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Transient Workers Count Too? The  
intersection of citizenship and gender in  
Singapore's civil society

L. T. Lyons

University of Wollongong, lenorel@uow.edu.au

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## **Transient Workers Count Too?**

### **The intersection of citizenship and gender in Singapore's civil society<sup>1</sup>**

I look forward to working together with all Singaporeans and with a broad spectrum of civic groups to grow our civic society, strengthen our sense of pride and ownership, and draw us closer together as one people. But remember that unity, pride and ownership depends also on a sense of common goals and shared visions (Lee 2004a).

In January 2004, in a landmark speech outlining his political platform as Singapore's Prime Minister Designate, Lee Hsien Loong spoke at length about 'civic society' and 'active citizenry'. He argued that it is the responsibility of all Singaporeans to promote active participation in Singapore's social and cultural life. Such involvement requires continued commitment to a set of national values and a sense of 'common goals and shared visions'. Lee's comments are consistent with statements made by previous leaders about the creation of a sphere of civil society that reflects 'Asian values' such as consensus ahead of confrontation. According to Lee, Singapore's civic society will be made up of active citizens who contribute to the state's nation-building project by providing thoughtful feedback and participating in state-sanctioned grassroots activities. This vision remains bounded, however, by the parameters of the nation-state; civic society is a space occupied by citizens engaged in the national project.

And yet, the Singaporean nation is intrinsically linked to the global political economy and subject to transnational flows of capital, people, ideas, and disease. Although Singapore recovered relatively quickly from the Asian financial crises of the late 1990s, in recent years economic growth has been impacted by global terrorism and SARS. As unemployment rates rise and wages are cut, Singaporean workers are increasingly concerned about the presence of large numbers of migrant workers, 'foreign talent'<sup>2</sup> and permanent residents whose commitment to the nation is questioned. It is against this backdrop that in August 2004 a group calling itself 'Transient Workers Count Too' (TWC2) was formed to advocate on behalf of migrant workers in Singapore. Using the TWC2 as a case study, this paper examines the efforts of Singapore's 'active citizens' to address the forces of transnational labour migration. By juxtaposing Lee Hsien Loong's statements about civic society against the work of the TWC2, this study brings into relief the underlying tensions between the

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<sup>1</sup> Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the CAPSTRANS Newcastle Seminar Series, and the Singapore Studies Workshop held at the University of Wollongong in October 2004. I want to thank colleagues who participated in those seminars for their thoughtful questions and feedback. I also wish to thank two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> A term used to describe expatriate white-collar professionals. The term 'migrant worker' is used for low-skilled workers in the construction and manufacturing industries, as well as domestic workers.

ruling party's vision of an active citizenry and attempts by local activists to advocate on behalf of non-citizens. In doing so, I highlight the ways that citizenship and gender intersect in shaping the work of non-government organisations (NGOs) in Singapore.

The first part of this paper provides an overview of the issues facing NGOs in Singapore as they attempt to forge a politically acceptable space for themselves within the parameters of the ruling party's civic society. This section provides the context for understanding civil society activism in Singapore. I argue that the constraints on activist engagement that are faced by Singaporean NGOs are compounded when issues of citizenship are central to activist concerns. Most accounts of NGOs and civil society actors in Singapore use the 'local' as their site of analysis.<sup>3</sup> Even those studies which take as the focus of their analysis the potentially globalised phenomenon of Internet politics retain the Singapore state and the bounded territory of the nation as their object of attention (see for example Ho, Baber, and Khondker 2002; George 2003). This analysis moves away from the study of 'local activism' to focus instead on 'ethnoscapes of activism', a term used by Lisa Law (2003, p.206) to contextualise NGO activism "within a broader frame of diasporic politics that account for the flow of ideas as well as people". Such an approach works to avoid the tendency to celebrate the emancipatory potential of transnational or global civil society by focusing on multiple and shifting scales of politics.

In the second part of the paper I give a detailed account of the TWC2's activities, paying particular attention to issues of citizenship and gender relations. Throughout this paper, the concept of 'citizenship' is used to refer to two interconnected issues – the making of citizens/non-citizens (particularly the ways in which state and non-state actors participate in the discursive construction of citizenship categories), and citizenship rights (used in its broadest sense to refer to social, political and cultural rights). My interest is in whether the TWC2 is able to challenge the rhetoric of active citizenry by including in its platform a space for non-citizens to play a role in Singapore's civic society. In other words, is the TWC2 able to problematise the PAP's definition of an 'active citizenry' and by association the meanings of citizenship for the Singaporean nation-state? To address this issue, I examine the extent to which migrant workers are included the TWC2's work and how their needs and interests are represented by Singaporean activists. I also explore the degree to which the TWC2 is able to focus its attention on issues beyond the nation-state by engaging with groups beyond Singapore's borders and by incorporating an analysis of globalisation into its work.

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<sup>3</sup> There are few in-depth studies of NGOs or civil society actors in Singapore, but see Lyons (2000b; 2000a; 2004) for a discussion of the Association of Women for Action and Research, and Singam et al. (2002) for a discussion of The Working Committee.

This latter issue goes to the heart of international debates about the impact of globalisation on the citizenship rights of transnational workers both at home and abroad. This analysis will show that while the TWC2 has been critical of the state's treatment of migrant workers, it has had limited success in fundamentally challenging the entrenched rules that constrain NGO activism in Singapore.

My study of the TWC2 is based on unstructured interviews and the analysis of newspapers and organisational documents. A series of interviews with TWC2 members and other migrant worker organisations (including CMI) were conducted in February and November 2004. Interviewees were asked to reflect on the TWC2's activities and the success of its various campaigns. As is common amongst NGO activists in Singapore, TWC2 members agreed to speak to me on condition of anonymity. I also undertook discourse analysis of reportage of the TWC2 in the Singaporean English language daily *The Straits Times* for the period November 2002 to April 2005. Much of the data used in my discussion is also drawn from the TWC2's official statements, policy documents, and web-site content. Unpublished documents were provided to me by TWC2 members (see reference list).

## **Fostering active citizenship**

Many scholars have remarked on the strict controls that Singapore's ruling party, the People's Action Party (PAP), places on NGOs and other civil society actors. Writing in the late 1980s, Michael Haas (1989) argued 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' characterised 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 has sought to encourage the growth of a more active citizenry through the promotion of civic society. The term 'civic society' is favoured because it emphasises civic responsibility as opposed to the rights of citizenship implied by the concept of civil society (Chua 2000, p.5).<sup>4</sup> Civic society is not a space in which individual rights are protected, but a space in which the state's vision of national values of 'nation, family, community, consensus, and harmony' is expressed. 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). In this way it is supportive of

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<sup>4</sup> The ruling elite sometimes uses 'civic society' interchangeable with 'civil society', however, the precise difference between the two terms remains deliberately ambiguous in most government statements.

the state's encouragement of volunteering and charitable work as evidenced in its promotion of Volunteer Welfare Organisations (VWOs) in contrast to NGOs.

The PAP describes its support for the growth of civic society as an attempt to encourage Singaporean citizens to take on greater responsibility for shaping the character of the country's future, albeit within tightly controlled limits. Speaking in 1991, Singapore's then Minister for Information and the Arts, Brigadier General George Yeo, likened the all-pervasive power of the PAP to the banyan tree:

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 (cited in Worthington 2003, p.7).

BG Yeo's statement apparently signalled a change in the way that the PAP would rule; the heavy-handed approach of the ruling party towards non-government organisations and civil society actors would be replaced with a more 'hands-off' style in which Singaporeans would be encouraged to take a more active role in civic society.

More recently, the concept of an 'active citizenry' has become part of this broader discourse of civic responsibility:

The hallmark of Singaporeans in the 21<sup>st</sup> 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 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 (S21 Facilitation Committee 2003). Lee Hsien Loong spelt these attributes out more clearly in January 2004 when he signalled that under his leadership new guidelines for public consultations on new policies or regulations would be developed (see Lee, "Gestural Politics", in this issue). These guidelines will be employed by the civil service to ensure that there is adequate 'public consultation' on government policy. Singaporeans will be encouraged to debate policies 'rigorously and robustly' through these public consultation exercises. Lee cautioned, however, that such debate "has to be issue-focused, based on facts and logic, and not just on assertions and emotions. The overriding objective is to reach correct conclusions on the best way forward for the country" (Lee 2004a). The media would play an

important role in achieving this vision of civic engagement. Its role is to ensure that the news is reported ‘accurately and fairly’ so as to educate the public on a national perspective on issues. Attention to these ‘guidelines’ for civic engagement would produce an ‘open and inclusive Singapore’ in which:

Our people should feel free to express diverse views, pursue unconventional ideas, or simply be different. We should have the confidence to engage in robust debate, so as understand our problems [sic], conceive fresh solutions, and open up new spaces (Lee 2004b, p.6).

In putting forward guidelines for public consultation, Lee was at pains to point out that this was not an articulation of the ‘Out-of-bounds markers’ (OB markers) that identify subjects that are ‘off-limits’. These have been described as “issues that are too sensitive to be discussed in public for fear of destabilising or jeopardising public peace and order” (Ho 2000, p.186). The ruling party 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. Rejecting claims that the growth of civil society has been impeded by the government’s refusal to clearly spell out these boundaries Lee Hsien Loong asserts that,

Had we pre-defined all the parameters for discussion, civil society would have lost the spark and autonomy that allows fresh areas to be explored, limits to be redefined, and both Government and civic groups to develop a certain responsiveness to each other and move society forward by engaging each other (Lee 2004a).

In a characteristic act of double-speak, the PAP claims that its failure to clearly spell out the OB markers in fact encourages the growth of civic society by improving the relationship between the government and NGOs.

Lee’s statement points to the difference between civil activism and civic responsibility. By putting the onus on NGOs to regulate their own behaviour by second-guessing the state’s responses, the PAP has not only forced civil society actors to model their actions on the government’s cues but also to see themselves as partners rather than combatants. NGOs internalise and adopt the ruling party’s ideology and are rewarded for their ‘consultative’ approach. They engage in a process of self-regulation based on inherent conservatism shaped by a fear of being closed down (Lyons 2000a). This is the point that Garry Rodan (2003, p.506) makes when he argues that repressive laws such as the Internal Security Act (ISA)<sup>5</sup> are of diminishing importance. In their place,

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<sup>5</sup> The ISA provides the state with the means to arrest and detain without trial those individuals or groups that in its view threaten the national security.

administrative law (such as the Societies Act, see below) and extensive mechanisms of political co-optation are more effective. Where this is combined with an inherent conservatism that reflects the middle-class values promoted by the ruling elite, the opportunities for civil society actors to question the PAP's 'rules of engagement' are further undermined (PuruShotam 1998). This has led Rodan to claim that Singapore is characterised by the presence of 'civil society forces' rather than genuine civil society.

## **Advocating for domestic worker rights**

Numerous studies have documented the tenuous position of female migrant workers in relation to labour laws and citizenship rights in the Asia-Pacific (Huang and Yeoh 1996; Lim and Oishi 1996; Yeoh and Huang 1997; Lindio-McGovern 2001). Sending and receiving states have been slow to address these workers' welfare despite their dependency on the labour and remittances of migrant workers. NGOs have stepped into this breach, providing both information and assistance to migrant workers. The most visible of these are Filipino migrant worker groups based in Hong Kong, Japan and the Philippines (Ball and Piper 2002; Law and Nadeu 1999; Law 2003). Nicola Piper (2003) argues that Filipino migrant worker groups have received the most scholarly attention not only because of the significant proportion of female domestic workers from the Philippines who work in the region, but also because they have the strongest transnational advocacy networks. 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.

Foreign-based NGOs have always found it difficult to operate on the ground in Singapore. While the Singapore Constitution guarantees freedom of association (Article 14) in principle, organisations with more than 10 members or committees with more than five members are required to register under the Societies Act or the Companies Act. Individuals who participate in groups that are not officially registered face the threat of arrest and imprisonment for participating in 'illegal assemblies'. All registered organizations are expressly prohibited from engaging in 'political activity' and must restrict their activities to issues outlined in their constitutions. The government has effectively used the Societies Act to suppress the activities of a number of local groups<sup>6</sup> as well as foreign-based NGOs. Without registration and accreditation these groups cannot operate on the

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<sup>6</sup> For example, most recently the Societies Act has been used to restrict the activities of the gay rights organisation People Like Us (Tanaka 2002, p.209; People Like Us 2000).

ground. This has resulted in a very small international NGO presence in Singapore, and very few formalised transnational linkages between local, regional and global groups. Where transnational links do occur, they are mostly at the level of informal networks and participation in regional or international conferences or workshops (Lyons 2004; Tanaka 2002).

In addition, for many years the plight of migrant workers in Singapore has remained ‘out-of-bounds’. Like many taboo topics, the issue of migrant labour 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. The Marxist Conspiracy is a term used to describe the arrest and detention under the ISA of 22 people in May 1987 for threatening the state and national interests (Rodan 1993, p.92). Among those arrested included were Catholic social workers and lay workers from the Geylang Catholic Centre for Foreign Workers. This group advocated for higher wages, social security benefits, job security and employment conditions for all foreign workers (Mauzy and Milne 2002, p.130). At the time of their arrest, the government claimed that Catholic organisations were “a cover for political agitation” to “radicalise student and Christian activists” (cited in Haas 1989, p.59). The Catholic Centre for Foreign Workers was subsequently closed.<sup>7</sup>

Some members of Singapore’s main feminist organisation, the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE), were arrested for their involvement in the Marxist Conspiracy. Formally registered as an organisation in 1986, at the time of the arrests AWARE’s small membership chose to remain silent in order to avoid suspicion of the organisation’s activities. The arrests were interpreted as a clear signal that the rights of female migrant workers (a logical client group for a women’s rights organisation) were off-limits and that for AWARE to address the issue would be extremely risky (Lyons 2004). Since then, despite its wide-ranging work on a range of gender issues including violence against women and sex discrimination, AWARE has not included female migrant workers as part of its constituency. Another important local women’s group, the Singapore Council of Women’s Organisations (SCWO) has also been silent on the plight of female migrant workers. The SCWO is a state-sponsored umbrella group that acts as a federation of all women’s organisations in Singapore, including professional and interest-based groups. Some critics suggest that it is a conservative mouthpiece for government policy that is not directed towards the goal of improving women’s social or legal status, but simply reflects the PAP’s own gender position (Lyons 2004). The inherent conservatism of both organisations partly explains the

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<sup>7</sup> The workers arrested were detained for varying periods. Some were charged and had to admit to being a Marxist as a condition of their release. They were ‘rehabilitated’ with an agreement not to enter into politics.

reluctance of the local women's movement to address the needs of migrant workers since the mid-1980s. Working within the framework provided by the OB markers, local women's groups temper their public statements or limit their activities to avoid criticism (Lyons 2000b).

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 organisations that are largely supportive of the government's economic and labour policies (Rodan 1996, p.100). The labour movement has emerged as a co-partner with both the government and employer groups to ensure Singapore's continued economic growth and sustainability. As the numbers of migrant workers in Singapore rose during the 1990s, there were increasing concerns that such workers were linked to higher crime rates, drug offences, and the spread of contagious diseases. Trade unions were called upon to assist in helping such workers to adjust to the local environment through social outings and other organised events (Low 2001; Channel NewsAsia 2004b). Foreign workers may join local trade unions, although there are caps on their representation at the executive level.<sup>8</sup> Unions have played little role, however, in advocating for better working conditions for such workers. More recently, as levels of retrenchment and unemployment rise the NTUC has sided with the concerns of local workers and expressed its concern that the migrant workers are taking 'Singaporean jobs' (Channel NewsAsia 2004c).

Religious groups and foreign embassies stepped in and filled the void created by the absence of a local or international NGO presence in Singapore to deal with the rights of migrant workers. Their actions, however, were largely ad hoc and mostly related to female domestic workers. Throughout the 1990s, as a result of high publicity cases of maid abuse or death, migrant worker welfare became a significant issue for bilateral relations between receiving and sending countries throughout Southeast Asia.<sup>9</sup> For example, increasing pressure was placed on the Philippines Government to utilise the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) to protect the rights of overseas workers. The OWWA runs a range of services for overseas Filipino workers, including refuges for maids in a number of countries. In Singapore, the OWWA operates a half-way house for runaway maids through the Philippines Embassy.

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<sup>8</sup> The role of non-citizens in trade unions recently came under scrutiny in relation to Singapore Airlines (The Straits Times 2004a).

<sup>9</sup> In Singapore, these claims were crystallised around the arrest and execution of a Filipina domestic worker, Flor Contemplacion, in 1995 for the murder of another maid and the maid's four-year old charge. The execution caused a diplomatic rift between the Philippines and Singapore as speculation mounted over her guilt. For a discussion of this case, see Hildson et al. (2000) and Yeoh et al. (1999).

Although Christian churches were initially extremely careful in their public dealings with migrant workers because of ongoing concerns about the association between Catholicism and the Marxist Conspiracy, they gradually came to play a renewed role. Muslim groups too began providing support and training services to Muslim workers (predominantly from Indonesia) through their mosque-based outreach programs. Both groups act informally to assist ‘runaway’ maids to contact embassy officials when they needed assistance. 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). For example, in relation to domestic workers, the CMI works with the Singapore Ministry of Manpower to run workshops for employers on ‘How to establish a Harmonious Working Relationship with your Foreign Domestic Helper’. Catholic Welfare Services also runs half-way houses, such as the Good Shepherd Centre. 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 (TWC2)**

Migrant workers are part of a global phenomenon of transnational labour movements from which Singapore is not immune. One-quarter of Singapore’s workforce is made up of foreign workers (Channel NewsAsia 2004a). The Singapore government does not release precise data on the numbers of migrant workers in Singapore because of public sensitivity about their presence. Available data shows that out of a total resident population of 4 million, 3 million are Singaporean citizens, 350,000 are Permanent Residents, and 800,000 are foreign residents on long-term employment or spouse passes (Lian 2004). The majority of migrant workers in low-skilled areas are Work Permit Holders. Migrant workers in white-collar professions (referred to as ‘foreign talent’) are issued with a separate category of visa (called Employment Passes). In comparison with other countries in Southeast Asia, Singapore has a relatively small number of undocumented migrant workers due to its tough immigration controls, tight regulation of the labour market, and active policing of work-sites. While some undocumented workers enter Singapore illegally, the majority enter on Tourist Passes and work until their passes expires or they remain and become over-stayers.

It is estimated that there are currently over 150,000 foreign domestic workers (FDWs) in Singapore, made up of a third each from the Philippines and Indonesia, and a significant minority from Sri Lanka (Tan and Almenoar 2004; The Straits Times 2004b). This equates to approximately one foreign domestic worker to every seven households (Yeoh, Huang, and Devasahayam 2004). The feminisation of transnational labour migration and the role of the ‘maid economy’ in Singapore has attracted considerable scholarly attention (Huang and Yeoh 1996, 1998; Yeoh and Huang 1998, 1999; Yeoh, Huang, and Devasahayam 2004). Much of this work focuses on the tenuous position of female domestic workers in relation to labour laws and citizenship rights. Female migrant workers face difficult working conditions, poor remuneration, and constant surveillance by both the state and their employers.

As the numbers of domestic workers entering Singapore has risen, so too have reports of physical and sexual abuse of maids by their employers, maid deaths, as well as incidents of assaults or theft carried out by maids. The increasing visibility of these issues has made them difficult to ignore despite concerns about overstepping the OB markers. 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). These comments prompted a number of Singaporeans to meet informally with the goal of addressing attitudes towards and treatment of domestic workers in Singapore. Calling themselves The Working Committee 2 (TWC2), this group of activists formed an ad hoc network in November 2002 to advocate for the rights of foreign domestic workers (FDWs) working in Singapore. The group modelled itself on the short-lived ‘The Working Committee’ or TWC that was formed in late 1998 and disbanded a year later.<sup>10</sup>

The TWC2’s activities were organised under the banner ‘Dignity Overdue: Respecting the rights of maids’, and included research on the conditions of FDWs; meetings (called ‘dialogue sessions’) with a range of key stakeholders; a public education campaign; and community-based activities (The Working Committee 2 2003e). The TWC2’s aim was to “promote respect for domestic

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<sup>10</sup> The TWC operated as an informal network of individuals and representatives of NGOs and 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 organisations. During this time, it organised workshops, open houses (public visits to the offices of NGOs), 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 also acted as a focal point for broader public discussion of the meaning of civil society (see Singam et al. 2002).

workers through education, and secure better treatment of domestic workers through legislation and other means” (The Working Committee 2 2003c). Like its predecessor, the TWC2 deliberately chose not to seek accreditation from the Registrar of Societies. Drawing on the state’s apparent support for the TWC as an alternative model of civic society activism, the TWC2 also limited its life-span to one year and restricted the scope of its activities. 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<sup>11</sup> and member of AWARE, chaired the committee. Both AWARE and the SCWO were listed as ‘partner’ organisations, and the TWC2 web-site and bulletin board were hosted on the AWARE web-site.

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 and indirect (often private) meetings with stakeholders. The TWC2’s research program documented the experiences of foreign domestic workers and examined existing legislation regulating their employment. The research findings have not been formally published but were presented as public and closed-door forums as a means of stimulating feedback and discussion. These and other events provided an opportunity for TWC2 to meet with a range of stakeholders, including FDWs, employers, agencies, embassies, trade unions, government bodies and NGOs.

Part of the group’s activities directed attention to the gendered division of labour within the home, and finding alternatives to Singapore’s reliance on the labour of domestic workers. For example, the art-installation ‘houseWORK project’ brought together artists who asked members of the audience to bring along their clothes to be ironed on stage as a means of highlighting the ‘work’ involved in the home (Teng 2003). The TWC2 also drew attention to problems 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. By educating Singaporeans about the need for gender equality within the home, the TWC2’s activities were also linked to a program of social change that would create a “future free from sexism” (Price and Lim 2003).

Recognising, however, that finding alternatives for domestic workers would take some time, the TWC2’s other interest was in engaging the public through television, radio and print media about

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<sup>11</sup> 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.

the ‘rights’ of domestic workers. Here ‘rights’ referred to two interrelated issues: improving treatment of maids by their by employers, and standardising employment contracts. These issues were addressed in the context of ‘professionalising’ the FDW industry. In particular, members were concerned with eliminating violence against female domestic workers by their employers. For this reason, the group’s activities culminated with a series of events focused on Singapore’s first ‘White Ribbon Campaign’.<sup>12</sup> In relation to employment contracts, the TWC2 focused on issues to do with working hours, off days, and wages. It encouraged employers to provide a day off per week to their employees. Members organised a ‘Sunday Off Campaign’ that included a Block Party<sup>13</sup> for workers and their employers, and a photography exhibition of maids on their days off (Tee 2003). Members also used the forum pages in the local media to raise the issue of standardised 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, 2002b). This is a view shared by the Association of Employment Agencies of Singapore (AEAS) and the CMI (Arshad 2003b). The TWC2 consistently argued, however, that only standardised (and regulated) employment contracts would protect the rights of female domestic workers. In November 2003, it circulated to the government, employers, FDW agencies and embassies a draft proposal for a Foreign Domestic Workers (FDW) Bill aimed at establishing “clear basic ground rules for the employment of foreign domestic workers in Singapore” (The Working Committee 2 n.d.-a, p.2). The draft bill identified six areas that the proposed FDW Bill would need to address:

- A) A written contract of service between the foreign domestic worker and the employer that clearly states the conditions of employment, as well as provisions that allow for termination of contract.
- B) A minimum wage for foreign domestic workers and a standardized means by which payment is calculated and dispensed.
- C) Stipulation of costs accruing to the foreign domestic worker and the employer.
- D) Stipulation of entitlements for the foreign domestic worker including rest periods and hours of work; leaves; accommodation; meals; and medical benefits.
- E) Codes of conduct for foreign domestic workers and employer.
- F) Guidelines for the Commissioner and all other officers appointed or acting under this Bill for its regulation (The Working Committee 2 n.d.-a, p.2).

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<sup>12</sup> 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).

<sup>13</sup> Block here refers to a housing apartment block, the main form of housing in Singapore.

The Bill was not released in re-drafted form and its status remains unclear. Although it would have been possible for Braema Mathi to table the Bill in parliament as an NMP it would have had no chance of success unless it received the support of the PAP.<sup>14</sup> Given the government's previous statements about standardised employment contracts and wage levels, it is unlikely that the Bill would have been supported.<sup>15</sup>

In December 2004, at the end of its year-long activities, the TWC2 announced that it would seek to establish a Home Help Resource Centre (HHRC) to,

serve as a coordinating and reference point for the may stakeholders in the FDW situation [and] work with stakeholders towards the professionalisation of the FDW industry (The Working Committee 2 n.d.-b, p.2).

The HHRC would be involved in training and skills upgrading for FDWs and employers; liaison, mediation and advocacy for FDWs; public outreach and education programs; and research and resource development (The Working Committee 2 n.d.-b, pp.5-6).

Retaining the original acronym but changing its name to 'Transient Workers Count Too', the TWC2 applied for formal registration under the Societies Act in January 2004 and received approval in August 2004 after lengthy discussions with the Registrar of Societies about aspects of its Constitution (Lim 2004). In its Constitution, Transient Workers Count Too has signalled a broadening of its objectives beyond the needs and interests of foreign domestic workers to all 'transient workers'. The new TWC2's objectives are:

To improve the welfare of transient workers by providing them, and their employers, with services to help them:

- (i) cope with situations of work-related or personal distress;
- (ii) develop skills to ensure a harmonious and mutually beneficial employer-employee relationship (TWC2 n.d., p.1).

The society was largely inactive in the period leading up to its registration and it has received little public attention since. Instead, it has used this time to review the success of its earlier campaigns and plan its new program of activities.<sup>16</sup> For this reason, the following discussion is mostly focused

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<sup>14</sup> The PAP effectively rules Singapore as a one-party state. During the TWC2's campaign, there were only 2 non-PAP members of parliament out of total of 84 MPs, and the party whip maintains tight control over PAP MPs voting patterns.

<sup>15</sup> Braema Mathi's term as an NMP has since ended. The opportunity for the TWC2 to table such a Bill would depend on the group finding another supporter amongst the current crop of NMPs.

<sup>16</sup> Personal communication with Noorashikin Abdul Rahman, TWC2 Executive Committee member, November 2004.

on the original TWC2 (The Working Committee 2) and its activities during the course of 2002-2003.

## **Spaces for non-citizens**

The original TWC2's activities were consistent with the model of active citizenry promoted by the PAP government. Its members adopted a conservative approach in their dealings with the state, preferring to engage with policy makers via 'closed-door' forums or 'dialogue sessions'. Most of its activities focused on public education campaigns that centred on the gendered division of labour within the home, and instances of abuse against maids. My interest is in the extent to which the TWC2 was able to challenge the rhetoric of active citizenry by including in its platform a space for non-citizens to play an active role in Singapore's civil society, either by involving them in the TWC2's work or by highlighting their contribution to Singapore's national development. Both issues relate to the politics of representation. The first is a measure of the extent to which FDWs are represented as equal partners in the TWC2's activities, while the second relates to the ways in which FDWs are constructed as subjects of activist intervention.

The TWC2 adopted a conscious decision to include the voices of FDWs in its campaign work. Domestic workers were welcomed as members of the network and events were organised that specifically targeted their involvement.<sup>17</sup> One of these was the 'Sundays Off Campaign', which centred on a Block Party for domestic workers and their employers. The party was held on the void deck of a local housing block and employers and their maids from the local area were encouraged to attend. Although the event received a great deal of publicity, members were disappointed by the poor turnout from domestic workers.<sup>18</sup> Another event in which employers and their maids were encouraged to jointly participate was the launching of a documentary film "Maid in Singapore" about the lives of three domestic workers living in Singapore. Although the TWC2 offered 55 tickets to maids and their employers to attend the film, only about 30 maids turned up, many of them without their employers (Neo 2004).

Apart from these events, and a public forum in which three domestic workers were asked to speak about their experiences, there were few other opportunities for members of the TWC2 to interact

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<sup>17</sup> The Constitution of Transient Workers Count Too also provides for membership by domestic workers and other Work Permit Holders. However, only Singaporean citizens and Permanent Residents (PRs) are eligible to hold office (with a cap of 25% for PRs) (TWC2 n.d., p.2).

<sup>18</sup> Personal communication with member of TWC2, February 2004. Respondent chose to remain anonymous.

with FDWs or to hear their stories. This is not surprising given the problems faced by FDWs as a class of workers – isolation, poor English language skills, lack of ‘free time’, and frequently a tenuous immigration status.<sup>19</sup> When this is combined with cultural and gender scripts that discourage participation in public life as well as distrust of government agencies (including the police), participation in NGO activities and other forms of civil society engagement may be viewed with considerable distrust by such workers.<sup>20</sup>

The problems faced by the TWC2 in getting employers and maids to attend these functions together points to the inherent power differentials between the two groups. It is also linked to the associated problem of reaching out to women who are often isolated within the homes of their employers with limited access to information about groups that seek to advocate on their behalf. Where maids were part of the TWC2’s activities, they were often invited to come along by Singaporeans who knew them because of their work as maids (either because they were the woman’s employer or a member of her employer’s extended family). Their relationships with members of the TWC2 were thus embedded within complex relations of class, nationality, and employment. One of the striking issues that the TWC2 had to confront in its work was the fact that a significant number of its own members are employers of domestic workers. While their actions can be explained as instances of ‘good’ employer-employee relations (e.g. regular off days, good wages, lack of abuse), nonetheless their ability to advocate on behalf of domestic workers is a product of the labour of those very same women.

Foreign domestic workers were clearly not equal partners in the TWC2’s activities. This lack of participation is not necessarily problematic where it is combined with careful attention to issues of representation. One of the enduring debates within international feminism centres on the ability of feminists to represent the interests of women unlike themselves. Feminist scholars have long been interested in the politics of speech acts. This interest is based on an acknowledgment that women are “not politically equal, and, given that politics is connected to truth, all are not epistemically equal” (Alcoff 1991, pp.14-15). Acts of speech are problematic because we are all located within structures of oppression. For this reason there has been a concern to distinguish between two interrelated practices - speaking for others and speaking about others. Speaking about others is an act of representation (‘participating in the construction of their subject-positions’) and thus a

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<sup>19</sup> While some women enter Singapore as documented migrant workers, many others enter on tourist visas that are later converted to workers permits. Many women have their passports and official papers confiscated by recruitment agents or employers in an effort to discourage them from ‘running away’.

<sup>20</sup> These same problems are likely to persist under the new TWC2, even though its Constitution expressly allows for Work Permit Holders to join the organisation.

process of interpretation (Alcoff 1991, p.9). In contrast, speaking for or on behalf of others is a process of appropriation (taking on aspects of the Other's identity/experience) and thus deception (Gunew 1993). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) describes the difference between these two forms of representation as that between a portrait and a proxy, and calls on feminists to disavow the latter. While many women may accept the moral and ethical imperative to relinquish claims to 'speak for' other women while continuing to 'speak about' them, others claim that they have a political responsibility as feminists to speak when other women cannot. However, the question is not, as Spivak points out, whether the subaltern can speak, but who can speak, who will listen, and how?

In the case of the TWC2, the representation of foreign domestic workers was overwhelmingly informed by a discourse of victimhood that stemmed from the initial instance of abuse that acted as a catalyst to the group's formation. The quotation "It is not my business. He can do what he wants, that's his problem" was displayed prominently in the top banner of the TWC2 web-site, along with images of domestic workers engaged in housework. This view is further reflected in the group's statement about why the 'White Ribbon Campaign' was focused on foreign domestic workers:

... 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 (The Working Committee 2 2003d).

Violence was a central trope in the TWC2's media campaign such that journalists felt the need to find alternative voices that would counter the stories of abuse (see for example Arshad 2003a). The TWC2's strategy not only had the effect of defining FDWs as primarily 'victims' in need of saving by benevolent Singaporeans, but also meant that the circumstances of the vast majority of workers who do not face violence in the workplace were obfuscated.

In the absence of FDW's own voices, the TWC2 commissioned two other groups to tell their stories about 'maids'. The first of these were children who took part in an essay writing competition via their schools. More than 2000 children from 40 primary schools took part in the competition (The Working Committee 2 2003b). Fourteen of the prize winning stories were published on the TWC2 website. In these stories a number of recurring themes emerge. Even at a young age the children demonstrated a clear awareness of the problems surrounding maid abuse and negative attitudes towards domestic workers in Singapore. Li Yi Hong, who won first prize in the Primary 4 category, wrote:

I feel very sad for those maids who get bullied by employers. They get tortured so badly and seeing all their scars and cuts makes me want to cry. We are always commanding them around, treating them like servants. I find it very important to treat them as friends (Li Yi Hong cited in The Working Committee 2 2003b).

The theme of friendship re-emerges in many of the stories – the women are described as ‘good friends’, ‘best friends’, and ‘elder sisters’:

Cora is the greatest friend. She has great talents. I think Cora is not like other maids – she is unbelievable! (Sacha Armstrong cited in The Working Committee 2 2003b).

The children also reflected on their own affluence compared to the hardship faced by domestic workers in their home countries. Recounting stories of poverty told to them by their domestic workers, the children commented on how different their own lives were:

I realized how fortunate I am to be living in Singapore, having everything under one roof (Charmaine Tan Xin Yi cited in The Working Committee 2 2003b).

Hamidah has emerged, a stronger person, from her adversities. I have learnt much about life’s lessons from her. These are lessons that I can never learn in school. To me, my maid, Hamidah, is a living textbook on the realities of life, and that is an added reason to liking her (Qiu Yun cited in The Working Committee 2 2003b).

Although the majority of prize winning stories recounted positive experiences, members of the judging panel were startled by the level of resentment that some children felt towards their maids (Ng 2003). Some expressed dislike and even hatred towards domestic workers in their homes:

After some time, I started hating her. I hated her and even did not like to see her face (cited in Ng 2003).

I am just glad that she never burnt the house down (cited in Ng 2003).

The second group commissioned to represent FDWs was a group of six Singaporean photographers who took part in a travelling exhibition titled “Day Off: Photographs of foreign domestic workers in Singapore”. Their brief was to expand Singaporeans’ understanding of the lives that maids lead:

What do maids do beyond cleaning our houses? Can good care-taking be strictly professional with no emotional attachment? Should it? What happens to a maid who is newly-arrived? And above all, what does a maid do on her days off? (The Working Committee 2 2003a)

The exhibition was motivated by a desire to show domestic workers as human subjects rather than always defined as workers. The human face of domestic labour would portray FDWs as mothers, sisters, wives, and friends; and as women in a strange country confronted by a range of emotions from fear and trepidation on arrival, to love and fondness for their employers. In a newspaper article titled “They’re maid like you and I”, Braema Mathi was quoted as saying “We wanted to strip her of this invisibility and show her as a human being, within our homes, who has her own interests and friends outside of her workplace” (Tee 2003). In both cases, Singaporeans drew on their own common-sense assumptions about ‘the life of a maid’, to represent ‘the other’ in their midst. These included images of women attending medical check-ups, agent briefings, training sessions or self-help workshops, as well as women acting as care-givers to members of their employers’ households. In taking images of the emotional parting of an Indonesian maid from her three young charges at the airport, photographer Wang Hui Fen commented: “I went to places like Mustafa and Lucky Plaza [shopping centers] at first as I wanted to portray a maid shopping for goods before she went home. But I realised that some kids do become very attached to their maids, so I decided to stake out the airport instead” (Tee 2003).

In the case of the photographs, such acts of representation required intrusion into the ‘personal’ life of the women being photographed, thus reinforcing the continual blurring of the boundaries between public and private space that characterises the life of domestic workers. Not only is the ‘public’ nature of their work ignored by a state that treats ‘women’s work’ as a private affair, but domestic workers also find themselves the constant object of employer surveillance within the ‘private’ space of the home (Lyons in press). Many women have very little private space in the workplace, and paradoxically may live out their ‘private lives’ in the anonymity afforded by public places such as parks and shopping malls. By ‘staking out’ maids in such places for a glimpse of their ‘human face’, the photographers contributed to the construction of the domestic workers as ‘public property’.

Perhaps the most significant act of representation, however, was linked to the TWC2’s use of the term ‘foreign domestic worker’ and the associated acronym ‘FDW’. Although it also used the term ‘maid’ as part of its activities, members preferred to use FDW. This was part of a decision to link the work of FDWs to debates about work and the unrecognised nature of women’s household responsibilities. In doing so, they succeeded in constructing FDWs as ‘workers’ rather than just women involved in traditional caring activities. This was the central focus of the ‘houseWORK’ campaign. It was also implicit in the TWC2’s claims about employment contracts and the need to include this group of workers in the Employment Act. One of the consequences of constructing the

women in this way, was that the public association of workers as national subjects (Filipinas, Indonesians, etc), was weakened. The women that the TWC2 advocated on behalf of were ‘women workers’, and as such shared common experiences of oppression. Breaking down ethnic and nationality barriers between women in this way can be an important means of coalition building amongst diverse groups. In Hong Kong, the work of the Asian Migrant Coordinating Body (AMCB), which brings together different nationality-based migrant organisations that had previously worked independently, functions in a similar way. Lisa Law (2003, p.216) argues that the emergence of this coalition “reflects the important perspective in Hong Kong of domestic workers as ‘workers’, and attempts to build solidarity on this basis. It also reflects the financial imperatives of domestic workers themselves, who migrate to Hong Kong primarily for economic reasons”.

In the context of Singapore, where nationality-based migrant worker NGOs only operate around official government outposts such as embassies, and where the isolated nature of domestic work means that there are few opportunities for women to meet each other, the TWC2 provided a context in which domestic workers could see themselves as a group of workers who shared common experiences of exploitation and oppression. The limited presence of FDWs in the group’s events, however, meant that the potential for forming strong cross-national alliances was slim. Similarly, the potential to build alliances with local domestic workers remained unaddressed; as the acronym ‘FDW’ suggests, the women were first and foremost ‘foreign’ workers.

This strategy of constructing FDWs as a common ‘class’ of workers was more successful, however, in challenging common stereotypes about the qualities of maids. These stereotypes are a central component of the marketing and recruitment process used by agencies in placing domestic workers with employers (Lyons in press). The key marker of product differentiation is nationality, which in turn draws on common-sense assumptions about gender, ethnicity, religion, language ability, class and educational qualifications (Huang and Yeoh 1998). These characteristics shape employment conditions, with Filipinas receiving higher wages than Indonesians, who in turn receive higher wages than Sri Lankans. Filipinas are also more likely to receive one day off per week compared to other national groups. The women themselves are quite familiar with these stereotypes. Filipinas are ‘outspoken’ and more ‘hardworking’ than Indonesians who are ‘quiet and stupid’. Employers are told that despite their expense and demanding nature, Filipinas are ‘good with children’, whereas Indonesians are better at mundane household chores (Lyons in press). By arguing for standardised contracts for all workers, the TWC2 deliberately broke the nexus between nationality and conditions of employment, particularly as it relates to wages and hours of work.

It is clear, however, that there were few opportunities for non-citizens to be active TWC2 partners. Rather than active subjects in Singapore's civil society, maids were the objects of the TWC2's activities. They were represented as victims and as workers, but also implicitly as aliens. The division between Singapore's active citizens and their passive client group – victimised, foreign workers – remained entrenched. In this sense the TWC2's work was consistent with the PAP's vision of civil society as a space occupied by Singaporean citizens. The problems associated with attempts by Singaporean activists to include FDWs as equal partners in their work further reveals the contradictions surrounding attempts to forge transnational alliances. Not only does it point to the need to interrogate the desire of those with socio-economic power to develop rapport and intimacy with 'the other' (Sampaio 2004, p.199), but it also highlights how attempts to work across differences of ethnicity, class, and culture, requires attention to the structural factors that shape globalisation. It is this second issue that I turn to next.

### **Active citizens as transnational actors**

As I argued above, the PAP's vision of civic society is primarily oriented towards national development and the construction of shared values. In contrast, by orienting its work around issues of migrant labour, the TWC2 provided an opportunity for Singaporean activists to challenge this vision of civic society and focus their attention on issues beyond the nation-state. Advocating on behalf of migrant workers could provide Singaporeans with the opportunity to engage with groups beyond Singapore's borders and thus to see themselves as part of a global migrant rights movement. By drawing attention to the processes of globalisation such work also has the potential to encourage Singaporean activists to focus their attention beyond national borders.

The TWC2 had limited contact with migrant worker NGOs based overseas, and it remains largely isolated from the many transnational activist networks advocating for migrant worker rights. Instead, it focused its activities on building alliances with Singaporean-based groups, such as AWARE, SCWO, and CMI, and engaging in 'dialogue' with non-Singaporean stakeholders such as diplomats in the embassies of sending countries. In this regard, the TWC2's actions are consistent with other Singaporean NGOs. For example, AWARE very rarely makes public statements about the status or rights of women in other countries, preferring instead to focus its attention on local issues. Ironically, on one of the few occasions in which AWARE broke its self-imposed silence on women overseas, 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.<sup>21</sup> The SCWO, as a government sponsored umbrella group has very strong ties with regional and international women's networks. Both AWARE and the SCWO participate in these networks as Singaporean NGO representatives. However, these are networking roles aimed at building contacts with women internationally, sharing information and reporting on events in Singapore. As such, they do not constitute examples of collaborative action around specific events or issues (i.e. transnational activism).

This failure of local NGOs to engage transnationally as part of an international campaign reflects fears about government attitudes towards international agencies and foreign-based NGOs. In a recent statement explaining changes to the registration process for NGOs, Senior Minister of State (Law and Home Affairs) Ho Peng Kee stated that groups whose activities were related to religious, ethnic, civil and political rights, or the governance of Singapore, needed to be carefully screened because they may potentially give rise to 'law and order' problems and carry out activities that may be prejudicial to the national interest. In addition, these groups needed to be scrutinised closely to ensure that "foreign elements do not hijack [them] to serve a foreign agenda which is contrary to our national interests" (Parliamentary Debates Republic of Singapore: Official Report 2004, p.[37]). For this reason, local NGOs are understandably wary of receiving funding from overseas sources for fear that this may result in government suspicion about their activities (Perera and Ng 2002).

Against this backdrop, it is easy to understand why the TWC2 had limited opportunities to engage with groups elsewhere. This does not mean, however, that it was unable to engage with a range of circulating transnational discourses about the local, regional and global factors that have led to the feminisation of transnational labour. This is evident in the group's decision to describe maids as 'workers', as well as in its campaign to improve 'conditions of work'. Both of these terms (and the claims that underpin them) draw on international labour rights discourses. In common with migrant worker organisations elsewhere, the TWC2's focus on employment contracts concentrated on the standardisation and regulation of working hours and tasks, and equality of wages. The group also argued for the incorporation of domestic workers into the Employment Act so that they could ensure, among other things, mandatory days off (Tan 2003b). The TWC2 also campaigned for the right of domestic workers to 'live out'. Under the conditions of their employment contracts and Work Passes, all FDWs are required to live in the homes of their employers. This leads to a situation in which domestic workers find themselves 'on-call' twenty-four hours a day. The

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<sup>21</sup> 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).

separation between ‘working hours’ and ‘leisure hours’ thus becomes blurred. In addition, migrant workers are rarely permitted to bring friends or relatives into their employers’ homes. The TWC2 argued that allowing migrant workers to live outside the workplace would better replicate the conditions of other ‘workers’ and improve the conditions of their daily lives.

This claim, however, did not extend to another important aspect of international labour campaigns - workers’ rights in relation to marriage and migration. Under the conditions of their work permits, domestic workers in Singapore (like other Work Pass holders) are forbidden from marrying local citizens.<sup>22</sup> Any woman found to have married a Singaporean man is immediately deported and barred from re-entering the country. A former Work Pass holder who marries a Singaporean man in another country at the end of her contract faces difficulty in obtaining a re-entry visa to live with her husband. Similarly, any woman found to become pregnant during her contract is forcibly repatriated. The regulation of domestic worker sexuality is enforced through a program of compulsory 6 monthly medical check-ups. Any woman found to have contracted sexually transmitted disease is also repatriated. Although state regulation of domestic worker sexuality and restrictions on a woman’s right to marry are two important aspects of migrant worker rights, the TWC2 did not make them the focus of its campaign. Its concern was with standardizing conditions of employment rather than with addressing broader human rights issues.

Similarly, the TWC2 failed to address the issue of migrant workers’ rights to bring their families with them during the period of their employment contract. Professional ‘foreign talent’ can apply for dependant’s passes for their spouse and children, while Work Pass holders cannot. Many studies have reported on the extreme hardship faced by migrant workers who leave their families at home when they travel abroad to work for several years (Constable 1997; Chin 2003). Such workers not only face the prohibitive cost of visiting their families during this period, but also tight restrictions on their ability to take recreational leave. Paradoxically, women working as maids leave the care of their own children to relatives while they raise their employers’ children. Many women become estranged from their spouse and children after many years abroad.

Rather than focusing on changes to the immigration law, the TWC2 advocated for improved training and skills development for migrant workers that would assist them to ‘go home’ and support their families. This focus on transferable skills development is also common among migrant worker activists operating in other countries (Weekley 2004). Such training activities are endorsed

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<sup>22</sup> For an overview of regulations concerning the employment of domestic workers see Ministry of Manpower (2004).

without proper recognition of the difficulties that such women face in seeking alternative sources of employment. Many FDWs have completed secondary or tertiary education and worked in the manufacturing or service sectors prior to being deployed overseas. Focus on skills training also overlooks the multitude of reasons why women seek work abroad. While remittances may form an important part of their decision making, many women choose to go overseas to escape difficult family situations, gain financial independence, travel, or develop networks that allow them to migrate to third countries (Huang and Yeoh 1998; Constable 1997). The focus on training also overlooks the difficulties that domestic workers face in finding time to attend classes. By focusing on cooking, sewing, and hairdressing, many training programs also reinforce a gendered division of labour that marginalises domestic workers as ‘women’ workers. It also assumes that domestic workers want ‘skills upgrading’ in order to ‘improve’ themselves.<sup>23</sup>

The focus on skills training meant that the TWC2 lost the ability to focus on the particularities of their experiences as national subjects. The label ‘foreign domestic worker’ replaced the value-laden ‘maid’, but in the process, this new identity was also cut off from the specificity of national debates that link economic restructuring and globalisation with the increasing feminisation of transnational migration. This includes recognition of the place of Singapore as an importer of migrant labour and of middle-class Singaporean women as consumers of other women’s labour. Instead, attention to ‘demand and supply’ issues rested on the assertion that Singaporean families need to re-organise the way they manage household work (and thus reduce the demand for maids), and that domestic workers need to be provided with training that would equip them for alternative employment (presumably ‘back home’). In advocating for better training opportunities, the TWC2 clearly drew on transnational discourses of ‘skills development’ that are promoted by both sending and receiving governments, as well as migrant worker organisations. Like many groups operating in other countries, it also failed to address the important class and ethnic divisions that underpin the work of migrant worker organisations (see for example Weekley 2004).

In the absence of a critique of globalisation and its impact on citizenship and human rights, the TWC2’s activities remained narrowly focused on national issues. Paradoxically, while the TWC2’s focus on the gendered division of labour rested on a feminist critique of patriarchal family structures and was thus critical of the ruling government’s support for traditional gender ideologies,

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<sup>23</sup> In discussions with training providers in Singapore, I have encountered exasperation on the part of organisers who fail to understand why FDWs do not take up training opportunities when they have the chance. These women are portrayed as lazy and/or ignorant.

it was also supportive of the PAP's assertion that Singaporean families are 'maid-dependent'.<sup>24</sup> The 'maid problem' was thus presented as a national issue requiring a solution that would reduce the numbers of FDWs while simultaneously finding alternatives to the gendered division of labour within the home. This dilemma reflects ongoing debates within feminist theory about middle-class women's reliance on working-class women's transnational labour (see Anderson 2000).

Despite its critical statements about the PAP government's policy on FDWs, the TWC2's anti-violence campaign was 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 maid-abuse. Even so, this campaign was able to inject a critical dimension by exploring the ways in which a culture of abuse towards maids was part of a wider system of abuse towards women. In a letter published in the Forum pages of the national English daily newspaper, Constance Singam, a member of the TWC2 and former President of AWARE, noted that:

The culture of abuse in the private space cannot be isolated from the wider culture. The overarching ideologies of patriarchy and Confucianism and the resultant hierarchical structure and effect on the status of women, class and race prejudice, the family-unfriendly corporate culture – all these have a direct impact on our perception of foreign domestic workers, housework, abuse and the formulation of public policies (Singam 2003).

This message, however, received little public attention. In the press, maid abuse was largely understood as an individual act by 'sick' employers and thus a national shame (Yeoh, Huang, and Devasahayam 2004). Although Singam and other TWC2 members linked violence with patriarchy, there were few opportunities to broaden the group's campaign to demonstrate that 'they' (FDWs) were just like 'us' (Singaporean women).<sup>25</sup> The TWC2's attempts to publicly link violence against maids with violence against all women also failed to receive support from local women's groups. Although both the SCWO and AWARE have had a long-term interest in action against violence against women, and were listed as TWC2 'partners', neither joined with the TWC2 to highlight the structural basis of gender violence against FDWs. In part, this may reflect concerns about overstepping the state's OB markers by working closely with an unregistered NGO.

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<sup>24</sup> The government has used this claim to explain its policy of taxing all households who employ a foreign domestic worker with a maid levy (per worker) that is paid on top of wages and other compulsory charges (Tan 2002a).

<sup>25</sup> On one occasion in which the TWC2 did attempt to make this link it failed to receive state support. It applied repeatedly to the Singapore Police Department to hold a public event to mark International Day Against Violence Against Women on the 25<sup>th</sup> November 2003. Its application to stage a public walk against violence against women was rejected on the grounds that it could pose 'law and order' problems. Its second attempt, to stage an outdoor public performance and talk about violence against women was rejected on the grounds that speeches were not allowed outdoors except at Speaker's Corner. In its third attempt, the TWC2 applied for a public entertainment licence to stage a 'song and dance' performance but was also knocked back (Tan 2003d).

Nonetheless, as a result of the TWC2's efforts, the issue of maid abuse received sustained media attention throughout 2003 (see for example Arshad 2003a; Tan 2003c). Many of the TWC2's members were journalists and used their access to the media to promote the TWC2's cause. Like other journalists their reportage was subject to tight editorial control. Although the TWC2 found that its attempts to publish letters in the forum pages were sometimes restricted, its campaign by and large received the support of the press. Given Lee Hsien Loong's recent statements about the media's role as a co-partner in civic society whose role it is to educate the public, the support that the TWC2 received from the media is indicative of the PAP's own attitude towards the group's campaign. It is unlikely that the TWC2 would have received such coverage if its views significantly challenged the ruling party or promoted values that the PAP felt were counter to the national interest.<sup>26</sup>

An unexpected outcome of the media's focus on violence against maids was a backlash by those who felt that the TWC2 was responsible for Singaporeans being portrayed as violent and abusive in the foreign press. In justifying its actions, the TWC2 claimed that its focus had always been internal and that it had never initiated contact with non-Singaporean journalists. Nonetheless, it claimed that its actions played a crucial role in 'balancing' the often-prejudicial views of the foreign media:

When TWC2 stretches out its hands to aggrieved FDWs, that gesture helps to moderate tension in the relationship. It helps to fight the prejudicial view that people in Singapore is bloody-minded or indifferent about the FDWs welfare (The Working Committee 2 2003e, p.7).

In this statement, the TWC2 re-asserts its role a nationally oriented civic society organisation. Although foreign journalists reported on the TWC2's work, advocating beyond the borders was not part of its mission. Instead, its concerns lay much closer to home: changing the mindsets and actions of Singaporeans. In this sense, the TWC2's work remains supportive of the PAP's vision of an active citizenry engaged in the national project of making Singapore a 'better place to live'. The TWC2 makes no claims to be engaged in a transnational movement of activists interested in improving the lives of migrant workers everywhere nor of addressing the forces of globalisation that compel millions of people to seek work beyond the borders of their own nation-states. Instead, it is a group of concerned citizens whose aim it is to improve the conditions of employment of transient workers who find themselves employed briefly in Singapore.

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<sup>26</sup> This was clearly demonstrated in 1994 when prominent Singaporean novelist Catherine Lim published two articles in the English daily *The Straits Times* about the government. Then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong issued strong public rebuttals to her comments explaining that he had to respond to her articles because it was incumbent upon him to "set out the out-of-bounds markers clearly, so that everyone knows the limits of openness and consultation" (The Straits Times 2003).

## Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to move the analysis of Singaporean civil society away from the restrictive boundaries of the nation (and the seemingly pervasive power of the state) to focus on a broader ethnoscape of activism. My discussion remains focused at the local (national) level, however, because of the TWC2's limited ability to engage beyond Singapore's borders to the regional or international level. While the TWC2 may not openly engage with activists across borders, they clearly engage with other types of transnational actors (i.e. FDWs) as well as transnational ideas (including international human rights discourses). My interest in exploring these connections is to examine the extent to which the TWC2 is able to draw on these transnational linkages to challenge the PAP's vision of both civil society and an active citizenry. These issues are important, not only to Singapore's civil society actors, but also to feminists interested in forging effective transnational alliances.

It is important to remember, however, that the TWC2 was not primarily motivated by a desire to challenge the PAP's discourse of civic society. For this reason, I want to emphasise the significant achievements made during the group's first year-long campaign. Throughout 2003 the TWC2 ran a successful public education campaign focused on violence against maids and standardised employment contracts. Its work was unprecedented for both the attention it received in the media, as well as for the diversity and intensity of its campaign. In Singapore's small civil society sphere, NGOs continually face problems of burnout and lack of time among their volunteers. The TWC2 was able to harness the energies of its membership and use a range of events to reinforce its message. Not only has its work led to important changes in government policy and employment agency practices, but it also contributed to a widespread public debate about the demand for FDWs and Singapore's treatment of its migrant workforce.

Without downplaying these achievements, I also want to explore the extent to which the TWC2 was able to challenge the PAP's 'ground rules' for civil society activism. My analysis has shown that while the TWC2's activities were creative, ultimately they remained non-confrontational and consensual. Despite the fact that much of the TWC2's work was focused on non-citizens, its activities provided few opportunities to challenge the assertion that civic society is a space occupied by Singaporeans engaged in a process of consensual nation-building. FDWs were rarely included as equal partners, and where they did participate it was often because they were known to individual

TWC2 members through their work (i.e. as the employee of a member or his/her family). The difficulties faced by the TWC2 in including FDWs as active members is partly a reflection of the problems faced by all Singaporean NGOs and trade unions who try to advocate on behalf of non-citizens. I also want to suggest, however, that it also draws on a dominant discourse within the organisation that portrays FDWs as primarily victims, always workers, and ultimately aliens.

In contrast, the TWC2's members are archetype 'active-citizens'. They engage in thoughtful discussions, they do not publicly challenge the PAP, and they make measured suggestions to improve Singaporean life. Their campaigns remained supportive of the state's own interest in developing a gracious and more civic-minded citizen. This conservatism reflects well-founded concerns about overstepping the state's unspecified 'OB' markers. It also reflects the conservative nature of the group's gender activism. Although there was scope in the discussion of housework to discuss gender inequality, it remained focused on gender difference; that is, it focused on getting more men to do housework, rather than addressing women's primary role as mothers in the process of nation-building. At a national level, its work 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 (that is, a critique of the public/private dualism implicit in state policy-making), or the commonalities between local workers and foreign workers. Instead, it remained largely focused on migrant women, thus reinforcing an us/them dualism. The group lacked radical potential because its members failed to address the substantive issues of class, gender, ethnicity and citizenship that underpin the demand for domestic migrant labour, as well as the factors that constrain the rights of these workers. Ultimately, the TWC2 did not challenge the view that civil society is only about national concerns; its work focused on improving Singaporean society.

The formation of the TWC2, and its first year of activism, represents an important moment in the history of civil society in Singapore under the PAP. Drawing on the model provided by the TWC, it was able to present a vision of NGO activism that was both refreshing and exciting. The group's public education campaign and lobbying activities brought about significant advances for migrant workers. These gains, however, are merely indicative of the extent to which the organisation was able to play by the PAP's ground rules. Despite the creativity of its campaigns and the slightly unorthodox nature of its organisational structure, the TWC2 did not signify a relaxation of the OB markers. The TWC2's work is a successful example of a civil society group inculcating the state's own vision of what civic society and active citizens should be. In this sense, it represents what the

government describes as a 'maturing' of the citizenry – the ability to deal with potentially sensitive issues in a careful and considered manner without challenging PAP rule.

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