

Gender relations in Singapore
Malay Dual Income Households
– (un)changing perceptions and
practices

Suriani Suratman

Department of Malay Studies, NUS

Introduction

- Increasing women's involvement in labour force
- Trend towards dual income couples
- Division of labour in dual income households
 - Findings of practices in Singapore Malay dual-income households
- Discourses on women's role as mother
- Gender as social structure

Malay women's participation in the labour force

- Over the last four decades labour force participation rate of Malay women is steadily increasing.
- Malay women are making the choice to be employed.
- 2005 General Household Survey - 46% of married Malay women continue to stay employed.

Female labour force participation rate

Ethnic group/ Year	1970	1980	1990	2000
Malay	14.3%	44.6%	45%	40.8%

(Singapore Census of Population – Key stats 1980, 1990, 2000)

Trend towards dual income couples

- Increasing numbers of dual income couples:
 - 43.8% among married couples in 2005 are dual income couples.
- Trend is tied to several factors:
 - Government's development strategy for industrialization
 - Rising standards of living
 - Women's aspirations to pursue education and career

Division of labour in dual income households

- How do couples who are both employed manage work and family?
 - Study of young Malay dual-income households in Singapore (2000-2006) and how they manage child caring and household work:
 - 10 dual-income families with babies, young children and school going children
 - At least one of the spouse is a professional

Practices in Singapore Malay dual income households

- Managing childminding arrangements:
 - Variety of childminding arrangements
 - Relying on grandparents or other relatives, turning to babysitters, hiring live-in helpers or enrolling their children in childcare centres
 - Choice of arrangements depends on a combination of factors:
 - Existing social networks
 - Available financial resources

Practices in Singapore Malay dual income households

■ Who makes the decision?

“My husband left it to me...he says whatever is convenient for me
(Couple A, 1 child aged 2 years)

“We talked over this together. Both our parents are still working so we can't ask them. I don't like the idea of sending my children to a childcare centre and spending the whole day there...I have to send them and pick them up. It's too troublesome...That's why in the end we decided to have a maid .”(Couple C, 2 children aged 7 and 3 years)

Practices in Singapore Malay dual income households

- Daily child caring tasks:
 - Bathing, dressing, changing of diapers, meal preparation, feeding, playing, reading, homework, ferrying children, putting children to sleep
 - Women carry out the bulk of the tasks
 - Men carry out some tasks in the role of assistant rather than the role of equal participant.
- Unpredictable and occasional child caring demands:
 - More sharing between husbands and wives
 - Depends on flexibility of work hours

Practices in Singapore Malay dual income households

- Couples with live-in helpers:
 - Transfer almost all household tasks
 - Cooking
 - Marketing
- Couples without live-in helpers:
 - Wife sees to all household tasks
 - Some sharing – husband sees to vacuuming, cleaning bathroom and toilet
 - Marketing
- Women see to the bulk of household work
- Even if they do not carry out tasks women take charge in supervising live-helpers with regards to household tasks

Practices in Singapore Malay dual income households

- Time constraints of employed women:
 - Work schedules and limited time at home
- Allocating tasks and gaining time:
 - Women transfer particularly household tasks to have time for children
 - Compensating and making up for their absence

*“I’m always in a hurry for work in the morning. There’s so little time on the weekdays and the weekend is so short. I see so little of my children. With a maid I have time with my children in the evenings.”
(Wife of Couple F)*

Practices in Singapore Malay dual income households

- Women decide what tasks can be allocated:
 - List of tasks based on women's priority:
 - Playing and reading to children – not transferred
 - Household tasks – transferred to live-in helper, husband
- Women decide to whom the task can be allocated to:
 - Ability and competency of the person:
 - Women's definition of women's work and men's work

Practices in Singapore Malay dual income households

“I prepare the dinner while my husband minds the children. It’s not that he can’t cook. He can cook...simple dishes. But he takes too long. I can cook better and faster than him” (Wife of Couple C)

“My husband doesn’t bathe her (daughter) or change nappies. He cannot do these things...he doesn’t know...he’s not used to doing this (tak biasa). So I do everything” (Wife of Couple A)

Malay women's "maternal gatekeeping"

- Maternal gatekeeping (Allen and Hawkins 1999):
 - Mother's belief that only they can see to "maternal" tasks (Allen and Hawkins 1999):
 - Mother's reluctance to relinquish responsibilities because she thinks that only she has the skills.
 - External validation of a woman's maternal role which allows a woman to affirm to herself and others that she is a good homemaker.
 - Woman's beliefs of work arrangements are more important than men's.

Malay women's "maternal gatekeeping"

- Women in my study carry out maternal gatekeeping:
 - Unwillingness to give up tasks to husbands:
 - Determine ability/inability, efficiency /inefficiency of their husbands
- Paternal gatekeeping?

Discourses on woman's role as mother

- View of the government that the primary caregiver in the family is the woman:
 - Reflected in their provisions and incentives for employed married women
 - Creating “Supermums”

Discourses on woman's role as mother

- The birth of Singapore's "Supermum" (1980 – 2005):
 - "Working mother" – a woman can be a better mother if she is also a good worker
 - "Good mothers" – must know how to do "balancing act"
 - "Quality mums" – ability to do "fine balancing"
 - "Supermums" – works smart therefore has successful career and sees to the needs of children.

Discourses on woman's role as mother

- Prevailing cultural perceptions regarding roles of women and men:
 - Findings of studies that show Men are economic providers and women are care givers (Li 1989, Zarinahj 1990, Inserto1997)
 - Public forum on the “Harmonious Family” at Community Centres:
 - Responsibility of the father is to provide and the responsibility of the mother is to take care
 - TAQWA Family Values campaign by MUIS

Conclusion

- Gender as social structure (Risman 1998, 2004):
 - Repeated patterns of behaviour that are based on gender differentiations:
 - Three interconnecting dimensions:
 - Individual level of gendered identities
 - Gendered cultural meanings and expectations as played out in interactions
 - Gender-specific institutional constraints and opportunities

Conclusion

- Malay women's and men's decisions around division of household labour is gendered
- Malay cultural expectations of appropriate behaviour of women and men as mothers and fathers
- Singapore government's views of roles of women and men within the context of industrialization and modernity.