

Govt's commitment needed to move needle on gender equality: Veteran women's rights activist

Tham Yuen-C

The Straits Times, 29 April 2021

SINGAPORE - 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 in a lecture on Thursday (April 29).

To this end, the Government's 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 two 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, referring to the review on women's issues.

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

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

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

Throughout Singapore's modern history, she said, these groups have helped women make big leaps.

She cited the instrumental role of the Singapore Council of Women (SCW), led by a group of women activists, and the People's Action Party Women's League, in pushing for polygamy to be outlawed through the passage of the Women's Charter in the 1960s.

The practice was rife in those times, with men setting up multiple families that they had no means to support, and the SCW lobbied the Government, community groups as well as political leaders on the issue for many years.

Among the political parties, the PAP made the strongest stand on women's rights, with the PAP Women's League 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 the work of a few brave women or activists to raise individual issues.

Relying on sustained advocacy by activists inside and outside politics is not ideal, she said and added: "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 that 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.

Every five years, the Government has had to report to the Cedaw committee on what it has done on this front, and non-government groups also get to participate in the process.

Ms Lim credited the Cedaw process for having contributed to changes in policies, such as the introduction of the Protection from Harassment Act, Prevention of Human Trafficking Act and removal of immunity for marital rape.

In the same vein, the Government's ongoing review on women's issues can also provide the infrastructure to help make progress on gender equality, she said.

She added that in the past 10 years, social media has led to the democratisation of the feminist agenda, and topics like misogyny, the motherhood penalty and sexual violence have come into the mainstream and become the concerns of ordinary people, not just activists.

"These are now seen as everyday problems that people encounter in their workplaces, homes, schools, communities," she said.

Amid these developments, the review on women's issues has come at the right time, she added.

On the review, which will culminate in a White Paper, Ms Lim said she hopes the White Paper will set out a clear and comprehensive plan on the steps the Government will take to set in place laws, policies and programmes to advance gender equality.

The White Paper should also spell out what communities, companies and families can do in this regard, she added.

She also called on the Government to enshrine gender equality in the Constitution, suggesting that it should be done through amending Article 12(2) which currently prohibits discrimination based on race, religion, descent, 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 in 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."