

# Denied Work

An audit of employment discrimination on  
the basis of gender identity in **SINGAPORE**



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*Dr Catriona Davis-McCabe, Curtin University, Western Australia*

*Dr Sam Winter, Curtin University, Western Australia*

*Dr Cianán B. Russell, Asia Pacific Transgender Network, Thailand*

*Dorian Wilde, Asia Pacific Transgender Network, Malaysia*

*Joe Wong, Asia Pacific Transgender Network, Singapore*

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# Authors' Note

**It is an example of how trans community and researchers can work together, collaborating as equal partners in work that can inform advocacy, and potentially impact on public policy and enhance the lives of trans people.**

This report adds significantly to our understanding of discrimination against trans people in Singapore. Our field experiment methodology provides confirmation for what trans people have told us for years - that they are often shut out of the job market. But this study represents much more than its findings.

The Curtin and the Asia Pacific Transgender Network team worked together to develop the research proposal and secure funding for this project. While the funds are primarily managed by APTN, both teams worked together to select research assistants, to train them, and to manage the project. We collaborated to write the report. We were partners throughout.

In a world in which trans community members often feel ill-served, even exploited, by those who research their lives, this Job Audit represents a shining example of how things can be.

## **Catriona Davis-McCabe**

*Senior Lecturer, School of Psychology*  
Curtin University

## **Sam Winter**

*Associate Professor, School of Public Health*  
Curtin University

## **Joe Wong**

*Executive Director*  
Asia Pacific Transgender Network







## Acknowledgements

**The four individual country reports from Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore on job employment discrimination provide groundbreaking data for trans rights and advocacy in the region. This study is part of a multi-country project implemented in partnership with UNDP and Curtin University conducted to identify the barriers that trans people experience while seeking employment.**

Each country report is different in terms of its culture, community, and findings. However, overall the data shows that trans people in Asia and the Pacific often experience heightened levels of discrimination in the early stages of employment compared to similarly qualified cis people. The country reports provide a detailed and distinct data overview of the country considering the unique identities, cultures, and challenges trans people experience in each country. The country reports should be read in conjunction with the regional report to best understand the nuance of challenges that trans people experience in employment in different countries throughout Asia.

The reports make recommendations for employers in the position of hiring to accept and we urge that the recommendations are accepted and implemented by employers. We also hope that these country reports will be utilised by individuals and organisations in-country to advocate for greater protections of trans people. We hope that the research and information presented in these reports can inform legal, policy, and social reform that promotes equality in hiring and employment.

The data was gathered with trans people leading the process at every step and empowered trans individuals by training them as country leads in the project. APTN would like to thank all of the trans community participants and organisations who contributed to the development of this important publication. A heartfelt thanks to our country research assistants, Peeranee Suparak (Ami), Thailand, Chu Thanh Ha, Vietnam, Dorian Wilde, Malaysia and Singapore who have been pivotal in gathering the data for each of the countries. We also extend our gratitude to Edmund Settle, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and Sam Winter and Catriona Davis, Curtin University for their financial and technical support in this project and to the community members and organisations that have provided insights and guidance in the development of the study.

We look forward to this report being utilised to break barriers, foster collaborations and spark greater dialogue surrounding workplace discrimination and policy changes to advance social protections and the livelihood of trans people.

**Joe Wong**

*Executive Director*

Asia Pacific Transgender Network



# Denied Work: An Audit of Employment Discrimination on the Basis of Gender Identity in Singapore<sup>1</sup>

We conducted a correspondence audit study<sup>2</sup> in the Singaporean job market of 2017. The study was approved by Curtin University's Human Research Ethics Committee.

*Note: We use the term transgender (or simply trans) as an adjective describing persons who identify in a gender other than the one that matches the sex they have been assigned (usually at birth). We use the English term "trans women" to describe transfeminine people, "trans men" to describe transmasculine people, and the broader English phrasing "trans people" to describe these groups collectively. We use the term cisgender (or simply cis) to describe individuals who identify in the gender that matches the sex they were originally assigned (again usually at or shortly after birth). We use the term "use name" to refer to the name used by a trans person to be consistent with their gender identity, which is different from their legal name.*

Pairs of resumes were sent to entry level job postings to examine how signals of gender identity affect the likelihood of receiving a positive response to a job application. The correspondence audit allows for a randomised experimental design, which provides direct evidence of discrimination or equality. Resumes were piloted, matched for equivalence. Each resume was then assigned a gender identity marker, either trans or cis, at random.

Applicants were marked as trans in two ways. First by way of an explicit gender identification as "transgender woman" or "transgender man". Second by way of a gender specific legal name matching assigned sex, printed alongside a use name matching the individual's gender identity. Consistent with common

practice in applying for jobs in Singapore, our resumes also carried a photo, with the photo chosen to match gender identity. Applicants were marked as cisgender by way of a simple designation as "female" or "male", with a name and photo.

Three job sectors were targeted. Two were for university graduates in business administration and information technology. One was for school leavers. We found discrimination based on gender identity, with trans people significantly less likely to receive a positive response (including being invited to interview than their cisgender counterparts).

# Key Findings

I.

Trans people are discriminated against when seeking employment in Singapore. Alarming, this occurs even before the interview stage. Trans people are significantly less likely than cisgender people to receive a positive response to a job application.

II.

Even with equal experience and qualifications, the cis applicants in our study received 81.5% more positive responses to job applications than trans applicants (216 versus 127). A cis woman was 76.5% more likely to receive a positive response to a job application than a trans woman. A cis man was 90% more likely to receive a positive response to a job application than a trans man.

III.

Raw data underlined the scale of missed opportunities. The job market was challenging for all applicants. The 600 job applications resulted in only 87 invitations to interview for cis applicants. Yet it was even more challenging for trans applicants. With only 42 trans applicants called to interview, in our study it appears that being trans resulted in 45 lost interview opportunities; despite both applicants being equally qualified and experienced.

IV.

Our data does not go beyond the initial application stage. It is expected that further discrimination against trans people occurs where they are fortunate enough to get an interview.

# Employment of Trans People in Singapore

Equal access to employment is not a reality for trans people across the world.<sup>3</sup>



Trans people suffer from limited access to education;<sup>4</sup> inaccurate, limited, or stigmatising legal identity documents;<sup>5</sup> limited access to healthcare, adequately trained healthcare professionals, and to insurance coverage and time off for medical needs, which can lead to work-related issues such as underperformance and increased need for time off or flexibility;<sup>6</sup> unstable home life;<sup>7</sup> inconsistent access to housing;<sup>8</sup> and trans-antagonistic violence, stigma and discrimination with limited avenues for redress.<sup>9</sup>

Collectively, these issues create a situation in which trans people struggle to find and keep gainful employment, and ultimately entering a cycle of oppression and disenfranchisement.

Singapore has one of the more progressive legal landscapes for trans people in Southeast Asia, allowing legal gender recognition – the ability to change one’s name and gender marker on one’s legal documents.<sup>10</sup> However, transphobic stigma and discrimination in society are rampant.<sup>11,12</sup> Furthermore, sexual orientation and gender identity are not clearly understood by the general public, with widespread discriminatory attitudes as the norm.<sup>13</sup> Transmasculine people (assigned female at birth who transition to live as men) are largely invisible in modern discussions

of sexual orientation and gender identity.

In Singapore, at the time of this writing, there was no research on employment for trans people specifically. One study of LGBT people broadly reports that 15% of LGBT employees report experiencing some sort of discrimination in employment.<sup>14</sup>

As mentioned earlier, transgender people in Singapore are legally able to change their identity documents to reflect their self-defined gender. However, applicants for this change must provide evidence of gender affirming surgery. The Singaporean National Health system does not cover the costs of these procedures – in fact, the required surgeries have not been offered at Singaporean hospitals since 2003<sup>15</sup> – meaning that trans people who are unable to afford surgery or choose not to have surgery for a variety of reasons are not able to change their documents. This leads to a sticking point: a trans person who cannot afford chooses not to have surgery thus cannot change their documents and is unable to access employment in their self-defined gender and must “out” themselves to employers at the very beginning of the application process when providing their name and identity information. Anti-transgender bias and discrimination are not against the law.





“As mentioned earlier, transgender people in **Singapore** are legally able to change their identity documents to reflect their self-defined gender. However, applicants for this change must provide evidence of gender affirming surgery.”

## Previous Audit Research

Some of the most convincing field evidence for discrimination against minority groups has come from audit methodology, in which the experiences of members of a minority community are examined in a specific social situation, and are then compared with the experiences of persons in the general population when in that same situation.

There appear to have been only three audit studies examining discrimination against trans people seeking employment. One employed an in-person audit. The other two were correspondence tests. All were small-scale US studies.

The first was a small in-person employment audit conducted in 2008 by an organization called Make the Road NY.<sup>16</sup> Twenty-four various retail stores in Manhattan were tested. Cisgender testers received 11 offers of employment, whilst transgender testers received only two, suggesting a massive level of discrimination against trans applicants. While the size and generalizability of this study is limited, results clearly indicate significant discrimination against trans people at the hiring level of employment.

Bardales<sup>17</sup> conducted a correspondence test to assess discrimination against trans women. Bardales sent matching resumes - one with a trans marker, and one without - in response to 109 online job adverts within the customer service and food management job sectors in two cities in Texas. All applications were from women (trans or cis). Extrapolating from the figures provided by Bardales, it is apparent that cis applicants received responses 54.1% more often than trans applicants. As in the case of the Make the Road research in New York, this Texas study was of limited scope. It examined discrimination against women only, was confined to two job sectors, and in any case involved a relatively small number of applications. Questions therefore remain about its generalizability. The

researchers made equivalent resumes based on their own ideas, with no validation process.

Most recently, in a report entitled *Qualified and Transgender*, the District of Columbia (DC) Office of Human Rights (OHR) conducted a correspondence test examining trans hiring discrimination across a range of job sectors.<sup>18</sup> It is important to note that DC has anti discrimination policies in place to protect against such discrimination. The applications targeted 50 jobs. There were a total of 200 applications; four for each job, from cis and trans men and women, and other gender non-conforming persons. The authors reported that employers made responses in regard to 21 jobs, and that in ten of these there was clear evidence of discrimination against

trans and gender non-conforming applicants. The worst discrimination appeared to be against trans male applicants reporting previous work-experience at a transgender advocacy organization. In terms of job sector, the restaurant industry appeared the most discriminatory among the job sectors examined. Once again, this study was small; limiting its generalizability. Moreover, the study explicitly ensured that each trans and gender nonconforming applicants were more highly qualified than the corresponding cis applicants. It is impossible to know what the impact of this aspect of the methodology may have been. However it is likely that it may have enhanced the apparent employability of the trans applicants, thereby masking any discrimination on the basis of their gender identity status.

**“The worst **discrimination** appeared to be against trans male applicants reporting previous work-experience at a transgender advocacy organization.”**

# Current Audit Research

A research assistant worked on the project over a period of six months. The researcher had experience working on a previous job audit project and was familiar with the Singaporean job market.

## INITIAL DEVELOPMENT OF PAIRS OF EQUIVALENT RESUMES (PILOT STAGE)

As a first step we held an advisory group meeting with members of the trans community in Singapore, during which we discussed the job market, job applications and ideas for possible gender markers. We then developed resumes based on the feedback from the advisory group.

We developed pairs of resumes for each of the three job sectors (for diploma graduates in business administration (job sector 1) and information technology (sector 2), as well as for a school leaver (sector 3)). We tested whether the resumes in each pair were similarly attractive in their intended job market. We did so by sending them out in response to job advertisements and counting employer responses. We coded responses in terms of three positive categories ('call us', 'provide more information', and 'come to an interview'), and two types of negative response ('not interested', and no response at all).

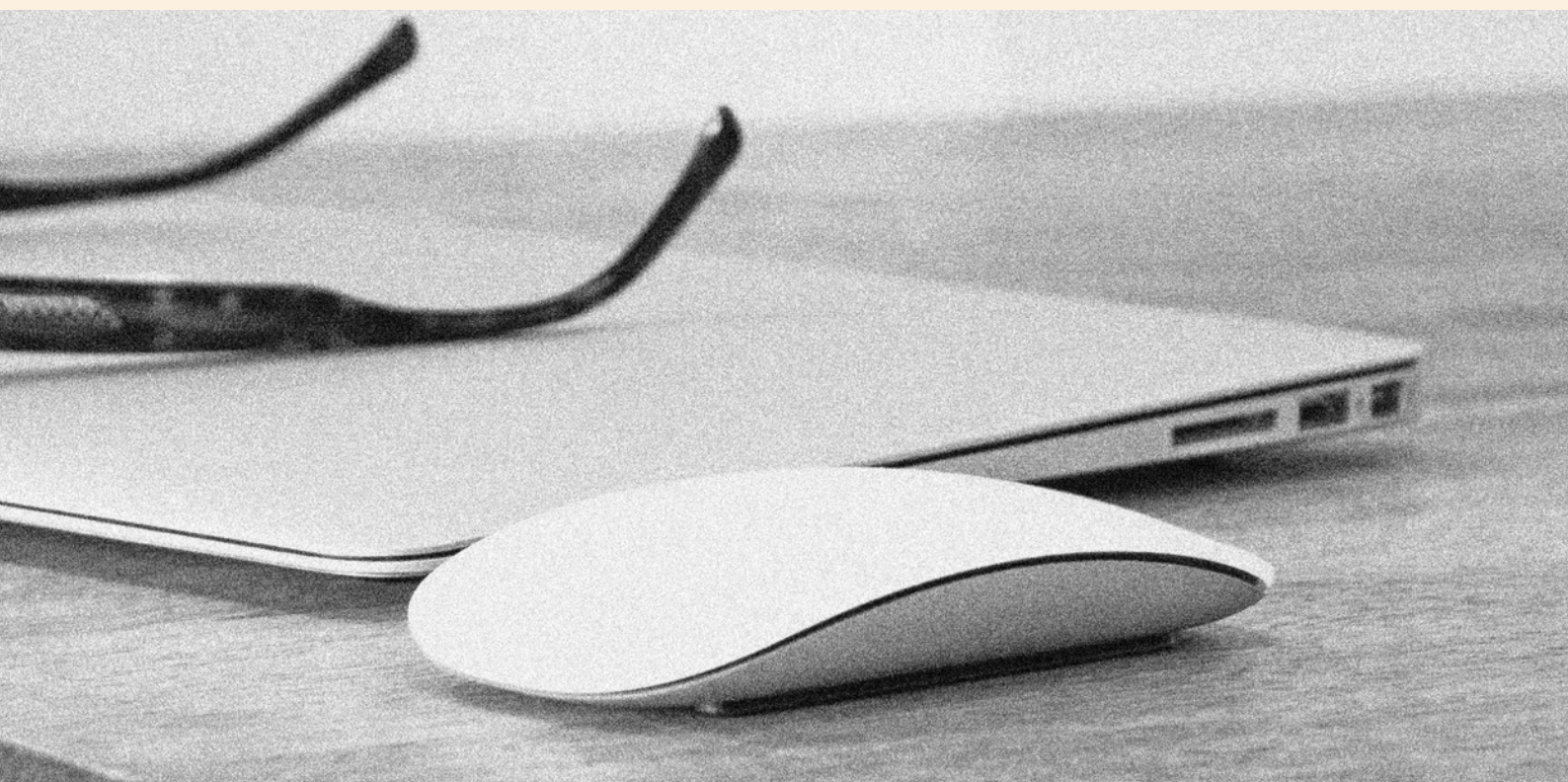
We used McNemar's test<sup>19</sup> for detecting a discrepancy in positive responses for the two resumes. This enabled us to assess whether any apparent difference in attractiveness was real or due to chance. Where one resume appeared more attractive than another we discussed possible reasons, made suitable changes, and then restarted the testing process, continuing in this way until we reached statistical equivalence.



**TESTING FOR  
DISCRIMINATION  
(MAIN STUDY STAGE)**

Once the resumes in each pair were deemed statistically equivalent, we assigned to each resume a gender identity marker (either trans or cis) at random. Applicants were marked as either cis or trans in two ways. First by way of an explicit gender identification as “transgender woman” or “transgender man”. Second by way of a gender specific legal name matching assigned sex, printed alongside a use name matching the individual’s gender identity. Consistent with common practice in applying for jobs in Singapore, our resumes also carried a photo, with the photo chosen to match gender identity. Applicants were marked as cisgender by way of a simple designation as “female” or “male”, with a name and photo.

Over several months we sent out 1200 applications, two for each of 600 jobs, with 200 jobs in each of the three job sectors in two phases: one phase comparing a cis man and trans man applicant on a set of 100 jobs, and one phase comparing a cis woman and a trans woman on a second set of 100 jobs. The gender identity markers were rotated to mitigate impacts of differences between the two resumes in each set: one resume in the pair was allocated the trans marker or the cis marker for 25 applications, then the markers were switched for 25 applications, and so on. In this way we ensured balance in the number of times a resume was used by a cis man, cis woman, trans man and trans woman.



# Results & Discussion

Table 1 summarises the raw data collected. It displays response data for cis and trans applications (male and female) in terms of three positive response categories ('call us', 'provide more information', 'come to an interview'). The table also provides pooled data, for the three positive response types combined, the two negative responses combined ('not interested' and no response at all), and the four job sectors combined (see final rows).

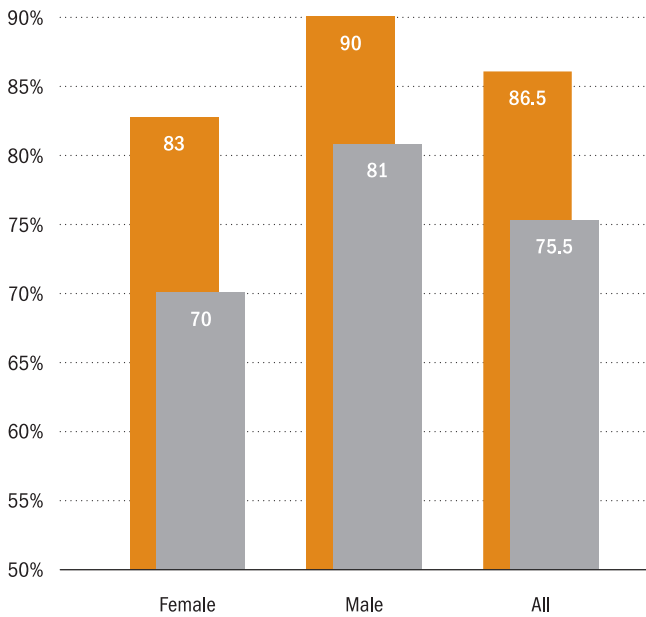
TABLE 1: SUMMARY RESPONSE DATA FOR SINGAPORE

SINGAPORE		NATURE OF RESPONSE									
Job Sector	Gender	Negative Responses		Call Us (1)		Tell Us More (2)		Come For Interview (3)		All Positive Responses (1-3)	
		Cis	Trans	Cis	Trans	Cis	Trans	Cis	Trans	Cis	Trans
1.Diploma Business Administration	Female	66	81	8	6	5	2	21	11	34	19
	Male	86	92	3	5	1	0	10	3	14	8
	All	152	173	11	11	6	2	31	14	48	27
2.Diploma Information Technology	Female	69	78	10	5	8	10	13	7	31	22
	Male	70	87	5	2	4	2	21	9	30	13
	All	139	165	15	7	12	12	34	16	61	35
3.High School	Female	75	90	5	2	3	2	17	6	25	10
	Male	87	91	5	3	3	0	5	6	13	9
	All	162	181	10	5	6	2	22	12	38	19
All	Female	210	249	23	13	16	14	51	24	90	51
	Male	243	270	13	10	8	2	36	18	57	30
	All	453	519	36	23	24	16	87	42	147	81

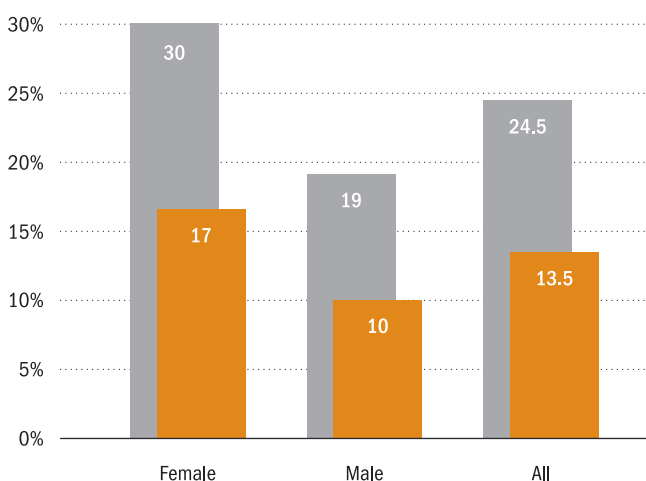
It is clear from our data that trans people in our study were discriminated against when seeking employment. Despite equivalent qualifications and experience, trans applicants were across the three job sectors less likely than cis applicants to receive a positive response (either being invited to contact the employer, being asked for more information, or being called to interview) with trans applicants receiving 81 positive responses compared to

147 for cis applicants to the same jobs.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, trans applicants were more likely to get a negative response (that the employer was not interested, or receive no response at all), with trans applicants receiving 519 negative responses compared to 453 negative responses for cis applicants. See Figures 1 and 2.

**Figure 1.** | Cis Trans  
Singapore – Percentage of applications receiving a negative response (employer not interested) or no response at all. All job sectors.



**Figure 2.** | Cis Trans  
Singapore – Percentage of applications receiving a positive response (request to call, or for more information, or to attend an interview). All job sectors.

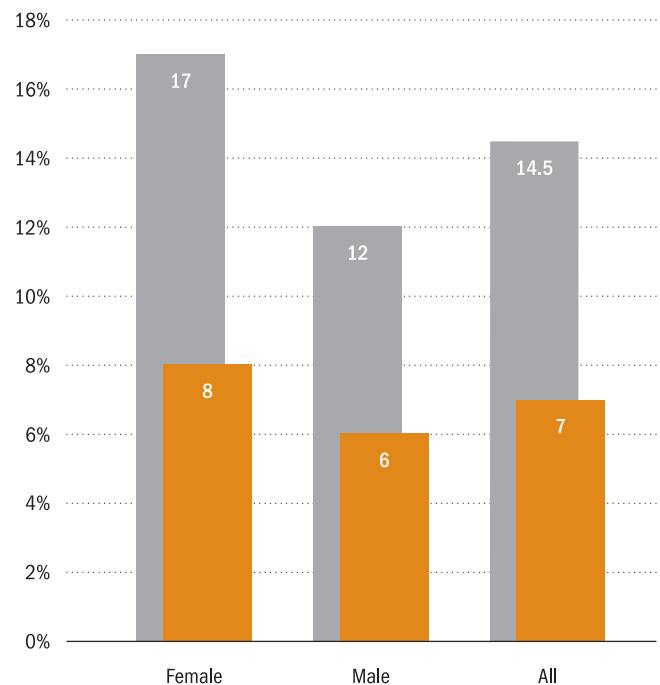


Overall the cis applicants received 81.5% more positive responses than the trans applicants (147 versus 81, respectively). Both trans women and trans men appeared

to experience broadly similar levels of discrimination. Cis women received 76.5% more positive responses than trans women (90 versus 51, respectively). The corresponding figure for men was 90.0% more positive responses (57 for cis men versus 30 for trans men).

The trend towards discrimination against trans applicants was particularly evident in the case of requests to attend interview. See Figure 3. Cis applicants, though no more qualified and experienced than the trans applicants, nevertheless overall received 107.1% more requests to attend interview (87 versus 42, respectively). This

**Figure 3.** | Cis Trans  
Singapore – Percentage of applications resulting in an invitation to attend an interview. All job sectors.



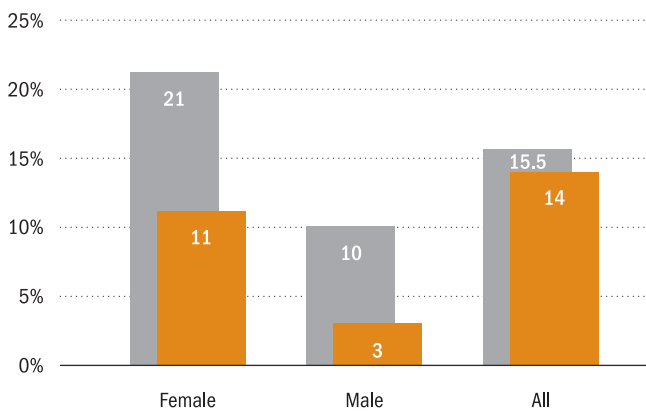
difference indicates that even when an employer may be willing to consider a trans applicant, the type of response is qualitatively different than for a cis person with the same qualifications. Again, trans women and trans men experienced broadly similar levels of discrimination. Cis women received 112.5% more invitations to interview than trans women (51 versus 24, respectively). The corresponding figure for men was 100.0% more invitations (36 for cis men versus 18 for trans men).

Discrimination was evident, to varying extents, in all three employment sectors examined. Figures 4a to 4c provide, for each of the three job sectors, percentages

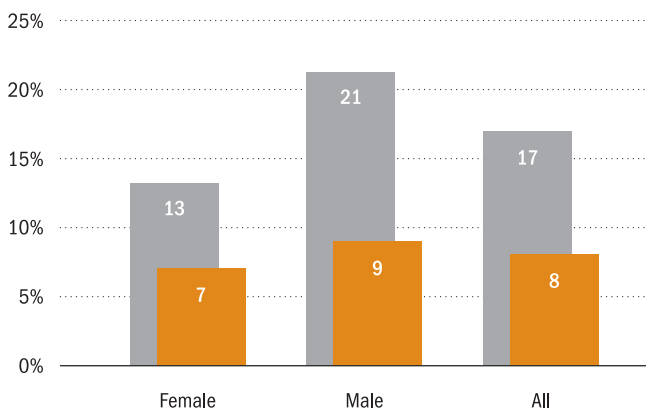
corresponding to the data in Figure 3. The situation faced by business administration graduates appeared particularly severe, with cis applicants overall getting called to interview 121.4% more frequently than trans applicants (31 versus 14, respectively). Similarly, in information technology cis applicants were 112.5% more likely to get interviews than trans applicants (34 versus 16, respectively). The school leaver sector was only a little better, with cis applicants 83.3% more likely to get called to interview than trans applicants (22 versus 12).

In two of the job sectors, business administration and information technology, the discrimination faced by trans men seemed particularly severe, as compared with trans women. Among business administration graduates cis women were 90.9% more likely to be called to interview than equivalently qualified and experienced trans women (21 invitations versus 11, respectively). The corresponding figure for men was 233.3% (10 versus 3).

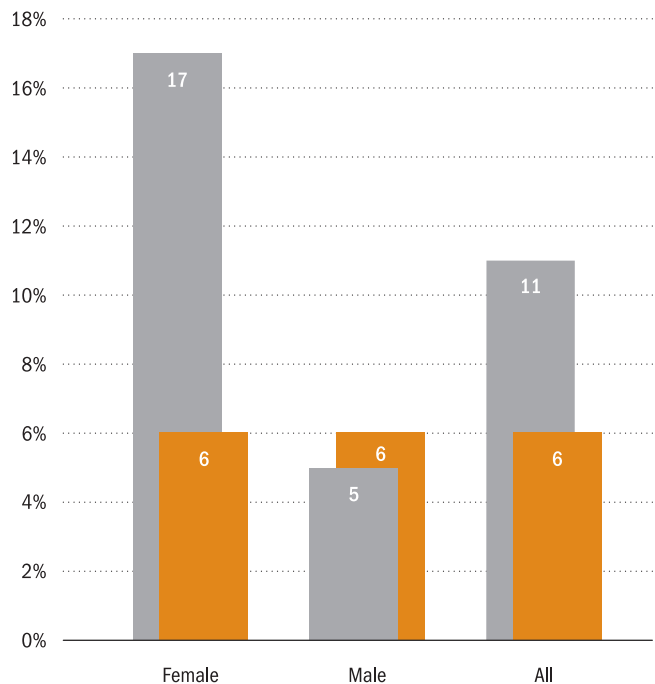
**Figure 4a.** | Cis Trans  
Singapore – Business Administration: Percentage of applications resulting in an invitation to attend an interview.



**Figure 4b.** | Cis Trans  
Singapore – Information Technology: Percentage of applications resulting in an invitation to attend an interview.



**Figure 4c.** | Cis Trans  
Singapore – School Leavers: Percentage of applications resulting in an invitation to attend an interview.



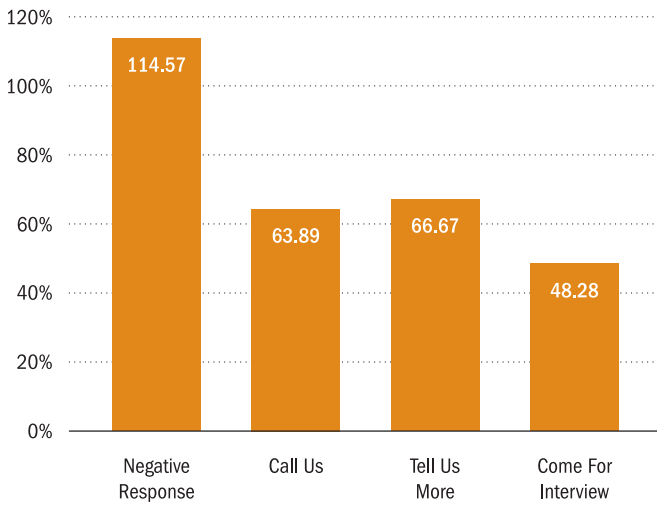
Among information technology graduates, cis women were 85.7% more likely to be called to interview than trans women (13 versus 7). The corresponding figure for men was 133.3% (21 versus 9).

The remaining job sector, for school leavers, showed a rather different pattern, with trans women encountering greatest discrimination. Cis women were 183.3% more likely than trans women to be called to interview (17 versus 6). In a finding that went against the general pattern in Singapore (and the overall pattern in the three other countries we researched in) cis men were actually 16.7% less likely to be called to interview than were trans men (5 versus 6).

Finally, as a way of standing back and looking at the entire data (see Table 1), it is possible to calculate the relative likelihood of a trans applicant getting specific types of response, as compared with the likelihood for cis applicants. Figure 5 shows the results of this calculation.<sup>21</sup> We see how discrimination against trans applicants is evident across the full spectrum of possible responses. At one end of the spectrum, trans applicants were disproportionately likely, as compared with cis applicants, to have their applications ignored by employers. At the other end of the spectrum of responses, they were, as we have seen, less likely to be called to

interview. The more apparently negative response, the more likely it was that a trans applicant rather than a cis applicant would encounter it. The more apparently positive the response from an employer, the less likely it was, relative to a cis person, that a trans person would encounter it.

**Figure 5.**  
Singapore – Likelihood of a trans applicant getting a specific type of response, relative to the likelihood for a cis applicant. Negative responses comprise 'not interested' and no response at all.



## Lost Opportunities

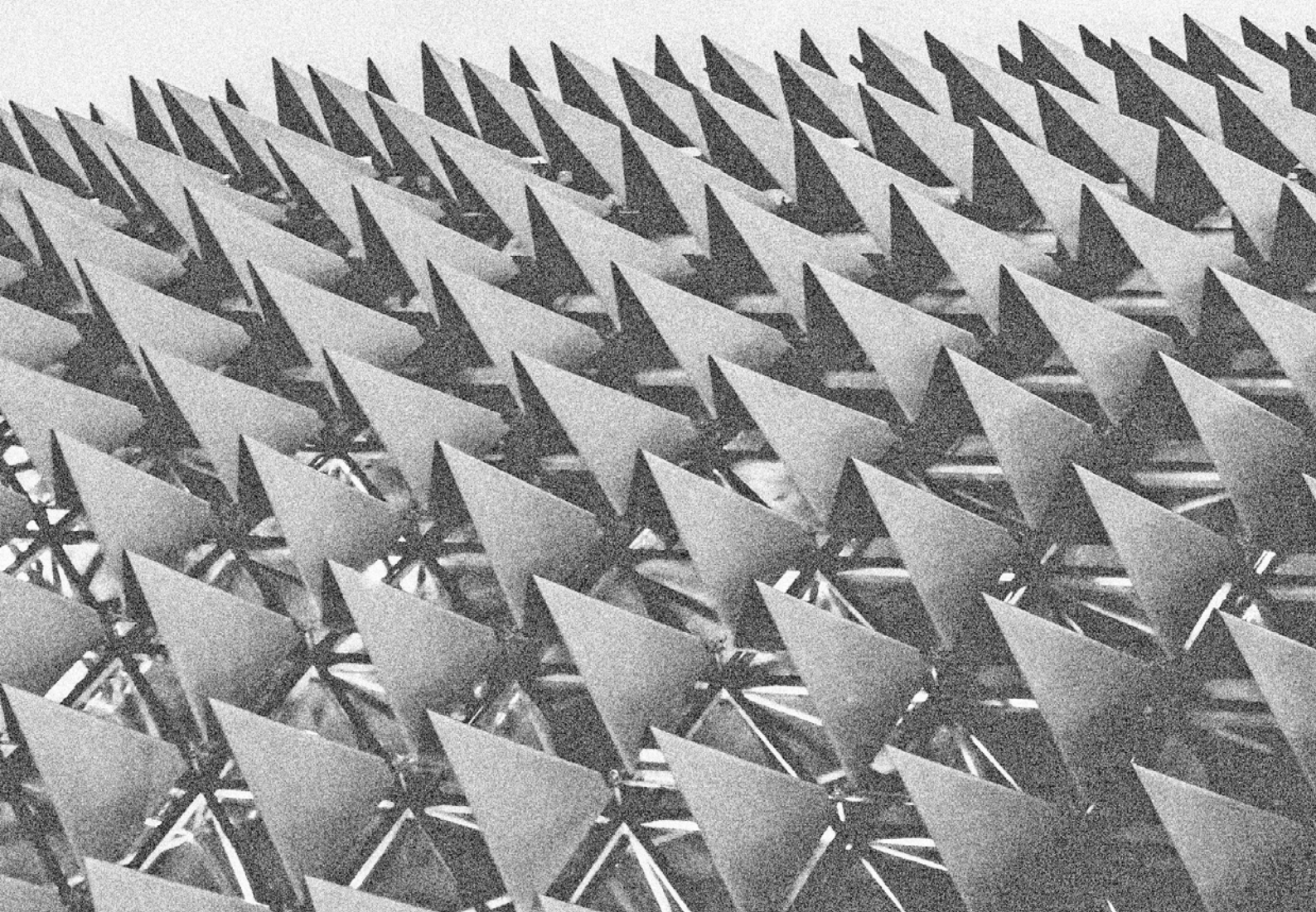
**Overall, the results indicate when a gender identity marker is added to two equivalent resumes, the resume with the trans marker is considerably less likely to receive a positive response than the one with a cis marker. This shows direct evidence of discrimination based on gender identity; it also highlights the actual lost opportunities experienced by trans people when seeking employment in Singapore.**

When we explore the raw data (Table 1), we can see how many opportunities opened up for cis applicants, but not for equally qualified and experienced trans applicants. The cis applicants received 81.5% more positive responses than the trans applicants. This reflected 66 actual lost opportunities for the trans applicants. Of these 66 lost opportunities, 39 impacted on trans women, and 27 upon trans men.

If we look more specifically at invitations to interview (type e, the most positive of responses observed in this study) we see that 87 cis applicants were invited to interview, as compared with only 42 trans applicants. This represents 45 missed interview opportunities (27 of them experienced by trans women, 18 by trans men).

It is worth remembering again that, before the gender identity markers were added, these resumes had been carefully piloted to be equivalently attractive in the job market. The jobs targeted by our applications were real jobs, and, as far as the employers were concerned, these were real applicants. Those 45 missed interview opportunities therefore represented 45 cases in which those involved in recruitment had decided to deny opportunities to applicants they believed to be trans. In any given case we are unable to say whether the denial of opportunity was stemmed from the applicants' transgender status. However, the general picture is clearly one of discrimination against trans applicants.

“The jobs targeted by our applications were **real jobs**, and, as far as the employers were concerned, these were **real applicants**. Those 45 missed interview opportunities therefore represented 45 cases in which those involved in recruitment had decided to deny opportunities to applicants they believed to be trans.”



## Concluding Notes

**Overall, trans people in our Singapore study were discriminated against when seeking employment. Despite equivalent qualifications and experience, trans applicants were less likely than cis applicants to receive a positive response.**

The discrimination was evident whether one looked broadly at positive responses of all types, or more specifically at invitations to interview. Discrimination was severe in each of the job sectors. Trans men and women both experienced discrimination. However, in the two graduate job sectors examined trans men appeared to experience the greatest discrimination. appeared to suffer. By contrast, in the school leaver sector it was trans women who appeared to experience the greatest discrimination.

This study examined job discrimination at the first stage of a

search for a job – submitting a job application. We are not able to draw conclusions on what the experiences are for those trans applicants who are fortunate enough to gain an interview. The Make the Road research<sup>23</sup> reviewed earlier suggests that, when trans people come face to face with potential employers, they face discrimination afresh.

Finally, a word of caution. Across much of the world an increasing amount of recruitment is being done through agencies hired by companies for the purpose, and through recruitment software (some of it making use of Artificial

Intelligence). Consequently, the relatively poor response rates evident for trans people in this study may reflect prejudice and discrimination in the agencies hired to recruit employees, or the programming of software being used in recruitment. In effect, a company that advertises a job and which appears at first glance to be discriminating against trans applicants may not actually be directly responsible for the discrimination at all. Indeed, it may not even be aware that discrimination is being perpetrated.

*Comments from the Research Assistant:* We also collected qualitative data from the research assistant about their experience during the data collecting phase. The data collection had quite an impact on them.

*“As a transgender person planning to seek employment in Singapore, doing the results from the study has caused me to feel some anxiety about my chances of successfully applying for a job in Singapore. I also feel increased anxiety from the possibility that I might be misgendered by my future employer and that they might not respect my true identity and name.”*



## Recommendations

**The findings in this study indicate that the job market for trans applicants is not equivalent to that for cis applicants in Singapore. There are several steps of note that trans communities, groups, networks and allies may take to prepare trans applicants for existing obstacles.**

Firstly, in Singapore, Article 12 of the Constitution “guarantees to all persons equality before the law and equal protection of the law.” While there is not an explicit mention of protection on the basis of gender identity or expression, this broad clause can be used to address discrimination experienced on these grounds. Advocates for gender equality may be valuable allies in preparing concerted responses to trans employment discrimination issues and related legislation and adjudication. Secondly, it is essential to document and monitor discriminatory job advertisements and recruitment practices in order to better work towards the mission

of the Ministry of Manpower “To develop a productive workforce and progressive workplaces, for Singaporeans to have better jobs and a secure retirement.” Thirdly, it is vital to prepare trans job applicants for the types of discrimination they may face entering the job market, with specific attention paid to trans women and to the more difficult job sectors. Finally, there is a clear need for education and sensitivity trainings for businesses, especially those with international ties and which profess existing non-discrimination policies or practises.

# Recommendations for Breaking Down Existing Barriers Include:

1

Developing a lobbying strategy with government, based on evidence of discrimination in hiring, using these findings. Specifically, it may be useful to engage state governments, specific state legislators and policymakers, lawyers involved in employment litigation, and others involved in the drafting of legislation;

2

Performing an audit on job hiring practices and promoting a tool for reporting discriminatory practices;

3

Developing trans cultural and trans competent hiring standards or practice with groups or alliances such as the TAFEP;  
Promoting best workplace standards and publicising best practice employers;

4

Building awareness, capacity and knowledge in fields that will help trans applicants secure a job, such as, resume-writing classes, community discussions on discrimination and discriminatory employers, and community-sponsored classes to improve one's qualifications may be of use;

5

Creating more social and media awareness on job employment challenges faced by trans people;

6

Developing a curriculum amongst trans activists and advocates for this sensitisation, and working with allies (such as corporate sectors, organisations, chambers of commerce, and university preparatory programs) to provide the curriculum to employers, both to build and improve relationships and trust between the trans community and the corporate sector and to decrease incidents of implicit and explicit bias in hiring within these companies.

# Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Acknowledgements to community members who took part in consultations in the early stages of the study, and to Dr Robert Kane and Dr Jun Chih, Curtin University, Western Australia, for help with data management.
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For more information  
please contact: \_\_\_\_\_

**Asia Pacific Transgender Network**

Hof Art, W District  
3/29, 3rd fl, Soi Sukhumvit 71  
Phra Khanong Nuea, Watthana,  
Bangkok 10110 THAILAND

[E] [hello@weareaptn.org](mailto:hello@weareaptn.org)