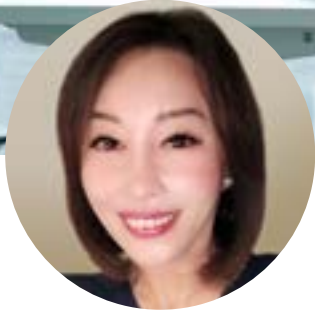


The role of government and gratitude in gender equality



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Gender equality in the Asian workforce has always fought a long, hard battle against the entrenched perception of women's role in society. With studies¹ now showing that diversity in leadership and decision-making roles are key to boosting economies, all genders must play a role in understanding and shifting the cultural dynamics, which manifest themselves in the workplace.

Part of this shift will be embracing the power of gratitude and appreciation, and developing innovative ways to overcome the barriers of a culture that has typically considered social and cultural values inappropriate and unprofessional in the workplace.

But it is commitment from governments across Asia Pacific that will truly move the needle on the issue – firstly with the ongoing review of gender parity that will provide the infrastructure to help make progress, and secondly by actively working towards diversity within their own ranks.

Women are grossly underrepresented in government across the region. Less than 30% of national parliamentarians in Singapore are women². In Japan, women in government account for less than 10% of members of parliament³, and India is not much better at less than 15%⁴.

Greater diversity is needed in the private sector too, with women holding just 15.1% of board seats in 1,573 top companies⁵ across 20 economies in Asia-Pacific.

In Singapore – a country which holds strong hierarchical views of gender⁶ – the government launched⁷ a review in September 2020 into issues affecting women to bring about cultural and mindset changes within the community.

These hierarchical views on gender culminate in the workplace. In my experience, women are typically the first to attend to administrative tasks in a meeting, such as cleaning whiteboards and distributing papers, regardless of seniority.

Office 'housekeeping duties' and 'extra' unpaid office responsibilities are not generally appreciated as business values in Asian culture. This stems, in my opinion, from parenting trends that typically focus on the "hard goals" of grades in education, rather than social and cultural approaches, respect and gratitude.

So how can Asia Pacific countries create environments for more women to succeed in the public and private sectors, in spite of these wider social and cultural norms?

The promotion of STEM education and careers among women is an important pathway to the use of technology to help bridge the gender divide. Collaboration and secure connectivity provide opportunities for women to streamline work-life balance and contribute economically towards national development.

With the younger generation already conforming less to the traditional split of domestic duties⁸, we can also fast track changes in perception by introducing diversity and gender studies at primary and secondary education levels, and by teaching children that traditional siloed roles disadvantage all genders.

Why then gratitude?

The practice of gratitude has started to infiltrate workplaces, and research proves its power in strengthening relationships and achieving higher job satisfaction⁹.

However, undervalued labour at work is an issue globally for women. Female leaders invest more in their teams, provide emotional support and take active steps to prevent employee burnout. Generally, women also spend more time than men on work that falls outside of their formal job responsibilities, such as participating in employee resource groups¹⁰.

As part of challenging traditional views and shifting the attitudes of male and female employees to tackle gender equality at work, companies that actively value and instil gratitude for proactive behaviour, culture-building efforts and contributions to employee wellbeing will experience longitudinal effects like profitability and performance, generating overall better business results.

Managers' efforts to promote wellbeing drive better outcomes for all employees and increase staff retention. Therefore, formal recognition of the importance of these 'softer skills' is important.

On a macro level, more women in the public and private sectors will lead to more ideas, insights and innovation. For example, estimates show¹¹ that with women contributing equally to men in the workplace, Singapore can add an additional US\$28 trillion of incremental global gross domestic product by 2025.

Equality in the workforce depends on not just promotion, but a cultural shift over time. Only when Asia Pacific countries address the issues underlying their lack of gender parity, will they reap the full benefits of equality on their economies and societies more broadly.

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 - 3 https://data.ipu.org/content/japan?chamber_id=13432
 - 4 https://data.ipu.org/content/india?chamber_id=13418
 - 5 <https://globewomen.org/CWDINet/index.php/2018-fortune-global-200-companies-2/>
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