

IPS Women's Conference 2021
Gender Equality In Singapore: An Action Plan for Progress
3 June 2021

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On 3 June 2021, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) held the IPS Women's Conference, titled "Gender Equality in Singapore: An Action Plan for Progress". The one-day virtual conference came amid a national review of women's issues by the government that will culminate in a White Paper to be tabled in Parliament this year. The aim of the conference was to navigate contemporary issues of gender inequality in Singapore and identify best practices for policy action.

Attended by about 800 participants, the conference brought together thought leaders, academics, activists, and community leaders to discuss the challenges Singaporean women face in a changing world. It featured an opening address by President Halimah Yacob, three moderated panels, and a closing dialogue with Minister for Home Affairs and Law, Mr K Shanmugam, and Member of Parliament for Sengkang GRC, Ms He Ting Ru.

This report summarises the presentations and discussion that took place during the conference. Refer to Appendix A for a list of recommendations for policy action.

Opening Address

Speaker
Mdm Halimah Yacob President Republic of Singapore

President Halimah Yacob acknowledged the progress and achievements of Singaporean women, while still recognising room for improvement. She highlighted the government's ongoing efforts to support women's issues through a series called "Conversations on Singapore Women's Development" launched in September 2020. These community dialogues aim to better understand Singaporeans' aspirations for women and will help inform a White Paper focused on achieving greater gender equality in Singapore.

In her speech, the President illustrated the progress Singapore has made in its pursuit of gender equality, starting with the groundbreaking 1961 Women's Charter. She described how the Charter afforded various legal rights to women and the instrumental role of pioneer female politicians, such as Chan Choy Siong, in paving the way for women's rights in Singapore. She noted that, over the past six decades, the Women's Charter has been amended multiple times to better support and protect Singapore women.

The President also drew attention to various laws and policies that have been reviewed to respond to changes in attitudes and challenges pertaining to gender equality. These include amendments to the Penal Code, Protection from Harassment Act, and the Sentencing Framework for Sexual and Hurt Offences. The President also stressed the government's commitment to equality between men and women on the global stage, noting that Singapore had acceded to the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1995.

Despite these advances in gender equality, the President shared that Singapore women still faced many challenges, such as the gender pay gap, disparate caregiving expectations, and sexual harassment. She called for a whole-of-society effort to address these issues and effect positive change on societal norms and practices. To help women balance the disproportionate demands of domestic caregiving responsibilities, she urged fathers to be more involved in family caregiving and employers to be more understanding by creating family-friendly workplaces. She also encouraged Singaporeans to send a strong signal condemning sexual harassment and violence against women, emphasising the need for "zero tolerance for the degradation of girls and women in our society".



Caption for photo: President Halimah Yacob delivering her opening address for the conference.

Panel I - Equal Work, Equal Pay

Chairperson		
Ms Tan Su Shan Group Head of Institutional Banking DBS Bank		
Speakers		
A/P Jessica Pan Associate Professor Department of Economics, National University of Singapore	Ms Carrie Tan Founder and Strategic Advisor Daughters Of Tomorrow (DOT)	Dr Juliana Chan Chief Executive Officer Wildtype Media Group

The first panel of the IPS Women's Conference focused on "Equal Work, Equal Pay" and was moderated by Ms Tan Su Shan, Group Head of Institutional Banking at DBS Bank. It featured Associate Professor (A/P) Jessica Pan from the Department of Economics, National University of Singapore; Ms Carrie Tan, Founder and Strategic Advisor of Daughters Of Tomorrow (DOT) and Member of Parliament at Nee Soon GRC; and Dr Juliana Chan, Chief Executive Officer at Wildtype Media Group. Ms Tan began the session with an overview of the gender pay gap in Singapore, noting that despite increased female participation in the workplace, there remained significant disparities in the salaries of men and women. She asked what else society could do to rebalance the gender equation.

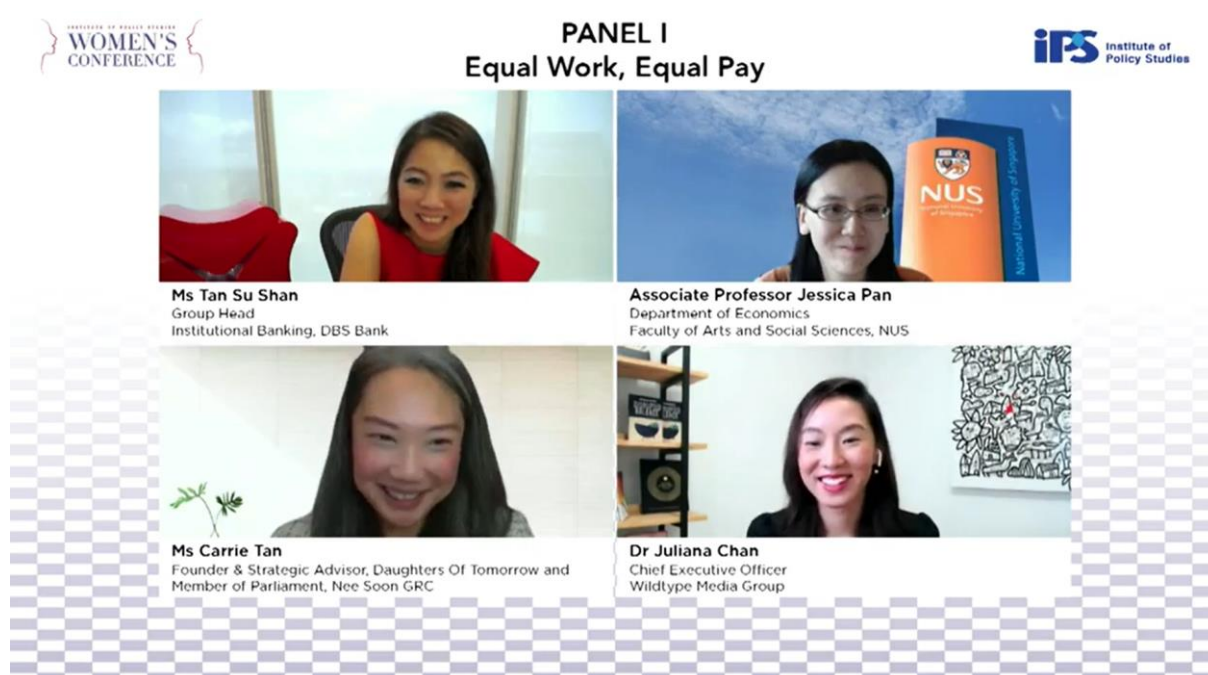
Weakening gender norms with paternity leave and flexible work arrangements

A/P Jessica Pan began her presentation by outlining the progress of women in the labour market. Compared with the previous generation, Singapore women today have acquired more education and work experience. She argued that, from an economic standpoint, the inclusion of women would maximise labour efficiency in the market, enhance productivity within organisations, and mitigate the impact of an aging population. However, women continue to be underrepresented in high-income, high-status occupations.

In addition, the career trajectories of men and women diverge sharply upon the arrival of the first child, with men scarcely affected, while women experience a sharp decline. According to A/P Pan, such disparities are due to the prevalence and persistence of traditional, gendered expectations. While women are expected to be homemakers and childcare providers, men are expected to be breadwinners, or at least earn more than their wives. These problems of equity are exacerbated for those in jobs that reward employees for pulling in more hours at work. Due to social norms, such work structures lead to mothers staying at home so that their husbands can reap the benefits of fully committing to their work obligations.

Current policy solutions that augment work-family amenities, such as parental leave, part-time work, and flexibility work arrangements, help to attract and retain women in the workforce. However, when such benefits are solely used by women, the perceived costs of hiring them increases. Other solutions, such as outsourcing childcare in the form of subsidised childcare and foreign domestic helpers, are helpful in advancing women's careers. Nonetheless, they may not increase quality time spent with children — an aspect of parenting that remains valuable to mothers.

A/P Pan highlighted a promising policy option focused on providing parental leave that is “ringfenced” for use by fathers. Evaluation of such policies in Europe show that most fathers do exhaust such dedicated paternity leave quotas, even contributing to childcare and housework after the leave has been utilised. She also proposed reorganising and redesigning jobs to better accommodate flexible work arrangements that encourage both parents to balance home and work commitments as a team. Some suggestions include making employees more substitutable to clients, easing coordination across competing firms, and ensuring greater female representation in management roles. Finally, she noted a need for the policy narrative about work-family trade-offs to shift from being a “women’s” issue to being a “family” issue to better reflect their benefits for both women and men.



Caption for photo: Speakers discussing the valuation of care work during the panel on “Equal Work, Equal Pay”.

Un-gendering and valuing care work

Drawing upon her experiences at DOT, a local non-profit organisation she founded seven years ago, Ms Carrie Tan observed that not all women were treated equally in the workforce. Low-income women would face complex and distinct challenges in finding employment,

many occurring at the intersection of poverty, gender, class, and race. While seeking employment, these women often face the triple threat of childcare difficulties, unstable incomes, and workplace or hiring indignities. This is because gendered notions of who should be the main caregiver and breadwinner often force low-income women to stay at home, even if mothers have better wage prospects than fathers.

At the workplace, the circumstances of these women — such as judgement for leaving young children at home or leaving work early to pick-up their child from childcare — create barriers to employment, she said. Hence, many seek self-employment and casual work. However, working outside of formal employment structures makes it difficult for women to save for their future because they do not receive Central Provident Fund and Medisave contributions, and are unable to access leave, medical, and hospitalisation benefits. A number of these women also fall through the cracks of well-meaning government support schemes, such as the Workfare Income Supplement (WIS). Ms Tan also noted that low-income women from ethnic minority groups were more likely to be interviewed by Chinese hiring managers, who may have implicit prejudicial views about applicants based on their race. Thus, in addition to proving one's capabilities at work, a female ethnic minority applicant may also deal with racial biases, which those from the Chinese ethnic majority are not subjected to. Jobs that require Mandarin language abilities — a poorly justified application criteria — further exclude non-Chinese women from the workplace.

To address the employment challenges faced by caregivers, Ms Tan urged policymakers to implement CareFare — a scheme that she had previously proposed in parliament to recognise the work of caregivers with a basic income. Functioning as a parallel scheme to WIS, CareFare recognises that care work is the main work of caregivers, who are often forced into the role by circumstances and lesser means. She also called upon society to unpack and combat toxic masculinity. Society should mainstream and normalise men as more than just breadwinners, such that both the roles of caregiver and breadwinner can be un-gendered. Policymakers could also proactively encourage this mindset change.

Cultivating women leaders in STEM

Dr Juliana Chan began her presentation by explaining how her experience as a scientist, entrepreneur, and mother have motivated her to address the “leaky pipeline” of women in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) industry. Although more women are undertaking undergraduate degrees in STEM-related fields, they are notably absent in the industry particularly in senior management roles. This gender disparity threatens the creation of a sustainable and productive future workforce.

Dr Chan attributed these disparities to gender biases that are socialised early in childhood and discussed research that showed how parents were more likely to view design, technology, and advanced mathematics as particularly suitable subjects for boys, while literature and art were deemed more appropriate for girls. These gender-based assumptions become magnified when these children eventually choose their career paths. As Singapore moves towards a more STEM-driven world, such imbalances in the field could have wide-

ranging societal implications, from gender biased algorithm-based hiring processes and credit rating evaluations to medical misdiagnoses.

Dr Chan offered four suggestions to harness women's talent and potential for the future economy. First, greater media visibility should be accorded to strong female role models, especially in traditionally male-dominated STEM fields. Second, new policies to incentivise the employment and promotion of women are needed, such as the Athena Swan Charter in the United Kingdom, which helps higher education institutions measure gender equality and implement related policies. Third, leaders must be trained to manage a diverse and inclusive workforce. Dr Chan highlighted how women entrepreneurs face high rejection rates from venture capitalist funding despite being more likely to start businesses with social purposes. This could lead to a serious shortfall in capital, and hence availability of businesses, that can address social needs. Finally, Dr Chan called upon companies to include caregiving responsibilities in workplace productivity evaluations.

Questions and Answers

Recognise immense effort needed for childcare

During the discussion session, the panel reiterated the need to recognise the impact of childcare on women's workforce participation and advancement. A/P Pan said women who do not have children are not subjected to the same motherhood penalties. Without the responsibility of childcare, their career progress is similar to that of their male peers. Even among women, the careers of those who have childcare responsibilities are the most negatively impacted.

Encourage fathers to be involved in the household

Several participants asked how the household division of labour could be equalised between parents. One asked if pegging parental leave to a family unit rather than a working mother would help the issue of household labour division. In response, A/P Pan said that such leave flexibility would typically see mothers use the parental leave; current research suggests that in the face of flexibility, families tended to rely on traditional gender norms to make childcare decisions. Citing the prevalence of "mummy guilt", which refers to feelings of inadequacy faced by mothers struggling to provide more direct care for their children, Ms Tan Su Shan suggested highlighting "daddy's guilt" so fathers feel similarly obligated to take up paternity leave and share the responsibilities of childcare.

Other barriers to male proactivity in the domestic front include women's expectations. Drawing upon their own experiences as mothers, both A/P Pan and Dr Chan observed how mothers may have preconceived notions of how household tasks should be done and may inadvertently invalidate their spouses' domestic contributions. Setting aside these expectations and embracing their spouses' caregiving style allows them time and opportunity to learn the ropes of caregiving. Ms Tan Su Shan noted: while men operate within the efficiency frontier at work, women operate within the efficiency frontier at home. A mindset shift is critical in un-gendering work and home responsibilities. To that, Ms Carrie Tan added

that greater media representation of nurturing males would be useful for changing our perceptions of roles of fathers.

Understand complexity of intergenerational gender norms

One question raised by the public was about the gender expectations placed on women by fellow women. Ms Carrie Tan shared her observations of gender norms being transmitted across generations, where women are pressured to adhere to gendered notions of mothers and wives by their own mothers and mothers-in-law. She noted an absence of discussions on women's issues in the vernacular mainstream media; this could affect the extent to which the older generation are aware of and engaged in current discourse on gender equality.

Develop understanding and sensitivity among employers

A question was asked about the alternatives to late pickup penalty fees in childcare centres. These fees are supposed to function as compensation to childcare teachers, many of whom are women facing similar struggles with work-family balance. Rather than reducing the late penalty fees, Ms Carrie Tan said the key to avoiding them lies in workplace support. Low-income women tend to be in lower-wage jobs where they view themselves as powerless and easily replaceable. This can reduce their confidence in asking for understanding from employers. A sensitive and understanding employer would be able to ease their employees' worries about caregiving, such as leaving work to pick up their children from childcare on time. This would render the financial penalty for late pickup irrelevant.

Reconsider existing hiring practices

A participant asked if the practice of employers requesting potential hires for last-drawn salaries should be abolished, as this could disadvantage women, who are often paid lower salaries. According to A/P Pan, the benefits of such a policy change remain unclear. On one hand, it may protect women who typically earn lower salaries. On the other hand, it may disadvantage well-established women who managed to earn a decent salary at their last job. A better approach shown to decrease the gender pay gap is pay transparency policies, where organisations make known their pay structures. This often leads to higher salaries for both men and women. Dr Chan added that hiring policies should go beyond abolishing questions about last-drawn pay. She expressed concern about "locker room talk" by men in the workplace that disparage women for being married or having children. She also emphasised the need to protect mothers and soon-to-be mothers from sexism at work.

Boost community-based mutual aid network

A participant asked how low-income women could address the challenge of seeking employment without existing childcare support. Ms Carrie Tan clarified that recent adjustments to government policies now allow job-seeking women to qualify for childcare subsidies. However, more subsidies could be extended for informal childcare support. Currently, DoT is piloting a community-based child-minding network that allows women who choose not to engage in formal work to offer their caregiving services to mothers seeking employment. Ms Tan expressed her hope for increased informal care networks and unpaid care work to be supplemented by CareFare.

Develop awareness of unconscious biases

A participant asked how educational institutions could reduce gender stereotypes in the classroom. Both Dr Chan and Ms Tan Su Shan encouraged more school-going girls to enrol in STEM classes. Beyond that, Ms Carrie Tan pointed out how ingrained unconscious gender biases in society can be. She recommended rolling out implicit bias training at a national level, such that educators, leaders, and recruiters become more aware of their gender biases before they make important.

Lessons from the women's movement for racial equality

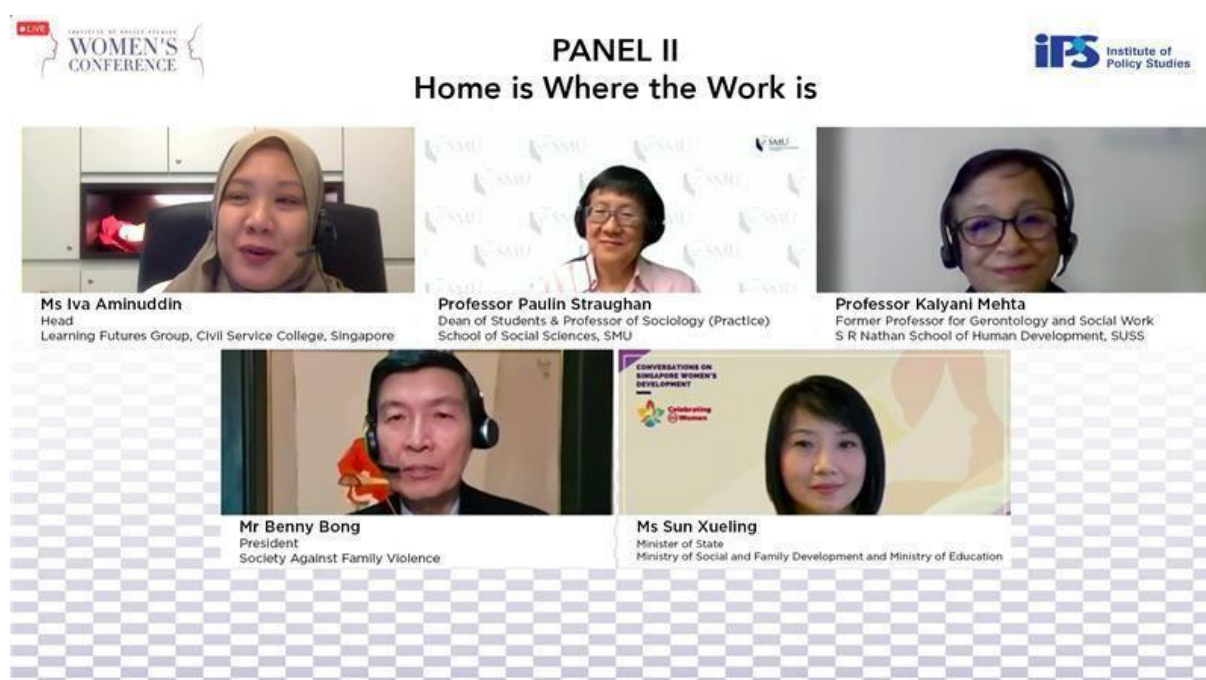
At the end of the session, a question drew comparisons between the gender equality and racial equality movements in Singapore: if women have yet to gain equal standing despite fighting the good battle far longer than the racial equality movement, what hope do minorities have for the future, especially women who are ethnic minorities? Ms Carrie Tan expressed her hopes for the racial equality agenda in Singapore and reminded the audience that “all journeys... take different times.” Setbacks suffered by the women's movement can be seen as lessons in building an inclusive society, which can in turn be applied to the fight for racial equality, so that the same mistakes are not repeated. Dr Chan added that it was important for minority women to show up on panels, even if their inclusion comes across as tokenistic. The continued presence of racial and gender minorities in such settings contributes to their public representation, which remains critical for either movement.

Panel II: Home is Where the Work is

Chairperson	
<p>Ms Iva Aminuddin Head of Learning Futures Group Civil Service College</p>	
Speakers	
<p>Professor Paulin Straughan Dean of Students & Professor of Sociology (Practice) School of Social Sciences, Singapore Management University</p>	<p>Professor Kalyani Mehta Former Professor for Gerontology and Social Work S R Nathan School of Human Development, Singapore University of Social Sciences</p>
<p>Mr Benny Bong President Society Against Family Violence</p>	<p>Ms Sun Xueling Minister of State (MOS) Ministry of Education and Ministry of Social and Family Development</p>

The second panel of IPS Women's Conference featured discussions on how to make home an equitable and safe place for women. The panel was moderated by Ms Iva Aminuddin, Head of Learning Futures Group at the Civil Service College. The panel speakers included Professor Paulin Straughan, Dean of Students & Professor of Sociology (Practice) at the School of Social Sciences, Singapore Management University; Professor Kalyani Mehta, former Professor for Gerontology and Social Work, Gerontology Graduate Programme, S R Nathan School of Human Development, at the Singapore University of Social Sciences; Mr Benny Bong, President of Society Against Family Violence; and Ms Sun Xueling, Minister of State in the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Social and Family Development, who took part as a discussant. The session covered topics like equal sharing of caregiving responsibilities, gender-inclusive households, and institutional support for caregivers.

Ms Iva opened the panel by sharing about her struggles as a working mother, made even more challenging with the introduction of work-from-home and home-based learning arrangements during the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on Panel 1's discussions, Ms Iva highlighted how Singapore women were still taking on the bulk of household and caregiving responsibilities.



Caption for photo: Ms Iva (top, left) introducing the speakers for the second panel, titled "Home is Where the Work is".

The systematic devaluation of domestic work

Professor Paulin Straughan presented national statistics on the unequal division of domestic labour, showing that women consistently do more across all three domains of care: childcare, homecare, and eldercare. However, she also observed that men have progressively stepped up, particularly in the provision of childcare. Yet, despite the unequal division of domestic labour, women consistently reported that they were happy with the work overload. Professor

Straughan attributed this finding to the socialisation of gender ideologies that prescribe role differentiation and also reinforced beliefs that women are better caregivers and domestic managers.

However, she said it was not gender role differentiation itself that was contentious but rather the systematic devaluation of domestic work that led to the perpetuation of gender inequality. She explained that the increasing emergence of dual-income households has challenged the notion of “dual-spheres” in society — and rendered private, domestic work invisible. As a result of this tension, an intermediary area of supplementary labour — where many female-dominated occupations are situated — has been created to cushion the gap.

Professor Straughan noted that such devaluation of women's domestic work was detrimental to the society's stability. It reinforces negative perceptions of women's abilities to manage work and family commitments and the availability of formal support for dual-income couples, particularly those with young children. This could lead to a drop in a nation's total fertility rate and an increase in the proportion of women who are childless by choice. She commended Singapore's pro-family policies that recognise the weight of childcare responsibilities and the introduction of eldercare leave that increases the visibility of caregiving responsibilities of adult children.

At the end of her presentation, Professor Straughan discussed how the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to further blurring of the private and public spheres. While work-from-home arrangements increased employer-employee trust and enhanced interpersonal relations among work teams, it also led to increased stress due to reduced work-life balance. She concluded by reminding individuals to practise compassion and empathy in their interactions with people at work.

The feminisation of ageing

In her presentation, Professor Kalyani Mehta observed that a feminisation of ageing, where the ratio of women to men increases with age. Yet, among the current cohort of women who are 70 years old and above, women have less education, less savings, and suffer from more chronic illnesses than their male counterparts. Thus, with overall population gains in life expectancy, more Singapore women would spend more years in poor health.

In agreement with Professor Straughan, Professor Mehta noted that women were often seen as nurturers, homemakers, and emotional pillars suited for caregiving work. She cited a survey on informal caregiving conducted by the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS) that showed that the female-to-male caregiver ratio was six to four. This suggests that eldercare would become an increasingly important issue for women as the population ages. Moreover, because caregiving and domestic work are seldom seen as economic contributions, caregivers, in particular spousal caregivers, are likely to have their savings depleted due to extended caregiving responsibilities. Hence, more financial and emotional support is needed for family caregivers.

To create a more egalitarian distribution of housework and caregiving tasks in homes, Professor Mehta said a mindset shift was required. As a start, working-aged women will have to be well supported to ensure that they do not leave the labour force due to caregiving tasks. Society also needs to address the stigma surrounding men engaging in domestic labour. Finally, Professor Mehta proposed mandating annual paid eldercare leave of at least three days for all organisations. For Singapore society to grow past COVID-19, she believed that radical societal changes were needed to eradicate ageism and sexism.

Partnership, not servitude

Mr Benny Bong shared his view of domestic violence as a gendered issue. He noted that, in general, women were more likely to be victims of domestic violence than men. Since the start of COVID-19 pandemic, family violence specialist centres have reported a 37 per cent increase in incidents of domestic violence, which highlighted another way that the pandemic has disproportionately affect women. While Mr Bong recognised the progress that Singapore has made in terms of gender equality — such as robust laws protecting women and the prompt and appropriate response of the Singapore Police Force to domestic violence reports — he also noted persistent disparities and imbalances between men and women in both domestic and work domains.

In particular, Mr Bong highlighted an area for improvement — societal values. He observed that men's views about their roles remained relatively unchanged, treating housework as a mark of their contribution instead of their responsibility. He urged men to view the relationship with their spouse as one of partnership and not of servitude, and to shift the idea of compartmentalisation of responsibilities to one of harmonisation. Mr Bong agreed with an observation made by Panel 1, that men often lack the skills required for domestic work. He called for more men to step up to the task and encouraged women to relinquish their caregiving; this would promote more equitable sharing of the domestic burdens. To achieve this, Mr Bong said that harmony at home should be emphasised over efficiency in completing domestic tasks.

From a macro perspective, Mr Bong stated there was a need to challenge societal conceptions of masculinity and femininity. He noted that change should come from the bottom, and appealed to educational institutions, the media, religious institutions, and civil society to take the lead in ensuring more egalitarian relations between men and women.

Real choices for all

Minister of State Ms Sun Xueling began her presentation by observing that for many Singaporean women, home and work blend into a continuous sphere resulting in poor work-life balance. To address this problem, Ms Sun stressed the importance of enabling women to have real choices in their lives and the need to consider the role of men in charting a path towards more sustainable partnerships and better work-life balance for both genders.

Ms Sun then discussed the importance of the 3 “Cs” for real choices and partnership — communication, capabilities, and culture. She noted that each family was unique. To achieve the first “C”, family members should have an open, respectful discussion about their respective strengths and preferences, and how to best share domestic responsibilities between them. Echoing Mr Bong’s idea of respectful partnership, she noted that couples should support one another to advance their careers in the workplace. Ms Sun believed that a successful partnership was one in which each individual can feel supported and appreciated for the choices that they have made. To illustrate this, Ms Sun said men could choose to stay at home to look after the children while their wives work.

Ms Sun stressed that both men and women needed to be equipped with the skills and knowledge for a more balanced partnership. In the ongoing “Conversations on Singapore Women’s Development”, she noted that male participants have shared that they had not been taught to perform domestic tasks in their youth. As an example of how the government has tried to address this issue, she described the revised Character & Citizenship Education (CCE) curriculum launched by the Ministry of Education (MOE) in 2021, where boys and girls are taught to have positive attitudes towards family rules, and not to have preconceived notions or gender stereotypes which may impact their views on the role a father or a mother should play. In addition, Ms Sun said there were various community partners with programmes and campaigns that targeted men, by promoting active fathering and shared parenting responsibilities. To increase financial independence among women, Ms Sun noted that the government has also introduced programmes to help women develop financial literacy skills.

In terms of support, Ms Sun noted that Singapore’s parental leave policies and promotion of work-life harmony provided couples with time for their families and allowed them some flexibility to manage their family and work responsibilities. To support the needs of seniors and caregivers, the government has also enhanced access to affordable and quality childcare and eldercare services so that caregivers can have alternative care options. She shared that the Caregiver Support Action Plan that was launched in 2019 covers some key pillars of caregiver support, including strengthening financial support through the Home Caregiving Grant and expanding the range of care services. Caregiving recipients can also receive subsidies for outpatient care and MediShield Life premiums along with other benefits. In particular, the Silver Support Scheme supplements the incomes of seniors who have had lower incomes over their lifetimes and have less retirement support.

Finally, Ms Sun argued that gender stereotypes might hinder the rise of stay-home fathers due to the stigma from society, family members, and friends. To address this, she stated that principles of equality and respect between men and women must be ingrained in our society. She also noted that schools played a critical role in shaping social norms for young minds and highlighted the importance of fostering close partnerships between men and women to allow people to choose their preferred role in society.

Questions and Answers

The valorisation of caregiving and domestic work

A participant asked Professor Straughan to share more on her observation that women reported paradoxical contentment in their caregiving and domestic roles. Professor Straughan replied that for many women, the ability to care for their children and family helped them to valorise their role at home. She stressed that equality was not about forcing men and women to have undifferentiated aspirations and goals, but rather showing equal amounts of appreciation for the work that they did. Domestic work is not paid work, and cannot be; therefore, society must look beyond economic returns to valorise the work of caregivers and homemakers and focus instead rewarding mothers and caregivers on an emotional level by valuing and appreciating their efforts.

Ms Sun agreed with this perspective and noted that for many caregivers their labour of love for their family was adequately recognised through their family's respect and love for them. Professor Mehta also stressed the importance of recognition at work. She recounted conversations with caregivers who reported feeling upset when questioned by bosses on their late arrival at work. She urged for more consideration and compassion to be shown towards work colleagues who might require more time-off to attend to domestic and caregiving duties.

Offering a male perspective, Mr Bong observed that many women believed that love required sacrifice and highlighted the role that society played in ingraining this sacrificial mindset in women from a young age. Speaking from personal experience, he said that many men did not feel a similar need to sacrifice themselves in the domain of home. Disagreeing with Mr Bong's statement that work at home was viewed by women as a sacrifice, Professor Straughan directed attention to the topic of mutual respect. She spoke of the need to support men and women as they juggle multiple roles at home and at work. As a caring nation, she noted that people ought to respect and support each individual to the best of their abilities, no matter what alternative pathways they choose for themselves. Ms Sun added to this by noting that caregiving was systematically perceived to be undervalued because it was unpaid work, when in fact the value of caregiving comes also in societal, emotional, and psychological forms. Reiterating the importance of respect and recognition from family members, Ms Sun concluded that society could also play a part in showing appreciation, such as supporting flexible work arrangements to help caregivers.

Recognising caregiving contributions on a national level

A participant asked how caregiving contribution could be measured on the national level. Professor Mehta said that unfortunately recommendations such as caregiver allowance have typically faced resistance from the public. She noted that some fear that paid caregiving might reduce filial piety in families. Professor Mehta proposed the idea of time banking to alleviate the burdens of caregiving. Time banking enables the exchange of caretaking service hours to provide respite for caregivers. This caregiving solution has been

successfully implemented in other countries and could be implemented in Singapore to support the increased caregiving needs of an ageing population.

Professor Straughan also stressed that healthy retirees are a valuable human resource for Singapore. While subsidies and cash vouchers provide some reprieve for caregivers, she believed that financial support was not a sustainable solution. As such, Professor Straughan proposed investing in community infrastructure such as senior centres and communal spaces in neighbourhoods. The government can also award social titles to “valorise” caregiver and community contributions. This will enable the creation of a self-help situation in which healthy and able individuals can contribute back to their communities. The government could initiate the process by exploring collaborations with various voluntary welfare organisations on the ground. Looking towards the future, Professor Straughan said she hoped to live in a society where individuals could look forward to retirement and giving back to their communities.

Responding to Professor Straughan’s suggestion on better community-based infrastructural support, Ms Sun shared current and future plans by the government. On infrastructural support, the government plans to invest more in infrastructure to support an ageing population in the form of day care centres and homecare facilities for homebound seniors, as well as eldercare centres and nursing homes. In addition, there are plans to further empower the community. As Singapore continues to promote active ageing in society, there is a need to set up an ecosystem of support caregivers who can provide necessary emotional and practical support to one another, she said. To this end, the government is forming new alliances with voluntary organisations to bring together a community of support caregivers.

Challenges faced by spousal caregivers

A participant asked Professor Mehta to identify the key challenges that female elderly caregiver faced. Based on her personal observations on spousal caregiving, Professor Mehta said many men and women struggled with their own health and financial issues on top of the physical burdens of caregiving. Moreover, an indirect result of shifting family dynamics to dual-income arrangements means that many spouses are carrying a larger share of the caregiving responsibility today than previous generations. She further noted that spousal caregiving was often taken for granted. Thus, it is important for society to recognise the contributions and sacrifices of seniors who are spousal caregivers. In addition, Professor Mehta suggested the government should consider revising the Home Caregiving Grant criteria to benefit low-income families who were currently unable to access the grant.

In response, Ms Sun noted that the government appreciated and recognised the burdens borne by caregivers. It is actively reviewing caregiver support to ensure that there are sufficient support measures to address the various financial, infrastructural, and emotional needs. She also noted the interconnected nature of the different pillars of caregiving support and stressed the importance of ensuring that the measures are seamlessly integrated to help those who need it the most.

A message of hope

To conclude the discussion, Ms Iva asked the speakers to share one takeaway message for the conference participants. Referencing his earlier comments, Mr Bong shared his hope that society would redefine gender roles and the societal values tied to them. He urged more men to expand their domestic skills and competencies so they can better share in household responsibilities.

Professor Mehta reiterated the idea of a time banking system for caregivers and stressed the importance of maintaining synergistic partnerships with various stakeholders. She also hoped that technology could be used to build a network of caregiving support and reassure seniors in need of special care.

Professor Straughan stressed that in advancing gender equality, it is important that society does not inadvertently restrict the aspirations of women. She hoped that Singapore would continue to support older women by helping them stay connected and validating their contributions within their homes, workplaces, and the wider community.

Ms Sun concluded with her hope for the co-creation of solutions that help both men and women achieve their greatest potential, and for Singapore to support real choices for citizens, regardless of gender and background, through synergistic partnerships between civil society, government, religious organisations, and other institutions.

Panel III: Mindsets and Minefields

Chairperson	
<p>Ms Junie Foo President Singapore Council of Women's Organisations</p>	
Speakers	
<p>Mr Bryan Tan Chief Executive Officer Centre for Fathering Ltd and Dads for Life</p>	<p>Ms Monica Baey Advocate for Survivors of Sexual Violence</p>
<p>Mr Wendell Wong Director of Dispute Resolution and Co-Head of Investigations and Criminal Law Practice Drew & Napier LLC</p>	<p>Ms Danielle Pereira Spokesperson Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) Aim for Zero Campaign</p>

The third panel of the IPS Women's Conference focused on societal expectations of men and women and its implications on gender relations in the workplace and larger society. The

panel, titled “Mindsets and Minefields”, was moderated by Ms Junie Foo, President of the Singapore Council of Women’s Organisations. The panel speakers included Mr Bryan Tan, Chief Executive Officer of the Centre for Fathering Ltd and Dads for Life; Ms Monica Baey, an advocate for survivors of sexual violence; Mr Wendell Wong, Director of Dispute Resolution and Co-Head of Investigations and Criminal Law Practice at Drew & Napier LLC; and Ms Danielle Pereira, spokesperson for the Association of Women for Action and Research’s (AWARE) Aim for Zero campaign.

Overcoming toxic masculinity

In his presentation, Mr Bryan Tan focused on how societal expectations of masculinity could be a problem for both men and women. Reflecting on his personal experience, he shared that before joining the Centre for Fathering Ltd he had embodied some toxic masculine traits such as being stoic, aggressive, and detached from his family. He highlighted that, like him, many men are often taught to express such traits from a young age, especially by male figures of authority such as their fathers. These traits are particularly emphasised to encourage boys and men to become “alpha males” who can protect their family members. Therefore, it is sometimes very difficult for men to recognise and accept that their behaviours can be harmful to others.

Mr Tan also added that the constant pressure of having to live up to such gendered expectations places unnecessary stress on some men and the lack of support networks further exacerbates this problem. To overcome this, Mr Tan suggested that the government develop more specialised services for men — especially fathers — to promote a better model of masculinity. Based on his observations, he noted that in recent years, more men in Singapore were willing to deviate from some of these gendered expectations and were instead, taking on a more active role in parenting and caregiving. In addition to providing safe spaces for men who are undergoing difficulties and challenges in their lives, such services can thus further encourage shifts in gendered expectations.

In addition, Mr Tan discussed the harmful effects of toxic masculinity on women in the private and public spheres. Such traits not only promote domestic abuse and violence but also create unsafe and hostile working environments for women. He also touched on the topic of online harm. With the prevalence of pornography — which promotes the hyper-sexualisation and objectification of women — Mr Tan recommended that the government enhance legislation on the creation, distribution, and consumption of pornographic materials online as well as establish agencies to protect women and children against online harm.

Overall, Mr Tan felt that older men had the responsibility to “pass down the right sense of masculinity” from one generation to the next. To do this, people need to be more supportive of organisations such as the Centre for Fathering Ltd and Dads for Life.



Caption for photo: Ms Junie Foo (top, left) introducing the speakers for the third panel, titled “Mindsets and Minefields”.

Change starts with the individual

Ms Monica Baey, who experienced sexual voyeurism in the National University of Singapore (NUS) in 2018, expressed her disappointment with how cases of sexual harassment were dealt with in Singapore. For example, survivors often experienced victim-blaming attitudes from investigating officers and were not provided with the necessary updates on their case. Perpetrators of such crimes also did not receive adequate punishment for their actions. Drawing on her personal experience, Ms Baey shared how social media was a useful tool in raising greater awareness on her case as well as pushing for more institutional changes within NUS and more legislative reforms pertaining to sexual harassment. She acknowledged that social media could be a double-edged sword as people could use it to engage in cyberbullying, but felt that the problem could be managed with greater regulation and surveillance of the online space.

Ms Baey also shared that many survivors of sexual harassment faced judgement and doubts when they shared their experiences with others. She stressed that a change in mindsets was needed; there is little reason to doubt the validity of sexual harassment experiences because the number of false reporting cases is extremely low. Therefore, when survivors choose to bravely come forward and share their experiences, society should practice empathy and be non-judgemental when listening to them.

Moving forward, Ms Baey said that every individual has a key role to play in reducing the prevalence of sexual harassment in society. This can include calling out problematic behaviours in workplaces and institutions, accompanying friends who have experienced

sexual harassment to make a police report, and attending workshops such as AWARE's Sexual Assault First Responder Training.

Technology as the new “weapon of choice”

Mr Wendell Wong discussed the rising number of technology-facilitated sexual violence cases, such as cyberstalking and image-based sexual abuse in Singapore. Citing a report by *TODAY* that was published in 2020, he noted that the number of technology-facilitated sexual violence has tripled over the last four years. Using various examples of technology-facilitated sexual violence committed in tertiary institutions and workplaces, he said technology has now become the new “weapon of choice” for perpetrators, and society needs to think about the ways in which it can protect users. His view was that the government acknowledges technology-facilitated sexual violence in Singapore is a serious problem. It has actively engaged key stakeholders including survivors of sexual violence, members of the penal code review committee, policymakers, and other relevant experts to create a safer online space for everyone. This is reflected in legislative reforms that have been continually introduced over the past few years. For example, in 2019, the government announced that doxxing would be criminalised under the Protection from Harassment Act. Similarly, in 2020, voyeurism was added as a specific offence in the Penal Code. More recently, in May 2021, the government announced the establishment of a new court dedicated to dealing with harassment cases.

Mr Wong suggested four possible ways to ensure that the online space remains safe for all. First, have a proper chain of detection and deterrence through collaborating with service providers to limit users' anonymity online. Second, encourage netizens to patrol online spaces and to develop a positive whistle blowing culture. This can be encouraged by further strengthening private-public partnerships. Third, leverage technology by having more artificial intelligence online patrols. Finally, educate people on the safe and responsible use of online platforms and advise them on the legal tools available should they experience technology-facilitated sexual violence.

Combating workplace sexual harassment

Ms Danielle Pereira opened her presentation by sharing her personal experience with workplace sexual harassment as a junior lawyer. While she acknowledged that workplace sexual harassment was a problem that affected both men and women, research has shown that majority of workplace sexual harassment cases involved women. Ms Pereira noted that although the topic of sexual harassment has gained much traction, particularly amid the global “Me Too” movement, many survivors still hesitate to come forward to share their experiences and hold their perpetrators accountable for their actions. The few who choose to do so often experience doubt and ridicule. Such stigmatising attitudes often prevail due to a lack of proper understanding among people on what constitutes sexual harassment in a workplace setting.

To illustrate this, Ms Pereira presented the findings from a survey by Ipsos and AWARE that was conducted in 2020 that involved 1,000 Singapore citizens and Permanent Residents. In

the survey, respondents were asked whether they had experienced sexual harassment at work. Initially, only one in five respondents (i.e., 20 per cent) reported experiencing sexual harassment at work. However, upon being provided with specific examples of sexual harassment such as unwanted physical contact, two in five respondents (i.e., 40 per cent) said they had experienced sexual harassment in their workplace. Using results from the same survey, she noted that only 30 per cent of women who experienced harassment in their workplace made a report. Of those who made a report, 50 per cent received a negative response. In addition, 20 per cent of the perpetrators did not face any consequences for their actions. These numbers indicate the reality of how challenging it is for survivors of workplace harassment to protect themselves in Singapore. Reflecting on her personal experience, Ms Pereira said workplace sexual harassment could have long-lasting effects on the personal and professional development of women. For example, it can adversely affect their mental well-being and force them to resign or move to another industry altogether. Perpetrators on the other hand are rarely held accountable for any of their actions.

To successfully combat workplace sexual harassment, Ms Pereira suggested enacting national legislation to raise people's awareness of what constitutes workplace sexual harassment; place legal obligation on employers to prevent workplace sexual harassment; create liability for those who fail to prevent or address workplace sexual harassment; provide protection for survivors in the event of retaliation; and inform and educate the public on this issue by disseminating data on workplace harassment. Ms Pereira concluded by acknowledging that such legislative changes will take some time and effort before they bring about long-lasting results. Nonetheless, it is important for everyone to work together to create safe, inclusive, and empowering workspaces for all.

Questions and Answers

Changing mindsets and rehabilitating “broken men”

A participant asked Mr Tan to share some possible ways to change the mindsets of men who consider women to be inferior to them. In response, Mr Tan said that based on his interactions with his peers, such mindsets are not very common among men in Singapore; however, one solution would be to encourage more open and honest conversations between men and women. Such conversations are especially important for men as they provide them with the opportunity to learn more about how they can change certain problematic behaviours. He also described various programmes conducted by the Centre for Fathering Ltd and Dads for Life that provide a safe space for men who struggle with overcoming such mindsets and other challenges.

Alluding to an earlier point made by Mr Tan during his presentation on how some men put in immense effort to pursue and eventually marry a woman, a participant asked if such behaviours could contribute to these men treating women as possessions that they needed to control. In response, Mr Tan shared that many men like himself fail to treat their wives with respect and take them for granted after marriage. Calling this a “poverty of relationship”, he said it was important to equip men with the necessary skills to have constructive conversations with their wives to learn how they could better themselves and be more supportive partners. He reiterated that having support networks like the Centre for Fathers

Ltd and Dads for Life movement could play an important role in providing the right mentorship for husbands and fathers who struggled with this problem.

Another participant asked the panel on whether “broken men” (i.e., men who exhibit toxic masculinity and violent behaviours) should be seen as “victims” of the environment that they grew up in. If so, the participant asked for some rehabilitation suggestions, apart from legal punishment. In response, Ms Pereira pointed out that a patriarchal society that allows men to exert greater dominance and power over women also tends to place rigid expectations on men, which can contribute to mental health problems. Therefore, she felt that “broken men” can be regarded as victims of their environment and that something must be done to address this. Mr Tan added to the discussion by noting that it is sometimes difficult for men to learn and recognise the toxic nature of their behaviours because they have been taught to exhibit them from a very early age. He also said that it could be challenging for men to manage the different expectations of their family members, peers, and the wider society.

Regarding the rehabilitation, Mr Wong agreed that specific laws or regulations might not be the most productive way to help them. Instead, society should focus on creating a culture of respect and understanding between men and women. Based on his observations, he noted that there have been many recent discussions on the changing concept of Asian family values that challenge traditional perspectives of the roles of men and women in the family and workplace. He presented an optimistic view that with more of such discussions, positive changes would follow.

National Service as a source of toxic masculinity

In reference to the recent public discourse pertaining to the topic of National Service (NS), a participant asked the speakers whether they thought male-dominated institutions like NS promoted toxic masculinity among men in Singapore. Mr Wong responded that it is important to first “deconstruct and re-define” toxic masculinity. In his view, men in NS participate in different forms of training activities that help them to bond with one another and equip them with the relevant skills to complete a mission or undertake any defence related task. As such, these activities should not be seen as encouraging toxic masculinity. Mr Tan, who spent over 20 years in the Singapore Armed Forces, echoed Mr Wong’s view that while there are some activities that require recruits to “man up” as part of their training, the organisation’s leadership takes a strong stance against any form of activity or behaviour that are offensive to women. Moving forward, he supported the constant review of leadership and management to create a safe, conducive, and respectful working environment for servicemen and servicewomen.

Ms Pereira expressed a different view on this topic. Based on her experience interacting with survivors of sexual harassment, she felt that misogyny was a “very serious” problem among young men in Singapore. Referring to existing research on how NS shapes masculinity among men in Singapore, she pointed out that much of the conversations in training camps revolve around the objectification and sexualisation of women. Describing this as “locker room talk”, Ms Pereira shared that many men think that such “locker room talk” is “harmless” and purely a form of entertainment. However, such discourse influences the way men view

women. She noted that younger men often inherit this “locker room talk” culture from their male superiors and subsequently share this culture with other men, which can create a vicious cycle of toxicity in NS. To break this cycle, she stressed a need for change in the way men in leadership or authoritative positions interacted with their peers.

Existing barriers faced by bystanders in advocating for survivors of sexual harassment

A participant asked about existing barriers faced by bystanders when advocating for survivors of sexual harassment and the possible ways to overcome some of these barriers. According to Ms Baey, many bystanders are not adequately equipped with the relevant skills and knowledge on how to react when their friends or family members share their experiences with sexual harassment. They may also be unaware of the different ways they can support them. To overcome this, Ms Baey reiterated the importance of attending workshops such as AWARE’s Sexual Assault First Responder Training that provide information on trauma informed care. Such workshops can also help bystanders understand what sexual harassment is, the resources and assistance available to survivors, and how they can be a non-judgemental source of support for them. Ms Baey also added that institutions should also work towards creating safe spaces for survivors of sexual harassment. She shared the example of how NUS set up a Victim Care Unit in the aftermath of her experience with sexual harassment, which she saw as a step in the right direction.

Regulating the online space

A participant observed that despite regulations such as the Protection from Harassment Act that had been put in place to deal with online harassment, many websites and forums such as HardwareZone still feature anonymous sexist content. She asked for recommendations to tackle this problem. Mr Wong noted that more could be done to limit the anonymity of users online by working with service providers. In his view, the ability of perpetrators to remain anonymous equips them with a sense of confidence and encourages them to engage in harmful activities online. He also recommended having more public-private partnerships and netizen-led patrols because they could help to create a safe environment for people to report offensive content. Given the rapidly changing nature of the technology landscape and increase in the technological savviness of perpetrators, Mr Wong urged policymakers to get “a couple of steps ahead” when introducing new laws and reforms. Contributing to this discussion, Mr Tan said parents needed to be equipped with the necessary skills to help their children navigate the online space safely and respectfully.

The role of social media and “cancel culture”

A participant raised the point of how “cancel culture” lacks important discussions of recovery and creates an unforgiving system for perpetrators. He asked about how we could deal with perpetrators who have already “served their time” (i.e., undergone punishment) for their actions. In response, Ms Baey said that the approach would depend on their specific circumstances. On the topic of “cancel culture”, Ms Baey stated that cancel culture initially

started as an effective platform to encourage positive whistleblowing. However, she acknowledged that in recent years, it has evolved into a “monster” because of the way some have used it to engage in cyberbullying. Nonetheless, Ms Baey felt that social media remains an important platform for constructive conversations and calling out problematic behaviours. She also reiterated the need for more regulations to monitor the content that people post or share online.

Overall, the speakers agreed that to move towards achieving greater gender equality in society, a shift in the attitudes and mindsets of people regarding existing gendered expectations was needed. Legislative changes must also consider the rapidly evolving landscape in Singapore.

Closing Dialogue

Chairperson	
<p>Professor Lily Kong President Singapore Management University</p>	
Speakers	
<p>Mr K Shanmugam Minister Ministry Home Affairs, Ministry of Law</p>	<p>Ms He Ting Ru Member of Parliament Sengkang GRC</p>

The closing dialogue of the IPS Women’s Conference featured Mr K Shanmugam, Minister for Home Affairs and Minister for Law, and Ms He Ting Ru, Member of Parliament for Sengkang GRC. Synthesising the discussions from the three earlier panels on the challenges faced by women at work, at home and in society, both political leaders deliberated on the policy actions needed to build a gender-inclusive society. The question-and-answer segment of the session was moderated by Professor Lily Kong, President of the Singapore Management University.

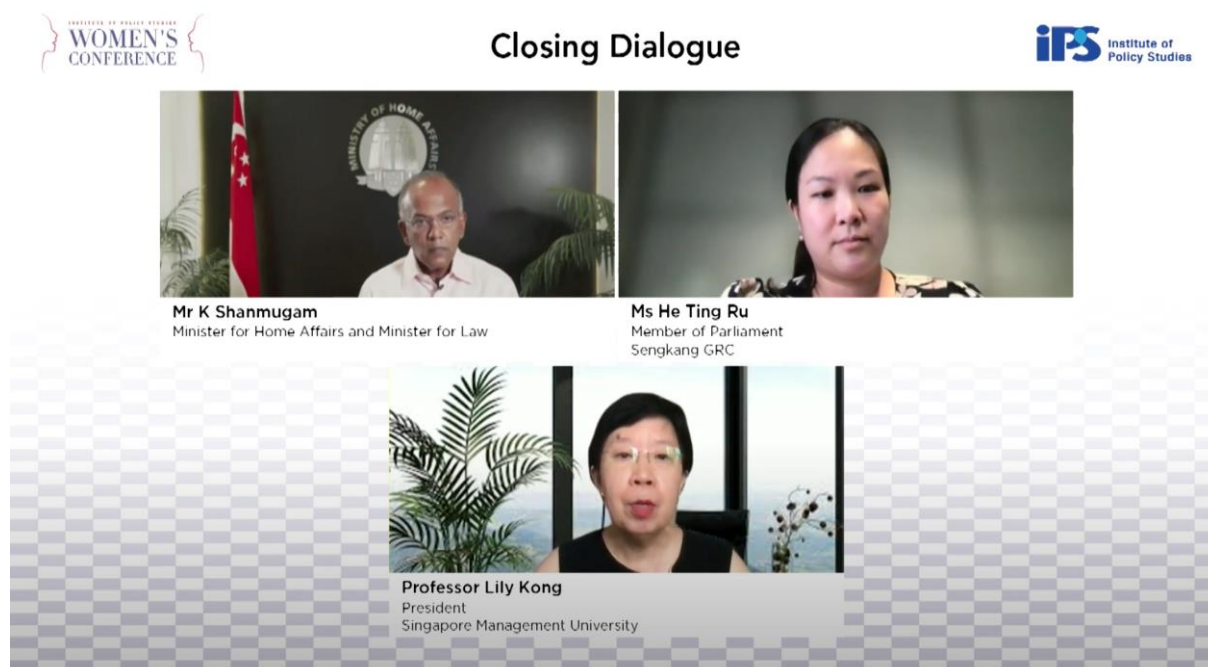
Remarks by Minister K Shanmugam

Mr Shanmugam began by raising the question: what is the position of women today in our society? He observed that the glass might be two-thirds full, due to Singapore’s achievements in education for women, as well as Singapore’s gender equality ranking — 12th out of 162 countries — in the 2020 UN Human Development Report. However, he also acknowledged that Singapore needed to do more.

Mr Shanmugam emphasised the need for a more fundamental mindset change in society to address the structural issues that affect women’s ability to achieve their full potential. While the government had taken a strong stance by increasing penalties for sexual and hurt

offences, he asserted the need to address sexual harassment and violence against women as more than an issue of crime and punishment. Society must also view it as an affront to what it stands for and against its most deeply held beliefs. Disavowing statements made by some individuals in defence of sexual offenders, Mr Shanmugam clarified that there is no excuse for such crimes. He stressed that the values of mutual respect, equality and autonomy must be taught to Singapore boys and girls at school, and that the idea of gender equality should be hardcoded from young and imprinted deeply into society's collective consciousness.

With regard to the action plan for gender equality progress in Singapore, Mr Shanmugam said the government was examining various issues that had been raised in the ongoing conversations on women's development, and that an upcoming White Paper will be tabled for discussion in parliament. He gave an overview of some of the issues that were discussed in these dialogues, including during the IPS Women's Conference. Regarding the hurdles women face in the workplace and the low representation of women on boards of listed companies in Singapore, Mr Shanmugam noted that these issues were linked to situations at home, since women often take on a larger share of housework and caregiving. On legislation for hurt and sexual crimes, Mr Shanmugam reiterated the government's commitment to protecting women through the establishment of the Protection from Harassment Court, enhanced protection for victims abused by intimate partners under the amended Protection from Harassment Act, and criminal law reforms that address technology-enabled sexual offences.



Caption for photo: Professor Lily Kong (bottom) poses a question on anti-discrimination laws to Mr K Shanmugam (top left) and Ms He Ting Ru (top right)

Remarks by Ms He Ting Ru

Ms He began by inviting the audience to reflect on the diverse lived experiences of Singapore women. She cautioned that gender equality would continue to be elusive if society persisted in viewing success through the lens of traditional measures, such as career advancement and earning power, and continued to consider work traditionally done by women — such as caring, running households and looking after their families — as inferior or ancillary work to the “real” work of earning wages. She emphasised that both men and women must be given a chance to make the choices that suit their family circumstances, without facing stigma or penalty. Ms He asked the audience to view unpaid labour as having equal value to paid work. She asserted that such a mindset change was needed to provide a solid foundation for Singapore to address gender inequality in the workplace, in homes and in society.

With respect to workplace measures, Ms He said that women bring much value to the workplace, and enterprises and employers benefit when working conditions are supportive of the unique situations that female employees face. To address workplace disparities, she recommended normalising flexible work arrangements and legislating shared parental leave as well as gender-neutral family care leave. She reiterated that these structural measures must be accompanied by the weakening of social norms that narrowly define men as the primary breadwinners and achievers in the workplace. Ms He explained that by removing the stigma of men taking on a greater share of housework and care work, women would be less stretched at home and have the freedom to physically and mentally focus on their jobs. This may in turn help to close the gender pay gap. She also suggested that such measures could help tackle Singapore’s abjectly low fertility rates, particularly if women no longer have to choose between sacrificing their family or career.

To move towards full gender equality, Ms He said more must be done to remove misogynistic attitudes and biases towards women. While she acknowledged that there were vulnerable groups of women who required more protection, she called for the narrative to change from one which views women as victims needing special help, to one where women are equipped with the correct tools to stand up for themselves. Ms He said laws have to enshrine people’s absolute right to be free from harassment and discrimination. This includes legislation that mandates employers to have proper procedures in place to protect their employees from workplace harassment and discrimination. She pointed out that existing measures assume that individuals should be responsible for their own safety and require them to take steps to seek accountability. Such measures do not recognise the reality of power dynamics or the concerns that making a report can cost one’s job. Ms He also noted that while strong deterrents and punishment for crimes are important, people should understand that objectification and discrimination are fundamentally wrong. She recommended addressing these mindsets through education in schools and in the wider community.

Questions and Answers

The role and limits of legislation

Several questions relating to legislation to regulate online behaviours were asked (e.g., identity verification on forums, anti-pornography regulations). Mr Shanmugam responded that the government would act wherever possible and, as an example, described how the government prohibited certain sites and fined the men who were circulating pictures of women and underaged girls without their consent. However, he noted that traceability issues remained, with such online platforms often proliferating faster than they can be blocked. He also stated that the individual platforms have a responsibility to take steps to stop such behaviours and called on them to work with the government to do more.

Participants also raised questions about anti-discrimination legislation. Reiterating her earlier call for more anti-discrimination legislation in the workplace, Ms He said that many women have been denied pay raises or promotions by their employers when they go on maternity leave. Thus, more organisational structures are required to prevent employers from discriminating against women. Mr Shanmugam stated that while the government should not rule out anti-discrimination legislation, legislation alone would not solve the problem because a whole-of-society mindset change is needed. Referring to cases overseas, he noted that it is often not easy to prove gender discrimination in court. Mr Shanmugam further proposed that while legislative frameworks are needed, men and women in senior positions must also recognise the importance of supporting their employees' childcare efforts. Ms He agreed that anti-discrimination legislation is merely a framework that signals the importance of these values to society.

Mr Shanmugam also acknowledged Ms He's point on how current approaches tend to place the onus on victims of harassment and said that it was imperative that any harassment be handled sensitively, properly and effectively. He shared how procedures have been put in place in many government agencies, although a universal process may be difficult for all companies to institute. Nevertheless, Mr Shanmugam affirmed the need for people to have avenues to raise issues to their superiors without sanction and for follow-up action to be taken seriously without the individual being targeted or negatively dealt with. However, he also stated that there must be consequences for fabricated harassment complaints.

Education to effect mindset shifts

Both speakers agreed on the need for education to bring about more fundamental cultural and mindset changes. Mr Shanmugam said the Ministry of Education has been looking at a comprehensive programme for schools. He also reiterated that wider public education is also necessary to ensure people show respect and treat others as equals. With regard to education in schools, Ms He suggested that the policymakers could look at more targeted approaches to tackle the problem of toxic masculinity and offered examples of such programmes in the United Kingdom for boys aged nine to 14. She also encouraged parents to communicate openly with their children and discuss ideas about gender that they are

exposed to at school. In terms of public education, Ms He expressed her hope that having women comprise 30 per cent of Parliament in Singapore, a goal established by the United Nations as the ideal minimum proportion of women in leadership positions, would send an important signal to society that women should be respected.

A question was raised about whether single-sex schools are obstacles to gender equality. Both Mr Shanmugam and Ms He acknowledged some benefits to single-sex education. Ms He argued that the existence of single-sex schools should not be a barrier to gender equality, as schools can implement education programmes to teach students about respect and healthy relationships and inter-school exchanges can also help expose students to lived experiences that vary from their own lives.

Addressing caregiving needs

Participants asked about policies to help address the problem of unpaid and invisible caregiving work that is primarily undertaken by women. Mr Shanmugam reiterated that mindset changes for men to take on more caregiving will take time, and stated that the government was exploring care support networks with volunteers, agencies and healthcare providers, to better support the mental and physical well-being of caregivers.

While both speakers emphasised the need to recognise the value of caregiving, they had different perspectives on the issue of financial support for caregivers. Mr Shanmugam cautioned that even though financial recognition may be helpful, it is crucial to not cheapen care by solely linking it to money. In response to Professor Kong's question on CareFare, Ms He expressed interest in the idea, particularly for essential workers, such as nurses and teachers, who provide care to the vulnerable segments of society and who are typically poorly paid and perceived as having low status. Ms He expressed her belief that recognising the value of these jobs may lead to greater importance being placed on unpaid and informal care work. She also spoke about the need to explore the retirement adequacy of caregivers, citing that many of her constituents have sought financial assistance in old age because they needed to leave the workforce earlier in life to care for their family.

A participant asked a question on equal parental leave for fathers and mothers. Ms He stated that it is an important policy to consider as men who take parental leave have been shown to be more involved in caring for the children and household. She suggested that policymakers consider a shared parental leave scheme of up to 24 weeks, which offers families the option to decide how best to distribute the leave based on their individual circumstances. Mr Shanmugam expressed concern about the trade-offs incurred if parental leave costs are imposed on employers, as it could make Singapore become less attractive for foreign investments. Ms He challenged the assumption that inclusion policies add financial costs to businesses and that policymakers must choose between achieving gender equality and economic competitiveness. In contrast to the false dichotomy presented, she argued that studies show that diversity in the workplaces can lead to improvements in worker and business performances.

Questions on how society could better support marginalised women, including single parents and foreign domestic workers, were also fielded. Ms He stated that policies or laws that penalise single mothers and their children should be reviewed. She acknowledged that relying on foreign domestic workers, who typically sacrifice caring for their own children and come to Singapore to do very difficult jobs, was not a sustainable labour solution. Ms He reiterated the need to better support households and carers and help families balance work-life responsibilities. Mr Shanmugam agreed that there was a need to help single women and their children. He said there are social support programmes run by the Ministry of Social and Family Development and comprehensive education programmes in schools to help vulnerable children from single parent families or low-income families. Mr Shanmugam also spoke of the need to provide better protection for foreign domestic workers, especially in light of recent abuse cases in Singapore. He stated that foreign domestic workers make an economic choice to come to Singapore and make these wages, and their personal liberty and safety should be protected.

Diversity in organisations and choosing people based on merit

A participant asked about the removal of questions and identifiers pertaining to marital status, race, and gender on job applications. Ms He cited some positive examples of gender-blind job application processes overseas, but acknowledged that such measures often address the applicant discrimination at the first stage of the recruitment process, and not all stages.

Professor Kong then sought the speakers' perspectives on the use of diversity quotas to increase the number of women on organisational boards. Mr Shanmugam stated that enforcing strict quotas might not be the best approach; people who were selected because of quotas might not feel that they had been selected on merit. He noted that the Monetary Authority of Singapore and the Council for Board Diversity (CBD) were developing a framework to evaluate the representation of females in leadership positions of listed companies and publish data to motivate companies to do better. He also applauded CBD for the work they have done through their mentorship programmes to prepare women for leadership positions. Ms He similarly acknowledged the danger of tokenism with quotas and agreed with Mr Shanmugam on the need for more female role models. She also stated that if leaders in business and politics could demonstrate a diverse representation at senior management levels, this could drive companies to diversify their boards. Ms He shared how the Workers' Party has benefited from the diversity of experiences brought by minority Members of Parliament.

Gender in the media

Questions were asked on the media's role in reinforcing stereotypes and the actions that could be taken to change negative depictions of women and men. Mr Shanmugam opined that there were many highly educated women and men working in journalism, and he was optimistic that women working in media were aware that individuals should be judged on their ability rather than gender. He stated that while some media objectification of women does occur to sell more copies of newspapers and magazines, the Singapore media does

not appear to overstep as many boundaries as media in some other countries. Ms He shared that there were clear differences during the 2015 General Election between how she, a young single female candidate, was treated by the media compared with her male peers. She said that while her male peers were asked questions on policy plans, she received many questions relating to her marital status, whether she was dating someone and when she planned to have children. She stated that there was a need to be mindful that women can often be another woman's harshest critic.

A whole-of-society issue and effort

Both speakers emphasised that gender equality is an important whole-of-society matter and is as critical an issue for men as it is for women. Mr Shanmugam urged more men to engage in the ongoing conversations on women's development, where only a quarter of participants thus far are men. Ms He concurred that men should play a part in supporting the gender equality movement, although it is critical that male voices or patriarchal mindsets, do not obscure the voices of women. She suggested that one way for men to play a greater role is to engage the women in their lives, to learn more about their experiences and struggles, and to put themselves in their shoes to gain a deeper understanding of women's issues. She also acknowledged that even as a woman, her lived experience may be different from those of others, so engaging in meaningful and constructive discussions with others in society can support efforts towards gender inclusivity in Singapore.

Both speakers also agreed that the work towards gender equality should not end with this conference and the upcoming White Paper. Mr Shanmugam stated that mindset changes will not happen overnight, and society must work together to push the agenda forward. Ms He concluded by expressing her hope that women and men can work together on actionable plans for gender equality.

Nandhini D/O Bala Krishnan, Yu Yen King, Neo Yee Win, and Deon Tan are Research Assistants in the Society & Culture cluster at IPS. Douglas Leong who is an intern at IPS also contributed to this report.

Please visit the IPS Women's Conference 2021 event [page](#) for videos and transcripts.

Appendix A

GENDER EQUALITY IN SINGAPORE: AN ACTION PLAN FOR PROGRESS

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Increase Diversity and Inclusion in the Workplace

1. Introduce legislation and frameworks to address gender discrimination and sexual harassment in the workplace

- 1.1. Introduce legislation to address unequal pay and promotion for women going on maternity leave. Promote the inclusion of unpaid care and domestic responsibilities in workplace productivity evaluations for women. Reward institutions for their commitment to gender equality in the workplace.
- 1.2. Develop legislation that requires employers to institute proper procedures to protect employees from workplace harassment and discrimination. Ensure the legislation defines the problem, spells out legal obligations for employers, and enforces against errant employers.
- 1.3. Mandate the removal of gender, marital status, and racial identifiers from job applications. This could allow a more diverse group of applicants to pass initial hurdles of the recruitment process.

2. Increase family leave and family-care subsidies to support the work of caregivers

- 2.1. Increase parental leave to up to 24 weeks. As shared parental leave tends to be used by women, “ringfence” benefits, leave and provisions for fathers only. Fathers will lose the benefits if they do not use them. Such a policy, implemented in other countries, have shown positive results in equalising childcare responsibilities.
- 2.2. Mandate all organisations to provide annual paid eldercare leave (3 days).
- 2.3. Increase childcare subsidies for low-income families to encourage women from these families to re-enter the workforce.
- 2.4. Shift policy narrative from “women’s issue” to “family issue” when discussing work-life trade-offs.

3. Change the structure of work to close the gender gap

- 3.1. Increase flexible work arrangements in workplaces, such as encouraging work-from home arrangements, and allowing flexible work times and time-off from work.
- 3.2. Redesign jobs to make employees more suitable to clients and ease coordination across competing firms.

Create opportunities in organisations that encourage diversity and inclusion

- 3.3. Introduce policies to incentivise the recruitment and promotion of women, such as the UK Athena Swan Charter, a global framework used to support gender equality within higher education and research. For male-dominated industries, such as STEM and ICT, offer more scholarships to women to improve the current gender ratios.
- 3.4. Provide more mentoring opportunities for women in business, politics, and other organisations to increase their participation in senior leadership positions. This can help accelerate organisational change and job redesign.
- 3.5. Train leaders to manage a more diverse and inclusive workforce. Employ Chief Diversity Officers tasked with managing organisational gender (and racial) imbalance.

B. Increase Recognition and Support for Caregivers

1. Develop community-based support for caregivers

- 1.1. Create community time banking systems to allow caregivers in a community to help one another by offering caregiving support and respite.
- 1.2. Invest in building neighbourhoods with infrastructure that encourages community members, particularly those over age 60, to volunteer and assist those in need of help in their area. Mobilise community stakeholders (e.g., volunteers, agencies, healthcare providers) to provide integrated care and support for caregivers.

2. Provide basic income to caregivers and relax existing criteria for caregiving subsidies

- 2.1. Introduce CareFare, a basic income supplement to compensate unpaid caregivers. This should be in parallel to the Workfare Income Supplement (WIS) to support low-wage workers who may not earn enough to make Medisave contributions (a criteria for WIS eligibility).
- 2.2. Relax the Home Caregiving Grant eligibility criteria to provide more affordable and accessible financial and emotional support for family caregivers.

C. Tackle Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence (TSFV)

1. Ensure adequate legislation focused on issues of TSFV

- 1.1. Continually review legislation to respond to rapid changes in technology used to sexually harass and violate others, striking a balance in the carrot and stick approach.

- 1.2. Establish a chain of detection and deterrence by creating agencies focused on monitoring issues of TSFV and online safety, and limiting anonymity.

2. Encourage public-private-people partnerships to promote online safety

- 2.1. Work with online platforms and service providers to trace and prohibit sexist comments. Develop artificial intelligence patrols that target online harassment and abuse.
- 2.2. Create and enforce standards for proper online behaviour and discourse. Provide public education on the safe and responsible use of online spaces, and encourage whistleblowing among netizens.

D. Shift Societal Mindsets on Gender Roles and Expectations

1. Improve public education on sexual harassment and violence

- 1.1. Inform and educate the public on the impact of sexual harassment in the community and workplaces by collecting and disseminating relevant data. Increase support for and access to workshops and programmes on how to define sexual harassment and violence, together with information on how to report these behaviours and support victims.

2. Promote notions of gender equality through the specialised services, educational institutions, and the media

- 2.1. Establish more specialised services for men to promote the modelling of positive masculine traits and to equip them with domestic and caregiving skills necessary to be equal partners in the home.
- 2.2. Ensure that training and bonding activities in organisations, particularly those that are male-dominated such as National Service, do not promote attitudes and behaviours that reinforce gender stereotypes and are harmful to women.
- 2.3. Encourage formal and informal discussions in schools on issues of gender stereotypes and gender inequality.
- 2.4. Increase media visibility of strong female role models who challenge existing gender stereotypes, such as women scientists.

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