

Gender norms that widen pay gap for mothers must change: Panel

Weakening the traditional division of labour may be key to a more optimal arrangement

Sue-Ann Tan

A man was overheard saying that if he had known a certain woman was “so prolific at having children”, he would not have hired her.

Such “locker room talk” is not unusual and there are enough of such anecdotes to show that it is a trend, said Dr Juliana Chan, chief executive of Wildtype Media Group, a media company focused on healthcare and science, technology, engineering and mathematics (Stem).

She was a panellist at a discussion on equal work and equal pay, as part of the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) Women’s Conference yesterday. One topic was the gender pay gap, which is widened when women have children.

Fellow panellist Jessica Pan, an associate professor at the National University of Singapore, said: “The figures show that for a variety of countries, men and women’s careers... progress in very similar ways. A huge change happens

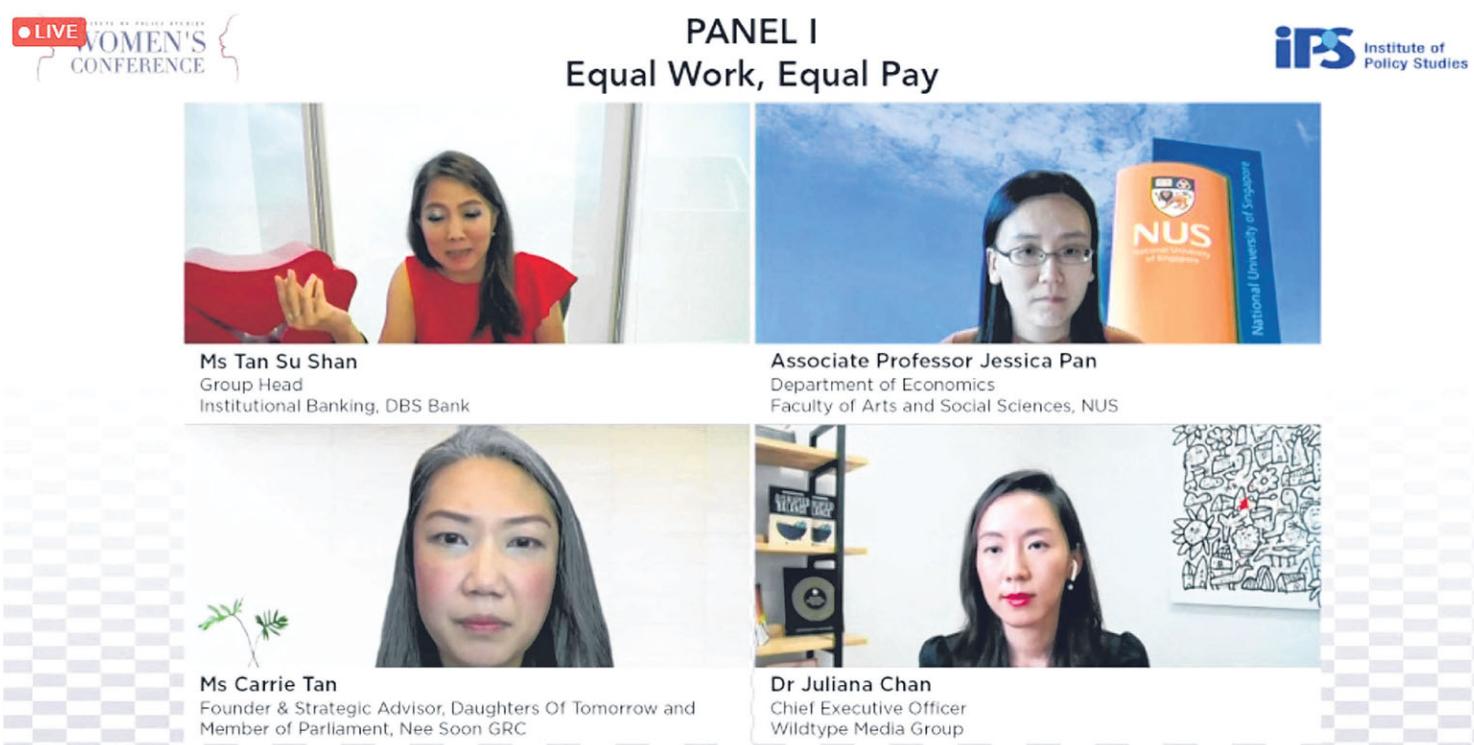
when the child is born. These gaps really don’t close even 10 years after the birth of the first child. Why is it that women are still expected to be the main providers of childcare within the household?”

She said there could be more parental leave and flexible work arrangements. But even these could backfire if they are costly from an employer’s perspective.

Paternity leave provisions that European countries have hold promise, she said. “They really potentially address the core of what is holding women back, by fundamentally addressing – hopefully weakening – the traditional division of labour and helping to speed up the shift in gender norms.”

But societal norms that pigeonhole women as homemakers and men as breadwinners are not easily changed, speakers said.

Nee Soon GRC MP Carrie Tan noted: “Entrenched notions of what the roles of mothers and wives should be are still very prevalent, cut across generations and are going to still exert an influence



Clockwise from top left: Moderator of the panel discussion on equal work, equal pay, Ms Tan Su Shan, group head of Institutional Banking at DBS Bank, and panellists Associate Professor Jessica Pan from the Department of Economics at the National University of Singapore; Dr Juliana Chan, chief executive officer of Wildtype Media Group; and Nee Soon GRC MP Carrie Tan, who is also founder and strategic adviser of Daughters Of Tomorrow. PHOTO: INSTITUTE OF POLICY STUDIES

if we don’t address that right now.”

Childcare issues are the most common barrier to employment, particularly for low-income women, said Ms Tan, who founded charity Daughters Of Tomorrow.

She noted that in some cases, a

mother with better job or wage prospects than the father still has to stay home to care for children due to gender norms. “Traditional masculinity defines men as the breadwinner, with very damaging effects on families who can benefit

from a more optimal and un-gendered division of labour.”

Discriminatory practices in hiring – such as requiring applicants to be Mandarin-speaking – pose greater barriers to women from minority races, she added.

Where caregiving duties fall solely or mainly to the woman, some turn to self-employment and casual labour like home-based businesses and beauticians, but do not earn much from these avenues.

Ms Tan cited a survey of 37 home-based business owners, which found women ringing average monthly sales of \$300 to \$600.

She proposed an initiative called Carefare, a parallel to the Welfare Income Supplement scheme for low-wage workers. This will help women who fall through the cracks because they do not have enough money to make MediSave contributions, which is part of the eligibility criteria for Welfare.

“With Carefare, low-income persons – women or men – whose circumstances force them to be full-time caregivers, would be recognised by a basic income, while the self-employment or gig work helps to supplement them to help them reach a decent quality of life.

“The fact is that the main work that these individuals do is care (for their family) while their casual work or home-based businesses really serve as a potential supplement to make ends meet.”

Dr Chan said to create a sustainable, productive future economy, women also need to play an equal role in areas related to Stem. “The stereotyping of women with the soft sciences and humanities and men with the hard sciences and technology is pervasive. And these gender-based assumptions can become magnified and transmitted as the children choose what subjects to study in college and what careers to pursue later on in life.”

suetan@sph.com.sg