of countries in the world that had signed at least one UN Human Rights treaty, but acknowledged that Cedaw has provided the Government and non-governmental organisations with a process for eliminating gender discrimination.

Ms Lim credited this process for having contributed to policy changes, such as the introduction of laws against harassment and human trafficking, and removal of immunity for marital rape.

In the same vein, the Government's review on women's issues can provide the infrastructure to advance gender equality, she said.

She added that social media has led to the democratisation of the feminist agenda, with topics like misogyny and sexual violence coming into the mainstream and becoming the concerns of ordinary people. "These are now seen as everyday problems that people encounter in their workplaces, homes, schools, communities."

Amid these developments, the review on women's issues, which will culminate in a White Paper, has come at the right time, she added.

Ms Lim said she hopes the White Paper will set out a comprehensive and clear plan on the steps the Government will take to put in place laws, policies and programmes to advance gender equality. The White Paper should also spell out what communities, companies and families can do, she added.

She called for gender equality to be enshrined in the Constitution through amending Article 12 (2), which prohibits discrimination based on race, religion, descent and place of birth, but not gender.

If the amendment is not feasible, an aspirational provision could be inserted into the Constitution to signify Singapore's commitment towards gender equality, she added.

She also suggested adding "gender" to the list of values in the pledge, changing the relevant line of the pledge to: "We the citizens of Singapore, pledge ourselves as one united people, regardless of race, language, religion or gender."

Said Ms Lim: "Imagine, if every day, girls and boys recited (this)... gender equality would quickly be imprinted in the collective consciousness of all these young minds."