

FEWER WOMEN LEADERS THAN MEN

Unwilling, unable, or just not given a chance?

Give women the opportunity to lead – and be assessed – in ways that are more inclusive and representative of society at large, say leaders in academia and industry



Ng Wei Kai

Four years into private practice as a litigator, Jaclyn Neo was at a crossroads.

She contemplated returning to academia at the National University of Singapore (NUS) to pursue her first love – public law – but was daunted by the lack of role models.

Encouraged by the NUS law school's dean at the time, Professor Tan Cheng Han, and inspired by one of her former professors, a woman, she pushed on in academia and is now an associate professor and director of NUS Law's Centre for Asian Legal Studies.

Women like Associate Professor Neo who rise through Singapore's academic ranks are still a rare breed – an issue thrust under the spotlight earlier in January by former MP and academic Intan Azura Mokhtar of the Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT).

Speaking at an Institute of Policy Studies conference, Associate Professor Intan said: "In our six autonomous universities, there is only one female university president."

She was referring to Singapore Management University's (SMU) Lily Kong, the first Singaporean woman to get the top job at a university here.

IN GOOD COMPANY

The situation here is not unusual, said Professor Kong in an e-mail interview with The Sunday Times.

A geographer who was the first woman to become a university provost here in 2015, Prof Kong moved to SMU after a 24-year career at NUS, where she held positions such as vice-provost of academic personnel, and dean of NUS' Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and its University Scholars Programme.

She pointed out that in Hong Kong, where there are eight University Grants Committee-funded universities, there is only one female president.

The University of Oxford appointed its first female vice-chancellor in 2016, when the university was well over 900 years old, and Harvard University appointed its first female president in 2007 after more than 370 years.

More recently, economist Nemat "Minouche" Shafik became the first woman president in Columbia University's 268-year history.

Back home, Singapore's oldest university, NUS, has yet to appoint one after nearly 120 years.

In contrast, SMU appointed its first female president – Professor

Janice Bellace, who had been deputy dean of The Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania – at its founding in 2000. In 2022, SMU also appointed its first female law school dean, Professor Lee Pey Woon.

Prof Kong said: "I am in fact the second woman president of SMU, and (SMU is only) 23 years old."

LEAKY PIPELINE

But why does the gap exist in the first place?

Prof Kong called it the "leaky pipeline", a phenomenon observed in universities around the world.

She said: "There is a gendered pyramid structure – there are actually more female undergraduates than male, so there is a strong base to build on."

"But by the time one gets to post-graduate study, and particularly at the PhD level, there are generally more males than females enrolled."

As university leaders are most commonly selected from the professorial ranks, this means a smaller pool of women to choose from.

There is a potent mix of cultural, societal and biological reasons for this, Prof Kong said.

"There are... deep-seated cultural beliefs that women need not be so highly educated, societal expectations that women balance work and family care, resistance towards marrying women who are more highly educated than men, tenure clocks that coincide with biological clocks, and so forth."

Female academics The Sunday Times spoke to said a lack of informal connections and role models as well as the pressures of child-rearing play a part.

Professor Shirley Ho, associate vice-president for humanities, social sciences and research communication at Nanyang Technological University, said that female academics with young children, like herself, often end up working a "second shift" when they get home.

For female academics to excel and get tenure and leadership positions, they often have to divide their limited time between work and family, she said.

Prof Ho, who is in her 40s and has a 10-year-old daughter, said her supportive family, peers, bosses and a good working culture at NTU have helped her juggle family and career well. However, she noted that not everyone is able to find the right balance in most places.

NUS' Prof Neo, 43, said women often do not have access to the same set of informal connections that men do when entering male-dominated industries, which may set them back in terms of network-

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ing and opportunities.

She said: "Women also tend to underplay their abilities, which may lead to them short-changing themselves when applying for jobs or leadership positions."

When there is a lack of women in universities, there is a risk that the inventions, knowledge and solutions these institutions produce may not cater to as representative a swathe of society as possible.

Said Prof Ho: "It's about perspective. Both men and women have different perspectives about things and you need both to work together to serve the society."

SIT's Prof Intan told The Sunday Times during a Zoom interview that diversity, not just in terms of gender but also ethnic and socio-economic background, is important for organisations and decision-making bodies to make sound choices.

She said: "People having different perspectives enhances the process of decision-making, goal setting as well as strategising."

RETHINKING LEADERSHIP AND APPRAISALS

Hardline policies such as introducing quotas are not the solution, as this would create the impression that women do not get to their positions on merit, said Prof Neo.

A better way forward, she said, may be for established academics to identify and mentor suitable young women and set them up to seize opportunities in academia.

Singapore University of Social Sciences provost Robbie Goh, who was dean of NUS' Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences from 2017 to 2021, said more holistic assessments are needed.

He observed that today, research is still accorded more weight than excellence in teaching and service.

This may eliminate some potential leaders – not just women – who may not fulfil the very highest standards in research, but have much to offer in terms of commitment to education, leadership and service.

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To Prof Intan, Singapore's meritocracy can be more inclusive and representative.

She said: "A lot of the time, we think inclusion means being more empathetic to those less fortunate than us, but actually what we should be doing is broadening the definition of merit."

This means recognising abilities and capacities that are not traditionally rewarded in an academic setting, such as being compassionate and nurturing – qualities which many women have, she said.

"Appraisal systems which look only at quantitative metrics like grades need to be relooked, which should lead to us seeing more diversity reaching the top of many institutions."

Ultimately, it is not just about adding women in various fields, but rather giving women – and other communities – the opportunity to lead in ways that work for them.

Only when diverse voices are allowed to bring diverse approaches to leadership can their abilities be fully tapped for society's benefit.

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