

Men wanted: All need to play a part in pushing for gender equality, says Shanmugam

Tham Yuen-C

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SINGAPORE - About one out of four participants in the ongoing series of conversations on women's issues have been men, but the proportion should ideally be at least two out of four, said Home Affairs and Law Minister K. Shanmugam on Thursday (June 3).

This is because the push for women to be on an equal footing with men is an issue for society, so every man has a serious role to play, he added.

"This is an important cause. It's as much a cause for men as well as women; we all have to put our shoulders to the wheel, pushing on this," he said at a virtual dialogue, in response to a question on how to get men to jointly advocate for women's equality.

Joining Mr Shanmugam for the closing dialogue at the Institute of Policy Studies Women's Conference was [Workers' Party MP He Ting Ru](#).

One theme that emerged across the four panel discussions at the conference was how men can support women and gender equality.

Various panellists made the point that men can and should do something to change attitudes and cultural norms that disadvantage women, be it at home, at the workplace or in the community.

Mr Shanmugam said the Government has tried to get men to participate in the series of conversations which are part of a wider national review on women's issues, but added that the participation rate was still not ideal even though many men have said they believe in equality for women.

"So, is it half full or half empty. I think we can do more. But the good news is that a lot of men do believe it," he added, quipping that men cannot be forced to take part in the conversations.

Ms He wondered if this was due to a lack of interest, or if men just feel too awkward to participate. Well-meaning men speaking up as champions of women is not enough, she added.

"While men should be part of the conversation for sure, we need to aim for a society that respects women for who we are and to take strides towards a society that gives us a voice to get where we want to go from here," said the Sengkang GRC MP.

During a wide-ranging discussion that covered the experiences of women in different social groups and different settings, Mr Shanmugam and Ms He answered questions about what more can be done to level the playing field.

Mr Shanmugam said that while some of the issues that women face - like sexual harassment - [can be addressed through legislation, laws are not a silver bullet.](#)

Asked about anti-discrimination laws at the workplace, he said these should not be ruled out. But the experience in other countries shows it is not so straightforward because employees who complain about gender discrimination often have to prove their case in court, as employers can cite other reasons for dismissing them, he noted.

Ms He felt such laws would put the onus on the employer to make sure there is no discrimination, and make it easier for victims, citing that they now bear the burden of reporting any discrimination they suffer under the current system.

She added that many mothers feel strongly about the issue: "When we go on maternity leave, the employers do actually say, 'you are leaving for a few months, I can't justify a pay raise, I can't justify a promotion'."

Mr Shanmugam also warned of the trade-offs for suggestions like equal parental leave between fathers and mothers.

For instance, he said, while equal parental leave in some European countries has successfully nudged men to take on more of the child-rearing role, legislating such leave in Singapore - which has an economy that is very dependent on external investments - could erode competitiveness.

To this, Ms He said diversity has shown to help overall performance for companies, and added that comparing equality with financial costs might be a false dichotomy.

Mr Shanmugam noted that women essentially want fairness, and said Singapore will have to create a legal framework and, at the same time, [change the prevailing cultural mindset to ensure women get fair treatment.](#)

Such mindset change will take a long time, and it is important to start with the young, he said.

For a start, employers should give women an equal stab at top jobs, and men can help out more in the household.

Mr Shanmugam said: "This is, in some ways, a job that is never fully done... As a society, we have to have that approach, but we have to keep pushing on this, we have to keep plugging on it."