For the good of the nation: ‘Strategic egalitarianism’ in the Singapore context

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ABSTRACT: In this article, I introduce the concept of ‘strategic egalitarianism’ in relation to women’s co-optation into nationalist projects in Singapore. By strategic egalitarianism, I mean the granting of equality to women that is contingent upon meeting particular pragmatic nationalist objectives. For example, the granting of equal educational and employment opportunities by the government in the 1960s was necessitated by Singapore’s economic survival as a newly emerging nation. By the 1980s, another pragmatic national concern dealing with rapid decline in population growth emerged, requiring that women prioritise the role of motherhood. A complicating factor in the procreationist discourse is the government’s eugenic policy that favours the ‘right’ kind of women, in particular, to bear the ‘right’ kind of babies for the continued vitality of the nation. In the course of this article, I examine the problem with strategic egalitarianism, which shifts its ground depending on the nationalist goals of the day, and the implications this has for Singapore women.

Introduction

It has been noted that over the years the political leadership in Singapore under the People’s Action Party (PAP) has been involved in ‘double-talk’ (Lazar 1993) or sending women ‘mixed messages’ (Goldberg 1987).¹ On the one hand, women in Singapore have been encouraged to believe that they have equal rights and opportunities as the menfolk. Yet, on the other hand, women’s reproductive and nurturing roles as mothers have been prioritised for them, which serve to curtail their life choices and aspirations. Both situations have been extended to women in the name of national interest, although which gets foregrounded depends on the nationalist project at hand. In this article, I argue that the reason behind the contradictory signals to women, and the apparent ease with which the government is able to switch emphasis, can be attributed to the PAP’s practice of ‘strategic egalitarianism’.

By ‘strategic egalitarianism’, I mean the granting of equality to women that is contingent upon meeting specific political and economic goals. Undeniably, changes promoting egalitarianism that have been instituted, as a result, have...
impacted favourably on the social and economic status of women in Singapore. However, these changes, which are motivated solely by pragmatism and which are highly selective, stop short of allowing women full social emancipation in all spheres of life. Moreover, implied in the concept of strategic egalitarianism is that only the political elite is in the position to decide whether, and to what extent, institutional equality may be granted. The granting, therefore, of certain rights and opportunities to women in Singapore, has led some scholars to describe these, wryly, as ‘gifts’ from the government (PuruShotam 1992). PuruShotam observes that, in the final analysis, the gifts are meant to be more useful to the giver than to the receiver; this is not surprising given, as I have described, the instrumentality behind the gift-giving. Importantly, too, the gift-giving affects the quality of autonomy and empowerment that Singapore women have come to enjoy under such circumstances:

The largesse of the government obliges the person taking the gifts to suffer a dependent obligation; it is up to a particularly male-based polity to decide upon the quality of a woman’s life. The power women enjoy is but a shadow, a mirroring of power, that radiates from particular loci – coalesced under the label of a mostly male ‘government’ and ruling political party (the People’s Action Party or PAP). (PuruShotam 1992: 321)

I discuss below the operation of strategic egalitarianism in two parts. In the first part, I consider the granting of equality to women in the 1960s and 1970s in the context of Singapore as a newly emerging nation. In this section, I will examine the gifts to women in the areas of women’s rights, and educational and employment opportunities, and discuss the political and economic motivations behind the gift-giving. Further, I will highlight that the gifts in themselves were far from comprehensively equal for women and men. In the second part of the article, I discuss the emergence of another issue of national concern that brings into sharp relief the strategic nature of the egalitarianism practised by the PAP government. In the 1980s, the government noted a rapid decline in the national fertility rate, and required that women prioritise the role of motherhood above all else. However, this was brought to bear particularly upon some women more than others, resulting in a scenario of different gifts given to different groups of women in Singapore. What is encountered in this instance is strategic egalitarianism’s twin – ‘strategic inegalitarianism’. Before proceeding to the main discussion, I provide the background required to understand better the function and operation of strategic (in)egalitarianism in the Singapore context.

National interest, pragmatism and strategic egalitarianism

Achieving a correspondence between ‘nation’ and ‘state’ is a goal that the PAP government has strived for since it came into power in 1959. As a settler
society comprising three main ethnic groups – the Chinese (76.9 per cent), Malays (14 per cent) and Indians (7.7 per cent) – the forging of a nation that coincides with the island boundary of Singapore has been a top priority of the political elite. This is explicitly clear, for example, in recent nationalist slogans such as ‘My Singapore, My Home’, and the 1999 slogans ‘My Singapore, Our Future’ and ‘Singapore 21. Together We Make the Difference: Every Singaporean Matters’. The slogans illustrate the government’s efforts to imagine a community of one people (Anderson 1991) out of a diversity of ethnic groups. This has been accomplished both by construing a ‘common destiny’, which is typical of nationalisms in settler societies (Yuval-Davis 1997: 19), as well as creating from the diversity a semblance of ‘common origin’. The latter was formulated in a white paper on ‘Shared Values’ in 1991, which, according to the government, encompasses ‘essential’ Asian values shared by all three major ethnic groups. One of the shared values central to the conception of citizenship in Singapore is the abrogation of individuals’ interests and freedom in favour of upholding whatever gets defined as the national interest. Brigadier-General Lee Hsien Loong (now deputy prime minister) described this as ‘sacrificing the smaller self, to achieve the greater self’ (The Straits Times, 12 January 1989).

Whilst the nationalist discourse cultivates social discipline in the citizenry, the nationalising of the state has enabled the PAP government readily to assume for itself the position of the representative and protector, which defines the national interests for ‘the people’ (cf. Pettman 1996: 46). This in turn enables the elected to slip into authoritarianism (Chua 1994: 28) and paternalism. In order to ensure that what needs to be done in the name of national interest gets done, the PAP government uses pragmatism as its modus operandi. Chua (1994) explains that pragmatism has been rationalised by the leaders as ‘the natural’, ‘the necessary’ and ‘the realistic’ solution to the problems of nation-building, to the extent that pragmatism is rendered non-ideological. At the heart of the PAP pragmatism, Chua contends, is the single-minded pursuit of continuous economic growth as the key to national survival and progress. To achieve that goal, all aspects of social life are viewed as possible resources that can be instrumentally harnessed. The PAP pragmatism, however, I would suggest, is not limited to economic interest but, as I shall demonstrate in this article, is motivated also by what makes good political sense.

Strategic egalitarianism, in a nutshell, has its roots in the pragmatism of the ruling government. Equality to women has been granted in so far as that is required to meet certain pragmatic economic and political goals, and no more than that. Alongside the instrumental rationality of pragmatism is the PAP’s selective acceptance of Confucian ideology. The government subscribes to Confucianism as a combative Asian force against Western liberalism that privileges individualism over collectivism, and promotes a Confucianist ethos in aspects of social life. At a fundamental level, Confucian ideology also informs the government’s attitude towards gender relations.
Although often Confucian patriarchal notions of women’s subordinate status to men are implicit (say, in government policies), this was explicitly legitimised as acceptable by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in 1993. At a ceremony to launch two books by a women’s organisation (the PAP Women’s Wing) on the status of Singapore women, the prime minister was quoted in Singapore’s main newspaper as saying that:

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 … [M]inor areas where women were not treated in the same way as men should be expected in a largely patriarchal society … [T]hese differences should not be regarded as ‘pockets of discrimination’ … Instead, they were ‘anthropological asymmetries’ or products of the society’s traditions. In other words, these differences have to be accepted. (*The Straits Times*, 14 June 1993)

Not surprisingly, therefore, strategic egalitarianism poses little serious challenge to patriarchy. Indeed, I would argue that strategic egalitarianism has been actively shaped by pragmatism as well as through containment by Confucianist gender ideology.

**Strategic egalitarianism in the 1960s and 1970s**

*Women’s rights*

Strategic egalitarianism has its foundations in the Women’s Charter that the newly elected PAP government passed in 1961. As the first ‘gift’ of rights to women, this document provided an important basis for the emancipation of women. Amongst other things, the Charter made the registration of marriages mandatory, outlawed polygamy, recognised women’s property rights and married women’s rights to a domicile separate from their husbands’, guaranteed women the right to act in their own legal capacity, and allowed women to engage independently in any trade or profession (AWARE 1988: 21). Although it was considered a ‘remarkable piece of civil rights for its time’ in Singapore and in the whole of Southeast Asia (Wee, *The Straits Times*, 3 September 1992), since then the Charter has been noted for its limitations. An elected member of the Legislative Assembly, Leong Wai Kum, observed that ‘this Charter falls very short of what one might expect from a Women’s Charter’ (in Hill and Lian 1995: 145). The existing title, she argued:

is misleading as it suggests that it embodies a corpus of legal rights of women in Singapore. The statute does not contain what the title implies, and indeed contains much more than that which concerns women alone. (Quoted in PuruShotam 1992: 323)

In a bid to ‘bargain with patriarchy’ (Kandiyoti 1998), Leong submitted – but with little success – that the title be changed to reflect its more restricted scope, which pertained mostly to women’s rights in marriage and the family.
In any case, even in the areas of marriage and family, the laws have not been comprehensively equal. Other laws that fall outside the purview of the Charter continue to discriminate against women on the grounds that men are the rightful heads of households and it is solely their responsibility to maintain their wives and children. These laws include matters appertaining to family maintenance, inheritance, immigration, citizenship and taxation (AWARE 1988: 21–2).

The enactment of the Women’s Charter, however, was undoubtedly a shrewd political and economic move by the PAP government. In order fully to appreciate the pragmatic genius of the government, the Charter needs to be historically contextualised. The Charter was born out of the PAP’s pledge for equality in its political campaign during Singapore’s first and crucial general elections in 1959. This, in turn, was a response to already existing pressure by several activist women’s groups at the time. What the PAP did as a result was to set up its own women’s group within the party, and incorporate feminist concerns within its broader political agenda. The PAP announced in its election manifesto that:

in a full socialist society for which the PAP will work, all people will have equal rights and opportunities, irrespective of sex, race and religion. There is no place in the socialist society for the exploitation of women. (The Tasks Ahead, quoted in Wee 1987: 6)

Further, the manifesto promised to encourage women’s active participation in politics and administration; to enable women to organise a unified women’s movement to fight for women’s rights; to open up employment opportunities for women; to provide more childcare services; and to safeguard women’s rights in marriage and in the family. By integrating feminist struggle into their campaign platform, the PAP enhanced its own political image in progressive, humanitarian and revolutionary terms. It won the backing of women’s groups, notably the Singapore Council of Women, and obtained full and tireless support from its own Women’s League in the party.

The Women’s League was active in rallying women members and supporters to campaign for the PAP … They were especially effective in house to house canvassing, cooking food for Party workers, distributing leaflets, and providing speakers at rallies. The women worked as hard as the men and their contribution to the success of the Party was visible to all. (Quoted in Heng 1997: 36)

However, after the PAP won the elections and formed the national government, few of the promises were delivered. The ones delivered were those encapsulated in the Women’s Charter, which, as already noted, was not entirely satisfactory. Besides, as some scholars have suggested, the Charter was motivated more by a pragmatic zeal of the PAP government to resolve an existing chaotic situation with regard to marriage, divorce and the rights of spouses and their children of a migrant Singapore society than by a genuine concern about women’s rights (Hill and Lian 1995: 145). Further, the equality
offered to women by the Charter was economically expedient. It provided the leeway needed for women to leave their homes and enter the paid workforce. Notwithstanding that the Charter was motivated by reasons other than a concern for women’s interests, and that in many ways it was an inadequate Bill, the provision of the Charter created an aura of post-feminism in the post-election years. Heng reports (1997: 37) that the general feeling was that feminism was redundant for women in Singapore as the Charter was considered to have already addressed the most pressing gender inequalities. In other words, in addition to the benefits that accrued to the PAP on account of giving women rights there were two others. The provision of the Charter reflected well on the PAP government as having benevolently bestowed rights upon women. At the same time, the government’s rights-as-gifts muted the element of struggle by feminist groups. Rather than rights of women as an achievement by existing women’s groups, rights were seen as instituted solely by the government, thus displacing the societal relevance of feminist activism at the time, and its potential threat to PAP authority.5

Economic and educational opportunities

Almost equal employment and educational opportunities became available to women in the 1960s and especially from the 1970s when the government embarked on a massive and rapid industrialisation programme. Consequently, female labour-force participation rates6 have risen steadily over the years from a mere 17.5 per cent in 1957, to 25.8 per cent in 1970, to 36.7 per cent in 1975, to 45.6 per cent in 1986 (Goldberg 1987: 27), to 51 per cent in 1992 (The Straits Times, 6 March 1993) till the present. Hand-in-glove with the demand for women workers in the economy, universal education became available in Singapore as this was viewed as a vital investment for a competitive labour force. Studies show that the literacy rate for women doubled from 34 per cent in 1957, to 65 per cent in 1965, to 80 per cent in 1980 (reported in Hill and Lian 1995: 149).

The former prime minister’s speech at the National Trades Union Congress to inaugurate the 1975 International Women’s Year was manifestly a high point for women and gender equality. Mr Lee Kuan Yew declared that:

The only differences between men and women workers are the physical and biological ones. Women are equal to men in intellectual capacity. With more jobs open to women . . . the status of women in our society has been changed. However, with economic independence, the dependent position of wives must also change . . . It has been government policy to encourage the education of women to their fullest ability and their employment commensurate with their abilities . . . (Quoted in Wee 1987: 8)

Political scientist, Professor Chan Heng Chee, however, explained the government’s enlightened magnanimity in utilitarian terms. Writing in the same year as Lee’s speech, she pointed out that the government was
motivated more by urgent industrialisation needs of the country than by genuine concern for women’s equality. She wrote:

The mobilisation of women into the economy is a conscious government policy ... to relieve the labour shortage to reduce the dependence on immigrant labour. It is by no means clear that the participation of women in labour is a commitment (to the) principle of belief in emancipation, that women are entitled to the equal right as men to work. As a woman journalist in the Republic wryly commented, ‘Women get the chance to play a role in the economy only when economic necessity forces the male to call upon her services.’ Thus when recession made its impact on Singapore, women were the first to be retrenched. (Quoted in PuruShotam 1992: 326)

Given the pursuance of strategic egalitarianism by the political leaders, it is not surprising that in spite of declarations of provision of equal opportunities in education and employment, this was not manifested comprehensively in their policies. In terms of educational policy, for example, there has been a quota since 1979 on the number of women who may enter medical school. Women students may comprise only one-third of the total enrolment. The government reasoned that women’s competing responsibilities in the home would interfere with the rigours of the medical profession, and therefore it would not be worth investing the education dollar on women rather than men. Instead of working towards the redistribution of domestic and public-sphere responsibilities, the government opted to react to the conflict women face in terms of their domestic duties and medical practice by reinforcing traditional gender roles (Goldberg 1987: 35), thereby penalising bright and dedicated women who aspire to join the profession.

In the area of employment, although the government had since 1962 granted pay to women civil servants equal to that of their male counterparts, this was never made into legislation. This means that the principle of ‘equal pay for equal work’ need not apply in the private sector. Moreover, in spite of the existence of this principle in the public sector, medical benefits are extended to the spouse and children only of male employees and not female workers. The government has consistently rejected calls to extend the benefits to the dependents of ‘working’ women on the grounds that this may lead to an undesired situation of men dropping out of the labour force and becoming ‘house-husbands’ (see parliamentary debates in Goldberg 1987: 34). Perhaps the most telling indication of the extent of the government’s commitment towards genuine egalitarianism – and in direct contradiction to the principle of ‘equal pay for equal work’ – is encapsulated in Article 12 of the state’s Constitution. Implicit in this article is that gender discrimination in the Singapore workplace is legal:

There shall be no discrimination against citizens of Singapore on the ground only of religion, race, descent or place of birth in any law or in the appointment of any office or employment under a public authority or in the administration of any law relating to the acquisition, holding or carrying of any trade, business, profession, vocation or employment.
Strategic egalitarianism in the 1980s and 1990s

In the 1980s, a demographic ‘crisis’ situation emerged, which showed very starkly the strategic and limited nature of gender egalitarianism promoted by the PAP government. Further, for the first time, there emerged quite explicitly the operation of strategic inegalitarianism in the treatment of different classes of Singapore women.

The demographic ‘crisis’

In his 1983 National Day Rally Speech, former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew raised birth trends as an issue of urgent national concern. The demographic situation as presented by Lee was that the overall national fertility rate had declined (i.e. a ‘quantity’ issue), but, more importantly, that it had declined unevenly across different educational classes (i.e. a ‘quality’ issue). Citing the 1980 Population Census, he made two main observations. The first was that the better educated a woman was, the fewer children she had. A woman below the age of forty with no educational qualifications, he noted, produced about three children; with a primary education, she produced about two; and with secondary or tertiary education, she averaged about one and a quarter children. Lee’s second main observation was that a growing number of better-educated women were staying single and, therefore, not producing the next generation. He supported this by citing statistics of women in their forties, showing that 13.5 per cent of those who were tertiary-educated and 10.5 per cent of the secondary-educated were single. The significance of the findings was not that these reproductive trends were unique only to Singapore’s better-educated women, but that, as evident from the 1980 census findings, ‘no other society has ever compressed this process into just over one generation, from the 1950s to the 1970s’ (The Straits Times, 15 August 1983).

The concern that better-educated women were not reproducing enough, or at all, was motivated by Lee’s eugenic conviction that children’s intelligence is greatly determined by their mother’s educational attainment and intelligence. He was convinced that 80 per cent of a child’s performance was governed by nature or what was inherited, and 20 per cent was derived from the environment and upbringing. Children of better-educated mothers, he felt, were doubly advantaged in that they not only benefited from their mother’s allegedly superior genes, they would also benefit from the better intellectual environment that graduate mothers could provide.

The eugenic argument thus provided a strong rationale for aiming not only for a quantitative increase in population growth; rather, as the director of the Population and Planning Unit, Dr Paul Cheung, later explained, ‘as a small nation, with no natural resources except intellectual resources, it is vital [for Singapore] to aim for quality’ (Cheung 1989: 25). Combining a ‘eugenicist’ discourse with a ‘people as power’ discourse (Yuval-Davis 1997), the under-representation of births by better-educated women was thus construed as a...
'problem' that required urgent attention. Otherwise, as bleakly portrayed by Lee, the future of the nation would be in jeopardy:

If we continue to reproduce ourselves in this lopsided way, we will be unable to maintain our present standards. Levels of competence will decline. Our economy will falter, the administration will suffer, and the society will decline. For how can we avoid lowering performance when for every two graduates, in twenty-five years’ time, there will be one graduate, and for every two uneducated workers, there will be three? Worse, the coming society of computers and robotics needs more, not less, well-educated workers. (*The Straits Times*, 15 August 1983)

**Retraction of ‘gifts’**

In view of this new ‘national crisis’, the strategic egalitarianism promoted by the PAP came under self-censure. In the 1983 speech, Lee Kuan Yew attributed the decline in births, particularly amongst the better-educated, to the ‘unintended consequences of changes in our education policy and career opportunities for women’ (*The Straits Times*, 15 August 1983). Further, in a speech at the National University of Singapore in 1986, Lee openly expressed regret over the equal opportunities that his government had granted women, calling such a provision a possible ‘error’. In contrast, he praised the Japanese for what he regarded as their greater wisdom in keeping their women in lowly capacities, for example, as translators and as servers of tea, and yet managing, as a nation, to achieve great strides of economic success (Wee 1987: 11).

What the government gives as gifts to women, it can also withdraw or withhold from them in the light of other pragmatic national considerations. This may be seen as an extension to the metaphor of gift-giving. We have already seen Lee’s regret about having given women almost equal opportunities in employment and education. The leadership, consequently, has had no qualms in manoeuvring certain education policies that curtail opportunities for women, or positively discriminate in favour of men. For example, two months after Lee’s 1983 speech, the intake of students at the National University of Singapore (at the time, Singapore’s only university) was relaxed to allow more men to enter for the expressed purpose of ‘correcting’ the ‘imbalance’ in the ratio between male and female students. Another example is the Gifted Children’s Programme that was introduced in 1984, in which girls have consistently comprised only a third of the total enrollment. Koh and Wee (1987: 3) interpret this trend as indicative of some undeclared quota operating in the selection process that ensures that boys get over-represented in the programme. They caution that the positive discrimination pursued by the government in favour of males would bolster the already dominant status enjoyed by men at the further expense of women. Also in 1984, the government reversed an education policy disallowing girls in lower secondary classes from reading technical studies, which up to 40 per cent of girls had chosen to read in previous years. At the same time home economics was made a compulsory subject for girls, whilst making it totally
The blatant reaffirmation of traditional gender roles was voiced by the minister of state for education, who said that 'girls should be girls' and, therefore, be trained for their future roles as 'wives, mothers and workers' (Wee 1987: 10). This type of reasoning, as Koh (1987: 130) points out, implies that boys apparently do not need to be similarly trained to fulfil their future roles as 'husbands' and 'fathers', only as 'workers'. Moreover, it is presupposed that home-making is 'women's work', for which only girls require training to be able to undertake this task in the future.

Finally, Lee also speculated on the possibility of reintroducing polygamy as a way of increasing the 'superior' gene pool. Although polygamy was one of the thorny issues in early Singapore, against which activist women’s groups had agitated, and which was subsequently outlawed by the Women’s Charter, Lee Kuan Yew was reconsidering it as an option. Speaking to an audience of university students, he said that polygamy would provide the opportunity for the mentally and physically vibrant to reproduce. Citing the example of Kakuei Tanaka, the former prime minister of Japan, who had children both by his wife and his mistress, Lee commented that 'the more Tanakas there were in Japan, the more dynamic its society would be' (*The Sunday Times*, 28 December 1986).

**Prioritisation of the motherhood role**

As a corollary to the regret in granting women equality and retracting some of the gifts given, the PAP government began to prioritise motherhood for women. This indicates the superficiality of egalitarianism that is strategically instituted, which can be overridden in favour of reinstating traditional roles and responsibilities for women. Lee’s remark (below) in his 1983 National Day Speech marked the first of many that the political elite would make, which overtly grounded and prioritised for women their traditional 'duty'. Lee stated:

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

A year later in Parliament, an MP, Mr Lim Boon Heng, made a similar comment. Note the qualification in his statement, too:

> A career presents the women [sic] with a sense of usefulness, equality and fulfilment. *But* to pursue a career lands her in direct conflict with her natural instinct for motherhood. (Quoted in Goldberg 1987: 29, emphasis added)

Also in Parliament earlier that year, Lee Kuan Yew pointedly asked a disturbing rhetorical question:

> Do our women need to value their careers more than, and at the expense of, their families? (*The Straits Times*, 19 February 1984)

During this time, there was also a suggestion that (better-educated) Singapore women be *required* to bear children as a form of national service. It
was rationalised as a fair expectation given that since 1967 men in Singapore have been required to perform two-and-a-half years of compulsory (but paid) military service. The idea in itself is hardly a novel one as international women scholars have noted the ‘men as bearers of arms, women as bearers of children’ theme rehearsed in several nationalist discourses. What was perhaps surprising and ironic, though, was that in this particular case, the proposition was put forward by two women’s groups in complicity with the government’s stand.10

In a climate of intense pressure especially for educated women to serve as ‘nationalist wombs’ (Enloe 1989), unmarried educated women were looked upon with disfavour. As Soin (1996: 197), a feminist and one of the non-elected members of parliament, noted, single educated women were made to feel that they were letting the nation down by not fulfilling the national objective of reproducing a ‘quality’ population. As a result, one of the unwritten penalties for these ‘deviant’ women is that they are considered unsuitable for political candidature. Further, to the American journal, *Foreign Affairs*, Lee Kuan Yew speculated aloud the possibility of instituting in the future a system whereby married Singaporeans with children would be given an extra vote. When interviewed by a local reporter, Lee elaborated that:

It is not necessary to change our system at present. But, later, we may have to give more weightage to the people whose views should carry more weight because their contributions are greater, and their responsibilities are greater; in which case, we should consider giving those between 35 and 60, married and with families, one extra vote. (Quoted in Han, Fernandez and Tan 1998)

**Strategic inegalitarianism**

The concern that some women (more than others) should be the chief biological reproducers of the nation resulted, for the first time, in an open practice of strategic inegalitarianism in regard to different classes of women. Whereas better-educated women were given incentives to become mothers, those lesser-educated were given (dis)incentives to control their fertility. Although the educational criterion was the primary category of differentiation, class and race/ethnicity were other categories that intersected with it. The statistics presented by Lee in his 1983 National Day Rally Speech showed that, on the whole, it was the Chinese, upper- and middle-class professional women who had the lowest fertility figures, whilst the working-class ethnic minority women (Malays and Indians) registered disproportionately higher rates (Heng and Devan 1992). Interestingly enough, a ‘Population Paper’ by AWARE (a feminist group) that studied the government’s change in population policy reported that, contrary to the official concern over the progressive drop in the fertility rate amongst the Chinese, the statistics indicated that it was the non-Chinese births that were more steeply declining (Anuar 1989). Whichever interpretation is chosen, it appears that the government has been concerned to maintain the existing ethnic ratio,
whereby the Chinese are significantly in the majority and the Malays and Indians are in the minority (see Heng and Devan 1992).

As an integral part of the government’s eugenic move to ensure future ‘quality’ births, the Social Development Unit (SDU) was formed in 1984 to facilitate interaction between unmarried tertiary-educated (and later extended to include also post-secondary-educated) women and men, in the hope that they will find suitable marriage partners within its restricted pool of members. Being a project of the government, the SDU is possibly the only set-up of its kind in the world (LINK, January–March 1987: 4), which offers a wide range of social activities as well as matchmaking services such as I-Pal (formerly Tele-Pal), Choice Match, and Computer Matchmaking. A survey taken four years after its inception showed that the number of single graduates participating in SDU’s activities had increased from 1,395 in 1984 to 6,972 in 1988, and that the number of marriages among the participants had gone up from 91 in 1985 to 516 in 1988 (The Straits Times, 1988, reported in Quah 1990: 277).

In the same year that the SDU was set up, eugenic fertility measures were introduced that blatantly discriminated between women of different classes. Anti-natalist eugenic measures were introduced to discourage poor and less-educated women from having more than two children. A Sterilisation Cash Incentive Scheme offered these women a $10,000 cash grant if they underwent sterilisation after the birth of their first or second child. The scheme was presented in benevolent terms as the government ‘helping’ poorer families with the grant and having their family interest at heart. At the same time, the accouchement fees at government hospitals were modified such that the poorer and less-educated faced relatively greater financial penalty than the other segments of the population for delivering higher parity babies (Saw 1990: 12). In the meantime, a pro-natalist eugenic measure, called the Graduate Mothers’ Scheme, was introduced to encourage tertiary-educated women to produce more babies, by giving them priority in the choice of primary schools for their children. The eugenic measures of 1984 generated much resentment amongst the better- and the lesser-educated segments of the population alike, which was partly reflected by the sizeable protest votes in the 1984 general elections. As a result, the priority scheme for graduate mothers was rescinded in the following year. The elitist measures, moreover, had not addressed the more urgent problem of overall below-replacement birth rates in the country. Subsequently, when in 1987 the government announced its New Population Policy, it introduced measures that were more widely applicable across the population. Among the new fertility policies introduced were tax rebates for the third child, childcare subsidy for the first three children, relaxation of public-housing rules for families wishing to upgrade after the birth of the third or fourth child, the conversion of full-time to part-time work for mothers, and the introduction of full-pay unrecorded leave for working mothers attending to their children who may be ill (Saw 1990: 26–33). Incorporated into some of these measures, however, were conditions of entitlement based on the educational attainment
of mothers or parents. At the same time, the measures under the previous population policy, which had been one of ‘family planning’ and small family size, were not completely eliminated, but continued to exist alongside the New Population Policy. The reason for this was mainly out of fear that the poorer and lesser-educated segment of the population might over-reproduce (Saw 1990: 26). Proactively, too, in 1993, the government introduced the Small Families Improvement Scheme, which further encouraged this group to stop at two by giving mothers an annual housing grant plus education bursaries for their children. Not unlike the 1984 sterilisation grant scheme, the present scheme was couched in benevolent, gift-giving terms. In the meantime, better-educated mothers were actively discouraged from sterilisation if they had fewer than three children.

At the same time as encouraging better-educated women to have more children, it was recognised by the leadership that this class of women, in particular, had become an undeniably significant economic resource in Singapore. Therefore, it could ill afford to lose them now if they were to leave the workforce to raise children. Hence, in order to keep educated women in the workforce, the government set up more childcare centres for those who would be able to afford them, and implemented an ‘enhanced child relief’ scheme – which an opposition MP called ‘a subsidy for the rich’ (cited in Goldberg 1987: 31) – to help educated women better afford the financial cost of raising children. Goldberg (ibid.: 32) notes that by making eligibility for the relief contingent on the mother’s, instead of either parent’s, qualifications, the government has been able simultaneously to ‘make its ideological point and keep the economy going’. In other words, the government is able to keep better-educated women in the paid workforce, whilst underscoring their traditional maternal role. Furthermore, the government continued its Foreign Maids scheme, introduced in 1978, which enabled those who could afford to employ women from foreign countries to work as live-in domestic help. The scheme has helped in alleviating the domestic burden of professional women; none the less, it should be noted that this has merely shifted household chores from one class of women to another, less privileged, class of women. Nothing fundamental has changed in the gender order, for it is still women who do the housework and mind the children.

Conclusion

In this article I examined how women in Singapore have been co-opted into different nationalist projects over the years, under the leadership of the PAP government. During the post-independence era, women in Singapore had been granted rights as well as economic and educational opportunities in order better to contribute to the survival and progress of the newly forming nation. Twenty years later, the equality that was instituted was itself partly blamed for the decline in fertility, and the role of motherhood became
prioritised for women, particularly for those who were better educated. This, too, was in the name of (continued) survival and success of the nation. The call upon women to serve as waged workers and mothers, over the past forty years, has not been a matter of one at the exclusion of the other. Instead, it has been a question of which gets foregrounded under the exigencies of the different nationalist calls.

The problem posed for women by strategic egalitarianism is not in the pragmatic motivations per se. Rather, it is because strategic egalitarianism keeps close company with patriarchal conservatism. Strategic egalitarianism is a hybrid discourse that thrives at the interstices of gender symmetry and asymmetry. Therefore, the granting of equality to women in certain aspects of the ‘private’ and ‘public’ spheres of life is not to be mistaken for a comprehensive or radical change in the traditional gender order. Indeed, because of its fluid, non-committal nature, aspects of equality granted may – in principle and in practice – be retracted. The quality of egalitarianism, therefore, is limited and limiting upon women. Women are obliged to bear the twin burdens of waged work and motherhood, and resolve whatever contradictions that may emerge as a result, based on their own personal resources. Indeed, this has been the recommendation of the government to women for more than ten years in a national advertising campaign, aimed at changing attitudes and behaviours. These advertisements promote a sense of other-centredness in women, to the extent of being self-effacing. To single professional women, the ads encourage them to modify their expectations and accommodate the chauvinism of men (Lazar 1993), and to those already married, having and raising children are construed in terms of how that benefits husbands and children (Lazar 2000). The prioritisation of motherhood as women’s primary and ultimate identity has meant the prioritisation of the nation’s, men’s and children’s interests at the expense of women’s own aspirations and life choices. Although one class of women have been particularly targeted in this procreationist project,11 it is none the less the case that the range and extent of possibilities concerning women’s life choices, in general, are determined by the pragmatic use or disuse the government has for them in the light of different nationalist projects.

Notes
1 Also see Kandiyoti (1991), who notes that the integration of women into nationalist projects, especially in post-colonial societies, has been rich in paradoxes and ambiguities.
2 This is the ethnic distribution as of 1999 (Singapore in Figures 2000). The remaining 1.4 per cent comprises ‘others’, which includes Eurasians, Armenians, Arabs and Westerners.
3 Although the concept of patriarchy is not an unproblematic one in current feminist scholarship, in the Singapore context, the political leaders treat it as if it was unproblematic, as Prime Minister Goh’s views quoted above show. Patriarchy is considered a ‘given’ fact of (Asian) social life that is beyond critique and challenge.
4 Molyneaux (1998: 73–4) notes that it is not uncommon for modernising nationalisms and socialist movements, in advancing broader political goals, to express a commitment to furthering
women’s interests within the context of a general commitment to social change. Such movements and/or governments favour the voicing of women’s interests through official women’s organisations. Molyneaux highlights that the point, however, is that such ‘directed mobilisations’ subject women’s gender interests to the control and direction of the government (or nationalist/socialist movement) as the overarching authority, with little or no room for genuine negotiation of goals.

5 This is not to say that feminism in Singapore ceased to exist altogether, but that it has had to adapt continually in order to survive. In the 1960s and 1970s, women’s groups kept a low profile on gender issues. They assumed, among others, the form of social work and community service organisations. This changed in the 1980s, with the formation, notably, of AWARE, a vocal feminist organisation. However, AWARE’s strong critique of the government and its policies was met with a swift retaliatory move that subsequently clipped its wings. Today, AWARE and other women’s organisations adopt a cautious and non-threatening stance towards the political authority. (For more details, see Heng 1997.) The adaptive variety of Singaporean feminism may appear somewhat alien to feminisms in the West, but as Heng (1997: 45) pointedly remarks, ‘rights seized upon and practices initiated by women in the pursuit of their imagined collective interest, even if such practices and acts seem only uncomfortably or unfamiliarly to fit received descriptions of feminism, are indisputably feminist practices’.

6 Much of women’s early labour-force participation was in unskilled and semi-skilled low-income jobs in the manufacturing (textile and electronics) industry (Goldberg 1987: 27). Over the years, there has been better representation of women in other sectors of the economy. It has been noted that in recent years, women comprise about three-quarters of all clerical workers, two-fifths of professional and technical workers, almost the same proportion of sales and service personnel, and more a third of all production and related workers. Women are still under-represented, however, in administrative and managerial jobs – holding less than a fifth of the total positions (Liak 1994: 57).

7 1962, when the PAP promised to grant ‘equal pay for equal work’, was another important election year. The main opposition party at the time, the Barisan Socialist, described the promise as a tactical ‘vote catching device’.

8 The government later retracted this policy, making technical studies and home economics available once again to all lower secondary pupils in 1997. (Tarmugi 1995: 90)

9 About ten years later, a similar sentiment was expressed by the new prime minister, Mr Goh Chok Tong, who, in commenting about the inadequate representation of Singapore women in politics, had this to say: ‘It’s a very demanding job. Even for a man … it’s difficult … For the woman, there’s a home to look after, too. Like it or not, in Singapore, we expect the woman to play a bigger role in the home’ (The Straits Times, 14 June 1993).

10 Molyneaux’s (1985) distinction between ‘women’s interests’, more broadly, and ‘women’s gender interests’, more specifically, as reported in Kandiyoti 1998, is important in thinking about non-feminist versus feminist women’s groups in Singapore.

11 At the time this article was in press, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong reported in his National Day Rally speech of 2000 that the government’s programme to increase the number of births had not succeeded. The total fertility rate in 1999, in fact, had fallen to 1.48, which is even below the level of 1.62 reported in 1987. As a result, the Prime Minister announced further (newer) government initiatives that appeared to encourage all Singaporeans – irrespective of educational class – to have (more) children (channelnewsasia.com). However, when asked at a press conference on whether this was indeed the case, Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew was reported as saying “Not quite, read the small print carefully … we’ve learnt how to present it”. (The Straits Times, 15 September 2000).

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