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The Singapore Council of Women and the Women's Movement

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The greater part of the historical literature concerning Southeast Asia says little about women because, following the western tradition, writers have concentrated on those individuals associated with decision making and power, areas where men have featured predominantly. Although women have contributed significantly to social and political movements, they have been neglected in historical accounts and often, their contribution has been excluded altogether. Even studies dealing specifically with legislation involving women's rights in Singapore such as the Women's Charter, have given insufficient attention to the part played by women in laying much of the preliminary groundwork.¹

To redress the situation, this article focuses on the activities of the Singapore Council of Women (SCW) and the women's movement in Singapore. It tells how from the year of its inception (1952) to the passing of the Women's Charter in 1961, the SCW became the first women's organization which boldly sought to change existing laws affecting women through legislation. The group's single-minded thrust against the practice of polygamy gained its widespread publicity and for the first time in Singapore's history, excited and engaged the loyalty and energy of a broad spectrum of women towards achieving a common goal. The SCW was strikingly successful. Within five years, the Muslim Ordinance was passed which included many of the demands which were first brought to public attention by the SCW. Within eight years, in 1961, the Women's Charter granting most of their demands, became law in Singapore.

THE FORMATION OF THE SCW

Two factors account for the formation of the SCW. First, the social political stirrings brought about by the Second World War and the Japanese occupation; and second, the presence of a group of socially conscious women who were greatly dissatisfied with the existing status quo with regards to women's rights.

Socio-political Stirrings

Women in Singapore emerged from the Japanese occupation with a deeper awareness of the world around them and a greater confidence of their own capabilities to survive social and political changes. They were ready for new changes, having seen the

This paper is based on interviews and on personal letters, annual reports, and minutes of the Singapore Council of Women. These materials are found in the Singapore National Archives (Microfilm NA 2044) and the private collection of the family of Mrs Shirin Fozdar.

¹See e.g. Charmian Chelvam, "The Women's Charter" (Unpublished B.A. Hons. Academic Exercise, Dept. of History, University of Singapore, 1972); Yu-lin Ooi, "The Changing Status of Chinese Women in Singapore 1879-1961" (Unpublished B.A. Hons. Academic Exercise, Dept. of History, National University of Singapore, 1981); Esther Quah, "Divorce among the Chinese in Singapore, 1819-1961" (Unpublished B.A. Hons. Academic Exercise, Dept. of History, National University of Singapore, 1989/90).

humiliating defeat of British forces in the march of Japanese militarism and with it the shattering of the myth of the supremacy of the white colonialist. The inhibitions of women where public life was concerned were noticeably reduced and they began to take a greater interest in reaching out to the less fortunate of society. Emerging from their homes in significant numbers, they contributed to the war rehabilitation efforts, took up jury service² and became Justices of Peace.³

Hundreds of women came forward to help rebuild Singapore society. Women volunteers manned the feeding centres set up by the colonial government to cater for the thousands of children who were roaming the streets looking for food.⁴ They also banded together to establish the first family planning association in Singapore, convinced that a family should have no more children than they could feed, clothe and educate properly.⁵ Women also rallied to the call for decolonialization and for the first time, joined political parties and stood for elections in the Municipal Council.⁶

More began to be interested in forming associations of their own.⁷ Old girls' associations were the first to be formed and they were followed by associations related to work, welfare and recreation. By 1952, the year of the formation of the SCW, there were over thirty women's associations in Singapore. There were school alumni associations (e.g. the Raffles Old Girls' Association), recreational clubs (e.g. Girls' Sports Club), community service clubs (e.g. Chinese Ladies Association), religiously inspired organizations (e.g. the Young Women's Christian Association), racial groups (e.g. Malay Women's Welfare), wives' groups (e.g. the Inner Wheel of the Rotary Club), professional groups (e.g. Singapore Nurses' Association), and mutual help groups (Singapore Cantonese Women Mutual Help Association).⁸

While such activity encouraged the formation of the SCW, its conception was also prompted by the need to be different from the women's groups existing in 1952. Existing associations saw women as fulfilling important but supportive roles. Their chief aim was to draw women from their homes to a richer community life through social, recreational, mutual help, and community service activities. Their energies were focused on fund-raising for the needy of society and on traditional feminine courses such as cultural dances, cooking, art and handicraft classes. Women's rights was not

²The year 1952 saw a record 500 women listed as jurors. See *Sunday Times*, 20 Jan. 1952.

³Among the women JPs were Mrs Loh Poon Lip, Mrs Goh Kok Kee, Mrs Lim Boon Keng, Mrs Tay Lian Teck and Mrs Tan Chin Tuan.

⁴Many of these volunteers were from existing women's organizations such as the Chinese Ladies' Association and the Young Women's Christian Association. See Social Welfare Dept. to Mrs S.K. Wong of the Chinese Ladies' Association, 15 Oct. 1948.

⁵Interview with Mrs Goh Kok Kee, founder-member of Family Planning Association, 3 Feb. 1993.

⁶The first municipal elections were held in 1949 and the first two women elected to the Municipal/City Council were Mrs Robert Eu in 1949 and Miss Amy Laycock in 1950. In 1951, two other women — Mrs Elizabeth Choy and Mrs Vilasini Menon made history when they became members of the Legislative Council.

⁷In 1947, three women's groups were formed: The Nanyang Girls' School Alumni Association, the Singapore Chung Hwa Girls' Old Students' Association, and the Singapore Cantonese Women Mutual Help Association. Registrar of Societies, 1945-50.

⁸Of these, the more prominent ones were the Chinese Ladies Association (CLA), Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), the Kamala Club, the Girls' Sports Club, Singapore Inner Wheel Club and the Malay Women's Welfare Association, all of which, except for the last two, had their origins before the war.

an issue; what was important was how women could contribute towards making society a better place for all concerned.

In contrast, the SCW was established primarily to unite the different women's groups in the colony and to fight for the advancement of rights for women and seek specific changes such as the abolition of polygamy. Accordingly it became the first women's organization to identify the importance of unity and to bring the issue of women's rights to the forefront. Not content merely to walk the rounds of charity or to promote learning in the traditional skills and crafts, the SCW sought to change the status quo where men-women relationships were concerned.⁹ From the beginning, the SCW was resolved on reforming the "obsolete and oppressive marriage laws and to enact suitable legislation that would tend to the civil rights of women in Singapore".¹⁰

The Women On-The-Spot

While the socio-political climate was conducive to the formation of the SCW, its inception and viability would not have been ensured without the concerted efforts of a small group women under the leadership of Mrs Shirin Fozdar.¹¹

Born in Bombay, India, of Persian-Baha'i parents in 1905 and inspired by the Baha'i principle that men and women are equal in status, Mrs Fozdar had begun the fight for the emancipation of women in India when she was a teenager. Her involvement in the women's movement in India culminated in her nomination in 1934 as the representative of the All Asian Women's Conference executive committee on women's rights at the League of Nations in Geneva. A decade later, she set up women's organizations in India to help impoverished women. In 1941, she delivered peace lectures to the riot-torn city of Ahmedabad on the instructions of Mahatma Gandhi who called her "his daughter". In 1950, she migrated to Singapore with her husband, a medical practitioner.¹²

The idea to form a council which would unite all women on a common platform and give strength to their efforts for a better society was first mooted at a meeting of Malay women in October 1951. A group of 70 Malay women and 10 men had gathered to listen to Mrs Sutan Shahrir, a women's rights activist from Indonesia, who inspired the audience with accounts of how the women of Indonesia had been given the same rights as men after the establishment of the Indonesian Republic. "The progress of any society", she said, "can only be judged by the position of the woman". Among the audience were many women who would later become members of the SCW, including two members of the SCW pro tem committee, Mrs Shirin Fozdar of the Singapore United Nations Committee and Zahara bte. Noor Mohammed of the Malay Women's Welfare Association (MWWA).¹³

⁹While associations such as the CLA had realised as early as 1948 that there was a need to discourage the practice of polygamy, no attempt was made as they found it "a controversial subject in public". Minutes of the CLA, 1948-49.

¹⁰Minutes of the pro tem committee of the SCW, 1951.

¹¹*The Star*, 8 Sep. 1976; *Business Times*, 16-17 May 1987 (Weekend Edition); *Hongkong Standard*, 12 Jun. 1987. See also Andree Kail, "Housewives", *Chinese Women in Southeast Asia*, eds. Joyce Lebra and Joy Paulson (Singapore: Times Books International, 1980), pp. 98-99.

¹²*Straits Times* (hereafter *ST*), 15 Sep. 1950; *ST*, 20 Sep. 1950; *ST*, 21 Sep. 1950.

¹³*ST*, 13 Oct. 1951.

A month later, a small group of women under the leadership of Mrs Fozdar called a public meeting to discuss the formation of such an organization. Thirty prominent women members of the community met, including Legislative Council members Mrs Elizabeth Choy and Mrs Vilasini Menon, Municipal Councillors Mrs Robert Eu and Miss Amy Laycock, and a host of others from organizations such as the Kamala Club, the YWCA, the MWWA, the Indonesian Ladies Club, the Inner Wheel, and the Chinese Ladies Association.¹⁴ The women in the meeting agreed that despite “fine work done by the Young Women’s Christian Association, the Social Welfare Department and the Malay Women’s Welfare Association, their admirable work could not ameliorate the legal disabilities which women were suffering and which were the causes of many social evils”.¹⁵ Convinced that none of the existing women’s organizations could fulfill this task, they called for the setting up of a women’s council which would unite the women of Singapore and would not “overlap the work and activities of the existing social welfare organizations, but go to the root of all the social evils that exist and handicap the progress of women towards their emancipation and their enjoyment of equal rights with man”. The council was first and foremost “to be a women’s movement for the promotion of the economic, educational, cultural and social status of women” and was to attempt to “mould public opinion in the best manner possible to implement the Human Rights Charter as agreed upon by the signatory nations of the United Nations Organization”.¹⁶

The meeting resulted in the formation of a pro tem committee¹⁷ whose function was to draft the constitution of the proposed council, which was to cut across racial, linguistic, religious or occupational lines. Drawing upon the inspiration provided by the National Council of Women in India¹⁸, the SCW came up with a constitution which was unique in the history of the women’s movement in Singapore. It was, for example, created as a central organization which accepted other women’s associations as affiliate members. Basically, there were four main objectives of the SCW:

1. to arrange affiliation with other organizations in Singapore and to coordinate activities in furtherance of their Council’s policy.
2. to further the cultural, educational, economic, moral and social status of women in Singapore.
3. to ensure through legislation if necessary, justice to all women and to further their welfare as embodied in the Declaration of Human Rights Charter.

¹⁴Minutes of the pro tem committee of the SCW, 20 Nov. 1951.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid. The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights was signed in 1948. Later, The UN Commission on the Status of Women, 1949, recommended to countries whose legal system resulted in the subordinate status of the wife, to permit freedom of choice in marriage, monogamy and equal rights to the dissolution of marriage.

¹⁷The pro tem committee comprised Mrs Elizabeth Choy as President, Mrs Goh Kok Kee and Zahara as Vice Presidents, Mrs Vilasini Menon as Treasurer, Mrs Shirin Fozdar as Secretary and Mrs E.V. Davies, Mrs J. Alcock, Mrs A. Alsagoff and Mrs Helen Tan as committee members.

¹⁸The Council was formed in 1925 with the aim of working for the improvement of the position of women and also for the establishment of a permanent link between women’s organizations in the different provinces of India. See the Constitution of the National Council of Women in India, 1925.

4. to facilitate and encourage friendship, understanding and cooperation among women of all races, religions and nationalities in Singapore.¹⁹

The SCW was formally inaugurated on the 4th April 1952 at a ceremony attended by several women's groups and government officials.²⁰

THE AGENDA OF THE SCW

The SCW's agenda can basically be understood in terms of two broad objectives which they adopted. The first was to highlight themselves as a broad-based council of women which was involved not only in promoting women's rights but also in helping fellow women in need. The other was to find a problem which confronted women and which could be made into an issue which would be symbolic of the injustices faced by women in Singapore. This they found in the practice of polygamy.

A Broad-based Council

To achieve the first objective, the SCW concentrated on four strategies: the recruitment of individual members, the cultivation of a good relationship with the press, the maintenance of an international women's network and a distinct brand of community service.

A large membership was needed to give the SCW social clout as well as a large pool for collecting funds, and the SCW promoted membership across racial, religious, political and national lines. However, while the SCW aimed to recruit 10,000 members, the membership peaked at 2,000 in 1955.²¹ Nevertheless, it was a pool large enough to provide funds and manpower. Members were recruited from the Hawker Union, the Medical Services, the University of Malaya and private factories.²² Recruitment was nevertheless an uphill task as involvement in the women's movement often meant censure or ridicule from their families and peers.²³

The constitution of the SCW also provided membership for societies as well as individuals, but women's associations were reluctant to affiliate themselves with the SCW as they were unused to the concept of affiliation²⁴ and some were put off by what seemed to be the organization's "far reaching and idealistic" agenda.²⁵ Thus, while

¹⁹1952 Constitution of the SCW, registered with the Registrar of Societies.

²⁰*ST*, 4 Apr. 1952; *Singapore Free Press* (hereafter *SFP*), 4 Apr. 1952.

²¹This was quite remarkable bearing in mind that the CLA, the oldest Chinese women's association, had only a membership of 60-100 in 1950. AGM of the CLA 1948, 1951. It must be noted however that most of the members of the SWC were passive; and active members of the SCW numbered less than a hundred. See also *ST*, 2 Apr. 1953.

²²Minutes of the SCW 6 Jan. 1954; SCW to Director of Medical Services, *circa* 1953; SCW to the Vice Chancellor, University of Malaya, 26 May 1952; SCW to Managing Directors of factories, 1 Jul. 1952.

²³Information obtained from an interview with Mrs Amy Ede (Miss Amy Laycock), 6 Nov. 1992, and Mrs Elizabeth Choy, 25 Oct. 1992, members of the pro tem committee of the SCW. Says Mrs Choy, "In those days, the social climate of the time was inimical to drastic ideas like equality of the sexes."

²⁴The draft constitution did not originally provide for individual membership. However, this was included at the request of certain members. Mrs R.A. Pohan, President of the Indonesian Women's Club, to SCW on the advantages of including an individual membership category, 26 May 1952.

²⁵Mrs Seow Peck Leng, founder of the Siglap Girls' Club in 1954 (which later became the Singapore Women's Association), for instance, said of Mrs Shirin Fozdar: "At that time, her ideas were too radical, even for me. But then without her, the women rights movement wouldn't have begun." Interview with Mrs Seow Peck Leng, 29 Nov. 1992.

they cooperated with the SCW to the extent of sending representatives to its annual meetings, most adopted a “wait-and-see” attitude.²⁶ Nevertheless, many members of the SCW came from the main women’s groups of the period.²⁷ A number came from the YWCA, including Mrs Shufen Khoo, Mrs M.C. Compton, Mrs Mary Lobo and Mrs H.A. Amstutz, and the YWCA would work closely together with the SCW on several fundraising projects related to women’s welfare in the fifties. The SCW also had free use of the YWCA building for many of its meetings and activities.²⁸ It may be noted that many key members of the SCW were Christians since the Christians made up one of the better educated and more socially conscious segments of the population.

A remarkable feature of the SCW was that its executive committee throughout the 1950s was a multiracial group consisting of women mainly in their forties and fifties.²⁹ The first executive committee of 1952 boasted seven Chinese, four Indians, two Malays, one Indonesian and one Briton, a composition which was not to change much throughout its years of existence. This racial mix reflected the SCW membership, the majority of whom were Chinese, followed by Malays, Indians, Eurasians and Europeans. Annual reports of activities were also given in Malay, English and Chinese.³⁰ Those elected to sit on the committee were, however, predominantly English educated, with a relatively high level of education and from the wealthier segments of society.³¹

The next strategy was to cultivate a good working relationship with the press.³² Realising that media support was indispensable if they were to succeed in their twin objectives, key members of the SCW wrote regularly to the press concerning women’s issues, and many of these letters were published.³³ The press also gave coverage to SCW activities through feature articles and editorials.³⁴ Moreover, from the inception

²⁶*SFP*, 4 Mar. 1952. In 1956 only the Young Women’s Muslim Association and the International Women’s Club showed an interest. Letter from SCW to all the women’s associations in Singapore, 3 May 1956. See also minutes of the SCW, 19 Feb. 1957.

²⁷The Indonesian Women’s Club was represented on the SCW’s committee by the presence of its President, Mrs R.A. Pohan; the Kamala Club was represented by its honorary treasurer, Mrs Helen Tan; the Chinese Ladies Association by its secretary Mrs Rosalie Hennon; the International Women’s Club by its President Mrs S.G. Butcher; and the Inner Wheel by its President Mrs E.V. Davis. *SFP*, 7 May 1952, *ST*, 20 Oct. 1959.

²⁸Minutes of the SCW, 18 Apr. 1952. The Kamala Club club house was another popular venue for the SCW.

²⁹Chelvam’s suggestion that the membership of the SCW comprised “elderly educated women” is therefore erroneous. “The Women’s Charter”, p. 27.

³⁰At the 1953 annual general meeting, for example, Mrs R.A. Pohan gave the annual report in Malay, Mrs Shufen Khoo in Chinese and Mrs George Lee in English. Minutes of the SCW, 6 Aug. 1953.

³¹Minutes of the SCW, 14 Jun. 1957.

³²The media was also responsive as more and more women were becoming educated and entering the workforce. In 1952, for example, a radio feature called “Women’s Magazine” dealing with subjects of feminine interest not often heard in Singapore, made its debut. *ST*, 22 Jan. 1952.

³³See e.g. *ST*, 29 Feb. 1952, *ST*, 3 Aug. 1954, *ST*, 18 Mar. 1955, *ST*, 9 Mar. 1957, *ST*, 11.7.1957, *ST*, 22 Mar. 1958.

³⁴Editorials commenting on the SCW’s agenda appeared regularly throughout the fifties, e.g.: *SFP*, 10 Mar. 1952; *SFP*, 5 Apr. 1952; *SFP*, 29 Apr. 1952; *Malay Mail* (hereafter *MM*), 30 May 1955; *MM*, 9 Jul. 1955; *MM*, 25 Apr. 1958; *Sunday Times*, 22 Jun. 1958; *Singapore Tiger Standard*, 27 Aug. 1958; *SFP*, 20 Oct. 1959; *ST*, 20 Oct. 1959.

of the SCW the media began to highlight regularly problems with marriages and the issue of divorce.³⁵

The giving of public talks was another means whereby the SCW sought to obtain publicity for their agenda. Teams were sent out by the first executive committee “to lecture and advise women in kampongs, Chinatown and other areas of their rights and liberties”³⁶ Throughout the fifties, members of the SCW, notably Mrs Shirin Fozdar, Mrs E.V. Davis, Mrs George Lee, Mrs Mary Lobo and Mrs Seow Peck Leng spoke at the Rotary Club, the Junior Chamber of Commerce, the public library, Methodist fellowship groups, the universities and schools.³⁷ The SCW also organized public-speaking classes as part of their attempt to persuade the government “to include women on delegations going abroad on goodwill and other missions whenever possible”.³⁸

The creation of an international network was also regarded as a means of strengthening the SCW’s media coverage, prestige and bargaining position both locally and internationally. One of the first things that the SCW did was to seek affiliation with the International Council of Women (ICW).³⁹ It also maintained links with women’s organizations abroad such as the National Council of Women in Great Britain,⁴⁰ and organizations which were deemed progressive such as the National Council for Civil Liberties in London and the British Commonwealth League.⁴¹ Communication concerning the status of women was carried on with women’s groups in other countries such as Japan, Hong Kong, Vietnam, Cambodia, China and Indonesia,⁴² and SCW members also went on lecture tours of these countries.⁴³

Viewing itself as part of a network of a worldwide confederation of women, the SCW attempted to keep abreast with world affairs through the use of letter and telegram lobbies. When Perwari, the Indonesian Women’s Association, marched to the

³⁵*ST*, 29 Apr. 1952; *ST*, 2 Mar. 1952; *ST*, 30 Dec. 1952; *MM*, 16 May 1952; *Sunday Times*, 16 Mar. 1952; *Sunday Times*, 23 Mar. 1952; *SFP*, 7 Aug. 1953; etc.

³⁶*ST*, 17 Nov. 1951.

³⁷*ST*, 22 Feb. 1952; *ST*, 29 Feb. 1952; *ST*, 6 Aug. 1957; *SFP*, 30 Aug. 1957; *ST*, 26 Jul. 1958; *SFP*, 15 Oct. 1959, *Sunday Times*, 2 Aug. 1959. See also Rev. S.M. Thevathasan to SCW, 27 Feb. 1952; and Methodist Fellowship Group to SCW, n.d.

³⁸*Singapore Standard*, 1 Dec. 1953; SCW to Governor-in-Council, 3 Jun. 1957; *SFP*, 15 Jul. 1958.

³⁹SCW to President, International Council of Women, 6 Jan. 1959. Established in 1925 in Switzerland, the NCW was formed with the aim of strengthening and coordinating women’s activities by federating the various women’s associations in the world working for the improvement of the position of women and for social progress.

⁴⁰National Director, YWCA of Malaya and Singapore to SCW, 31 May 1954.

⁴¹Mrs Winnifred Holmes, overseas representative for the Women’s Council of the United Kingdom was one of the members of the SCW. Mrs V.M. West, a former member of Britain’s National Council of Women was a committee member of the SCW. The SCW also played host to visiting representatives of international affiliates such as Mrs Mary McLarty of the National Council of Women of South Africa in 1958. Minutes of the SCW, 9 Sep. 1953.

⁴²Chief, Women’s Bureau, Liberal-Democratic Party of Japan to President, SCW, 27 Aug. 1957. Annual Report of the SCW, 1954, Letter from Consulate General for the Republic of Indonesia, Singapore, to the SCW, 26 Feb. 1954 and 18 Mar. 1954; Letter from Hong Kong Council of Women to SCW, 28 Jan. 1954.

⁴³Representatives of the SCW, notably Mrs Shirin Fozdar and Mrs George Lee liaised with women’s groups in Hong Kong, Vietnam, Cambodia, China and Britain and undertook lecture tours. Annual Report of the SCW 1954 & 1960; *Sunday Times*, 17 Aug. 1958; *SFP*, 8 Aug. 1959; *ST*, 10 Aug. 1959; *Sunday Times*, 6 Sep. 1959; *ST*, 8 Sep. 1959.

Indonesian Prime Minister's office demanding the abolition of polygamy and child marriages in December 1953, the SCW extended their congratulations.⁴⁴ When Egyptian feminist, Doria Shafik, went on a hunger strike in order to get voting rights for the women of her country, SCW sent a telegram to President General Muhammed Nguib of Egypt requesting him to consider her demands favourably.⁴⁵ When British women petitioned the House of Commons on 9th March 1954 for "equal pay for equal work", SCW sent another telegram of support. When the United Nations Economic and Social Council sat to draft the convention on the status of women in 1954, the SCW alerted the local press.⁴⁶ And when the Governor of Singapore, Sir Robert Black, was transferred to Hong Kong in 1957, the SCW requested him to assist the Hong Kong Council of Women in their efforts to change the marriage laws.⁴⁷

Finally, the SCW created a distinct brand of community service. Rather than carrying out fundraising and offering voluntary services to charitable organizations, the SCW decided that its community service projects would be related directly to the problems faced by the women in the colony and which would illustrate the need for women's rights. They would be projects which were not already addressed in a satisfactory manner by any welfare organization. Several projects distinguished the community-service role of the SCW: the opening of a girls' club, the setting up of creches and the opening of a home for the rehabilitation of girls and marriage counselling.⁴⁸

The establishment of a girls' club in Singapore was first mooted by the Social Welfare Department who "noting that there were at present eight boys clubs but no girls club in Singapore" asked the SCW to consider the sponsoring of one so as to enable girls to make "healthy use of their leisure time".⁴⁹ Rising to the challenge, money was raised and a premise found. Wealthier members of the SCW donated equipment for the club such as typewriters and sewing machines.⁵⁰ The club began functioning in February 1953 at the Joo Chiat Welfare Centre.⁵¹ Meanwhile, volunteers were recruited, mostly from the SCW, to teach the girls subjects such as English, the vernacular languages, cooking, sewing and the art of self defence.⁵² The club proved immensely popular with two hundred girls registering on the first day and the subsequent increase

⁴⁴SCW to Indonesian Women's Association, Djakarta, 26 Dec. 1953.

⁴⁵SCW to General Nguib of Cairo, March 1954.

⁴⁶*SFP*, 16 Jul. 1954.

⁴⁷Governor Black was polite but non-committal, replying that he "would take note of it". Minutes of the SCW, 30 Jul. 1958.

⁴⁸Pressure was also felt within the SCW leadership for it to play a bigger role in community service. Vice-President Mrs Goh Kok Kee, for instance, felt that "we shall achieve most if we show that we are out to assess the needs of the women of Singapore and the potential contribution they would make to the community given the opportunity and the facilities, rather than to stress fighting for one's rights". Interview with Mrs Goh Kok Kee. See also Mrs Goh to Shirin Fozdar, 11 Apr. 1952.

⁴⁹Secretary for Social Welfare, T.E. Smith to SCW, 12 Aug. 1952 and 6 Mar. 1953.

⁵⁰Minutes of the SCW, 7 Apr. 1953, 20 Oct. 1953 and 24 Nov. 1953.

⁵¹The club was opened by Muriel Blythe, the wife of the Colonial Secretary. Mrs Muriel Blythe to SCW, 17 Feb. 1953.

⁵²*ST*, 2 Apr. 1953; *SFP*, 16 Feb. 1953; *ST*, 20 Feb. 1953. SCW also tried to find positions for girls from the club to train as midwives. Matron of Kandang Kerbau Hospital to SCW, 5 Dec. 1953. See also Open Letter of the SCW to the Privileged Women of Singapore, 25 Feb. 1953.

in enrolment forced the SCW to transfer some classes from the Joo Chiat Welfare Centre to the Tanjong Katong Girls' School.⁵³

Another task which the SCW thought worthy of its attention was the setting up of creches in factories. In 1952, noticing that large numbers of working women were finding it difficult to combine family upbringing with employment, they appealed to factories employing more than a hundred women such as the Lee Rubber Co Ltd. and the Dunlop Rubber Purchasing Co. Ltd. to consider the setting up of creches within the factory premises. Free advice was offered on how to run them "in an economical and yet humane way so that children will not be left unattended or at the mercies of some neighbour or relative when the mother is at work". However, while some factories promised to look into the matter, most were reluctant to take up the offer of the SCW.⁵⁴

Finally, concerned about the prevalence of prostitution in Singapore, the SCW resolved to focus on the problem of girls and women from Hong Kong and China who had been sold to brothel owners against their knowledge or will.⁵⁵ To put pressure on the government to bring about reforms in this area, the SCW decided to highlight the problem at international women's conferences such as the Afro-Asian Conference in Colombo, and the Pan Pacific Southeast Asian Women Association conference in Tokyo, held in February and November 1958 respectively. At the Colombo conference, Mrs Fozdar, Secretary of the SCW, depicted the urgent need for social reforms by portraying Singapore as a place where a lucrative trade in women was being carried out.⁵⁶ The publicity in the press brought about by her remarks caused an uproar and necessitated a meeting with the Chief Minister.

The SCW was also concerned about the vice trade, and particularly about the situation of women forced to become prostitutes. The SCW proposed to establish a centre where women who wished to leave the vice trade could be rehabilitated and taught useful skills to enable them to make an alternate living.⁵⁷ However, this did not materialize due to the lack of financial and governmental support.⁵⁸

⁵³Asst. Director of Education to SCW, 4.5.1953. Later, there was an attempt to start another girls' club in the Kim Keat area. Minutes of the SCW, 19 Sep. 1953, 20 Oct. 1953 and 16 Sep. 1957.

⁵⁴Lee Seng Gee, Lee Rubber Co Ltd. to SCW, 2 Jul. 1952; Manager, Dunlop Rubber Purchasing Co. Ltd. to SCW, 3 Jul. 1952; and Manager, Malayan Breweries Ltd. to SCW, 14 Jul. 1952.

⁵⁵SCW to Minister for Labour and Welfare, 16.9.1957; Minister for Labour and Welfare to SCW, 25 Sep. 1957. See also Ah Eng Lai, *Peasants, Proletariat and Prostitutes: A Preliminary Investigation in the Work of Chinese Women in Colonial Malaya* (Singapore: ISEAS, 1986), pp. viii, 115.

⁵⁶*Sunday Times*, 17 Aug. 1958. See also Minutes of the SCW, 1 Jun. 1957; 18 Nov. 1957; and 19 Mar. 1958.

⁵⁷*SFP*, 30 Jul. 1958. The SCW was chiefly handicapped by the lack of a building and made several attempts in this respect to secure one from philanthropist Lee Kong Chian as well as Chief Minister Lim Yew Hock. Minutes of the SCW, 16 Oct. 1957, 18 Nov. 1957 and 3 Jan. 1958.

⁵⁸Things began to change however with the election victory of the People's Action Party (PAP) in 1959. In November 1959, a Women and Girls Advisory Committee was established by the government with the object of keeping prostitution under control through the suppression of brothels and vice racketeers. By 1960, the Social Welfare had become more fully involved in the rehabilitation and welfare of prostitutes and for this purpose, a separate section, the Women and Girls Welfare Section was established to concentrate its efforts in this field. The Women's Charter of 1961 also included increased penalties for offences against women and girls.

The Polygamy Issue

However, the SCW is best remembered not so much for its service-oriented projects, or its contacts with the press and international bodies, but for its attempts to lobby for the legislation of the principle of monogamy in all marriages in Singapore.⁵⁹ The decision to make polygamy the symbol of the injustices suffered by women in society was fueled by the following considerations.

First, apart from a small percentage of Chinese and Indian women, who married under the Christian and Civil Marriage Ordinance, the larger proportion of female population in Singapore, many lacking any formal education, was totally unprotected against customary and religious laws which allowed men to take more than one wife.⁶⁰ Polygamy thus became a prevalent practice.

Second, divorce laws were lax and women were greatly disadvantaged. While the man could divorce his wife on the slightest excuse, the women could not do likewise, owing to a lack of education as well as the fact that a woman and her children were often totally dependent on the man in the house. A link was made between the practice of polygamy and the high divorce rate in the colony⁶¹ in the sense that the condoning of polygamy led not only to the breakup of the family unit but also encouraged men to divorce their wives so as to take additional ones, without incurring additional expenses of maintenance.

Third, as most marriages were not properly registered, women were left with few rights for settling grievances in court and had often to resort to government or quasi-government agencies like the Social Welfare Department or the Chinese Consulate General for informal arbitration. The Indians, for example, brought their complaints of promiscuity, desertion and illegal unions to the Labour Department which also acted as an agency offering advice and guidance on marital problems. The Social Welfare Department thus found itself inundated with cases of women and children who were left destitute by husbands who had divorced them without their knowledge or consent.⁶² Similarly, the SCW found itself counselling large numbers of women on this issue and spending a large proportion of its time liaising with the Department of Social Welfare on various aspects of marriage counselling and the Department of Immigration on the importing of women from Hong Kong, China and Japan as secondary wives.⁶³

⁵⁹Thus it was that in September 1953, a "furious discussion" of 300 members at the British Council ended with a commitment to fight for legislation to end polygamy. *ST*, 7 Aug. 1953; *SFP*, 8 Aug. 1953; Minutes of the SCW, 6 Aug. 1953.

⁶⁰Maurice Freedman, *Colonial Law and Chinese Society* (London: Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, 1952), p. 102.

⁶¹The years 1946–60 show divorce on the increase. The Divorce Case Book of the High Court.

⁶²City Councillor Mrs Robert Eu (1949–57) and vice-president of the pro tem committee of the SCW, recalled: "Whenever, a mother came to see me in tears that her husband was taking another wife because she was three months pregnant, I had to tell lies to Immigration so as to prevent the man from importing another wife from Shanghai." Lies were necessary because "if I had told the truth, they would say I was interfering in Chinese customs, so I had to say that he was importing a woman to be a prostitute". Interview with Mrs Robert Eu, 11 Nov. 1992.

⁶³Interview with Mrs George Lee, President of the SCW 1952–60 on 21 Nov. 1992. See also Depy Secy for Social Welfare to SCW, 4 Dec. 1953 and 17 Dec. 1953. Letters soliciting help also flowed in. See e.g. Kathi H. Zubir B. H. Md. Amin to SCW, 23 Jun. 1952, Kamil bin Abdullah to SCW, 2 Oct. 1957 and C.R. Devaraj to SCW, 1 Dec. 1953.

Last but not least, reforms taking place in India and China convinced SCW members of the viability of the anti-polygamy campaign. In 1950, a new set of marriage laws was introduced in the People's Republic of China which prohibited polygamy, concubinage and arranged marriage. Monogamy and the freedom to choose marriage partners and equality of status for both sexes were also enforced. In India, both women and social reform organizations were also fighting for similar legislation. Their agitation was to lead to the passing of two historic bills – the Hindu Marriage and Divorce Bill and the Hindu Succession Bill in 1955.⁶⁴ These bills established monogamous marriage for all Hindus in the country and gave women essentially the same rights as those enforced in China.

Being simple to understand and close enough to the hearts of most women, the issue of polygamy was thus pinpointed as one capable of harnessing wide support. Convinced that legislation would be the most effective way to end polygamy, the SCW proceeded to draft the “Singapore Prevention of Bigamous Marriages Ordinance” and decided to lobby for support from five main groups: the Legislative Councillors, the British authorities, the Muslim community, the Chinese community and the political parties (see Appendix A).

A Bill for the Legislative Council

The 1954 Prevention of Bigamous Marriages Ordinance called for the minimum marriage age to be raised to sixteen and for bigamous marriages to be made void. The first condition was motivated by the fact that there had been instances of girls of sixteen who had been divorced three or four times, and the second by the rampant practice of polygamy and the high divorce rates. Members of the Legislative Council were approached for their help to move the bill in council.⁶⁵

The bill was supported notably by two members – John Laycock and Dasaratha Raj. As a Legislative Councillor and a founder-member of the Progressive Party, Laycock had tried unsuccessfully in 1950 to move a bill preventing the marriage of girls below the age of 16. Although the bill excluded Muslims from its provisions, much opposition was encountered from the Muslim Advisory Board and the All-Malaya Muslim Missionary Society. Muslim Legislative Councillors such as M.J. Namazie and Sardon bin Haji Jubir were also reluctant to support it on the grounds of custom and religion, arguing that education of the citizenry as to the disadvantages of marrying early, rather than legislation, would be more appropriate.⁶⁶

⁶⁴Ooi, “The Changing Status of Chinese Women”, p. 86, argues that external forces from India and China played a major role in changing the perceptions of the people: “In the twentieth century, the forces of modernization and urbanization were especially influential in changing the perspectives of Chinese society, and concepts from the west were easily assimilated.” The role of women's groups such as the SCW, is downplayed.

⁶⁵SCW members presented copies of the bill to members such as Lim Yew Hock, elected member for Keppel, E.J. Davies/QC (ex-officio), Thio Chan Bee JP elected member for Balestier, the Hon. Inche Ahmad bin Mohd. Ibrahim, nominated unofficial members, C.R. Dasaratha Raj, elected member of Rochore, G.W. Davis, Commissioner for Labour and nominated official members. Interview with Mrs Elizabeth Choy, president of pro tem committee of SCW and nominated unofficial member of the Legislative Council 1951–55.

⁶⁶The bill was thus referred to a Select Committee, which was unable to complete its work before the dissolution of the Council in 1951. See Progress Report of the Select Committee appointed to examine and report on the age of Marriage Bill; also Colony of Singapore, *Proceedings of the First Legislative Council* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 13 Oct. 1950), pp. B381–90.

Dasaratha Raj, a member of the Hindu Advisory Board advised the SCW to hold on to their bill until his own – the Hindu Monogamous Marriage Bill – was passed.⁶⁷ This was because he was afraid that if the SCW's bill met with opposition, which was more likely to be the case since it affected all those residing in Singapore, then his hope of enforcing monogamy on the Hindus would also be frustrated.⁶⁸ Like Laycock, Raj was unsuccessful and he was fiercely attacked by the more conservative Hindu members of his community. The Tamil Reform Association, for example, which objected to the bill on the grounds that it advocated monogamy, argued that there was no need for monogamy and the question of divorce should be settled according to Hindu customary law.⁶⁹ Confronted with strong resistance, Raj was not able to move the SCW's bill, as he had promised.⁷⁰

It was to be two years later before another attempt was made to bring about reforms in family laws for the Hindu community. Introduced the second time around by M.P.D. Nair, the Hindu Monogamous Marriage Bill of 1956 attempted to take up the threads left by the Hindu Monogamous Marriage Bill. However, opposition by the Tamil Reform Association was once again felt. This time while conceding that compulsory registration of Hindu marriage might be useful, the association was against embarking on controversial matters such as provisions for monogamy and divorce.⁷¹ Referred to a Select Committee the bill was not read again until 1958, when another Legislative Assembly member, Lee Choon Eng, asked the government whether they would introduce legislation for the registration of Hindu marriages. It was obvious by then that the government was hesitant in introducing the Bill for fear of splitting the Hindu community on the issue.⁷²

The strong opposition faced by Raj in 1954 in his attempts to introduce monogamy among the Hindus convinced the SCW that their attempts to move their own bill would also be futile. They decided instead to concentrate on lobbying other influential groups to support the bill.⁷³

The British Authorities

In 1953, the SCW appealed to the colonial government to introduce legislation “which would prevent such laxity in marriage laws . . . so that any woman in this country may in future enjoy the same marital privileges and rights as are enjoyed by women in other British dominions”. Arguing their case on grounds that they were acting “in accordance with the provisions of the Human Rights Charter of the United

⁶⁷*SFP*, 16 Jul. 1954.

⁶⁸Minutes of the SCW, 8 Feb. 1954. Since 1952, Raj, the Labour member of the Legislative Council had wanted to tighten Hindu marriage laws and make them as binding as Christian marriage laws. *ST*, 21 Jan. 1952.

⁶⁹Tamil Reform Association's memorandum to the Select Committee on the Hindu Monogamous Marriage Bill, 28 Jun. 1954.

⁷⁰Colony of Singapore, *Proceedings of the Second Legislative Council*, 17 Mar. 1954 and 13 Apr. 1954 (Singapore: Government Printing Office), pp. B49, B79–84.

⁷¹Colony of Singapore, *Singapore Legislative Assembly Debates*, 7 Mar. 1956 (Singapore: Government Printing Office), pp. 1710–28. Also see *ST*, 8 Mar. 1957.

⁷²The reason the British gave was that they were waiting for similar developments in the Federation to occur first. *Ibid.*, 11 Jun. 1958, p. 328.

⁷³Minutes of the SCW, 5 Jan. 1954.

Nations Organization to which her Majesty is a signatory”,⁷⁴ they called on the British “to do for the women of Singapore what Lord Bentinck, your countryman did for the women of India”.⁷⁵

The British authorities were placed in a difficult situation. While concerned with “justice and right” and the protection of women in the colony, they did not on the other hand wish to depart from their policy of non-interference with local customs and were careful to refrain from enacting legislation that would arouse religious controversies. Thus, while the Colonial Secretary assured the SCW privately that he “appreciated our move and was 100 per cent in sympathy with our aspirations”, he expressed his anxiety at the attitude of some of the Muslim leaders who were opposed to the bill.⁷⁶ The message was clear: British support would be forthcoming only if the SCW could first persuade the leaders of the communities concerned of the need for reforms.⁷⁷ The Secretary of Chinese Affairs, R.N. Broom, advised the refusal of British support “until there is a clear demand from the Chinese community, which is not so apparent so far. . . .”⁷⁸ Nevertheless, indirect and informal support from the British enabled the SCW to work fruitfully with government departments, such as those for Social Welfare and Education, in their many projects.⁷⁹

However, the British authorities did attempt to assess the extent to which the SCW’s Bill commanded popular support. Commenting on the issue of polygamy in 1954, for example, the Controller of Immigration reported to the Secretary of Chinese Affairs that: “there is as yet no clear demand from the Chinese community for legislation about Chinese marriage in the Colony although I think it is true to say that there is a decided movement, amongst the younger generation at any rate, from polygamy to monogamy. I personally hope that this gathers strength and that we shall soon see a definite demand for legislation.”⁸⁰ As clear support was not evident, the British authorities were content to let matters lie.

The SCW also lobbied with the Constitutional Commission under George Rendel in 1953. A petition was sent to the Commission imploring its members “to ensure that women’s rights pertaining to divorce and marriage be fully safeguarded in any new constitution that may eventually be adopted for the colony”. However, as women already had the vote and as the terms of reference of the Commission did not enable it to make recommendations on any matters other than the future constitutional structure of Singapore, this initiative came to nought.⁸¹

The Muslim Community

Of all the ethnic communities in Singapore, the Muslim community was the one which the SCW felt needed reforms in marriage most. Concerned that in the past

⁷⁴SCW to Governor in Council, 5 May 1953.

⁷⁵SCW to the Governor in Council, 3 Jun. 1957.

⁷⁶Chief Secretary to Secretary of Internal Affairs, 20 Jun. 1957.

⁷⁷Colonial Secretary to SCW, 23 Jul. 1952 and 27 Jul. 1953; Minutes of the SCW, 5 Jan. 1954.

⁷⁸Secretary of Chinese Affairs to Comptroller of Immigration, 19 May 1954.

⁷⁹*Singapore Standard*, 1 Dec. 1953. The colonial government gave two representatives from the SCW covered seats along the coronation route in London, which they accepted. Colonial Secretary’s Office to SCW, 4 Mar. 1953.

⁸⁰Controller of Immigration to Secretary for Chinese Affairs, 29 Mar. 1954.

⁸¹SCW to Sir George Rendel, 14 Dec. 1953; Secretary of Constitutional Commission to SCW, 29 Dec. 1953.

decades, more than half of Malay marriages had ended in divorce,⁸² the SCW resolved that as a council of all Singapore women, their fight to end polygamy should not exclude Muslims. Muslim membership was thus encouraged and attempts were made to pressurize the Muslim Advisory Board (MAB) to look into reforms. These attempts would result in the passing of the Muslim Ordinance of 1957 which fulfilled some of their demands.

In an attempt to draw support from Muslim women, handbills were distributed in the kampongs in 1953 by members of the SCW. Quoting from the Koran, the handbill argued that monogamy, rather than polygamy, was the natural state of affairs: "And if you fear that you cannot act equitably towards orphans, then marry such women as seem good to you, two and three and four; but if you fear that you will not do justice (between them) then (marry) only one or what your right hand possesses (i.e. females taken as prisoners of war); this is more proper that you may not deviate from the right course."⁸³ However, the distribution of the handbill was stopped in mid-course by the police who feared a breach of peace.⁸⁴

The SCW agenda attracted many Muslim women and a handful even sat on its executive committee. However, many joined the association anonymously for "fear of reprimand from their husbands and parents",⁸⁵ and support from Muslim women was often passive and in secret. An article in the press stated that Muslim women "cannot raise their protests for fear of being divorced".⁸⁶

Realizing that they had no hope of gaining government support for their bill unless they were able to obtain the prior backing of the MAB,⁸⁷ the SCW began to petition the Board for reforms. Thus began in 1953, the series of correspondence between the SCW and the MAB, the body responsible for advising the government on social, cultural, economic and religious matters pertaining to the Muslims. While the more reform-minded members of the MAB were willing to consider reforms,⁸⁸ the majority was strongly opposed to the idea.⁸⁹

As a means of putting pressure on the MAB, a petition was sent in 1954 to a member of the House of Commons in England, Stanley Awbery, decrying "the terrible insecurity of married life in this country" and the opposition the SCW was encounter-

⁸²For a Muslim couple to be divorced the husband must pronounce a ritual formula, stating to his wife "I divorce you". If the husband pronounced a triple "talak", stating "I divorce you" three times in succession, the divorce is irrevocable.

⁸³Handbill distributed by the SCW, *circa* Dec. 1953/Jan. 1954. See also Minutes of SCW, 8 Jan. 1954, 12 Jan. 1954 and 9 Feb. 1954.

⁸⁴Commissioner of Police to the SCW, 29 Jan. 1954. According to SCW committee member, Mrs Manisah Parbury, "The fight was hard and bitter so much so that Shirin Fozdar the secretary of the SCW was on two occasions threatened with murder". *ST*, 9 Jul. 1957.

⁸⁵Interview with Mrs George Lee, President of SCW, 21 Nov. 1992; and Cik Azizah Osman, SCW executive committee member, 10 Dec. 1992.

⁸⁶*SFP*, 7 Jan. 1954.

⁸⁷For more details, on the role and functions of the MAB, see Shahril bin Mohd. Shah, "The Muslim Advisory Board of Singapore 1947-1968" (B.A. Honours Academic Exercise, Dept. of History, National University of Singapore, 1989/90).

⁸⁸Ahmad bin Mohd. Ibrahim and Abu Bakar Pawanchee were sympathetic to marriage reforms. Interview with Mrs M. Siraj, founder member of the Young Muslim Women's Association, 1952, on 11 Feb. 1993.

⁸⁹Minutes of the SCW, 6 Aug. 1953; SCW to MAB, 14 Dec. 1953, 19 Mar. 1954; MAB to SCW, 18 Dec. 1953.

ing in its attempts to institute reforms.⁹⁰ The SCW argued that while they had a sizable number of Malay supporters, a few leaders of the Malays “who are mostly themselves either Arabs, Persians or Indians and who are rich and can indulge in polygamy, are opposed to any change”. Moreover, these men were “backed by the Kathis (priests), who have made a lucrative business out of frequent marriages and divorces”.⁹¹ The petition prompted Awbery to ask the Secretary of State for the Colonies in the House of Commons report on the divorce rate in Singapore as well as “the steps which were being taken to tighten the marriage and divorce laws so as to give the women the same marital rights as are enjoyed by women in other parts of the British Commonwealth”.⁹²

Later, in September 1955, the SCW wrote to President Gemal Abdul Nassar of Egypt, then the dominant force in Arab politics, asking him to come to the rescue of Muslim women all over the world and to legislate for monogamous marriage, so that other Muslim countries could follow the progressive trend in Egypt.⁹³ By November 1955, seeing that no headway could be made, the SCW toned down their demands. Instead of asking for the abolition of bigamous marriages, the SCW petitioned instead for reforms which would restrict them in practice:

1. education of girls must be made compulsory, which included religious education.
2. the raising of the marriage age of girls to 16, thereby giving them time to learn domestic science and be better equipped as housewives.
3. the encouragement of monogamy.
4. the discouragement of frivolous divorces by enforcing the appearance of the couple before a court and the giving of valid reasons for divorce.
5. sufficient maintenance to be granted to children by the father even though the wife is divorced.
6. the permitting of civil marriages between Muslims and non-Muslims to cut down on instances of Malay women living with non-Muslim husbands out of wedlock.
7. the employment of enlightened and honest religious teachers and preachers from Cairo and Iraq so that a correct training in religion may be imparted to the Malay community.

The above petition was also sent to all the Sultans in the States of Malaya.⁹⁴ The SCW saw a close link between Singapore and the Federation of Malaya as Singapore had preserved many links with the Malayan Union (and subsequently the Federation) in matters such as immigration, currency, university education, income tax. In addition, many women residing in the Federation had also written to them for help.⁹⁵

⁹⁰SCW to Stanley Awbery, 8 Jan. 1954 and 9 Sep. 1954.

⁹¹SCW to Stanley Awbery, 9 Sep. 1954.

⁹²The reply given was that no comprehensive statistics were available and that such matters were governed by religious and customary observances. Women problems were also, according to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, “not urgent enough to warrant special attention”. Reply from Hopkinson to Awbery, House of Commons, 27 Jan. 1954; Stanley Awbery to SCW, 21 Jan. 1954.

⁹³SCW to President Nasser of Egypt, 8 Sep. 1955.

⁹⁴SCW to all the Sultans of Malaya, 25 Nov. 1955; Private Secretary, Sultan of Johore to SCW, 1 Dec. 1955; Secretary, Sultan of Kedah to SCW, 7 Jan. 1956.

⁹⁵The SCW referred such cases to the UMNO Kaum Ibu as well as the Chief Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman. From woman (name withheld) to SCW, 18 Mar. 1956; SCW to woman, 27 Mar. 1956; SCW to Chief Minister, Malay Federation, 27 Mar. 1956; SCW to UMNO Kaum Ibu, 27 Mar. 1956.

Aware that the marriage laws in the Federation of Malaysia were even more flexible and that many Malay men wishing to avoid the stricter laws in Singapore could go across to Johore to be married, the SCW viewed changes in the Federation as a necessary adjunct to their activities. Last but not least, the SCW was also fired by their ambition to establish a Malayan Women's Council (which would include Singapore).⁹⁶

A series of talks was undertaken by committee members of the SCW from 1955 to 1957 in the town halls of Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Ipoh, Taiping and Muar.⁹⁷ Mrs Shirin Fozdar's contention that "Shame and misery are forced on Muslim women in Malaya in the name of God and religion" and "Malaya beats Hollywood: 60 out of 100 marriages end on rocks"⁹⁸ at one instance won many supporters and opponents. A cordial relationship with Tengku Abdul Rahman, President of the United Malay National Organization (UMNO) and later Prime Minister of the Federation of Malaya,⁹⁹ as well as Tan Cheng Lock and Dr Lim Chong Eu, leaders of the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) benefitted the effort to lobby support for their cause.¹⁰⁰ Arising from these activities, a meeting of the UMNO Kaum Ibu (Women's Section) in 1958 moved a resolution that something should be done to curb the high divorce rates and that divorced women be given maintenance.¹⁰¹ Concrete measures however did not materialize for although such leaders of the Alliance were personally sympathetic to the SCW's agenda, the leadership as a whole was essentially a conservative, English-educated, upper-middle class, propertied group, who did not want to see radical social or economic change.¹⁰²

Although the *Malay Mail* reported that Shirin Fozdar and the SCW had "a rapidly increasing following throughout Malaya and Singapore and not from the womenfolk only",¹⁰³ the SCW was unable to draw strong support in Malaya. The main women's groups in Malaya in the fifties, such as the National Association of Woman's Institute (NAWI) and the YWCA (Malaya branch), attracted elite women and expatriate wives, and focused on women's roles in the home and on social welfare. An editorial assessing the SCW's Malayan campaign summed up the situation succinctly: "although Mrs Fozdar had striven to awaken women in the Federation, she has certainly set her sights

⁹⁶There were talks that their name should be changed from the SCW to the MCW (Malayan Council of Women). As late as 1961, novelist Dr Han Suyin, then Vice-President of the SCW, urged that a similar SCW be established in the Peninsula. This however, never materialized. Minutes of the SCW, 26 Feb. 1961; Report of SCW Annual General Meeting 1958-59.

⁹⁷*Borneo Bulletin*, 19 Mar. 1954; *MM*, 23 May 1955; *ST*, 20 Apr. 1958; *MM*, 25 Jul. 1960. See also Minutes of the SCW, 20 Jul. 1958.

⁹⁸*ST*, 5 Feb. 1958; *Weekender*, 7 Mar. 1958.

⁹⁹SCW to Tunku Abdul Rahman, 27 Oct. 1959; Private Secretary, Tunku Abdul Rahman to SCW, 29 Oct. 1959.

¹⁰⁰MCA to SCW, 21 Jul. 1952, 23 Jul. 1952 and 19 Aug. 1952; SCW to MCA, 16 Aug. 1952, 8 Sep. 1952 and 26 Dec. 1953. In 1957, Dr. Lim Chong Eu of the MCA assured the SCW that "as soon as he had consolidated his position (politically) he would move in this matter" and that "in 1959 he would be in a position to introduce the much sought after reform in Chinese marriages". Report of the Secretary, SCW, 1957-58.

¹⁰¹*ST*, 7 Jun. 1958.

¹⁰²Mary C. Turnbull, *A History of Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei*, Rev. ed. (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989).

¹⁰³See editorial entitled "Women Leaders", *MM*, 25 Apr. 1958.

high, and her programme for a Malayan Women's council is fully as revolutionary in its way as that of the most extreme nationalists in Malaya."¹⁰⁴

The Singapore Muslim Ordinance of 1957

Nevertheless, these developments put pressure on the Muslim Advisory Board for reforms and the Board eventually agreed to the provision of the Muslim Ordinance, which became law in 1957.¹⁰⁵ Equally pressured by the rising demands of Muslim women,¹⁰⁶ the MAB was finally persuaded to consider the establishment of a Syariah Court where all disputed divorces could be tried and a bill was finally introduced in the Legislative Assembly in November 1955.¹⁰⁷ It was committed to a second hearing in 1956 and finally passed in April 1957.¹⁰⁸

Like the Hindu Bill of 1956, the Muslim Ordinance was silent on the issue of polygamy. Nevertheless, the Ordinance was remarkably progressive for its time in the sense that it safeguarded the interests of Muslim women through a number of provisions. Basically, the ordinance provided for the establishment of a Muslim law court (Syariah Court) so as to make the process of divorce more difficult.¹⁰⁹ It would be empowered to inquire into and adjudicate upon the claims of married women for the payment of maintenance and consolatory gifts, and to deal with the question of custody of children and the division of property. The marriage age of Muslim couples was also set at 16 years except under special circumstances.¹¹⁰

While it may be expected that the SCW should have cause for celebration, this was far from the case. Their response to the Muslim Ordinance was that not enough had been done. While pleased that two of their initial demands had been met, the establishment of a Syariah Court to hear and determine disputes among Muslims and the raising of the marriage age, they were concerned that the Ordinance did not support the principle of "one man one wife". Moreover, while there were measures to restrict divorces and control polygamy, there was no strong provisions to deter a man from taking a second wife.¹¹¹ The SCW was also dissatisfied that the ordinance did not

¹⁰⁴*MM*, 30 May 1955. Women in the Fédération were not ready and the National Council of Women's Organizations (NCWO), which may be said to be a near equivalent of the SCW, was formed only in 1963, with the expressed aim of raising the status of women by fighting for among other things, reforms in marriage and divorce laws and equal pay for men and women in the public sector.

¹⁰⁵*Singapore Legislative Assembly Debates*, 26 Apr. 1957, pp. 1656–65.

¹⁰⁶Public opinion was also changing with fewer parents agreeing to give their daughters in marriage to a man whom they know to be already married. There was also a growing group of educated Muslim men and women who declared it to be reprehensible and sought justification for this opinion in an reinterpretation of the Koranic text. Interview with Mrs M. Siraj, first women case-worker at the Syariah Court. See also *PPSEAWA Singapore Bulletin* (Singapore, 1960), p. 88.

¹⁰⁷*Singapore Legislative Assembly Debates*, 21 Nov. 1955, p. 968.

¹⁰⁸*Ibid.*, 5 Nov. 1956, pp. 433–37 and 26 Apr. 1957, pp. 1655–65. See also *ST*, 27 Apr. 1957.

¹⁰⁹Due to the problem of finding a judge, the Shariah Court came into operation only towards the end of 1958. Minutes of the SCW, 19 Mar. 1958 and 23 Oct. 1958.

¹¹⁰Ahmad bin Ibrahim, "The Muslim Ordinance 1957 of Singapore", *Islamic World* 1, no. 4 (Jul. 1958): 4.

¹¹¹Ten years later, on 1 Jul. 1968, the Administration of Muslim Law Act (Cap 42) repealed the Ordinance of 1957. In accordance with this new law, a man who wishes to undergo a second marriage is required to seek the approval of the *kathi*.

provide for the representation of women on the Syariah Court: "Since marriage and divorce are matters concerning both the man and women, would it not, therefore, be more equitable if some women well versed in the Koranic injunctions were also represented on the Law Court. Is it fair that women appearing before these courts should continue to fear these courts consisting of men only and therefore biased towards men?"¹¹²

The MAB however felt that they had been generous and warned the SCW that their attempts "to tamper with that code of life and culture, will only result in embittering feelings in Singapore" and that "it cannot lend its support to a proposed measure which is, and will be, strongly opposed by the vast majority of Muslim men and women of Singapore and which might have the effect of increasing the incidence of divorce among Muslims, a result the reverse of that which you are desirous of achieving".¹¹³

Undaunted, the SCW sent a letter of protest to the Governor, asking the British government to pay attention to the type of men nominated to advise on communal customs and traditions: "In a country whose government is based on socialistic ideals, men with the feudalistic practice of maintaining harems should not be appointed to such boards." The Chairman of the Muslim Advisory Board, Dato S.I.O. Alsagoff commenting on this statement reassured the public that: "Neither the government nor the Muslim community would ever agree to such a demand. The resolution is meaningless and I don't think any attention will be paid to it."¹¹⁴

Nevertheless, despite its perceived lapses, the Muslim Ordinance produced many significant changes. Its enactment resulted in a marked decline in the divorce rate among Muslims. While the divorce rate was 51.7 per cent in 1957, the year of the passing of the Ordinance, it fell to 49.2 per cent in 1958, to 36.8 per cent in 1959, to 26.9 per cent in 1960, and to 21.8 per cent in 1961. By 1962, the Singapore divorce rate of 26.8 per cent was far lower than the divorce rate in the Malay states, including the states of Penang and Melaka, which formerly along with Singapore made up the Straits Settlements and had somewhat similar populations.¹¹⁵

The Chinese Community and the Chinese Advisory Board

The next group which the SCW attempted to lobby for support was the Chinese Advisory Board (CAB), which was part of the Chinese Secretariat and the Governor's chief advisor on all important Chinese matters.¹¹⁶ From 1953-61, the CAB was the recipient of numerous petitions by the SCW.

In 1954, referring to the fact that Dasaratha Raj had already introduced a bill to prohibit polygamous marriages among the Hindus, the SCW called on the CAB to arise to do the same.¹¹⁷

¹¹²SCW to the MAB, 6 Dec. 1955.

¹¹³MAB to SCW, 12 Feb. 1958; SCW to MAB, 14 Dec. 1958.

¹¹⁴SCW to Governor-in-Council, 3 Jun. 1957. See also *SFP*, 25 Apr. 1957.

¹¹⁵Shirle Gordon, "Marriage/Divorce in the Eleven States of Malaya and Singapore", *Intisari* 2, no. 2 (1965): 23-25.

¹¹⁶The Chinese Secretariat formed in 1946 had its origins in 1876 when a Chinese protectorate was formed. Between 1876 to 1941, it became known as a bureau to administer all matters pertaining to the Chinese community. In 1946, many of its functions were transferred to other departments and the post of Protectorate was abolished and the department was renamed the Chinese Secretariat. The department ceased to exist in 1958.

¹¹⁷Secretary for Social Welfare to Secretary for Chinese Affairs, 6 May 1954.

The sincerity of the Chinese men is now being tested by the women of this country. How far are you men prepared to implement that Charter of Human Rights, as far as the Rights of Women are concerned? Are you prepared to forego some of your rights and privileges and assist your unfortunate sisters to rise to the heights provided for women in that charter?

The SCW also urged them to:

Forget for a time the rights and privileges which a dying custom and a faulty judgment bestows upon a selfish husband, and learn to think in terms of your duties as fathers. The destiny of millions of Chinese girls is in your hands. Deal with them as you would like your daughters to be dealt with.¹¹⁸

However, like the MAB, the majority of the members of the CAB were totally opposed to the bill. They argued that since members of the public were free to avail themselves of the facilities provided by the Civil Marriage Ordinance and which had been popular with Chinese Christians, there was no real necessity for legislation. They also questioned the wisdom of introducing legislation in view of different customs and traditions in Singapore.¹¹⁹

The SCW asked the CAB to furnish them with a clear statement of Chinese marriage customs "so that we may publish it for our members".¹²⁰ They also corresponded with government departments such as the Social Welfare and Immigration departments to highlight the problems which loose marriage laws were causing. Working closely with the SCW, the Secretary for Social Welfare Department, T.P. Cromwell, had obtained information regarding the Civil Law ceremony for members of the Jewish Faith in England to use as a model in putting the customary marriage practices of the local Chinese community into a more regular form.¹²¹

Due to mounting pressure by the SCW and the fear of unfavourable publicity in the press, the CAB appointed a sub-committee in 1955 to look into what constituted a valid Chinese marriage.¹²² In 1956, the sub-committee reported that Chinese marriages required only a simple ceremony and the signing of a marriage certificate. It must be pointed out however that while the CAB felt it prudent to investigate what constituted a valid Chinese marriage, like leaders of the Muslim and Hindu community they refused to accept the principle of monogamy, regarding the matter as a "problem of considerable complexity".¹²³ Unlike the Muslim and Hindu Advisory Boards, the CAB did not ask that the question of monogamy be raised in the Legislative Assembly.

The SCW argued that the high birth rate was the result of polygamy and called on the CAB to deal with the social problem accordingly.¹²⁴ The *Kandang Kerbau*

¹¹⁸SCW to CAB, 23 Aug. 1954; see also SCW to Secretary for Chinese Affairs, 11 Nov. 1954.

¹¹⁹Report by the Secretary of Chinese Affairs, 24 Aug. 1957.

¹²⁰SCW to CAB, 29 May 1954.

¹²¹Secretary for Social Welfare to Secretary for Chinese Affairs, 6 May 1954.

¹²²On the other hand, the CAB felt that they could not ignore the question altogether especially as "they were under considerable pressure from the Singapore Council for women. If they were to refuse to discuss it and say anything at all, they would get a great deal of undesirable publicity from them." Minutes of the CAB, 3 Dec. 1954.

¹²³Minutes of the CAB, 3 Dec. 1954, 3 May 1955, 21 Jul. 1957; Secretary for Chinese Affairs to SCW, 11 Nov. 1954, 4 Jan. 1955.

¹²⁴SCW to the CAB, 20 Nov. 1958. Also *ST*, 24 Sep. 1953.

Hospital, the largest maternity hospital in Singapore was bursting at its seams. Added pressure was also put on the CAB through press statements released by the SCW at international conferences stating that Singapore was a haven for prostitutes because of its lax marriage laws, a deliberate exercise which angered and deeply embarrassed members of the CAB.¹²⁵ The CAB nevertheless did not shift from its original position *vis-à-vis* the SCW — that the SCW should concentrate on preventing child marriages rather than plural marriages.¹²⁶

The Political Parties

Finally, the SCW focused on local politicians and political parties, which were fast gaining political clout in a Singapore gearing up for self-government. The number of popularly elected seats in the Legislative Assembly increased from 6 in 1948, to 9 in 1951, 25 in 1955, and eventually to 51 seats in a fully elected Assembly in 1959. During the same period the number of ex-officio and nominated members decreased from 13 in 1948 and 1951 to 7 in 1955 and none in 1959.

Thus, it was imperative for the SCW to lobby for women's rights with the political parties, many of which (such as the Labour Front and the People's Action Party) were formed with the immediate aim of contesting seats in the new Legislative Council as provided for by the Rendel Commission in 1955. However, none of the political parties in the 1955 elections came out with a manifesto promising reforms for women. While parties promised socialistic reforms, they avoided touching on the problems of women for fear of losing popular support. Mrs Fozdar, then Secretary of the SCW, stated, "Nothing happened. . . . We approached all the political parties represented in the Assembly, but not a single one has the courage to undertake to introduce it."¹²⁷ As Lee Kuan Yew, Secretary-General of the People's Action Party (PAP) remarked in 1956, commenting on the registration of Hindu marriages: "no single political party could brave the storm of religious protest and resistance, but we should make a serious attempt to reconcile religious practices with modern-day needs in a modern day world".¹²⁸

It was a period when women were not politically conscious. Although women had the right to vote,¹²⁹ in the 1948 and 1951 elections voting was voluntary and many women did not bother to come out of their homes. Despite the automatic registration of voters in 1955, only 53 per cent of the electorate voted, and most of those who did so were men.¹³⁰

¹²⁵Minutes of CAB, 26 Feb. 1959. This vigorous campaign created some concern, causing the Chief Secretary to issue a memo: "Mrs Fozdar and her council have caused us much concern three years ago with a Bill for monogamy and we had to tell her to stop arousing Muslim feeling. Now she seems to be gunning for the Chinese. Could you tell us about present Chinese public opinion on monogamy, whether the CAB is interested in reforms and its attitude to a campaign by the SCW." Chief Secretary, W.A.C. Goode, to Secretary of Internal Affairs, 20 Jun. 1957.

¹²⁶Letter from CAB to SCW, 6 May 1959.

¹²⁷*SFP*, 7 Jun. 1957; *ST*, 11 Jul 1959.

¹²⁸*Singapore Legislative Assembly Debates*, 7 Mar. 1956, p. 1719.

¹²⁹In 1952, before the provision of automatic registration of voters provided by the Rendel Commission, the SCW had decided that the first task of their 15-member executive committee would be to start a door-to-door drive to enrol more members, while at the same time, cooperating with the supervisor of elections, to persuade women to register as voters. *ST*, 17 May 1952.

¹³⁰Interview with Mrs Robert Eu and Mrs Amy Ede, members of the Municipal/City Council, 1949–57.

The SCW had a good working relationship with members of the Labour Front such as David Marshall and Lim Yew Hock, both of whom were to become subsequently Chief Ministers of Singapore.¹³¹ From 1955–59, the SCW called on their government to remove the injustices which women faced, arguing that the “attainment of independence will remain an idle dream if the men in this country do not rise to generous heights to grant that independence to their own kith and kin – the women of the country”.¹³²

However, although both leaders personally supported the monogamy bill, they thought that putting it down as party policy would be politically inexpedient since such a policy could very well lose them votes because of its controversial nature.¹³³ Besides, the Labour Front regime was too preoccupied with strikes, violent labour disputes and riots over education to worry about women’s issues, while David Marshall was pre-occupied with the fight for the attainment of full internal self-government. Nevertheless, as Chief Minister, Marshall supported the establishment of the Syariah Court and told the SCW in 1955 that his ministry “was seriously considering amendments to the Muslim Ordinance, with a view to establishing the Syariah court”.¹³⁴ Marshall’s immediate successor, Lim Yew Hock, was most concerned with suppressing Communist activities.

Of all the political parties the PAP took the strongest stand on women’s rights. Formed in 1954 with the aim of ending colonial rule,¹³⁵ the PAP was under strong pressure from members of its Women’s League, many of whom were young, Chinese-educated, and markedly socialist in their ideals. Launched in 1956 under the leadership of Miss Chan Choy Siong, it called for women to join the political movement to oppose colonialism.¹³⁶ Members perceived women’s struggle for equality as intrinsically linked to the general class struggle, and women as a group were mobilized together with student and worker groups for the political cause. The “one man one wife” slogan was adopted as part of the anti-colonial theme.¹³⁷

The first big function organized by the League was the celebration of International Women’s Day on the 8th of March 1956.¹³⁸ The rally which was held at four places simultaneously was attended by more than 2,000 people, most of them trade unionists and Chinese school students.¹³⁹ Women leaders from all walks of life were invited to

¹³¹Interview with David Marshall, Chief Minister of Singapore, 1955–56, 18 Jan. 1993.

¹³²*MM*, 9 Jul. 1955; *The Weekender*, 4 Nov. 1955. See also J.M. Jumabhoy to Mrs Shirin Fozdar, 26 Apr. 1958; Lim Yew Hock to Shirin Fozdar, 29 Apr. 1958.

¹³³Interview with David Marshall. See also SCW to Chief Minister (Lim Yew Hock), 3 Feb. 1958; and Lim Yew Hock to Shirin Fozdar, 22 Mar. 1956.

¹³⁴Open letter from SCW to Chief Minister, 6 Jul. 1955. See also *MM*, 9 Jul. 1955.

¹³⁵S. Rajaratnam, *The Prophetic and the Political. Selected Speeches and Writings of S. Rajaratnam* (New York: Graham Brash and St. Martin’s Press, 1987), p. 29.

¹³⁶In December 1955, the pro tem committee of the Women’s League met to draft the constitution.

¹³⁷Interview with PAP members, Dr Toh Chin Chye, 27 Jan. 1993, and S. Rajaratnam, 1 Feb. 1993.

¹³⁸*ST*, 9 Mar. 1956; Fong, *The PAP*, p. 41, however, states that the women’s day rally was held on 3 March 1955 rather than 8 March 1956. Sip Chee Fong, *The PAP Story: The Pioneering Years, Singapore*, 1974.

¹³⁹The rally was held at Badminton Hall, Happy World Stadium, the B.O.D. Civilian Association and Shenton Way. Interview with Ong Pang Boon, Organizing Secretary of PAP Tanjong Pagar Branch 1955–60, 23 Feb. 1993. See also Pang Cheng Lian, *Singapore People’s Action Party* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 4.

celebrate the occasion. The SCW's representative was Mrs Shirin Fozdar, who urged the crowd to support their stand on the abolition of polygamy (see Appendix B). It was on this occasion that a resolution was passed for the first time by the League in support of the principle of monogamy. Two other resolutions which were passed were "equal pay for equal work" and the listing of Women's Day as a public holiday. The first two resolutions were subsequently moved during the party's annual general meeting in 1957.¹⁴⁰ The large turnout at the rally encouraged the PAP to plan another the following year. However, the British authorities were wary of the Party using the occasion as an opportunity to expound the communist cause rather than that of women's rights, and despite reassurances by Dr Toh Chin Chye, Chairman of the PAP, that "we wanted to celebrate Women's Day because we want women to have the same rights with men", permits for subsequent rallies were denied.¹⁴¹

The SCW was also skeptical of the PAP's sincerity in supporting the women's cause.¹⁴² Disappointed that the PAP had not campaigned against plural marriages, and had been silent on the issue of maintenance after divorce for Malay women,¹⁴³ the SCW voiced their dissatisfaction in 1957: "the most honest way is to introduce a monogamous bill. We've the draft if Mr Lee wants to help. . . ." The SCW suggested that political parties should not *make capital* out of women's issues "by holding elections once a year and shouting slogans".¹⁴⁴ They were also wary of the party's strong communist overtones. Convinced that "no Singapore political party is primarily concerned with women's rights", and that what the women of Singapore needed was "intelligent and capable women representatives who will speak out fearlessly for women's point of view", rather than women who toed the party line, the SCW called on women to stand as independents rather than as party members for the December 1957 City Council elections, regarded then as a dry run for the general elections of May 1959.¹⁴⁵ It was also during this time that the SCW toyed unsuccessfully with the idea of putting up an independent candidate for the next election so as to push for the monogamous marriage bill.¹⁴⁶

Inspired by the success of the PAP mass rally, the SCW also attempted in 1958 to organize its own mass rally where speakers could speak on women's rights in 1958. However, they lacked the organizational expertise of the PAP. Although over 10,000 pamphlets and posters were distributed, only a hundred people turned up.¹⁴⁷ Meanwhile, women's rights took a downswing on the PAP agenda as many active pro-

¹⁴⁰Interview with Ong Pang Boon. According to Ong, "little records were kept during those days for fear of police raids".

¹⁴¹*ST*, 4 Mar. 1957; *ST*, 9 Mar. 1957.

¹⁴²Minutes of the SCW, 19 Jun. 1957.

¹⁴³Other criticisms of the PAP included the fact that up to then, the PAP had not put up any women candidates at the polls and that many PAP members were also polygamous. *ST*, 9 Mar. 1957.

¹⁴⁴*ST*, 9 Mar. 1957.

¹⁴⁵*Sunday Times*, 18 Aug. 1957.

¹⁴⁶*ST*, 7 Jun. 1957; *SFP*, 8 Sep. 1957; *Sunday Times*, 18 Aug. 1957. During this time, SCW's Vice-President, Mrs Seow Peck Leng, also joined the Labour Front in an effort to push for women's rights.

¹⁴⁷*ST*, 10 Jun. 1958; *Singapore Standard*, 10 Jun. 1958; *Sunday Times*, 22 Jun. 1958. The Malay Women's Welfare Association however attributed the failure of the rally to the fact that not enough publicity of the event was given to the Muslim community. *Singapore Standard*, 22 Jun. 1958.

Communist leaders had resigned from its Women's League in 1957–58.¹⁴⁸ Moderate women leaders of the PAP were also concentrating their efforts in the City Council, and trying to implement an electoral programme rather than working on organizational activities for the League.¹⁴⁹

While the PAP was experiencing an internal power struggle between leftist and moderate elements within the party, the successful women's rally in 1956 by the PAP had shown other political parties that women were emerging as a force not to be ignored. This impression was reinforced by the 1957 City Council elections which saw the election of three women, two of whom were from the PAP.¹⁵⁰ Furthermore, with compulsory voting coming into effect for the first time in the 1959 elections, women's votes were now a factor not to be brushed aside easily.

Thus, while political parties gave low priority to women's issues, they were increasingly aware that concessions had to be made. In June 1958, Francis Thomas, Minister for Communications and Secretary-General of the Labour Front said that the Labour Front had been considering reforms of marriage laws. This was confirmed in a private audience with Chief Minister Lim Yew Hock of the Labour Front who also told the SCW that "the extent to which he could carry out the recommendations would depend on the political stability of his party".¹⁵¹ Not to be left out, E.K. Tan, Secretary-General of the Liberal Socialist said: "We believe it is only right that women be given equal social rights. Our party will consider introducing measures to end polygamy."¹⁵²

However, only one political party took the bold measure of putting their beliefs down in writing. Calculating that women's votes would play a crucial part in the 1959 elections, the PAP decided to include the principle of "one man one wife" in their election manifesto and became the only political party to campaign openly on the slogan of "one man one wife". The dramatic enunciation of women's rights by the PAP brought them immediately to the forefront of the women's movement.¹⁵³ In the PAP election manifesto of May 1959, the party pledged to improve the status of women by:

1. encouraging them to take an active part in politics.
2. helping them organize a unified women's movement to fight for women's rights.
3. encouraging women to play their proper part in government administration.
4. opening up new avenues of employment for women.

¹⁴⁸Interview with Ong Pang Boon. See also Pang Cheng Lian, *Singapore*, p. 4.

¹⁴⁹PAP City Councillors Mdm Ho Puay Choo and Miss Chan Choy Siong were now heavily involved in City Council duties and preparing for the 1959 elections rather than women's issues.

¹⁵⁰Miss Chan Choy Siong and Mdm Hoe Puay Choo from the Peoples' Action Party and Mrs Felice Leon-Soh from the Liberal Socialist.

¹⁵¹*Singapore Standard*, 2 Apr. 1958; Annual report of the SCW, 1957–58; Chief Minister Lim Yew Hock to SCW, 26 Sep. 1957. See also Chief, Women's Bureau, Liberal-Democratic Party of Japan to President, SCW, 27 Aug. 1957.

¹⁵²In a letter to his Vice-President, E.K. Tan wrote: "You can let Mrs Fozdar know that this party will stand for equal rights for women on all counts whether any other political party supports it or not." Mrs Felice Leon-Soh to Mrs Shirin Fozdar, 19 Aug. 1957. Mrs Leon-Soh also took the trouble to introduce some members for the SCW, 26 Feb. 1961.

¹⁵³Interviews with Dr Toh Chin Chye, Chairman of the PAP in 1959 and Ong Pang Boon. Public opinion was also changing and leading citizens such as Lee Wee Nam, a banker, were coming out openly against polygamy.

5. insisting that married women be given an opportunity to live a full life, including the right to work on level terms with others. Under law, maternity leave and allowances will be compulsory.
6. insisting that the welfare of widows and orphans must be the responsibility of government.
7. encouraging factories employing large numbers of women to provide creches on factory sites. The government on its part would also establish creches.
8. passing a monogamous marriage law. Such a law however, would not apply to cases where there was a conflict with religious beliefs.¹⁵⁴

The extent to which the adoption of women's rights contributed to the PAP's unexpected landslide victory in the elections should not be underestimated.¹⁵⁵ Women came out in force in the 1959 elections because voting was now compulsory, and the PAP won 43 out of the 51 seats contested. The party's clear victory and its subsequent control of the Legislative Assembly meant that Singapore society was more prepared to accept the idea of civil rights for women. As a result, the controversy over the issue of polygamy and child marriages died down almost instantly.¹⁵⁶ As Janet Wee stated in a letter of appreciation to the SCW in 1960: "We will never forget what the People's Action Party had done for us, and we will keep on voting for the PAP as long as we live".¹⁵⁷

When the PAP assumed power in July 1959, the SCW lost no time in reminding the party of its election promise and in submitting their 1954 Bill to K.M. Bryne, the Minister of Law and Ong Eng Guan, the Minister for National Development for consideration.¹⁵⁸ By March 1960, a woman's charter, incorporating many of the provisions of the 1954 bill, was ready to be introduced and presented to the Legislative Assembly. Helped by the presence of five women Legislative Assembly members, the bill moved quickly.¹⁵⁹ Judging from the debates in parliament, women legislative members were irked by the male privilege of polygamy. Not surprisingly, the abolition of polygamy became the cornerstone of the Women's Charter.

On 24 May 1961 the Legislative Assembly passed the Women's Charter Bill bringing to a climax the SCW's fight for women's rights. The Charter provided that the only form of marriage permitted from then on would be monogamy, whether the rites were civil, Christian or customary. Women could sue for adultery and bigamy, and receive both a hearing and justice under the law. The Charter also consolidated the law relating

¹⁵⁴*The Tasks Ahead, PAP's Five Year Plan 1959-64*, Part I (Singapore, 1959), p. 7.

¹⁵⁵Ong Chit Chung has argued that it was bread-and-butter issues which held the attention of the electorate and were the major points of contention for the electorate. See "The 1959 Singapore General Elections", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 6, no. 1 (March, 1975). Subsequent studies have also discounted the significance of women's votes.

¹⁵⁶The PAP was also able to weather opposition from its more conservative members regarding the bold legal measures embodied in the Women's Charter.

¹⁵⁷Mrs Janet Wee to SCW, 7 Jan. 1960.

¹⁵⁸Interview with S. Rajaratnam. See also *Sunday Times*, 9 Aug. 1959 and SCW to Ong Eng Guan, 26 Oct. 1959.

¹⁵⁹Assembly members Ho Puay Choo, Fung Yoke Ching, Chan Choy Siong, Sahorah bte Amat and Seow Peck Leng spoke up in favour of the bill and played an important part in pressing the Assembly for the early introduction of a new legislation to protect the interests of women in Singapore. *Proceedings of the Legislative Assembly of Singapore*, C443, vol. 14, pp. 1200-1210; vol. 12, p. 446.

to the registration of marriages, divorce, the maintenance of wives and children and contained provisions regarding offences against women and girls.¹⁶⁰

The Charter did not apply to Muslim women, but its passage forced the Muslim community to look into further means of improving the status of Muslim women through an amendment of the Muslim Ordinance. In an attempt to appeal to educated Muslim youth in the wake of the Women's Charter "to arise to champion the cause of their mothers and sisters", the SCW organized a talk, which was subsequently broadcast over Radio Singapore, at the Muslim Society in the University of Malaya in July 1959.¹⁶¹

By then, Muslim women had also gained added courage to express their views publicly.¹⁶² In March 1960, Sahorah bte Ahmat, the only woman Malay Legislative Assembly member, took up arms against easy divorce by proposing a bill to solve the problem of maintenance for divorced Muslim women.¹⁶³ In 1960 amendments to the Muslim Ordinance enlarged the powers of the Syariah Court significantly. The amendments empowered the court to enforce orders upon husbands to give maintenance to their divorced wives until they remarried or died. The practice of polygamy was further restricted by a rule stating that only the Chief Kathi had the exclusive jurisdiction to approve marriages in cases where the man already had a wife living. Muslim men were also not allowed to take another wife if they were unable to show that they were financially capable of doing so.¹⁶⁴ Rules were issued for parties wishing to have a marriage or divorce registered requiring them to apply on prescribed forms and to swear to the truth of the particulars given by making a statutory declaration. Thus, while the SCW were unable to introduce the principle of monogamy in Muslim marriages, they were able to effectively restrict the practice of polygamy.

VICTORY AND DEMISE

It must be noted that while the PAP government was responsible for the drafting of the Women's Charter and the Muslim Ordinance, their speedy passage was due to vigorous lobbying led by a small group of socially-conscious and dedicated women, most of whom were associated with the SCW.¹⁶⁵ The passing of these revolutionary landmark ordinances was the high point of the SCW's achievements, but also signalled the beginning of the SCW's demise.

The Charter set Singapore way ahead of most parts of the world where women's rights were concerned.¹⁶⁶ Non-Muslims in Malaysia acquired rights similar to those contained in the Women's Charter of Singapore only after the Marriage and Divorce Act of 1976 was finally implemented in March 1982. For Muslims, a statute safe-

¹⁶⁰*ST*, 2 Mar. 1960.

¹⁶¹*Singapore Standard*, 22 Jul. 1959. See also *ST*, 9 Aug. 1959.

¹⁶²*ST*, 9 Jul. 1959; *SFP*, 5 Mar. 1960. See also "Young Women Muslim Association", *PPSEAWA Singapore Bulletin* (Singapore, 1960).

¹⁶³*ST*, 3 Mar. 1960.

¹⁶⁴*SFP*, 5 Mar. 1960; *ST*, 16 Mar. 1960; and *ST*, 27 Mar. 1960.

¹⁶⁵Chelvam, "The Women's Charter", p. 30, makes little mention of the activities of the SCW and asserts that "it was the PAP's conscious policy towards the support of women's emancipation in Singapore society and their control of the Legislative Assembly in 1959 which made possible the enactment of the Women's Charter in 1961".

¹⁶⁶*Sunday Times*, 3 Jun. 1962.

guarding women's rights comparable to the Muslim Ordinance of 1961 only came into effect in the different states in 1983–87.¹⁶⁷ Likewise, although Indonesian women had united as early as 1946 to form Kowani (Indonesia Women's Congress), it was not until 1974 that the status of women in marriage was safeguarded by a Marriage Act which recognized the principle of monogamy in marriage and allowed polygamy only with prior approval from the first wife and a court of law.

Where the rest of the world was concerned, in 1962 the United Nations passed a convention concerning consent to marriage, minimum age for marriage and registration of marriage. This was followed in 1965 by a United Nations resolution aimed at prohibiting child marriages and safeguarding the principle of free consent to marriage.¹⁶⁸ In 1967 the United Nations General Assembly adopted a Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against women, which united in a single instrument, principles and standards relating to the rights of women in all spheres of family life and of society.¹⁶⁹

However, while the Charter contained nearly all the points the SCW had sought with respect to non-Muslims, its passage left the SCW without a viable sense of direction. The predominant issue which had sustained the energies of its members was gone. The organization undertook the planning of social events so that "young women will have a chance to mix and get to know each other", but such activities did not offer a comparable sense of mission and urgency.¹⁷⁰ The departure of Mrs Shirin Fozdar, regarded by many as the driving force behind the SCW, from the colony also contributed to its eventual eclipse.¹⁷¹ Support declined throughout the sixties, and the SCW was deregistered in 1971.

To conclude, it must be said that the achievements of the SCW went far beyond successful lobbying with respect to the Women's Charter, for the organization left an indelible mark on the women's movement in Singapore. In brief, its significance lies in the fact that it lifted women's groups in Singapore beyond self-improvement courses, charitable fundraising, socializing and relaxation, and changed the way Singapore society perceived women once and for all. Rather than assuming a supportive role for women, the SCW confronted head on the injustices faced by women and was prepared for opposition. From the outset it was singleminded in the pursuit of its goals, dynamic and vociferous in its demands, wide-ranging in its call for reforms benefiting women and forward-looking in its agenda. The SCW's vision of women as equal partners with men, dynamically working and complementing each other in their efforts to build a new society after the Second World War, added a perspective not apparent before in women's groups.

¹⁶⁷Jamilah Arifin, *Women and Development in Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Pelanduk Publications, 1992), pp. 155–61.

¹⁶⁸United Nations Department of Public Information. *Basic Facts about the United Nations* (New York: UN Publications, 1980).

¹⁶⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰*SFP*, 4 Sep. 1961.

¹⁷¹In 1961, Mrs Fozdar decided to leave Singapore to start a school in Yasothorn province in north-eastern Thailand. She was not to return until 1975. See *ST*, 21 Apr. 1961; *SFP*, 22 Apr. 1961; *SFP*, 26 Apr. 1961; *New Nation*, 9 Sep. 1977.

The SCW foreshadowed many women's groups which were formed during the 1950s across racial and religious lines, and lobbied aggressively in support of women's causes. These organizations included the Siglap Girls' Club (later to become the Singapore Women's Association),¹⁷² the Singapore Women's Federation (SWF),¹⁷³ the Professional Women's Association¹⁷⁴ and the Pan Pacific Southeast Asian Women's Association (PPSEAWA).¹⁷⁵

The formation of the first SCW may therefore be said to signal the awakening of Singapore women to a new consciousness of themselves as women and thus marked the real attempt of women as a group to fight for social reforms and increase their status with respect to men in society.¹⁷⁶ By defining issues and goals, by organizing working groups, enlisting public support, analyzing and working with the media, and taking their message to the appropriate authorities, the SCW provided an impetus for change and showed how women, so often in the background of events, could lead the way in achieving change.

¹⁷²Interview with Mrs Seow Peck Leng. The Siglap Girls' Club was formed in 1954.

¹⁷³Formed by Chinese-educated pro-Communist women in 1955, the SWF carried much of the same social aims as the SCW in their constitution, for example, the unity of women irrespective of race, religion and nationality, the striving for equal political, legal and economic rights for women and the encouragement of friendship and understanding among women. See Constitution of the SWF, Registrar of Societies, Singapore.

¹⁷⁴In February 1957, "appalled that women teachers were not enjoying the same salary as their fellow male colleagues", SCW Vice-President Mrs Seow founded the SWA with the aim of fighting for "equal pay for equal work" as well as the abolition of polygamy. See *SFP*, 21 Oct. 1957 and 15 Jul. 1958.

¹⁷⁵The formation of PPSEAWA in 1958 was inspired by several members of the SCW who attended the PPSEAWA regional conference in Tokyo in 1957. SCW members Mrs Seow Peck Leng and Mrs Rosalie Hennon sat on the first executive committee of the PPSEAWA. See Minutes of the SCW, 14 May 1958 and 19 Sep. 1958. Also *PPSEAWA Singapore Bulletin* (Singapore, 1960), p. 13.

¹⁷⁶To date, there has been three Singapore councils of women: The SCW formed in 1952, the National Council of Women (NCW) formed in 1975, and the Singapore Council of Women's Organizations (SCWO), formed in 1980.

APPENDIX A

Proposed Prevention of Bigamous Marriages Ordinance 1954

(prepared by the Singapore Council of Women)

In 1953 the Singapore Council of Women drafted a proposed ordinance for the Prevention of Bigamous Marriages which was distributed to members of the Legislative Assembly. Although no bill was submitted at this time, most of the provisions in the SCW draft were later incorporated in the Women's Charter of 1961. The key provisions of the draft ordinance are as follows:

- 3a. "Bigamous Marriage" means the marriage of a person during the lifetime of his or her spouse. If the marriage of such person with such spouse has not been dissolved or declared void by a court of competent jurisdiction or has not been dissolved, or is not void according to the custom or usage of the community to which either of the parties to such marriage belongs; but does not include the marriage of a person during the lifetime of his or her spouse, if such spouse at the time of such marriage shall have been continually absent from such person for the space of seven years, and shall not have been heard of by such person as being alive within that time provided that the person contracting such marriage shall, before such marriages take place, inform the person with whom such marriage is contracted of the real state of facts so far as the same are within his or her knowledge.
- 3b. "Minor" means any person who is under sixteen years of age.
4. Notwithstanding any law, custom or usage to the contrary, a bigamous marriage shall be void if it is contracted in this Colony after the coming into force of this Ordinance and either or both the contracting parties to such marriage are domiciled in the colony.
5. Notwithstanding any law, custom or usage to the contrary, whoever not being a minor contracts a bigamous marriage which is void under Section 4 shall, on conviction, be punishable with imprisonment for a term which may extend to seven years and shall be liable to fine.
6. Whoever performs, conducts or abets any bigamous marriage in this Colony shall, on conviction, be punishable with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to six months or with fine or with both, unless he proves that he had reason to believe that such marriage was not a bigamous marriage.
- 7a. When a minor contracts a bigamous marriage which is void under Section 4, any person having charge of the minor whether as parent or Guardian or any other capacity, lawful or otherwise, who does any act to promote the marriage, or permits it to be solemnized or negligently fails to prevent it from being solemnized shall, on conviction, be punishable with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to six months or with fine or with both.
- 7b. For the purpose of this Section, it shall be presumed, unless and until the contrary is proved, that where a minor has contracted a bigamous marriage which is void under Section 4, the person having charge of such minor, whether as parent or Guardian, or in any other capacity lawful or otherwise, has negligently failed to prevent the marriage from being solemnized.

APPENDIX B**Address given by Mrs Shirin Fozdar, Secretary of the SCW, to the International Women's Day Conference organized by the PAP on 8th March 1956**

Dear Friends,

The people of Singapore have awakened from their political lethargy and desire not to be considered a country of spineless people, who wallow contentedly in the depth of their degradation. Last year, seats in the legislature began. During the electioneering campaign grand words were uttered, socialistic reforms were promised to the masses and their interests assured. Unfortunately everyone of these parties seemed to be thinking in terms of the male population alone, and they feared to touch the problem of women lest they may lose popular support. Their pandering to only the male population showed the indifference of the parties to the country as a whole. The candidates were concerned with their own self aggrandizement and not interested in the welfare and solidarity of the family unit which is the basis of all civilized and progressive countries.

It is very gratifying to note that the People's Action Party has realized the need for giving some importance to the women and is observing the International Women's Day. The people of a country constitute both the male as well as the female, and it is but apt that a party wishing to identify itself with the "people" should not forget the other half, i.e. the women. A modern seer has stated that "The male and female are like the two wings of a bird, which when reinforced with the same impulse the bird of humanity will soar heavenwards to the summit of progress".

The world's modern yardstick measures the greatness of a country according to the heights to which women have arisen. If women are kept in subjection then to that extent the country is considered backward. What greatness can we expect for this country, where, in every home, the women live in a state of constant fear of being deprived of marital security and everything that goes to make a happy family? All advanced nations have granted equal rights to women and facilitated their rising to contribute their share and shoulder equal responsibilities with men for the progress of their country. It is very unfortunate that in this country a woman after serving her husband faithfully for years, bearing and rearing his children, suddenly finds herself discarded for another younger woman. The unfortunate children, born of such fathers, have no security and are often sold or given away or permitted to add themselves to the number of delinquents. Very often the home of a polygamous man is like a battleground where each wife with her children is pitted against the other wives and children. The husband who originally had hoped to have a large unified family to rejoice his heart will find his heart broken at the spectacle of hate and discord among his wives and their children. Such men are the cause of untold misery to their progeny who very often due to poverty become a burden on society. It is high time, therefore, that polygamy and easy divorce were abolished in Singapore.