

The Straits Times says

Women's rightful, equal place in society

The recently organised Institute of Policy Studies Women's Conference 2021 threw up a number of issues on the attitudes and cultural norms in society that put women at home, at the workplace and in the community at a disadvantage. Ensuring women's rights has been an exhausting race run across generations, encountering occasional setbacks even as it advanced incrementally in the most progressive countries. In Singapore, the Women's Charter of 1961 remains a foundational document and baseline of Singapore's commitment to gender equality. The Charter transformed women's rights from an aspirational goal to being the norm by giving legislative power to the protection and advancement of their rights.

The abolition of bigamy under civil law, for example, was a revolutionary move that made the legal status of married women equal to that of their husbands. The Women's Charter typifies the role of the legislature in upholding female rights. Certainly, social mores take time to catch up with the spirit of the law. But the law must be there in the first place to be a clear enabler. Singapore's no-nonsense approach to sexual harassment today is an example of a legal approach that can help mould social behaviour – punitively if need be.

However, the law can only go so far in mediating gender relations at home and at work. The privacy of the home is an area where the state intervenes only at some risk of harming the very fam-

ily relationships it seeks to protect. It is neither possible nor desirable to legislate private relationships between wife and husband in the same way in which public conduct can and should be regulated by law. At home, it falls on couples to treat a spouse or partner in the way they would want to be treated if their gender roles were reversed. From the simple cleaning up, cooking of meals and washing after dinner to all-important child-rearing and other caregiving tasks, the division of household responsibilities must not be skewed to the woman's disadvantage. Women cannot enjoy gender equality without a change in attitude, and greater and more active participation of men in hitherto "women-only" tasks.

At the workplace, what is required is an institutionalised and habitual recognition of the equal economic worth of male and female employees. That recognition must, for example, entail not penalising pregnant women in terms of their career prospects and, even more fundamentally, their job security. Of course, the law in any country could do more to ensure equality on such fronts. But it behoves companies – and bosses, who are predominantly male – to offer a gender-friendly work culture without the need for female employees to feel that their only recourse to ensuring their employment rights and rewards is to turn to tribunals or the courts. Having more corporate women leaders could help ensure this too.