

WP MP He Ting Ru highlights the need to implement anti-discrimination legislation to protect women at workplace

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The Workers' Party (WP) MP for Sengkang GRC He Ting Ru on Thursday (3 June) highlighted the need to implement anti-discrimination legislation to protect women at the workplace, noting that the current system under Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices (TAFEP) puts "unfair responsibility" on women and survivors of workplace harassment to seek protection.

Ms He was speaking in the [closing dialogue](#) of the Institute of Policy Studies' (IPS) Women's Conference on Thursday, which was also joined by Minister for Home Affairs and Law K Shanmugam and moderated by Singapore Management University president Lily Kong.

Among the topics discussed in the dialogue include parental leave policies, workplace quotas, single-sex schools and the role of the media in gender equality.

During the dialogue, Ms He recalled the "flippant comments" she received from colleagues, such as hiring a male employee is more preferable as they "won't disappear for a few months", or that promotion or pay increment should be withheld from an employee who is taking maternity leave.

She also pointed out that female job applicants are often asked about marital status, whether they intend to have children, or if they are in a romantic relationship.

"While it aims to tackle this problem, the current TAFEP system places unfair responsibility on women, and indeed survivors of workplace harassment, to seek accountability and protection.

"The onus is placed on victims to make a report to TAFEP when experiencing workplace harassment or discrimination," said the MP.

Citing the Tripartite Advisory on Managing Workplace Harassment, Ms He pointed out that it advised individuals to "take charge of their personal safety, health and wellbeing at the workplace", or to consider "telling the harasser to stop his/her unreasonable behaviour".

This indicates how the mindset and mentality is still that the individual is ultimately responsible for their own safety and well-being, she said.

“While well-intentioned, this fails to recognize the realities of existing power dynamics, or the concerns that making a report may cost one’s job. These make it difficult for individuals to take steps to protect oneself or to seek accountability,” she added.

As such, Ms He suggested implementing anti-discrimination legislation to legally mandate all employers to ensure proper procedures are in place to protect their employees from workplace harassment and discrimination.

She pointed out that such legislation is also needed to remind employers about their duty to ensure the safety and well-being of their employees at the workplace.

“We can all do our part by calling out misogynistic comments made against women”

While Ms He acknowledged that strong deterrents and punishments are important to tackle sexual assault incidents, she stressed that society should also “standing up against the objectification of women generally”.

“We can all do our part by calling out misogynistic comments made against women, particularly if such comments touch on the appearance of women, and to make it clear that women must be respected.

“We need to, as a society, decide that such ‘locker room banter’ is in fact harmful and degrades women and perpetuates the idea that we need not be respectful of women,” she added.

Ms He opined that equality should start with education in schools and in “the wider public”.

“People must understand that objectification and discrimination are fundamentally wrong, not just that they may get punished. We need to be empowered to call out discriminatory behaviour and be able to address structural power imbalances,” she asserted.

Men and women should be able to make choices for their families without stigma

Meanwhile, Ms He also highlighted the need to normalize flexible work arrangements on a structural and cultural level, as well as legislate more shared parental leave along with a gender-neutral family care leave.

“Removing the stigma of men taking responsibility for a greater burden of running households and care work means that women are less over-stretched at home, freeing

them physically and mentally to concentrate on their jobs, which in turn helps to close the gender pay gap,” she added.

Ms He noted that “true equality” is hard to achieve if society continues to perceive work traditionally done by women – caring, running households, and looking after their families – as being “inferior” or “merely ancillary to the real work” of earning wages.

“Why do we say that women who have dedicated their lives to bringing up their children and caring for vulnerable family members are contributing less to our society, and that the measure of a man’s worth is his ability to win bread for the family?”

“Indeed, how do we even begin to value or quantify such invaluable labour typically carried out by women? How many mothers here have been told that going on maternity leave is going on ‘holiday’, and that ‘tatais have it good’? I certainly have,” she explained.

Ms He believes that both men and women must be able to take on either role without feeling embarrassed or suffering a penalty.

“Mothers and fathers must feel equally able to take time off work, few hours out of their workday, to attend to the call informing them that their child has a fever and needs to be picked up from school in the middle of the day,” she added.