



UNIVERSITY
OF WOLLONGONG
AUSTRALIA

University of Wollongong
Research Online

Faculty of Arts - Papers (Archive)

Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts

2001

Negotiating Difference: Singaporean Women Building an Ethics of Respect

Lenore T. Lyons

University of Wollongong, lenorel@uow.edu.au

Publication Details

Lyons, LT, *Negotiating Difference: Singaporean Women Building an Ethics of Respect*, in S. Schacht and J. Bystydzienski (eds.), *Forging Radical Alliances Across Difference: Coalition Politics for the New Millennium*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, London, 2001, 177-190.

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library:
research-pubs@uow.edu.au

NEGOTIATING DIFFERENCE: SINGAPOREAN WOMEN BUILDING AN ETHICS OF RESPECTⁱ

The problem of difference emerged as a significant issue in western feminist theory making during the 1980s-1990s. In response to claims that western feminism ignored the lives and voices of third world women¹, attention was increasingly placed on the need to forge broad-based coalitions that embrace difference and commonality. But, in the call to build coalitions, little work focused on the meaning of difference in the everyday lives of feminist activists; how do feminists work with women who are different to themselves? In this paper I examine the lives of women who belong to the Singaporean feminist organisation AWARE (Association of Women for Action and Research). AWARE's membership is diverse - ranging across the broad number of officially designated 'races', as well as age and occupational groupings. Not all members of AWARE embrace the label 'feminist' for either themselves or the organisation; and many do not share the same visions or goals for AWARE. In negotiating the complex web of connections and relationships that they have with 'other' women, AWARE members construct an ethical framework built on different modes of interaction - tolerance, acceptance and respect. These experiences show that working with others is neither easy nor safe, but as the women of AWARE assert, to do anything else would be to ignore the realities of shared gender oppression.

WESTERN FEMINISM AND THE POLITICS OF ALLIANCE-MAKING

The present interest in alliance-making within western feminism has its origins in the critique of women who were marginalised by mainstream feminism. Non-white, non-anglo, non-western, and working-class women argued that the second-wave women's liberation movement was primarily

ⁱ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Centre for Research for Women, University of Western Australia, Perth, 29 May 1998. Many thanks to Jill Bystydzienski and Steve Schact for their helpful comments on the draft of this chapter.

white, middle-class, and western (see O'Shane, 1976; Bethel, 1979; hooks, 1981; Moraga and Anzaldúa, 1981; Carby, 1983). They claimed that for feminism to be truly inclusive it would have to mobilise on the basis of more complex identities - gender itself could not be the sole basis for activism (see Davis, 1980; Dill, 1983; Trivedi, 1984; Zinn et. al, 1990). In doing so, they argued for the incorporation of 'race'/ethnicity, class, sexuality, age, and disability into the political identity 'sister'. In addressing these demands, many mainstream feminist theorists have called for a celebration of diversity in which sisterhood is replaced with the vague (and somewhat comforting) language of solidarity, alliance and coalition.

The metaphor of alliance or coalition making appears in a diverse range of theoretical approaches, including models of global sisterhood (Bulbeck, 1988, Itzin, 1985); multicultural feminism (Hartmann et al, 1996; Miles, 1996); and crossover or coalition feminism (Caraway, 1991; Haraway, 1989). Such writers attribute the success of women's alliance-making to friendship (Raymond, 1985), empathy (Russo, 1991; Mascia-Lees et al, 1989), affinity (Caraway, 1991; Haraway, 1989) and/or commitment (Miles, 1996). They tend to speak of difference as if it is monolithic and knowable (*we're all different*) and alliances as if they are simply based on individual motivations or attitudes.

Consequently, they overlook the ways in which gender is constructed in particular contexts, and the question of why some differences matter and others do not. Much of their discussion is divorced from the experiences and insights of women who are engaged in the day-to-day realities of forging multi-racial, multi-class alliances. Such women attribute the success of specific coalitions not to commitment or affinity but to strong organisational and ethical principles. These may include a credible model of leadership that takes differences into account (Albrecht and Brewer, 1990:4); the presence of women of colour in leadership positions (Gutierrez and Lewis, 1992); and the use of different languages or cultural and political symbols (Bookman and Morgen, 1988:317). While some women call for less hierarchical organisational structures (Faver, 1995; Holter et. al, 1985), others suggest that effective coalitions may depend more on the presence, not absence, of strong leadership (Staggenborg, 1986). Some alliance activists call for groups to establish a strong sense of their identity and individual goals before embarking on their collective goals (Bass, 1998:260), while others promote the need for clear ethical guidelines (Webber, 1985) or processes of group accountability (Caraway,

1991; Hurtado, 1996). Others suggest that the key to building effective alliances is to face rather than to avoid confrontation (Childers and hooks, 1990:79; Hirsch and Keller, 1990:379-80; hooks, 1997:499).

My study builds on this work by exploring the everyday workings of a Singaporean women's organisation that is cross-cut by race, culture, class and sexuality. I examine the ways women in a multi-racial, multicultural organisation understand and then take account of points of sameness and difference during the course of their feminist activism. These women's lives are far removed from those of women in the West. As feminists, their political concerns are also far removed from those of white feminists. Their experiences of alliance-making emerge in a particular historical context, and their struggles to 'deal with difference' make no reference to the politics of difference debate taking place within mainstream feminism. Their story remains important, however, as a localised account of women working around difference in order to achieve social change. It is an account that points to the very complexity of the issues that face diverse groups of women as they engage in multi-racial, multicultural coalitions.

THE ASSOCIATION OF WOMEN FOR ACTION AND RESEARCH

AWARE was established in 1985 and is commonly recognised as one of the few women's groups in Singapore which directly addresses the status of women. Its role is to make both men and women aware of the barriers that they face in their everyday lives as a result of gender discrimination. Thus, the AWARE Constitution (1990:1) states the following three general objectives of the society:

- 1) to promote the awareness and participation of women in all areas;
- 2) to promote the attainment of full equality;
- 3) to promote equal opportunities for women.

Among the prohibitions listed in the Constitution are those against engaging in political activity (Clause 24e). This is a standard clause inserted into the constitutions of all officially registered (and thus legal) societies in Singapore. Therefore, in pursuing these goals AWARE maintains an explicitly

non-political profile based upon acceptance of the government's own ground rules of 'consensus' ahead of 'confrontation' (Rodan, 1993:94).

Full membership to AWARE is open to female Singaporean citizens and permanent residents over 21 years of age. Male Singaporeans, as well as foreign men and women without permanent residency may join as associate members or 'Friends of AWARE'. In 2000 membership stood at approximately 700. Occupational data from the membership records shows that 65% of members are employed in professional, technical, administrative, executive and managerial positions (middle-class). Another 22% are employed in clerical, sales and service areas (working-class), with 13% not-employed for a wage (including unemployed, retired, home-makers, and students). None of the women are employed in production or labouring positions. Based on predominant identifiers of class labels in Singapore – occupation, income, education, English speaking – AWARE's membership is firmly located within the middle-class and upper middle-class. The majority of members are aged below 50 years (88%) and over half are married.

One of AWARE's founding principles was that the association would be multi-racial² and secular. Women from all major ethnic groups are reflected in the membership - Chinese, Indian, Malay, Eurasian, and 'foreigners'³. This multi-racial make-up is a reference point in AWARE's claim to speak for all women. As part of this same strategy, AWARE deliberately avoids collecting data on the 'race' of its members. It is women's experience of gender rather than 'race' that brings them together. This does not mean that 'race' is unimportant or peripheral to the experience of gendered oppression, but that in addressing gender inequality women can achieve more if they are united in one organisation rather than divided into 'women's groups' based on race/ethnic affiliation (eg. a Chinese women's group). This policy is supportive of the state's own principle of multi-racialism which insists that 'race', as a site of division, must be down-played in the interests of the national good.. Multi-racialism provides citizens with a common set of values and access to a discourse of 'Singaporean' identity and culture, and hence the basis for a sense of 'sameness'. At the same time, however, that multi-racialism forges a national identity based on 'harmony in diversity', it also plays up ethnic characteristics and insists that all citizens are 'racialised'. When combined with a range of socio-economic disparities

between the majority Chinese population and the remaining ‘minorities’⁴, this serves to reinforce Singaporean awareness of ‘race’ affiliations.

Within AWARE, however, racial identity is displaced by gendered experience. Thus, for some women, to be an AWARE member is to be ‘less Chinese’, ‘less Indian’, or ‘less Malay’. Such identification risks the associated labelling of AWARE members as perhaps ‘western’. Such divisions are also strongly mediated by a common middle-class background. Working class women are under-represented in the organisation and are characterised as traditional and uninformed about feminist issues.

The government’s insistence on racial harmony and meritocracy as core national values circumscribes any attempts to place race- or class-based inequality on the political agenda. While racial difference, and to a lesser extent class difference, is seen as a marker of diversity and potential division, it is rarely seen as a signifier of power. While many individual members are concerned with questions of justice and equity, as a collective AWARE members lack awareness of their structural locations of privilege. In part this stems from the constraints of working within the existing political culture. Any attempts to address structural inequality are inevitably labelled ‘political’ by the state and are thus a danger to AWARE’s constitutional prescription to remain non-political. Consequently, members are much more conscious of the potential divisions between them that arise because of age, sexuality, culture, and religion, than they are of class or ‘race’ barriers. Thinking about difference as diversity in attitudes and beliefs rather than power, however, only reinforces AWARE’s perception of ‘other’ women as victims lacking agency. Consequently, AWARE’s activities are based on self-help, counselling, and education, rather than programs or projects designed to bring about structural change.

While members share a common belief in the need to ‘improve’ women’s status, their understanding of what constitute ‘feminist’ goals also varies. Not all women who belong to AWARE acknowledge or feel comfortable with the label ‘feminist’. Nor do they share a common understanding of what the organisation ‘is’. Many do not become active, some concentrate on grassroots community-based activities, while others become involved in research and policy formation. Even if they become the

targets of AWARE's abstract goals, not all women – and not all AWARE members - are expected to become part of the feminist constituency. There is a constant contestation of the limits of feminism as a unifying term (a common location or community) (see Lyons, 1999).

'Difference' then for members of AWARE stands for diversity in women's belief systems and values. 'Racial difference', rather than representing a structural hierarchy of inequality, is discussed in terms of cultural and/or religious beliefs and attitudes. Similarly, 'class difference' signifies individual women's differing attitudes towards traditional sex roles – in part a product of differing educational and work experiences. Age and sexuality are also understood as markers of experiential and attitudinal variation. 'Sameness' too is based on beliefs and experiences; the women share experiences of gendered oppression and a desire to bring about change. These understandings of sameness/difference arise in part because of the political context (the imperative to be non-political), but are also tied intrinsically to AWARE members' positions of structural privilege. These understandings not only shape AWARE's organisational culture, but also its members' interactions with women who are alike and yet different.

AN ETHICS OF RESPECT

As part of my exploration of sameness/difference within AWARE I asked members to consider what they thought enabled them to work together with women whom they considered to be different to themselves⁵. The terms 'respect', 'acceptance' and 'tolerance' were used interchangeably to describe the negotiation of difference:

I think it is *respecting*, a sort of respect for other people's perspectives and saying [that] the initiatives have to come from the people who are immediately concerned and involved in those issues. And you shouldn't otherwise tell other women what they should be doing with their lives. It is in a way a form of being patronising [Soh Yen Chin].⁶

I think an openness and *acceptance* of the realities that are facing these women. These are the constraints, these are their realities. And you try to understand that, and you will probably not dictate what they should or should not be doing [Geetha Chettiah].

People are fighting [so] that women should be equal. I think that is the whole basis otherwise, what is the point? . . . But that doesn't mean that we shouldn't be able to *tolerate* differences of opinion. Because everybody comes with different expectations, different experiences that you bring to the situation [Fatimah Ibrahim].

The meanings of these terms were teased out in a focus session in which AWARE members began to see them as different modes of dealing with difference within a broad ethical framework. Sometimes the terms were used positively and on other occasions negatively. As a conceptual model, this ethical framework is useful for thinking about the ways in which women in AWARE interact with each other. At the same time, it is important to point out that it is an analytical tool rather than a description of individual behaviour or usage.

As a model of alliance-making, the ethics of respect is made up of three modes of interaction – tolerance, acceptance and respect. Tolerance involves an element of distaste or putting up with something unpleasant. Fatimah Ibrahim (above) suggests above that an AWARE member may ‘tolerate’ differences in opinion. At the heart of tolerance is a validation of women’s choices and beliefs. For example, a member may find another woman’s choices distasteful or ‘oppressive’ (eg. an AWARE member who rushes home from meetings to prepare her husband’s dinner) or may find some members’ beliefs non- or anti-feminist (eg. an AWARE member who is anti-abortion). However, she will tolerate certain behaviours or practices not because she supports them, but because openness and choice are basic to AWARE’s definition of a just and equal society. To dictate certain modes of behaviour would only replicate masculinist patterns of domination and control.

Acceptance is stronger and more positive than tolerance. If a women merely tolerates someone or something she retains a sense of discomfort. In contrast, acceptance means giving up certain beliefs or releasing one’s own prejudices, and in the process beginning to feel more at ease.

Tolerance is like there is little nagging thing behind you that “I don’t really like this”, or “I don’t like her”, but you put up with it. But acceptance is to give that space to the other person. You free yourself. You give yourself that space. So, you are very, very comfortable. But, it doesn’t mean you have to agree [May Wong].

To move from a state of tolerance to acceptance involves a change in the way the AWARE member ‘sees’ the other woman. It could involve learning more about her beliefs and seeing them in a different light. As Gheetha Chettiah says in the quotation above, it involves accepting other women’s lived realities. An instance of acceptance is recognition that if a woman’s religion is important to her, she makes certain decisions about how she will behave (eg. wearing a veil) or what she believes is important (eg. being pro-life). Acceptance means learning more about ‘her’ and listening to her explanations.

Like acceptance, respect involves a learning process. It involves a shift in the way one ‘sees’ the other person and in turn how one sees oneself. This understanding of respect is expressed in the following example:

There are some situations where you discover something. Just to give you an example, there was a time when divorce among Muslims was just two dollars to an uneducated *imam* [religious leader]. To Muslims, divorce is permitted but the most abhorrent of all things. That has really stuck with me. That is a wonderful way of dealing with abortion if it comes to that. ... Human nature being the way that it is, you can't do without it, but on the other hand, that doesn't mean you have to like it. That was a very important moment for me, and I would regard that as moving from acceptance to respect, learning something. I had to get further in [Patricia Quah].

Patricia Quah argues that when she simply saw Muslim divorce as a cheap solution to marital disagreements, she felt that the Islamic faith did not value marriage. When she realised that Islamic religious leaders adopted a more pragmatic approach to divorce – abhorrent but necessary – she changed her way of thinking. Unlike acceptance, with respect, not only has Patricia learnt more about the other woman and thus come to a greater understanding of ‘who she is’, but she has learnt something from her. In the process, Patricia learns something new about herself and changes her conception of who she ‘is’.

AWARE members see the core of such an ethical framework as compromise:

I can't impose my values on her. . . There are certain views that you cannot impose. There has to be compromise [Anna Lee].

The act of compromise is expected to be mutual; members must learn to give and take. In this model, movement is possible and constant. Members can lose respect by doing something that another woman cannot tolerate. In the same way, the greater the interaction between the two, the more opportunity there is to share information, the more likely it is that they will move from a state of acceptance to respect. Individual women within the organisation could be located at different stages of this ethical scale depending on where they stood personally on a particular cultural practice. It acknowledges that they could hold a range of views on the same practice depending on their interpretation of the specifics of each and that they could change their views. The ethics of respect is thus a multi-dimensional model in which identity, experience, and interaction inform individual behaviour.

When asked how they saw their practice in ethical terms, AWARE members replied that it was generally somewhere between respect and acceptance, depending on the context. This in itself explains the success of the ethical framework. It is difficult to maintain a sense of common purpose and unity based predominantly on tolerance. However, in validating a position of tolerance, the organisation 'makes room' for those who are potentially divisive or prejudiced and provides them with an opportunity to learn and thus change. If there was a requirement that all women must accept each other before they could work together, the membership would be restricted from the very beginning - building alliances would become difficult if not impossible.

RESPECTING 'OTHER' WOMEN

The ethics of respect not only informs individual practice, but also organisational and group behaviour. In this sense, it also operates as an organisational ethic. At an organisational level, practising an ethics of respect means that all women should be given the freedom to negotiate their own life choices within the unique frameworks provided by their culture and religion. By acknowledging and affirming a

diversity of views, AWARE opens up the possibility of dialogue with all women. For example, AWARE consciously avoids any discussion of religion in its activist work. This in part can be explained through reference to Singapore's policy of multi-racialism and the maintenance of religious harmony. Behind this recognition that religion is a 'taboo' topic, however, is also a strong belief in the need to respect women's religious convictions. Much of this discussion focuses on Islam and by association Malay and other Muslim women. Thus, while the call by AWARE to 'respect religion' is a general one, it is one that must be consciously exercised *by* all members in relation *to* Muslims. This sensitivity in part reflects Singapore's geographical location between the predominantly Muslim countries of Malaysia and Indonesia, as well as the status of Malays as the 'indigenous' population.

In addressing the question of Islam, AWARE is careful not to be seen by outsiders to be influencing or educating Muslim women. While AWARE represents the general needs of such women as 'workers' or 'students' or 'victims of violence' in its policy-making (ie. as 'Singaporean women'), when it deals with them as individuals or as a group (ie. 'Malay women'), the association is always careful not to speak 'for' them. Consequently, AWARE sponsored forums and information sessions for Muslim women are coordinated and run by Muslim members. This is much more than a manifestation of a legal/political imperative not to become involved in religious affairs. Using the ethics of respect, accepting a Muslim woman's difference means accepting that her religion is important to her and that those outside her religion have no right to question her choices. It is up to Muslim women to address issues of religion for themselves:

I think it is up to Muslim women to stand up for what they believe in. In a way it is a respecting of the women. . . They have got to . . . fight the battle, and of course we should support them. But it must be initiated, it must come from the Muslim women [Soh Yen Chin].

An example of AWARE's non-interventionist stance is its treatment of Muslim women who use the organisation's counselling Helpline:

There are certain things that we won't say to a Muslim caller because we know it won't make any difference anyway, so I feel very sad about that. But, then again, . . . I see it as a matter of strategising. You can go against, antagonise religious leaders ... or you can look at it another

way round. So, we conveniently leave it out. But, but, behind that is of course this respecting, respecting the beliefs of the religion [Ng Soo Chin].

In this quotation, Ng Soo Chin points to AWARE's desire not to antagonise Islamic religious leaders by pushing a feminist agenda which is anti-Islam or critical of Islamic practices. When she says that she will not say something 'because we know it won't make any difference anyway', she also employs a time worn image of non-agency. At the same time as she employs this line of reasoning, however, Soo Chin argues that 'behind that is of course this respecting'. In this way she validates individual choice - Muslim women may be victims, but their religion is important to them.

This construction of Muslim women as victims by non-Muslim members, while prevalent in the organisation, is by no means the only representation used. Some members describe Muslim women as having choices that they exercise:

Women have the choice, whether or not they want to be second wives or whether they want to allow a second wife, or to be the first wife and have a man take a second wife. Right? I think our situation should be to see that women do have that choice as a realistic one. That they have sufficient knowledge of their rights... But to fight against something that is cultural, you are going to lose the battle, and you are going to weaken your capacity to win other battles... The first thing that you have to do is assess whether the battle is worth fighting or not. Then you have to discuss, you have to be good strategists. And I think there are other important things. There could be worse things than polygamy. It has worked for many years, for many situations [Alice Mercer].

In this quotation, Alice Mercer (a Eurasian woman) distinguishes between knowledge of one's legal rights and 'tradition'. She suggests that AWARE's activities should be directed towards ensuring that Muslim women are aware of their rights (through information sessions co-ordinated by Malay members) rather than questioning the traditional practice of polygamy. Here, 'tradition' is read as religion, not simply 'the way things have always been done'. Amy White (a Chinese woman) points to this difference in her comparison of concubinage and polygamy:

We also have to respect each other's religions. We can fight against concubinage . . . the Women's Act has changed that, we can fight against that. I can fight strongly against [non-Muslim] men having second wives and all that you see, because that is not religion. That's just fancy. But when it comes to Muslim faith where you are allowed four wives, that is what they

practised for centuries. It's not for me to go and tell them it is right or wrong when the women are willing to do it. Nobody is forcing these women to do it. . . . I've spoken to a Muslim first wife. I said, "How can you condone it?" and she said "I have my ways" and she can hold her head up high. She knows she is wife number one and she will condone it. She said "It is an act of love for me" because I think she accepts in her mind that the men are like that and they need to have it [sex] [Amy White].

Alice Mercer and Amy White argue that AWARE members need to 'respect' each other's religion. In failing to construct polygamy as a 'bad' practice, they open up the possibility that it could have its positive and negative qualities.

Exercising an ethics of respect in dealing with religious practice means that AWARE adopts the role of educator. The association's goal is to ensure that women have access to all available information so that it is possible for them to make an 'informed choice' about their own lives. In its role as educator, however, AWARE is careful to avoid speaking for or about 'others'. Information is best presented by women who are the 'same', where sameness is measured primarily in terms of 'race'/religion and then other characteristics (age, marital status).

The success of this strategy depends in part upon AWARE's ability to manage organisational tension and to ensure that all members are successfully inducted into the values that are central to the ethics of respect. AWARE has relied on an informal process of induction in which new members to both the Exco and various sub-committees are introduced to the organisational culture via example.

Membership of the Exco is carefully chosen to include new members as well as a revolving pool of past members (including past-Presidents and vice-presidents, and/or founding members). These women place a firm, guiding hand on the actions of younger and/or newer members. Their efforts are not always successful nor welcome. In recent years, the value of acceptance (accepting diversity of opinion within AWARE) has come into conflict with the need to temper public statements (not to be too radical). While such matters are dealt with in a typically 'open' and 'non-hierarchical' manner by calling a meeting of those concerned and asking them to express their views, conflict is sometimes heightened rather than diminished.

As a method of alliance-making, the ethics of respect provides important principles for inter-group and group-community interaction. Suppressing one's own prejudices, learning from others, and using compromise to deal with dissent or division are all important techniques of successful group work. At the same time, however, the ethics of respect actively supports AWARE's internal policy to remain non-political. By reducing difference to diversity of experiences and beliefs, AWARE avoids questions related to its members' own structural locations of privilege. Thus, while AWARE is able to support and provide assistance to other women, it is ineffective in addressing sustained structural inequalities. This is not merely an organisational failing; to attempt to question the state's strategy for managing its citizenry could result in de-registration.

CONCLUSION

The women of AWARE are not 'smarter' or 'more respectful' or 'less racist' than other women. They are activists who, during the course of bringing about social change, must necessarily address points of sameness and difference amongst themselves. This then is an account of the particular; it is a localised example of how women in a specific social and political context address the issue of diversity during the course of their daily feminist activism. Within AWARE the ethics of respect provides a way of thinking about and learning to deal with differences of beliefs, values, and attitudes. It provides a mechanism for accepting other women's choices as important to them, and of learning to tolerate those things one does not like in order to achieve a greater good. It underpins the way individual AWARE members interact with each other and with other women. It is an ethical practice which validates individual choice and specifies subject positions. Unlike a fixed framework, however, it is a practice which is fluid (there is constant movement). It is an expression of the universal (a way to treat all people) in the particular (I treat individuals differently within this framework).

The ethics of respect provides guidelines for AWARE's interventions to bring about social change. Where pre-existing laws or principles exist such an ethical practice is unnecessary because infringements of the law are unacceptable. Such a practice is essential, however, in guiding

AWARE's political interventions in the private, un-legislated realm. Here, respect for cultural difference guides the overall goal of equality. At one level this is an expression of deeply held beliefs on the sacredness of culture and religion, while at another level it is an acknowledgment of the constraints imposed by present day political culture. At the level of group action, an ethics of respect means validating all members' views and contributions, and adopting a public face which is inclusive and non-confrontational. This strategy has not always been successful and will depend in future on the ability to manage organisational tension. While it is a strategy which provides little opportunity for sustained analysis of structural inequality, it has the potential to undermine the state's own vision of 'harmony in diversity' by insisting that women as a 'class' can form the basis for multi-racial, multicultural activism. AWARE's experience shows that while the process of negotiating difference is always fraught, it remains central to the process of bringing about social change for *all* women.

¹ In using the terms 'western feminism' and 'third world women' I draw on the work of Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1991:52) who refers to these categories as 'imagined communities' held together by an oppositional politics. For this reason she includes indigenous, migrant and minority women from the 'west' in the category 'third world'. It is these women's oppositional political relation to sexist, racist, and imperialist structures that constitutes their potential commonality (see Sandoval, 1991). Similarly, it is feminism's largely Anglophone tradition that I am referring to by my use of the terms 'white', 'western' and 'mainstream' feminism.

² The present ethnic mix of the Singapore population is 78% ethnic Chinese, 14% Malay, 7% Indian, and the remainder a mixture of 'Others' including Eurasians and Europeans (Brown, 1994:66).

³ Singaporean nationals make up approximately 81% of the membership. Observation suggests that Malay women are under-represented in the organisation.

⁴ Malays are more likely to be employed as production workers (60%) compared to Chinese and Indians (40%), and are under-represented in professional or management positions (6% compared to 15% for the other two groups) (Chiew, 1991a:156). Similarly, less than 1% of Malays are employers, compared to 4.5% of Chinese, and 3.7% of Indians (Chiew, 1991a:149). While the disparity between Chinese and Indians is less marked, the difference in population numbers produces an image of greater Chinese wealth.

⁵ The data is drawn from a series of in-depth interviews and a focus session with thirty-three AWARE members in 1995 and 1997.

⁶ Most names used are pseudonyms chosen to reflect the use of ethnic language or Christian based names.

REFERENCES

Albrecht, Lisa and Rose M. Brewer (1990). Bridges of Power: Women's Multicultural Alliances for Social Change. In Lisa Albrecht and Rose M. Brewer (Eds.), *Bridges of Power: Women's Multicultural Alliances* (pp.1-22). Philadelphia: New Society Publishers.

AWARE (1990). *Association of Women for Action and Research Declaration and Constitution*. Singapore: AWARE.

Bass, Marie (1998). Toward Coalition: The Reproductive Health Technologies Project. In Rickie Solinger (Ed.), *Abortion Wars: A Half Century of Struggle, 1950-2000*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Bethel, Lorraine (1979). What Chou Mean *We*, White Girl? *Conditions: Five*, **11**(2), 86-92.

Bookman, Ann and Sandra Morgen (1988). 'Carry it On': Continuing the Discussion and the Struggle. In Ann Bookman and Sandra Morgen (Eds.), *Women and the Politics of Empowerment*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Brown, David (1994). *The State and Ethnic Politics in Southeast Asia*. London: Routledge.

Bulbeck, Chilla (1988). *One World Women's Movement*. London: Pluto Press.

Caraway, Nancy (1991). *Segregated Sisterhood: Racism and the Politics of American Feminism*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press.

Carby, Hazel (1983). White woman listen: black feminism and the boundaries of sisterhood. In Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (Ed.), *The Empire Strikes Back Race and Racism in 70s Britain* (pp. 212-235). London: Hutchinson.

Chiew Seen Kong (1991) "Ethnic Stratification", in Stella R. Quah, Chiew Seen Kong, Ko Yiu Chung, and Sharon Mengchee Lee (eds), *Social Class in Singapore* (pp.138-182). Singapore: Times Academic Press.

Childers, Mary and bell hooks (1990). A Conversation about Race and Class. In Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller (Eds.), *Conflicts in Feminism* (pp.60-81). New York: Routledge.

Chua, Beng-Huat. (1995). *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore*. London: Routledge.

Davis, Angela (1980). *Women, Race and Class*. New York: Random House.

Dill, Bonnie Thornton (1983). Race, Class, and Gender: Prospects for an All-inclusive Sisterhood. *Feminist Studies*, **9**, 131-150.

Faver, Catherine A. (1995). Feminist Ideology and Strategies for Social Change: An Analysis of Social Movements. *The Journal of Applied Social Sciences*, **18**(1), 123-134.

Gutierrez, Lorraine M., and Edith A. Lewis (1992). A Feminist Perspective on Organizing with Women of Color. In Felix Rivera and John Erlich (Eds.), *Community Organizing in a Diverse Society* (pp.113-132). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Haraway, Donna (1989). A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s. In Elizabeth Weed (Ed.), *Coming to Terms: Feminism, Theory, Politics* (pp. 173-204). New York: Routledge.

Hartmann, Heidi, Ellen Bravo, Charlotte Bunch, Nancy Hartsock, Roberta Spalter-Roth, Linda Williams, and Maria Blanco (1996). Bringing Together Feminist Theory and Practice: A Collective Interview. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, **21**(4), 917-951.

Hirsch, Marianne and Evelyn Fox Keller (1990). Conclusion: Practicing Conflict in Feminist Theory. In Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller (Eds.), *Conflicts in Feminism* (pp.370-385). New York: Routledge.

Holter, Harriet, Ve, Hildur and Hanne Haavind (1985). Cooperation and Conflict: A Case Study of a Women's Research Network in Norway. *Women's Studies International Forum*, **8**(1), 37-44.

hooks, bell (1997). Sisterhood: Political Solidarity Between Women. In D. Tietjens Meyers (Ed.), *Feminist Social Thought: A Reader* (pp.485-500). New York: Routledge.

hooks, bell (1981). *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism*. Boston: South End Press.

Hurtado, Aida (1996). *The Color of Privilege: Three Blasphemies on Race and Feminism*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.

Itzin, Catherine (1985). Margaret Thatcher is My Sister: Counselling on divisions between women. *Women's Studies International Forum*, **8**(1), 73-83.

Lin, Jenny Lam (1993). *Voices and Choices: The Women's Movement in Singapore*. Singapore: Singapore Council of Women's Organisations.

Lyons, Lenore (1999). Believing in Equality: The Meanings Attached to 'Feminism' in Singapore. *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, **5**(1), 115-139.

Mascia-Lee, Francis E., Patricia Sharpe and Colleen Ballerino Cohen (1989). The Postmodernist Turn in Anthropology: Cautions from a Feminist Perspective. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. **15**(1), 7-33.

Miles, Angela (1996). *Integrative Feminisms: Building Global Visions 1960s-1990s*. New York: Routledge.

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade (1991). Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarships and Colonial Discourses. In Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo and Lourdes Torres (Eds.), *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (pp.51-80). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Moraga, Cherrie and Gloria Anzaldúa (1981). *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press.

O'Shane, Pat (1976). Is there any relevance in the Women's Movement for Aboriginal Women?. *Refractory Girl*, September. N. pag.

Raymond, Janice (1985). The Visionary Task: Two Sights-seeing. *Women's Studies International Forum*, **8**(1), 85-90.

Rodan, Garry (1993). Preserving the one-party state in contemporary Singapore. In Kevin Hewison, Richard Robison & Garry Rodan (Eds.), *Southeast Asia in the 1990s: Authoritarianism, democracy, and capitalism* (pp.75-108). St Leonards: Allen and Unwin.

Rodan, Garry (1995). Class transformations and political tensions in Singapore's development. In Richard Robison and David S. G. Goodman (Eds.), *The New Rich in Asia: Mobile phones, McDonalds and middle-class revolution* (pp.19-48). London: Routledge.

Russo, Ann (1991) 'We Cannot Live Without Our Lives': White Women, Antiracism, and Feminism. In Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres (Eds.), *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (pp.297-313). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Sandoval, Chela (1991) "U.S. Third World Feminism: The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World", *Genders*, 10(Spring): 1-24.

Saw, Swee Hong. (1990). *Changes in the Fertility Policy of Singapore*. Singapore: The Institute of Policy Studies.

Staggenborg, Suzanne (1986). Coalition Work in the Pro-Choice Movement: Organizational and Environmental Opportunities and Obstacles. *Social Problems*, **33**(5), 374-390.

Trivedi, Parita (1984). To Deny Our Fullness: Asian Women in the Making of History. *Feminist Review*, **17**, 37-50.

Webber, Gail M. (1985). Sisterly Conduct: Do Feminists Need Guidelines for Ethical Behavior with one another?. *Women's Studies International Forum*, **8**(1), 51-58.

Zinn, Maxine Baca, Lynn Weber Cannon, Elizabeth Higginbotham, and Bonnie Thornton Dill(1990). The Costs of Exclusionary Practices in Women's Studies. In Gloria Anzaldúa (Ed.), *Making Face, Making Soul – Hacienda Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color* (pp.29-41). San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.