

DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION IN SINGAPOREAN WORKPLACES

2021

About CPA Australia

CPA Australia is one of the largest professional accounting bodies in the world, with more than 168,000 members in over 100 countries and regions, including more than 8,500 members in Singapore. CPA Australia has been operating in Singapore since 1954 and opened our Singapore office in 1989. Our core services include education, training, technical support and advocacy. CPA Australia provides thought leadership on local, national and international issues affecting the accounting profession and public interest. We engage with governments, regulators and industries to advocate policies that stimulate sustainable economic growth and have positive business and public outcomes. Find out more at cpaaustralia.com.au

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WHY IS GENDER EQUALITY IMPORTANT TO SINGAPORE?

Over the last year, Singapore has fallen in ranks with respect to parity in economic participation and opportunity (ranked 20th in 2020¹, and 33rd in 2021²). In September 2020, the Singapore government launched³ a review into issues affecting women to bring about cultural and mindset changes within the community.

Equality in the workplace means that people are given equal opportunities, equal pay and are well accepted for their differences. Aiming for gender equality requires building an inclusive and conducive work environment where employees feel valued, secure and motivated.

Workplace gender equality is associated with:

- increased organisational performance
- enhanced ability to attract talent and retain employees
- enhanced organisational reputation
- better access to new business opportunities
- improved productivity⁴

Further, societies that value women and men as equal are safer and healthier for it.

Until Singapore addresses the issues underlying its decline in parity, it will not reap the full benefits of equality on its economy and society more generally.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Workplace practices are shaped by societal culture, norms and mindset, reinforced by organisational practices. Representing professional accountants globally, we sought to understand such drivers better, and identify how our members can progress change.

CPA Australia's report on diversity and inclusion describes members' views on gendered challenges in Singaporean workplaces. It also proposes approaches to addressing such issues for women, men, organisations, government, and society at large to consider.

This report draws on research and the views of CPA Australia members on:

- opportunities for women and men Singaporean workplaces
- representation of women in senior roles
- the impact of having a family on career progression
- organisational accountability and commitment towards gender equality.

Members views were obtained through a panel discussion and poll questions.

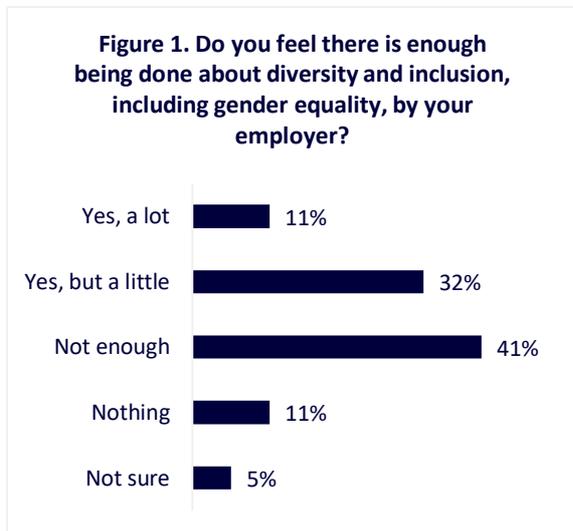
¹ https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2020.pdf

² http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2021.pdf

³ <https://www.msf.gov.sg/media-room/Pages/Conversations-on-Women-Development.aspx>

⁴ <https://www.wgea.gov.au/about/workplace-gender-equality#:~:text=Achieving%20gender%20equality%20is%20important,national%20productivity%20and%20economic%20growth>

MEMBER FEEDBACK



Like nearly every other country, gender bias is still prevalent in Singaporean workplaces. The general member sentiment in Singapore is that more needs to be done in achieving gender parity in the local workplace.

While members said that employers in Singapore have come a long way in gender equality, it's not clear whether gender equality is a priority.

Members observed that board diversity has improved but still more than 70 per cent of the members polled indicated that women are not sufficiently represented in senior roles in their organisations (See Figure 5).

Almost five in ten members polled felt that women employees were not getting the same opportunities as their male counterparts. 15 per cent were not sure about "equal opportunity" practices in their organisations (See Figure 2).

The majority of members polled still believe that there is a penalty for working mothers when it comes to promotion opportunities and salary increases. Of the respondents to our poll, 54 per cent said that having children had a negative impact on their careers (See Figure 3).

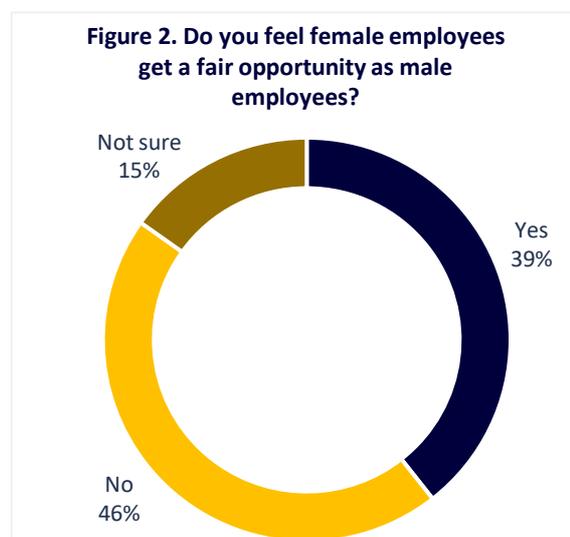
While many members stated that corporates do often have diversity and inclusion frameworks and policies in place, there was little knowledge of whether the effectiveness of these policies are measured.

Approximately 25 per cent of the polled respondents were aware of their organisation's diversity and inclusion targets, however, 46 per cent didn't know if their organisation had targets. Three in ten respondents

indicated that their employers did not report on targets (See Figure 4).

What this tells us is that:

- gender equality may be more than a "nice to have" but it is not an organisational priority
- there is an underrepresentation of women in senior roles
- there is an opportunity to do better.



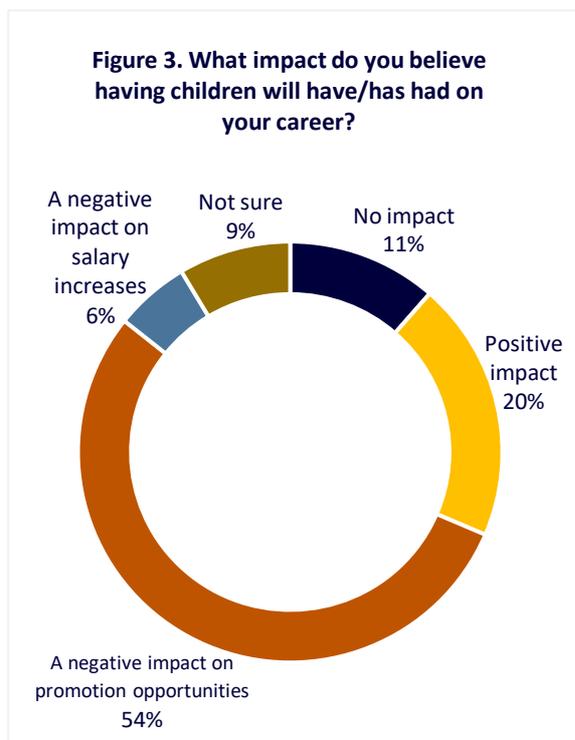
ANALYSIS OF ISSUES

1. The perception of women's roles in society and family has not changed much in Singapore

Over the years, the Singapore government has sought to support women's advancement through policies on improving their access to education and balancing family-work commitments.

Despite parity in access to education in Singapore, members observed that there still aren't as many women in the workplace as women graduating with degrees. Until recently, flexible working was not embraced as it was not seen as a productive means of working.

Members put this down to cultural issues - the underpinning social construct that impacts self-perception and the general perception of the capacity and role of women in society.



The divide in gender roles is still upheld in public discourse and the institutional environment. For example, the Flexible Work Arrangements (FWAs) policy to support mothers’ transition back to full time work still enforces the norm of women as the primary caregivers and men as supporting players in the family.

There seems to be an underlying belief that if a woman was to pursue a career, it would come at the expense of being a good mother or a good wife. Studies⁵ show that rising costs in Singapore, and the link between employment and access to social goods and services has led to greater workforce participation by women. However, it is suggested that they avoid high level positions because it conflicts with their roles as mothers and wives.

This stems from traditional gendered views of what men should or shouldn’t do, and what women should or shouldn’t do in society. This inevitably translates to the workplace.

We see many organisations setting up the formal infrastructure to create a conscious reset of gendered roles. However, the diversity and inclusion challenges are embedded in the informal practices in the

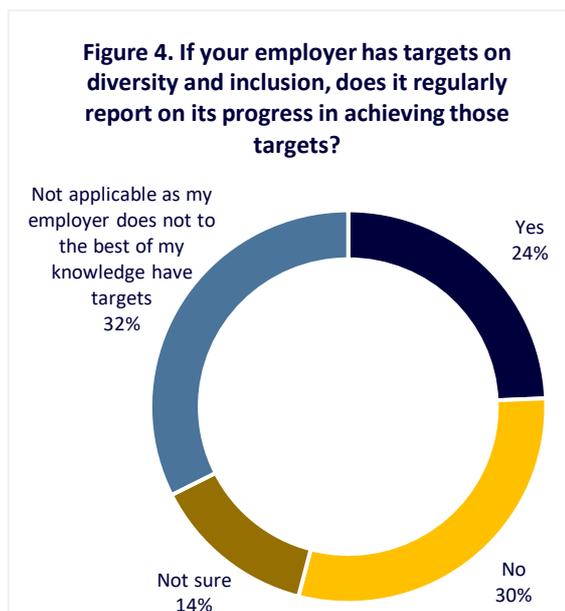
⁵ Haque M S 2000 Representation of women in governance in Singapore: Trends and problems Asian Journal of Political Science 8 59–87

workplace. Informal practices which are governed by gender norm beliefs that are so entrenched that individuals, including women, are not aware of them.

2. Gender equality is not explicitly set as an organisational priority

It should be acknowledged that an increasing number of employers in Singapore have diversity and inclusion frameworks and policies in place. This reflects a greater acceptance of the need for organisations to embed equality in day-to-day operations. However, the poll results suggest that equal opportunities between the genders is not an explicit priority for many employers.

What may be missing from these organisations’ diversity and inclusion efforts is a picture of what an “equal opportunity” work environment would look like, what it means for the organisation and its people, and what the organisation is committed to achieve.



For gender equality to work, individuals need to buy into the value of diversity, rather than just comply with some rules about it. Setting clear targets, making them known and reporting back on progress can send a very important message on an organisation’s commitment towards gender equality goals. It shows that it’s an

organisational priority and has the potential to influence the desired behavioural change within the organisation.

A study, by Professor Letian Zhang (Harvard Business School), found that gender diversity produced more productive companies, especially where there’s widespread belief that gender diversity is important. Although regulatory support of working women is correlated with acceptance of the roles of women in the workplace, they are not the same.

Therefore, advancing gender inclusion is not just about the regulation and targets but the ongoing iterative experience. Based on the poll results, current diversity and inclusion policies and practice are not sufficient to impact behavioural change in the workplace. CPA Australia suggests that commitment and accountability to such policies needs to be elevated. There also needs to be strategies to address and challenge underlying cultural beliefs. However, care must be taken to avoid diversity fatigue, especially where the results are not meeting expectations.

Diversity fatigue occurs when people don’t necessarily believe in the value of equality but are made to practice it through external frameworks and rules. They are more likely to be dismissive of such efforts. This is especially so where that effort doesn’t result in the desired outcomes. However, if they can be shown the value of equality, they are more likely to practice it in the workplace or social settings.

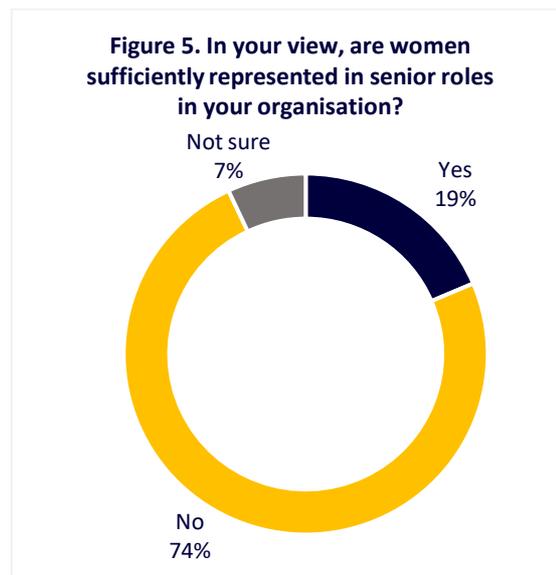
3. There is an underrepresentation of women in the corporate pipeline

Women make up less than 20 per cent of board appointments on all Singapore Exchange listed companies. And there was a decline in the total number of appointments from 530 in 2019 to 394 in 2020⁶.

Over 70 per cent of members polled indicated that women are not sufficiently represented in senior roles in their organisations. We also observe that the proportion of women in professional and technical roles has reduced in the last year^{7,8}. Further, the population of women entrepreneurs has not increased greatly either⁹.

The underpinning beliefs that keep a lot of women from acting on their corporate ambitions and superficial

organisational efforts mean fewer women in the corporate pipeline for senior positions. The COVID-19 pandemic magnified families’ struggles to reconcile caregiving and employment, especially for working mothers.



Many women end up dropping out of the pipeline to senior positions due to the lack of organisational efforts to support them and the expectation of women as primary caregivers. This reinforces a motherhood penalty for working women. It also contributes to the underrepresentation of women in the “jobs of tomorrow”. Technology in some sectors is advancing at such a rapid pace that time out of the workforce and / or not having sufficient time to keep up due to carers responsibilities can put such people behind others.

⁶ <https://www.councilforboarddiversity.sg/statistics/as-at-dec-2020/>
⁷ https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2021.pdf
⁸ https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GenderGap_Report_2006.pdf

⁹ https://www.mastercard.com/news/media/1ulpy5at/ma_miwe-report-2020.pdf

RECOMMENDATION FOR BUSINESSES

Gender forward strategies encompass policies, processes, role-modelling and communication that sends the message that gender equality is important. This may require a change in working routines as everyone will need to integrate gender equality into their respective functions. More importantly, it should strongly influence individuals to reflect on their own perception of gender. Gender inclusion is a “whole of organisation” responsibility. Business leaders and employees alike have a responsibility to create and demand accountability for its implementation.

1. Set clear targets, track progress and report on the progress

It does not matter how much effort you put in, only whether the efforts take you closer to your gender inclusion goals.

Setting targets

Set a gender-related goal in the corporate plan and pick focus areas based on where the organisation is in its growth cycle. Some common focus areas could include:

- Male to female ratio in
 - senior and decision-making roles
 - managerial positions
 - early career recruits
 - the hiring pool
 - organisational activities
 - technical and administrative roles
- Equal remuneration and benefits.

The Australian Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) has a guide on “[How to set gender diversity targets](#)” that could assist in this process. It is important to ensure that the metric is meaningful for the organisation such that it influences key processes and practices. For example, WGEA found that when organisations commit to equal pay, they will ensure that:

- the wages and conditions of jobs are assessed in a non-discriminatory way: by valuing skills, responsibilities and working conditions in each job or job type, and then remunerating the employees accordingly.
- the workplace’s organisational structures and processes empower (and not impede) female

employees’ access to work-based training, promotions and flexible working arrangements.

Reporting

Reporting on progress creates accountability and shows the organisation’s commitment towards its equality agenda. It provides the information necessary for leadership to make strategic decisions, empower employees to do better and hold each other accountable. It also communicates the organisations’ commitment and values to external stakeholders. This kind of transparency creates a sense of collective responsibility and builds trust in the organisation.

2. Make equality a core organisational value

Business values are a powerful asset. They signal to potential employees and customers what the organisation believes in and the culture within. It also reminds current staff of the preferred way of operating and achieving outcomes.

Make equality a core value to alter the hidden cultural elements. Undertake “values initiatives” to ensure such beliefs become part of the organisation’s culture. The values effort could be driven by small teams that include the business leaders and a handful of key employees.

This will guide the development of an inclusive framework for recruitment, work allocation and promotions, internal and external communication and more. Aggressively adhering to the core values will help the business make strategic decisions and reach targets.

3. Weave the core values into informal processes

Mobilise equality as a core value in the organisation. It needs to be integrated into every employee-related process – hiring methods, performance management systems, criteria for promotion and rewards, and even dismissal policies. From the first interview to the last day of work, employees should be constantly reminded that the core value forms the basis for every decision the company makes.

This should influence how leaders communicate their commitment to the gender equality agenda, demonstrate their support, encourage staff, and set a good example by implementing gender inclusion in their daily work routines, decision-making processes and all other activities.

4. Ensure gender neutral workplace policies

To truly improve equality, the opportunities to balance home and work obligations should be made available to both men and women. Otherwise, women will always find themselves in the position of having to manage domestic obligations because the flexibility is more likely to exist only for them. Providing parental leave for women and not men, for example, perpetuates that domestic responsibilities rest on the shoulders of women. It also takes away the option for the men to play a bigger caregiving role while managing their work commitments.

Workplaces need to equalise family benefits for all, encourage the use of flexible work arrangements by all and concentrate efforts on engaging and creating an inclusive culture.

5. Influence society through external communication

A cultural revamp within the organisation often stops with internal communications. But to get the right people into the business, organisations need to tackle the issue of slow changing societal perception of gender roles. This means having awareness of gender representation in its external communications. This may be company brochures, public events, marketing campaigns, how employees interact outside the organisation, and the company's corporate social responsibility exercises.

Some of these considerations may go against the grain of what organisations have experienced. For example, if the organisation was marketing dishwashing liquids, it may prefer to advertise with women leads because statistically women have been heavy consumers of such products and are most likely to be engaged by the ad. There's an opportunity now for organisations to be creative, maintain a female lead but change the narrative.

Companies play an important role in society, they can position themselves to lead and influence on a broader level.

HOW CAN GOVERNMENT SUPPORT BUSINESSES?

The efforts of governments and businesses to achieve gender equality go hand in glove. As the businesses strive to influence culture from within the organisation, the government could help drive broader change through:

- regulatory support e.g. employment laws, mandatory reporting on the number of women in senior leadership as well as the firm-level gender pay
- shifting the traditional mindset at the grassroots level e.g. looking into the education system
- improving social and welfare support e.g. government funded affordable childcare and elderly care facilities
- role-modelling equality in the workplace in the public sector.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 led health, social and economic crisis has driven home the focus on sustainability. For a sustainable future, businesses need to maximise more than just profits and governments need to look beyond just raising GDP. It is important that gender inclusion becomes a key policy for business, government and society so that organisations can attract and retain the best talent, and that everyone has the opportunity to reach their full potential at work and in life.

