

*Note: The Enquirer was an independent news website based in NTU. It is now defunct.*

## **NTU, are you sexist?**

By Chua Yini



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Last Monday, at the much-anticipated Dialogue with Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, the following exchange occurred between the former prime minister and Joan Sim, a 27-year-old female PhD student:

Mr. Lee: how old are you now?

Ms. Sim: I'm 27 this year.

Mr. Lee: You are...?

Ms. Sim: 27.

Mr. Lee: Are you married? [audience laughs] You're doing a PhD?

Ms. Sim: Yes.

Mr. Lee: And when will you finish your PhD?

Ms. Sim: In another two years. [laughter from audience]

Mr. Lee: Are you married?

Ms. Sim: [shakes head]

Mr. Lee: have you got a boyfriend? [laughter and clapping from audience]

Ms. Sim: No. [laughter from audience]

Mr. Lee: Childbearing years are until 35. After 35, the dangers of having mongoloid children, Down's Syndrome, in other words, a dull person, rises. So, my advice is, please don't waste time. It's more important and more satisfying than your PhD. Good

luck to you, I hope you get your PhD and your boyfriend.

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The exchange occurred after Ms. Sim asked Mr. Lee about Singapore's social cohesiveness given that a large number of foreign immigrants had been accepted.

The latter replied that Singapore needs to accept a sizeable number of immigrants to counter her ageing population and low birth rate, and started to quiz her about her personal life.

Singapore's newspapers portrayed it as a humorous exchange.

The Straits Times wrote: "Mr. Lee then turned the tables on Ms. Sim and started gently quizzing her about her personal life, to the surprise and amusement of the audience."

TODAY<sup>1</sup> described Mr. Lee's comment as a 'quip', saying, "...Mr. Lee quipped to rapturous applause..."

What the newspapers failed to include, apart from the 'rapturous applause' was the raucous laughter of the audience present at the dialogue, both male and female.

At that point in time, as I was surrounded by my fellow university undergraduates laughing and clapping about a highly educated and intelligent woman being interrogated in public about her personal and reproductive life, I felt disillusioned and strangely disconnected from them.

I could not understand why people would find the exchange entertaining, much less express their amusement in such blatant ways. The whole incident left a bad taste in my mouth and made me think about the value of education here in Singapore.

How could such obvious sexist undertones of Mr. Lee's comments slip by, undetected, among the supposedly more educated, independent and intelligent citizens in Singapore?

To make sure I wasn't being oversensitive, I consulted Assistant Professor Emma Jane, who agreed that Ms. Sim had been treated unfairly.

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<sup>1</sup>[http://www3.ntu.edu.sg/CorpComms2/Documents/2011/Sep/Today\\_110906\\_1%20and%202\\_Ministerial%20forum.pdf](http://www3.ntu.edu.sg/CorpComms2/Documents/2011/Sep/Today_110906_1%20and%202_Ministerial%20forum.pdf)

The 35-year-old, who teaches gender history in NTU, said: “The fact that so many people laughed suggests that there is a lack of awareness to the problem of sexual discrimination.

“The demeaning reduction of a woman to her reproductive status is a classic technique of disempowerment, one that has frequently been used to socialize women into believing that ability to reproduce constitutes her most important function for society.”

Likewise, in a letter to the Straits Times Forum<sup>2</sup>, AWARE president Nicole Tan stated: “Implying that marriage and motherhood are more important than education and work belittles the choices and contributions of women who prefer to be single or childless.”

Unfortunately, race and religious issues are landmines in Singapore while sexism remains an uncharted territory.

Students are conditioned to exercise caution when handling racial and religious issues, but since sexism has never been mentioned explicitly by the government and our moral education textbooks in secondary school, we are almost running blind in the uncharted territory of sexism.

Therefore, I wouldn't say that the people who laughed at the dialogue are sexist but they are most certainly ignorant and insensitive.

Adding on the pressure to reproduce is our local newspapers' extensive coverage on our ageing population, which seems to point the finger at women putting off marriage or choosing not to have children.

It does not help that respected figures like Mr. Lee are making statements that may seem pragmatic at first glance but actually have the negative effect of perpetuating sexism in Singapore.

To all intelligent and confident Singaporean women out there: Do you think that getting married and having children are more important than your education?

*Retrieved from: <http://enquirer.sg/2011/09/14/ntu-are-you-sexist/>*

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.aware.org.sg/2011/09/our-response-to-a-phds-fine-but-what-about-love-and-babies/>