Men have serious role to play in push for gender equality: Shanmugam

More need to take part in conversations as push for equal footing is an issue for society

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About one out of four participants in the ongoing series of conversations on women’s issues have been men, but the proportion should ideally be at least two out of four, Home Affairs and Law Minister K. Shanmugam said yesterday. This is because the push for women to be on an equal footing with men is an issue for society, so every man has a serious role to play.

“This is an important cause. It’s as much a cause for men as well as women; we all have to put our shoulders to the wheel, pushing on this,” he said, in response to a question on how to get men to jointly advocate women’s equality.

Joining the minister at the closing dialogue of the Institute of Policy Studies Women’s Conference was Workers’ Party MP He Ting Ru.

One common theme throughout the day was how men can support women and gender equality by changing attitudes and cultural norms that disadvantage women.

Mr Shanmugam said the Government has tried to get men to participate in the conversations which are part of a wider national review on women’s issues, but added that the participation rate was still not ideal even though many men have said they believe in equality for women.

“So, is it half full or half empty? I think we can do more. But the good news is that a lot of men do believe it,” he added, quipping that men cannot be forced to take part.

Mr He wondered if this was due to a lack of interest, or if men just don’t feel too awkward to participate. It is not enough for well-meaning men to speak up as champions of women, he added.

“While men should be part of the conversation for sure, we need to aim for a society that respects women for who we are and to take strides towards a society that gives us a voice to get where we want to go from here,” said the Sengkang GRC MP.

During a wide-ranging discussion, Mr Shanmugam and Ms He answered questions about what more can be done to level the playing field. Mr Shanmugam said that while some of the issues that women face — such as sexual harassment — can be addressed through legislation, laws are not a silver bullet.

When asked about anti-discrimination laws at the workplace, he said these should not be ruled out. But the experience in other countries shows it is not so straightforward because employees who complain about gender discrimination often have to prove their case in court, as employers can cite other reasons for dismissing them, he noted.

Ms He said such laws would put the onus on the employer to make sure there is no discrimination, and make it easier for victims. She said many mothers feel strongly about the issue: “When we go on maternity leave, the employers do actually say ‘you are leaving for a few months, I can’t justify a pay rise, I can’t justify a promotion.’”

Mr Shanmugam also warned of the trade-offs for suggestions like equal parental leave between fathers and mothers. For instance, while equal parental leave in some European countries has successfully nudged men to take on the child-rearing role more often, legislating such leave in Singapore — which has an economy that is very dependent on external investments — could erode competitiveness.

In response, Mr He said diversity has been shown to help the overall performance of companies, and added that comparing equality with financial costs might be a false dichotomy.

Mr Shanmugam noted women essentially want fairness, and said Singapore will have to create a legal framework and, at the same time, change the prevailing cultural mindset to ensure women get fair treatment. This will take a long time, and it is important to start with the young, he said.

For a start, employers should give women an equal stab at top jobs, and men can help out more in the household.

The minister said: “This is, in some ways, a job that is never fully done... As a society, we have to have that approach, but we have to keep pushing on this, we have to keep plugging on.”

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At the Institute of Policy Studies Women’s Conference, Home Affairs and Law Minister K. Shanmugam said legislating equal parental leave between fathers and mothers in Singapore could erode competitiveness, while Workers’ Party MP He Ting Ru said diversity has been shown to help the overall performance of companies. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG