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Feminist Responses to Reproductive Policy in  
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# Making citizen Babies for Papa: Feminist Responses to Reproductive Policy in Singapore

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines recent debates about reproductive policy in Singapore by examining the responses of two different groups of women - women Members of Parliament and feminist activists. Women currently make up 10% of MPs in Singapore. Although this figure is low when compared to average rates of female representation globally, it is the highest level in Singapore since Independence. All these women are members of the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) in power since 1959. While publicly supportive of the view of the PAP male elite, this group of women has introduced a level of critique into reproductive policy not previously seen by the Singapore public. Local women's groups too have played a visible role in public debates about population policy. The feminist group, the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) has had a long interest in reproductive policy issues and released its own position paper to address the government's recent policy making. This paper examines the responses of these two groups of women towards the PAP's pro-natalist stance. It explores the extent to which these women have challenged the PAP as well as the obstacles to an independent feminist voice on population matters

**Keywords:** Singapore, population policy, reproductive policy, total fertility rate, feminism, women in politics

## **Making Citizen Babies for Papa': Reproductive Policy Debates in Singapore**

Reproductive policy debates were re-ignited in Singapore in 2004 when the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) government, as part of its annual Budget Statement, announced that it was going to consider a new round of initiatives to increase the birth rate. Twenty years after Lee Kuan Yew's infamous 'Great Marriage Debate', the PAP embarked on yet another range of measures to encourage young men and women to marry early and have children. What is remarkable about the recent initiatives is that they occurred at a time when the number of women MPs is at its highest level since Independence. These women, while publicly supportive of the malestream PAP line, have introduced a level of critique into reproductive policy not previously seen by the Singapore public. Local women's groups too have played a visible role in public debates about population policy. This paper examines the responses of these two groups of women towards the PAP's pro-natalist stance. It will explore the extent to which Singaporean women MPs and the women's movement have challenged the PAP's views on population matters. This study highlights the problems and pitfalls facing feminists who seek to make alternative claims about women's roles in nation-building.

### **Reproductive policy in Singapore**

The PAP government, in power since 1959, has had a long interest in population policy in Singapore. In the 1970s, the government pursued a strong anti-natalist policy that aimed at encouraging people to 'Stop at Two', to have later marriages, to delay having the first child and to space out the two children (Quah 1988). Increasing educational levels, widespread female employment, rising affluence, and an improvement in housing conditions all contributed to a decline in

the birth rate from 4.62 in 1965 to below replacement level by the mid-1980s (Saw 1990: 15). Concerned with this trend, the government began to target graduate women whom it claimed were delaying or forgoing marriage and children for their careers. In a National Day Rally Speech in August 1983, then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew argued that a decline in birth rates amongst the well-educated would result in a 'thinning of the gene pool', and thus national economic disaster (The Straits Times 1983). Lee cited the 1980 census that showed that while uneducated women were producing an average of three children, those with secondary or tertiary education had 1.65 children (Saw 1990: 41). Lee referred to this as a 'lop-sided procreation pattern' and the issue was dubbed 'The Great Marriage Debate' by the local press (Lyons-Lee 1998). In subsequent discussion of this issue, two changes in demographic behaviour were referred to - the increasing number of unmarried women with tertiary education, and the lower reproduction rate among Chinese (particularly those with higher education). These were considered to be social problems because they contributed to a loss of talent (the eugenics argument), a loss of labour power and an imbalance in the proportion of aged dependants in a country that has no natural resources and is solely reliant on its workforce for economic growth.

To address these problems, the state undertook another round of mass educational campaigns, this time promoting marriage and children. By 1987, the previous population policy of 'Stop at Two' was replaced by 'Have three and more, if you can afford it'. State sponsored matchmaking agencies were set up in the civil service, and graduate women were encouraged to marry and have children through a series of financial and social incentives, including tax relief (Saw 1990). Over the last twenty years, these measures have undergone constant review and enhancement, the most recent initiative being the 'Baby Bonus Scheme' introduced in 2000. Many of these schemes to promote marriage and procreation deliberately target women with secondary school education and above, based on the eugenicist belief that well educated mothers produce more intelligent children. It has also been

pointed out that in a country with declining birth rates among the upper and middle-classes (predominantly Chinese), that the call for graduate mothers to produce more children is intrinsically tied to a policy of cultural/racial maintenance (Heng and Devan 1995). These schemes have had little success. The Total Fertility Rate (TFR) continued to fall and stood at an historic low of 1.26 in 2004 (Long 2004).

Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that the PAP chose to highlight the falling birth rate in its 2004 Annual Budget. In the lead up to his budget statement, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance Lee Hsien Loong hinted to the press that population issues were going to be at the centre of his speech, although he refused to comment on the detail (The Straits Times 2004a). These comments sparked considerable media interest, and the newspapers and television broadcasters ran numerous stories about falling birth rates and measures to encourage couples to marry and have children. In a typical PAP strategy built around the public management of 'national crises', the public were already primed for the Deputy Prime Minister to announce another state-led solution to the taken-for-granted problem of fertility decline. In his budget statement Lee chose to address the issue of falling birth rates under the heading "Building a Strong Society – Building the next generation". He pointed out that although the government gave out over \$200 million annually in tax reliefs and rebates to increase the birth rate, the TFR continued to fall. He described the falling birth rate as a serious problem that would "sap the vitality and resilience of our country" (Parliamentary Debates Republic of Singapore: Official Report 2004b: [60]).

Lee Hsien Loong attributed the declining birth rate to three trends – increasing single-hood, later marriages and family formation, and the desire for smaller families (Ministry of Finance 2004). Added to this was recent national economic uncertainty which made couples more cautious about having children (Parliamentary Debates Republic of Singapore: Official Report 2004a: [34]). The government's solution to this crisis was the creation of a Inter-Ministerial Working

Committee on Population charged with developing a more 'comprehensive' and 'long-term' approach that would "encourage young people to marry and marry earlier, and make it easier for young couples to start and raise a family" (Parliamentary Debates Republic of Singapore: Official Report 2004b: [61]). The Working Committee would address two inter-related population challenges facing Singapore: 1) low total births over the next 10-20 years because of the low total births in 1976-1986; and 2) an ageing population. It was guided by three principles:

Producing Singaporean citizens - referred to as 'Singapore citizen babies'. Lee distinguished between growing the total population, and reproducing and maintaining the "core group of citizens who will build and defend our country, and without whom we would not be a nation" (Parliamentary Debates Republic of Singapore: Official Report 2004b: [61]).

Directing policies at educated mothers on high incomes because "the more a woman is able to earn a living, the heavier the opportunity cost to her of having children" (Parliamentary Debates Republic of Singapore: Official Report 2004b: [61]) and thus incentives must be effective for such women.

Increasing immigration and encouraging Permanent Residents to become citizens by treating them differently so that they "have incentives to take up the privileges and responsibilities of being Singaporeans" (Parliamentary Debates Republic of Singapore: Official Report 2004b: [62]).

The Working Committee was expected to release its report in August 2004. Its release would coincide with Lee Hsien Loong's expected appointment to the role of Prime Minister, thus enshrining population issues as a key policy platform under his leadership.

## **Great Baby Debate<sup>ii</sup>**

By raising the issue of fertility decline prior to his budget speech, Lee paved the way for sustained media attention to population matters. Members of the public were invited to contribute to the broader discussion of population issues by submitting their views via a range of government sponsored feedback initiatives. The Working Committee on Population, for example, ran a series of online surveys on issues such as increased maternity leave and paternity leave (Tan 2004a). Two visible groups of women participated in the broader public debate – women members of parliament, and members of the avowedly feminist organisation, the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE). The first group participated in the debate primarily through their speeches in parliament, which were widely reported in the media. The second group contributed to the debate through letters to the forum pages of daily newspapers, a public forum, and through the release of a position paper titled *Beyond Babies: National Duty or Personal Choice?* (AWARE 2004).

## **Women MPS: A Critical Voice?**

Parliamentary debate on the government's proposed population policies began a week after Lee released the budget. Lending weight to the seriousness of the falling TFR, the majority of members who responded to the budget devoted at least some part of their speech to procreation issues. The comparatively large number of women in parliament since the last election made a significant impact on the tone of discussion.<sup>iii</sup> Women MPs have been largely absent in Singapore's parliament since Independence in 1965. The last general election (held in 2001) saw 10 PAP women elected, more than double the number of women MPs from the previous election, and the highest level since elections began in 1959. As members of the dominant ruling party, however, these women are governed by the strong hand of the party whip. At the time of the budget debates, no women were

appointed to Cabinet, and thus their voices were peripheral to the main site of party decision-making. Women MPs and NMPs dominated the discussion in terms of the breadth of issues covered, and the percentage of their speeches concerned with population matters. In common with the majority of MPs who spoke to the issue of fertility decline, none of these women questioned the government's assessment of the 'problem' posed by the falling birth rate. The low TFR was universally understood to lead to potential economic decline through an ageing population, a lack of 'manpower resources', and fewer soldiers to defend the nation:

We need a certain critical mass of a citizen base that is intelligent, productive, educated, and committed if we want to maintain our competitiveness in the new economy. ... We also need a critical mass of able-bodied male soldiers to help guard and defend the sovereignty of this nation. ... We also need that critical mass of solid-base citizens whose tax revenues ensure that we maintain healthy fiscal balances (Madam Ho Geok Choo MP cited in Parliamentary Debates Republic of Singapore: Official Report 2004c: [83]).

We need to produce many crops of young Singaporeans who are able and willing to take up arms to defend our country, to feel a bond for this place we call home. In a nutshell, we need to build future generations of Singaporeans, born and bred here (Dr Amy Khor Lean Suan MP cited in Parliamentary Debates Republic of Singapore: Official Report 2004d: [40]).

In both of these quotes fertility is linked unproblematically to nation-building. Singapore needs more citizens who will defend the country and ensure ongoing economic growth. More significantly, these citizens – 'born and bred here' – will share a common set of beliefs and values that preserve the national identity. These views resonate with Lee Hsien Loong's own statements about the need for 'Singapore *citizen* babies':

No matter how globalised we become, Singapore needs a core of Singapore citizens. This is important not only to maintain the resilience of our economy and society, but also to preserve our identity as a nation based on Singaporean values (Lee Hsien Loong cited in Ministry of Finance 2004: n.pg).

What remains unstated in these accounts is the direct link between growth the citizen base and women's roles in nation-building. While the language is inclusive – 'We need' – responsibility falls on women to produce the next generation. Women MPs, however, were careful to avoid explicitly describing this as a duty to the nation. One male MP who described childbearing as a national duty was quickly forced to amend his comments following a public outcry.<sup>iv</sup> The PAP leadership responded by arguing that having children is a 'personal choice' and not a national duty. And yet, the decision about whether or not to have children in Singapore today clearly says something important about the kind of 'citizen' that you are because the way that individual citizens respond to the fertility problem will determine the face of Singapore to come:

Because having children is believing in the future. It is about setting aside our own comforts and conveniences for their sake. It is the same values that make us good parents - sacrifice, selflessness, confidence, and resilience - that will also make us a strong society. And that, more than anything else, is why we must help Singaporeans to raise families for the future (Lee Hsien Loong MP cited in Parliamentary Debates Republic of Singapore: Official Report 2004e: [57]).

Avoiding the language of national duty and responsibility is a strategic decision by the PAP. After twenty years of government campaigning on a citizen's responsibility to procreate, Singaporeans want to claim the space of fertility decision-making as a private issue. By reaffirming 'personal choice' the government takes on the role of arbiter – merely informing the populace of the ramifications of personal decision-making. There is little room here to question the PAP's projections

of national economic and social disaster. The debate shifts to individuals who, presented with the 'facts', make personal choices. Putting responsibility back onto individuals allows the citizenry to make a final decision about loyalty to the nation – after all, who would knowingly choose national disaster?

The link between citizenship, loyalty and fertility is also apparent in discussions about immigration as a possible solution to the declining birth rate. The PAP argues that while migration can supplement natural increase by Singaporean citizens, it cannot replace it. This discussion of immigration and population growth occurred against the backdrop of ongoing public debate about the number of foreign workers in Singapore, and particularly the spectre of foreigners taking 'Singaporean jobs' at a time of relatively high unemployment and wage restraint. Permanent Residents were singled out for particular attention. Two issues were debated at length – making the distinction between Permanent Residents (PRs) and citizens clearer so as to encourage the take up of citizenship; and concern that increasing immigration will lead to a weakening of 'Singaporean values'. One of the concerns voiced by MPs was that although PRs get the same privileges of citizenship (except the right to vote) they don't need to make the same commitments (e.g. National Service). In her coverage of the Budget Debates, *Straits Times* journalist Susan Long noted that if the current trend of a low TFR of 1.26 were to continue, "it will not take long before migrants actually replace the original stock, bringing about dire social disruption" (Long 2004: n.pg). For a country that celebrates its migrant history as defining of the nation, the assertion that immigration equals social upheaval was unquestioned by both MPs and the media. The issue was put by one journalist as: "it's not just a matter of 'Singaporean-ising' them but also accepting to be 'de-Singaporean-ised' in the process" (Lee 2004). While immigration may address concerns about a decline in the size of the workforce, it does not address the issue of national defence. Not only are non-citizen residents unlikely to protect the nation in times of conflict, but they are less likely to share the same values as Singaporeans, thus jeopardising social and political cohesion. Migrants are therefore

welcome only if they pledge their allegiance to the nation and assimilate.

These assertions about the need to increase the TFR in order to protect the nation performed a largely rhetorical function – they were a way of asserting a MPs loyalty to both the PAP and the nation, and a way of reinforcing the message that the nation needed more babies. In their budget speeches, most MPs quickly moved from these ‘motherhood’ statements to the presentation of solutions to the problem of declining birth rates. These included: family-friendly workplaces and flexible working hours to address stress in the workplace; improved and/or extended access to maternity leave, paternity leave and parenting leave; increased tax or financial incentives to address the cost of childbirth and childrearing; improved access to childcare, infant care and before/after school care; and educational campaigns aimed at promoting early marriage, early childbearing, large family sizes, romance, and family values. Most of these suggestions were not new, they had been raised in the past and some were already being adopted by the government. The presence of women MPs, however, changed the nature of the Committee of Supply debates in one important way. In contrast to most of their male counterparts, women MPs argued that part of the solution to the falling TFR also lay with changing patriarchal attitudes amongst employers, families and even the government itself:

The issue of procreation is linked to the larger issue of gender roles facing women and how Singapore society perceives them. Due to societal and cultural norms still held by many Singaporeans, *signals from the Government which speak of a patriarchal and male-dominated society* and our own drive for self-actualisation as a result of better education, Singaporean women are torn between demands of work and their duties as wife, mother and daughter (Amy Khor Lean Suan MP cited in Parliamentary Debates Republic of Singapore: Official Report 2004d: [43], emphasis added).

For the first time, the PAP male elite found itself to be the target of sustained

critique from its own parliamentarians. Women MPs argued that not only did the government replicate patriarchal values in its policy making and public statements, but that it had a primary responsibility for changing patriarchal attitudes towards women in the wider society. Women MPs called on the government to play a leading role in promoting equal responsibility for childcare and household tasks:

... measures by themselves may not be enough to check the falling fertility rate if we do not make a decisive shift from our patriarchal system to a more gender-equal one (Ms Irene Ng Phek Hoong MP cited in Parliamentary Debates Republic of Singapore: Official Report 2004d: [53]).

Our Government has never shirked from changing mindsets if it has to. ... There is no going back. If you want to have more children then you would have to make this mindset change or you face the risk of becoming extinct (Ms Indranee Rajah MP cited in Parliamentary Debates Republic of Singapore: Official Report 2004d: [85]).

Amongst the mindset changes that this group recommended was changing the government's view that well educated women have a central role to play in addressing fertility decline. Many MPs argued that population decline was an issue for all Singaporeans, not just the well educated middle-classes.

While the PAP's male frontbench responded with amusement to some of the statements of their female colleagues, Lee Hsien Loong was more conciliatory:

The women MPs have all reminded us that what we need are mindset changes - in the home, the workplace, and society at large (Parliamentary Debates Republic of Singapore: Official Report 2004e: [57]).

He noticeably changed tack on his initial comments about the 'special' role of educated women, and argued that fertility decline was a serious issue that all Singaporeans would play a part in addressing. Furthermore, he reiterated that it was the Government's role to "foster a conducive environment and strengthen the support network to help Singaporeans fulfil their aspirations and to enjoy parenthood and family living" (Parliamentary Debates Republic of Singapore: Official Report 2004e: [55]). However, he stopped short of acknowledging the PAP and the government as patriarchal institutions.

### **Feminist Responses**

Singaporean women's groups have had a long interest in population policy. The feminist group the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) was formed in 1985 in direct response to the Great Marriage Debate. Among its first actions was to release a Population Paper aimed at addressing the government's stance on graduate motherhood and its broader policies on family formation (AWARE 1988). Although the paper was never made public, it was distributed to key government ministries and selected members of parliament, and discussed at a closed-door forum.<sup>v</sup> Since its formation, AWARE has publicly argued that a comprehensive solution to fertility decline would need to pay attention to the underlying gender inequalities present in much government policy and legislation. In particular, it has been concerned with ensuring adequate recognition of the roles of husbands and fathers (through paternity leave and equal sharing of household responsibilities); ensuring government and employer recognition of gender equity in marriage and parenting; highlighting anomalies in existing legislation; supporting the role of single women; and promoting pro-family policies (such as the five-day week) and family-oriented workplace policies (such as carers leave for sick children, spouse or parents, and childcare in the workplace). Two key areas where it has advocated for change are citizenship for children born overseas to Singaporean women and medical benefits for the dependents of female civil servants.<sup>vi</sup>

AWARE believes that the government should take a lead role in bringing about changes in gender attitudes because of its ability to influence change in key areas outside the family, including the education system, trade unions and the army (Lam-Teo 2000). In response, the government has argued that it is up to individual men, women and their families to make these changes, and then other sectors will follow their lead. This view is supported by the government's reference to the 'inevitability' of inequality. As an example of this view, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong is quoted in 1993 as saying, "it is neither possible nor wise to have complete equality of the sexes . . . Some differences between the sexes were a product of the society here and would have to be accepted" (The Straits Times 1993: 1). Given the PAP's central role in the manufacture of 'traditional' culture and Asian values (Wee 1995), it is clear that this view works to support that important political role that women as mothers serve for the government.<sup>vii</sup>

When the latest Baby Debate began in 2004, AWARE seemed to be momentarily taken off guard by the government's willingness to address a range of 'sacred cows'.<sup>viii</sup> After almost 20 years of lobbying on the issues of medical benefits and citizenship, it appeared that the government was about to capitulate on both matters without too much effort.<sup>ix</sup> In anticipating these changes, Lee Hsien Loong explicitly used the language of gender equality and social change: "Ten years ago, I don't think you could have imagined a women's team wanting to climb Mount Everest. But today, there is" (cited in The Straits Times 2004b). In signalling its intention to revoke these two forms of discriminatory legislation, the ruling elite claimed that it was responsive to changing gender and sex roles. Making these changes under the guise of population policy, however, makes the PAP's claim that it is merely responding to changing social attitudes dubious. More worryingly, it allows the government to re-introduce women's traditional roles as 'wives/mothers' into the terms of debate without question. In other words, these policies have been introduced to reward women for doing their national duty as mothers, rather than as

a means of addressing underlying inequality. As one journalist remarked:

Has the change [in citizenship laws] come about only because the Government now needs urgently to boost the number of Singaporean babies? Or is it because the Government finally recognises that female citizens are to be valued as much as their male counterparts and are not, as Nominated MP Jennifer Lee put it, 'second class citizens'? (Lim 2004).

This puts AWARE in the difficult position of having to support legislative change that it has long advocated for, while at the same time, getting across the message that it might be a case of 'the right decision for the wrong reasons'.

With both the party elite and women MPs referring to issues of gender equality, AWARE found itself in the unusual position of having its policy turf usurped. Braema Mathi, an AWARE member and NMP, was elected as the new AWARE President the day after the budget debates ended. Her budget response is quite telling as an indicator of AWARE's initial reaction to the Deputy Prime Minister's budget speech. She touched on a range of issues common to many MPs who responded to the budget – the 5 day working week, parenting leave, tax relief, reduction in the foreign maid levy, easing marriage laws for domestic workers who wish to marry Singaporeans, heads of households and medical benefits for civil servants, and easing the adoption process (Parliamentary Debates Republic of Singapore: Official Report 2004c: [101-4]). There was little, however, that marked Mathi's comments apart from those of her fellow female parliamentarians except perhaps her failure to argue for more widespread legislative change. In contrast, NMP Jennifer Lee, former head of the more moderate women's group, Singapore Council of Women's Organisations (SCWO), advocated for mandatory paternity leave of one month and anti-discriminatory hiring laws to address potential discrimination by employers if maternity leave was extended (Parliamentary Debates Republic of Singapore: Official Report 2004c: [122-3]). Mathi's statement

stood in contrast to those who took a much stronger stance on the issue of anti-discrimination legislation and the government's patriarchal views.

At the end of the Committee of Supply debates, AWARE initiated a survey of public attitudes towards the government's proposed new policies. The results of the 'Baby Survey' and an associated public forum were used to develop a position paper released in July 2004 (AWARE 2004). Respondents to the survey overwhelmingly cited 'quality of life' as the most important factor for the low birth rate (AWARE 2004: 42). 'Quality of life' was understood in its broadest sense to mean "a healthy balance between working, family and community life that is underpinned by institutions, mores and norms, that fundamentally recognise the diversity of Singaporean society and respect each individual" (AWARE 2004: 42). In its policy paper, AWARE re-stated its long held view that declining fertility is linked to a lack of gender equity and argues that it is the responsibility of the government, employers and individuals to create a society in which parenting becomes a more viable option. At the same time, AWARE cautions that fertility decisions are the domain of individuals and that the government should be 'less invasive' and adopt a more 'behind-the-scenes' approach (AWARE 2004: 47). Rather than acting as an enforcer or regulator, its role is to lead by example and develop policies and laws that enable Singaporeans to make more informed decisions about fertility. Such policies must reflect gender equity principles so that marriage and childbirth are no longer seen as simply 'women's issues'. Employing the language of 'corporate social responsibility', AWARE further argues that employers should take a proactive role in "guiding corporate behaviour and culture to support work/life balance arrangements and organisations so as to allow space and time for Singaporean workers' personal and family pursuits" (AWARE 2004: 51).

Although AWARE's position paper begins with the premise that procreation is a 'personal issue', it treads a rather uneasy line between support for the rights of individuals and recognition that declining fertility is a problem of 'national concern'

that requires government intervention in the private lives of citizens. AWARE attempts to reconcile these demands at the end of the paper by calling for further research in order to identify a realistic TFR and target population for Singapore. These issues were not canvassed during the parliamentary debates – the government’s targets were accepted as realistic and necessary. AWARE called for wider public consultation on population targets and thus questioned the underlying basis of the ‘problem’ presented by the PAP. Recognising that such a discussion has yet to take place, however, the association argued that all current and future policy-making should reflect gender equity principles.

AWARE supports a change to citizenship laws to encourage PRs to take up citizenship, as well as a re-examination of immigration policy to allow more foreigners to settle in Singapore. This would include changing the law to allow work permit holders (traditionally in low-skilled occupations) and foreign domestic workers (FDWs) to marry Singaporeans (AWARE 2004: 50). One-quarter of Singapore’s workforce is made up of foreign workers (Channel NewsAsia 2004).<sup>x</sup> The majority of migrant workers in low-skilled areas are Work Permit Holders. Migrant workers in white-collar professions (referred to as ‘foreign talent’) are issued with separate category of visa called Employment Passes. While work permit holders and FDWs are integral to Singapore’s economic development, employment and immigration laws restrict their access to full citizenship rights, including the right to marry and have children. Recognising that its recommendations in relation to foreign workers are controversial, AWARE argues “... we must be ready as a nation to embrace our heritage as a nation of migrants and accept ‘not-yet-Singaporeans’ who may be sincere to ‘down-root’ in our country” (AWARE 2004: 54). Within this argument is an implicit nationalism based on a notion of ‘Singaporean values’. New emigrants are expected to inculcate these values, including presumably a commitment to boosting the birth rate.

AWARE’s perspectives are framed by a discourse of citizenship rights and

responsibilities. In her Foreword to the position paper, AWARE President Braema Mathi uses the language of the 'citizenry' to describe the targets of the government's pro-natalist policies: "Citizens may or may not have babies for many reasons... [what is needed is] a holistic approach that encompasses all citizens ... and potential citizens" (AWARE 2004: iii). Given AWARE's call for fertility decline to be understood as a gender equality issue, this use of the term 'citizen' is a deliberate strategy aimed at emphasising women's human rights as citizens. The term also becomes shorthand for 'all Singaporeans' and is a way of portraying population issues as a matter of concern to everyone regardless of gender (or age, marital status, etc). However, using the language of citizenship also clearly resonated with Lee Hsien Loong's own statements about the need not merely for babies but for Singapore *citizen* babies. Lee distinguished between growing the total population, and reproducing and maintaining the "core group of citizens who will build and defend our country, and without whom we would not be a nation" (Parliamentary Debates Republic of Singapore: Official Report 2004b: [61]). Unlike AWARE's usage of the term 'citizen' which embodied the notion of rights, Lee's usage emphasises responsibilities, in particular the responsibility of building and defending the nation.

While recognising that individuals see procreation as an intensely personal issue and not an aspect of national duty (AWARE 2004: 38), nonetheless, the association's research project and position paper are imbued with the state's own rhetoric about nation-building and national survival. AWARE's research activities centred on the image of a pregnant torso in combat fatigues accompanied by the slogan, "Beyond Babies: National Duty or Personal Choice?". The same image appears on the cover of the position paper. By deliberately pairing pregnancy with national duty, AWARE brought the terms of debate into clear view. As AWARE's imagery clearly points out, the decision about whether or not to have children in Singapore today says something important about the kind of 'citizen' that you are. The focus on national duty as depicted through an army uniform is itself reflective of men's role in compulsory National Service. The image also plays on the Ministry of

Defence's (MINDEF) current homeland security campaign. In a MINDEF public education poster, the language of fatherhood is tied to national duty in quite a different way. A Chinese soldier wearing army fatigues stands outside a housing block with a small boy in his arms, accompanied by the slogan: 'What you value, you will defend' (see Figure 2). The accompanying text on the poster reads:

We all know that what we do is tough, but its importance can be seen in our children's faces. A small nation like ours cannot leave its security to chance. It's the commitment of soldiers that keeps our country strong. And I'm proud to play my part – it's my duty, as a citizen and as a father.

In this vision of citizenship, fathers defend the nation while mothers (absent in this image) procreate and nurture. In contrast, while the issue of women's 'national service' is deliberately brought to the fore by AWARE's image of a pregnant soldier, the broader issue of differential citizenship rights in relation to military service was not discussed in the association's position paper.<sup>xi</sup> Instead, Singaporeans were encouraged to become 'active citizens' (rather than 'soldier citizens') as a means of addressing fertility decline. The concept of 'active citizenship' is central to the PAP's own vision of civil society and is a central tenet of the government's most recent vision statement *S21*:

The hallmark of Singaporeans in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be active participation in civic life. This will be built upon a foundation of mutual respect and trust between the public and people sectors, and enlightened by commitment to the values and principles that underpin Singapore (*S21 Facilitation Committee 2003*)

This vision requires Singapore's 'active citizens' to inform themselves of issues and challenges facing the country; offer feedback and suggestions in a thoughtful manner with the aim of making things better; and help to implement what they suggest (*S21 Facilitation Committee 2003*). According to this view, active citizens play a key role in promoting 'civic society', a term that emphasises civic

responsibility as opposed to the rights of citizenship implied by the concept of civil society (Chua 2000b: 5).

Using the concept of 'active citizenship' in relation to population policy, AWARE calls on individuals to "take action, voice opinions, challenge the status quo, and thus provide the force to influence policy decisions from the grassroots level, and play an active role in shaping our collective future" (AWARE 2004: 52). Specifically, this involves rethinking a number of taken-for-granted assumptions about modern life, including the relationships between husbands and wives, fathers and mothers; the value of children; and the need to be involved in socio-political matters (AWARE 2004: 53). These recommendations reflect what the association sees as problems of political apathy and an over-dependence on the state. Such a view, while it contains radical potential to question the dominance of the PAP nevertheless remains consistent with the ruling elite's own vision of an active citizenry. The conclusion outlined in the position paper is that population issues (and the associated issue of gender inequality) will be addressed 'naturally' if everyone simply does 'their bit':

We urge the state to exhibit political courage and imagination, the private sector to play a responsible role, and most of all, Singaporeans to take ownership of their own lives right now. The lives of future generations will be affected by the decisions we make today. Let us act wisely, for our own happiness, and theirs, and everything will naturally fall into place (AWARE 2004: viii).

But as AWARE knows, civil society isn't simply a neutral space that has opened up between the state and the family in Singapore – it is shaped by the same gender relations that inform other social spheres, including ideas about sex differences, sex roles, and 'nature', as well as class and racial difference. The ways in which the PAP talks about civil society, and seeks feedback on its population policies, says something important about how the rights and responsibilities of

citizenship are conceived (Chua 2000a: 63). And, most clearly, these rights and responsibilities are gendered. For women who are daily confronted with images of men in combat fatigues, rights and responsibilities in the sphere of civil society (whether as members of an NGO or as 'active citizens'), rarely transcend mothering.

## **Conclusion**

The Singaporean government's interest in population policy and fertility decline is not new. The PAP has long argued future economic development will be compromised by an ageing population and a reduction in the percentage and number of young citizen workers and male citizen soldiers. Despite its claims to the contrary, it is clear that childbirth and childrearing are considered to be a national duty in the eyes of the PAP government. This view is summed up in the statement of a senior member of Cabinet who said that Singaporeans must develop a strong 'nesting' instinct – "We need nests everywhere in Singapore, and eggs in those nests" (BG Yeo MP cited in Buenas 2004). However, the issues are a little more complex than the simple juxtaposition of 'national duty' versus 'personal choice' that dominated discussion by both the PAP elite, women MPs and AWARE.

While the women MPs introduced a level of critique into the parliamentary debates on population policy, their views did not diverge significantly from those of the PAP male elite. The PAP's explanation for the 'problem' posed by the falling birth rate was accepted by all – a low TFR would lead to economic decline through an ageing population, a smaller workforce and a reduction in the size of the military. Singapore needs more citizen babies to address this decline. While immigration may supplement a shrinking workforce, it cannot address the need for soldier citizens who will defend the nation. In addition, non-citizen residents do not share the values that underpin Singapore's national identity and thus their presence is potentially disruptive to social and political order. Like the government, women MPs are careful not to equate childbirth with national duty. Espousing the language

of 'personal choice', they nonetheless reiterate the view that the country's future depends on raising the fertility rate. While the language of citizenship obfuscates the central role that women play in addressing the falling TFR, women MPs are clear that the solution lies in removing patriarchal attitudes throughout society, including within their own party.

AWARE shares this view; the association argues that gender inequality lies at the heart of fertility decline. Unlike women MPs, however, AWARE questions the apparent 'problem' posed by a low TFR and calls for greater public debate about optimum population size and realistic birth rates. Arguing that Singapore needs more 'active citizens' (not soldier/worker citizens), the association calls on Singaporeans to get more actively involved in decision-making about population matters. In doing so, AWARE confronts the debate about national duty and personal choice head-on. Invoking the state's own use of the language of citizenship, AWARE emphasises the right of all citizens to make decisions about their fertility. While the term 'citizen' is used deliberately to refer to both men and women, however, it resonates uncomfortably with the state's own distinction between 'Singaporeans' and 'Others'. Although AWARE argues strongly for changes to immigration law to allow migrant workers to settle in Singapore and contribute to the economy as citizens, it nonetheless asserts that these new immigrants will assimilate and presumably contribute to the birth-rate.

This study reveals that engaging in debate about population policy in Singapore is fraught. The PAP government sets the terms of debate both literally and figuratively. While the government asserts that fertility decisions are matters of personal choice, it leaves little doubt that the individual choices of Singaporeans will determine the future of the nation. Fertility is tied intrinsically to loyalty, nation-building and citizenship. The government, under pressure from within its own party, is more willing to address gender inequality as a cause of fertility decline. This does not stretch, however, to an assertion of gender equality as a principle in its own

right. Patriarchy is only a problem when it interferes with the government's agenda. For women MPs (whose positions are dependent on the patronage of a PAP male elite) and for feminist activists (who occupy a tenuous position in civil society), attempting to point out the flaws in this argument is extremely difficult. Their ability to make counter claims about duties, responsibilities and rights inevitably requires them to employ the state's own language of citizenship and nation-building. To do otherwise would be to risk revealing their own potential disloyalty to the state and the nation.

## NOTES

<sup>i</sup> The term 'Papa' here is used to refer to the paternalism of Singapore's governing People's Action Party (PAP), in power since 1959. For a discussion of the original use of this term see Heng and Devan (1995).

<sup>ii</sup> The wider social issue has been referred to as the 'Great Baby Debate' (Parliamentary Debates Republic of Singapore: Official Report 2004c: [42]); 'Baby Blues Debate' (Tan 2004b); and 'Baby Boosting Budget' (Parliamentary Debates Republic of Singapore: Official Report 2004e: [13]).

<sup>iii</sup> At the time of the parliamentary debates on population there were fifteen women (10% of all MPs) in parliament. This included 10 MPs and 5 NMPs (Lyons 2005). NMPs (Nominated Members of Parliament) are nominated by members of the public, NGOs or Voluntary Welfare Organisations, and appointed by the government for a term of 3 years. While NMPs share the same parliamentary privileges and immunities as normal MPs, they have limited voting rights and do not play a role in the running of town councils.

<sup>iv</sup> Dr Ong Seh Ong (MP) stated, "It is not only the bounden duty of everyone to procreate, but it is also the moral obligation or moral responsibility of every citizen towards his (sic) family, parents, society and the state" (The Straits Times 2004). Ong quoted Confucian scholar, Mencius who stated "Among the three instances of unfiliality (sic), the worst is having no descendants" (see Ong 2004; see Tan and Asmani 2004).

<sup>v</sup> For a discussion of AWARE and its relationship with the state, see Lyons (2004).

<sup>vi</sup> The first issue relates to the right of male Singaporeans to pass on citizenship by descent to their children born overseas. In contrast, female Singaporeans had to apply for citizenship of their children by registration. AWARE has argued that this law discriminated against Singaporean women who marry foreigners, but who may wish for their children to become Singaporeans (Khoo 1999; The Straits Times 2003). The second issue relates to active discrimination against female civil servants who, unlike their male counterparts, were not entitled to medical benefits subsidies for their dependants unless they were divorced, widowed, legally separated and had custody

of their children. The government's consistent response when AWARE raised this issue in the past was to claim that male civil servants have a special role as 'heads of households'. In 2002, Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said: "In an Asian society, the husband is responsible for taking care of the family including for the medical expenses. Our medical benefits scheme should reflect this and should not undermine the rationale for holding the husband responsible" (Channel News Asia 2002).

<sup>vii</sup> Paradoxically, this discourse is supported by a large segment of AWARE's membership (Lyons 2004). As Nirmala PuruShotam (1998: 144) has pointed out, the middle-class values espoused by the ruling PAP and AWARE are marked by a "constantly shifting continuum of compliance with and resistance to patriarchal ideologies and practices" (PuruShotam 1998: 145).

<sup>viii</sup> This was a term used by one government MP in discussing proposed changes to both the medical benefits and citizenship legislation (Lim 2004).

<sup>ix</sup> By the end of the parliamentary debate, Lee Hsien Loong announced that the citizenship law would be changed. Six months later he confirmed that medical benefits would be extended to the dependents of female civil servants.

<sup>x</sup> The Singapore government does not release precise data on the numbers of migrant workers in Singapore because of public sensitivity about their presence. Available data shows that out of a total resident population of 4 million, 3 million are Singaporean citizens, 350,000 are Permanent Residents, and 800,000 are foreign residents on long-term employment or spouse passes (Lian 2004).

<sup>xi</sup> The issue of women's contribution to National Service, however, was raised during the Committee of Supply debates, with several women MPs and NMPs, including Jennifer Lee and Braema Mathi, arguing for compulsory NS for women.

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