

So, what will Mdm Minister do at the PMO?

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Today, 28 March 2009

NOW that Singapore has a full-fledged woman minister, is the creation of a women's desk next on the cards?

While it is tempting to speculate that with Mrs Lim Hwee Hua as Minister in the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), the Government may want her to head a unit specialising in women issues, several female Members of Parliament doubt it will come to pass.

Jurong GRC MP Halimah Yacob noted that the Government does not "compartmentalise gender perspectives" when it comes to policy making.

Instead, Mrs Lim — who will serve as Minister in the PMO and Second Minister for Transport and Finance from April 1 — could provide the women's perspective on policy issues.

As a member of the National Population Committee, Mrs Lim could offer "a feminine touch" to the procreation policies, said Mdm Halimah.

After all, "the people you really want to encourage and persuade to have more children are the women", she added.

Given Singapore's rapidly ageing population and with women living longer than men, Mrs Lim could also focus on areas such as women's preventive healthcare, suggested Bishan-Toa Payoh MP Josephine Teo.

"What you really want are people sensitive to issues raised by women," she said.

However, there are those who believe that with Mrs Lim's wide-ranging experience — she has worked in the Education, Finance and Law ministries before and was part of the Ministerial Committee on Low-Wage Workers — the Aljunied MP could also move beyond women-related issues.

As a trained mathematician, Mrs Lim could be assigned to handle "economic issues, issues of survival", said MP Ho Geok Choo (West Coast).

An additional minister to deal with such issues during these challenging times "will help this workload to be shared so we can have more attention to details and in-depth treatment of these issues", Ms Ho said.

While women groups cheered Mrs Lim's appointment as a case of empowering women in politics, former presidents of the Association of Women for Action and Research (Aware), Ms Braema Mathi and Ms Dana Lam were less enthusiastic.

“Given Mrs Lim’s capability and credentials, it would have been great for her to have a full ministry under her charge ... and we hope in time it will happen,” said Ms Mathi.

But ministers in the PMO have to tackle issues that cut across ministries, said senior research fellow Gillian Koh.

“It’s no less a portfolio than actually running a ministry,” Ms Koh said.