

Singapore's gender pay gap narrows to 6%

Trend tracked over 16 years – at this rate, it will be 2066 before gap is completely eliminated, says one analysis; other occupational segregation appears to have worsened

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WHILE women still earn less than men in Singapore, the pay difference between men and women with similar roles, experience and age has narrowed over the years, even if other occupational segregation appears to have worsened, a study has found.

Researchers from the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) and the National University of Singapore (NUS) found that the median pay gap between men and women was 6 per cent in 2018, after adjusting for factors such as industry, age, education and experience, down from 8.8 per cent in 2002.

The gap for both the US and Canada is about 8 per cent, MOM said.

The findings from this first study of its kind were published in an occasional paper on Thursday.

Commenting on the findings, Low Peck Kem, president of the Singapore Human Resources Institute (SHRI), said it is a good trend “even though it took 16 years”, adding that she is confident Singapore can do even better.

Sonia Akter, assistant professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, had a less rosy view, calling it “very slow progress”. She added: “If Singapore progresses at this rate, it will be 2066 before gender pay gap is completely eliminated.”

Without accounting for those factors, however, the unadjusted gender pay gap, which is computed using median incomes of men and women, stands at 16.3 per cent in 2018, marginally higher than 2002's gap of 16 per cent.

The unadjusted pay gap is commonly used in international comparisons, including those by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

One key driver of the 10.3 percentage point difference between the two values recorded for 2018 is “occupational segregation”, the paper said.

This occurs due to “inherent gender differences” that may, for example, influence women to avoid jobs in sectors that are “traditionally male-dominated”, such as IT and engineering.

Prof Akter said: “The difference says that the gender-specific barriers are still deterring women's participation in high-wage occupations. Women are still gravitating towards pink-collar professions that require low skill, low education and lower prospect of career progression.”

Factors leading to the 6 per cent gap cannot be measured using available data, the paper said. Such factors could include job scope or type of experience, but researchers believe the gap is largely due to motherhood and caregiving responsibilities.

Ms Low agreed, saying: “Men have become more progressive these days in that they take more than their fathers' share in terms of household chores and family care, but fundamentally it is more of the women, and it's very much cultural.”

To combat this, MOM said the government's support for more shared caregiving responsibilities and flexible work arrangements aims to reduce the effects of such norms.

However, MOM's data indicates

even females with no children earn less than men, suggesting that other factors could be present. Employer bias and discrimination cannot be ruled out, but researchers do not think these are “prevalent”.

Meanwhile, the uptick in the unadjusted gender pay gap over the 16-year period suggests that occupational segregation could have widened, possibly together with increased differences in pay across occupations, the paper said.

In other words, women may remain under-represented in certain high-paying male-dominated sectors, even though the pay gap between male and female employees with similar attributes in the same industry has been narrowing.

Vivien Li, human resource director at decontamination firm Quest Technology Systems, said the company struggles to find women with a strong tech background even though they want to hire more female engineers as they “bring a different perspective”.

“For the employers, one of the things we can do is to set a goal or target,” Ms Li said, adding that it is about raising awareness in hiring managers. This has helped the firm's female engineer population grow to 17 per cent, from “a single digit” per cent three years ago.

SHRI's Ms Low said it also helps to hold talks in universities and all-girls schools to help demystify engineering and tech roles and encourage them to go into such fields.