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The ‘Graduate Woman” Phenomenon:
Changing Constructions of the Family in Singapore

Lenore Lyons-Lee

Introduction

In recent years the Singapore state, as part of its broader population planning policy, has focused attention on encouraging graduate men and women to marry and have children at a younger age. These policies have been promoted through a series of well-publicised advertising campaigns in the television and print media. Tertiary educated women have been constructed as ‘problematic’ within this discourse of state-directed social change because they are marrying later, having fewer children, and on occassion foregoing marriage altogether. This paper examines the ways such women understand the current marrige debate, and the reasons they give for their life choices. I will argue that contrary to popular media and state views, such women have not rejected marriage but rather traditional constructions of gender roles within the family.

The ‘Great Marriage Debate”

The ‘Graduate Woman” phenomenon emerged as a serious social problem in Singapore in the mid-1980s. In a National Day Rally Speech in August 1983, then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew called attention to a trend in which graduate women were delaying or forgoing marriage and children for their careers. Lee feared that in a country whose only resource was its people, a decline in birthrates amongst the well-educated would result in a ‘thinning of the gene pool”, and thus national economic disaster:

> We must further amend our policies, and try to reshape our demographic configuration so that our better-educated women will have more children to be adequately represented in the next generation ... Equal employment opportunities,

> yes, but we shouldn't get our women into jobs where they cannot, at the same time, be mothers .... You just can't be doing a full-time heavy job like that of a doctor or engineer and run a home and bring up children (Straits Times, 1983).

Using an eugenicist approach, Lee argued that while all women can be mothers, better-educated women should be mothers. Lee cited the 1980 census which showed that while uneducated women were producing an average of three children, those with secondary or tertiary education had 1.65 children (Saw, 1990:41). Lee referred to this as a 'lop-sided procreation pattern" and the issue was dubbed 'The Great Marriage Debate" by the local press. In subsequent discussion of this issue, two changes in demographic behaviour were referred to - the increasing number of unmarried women with tertiary education, and the lower reproduction rate among Chinese (particularly those with higher education). These were considered to be social problems because they contributed to a loss of talent (the eugenics argument), a loss of labour power and an imbalance in the proportion of aged dependants in a country which has no natural resources and is solely reliant on its workforce for economic growth (Quah, 1994:136).

Data from the national census carried out in 1947, 1957, 1970, 1980 and 1990 show that marriage continues to be the most common state of life for women in Singapore. The proportion of women who are married was highest in 1957 (61.9%) and although it dropped to 52.5% in 1990, still remains high (Quah, 1993:27). In part, these differences can be explained by Singapore's young population. The most significant change has been the increase in the proportion of single women, which rose from 22.5% in 1957 to 37% in 1990 (Quah, 1993:27). At the same time, however, it must also be noted that the proportion of single men has also increased, and that the proportion of single men outnumbers the proportion of single women in all age groups. For example, amongst the 'problematic" group - the over 35 age group - 8.3% of women are single and 9.8% of men are single (Quah, 1993:28). The problem, for the government, is not so much the actual numbers of single people (although this is a concern for an ageing population), as the educational backgrounds of those who are unmarried. When the educational qualifications of singles are examined, the data indicates that the proportion

of women with tertiary education who are single increased from 42.4% in 1980 to 53.1% in 1990 (Quah, 1993:32).

The above figures on single women of course include a large number of women who will marry. The average age of first marriage has increased steadily from 24.7 years in 1957 to 26.6 years in 1990. The ages of men have similarly increased, with men generally two years older than women at marriage (Quah, 1993:31). In her analysis of marriage patterns and delayed marriage, Stella Quah (1993) suggests that the tendency to delay marriage until one feels economically secure, combined with a desire to obtain higher educational qualifications, has led to a situation in which most women below 25 years are either students or single employees. Women who marry earlier tend to have lower formal educational qualifications than those who marry later (Quah, 1993:42).

A further problem identified by the government was not only that graduate women were marrying later, but that graduate men were choosing to marry women with lower educational qualifications rather than those with similar or higher educational qualifications to themselves:

> It could be male ignorance and prejudice which lead to his preference of a wife less educated than himself. Or it may be that an educated woman shies away from a husband with less educated ways. Whatever it is, this is a new problem (Lee cited in Saw, 1990:43-4).

The government argued that graduate women must lower their expectations, and that graduate men must change their attitudes (Straits Times Overseas Edition, 1990). While Lee Kuan Yew was concerned that women's 'traditional role as mothers" had been affected by changes in education policy and equal employment opportunities, he recognised that it was too late to reverse these policies: 'Our women", he said, 'will not stand for it" (Lee cited in Saw, 1990:44). The solution lay in incentives to encourage better-educated women to marry and to have more children, not in disincentives.

The decline in birthrates has directly fuelled the government's concern that graduates marry and procreate before it is `too late'. Before 1984 the government's emphasis was on population control. The main family planning policies, implemented via the Singapore Family Planning and Population Board (SFPPB), were aimed at encouraging people to 'Stop at Two", to have later marriages, to delay having the first child and to space out the two children (Quah, 1988:2). These policies were highly successful, with the birthrate dropping from 6.55 children in 1947 to 4.62 in 1965 (Saw, 1990:15), to 1.7 in 1990 (Wong and Leong, 1993:4). This rapid decline in birthrates has also been attributed to increasing educational levels, widespread female employment, rising affluence, improvement in housing conditions, and government efforts to legitimise the small family norm (Fawcett and Khoo, 1980:575). An accompanying trend of reduced birth rates is that women with higher education have a smaller number of children than women with lower education. Among women with post-secondary education, the proportion of those with three or more children declined from 18.3% in 1980 to 12.2% in 1990 (Quah, 1993:54)._ On the other hand, the proportion of women with primary and secondary education who had three or more children increased from 37.2% and 18.8% in 1980 respectively to 51.7% and 23.1% in 1990, respectively.

State promotion of marriage and procreation began as a series of mass educational campaigns conducted in the Singaporean media since the mid-1980s. Run under the auspices of the Family Life Education Programme, campaign slogans have included: 'Are you giving men the wrong idea?", 'Life will be lonely without a family. Don't leave it too late" and 'Why not reality? You could wait a lifetime for a dream". In January 1984 the Social Development Unit (SDU) was set up within the Ministry of Finance for the purpose of matchmaking male and female university graduates in the public service. Two years later the scheme was expanded to graduates employed in the private sector. Two schemes for non-university graduates, the Social Promotion Section (SPS) and the Social Development Section (SDS) were also introduced for 'O" levels (secondary school) and 'A" levels (college) certificate holders. Membership to these groups is based primarily on educational attainment, although exceptions are made for those earning more than the salaries considered commensurate with their qualifications (Wee, 1987:11). Activities

include talks, cruises, dances, parties, local outings, overseas trips, and courses on wine appreciation, personal grooming, wind surfing, etc. (Straits Times, 1991).

In addition to its matchmaking activities, the government set about encouraging graduate women to marry and procreate through a series of financial and social incentives. The first of these was the announcement in 1984 by the Ministry of Education of a new 'priority scheme" for the registration of Primary One children called the 'Graduate Mothers' Priority Scheme". In the past, priority was given to the children of parents who were sterilised after the first or second child. Under the new scheme, children of university-educated women who had three or more children were to receive priority (see Saw, 1990). However, the scheme was rescinded in 1985 after public outcry against it. Another social policy to encourage marriage pertains to housing. Single men and women under the age of 35 are not permitted to buy Housing Development Board flats (which account for approximately 85% of all housing). In addition, there are few support services for single or unwed mothers.

Foremost in the range of financial incentives introduced to encourage educated women to have more children are tax reliefs. In 1984, the government announced that married women with at least five 'O" level passes could claim $10,000 tax relief for each of their first three children. The full rebate was to be made available to women who had their third child by the age of 28 and would not be available to women whose third child was born after the age of 31._ (Saw, 1990:9). At the same time the government announced that it would give $10,000 to less-educated, low-income mothers under 30 years of age if they were sterilised after their first or second child (Saw, 1990:11). Hospital delivery costs were also adjusted up for the fourth and fifth child. By 1987, the previous population policy of 'Stop at Two" had also been replaced by 'Have three and more, if you can afford it". The government spread its new message of procreation through campaign slogans such as 'Children. Life would be empty without them" and 'Children. Experience the joy while you're young". Changes in the sterilisation programme were also introduced in 1987 to discourage better-educated men and women from undergoing sterilisation, and compulsory pre-abortion counselling has been

introduced for women with some secondary education who have fewer than three children (Saw, 1990:29).

For the government, the problem is not one of simply encouraging graduate women to become mothers but rather to be both mothers and productive workers simultaneously. The state is caught between a belief that graduates make better mothers and a need for graduate women's labour participation in the economy. Thus, a work-based strategy to encourage graduate women to have more children is the liberalisation of unpaid childcare leave within the public service. Women officers for example can take up to four years unpaid leave after the birth of their child (Saw, 1990:28). In response to the needs of working mothers, the government has also subsidised and supported the growth of childcare centres, which increased from 33 in 1981 to 297 in 1992 (Quah, 1994:164) (although even so, the fee structure in most childcare facilities means that those with low-incomes are unable to afford such care). The government explained the logic behind these policies as that 'women should delegate their mothering responsibilities only if their labour is needed by the state" (Goldberg, 1987:32). Women with lower education are encouraged to have small families and if they cannot afford childcare, to stay at home with their children full-time.

The schemes to promote marriage and procreation deliberately targeted women with secondary school education and above, based on Lee's eugenicist belief that well educated mothers would produce more intelligent children. It has also been pointed out that in a country with declining birth rates among the upper and middle-classes (predominantly Chinese), Lee's call for graduate mothers to produce more children is intrinsically tied to a policy of cultural/racial maintenance (Heng and Devan, 1995). However, there has been little public dissent over the campaign and range of financial incentives introduced to encourage educated women to have more children. In part this is because such policies do not actively discriminate against the majority of women except for the most marginal group - the uneducated poor.

While the range of financial and social incentives designed to encourage graduates to marry and have children affects men and women, the 'problem" is largely understood and represented by the government and the media as one faced by graduate women. Graduate women are largely described as 'too independent", 'career-minded", and 'choosy". Graduate men, on the other hand, are considered to be in a 'buyer's market" and able to choose among women from all educational backgrounds. While the pressures on graduate women to marry remain high, there is a certain degree of resignation amongst those active in implementing state policy that large numbers of women over 30 will remain unmarried (see Lee, 1990).

A number of important studies of marriage and parenthood have been carried out in Singapore in the past two decades. These studies show that the vast majority of single women (including women with tertiary education) consider marriage to be a top personal goal (see Quah, 1986, 1988; Cheung, 1988). Based on these findings, Stella Quah (1994:125) argues that the increase in the number of single graduate women should be understood 'as a manifestation of difficulties in meeting a suitable marriage-partner rather than as a rejection of marriage". These difficulties may arise from unrealistic expectations (Sunday Times, 1989; Cheung, 1988) or the absence of suitable people in one's daily life (Quah, 1994:125). Lee Kuan Yew (cited in Saw, 1990:44) attributed the difficulties in finding suitable partners to 'Western-style individual free choice" and 'male chauvinism".

The views of those women who are actually targeted by these campaigns - graduate women - remain largely absent in the rhetoric that surrounds the 'Great Marriage Debate". The following discussion of my research provides some views of single graduate women on these campaigns and their underlying issues of marriage and procreation. By examining these women's perceptions of the state's strategies to encourage them to marry and have children, as well as the reasons they give for their refusal or inability to do so, I will argue that the 'Graduate Woman Phenomenon" remains a problem largely of the government's own making. Even as it has supported women's movement into the labour force, it remains committed to traditional views of

gender roles and family structure. Graduate women thus find themselves caught within the ambiguities of these 'mixed messages" (Goldberg, 1987).

'Problematic" Women

In this section, I focus on the views of eleven single graduate women aged in their twenties to forties who are members of the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE)_, a Singaporean women's organisation. These views were gathered from an extensive study conducted over a four-year period (1994-1997) in my capacity as both a member and an `outsider' researcher. The data is gathered from a lengthy survey questionnaire of the entire membership, interviews, a focus session, and documentary analysis.

My research grew from an interest in women who espouse a range of pro-women views, ranging from those who could be described as feminist to those who argue for a more moderate 'equalist" or anti-discriminatory position. In examining the views of women who belong to activist organisations, the question of belief origins inevitably arises: did they join because they held certain beliefs or did their views change as a result of joining the organisation? The issue of belief origins remains outside the scope of the present study. Similarly, an assessment of the extent to which the views of these women are representative of other graduate women would require comparative analysis with married graduate women members of AWARE and with graduate women who do not belong to AWARE. What this study does provide is some insight into the ways in which graduate women understand the current debate and the reasons that they provide for their life choices.

Many of the members of AWARE_ fit the government's profile of 'women at risk" of rejecting marriage and children - half are unmarried, they are in their 20s-30s in age (88% of members are below 50 years of age), most are largely tertiary-educated and work in a range of professional positions. Occupational data from the membership records shows that 65% of members are employed in professional, technical,

administrative, executive and managerial positions. Another 22% are employed in clerical, sales and service areas, with 13% not-employed for a wage (including unemployed, retired, home-makers, and students). None of the women are employed in production or labouring positions. Based on predominant identifiers of class labels in Singapore - occupation, income, education, English-speaking - these women are firmly located within the middle-class and upper middle-class and the majority of women self-identified in this way.

The majority of the eleven single graduate women whose views are discussed here were interviewed first in January 1995 and then in follow-up interviews in August 1997. The women are representative of all major ethnic groups in Singapore. The sample included six Chinese women (Stella Kok, Theresa Lim, Ng Soo Chin, Sylvia Ong, May Wong and Anna Lee), two Indian women (Kalyani Bhatal and Geetha Chettiah), two Eurasian women (Robyn Drake and Margaret Thomas) and one Malay woman (Fatimah Ibrahim)._ At the time of the initial interview nine of the women were living with their families, and another two were living on their own or with friends. All are educated at tertiary level, with three holding Masters degrees, and all are employed in a range of professional occupations.

All of the women I spoke to were familiar with the government's policy to encourage graduates to marry. Many of them had been approached by the government-approved Social Development Unit (SDU) or by matchmaking bodies in their workplaces. They were angry and critical of the way in which they were constructed as a 'problem" or a 'deviant" group by both the state and the media:

> You're only a complete woman if you are married and you have kids. If you are single there is something wrong with you; you're a misfit, almost like a social disease. ... So because of that, the pressure on the single woman is quite tremendous. ... She may be very successful, she may be enjoying herself, she may be taking trips ... overseas every year, but there's still something wrong with her (Stella Kok, 27).

For some women this pressure came directly from their immediate families and was heightened during festive occasions like Chinese New Year when extended families met. At these times, aunts and cousins would ask questions about whether the woman is dating, if she has a boyfriend, and even more directly, when she is getting married. In order to avoid these situations, some women deliberately went abroad on holiday during this period. This in turn only enforced their sense of being 'different" and contributed to tension and conflict within the family. The government's stance on graduate women provided a context in which their families could read traditional values against the concept of 'social good". Not only were they letting down their families, but also their nation. Within these overlapping discourses of family values and national values, the unmarried graduate woman is rendered socially deviant. There is no room within these discourses for a 'single" status; she is marked out as a 'spinster" or an 'old maid" by her failure to marry.

The degree of family pressure that the women felt varied according to their age and perceived marriageability. Women in their twenties believed that their parents still considered them to have a 'chance". Consequently, they were encouraged to take it easy at work and go out and meet 'eligible" men. They could explain their unmarried status on not having found the right man 'yet". As women reach their thirties, however, their place in the marriageability stakes begins to drop and some parents begin to question their daughters attitudes towards marriage. Robyn Drake, a thirty-five year old Eurasian, recounted an argument with her father in which he called her 'idealistic" and 'unrealistic" in her expectations of marriage and relationships. She recalls him saying, 'If you were just realistic and settled down and did everything that normal people do you wouldn't have a problem". Her father's reference to being 'normal" was also reflected in the attitudes of strangers. During a job interview with a government department, Robyn's interviewers questioned her about her unmarried status. She believes that her comment that having a family was not important to her made her unsuitable in the eyes of a potential employer.

For some women, singlehood was indeed a rejection of marriage and a reflection of their sexuality. In the interviews none of the women identified themselves in terms of sexual orientation._ Sex and sexuality are taboo topics in Singaporean society. There is little open public discussion of sex issues, although in recent years 'sex pages" in women's magazines have become more popular. Legal prohibition of male homosexuality dates from British colonial rule and criminal sanctions are frequently enforced against practising male homosexuals (see Leong, 1995). Such laws ignore lesbians with the result that officially, lesbianism does not exist. Studies conducted in other predominantly Chinese populations show that there are no moral or religious sanctions against homosexuality in 'traditional" Chinese culture (Lieh-Mak et al, 1983; Ruan and Tsai, 1988). This led some writers to suggest that there is no social disapproval of homosexuality in particular but, rather, social constraint on sexual matters in general (Lieh-Mak et al, 1983:106). In the Singaporean context, however, such notions of 'tolerance" (if they are indeed 'cultural") are mediated by religion (particularly Christianity and Islam) and state attitudes which attribute homosexuality to an immoral and decadent 'West". There is no officially registered gay or lesbian organisation in Singapore, and attempts to formally register such groups have failed (see PLU, 1997). The Singapore state's attitudes towards gay men and lesbians needs to be read against its promotion of marriage and the family as a cornerstone of society. Homosexuality 'constitutes a threat and an aberration to the paternalistic state because same-gender unions usually do not result in procreation, and indeed they subvert the cause of genetic engineering" (Leong, 1995:18).

For those women who have made a deliberate decision not to marry, the lack of social and family understanding is strong. Kalyani Bhatal, a 36 year old Indian woman, says that her parents had not anticipated her decision not to marry and her mother felt that not only was it unnatural, but also 'vaguely immoral". These views came as a shock to Kalyani:

> Because the whole purpose of getting yourself educated is to ... avoid having to get married, to be independent, mentally, physically, financially, intellectually,

> everywhere. To be independent, to be your own person. To get married and to be somebody's wife, to be a mother of kids, to look after the family, to look after the home, it just did not appeal to me. Especially in the Indian context where you have to be submissive to your husband, submissive to your mother-in-law, submissive to your father-in-law. I think ... that's just too many people to be submissive to (Kalyani Bhatal, 36).

For women such as Kalyani, however, age becomes a strong mediating factor in people's attitudes. As she says, 'I've become old in the eyes of the community, you know I'm an old woman so that again makes things easier". Margaret Thomas, a Eurasian in her forties reflected that, '31-32 by SDU terms [is] one step into the graveyard. Once you reach 35, that's it".

The extent to which all of the women are able to cope with social and family pressures depends on a number of factors. The size and physical proximity of one's extended family is very important. Those women who did not have contact with their relatives because of distance (they lived overseas) or size (a small number) did not have to deal with constantly prying questions and their parent's subsequent shame. Similarly, for those women whose parents occupy a position of high social status within the community, an unmarried daughter is potentially shameful.

While singlehood for women like Kalyani is a deliberate life choice, the majority of women saw it as either a "life stage' or a compromise. For them, being single did not signify a rejection of marriage or motherhood. For women in their twenties, like Stella Kok and Ng Soo Chin, being single was simply a reflection of their decision to pursue education and employment opportunities first. They dated regularly and saw themselves marrying in a few years time. Like women in Stella Quah's (1988) study of delayed marriage, these women had not rejected marriage and motherhood; they merely postponed it. They were clearly angry at the government's suggestion that they were a "problem'. After all, they had only followed the government's own prescription to study and work hard. They wanted an opportunity to enjoy the financial and emotional rewards

that their jobs provided them with. Why, they asked, did the government encourage them to be independent and assertive in the workplace, but not in their personal lives?

Behind these women's claim that they remained committed to marriage and children, however, was a growing recognition that "having it all' was not going to be easy. Ng Soo Chin was the only woman in the group who had married between the initial interview in 1995 and the follow-up in 1997. When I spoke to her the second time, she was 30 years old and finding the adjustment to married life difficult but not insurmountable. Finding an appropriate balance in the sharing of household responsibilities was a constant challenge and she was worried about the changes that children might bring. Stella Kok, now also in her thirties too began to think about the compromises that she would have to make in her life if she married and had children:

> I am really beginning to see that it is women who have to make the hard decisions. They are still the one's sacrificing their careers you know? And it is a very, very, very difficult decision. I am really seeing it happening. And there is no easy solution to it. And, so I try to think about it when I have kids. Well, I think fortunately my mother would be quite happy to help. But, it looks like it is still the mothers who have to do the primary [nurturing] (Stella Kok, 30).

Stella was the only woman who spoke about the possibility of single parenthood. She wanted children to be part of her life and contemplated becoming a single mother if she had not found a suitable partner by the time she was 35. Stella's unmarried status was not a reflection of her rejection of marriage or children, but rather a pragmatic assessment of the possibility of finding a life partner who shared her own views of marriage and family life.

Theresa Lim, also in her twenties was the only woman who expressed a rejection of the marriage "contract'. She argued that she could see herself living with a man in the future but was ideologically and politically opposed to marriage on the grounds that the relationship was inherently patriarchal. She recognised, however, that to lead such a life

she would probably have to leave Singapore. What Theresa shared in common with many of the other women, however, was a critical view of her mother's position within the home. Many of the women described their mothers as primarily housewives who were dependent on their husbands financially and who suppressed their own needs and interests. Within these families, girls were expected to carry on and support their mother's role by looking after their father and brothers. These traditional understandings of gendered roles within the family were rejected as outdated and inherently unequal.

It was this critical assessment of married life that also explained the views of women in their thirties like Robyn Drake and Fatimah Ibrahim. In talking about their visions of married life they made reference to the language of independence, equality, sharing, and respect. Robyn Drake comments:

> I think what's really important to me is I don't want any kind of relationship that I'm in to seem like either that there is any kind of dependency. I consider that dependency financial as well as emotional dependency. ... And it comes from a philosophy that if I get into a partnership, I want to be a partner in the broadest sense of the word. I don't want to be taken care of. I don't want you to think for me, I don't want you to fix me, ... It's got to be based on respect and love. And that's my bottom line (Robyn Drake, 35).

It was this failure to find a man who shared her own views on marriage that led Fatimah Ibrahim to finally make the decision to purchase her own flat and move out of her family home. Reaching 35 was a great relief for Fatimah because she could finally buy a public housing flat and become independent. She was the only woman in the group who had taken this opportunity. Fatimah attributed part of her strength to the experience of growing up in a family of strong women headed by her maternal grandmother. These values were handed down from mother to daughter, and even after she married, Fatimah's mother remained financially independent of her husband. However, even this family of strong women was disappointed with her choice.

The women are not only critical of men's attitudes towards marriage, but also the lack of state and corporate support for married women and mothers. They point to the lack of employer-based childcare and flexible working arrangements for mothers with young children, the lack of promotional opportunities for married women, and discrimination by employers against fathers taking an active role in parenting. However, it would be misleading to suggest that the government has been unsympathetic to these claims.

The state's significant support for childcare centres (Quah, 1994) and continuing encouragement for private employers to offer better terms and conditions are two examples of its interest in addressing women's 'double burden". There are many areas, however, in which the state has failed to take a leading role - particularly in terms of support for gender equality in the home. In explaining the reasons behind the lack of progress in bringing about more equitable gender roles, the government has been quick to blame 'deep-rooted prejudices against women" (Rahim, 1979:74) and women themselves (particularly mothers of sons) (Smith, 1988:159-60). Claims that the state cannot interfere in the "private sphere' ring hollow when the government's involvement in other cultural spheres are considered - for example, language (Speak Mandarin campaign), religion (Confucian education), and the family (Asian family values). Despite its recourse to "culture' and "tradition' as explanations for women's continued subordination within the home, an examination of state policies in both education and employment show that rather than being a neutral body, the state has actively supported traditional gender roles. Such policies include compulsory home economics for girls (recently made available to boys in schools) and discriminatory medical benefits for male civil servants on the basis that men are heads of households. As a result, the costs of balancing women's dual roles (roles made implicit in the state's own mixed messages of work and motherhood) are born by the women themselves.

Given this context, is it any wonder then that some graduate women when faced with men who do not share their views on gender equality, and a government which implicitly supports the maintenance of traditional gender roles, have chosen to delay

marriage? Stella Quah's works (1988, 1993, 1994) show that the majority of Singaporean women have met these competing demands either by compartmentalising their roles into different life cycles (joining the labour force while they are single), or by separating their attitudes from their behaviour (being liberal in thought but traditional in action). For the majority of women in this study, however, the emotional and psychological stresses involved in denying their visions of family life have resulted in a "wait and see' approach. For them, singlehood is preferable to a compromised marriage.

Conclusion

The majority of single women I spoke to had not rejected marriage or childrearing but merely traditional constructions of gendered roles within the family. They wanted husbands who shared a similar outlook on life, were not afraid of their wives' success and independence, and were committed to equality within the home, but were finding these hard to attain or realise. In the meantime, singlehood was for them a compromise position. Their financial independence provided them with the opportunity to remain committed to the promise of equality. Yet, for many independence was bittersweet.

All of the women were familiar with the government's policies towards graduate women and saw themselves as direct targets of these policies. They were critical not only of the state's view, but also of the way in which they were constructed as deviant or problematic within this discourse. State pressures to marry were only reinforced by family and wider social pressures. Within Singapore there is no recognised 'single" status for such women - they are by definition 'unmarried" and therefore lacking. Being unmarried becomes in turn a life-style choice that women have to explain and support - whether through reference to the 'right man", career or desire. It is not only unnatural, but also immoral, and a source of potential and actual shame to their parents. These women's ability to cope with such pressure depends on their family situation, their financial independence, and their age.

Some of the women blame both the state and their own families for the bind in which they find themselves. Encouraged to pursue higher education and careers, they have been rewarded with financial independence and opportunities outside the narrow sphere of wife/mother. They are critical that men's expectations have not similarly altered and wonder how to balance their desire for marriage and children and their recognition that there is little social or state support for more equal family arrangements. As these women argue, getting graduates to marry requires more than romantic images of couples dancing and fathers playing with their children. However, loosening state definitions of family and gender roles continues to remain outside the government's agenda.

NOTES

Fertility figures also vary by ethnicity, with total fertility rates higher among Malays than Indians or Chinese (figures for 1988 are 2.31, 2.19 and 1.88 respectively) (Saw, 1990:16).

Many women argued that this effectively reduced the chances of women over 28 finding suitable partners because they would become financially `less attractive' to men in the `buyer's market' (see Lee, 1990).

Formed in 1985, AWARE is an openly multi-racial organisation with research, service and advocacy arms. Full membership to AWARE is open to female Singaporean citizens and permanent residents over 21 years of age. Male Singaporeans, as well as foreign men and women without permanent residency may join as associate members or "Friends of AWARE'. Although AWARE does not have a formal recruitment arm and does not actively solicit new members, numbers have increased steadily since the early 1990s. In 1986 AWARE's membership stood at 78. This figure remained fairly stable until 1992 when it jumped to 270. Thereafter it rose rapidly to 670 by April 1995. AWARE describes its role as primarily one of research, discussion and support. This is to be achieved by making both men and women aware of the barriers that they face in their

everyday lives as a result of gender discrimination. An important change in focus and direction began in 1991 with the formation of a Helpline service which signalled AWARE's involvement in the provision of direct community services, and was thus a significant move away from the goal of education. In establishing the Helpline AWARE radically changed its public persona. No longer seen as simply an association of intellectuals, AWARE has gained greater public legitimacy as an organisation that 'helps abused women".

Singaporeans make up approximately 81% of the entire membership. Women from all major ethnic groups are reflected in the membership - Chinese, Indian, Malay, Eurasian, and 'foreigners", but observation indicates that Malay women as a percentage of the population are under-represented. The current ethnic mix of the Singaporean population is 78% Chinese, 14% Malay, 7% Indian, and the remainder a mixture of "Others', including Eurasians and Europeans.

Most names used are pseudonyms chosen to reflect the use of ethnic and Christian names. Real names used are with the women's permission.

I assumed that some of the women were lesbian, based on hearsay or supposition, but I did not broach this issue with them.

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