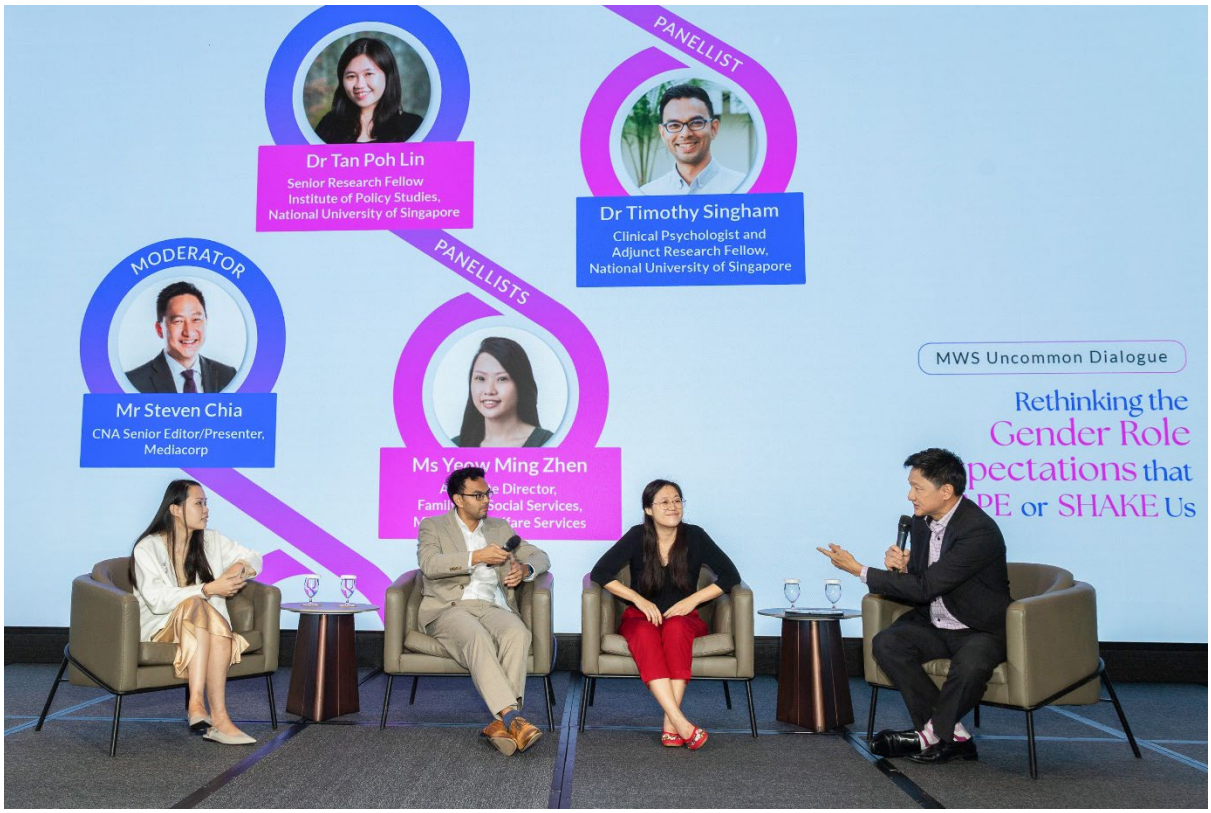
Press Release

Are Gender Role Expectations Keeping Pace with Changing Family Realities?

MWS Uncommon Dialogue 2026 examines how gender role expectations affect families and if policies, practices and support may need to change



(From left) Panellists Yeow Ming Zhen (Associate Director, Family & Social Services, MWS), Dr Timothy Singham (Adjunct Research Fellow, NUS, and Clinical Psychologist), Dr Tan Poh Lin (Senior Research Fellow, NUS Institute of Policy Studies) and moderator Steven Chia (CNA Senior Editor and Presenter, Mediacorp) at the MWS Uncommon Dialogue 2026: Rethinking the Gender Role Expectations that Shape or Shake Us, held on 30 October 2026 at the PARKROYAL COLLECTION Pickering

Singapore, 2 November 2026 – As family life evolves in Singapore, traditional expectations of men's and women's roles may not always keep pace. Who should provide for the family? Who takes on caregiving and household responsibilities? And what happens when individuals struggle to meet these expectations? Such pressures can affect relationships, mental well-being and willingness to seek help.

These were among the issues explored at Methodist Welfare Services' (MWS) Uncommon Dialogue 2026, which brought together research, psychological, and social

service perspectives to examine how gender role expectations affect individuals and families in their work, caregiving, relationships and mental health.

Presenting her research at the dialogue, Dr Tan Poh Lin, Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, highlighted that men in Singapore spend more time in paid employment, while women shoulder more unpaid work. This gap widens from around age 25 and persists into retirement, raising questions about how families share household and caregiving responsibilities, and whether these arrangements reflect their evolving needs.

The panel featured Dr Tan; Ms Yeow Ming Zhen, Associate Director for Strategic Development at MWS' Family & Social Services Group; and Dr Timothy Singham, Adjunct Research Fellow at the National University of Singapore, and Clinical Psychologist.

Challenging expectations within families

With demanding work schedules leaving less time for caregiving, traditional expectations can lead family members to assume or assign certain responsibilities without discussing them. Ms Yeow highlighted that families face different pressures and circumstances, making it important for couples to negotiate responsibilities rather than assume that one arrangement works for everyone.

In her work with individuals and families seeking counselling and social services, she observed that gender-related pressures can often go unspoken. Couples may hold different expectations of what constitutes a "normal" or "natural" division of responsibilities, with one partner expecting the other to be more present or contribute differently. Left unaddressed, these mismatched expectations can breed unhappiness and resentment.

"Being open to discussion … to understand where our fixed expectation of how lives should be could possibly be a healthier way of thinking about the situation … rather than allowing things to lead to resentment because they are not talked about," she said.

Navigating changing roles and economic uncertainty

Dr Singham highlighted how artificial intelligence (AI) and technological disruption could reshape employment prospects and traditional expectations of men as breadwinners. He expressed concern about unemployment among young men, including those working in fields such as coding, and suggested that men could be disproportionately affected by workplace disruptions in the short term.

"We will somehow be forced to re-evaluate how we think about life because life is not going to be a straight line," he said. "I think communication is still key. I know of male peers who are already preparing their wives and families for a period of unemployment because they know retrenchments are coming. This whole idea of an iron rice bowl is no longer a reality."

While acknowledging the privileges men continue to hold in many systems, he noted that technological disruption could shift existing dynamics, at least in the short term.



From left: Albert Ching (MWS CEO), Yeow Ming Zhen, Dr Timothy Singham, Dr Tan Poh Lin, Eugene Toh (Chairperson, MWS Board of Governance), and Steven Chia at the MWS Uncommon Dialogue 2026

Ms Yeow also highlighted how social judgement can affect men who take on traditionally female-associated roles. A stay-at-home father, for instance, may find fulfilment in caring for his children but still feel the effects of judgement from his peers. Such experiences could lead him to withdraw from social activities, weakening his support network.

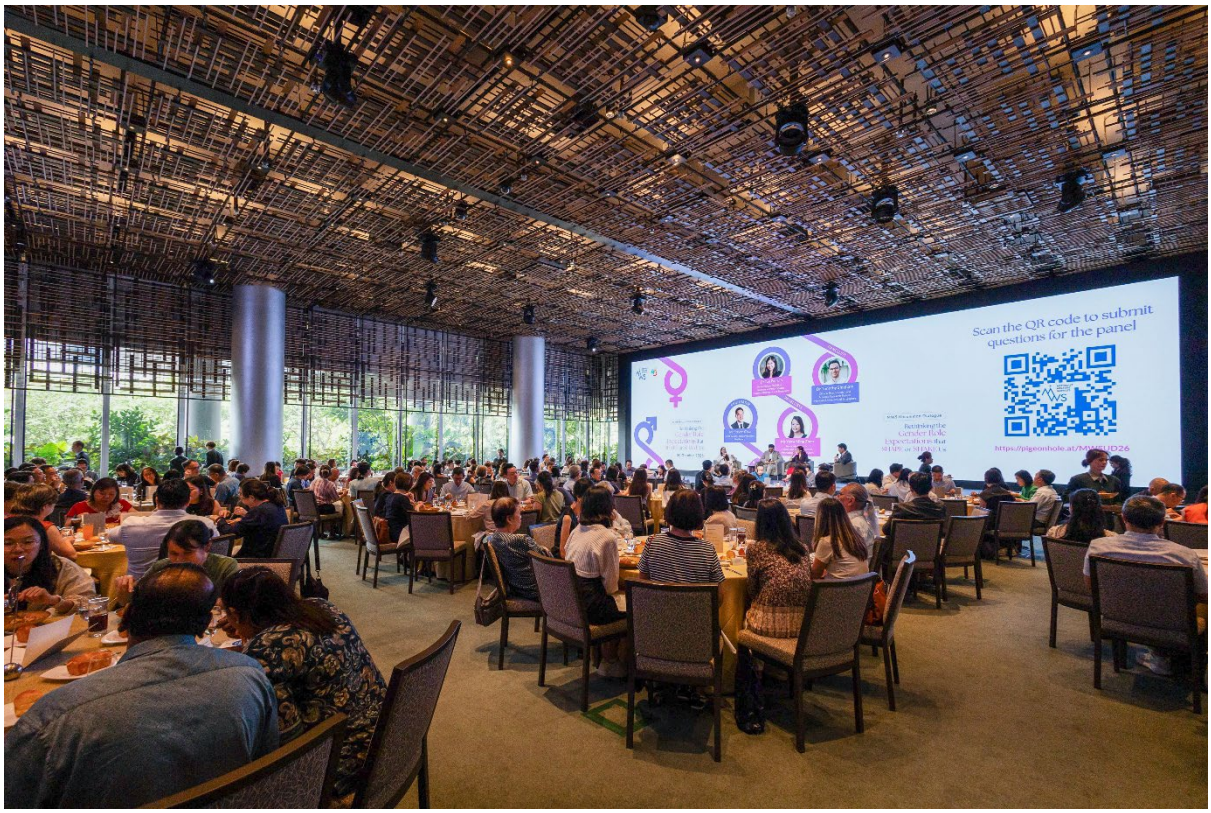
“Dialogue and communication are important. Stereotypes need to be challenged, not just at work, but also in social activities and gatherings,” she said.

Supporting individuals and families through changing needs
The implications of shifting gender expectations extend beyond individual families to the wider community and social service sector.

For MWS, recognising these underlying pressures is important in understanding the challenges individuals and families face and providing support that responds to their needs.

"Many of the struggles that individuals and families bring to us are shaped by pressures that aren't immediately visible, including changing expectations of what men and women should be and do at home, at work and in the community. Conversations like

the Uncommon Dialogue help bring these pressures into the open, so that we can rethink stereotypes and support families in ways that truly meet their needs," said Eugene Toh, Chairperson of the MWS Board of Governance.



Over 150 guests including donors, corporate leaders and representatives from Methodist churches attended the event

As MWS marks 45 years of service in 2026, its programmes have evolved to address the changing needs and circumstances of those it serves. Its Men-Only Happy Hour programme, run at MWS Active Ageing Centres, gives men aged 60 and above a space to socialise through games and shared activities. MWS introduced the programme to engage older men who may be less inclined to participate in activities at Active Ageing Centres, where women tend to make up a larger share of participants.

MWS also runs a Divorce Support Group for men who are going through or have experienced divorce. The group provides a safe space for participants to share experiences, navigate emotional changes, build resilience, and work through challenges such as co-parenting and supporting their children through divorce. It was introduced after MWS observed that few men came forward for counselling or support.

Recognising the challenges of parenthood and family relationships, MWS has also intentionally co-located a range of its family and social services – from early prevention to marriage and parenting support to intensive intervention – in one connected ecosystem in Hougang. The ‘no wrong door’ approach enables families and couples to access critical support much more readily.

Rethinking roles and expectations
As family circumstances continue to change, the panellists underscored the need for individuals, families, organisations, and policymakers to re-examine longstanding assumptions about gender roles and consider whether existing practices, policies, and support systems remain relevant.

Dr Tan noted that some family tensions stem from social hierarchies that shape how individuals perceive their status and identity. For men, losing a job and taking on household responsibilities can feel like a double loss of status.

She encouraged individuals to approach family responsibilities with a spirit of mutual support, rather than viewing them as a loss of standing.

“Rather than feeling upset about being lower in the hierarchy or trying to rise as high as possible, we should be willing to serve others in the family,” she said. “That is key to resolving a lot of tension (in family life).”

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About MWS Uncommon Dialogue

Methodist Welfare Services’ (MWS) Uncommon Dialogue is a thought-leadership forum that brings together experts, social service and community care practitioners, community leaders, corporate partners, faith leaders, and MWS supporters including donors, to explore complex, often under-discussed social issues affecting Singapore. Each edition focuses on a specific theme, such as intergenerational poverty or mental health, through panel discussions and insights from research and on-the-ground experience. The intimate format encourages open and constructive dialogue and provides participants with deeper understanding of MWS’ social impact.

The event also serves as a platform for guests to invite their networks to learn more about MWS and the communities it serves. By fostering greater awareness of social challenges and the realities faced by vulnerable groups, Uncommon Dialogue seeks to encourage broader community engagement and support. It also brings together different perspectives to surface ideas for stronger collaboration and collective action.

About Methodist Welfare Services

Methodist Welfare Services (MWS) is committed to empowering people to have life to the full. Our story began out of Christian love in 1981 with a simple desire to help those in need. From a humble starter project of a small nursing home for 24 sick elderly, we have grown to 25 service points island-wide, serving over 25,000 families and individuals who may experience different struggles in life, such as poor health, strained relationships, financial distress, or simply feeling alone. The MWS network of services enables cross-referrals and multi-disciplinary interventions from a range of social and healthcare services. These include casework, counselling and therapy; parenting

support; medical and rehabilitative care; pastoral care; home-based, community-based and residential care; a debt clearance and asset building scheme; and others.

We are an Institution of a Public Character and a member of the National Council of Social Service, and serve across all age groups, ethnicities and religions.

Please visit www.mws.sg for more information.

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