

Pay gap between Singapore women and male peers narrows

Women in Singapore are earning less even if they may be doing the same job as male colleagues of the same age and education level, even as this pay gap has narrowed.

The adjusted gender pay gap was 6 per cent in 2018, down from 8.8 per cent in 2002, according to a new study released yesterday.

The study noted that higher-paying roles – such as managing direc-

tors, chief executives and general managers, and sales, marketing and business development managers, still tend to be male-dominated.

Occupation accounted for 43 per cent of the pay gap in 2018 and played the biggest role, based on the study by the Manpower Ministry and National University of Singapore economist Jessica Pan.

Experts say hurdles remain. For instance, unpaid care work remains skewed towards women. Some ways to bridge the gap include getting companies to address possible bias in performance assessments.

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Adjusted gender pay gap narrows over more than a decade

It improves to 6% in 2018 from 8.8% in 2002 but higher-paying roles tend to be male dominated

Joanna Seow
Manpower Correspondent

The gap between the median pay of men and women here has narrowed over more than a decade, after removing the effects of factors such as age and occupation.

The adjusted gender pay gap was 6 per cent – or \$342 a month – in 2018, down from 8.8 per cent in 2002, according to a new study released yesterday.

But it means a woman may still be doing the same job as her male colleague of the same age and education level for less pay.

The study by the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) and National University of Singapore economist Jessica Pan found that the gap was wider when the effects of age, education, occupation, industry and usual hours worked were not removed.

The unadjusted median monthly salary of a woman in full-time work was 16.3 per cent less than that of her male counterpart in 2018, a slightly larger gap than 16 per cent in 2002.

The study is based on data for Singaporeans and permanent residents aged 25 to 54 taken from the Comprehensive Labour Force Survey of about 33,000 households.

It is the first local study to analyse the pay gap to this level of detail, said an MOM spokesman.

The study noted that Singapore's gap is lower than the latest available figures from countries like the United States (8 per cent), Canada (7.7 per cent to 8.3 per cent) and China (18.3 per cent).

The researchers used a statistical model to calculate the share of the pay gap that is due to various factors: age, education, occupation, industry and usual hours worked.

MOM noted that the employment rate among women rose from 62.2

per cent to 78 per cent over the period and more women are now in professional, manager, executive and technician occupations.

But higher-paying roles such as company heads, and software developers and analysts, are still male dominated. Women tend to be in lower-paying roles, such as general office clerks and human resource officers. This divergence is called occupational segregation.

Furthermore, more men have jobs with higher levels of wage increases while women tend to be over-represented in roles with lower wage increases.

The study found that the occupation factor accounted for 43 per cent of the pay gap in 2018 and played the biggest role. Its impact also increased over the years, as it accounted for only 16 per cent of the gap in 2002.

"Despite women upgrading their occupations and improving their labour market attachment, gender differences in occupational wages had become larger due to occupational income growth favouring men," the researchers said.

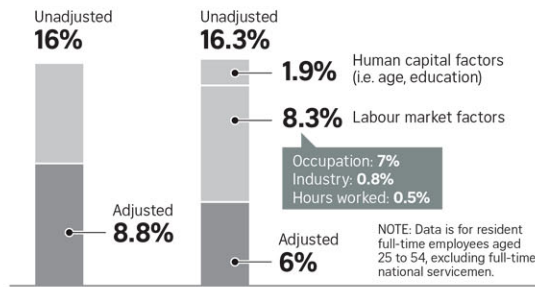
As for the remainder of the pay gap that is unexplained – after the effects of age, education, occupation, industry and usual hours worked are removed in the adjustment – the report said it could be due to factors such as firm type, job scope, parenthood and work experience. An MOM spokesman said other studies show the cost of parenthood is a big factor in the gender pay gap, though MOM is not ruling out inherent biases by employers having an effect too.

Singapore Human Resources Institute president Low Peck Kem said pay should be determined by the job and its scope, and the skills and capabilities of the candidate, rather than gender. "By pricing the job fairly, the company stands to gain from attracting and retaining the right talent, regardless of gender," she said.

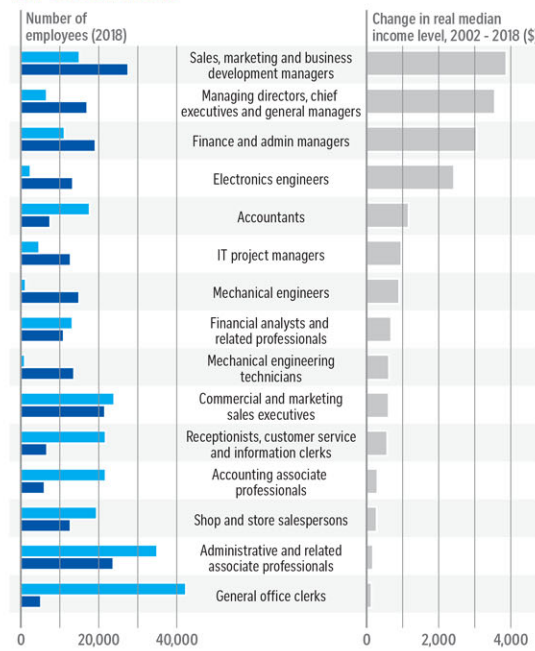
National Trades Union Congress assistant secretary-general Patrick Tay said in a Facebook post that it is important to ensure women have access to more diverse job opportuni-

Gender pay gap in Singapore

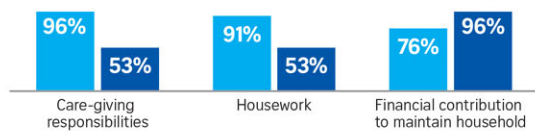
GAP IN MEDIAN PAY



TOP OCCUPATIONS



SOCIAL ROLES



NOTE: Denotes percentage of respondents who felt equally or primarily responsible for that role. Sources: MOM, MSF STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

ties and higher value-added jobs, and to improve access to training especially for workers with lower pay.

MOM noted that there are initiatives in place to attract women to traditionally male-dominated fields like technology and cyber security.

The Government also provides support for parents to share caregiving responsibilities, such as shared parental leave, and funding for flexi-

ble work arrangements.

Workers were not surprised to hear a pay gap still exists.

Marketing executive Alicia Wong, 35, said women's perceived performance may be affected by time spent on family. "I look forward to a time when things like maternity leave don't affect job prospects," she said.

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Hurdles still stand in the way of pay parity, say experts

Choo Yun Ting

The adjusted gender pay gap between men and women narrowed from 2002 to 2018, but experts say hurdles still stand in the way of parity.

The gap for 2018 came in at 6 per cent, compared with 8.8 per cent in 2002, according to a new study by the Ministry of Manpower and National University of Singapore economist Jessica Pan released yesterday.

Professor Paulin Straughan from the Singapore Management University (SMU) said that besides the narrowing of the adjusted gender pay gap, the study showed women today have similar educational levels as men.

"Education is always used as a tool for upward mobility, so this means that women in Singapore can have the means to strive towards these aspirations and similar opportunities to their male counterparts," she said.

However, Dr Noeleen Heyzer, distinguished fellow at SMU's School of Social Sciences, said the report's findings suggest there is a persistent gender discrimination which can be attributed to occupational and industry segregation.

The study noted that unpaid care work remains skewed towards women. Women spend about one to four hours more per day than men on such activities, and their caregiving duties may be one reason why women here worked fewer hours on average than men.

Dr Heyzer said the gender pay gap has significant implications for the younger generation as it will compound over an individual's career. "Women will have lower lifetime earnings and their CPF (Central Provident Fund) contributions will be lower than (that of) their male counterparts despite having a longer life expectancy on average, which means they could have a greater chance of poverty in their old age," she said.

Meanwhile, the unadjusted gender pay gap, before taking into consideration factors such as education, age, occupation and years of work experience, was 16.3 per cent in 2018 as compared with 16 per cent in 2002.

The key factor for this was occupational segregation, or the tendency of men and women to work in different occupations, the study found.

Ms Shalley Hingorani, head of research and advocacy at the Association of Women for Action and Research, said: "One reason that the unadjusted gender pay gap has not seemed to change much over the years may be a lack of societal progress in changing this work-care allocation, (such as) encouraging men to take up equal caregiving responsibilities so that their wives can continue to advance fairly in their careers."

Prof Straughan said the way society views female-dominated occupations as being of less value is a primary reason why the gap persists. "Can we do without nurses? Can we do without teachers? Can we do without home-based caregiving? If the answer is no, then it is important that we reorganise and rejig the way we attach value to these services," she added.

Women will stop going into these sectors if these important segments in society continue to be undervalued and underpaid, Prof Straughan noted.

"They will be drawn towards (sectors) where there is what is perceived to be fair remuneration. As a result, you will have fewer talent going into teaching, the service sector and nursing," she said.

Asia Polyurethane Manufacturing chief executive Erman Tan, who is the former president of the Singapore Human Resources Institute, said women and men of the same age may have different levels of work experience as women usually step away from work for a period of time due to family commitments, such as to raise their children or to take care of their aged parents.

"Women tend to play a supporting role and be less ambitious in the workplace, but of course this is changing," he said.

For many women, taking on corporate leadership roles often means compromising on their family time, and not all of them choose to make this sacrifice, he added.

Ms Wendy Foong, chief human resource officer at Sembcorp Industries, said that based on her experience in several corporations, one of the key reasons for unequal pay between men and women has to do with the perception that women are less productive than men.

One way for companies to address possible bias in performance assessments that may result in pay disparity is for companies to "consciously review the pay gaps that exist within their organisations" and evaluate if biases are the cause of the gaps, she added.

Dr Heyzer said social policies to deal with the unequal proportion of unpaid care work is important to close the gap, such as ways to create and maintain work-life balance and giving employees the option of flexible work arrangements.

"This would mean women will have a greater ability to participate in full employment" and the resulting higher income, she noted.

Ms Foong said some progress is being made, and a wider change in mindset across society will help to close the gap. She said: "Fathers today are more involved, and corporations are also looking at flexible work arrangements for both men and women."

But while work should be measured by outcome and not time spent, it is a mindset in the midst of change and a performance outcome-oriented way of assessing employees will help to alleviate the biases contributing to the gender pay gap, Ms Foong added.

Ms Hingorani said there appears to be a consensus that the gender pay gap is driven by traditional ideas that men should get more as they are breadwinners and that caregiving falls under the women's domain.

There is a "need for focused policies and efforts to change these outdated attitudes", she said.

Ms Rachel Lee, managing director of local bus manufacturer SC Auto, said: "If (domestic) expectations can be adjusted and made more equal so that men and women can have the same responsibilities for caregiving at home, I think that will help to close the gap."

Women would then be in a better position to take advantage of opportunities in the workplace, she added.

Dr Heyzer said making sure that well-educated women are better represented in higher-paying jobs is another way to bridge the gap. Companies need to recognise that women are highly skilled, she added.

"We need to better value what are often considered innate characteristics of women, such as interpersonal skills, as strengths and skills acquired through experience," Dr Heyzer said.

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The study noted that more men have jobs with higher levels of wage increases while women tend to be over-represented in roles with lower wage hikes. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG