



# GENDER EQUALITY IN SINGAPORE

## TIME FOR YOU TO STEP UP

**Do we want to go back to a Singapore where daughters stayed at home and sons went to school? Where men could legally take several wives? Where married women could not own and control personal property?**

Let me hear a resounding NO!

Singapore has made huge leaps when it comes to gender equality, predominantly thanks to the Women's Charter.<sup>1</sup> The Women's Charter was passed in 1961 to advocate girls' and women's rights in Singapore, and promote equality in marriage. An event described as momentous in Singapore's history because it significantly protected and advanced women's rights.

**Should we be happy with the status quo?**

Singapore has achieved more progress towards gender parity than Asia Pacific as a whole, but lags behind other advanced economies. New research<sup>2</sup> from McKinsey Global Institute (MGI)

calculates a country's Gender Parity Score (GPS) using 15 indicators of gender equality at work and in society. Singapore has a GPS of 0.68 on gender equality in work, well above Asia Pacific overall (0.44) but somewhat behind the best in region (0.73). In 3 of the 15 indicators, Singapore has high or extremely high gender inequality: leadership positions, legal protection and political representation.

Hardly surprising when you look at the facts. 52% of Singapore's companies have less than 20% of women in leadership roles.<sup>2</sup> The World Bank Women Business and Law database<sup>3</sup> noted that Singapore currently does not have laws mandating non-discrimination based on gender in hiring, or laws stipulating equal pay for work of equal value. Singaporean women account for only 24% of members of parliament and 9% of ministerial or cabinet roles.<sup>2</sup>



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The sad fact is that despite 76%<sup>4</sup> of Singaporean women of prime working age (25-54 years) in paid employment, subconscious bias and gender gaps in terms of senior management representation still exist. Only 13% of board seats of the top 100 listed companies in Singapore are held by women.

Directors promoted to Singapore boards over the past 3 years were predominantly men; more than 80% for all SGX listed companies.<sup>5</sup>

Looking further afield, after reaching an all time high in 2017 with 32 women CEOs on the Fortune 500, so far in 2018, we have already seen a decline of 25%, leaving female CEOs on the Fortune 500 at a mere 5%.<sup>6</sup>

And its not just our boards that have a diversity shortage. LeanIn and MGI research<sup>7</sup> shows that the percentage of roles held by women steadily decreases at every seniority level. Men and women enter the workforce at relatively the same levels. But between entry level and the C suite, the percentage of female

employees more than halves, while male representation jumps by 27%. This trend is consistent across every industry; even those that are female dominated in the early stages of the career path see a steady drop off of female representation towards the C suite.

Today, worldwide, women are paid an average of 23% less than men.<sup>8</sup> Taking Singapore specifically, men are still earning 18% more than women, and this gap hasn't changed much in the last decade.<sup>9</sup> At current rates of progress the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2017<sup>8</sup> reveals that it will take **217 years** globally to close the gender gaps around economic opportunity, participation and pay.

Why is this? Why do we still see that glass ceiling when 73%<sup>10</sup> of global firms allegedly have equal opportunity policies in place? And when so much research points to the competitive advantages of gender diverse companies?

A photograph of two young children, a boy and a girl, dressed as superheroes. The boy on the left is wearing a blue suit with a red mask and a red cape. The girl on the right is wearing a red suit with a black mask and a blue cape. They are both smiling and standing outdoors in a grassy area.

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MGI research actually proved that gender diverse companies in the top quartile financially outperform those in the bottom quartile by 15%.<sup>11</sup> MGI also estimates that S\$20 billion could be added to Singapore's annual GDP by 2025 by advancing women's equality.<sup>2</sup>

**So what are we missing? Why is progress towards gender equality so slow?** One of the most powerful reasons for this is a simple one; we have blind spots when it comes to diversity. How can we solve problems that we don't see or understand? Nearly 50% of men think women are well represented in leadership roles when 1 in 10 leaders is a woman. 30% of women feel the same way.<sup>7</sup>

Another reason? The simple fact that organisational policies and practices have not caught up to the enormous changes that have transformed Singapore society since 1961. A simple illustration; only 47% of firms in Singapore offer flexible work arrangements.<sup>2</sup> More change is yet to come as Singapore's population ages, adding elderly care to the list

of barriers keeping Singaporean women from participating fully in the workforce.

*"Those days when the average family was a dad who went to work every day and a mom who stayed at home and did all the unpaid labour – that's not what our economy looks like anymore. Household and work arrangements come in all shapes and all combinations, and yet, our workplace policies still look like they're straight out of Mad Men".*

– Barack Obama

**To speed up progress and see gender equality in our lifetimes, we need YOU.**

If we really want organisational policies and practices that work for everybody, that account for the realities of how people live today, we need more women in decision-making structures; in politics, in education, in the C-suite. We don't have to wait for laws to change - we can make progress without them. We need ordinary women helping to remove barriers that prevent women from participating fully in their societies or workplaces.

A photograph of two young children, a boy and a girl, dressed as superheroes. The boy on the left is wearing a red mask and a blue cape over a blue shirt. The girl on the right is wearing a black mask and a red cape over a red shirt. They are both smiling and standing outdoors in a grassy area. The text 'GENDER EQUALITY IN SINGAPORE' is overlaid in white, and 'TIME FOR YOU TO STEP UP' is overlaid in yellow below it.

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We need everyday role models that create more opportunities and show the rest of us how to do it. After all, how can we strive to be what we can't see?

**We can all be that everyday hero.** We can all do something to get us closer to our greatest ideal. Let's start with our own subconscious bias. We are still boxed in by stereotypes about how men and women should behave. We all have the power to change this – for ourselves and for our children.

- ✓ Change the attitude that criticises our daughters for being bossy and our sons for being sensitive.
- ✓ Change the attitude that stigmatises full-time fathers and penalises working mothers.
- ✓ Change the attitude that sees gender equality as a women only issue. Invite men to the discussion.
- ✓ Change the attitude that sees advances in female leadership as a threat to men.
- ✓ Change the attitude that assumes women are less competent or committed to their careers because they have children.
- ✓ Change the attitude that undervalues women, giving them less credit than men for successful outcomes and more blame for failure.
- ✓ Change the attitude that stops women from applying for roles until they meet 100% of the hiring criteria. (Research shows that men typically apply when they meet 60%).<sup>12</sup>
- ✓ Change the attitude that believes leadership competencies require typically 'male' characteristics.

**So come on Singapore! Why wait 217 years?**



This article was written by **Developing Global Leaders Asia** (DGL). We believe responsible leadership combined with the ability to lead across borders and cultures has the power to transform individuals, organisations and societies - when it's done right.

DGL has decades of research and practical experience, with clients around the globe, and a proven track record of measurable long-lasting results. DGL consulting and training services focus on developing globally competent and socially responsible leaders, cohesive multicultural teams, and sustainable corporate culture that respects the organisation's social and environmental impact.



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