

Women's development in Singapore: An explainer for kids

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SINGAPORE - The Singapore Government came up with a [White Paper on Singapore Women's Development](#), which was submitted to Parliament on March 28.

It is a 10-year plan to improve the lives of women and move towards gender equality. It started with a series of conversations on the development of women in Singapore from September 2020, which gathered views from some 6,000 participants over a year.

The [motion on the White Paper was passed unanimously](#) by all MPs present on April 5. This means that MPs, who have the power to make or amend laws, support the plans presented in the paper.

Discussions on women's rights have attracted much attention in recent years, from discourse about workplace discrimination to the unfair burden on women who, during the Covid-19 pandemic, have to juggle working from home with supervising their children's home-based learning or doing more household chores.

Here is an explainer for parents and children aged 10 and above on the White Paper, what it covers and why it matters, produced by the team behind Little Red Dot and IN, The Straits Times' publications for students.

What is gender equality?

It is when people have equal opportunities and access to resources, regardless of their gender.

Is there no gender equality currently?

There is a global gender gap, which is the difference between men and women in various aspects of society, such as the level of education attained, amount of money earned and representation in business or politics, to name a few examples.

This gap, in which women lag behind men, persists, based on findings by international organisations such as the United Nations and the World Economic Forum.

The 2021 Global Gender Gap Report found that it would take 135.6 years for the gap to close.

What is holding women back?

Worldwide, women have less access to education and health resources.

In less developed countries, young people in rural areas are less likely to attend school than those in urban areas because schools are farther away and they are needed to help with farm work or chores. Girls living in rural areas are even less likely than boys to attend school because some families favour males.

Women are also less represented in the workforce politics globally. This means that women generally make less money than men and are less involved in decision-making on policies that affect their lives.

What barriers are there to gender equality in Singapore?

Some [people here still hold gender stereotypes](#), which are ideas of what men and women ought to do.

An example is the thinking that certain jobs should be done by women and some jobs by men. Some people believe that men should do jobs in science and engineering, while women should do jobs that are seen to be more caring, such as nurses.

Some people may also have the mindset that men support the family through work and women through caring for children and doing the chores.

This may result in people treating men and women differently.

A study by the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry found that in the workplace, four in 10 women reported encountering gender discrimination, while only one in 10 men reported experiencing the same.

What is covered under the White Paper on Singapore Women's Development?

There are 25 action plans, which are specific measures, in these five main areas:

- equal opportunities in the workplace;
- recognition and support for caregivers (caregivers are people who care for others, such as someone who takes care of one's elderly parents and young children, and women are far more likely to be the caregivers in families);
- protection against violence and harm;
- other support measures that address more specific situations such as single parents, divorced or divorcing women, among others;
- mindset shifts, which would address issues such as gender stereotyping

How does this paper affect young people now?

Gender stereotyping, such as ideas of suitable courses or careers for men and women, may affect one's choice of study or future work.

For example, the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (Stem), which offer high-paying jobs, have a lower female representation.

Although the percentage of women studying in Stem courses has increased from 38 per cent in 2017 to 41 per cent in 2019, only 55 per cent of women graduating with such degrees or diplomas entered related careers. This is in contrast to 70 per cent of men doing so.

When society overcomes gender stereotypes, it can open up possibilities for both boys and girls.

Gender stereotyping could mean that a person feels influenced or pressured to pursue a career or lifestyle that fits gender norms, instead of what he or she really wants. This could mean that he or she may end up not pursuing what is meaningful to him or her, or end up not reaching his or her potential.

What is being done in schools?

Gender stereotyping is being addressed in schools. The Character and Citizenship Education curriculum now includes discussions on gender stereotypes and the equity of familial roles.

Institutes of higher learning also continue to encourage women to enter Stem fields.

Did you know?

Policies can break or reinforce gender stereotypes. Here are some policy changes in Singapore over the years:

- From the mid-1990s, secondary school students started taking both Home Economics and Design and Technology. In the past, the subjects were divided according to gender, with girls taking Home Economics and boys taking Design and Technology. This change for students to take both subjects was viewed as a reflection of a societal shift towards shared responsibilities at home. It was fully implemented for all streams by 1998.
- In 2003, the quota limiting the proportion of female medical students was lifted. The decades-old policy was introduced in 1979, imposing a one-third quota on female medical students - this meant that only one-third of each medical cohort could be female. The Government justified the restriction then by saying that training doctors was costly, and women were more likely than men to quit or work only part-time.
- From 2005, married women civil servants received the same dependant healthcare benefits as their male counterparts. Before 2005, medical benefits were extended to dependants (such as the spouse, or children aged below 18) of only male civil servants. This was based on the notion that the man was the head of the household.

What is a White Paper and why is it significant?

According to the Office of the Clerk of Parliament, a White Paper is a document issued by the Government to explain or discuss important policy matters.

White Papers are often presented for debate and approval in Parliament. Examples of other issues that White Papers have covered are junior college and upper secondary education, and CareShield Life.

White Papers may result in the amendment of existing laws or introduction of new ones. If they do, these legislative changes are introduced in Parliament as Bills, or draft laws, where MPs would still have to examine the substance of the proposed changes before deciding whether to vote in support of them.