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The Straits Times says

Enabling women's careers in critical fields

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Efforts to get more women into the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (Stem) received encouraging support from Manpower Minister Tan See Leng's personal contribution of \$1 million this week. He made the announcement at a forum commemorating the first anniversary of Nanyang Technological University's (NTU) Promotion of Women in Engineering, Research and Science (Powers) programme, which aims to close the gender gap in such career fields. The programme facilitates creating a supportive ecosystem, conducts research to address diversity barriers, and provides education and skills training for career advancement in Stem fields.

It is an excellent example of the role a university can and should play to reduce gender differences in such fields, which are crucial for Singapore's development. Unfortunately, according to a Powers programme survey, only 58 per cent of women who graduate with Stem diplomas or degrees went on to work in a related field, compared with 70 per cent of men with the same qualifications. This is in spite of women and men expressing equal interest in Stem-related careers.

Much of the blame must be laid at the door of gender stereotypes that create different self-expectations in women and men. Another Powers programme survey notes that the intention by women to pursue careers in Stem is influenced by the prevailing cultural stereotype that men are naturally better in such fields. The more that women are aware of this stereotype, the more they feel they do not belong in such careers, and the less confident they are about their abilities. Also, half the women in the Stem industry believe it is harder to get a job and progress because of their gender. Thus they are significantly less likely to work there in spite of a sizeable proportion of them being keen on such jobs. Although girls here have generally performed as well as boys in mathematics and science in the Programme for International Student Assessment, the persistence of gender-differentiated self-expectations is cause for concern because such attitudes handicap the national pursuit of global excellence in cutting-edge Stem fields.

That gender equality in the workforce enhances economic growth has become self-evident, particularly since the publication of an iconic 2015 McKinsey report on diversity in the workplace. Employers and society too must recognise that increasing women's participation in the Stem workforce, a vanguard industry, will advance Singapore's economic interests as a whole. The gender gap in Stem deserves continuing scrutiny. NTU's initiatives and support from benefactors like Dr Tan in this regard should be welcomed by all who believe that gender equality is a good in itself and is an opportunity to expand Singapore's economic horizons.

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