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Organizing for Domestic Worker Rights in Singapore: The Limits of Transnationalism

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The forces of globalization increasingly compel feminist activists to engage internationally, either through involvement in transnational networks and social movements, or by incorporating understandings of the 'global' into local and national practices. Globalization collapses both time and space, thus fundamentally altering the types of political and economic relationships that states maintain with both citizens and a range of 'others'. For this reason, Rochelle Ball and Nicola Piper assert that non-government organizations (NGOs) 'will increasingly play a pivotal role in lobbying nationally and transnationally for greater state and multi-lateral institutional accountability to both national and global citizens' (2002: 1031). However, as differently situated actors with diverse agendas and priorities come together to address women's rights within a transnational frame they face a range of challenges and contradictions. Rather than simply transcending the 'national', transnational feminist activists must pay particular attention to the roles played by nation-states and national governments in mediating the relationship between local and transnational groups. This embeddedness of the national within transnationalism is often overlooked in romanticized accounts of global civil society.

This article examines the limits of transnational feminist activism through a case study of domestic worker rights in Singapore. This work builds on my decade-long research on the feminist movement in Singapore and my activist involvement in the Singaporean women's organisation, the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE). I argue that the Singaporean state inhibits attempts by local feminist organizations to engage transnationally (either through links with international NGOs, or by confronting the forces of globalization locally). Singaporean activists have creatively responded to these challenges, but their actions remain constrained by the imperatives of the nation-state.

The first part of this article briefly surveys the growing literature on feminist transnational activism, before examining the issues facing domestic migrant workers in Southeast Asia. In the second part of the paper I provide an overview of the history of the feminist movement in Singapore with particular emphasis on the constraints of working within a state-defined sphere of civil society, and the implications this has for attempts by Singaporean feminists to engage transnationally. The article ends with a case study of The Working Committee 2, a loose network of Singaporean activists working to address the rights of foreign domestic workers in Singapore.

Transnational Feminism and Global Civil Society

Although women's movements have a long history of engagement in the international arena (Daley and Nolan 1994; Rupp 1997; Rupp and Taylor 1999), it was not until the 1990s that women's rights advocates began to organize on an unprecedented scale transnationally (Friedman 2003).[1] A number of recent studies have sought to document the diverse activities of such groups (Meyer and Prügl 1999; Basu 2000; Mitter and Rowbotham 2000; Moghadam 2000; Mackie 2001; Sperling, Ferree and Risman 2001; Naples and Desai 2002). This work forms part of a growing body of research on the role of transnational NGOs, advocacy networks and social movements in the emergence of global civil society (see for example Guarnizo and Smith 1998; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Della Porta, Kriesi and Rucht 1999; Anheier, Glasius and Kaldor 2001). For Valentine Moghadam, the creation of transnational feminist networks is indicative of the emergence of 'global feminism', defined as 'the discourse and movement of women aimed at advancing the status of women … through transnational forms of organizing and mobilizing' (2000: 62). Examples of such networks include Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN) and Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML). These groups engage in information exchange, mutual support and a combination of lobbying, advocacy and direct action toward the realization of their goals of equality and empowerment for women and social justice and societal democratisation. (Moghadam 2000: 62)

Their emergence can be seen as a direct response to the processes of globalization.

On a cautionary note, Vera Mackie (2001: 188) reminds us that the 'transnational public sphere, if it can be said to exist, is a gendered, raced, classed and ethnicized public sphere'. It is not unsurprising then, that the relationship between 'grassroots' and/or community-based activists and transnational groups is often fraught. A number of studies have begun to document the numerous problems facing transnational feminist activists, including: the dominant role played by women's groups from the North; the disproportionate amounts of attention and support from international agencies that is directed to more 'well-known' Third World NGOs; the enormous resources and energy required to organize transnationally; the particular skill-sets needed to be effective (such as international legal or scientific expertise, and knowledge of the rivalries and practices of inter-state political bargaining); and the varied value systems and priorities of differently situated actors (Basu 2000; Mitter and Rowbotham 2000; Moghadam 2000; Sperling et al. 2001). In their work, Valerie Sperling, Myra Marx Ferree and Barbara Risman (2001) identified a number of strategies used by local and transnational activists to build cross-cultural, trans-national alliances or coalitions. These strategies may include ethical principles, organizational structures, leadership models, language policies and forged common identities.

Opportunities for transnational activist groups to advocate on behalf of women's rights are frequently constrained by states that tightly control access to the politically sensitive arena of civil society. Local and transnational groups must pay attention to the complexities and contradictions of civil society as they consider what kind of alliances to forge and resources to accept. Despite the important role played by the state, few studies have focused their attention on the limitations posed to feminist transnationalism by local state forces (but see Gurowitz 2000; Uhlin 2001). Instead, there is a tendency for scholars and policy-makers to unproblematically project a romance of 'more' civil society as ballast against coercive state power and its excesses (Phillips 1999). This partly explains the continuing commitment of international funding agencies towards strengthening civil society and thereby addressing 'women's rights'. In these approaches, civil society is often treated as a monolithic whole with a unity of purpose rather than as a space occupied by range of actors with divergent agendas (Howell and Mulligan 2003). In some contexts, local activists may find it politically safer to avoid transnational interactions, or to restrict their involvement to groups with similar goals and objectives. For example, the Malaysian group, Sisters in Islam, distances itself from western feminist models of global sisterhood, preferring instead to forge strategic alliances with women's organizations in other Muslim countries (Ong 1996). This example points to the need for feminists to pay closer attention to the local content of debates about 'feminism', 'women's rights', 'human rights', and 'civil society', if transnational activism is to be successful.

Female Migrant Domestic Workers

Large segments of the world's population are increasingly mobile. Women migrate within national boundaries and across international borders for many reasons. While many migrate by choice as workers, wives and mothers (Piper and Roces 2002), others find themselves victims of displacement or trafficking (Ucarer 1999). Within Southeast Asia, the increasing feminization of transnational migration is associated with labour movements into the domestic service sector by women from the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Burma, and Thailand. There are no precise figures on the numbers of transnational female migrants from Southeast Asia working as domestic workers.[2] As an indicator, however, some estimate that there are between 4.2 to 6.4 million Filipinas working abroad as domestic helpers and entertainers (Wee and Sim 2003: 2). While these women typically migrate to the Middle East, Japan, Europe and North America as domestic workers, large numbers also find employment in the rapidly developing countries of the region. As increasing numbers of women in Hong Kong, Singapore, and Malaysia enter paid employment outside the home, demand for relatively cheap female migrant labour to perform household tasks has risen. In Singapore, for example, women's labour force participation is 53.9 per cent (Singapore Department of Statistics 2003). There are currently over 140,000 foreign domestic workers in Singapore (Chiam 2003).

Huang and Yeoh (2003) estimate that there are almost equal numbers of women from the Philippines and Indonesia working as maids, with a significant minority from Sri Lanka. This equates to approximately one foreign domestic worker to every seven households.

Numerous studies have documented the tenuous position of female migrant workers in relation to labour laws and citizenship rights in the Asia-Pacific. Migrant workers face difficult working conditions, poor remuneration, and constant surveillance by both the state and their employers (see for example Huang and Yeoh 1996; Lim and Oishi 1996; Shah and Menon 1997; Yeoh and Huang 1997; Lindio-McGovern 2001). Despite their dependency on the labour and remittances of migrant workers, sending and receiving states have been slow to address these workers' welfare. For this reason, NGOs have begun to play a significant role in both disseminating information and providing assistance to migrant workers. While some migrant-worker NGOs are associated with local or transnational women's movements, others are affiliated with religious groups, unions or civil rights groups. Some adopt gender-specific responses to the plight of domestic workers, while others organize around class or work (i.e., women's role as workers) as well as race/ethnicity or nationality (i.e., advocating on behalf of women with a common country of origin).

The most visible of these are Filipino migrant worker groups based in Hong Kong, Japan and the Philippines (Law and Nadeu 1999; Ball and Piper 2002; Law 2003; Piper 2003). Filipino migrant worker groups have received the most scholarly attention not only because of the significant proportion of female domestic 'maids' from the Philippines who work in the region, but also because in comparison with other national groups, Filipinos have the strongest transnational advocacy networks (Piper 2003). Although Singapore is a major receiving country for female migrant labour in the region, groups such as these are noticeably absent. In part, their absence can be explained by the presence of a strong, authoritarian state and a relatively weak NGO sector. This has meant that for many years, the plight of domestic workers in Singapore has remained largely unaddressed.

Participating in Singapore's 'Civil Society Experiment'

To understand the forces that impact on the ability of international agencies and transnational groups to advocate for foreign worker rights in Singapore, it is necessary to examine the relationship between the state and civil society. After achieving independence in 1965, the Singaporean government embarked on a program of widespread social and economic transformation aimed at boosting economic growth and maintaining social and political stability. The cornerstone of this program is a model of strong government built on a limited social welfare network and an emphasis on technological innovation aimed at maintaining a competitive edge in the global market place (Rodan 1993). Such an approach has seen Singapore outstrip its neighbours in terms of both economic growth measures and social/lifestyle indicators. During this period, the People's Action Party (PAP) maintained its political dominance such that the government, the state and the political party are synonymous in terms of both everyday governance and public sentiment. Michael Haas (1989) argues that despite a parliament modelled on Westminster-style democracy, the PAP has effectively restricted the growth of a participatory parliamentary system, and instead fostered a 'mass society' characterized by a lack of political institutions between the state and the people; Singapore lacks an effective civil society.

Since the mid-1990s, however, the PAP government has sought to encourage the growth of a more active citizenry through the promotion of 'civic society'. The party's absolute hold on all parliamentary seats began to decline in 1981.[3] Amongst the leadership the loss of seats, combined with a decline in the PAP's share of the vote, was attributed to alienation amongst the middle-class. In an effort to win back the support of these voters, the PAP embarked on a range of initiatives intended to provide alternative avenues for public involvement in policy debate, thereby undercutting other potentially threatening political alternatives. Likening the all-pervasive power of the PAP to that of the banyan tree, Minister for Information and the Arts, Brigadier General George Yeo reflected that:

The problem now is that under the banyan tree, very little else can grow. When state institutions are too pervasive, civic institutions cannot thrive. Therefore, it is necessary to prune the banyan tree so that other plants can grow (qtd. in Worthington 2003: 7).

Chua Beng Huat (2000) notes the that use of the term 'civic' was favoured by the government because of its emphasis on the civic responsibilities of citizens as opposed to the rights of citizenship implied by the concept of civil society. The discourse of civic society also stresses the positive attributes of 'civility, kindness and public orderliness' exemplified in state sponsored courtesy and graciousness campaigns (Lee 2002). More recently, the term 'civic society' is used interchangeable with 'civil society', however, the precise meanings attached to both terms remains deliberately ambiguous (Chua 2000).

In developing its vision statement for the new millennium (referred to as Singapore 21), the PAP government identified 'active citizenry' as one of the five pillars on which the Singaporean society of the future will be built:

The hallmark of Singaporeans in the 21st century will be active participation in civic life. This will be built upon a foundation of mutual respect and trust between the public and people sectors, and enlightened by commitment to the values and principles that underpin Singapore (S21 Facilitation Committee 2003)

This vision of civic or civil society requires Singapore's 'active citizens' to inform themselves of issues and challenges facing the country; offer feedback and suggestions in a thoughtful manner with the aim of making things better; and help to implement what they suggest. The PAP expects those engaged in civil society to support state-defined 'national values'. These values are 1) nation before community and society above self; 2) upholding the family as the basic building block of society; 3) resolving major issues through consensus instead of contentions; 4) stressing racial and religious tolerance and harmony; and 5) regard and community support for the individual (see Chua 1995: 32). Consequently, some subjects are always 'off-limits' or fall within what the governing elite refers to as 'out-of-bounds markers' (OB markers). Ho Kai Leong describes these as 'issues that are too sensitive to be discussed in public for fear of destabilising or jeopardising public peace and order' (2000: 186). The ruling PAP government is responsible for determining the limits of the OB markers, a task that it largely performs retrospectively with the result that what actually constitutes 'unacceptable political engagement' is unclear. In 1995, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong commented that:

Use your common sense. On government policy, ministerial salaries, COEs [Certificates of Entitlement] and so on, you are free to debate that, no problem whatsoever. If you are to venture into areas that touch on religious sensitivity, on race, then we would pull you back very early before you cause problems for the ground or for the community ('PM: debate welcomed but govt will rebut malicious arguments' 1995).

Negotiating the constraints of state-defined civil society continues to be a fraught process for Singapore's NGOs. In embarking on the 'civil society experiment' both the state and the NGOs themselves are engaged in a constant process of 'testing the boundaries' between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.

The state also limits the parameters of civil society through legislation. While the Singapore Constitution guarantees freedom of association (Article 14) in principle, organizations with more than ten members or committees with more than five members are required to register under the *Societies Act* or the *Companies Act* (Tanaka 2002: 208). The Registrar of Societies is empowered to exercise discretion with regard to registration and accreditation, and requires all registered groups to have a formal organizational structure and membership. All registered organizations are expressly prohibited from engaging in 'political activity' and must restrict their activities to issues outlined in their constitutions. Individuals who participate in groups that are not officially registered face the threat of arrest and imprisonment for participating in

4

'illegal assemblies'. The government has effectively used the *Societies Act* to suppress the activities of a number of local groups (Tanaka 2002: 209).

The legislative framework also works to limit the opportunity for international NGOs to participate in Singapore's civil society. Foreign-based NGOs find it difficult to become formally registered in Singapore, and without registration and accreditation, cannot operate on the ground. In addition, locally-based NGOs are extremely wary of receiving funding from overseas sources for fear that this may result in government suspicion about their activities (Perera and Ng 2002). This has resulted in a very small international NGO presence in Singapore, and very few transnational linkages between local, regional and global groups.

In addition to the *Societies Act*, the government also uses the *Internal Security Act* (ISA) to discipline the actions of groups it sees as politically threatening. The ISA was introduced during British colonial rule and was originally used against suspected communists. It provides the state with the means to arrest and detain without trial those individuals or groups that in its view threaten the national security.

The *Internal Security Act* and the *Societies Act* are significant deterrents to the emergence of a broad-based and diverse feminist movement. Instead, the feminist movement in Singapore can be characterized as a 'one organization movement' (Lyons 2004) dominated by the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE). AWARE[4] was established in 1985 in response to a series of government policies known as the 'Great Marriage Debate' aimed at encouraging graduate women to marry and have more children (Lyons-Lee 1998). These policies prompted a backlash amongst middle-class women and formed a crucial rallying point around which the organization was formed. AWARE's stated goals are to promote: 1) the awareness and participation of women in all areas; 2) the attainment of full equality; and 3) equal opportunities for women (AWARE 1990). Through research, discussion and support, it aims to make men and women more aware of the barriers that each faces as a result of gender discrimination. In addition to its research work, AWARE also runs workshops and seminars, and operates a volunteer helpline service. The organization is publicly recognized as a feminist group, even though it rarely uses the term to describe its own activities. The majority of members are uncomfortable about using the label 'feminist' for either themselves or the organization. The meanings attached to feminism are closely tied to the debate over Western versus Asian values. In public discourse, feminism is described as a western ideology associated with radical lesbian man-haters and/or sexually promiscuous women with a 'chip on their shoulders'. [5]

While there are many other 'women's organizations' in Singapore, these tend to be formed on the basis of professional affiliation, ethnicity, religion, interest, service provision, or are local chapters of international organizations (e.g. the YWCA). The Singapore Council of Women's Organizations (SCWO) is a state-sponsored umbrella group that acts as a federation of all these groups. The SCWO holds regular forums and workshops aimed at examining and improving the status of women. It is involved in the development of government policy through its research and legislative arm (Singapore Council of Women's Organizations 2002). Given the diversity of organizations that are associated with the SCWO, the organization is careful not to present itself as feminist in either goals or orientation. This has led some critics to suggest that the SCWO is a conservative mouthpiece for government policy that is not directed towards the goal of improving women's social or legal status (Lyons 2004). While informal groups and networks do emerge, they tend to operate by word-of-mouth and with almost no public profile. In this environment, AWARE thus continues to be the public face of feminism in Singapore.

AWARE adopts a cautious and conservative approach to its activities. Working within the framework provided by the 'out-of-bounds markers', members are never completely sure how the organization's statements will be received and are forced to respond carefully (Lyons 2000b, 2000a). Fear of negative perceptions or closure means that AWARE tempers its public statements or limits its activities to avoid criticism. Issues of sexuality and the rights of lesbians, religion and the role of Shariah Law, or class-based social divisions are all designated as 'off-limits' by the organization. Instead, AWARE has focused on equal employment opportunities for women, access to equal educational opportunities for girls, and changes to domestic violence law. As Chua Beng Huat (1995: 208) comments, AWARE's demands 'do not challenge the fundamental premise of the regime although they do bring out anomalies in existing state practices'. AWARE's activities remain essentially reformist in nature. In many ways, this is a successful means of state

control—AWARE ends up policing its own behaviour; the Singapore government is most adept in utilizing group and individual self-regulation as a means of control.

This picture of civil society in Singapore, however, is overly pessimistic. There is no doubt that the Singapore government has effectively stifled the growth of an independent and vibrant sphere of NGO activity. Nonetheless, a number of organizations continue to test the OB markers. Among these was the short-lived 'The Working Committee' or TWC that was formed in late 1998 and disbanded a year later.[6] The TWC operated as an informal network of individuals and representatives of NGOs and voluntary welfare organizations (VWOs). Its goal was to build links between differently situated civil society actors, and thereby participate in both re-assessing and re-invigorating the sphere of civil society in Singapore. Unlike other NGOs, the TWC was not formally registered through the *Societies Act*, but operated as a loose affiliation of individuals and organizations. During this time, it organized workshops, open houses,[7] public forums, and a conference. By deliberately limiting its life span to one year, and focusing its activities on 'network building' rather than pursuing the interests of a particular client or membership group, the TWC was able to avoid the otherwise restrictive requirements of registration under the *Societies Act*. Not only did it facilitate greater information sharing amongst Singaporean NGOs and VWOs, but it also acted as a focal point for broader public discussion of the meaning of civil society. As I argue below, it was also an important alternative model of civil society engagement for other groups and has provided an opportunity for previously banned topics to be dealt with.

Advocating for Domestic Worker Rights

For many years, the plight of women working as domestics in Singapore has remained 'out-of-bounds'. Like many taboo topics, the issue of domestic workers has not been publicly identified by the state in its official statements as a topic that is 'off-limits', but its association with the 'Marxist conspiracy' has meant that few NGOs have been willing to address it. In May 1987, 22 people (including several AWARE members) were arrested under the *Internal Security Act* for threatening the state and national interests (Rodan 1993). Those arrested included Catholic social workers and lay workers at the Geylang Catholic Center for Foreign Workers. Among the issues that they were concerned with were higher wages, social security benefits, job security and employment conditions for all foreign workers (Mauzy and Milne 2002). At the time of their arrest, the government's official statements claimed that Catholic organizations were 'a cover for political agitation' to 'radicalise student and Christian activists' (qtd. in Haas 1989: 59). The Catholic Center for Foreign Workers was subsequently closed. Of those arrested, some were later released, while others were detained for varying periods. Those charged had to admit to being a Marxist as a condition of their release. They were 'rehabilitated' with an agreement not to enter into politics.

AWARE was silent on the arrests, and many members still believe that they narrowly escaped arrest and the closure of the organization. In interviews I conducted with AWARE members in the mid-1990s, the Marxist Conspiracy was still fresh in their memories. Many AWARE members interpreted the arrests as a clear signal that domestic worker rights were off-limits and that for AWARE to address the issue would be extremely risky. AWARE's failure to engage with the domestic worker issue since the late 1980s, however, cannot be solely attributed to its fear of closure. As Nirmala PuruShotam has clearly pointed out that there is a remarkable alliance between the middle-class values espoused by the PAP and AWARE which centres around a 'shared language' of 'fears of falling and the normal family ideology' (1998: 144) This group has experienced rapid upward class mobility since the 1960s and clings to a normative family model as a means of shoring up their class position (ie. fear of falling back into the working class). This produces a situation in which the predominant voice of 'moderate feminism' in AWARE 'arises and takes shape within a constantly shifting continuum of compliance with and resistance to patriarchal ideologies and practices' (PuruShotam 1998: 145). The majority of AWARE members are middle-class and it is widely acknowledged within the organization that many members employ domestic workers. My own research on AWARE members' attitudes towards feminism and social change suggest that a significant group hold conservative views on sex roles and family structures, and are thus supportive of the traditional association

of household labour with 'women's work' (Lyons 1999). For these busy women, hiring a live-in domestic worker is a pre-requisite for juggling career and family responsibilities. Engaging with the question of maids would require AWARE members to address the contentious topics of class and sex/gender roles, issues that the organization has carefully avoided in its public statements and activities.

AWARE's silence was also consistent with its claim not to speak on behalf of 'other' women. In their dealings with a range of others (including non-AWARE members and non-Singaporeans), AWARE members adopt an ethical framework of 'respect' (Lyons 2000b, 2001). The decision not to speak about religion or sexuality is therefore seen not only as a strategic move to avoid state wrath, but also as a validation of the very principle of respect. For example, behind the relegation of religion as a taboo topic by AWARE, is a strong belief in the need to respect women's religious convictions. This principle extends to AWARE's decision not to make public statements about the status or rights of women in other countries. On one of the few occasions in which AWARE broke its self-imposed silence on foreign women, it found itself the target of a backlash against its own failure to take a stand on the issue of foreign domestic workers in Singapore.[8]

The labour movement has also been silent on issues surrounding migrant labour in Singapore. Most independent unions were closed down or weakened in the 1960s, and replaced by a state-sponsored National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) that acts as an umbrella group for affiliated organizations that are largely supportive of the government's economic and labour policies (Rodan 1996).

In the absence of a local or international NGO presence in Singapore to deal with the rights of domestic workers, religious groups and foreign embassies stepped in and filled the void. Their actions, however, were largely ad hoc. During the 1990s, concerned about the linkage between Catholicism and the Marxist Conspiracy, Christian churches were extremely careful in their public dealings with domestic workers. As the numbers of Indonesian foreign workers rose, several mosques began to provide support and training services to Muslim domestic workers through their women's programs.[9] Both groups acted informally to assist 'runaway' domestics to contact embassy officials when they needed assistance. These ties became stronger in the 1990s as increasing pressure was placed on sending countries by overseas workers and their families to address the needs of their citizens working abroad. In Singapore, these claims were crystallised around the arrest and execution of a Filipina domestic worker, Flor Contemplacion, in 1995. Contemplacion was found guilty of murdering another domestic worker and her four-year old charge. The execution caused a diplomatic rift between the Philippines and Singapore as speculation mounted over her guilt.[10]

As a result of this, and other cases, migrant worker welfare became a significant issue for bilateral relations between receiving and sending countries throughout Southeast Asia. The Philippines Government established the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) as part of the Department of Labour and Employment. The OWWA runs a range of services for overseas Filipino workers, including refuges for domestic workers in a number of countries. In Singapore, the OWWA half-way house for runaway domestic workers operates through the Philippines Embassy. In 1998, the Catholic Archdiocese of Singapore established the Commission for Migrants and Itinerant People (CMI). One of its goals is to reach out to 'strangers' (including migrant workers, foreign students, travellers and refugees) 'who have experienced injustice, oppression and alienation' (The Commission for Migrants and Itinerant People 2001). In addition to services aimed as assisting domestic workers, the CMI has also worked with the Singapore Ministry of Manpower to run workshops for employers on 'How to establish a Harmonious Working Relationship with your Foreign Domestic Helper'. Both groups operate in partnership with the Singaporean government to address the question of individual treatment of domestic workers by employers, rather than dealing with broader questions of labour law, immigration law, or citizenship rights.

The Working Committee 2

As the numbers of domestic workers entering Singapore has risen, so too have reports of physical and sexual abuse of domestic workers by their employers, domestic worker deaths, as well as incidents of assaults or theft carried out by domestic workers. Despite concerns about overstepping the OB markers in

relation to maids, the increasing visibility of these issues has made them difficult to ignore. In December 2001, a 19-year old Indonesian woman, Muawanatul Chasanah, died after months of brutal assault by her employer Ng Hua Chye. Ng's neighbour, Mr Neo, was quoted in the media as saying: 'Even if I knew, I wouldn't have called the police, it's not my business. He can do what he wants, that's his problem' (Ho and Chong 2002: n.pg). These comments prompted a number of Singaporeans to meet informally with the goal of addressing attitudes towards and treatment of domestic workers in Singapore. Modelling themselves on the TWC, The Working Committee 2 (TWC2) emerged in late 2002.

The TWC2's aim was to 'promote respect for domestic workers through education, and secure better treatment of domestic workers through legislation and other means' (TWC2 2003a). Like its predecessor, the TWC2 was formed as an ad-hoc group of individuals and organizations with a one-year limited life-span. International Day to Eliminate Violence against Women on 25 November 2003 marked the culmination of its year-long efforts. Braema Mathi, a Nominated Member of Parliament[11] and member of AWARE, chaired the committee. The TWC2's membership was multi-racial, reflecting the major ethnic groups in Singapore (Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others—a euphemism for Europeans and Eurasians). It included women and men, a wide distribution of age groups, as well as foreign nationals, including some domestic workers. Both AWARE and the SCWO were listed as 'partner' organizations, and the TWC2 web-site and bulletin board were hosted on the AWARE web-site. Although AWARE supported the TWC2's activities, it did not take a public stance in relation to the issue of domestic worker rights or incorporate similar activities into its own agenda.

The TWC2's activities were organized under the banner 'Dignity Overdue: Respecting the rights of maids', and included workshops, public forums, and exhibitions. The issue of domestic worker 'rights' focused on three interrelated topics—reducing demand for domestic workers; employment contracts (including wages and conditions); and treatment by employers (built around a notion of respect for human dignity). Consistent with other NGOs in Singapore, rather than adopting a direct lobbying role in relation to legislative change, the TWC2 focused its activities on public education. For this reason, part of the group's activities were focused on drawing attention to the gendered division of labour within the home, and finding alternative solutions to Singapore's reliance on the labour of domestic workers. For example, the art-installation 'houseWORK project' brought together a range of artists who drew attention to the issue of household labour by asking participants to bring along their clothes to be ironed on stage (Teng 2003). The TWC2 also drew attention to the problems facing Singaporean families, such as the lack of childcare or after-school care, the lack of nursing homes or alternative facilities for the care of the elderly or disabled, and the lack of family-friendly workplace policies within both the public and private sectors.

In relation to employment contracts, the TWC2 encouraged employers to provide a day off per week to their employees. Members organized a 'Sunday Off Campaign' that included a Block Party[12] for workers and their employers, and a photograph exhibition of domestic workers on their days off (Tee 2003). Members also used the forum pages in the local media to raise the issue of standardized contracts for foreign domestic workers (Price and Lim 2003). These, and other initiatives, were successful in raising public awareness of the issues surrounding conditions of work. The PAP government, however, continues to argue that the matter of working conditions is an issue to be negotiated between individual employers (or agents) and employees because of the individual nature of the duties required in each household (Tan 2003a, 2003b).

The TWC2's interest in the treatment of domestic workers focused on the issue of violence. The group's activities culminated with a series of events focused on International Day to Eliminate Violence against Women and Singapore's first 'White Ribbon Campaign'.[13] The TWC2 focused the campaign on the foreign domestic worker because

she is the most vulnerable woman in our homes. She is a guest worker, here at our invitation, to support our families and earn an honest living for their own families. Help agencies get one new case of abuse every week. Every act of violence against her is a shame on us (TWC2 2003b).

Although this campaign could have provided an important opportunity to address the intersection between domestic violence against all women, and the 'private' nature of violence against domestic workers, it remained largely focused on migrant women. The campaign was thus supportive of the state's own interest in developing a gracious and more civic-minded citizen, in contrast to the image of the 'ugly Singaporean' conjured up by images of domestic worker-abuse. The interrelated issues of citizenship, marriage, residence, and family migration, were largely unaddressed. In part, this reflects concerns about overstepping the state's OB markers. But, it also points to an inability to address violence as an issue of power embedded in social relations, rather than as an individual, isolated act. The focus on violence also meant that the rights of the vast majority of workers who do not face violence in the workplace, were also overlooked.

After the TWC2 was disbanded in November 2003, a new group consisting of former members announced that they would establish a Maid Resource Centre to deal with,

> all issues relating to maids, whether these are raised by workers, employers or recruitment agencies. .. It plans to be a one-stop centre for maids, providing information on the industry, a training centre for skills upgrading, as well as a coordination point to link workers, employers, foreign embassies and employment agencies (Hooi 2003).

In signalling its intentions to extend the TWC2's work, this group raises the possibility of a stronger, more formalized NGO presence in the field of domestic worker rights. At this stage, it is too early to tell whether they will be successful, and what implications this will have for both domestic worker rights and the expansion of civil society in Singapore. It may be that the 'maid-economy' is now such a public issue for discussion and debate, that a more formal NGO presence and/or the incorporation of domestic worker rights into pre-existing NGO activities (such as those of AWARE), will not be seen to be overstep the OB markers.

Conclusion

The feminization of migrant labour clearly is a transnational issue and many groups are working to improve the status of female migrant workers both globally and regionally. This study, however, points to problems that transnational activists face as they attempt to advocate across national borders. Singapore is a major receiving country of migrant labour in the region, and like women elsewhere, domestic workers there face a range of problems. Transnational actors seeking to advocate on their behalf not only face legal barriers to cross-border activism, but also the constraints of working in a narrowly defined sphere of civil society. For their part, local activists are understandably wary of associating too closely with international groups, and limit their activities in ways that support state-defined 'out-of-bounds markers'. The Working Committee 2 tests the boundaries of these markers through its activities. It marks one of the first attempts by local NGOs and activists in Singapore to address a transnational issue. However, it has done so by focusing specifically on 'national' issues and deliberately avoiding affiliations or alliances with non-Singaporean based networks or organizations. While the TWC2's activities are creative, ultimately they remain non-confrontational and consensual. The group lacks radical potential because its members fail to address the substantive issues of class, gender and ethnicity that underpin the demand for domestic migrant labour, as well as the factors that constrain the rights of these workers.

In the rush to celebrate the emergence of global civil society, we must stop to remind ourselves that transnationalism does not transcend difference but is embedded within it. For transnational activism to be successful, feminists must consciously delineate the boundaries of their engagement, paying close attention to the different situations 'on the ground' in those places where they seek to forge alliances. Like locally-based groups such as the TWC2, transnational activists need to develop creative responses to the limitations imposed by state forces. They must also seek ways of supporting the efforts of local groups without jeopardizing their activities. Recognizing the limitations of transnationalism is thus the greatest challenge facing the future of global feminism.

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[1]Transnationalism can be defined as 'regular activity crossing national borders that involve at least one nonstate actor', in contrast to 'international' activism which primarily involves state actors (Clark, Friedman and Hochstetler 1998: 3).

[2]Data on transnational migration in the region is extremely difficult to verify due to the large numbers of 'illegal' or 'unofficial' migrants.

[3]Although the number of opposition held seats has since remained less than five per cent of the total.

[4]In 2003, AWARE had a membership of over 600. Membership is open to female Singaporean citizens and permanent residents. Men and non-citizens may participate in some activities as 'Friends of AWARE'. For a discussion of AWARE's goals and activities see Lyons (2004).

[5]See Lyons (1999) for a more detailed discussion of the debates around the meaning of feminism within AWARE.

[6]For a discussion of the TWC see Singam et al. (2002).

[7]Visits to the premises of affiliated NGOs.

[8]In 1998, AWARE presented a petition to the Indonesian Embassy decrying the treatment of ethnically Chinese women in Indonesia who were raped during a series of racial clashes that year. In receiving the petition, a spokeswoman for the Indonesian Embassy pointed out that Indonesian women were frequent victims of violent abuse while working as domestic workers in Singapore, an issue that AWARE had not addressed (Zakaria 1998).

[9]Such activities include religious instruction as well as English language tuition.

[10]For a discussion of this case, see Hildson et al. (2000) and Yeoh, Huang and Gozalez III (1999).

[11]The Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP) scheme was introduced in 1990 to co-opt alternative non-partisan voices into parliament. NMPs are nominated by members of the public, NGOs or VWOs, and appointed by the government for a term of 3 years. While NMPs share the same parliamentary privileges and immunities as normal MPs, they have limited voting rights and do not play a role in the running of town councils.

[12]Block here refers to a housing apartment block, the main form of housing in Singapore.

[13]The White Ribbon Campaign is an international program organised by men where ribbon wearers pledge 'never to commit, never to condone and never to remain silent about violence against women' (White Ribbon Campaign 2003).

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