

Economic Pragmatism and the ‘Schooling’ of Girls in Singapore

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Introduction

Women in Singapore today are considered by many to be modern, liberated and progressive. They have been accorded many opportunities for education and employment since the 1960s and appear to have made great strides in many areas of economic and social life in Singapore. An official survey outlined women’s socio-economic and educational achievements in Singapore between 1987 and 1997 thus (Department of Statistics, 1998, p.1):

Along with Singapore’s economic progress, women in Singapore have achieved significant improvements in various aspects of their life. Their educational level is almost on par with men, they participate actively in economic and social activities, and they have access to good health care and live longer lives. Concomitant with these changes is the marked improvement in the status of women in Singapore society.

Indeed, since the People’s Action Party (PAP) was elected into power, Singapore women have made great strides in the socio-economic arena as a result of the ruling party’s policy of equal opportunities. Between the years 1959 and 2010, the educational profile of the female population has improved markedly. Women’s literacy rate rose significantly from a mere 34% in 1957 to 93.8% by the year 2010 (Singapore, 1964 & Department

of Statistics, 2012). The mean years of schooling for girls more than doubled from 4.6 in 1980 to 9.7 in 2010 (Department of Statistics, 2012). The increase in the number of years of schooling means that most girls were going on to secondary and even tertiary education. By the year 2010, approximately 93.6% of females aged 15–24 years and 93% aged 25–34 years had received at least a secondary education.ⁱ Women’s economic position has improved significantly as a result of education and their greater participation in the workforce. The female labour force participation rate (FLFPR) rose to 58.6% in 2014 from a mere 21.6% in 1957 (Singapore, 1964, p. 80; Ministry of Social & Family Development Research Room, 2015). The financial position of women has also been enhanced over the years as a result of a significant increase in the income of females. The median monthly income of women rose from \$2,863 in 2010 to \$3,518 in 2014 (Ministry of Social and Family Development Research Room, 2015). Based on these statistics, it looks like access to modern education and job opportunities has empowered many Singapore women. For many in Singapore, gender issues are not significant areas of concern because the ruling party’s declared policy of equal opportunities has allowed women to achieve much in society.

Yet, in spite of what these statistics show, the 2014 Global Gender Gap Index shows that Singapore, which is ranked 59 out of 142 countries in this study, is still a long way from achieving gender equality

(*Straits Times*, 2014, October 28). The study shows that in terms of economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment, Singapore women are still lagging behind men, especially in the areas of leadership and political representation. Furthermore, in spite of the increase in women's wages, there is still a significant gender wage gap which has increased from 9.4% to 12.1% in the period 2010-2014 (Ministry of Social and Family Development, 2015). This is attributed to a higher concentration of females in lower-paying occupations among the older cohorts of female workers who are less educated. Another factor for the disparity in income is the lower number of years of working experience because female workers tend to disrupt or drop out of the workforce after marriage or childbirth. The 2014 Report on Labour Force in Singapore showed that the employment rate for women in the prime-working ages of 25 to 54 rose to a record high 76.0% in 2014, but it is still significantly less than the 92.2% rate for prime-working age men (Ministry of Manpower, 2014, p. 15). The Report also noted that women formed the majority of those outside the labour force. The main reasons given for not working were family responsibilities, such as childcare, housework and care-giving to family/relatives (Ministry of Manpower, 2014, p. 40). Thus, in spite of their education and economic empowerment, women continue to hold traditional gender ideologies of being the primary caregivers and nurturers of their families.

Sociologist Stella Quah suggests that many Singaporean women are struggling to maintain coherence in their gender roles (Quah, 1998). This struggle has been blamed on the government's contradictory signals to women (Goldberg, 1987; Lazar, 1993). On the one hand, women are

expected to play an important role in the economic development of the nation through participating in the workforce. On the other hand, they are also expected to stay at home to look after the children so as preserve the family unit and maintain the social fabric of society. Lazar points out that the cause of such contradictions is the PAP government's practice of "strategic egalitarianism", i.e., the granting of equal opportunities being dependent on meeting economic and political goals. This author concurs with her thesis but also posits in this paper that in spite of these seemingly contradictory messages, the government's gender ideology has been a consistent one. This consistency is noted by researchers such as N. Purushotam who asserts that the concern has never been about how the nation can emancipate and empower women but rather it is about "how women can best serve 'the nation'" (Purushotam, 2004, p. 335). Women are auxiliary, not primary, in the PAP's conception of a modern First World nation. Opportunities for women's education and economic participation were motivated by economic imperative, not by any intrinsic belief in equality of the sexes nor support for women's rights. This was also noted by Chan Heng Chee who commented that "the participation of women in labour is not a commitment to the principle or belief in emancipation, that women are entitled to the equal right as men to work" (Chan, 1975). Purushotam calls this "the myth of the gift" – a perspective that these opportunities were the result of the government's benevolence (Purushotam, 2004). And she notes that this gift places an obligation on the recipient and puts women in a dependent position.

Singapore women's continued struggle for coherence in their gender roles and the evidence of the statistics showing continued gender disparity contradict liberal feminism's claim that education is

key to helping women achieve equal status with men and raise serious questions about the extent to which women in Singapore are emancipated and empowered as a result of their increased access to education. The school is one of the more significant agents of socialisation, besides the state, family, peers, and the mass media and schools act as ideological state apparatuses that transmit the desired knowledge, ideologies, values and attitudes necessary for an individual to become a contributing member of society. In Singapore, schools play a very critical role in the transmission of a state-sanctioned gender ideology. This is key to understanding why women in Singapore continue to hold certain conservative gender beliefs and stereotypes. Education, which is purportedly important in raising the status of women, may in fact be entrapping them by socialising them to preserve the status quo of patriarchal relations (Leach, 1998). Hegemonic discourses by the state and in the school curriculum serve to perpetuate the status quo by influencing the structures within which people think, making it difficult or impossible for them to conceive of things in any other way and thereby causing them to behave in ways accepted by society (Paechter, 1998). In this way, girls in school are socialised to accept their roles in society. For example, state discourse in Singapore on the economic imperative of both men and women to contribute to Singapore's national survival was seen as indisputable common sense and hence radically altered women's roles in society. At the same time, state discourse and school policies continued, for a long time, to emphasise the importance of maintaining patriarchy in Singapore, thus contributing to society's continued perception of women as subordinate to men.

This paper raises questions concerning

the motivation of the government in according equal opportunities of education to women as well as the role of schooling in perpetuating the state's gender ideology. This paper highlights and discusses some key state discourses and education policies to provide insight into the motives behind the PAP moves to provide equal opportunities for women in Singapore and the gender ideology that is transmitted in these hegemonic discourses. In the process, it will be seen that the state's discourse may have appeared inconsistent but its gender ideology remained consistently conservative for a long time and education policies reflected and transmitted this ideology.

Mixed Messages: Contradictions in Re-defining Women's Roles, 1950s-1970s

The PAP's support for women's rights was both politically and economically motivated. By the second half of the 1950s, there was increasing consciousness of the emerging social and political forces that women represented. The automatic registration of voters, introduction of compulsory voting and the 1957 citizenship ordinance had enfranchised a significantly enlarged electorate (Yeo & Lau, 1991, p. 139). Women formed half of this electorate, thus making their support critical for the 1959 Legislative Assembly elections for a self-governing state. This was highlighted by the press which pointed out that as the sex ratio was about 50:50, the female electorate held 50 per cent of the political power in Singapore ("Women hold half the power," *Straits Times*, 1959, 3 January). Undoubtedly the PAP saw the relevance of winning women's votes as evidenced in the speech by Kwa Geok Choo, wife of Lee Kuan Yew exhorting women to vote for the PAP in the 1959 elections (cited in Lee, 1998, p. 325):

Our society is still built on the assumption that women are the social, political and economic inferiors of men. This myth has been made the excuse for the exploitation of female labour..... Let us show them (the other parties) that Singapore women are tired of their pantomime and buffoonery. I appeal to women to vote for PAP. It is the only party with the idealism, the honesty and ability to carry out its election programme.

The economic underpinnings of PAP's support for women are also obvious. In his memoirs, Lee Kuan Yew recalled the party's early support for women (Lee, 1998, p. 325):

... we shared the view of the communists that one reason for the backwardness of China and the rest of Asia, except Japan, was that women had not been emancipated. They had to be put on a par with the men, given the same education and enabled to make their full contribution to society.

In terms of education policy, The Report of the All-Party Committee on Chinese Education which supported the principles of universal education and equal educational opportunities for all children was central to the PAP's education platform in the 1959 election (PAP, 1959a, p. 10). Education served a twofold function – for economic progress and social cohesion. The leaders saw the key role to be played by schools and teachers in cultivating social and national values. In 1959, this was considered crucial because of the immigrant, pluralistic and potentially divisive nature of Singapore society. Education was important for producing the necessary manpower for Singapore's economic progress. In *The Tasks Ahead*, the PAP's 1959 election manifesto, education was described as the

“spring source of the nation” (PAP, 1959b, p. 2). It was made clear that “education had to be considered in relation to our political and social needs. There cannot be education for education's sake, like art for art's sake. Education must serve a purpose” (PAP, 1959, pp. 1-2). That purpose was nation-building—not just inculcating the young to be loyal citizens, but also equipping them with the necessary technical skills to contribute to national development.

Upon assumption of power in Singapore in 1959, the main focus of the PAP government was on rapid expansion of educational facilities in keeping with their election promise of providing universal education for all in Singapore. A non-discriminatory policy towards girls was pursued. At that time, economic and political survival was critical as was maintaining harmony in the multi-racial society and developing national identity. To achieve this, the Ministry of Education (MOE) placed special attention on promoting extra-curricular activities (ECA) in schools. In terms of opportunities for ECA, there was also no discrimination against girls. Their participation in uniformed groups such as Girl Guides, Army Cadets (later re-named National Cadet Corps or NCC) and Police Cadet Corps (later renamed National Police Cadet Corps or NPCC) was encouraged. As early as 1964, for example, the first girls' units of the PCC were formed in Raffles Girls' Secondary School and Sang Nila Utama Malay Secondary School (Teow & Wijesingha, 2000, p. 32). The meetings, parades, camps and other outdoor activities of the uniformed groups were intended to cultivate desirable character traits, discipline and leadership among the members as well as to promote physical development (Ministry of Education, 1966, p. 14). To promote greater participation in such uniformed

groups, a system of accreditation for ECA was introduced for entry into pre-university classes.

In post-independent Singapore economic development was of critical urgency. With the loss of the Malaysian hinterland its viability as an independent nation was in great doubt. At that juncture, the PAP government attempted to re-define the role of women by emphasising the need for women's participation in national development. Pursuant to the decision to develop an industrial economy, educational policy focused on providing technical education for more students and channelling school leavers into blue-collar jobs so as to meet the need for skilled labour to support the rapid industrialisation programme. In 1966, for example, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew emphasised the need to review the secondary curriculum to align it to meeting Singapore's economic needs. He exhorted parents to prepare their children for occupations in industries and not to insist on white-collar jobs for them (Lee, 1966):

Mr Lee said that Singapore gave equal opportunities to all for education, irrespective of whether parents were rich or poor... But parents who preferred to educate their children for white-collar jobs should realize that their children stood a better chance in life if they were given a technical education.

By the late 1960s, girls were exhorted to be like boys and pursue technical subjects in order to be prepared to participate in an industrial economy. In a speech at St Margaret's Secondary School's annual speech and prize-giving day, E.W. Barker, the Minister for Law and National Development, told girls of the future role they had to play (*Straits Times*, 1968, July 27):

If you want equality of treatment with boys, you too must prepare yourselves for the change-over to technical and vocational education. For obvious reasons we cannot let all the boys go to the technical institutions and leave all the girls in the academic schools. In other words, you girls have to *work as hard as the boys*, and become *not just good housewives but economic assets as well* [Emphasis added.]

This speech emphasised the dual role expected of Singapore women—that of wage-earner, labelled as an asset because of its economic value, and homemaker, which by implication, was not an asset because of its perceived non-monetary nature. In the same speech, Barker went on to emphasise that the government had made it a policy not to discriminate against girls and had provided equal opportunities for all in education with the expectation that girls would contribute to economic growth. The maintenance of such a policy of equal opportunities, however, was dependent on continued economic prosperity and should not be taken for granted. This shows that to the political leaders, girls' education was not provided as a basic human right but as an investment for the future. In return for education, girls had to play their part to actively participate in the labour force and contribute towards sustaining national development. As pointed out by Puroshotam, the "gift" of education came with strings attached.

The increasing emphasis on technical education was made a formal policy in 1968 when Ong Pang Boon, the Minister for Education, announced a re-structuring of the secondary school system to include technical subjects in the curriculum. Technical studies became compulsory for all boys and for fifty per cent of girls in the

lower secondary forms (Ong, 1968). Following this announcement, the MOE embarked on a publicity campaign to convince parents and girls of the advantages of technical education. This took the form of speeches explaining how girls are suited for technical careers and the organization of career guidance seminars for girls, for example (Ong, 1968):

There is no reason why a woman should not handle a machine as efficiently as a man. Indeed in operations which require precision, women may outperform men

Career guidance notes were sent to parents stressing that girls were suited for technical education. Toh Chin Chye, the Minister for Science and Technology, stressed that ‘Womanpower’ was required to meet the labour shortage caused by rapid industrialization (*Straits Times*, 1971, 12 March).

A second critical need in newly independent Singapore was social cohesion and creating a sense of national identity which became more urgent in the wake of the racial riots that preceded Singapore’s exit from Malaysia. Educational policy laid stress on building a national identity in the young and on inculcating social discipline and developing a rugged society. Physical education was emphasised as children of both sexes were encouraged to participate in sports and games and efforts were made to encourage schools of different language media to participate in joint activities. A number of sports and games such as athletics, netball and basketball were available to girls who were encouraged to be as physically active and rugged as the boys. In 1968, the MOE revised the school curriculum to provide more time for students’ participation in extra-curricular

activities. The stress was on producing a new generation of youths who were “rugged, vigorous, intelligent and capable, endowed with a strong sense of patriotism, possessing a high standard of education.” (*The Straits Times*, 1968, January 2).ⁱⁱ The discourse and educational thrust of the period thus challenged traditional feminine ideology of passivity, docility and submission. Instead, girls were encouraged to be active, rugged and tough—like boys—and to participate in physical education and extra-curricular activities.

In 1975, it was announced that all secondary schools with an enrolment of more than 1,000 students were required to have NCC and NPCC units of boys and girls, the intention being to give every boy and girl a chance to join a unit (*Straits Times*, 1975, April 15). Girls were also encouraged to participate in physically and mentally demanding courses such as those conducted by the Outward Bound School (*Straits Times*, 1969, August 5). These MOE policies were aligned to the overall governmental push for a “rugged society”. Lee Kuan Yew recalled in his memoirs (Lee, 2000):

We set up national cadet corps and national police cadet corps in all secondary schools so that parents would identify the army and police with their sons and daughters... We also had to improve the physical condition of our young by getting them to participate in sports and physical activity of all kinds, and to develop a taste for adventure and strenuous, thrilling activities that were not without danger to themselves.

It should be noted, however, that in spite of the stress on need for “womanpower” to contribute to economic progress, the re-structuring of the curriculum to encourage girls to take up

technical education, domestic science remained an essential subject of study for girls while boys were exempt from it. This was made clear by Ong in the same speech when he announced the re-structuring of the school curriculum to include technical subjects (Ong, 1968):

Domestic Science will be a compulsory subject for *all girls*. However, for girls who are also taking technical subjects, Domestic Science will not be an examination subject and a modified syllabus will be followed [Emphasis added]

Ong also made the point that girls would have to study domestic science as a compulsory subject so that “the girls who leave our schools will have an adequate knowledge of home economics and be able to contribute to better health and better living conditions of our society as a whole”(Ong, 1968). The compulsory study of domestic science was a clear signal to girls about their continued domestic role in Singapore. In spite of the rhetoric about girls being as able as boys in taking on technical subjects and the emphasis on women being important in the economic development of Singapore, the official discourse and educational policy, which had significant influence on the construction of femininity in the school, persisted in upholding the traditional domestic role of women in the home.

The experiment of providing technical education for girls was short-lived. By 1977, the policy of having 50% of lower secondary girls study technical subjects was changed to allow girls the choice of taking either technical studies or home economics. Boys, however, would continue with technical workshop practice and were not required to learn home economics (*Straits Times*, 1976, December 28).

The contradiction in these messages to girls is obvious. On the one hand, girls were exhorted to be more like boys, to be rugged and robust, prepared to learn technical skills and take up blue-collar jobs. On the other hand, the policy reinforced the message that women’s role in the home was to be maintained. In this regard, Lee Kuan Yew’s comments on women and social attitudes in 1975 are illuminating (Lee, 1975):

It has been government policy to encourage the education of women to their fullest ability and their employment commensurate with their abilities. Parents have also changed their attitudes and now send their daughters for secondary and tertiary education as they would their sons... However, what has not yet taken place in traditional male-dominant Asian societies is the helping in household work by husbands—the marketing, cooking, cleaning up. *This change in social attitudes cannot come by legislation. Such adjustments should be allowed to develop naturally. Our primary concern is to ensure that, whilst all our women become equal to men in education, getting employment and promotions, the family framework does not suffer* as a result of high divorce rates, or equally damaging, neglect of the children with both parents working. [Emphasis added.]

This excerpt clearly reflects the reluctance of the authorities to bring about changes in gender ideology. The primary concern of the PAP government was on preserving social stability based on the traditional patriarchal male-dominated social structure.

The year 1979 marked a turning point in the state’s policy towards education for girls when a one-third quota was imposed

on female students admitted into the medical faculty of the National University of Singapore. This was a clear departure from the past policy of equal opportunities for all. The official explanation for this was that “women doctors, particularly after marriage, cannot be assigned duties as freely as male doctors” (*Straits Times*, 1979, March 10). Toh Chin Chye, the Health Minister, clarified in Parliament that it was very difficult for a woman to be a good doctor because “she had to be a wife and a mother besides performing night duty in government hospitals” (*Straits Times*, 1979, March 17). Other reasons given were that women doctors preferred to work office hours in outpatient clinics and were selective about their area of specialisation. Many had refused to go into obstetrics and gynaecology where the need for women doctors was greater. A number of female doctors also withdrew from the workforce when they married and had families. As a result, the investment in the education of these women did not yield sufficient returns.

Despite protests from members of the public and women’s associations, this quota was imposed from 1979 onwards. For many years, several calls to lift the quota went unheeded. In 1994, for example, Kanwaljit Soin, a Nominated Member of Parliament and medical practitioner, argued eloquently for the abolition of the one-third quota on female medical students, unequivocally pointing out that such a policy was unconstitutional and against the “ethos of building a society based on justice and meritocracy” (*Parliamentary Debates*, 63:5, 1994, August 25, cols. 485–486.). Lee Yock Suan, the Minister for Education, refuted her arguments and declared that he had checked with the University’s lawyers who had confirmed that the policy was not against the Constitution. Lee issued the ultimate challenge to Soin to put it to a test

in a court of law (*Parliamentary Debates*, 63:5, 1994, August 25, col. 487). The matter was never taken to court. With regards to educational rights, the Constitution of Singapore provides that “there shall be no discrimination against any citizen of Singapore on the grounds only of religion, race, descent or place of birth.” (Singapore, 2015). The term “sex” is noticeably missing in the Constitution with regards to rights to education and the Education Minister was therefore right in saying that the medical quota was not unconstitutional. Nonetheless, this indicates that there is a legal loophole in the protection of women’s rights in Singapore.

The imposition of the medical quota shows that pragmatism takes precedence when economic interests conflict with gender equality. Although the initial reasons offered for the imposition had to do with the difficulties women faced as doctors, there is no doubt that the main considerations had to do with the diminished returns to the government’s investment in women’s medical training. This is further evidence that education for girls was provided not because it was a basic human right, but because pragmatically it was necessary to achieve two objectives: economic survival and social stability. When this educational provision ran counter to national objectives, as in the case of educating female doctors, there were no apologies for not keeping to the promise of equality. To the political leaders of the day, it was purely a matter of economic and social pragmatism.

Putting Women Back in the Homes: State Discourse and Education Policies in the 1980s -1990s

A seminal speech concerning equal opportunities for Singapore women is Lee

Kuan Yew's National Day Rally speech in August 1983 when he attributed the declining birthrate, especially amongst better-educated women to the "unintended consequences" of education (Lee, 1983). Additionally, in 1994 he openly expressed regret over providing women with equal opportunities to education (*New Sunday Times*, 1994, July 31). Education had reduced women's marriage prospects and affected their traditional roles as mothers.

As a result of the concern over the declining population, stress began to be placed on getting women back into the homes and preserving traditional notions of femininity in girls. Tay Eng Soon, Minister of State for Education expressed puzzlement that girls would want to join NCC and asserted that "girls should be girls" and schools should encourage and cater more for their feminine interest such as music, ballet, or literature (Tay, 1983). He also lamented that girls' schools seemed no different from boys' schools, adding that girls' schools should focus on more "feminine" activities so as to prepare girls for marriage and motherhood which he regarded as their future "natural and proper role in life" (Tay, 1983). There was evidently a reversal of the earlier policy of building a rugged society. In the 1960s and 1970s, a lot of stress was placed on girls being as strong and rugged as boys and NCC and NPCC units for girls were set up for this purpose. Suddenly in the 1980s, these were deemed unsuitable for girls. The notions of a rugged and disciplined society, strength of character and physical robustness that were catch phrases of the 1960s became irrelevant. Instead, there began a policy to "feminise" girls and schools were exhorted to mount enrichment programmes to achieve this.

The reversal of policy was made in 1984 when the MOE announced that the study of home economics (previously

called domestic science) would be compulsory for lower secondary girls from 1985 (*Straits Times*, 1984, September 9). With this decision, lower secondary girls no longer had the option to take technical studies. Lower secondary boys did not have to take home economics but instead continued with technical studies. This differentiation in curriculum reflects the state's concern that girls should be 'feminine'. In spite of public opposition and a petition against this change, the MOE pushed ahead with its policy, showing the uncompromising stance of the ruling elite on its perception of desirable feminine characteristics and what girls' education should consist of. Ho Kah Leong, the Parliamentary Secretary for Education, explained that the policy of not allowing boys to do home economics was because of a lack of facilities and teachers and not because the MOE was sexist (*Straits Times*, 1984, November 27). However, it took the Ministry more than a decade to finally build enough facilities and train enough teachers to implement home economics for all lower secondary students (*Straits Times*, 1993, August 31). This delay is unusual for a country noted for its efficiency and reflects more clearly the low priority placed on this by the government. In fact, when pressed for the reason why the home economics option would be given to boys, Ho's reply was that the best cooks and hairdressers in the world were males (*Straits Times*, 1993, August 31). The economic underpinning in such a reply is all too evident. The provision of such an option to boys would have been the result of a pragmatic economic consideration rather than a genuine acceptance of changes in gender roles in Singapore.

In the 1980s and 1990s government leaders vacillated between emphasising the importance of women's role in the home and exhorting women to take on more

technical vocations – the result of the state trying to balance the two conflicting goals of economic development and maintaining the traditional patriarchal framework. One outcome of the MOE policy of curriculum differentiation was a dearth of applicants for engineering courses at the university. Tony Tan, the Minister for Education, lamented in Parliament in 1988 that there had been a shortfall of students for admission into engineering courses in 1986 and 1987. Commenting on this shortfall, a *Straits Times* editorial pointed out that female students could have filled these vacancies and that “if Singapore were to succeed in the world of high technology,” the traditional stereotype of the engineering profession being a male preserve should be eradicated (*Straits Times*, 1988, April 13).

In the late 1980s, therefore, the National University of Singapore and Nanyang Technological Institute took additional measures such as conducting career talks and seminars to woo female students to join engineering courses (*Business Times* 1988, April 7 and *Straits Times*, 1988, May 2). Tay Eng Soon commented that women’s reluctance to study technical subjects was depriving Singapore of much-needed technical workers and supported these efforts to recruit more women engineers (Tay, 1987). The inconsistency in gender messages in the PAP discourse is seen here for it was Tay who, while espousing the virtues of traditional femininity and the ‘natural’ role of women, was also encouraging more girls to enrol in engineering courses. An editorial in *The Business Times* pointed out these inconsistencies and added that exhortations alone were insufficient to persuade more girls into engineering professions. What was needed instead was for MOE to remove stereotyped depictions of male and female roles from textbooks and

reconsider the policy of curriculum differentiation for boys and girls (*The Business Times*, April 15, 1988). This indictment of MOE policy shows up the government’s outmoded values and the inherent contradictions in its policies that had hindered the achievement of its objectives.

In 1991 the MOE announced that starting from 1994, all secondary school students would have to take home economics and design and technology. The Acting Minister of State (Education), Dr Seet Ai Mee acknowledged that Singapore’s changing socio-economic norms meant that men and women would have to play complementary roles in managing the home, hence the change in curriculum. A *Sunday Times* editorial with a telling headline, “Enlightened at last”, criticised the MOE for its past policy (*Sunday Times*, 1991, July 14):

By insisting in 1984 that girls could take only home economics where they previously could choose between that and technical studies, the Education Ministry was trying to force the sexes into stereotypes that were completely out-of-date in an age when women were not only going out to work but encouraged to do so... The ministry apparently felt that one reason [for the number of unmarried graduate women] was that girls were becoming too much like boys and felt it had to rectify this by ensuring that girls did not dissipate their time on manly stuff like technical education and that they concentrate instead on learning to be good wives and mothers... The tactic was ...retrograde.

This policy seemed to reflect a more progressive gender ideology amongst government officials. However, this was not the case. Goh Chok Tong, the new

Prime Minister asserted in 1993 that “it is not possible, nor is it wise to have total sex equality in all areas” (Goh, 1993). In his speech, he reiterated the official stance that Singapore society should retain its patriarchal structure where “minor areas where women are not accorded the same treatment should be expected so long as the welfare of women and of the family is protected” (Goh, 1993).

One major area of differential treatment that Prime Minister Goh was referring to was the issue of female civil service officers’ medical benefits. While male officers had medical benefits extended to their spouses and dependent children, the same treatment was not given to female officers. The finance Minister defended the policy on the “principle that in our Asian society the husband is the head of the household. It is his responsibility to look after the family’s needs, including their medical needs” (*Parliamentary Debates*, 61, 1993, November 11, cols 1012–1013). This defence was reinforced in 1994 by Prime Minister Goh’s National Day Rally speech (Goh, 1994) in which he further elaborated on Singapore’s need to maintain a patriarchal society:

Asian society has always held the man responsible for the child he has fathered. He is the primary provider, not his wife... I am not saying that woman is inferior to man and must play a subservient role. I believe women should have equal opportunities and men should help out at home, looking after babies, cleaning the house and washing dishes. But we must hold the man responsible for the child he has fathered, otherwise we will change for the worse a very basic sanction of Asian society.

By trying to make a difference between responsibility (the man being responsible

for providing for the family) and gender equality in the home (the woman is not inferior to man) the Prime Minister was reconstructing patriarchy to suit the government’s purposes of women’s participation in the labour market and yet maintain an ideology of women’s domesticity. Yet, by giving medical benefits only to the man of the house, the government had created an unequal power balance in the home.

The Twenty-First Century: Demise of Asian Patriarchy

With the turn of the century, however, the state appears to have abandoned the ideology of Singapore as an Asian patriarchy. This was evident in two major policy changes —the lifting of the medical quota on female students and equal medical benefits given to female civil servants. After twenty-three years of imposition of a quota on the admission of female medical students into the university, the Health Ministry removed the quota in December 2002 after a review of the healthcare situation. The dropout rate of male and female doctors had narrowed and there was a growing need for more specialist doctors in Singapore (*Straits Times*, 2002, December 6). One of the reasons given was that there were fewer female doctors leaving the profession. At the same time there was a need for more doctors because of the ageing population, the increase in population resulting from immigration and Singapore’s move into the life sciences (*Straits Times*, 2002, December 6). The reasons cited for the lifting of the quota were once again pragmatic economic and social considerations.

The second policy change was in 2004 when female civil servants were accorded the same medical benefits as their male counterparts. In his National Day Rally

speech, the new Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong, acknowledged that mindsets had to change along with changes in society in order that there would be more equal sharing of family responsibilities between couples (Lee, 2004). Together with this move to equalise medical benefits, Lee also moved to provide greater support for working mothers. A slew of measures were introduced to assist working mothers as well as boost the declining fertility rate. Such measures included longer maternity leave, childcare leave for both parents, infant care subsidies and financial support for the family (Sadasivan, 2005). The motivations behind all these financial and other incentives were both economic and social. As a nation with limited resources, women's participation in the economy was an imperative. The government thus had to provide the necessary milieu to encourage women to continue working and yet at the same time ensure that the social framework of the family as the basic unit of society remained intact. The discourse on women in the twenty-first century thus shifted from the role of women in a patriarchal society to maintaining work-life balance. There was no longer any discussion of the 'natural' roles of women, the separate responsibilities of men and women in the home or in society, or the traditional traits and interests of feminine women.

Conclusion

It is clear that pragmatic economic, social and political considerations were the primary motivators behind the formulation of a dual role for women. On the one hand, because of Singapore's scarce resources, economic pragmatism dictated that women engage in paid labour. On the other hand social stability, which the PAP saw as maintaining a patriarchal family structure, was necessary to attract and keep foreign investors and therefore a prerequisite for

sustained economic development. Politically, the PAP can remain in power as long as they delivered on economic goods. Pragmatism was thus the PAP's guiding principle and economic development was its foremost objective. As Lee Kuan Yew emphasised, the pragmatic approach meant not being tied to theory or dogma, but decisions are based on 'what works'. Yet, pragmatism in itself can be considered the PAP's dogma because the party used this as its primary guiding principle. The pragmatic approach dictated the way the party resolved all issues or challenges, hence Lazar's criticism of "strategic egalitarianism" as the PAP's approach to equal opportunities for women is a valid one. Most policies and government initiatives were strategic - considered on the bases of their workability and practicality and assessed by the results produced. However, such an approach inevitably resulted in inconsistencies and seeming contradictions in their policies. Public policies on women were adapted to the practical considerations of national development but the result was that official discourses showed little consistency as they tended to vacillate between emphasising women's roles in the workforce or in the home. Education policies tended to fluctuate in like manner, depending on the government's priority and focus at that point in time. As a result, PAP policies and discourse sometimes appeared *ad hoc* and there did not seem to be a consistent policy towards women in general and girls' education in particular. But for a long time, the patriarchal gender ideology of the PAP remained constant. State discourses and policies attempted to maintain this ideology. The influence of such hegemonic discourses and educational policies has contributed to society's continued perception of the primary role of women being "good housewives and mothers." This is a possible reason why many

women leave the workforce to look after their families. Ultimately, the primary objective of PAP pragmatism is economic prosperity which can be achieved only if there is social stability. All policies were geared towards achieving this end. There were policy changes and reversals along the way, but the PAP vision of a First World Singapore was never clouded by considerations of gender equality.

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- i Percentages calculated by author from data from Singapore, *Census of Population, 2010, Statistical Release 1* (2011), Table 30, 94–95.
- ii Several newspaper articles emphasised this. See for example, “Citizens fit in mind, body is aim of new education policy: Ong,” *The Straits Times*, 1968, January 2, “The way to build a rugged generation,” *The Straits Times*, 1967, April 13, and “Take lead in building rugged society, teachers told,” *The Straits Times*, 1967, June 3.