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# A curious space 'in-between': The public/private divide and gender-based activism in Singapore

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## Publication Details

Lyons, LT, A curious space 'in-between': The public/private divide and gender-based activist in Singapore, *Gender, Technology and Development*, 11, 2007, 27-51. Original journal available [here](#). Copyright Sage Publications 2007.

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# A curious space 'in-between': The public/private divide and gender-based activism in Singapore<sup>1</sup>

LENORE LYONS

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*In Singapore, the state's role in shaping the space of civil society has been well documented. Many scholars argue that civil society in Singapore is largely a state-sanctioned sphere of engagement that has emerged in response to middle-class pressure for greater political liberalization. In these accounts, the space of civil society is described as an arena that is shaped by the state, and in which the state constantly intervenes. What is less clear, however, is how the space of civil society is gendered. Through an analysis of women's activism in Singapore, this article deconstructs the binaries 'public/private' and 'state/civil society' that dominate discussions of women's engagement with the state. By posing questions not only about the limitations of state-sponsored social change, but also about the possibilities for feminist intervention in the public and private spheres, I shed light on the relationship between an expanding civil society, an encroaching state, and the possibilities for increased gender equality via democratization.*

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**Scholarly accounts of the** Singaporean women's movement are dominated by descriptions of the ways in which the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) controls the space within which women's organizations operate. In this sense, it is always a story about a dominant, authoritarian state and a compliant, reformist-oriented women's movement. According to this logic, gender-based activism which is focused on improving women's status is not part of an independent social movement but is contained within the actions of a limited number of state-sanctioned women's organizations. In simple, blunt terms, these accounts stress that women's organizations exist only through an act of benevolence by the state. This point is also emphasized in the PAP's own rhetoric about non-government organizations (NGOs) and is revealed in the language used by the party to discuss the non-state sphere of 'civic society'. The state not only defines what the 'Singaporean women's movement' is and how it operates, but through the use of legislation governing the

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registration of women's organizations, it also gets to determine who legitimate women's rights activists are.

Most scholars consider the PAP's treatment of women's organizations to be reflective of its general attitude towards NGOs and other civil society actors. In other words, it does not reflect an inherently gendered view of civil society because all NGOs are treated in the same way. In these accounts, both the state and civil society are remarkably undifferentiated. This gender-neutral view assumes that all members of society experience both the state and civil society in the same way. The gendered nature of state discourses, policies and interventions, and the ways in which gender practices become institutionalized in historically specific state forms is overlooked. This has important implications for the way we understand the relationship between the state and civil society as an emerging arena of democratization in Singapore. It leads to a tendency in most accounts of civil society in Singapore to either overstate the gains of increased activity within civil society, or to over-emphasize the power of the state to encroach on the daily lives of its citizens.

This article seeks to address this problem by highlighting the ways in which PAP policy-making reflects an inherently gendered vision of civil society. Focusing on examples drawn from the activities of a women's rights organization, the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE), this study reveals an implicit gendering of the space of civil society. I demonstrate that within PAP rhetoric, civil society is represented as a space set apart from both the public (the state realm of politics) and the private (the sacred space of family and culture). I argue that feminist and other women's groups occupy a curious gendered space 'in-between' the public and private spheres. This construction of the 'separateness' of civil society has significant implications for feminist and other transformative women's movements pursuing social change agendas. By exploring the gender ideologies that underpin the PAP's nation-building strategies, this article examines the contradictions in the PAP's accounts of state-civil society interactions, and the opportunities for women's groups to develop spaces within which to pursue gender equality goals. I begin with a brief review of the feminist literature on the state and civil society and outline a theoretical approach with which to examine the case study of AWARE. In the second part of the article, examples of AWARE's activities and campaigns are used to highlight the inherent contradictions in the PAP's rhetoric about state-society relations. These accounts not only challenge common scholarly orthodoxies about the nature of authoritarianism and state-sponsored civil society, but also demonstrate the complex nature of women's activism in Singapore.

### *Gender, the State and Civil Society*

Feminist theorists have long argued that theories of the state have problems coming to terms with gender. In mainstream accounts of the state, when gender does figure, it is often discussed in relation to the impact of state-directed social change on women's (and not men's) reproductive roles. The gendered nature of state discourses, policies and interventions, and the ways in which gender practices become institutionalized is rarely acknowledged. Whereas traditional political science and sociology have had trouble with fitting gender into the state, those theorists grounded in gender analysis have had equal trouble working out what to do with the state. While some see the state as an oppressive instrument of the ruling capitalist class (McIntosh, 1978), others contend that it is an agent of both capitalism and patriarchy (Eisenstein, 1979). By focusing on the oppressive aspects of the state, such approaches not only overemphasize the effectiveness with which the welfare state reproduces the capitalist mode of production, but also fail to explain why the state would support male dominance (Pringle and Watson, 1992). In contrast to these approaches, liberal and socialist feminists (writing from different traditions) have emphasized the positive values of state intervention. In Australia, this positive assessment gave rise to the phenomenon of the 'femocrats' – bureaucrats who have actively worked both with and in the state to achieve 'feminist' goals. Considerable debate has arisen over the role of femocrats, and the ways they are involved in reinforcing or supporting masculinist ideas (see Watson, 1990; Yeatman, 1990). Those theorists who are skeptical of women's engagement with state bureaucracies point to women's continued absence from local and national political institutions and the even fewer numbers of women at the international level as evidence that working within the institutions of the state is problematic.

Few feminists, however, have accepted Judith Allen's (1990) view that the state is 'too aggregative, too unitary and too unspecific' to be of much use. Arguing strongly for a nuanced theory of the state that accounts for the diversity of women's experiences, Shirin Rai (1996) claims that most third world feminists<sup>2</sup> see the state as crucial because third world women cannot escape the often brutal and violent impact of state forces in their daily lives. She states that women in the global South are differently influenced by the regulatory power of the state. While many are far removed from the state because of the absence of a welfare safety network (the primary source of interaction between women and the state in Western liberal democracies) and the relative weakness of state legislation, others are more susceptible to high levels of state and non-state violence. For such women, working within and against the state is essential if fundamental change is to be achieved.

Feminist suspicion of the state has meant that many have focused on democracy via civil society and NGOs rather than through formal political structures. And yet, the same criticisms that are made of mainstream theories of the state could also be made about most mainstream accounts of civil society – that is, they lack a gendered analysis. Where gender does emerge it is usually in

terms of descriptions of women's movements or feminist movements, and sometimes, but rarely, in terms of gay rights activism. Western feminist theorists have paid considerably less attention to civil society than to the state – which is surprising given that much feminist theorizing is based on an inherent claim to be engaged in transformative politics. There has been a tendency, therefore, for feminist theorists to project a romance of 'more' civil society as ballast against coercive state power and its excesses (Phillips, 1999). In contrast, many third world feminists are wary of 'civil society', arguing that the concept is as deeply masculinist as those pertaining to the more formalized networks of power within the state (Rai, 1996). For them, the limited role of NGOs in influencing state decisions and the state's role in acting as a buffer between citizens and the forces of globalization, has meant that the state is a more important arena of activism (Tickner, 2001). For this reason, they argue that it is important that feminists and women's activists have a nuanced and robust theory of the state from which they can operate.

Much Western feminist analysis of the state rests on a division between the public and private spheres, where women have traditionally been located within the private realm of the family (Pateman, 1988). This is associated with the separation of domestic and wage labor during industrialization and state support for a nuclear family form that is allegedly functional for capitalist accumulation.<sup>3</sup> However, the public/private distinction has been the subject of much feminist debate (Franzway et al., 1989). Many third world feminists argue that by focusing almost exclusively on Western state formations and a particular family form (Western and bourgeois), Western feminists occlude how the 'private' sphere is a distinct product of European modernity. They argue that Western feminist accounts of the public/private distinction, with their focus on the welfare state, have little relevance to an examination of state-gender relations outside of the Euro-American context. In particular, they ignore the crucial role that colonialism played in the construction of state-gender relations in material terms (e.g. displacing women's economic roles) and discursively through orientalism (Mohanty et al., 1991; Rai, 1996), as well as the experiences of third world women living in post-colonial states.

What is curious is that although the centrality of the public/private distinction to analyses of the state is heavily critiqued, it continues to be a defining reference point in discussions of civil society – that is, there is a common assertion that there are public and private dimensions to civil society. In part, these problems emerge because of contestations over terms. Some theorists adopt a minimalist definition and use the term 'civil society' to refer to the space between the economy and the state (Phillips, 1999), while others include the market as part of the civil (Yuval-Davis, 1997). Others describe these as three separate 'sectors' that operate against a 'background' of private activities by individuals, families, households and communities. These private activities include rearing children, supporting family members, caring for the sick, looking after the home and garden.

Jørgensen (1996: 36) notes that ‘although these activities are of course closely connected with the three formal sectors, and feed into them, they are not part of them’. In other accounts, however, the dualism of state and civil society is sometimes used interchangeably with the public/private distinction, such that family/kinship relations are described as a space within the wider non-government sphere (civil society). For example, Carole Pateman (cited in Tickner, 2001: 105) suggests that:

the private sphere, as a site of subjection, is part of civil society but separate from the ‘civil’ sphere; each gains meaning from the other and each is mutually dependent on the other. This separation of the public and private spheres has had important ramifications for the construction and evolution of political and economic institutions at all levels.

Maila Stivens (1990: 103) argues that this space – the private in the civil – is represented as a place of ‘strange emptiness ... where the state takes a hands-off approach’. An exception to this is the work of Nira Yuval-Davis (1997) who argues for the need to theorize the realm of the family and kinship relations as a sphere separate from both state and civil society. Yuval-Davis is not suggesting, however, another sphere be added to our analyses. Instead, she highlights the numerous points of intersection between these spheres, and their cultural and historical specificity. Alison Jaggar (2005: 16) makes a similar point when she argues that,

civil society does not exist as a sphere separate from the state; instead, it is necessarily enmeshed with the state, as it is with the economy, in a complex, changing and co-dependent web of relationships that are both oppositional and symbiotic.

Such an approach, however, requires a theory of both the state and civil society in which they are not seen as contradictory spheres, but as complexly connected and disconnected. It requires a shift away from seeing both the state and civil society as coherent (and contradictory) units, to seeing them as ‘a diverse set of discursive areas which play a crucial role in organizing relations of power’ (Pringle and Watson, 1992: 70). According to this view, the state and civil society can be conceptualized as a ‘series of arenas’ (Pringle and Watson, 1992) or a ‘plurality of discursive forums’ (Yeatman, 1990) that are historically produced. In writing about the state, Pringle and Watson (1992: 63) suggest that using this approach means that,

we do not have to puzzle about why the state acts so contradictorily or, on occasion, fails to act at all. We do not have to conclude in advance that it will act uniformly to maintain

capitalist or patriarchal relations, or that this is its 'purpose'. The outcomes of particular policies will depend not purely on the limits placed by 'structures' but on the range of discursive struggles which define and constitute the state and specific interests, from one moment to the next.

Extending this analysis to civil society allows us to explicate the complex web of connections between the two arenas, and also to question the inherent assumption that civil society is necessarily a 'good' thing for feminist activists.

In the case of state-civil society relations in Singapore, such an approach provides a means to critique dominant scholarly and state-sponsored accounts of the women's movement. It provides a tool with which to analyze the state's own discourses about the nature of 'civic society' as well as a means by which to explore the ways in which the state and civil society actors interact. By exploring the PAP's policy statements about the nature of state-civil society interactions, and AWARE's responses to these statements and practices, I demonstrate how feminist politics is constructed in the process of interaction with specific institutions and sites. This analysis reveals both the ways in which the state and civil society are gendered, and the implications that gendered constructions of citizenship have on the opportunities for women's rights activists to engage the state in their activist interventions.

### *The State/Civil Society Binary*

The PAP adopts a view of society made up of four distinct spheres – the public (the realm of party politics and government), the private (the realm of family and culture), the market (the realm of business and economic development), and civic society. According to the PAP, civic society is a state-led initiative which has been actively encouraged since the mid-1990s. The term 'civic society' is preferred by the ruling party because it emphasizes civic responsibility in contrast to the rights of citizenship implied by the concept of civil society (Chua, 2000: 5).<sup>4</sup> In this conceptualization, rather than being a space in which individual rights are protected, civic society is understood as 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). From the PAP's perspective, the growth of civic society will further encourage Singaporean citizens to take responsibility for shaping (within tightly controlled

limits) the country's future. The concept of 'active citizenry' has recently 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).

According to this vision, Singapore's 'active citizens' 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). Current Prime Minister Mr. Lee Hsien Loong spelt out these attributes more clearly in January 2004 when he signaled that under his leadership new guidelines for public consultation would be developed. 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: 6).

Lee was at pains to point out that this was not an articulation of the 'Out-of-bounds markers' (OB markers). The PAP coined this term based on golfing parlance to 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: 186). While the ruling party is responsible for determining the limits of the OB markers, this is largely done retrospectively – most of the time what actually constitutes 'unacceptable political engagement' is unclear. In a characteristic act of double-speak, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong claims that the government's 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 (see Lee 2004a).

By placing the responsibility on NGOs to regulate their own behavior, the PAP encourages civil society actors to model their actions on the government's cues and to see themselves as partners rather than combatants. In-depth studies of Singaporean NGOs demonstrate that such organizations have internalized this message and engage in a process of self-regulation for fear of being closed down (Lyons, 2000; 2005). Organizations that accept the ruling party's ideology are rewarded for their consultative approach. This has led some commentators to conclude that despite



a parliament modeled on Westminster-style democracy, the PAP has effectively restricted the growth of a participatory parliamentary system, and instead fostered a ‘mass society’ characterized by a lack of political institutions between the state and the people; that is, that Singapore lacks an effective civil society (Haas, 1989; Tamney, 1996). In these accounts, the space of civil society is described as an ineffective arena for democratization because it was created by the state, and the state constantly intervenes in it. 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).

In these accounts of Singapore’s civil society, a clear binary emerges – state/civil society – in which the state occupies a powerful and determining role. According to the state’s own rhetoric, civil (civic) society is a space created by the state for the purposes of harnessing the citizenry towards the state’s developmentalist goals. The state determines who gets to participate in civil society and on what terms. According to the PAP’s logic, civil society does not exist independently of or without the interventionist role of the Singaporean state – it is a PAP creation. This view is supported by scholars who claim that civil society in Singapore is largely a state-sanctioned sphere of engagement that has emerged in response to middle-class pressure for greater political liberalization (see for example Chua, 2000; Koh and Ooi, 2004; Rodan, 1996).

Singapore’s most prominent women’s rights organization – AWARE – is often cited as an example of this new type of NGO that emerged from middle-class pressure for a greater role in policy-making (Rodan, 1996; Weiss, 1997). It has become a ‘poster girl’ for civil society in Singapore.<sup>5</sup> The PAP government has contributed to this view through the publication of two books that appeared in the early 1990s — one published under the auspices of the PAP Women’s Wing (Wong and Leong, 1993) and the other by a government sponsored umbrella group the Singapore Council of Women’s Organizations (Lam, 1993). Both texts adopt an up-beat account of women’s status; Singaporean women, they claim, ‘have come a long way’ thanks to the PAP. One of the consequences of giving the PAP such a prominent place in the telling of women’s history in post-Independence Singapore is that the party consequently takes on the role of catalyst for the women’s movement. This is apparent in Lam’s overview of women’s rights activism. She focuses on two main events — (1) the struggle against polygamy in the 1950s; and (2) the reaction against ‘The Great Marriage Debate’ in the 1980s. In the first example, the PAP is feted for its role in introducing legislation that outlawed polygamous marriage for non-Muslims. In contrast, the Singapore Council of Women which campaigned throughout the 1950s to change the law and used its lobbying power to persuade the PAP to introduce the Women’s Charter, is relegated to a secondary role. In the second case, the PAP occupies a direct role as protagonist – this time its

population policies spark a renewed interest in women's rights issues and give birth to AWARE (Lyons, 2004b).

What these different accounts share is a view that for a women's rights organization to succeed it must operate within the state-sanctioned sphere of civil society on the state's own terms. Compromise, reform, and moderacy become rational responses to authoritarian control. Within AWARE itself, the logic of this response rests on the organization's own view of its place within the Singaporean women's movement, namely, that AWARE is Singapore's *only* women's rights organization. The slippage very easily becomes one in which AWARE is not simply a Singaporean women's organization, but the Singaporean women's *movement*. Not only does this require AWARE to become a place in which all women find their natural (feminist) home, but it also puts pressure on the organization to succeed. For an organization that owes its existence to the PAP, the possibility of de-registration is always just around the corner. Collapse would be more than the failure of a women's organization, it would signal the demise of the entire Singaporean women's movement.<sup>6</sup>

This discussion reveals the implicit binary that operates in both scholarly and public discussions about the nature of civil society in Singapore. According to this view, the Singapore state is an all-powerful, authoritarian entity and civil (civic society) is weak and ineffectual as a site of democratization. The omnipresence of the Singapore state is evident both in its definitive role in creating civic society and in its ability to destroy it. What is remarkable is that in these accounts of state-civil society, there is an easy slippage between the party, the government and the state. The electoral dominance of the PAP, which has ruled since self-government in 1959 (prior to Independence), has meant that the government and the organs of bureaucracy are effectively the creation of one party. The government's strong hand in development policy and the economy (particularly through state-led enterprises), the PAP's strong connections with grassroots organizations such as community centers and local councils, and the ruling elite's role in grooming and appointing key bureaucrats, further entrenches this association. Significantly, the added implication of these accounts is that the state is not only hegemonic, but also uniform. In both the PAP's rhetoric as well as in scholarly discussion of Singapore's political environment, 'the state' is represented as a consistent and coherent set of organizational practices rather than a site of political contestation. This has the further added effect of entrenching the omnipresence of one-party rule. Not only does this overlook the complexity of state-society relations, but there is also a propensity to 'obscure the great diversity of social and political elements in civil society in favor of a general championing of civil society *per se*' (Rodan, 1997: 162).

The PAP's own officially sanctioned history of the Singaporean women's movement supports this account. Arguing that the only legitimate form of gender activism occurs within the state-sanctioned sphere of civic society has the further added effect of entrenching a belief that gender equality will only be achieved with state support. This belief has a significant impact on organizational practices and cultures within women's groups. AWARE's first decade was dominated by an overt fear of being 'closed down' (Lyons, in press). Nowadays the state relies more on legislative frameworks such as the Societies Act and self-regulation by NGOs, and less on overt actions such as arrest and detention to achieve these ends (Rodan, 2003). This is evident among members of the AWARE Executive Committee. While fear is no longer palpable in their comments it continues to hold a certain resonance in decision-making. Groups with a shorter history, such as Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) which advocates for the rights of female migrant workers, are also cognizant of these issues when planning their activities (Lyons, 2005). However, fear or wariness are not the only factors which shape the culture of women's organizing in Singapore. The state's insistence on the separation between the public and private also plays a significant role in shaping NGO activism.

### *The Public/Private Divide*

In PAP rhetoric surrounding state-civil society relations there is an implicit assumption that civil society occupies a space set apart from both the public and private realms. The OB markers, which demarcate the space occupied by civic society, more accurately represent the boundaries of the public and private. For the ruling party, the public is the sphere of government and party politics as mentioned above. The PAP asserts that the only legally legitimate form of political activity takes place within this space. For this reason, all registered organizations are expressly prohibited from engaging in 'political activity' and must restrict their activities to issues outlined in their constitutions. For example, in the AWARE Constitution the relevant section (Clause 24e) states:

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

This stance is enforced by a requirement for all NGOs to become officially registered. While the Singapore Constitution guarantees freedom of association (Article 14) in principle, organizations 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’.

For an officially registered women’s rights organization such as AWARE, delineating the boundaries of the political and non-political is a difficult exercise. Turning the spotlight on the public sphere of government as a site of gender equality is a fraught exercise. For this reason, the organization adopts a cautious and conciliatory approach whenever its goal of improving ‘women’s status’ crosses-over into matters of government policy. One way that AWARE has sought to engage in the public arena is by positioning itself as a partner in national development. Using the PAP’s own rhetoric of meritocracy (merit according to ability), for example, AWARE has pointed out to the government instances where meritocracy has not been applied consistently. In doing so, AWARE carefully monitors the tone of its language and adopt a conciliatory, back-door approach. This requires the organization to avoid making overtly public statements and instead to lobby in private, ‘closed-door’ sessions with political leaders and bureaucrats. It consistently used this approach, for example, in its decades-long campaign to support equal medical benefits for women civil servants.<sup>7</sup> In this instance, AWARE used the state’s own discourse of meritocracy to question anomalies in the way that merit is applied in the public service. It pointed to inconsistencies in the PAP’s claim that all citizens are ‘equal’. It was able to adopt a critical voice by employing the language of meritocracy and by describing its own role as supportive of the national interest. AWARE has adopted similar strategies in addressing other forms of gender discrimination in the public arena including quotas on women’s entry into university, citizenship for children born overseas to Singaporean women, and on teaching both girls and boys home economics (Lyons, 2004b). This strategy has had limited success. While a quiet, conciliatory approach may ensure that AWARE avoids the state’s wrath, it does not necessarily ensure that the organization is able to influence policy decisions. In the case of all these matters of ‘public’ policy concern change has occurred extremely slowly.

If there are limited opportunities to engage in the public sphere of party politics and government policy-making, then according to PAP discourse, there are even fewer opportunities for civil society actors to intervene in the private sphere because it is beyond the scrutiny of both the government and civil society actors. The PAP describes the private arena as a space dominated by ‘traditional values’ and ‘sensitive matters’ such as family life, race and ethnic relations, cultural and religious practices, and matters of sexual behavior. According to the PAP, the private sphere is characterized by traditional attitudes towards sex roles, and a normative model of heterosexuality built on a patriarchal family structure. Claiming that gender inequality is an ‘inevitable’ feature of such families, the government asserts that it is up to individual women, men and their families

(rather than the state or civil society) to change family structures. The state and civil society should therefore take a ‘hands-off’ approach when it comes to such private matters.

Many scholars and women’s activists, and even some government politicians, have countered this view by pointing to the PAP’s own wide-ranging program of socio-cultural engineering. They claim that the PAP’s ‘hands-off’ doctrine is inconsistent with its direct role in shaping social and cultural attitudes and behaviors. It is clear that the government is actively engaged in constructing its own vision of the private sphere. The government’s stance on a range of issues, including household headship and citizenship, reflects its view that the family is the core of the nation and that womanhood is largely understood through reference to motherhood and household responsibility; and manhood through breadwinning and defense. As Nirmala PuruShotam (1998: 135) argues, such a family structure and form is located in antiquity, is Chinese, ageist, sexist, and retains a powerful morality. While it is true that the differential sex roles associated with mothering have historical and cultural origins, women as mothers also serve an important political role for the PAP. Traditional ‘Asian’ sex roles are recuperated for very modern purposes: they serve to establish a political environment in which women are always bound to the family.<sup>8</sup>

However, close attention to the PAP’s family and reproductive policies reveals not only that the government takes a very ‘hands-on’ approach to the seemingly off-limits arena of the private, but also that its very gendered view of family life is cross-cut by entrenched assumptions about the nature of class and ethnicity (other so-called ‘private’ matters). Singapore is championed as a middle-class society where everyone has a chance to prosper according to their abilities (meritocracy) and not based on their gender, class or racial backgrounds. Multiracialism is strictly policed through laws such as the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act and finds its legitimacy in the imagery of an ever present potential for inter-ethnic (particularly religious) conflict (Lai, 1995: 19). Even so, gender inequality is enshrined in the state’s policy of multiracialism which accords a special place to the preservation of ‘traditional’ family values. For example, sustained analysis of the PAP’s policies directed at ‘women’ and ‘the family’ shows that not all wives and mothers are accorded an equal role in the creation of the Singaporean nation. As Heng and Devan (1995) point out, the state’s population policy is not merely concerned with birth rates, but also with ensuring that the current ethnic/racial mix is not altered. Middle-class Chinese women are often the prime protagonists in the PAP’s population policies. Late marriages and lower birth rates amongst these women work to undermine the state’s carefully managed racial balance.

Attention to the gendered underpinnings of racial politics also reveals that women and men play different roles in ensuring that the boundaries of ethnicity are maintained. While women have limited ability to impart *racial* identity (which follows the father), they are nonetheless charged with ensuring that the boundaries of ethnicity are maintained through marriage and mothering

(particularly instructing children in the ‘mother tongue’). For families that challenge the stability of ethnic boundaries through ‘inter-racial marriages’, these contradictory roles throw into relief the tensions between cultural and reproductive constructions of the nation. That is, while all women (should) play an important role in reproducing the nation by fulfilling their biological function as mothers, not all mothers reproduce the PAP’s vision of a society characterized by distinctive and discrete racial categories. Similarly, for many mothers engaged in unskilled and semi-skilled low-income jobs, the recent economic downturn and rising unemployment have signaled a change in their roles as citizens. Their redeployment in the family sphere serves not only to strengthen ‘family values’ but it also opens up a space in the formal economic sphere for unskilled male labor (Lyons-Lee, 1998).

State discourses of family not only proscribe and reinforce gendered sex roles, but also reinscribe heterosexual reproductive relations as normative. The PAP’s vision of ‘traditional family values’ is inherently heterosexual. Non-reproductive sexualities (homosexual and celibate sexualities) and alien sexualities (the sexualities of migrant workers) are inscribed as deviant, such that sexuality, reproduction and patriotism intersect in the shaping of models of ‘good’ citizenship (Lyons, 2004a). In Singapore, legal prohibition of male homosexuality dates from British colonial rule and criminal sanctions are frequently enforced against practicing male homosexuals. The Court of Appeal has held that natural sexual intercourse (sex which is in the order of nature) involves coitus of the female and male sexual organs. This definition is sufficiently narrow to exclude a range of sexual acts between and amongst women and men, including oral and anal sex. The law has only been applied to male homosexual behavior and ignores lesbians and it is unclear how the courts would interpret the law in such instances. The government has consistently argued that its policies are not homophobic but merely reflect the views of the majority of its citizens. However, the state’s attitude towards gay men and lesbians needs to be read against its promotion of marriage and the family as a cornerstone of society. In these terms, homosexuality ‘constitutes a threat and an aberration to the paternalistic state because same-gender unions usually do not result in procreation, and indeed they subvert the cause of genetic engineering’ (Leong, 1995: 18).<sup>9</sup> These examples demonstrate that despite its apparently sensitive and private nature, sexuality is an integral part of the Singaporean state’s management of citizenship and reflects an inherently gendered vision of the nation (Lyons, 2004a).

This discussion shows that notwithstanding the PAP’s assertions about the sanctity of the ‘private’ sphere, the public/private distinction is less clear-cut and the relations between the two sectors are more complex than the government may wish to suggest. This complexity is demonstrated by the PAP’s recent decision to change its policies on medical benefits for female civil servants and citizenship for children born overseas to Singaporean mothers. In 2004, after

almost 20 years of lobbying by AWARE and other women's groups on these issues, the government finally announced that it would overturn the implicit gender discrimination contained in both pieces of legislation. This change of heart was announced as part of a broader package of measures designed to increase birth rates. In signaling its intention to revoke these two forms of discriminatory legislation, the ruling elite claimed that it was responding to changing sex roles within families (Tan, 2004; The Straits Times, 2004). In other words, the state has responded to changes within the private sphere rather than seeking to influence social attitudes towards sex roles (i.e. the sanctity of the private sphere as a 'no-go' zone for the government has remained intact).

Making these changes under the guise of population policy, however, makes the PAP's claim that it is merely responding to changing social attitudes dubious. This move clearly allowed the government to re-introduce women's traditional roles as 'wives/mothers' into the population debate without question. As one journalist remarked:

Has the change [in citizenship laws] come about only because the Government now needs urgently to boost the number of Singaporean babies? Or is it because the Government finally recognises that female citizens are to be valued as much as their male counterparts and are not, as Nominated MP Jennifer Lee put it, 'second class citizens'? (Lim, 2004).

As Lim and other cynics mused, the policies were introduced to 'reward' women for doing their national duty as mothers, thus re-inscribing their traditional sex roles. The implications of these changes were profound for women's rights activists. The PAP's move to revoke these two pieces of discriminatory legislation put AWARE in the difficult position of having to support legislative change that it has long advocated for, while at the same time, getting across the impossible message that it might be a case of 'the right decision for the wrong reasons'. This example highlights the difficulty that AWARE and other women's organizations have in addressing the intersection between gender discrimination in the public sphere and the state's reproductive policies in the private sector.

### *The Feminization of Civil Society*

Despite the porousness of the boundary between the public/private when it comes to state intervention, the boundary separating the private sphere from civil society immediately solidifies when women's rights activists' wish to address private matters such as race and ethnicity, or sexuality. Structural inequalities based on class and race are clearly 'off-limits' to actors engaged in

the PAP's state-sanctioned sphere of civic society. When this is combined with a general public perception that ethnicity and race relations are sensitive or even taboo subjects (Lai, 1995), the opportunities to question the state's vision of multiracialism are limited. AWARE has responded to these constraints by deliberately choosing to model itself on a different kind of multiracialism that downplays communal loyalties. It thus rejects the project of ethnic or race-based self-help groups which are promoted by the state (i.e., it rejects the proposition that civil society organizations should be formed on the basis of racial or ethnic affiliation), and consciously presents itself as a partner in national development through its own internal policy of multiracialism. Recognizing that taking on the issue of racial inequality would be suicidal, AWARE tries to promote an alternative vision of multiracialism to that constructed by the PAP. Such a strategy has limited impact beyond the small circle of women who are active in the organization. While these women may learn about a different way of doing multiracialism, AWARE's inability to question the state's policy or publicize its alternative approach means that for the vast majority of inactive members and the general public racial politics continue to be 'off-limits'. AWARE has responded in a similar way to the question of sexuality. While some AWARE members are openly gay, issues affecting lesbians (e.g. housing or parenting rights) are rarely addressed (Lyons, 2004b). This decision occurs against a backdrop in which the gay movement in Singapore is small and remains underground and informal.<sup>10</sup>

While the questions of race and sexuality continue to be taboo topics within AWARE, the issue of class is more openly discussed. However, this class awareness relates to concerns about trying to increase the number of working-class women in the organization's activities rather than persistently critiquing class-based structural inequalities at either an organizational or national level. In part, AWARE's concerns about the lack of a working-class membership are related to a perception that future sustainability requires the development of a grassroots support base. One of the consequences of adopting a back-door approach to lobbying is that AWARE has a limited public profile. Greater public awareness could help to harness wider public support and thus would act as a potential means of influencing the ruling elite through a show of strength. Instead, AWARE is positioned as a relatively small and thus insignificant middle-class/elite women's group. In the absence of a grassroots support base, and without the ability to harness a grassroots membership through an effective public awareness campaign, AWARE is restricted to speaking on behalf of 'all Singaporean' women from a privileged class position. Added to this is the reality that the Singapore government's discourse of social transformation is ultimately supported by a large segment of AWARE's mostly middle-class membership (Lyons 2000, 2004b).



The organization's failure to engage in a sustained critique of all forms of structural inequality ultimately influences the nature of its activities. Rather than developing programs or projects designed to bring about structural change, it has tended to focus on a range of self-help programs, counseling services, and research and education activities. The provision of welfare services such as domestic violence counseling has been particularly welcomed by the state. Some AWARE members suggest that establishing a helpline service for women in the mid-1990s was key in garnering state-support for the organization (Lyons, 2004b). It not only made the organization 'reputable' as group of women doing charitable deeds, but it helped to downplay the group's more activist goals.<sup>11</sup> For the PAP, charitable groups are the archetype members of civil society. Singaporeans (as active citizens) are being encouraged by the government to actively volunteer in civic society in order to help those less fortunate themselves. This has led in recent years to strong state support for the establishment of a wide range of Volunteer Welfare Organizations (VWOs) (in contrast to the more questionable 'NGOs') engaged in charitable activities aimed at a range of disadvantaged groups, including the elderly, the disabled, and the terminally ill.

Women make up the broad-based membership of VWOs.<sup>12</sup> As volunteer 'carers' they have been injected into civil society as a way of addressing continued concerns about the breakdown of the family and fear that the state may have to take on more responsibility for providing social services. Given the PAP's expressly anti-welfarist stance, the space of civil society is increasingly becoming the public face of non-state welfarism (the private in the public) and a way for the state to avoid taking responsibility for the provision of social services. This gendering of civil society has important implications for NGOs that pursue social transformational goals. They are being increasingly marginalized in the civic sphere in favor of non-threatening charitable organizations. As volunteers, women's energies are diverted to addressing social problems rather than mobilizing as citizens to lobby the state. For women who are daily confronted with billboards and television advertising that valorizes men's roles in national service, rights and responsibilities in the civil sphere rarely transcend mothering roles. The push to harness women's labor as voluntary carers further entrenches this association. In this case, expanding civil society has not enhanced women's citizenship, but actually shrunk the political spaces for women to engage in.

### ***Conclusion***

This analysis reveals that within the PAP's technologies of governance, the public/private distinction has become a powerful means of regulating the behavior of women's rights activists. According to the PAP's logic, the public is the only sphere in which rational, masculinist agendas

are debated and addressed. The party effectively deflects attention from its own gendered policies through the double act of restricting civil society actors to ‘non-political’ engagement and designating certain issues as ‘private’ and therefore outside the realm of both civil society and state influence. While the state ideally takes a hands-off approach to the private sphere, the national imperative to increase the birth rate or the potential for dangerous communal loyalties to emerge within the private realm, sometimes means that the government must actively intervene in this sphere too. The private, however, is always off-limits to civil society actors unless they can demonstrate that matters of public policy which impact on the private sphere are inconsistent with the state’s vision of multiracialism and meritocracy.

Women’s rights activists who wish to engage in the public arena must do so on the PAP’s terms – as members of political parties or as partners in national development. By positioning themselves as partners with the government, organizations such as AWARE are able to leverage the state’s own discourses of meritocracy to highlight instances of gender discrimination. Fear of state power means, however, that they adopt a cautious approach in criticizing state policies. Their success in negotiating a range of conflicting agendas and retaining the implicit support of the state has resulted in AWARE becoming one of the symbols for Singapore’s newly emerging civil society. This strategy, however, has its limitations. Using a cautious, back-door approach to lobbying the government means that AWARE is unable to harness a grassroots support base and must wait patiently for the state to initiate policy change on its own terms. Where this is combined with an inherent middle-class conservatism, which is supportive of the state’s developmentalist goals, the opportunities for significant political transformation are limited. The prospects for women’s rights organizations to intervene in the private sphere are also restricted. According to the PAP, the private sphere is dominated by ‘traditional’ cultural values towards the family and sexuality. Heeding the government’s warning, AWARE avoids potentially risky private matters such as class, race and ethnicity, and sexuality.

In the absence of broader social and political change, Singapore’s women’s rights activists find themselves occupying the space of state-defined civil (civic) society. But, as this discussion demonstrate, civil society is not simply a neutral space that has opened up between the state and the family in Singapore – it is shaped by the same gender relations that inform other social spheres, including ideas about sex differences, sex roles, and ‘nature’, as well as class and racial differences. In the case of Singapore, it is also a space which is becoming increasingly feminized through state support for the creation of charitable organizations in which women occupy primary roles as volunteer carers. One of the few issues on which AWARE has been able to consistently intercede is in relation to reproductive policy. Here, however, AWARE faces the specter of engaging with the ‘Asian values’ debate. Attempting to deconstruct the ideologies surrounding ‘Asian family values’,

while at the same time avoiding issues of ‘difference’ (race, ethnicity, class and sexuality), has proved enormously difficult. There is growing evidence to suggest, however, that the ‘Singaporean state’ is no longer as homogenous as it may have been in the past. The most recent reproductive policy debates revealed a diversity of opinions within the ruling party, and a willingness on the part of the ruling elite to tolerate a public discussion of these different views by parliament members. These events challenge a view of the Singaporean state as monolithic and point to the possibilities of leveraging political support in the future from *within* the machineries of government.

These schisms not only call into question the view of a monolithic, authoritarian Singapore state, but also point to the complex nature of interactions between the state, civil society and the family. AWARE’s pursuit of gender equality is not only shaped by overt government control over the space of civic society, but by the class location of its membership and the intersecting webs of political and economic patronage that inform its goals and objectives. At the same time, it would be a mistake to dismiss AWARE as an elite women’s group that merely reflects the values and aspirations of the ruling party. The discursive positioning of the private sphere as a bundle of sensitive and taboo matters has meant that the organization has learnt to leverage both its class location and its charitable activities in order to lobby the government from a non-threatening position. Although the PAP’s public/private distinction provides a powerful means to regulate civil society, the inherent contradictions in this binary also open up spaces for women’s rights activists to challenge the state’s own political and discursive practices. It is in the interstices, the curious spaces ‘in-between’, that Singapore’s feminists find the most fruitful ground to confront both the state and its associated gender orthodoxies.

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this article was presented at a joint seminar on 'Women and the State' presented with Cecilia Ng Choon Sim as part of the Malaysia Study Group Seminar, Asia Research Institute (ARI), National University of Singapore, 29 March 2006. I would like to acknowledge the support of ARI in co-sponsoring my visit to Singapore, and the insightful feedback of audience participants and anonymous reviewers.

<sup>2</sup> My use of the terms 'third world feminist' and 'third world feminism' draws on the work of Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1991: 52) who uses the categories 'western feminism' and 'third world feminism' to highlight the textual strategies used by writers 'which codify Others as non-Western and hence themselves as (implicitly) Western'. For Mohanty, these are 'imagined communities'

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held together by an oppositional politics, and for this reason she includes indigenous, migrant and minority women from the 'west' in the category 'third world'.

<sup>3</sup> Carole Pateman (1988) argues that liberal definitions of citizenship were based on a model of male, property-owning heads of households. Women were not party to the original social contract but were instead incorporated into the private sphere through the marriage contract. They were wives subservient to their husbands, rather than autonomous individuals.

<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.

<sup>5</sup> Geraldine Heng (1997: 32), for example, uses the case study of AWARE to argue that one of the defining features of third world feminism is the 'presence, intervention, and the role of the state'. Heng projects an image of Singaporean women reacting to authoritarian control, and ignores the complexity of attitudes towards both feminism and difference within AWARE (see Lyons, 2004b).

<sup>6</sup> Some members have also suggested that because AWARE was the first politicized NGO to emerge post-Independence its survival extends, beyond its impact on the women's movement, to the sphere of civil society as a whole (Lyons in press).

<sup>7</sup> Prior to changes announced by the government in late 2004, male civil servants were entitled to a subsidy of 60 percent for their dependants for outpatient medical treatment. In contrast, however, a female civil servant was not provided with the same benefits unless she was divorced, widowed, or legally separated and had custody of her children. AWARE consistently argued that such a policy was discriminatory against women and failed to acknowledge the important and equal roles that both husband and wife play as parents and carers (see for example Ng 2002). The government's response to these claims, however, was that male civil servants had a special role as 'heads of households' and that the medical benefits policy supported and endorsed this role (Lim, 1997).



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<sup>8</sup> Such policies have a long history. For example, there are clear links with the ways that the colonial state reconstituted kinship relations via selected policies on female migration. These histories become obfuscated by present day state recourse to ‘tradition’, and the very ‘modern-ness’ of the extended family thus remains untold. Similar historical linkages could also be made in relation to current day immigration and labor policies, and on marriage relations among non-Singaporeans.

<sup>9</sup> At the same time, sex clearly sells. The state’s own re-deployment of ‘oriental/exotic sexuality’ for specific economic purposes in the Singapore Airlines’ ‘Singapore Girl’ campaign is evidence of this. So too is the state’s tolerance of transsexuality. Singapore’s medical research success has meant that it has become a prime destination for sex change operations and the government actively markets Singapore as a medical-hub offering high quality health care to overseas visitors. These examples also clearly demonstrate the problematic assertion that the economy (the market) is a distinct sphere set apart from both the public and private.

<sup>10</sup> There is no officially registered gay or lesbian organization in Singapore, and attempts to formally register such groups have failed. In 1997 a group of gay, lesbian, bisexual and heterosexual women and men calling themselves People Like Us (PLU) applied to register as a society. PLU’s mission statement sought to ‘promote awareness and understanding of the issues and problems concerning gay, lesbian and bisexual persons’ via small group discussions, research, social events, and the circulation of a newsletter (People Like Us, 1997). The application was rejected without explanation despite a lengthy period of appeal (see Heng, 2001). Instead, gay men and lesbians have turned to the Internet as a forum in which to meet and discuss issues associated with their identity and sexuality (see Ng, 1999). In addition, informal gay and lesbian social groups operate underground, and there is a growing gay dance club scene and spa/sauna culture.

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<sup>11</sup> Similarly, while no gay rights organization has been able to register under the Societies Act in Singapore, the group Action for AIDS, which has a large gay male membership, has been tolerated because of its focus on services to support people living with HIV/AIDS.

<sup>12</sup> Importantly, women are less represented in executive roles in VWOs and other welfare-oriented groups.