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Representation of Women in Governance in Singapore: Trends and Problems

*M. Shamsul Haque**

Introduction

The area of gender studies is predominantly a matter of describing, analysing, and evaluating the power configuration between the male and female populations that exists in various societies. Even the socioeconomic dimensions of female population relating to employment, education, health, income, and status are inseparable from women's access to positions in power structure. A major mechanism of such women's access to power is their representation in various sources of power such as property and wealth, political and administrative position, education and knowledge, corporate ownership and control, and construction of social norms and perception. Without recognizing women's representation in these sources of power, the understanding of issues or concerns related to gender may remain parochial, prejudiced and often misleading.

However, unlike the common interpretation of social power based on politico-economic parameters, the study of gender representation in various realms of power structure, including public governance, must take into account the sociocultural determinants of power. It is because, while the unequal representation of different classes or income groups is largely shaped by factors such as property ownership, educational achievement, information access, and interest articulation, the condition of gender inequality and under-representation can be reinforced by gender-biased values and customs ascribing women to lower social status and position compared to their male counterparts even within the same race and class.¹ Thus, for any comprehensive study on female representation in governance, it is not only crucial to examine economic structure, institutional patterns, education system, legal provisions, and state policy, it is also essential to critically explore gender-related beliefs, norms, and perceptions that exist in various cultures, civilisations, or traditions.

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How significant is this issue of gender representation in public governance? The representation or participation of women in governance is necessary to enhance democracy that requires equal citizenship rights of women; to meet the legitimization challenge posed by women's distrust in government when they are not represented; to respond to the varying human interests such as women's unique needs and preferences; to facilitate changes in politics and policies (especially those related to family and sexuality) brought about by women; and to make proper use of human resources comprising both male and female talent pools.² In short, women's representation in governance is essential for democracy, legitimacy, interest articulation, policy change, and human resource supply. It has also been pointed out that without the active participation and representation of women at all levels of decision-making, especially in governance, "the goals of equality, development and peace cannot be achieved".³ In fact, the interpretations of "good governance" are based on principles such as equal representation of men and women in decision-making positions, institutional responsibility and responsiveness to all citizens irrespective of gender, and equal opportunity for both men and women in terms of living standards.⁴

Despite this significance of female representation in governance, the progress in such representation has been quite disappointing. The existing studies show that, globally, women's representation in the legislative, ministerial, sub-ministerial, and managerial positions has remained limited.⁵ Reflecting this global trend, female representation in governance has been quite poor in most Asian countries.⁶ In short, notwithstanding the abovementioned importance of equal gender representation in public governance, the status of such representation remains relatively weak. This article explores this issue of women's representation in various domains of governance—including the legislature, cabinet, administrative agencies, and local organisations—in Asia with special reference to Singapore. However, before venturing into this specific issue of representation in Asian governance, it could be useful to explore the contemporary global trends in gender-related issues in general.

Recent Trends in Gender Issues: Events and Institutions

In the history of women's emancipation, many forces functioned as contributory factors, including the Renaissance and the Enlightenment emphasizing women's education and rights, the socialist revolution expanding women's role, the anti-colonial movements allowing women's political participation, the expansion of agriculture and industry requiring a female labour force, the dissemination of literature highlighting gender inequality, and the organised protests of women demanding equal rights and end of discrimination.⁷ With growing demand for and recognition of women's representation and participation in various realms of society, the postwar period witnessed the proliferation of conventions, institutions, and forums related to women's rights to equality, representation and participation.

For example, in terms of international conventions or laws, there emerged the International Labour Organisation's Equal Remuneration Convention (1951); the Convention on the Political Rights of Women (1952); the Discrimination (Employment

and Occupation) Convention (1958); the Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960); the Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages (1962); the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (1967); and the Declaration on the Protection of Women and Children in Emergencies and Armed Conflicts (1974). One of the most comprehensive measures, however, has been the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) adopted by the United Nations (UN) in 1979. It defines legally binding and internationally accepted principles of women's rights, requires the prohibition of any form of discrimination against women, demands the enforcement of women's equal rights compared to men, and prescribes measures to be adopted in this regard.

In line with the above conventions, laws, and declarations, there have emerged various international institutions, especially within the UN system, to address gender issues worldwide. Some of these international organisations include the Commission on the Status of Women, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, the Division for the Advancement of Women, the United Nations Development Fund for Women, and the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women. There are other institutions which, although created for other specific tasks or fields, deal with gender-related issues within their respective fields.⁸ At the national level, in almost all countries, there are ministries, agencies, departments, commissions, and/or committees dealing with gender-related issues such as poverty, health, education, unemployment, discrimination, violence, and under-representation. Among Asian countries, these government institutions include the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs (Bangladesh), the National Commission on Women (Brunei), the Ministry of Women's Affairs (Cambodia), the Programme for the Development of Chinese Women (China), the Department of Women and Child Development (India), the Headquarters for the Promotion of Gender Equality (Japan), the National Working Committee for Women's Affairs (Myanmar), the Ministry of Women Development (Pakistan), the National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women (Philippines), the Council of Women's Organizations (Singapore); the National Commission on Women's Affairs (Thailand), and the National Committee for the Advancement of Women (Vietnam). Beyond these national and international initiatives, there are varieties of non-government organisations or NGOs at the national, regional, and global levels, which study gender-related issues, influence state policies, mould public opinions, and directly or indirectly assist underprivileged women.

In addition to these legal and institutional measures related to gender equality, there has also been extensive intellectual debate and information dissemination through various international conferences. The Public Service International (PSI) pursued a global agenda to address women's rights and representation, especially in the public service in various regions and countries.⁹ At the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in September 1995, the participating governments accepted the principle of equality and development for all women, recognized the problems of gender inequalities, underscored women's equal rights, highlighted the worsening poverty among women and children, stressed women's access to power and resources,

emphasized elimination of violence against women, and acknowledged diversity in women's voices and roles.¹⁰ In their plenary speeches at this conference, the governments of 189 countries showed commitment or paid attention to various critical gender-related issues.¹¹

The governments in Asia committed themselves (at this Fourth World Conference on Women) to adopt legal, institutional, and economic measures to improve women's education and training (Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Maldives, Mongolia, Nepal, Singapore); to involve more women in political and administrative institutions and decisions (Bangladesh, China, Japan, Malaysia, Maldives); to improve women's health care (Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Mongolia, Nepal); to enhance women's involvement in economic activities (Cambodia, China, Japan, Nepal, the Philippines, Singapore); to undertake appropriate measures to prevent violence against women (Japan, Maldives, Nepal, the Philippines); and to reduce gender discrimination and strengthen women's human rights (Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Malaysia, Nepal, Pakistan).¹² With regard to enhancing women's participation in public governance in particular, some Asian countries expressed specific commitments or interests: Bangladesh wanted to establish committees at the district, sub-district, and union levels to engage women in development activities; China highlighted the increased participation of women in the political arena; Japan emphasized the employment of women in the public service; Malaysia stressed the involvement of women in political and administrative decisions; and the Maldives mentioned the creation of gender balance in decision-making bodies.

The above proliferation of conventions, institutions, and conferences undoubtedly indicate that there has been a significant progress in recognizing, publicizing, legalizing, and enforcing women's rights and representation all over the world. However, in reality, the progress has been slow, and the extent of representation remains poor in most countries, especially in the developing world. In the realm of governance, although the number of women has increased in many countries, the recent figures show that women represent only 13 percent of legislative positions, 11.7 percent of ministerial positions, 9.9 percent of sub-ministerial positions, and less than 6 percent of top managerial positions.¹³ There has even been a decline in parliamentary seats occupied by women, and their representation in ministerial positions (which is already marginal) has been limited to the relatively powerless social sectors.¹⁴ Similar scenarios can be found in other areas of public governance, such as civil service, autonomous agencies, and local institutions.

Features of Gender-Related Initiatives in Singapore

As mentioned above, public governance encompasses various public institutions and functions, including political bodies such as parliaments and ministries, administrative agencies or departments, and local-level organisations and associations. A major thrust of this paper is to explore the extent of female representation at these different levels of governance in Singapore, and evaluate the situation (especially in the political and administrative realms) in comparison with that in other Asian countries. However, as a

prelude to such a comparative cross-national analysis pursued later in the paper, this section presents a brief description of the origins and features of gender-related initiatives in Singapore.

Among Asian countries, the formation of the Singapore polity began with a socialist ideological predilection of the ruling People's Action Party (PAP), which, to a certain extent, did reinforce its support for women's rights and participation as pronounced in the PAP's election manifesto of 1954.¹⁵ Subsequently, the PAP relied on its women members to mobilize political support (1959); created its Women's Affairs Bureau (replaced in 1975); introduced the Women's Charter (1961); adopted the principle of "equal pay for equal work" (1962); formed the Women's Sub-Committee in the National Trade Union Congress (NTUC) (1973); and established the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations (SCWO) (1980).¹⁶ In various degrees, these government measures recognized the significance of women's political rights, representation, and participation.

With regard to legal measures in favour of women, one of the most crucial laws in Singapore is the Women's Charter adopted in 1961, which allows a married woman to use her own surname, to sue and be sued in her own name, to enter into contracts on her own, to acquire or dispose of property, and to get involved in any trade and profession.¹⁷ These legal provisions contributed significantly to the empowerment of women in Singapore. At the international level, the aforementioned UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women or CEDAW—which requires national governments to adopt the principle of gender equality in their constitutions and laws, introduce legal measures to eliminate discrimination against women, and guarantee the legal protection of women's rights—was signed by Singapore in 1995.¹⁸ Singapore was far behind other countries in terms of signing this international convention adopted in 1979, but it eventually committed itself to such a convention. Although some women's groups appreciated the move, Aline Wong (Chairman of the People's Action Party Women's Wing and Senior Minister of State for Health and Education) mentioned that the signing of the convention would have little direct impact on government policies in Singapore.¹⁹

Beyond these legal measures, Singapore also hosted and participated in various fora related to gender issues. For instance, it hosted the Public Service International (PSI) Congress in 1981, the PSI World Women's Conference in 1992, and the regional meeting on Women, Economics and Sustainable Development in 1994. The Singapore government also took part in the Seminar on Participation of Women in Politics as an Aspect of Human Resources Development in Seoul in 1992. Along with other Asia-Pacific countries, it recognized the resolutions adopted by this Seminar with regard to equal rights of women to participate in public life, vote in and stand for elections, be involved in government policies and non-government organisations, and perform public duties at all levels of government.²⁰ Singapore also participated in the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, and approved *The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*.

In terms of institutional means, there are various government and non-government organisations in Singapore to address different gender issues. Some of these institutional arrangements include the Women's Wing of the PAP, the Women's Sub-Committee in

NTUC, and the Women's Executive Committees (WECs). Various women's associations also emerged, mostly in the 1980s, including the Association of Women for Action and Research, the Singapore Business and Professional Women's Association, the Singapore Association of Women Lawyers, the Singapore Association for Professional and Executive Secretaries, the Singapore Association of Social Workers, and the SCWO coordinating all these associations.²¹ Under the SCWO, there are also various co-operatives run by women.

What are the implications of these legal and institutional arrangements for gender equality and representation in reality? What are the outcomes of the above government initiatives in terms of women's representation in politics, administration, and local organisations constituting the public governance? With regard to political representation, for example, there emerged concerns in the past that the number of the ruling party's women members in parliament declined from 3 in 1963 to 1 in 1968; that for more than a decade there was no woman legislative member from the ruling party until 1984 (when situation improved a bit); and that there was another decline in the number of elected female members of parliament from 4 to 2 in the 1990s.²² After this short background, it is necessary to examine the current status of female representation in the political, administrative, professional, and local-institutional spheres of governance. In the next section, the paper examines the current situation of female representation in various domains of governance in Singapore—including legislature, cabinet, administrative service, professional position, local institution, and overall workforce—compared with other Asian countries.

Women's Representation in Singapore and Other Asian Countries

Representation in the Legislature

The representation of women in Asian legislatures has been quite limited in relation to other regions of the world. According to 1997 figures, the proportion of female members in the legislature was 14 percent in Europe, 13 percent in North America, 8 percent in both Africa and South America, and only 7 percent in Asia.²³ In February 2000, the average percentage of women in both the upper and lower houses (combined) was 38.9 percent in Nordic countries, 12.5 percent in Europe (excluding Nordic countries), 15.2 percent in North and South Americas, 14.1 percent in the Pacific, 11.3 percent in Sub-Saharan Africa, and 14.1 percent in Asia.²⁴ Thus, the situation of women representation in Asian legislatures is slightly better than that in Africa, but worse than that in Europe, North America, and South America.

However, there are considerable variations among Asian countries themselves. It can be found from Table 1 that the percentage of female representation in the legislature is 26 percent in Vietnam, 21.8 percent in China, 20 percent in North Korea, 12.4 percent in the Philippines, 11 percent in Taiwan, 10.4 percent in Malaysia, 9.1 percent in Bangladesh, 9 percent in India and Laos, 8 percent in Indonesia, 7.4 percent in Cambodia, 5.9 percent in Nepal, 5 percent in Japan, 4.9 percent in Sri Lanka, 4.8 in Thailand, 4.3 percent in Singapore, 3 percent in South Korea, and 2 percent in Pakistan. Among these 18 Asian countries, Singapore's rank of female representation in the legislature is 15th, which falls behind most of these Asian cases except South Korea and

Table 1: Percentage of Women in National Legislature and Cabinet in Asian Countries, 1997 and 2000.

Country	% in Legislature (Rank) (2000)		% in Cabinet (Rank) (1997)	
Bangladesh	9.1	(7)	10	(3)
Cambodia	7.4	(10)	0	(N/A)
China	21.8	(2)	8	(4)
India	9	(8)	4	(8)
Indonesia	8	(9)	5	(7)
Japan	5	(12)	0	(N/A)
Laos	9	(8)	0	(N/A)
Malaysia	10.4	(6)	8	(4)
Nepal	5.9	(11)	0	(N/A)
North Korea	20	(3)	4	(8)
Pakistan	2	(17)	7	(5)
Philippines	12.4	(4)	14	(2)
Singapore	4.3	(15)	0	(N/A)
South Korea	3	(16)	5	(7)
Sri Lanka	4.9	(13)	21	(1)
Taiwan	11	(5)	8	(4)
Thailand	4.8	(14)	5	(7)
Vietnam	26	(1)	6	(6)

Sources: Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), "Women in National Parliaments: As of 15 April 2000," IPU, Geneva, 2000 (<http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>). Naomi Neft and Ann D. Levine, *Where Women Stand: An International Report on the Status of Women in 140 Countries: 1997-98*. New York: Random House (New York: Random House, 1997), pp.21-23.

Pakistan. In fact, it was pointed out recently that of the total 81 elected members of parliament in Singapore, 2 (2.5%) were female; and of the total 6 nominated members of parliament, 1 (16.7%) was female.²⁵

In terms of the current scenario, it is clear from the above figures that Singapore's status of women's representation in the legislature is far below the Asian average of 14.1 percent. Within Singapore itself, the trend has rather been regressive. According to Stella R. Quah, while the extent of women's representation in politics has progressively increased during the postwar period in Western countries, Singapore witnessed almost a "reverse pattern", especially in terms of a continuing small number of women elected as parliamentarians in various election years—the number of such elected women members was 9 in 1959, 11 in 1963, zero during 1972-1984, 3 in 1984, 4 in 1988, 2 in 1991, and 4 in 1997.²⁶

Representation in the Cabinet

It can be seen from Table 1 that women's representation in the cabinet is about 21 percent in Sri Lanka, 14 percent in the Philippines, 10 percent in Bangladesh, 8 percent in China and Malaysia, 7 percent in Pakistan, 6 percent in Vietnam, 5 percent in Indonesia, South Korea, and Thailand, and 4 percent in India and North Korea, while the remaining cases (Cambodia, Japan, Indonesia, Laos, Nepal, Singapore) have no representation.

Table 2: Percentage of Positions Occupied by Women in Asian Countries, 1999.

Country	Ministerial Level* %	Sub-ministerial Level** %	Total %
Bangladesh	7.7	0.0	1.9
Cambodia	0.0	3.1	2.4
China	6.1	3.9	4.3
India	3.2	6.2	5.8
Indonesia	3.6	1.6	1.9
Japan	5.9	10.1	9.3
North Korea	1.3	0.6	0.8
South Korea	3.0	0.6	1.0
Laos	0.0	6.4	3.7
Malaysia	6.1	9.0	8.1
Maldives	5.6	14.1	13.0
Myanmar	0.0	0.0	0.0
Nepal	0.0	0.0	0.0
Pakistan	4.0	2.2	2.6
Philippines	4.5	25.3	22.8
Singapore	0.0	9.6	7.2
Sri Lanka	13.0	9.6	10.2
Thailand	0.0	2.6	2.1
Viet Nam	7.0	4.4	5.3

*Ministerial level positions refer to ministers.

**Sub-ministerial level positions include deputy or assistant ministers, secretaries of state, permanent secretaries, and government directors, and equivalent of these positions.

Source: United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 1999* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp.238-240.

On the other hand, at the sub-ministerial level (comprised of deputy/assistant ministers, secretaries of state, permanent secretaries, government directors, and the equivalent positions), the representation of women appears to be 25 percent in the Philippines, 14.1 percent in the Maldives, 10.1 percent in Japan, 9.6 percent in Singapore and Sri Lanka, 9.0 percent in Malaysia, 6.4 percent in Laos, 6.2 percent in India, 4.4 percent in Vietnam, 3.9 percent in China, 3.1 percent in Cambodia, 2.6 percent in Thailand, 2.2 percent in Pakistan, 1.6 percent in Indonesia, and below 1 percent in other Asian cases (see Table 2). In this case of sub-ministerial level of women representation, Singapore's position is better than many Asian countries except cases like Japan, the Maldives, and the Philippines.

Representation in Administrative and Professional Positions

A major domain of public governance consists of high-level administrative/managerial and professional/technical services. In examining women's rights to representation in governance, these essential areas need serious consideration. In this regard, it is obvious from Table 3 that among the various regions, Asia reflects poorly in terms women's participation in administrative and professional services. In administrative or managerial positions, for every 100 men, the number of women is 34 in North America, 30 in Europe, 24 in South America, 13 in Asia, and 12 in Africa. In other words, although Asia has a slightly better record than Africa, it is far behind the other regions of the world. Similarly, in professional or technical positions, for every 100 male employees, the number of female employees is 108 in Europe, 104 in South America, 97 in North America, 66 in Asia, and 31 in Africa. Although South America is a developing region, its rate of women representation in both administrative and professional services is much higher than that of Asia.

However, there are significant variations among countries within Asia itself. More specifically, for every 100 men in administrative and managerial positions, the number of female employees is 33 in Sri Lanka, 30 in Nepal, 29 in Thailand, 19 in Singapore, 13 in China and Myanmar, 9 in Japan, 7 in Indonesia, 5 in Bangladesh, 4 in both North and South Korea, 3 in Pakistan, 2 in India, and 1 in Malaysia (Table 3). Thus, while women's representation in administrative and managerial positions in Singapore is better than that in 10 Asian countries, it is far lower than that in Sri Lanka, Nepal, Thailand, and the Philippines. In the case of professional services, women representation in Singapore is higher than that in Nepal, Indonesia, Bangladesh, North Korea, Pakistan, and India, but it is lower than that in Sri Lanka, Thailand, China, Myanmar, Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, and Malaysia (Table 3). The overall position of Singapore appears to be at the middle of the female representation continuum between Sri Lanka and Thailand at the higher end and India and Pakistan at the lower end. In Singapore, the situation is not that different in specialized services such as police and judiciary.²⁷ According to some recent studies, however, the condition has improved in Singapore with an increase in the percentage of women in professional, managerial, administrative, and technical services from 12 percent in 1980 to 30.8 percent in 1996.²⁸

Table 3: Number of Women (per 100 Men) in Various Jobs and Positions in Asian Countries, 1997:

Region/ Country	Administrative/ Managerial*	Professional/ Technical**	Clerical	Sales	Service+
Africa	12	31	—	—	—
Asia	13	66	—	—	—
Europe	30	108	—	—	—
North America	34	97	—	—	—
South America	24	104	—	—	—
Philippines	38	172	119	189	138
Sri Lanka	33	82	69	25	—
Nepal	30	57	5	23	23
Thailand	29	111	94	150	128
Singapore	19	68	239	69	—
China	13	82	35	88	107
Myanmar	13	72	33	142	24
Japan	9	74	192	—	255
Indonesia	7	69	21	105	135
Bangladesh	5	30	8	3	87
North Korea	4	33	30	76	141
South Korea	4	74	67	91	156
Pakistan	3	22	3	3	16
India	2	26	380	223	306
Malaysia	1	87	106	51	77

*Administrative/professional positions include senior administrators, chief executives, corporate managers, village heads, etc.

**Professional/technical positions include teachers, scientists, writers, medical specialists, dentists, nurses, etc.

+Service sector includes restaurants, hotels, insurance, social and personal services, etc.

Source: Naomi Neft and Ann D. Levine, *Where Women Stand: An International Report on the Status of Women in 140 Countries: 1997-98*. New York: Random House (New York: Random House, 1997), pp.63-69, 495-498.

It has been pointed out that in Singapore, although the percentage of women is equal to (or even higher than) that of men in the overall civil service, and although there has been an increase in the number of female employees at the mid-management level,²⁹ the situation was found to be quite dismal at the higher end: only 5 out of 100 top public-sector posts were held by women, there were only two female judges compared

to 10 male judges, and there was no woman permanent secretary (now there is one).³⁰ In this regard, Soin feels that “women are not at all well represented in senior and professional positions in the work force”, and that “[t]here is a lack of women, and sometimes no women are present, in the constitution of public bodies, national councils, advisory committees, national commissions and statutory bodies.”³¹ In addition, in terms of overall allocation of employees at all ranks, although women are over-represented in certain ministries like Community Development (75 percent) and Education (67 percent), they are under-represented in more powerful ministries such as Home Affairs (27 percent), Trade and Industry (25 percent), Foreign Affairs (12 percent), Finance (5 percent), and Defence (4 percent).³²

Representation in Local Organisations

Since the local institutions, especially local government organisations, constitute a major component of public governance, it is necessary to explore the membership and leadership composition of these organisations in order to evaluate the degree of women’s representation in the overall public governance. In Asian countries such as Sri Lanka, the level of women’s participation is quite low: in January 1994, the representation of women was only 2.8 percent in the case of Municipal Councils, 2.3 percent in Urban Councils, and 1.1 percent in Provincial Councils.³³ In Singapore, although there is no such system of local governance, it has an expansive network of local-level organisations—including the Community Centres (CCs), the Community Centre Management Committees (CCMCs), the Citizens’ Consultative Committees (CCs), the Residents’ Committees (RCs), the Town Councils (TCs), and the Community Development Councils (CDCs)—which are created or sponsored by government, and thus, constitute a major part of public governance in the country.³⁴

The representation of women in these local organisations has been found to be limited. According to Seet, the number of female members in these organisations is 11.3 percent in the CCMCs, 18.5 percent in the RCs, and only 5.6 percent in the CCCs.³⁵ The situation looks worse when one examines women’s representation in the higher positions of these local institutions. It was observed that the total number of women chairpersons was only 1 in the 81 CCCs, 27 in the 401 RCs, and 1 in the 109 CCMCs; and the number of women vice-chairmen was 4 in the 81 CCCs, 50 in the 401 RCs, and 3 in the 109 CCMCs.³⁶ In fact, some of the national political leaders have recently expressed dissatisfaction with the current low level of women representation in these grassroots organisations. For example, Yu-Foo Yee Shoon, a leading female political leader from the ruling party, showed concern for this poor participation of women as they made up only 20 percent of the RCs and 14 percent of the CCMCs, and that out of the 81 CCCs, only one had a female chairperson.³⁷ Similarly, Wong Kan Seng, Minister of Home Affairs, pointed out in 1997 that grassroots organisations such as the RCs had 70 percent male members and 30 percent female members, and the CCCs and CCMCs had 90 percent male members and only 10 percent female members.³⁸ It appears from this description that although these national leaders do not worry much about women’s under-representation in national-level political and administrative institutions, they are quite concerned about such under-representation in these local organisations. However, the situation has not improved much even in this case of grassroots organisations.

Representation in Overall Employment and Income

The quality and extent of women's representation in public governance can be understood more meaningfully by looking into the overall situation of female employment and income, of which public sector employment is a constitutive part. At the global level, since women represent 34 percent of all workers worldwide,³⁹ it is not feasible to expect equal gender representation in public governance, especially at the higher level. In the case of Singapore, the representation of women in the total workforce is relatively low given the country's extremely urbanized and industrialized nature. According to Neft and Levine, women's share in the total workforce is 31 percent in Singapore, which is higher than that in Sri Lanka (27 percent), India (25 percent), and Pakistan (13 percent), but lower than that in Vietnam (47 percent), North Korea (46 percent), Thailand (44 percent), China (43 percent), Bangladesh (41 percent), Japan (40 percent), South Korea (40 percent), Indonesia (39 percent), Myanmar (36 percent), Malaysia (35 percent), and Taiwan (33 percent).⁴⁰

Thus, it is not only in the institutions of public governance, but also in the overall workforce in Singapore where female representation is relatively low compared with some other Asian cases. Furthermore, the picture may look worse if one considers the fact that female employees are mostly in lower-level jobs. According to Singapore's Department of Statistics, among younger workers aged 25-39 years, about 70 percent of administrative clerks, assemblers, and secondary school teachers are women, while 70 percent of managers, professionals, engineers, and architects are men.⁴¹

Table 4: Pay Differences in Asian Countries, 1997-1999.

<i>Country</i>	<i>Non-Agricultural Jobs Women's Wages as % of Men's</i>	<i>Manufacturing Jobs Ratio of female wages to male wages</i>
Vietnam	92%	—
Sri Lanka	90%	90
Singapore	71%	58
Thailand	68%	71
Philippines	61%	95
China	59%	—
South Korea	54%	54
Japan	51%	—
Hong Kong	—	65
Malaysia	—	58
Myanmar	—	95

Sources: Naomi Neft and Ann D. Levine, *Where Women Stand: An International Report on the Status of Women in 140 Countries: 1997-98*. New York: Random House (New York: Random House, 1997), pp.71, 76. United Nations, *Statistics on Women in Asia and the Pacific 1999* (Bangkok: UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 1999).

With regard to women's representation in the economy in terms of their share of national income, there is a gap between men and women in Singapore. From Table 4, it can be observed that as a percentage of men's wages, the women's wages represent 71 percent in Singapore, which is higher than that in Thailand (68 percent), the Philippines (61 percent), China (59 percent), South Korea (54 percent), and Japan (51 percent), but lower than that in Vietnam (92 percent) and Sri Lanka (90 percent). Although women's wages, which is worth 71 percent of men's wages, is not that bad compared to many developing countries, it has been found that between 1990 and 1995, the income gap between men and women in Singapore widened further—"with women on average earning 59 cents to every dollar earned by men in 1995 compared with 73 cents five years earlier".⁴² In the manufacturing sector, the ratio of female wages to male wages in Singapore (58) is similar to that in Malaysia, but worse than that in Hong Kong (65), Thailand (71), the Philippines (76), Sri Lanka (90), and Myanmar (95) (see Table 4). Such a wage gap between men and women implies the following: it is not only that women are less represented in terms of their percentage in the total workforce and in higher positions, it is also the fact that women who are already in the workforce, earn on average less than their male counterparts. These wage differentials may, in effect, weaken the degree of representation, especially in terms of women's share in the nation's income.

Factors Affecting Women Representation in Singapore

From the above comparative analysis, it is obvious that although female representation in governance had a favourable beginning in Singapore based on considerable support of the ruling party for women's rights and participation, today it appears that there is a need for further improvement in the level of representation. In order to make any policy recommendations, however, it is necessary to examine some of the potential limits that might have hindered or delimited female representation in Singapore, especially in its public governance.

Ideological Shift in Governance

As mentioned above, the history of gender equality was quite progressive during the early years of the PAP government, although during a more recent period (since the mid-1960s), there seems to have emerged a relatively regressive trend relating to female representation in governance. The articles authored by Wee, Seet, and Soin, tend to imply that although the PAP campaigned for greater women's rights and participation in politics in the 1954 and 1959 elections, and adopted a series of measures in this vein during the early 1960s (including the Women's Affairs Bureau, the Women's Charter, and the "equal pay for equal work" principle), the later years saw the emergence of state policies that were less conducive to gender equality, including gender-specific medical benefits, a limited quota for the admission of female students to the medical faculty, and the salary differentials favouring men trained in the National Service.⁴³ A major hallmark distinguishing these two phases of the PAP—one guided by a progressive agenda for

women, and another identifiable by policies favouring the male population—is the ideological transition in the PAP from its earlier socialist leanings to a more capitalist orientation manifested in its increasing emphasis on market-led economic growth.⁴⁴

As Soin points out, “from the middle of the 60s, the main preoccupation of Singapore became economic survival, and gender considerations were pushed into the background”.⁴⁵ In other words, the ideological shift in the objectives, policies, programmes, and institutions of the ruling party cannot be discounted as a factor affecting gender configuration in Singapore. In fact, the experiences of former socialist states in Eastern and Central Europe suggest that, despite their highly centralized nature of governance, the degree of female representation in political and administrative positions in these states was much higher than that in capitalist states. Similarly, in the Nordic countries practising the principles of welfare states and resembling certain dimensions of socialist planning, the degree of female representation in governance remains the highest in the world. This does not imply that one has to build a socialist polity to enhance women representation without considering the adverse economic and political outcomes of such a polity often highlighted by the Singapore government.

Constitutional and Legal Issues

According to some critics, there are various constitutional and legal constraints to the realization of gender equality in Singapore. More specifically, with regard to the Singapore Constitution, it has been pointed out by Corinna Cecilia Lim, the Vice-President of the Singapore Association of Women Lawyers, that the examples of “discriminatory laws” can be found in the Constitution’s citizenship sections under which “the right to citizenship by descent is given only to children born outside Singapore whose fathers are Singapore citizens but not to children whose mothers are Singapore citizens; foreign wives, but not foreign husbands, married to Singapore citizens are entitled to apply for citizenship”.⁴⁶ In addition, for Soin, “the Constitution guarantees citizens’ protection against discrimination on the ground of religion, race, descent or place of birth. There is no mention of sex”.⁴⁷ Although these constitutional concerns have been pointed out repeatedly in Singapore, especially by those dealing with gender issues, there is no comprehensive studies on the extent of threats—e.g., in terms of how many such children are denied citizenship and how much harm is caused by the absence of the constitutional reference to sexual discrimination—posed by such constitutional provisions to gender equality and representation.

Regarding the gender-related state policies in Singapore, it has been criticized by Soin, Heyzer, and Wee that the government tends to favour man by defining him as the head of the household and providing children’s medical benefits to him as the head, while excluding the woman’s entitlement to such benefits.⁴⁸ Even under the current Comprehensive-Payment Scheme, the dependents of male civil servants pay 40 percent of hospitalization charges, while the dependents of female civil servants have to pay the full amount of such charges.⁴⁹ The recently appointed female permanent secretary, Lim Soo Hoon, agrees that the only blip in the Singapore Civil Service is its policy to provide medical benefits to the dependents of male civil servants.⁵⁰ For Phua and Yeoh, another domain of policy and legal framework that uses the male-biased definition of family and

adversely affects women, is the provision of public housing. More specifically, the Housing and Development Board (HDB), which provides low-cost public housing to about 86 percent Singaporeans, uses the male-dominated definition of “family” in providing such public housing. It bans unmarried mothers from buying HDB flats since they allegedly do not fall into this definition of family, and sets the eligibility conditions that assume men as the qualified applicants for such flats while considering women as merely the “co-applicants” or “proposed occupiers”.⁵¹

Another concern has been expressed regarding the current quota limiting the number of female students admitted to the National University of Singapore’s medical faculty as the percentage of female students admitted cannot exceed 33 percent of the faculty’s total enrolment.⁵² Soin is skeptical about the government’s rationale for such a policy that female medical students often do not graduate and that female doctors may discontinue their medical practices.⁵³ Finally, the government policy to recruit only men for National Service, has also been questioned. In this regard, Zaibun Siraj raises the point that although this policy may allow women to start their university education earlier than men, it still favours men, because National Service provides them with skills in leadership, organisation, and decision-making required in the job market, and awards them a higher starting salary in the public and private sectors, while these privileges and benefits are denied to women.⁵⁴ In other words, the provision of male-dominated National Service may have negative implications for women in terms of their representation in the public and private sectors.

Social Norms and Perceptions

The degree and opportunity of women’s representation are considerably affected by social norms and perceptions regarding women’s roles in society, especially in terms of their perceived roles as daughters, wives, mothers, workers, managers, politicians, administrators, ministers, educators, and business persons.⁵⁵ These diverse roles played by women in different combinations often come into conflict, require mutual adjustment and compromise, and eventually result in an institutionalized role structure that varies among societies and cultures and determines women’s status or positions. In this regard, a recent study covering 1,200 mothers from 22 cities in 12 countries, suggests that a typical Asian mother is expected to be a good mother, maid, manager, mediator, and mate, although there are variations among countries in Asia.⁵⁶

In the case of Singapore, there is a prevailing sociocultural assumption that women’s “primary role is in the family”, which creates certain tension between their household duties and their responsibilities as working women.⁵⁷ The social perception about women’s role in politics and administration is not very favourable. According to a 1996 survey, only 20 percent Singaporeans thought that Singapore would be better off with more women in political offices, which was much lower in comparison with Thailand where 72 percent people supported such an idea.⁵⁸ In fact, according to this survey, Singapore had the lowest score. Advani writes that in Singapore, due to “the predominantly patriarchal mentality of the populace, most people are of the opinion that women are not ‘suitable’ to assume the responsibilities of an MP”.⁵⁹ Such a belief in the primacy of women’s role in the family rather than in politics and administration,

can be found even among highly educated citizens.⁶⁰ In this regard, Soin mentions that although the economic realities have changed in Singapore, its people, especially men, “still cling to traditional patriarchal attitudes whereby the home and the care of the young and aged are considered to be the responsibility of women”.⁶¹ Among other Asian countries, such gender-biased attitudes and perceptions exist not only in a modern industrial society such as Japan and an agricultural economy such as Indonesia, they also prevail in a relatively liberal polity such as the Philippines.⁶²

In the case of Singapore, the perception of women’s primary role in the family is also endorsed and reinforced by the leading members of the ruling party. For instance, the former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew mentioned in 1983 that equal career opportunities for women adversely affected their role as mothers; and regretted in 1994 that women’s equal education and employment rights made it difficult for them to find husbands.⁶³ In 1997, Home Affairs Minister Wong Kan Seng mentioned in a speech that even if women “do not directly contribute to the economy, by looking after the home and the children their husbands can work with a peaceful mind. That is their contribution”.⁶⁴ In 1995, Rear-Admiral (National Service) Teo Chee Hean, then Minister of State for Defence and Finance, pointed out that although women in Singapore had made progress in education and the workforce, such progress was only partial without their roles in the family and community.⁶⁵ Similarly, the former Labour Minister Lee Boon Yang emphasized in 1996 that working women in Singapore must strike a balance between family and working life, that they should take a few years off to take care of the children, that the employment of maids for child care might be detrimental to children’s social values.⁶⁶ In response to issues concerning unequal medical benefits for the dependents of public servants, Finance Minister, Richard Hu mentioned that “it is the husband’s responsibility to look after the family’s needs. This is how our society is structured. It would be unwise to tamper with this structure”.⁶⁷

These few examples imply that there is a tendency among political leaders in Singapore to reinforce the notion that women’s role in the family remains most crucial. In fact, it has been noted that even the school textbooks in Singapore tend to reinforce “sex-role stereotypes of men as economic providers and women as housewives and mothers . . .”⁶⁸ This role perception among people and politicians might affect the self-identity and attitudes of women themselves with regard to their active participation and representation in the nation’s workforce encompassing both the private sector and public governance. For Soin, it is largely due to this social perception of women that in any event of economic crisis, female employees would be the first to lose their jobs,⁶⁹ implying a further decline in female representation.

Women’s Self-Perception and Attitudinal Patterns

The formation of self-perception and attitude among men and women are often affected by the prevailing societal beliefs and norms. Indeed, in Asian countries such as Indonesia, women’s status or position is largely affected by the prevailing male-biased social norms and beliefs, and women’s own perception about their self-worth is shaped or reinforced by such cultural and religious beliefs.⁷⁰ In Singapore, given the primacy of family-oriented rather than work-related social norms and role expectations, the self-image and attitude among women may have been affected in terms of their aspiration for participation

and representation in top political and administrative positions, although exceptional cases exist in all societies. In this regard, it has been pointed out that “the single most damaging roadblock to a woman’s success [in Singapore] is a low perception of self. . . The power of the socialization process cannot be underestimated.”⁷¹

It was pointed out by Yu-Foo Yee Shoon that “76 per cent of Singaporean women indicated that they were prepared to give up their jobs if suitable child care arrangements for their children could not be found.”⁷² Despite women’s opportunities for education and career, they are held back due to their “self perceptions”, they “undersell” their abilities, and they struggle to balance their professional lives with perceived images of themselves.⁷³ In fact, there seems to be a tension between the family’s economic need that requires women to join the workforce, the family’s expectation of women to play the role of a good mother and good wife that asks them to leave the workforce, and women’s self-perception and identity torn between work and family. In fact, according to Low Guat Tin, even women who are relatively successful in their careers, feel a sense of guilt that they are not doing enough as mothers and spouses.⁷⁴ According to a 1994 poll, in Singapore, 78 percent of women felt that the husband should be the head of the family, 76 percent thought that it is husband who should be the financial provider, and 64 percent believed that the wife should be the main homemaker.⁷⁵ Such a self-perception may encourage women to undertake less demanding, low-level jobs that allow them to attend to family matters, and discourage them from taking on more demanding higher-level positions in politics and administration.

Due to the above self-perception among women, a significant proportion of them may choose to remain outside the workforce or quit their jobs in order to accomplish their socially-defined and self-perceived primary roles in performing family duties. In Singapore, the correlation between women’s non-participation in the income-earning workforce and their participation in unpaid family activities, is evident in the fact that almost 77 percent of family workers in Singapore are women; and of all the women who are “economically inactive” (outside the workforce), 70.9 percent are homemakers involved in household activities.⁷⁶ It is, thus, not surprising that the overall women’s participation in the workforce is relatively low in Singapore where 52 percent women in the 40-49 age group are employed, compared to 79 percent in the U.S. and 96 percent in Germany.⁷⁷ This relatively lower level of women’s participation in the workforce in Singapore is not altogether related to their lack of educational qualifications, because the enrolment of female students in universities has increased considerably, and today, almost half of the university graduates are women.⁷⁸ Thus, one should seriously consider the abovementioned public expectation and self-perception about women’s role in society, as one of the most crucial factors accounting for a lower-level participation of women in the workforce in both the public and private sectors.

Recent Remedial Measures: Limits and Alternatives

Remedial Measures and Their Limits

In order to enhance women’s rights and their participation and representation in the public and private sectors, the government has adopted certain corrective measures in

Singapore. For instance, there have been some amendments in the Women's Charter to protect women and children from domestic violence, to facilitate the maintenance payments to women and children from ex-husbands and fathers, and to ensure a more equitable share of the matrimonial assets. More specifically, the amended Women's Charter extends the maintenance payments to children above the age of 21 (previously it was below 21); recognizes the home-makers in the division of matrimonial assets and removes the distinction of whether the assets were acquired jointly or by a single partner; and widens the definition of domestic violence to encompass mental abuse, and extends anti-violence protection to family members beyond the spouse and children.⁷⁹ This amendment to the Charter symbolizes further recognition of women's rights in Singapore.

Another example of the recent initiative is the government's advocacy for flexible working hours to encourage housewives to join the workforce. Organisations such as the NTUC Women's Programme, the National Productivity Board, the Singapore National Employers' Federation, the SCWO, and the People's Association have launched campaigns to advise employers to create more jobs based on flexible working hours, and to motivate women to take up such jobs. Initiative has also been taken at the local level to encourage women to join various grassroots organisations, especially the CCs and RCs. There has also been a more flexible government approach to recruiting women in traditionally male-dominated jobs such as those of fire fighters.⁸⁰ But one needs to reexamine these recent policy initiatives in terms of whether they are adequate to significantly improve women's rights and representation.

In fact, there are certain limitations with these recent initiatives. First, the campaign for flexible-working-hour jobs has not been that realistic: because while it is true that almost 70 percent of women who want to come back to work prefer flexible working hours and part-time jobs, the reality is that only 2.8 percent of the jobs are part-time in nature, and the employment agencies concerned have only 1 out of 10 openings as part-time.⁸¹ Second, there are some policy contradictions with regard to the government's preferences in relation to female representation in the workforce in the public and private sectors. As discussed above, on the one hand, the government tends to emphasize women's role in the family rather than the job market; on the other hand it is campaigning for flexible working hours in order to enhance women's participation in the labour force. Similarly, the government strongly espouses the principle of meritocracy that provides equal opportunity irrespective of gender, but it also practises fixed quotas in certain occupations such as medical practices where the maximum number of female students is restricted to only one-third of the total intake. According to Soin, this policy goes against the principle of merit, and amounts to a form of gender discrimination.⁸²

Finally, in Singapore, the scope and opportunity for women's participation or representation in public governance and the business profession seem to be based on the increased "need" for female employees in the labour market, which is quite different from women's participation or representation based on their rights or entitlement. Given Singapore's overwhelming emphasis on economic performance, the government policies and campaigns to expand women's participation in the workforce have largely been guided by the reality of labour shortage. For instance, the recent campaign in Singapore to bring back married women to the workforce has not been unrelated to the

growing scarcity of lower-level clerical and manual workers and overdependence on foreign labour. Even in the case of education, the female students were encouraged to study engineering only when it was realized that there was an overall shortage of engineering undergraduates and a decline in engineering enrolment: after the launch of the campaign, there was an increase in the enrolment of female students in engineering by 25 percent between 1995 and 1996.⁸³

But the fact remains that such increases in female representation in employment and education are guided by pragmatic economic needs rather than the rights or entitlement of women to be represented regardless of conditions in the labour market. Even in the political realm, one may examine whether the creation of various women's organisations—such as the Women's Wing in the ruling party, the Women's Sub-Committee in NTUC, the WECs at the grassroots level, and the SCWO—have been guided by political need to mobilize women voters and enhance their support. Once again, such political participation of women may imply that they were needed to mobilize political support rather than to enhance their political rights. In fact, this emphasis on the need for rather than the rights of women, may be found at the broader societal level in Singapore, which reflects its gender-biased social perception discussed above.⁸⁴ In understanding the representation of women in politics, bureaucracy, and local administration, this distinction should be made between their rights to this representation on the one hand, and the economic, political, and administrative needs for such representation on the other. While representation based on instrumental needs is uncertain due to the changing nature of these needs themselves, representation based on women's democratic rights is more genuine since it is based on the principle of progressive citizenship that cannot be changed overnight.

What Are the Alternatives?

After discussing the limitations of the current measures undertaken by the government to enhance women's rights and representation in Singapore, the logical next step is to explore certain policy alternatives that the government may examine in this regard. However, the suggested alternatives can hardly be anything new, because as mentioned at the beginning, there are already an adequate number of proposals and provisions made by various international fora and conventions related to women's representation, participation, protection, and equality, which can also be considered in Singapore.

First, the government may consider various *political-electoral* measures in order to rectify the under-representation of women in political parties and institutions. In fact, at the aforementioned Seminar on the Participation of Women in Politics as an Aspect of Human Resources Development, along with other Asia-Pacific countries, Singapore recognized the proposals to increase women's participation in the party ranks, to provide adequate election campaign funds to women candidates, to adopt an election system that would allow women equal access to political positions, and so on.⁸⁵ In practice, the Singapore government has been encouraging women's participation in politics, but it has not shown any intention to adopt an electoral system in favour of their equal representation in political institutions. With regard to the electoral system, Soin proposed that following the required representation of ethnic-minority candidates in the

GRCs, the government should introduce a similar representational requirement for women candidacy in these GRCs—a proposal that was rejected by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong.⁸⁶

Second, the government may seriously consider certain *constitutional-legal* measures, especially the corrective “affirmative action” programmes such as the reservation of seats for women in the legislature and local government institutions. In Asia, countries such as India and Sri Lanka have gone through serious legislative debates on the proposals for reserved parliamentary seats for women.⁸⁷ In India, the constitutional provision of a one-third quota for women in local (both urban and rural) councils has increased the number of seats occupied by women to 43 percent in these councils.⁸⁸ In Bangladesh, the policy to reserve a certain number of parliamentary seats for women has been quite effective in increasing their representation.⁸⁹ Korea has moved towards a quota system in public-sector recruitment in favour of women, which provides additional 3-5 points to female candidates, and the scope of such a quota was to increase from 10 percent in 1996 to 15 percent in 1998 to 20 percent in 2000.⁹⁰ Among African countries, the provision of reserved legislative seats exists in Eritrea, Uganda, Tanzania, and South Africa.⁹¹

In the case of Singapore, however, the government is against such an affirmative action. In response to the proposal of Nominated MP Kanwaljit Soin that there should be minimal representation of women in various government institutions, Prime Minister Goh said that the practice of meritocracy should be maintained, because there were unhappy outcomes of affirmative action in some countries.⁹² Similarly, the Singapore delegate to the Fourth UN Conference on Women in Beijing (1995), maintained that the under-representation of women in power positions resulted from their own choice and, according to Minister for Community Development Abdullah Tarmugi, Singapore would oppose any form of numerical quota for women in decision-making positions.⁹³ However, considering the current trend of such a quota adopted in many developing nations and its contribution to a greater degree of women’s representation in governance, especially in Central and Eastern European countries,⁹⁴ Singapore may rethink its position with a view to enhancing such representation in political institutions at the national and local levels.

Third, some of the *administrative-organisational* measures could be closely examined and considered. Similar to the above affirmative action in the political sphere, special quotas for women can also be adopted for administrative positions.⁹⁵ Such administrative quotas related to ethnicity, race, and gender, exist in many developed and developing countries in order to enhance equal representation of various social groups in administrative institutions. Although the overall representation of women in the public service is equitable in Singapore, their representation in the highest administrative ranks remains inadequate, and thus may need some form of affirmative action such as a quota system that requires a certain percentage of such high-ranking positions reserved exclusively for women. Beyond such a remedial measure, it may be necessary to reexamine the criteria of merit itself. More specifically, the criteria of recruitment, promotion, appraisal, and compensation in Singapore are largely guided by the traditional British model of “rank classification”, which tends to overemphasize educational qualifications, and makes a distinction between scholars and non-scholars, while overlooking more objective job-

related factors considered in “position classification”, including job responsibility, difficulty, risk, skill, and complexity associated with various positions.

While the former (rank classification) often involves subjective judgments of appointing and promoting authorities, and thus are prone to biases (including gender bias), the latter (position classification) has less avenue for any bias due to its job-centred rather than person-centred approach. Although there is no evidence of any gender bias in recruitment and promotion practices in the Singapore civil service, the adoption of position classification might reduce the potential of subjective judgment, and thus the avenue for gender biases, in such personnel practices. In addition, since any form of gender inequality in education adversely affects the status of gender representation in public employment, the government can at least consider abolishing the aforementioned quota of female students in the medical faculty that limits the number of female graduates and constrains the extent of female representation in the medical profession. The government may also adopt certain job-related measures, especially a longer period of maternity leave, to facilitate and encourage women’s representation in governance without compromising their role as mothers. This is more significant today when the government is encouraging Singaporeans to have more children. Unfortunately, an eight-week maternity leave in Singapore is one of the shortest in the world except for a few countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Nepal. In Asia, maternity leave is much longer in many countries—12 weeks in Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka; 13 weeks in Cambodia, China, Indonesia, and Thailand; and 14-15 weeks in Japan and Mongolia.⁹⁶ The extension of maternity leave in Singapore would certainly be conducive and encouraging to women’s participation in public office.

Fourth, it is necessary to adopt various *educational-informational* means to change the aforementioned public perception of women’s role in various spheres of society, including family, politics, administration, and business. The prevailing common perception that women’s primary role is in family affairs rather than in the positions of power and income, which may reinforce women’s own self-perception as homemakers rather than as political and administrative leaders (discussed above), needs to be transformed through means such as education, training, cultural programmes, and information networks. These educational-informational means may enhance public awareness of any form of gender stereotyping, minimize social prejudice against women’s role, and reinforce a positive self-perception among the female population—especially by incorporating gender study in the education system, encouraging educational institutions to highlight the significance of gender equality, portraying a positive image of women, and publicizing their contributions to society and public governance.⁹⁷ The media can play a crucial role in presenting various success stories related to roles played by women in public governance. Mass media can help portray a positive image of women in relation to political and administrative positions, local institutions, and civil and diplomatic services.⁹⁸ The purpose is to overcome the stereotyped primary role of women in the family rather than in the workforce, and to reinforce their positive self-image to actively participate in public office.

Finally, there is a need to undertake various *regional-international* measures by the Singapore government, including the ratification and implementation of gender-related international conventions, participation in various global and regional fora on women,

and initiation of conferences and workshops on gender. There are many international conventions mentioned above—such as Convention on the Political Rights of Women, Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, Convention against Discrimination in Education, and Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women—which need to be more seriously considered in terms of their effective enforcement or implementation. The lists of gender-related initiatives in Asian countries, recently published in *Asia-Pacific Post-Beijing Implementation Monitor* (1998), show that during the period since the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, countries such as Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Korea, China, and Vietnam have apparently been more forthcoming than Singapore in terms of undertaking policy initiatives for gender issues.⁹⁹

Active participation, especially by the new-generation policy makers, in regional and international conferences and workshops on gender issues might help reinforce their sensitivity to the significance of women's rights, representation, and participation. In fact, Singapore itself can host such conferences and workshops and allow various women groups and academics to organise and participate in such fora. In addition, Singapore can exchange its experience with and learn lessons from other countries, especially those Asian countries that have introduced various policies and institutions to improve the status of female representation and gender equality.

Conclusion

Internationally, despite certain improvements made in gender equality and representation, in many ways, the situation remains quite bleak. At the global level, women occupy less than 6 percent of higher managerial positions, they earn 30 to 40 percent less than men for comparable work, and they constitute over 60 percent of the world's poor.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, in the case of Singapore, although the situation of gender representation is much better today, the scope for improvement still remains. Singaporean authors such as Soin and Seet are proud of the country's spectacular economic achievements in terms of its high growth rate, low inflation rate, zero foreign debt, and good living standards, but they are quite dissatisfied with the lower level of female representation in higher administrative, professional, political, and judicial positions.¹⁰¹

However, the governments in Asian countries, including Singapore, should consider the remedial alternatives based on a genuine concern for women representation felt by citizens without giving in to the Eurocentric gender rhetoric that tends to highlight women subjugation in developing nations as an exclusive issue without relating it to the question of poverty and class inequality in these countries, and that advocates women emancipation in terms of culture and lifestyle rather than ownership and power.¹⁰² Although there is a dominant global tendency to portray women in developed nations as the liberated role model for others, the historical and contemporary realities tell a different story. For instance, the year in which women received their political right to vote was 1948 in Belgium, 1950 in Canada, 1957 in Greece, 1962 in Australia, 1971 in Switzerland, and 1976 in Portugal, whereas it was 1931 in Sri

Lanka, 1932 in Maldives and Thailand, 1934 in Brazil and Cuba, 1935 in Myanmar, 1937 in the Philippines, 1945 in Indonesia, and 1946 in Vietnam.¹⁰³ Today, even at the family level, the situation of serious domestic violence against women remains alarming in the U.S.,¹⁰⁴ a country that advocates so much for liberating women from family repression in developing countries. Thus, while Asian policy makers need not be too apprehensive about external demonization of women's status in the region, they should adopt appropriate policies to enhance women's representation as a matter of universal principle of human justice that is still in short supply in many Western countries themselves.

In the case of Singapore, the study of gender must go beyond the relatively trivial but publicized events or issues such as the increase in the number of women motorbikers, female authors, women cyber-surfers, and female award winners, and emphasize the extent of women representation and participation in top political, administrative, and corporate positions that represent social power. Although the extent of women's representation has improved in the administrative sphere, the political realm of governance remains noticeably under-represented, and thus, may require the remedial measures suggested above.

In addition, an unexplored dimension that has largely been overlooked even by the harshest critics of gender policies in Singapore, is the class dimension of women's representation. In this regard, Tan points out that most women who have been arguing for greater gender equality and representation in the country, have been the middle-upper class, well-educated, and high-flying career women, while the less-educated and lower-income women such as clerks, telephone operators, bank tellers, office assistants, and home-makers have remained excluded from the gender discourse. In fact, the prevalent status of women's representation in Asian countries, including Singapore, might look even more dismal if one would consider the class affiliation of women represented at the higher levels of governance, meaning the representation of lower-income women might look much narrower. This concern should not be ignored because, worldwide, the dominant voice for female representation at various international conferences or fora has largely been the voice of women representing the social elite in various countries.¹⁰⁵

Finally, whatever extent of women representation in governance may prevail in a society, it may not reflect whether such representation is due to the practical economic and managerial needs for human resources or whether it is based on the women's rights to be represented regardless of the economic outcomes of such representation. As pointed out above, in the case of Singapore, although the ruling party showed greater concern for female representation in its early years, the recent expansion of such representation has largely been based on the increasing need for female workers or employees in the public and private sectors, which mainly reflects the supply of and demand for female workforce in the overall labour market.¹⁰⁶ In order to overcome this transitional and uncertain nature of market-driven women's representation, and to ensure a more guaranteed status of such representation, it may be necessary to adopt the legal-constitutional provision of proportional representation based on the principle of women's "right to be represented" in public and private institutions. Such a provision based on women's right to representation implies that certain redress mechanisms,

including the abovementioned affirmative action, would be necessary to rectify any form of gender inequality or under-representation in various spheres of public governance, including politics, bureaucracy, and local administration.

Notes

- 1 For instance, it has been pointed out that women had no property right and control over children in ancient Greece and Rome; they were considered inferior to men in both Christian and ancient Chinese traditions; they did not have equal right to divorce under Jewish and Islamic laws; they were secluded from the outside world of males in North American Indian tribes; and they were to be burnt alive with their dead husbands under the Hindu laws of Manu. See Naomi Neft and Ann D. Levine, *Where Women Stand: An International Report on the Status of Women in 140 Countries: 1997-98* (New York: Random House, 1997), pp.10-11.
- 2 See United Nations, *Women in Politics and Decision-Making in the Late Twentieth Century* (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Nijhoff Publishers, 1992).
- 3 United Nations, *The Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action* (New York: United Nations, 1996), p.109.
- 4 Garry L. Wamsley et al., "A Legitimate Role for Bureaucracy in Democratic Governance," in Larry B. Hill et. al (eds.), *The State of Public Bureaucracy* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1992), pp.59-86; Gayle Arnold, Joanne Llewellyn, and Qiumeng Mao, "International Trends in Public Administration—Notes," *Canberra Bulletin of Public Administration*, no.88 (May 1998); and UNDP, *A Global Research Framework of the Decentralized Governance Programme* (New York: UNDP, 1997).
- 5 Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW), "Women 2000: Women and Decision-Making," United Nations, New York, 1996 (<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/public/w20ct97.htm>); and Neft and Levine, *Where Women Stand*.
- 6 In the Asia and Pacific region, the average female representation in ministerial positions was less than 5 percent in 1996, and only 2 percent of these positions occupied by women were in economic ministries. DAW, "Fact Sheet on Women in Government," United Nations, New York, 1996 (<http://www.un.org/esa/gopher-data/sec/dpcsd/daw/womgovt/Factsheet/FACT.EN>).
- 7 See Neft and Levine, *Where Women Stand*.
- 8 Some of these include International Labour Organisation, United Nations Children's Fund, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, United Nations Population Fund, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, and so on. At the regional level, there are similar sets of organisations affiliated with or independent of these international bodies.
- 9 Attended by the delegates and representatives from countries all over the world, these international congresses and conferences initiated by Public Service International (PSI) included the PSI World Conference for Women Workers in the Public Services in Stockholm (1970), the PSI Congress in Singapore (1981), the PSI World Conference for Women in New York (1984), the PSI Congress in Caracas (1985), the PSI Congress in Harare (1989), the PSI World Women's Conference in Singapore (1992), and the PSI Congress in Helsinki (1993). These conferences adopted some major resolutions for female employees in the public sector, which emphasized free social and health services, flexible working hours, child care facilities, adequate maternity leave, equality in compensation,

equal rights in trade unions, equal access to higher-level jobs, and elimination of sexual harassment and violence.

10 United Nations, *The Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action : Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, China, 4 -15 September, 1995* (New York: Department of Public Information, United Nations, 1996).

11 For example, 90 countries made commitment to improve the situation of women by introducing or revising laws and regulations; 41 countries wanted to promote and protect women's human rights; 38 countries paid attention to gender gap in labour market and women's access to resources; 35 countries emphasized improvements in women's education and training; 33 countries highlighted the need for ensuring women's health care; 25 countries stressed the prevention of violence against women; and 21 countries underlined the significance of women's participation in decision-making. See DAW, "Commitments of Governments to Implement the Beijing Platform for Action," United Nations, New York, 1996 (<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/ascommit.htm#Bangladesh>).

12 Ibid.

13 Neft and Levine, *Where Women Stand*; DAW, "Women 2000"; and IPU (Inter-Parliamentary Union) (2000), "Women in National Parliaments: Situation as of 25 February 2000," Inter-Parliamentary Union, Geneva, 2000 (<http://www.ipu.org/wmm-e/world.htm>).

14 For instance, female representation in parliaments dropped from the global average of 14.8 percent in 1988 to 11.7 percent in 1996. With regard to ministerial positions, in 1996, women had no representation in the core economic ministries in 136 countries. See DAW, "Women 2000."

15 Seet Ai Mee, "Singapore," in ESCAP (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, UN) (ed.), *Women in Politics in Asia and the Pacific* (New York: United Nations, 1993), p.143.

16 Ibid.; and Vivienne Wee, "The Ups and Downs of Women's Status in Singapore: A Chronology of Some Landmark Events—1950-1987," *Commentary*, vol.7, nos.2 & 3 (1987), pp.5-12.

17 Kanwaljit Soin. "National Policies: Their Impacts on Women and Family." In Association of Women for Action and Research (ed.) *The Ties That Bind: In Search of the Modern Singapore Family* (Singapore: Armour Publishing, 1996), p.194.

18 Wang Hui Ling, "Prejudice Against Women: S'pore Signs UN Convention," *The Straits Times*, 21 November 1995, p.2.

19 Ibid.

20 ESCAP (ed.), *Women in Politics in Asia and the Pacific* (New York: United Nations, 1993), pp.9-10.

21 Wang Hui Ling, "Why Women Leaders Do Not See Eye to Eye," *The Straits Times*, 18 November 1995, p.32.

22 Seet, "Singapore," pp.144-146; and Kanwaljit Soin (1995). "About That Missing Half in Singapore Politics . . ." *The Business Times*, 30-31 December 1995, p.2.

23 Neft and Levine, *Where Women Stand*, pp.23-25.

24 IPU, "Women in National Parliaments: Situation as of 25 February 2000."

25 Seet, "Singapore," p.150; and "Yu-Foo Urges More Women to be Grassroots Leaders and Enter Politics," *The Straits Times*, 27 March 1996, p.25.

26 Stella R. Quah, *Family in Singapore: Sociological Perspectives*, 2nd edition (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1998), pp.158-159.

- 27 It was found earlier that among its 10,000 police officers, “men outnumbered women by six to one”, and of the total 21 members of judiciary, only 2 (9.6 percent) were women. Seet, “Singapore,” p.150; and Tan Ooi Boon, “More Women Apply to Join Police Force,” *The Straits Times*, 10 January 1995, p.10.
- 28 Patricia Tung Kai Lee, *Women in the Singapore Civil Service: The Question of Representation* (Singapore: B.Soc.Sc. Honours Thesis, Department of Political Science, National University of Singapore, 2000), p.42.
- 29 It is noted that today although there are more men than women in the overall Singapore Civil Service, women are still under-represented in the middle-rank positions—they account for 23 percent of the total number of Administrative Officers. See Tung, *Women in the Singapore Civil Service*, pp.26, 29.
- 30 “Structural Blocks Among Hurdles Faced by Women,” *The Straits Times*, 23 September 1995, p.38; “Women Still Lag Behind Men Here,” *The Straits Times*, 13 May 1998, p.2; Seet, “Singapore,” p.149; and Soin, “About That Missing Half,” p.2.
- 31 Soin, “About That Missing Half,” p.2.
- 32 See Tung, *Women in the Singapore Civil Service*, p.31.
- 33 Mario Gomez and Shyamala Gomez, “Reserving Quotas for Women,” *The Sunday Times* (Sri Lanka), 15 June 1997.
- 34 M. Shamsul Haque, “A Grassroots Approach to Decentralization in Singapore,” *Asian Journal of Political Science*, vol.4, no.1 (1996), pp.64-84.
- 35 Seet, “Singapore,” p.152.
- 36 *Ibid.*, p.153.
- 37 “Yu-Foo Urges . . .” p.25.
- 38 Jason Leow, “More Women Activists Needed in Grassroots Organizations,” *The Straits Times*, 10 March 1997, p.27.
- 39 Noeleen Heyzer and Vivienne Wee, “Obstacles to Women’s Advancement,” *The Business Times*, April 30-1 May, 1994.
- 40 Neft and Levine, *Where Women Stand*, pp.51-52.
- 41 Singapore Department of Statistics, *Social Progress of Singapore Women: A Statistical Assessment*, Occasional Paper on Social Statistics (Singapore: Department of Statistics, November 1998), p.9.
- 42 Corinne Kerk, “Income Gap Between Sexes Widens: Women Get Only 59% of Men’s Pay,” *The Business Times*, 8-9 March 1997, p.1.
- 43 Seet, “Singapore”; Wee, “The Ups and Downs of Women’s Status in Singapore”; and Soin, “About That Missing Half.”
- 44 Wee, “The Ups and Downs of Women’s Status in Singapore”; and Soin, “About That Missing Half,” p.2.
- 45 Soin, “National Policies,” p.194.
- 46 Corinna Cecilia Lim, “Review Laws Discriminating on Basis of Sex,” *The Straits Times*, 30 September 1995, p.38.
- 47 Soin, “National Policies,” p.205.
- 48 *Ibid.*, p.200; and Heyzer and Wee, “Obstacles to Women’s Advancement.”
- 49 Tung, *Women in the Singapore Civil Service*, p.24.
- 50 Chua Mui Hoong, “A Top Woman Mandarin, But She’s No Feminist,” *The Straits Times*, 3 March 2000, p.52.

- 51 Lily Phua and Brenda Yeoh, "Gendered Ideology and Women's Negotiation of Everyday Lives in Singapore's Public Housing Landscape," in *International Conference on Women in the Asia-Pacific Region: Proceedings*, 11-13 August 1997, Singapore, p.457.
- 52 Zaibun Siraj, "More Reason to Drop Quota on Women Doctors," *The Straits Times*, 25 July 1996, p.40; and Soin, "National Policies," p.201.
- 53 Soin, "National Policies."
- 54 Zaibun Siraj, "Gender Inequality Must be Eliminated Wherever It Occurs," *The Straits Times*, 2 August 1996, p.47.
- 55 In this regard, it has been pointed out that "socialization and negative stereotyping of women and men . . . reinforces the tendency for political decision-making to remain the domain of men." United Nations, *The Beijing Declaration*, p.110.
- 56 Carol Eng, "The Reality of the Asian Mother: A 16-Hour Day," *The Business Times*, 15 July 1998, p.6.
- 57 Soin, "About That Missing Half," p.2.; and "International Women's Day 1997: Stand Up and be Counted," in *The Business Times*, 8-9 March, 1997, p.1.
- 58 Anna Teo, "Only 20% Say More Women Politicians Will Benefit S'pore," *The Business Times*, 27 November 1996, p.2.
- 59 Sameer Advani, "Don't Sweep Aside Issue of Women in GRCs," *The Straits Times*, 30 October 1996, p.42.
- 60 For instance, Basant Kapur, a Professor of Economics at the National University of Singapore, recommends that Singapore should follow the family practices of Japan where women leave the workforce once they get married and have children. See Basant K. Kapur, "Encourage Mothers to Stay Home for Their Children," *The Straits Times*, 22 February, 1996, p.20.
- 61 Soin, "National Policies," p.199.
- 62 It has been observed that the status and power in the Philippines is affected by male-biased cultural and religious beliefs. See Proserpina Domingo-Tapales, "Women in Politics and Public Administration," *Asian Review of Public Administration*, vol.4, no.1 (1992), pp.1-8.
- 63 Meredith L. Weiss, "From Consciousness-Raising to Confrontation: The Policy of Women's Groups in Singapore," in *International Conference on Women in the Asia-Pacific Region: Proceedings*, 11-13 August 1997, Singapore, p.687.
- 64 Quoted in Leow, "More Women Activists Needed," p.27.
- 65 "Women's Achievements 'Only One Measure of Nation's Progress'," *The Straits Times*, 10 March 1995, p.2.
- 66 Walter Fernandez, "Women Urged to Strike a Balance," *The Straits Times*, 30 September 1996, p.30.
- 67 Quoted in Tung, *Women in the Singapore Civil Service*, p.25.
- 68 Stella R. Quah, *Family in Singapore*, p.23.
- 69 Wang, "Why Women Leaders Do Not See Eye to Eye."
- 70 See Titi Sumbung, "Androgynous Manager: A Strategy for Success in Public Administration," *Asian Review of Public Administration*, vol.4, no.1 (1992), pp.25-34.
- 71 Low Guat Tin, *Successful Women in Singapore: Issues, Problems and Challenges* (Singapore : EPB Publishers, 1993), pp.41-43. For Soin, in Singapore, due to the measure of women's success by their family role, they "are reluctant to jeopardise this facet of their life. . . . women are not used to seeing themselves as politicians, just as society is unused to seeing women on the podium." Soin, "About That Missing Half," p.2.

- 72 Wang Hui Ling, "Singapore Women Stay Out of Politics by Choice: Yuhua MP," *The Straits Times*, 26 January 1994, p.27.
- 73 Kerk, "Income Gap Between Sexes Widens."
- 74 Low, *Successful Women in Singapore*, pp.41-43.
- 75 Weiss, "From Consciousness-Raising to Confrontation," p.687.
- 76 "They Quit Jobs for Their Family," *The Straits Times*, 5 June 1995, p.4.
- 77 Janet Ho, "Housewives Keen to Work, But Most Cannot Find Jobs," *The Straits Times*, 6 August 1996, p.3.
- 78 Seet, "Singapore," p.149; and "Women Still Lag Behind Men Here," *The Straits Times*, 13 May 1998, p.2.
- 79 Wang Hui Ling, "Amendments to Women's Charter: For Better or for Worse?" *The Straits Times*, 27 January 1996, p.34.
- 80 David Miller, "Women Get Green Light to Join SCDF as Firefighters," *The Sunday Times* (Singapore), 27 April 1997, p.34.
- 81 Ho, "Housewives Keen to Work"; and Walter Fernandez, "NTUC to Launch Campaign to Get Women Back in Workforce," *The Straits Times*, 21 May 1995, p.25.
- 82 Soin, "National Policies."
- 83 M. Nirmala, "Up: Number of Women Choosing Engineering," *The Straits Times*, 23 August 1996, p.3.
- 84 For instance, with regard to the recent proposal to incorporate women into the National Service on a voluntary basis, some people raised the concern that such a provision of 2.5 years' full-time training in army would deplete female labour supply and compromise family needs. See "NS-for-Women Call Would Leave Work, Families Unattended," *The Straits Times*, 7 April 1995, p.32.
- 85 ESCAP (ed.), *Women in Politics in Asia and the Pacific*, pp.10-12
- 86 "Meritocracy and Ethnicity More Vital than Gender," *The Straits Times*, 29 October 1996, p.23.
- 87 Gomez and Gomez, "Reserving Quotas for Women."
- 88 DAW, "Women 2000."
- 89 Commonwealth Secretariat, *Women in Politics: Voices from the Commonwealth* (London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 1999), p.150.
- 90 Asian and Pacific Development Centre, *Asia-Pacific Post-Beijing Implementation Monitor* (Malaysia: Asian and Pacific Development Centre, 1998), p.96.
- 91 DAW, "Women 2000."
- 92 "Meritocracy and Ethnicity."
- 93 Tan Tarn How, "Singapore Against Setting Job quotas," *The Straits Times*, 10 September, 1995; and Tan Tarn How, "S'pore Women 'Shun Power by Choice,'" *Straits Times*, 16 September 1995.
- 94 DAW, "Women 2000."
- 95 With regard to policy alternative needed for increasing women representation in the public service in the case of Indonesia, it has been pointed out that "civil service should accept as legitimate that equal employment opportunity and affirmative action strategies are a necessary part of human resource management." Titi Sumbung, "Androgynous Manager," p.33.

- 96 Yana van der Meulen Rodgers, *Protecting Women and Promoting Equality in the Labor Market: Theory and Evidence*, Gender and Development Working Paper Series No.6. (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 1999), p.34.
- 97 In fact, Stella Quah in her study found serious gender biases in the textbooks and ideas in Singapore schools. See Quah, *Family in Singapore*, p.161. Thus, there is a serious need for rethinking and restructuring education curriculum with regard to gender-related issues.
- 98 ESCAP (ed.), *Women in Politics in Asia and the Pacific*, pp.10-11.
- 99 Asian and Pacific Development Centre, *Asia-Pacific Post-Beijing Implementation Monitor*, pp. 185-188.
- 100 Heyzer and Wee, "Obstacles to Women's Advancement"; and Neft and Levine, *Where Women Stand*.
- 101 Soin, "National Policies," p.191; and Seet, "Singapore," p.150.
- 102 In fact, in this age of transnational capital, global consumerism, and culture industry, there has been a sudden upsurge in advocacy for liberating Third World women from alleged social and family repression, which may have been intended to induce millions of these women, especially younger age groups, to break away from traditional family bonds and join transnational labour force. This younger generation of Third World women are not only becoming a primary source of cheap labour for newly created free trade zones, entertainment businesses, and sex and tourism industry (often owned or managed by foreign firms), they also represent now the huge consumption markets for foreign goods such as fast foods, trendy outfits, action films, women magazines, cigarettes, beverages, cosmetics, and so on. Thus, the new generation women in developing nations—who are mystified by sensational foreign media, confused by their distorted self-images, and craze for foreign goods—attempt to get out of traditional family structures just to be subjugated by more powerful (but manipulating) international market forces that give them a false sense of liberation while stripping off their cultural identity, religious affiliation, and self-respect.
- 103 UNDP, *Human Development Report 1999* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp.238-240.
- 104 According to the National Criminal Victimization Survey and the National Family Violence Survey, in the U.S., more than 50 percent of couples experience family violence; in more than 90 percent of these cases, the victims are female; and about 40 percent cases of such violence involve punching, kicking, beatings, and attacks with knives and guns. See "Aware: Domestic Violence and the Law Enforcement Community," 2000 (<http://www.sisna.com/lcsd/Aware.html>).
- 105 Tan Sai Siong, "What Does Seow Ah Huay Think About Glass Ceiling?" *The Straits Times*, 30 January 1994, p.2.
- 106 According to Stella R. Quah, even the early effort of the ruling party in the 1950s to promote gender equality in Singapore was not intended to initiate a women's movement or introduce any radical change in women's role definition, it was rather guided by the need for female workers in the workforce. See Stella R. Quah, *Family in Singapore*, p.158.