

## Gender norms that widen pay gap for mothers must change: IPS panel

**Sue-Ann Tan**

***The Straits Times***, 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2021

SINGAPORE - A man was overheard saying that if he had known a certain woman was "so prolific at having children", he would not have hired her.

Such "locker room talk" is not unusual and there are enough of such anecdotes to show that it is a trend, said Dr Juliana Chan, chief executive of Wildtype Media Group, a media company focused on healthcare and science, technology, engineering and mathematics (Stem).

Dr Chan was a panellist at a discussion on having equal work and equal pay, as part of the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) Women's Conference held on Thursday (June 3).

A topic discussed was [the gender pay gap](#), which is widened when women have children.

Proposed explanations for this centre around how children impose different demands on a woman's time compared with a man's, said fellow panellist Jessica Pan, an associate professor from the National University of Singapore.

"The figures show that for a variety of countries, men and women's careers... progress in very similar ways. A huge change happens when the child is born," she said.

"These gaps really don't close even 10 years after the birth of the first child," Prof Pan added.

"This leaves us with this puzzle: Despite the fact that the economic roles of men and women are converging, why is it that women are still expected to be the main providers of childcare within the household?"

She noted that potential policy responses could be to allow for more parental leave and flexible work arrangements. But even these could backfire if they are costly from an employer's perspective.

Paternity leave provisions that European countries have hold promise, she said.

"They really potentially address the core of what is holding women back, by fundamentally addressing - hopefully weakening - the traditional division of labour and helping to speed up the shift in gender norms."

But ingrained societal norms that pigeonhole women as homemakers and men as breadwinners are also not easily solved, the panellists agreed.

Nee Soon GRC MP Carrie Tan noted: "Entrenched notions of what the roles of mothers and wives should be are still very prevalent, cut across generations and are going to still exert an influence if we don't address that right now," said Ms Tan, who is also the founder of charity Daughters Of Tomorrow.

Childcare issues are the most common barrier to employment, particularly for low-income women, she said.

Ms Tan noted that in some cases, a mother with better job or wage prospects than the father still has to stay home to care for children due to gender norms.

"Traditional masculinity defines men as the breadwinner, with very damaging effects on families who can benefit from a more optimal and un-gendered division of labour," she said.

Discriminatory practices in hiring - such as requiring applicants to be Mandarin-speaking - pose greater barriers to women from minority races, she added.

Where caregiving duties - for children, for instance - fall solely or mainly to the woman, some turn to self-employment and casual labour like home-based businesses and beauticians, but they do not earn much from these avenues.

Ms Tan cited a survey among 37 home-based business owners, which found that the women saw average sales of \$300 to \$600 monthly.

To this end, she proposed an initiative called Carefare, a parallel to the current Workfare Income Supplement scheme which supports low-wage workers.

This will help these women who fall through the cracks because they do not have enough money to make MediSave contributions, which is part of the eligibility criteria for Workfare.

"With Carefare, low-income persons - women or men - whose circumstances force them to be full-time caregivers, would be recognised by a basic income, while the self-employment or gig work helps to supplement them to help them reach a decent quality of life."

"The fact is that the main work that these individuals do is care (for their family) while their casual work or home-based businesses really serve as a potential supplement to make ends meet," she said.

Dr Chan also said that to create a sustainable, productive future economy, women also need to play an equal role in areas related to Stem.

"The stereotyping of women with the soft sciences and humanities and men with the hard sciences and technology is pervasive and goes even beyond Singapore's borders," she noted.

"And these gender-based assumptions can become magnified and transmitted as the children choose what subjects to study in college and what careers to pursue later on in life."