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On “Spectral Gender”

Singapore might be one of the few countries in the world today, and in fact in all of history, where it's -- plot twist -- better to be a woman than to be a man.

Of course, discrimination against women still exists. There are still issues over equal pay and glass ceilings. In certain sectors of society, domestic violence is still a problem. Chauvinism is far from extinct.

But overall, there is a commitment towards equal treatment for Singapore citizens. We do have women in powerful positions in both the public and private sectors. In general, I would say that the situation is very similar to that in the United States – it's not Finland but, all things considered, it's pretty good.

But Singaporean women have one major advantage over their male counterparts: They do not face conscription.

Singapore has two years of mandatory national service, or NS, for male citizens. This service is by and large military service, though some are posted to the police or civil defense force. Less physically fit men serve in non-combat positions in the military, such as being a medic or a clerk. Men usually enter national service at the age of 18, after high school. Those who refuse face a jail term and a fine.

This practice might seem a throwback to the days of warring feudal states, but the reasoning behind it is that Singapore has a very small population – it has about 5 million people, of which only about 3 million are born locally. The official logic goes that if there is no conscription, the country will not have a large enough force to defend itself.

Even so, women are not conscripted, though they can and do enlist in the military, police or civil defense force as a career. Admittedly, I have never really questioned why women are exempt from national service, probably because the status quo is in my own interest. So, it is not only men who are blind when it comes to issues of gender equality.

As a rite of passage for approximately half of all Singaporeans, national service is well-represented in Singaporean literature. The “NS” story can in fact be considered a genre of Singaporean writing. Naturally, this genre is dominated by men. Most Singaporean male poets will have penned a couple of poems on national service. There have been several plays depicting national service, and even a literary anthology released in its honor.

Some depictions are positive, such as Michael Chiang's 1987 play *Army Daze*, a heartwarming if somewhat simplistic coming-of-age tale which has been staged multiple times and made into a movie. As for the others, I cannot do better than quote what Cyril Wong, one of Singapore's most acclaimed poets writing today, wrote in a piece for the online Kin poetry journal earlier this year:

“As a faggoty kid entering National Service at eighteen, I grew so isolated and depressed [...] that I moved on quickly from my earlier dream of becoming a horror-novelist like Clive Barker. Each quivering boy afloat inside his bulky green uniform was given a notebook to jot down lessons about weaponry and strategies during warfare – it was all a crock of shit. Instead I wrote little navel-gazing, self-pitying notes that a friend told me were actually poems -- more like whiny doggerel, which helped me to cope nonetheless with being sad all the time.”

As with any duty assigned by gender, national service becomes a big issue for those who do not follow traditional gender norms or fit neatly into the gender binary, such as transgendered people. I would say

that Singapore officially treats its transgendered citizens fairly: They can change their gender on their identity cards and in other aspects of law be treated as a member of the gender they identify with.

However, in the case of national service, recruits are usually too young to have undergone gender reassignment surgery. Thus, I understand that transgendered people – in this case, all male-to-female transsexuals -- are deployed only to non-combat and non-sensitive positions. Whether this is something positive or not is open to debate. On the one hand, it respects the conscripted person's decision to identify as female. On the other hand, it implies that transwomen are somehow less competent than gender-normative men.

Due to the smaller size of the transgender community, there is less literature about their experiences. However, one noteworthy non-fiction account is by Leona Lo, who transitioned after national service. Her 2007 autobiography, *From Leonard To Leona*, includes a description of her nervous breakdown during national service, including a suicide attempt.

My conclusion is that even in a country like Singapore, where gender equality is fairly entrenched in both the law and social norms, gender and related issues continue to affect our status and our opportunities. As writers, it is our duty and our privilege to speak up against discrimination – no matter if we identify as male, or female, or otherwise. Thank you.