



# Remaking Singapore: Views of Half the Nation

*"The Confucian practice of male over female, of a patriarchal society – this has to change."*

**Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew  
January 2001**

## INTRODUCTION

AWARE welcomes the Remaking Singapore effort and looks forward to the recommendations that will be made and the changes that will follow. We look forward in particular to a change that is fundamental to the Remaking Singapore effort – the rejection of the Confucian notion of a patriarchal society, of male over female.

That this archaic practice must go was acknowledged by Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew in January 2001. The women of Singapore are still waiting for his words to be turned into decisive action.

The successful remaking of Singapore is critical to the nation's continued progress, and true equality between women and men is critical to this remaking effort. It is critical because a nation whose only real resource is its people must maximise the potential of each and every one of its citizens. This cannot happen fully if half of these citizens, because of their gender, face obstructions, whether of policy or of perception, in exploring and expressing their potential.

These obstructions range from a handful of laws and policies that explicitly differentiate between men and women to a host of signals that subtly and insidiously separate women from men in areas of personal growth and development.

AWARE has for 18 years strived for the remaking of Singapore in the context of women's right to participate fully and equally in all aspects of the nation's development.

We have seen some changes for the better, such as the signing of CEDAW, the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, in October 1995. This commitment by the government to an international declaration of the equality of women is commendable.

What it must now do, in the effort to remake Singapore, is eliminate the lingering obstacles that Singapore women face, and make a genuine effort to bring about true gender equality in all aspects of Singapore life. In this note, we identify the most pernicious of the obstacles and offer our views, arguments and proposals for change.

## 1. Participation in Policy Making

Men vastly outnumber women at the top echelons of policy-making. The latest available figures show:

### *Directorships at government-linked companies:*

Total	- 2,175
Men	- 1,999
Women	- 176 (8%)

### *Directorships at statutory boards:*

Total	- 666
Men	- 612
Women	- 54 (8%)

### *Cabinet:*

Total	- 20
Men	- 20
Women	- 0 (0%)

### *Members of Parliament (elected):*

Total	- 85
Men	- 75
Women	- 10 (12%)

### *Members of Parliament (nominated):*

Total	- 9
Men	- 4
Women	- 5 (55%)

### *Mayors:*

Total	- 5
Men	- 4
Women	- 1 (20%)

### *Permanent Secretary in civil service:*

Total	- 19
Men	- 17
Women	- 2 (10%)

### Government Rationale

We are open to more women participating in policy-making, but we can't help it if they prefer to stay out of the limelight or want to put their families first.

### AWARE's Comment

The recent increase in the number of women MPs and NMPs is welcome. It shows that there are women ready and able to take on leadership positions in policy-making. There are many more like them. The government just needs to decide to get them into the policy-making ranks, and the best way to do this is commit to a target.

### **Proposal**

- Appoint at least one woman Minister by the end of 2003, at least three women Ministers by 2005
- Achieve at least 30% representation of women in parliament by the next election

## **2. Birthright**

At present a child born outside Singapore to a Singaporean mother and non-Singaporean father has to apply for Singapore citizenship by registration, which may be refused. Conversely, a child born outside of Singapore to a Singaporean father and a non-Singaporean mother gets citizenship by descent.

### Government's Rationale

Man is the head of the family.

### AWARE's Comment

This policy discriminates against Singaporean women. And it may well have the effect of keeping Singapore women with foreign husbands and children away from Singapore.

This is an untenable waste of our scarce human resources. We have for years been lamenting the fact of our falling birth rate. We should be welcoming as citizens the offspring of all Singaporeans, regardless of the nationality of the father and the child's birthplace. We are seeking foreign talent, and yet we do not automatically embrace the foreign-born children of our women who have foreign husbands.

Article 5(a) of CEDAW requires signatory states to 'modify social and cultural patterns of conduct...which are based on ...stereotyped roles for men and women.' This immigration policy, which rests on the flimsy excuse that the man is the head of the household, contravenes this article and should be changed.

### **Proposal**

Any child born to a Singaporean parent in or outside of Singapore is a citizen by descent.

## **3. Constitutional Rights**

The Singapore Constitution declares in Article 12 that "... shall be no discrimination against citizens of Singapore on the grounds of religion, race, descent or place of birth..." It is silent on one other area of possible discrimination - gender.

### Government's Rationale

Any person who thinks his/her legal rights have been infringed can bring the matter before the courts. Singapore advocates an equal opportunity policy for both sexes in all sectors of the economy, based on a principle of meritocracy.

### AWARE's Comment

The exclusion of 'gender' from Article 12 of the Constitution breaches the social contract made more than 40 years ago when the People's Action Party (PAP) promised voters that "all people will have equal rights and opportunities, irrespective of sex, race and religion". It went on to say "There is no place in the socialist society for the exploitation of women." (PAP Election Manifesto: The Tasks Ahead, 1959)

The absence of clear and specific protection against gender-based discrimination has enabled, from time to time, the enactment of policies and rules that favour one gender over the other. Examples of discriminatory policies still standing include:

- the birthright of children born outside of Singapore to Singaporean mothers and foreign fathers (see item 1)
- Medical Benefits (item 7.1), quota on women entering medical school (item 6), the maintenance order in the Women's Charter (item 4), compulsory National Service for boys (item 5).

Without protection enshrined in the highest law of the land, women and men are exposed to exploitation on the basis of their gender.

### **Proposal**

Article 12 to be amended to read: "...shall be no discrimination against citizens of Singapore on the grounds of gender, religion, race, descent or place of birth..."

## **4. Maintenance Order, Women's Charter Bill**

Section 69 of the Women's Charter Bill allows a wife to claim maintenance from her husband but does not give a husband the same right.

### **Government's Rationale**

Asian family values place husbands as heads of households. Male pride will not allow men to claim maintenance.

### **AWARE's Comment**

This policy discriminates against a man who may have done his fair share in a long marriage and is physically incapacitated, or who may have lost his job and is unable to find work.

This policy also contravenes Section 46 of the Women's Charter Bill which states that a husband and wife have equal rights and duties.

Women are in a difficult and no-win position because as long as this discrimination exists in law, many women will be accused of not shouldering their responsibilities.

### **Proposal**

Amend the Women's Charter to give men and women equal right to claim maintenance from their spouse.

## **5. National Service**

Women are not required to serve National Service, which is compulsory for men. Because they have given 2-3 years of their lives to the nation, men enjoy salary and tax benefits. Many also develop a network of friends that can be advantageous in their work life.

### **Government's Rationale**

Asian parents do not want their daughters to go through national service.

### **AWARE's Comment**

The principle of equal treatment should apply in all areas. If young men are asked to give 2-3 years of their life to the nation, so should women. The concept of National Service should be broadened. In keeping with the principle of Total Defence, women

drafted for NS – and men unsuitable for military service – can serve the nation in many other ways.

#### Proposal

Women and men should be called up equally for compulsory national service. They should have the choice of military or non-military service and there should be no hierarchical distinctions for either arm of NS. Measures should also be taken to eliminate sexual stereotyping and any possibility of sexual harassment while young Singaporeans serve their National Service.

## **6. Quota on Women Entering Medical School**

A policy introduced in 1979 limits the number of female medical students to one-third of every cohort. The quota continues even as Singapore faces a shortage of doctors (as reported in August 2001 by the International Medical Education Review Panel). To make up for this anticipated shortfall, the Government is easing entry requirements to medical school and welcoming foreign trained doctors – while the quota on women students remains.

#### Government's Rationale

The 15 to 20% attrition rate among women doctors is a waste of the money spent training them.

"Equal 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 a doctor or engineer and run a home and bring up children," said then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew in August 1983.

Women doctors, because of their responsibilities to family, only want to "work office hours and watch the clock", was the reason given in 1987 by the then Health Minister Toh Chin Chye.

#### AWARE's Comment

The evidence – a survey by the Association of Women Doctors (Singapore) – shows only a 1% difference in the drop out rate between women and men doctors. To maintain the quota is an outrageous act of outright discrimination.

#### Proposal

Immediately remove the quota on women entering medical school.

## **7. Human resource policies in the Civil Service**

### **7.1 Medical Benefits**

Dependants of male civil servants can claim up to 60 per cent of their medical costs, but dependants of female civil servants cannot. Provisions are made for divorced or widowed women, and those whose husbands are seriously ill. Many of the companies that keep to a similar policy take their lead from the civil service.

#### Government's Rationale

1986, then Finance Minister Richard Hu: It is too costly to extend the benefit to the families of women employees, and it is not in keeping with the Government's attempt to cut back spending during the recession.

1993, then Finance Minister Richard Hu: The policy preserves the social structure by supporting the principle of husband-as-head-of-household. "It is the husband's responsibility to look after the family's needs, including their medical needs. This is how our society is structured. It would be unwise to tamper with this structure.

2002, Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong: "Because this is an Asian society, and in an Asian society the husband is responsible for taking care of the family, including the medical expense. Our medical benefits schemes should reflect this and should not undermine the rationale for holding the husband responsible...the government's view is that on a matter as basic as the family structure, we should follow, rather than lead social changes."

#### AWARE's Comment

The policy contravenes section 46 of the Women's Charter which states that a husband and wife have equal rights and duties to the family. It discriminates against more than half the civil service as women make up 55% of the service.

The government's rationale for this policy has been inconsistent.

In 1986, it cited the recession as the reason to withhold the benefit from women, who accepted the argument and waited patiently. In 1993, when the economy was strong, the rationale switched to social structure and the man needing to be the head of the household. This is the argument still being used.

Consider the reality of the home and the workplace today. Women head some 160,000, or 17%, of the approximately 1 million households in Singapore. In other words, 1 in 6 households has a woman as its head. With the current recession and unemployment rate, many of the men who are supposed to head and provide for their households are unable to do so. The family thus depends on the wife/mother – who, if she is a civil servant, cannot claim medical benefits for her family.

#### Proposal

Extend equal medical benefits to women and men in the civil service.

### **7.2 Paternity Leave**

Women are entitled to two months' maternity leave but their husbands can only claim three days' paternity leave.

#### AWARE's Comment

Three days paternity leave is grossly inadequate. The arrival of a new-born is a time of upheaval for the family. It requires psychological, emotional and physical adjustments by both the father and the mother. There are changes in routines, new demands and serious responsibilities to be shared. The mother has to recuperate from the birth as well as cope with feeding schedules and other demands of the new life in the family. The father, too, needs time to adjust to the changes in his family and to his new role. He requires time too to support his wife and to bond with his child.

#### Proposal

At least two weeks paternity leave for the father so he can provide proper support to his wife and family.

### **7.3 Sick Child Leave**

Married women **officers** with children under 6 years old are allowed full pay leave of up to 5 days for each child subject to a maximum of 15 days a year for 3 children. This is not available to married men or single parents.

#### Government Rationale

It is the natural role of the mother to be the care-provider for her family.

#### AWARE's Comment

Some 43 percent of Singapore families depend on the income of both wife and husband. Increasingly, the wife's career and income are as important as the husband's. To continue to see the wife and mother as the care-provider for the family reinforces a sexual stereotype and undermines the principle of shared responsibilities that the Government, through the Ministry for Community Development and Sports, is attempting to promote. With mothers increasingly playing an equal and even critical role in supplying the family's income, fathers must play an equal role in providing care for the family.

#### Proposal

Sick child leave to be available equally to men and women.

### **7.4 Four Years Unpaid Childcare Leave**

Women civil servants can claim up to four years unpaid childcare leave without a loss in job status.

#### AWARE's Comment

This policy discriminates against men and their right to participate fully in the nurturing and welfare of their children. Giving men the choice of taking unpaid leave to look after their children will help shape stronger families.

#### Proposal

Extend four years unpaid childcare leave to male civil servants.

### **7.5 Sexual Harassment & Dismissal of Pregnant women**

There is currently no recourse for sexual harassment in the workplace, or for pregnant women who are dismissed suddenly and for no convincing reason.

#### AWARE's Comment

There is enough anecdotal evidence of sexual harassment and victimisation of pregnant women to warrant serious consideration of legislation. Ahead of such legislation, the civil service can make a start by instituting policies against sexual harassment.

#### Proposal

Conduct a study of the extent of sexual harassment in the workplace and draw up a code, possibly also laws, to deal with it.

## **8. Cultural Change**

Article 5(a) of CEDAW requires signatory states to 'modify social and cultural patterns of conduct...which are based on ...stereotyped roles for men and women.'

### AWARE's Comment

Cultural change requires courage and commitment to move away from familiar, habitual ways of seeing, thinking and doing. As we encourage understanding of industries by studying economics and business methods among other knowledge, so we must encourage understanding of gender equality matters by studying gender – its history, theory and application.

### Proposal

- Incorporate compulsory gender studies modules at primary, secondary and tertiary levels in the education system
- Incorporate compulsory gender studies modules in the Civil Service Training curriculum.

## **9. Tax Rebates on Foreign Domestic Worker Levy**

Married women, including those who separated, divorced or widowed, can claim a tax rebate amounting to two times the amount of the maid's levy but restricted to one maid. Single men and women cannot claim this rebate.

### Government's Rationale

The foreign domestic maid rebate scheme is to support married women who are going back to the workplace. For social reasons, government is trying to put a cap on the number of foreign domestic workers coming into the country.

### AWARE's Comment

Single men and women who have sick and elderly parents or other dependants need domestic help in order to stay in the workplace and contribute to the economy. To deny them the rebate undermines the national policy of encouraging Singaporeans to care for their sick and elderly.

### Proposal

Extend rebate to the single persons with dependants.

## **10. Foreign Workers**

The monthly levy paid by employers on every foreign worker goes into the government's coffers. The workers do not get a cent of it.

### Government's Rationale

The levy was not designed to benefit the workers. It is a way to help control the number of foreign workers in Singapore by.

### AWARE's Comment

Foreign workers are guests in our country. Their contribution helps build and maintain our society. In most cases, their wages are well below minimum wage

levels. Sometimes, foreign workers – and especially maids – suffer at the hands of their employers or have serious and even fatal accidents.

A portion of the monthly levy should go into some form of insurance scheme that covers foreign workers in the event of injury or death, and loss of job and income through no fault of their own such as when they have to return home before they have been able to work long enough to save money to repay the costs of coming to Singapore. If a foreign worker does not draw upon the scheme for emergencies, he or she should still be entitled to a certain amount when he or she completes her contract and returns home.

#### Proposal

- Set a minimum wage for foreign workers, and introduce an insurance scheme funded via the monthly levy to provide cover for foreign workers.
- Step up public education efforts to encourage respect and appreciation of the foreign worker's contribution to Singapore and their human rights.

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