

In war for talent, turning a blind eye to gender is key
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Money

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No organisation today can afford to ignore half the population, says SingTel chief executive ONE of Singapore's most powerful women, Ms Chua Sock Koong, has revealed how she once felt the sting of workplace sexism.

About two decades ago, while working at another company, Ms Chua, 50, now SingTel group chief executive, had been expected to make drinks for her male colleagues and business partners.

Due to her gender, she was mistaken as the most junior person at a business meeting. The mistake was realised quickly, and someone else prepared the drinks instead.

The usually private Ms Chua related this little-known episode at a Women Mean Business event yesterday, where she was the guest speaker.

The event was organised by the Australian High Commission and the National Committee for the United Nations Development Fund for Women (Unifem) Singapore.

The fund-raising luncheon, held to celebrate International Women's Day last Saturday, attracted 170 participants - all but a handful of whom were female.

Working women are certainly better off now, said Ms Chua.

In fact, she believes it is 'not impossible' that Singapore may see a woman prime minister 'one day' - previously almost unthinkable.

Businesses, however, need to do more to help women maximise their potential, said Ms Chua, named by CNN's Fortune Magazine as the 15th most powerful female executive in global business last year.

In the global war for talent, she warned, no organisation can afford to ignore 'half the population'. For businesses, this means a meritocratic, 'gender-blind' appraisal system.

Companies also need to recognise that women have to juggle many roles - from manager to mother to wife and daughter.

They should have flexible working conditions to allow them to fulfil all these roles as long as it does not hurt their work, she said.

SingTel has tried to do this. For instance, it allows staff to work from home and has also set up onsite childcare facilities.

It even gives mothers five days of family leave per year per child for urgent family matters.

These were all measures that Ms Chua had an instrumental role in implementing. While she did not say how successful these measures had been, she noted that 40 per cent of SingTel's senior management is female. This, for a company in the notoriously male-dominated telecoms industry, is something she is 'very proud of'.

While companies need to do their part, this does not give women a free pass to slack, she said.

The future is bright for women who work hard, she said.

Women should also recognise that they may need to prioritise what they want to do at different stages of life, she said. Ms Chua herself quit her previous job, which required frequent overseas travel, to join SingTel, then primarily focused on the Singapore market,

so that she could spend more time with her two daughters.

Finally, women should not be too proud to ask bosses, colleagues or family for help. She had benefited from such help, she said.

Unifem board member Karen Ho, who attended the event, agreed with Ms Chua's remarks. In Singapore, said Ms Ho, women enjoy a 'good baseline', thanks to equal access to education. While genuine equality is still some way off, she said, 'even men have to prioritise... Nobody can have it all'.

Ms Sarah Mavrinc, who runs a non-profit education centre for migrant women, added that women, too, were guilty of stereotyping.

'The presumption of women in subservient roles exists in both men and women's minds.'

Asked if she, like many other high-flying women, intended to go into politics, Ms Chua said no.

There are many capable female politicians now, she said, but she has no intention of joining their ranks. Politics, said Ms Chua, is 'not how I would contribute to nation-building'.

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GETTING SUPPORT

Women have to juggle many roles - from manager to mother to wife and daughter - so they require flexible working conditions, says Ms Chua.

NOT A FREE PASS

While firms need to do their part in making the workplace gender-neutral, this does not give women a free pass to slack. The future is bright for women who work hard, Ms Chua stresses.