

There is no legal bar to the participation of women in political life; however, women are underrepresented in government and politics. Women hold only 4 of the 83 elected parliamentary seats and 2 of the 9 Nominated Member of Parliament seats. There are no female ministers.

This low representation of women in Singaporean politics reflects the highly Confucian nature of the Singaporean society, which is very paternalistic. According to Association of Women for Action and Research:

“Singapore is possibly the only country in the world where the male dominated ruling party is also an avowed patriarchy. The policies of our country are made with the patriarchal view in mind.

A patriarchal system obliges women to be at the receiving end of privileges that may be handed out, or withdrawn, at the will of men who are the designated leaders. In this system, women are granted privileges not rights. A right is something that is inalienable.

In addition, the patriarchal system puts pressure on men to perform regardless of their ability and circumstance, and limits the potential of women regardless of our ability and circumstance.”

Women constitute 42 percent of the labor force and are well represented in many professions but hold few leadership positions in the private sector. They still hold the preponderance of low-wage jobs such as clerks and secretaries. The average salary of women is only 75 percent of that of men (compared with 68 percent 10 years ago). Observers note that the wage differential is smaller in professional jobs, and attribute much of the overall wage disparity to average lower educational qualifications by women, and to fewer years of job experience by women due to family commitments, rather than discrimination.

Women enjoy the same legal rights as men in most areas, including civil liberties, employment, commercial activity, and education. The Women's Charter, enacted in 1961, gives women, among other rights, the right to own property, conduct trade, and receive divorce settlements. Muslim women enjoy most of the rights and protections of the Women's Charter. For the most part, Muslim marriage law falls under the administration of the Muslim Law Act, which empowers the Shari'a court to oversee such matters. Those laws allow Muslim men to practice polygyny. Both men and women have the right to unilateral divorce; however, women face significant difficulties in initiating unilateral divorce proceedings, which often prevents them from pursuing proceedings.

There is no evidence of any widespread practice of violence or abuse against women. The Penal Code and the Women's Charter protect women against domestic violence and sexual or physical harassment. A battered wife can obtain court orders barring the spouse from the home until the court is satisfied that he has ceased his aggressive behavior. Court orders for protection against violent family members have increased in recent years, partially because of a 1997 amendment to the Women's Charter Act that broadened the definition of violence to include intimidation, continual harassment, or restraint against one's will. The Penal Code prescribes mandatory caning and a minimum imprisonment of 2 years for conviction on a charge of “outraging modesty” that causes the victim fear of death or injury. The press gives fairly prominent coverage to instances of abuse or violence against women. There are several organizations that provide assistance to abused women. The Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) has a hotline that offers counseling and legal advice. The Family Protection Unit documents physical and psychological abuse, and provides counseling and legal services to abused women. In July 1999, the Council of Women's Organizations established a crisis center for abused persons. The Star shelter accepts children, women, and men, and can accommodate up to 30 persons.

Trafficking in women for the purpose of prostitution is a limited problem.

Some areas of discrimination remain. Children born overseas to female citizens are not granted citizenship automatically, while those of male citizens are. Female civil service employees who are married do not receive health benefits for their spouses and dependents as do male government employees. However, for the first time, beginning on January 2, female citizens were able to sponsor their noncitizen husbands for citizenship. 🇸🇬