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*The Social Contradictions of the Normal Family:
Challenges to the Ideology*

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Abstract

The institution of the family is upheld and championed by the state. However, due to developments in contemporary society, the ideology of the "normal" family is contradicted by the other two dominant ideologies namely, gender ideology and wage labour ideology. These inconsistencies are accentuated by the rise of the feminist movement, increase in formal education of women, demands from industrial society, and importance of individualism. As a result, the ideology of the family is challenged by three major social structural constraints: glorification of marriage versus actual practice of marriage, traditional gender role ideology versus contemporary women's roles, and work and family conflict. These social structural constraints have resulted in several trends that caused concern to the state: delay in age at first marriage, lower fertility rates, increase in divorce rates, and increase in the proportion of choice childlessness and singlehood. Unless these contradictions are resolved, the stability of the family as a social institution will be threatened.

Introduction

The family plays a pivotal role in every society. As a social institution, it serves several functions that are essential for the sustenance of contemporary industrial society. These include reproduction and accordance of legitimacy, socialisation, social support, and social control. Thus, it is not surprising that the state has a vested interest in promoting and enhancing the family as a social institution. However, the family is not an objective social grouping that exists in constant form over time and space. Rather, it is a social construct. The definition of “family” is very much influenced by social and cultural norms, and it varies over time and across cultures. For the family to support the state effectively, it has to take on a form that is conducive for cultivating the ideologies that are in fashion. As such, the state invests heavily in promoting an ideal family form that is conducive for sustaining and enhancing contemporary society.

This paper looks at the normal family ideology in Singapore, how the ideology is policed, and the deviation between the ideological norm and the statistical norm. In particular, attention is focused on the social structural constraints that challenge this ideology and the consequences of social contradictions on the Singapore family.

The role of family ideology and the “normal” family in Singapore

Bernardas (1985) argued that family ideology is essential for the sustenance of contemporary industrial society. Ideology is concerned with the erection and maintenance of meaning in everyday life. It is, as he put it, “not merely a set of ideas, but is, rather, a necessary component of everyday social practice” (p.277) He defined family ideology as “a varied and multilayered system of ideas and practices which holds ‘The Family to be a natural and universally present feature of all human societies, an ‘institution’ which is positively functional and the basis of morality” (p.279) This ideology interlocks with gender ideology and wage labour ideology to form the major part of contemporary dominant ideology. Not only does family ideology legitimates contemporary social arrangements, it also ensures that only

certain parts of everyday family life are seen and marginalizes alternative forms of living arrangements.

Family ideology functions to sustain industrial societies via four key elements (Bernardes 1995, p.281-291). First, it sustains an individualistic mode of thought in contemporary society. This emphasises competition and striving for achievement in a material and individualistic context, elements that are endemic to capitalist economies. Second, it sustains a naturalistic analysis of human behaviour. This reinforces the debates about the universality and functionality of the family. Third, it facilitates and sustains major forms of differentiation in contemporary society. As a result, inequalities based on gender, age and race are legitimised. Fourth, family ideology creates and venerates an idol of The Family, which in turn mystifies the reality of lived family life.

While the notion of a normal family ideology is universal, the contents of the ideology vary with culture and time. To obtain a portrait of the ideal family in any society, we should look carefully at the portrayal of the normal family by the state and the mass media. The following is a social construction of the normal Singapore family.

The couple

The normal Singapore family consists of a heterosexual couple who are legally married. When we study the dating preferences and spouse selection patterns, we see that an ideal couple is one where the husband is older, more educated and taller than the wife is. While the data on age and height are not available, the 1990 census data showed that men tend to marry women with lower educational qualifications (Lau 1990, p.13-14). Why these preferences? The answer lies in patriarchy. Under the traditional order of patriarchy, the husband is the head of the household. Thus, the inequalities facilitate the leadership position that is assigned to the male partner.

There is a gender-based division of labour. Traditionally, the husband as head of the household would focus his energy on paid work. The wife played the role of domestic manager and childminder. However, as Singapore took her place in the as one of the

four newly industrialised economies, adjustments had to be made in the way gender roles were prescribed. Women were encouraged to enter the labour force. In 1990, female employees made up 38.6% of the total working population. The female labour force participation rate in 1990 was 50.3%, of which 50% were married women (Low et al. 1993:87-93). Increasingly, the dual-earner family replaces the traditional Parsonian family with husband as breadwinner and wife as domestic manager. The 1990 Singapore census showed that 40% of all married couples are dual-earners compared to 45% where only the husbands worked (Straits Times 28.11.1992). Even though women started to cross over to the traditionally male domain of paid work, domestic labour is still very much the responsibility of the wives. This is documented in two surveys conducted in Singapore (see Quah 1998).

Children

The family is the only legitimate source of reproduction. Thus, it is the most important source of supply for the next generation of labour. Singapore has a selectively pronatalistic policy. To combat the falling fertility rate, the Government reversed its two-child policy in March 1987 and replaced it with “three (children), or more if you can afford it” (Singapore Planned Parenthood Association 1993:4).

To encourage educated working women to have more children, several incentives were institutionalised. Under tax incentives, the 1988 amendment to the Income Tax Act extended child incentives to all married working women with 3 GCE “O” Levels passes (i.e., secondary school national examination performance). The “educated” working mothers could claim, in addition to the usual child deductions, a further 5% of their earned salary for the first child, 10% for the second child, and 15% for the third child, up to a maximum of S\$10 000. Later, enhanced child relief was introduced. Under this scheme, working mothers are allowed to claim an additional tax relief of 15% of their earned income for the second child, 20% for the third child, and 25% for the fourth child up to a maximum of S\$15 000 (see Quah 1990, p. 275-277).

In addition, to facilitate larger families, a Third Child Priority Housing Scheme was set up to give priority to families who wish to upgrade to bigger public housing (HDB) apartments upon the birth of the third child (Ministry of Community Development 1996, p.4). To help dual-earner families cope with childcare and family responsibilities, tax relief for the Foreign Maid Levy was introduced to encourage working married women to have children. Under this scheme, working mothers who employ foreign domestic maids can claim tax relief for the Foreign Maid Levy (a tax paid to the Government when a foreign domestic worker is employed) (Ministry of Community Development 1996, p.11).

The three-generation extended family

While foreign maids are an option for dual-earner families, the state is careful that this remains a temporary solution, and that families should seek a long term solution that is more stable and not dependent on availability of foreign labour. The logical solution to childcare needs lies in support from grandparents. This will ensure that the children are socialised by adults from the same cultural backgrounds. To facilitate the three-generation extended family, several public housing policies were initiated.

The Multi-Tier Family Housing Priority Scheme encourages three-generation families to live under the same roof. 5% of the public housing supply are set aside for these extended families. To encourage parents and their married children to live within the same housing estate, 5% of the public housing supply in non-mature estates is set aside for parents and their married children who wish purchase apartments within the same estate under the Joint-Selection Scheme. In addition, married children who wish to purchase a resale apartment near their parents' apartment can obtain a S\$50,000 housing grant from the Government (Ministry of Community Development 1996, p.5).

These policies facilitate the creation of informal support networks that are located within close proximity to one another. These extended family networks serve two primary purposes. First, in the formative years of new families, young working parents can call upon their parents to play surrogate parents to their children when

they are at work. Second, when the grandparents grow old and need assistance, they can in turn depend on their adult children to provide the necessary support. This arrangement will free the state from two growing concerns of industrial societies: child care and care of the elderly. Private problems – private solutions.

The ideological norm

We can thus conclude that the “normal” Singapore family as supported by the state and perpetuated by the popular media is one where there is married heterosexual partner, dual-earner with the husband as head of household, and three or more children if they can afford it. In addition, the preferred norm is the extended family of three generations, with grandparents, parents and children.

Challenges to the Ideological Norm

Worrying trends

Statistics on the Singapore family show that increasingly, there are challenges to the ideological family form upheld by the state. Essentially, there are three main areas of concern. First, younger Singaporeans are delaying marriage. This trend is particularly noticeable in the educated young adults, especially among the tertiary educated women. In 1977, the average age at first marriage for non-Muslim marriages was 24.3 for females and 27.6 for males. By 1995, the average age went up to 27.1 for females and 30.6 for males. The trend is similar for Muslim marriages (Quah 1998, p.87). Even more alarming is the statistic for those who remain single. The percentage of single women in the 25-29 age group rose from 30.5% in 1975 to 52.8% in 1996. This increase is found across all ethnic groups. The trend is accentuated for women with tertiary education. The proportion of single women with tertiary education in the 30-34 age group rose from 12.1% in 1980 to 35.5% in 1990 (Quah 1998, p.86, 92). This prompted the Government to form the Social development Unit (SDU) in 1984 which primary purpose is to match graduates with each other, with matrimony in mind.

The second worrying trend is the drop in fertility rate. The total fertility rate (per woman) fell from 2.07 (replacement level) in 1975 to 1.40 in 1986. Through some successful state policies that are selectively pronatalistic, the fertility rate rose a little, to 1.73 in 1991 (Singapore Planned Parenthood Association 1993, p.1). Number of children correlates with education level of the mothers. The 1990 census showed that average number of children born alive per married woman fell as the educational level of the mother increased. Married women with no formal education had an average of 4.6 children, women with primary and secondary school education had an average of 2.4 and 1.6 children respectively, and those with tertiary education had only 1.4 children on average. The proportion of childless married women also increased, from 5.2% in 1970 to 11.5% in 1990. The figures are more acute when we look at the statistic by age group. Within the 25-29 years age group, the proportion of childless women rose from 19.2% in 1980 to 32.9% in 1990. For women in the 30-34 years age group, the proportion rose from 6.9% to 13.6%. Again, married women with tertiary education were more likely to have no children (Quah 1998, p.59-60; Singapore Census 1990).

The third development that caused concern is the rise in divorce rates. Statistics for non-Muslim marriages recorded under the Women's Charter show the divorce rate per 1000 marriages increased from 13.9 in 1970 to 152.1 in 1995. A similar trend is noted for Muslim marriages registered under the Syariah Court. The divorce rate rose from 96.4 per 1000 marriages in 1970 to 206.4 in 1995 (Quah 1998, p.53).

What is causing these disruptions to the Singapore family? I argue that with the development of industrialisation and modernisation, several social structural constraints developed in our society that challenged the ideology of the normal family. These are: the glorification of marriage versus the actual practice of marriage; the contradiction between work and family; and contemporary gender ideology versus traditional gender ideology. I will elaborate on these individually.

Contradiction I: Glorification of marriage versus actual practice of marriage

Our society rewards people who are married (Nock 1992, p.107-112). Rituals are performed to glorify the wedded state. A sense of prestige is conferred through the diamond engagement ring, the engagement party, the wedding rings, the wedding banquet as well as the celebration of wedding anniversaries. These rituals celebrate the wedded state and in the process, glorify marriage. Not marrying is suspect. Adults who are still single are perceived as being either wilful, selfish (because marriage is glorified for its self-sacrifice), of deviant sexual orientations, or suffering from some form of deficiency since no one wants them for a mate. Marriage is a socially legitimised means of demonstrating to others as well as to ourselves our maturity, personal adequacy, and heterosexual normalcy.

The social construction of marriage in our society elevates the ideals of the marital union. This is particularly apparent in contemporary society when women no longer marry for economic security. To encourage women to get married, society portrays marriage as blissful, happy and desirable. We accord special privileges to married couples, both tangible rewards like tax relief and eligibility for subsidised public housing, and intangible rewards like prestige, perception of maturity and dependability. Advertisements sponsored by the Social Development Unit as well as the popular media show images of ideal marriages where the couples find ultimate fulfilment in each other's companionship.

This glorification and idealisation of marriage is further enforced by changes in the idealisation of marriage among women. With the advent of industrialisation, rise of the feminist movement, universal education, and foray of women into the traditionally male dominated paid labour force, women no longer need to marry for economic reasons. Thus, there is a shift in the idealisation of marriage for women – from economic dependence to actualisation of personal satisfaction. Women now marry for intrinsic reasons – for companionship, romantic love, and mutual respect. Unlike economic support, these intrinsic ideals are much harder to satisfy. In addition, these intrinsic ideals are also labour intensive – a marriage built on love, understanding, companionship takes an enormous amount of time and commitment to develop and

sustain. Marriage, like parenthood, is a very intensive and time-consuming social institution. Unfortunately, time is a luxury commodity that is not easily available for young married couples, a point that I will expand on in the next section.

The glorification of marriage causes a paradox. Because of its social desirability, many young adults enter marriage without due consideration and with very high expectations. Often times, they are ignorant of, and unable to fulfil the level of commitment marriage demands. In the process of glorifying marriage, young adults are not warned that it takes a lot of work, compromises on personal desires, and maybe even a change in lifestyle and career goals in order to achieve this ideal. Thus, when these couples compare their married life with the ideals they had embraced, many are disappointed and disillusioned. When they are unable to accept the deviation between ideal and reality, they end up either very dissatisfied with their marriage or they might even resort to dissolving the marital union.

This deviation also affects the proportion of adults who remain single in two ways. First, the process of glorifying marriage may make it difficult for single adults to find the ideal mate. They set the ideal so high that it becomes almost impossible to find anyone who can fit this ideal. Second, when a marriage fails, it sends a strong signal to those around that the institution of marriage is not infallible. Those who are not yet married would realise that marriage is not necessarily always rewarding and would exercise great caution when making the decision themselves.

Contradiction II: Work versus Family – the time bind

One main reason why so many young married couples find it difficult to commit enough time to their marriage is because of the demands of work. One of the challenges to the family in contemporary society is the emergence of the dual-earner family. Traditionally, families are very Parsonian in structure, with the husband as the sole breadwinner and the wife as full-time domestic manager. When Singapore moved toward industrialisation and economic development in the 1960s and 1970s, it was inevitable that women had to enter the labour force. This, together with universal education, the influence of the feminist movement (both of which redefined the

aspirations of women) as well as the increased cost of living pushed a significant proportion of married women into the work force. By 1990, about 40% of all married couples fell under the category of “dual-earner”.

This shift of women from domestic area into the public domain of paid work has several impacts on the family. First, women no longer marry for economic reasons, a point raised in an earlier section. Their involvement in work plus their increased education changed their aspirations and made them less exclusively oriented toward family roles. Second, more women delay family formation because of their involvement in work. With paid work comes economic independence, occupational prestige, job satisfaction and companionship of colleagues. Thus, women are tempted to devote more energy to achieving occupational goals rather than the pursuit of a traditional marriage. Now, women have an alternative. They no longer have to marry; they marry only if they want to. Third, there are serious contradictions between work and family, and when these contradictions arise, the family tends to end up short changed. I will elaborate on this further.

Perhaps the best way to understand the conflict between work and family is to examine the relationship in light of the dual-sphere ideology. This ideology argues that our world is artificially divided into two distinctive spheres – the public sphere of men (i.e., the work world) and the private sphere of women (i.e., the domestic world). Lopata (1993) wrote:

“ .. The two-sphere imagery was an ideological tool used to justify restrictions on women’s involvements in economic and political activity and men’s involvements in family and community. The ideology was, and still is, an artificial polarity that ignores the continuum of social relations in real life and which has become increasingly dysfunctional to modern life.” (p.176)

Traditionally, when women stayed at home to manage domestic affairs full-time, families were still able to cope because of the gender-specific division of labour. Wives took care of all domestic responsibilities and husbands were able to focus all

their energy in the work place. However, in contemporary society where women are very likely to engage in paid work, this artificial polarity causes severe conflict. Since paid work yields economic power, it is further assumed that the work world should be dominant over the family. Employers expect their employees to attach greater priority to the company and demand that their employees spend as much time as needed at the office fulfilling official duties. In many work places, employees are expected to stay beyond office hours (with or without overtime compensation) to demonstrate their loyalty and commitment to their companies. While the employees are expected to bring work home whenever necessary, it is understood that family affairs and problems should be kept out of the work place.

This artificial polarity contradicts the ideology of the normal family and as a result, it causes stress in dual-earner families. Society continues to operate on the assumption that there is a full-time domestic manager at home to take care of the needs of the family, particularly, the needs of children. Lopata (1993) sums up the sentiments very accurately when she wrote:

“ .. The economic institution of this affluent society had been built upon the assumption that men in important professional and managerial occupations could devote their whole attention to such demands, having a backup person in the home to solve all family and domestic – often also the husband’s occupational – problems.” (p. 181)

As a result of the delegation of domestic work into the private sphere of women, many aspects of actual work and activities of women (like housekeeping, child care) that critically facilitates the functioning of society were made invisible. When a woman takes on a full-time job, she is expected to perform under the same conditions of her male counterpart. Her responsibilities in the private sphere are ignored because she chose to enter the public domain of work. Thus, when the employer is not supportive of the employee’s multiple roles (of being a wife/husband, mother/father, employee) and continues to expect the employee to give priority to the paid work domain, the

employee is likely to suffer from role strain and stress from role overload. This has repercussions on the family in several ways.

First, dual-earner families who are not able to cope with the demands of work and family end up dissatisfied with family life. Several studies have documented this development. Women who perceived work overload report lower levels of marital adjustment, marital satisfaction, and family cohesion (Sears and Galambos 1992; Bolger et al 1989; Coverman 1989; Repetti 1987). When these dissatisfactions are not resolved, these couples may resort to divorce. Second, the contradictions between work and family result in lower fertility rates. Because of the lack of flexibility in work schedules, many dual-earner families find it difficult to have more children. The demands of work on family life coupled with the lack of childcare alternatives make parenthood a very unattractive option for young married couples. Third, the over-emphases on paid work has resulted in neglect of the family. Paid work provides economic, social and political power. The family gives intrinsic rewards. As a result, many young married employees put in disproportionately more time in their work than they do in their family. However, the process of glorifying marriage results in the conceptualisation of an ideal family that requires an enormous amount of work and commitment. Marriage and family as a source of companionship, romantic love, care and concern -- all these ideals cannot be developed if the married couple do not spend enough time together. There is a great amount of learning involved in married life -- living with another person, adjusting one's lifestyle, getting inaugurated into a new extended family, dealing with in-law relationships. Unless one can afford to spend time working at it, it is extremely difficult to achieve the quality of marital relationship that is promised in the idealisation of the normal family.

On a related note, the fourth repercussion on family relates to family formation. One common complaint from young people who join the work force is the lack of time. Many young employees are focused on building their career. As a result of the demands from work, they have little time to spend socialising and meeting potential spouses. The glorification of marriage results in the social construction of an ideal spouse. As a result, many young people, especially those who are more educated, are

not willing to settle for the first person they meet. So when a young adult has a very specific set of criteria, and very little time to expand his/her social circle, the chances of finding a desirable match is very low.

Contradiction III: Traditional gender roles versus contemporary gender ideology

Under the traditional gender role ideology, the husband is the head of the household and the breadwinner. His role is that of provider and disciplinarian, and through his position in the public domain of work, his family attains its social status. Traditionally, the wife is the domestic manager and childminder. Even if she works, her income is but supplementary to her husband's, and her primary responsibility is still with the family. A gender-based division of labour sustains traditional gender role ideology.

With the onset of industrialisation, women were needed to play an active role in the work force. As work in factories and industries became more complex, women had to be educated and trained. Universal education, influence from the feminist movement, exposure to the work culture and economic independence – all these factors effected a change in gender ideology. The result is the evolution of a new gender role ideology that redefined women's roles. Contemporary gender role ideology specifies greater equality between men and women, where the division of labour is not based on gender but rather, equity. Women are not confined to the home and men are not exempted from domestic duties.

However, while the culture of gender roles have changed, the practice remains traditional. Women continue to bear primary responsibilities at home (in terms of housework and childcare) even when they hold full-time jobs (Berardo et al. 1987; Pleck 1985). Data collected from Singapore women reflect the same trend. The wife, regardless of whether she is working, is the principal person responsible for housework (Quah 1998, p.173). Thus, the foray into the opposite gender's domain is asymmetrical. This asymmetry can be conceptualised in terms of power dynamics (Silberstein 1992). While women stand to gain power when they enter the work sphere, men do not increase their power in the family by participating in domestic

chores. Therefore, most husbands continue to adhere to the traditional gender roles and expect their wives to continue as the primary providers in the family.

Lopata (1993) argued that as long men continue to hold key positions of power in society, the definition of a “good” wife and a “good” husband will sustain this division of the work into two separate spheres and reinforce traditional gender role ideology.

The most problematic issue with regards to gender roles expectations is parenting. While household chores can be time consuming and demanding, we can still resort to household technologies (like the vacuum, washing machines, dryers), the service industry (eating out at restaurants, food runners, laundry services) or even a part-time maid to ease the burden. However, when it comes to childcare, parents have to bear full responsibility. Part of the normal family ideology specifies that children are cared for and socialised by their parents. In particular, the mother is responsible for the day-to-day well being of her children.

The contemporary ideology of true womanhood sustains the image of a “supermom” – a devoted mother who subscribes to intensive mothering techniques, a supportive and capable wife who takes good care of both her home and her husband, and on top of it all, she is a successful career woman. Under the Employment Act in Singapore, full-time female civil servants are granted eight weeks of paid maternal leave. In addition, they are eligible for up to four years of no-pay leave that can be taken within four years after the birth of the child, and five days of unrecorded leave per year for each child under six years old (subject to a maximum of three children) to allow them to tend to their sick children. No similar provisions are available for the male counterparts. These policies clearly specify that childcare is primarily the responsibility of the mother. Under the tax system, working mothers who engage foreign domestic maids enjoy double tax relief for the Foreign Maid Levy, the rationale being that the maids are there to take over responsibilities that are normally taken on by the working mothers.

The cultural contradiction of motherhood is further escalated by the ideology of intensive motherhood. Ideology and practices of appropriate childrearing are socially constructed. In Singapore, ideals governing appropriate childrearing are very similar to that which is practised in North America. The mother is socially defined as the primary caregiver to her children. Under the ideology of intensive motherhood, children are perceived as precious, innocent and priceless little beings who are in need of constant care and attention. Thus, childrearing is centred on the children's needs, with methods informed by experts (like child psychologists, paediatricians, educationalists). These methods are generally time consuming, labour intensive and costly (Hays 1996).

Mothers are expected to cater to the needs of their children full-time, regardless of her working status. A "good" mother is one who takes care of the health, welfare and general well being of her children 24 hours a day (Lopata 1993, p. 182). If a mother goes against the expected norm, she is then labelled a deviant and her skills and commitment as a mother are questioned by society.

Hays (1996) argued that the ideology of intensive mothering is imposed and sustained by those in power, namely men, upper class, capitalists, and state leaders. Men benefit because women are kept out of competition for paid jobs in the labour market. In addition, with the mother as the socially designated childminder, fathers are freed from childcare and domestic responsibilities. As domestic roles are given neither economic nor social recognition, this serves to maintain women in subordinate positions in society. Members of the upper class support the ideology of intensive motherhood because they have the financial means to do so. As the ideology carries with it value-loaded connotations, upper-class members are able to sustain their sense of superiority when they compare their expensive and time-consuming childcare methods with that engaged by the lower classes. Capitalists stand to gain from this ideology because they profit from selling expensive products and services to anxious parents. Employers justify paying women since their primary responsibility is in the domestic arena and their income is perceived as supplementary to their husbands'. Capitalists also benefit from the free training and grooming of young workers for the future. Under intensive mothering, the progress of children is monitored closely, and

from a tender age, they are taught social and technical skills that will give them a head start in their adult life. State leaders support the ideology of intensive motherhood because it frees the state from taking care of dependent young children. The ideology of intensive motherhood, together with the normal family ideology, serves to police young members of society and as a result, contributes to political and social stability.

So how have women coped? There are three options that have arisen. To cater to the demands of intensive motherhood, one group has chosen the traditional role of full-time homemaker. However, because of the devaluation of housework in capitalist societies, many educated women do not see this as a viable option. In addition, the state's policy of encouraging women to join the work force also pushed women towards defining their self-worth against economic returns. As a result, homemakers themselves often suffer from low self-esteem. The second option is to play the role of supermom. These women try to juggle a full-time job and intensive motherhood, a task that is extremely demanding given that both roles are equally intensive and time-consuming. Neither of these options is satisfactory. The homemakers tend to perceive themselves as useless, mindless, bored, isolated, and invisible to the world outside their home. On the other hand, working mothers tend to feel guilty about leaving their children at home, stressed out by their multiple roles, and suffer from role conflict.

The third option, which is becoming more significant as the cultural contradictions persist, is voluntary childlessness. The ideology of true womanhood requires the woman to be a good wife (who takes care of all her husband's needs), a good mother (who subscribes to the ideology of intensive motherhood), and a good employee (who upholds the importance and supremacy of the work sphere and is willing to commit herself 100% to her paid job). While the woman's role has been expanded to include her participation in paid work, the man's role has not been transformed significantly. The father's role has not been redefined. He is still the primary breadwinner, expected to put paid work first, and his family responsibilities are marginalised. Men adopt the progressive practice of fatherhood at their own cost. American data shows that on average, employed women spend 6.6 hours per week on undivided childcare while their male counterparts put in only 2.5 hours (Newsweek 1997, p.50-57)

In light of the divergence between contemporary gender ideology and the actual practice of gender roles, many young educated women opt to go the deviant route. They choose not to reproduce and therefore, free themselves from the demands of motherhood. Others take an even more extreme option – they choose to remain single. The Japanese Government announced that Japan today has fewer children under 15 than at any other time since the first national census in 1920. In addition, many Japanese women of childbearing age are choosing not to get married, and not to have children. The statistics show that 50% of all women between 25-29 years are single (Newsweek 1997, p.18). The Singapore statistics send similar signals. 39.2% of all females between 25-29 years are single, compare to 22.6% in 1970. 25% of married women with post-secondary education have no children (Quah 1998, p.38,60).

Conclusion

In reaction to the growing trends, marriage and parenthood are glorified even more. Paid work continues to take precedence over family time in our capitalist industrial society. The demands of work are even more pressing in global economy where business-related travels continue to take workers away from their families. Childcare and domestic management continue to be the primary responsibilities of women, even when they are full-time players in paid work.

If we allow these social contradictions to persist, then the family as we construct it now will be destabilised and replaced by a variant form. This would include families where parenthood roles are redefined and childrearing becomes the responsibility of paid surrogate minders (like foreign domestic maids, childcare centres and after school care centres), married couples with no children, or families where marriage is not a necessary condition.

In order to preserve the ideology and practice of the normal family as we know it today, society will have to look seriously at the social contradictions that have surfaced, identify the causes of these contradictions, and re-evaluate how we practice family life in our society.

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