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# The Limits of Feminist Political Intervention in Singapore

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# **The Limits of Feminist Political Intervention in Singapore**

**Lenore Lyons**

In recent years increasing attention has focused on the Singapore government's new attitude towards limited public participation in civil society. The women's rights organisation the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) is one example of a non-government organisation (NGO) that is directly engaged in this newly emerging 'civic' society. AWARE's activities are constrained, however, by a state demand that its objectives remain overtly 'non-political' and reformist in character. This has led some observers to comment that as a state-defined practice, feminism in Singapore is unable to address issues of structural inequality and difference. Instead, using a discourse of strategic conservatism and political astuteness, AWARE is seen to be acted upon by external forces and re-acts in a recognisably rational mode. Through an analysis of the decision-making process within AWARE, I argue that to see the association's actions solely through reference to 'authoritarian state control' risks overlooking the values that AWARE members attribute to their own feminist practices. While the need to 'strategise' and 'work within' state defined boundaries remains critical, AWARE's decision not to address issues of race, class or sexuality must also be read against an ethical principle that calls for members to validate and respect the lives of 'other' women. In this way, it consciously works to subvert two of the state's key principles of governance - multiracialism and meritocracy. In Singapore, being a feminist not only means keeping one eye on the People's Action Party (PAP), but actively asserting *all* women's right to define their own lives.

## **AWARE and Singapore's emerging civil society**

Formed in 1985, AWARE is an openly multi-racial organisation with research, service and advocacy arms. 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'. Garry Rodan (1993, 1995) argues that AWARE's emergence coincided with the PAP's first steps towards the creation of a 'civic' or 'civil' society. The PAP's absolute hold on all

parliamentary seats began to decline in 1981 (although the number of opposition held seats has only ranged between one to four). Amongst the leadership the loss of seats, combined with a decline in the PAP's share of the vote, was attributed to alienation amongst the middle-class. In an effort to win back the support of these voters, the PAP embarked on a range of initiatives intended to provide alternative avenues for public involvement in policy debate, thereby undercutting other potentially threatening political alternatives (see Rodan, 1993, p.87). The emergence of NGOs such as AWARE is seen as one example of such 'loosening up' on the part of the PAP.

A more specific catalyst for AWARE's formation was what has been termed the 'Great Marriage Debate'. The debate grew as a public reaction to a series of statements by then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. In 1983, Lee called attention to a trend in which graduate women were delaying or forgoing marriage and children for their careers. Lee feared that in a country whose only resource was its people, a decline in birthrates amongst the well-educated would result in a 'thinning of the gene pool', and thus national economic disaster (Chua, 1995, p.21). So concerned was the government with the declining birth rate, that a series of incentives (including reduced personal income tax and priority education schemes) were developed to encourage graduate women to marry and have more than two children. In addition, incentives were implemented to encourage less educated women to 'stop at two' (see Saw, 1990). The schemes deliberately targeted women with secondary school education and above, based on Lee's eugenicist belief that well educated mothers would produce more intelligent children. It was in response to these comments that AWARE was formed. Up until this time, the women's movement in Singapore consisted of a loose affiliation of interest or service-oriented women's groups who were largely supportive of the government's vision of socio-economic change (Lin, 1993). The formation of AWARE was pivotal in sparking a renewed interest among Singaporean women in women's rights and it continues to be recognised locally as one of the few women's groups which directly addresses the status of women.

### **AWARE's goals and objectives**

While AWARE is commonly recognised as the first Singaporean feminist organisation, neither the terms 'feminist' nor 'feminism' appear in the AWARE Declaration and

Constitution (AWARE, 1990). Instead, AWARE is advertised as a ‘women’s’ or ‘women’s rights’ organisation. At the same time, however, the majority of the membership agrees that the organisation is feminist in both goals and orientation. This seeming contradiction stems from an astute political awareness of the negative connotations that the term ‘feminist’ holds in the public consciousness and in particular, its association with the threat of an encroaching western value system. The Declaration makes two important points - it constructs women’s disadvantage not as the product of men’s domination of women, but rather the product of history and tradition. Secondly, it describes gender inequality as a circumstance that affects both men’s and women’s life opportunities. In this way, an important distinction is established between modern democracy (the Singaporean state) and ancient traditions (the source of gender bias). AWARE’s actions are thus both modern and democratic (and thus supportive of the state) at the same time that they are non-political (they are directed towards the private sphere of culture):

Whereas it is the pledge of all Singaporeans to build a democratic society based on justice and equality so as to achieve happiness, prosperity and progress for our nation. [sic] It is the intention of the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) to contribute towards the achievement of these goals. It is recognised, however, that there are gender-based barriers that can and do limit the ability of some citizens to explore and develop their full potential. These barriers apply to both women and men, but because of the way human society has evolved, it is women who are more likely to come up against these barriers. As long as these barriers exist, whether they be structural, attitudinal, or self-imposed, some Singaporeans will be denied the opportunity to develop their talents to the fullest and to realise their personal visions and hopes. It is thus the aim of AWARE to contribute towards the removal of these gender-based barriers. The first step is to encourage both women and men to recognise that these barriers exist, to understand how they came about and how they can inhibit individuals and to agree that these barriers must be removed. It is important that both women and men be made aware of these barriers. However, it is ultimately women who will have to decide if they want changes and how change can be brought about, for it is women who are more hindered by these barriers. It is AWARE’s role to clarify gender issues through research and discussion and to support efforts by women to realise their visions for an equal and just society (AWARE, 1990, p.[i]).

In an obviously carefully worded opening sentence, AWARE establishes important historical and legal antecedents for itself in Singapore’s Constitution. In this way, AWARE adopts a non-confrontational stance vis-a-vis the state. AWARE affirms its belief in the principles of democracy, justice and equality and situates itself as an important partner in their achievement. It is this affirmation that signals AWARE’s role as overtly uncritical, in the

sense that it does not question the place of the government and accepts present day constraints on its activities. AWARE concerns itself instead with “gender-based barriers” which affect both men and women, and which have emerged “because of the way human society has evolved”. AWARE’s goal in removing these barriers is to allow all Singaporeans “to develop their talents to the fullest and realise their personal visions and hopes”. AWARE thus reaffirms the goals of “happiness, prosperity, and progress for our nation”. Only when both men and women achieve their fullest potential will they be happy and productive citizens.

In pursuing these goals, however, AWARE must maintain an explicitly non-political profile. Among the prohibitions listed in the Constitution are those against engaging in political activity (Clause 24e):

The Society shall not indulge in any political activity or allow its funds and/or premises to be used for political purposes (AWARE, 1990, p.6).

This is a standard clause inserted into the constitutions of all officially registered societies. What is meant by ‘political’ is a contentious issue and it is this clause that causes the greatest amount of uncertainty amongst Singaporean NGOs. For an organisation such as AWARE which sees itself performing an important role in civil society, this clause is instrumental in determining both the association’s public ‘presentation of self’, as well as its internal decision-making. Delineating the boundaries of the political and non-political is a difficult exercise. In the first instance, being barred from making political statements means that AWARE cannot comment on issues outside the interests of its specifically defined constituency. But, as Singaporean sociologist Chua Beng Huat (1995, p.208) comments, associations such as AWARE cannot avoid ‘political’ issues when speaking on women’s status. The constraints of the Societies’ Act mean, however, that such statements must remain reformist in character.

AWARE describes its role as primarily one of research, discussion and support. This is to be achieved by making 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, p.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.

The term 'promote' is interpreted by many AWARE members in its most passive form. These then are long term goals, to be worked towards rather than actively pursued. The language of 'promotion' is thus overtly non-political in contrast to the alternative 'achieve'. Change is not for AWARE to achieve, but is an individual choice to be made by women and men themselves. AWARE's functions are more clearly delineated in the Constitution as:

- 1) to identify and undertake research in any issue affecting women;
- 2) to obtain information relevant to issues affecting women and to disseminate such information to members, women, or the general public;
- 3) to bring out such publications as may be necessary to fulfil the Society's general objectives;
- 4) to hold exhibitions, film shows, concerts, plays, forums, seminars, workshops, courses and other such activities in keeping with the Society's general objectives (AWARE, 1990, p.1).

All of these activities concern gathering and disseminating information. In the years since AWARE's formation in 1985, these goals and objectives have undergone some degree of modification. While AWARE's formal Constitution has not changed, an important change in focus and direction began in 1991 with the formation of a Helpline service which signalled AWARE's involvement in the provision of direct community services, and was thus a significant move away from the goal of education. In establishing the Helpline AWARE radically changed its public persona. No longer seen as simply an association of intellectuals, AWARE has gained greater public legitimacy as an organisation that 'helps abused women'. Some AWARE members speculate that this new orientation provides the association with greater legitimacy amongst policy makers. At the same time, however, AWARE's existence continues to be conditional upon acceptance of the government's own ground rules of 'consensus' ahead of 'confrontation' (Rodan, 1993, p.94).

### **Constraints on AWARE's activities**

Negotiating the constraints of state-defined 'civic society' continues to be a fraught process for AWARE and other NGOs. In embarking on the 'NGO experiment' both the state and the NGOs themselves are engaged in a constant process of 'testing the boundaries' between

acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. For this reason, AWARE is never completely sure how its statements will be received and is forced to respond cautiously:

It's a fine balance. You want to say something but you kind of have to know where the markers are. In anything you need to know where the markers are, except in anything you don't really know where they are. So you err on the side of caution. You are always very careful [May Wong].<sup>1</sup>

Fear of negative perceptions or closure means that the organisation tempers its public statements or limits its activities to avoid criticism. In many ways, this is a successful means of state control - AWARE ends up policing its own behaviour; the Singapore government is most adept in utilising group and individual self-regulation as a means of control (see Chua, 1995).

Many women use the language of strategy and warfare to describe AWARE's deliberate decision not to raise certain issues. This is based on a recognition of two factors - first that public antagonism is unhelpful in trying to bring about change, and second, a strong fear of government displeasure leading to the possibility that the association could be closed down:

Sometimes guerrilla warfare is more successful than outright war. Especially if you are in the minority. When the 'enemy' advances, you retreat. And it's only when you have the chance to come out and do something that is effective. You don't want to be charging into battle and getting killed. How does that help the cause? And I would like to be in it for the long term. For long term gains. Maybe working very slowly but making gains in the long term. Because women's problems will be here for decades. Long after we are dead and gone. Somebody else should be able to continue the work for AWARE. We are not just here for your term or my term. Or my life time [Joan Fung].

Fear of being 'closed down' or de-registered is constant within the organisation, particularly amongst older members. Bracketing or putting aside some issues is a tactic that enables AWARE to continue its activism in other areas. Many younger members are sceptical of the government's desire to close AWARE down. Some argue that AWARE is too vocal and too visible for de-registration to occur without any fuss. Other members, however, point to the 'Marxist conspiracy' and its ramifications.<sup>2</sup> While recognising that there could be more room for change, Fatimah Ibrahim worries about the state stepping in:

Personally I would like to see AWARE ... maybe pushing certain boundaries a bit. But with the government it is difficult to know what is really okay and what is not

okay, depending on how they feel about you at that point in time. For example, issues on benefits for women working in the civil service. That is one issue we could push. On the other hand, I don't want the situation where AWARE after 10 years of building up a certain level of credibility, and establishing itself in Singapore, I don't want to see that go to waste, in terms of, that the government says that this organisation is not legal and all that [Fatimah Ibrahim].

These fears are not totally unfounded. At the 1993 Woman of the Year award ceremony Acting Community Development Minister Abdullah Tarmugi warned that some younger women preferred a more aggressive approach to social change. His advice was to “continue to be moderate and avoid being confrontational” (quoted in Nirmala, 1995, p.6).

The PAP expects those engaged in civil society support state-defined ‘national values’. These values are 1) nation before community and society above self; 2) upholding the family as the basic building block of society; 3) resolving major issues through consensus instead of contentions; 4) stressing racial and religious tolerance and harmony; and 5) regard and community support for the individual (Chua, 1995, p.32). Consequently, some subjects are always ‘off-limits’. Geraldine Heng (1997, p.43) argues that these include:

all issues of race, class, ethnicity, and sexual preference; the identification of structural and systemic, rather than contingent, inequities in society; the analysis of state apparatuses of power in the lives of Singaporean women; and, indeed, government policies and positions on controversial issues of national importance.

In determining the limits of NGO activity, the state employs a three-tiered discourse of the private, the civic, and the national interest. Within this discourse, certain issues are designated as ‘private’, and thus outside state control. These include cultural beliefs and practices, the family, and personal relationships. According to Chua Beng Huat, through its policy of multiracialism the government relegates racial cultural practices to the realm of the private by adopting a ‘neutral’ stance in which it chooses not to privilege any particular racial group. This “neutral stance preserves for the state a very high level of autonomy and insulates it from pressures that may be generated by race” (Chua, 1995, p.106). Thus, while multiracialism and racial harmony are part of the national interest, ethnic or cultural practices (festivals, dress, religion) are private matters – unless they threaten national stability. Within this discourse, AWARE cannot speak about issues related to the government’s policy of multiracialism, and neither should it address private matters of culture or religion. Similarly, the family and intimate relationships are private matters unless they threaten Singapore’s



development goals – and hence the state’s role in reproductive policy. The association cannot speak about matters related to class or structural inequality, including the position of minorities, or question the principles of meritocracy.

Given this comprehensive range of exclusions one could be tempted to ask whether ‘civic society’ exists at all. It is also easy to conclude that the state occupies a primarily determining role in AWARE’s activities. Geraldine Heng (1997, p.32) expresses such a view when she argues that one of the defining features of third world feminism is the “presence, intervention, and the role of the state”. Using the example of AWARE, she believes that the organisation must,

of necessity disengage itself from all recognition of difference, all social fronts, beyond the single focal point of gender; a feminism, moreover, that must look past race, class, ethnicity and sexuality; ignore the operations of ideology, of transnational collusions, and of technologies and instrumentalities of power; and blind itself to the controlling and manipulative force of state institutions; a feminism that must, in short, bracket off and put aside the varied discursivities, categories of difference, and totalizing institutions that crisscross and intersect with gender in the real world (Ibid., p.42).

While I recognise the significant role of the state in delineating AWARE’s sphere of intervention, I do not believe that this represents a total ‘disengagement’ from a recognition of difference. Instead, I think that such ‘political’ constraints serve to reinforce an ethical commitment to respecting the Other’s difference, and in doing so, validate each woman’s lived experience. AWARE’s actions are not simply reformist because of state power, but also because AWARE is compelled to respect the choices that other women make in their lives. AWARE’s role then is one of education and information dissemination – providing women with new ways of looking at old issues. The extent to which such functions can address race, class or sexuality, depends on whether the state deems such interventions ‘appropriate’. It is not that I disagree with Heng, but that in focusing on the state she tends to project an image of Singaporean women reacting to authoritarian control, and to ignore the complexity of attitudes towards both feminism and difference within AWARE. Such a reading also ignores the presence of organisational conflict and tension.

## **Respecting ‘other’ women**

As an ethical value, respect becomes the defining framework within which AWARE members negotiate their differences with ‘other’ women. 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. The decision not to speak about religion or sexuality can therefore be seen not only as a strategic move to avoid state wrath, but also as a validation of the very principles of respect. I suggested above that AWARE deliberately avoids speaking about religion because of Singapore’s policy of multiracialism (the maintenance of religious harmony) and the relegation of religion to the realm of the sacred. 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. 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.

In addressing the question of Islam, AWARE is careful not to be seen by outsiders to be influencing/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 this was AWARE’s decision not to become involved in a UN funded project documenting the global status of Muslim women living under Islamic law. The Executive Committee (Exco) felt that instead of AWARE co-ordinating the project, Muslim women

should do this for themselves. This is a clear example of the Exco deliberately restricting the actions of the Research and Publications Sub-committee as a sign of respect to Muslim women. Another example of AWARE's non-interventionist stance is its treatment of Muslim women who use the 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, just like we are seen as antagonising the system in terms of . . . doing media work and things like that. 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. 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, and their beliefs should be taken into consideration.

In pushing for its vision of an equal society, AWARE accepts that women's choices vary. Feminism is about giving women choices, not dictating what those choices should be. For example, many women value their roles as wives and mothers and believe that they are performing invaluable social functions. Other women have no desire to raise children. AWARE's critique of traditional wife/mother roles is therefore mediated by a strong respect for choice. This means that where women value 'female traits' these should be reaffirmed and validated. According to this view, if women 'really' have a choice it doesn't matter how they choose to exercise it:

In pragmatic terms we ask, has the woman's lot improved, can it become better, has the system given women the best opportunities to do of her own choosing? If she cannot choose, if she can choose, is she able to choose? Even if we say she can choose, we have to look at the complex situation and whether she is able to choose. If she is unable to choose, why not? Education? Family restrictions? There are all these - it comes to education and self-awareness [Claire Chiang].

For Claire Chiang feminism is about opening up and expanding the opportunities that women have in their lives. In this construction of women's subjectivity, change is possible and

proceeds at the level of day-to-day interaction through new ideas and attitudes. 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).

This is not to suggest that all AWARE members share the same set of beliefs. Within the organisation it is possible to isolate a range of 'feminist' beliefs ranging from the more conservative to the more radical (see Lyons-Lee, 1998; PuruShotam, 1998). Nor am I overlooking the significant constraints that are placed on AWARE's activities by present-day political culture (see Rodan, 1995; Heng, 1997). AWARE's decision-making does not take place within a vacuum, and the ability of the state to set limits on acceptable civil engagement is formidable. Neither am I suggesting that AWARE's actions should be read solely through reference to 'authoritarian state control'. As Nirmala PuruShotam (1998, p.144) has clearly pointed out, there is a remarkable alliance between the middle-class values espoused by the PAP and AWARE which centres around a 'shared language' of "fears of falling and the normal family ideology". This produces a situation in which the predominant voice of 'moderate feminism' in AWARE "arises and takes shape within a constantly shifting continuum of compliance with and resistance to patriarchal ideologies and practices" (Ibid., p.145). It is my contention that while the call for members to validate and respect the lives of 'other' women may be supportive of state regulation, it also has the potential to subvert two of the PAP's key principles of governance - multiracialism and meritocracy.

### ***Multiracialism***

Since self-government in 1959 and with independence in 1965, the state's management of ethnicity and potential ethnic conflict has been dependent upon a strategy which emphasises selected race identities and down-plays others. Under this policy of multiracialism all Singaporeans fall into one of four official race categories - Chinese (78%), Malay (14%), Indian (7%), and Other, or CMIO multiracialism (Lai, 1995). Sometimes Eurasians (mixed race where patrilineage is traced to a European) are designated as a fifth 'official race'. These racial categories are broadly synonymous with the four official languages (or mother tongues)

- Mandarin, Malay, Tamil, and English – and race identified religions – Chinese religion, Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity (Lai, 1995, p.179). This model has seen a gradual movement away from recording race in terms of ethnic, religious or dialect background (eg. Sikh or Cantonese) to designation based on the CMIO multiracialism model (eg. Indian or Chinese). This has been accompanied by an imperative for children to become effectively bilingual in their race-identified mother tongue (eg. Tamil instead of Hindi, Mandarin instead of Hokkien) and English. This policy is explained by the state in terms of a move away from dialect groupings to a common core language to facilitate communication within racial groups and to break down communalism within ethnic categories. While the national language is Malay, (reflecting the island's geographic and historical links to the region), English has replaced it as the language of education, business and inter-ethnic communication.

The policy of multiracialism is based on the principle of racial harmony in which individual races/cultures are encouraged to retain their beliefs and practices – coexistence and integration rather than assimilation. Multiracialism is supported via several practical measures. The Constitution guarantees non-discrimination on the grounds of race, descent, place of origin, or religion; it enshrines minority rights, especially of Malays as Singapore's indigenous people. Two separate civil law codes exist side by side – the Shariah (Islamic) Court for Muslims and the Common Law (British based) system for non-Muslims, although the prescriptions of the Shariah Court are mainly limited to issues such as marriage and divorce. All major religious and traditional holidays are observed and the national broadcasting system broadcasts in all four official languages. In electoral zones, a system of Group Representative Constituency (GRC) has been implemented to ensure that the minority groups (Malay or Indian) are given representation in parliament. Under this system, political parties contesting a GRC must field their candidates as a slate, of whom one must be from a minority group (Chua, 1995, p.122). The Housing Development Board also ensures the physical integration of racial groups by placing racial quotas on home ownership in housing blocks (see Lai, 1995).

This policy of multiracialism, however, goes much further than simply providing an environment in which cultural and religious practices can be observed and upheld. Race remains an important way of labelling the population and individuals are encouraged to think about themselves within these racial categories. This has been supported in recent years with the introduction of ethnically based welfare support systems in which race identified communities are encouraged to establish programs that target the poor and needy within those

communities. These include MENDAKI (Council for the Education of Muslim Children), SINDA (Singapore Indian Development Agency), the Eurasian Association, and the CDAC (Chinese Development Assistance Council).

It must be recognised, however, that while race occupies a central place in state discussions of nationhood, amongst the public, ethnicity and ethnic relations are traditionally regarded as sensitive or even taboo subjects (Lai, 1995, p.19). The policy of multiracialism in fact *relies* for its legitimacy upon the imagery of an ever present potential for inter-ethnic (particularly religious) conflict. and is promoted as a pragmatic solution to the realities of nation-building in the region (Chua, 1995, p.59). Consequently, while race occupies a central place in the formation of the 'nation',

the concept of national interest simultaneously denies these differences as a rational basis for legitimate political organisation and prevents them from being politically thematised in the public domain by casting them as potentially against the national interests themselves (Ibid., p.107-8).

In the process racial difference is restricted to the private realm of festivals and dress.

One of AWARE's founding principles was that the association would be multi-racial and secular. AWARE's claim to speak for all women can only be validated if the organisation is seen to be open to all women. The desire to appear multi-racial also influences the selection of Presidents and members of the Executive Committee. 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 in AWARE. 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 rather than divided by race/ethnic affiliation.

Many of the women voiced a strong disagreement with the government's policy of race-based poverty alleviation schemes. They felt that instead of promoting a policy of racial harmony, the government was in fact re-emphasising communal loyalties through race identification. AWARE's own multi-racial membership was upheld as a deliberate attempt to counter state attempts to reinforce communal ties:

[AWARE is] getting away from the tendency in Singaporean societies to categorise people and compartmentalise it. Perhaps a reaction to that, because, you know, you are always Chinese, Malay, Indian or Others ... I mean we are all women, and we [are] always talking, and say[ing] among ourselves too, against ethnic stereotypes [Soh Yen Chin].

While the women were critical of state enforced race identities, they were nonetheless well versed in racial meaning. The language of race was frequently used to demarcate the boundaries between Self and Other. In particular, labelling others with racial identities became an important way of describing or explaining the presence of sexism. Several important themes emerge in these discussions of race. The first is the idea that race as a marker of biological or phenotypical difference is both a transparent fact (people belong to different ‘races’) and an irrelevancy (‘we are all women’). This understanding of race/ethnicity is supportive of state constructions of multiracial, multicultural difference. However, the vision of multiculturalism promoted by AWARE is quite different from that promoted by the state. Joining a vigorously secular and multi-racial organisation is part of a practice of distancing oneself from the constraints of race-based identity. So while AWARE adopts dominant understandings of race and ethnicity, its organisational structure works to undermine them. The term race, however, is an important way of talking about cultural difference, or what may be more appropriately called ‘ethnicity’. Racial identifiers (Chinese, Indian, Malay) are central, however, in identifying traditional (versus modern) understandings of gender relations. AWARE women compare themselves to ‘traditional women’ and in the process distance themselves from a strong racial identification.

### ***Meritocracy***

The majority of Singaporeans consider themselves to be middle-class (Reader and Wong, 1988; Lee, 1991), and this view is also shared by the state (Rodan, 1995, p.30). In a comprehensive study of class in the 1980s, however, Stella Quah (1991, p.262) found no evidence of a concentration of people in the ‘middle-classes’, thus disputing Singaporeans’ own self-identification. In determining their class position, Singaporeans use a range of indices - money, wealth, values, beliefs, occupation, behaviour and education. Using this system of classification, the population can be divided into three classes – the upper-class, the middle-class, and the working-class - although the language of class is generally not used in

public discourse but is replaced by terms such as ‘rich *tai-tais*’ (married women of the wealthy upper class who do not work) and ‘factory workers’. The upper-class represents the elite of business and politics. The middle-class is characterised by its income (displayed by residence and sometimes ownership of a luxury vehicle), education (typically English educated) and access to free time (ability to hire maids). The upper middle-class typically own ‘landed’ property (a house or terrace with a small garden) or a condominium (luxury apartment). Those in the lower middle-class and below own government flats. In a country where approximately 85% of the population live in public housing, it is not the ownership of these Housing and Development Board (HDB) flats that determines class position, but rather the size and location of one’s residence. Even so, class enclaves are dispersed by mixing different sized flats within housing blocks (Chua, 1995, p.141). The working-class is defined by occupation (they are predominantly factory workers or contract labourers; women who do not work for wages are housewives), first language (typically Chinese speakers with poor English skills) and residence. The working-class may rent or if they are in the process of owning their own home, it is usually small (one or two rooms). At the same time, however, it must be emphasised that this discussion of class is painted in the broadest of terms. As a rapidly industrialising country, Singapore has experienced significant upward mobility since the 1970s (Chiew, 1991), although this claim tends to ignore the mediating factor of ethnicity.

The PAP adopts an uncompromising position of meritocracy in its treatment of class difference. Consequently, socio-economic differences between groups are explained on the basis of ability and merit. These principles are underscored in the state’s actively anti-welfarist stance and in its eugenicist population policy. Where class is cross-cut by gender or ethnicity, such differences are explained through reference to culture (men as heads of households, Confucian work ethic) or a pre-existing income gap (National Service increments, remnants of racially discriminatory practices under colonialism). It is up to individuals and communities, through education and ‘hard work’ to improve their social and economic status.

AWARE’s membership is predominantly middle-class. 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. All the women I spoke to were familiar with



the characterisation that AWARE is a middle-class organisation that does not represent the masses of women. Therefore the process of describing their own class identity is also a process of engaging with this debate. In other words, to talk about one's own 'class' is to talk about AWARE's class identification. The predominance of middle-class members in the organisation is explained as a reflection of the type of women who have the time and resources for activism:

I think that to get things done you have to be educated enough. So often the people from the very elite in society, they have everything going for them that there is very little that they would want to change. People who lack the education, who lack economic resources simply have no time or resources to get things done. So, naturally it's going to be the middle-class [Kalyani Bhatal].

Using this shared conception of class, the working-class are by definition not AWARE members in all but exceptional cases. Working-class women are typically regarded by AWARE members as lacking the time to become involved in AWARE activities because of the 'double burden' of work inside and outside the home, general child-care responsibilities, or shiftwork. And yet, in an unreflexive account, such explanations ignore the fact that middle-classes women still perform the vast majority of household chores and maintain responsibility for childcare. Most middle-class women do not employ foreign domestic maids nor pay for childcare so that the double burden can be relieved. Significant numbers of working-class women also employ maids on a full-time or part-time basis in order to take care of the household while they work. It would appear that income level and the ability to employ a maid, as class indicators, are not the sole determinants of whether women 'have the time' to join AWARE.

Another common explanation for the absence of working-class women in the organisation is a language barrier. Within AWARE working-class women are commonly perceived as having minimal education levels, or where they are educated to high school level, it is in a non-English environment. 'Working-class' is thus a signifier for poor English communication skills. Within AWARE, English is the language of informal discussion, formal meetings, and public education. An inability to speak English or poor English language skills could therefore be important barriers to joining the organisation or participating in its activities. Non-English speakers are also excluded from public awareness campaigns which are usually promoted in the English language media. Class is not only linked to education, employment

and language, but also to place of residence. Within AWARE the term 'HDB housewife' is often used to refer to working-class women. Consequently, reaching out to the 'HDB heartlands' is seen as another important way of making contact with working-class women.

If AWARE is middle-class, then upper class and working-class women cannot, by definition, *be* AWARE members. AWARE's concern, however, is to 'reach out' to the working-class because they lack the resources to 'help themselves'. AWARE's goal is not so much to address structural systems of inequality as to alleviate some of its effects. This understanding of class is supportive of the government's own policy of meritocracy in which 'welfare' organisations have a minimal role to play in helping the 'less able'. It obscures AWARE's structural location of privilege at the same time that it glosses over the significant class disparities between ethnic groups.

At the same time, however, that AWARE invokes the state's own principle of meritocracy, it works to redress various forms of gender discrimination that are implicit in this policy. In the arena of employment for example, AWARE continues to lobby the government for equal medical benefits for women civil servants. Currently, only male civil servants may extend their medical benefits to their dependents. AWARE argues that if women are performing the same job as men, with the same qualifications, then they should receive the same remuneration, including employment benefits. In addressing this issue AWARE writes letters to the national newspapers, organises public forums, and lobbies government ministers through private 'dialogue' sessions. The matter has been taken up by the press and has received widespread public support. The government's response so far is to deny women these benefits on the grounds that they undermine the role of men as 'heads of households', for if women could extend their medical benefits to their dependents, men would become superfluous and lose their sense of identity. The family, as a central social institution, would be weakened.

There was a great deal of debate within the organisation over how the issue of heads of households should be tackled. Some members felt that AWARE should not confront the government over this matter because it was a private/cultural issue. Despite these reservations, the Executive Committee decided that they had to respond. AWARE called for greater recognition of the equal contribution that both men and women make in the family. Thus, they argued that the term 'head of household' did not reflect the reality of men's and

women's shared responsibilities. In this way AWARE validated the roles performed by both men and women, at the same time that it encouraged them to think about the limitations placed on their freedom to choose other roles. In what the Exco considers to be a victory, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong later responded that the 'head of the household' is whoever individual families may wish to nominate. Nonetheless, he did not change the legislation as it applies to the Civil Service. This example is important, however, in highlighting the way in which AWARE actively uses the state's own discourse of meritocracy to question anomalies in the way that merit is applied. In doing so, AWARE points to inconsistencies in the PAP's claim that all citizens are 'equal'.

## **Conclusion**

To see AWARE's decision-making processes solely through reference to authoritarian state control overlooks AWARE's organisational imperative to respect and thereby validate the lives and experiences of *all* women. Although NGO activity in Singapore is constrained by the requirement to remain 'non-political', AWARE is actively engaged in testing the boundaries of acceptable 'civil' behaviour. Even so, some areas, the 'political' and the 'private', continue to remain outside the limits of permissible civil engagement. At the same time, however, AWARE's decision not to become involved in 'sensitive' or 'taboo' issues such as those related to religion, sexuality, or structural inequality, must also be read against the need for all members to 'respect' the lives of other women. This gives rise to a situation in which AWARE consciously chooses not to speak for or about 'other' women or to openly criticise their life choices. I believe that this represents much more than a simple 'rationalising' of AWARE's decision-making on the basis of state constraints, but is a sign of its members' commitment to 'respect' as an organisational ethical principle. Such a principle serves to question state policies of multiracialism and meritocracy. Through its focus on a gender identity that is attuned to the racialised dimensions of gender discrimination, AWARE subverts state attempts to re-inscribe racial difference as a defining principle of both social interaction and state regulation. By actively utilising the PAP's own language of meritocracy, AWARE points to inconsistencies in its application and thus questions the state's claim that all citizens are equal. In the process AWARE requires that the state articulate the sources of these differences. Ultimately, however, in negotiating the joint processes of a state delineated sphere of intervention and an ethical framework of respect, AWARE's activities remain

essentially reformist in nature. As Chua Beng Huat (1995, p.208) comments, AWARE's demands "do not challenge the fundamental premise of the regime although they do bring out anomalies in existing state practices". The danger with such ethical commitments, however, is that they can become an important mechanism in the organisation's own internal self-regulation. While AWARE's actions may not be seen by those advocating substantive political reform in Singapore as 'radically resistant', they do constitute a visible challenge to the state's own vision of civil engagement.

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<sup>1</sup> Statements attributed to AWARE members have been extracted from interviews that were conducted between January 1995 and August 1997. Most names used are pseudonyms chosen to reflect the use of ethnic language or Christian based names.

<sup>22</sup> In May 1987, 22 people (including several AWARE members) were arrested under the Internal Security Act for threatening the state and national interests (see Rodan, 1993:92). They were detained without trial. Some later confessed and were rehabilitated with an agreement not to enter into 'politics'. AWARE was silent on the arrests, and many members still believe that they narrowly escaped arrest and the closure of the organisation.