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**Case Study : Singapore - Using The New Technologies  
To Improve The Status Of Women**

**By**

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Engender

Centre for Environment, Gender and Development

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## Using the new communications technologies to improve the status of women.

Before we proceed with the case study, the statement merits closer examination. It is clear that the goal of this exercise is to improve the status of women, and the statement reflects a well-meaning desire to attain this goal through the use of the new communications technologies. However, implicit in this statement is the assumption that the new communications will help us attain the goal that essentially requires attitudinal changes in society.

Communications technology is merely a tool to carry our messages. The technology does not discriminate in the messages it carries. The messages being carried might rally people, or show them how to improve women's status. In short, messages that are empowering for women. But this technology can even go so far as to hold women back in their progress, perpetuate stereotypes or degrade them.

Hence, any discussion of the communications must not merely discuss the hardware but also examine the messages that are being transmitted. The latter is a problem that we all face whether it is a new communications technology or existing one. It is even more urgent that we discuss these content problems now since new technology often implies faster, more efficient, better quality, more sophisticated, wider geographic range etc. There is also greater potential for stereotypical or degrading messages to be transmitted, faster, more efficiently, over a wider range in a more sophisticated manner.

We cannot also ignore the other issues related to the new communications technology. An important question is accessibility. We are all

constrained by media regulation. Singapore is known to have strict regulation in this area. We can only use what we have been allowed to use. The use of new technology also involves a great deal of infrastructural investments. Usually such huge sums of money can only be afforded by huge corporate or government concerns. Hence the availability and accessibility of these technologies is dependent on the will of these institutions to deploy them. It has been well documented that the introduction of new technology usually only follows the trail of big business, so some of these new technologies will be well beyond the means of most NGO's in the women's movement, since their communications activities are not subsidized by massive profits.

The women's movement has also had to seek attitudinal change, through the most effective means it can afford, so new technology will only be used if it can afford it.

This case study will therefore try to cover these issues and other problems within the Singapore context but it will also include the possibilities of empowerment, and hence, status improvement, through the new technologies used in combination with content that could help women attain such goals.

In the context of this case, I will treat the communications technologies as a tool to be used by the women's movement to influence public opinion or mobilizing action to improve women's status, and as a tool in education that will help girls or women attain empowerment or as tools that might free men and women from their gender division of labour.

Now what are some of the new communications technologies that have been introduced and gained some currency in the last two years in Singapore?

They are :

- 1) the internet, and electronic mail technology, multimedia , and
- 2) Cable Television, while not strictly a new technology, is considered new in Singapore since the government only launched the cable network this year.

The people the women's movement need to communicate with can roughly be grouped into five categories, of course people's membership in these groups do sometimes intersect.

They are

- a) The government
- b) Employers and Unions
- c) people in the Mass Media
- d) People in the movement (locally and overseas), students, researchers, educators
- e) society

The groups have the potential to influence each other by the actions they take.

The group with that can make the greatest difference in improving status is the government. Since it has legislative power on its side to change laws and the aid of gaggles of planners to make structural changes that are

equitable to women. The following examples show the work that still needs to be done.

Women with the same education qualifications as men are still earning sizeably less salaries. The Ministry of Labour's 1991 figures show that women are still earning about 70-75% of what men are earning.

Median Gross Monthly Wages 1974-1991

	Total \$	Male \$	Female \$	Female/Male
<b>Total</b>				
1974	251	290	165	0.57
1980	583	695	445	0.64
1991	919	1030	751	0.73
<b>Primary / Lower Secondary</b>				
1974	217	265	142	0.54
1980	360	406	289	0.71
1991	767	869	597	0.69
<b>Secondary / Upper Secondary</b>				
1974	331	379	282	0.74
1980	557	658	476	0.72
1991	1065	1236	931	0.75
<b>Tertiary</b>				
1974	877	1062	603	0.57
1980	1896	2238	1344	0.60
1991	2345	2695	1849	0.69

*Singapore Ministry of Labour, Labour Force Survey 1974, 1991  
Department of Statistics 1980 Population Census*

In 1991, 51.9% of the women who left their jobs, said they did it because of Housework/Childcare or Marriage. The two biggest groups of women who left were aged from 25 to 34-a time when others are working hardest to make headways in their Career.

Reasons Economically Inactive Females left previous job 1991

• Housework/Childcare/Marriage	59.1%
• Others ( Including cessation of business, completion of contract/job, job dissatisfaction)	26.8 %
• Poor Health/Physical Disablement	7.8 %
• Retrenchment	2.0%
• Retirement	4.3 %
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Men in civil service get medical service for themselves and their families. Women civil servants get medical benefits only for themselves but not their families. The government has within the past year asserted that this policy is in line with their affirmation of traditional values to consider males the head of the family.

There is still gender division labour and discrimination in the labour market as evidenced in newspaper job advertisements (See Annexe 1).

There are numerous other inequities that can be listed. Sociological and anthropological evidence has shown that women are still considered inferior to males, with women internalizing their subversion hence these problems. The womens' movement alone, cannot effect structural and legal changes that will be equitable for women without the help of the government's political will.

In the last decade or so, the concensus reached at UN international conferences on such diverse issues as social development, environment and human rights have recognised that gender issues cross-cut all issues. Yet, this may not have penetrated at a local level. Women have not been empowered enough to go beyond their supportive roles in such key areas as politics and in trade unions.



It is undeniable that statistics will show women to be better educated and are earning more but to quote our non-nominated member of Parliament, Dr Kanwaljit Soin "the condition of Singapore may have improved, but their status has not".

Gender issues are still not integrated fully across the board despite much documentation within Gender and Development studies showing that planning that does not take into account women's needs and perspectives do not benefit women. Hence according to Naila Kabeer in her book "Reversed Realities : Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought", certain abilities are rewarded over others, people in the workforce are treated as though they are "unencumbered by bodies, families or sexual identities, hence problems such as sexual harassment, childcare, emerge only when women enter the work place. Rewards go to people who do not bring family responsibilities into the work place. Women's development hence is still hampered by the proverbial double burden.

To solve these problems, women's activists researchers and planners and government need to discuss these matters and find solutions. The government has prescribed certain channels as proper.

The government-designated channels are

- a) the media fora in newspapers and television, with messages being controlled by editors so that information could be edited or withheld
- b) the feedback unit within the Ministry of Community Development which also serves as an education arm to explain government policy to the

wider public. Feedback can be sent direct to the unit, which will then be directed to the various other ministries

- c) occasional Ministerial walkabouts, MP meet the people session at the constituencies. This may not be an entirely effective channel for raising women's issues since these will compete for attention with dozens of other more specific concerns of the constituency.

While some channels exist, I fear that the new communications technologies cannot make planners understand women's perspective, A partial solution might lie in the setting up of a Singapore women's information database on the internet to aid understanding.

Research has already been done on women across many disciplines and at various institutions, however such information is scattered, requiring much time in information gathering. The difficulties I had in researching this paper was indicative of the dispersed nature of this information which required visits to various places. Conversations with some activists in the movement indicated that even they did not know what information is available where. An ideal situation would be to place multidisciplinary gender research material, statistics, and educational material on the internet since this would give us a broader and more integrated perspective on the status of women, and of women's realities than is currently available.

While no one can compel anyone to visit an internet site, the ease of finding information at one stop within easy reach might convince people to turn to it as a first source of information about gender issues.

This leaves the question of why the internet? A main reason is that it is progressively becoming an assessable medium to Singaporeans, by virtue of the government's IT2000 plan to make this an intelligent Island. By early next century, the planners' goal is to have every household own a personal computer, and have every computer on the island linked to form a nation-wide network. All government departments and some big businesses are now linked. The general public now has access to the internet in public libraries and newly sprung internet cafes. Anyone can go to these places to have a cup of coffee and go on-line. If you do not know how to get started \$10.00 Singapore will get you an hour's session with a tutor.

As is, all students in the polytechnics and Universities in Singapore male and female have internet accounts. The Information Technology plan for the next few years is to have internet terminals for student use in all secondary schools .

Latest figures available from some polytechnics and one of the two universities, show female population to range from more than a third to more than half the graduands. In the long term, if and when the IT2000 plans come to fruition there will be a new generation of women with access and the ability make their voices heard to almost all Singaporeans and the rest of cyberspace.

Currently a fairly active organisation in the movement, the Singapore Women's Association of Women's Lawyers (SAWL) will put educational material on laws affecting women on the internet. They already publish a book "The Law and You", which popularises legal knowledge relevant to women. They will adapt this for the internet. hence, this service is not just

relevant for government but for the sectors of business and unions, the other groups identified as people the movement need to communicate to.

If I seem enthusiastic about the internet, it is because this seems to be a technology that has a potential for a large audience with women themselves being their own publisher. Unlike other mass media it does not have a gatekeeper and it does not have to go through intermediaries such as reporters,. According to a local internet publication provider, publishing information on the internet is well within the reach of anyone with basic computer skills such as word processing. Currently, a girl's secondary school has successfully published their own information on the net with the students themselves having responsibility of the content and the technicalities of putting it on-line. The only equipment needed would be an internet account with a service provider and the use of a computer that is networked.

This networking of the island will incidentally have other useful advantages, such as, the possibility of teleworking, which allows us to spend less time in the office, and send in our work from home to the office through the networks. Of course this will only affect those not involve in production or manufacturing work. SAWL is already looking into the possibility of this for its members so that women lawyers can work from home and take care of family responsibilities. However, if we take a broader view, this technology would also free men from their offices, allowing them to participate more in the nurturing and caregiving in the the family. Much work will still have to be done to convince employers of this type of schemes. SAWL itself admits it has much to do in this area.

I have already raised the point that the effectiveness of communications about improving the status of women being dependent on

content. The other mass media does not offer individual women or women's active as much opportunities to speak with their own voice since information is shaped by journalists and controlled by editors.

In 1991-1992, out of a population of 2.7 million, 1.9 million or 70% of Singaporeans tuned into their TV sets and more than 1 million people read the most popular daily newspaper. We have a choice of 14 local radio stations. In the face of such large audiences, it is even more critical when we look at the messages in the media that are still present. Already, Singapore's sole local broadcasting group is going regional via satellite and print magazine are moving on-line. One of the media's duties is give voice to a variety of views, but given that it wields so much power, it also has to consider the effects of its messages.

I am afraid I do not give much credence to the theory that once you increase the number of women in the editorial decision making process, we will see more empowering messages for women. Though no figures are available, from observation and speaking with women in the media, there is already sizeable portion of women who are producers, journalists and editors, yet this will not ensure that empowering messages will be produced.

As recently as a month ago, a senior political journalist, a woman with years of experience, proclaimed in the highest circulation weekend paper, The Sunday Times that :

I found the stories about the whole event (the UN World Conference on Women) a yawn. To my mind, the conference, particularly the one by the NGOs was just another one of those feminist events where women gather to condemn men shrilly.

She went on to say “the idea of joining a women’s group to fight for these issues (violence against women, female genital mutilation etc) repels me.”

On the television front this month, the television corporation of Singapore (TCS) which runs Singapore’s two most popular TV channels was also accused of being sexist in their “All-Star Anniversary Challenge”. Their first anniversary was celebrated in a battle of the sexes—a telematch of sorts. A newspaper reporter of the “New Paper”, an afternoon daily, was of the opinion that “the show was sexist and stereotyped females”.

“The women were good at baking while men were not. In the sports and games, they were the weaker sex who needed help from the men to win”, she wrote. And 70 out of the 160 people who called the newspaper agreed.

From my own observation of print advertisements, and preliminary content analysis studies of broadcast advertisements by the Mediawatch subcommittee of AWARE, the Association for Women’s Action and Research, women are still stereotyped as caregivers, women are also represented as professionals, significantly less often than males (see Annex 1). We will not go over the details about how these messages affect societal perception of the status of women.

To be fair, the news and current affairs media have become more aware of women’s issues—more articles have appeared on such topics. However I believe gender sensitivity workshops for the media are sorely needed to reduce the kinds of examples I have highlighted. The head of the Mass Communications Department in Ngee Ann Polytechnic and an experienced designer of such courses in the Asia-Pacific region, Victor

Valbuena echoes my views. Perhaps women's organisations could link up with such regulatory bodies such as the Singapore Broadcasting Authority and the Advertising Standards Authority of Singapore etc. to carry out such programmes. That is not to say that all media people set out to be against women's causes or perpetuate stereotypes. The workshops could however help media people to uncover many assumptions about men and women that many of us have still, sometimes unconsciously, think of as "natural". Whereas it needs to be shown that these ideas and practices are socially and culturally constructed. With such awareness the media is less likely to reproduce these deeply internalised and embedded ideas.

On the level of using the communications to improve the educational opportunities of Singapore women, a local polytechnic and Singapore Cable Vision has plans to provide basic education in practical skills in technical subjects, accounting and business etc. to people who are confined to the home. This has implications on women who are home bound due to family responsibilities, illness, physical disability or for women who do shift work. The drawback is that they would have to be subscribers of cable to receive the lessons. This will be included in a \$29,90 for 20 channels per month deal. Hopefully the targeted people will be able to afford the lessons. The lecturer who formulated these proposals Soh Yew Ping says lecture-discussions will be scheduled 9-10 am when other family members have usually gone to school or work. They will be repeated in the evenings at 7-8 pm. At specified times, students will be able to call in the the polytechnic to ask lecturers questions. Before viewer make the decision to register for the certificate course, they will be given four free lessons or prep courses to teach them the basics of the subject. These prep courses will also be designed to allay their fears about embarking on such ventures and give them details about the industries they will be going in. Soh hopes such information will allow people to gauge their

needs and abilities before they sign up. The certificate will be a bridge to a polytechnic education and give students a recognised qualification if ever they are ready to go out into the job market. The accessibility will still depend on whether women will be able to afford the subscription and the progress of wiring all households to cable. Betty Friedan has noted that being cooped up at home can lead to "the problem with no name" - frustration and loss of self-confidence. Learning a new skill might just be able to restore their confidence in their abilities.

Finally, I would like to add that the smallness of my country has been a great advantage over many of our neighbours in the region in terms of the relative ease of implementing such undertakings as networking. In bringing up the communications possibilities and highlighting some communication problems facing the women's movement, I hope for the day where, in the words of a Singapore sister :

Both men and women will be able to move equally between household and employment , where men and women will have equal share in care of children and aged. This means more than men "helping" women, but a real sharing of responsibility. This non-gendered quality in society also means that women and men vary as individuals, not as sexes in their priorities and experiences.



## Annexe 1

The advertisements below were taken from the Straits Times on 30 September, showing blatant sexual discrimination in the job market.

### YUNNAN REALTY PTE LTD

Invite application for the post of:-

#### FEMALE ACCOUNTS ASSISTANT

- G.C.E. "A" Level or above
- L.C.C.I. Higher Accounting Cert.
- Experience in keeping full set of accounts
- Computer literate eg. Lotus / Winword
- Able to speak Mandarin and write Chinese

Interested applicants please write in with recent **photograph**, **expected salary** and **contact number** to:

#### THE PROJECT MANAGER

YUNNAN REALTY PTE LTD  
137 TELOK AYER STREET, SINGAPORE 068602

An Established American Company  
requires

### ADMIN. CLERK

- Female 20 - 25 yrs. old
- GCE 'O' / 'N' level
- MS Word/ Excel knowledge preferred
- Relevant working experience preferred but not necessary as training is provided
- 5 day work week

Write with resume or call

**2524145**

The Manager

51 Goldhill Plaza

#14-09 Singapore 308900  
(Near Novena MRT)

ARCHITECTS VISTA  
79 Robinson Road #11-03  
CPF Building S(068897)

### OFFICE BOY AS APPRENTICE DRAFTSMAN

required

- Secondary education with technical background
- Fresh school leavers are welcome
- Training provided

Please call Mrs Leong/  
Mr Goh ☎ 223 1359  
for an appointment

Well established co  
has **IMMEDIATE**  
vacancy for:

### ASSISTANT PRODUCTION SUPERVISOR

- Male, Age below 40
- ITC/ Diploma in Mechanical Engineering
- Knowledge in Chemical preferred

Interested applicants,  
pls. call 7520967  
to arrange for  
an interview

TAKARA ENGINEERING (S) PTE LTD

a Leading Japanese Tool & Die Maker

urgently requires:

### SURFACE GRINDING MACHINISTS

- \* Male
- \* Below 25 years old
- \* NTC 2/NTC 3 holder
- \* Preferably with some experience
- \* Malaysians are also welcome

We provide attractive benefits such as variable bonus, transport & attendance allowance, 5 days working week, etc.

Interested applicants please walk-in between 8am - 12pm and 1pm - 5.45pm for an interview, or call at 271 3211 for an appointment.

Blk 1001 Jalan Bukit Merah  
#01-10 Redhill Industrial Estate  
Singapore 159455  
(Next to NPB Building)

Established Company In  
Tuas requires Immediately:

### FEMALE SALES CO-ORDINATORS

- Chinese, GCE 'O' Level
- MS Words, Excel, Access
- Good prospect for right candidates
- Salary negotiable.  
Min. \$1500 upwards

Please call:

**8 6 2 4 8 3 3**

**Ms Wong**

to arrange for  
immediate interview

A shipping/ freight forwarder require

### FEMALE SHIPPING ASSISTANT

- Experience preferred but no experience can also apply
- Malaysians are also welcome
- Minimum salary \$1200

Please call Catherine tel. 2215981 for an interview

**GOODSTAR SHIPPING AGENCIES**

7 Keppel Road

Tanjong Pagar Complex

#02-01

Singapore 0208

## Annexe 2

The Association for Women's Action and Research (AWARE), Media Watch subcommittee did a content analysis of programmes of advertisements on Channel 5 (English) in September and August 1994. Their results are due to be published later this year. Analysis was done on other media and categories as well but information was not available at the time of writing.

### Methodology

During August to September, advertisements during prime time (8-11pm) on channel 5 were viewed. Men and women were characterised according to their occupations and product categories. If advertisements were repeated during the course of the evening, the advertisement was still counted only once.

### Content analysis of Males and Females in Various Occupations

<u>Occupation</u>	<u>Male</u>	<u>Female</u>
Professionals	163	85
Skilled Workers	81	70
Unskilled Workers	30	35
Caregiver/Nurturer	3	30
Celebrities	23	61
Unknown	282	463

While the numbers in the Skilled and Unskilled worker categories were more or less even, it is obvious that the people in the Professional and Caregiver/Nurturer categories were severely gender stereotyped. Only 34.3% of the professionals were shown to be executives. 91% of representations of caregivers/nurturers were female. The figures show that many TV advertisements still perpetuate stereotypes of gender division of labour.