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# ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

# and WOMEN'S PLACE

PROGRAMA UNIVERSITARIO DE  
"ESTUDIOS DE GENERO" - U.N.A.M.

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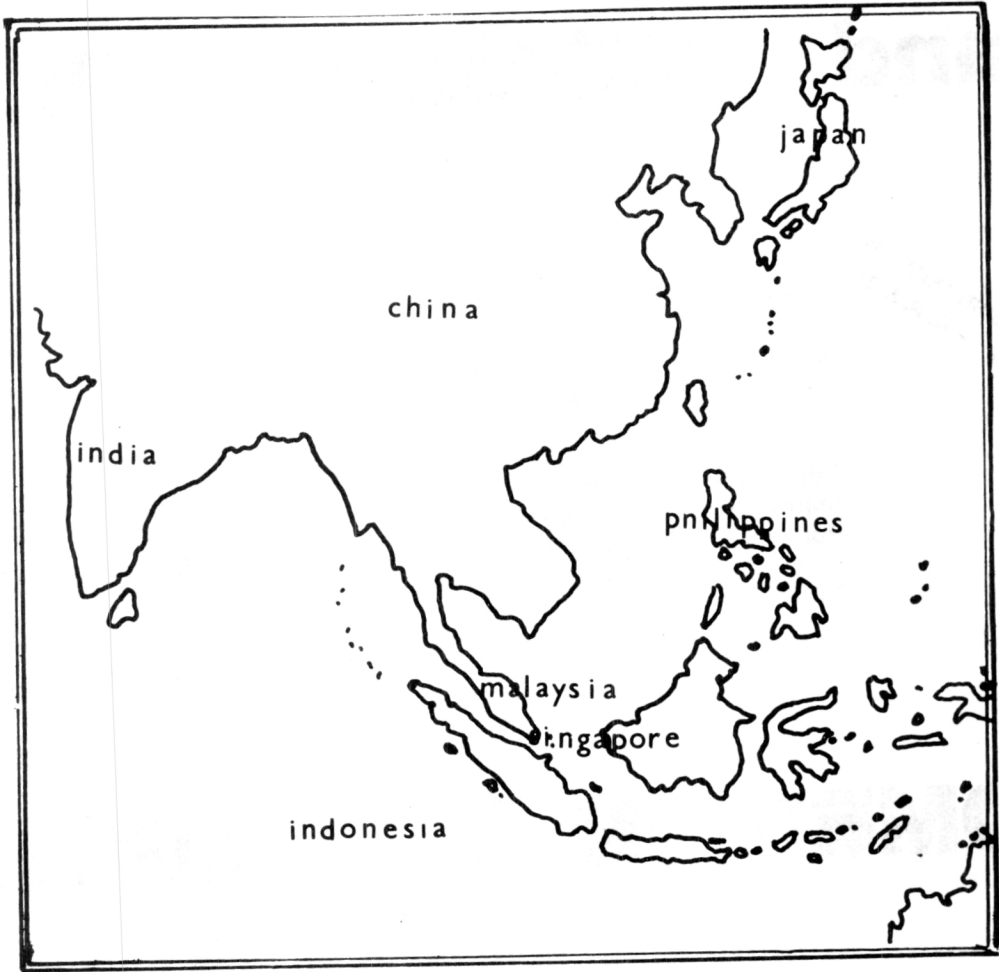
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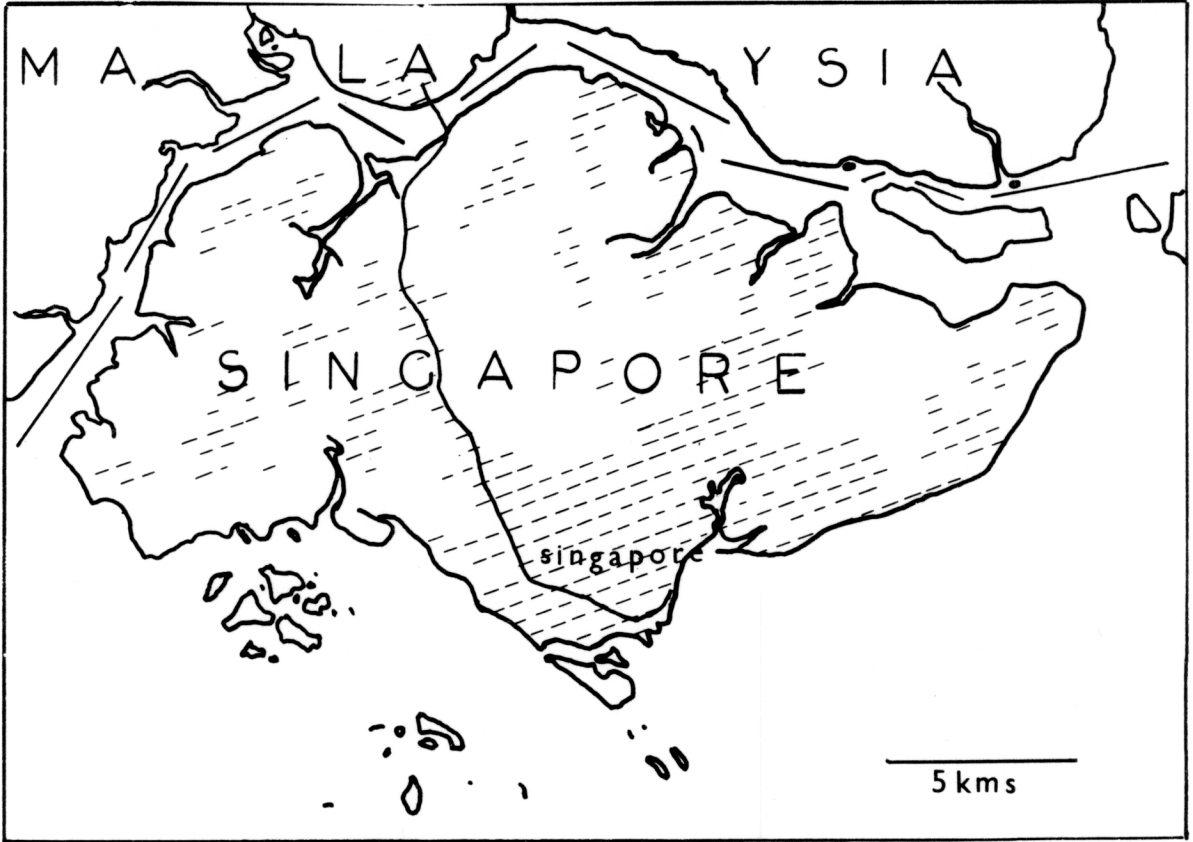
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# WOMEN IN SINGAPORE

by Aline K. Wong

12.04  
W837





**Whereas the peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in equal rights of men and women and have determined to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom...**

*Universal Declaration of Human Rights,  
10 December 1948*

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## **I Background: The Cross Roads of Asia**

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The Republic of Singapore, with a population density of 3,788 persons per sq km, is one of the most densely-populated countries in the world. It comprises the main island of Singapore and some 40 small offshore islands. The total land area is 588 sq km and the population was estimated to be 2.3 million in mid-1978. The population is heterogeneous: 76% are Chinese, 15% Malay, 7% Indian and 2% Eurasian and 'others', with each of these major groups having its own dialect sub-divisions. Since the middle of the 1960s, Singapore has experienced a rapid fertility decline which brought the natural rate of increase from 2.3% in 1966 to 1.2% in 1977 and 1978.

Singapore had thrived as a commercial centre and entrepôt port under the British colonial rule. Since independence and separation from the Federation of Malaysia in 1965, the government of Singapore has embarked on extensive programmes of industrialisation. As a result, the Singapore economy has achieved remarkable rates of growth, with an average annual GDP growth rate of 8.6% between 1970-77. In 1977, the per capita GNP was US\$2,880, thus putting Singapore squarely among the ranks of the Middle Income Countries.<sup>1</sup>

Industrialisation and sustained economic growth have brought about major structural changes in the economy, as reflected in the fact that between 1960-1977, the share of the manufacturing sector in the country's GDP increased from 12% to 25%. The manufacturing sector is also the most dynamic sector in the Singapore economy. In 1978, there were over 2,900 manufacturing establishments (with 10 or more workers) employing a total of 244,000 workers.<sup>2</sup> Much of the growth of the manufacturing sector is directly attributable to the role of foreign investment: as Singapore lacks natural resources – except for its natural harbour and a young, disciplined workforce – the strategy of economic development adopted by the government has been a heavy reliance on the inflow of foreign capital and technology. Although wholly-foreign owned or joint-venture firms constituted only 33% of the total number of manufacturing establishments in 1978, these firms comprised 82.7% of the total output value, 78.4% of the value-added, nearly 68.7% of total industrial employment and 91.8% of the direct export value of manufactured goods.<sup>3</sup>

Economic development has brought about a steadily rising standard of living to the majority of the local population. Although Singapore is not a welfare state, the government has provided subsidised social services, especially in the areas of public low-cost housing, health, education and other social amenities. In 1978, 64% of the local population were living in subsidised government housing, with 35% actually owning their flats.<sup>4</sup> Primary school education is universal and almost free. Medical services are heavily subsidised. In addition, there are schemes of social security, legal aid, public assistance and other welfare provisions. However, labour-management relations are heavily regulated by government in the interest of keeping the costs of labour low enough to attract and retain foreign investors.

With rapid economic changes over the past one and half decades, very significant social changes have also taken place. Given the fact that Singapore is an open, industrialising and western-oriented society, traditional customs and Asian values have changed rapidly. The general population is highly oriented towards individual achievement, upward social mobility and the acquisition of material wealth. With a rising level of education and the opening of industrial employment opportunities, more and more women are now economically active. In 1978, the rate of female economic activity reached 40.1%. Other accompanying social changes include a rising age of marriage, a small family size and widespread family planning practice.<sup>5</sup>

No marriage shall be legally entered into without the full and free consent of both parties, such consent to be expressed by them in person after due publicity and in the presence of the authorities competent to solemnise the marriage and of witnesses as prescribed by law.

### *Article 1*

*UN Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages, 7 November 1962*

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## **II The Cultural and Historical Status of Women**

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Singapore being a multi-racial society, the traditional status of women was in accordance with the three major cultural-religious systems, namely, Chinese, Muslim and Hindu. The migrants who came to Singapore brought with them their own cultural traditions; however conditions in early Singapore and Malaya were such that customs and beliefs had to be modified, with the effect that some of the harsh discriminatory practices against women prevalent in their home countries were ameliorated in the new society.



Traditional Chinese society was patriarchal. The cultural emphasis on continuity of the male lineage, the Confucian concept of filial piety, and the religious practice of ancestor worship, together with the segregation of the private and the public domain had resulted in the relegation of women's place strictly within the home. All marriages were arranged; a woman's chief function was to serve her husband and his parents, and to produce sons for the family line. She could not inherit any property, nor could she hold any except her own dowry. She had no say in family decisions except when she became a mother-in-law or a widow. A barren woman, a divorcee or a widow who remarried were social outcasts. Concubinage, child brides and female infanticide were widespread practices over different parts of pre-modern China. Although women in the lower social classes were somewhat less subjugated than their upper-class counterparts, it was the cultural ideal for the Chinese man to produce as many sons as he could, and take as many wives as he could afford.<sup>6</sup>

The stream of Chinese migrants who came to Singapore near the end of the eighteenth century was almost entirely male. It was not until the latter half of the nineteenth century that it became more common for a Chinese male to return to his village and bring back a wife. Between 1930 and the end of the Second World War, the sex ratio among the Chinese in Singapore was steeply restored to almost normal by restricting male but not female immigration. Among these female migrants, large numbers were single or widowed. From the 1940's onwards, the normal sex ratio among the Chinese was the result of natural population increase. The separate streams of male and female migrants had at least two important consequences for the status of Chinese women in Singapore. The first is the considerable number of women who constituted single-person households, or were heads of households around the middle of the present century. The second is the relatively higher position of the secondary wife here as compared to that of the concubine back in China. Although the extent of taking secondary wives cannot be determined, the secondary wife in Singapore and Malaya enjoyed some social recognition. As depicted by Ann Wee, she need not have come from a lower social class than her husband, in fact she might be better educated, English-speaking, and managing her husband's local business concerns. However, Ann Wee also pointed out that the position of the secondary wife was by no means secure, so that most secondary wives eagerly sought formal recognition by the family of the principal wife, or at least had their children accepted by them as legitimate.<sup>7</sup>

The sacred writings of the Hindu religion, such as the Laws of Manu, prescribed a system of 'perpetual tutelage' for women.<sup>8</sup> Although women in India were revered as mothers and likened to goddesses, they were at the same time considered as weak and lacking in the higher mental qualities exclusively found in men. Like the Chinese, an Indian woman was required to be dependent on her father when she

was a child, on her husband after she was married and on her son when she was widowed. Upper caste Hindu women were kept in separate quarters of the household. Divorce was not recognised. Widows were strictly forbidden to remarry, and *sati* (the self-immolation of widows on the funeral pyres of their husbands) was practised. The giving away of child brides was prevalent in India even up to the early twentieth century. Although monogamy was an Hindu ideal, polygamy was allowed and followed mainly on ground of barrenness of the wife.

Little is known about the social life of the Indian community in Malaya and Singapore during the early days of the settlements. Being imported labour, the Indian community was dispersed on plantations and tin mines. However, the Indian migrant population also had an extremely unbalanced sex-ratio which persisted well into the 1950s. This meant that, for the males, it was impossible to have a normal family life. Marriages were unstable; marital infidelity and prostitution were rampant.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless; the Indian community has preserved certain traditional features of social and cultural life, as seen in the persistence of caste considerations in present-day marriage arrangements<sup>10</sup>, and the continuing significance of religious rituals for family and social life.<sup>11</sup> Although young girls and married women are no longer excluded from public life, they nevertheless are tightly controlled by their family and kin circles, and much more so than their Malay and Chinese counterparts.

The Malays in Singapore followed both the religious tenets of Islam as well as a body of customary law known as the *adat*. Traditional Islamic law permits a man to have up to four wives at any one time, and the law does not require a husband to obtain permission of his current wife before contracting an additional marriage. All schools and sects of Islam recognise the right of 'guardians' to contract their infant wards of either sex in marriage without their consent.<sup>12</sup> In the Muslim world, women are veiled, and are kept in separate quarters in the house. As compared to Chinese and Hindu women, however, Malay women in Singapore enjoy more privileges under customary law. It is also generally believed that a man's first duty is to his wife and children, and he would be subject to great social pressures if he fails to provide for them. Malay women from the lower social classes are not secluded, but they have customarily a certain measure of economic independence, and it is not unusual to find women controlling family expenses. A woman has complete ownership rights over her own property, and in the case of her husband's death, she is entitled to a share of his property. The Malays view marriage as a contract; divorce is possible, in fact, and it is said to be a much more common feature of village life than polygyny.<sup>13</sup> The wife is entitled to maintenance from her husband during the *iddah* or waiting period (the three months of waiting before a divorcee can remarry), and she is also entitled to a consolatory gift upon being divorced. However, it is in the

matter of the right to initiate divorce and in the institution of polygyny that the inferior position of Malay women is seen.

To sum up, the traditional ethnic communities in Singapore accorded an inferior and subordinate position to women. Whether born as a Chinese, an Indian or a Malay, a woman was subjected to socio-cultural and religious pressures to conform to the roles of wife and mother and to lead a secluded life. Women were effectively prohibited from social and economic participation by the absence of educational and economic opportunities until the recent educational and legal reforms, and the process of economic development, brought women out from their homes to participate in public life.

Women shall be entitled to vote in all elections on equal terms with men, without any discrimination.

*UN Convention on the Political Rights of Women, 20 December 1952*

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### III Legal Status Today

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Under British colonial rule, the traditional customs and religious tenets concerning family law were deliberately recognised and, under certain circumstances, even made to supersede English family law. This policy gave rise to the simultaneous recognition of no less than seven different marriage law systems resulting in a highly confusing state of affairs relating to marriage, legitimacy, inheritance and the general legal status of women.<sup>14</sup>

Shortly after independence, the Singapore government passed a **Women's Charter (1961)** which brought all Chinese, Hindu, and Christian marriages henceforth under its regulation (and later, its Amendment 1967). On the other hand, Muslim marriages came under the regulation of the Muslims Ordinance (1957), the Muslims (Amendment) Ordinance (1960) and the Administration of Muslim Law Act (1966). The Women's Charter provided for the solemnisation and registration of all Chinese, Hindu and Christian marriages. It did away with polygamy by recognising only monogamous marriages from then on. The legal minimum age for marriage was set at 21 (or 18, where consent of parents or guardians must be obtained). It proclaimed the mutual responsibility of husbands and wives to maintain the family and to provide for the children. Sections of the Charter also provide for the protection of young persons against exploitation and abuse. Under the Women's Charter, husbands and wives have equal rights to divorce. Either spouse may petition to the High Court for divorce on one of the following five grounds: adultery, cruelty, mental illness, desertion for a period of three years, and separation for a period of seven years. The wife has four additional grounds for petition: when the husband has committed bigamy, or

has been guilty of rape, sodomy or bestiality. The conditions under which couples may petition for divorce are, however, rather restrictive.<sup>15</sup>

The modern law has shaken off the old Common Law rules which greatly restricted the legal capacity of married women to enter into legal contracts on their own behalf, to sue and be sued in courts, and to hold property. Under the Women's Charter and other statutes, the married woman is fully equal to the legal status of her husband. Either spouse is free to dispose of his or her property by will. On either spouse's dying intestate, the succession law applies without discrimination as to the sex of the surviving spouse. Most of the rights and obligations of husband and wife as described above are also applicable to Muslims. A strict system of separate property exists between Muslim spouses, and each retains fully the legal capacity which each possesses before marriage. The Administration of Muslim Law Act, however, was not aimed at fundamental changes in the religious law governing marriage and divorce. Although marriages have now to be registered with the Registrar of Muslim Marriages, polygamy is still allowed, and unilateral divorce in the form of the 'three *talak*' is retained.<sup>16</sup> The successive codification of the Muslim Law was designed mainly so that the laws of Islam might be enforced more effectively, and was made clearly as a response to the situation where the rate of Muslim divorces had reached alarming heights in the middle of the 1950s.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the *Sharia* Court, set up since 1958, considers all applications for divorce, and is empowered to adjudicate upon the claims of the married woman for the payment of her '*maskahwin*'<sup>18</sup>, the payment of maintenance and consolatory gifts, as well as over the question of custody of children and the division of property. Divorces are not granted until after some reconciliatory efforts are made by the Court. The setting up of the Shariah Court had almost immediate effects on the Muslim divorce rate which showed a rapid decline during the following decade.

Legal reforms not only brought uniformity to family law in Singapore, they also meant improvement in the legal status of women compared to that which obtained under the traditional cultural and religious systems. However, the shortcomings of legal provisions lie not only with existing loopholes or the practical problems of enforcement, but also with the fact that some proportions of the population may not be aware of their legal rights and consequently fail to assert them. Even though registration of marriage was made compulsory, there were evidences that up to the early 1970s, some Chinese couples still did not know of the law, believing that customary rites were sufficient to validate their marriages. Thus, in 1973, the government had to reinforce the law providing a temporary period for post-registration.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, the law is also slow to respond to changing modern values with regard to marriage and divorce, or to recognise the fact that women have become better educated and more and more are now economically independent.

Over the past few years, the restrictiveness of the divorce law under the Women's Charter has come under some heavy criticisms by groups of professional women. It was only in late 1979 that the government finally appointed a select committee to study proposals for the liberalisation of the divorce law.

**Each member for which this Convention is in force undertakes to declare and pursue a national policy designed to promote, by methods appropriate to national conditions and practice, equality of opportunity and treatment in respect of employment and occupation, with a view to eliminating any discrimination in respect thereof.**

*Article 2*

*ILO Convention on Discrimination in Employment and Occupation, 25 June 1958*

#### **IV Economic Activity in Rapid Industrialisation**

Increasing educational and economic opportunities for women have wrought important changes in the social and economic status of women in Singapore over the past 15 years. In 1957, just before Independence, only 21.6% of the total female population aged 15 years and above were economically active. But as Singapore rapidly industrialised, particularly since the late 1960s, the rate of female labour force participation rose impressively. From a rate of 29.5% in 1970, it rose to 40.1% in 1978, a rate which is highly comparable to that obtained in most economically advanced countries.

**Table 1: Female Labour Force Participation Rates in Singapore (Percent)**

	1957	1970	1975	1978
Economically active females as proportion of total female population aged 15 and over	21.6	29.5	34.9	40.1
Employed females as proportion of total number employed	17.5	23.5	29.6	33.1

*Source:* Figures for 1957 and 1970 are based on the population censuses; figures for 1975 and 1978 are based on the Labour Force Survey of Singapore for both years.

The age-specific economic activity rates for Singapore women, however, deviate from the general bi-modal pattern so typical of developed countries. Table 2 shows that in Singapore, the highest participation rate is found among women aged 20-24, when most women would still be single.

After that, the rate steadily declines for every older age group, with no resurgence around the age group 40-45, as found in the developed countries, when women with older children would return to the labour force.

**Table 2: Age-specific Female Activity Rates 1957-1978 (Percent)**

Age group	1957	1970	1978
Total	21.6	29.5	40.1
15-19	23.4	43.0	41.4
20-24	22.9	53.6	73.2
25-29	16.5	30.8	53.1
30-34	17.3	22.7	36.8
35-39	20.8	19.3	33.4
40-44	26.3	17.8	30.1
45-49	30.1	17.5	23.7
50-54	28.8	17.5	20.6
55-59	24.7	16.2	13.8
60-64	17.1	13.4	12.1
65 and over	5.8	6.5	7.5

*Source:* Same as Table 1.

The return of older women to the labour force in developed countries is made possible by the availability of part-time jobs. In Singapore, however, such part-time jobs are very rare. From a recent study made on the problems and prospects of part-time work for women in Singapore, it would appear that part-time female workers with children are no better-off than full-time workers in terms of the amount of household and child care help received from husbands or other members of the family, and suffer almost the same amount of role strains as a result of working. Employers on their part are also unwilling to hire women on a part-time basis, on account of increased administrative costs, re-training required, and the problem of turnover.<sup>20</sup> For older working women in general, it is clear that they encounter societal prejudices against married women having their own careers, and from the general belief that married women are less committed to their jobs. In spite of such prejudices, however, greater proportions of married women have come out to work in recent years, as can be seen from both Table 2 and Table 3. The proportion of married women working has increased from 14.7% in 1970 to 26.5% in 1978. More married women are working not only because of a higher level of educational attainment, but also because the rising costs of living and the rising expectations of a better living standard have prompted many married women to remain in the labour force. Family planning and child-spacing practices have also made it possible for married women to work, although they still face various problems such as childcare arrangements. Finally, in view of the labour shortage in the late 1960s, the government has repeatedly called on married women to come out and fill the large number of vacancies in the industrial, commercial and service sectors.

**Table 4: Distribution of Female Labour Force by Industry, 1957-1978**

Industry	1957		1970		1975		1978	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Agriculture, forestry & fishing	9,819	11.7	4,796	3.1	5,033	2.0	4,622	1.5
Mining & Quarrying	165	0.2	205	0.1	271	0.1	148	-
Manufacturing	16,301	19.4	48,121	31.3	86,210	34.9	123,245	39.0
Electricity, gas & water	77	-	533	0.4	758	0.3	1,230	0.4
Construction	1,761	2.1	2,817	1.8	3,085	1.2	5,110	1.6
Commerce	13,246	15.7	28,986	18.9	55,958	22.7	74,206	23.4
Transport and communication	1,112	1.3	3,943	2.6	11,311	4.6	16,113	5.1
Finance, insurance & business services	2,013	2.4	5,305	3.5	17,480	7.1	25,400	8.0
Community, social & personal services	39,551	47.0	58,843	38.3	66,511	26.9	66,509	21.0
Activities not adequately defined	165	0.2	63	-	379	0.2	148	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>84,210</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>153,612</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>246,995</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>316,731</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: Same as Table 1.

**Table 5: Distribution of female Labour Force by Major Occupation Groups, 1957-1978**

Occupation Group	1957		1970		1975		1978	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Professional, Technical & related workers	8,328	9.9	21,818	14.2	26,572	10.8	29,258	9.2
Administrative & managerial workers	259	0.3	645	0.4	1,569	0.6	1,654	0.5
Clerical & related workers	5,616	6.7	26,029	16.9	61,586	24.9	80,778	25.5
Sales workers	8,630	10.2	16,433	10.7	30,306	12.3	39,308	12.4
Service workers	30,112	35.7	35,884	23.4	40,318	16.3	47,089	14.9
Agricultural, animal husbandry workers & fishermen	10,057	11.9	4,950	3.2	6,169	2.5	5,131	1.6
Production & related, transport equipment operators and labourers	21,098	25.1	47,412	30.9	79,337	32.1	112,835	35.6
Workers not classifiable by occupation	110	0.2	441	0.3	1,136	0.5	678	0.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>84,210</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>153,612</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>246,995</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>316,731</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: Same as Table 1.



**Table 3: Activity Rates of Females by Marital Status 1957-1978 (Percent)**

Marital Status	Activity Rates			
	1957	1970	1975	1978
Single	24.8	35.6	39.1	63.7
Married	14.0	14.7	22.1	26.5
Widowed	25.8	15.5	14.8	19.3
Divorced	46.5	47.6	50.0	63.6

Source: Same as Table 1.

With the opening of opportunities in the secondary and tertiary sectors of the economy, women are increasingly employed in industry and commerce, with gains in the manufacturing sector being the most prominent since 1970. In 1978, 39% of the female labour force were in the manufacturing industries, and 23.4% were in the commercial sector. Correspondingly, the percentage of female workers in the community, social and personal services has steadily declined to 21.0%, although this still remains the third largest sector for female employment.

These changes are also reflected in the occupational structure. In 1978, 35.6% of the total female labour force were production and related workers, transport equipment operators and labourers, another 25.5% were clerical and related workers, followed by 14.9% being service workers.

The great increase in the number of industrial jobs available to women has had interesting consequences for the economic participation of women belonging to different ethnic groups. In 1957, the Chinese women had the highest participation rate of 21.8%, as compared to the 6.3% among Malay women and 7.1% among the Indian women. By 1978, the rates of economic participation of the three major ethnic groups have reached very similar proportions of approximately 40%.

**Table 6: Female Economic Activity Rates by Ethnic Group 1957-1978 (Percent)**

	1957	1970	1975	1978
Total				
Chinese	21.8	27.0	31.5	40.5
Malays	6.3	14.3	22.4	40.0
Indians	7.1	16.0	25.6	38.7

Source: Same as Table 1.

This clearly indicates that the rate of increase in economic participation among Malay and Indian women has been much higher than among the Chinese. Furthermore, the Malays and Indians have gained entry into the manufacturing sector at a much more rapid rate during the recent years in comparison to the Chinese. In 1957, 21% of the Chinese

female workers were engaged in manufacturing, while only 3.7% of the Malays and 2.1% of the Indians were in this sector. In 1970, shortly after Singapore began to industrialise, the proportions of Malay and Indian female workers in manufacturing climbed to 31.2% and 18.9% respectively, as compared to 32.2% of the Chinese female workers. By 1978, the proportions of Malays and Indians have jumped to 55.3% and 43.5% respectively, whereas the proportion of Chinese females has risen only slightly, to 36.1%.

Correspondingly, the proportions of Malays and Indians have declined by leaps and bounds in the community, social and personal services sector, where employment of women from these two ethnic groups has traditionally been concentrated, particularly as domestic servants. The large-scale entry of young Malay and Indian women into the manufacturing sector has come about not only as a consequence of expansion in industrial employment in general, but also as a consequence of the fact that, particularly in the more recent years, older Chinese women have turned more and more to the better-paying, 'soft' white-collar jobs in the commercial sector, thus leaving vacancies in manufacturing (especially in the electrical and electronics industries) for the Malay and Indian women.

The overall gains in economic participation by women of all ethnic groups become less impressive when the sex composition of certain occupations is examined. Table 8 clearly shows that some occupations still remain the 'reserves' of women, as such occupations have traditionally been defined as 'women's work'. Thus, women form the majority of the teaching profession, the stenographers and typists, and clerks and cashiers, the domestic service workers, the tailors and dressmakers, and the electronics workers.

The preponderance of women among the electrical and electronics workers calls for a special comment. The electronics industry, together with the textiles and garments industry, form the largest employers of female labour in manufacturing. As we mentioned, industrialisation in Singapore has been heavily dependent on foreign capital, which has been attracted here by the availability of a cheap labour force, the infrastructural services and the special concessions and tax incentives offered by the government to the so-called 'pioneer status' industries. Women are considered by foreign corporate managers to have some special qualities such as docility, diligence, and the 'swift fingers' which make them specially suitable for certain categories of unskilled work. Thus, the new electronics industry, particularly its assembling branches, has become a new 'women's reserve'.<sup>21</sup> Whether working as operatives and semi-skilled workers in industries, or as workers in commerce and the services, women in general are poorly-paid and are rarely provided with further training or promotion opportunities. The net effect is that women workers are low wage-earners, as Table 9a indicates, with 34.4% of the female workers earning less than S\$200 per month, as compared to only 15.6% of the

**Table 7: Working/Employed Females by Industry and Ethnic Group 1957-1978**

Industry	1957			1970			1978		
	Chinese	Malays	Indians	Chinese	Malays	Indians	Chinese	Malays	Indians
Agriculture, forestry & fishing	12.5	8.1	2.8	3.4	1.0	0.3	1.7	0.5	0.6
Mining & quarrying	0.2	-	-	0.1	-	0.1	-	-	0.3
Manufacturing	21.0	3.7	2.1	32.2	31.2	18.9	36.1	55.3	43.5
Electricity, gas and water	0.1	0.1	0.6	0.4	0.2	0.6	0.3	0.8	0.8
Construction	2.2	0.3	1.2	2.0	0.2	0.8	1.9	0.5	1.3
Commerce	16.0	10.9	8.5	19.6	11.8	12.8	26.5	10.9	12.9
Transport & communication	1.0	0.5	2.3	2.4	3.1	3.2	4.7	5.8	6.6
Finance, insurance & business services	2.3	0.6	1.7	3.6	0.9	2.3	8.4	5.8	6.4
Community, social & personal services	44.5	75.7	80.4	36.2	51.6	60.9	20.4	20.4	27.6
Activities not adequately defined	0.2	0.1	0.4	0.1	-	0.1	-	-	-
Total	100.0 76,217	100.0 3,438	100.0 1,441	100.0 136,489	100.0 9,737	100.0 4,375	100.0 250,200	100.0 44,608	100.0 17,491

**Table 8: Employed Females by Selected Occupations in which there were more than 10,000 Female Workers, 1978.**

Source: Same as Table 1.

Selected Occupations	Total Persons	% Female	
		Female	Female
Teachers	20,608	11,915	57.8
Stenographers, typists, card-and-tape punching machine operators	14,608	13,463	92.2
Bookkeepers, financial record clerks, cashiers & related workers	27,159	17,258	63.5
Clerical and related workers not elsewhere classified	70,707	39,605	56.0
Salesmen, shop assistants and related workers	101,640	35,597	35.0
Domestic service workers	15,435	15,032	97.4
Tailors, dressmakers, sewers, upholsterers and related workers	27,308	23,110	84.6
Electrical fitters and related electrical and electronics workers	58,156	40,368	69.4

Source: Labour Force Survey of Singapore, 1978.

**Table 9(a): Employed Persons by Gross Monthly Income and Sex, 1978 (Percent)**

Gross monthly income (S\$)	Males	Females
Under 200	15.6	34.4
200-399	42.3	47.6
400-599	23.0	9.6
600-799	7.8	4.2
800-999	3.7	1.9
1000-1499	5.0	1.8
1500 and over	3.6	0.5
Total	(638889)	(316731)

Source: Labour Force Survey of Singapore, 1978.

**Table 9(b): Median Gross Monthly Income (S\$) by Sex and Occupations, 1978**

	Male	Female	Income differential
All occupations	366	265	101
Professional, technical and related	750	581	169
Administrative and managerial	956	755	201
Clerical and related	418	336	82
Sales	404	200*	204
Services	319	217	102
Production & related transport equipment operators & labourers	344	206	138

Source: Same as Table 9(a).

\*The median income cannot be computed on account of the open-ended category of "below \$200 pm"

male workers. The wage differential between the sexes exists for all the occupational categories, with the largest difference in the administrative and managerial jobs, as well as in the sales jobs.

Although the principle of equal pay is recognised by the government, and is operative in the civil service, it is by no means adhered to in the private sector. Even though women are free to enter into any kinds of jobs, there being no formal barriers, yet sex discrimination occurs in many covert forms, such as the practice of hiring women mainly in the lower-ranks of the occupational structure, the withholding of training and promotion, the preference for single young women to older married women, and the withdrawal of certain fringe benefits from working mothers with large families.

The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to ensure the equal right of men and women to the enjoyment of all economic, social and cultural rights set forth in the present Covenant.

#### Article 3

*International Covenant on Social Economic and Cultural Rights, 16 December 1966*

## V Education

In 1978, the general literacy rate for Singapore's population 10 years and above was 77.4%. Illiteracy is mainly a problem in the older age groups among both men and women. Primary education is free for all citizens, and with the great expansion in educational opportunities over the past twenty years, female students constitute 47.0% of the primary school enrolment, 53.7% of the secondary (academic) enrolment, and 43.7% of the university enrolment (1977).<sup>22</sup> In spite of the nearly 50-50 split in the student population between girls and boys, the expansion of educational opportunities has been by no means even for the sexes. Girls tend to elect (or are channelled into) the academic and commercial streams, rather than the technical stream (despite the preponderance of women in the electronics assembly workforce). In 1978, for example, 72.9% of the students in secondary commercial schools were female, as compared to 27.6% female in the secondary technical stream and 7.9% only in the technical vocational institutes. At the post-secondary level, while 77.8% of the students training at the Institute of Education were women, only 19.2% of those at the technical colleges were women.

At the universities, the sex bias in the subjects chosen is obvious. As in many other countries, girls in Singapore tend to concentrate on the arts and social sciences, and on science subjects, which prepare students mainly as school teachers. Although more and more girls have taken up law, accountancy and business administration, other professions such as medicine, engineering and architecture remain largely male-dominated. Among the entire female workforce in 1978, 9.2% were working as professional, technical and related workers, while only 0.5% were administrative and managerial workers.

The more recent entry of the Malay and Indian female workers into the manufacturing sector has had an interesting effect on the ethnic composition of the highly-educated professional women group. In 1957, as much as 29.1% of the Indian female workforce were engaged as professional, technical and related workers, compared to 11.4% among the Malay and 8.2% among the Chinese. In 1978, the proportion of professional and technical workers among the Indians has fallen to 8.9% only, as compared to the stable 9.8% among the Chinese and the decreased proportion of

5.8% among the Malays. These relative changes stem from the fact that, before Singapore industrialised, only two main types of occupations were open to the Indian and Malay women: the professional and technical jobs for the highly-educated few, and domestic service for those with little or no education. Thus, with the expansion of industrial jobs, Indian and Malay girls with only primary education can now find employment. Non-technical education at the primary and secondary levels clearly prepare girls only for the low-paid jobs in the commercial and service sectors. For those who enter the industries with only some primary education, they are the unskilled and semi-skilled workers. Thus, the effect of non-technical education has been a general low

wage level for the majority of girls who do not make it to higher education. Even for girls with a higher level of education, they tend to suffer discrimination in terms of entry to certain occupations and the treatment received on the job. Thus, for all levels of occupation, women are earning less than their male counterparts, as we have pointed out in the previous section. Furthermore, we find substantial wage differentials between the sexes, even when the level of educational attainment is held constant. Table 12 clearly indicates that the income differential is largest between male and female workers with a tertiary education, and is also substantial for workers at the other end of the educational scale, ie among those with little or no education.

**Table 10: Student Enrolment in Educational Institutions, 1977**

	Total	Male	Female	% Female
Primary	308,342	163,292	145,050	47.0
Secondary				
Academic/bilateral	153,055	70,835	82,220	53.7
Technical	19,100	13,893	5,207	27.6
Commercial	6,031	1,634	4,397	72.9
Technical & Vocational Institutes	10,860	9,998	862	7.9
Technical Colleges	10,576	8,545	2,031	19.2
Institute of Education	1,328	295	1,033	77.8
Universities	8,830	4,972	3,858	43.7

Source: Yearbook of Statistics, Singapore, 1977/78

**Table 11: Percentage Distribution of Student Enrolment in Universities by Sex and Subject of Study, 1977\***

Subject	1977	
	Male	Female
Arts and social sciences	18.7	31.7
Science	16.9	22.9
Law	3.3	4.2
Medicine	8.5	6.0
Dentistry	1.7	1.6
Pharmacy	-	-
Engineering	23.1	4.8
Architecture and Building/Estate Management	4.5	6.1
Commerce & Business Administration	23.3	22.7
Education	-	-
Total	100.0	100.0
	1,566	1,154

\*Choice of subjects upon enrolment/admission. The number of students refers to first year students.

Source: Same as Table 10.

**Table 12: Median Gross Monthly Income (S\$) by Sex and Highest Qualification Attained, 1978**

	Male	Female	Income differential
Never attended school	342	200*	142*
No qualification	348	200*	148*
Primary	334	221	113
Post primary	276	227	49
Secondary	405	315	90
Post secondary	568	437	131
Tertiary	1,547	1,063	484
Qualifications not elsewhere classifiable	1,348	600	748

Source: Same as Table 9(a).

\*The median income cannot be computed on account of the open-ended category of "below \$200 pm"



All appropriate measures shall be taken to educate public opinion and to direct national aspirations towards the eradication of prejudice and the abolition of customary and other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority of women.

### *Article 3*

*Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, 7 November 1975*

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## **VI Marriage, Family and Women's Roles**

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Economic development and an increasing level of education among the general population have resulted in a rising age of marriage for Singapore men and women over the past decade. In 1978, the average age of grooms was 27.8 years, while that for brides was 24.4 years.<sup>23</sup> Among the different ethnic groups, the Chinese marry at ages very close to the national averages, while the Indians marry somewhat earlier, and the Malays the earliest.<sup>24</sup> Among the Malays also, there is a high proportion of teenage brides (aged 15-19), which in 1978 constituted around 23% of all Muslim marriages.<sup>25</sup> In the traditional communities of the three major ethnic groups, all marriages were arranged by the parents, often without consent from the children themselves. In today's society, dating among young people is prevalent, starting at around age 16-17 years. Young people expect to choose their own marriage partners. On the other hand, there is evidence suggesting that many young people are reluctant to marry someone against their parents' approval. Interethnic marriage is not widespread,<sup>26</sup> and between the different ethnic groups, young Indian and Malay women tend more readily than Chinese women to accept some form of marriage arrangement by their parents, although this is to be distinguished from the traditional form of 'total arrangement'.<sup>27</sup>

Owing to a number of historical factors, such as the immigration background of the population which made it impossible for the traditional corporate kin group to be established in the local society, the nuclear family household has long been a predominant pattern of family living in Singapore.<sup>28</sup> This trend has been emphasised in the recent years by the forces of urbanisation, education and Western cultural influences, and by other social factors associated with the form of life in high-rise, high-density public housing. In 1977, 'one family nucleus' households constituted 80.7% of the total number of households.<sup>29</sup> There was very little difference between the ethnic groups (with 81.2% of the Chinese, 82.4% of the Malay and 71.7% of the Indian households falling under this category). However, the Indian sub-community still had a sizeable proportion of 'single-person households' (17.8%), a legacy of the colonial practice of indentured Indian labour. Excluding the single-person households, therefore, the average size of the house-

hold for the Chinese was 5.6, the Malays 6.3, and the Indians, 5.4 in 1977.

Although more and more young women are economically independent, marriage remains the single most important life-goal and having children is considered as one of the important criteria for marital happiness. Children are valued not only for the sense of satisfaction and achievement they bring but also for the financial and emotional support they may provide, especially during the parents' old age. However, given the widespread practice of family planning,<sup>30</sup> and the government's continuous emphasis on population size control, most young women now desire only a small family (with a median number of 2.5 children considered to be ideal).<sup>31</sup> However, the traditional preference for sons still persists to a small extent.<sup>32</sup> The ideal husband-and-wife relationship is conveyed by many young people as the 'companionship type', as in modern Western societies. However, there is a strong emphasis on the husband being the main provider and the wife being a good mother.<sup>33</sup> Recent studies have shown that husbands and wives generally share decision-making over a large number of family matters.<sup>34</sup> And as in other countries, gainful employment of the woman gives her an increased amount of control over her own activities as well as over the family's activities. Nevertheless, household work and childcare remain by and large the wife's responsibility.

The crucial question with regard to a woman's role lies, however, in how women and men view the question of a married woman having her own career. From recent studies made, it is obvious that Singapore men in general oppose the idea of a married woman having an independent career. Husbands would consent to their wives working only if family finances require it, and only when adequate childcare arrangements have already been made. Working women not only encounter discrimination in their work, they also suffer from role strains and role conflicts, and from the general lack of societal support, such as in the provision of adequate childcare services. Non-working women, however, are aware of the opportunity costs of childbearing, in terms of loss of income, and of opportunities for social life and personal independence.<sup>36</sup> Among the different ethnic groups, the Chinese seem to accept somewhat better the fact of a married woman working. This can be inferred from the working status of married couples in a recent sample survey of households.<sup>37</sup> Thus, among the Chinese, some 27.2% of the married couples had both the husband and wife working, while the proportions among the Malays and the Indians were 23.9% and 18.8% respectively. On the other hand, the proportions of couples where only the husband worked were 63.0% among the Chinese, 67.7% among the Malays and 70.6% among the Indians. By many indications, the Indian community seems to be the one which asserts the most amount of control over their women, whether during their young age or after marriage.

The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to ensure the equal right of men and women to the enjoyment of all civil and political rights set forth in the present Covenant.

#### *Article 3*

*International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 16 December 1966*

## **VII Political and Organisational Participation in a Depoliticising Society**

In 1979, out of the 220,000 unionised workers under the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC), the umbrella trade union organisation in Singapore, 89,000 or 38% were women.<sup>38</sup> While this proportion represents a tremendous increase of female trade union membership since the early 1950s, at the same time, it is also a reflection of the great increase in the number of females in the general workforce, especially since 1970. Women's participation in the trade union movement is concentrated in three of the largest affiliates of the Congress, viz, the Singapore Industrial Labour Organization (SILO), the Amalgamated Union of Public Employees (AUPE), and the Pioneer Industries Employees Union (PIEU), where female membership accounted for 56%, 45% and 41% respectively. The concentration of female members in both the SILO and PIEU is due to the fact that many of the industries included in these two unions (particularly the textiles and electronics industries) almost entirely employ females only. So too is the case with the smaller Singapore Teachers Union and the Singapore Bank Employees Union, where women constituted 62% and 54% of their respective membership.<sup>39</sup> The proportion of women officials at the local branch level is quite impressive in some of the unions. In SILO, for example, 31% of its 650 branch officials in 1979 were women; in PIEU, 28% of its 315 officials were women. However, female participation at the executive council level of these unions is very low. Out of the 39 Council members of SILO and PIEU together, only 5 were women. The Central Committee of the NTUC has had a woman member only on two occasions and for a very brief period each time.

In Singapore, although the trade unions do engage in collective bargaining, the ability of the unions to take industrial action has been greatly curtailed since the passing of the Employment Act and the Industrial Relations (Amendment) Act of 1968. The unions' role in collective bargaining was further reduced by the setting up of a National Wages Council in 1971. As defined by the government, the role of the unions has become one partner in the tripartite alliance between the government, capital and labour, all working for the economic stability of Singapore. With the gradual attrition of the role of the unions, union membership went through a period of decline in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Subsequently, the unions have embarked on cooperative business enterprises which also serve to attract new members to the movement.<sup>40</sup> The female workers' involvement in the trade unions must therefore be seen against this background of the role of trade unions in Singapore. As the Secretary for Women's Programmes of the NTUC remarked, there is a 'genuine lack of enthusiasm' for the trade union movement, and the female workers and members are more interested in 'developing themselves through courses like cooking, sewing, etc than in contributing their best in the social and community fields.'<sup>41</sup>

The lack of enthusiasm for the trade union movement is not confined among the women workers, of course, as the general population is largely indifferent to politics. This in itself is a reflection of the overall process of depoliticisation of the Singapore society. Since the People's Action Party came to power in 1959, and has remained the single dominant party ever since, it has successfully controlled the left-wing unions and left-wing parties, while at the same time focused the public's interest and energy singly on economic development. This process of depoliticisation has been most ably described by Chan Heng Chee, a local political scientist.<sup>42</sup> She also noted that the so-called women's movement in Singapore today is devoid of any ideological element, in stark contrast to the earlier days when women were actively involved in the left-wing, nationalistic struggle for independence.<sup>43</sup> Over the last few general elections, the political participation of women has steadily declined, as witnessed in the dwindling number of women candidates put up by the various political parties. Singapore has not had a woman Member of Parliament since the early 1960s. Within the People's Action Party itself, there is no longer an active women's section. Instead, most of the women who want to participate in some form of meaningful public activity do so now at the community centres under the People's Association. These centres cater to the social and recreational needs of local residents, which were previously provided for by the party branches. At the community centres, women can serve on the women's subcommittees, but they seldom become members of the decision-making management committees.

In Singapore today, there are some thirty women's organisations which are mainly professional and charitable organisations, catering to the social and recreational needs of well-educated, middle-class women, and to the welfare needs of some under-privileged groups. While some of these groups have been in existence for a long time, others have sprung up more recently, particularly during the International Women's Year. Some are better organised than others. However, the memberships of these organisations are not broadly-based, and the total membership of the organisations is not known. There has been no federation of women's organisations on the national level until very recently when a Singapore Council of Women's Organisations was formed in February 1980, under the general

auspices of the Singapore Council of Social Service. As a start it has been joined by 15 women's organisations already, which are said to represent some 20,000 women.<sup>44</sup> The effectiveness of this umbrella organisation remains to be seen, and it has yet to implement some creditable action programmes. However, it is unlikely that the philosophy or style of operation of this newly-formed federation will be radically different from the women's organisations in the past. Equally, it is unlikely that the government will tolerate any effective lobbyist group which can pose as a political force outside the government. The philosophy and the style of operation of this women's federation will thus be unlikely to deviate radically from those adopted by women's organisations in the past.

***Noting the Charter of the United Nations reaffirms faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women,***

***Considering the international conventions concluded under the auspices of the United Nations and the specialised agencies promoting equality of rights of men and women,***

***Noting also the resolutions, declarations and recommendations adopted by the United Nations and the specialised agencies promoting equality of rights of men and women,***

***Concerned, however, that despite these various instruments extensive discrimination continues to exist...***

***Concerned that in situations of poverty women have the least access to food, health, education, training and opportunities for employment and other needs...***

***Convinced that the full and complete development of a country, the welfare of the world and the cause of peace require the maximum participation of women on equal terms with men in all fields...***

***Bearing in mind the great contribution of women to the welfare of the family and to the development of society so far not fully recognised, the social significance of maternity and the role of both parents in the family and in the upbringing of children and aware that the role of women in procreation should not be a basis for discrimination but that the upbringing of children requires a sharing of responsibility between men and women and society as a whole,***

***Aware that a change in the traditional role of men as well as the role of women in society and in the family is needed to achieve full equality between men and women, Determined to implement the***

***Preamble to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women,***

***18 December 1979***

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## **VIII Economic Development and Women's Place**

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Singapore's experience with economic development over the last two decades raises a number of issues with regard to the particular roles played by women in the process, as well as with regard to the effects of the development process on women themselves. In this paper, we have noted how women have been drawn into the labour force, what kinds of occupations they have entered into, and what kinds of social and cultural changes have accompanied women's economic participation. The question still remains as to whether women are indeed integrated in Singapore's overall development, and how far women themselves have benefitted from the process.

Soon after Singapore embarked on extensive programmes of industrialisation in the late 1960s, it encountered a severe labour shortage, especially in the labour-intensive branches of the manufacturing industries. To meet this labour shortage, the government resorted on the one hand to granting large numbers of work permits to foreign workers (mainly from nearby Malaysia), and on the other to encouraging the local female population to enter the labour force. Light manufacturing industries were located on the peripheries of large public housing estates and creches were set up in order to tap the large pool of reserve labour among women residing on the populous housing estates. Given the available opportunities, the proportion of women in the labour force has risen steadily, from 24% of the total number employed in 1970 to 33% in 1978. Women's contribution to Singapore's industrial success cannot be ignored. Women's gainful employment has also meant a second wage-packet for their families whose standard of living consequently rises. However, women's work has never been regarded by the government nor by the society at large as a matter of women's equal right to work as men. Rather, women's work is considered to be dispensable when the economy does not require it, or supplementary to men's work at best. Besides, given the fact that women workers are heavily concentrated in the light manufacturing industries financed by foreign capital, women's employment is subject to highly fluctuating international market demands. Thus, when economic recession came in the wake of the world oil crisis, its first impact was on the female workers. In 1974 alone, out of the 16,900 workers who were retrenched, 79% were women.

Singapore has since recovered from the recession of 1973-74, and women have returned to work in increasing numbers. However, the kinds of work that women do, the pay received, the various discriminatory practices faced by both educated and uneducated women in the labour force, are hardly conducive to women's sense of commitment to their work. Married women in particular do not receive societal

support for their special needs arising from their family responsibilities. Hence, the rates of female labour turnover, absenteeism, and drop-out are very high in some industries, which in turn lead both the government and the managers to claim women are not very highly committed workers. As Singapore now enters into the second phase of its industrialisation, one which emphasises capital-intensive and high-technology industries rather than the previous labour-intensive industries, it is most likely that women will again be the first victims of the necessary structural changes. Although the government has set up an industrial skills development fund for the re-training and up-grading of workers' skills, it is by no means clear how women workers will be able to benefit from such government assistance. In fact, it is rather predictable that women will be left out from the initial programmes.

The age-specific female activity rates as presented in Table 2 raises another question in regard to women's roles in Singapore's economic development. As we have observed, the present distribution of the female labour force is unimodal, in that the highest rate of economic participation occurs in the younger age group (20-24), after which the rate of participation drops off for every older age group. However, this has not always been the case. In 1957, for example, the age-specific activity rates actually showed a bimodal pattern, indicating that older women then were able to remain in the work force until 'retirement'. The occupations of women before Singapore industrialised were different, of course. In 1957, nearly 50% of the female workforce were in the community, social and personal services, with another 16% in commerce. These types of occupations do not discriminate against older, married women, as is the case now with manufacturing industries which generally prefer to hire young and single females. Thus, whatever measure of economic independence that older women used to enjoy before is lost to them now. Although Singapore has long been a commercial city, it appears that the experience of women's employment here is somewhat similar to that of women's employment in other developing countries, where the initial impact of economic development has meant a loss in the economic position of women who used to engage in agricultural, or other, income-earning subsistence activities.<sup>45</sup>

Here as elsewhere, rapid economic changes have brought about momentous changes in the social and cultural fabrics of life. Among the different ethnic groups, we have seen that entry into industrial jobs by Malay and Indian women has been much more recent than their Chinese counterparts. In the past, only the highly-educated Malay and Indian women worked as independent professionals, while those with little education would be in the personal services. Today, the largest proportion of both the Malay and Indian female workers are in the manufacturing industries. Industrial work brings with it very different demands and life-styles, as compared to work in the personal services or in family commercial enterprises. Given the fact that both the Malay and the

Indian communities in Singapore are much more 'conservative' communities, in terms of their social and cultural traditions, the introduction of large numbers of their women in the industrial workforce may mean drastic and even traumatic changes in the personal lives of the females, as well as have serious implications for the cultural continuities of their ethnic communities. Unfortunately, this is an area which has not yet been explored by the social scientists.

Economic development in Singapore has been accompanied by a spectacular decline in the population growth rate. Since the institution of the national family planning and population programme in 1966, the two-child family has become the ideal family size for over 50% of the female population. And as we pointed out, the actual size of the family has also continued to decrease. In 1975, Singapore achieved a net reproduction rate of 1.00, which means that women were bearing only two children on the average. This demographic achievement was so significant that social policy-makers in Singapore are beginning to think in terms of planning for zero population growth estimated about the year 2030. The rapid fertility decline since 1966 has come about from a combination of social and economic factors, among which are industrialisation, the rising standard of living, rising level of education, women's participation in the labour force, and not the least, the government's concentrated efforts in promoting family planning. The official view of rapid population growth is heavily tainted with Malthusian arguments; a high population growth rate is seen as an obstacle to economic development. Given this, it can be said that the government's family planning programme is one of the major strategies for economic growth.

Thus, the government's message to the population in encouraging family planning acceptance has always been a utilitarian one. Men and women in Singapore are urged to marry late and bear only two children. The advantages of planning for a small family were often publicised as bringing a higher standard of living for the family. Apart from mentioning that family planning brings better health to the mother enabling her to work (hence bringing in more income for the family) relatively little emphasis has been given to the woman as an individual, such as in terms of her ability to take on alternative roles or opportunities for personal development.

As is compatible with the government's economic growth strategy - 'grow now, redistribute later' - family planning has also been promoted as a means by which the poor can pull themselves up in the social ladder. The poor are said to suffer disadvantages in society because they bear large families. Parents who bear large families are considered socially irresponsible, because they drain society's resources and claim a disproportionate share of the subsidised social services. At no time has it been debated whether the poor are poor because they are also imbedded in a socio-economic order which itself thrives on social inequalities. While Singa-



pore has successfully eradicated abject poverty of the kind that prevails in many other developing countries, poverty cases are treated as marginal and 'abnormal' in a generally affluent society with full employment. The national family planning programme has therefore placed the onus of responsibility for self-improvement upon the lower social strata, and the women among them.

The rising level of affluence has had a most interesting effect on the personal outlook of women and on their participation in public life. We have briefly touched on women's participation in the trade union movement and their lack of involvement in politics, against a background of the depoliticisation of the local population. The same process of depoliticisation has been accompanied by the phenomenon of 'embourgeoisement' of feminine values. This phenomenon, although very difficult to document, has been noted by Chan Heng Chee who quoted a former woman leader as saying '... this economic uplift (in the 1960s) and the influence of western cultures have turned many women towards the pursuit of luxury and vanity. This has produced a general psychology of self-consolation. They have disregarded the movement for the enjoyment of the present peace and leisure. This unhealthy phenomenon has drastically reduced the movement to its present ebb.'<sup>46</sup> With rising affluence came higher expectations for a better standard of living, which in Singapore, as in other developing countries of the Third World, means the standards of material comfort set by the industrialised West. Hence, middle-class and upper working-class families have adopted consumer tastes which are universally promoted by the multinational advertisement industry. Women in particular fall victim to modern household appliances, fashions and beauty-aids, which together bring a 'western' middle-class conception of femininity: family-centeredness, beauty, leisure and enjoyment of the present.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, the women's organisations have concentrated their activities on leisure and social events (including beauty pageantry) apart from periodical charitable projects for the 'unfortunate poor.'

In questioning women's role in Singapore's development, we are not denying that certain improvements have been made in women's lives, in that women now have a wider range of educational and occupational opportunities, that women's employment brings certain measures of independence and decision-making power within the household, that women who adopt family planning can better coordinate their child-rearing responsibilities with their work and other activities, or that women in general have shared some of the national wealth. But the question we must ask is: are such changes only superficial compared to women's role in the general restructuring of society? The question is not simply whether inequality between the sexes still exists, but whether or not the uplift in women's economic and social statuses has occurred as an integral part in the opening up of the social class structure, or the redistribution of wealth and power? In

Singapore, as in many other developing countries, the changes in women's roles have come about mainly as a consequence of general socio-economic changes. The interests of women have seldom been incorporated in state planning, whether it is planning for industrialisation, employment, population growth, education or other social services. Neither do women play a role in the national policy-making process which charts the course of Singapore's development. If women have benefitted somewhat from development, they have benefitted only as the passive recipients. It may be that Singapore has chosen a particular path to economic development because of many exigencies in her geo-political social and cultural environment, and because of the ideology and style of its government. It is also a fact that the local population, by tradition, expects firm guidance from a strong government. However, it is by no means clear why women should have been given such a secondary place in the state's planning.

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- 22 Department of Statistics, Singapore, *Yearbook of Statistics 1978/9*.
- 23 *Ibid*.
- 24 The difference between the age at first marriage of Malays and that of the national average is not great, however. In 1978, the mean age of Muslim grooms was 27.4 years, while that of Muslim brides was 23.5 years. *Ibid*.
- 25 *Ibid*.
- 26 Between 1966 and 1975, the rate of interethnic marriage averaged at a very stable rate of 4.4% among all marriages registered each year. Eddie C Y Kuo and Riaz Hassan, 'Ethnic Inter-marriage in a Multiethnic Society', in Eddie C Y Kuo and Aline K Wong (eds) 1979, *op cit*, p 171.
- 27 Aline K Wong, 1975, *op cit*. Some preliminary findings from a 1979 survey of 1000 teenagers by Saw Swee-Hock and Aline K Wong also supported this observation.
- 28 According to the 1957 Census, the proportion of 'one family nucleus' households was 63.5%. By 1966, this proportion has increased to 76.4%. See Stephen Yeh, 'The Size and Structure of Households in Singapore, 1957-1966', *Malayan Economic Review*, Vol 12, NO 2, 1967, pp 97-115. Based on the 1966 estimates, Peter Chen calculated the proportion of nuclear family households to be 51% in 1957, and 57% in 1970. Peter S J Chen, 'Policies Affecting the Family and Fertility Behaviour', in Peter S J Chen and James T Fawcett (eds) *Public Policy and Population Change in Singapore*. New York: The Population Council, 1979, p 188.
- 29 Department of Statistics, Singapore, *Report on Survey of Households*, April 1977, p 24.
- 30 In 1977, some 71% of the married female population aged 15-44 were currently practising family planning. This figure included 22% sterilised already. Singapore Family Planning and Population Board, *Report of the Second National Family Planning and Population Survey in Singapore 1977*, p 4.
- 31 *Ibid*, p 2.
- 32 The median preferred number of sons was 1.6, as compared to 1.4 for daughters. *Ibid*, p 2.
- 33 Preliminary findings from a 1979 survey of 1000 teenagers, aged 14-21, by Saw Swee-Hock and Aline K Wong.
- 34 See Peter S J Chen, *A Comparative Study of Husband-Wife Communication and Family Planning in Four Asian Countries: National Report on Singapore*, Bangkok: UN ECAFE, 1973. Also, Aline K Wong, 'Women's Status and Changing Family Values: Implications of Maternal Employment and Educational Attainment', in Eddie C Y Kuo and Aline K Wong (eds), 1979, *op cit*, pp 40-61.

- 35 Aline K Wong, 1979, *op cit*.
- 36 *Ibid*.
- 37 *Report on Survey of Households*, April 1977, p 72.
- 38 Yu-Foo Yee Shoon, Secretary for Women's Programmes, NTUC, 'The Responsibilities and Aspirations of Working Women in Singapore: Women's Involvement in the Trade Union Movement', paper presented at the NTUC Seminar on *The Responsibilities and Aspirations of Working Women in Singapore*, January 13-14, 1979.
- 39 *Ibid*.
- 40 Pang Eng-Fong and Thelma Kay, 'Change and Continuity in Singapore's Industrial Relations System', Department of Sociology, University of Singapore, Working Paper No 35, May 1974; Delice Gan, 'The Changing Role of the Singapore National Trades Union Congress in National Development, 1961-1975', unpublished Honours Thesis, Department of Sociology, University of Singapore, 1976/77.
- 41 Yu-Foo Yee Shoon, *op cit*.
- 42 Chan Heng-Chee, 'Politics in an Administrative State: Where has the Politics Gone?' in Seah Chee Meow (ed) *Trends in Singapore*, Singapore University Press, for the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1975, pp 51-68. Chan Heng-Chee, *The Dynamics of One Party Dominance: The PAP at the Grass-Roots*, Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1976.
- 43 Chan Heng-Chee, 'Notes on the Mobilization of Women into the Economy and Politics of Singapore', in Wu Teh-Yao (ed) *Political and Social Change in Singapore*, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Southeast Asian Perspectives, No 3, November 1975.
- 44 *Straits Times*, Singapore, 16 February, 1980. Some of the work programmes proposed by the Council, as revealed by its protem chairman, include: credit unions, insurance agencies, co-operatives or other enterprises, apart from the coordination of existing programmes and activities of the member organisations. *Straits Times*, 23 February, 1980.
- 45 See for example, Ester Boserup, *Woman's Role in Economic Development*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1970. Irene Tinker, 'The Adverse Impact of Development on Women', in Irene Tinker and Michele Bo Bramsen (eds), *Women and World Development*, Overseas Development Council, 1976, pp 22-34.
- 46 Chan Heng Chee, 1975, *op cit*.
- 47 See Mary Yeo Chuan-Hua, 'The Cultural Implications of Multinational Corporations for Singapore Women: An Exploratory Study', unpublished Honours Thesis, Department of Sociology, University of Singapore, 1979/80.