

# Making choices amidst increasing burdens: a feminist analysis of Singapore's pronatal policies

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## **Abstract**

In the past 25 years, the Singapore state has embarked on pronatalist campaigns in an effort to stem trends toward delayed marriage and low fertility. Although their effects in reversing demographic trends have been at best modest, they have shaped Singaporeans' understandings of themselves as members of families, as mothers and fathers, daughters and sons. The many campaigns and policies, primarily targeted at women, have also had profound effects in shaping women's and men's "choices."

In this paper, I will argue that "choice"—so central to liberal feminism—is in fact a highly problematic concept when detached from consideration of structural conditions. In other words, it is crucial to ask: what choices are possible and what are impossible in a given context? Who has/gets to make choices and who does not? What are the conditions under which women and men make choices?

I will look closely at the "choices" offered up by the state—its maternity and paternity leave provisions (or lack thereof) and foreign domestic worker policies—and how these have been heavily constraining. I will argue that the state has placed issues of fertility firmly in the realm of women's "choices" and outside those of men's. In so doing, they have produced a familial form wherein gendered asymmetries are upheld and perpetuated by the strong structures of state policy and national norms. These asymmetries, furthermore, are detrimental for both women and men aspiring to better lives in contemporary Singapore.

## Choices, choices everywhere

But I would say whatever the leave arrangements and whatever the government carries, ultimately the woman or the man must make a personal choice. Do you work 110 per cent on your career or do you set aside time for other activities for a balanced life? I think each person has to decide his or her own point of balance.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong,  
National Day Rally Speech, 2008

I never actually thought about what the government wants. I think it's more important what I want. If it coincides with the policies, that's good. But if not, too bad. I see it as a personal choice. The government, they want to achieve a certain [thing], but for me, it's like it's more important I know what I want.

“Farah,” a married Malay woman with no children,  
in an interview by the author in 2003

Having “choices” matter to Singaporeans. What to eat, how to dress, where to live, what credit card to apply for, what sort of career to pursue, who to marry and what type of wedding to have, which class ward to stay in at the hospital. As a nation relatively new to capitalist wealth, we revel collectively in the feeling that we have choices. We seem less obsessed with what we choose and more concerned with the fact that we have choices. Choices and our access to them mark us as having arrived – we are global citizens, with capacities to discern, with resources to alternatives.

In the public discourse on childbearing and childrearing, this attachment to the notion of choice is especially strong. In the context of a state highly present and visible in all realms of social life, both government officials and regular citizens nonetheless insist that having children is, “ultimately,” “at the end of the day,” “when all is said and done,” a personal choice.

What are the implications of this? When we say having children is a personal choice, what do we imply?

The term “choice” plays an important role in feminism. It signifies women’s desires for control over their bodies, their families, their work, their lives. In the historical transition from what has been called the Second Wave to Third Wave feminist movements, it also signifies an important shift toward greater inclusivity—of women of all ethnoracial and class backgrounds and sexual orientations (Heywood and Drake 1997; Snyder-Hall 2010). “Choice” embeds within it the idea that different women have different interests and desires and that feminism ought to be a movement that embraces the fight for women’s capacities to exercise these differences. And one important difference between women lies in their differential desires for children.

“Choice,” however, is a problematic concept. The word conjures up images of autonomous individuals, making decisions independently. Applied to contexts where

neoliberal market ideology also reigns, choice becomes an especially individualized concept – that is, where conventional wisdom deigns that the individual is ultimately responsible for her/his own economic competitiveness and survival and that the state (and society) can play only peripheral roles – the sociological dimensions in any exercise of “choice” are inevitably obscured. Invoking “choice” often implies a strong view of individual autonomy and agency – a view that overlooks the importance of how these choices are shaped; what forces, institutions and actors shape them, and how individuals are strongly constrained in the types of action they can take and even imagine taking.

Snyder-Hall (2010) has argued that this does not necessarily have to be so. She argues for embracing respect for pluralism and self-determination while keeping in view larger social conditions and the implications of individual actions. This is, in my view, a good compromise. It suggests that we respect that there are differences in what people want while always recognizing that what and how we “want” is always shaped by the norms, rules, and laws we are embedded in. And the choices we make always, in turn, have social implications—whether it is in shaping demographic trends, or in influencing how people think about differences between men and women.

The purpose of this paper is to take on precisely this task with reference to the national discussion of childbearing and childcare in the contemporary Singapore context. What choices are possible and what are impossible in a given context? Who has/gets to make choices and who does not? What are the conditions under which people make choices?

I look closely at the “choices” offered up by the state – its maternity leave provisions and foreign domestic worker policies in particular – and show how these have been heavily constraining for women as well as men. I argue that the state has placed issues of fertility firmly in the realm of women’s “choices” that in so doing, they have produced a familial form wherein gendered differentials and inequalities are upheld and perpetuated by the strong structures of state policy and national norms. The ultimate consequence is of constraints for both women and men of childbearing age.

## **Young Singaporeans: similar aspirations, split pathways**

In contemporary Singapore, young women and men take similar paths up until the point of young adulthood—when work, marriage and childbearing enter the picture. While there are no doubt differentiations in how boys and girls are socialized in schools and at home, we see clear evidence that boys are not favored over girls in terms of general educational opportunities. In 2008, 94.6% of women and 92.8% of men between 25 and 34 years old, and 83.6% of women and 82.5% of men between 35 and 44 years old had at least secondary education (Ministry of Manpower 2008). In 2009, women made up 51% of all graduates from universities (Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, 2010a).

It is increasingly the case that up until young adulthood, young women and men are exposed to similar values regarding the importance of education and employment. They consequently develop comparable sensibilities toward the centrality of work and aspirations to secure good jobs—work that can help them secure their financial futures,

and work that can bring personal satisfaction. Young women, then, have every reason to believe that they have the same “choices” as their brothers and boy friends.

Their paths begin to split when they enter the realm of work. Singaporean men are paid more than Singaporean women. Women earn, on average, 73% of what men do in Singapore (Seager 2009). National Service is used to justify these differences, which appear to persist throughout careers. There is, moreover, the issue of sex segregation by work. Women continue to be over-represented in low-paying, low-status jobs and under-represented in high-paying, high-status ones. Additionally, as in many other parts of the world, women in Singapore do more of the unpaid labor within homes—housework as well as caring for the disabled, young or elderly.

We begin to see that the biggest split between men and women happen at the intersection of home/family and work/career. As young men and women make “choices” about marriage, childbearing and caregiving, they learn that what appear to be the same set of “choices” result in very different consequences for their aspirations, their future financial security and general wellbeing, and the texture of their everyday lives.

These differences in the consequences of choices have intertwining cultural and structural elements. They are cultural to the extent that they involve beliefs, values, and norms about what virtuous women should do and how manly man should behave. And they are cultural to the extent that people view the differentiations as arising from important cultural “traditions” and therefore sacred and/or immutable. Importantly, culture and structure are not independent entities; the cultural elements intertwine with the structural insofar as laws, regulations and policies uphold, reinforce and indeed reify norms, beliefs and values around particular types of familial forms and caregiving arrangements.

The rest of this paper looks more closely at how the cultural and structural come together to shape women’s and men’s “choices” around work and family. It does this by tracing a lens on the contemporary Singapore state’s policies toward the issues of fertility and the caregiving of children.

## **The choices we can and cannot make**

The Singapore state has in the past four decades made concerted efforts at controlling its population. These were first antinatalist (1960s to 1970s) and then pronatalist (mid-1980s onward). The turn from antinatalism to pronatalism has been a gradual one. Throughout the process, both state discourse and public policy have implicated women far more deeply than men in the decision-making processes of childbearing and childrearing. In the following, I briefly sketch the state’s pronatalist interventions before discussing maternity/paternity leave and foreign domestic worker policies. Both of these produce and reproduce gender differentiations and inequalities.

The early years of pronatalism had clear eugenic overtones and were targeted entirely at women – highly educated women were encouraged to have more children and lower-educated ones fewer (Heng and Devan 1995; Lee 1983; Wong and Yeoh 2003). The rationale was that the highly-educated were more intelligent and could produce better offspring who would be “talent for the future.” Although the most controversial aspects of the policies were quickly toned down, elements of the eugenics logic remained

well into the early 2000s. Up until 2003, for example, there was a tax relief—the Enhanced Child Relief—where married, divorced or widowed women with ‘O’ level examination passes in at least three subjects received additional income tax reliefs for their *legitimate* and *biological* children (Ministry of Community Development and Sports 2003). Indeed, even up to now, many of the pronatalist measures reside in attempts to incentivize higher-income women, through tax reliefs, to have children.

It was not until the mid-2000s that a more universalistic message emerged: low fertility is a problem for the nation not just from a “talent” perspective but also more generally (though relatedly) from the perspective of economic growth and sustainability. By this period, marriage and fertility had become issues firmly entrenched in the discourse of national development; the idea that marriage plus children equals happy family had become construed as a foundation in the quest to maintain Singapore’s hard-earned economic standing.<sup>1</sup>

The notion that marriage and childbearing could make for happy families is not in itself problematic. What require critical analyses are the specificities of what make for an ideal family in contemporary Singapore, with particular attention to how men and women are expected play differential roles in building this family.

The PAP government has historically pushed for women’s education and workforce participation (Pyle 2001). This should not be read, however, as a feminist position. Instead, it reflects the state’s quest for national economic development. We see that in the realm of pronatal policies, the state’s position on gender emphasizes and reinforces women’s dual responsibilities as caregivers and earners and men’s primary responsibilities as earners. While women’s contributions to the Singapore economy have become increasingly significant, the state has insisted—through rhetoric as well as policies—on their responsibilities as caregivers. Men on the other hand have not been compelled or abetted in similar ways to participate more in household labour.

This gender asymmetry is particularly salient on the organization of two issues: time-off from work and domestic labor. Public policy and market forces have combined to produce a situation wherein there has been a naturalization of the notion that childbearing and childrearing practices rest firmly in the realm of women’s “choices.” When it comes to cutting back on work in order to make way for childrearing, women are the ones who are placed in positions to make adjustments and compelled to make efforts toward the often-elusive “work-life balance.” Men—regardless of their changing sensibilities toward marriage and fatherhood—are assumed to be principal earners and relegated to playing supporting roles in caregiving, poorly supported and barely recognized.

The differentiation between men as employees/fathers and women as employees/mothers is stark: while employers are mandated by law to grant women employees up to 16 weeks of paid maternity leave, the granting (or not) of paternity leave is left entirely to the discretion of individual employers. Taking cues from the Civil Service, three days paternity leave has become a norm of sorts. Fathers who are able to, given their jobs and employers, may take a few more days using their annual leave entitlements. Unsurprisingly, it is rare to hear of men taking more than two weeks off after the birth of a child.

People who have taken care of infants know that there is a fair bit of learning to do when it comes to changing diapers, giving baths, feeding, burping, and putting a child to bed. Even those who have not done it know this instinctively; why else do parents insist on hiring “experienced” caregivers? The lopsided leave provisions therefore ensure that men and women are socialized into parenthood in vastly different ways—with mothers clocking in vastly more hours than fathers. The path that parents embark on at the point of birth therefore set in place patterns of differential responsibilities *and* capacities of mothers and fathers, supposedly “natural” or deeply “cultural” but in fact quite clearly reinforced through the structural realities of maternity versus paternity leaves.

Furthermore, while the relatively generous maternity leave provisions suggest a family-friendly work environment, the implementation is not necessarily experienced as such. Norms emphasizing the primacy of work and illegitimacy around long periods of time-off persist. Women therefore often experience guilt and insecurity—sometimes as a direct result of bosses and co-workers’ attitudes and actions—when they take time-off. Moreover, since women but not men are “entitled” to such leave, they are the ones who have to take responsibility for deciding how long they can afford to be away from work. The factors they consider go beyond how long they need to care for their newborns, but also how much responsibility they have at work, what they “owe” to their co-workers and bosses, and whether they will be rendered irrelevant by extended absences. In some work contexts, the increase in maternity leave without corresponding increase in paternity leave has rendered married women in their 20s and 30s more rather than less vulnerable as workers as they are looked upon as potentially less productive employees.<sup>2</sup>

For working women in Singapore—increasingly trained, educated and socialized for employment; more and more aware of the importance of long-term financial independence, and increasingly significant as contributors to the financial security of the family—the “choice” to have a child and leave the workforce is one fraught with difficulties. It is clear that they will have to take up a heavy set of responsibilities within the home that cannot be shared with their husbands, on top of having to work harder to prove their worth at the workplace.

The mirror image of these quandaries is the complete absence of choices for men. Singaporean men between their 20s and 40s have grown up in a Singapore where girls and women are increasingly their equals in schools, in polytechnics and universities, at work and within various realms of their communities. Young men inhabit a world that feminist movements *have* altered: “modern men” *are* expected to be more respectful toward women, to acknowledge their rights to employment, and to be more attentive to the everyday care of children than their fathers were. Yet, public policies around the family barely acknowledge their existence. Campaigns that laud fatherhood are well and good, but they do not on their own create more opportunities for men to take time off work to learn to be significant caregivers. In situations where men make efforts to create work-life balance, they as individuals bear the costs of whatever time they take to be present as caregivers.

State policies further shape women’s and men’s “choices” in the everyday domestic realm. Domestic work—household chores as well as the care of young and

old—are increasingly entrenched as women’s work through the huge influx of migrant workers.

The state regulates the entry of women (and only women), from a fixed set of neighboring countries—Philippines and Indonesia foremost among them—to work as live-in, full-time, and relatively low-cost domestic labor. There are no laws governing minimum wage, minimum rest days or maximum work hours, and foreign domestic workers live in employers’ homes and are fully dependent on them for food and shelter. This renders their labor highly continuous and cheap considering the number of hours they work and the amount of work they do.

For middle to high-income Singaporean households, this option has become increasingly a norm. Compared to average monthly fees of S\$754 for full-day child care programs (Ministry of Community Development Youth and Sports 2010) (less subsidies ranging from S\$150 to S\$300, depending on employment status of mothers<sup>3</sup>), paying a domestic worker between S\$220 to S\$350 per month (plus about S\$200 or S\$290 to the government in “maid levy”—the lower rate for those with a child under 12 or an older person above 65 within the household) means not only that there are round-the-clock options for childcare, but that groceries are bought, dinners get cooked, clothes washed, and bathrooms cleaned. There is furthermore none of the hassle involved with having to drop off or pick up children at given hours and arranging for other forms of care when they fall sick or when centers shut down for weekends and holidays. The less pleasant aspects of childcare – changing diapers, waking up in the middle of the night to deal with fussiness – can also be displaced onto domestic workers. For families where both husband and wife work relatively long hours – and this is increasingly the norm – domestic workers appear the most economically sensible and reliable option. While two to three hour “play groups” and nurseries have become more popular among parents of preschool-age children, including those who hire domestic workers, the use of childcare centers as primary mode of care is relatively rare.

The number of foreign domestic workers has grown eight-fold from about 20,000 in 1987 (Asis, Huang and Yeoh 2004) to roughly 170,000 by 2008 – roughly one employed in every six households (Wong 2008). Significantly, as more Singaporeans take this route, it has become entrenched as a norm (Teo 2009). An entire discourse about this particular option has formed among Singaporeans: “maids” are a “no choice” solution – problematic because they do not have the same “values” and cannot be trusted completely (to not abuse children, steal or bring men home). They are nonetheless “necessary.” The way to manage employers’ fears is to rope in the unpaid labor of grandmothers (and sometimes grandfathers) to “supervise” maids while young couples are at work. Although not completely desirable, this arrangement is still seen as more logical than full-time childcare centers because children receive continuous care within the home and much of the other work necessary for running a household also gets done. These “common sense” ways of thinking about the childcare issue further naturalize such household arrangements.

The turn to foreign domestic workers results in a number of things: housework and childcare is further entrenched as women’s work. Whereas domestic struggles and negotiations within the home around issues of housework have the potential for altering gender dynamics for dual-earner heterosexual couples, this is largely diffused by the

presence of the domestic worker. Housework, meanwhile, is further devalued; it not only persists as women's work but also takes on the additional taint of being the low-paid work of women of lower ethno-national and class stature.<sup>4</sup> Very importantly, because the structurally inferior position of domestic workers continually reinforces these women as "lowly" in Singaporean society, they can never be seen, *as a group* (nevermind individual exceptions), as ideal caregivers. As substitutes for mothers and grandmothers, they will always be seen as a distant third choice as long as their labour is perceived as cheap, replaceable, and unprofessional. Insofar as domestic workers are nonetheless increasingly playing these roles as caregivers and housekeepers, Singaporean women (and men) will always have to be apologetic and guilty – "no choice lah" – about turning to this source of help. In other words, although foreign domestic workers *have* indeed contributed greatly to upholding our social and economic system, their presence in fact renders the family a perplexing place and childbearing/raising a difficult set of decisions to make.

Three implications of maternity/paternity leave structures and foreign domestic worker policies are worth reiterating here: first, they presume and reproduce the ideal that women are inextricably linked to family – that building and maintaining families ought to be a woman's principal role in life, and that women are the ones with primary responsibility for maintaining the (non-financial) wellbeing of households. Men's roles as fathers are left undefined, and the silence implies their primary roles as earners.

Second, shaped by an orientation toward nationalist goals of economic development, the state encourages and incentivizes women – particularly higher-income women – to maintain formal employment. In an increasingly expensive city where there are limited social security measures except for the truly destitute, and where one's access to public housing, healthcare and retirement support is dependent upon regular and long-term employment, most women are indeed compelled by economic realities to maintain formal employment. As more and more women step outside the domestic sphere, men are not similarly herded into the world of being both earner and caregiver.

Third, the state insists that the caregiving functions of the family belong *within* the private sphere – to be fulfilled and resolved within the spatial confines of specific types of individual households. Instead of spending public resources on building universally accessible childcare centers, it presents individual families with maternity leave, tax reliefs, subsidies and the "choice" to hire low-cost domestic labor from neighboring countries. On the surface, this appears to be a highly democratic solution—one that allows individual families to make the choices they want and that work for them. In practice, families find that their options are in fact quite limited. The "normal" and idealized mode of raising a child in Singapore involves these ingredients: a mother working and earning enough to pay for some preschool education (because this is quickly becoming a precondition for social mobility through a highly competitive education system)<sup>5</sup> – in an environment where her long-term career prospects and the financial security of her family are negatively affected by her childbearing; a father working to ensure a good long-term financial future for the family – in a context where he and his wife are also responsible for *their* parents; the young couple must also be earning enough to hire a foreign domestic worker to take care of their child(ren) while they work long hours outside the home; and the presence of older relatives, grandmothers in particular, who can "supervise" domestic workers.

Needless to say, many families do not look like that nor are near having all of these preconditions. Many individuals cannot see making such a life, even if in the abstract marriage and babies sound like good things to have in life. Where the conditions are too fraught, the “choices” become that of having or not having a child (or a second child), and not how a child will be taken care of. Indeed, this idealized family—a *socially* generated ideal, bolstered strongly by state policy, which individuals are essentially left on their own *as individuals* to create—is clearly difficult to attain. While surveys consistently show that young Singaporeans hold marriage and children in high regard (Ministry of Community Development Youth and Sports 2008), marriage and fertility rates have been dropping steadily.

## Locating Singapore within a global context

The Singapore case is not an anomaly. Demographically, its trends are comparable to those of other developed economies and particular its East Asian neighbors (Jones, Straughan and Chan 2008). In terms of gender relations and inequalities, we also have similar issues of women doing “double shifts”<sup>6</sup> at home and work, while men are not making the reverse movement into the household. Scholars have referred to these issues within the American and European contexts as “stalled revolution” (England 2010), “unfinished revolution” (Gerson 2010), and “incomplete transformations” (Gornick, Meyers and Wright 2009)—suggesting that feminist movements have greatly altered and enhanced people’s lives, but that there remain much work to be done.

The solutions these scholars have proposed have drawn on actual policy mechanisms that have worked to *enhance the space in which women and men can make choices*.<sup>7</sup> As the authors of one recent study—drawing on evidence from Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, Belgium, and France—put it, “policy elements that support our Real Utopia [wherein both men and women can be earners *and* caregivers] are in the realm of possibility” (Gornick and Meyers 2009).

Tracing our lens comparatively, we see that women’s positions in Singapore society have improved in important regards in the past few decades. In terms of access to education and means of controlling fertility, in particular, there have clearly been significant improvements. These enhancements to women’s choices have been integral to Singapore’s social and economic development, and to the wellbeing of their individual families. We see among young Singaporeans that these shifts have had the effect of altering sensibilities and expectations so that young women and men want it all—work, family, a good life for themselves and those they love. In other words, even “culturally”—that which is often blamed for the state’s cautious move toward gender equality in its family policies—we are already in fact in a different place than that suggested by public policy.

Singapore, similar to many other wealthy countries, is at a crossroads in terms of creating genuine choices for both women and men when it comes to family formation and work-life balance.

## We have the conditions

Economically and politically, Singapore is in fact in a superior position to create the appropriate conditions for genuine choices. Although Singaporeans value material wealth and to a large extent accept the logic that markets ought to be free, both the Singapore state and Singaporeans retain a strong ethic around the importance of state interventions to ensure that the country is a good place to live for all. Economically, the country has the capacity to put national resources into building up high quality public resources that everyone can tap into.

There are a number of things I believe can enhance the quality of the environment in which people make choices.

First, we need to shift the national discursive framework around welfare. We have to start thinking of public spending as precisely that—public. The state is entrusted with the resources of the collective, society as a whole. For society’s members to feel like they are part of a collective, there has to be shared responsibility and mutual help—a sense that we are citizens together, mutually dependent, where individual wellbeing depends upon collective wellbeing.<sup>8</sup> The government and its many institutions have the capacity to come up with and implement policies and provides support, but this process cannot happen independently of civil society, and the solutions must not be seen as government supports but *social* supports. Demonizing the notion of welfare suppresses our rights as citizens to protect one another.

Related to this, policies cannot remain as individualized as they are now. There is, in fact, already a great deal of public spending. This is, however, too often targeted at getting *individual* families to behave in very narrow ways. As I show earlier, these place people in positions with little room to maneuver, not only with few true choices, but with very limited space to imagine alternatives. Drawing from comparative examples, particularly from the Scandinavian countries,<sup>9</sup> we should consider directing more public spending toward, for example, growing an evenly high-quality and universally accessible childcare sector so that people will see this as a truly practical and desirable option, something that “normal” Singaporeans can count on. We also have to direct resources into providing paternity leave so that women and men can exercise true choice in how they want to organize their family lives, so that both men and women can access that now-elusive work-life balance. Some families will still continue to feel the need to hire domestic workers, and that should still be supported, but others will find that it is possible to hold down full-time jobs, raise children, and still have a reasonably clean home and meals to eat – if members of a household all pitch in.

Finally, we have to look beyond the narrow parameters of the immediate problems of childcare. When people think about the value of marriage and children, they are imagining the sorts of lives they can have. They are looking at married people who have children and this is what they are seeing: long hours of work so that secure retirement is possible and so that ageing parents can be supported; for women—a “mommy track” where advancement is difficult and a long second shift where they have to bend over backwards trying to be “good” mothers (who breastfeed, who make sure their kids eat well, pass exams, have “creative” skills, good manners and values—mothers destined to fail in all these endeavors because the experts keep coming up with new criteria); for men, heavy psychic and physical burdens of being dominant earners, and with little time to enjoy the very children they are struggling to support. They are also

seeing that people married with children are drawing on much unpaid labor within the extended family (and there are only so many grandmothers to go around), and that they are “resorting” to “no choice” solutions of maids. Children bring much joy and love, but it is also clear that working parents are stressed out and constantly worried about whether their children will be able to “make it” in Singapore. Compared to the lives the unmarried or/and the child-free already have – lives where they strive to find fulfillment in work and hobbies, lives where they already have financial burdens and some responsibilities toward parents and other familial members – this scenario is not particularly attractive. In the national discussion regarding fertility, then, we have to take a broader view at considering what makes a good life and if indeed, now that we are a “First World” country, we have access to it.

This is not a pro-marriage, pro-baby paper. As a feminist, I believe that gender equality should be an end in itself. And it should be an end in itself not only because it improves women’s lives, but because it enhances all lives. The notion of “choice” has been integral to the feminist movement. When discussing choice, however, we have to be careful to locate it within a given social context. On the anniversary of the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE), it is appropriate to recognize the great leaps we have made in expanding women’s choices. We should also be mindful that there remain serious limitations in the environment in which women and men make choices. These limitations help account for why Singaporeans are seemingly “pro marriage/family” at the same time that they delay or avoid marriage and childbearing. They also, more importantly, illuminate the things we should work on as a society, and as AWARE looks forward to the next 25 years, so that our people can make genuine choices as they aspire to better lives. These may or may not include marriage and children, but it will be an achievement if people feel they are truly in positions to make these choices.

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<sup>1</sup> For a more thorough account of the shifts in discourse and policy orientations toward fertility issues, as well as how these are intertwined with broader national developmental goals, see

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Chapters 2 and 3 in Youyenn Teo, *Neoliberal Morality in Singapore: How family policies produce state and society* (London: Routledge, Forthcoming in 2011).

<sup>2</sup> The anxiety surrounding discussions of maternity leave stand in contrast to the relative nonchalance about the time men are away from work for mandatory military service. All Singaporean men are required to serve in the military, and can be called upon for training and away from work at any time until the age of 40 (50 for officers), and up to 40 days each year. In the work lives of Singaporean men and women then, there is in fact a high probability that men are on average away from work more than women.

<sup>3</sup> I refer here only to the Centre-based Childcare Subsidies that are accessible to all working and non-working Singaporean mothers regardless of income. There are further Financial Assistance Schemes available to low-income households.

<sup>4</sup> For a prescient discussion of how children growing up in households with servants come to see gender and class inequalities as natural, see Raka Ray and Seemin Qayum, *Cultures of servitude: modernity, domesticity, and class in India* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> While primary school education is mandated by law, highly subsidized and, practically speaking, universally accessible, preschool education is not. For a discussion of the implications of this for intensifying inequality, see Michael D. Barr and Zlatko Skrbis, *Constructing Singapore: Elitism, Ethnicity and the Nation-Building project* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Arlie Hochschild and Anne Machung famously called housework and caregiving working women's "second shift." See Arlie Russell Hochschild and Anne Machung, *The second shift: working parents and the revolution at home* (New York, N.Y.: Viking, 1989).

<sup>7</sup> Gornick and Meyers make this point most explicitly. See Janet C. Gornick and Marcia K. Meyers, "Institutions that Support Gender Equality in Parenthood and Employment," pp. 3-64 in *Gender equality: Transforming family divisions of labor*, edited by Janet C. Gornick, Marcia K. Meyers and Erik Olin Wright (London: Verso, 2009). For comparative studies of family policies which demonstrate the importance of gender equality, see also Rebecca Ray, Janet C. Gornick and John Schmitt, "Parental Leave Policies in 21 Countries" (Washington, D.C.: Center for Economic and Policy Research, 2008). Demographers have also compared fertility trends and argued for the importance of gender equality in stemming the trends toward low fertility. See Francis G. Castles, "The world turned upside down: below replacement fertility, changing preferences and family-friendly public policy in 21 OECD countries," *Journal of European Social Policy* 13 (2003): 209-227, Peter McDonald, "Work-Family Policies are the Right Approach to the Prevention of Very Low Fertility," *People and Place* 9 (2001): 317-327.

<sup>8</sup> For a compelling example on the importance of this and the devastating effects of individual citizens detaching their wellbeing from those of their fellow citizens, see Margaret R. Somers, *Genealogies of citizenship: markets, statelessness, and the right to have rights* (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> It is also time, indeed, to stop claiming that we are "culturally" unready, and that we cannot use places like the Scandinavian countries as models. As I have argued throughout this paper, young men and women have grown up in a context in which certain elements of gender equality are already a foregone conclusion. As far as "traditional" patriarchal arrangements go – where men make all the important familial decisions and have full control over money – *that ship* has long sailed, with many positive effects for the nation as a whole. Moreover, the Scandinavian countries have seen changes in fatherly practices *following* policy changes, not prior. See, for example, Anna Lise Ellingsaeter, "Dual breadwinners between state and market," pp. 40- in *Restructuring gender relations and employment: The decline of the male breadwinner*, edited by Rosemary Crompton (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).