



SG HER EMPOWERMENT

SOCIAL EXPERIMENT ON GENDER MINDSETS

November 2023

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I. INTRODUCTION

Gender stereotypes inform our mindsets, impacting our decisions and behaviour. Left unchecked, they can result in bias and affect fair and equal treatment at home and in the workplace, and even online.

Understanding the current state of gender mindsets in Singapore is thus a crucial starting point for identifying where the biggest challenges lie, so that we can drive forward the conversation on how to effect positive change.

In September 2023, SG Her Empowerment (SHE) conducted an online social experiment with 406 Singaporean residents aged 18 and above, to uncover insights into Singaporeans' current mindsets on gender norms and stereotypes.¹ We used a series of hypothetical scenarios and Implicit Association Testing (IAT), the latter being a widely used research tool to examine beliefs that people may not be conscious of or may hesitate to share publicly.

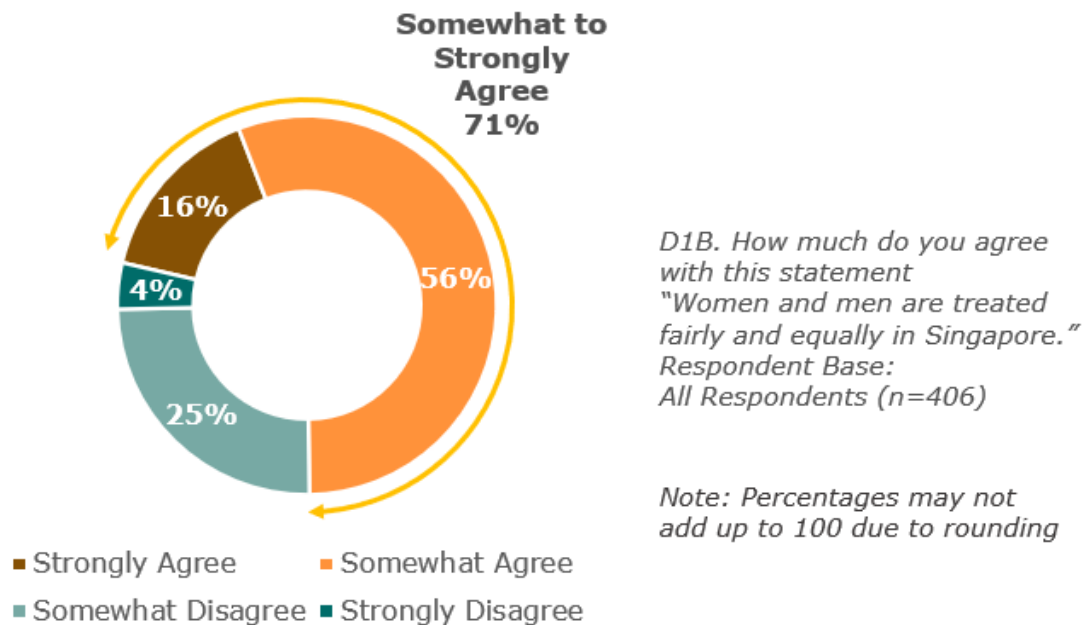
II. KEY FINDINGS

1. Critical mismatch between perception and reality

While seven in 10 study participants believed that women and men were treated fairly and equally in Singapore (see [Figure 1](#)), the study findings uncovered that traditional and potentially damaging gender stereotypes persist (see [Figure 2](#)) in our homes (see [Figure 3](#)) and workplaces (see [Figure 4](#)), and now even play out online (see [Figure 5](#)). There thus remains a real risk that this may cause unequal opportunities and unfair treatment.

¹ This research was conducted online among 406 Singaporean residents aged 18 and above, representative of the local resident population by gender, age, and ethnicity through controlled quotas. All data was collected through online self-completion in September 2023 using the Kantar Profiles Audience Network. The research instrument comprised hypothetical scenarios, an IAT and perception questions. IATs are a widely used research tool designed to examine beliefs people may not be conscious of or may hesitate to share publicly. During the IAT, participants were shown personality traits and asked to categorise them according to gender as quickly as they could.

Figure 1: Agreement that women and men were treated fairly and equally in Singapore



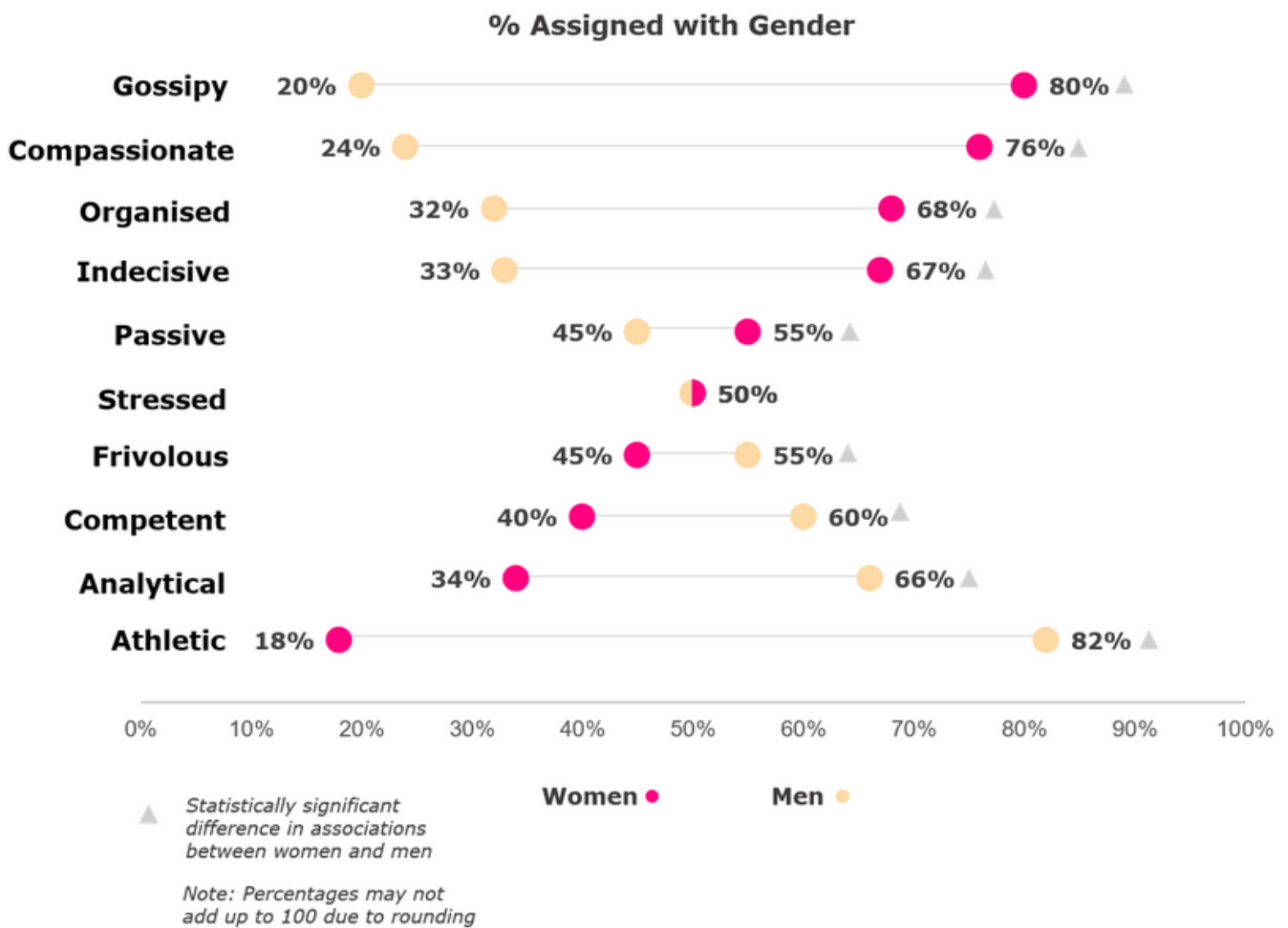
2. Gender stereotypes remain ingrained

The IAT findings revealed that Singaporeans still subscribe to traditional gender stereotypes on certain common qualities and characteristics (see [Figure 2](#)).

- Women were significantly associated with being compassionate (F: 76 percent, M: 24 percent) and organised (F: 68 percent, M: 32 percent), but were also seen as gossipy (F: 80 percent, M: 20 percent) and indecisive (F: 67 percent, M: 33 percent)
- Conversely, men were significantly associated with being athletic (F: 18 percent, M: 82 percent), analytical (F: 34 percent, M: 66 percent) and competent (F: 40 percent, M: 60 percent), but were also seen as frivolous (F: 45 percent, M: 55 percent)

The findings also show that women and men play a role in self-reinforcing such stereotypes, pointing to how deeply internalised such norms can be:

- Female participants were significantly more likely to associate women with being compassionate (F: 81 percent, M: 71 percent)
- Male participants were significantly more likely to associate men with being athletic (F: 76 percent, M: 89 percent)

Figure 2: Gender association of personality traits

Why do gender stereotypes persist?

Our beliefs about gender are informed by a complex web of factors such as one's historical or cultural context. Evolutionarily speaking, our minds are designed to rely on simple categorisations to help us navigate our surroundings quickly and keep us safe.

Therefore, our inherent beliefs can instinctively guide our decisions without us even realising it. Sometimes, we may make decisions based on generalisations which are unfounded or even irrelevant to the situation at hand.

We must actively question our assumptions about women, men, and gender, to avoid making snap judgments based on misconceptions.



Do our gender mindsets have consequences?

Holding harmful or limiting beliefs about gender can be an insidious problem, as when such beliefs are applied to our daily decisions, actions, and choices, gender-based bias or discrimination can ensue.

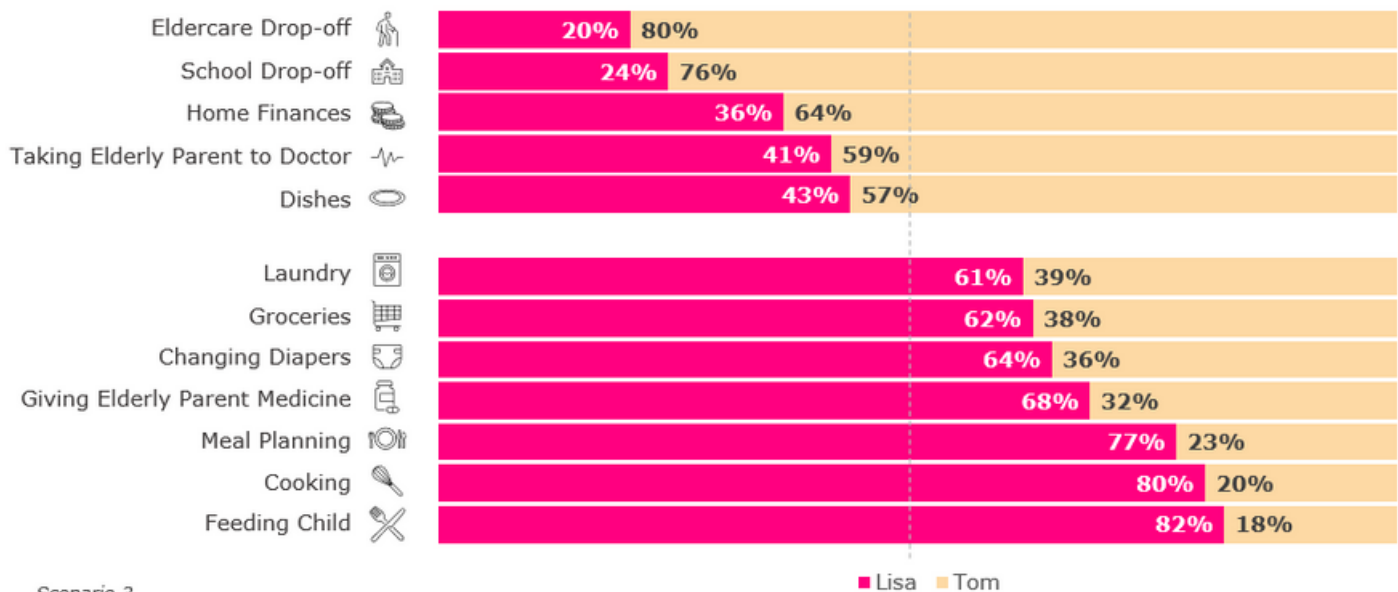
For example, our study found that close to half (45 percent) of our participants reported witnessing or experiencing bias against women in the workplace, particularly in the form of stereotyping (38 percent), double standards (36 percent), and sexual harassment (31 percent).

3. *Women remain heavily relied upon at home*

The study examined the division of household chores among Singapore's "sandwiched" families, who engage in caregiving of both the young and the elderly.

Participants were asked to divide a variety of common household tasks between a dual-income couple, Tom and Lisa, who live with their toddler and two elderly parents. The findings revealed that women were disproportionately expected to shoulder such responsibilities (see [Figure 3](#)):

- Women were assigned most household tasks identified (seven out of twelve)
- Women were overwhelmingly preferred for food-related tasks, for example, feeding children (F: 82 percent, M: 18 percent), cooking (F: 80 percent, M: 20 percent), meal planning (F: 77 percent, M: 23 percent), and grocery shopping (F: 62 percent, M: 38 percent)
- They also tend to be preferred for daily tasks within the home such as changing diapers (F: 64 percent, M: 36 percent) and laundry (F: 61 percent, M: 39 percent)
- Comparatively, men tend to be assigned tasks related to transportation, for example, ferrying children to school (F: 24 percent, M: 76 percent)

Figure 3: Assignment of household tasks to Tom/Lisa

Scenario 3

A3. Below is a list of household items, who (in your opinion) should take up each chore?
Respondent Base: All Respondents (n=406)

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding



Do existing gender norms affect how women and men balance home and work responsibilities?

Our study found that female participants were **almost twice as likely** as males to say they had *often* considered giving up their careers for their family (F: 15 percent, M: 8 percent), suggesting they feel the pressure of balancing work and home duties more acutely.

Responsibilities at home pull Singaporean women away from the workforce more frequently than men for a range of reasons, one of which is that higher demands on them at home can reduce their time available or capacity for income-producing work.

In addition, traditional gender expectations placed on men to be the primary breadwinners could hold them back from contributing more at home, even if they would like to. Whilst our study found that 50 percent of male participants had *at least sometimes* considered giving up their careers for their family, it appears very few actually act on this. Data from the Ministry of Manpower also showed that there were only about 1,500 stay-home dads in 2017. This is certainly an area for improvement.



Why should we change our attitudes on the division of labour at home?

We may not realise how starkly household tasks are assigned along gender lines. The less attention we pay to such choices in our homes, the more we normalise and entrench the status quo.

As domestic caregiving responsibilities may increase with our ageing population, a more equitable division of labour is necessary to ensure women do not face greater challenges with participating in the workforce.

Whilst every family is different, we should start paying closer attention to how we divide up the household work between women and men, and ask ourselves if the distribution is fair and equal.

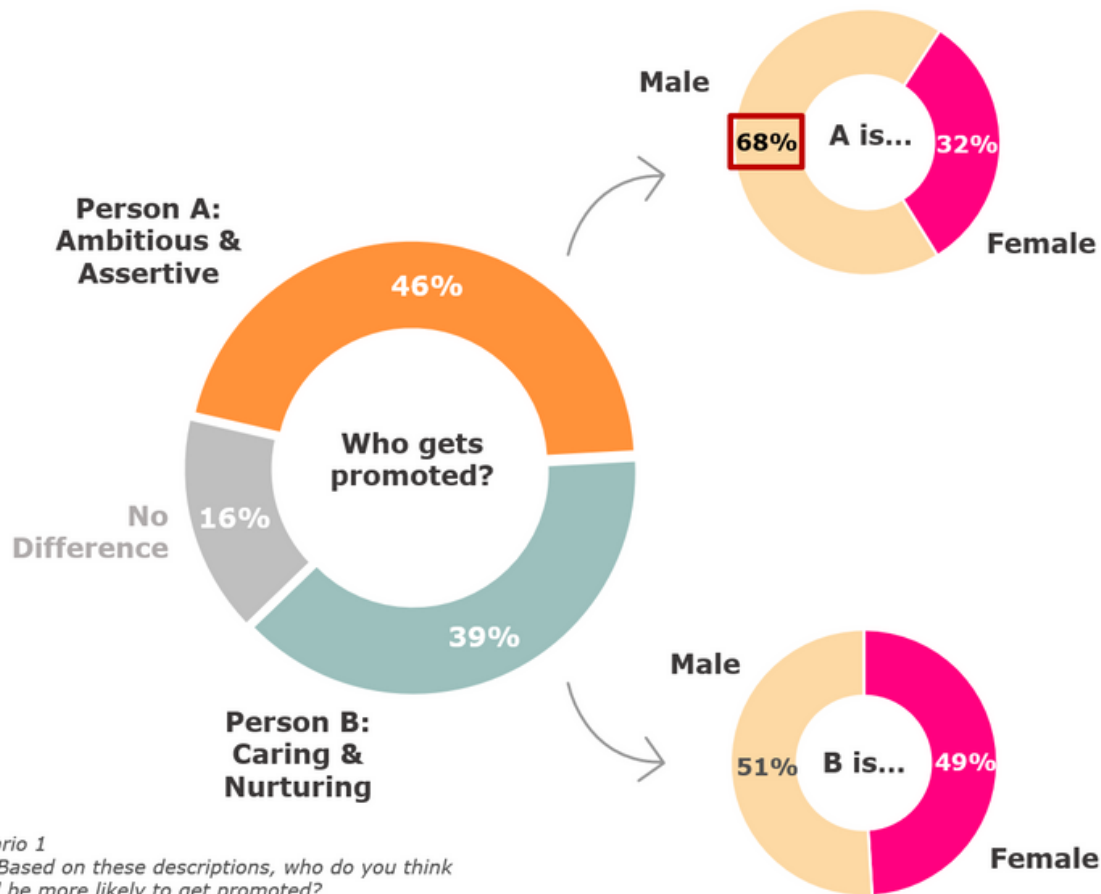
4. Career success remains tied to “male” traits

Study participants were asked to choose between two employees of the same age, similar qualifications, and experience, for a promotion. One employee was described as “*ambitious and assertive*” while the other was described as “*caring and nurturing*.” Participants were later asked to indicate whether they believed each of these two employees was a woman or a man.

The findings showed that being “*ambitious and assertive*” puts workers at an advantage for promotion, and that men were far more likely to be associated with these traits (see [Figure 4](#)):

- 46 percent believed the “*ambitious and assertive*” employee would get promoted while 39 percent opted for the “*caring and nurturing*” employee. Only 16 percent indicated there would be “*no difference*”
- 68 percent identified the “*ambitious and assertive*” individual as male

Figure 4: Participants' preferred traits for promotion at work and their associated gender



Scenario 1

A1A. Based on these descriptions, who do you think would be more likely to get promoted?

A1B. Do you think <personA> is a male or female?

A1C. Do you think <personB> is a male or female?

Respondent Base: All Respondents (n=406)

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding



How do these stereotypes affect women who want to progress at work?

When definitions of career success are tied to male-associated traits, men are rewarded when they display stereotypically male behaviours, creating a self-perpetuating cycle. As it is much easier for men to display typically male traits, women can lose out on opportunities.

To meet the expectations for a suitable promotion candidate, women may find themselves caught in a “double bind” where they must display masculine traits to be promoted, yet risk being deemed inauthentic for flouting societal expectations of feminine behaviour.



Should we rethink our definitions of competence and leadership?

There is growing discourse to support the fact that women are competent and successful leaders, that leadership qualities need not be confined to typically male traits, and that gender diverse leadership can greatly benefit an organisation.

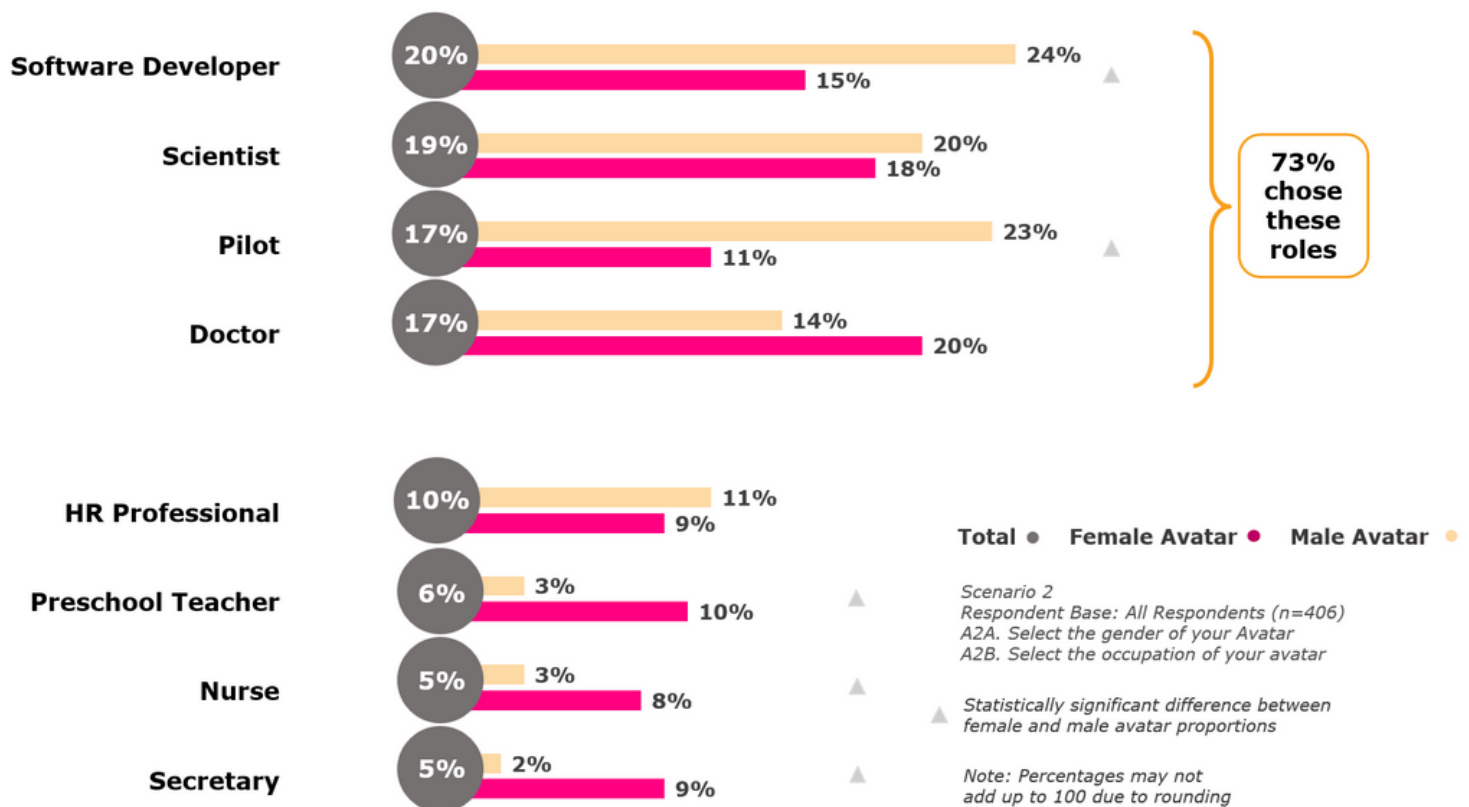
As a society, we should broaden the skills and competencies we value in top performers and leaders at work, and ensure these do not unfairly cause divides along gender lines.

5. Our gender bias is mirrored in our online behaviour

Study participants were presented with an online gaming scenario where they were first asked to pick a male or female avatar. Thereafter, they were asked to select a “*smart and strong*” occupation for their chosen avatar (see [Figure 5](#)). Overall, the findings suggest that our real-life gender associations and stereotypes are also reflected in our online actions and choices, with males being more associated with “*smart and strong*” jobs.

- Most study participants selected an avatar that correlated to their own gender (*i.e.*, females tended to pick female avatars, and males tended to pick male avatars)
- Seven in 10 participants selected historically male-dominated occupations, such as software developer, scientist, pilot, and doctor² as the “*smart and strong*” occupation for their avatar
- The least popular “*smart and strong*” roles were historically female-dominated occupations, such as human resource professional, preschool teacher, nurse, and secretary

² Interestingly, more female than male avatars chose the occupation doctor, suggesting that traditional gender norms can change over time.

Figure 5: Top occupations selected by female and male avatars

What does online gender bias look like?

When gender bias and stereotypes play out online, this can affect girls and women in very real ways.

For example, online job application processes increasingly incorporate Artificial Intelligence to select applicants. Girls and women may be disadvantaged if the sorting algorithm flags candidates that display typically male leadership qualities.

Gender bias may also rear its head in the form of gender-based online harms. Harms known to affect girls and women include sexual harassment, image-based sexual abuse, and cyberstalking. Concerningly, according to SHE's 2023 Study on Online Harms in Singapore, female youths were almost twice as likely as male youths to experience sexual harassment online.

Visit <https://tinyurl.com/SHEOHS23> for more insights.

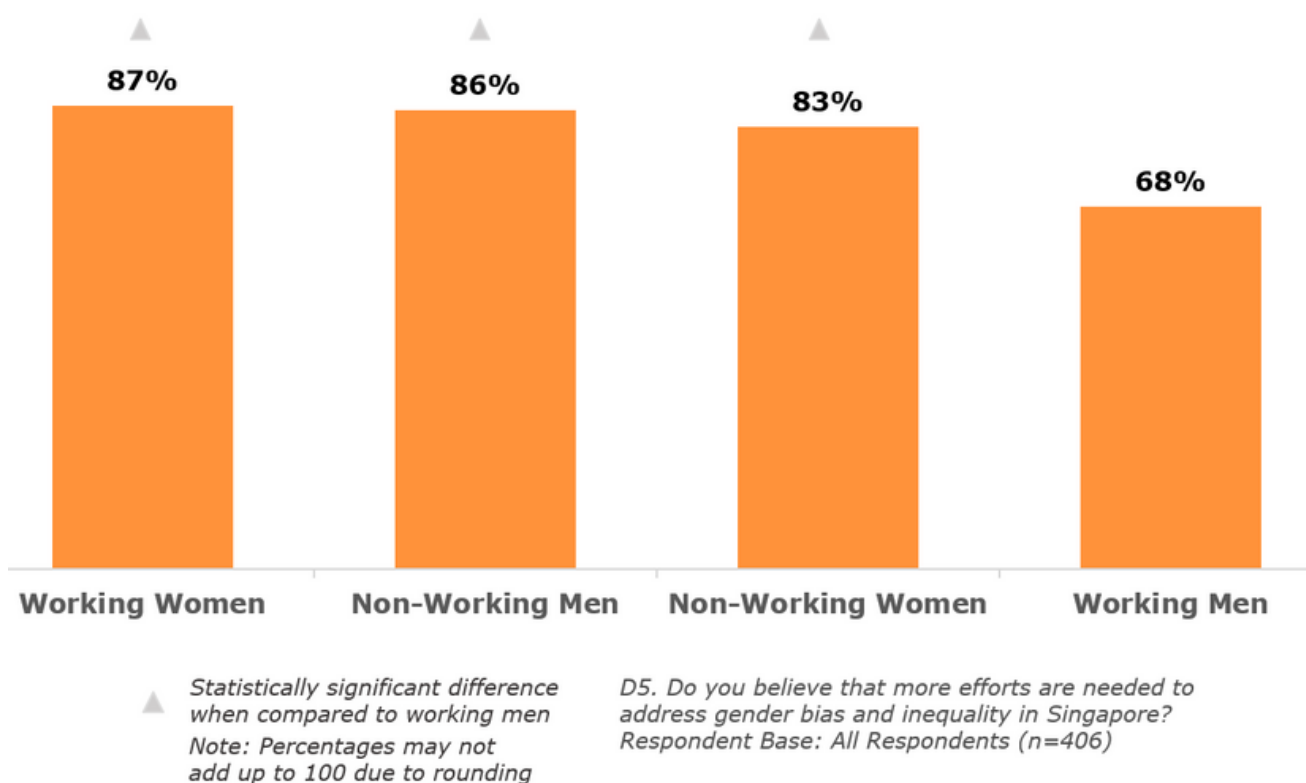
6. Majority want more efforts to address gender bias and inequality, with the workplace a key battle ground

Eight in 10 study participants indicated that more efforts were needed to address gender bias and inequality in Singapore, perhaps as a recognition that there remains much to be done to achieve a truly fair and equal nation.

Working women were the most likely to adopt this view, while working men were the least likely to do the same (see [Figure 6](#)), suggesting that the workplace is an area where dissonance on this issue exists between women and men:

- Working women (87 percent) were most likely to say added efforts were needed, whilst working men (68 percent) were least likely to say such efforts were needed

Figure 6: Proportion who said more efforts were needed to address gender bias and inequality, by employment status and gender





Why might this dissonance exist?

84 percent of female participants in our study felt that women were *occasionally/frequently* overlooked for promotions due to gender, as compared to only 68 percent of male participants. This suggests that men may not be fully aware of the extent to which women experience gender bias.

This is understandable, as women and men have different lived experiences, and one group cannot be expected to know and understand everything about the other. Efforts to close this information gap will be an important step in levelling the playing field. This can be done through further research and encouraging conversations on the issue.

7. Awareness of gender equality initiatives can be improved, particularly among women

One in three participants said they were not familiar at all with Government initiatives related to gender equality.

- Women were significantly more likely to say they were not familiar at all, as compared to men (F: 39 percent, M: 27 percent)



What can we do about this?

Public education to effect gender mindset shifts must include women and men, so that we can all progress together as a society. However, the data suggests that we must, at least at the outset, target greater efforts at women themselves. Providing women with information on the relevant issues means each will become empowered to advocate for meaningful, positive change in their own lives.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

Gender stereotypes are deeply ingrained in Singapore – perhaps more than we may want to admit. These findings give us a snapshot of some areas in which stereotypes and bias continue to shape Singaporeans’ mindsets and behaviour.

The 2022 White Paper on Singapore Women’s Development identified mindset shifts as one of five key areas in which collective action was required to achieve a fairer and more inclusive society for women and men alike.

SHE is committed to driving positive mindset shifts on gender norms, across society. We will continue to drive the conversation forward through:

Research

- In order to achieve change, we must first identify and understand the issues. SHE will continue to track the sentiments of Singaporeans from all walks of life, on the issue of gender norms and mindsets.
- Our research will deep dive into topical issues such as the role that gender bias may play in Singapore workplaces, particularly during hiring, performance appraisals and promotions, and in implementing family-friendly policies such as flexible work arrangements and women-specific facilities such as mothers’ rooms.
- We will also continue to study gender equality and bias online, to understand the impact this has on girls and women, and society at large.

Public Engagement

- Changing mindsets across society requires everyone involved to know about the issues and understand how these affect the fair and equal treatment of women and men in Singapore. This will also help close the information gap between women and men on how gender bias is experienced by Singaporeans even today.
- SHE will provide platforms for such discussions and conversations, as we hope to encourage informed and meaningful discussions, particularly among the youth, on the best ways that we can progress.

Raising Awareness

- Conversations are one way of driving change, but nothing beats a public campaign to raise awareness on the issues. Using Singapore-specific data, SHE hopes to shine the light on important topics such as unconscious bias, and how gender bias and discrimination can be perpetuated through new digital technologies such as Artificial Intelligence.

The logo consists of the word "SHE" in a bold, red, sans-serif font, centered within a white square. The background of the entire image is a gradient of orange and red.

SHE

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