

Women in the workplace: The Singapore way

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Female employees make up one-third of Singtel's senior management positions

Tan Su Shan typically starts her day early: a breakfast meeting with a client, or - if they ask for it - dropping off her children at school.

Impeccably dressed and coiffed, she is one of Singapore's success stories, having started her career in banking more than two decades ago.

She now runs the wealth management and consumer banking team at DBS, one of Singapore's most valuable firms.

But she admits she couldn't do this without help.

"When I got pregnant I moved very close to my parents," she told me. "They were literally a stone's throw away so they were always there for me or my children.

"I also had a [domestic] helper, which is possible in Singapore because it's relatively affordable, and I had very supportive bosses at work who allowed me to juggle my time and my flexibility."

Ms Tan is one of a small but powerful group of women helping to run some of the biggest companies in Singapore.

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Tan Su Shan is the head of wealth management and consumer banking at South East Asia's biggest bank, DBS

At telecom giant Singtel, female employees make up one third of the senior management positions - including the group chief executive, and investment, technology and operating heads.

Over the last decade Singapore has outperformed its Asian peers in closing the gender workplace and pay gap - but still very few women end up joining what is essentially a men's club in the business world here.

When it comes to gender equality in the workplace, the city-state still has a long way to go.

- Over the last 10 years Singapore has seen the number of women in the workforce jump by 15%, according to the World Economic Forum.
- Women make up 15% of chief executives in Singapore: the highest in Asia and third highest in the world, according to Credit Suisse.
- But women in Singapore still lag behind many of their Asian counterparts in some areas, especially in terms of female participation on management boards.
- Women make up just over 8% of boards in Singapore.
- On average women are paid at least 10% less than men for doing the same job in most sectors, according to a study from the Ministry of Manpower.

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BBC's Karishma Vaswani on the gender pay gap in Singapore

Women being held back

Experts say women are still being held back because the corporate culture in Singapore penalises them if they decide to spend a few years out of the workforce.

"Some women do take time off for their own family issues and then the companies would say - oh you took two years off so you're not getting as much exposure as the man who didn't take the time off," says Prof Annie Koh of Singapore Management University (SMU), who has been working on the issue of gender equality for years.



Prof Annie Koh of SMU says the corporate culture in Singapore penalises women for taking time out to have children

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As a mother of two herself, she says women often feel they deserve less than men, because of their family commitments.

"Women aren't good at asking. We keep telling ourselves that our bosses will tell us when we deserve more, that perhaps because we came back after giving birth we shouldn't be paid as much as men," she says.

"Women shouldn't be penalised for stepping out of the workforce."

Work-life balance

Singapore regularly ranks as one of Asia's worst countries in terms of work life balance, and experts say that's why it's suffering from a declining birth rate.

"Some women end up having the 'either/or' mentality", Prof Koh said, "choosing either the life of a professional or the life of a mother".

"But it doesn't have to be like that. The government is encouraging companies to bring women into the workforce, because it's good for business, and for the economy."

But by some accounts, the workplace is only getting more competitive in an already highly stressful Singapore.

Vithiya Gajandran is a 24 year-old postgraduate student. Ambitious and keen to succeed, she is the epitome of the Singaporean millennial.

But while she does plan to have a family some day, she says it's much harder to have kids and a career in Singapore now than it used to be.



Twenty-four year old postgraduate student Vithiya Gajandran says working conditions make it tough to start a family

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"I remember how my mum would go to work and look after us and she was always able to do both" she said as we sat in her lecture theatre waiting for class to begin.

"I don't think it's so easy to do these days. It's getting more competitive, bosses are requiring more of you and want you to produce more, you are required to put in extra hours, its no longer the 9 to 5 workplace. It's definitely getting tougher."

As a nation, Singapore has always depended on its highly educated workforce to get ahead and stay competitive.

And increasingly women here are setting their sights on success - but many are still struggling to find the right balance between work and family.