

## Whole-of-society effort needed to change norms and practices on women's roles, says President Halimah Yacob

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SINGAPORE - A whole-of-society effort is needed for societal norms and practices to change and better support women, said President Halimah Yacob on Thursday (June 3) at a conference on gender equality here.

The issue is not just about securing rights for women, but also giving them the respect and appreciation they deserve for their contributions and sacrifices, she said.

"All of us are in a position of influence to do so," she said.

"With respect as the cornerstone of the rapport between women and men, we can create a society where every woman and man can achieve their aspirations and fullest potential."

Madam Halimah, Singapore's first woman president, and before that, first woman Speaker of Parliament, was giving the keynote speech at the Institute of Policy Studies Women's Conference 2021.

The fully virtual event brings together more than 250 academics, activists, business and community leaders, as well as representatives from government to discuss challenges Singapore women face in a changing world.

Speaking in a recorded message, President Halimah said that Singapore has pledged its commitment to equality between women and men, and acceded to the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1995.

"To ensure continued progress as a nation, it is imperative we invest, develop and maximise the full potential of every individual and support them in achieving their aspirations, regardless of whether they are women or men," she added.

"We must make it a priority for women who hold up 'half the sky' to be able to participate and contribute fully, and equally, to Singapore's development."

The conference comes amid an ongoing series of Conversations on Singapore Women's Development, as part of a national review of women's issues.

Since last September, the Government has partnered civil society, business and community groups to better understand citizens' aspirations for Singapore women, and held about 100 conversations involving more than 3,300 participants.

President Halimah said all views on how to achieve greater gender equality will be considered, and the Government will present a White Paper on recommendations as well as a road map for implementation.

As Singapore takes stock of the progress of its women, President Halimah stressed that it is also important to relook existing policies and social norms to respond to changing attitudes and challenges when it comes to equality between women and men.

### **Laws, policies regularly reviewed to better protect women**

She noted that the Government is constantly reviewing its laws and policies on this front. For instance, the Women's Charter, which came into effect 60 years ago in May 1961, has been amended over the years and is not a static document.

The President noted that the law was ground-breaking for its time, codifying marriage and divorce laws and giving married women the legal right to sign contracts and own property using their own name.

"We owe a great debt to Chan Choy Siong and other women who came before us for blazing the trail towards equality between women and men," she said, referring to the pioneering woman politician who played a key role in the passage of the charter in the Legislative Assembly.

She added that amendments over the years have strengthened protections for women, such as on the enforcement of maintenance orders after divorce and support for vulnerable women facing family violence.

Other laws such as the Penal Code and Protection from Harassment Act have also been updated, to repeal marital immunity for rape, enhance punishments for violence towards intimate partners and strengthen protection for victims of harassment and stalking, among other changes.

And in March, the Ministerial Statement on the Review of the Sentencing Framework for Sexual and Hurt Offences set out the Government's philosophy for deterrent and proportionate punishment to take precedence over rehabilitation of adult offenders.

### **Room for improvement in the workplace, at home**

On women's progress, President Halimah said that while women here have made great strides, especially in education, work and community participation, "there is always room for improvement as progress is an ongoing effort".

She noted that women with caregiving responsibilities, for instance, continue to face barriers at the workplace, and their propensity to take on these duties was a key contributing factor to the gender pay gap, which stood at 6 per cent in 2018, based on a study by the Ministry of Manpower and the National University of Singapore.

Work-from-home arrangements brought about by the pandemic have created opportunities for women to balance work and caregiving, she added, and hoped they will continue to be available after the crisis. But she noted that women might find themselves disproportionately taking on more unpaid care work, such as being in charge of their children's home-based learning and domestic tasks.

Madam Halimah called on fathers to step up and play a more active role at home, and on employers to be more understanding.

### **Need for strong signal against online harassment**

Another area in which women face challenges is in the digital realm, the President noted.

She alluded to recent instances of harassment and bullying of women, sometimes by anonymous trolls, on social media, and cited recent media reports of technology-facilitated sexual violence against women.

While laws have been enhanced and stiffer penalties introduced to tackle these problems, Madam Halimah said, it is also important for society to take a stand and for schools and workplaces to take sexual harassment, including online, seriously.

"Singaporeans must send a strong signal that we condemn such behaviours, because no woman is safe from such abuses, including our own female family members.

"While technology has opened new avenues for harassment and violence against women, the attitudes that gave rise to these anti-social behaviours in the first place have been with us for much longer," she added.

Madam Halimah also said that change must take place "upstream", with young men taught from an early age that women are their equals and are to be respected. "This is where families, peers and institutions such as schools can play a part in educating boys and girls about gender stereotypes of careers and parenting roles," she said.

"We need to signal that there is zero tolerance for the degradation of girls and women in our society, and that they are valued for their contributions in the family, in the workplace, and in our society."