

By Invitation

Women's quest for justice and equality – a short history

Singapore women have done well in achieving parity with men but in other parts of the world, the struggle continues



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Women's rights are human rights. The struggle by women for justice and equality is one of the longest in the history of human rights.

Although much progress has been made, the struggle is not over in some parts of the world.

Boys and girls are born equal. Inequality sets in as they grow up.

The causes are many, with history, religion and culture all playing a part.

In the ancient world, women were treated as chattel. They could be bought or sold. Women had to marry the men chosen for them. They had no legal personality. They could not own property. They had no freedom of movement. Men's oppression of women is therefore an evil which has ancient roots.

Religion has generally reinforced gender inequality with precepts and doctrines that subordinate women to men.

Some Christian denominations bar women from the priesthood or leadership positions. In Islam, women face restrictions on leading public prayers. According to some Buddhist texts, women can attain Buddhahood only by first being reborn as men. In Hindu literature, women are sometimes depicted as being weak, sinful and irresponsible. The two religions which treat men and women equally are Sikhism and Baha'ism.

Confucius taught that a daughter should obey her father, a wife her husband and a widow her son.

Confucianism has had a pernicious influence on the status of women in Asia as it continues to influence the behaviour of men towards women in North-east and South-east Asia.

The male chauvinist teachings of Confucius may be the reason why societies in these parts of Asia have such low fertility rates.

COLONIAL SINGAPORE

What was the situation in colonial Singapore? The British rulers of Singapore were all men.

Reflecting the attitude back home, their attitude towards women was unenlightened.

Professor Aline Wong, in her book *Women in Modern Singapore*, described the situation in colonial Singapore in the following way: "The cultural traditions of the

major ethnic communities in Singapore place a greater premium on the male compared with the female. Whether born as a Chinese, an Indian or a Malay, a woman is subjected to sociocultural and religious pressures to conform to the roles of wife and mother and to lead a secluded life."

Although several women's leaders such as Shirin Fozdar, Seow Peck Leng and May Wong had petitioned the British Governor and the British Parliament to abolish polygamy, their petition was rejected. Chinese men were free to have as many wives and concubines as they wished.

Women occupied an inferior status during British rule.

In 1877, the British Government established the Chinese Protectorate. Its objective was to look after the needs of the Chinese community. To its credit, the protectorate did try to tackle the problem of the trafficking of women and girls for prostitution.

They also tried to ensure that the sale of young girls to rich families as *muit sai* was not a form of slavery.

WOMEN'S CHARTER OF 1961

In its early days, the People's Action Party (PAP) was a revolutionary

party. In 1959, it campaigned for the policy of one man, one wife. In 1961, the Singapore Government enacted the Women's Charter. It was nothing less than the Magna Carta for women in Singapore.

What are the most important provisions of the Women's Charter?

- First, it abolished polygamy for all non-Muslim men and required that all future marriages be registered.
- Second, a married woman could continue to use her own name.
- Third, husband and wife were treated as equal partners in a marriage.
- Fourth, women had the right to own, buy and sell property.
- Fifth, the Charter safeguards the rights of women in matters relating to marriage and divorce.
- Sixth, the Charter also protects the right of the wife to matrimonial assets, maintenance and the custody of children.

THE PAP AND WOMEN

In the 1950s and 1960s, the PAP had several women leaders such as Chan Choy Siang.

It was a pro-woman party. However, by the 1970s and 1980s, the PAP no longer had any women

in its leadership. The party drifted away from its origin and became anti-women. Let me cite three examples to support my point.

Quota for women in medical school

In 1979, the Minister for Health, Dr Toh Chin Chye, announced that women would be restricted to one-third of the intake for medical school. This unreasonable discrimination against women was abolished only in 2003.

Lower admission requirements for male students

In 1983, the National University of Singapore modified its entry requirements for male students.

Why? In order to prevent any imbalance in the sex ratio in favour of women. Speaking in justification of this discrimination, the NUS vice-chancellor, Professor Lim Pin, said that a gender imbalance in the university would only aggravate the "problem of having unmarried graduate women".

Home economics not for boys

In 1984, the Ministry of Education stopped all Secondary 1 and Secondary 2 girls from taking technical studies. Henceforth, all

girls had to study home economics and the boys had to take technical studies.

THE UNITED NATIONS' POSITIVE INFLUENCE

Some foolish people think the world would be better off without the United Nations.

Without the UN, we would not have the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and, most importantly, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (Cedaw).

Cedaw was adopted in 1979 and came into force in 1981. Singapore became a party to the Convention in 1995.

Article 16 of Cedaw requires all state parties to eliminate discrimination against women in all matters relating to marriage and family matters.

What are the rights of women protected by Cedaw? First, the right to freely and consensually choose her spouse. Second, to have personal rights to her children even in the event of divorce. Third, the right of a married woman to choose

a profession or occupation. Fourth, to have property rights within marriage.

Before leaving the subject of the UN, I would like to acknowledge the important contributions which a Singaporean, Dr Noeleen Heyzer, the former executive director of the UN Development Fund for Women, has made.

In 2000, Dr Heyzer succeeded in persuading the UN Security Council to adopt Resolution 1325.

The resolution calls on states to safeguard the rights of women and girls in armed conflict.

Judge Navanethem Pillay of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda said: "From time immemorial, rape has been regarded as one of the spoils of war. Now it is a war crime. We want to send out a strong message that rape is no longer a trophy of war."

STATUS OF WOMEN IN SINGAPORE

Have Singapore women succeeded in achieving justice and equality with men? I think it would be fair to say that in most important respects, women have achieved equality with men.

Our women have achieved parity with men in education at all levels. Women's participation in our workforce is at about 60 per cent but there is still a wage gap between men and women.

Women outlive men. Most glass ceilings impeding the rise of women in Singapore have been broken. We have a woman as our President. We have several very capable woman ministers, permanent secretaries, judges of the Supreme Court, CEOs of statutory boards and leading corporations.

The only two areas which need improvement are the number of women in Parliament and the under-representation of women on corporate boards and in senior decision-making positions.

The world has recognised the tremendous progress which women in Singapore have achieved in the past 50 years.

In 2016, the UN Human Development Report ranked Singapore No. 11 out of 159 countries on its Gender Inequality Index. In 2017, the US News and World Report published a list of the 23 best countries in the world for a woman to live in. Singapore was ranked No. 22.

CONCLUSION

Women's quest for justice and equality has made tremendous progress in the past few decades.

In Singapore, women have largely achieved parity with men. The Singapore Council of Women's Organisations and the Association of Women for Action and Research should be acknowledged for their pivotal role in fighting for equal rights.

Singapore has become one of the world's most women-friendly countries. However, women in some other parts of the world are not so fortunate.

They are still treated as second-class citizens and continue to live under the oppression of men. The struggle is not over.

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