

At work

Challenges from managing expectations and representation

Jolene Ang

Unequal payment for equal work, the lack of board diversity, and insufficient help for stay-at-home mothers to transition back to work if they want to.

These are some of the concerns of women in the workplace that have been raised by females in corporate leadership positions here.

Their comments come as Singapore embarks on a review of issues affecting women to bring about a mindset change on values such as gender equality and respect for women.

GENDER STEREOTYPES AND ROLES IN THE WORKPLACE

Female industry leaders and observers told Insight that a key reason women may find it difficult to advance in their careers is that they tend to be perceived as “doers” and overlooked as leaders.

Ms Ang Sze Pheng, 43, World Wide Technology's human resources director for the Asia-Pacific region, says: “At home, mothers are expected to do everything, like chores, while fathers take on the role of head of the family.”

“This perspective has been brought into the workplace... and it will take generations to change that mindset.”

Big Four accounting firm Deloitte's Asia-Pacific chief executive Cindy Hook, 56, says the challenge for women is the lack of equal opportunities as well as options, stemming from these stereotypes.

For instance, multiple demands and expectations can pressure women to put their careers on hold when they start a family, she says.

At Deloitte Singapore, the ratio of female-to-male fresh-graduate hires is about 60 to 40.

But, at the partner level, a fairly senior role that requires about 12 years of work experience, it tilts to about 30 to 70.

What helped in Ms Hook's career were “sponsors”. “It's not just about mentors who give you good advice. It's also about people who look at you and say, ‘She has talent, she can do more.’”

CHANGING MINDSETS

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MS ANG SZE PHENG, World Wide Technology's human resources director for the Asia-Pacific region, on how women's roles are perceived.

The American, who has been based in Singapore for around three years, notes that men here are supportive of women in the corporate world. “But there's a difference between giving support and taking tangible actions to help.”

Ms Karen Teo, 47, Facebook's vice-president for small and medium businesses in Asia-Pacific, says mentorship can go a long way in nurturing women to become leaders in the workplace.

“I hope the next generation remembers the people who took time to mentor them and pays it forward,” she adds.

NEED FOR PAY TRANSPARENCY

From a human resource perspective, the issue of pay transparency often comes up in conversations on gender equality, says Ms Ang.

In Singapore, men tend to receive a higher starting salary as compared with their female counterparts even if they are performing the same role, she notes, to compensate “lost years” given to national service.

“But pay should be constructed in a way that is balanced and gender-neutral – based on productivity and results, and transparent to everyone so they know where they stand in the organisation.”

This is an issue she feels strongly about and is working on in her company. The US-headquartered tech solutions firm has achieved about 50 per cent pay transparency across global offices.

LACK OF BOARD DIVERSITY

Mrs Mildred Tan, who co-chairs the Council for Board Diversity, said women's competing priorities between work and home responsibilities can lead to a situation where women in senior management roles are in the minority.

But having directors with a wider mix of genders, ages, skills, experiences and backgrounds “provides a broad-based judgment of risks and opportunities”, she emphasises.

She notes that women need to make concerted efforts to form networks and find mentors as they advance in their careers.

Yet many boards still rely on personal networks for potential board directors, and it is important that they be open to inviting new members, says Mrs Tan, 62.

“My hope is that (the review) will see an emergence of a framework for the next generation of women in the workplace where women will take charge of their career development,” she adds.

“At the same time, men and women leaders should give competent and high-performing individuals equal opportunities, rather than imposing assumptions that women with young children will be less keen on postings or rotations.”

HELP FOR STAY-HOME MOTHERS TO TRANSITION BACK TO WORK

The issue of board diversity, while important, is applicable only to a small group of women, Ms Ean Yeo points out.

A larger and often overlooked group is stay-at-home mothers who may wish to return to the workplace after their children have grown up, says Ms Yeo, the founder and president of non-profit organisation Women Empowered for Work And Mothering.

Ms Yeo, 57, says many of these women “put aside their dreams and careers and the potential to build up financial capabilities and retirement adequacies”. She hopes the review will look at doing more to help them transit back to work if they wish to.

“My hope for the next generation of women is that they will always be able to refresh (their skills) so they can fulfil their dreams, and that they can redefine the success they want, rather than what the world wants,” says Ms Yeo.

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WOMEN ON THE FRONT LINE OF COVID-19 FIGHT

Mother of two takes the lead in clinical trial of antibody treatment

Sherlyn Sim

She is not just an infectious diseases doctor, but also the leader of one of the latest clinical trials of a Covid-19 antibody to treat patients with the virus.

Dr Shirin Kalimuddin, a consultant with the Department of Infectious Diseases at Singapore General Hospital, is the principal investigator of a clinical trial of a monoclonal antibody.

The monoclonal antibody will block the Sars-CoV-2 virus from gaining entry into cells.

Dr Shirin says: “I am hopeful that this trial will be able to contribute in some way to finding an effective treatment for Covid-19.”

“As there has been no effective treatment for the virus so far, this

antibody could be used to treat patients with Covid-19 if proven to be effective.”

The trial, which is run by SingHealth's Investigational Medicine Unit, began last month after around four months of preparation. The antibody is being trialled on healthy volunteers, and the trial is currently in the first phase of three.

As a principal investigator, Dr Shirin, 39, oversees the entire research process, from recruiting volunteers to seeing patients to monitoring them and analysing data.

She also conducts research to study how one's immune system responds to the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine and saw patients with Covid-19 in the past year.

The demands of working on the front line have taken a toll on the mother of two daughters aged six

and nine, who worked up to 12 hours a day during the peak of the pandemic.

Dr Shirin, whose husband is an orthopaedic doctor, says: “When my younger daughter was in kindergarten last year, I wasn't able to attend her school performances, even the ones on Zoom.”

“I felt a little guilty missing out, but for the ones I can attend, I make sure that I am fully there and present.”

She says her hope for International Women's Day next Monday is for women to be given more opportunities to realise their full potential.

“I hope people realise that in the workplace, women are not one-dimensional but multifaceted, so different women will have different talents and skills.”

“Their opinions carry worth, and should be valued and respected.”

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DEMANDING WORK

When my younger daughter was in kindergarten last year, I wasn't able to attend her school performances, even the ones on Zoom.



DR SHIRIN KALIMUDDIN, on some of the challenges of working on the front line of the Covid-19 pandemic fight.



Dr Shirin Kalimuddin, a consultant with the Department of Infectious Diseases at Singapore General Hospital, says she hopes people realise that at the workplace, women are not one-dimensional but multifaceted, with different talents and skills. ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI



The National Centre for Infectious Diseases' Dr Ho Lai Peng says social work is dominated by women as they are unafraid to face difficult emotions and life issues. ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE

Medical social worker finds meaning in supporting patients

When the pandemic struck last year, Dr Ho Lai Peng encountered an anxious Covid-19 patient hospitalised at the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID) who was separated from her young children.

The patient was worried about her children's well-being, as they were in another hospital with a relative who had been admitted for another infection.

Says Dr Ho, a principal medical social worker at NCID: “Her children were anxious as well, as they were away from their mother.”

“It was important to work with the other hospital during this period to coordinate care until both patients were safely discharged.”

“It was also important to provide a listening ear to the mother and talk to her, as this would help reduce anxiety.”

For the past 30 years, Dr Ho has been a medical social worker providing counselling and emotional support to patients – and their families – with difficulties adjusting to medical conditions or who are in the hospital for emotional issues.

She now leads a team of 20 medical social workers and staff at NCID.

Dr Ho and her team help facilitate video calls between Covid-19 patients and their families, communicate a grave prognosis to the families if the patient's condition worsens and provide bereavement support should the patient die.

She says: “The patients may be well one moment and become gravely ill the next. As the deterioration may be sudden for some, it's difficult for the families to grapple with that. It's hard when they can say their goodbyes only through the glass of the patient's room or over the phone or via video call.”

Having to treat Covid-19 patients is not just physically taxing, but also emotionally exhausting.

But Dr Ho says: “I find my job meaningful as I support patients as they undergo change, and am part of the same journey with them. That in itself is a reward.”

She notes that the field of social work is dominated by women as they are unafraid to face difficult emotions and life issues.

But, more broadly, she hopes to see equal treatment and opportunities for women, especially in positions of authority, and for a more open discussion on gender equality in Singapore.

“It is important to address women's issues because gender inequality is something that still exists to some degree in society,” she says.

“Gender equality should be a given and not something which women have to fight for.”

Sherlyn Sim