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"Talking Point(s)": What Singaporean Female Politicians Choose to Say in Parliament

THERESA W. DEVASAHAYAM

In January 2012, with the sudden resignation of the Speaker of the House because of an inappropriate affair he had had, a by-election was held in the Punggol East constituency. The following weeks since Mr Michael Palmer's resignation on Janu-

ary 9th saw a number of opposition parties announcing their interest to contest. The Workers' Party (WP) that had formerly contested in the May 2011 General Elections came forward with their pick in Ms Lee Li Lian, a young woman from a humble family background who works as a trainer with a private institution. At about the same time, the ruling party, the People's Action Party (PAP), also made their choice but in a medical doctor, Dr Koh Poh Koon.

While the island-state of Singapore has been known worldwide for being a success story on the economic front, progressing from „third world" to „first world" status within a generation, and boasting human development indicators that have only surged forward ever since the country came into existence in 1965, its citizens have become increasingly aware that a one-party state in the hands of the PAP was not what they wanted. Disgruntled over various policies and the rising cost of living, growing numbers of Singaporeans have begun to show their unhappiness and dissatisfaction with how the country was governed. The 2011 General Election saw a drastic change in the hearts and minds of Singaporeans: formerly, Singaporeans who had been known to be generally politically apathetic were instead seeing many new faces coming forward to contest in the elections. The results of the elections were not entirely surprising with the opposition party, the WP, usurping a Group Representation Constituency (GRC).[1] In all, the WP won six seats in Parliament while the dominant party, the PAP, won the rest (81 seats). In sum, the 2011 General Elections was a watershed election for the country and the opposition (Tan 2011).

Against this political backdrop, it was of no surprise that Ms Lee won Punggol East by a clear margin of 54.2 percent of the votes compared with her opponents, and, in particular, Dr Koh who won 43.7 percent of the votes (Chua 2013). Ms Lee who gained 41 percent of the total votes in the 2011 elections managed to push up her rating considerably compared with the PAP who instead lost this seat (Chua 2013).

Amidst all this political ferment, a new Speaker of Parliament had to be chosen to replace Mr Michael Palmer. It was on January 14th 2013 that Madam *Halimah Yacob* was elected to the post. A Member of Parliament (MP)[2] since 2001 and one of the MPs of the Jurong GRC, Madam Yacob is Singapore's first woman Speaker of Parliament.[3] Countering a myriad of stereotypes, Madam Yacob is a Muslim woman who dons a veil (tudung) in keeping with her religious beliefs and is a mother of five children who insists that "a woman can have it 'all'" (Long 2013, A35).

In Singapore, however, the arena of politics largely belongs to men. Since the country's beginnings, one could easily say that a "participation dividend" on the part of women persists in the area of politics in that women's representation in the arena is far less than that of men. In such a system, a quota to ensure women's representation in politics does not exist (Chen 2010). Rather the dominant party, the PAP, approaches and "invites" women whom they consider capable to join the party although it would be up to these women to make the decision to accept or decline the invitation. In this sense, a woman is selected to join politics rather than her actively making the decision to enter the domain. The women who have been approached

tend to be professionals and are highly qualified in their fields. The selection of candidates is exercised based on the principle of meritocracy – an ideology that emphasizes that merit rather than social status or pedigree determines who succeeds – and that for leadership positions, it is the best and brightest, regardless of race and religion, which are chosen. While the dominant party has espoused this principle in its governance style for many years, there have been criticisms that this practice has become bound up with inequality and elitism contrary to what it purports to achieve (Tan 2008). Unlike the PAP, however, candidates of opposition parties have joined a party based on their decision and choice rather than having been invited into politics. Partly for this reason, the women who have joined the opposition groups include a more heterogeneous group comprising both professionals and highly educated individuals as well as those perceived as not being high-flyers in the Singapore context. Regardless of the party in question, there is a distinct shortfall in the numbers of women compared with men in politics in Singapore.

While the lack of gender parity in Singapore's Parliament, with a shortfall of women compared to men, may set off alarm bells in some circles, especially among those who desire for greater gender equality in the area of representative politics, this paper seeks to investigate the implications of women's underrepresentation in politics in relation to the kinds of issues they raise in Parliament. Proponents arguing for gender parity in politics have raised the point that women's representation is essential since women bring different perspectives to the table for discussion and since men and women

> have … distinctive experiences and situations of living, been represented among 'different activities, (worked) with different things, (have) different responsibilities, (been) involved with people in different ways' (Jónasdóttir 1988, 43, as cited in Jónasdóttir/Jones 2008, 9).

The corpus of literature on women and politics has covered women's engagement in this sphere on a variety of fronts. Considerable attention has been granted to detailing how women in political standing have consistently sought to address issues different from that of their male counterparts – issues that would demonstrate women's specialized attitude to express care towards others. Iwanaga (2008, 171) notes how women holding political office have been found to be "more likely to express concern about such issues and take an active interest in them". These issues, generally known as „women's issues", are linked to women more than men, and tend to include concerns related to the family as well as children, health, and education. In the US, for example, research has highlighted how female legislators tend to focus their legislative activities on issues concerning women, family, and children (Skard/Haavio-Mannila 1985, Thomas/Welch 1991) as compared to male legislators who in contrast concentrated on issues that typically emphasized foreign affairs, defence, and economic issues. In another study, it was found that female senators were more supportive of votes on issues of concern to women compared to male senators (Fre-

derick 2011). A similar trend was recorded in the 2010 U.K. General Election where it was discovered that while politicians paid a great deal of attention to winning the women's vote, the lack of women represented in the election campaigns meant that women's issues became peripheral – a situation which the authors surmised could have been reversed if there were greater numbers of women running for office (Campbell/Childs 2010). The research on women and politics has also begged the question if women's participation makes a difference in political decision-making and governance. In this regard, numbers to some extent become significant in the final analysis, as argued by some scholars; using critical mass theory as the point of departure, they have emphasized how women as members of legislatures would only make a difference in political representation substantively depending on their proportions (Thomas/Welch 1991, Dodson 1998, Bratton/Ray 2002). At the other end of the spectrum is the assertion that numbers do not necessarily matter but what is of significance instead is that men and women are active in political participation although engaging in different types of political activities for differing reasons (Coffé/Bolzendahl 2010).

In light of the above literature cited, this paper has two objectives. First, it raises the question of whether the current cohort of female MPs in Singapore has different political interests from their male colleagues through an investigation of the kinds of issues female and male MPs have raised and discussed in Parliament. Second, the paper seeks to understand the larger concern of whether female MPs see their role in politics to be different from that of men's. Based on an analysis of mainly archival data, primarily in the form of Parliamentary Reports, supported by interviews with three current MPs (two MPs from PAP and one female opposition MP), the paper argues that because the current cohort of female MPs operate within a paradigm that is masculine, they tend not to voice their opinion exclusively on issues thought to belong traditionally to the domain of women but rather on a range of issues. By not restricting themselves to discussing women's issues only, it is evident that these women have consciously chosen to demonstrate that they are equal to men and are capable of handling any issue rather than those associated only with women. The subtext here suggests that politics emblematizes the "masculine" while stifling the "feminine", and thus it is of no surprise that among Singaporean female MPs, there is an implicit understanding that they were voted in based on their capacity to contribute and serve the community to fulfil the goals of their respective parties rather than on their gender identity.

For this paper, the author concentrated on an analysis of the Parliamentary Reports dated from the month of October 2011 until March 2013 (the time of writing). The rationale for selecting the reports published in October 2011 was because it was then that the first sitting of the 12th Parliament took place in which the current cohort of MPs commenced their term.[4] The interviews, with the three respective female MPs who had agreed to grant an interview for this study, were conducted in July and August of 2012. A pre-prepared list of questions was employed to guide the open-ended

interview so that consistent information could be gathered from each of the women interviewed. A range of questions were included in the list such as the reasons for why they entered politics and if they thought that politics in Singapore was a male domain such that it is more difficult for women to enter politics compared with men. Since the study was concerned with whether women's role in politics differed from that of men's, the question of whether female politicians were more likely to speak up on issues related to women more than male politicians was also posed to all the interviewees. However, for the rest of the questions, the interviews were more general in nature concerning their political lives since the aim was to gather as much information as the author could. All the interviews took place in the offices of the respective MPs and they lasted about 45 minutes to an hour. For all the interviews, a soft copy of the interview schedule was electronically sent to the female MPs ahead of time in accordance to their request.

Women in Politics: Past and Present

Since 1963, the PAP has been the country's dominant party, seizing most if not all of the seats in subsequent general elections (Mauzy and Milne 2002; see also Worthington 2003). The shortfall of women's representation goes back to PAP's origins. When PAP rose to power in 1959, five female PAP candidates were voted into the self-governing Assembly, seizing 9.8 percent of the seats (Chew 2008). But with the PAP-Barisan Sosialis schism, two women members left for the Barisan Sosialis, while two remained, among whom was Chan Choy Siong who was the lone surviving woman until 1968. With her exit from politics in 1970, Singapore did not see a woman MP until 1984 (Chew 2001, 2008). That same year saw three women – Dr Dixie Tan, Dr Aline Wong, and Mrs Yu-Fu Yee Shoon – holding political office as MPs, soon to be joined by a fourth in Dr Seet Ai Mee in 1988. Since then, the political scene changed significantly as from 1984 to about 2000, women constituted around 2-6 percent of the country's MPs (Chew 2001). Moreover, from 1990 onwards, there were also women, who were appointed as Nominated Members of Parliament (NMPs), thus raising the numbers of women in Parliament (Parliament of Singapore: Members of Parliament 2013).

As much as the 2011 General Elections was a watershed for Singapore and the opposition, it may be said that 2001 was a watershed for women in politics in the country because from 2001 to 2006, women's representation in politics had doubled from 12 to 21 percent – a significant increase in spite of a political climate where a quota system to encourage women into politics does not operate. While figures for women's parliamentary representation in Singapore surpass the world average of 19.5 percent (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2012), they continue to be underrepresented in Parliament at only 22.9 percent with 20 elected women parliamentarians out of 87, 18 of whom are from PAP and two from WP as of April 2013. Moreover, Singapore does not have a full Minister who is a female (AWARE 2011); the sole female Minister

in the country's Cabinet, Ms Grace Fu, only holds the positions of Second Minister for the Environment and Water Resources and Second Minister for Foreign Affairs.

What Male and Female MPs Debate On

A survey of the Parliamentary Reports revealed a remarkable range of issues female MPs spoke to. The following is a list of some of the issues engaged in by female MPs: (a) personal data protection; (b) Computer Misuse (Amendment) Bill; (c) Heritage Roads in Singapore; (d) external geopolitical environment; (e) dengue outbreak; (f) promotion and subsidy of dental care; (g) investigations into bus drivers' claims of police brutality; (h) Singapore-citizen faculty members in the four autonomous universities; (i) appointment process for PRs (permanent residents) and New Citizens; (j) population and immigration issues and data; (k) anti-corruption stance; (l) National Climate Change Secretariat; (m) national service;[5] (n) defence; (o) foreign affairs; (p) external audits of three institutions of higher learning; (q) Legal Aid and Advice (amendment) Bill; (r) Misuse of Drugs (Amendment) Bill; (s) transport; (t) environment and water resources; and (u) public housing. On these issues, female MPs may have either raised them or they might have engaged in the discussions around them if they had been raised by their male counterparts.

The Parliamentary Reports were filled with instances of female MPs displaying a keen interest in discussions related to family, health, and education. As expected, female MPs did on many occasions raise a variety of concerns related to the well-being of the family (Parliament No. 12, Session No. 1, Vol. No. 90, Sitting No. 10, Sitting Date: 07.03.2013). For example, the country's budget debate included some discussion on issues associated with the family and other related areas of concerns. In her support of the 2013 budget, MP Dr Intan Azura Mokhtar raised questions around the preschool sector, families, and healthcare financing (Parliament No. 12, Session No. 1, Vol. No. 90, Sitting No. 8, Sitting Date: 05.03.2013). During that same sitting, MP Ms Ellen Lee discussed issues of ageing and eldercare and preschool education, issues that may be thought to come under the purview of women, followed by NMP Ms Mary Liew whose concerns poignantly revolved around labour issues including bringing women back into the workforce. In that same session, NMP Ms Janice Koh was also found to raise questions regarding the pre-school sector in addition to the cost of the country's healthcare services.

In another separate debate session, the issue of the temporary exemption of car loan restrictions in order to benefit the disabled and their caregivers as well as families with elderly dependents was raised by MP Ms Lee Li Lian (Parliament No. 12, Session No. 1, Vol. No. 90, Sitting No. 10, Sitting Date: 07.03.2013). In yet the same session, Ms Lee addressed the enhanced baby bonus scheme, a government-led initiative introduced in April 2001 with the intent of alleviating the financial cost of raising children by calling upon the House to consider removing the dollar matching requirement for the couple's first two children especially in light of the urgent need

to raise the total fertility rate of the country (Parliament No 12, Session No. 1, Vol. No. 90, Sitting No. 10, 07.03.2013). In fact, Ms Lee appears to have been the only female MP aggressively calling for more support for single mothers and, in turn, openly standing up for women, although she too does call to question other issues outside the domain of women in Parliament (Channel News Asia 2013, The Workers' Party 2013a).[6]

Another concern related to the family that was debated by female Parliamentarians revolved around foreign domestic workers. In Singapore, one out of six families has resorted to employing a foreign woman as a domestic helper. Labour laws have been integral to managing this migrant group (Devasahayam 2010). In view of controlling the numbers of foreign domestic workers in Singapore to discourage reliance on this group on the part of Singaporeans, employers are mandated to pay the Foreign Domestic Worker Levy. On this, female MP Er Dr Lee Bee Wah made the point that reducing the levy could essentially benefit families and help them cope with the increasing cost of hiring a helper especially in light of the fact that it is difficult to secure a worker for this kind of job because of the excessively low salary attached to this job (Parliament No. 12, Session No. 1, Vol. No. 90, Sitting No. 7, Sitting Date: 25.02.013).

Caregiving concerns around Singapore's ageing population were also highlighted by female MPs. MP Ms Tin Pei Ling queried the Minister for Health on the complaints of abuse of patients in nursing homes since June 2011 and what measures had been put in place to prevent potential abuses (Parliament No.12, Session No. 1, Vol. No. 88, Sitting No. 14, Sitting Date: 17.02.2012). In another session, MP Dr Intan Azura Mokhtar asked the House if elderly and grandparent caregivers may receive some direct benefits or incentives such as free public transport passes, and annual passes to places of interest or even shopping or discount vouchers at shopping malls as they are likely not to receive any income except for small token sums of money from other working adults in the family (Parliament No 12, Session No. 1, Vol. No. 90, Sitting No. 10, Sitting Date: 07.03.2013).

Other family matters such as the plight of divorced women was also raised by female MP Er Dr Lee Bee Wah who asked the Acting Minister for Social and Family Development whether the Ministry had plans to increase the age and income limit under the Home Ownership Plus Education (HOPE) Scheme to help divorced women who have custody of their children. Moreover, she asked if more support would be granted to divorcees in the areas of housing costs and childcare and how the Ministry ensures that divorcees receive maintenance fees in a timely manner (Parliament No. 12, Session No. 1, Vol. No. 90, Sitting No. 5, Sitting Date: 07.02.2013).

In a work-driven culture, the topic of balancing multiple roles has often been discussed in numerous contexts drawing the attention of mainly policymakers and non-governmental organizations concerned with this issue. This issue has also been discussed on several occasions at the Parliamentary level by female MPs. Concerned with the lives of married women, in particular, MP Associate Professor Fatimah

Lateef broached the issue about how flexible work arrangements can be put in place to draw women back into the workforce (Parliament No 12, Session No. 1, Vol. No. 90, Sitting No. 10, Sitting Date: 07.03.2013). Similar issues related to the family were also raised by MPs Ms Lee Li Lian and Ms Denise Phua and NMP Ms Mary Liew in another Parliamentary debate (Parliament No. 12, Session No. 1, Vol. No. 90, Sitting No. 15, Sitting Date: 14.03.2013).

The rising cost of living battering Singaporeans has also been a regular topic of discussion among the MPs. Among the female MPs, how poorer families coped with their everyday existence seemed to have been a topic that was taken up relatively frequently. For example, MP Ms Penny Low raised the question on how the government has put in place measures to contain the rising costs of living especially when it comes to food security (Parliament No. 12, Session No. 1, Vol. No. 89, Sitting No. 5, Sitting Date: 13.08.2012).

Female MPs also showed a concern for health issues – another area typically considered to be a women's concern. MP Associate Professor Fatimah Lateef asked what the current criteria were for receiving a government subsidy for the reversal of ligation or sexual sterilization. On a related issue on voluntary sterilization, female MPs Ms Sylvia Lim, Associate Professor Lateef, Ms Denise Puah, joined by NMPs, Ms Faizah Jamal and Ms Mary Liew, appeared to be heavily engaged in the debate (Parliament No. 12, Session No. 1, Vol. No. 89, Sitting No. 9, Sitting Date: 16.10.2012), although it must be noted that several male MPs also showed as much interest in the issue as their female counterparts. In this case, there seemed to be a balance of interest from both sexes on the issue based on the reports.

Aside from health concerns, Singaporean female MPs were found to address issues related to education. NMP Ms Janice Koh, for example, drew attention to the decline in literature enrolment in secondary schools in relation to school rankings/scores as well as the role of the humanities in the school curriculum (Parliament No. 12, Session No. 1, Vol. No. 90, Sitting No. 14, Sitting Date: 13.03.2013). During that sitting, MP Ms Denise Phua also spoke up on issues related to pre-school education and the flaws of the current primary school system. In another session, MP Associate Professor Fatimah Lateef asked the Minister for Education, Mr Heng Swee Keat, about the Ministry's future plans for the Special Assistance Plan (SAP) schools, while MP Dr Intan Azura Mokhtar asked about the admission of students who do not take Chinese as their Mother Tongue Language into these schools (Parliament No. 12, Session 1, Volume 90, Sitting 2, Sitting Date: 4.2.2013). On another occasion, MP Associate Professor Lateef sought an update from the Minister for Education on the mental wellness programme implemented in primary and secondary schools as well as junior colleges (Parliament No. 12, Session No. 1, Vol. No. 89, Sitting No. 8, Sitting Date: 15.10.2012). While it may be said that Associate Professor Lateef might have been interested in raising the issue of education because she is a woman, this argument is not justifiable especially in light of the fact that there have been numerous instances in which she had engaged in issues aside from those related

to family, education, and health. For example, Associate Professor Lateef sought clarification on the Payment Systems (Oversight) (Amendment) Bill which was first introduced in June 2006 to oversee the payment systems and stored value facilities in Singapore (Parliament No. 12, Session No. 1, Vol. No. 90, Sitting No. 1, Sitting Date: 14.1.2013).

In fact, there were countless examples of female MPs who discussed issues beyond the ambits of family, education, and health. Some did so because they held portfolios, which required them to discuss such issues. For example, MP Mrs Josephine Teo raised the debate on the Stamp Duties (Amendments) Bill on 14 January 2013 principally because she is the Minister of State for Finance (Parliament No. 12, Session No. 1, Vol. No. 90, Sitting No. 1, Sitting Date: 14.1.2013). Interestingly, aside from a male MP, Mr Christopher de Souza, MP Associate Professor Lateef also engaged in the discussion. On the issue of the external geopolitical environment, Ms Grace Fu, spoke up on Singapore's relations with the European Union (EU) and other major economies. However, it may be deduced that her inclination to discuss the matter was related to her capacity as Second Minister for Foreign Affairs (Parliament No. 12, Session No. 1, Vol. No. 90, Sitting No. 11, Sitting Date: 8.3.2013). Another issue unrelated to women's issues to which a female MP spoke up on was the loan of giant pandas from China (Parliament No. 12, Session No. 1, Vol. No. 89, Sitting No 13, Sitting Date: 16.11.2012). On this issue, Ms Grace Fu explained the rationale for the loan – that is, that it was a gesture of good will from the Chinese to enhance friendly ties between China and Singapore. Interestingly enough, the query on the loan of the pandas was raised by a female NMP, Ms Faizah Jamal (Parliament No. 12, Session No. 1, Vol. No. 89, Sitting No. 13, Sitting Date: 16.11.2012). Another instance, which saw the engagement of a female MP because of her portfolio, was the issue of care for persons with mental disabilities. In this case, MP Dr Amy Khor may be said to have responded to the discussion with extensive details because of her own portfolio as the Minister of State for Health on behalf of the Minister of Health (Parliament No. 12, Session No. 1, Vol. No. 89, Sitting No. 10, Sitting Date: 12.11.2012). In another instance during the budget debate, MP Ms Sim Ann spoke for the needs of students with special needs because of her portfolio as the Senior Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Education (Parliament No. 12, Session No. 1, Vol. No. 90, Sitting No. 14, Sitting Date: 13.03.2013).

Even on issues, which might be considered gender neutral such as the debate on the Personal Data Protection Bill, women were found to be actively engaged in the discussion. While the majority of MPs (15 altogether) engaged in the discussion were male, there were four female MPs who voiced their concerns on this matter (Parliament No. 12, Session No. 1, Vol. No. 89, Sitting No. 8, Sitting Date: 15.10.2012). Other issues that might have been labelled as gender neutral in which female MPs showed a keen interest included the layout of traffic junctions, the Singapore Arts Festival, and the impact of tighter foreign worker quotas on the completion of new HDB flats (Parliament No. 12, Session No. 1, Vol. No. 90, Sitting No. 17, Sitting

Date: 8.4.2013; Parliament No. 12, Session No. 1, Vol. No. 89, Sitting No. 5, Sitting Date: 13.08.2012; Parliament No. 12, Session No. 1, Vol. No. 90, Sitting No. 17, Sitting Date: 8.4.2013). In fact, it is not surprising that MP Er Dr Lee Bee Wah raised a question related to Singapore's infrastructure because of her own training as an engineer.

In fact, there were a number of instances in which female MPs addressed an issue not because of their portfolio but because of their own professional background. Such is the case of MPs Ms Ellen Lee and Ms Sylvia Lim who respectively commented on the Penal Code (Amendment) Bill since they were both trained in the legal profession (Parliament No 12, Session No. 1, Vol. No. 89, Sitting No. 11, Sitting Date: 14.11.2012). In a debate on the annual budget statement, it is of no surprise that MP Ms Foo Mee Har addresses the issue of the restructuring of the country's economy especially in terms of small and medium enterprises since professionally she has close links to the corporate world. In her speech, she also discusses the issues of productivity and foreign manpower, while also raising her concerns on pro-family employer practices (Parliament No. 12, Session No. 1, Vol. No. 90, Sitting No. 8, Sitting Date: 05.03.2013).

At the other end of the spectrum were female MPs who engaged in discussions not only on issues that might have been thought to be gender neutral but actually considered male-oriented or "macho". Such is the topic of defence. During a debate on the country's budget allocated to the Ministry of Defence, female MP Ms Ellen Lee raised her concerns about Singapore's bilateral defence relationship with Malaysia and the Philippines in the wake of the intrusion of Filipino militant groups into the Malaysian state of Sabah (Parliament No. 12, Session No. 1, Vol. No. 90, Sitting No. 12, Sitting Date: 11.03.2013). At the same sitting, MP Ms Sylvia Lim asked a question on whether more information about MINDEF's (Ministry of Defence) spending can be shared with Parliamentarians and the general public with the aim of reducing Singapore's corruption risk given that the country scored a D+ in the anti-corruption index generated by Transparency International (TI).

Having said these, it must be highlighted that in no way did the male MPs show disinterest in issues related to the family, education, and health. On the contrary, there were numerous occasions from the Parliamentary Reports in which male MPs demonstrated as much interest as their female counterparts on issues generally thought to be of concern mainly to women. For example, Non-Constituency MP Mr Gerald Giam sought to find out if the government would consider extending childcare leave benefits to unmarried single parents (Parliament No. 12, Session No. 1, Vol. No. 90, Sitting No. 15, Sitting Date: 14.03.2013). In another instance, male MPs seemed to dominate the discussion on the Child Development Co-Savings (Amendment) Bill with fewer female MPs putting forth their opinion on the issue (Parliament No. 12, Session No. 1, Vol. No. 90, Sitting No. 17, Sitting Date: 08.04.2013). Yet in another session, a male MP was found to question the government's position on foreign spouses – an issue thought to be a women's issue since it relates to the well-being

of the family (Parliament No. 12, Session No. 1, Vol. No. 90, Sitting No. 10, Sitting Date: 7.3.2013). This issue was raised by MP Mr David Ong, of Ms Grace Fu for the Prime Minister's office, who had asked about the circumstances of children of deceased Singaporean fathers or mothers and whose spouses are typically only granted a Long-Term Visit Pass.

Moreover in one of the budget debates, several male MPs were found to join their female counterparts in an active discussion on various issues related to the family from childcare and infant-care centres and the master-plan for the disabled to strengthening the social service sector and concessions for seniors although this might have been expected since the debate was concerned with a discussion on the budget allocated towards the Ministry of Social and Family Development (Parliament No. 12, Session No. 1, Vol. No. 90, Sitting No. 15, Sitting Date: 14.3.2013). Male MPs also showed a concern for issues related to the family during the debate on the annual budget. During a session, MP Dr Lim Wee Kiak addressed concerns around preschool and healthcare financing targeted at the elderly (Parliament No. 12, Session No. 1, Vol. No. 90, Sitting No. 8, Sitting Date: 5.3.2013). The debate on the annual budget statement also saw NMP Mr R Dhinakaran, in discussing employment, labour, and economic growth issues, engaged in a lengthy discussion on family and the Singaporean woman and what more can be done to help women balance their multiple roles as mother and worker (Parliament No. 12, Session No. 1, Vol. No. 90, Sitting No. 8, Sitting Date: 5.3.2013). MP Mr Christopher De Souza, in that same session, also raised similar concerns for more funding for pre-school education and flexi- and part-time work arrangements for mothers as well as the provision of a caregiver allowance for those caring for the elderly and disabled (Parliament No. 12, Session No. 1, Vol. No. 90, Sitting No. 8, Sitting Date: 5.3.2013).

Avoiding Gender Stereotypes at all Costs

It is evident from the Parliamentary Reports selected for analysis that female MPs in Singapore do not only represent women's issues but in demonstrating a capacity to be able to discuss a range of issues, aside from those typically labelled as women's issues, they have come to display their political interests to be all-encompassing. It was the interviews, however, which the author found to be critical in this analysis, since they reveal the possible reasons for why the majority of female MPs did not want to confine themselves to raising and/or discussing women's issues only in Parliament.[7]

The perspectives of these MPs were intriguing in that it facilitates an understanding of what they saw to be their role in politics and if they saw their role to be different from that of their male counterparts. MP Christina Foo[8] described her observation of the debates in Parliament this way:

> Women speak up on all sorts of issues (…) and in fact women politicians raise more issues than others (men) (…) There was a *Today* paper report that was done (…) I can't remember the year (…) I think it was '05 or '06 where they did a comparison of the questions raised by women MPs and men MPs and I think it was (….) two-thirds of the issues were raised by women MPs (…) I guess they just questioned more (…) I don't know if that is still the case (…). Speaker Thanmugi always used to say that the women talked more than the men in Parliament (…) he said it with an air of trepidation.

While she does not state explicitly that there was a clear avoidance on the part of female MPs not to restrict themselves to discussions on issues related only to women, it is evident from this quote that this female MP affirmed the stance female MPs adopted. In fact, her quote suggests that the stance women adopted was not any different from that of men's. To put it differently, both male and female MPs operated in the same way in Parliament with no clear gender differences in the kinds of topics they either raised or discussed.

In contrast, MP Catherine Chew clearly demonstrated that there were female MPs who actually made an active decision on not wanting to represent women's issues exclusively. Describing at length why she did not speak up only on women's issues, her rationale for the position she took was bound up with how she saw her role as MP in serving her constituency:

> I don't only talk about women's issues (…) because I don't only represent women (…). I should be representing everybody (…) men, women, young and old (…) where a particular topic touches on women and I think it is important enough to speak up on it, I will do that (…) or even if it concerns men (…) I think I have done it (…) I focus more on families and dysfunctional families (…) as well as the needy. (…) men generally giving credit to our male politicians, they have been speaking up on women's issues as well (…) and I believe because I think they also realize that they cannot be gender bias (…) because their voters comprise of both males and females.

From the perspective of this female MP, because she has been serving different groups of people within her constituency of which women formed one collective, it did not seem logical to her to only want to raise and discuss issues related to women.

The third response provided by MP Patricia Tan on the question of whether she saw a woman's role in politics as a spokesperson for women's issues was even more revealing than the first two interviews. This female MP, in fact, held reservations about being stereotyped as a politician who addressed women's issues because of her own gender identity. That she was conscious of the fact of not wanting to be seen as a politician who discusses issues related only to women was picked up in the interview:

> Usually, I have not raised women's issues (…). I don't raise women's issues (…). And I think probably it would (…) depending on one's experience and expertise to raise issues

> that are (…) in a way you are comfortable with or you choose to (…) because your residents presented it to you (…) and of course the other thing is that as a leader of a political party, I am also conscious of the fact that I don't want people to pigeon hole me in a certain mould that (…) oh because you are a woman you speak up on these issues (…) and I think it is not helpful I think because we need to have a broad base policy interest.

On further prompting her, however, her position seemed a little more complicated than meets the eye as she acknowledged that there might be favourable instances in which a female politician might consider playing up on her gender identity. She later said:

> But having said that again (…) this is sort of related (…) I am recalling now Hilary Clinton's presidential campaign for the democratic nomination right? (…) when she was competing with Barack Obama (…) and she was also very conscious of not being seen to be playing on her being female or whatever but she wanted to be judged based on merit (…) and interestingly at the end of the campaign many analysts and she herself also probably did agree that she should have made use of it (…) because women voters were waiting for her to communicate with them (…) and they found that she was communicating like anybody else so (…) you see women's view of politics is also very different. (…) so far (…) on average women (...) I wouldn't say don't (…) on average (women) have less interest (…) in political matters (…) so in that sense to connect with the women voters it is a different thing again (…) so in that sense women sometimes have an advantage they can make use of but (…) often those of us especially who would like to be given any handicaps so to speak for being a woman (…) we tend to like (to be) judged with everybody else on the same plane (…) but really being a woman I have found can be an advantage sometimes (…) it depends on whether we want to make use of it (…). I am a bit uncomfortable because generally I am not that kind of a person.

Unlike MPs Christina Foo and Catherine Chew, it was evident from MP Patricia Tan's response that women are the "second sex" (cf. de Beauvoir 1953) in politics and that women do not compete with men on an equal playing field in that arena. In spite of acknowledging that there may be instances in which playing up on women's issues may work to the benefit of a female politician, it appeared that this female MP was certain that she had made an active choice not to want to capitalize on this disadvantage based on her sex in order to achieve her own objectives. Thus, she has made it her aim to represent all issues rather than confine herself to addressing only or even mostly women's issues.

It must also be highlighted that the position these women have taken may reflect the broader idea of women's concerns prevailing in the country. The words of MP Catherine Chew are indicative of this point:

> But I think in Singapore itself most of the gender issues have been solved (…) we don't have any (…) look even our maternity leave has been solved (…) the citizenship issue has

> been solved as well (…) what else are there that may not have been solved (…) other than maintenance for men.

In light of this statement, it is not surprising that female MPs have made a conscious effort not to highlight the concerns of women and neither do they desire to be seen as politicians who only advocate women's issues.
Moreover, because women hold a minority status in politics since men overwhelmingly outnumber them, they feel even more strongly about not wanting to be stereotyped, fully aware that this would further marginalize them. Thus in Singapore, the arena of politics is one where men perceive themselves as the *Self* (the subject) while women are the *Other* (cf. de Beauvoir 2001). However, in the case of women, a similar polarity does not exist. For them, while they see men as the *Self*, the problem lies in that they, like men, see themselves as the *Other* and, hence, there is every reason for these women to feel that they have little choice but to "fit in" rather than "stick out" by claiming difference from men. As Simone de Beauvoir (2001, 564) asserts, women themselves do not "dispute male sovereignty", an idea which may be applied to the Singapore context in view of how female MPs express their political interests. Instead, they are seen to acknowledge their minority status and, in turn, express a "subjugation of the weaker by the stronger" (de Beauvoir 2001, 564).

Conclusion

In spite of the seemingly positive improvements in the lives of Singaporean women in the last few decades, Singapore remains largely a "woman-unfriendly state", and without any doubt this pattern shores up in the arena of politics (cf. Jónasdóttir/Jones 2008). Among the few women who have been in a privileged position to enter the domain, they are fully aware that politics is about men and not about women; to put it differently, politics remains an androcentric arena. For this reason, women cannot choose to differentiate themselves from men in terms of the issues they raise and/or discuss in Parliament. Instead, they have chosen to deliberately suppress or, at the least, stifle the "feminine". In fact should women want to engage in politics, they have to engage in this arena like their male counterparts – being clear in their minds that they are in politics because of their capabilities, and not because they represent the "token" number of women whose presence and participation are required to fulfil a quota. Thus they would do everything not to claim difference from men but rather to come across as gender neutral in their political interests, while in some instances consciously taking on even a hyper-masculine position, if the situation calls for it.
Having said that, it must be noted that the imbalance of the sexes in politics in the Singapore context is nonetheless about power and domination – a power exercised largely by men, on the one hand, because of their sheer numbers now as well as in the past, and recognized by women, on the other, only because the latter have little choice in this matter. To put it differently, women do recognize that they constitute

the "second sex" in the relationship between the sexes in the arena of politics. But this is not necessarily a negative point. Although the women engaged in politics are not generating an "alternative value (system) that would include new concepts of power" (hooks 2000, 90), they do possess some measure of power and for them to access power and prestige in the existing structure means that they have to support the present structure for the time being – a structure which denies the feminine fullest expression. And for the majority among them given the circumstances of having found their feet in politics more recently compared to their male counterparts, they will accept men's definition of their reality. It is only until the numbers of women grow more significantly in Parliament that we can expect that female MPs would be comfortable in speaking about women's issues, even if that means exclusively.

Notes

1 This is usually a larger electoral division compared with single member constituencies (SMCs) in terms of population and physical area. As compared with an SMC, a GRC may be made up of three, four, five or six individuals. For each GRC, it is the President who by law declares the group number. See Elections Department Singapore, 2013.

2 This refers to a directly elected MP in contrast to a Nominated MP (NMP). Since 1990, changes in the country's constitution have made a provision for the appointment of up to nine NMPs. The reason for this change was to ensure a wider representation of community views in Parliament allowing for independent and non-partisan views to be heard. NMPs are directly appointed by the President of Singapore for a term of two and a half years on the recommendation of a Special Select Committee chaired by the Speaker of Parliament (Parliament of Singapore: Members of Parliament 2013 (20.8.2013)).

3 See Parliament of Singapore: Speaker of Parliament, 2013. (20.8.2013).

4 See Parliament of Singapore: Sessions of Parliament, 2013. (20.8.2013).

5 This refers to the mandatory military conscription in which all male Singaporeans or non-first-generation permanent residents, who have reached 18 years of age, have to enroll for a period of 22 or 24 months. These men serve as Full Time National Servicemen (NSFs), either in the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF), Singapore Police Force (SPF), or the Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF).

6 Her interest in pushing women's concerns forward was also demonstrated in a Singapore Yahoo interview in which she declared her interest in generating greater political awareness among women and youth (The Workers' Party 2013b). By no means does this suggest that PAP has no interest in bringing more women into Parliament. In 2011, the PAP Women's Wing called for more women to enter politics (SG Links 2011). The aim was to have women make up at least 30% of Parliament. But thus far, it may be said that PAP has only met with moderate success in wooing more women into politics given the fact that the proportion of female MPs falls short of that of their male counterparts.

7 It should be noted that the three MPs were interviewed for a larger ongoing project on women and politics in Singapore.

8 Please note that the names of the three MPs the author had interviewed are pseudonyms so that the confidentiality of these individuals may be protected.

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