

WHEN WOMEN TAKE CONTROL:

*Singapore's Family Planning Pioneers and the
Making of a Woman's World (1949–1966)*

ABSTRACT

This paper goes against the grain of population control discourse and institutional histories of the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) to tell a feminist story of the early family planning pioneers from an Asian perspective. Focusing on the Family Planning Association of Singapore (FPAS) as a case study, it asks: *How did the largely women-led FPAS navigate often hostile and highly gendered local and international public spheres to advance women's welfare and reproductive freedoms?* Oral history interviews, biographies, Legislative Assembly transcripts, and 291 newspaper articles from the Singaporean publication *The Straits Times* published between 1949 to 1966 were analyzed with NVivo. Two surprising conclusions emerged: First, against the common assumption that Asian birth control movements were dominated by biopolitical and developmental concerns, the women-led FPAS mobilized the public sphere by retaining its focus on women's welfare. Second, the gender-segregated nature of local politics produced, rather than impeded, the dynamism and flexibility of the FPAS. This novel historical analysis also opens up new opportunities to study other national FPAs as agents between local politics and international organizations and understand how early female activists changed a world that remained distinctly unequal for them.

by **Sharmaine Koh, SM '22**

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Advised by **Professor Wannes Dupont**

Edited by **Grace Blaxill, Daevan Mangalmurti, Judah Millen, and
Larissa Jimenez Gratereaux**

INTRODUCTION

For Women, By Women: The Female Face of Birth Control

WHEN MRS. CONSTANCE GOH registered the Family Planning Association of Singapore (FPAS) in June 1949, the organization was a small band of women who took it upon themselves to alleviate the suffering of fellow women. In the aftermath of the Japanese Occupation, social conditions in Singapore were debilitating. Years of war had aggravated the deprivation and poverty that plagued slum dwellers in the streets of Chinatown, where “urchins and waifs [were] running wild, scavenging, begging, totally unrestrained.”¹ Continuous childbirth and endemic poverty perpetuated the misery of weary mothers, as more children meant greater suffering for large families.² Yet, in a patriarchal society dominated by son bias and conservative values, women often found themselves straining under successive unwanted pregnancies. Constance Goh and her counterparts were members of a class of “enabled women” who believed that women’s emancipation required escaping from their roles as mere “breeders and minders of the next generation.”³ Family planning, the ability to limit and space one’s pregnancies, became the solution for women to take control of their lives.

A Brief History of the Birth Control Movement: From Margaret Sanger to the IPPF

Singapore’s FPAS pioneers were not alone. Around the world, women had been first movers in setting up family planning centers. The birth control movement began with American-born activist Margaret Sanger, who believed that a woman’s ability to control the size of her family was key to ending her poverty and misery.⁴ However, federal laws regarded birth control information as “obscene material” and prohibited its dissemination. Undeterred, Sanger launched *The Woman Rebel* in 1914, a feminist publication that advocated for birth control. Two years later, she opened the first birth control clinic in Brownsville, Brooklyn.⁵ Sanger’s repeated defiance of the law landed her in prison for thirty days, but her advocacy ignited a movement that garnered significant public support. In 1921, Sanger founded the American Birth Control League that brought together influential social workers and medical professionals who began lobbying Congress for the legalization of birth control. Eventually, Sanger was able to open another clinic in 1923 due to a loophole in the law that allowed physicians to prescribe contraceptives for medical reasons.⁶ Staffed by female doctors and social workers, Sanger’s clinic would later provide the model for family planning movements and service providers around the world. The International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF)—of which the FPAS was a founding member—emerged in 1952 from a network of national Family Planning Associations (FPA).⁷ Sanger personally traveled to several countries and engaged with local family planning leaders like Constance Goh, who shared the belief in the emancipatory promise of family planning to alleviate the conditions of women.

There were men who stepped into action too, such as India’s Professor R.D. Karve, who opened a clinic

1 Zhou Mei, *The Life of a Family Planning Pioneer, Constance Goh: A Point of Light* (Singapore: Graham Brash, 1966), 125.

2 Zhou, *The Life of a Family Planning Pioneer*, 15.

3 Zhou, *The Life of a Family Planning Pioneer*, 134.

4 Margaret Sanger, *The Autobiography of Margaret Sanger* (Courier Corporation, 2012), 92-94, 98-99.

5 Beryl Suitsers, *Be Brave and Angry: Chronicles of the International Planned Parenthood Federation* (London: International Planned Parenthood Federation, 1973), 5.

6 Debra Michals, “Margaret Sanger,” National Women’s History Museum, 2017, accessed January 13, 2022, <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/margaret-sanger>.

7 A brief note about the structure of the IPPF: IPPF is made up of national member organizations, called “Member Associations.” Member Associations may operate within countries (e.g. the Family Planning Association of Singapore), across regions, and/or internationally. Each Member Association belongs to 1 of 6 IPPF Regions. Each Member Association has an elected governing body made up of volunteers. The structure and governance of the IPPF has evolved slightly, but its contemporary iteration remains largely consistent with that of the mid-20th century. For the purposes of disambiguation, I refer to the “Member Associations” as Family Planning Associations (FPA), which collectively make up the IPPF.

in Poona in 1923, and R. Kaufman of Ontario, who pioneered Canada's Parent's Information Bureau in 1929.⁸ Male advocates of birth control largely hailed from a class of medical professionals, a phenomenon that reflected the lack of female representation in science and medicine. However, it was primarily women who directed national family planning campaigns. Photographs of the early conferences of the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) demonstrate the distinctly female face of the global birth control movement. Yet, few scholars have commented on the IPPF's emergence in 1952 as a global network of largely *women-led* local family planning movements, even though women's leadership on the international stage would have been very unusual at the time.

Putting Women Back: The Troubling Legacies of the Birth Control

Within decades, this picture of female empowerment became virtually unrecognizable, as the women's agenda gave way to louder appeals of biopolitics and population control. Biopolitics, as theorized by Foucault, was a type of modern political rationality that equated governance to the administration of life and populations.⁹ Around the time of the IPPF's formation, official attitudes had largely been influenced by World War II and its effects on family and population patterns.¹⁰ The advent of the Cold War turned the attention of the developed capitalist world toward the "teeming masses" of Third



One (though certainly not the only) photograph at the 1955 IPPF Conference in Tokyo pictured the leaders of the national family planning organizations standing arm-in-arm: From left to right, Constance Goh (Singapore), Margaret Sanger (U.S.), Elizabeth M. Jolly (Hong Kong), Elise Ottesen-Jensen (Sweden), Lady Rama Rao (India), Shidzue Kato (Japan). [1]

⁸ Suiters, *Be Brave and Angry*, 5.

⁹ Rachel Adams, "Michel Foucault: Biopolitics and Biopower," *Critical Legal Thinking* (blog), May 10, 2017, <https://criticallegalthinking.com/2017/05/10/michel-foucault-biopolitics-biopower/>.

¹⁰ Perdita Huston, *Motherhood by Choice: Pioneers in Women's Health and Family Planning*, (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 1992) 3.

World countries.¹¹ Paranoia that overpopulation would drive poverty and create “breeding ground for communist insurrection” spread.¹² Still others were concerned that unchecked population growth would put humanity on track to certain disaster when the number of mouths to feed outstripped the earth’s available supply of resources.

By the 1980s, the IPPF faced a crisis of confidence. Once flush with money and endorsed by development theory, “population control” had become an unfashionable word. Globally, changing moods precipitated the startling reversal of a biopolitical movement that had been gaining steady traction since the 1920s. Although Stanford Professor Paul Ehrlich’s *Population Bomb* rhetoric had formed the population paradigm for decades,¹³ it now struggled for legitimacy against supply-side demographers and politicized evangelicals, whose ideologies enjoyed favor in Reagan’s White House.¹⁴ “The Emergency” in Gandhi’s India (1975–77) and “One-Child Policy” in Deng’s China (1979) spelled out the horrors of overzealous state-sanctioned population control.¹⁵ Surveying the specter of forced sterilizations and abortions, feminists decried the hollow emancipatory promises of birth control: “women were reduced to their wombs.”¹⁶ For an organization that was started by women, for women, it was perhaps women’s opposition to the IPPF—and, more broadly, population control—that formed the most unsettling paradox.¹⁷

Faced with an increasingly hostile environment, internal IPPF documents reflected a deep existential crisis that frustrated and demoralized member Family Planning Associations (FPA) and volunteers.¹⁸ State-

ments from official reports and management studies, as well as interviews conducted with external sources, IPPF staff and volunteers, told a troubling story. “In many countries, the image is no longer one of a radical reformist movement but of a sedate, cautious and rich agency,” wrote one 1977 Forward Look Study,¹⁹ while another done in 1986 by Coopers and Lybrand suggested that “IPPF is seen as having lost its leadership position and sense of direction.”²⁰ One staff member’s lament, documented in 1989, was particularly telling of how far the organization had drifted from its origins:

“Who’s running the FPA[s]? What kind of volunteers? What are they volunteering for? Is it just a bunch of geriatric men? In certain FPAs that is exactly the case. How many women? What are their ages?”²¹

How did it come to this? The facelessness of the IPPF and the birth control movement—as encapsulated in the despairing comments of this staff member—is an image that dominates the large corpus of historical scholarship today. Nationalist and institutionalist frameworks loom large, partly because birth control finds itself a natural subject of biopolitics and geopolitics. Swept up in grand narratives of demography and development, what emerges is an anonymized and acronymized account that obscures the rich social, personal, and *women’s* history of the global birth control movement. The latter is what this paper attempts to resurface, in an effort to craft a more nuanced historical image of the birth control movement.

11 Robert Zubrin, “The Population Control Holocaust,” *The New Atlantis*, no. 35 (Spring 2012), <https://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/the-population-control-holocaust>.

12 Kolson Schlosser, “Malthus at mid-century: neo-Malthusianism as bio-political governance in the post-WWII United States,” *Cultural Geographies* 16, no. 4 (2009): 477. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1474474009340096>.

13 In 1968, Stanford University entomologist Professor Paul R. Ehrlich predicted that the “Population Bomb”—continued unbridled human population growth—would result in mass starvation and ecological destruction. Ehrlich echoed the antihumanist ideologies of Thomas Malthus (1766–1834), who popularized the idea that human reproduction would deterministically outrun available resources, thus necessitating drastic measures to contain humanity. Ehrlich opened his book with his experiences of an overcrowded slum area in Delhi, in an aging taxi with its seats infested with fleas, an image that relied on popular racist stereotypes of the developing world to fan fears of “dark, teeming masses.” The highly influential book fueled a population control and eugenics crusade that led to human rights abuses around the world, particularly in countries of the “Third World.” Often, impoverished families became victims of forced sterilization and birth control policies that viewed their large families as problems, since more mouths to feed created a drain on resources and drove underdevelopment.

14 Michelle Goldberg, *The Means of Reproduction: Sex, Power, and the Future of the World* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 91.

15 Betsy Hartmann, *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs: The Global Politics of Population Control*. Revised Edition, edn. 2, (Boston: South End Press, 1995).

16 Goldberg, “The Means of Reproduction,” 77.

17 Some of the staunchest opposition would come from women in religious groups. See Sarah Primrose, “The Attack on Planned Parenthood,” *UCLA Women’s Law Journal*, 19:2, (2012). <https://escholarship.org/content/qt38f952g1/qt38f952g1.pdf?t=mlqq44>.

18 Dolores Foley, “Non-Governmental Organizations as Catalysts of Policy Reform and Social Change: A Case Study of the International Planned Parenthood Federation,” Order No. DP31241, University of Southern California, 1989, 200–201.

19 Foley, “Non-Governmental Organizations as Catalysts of Policy Reform and Social Change,” 197.

20 Foley, “Non-Governmental Organizations as Catalysts of Policy Reform and Social Change,” 198.

21 Foley, “Non-Governmental Organizations as Catalysts of Policy Reform and Social Change,” 197.

LITERATURE REVIEW

TWO KEY REASONS explain why existing literature has paid little attention to the leading role of women in the early birth control movement. First, although a wealth of literature exists on the emergence of reproductive rights arguments in the 1980s, the women's agenda is usually portrayed as a later entrant into the history of birth control discourse.²² Until the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), birth control was strongly associated with biopolitics. The turning point in international discussions about the purposes of birth control only emerged after the "Cairo Consensus" of the 1994 ICPD. There, national governments agreed that population policies that had heretofore focused on slowing population growth and combating underdevelopment needed broader and nobler objectives: the empowerment of women through advancements in reproductive rights and well-being.²³ A year later, the feminist front scored an ideological victory over the increasingly outmoded Malthusian ethos of "cold demographic utilitarianism"²⁴ when then First Lady of the United States, Hillary Clinton, made her seminal speech at the 1995 UN Conference on Women:

"It is a violation of human rights when women are denied the right to plan their own families, and that includes being forced to have abortions or being sterilized against their will. If there is one message that echoes forth from this conference, it is that human rights are women's rights ... And women's rights are human rights."²⁵

Because the drama of these global moments captured

the popular imagination, birth control history is often periodized into a linear chronology of international conferences that situates the feminist agenda as a late-20th century development. Examples include Betsy Hartmann's *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs: The Global Politics of Population Control* and Michelle Goldberg's *The Means of Reproduction: Sex, Power and the Future of the World*, both of which provide authoritative accounts on the emergence and triumph of the feminist agenda at Cairo and Beijing. However, while one might trace the emergence of the global "women's agenda" to the 1976 establishment of the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), advocacy for women's rights and well-being existed long before its international formalisms. Fewer works have analysed the early mobilization by family planning pioneers—especially in Asia—as a fundamentally feminist movement.

This is related to the second reason: the early move by most local and international movements to emphasize "family planning" in their agenda displaced "birth control" from an issue of woman's emancipation and reproductive rights to one concerned with family, social, and global welfare.²⁶ The women's agenda, while close to the hearts of family planning volunteers who witnessed the suffering of mothers and children in their local communities, did not score with philanthropists and policymakers who were preoccupied with eugenics and overpopulation. Moreover, the Catholic Church was a formidable opponent of birth control. Constance Goh recalled how the "Catholic Church used to send [her] to hell twice a month."²⁷ Papal pronouncements through the 20th century, notably Pope Pius XI's "Casti Connubii" (1930) and Pope John Paul II's "Humanae Vitae" (1968), reliably prohibited artificial contraception as a sin against the sanctity of life.²⁸ As the Cold War intensified, Catholicism and Communism found common ground in their pronatalist views, especially in Eastern bloc countries where Catholicism was especially politi-

22 Betsy Hartmann, *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs: The Global Politics of Population Control* (Boston: South End Press, 1995); Michelle Goldberg, *The Means of Reproduction: Sex, Power, and the Future of the World* (New York: Penguin, 2009).

23 Lori S. Ashford, "What Was Cairo? The Promise and Reality of ICPD," PRB, September 14, 2004, <https://www.prb.org/resources/what-was-cairo-the-promise-and-reality-of-icpd/>.

24 Goldberg, *The Means of Reproduction*, 80.

25 Hillary Clinton, "Remarks for the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women," transcript of speech delivered in Beijing, China, September 5, 1995, <https://www.un.org/esa/gopher-data/conf/fwcw/conf/gov/950905175653.txt>.

26 Sandra Whitworth, "Feminism and International Relations: Gender in the International Planned Parenthood Federation and the International Labour Organization," (PhD diss., Carleton University, 1992), <https://doi.org/10.22215/etd/1992-02095>. 138.

27 Whitworth, "Feminism and International Relations," 60.

28 Lisa McClain, "How the Catholic Church came to oppose birth control," *The Conversation*, July 9, 2018, <https://theconversation.com/how-the-catholic-church-came-to-oppose-birth-control-95694>.

cally influential.²⁹ Socialist and communist objections to neo-Malthusian economic theory—which viewed population increase as the main cause of poverty and endorsed population reduction as an economic intervention—drove many arguments against birth control.

Geopolitical and Cold War ideological debates increasingly distracted attention from narratives of female empowerment, which were sidelined from contemporary public discourse. Given that the existential priority for FPAs was to increase acceptance toward their work and agenda, several downplayed their feminist credentials and appealed instead to economically-driven, intellectually legitimated arguments to avoid alienating local society. Marie Stopes in England and Margaret Sanger in the United States sought to make the movement “respectable” by dissociating it from feminist radicalism and portraying it as a broader, middle-class issue that focused on improving family life. Sanger and Stopes opted to seek support from doctors, eugenicists, and wealthy philanthropists, a decision that continues to cloud Sanger’s legacy with accusations of racism and eugenics today.³⁰ Later, alarmist concerns that the developing world was becoming dangerously overpopulated and ecologically unsustainable saw governments co-opt local birth control movements to further population policies aimed at biopolitical control and demographic stability.³¹ Consequently, a large corpus of scholarship focuses on the history of birth control as driven by population controllers, eugenicists, governments, and large transnational organizations like the UN Population Council, Ford Foundation, and Rockefeller Foundation.³² As these organizations increased funding support for the IPPF and its local FPAs throughout the 20th century, their interests gradually came to dominate the agenda and

work of the FPAs. Yet, especially in its earlier years, the IPPF as a coalition of local FPAs was much more committed to women’s well-being than male-driven, Cold War-oriented, and developmentalist non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and foundations. Oral histories of the female pioneers of the birth control movement have tended to emphasize their desire to ameliorate the suffering and death of women caused by unplanned and unwanted pregnancy.³³

Literature on family planning in Singapore, like its international parallel, is largely monolithic and institutional. Much attention is accorded to government population control policies since 1966, when a political climate of one-partyism buttressed by then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew’s strongman leadership, generated and solidified an increasingly biopolitical and paternalistic state. Scholars of Singaporean history tend to focus on a few notable policies, such as the 1972 “Stop at Two” campaign that encouraged couples to have no more than two children, or the highly unpopular 1983 “Graduate Mothers Scheme” that espoused markedly eugenicist ideas aimed at incentivizing only higher educated women to have children. Other histories that focus on the FPAS tend to present the organization as a brief prelude to the state apparatus of population control that succeeded it after independence in 1966,³⁴ with little attention given to the international networks or local women that facilitated the FPAS’s efforts.³⁵ Stories of the early pioneers and their activism have thus far been confined to the genre of biography, several of which engage extensively with Constance Goh’s life and advocacy. Yet, although Singapore’s pioneering family planning advocate was often described by her contemporaries as a “charismatic individual,” “key activist,” and “catalyst in the region,”³⁶ her

29 Allison Bashford, “Population, Geopolitics and International Organizations in the Mid-Twentieth Century,” *Journal of World History* 19, no. 3 (September 2008): 330, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40542618>.

30 Whitworth, “Feminism and International Relations,” 139-140.

31 Warren Thompson, *Danger Spots in World Population* (New York: Knopf, 1929).

32 Jeremy Shiffman and Kathryn Quissel, “Family Planning’s Contentious History,” *Population Association of America*, March 23, 2012, 3; For an overview of institutional activities and development agendas, see Alison Bashford, “Population, Geopolitics, and International Organizations in the Mid Twentieth Century,” *Journal of World History*, 19/3, 2008, 327-348; For the Asian context, see John Dimoia, “‘Counting One’s Allies’: The Mobilization of Demography, Population, and Family Planning in East Asia, Late 1920s–Present,” *East Asian Science, Technology and Society. An International Journal*, 10/4, 2016, 355-376.

33 Shiffman and Quissel, “Family Planning’s Contentious History,” 5.

34 Saw Swee Hock, *Population Policies and Programmes in Singapore* (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2005); Mohamed Nasir Kamaludeen & Bryan Turner, *The Future of Singapore: Population, Society and the Nature of the State* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014); Yap, Mui Teng, “Singapore: Population Policies and Programmes,” ed. Warren Robinson & John Ross, *The Global Family Planning Revolution: Three Decades of Population Policies and Programs* (World Bank Publications, 2007), 201-219; K Kanagaratnam, “Singapore: The National Family Planning Program,” *Studies in Family Planning* 1, no. 28 (1968): 1-11.

35 Shao Han Lim, “Family Planning in Singapore: From Planning Families to Planning Population, 1949-66,” (unpublished bachelor thesis in the field of History, National University of Singapore, 2015).

36 Foley, “Non-governmental organizations,” 88.

contributions are often treated peripherally at best. The focus on the FPAS is thus not an arbitrary or convenient choice: rather, Singapore's role as a founding member of the IPPF and the headquarters of the IPPF's East and Southeast Asia and Oceania (Eseasor) Region make it a crucial piece in understanding women's and social history in Asia. What is missing from existing literature is a history of the early birth control movement that bridges the gap between the national and the international, the personal and the institutional.

Thus, this paper seeks to illuminate the intersection between local action and international advocacy by situating the story of Constance Goh and the Family Planning Association of Singapore within the broader forces of global biopolitics and geopolitics. The focus of this inquiry begins from an interesting contradiction between the politics of birth control at the local and international political spheres. When considering the birth control movement, how can we reconcile the prominent leadership of women at the international level with their relative marginalization from local politics? Although women like Margaret Sanger, Lady Rama Rao, Elise Ottesen-Jensen, Shidzue Kato, and Constance Goh were front and center of the international movement, they were commonly sidelined from local politics, the locus of social change and policy reform. Focusing on the FPAS as a case study, this paper asks: How did the largely women-led FPAS navigate often-hostile and highly gendered local and international public spheres to advance women's welfare and reproductive freedom from 1949 to 1966?

To address this question, I examined 291 newspaper articles from *The Straits Times* between 1949 to 1966, comparing them to oral history interviews of family planning pioneers, biographies, and Legislative Assembly transcripts to reconstruct the gendered spheres of public action in Singapore and the world.³⁷ Understanding the voices present and absent in newspapers and parliamentary records allows us to excavate the ways in which Singapore's family planning pioneers and everyday women negotiated their access to birth control in Singapore's pre-independence period, particularly from 1949 to 1966 when the FPAS operated independently of the government. Two surprising conclusions emerged from an anal-

ysis with NVivo. First, contrary to the common logic that Asian and international birth control movements were dominated by development concerns, the women-led FPAS mobilized the public sphere by placing the women's agenda *first*, retaining its focus on women's welfare at least up to 1966. Second, the sexism of local politics and public action *produced*, rather than impeded, the dynamism and flexibility of the FPAS. Analyzing the FPAS's experiences offers new ways to study national FPAs as agents between local politics and international systems and think about how female activists laid an international foundation for supporting women's choice in a world that remained distinctly unequal for them.

It should be noted that the following story of the Singaporean birth control movement, though told from women's eyes to remedy the male-centric narratives of mainstream historiography, does not yet represent a comprehensive cross-section of Singaporean society from 1949 to 1966. The same forces that impeded some women—more so than others—from exercising full and free autonomy over their own bodies have also produced their relative absence and silence in the historical archives. Most of these women were impoverished and illiterate and certainly would not have been privy to the conversations and debates between FPAS pioneers and the elite English-speaking public that animated the pages of *The Straits Times*. In contrast, Constance Goh and her peers, many of whom were expatriates, understood that their privileged backgrounds and networks enabled them to travel between local and international spheres of action, to engage with ideologies of women's wellbeing and medical advancement, and to shape the global conversation on family planning and birth control. What little we may know about the conditions of women in the communities that the FPAS served are seen from the eyes of this class of educated women. Nevertheless, their perspectives illuminate how some women worked within the confines of heteropatriarchal spaces to translate global politics to their own communities, and utilized their nerve and networks to realize their vision of women's empowerment.

Because terminologies like “birth control,” “family planning,” “contraception,” and later “population control” were often used interchangeably by historical

³⁷ Established in 1845, *The Straits Times* is considered one of Singapore's oldest and most widely-read newspaper publications. Until the formal separation of Singapore from Malaysia in 1964, the paper was headquartered in Kuala Lumpur and provided local and international news to both Singaporean and Malayan communities.

actors, the term “birth control” will be used throughout this paper to denote a repertoire of methods aimed at preventing pregnancy, which includes medications, procedures, devices, and behaviors. In comparison, “family planning” and “population control” represent alternative ways that birth control was packaged and marketed.

ORIGINS

Constance Goh and the Family Planning Association of Singapore

IN HER BIOGRAPHY of Constance Goh, Zhou Mei described the family planning pioneer as a woman of idealism and zeal, one who “felt an irresistible urge to do something for the down-trodden, the deprived.”³⁸ As a granddaughter of an imperial magistrate in Xiamen, Constance Goh grew up with a keen consciousness of injustice. She understood early on that there existed a difference between her privileged station and that of the beggars outside of her family home.

When Constance turned twelve, her mother left China and brought Constance to Singapore with her, a departure partly motivated by her father’s perpetual absence and his practice of concubinage. The events of Constance’s early family life reflected the overt sexism of her time, not just in her hometown in China, but also embedded in the patriarchal cultural norms of the many immigrant communities that populated and shaped the culture of early Singaporean society. Sons were preferred to daughters. Women were taught subservience and obedience to their husbands and their families. The proper place of a woman was at home bearing and rearing children, while men were natural breadwinners, decision-makers, politicians, and professionals. It was not natural for women to be

seen or heard in public spaces, a norm that Constance Goh’s life and advocacy defied. Raised by an educated woman amidst “the thick of feudalistic prejudices against daughters,”³⁹ Constance understood but was not resigned to the secondary place that women were consigned. Her upbringing, unconventional for most women in her time, imbued her with a desire to extend a hand to fellow women,⁴⁰ whom she saw as “the underdogs, the disadvantaged second-class members of a family.”⁴¹ As she witnessed the sufferings of the hungry masses in China and Singapore, she came to a nascent understanding that poverty was somehow related to the suffering brought about by endless childbirth that some women found themselves in.⁴²

When the war ended, the euphoria of liberation filled Constance Goh with an energy and enthusiasm to “do everything at once.”⁴³ It was the painful plight of women and children that drew her attention and drove her to action. She began with a soup kitchen, calling together other volunteers in an abandoned motor workshop in Havelock Road, feeding and cleaning the hungry children who roamed the streets scavenging for food.⁴⁴ But she and her fellow volunteers desired a longer-term solution to the poverty that they believed was producing scores of unwanted and underfed children. As they discussed this problem, they came to the conclusion that they had to start with the mothers. By providing women with the means and knowledge to choose the number of children they wanted and the spacing of their births, women would be able to escape the debilitating burden of unwanted childbirth.⁴⁵

Political outsidership, widespread poverty, and lack of support from the government among other factors made running the FPAS difficult especially in its nascent stages. When the women registered the FPAS in 1949, local expertise on contraception and birth control was scarce. The women sent letters to friends and contacts abroad—primarily to England (which continued to exercise colonial control over Singapore until

38 Zhou, *The Life of a Family Planning Pioneer*, 15.

39 Zhou, *The Life of a Family Planning Pioneer*, 15.

40 Zhou, *The Life of a Family Planning Pioneer*, 15.

41 Zhou, *The Life of a Family Planning Pioneer*, 127.

42 Zhou, *The Life of a Family Planning Pioneer*, 54.

43 Zhou, *The Life of a Family Planning Pioneer*, 126.

44 Zhou, *The Life of a Family Planning Pioneer*, 126.

45 Zhou, *The Life of a Family Planning Pioneer*, 134.

1965)—for information and supplies.⁴⁶ As Constance Goh wrote:

“Fumbled and stumbled, the blind leading the blinder, how we begged, borrowed and bullied for funds, haggled over prices with manufacturers overseas, worried over labeling, packaging, freight and storage, coined literature and dreamed up ways and means to make friends and influence the public.”⁴⁷

As the FPAS expanded its initial operations from Constance’s husband’s medical practice in South Bridge Road, the need for resources and volunteers grew. Elite women like Constance took turns running the clinics, raising funds, and visiting homes. Soon enough, it became apparent that the scale of silent suffering among women in Singapore was, as the volunteers surmised, immense. A pattern emerged from the case files of the typical patient:

“She would have already had several children, the average was about six per woman but there were many cases of double-digit births. There was a Chinese woman who had had nineteen pregnancies before she found her way to a family planning clinic in 1955 [...] From the patients, volunteers manning the clinics learnt that all too often, babies had been given away. In all cases, poverty was given as the reason [...] The women’s common refrain: ‘I don’t know what to do!’”⁴⁸

Oral history accounts from midwives who conducted home deliveries corroborated the observations by FPAS volunteers about the conditions of Singaporean women. Mary Hee, a former midwife who was posted to a rural village for three months, related:

“In those days the Malays will give birth until 13. The Chinese also got. The highest I think is 18. One year [deliver] twice. Beginning of the year and ending of the year. So two at one shot, in one year, That sort

of thing. Last time they gave birth a lot, they never thought of how to feed them.”⁴⁹

Access to birth control alone was often not sufficient, as women and their husbands had to be educated on how to properly use it. At times, sexual abuse and domestic violence made it difficult for women—rich and poor alike—to seek cooperation from their husbands in using condoms and contraceptives. Another social welfare worker and founder of the Young Women Muslim Association in Singapore (Pasatuan Pemudi Islam Singapura), Mrs. Mohamed Siraj, described her observations of Malay women in Singapore:

“I found out that a lot of the Malay Muslim women were suffering, because some of the men were not very good to the families [...] Either he goes off with another woman or he goes and gambles, or he drinks or he does all sorts of things; there’s not enough money, not enough anything and the worst thing is violence [...] no one is helping all these women, they don’t know anything. They are innocent and they are ignorant [...] Some of them cannot read or write, most of them cannot read. Those days, who goes to school? Malays and Muslim majority don’t go, they do not go to school, they are thrown on the road; wife and children.”⁵⁰

Supporting these women through easy access to birth control was a difficult challenge, as the severity of the average case makes clear. Yet, it was not enough to obtain the support of would-be mothers and other patrons of the clinics for its growth to be sustainable. In order to broaden public support and make the movement “respectable,” the FPAS needed the endorsement of the all-male politicians who held the keys to policy and resources in the colony.

46 Zhou, *The Life of a Family Planning Pioneer*, 135.

47 Zhou, *The Life of a Family Planning Pioneer*, 133.

48 Zhou, *The Life of a Family Planning Pioneer*, 133.

49 Sook Yin Mary Hee, interview by Patricia Lee, September 20, 1999, Accession Number 002206, Reel 8/11, transcript, National Archives of Singapore, Singapore, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/Flipviewer/publish/ff38d619-115f-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad-OHC002206_008/web/html5/index.html.

50 Mrs. Mohamad Siraj [Khatijun Nissa Siraj], interview by Ruzita Zaki, August 4, 1995, Accession Number 001663, Reel 16/36, transcript, National Archives of Singapore, Singapore. https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/record-details/4bbc8195-115e-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad?keywords=family%20planning%20association&keywords-type=all.

THE GENDERED LOCAL PUBLIC SPHERE

FROM 1949 TO 1966, the FPAS operated in a local environment that was dismissive of women's leadership in public affairs and apathetic towards women's issues in the private sphere. World War II and the Japanese Occupation had increased political awareness among larger segments of society and shattered the myth of colonial supremacy.⁵¹ Amidst this social upheaval, new avenues opened for women's participation in civil society. Yet, though women increasingly populated juries, volunteered at feeding centers, and established associations that ranged from professional to mutual aid groups, gender hierarchies continued to reinforce patriarchal norms for large segments of women in society. By 1955, only 50% of the female population voted in elections. It was only in 1959 that the first female candidates of the People's Action Party were voted into the self-governing Legislative Assembly. Until then, the colony was completely run by local and colonial male politicians. Moreover, the few women who were active in politics primarily reflected English-educated and middle-class interests.⁵²

During this time, the FPAS was a volunteer-run organization dependent on charitable allowances from the government. The gendered politics of birth control, specifically the misogynistic disregard male politicians had for the issue, was most obvious at the 1955 Legislative Assembly budget debate over the FPAS's share of charitable allowances, which was motioned to be raised by \$25,000 that year.⁵³ Opposition to the FPAS was

raised on the grounds that Christians and Muslims would take offense at the allotment of public money to support "sinful practices."⁵⁴ Others appealed to nationalist logics and argued that support for birth control and family planning was tantamount to the "slow slaying of a rising nation."⁵⁵ The debate trailed towards religion, economy, social inequality, overpopulation, covering nearly every facet of birth control except the women themselves. At last, Mr. G. A. P. Sutherland observed the lack of female Assembly members to voice their point of view to the all-male room—though not before disclaiming that he "[did] not wish to pose as a feminist — in fact, [he] usually [took] the opposite role."⁵⁶ It was then that order in the assembly unraveled. Mr. Lim Cher Keng's remarks that he would "represent [his] wife to this House" incited several wife-related jokes that were received with raucous laughter. Only Mr. Francis Thomas put a stop to this, describing the discussion as "far too much laughter amongst a group of men who are dealing with what is in the long run *a woman's problem* [*italics mine*]."⁵⁷ The men also remarked that the FPAS women were wealthy ladies who should "save that money and not spend it on diamond rings and beautiful dresses," and "ask their husbands"—not taxpayers—for money to fund family planning work.⁵⁸ The acceptability of tongue-in-cheek comments about feminists and light-hearted attitudes towards women's issues in the highest decision-making body of pre-independence Singapore made it difficult to table the women's agenda and women's work as an issue of serious political importance. It was evident from their patronizing portrayals of the women leaders of FPAS—as wealthy and bored wives—that the public sphere remained the locus of male action. Women, if acknowledged at all, were reduced to their private identities as dependent wives and mothers.

In fact, women had long been involved in public action, albeit almost exclusively in social

51 Phyllis Chew, "Blazing a Trail: The Fight for Women's Rights in Singapore," *BiblioAsia* 14, no. 3 (December 2018): 32–37, https://biblioasia.nlb.gov.sg/files/pdf/vol-14/v14-issue3_Trail.pdfhttps://biblioasia.nlb.gov.sg/files/pdf/vol-14/v14-issue3_Trail.pdf.

52 Aline Wong, and Wai Kum Leong, *Singapore Women: Three Decades of Change* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1993).

53 Singapore Legislative Assembly Debates, Vol. 1, Sitting 18, *Bills*, Col. 924, November 9, 1955.

54 Singapore Legislative Assembly Debates, Vol. 1, Sitting 18, *Bills*, Remarks by Mr. Goh Tong Liang, Col. 1103.

55 Singapore Legislative Assembly Debates, Vol. 1, Sitting 18, *Bills*, Remarks by Mr A. R. Lazarus, Col. 1106.

56 Singapore Legislative Assembly Debates, Vol. 1, Sitting 18, *Bills*, Remarks by Mr. G. A. P. Sutherland, Col. 1110.

57 Singapore Legislative Assembly Debates, Vol. 1, Sitting 18, *Bills*, Remarks by Mr. Francis Thomas, Col. 1120.

58 Singapore Legislative Assembly Debates, Vol. 1, Sitting 18, *Bills*, Remarks by Mr. Lim Cher Keng, Col. 1115.

PRIORITIZING THE WOMEN'S AGENDA

welfare, volunteerism, and community-based associations. Men were as absent from social work as women were from politics. When the Singapore government appointed 18 women as Justices of the Peace in 1948 “in recognition of the growing importance of women in the public life of the colony,”⁵⁹ 100 women representatives of various local communities attended the celebratory tea party, including FPAS volunteers Constance Goh and Gnanasundaram Thevathasan.⁶⁰ There, the women were called to give their services, energy, and time for the “general benefit of the public.”⁶¹ The all-female attendance demonstrated that social work was a highly feminized sphere led by a class of elite women with links to the upper echelons of society.⁶² They were mostly expatriates and housewives, and as one female social worker described: “They were all educated women and of course, they all had money.”⁶³

The characterization of birth control as a “woman’s problem” in public discourse also made it difficult to broaden the movement’s appeal. In FPAS’s first two years, birth control and family planning related news were placed in a female-targeted section of *The Straits Times* (“Feminine Forum”) alongside advertisements for beauty products and baby food recipes.⁶⁴ As Constance Goh described: “We dared not say too much; we never had any publicity because it was known we would be accused of trying to thrust something at other women, having nothing to do, or trying to get jobs. That was the attitude of the men, the public [...] Many times their wives had to come to us in secret.”⁶⁵ It was against and within this hostile environment, one often indifferent to the plight of women, which the FPAS had to operate.

SINGAPORE’S GENDERED PUBLIC sphere was not unique, as women around the world struggled to carve out a space for themselves in politics. The international birth control movement had to contend with staunch post-WWII nationalism, the global Catholic Church, and the Communist bloc. These hostile circumstances confronted the international birth control movement with a paradox: popularizing birth control—fundamentally a women’s issue—often meant taking women out of the picture in favor of development-oriented population control.

The first women leaders understood the secondary place they held in society,⁶⁶ and it was this desire to revolutionize women’s social freedoms that motivated their advocacy of birth control. But they also quickly learned that their status as political outsiders would not succeed against prevailing sexism and gender roles. Although Margaret Sanger coined “birth control”⁶⁷ in the 1914 issues of *Woman Rebel* that called on women to “look the whole world in the face with a go-to-hell look in the eyes,”⁶⁸ the loud feminism of her early advocacy took a backseat when building financial and public support necessitated presenting contraception as a medical treatment conducted by professionals and legitimated by science.

Like her American counterpart, Constance Goh was unabashed about her feminism in personal interviews: “I was always concerned for girls — I don’t care a hoot for the boys.”⁶⁹ Yet, a son-biased society would not

59 “Colony names women as J.P.s,” *The Straits Times*, March 28, 1948, 1.

60 “Tea Party to 13 Women J.P.s,” *The Straits Times*, May 10, 1948, 4.

61 “Tea Party to 13 Women J.P.s,” *The Straits Times*, May 10, 1948.

62 “Lord Listowel with three women social welfare workers,” *The Straits Times*, March 5, 1948, 5.

63 Mrs. Mohamad Siraj [Khatijun Nissa Siraj], interview by Ruzita Zaki, November 15, 1995, Accession Number 001663, Reel 16/36, transcript, National Archives of Singapore, Singapore.

64 For example, see Mary Heathcott, “I wish there had been a time...,” *The Straits Times*, December 10, 1950, 7; Susan Barrie, “Gala fete,” *The Straits Times*, May 21, 1957.

65 Huston, *Motherhood by Choice*, 61.

66 Zhou, *The Life of a Family Planning Pioneer*, 127-8.

67 Margaret Sanger, “Mary, Mother Mary,” *The Woman Rebel*, Vol. 1, No. 4, June 1914, 32, Margaret Sanger Microfilm C16:0546, <https://www.nyu.edu/projects/sanger/webedition/app/documents/show.php?sangerDoc=test.xml>.

68 Margaret Sanger, “A Woman’s Duty,” *The Woman Rebel*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Mar. 1914, 8, Margaret Sanger Microfilm C16:0522, <https://www.nyu.edu/projects/sanger/webedition/app/documents/show.php?sangerDoc=420071.xml>.

69 Huston, *Motherhood by Choice*, 61.



President of the West Pakistan Social Welfare Club and English wife of the former Prime Minister of Pakistan, Lady Noon, in Singapore in 1963. Social work was a "feminine sphere not just in Singapore, but internationally. Lady Noon was typical of wives of prominent male public figures, who were often expected to complement their husbands' political involvement with their own active social work [2].

respond well to this private sentiment. There was little appetite for "women's emancipation" when most women were politically *tidak-apa*⁷⁰—apathetic.⁷¹ The FPAS officially centered its goals on the family,⁷² which distanced it from "population control," but nevertheless conservatively focused on the woman within her *marriage* and *family*. For this reason, the words "women" and "mother" were not reflected in its founding constitution. Rather, we can read what the FPAS communicated in its objectives—"scientific contraception," "ill health," "overcrowding," "production of healthy children who are an asset to the nation"—as a reflection of the priorities of the society and the authorities it operated within and under. Presenting birth control within these frameworks helped to show that it was not radical and suspect, but rather legitimized by science and justified by national and social development.

How can we explain this discrepancy between the publicly utilitarian presentation of the FPAS's goals and the privately feminist individual motivations of its volunteers? In the 1950s, this contradiction between govern-

ment interests and the concerns of local family planning pioneers, reflected the tension between growing international calls for development-oriented population control and the original focus on women's issues. Although the FPAS continued to advocate primarily for women's welfare, opinions from the "professionals," such as economists and doctors, took increasingly alarmist tones. Just a year after the FPAS's formation in 1949, prominent local economist Thomas H. Silcock cautioned that unchecked population growth could lead to "explosive results" if it outstripped the resources available in the colony to support a demographic expansion.⁷³ Indeed, the male politicians whose buy-ins the FPAS obtained tended to represent family planning as a solution for Singapore's development problems. When Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, for example, opened the Singapore IPPF conference in 1963, he couched it in terms of the sociological problems connected with population control.⁷⁴ Sir Percy McNeice, in a 1981 oral interview about how he came to be FPAS president, recalled that it was neither his idea, nor was he "particularly interested in [it] at all." Constance Goh and the other women volunteers approached him and persuaded him with the "population problem."⁷⁵

Although political expediency may have necessitated some rhetorical compromises, the FPAS's focus on women was not absent but coded within its objectives. The organization's contributions to on-the-ground service delivery and its *all-female* force of clinic volunteers (with the exception of doctors) became the FPAS's strongest source of authority as an organization for women by women. As told by Lady McNeice, patron of and volunteer for the FPAS, "it was unheard of to have a man volunteer unless he was a doctor."⁷⁶

It is not difficult to see why *women*—whether they were FPAS volunteers, midwives, social welfare workers, or doctors—had to be the mediators and advocates of birth control in a time when social taboos clouded discussions of sex and sexuality. In many cases, women were terrified

70 *Tidak-apa* is Malay for "it doesn't matter."

71 "Polls: A Drive on Tida-Apa Women," *The Straits Times*, September 22, 1957, 5.

72 Youth Workers, "A surprise" (letter), *The Straits Times*, March 21, 1954, 10.

73 "At Kandang Kerbau," *The Straits Times*, October 5, 1950, 6.

74 Kuan Yew Lee, "Speech by the Prime Minister at the Opening of the Seventh International Conference on Planned Parenthood on Sunday", transcript of speech delivered at Victoria Theater, February 10, 1963, National Archives of Singapore. <https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/lky19630210.pdf>.

75 Thomas Percy Ferguson McNeice, interview by Foo Kim Leng, December 7, 1981, Accession Number 000099, Reel 15/22, transcript, 134, National Archives of Singapore.

76 Yuen-Peng McNeice, interview by Helen Choo, August 4, 1982, Accession Number 000190, Reel 4/4, transcript, National Archives of Singapore.

of their husbands.⁷⁷ At the Family Planning Clinics, volunteers had to coach women on “how to use psychology to get their way with their husbands; if necessary, throw in feminine wiles.”⁷⁸ Women often felt more comfortable confiding in fellow women about matters they considered too personal. As midwife Mary Hee described: “The patients [will tell you] everything honestly. All about their sex life, they will tell you because they got nobody to turn to [...] Even the [male] doctor also cannot find out.” For more conservative communities like the Malay Muslims, it was considered unacceptable for a woman to show her body to a male doctor, so the intervention of trained female representatives and medical professionals was necessary.⁷⁹

The Objects

The objects of the association are: (1) Advocate the provision of facilities for scientific contraception to mitigate the evils of ill-health and overcrowding; (2) To advocate and promote the establishment of Family Planning Centres; (3) To encourage the production of healthy children who are an asset to the nation.

Mrs Goh Kok Kee, Dr. Loe Poon Lip, Dr Mary Tan, Mrs Robert Eu, Mrs C. S. Ashbrook, Mrs H. B. Amstutz, Mr W. Lowick, Mr C. J. Poh and Mrs S. M. Barnwell were elected to serve on the committee. Mrs P. A. B. McKerron is to be invited to become patroness of the new association.

The Objects of the FPAS, 1949. [3]

Thus, given the stigma that surrounded the work of the FPAS in its early days, a woman’s decision to risk embarrassment by visiting a family planning clinic demonstrated significant trust and courage on her part. While we lack the means to hear most of the women’s responses to the work of the FPAS, the growing number of birth control acceptors allows us to reasonably infer that its intervention was welcome by many women around Singapore. By the end of its first year of operation, the FPAS had to increase the number of operating clinics from one to five in order to meet demand.⁸⁰

From 1949–1966, the FPAS’s biggest battles would be waged in *The Straits Times* forum letters between op-

ponents of the FPA and its supporters, many of whom were fellow, anonymous women. Whenever matters of the government’s allowance to the FPAS were announced in the press, members of the public submitted angry forum letters to *The Straits Times*, decrying the use of public resources for birth control. Religious oppositions were common:

“The main activity of the FPA is immoral and unethical. Is it desirable to grant such an association allocations from public funds to carry on this activity which is against the law of God and against the conscience of many of the taxpayers?”⁸¹

One sought to undermine the project of women’s emancipation as a front for Communist subversion:

“You are not unaware, I take it, that two of the best defenses against atheistic Communism are the family and religion. May I, therefore, ask what is really behind this local “emancipation for women” movement here, since in last Sunday’s article it seemed to attack both the family and religion? Is it a secret Red move?”⁸²

Another made unfounded accusations about the work of the FPAS, accusing them of using women for “tests”:

“A cheap, new, uncomplicated FPA method for solving Asia’s population problem is now being tested out on a Malay fishing community [...] It is an admission that the previous methods used, though advertised as highly effective, have not proved satisfactory, and by no means sure this will either.”⁸³

In response, the FPAS used the discursive space provided by *The Straits Times* forum letters to engage with their opponents and influence public opinion towards birth control. Letters provocatively titled “Talk to the mothers,”⁸⁴ “A Woman to FPA

⁷⁷ Interview with Mary Hee, Reel 9/11, transcript, 141, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/Flipviewer/publish/5/520c876f-115e-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad-OHC002206_009/web/html5/index.html.

⁷⁸ Zhou, *The Life of a Family Planning Pioneer*, 138.

⁷⁹ Rane Chinnappa, interview by Dr. Daniel Chew, August 30, 2014, Reel 2/2, transcript, National Archives of Singapore, Singapore, 16, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/Flipviewer/publish/0/0a2b8af6-115e-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad-OHC000848_002/web/html5/index.html.

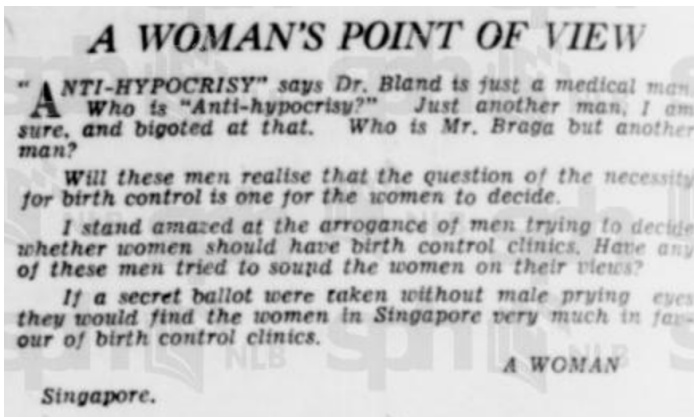
⁸⁰ Zhou, *The Life of a Family Planning Pioneer*, 137.

⁸¹ Anti-Hypocrisy, “The Criminal Objects of the FPA” (letter), *The Straits Times*, April 28, 1955.

⁸² Mother and Father of Three, “The doctrine and dogma of family planning” (letter), *The Straits Times*, July 25, 1959.

⁸³ Common Sense, “This is no solution” (letter), *The Straits Times*, June 10, 1955.

⁸⁴ W. S. I., “Talk to the mothers: might change their opinion” (letter), *The Straits Times*, May 17, 1955, 6.



"A Woman" condemns the "arrogance of men" in deciding women's affairs. [4]

Critics,⁸⁵ "If Husbands had the first baby,"⁸⁶ decried the arrogance of "male attackers" in politics and the press who presumed to have the authority to decide "whether women should have birth control clinics."⁸⁷ In the first year of the FPAS's operations, the incumbent Labour Party campaigned against birth control during the 1949 Municipal Assembly Elections. One irate woman wrote in to *The Straits Times* with a letter titled "And this is what a woman thinks" to condemn the party's stance: "To the Labour Party I say this: leave the birth control clinics alone and devote your time to other subjects, such as repairs to the many bad roads of this city."⁸⁸

Another incident in 1950 demonstrated the ways that women in Singapore expressed solidarity and support for the FPAS when controversy surrounding its campaigns periodically leapt to public attention. In March of that year, the volunteers of the FPAS arranged the screening of a cinema slide to educate the Chinese community about family planning and birth control. This angered some members of the public, who submitted letters to the *Straits Times* excoriating the inappropriateness of the slides. One, under the pseudonym "A Worker," wrote:

"The fact that some "enlightened people" are guilty of a practice which prior to our time was indulged

*in only by prostitutes, but which is now regarded as fashionable, does not give them the right to justify the same conduct in others. No, not even in the poor impoverished Chinese or any other woman, who are striving to rear their families in honesty and decency, even amidst poverty and hardship."*⁸⁹

This provoked swift and flurried outcry from women readers, who slammed the apparent misogyny of "The Worker's" comments. One FPA attendant spoke out in defense of her work at the clinic, describing the plight of many mothers who came to the FPAS in search of assistance.⁹⁰ Another woman, lamenting that "there have been altogether too few views expressed by women on the subject [when it is] after all the women whom it most concerns," wrote in to lend her voice in support of the "blessing" that family planning brought to a woman and her family.⁹¹

Such letters provided useful support for the FPAS's own letters to the press. Constance Goh, for example, penned her own response letter to "The Worker" when the controversy surrounding the cinema slides erupted, presenting a number of socio-economic arguments for family planning while drawing attention to "the suffering inflicted upon women by too frequent pregnancies, that has been so often stressed" by the FPAS and its supporters.⁹² The prolific letter rebuttals of Mrs. Joanna Moore, who served as the FPAS's Publicity Officer from 1955 to 1960, provide a further insight into the real concerns of the FPAS: the individual welfare of women.

Moore was direct about her frustrations with criticisms from the public which insinuated that the organization was a eugenicist and immoral force in society that endorsed family planning as a neo-Malthusian solution for solving "Asia's population problem". More than once, she began her letters to newspaper forums with, "As we have said so many times already,"⁹³ or "Please, please, let us get this straight once and for all":

85 Ignorance is not Bliss, "A Woman to FPA Critics" (letter), *The Straits Times*, March 30, 1950, 8.

86 An English Mother, "If Husbands had the first baby" (letter), *The Straits Times*, August 6, 1949, 6.

87 "A Woman's Point of View" (letter), 6.

88 D. Lee, "And this is what a woman thinks" (letter), *The Straits Times*, December 10, 1949, 8.

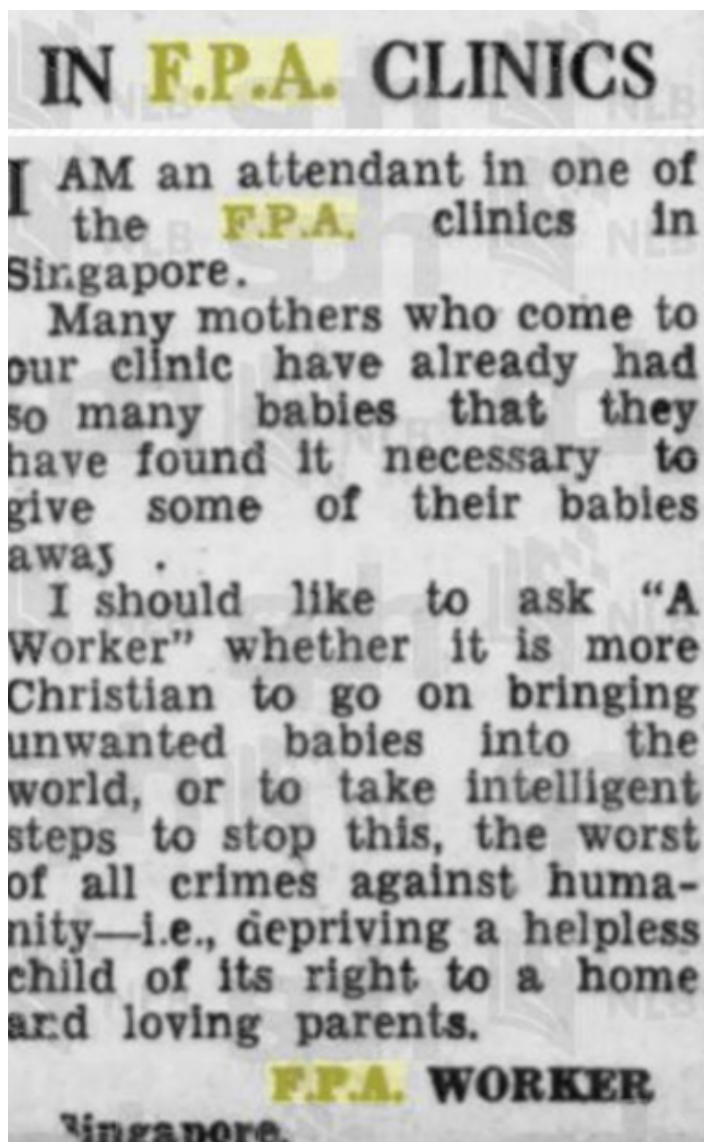
89 Mother and Father of Three, "The doctrine and dogma of family planning" (letter), *The Straits Times*, July 25, 1959.

90 FPA Worker, "In FPA Clinics" (letter), *The Straits Times*, March 28, 1950.

91 Ignorance is not Bliss, "A Woman to FPA Critics" (letter), *The Straits Times*, March 30, 1950.

92 Constance Goh, "A Chinese Social Worker Defends the FPA" (letter), *The Straits Times*, April 1, 1950, 9.

93 Joanna Moore, "FPA: No One Being Used for Tests" (letter), *The Straits Times*, June 16, 1955, 14.



"In FPA Clinics": An FPA attendant responds to the accusation of "A Worker." [5]

"The Singapore Family Planning Association makes no claim to solve any problems whatsoever other than the personal and individual problem of the women who visit our clinics [...] our sole object is to make this knowledge available to all women who want it and who cannot afford to go to a private doctor for it."⁹⁴

The FPAS, she maintained, was not ignorant of "agricultural, economic distribution, social and other solutions," but it would leave it to the "agriculturalists,

economists, and sociologists."⁹⁵ The function of the FPAS was to help the individual woman. In fact, the focus on the women's agenda in the local context was necessary to debunk concerns that the FPAS was a "foreign-inspired organisation aiming at the prenatal destruction of the Malayan nation."⁹⁶ Against the backdrop of decolonization and the Cold War, there remained suspicion towards people like "the lady [Sanger] who is shortly coming to preach birth prevention from the USA,"⁹⁷ who were seen as exporting ideas which were either imperialist and antithetical to "independence," or viewed as Western and irreconcilable with "Oriental values."⁹⁸ Consequently, an appeal to sympathy for the suffering, childbirth-weary women, and the universalism of the "rights for women" discourse remained the most defensible argument for the work of the FPAS's women volunteers.

TO CHANGE A MAN'S WORLD

EXCLUSION FROM THE decision-making room did not impede Constance Goh and her fellow women volunteers from adroitly seeking the support of prominent male figureheads of power. They demonstrated this strategy from the moment of FPAS's inception, when they asked the head of Singapore's Social Welfare Department, Sir Percy McNeice, to become president of the organization. As a prominent civil servant, his participation was crucial in enhancing the FPAS's social respectability, and he would become the organization's most active spokesperson and figurehead in the press.⁹⁹ But the movement remained discreet until 1951 when, unprompted, the Colonial Treasurer allocated \$5000 to the FPAS. "All of a sudden we were respectable, approved by the government,"¹⁰⁰ recalled Constance Goh. The boost from a prominent figure confirmed her suspicion that male allies with access to pow-

⁹⁴ Moore, "FPA" (letter), 14.

⁹⁵ Joanna Moore, "The Problems that Await Solution in Singapore" (letter), *The Straits Times*, October 2, 1960, 6.

⁹⁶ B. S. Ang, "A Grant from the MCA" (letter), *The Straits Times*, October 26, 1952, 9.

⁹⁷ Katong, "Foreign Inspired" (letter), *The Straits Times*, February 8, 1952, 9.

⁹⁸ Katong, "Foreign Inspired," 9.

⁹⁹ For example, see "Own clinic for colony FPA: Mr. McNeice on Need for More Funds, Members," *The Straits Times*, July 14, 1950; Percy McNeice, "FPA and Government Policy" (Letter), *The Straits Times*, December 23, 1958.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

A Woman To F.P.A. Critics

I FEEL that I must—as a woman and, so far a mother of one—reply to the letter from “A Worker” published on Mar. 27 on the subject of Family Planning Association slides in Chinese cinemas.

There have been altogether too few views expressed by women on this subject and it is after all the women whom it most concerns.

Birth control is in no way a menace to the family—it is its blessing. Under present stupid and illogical prejudices, the ignorant woman bears her children one after another without pause, to the detriment of at least four of the seven or eight children to which a normal woman can successfully give live birth.

After three quick, successive births a mother is sick in body and mind (something which the fierce males overlook on this question) and consequently her fourth, fifth and sixth babies are sick and puny too.

Breathing Space

With the blessing of birth control, these same children could be equally healthy, as their mother could have a breathing space of at least a year between each conception to give her body the necessary rest and health to face the exhausting process again.

With such a scourge as tuberculosis in Malaya, it would be well if all these fierce male attackers of the F.P.A. spared a thought for those of their family yet unborn, and also for the woman who is to bear them. Her health and the health of her children are the responsibility of the father.

And so to “A Worker” I say: “Go ahead. Have your large family. No one is threatening your right to a ‘full quiver’; but for the sake of humanity let your arrows be equally straight and strong.”

IGNORANCE IS NOT BLISS.
Singapore.

PLEASE, please, let us get this straight once and for all.

The F.P.A. does not “ignore the agricultural, economic, distribution, social and other solutions” to the problem of population.

It prays fervently that the agriculturists, economists and sociologists will do their utmost to solve these problems, as only they can.

But they cannot solve the problem of the poor, wretched woman in Chinatown whose husband earns \$100 a month and who has had 11 pregnancies. This is the function of the F.P.A.—to help individual parents with their individual, personal problem of how best to plan their family.

ment of Singapore attempts to make it so I hope that “Mother of Three” will be there with me in the front rank of the freedom fighters. But when she is, let her remember that the F.P.A.’s fight has always been to give men and women in Singapore just that freedom of choice that she enjoys.

They cannot choose until they know the alternatives that are there. To deny them knowledge is as wrong as to deny them freedom.

JOANNA MOORE

Singapore.

WHAT DOES

An example of Moore's Response Letters: "The Problems that Await Solution in Singapore." [7]

Times mentioned funding. It was never enough. Jumble sales,¹⁰³ film shows,¹⁰⁴ buffets,¹⁰⁵ garden fetes—organized, run, and hosted by upper-class women—raised the petty cash the organization needed to survive. The FPAS women mobilized the female social worlds in which they shared common membership, a cross section of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) and the Singapore Chinese Ladies Association.

Parallel organizations in other countries were mostly led by like-minded women who believed in the idea that birth control was essential to women's and social welfare. Thus, in the absence of more supportive local actors, the FPAS readily found allies in the female-led international network. Through the IPPF, they formed one node in a dynamic web of dedicated individuals who traveled around the world locating and assisting individuals interested in starting similar movements in their countries.¹⁰⁶ Regionally, the FPAS leaders worked closely with counterparts in the IPPF's East, Southeast Asia, and Oceania Region (ESEAO), responding to the “spontaneous inquiries coming from all parts of the Federation of Malaya, Sarawak and Indonesia.”¹⁰⁷ It was not uncommon, in

"A Woman to FPA Clinics": A woman criticizes a lacking female perspective on birth control and advocates for its benefits. [6]

er—whether in politics or medicine—were needed for a women's movement to succeed. Later, the prominent obstetrician and future President of Singapore, Professor Benjamin Sheares, did much to defend the FPAS's endorsement of new contraceptive technology, such as sterilization.¹⁰¹

Arguably, however, it was not male networks of power, but informal female networks of solidarity that availed the FPAS of material and public support that it otherwise would not have received from a divided Legislative Assembly.¹⁰² From 1949 to 1966, 75 out of the 291 (26%) FPAS-related articles analyzed in *The Straits*

101 “Professor Tells of Effects of Legalised Abortion”, *The Straits Times*, February 14, 1963; “Sterilisation as Part of Family Planning”, *The Straits Times*, February 16, 1963. Sheares would become President of the FPA in 1960 and later President of the Republic in 1971.

102 In 1966, the issue of the FPAS's funding—this time to be raised to \$100,000—was furiously debated in Parliament again. The Assembly was quite literally, in two minds. 15 votes were in favor, the other 14 comprised 8 objections and 6 abstentions. See “Passed: That \$1000,000 for FPA”, *The Straits Times*, November 23, 1956.

103 “FPA to expand mothers' service,” Singapore Free Press, June 29, 1953, 5.

104 Cathay Organization: Smiley Gets a Gun (In Support of the FPA) (advertisement), *The Straits Times*, April 2, 1959, 8.

105 “Buffet”, *The Straits Times*, November 11, 1963.

106 Dolores Foley, “Non-Governmental Organizations as Catalysts of Policy Reform and Social Change: A Case Study of the International Planned Parenthood Federation.” Order No. DP31241, University of Southern California, 1989, 7.

107 “Own Clinic for Colony FPA”, *The Straits Times*, February 14, 1950, 7.

SHOES GALORE—AND ONLY FIVE CENTS A PAIR!

SHOES GALORE, for men, women and children, were sold at five cents and 10 cents a pair at a jumble sale in the Presbyterian Hall yesterday. The sale was in aid of the Family Planning Association.

Crowds turned up with big bags and baskets to carry away bargains in clothing, toys, cutlery, books and magazines.

One Army wife, Mrs. T.M. Potts, exulted: "It was the cheapest sale I've ever been to — just look what I got for \$2.50: a pair of shoes for each member of the family (total cost 30 cents), two pairs of shorts and three vests for my sons (80 cents) and a nightgown, a dress and four fashion magazines for myself (\$1.50)!"

Organiser of the sale was Mrs. Rose Ho. She expects it will realise more than \$700 for the F.P.A. — Straits Times picture.



"Shoes galore." [8]

the early days of the IPPF, for established FPAs to raise funds from private individuals and various foundations to aid other, newer FPAs.¹⁰⁸ In Malaysia, the Ipoh FPA was started by the Government Lady Medical Officer who visited Singapore's Bukit Panjang Clinic to learn about birth control methods in 1950.¹⁰⁹ When Johor opened its first clinic in 1954, the secretary, Mrs. Enid Watts, gave generous credit to the Singaporean volunteers: "Helped by the leaders of the Singapore Family Planning Association, we got an exceptionally good response [...] Singapore FPA has promised to provide us with \$1000 worth of equipment."¹¹⁰ Locally, women had limited power to effect policy change and generate resources. Yet, they found sympathetic allies across borders, and when organized in an international network, they were collectively powerful.

In fact, although the local pioneers did much to lobby the government to support family planning, it was the international alliance that drove the government to

action. References to active government support of family planning in other nations, such as Hong Kong, Japan, and India, were raised in parliament as arguments for financing the FPAS.¹¹¹ The publicity generated by large philanthropic donations that dwarfed the government's family planning budget likely nudged the government to reconsider its stance on funding family planning.¹¹² The growing frequency of praise from high-profile visitors towards the FPAS,¹¹³ and the fanfare that surrounded the 1963 IPPF Conference in Singapore, increasingly turned the attention of the government to the prestige associated with Singapore's regional family planning leadership.

CONCLUSION

WHAT EMERGES FROM the above evidence is a picture of an FPAS that straddled local politics and international developments. Excluded from the chambers of power, the female-dominated FPAS could work largely autonomously without government influence, which was more concerned with population control. Meanwhile, although the FPAS's international orientation was crucial, sensitivity to local nationalism meant that it distanced itself from narratives concerned with global stability and population control. This agile positioning allowed the FPAS to focus on service delivery in its clinics, where it remained close to the ground and to its original commitment to women, even as its international parallels became increasingly bogged down by bureaucracy and big money.

As a space that created and shaped ideas and discourse, the Straits Times provides a window to understand the ways in which women and the FPAS represented and defended their work. Given the con-

¹⁰⁸ Foley, "Non-Governmental Organizations", 7.

¹⁰⁹ "Family Planning for Sarawak", *The Straits Times*, February 2, 1950, 4.

¹¹⁰ "Johore Family Planning Now", *The Straits Times*, August 27, 1954, 5.

¹¹¹ Singapore Legislative Assembly Debates, Vol. 1, Sitting 18, *Bills*, Col. 1127, 9 November 1955, https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/topic?reportid=018_19551109_S0002_T0002.

¹¹² See, for example: "£6,000 windfall for family planners", *The Straits Times*, November 11, 1957, 7; "Family Planning Group gets \$1,500 gift", *The Straits Times*, October 17, 1956; "FPA gets \$500,000 grants from Ford Foundation", *The Straits Times*, April 18, 1965, 8. The FPA received \$180,000 the year after, "Ford grant for FPA", *The Straits Times*, April 25, 1966, 16.

¹¹³ See, for example: Mrs. Lois Jessup's comment in "S.E. Asia Women Inspiring", *The Straits Times*, August 2, 1950, 5; Dr. Clarence Gambles remarks in "American praises family planning", *The Straits Times*, January 3, 1953, 5.; Mr. George W. Cadbury's comments in "Idea of Family Planning is Catching on in Asia", *The Straits Times*, January 10, 1961, 14; Margaret Sanger's and Lady Rao's visits also generated much local interest in "Family Planners Arrive Today", *The Straits Times*, November 15, 1952; "Coming to Singapore: Lady Rama Rao", *The Straits Times*, October 2, 1955.

troversial nature of contraception and family planning at the time of FPAS's inception, each word and interaction in the forum letters were arguably strategic and deliberate rhetorical choices that framed birth control in ways that would increase acceptance and empathy from the public. Thus, although the FPAS publicly engaged with development and socioeconomic concerns to court the government's support of their work, it continued to reiterate its focus on women's issues. This strategic choice was perhaps what secured its biggest public relations victories, in light of a local political environment that was dominated by men. It was in this way that the FPAS shored up its authority as a representative of women's interests, a powerful position from which to lobby an all-male Legislative Assembly that continuously fumbled in constructively debating what they saw as fundamentally "a woman's problem." The Singapore experience demonstrates the advantage that local movements enjoyed over their international parallels in retaining focus and autonomy. Their small, marginalized positions afforded them a distinct dynamism and flexibility.¹¹⁴ This should not discount, however, the independence, networks, and vital support afforded to them by fellow FPAs through the IPPF network, which enabled them to focus on overcoming hostile local environments.

As the government came to recognize "family planning diplomacy" and the opportunity to position Singapore as a regional leader in population control,¹¹⁵ discussions about a government takeover began to dominate headlines.¹¹⁶ This finally occurred in 1966, irrevocably changing the complexion of the local birth control movement to one that emphasized "popular rather than personal benefits."¹¹⁷ In the words of Constance Goh: "My experience shows that women started the family planning movement at the ground level, and then when it became respectable the men jumped in."¹¹⁸ When demand for family planning services rose in response to the first government birth control cam-

paign in 1960 and the IPPF Conference in Singapore in 1963, the FPAS grew increasingly concerned that it would be "swamped." The complexion and composition of the local movement altered definitively with the 1965 Population White Paper, the official demographic report on population in Singapore. One *Straits Times* opinion-editorial summed up the changed tenor of the family planning movement: "the White Paper's approach, with its emphasis on popular rather than personal benefits, marks the great change which will occur when the Government takes over most family planning operations [from 1966]."¹¹⁹

Sir McNeice said of the FPAS women volunteers in 1952: "They have no uniforms, no medals, no parades and no glamor—but they get the job done."¹²⁰ He further commented that the "voluntary workers of the SFPA were among the most unobtrusive and self-effacing in the colony."¹²¹ McNeice had likely intended for his remark to pay tribute to the selflessness of the women, but we may read in his remark the implicit observation that the women remained—as they did in the history of birth control in Singapore—relatively unknown. From approaching male politicians and international allies for support to working primarily in the backroom of the FPA clinics, the women were content—or at least came to terms—with working in the background.

The FPAS pioneers were ahead of their time. In Singapore, broad political change and social reform still lay in the hands of a male-dominated government. Perhaps the biggest lesson that Constance Goh and her fellow pioneers taught to posterity is that being "in control" does not equate to being front-face and center, as the scarcity of literature on their work has shown. The monumental nature of their legacy, however, demonstrates how women birth control pioneers negotiated their marginal positions as local actors to give women control over their own lives and laid the foundations for later generations of women leaders to build on. ♦

114 Interview with Professor Dolores Foley.

115 See, for example, "World body picks up ideas from Singapore," *The Straits Times*, December 22, 1960, 4; "Idea of Family Planning is Catching on in Asia," *The Straits Times*, January 10, 1961, 14.

116 See, for example, "Yes, Govt. should take over FPA work," *The Straits Times*, June 27, 1959, 7; "FPA needs cash to aid 200,000 women," *The Straits Times*, February 12, 1960, 4.

117 "Family Planning," *The Straits Times*, October 1, 1965, 8.

118 Huston, *Motherhood by Choice*, 64.

119 "Family Planning," 8.

120 "Family Expert Visiting Singapore," *The Straits Times*, September 19, 1952, 9.

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