

CONSTRUCTION OF FEMININITY: GIRLS' EDUCATION IN SINGAPORE, 1959-2000

KHO EE MOI

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“Singapore women are well-educated, progressive and enjoy a high status in society. There are no problematic gender issues in Singapore.” Such are the comments expressed by many people in Singapore, including women themselves. There is such a general feeling of satisfaction with the position of women here that when I mention that my area of research is on gender and education, some of the more forthright people have asked me, “What is there to find out?” After all, equal educational opportunities were given without women having to really fight for them. There are few if any overt instances of gender discrimination in schools. Girls get the same education as boys, and, women are doing well in the economy because of their improved educational qualifications.

But are girls really getting the same education as boys? If women are doing as well as men in Singapore, why is there a need to celebrate whenever there are media reports of women having broken through the ‘glass ceiling’? Why are there so few women political leaders? Why do so many educated women feel that looking after their children is their primary role in life, causing them to leave well-paying jobs when they get married and start families? Why have gender relations not undergone a radical change as a result of modern education? These were some of the questions that I grappled with during the short period when I was a homemaker, having resigned from my job to nurture my children. What began as personal reflections developed into a quest and hence this thesis.

Many people have contributed in various ways to the conceptualization, development and maturation of this thesis. I am indebted to them and take pleasure in acknowledging their help. First and foremost, I owe a lifetime of gratitude to my

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SUMMARY

The school is very often seen as an ideological apparatus of the state and this study will examine how the education system has been used to influence the construction of femininity in school, thus maintaining the state's hegemony and preservation of a patriarchal framework in Singapore. It will examine the discourse and educational policies of the government in order to understand the official gender ideology and how this ideology is transmitted through schooling. In the course of this, questions related to the state's concept of women's roles and place in Singapore as well as whether schooling has empowered or entrapped girls in subordination will also be discussed. The period covered spans over forty years, from 1959, when Singapore was granted internal self-government and the People's Action Party (PAP) took control of domestic affairs, to the end of the twentieth century in the year 2000.

The examination of state discourse provides an understanding of the motivations behind the PAP policy of promoting equal educational opportunities for girls in Singapore. Early PAP discourse espoused a seemingly modern gender ideology of sex equality in all spheres and there was an attempt to re-define femininity and female roles to extend beyond the domestic arena and include women's participation in the public sphere, i.e., in waged labour. It will be seen, however, that the government's early support for women was really a corollary of its national priorities and the state's attempt to re-define female roles and femininity was the result of economic imperatives of having more women participate in an industrialized economy. It will be seen that the government pursued two strategic goals – that of economic development and maintaining social stability, both of which women played significant roles. However, it is not always possible for women to

successfully play these two roles concurrently, thus resulting in difficulty in achieving coherence in their gender roles. In trying to achieve both goals, the PAP government's policies towards women, especially with regard to education, were at times discordant. The later state discourse reveals this more clearly when the leaders seemed to vacillate between emphasizing the importance of women's role in the home and their role in the economy, resulting in conflicting policies that seemed to subvert both objectives.

The analysis of the curriculum policies shows that for many years, a deliberate policy of gender differentiation in the form of home economics for girls and technical education for boys influenced many girls to accept a domestic and subordinate role in a patriarchal society. This is the case despite their being exposed to a modern, scientific and technological education. Additionally, it is found that the gender codes embedded in the instructional materials emphasize the superiority of males and inferiority of females, contributing to a skewed understanding of the role of women.

The state's traditional gender ideology is reinforced in the disciplinary policies. Girls are perceived to be both physically and mentally weaker than males and while males can be punished with the cane if necessary, corporal punishment on females is prohibited. Conservative notions of femininity can be seen in the school rules which dictate that girls should be quiet, gentle, docile, obedient and conforming to rules. Boisterous, unruly behaviour and outspokenness are discouraged. However, this conservatism is contradicted by other state discourse and policies which promote modern ideas of individualism and equality of the sexes as well as by images of modern womanhood that are transmitted through the media. Thus, by the end of the 1990s, notions of conservative femininity are increasingly being challenged, as evidenced in the rise in female disciplinary problems.

This study shows that the gender ideology of the state was and remains patriarchal and the school plays an important role in transmitting this ideology to girls. Women play an important but subordinate role in Singapore, be it in the economic, political or social sphere and the government's support for equal opportunities for girls is based on pragmatic economic considerations and not on adherence to any dogma or theory. However, the provision of modern education, especially in science and technology and the opportunities for employment have enabled women to become legally and financially independent, and contributed to changes in society's gender ideology. Modern education has thus contributed to the empowerment of females and it has become increasingly difficult for the state to maintain a traditional patriarchal framework based on women's subordination.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CDIS	Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore
CID	Criminal Investigation Department
CPDD	Curriculum Planning & Development Division
ECA	Extra-curricular Activities
FLFPR	Female Labour Force Participation Rate
MCP	Malayan Communist Party
MOE	Ministry of Education
NCC	National Cadet Corps
NPCC	National Police Cadet Corps
NTU	Nanyang Technological University
NUS	National University of Singapore
PAP	People's Action Party
PCC	Police Cadet Corps
PEP	Primary English Programme
PETS	Primary English Thematic Series
SCW	Singapore Council of Women
STU	Singapore Teachers' Union
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific & Cultural Organisation

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Women in Singapore today are considered by many to be modern, liberated and progressive. They have been accorded opportunities for education and employment since the 1960s and appear to have made great strides in many areas of economic and social life. Mdm Ho Geok Choo, Member of Parliament for West Coast GRC and President of Singapore Human Resources Institute, for example, emphasized the achievements of Singapore women in a recent speech:

Considering the relatively short history of Singapore, I can say that Singapore women have not done too badly.... In the public sector and politics, we are also seeing increasing numbers moving up the hierarchy. To date we have two women ambassadors, two women Permanent Secretaries and ten women Member of Parliament (MP)... the *quantum leap increase* in the number of women MPs is significant and is a true reflection of the Government's recognition of the importance of a woman's perspective and voice in Parliament.¹

Indeed, Singapore women have advanced significantly since the 1950s, and especially during the late 1980s and 1990s, as summed up in an official survey outlining women's socio-economic and educational achievements in Singapore between 1987 and 1997:

Along with Singapore's economic progress, women in Singapore have achieved significant improvements in various aspects of their life. Their educational level is almost on par with men, they participate actively in economic and social activities, and they have access to good health care and live longer lives. Concomitant with these changes is the marked improvement in the status of women in Singapore society.²

¹ Opening Address by Mdm Ho Geok Choo, MP for West Coast GRC (Boon Lay Division) and President of the Singapore Human Resources Institute (SHRI), Singapore Women's Congress 2002: The Art of Success, 8 March 2002. [Emphasis added]

² Singapore, *Social Progress of Singapore Women: A Statistical Assessment* (Singapore : Dept. of Statistics, 1998), p. 1.

This rise in women's status is often attributed to their being given access to education, which is purported to dispel ignorance and replace it with enlightenment.³ Liberal feminism argues that men and women are very similar and that women have the same capabilities as men and thus attributes women's second-class status to the lack of equal economic and educational opportunities being given to them.⁴ The solution, according to this school of thought, is to provide girls with opportunities for education and employment so as to enable them to enter into a full range of professions. This was assumed to be the key to emancipating and empowering women and raising their status in society.

Education and economic performance indicators have therefore often been used to assess improvements in women's status in society. The following section uses these indicators to assess and reflect on Singapore women's performance from the time of the People's Action Party's (PAP) first government in 1959 to 2000, a period of approximately forty years. This review highlights Singapore women's achievements but at the same time also raises questions about the extent to which women have attained equal status with men after more than forty years of equal educational opportunities provided by the state. The key research questions will then be discussed in the light of this review of women's progress.

³ Lynda Measor & Pat Sikes, *Gender and Schools* (London: Cassell, 1992), p. 21.

⁴ See Gaby Weiner, *Feminisms in Education: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1994), Chapter 4 for a comprehensive introduction to the different forms of feminism and feminist thought.

Review of Women's Progress

Since 1959, when the PAP came into power, Singapore women have made great strides in the socio-economic arena as a result of the ruling party's policy of equal opportunities. Between the years 1959 and 2000, the educational profile of the female population has improved markedly. Women's literacy rate rose significantly from a mere 34% in 1957 to 89% by the year 2000.⁵ The mean years of schooling for girls doubled from almost 4 years in 1980 to 8 years in 2000.⁶ The increase in the number of years of schooling means that by the year 2000, most girls were going on to secondary and even tertiary education. By the year 2000, approximately 86% of females aged 15-24 years and 81% aged 25-34 years had received at least a secondary education [Chart 1.1]. The tremendous progress that women have made in education from 1959 to 2000 can be seen in the greater disparity between male and female educational attainment in the older age groups. Only 42% of females aged between 45-54 have at least a secondary education compared to 53% of males in the same age group and among those aged 55 and over, the disparity is even greater with the number of males with at least a secondary education being twice that of females in the same age group [Chart 1.1].

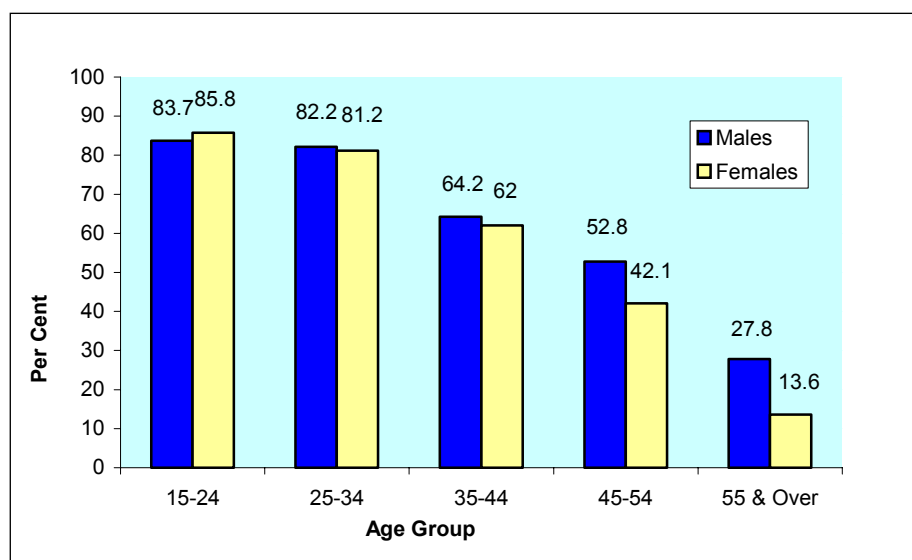
Another indicator of improvement in girls' education is seen in the higher female enrolment in tertiary institutions. In 1960, female enrolment in the University of Singapore and Nanyang University comprised only 23% of the total enrolment at both universities; by the year 2000, female undergraduates had outnumbered males

⁵ Singapore, *Report on the Census of Population, 1957* (Singapore: Government Printer, 1964), p. 77 & Singapore, *Singapore 2001: Statistical Highlights* (Singapore: Dept of Statistics, 2001), p. 53.

⁶ Data on mean years of schooling prior to 1980 is not available. See Singapore, *Singapore 2001: Statistical Highlights* (Singapore: Dept of Statistics, 2001), p. 53.

and formed about 53% of the total enrolment in the universities.⁷ The female enrolment in universities as a ratio of resident female population is seen to have increased from 8% in 1987 to 18% in 1997.⁸ However, women appear to dominate in arts and business-related disciplines in tertiary institutions while men tend to major in technical disciplines. There still exists a perception that engineering and other technical-related disciplines are male domains and women continue to avoid these disciplines in spite of the modern scientific education that they have received. Gender stereotypes seem to have persisted.

Chart 1.1
Proportion With At Least Secondary Education, 2000



Source: Singapore, *Census of Population 2000: Advance Data Release* (Singapore: Department of Statistics, 2001), p. 22.

There is no doubt that women's economic position has improved significantly as a result of education and their greater participation in the work force. The female labour force participation rate rose to 55.5% in 2000 from a mere 19.2% in 1957 [Table 1.1], and over the decade from 1992 to 2002, the labour force growth rate was

⁷ Singapore, *Economic & Social Statistics, Singapore:1960-1982*, (Singapore: Dept of Statistics, 1983), p. 238 & Leow Bee Geok, *Census of Population 2000, Education, Language & Religion* (Singapore: Dept of Statistics, 2001), p. 33.

⁸ Singapore, *Social Progress of Singapore Women: A Statistical Assessment*, p. 4.

higher for females (3.6%) compared with males (2.2%), and females now make up 44% of the labour force, up from 40% in 1992.⁹

The economic and financial position of women has also been enhanced over the years as a result of a significant increase in the income of females. The median monthly income of women rose from \$900 in 1990 to \$1,640 in 1997, an average annual growth of 9%. This compared favourably with the 10% rise in income of the male workforce.¹⁰

Table 1.1
Labour Force Participation Rate, 1957 – 2000

Year	Labour Force Participation Rate	
	Male (%)	Female (%)
1957 ¹	76.6	19.2
1965 ²	64.4	19.8
1970	81.2	28.2
1975	79.3	34.9
1980	81.5	44.3
1985	79.9	44.9
1990	79.0	53.0
1995	78.4	50.1
2000	81.1	55.5

Source: 1. 1957 figures represent the percentage in the category of 'Economically Active.' Taken from Singapore, *Report on the Census of Population, 1957* (Singapore: Government Printer, 1964), p. 80.

2. 1965-2000 data from *Singapore 2001: Statistical Highlights* (Singapore: Dept. of Statistics, 2001), p. 54.

Access to modern education and job opportunities has thus enabled many women to acquire economic independence. Working female professionals are often perceived as achievement-oriented, capable and successful in their respective careers. For many in Singapore, gender issues are not significant areas of concern because the

⁹ Ministry of Manpower, *Report on Labour Force in Singapore, 2002* (Singapore: Manpower Research and Statistics Dept., 2002), p. 2.

¹⁰ Singapore, *Social Progress of Singapore Women: A Statistical Assessment*, p. 10.

ruling party's declared policy of equal opportunities has allowed women to achieve much in society. Indeed, women in Singapore appear to have achieved fairly equal status with men.

A closer examination of the statistics however, reveals that this view of the situation is too simplistic. Considering that Singapore is a developed economy, the female labour force participation rate is still far below that of males, especially when contrasted against comparable modern economies such as South Korea, Japan and the United States [Table 1.2]. There is also a significant gender disparity in income with the median income of females comprising only 75% of that for men [Table 1.3].¹¹ Among full-time workers, for example, the median monthly income for males in 2002 was \$2,167 compared with \$1,625 for women. This is attributed to a higher concentration of females in lower-paying occupations among the older cohorts of female workers who were less educated.

Table 1.2
Comparison of Labour Force Participation Rates
of Some Developed Countries, 2001

Country	Females Aged 40-54	Older Persons Aged 55-64		
		Total %	Males %	Females %
Singapore	58.5 (58.5)	45.1 (47.5)	64.2 (67.5)	27.6 (29.2)
Taiwan	53.8	41.8	61.7	22.5
Hong Kong	55.6	43.2	62.0	21.4
South Korea	61.8	59.2	71.3	47.9
Japan	70.2	65.8	83.4	49.2
United States	77.0	60.2	68.1	53.0

Figures in brackets refer to 2002

Source: Ministry of Manpower, *Report on Labour Force in Singapore, 2002* (Singapore: Manpower Research and Statistics Dept., 2002), p. 4.

¹¹ Ministry of Manpower, *Report On Labour Force In Singapore, 2002*, p. 17.

Another factor for the disparity in income is the lower number of years of working experience because female workers tend to disrupt or drop out of the workforce after marriage or childbirth.¹² It appears therefore, that traditional conservative attitudes have remained, resulting in many married women feeling that it is their responsibility to stay at home to nurture their children. While male participation remained high in the prime working age of 25-49, female participation peaked at age 25-29 and declined after that as married women withdrew to stay home to look after their children [Chart 1.2].

Table 1.3
Median Monthly Income By Sex, 2002

Category	Total S\$	Males S\$	Females S\$
All Employed Persons	1,867	2,000	1,500
Full-Time	2,000	2,167	1,625
Part-Time	600	600	542

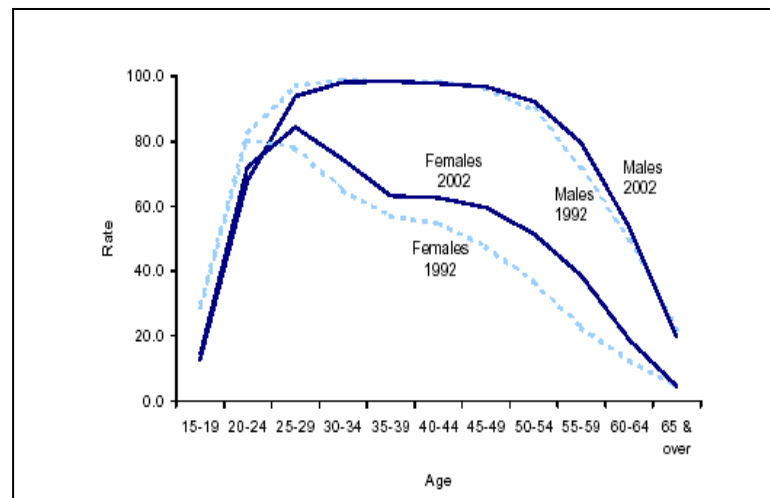
Source: Ministry of Manpower, *Report on Labour Force in Singapore, 2002* (Singapore: Manpower Research and Statistics Dept., 2003), p. 17.

A recent survey of economically inactive residents has found that 398,300 or one in three of the economically inactive persons were in the prime working age of 25-54 years.¹³ Of this, 361,700 or 91% were females and only 36,500 or 9.2% were males. The majority of the females who were not working gave housework (64%) and childcare (27%) as the reasons for not working. In contrast, the reasons why most of the males were not working were because they were still schooling, in poor health, disabled, old, or had retired.

¹² Singapore, *Social Progress of Singapore Women: A Statistical Assessment*, p. 10.

¹³ Ibid.

Chart 1.2
Age-Sex Specific Labour Force Participation Rate, 1992, 2002



Source: Ministry of Manpower, *Report on Labour Force in Singapore, 2002* (Singapore: Manpower Research and Statistics Dept., 2003), p. 3.

Also noteworthy is the fact that in spite of women’s improved educational profile, there are still proportionately more men than women in professional, technical, administrative and managerial jobs. It is reported that among those aged below 40 years, 47% of men and 35% of women were holding such jobs. The disparity is wider among those aged 40 and above, with 41% of men and 26% of women employed in such higher- profiled occupations.¹⁴ In contrast, more women are employed in lower-paying jobs such as in clerical and sales and service occupations [Table 1.4].

Recent surveys also reveal a greater concentration of female tertiary students in non-technical courses while men tended to major in technical disciplines as shown by census data for 2002 [Table 1.5]. In the polytechnics, of the total number of graduates from the business administration and health sciences disciplines, females formed 70% and 84% respectively. Most of those enrolled in the health sciences were

¹⁴ Singapore, *Social Progress of Singapore Women: A Statistical Assessment*, p. 12.

trainee nurses, emphasizing the occupational stereotype of nursing as a female profession.

Table 1.4
Occupations By Sex, 1987 & 1997

	Males			Females		
	1987 %	1997 %	Change %	1987 %	1997 %	Change %
<u>Below 40 Years</u>						
Administrative & Managerial	7.4	13.1	5.7	2.0	6.0	4.0
Professional & Technical	16.6	33.4	16.8	15.7	29.2	13.5
Clerical	6.2	6.0	-0.2	32.2	32.8	0.6
Sales & Service	13.8	10.9	-2.9	12.9	10.4	-2.5
Production & Related	43.8	27.0	-16.8	36.8	21.4	-15.4
Others	12.2	9.7	-2.5	0.5	0.2	-0.3
	100.0	100.0		100.0	100.0	
<u>40 Years & Over</u>						
Administrative & Managerial	16.8	20.8	4.0	4.5	8.3	3.8
Professional & Technical	12.5	19.8	7.3	11.8	17.8	6.0
Clerical	5.6	5.7	0.1	8.4	20.3	11.9
Sales & Service	19.2	13.1	-6.1	28.3	19.2	-9.1
Production & Related	43.1	39.6	-3.5	45.6	34.0	-11.6
Others	2.7	0.9	-1.8	1.3	0.	-1.0

Source: Singapore, *Social Progress of Singapore Women: A Statistical Assessment* (Singapore: Dept. of Statistics, 1998), p. 8.

In contrast, male graduates in engineering courses in the polytechnics were greater in number, comprising 78.3% of total graduates from engineering sciences and 80.3% from the engineering, manufacturing and related trades course. Females dominated the education, fine and applied arts, and humanities and social sciences disciplines at the university but comprised only a meagre 16% of graduates from the engineering faculty. Despite such differences, however, there appears to be an upward trend in the enrolment of women in traditionally male-dominated engineering

courses. The proportion of female students enrolled in engineering courses in the polytechnics increased from 8% in 1970 to almost 30% in 2000 and in the universities, from 3% to 25% in the same period [Table 1.6]. Nonetheless, the number of women enrolled in this course is still small compared to that of other courses and the increase over the years is insignificant. There is no significant change in the perception of engineering as a male profession and gender stereotypes have persisted despite years of modern and scientific education being provided for girls.

Table 1.5
Resident Polytechnic and University Graduates by Field of Study and Sex, 2000

Field of Study	Total	Males	Females	% Female
Polytechnic				
Fine & Applied Arts	2683	1368	1315	49
Business & Administration	29079	8841	20238	70
Health Sciences	2672	423	2249	84
Engineering Sciences	77656	60810	16845	22
Engineering, Manufacturing & Related Trades	4664	3745	919	20
University				
Education	6622	1965	4657	70
Fine & Applied Arts	5230	1604	3626	69
Humanities & Social Sciences	35940	13223	22717	63
Business & Administration	82038	39746	42293	52
Engineering Sciences	60656	50765	9892	16

Source: Enrolment figures taken from Singapore, *Census of Population 2000: Literacy, Education and Religion* (Singapore: Dept. of Statistics, 2001), pp. 68 & 72.

Table 1.6
Female Enrolment in Polytechnic and University Engineering Courses, 1970 – 2000

Year	Polytechnic			University		
	Total	Female	% Female	Total	Female	% Female
1970	1392	109	8	337	10	3
1980	3629	694	19	602	46	8
1991/92	7894	2015	25	1690	208	12
2000	22112	6486	29	11963	3048	25

Source: Low Guat Tin, “Women, Education and Development in Singapore” in Jason Tan, S. Gopinathan & Ho Wah Kam, (eds.), *Education in Singapore: A Book of Readings* (Singapore: Prentice Hall, 1997), pp. 348-349 & Education Statistics Digest Online, <http://www2.moe.edu.sg/esd>

Thus, many questions regarding women’s position and achievements in Singapore society remain. If women are as well-educated as men, why is there still a significant income disparity? Why are there still more men than women in top managerial positions? Why is it that, after almost forty years of independence, women are still relatively unrepresented in the legislature, so much so that having 10 females in a parliament of 85 members is considered a “quantum leap increase?”¹⁵ Why do women continue to feel that it is their responsibility to withdraw from the workforce to look after the family?

A survey of Singaporean values and lifestyles in 1998 found that a significant proportion of people hold fairly conservative views of women’s role in society.¹⁶ For example, 59.2% of females agreed that a woman’s life is fulfilled only if she can provide a happy home for her family. At the same time, 73.5% of them felt that a woman should have her own career. Significantly enough, a mere 53.1% of male

¹⁵ Refer to Mdm Ho Geok Choo’s speech at the Women’s Congress, 2001, cited on p. 1.

¹⁶ Kau Ah Keng, Tan Soo Jiuan & Jochen Wirtz, *7 Faces of Singaporeans: Their Values, Aspirations and Lifestyles* (Singapore: PrenticeHall, 1998), pp. 94 – 100.

interviewees shared that opinion.¹⁷ This shows that a number of male Singaporeans still hold traditional views about women's career aspirations.

Sociologist Stella Quah argues that many Singaporean women are struggling to maintain coherence in their gender roles.¹⁸ On the one hand, women are expected to play an important role in the economic development of the nation through participating in the workforce. On the other hand, they are also expected to stay at home to look after the children so as preserve the family unit and maintain the social fabric of society. There are three contradictory signals contributing to this struggle, namely, a revival of traditional values, the exigencies of a modern economy leading to government encouragement of female participation in the workforce and the concept of gender equality, which is promoted through universal education and modernization.¹⁹ The assertion of women's struggle for coherence, the evidence of the statistics showing continued existence of gender disparity, stereotypes and traditional gender ideology raise serious questions about the extent to which women in Singapore are emancipated and empowered as a result of their increased access to education.

This study will explore the influence of the government's educational policies on the construction of femininity in schools and examine if education was intended to empower or entrap women in subordination within a patriarchal society. In the process, it will also discuss the state's gender ideology and the place of women in the PAP government's schema of a First World nation. These key issues will be elaborated on in the next sections, which will discuss these questions in the context of some of the main concepts that are used in the framework of this research.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 94 – 96.

¹⁸ Stella R. Quah, *Family in Singapore: Sociological Perspectives* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1994), p. 177.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 177 –179.

Goal of Modernity and Approach of Pragmatism

Singapore women's progress is closely tied with the nation's development as a modern economy. Modernity is often characterized by rationality, objectivity, science, industrialization and progress. From 1959 when the PAP took over the government of Singapore, its goal was to ensure the state's survival, which the PAP associated almost completely with economic progress. The leaders perceived that Singapore's survival and growth as a modern nation hinged on a centrally controlled and carefully planned economic development. Given the nation's lack of natural resources and the loss of a hinterland after Singapore's expulsion from Malaysia in 1965, the most critical problem at that time was that of economic survival. Industrialization was seen as the only solution to Singapore's problems but this could be achieved only with foreign investments and it was deemed necessary that Singapore achieved First World standards in order to attract such investments.²⁰ As explicitly stated in the second volume of Lee Kuan Yew's memoirs, significantly entitled *From Third World to First*, the many policies initiated by the PAP, such as creating a clean and green garden city, constructing a world class infrastructure, clearing out illegal hawkers, organizing campaigns to stop littering, spitting in public places and so on, were all carefully designed and orchestrated to attract investments from multinational companies.²¹ The guiding principle for survival was that "Singapore had to be more rugged, better organized and more efficient than others in the region."²²

²⁰ *The Tasks Ahead, PAP's 5-Year Plan, 1959-1964, Part I* (Singapore: Petir, May 1959), pp. 7-9, and Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First. The Singapore Story: 1965-2000* (Singapore: Times Media Pte Ltd., 2000), pp. 66-69.

²¹ Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First. The Singapore Story: 1965 - 2000*, pp. 76-77 & 199-211.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 76.

The PAP's success in achieving its goal of bringing Singapore from Third World status to First World in one generation is presented as resulting from the application of modern scientific inquiry and a pragmatic approach. The clearest statement of this is from Lee himself:

If there was one formula for our success, it was that we were constantly studying how to make things work, or how to make them work better. I was never a prisoner of any theory. What guided me were reason and reality. The acid test I applied to every theory or scheme was, would it work?²³

Here, Lee represents the PAP leaders and himself in what is widely perceived as modern masculine terms: rational, objective, using the scientific approach of observation and experimentation, guided by reason and practicality and not given to emotional attachment to dogma or theory.

Despite his assertion to the contrary, the PAP leadership did adhere to a theory – that of pragmatism. Lee's constant reference to his approach of asking "What works?" bears close resemblance to the American philosophy of pragmatism, founded by Charles Peirce and later popularized by William James and John Dewey. This philosophy disputes the notion of absolute truth and rejects all forms of determinism. Instead it considers truth or the moral goodness or badness of actions by examining the consequences of these actions. The pragmatist rejects abstractions, dogma and insufficiency and turns towards concreteness, facts, action and power.²⁴ He is not constrained by dogmas or doctrines but looks at facts, fruits and consequences.²⁵

Similarly, the PAP had one all-consuming goal of achieving First World status (defined largely in economic terms) for Singapore and the policies and measures

²³ Ibid. p. 758.

²⁴ William James, "Pragmatism," in Louis P. Pojman (ed.), *Classics of Philosophy*, 2nd edn. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 1087.

²⁵ Ibid.

adopted to achieve this goal were based on practical considerations of the results to be obtained from these. According to sociologist, Chua Beng Huat, the origins of PAP pragmatism were the result of historical and material considerations as well as a conscious formulation by PAP.²⁶ Historical and material constraints were determined by the economic situation, particularly after Singapore's separation from Malaysia in 1965. The threat to Singapore's economy was multiplied when the British government announced, in 1968, that British troops stationed in Singapore would be withdrawn by early 1971.²⁷ This withdrawal posed serious problems because Britain's expenditure of \$450 million a year accounted for 25% of Singapore's gross national product and the evacuation of the military bases would also affect thousands of people whose livelihood were derived either directly or indirectly from servicing the British troops.²⁸ The PAP government thus presented the situation as a crisis of survival and persistently highlighted economic imperatives as the only reality in order to galvanize a nation of disparate groups to pull together towards a common goal. Pragmatism was used to rationalize all policy issues and "became the term used to gloss over economic instrumental rationality."²⁹ Policies were explained on the basis of practicality, commonsense and necessity. Such policies were ostensibly formulated on rational and scientific principles, with the PAP often referring to "what works" rather than on any explicitly stated ideology or "what we believe in". Thus, the day-to-day policies and the ensuing social and political system were buttressed by the prestige of science and technology. In practice, however, the pragmatic approach has

²⁶ Chua Beng Huat, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 17-20.

²⁷ C.M. Turnbull, *A History of Singapore: 1819-1975* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 305.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Chua Beng Huat, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore*, p. 19.

caused some government policies to appear lacking in coherence and consistency.

According to Chua:

...pragmatism is governed by ad hoc contextual rationality that seeks to achieve specific gains at particular points in time and pays scant attention to systematicity and coherence as necessary rational criteria for action...³⁰

The pragmatic approach dictated that women should participate in the economic development of the nation. This was necessary for industrialization to succeed, hence the decision to accord equal opportunities in education and employment. Yet, at the same time, the PAP emphasized the need for women to retain their traditional domestic roles. In other words, the economic imperative required women to take on traditionally masculine qualities in order to function effectively in the industrial sector. Yet, the emphasis on maintaining a patriarchal society required them to preserve traditionally feminine characteristics of domesticity and subordination to men. These contradictions haunted women's struggle for a coherent gender identity and the education system has played a significant socializing role here.

Critical questions are thus raised concerning the motivation of the government in according equal opportunities to women and the place of women in the PAP's conception of modernity and Singapore's status as a First World nation. The defined goal of modernity and the PAP's pragmatic approach in Singapore were played out within the context of a hegemonic party-state system with a patriarchal tone.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 58.

Hegemony and Preservation of Patriarchy

One critical question that needs to be answered is why, in spite of women's struggle for gender coherence, there is little discontent and Singapore women are generally satisfied with the existing situation? Feminists believe that women have been socialized to accept existing conditions of a society. Socialization refers to the process by which an individual learns the values, patterns of thought and behaviour necessary to become a member of his/her society.³¹ These social patterns and values vary greatly over time and space, that is, they are peculiar to individual societies and to different times in history. Some of the more significant agents of socialization are the state, family, school and teachers, peers, and the mass media.

There are a number of socialization theories that seek to explain how societies replicate and maintain themselves. Social reproduction theories, for instance, try to explain how capitalist societies were able to maintain themselves despite Marxist predictions of their self-destruction. In the 1960s, much of radical social theory was influenced by Louis Althusser's pioneering thesis that all societies are based on a particular mode of economic production and for a society to continue in existence, it must reproduce both the labour power to support the economic system and the relations of production or state ideology to ensure the continued existence of that society.³² Education was seen as a key means by which this reproduction of state ideology takes place. This is accomplished through the inculcation of the desired values and behaviour for living in that society.

Another social theory, by economists Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, is drawn from their study of the relationship between American educational reforms and

³¹ Lynda Measor & Pat Sikes, *Gender and Schools*, p. 8.

³² Paige Porter, *Gender and Education* (Victoria: Deakin University, 1986), p. 4.

the changes in the system of economic production.³³ Bowles and Gintis see a close correlation between the social relations in the school and that in the workplace. According to them, there is a correspondence between these two environments. The hierarchy and control system in school replicates the hierarchical and vertical power structure in the workplace, and the powerlessness that workers have over the content of their jobs is reflected in students' lack of control over their curriculum. The motivational system and the emphasis on individual competition within schools are also similar to that in the workplace.³⁴

Reproduction theories have been criticized for their deterministic nature and the omission of gender considerations. The determinism in these theories assumes that children simply accept and absorb the transmitted ideology without question or resistance. They do not explain how social change occurs or why individuals or groups of people within a society can have very different world-views. Sociologist Madeleine Arnot pointed out that the educational analyses by Althusser, and Bowles and Gintis, did not take into account the differences in male and female life experiences.³⁵ For example, issues of power relations between the sexes in the school and workplace, sexual division of labour and the school curriculum as well as the inculcation of patriarchal ideology through the school system were not sufficiently taken into account in their theories. Althusserianism has also been criticized as being too 'statist' in its conception of power. To Althusser, power is located in the state and its various components comprising repressive state apparatuses, such as the armed

³³ Samuel Bowles & Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976).

³⁴ Paige Porter, *Gender and Education* (London: Falmer Press, 1998), pp. 4-5.

³⁵ Madeleine Arnot, *Reproducing Gender? Essays on Educational Theory and Feminist Politics* (London: Routledge Falmer, 2002), pp. 25-37.

forces and the police as well as ideological state apparatuses, such as schools and churches.³⁶

Critics of Althusser have instead drawn upon Antonio Gramsci's (1891-1937) concept of hegemony. This concept is used to explain how a dominant class is able to project its own particular way of seeing the world of human relationships so successfully that its view is accepted as common sense and as part of the natural order of things, even by those who are, in fact, subordinate to it.³⁷ Hegemony is inherent in social practices, forming part of the accepted norms and thinking of people in a particular society so much so that it 'saturates' the consciousness of the entire society. A ruling elite therefore maintains its power not only through coercive mechanisms but also through ideological leadership.

Feminists have drawn upon Gramscian hegemony and the Foucauldian concepts of power and discourse in their criticism of male dominance in society. They have pointed out that social control of women or the perpetuation of male dominance is maintained through the use of hegemonic discourse.³⁸ The term 'discourse' refers to the mode of speaking, writing, or thinking about specific things or issues which are presented as given, unchallengeable truths. It pertains to socially organized frameworks of meanings that define categories and encompasses all the statements, verbal and written structures, concepts, figures of speech and vocabulary specific to particular social situations or practices. Specific disciplines of study, for example will have their own particular terms, concepts and modes of expressions and hence, their own discourse. Hegemonic discourses serve to perpetuate the status quo by affecting the structures within which people think, making it difficult or impossible

³⁶ Robert Bocock, *Hegemony* (Chichester: Tavistock Publications, 1986), p. 16.

³⁷ A. Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1983), p. 474.

³⁸ Carrie F. Paechter, *Educating the Other: Gender, Power and Schooling*, p. 2.

for them to conceive of things in any other way and thereby causing them to behave in ways accepted by society.³⁹ Because hegemonic discourses are often unquestioned, unchallenged and benign, they also act as forces in the oppression of some individuals or groups in society, operating in such a way as to make them the agents of their own oppression.⁴⁰ For example, state discourse in Singapore on the economic imperative of both men and women to contribute to Singapore's national survival was seen as undisputable common sense. Such discourse sought to establish hegemony on the need for women to participate in the labour force and effectively altered women's roles in society. The pre- and post-independence hegemonic state discourse on women and girls' education will be examined in the second and third chapters of this study.

Gramscian theorists also view the education system as playing an important role in the reproduction and maintenance of cultural and ideological hegemony.⁴¹ Michael W. Apple, a professor of educational policy and curriculum, in his seminal work, *Ideology and Curriculum*, argues that schools not only play the role of distributing ideological values and knowledge, but they also help produce the type of knowledge that is needed to maintain the existing dominant economic, political and cultural arrangements. Thus, education enables social control to be maintained without dominant groups having to resort to overt mechanisms of domination.⁴²

In studying the interconnections between ideology and curriculum, three areas of school life need to be examined. The first area to investigate is the overt curriculum, that is, how the specific forms of curricular knowledge reflect the ideologies to be transmitted. The second area one should examine is the 'hidden'

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 3.

⁴¹ Michael W. Apple, *Ideology and Curriculum* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 6.

⁴² Ibid., pp. 1-7.

curriculum, that is, the “tacit teaching to students of norms, values and dispositions that goes on simply by their living in and coping with the institutional expectations and routines of schools day in and day out.”⁴³ The third aspect concerns the ideologies that educators accept and use in the dispensation of their professional responsibilities. Apple argues that it is imperative to situate the knowledge that is taught, the social relations that dominate classrooms, the school as a mechanism of cultural and economic preservation and the educators themselves, in the context of the existing society.⁴⁴ However, as Apple stresses, it is important not to situate these in an overly deterministic and mechanistic way for the relationship between economics and culture is not a one-to-one correspondence but really a dialectical one. Culture is not simplistically determined by economics but is mediated by human action, by the specific activities, contradictions and relationships among people.⁴⁵ In sum, it is thus important to understand the educational policies and practices of the state, the curriculum, both overt and hidden, being taught in the schools, as well as the fundamental perspectives of educators.

In recent years, socialist and radical feminists have argued that education has not resulted in the anticipated emancipation of women. Unlike liberal feminists, the socialist and radical feminists see women’s subordination as more fundamentally rooted in the way society is organized, not simply in the lack of opportunities given to them. They argue that despite modern education and occupational opportunities, women continue to be subordinate to men. This is attributed to the patriarchal nature of society where the major power brokers in these societies – the parliament, public service, universities, legal profession, military, industry, and the like, are almost all

⁴³ Ibid., p. 14.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 3.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 3-4.

run by men.⁴⁶ The socialist feminists link capitalism with women's subordination by pointing out that industries and large corporations (which are mostly run by men) in capitalist societies have organized interests in subjugating women. To these socialist feminists, education reproduces both gender and class inequality as schools socialize girls by transmitting messages about appropriate roles and activities for girls. The main role of schooling, it is pointed out, is to transmit those values necessary for preserving a capitalist society.⁴⁷

The radical feminists further suggest that schools are microcosms of society and patriarchal power structure is reproduced in the school system. They highlight the studies that show that boys dominate classrooms and teacher attention and argue that male interests dictate the school curriculum. These radical feminists contend that schooling is used as an instrument to preserve patriarchy in society.⁴⁸ The term 'patriarchy' is used to describe the situation of domination of women by men. It is derived from Greek, literally meaning 'the rule of the father'.⁴⁹ Although there is no complete agreement over what this term really means, it generally implies that men and women are not only different, they are also in a power relationship in which males have more power and authority than females and more specifically, that males

⁴⁶ See Christine Skelton, "Women and Education", in Victoria Robinson & Diane Richardson (eds.), *Introducing Women's Studies: Feminist Theory and Practice*, 2nd edn. (Hampshire: MacMillan Press, 1997), pp. 303-322 and Fiona Leach, "Gender, Education and Training: An International Perspective", *Gender and Development*, 6:2 (July 1998), pp. 9-18.

⁴⁷ Lynda Measor & Pat Sikes, *Gender and Schools*, p. 25.

⁴⁸ See Dale Spender, "Education: The Patriarchal Paradigm and the Response to Feminism", in Madeleine Arnot & Gaby Weiner (eds.), *Gender and the Politics of Schooling* (London: Hutchinson Education, 1987), pp. 143-154; Rosemary Gordon, "'Girls Cannot Think as Boys Do': Socializing Children through the Zimbabwean School System", *Gender and Development*, 6:2 (July 1998), pp. 53-58; Sara Hlupekile Longwe, "Education for Women's Empowerment or Schooling for Women's Subordination?", *Gender and Development*, 6:2 (July 1998), pp. 19-26 and Rosemary Deem, "State Policy and Ideology in the Education of Women, 1944-1980", in Liz Dawtrey, et al., (eds.), *Equality and Inequality in Education Policy* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd, 1995), pp. 31-45.

⁴⁹ Hester Eisenstein, "Patriarchy and the Universal Oppression of Women: Feminist Debates", in Madeleine Arnot & Gaby Weiner (eds.), *Gender and the Politics of Schooling* (London: Hutchinson Education, 1987), p. 35.

have power over females. This may seem a dubious term to be applied to women in modern civilization, but some feminists argue that despite the many differences in the lives of women in the west and those in the Third World countries, the fundamental fact of male domination can be discerned in all societies in the world. Adrienne Rich, for example, sees women's position and status in society as dependent on the extent that the men are willing to cede these privileges to them:

Patriarchy is the power of the fathers: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men – by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, education and the division of labor, determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male.... Under patriarchy... I live under the power of the fathers, and I have access only to so much privilege or influence as the patriarchy is willing to accede to me, and only for so long as I will pay the price for male approval.⁵⁰

Thus, while modernity has revised the notion of patriarchy to accommodate the idea of equality of the sexes, power remains essentially an important value embodied in this concept. Patriarchy continues to exist in society because it has become part of the 'psyche'. The internalization of this ideology takes place not only in the family but during socialization in the school as well. Some feminists assert that it is largely in the school that children develop their self-concepts and construct their gender identities.⁵¹

Both socialist and radical feminists have questioned if the kind of education offered to girls really empowers them or actually entraps them by socializing them to preserve the status quo of patriarchal relations.⁵² The gender messages transmitted in

⁵⁰ Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1976), cited in Hester Eisenstein, "Patriarchy and the Universal Oppression of Women: Feminist Debates", p. 35.

⁵¹ Rosemary Gordon, "'Girls Cannot Think as Boys Do': Socializing Children through the Zimbabwean School System", p. 57.

⁵² Fiona Leach, "Gender, Education and Training: An International Perspective", p. 10.

the school system have resulted in the construction of a traditional gender ideology that emphasizes the subordination of women. They maintain that schools can act both as a force for change and as a vehicle for preserving existing social norms and values. They thus highlight the distinction between schooling for subordination and education for empowerment. These feminists argue that the conservative view of empowerment for women by educating and equipping them with the knowledge and skills to advance within pre-existing society and societal norms is fatally flawed.⁵³ Sara Hlupekile Longwe, for example, asserts that to truly empower women, traditional social values and norms that have been inculcated through the conventional school system must be reversed and that fundamental structural changes in society and social values are needed before women can be truly empowered and emancipated from male domination.⁵⁴

Women in Singapore, as those in the west, are allowed opportunities for education and employment within the explicitly state-proclaimed patriarchal framework established by the PAP government. In spite of the leadership's recognition of equality of the sexes, power is still very much in the hands of male politicians, bureaucrats and administrators.

The mainstream view in Singapore is that the "natural" role of women is in the domestic sphere and women should be home-makers and child-bearers.⁵⁵ Stress is thus laid on preserving values such as traditional feminine traits and women's domestic gender role. This is reflected in state discourse as well as in the curriculum offered to girls in schools. There is an inherent contradiction in the government's

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Sara Hlupekile Longwe, "Education for Women's Empowerment or Schooling for Women's Subordination?", p. 22. See also, Christine Skelton, "Women and Education" and Rosemary Deem, "State Policy and Ideology in the Education of Women, 1944-1980".

⁵⁵ Phyllis Chew, "Gender and Power", *Awareness*, 5:1 (Jan 1998), p. 22.

policy of giving girls a modern education and its continued stress on preserving traditional femininity and gender roles as this research will show.

It is also useful at this point to distinguish between the concepts of ‘sex’ and ‘gender’. This distinction was borrowed by feminists from Robert Stoller, a psychologist who worked with individuals born with ambiguous genitalia. Such a distinction is useful in describing situations in which an individual’s biological sex is at variance with the gender category he/she was assigned at birth. Using this distinction, feminists theorize that gender is not a direct product of biological sex. Sex refers to the anatomical and physiological characteristics which define maleness and femaleness. On the other hand, gender is a socially and culturally constructed and imposed division of the sexes. It is the cluster of expectations, attributes and behaviours assigned to the male and female sex by the particular society into which the child is born.⁵⁶

Related to the idea of gender as a social and cultural construct are the concepts of ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’. These refer to ‘femaleness’ and ‘maleness’, or the attributes of being female or male. They are social, cultural and psychological attributes associated with being female or male. These attributes are acquired through socialization in a particular society at a particular time.⁵⁷ These attributes incorporate different components, including the concepts of gender identity and roles played in society. Femaleness and maleness are not inherent properties of individuals but are structural properties of society. Individuals take on board and construct their own knowledge and understanding of gender attributes within a social context. Femininity and masculinity are therefore not fixed by nature but are historically and culturally

⁵⁶ Hester Eisenstein, “Patriarchy and the Universal Oppression of Women: Feminist Debates”, p. 37.

⁵⁷ Stevi Jackson, “Theorising Gender and Sexuality”, in Stevi Jackson & Jackie Jones (eds.), *Contemporary Feminist Theories* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), p. 133.

variable. What it means to be a man or a woman would vary not only over space, but over time as well.

In all societies, there are stereotypes of socially desirable femininity and masculinity. While concepts of femininity and masculinity vary in different societies, an extensive study involving 30 nations by J.E. Williams and D.L. Best has found a “pan-cultural generality” in many aspects of gender stereotypes.⁵⁸ For example, men are generally viewed as stronger, more independent, active, aggressive and higher in achievement while women are typically weaker, less active, nurturing, deferent and more concerned with affiliation. The traditional female identity is also often associated with the ideology of domesticity, that is, the woman’s primary role is seen as that of home-maker and mother.⁵⁹ Anthropologists have pointed out that concepts of masculinity and femininity are fundamentally influenced by the nature of the economic structure of a society and the resulting division of labour.⁶⁰ The greatest sex role differentiation occurs in economies where high premium is placed on superior strength and superior development of motor skills requiring strength, such as in societies where hunting, herding and warfare are important. This superiority has entered the value system of most societies and pervaded many areas such as access to power and control of resources, thus explaining the rise of patriarchal societies.⁶¹

Female subordination and domesticity can be seen in June Purvis’ description of the nature of Victorian society which she sees as being influenced largely by a

⁵⁸ J.E. Williams & D.L. Best, *Measuring Sex Stereotypes. A Thirty Nation Study* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, c. 1982).

⁵⁹ See June Purvis, “Social Class, Education and Ideals of Femininity in the Nineteenth Century”, in Madeleine Arnot & Gaby Weiner (eds.), *Gender and the Politics of Schooling*, p. 253.

⁶⁰ Sue Sharpe, *‘Just Like a Girl’: How Girls Learn to be Women* (Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1976), p. 62.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

middle-class domestic ideology.⁶² This ideology embodies three assumptions: firstly the notion of separate spheres as a “natural” division between the sexes, based on biological differences; secondly, women, who primarily played the roles of wives and mothers, were essentially ‘relative’ beings, that is, they were nonentities in themselves but were defined only in relation to men and children; and thirdly, because women were ‘relative beings,’ they were therefore inferior and subordinate to men.⁶³

Similarly, gender researcher, R.W. Connell argues that patriarchal societies are characterized by ‘emphasized femininity’ and ‘hegemonic masculinity’.⁶⁴ Power, authority, aggression and technical competence characterize hegemonic masculinity. This masculinity is constructed in relation to other subordinated masculinities and femininities as well. Emphasized femininity, on the other hand is characterized by subordination and accommodation to male interests and desires.⁶⁵ What is implied in the relationship between hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity is the development of a strategy or set of practices that successfully institutionalizes male dominance over females.

Concepts of masculinity and femininity are constructed and developed as a child grows and interacts with members of his/her family and society. As mentioned earlier, the state, family, school and mass media all contribute to children’s experiences of gender definitions. In fact, much of the period when children are developing an understanding of their sexuality and actively constructing their gender identity occurs when they are in school. Gender messages transmitted through

⁶² June Purvis, *A History of Women’s Education in England* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1991), pp. 2-3.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ R.W. Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press in association with B. Blackwell, 1987), pp. 183-188.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

various aspects of schooling, such as the overt and 'hidden curriculum' therefore have great influence on schoolchildren's gender construction.

As is the case in the West, women in Singapore are given opportunities for education and employment, but within an Asian patriarchal framework as defined by the government. This study investigates the impact of this state-provided modern education on the construction of femininity over the period 1959 to 2000. It will explore further the concepts of patriarchy, femininity and the domestic ideology in the context of Singapore, particularly focusing on how the state has defined patriarchy and femininity to suit its goals of national development and the practices and policies it has set in place to institutionalize male dominance here. The second and third chapters will examine the state's hegemonic discourse to throw light on the gender ideology of the state, the objectives of its official policies and the impact of these on the construction of femininity in school. It traces the motivations behind the provision of education for girls and the changes and continuities in the gender messages transmitted to girls in the school system from 1959 to 2000. The discourse and policies are discussed in the wider context of Singapore's social, economic and political milieu to provide an understanding of the patriarchal gender ideology held by the PAP government and the motivations behind the changes in educational policies towards girls.

Recent researches on gender and education point out, however, that children are not passive recipients but are actively engaged in gender construction or making meaning of their gender roles and identities from their own learning and from previous experiences. While society communicates patterns for children to identify with, these merely act as a frame within which choices are made and individual

‘scripts’ are constructed from these.⁶⁶ Hence, while the school does transmit a gender code, the extent to which this is a unified code is arguable. Researchers such as R.W. Connell argue that it is wrong to assume that stereotyped sex-role patterns for girls and boys are imposed by the school. A range of messages and patterns are modelled, enabling pupils to construct their own gender code by choosing elements from these patterns and combining them with ideas that derive from their own background and community.⁶⁷

The fourth and fifth chapters of this study will therefore explore the gender codes embedded in the overt and ‘hidden’ curriculum and examine the changes and continuities in these codes over the period of study. The dissonance in the gender messages resulting from contradictions in policies will be highlighted and it will be seen that the government’s efforts to construct a traditional femininity to maintain the patriarchal framework appears to be unravelling towards the end of the twentieth century as its contradictory pragmatic policies for Singapore’s sustained economic development actually subvert these efforts.

In examining the state policies with regard to the construction of femininity in school, one important question regarding the place of women in PAP’s conception of a modern First World economy will also be answered. Questions pertaining to the extent to which the formal education system has emancipated women by empowering them or acted as an ideological state apparatus transmitting gender messages that reinforced traditional values, thus resulting in the construction of a femininity that works to maintain the patriarchal nature of society will also be explored.

⁶⁶ Lynda Measor & Pat Sikes, *Gender and Schools*, pp. 13-14.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

Limitations in Research

This study has tried to cover the major areas affecting the construction of femininity in schools. However, there are a number of limitations in this study. One limitation is that ethnic and class differences in girls' experiences in the construction of gender have not been taken into account. Singapore is a multi-ethnic and multicultural nation and it cannot be assumed that gender construction is identical across all ethnic groups. This is particularly so as the dominant ethnic groups, that is, the Chinese, Malays and Indians have long established traditions and are culturally very different. However, while it is recognized that such differences are important, it would have made the research much too complex, so the focus in this study is only on girls' educational experiences in English-medium schools as such schools have existed from colonial to present times and a study of the period from 1959 to 2000 is possible. The vernacular schools had all but disappeared by the mid 1980s and by 1987, all schools used English as the medium of instruction. There would thus have been a break in the study if vernacular schools had been included. There is also a problem of using vernacular language media as this researcher is not sufficiently competent in the vernacular languages.

A number of other factors considered by researchers to be important in the construction of gender in schools are also not included in this research. One important factor in the construction of femininity that is not covered here is the influence of teachers on pupils. As this is a historical research, ethnographic studies and qualitative analyses of teacher interactions with pupils in the schools have not been carried out. There have been very few studies on gender in Singapore schools and no studies on pedagogical practices that could be referred to.

Another factor that is not examined in this study is the extent of male dominance in the leadership hierarchy in the Ministry of Education and in schools. This is because it was difficult to obtain complete sets of information on the gender breakdown in the organizational network covering the whole period under study. There were also difficulties in getting statistical data, particularly those relating to gender performances in national examinations. Requests made to the Ministry of Education for such data were denied and it was only possible to use the findings of a few studies that were carried out earlier by other researchers. Another request for statistical information on the number of female discipline cases in schools after 1996 was also rejected.

In spite of the constraints and limitations, this research represents a pioneering study of the history of the socialization of girls in school. It is hoped that this research will spawn more investigations into gender in education as there is a conspicuous lacuna in Singapore's feminist research. Most feminist writings here have focused on issues of adult women in society such as the legal, economic and political status and progress of women. There is not enough research into gender and education issues and while the Ministry of Education may have carried out investigations such as trend studies of examination performances by both sexes, the results of such studies are often not made public. Furthermore, because of the purportedly gender blind policy of equal opportunities, the majority of Singaporeans assume that there are no gender issues in the schools that are worth investigating. This has resulted in complacency and general ignorance amongst the population of important studies carried out elsewhere that may have relevance to Singapore. This study aspires to contribute towards a better understanding of such issues.

CHAPTER TWO

PRE-INDEPENDENCE STATE DISCOURSE ON EDUCATION AND WOMEN

Education is a vital element in emancipating women and raising their status and position in society. As mentioned in Chapter One, liberal feminism espouses that access to education opens up opportunities for social and economic enhancement for women and enables them to be economically independent and self-reliant. On the other hand, women's lack of education results in their subordination at home, their low participation rate in the economy and, sometimes, to their resorting to activities such as street trading or prostitution for survival.⁶⁸ Some gender researchers, however, have pointed out that education can serve to school women for subordination instead of empowerment. It is thus important to understand the state's motivation and goals in providing education for girls.

When the People's Action Party (PAP) formed the government in 1959, they embarked on a policy of providing education for all children irrespective of race and sex. Girls were given the same access as boys to primary and secondary education. An examination of state discourse on women, including that on girls' education and the consequent policies towards education, will provide an understanding of the Singapore government's goals in education as well as reveal how the ruling elite used hegemonic discourse to define femininity for their own purpose in Singapore.

As indicated in the first chapter, this study begins from 1959 when the PAP took over the reins of government in Singapore and covers a 41-year period from 1959 to 2000. In this chapter, however, I will begin the discussion on the discourse beginning from 1956, when the Women's League of the PAP was formed, and cover

⁶⁸ Fiona Leach, "Gender, Education and Training: An International Perspective", *Gender and Development*, 6:2 (July 1998), p. 11.

the period to Singapore's independence in 1965. The party policy towards women was made patent only after the formation of the Women's League and the clearest gender policy statement is in its 1959 election manifesto, *The Tasks Ahead, PAP's 5-Year Policy: 1959-1964*. An examination of this will provide some insight into the early gender ideology espoused by the PAP prior to taking over the reins of government as well as an understanding of the genesis of PAP policy towards education for girls. The focus is on PAP discourse because it was the party that formed the government in 1959 and its domination of Singapore's parliament and bureaucracy has increased over the years, so much so that Singapore has evolved into a single party state with the PAP being widely seen as almost synonymous with the state.

Before discussing the official discourse on women and education, it is necessary to provide some background on the status of girls' education as well as the political and social situation of women in Singapore in the 1950s. This will provide the context in which the discourse and the social changes brought about by the newly-elected post-1959 PAP government will be better understood.

Political and Social Background in the 1950s

Singapore had begun to take its initial steps towards democracy in 1948 when the British set up a Legislative Council comprising nine officials and thirteen non-officials.⁶⁹ Of the non-officials, four were nominated by the Governor, three elected by the chambers of commerce and the remaining six were to be elected by British subjects who had been resident in Singapore for at least one year before the election.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ C.M. Turnbull, *A History of Singapore, 1819-1975* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 235.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

In the 1948 election, the Progressive Party, a moderate party of mainly English-educated professional men, was the only political party that participated in the elections. Led by John Laycock, C.C. Tan and N.A. Mallal, the party won three of the six seats, with the other three going to independents. In that year, the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) began an armed struggle against the British colonial power, which led to the declaration of a state of emergency in Malaya and Singapore.⁷¹ The emergency regulations prohibited political parties and other organizations from holding public meetings except during the election period. The MCP was banned and the police arrested many left-wing unionists and politicians in an effort to eradicate communist activities.⁷² One effect of the communist insurgency was that the left-wing political movement was crippled as many militant political leaders were either thrown into jail or went into hiding. The conservatives thus dominated the political scene in the early 1950s.⁷³

The situation began to change after the Rendel Constitution, published in 1954, provided for the transfer of control of domestic affairs into the hands of a predominantly elected government. At the same time, the colonial authorities introduced automatic registration, which increased the electorate to approximately 300,000 voters.⁷⁴ As the Emergency situation started to improve, the government also began to allow greater freedom in political activities. Taking advantage of the relaxation in restrictions, the MCP began to infiltrate open organizations, especially

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 238.

⁷² Yeo Kim Wah & Albert Lau, "From Colonialism to Independence, 1945-1965", in Ernest Chew & Edwin Lee (eds.), *A History of Singapore* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 123-124.

⁷³ C.M. Turnbull, *A History of Singapore, 1819-1975*, pp. 238-241.

⁷⁴ Yeo Kim Wah & Albert Lau, "From colonialism to independence, 1945-1965", p. 129.

the labour unions and Chinese schools, often playing upon the discontent of the Chinese students and workers.⁷⁵

The developments in the political arena stirred up greater interest in the population and new parties were formed in preparation for elections in 1955. 1954 saw the inauguration of two left-wing parties, the Singapore Socialist Party, which was re-named the Singapore Labour Front led by liberal-minded professional-businessmen, David Marshall, Lim Yew Hock and Francis Thomas and the People's Action Party (PAP), led by Lee Kuan Yew.⁷⁶ Lee and his compatriots, Goh Keng Swee, Toh Chin Chye and K.M. Byrne, were English-educated socialists but they were attracted by the mass support enjoyed by the largely Chinese-educated communists and saw the potential of tapping into that base. It began working closely with the communist-influenced labour unions and Chinese schools to build up mass support for the party.

The political situation in the second half of the 1950s was thus characterized by a new political awakening as new nationalist leaders emerged and important issues of genuine concern to the people were brought into the political arena. Right from the start, the PAP adopted a militant, anti-colonial stance, demanding immediate independence through a Singapore-Malaya merger. At the time of its founding, the PAP's objective was ending colonial rule and there was no indication of the leadership's interest in championing women's rights or improving women's status in society.⁷⁷ At the time of its inauguration, the PAP leaders did not highlight the emancipation of women as an important issue in their political agenda.

⁷⁵ C.M. Turnbull, *A History of Singapore, 1819-1975*, p. 248.

⁷⁶ Yeo Kim Wah & Albert Lau, "From colonialism to independence, 1945-1965", pp. 129-130.

⁷⁷ This lack of interest was highlighted in an interview with Shirin Fozdar, a leading women's rights activist in the 1950s. See discussion on p. 42.

In the 1950s, Singapore women were disadvantaged and occupied a lowly position in society. Many were not educated and were financially dependent on the male members of the family. According to sociologist Ann Wee, the lack of education and employment opportunities was the source of many women's problems. Single mothers who were either widowed or abandoned by their husbands often had to resort to prostitution to feed and school their children.⁷⁸

During that time, the Singapore woman's situation was compounded by a lack of adequate legislation to protect her rights and interests, for prior to the enactment of the Women's Charter in 1961, women were greatly discriminated against and their position was one of subordination in a highly patriarchal family system. The largely migrant community had brought with it and preserved a cultural package of polygamy and preference for sons.⁷⁹ Very few women received an education and those who did usually came from well-to-do and enlightened families. The attitude was that daughters should be married off as early as possible, thus schooling for them would bring little benefit to the family. Many of the women interviewed by the Oral History Department of Singapore about their education in the 1930s and 1940s corroborated this. Mrs Florence Raj, a retired teacher, for example, revealed that her mother felt that it was not necessary for her to take the secondary school Cambridge Certificate, or what she recalls as the 'O' (Ordinary) level examination: "And my mother had the same idea with me. You know, when I came out to O-level, she said no need to take O-level. After all you are going to get married."⁸⁰ Fortunately for Mrs Raj, her father

⁷⁸ Foreword by Ann Wee in Phyllis Chew, *The Singapore Council of Women and the Women's Movement* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1999).

⁷⁹ Phyllis Chew & Tan Ee Sze, "Metamorphosis of Singapore Women", in Jenny Lam Lin (ed.), *Voices & Choices: The Women's Movement in Singapore* (Singapore: Singapore Council of Women's Organizations & Singapore Baha'i Women's Committee, 1993), p. 102.

⁸⁰ Oral History Interview with Mrs Florence Soundra Leela Raj [1994], Singapore, Oral History Department, A001536/22, Reel 1, transcript, p. 14.

was enlightened enough to override his wife's sentiments and supported Mrs Raj's education right up to Senior Cambridge, the equivalent of the current General Certificate of Examinations, 'Advanced' Level. On the other hand, the father of Miss Tan Sock Kern did not support her desire to study. She noted the discrepancy in her father's treatment of her brothers and herself when they asked for money to buy textbooks. While her brothers were easily able to get money whenever they asked, Miss Tan did not. Her father would always respond, "Why? Why must buy books? No need to study."⁸¹ Miss Tan added that he would finally give her the money, but "he always makes me feel like I'm begging."⁸²

In most cases, daughters were kept at home and trained for a career of domesticity.⁸³ This included inculcating the right moral and spiritual values and training in the domestic arts of cooking, sewing, nursing and housekeeping. Girls from poorer homes received no education at all and, in cases where the women had to seek jobs to support their families, there were few options open to them except in menial and lowly paid domestic jobs or prostitution. Such then were the attitudes towards girls' education and the role and place of women in society. This was despite the fact that in the 1950s there was already in existence a policy of equal opportunity for education for boys and girls, which was laid down by the 1947 Ten Year Programme for Education in the Colony of Singapore.

Two fundamental principles highlighted in this Ten Year Programme were that "equal educational opportunity should be afforded to the children – both boys and girls – of all races", and that free primary education would be provided by the

⁸¹ Oral History Interview with Miss Tan Sock Kern [1993], Singapore Oral History Department, A001427/20, Reel 7 (no transcript).

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Cheng Siok Hwa, "The Education of Women in Singapore", in *Handbook for Women* (Singapore: Family Planning Association of Singapore, 1982), p. 9.

government and upon that basis, secondary, vocational and higher education that would best meet the needs of the country would be developed.⁸⁴ However, the ten year programme was not very successfully implemented, mainly because of its focus on developing English-medium education and the lack of support for education in the other three language media, viz., the Chinese, Malay and Indian medium schools.⁸⁵ This caused resentment in the other medium schools, particularly in the Chinese schools.

In 1955 an All-Party Committee on Chinese Education, which also included the PAP, was set up to look into increasing problems in Chinese schools. The report of this committee went beyond the confines of examining the problems in Chinese schools and proposed what is considered to be the first national education policy that met the needs of the various communities in Singapore.⁸⁶ It reiterated the principle laid down in the 1947 Ten Year Programme for Education of providing educational opportunities to all children regardless of race or sex or creed.⁸⁷ The report was followed by the publication of a White Paper on Education Policy which summed up the major recommendations made by the All-Party Committee. Some of the major recommendations included equal treatment for the four language streams of education (Malay, Chinese, English and Tamil), equality of grants and service conditions for all government and government-aided schools, the establishment of common curricula for all schools as well as the development of more Malayan-centred textbooks for use in all schools, introduction of bilingual education in primary schools and trilingual

⁸⁴ Colony of Singapore, *Educational Policy in the Colony of Singapore: Ten Years' Programme* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1947), p. 1.

⁸⁵ For a comprehensive discussion of the Ten Year Programme, see Saravanan Gopinathan, *Towards a National System of Education in Singapore, 1945 – 1973* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1974).

⁸⁶ Saravanan Gopinathan, *Towards a National System of Education in Singapore, 1945 – 1973*, p. 19.

⁸⁷ Singapore, *Report of the All-Party Committee of the Singapore Legislative Assembly on Chinese Education* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1956), p. 30.

education in secondary schools, teaching of ethics and greater interaction of pupils from the different school systems through sports and other extra-curricular activities.⁸⁸

Following the publication of the White Paper, an Education Ordinance which applied to all schools in Singapore was enacted and published on 13 December 1957.⁸⁹ It dealt with matters pertaining to, *inter alia*, education finance, establishment of an educational advisory council, the registration and inspection of schools and registration and employment of teachers. This Ordinance established the principle of equality in education by giving equal treatment to all schools regardless of language medium. Grants-in-aid were extended to all schools that were able to meet the prescribed conditions and a uniform system of remuneration based on qualification and experience was implemented for teachers in both government and government-aided schools.⁹⁰ Thus the All-Party Report was viewed in some quarters as the greatest achievement in the area of education in the 1950s because “it set up ideas of primary education, equality of the four language streams, the right of parents to choose the medium of instruction...”⁹¹

On the social front a women’s movement began, in the early 1950s, to lobby for legislation to protect women and for greater access to education for girls to empower them to break out of the bondage of poverty, discrimination and subjugation to men. On 4 April 1952, the Singapore Council of Women (SCW) was established

⁸⁸ Colony of Singapore, *White Paper on Education Policy*, Legislative Assembly, Sessional paper no. Cmd 15 of 1956.

⁸⁹ Colony of Singapore, *The Education Ordinance, 1957* (Singapore: Government Printers, 1957).

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ T.R. Doraisamy (ed.), *150 Years of Education in Singapore* (Singapore: TTC Publications, 1969), p. 57.

to unite all women and to give a voice to their demands for equal rights.⁹² Its goal was to unite the different women's groups and to work for the emancipation of women, for "equal rights in every respect – marriage and divorce, inheritance, equal pay for equal work, equal facility for education and entering all professions."⁹³

The importance of education was highlighted as a key to emancipating women. Mrs Sutan Sharir, a women's rights activist from Indonesia, told a Singapore gathering of 70 women and 10 men in 1951 that the "only solution to the problem of backwardness of women in the East is to raise their standards of education."⁹⁴ This was a sentiment echoed by others, for example, in a 1952 editorial of *The Singapore Free Press*:

Education is of course the key to woman's emancipation. So long as women in Malaya remain ignorant and illiterate, all attempts at progress in health and social welfare will be handicapped.⁹⁵

It was pointed out that boys had priority for schooling, especially in homes with small incomes. This was because education for girls was deemed unnecessary. The editorial pointed out that the mere provision of schools and other facilities for equal access to education was not enough and it was necessary to change the existing social values and attitudes towards educating girls.⁹⁶ Throughout the decade of the 1950s, this issue of education was perceived as the key to women's liberation, as reflected in letters written to the press as well as talks and conferences organized by women's groups.

⁹² Phyllis Chew, *The Singapore Council of Women and the Women's Movement*, pp. 4-5.

⁹³ Interview with Mrs Shirin Fozdar, in *Women Through The Years: Economic & Family Lives* (Singapore: Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, 1999), Reel 14, transcript, p. 113.

⁹⁴ "Education the only remedy – Mrs Sharir", *Straits Times*, 13 Oct 1951.

⁹⁵ "Weaker Sex", *The Singapore Free Press*, 10 Mar 1952.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

Despite the lobbying by SCW and others, little headway was made towards improving women's position in Singapore in the early 1950s. For example, a SCW-drafted 1954 Prevention of Bigamous Marriages Ordinance which called for all bigamous marriages to be made void and for raising the minimum marriage age to sixteen, failed to get support from members of the Legislative Council.⁹⁷ The bill was supported by only two members, John Laycock and Dasaratha Raj, and although it excluded Muslims from its provisions, there was strong opposition from the Muslim Advisory Board and the All-Malaya Muslim Missionary Society.⁹⁸ Muslim politicians were reluctant to support such a bill on the grounds of religion and custom, as Muslim males are allowed to marry up to a maximum of four wives. All the political parties avoided open support of women's issues because of the controversial nature of these issues and for fear of losing popular support. According to Mrs Fozdar, "Some of the Assemblymen were in favour of such a reform but had no 'moral' courage to introduce a Bill in the Assembly because they were afraid that they might lose votes by doing so."⁹⁹ Even the PAP in its initial years of formation did not see women's rights as an important issue:

... we tried our best for eight years, and gradually when these various political parties were formed, I used to go and see them. But at one time when the PAP and all [sic] came into existence, I went and saw Dr Toh Chin Chye and Mr Lee Kuan Yew and asked them what they would do for women's cause. So at that time they didn't see the need for making this a big issue. And Lee Kuan Yew even said it was not such a burning point.¹⁰⁰

It was only after a number of years of highlighting women's problems that the socio-political climate in Singapore began to change. This was aided by

⁹⁷ Phyllis Chew, *The Singapore Council of Women and the Women's Movement*, pp. 11-12.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ "Assemblymen are so Frightened", *Singapore Free Press*, 25 Apr 1957.

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Mrs Shirin Fozdar, transcript, p. 113.

external developments, particularly in China and India. In 1950, the new Chinese Communist government had just laid down the principles of monogamy and equal rights for both sexes through its enactment of the Marriage Code. In India too, reforms to marriage and family law were carried out in 1955 and 1956, significantly raising the status of Indian women.¹⁰¹ The largely immigrant populace in Singapore watched, with growing interest, the reforms in India and China. It was in such a political and social context that the PAP eventually added its support to the women's movement.

Emancipating Women: The Pre-1965 PAP Discourse

A recognizable change in the PAP policy became evident when it began to publicly support women's issues in 1956. In that year, the Women's League of the PAP was launched. Led by Miss Chan Choy Siong, the League had in its membership many young, Chinese-educated women who were "markedly socialist in their ideals."¹⁰² The manifesto of the Women's League declared:

Today the people of Malaya are struggling for a democratic and independent Malaya. The people have united to fight for their inalienable elementary rights. Women's emancipation movement must be aligned to this movement for independence. The women's movement is only part of the whole social movement, and only when the whole society is free can there be a real solution for the women's peculiar problem.... The Women's League of the People's Action Party believe that we, the women of Malaya, can also be free. But we require the support from all our fellow sisters so that we can be a force in our national struggle for a free democratic and independent Malaya.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ For a fuller discussion of the social and marriage reforms carried out by the governments in India and China, see Charmian Chelvam, "The Women's Charter", B.A. (Hons.) academic exercise (History Department, NUS, 1972).

¹⁰² Phyllis Chew, *The Singapore Council of Women and the Women's Movement*, p. 21.

¹⁰³ *Petir*, 1, 1 (7 May, 1956).

The PAP Women's League placed women as part of the oppressed class who were dominated by the colonial masters and women's struggle for equality was seen as part of the anti-colonial and class struggle. The early PAP discourse on women clearly reflected this commitment to socialist/communist ideals.

In his memoirs, Mr Lee Kuan Yew recalled that the party's early support for women's liberation was founded on communist ideology:

... we shared the view of the communists that one reason for the backwardness of China and the rest of Asia, except Japan, was that women had not been emancipated. They had to be put on a par with the men, given the same education and enabled to make their full contribution to society. ... This was a serious commitment, or I would not have agreed to my wife making it in a broadcast.¹⁰⁴

It seems therefore, that some time between 1957 when Mrs Fozdar was lamenting that no political party was courageous enough to support the Bill on the Prevention of Bigamous Marriages and before the general elections in 1959, the PAP revised their stand with regard to women's issues.

The economic motivation behind such support can be seen in the above excerpt. The PAP perceived Singapore's economic development to be tied to the emancipation of women. As Singapore had no natural resources, labour was the only resource that could be developed. The PAP's economic programme of rapid industrialization required the full support and participation of every citizen, male and female. It was therefore necessary to implement policies to enable and encourage women to contribute to nation-building.

There was also a political consideration behind PAP's support. By the second half of the 1950s, there was increasing consciousness of the emerging social and

¹⁰⁴ Lee Kuan Yew, *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew* (Singapore: Times Editions Pte Ltd, 1998), p. 325.

political forces that women represented. On International Women's Day in 1956, the PAP Women's League organized a rally which was attended by ten thousand women.¹⁰⁵ The success of the rally, during which women's rights and equality with men were discussed, effectively demonstrated to the PAP leadership that women were an important force to be harnessed.

Other developments in Singapore added to the realization of women as a major political force. The automatic registration of voters, introduction of compulsory voting and the 1957 citizenship ordinance had enfranchised a significantly enlarged electorate.¹⁰⁶ Women formed half of this electorate, thus making their support critical for the 1959 Legislative Assembly elections for a self-governing state. This was highlighted by the press which pointed out that as the sex ratio was about 50:50, the female electorate held 50 per cent of the political power in Singapore.¹⁰⁷ Undoubtedly the PAP saw the relevance of winning women's votes. This is evident in the speech delivered by Mrs Lee Kuan Yew in the 1959 elections:

Our society is still built on the assumption that women are the social, political and economic inferiors of men. This myth has been made the excuse for the exploitation of female labour. Many women do the same kind of work as men but do not get the same pay.... Let us show them (the other parties) that Singapore women are tired of their pantomime and buffoonery. I appeal to women to vote for PAP. It is the only party with the idealism, the honesty and ability to carry out its election programme.¹⁰⁸

In the 1959 Legislative Assembly elections, therefore, support for women's equal rights with men were included in the PAP party manifesto. Published as *The Tasks Ahead: PAP's 5 Year Plan, 1959-1964*, it was a collection of party broadcasts by PAP

¹⁰⁵ "Ten Thousand Colony Women Clamour for Equality with Men", *Straits Times*, 9 Mar, 1956.

¹⁰⁶ Yeo Kim Wah & Albert Lau, "From Colonialism to Independence, 1945-1965", in Ernest Chew & Edwin Lee (eds.), *A History of Singapore*, p. 139.

¹⁰⁷ "Women Hold Half the Power", *Straits Times*, 3 Jan. 1959.

¹⁰⁸ Cited in Lee Kuan Yew, *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew*, p. 325.

electoral candidates made during the 1959 general election. This was the blueprint of the party's program for Singapore's development which promised, *inter alia*, to carry out legal reforms to protect women and introduce measures to elevate their status in society if they were to be elected to power.¹⁰⁹

***The Tasks Ahead, PAP's 5-Year Plan, 1959-1964:*
Emancipation of Women and Economic Development**

The Tasks Ahead, PAP's 5-Year Plan, 1959-1964, consists of a collection of election speeches by party leaders describing the platform and concerns of the party. Here, the PAP presented itself as a socialist party, albeit a democratic socialist one whose goal was to set up a socialist state that would ensure equal rights for all, including women. PAP support for women was portrayed as part of the overall Asian socialist struggle to end colonialism and establish a just and fair society. Women's fight for equality was depicted as part of the overall class struggle and women's problems were seen to be the consequence of exploitation in a semi-feudal and semi-colonial society. The solution to the problem was the establishment of a socialist society that would give equal rights to all:

In an unfair society women are handicapped because of political, economic and religious factors.... In a semi-feudal and semi-colonial society, their position is worse. In their homes they are slaves of husbands and children...When the People's Action Party comes into power immediate steps will be taken to *raise the status of women to where it should be*.... In a full socialist society, for which the PAP will work for, all people will have equal rights and opportunities,

¹⁰⁹ *The Tasks Ahead, PAP's 5-Year Plan, 1959-1964, Part 1 & 2* (Singapore: Petir, May 1959).

irrespective of sex, race or religion. There is no place in a socialist society for exploitation of women.¹¹⁰

Women's position in society was seen as equal to that of men and no discrimination or exploitation of any form was permissible. Implicitly then, women should enjoy equal rights and opportunities in education as well. This educational dimension, however, was not explicitly stated here. What was promised was that steps would be taken to raise the general status of women to where it should be, that is, on an equal footing with men.

The discourse in other parts of the manifesto shows that the PAP considered women as important in society because of their economic potential. Its support for women's liberation appears to stem from a realization of the economic imperative of women's active participation in the economy. Industrialization featured strongly in the PAP's blueprint for Singapore's economic development. To succeed, a large pool of cheap labour was required and women formed a significant potential labour pool in resource-scarce Singapore. To optimize the use of all resources the PAP therefore supported women's emancipation as it saw the necessity for more women to participate in the economic development of Singapore:

Women who form nearly half of our population have an important part to play in our national construction. In the first instance in order to emancipate them from the bonds of feudalism and conservatism, a monogamous marriage law will be passed.... We shall foster the principle that there shall be equality of women with men in all spheres and we shall encourage them to come forward to play a leading role in politics, administration, business and industry, education and in other spheres."¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ *The Tasks Ahead: PAP's 5-Year Plan, 1959-1964, Part 2* (Singapore: Petir, May 1959), p. 17. [Emphasis added]

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, *Part 1*, p. 11.

Here the PAP portrays itself as a progressive party that recognizes the principle of equality of the sexes. What is notable is the open acknowledgement of women's equality with men in all spheres. Yet there was no specific mention of promoting education for girls. This appears to be a glaring omission, considering that the party explicitly recognized that the lack of education was one root cause of women's problems, the other being the lack of economic opportunities: "Unmarried women are often unable to stand on their own two feet economically because of lack of employment opportunities and lack of education."¹¹² Having noted the root causes of women's problems, it seems unusual that the offered solution focused only on providing more employment opportunities for women and not on promoting education for women. The focus in its discourse on providing more employment opportunities for women and encouraging women to play a more prominent role in politics, business and industry, etc., indicate that PAP's motivation for support of women's emancipation in the 1960s stems more from an economic than an egalitarian and humanistic concern.

The socialist vision that was evident in *The Tasks Ahead* was tempered by the PAP's pragmatism. In the manifesto, it emphasized that the party was a "realistic" one that recognized the complexities and constraints of our multi-racial society:

The PAP believes in the principle of equal pay for equal work. This may not be possible immediately. It must be achieved step by step without dislocating our economy. Ever since the formation of the People's Action Party the aim has been to achieve a socialist society in Singapore; but the PAP is a realistic party, and we recognize the complexities of our multi-racial society, and the special problems which they pose in an island of 210 square miles which has a population of 1½ million capable of expanding at the rate of 65000 a year...It is within these limitations that we must construct and lay the

¹¹² Ibid., *Part 2*, p. 17.

basis for a future socialist society...the PAP will struggle realistically to improve the status of women.¹¹³

Within the socialist ideology, women should receive equal pay for equal work, but the PAP statement emphasized that this was not immediately possible and gradual steps in that direction would have to be taken without dislocating the economy. This suggests that its pragmatic grasp of the problems of a multi-racial society whose traditional attitudes towards women had not changed sufficiently to accept drastic reforms to emancipate women. The commitment to pragmatism is evidence of the PAP's "flexibility in ideological outlook, adaptation, adjustment and innovation to change."¹¹⁴ Doctrinaire ideology was underplayed and although socialist ideals were espoused, there was no systematized institution of thought or commitment to dogma. This pragmatism was born out of the need to survive and to adapt to changing circumstances. The PAP support for women's rights in the late 1950s should thus be seen in the light of this commitment to national survival. Improvement of women's status had to be accomplished within the constraints of existing societal norms and drastic reforms to change social and cultural values were avoided because of the perceived need to preserve social stability. The PAP members were obviously not revolutionary zealots committed to overthrowing existing society to create a new socialist ideal.

To its credit, the PAP government did institute the policy of equal pay for equal work in the civil service in 1962.¹¹⁵ This, however, did not apply to the private sector which was left to decide on its own policies regarding women's pay. As noted

¹¹³ Ibid., pp. 17-18.

¹¹⁴ Comment by K.C. Lee, a CEC member, cited in Shee Poon Kim, "The People's Action Party of Singapore 1954-1970: A Study in Survivalism of a Single Dominant Party", unpublished PhD. Thesis, Indiana University (Ann Arbor, Mich: University Microfilms International, 1971), p. 179.

¹¹⁵ "Equal Pay Now for Women", *Straits Times*, 3 Mar 1962.

earlier, the PAP did not attempt to institute laws that would reform social values; instead they tried to lead by example via the public sector.

Leaving aside the gender dimension, the official discourse in *The Tasks Ahead* placed great importance on education. The Report of the All Party Committee on Chinese Education which supported the principles of universal education and equal educational opportunities for all children was central to the PAP's education platform in the 1959 election.¹¹⁶ The leaders saw the key role to be played by schools and teachers in cultivating social and national values. In 1959, this was considered crucial because of the immigrant, plural and potentially divisive nature of Singapore society:

In a stable and integrated society with long inherited traditions, the education system is the principal media through which the values of the nation and of society are imparted to the young child. Thus the child grows up in harmony with the social values of his environment which he learns from his teachers. But this has not been the case in Singapore. Singapore does not have a stable integrated society, nor has it inherited any traditions. So we hear many discordant voices. And the divergences of beliefs and customs are probably greater in our plural society than among any other population of equal size. Much of this confusion is strongly reflected in our schools today.... Our teachers must therefore realize the important role they play in the building of a united democratic Malayan nation They have a whole generation of children to mould into a national pattern.¹¹⁷

Such words are indicative of the mindset of the PAP towards moulding the new generation of Singaporeans. One important function of education was nation-building which was seen as imprinting a “national pattern” on young citizens. Schools were therefore seen as important agencies for social replication. Such a perception of the role of schools supports Michael Apple's thesis that schools play important roles as ideological state apparatus for the transmission of a ‘selective tradition’ as well as Louis Althusser's socialization theory that a society continues in existence by

¹¹⁶ *The Tasks Ahead, Part 1*, p. 10.

¹¹⁷ *The Tasks Ahead, Part 2*, pp. 4-5.

reproducing the labourers as well as inculcating in them the world-view or the set of values necessary for support of that society to continue. Education is the key means by which such a state-endorsed world-view is reproduced.¹¹⁸ The construction of gender identity is part and parcel of this process of social reproduction and in the Singaporean context, children had to be moulded to suit the PAP concept of useful citizens who would contribute to the economic development and social stability of Singapore.

Education was also important for producing the necessary manpower for Singapore's economic progress. In *The Tasks Ahead*, education was described as the "spring source of the nation" which would develop into a stream that will nourish an oasis if it was well taken care of.¹¹⁹ In 1959, Singapore's economic viability was highly uncertain and the PAP saw the dire need to transform the economy from one dependent on entrepot trade to an industrialized one. This meant that the education system had to be restructured to produce the workers needed for an industrial economy. So it was made clear that "education had to be considered in relation to our political and social needs. There cannot be education for education's sake, like art for art's sake. Education must serve a purpose."¹²⁰ The influence of the Chinese Communist Party is seen here. This doctrine is similar to that espoused by a Chinese Communist Party leader, Lu Ting-yi, who advocated that education should be combined with productive labour to serve working class politics. Bourgeois education, which was described as "education for education's sake," was considered

¹¹⁸ Michael W. Apple and Louis Althusser's theses were discussed in Chapter One.

¹¹⁹ *The Tasks Ahead, Part 2*, p. 2.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.

unproductive and trivial in its aim.¹²¹ To the communists, education must serve a purpose and that purpose was nation-building – not just inculcating the young to be loyal citizens, but also equipping them with the necessary technical skills to contribute to national development. The doctrine in *The Tasks Ahead* reflected similar sentiments towards education:

It must be the foremost aim of our education policy to train the children in our schools so that they can become useful citizens who can adapt themselves into the construction work of re-orientating our economic policy and so form the vanguard in laying down the basis for a future socialist society.¹²²

Significantly, the generic term ‘children’ was used and there was never an attempt to specifically discuss education for girls throughout the manifesto. It seems that the PAP saw no need to single out girls’ education as an issue to be discussed. The only mention of the need to educate women occurred in the section entitled “Eradicate Yellow Culture” where reference was made to women being encouraged to “improve their education by attending Adult Education classes” so as to “check the inflow of immoral and yellow culture.”¹²³ Yellow culture was detrimental to social well-being and the education of women was necessary to check this inflow perceived as coming from the West. The implication was that education for women was important for the purpose of preserving social and moral values. Yet, the idea of education for emancipating and empowering them was not mentioned in the manifesto. Instead, the theme of their discourse on education was on citizenship building and preparing the future generation for an industrial economy.

¹²¹ Lu Ting-yi, “Our Educational Work Must Be Reformed”, 9 April, 1960, reproduced in John Wilson Lewis (ed.), *Major Doctrines of Communist China* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1964), p. 325.

¹²² *The Tasks Ahead, Part 2*, p. 5.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

Nevertheless, from the very start of PAP rule therefore, the focus was on rapid expansion of educational facilities in keeping with their election promise of providing universal education for all in Singapore.¹²⁴ The Ministry of Education (MOE) pursued a non-discriminatory policy towards girls. Against that backdrop of rapid construction of the infrastructure to provide for universal education, the concern was on providing enough facilities for all children of school-going age. At that time, maintaining racial harmony in the plural population was high on the PAP agenda. The MOE was therefore more concerned with ensuring equality of opportunities among the different races and streamlining education in the four language streams than with catering to the specific educational needs of girls.

One of the first educational issues that the PAP government tackled was the establishment of a common curriculum for all, irrespective of race and sex.¹²⁵ A Textbook Advisory Council was set up and under it, a Textbooks and Syllabus Committee was established to design syllabuses with common content in the four language media for all schools.¹²⁶ The aim was to develop a common curriculum that was suited to the local environment so as to inculcate a sense of national identity in the young. On this issue, Prime Minister Lee said:

If in the four different languages of instruction, we teach our children four different standards of right and wrong, four different ideal patterns of behaviour, then we will produce four different groups of people and there will be no integrated coherent society...¹²⁷

¹²⁴ John Yip Soon Kwong, Eng Soo Peck & Jay Yap Ye Chin, "25 Years of Educational Reform" in Jason Tan, S Gopinathan & Ho Wah Kam, (eds.) *Education in Singapore: A Book of Readings* (Singapore: Prentice Hall, 1997), p. 11.

¹²⁵ "'New Look' School: Six-Day Week from Next Term", *Straits Times*, 13 Aug 1959.

¹²⁶ Ministry of Education, *Progress in Education, Singapore, 1959-1965* (Singapore: Ministry of Education, 1966), p. 10.

¹²⁷ "Speech by Lee Kuan Yew at the Education Ministry's Rally of Teachers, Happy World Stadium, 8 Dec 1959," in Douglas Koh, "Excerpts of Speeches by Lee Kuan Yew on Singapore", an unpublished compilation of speeches (Singapore, 1976), p. 49.

To inculcate this sense of national identity and values in the young, the MOE placed special attention on promoting extra-curricular activities (ECA) in schools. In terms of opportunities for ECA, there was also no discrimination against girls. Their participation in uniformed groups such as Girl Guides, Army Cadets, later re-named National Cadet Corps (NCC) and Police Cadet Corps (PCC) was encouraged. As early as 1964, for example, the first girls' units of the Police Cadet Corps were formed in Raffles Girls' Secondary and Sang Nila Utama Malay Secondary School.¹²⁸ The meetings, parades, camps and other outdoor activities of the uniformed groups were intended to cultivate desirable character traits, discipline and leadership among the members as well as to promote physical development.¹²⁹ To promote greater participation in such uniformed groups, a system of accreditation for ECA was introduced for entry into pre-university classes.

Physical education was at that time a part of ECA and, from 1959, emphasis was placed on mass participation. Children of both sexes were encouraged to participate in sports and games and efforts were made to encourage schools of different language media to participate in joint activities. District Sports Meets were organized to enable children from different language-medium schools to compete against each other.¹³⁰ A number of sports and games such as athletics, netball and basketball were available to girls who were encouraged to be as physically active and rugged as the boys.

In the early 1960s therefore, there was little concern about differentiating the education of girls and boys and the MOE adopted a gender blind policy towards education. Universal education was promised and girls and boys were given equal

¹²⁸ Michael Teow Beng Kim & Eugene Wijesingha, *National Police Cadets Corps: Its Origin, Growth and Development* (Singapore: National Police Cadets Corps, 2000), p. 32.

¹²⁹ Ministry of Education, *Progress in Education, Singapore, 1959-1965*, p. 14.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

opportunities to primary and secondary education.¹³¹ It appeared that the state considered the provision of equal educational opportunities for all children to be the most important educational issue to be tackled and girls' problems would automatically be resolved once that policy was implemented.

Besides carrying out the promise of providing education for all children of school-going age, the PAP, after its assumption of power in 1959, also had to make good its election promise of enacting legislation to protect and elevate the status of women. This took the form of *The Women's Charter*, which was introduced into the Legislative Assembly in 1960 but only passed in 1961. An examination of the discourse in the legislative debate on the Women's Charter as well as that in the charter itself gives us an idea of the gender ideology held by PAP cabinet ministers and members of parliament.

The Women's Charter, 1961: Enshrining Equality of Sexes in All Spheres?

In the Legislative Assembly debate on the Charter, the Deputy Prime Minister Dr Toh Chin Chye explained that the *Women's Charter* was introduced "not only out of gallantry to the female sex but also out of political conviction."¹³² That political conviction was one of establishing a socialist society that would not discriminate against people regardless of race and gender, as enunciated by Tee Kim Leng, PAP member for Pasir Panjang constituency: "We the PAP Government claim to be a Socialist Government. The principle of socialism is to treat all alike, irrespective of race or sex."¹³³

¹³¹ This was reiterated by PAP officials over many years, for example, "Free Education", *Straits Times*, 1 Apr 1963, "Ong: 46 Per cent of Pupils in Singapore are Girls", *Straits Times*, 16 Mar 1968, "Equal Opportunity, Fair Competition", *Straits Times*, 17 Jul 1978.

¹³² Singapore, *Legislative Assembly Debates: Official Report*, 12:7 (6 Apr 1960), col. 469.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, col. 465.

In that same Legislative Assembly debate, a key member of the PAP Women's Wing, Chan Choy Siong emphasized that the purpose of the Charter was to "enable women to have their rights safeguarded by legislation and to give people far-reaching stability in marriages."¹³⁴ According to her, women's problems were the result of the inhuman semi-feudalistic and semi-colonial system and the PAP had introduced this legislation to liberate women from their oppression:

In a semi-colonial and semi-feudalistic society, the tragedy of women was very common. Men could have three or four spouses. Men are considered honorable, but women are considered mean.... Women in our society are like pieces of meat put on the table for men to slice. The PAP government has made a promise. We cannot allow this inequality in the family to exist in this country. We will liberate women from the hands of the oppressor. With the passing of this legislation, women can contribute their part to the country.¹³⁵

Women's problems were thus put in the context of a class struggle, and the solution was the establishment of a socialist society. Miss Fung Yin Ching, another PAP Women's Wing leader stated this most clearly:

In a society where people are exploited, it is very difficult to solve these problems. Only after a socialist society has been established can women's problems be solved. The PAP government is trying its best to help solve these problems. These problems are, among other things, economic, educational and moral in nature. The solving of these problems is only the first step taken towards solving the women's problems.¹³⁶

In this extract, there was open recognition that one of the problems was education. Miss Fung also added that it was necessary to ensure that women were not exploited and not "deprived of the facilities of education."¹³⁷ She emphasized that the mere

¹³⁴ Ibid., col. 443.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid., col. 461.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

passing of a law would not resolve women's problems; what was needed was a total change in the social system:

The mere passing of a law cannot change people's attitude towards them. It is useless to improve the society if the women cannot improve themselves...if we do not change our social system but only pass a law in order to solve the problems of women or to raise their status – then it will be completely useless.¹³⁸

Women had to improve themselves, but society's values and attitudes would have to change as well. In Fung's view, the Charter was only a first step towards achieving gender equality.

Despite such rhetoric, equal educational opportunities for girls, which was deemed vital for improving women's lot, was not explicitly included as a principle in the Charter. An opposition member and president of the Singapore branch of the Pan-Pacific Women's League, Seow Peck Leng pointed out this shortcoming:

In Singapore, Sir, may I ask how many women are holding such high posts in the judiciary, administrative or Governmental departments? Why is there not even one woman Minister amongst the Ministers? Probably the answer is that the women in Singapore do not possess the necessary qualifications. If this is true, should the Women's Charter not provide education for girls and women so as to equip them for such high posts? If the Charter is worthy of its name, should it not provide opportunities for women so that they could rise to such posts?¹³⁹

In the Legislative Assembly debate, Mrs Seow also cited the recommendations of the UNESCO Conference held in Paris in 1959 which called for, *inter alia*, the enforcement of compulsory education for girls where it existed and special assistance for girls' education in the form of scholarships and grants. She thus pressed for some provisions to improve the education of women to be included in the Charter:

¹³⁸ Ibid., cols. 461-462.

¹³⁹ Ibid., col. 446.

Sir, I realize that not all those recommendations are adaptable to conditions in Singapore, but a Women's Charter should make some provision to improve the education of women –

- (a) to prepare them for holding the high posts which they deserve, and
- (b) to prepare them for showing the responsibility that they should show, and also to enable them to make wise use of the rights that have been granted to women.”¹⁴⁰

Unfortunately, despite such strong advocacy, no amendments were made to the Charter to include women's rights to education. PAP members pointed out that there were no prevailing restrictions on women's education. Dr Lee Siew Choh who was then a PAP member, but who in later years left the party and became a key opposition figure, refuted Mrs Seow's criticism of the Charter:

Surely everyone knows that education in this country is free, that everybody can go to any higher seat of education to equip himself or herself so that ultimately every person will have an equal chance. In view of our present policy of giving equal treatment to all the streams and to males and females, surely that would be a proper answer to the Member of Mountbatten.¹⁴¹

The PAP members seemed to assume that the provision of educational facilities for all meant that girls automatically had educational opportunities. They did not take into account the social prejudices against girls' education and the need to change social values and attitudes. Therefore, despite Fung Yin Ching's stress on the need to change societal values, no legislative measures were taken to change social prejudices or to mandate equal educational rights for girls. Inche Yaacob bin Mohamed, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for National Development, expressed confidence that girls already had equal opportunities to education and the PAP would

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., col. 446-447.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., col. 453.

ensure that no restrictions on girls would be imposed; so there was no need to enforce education for girls by legislation:

Although there are certain quarters who say that the Women's Charter is incomplete on the grounds that it excludes education, economic and other provisions, I feel that with the present democratic government which we have in Singapore, there are, in fact, no restrictions on women. To any extent that the women would like to achieve in the fields of education or in other spheres, they can now do so. If there is any restriction on women going to the University, I am quite positive that this Government will introduce legislation to free them from such a restriction."¹⁴²

The belief in the integrity and goodwill of the PAP government towards protecting women's rights was so strong that the need to enshrine these rights in black and white was deemed unnecessary.

In the end, the primary purpose of *The Women's Charter* was to redress the injustices suffered by women in Singapore with regard to marital issues, providing for monogamous marriages and registration of such marriages. It also amended and consolidated the laws on divorce, the rights and duties of married persons, maintenance of wives and children and punishment of offences against women and girls.¹⁴³ This Charter has been hailed by many as a landmark piece of legislation that marked the start of women's rights in Singapore and provided "an invaluable impetus to the improvement of the position of women in this society."¹⁴⁴ Claudine Goh for instance, presents the Charter as an instrument of social change that has successfully

¹⁴² Ibid., col. 462.

¹⁴³ Singapore, *Reprint of The Women's Charter* (Singapore: Government Printer, 1981), p. 9.

¹⁴⁴ Leong Wai Kum, *Family Law in Singapore* (Singapore: Malayan Law Journal Pte Ltd., 1990), p. 16.

improved the status of women in Singapore in less than one generation after the enactment of the Charter.¹⁴⁵

While it has many admirers, the Charter has had a few detractors as well. It has been criticized as simply a re-enactment, with some amendments, of earlier legislative provisions and that it had done little more than check polygamy and extra-judicial divorce.¹⁴⁶ In fact, *The Women's Charter* has been considered by some as merely a Family Charter because the bulk of its provisions deal with issues related to marriages and the rights and duties of married persons, divorce, and the maintenance of wives and children. Most of the provisions apply to non-Muslims only, as Muslims are regulated by their own Syariah laws. Some provisions, however, are applicable to Muslims as well. These are Part VII (Maintenance of Wife and Children), Part VIII (Enforcement of Maintenance Orders), Part X (Offences Against Women and Girls) and Part XI (Miscellaneous). Part X, which deals with offences against women and children and really relates to offences dealing with prostitution and trafficking in women and girls, does not seem to belong in this ordinance, but was included because of the desire to bring all the laws relating to women and girls together into a single “compendious and comprehensive piece of legislation.”¹⁴⁷ Since 1961, *The Women's Charter* has been amended on several occasions in 1967, 1975, 1981 and 1996 to keep up with changing times and needs.¹⁴⁸ However, most of its fundamental principles remain essentially unchanged.

¹⁴⁵ Claudine Goh Shing Yen, “The Women's Charter – An Instrument of Social Change”, LLB (Hons) academic exercise (National University of Singapore, 1996).

¹⁴⁶ L.W. Athulathmudali, & G.W. Bartholomew, “The Women's Charter”, *University of Malaya Law Review*, 3:2 (Dec 1961), p. 316.

¹⁴⁷ Singapore, *Legislative Assembly Debates: Official Report*, 12:7 (6 Apr 1960), col. 481.

¹⁴⁸ An account of the amendments from 1961 to 1981 is given in Leong Wai Kum, *Family Law in Singapore*, pp. 16-19.

The key principles of the Charter include the institution of monogamous marriages, the recognition of mutual responsibility and equal rights between the husband and wife in running the matrimonial household, recognition of the individuality of the married woman and her legal capacities, the legal obligation of a husband to maintain his wife and children and protection of women and girls against sexual crimes. As a law to protect women's rights, the *Women's Charter* can be considered ground-breaking because some of the principles, such as enforcement of monogamy and the recognition of married women's individuality, went against prevailing social norms as polygamy was a rather rampant practice in the 1950s and, prior to the enactment of the Charter, when a woman married, she would lose all her personal rights to using her name and maintaining her own property.¹⁴⁹ Through the Charter, therefore, the PAP gave official recognition of women as individual beings capable of handling their own financial and business matters. Women could no longer be regarded as nonentities or mere chattels. This official discourse gave a much-needed boost to women's status. The Charter was thus seen as an enlightened move and a vindication of the PAP's election promise to recognize women's important place in society. There was an expectation that the passing of that law would "bring about a revolutionary change in society on a practical basis."¹⁵⁰

The recognition of mutual responsibility and equal rights between the husband and wife in running the matrimonial household enshrined the principle of equality of men and women with respect to the responsibilities of marriage and the home.¹⁵¹

Claudine Goh asserts that "this is a clear message that spouses are to treat each other

¹⁴⁹ Claudine Goh Shing Yen, "The Women's Charter – An Instrument of Social Change", p. 10.

¹⁵⁰ Singapore, *Legislative Assembly Debates: Official Report*, 12:7, col. 443.

¹⁵¹ Section 45 (1) committed the husband and wife to be mutually responsible for safeguarding the marriage and caring and providing for the children. See Singapore, *Reprint of The Women's Charter*, p. 24.

as equals and a woman's status is not inferior to her husband's in the household...[and] the legitimising effect of the law can sometimes perform an educative function by merely espousing the ideal."¹⁵² In her view, the *Women's Charter* has contributed to educating the public about gender equality in the home. This recognition of gender equality, however, is limited to the responsibilities in running the household and it cannot be assumed that equal rights in running the matrimonial household is the same as treating each other as equals in the home. What is even more significant is that nowhere in the Charter is there any explicit statement of gender equality in other spheres. The extent of PAP's recognition of the equality between the sexes then appears to be limited to sharing equal responsibilities in running the household. Despite the socialist ideal of complete gender equality espoused in *The Tasks Ahead*, there were no clear sanctions to safeguard women's equality with men in other spheres of life. That the Charter had not covered every aspect of women's rights was pointed out during the Legislative Assembly debate in 1960 by Seow Peck Leng:

To be worthy of that name, a Women's Charter should uplift the status of women not only in one field, but in all fields, such as political, economic, social, legal, civil, educational and professional. This Charter only deals with the civil rights of women.¹⁵³

Part VII of the Charter declared that the husband is legally obliged to provide reasonable maintenance for his wife and children and a woman could apply to the court to order her husband to pay her a monthly allowance if he failed to do so. In that way, women had recourse to the law to ensure that husbands did not abandon

¹⁵² Claudine Goh Shing Yen, "The Women's Charter - An Instrument of Social Change", p. 11.

¹⁵³ Singapore, *Legislative Assembly Debates: Official Report*, 12:7, col. 445.

them and their children at will.¹⁵⁴ This provision was included in response to calls by women's groups to provide legal protection for women, many of whom at that time were housewives and financially dependent on their husbands. At the time of enactment of the Charter, therefore, it was a much-lauded move. However, this provision actually had the unforeseen consequence of reinforcing the subordinate position of the woman by making only the man responsible for maintaining his wife and children.

PAP's discourse on women as seen in the *Women's Charter*, showed that women were considered important members of society with individual economic and financial rights. At the same time, however, they were perceived as the weaker sex who needed to be protected from unscrupulous males. It was deemed necessary to legislate reforms to provide for their financial maintenance and to protect their position in the home. In *The Tasks Ahead*, education was acknowledged as a means to emancipate women, but it was not included as an irrevocable right in the *Women's Charter*. Women's equality with men was recognized only in the running of the home.

Ironically, by recognising women's equality with men in the home, it would seem that the PAP actually flouted the traditional Confucian patriarchal model of the woman being subordinate to the husband in the home. Indeed, the PAP government would later contradict its earlier stand on equality of the husband and wife in the home by promoting a Confucian patriarchal society as the ideal for maintaining Singapore's stable fabric of society.¹⁵⁵ It must be remembered that the PAP began as a socialist party and, in order to win the support of pro-communists, the leaders frequently espoused the socialist doctrine of equality for all in every sphere in society.

¹⁵⁴ Singapore, *Reprint of the Women's Charter*, Parts VII & VIII.

¹⁵⁵ This is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three, see pp. 82-84.

Women members such as Chan Choy Siong and Fung Yin Ching were Chinese-educated females who were strongly influenced by the communist movement in China. Thus their speeches were more stridently socialist in nature. On the other hand, many male PAP leaders were English-educated pragmatists and so not all the socialist rhetoric espoused in *The Tasks Ahead* were included in the Women's Charter. Because the Charter focused largely on women's position in the home, the PAP underscored the message that women's primary role in society was still a domestic one. The PAP discourse thus highlighted the importance of women but situated them firmly in the home. The Charter, therefore, did not go far enough towards changing social values and traditional biases. Lee Kuan Yew himself admitted this in his memoirs:

The charter was comprehensive and altered the status of women. But it did not change the cultural bias of parents against daughters in favour of sons. *That has still not been achieved.*¹⁵⁶

The use of the present tense in the last statement above seems to imply that Mr Lee was of the opinion that cultural bias against females still existed at the time when his memoirs were published. In the final analysis, the Charter was not sufficiently comprehensive. Not all women's rights were covered in the Charter. Furthermore, by placing women's importance in the home, it actually reinforced the patriarchal family structure of society.

Thus, the early discourse of the PAP was clear in its support for women's rights and equality of the sexes. The party did deliver on its election promises by providing educational opportunities for both boys and girls, legislating the Women's Charter and adopting a policy of equal pay for female civil servants. The discourse

¹⁵⁶ Lee Kuan Yew, *The Singapore Story*, p. 326. [Emphasis added]

also reveals that pragmatic considerations motivated PAP support for women and provision of education for girls. The party was concerned about girls' education primarily because it saw this as an economic and political imperative. The constant emphasis in the state discourse on the need for women's participation in national development was an attempt to establish hegemony on its definition of women's role in Singapore. The main theme of state discourse in the 1960s was therefore that of economic survival and the need for everyone in the nation to work together to survive.

Singapore's separation from Malaysia in 1965 heightened problems of national survival. Besides economic survival, there were also challenges in fostering national cohesion and creating a sense of national identity. The PAP policy thus focused on building a multi-racial, multi-lingual secular society and gender differentiation was not an important concern of the state. Of more critical importance was maintaining racial harmony, especially because of the experiences of racial riots that preceded Singapore's exit from Malaysia. Instead of suppressing ethnic differences, the official policy put stress on the richness of cultural diversity but at the same time, superimposed on this "a specifically Singaporean identity and sense of values."¹⁵⁷ State discourse on education in the immediate post-independence period thus laid stress on building a national identity in the young and on inculcating social discipline and developing a rugged society.

The gender ideology that is discernible from the discourse contains elements of conservatism and progressiveness. On the one hand, the open support for equality of the sexes, monogamy and emancipation of women reflects the socialist and progressive thinking of the PAP leaders. The attempt to extend the role of women

¹⁵⁷ C.M. Turnbull, *A History of Singapore, 1819-1975* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 301.

beyond the confines of the home to include their participation in paid labour represents an attempt to define femininity in more modern terms. However, the conservatism of the leaders is seen also in the Women's Charter which has reinforced patriarchal values by making the man the head of the household as he is legally responsible for providing for the wife and children. The provisions in the Women's Charter also seem to underscore an ideology of female domesticity by focusing largely on women's rights and responsibilities in the home.

The state's gender ideology is thus rather mixed and at times, incongruous. What is discernible at this early stage is the state's attempt to define femininity to combine the dual roles of unpaid domestic service with salaried labour. This was because the economic imperative demanded that women had to participate in the workforce. However, the discourse and policies arising from the need to emphasize both these roles tends to be discordant and contradictory. Such discordance and contradictions become even more obvious in the later years as the following chapter will show.

CHAPTER THREE

POST-INDEPENDENCE STATE DISCOURSE ON EDUCATION AND WOMEN

This chapter continues the discussion on state discourse on education and women, focusing on the post-independence period. It begins with a quick overview of how parental attitudes towards educating girls changed as a result of the state's policies on universal education and population control. This will be followed by an examination of state discourse from 1966 to 2000, situating it within the context of social, economic and political developments in Singapore. In the process, this chapter will also highlight some educational policies that had impact on the education of girls and the construction of femininity in school.

As described in the previous chapter, the PAP in its first five years of rule focused on implementing a policy of universal education for all Singapore children. As a result of the policy of universal education and equal opportunities for children of all races, creed and sex, more parents were encouraged to send their children, both boys and girls, to school. With the provision of free primary education, total enrolment in primary schools increased from 272,254 in 1959 to 341,697 in 1965. Correspondingly, female enrolment which comprised 38% of total enrolment in 1959 increased to 46% in 1965.¹⁵⁸

The rapidly expanding population in land-scarce Singapore was one major problem that required the government's urgent attention in the post-independence period. The attainment of independence resulting from the separation of Singapore from Malaysia meant the loss of a hinterland and greatly reduced economic opportunities. With more than 1.8 million people, a population density of 8,000

¹⁵⁸ Singapore, *Ministry of Education Annual Report, 1959* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1960) & Singapore, *Ministry of Education Annual Report, 1960* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1966).

persons per square mile in 1965 and a crude birth rate of 32 per thousand, the PAP government was concerned with the problem of housing and feeding the rapidly expanding population.¹⁵⁹ In January 1966 the Family Planning and Population Board was set up to carry out a five-year plan to encourage family planning by initiating and undertaking population control programmes as well as promoting and disseminating information on family planning in Singapore.¹⁶⁰ The first five-year plan from 1966 to 1970, envisaged that by the 1970s the population would be brought down to an annual net increase of one half of the 1965 rate.¹⁶¹ The Board subsequently launched a massive programme to educate the public on all areas of family planning. Intensive publicity through the mass media, posters, pamphlets, exhibitions and talks resulted in increased awareness and acceptance of family planning. The second five-year plan promoted the two-child family policy and slogans such as “Boy or Girl, Two is Enough” became familiar to the general public.

Besides the massive education programme, the Family Planning and Population Board also set up a network of clinics that provided a spectrum of birth control services. Over the years, a wide range of social and fiscal policy measures were introduced to achieve the two-child family norm.¹⁶² Abortion and sterilization were legalized and fiscal incentives were given to couples who had achieved a two-child family to undergo sterilization. The goal of the third five-year plan was to maintain fertility at replacement level by 1980 and then to maintain this level so as to achieve Zero Population Growth by 2030.¹⁶³ In the late 1970s, therefore, messages

¹⁵⁹ Singapore, *Parliamentary Debates: Official Report*, 24 (8 Dec 1965), col. 878.

¹⁶⁰ “Speech by Mr Yong Nyuk Lin at the Inaugural Meeting of the Singapore Family Planning and Population Board, 12 Jan 1966” in *Family Planning* (Singapore: Singapore Family Planning and Population Board, c. 1969), pp. 4-6.

¹⁶¹ Singapore, *Parliamentary Debates: Official Report*, 24, col. 878.

¹⁶² Singapore Planned Parenthood Association, *Towards 2000: The Singapore Planned Parenthood Association Strategic Plan* (Singapore: Singapore Planned Parenthood Association, c. 1993), p. 4.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 2-5.

promoting later marriages and longer birth intervals were introduced. The population policy was so successful that replacement level fertility was reached in 1975, before the target year of 1980 and since 1976 the total fertility rate has remained below replacement level.

To a large extent, the population policy had an effect of changing social attitudes towards girls. The slogan “Boy or Girl, Two is Enough” implied that girls are as good as boys and therefore should have the same privileges. This change in attitude is reflected in the increase in girls’ enrolment in secondary and tertiary institutions. In 1960, there were 22,669 girls, or 39% of total enrolment in secondary schools (including pre-university classes) and 733 females comprising 22% of total enrolment in the universities (Nanyang University and Singapore University).¹⁶⁴ By 1980, girls formed almost 52% of total enrolment in secondary school and junior colleges and about 46% in universities.¹⁶⁵ With smaller families, most parents could afford to send their children to school and girls did not have to wait in line behind their male siblings. This changing population profile and social attitude towards girls’ education provide the backdrop to the following discussion on post-independence state discourse, which proved to be neither coherent nor consistent.

Discord I, 1966 – 1978: Educating Girls for Home or the Workforce?

This chapter’s discussion of state discourse begins in 1966 when adequate facilities to cater to all children of primary-school-going age had been put in place and the focus then shifted to providing secondary education.¹⁶⁶ As in most developing nations in the immediate post-independence period, strong emphasis was placed on

¹⁶⁴ Low Guat Tin, “Women, Education and Development in Singapore”, in Jason Tan, S. Gopinathan, Ho Wah Kam, *Education in Singapore: A Book of Readings* (Singapore: Prentice Hall, 1997), p. 346.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ “New Schools Plan to Boost Economy”, *Straits Times*, 28 Jul 1965.

values education and character-building in schools to foster unity and forge a common identity. Citizenship education was pre-eminent and there were constant reminders for schools to provide a balanced education that emphasized not just academic achievement but also development in the physical and moral spheres. In 1968, the Ministry of Education revised the school curriculum to provide more time for students' participation in extra-curricular activities. Girls and boys alike were encouraged to participate in these extra-curricular activities:

All these extra-curricular activities are very necessary in order that we may have strong, disciplined, responsible and loyal citizens in our Republic. If boys and girls do not take part in these social activities, we shall get only selfish, anti-social citizens.¹⁶⁷

The stress was on producing a new generation of youths who were “rugged, vigorous, intelligent and capable, endowed with a strong sense of patriotism, possessing a high standard of education.”¹⁶⁸ No differentiation was made regarding the desirable qualities for males and females and the term “youths” was used most of the time to refer to schoolchildren of both sexes. The discourse and educational thrust of the period thus challenged traditional femininity incorporating passivity, docility and submission. Instead, girls were encouraged to be active, rugged and tough like boys, and to participate in physical education and extracurricular activities. Thus, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the first girls' units of the PCC were started in Raffles Girls' Secondary School and Sang Nila Utama Malay Secondary School in 1964.¹⁶⁹ The NCC (Land-Girls) was formed to set up and co-ordinate units in girls'

¹⁶⁷ “Speech by Inche A. Rahim Ishak, Minister of State for Education, at the St Patrick's School Speech Day on Friday, 7 Oct 1966”, Singapore Government Press Statement, MC. Oct 15/66 (Edun).

¹⁶⁸ “Citizens Fit in Mind, Body is Aim of New Education Policy: Ong”, *Straits Times*, 2 Jan 1968. See also “The Way to Build a Rugged Generation”, *Straits Times*, 13 Apr 1967 and “Take Lead in Building Rugged Society, Teachers Told”, *Straits Times*, 3 Jun 1967.

¹⁶⁹ See Chapter Two, p. 54.

and mixed secondary schools in 1967.¹⁷⁰ In 1969, the PCC and the NCC came under an umbrella organization, the Headquarters National Cadet Corps, which was established to manage and coordinate all the units in NCC Land, Sea, Air and Girls.¹⁷¹ From then on, PCC became known as National Police Cadet Corps (NPCC). In 1975, the Parliamentary Secretary for Education, Mr Ahmad Mattar announced that all secondary schools with an enrolment of more than 1000 students were required to have NCC and NPCC units of both boys and girls, the intention being to give every boy and girl a chance to join a unit.¹⁷² Girls were also encouraged to participate in physically and mentally demanding courses such as those conducted by the Outward Bound School.¹⁷³ These MOE policies were aligned to the overall governmental push for a “rugged society.” Mr Lee Kuan Yew recalls in his memoirs:

We set up national cadet corps and national police cadet corps in all secondary schools so that parents would identify the army and police with their sons and daughters.... We also had to improve the physical condition of our young by getting them to participate in sports and physical activity of all kinds, and to develop a taste for adventure and strenuous, thrilling activities that were not without danger to themselves.¹⁷⁴

At the same time, however, and contrary to the discourse on producing rugged girls, attention began to be put on the curricula perceived to be suitable for girls in preparing for their future role in the domestic scene and the need for curricula differentiation for the sexes came to be highlighted. In 1966, the Minister of Education Mr Ong Pang Boon spoke of the need to cater to the specific needs of girls at secondary school:

¹⁷⁰ Maj. Heng Fock Wu, “Practical Lessons in Education for Living”, in *Teachers’ Rostrum* (Sep/Oct 1975), p. 48.

¹⁷¹ National Cadet Corps, *National Cadet Corps: 100 Years of Distinction* (Singapore: National Cadet Corps, c. 2001), p. 15.

¹⁷² “In Uniform”, *Straits Times*, 15 Apr 1975.

¹⁷³ “Taste of Life in the Rough for Girls at the Outward Bound School”, *Straits Times*, 5 Aug 1969.

¹⁷⁴ Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First. The Singapore Story: 1965 – 2000*, (Singapore: Times Media Pte Ltd., 2000), pp. 33-34.

Secondary education in any advanced country is getting more and more specialized. It caters for a wide range of interests, aptitudes and abilities...In the primary school there is little distinction between boys' and girls' school subjects. It is not so in the secondary school. With the large number of girls in secondary schools, girls' subjects like Domestic Science, must receive special attention.¹⁷⁵

The above reflects the state's patriarchal perception of women's role in society. This conservative and traditional gender ideology resulted in a policy of a differentiated gender curriculum with domestic science being deemed necessary to prepare girls for their primary role in life.

However, the need for skilled labour to support the rapid industrialization programme also required the training of girls and boys in technical fields. The post-independence educational policy thus focused on providing technical education for more students and channelling school leavers into blue-collar jobs. In 1966, for example, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew emphasized the need to review the secondary curriculum to align it to meeting Singapore's economic needs. He also exhorted parents to prepare their children for occupations in industries and not insist on white-collar jobs for them:

...the Government proposed to review the education content and syllabus so that secondary level schools could produce the type of students who would be needed.... Mr Lee said that Singapore gave equal opportunities to all for education, irrespective of whether parents were rich or poor... But parents who preferred to educate their children for white-collar jobs should realize that their children stood a better chance in life if they were given a technical education.¹⁷⁶

By the late 1960s, girls were exhorted to be like the boys and pursue technical subjects in order to be prepared to participate in an industrial economy. In a speech at

¹⁷⁵ "Speech by Minister for Education, Mr Ong Pang Boon at Teachers' Training College Graduation Day Ceremony at Singapore Conference Hall, Saturday, 29 Oct 1966", Singapore Government Press Statement, MC Oct 54/66 (Edun).

¹⁷⁶ "Lee: Education to be changed to meet our needs", *Straits Times*, 11 Dec 1966.

St Margaret's Secondary School's annual speech and prize-giving day, Mr E.W. Barker, the Minister for Law and National Development told girls of the future role they had to play:

If you want equality of treatment with boys, you too must prepare yourselves for the change-over to technical and vocational education. For obvious reasons we cannot let all the boys go to the technical institutions and leave all the girls in the academic schools. In other words, you girls have to *work as hard as the boys*, and become *not just good housewives but economic assets as well*.¹⁷⁷

This speech, including the exhortation for girls to work as hard as boys reflects some amount of condescension and male chauvinism in the speaker. His speech also emphasized the dual role expected of Singapore women – that of wage earner, labelled as an asset because of its economic value, and home-maker, which by implication, was not an asset because of its perceived non-monetary nature. This discourse thus defined the role of women as extending beyond the traditional domestic sphere to include their participation in the labour force.

In the same speech, Mr Barker went on to emphasize that the government had made it a policy not to discriminate against girls and had provided equal opportunities for all in education, albeit the maintenance of this educational policy and system depended on sustained economic growth:

In simple terms, this means that we can continue to spend as much on education as we have been doing only if we continue to earn enough money to afford it... In providing girls the same educational opportunities as the boys, we expect the girls to be equally capable of contributing to the economic growth of our nation.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁷ "Girls Urged to Work as Hard as the Boys", *Straits Times*, 27 Jul 1968. [Emphasis added]

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

So it appears that equal educational opportunities for girls came with provisos and strings attached. Equal opportunities for education was dependent on the nation's economic prosperity and could not be taken for granted. Thus education for girls was not provided as a basic human right but as an investment for the future. In return for education, girls were expected to participate and contribute towards sustaining national development.

The emphasis on technical education was made into a formal policy in 1968. At the annual budget debate in December 1968, the Minister for Education, Mr Ong Pang Boon announced a re-structuring of the secondary school system to include technical subjects in the curriculum. This was aimed at channelling a larger number of pupils to technical education. With this move, technical studies was included in the curriculum of all boys and 50% of girls in the lower secondary forms:

Beginning with Secondary I classes next year, a new common curriculum will be introduced for all Secondary I and II pupils in all types of schools and in all four language streams. This new curriculum provides for all boys and 50% of the girls to take a combination of academic and technical subjects, including workshop practice.¹⁷⁹

It was neither clear why only half of lower secondary girls were given this opportunity for technical studies nor whether there was a plan to eventually allow all girls to take technical studies, but the MOE soon embarked on a publicity campaign to convince parents and girls of the advantages of technical education. This took the form of speeches explaining how girls are suited for technical careers and career guidance seminars for girls. For example, in a speech at the opening ceremony of the

¹⁷⁹ "Speech by the Minister for Education, Mr Ong Pang Boon at the Resumed Debate on the Annual Budget Statement of the Minister for Finance on 12 Dec 1968", Singapore Government Press Statement, MC. Dec 21/68 (Edun).

building extension to Fairfield Methodist Girls' School in December 1968, Mr Ong Pang Boon made this point:

As you know, we are laying much greater emphasis on technical and vocational education. How will this change in policy affect the girls? There is no reason why a woman should not handle a machine as efficiently as a man. Indeed in operations which require precision, women may outperform men.¹⁸⁰

In 1970, a career guidance note to parents from the Ministry of Education stressed that girls were suited for technical education.¹⁸¹ In that note, the Ministry pointed out that a technical career did not necessarily require physical strength. For example, the most important areas in the engineering field were in research and development which required intelligence, imagination and creativity rather than physical strength.¹⁸²

Girls were thus encouraged to pursue technical studies so as to contribute to Singapore's industrialization programme. Womanpower was required to meet the labour shortage caused by rapid industrialization. Dr Toh Chin Chye, the Minister for Science and Technology made this point in a speech to students of Tanjong Katong Girls' School:

Rapid industrialization ha[s] resulted in a shortage of manpower. The shortage [can] be countered by womanpower...Educational opportunities for both boys and girls are equal. In reality, boys predominate in certain occupations like engineering. But this is due more to social and parental attitudes — not because girls lack the brains.¹⁸³

He added that women's neatness and careful attitudes made them well suited to jobs in the refined sciences which demanded care and precision.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸⁰ "Speech by Minister for Education, Mr Ong Pang Boon, 20 Dec 1968", Singapore Government Press Statement, MC. Dec 35/68 (Edun).

¹⁸¹ "Ministry: Girls Suited for Technical Education", *Straits Times*, 4 Dec 1970.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ "Womanpower – by Dr Toh", *Straits Times*, 12 Mar 1971.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

In spite of the restructured curriculum and emphasis on technical education for girls, domestic science remained an essential subject of study for girls while boys were exempt. This was made clear by Mr Ong Pang Boon in the same speech when he announced the restructuring of the school curriculum to include technical subjects:

Domestic Science will be a compulsory subject for all girls. However, for girls who are also taking technical subjects, Domestic Science will not be an examination subject and a modified syllabus will be followed.¹⁸⁵

Thus, despite the policy of exposing more girls to technical subjects, domestic science was still deemed an indispensable subject for girls. In his speech to students at Fairfield Methodist Girls' School, Mr Ong made the point that they would have to study domestic science as a compulsory subject so that "the girls who leave our schools will have an adequate knowledge of home economics and be able to contribute to better health and better living conditions of our society as a whole."¹⁸⁶ The compulsory study of domestic science was a clear signal to girls about their future domestic role in Singapore. In spite of the rhetoric about women being important in the economic development of Singapore, the official discourse and educational policy, which had significant influence on the construction of femininity in the school, continued to emphasize the role of women in the home.

The inconsistency in these messages to girls is obvious. On the one hand, girls were exhorted to be more like boys, to be rugged and robust, prepared to learn technical skills and take up blue-collar jobs. On the other hand, the policy reinforced the message that women's role in the home was to be maintained. In spite of the

¹⁸⁵ "Speech by the Minister for Education, Mr Ong Pang Boon at the Resumed Debate on the Annual Budget Statement of the Minister for Finance on 12 December, 1968", Singapore Government Press Statement, MC. Dec 21/68 (Edun).

¹⁸⁶ "Speech by Minister for Education, Mr Ong Pang Boon at the Opening Ceremony of the Building Extension to Fairfield Methodist Girls' School on 20 Dec 1968", Singapore Government Press Statement, MC. Dec 35/68 (Edun).

desire to increase the female labour force participation rate to meet the needs of a modern economy, the government's own perceptions of women's role in society was still a traditional one. That being the case, it was only natural that Singaporeans continued to hold on to such traditional values. In this context, the Prime Minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew's comments on women and social attitudes at the NTUC's International Women's Year Seminar in 1975 is noteworthy:

It has been government policy to encourage the education of women to their fullest ability and their employment commensurate with their abilities. Parents have also changed their attitudes and now send their daughters for secondary and tertiary education as they would their sons.... However, what has not yet taken place in traditional male-dominant Asian societies is the helping in household work by husbands – the marketing, cooking, cleaning up. *This change in social attitudes cannot come by legislation. Such adjustments should be allowed to develop naturally. Our primary concern is to ensure that, whilst all our women become equal to men in education, getting employment and promotions, the family framework does not suffer* as a result of high divorce rates, or equally damaging, neglect of the children with both parents working.¹⁸⁷

This excerpt clearly reflects the cherishing of prevailing traditional values and the unwillingness of the authorities to bring about changes in social values and attitudes. The primary concern of the PAP government was on preserving social stability based on the Asian male-dominated social structure.

In 1977, the policy of having 50% of lower secondary girls study technical subjects was changed to allow girls the choice of taking either technical studies or home economics. Boys would continue with technical workshop practice.¹⁸⁸ Following this announcement, school principals were reported to be worried that their school home economics facilities would not be able to cope with the increase in the

¹⁸⁷ “Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew at the NTUC's International Women's Year Seminar-cum Exhibition at the DBS Auditorium, 1 Sep 1975”, in National Trades Union Congress, *Proceedings of International Women's Year, Seminar cum Exhibition* (Singapore: NTUC, 1975). [Emphasis added]

¹⁸⁸ “Ministry Move to Help Sec 1 Students”, *Straits Times*, 28 Dec 1976.

number of girls wanting to take that subject. Most principals expected some 80% of the girls to opt for Home Economics. This expectation reflects the failure of the Ministry of Education to convince Singaporean society about the suitability of girls for technical careers. For almost ten years, between 1968 and 1976, the MOE had tried to channel more girls into technical studies. In spite of this, when choice was given, it was anticipated that most girls would choose not to study technical subjects. Evidently there was still considerable gender bias against a technical education for girls. It is probable that the conflicting messages being sent by the Ministry — on the one hand, encouraging girls to pursue technical studies and on the other hand, making it compulsory for girls to study domestic science, was responsible for this failure. Such moves only served to confuse girls about the role they were expected to play in society.

In this period therefore, the PAP discourse was discordant as confusing gender messages were being sent out to girls. On the one hand, differentiated curricula at secondary level in the form of the compulsory study of Domestic Science by girls reinforced the importance of women's role in the home. On the other, the push for technical education for girls highlighted women's role in the workforce. The political leaders did not seem to fully appreciate the fact that these were two conflicting roles.

Interlude, 1979-1987: Confucianizing Society and Feminizing Girls

In the period 1979-1987, the government's discourse on girls' education began to focus increasingly on women's role in maintaining the social framework. 1979 marks a turning point in the state's policy towards education for girls when a one-third quota was imposed on female students admitted into the medical faculty of the National University of Singapore. This was a clear departure from the past policy of

equal opportunities for all. The official explanation for this was that “women doctors, particularly after marriage, cannot be assigned duties as freely as male doctors.”¹⁸⁹ The Health Minister, Dr Toh Chin Chye later clarified in Parliament that it was very difficult for a woman to be a good doctor because “she had to be a wife and a mother besides performing night duty in government hospitals.” Other reasons given were that women doctors preferred to work office hours in outpatient clinics and were selective about their area of specialization. Many had refused to go into obstetrics and gynaecology where the need for women doctors was greater.¹⁹⁰

The fact that girls’ educational rights were not specifically enshrined in any ordinance in the country, including The Women’s Charter, meant that the PAP government could institute such an arbitrary discriminating policy. It is ironical that the PAP should introduce restrictions on women in medical studies when Inche Yaacob bin Mohamed had declared during the debate on The Women’s Charter in 1961, that the PAP would introduce legislation to free women if there should be any restrictions on women entering the University.¹⁹¹ Despite loud protests from members of the public and women’s associations, this quota was imposed from 1979 onwards. Over the years, several calls to lift the quota went unheeded. In 1994, for example, Dr Kanwaljit Soin, a Nominated Member of Parliament and medical practitioner, argued eloquently for the abolition of the one-third quota on female medical students, unequivocally pointing out that such a policy was unconstitutional:

...I am sure that the Minister knows that the medical quota is against our Constitution which is predicated on equality and equal protection of the law.... Not only does this practice offend the letter and the spirit of our Constitution, but it is also against our ethos of building a society based on justice and meritocracy. Here I would like to quote the

¹⁸⁹ “New Curbs on Medical Intake”, *Straits Times*, 10 Mar 1979.

¹⁹⁰ “Why Intake of Women into Medical Faculty Cut: Toh”, 17 Mar 1979.

¹⁹¹ See abstract of Inche Yaacob’s speech in Chapter Two, p. 57.

Minister for Education, Mr Lee Yock Suan, himself. This is what he said with regard to the admission of candidates into the medical course, and I quote: “In the selection process, aptitude and suitability for the course as assessed by the interview are taken into account together with the “A” level performance. The selection is based entirely on merit.”¹⁹²

The Minister for Education, Mr Lee Yock Suan refuted her arguments and declared that he had checked with the University’s lawyers who had confirmed that the policy was not against the Constitution. Mr Lee issued the ultimate challenge to Dr Soin to put it to a test in a court of law.¹⁹³ Perhaps the prohibitive cost of a legal challenge deterred Dr Soin and the matter was never taken to court, but a superficial reading of the Constitution shows that the Minister was right. With regard to educational rights, the Constitution of Singapore provides that “there shall be no discrimination against any citizen of Singapore on the grounds only of religion, race, descent or place of birth.”¹⁹⁴ The term “sex” is noticeably missing in the above excerpt from the Constitution and the Education Minister is therefore right in saying that the medical quota is not unconstitutional. Nonetheless, this indicates that there is a legal loophole in the protection of women’s rights in Singapore.

The imposition of the medical quota shows that pragmatism takes pre-eminence when economic interests conflict with gender equality. Although the initial reasons offered for the imposition had to do with the difficulties women faced as doctors, there is no doubt that the main considerations had to do with the diminished returns to the government’s investment in women’s medical training. The primary consideration was an economic one but the official explanations for the imposition of the quota reflected the PAP government’s attitude towards the role of women as well

¹⁹² Singapore, *Parliamentary Debates: Official Report*, 63:5 (25 Aug 1994), cols. 485-486.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, col. 487.

¹⁹⁴ Singapore, *Constitution of the Republic of Singapore*, at <http://agcvldb4.agc.gov.sg>, Part IV, Fundamental Liberties, Section 16, Rights in Respect of Education.

as towards girls' education. Their occasional espousal of gender equality notwithstanding, they did not hesitate to impose a quota when the investment in female doctors did not bear the expected returns.

This quota imposition also reflected the PAP's concern with preserving women's primary role in society as that of wife and mother. As mentioned earlier, the Prime Minister had emphasized the need to maintain the traditional social framework while providing women with equal educational and work opportunities.¹⁹⁵ When women's primary role as wife and mother was seen to be in conflict with their career, the solution was to channel them into other occupations. There was no question of changing women's primary role in society. The promise of equal educational opportunities for girls was thus breached. This is further evidence that education for girls was provided not because it was a basic human right, but because pragmatically it was necessary to achieve two objectives — economic survival and social stability. When this educational provision ran counter to national objectives, as in the case of educating female doctors, there were no apologies for not keeping to the promise of equality. To the PAP, it was purely a matter of economic and social pragmatism.

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Singapore economy was taking off and the government began to focus increasingly on social issues. Singapore's Gross Domestic Product per capita had grown from S\$2,798 in 1970 to S\$10,394 in 1980.¹⁹⁶ The economy grew by 10% a year from 1978 to 1982 and the overall growth of the economy was reflected in the rise in the standard of living. With increasing affluence, the PAP leaders in the early 1980s began to express concern over what they saw as the influence of the 'decadent' West resulting in excessive individualism and an

¹⁹⁵ See abstract of PM Lee's speech on pp. 77-78.

¹⁹⁶ Singapore, *Economic Survey of Singapore, 1991* (Singapore: Ministry of Trade and Industry, 1992).

erosion of moral values and cultural identity. Dr Goh Keng Swee, First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education, pointed out that “[t]here are very good reasons why just going along with the West will really get us into serious trouble”, emphasizing that “without morality and a sense of public duty that does not put self always first, Singapore could decline.”¹⁹⁷

This crisis of morality led firstly, to an increased emphasis on bilingualism in the education system in which Eastern cultural values were to be introduced and inculcated in the students; and secondly, the introduction of moral education in 1979 and religious studies in schools in 1984.¹⁹⁸ Confucian Ethics was introduced as an option in the compulsory Religious Knowledge studies to be taken by Upper Secondary students. In preparation for this subject to be offered to students, eight Confucian scholars were invited to Singapore to help the MOE draw up a conceptual framework for the syllabus.¹⁹⁹ Intense publicity was given to these eight scholars. In the course of their visit, they gave public lectures, held seminars, visited selected schools, held discussions with members of parliament and cabinet ministers and even appeared on a televised talk show. Government leaders also began to use Confucian values and precepts in their discourse. They highlighted the relevance of Confucian values in Singapore and the need to preserve the family and nation:

Confucian ethics challenge us to strive towards human excellence – integrity, honesty and commitment to the preservation of security and peace in the nation and family.... The government is currently promoting the learning of Confucian Ethics in our schools. It is our hope that this will equip our children with the right values and enable

¹⁹⁷ “The Goh Keng Swee Interview: Day One”, *Straits Times*, 28 Dec 1982.

¹⁹⁸ “Eastern Cultural Ballast for our Students”, *Straits Times*, 12 May 1978; “Role of Moral Education in School”, Speech by Dr Wong Kwei Cheong, Minister of State for Labour at the Children’s Party at Block 50 Dorset Road on 20 Feb 1982, *Speeches*, 5:9 (Mar 1982); “Religions Can Help Transmit Moral Values”, Speech by Prof. S. Jayakumar, Minister of State for Law and Home Affairs at the Hindu Centre Youth Rally and Cultural Show on 13 Feb 1982”, *Speeches*, 5:9 (Mar 1982).

¹⁹⁹ “Scholars Invited to Singapore”, *Straits Times*, 13 Jun 1982.

them to become good and upright citizens. However, for our country to succeed and progress we cannot relegate the imparting of Confucian ethics solely to our school. In fact, all social organizations have important roles to play. For instance, our community centers and other grassroots organizations can participate in this education process so that Confucian ethics become part and parcel of our way of life.²⁰⁰

Thus what began as an attempt to develop a curriculum escalated into a national exercise in ‘Confucianizing’ society and was used by the PAP to justify its thesis that Singapore society was based on patriarchy. In this manner, the introduction of Confucian ethics in schools and Singapore society reinforced the role of women in the home. According to Prof. Tu Wei-Ming, one of the eight Confucian scholars:

In the Confucian tradition, a great deal of emphasis is placed on the division of labour...The husband took care of affairs outside of the family; the wife took charge of affairs within the family. In the classical formulation of the proper conjugal relationship, the wife is one’s equal for in this division of labour each takes care of an equally important area.²⁰¹

This classical formulation is very similar to the Victorian middle-class domestic ideology described in Chapter One, that embodies a notion of separate spheres as a ‘natural’ division between the sexes.²⁰² Unlike that Victorian domestic ideology which assumed women to be inferior and subordinate to men, however, Tu’s ‘classical formulation’, contrary to what that term suggests, appears to be a modern reformulation of femininity which espouses equality of the sexes and presents the different spheres as separate but equally important.

This domestic ideology is reinforced in Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew’s National Day Rally speech in August 1983 where he voiced concern over the patterns

²⁰⁰ “Speech by Dr Wong Kwei Cheong, Minister of State (Labour) and Member of Parliament for Cairnhill, at the 19th Anniversary Celebration of Pek Kio Community Centre on Wednesday, 21 April 1982”, Singapore Government Press Release, 12-2/82/04/21.

²⁰¹ Tu Wei-Ming, *Confucian Ethics Today: The Singapore Challenge* (Singapore: Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore, 1984), p. 61.

²⁰² June Purvis, *A History of Women’s Education in England* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1991), pp. 2-3.

of marriage and procreation in Singapore. He pointed out that an increasing number of better-educated women were remaining single as male ignorance or prejudice was leading men to prefer marrying a wife less educated than himself.²⁰³ This had led to losses in Singapore's talent pool as these educated women were not reproducing themselves sufficiently. According to the Prime Minister, there was an urgent need to arrest this trend as Singapore's progress would otherwise be affected:

Our most valuable asset is in the ability of our people. Yet we are frittering away this asset through the unintended consequences of changes in our education policy and equal career opportunities for women. This has affected their *traditional role as mothers*. It is too late for us to reverse our policies and have our women go back to their primary role as mothers, the creators and protectors of the next generation. Our women will not stand for it. And anyway, they have already become too important a factor in the economy. Therefore, we must further amend our policies, and try to reshape our demographic configuration so that our better-educated women will have more children to be adequately represented in the next generation.²⁰⁴

Prime Minister Lee's view of women's role was patriarchal and conservative, believing that women should be homemakers and mothers:

Equal employment opportunities, yes, but we shouldn't get our women into jobs where they cannot, at the same time, be mothers... You just can't be doing a full-time heavy job like that of a doctor or engineer and run a home and bring up children.²⁰⁵

The inherent contradictions in the government's economic and social priorities is clearly illustrated in the above two excerpts. While the government needed to tap on the female labour force, it also wanted, at the same time to maintain women's traditional domestic role. Dr Tony Tan, the then Minister of Trade and Industry

²⁰³ Lee Kuan Yew, "The Education of Women and Patterns of Procreation", excerpts of speech by Mr Lee Kuan Yew delivered at the National Day Cultural Show and Rally in Singapore, reproduced in *RIHED bulletin*, 10, 3 (Jul-Sep 1983), p. 7.

²⁰⁴ Ibid. [Emphasis added]

²⁰⁵ "Talent for the Future", *Straits Times*, 15 Aug 1983.

summed up the dual objectives of the government in the following unapologetic manner:

Some Members feel that the government is a little bit confused and does not know what it wants: whether educated women should stay at home, have children, bring up their families, or go to work and contribute to the economy. The answer is, of course, we want both.²⁰⁶

Notwithstanding the economic imperative of having more educated women in the workforce, the conservative gender ideology espoused by the Prime Minister in 1983 seemed to be shared by a number of male PAP members. For example, Prof S. Jayakumar, Acting Minister for Labour in 1984, suggested that women should stop working to care for their children till they grew older:

When it comes to married women with young children working full-time, it will inevitably affect their ability to give that much care and attention to inculcate the right values amongst the children. There are some who may be able to cope both with a full-time job and with raising young children, but not all can. For those who cannot, perhaps they should stop working while the children are young and rejoin the labour force when the children are older or to do part-time work.²⁰⁷

Another Member of Parliament, Mr Lim Boon Heng also espoused the view that pursuing a career lands a woman “in direct conflict with her *natural instinct for motherhood*.”²⁰⁸ It is evident that many PAP members held conservative views about the role of women in society.

In the 1980s, therefore, there was a debate between the conservative and more progressive PAP members on the role of women, especially the better-educated women. What is evident is the dominance of a notion of domesticity as the natural and primary role of women. This domestic ideology in the discourse of the 1980s

²⁰⁶ Singapore, *Parliamentary Debates: Official Report*, 43 (12 Mar 1984), col. 864.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, col. 1414.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, col. 799. [Emphasis added]

thus became translated into an important education policy with emphasis being placed on preparing girls for their ‘primary’ role in life.

In 1984, the MOE announced its intention to make the study of home economics (previously called domestic science) compulsory for lower secondary girls from 1985.²⁰⁹ With this decision, lower secondary girls no longer had the option to take technical studies. Lower secondary boys did not have to take home economics but instead continued with technical workshop practice. This differentiation in curriculum reflects the state’s concern that girls should be ‘feminine’. The skills of cooking, sewing and looking after babies became highlighted as important and desirable feminine abilities.²¹⁰ This was a policy reversal from the earlier emphasis on technical education for girls and preparing girls to take on ‘blue collar’ jobs. The economic imperative of the 1960s and 1970s to produce the skilled labour for a newly industrialized nation was no longer significant and in the 1980s, the government began to focus more on social concerns.

The stress on preserving traditional notions of femininity in girls was discernible in a speech by Dr Tay Eng Soon, the Minister of State for Education, at the 50th anniversary celebrations of St Nicholas Girls’ School:

Girls are as active in computer clubs as boys – 43% of the members are girls. On the other hand, only 12% of girls take domestic science subjects at ‘O’ level.... Girls even join NCC (National Cadet Corps) — nearly one in four of the land NCC cadets are girls. I have always been puzzled why girls are attracted to the NCC when there are other groups such as Girls Guides and Girls Brigade.... But girls should be girls. What about schools encouraging and catering more for their feminine interests? For example, music, art, ballet, literature, etc.²¹¹

²⁰⁹ “Cooking a ‘Must’ for the Girls”, *Straits Times*, 9 Sep 1984.

²¹⁰ The home economics syllabuses and codes of femininity that are transmitted through the home economics texts will be discussed further in the following chapter.

²¹¹ “Speech by Dr Tay Eng Soon, Minister of State for Education, 3 Sep 1983”, Singapore Government Press Release, 06/Sep 06-3/83/09/03.

Such was the state's concept of 'femininity'. There was evidently a reversal of the earlier policy of building a rugged society. In the 1960s and 1970s, a lot of stress was placed on extra-curricular activities. Girls were encouraged to be as strong and rugged as boys and NCC and NPCC units for girls were set up for this purpose.²¹² Suddenly in the 1980s, these were deemed unsuitable for girls. The notions of a rugged society, strength of character and physical robustness that were catch phrases in the 1960s became irrelevant. In its place was a policy to 'feminize' girls and schools were exhorted to mount enrichment programs to achieve this. The above speech signalled a return to a traditional construct of femininity that emphasized gentility and proficiency in the arts such as literature, music and dance.

It should be noted that Dr Tay Eng Soon, who helmed the Education Ministry as Minister of State for many years, was also a staunch Christian and inevitably, his gender ideology was influenced by his religious belief. Traditional Christian teaching prescribes social codes regarding women's roles, behaviour and often keeps women in a subordinate relationship with men.²¹³ The religious influence in his gender ideology can be seen in his discourse on girls when he lamented that girls' schools seemed no different from boys' schools, adding that girls' schools should focus on more 'feminine' activities so as to prepare girls for their future 'natural' role in life:

...most of your students will one day marry and become mothers regardless of their academic achievements or careers. *This is their natural and proper role in life.* My question is: Do schools, especially girls' schools, recognize this fact? If so, do they have a role in

²¹² The promotion of participation in uniformed groups and other physical activities was discussed earlier in pp. 70-72.

²¹³ Bridget Walker, "Christianity, Development and Women's Liberation", *Gender and Development*, 7:1 (Mar 1999), p. 15.

preparing their girls for marriage and motherhood later on, to realize that this is as important and worthwhile as being a career woman?²¹⁴

The emphasis on girls' natural and proper role in life as wives and mothers is a reflection of Dr Tay's personal belief, but, given his key ministerial appointment, it is, at the same time, an example of state hegemonic discourse aimed at influencing the construction of a traditional femininity in the school.

It is reasonable to surmise that the Ministry of Education's decision to make home economics compulsory for girls in 1985 was a result of the warning signal by Prime Minister Lee about the changes in demographic structure and procreation patterns of educated women. It was surely part of the overall change in policies designed to make girls more feminine and attractive to the male gender.

The public reaction to the announcement of compulsory home economics for girls was unexpectedly vociferous. For the first time, an announcement of the differentiated curriculum for girls and boys resulted in loud protests. A petition signed by 428 people urged the MOE to re-think its policy and "open home economics to all students and let girls have the choice of doing technical training at the lower secondary level."²¹⁵ Besides arguing that girls will lose out on technical education, the petition also expressed that "such skills as cooking, sewing, child-minding, budgeting and running the home must not be treated as naturally feminine characteristics," and that boys should also be made to study home economics.²¹⁶ Despite the petition, the Ministry of Education pushed forward with its policy, showing the uncompromising stance of the ruling elite on its perception of 'feminine traits' and what girls' education should consist of.

²¹⁴ "Speech by Dr Tay Eng Soon, Minister of State for Education, 3 Sep 1983", Singapore Government Press Release, 06/Sep 06-3/83/09/03. [Emphasis added]

²¹⁵ "428 Petition Against Compulsory Home Econs", *Straits Times*, 24 Nov 1984.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

The Parliamentary Secretary (Education) Mr Ho Kah Leong explained that the policy of not allowing boys to do home economics was because of a lack of facilities and teachers and not because it was sexist.²¹⁷ However, it took the Ministry more than a decade to finally build enough facilities and train enough teachers to implement home economics for all lower secondary students.²¹⁸ This delay is unusual for a country noted for its efficiency and reflects more clearly the low priority placed on this by the government. In fact, when pressed for the reason why the home economics option would surely be given to boys, Mr Ho Kah Leong replied that the best cooks and hairdressers in the world were males.²¹⁹ The superior male attitude is evident in this response. What can be further adduced from such a statement is that giving such an option to boys would have been the result of a pragmatic economic consideration rather than a genuine acceptance of changes in gender roles in Singapore and this again reflects the largely economic underpinning of policy decisions in education.

In the same period when the PAP leaders were focused on feminizing girls, there was also a concurrent effort to toughen boys. In 1981, Dr Goh Keng Swee, the Deputy Prime Minister and Education Minister announced that the NCC curricula was being revamped to provide very rigorous training for boys so as to make them physically very tough and fit.²²⁰ Reservist teachers, particularly those with good military records were to be the NCC instructors. Dr Goh dismissed a suggestion that women teachers could be NCC instructors with these words:

²¹⁷ “Boys Should Also Do Home Econs: Ministry”, *Straits Times*, 27 Nov 1984.

²¹⁸ “Home Econs, Technical Studies for Secondary Students from ’97”, *Straits Times*, Aug 31, 1993.

²¹⁹ “Boys Should Also Do Home Econs: Ministry”, *Straits Times*, 27 Nov 1984.

²²⁰ “NCC to Toughen the Boys in Land Units”, *Straits Times*, 6 Sep 1981.

This army thing is an unpleasant business. It's not a parade, turning out toy soldiers. We're turning out fighters. It's very unpleasant business, very dirty business.²²¹

This excerpt reflects again, the conservative concept that government leaders had of women and femininity. To them, women are weak and would not be able to withstand the rough and tough training of the army and should not be expected to do so as that is “dirty work.”

At the same time that the boys' curriculum was made more rigorous, the curriculum for girls in NCC was also revised to focus on campcraft, field cooking, first aid and nursing – all of which are extensions of women's traditional domestic and nurturing roles.²²² Interestingly, in 1982, female cadets expressed dissatisfaction with this revised curriculum, claiming that it was too ‘soft’.²²³ This reaction shows that the earlier emphasis on a rugged generation had succeeded and the attempt to reverse such a policy was not very successful, despite the conservative views of members of the government.

Discord II, 1988 – 2000: Different Responses to Increasing Feminist Pressure

Unlike the discourse in the earlier period which focused fairly consistently on feminizing girls, the discourse between 1988 to 2000 became discordant again as government leaders vacillated between exhorting women to take on more technical vocations and emphasizing the importance of women's role in the home — the result of the state trying to balance the two conflicting goals of economic development and maintaining the traditional social framework.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² “Speech by Dr Tay Eng Soon, Minister of State for Education at the NCC Day Dinner at Cathay Restaurant on 4 Jul 1981”, Singapore Government Press Release, 06-2/81/07/04, and “NCC to Toughen the Boys in Land Units”, *Straits Times*, 6 Sep 1981.

²²³ “Girls Find New Cadet Corps Programme ‘Soft’”, *Straits Times*, 26 Sep 1982.

One outcome of the MOE policy of curriculum differentiation was a dearth of applicants for engineering courses at the university. Dr Tony Tan, the Minister for Education, lamented in Parliament in 1988 that there had been a shortfall of students for admission into engineering courses in 1986 and 1987. In 1987, for example, only 1150 places of the 1230 available places in the National University of Singapore (NUS) were filled, even after admitting some “marginal students”.²²⁴ Commenting on this shortfall, a *Straits Times* editorial pointed out that female students could have filled these vacancies. The traditional stereotype of the engineering profession being a male preserve should be eradicated and female students persuaded to opt for this profession or Singapore would suffer:

The result of Singapore’s female students shying away from the engineering faculty is to deny it half the country’s talent, which must mean fewer or poorer quality engineers. If Singapore were to succeed in the world of high-tech industries, this cannot be allowed to continue.²²⁵

As Singapore restructured its economy in the 1980s and 1990s to move into more high-tech industries specializing in product design, research and development, the need for engineers became more acute. Despite the discourse since the 1960s that encouraged girls to pursue technical vocations, the number who did so was still too few. In the late 1980s, therefore, the National University of Singapore and Nanyang Technological Institute took additional measures such as conducting career talks and seminars to woo female students to join engineering courses.²²⁶ Dr Tay Eng Soon commented that women’s reluctance to study technical subjects was depriving Singapore of much-needed technical workers and supported these efforts to recruit

²²⁴ Singapore, *Parliamentary Debates: Official Report*, 50:4 (21 Mar 1988), cols 1100-1101.

²²⁵ “Also for Women”, *Straits Times*, 13 Apr 1988.

²²⁶ “Engineering Faculty Out to Woo More Girls”, *Business Times*, 7 Apr 1988 & “Seminar on Engineering for Girls”, *Straits Times*, 2 May 1988.

more women engineers.²²⁷ The inconsistency in gender messages in the PAP discourse is seen here for it was Dr Tay Eng Soon who, while espousing the virtues of traditional femininity and the natural role of women, was also encouraging more girls to enrol in engineering courses.

An editorial in the *Business Times* pointed out these inconsistencies and added that exhortations alone were insufficient to persuade more girls into engineering professions:

The Education Ministry needs to work at removing stereotyped depictions of male and female roles from school textbooks. It needs also to reconsider its boys only for technical studies and girls only for home economics courses policy in the lower secondary classes. The message that the world of technology is wide open to women needs to be put across long before young Singaporeans enter university.²²⁸

Responsibility for the dearth of engineers was thus put squarely on MOE. Its policy of gender stereotyping and curriculum differentiation in its attempt to make girls feminine had had the unintended ramification of stereotyping professions as ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’. This indictment of MOE policy shows up the government’s outmoded values and the inherent contradictions in its policies that had hindered the achievement of its objectives.

That the government’s values were outmoded was, however, refuted by Prime Minister Lee who, in 1990, asserted that male attitudes had to change so that women could successfully play their roles as wives, mothers and wage-earners.²²⁹ He claimed that the Government had been ahead of society when they provided equal educational opportunities for women in the 1960s:

²²⁷ “Speech by Dr Tay Eng Soon, Minister of State for Education, at the opening of the Technology Month at the Pavilion Inter-Continental Hotel on Thursday, 1 Oct 1987”, Singapore Government Press Release, 02/Oct, 06-2/87/10/01.

²²⁸ “Drawing on Womanpower”, *Business Times*, 15 Apr 1988.

²²⁹ “Men’s Attitudes as Husbands, Fathers Must Change: PM”, *Straits Times*, 2 Jul 1990.

But there was no doubt that the Government had moved faster than our people were culturally prepared for. Hence the problems we have of large numbers of unmarried educated women.... We could not change the cultural attitudes of men as fast as we were dismantling the old system, which kept women subordinate in the economy.²³⁰

The government was thus portrayed as being more progressive than society. But throughout the years, from 1959 to 1990, there had been little attempt to alter cultural attitudes in the first place. There was simply the lame acknowledgement that society's values were still traditional and that "[t]his change in social attitudes cannot come by legislation. Such adjustments should be allowed to develop naturally."²³¹ Moreover, at the same time, discriminatory practices and policies such as compulsory Home Economics for girls, medical benefits for male civil servants and the quota on female medical students had reinforced traditional perceptions of women's place in society. Instead of dismantling the old system, the PAP's discourse and policies seemed to have propped it up. The government's values too had been lagging behind.

Prime Minister Lee added that it was not easy for his government to effect attitudinal changes but that this was necessary:

However we must bring them about if we are to have a balanced society where women have a more equal role in the economy and men play a *nearly equal role* in the home and the bringing up of children.²³²

It is ironic that this statement should be made almost thirty years after the enactment of the *Women's Charter* in 1961 which had promulgated that men and women should have equal rights and responsibilities in running the household. It is an admission of the stagnation of socio-cultural attitudes towards the role of women. These attitudes

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ This comment was made by Mr Lee in a speech in 1975. See pp. 77-78.

²³² "Men's Attitudes as Husbands, Fathers Must Change: PM", *Straits Times*, 2 Jul 1990. [Emphasis added]

towards gender roles would probably have developed more rapidly if the state had done more to change them. Instead, official discourse in the past had emphasized the important role played by women in the home and the need to preserve traditional society. At the same time, policies introduced in the education system continued to emphasize the femininity of girls and their future roles as wives and mothers. All these worked to fossilize patriarchal values.

The economic motivation behind the Prime Minister's speech is evident. Male attitudes had to change to enable women to successfully juggle their roles at home and at work. A balanced society was perceived as one where women would play an equal role in society but men, a "nearly" equal role in the home. This seems to indicate a reluctance to completely relinquish the traditional model of male superiority in the home.

Following the Prime Minister's lead, the MOE announced in 1991 that home economics and design and technology would be compulsory for all secondary school students. All students entering the Normal (Technical) course at Secondary One in 1994 would have to take crafts and technology, which was a combination of art and craft, home economics and design and technology. Eventually all students in the Special, Express and Normal (Academic) courses would also have to learn both home economics and design and technology.²³³ Announcing this, the Minister of State for Education, Dr Seet Ai Mee explained that Singapore's changing socio-economic norms meant that men and women would have to play complementary roles in managing the home:

In the past, Mother stayed at home while Father went to work. Mother looked after the children and saw to all the household chores... The

²³³ "Home Economics a Must for Sec 1 Pupils from 1994", *Straits Times*, 11 Jul 1991.

norm these days is that both Father and Mother have full time jobs. Because of this, both have to play complementary roles in bringing up the children and managing the home... A home economics programme for boys and girls will pave the way towards shared responsibility in the home...²³⁴

This new discourse reflects a change in official thinking about the role of women in Singapore. Shared responsibility had been in the official discourse as early as 1961 in the *Women's Charter*, the encouragement of women to go out to work had begun in the early 1960s, yet subsequent government discourse had continued to emphasize the need to preserve traditional society in which women should play the key role in the home. This policy to include in the school curriculum the training of boys and girls for shared responsibility in the home was thirty years late in implementation.

The response from some members of the public to this change in policy is an indication of how society had progressed faster than PAP officials' expectations. A senior executive, Mr Chan Hock Soon, when informed of this change, was reported to have welcomed the move:

It's high time men learnt to share equal responsibility with women. I would like my son to go through home economics. When he grows up it'll be a plus for his wife.²³⁵

Mr Chan had shared the housework equally with his wife in the days before he employed a maid. This implies that members of the public, unlike government officials, had already recognized the need for a change in attitudes and had accommodated such changes. A *Sunday Times* editorial with a telling headline, 'Enlightened at last', criticized the MOE for its past policy:

²³⁴ "Speech by Dr Seet Ai Mee, Acting Minister for Community Development at the opening of the Home Economics and the Environment Exhibition held in the Conference Hall on 10 Jul 1991", Singapore Government Press Release, 21/Jul, 04-1/91/07/10.

²³⁵ "Home Economics a Must for Sec 1 Pupils from 1994", *Straits Times*, 11 Jul 1991.

By insisting in 1984 that girls could take only home economics where they previously could choose between that and technical studies, the Education Ministry was trying to force the sexes into stereotypes that were completely out-of-date in an age when women were not only going out to work but encouraged to do so.... The ministry apparently felt that one reason [for the number of unmarried graduate women] was that girls were becoming too much like boys and felt it had to rectify this by ensuring that girls did not dissipate their time on manly stuff like technical education and that they concentrate instead on learning to be good wives and mothers.... The tactic was ...retrograde...²³⁶

The press therefore accurately pointed out that it was MOE that was “retrograde” or anachronistic and not Singapore society, as previously suggested by Prime Minister Lee. Two local social researchers, Lily Kong and Jasmine Chan viewed this change in policy as “an indication that the state has recognized that the economic cost of this patriarchal division is too high, and as such, patriarchy must give way to pragmatism.”²³⁷ Giving lower secondary girls an exposure to technical education was tacit recognition that it was necessary to prepare them to contribute to Singapore’s economic move into a higher technology. At the same time, making boys take home economics was a clear acknowledgement that to maintain women in the workforce, the men would have to have a greater share in the responsibilities at home.²³⁸

The change in policy of not differentiating curriculum between the sexes was fully implemented by 1998 when home economics as well as design and technology were studied by both boys and girls in the express and special streams.²³⁹ This marked a step forward as subjects are no longer identified as gender-specific and girls and boys alike are expected to study home economics and design and technology. Since the late 1980s, there was also a greater awareness of the need to eradicate

²³⁶ “Enlightened At Last”, *The Sunday Times*, 14 Jul 1991.

²³⁷ Lily Kong & Jasmine Chan, “Patriarchy and Pragmatism: Ideological Contradictions in State Policies”, in *Asian Studies Review*, 24:4 (Dec 2000), p. 524.

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ “Boys-,Girls- Only Courses Open to All”, *Straits Times*, 30 Mar 1996.

gender stereotyping in school textbooks. In 1987 the MOE had announced that locally-produced textbooks would be updated to reflect the government's new family policy.²⁴⁰ This revision of textbooks was yet another step forward for gender equality as the government began to use a multi-pronged approach to eradicate gender differentiation in the school system.²⁴¹

The change in policy by the MOE, however, did not seem to permeate through all government quarters. Mr Goh Chok Tong, who succeeded Mr Lee Kuan Yew as Prime Minister in late 1990, set the government back again when he asserted in 1993 that "it is not possible, nor is it wise to have total sex equality in all areas."²⁴² In his speech, he reiterated the official stance that Singapore society should retain its patriarchal structure:

Most societies are organized in such a way that there is a clear male or female line of authority, descent and inheritance. In a few, it is the women who are dominant, but in most, it is the men. In matriarchal societies, the men accept that the women are more equal. In a largely patriarchal society, minor areas where women are not accorded the same treatment should be expected so long as the welfare of women and of the family is protected. I would not regard them as "pockets of discrimination" or "blemishes" but as traditional areas of differential treatment.²⁴³

This discourse seemed to be a step backward from the progress made in the 1990 and 1991 speeches. Despite recognition of the need for men to help out in the home, the official mindset on patriarchy had apparently not changed.

²⁴⁰ "Textbooks to be updated to reflect new family policy", *Straits Times*, 20 Aug 1987.

²⁴¹ The issue of gender bias in textbooks and textbook revision will be examined in greater detail in Chapter Four.

²⁴² "Speech by Prime Minister Mr Goh Chok Tong at the People's Action Party (PAP) Women's Wing Book Launching Ceremony of 'Singapore Women' and 'A Woman's Place' at the Mandarin Ballroom, Mandarin Hotel on Sunday, 13 June 1993", Singapore Government Press Release, 15/Jun, 02-1/93/06/13.

²⁴³ Ibid.

One major area of differential treatment that Prime Minister Goh was referring to was the issue of female civil service officers' medical benefits. While male officers had medical benefits extended to their spouses and dependent children, the same treatment was not given to female officers. Dr Richard Hu, the Finance Minister defended this policy thus:

The reason for this is not the cost of extending equal benefits to women, but the principle that in our Asian society the husband is the head of the household. It is his responsibility to look after the family's needs, including their medical needs. This is how our society is structured. It would be unwise to tamper with this structure.²⁴⁴

This defense was reinforced in 1994 by Prime Minister Goh's National Day Rally speech in which he further elaborated on Singapore's need to maintain a patriarchal society:

Women's groups have pressed the government to change the Civil Service rule on medical benefits for family members of female officers. The Cabinet has discussed this several times and is reluctant to do so. Changing the rule will alter the balance of responsibility between man and woman in the family. Asian society has always held the man responsible for the child he has fathered. He is the primary provider, not his wife.... I am not saying that woman is inferior to man and must play a subservient role. I believe women should have equal opportunities and men should help out at home, looking after babies, cleaning the house and washing dishes. But we must hold the man responsible for the child he has fathered, otherwise we will change for the worse a very basic sanction of Asian society...²⁴⁵

By trying to make a difference between responsibility (the man being responsible for providing for the family) and gender equality in the home (the woman is not inferior to man) the Prime Minister was reconstructing patriarchy to suit the government's purposes of encouraging women to participate in the labour market and yet maintain

²⁴⁴ Singapore, *Parliamentary Debates: Official Report*, 61 (11 Nov 1993), cols 1012-1013.

²⁴⁵ "Prime Minister's National Day Rally Speech, 21 August 1994", Singapore Government Press Release, 49/August, 20-1/94/08/21.

an ideology of domesticity in women. Yet, by giving medical benefits only to the man of the house, the government had created a power balance and hence, inequality, in the home. Official discourse and policy were expressly intended to preserve the balance in favour of men. Such values continue to be held by government leaders and taught to young citizens:

*Because we uphold tried and tested traditional values and inculcate them in our young, we are a different society... We have a built-in set of traditional values that have made our families strong. These values are tried and tested and have held us together, and propelled us forward. We must keep them as the bedrock of our society for the next century.*²⁴⁶

This then, was the uncompromising stance of the new leader of the PAP government with regard to traditional values in society. Such patriarchal values, although criticized as outmoded and regressive, continue to be held up as the cultural ballast of our society that would see Singapore through even in the 21st century. The new Prime Minister thus appeared to be contradicting earlier discourse by the previous Prime Minister on the need for values to change. It was also in conflict with MOE's revised policy of non-gender differentiation in the curriculum.

The contradictions in state discourse is again seen in 1995, when a PAP leader was espousing that education and training was “the key to widen women’s role and improve their status in society.”²⁴⁷ Speaking as head of the Singapore delegation to the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women, Mr Abdullah Tarmugi informed the conference that Singapore had provided equal opportunities for education for all in schools and tertiary institutions. This policy, according to him, had resulted in an increase in women’s literacy rate, parity of enrolment between the

²⁴⁶ Ibid.[Emphasis added]

²⁴⁷ “Education and Training Vital, says Abdullah”, *Straits Times*, 7 Sep 1995.

two sexes in schools and an increase in female enrolment in institutions of higher learning.²⁴⁸ He added that Singapore, being a country without natural resources, was dependent on human resources and therefore deeply committed to developing every citizen to his or her fullest potential. Notably therefore, the given reason for educating women was again the imperative of economic survival.

Further evidence of the dissonance in government discourse can be seen in 1996 when it was proposed by some quarters that Part VII of the *Women's Charter* be amended to allow a husband to claim maintenance from the wife. This proposal was made in view of the changed socio-economic context and the economic progress made by Singapore women.²⁴⁹ The Select Committee looking into amendments to the Charter however, eventually rejected it.²⁵⁰ By this provision in the Charter, the husband is responsible for providing for the wife but not vice versa. In cases of divorce, for example, the man has to pay for wife and child maintenance, but he cannot claim maintenance from the wife even if the wife earns a higher salary than the man. Despite the progress made by women in the economic sphere, the PAP government was not willing to acknowledge the changes in the social and family structure and alter its concept of the place and role of women in Singapore.

This period thus saw a gradual move towards less differentiation in curriculum as a result of a changing society that was becoming more modern and liberated in outlook. The need for more women in the traditionally male-dominated occupations such as engineering forced the government to re-think its policy of gender differentiating the curriculum. However, Asian patriarchy continued to be highlighted

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ "Should wives maintain husbands?", *Straits Times*, 28 Aug 1996.

²⁵⁰ "Panel rejects idea of men claiming maintenance", *Straits Times*, 17 Aug 1996.

in the discourse of leaders such as the Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong, hence the tensions and discordance.

Conflicting Goals, Discordant Discourse

State discourse between 1966 to the 1970s initially served to challenge traditional cultural structures of thinking by promoting women's equality with men. This was the result of economic imperatives of increasing the labour force. The PAP leaders initially tried to re-define traditional feminine traits by encouraging and providing opportunities for girls to become as tough and robust as boys. There was also an attempt to break gender stereotypes by encouraging girls to take on technical jobs that were traditionally perceived to be for males only. By the early 1980s, however, the discourse had altered somewhat to one of male hegemony and perpetuation of the patriarchal status quo. The promotion of Confucian Ethics in Singapore was a clear indication of this patriarchal stance and PAP speeches began to take on a veneer of parochialism. Subsequently, there was an increasing tendency to use patriarchy and the need to maintain this social framework for stability in Singapore to justify their policies and interference in social and gender issues. Yet, pragmatism ruled that equal opportunities for women in education and employment had to be given in order to achieve and maintain economic development. The dissonance in the discourse of the PAP leaders was the result of inherent contradictions in these two goals, viz., economic progress and the maintenance of patriarchy.

Despite the apparent discord in the public speeches, there is a consistency in PAP's policy towards achieving these two goals. The PAP's support for girls' education was not premised on any ideological belief in gender equality but on a

pragmatic approach to economic development. Educational and employment opportunities were provided insofar as these supported the achievement of the twin goals. When such opportunities threatened either of the goals, these privileges were withdrawn. This can be seen in policy decisions such as medical benefits being given for the dependants of only male civil servants so as not to undermine the patriarchal structure of society and the imposition of a quota on female medical students when it was seen to be economically imprudent to give equal opportunities in that area. In both instances, monetary and social considerations are of primary importance.

For twenty-three years such a restriction was placed on the admission of female medical students into the university. It was only on 19 January 2002, that the Health Ministry announced that it would review the quota on intake of female medical students. Two days later, the Health Minister, Lim Hng Kiang stated that the quota might be lifted if medical students paid for their own studies. According to him, the government subsidized 80% of the half a million dollars needed over five years to train a medical doctor, hence the need for the quota and for careful choice of candidates. The Ministry of Health finally lifted the quota in December 2002 after a review of the healthcare situation. The dropout rate of male and female doctors had narrowed and there was a growing need for more specialist doctors in Singapore.²⁵¹ At the time when the quota was imposed, 16% to 19% of female doctors from each cohort would leave the profession, compared to 5% to 8% of males. This gap had narrowed to about 14% of female compared to 9% of male doctors leaving the profession. At the same time, there was a need for more doctors because of the ageing population, the rise in population resulting from an increasing number of

²⁵¹ "Lifted: Quota on Women in Medicine", *Straits Times*, 6 Dec 2002.

immigrants and Singapore's move into the life sciences.²⁵² The Health Minister added that Singapore had more resources and therefore could afford to be more liberal. The reasons cited for the lifting of the quota were thus, pragmatic economic ones, with no mention of the social effects of women doctors not being able to play their roles of doctor, wife and mother.²⁵³

As noted in Chapter One, recent feminist writings have criticized the belief about the empowerment of women through education. A pertinent question to ask of girls' education in Singapore is whether girls are being schooled for subordination or educated for empowerment. In our discussion of the discourse and policies of the PAP, the former appears to be the case in Singapore. The concern of the state was not so much to empower women as to enable them to contribute to the development of the nation. The provision of education for girls was thus based on very pragmatic economic considerations. At the same time the education system is used by the state to reinforce traditional values of patriarchy rather than educate women to challenge and overturn the established social framework. This will be seen more clearly in the examination of the open and hidden curriculum in chapters four and five.

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ This was the reason given in 1979. See abstract of speech and earlier discussion on pp. 79-82.

CHAPTER FOUR

GENDERED CURRICULUM: SOCIALIZATION IN TRADITIONAL FEMININITY

As discussed in Chapter One, the transmission of a “selective tradition” takes place in school and, in studying the interconnections between ideology and curriculum, one key area of school life that needs to be examined is the curriculum. Scholars in the field of curriculum continue to debate on definitions of this term. For the purpose of this study, the curriculum is defined as “the formal and informal content and process by which learners gain knowledge and understanding, develop skills, and alter attitudes, appreciations, and values under the auspices of [the] school.”²⁵⁴ The formal or planned curriculum, includes the learning derived from subjects offered on the school timetable, information in the instructional material, and formal co-curricular activities planned and offered in school. The informal or ‘hidden’ curriculum includes varied experiences such as that derived from the school’s disciplinary procedures, interactions between teachers and students within and outside of classrooms, from peer interactions of students and student perceptions of the school’s organizational structure.²⁵⁵

The curriculum is a vital means by which desired cultural and social norms and expectations are transmitted to the young to prepare them for their future adult role.²⁵⁶ Curricular policies are often derived from national objectives and official ideologies. The curriculum reflects the critical knowledge, skills and values that the state perceives as important for children to acquire. Thus, the desired knowledge,

²⁵⁴ Ronald C. Doll, *Curriculum Improvement: Decision Making and Process* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1996), p. 15.

²⁵⁵ One aspect of the ‘hidden’ curriculum, namely, school disciplinary processes will be discussed in Chapter Five.

²⁵⁶ Sheila I. Riddell, *Gender and the Politics of the Curriculum* (London: Routledge), 1992, p. 1.

social values and perceptions of gender roles, femininity and masculinity are transmitted and reinforced within the curriculum offered by the school.

The MOE's policy of curriculum differentiation for male and female students in the form of home economics for girls and technical studies for boys has already been discussed in the previous chapter. This chapter, which focuses on the gender ideologies that are reflected and embedded in the formal school curriculum, is divided into three sections. The first section examines the gender codes embedded in home economics syllabuses and textbooks used in the period from 1959 to 2000. This will unveil the concepts of femininity held by curriculum developers and textbook writers of the period. Following up on this, the second section is a content analysis of gender representations in some school texts and a discussion of the implicit gender messages in these representations. The final section focuses on the state's curriculum policy of providing a modern scientific education and examines the extent to which such a policy has altered gender ideologies among girls and broken occupational stereotypes resulting in more girls entering into traditionally male-dominated occupations in the technical and engineering fields.

It should be noted from the outset that the school curriculum is not static. It changes over time in response to factors such as fluctuating economic requirements, shifting ideologies of political leaders, altered cultural and social norms and, also the varying consciousness of those who teach and learn. These changes would necessarily have an impact on the construction of gender identity and thus, it is useful to examine curricula over time to see the changes and continuities in policies and gender ideologies that are transmitted in the school.

Policy of Curriculum Differentiation: Home Economics to Preserve Patriarchy

In examining school curricula, it is important to study state policies regarding basic core curricula provided to all students and subject options offered in schools. The PAP government was well aware of the important role of the school in social reproduction. PAP leaders saw education as a key means by which the reproduction of state ideology took place. In this way, children would be socialized to accept the prevailing values and attitudes, and thus continue to maintain the hegemony of the state. In order to inculcate the desired values in all children, the PAP took immediate steps upon assumption of power, to bring about greater state control over education. This included creating a more integrated school system and streamlining the curricula of all schools in the four language streams. A Textbook Advisory Council was set up and under it, a Textbooks and Syllabus Committee was established to design syllabuses with common content for all schools.²⁵⁷ As a result, a common curriculum was drawn up for the different language streams and although there was a largely common curriculum for both boys and girls, there was a policy of curriculum differentiation in the form of domestic science for girls and technical studies for boys.

As discussed in Chapter One, traditional femininity is associated with domesticity and this has resulted quite often in girls' curricula including some form of training in domestic skills. Such was the case in studies of girls' education in England and Australia. For example, the ideal of the 'good woman' that characterized working class femininity in nineteenth century England resulted in a basic curriculum consisting of the 3 Rs (reading, writing and arithmetic) and practical utilitarian subjects such as sewing and knitting. The intention was to equip girls with skills that could be used both in the domestic situation as well as in forms of waged labour such

²⁵⁷ Ministry of Education, *Progress in Education, Singapore, 1959-1965* (Singapore: Ministry of Education, 1966), p. 10.

as domestic service or dressmaking.²⁵⁸ Similarly, in Western Australia, ‘domestic economy’ was a subject offered to upper primary girls in state schools. The curriculum included cooking, cleaning, care of children and the sick as well as home management, and was intended to prepare girls for their future roles in life.²⁵⁹

In Singapore, girls’ curriculum followed a similar pattern with its emphasis on training in domesticity. As discussed in Chapter Three, in the years from 1959 to 1994, the state’s gender ideology was reflected in the policy of curriculum differentiation between the two sexes in the form of compulsory study of home economics by lower secondary girls and technical studies by boys. The home economics syllabuses and instructional materials used over the period 1959 to 2000 will be examined here to provide an insight into the gender messages and concepts of femininity that were transmitted to girls over the years.

The study of domestic subjects by girls was not new in 1959. Some form of domestic studies had been included in the school curriculum for girls since the mid 1930s.²⁶⁰ At that time, it was known as domestic science and covered only cookery and needlework. For many who sent their girls to schools, the primary purpose then was to prepare them to be better wives and mothers and domestic science was perceived as an integral part of girls’ education. By 1951, domestic science could be offered as a subject in the Cambridge School Certificate Examinations. When the

²⁵⁸ June Purvis, “Social Class, Education and Ideals of Femininity in the Nineteenth Century”, in Madeleine Arnot & Gaby Weiner (eds.) *Gender, Politics and Schooling* (London: Hutchinson, 1987), p. 264.

²⁵⁹ Paige Porter, *Sociology of the School: Gender and Education* (Victoria: Deakin University, 1986), p. 22.

²⁶⁰ Soo Soon Imm, “History of Home Economics in Singapore”, an unpublished information paper written by a MOE curriculum officer who was responsible for the review and design of Home Economics curricula, c. 1994, p. 1.

PAP took office, it saw the importance of the subject for girls and the plans for school buildings in the 1960s included rooms and facilities for teaching it.²⁶¹

A syllabus document for domestic science was published in 1959 and re-issued in 1961 under the PAP government. It spelled out a six-year primary school needlework syllabus, a two-year combined general course, and a four-year secondary syllabus.²⁶² The syllabuses focused on training girls in practical domestic tasks such as needlework and laundrywork, with the objective of developing their manipulative skills [Table 4.1].

Table 4.1
Summary of Domestic Science Syllabuses, 1959

Years	Major Areas Of Study	Aims Of Syllabuses
1959- 1979	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Needlework 2. Health Education 3. Laundry Work 4. Cookery 5. Housewifery 	To train a girl to look after herself and her home in a sensible and economical manner. Emphasis is on practical application and development of high standard of manipulative skill.

Source: Summarized from Ministry of Education, *Syllabus for Domestic Science* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1959)

The primary school needlework syllabus, for example, outlined a six-year practical course comprising hand and machine sewing, knitting, embroidery, and smocking. As many girls in the 1960s left school at the end of Primary Six, the intention was to equip them with some basic skills in sewing, knitting and embroidery.

The traditional ideology of a domestic femininity and the conservative view towards education for girls is clear in the syllabus document. For example, the Director of Education, Lee Siow Mong, who was a man steeped in Chinese tradition and values, advocated that there should be a division of duties between men and

²⁶¹ Ibid.

²⁶² Ministry of Education, *Syllabus for Domestic Science* (Singapore: Ministry of Education, 1959).

women and that women's duties were located in the home.²⁶³ He argued that this should not be regarded as "separating the inferior from the superior, but rather as a division of a complete whole in home life."²⁶⁴ To support his argument, he drew an example from the Chinese classics:

... the ancient Chinese classics for girls says that a woman's work is not only drawing and embroidering but should include spinning and the preparation of flavourings for cooking and a host of other things for making the home a comfortable place, not only for herself, but for her family as well.²⁶⁵

Femininity was thus defined in traditional terms incorporating skills in the visual arts (drawing and embroidery) and home-making with the topics covered in the 1959 courses being designed to produce the ultimate idealized home-maker whose skills ranged from being able to cook, sew, embroider, maintain personal hygiene and cleanliness, look after the health and nutrition of family members, keep the house in good order, and even be a gracious hostess. Domestic science, paradoxically, was thus more an art than a science as it focused on practical skills rather than cognitive development.²⁶⁶

This perception of women's role as primarily that of homemakers is evident in the coursebooks used in that period. In one of the texts, *Comprehensive Domestic Science 1* for example, this role typecasting is seen in the Foreword:

Houses are very easily built and are coming up like mushrooms all over the country, but it takes a woman with the necessary knowledge and know-how to transform a house into a home.... It is hoped that with a little guidance and practice together with their inborn artistic

²⁶³ In his retirement years, he published some books on Chinese culture and traditions, notably, Lee Siow Mong, *Chinese Culture and Religion* (Singapore: Singapore Buddhist Mission, 1983) and *Spectrum of Chinese Culture* (Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications, 1986).

²⁶⁴ Ministry of Education, *Syllabus for Domestic Science* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1959), p. 1.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

ability, the present schoolgirls will grow up into a generation of house-proud and efficient housewives.²⁶⁷

A domestic femininity is reinforced in other ways in coursebooks, for example, the use of the female gender when referring to homemakers:

The amount of equipment required depends on the *housewife* and the amount of cooking *she* does, and the amount of storage space *she* has in *her* kitchen.²⁶⁸

This is also done through illustrations of only female figures carrying out household tasks such as cooking and washing dishes [Figure 4.1].

The femininity portrayed in these textbooks is thus associated with being able to cook, sew and keep house. At the same time, neatness, gentleness, hospitality, attention to personal grooming and hygiene are touted as important traits for girls to develop. The paragraph below taken from *Comprehensive Domestic Science 1* illustrates this:

Every girl wants to look beautiful, and though she may not be born beautiful she can make herself look her best. It is very important that every girl should take an interest in her personal appearance, for if she knows she is clean in person and is well-groomed, she can face the world with pride and confidence. As she grows up into a young lady, it is absolutely essential that she is clean and dainty at all times...²⁶⁹

The above paragraph typifies the kinds of exhortations to girls found in domestic science textbooks used in the period of the 1960s. Such exhortations also appear in coursebooks used in the 1970s. One section on 'Entertaining' informs girls that:

²⁶⁷ Lee Sook Ching & Seow Peng Kim, *Comprehensive Domestic Science Book 1* (Singapore: Federal Publications Sdn Bhd, 1968).

²⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 15. [Emphasis added]

²⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 2.

The homemaker should learn to play the part of the hostess while young. Whatever the occasion, casual or formal, she should learn to be calm and at ease, to be pleasant and hospitable to her guests.²⁷⁰

This is followed by guidelines on how to go about preparing to entertain, rules on hostessing and social etiquette. Such were the notions of femininity held by society of that time and transmitted through the textbooks.

Figure 4.1
Housework Shown as Female Activity



Illustrations are mostly of females doing household chores such as washing up.

Source: Hamidah Khalid & Siti Majhar (eds) *Home Economics Book 1* (Singapore: Longman Malaysia Sdn. Bhd, 1973).

There is very infrequent mention of career women and in two instances the term “housewives” is tagged on even when women are described as taking on paid employment outside the home:

- i) Working *housewives* should choose easily prepared meals.²⁷¹
- ii) With more *housewives* going out to work during the day, it has become more and more necessary to do the marketing once or twice a week.²⁷²

The expression, “working housewives” is an oxymoron as “housewives” are, by its very definition, expected to be home-bound and not working outside the home. This

²⁷⁰ Hamidah Khalid & Siti Majhar (eds.) *Home Economics Book 2* (Singapore: Longman Malaysia Sdn Bhd, 1973), p. 126.

²⁷¹ Hamidah Khalid & Siti Majhar (eds) *Home Economics Book 1* (Singapore: Longman Malaysia Sdn Bhd, 1973), p. 13.

²⁷² Lee Sook Ching & Seow Peng Kim, *Comprehensive Domestic Science Book 2* (Singapore: Federal Publications Sdn Bhd, 1968), p. 3.

is a reflection of the mindset of writers of that time who saw women's primary role as housewives whether or not they were also career women. The above examples show also the beginnings of a change in gender role ideology from a traditional one of women being located only in the home to a modern perception that women should play dual roles – that of housewife and wage earner.

Despite the acknowledgement of more women pursuing careers outside the home, the only female profession mentioned in the coursebooks is nursing:

The nurse must be patient, sympathetic and understanding, tactful and gentle in her dealings with the patient. She must be very observant and report accurately to the doctor.”²⁷³

This is a stereotyped image as female professions are often seen as extensions of their traditional domestic or nurturing roles. The above show that in the 1960s and 1970s, traditional patriarchal gender notions were conveyed in the domestic science curriculum. These reflected not just the gender ideology of the textbook writers but also societal perceptions of women's role of that time.

Between 1966 and 1980, no major changes were made to the domestic science syllabuses. There were some slight modifications, for example, pattern drafting was added in 1968 to the Needlework syllabus and improvements made to the cookery syllabus with the addition of a section on convenience food and an increased focus on nutrition. The Laundry, Health Education and Housewifery components were also later integrated under a single topic labelled Housecraft.²⁷⁴

In 1980 the New Education System was implemented and together with this, a new home economics syllabus was issued for lower and upper secondary levels. This New Education System revised the curricula of primary and secondary schools and

²⁷³ Ibid., p. 31.

²⁷⁴ Soo Soon Imm, “History of Home Economics in Singapore”, p. 3.

introduced streaming of pupils by ability. Some of the changes made included the removal of domestic science from the primary school curriculum except for the monolingual stream in primary seven and eight. Lower secondary girls continued to have a choice of either home economics or technical studies, a choice that was given in 1977. At the upper secondary level, home economics became an optional subject for girls and boys to be taken in the General Certificate of Education ‘Ordinary’ (GCE ‘O’) Level Examinations. Three options were offered at upper secondary level: Food and Nutrition, Fashion and Fabrics and General Housecraft. Candidates for the GCE ‘O’ Level Examinations offer only one of the three.

The 1980 lower secondary syllabus differed substantially from that of 1959 and 1961, in emphasis and content. A significant move away from the earlier emphasis on manipulative skills was made and the scope was broadened to include knowledge and skills for family living [Table 4.2].

Table 4.2
Summary of Lower Secondary Home Economics Syllabus, 1980

Year	Major Areas Of Study	Aims Of Syllabus
1980-1984	Family Life Food and Nutrition Fashion and Fabrics General Housecraft	To establish attitudes and values which will equip students to interact and react favourably in work situations and give meaning to personal and family living. To enable students to create a home and community environment conducive to healthy growth and development of family members and to give training in management of personal and family resources.

Source: Summarized from Ministry of Education, *Syllabus and Guidelines for Home Economics in Secondary Schools* (Singapore, Government Printers, 1980)

There was a distinct change in the focus of the subject, with emphasis being placed on management of personal and family resources, thus giving it a distinct economics-orientation. Family Life was made the core section of the 1980 lower secondary

syllabus. Although the stated intention was to “equip students to interact and react favourably in work situations,” a study of the topics shows that there was little content related to office-work situations and the scope of coverage was largely limited to the environment of the home. The goal of the syllabus appears to be to infuse values that would reinforce the importance of family living in girls. This was a reflection of the government’s increasing emphasis, in the 1980s, on preserving the cultural tradition of valuing the family as the basic unit of society. Such an emphasis was a reaction to the fear of societal breakdown because of the perceived influence from the ‘decadent’ West. It was this fear that also led to the introduction of Moral Education and Religious Knowledge into the curricula of primary and secondary schools as well as a general governmental attempt to Confucianize Singapore society in the 1980s.²⁷⁵

The 1980 syllabus differed from the earlier 1961 syllabus in that new topics such as The Family, Parents’ Role in the Family, Mothercraft, and even Facts of Life, which covered the physical development of the girl, including the onset of puberty and the menstrual cycle, were introduced. These topics, focusing only on girls’ physical development and girls’ roles in the home show the gender exclusivity of home economics education. The term ‘Mothercraft’ also reinforces the circumscription of childcare within the preserve of women.

As discussed in the previous chapter, in 1984, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew had expressed concern over the trend of an increasing number of well-educated women not marrying and well-educated married women not procreating sufficiently to replace themselves. Several schemes, including tax incentives and priority of school registration, were implemented to curb this trend and encourage more graduate

²⁷⁵ This attempt at Confucianization was discussed earlier in Chapter Three, pp. 83-85.

women to marry and have children.²⁷⁶ One outcome of this was a change of policy with regard to curriculum option for girls. In 1984, it was announced that girls would no longer have the option of either taking home economics or technical, an option given from 1977 to 1984. The Minister of State for Education, Dr Tay Eng Soon, in justifying the policy change, explained that “girls would gain more from Homec [sic] than from technical studies” and that “very few Singaporeans had housemaids and the responsibilities of running a home and bringing up children would fall heavily on women.”²⁷⁷ This policy change was part of an overall governmental push to ‘feminize girls’ as well as preserve the patriarchal family structure. The expectation that responsibilities for managing a home would fall on women’s shoulders reveals that government leaders in the 1980s still had a conservative gender ideology that saw women’s role as primarily a domestic one.

This resulted in a revised home economics syllabus for lower secondary girls in 1985 to take into account “the changing government policies regarding quality of population, family life and child development.”²⁷⁸ This revised syllabus was very similar in scope and content to the 1980 syllabus and was largely a consolidation and re-organization of topics under different headings. For example, General Housecraft (a major topic in the 1980 syllabus) was re-named Home Management and combined with Family Life. As a result, there were only three major topic areas in the 1985 syllabus [Table 4.3].

Significantly, this 1985 syllabus acknowledged the many roles women played in society, including their additional role in the nation’s economic development as

²⁷⁶ For more detailed discussions of this issue see Lenore Lyons-Lee, “The ‘Graduate Woman’ Phenomenon: Changing Constructions of the Family in Singapore”, *Sojourn*, 13:2 (1998), pp. 309-327 and Janadas Devan & Geraldine Heng, “State Fatherhood: The Politics of Nationalism, Sexuality and Race in Singapore”, in Andrew Parker, Mary Russo, Doris Sommer & Patricia Yaeger (eds.), *Nationalism and Sexualities* (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 195-215.

²⁷⁷ “Cooking a Must for the Girls”, *Straits Times*, 9 Sep 1984.

²⁷⁸ Soo Soon Imm, “History of Home Economics in Singapore”, p. 1.

‘wage-earners’ [Table 4.3]. The syllabus was intended to prepare girls to handle the complexities in “shared family life,” but what policy-makers meant by that term was unclear. “Shared family life” implies the participation of both sexes in maintaining the home as well as child-care but little in the syllabus touched on the roles of males in the home. Because boys were not made to study home economics, by implication, they were not expected to play a significant role in the home. Bearing in mind that the PAP’s concept of a stable family and society was and is built on a patriarchal ideology, the policy of compulsory home economics for girls can be interpreted as an attempt to teach girls to accept their place and preserve their own subjugation in society.

Table 4.3
Summary of Lower Secondary Home Economics Syllabus, 1985

Year	Major Areas Of Study	Aims Of Syllabus
1985-1993	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Family Life & Home Management 2. Food and Nutrition 3. Fabrics and Clothing 	<p>To prepare pupils for living in today’s world as well as to prepare them for their future roles as home-makers, parents, <i>wage-earners</i> and consumers. They will be made aware of ways to handle the complexities they are confronted with in <i>shared family life</i>, child care, nutrition, personal grooming, useful leisure pursuits and consumerism.</p>

Source: Summarized from Ministry of Education, *Syllabus and Guidelines for Home Economics in Secondary Schools* (Singapore, Government Printers, 1985) [Emphasis added]

Both the 1980 and 1985 syllabus documents pointed out the need to guide young people exposed to a variety of influences from the East and West, in determining and retaining important elements of our culture and traditions so as to preserve our family and society:

Traditional family lifestyles are now being challenged by a rapidly changing Singapore society brought about by improved

communication systems, tourism, urbanization, industrialization and innovative technology. Young people need guidance in developing an appreciation for the important elements of our culture and traditions in order to maintain a sense of values for the good of the family and society.²⁷⁹

As was discussed in the previous chapter, the discourse of the ruling elite in the 1980s showed their great concern about modern [western] values creeping into and “corrupting” Singapore society. This near-paranoia is reflected in the above abstract from the introduction to the 1985 home economics syllabus.

In the 1985 syllabus, even greater emphasis was placed on Family Life with particular stress on values and attitudes related to roles and responsibilities in the family and the management of family resources. Some topics covered in the area of Family Life included a discussion of the concept of family, family patterns and roles, relationships and responsibilities of family members. It is interesting to note that one stated learning outcome of the topic of Family Roles, Relationships and Responsibilities was that pupils would be able to give examples of how they could be useful family members who would serve the functions which the family demands.²⁸⁰ This stress on usefulness and serving the functions which the family demands was intended to inculcate values of subservience and obedience amongst schoolgirls. These are important values for preserving a patriarchal structure in society.

Other topics in Family Life included health habits, home management and parenting and child-care. Changes during the onset of puberty, menstrual hygiene, good grooming (including control of body odour and bad breath) and deportment, fitness and good posture and even how to care for costume accessories were covered under the topic of health habits. These are important aspects of a traditional concept

²⁷⁹ Ministry of Education, *Syllabus and Guidelines for Home Economics in Secondary Schools* (Singapore: Government Printers, 1985), p. 1.

²⁸⁰ Ministry of Education, *Syllabus and Guidelines for Home Economics in Secondary Schools*, p. 10.

of femininity. Topics in home management and child-care emphasized the role and responsibilities of girls in maintaining a clean and homely environment and looking after children.

The area of Fabrics and Clothing was de-emphasized and the content changed to reflect the changing lifestyle in Singapore society. There was no longer an emphasis on the skills of needlework and much of the content instead focused on intelligent consumerism since it was relatively cheap to purchase off-the-rack clothing in Singapore and few people sewed their own clothes anymore.²⁸¹ The availability and affordability of clothing and more women going out to work and thus having less time to spend on domestic work such as sewing, are indications of changes that were taking place in Singapore society in the 1980s. In spite of these social and economic changes, the gender ideology of a domestic femininity remained but was modified to include an economic role for women.

These social changes are seen in the textbooks used in that period. More gender-neutral terms are used, for example, 'home-maker' is used in place of 'housewife'. The tone is less didactic and there are no statements expressing what girls should be like, how girls should dress and behave. While the 1960s texts refer specifically to 'girls', the personal pronoun 'you' is used in the 1980s texts.²⁸² Some illustrations in the coursebooks, however, continue to perpetuate gender stereotypes. Pictures of women carrying out household tasks, such as washing dishes or pressing clothes are used. Two exceptions are noted. One is a picture of a man putting place settings at a dining table and the second, a more significant exception, is an illustration of a father tending to an infant, accompanied by a caption 'Fathering is

²⁸¹ Soo Soon Imm, "History of Home Economics in Singapore", p. 5.

²⁸² Refer to Hamidah Khalid & Siti Majhar, *New Home Economics Book 1*, 2nd edn. (Singapore: Longman, 1986).

just as important as mothering' [Figure 4.2].²⁸³ In this section, there is some discussion of the changing family roles and the need for fathers to help out in housework, especially if the mother is a co-earner. This is included in the topic of Family Living and that section of the text is a significant improvement as it explicitly discusses the need for family roles to change to keep pace with developments in society. This is evidence of progress in the thinking of the writers of these textbooks and a reflection of changing social values. The impact of this is lost, however, because males were not required to study this subject.

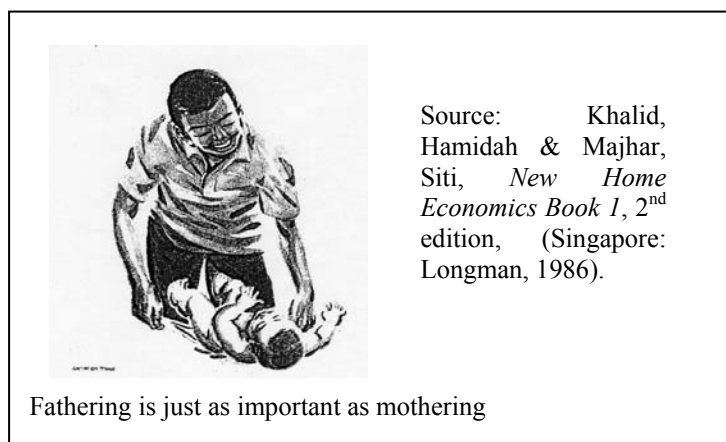
In 1991, a radical change in policy was made when the MOE announced that home economics and technical studies would be offered to all lower secondary students. The implementation of this policy change began with the introduction of crafts and technology which was a combination of art and craft, home economics and design and technology, to both boys and girls in the Normal (Technical) course.²⁸⁴ A new home economics syllabus for lower secondary students was designed and implemented in stages, beginning with boys in the Normal (Technical) stream in 1994, and slowly extending to boys in the other courses as facilities and teaching staff became available. Home economics for boys was fully implemented across all streams only in 1997.²⁸⁵

²⁸³ Ibid., p. 10.

²⁸⁴ A major review of the education system was carried out in the early 1990s. Following the review, the Improved Education System was implemented. Primary education was restructured to provide a four-year foundation stage, followed by a two-year orientation stage. At secondary level, a new, more technical-oriented course to cater to the academically less-inclined was included. This Normal (Technical) course aimed at providing such pupils with better practical skills and academic grounding, especially in the English language and Mathematics before channeling them for further skills-based training at the Institute of Technical Education.

²⁸⁵ The Home Economics curriculum was extended to boys in the Normal (Academic) course in 1996 and to all Special and Express course boys by 1998. See "Home Econs, Technical Studies for Secondary Students from '97", *Straits Times*, 31 Aug 1993.

Figure 4.2
Illustration of a Father in a Pre-1987 Home Economics Text



The important role of men in the home was recognized in the 1994 home economics syllabus [Table 4.4]. Women’s dual role as co-earner and home-maker and the need for men to support women by helping out in the home was, for the first time, explicitly acknowledged in the 1994 syllabus document:

Today, more and more women join the work force to contribute to the family income and improve standards of living. The traditional role of women as home-maker has thus been extended to that of co-earner. Men need to realize the importance of this extended role and to provide the support to their women folk through partnership in the home.²⁸⁶

Table 4.4
Summary of Lower Secondary Home Economics Syllabus, 1994

Years	Major Areas Of Study	Aims Of Syllabus
1994-1998	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Nutrition for the Family 2. Food Management 3. Creative Textiles 4. Consumer Education 5. Children at Play 	To prepare boys and girls for their future dual roles. The course will impart to pupils the knowledge and skills to be creative, adaptable and resourceful in the home. It also aims at developing in boys and girls collaborative skills within the family.

Source: Summarized from Ministry of Education, *Home Economics Syllabus For Secondary 1 and 2 Special, Express and Normal (Academic /Technical) Courses* (Singapore: Curriculum Planning Division, 1994).

²⁸⁶ Ministry of Education, *Home Economics Syllabus For Secondary 1 and 2 Special, Express and Normal (Academic /Technical) Courses* (Singapore: Curriculum Planning Division, 1994), p. 2.

The 1994 syllabus was clearly designed for both boys and girls. A comparison of the 1985 syllabus and the 1994 syllabus shows great differences in the stated rationale and purpose of the courses. The 1985 syllabus emphasized the inculcation of values in the pupils. According to the syllabus document, the aim of the course was to “implant intrinsic values which will equip pupils to interact and react favourably in classroom and home situations.”²⁸⁷ Additionally, it was to “help pupils understand the importance of nurturing and strengthening family life.”²⁸⁸ This was to be achieved by creating in pupils an awareness of the responsibilities involved in managing the home. The 1994 syllabus, on the other hand, emphasized knowledge and skills, particularly those that would enable pupils to become creative problem solvers and decision-makers.²⁸⁹ A more scientific, and problem-solving approach was recommended for the teaching of this new syllabus. Stress was placed on creativity, use of thinking skills, independent studies, experimentation, investigation and decision-making.²⁹⁰

The topics in the 1994 syllabus were also quite different from the previous syllabuses. They were much more science-biased, with little of the past syllabuses’ emphasis on inculcation of values and roles and responsibilities of individuals in the family. Topics on family life and discussions of roles and responsibilities of individuals in the family that formed the core in the 1980 and 1985 syllabuses were removed. According to a MOE curriculum officer, Family Life and Home Management was removed because this area was fairly extensively covered in two other courses – Pastoral Care and Career Guidance and Civics and Moral Education.

²⁸⁷ Ministry of Education, *Syllabus and Guidelines for Home Economics in Secondary Schools*, p. 2.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

²⁸⁹ Ministry of Education, *Home Economics Syllabus For Secondary 1 and 2 Special, Express and Normal (Academic /Technical) Courses*, p. 2.

²⁹⁰ Soo Soon Im, “History of Home Economics in Singapore”, p. 7.

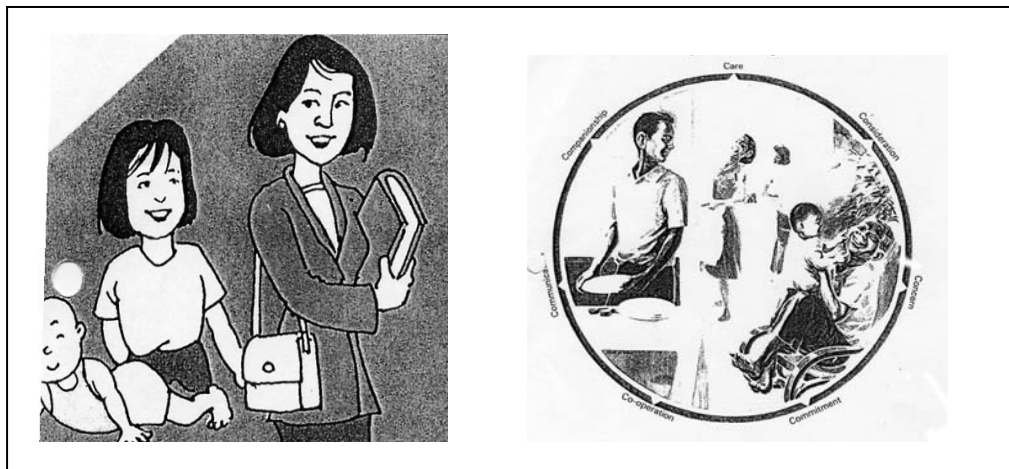
The topics would instead be subsumed and integrated into the five topics of the revised home economics syllabus.²⁹¹ However, an examination of the sub-topics and objectives in the 1994 syllabus shows no semblance of the topics which were in Family Life being integrated. Also removed from the syllabus were topics on personal grooming and hygiene in which issues such as the onset of puberty and menstruation were covered. In their place were topics like Nutrition for the Family, covering nutrition in foods, types of nutrition suitable for different age groups and Food Management, which focused on food science, food safety and basic food preparation. Other topics included fabrics and decorative work on fabrics, consumer education, that is, how to shop sensibly for food and clothes, and child development. These topics and the scientific approach taken meant that the emphasis in previous syllabuses on the affective development (values and attitudes) was replaced by a stress on cognitive and skills development.

The coursebooks developed for the 1994 syllabus are very different from previous ones. An examination of four coursebooks shows that there is a more balanced presentation of gender roles in the home.²⁹² There are illustrations of career women going to work and males carrying out household tasks and being involved in child-care [Figures 4.3 & 4.5].

²⁹¹ Ibid.

²⁹² The 4 coursebooks are: Ministry of Education, Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore, *Home Economics Today, Secondary 1 Special/Express/Normal (Academic)*, 2nd edn. (Singapore: Pan Pacific Publications, 1996); Ministry of Education, Curriculum Planning and Development Division, *Home Economics Today, Secondary 2 Special/Express/Normal (Academic)*, 2nd edn. (Singapore: Pan Pacific Publications, 1997); Ministry of Education, Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore, *Home Economics Today (revised edition), Secondary 1 Normal (Technical)*, (Singapore: Pan Pacific Publications, 1995); Ministry of Education, Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore, *Home Economics Today for boys and girls, Secondary 2 Normal (Technical)* (Singapore: Pan Pacific Publications, 1994).

Figure 4.3
Greater Balance in Gender Activities



Source: Ministry of Education, *Home Economics Today, Secondary 1, Special/Express/Normal (Academic)*, 2nd edition (Singapore: Pan Pacific Publications, 1996), Ministry of Education, *Home Economics Today, Secondary 2, Special/Express/Normal (Academic)*, 2nd edition (Singapore: Pan Pacific Publications, 1997).

The involvement of both men and women in household activities is also seen in the revised home economics text. They are shown performing tasks such as sewing, cooking and cleaning the home. At the same time, the range of girls' activities is wider, including cycling, playing tennis and working on a computer [Figures 4.4 & 4.5].

Figure 4.4
More Balanced Portrayal of Gender Activities

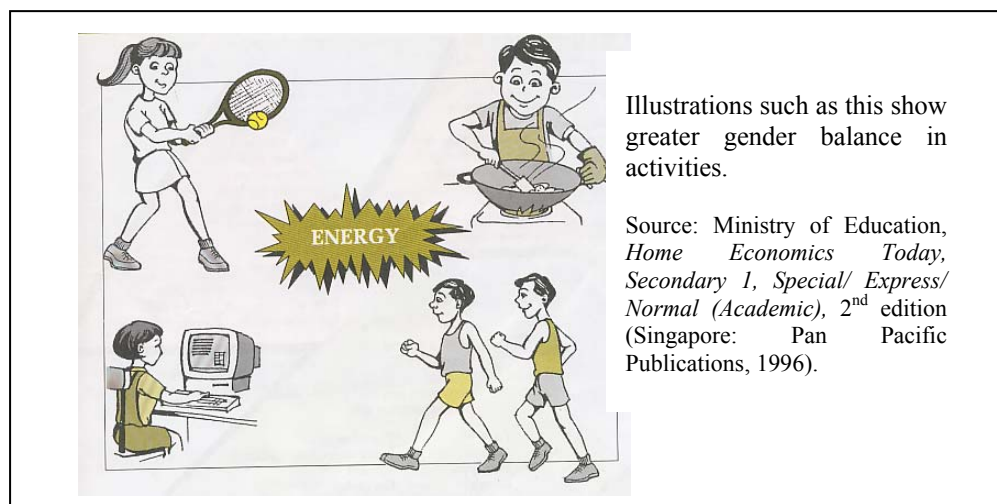
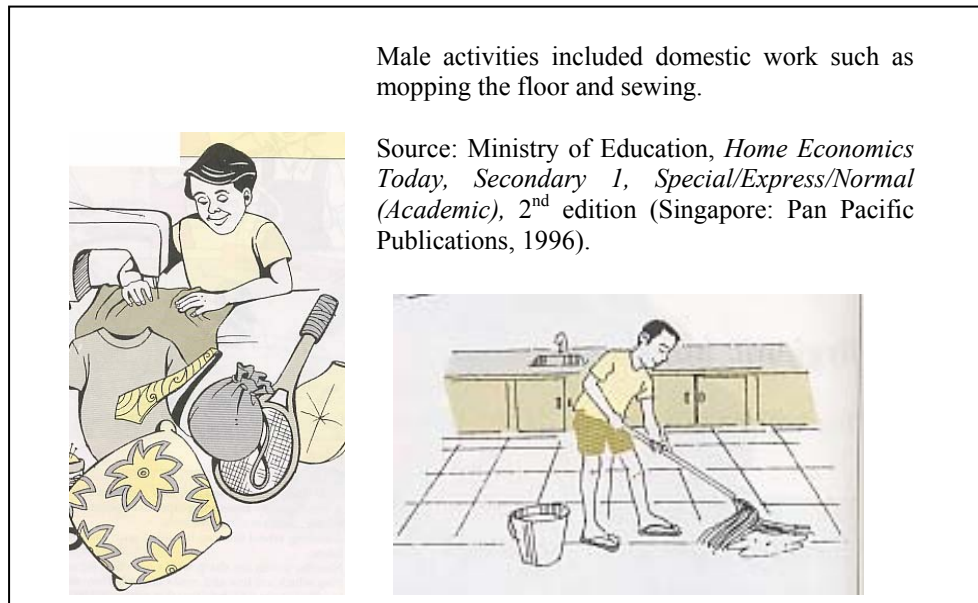
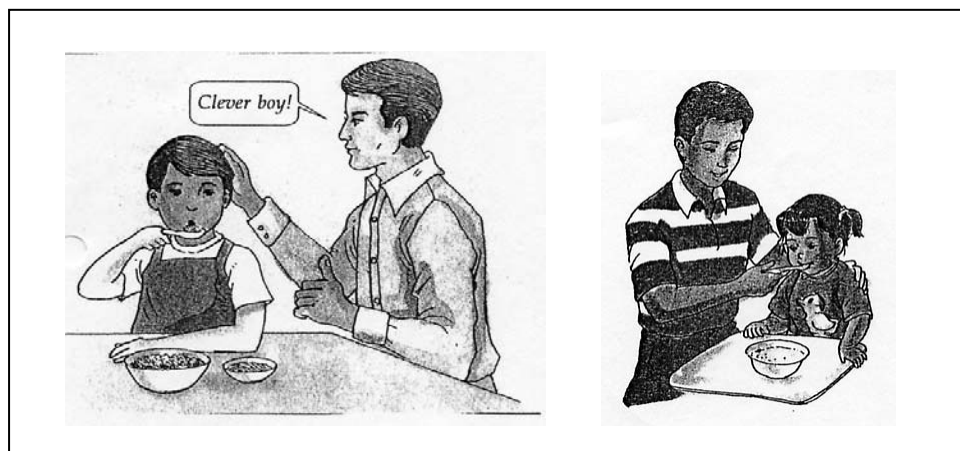


Figure 4.5
More Males Depicted in Domestic Work



Thus, although the topic of Family Living was removed, the illustrations indicate a realization of the need to break gender stereotypes related to family living and management of the home. In the section on Development of the Child, the importance of the father, although not stated textually, can be seen in many illustrations showing the father interacting with the child [Figure 4.6].

Figure 4.6
More Illustrations of Fathers Involved in Child-Care



Source: Ministry of Education, *Home Economics Today, Secondary 1 Normal (Technical)* rev. ed. (Singapore: Pan Pacific Publications, 1995).

In 1999, the MOE carried out a content reduction exercise for all curricula in recognition of the need for more time required to implement the three MOE initiatives of infusing National Education, Information Technology and Thinking into the curriculum. As a result, the topic Children at Play was removed. This was because feedback from teachers was that students found the concepts abstract and they did not see the relevance of the topic to their present stage of life.²⁹³

In summary, for many years, only girls studied home economics and the desired cultural values to preserve patriarchy were inculcated through this curriculum. The topics taught in the syllabuses between 1959 to 1993 emphasized to girls not only the importance of their role as home-makers and nurturers but also taught them various aspects of traditional femininity such as gentleness, poise, good grooming as well as maintenance of personal hygiene. The images of women in the instructional materials used between the 1960s and 1980s reinforced this ideology of domesticity and traditional femininity. Significant changes in ideology and gender representations in the home economics texts were only made in the 1990s when the syllabus and instructional materials were designed for both sexes. Only then did more balanced gender representations appear in the texts. On the whole, however, home economics texts tend to situate women's activities largely within the home and do not adequately reflect their participation in the labour market and in public life. This is true also of other school texts, as the next section will show.

²⁹³ Ministry of Education, *Syllabus for implementation from January 1999, Home Economics, Lower Secondary 1 and 2, Special, Express, and Normal (Academic/Technical)*, p. 7.

Gender Representations in Textbooks

Gender researchers Pam Gilbert and Sandra Taylor have asserted that, “gender ideologies transmitted through schooling are important in maintaining women’s subordinate position in domestic work and in the labour market.”²⁹⁴ School curricula usually present the man as active and the woman as passive and supportive.²⁹⁵ In many school subjects, children learn that inventors, famous leaders and protagonists are male and women are mothers, nurturers or damsels in distress. All these have impact on students’ understanding and construction of gender roles and relations, and what it means to be feminine or masculine. It has been found that because women are often left out of or stereotyped in the curriculum, children know little about them. Adrienne Alton-Lee, investigating the effect of sexist curriculum on children in New Zealand schools, found that children tended to fill in the gaps of their knowledge with gender stereotypes and distortions. For example, when observing a history class on the Middle Ages, she found that three to four male names were mentioned every minute of class discussion and only one female name every six minutes. At the end of the unit, when interviewers questioned students about what women did during the Middle Ages, one boy responded that women tried to act beautiful and walked up and down castles to show off.²⁹⁶

In the delivery of curricula, textbooks or coursebooks play a very crucial role as they determine the curriculum content or subject matter for instruction. Very often, the national ideology is embedded in the coursebooks, either with conscious or unconscious intent. Madeleine MacDonald has argued that ‘the message of school

²⁹⁴ Pam Gilbert and Sandra Taylor, *Fashioning the Feminine: Girls, Popular Culture and Schooling* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1991), p. 19.

²⁹⁵ Bronwyn Davies, *Gender, Equity and Early Childhood, National Curriculum Issues 3* (Curriculum Development Centre: Commonwealth of Australia, 1988), p. 21.

²⁹⁶ Research cited in Myra & David Sadker, *Failing at Fairness: How Our Schools Cheat Girls* (New York: Touchstone, 1994), p. 73.

texts is most likely to represent in its purest form the ideological statement of the ruling class or, at least, those values which it considers essential to transmit.²⁹⁷ The PAP was well aware of the importance of textbooks in the socialization process. This was seen in the Minister of Education, Mr Ong Pang Boon's speech in 1967:

...authors, publishers and others concerned with book production have to take into account the multi-racial, multi-religious and multi-cultural nature of our society with its inherent centrifugal tendencies [and] bear in mind their additional responsibility to counteract such undesirable tendencies.... local authors could play a more positive role by making appropriate references and allusions to local conditions and factors and by consciously emphasizing points of view more in conformity with the spirit of the times and with our national needs and aspirations.²⁹⁸

School textbooks are seen as major agents of socialization because they have immense influence on children and thus play an important role in maintaining the social order:

...students are less free to disregard or be critical of educational materials than they are of the media. In fact, they are frequently required to absorb and assimilate this material in minute detail. Second, people attach a great deal of credibility and authority to educational and reference material, and are therefore probably more attentive to the messages that they convey and susceptible to the sway of their influence.²⁹⁹

Thus, students often perceive instructional materials as presenting infallible truths and are especially susceptible to the influence of the messages conveyed in these books. Gender studies have shown, for example, that "when children read about people in non-traditional gender roles, they are less likely to limit themselves to stereotypes.

²⁹⁷ Madeleine MacDonald, "Schooling and the Reproduction of Class and Gender Relations", in R. Dale et al (eds.) *Politics, Patriarchy and Practice* (Lewes: Falmer/Open University Press, 1981), p. 172.

²⁹⁸ Opening Address by Ong Pang Boon at the Workshop on the Problems of Book Production and Distribution in Singapore, in *Perpustakaan*, Conference Issue, 1:2/2:1 May 1967, p. 78.

²⁹⁹ Philip Smith, *Languages, the Sexes and Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), p. 37.

When children read about women and minorities in history, they are more likely to feel that these groups have made important contributions to the country.³⁰⁰

Unfortunately, analyses of textbooks in many countries have shown a number of biases in the representations of the female sex. These biases include linguistic bias, stereotyping, invisibility of females and imbalance in portrayal of contributions.³⁰¹ Linguistic bias is seen in the use of gender exclusive language, for example, the practice of using masculine terms and pronouns as a generic reference as in terms like ‘caveman’, ‘forefathers’, ‘businessman’ and the pronoun ‘he’ to refer to both sexes. The result is that women have been rendered invisible or insignificant.

When depicted, women are usually given a submissive persona or typecast as silly, vain, selfish, untrustworthy, dependent and cowardly.³⁰² Derogatory comments on feminine disability would also appear in readers. For example, in a reader *Around the Corner*, published in the 1960s: “Look at her, Mother, just look at her. She is just like a girl. She gives up.”³⁰³ In another reader from the Lippincott Basic Reading Series: “Women’s advice is never worth two pennies. Yours isn’t worth even a penny.”³⁰⁴ Women are also usually shown in the domestic arena, cooking, sewing, minding children or shopping, and men are working with machines, reading the paper, painting the house.³⁰⁵ Women’s contributions to society are also not shown in instructional materials, particularly in history texts.

³⁰⁰ Myra & David Sadker, *Failing at Fairness: How Our Schools Cheat Girls*, p. 69.

³⁰¹ Myra Sadker, David Sadker and Lynette Long, “Gender and Educational Equality” in James A. Banks & Cherry A. McGee Banks, (eds.), *Multicultural Education: Issues and Perspectives*, 3rd edn. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1997), pp. 132-134.

³⁰² See Christine Skelton, “Women and Education”, in Victoria Robinson & Diane Richardson (eds.), *Introducing Women’s Studies: Feminist Theory and Practice* (Hampshire: Macmillan Press, 1997), p. 309 and Myra & David Sadker, *Failing at Fairness: How Our Schools Cheat Girls*, p. 70.

³⁰³ M. O’ Donnell, and Van Roekel, (eds.), *Around the Corner* (Harper & Row, 1966), cited in Myra & David Sadker, *Failing at Fairness*, p. 70.

³⁰⁴ Glenn McCracken, and Charles Walcutt, (eds.), Lippincott Basic Reading series, Book H, 1970, cited in Myra & David Sadker, *Failing at Fairness*, p. 70.

³⁰⁵ Margaret Sutherland, *Sex Bias in Education* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981), p. 129.

A series of national studies on gender portrayal in school textbooks and children's literature commissioned by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has shown that textbooks often contained stereotyped images of men and women.³⁰⁶ Studies in China, France, Ukraine and Kuwait all record gender stereotyping in terms of roles, occupations, power, and personality traits. For example, a Peruvian study recorded an over-representation of men and boys in the texts and illustrations at all levels of primary education. At the same time, stereotyped personality traits of each gender are also reflected: "men are portrayed as brave, intelligent, patriotic and infused with a spirit of fellowship; women, on the other hand, are obedient and devoted to caring for others."³⁰⁷ In China too, although there had been conscious effort to eliminate sexist stereotypes, the Chinese Ministry of Culture admitted that vestiges of stereotypes still existed in some books.³⁰⁸

Recent studies in Korea too have shown that gender representations in textbooks tend to render the woman invisible or typecast the female image. The findings of one study in the 1980s concluded that proportionately more women were portrayed as "dependent, obedient and cries easily."³⁰⁹ A later study revealed that despite "a directed effort to educate students in the changes in gender roles and status that have occurred as a result of social change," elementary and secondary textbooks still contained "traditional conceptions of gender roles which are unconsciously

³⁰⁶ The studies covered countries in different regions such as Asia, Europe and the Middle East. Some of the countries involved included China, Ukraine, Kuwait and France. Singapore was not involved in this project. For a summary of the findings of the studies commissioned by UNESCO, refer to Andree Michel, *Down with Stereotypes! Eliminating Sexism from Children's Literature and School Textbooks* (Paris: Unesco, 1986).

³⁰⁷ J. Anderson, C. Herencia, *L'image De La Femme Et De L'homme Dans Les Livres Scolaires Peruviens*, Peruvian Commission for Co-operation with UNESCO (Paris: UNESCO, 1983), cited in Andree Michel, *Down with Stereotypes!*, p. 29.

³⁰⁸ Andree Michel, *Down with Stereotypes!*, p. 20.

³⁰⁹ Kim Jung-Ja, "A Study on Gender Role in the Secondary School Curricula", *Women's Studies Forum*, (1988), p. 113.

instilled in the minds of the students.”³¹⁰ Regardless of subject and level, the Korean textbooks portrayed men as active and exhibiting leadership and women as passive and emotional.

To understand how women are portrayed in instructional materials used by children in Singapore, a study of some textbooks used in the schools was carried out.³¹¹ The texts were analysed for linguistic bias, visibility of women and gender stereotyping. Besides the texts for history and social studies, the coursebooks for technical studies and home economics were also studied.³¹² For each subject, two books (or series of books) were examined, one published before 1987 and another after that year. This is because the need to eradicate gender stereotyping in school textbooks was officially recognized in 1987 when the MOE announced that locally-produced textbooks would be revised and updated. A ministry official explained that the reason for this was to “make sure we don’t stereotype the roles of men and women, especially when many mums are career women too, and need their husbands

³¹⁰ Kim Jae-in, “A Study on Gender Roles in the Elementary and Secondary School Textbooks”, in *Women’s Studies Forum*, 9 (1993), p. 79.

³¹¹ Three books each from two series of social studies texts were examined: Ministry of Education, *Social Studies for Primary Schools: Our People* (Singapore: Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore, 1984); *Social Studies for Primary Schools: Our Heritage* (Singapore: Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore, 1985); *Social Studies for Primary Schools: Our Southeast Asian Neighbours* (Singapore: Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore, 1986), Ministry of Education, *Discovering Our World: Our Neighbourhood* (Singapore: Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2000); *Discovering Our World: Our Heritage* (Singapore: Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2001); *Discovering Our World: Birth of a Nation* (Singapore: Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2000). Two history texts were also analysed: Ministry of Education, *Social and Economic History of Modern Singapore* (Singapore: Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore, 1984) and Ministry of Education, *Understanding Our Past: Singapore: from Colony to Nation* (Singapore: Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 1999).

³¹² The Home Economics textbooks examined are: Hamidah Khalid & Siti Majhar (eds.), *Home Economics Book 1* (Singapore: Longman Malaysia Sdn Bhd, 1973), and Ministry of Education, *Home Economics Today*, 2nd edn. (Singapore: Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore, 1996). The first set of technical coursebooks are in 3 modules: Ministry of Education, *Technical Studies for Secondary One: Technical Graphics, Module 1; Wood Processing, Module 2 & Metal Processing, Module 3* (Singapore: Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore, 1987). The other technical text is: Peter Stensel, Andrew Tung & Soh Beng Seng, *Building a Foundation with Design & Technology 1* (Singapore: Pearson Education Asia Pte. Ltd., 2000).

to help out at home.”³¹³ An examination of books published after 1987 would indicate the extent to which this policy was carried out.

The findings of two studies of English language readers are also included in this discussion. The first study, carried out in the 1980s by Anthea Fraser Gupta and Ameline Lee Su Yin, examined materials used in two reading programmes in Singapore – the *Primary English Programme (PEP)* series, developed in the 1980s by the Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore (CDIS) of the MOE and *Reading 360*, a series of readers published by Ginn and Company.³¹⁴ The second study, carried out almost a decade later by Ong Chye Wah, examined another set of primary English coursebooks, the Primary English Thematic Series (PETS) published in the 1990s.³¹⁵

The analyses of the language used in most texts show a definite male-bias. Texts published before 1987 are strongly androcentric, with the proportion of male nouns and pronouns exceeding 80% of the total in social studies, history and technical studies texts [Table 4.5]. This male-bias results in a low visibility or salience of women in the texts. Significantly, there are no female references at all in the 1987 technical studies coursebooks as the intended audience was male. On the other hand, there are few male references in *Home Economics Book 1*. The reason for this is clearly because it was a home economics text used solely by girls. This strong imbalance in gender representations in home economics and technical studies textbooks reflects the clear lines drawn between male and female gender roles.

³¹³ “Textbooks to be Updated to Reflect New Family Policy”, *Straits Times*, 20 Aug 1987.

³¹⁴ Anthea Fraser Gupta & Ameline Lee Su Yin, “Gender Representation in English Language Textbooks used in the Singapore Primary Schools”, *Language and Education*, 4:1 (1990).

³¹⁵ Ong Chye Wah, “Gender Representation and Gender Inclusive/Exclusive Language in Current Singapore Primary English Coursebooks”, a thesis submitted for Masters in Applied Linguistics, Regional Language Centre, 1999.

Low female salience is also seen in the English basal readers used by children in Singapore in the 1980s. Gupta and Lee report that there are fewer female speakers than male and that the mean number of utterances is slightly higher for males.³¹⁶ However, while in the *PEP* series, the number of male and female utterances rises almost equally in readers used at the higher grades, the number of female utterances in the *Reading 360* series actually drops as the levels rise. This trend is repeated in the mean length of utterance, that is, the average number of words per speaking turn.³¹⁷

Table 4.5

Male & Female Linguistic References in Social Studies, History, Home Economics & Technical Texts

Series Title	Male pronouns/nouns	Female pronouns/nouns	Total pronouns/nouns	Proforms of 'man'
Pre-1987 Texts				
<i>Social Studies for Primary Schools</i>	677 (84%)	128 (16%)	805 (100%)	26
<i>Social and Economic History of Modern Singapore</i>	884 (88%)	126 (12%)	1010 (100%)	130
<i>Home Economics Book 1</i>	5 (12%)	37 (88%)	42 (100%)	1
<i>Technical Studies for Secondary 1: Modules 1-3</i>	28 (100%)	0 (0%)	28 (100%)	9
Post-1987 Texts				
<i>Discovering Our World</i> (Social Studies Text)	246 (85%)	42 (15%)	288 (100%)	5
<i>Understanding Our Past</i> (History Text)	372 (86%)	61 (14%)	433 (100%)	38
<i>Home Economics Today</i> (2 nd edition)	24 (63%)	14 (37%)	38 (100%)	2
<i>Building a Foundation with Design and Technology 1</i>	6 (75%)	2 (25%)	8 (100%)	1

Source: Self-constructed based on analysis of textbooks by this researcher.

³¹⁶ Anthea Fraser Gupta & Ameline Lee Su Yin, "Gender Representation in English Language Textbooks used in the Singapore Primary Schools", p. 32.

³¹⁷ Ibid.

Some post-1987 textbooks show less linguistic bias. This is evident in the technical studies and home economics textbooks published in the 1990s for use by both sexes. The proportion of female linguistic references in technical texts rose from nil in the 1987 coursebooks to 25% in *Building a Foundation with Design and Technology 1*. Male references in the home economics texts increased from 12% in the pre-1987 text to 63% in the post-1987 text [Table 4.5]. There is also greater use of gender-inclusive language as in this sentence from *Building a Foundation with Design & Technology 1*: “A designer must have a clear idea of what *he or she* is aiming to achieve before thinking about the solution.”³¹⁸ The generic ‘he’ to represent both sexes is not used and plural forms, like ‘people’ or gender neutral terms like ‘the designer’ are used instead.

From Table 4.5, it can be seen that the proportions of female linguistic references in social studies and history texts, on the other hand, do not improve in the later texts, even in those published as late as 1999 and 2000. Although there are less proforms of ‘man’, such as foreman, fireman or policeman, the proportion of female nouns and pronouns in the 1999 history text, *Understanding Our Past*, shows no significant improvement from the 1984 text. There is some attempt to use plural terms or gender-inclusive terms such as ‘ancestors’ in place of ‘forefathers’ and ‘people’ in place of ‘men’ in *Understanding Our Past*. Nevertheless, there are many instances of male references being used when referring to both male and female sexes. For example, one section is subtitled “Our Forefathers” and includes this sentence: “Let us read the success stories of three of our *forefathers* who became successful but did not forget the needs of their fellow *countrymen*.”³¹⁹ The use of masculine gender

³¹⁸ Peter Stensel, Andrew Tung & Soh Beng Seng, *Building a Foundation with Design & Technology 1*, p. 8. [Emphasis added]

³¹⁹ Ministry of Education, *Understanding Our Past*, p. 33. [Emphasis added]

to refer to both sexes gives the impression of male dominance and success. There is low visibility of women in these texts and this supports feminist criticism of the lack of female representation in history, which does not provide an accurate reflection of society and reinforces the impression that the female gender is not a significant contributor to human development.³²⁰

Such an impression of women's insignificance is reinforced by the lack of female characters in the textbooks. In both the *PEP* and *Reading 360* series, there are fewer female characters than male, and fewer female protagonists (main characters) and speakers. Males form 71% of all characters whose gender is identified in the *Reading 360* series and 70% in *PEP*.³²¹ There is a considerably higher proportion of male protagonists in the *PEP* series and a slight tendency in both series for the percentage of males to rise at the higher levels. The later series of readers (*PETS*) also show more male characters, speakers and protagonists than female. This statistical difference is greatest in the proportion of protagonists.³²²

There are no specific characters identified in both sets of home economics texts and the first set of technical coursebooks. History texts and social studies texts containing historical content contain very few female characters. The proportion of female characters in *Social and Economic History of Modern Singapore*, for example, comprises only 9% of total characters mentioned and this proportion drops to 5% in *Understanding Our Past* [Table 4.6].

Only male pioneers are highlighted as having made contributions to Singapore's growth and women's contributions in Singapore's history are glossed

³²⁰ Myra Sadker, David Sadker & Lynette Long, "Gender and Educational Equality", pp. 132-134.

³²¹ Anthea Fraser Gupta & Ameline Lee Su Yin, "Gender Representation in English Language Textbooks used in the Singapore Primary Schools", p. 32.

³²² Ong Chye Wah, "Gender Representation and Gender Inclusive/Exclusive Language in Current Singapore Primary English Coursebooks", p. 62.

over, as in the case of Hajjah Fatimah whose contribution as a businesswoman is summed up in one sentence.³²³ She is, in fact the only female pioneer highlighted in the history and social studies texts. This is mainly because the history taught in the schools is very much a triumphant type of political history, with emphasis on golden ages, glorious deeds and achievements and there are few historical records of women achievers. Yet, even Elizabeth Choy, a woman who was feted as a war heroine, failed to get a mention in the history text. On the other hand, Adnan Saidi and Lim Bo Seng, two heroes of the Second World War, are highlighted in the history and social studies texts. Women like Chan Choy Siong, Shirin Fozdar and Mrs Seow Peck Leng, who were actively involved in the women's movement and the political arena are not included in the texts.

Table 4.6
Number of Male and Female Characters
in Social Studies, History & Technical Texts

Title of Text	Male characters	Female Characters	Total Characters
Pre-1987 Texts			
<i>Social Studies for Primary Schools: Our People</i>	46 (85%)	8 (15%)	54 (100%)
<i>Social Studies for Primary Schools: Our Progress</i>	27 (84%)	5 (16%)	32 (100%)
<i>Social Studies for Primary Schools: Our SE Asian Neighbours</i>	20 (59%)	14 (41%)	34 (100%)
<i>Social and Economic History of Modern Singapore</i>	87 (91%)	9 (9%)	96 (100%)
Post-1987 Texts			
<i>Discovering Our World: Our Neighbourhood</i>	13 (48%)	14 (52%)	27 (100%)
<i>Discovering Our World: Our Heritage</i>	28 (80%)	7 (20%)	35 (100%)
<i>Discovering Our World: Birth of a Nation</i>	32 (78.0%)	9 (22%)	41 (100%)
<i>Understanding Our Past</i>	101 (95%)	5 (5%)	106 (100%)
<i>Building a Foundation with Design and Technology I</i>	3 (75%)	1 (25%)	4 (100%)

Source: Self-constructed based on analysis of textbooks by this researcher.

³²³ Ministry of Education, *Understanding Our Past*, p. 25.

The emphasis on significant events and milestones in the history curriculum has also resulted in a lack of focus on social and women's history. There is little information on popular culture, on how the ordinary people lived and the underside of Singapore history. Students do not learn about the lives of early female immigrants, for example, the 'mui tsai' who were young slave girls sold to rich families, prostitutes, samsui women who worked in the construction industry and the black-and-white amahs (domestic servants). By not presenting information of other women who, like the men, also lived in and contributed to Singapore's development, the texts give a rather biased portrayal of immigrant women's activities and capabilities. The samsui women, for example, were labourers who worked like men, at construction sites, and led economically independent lives. There were also the black-and-white amahs who worked as house-servants and nannies, contributing significantly to Singapore's development. These groups of people and their contributions are not acknowledged in the curricula content offered in Singapore's history and social studies texts.

The number and type of illustrations in the texts reveal also the visibility of women and the way the sexes are typecast. Male-centred illustrations outnumber female-centred ones in most pre- and post-1990 texts [Table 4.7].³²⁴ This imbalance is highest in history and technical studies texts. The only texts that show a high proportion of female-centred illustrations are the home economics texts.

The pre-1987 technical studies text contains no female-centred illustration at all and the later text includes only two female-centred illustrations. In both, only males are depicted operating machines and there are no illustrations of females carrying out technical workshop tasks [Figure 4.7]. Additionally, although the writers

³²⁴ Male-centred illustrations are illustrations that portray only males. Female-centred illustrations show only females.

of the later textbook are careful not to use gendered pronouns when referring to designers, a male figure is used in the illustration of a design process [Figure 4.8].

Table 4.7
Number of Gendered Illustrations
in Social Studies, History, Home Economics & Technical Texts

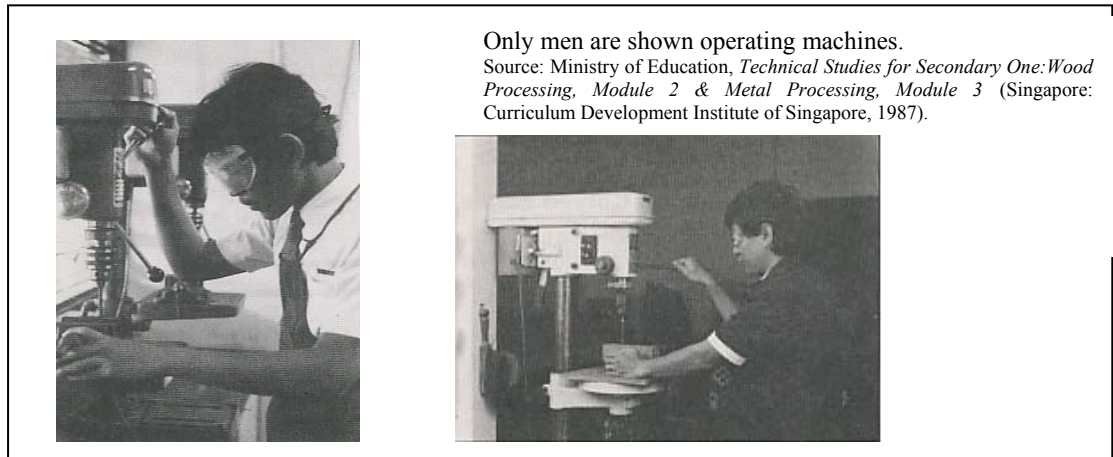
Title of Text	Male-centred	Female-centred	Both sexes	Total
Pre-1987 Texts				
<i>Social Studies for Primary Schools</i>	66 (60%)	15 (13%)	30 (27.0%)	111 (100%)
<i>Social and Economic History of Modern Singapore</i>	60 (80%)	1 (1%)	14 (19%)	75 (100%)
<i>Home Economics Book 1</i>	2 (9%)	19 (91%)	0	21 (100%)
<i>Technical Studies for Secondary 1: Modules 1-3</i>	5 (83%)	0	1 (17%)	6 (100%)
Post-1987 Texts				
<i>Discovering Our World</i>	191 (56%)	56 (16%)	98 (28%)	345 (100%)
<i>Understanding Our Past</i>	164 (75%)	11 (5.0%)	44 (20%)	219 (100%)
<i>Home Economics Today (2nd edition)</i>	12 (26%)	15 (33%)	19 (41%)	46 (100%)
<i>Building a Foundation with Design and Technology 1</i>	8 (66%)	2 (17%)	2 (17%)	12 (100%)

Source: Self-constructed based on analysis of textbooks by this researcher.

The post-1987 home economics text has a better balance of illustrations, with 26% male-centred and 33% female-centred illustrations. Those showing both sexes form the majority of gendered illustrations (41%). The illustrations in this text reflect a more accurate picture of the changes in gender roles and characteristics that have taken place in society. For example, both males and females are depicted as participating in sports as well as performing tasks such as cooking, cleaning or sewing. In addition, there are also illustrations of a career woman, a girl working on a computer, mannequins of both sexes modelling different fashion designs. This

contrasts with the illustrations in *Home Economics Book 1*, which depict only females performing household chores and modelling female attire.

Figure 4.7
Technical Work Shown As Male Activity

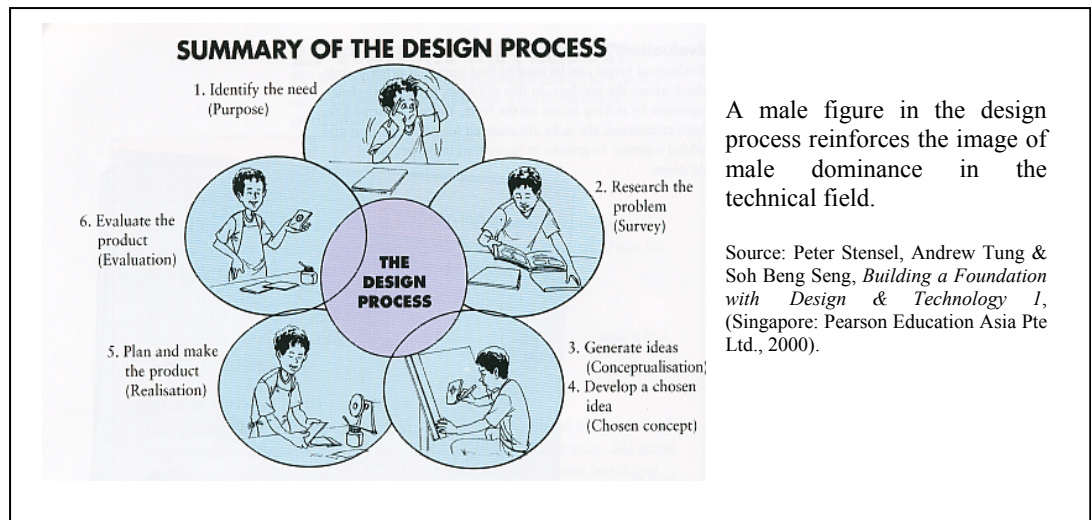


There is also a slight improvement in the post-1987 history and social studies texts, although statistically the percentage increase in female-centred illustrations is not very significant. Some improvement is also seen in illustrations showing both sexes together, for example, in the history and social studies texts. This is important as it gives greater prominence to women's participation in history. A photograph of female workers in a garment factory and another of a woman technician in *Understanding Our Past*, are significant as they illustrate the participation of women in the labour force [Figure 4.9]. The photograph of the woman technician, in particular, is important for breaking occupational stereotypes that students may have of the technical field being a male preserve. However, the caption to this photograph is noteworthy: "Even female pupils were encouraged to take up technical education".³²⁵ The word "even" implies that it was an unusual situation for females to

³²⁵ Ministry of Education, *Understanding Our Past*, p. 214.

take up technical studies and betrays the social environment of the day and, perhaps, more so, the writers' own traditional mindset.

Figure 4.8
Male Figure Used In Illustration Of Design Process



Stereotyped images of males and females are depicted not only in illustrations but in the written discourse as well. Males are described as strong and brave hunters, pioneers, leaders and statesmen [Figure 4.10]. They also gamble, rob, and commit other atrocities. Men occupy positions of power while women are weak and need rescuing by men as seen in this passage:

The Chinese Protectorate tried to rescue girls who refused to lead immoral lives in brothels. Girls who were rescued were taken to the Home for Girls.... There they were trained in sewing, cooking and other housework, and were also taught to read and write Chinese. They were thus helped to lead moral and useful lives. Some of them later became good housewives ...³²⁶

In some cases, women are shown as anti-heroines, as in the case of Maria Hertogh, her Dutch mother, Adelaine Hertogh, and her adoptive mother, Che Aminah

³²⁶ Ministry of Education, *Social and Economic History of Modern Singapore*, p. 100.

who are mentioned in the 1999 history text only because their court case over the custody of Maria sparked off a race riot in Singapore.

Figure 4.9
Illustrations of Female Participation in Labour Force in History Texts



In examining the portrayal of roles and activities, Gupta and Lee's study concluded that males are portrayed in a substantially wider range than females. This is also true of the other texts in this study, particularly those published before 1987. More occupations are attributed to men than women in both pre-1987 and post-1987 texts, as can be seen in Table 4.8.

Figure 4.10
Males Depicted As Strong And Brave in History Texts



Table 4.8
Economic Activities in English Language, Social Studies, History,
Home Economics & Technical Texts

Title of Text	Male & Female	Male-only	Female-only
Pre-1987 Texts			
<i>Reading 360*</i>	4	41	9
<i>Primary English Programme*</i>	6	45	2
<i>Social Studies for Primary Schools</i>	43	63	18
<i>Social and Economic History of Modern Singapore</i>	52	87	7
<i>Home Economics Book 1</i>	0	1	0
<i>Technical Studies for Secondary 1: Modules 1-3</i>	0	0	0
Post-1987 Texts			
<i>Primary English Thematic Series⁺</i>	40	76	22
<i>Understanding Our Past</i>	11	57	4
<i>Discovering Our World</i>	7	75	21
<i>Home Economics Today (2nd edition)</i>	2	1	1
<i>Building a Foundation with Design and Technology 1</i>	3	6	2

* Source: Anthea Fraser Gupta & Ameline Lee Su Yin, "Gender Representation in English Language Textbooks used in the Singapore Primary Schools", in *Language and Education*, 4:1, 1990, p. 40.

⁺ Source: Ong Chye Wah, "Gender representation and gender inclusive/exclusive language in current Singapore primary English coursebooks", a thesis submitted for Masters in Applied Linguistics, Regional Language Centre, 1999, p. 44.

The figures for social studies, history, home economics and technical textbooks were derived from an examination of the texts by this researcher.

Female occupations are often stereotyped and generally of low status as compared with men. In most cases, women's professions are extensions of their domestic and nurturing roles, for example, as domestic workers, cleaners, nurses, service personnel and teachers. One example of occupational stereotyping is seen in a description of a factory in a social studies text. Here, the supervisor and factory manager is portrayed as male while the factory workers are female.³²⁷ Similarly, when describing office workers, the manager is depicted as male while the secretary, receptionist and telephone operator are female. It is unlikely that the writers

³²⁷ Ministry of Education, *Social Studies for Primary Schools: Our People* (Singapore: Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore, 1984).

deliberately typecast these occupations but it is an unconscious reflection of the prevailing occupational and social stereotype.

An unusual mention of a female construction worker in the social studies text stands out, as construction work is not a conventional occupation for women and this appears to be a deliberate attempt to change pupils' concept of women and women's work. The teachers' guide gives additional information to teachers, informing them that:

Nowadays many women work at construction sites. They include architects, surveyors, electricians, plumbers and construction workers. In other words they do the same jobs as men.³²⁸

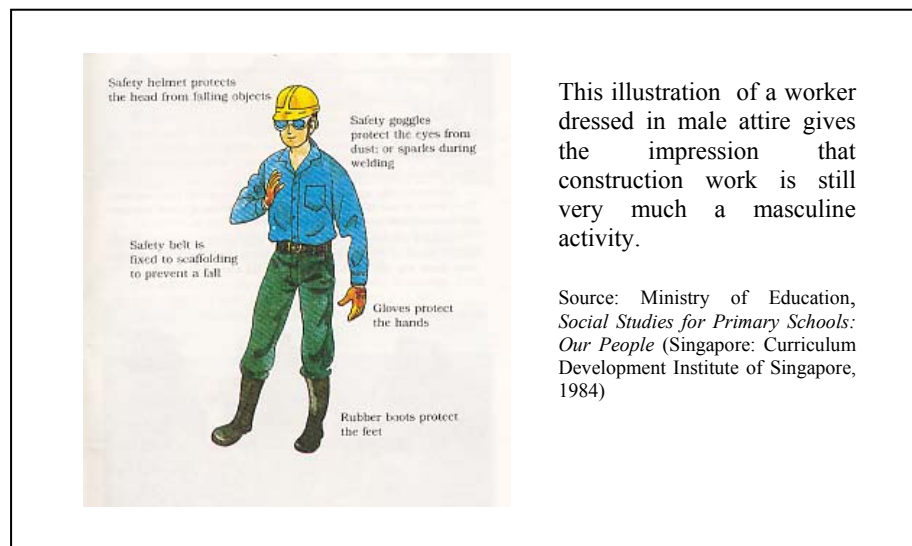
However, the accompanying illustration shows a construction worker in male attire and reinforces the impression that construction work remains very much a masculine activity [Figure 4.11].

Of the post-1987 texts, only the English basal readers show any significant improvement in the portrayal of female economic activities. Women are portrayed in a wider range of occupations, including professions such as studio director, mathematician, draftsman, professor and cartoonist. The other post-1987 texts, however, do not adequately reflect Singapore's economic and social progress by the 1990s. Women continue to be portrayed as service providers such as librarian, salesperson, nurse and cleaner. Although women were still under-represented in the highest positions of economic strata in the 1980s and 1990s, their participation in the workforce was higher and the range of occupations was certainly wider than what is shown in the texts. Between 1980 and 2000, women's participation in the labour

³²⁸ *Social Studies for Primary Schools, Teacher's Edition 2: Our People* (Singapore: Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore, 1984), p. 76.

force had increased from 44% to 56%.³²⁹ In that period too, the percentage of women in the professional, managerial and technical occupations had risen from 14% to 33%.³³⁰

Figure 4.11
Construction Worker in Male Attire



In the non-economic area, there is less stereotyping and differentiation in the portrayal of male and female activities in the *Reading 360* and *PEP* series. Males and females are shown engaged in outdoor activities such as camping, swimming, playing ball and jungle trekking and appear to be equally involved in domestic roles and in childcare. However, it was noted that male domestic roles are more ancillary than primary. They are shown to be helping their wives in shopping (men are not portrayed shopping alone) or looking after the baby when wives are busy. Outdoors, males are shown to be participating in a wider and more exciting range of games than females. Men are seen operating machines such as cars, lawnmowers and spaceships while women are still generally shown as nurturers.

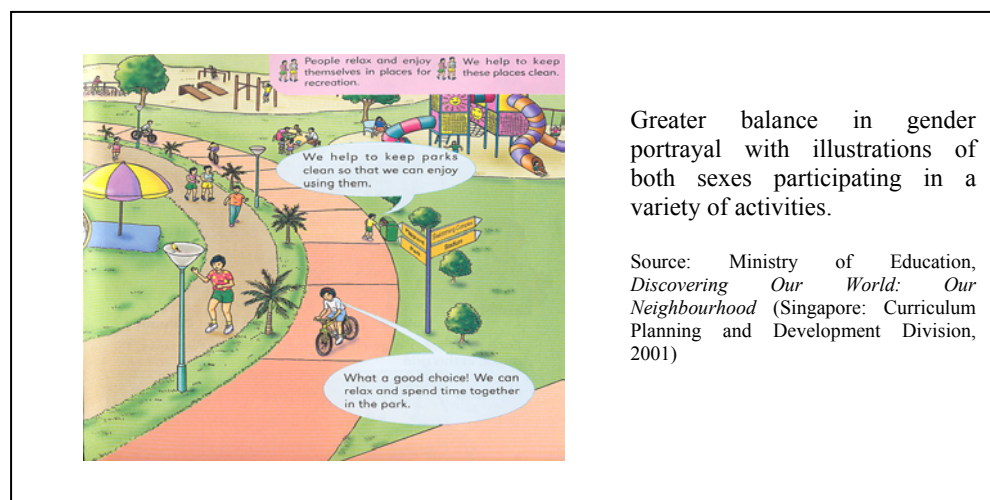
³²⁹ *Singapore 2001: Statistical Highlights* (Singapore : Dept. of Statistics, 2001), p. 54.

³³⁰ Ibid.

Some improvement in the portrayal of women's activities is seen in the post-1987 texts. The *PETS* series shows females in a broader range of non-economic roles but still less than that of males. Both gender are shown engaged in strenuous physical activities such as trekking and mountain climbing, but more males than females are seen participating in these activities. More males are shown in leisure activities, playing games such as chess, and sports. Both sexes are also featured together in domestic duties, for example sharing in household tasks, childcare and shopping. However, according to Ong, females continue to be more family-oriented. Males also are seen as aggressive and only male criminals are shown, except in a story of a real-life female pirate.

Some post-1987 social studies texts also show greater balance in the portrayal of non-economic activities. In *Discovering Our World: Our Neighbourhood*, males and females are seen participating in a variety of physical activities such as jogging and cycling [Figure 4.12]. Both sexes are also involved in family life, nurturing children, playing or reading to children, shopping, dining together as a family, etc.

Figure 4.12
More Balanced Portrayal of Activities In Social Studies Texts



The analysis has shown, therefore, that the instructional materials published prior to 1987, are very androcentric as gender representations in texts is skewed towards male dominance and female experiences are largely ignored and excluded from the curriculum. In all the pre-1987 texts in this study, with the exception of that used in home economics, there is significant over-representation of male characters and greater use of male references as well as stereotyped images of gender roles and activities in all texts. This is especially conspicuous in textbooks used in social studies and lower secondary history. Little change is observed in post-1987 history texts. Only males are portrayed as active participants of history and women are marginalized. This is because the history taught in schools is mainly political history and since, for a long time, positions of authority and power have been occupied mainly by men, it is inevitable that they dominate the history texts.

History has been highlighted as a prime example of a gendered content curriculum all over the world. Analyses of history curricula by Michelle Commeyras and Donna Alverman (1996) in the United States and Gaby Weiner (1993) in England reveal that in spite of the feminist movement, an androcentric view of history continues to dominate, the prescribed content of history is still gender-biased, and curriculum materials represent women in stereotyped ways.³³¹ Analyses of other countries' history texts have also revealed the same results. A Peruvian study, for example, showed that textbooks "all but ignore the role of women in history."³³² A Korean study had the same conclusion:

What is most striking about secondary school Korean History textbooks is that, beginning from the past and up to present times, women are treated virtually as foreigners in the historical development

³³¹ Amanda Coffey and Sara Delamont, *Feminism and the Classroom Teacher: Research, Praxis, Pedagogy* (London: Routledge Falmer, 2000), pp. 36-37.

³³² Andree Michel, *Down with Stereotypes!*, p. 29.

of Korea. As men are portrayed as the leaders of history from the beginning of history, it is almost impossible to find women in any historical period.³³³

Thus, it would seem that how history is recorded and written about is the same over time and space. Despite the passage of time and the progress of women, little attempt has been made to show female participation in and contribution towards the historical development of countries. This is certainly so in Singapore, in spite of the declared intention by the MOE in 1987 to eliminate gender stereotyping in textbooks.

This lack of female representation is also evident in other Singapore texts such as the basal readers and coursebooks for technical studies that were published in the 1980s. The low female salience contributes to a lack of role models for girls and this makes it difficult for girls to see beyond the gender stereotypes depicted in the textbooks. Female representations in the texts also tend to limit women's activities to the home, or typecast them in nurturing or domestic occupations. The range of activities attributed to them is often limited, compared with that of men.

This portrayal of women in the very restricted role of nurturer may initially seem to be an intention to inculcate in children an expectation of a limited and domestic sphere for women. It is, however, unlikely that there is a conscious deliberateness on the part of the Singapore writers, many of whom are women themselves, to transmit such gender ideologies, but rather, it is a reflection of the writers' own socialization and the result of a lack of awareness of feminist research and literature. Gupta and Lee also attribute this to "an acceptance of a genre norm,

³³³ Kim Jae-in, "A Study on Gender Roles in the Elementary and Secondary School Textbooks", p. 77.

which writers unconsciously follow, and which they would have to make a conscious effort to break free from.”³³⁴

As discussed, the technical studies and home economics coursebooks published in the latter half of the 1990s present more modern notions of femininity and gender relations which are a more accurate reflection of how society has progressed. Because there is greater consciousness that these texts are to be used by both sexes, there is a corresponding increased attempt to break gender stereotypes and show the female gender as physically, economically and socially active and males as relevant to and participating in family life. This is a clear reflection of the government’s realization of the need to revise its gender ideology so as to enable more women to participate in the labour force. However, this was not a blanket move as gender representations in instructional materials for other subjects such as social studies and history continue to be male-dominated and reflect traditional notions of femininity.

The conflicting messages in the Singaporean post-1987 instructional materials mirror the dissonant public discourse of the government. On the one hand, government leaders emphasized the equality of the sexes and the need for women to be emancipated from the bonds of the home so that they can contribute to national development. On the other hand, they also stressed the preservation of an Asian patriarchy as the basis of Singapore society and the importance of women’s role in maintaining the family as the basic unit of society. The mixed gender messages in discourse and curricula has caused problems for girls in their construction of

³³⁴ Anthea Fraser Gupta & Ameline Lee Su Yin, “Gender Representation in English Language Textbooks used in the Singapore Primary Schools”, p. 41.

femininity and has resulted in what sociologist Stella Quah labels, “women’s struggle for coherence” in their lives.³³⁵

This discordance in gender ideology is amplified by the state policy of providing a science and technology-biased modern education. This policy was born out of the perceived need to modernize the economy and the labour requirements to meet such an economy. Within this policy, no discrimination was made against girls. Both boys and girls were offered a common curriculum with a strong emphasis on mathematics and the sciences, commonly considered the ‘hard options’ by girls. The impact of this emphasis is explored further in the next section.

Subject Choice and Emphasis on the ‘Hard Options’

As early as 1959, the PAP saw the need to modernize the economy. Modernization is often associated with science, technology and industrialization and requires rational and pragmatic state planning of the economy. The government therefore focused on industrialization as the way to modernizing the economy. There was consequently a need to produce the labour power to support this economic plan. To achieve that objective, emphasis was placed on science and technical-biased education:

In a long term technological development programme special attention should be directed to the teaching of science in the schools so that these could feed the universities, the polytechnics and vocational schools with good material.³³⁶

Consequently, the MOE placed great emphasis on developing the science and technical curricula and the teaching and learning of these subjects. Both boys and girls had equal opportunities to learn science and mathematics in primary and

³³⁵ See Stella R. Quah, *Family in Singapore: Sociological Perspectives* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1994).

³³⁶ *The Tasks Ahead: PAP’s 5-Year Plan, 1959-1964, Part 1* (Singapore: Petir, May 1959), p. 24.

secondary schools. This was the case even though these two subjects were considered the 'hard options' and commonly perceived as more difficult than the arts and humanities such as history and literature, which are termed 'soft options'. Feminist researchers have pointed out that most girls shun mathematics and sciences and prefer to pursue the 'soft options'. Sue Sharpe, for example, found that the curricula of British secondary schools in the 1970s tended to be divided into 'girls' subjects' and 'boys' subjects'. 'Girls' subjects' included the arts, like cookery, needlework, typing and commerce while 'boys' subjects' were scientific, mathematical and involved problem solving and analysis.³³⁷

The policy that began in the 1960s, of making both girls and boys take the 'hard options' because of the need to support the requirements of an industrial economy represented a break from past tradition. As was seen in Chapter Two, education for girls in Singapore in the 1940s and 1950s was generally seen as important only insofar as it equipped them with the necessary knowledge and skills to become good wives and mothers. The new policy therefore challenged the existing gender ideology that girls were destined to play only a domestic role and not an economic one.

With the implementation of the policy of emphasis on preparing the young for the industrial economy, science, mathematics and technical studies took prominent places in the school curriculum from primary to pre-university levels. At primary and secondary levels, mathematics and science were compulsory for all students. In 1980, with the implementation of the New Education System, mathematics and science

³³⁷ Sue Sharpe, *'Just Like a Girl': How Girls Learn to be Women* (Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1976), pp. 147-148.

constituted 43% of curriculum time in primary school.³³⁸ The importance of these two subjects can also be seen in the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) where mathematics and science comprise two of the four subjects tested (the other two being English and Mother-tongue languages). At the lower secondary level, besides compulsory mathematics and science, from 1969 to present time, boys also have had to study technical subjects, which incorporate elements of basic electricity, woodwork, metalwork and design. Similarly, about half of lower secondary girls also studied technical subjects from 1969 to 1984 and from 1996 to the present day.

At the end of secondary four, all students sit for an external examination, either the General Certificate of Education 'Ordinary' Level (GCE 'O') for more academically inclined students, or the General Certificate of Education 'Normal' Level (GCE 'N'), for students who are weaker in their studies. All students intending to go on to tertiary education need to study at least one science and one mathematics subject, as these are required for entry into pre-university or the polytechnic. Theoretically, subject choice is given to students at the end of secondary two, to opt for the subject combination that they want, but in practice, the selection of students for science courses is based more on ability than choice. The top ability students usually take three pure sciences: physics, chemistry and biology, and many in the middle ability group will take two science subjects such as physics and chemistry. The least academically able will take at least one science subject as part of their school curriculum. Similarly, students are allowed to read either one or two mathematics subjects for the GCE 'O' or 'N' level examinations. Students who perform better in the academic subjects often opt to read two mathematics subjects:

³³⁸ W.O. Lee, *Social Change and Educational Problems in Japan, Singapore and Hong Kong* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1990), p. 103.

elementary mathematics and additional mathematics, while the less academically able would opt to take only elementary mathematics.

Two local studies of gender differences in science concluded that there are no sex-related differences in Singapore students' performance of science practical tasks as well as in the performance of a Physics Problem Set which comprised questions drawn from the GCE 'O' level examinations.³³⁹ In the latter study, the researchers found no significant difference in performance, as girls appeared to do as well as boys in solving the set of physics problems. In terms of aptitudes, however, boys were shown to be superior in the areas of perceptual, spatial and mechanical/technical reasoning although both sexes were found to be equally good in the areas of memory and verbal, numerical and analytical reasoning.³⁴⁰ The researchers concluded that there were no gender differences because the examination questions were fair and did not invoke aptitudes that would put girls at a disadvantage and thus the girls were able to perform as well as the boys.³⁴¹ However, the studies had found fundamental differences in aptitudes and the conclusion drawn by the researchers that gender differences "don't happen here" just because the examination questions did not disadvantage girls, seems to be too simplistic.

In the area of mathematics, studies have found few consistent gender differences in mathematics achievement at the primary level. A study of sex-related examination performance over the period 1977 to 1987 by the Ministry of Education found that at Primary Three level, girls did better than boys in the first and second languages and in mathematics. At PSLE, however, boys performed better than girls at

³³⁹ See Toh Kok-Aun, "Gender and Practical Tasks in Science", *Educational Research*, 35:3 (Winter 1993), pp. 255-265 and K.A. Toh & A. Sivakumar, "Gender Differences: They Don't Happen Here", *Journal of Science and Mathematics Education in Southeast Asia*, XVII:1 (1994), pp. 54-60.

³⁴⁰ K.A. Toh & A. Sivakumar, "Gender Differences: They Don't Happen Here", *Journal of Science and Mathematics Education in Southeast Asia*, XVII:1 (1994), pp. 54-60.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

mathematics and science while girls did better in the languages.³⁴² At the secondary level, boys were found to outperform girls in some aspects of mathematics.³⁴³ A 1987 study by Berinderjeet Kaur, a lecturer at the National Institute of Education, found that in terms of overall mathematics achievement, boys performed better than girls in the 1986 GCE 'O' level examinations. While there were no significant gender differences in computational and problem solving skills, she found that males were superior in questions requiring understanding and application of mathematical concepts and skills.³⁴⁴ Another study of mathematics achievement that focused on equally matched 17-year-olds at junior college level found that males performed better than females in a mathematics test.³⁴⁵ The researchers also found that there was a stereotyped perception of mathematics and science as male subjects. This was held by both junior college boys and girls who expressed the opinion that boys do better in these subjects.³⁴⁶

The gender gap in mathematics performance appears to have closed by the late 1990s as shown in one study of gender differences in mathematics achievement across four Asian nations (Korea, Hong Kong, Japan and Singapore).³⁴⁷ Using published data from the Third International Mathematics and Science Study, the researchers

³⁴² Kam Kum Wone & Soh Kay Cheng, "25 Years of Research and Testing", in S.K.J. Yip & W.K. Sim, *Evolution of Educational Excellence: 25 Years of Education in the Republic of Singapore* (Singapore: Longman Publishers, 1990), p. 138.

³⁴³ See Berinderjeet Kaur, "Gender and Mathematics: The Singapore Perspective", Paper presented at the 7th International Congress on Mathematical Education organized by the International Organization of Women and Mathematics Education (IOWME) Study Group held in Quebec, Canada, August 17-23, 1992.

³⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 8.

³⁴⁵ B.C. Leuar, "Sex Differences and Mathematical Ability", unpublished assignment during period of induction, Institute of Education, Singapore, 1985, cited in Berinderjeet Kaur, "Gender and Mathematics: The Singapore Perspective".

³⁴⁶ Y.Y. Chung, "Investigation of Sex and Ability-based Differences in attitudes and expectations in Mathematics", an unpublished assignment during period of induction, Institute of Education, Singapore, 1985, & B.C. Leuar, "Sex Differences and Mathematical Ability", cited in Berinderjeet Kaur, "Gender and Mathematics: The Singapore Perspective".

³⁴⁷ Soh Kay Cheng, & Quek Khiok Seng, "Gender Differences in TIMSS Mathematics Achievement of Four Asian Nations: A Secondary Analysis", *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 27 (2001), pp. 331 – 340.

investigated the correlations in achievement profiles between boys and girls in the seventh and eighth grades within each nation and across nations within sex. The study found that there were greater sex differences in Hong Kong and Korea than in Japan and Singapore. The girls in Singapore in fact performed better than boys.³⁴⁸ The researchers postulated that a non-sexist learning environment could be a crucial factor for girls' better performance. They are of the view that in Singapore, parents and teachers have the same expectations of girls and boys and because there are more female than male mathematics teachers, this subject is not perceived as a male domain.³⁴⁹

As a result of the state's stress on mathematics and science, therefore, Singapore society has come to place higher value on a scientific education over a liberal arts one, to the extent that being able to take three pure science subjects at secondary level is now an aspiration of many students. Increasingly more girls are pursuing science courses at secondary school level. This can be seen in the statistics on the enrolment of girls in the science stream, which has increased steadily, such that by 1990 girls comprised nearly half of those in the science stream [Chart 4.1].

On the other hand, in spite of girls' achievement in mathematics and science, statistics show that at the higher educational levels female enrolment in the science stream tended to decline. Between 1985 and 2000, the proportion of females in pre-university had consistently remained at approximately 55% of total enrolment but the percentage of females enrolled in the science stream constituted only 20% of total pre-university enrolment between 1980 and 1990 [Table 4.9]. Female enrolment in science increased to 24% and 35% in 1995 and 2000 respectively but these figures are

³⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 334.

³⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 337.

still low compared to the percentage of secondary school girls who had taken the pure sciences.

Chart 4.1
Enrolment in Science Stream at Upper Secondary, 1980 – 1990



Source: Statistics derived from Ministry of Education, *Education Statistics Digest*, 1991. Figures before 1980 and after 1991 are not available.

In 1996, the Education Minister, Mr Lee Yock Suan highlighted that although more than 50% of girls had taken the pure sciences and additional mathematics in the GCE ‘O’ level, only 38% of them took mathematics and physics or physical sciences at GCE ‘A’ level and only 30% were enrolled in engineering and science courses at universities.³⁵⁰ Mr Lee blamed misrepresentations and stereotyped images of these professions for girls’ avoidance of engineering and science courses: “Engineers are portrayed traditionally in hard hats and boots, doing robust fieldwork, while scientists are perceived as weird individuals, pursuing esoteric research in ivory towers.”³⁵¹ He added that women had told him that they shunned those jobs because “it was less feminine and girls did not naturally do well.”³⁵² Thus, despite receiving equal access to science education and encouragement from government leaders as well as doing

³⁵⁰ “Two Moves to Attract Women Science Grads”, *Straits Times*, 21 Apr 1996.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*

³⁵² *Ibid.*

well in science examinations, most girls continued to have stereotyped attitudes towards gender achievement and participation in science-biased professions.

The figures on pre-university enrolment show that for many years commerce was the most popular stream among pre-university girls [Table 4.9]. In 1990, there were 7,411 females in this stream, constituting about one quarter of all females enrolled in the pre-university course. The numbers dropped subsequently and by the year 2000, only 6% of females were enrolled in this stream. This was the result of a policy decision to phase out the commerce stream in the junior colleges. The authorities deemed that students in junior colleges should have a broader-based education and that the two commerce subjects offered at GCE 'A' level, management of business and principles of accounting were too specialized.³⁵³ The stream was phased out in stages beginning with the commerce course in upper secondary and by 2001 the last batch of junior college commerce stream students took the GCE 'A' level examinations.³⁵⁴ This decision was likely a deliberate move by the authorities to increase enrolment in the science stream, as one effect of the phasing out of the commerce stream was a rise in enrolment in the science stream, particularly among the girls, from 24% of total enrolment in 1995 to 35% in the year 2000.³⁵⁵

³⁵³ Ministry of Education Press Release, "Phasing Out Of A-Level Commerce Course In Junior Colleges", Edun C09-02-013, 4:12 (Nov 1997) and interview on 4 Jun 2003 with a former Assistant Director in the Humanities and Aesthetics Branch, Curriculum Planning and Development Division of the Ministry of Education, who was responsible for the commerce curriculum.

³⁵⁴ Interview with a former Assistant Director in the Humanities and Aesthetics Branch, Curriculum Planning and Development Division of the Ministry of Education on 4 Jun 2003.

³⁵⁵ The former Assistant Director explained that a number of academically able students who could have qualified for the science stream in junior college opted for the commerce course instead. With the closure of the commerce course, such students then opted for the science stream.

Table 4.9
Pre-university Enrolments by Stream, 1980-2000

Year	Total Enrol- ment (M & F)	Total Female Enrol- ment	% of Total Enrol- ment	No. Males in Arts Stream	% of Total Enrol- ment	No. Females in Arts Stream	% of Total Enrol- ment	No. Males in Commer- ce Stream	% of Total Enrol- ment	No. Females in Commerce Stream	% of Total Enrol- ment	No. Males in Science Stream	% of Total Enrol- ment	No. Females in Science Stream	% of Total Enrol- ment
1980*	16,272**	9,618***	59	1,109	7	3,008	18	908	6	3,221	20	3,957	24	3,158	19
1985	24,699	13,730	56	1,787	7	3,953	16	2,059	8	5,277	21	7,123	29	4,500	18
1990	29,214	16,378	56	1,604	5	3,786	13	2,848	10	7,411	25	8,384	29	5,181	18
1995	21,690	11,822	55	854	4	1,932	9	1,808	8	4,684	22	7,206	33	5,206	24
2000	24,975	13,598	54	1,336	5	3,412	14	698	3	1,564	6	9,343	37	8,622	35

Source: Ministry of Education, *Education Statistics Digest* (Singapore: Education Statistics Section 1991 & 2000).

* Figures before 1980 were not available.

** Figure includes 911 students in the technical stream which was not offered at pre-university level after 1983.

*** Figure includes 231 females in the technical stream.

The figures in Table 4.9 also show that total pre-university enrolment for both males and females dropped significantly in 1995. Concomitantly, there was a rise in total male and female enrolments in the polytechnics. Since 1980, there has been an increasing trend in polytechnic enrolments. Between 1985 and 1990, total polytechnic enrolments had increased from 16,410 to 24,078, an increase of approximately 1.3% a year and the figure rose significantly in 1995 to 41002, an increase of about 11.5% a year.³⁵⁶ Female enrolment also showed a steady rise between 1980 and 2000 with the percentage of female enrolment increasing over the twenty-year period from 22% to 47%. The increase in female enrolment was a result of the establishment of new polytechnics — Temasek Polytechnic in 1990 and Nanyang Polytechnic in 1992 - which offered more ‘soft option’ courses such as publishing, business studies, information technology, graphic and product design, library studies and health sciences.³⁵⁷

Thus, in spite of compulsory science education for both boys and girls, there is still a tendency for girls to choose the ‘soft options’ in higher education. While there are many reasons for this trend, among which are parental expectations, social pressures and a lack of information about career options, it is evident that there are still deeply entrenched perceptions of science and technology as male disciplines. In this, the Singapore situation appears to be no different from that in the United Kingdom where studies have shown that in spite of better academic achievements

³⁵⁶ Enrolment statistics obtained from Ministry of Education, *Education Statistics Digest*, extract, <http://www2.moe.edu.sg/esd/extract26>.

³⁵⁷ Singapore, *Social Progress of Singapore Women: A Statistical Assessment* (Singapore: Dept. of Statistics, 1998), p. 4.

than male students, female students in post-compulsory and higher education continue to opt for stereotypically feminine subjects.³⁵⁸

Gendered Curriculum and Contradictions in Socialization

For many years in Singapore, schooling for girls reflected the government's conservative ideas of women's role in society. Domestic science or home economics was viewed by the authorities as a 'must' for girls to prepare them for their future roles as wives and mothers. The syllabuses from 1959 to 1985 reflect traditional notions of femininity that emphasized the affective development of feminine traits docility, gentleness and neatness as well as the development of skills in domesticity. Domestic science was less of a 'science' and more of an 'arts' subject, that is, a subject designed to train girls in the art of home-making. It was only after the syllabus was designed for both sexes that the subject took on more 'scientific' characteristics, emphasizing cognitive development and an inquiry approach that uses investigation, experimentation and problem-solving. This seems to support feminist research that the 'hard' curricula options such as science and mathematics are perceived as being associated with males and the 'softer' options, such as literature and history, with females.

In spite of equal exposure to science and mathematics, the good examination performances and the push for more female students to pursue technical studies, many girls continue to see these as masculine subjects. This perception that males are better at the 'hard' sciences has been slowly changing with more girls performing better

³⁵⁸ See Miriam David, Gaby Weiner & Madeleine Arnot, "Gender Equality and Schooling, Education Policy-Making and Feminist Research in England and Wales in the 1990s", in Jane Salisbury & Sheila Riddell (eds.), *Gender, Policy and Educational Change* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 19-36; Sheila Riddell, "Equal Opportunities and Education Reform in Scotland: The Limits of Liberalism", in Jane Salisbury & Sheila Riddell (eds.), *Gender, Policy and Educational Change*, pp. 37-54 and Linda Croxford, "Gender and National Curricula", in Jane Salisbury & Sheila Riddell (eds.), *Gender, Policy and Educational Change*, pp. 115-133.

than boys in the mathematics and science examinations and the trend of increased female enrolment in these disciplines. At the same time too, with increasing numbers of women succeeding in the corporate world, more females are taking up business studies and commerce, two disciplines that were previously considered male domains.³⁵⁹ There is also evidence of an upward trend in the enrolment of females in engineering courses, as discussed in Chapter One.³⁶⁰ However, the rate of change is slow and other aspects of the curriculum such as gender representations in instructional materials appear to continue to socialize girls in traditional femininity and maintenance of patriarchy.

The Singapore state discourse in the 1960s on girls being able to pursue science and technical vocations and the subsequent emphasis on science and mathematics education thus appears to be subverted by its policy of compulsory home economics for girls. On the one hand, girls imbibe traditional patriarchal values about femininity and are socialized through compulsory home economics to understand that their 'natural' role is to be a home-maker. On the other hand, with compulsory mathematics and science, they also learn about modern ideas of logic, rationality and inquiry (which are more often associated with masculinity), and are prepared for a future role in the economy. The curriculum has thus transmitted mixed gender messages as a result of these conflicting policies.

It must be recognized, however, that gender construction is not a simple, straightforward process. Girls do not always accept the notions of femininity that are transmitted through the curriculum without contention. As society progresses, social and cultural values have changed over time and these have had influence on girls'

³⁵⁹ In 2000, females comprised 52% of those enrolled in business & administration courses at universities and 70% at polytechnics. See Chapter One, Table 1.5.

³⁶⁰ Female enrolment in engineering courses in the polytechnics rose from 8% in 1970 to almost 30% in 2000 and in the universities, from 3% to 25% in the same period. See Chapter One, Table 1.6.

construction of femininity. The increasing female enrolment in traditionally male-dominated disciplines indicate that a change in these deep-seated attitudes is occurring, albeit slowly. The next chapter will examine some aspects of the hidden curriculum, namely, behaviour management and school disciplinary procedures that will show how the changes in social and cultural values have given rise to increasing conflict between the traditional gender ideology held by school officials and bureaucrats and the schoolgirls' more modern notions of femininity.

CHAPTER FIVE

SCHOOL DISCIPLINE: DISSONANCE OF TRADITIONS AND MODERNITY

The previous chapter examined the formal curriculum, which is one key area of school life in which the transmission of state ideology takes place. Other areas that should be examined, as mentioned in Chapter One, are the ‘hidden’ curriculum, that is, the tacit teaching of social norms and values that goes on in the day-to-day activities of the school, and the ideologies that educators accept and use in the dispensation of their professional duties.³⁶¹ These are also critical aspects of socialization and contribute significantly to the construction of femininity, especially because this teaching is unplanned and usually spontaneous and children learn more from observing how teachers live out their beliefs rather than from what the teachers tell them to believe.

Codes of conduct and disciplinary policies and procedures are part of the ‘hidden’ curriculum experienced by school children and these also reflect the gender expectations and ideologies held by educators. A number of researches on classroom discipline have been carried out in various countries and it has been found that teachers’ perceptions of femininity and masculinity influence the way they handle discipline in the classroom and that certain behaviours which are often unquestioned or even encouraged when exhibited by boys, are challenged by teachers when exhibited by girls.³⁶² The acceptance of discipline in school therefore involves “the

³⁶¹ Michael Apple, *Ideology and Curriculum* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 14.

³⁶² See for example, Dale Spender, *Invisible Women: The Schooling Scandal* (London: Writers & Readers, 1982), K.H. Robinson, “Classroom Discipline: Power, Resistance and Gender. A Look at Teacher Perspectives”, *Gender and Education*, 4, 3 (1992), pp. 273-287; Katherine Clarricoates, “Dinosaurs in the Classroom – The ‘Hidden’ Curriculum in Primary Schools”, in Madeleine Arnot & Gaby Weiner (eds.) *Gender and the Politics of Schooling* (London: Hutchinson Education, 1987), pp. 155-165 and Carrie Paechter, *Educating the Other: Gender, Power and Schooling* (London: Falmer Press, 1998).

suppression of unacceptable social behaviour, and an emphasis on the social importance of control and subordination.”³⁶³ This chapter will examine the disciplinary policies and procedures that play important roles in the socialization of the young so as to bring to light the gender ideologies of the policy-makers and the gender codes that have been transmitted over the years.

Two studies of the state of discipline in Singapore schools by the Singapore Teachers’ Union (STU) in 1985 and 1995 indicated that there was a growing problem of discipline among boys.³⁶⁴ These studies did not identify a problem of female delinquency at that time. However, press reports from the 1970s to 1990s showed that sporadic problems of delinquency such as theft, drug abuse and smoking and other breaches of school rules by female students existed.³⁶⁵ A surge in the number of female discipline cases was highlighted only in the latter half of the 1990s. In 1998, increasing concern over the state of girls’ discipline eventually led to the setting up of a committee to study the rise in teen delinquency among girls. The later sections of this chapter will thus discuss the changes in the state of girls’ discipline and the extent of girls’ acceptance of or rebellion against the traditional notions of femininity that have been transmitted through schooling.

The inculcation of discipline in school children is a major concern of most educators. For many teachers, classroom discipline is an issue of ‘power’ and

³⁶³ Sue Sharpe, *Just Like a Girl: How Girls Learn To Be Women* (Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd, 1976), p. 141.

³⁶⁴ Singapore Teachers’ Union, *Teachers’ Perception of the State of Discipline in Singapore Schools* (Singapore: STU, 1985), p. 5 and *Discipline in Singapore Schools. An STU Report* (Singapore: STU, 1995), p. 7.

³⁶⁵ Some examples of press reports include “Convent Probe on the ‘White Pill’ Students”, *Straits Times*, 12 Sep 1970; “Pupils not ‘Frisked’, says Mrs Bong”, *Straits Times*, 7 Apr 1972; “Drugs: 4 Girls Expelled”, *Straits Times*, 6 Jul 1973; ‘Op Snip Snip and 3 Girls Faint’ *Straits Times*, 10 May 1980; “Students Get the Snip After Hair Warning Ignored”, *Straits Times*, 7 May 1987; “Smoking Among Schoolgirls”, *Straits Times*, 11 Apr 1992 and “School discipline not worse but problem pupils more defiant”, *Straits Times*, 30 Jun 1995.

‘control’ and is often associated with masculine attributes and the ideology of ‘hegemonic masculinity’.³⁶⁶ This is part of the process of socialization that usually begins in the home and continues in school. According to British researcher, Sue Sharpe, “[t]he early social experiences and training of girls predispose them to accept the school’s demands for conformity.”³⁶⁷ For example, researchers found that girls were more protected by parents because they were perceived to be more fragile and weak, partly because of their physiology (female infants tend to be smaller) and also because of existing social constructs of what a girl should be.³⁶⁸ Fathers therefore tended to indulge in less rough-and-tumble play with their daughters than with their sons. Because of this perceived fragility, parents tended to protect, coddle and handle girls with greater care. As a result, girls were “given a headstart toward helplessness, passivity, dependence and diffidence.”³⁶⁹

A 1984 longitudinal study by Jeanne H. Block found clear evidence of differential socialization of males and females and expectations of more ‘ladylike’ behaviour of daughters by parents. Her findings showed that while fathers tended to be more authoritarian with sons, believed in physical punishment and were less tolerant of sons’ aggression, both fathers and mothers expressed reluctance to punish their daughters.³⁷⁰ Block also found that parents tended to ‘oversocialize’ their daughters along traditional socialization patterns, emphasizing tractability, obedience, control of impulses and self-sacrifice.³⁷¹ On the other hand, boys were seen as

³⁶⁶ K.H. Robinson, “Classroom Discipline: Power, Resistance and Gender”, p. 273.

³⁶⁷ Sue Sharpe, *Just Like a Girl: How Girls Learn To Be Women*, p. 142.

³⁶⁸ Constantina Safilios-Rothschild, “Sex Differences in Early Socialization and Upbringing and their Consequences for Educational Choices and Outcomes”, in *Girls and Women in Education*, (Paris: Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 1986), p. 31.

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

³⁷⁰ Jeanne H. Block, *Sex Role Identity and Ego Development* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1984), pp. 87-88.

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

physically strong and curious children who needed activity and rough games. Thus from a young age, boys were trained in independence, aggression and self-confidence.

In school, teachers also had differential expectations of male and female behaviour and interact differently with the two sexes. Teachers saw girls as obedient, submissive, controllable and ‘fragile’ and treated them more carefully than the boys.³⁷² Boys, on the other hand, were seen as boisterous and competitive and treated more roughly and compliance was obtained more with threat of violence than through negotiation. The differential treatment that began in the home is thus continued in the school. It was found, for example, that teachers spent more time interacting with boys than with girls. Such interaction involved greater negative feedback to boys as well responding directly to boys’ questions. Studies have shown that in general, boys were more successful in gaining teachers’ attention, girls received less and low-achieving boys received a lot of attention, but very often, in a negative way.³⁷³ Through this pattern of socialization, boys were trained to be assertive and confident while girls, sidelined in classroom discussions, learned to become passive spectators.³⁷⁴ Feminist researchers see the school as a microcosm of a patriarchal society in which males dominated space and time and females learned to be passive, compliant and conforming to a narrow, conservative model of femininity, described by Connell as ‘emphasized femininity’. Sue Sharpe, for example, contends that school-age girls learned to “distinguish between ‘prestige of power’ and ‘prestige of goodness’... and

³⁷² K.H. Robinson, “Classroom Discipline: Power, Resistance and Gender”, pp. 276-277.

³⁷³ Myra & David Sadker, *Failing at Fairness: How Our Schools Cheat Girls* (New York: Touchstone, 1994), p. 50. See also, Pam Gilbert & Sandra Taylor, *Fashioning the Feminine: Girls, Popular Culture and Schooling* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1991), p. 23 and Constantina Safilios-Rothschild, “Sex Differences in Early Socialization and Upbringing and their Consequences for Educational Choices and Outcomes”, pp. 40-41.

³⁷⁴ Daniel U. Levine & Rayna F. Levine, *Society and Education*, 9th edn. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1996), p. 364.

since little power is allocated to women, the only alternative is to be a 'good girl'.³⁷⁵
In this way, schoolgirls were socialized to be obedient and conforming to rules.

The inculcation of discipline in Singapore schools, often carried out through emphasis on adherence to published codes of conduct, also focuses very much on conformity and obedience. The implementation of discipline and pupil management are regulated by policies set by the Ministry of Education, but individual schools have the liberty of crafting their own specific school rules. The development of these policies from 1959 to 2000 and the impact on girls will be discussed in the following section.

Development of Pupil Management Policies: Corporal Punishment, School Rules and Pastoral Care

As early as 1959, the PAP in its party manifesto, *The Tasks Ahead* recognized the importance of socialization:

In a stable and integrated society with long inherited traditions, the education system is the principal media through which the values of the nation and of society are imparted to the young child. Thus the child grows up in harmony with the social values of his environment which he learns from his teachers... Our teachers must therefore realize the important role they play in the building of a united democratic Malayan nation... They have a whole generation of children to mould into a national pattern.³⁷⁶

The school was seen as a key agency through which school children would be socialized into a 'national pattern'. It was vital for forging a common identity and for producing a nation of socially disciplined citizens. School discipline was associated with social discipline, and was considered a vital requisite for Singapore's survival.

³⁷⁵ Sue Sharpe, *Just Like a Girl*, p. 142.

³⁷⁶ *The Tasks Ahead, PAP's 5-Year Plan, 1959-1964, Part 2* (Singapore: Petir, May 1959), pp. 4-5.

This was reiterated in the Minister of State for Education, Dr Lee Chiaw Meng's opening speech at a 1971 forum on punishment in school:

That social discipline is fundamental to the stability and survival of Singapore is undisputable. In the past few years, we have been able to maintain our level of discipline rather well. This is illustrated by the success of our many campaigns: to save water, in family planning, to keep Singapore clean and green, and pollution free, etc.... If we recognize that many of these efforts call for no less than the participation of the total population, we would also appreciate that their success is much dependent upon the social discipline of our youth and our school children as upon that of the adult population... While we debate the advisability of caning the difficult pupil, let us recognize the social force that our youth collectively possess and have exerted in our social evolution.³⁷⁷

The PAP government therefore placed a premium on measures to ensure the good behaviour of schoolchildren and youths so as to inculcate in them the social discipline deemed necessary for the survival of Singapore.

The term 'discipline' is often associated with ideas of control and punishment meted out in response to misbehaviour. The goal, however, is more than that. Educationists stress that discipline aims at developing self-control within students – a self-control that is “not merely submissive acceptance of authority or standards of behaviour imposed on an individual by others.”³⁷⁸ Rather, it is behaviour that is consistent with self-chosen beliefs and goals. There are therefore two aspects to discipline: the first is training to produce desired behaviour and the other is punishment to correct deviance or misbehaviour, that is, socially unacceptable behaviour. School discipline has the intended purpose of socializing children to behave in ways acceptable to society.

³⁷⁷ Singapore Government Press Statement, “Speech by Dr Lee Chiaw Meng, Minister of State for Education, at the Singapore Teachers’ Union Forum on Punishment in Schools”, 22 Oct 1971, M.C.:OCT/34/71 EDUN.

³⁷⁸ Tom V. Savage, *Discipline for Self-Control* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1991), p. 7.

For many years, from 1959 to the late 1980s, school discipline in Singapore concentrated on punishment in order to correct deviance. In this regard, an important issue for discussion is the ban on corporal punishment for girls. This ban was imposed after the enactment of the 1957 Education Ordinance by the British colonial government. After the PAP assumed power in 1959, no changes were made to the Education Ordinance and the subsequent Amendments to School Regulations that were sent out to schools in 1957 to regulate the administration of government schools. Among other things, these regulations prescribed how the discipline of schoolchildren should be carried out. Regulation 88 banned corporal punishment for schoolgirls and established guidelines on how corporal punishment for boys should be administered. It stated that:

1. No corporal punishment shall be administered to girl pupils
2. The corporal punishment of boy pupils shall be administered with a light cane on the palms of the hands or on the buttocks over the clothing. No other form of corporal punishment shall be administered to boy pupils.
3. Where there is more than one teacher in a school corporal punishment shall be inflicted by the principal only or under his express authority.³⁷⁹

The PAP reinforced this British policy in 1961 when it included a clause requiring the parent/guardian to be informed of the offence and the nature of the punishment meted out.³⁸⁰ Hitherto, this restriction on corporal punishment has remained unchanged. In a year 2000 publication by the Ministry of Education's Pastoral Care and Career Guidance Branch, *To Care is to Discipline: Guidelines for School Discipline*, how corporal punishment is to be administered is clearly spelt out:

³⁷⁹ Singapore, Ministry of Education, "Amendments to School Regulations 1957, Singapore National Archives, File Ref No: 2359/61.

³⁸⁰ Ibid.

- A range of 1 to 6 strokes of a light cane may be given on the palm or buttocks and nowhere else. Principals are urged to exercise restraint in the administration of corporal punishment.
- Other forms of corporal punishment are strictly forbidden.
- Only boys may be caned. Under no circumstances should girls be subjected to corporal punishment.
- Caning will be carried out by either the Principal or a delegated senior member of staff.
- A proper record should be kept to include the name of the pupil, person who used the cane, witnesses, the nature of the offence, the number of strokes given, the date and time.
- The pupil's parents should be informed immediately afterwards with details of the offence and the punishment meted out. Corporal punishment should be used only as a last resort.³⁸¹

The official policy on corporal punishment effectively curtailed teachers' freedom in the exercise of their prerogative to discipline. It is probable that this was done to prevent abuse of children by teachers. However, some teachers saw this as diminishing their authority and they often cited this restriction as a reason for the rise in disciplinary problems in school. In 1970 for example, the Singapore Chinese Middle School Teachers' Union called for a review of this policy in view of the fact that it was difficult to control unruly children without using corporal punishment. There was no consensus on this, however, as many other teachers and parents remained opposed to the suggestion of giving the cane back to classroom teachers.³⁸²

In 1971, some teachers asked for a clearer definition of 'corporal punishment', and criticized the Ministry of Education's guidelines as being vague. While the guidelines specified the procedures for administering corporal punishment, there was no clear specification of what constituted corporal punishment. Since the word 'corporal' is derived from the Latin term 'corpus' meaning 'body', corporal

³⁸¹ Ministry of Education, *Guidelines for School Discipline: To Care is to Discipline* (Singapore: Psychological and Guidance Services Branch, 2000), p. 39.

³⁸² "Mothers Don't Want the Cane Back in the Classroom", *Straits Times*, 26 May 1970.

punishment would mean any form of physical punishment inflicted on and affecting the body. Thus, teachers had asked:

Do pinching, smacking or boxing a student, making him do exercises like ‘push-ups’, running around the school field, standing at the corner of the class, writing lines, constitute corporal punishment?

All these affect the student physically. Indeed any form of punishment would affect the student. It looks as if we cannot punish girl pupils in any way and can only punish boys with the cane. How then are we to maintain discipline in the school?³⁸³

In view of such complaints by teachers, a forum on Punishment in Schools (Corporal and Other Forms), was organized by the STU in 1971 to discuss corporal punishment and other disciplinary methods, but it failed to provide consensus on what constituted ‘corporal punishment’. Speakers at the forum could only agree that there was a need to work out clearer boundary markers on this question.

It is likely that this was deliberately left unclear as it would have been difficult to cover every aspect of corporal punishment and leaving the definition amorphous would allow for each case to be investigated and dealt with individually. However, this lack of clarity caused some teachers to be wary and afraid to punish their pupils. According to Mr Mosbergen, the STU vice president, “teachers felt ‘cabinéd, cribbed and confined’ because they feared that if they punished a child it could be labelled as corporal punishment by the Ministry.”³⁸⁴ As a result, school discipline was not always rigorously and consistently imposed as some teachers preferred to turn a blind eye to breaches of discipline so as to avoid problems with the authorities.³⁸⁵ This inconsistency to impose discipline contributed to a rising number of disciplinary cases in schools.

³⁸³ “Discipline Doesn’t Come with the Cane”, *Straits Times*, 15 Oct 1971.

³⁸⁴ “Punishment Plays Part in Discipline”, *Straits Times*, 23 Oct 1971.

³⁸⁵ Mr Chen Keng Juan, Principal of Pei Chun Public School elaborated on this in an article published in 1995. See next page.

Thus, over the period of the 1970s to 1990s, the general discipline of schoolchildren and the official policy on corporal punishment were frequently mentioned in the press. From these news reports, female delinquency appeared to be on the rise and teachers were at a loss as to how to handle recalcitrant girls. For example, a teacher in a secondary girls' school recounted an incident when a girl had repeatedly ignored warnings not to speak loudly to her friend when the teacher was teaching. The teacher threatened to 'smack' her, whereupon the girl stormed up to the teacher, offered her face and defiantly said, "I dare you to slap me."³⁸⁶ Such open defiance could only have been the result of knowing that corporal punishment for girls was banned.

It was felt that this policy especially affected the discipline of girls, as there did not seem to be any other effective measure to correct recalcitrant girls. In 1981 a retired teacher called upon the MOE to review the policy on corporal punishment. Writing to the Forum page of the *Straits Times*, Phua Kim Yong commented:

In the first two decades of my career, I never came across offences such as stealing, extortion, punching girls, using obscene words, dumping excreta in a pupil's desk and showing vulgar signs behind a teacher's back.... I don't understand why some parents condemn the punishment of writing lines. What choice does a male teacher have when a girl does not do her homework and repeatedly forgets to bring her books? Give teachers the right to use the cane so they can perform their duties effectively.³⁸⁷

A number of teachers felt that without the cane or the threat of it, it was difficult to punish female students. But despite the ban on corporal punishment for girls, there were still occasional instances of violation by teachers. A Ministry of Education official revealed in 1974 that there had been numerous cases of "girl pupils

³⁸⁶ "STU: That Report Unfair to Teachers", *Straits Times*, 3 Dec 1974.

³⁸⁷ "Spare the rod and spoil the child", *Straits Times*, 29 May 1981.

being slapped and kicked by both male and female teachers.”³⁸⁸ The official revealed this to explain why the Ministry refused to review and relax the strict regulations regarding corporal punishment in school. A few such cases of violations were reported in the press. For example, in 1972, a male teacher was brought to court for slapping and punching a girl pupil. He was fined \$300.³⁸⁹ In another reported incident in 1976, a woman teacher was reprovved by the Ministry of Education for slapping a girl pupil.³⁹⁰ Yet another reported incident occurred in 1983 when a woman teacher was also fined \$300 by a magistrate’s court for caning a girl pupil. This teacher even claimed that she would cane a pupil again if she felt it was for the child’s good, but would now do it only with parents’ consent.³⁹¹

In 1995 a noted educationist, Chen Keng Juan, the president of the Singapore Chinese Teachers’ Union and principal of Pei Chun Public School again publicly advocated that the cane be returned to the teacher. In an article in the January issue of the *Bulletin of the Singapore Chinese Teachers’ Union*, entitled “Schools must have the right to expel and cane pupils. Do not spare the rod or society will pay a stiff price”, he pressed for greater authority to be given to teachers and the return of the cane, citing many disciplinary problems, even among girls, such as female students working as social escorts or dance hostesses, or students getting pregnant and going for abortions.³⁹² In that article, he argued that the policy on corporal punishment had “led to doting parents of problem children lodging complaints with principals, Members of Parliament and the MOE against teachers who cane students.”³⁹³ The

³⁸⁸ “Ministry’s Views on Corporal Punishment” in *Teachers Rostrum*, 7 (1974), p. 7.

³⁸⁹ “\$300 Fine for Teacher Who Hit Pupil”, *Straits Times*, 13 Jan 1972.

³⁹⁰ “Girl Pupil Slapped: Woman Teacher Reprovved”, *Straits Times*, 20 Aug 1976.

³⁹¹ “I Will Do It Again”, *Straits Times*, 18 Aug 1983.

³⁹² “Schools Must Have Right to Expel and Cane Pupils”, the article was translated from Mandarin and published in the *Straits Times*, 8 Apr 1995.

³⁹³ *Ibid.*

official policy had forced the Ministry of Education to take the side of parents and that, according to Mr Chen, was detrimental to the maintenance of good discipline as it had caused even responsible teachers to become discouraged and disillusioned, and resort to avoidance of any attempt to discipline the children. He therefore pressed for the return of the cane to all teachers:

To deprive all teachers of the right to exercise appropriate caning is to weaken or shake the discipline pillar of the school and society. The school is a microcosm of society. While our society must still mete out the death sentence, imprisonment and caning, so, too, must teachers have the vested right to cane students when necessary, to establish a symbol of their professional dignity. We should restore respect for the status of teachers.³⁹⁴

In his argument, the principal emphasized the importance of maintaining school discipline so as to uphold social discipline in young people. Discipline was worsening because of the policy on corporal punishment, causing teachers to become jaded and inactive in instilling discipline amongst children.

Despite such public pressure, the official policy remained unchanged. Instead, by 1990, it almost seemed that caning was on its way out in Singapore schools. A *Straits Times* interview with several school principals revealed that some schools had done away with caning “in line with new pastoral care policies while others use[d] it as a last resort to discipline students for very serious offences.”³⁹⁵ There was again no consensus as most principals seemingly preferred counseling to caning and Mr Chen and members of the pro-caning camp seemed to be in the minority. Another *Straits Times* survey following the publication of his article showed that schools preferred

³⁹⁴ Ibid.

³⁹⁵ “Caning an unpopular way to punish students”, *Straits Times*, 29 Aug 1990.

other disciplinary measures. Caning was used only as a last resort for incorrigible pupils.³⁹⁶

The total banning of corporal punishment for girls and its limited acceptance for boys is a reflection of the concept of femininity held by the government. Government officials perceived boys as strong, boisterous, adventurous, curious and rebellious and may sometimes require punishment with the cane, while girls were seen as the weaker sex, being more conforming, obedient and docile, who should not be subject to such physical punishment. This was clear from a reply to a question at the 1971 Forum on Punishment in Schools on the psychological effects on boys and girls of the differential policy on corporal punishment towards boys and girls. Dr Wong Yip Chong, a consultant psychiatrist and mental health lecturer with the University of Singapore explained:

...girls are generally more conforming than boys particularly at the years in which Corporal Punishment begins to become a serious matter... And so the need for punishing girls is just generally very much less. And girls tend also physically, as a difference of the sexes, to be more emotional. One can make them cry without too much difficulty and that is enough of punishment for them and generally the need is very, very rare for Corporal Punishment for girls.³⁹⁷

Such notions of femininity are congruent with the findings of researchers noted earlier in the chapter. Girls were perceived as weak and fragile and not able to suffer physical punishment. Official perceptions of such traditional notions of femininity would thus have impact on the construction of femininity in girls as the enforcement of such a disciplinary policy by principals and teachers is intended to replicate such femininity. On the other hand, the MOE policy of promoting extra-curricular

³⁹⁶ “Counselling is Preferable, say Principals”, *Straits Times*, 17 Apr 1995.

³⁹⁷ Forum on “Punishment in Schools”, in Singapore Teachers’ Union, *Education in Singapore Today* (Singapore: STU, April 1972), p. 36.

activities even for girls to produce a rugged society contradicted such a construct. The education policy of encouraging girls' participation in sports and uniformed groups such as NCC, NPCC, or Girl Guides had had the effect of imbuing 'masculine' qualities of toughness and ruggedness. These were qualities that the PAP government had promoted in the 1960s and early 1970s as desirable and necessary for schoolchildren's future participation in the economic development of the nation. These two contradicting policies resulted in a complex synthesis of traditional femininity comprising qualities of obedience, conformity and submissiveness on the one hand with modern femininity incorporating characteristics more traditionally viewed as masculine qualities such as those associated with leadership, courage, ruggedness and toughness. While these two femininities need not necessarily be mutually exclusive, some qualities may actually conflict. For example, girls cannot be passive and develop ruggedness, nor remain submissive and yet be able to lead others.

By the second half of the 1980s, disciplinary focus shifted from physical punishment to other forms of punishment to correct deviant behaviour. Corporal punishment became less emphasized as a disciplinary tool and counselling was preferred. Softer and more meaningful forms of corrective work involving 'hard labour' like cleaning windows and gardening now replaced the writing of lines or standing outside the classroom. Another measure used was the demerit point system in which points were accumulated for misbehaviour – the more points accumulated, the more severe the punishment.³⁹⁸ Detention was also another popular disciplinary measure. This involved making students remain in school for a period of time to do

³⁹⁸ "Tailoring Discipline to Suit Offence", *Straits Times*, 17 Apr 1995, and "Counselling is Preferable, say Principals", *Straits Times*, 17 Apr 1995.

work under the supervision of a teacher. Schools also sent teachers for training in counseling so as to help students in need and to deal with recalcitrant offenders.³⁹⁹ These measures reflected the social and educational progress made in Singapore society where corporal and other types of physical punishment were frowned upon and more humane measures were adopted instead.

Further progress was seen in 1988, when a pastoral care and career guidance programme for effective pupil management was piloted in seventeen secondary schools. By 1994 it had been implemented in all secondary schools and, by 1995, primary schools were included in the programme as well. The term ‘pastoral care’ was first used in the United Kingdom to refer to aspects of the teacher’s work that extended beyond pure teaching and included looking after the well-being of pupils.⁴⁰⁰ It was a holistic approach to education which emphasized the “acceptance and value of an individual, the nurturing of his or her development towards self-identity, self-discipline and personal responsibility.”⁴⁰¹ The pastoral care programme in Singapore used a whole-school approach in which all the resources in the school were harnessed towards creating a positive learning environment that would facilitate the academic and personal growth of pupils. Good school climate and ethos (the outward manifestation of the value system of the school) were emphasized. Principals and teachers were encouraged to establish a warm and caring school environment that would foster good relationships between teachers and pupils and among pupils as well. However, teachers were reminded that the pastoral care approach was not a soft option in disciplinary measures. All teachers were to be involved in maintaining

³⁹⁹ “Counselling is Preferable, say Principals”, *Straits Times*, 17 Apr 1995.

⁴⁰⁰ Singapore, Ministry of Education, *Pastoral Care: A Sharper Focus. A Handbook for Principals and Teachers*, (Singapore: Pastoral Care and Career Guidance Section, 1994), p. 1.

⁴⁰¹ Singapore, Ministry of Education, *Framework for Implementing Pastoral Care in Primary Schools* (Singapore: Pastoral Care and Career Guidance Section, c. 1995), p. 3.

discipline, but it was important to treat each disciplinary case individually and be judicious in the dispensation of punishment.⁴⁰²

The pastoral care programme thus aimed at the total development of pupils, focusing on nurturing pupils' self-identity and self-discipline. However, the programme did not highlight the need to help pupils in their development of gender identity. It is interesting to note that in a 1994 handbook for principals and teachers for the implementation of the pastoral care programme, reference was made to the management of problems of violence by delinquent girls. Of special significance is the following passage which put the blame for this problem on the influence of the media:

We live in an age where violence is increasing daily across the world; where, in some countries, there is no distinction made between the male and female, when the armed forces are trained for combat; where a tough image for the female is supplanting the traditional image, on television for example... As the impact of television is very powerful, it is likely that this may be a contributive factor to a trend which will affect a minority of girls; but the majority are likely to continue in their way of thinking and behaving.⁴⁰³

By implication, therefore, the traditional image of femininity as soft, gentle and docile was still desirable and the majority of girls were conforming to this traditional concept. The media was blamed for the aggressive, 'tough image' of the female that had influenced girls to behave in socially unacceptable ways. The basic underpinning of the pastoral programme was, therefore, still patriarchal in nature and girls were still expected to behave in traditionally feminine ways.

The fact that the government's policies themselves had contributed to altering the feminine construct was not acknowledged. For example, education policies gave

⁴⁰² Singapore, Ministry of Education, *Pastoral Care: A Sharper Focus. A Handbook for Principals and Teachers*, p. 33.

⁴⁰³ *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

girls equal education opportunities and introduced ideas of egalitarianism, meritocracy and equality of the sexes. The promotion of participation in sports and uniformed groups developed girls' leadership skills and taught them values of discipline, perseverance, ruggedness, adventurism and risk-taking. The encouragement of girls to take up technical studies with a view to breaking into male-dominated occupations such as engineering and the overall economic policies of encouraging women to join the labour force also contributed to altering notions of femininity and gender roles. Even the population policy of 'Girl or Boy, Two is Enough' encouraged parents to treat their daughters like boys and give them the same opportunities as their sons. All these policies had contributed to the blurring of lines between traditional masculinity and femininity. The fact that femininity needed to be reconstructed in view of altered social and economic conditions and pressures was not appreciated.

Although pastoral care aimed at the total development of the pupils, little attention was given to discussion of gender roles and identities. This was not considered a relevant issue as the existence of gender equality was a presumption and there was little awareness of sex discrimination or harassment in the school. The transmission of gender ideology took other forms such as training in correct behaviour. In this regard, a significant area to look at is the way notions of femininity had been encoded in school rules. These discipline codes regulated the behaviour of students and contributed to students' construction of gender identity and roles through its prescriptions of important values and proper conduct. Individual schools had their own school rules that were usually printed in students' handbooks. This ensured that students were aware of these rules and could not plead ignorance when caught for breach of rules.

The survey on teachers' perception of discipline carried out by STU in 1985 found that many schools had lengthy lists of rules covering every possible misbehaviour.⁴⁰⁴ The report commented that "[a] discipline code that consists of a very lengthy and detailed set of rules could give teachers and pupils the impression that there are too many trivialities and unnecessary restrictions on the pupils."⁴⁰⁵ This was clearly the case as students who were polled by a *Straits Times* forum, argued that there were too many rules and some of these were unnecessary. One student wrote:

When I entered secondary school, I was shocked by the number of rules in the handbook. They took up 3¼ pages. The written rules include the wearing of school jackets, faded uniforms must be discarded, only green stripes on our track shoes and the wearing of name tags.... Then there are the unwritten rules. One of the most absurd is that we are not allowed to talk to boys when we are in uniform. If the boy is our ex-classmate, we can only say "hi", then "bye". If we are caught talking to a guy in uniform, three demerit points straight away.⁴⁰⁶

Another girl complained about the amount of time taken up in school because of discipline:

Trying not to break rules takes up a great deal of time in school. There are occasional spot checks during assembly for the flag raising ceremony in my school. The prefects will make sure that we have neat hair, short fingernails and that we are wearing our slips.⁴⁰⁷

It was also found that most schools put rules pertaining to uniform among the top three rules in the list, indicating an emphasis on appearance.⁴⁰⁸ For example, girls' uniforms should not be above the knee, no jewellery was allowed and long hair had to be neatly tied up or plaited. The dress code for girls was emphasized, but

⁴⁰⁴ Singapore Teachers' Union, *Teachers' Perception of the State of Discipline in Singapore Schools*, p. 19.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁶ "Thumbs Up for the Jacket Rule", *Straits Times*, 20 Feb 1990.

⁴⁰⁷ "Thou Shalt Not!", *Straits Times*, 20 Feb 1990.

⁴⁰⁸ Singapore Teachers' Union, *Teachers' Perception of the State of Discipline in Singapore Schools*, pp. 19-20.

sometimes these rules were rather arbitrary, subjective and differed from school to school. Rules on hairstyles, for example, was often a bone of contention, judging by the number of complaints about this rule. This ‘hairy’ issue took centre-stage in a number of press reports. For example, in May 1980, it was reported that in Whampoa Secondary Chinese School, three girls fainted and several girls broke into tears after their hair was cut by the school principal.⁴⁰⁹ Seven years later in May 1987, a number of girls in Katong Convent were given the same treatment by a couple of teachers with sewing scissors. In 1990, a reader called the *Straits Times* NewsLine to complain about Maju Secondary School’s move to discourage girls from keeping long hair “to avoid giving a poor image of the school.”⁴¹⁰ The complainant was of the opinion that such a rule was unreasonable and girls should be allowed to keep their hair long. In 1992, a press report highlighted the strict discipline of Paya Lebar Methodist Girls’ Secondary School when it stated: “Girls will be little ladies here. No shorts. No messy long hair. And yes, petticoats under navy blue pinafores are de rigueur.”⁴¹¹ Girls in the school at that time were not allowed to keep their hair long. Ironically, one year later, the school was reported to have made two schoolgirls wear swimming caps because their hair was too short. The emphasis by the school on a feminine appearance was clear in a student’s comment: “The school does not allow us to keep boys’ hairstyles and the principal is always telling us that as girls, we have to look like girls.”⁴¹² A *Straits Times* poll showed that Paya Lebar Methodist Girls’ was not alone in adopting this policy. Four other girls’ schools also discouraged their girls

⁴⁰⁹ “Op Snip Snip and 3 Girls Faint”, *Straits Times*, 10 May 1980.

⁴¹⁰ “Girls With Long Hair ‘Give School a Poor Image’”, *Straits Times*, 22 Feb 1990.

⁴¹¹ “Well and Truly Little Ladies”, *Straits Times*, 19 Aug 1992.

⁴¹² “School Punishes Girls Whose Hair was Too Short”, *Straits Times*, 9 Apr 1993.

from sporting very short boyish crops, citing the need for girls to look feminine and gracious.⁴¹³

This issue of girls needing to look and behave in a more feminine manner spawned a facetious proposal from a self-proclaimed ‘citizens’ committee’ on how schools could make girls more ‘girlish.’ Entitled ‘A Modest Proposal for Femininity’, it proposed several ways to preserve femininity in girls, including the wearing of slips instead of shorts under the uniform and pumps instead of trainers for footwear.⁴¹⁴ The frivolous nature of the proposals seemed to mock at schools’ attempts to define femininity in such superficial terms. Underlying this frivolity, however, was a very serious issue of gender identity and sexuality. What constituted femininity was being worked out by girls at this age and most schools were still prescribing a very traditional image of femininity. There was fear that boyish crops and cross-dressing by girls would blur the distinctions between masculinity and femininity and cause homosexuality and transsexuality to become acceptable.

It can be seen from the above examples of school rules that definitions of the acceptable ‘feminine’ image varied over space and time. What is also evident is the attempt by schools to use rules to impose their own notions of femininity on girls. These rules were intended to inculcate traditional ‘feminine’ values of neatness of appearance in girls. In this, Singaporean schools are no different from schools in other parts of the world. Lynda Measor and Pat Sikes in their research on British schools, found that “[the] code of femininity states that girls must take appropriate care with their appearance and be conscious of fashion and style. However, it is

⁴¹³ “No Short Crop Girls, Say Some Schools”, *Straits Times*, 13 Apr 1993.

⁴¹⁴ “A Modest Proposal for Femininity”, *Straits Times*, 15 Apr 1993.

important they do not take this too far. This is associated with a more general issue of presentation of self, which demands that girls are quiet and unassuming.”⁴¹⁵

There is also evidence from researches in western countries, that there is female resistance to male power in the classroom. For example, it was observed that some girls could avoid doing their schoolwork without being noticed if they kept quiet and looked busy. Quiet resistance was thus masked by outward conformity. Girls who did that, however, risked being perceived as “intellectually unadventurous or less intelligent than the boys.”⁴¹⁶ Overt resistance by girls who deviated from expected passive behaviour were disapproved of and these girls were labelled as discipline cases. As mentioned earlier, behaviour such as boisterousness, unruliness, assertiveness and challenges to authority were considered deviant when exhibited by girls but accepted or even praised if exhibited by boys.⁴¹⁷ It was also found that teachers and students were likely to make harsh judgements about the morals and appearance of girls who deviated from the expected model of femininity and passivity.⁴¹⁸

Such findings of female resistance in the school have revealed that the assumption that gender ideology is simply and directly transmitted and accepted by the young is, in fact, not true. For instance, the assumption that a society’s dominant values are passed on through teachers is an over-simplification. Firstly, it would be difficult to find consistency in values held by all teachers and, secondly, the adoption of social values is not a straightforward process. Other factors, such as family and individual experiences as well as the media, interact to influence the adoption of these

⁴¹⁵ Lynda Measor & Pat Sikes, *Gender and Schools* (London: Cassell, 1992), pp. 93-94.

⁴¹⁶ Carrie Paechter, *Educating the Other: Gender, Power and Schooling*, pp. 26-27.

⁴¹⁷ K.H. Robinson, “Classroom Discipline: Power, Resistance and Gender”, pp. 273-274.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid.

social values. It is unlikely therefore that gender ideologies are passively internalized, but instead, they are actively negotiated and resisted by girls and women.⁴¹⁹ Hence, it would be a fallacy to assume that traditional notions of femininity are consistently accepted and replicated. The resistance against traditional notions of femininity is seen in the rise of female discipline problems and increasing cases of female juvenile delinquency. Such resistance is seen in Singapore as well, particularly in the 1990s, with increasing cases of female deviance as well as a rise in cases of cross-dressing and lesbianism among schoolgirls. These will be discussed further in the next section.

Decline in Girls' Discipline and Rise of Female Juvenile Delinquency

Between 1959 to the 1980s there was only a slight decline in girls' discipline but this was not of major concern to the authorities. Delinquent acts by juveniles in the 1970s were mostly committed by males.⁴²⁰ By 1973, the authorities were so concerned over the increase in male juvenile delinquency that a Committee on Crime and Delinquency was set up to "examine the incidence and nature of crime and delinquency in young offenders in Singapore" as well as to recommend measures to prevent juvenile delinquency and treat such delinquents.⁴²¹ In its report, the Committee revealed that, over a ten year period from 1963 to 1972, there had been an increasing trend in crime and delinquency [Table 5.1]. It noted that crime and delinquency among young offenders is predominantly a male activity. Supplementary statistics by the Committee showed that the incidence of female pre-delinquency in

⁴¹⁹ Pam Gilbert & Sandra Taylor, *Fashioning the Feminine*, p. 23.

⁴²⁰ A juvenile was defined under the provisions of the Children and Young Persons Act as a male or female person aged seven years upwards and under the age of sixteen. Cited in Singapore, *Report of the Committee on Crime and Delinquency* (Singapore: Ministry of Home Affairs, 1974), p. 1.

⁴²¹ *Ibid.*, p. iii.

1973 was also low with only 14.3 incidences of pre-delinquent activities in every 1000 females.⁴²²

Table 5.1
Incidence of Juvenile Delinquency, 1963 – 1972

Year	Number of Delinquents		Ratio F:M
	Female	Male	
1963	20	565	4:100
1964	33	464	7:100
1965	39	551	7:100
1966	49	631	8:100
1967	49	550	9:100
1968	68	521	13:100
1969	52	573	9:100
1970	54	456	12:100
1971	51	431	12:100
1972	81	690	12:100

Source: Singapore, *Report of the Committee on Crime and Delinquency* (Singapore: Ministry of Home Affairs, 1974).

Although male delinquents outnumbered female delinquents significantly, there was also a rising trend in female juvenile delinquency. The number of female delinquents had increased steadily in ten years from 20 in 1963 to 81 in 1972 [Table 5.1]. At the same time the ratio of female to male delinquents was also increasing over the ten-year period. There was a sudden unaccountable upsurge in the number of female delinquents in 1968, which brought the proportion of female delinquents to a high of 13 per hundred male, but this dropped to the 1967 rate in the following year. The rate then rose to 12 females per hundred male delinquents for the next three years. This steady rise in the number of female miscreants still did not cause much

⁴²² Pre-delinquency was defined by the Committee as acts which are regarded as preliminary signs of delinquency or criminality such as truancy, lying, cheating, bullying, smoking and gambling. See Singapore, *Report of the Committee on Crime and Delinquency* (Singapore: Ministry of Home Affairs, 1974), p. 1.

concern as delinquency was considered a predominantly male activity and the proportion of female delinquents, compared to that of male, was still relatively low.

In the 1970s and 1980s, some problems of girls smoking cigarettes and consuming drugs surfaced, but generally few problems of delinquent females were highlighted in the press.⁴²³ As discussed earlier, STU's surveys on school discipline showed that school discipline in general had deteriorated, but no mention was made of girls' discipline being a problem.⁴²⁴ The first indications of serious problems with female discipline became evident only in a 1992 report by the Singapore Cancer Society. It showed that 2% of schoolgirls in its sample of 10,000 students aged 12 - 20 were smokers.⁴²⁵ A separate survey by the Ministry of Health carried out in 1987 of students aged between 9 - 20 had found that only 0.2% of schoolgirls smoked. Although both surveys were not comparable because of differences in age group and sample size, the Cancer Society subscribed to the view that smoking among schoolgirls had increased significantly.⁴²⁶

The comments from a female and a male who were interviewed on the subject of female smokers showed the differing perspectives on femininity. Jessica, an eighteen-year-old 'A' level student who started smoking from the age of fifteen, commented:

I think a lot of girls smoke because of peer pressure. It's also because they think it is cool and gives them an adult and sexy look.⁴²⁷

Jessica's comments illustrated modern notions of femininity that viewed smoking, an activity more commonly associated with males, as fashionable, acceptable and even

⁴²³ See "Convent Probe on the 'White Pill' Students", *Straits Times*, 12 Sep 1970 & "Drugs: 4 Girls Expelled", *Straits Times*, 6 Jul 1973.

⁴²⁴ The STU conducted surveys on discipline in 1985 and again in 1995. See p. 163.

⁴²⁵ "Number of Schoolgirls Who Smoke Up Tenfold: Survey", *Straits Times*, 6 Apr 1992.

⁴²⁶ "2 Surveys Cited in Report Not Comparable: Health Ministry", *Straits Times*, 11 Apr 1992.

⁴²⁷ "Number of Schoolgirls Who Smoke Up Tenfold: Survey", *Straits Times*, 6 Apr 1992.

desirable for females. The comments of Lai Chung Han, a national serviceman, on the other hand, illustrated the traditional view of femininity:

Females who smoke give the impression they are not decent. They also produce a greater sense of revulsion than male smokers... I know it is discrimination on my part, but it is an opinion that is socially ingrained.⁴²⁸

Interestingly, Lai showed awareness of his gender bias but defended it as an opinion that was based on social norms and acceptability. Such differences in opinions showed the dichotomy in traditional and modern notions of femininity that were held by people, even among those who were in the same age bracket.

In the second half of the 1990s, problems of discipline among female students surged to the forefront. In 1990 there was a total of only 198 female juvenile delinquents. This number jumped dramatically in 1995 to 737 but dropped to 477 in 1999 in line with the decrease in overall juvenile delinquency [Chart 5.1]. Over a period of ten years, from 1990 to 1999, the proportion of female juvenile delinquents had increased from 16.4% to 28.9%.⁴²⁹

When these figures are compared with that in Table 5.1, the rise in female juvenile delinquency is more evident. In the twenty-year period from 1972 to 1992, female juvenile delinquency had risen from 81 to 301, a three-fold increase and by 1999, it had increased almost five-fold from 1972.⁴³⁰ Although the absolute number of female juvenile offenders began to decline in 1999, the government was concerned about the narrowing gap between male and female offenders. In 1972 there were 12 female offenders for every 100 who were male and this ratio rose to 20 in 1990 and

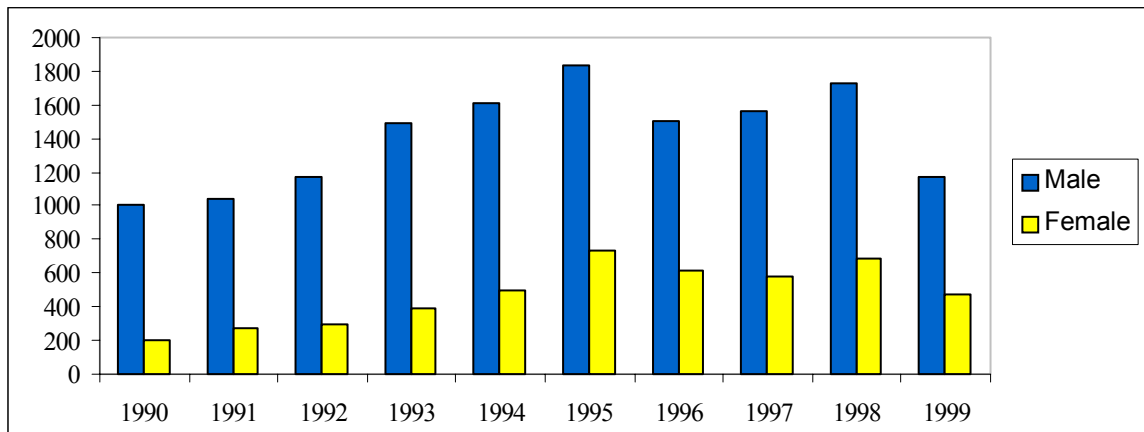
⁴²⁸ Ibid.

⁴²⁹ Alfred Choi & Lo T. Wing, *Fighting Youth Crime: Success and Failure of Two Little Dragons* (Singapore: Times Media Pte Ltd., 2002), pp. 32-33.

⁴³⁰ In percentage terms, the increase amounted to almost 272% from 1972 to 1992 and approximately 489% from 1972 to 1999.

41 by 1999. This trend was of grave concern as it signalled to the authorities the increasing rebellion by girls against conformity to society's norms and expectations.

Chart 5.1
Trend Chart of Juvenile Delinquency by Sex, 1990 – 1999



Source: Alfred Choi & T. Wing Lo, *Fighting Youth Crime: Success and Failure of Two Little Dragons* (Singapore: Times Media Pte Ltd., 2002)

In the 1990s, such rebellion by schoolgirls was increasingly highlighted in the press. Teachers who continued to hold traditional notions of femininity described these girls as defiant and brazen. Girls were reportedly “involved in gang clashes and used vulgar language.”⁴³¹ A 1996 press report showed that more teenage girls were joining gangs, smoking, getting drunk and picking fights:

Gone are the days when teenage girls used to be passive bystanders to fights among their male friends. These days, some of them are getting in on the action too, thinking nothing of getting drunk and picking a fight or two, with or without the guys.... It seems to be a new breed of girl – the underage [*sic*] teen who smokes and drinks illegally, curses and swears and turns violent for flimsy reasons.⁴³²

In the same press report, the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) revealed that in 1994, no teenage girls had been charged in court for involvement in gangs, but 64 were given warnings. In the following year, 23 were charged in court and 18 were

⁴³¹ “School Discipline Not Worse But Problem Pupils More Defiant”, *Straits Times*, 30 Jun 1995.

⁴³² “Bad Girls – It Used To Be Just Boys... Now Girls Cause Havoc Too”, *Straits Times*, 21 Jan 1996.

warned. The girls, according to the CID, were becoming more open about their gang involvement. In 1997, the press reported that more parents were applying to the Juvenile Court to control their daughters. According to figures released, the number of girls admitted to homes or placed under supervision had more than doubled from 46 in 1991 to 101 in 1996 [Chart 5.2].⁴³³

Such activities and behaviour were considered inappropriate for girls, leading concerned authorities to take action to curb this. In April 1998, the Ministry of Education set up a Committee on Discipline of Female Pupils, chaired by Dr Aline Wong, the Senior Minister of State for Education, to investigate the increase in delinquency among secondary schoolgirls and recommend policies and measures to curb this problem.⁴³⁴ The report by this committee emphasized that the general discipline of girls was good but admitted that there was a discernible rise in the number of discipline cases involving girls. Most of the offences were minor, 80% of which were attendance-related, and 17% were cases of misconduct.⁴³⁵ Offences that were classified as cases of misconduct included littering, improper attire and grooming, use of vulgar language, defiance and rudeness. Serious offences such as theft, smoking and gang-related activities made up only 3%.⁴³⁶ The number of truancy cases was of concern to the ministry because this “could be symptomatic of more serious problems such as involvement in gangs or cases where pupils are beyond parental control.”⁴³⁷ The report added that teachers had expressed that girls

⁴³³ “Parents of Rebellious Girls Turn to the Courts”, *Straits Times*, 3 Jul 1997.

⁴³⁴ Singapore, Ministry of Education Press Release, “School-Home-Community Partnership For Good Discipline Of Female Pupils: Findings of the Committee on Discipline of Female Pupils”, 16 Aug 1999, <http://www1.moe.edu.sg/Press/pr990916.htm>.

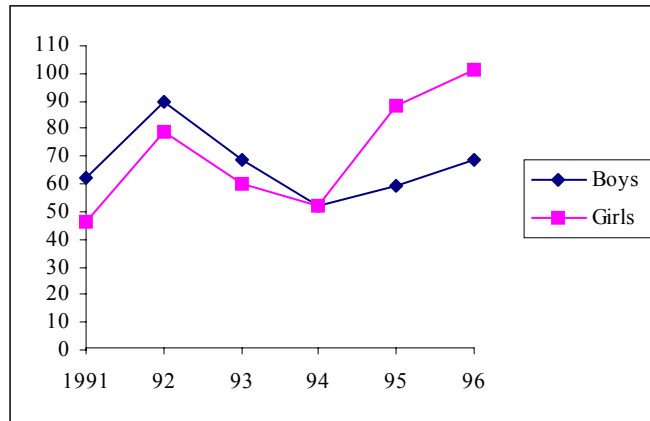
⁴³⁵ Ministry of Education, “Committee on Discipline of Female Pupils: Report”, an unpublished handout given during a slide presentation by the Committee on the Discipline of Female Pupils to Ministry of Education officers, c. 1998, no pagination.

⁴³⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴³⁷ *Ibid.*

had become less repentant of their misbehaviour and there was a fear that these girls would go on to commit more serious offences.

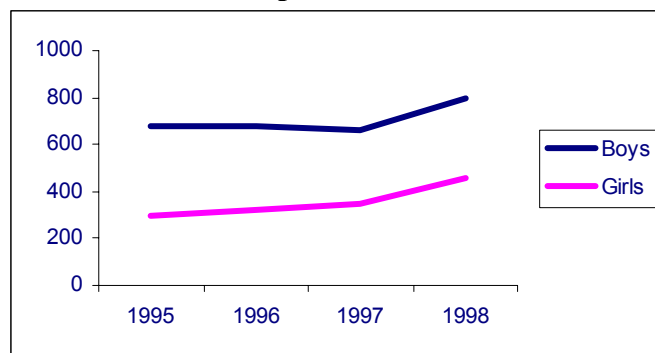
Chart 5.2
Number Of Youths Under Restrictive Orders By Juvenile Court, 1991-1996



Source: *Straits Times*, 3 Jul 1997.

The Ministry of Education was also concerned about the narrowing gap in the offence rate (the number of offences per 1000 students) between boys and girls. From 1995 to 1997, the offence rate for girls was half that of boys. In this period, the offence rate for boys dipped whilst that for girls showed an increase [Chart 5.3]. However, the rates for 1998 showed significant increases for both boys and girls. The offence rate for girls increased by 37% from 347 in 1997 to 455 in 1998, while that for boys went up by 21.6% from 657 to 799 in the same period.

Chart 5.3
Number of Offences per 1,000 Students, 1995-1998



Source: Statistics obtained from "Bad Girls: The Problem", *Straits Times*, 14 Sep 1999.

There seemed to be an attempt by the Committee to downplay a very serious problem concerning female rebellion. Despite the obvious increase in female disciplinary problems and the growing trend in female juvenile offences, the chairperson Dr Aline Wong, emphasized that the findings were not alarming and that there was no need to overreact. Yet figures released by the Ministry of Community Development revealed that the proportion of cases of girls beyond parental control had risen from 59% in 1995 to 67% in 1998. This meant that two thirds of the total cases of children beyond parental control were teenage girls, the majority of whom were between 14 - 16 years of age.⁴³⁸ This attempt to downplay the severity of the problem of girls' discipline reflects the government leaders' desire to preserve a façade of hegemony being maintained with the traditional concept of femininity being the accepted norm. There was an obvious refusal to admit that society's progress had brought about changes in the construction of femininity and gender norms.

Dr Anthony Loh, principal of Bukit Merah Secondary School, commented on the changes in the behaviour of schoolgirls:

Children hardly talked back then. Now they do. Children used to ask for permission to go out. Now they just tell their parents... What is most disturbing is the behaviour of girls. Following the latest fashion trends set by their favourite TV stars, like having dyed hair or smoking cigarettes, might sound alarming enough...but... he [Dr Loh] has caught a few of his schoolgirls sporting tattoos – not the washable stick-on ones but the real thing.⁴³⁹

Clearly, the modern schoolgirls were no longer like the schoolgirls of the past. These changes were the result of many factors, one of which was a more lax attitude in the discipline and upbringing of girls. Teachers had found it increasingly difficult to impose discipline on girls because of the ban on corporal punishment. Thus the result

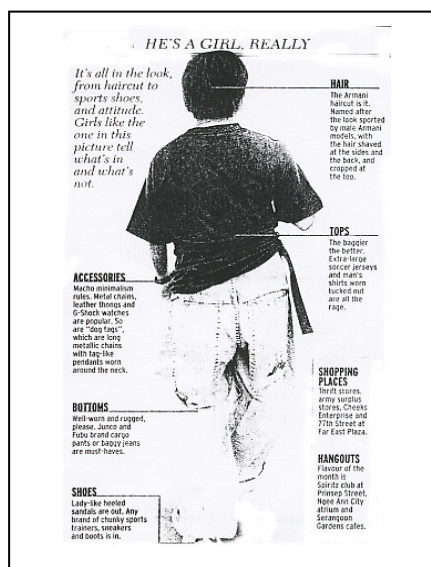
⁴³⁸ "2 in 3 Cases of Problem Kids Involve Girls", *Straits Times*, 12 Sep 1999.

⁴³⁹ "Help Yourself, Help Your Child", *Straits Times*, 14 Sep 1999.

was an increasing problem of socializing girls into accepting a femininity that is defined as docile and submissive.

The report also highlighted some principals' concern over a phenomenon which was termed 'inappropriate gender behaviour' in a few all-girls' schools.⁴⁴⁰ Such misbehaviour consisted of sporting short hair and dressing like boys [Figure 5.1].

Figure 5.1
Gender-bender dressing



Source: *Straits Times*, 19 Sep 1999

According to the medical director of the Mount Elizabeth-Charter Behavioural Health Services Dr Tan Chue Tin, this was temporary and most likely mere attention-seeking behaviour: "In an all-girls' school, bad behaviour receives a lot of attention and publicity whereas in boys' schools they would just be naughty boys...it is just a fashionable fad and a passing phase."⁴⁴¹ Dr Tan added that this may also be the result of teenage rebellion and problems in the home:

...many of these girls also come from broken homes or have troubled relationships with their parents. Instead of identifying more with their

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁴¹ "It's a Boy...No, She Just Looks Like One", *Straits Times*, 19 Sep 1999.

mothers, some might be excessively close to their fathers and estranged from their mother. *This prevents them from developing a female identity.*⁴⁴²

A number of principals also concluded that this was not a serious problem and was simply a reflection of girls trying to work out their personal identity.

A critical reason why schools banned close-cropped hair for girls and frowned upon gender-bender dressing was because these acts were manifestations of a more serious problem, that of lesbianism. A *Straits Times* article in 1992 had highlighted this problem in girls' schools. A principal of a secondary girls' school reportedly had to call in the police to deter a group of lesbians from approaching her students.⁴⁴³ According to her, at least three other girls' schools had the same problem. She first sensed something amiss when some of her students "started cutting their hair short, wearing men's clothes and walking with exaggerated strides."⁴⁴⁴ The principal discovered that two years earlier a group of older girls had tried to sell tickets to a lesbian party to her students. After approaching and speaking to the group that was troubling her students, she discovered from them that there were other similar groups hanging out at different shopping malls. It is not known if there was an increase in the number of lesbians, but it appeared that these lesbians were becoming more open in their activities. A psychologist explained that this sexual deviation among girls might have been caused by the growing number of women in the workforce. According to her, girls turned to older lesbians for love and attention because their mothers were working or often not at home and not giving them the attention that they needed.⁴⁴⁵

⁴⁴² Ibid. [Emphasis added]

⁴⁴³ "Girls' School Calls in Police Over Lesbians Approaching its Students", *Straits Times*, 5 Jul 1992.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid.

The rise in numbers of female offences and incidences of cross-dressing and lesbianism by schoolgirls were signs of increasing rejection of the traditional notions of femininity and its corresponding gender behaviour. They also indicated the problems that these girls had in constructing their gender identity as a result of rapid changes in the family and society.

Socio-Economic Progress: Femininity and the Paradox of Modernity

According to the 1998 Committee on Discipline of Female Pupils, the problem arose from a number of sources, among which were parental loss of control over their children and the negative influence of the media.⁴⁴⁶ These sources were the result of economic progress and the concomitant social changes resulting from this development. With economic progress and as Singapore increasingly became a global communications hub, girls were exposed to influences from a wide range of media such as the television and the internet. Negative influences from the dominance of sex and violence in the media are difficult to control, especially for children in nuclear families, left on their own with little supervision from parents who were both working outside the home. The lack of proper guidance from parents also meant a loss of positive role modelling of social values and culturally acceptable norms of behaviour. There was, therefore, a breakdown in the transmission of traditional notions of femininity in the home.

Dr Alfred Choi, a criminologist who has studied youth crime in Singapore, attributed the rising trend in juvenile delinquency to three aspects of social change, viz., changes in the family, education and youth.⁴⁴⁷ There have been substantial

⁴⁴⁶ "More Offences by Secondary Girls", *Straits Times*, 14 Sep 1999.

⁴⁴⁷ Alfred Choi & Lo T. Wing, *Fighting Youth Crime: Success and Failure of Two Little Dragons*, pp. 210-212.

changes in the family, the first of which is the predominance of the nuclear family (one-family nucleus) taking the place of traditional extended families in Singapore. In the period between 1957 and 1980, the number of one-family nucleus increased from 188,618 to 397,125, a growth of 110.5%. The multi-family nuclei household increased by only 60%, from 32,181 to 51,521 in the same period.⁴⁴⁸ The one-family nucleus household continued to grow rapidly and by 1990, constituted 85% of total residential households, compared to 78% in 1980. In the year 2000, although it declined somewhat to 82%, the proportion of multi-nuclei households also dropped precipitously to 5.6%. There was also a significant rise in one-person and other no-family households, indicating the rising problem of marriage avoidance in Singapore [Table 5.2].

Table 5.2
Private Households by Type of Household, 1957 - 2000

Type of Household	Number of households				
	1957	1970	1980	1990	2000
One Person	61,450 (21%)	50,007 (13%)	42,386 (8%)	34,578 (5%)	75,577 (8%)
Other No Family Nucleus	14,833 (5%)	13,860 (4%)	18,492 (4%)	23,173 (3%)	38,152 (4%)
One Family Nucleus	188,618 (63%)	272,164 (71%)	397,125 (78%)	559,580 (85%)	758,108 (82%)
Multi-family Nuclei	32,181 (11%)	44,492 (12%)	51,521 (10%)	44,399 (7%)	51,488 (6%)
Total	297,082 (100%)	380,523 (100%)	509,524 (100%)	661,730 (100%)	923,325 (100%)

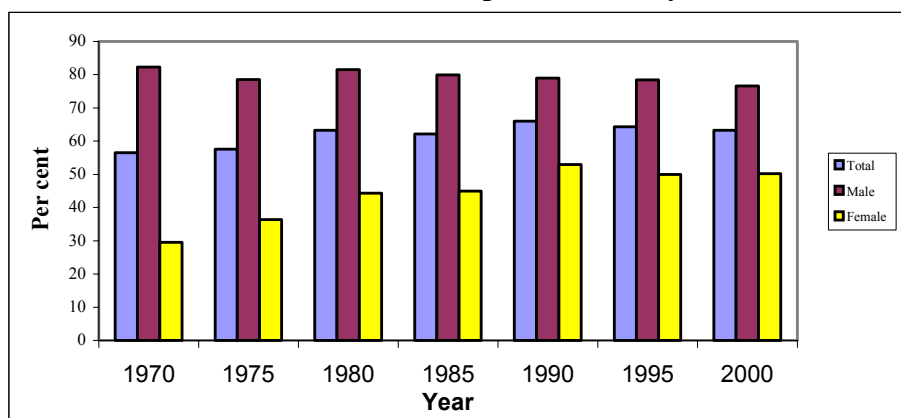
Source: Stephen H.K. Yeh, *Households and Housing*, Census Monograph No. 4 (Singapore: Dept of Statistics, 1985), Singapore, *Census of Population, 1990: Households and Housing*, Statistical Release 2 (Singapore: Dept. of Statistics, 1992), Singapore, *Census of Population, 2000: Households and Housing*, Statistical Release 5 (Singapore: Dept. of Statistics, 2001).

⁴⁴⁸ Stephen H.K. Yeh, *Households and Housing*, Census Monograph No. 4 (Singapore: Dept of Statistics, 1985).

According to Stephen H.K. Yeh, a professor of Sociology and Population Studies, this rapid growth of the nuclear family reflected “the increasing preference for privacy and independence among young married couples.”⁴⁴⁹ This resulted in significant reduction of grandparents’ involvement and participation in nurturing grandchildren. In the past, children had mothers or grandparents at home who would nurture and teach moral values to them.

The second change within the family was the increasing number of families with both parents working. Economic pragmatism entailed the maximization of Singapore’s resources. Hence the government actively pursued a policy of encouraging women to join the labour force. This policy has had success as the female labour force participation rate (FLFPR) has increased significantly. The FLFPR, which was a mere 21.6% in 1957, reached a high of 53% by 1990 but dropped to 50.2% by the year 2000 [Chart 5.4].

Chart 5.4
Labour Force Participation Rate by Sex, 1970 - 2000



Source: Statistics from *Singapore, 1965 – 1995, Statistical Highlights: A Review of 30 Years’ Development* (Singapore: Dept. of Statistics, 1996), Singapore, *Census of Population, 2000: Households and Housing, Statistical Release 5* (Singapore: Dept. of Statistics, 2001).

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 6.

With both parents working long hours to provide for the material well-being of their children, there was a resultant loss of effectiveness in parenting and sometimes a total loss of parental control. The rise in the number of working women meant that the care of children was increasingly taken over by domestic helpers, or other paid or unpaid care-givers. This resulted, in some cases, in the neglect and lack of supervision of children. This neglect often brought about parents' loss of control over their children. In the words of Dr. Choi, "[t]he power of the family, or parents in particular, as an agent of socialization has been weakened considerably."⁴⁵⁰ This has had serious implications for the school as home discipline is necessary to complement school discipline. Thus, economic and social changes which resulted in ineffectiveness in parenting and detachment of girls from schools became a grave concern as this "severely hamper[ed] the channels via which moral values and cultural norms are transmitted."⁴⁵¹

As early as 1983, Dr Tay Eng Soon, the Minister of State for Education had expressed concern over a report of increasing violence amongst pupils in Japan, "a country noted for the high social discipline of its people."⁴⁵² Dr Tay speculated that this could be due to the lack of parental care because many Japanese women had gone out to work. Noting that the general discipline in Singapore schools at that time was still high, Dr Tay nevertheless warned of the danger of parents over-indulging children to assuage their feelings of guilt for fostering them out. At the same time, he warned of dire consequences that could result from neglect of children by working

⁴⁵⁰ Alfred Choi & Lo T. Wing, *Fighting Youth Crime: Success and Failure of Two Little Dragons*, p. 210.

⁴⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

⁴⁵² "Tay: Our Children are Well-Disciplined", *Straits Times*, 21 Mar 1983.

parents. This was of grave concern because the economic imperative demanded that more women contributed to the labour force in Singapore.

A survey by the Singapore Press Holdings' Marketing, Planning and Development (Research) Department in 1999 revealed that an increasing number of parents admitted to losing control over their children and wanted schools to be the main disciplinarians.⁴⁵³ On the other hand, other parents were over-protective and did not want their children to be caned. The survey also found that most of the parents who wanted schools to “wield the rod usually work long hours, earn low incomes or are single parents with no family support.”⁴⁵⁴ These parents were too busy working and did not have time to work with the school on their children's behaviour. According to Mr Koh Chee Seng, principal of Boon Lay Primary:

Most of the time, these parents are working and they do not have time to come to talk about their children. Some tell us, when we get in touch, that they cannot control their children anyway and gave us the authority to cane them.⁴⁵⁵

This state of affairs was linked to changes in social and moral values in Singapore society. As a result of the stress on economic survival, the country focused on achieving rapid economic development. This in turn resulted in transforming a “traditional thrifty and collectivist Asian culture” to one where “people are driven by self-interest in pursuit of a comfortable life, luxuries and leisure.”⁴⁵⁶ Parents, who in the pursuit of material things simply did not have the time to check on their children and eventually lost control over them. A clearer picture of the change can be seen when Mr Koh's comment is contrasted with that made by Miss N.E. Norris, retired

⁴⁵³ “Discipline: Schools in a Quandary”, *Straits Times*, 12 Apr 1999.

⁴⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵⁶ Alfred Choi & Lo T. Wing, *Fighting Youth Crime: Success and Failure of Two Little Dragons*, p. 195.

principal of Raffles Girls' School when she recalled her early teaching days in Bukit Panjang Primary in the early 1940s:

And of course, being in a rural area in those days, cooperation between parents and school was very good. If you asked parents to turn up, they always did. They were very interested in their children.⁴⁵⁷

In the past, most parents took their parenting roles very seriously. Many of the women interviewed about their school life had reiterated that school discipline was complemented by home discipline in pre-war days. Mrs Chee Keng Soon pointed out that parents had become too busy and were not doing enough to reinforce the values that were taught in school:

...I think that is very important, giving instances of doing the right thing and then at the same time at home too, I think we [did] have more reinforcing of what has been taught at school. I think nowadays parents are too busy. And nowadays there is the influence of the media... I think the school is doing all they can to move the kids in the right direction where values is [*sic*] concerned. But I think the home can do a bit more.⁴⁵⁸

The government's economic policies, which were ostensibly intended to elevate the status of women as well as ensure Singapore's economic survival, inadvertently brought about some adverse developments in the social sphere. Progress had wrought significant changes in the structure and function of the family, which had repercussions on the family as a socialization agent. In short, the socialization of girls to accept the cultural norms of patriarchy, which the government had deemed essential for continued social stability in Singapore, was ironically undermined by its own economic policies.

⁴⁵⁷ Oral History Interview with Miss N.E. Norris [1982], Singapore, Oral History Department, A000221/18, Reel 2, transcript p. 14.

⁴⁵⁸ Oral History Interview with Mrs Chee Keng Soon [1995], Singapore, Oral History Department, A001720/10, Reel 2 (no transcript).

At the same time, some parents had also become indulgent of their children, often critical of school discipline and taking the side of their children. This was the result of the change in family size in Singapore. The success of the government's "Stop at Two" population policy had resulted in fewer children being born to each family. Children were therefore more precious and parents strove to afford them the best of things. Parental indulgence and the lack of support could be seen in their increasing interference with school authorities over the conduct of school discipline. A principal commented, for example, that "overprotective parents may call at the school office to query why their child had to stand during a lesson, get a scolding in front of other children or re-do his homework."⁴⁵⁹ Parents sometimes even took their children's side when they erred. For example, when the school principal expelled four girls from Katong Convent for smoking in the school toilet in 1973, the girls' parents criticized the principal for acting hastily and being too harsh. One even cast doubt on whether the girls were really guilty of the offence.⁴⁶⁰ In another incident, when three girls from Whampoa Secondary Chinese School fainted after their hair was cut by the principal, a number of letters to the Forum page of the *Straits Times* criticized the principal's action and the teachers for not acting to stop the principal despite pleas from the students.⁴⁶¹ This indulgence in children and criticism of school policies, when coupled with the lack of close supervision, often led to loss of parental and teacher control, and in consequence, a decline in school discipline as well.

The criticism of school disciplinary policies also reflected a change of public attitude towards the teaching profession. In the pre-war days and even up to the

⁴⁵⁹ "Discipline: Schools in a Quandary", *Straits Times*, 12 Apr 1999.

⁴⁶⁰ "Expelled Girls: We Were Only Eating In Toilet", *Straits Times*, 7 Jul 1973.

⁴⁶¹ "Principals Are Not Barbers", *Straits Times*, 15 May 1980; "Discipline Must Not Warp the Soul", *Straits Times*, 15 May 1980; "Important Place to a Child", *Straits Times*, 15 May 1980; "No Storm in Teacup", *Straits Times*, 22 May 1980.

1960s, teachers were well-respected and parents often entrusted the discipline of their children to the school. Since 1959, the government's mass education programme had resulted in a society that was more aware of Western values of egalitarianism and individualism. Parents began increasingly to question the way discipline, especially of girls, was handled. Mrs Alice John, former senior assistant at Raffles Girls' Secondary commented:

Before the war I remember clearly, that when the teacher scolded a pupil, the pupil used to go home and get another beating or caning ...But later on, we found that the parents were supporting their children. If the children were punished or scolded, the parents seemed to be on the children's side.... [I]n the old days the concept of a teacher was a very important person, and respected person [*sic*]. Teaching was regarded as a very respectable job...but later when parents became more educated and all, they found that the teacher was just one of them, at the same level. So perhaps, they felt they should query and wanted to know more about why their child was punished and they were more discerning and they thought about it more...⁴⁶²

In 1971, for instance, one parent wrote in to the *Straits Times* to complain about his daughter's school, claiming that "life for her and many girls in that school is sometimes a frightful hell."⁴⁶³ The parent was indignant that little girls were taken to the front of the hall and shamed for small misdemeanours such as throwing litter carelessly so that it fell outside of the litter bin instead of in it. He added:

Why have the principal, the senior mistress and the teachers become so hard and cold? Do they actually enjoy seeing sensitive little girls suffering in the agony of shame? Have they not studied child psychology? Do they not know that some small girls have become nervous wrecks and have taken to wetting the bed for days after suffering such shame?⁴⁶⁴

⁴⁶² Oral History Interview with Mrs A. John, [1996], Singapore, Oral History Department, A 001762/14, Reel 5 (no transcript).

⁴⁶³ "Where Girls Assemble for Punishment", *Straits Times*, 7 Apr 1971.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid.

The reference to psychological effects of fear created by the school authorities is evidence of the educational progress of Singapore society. With more people receiving education as well as with increased media exposure, there was greater awareness of research findings in disciplines such as human and social psychology. This letter was followed by a report of a warning by the president of the Singapore Association for Mental Health Dr Koh Eng Kheng, that public shaming of little children could result in their carrying “mental scars” for life.⁴⁶⁵ When this is again contrasted with what girls went through in the pre-war period, the extent to which society had changed becomes even clearer. According to Mrs Marie Bong, discipline was very strictly maintained, especially by the nuns:

They were strict, they were stern. Definitely it was part of their training to impose that kind of discipline on us. It was part of what they believed was necessary in the upbringing of a child, especially the emphasis on self-discipline... The punishments could be severe. You could be shamed in front of the whole assembly if you were naughty... Rudeness, cheating, things like that. Even just rudeness to the teacher was very severely dealt with. You could be put in front of the assembly and [be] lectured. You could be the subject of a lecture.⁴⁶⁶

Schoolgirls in pre-war Singapore were therefore subjected to such harsh measures, but parents and students alike accepted that as part and parcel of training in discipline and there was no complaint or evidence of “mental scarring” having taken place. By the 1970s, however, such disciplinary methods were no longer considered acceptable. From the 1970s to the 1990s, parents and other members of the public were quick to criticize schools for what they considered unreasonable punitive measures.

Another factor for the increase in delinquent girls, according to some social workers, was the changing attitudes towards girls’ upbringing. Increasingly, girls had

⁴⁶⁵ “‘Mental Scars for Life’ Warning”, *Straits Times*, 9 Apr 1971.

⁴⁶⁶ Oral History Interview with Mrs Marie Bong [1992], Singapore, Oral History Department, A001390/64, Reel 20, transcript, p. 206.

been given equal opportunities for education and greater liberty to participate in all sorts of activities that used to be limited only to boys. In the past, for example, girls used to be kept in the house when they reached puberty, to be trained in the art of home-making in preparation for marriage. This was especially so in the case of Peranakan girls.⁴⁶⁷ Miss Tan Sock Kern recalled that her aunt had told her mother that she had failed to bring up her daughter properly because she was allowed to climb trees, roam about and play games with her brothers and not kept in the house to be trained in domestic skills.⁴⁶⁸

In the 1940s and 1950s, schools provided only limited opportunities for extra-curricular activities for girls. This changed from the 1960s onwards with the government's stress on creating a rugged nation and girls were encouraged to be as active and rugged as boys through participation in school extra-curricular activities such as the NCC, NPCC or Girl Guides, athletics and a whole range of other outdoor activities. This policy of encouraging girls to develop physical toughness and endurance had reconstructed femininity to include ruggedness, toughness and strength of character. As discussed earlier, therein lay the basic contradiction in the government's gender ideology. At the same time that girls were encouraged to be rugged and active, they were still expected to be obedient and accept authority unquestioningly.

Parents too, brought up their girls by giving them the same rights as they would their sons, but still expected girls to behave in traditionally feminine ways.

⁴⁶⁷ Oral History Interview with Miss Tan Sock Kern [1993], Singapore, Oral History Department, A001427/20, Reel 5 (no transcript); Oral History Interview with Margaret Tan Guek Neo [1996], A001773/08, Reel 2 (no transcript) and Oral History Interview with Kan Keng Fong [1997], A001922/11, Reel 4 (no transcript).

⁴⁶⁸ Oral History Interview with Miss Tan Sock Kern, Reel 3 (no transcript).

Therefore when girls misbehaved, it was unacceptable and parents and teachers became alarmed. According to one social worker:

Many parents now raise their daughters no differently from their sons, but while they still think boys will be boys and get into trouble, they cannot deal with daughters who cross the line. This may breed resentment in the girls, family communication may break down and the girls may run away to their peers or boyfriends...⁴⁶⁹

While parents' attitudes towards the worth of girls had changed, leading to more equal treatment of sons and daughters, their gender concepts had not progressed in tandem with their change in attitude. Thus when boys misbehaved, it was accepted as that did not run counter to the social construct of boys and masculinity. However, girls' misbehaviour challenged the traditional conception of femininity and was unacceptable to society and the government.

In spite of society's economic and social advances, school rules, disciplinary measures and teachers' expectations of how girls should behave continued to transmit and reflect traditional notions of femininity – the girl as a gentle, quiet and submissive being. School rules focused on external manifestations of discipline such as conformity with the school dress code. The ongoing debates on the appropriate length of hair and skirt, how they should be worn, and so on, reflect the obsession with conformity and outward appearance. As mentioned earlier, notions of femininity are very much tied with outward appearances. Conservative notions of appropriate schoolgirl attire have not changed much, despite Singapore's economic and social progress. For example, pants are still considered male attire and inappropriate for girls. Skirts or pinafores continue, in the main, to be part of the school uniform for girls. To-date, despite the fact that jeans and pants are accepted forms of dress by

⁴⁶⁹ "Parents of Rebellious Girls Turn to the Courts", *Straits Times*, 3 Jul 1997.

females in Singapore society, only two schools have allowed pants as part of the school uniform for girls. The public service, which allows formal trousers or dress pants to be worn in the office by female civil servants, appears more progressive than schools.

Since 1998 the Ministry of Education had taken preventive and intervention measures to tackle the problems of misbehaving girls in the schools. These measures included programmes to educate students on their sexuality, inculcate values and self-discipline to enhance their self-esteem and confidence, improve peer support and generally, to look into the well-being of the student. There was also a greater attempt to work with parents and the community to “create an environment that is conducive to pupil development and growth, which will in turn reduce pupils’ tendency towards delinquency.”⁴⁷⁰ The MOE also worked closely with the Inter-Ministry Committee on Youth Crime which was formed in 1995 to “look into inter-agency co-ordination to reduce juvenile delinquency and youth crime in Singapore.”⁴⁷¹ A multi-pronged approach involving the Ministry of Education, the Police Force, Ministry of Community Development and Sports, Ministry of Home Affairs, National Council of Social Service, Prisons Department, Subordinate Courts and academics in youth work was developed to control the problem of youth crime and delinquency.

According to the Ministry of Education, there has been a reverse trend in the problems of discipline for both boys and girls since 1998. This was the result of using

⁴⁷⁰ “Measures to Address and Improve Discipline in School”, an unpublished paper by the Psychological and Guidance Services Branch, Ministry of Education, Oct. 2001, pp. 1-2. This paper was sent in response to a formal request for further information and statistics pertaining to the problem of girls’ discipline and the measures taken by MOE to tackle this problem.

⁴⁷¹ “Speech by Associate Professor Ho Peng Kee, Senior Minister of State for Law and Home Affairs, at the Community Safety and Security Programme Seminar for Schools on Wednesday, 27 March 2002”, Singapore Government Press Release, Media Division, Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, <http://app.internet.gov.sg/data/sprinter/pr/archives/2002032701.htm>.

both preventive and intervention measures to improve discipline.⁴⁷² The extent of success of such measures to curb discipline problems in the school is still unclear as no data on current offence rates was given despite repeated requests for statistical evidence.⁴⁷³ Brief figures released by the Senior Minister of State for Law and Home Affairs Assoc. Prof. Ho Peng Kee, indicated a decline in the overall student crime rate. According to Assoc. Prof. Ho, the number of student offenders had fallen from 2200 in 1999 to 1500 in 2001, a drop of about one-third.⁴⁷⁴ The efforts of the inter-government agencies appears to be succeeding in containing the problem of youth crime.

Louis Althusser had theorized that for a state to continue in existence, it had to not only reproduce the necessary labour power for the economy, but also replicate the relations of production.⁴⁷⁵ This was what the PAP tried to do when it came to power. It saw the importance of schools as socializing agencies and tried to use these to transmit the desired values and behaviour that it deemed necessary for Singapore's survival. This included the transmission of the state's gender ideology.

Unfortunately, the government did not seem to have a clear and consistent gender ideology. This chapter has shown that the MOE's policies towards girls' education had been premised on a whole slate of contradictory notions of gender role and relationships. The disciplinary policy was based on perceptions of an unequal relationship between the two sexes. Girls were considered to be softer and weaker

⁴⁷² Ministry of Education, "Measures to Address and Improve Discipline in School", p. 2.

⁴⁷³ My first request for information yielded a response from the MOE in the form of a paper detailing the steps that had been taken. No statistics were given to support the claim made in the paper that the situation had improved. A second request for statistical evidence received no response from the relevant department.

⁴⁷⁴ "Speech by Associate Professor Ho Peng Kee, Senior Minister of State for Law and Home Affairs, at the Community Safety and Security Programme Seminar for Schools on Wednesday, 27 March 2002".

⁴⁷⁵ See Chapter One, pp. 17-18 for discussion of Althusser's theory.

than boys and therefore should not be punished physically. Therein lay another inherent contradiction in the Ministry of Education's policy towards girls because the banning of corporal punishment for girls implies an unequal relationship between the two sexes, yet parents and schools treated girls like boys in many other respects. As a result of this, girls were given greater freedom to act and speak and thus became bolder and more outspoken. This ran counter to traditional expectations of how girls should behave and teachers then labelled them 'brazen'. Even with the introduction of more progressive methods such as pastoral care and counselling, the patriarchal ideology continues to underpin the whole system of pupil management and girls continue to be expected to behave in submissive, obedient and passive ways.

As pointed out by researchers such as Madeleine Arnot, girls are actively engaged in constructing their own gender identities. Society may present a code or pattern, but ultimately, differences in life experiences result in children's individual constructions of their own identities. The extent to which the MOE presented a unified gender code is arguable but the majority of schoolgirls seem to have accepted a traditional gender ideology. Yet, there was an indisputable rise in cases of deviancy and juvenile offences among schoolgirls in the period under study. This is an indication of the increasing resistance against the socially accepted notions of femininity that are transmitted in school. Conflict is bound to arise because educators continue to hold traditional gender ideologies and expectations of feminine behaviour with stress on conformity, submission and subordination but schoolgirls have derived different notions of femininity resulting from modern ideas of liberty, individualism and robustness that were introduced and inculcated through the education system as well as through the media. Modern images of women as strong, economically successful and achievement-oriented are in conflict with the traditional image

promoted through the school's discipline codes. Furthermore, the qualities of conformity and submissiveness expected of traditional femininity are not totally congruous or compatible with vigour and toughness – the qualities advocated by the state when it began to modernize the economy. The education of girls has thus wrought changes in their gender ideology, value system and attitudes. Girls no longer accept authority unquestioningly and are not content to simply do or act as they are told. There are thus problems in the socialization of girls in school resulting in increasing problems of discipline.

Moreover, in Singapore, the emphasis on education as a factor for rapid economic development has led to society putting stress on academic achievement and the education system becoming increasingly competitive. This has put great pressure on pupils to perform and girls who fail to do well academically are likely to become 'misfits' and resort to misbehaviour to vent their frustration. Problems of socialization are thus compounded when these girls 'rebel' against authority and detach themselves from schools. This detachment implies a rejection of the guidance and inculcation of values by the school. Instead, they have sought to work out their identities in deviant ways, such as through participation in gangs. The rise in female delinquency is a symptom of problems in the socialization process in school.

Hence, the socialization of girls to accept traditional notions of femininity and the cultural norms of patriarchy, which the state has deemed essential for continued stability and economic sustainability of Singapore, are ironically subverted by the success of its own economic and educational policies. State attempts to preserve traditional notions of femininity through the institution of the school seem to be losing effectiveness as resistance to state hegemony increases. The government has made

serious efforts to curb the problems of female deviancy and appears to be somewhat successful. However, these may just be attempts to contain the symptoms without really going into the root causes of the problems of girls. There is a serious need to re-think and develop a more coherent policy towards girls' education so as to minimize contradictions between what is perceived by the new generation of youths as traditional or 'outmoded' values versus modern and more relevant gender ideologies.

CHAPTER SIX
REFLECTIONS ON SUBORDINATED FEMININITY
IN A DOMINANT PARTY STATE

Since the mid-1950s, Singapore has attempted to construct a female identity comprising of, on the one hand, a traditional feminine domesticity and, on the other, a modern, liberated outlook emphasizing equal competition with men in the workplace. This gender ideology has been transmitted, as we have seen in the previous chapters, through the agency of schools, which have become instruments of ideological indoctrination. There is no doubt that both the economy of Singapore and its society has been transformed in the last half a century. However, while the status of Singapore women has improved and changed significantly in the process of socio-economic modernization, in many ways, they have not yet achieved equality in status with men.

The construction of femininity in school was strongly influenced by the gender ideology of the ruling elite. This study has shown how the state “invented” this new concept of femininity through the process of reforming not only the school system, but the social milieu as well in order to achieve the government’s goal of overcoming the “crisis of survival” since the early 1960s. Therefore, we need to delve into the gender messages in the discourse of government leaders and bureaucrats as well as the curriculum of the school in order to understand the political and social significance of this major social transformation.

The official gender ideology, as we have seen in the second and third chapters, tended to shift with changing economic and social thrusts. As a result, conflicting signals on what constitutes femininity have been relayed. Much of the PAP discourse emphasized the domestic role that women played in society. At the same time, the

stress on women's essential role in the economy and curricular policies emphasizing science and technology contradicted the traditional domestic ideology espoused by the ruling elite. This has contributed to the problem of coherence in girls' construction of their gender roles and feminine identity.

The examination of curriculum policies and student performance in the fourth chapter shows that in spite of being exposed to a modern scientific and technological education and doing well in mathematics and 'hard' sciences, most girls retain stereotyped perceptions of males being more suited for these disciplines. A deliberate sex differentiation in curriculum in the form of technical education for boys and home economics for girls has influenced girls to construct a traditional domestic gender identity.

Furthermore, the gender ideology embedded in the curriculum emphasizes the superiority of males and inferiority of females. Topics in pre-1994 home economics syllabuses stressed traditional feminine roles in the home, in childcare, nurturing and seeing to the family's health and well-being. Home economics textbooks developed to support those syllabuses extolled the values of graciousness, neatness and caring for others. Women were represented as home-makers and the role of men in the home was not significant. These were important gender messages influencing the construction of femininity. Gender representations in other textbooks presented images of females as weak, passive or insignificant nonentities. Males were depicted as leaders, inventors and heroes who were brave, strong, decisive and intelligent. Females were shown as followers, mothers and wives who were weak, passive, subservient and insignificant. Men tended to be shown as participating in a wide array of activities while women's activities were mostly limited to the home. The

gender representations in history textbooks in particular were considerably skewed towards male-dominance and superiority, with women being seen as not having contributed significantly to Singapore's development. The gender codes transmitted in the school curriculum were in dialectical opposition to the messages in early official discourses, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, that espoused gender equality and extolled the traits of strength, vigour and ruggedness that were considered necessary for successful participation in a modern economy.

Policies on school discipline and codes of behaviour, as we have seen in the fifth chapter, reflect conservative notions of gender held by the government. Females were perceived as both physically and mentally weaker than males and while males could be punished with the cane if necessary, corporal punishment on females was prohibited. Notions of femininity can be seen in the school rules which dictated not only the code of conduct but the dress code as well. School uniforms for girls usually comprised blouses with skirts or pinafores. Trousers were generally not seen as appropriate school attire for girls. The dress code places particular emphasis on the appearance of girls, detailing what are acceptable hairstyles and lengths, skirt length, hair accessories and jewellery. Notions of acceptable hair length for girls varied over time, but stress is consistently placed on neatness and a 'feminine' appearance. The code of conduct stressed quiet, gentle and docile behaviour and girls were expected to obey and conform to rules. Boisterous, unruly behaviour and outspokenness were discouraged.

The gender ideology transmitted through such discipline codes was obviously a very traditional and conservative one for it stressed a femininity that emphasized obedience and submission to authority. Rowdiness, outspokenness, questioning of

authority, or signs of aggression and non-conformity among boys was relatively more readily accepted, but when girls displayed such behaviour, they were considered ‘deviants’ or ‘discipline problems’. From the 1960s to the 1980s, there were occasional reports of feminine deviance but in the 1990s, the number of female delinquencies had escalated to an extent as to cause official concern. The rise in female deviance reflected the conflict between traditional gender expectations and modern femininity. The conservatism of the gender notions in the school was at odds with that transmitted through the media. There was inevitable conflict as girls struggled to make sense of the confusing messages sent by the government and by society at large. In some cases this confusion evinced itself in rebellion against authority. This can be seen as open contestation of socially accepted notions of femininity and it drew the attention of the authorities who had to take corrective measures to arrest the situation.

Economic Pragmatism and Patriarchal Hegemony

It is evident from this study that the state essentially held traditional notions of gender roles. However, the economic imperative of having women supplement the small labour force had at times caused the leaders to espouse support for gender equality and modern femininity. In the initial years of self-government and independence, the most fundamental goal was economic survival. As Chua Beng Huat says, “the necessity of economic development was raised as the ‘only reality’, any process that contributed to economic growth was therefore ‘practical’, ‘necessary’ for the survival of the nation.”⁴⁷⁶ Women’s participation in the economy was seen as part of the pragmatic solution to economic survival and hence, the PAP had to

⁴⁷⁶ Chua Beng Huat, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 19.

construct a femininity that supported women working outside the home. The promotion of education for girls and the discourse on girls' suitability in technical professions as well as developing the qualities of a rugged society were undertaken to overcome existing cultural prejudices against working women. A modern liberated femininity, incorporating qualities of independence, toughness, discipline and ambition, was then made fashionable.

However, in later years, especially from the 1980s onward, the PAP somewhat shifted emphasis to focus on women's domestic role. The attempt at Confucianizing society, the emphasis on traditional Asian patriarchal values and reiteration of the importance of women's role in maintaining the family as the basic unit of society were reactions to the influx of modern (often also touted as western) values of liberalism and individualism. These were viewed as undesirable and potentially destabilizing for the nation and therefore had to be curbed. Ironically the influx of these values was the result of the process of modernization perceived as necessary for economic survival and launched by the PAP leaders themselves. The pendulum thus appeared to have swung towards re-emphasizing traditional feminine roles so as to preserve patriarchy in Singapore. However, because women's participation in the economy was too fundamental to Singapore's development, state discourse and policies continued to sustain this as an essential role of women. Patriarchal hegemony was thus intended to be achieved with women maintaining the domestic and subordinate role while performing an economic function as well. This is exemplified in the life of the maestro of Singapore's development, Lee Kuan Yew, whose wife chose to play the roles of supportive home-maker and wage-earner. Because she was able to successfully combine both the domestic and economic roles, Singapore women could only be expected to do likewise.

The state's maintenance of the dual role of women created tensions because of inherent contradictions in this gender ideology. For instance, in order to successfully participate in modern industrial economy, women had to acquire masculine traits of aggressiveness, ruggedness and vigour. On the other hand, to maintain patriarchy, women had to retain qualities of passiveness, dependence and subordination to masculine authority. This explains the paradox of the majority of modern women in Singapore who continue to hold traditional patriarchal values of domesticity and subordination to men despite being well-educated and successful professionals. The socialization of women to accept patriarchy has been quite successful as most women continue to accept that theirs is a primarily subordinate and domestic role and male dominance is a 'natural' facet of life.⁴⁷⁷

It is clear that pragmatic economic considerations were the primary factors behind the formulation of a dual role for women. Social stability was necessary to attract and keep foreign investors and therefore, a prerequisite for sustained economic development. On the other hand, because of Singapore's scarce resources, economic pragmatism dictated that women should contribute to national development by participating in the labour force.

Pragmatism was thus the PAP's guiding principle and economic development was its foremost objective. As Lee Kuan Yew emphasized, the pragmatic approach meant not being tied to theory or dogma, but decisions are based on "what works." Yet, pragmatism in itself can be considered the PAP's ideology because the party used this as its primary guiding principle. The pragmatic approach dictated the way

⁴⁷⁷ For a discussion of how modern Singapore women cope with male dominance, see Nirmala Purushotam, "Women and Knowledge/Power: Notes on the Singaporean Dilemma", in Ban Kah Choon, Anne Pakir & Tong Chee Kiong (eds.) *Imagining Singapore* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1992), pp. 320-360.

the party resolved all issues or challenges. Most policies and government initiatives were considered on the bases of their workability and practicality and assessed by the results produced. However, such an approach inevitably resulted in inconsistencies and seeming contradictions in their policies. Public policies on women were adapted to the practical considerations of national development but the result was that official discourse showed little consistency as it tended to vacillate between emphasizing women's roles in the workforce or in the home.⁴⁷⁸ Education policies tended to fluctuate in like manner, depending on the government's priority and focus at that time. As a result, PAP policies and discourse sometimes appeared *ad hoc* and there did not seem to be a consistent policy towards women in general and girls' education in particular. But what comes through clearly is the economic underpinning of all state policies and discourse. Ultimately the primary objective of PAP pragmatism was economic prosperity and all policies were geared towards achieving this end. There were policy changes and reversals along the way, but the PAP vision of a First World Singapore was never clouded by other considerations.

Thus, in spite of some occasional rhetoric on gender equality and the emancipation of women, there was no fundamental change in the PAP leadership's understanding of women's role in society. Nirmala Purushotam asserts that there is "a significant continuity in ideas about women. The concern has never been how the nation can save women from the fetters of social, cultural, political and economic discrimination and exploitation. The concern has been and remains how women can best serve 'the nation'."⁴⁷⁹ In that sense, women are auxiliary, not primary in the

⁴⁷⁸ See Suzanne Goldberg, "Mixed Messages: Public Policy and Women in Singapore", *Commentary*, 7:2 & 3 (Dec 1987) for a detailed discussion of the mixed messages in the government's public policies on women in Singapore.

⁴⁷⁹ Nirmala Purushotam, "Women and Knowledge/Power: Notes on the Singaporean Dilemma", pp. 327-328.

PAP's conception of a modern First World nation. Support for women's education and economic participation was motivated by economic imperative, not by intrinsic belief in equality of the sexes nor support for women's rights. This was also noted by Chan Heng Chee, former political analyst and current ambassador to the United States, who commented that "the participation of women in labour is not a commitment to the principle or belief in emancipation, that women are entitled to the equal right as men to work."⁴⁸⁰ The evidence of this in education is in the changing curricular policies — technical education was promoted for girls when the needs of industrialization were pre-eminent but de-emphasized when women's reproductive roles were highlighted and it was deemed necessary to 'feminize' girls. It is seen also in the imposition of a quota on the number of girls studying medicine at the university and the unrelenting policy of denying medical benefits to dependents of female public service officers.

Yet, in spite of the tensions and struggle for coherence in women's gender ideology, the PAP's construction of femininity did not meet with serious opposition. The PAP was successful in establishing hegemony because of a number of factors. Firstly, Singapore is a small nation in terms of land area and population and it was thus not very difficult to extend state control over many aspects of life in Singapore. One of the first tasks undertaken when it came to power was to centralize and streamline the education system, thus bringing a very important ideological state apparatus under its control. As Althusser has argued, schools are important agencies through which state ideology is reproduced and the analyses of state discourse on education and the school curriculum have indeed shown the school's prominent role

⁴⁸⁰ Chan Heng Chee, *Notes on the Mobilization of Women into the Economy and Politics of Singapore*, Occasional Paper no. 23 (Singapore: Department of Political Science, National University of Singapore, 1975), p. 26.

in this.⁴⁸¹ PAP hegemony is established and maintained substantially through its control over aspects of the education system such as the curricular and disciplinary policies and development of instructional materials, especially for subjects that lend themselves very much to ideological transference, such as history and social studies. That is why Singapore's history and social studies instructional materials are developed by MOE officers while textbooks for other subjects such as Science or Mathematics are developed by commercial publishers. Just as Foucault has pointed out that knowledge is power, the Singapore government sees the control of information as critical for maintaining hegemony in the country.

It should be noted that the Singapore government has evolved into a dominant party-state with little credible opposition from other political parties. The PAP has retained power for more than forty years and the lack of alternatives from the other parties has meant that PAP policies could be implemented without much opposition. At the same time, the success of its economic policies to deliver the material goods has contributed in no small measure to the maintenance of hegemony, that is, the population's acceptance of the PAP's ideological and political leadership.

In the early years of PAP rule, the leaders had consistently articulated their support for gender equality and emancipation of women. Their much-vaunted policies of equal opportunities in education and employment and discursive celebrations of women's progress have led most to accept that the state has done much to raise women's status in society. Indeed, state policies have shown little overt discrimination against women and when there are 'pockets' of discrimination, these are rationalized as pragmatic, common-sense and necessary. As a result, there is,

⁴⁸¹ See discussion on Althusser's and Michael Apple's theses on pp. 17-21.

generally, little contestation of PAP policies. This dominant state control has meant that a subordinated femininity continues to be perpetuated through the state's ideological apparatuses.

Empowerment or Subordination?

It was noted in the first chapter that feminists such as Sara Hlupekile Longwe have pointed out that schooling for girls had not emancipated them but had in fact schooled them for subordination in a patriarchal society. Such feminists have criticized state-controlled educational processes for having simply socialized girls into subordination and accepting the existing patriarchal society. Longwe argues for a total reversal of the traditional cultural values and norms that have been inculcated through the conventional school system to truly empower women. Fundamental structural changes in society and social values have to take place before women can be truly emancipated from male domination.⁴⁸²

Most of the findings in this thesis appear to support this contention. Despite the educational opportunities given to females, there has been little significant change in the government's gender ideology and expectations. Traditional patriarchal values continue to be held by the PAP and transmitted in the school curriculum. As a result, from 1959 to 2000, gender ideology remained relatively conservative as the government continued to emphasize male dominance and female subordination through the education system. From that perspective, education for girls was more for subordination than empowerment.

However, a change in gender ideology amongst members of society is evident despite the government's attempts to preserve patriarchy in Singapore. As noted in

⁴⁸² Sara Hlupekile Longwe, "Education for Women's Empowerment Or Schooling for Women's Subordination?", *Gender and Development*, 6:2 (July 1998), p. 22.

Chapter Five, children themselves are not passive recipients but are actively engaged in the construction of gender ideology. The school is but one agency influencing gender construction. There is negotiation and resistance taking place as children struggle to make sense of the sometimes conflicting messages coming from other sources such as the family, political leaders, the media and their own peers. Therefore the traditional notions of gender roles and femininity that are transmitted in Singapore schools are not always wholly accepted and replicated. The report of the census of population in 2000, for example, noted that compared with 1990, the participation of married females in the labour force has increased, that is, fewer married women are withdrawing from the workforce to look after their children.⁴⁸³ This implies that traditional notions of gender roles are also breaking down as more married women pursue their careers instead of playing the role of a home-maker.

Traditional notions of feminine passivity and docility have also been transformed as western values of liberalism, egalitarianism and democracy take root. Modern education in science and technology has opened up opportunities for girls and parental attitudes towards the upbringing of girls have changed. These are, in fact, the result of government policies such as family planning and population control, equal education and employment opportunities for all and the emphasis on building a rugged society.

By the 1990s, girls had become less passive and more outspoken and aggressive. Between 1959 and 2000, women have become more independent both financially and intellectually and a number have attained leadership positions in managerial and professional fields. Statistics on the proportion of women working in

⁴⁸³ Singapore, *Census of Population 2000: Advance Data Release* (Singapore: Department of Statistics, 2001), p. 42.

professional, managerial and technical positions show that there has been a significant increase of 15% between 1970 and 2000.⁴⁸⁴

Notions of male superiority in the public sector have also been eroded with the rise in the number of women leaders in the civil service and parliament. The increased proportion of women leaders in the public and private sectors show that gender perceptions about women are changing despite the traditional values being taught in school. With the rising number of successful women as role models, femininity is no longer being seen as passive and submissive. The government too, has found it increasingly difficult to maintain policies that discriminate against girls. Hence, there was a change in curriculum policy in the late 1990s that gave equal opportunities for lower secondary girls and boys to study both technical subjects and home economics. The lifting of the quota on female medical students is also evidence of this.⁴⁸⁵ Although the reasons given for the lifting of the quota were again economic, the Health Minister Mr Lim Hng Kiang paid tribute in parliament, to two female members who had made significant effort in getting the quota lifted. It would appear that the increased female representation in parliament had an effect of raising women's profile and female concerns.

Therefore, in the Singapore context, it is not totally conclusive that education has merely schooled girls for subordination in a patriarchal society. Although the government has tried to maintain patriarchal values within the school system, its contradictory policies has had the effect of subverting these values. As Lily Kong and Jasmine Chan argue, "the state is an important perpetuator of patriarchal power, but it can also become an important source of social reform – reform that may benefit

⁴⁸⁴ Singapore, *Singapore 2001: Statistical Highlights* (Singapore : Dept. of Statistics, 2001), p. 54.

⁴⁸⁵ "Lifted: Quota On Women In Medicine", *Straits Times*, 6 Dec 2002.

women, even when the reasons for the reform are not pro-women.”⁴⁸⁶ For example, the population policies have changed parental attitudes towards girls and affording education to girls. The provision of modern education and the opportunities for employment have enabled women to attain greater success in the economic sphere and raised their status in society. This has contributed to changes in society’s gender ideology and enabled the empowerment of females.

In summary, education has contributed to changes in the construction of femininity in Singapore and, in spite of the state’s attempts to perpetuate patriarchy and women’s subordination, it has empowered women to a significant extent. Radical feminists’ criticisms of state-controlled education perpetuating patriarchy and the subordination of women have not taken into account that the construction of femininity is influenced by many factors other than education. While the intentions of the state may be to preserve traditional values, other policies have subverted such intentions and promoted the empowerment of women.

Therefore, although the state has for a long time continued to construct a subordinated femininity within a patriarchal society, there is evidence that this construct is unravelling. State policies, particularly in education, have enabled women to achieve much in the economic and social spheres and they are slowly making inroads in the political arena. However, as long as the dominant state party maintains a patriarchal stance, the education system will continue to be used as an important apparatus to transmit that state ideology. How the concept of femininity will change remains to be seen as Singapore society develops.

⁴⁸⁶ Lily L.L. Kong & Jasmine S. Chan, “Patriarchy and Pragmatism: Ideological Contradictions in State Policies”, *Asian Studies Review*, 24:4 (Dec 2000), p. 504.

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Research Framework and Method

The theoretical framework of this research is drawn from both education and gender studies. It attempts to draw together the arguments put forward by Michael W. Apple (1990) who propounds that schools are main agencies for the transmission of the dominant culture; and radical and socialist feminists' contention that women are being schooled for subordination rather than being educated for empowerment. The important research questions therefore centre on whether and how the state uses education as a means of transmitting an official gender ideology and whether education has resulted in women's subordination or empowerment. Within this framework, the concepts of socialization, femininity, hegemony, patriarchy, modernity and pragmatism are explored in the context of Singapore's education system. The research is also set within a historical framework of examining changes and continuities and causes and consequences of the state's policies and gender ideology. Using this framework therefore, the researcher has examined the discourse, official policies and the curriculum (both overt and hidden) offered to girls to find out the answers to the above key questions.

The research methods used in this thesis include a variety of both historical and gender studies approaches. A study of official documents and speeches as well as policies affecting women and girls' education over a span of about forty years is made to reveal the state's gender ideology. This is set in the context of social, economic and political developments in Singapore so as to better understand the conditions under which such discourse and policies were made. At the same time, a chronological approach is taken to highlight the causes and consequences and the changes continuities in state policies and gender messages.

An analysis of the overt curriculum offered to girls is made through an examination of the domestic science and home economics syllabuses and a content analysis of instructional materials. The intention was to highlight the gender messages embedded in the curriculum offered to girls. This approach is drawn largely from research methods used in gender studies. There is also an examination of research studies on girls' achievement in mathematics and science examinations and this is compared with statistical data on the enrolment of girls in science and technical-related courses to show that although girls appeared to be performing as well as boys in the sciences, the number of girls who pursued science and technical courses was still well below expectations.

A semi-chronological and issues-based approach is taken in the examination of the "hidden curriculum" affecting the construction of girls' gender ideology in schools. Newspaper articles highlighting problems of female discipline, official MOE policies with respect to school discipline, statistics on female delinquency and records of oral interviews with educationists were studied to trace the changes and continuities in girls' behaviour, pupil management procedures as well as identify the causes of the decline in girls' discipline.