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Mindsets need to change to bridge gender pay gap: Ong Ye Kung

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SINGAPORE -Despite a global momentum towards gender equality, there is still a gap in pay, the amount of household work done by men and women, and the senior positions between the sexes, said Mr Ong Ye Kung, Minister for Education (Higher Education and Skills).

He said he is not sure if the gap would ever close, unless there is a shift in social norms and in the expectations placed on women.

"Rightly or wrongly, society expects women to bear greater responsibilities at home, and in bringing up children," he said, adding how he knows his two daughters aged 15 and 17 would go to his wife when they are most in need of comfort and someone to listen to their deepest problems even though the couple spend the same amount of time with the children.

Speaking at S.N.O.W. (Say No to the Oppression of Women), the Singapore Committee for UN Women's annual gala fundraising dinner at Capella Singapore on Friday (Sept 22), Mr Ong pointed out that there must be equal opportunity for all men and women, based on their abilities.

"To suppress this based on stereotypes is narrow-minded and damaging, not only to the economy, but to society at large," he added.

But what is important, and what he cares about, is not absolute equality, but that women have the freedom of choice, said Mr Ong.

"If (women) want to pursue careers in any fields, they should be assessed based on their capabilities and performance no different from men, and there should be nothing standing in their way just because they are female.

"But if women decide to devote themselves to their families and children and let their careers take a backseat, they deserve respect for that choice too."

But this must be a "real choice, and not a social burden or dilemma that only women are subject to", Mr Ong said. Hence mothers should be given greater support from society, and men can do more to share household responsibilities with their wives, he added.

"I also hope men can step up more to share household responsibilities with their wives. We do the dishes not because we are helping our wives, but because we too had dinner. We change the diapers for the babies not because we are helping our wives, but because they are also our children," he added.

At the event, the self-funded organisation launched the #stoptherobbery campaign, which will raise awareness of the gender pay gap in Singapore through various events, after conducting a survey in early 2018.

For instance, the organisation hopes to work with Singapore Exchange to implement the Ring the Bell for Gender Equality initiative.

This worldwide UN Women event saw 40 stock exchanges around the world ring their bells on International Women's Day 2017.

Last month (Aug), The Straits Times reported that the gender pay gap in Singapore had not improved in the last 10 years, with men still earning nearly 20 per cent more than women.

According to consumer research firm ValuePenguin, the median gross monthly income of men was about \$2,452 in 2006, about 19 per cent higher than \$2,053 for women.

Last year (2016), males' median monthly income rose to \$3,991, still 18 per cent higher than the median for females of \$3,382.

The report does not say if national service (NS) contributes to the gender wage gap in Singapore. Some employers offer men higher starting salaries to compensate for two years of full-time military service.

Women The Straits Times spoke to are calling for greater awareness, transparency and communication where pay is concerned.

Ms Junie Foo, chair of BoardAgender, an initiative by the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations (SCWO), said awareness of the gender wage gap is key.

"I don't think a lot of people acknowledge it," she said, citing the "unconscious biases" of hirers who might assume a woman needs less pay because she has a husband.

Ms Jolene Tan, head of advocacy and research at the Association of Women for Action and Research (Aware), said: "The World Economic Forum has predicted that it will take 170 years for the global pay gap to close, at current rates of progress. How much progress we can make, and how quickly, depends a lot on the political will to take the issue seriously.

"In our view, men's contributions to NS should be compensated through improved pay and benefits during NS itself, rather than a lifelong wage differential in unrelated spheres, which reinforces the idea that men's labour generally is worth more than women's."

Aware has also long advocated that those who perform domestic and care work should be materially supported to ensure their economic well-being, be it through caregiver allowances or CPF credits.

Ms Trina Liang-Lin, president of the Singapore Committee for UN Women, hopes to see more transparent wage policies and communication, particularly in private companies, as well as more research and data to spotlight the issue of unequal pay.

Companies, she said, should "adopt a more transparent pay scale at all levels and have fair and unbiased performance discussions" while employees should have "active, honest discussions with employers about remuneration".

She added: "Discussing pay is still viewed as taboo and un-ladylike, particularly for women. That psyche must end. Men never usually have a problem discussing pay and it's usually one of the first things that is brought up during a performance review or job interview."

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