



Discussing Families in Singapore

By Zhang Jiayi
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The National University of Singapore Students' Political Association (NUSPA) held its Social Policies Forum on the topic "Our Families" on 19 March 2015. Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) Senior Research Fellow, Dr Mathew Mathews, moderated the session. There were three speakers. The first, Member of Parliament Baey Yam Keng, said he believed that he was invited because he vocalised his support in Parliament for the repeal of Section 377A of the Penal Code which criminalises sex between mutually consenting adult men. The second speaker, programmes and communications senior manager Jolene Tan from the Association of Women for Action and Research, had organised the "Let's Read!" event at the National Library in July 2014 in response to the announcement that a number of children's books featuring same-sex relationships were to be destroyed. The third speaker was Mr Leow Yangfa, a registered social worker and deputy executive director of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) counselling group Oogachaga.

Prior to the forum, some people had — online and in letters to the press — praised the NUSPA for encouraging discussion about family policy in Singapore. Supporters of the traditional family, however, pointed out that [the line-up of speakers for the forum was "one-sided" and "pro-LGBT".](#) This, they argued, was not constructive for a fair discussion. Some added that the forum should make an effort to include the government's definition of a family unit.

Around 100 people, including students and academic staff of NUS, came to the forum. Ms Tan and Mr Leow spoke passionately for Singapore to take a more inclusive approach towards family policy. Using emotive anecdotes as examples, they appealed for alternative families such as single-parent families as well as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) families to be accorded the same rights and entitlements as a traditional family. Mr Baey, who described himself as a "layman" before offering his views, said that while he supported the repeal of Section 377A of the Penal Code, he was against same-sex marriage. This was because he believed in gender roles in parenting, and that alternative families cannot provide what traditional families can provide for their children.

Several audience members questioned Mr Baey's stance during the question-and-answer session. They cited the need for equal treatment of families of all types as well as the social construction of gender roles as counter-arguments. They also pointed out that the media has a part to play by portraying alternative families in a fair manner so as to educate the general public on the multitude of types of families found in Singapore.

During the course of the two hour-long forum, Dr Mathews pointed out that it seemed likely that the traditional notion of the family would continue to inform social policies in Singapore. He suggested that this is because it is “risky” for the state to liberalise family policy, and that alternative families are still not as widely accepted in Singapore as compared to countries like the United States. As such, Singapore is likely to see little change in its social policies in the near future.

Dr Mathews subsequently wrote an op-ed for The Straits Times, which was published on 24 March 2015. The [op-ed](#) is in the Views section of this month’s e-newsletter.

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