

Gender Inequality in Singapore: Deep-Rooted Asian Values or Ails of Social Media

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In this paper, I argue that the lack of gender equality in Singapore is not just deep rooted in our Confusian values, but also recent depiction on social media platforms.

My topic will be centred around the plateau in gender equality and why women still hold less value than men in Singapore. My argument against this is that the issue is more than the Asian values instilled within our culture, but also social media is the mastermind behind portraying what each gender is capable of. Around last year, there was the rise of Andrew Tate who went viral for being a self-proclaimed misogynist. Firstly, using the sociological imagination, I will break down the personal problem and social issues behind gender equality. Then, I plan to approach this argument using sociological approaches like functionalism, social conflict theory, symbolic interactionism, feminist social thought and postmodern theories. This topic matters from a sociological point of view as it allows us to understand why some sustainable development goals (SGDs) may be hindered due to the way the media portrays the topic in spreading false information.

Growing up in an Asian household, while I was lucky enough to be brought up without overt gender biases or what my elders would call 重男輕女 zhòng nán qīng nǚ – which prioritises sons over daughters. Nevertheless, I was still exposed to this extremely flawed concept at a young age, especially in Singapore, where such attitudes persist in many families. Much of the discourse surrounding this topic points to cultural traditions, specifically Confucianism. Family values, while influential, are not easily quantifiable. Through this piece, I hope to break down the differing factors that impairs the global shift towards total gender equality. Gender inequality happens when a particular gender has advantages over the other gender over allotment of some valued good (Dorius, & Firebaugh, 2010). In this modern day and age, while family values are still valued and influence one's personal principles, other external factors brought about by globalisation such as social media also hold the same power. In this generation where everyone has a smartphone in their back pockets, it is unsurprising that the first point of contact for many youths with the latest news, trends, etc. is through social media. This includes the reemergence of discriminatory conservative views, such as misogyny. In this paper, I argue that the lack of gender equality in Singapore is not just deep rooted in our Asian values, most notably Confucianism, but also recent depiction on social media platforms.

Singapore's identity stems from traditional 'Asian Values', which promote family, community and nation above self (Davidson, 1998). As a multicultural harmonious society, equality between races have always been prioritised above gender equality (Hettne, 1996). Women in Singapore live under redefined gender roles fitted to the country's specific economic, political, and cultural needs (Doran, 1996). As such,

compared to the other East Asian countries, Singapore is considered to be progressive and modern. However, even with such empowering roles that women take on, they still are not viewed as equal to their male counterparts. Is there social conflict between the differing expectations of men and women in our society? Are more expected of women, beyond what they can offer?

With Singapore's heavy emphasis on one's contributions to the family, it is no surprise that the Confucian virtue most widely observed in Singapore is filial piety. Women still have a large role to play in their household, as the general consensus remains that women are naturally primary caregivers and men play supporting roles in the family (Teo, 2009), typically financially. These cultural definitions are the main violators of human rights for women, as they justify and defend acts of inequality, discrimination, and exclusion against women (Rao, 1995) regardless of ethnicity, race or culture (Davidson, 1998). While in this day and age, it is acceptable for one to be coined a "working mother", the struggle of maintaining work-life balance remains (Shah, Lim, 2024). Although, on paper, mothers in Singapore who work receive many formal incentives, such as the Working Mother's Child Relief (WMCR) (IRAS, 2024), the stigma they face if they fail to meet societal standards is still overwhelming. Extensive research shows how mothers bear the brunt of unpaid care work, encompassing domestic labour, childcare, and various household responsibilities (Bianchi et al., 2006, 2012; Gerson, 2011; Sharma et al., 2016). This unequal division of domestic and caregiving labour is due to gender norms and socially entrenched gender roles that prescribe women as primary caregivers, consequently restricting their time, choices, and employment

opportunities (Addati et al., 2018). This means that even if a woman wants to establish herself in her field, she first needs to ensure that everything at home is running smoothly, otherwise society will not value or care to look at her other accomplishments. In short, a woman's pride starts from her accomplishments within the household, a parallel to the Confucian beliefs that women only had power inside the home (Batista, 2017).

Drawing back to the writings of Confucius in the Analects, one reference referred to women is "Women and servants are hard to deal with" (Analects 17.25) (Batista, 2017). This shows how deep-rooted the prejudice against women in Confucius teachings stem from, making one wonder, why does Singapore embrace such flawed and discriminatory beliefs? This philosophy could enable sexist behaviour, in the name of preserving culture.

Evidently, present-day Singapore has developed significantly since its independence in terms of gender inequality in formal settings. Most notably its first female president in 2017, Halimah Yacob was elected unopposed under the first reserved presidential election, which was reserved for the Malay community (Sim, 2024). However, since Halimah did not earn the seats through an election, controversy sparked over her appointment (Rodan, 2018). The questioning over her political legitimacy however, sparked due to her party connections rather than her gender, on the surface. However, this still makes one wonder, is the discontent solely due to her political alignments, or is it just a cover for the fact that Singaporeans believe the nation is not ready for a female

president? Would the same level of discontent be shown if her male counterparts who had the same level of qualifications as her received the appointment? Statistically, despite the growth in mindsets, women are still underrepresented in managerial positions worldwide (Catalyst, 2012). In Singapore, only 7% of corporate board seats are held by women, and 15% are members of executive communities (McKinsey & Company, 2012). The stressful work culture in Singapore, coupled with familial expectations and duties, poses unique challenges for women leaders in Singapore as the ability to combine work and family duties has been reported as particularly burdensome for women (Linehan & Walsh, 2000).

However, it makes one wonder, is Confucianism really the only thing standing in the way? With Singaporeans and Singapore, in general, becoming more progressive, individuals are more bold in defying old fashioned societal norms. Additionally, the grounds of Confucianism do stem from meritocracy (Batista, 2017). Even then, gender inequality has stagnated or some might even say, worsened. Why is that so? I argue that in this digital age, social media plays a significant role in shaping one's perspective on global issues such as gender equality. This highlights one of the most overlooked ailments of social media and the dangers it poses to the modernisation of our society. Social media is an unforgiving field, where arguments are formed by collective opinion rather than facts, more often than not. This is not just pointing fingers at the misogynists that openly share their views on gender, but also how social media has become an echo chamber where traditional gender stereotypes are amplified.

Since the creation of modern day social media, due to the nature of freedom of speech on such platforms, individual creators are able to openly share their views on essentially any topic that interests them or they have an opinion on. While such platforms have triggered empowering movements such as the 4B Movement or the #metoo Movement, it has also spurred opinions from the other side of the fence, the sexists. While the Internet has triggered the 4B or #metoo Movement, which was created by women, for women, advocating for women's rights, straight men see it as a platform they can use to make amendments and look for loopholes to use the Internet the way they intend (Poland, 2016). This ability to twist the narrative, constitutes as one of the ailments of modern day social media, as this could undo years of social development for gender equality.

The lack of censorship on content also means that one can spread ideology that could potentially harm society's progress, sexist ideology being among them. When a user has interacted with a post promoting misogynistic ideology, their activity may feed algorithms, leading them to receive similar content, due to their preferences and attitudes (Cinelli, Morales, Galeazzi, Quattrociocchi, & Starnini, 2021). As a result, this echo chamber effect festers among individuals, and eventually spreads to the community. Eventually, these ideologies creep into the societal norms and stereotypes we live in. One prime example comes from a self-proclaimed misogynist known as Andrew Tate, who advocates male supremacy and celebrates violence against women (Artsy, 2023). While what he advocates for blatantly disrespects women, yet he still has garnered a sizable following, predominantly from men who believe he exerts a positive

influence on them (Artsy, 2023). As unbelievable as it seems, Tate is just one of many figures who make up the “manosphere,” an internet ecosystem that combines self-improvement advice with casual and sometimes violent misogyny (Artsy, 2023). In Singapore itself, there is the prime example of Brad Goh, a tiktoker who focuses on trading but went viral over misogynistic remarks he made over YouTube Shorts. The presence of such content on social media forms polarised groups around shared narratives, which quickly proliferates misinformation (Cinelli, Morales, Galeazzi, Quattrociocchi, & Starnini, 2021). It makes one wonder if decades of feminist movements could be overturned by the “manosphere”? What will happen to women and their position in society when it does?

Going back to the idea of a woman’s role in their household, it is also common for mothers to feel the need to live up to being a “perfect” mother and face guilt for perceived failure to do so (Borelli et al., 2017; Guendouzi, 2006; Redrick, 2011), an idea that has been coined on social media as “mom guilt” (Shah, Lim, 2024). Through the use of social media platforms, such as TikTok or Reddit for instance, many working mothers are able to share their plights. Many have shared concern over the mental stress of having to manage household matters (Shah, Lim, 2024) on top of their jobs. This stemmed from many worrying about the lack of emotional connection and communication during childhood that may have long-lasting implications (Shah, Lim, 2024). Additionally, in Singapore, with literacy rates being high between both genders, it is not impossible for women to have better career prospects than their partners. However, “mom guilt” still stops them from progressing further and putting their career

first. Many mothers faced judgement when navigating the complexities of working motherhood (Shah, Lim, 2024). Several scholars have also highlighted that the expectations of a “good mother” often conflict with those synonymous to being a “good worker”, where the pressures, frustration, and guilt may intensify further from not being able to fulfil either roles or duties well (Aarntzen et al., 2019; Whiley et al., 2021; Cejka & Eagly, 1999; Schein, 1973). Is it fair for mothers to have to juggle between having a career and coping with “mom guilt”?

In conclusion, gender equality is what we all strive for globally, as seen as Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by the United Nations in 2015 as a universal call to action to ensure that by 2030 all people enjoy peace and prosperity (*Sustainable Development Goals*, n.d.). However, the issue of why Singapore is unable to achieve it is a multifaceted problem. More than just the intersections between how Confucianism and social media exacerbate this issue, we should ask ourselves whether or not there are any other motives that hinder such growth and development. Statistically, populations are growing faster in countries where there is the greatest gender inequality (Dorius, & Firebaugh, 2010). However, there is more to inequality than policy-making, as seen in the deeply entrenched gender norms in Singapore, and the reemergence of misogyny on major social media platforms that perpetuates gender inequality. As a whole, in order for Singapore to solidify its status as a first world country, it has to reevaluate the way society prioritises its people, by making it an equal playing field for all regardless of gender. Only then, will the nation continue to prosper and

achieve the SDGs in time for review in 2030. Do you think this is attainable for Singapore?

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