

Dilemma Of Working Mums: Income Is Only 1/5th Of Their Male Counterparts

Sarmistha Neogy

theAsianparent, 4th June 2021

The onus of raising a family, caring for elders, managing a household and finances, and even supervising the maid is still very much on a woman. No matter how professionally successful she is, a woman still remains the 'homemaker' in many ways.

This has propelled the gender wage gap to not only increase, but push progress by many decades. Take for instance the new study by the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) and National University of Singapore economist Jessica Pan. Released in January last year, the study [reveals](#) that "The median monthly salary of a woman in full-time work was 16.3 per cent less than a man in full-time work, a slight rise from 16 per cent in 2002."

Unfortunately, the situation hasn't changed at all in Singapore.

According to this year's [Global Gender Gap Report](#), the estimated earned income of women is only one-fifth of their male counterparts. This reaffirms that when it comes to equal pay for men and women, companies have still a lot to catch on.

Incidentally, this was also the topic of a panel discussion that was held at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) Women's Conference held on Thursday (June 3).

The Gender Wage Gap Widens When Women Have Children

The panellist discussed several locker room conversations in offices where men express their displeasure or mock their female colleagues for giving birth.

As Dr Juliana Chan, chief executive of Wildtype Media Group who was part of the panel discussion was [reported](#) as saying, "Such "locker room talk" is not unusual and there are enough of such anecdotes to show that it is a trend."

Fellow panellist Jessica Pan of NUS [added](#), "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. These gaps really don't close even 10 years after the birth of the first child."

The panellists shared that they still wonder that while the economic roles of men and women are converging, why women are still expected to be the main provider of childcare within the household?

But why does this happen? Panelists discussed a few pertinent points and suggested some ideas that can bring about a change.

1. Paternity Leave And Flexible Timings Can Help

They suggested that men probably will be able to pitch in if they are provided with [paternity leave](#) and flexible work timings. The panelists however, did point that it has the potential to backfire because they are costly from the employer's perspective. But, it is also the only way, in which men can share the childcare load.

While they agreed that companies do have a part to play, but the ingrained societal norms that have categorised women as 'homemakers' and men as 'breadwinners' cannot easily be solved.

2. Societal bias worsens the situation

Sharing her sentiments, Nee Soon GRC MP, Carrie Tan [said](#), "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."

The panelists highlighted that there have been several such incidents where the woman with a better job or wage prospects than her husband eventually sacrificed her career and stayed at home to take care of her kids.

3. Discriminatory practices in hiring

The panel further spoke about the discriminatory hiring practices prevalent in many companies.

For instance, requiring applicants to be Mandarin-speaking. They pose greater barriers to women from minority races.

As the caregiving duties for children fall mainly on women, they often turn to self-employment and casual home-based businesses and/or beauticians. This goes without saying that they don't earn much from these options. But, this is just to keep themselves engaged.

Highlighting this point, the panellists shared a survey among 37 home-based business owners. It was found that that women saw average sales of \$300 to \$600 monthly.

4. Proposal of a Carefare initiative

Ms Tan suggested an initiative called Carefare that can support low-wage workers.

As part of this initiative, women who do not have enough money to make MediSave contributions will be helped.

With Carefare, low-income people – both women and men, whose circumstances have pushed them to become full-time caregivers, would be recognised by a basic income.

While self-employment or independent work will help to supplement them to get a decent quality of life.

5. Stereotyping women with soft sciences and humanities need to end

Dr Chan brought the audience's attention to another very relevant issue. She said that in order to create a sustainable, productive future economy, women 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](#).

This is a dangerous trend and it silently contributes to the gender wage gap. These gender-based assumptions, for instance, that women are weak in maths and science can also get transmitted as children choose what subjects to study in college.

All the panellist agreed that several things need to change to make conditions conducive for mums to continue their careers.

Pandemic Made It Worse “Shesession”

A March report, published on the World Economic Forum (WEF) website, said the “pandemic reversed women's workplace gains in many of the world's wealthiest countries as the burden of childcare rose and female-dominated sectors shed jobs.”

In fact, there were several [reports](#) that highlighted that women were more likely than men to lose their jobs in 17 of the 24 rich countries. [“Shesession”](#) was the term coined by C Nicole Mason, president and chief executive of the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR), a think tank. It is an economic downturn where job and income losses are affecting women more than men.

The report, which looked at 33 countries in the (OECD) club of rich nations said progress towards gender equality at work would not begin to recover until 2022.

Unfortunately, due to the pandemic, women were spending on average 7.7 more hours a week than men on unpaid childcare, a “second shift.”

This is nearly the equivalent of a full-time job and risks forcing some out of paid work altogether, according to the [PWC report](#).

The Gender Wage Gap: How To Shape Gender Equal Recovery

The [WEF report](#) focused on the Accelerator model that lists some steps to help shape a gender-equal recovery.

1. Reskilling women for reemployment

- To help women join back into the high-growth sector, companies and organisation should focus on re-skilling them.
- Companies must use gender-sensitive workforce planning and redeployment policies.

2. Close gender gaps in remuneration between and within sectors

- The focus should be on improving work quality and pay standards across currently low-paid essential workers.
- Pay reviews and appropriate remediation policies should be put in place.

3. Enable women's participation in the labour force

- To help women participate in the labour force, companies should have flexible and alternative work arrangements.
- In addition to this, provisions should be made to enhance social safety nets, specifically for childcare support.

4. Advance more women into management and leadership

This objective can be achieved by setting targets for women in leadership on a government and business level.

As countries gradually move to a post-pandemic world, it is important to include more women for economic and social recovery post COVID-19.

Unfortunately, today women are struggling even more than before to retain an equal footing in the economy. Their experience is shaped by the rising domestic and workplace violence, higher care responsibilities. In addition to this, the [uncertainty of jobs](#) and a disproportionate lack of access to working capital and digital tools such as mobile phones has impacted women in their career.

So now, an empathetic approach is the need of the hour.

Private companies can help mums with more work-from-home options. They can also provide them with child care options and flexible work schedules. This will surely help them to concentrate on both their work and manage their child at home.