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# A politics of accommodation: Women and the People's Action Party in Singapore

Lenore T. Lyons

*University of Wollongong*, [lenorel@uow.edu.au](mailto:lenorel@uow.edu.au)

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# **A politics of accommodation: Women and the People's Action Party in Singapore**

In 2001, women's parliamentary representation in Singapore reached its highest level for thirty years. In the national elections held in November that year, 10 women were elected (representing 12% of elected seats in parliament). In July 2002, an additional five women were appointed to parliament through the Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP) scheme, increasing women's overall share of the seats in parliament to an unprecedented 15.9%. While this figure is on par with the international and regional average (15.4%) for women's parliamentary representation in a single or lower house of parliament (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2003), Singapore still lags behind the United Nations target of 30% spelt out in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. The current number of women in Singapore's parliament represents a substantial increase over the previous electoral result of 4.8% in 1996, and the so-called 'dark years' between 1970 and 1984 when there were no women in parliament at all. 1984 was a watershed year, not only because it heralded the presence of women MPs after a 14 year absence, but also because it marked the start of the People's Action Party's electoral and constitutional reform agenda to foster a more 'consensual' style of government. In this article I examine the role that these reforms have played in increasing women's presence in government. My analysis begins with an overview of the international literature on women's legislative representation, followed by a brief discussion of the Singaporean political system. Through an examination of women's participation in party politics and the parliamentary system, I argue that recent changes to the electoral system have had a mixed impact on women's political representation.

## **Women and Political Representation**

Although many women throughout the world have achieved formal voting rights, the world average for women's share of the parliamentary seats in both upper and lower houses combined is only 15.2% (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2003). The gender 'representation gap' in women's political participation thus remains substantial. While some advocates for increasing women's representation in legislatures base their arguments around the issue of 'descriptive representation' – the view that parliament should be a mirror of the nation as a whole – others focus on the skills and values that women bring to government. Increasing women's electoral representation may lead to an increasing diversity of experiences and views among representatives (Darcy et al. 1994), and improve opportunities for parties and parliaments to deal with issues of significance to women, including the development of 'woman-friendly policies' (Lovenduski and Norris 1993; Reynolds 1999).

Most studies of gender inequality in legislative representation are based on the analysis of wealthy, industrialized countries<sup>i</sup>, although a number of more recent studies have undertaken cross-national comparisons that include developing countries (Kenworthy and Malami 1999; Reynolds 1999). These studies suggest that socioeconomic, cultural and political factors all influence the level of women's political representation, although scholars differ in the degree of emphasis that they place on one factor over another. In her overview of obstacles to women's participation in parliament, Nadezdha Shvedova (2002: 2) argues that 'political structures rather than social factors play a more significant role in women's parliamentary recruitment'. Similarly, in their cross-national study of 146 countries, Kenworthy and Malami (1999) argue that while socioeconomic factors (such as the proportion of women working outside the home) are important, they are weaker than political and cultural determinants. These studies paint a complex picture of the many diverse, inter-related and mutually reinforcing factors that affect the level of women's political representation. While they

suggest that there is no ‘simple-fit’ solution to addressing the problem of women’s low levels of representation, many scholars agree that the political culture within political parties and the structure of the electoral system have a significant impact on whether women achieve higher than average representation.

The cultural factors said to influence women’s election chances include religion<sup>ii</sup>, egalitarianism<sup>iii</sup>, and sex role ideology.<sup>iv</sup> Cultural values are said to influence the criteria used by party gatekeepers in their selection processes as well as determine whether women nominate as candidates (Inglehart et al. 2002: 322-3). Many of these studies utilise large quantitative data sets that seek to correlate levels of political representation against cultural attributes (e.g. religious identification) or attitudinal indices (e.g. support for ‘traditional’ values). In these accounts, culture is treated as a fixed and knowable variable, rather than as a set of contested discourses embedded in power relations. Culture and tradition become conflated, such that women’s political absence is mapped along a continuum marked by a series of dualisms: traditional/modern, oppressed/equal, authoritarian/democratic. The failure to critically interrogate the meanings associated with ‘culture’, along with the lack of in-depth historical and country-specific case studies, means that these studies tend to rely on a superficial discussion of ‘cultural attributes’ rather than a nuanced analysis of gender relations.

Among the political factors said to affect women’s political representation are the degree of political democracy<sup>v</sup>; the partisan composition of the legislature<sup>vi</sup>; the prevalence of a ‘masculine model’ of political life<sup>vii</sup>; and the degree of party support for women candidates.<sup>viii</sup> Where women are selected as political candidates, their success at election time is linked to the level of power and prestige associated with the office for which they are standing<sup>ix</sup>; incumbency and degree of competition for seats (Chou et al. 1990; Darcy et al. 1994); the level of contact and cooperation with other organizations, including trade unions (Shvedova 2002) and women’s organisations

(Matland 2002); and an electoral system which is favourable for women. Many argue that proportional representation (PR) electoral systems rather than majoritarian systems improve women's chances of being elected (Lovenduski and Norris 1993; Rule 1994; Matland 2002: 6).<sup>x</sup> The study of 'political culture' tends to suffer from the same limitations as the broader discussion of culture identified above, with the result that many studies resort to complex and detailed analysis of electoral processes and ignore the social relations that give rise to and shape these systems. Wilma Rule (1994: 689) claims that,

favorable societal conditions will not substitute for unfavorable electoral systems for women to reach their optimum representation in parliament and local legislatures. But unfavorable contextual conditions – including cultural biases and discriminatory practices - can be overcome to a great extent by alternate electoral systems.

Few countries have embarked on changes to their electoral systems as a means of boosting women's representation. For this reason, women have found it more productive to address party processes and party culture rather than the electoral system itself. These demands have had mixed outcomes, with party political culture itself inevitably affecting the strategies that women are able to employ. Women have largely kept to the rules of the political game and party divisions remain important barriers to women's collaboration across political lines.

Given the emphasis that many studies place on the form that the electoral system takes and the influence of party attitudes on women's parliamentary representation, my interest is in examining how these two factors have impacted on women's election chances in Singapore. Singapore is an interesting case study because of its economic and political stability and diverse multicultural population. It is ranked by the World Bank as a 'high income country' with a GNP per capita of almost US\$30,000 (World Bank 2001: 275). The People's Action Party has been in power since the

first contested elections during British Colonial rule in 1959, and has dominated the political scene since Independence. The population of 3.4 million is made up of 77% Chinese, 14% Malays, 8% Indians and a mixture of 'Others'. The dominant religion is Buddhism (42.5%) followed by Islam (14.9%) and Christianity (14.6%) (Singapore Department of Statistics 2000: 6).

## **Overview of the political system in Singapore**

Singapore achieved Independence in 1965, and both men and women have had formal voting rights since that date. Singapore has a unicameral government modelled after the Westminster system with each parliamentary term five years in length. The Constitution provides for an elected President who is the Head of State and who appoints the Prime Minister and the other Cabinet members from among the elected Members of Parliament. The Cabinet is responsible for all Government policies and the day-to-day administration of the affairs of the state.

The People's Action Party came to power in the first fully contested Legislative Assembly of 1959. After a short-lived federation with the Malayan states, the PAP formed the first government of the independent republic in 1965. The post-Independence period has been characterized by the dominance of the PAP and what has been referred to as 'illiberal democracy' (Rodan 1993) or 'communitarian democracy' (Chua 1995). The PAP has effectively restricted the growth of a participatory parliamentary system and instead fostered a 'mass society' characterised by a lack of political institutions between the state and the people (Haas 1989; Tamney 1996). Hussin Mutalib (2000: 316) claims that Singapore's model of 'inclusionary corporatism' by which he means that the PAP plays 'an interventionist, centrally coordinated and paternalistic role in many sectors of society', has led to political compliance and depoliticisation amongst the citizenry. Chua Beng-Huat (1995), however, cautions against overly emphasising authoritarianism, and acknowledges both 'democratic' and 'authoritarian' features of PAP governance. The PAP espouses a

communitarian ideology characterised by ‘pragmatism’ and ‘survivalism’ which informs both party-political and non-government engagement in political life and has as its overriding goal continued economic growth.

Singapore has a small and often controversial political opposition. Opposition parties were effectively destroyed in the post-Independence period through a series of deft political moves by the PAP. Although there are currently over 20 officially registered political parties in Singapore, they are fragmented and often racked by internal division. Hussin Mutalib (2000) attributes the lack of a strong opposition to the ‘PAP factor’ by which he refers to a culture of ‘soft authoritarianism’ and rigid adherence to the government’s values and belief systems. The unicameral parliament and ‘first-past-the-post’ electoral system have also reduced the electoral opportunities of small political parties that lack the resources and political machinery of the PAP. More significant, however, has been the PAP’s central role in grassroots activity including local council governance and cadre training, as well as its part in appointing executives and technical managers within the bureaucracy and non-government fields (military, statutory boards, education and health sectors). The media is effectively state-controlled, and the labour movement has been co-opted. Added to this mix is the government’s successful delivery of economic prosperity that dampens public demand for change.

Despite the overwhelming strength of the PAP, the party’s parliamentary control began to weaken in the 1980s. In 1984, the PAP suffered a 12.6% swing against it in the general elections, with the opposition polling 35% of the national vote, although this only translated into two seats (Thio 1997: 43).<sup>xi</sup> Responding to perceived community pressure for greater involvement in political life and policy-making, the PAP embarked on a range of initiatives intended to counter what it saw as the ‘destabilising tendencies’ of the ‘one person one vote’ system: the introduction of Non-constituency Members of Parliament and Nominated Members of Parliament; the establishment of a Feedback Unit and dialogue sessions for individuals to comment on government policy; the

establishment of Group Constituency Representatives; and the sanctioning of a range of NGOs (see Lyons 2000). These initiatives represent a significant change not only in the way in which the PAP government interacts with its citizens, but also in the way that the electoral system operates.

Group Representative Constituencies (GRCs) were introduced in 1988. Prior to this date, the electoral system was based on a number of single member constituencies from which one Member of Parliament was elected. Under the current GRC system, constituencies consist of up to six members, with the electorate casting their vote for a team of candidates, one of whom must be from a specified racial minority (Malay, Indian or 'Other'). The team with the highest number of votes in a GRC is elected into parliament. The system was introduced to guarantee a fixed multi-racial element in parliament as a way of avoiding the possibility of minority groups engaging in communal politics against the Chinese majority. For opposition candidates (including women), the GRC scheme has made it even more difficult to get elected because a party must be able to field a slate of candidates with the right racial mix – a difficult task for small opposition groups.

Following the general election of 1984 the government amended the Constitution to provide for Non-Constituency Members of Parliament (NCMP) with the aim of ensuring 'the representation in Parliament of a minimum number of Members from a political party or parties not forming the Government' (cited in Thio 1997: 44). The NCMP system is designed to introduce an opposition element into parliament by providing the top three losers of political parties not forming the government a seat on a 'second-past-the-post' basis. The system only operates if no opposition candidate has been directly elected into parliament and each candidate must have polled a minimum of 15% of the total number of votes. While NCMPs share the same parliamentary privileges and immunities as normal MPs, they have limited voting rights and do not play a role in the running of town councils. The number of NCMPs in parliament has remained small, however, due to the presence of a small number of genuinely elected opposition candidates.



The Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP) scheme was introduced in 1990 to co-opt alternative non-partisan voices into parliament. On the recommendations of a Special Parliamentary Select Committee, up to nine NMPs can be appointed for a term of between two and a half to three years. They have the same rights, privileges and voting restrictions as NCMPs. Candidates must be persons:

... who have rendered distinguished public service, or who have brought honour to the Republic, or who have distinguished themselves in the field of arts and letters, culture, the sciences, business, industry, the professions, social or community service or the labour movement (cited in Thio 1997: 45).

There is no question that these constitutional reforms have had a significant impact on both the electoral process and the operation of parliament. NMPs, in particular, have provided new voices and raised new concerns in the PAP dominated parliament. At the same time, these reforms have negatively affected the chances of opposition parties being elected.

## **Women in Singapore's Parliament**

As stated in the introduction, women's representation in parliament has only recently exceeded 10%. Table 1 provides an overview of the number of women MPs since 1959 when five women entered the Legislative Assembly. This number dropped steadily over the next three decades and did not rise again until the late 1990s. Currently, women account for 10 out of a total of 84 MPs, and five out of a total of nine NMPs (see Table 2). Women MPs have largely been of Chinese ethnicity, although in the most recent elections one Malay woman and one Indian woman were returned.

[Table 1, Table 2]

All of the serving women MPs since 1968 (the first contested election after Independence) have been PAP candidates. Although opposition parties have stood women candidates in almost every general election, all opposition MPs and NCMPs have been men. During the ‘dark years’ when there were no women MPs (1970-1984)<sup>xii</sup>, the PAP did not field any female candidates. Given the predominance of the PAP during these years, and the electoral success of PAP candidates, the failure of the PAP to select women candidates is a significant factor in their absence. For this reason, it is important to have an understanding of the views and attitudes of the party towards women’s participation in politics.

### **The PAP and women in politics**

It is commonly asserted that when the PAP came to power in 1959 it did so with the strong support of the women’s vote (Chew 1994). The PAP’s platform included a pledge to improve the status of women, in particular by abolishing polygamy, and establishing a set of laws protecting women’s rights in marriage (called the Women’s Charter). While women’s legal status in marriage changed dramatically with the passing of the Women’s Charter, there are still many areas where the legal position of women is different to that of men, including tax laws, inheritance laws, and immigration laws (AWARE 1988: 22). Although Singapore became a signatory to the UN Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1995, the government continues to argue that these anomalies are internal and/or private matters.

Although my interest here is specifically on parliamentary representation, data suggest that women have limited roles in other spheres of government policy-making. The current female labour force

participation rate is 53.9%, and 28% of women are employed in professional and technical occupations, and yet women make up only 8% of directors of both government-linked companies and of statutory boards (Singapore Department of Statistics 2000: 3). Only one of the five City Mayors is a woman, and only two out of 19 permanent secretaries in the civil service are women (AWARE 2001: 2).

There are no women currently serving in Cabinet. In 1988, two female MPs were appointed as Ministers – Dr Seet Ai Mee as Minister of State for Education and Community Development and Dr Aline Wong as Minister of State for Health. When Dr Seet was later appointed as Acting Minister for Community Development, she became the only female member of Cabinet (although not as a full minister). She was ousted from her ward in the 1991 General Election and Cabinet became an all-male preserve once again. No women were appointed to Cabinet at the last General Election in 2001, and the likelihood of women entering the ‘inner circle’ is diminished by the fact that no women are serving as ‘apprentice ministers’ – all ten Ministers of State are men. Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong commented at the time that the new Cabinet was formed that: ‘I hope of course that over time, there will be female faces who would be at the second-tier level at least’ (Tan and Neo 2003).

Within the PAP structure, women have tended to play a supporting role. The Central Executive Committee (CEC) is the chief policy making arm of the PAP and wields considerable political power. At the 2002 Party Conference, one recently elected woman MP, Mrs Lim Hwee Huan, was appointed to the CEC, and another MP, Dr Amy Khor, was appointed as Chair of the CEC Subcommittee on Information/Feedback. Mrs Lim also serves as the Chairman of the PAP Women’s Wing. One woman MP also currently serves on the executive committee of the party’s youth wing (Young PAP). The PAP currently has 84 branches, representing the number of seats in parliament, and these are headed by the 82 PAP MPs and two other branch chairmen (representing branches in

opposition electorates). Through their roles as branch chairmen (sic) PAP women MPs have an opportunity to participate in party political activities.

The PAP Women's Wing was established in 1988, in partial response to the return of women to the parliament and as a way of supporting and encouraging more women to participate in politics. At the time, all four women MPs were given specific responsibilities within the organization. The Women's Wing has received considerable criticism from some women for its failure to take up the cause of gender equality. In response to these criticisms, the first Women's Wing chairman Dr Aline Wong (MP) commented that the organization did not to act as a pressure group: 'Our role is to support the PAP and national issues, and to bring out awareness among women of national issues' (The Straits Times 1992: n.pg). These criticisms may reflect an ideological divide between the aspirations of women who see the Women's Wing as having a more direct role in influencing policy, and the party's view that it should work to address government defined 'problems', including 'helping single women find suitable husbands, the declining birth rate and problems relating to single-parent families' (Lam 1993: 124). According to the Women's Wing, national issues of concern to women are those issues associated with marriage, reproduction and childcare. This view is supportive of broader PAP ideology that seeks to position women's primary role in nation-building as wives and mothers (Heng and Devan 1995).

Given the emphasis that previous studies of women's political representation place on the role of party political culture, my interest is in exploring the extent to which the absence of women in parliament is reflective of the PAP's gender ideology. When the PAP's election committee chairman Goh Chok Tong (who later become Singapore's second Prime Minister) was asked in 1980, why the PAP had not fielded any woman candidates, he replied:

Can you find a woman who has the same kind of quality as a man, who is as good as a man, and whose husband or potential husband or boyfriend would allow that woman to carry on a hazardous and time-consuming profession? (cited in Lam 1993: 122).

His comments prompted a backlash amongst women who voiced their opinions in local newspapers, and in 1984 the PAP fielded three women, all of whom were returned. In response to a query as to why she stood for election, one of the newly elected women MPs, Dr Dixie Tan replied: ‘There was no question of saying ‘No’ to politics – no woman MP for 14 years and you throw me a challenge like that. My whole family felt the same’ (cited in Wang and Teo 1993: 294). Dr Tan was anxious, however, to deflect concern that she would specialize in ‘women’s issues’:

Forget about the fact that I would be a woman MP. I will serve my constituents like any other MP, male or female. I will not confine myself to articulating only women’s views (cited in Wang and Teo 1993: 294).

This was a view reiterated by the other two women MPs elected at the same time (see Wang and Teo 1993).

These responses reflect five continuing themes in PAP discourse about women and politics: 1) **differential ability** (there is a tangible difference in women’s and men’s abilities, qualifications and experience, and this impacts on their suitability as political candidates); 2) **traditional attitudes** (women are unlikely to self-select as political candidates because of the traditional attitudes of their husbands, families and community); 3) **gender differences** (unlike men, women politicians face unique problems associated with their roles as wives and mothers, i.e. ‘double burden’); 4) **gendered behaviour and traits** (concern that women MPs may focus on ‘softer’ issues like the family or women’s issues at the expense of the ‘tougher’ economic and political concerns of the

government); and 5) **gender neutrality** (insistence that neither the government nor the party are gender biased, i.e the problem lies elsewhere).

The following quotation, although lengthy, clearly expresses these concerns. Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong made the comments in 2003 in relation to women's political role in Singapore:

The women MPs have made a significant contribution to debate in Parliament. They have added a different dimension to the deliberations, and presented their views and perspectives articulately, freshly and persuasively. We will work even harder to bring more women into Parliament the next time. *The task should get easier as more women advance in their careers and distinguish themselves.* But I think that for quite a long time to come it will continue to be harder to recruit women than men into politics. *It is not so easy for a married woman to cope with the demands of being an MP, plus her professional career, plus her responsibilities as a wife and mother.*

All else being equal, the task is still probably harder for the women than for the men. If they are too soft-spoken they may not be able to lead and mobilise their grassroots leaders. Yet if they are too assertive, their constituents may not accept their leadership, because this does not gel with the traditional image of women in the minds of many Singaporeans. Rightly or wrongly, this is still the attitude of significant segments of our population, women as well as men. It reflects well on our women MPs that they have done well despite these additional challenges (Lee 2003: n.pg, emphasis added).

There are many complex and subtle messages in these comments, and given their currency and the fact that Lee Hsien Loong is such a senior member of the current government, they warrant detailed attention.

Lee begins by reiterating that it is the government's intention to have more women in parliament but that the 'limited pool of available talent' makes this task difficult. The task is becoming easier, however, 'as more women advance in their careers and distinguish themselves'. Speaking almost ten years earlier, Lee commended that: 'It is not that we have not tried to find them. But unfortunately, despite our best efforts, we have not discovered enough women, who are both suitable and willing, to field as candidates and appoint as ministers' (Ng 1994: 20). Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong too lamented these difficulties: '... I wring my hands in desperation. I cannot get women candidates ... It is no for want of trying. ... In the end, one has got to be neutral and whether it is a man or woman it does not matter' (Ibrahim 1995: 1).

The view that there are limited numbers of suitable candidates to stand for parliament is not only voiced in relation to women. The PAP regularly claims that it is difficult to find qualified and able candidates for the task of leading the country. This 'crisis of leadership' has become part of the PAP's wider culture of governance and is used to explain not only the party's recruitment strategies, but also issues such as the appointment of key bureaucrats, the role of the 'old guard' (particularly former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew) in decision making, the remuneration provided to parliamentarians, and the treatment of opposition parties. To advocate for a simple 'gender equality' model (50% of seats), would therefore undermine the party's emphasis on 'meritocracy'.

This is apparent in the party's continual rejection of a quota system for women. In its most recent policy statement to the government - 'Remaking Singapore: Views of Half the Nation' - local feminist organization, the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE), proposed that the government appoint at least one woman Minister by the end of 2003 and at least three women Ministers by 2005, and that the government achieve at least 30% representation of women in parliament by the next election due in 2006 (AWARE 2001: 2).<sup>xiii</sup> The PAP flatly rejected the

notion of a quota system. Such a view is in direct contrast to concerns about ensuring the representation of ethnic minorities through the GRC system. Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's views on why ethnicity is more important than gender in relation to parliamentary representation were reported in the *Straits Times* in 1996:

He said that unlike women, minority candidates in GRCs faced the problem of voters preferring same-race candidates, even though GRCs were formed for all constituencies to be integrated racially. If there were no minority candidates in Parliament one day, there would be grave disquiet in minority communities and this would threaten the political system. When it came to women, however, the problem was finding suitable women MPs, he said. The NMP scheme had helped to get more women into Parliament as the demands on NMPs were less onerous than on elected MPs, he said. He added that setting a quota on the number of women MPs through the GRC or a similar scheme would neither encourage nor help qualified women to enter politics (The Straits Times 1996: 23).

According to Goh, the problem facing women is not voter discrimination but the lack of suitable women candidates. According to this view, women would face few problems getting elected if only the party could find them.

In explaining why the women simply 'can't be found', the PAP leadership is careful to invoke a combination of explanations that revolve around traditional attitudes within the community and gendered responsibilities within the home (itself a reflection of traditional sex roles), rather than a simple focus on skills and qualifications. In trying to find women who are 'suitable and willing', the PAP is faced with a social environment in which women 'choose' not to become politicians because of the burdens associated with balancing working life with family. According to this view, women



are unlikely to consider a political career because (unlike men) they face additional demands as 'wives and mothers'. Prior to the 2001 general election, Lee Hsien Loong commented that:

The men can say "I leave it to my wife to look after the home"...

The women can't vouch that the husbands will do a bit more at home to help.

It's not easy to transfer *all the burden* to the men (Mathi 2001: 4, emphasis added).

The reason why women can't 'transfer all the burden', according to PAP leaders, is because of Singapore's 'traditional Asian culture'. Speaking in 2001, Minister without Portfolio Lim Boon Heng commented that:

What makes some of them [women] hesitate more to come forward is because of the role that women have to play within the family and in society. So *unless a woman has a very understanding spouse*, it is difficult. Here we are talking about changing the mindsets of men, rather than changing the attitudes of women (Long 2001: H7, emphasis added).

When asked whether Singapore would ever have a woman Prime Minister, Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew commented:

'I don't see why not, if there are enough tough-minded women prepared to give up their free time to go into politics'. But in reality it was difficult in an Asian society like Singapore for a woman to make the changes in family life, so she can serve in politics (Chua 2000: n.pg).

According to this view, the problems associated with traditional cultural views of women's place are firmly located in the private realm of the family – neither the government nor the party it seems espouse such traditional views and responsibility for changing them firmly rests with women and

their families. The government is ready to welcome more women into parliament as soon as they sort out these ‘private matters’:

It’s not men not wanting to share power. That is an issue in other countries. But in Singapore *it’s a level playing field*. The issue we face is whether women would like to make use of opportunities in the political arena. There isn’t pressure. It’s an open choice. *The ball is in the women’s court* (Tan 1995: 6, emphasis added).

Implied in this comment is the perception that women stay out of politics by choice rather than by exclusion – a view shared by women MPs themselves (Wang 1994: 27).

Such gender-neutral views of the political sphere overlook the extent to which gender discrimination is an intrinsic and accepted part of social life. Responding to a series of letters to the Editor of the *Straits Times* in 2002, Jennifer Lee, then President of the Singapore Council of Women’s Organisations (SCWO), commented that: ‘Until we have achieve more equal sharing of the responsibilities of home and family between men and women, and much more widespread and substantial work-life effectiveness programmes in the workplace, this balancing of roles will continue to hold women back’ (Lee 2002: n.pg). Jennifer Lee also commented that the fact that women do not participate in National Service also impacts on their participation in politics. National Service provides men with an opportunity to become more aware of national issues, and is also a primary means by which young men are identified and groomed for positions in government (Lee 2002: n.pg).

Given the PAP’s central role in the manufacture of Singaporean culture and Asian values, I question the extent to which such ‘traditions’ are said to be inherited and immutable. The PAP has embarked on a wider-ranging program of socio-cultural engineering and has successfully ‘manufactured’

tradition in the service of modernity (Wee 1995). This is not to suggest that differential sex roles associated with mothering do not have historical and cultural origins, but to argue that women as mothers serve an important political role for the PAP. The government has sought to strengthen this role through a range of social policies and financial incentives (Lyons-Lee 1998). For example, although Lee Hsien Loong was able to comment in 2001 that ‘The Singapore woman is not behind the man, but stands side-by-side with him at the forefront, taking on challenges of making Singapore a better place for all of us’ (Mathi 2001: 4), he reiterated that for the purposes of government policy, men remain the official ‘head of the household’.<sup>xiv</sup>

Women’s self-selection as political candidates is therefore mediated by the presence of political system dominated by an authoritarian party-government and a political culture in which women are seen primarily as mothers and wives. Those women who overcome these challenges and stand for parliament, face the difficult task of negotiating the fine line between being perceived as ‘too soft’ or ‘too hard’. These views are reflected in interviews with female voters printed in an article in a local women’s magazine just after the general elections of 1991. Interviewees lamented that women MPs did not ‘stand up for themselves’; ‘tended to be too soft’; ‘lacked finesse’; and had ‘poor interpersonal skills’ (Mohamed and Srinivasan 1991: 43-4).<sup>xv</sup> In her study of the social construction of the ‘political woman’ in the Singapore media, Phyllis Chew (2001: 728) uses a socio-linguistic analysis to highlight the ways in which ideology keeps women away from positions of leadership. She argues that male and female candidates are presented differently; women are packaged as wives, as those who are helped, as mothers, and as the ‘weaker sex’. The significance of this political culture in determining whether women (or indeed men) come forward as political candidates cannot be underestimated. Unlike men, potential women candidates are placed in the difficult position of proving their worthiness against masculine characteristics. This is why Goh Chok Tong points to the NMP scheme as more suitable for women – the duties associated with this

position are 'less onerous' (read: less masculine). When women fail to meet the selection criteria they are informed that it 'doesn't matter anyway' - after all, gender is irrelevant in politics.

At the same time that it encourages aspiring women MPs to be more like men (to become 'tough-minded'), the party acknowledges that women bring different qualities and values to politics. Lee Hsien Loong suggests that they bring another 'dimension' to politics. This view points to the multiple contradictions in the PAP's own discourse. For the party to ignore the issue of a gender gap in representation would risk alienating women voters. To invite women's 'different perspectives' into parliament would highlight the masculinist assumptions underpinning both party and parliamentary political culture and thus call into question the party's insistence that politics is a gender neutral arena. The solution for PAP leaders becomes one of re-asserting meritocracy and gender neutrality, and blaming women's political absence on women themselves.

The recent increase in women's political representation in Singapore at first appears anomalous with the PAP's statements about gender roles and the barriers that women face in embarking on a political career. There is no doubt that the PAP has been under greater pressure from local women's groups and members of the public to field more female candidates. Although it is difficult to determine the extent to which gender was an issue for discussion among the party elites at the last election, the increased number of women in parliament is directly related to the PAP's decision to nominate more women candidates. The strong political dominance of the PAP means that being selected by the party as a candidate almost guarantees electoral success. The number of opposition MPs in Singapore is very small and many electoral districts (constituencies) are uncontested by opposition parties with the result that the PAP is elected unopposed. In the last election, half the women MPs were elected in uncontested constituencies.

One important recent change in party practices that helped improve women's chances of being selected as political candidates was the removal of the requirement that PAP candidates must be married persons. Three of the new women MPs are single. In explaining its change of policy, the party was careful to not to call into question its commitment to 'family values' and women's important national roles as wives and mothers. Instead, the selection of single candidates was a re-affirmation of the party's commitment to 'meritocracy' - an emphasis on an individual's personal qualities rather than socio-cultural characteristics (age, gender, ethnicity, marital status). More significantly, 'singles' have been elevated to the status of an 'interest group'. Goh Chok Tong commented prior to the 2001 general election that:

We realized early that it's [single persons] a big constituency. They have problems, they have needs and aspirations which we may not understand as a government with its members all having families ... So we wanted somebody who can instinctively speak on behalf of such people, and we are trying to find one for the coming election (The Straits Times 2001: 1).

Curiously, while ethnic minorities and single persons need effective interest groups to advocate on their behalf, women do not. Their interests (as wives and mothers) can be represented by male MPs who 'all have families'.

### **The impact of constitutional change on women in politics**

To attribute the increasing numbers of women MPs solely to the party, however, risks over-stating the dominance of the PAP and overlooks the consequences of recent constitutional change on women's electoral chances. In part, the increasing number of women in parliament can also be attributed to the introduction of the Group Representative Constituency system and the Nominated

Member of Parliament scheme. While neither of these electoral reforms was introduced with the explicit goal of addressing women's parliamentary representation, they have directly contributed to the increased numbers women in parliament and indirectly placed 'women's issues' on the parliamentary agenda.

### **Women in Group Representative Constituencies**

Under the GRC system the state ensures multi-ethnic representation by requiring political parties to field at least one ethnic minority candidate in each constituency. There is no requirement to ensure a gender balance in each electoral zone. Although the GRC system has not been used to ensure the appointment of women to parliament, it has had the effect of increasing the opportunity for women PAP candidates to get elected. In 2001, all women MPs were elected as part of a GRC. In the case of one woman (Indranee Rajah), a woman also fulfilled the status of a 'minority group member'. Since 1984, when women first started appearing in parliament again, only one female PAP candidate has failed to be elected, and she stood in a single member constituency. It may be that for the PAP, the GRC is safer option for getting women elected than a single-member constituency. Comparative studies of single versus multiple member districts in other countries suggest that where votes are cast for individual candidates, 'unfavourable attitudes towards women as politicians, on the part of party leaders and/or voters, are likely to play a more influential role in determining who gets elected' (Kenworthy and Malami 1999: [2]). For a party concerned with ensuring electoral dominance, the GRC system not only limits opportunities for opposition voices, but it allows the party to take greater risks with individual candidates who may not be as well known or as popular with the electorate. By fielding candidates as a slate, the GRC may prove to be a mechanism by which young and/or inexperienced women get elected by association with strong and/or experienced male candidates.

The benefit of this scheme may be that the increasing visibility of women in parliament will not only shift social attitudes about women MPs but also encourage other women to participate in the political sphere. At this stage, it is probably too early to tell whether such a process has the effect of inducting more women into political life or merely reinforcing traditional stereotypes of women's (limited) abilities amongst the electorate. Li-Ann Thio (1997: 52) believes that the GRC creates a range of problems for all MPs:

[that] these newcomers only began to cultivate ties with the residents on an *ex post facto* basis after being elected to Parliament decries the idea of an MP representing people whose concerns he or she has invested time and effort getting to know. Where is the relationship of trust between MP and voter when the voter does not know the newcomer?

Women elected via the GRC system may be considered 'female tokens' whose election rests more on their association with a strong party and/or male incumbent than on their own electoral support.

### **Women Nominated Members of Parliament**

Women have been well-represented in the NMP scheme since its inception, and although their numbers have not exceeded one-third until most recently (see Table 2), this is a much higher percentage than the numbers of women elected as MPs. A total of eight women have participated in the scheme since 1992, with the majority serving more than one term each (see Table 3).

[Table 3]

Unlike elected MPs, whose views and actions are disciplined by the party whip, NMPs pursue their own agendas or those of their nominating interest group. One advantage of this scheme is that it

has allowed NMPs to raise issues of gender inequality more frequently in the parliament, and to influence policy-making through debate or private members' bills. Four women NMPs have actively pursued platforms associated with women's roles in society. Kanwaljit Soin and Braema Mathi were both nominated by the feminist organization AWARE, and Claire Chiang and Jennifer Lee have both been active in women's rights organizations. At the time of their initial appointment, all four were keen to raise issues associated with women's dual roles, and in particular finding a balance between working life and family. In contrast, when Lee Tsao Yuan was appointed, she said that she 'hoped to contribute to better governance, by contributing towards public discussions on alternatives where public policy is concerned' (Lim 1999: 60). In its coverage of her appointment, however, the *Straits Times* invoked a gender discourse which focused specifically on whether she would address 'women's issues' (in contrast to the other new male appointees for whom the issue of gender was not raised) and used the header 'Tsao Yuan to raise gender-neutral issues' as part of its coverage (The Straits Times 1994: 28).

NMP Kanwaljit Soin has undoubtedly had the most visible impact in raising 'women's issues' in parliament. Her maiden parliamentary speech was ridiculed by MPs when she proceeded to describe at length "A life in the day of an average Singaporean woman". She is most well known, however, for her introduction of a private member's bill - the Family Violence Bill. Although the Bill was rejected by parliament, Kanwaljit Soin was pivotal not only in placing domestic violence on the public agenda, but in bringing about changes to the way that domestic violence is handled by the police and the judiciary.

Given the PAP's support for traditional sex roles and continued gender discrimination in policy-making, the voices of women NMPs are extremely important in shaping public debate about gender equality. There is evidence to suggest that issues concerning women are more likely to be raised in parliament when there are women MPs present. The issue of medical benefits for women civil



servants is one such example (Wang 1993: 32). Women NMPs limited role in policy-making, however, means that they remain at the periphery of government decision-making. At the same time, the association of women NMPs with a particular 'interest group' also means that gender issues become firmly entrenched as 'women's issues' or identity based politics, rather than national issues facing the entire population. This allows the PAP to dodge the issue of its own record on gender and to continue to focus on 'important' economic issues at the expense of private cultural 'traditions'.

In terms of their impact on women's engagement in politics, it may be that the recent increase in women's representation in parliament (as both MPs and NMPs) is due in some part to the presence of women NMPs throughout the 1990s. It is possible that these women acted as role models for other women considering entering the political arena. At the same time, however, I agree with Thio's assessment that the NMP system may serve to contain the growth of a genuine opposition by creating complacency in the electorate and redirecting public interest in an effective opposition towards more high profile and articulate NMPs. In other words, by appointing highly visible, women NMPs who advocate on behalf of 'women's issues', pressure on the PAP to address women's under-representation amongst elected MPs may be diminished. Although it has been suggested that the NMP system, by familiarizing members of the public with the workings of parliament and by providing a favourable experience of political life, could encourage women NMPs to stand for election, none of the former women NMPs has yet come forward.

## **Conclusion**

Singapore is effectively ruled as a one party state. The People's Action Party dominates the election process to such an extent that women's electoral chances are in large part determined by whether or not they are nominated by the PAP. As this discussion has shown, while the party

outwardly supports the election of more women to parliament, in doing so, it is caught within the contradictions of its own discourses about women's abilities and roles. Not only do women lack the mental and physical toughness necessary to succeed as politicians, but they also face the additional burden of looking after their husbands and families. According to the PAP, these traditional roles reflect Singapore's culturally specific 'Asian values', and are thus private matters for women and their families to address without government intervention. But, as I have argued, the PAP government frequently intervenes in 'private' cultural matters, and explicitly pursues a range of social policies that inscribe women's roles as mothers. In negotiating these contradictory positions, PAP leaders often resort to 'gender neutrality' as their way out: they assert that gender doesn't really matter in politics anyway. But 'difference' clearly does matter in the case of ethnicity, and more recently, marital status. It seems that Chinese male politicians as 'heads of households' can represent 'their' women and families, but not ethnically different families nor single persons.

While the Singapore case study is unique in many ways because of the dominance of the PAP and the lack of local or regionally based political structures, it nonetheless sheds light on important aspects of women's political representation. Constitutional reform has had a mixed impact on women's political participation. The NMP and GRC systems both provide opportunities for women to become involved in parliament and political life. They foster an environment in which it may become easier for women to become politically active. While the GRC system allows more women to enter parliament, their prospects to pursue issues of gender equality are limited. While NMPs can do this, they face the double-edged sword of being relegated as a 'marginal interest group'. In either case, it is still the PAP that selects women candidates and appoints NMPs. The NMP system may provide a model for raising questions of gender and/or women's issues in other electoral systems, but its potential to radically alter the 'rules of the game' in Singapore is limited. Despite party protestations to the contrary, women don't enter a level playing field, but one in which the terms of engagement are largely PAP defined.

This study extends previous analyses of women's political representation that focus on cultural values and electoral structures to an examination of the ways in which political processes themselves constitute gender relations. By asserting that 'culture' and 'politics' are more significant than socioeconomic factors in shaping women's electoral chances, previous studies overlook the multiple ways in which power becomes embedded in cultural and political processes. Importantly, they ignore the fact that the construction of culture is itself a very political act. The discourses employed by the PAP male elite not only shape public discussion of women's place in politics, but also serve to inscribe a dominant model of 'Singaporean womanhood'. The party adopts and endorses a 'traditional' model of gender based on mothering roles for women and breadwinner roles for men. However, these traditional 'Asian' sex roles are recuperated for very modern purposes. They serve to establish a political environment in which women are always bound to the family. Until this issue is directly addressed, women's opportunities to participate in Singaporean party politics will therefore remain limited. The extent to which these discourses shape women's experiences within the party is unclear. However, it would appear that even single women MPs are aware of the constraints facing their political futures. As recently elected MP Ms Penny Low commented:

Dr Aline Wong and Mr Mah Bow Tan [two high profile PAP MPs] even joked that they had changed my walkabouts [opportunities to meet constituents] from Friday nights to Monday nights; otherwise I would have no chance to get married (Cheong 2001: 1).

I doubt that they were joking.

**Table 1 Women members of parliament in Singapore, 1959-2001**

Election Year	Women Candidates (PAP member)	Women Elected (PAP member)	Women as percentage of all MPs
1959*	9 (5)	5 (4)	10% (n=51)
1963**	11 (3)	3 (2)	5% (n=51)
1968	1 (1)	1 (1)	1.5% (n=58)
1972	2 (0)	0	0 (n=65)
1976	3 (0)	0	0 (n=69)
1980	1 (0)	0	0 (n=76)
1984	6 (3)	3 (3)	4% (n=79)
1988	9 (4)	4 (4)	5% (n=81)
1991	5 (3)	2 (2)	2.5% (n=81)
1996	4 (4)	4 (4)	5% (n=83)
2001	11 (10)	10 (10)	12% (n=84)

\*Legislative Assembly

\*\* Malayan Federation – members became part of the First Singaporean Parliament with separation in 1965.

Source: Wang and Teo (1993:288-289) and Singapore Elections Department (2003).

**Table 2 Women NMPs in Singapore, 1990-2002**

<b>NMP Term</b>	<b>Women NMPs</b>	<b>Total Number of NMPs</b>
1990-1991	0	2
1992-1994	1	6
1994-1996	2	6
1997-1999	2	9
1999-2001	2	9
2001*	2	8
2002-2004	5	9

\* In 2001, the NMP Term lasted 18 days after a general election was announced and parliament was dissolved.

Source: Parliament of Singapore (2000).

**Table 3 Women NMPs, 1992-2002**

<b>NMP</b>	<b>Terms served</b>
Dr Kanwaljit Soin	1992-1996 (2 terms)
Dr Lee Tsao Yuan	1994-1999 (2 terms)
Mdm Claire Chiang	1997-2001 (2 terms)
Dr Jennifer Lee	1999 - present (third term)*
Ms Braema Mathi	2001 – present (second term)*
Dr Ghan See Khem	2002 – present (first term)
Ms Olivia Lum	2002 – present (first term)
Mrs Fan Ai Lian	2002 – present (first term)

\* Includes a term of only 18 days in 2001 – see Table 2.

Source: Parliament of Singapore (2000).

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<sup>i</sup> See Lovenduski and Norris (1993), Darcy et al. (1994), Rule (1994), and Inglehart et al. (2002).

<sup>ii</sup> Inglehart et al. (2002) argue that Catholicism encourages more traditional attitudes towards women in politics than Protestantism, whereas Reynolds (1999) found the greatest divisions between Christian countries and all other religions.

<sup>iii</sup> Norris (1987) found that countries that score more highly on a 'political egalitarianism' index (based on a survey of attitudes towards women in politics) have a larger proportion of women in government.

<sup>iv</sup> Shvedova (2002) argues that cultural norms and values that assign sex roles to men and women hinder women's legislative participation.

<sup>v</sup> Paxton (cited in Kenworthy and Malami 1999) argues that there is an inverse relationship between democracy and women's share of parliamentary seats. Inglehart et al. (2002) argue that although gender equality in parliament is closely linked with democracy, neither variable seems to be a direct cause of the other. Rather they suggest that women's increasing representation in parliament is part of a 'broader cultural change that is ... bringing growing mass demands for increasingly democratic institutions' (Inglehart et al. 2002: 343).

<sup>vi</sup> Leftist parties are expected to espouse greater commitment to gender equality and to nominate more women as candidates. Although research conducted in European countries in the 1980s supports this view, more recent data suggests that in the most affluent democratic countries, conservative parties are as likely as leftists parties to nominate women (Kenworthy and Malami 1999).

<sup>vii</sup> Shvedova (2002) describes this model as a system of political life that is based around male norms, values and/or lifestyles, including competition and confrontation. Such values are not limited to the parliamentary system itself, but also predominate in political parties.

<sup>viii</sup> According to Lovenduski and Karam (2002) this includes the level of financial support, access to networks, and the nomination system used for candidates.

<sup>ix</sup> The so-called 'iron law of politics' that 'the more the power, the fewer the women' (Raaum 1995).

<sup>x</sup> Country specific studies show mixed results. A number of countries using PR have smaller percentages of women parliamentarians than countries using single-member majoritarian systems. Andrew Reynolds (1999: 572) argues that the role of PR systems is more noticeable in Western Europe than it is in other parts of the world, including Asia.

<sup>xi</sup> The number of opposition MPs rose to four in 1991 and has since dropped to two.

<sup>xii</sup> The last remaining women MP Madam Chan Choy Siong resigned from office in 1970.

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<sup>xiii</sup> Further information about AWARE can be obtained from the organisation's website – <http://www.aware.org.sg>. For an overview of AWARE's activities and membership see Lyons (2004).

<sup>xiv</sup> This classification is important because it determines men's and women's differential access to services and equal employment opportunities. The public sector, for example, only extends medical benefits to the dependants of male civil servants (officially designated as 'heads of households').

<sup>xv</sup> The government suspended the publication of *Woman's Affair* after the publication of this article. Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong stated: "My consultative style doesn't mean that we allow magazines to report only negative and biased views" (The Straits Times 1991).