

Women's Choices, Women's Lives: Shaping The Next 25 Years

Abstract of Presentation



Speaker: Linda Y. C. Lim

Title: *Beyond gender: The impact of age, ethnicity, nationality & economic growth on women in the Singapore economy.*

Abstract:

This paper uses Singapore Labour Force and Census data to examine trends in women's labour force participation, sectoral and occupational distribution, and wage incomes relative to men, including by age-cohort and educational attainment.

It finds that between 1980 and 2010, gender disparities in virtually all categories have substantially narrowed, and concludes that those which remain—such as women's continued under-representation at higher levels of the labour force and income distribution--result from their continued disproportionate responsibility for family care.

The paper identifies some areas of concern for women's economic future in Singapore, including the impacts of ageing, foreign labour and immigration, and the wage stagnation experienced by low-income families under Singapore's economic development model.

Linda Lim is Professor of Strategy at the Stephen M. Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan, where she also served as Director of the 50-year-old Center for Southeast Asian Studies from 2005-2009. A native of Singapore, Linda obtained her degrees in economics from the universities of Cambridge (BA), Yale (MA) and Michigan (PhD).

She has published widely on trade, investment, industrial policy, labor, multinational and local business in Asia, including numerous articles on women in the labor force, especially workers in labor-intensive export factories. Her work on the Singapore economy includes popular as well as academic articles spanning 35 years.

Her recent (2010) publications include "Globalizing State, Disappearing Nation: Foreign Participation in Singapore's Economy", and "Rebalancing in East Asia". Her current research is on China's foreign direct investment in Southeast Asia, and on Southeast Asian Chinese business and regional economic development.

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Speaker: Teo You Yenn

Title: *Making choices amidst increasing burdens: A Feminist Analysis of Singapore's Pro-natal policies*

Abstract:

In the past 25 years, the Singapore state has embarked on a pro-natalist campaign in an effort to stem trends toward delayed marriage and low fertility. Although their effects in reversing demographic trends have been at best modest, they have shaped Singaporeans' understandings of themselves as members of families, as mothers and fathers, daughters and sons.

The many campaigns and policies, primarily targeted at women, have also had profound effects in shaping women's "choices." In this paper, I will argue that "choice"—so central to liberal feminism—is in fact a highly problematic concept when detached from consideration of structural conditions. In other words, it is crucial to ask: what choices are possible and what are impossible in a given context? Who has/gets to make choices and who does not? What are the conditions under which people make choices?

I will look closely at the "choices" offered up by the state—its maternity leave provisions, tax relief measures and foreign domestic worker policies—and how these have been heavily constraining, particularly for women. I will argue that the state has placed issues of fertility firmly in the realm of women's "choices" and that in so doing, they have produced a familial form wherein gendered inequality are upheld and perpetuated by the strong structures of state policy and national norms.

Teo You Yenn received her PhD in Sociology from the University of California, Berkeley in 2005. She is currently Assistant Professor at the Nanyang Technological University. She is also a member of the Board at AWARE.

Her work on gender, family policies, and state-society relations has been published in *Critical Asian Studies*; *Signs*; *Population, Space and Place* and *Economy and Society*. Her book, *Neoliberal Morality in Singapore: How family policies produce state and society* will be published in 2011 by Routledge. Her current research focuses on the intersections between welfare policies and state ideals around the family.

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Speaker: Braema Mathi

Title: *Sustaining Women's Choices in Singapore - The Long and Short of It*

Abstract:

It is no longer a little known fact that women contributed to the independence of Singapore in a big way as many voted the current ruling party into power on the promise of remedying a domestic issue – outlawing polygamy through civil law. Then it was women who again shaped the economy as they toiled in the factories, giving our manufacturing industry its boost. The then Prime Minister valued the productive potential of women and effected equal access to education for boys and girls. That gave women the swiftest path to independent living and economic success.

However, in this discussion, we revisit the issue of women's choices. Choice suggests alternatives, assertion, independence. This paper takes a long and hard look at the choices that all types of women in Singapore can make presently and in the future. The paper begins with a historical mapping of women's independence in the early years of Singapore's history, with an emphasis on evaluating the motivations for the various choices offered to women.

The second part of the paper examines the limitations of these choices and how these have impacted women over the years. The third section discusses the new women – foreigners – and the marginalized communities of women – the disabled, the older person, the lower-income, the single, the divorcee, the working mother – to highlight their challenges.

The fourth section examines the remedial interventions made to enable women's access to processes for self-empowerment and identify the shortfalls. The last part is the conclusion where certain recommendations will be put forward.

Newly appointed as AWARE's Honorary Research and Advocacy Director, Braema Mathi has a long history with AWARE. She joined in 1992, served two consecutive terms as President of the association and headed the CEDAW sub-committee. As Research and Advocacy Director, she reviews AWARE research and advocacy priorities to set the framework and to put forth key areas on which to focus on in the short and long-term.

Braema served as Nominated Member of Parliament from 1998 to 2000 and was a journalist with the Straits Times for nine years. In addition to her role at AWARE, she is also founder of MARUAH (Working Group for an ASEAN Human Rights Mechanism, Singapore, Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) and A Recycling Network In Action (ARENA).

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Dr Kanwaljit Soin is a founder member of AWARE and served as its president from 1991 – 1993.

Currently Kanwaljit is a global ambassador of HelpAge International, a UK based international NGO serving disadvantaged older people worldwide. She was on the board of HelpAge International for 9 years and stepped down as Vice President of the organization at the end of 2010. She is also the Chair of WINGS in Singapore – “Women’s Initiative for Ageing Successfully.” She is a Board Member of Washington University International Advisory Council.

In addition to her full time practice, Kanwaljit was also a founder member of UNIFEM (Singapore), the Association of Women Doctors and the Shirin Fozdar Trust Fund. She served as the Chair of UNIFEM Singapore from 1997 to 2002. She was a past president of International Women’s Forum, Singapore from 2001 to 2003. She was Jury Member of Selection Committee for the prestigious Rolex Awards for Enterprise in 2000 and 2004. She was a Nominated Member of Parliament of Singapore from 1992 – 1996.

Kanwaljit was also nominated “Woman of the Year” in 1992 in Singapore and in 2000 she was presented “Women Who Make a Difference Award” by the International Women’s Forum, Washington D.C.

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Speaker: Kanwaljit Soin

Title: *The forgotten generation: the lost potential of older women*

Abstract:

In a capitalist market economy like Singapore, old people are considered a burden as they are not recognized as being functionally useful to society.

But the hard truths are:

- The so-called ageing problem is caused not by longer life spans and decreased fertility but by inappropriate institutions and behaviours.
- Appropriate and adequate investments in the health of older people are positively co-related with their increased contribution to the economy and to society.
- Singapore is ageing fast and accompanied by the feminization of ageing.
- Sex and gender both contribute to women’s vulnerability in old age.

Special attention has to be paid to older women’s health and well-being so that older women’s untapped potential can be realized and the human capital provided can be utilized fully to reap the longevity dividend.

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Speaker: Dana Lam

Title: *Twenty-five years of AWARE*

Forthcoming

Since joining AWARE in 1998, Dana Lam was the President of AWARE's board from 2000-2002 and 2009-2010. She also chaired AWARE's Education Sub-Committee from 1998-2001. She has worked on the Review of the 2nd Periodic Report from Singapore for CEDAW 2001 (CEDAW Shadow Report), the Education Report 2001 and Remaking Singapore: Views of Half the Nation 2002.

Dana is a published author and artist and currently lectures part time at LASALLE College of the Arts. She has a BA from the then University of Singapore and an MA (Fine Arts) from LASALLE Open University. She has worked as a reporter at The Straits Times and as a book editor and project co-ordinator.

Her most recent work was She Shapes a Nation, a short documentary inspired by the 80th birthday of Mrs Hedwig Anuar in November 2008, capturing the nuances of women's lives and women's choices in five decades of nation making. She also wrote the book, Days of Being Wild, on opposition voters in the Singapore General Elections of 2006.

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