

Woman Doctor in the House

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Before the implementation of the Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP) scheme came about, the only route to Parliament was to join a political party. This is a road that not too many Singaporeans, especially women, are eager to follow. One has to contend with party politics and none of the existing parties has a planned agenda for women. Also the general understanding is that where the People's Action Party (PAP) is concerned, one has to be "invited" to stand on the PAP ticket.

Therefore, the NMP scheme has been welcomed by civil society and especially by some women's NGOs (non-governmental organisations) as an alternative path for contribution to the national agenda. I was the President of AWARE (The Association of Women For Action and Research) in 1992 and that is when I decided to apply to become a NMP. This explains my entry into the Parliament of Singapore in September 1992.

My four and a half years in Parliament were very exciting and empowering for me personally, and I hope that I also contributed to the parliamentary process and the national agenda.

The fact that I am a surgeon increased my confidence as a parliamentarian. Also in Singapore's achievement-oriented society, it added a little more weight to what I had to say. I am sure that it would have been tougher for me if I had belonged to the so-called feminised professions of nursing, teaching or social work.

Furthermore, my scientific background was instrumental in ensuring that I was as accurate as possible in what I had to say. Working hard is not a problem for me (again I must thank my training as a surgeon) and I was able to combine my careers in medicine and politics in a manageable way. I had to give up night calls during my parliamentary stint because of the number of 'official' functions that I had to attend as the first woman NMP and Woman of the Year 1992. I also had to forgo family holidays and vacations abroad. However, all these 'sacrifices' were worth it. It is my opinion that the privilege of being in politics and adding to the national agenda more than offsets financial and personal sacrifices. This is one of the reasons why I voted against the pay rise for ministers.

In the medical profession, one learns to interact with people from all walks of life and this helped me in my encounters with ministers, politicians and the so-called 'ordinary' people of Singapore. I used



Dr Kanwaljit Soin – Meeting with the press.

to have regular 'meet the women' sessions which were also attended by some men. Many of their stories highlighted the difficulties and confusion caused by a system that is not overtly 'transparent' and often works on a 'case by case' basis.

I have alluded to the fact that being a doctor influenced my 'political career' in a positive way, but what really added to the passion of my convictions was my experience in AWARE – a woman's organisation that believes in equality and equal opportunities for both women and men.

Most politicians, even non-partisan ones, are often caught in no-win situations, and I was no exception. On the one hand, I was portrayed as addressing only 'women's issues and on the other hand, as raising too many national issues. (I asked a record number of questions in Parliament.) In fact, both these views happen to be correct. I believe that all issues of society are issues that concern and affect women. Even areas from which women are generally absent, eg. the army, high finance, big business, politics etc., affect women directly or indirectly. The recent financial contagion in our part of the world has caused many women to lose their jobs and their families to feel the intense fallout, and thus we can see that banking and financial matters are also women's issues.

However, sometimes for the sake of tradition, we nominate some aspects of life, eg. issues affecting families, children, the aged and the provision of care and nurturing, as women's issues, but these should be the concerns of the whole of society and not only of women. While in Parliament, I concentrated on some of these issues because I feel

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that many policy makers lack gender sensitivity. They ascribe only 'feminine roles' to women and 'masculine roles' to men and forget that rigid gender-roles can impede the full maximisation of human capital. Gender roles are not biologically ordained. No specific gene provides for the ability to look after little children or to change nappies. This so-called maternal instinct is actually a learned skill. A greater sensitivity towards gender roles would significantly benefit men as well. I advocate for a society that is not so rigid in what it considers are the roles and responsibilities of men and women. There should be more room for flexibility and compromise so that men may participate more in the private sphere and women may participate more in the public sphere. This will allow for more balance in the life of women and men, and for more diversity in the shaping of the national agenda.

As a parliamentarian (with input and help from some NGOs and concerned individuals), I tabled a private member's bill entitled '*The Family Violence Bill*'. This was the second time in the parliamentary history of Singapore that a private member's bill had ever been tabled. Although the bill was defeated, there were positive and tangible outcomes. The media took up the subject of family violence

in an earnest and responsible way and gave it a great deal of coverage, and this contributed to increased general awareness of the issue. The term 'family violence' has become a part of the vocabulary and consciousness of the public. Also the government made amendments to the *Women's Charter* and these incorporated many of the principles and concepts of the aborted *Family Violence Bill*.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasise that the NMP concept is an appealing one especially in the context of politics in Singapore where we do not have a bipartisan system. The PAP has a good track record but this does not diminish the need for constant vigilance. Every good institution needs an audit system in place. Elections are held regularly and openly and some consider this enough of a safeguard, but I think that an ongoing system of checks and balances is necessary for good governance. The upper house is often appointed in many countries that have a bicameral system, and so I consider it reasonable that some members of Parliament in Singapore are nominated and not elected. Even if a bipartisan system should eventually evolve here, there will still be a role for non-partisan NMPs to add another perspective to issues.