S'pore lags behind in female representation in boardrooms

By Melissa Kwek | Posted: 12 October 2012 20:47 hrs

SINGAPORE: Singapore companies should aim to have at least 15 per cent of women on their boards within the next five years, with statutory boards leading the way, at 25 per cent.

Minister of State for Community Development, Youth and Sports Halimah Yacob said this at the launch of the Singapore Board Gender Diversity Report.

The report is a joint initiative of the National University of Singapore Business School's Centre for Governance, Institutions and Organisations (CGIO) and BoardAgender. BoardAgender is an initiative by the Singapore Council of Women's Organisation.

The report, now into its second year, highlights gender diversity in the boardrooms of listed companies in Singapore.

This year, it showed the percentage of women in boardrooms increased from about 6.9 per cent in 2010 to 7.3 per cent in 2011.

Singapore still lags behind other Asian economies like Hong Kong and China, where the percentages stand at nine per cent and 8.5 per cent respectively.

The rate of increase for Singapore is also modest, compared to countries like Australia, which saw the proportion of its female board directors increase from 10.3 per cent in 2010, to 13.8 per cent last year.

Madam Halimah said Singapore is showing positive signs, with the public sector leading the way.

She said the percentage of all-male boards has decreased from 61.7 per cent in 2010, to 60 per cent in 2011.

"Women are much better represented in the boardrooms of statutory boards, at 19.8 per cent," said Madam Halimah.

"Women also hold 16.9 per cent of chair positions in statutory boards, and only 16.9 per cent of statutory boards have all-male boards."

"Some countries have taken to legislative quotas to boost the numbers," she added. "However, the legislative route may not necessarily be the best option for everyone. I also believe Singaporean women want to know that they were appointed on their individual merits, and not on account of a quota."

"Having said that, I think setting targets may be a good thing," she continued. "With our large pool of talented women, I believe this is one area in which we can do much better."

She added companies could do more to encourage mindset change.

"What is of critical importance is also the fact that your customers are now increasingly also women. As more and more women go out to work, as more and more women hold economic power as well, purchasing power, more of your customers are going to be women," she said.

"Over time, that may also translate into them wanting to know, how diverse this company is, how supportive this company is of being gender balanced."

-CNA/xq