



| Tatler for Good |

# Women Empowered

In celebration of *Tatler Singapore's* 40th anniversary this year, we look at how society has progressed, starting first with gender equality and female empowerment in Singapore. We find out from the advocates and organisations championing a better future for women on how far we have come and what more needs to be done *By Grace Ma*

Gender equality and female empowerment have been a core tenet in the United Nations (UN) Charter since 1945. But even though there has been progress in gender equality, UN secretary-general António Guterres warned in 2020 that the pace of change is not rapid

enough to close the global gender gap within the next 100 years. Obviously, the pandemic has exacerbated existing disparities. In Asia, lockdowns, remote working and online learning have increased gender gaps in employment and education, while

patriarchal mindsets have put a disproportionate burden on women when it comes to caregiving even as they are expected to perform at work. Margaret Thomas, president of the Association of Women for Action and Research (Aware), points

IMAGE 123 RF

“Singapore is moving in the right direction, but certainly, a mindset change has to take place and this starts at schools, where children are taught to respect one another because we all bring value to the table” – JUNIE FOO

out that women in the Asia-Pacific region spend 4.1 times more time on household and caregiving work than men, and this has an enormous impact on women’s leadership, careers, financial situation and well-being.

Areas of concern in Singapore, Thomas highlights, include a gender pay gap that has barely changed over the past 20 years, stagnating at around 16 per cent despite women making up 64.2 per cent of the labour force in 2021. Aware’s Sexual Assault Care Centre has also seen a rise in new forms of sexual violence, particularly technology-facilitated sexual violence (a 36 per cent increase from 2019 to 2020 alone), where unwanted sexual behaviour is carried out via digital technology such as cameras, social media platforms and dating apps.

At the same time, there has been headway in areas such as gender-based discrimination at work, protection from harassment, and marital rape. For instance, the Protection from Harassment Act was amended in 2019 to, among other things, include doxxing and make it easier for victims to seek redress. In 2020, marital rape immunity was repealed.

Junie Foo, president of the Singapore Council of Women’s Organisations, feels that although

it is very much less of a man’s world today, there is still a gender gap. “There are almost as many women as men with tertiary education, especially among the young. Women start innovative and successful enterprises, head huge corporations, and hold key commands in the uniformed professions. But women also bear the bulk of the caregiving burden, often at the cost of their careers, income and savings,” she says. “The gender wage gap has narrowed, but it’s still there. Women make up less than a fifth of corporate boards. We have a woman as the president [of Singapore], but just 29 per cent of our parliamentarians are women, and only 15 per cent of the Cabinet are female.”

A white paper, with recommendations on women’s issues such as fair workplace practices, caregiver support, and protection for victims of sexual offences and violence will be presented to parliament in the upcoming months.

In 2020, Asia Gender Network (AGN) was launched by Asian Venture Philanthropy Network to mobilise financial, intellectual and human capital to improve outcomes for women and girls in Asia, the first-ever pan-Asian network to do so. AGN’s head

Patricia Mathias shares that the network has pooled philanthropic funds in areas such as STEM education, entrepreneurship and maternal health. She explains: “The power of the network is in bringing together philanthropists and thought leaders from different countries to learn, share, catalyse impact and help close the gender equality gap in Asia.”

The bottom line of gender equality and female empowerment are the tenets of respect and value of every human being, whether male or female. Foo elucidates: “Singapore is moving in the right direction, but certainly, a mindset change has to take place and this starts at schools, where children are taught to respect one another because we all bring value to the table.”

GENDER PARITY  
**135.6 YEARS**

The Covid-19 pandemic has pushed gender parity by another generation—the global gender gap will now take 135.6 years to close, up from the 99.5 years pre-pandemic, according to the World Economic Forum’s *Global Gender Gap Report 2021*.



The pace of change is not rapid enough to close the global gender gap within the next 100 years

## STAND TOGETHER

Five women-led organisations doing good work in empowering women in Singapore

### AIDHA

Founded in 2006, the charity offers courses in areas such as financial literacy and technical skills for migrant domestic workers and low-income Singaporean women to help them achieve economic independence through financial education, income creation and entrepreneurship.

### THE CODETTE PROJECT

The non-profit organisation bridges minority and Muslim women to opportunities in the technological industry through learning workshops and interactive events.

### DAUGHTERS OF TOMORROW

The charity equips underprivileged women with necessary skills

and provides access to job opportunities. Its volunteers also offer practical and emotional support to the beneficiaries to help them sustain employment.

### PROJECT X

Established in 2008, it is the only non-profit organisation in Singapore that empowers sex workers with essential social, emotional and health support.

### THE T PROJECT

The first and only social service for the transgender community in Singapore, the non-profit initiative offers a shelter, counselling services and access to job opportunities for its beneficiaries.

## WOMEN IN STEM

32.4%

The percentage of women in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) sectors in Singapore in 2020, an increase from the 29.9 per cent in 2015.

## BOARDROOM REPRESENTATION

19.7%

Women hold just 19.7 per cent of board seats globally, according to the *Women in the Boardroom: A Global Perspective* report released in 2022 by Deloitte Global, in collaboration with global campaign The 30% Club. This is a 2.8 per cent increase from the report's last edition, published in 2019.

IMAGES ORE HUIYING (CONSTANCE SINGAM), 123 RF



## ROOM TO BLOOM

Georgette Tan, president of United Women Singapore, on female representation in the STEM sectors

*United Women Singapore (UWS) and market research company Ipsos conducted a study in 2021 on the gender gap in the STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) fields. What were the important takeaways?*

That it isn't that women aren't interested in these industries. Rather, we're seeing comparatively fewer women in these fields partly because as 13- or 14-year-old girls interested in these subjects, they don't get the same encouragement and support as their male counterparts. The girls are very bright and adept, even more so than the boys in many instances, so it isn't about competence, but confidence. If we want to see more female participation in these sectors,

we need to prop them up at a younger age; the earlier we back up their interest, the better the chances of keeping them on this path.

### What needs to be done to encourage female representation?

Family encouragement and support as well as role models are crucial in sustaining the girls' interest. We also need to highlight the creativity aspect in STEM to make it more appealing to the girls, who currently feel that STEM subjects don't allow them to express this aspect of themselves. Equally important are female mentors who can guide and inspire, as well as male allies committed to creating opportunities for female representation in the STEM sectors.

### What new plans does the UWS have to further encourage girls to go in the STEM direction?

For two years starting in 2022, our Girls2Pioneers programme will support 40 female ITE students aged 17 and above, particularly those from lower-income households, with a €100,000 bursary fund committed by Porsche—the funds will defray their living expenses so they can focus on making their dreams come true. Its curriculum has been expanded to include confidence building and job readiness workshops as well. Also, its group mentorship programme has been scaled to benefit more female students.

## ADVOCATES FOR FEMALE EMPOWERMENT



CONSTANCE SINGAM

The civil society veteran has consistently spoken out on violence against women, and lobbied for more sensitive and effective handling of such cases by the police.



KEVIN MCGUIGAN

The vice-president and managing director of 3M's Southeast Asia region, and country leader, Singapore, personally advocates for leadership opportunities for women in MNCs and connects aspiring students to the STEM community.



SALEEMAH ISMAIL

The co-founder of New Life Stories and Aidha is passionate about helping vulnerable, low-income and migrant women achieve economic independence through skills courses and financial education.



SHER-LI TORREY

The Mums@Work founder has tirelessly championed for fair employment spaces for mothers returning to the workforce and equipping them with the necessary skills to reintegrate successfully.