

Does gender inequality still have a place in Singapore's society today?

On April 24, 2021, a new resolution was passed for women in the Singapore Recreation Club (SRC) to be entitled with the same rights and privileges as male members. With this new resolution, women now have voting rights, and can be elected to the club's management committee. On top of this, they may assume the membership of either their spouse or their male next-of-kin. This news was announced after several failed attempts to amend the club's constitution over the course of its 137 year history since its founding.

This made me wonder: as one of Singapore's most well-established clubs, what took it so long to amend this constitution and allow for female members to have equal rights? Furthermore, to what extent was gender inequality prevalent over the course of Singapore's history? Therefore, this term paper intends to explore the history of gender inequality in Singapore, and whether it still has a place in our society today.

For starters, we first need to understand the history of SRC. Originating as a crickets' club for Eurasian players in 1883, the club gradually expanded to allow for more sports including football and hockey to be played, with various matches held against fellow clubs such as the Penang and Malacca Recreation Clubs. However, SRC membership was initially restricted to Eurasian males, with memberships only being made open to non-Europeans from 1955 onwards. Furthermore, European females were only formally allowed as guests in 1927, before subscription memberships were open to women of all races by 1956 as well, about one year after memberships were open to non-

Eurasian men. With drinking as a main social activity and occasional tea parties as SRC's non-sport social activities, it was no surprise that the club had only catered to men, which reinforced the stereotype against women as stay-at-home caregivers who did not enjoy such activities, especially before World War II.

From a more macro perspective, the above-mentioned restriction of women's enjoyment of such activities was also representative of the attitude towards women in colonial Singapore. With Singapore under British rule, women were "subjected to socio-cultural and religious pressures to conform to the roles of wife and mother and to lead a more secluded life". This had contrasted with men, whose gender was viewed to be more dominant based on the traditions of different cultures in Singapore. In addition, men were allowed to have multiple female partners, solidifying the perspective that women were inferior to men at that point of time.

From the 1950s however, there was an increase in female leaders emerging in Singapore's politics, leading the charge to pursue gender equality in the country. For instance, the establishment of the Women's Charter by the Singapore government in 1961 had aimed to provide equal rights to both genders. Clauses in the Charter include the compulsory registration of all marriages as well as providing women with the rights to their own housing, marriage and children if applicable. This was a big improvement from the Chinese Protectorate that was established during the colonial era, which mainly targeted at tackling the illegal prostitution of women. This showed that the local

government did try to push for women to be treated as equals to men, instead of merely taking care of their basic human needs.

In terms of job opportunities, more Singaporean women are seeking full-time employment by either pursuing higher education or entering the workforce, especially over the recent years. This breaks the traditional norm of women as stay-at-home caregivers, as more women aim to live independently as well. This is evident in the rise of the female labour force participation rate from 60.8% in 2018 to 61.2% in 2020. Furthermore, the increase in Professionals, Managers, Executives and Technicians from 50% in 2010 to 59% in 2020 amongst female employees shows that women, just like men, are capable of upskilling themselves and contributing meaningfully to the Singapore economy when given the opportunity. While a pay gap still exists between employed males and females in Singapore, the inclusion of more women especially in higher positions within the local workforce has helped to decrease this gender pay gap, paving the way towards gender equality based on the employment aspect.

To answer the question that I posed earlier: I believe that gender inequality should not have a place in Singapore's society today. While there is still more that can be done to ensure equal opportunities for both men and women in the long run, we have to recognise that the local government today is indeed trying to advocate for women's rights in Singapore. Its efforts in setting up the Women's Charter and encouraging more women to take up higher positions in the workforce, for example, have likewise spurred similar initiatives amongst external organisations. This includes the founding of organisations

such as AWARE for women to seek assistance against physical and emotional abuse, as well as the recent news of allowing women to take up management committee positions as well as have voting rights in SRC.

As mentioned by Law and Home Affairs Minister Shanmugam in February 2021, perhaps one way to promote gender equality more in Singapore is for employees of both genders to be entitled to equal parental leave, as observed in certain European countries. This would grant men the opportunity to experience the caregiver role as normally experienced by their spouses. In fact, encouraging such role reversals between both genders would allow mutual understanding of each other's roles, strengthening internal familial ties in the process.

Alternatively, gender equality can be introduced in one's education at a young age, such that this would be well ingrained in our future generations, gradually discouraging the idea of gender discrimination over time. Hopefully, these current initiatives and suggestions would allow women to realise their full potential and ensure that they are not seen as inferior compared to men. Furthermore, by having more diverse perspectives from both genders, this would allow for improved and balanced decisions to be made, in order to boost productivity in the workforce.

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