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# Internalized Boundaries: AWARE's Place in Singapore Emerging Civil Society

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## **Internalised Boundaries: AWARE's Place in Singapore's Emerging Civil Society**

Lenore Lyons

The period 1987 to 1995 was significant in establishing the organisational and ideological structures that underpin the sphere of civil society in Singapore today. The decade began with an event, commonly referred to as the 'Marxist conspiracy', that unequivocally demonstrated the authoritarian power of the People's Action Party (PAP), which was explored in the previous chapter by Michael Barr. It ended with a much more subtle but no less powerful demonstration of PAP power, namely the 'Catherine Lim Affair', and the articulation of a new form of political regulation under the rubric of 'OB markers' (out-of-bounds markers). These two events illustrate the transition from overt authoritarian control exercised through legal structures such as the Internal Security Act (ISA), to greater reliance on self-regulation by civil society actors themselves. The latter is premised on PAP statements about the need for consultation between the government and non-government sectors based on mutual support for a set of shared national values. According to this view, over time Singapore's active citizenry will rely less on the state to define the boundaries of acceptable activist engagement and will come to depend more on an internalised sense of what is best for the nation.

While several studies have documented the ways in which the political discourses surrounding civil society in Singapore changed during this period,<sup>1</sup>

few have explored the impact that these changes had on specific organisations. Using the case study of the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE), this chapter examines the ways in which political discourse and action shape the internal workings of a non-government organisation (NGO). The case study of AWARE is particularly telling because it is one of the very few active NGOs to have witnessed both the crackdown on civil society activism sparked by the Marxist conspiracy, as well as the transition to a more moderate form of political regulation under the leadership of Goh Chok Tong. In tracing the history of AWARE's activism during its first decade of operation (1985–95), it is possible to identify the significance that both the Marxist conspiracy and the Catherine Lim Affair had on the everyday workings of Singapore's NGOs. This period is pivotal not only in wider socio-political terms, but also because it laid the foundation for the emergence of a specific organisational culture within AWARE. Many of the lessons learnt and challenges faced during this period proved significant for the way that AWARE faced its second decade.

This analysis is based on narratives about AWARE's early history recounted to me during interviews conducted with AWARE members from 1994 to 1997.<sup>2</sup> While the focus of my interviews was with the meanings and actions associated with being a feminist in Singapore, we also touched on AWARE's early history and the individuals who founded the association. These interviews reveal an unspoken orthodoxy about the history of the women's movement and AWARE's place in it. Two dominant, overlapping narratives emerge: 1) Lee Kuan Yew's role in the founding of AWARE, placing the narrative of the organisation and the women's movement squarely

in the role of respondent to the actions of the state; and 2) the fear of being deregistered. Exploring these narratives provides useful insights into AWARE's organisational culture and activism during the late 1990s. It also sheds light on the ways in which state rhetoric is refracted within the inner workings of an NGO. In exploring these narratives I am not suggesting that the stories that members tell about the founding of AWARE are fixed and unchanging — as the broader socio-political context changes, members may become more willing to explore previously taboo topics, or focus on hitherto unexplored issues in the history of AWARE. While I have found that the same foundational narratives continue to circulate, founding members are certainly less reticent in talking about previously sensitive issues. In part this reflects the passage of time, as well as the changing political landscape in Singapore.

In the first part of this chapter, I explore these foundational narratives before turning to a case study of how these narratives shaped AWARE's response to internal conflict in the mid-1990s. This case study reveals the points of contention and convergence between the state's discourses about civil society and AWARE's own model of social activism. It demonstrates that the Marxist conspiracy had a significant impact on Singapore's civil society beyond those individuals who were immediately involved. In the case of AWARE, it became a constant reference point in the group's discussions about civil society and NGO activism throughout the 1990s. Occasional warnings from the ruling elite to AWARE's Executive served to further entrench the meanings and significance that the crackdown had on AWARE's organisational culture. By the end of the decade, and well before Goh Chok

Tong publicly used the term, AWARE had internalised the lessons of the Marxist conspiracy and was already modelling the OB markers.

### **Founding Fathers and Absent Mothers**

Formed in 1985, AWARE is an openly multiracial women's rights organisation with research, service and advocacy arms. Full membership to AWARE is open to female Singaporean citizens and permanent residents over 18 years of age. Male Singaporeans, as well as foreign women and men without permanent residency, may join as associate members. The AWARE Constitution<sup>3</sup> states three general objectives of the association: 1) to promote the awareness and participation of women in all areas; 2) to promote the attainment of full equality; and 3) to promote equal opportunities for women. The constraints of the Societies' Act mean that in pursuing these goals AWARE adopts an essentially reformist agenda. While the Singapore Constitution guarantees freedom of association (Article 14) in principle, organisations with more than ten members or committees with more than five members are required to register under the Societies Act or the Companies Act. Individuals who participate in groups that are not officially registered face the threat of arrest and imprisonment for participating in 'illegal assemblies'. All registered organisations are expressly prohibited from engaging in 'political activity' and must restrict their activities to issues outlined in their constitutions (see for example Clause 24e in the AWARE Constitution). The government has effectively used the Societies Act to suppress the activities of a number of local groups as well as foreign-based NGOs.<sup>4</sup>

AWARE's greatest role has been in the area of consciousness-raising, counselling and support services, and putting women's issues on the political agenda via public forums, letters to the editors of the major daily newspapers, or private approaches to government ministries. This often requires a back door approach in which AWARE gently and quietly lobbies the state, and sits back as the government takes the praise for its latest idea. Such an approach has seen important reform on matters related to family violence and sex discrimination.<sup>5</sup>

Former Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's 'Great Marriage Debate' plays a central role in the narratives surrounding AWARE's foundation. At a National Day Rally Speech in August 1983, the then Prime Minister called attention to a trend in which graduate women were delaying or forgoing marriage and childbirth. Lee voiced his fears that in a country whose only resource was its people, a decline in birth-rates amongst the well-educated would result in a 'thinning of the gene pool', and thus national economic disaster.<sup>6</sup> Using a eugenicist argument, Lee claimed that while all women can be mothers, better-educated women should be mothers. He cited the 1980 census which showed that while 'uneducated' women were producing an average of three children, those with secondary or tertiary education had 1.65 children. He referred to this as a 'lop-sided procreation pattern' but the issue was dubbed the Great Marriage Debate by the local press.<sup>7</sup>

In November 1984, in reaction to government policies aimed at encouraging graduate women to marry and have children, the National University of Singapore Society (NUSS) held a forum titled 'Women's

Choices, Women's Lives'. Several women who later became founding members of AWARE spoke at the forum. Popular memory records that a member of the audience provocatively reminded the speakers that talk was well and good, but 'what are we going to do now?' The challenge to address the issues raised during the forum was taken up by a group that included both the keynote speakers and members of the audience. A pro-tem committee agreed to meet with the objective of determining whether there was a need in Singapore for an association that addressed women's rights and sex discrimination. At this time none of the affiliate members of the government-oriented Singapore Council of Women's Organisations (SCWO), a federation of diverse women's groups, were explicitly oriented towards the goal of improving women's social or legal status. After one year of informal meetings, the Association of Women for Action and Research was formally registered with the Singapore Registrar of Societies.

According to this version of Singapore's feminist history, Lee Kuan Yew, the nation's founding father, was pivotal in putting women's rights issues in the spotlight. In this instance he played the role of protagonist. This is not a role, however, that he has always occupied. For example, the PAP is lauded for introducing the Women's Charter<sup>8</sup> and giving women access to education and employment opportunities in the immediate post-independence period. This positive portrayal of Lee Kuan Yew and his party is presented in two books that appeared in the early 1990s — one published under the auspices of the PAP Women's Wing<sup>9</sup> and the other by a government-sponsored umbrella group, the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations (SCWO).<sup>10</sup> Both texts adopt an upbeat account of women's status;

Singaporean women, they claim, ‘have come a long way’, thanks to the PAP. For example, echoing the view that the state is basically supportive of women’s rights, in her book Jenny Lam Lin argues that the labour-intensive industrialisation programme of the 1970s that was promoted by the PAP increased women’s participation in the workforce and created a situation in which most women saw themselves as men’s equals. The majority of AWARE members I spoke to in the mid-1990s accepted this account — they claimed that the PAP played an active role in eliminating gender inequality and promoting women’s participation in education and employment during the 1970s. This belief may in part explain their outrage when during the Great Marriage Debate Lee sought to introduce policies that would overturn these advances. Many of the women expressed their disbelief that a government which had promoted the principles of meritocracy and supported women’s participation in public life would seek to reinstate women’s primary roles as wives and mothers. Middle-class women who had benefited directly from the PAP’s push to increase women’s labour force participation were dismayed that younger women may not have the same opportunities that they had enjoyed.

One of the consequences of giving Lee Kuan Yew such a prominent place in the telling of women’s history in post-independence Singapore is that the state consequently takes on the role of catalyst for the women’s movement, making the movement appear more reactive than its history suggests. If we date the beginning of the women’s movement from the foundation of AWARE, then it was indeed born as a reaction to state initiatives. This narrative, however, ignores what is arguably the women’s movement’s greatest single success: the successful struggle against polygamy in the

1950s.<sup>11</sup> During the whole of the 1950s, the Singapore Council of Women (SCW) waged a thankless and apparently fruitless campaign to end polygamy.<sup>12</sup> Then, in the lead up to self-government in 1959, it lobbied all political parties to address the issue of women's rights under marriage. Although none of the political parties at this time gave priority to women's issues, they were increasingly persuaded by the SCW that women's votes would play an important role in the next election. Eventually the PAP included women's rights in their 1959 election manifesto, the only party to do so. When the PAP came to power, the SCW reminded it of its election promises and by 1961 the Women's Charter, which provides provisions against polygamous marriage, was passed into legislation. According to Phyllis Chew, women's votes and the lobbying power of the SCW were crucial to the PAP's success.<sup>13</sup> In popular history, however, the PAP (and rarely the SCW) is positioned as the champion of women's rights, thus relegating civil society to the margins. In the case of the Great Marriage Debate, the PAP and the state once again occupy a central role in popular mythology, to the point where the earlier history is contextualised to a footnote in history.

The narratives that members told me about the founding of AWARE reflected the popular mythology of the central role of the PAP. In these accounts, the history of women's activism outside the formal organisational context of AWARE was largely unacknowledged. The mothers of the nation, including members of the SCW, the National Council of Women (formed in International Women's Year in 1975), and the SCWO were also absent. Similarly, stories about women students and academics at the National University of Singapore who were active in forming discussion groups and

producing newsletters on topics related to women's status prior to the NUSS meeting of 1984, were subsumed by the PAP's (and by association, AWARE's) dominant place in the history of feminism. By giving the Great Marriage Debate and Lee's statements about women's roles as mothers such central prominence in the telling of AWARE's history, the organisation overemphasised the role played by the state and overlooked the existence of a nascent women's movement dating back well before independence. Playing up the power of the state to give (through the Women's Charter) and take away (such as through the Great Marriage Debate), became yet another PAP strategy of control and containment. The PAP's interest in recounting Singaporean women's history represents a case of the government co-opting feminism 'to subserve the party's political purposes'.<sup>14</sup>

In this Big Bang account of Singaporean feminism, the interview respondents felt comfortable in asserting that prior to AWARE, there was 'nothing'. For many founding members, this reflected their own lack of engagement with women's rights or feminist issues prior to AWARE and/or their lack of involvement with other women's organisations.<sup>15</sup> But it is also based on an assessment of what other women's groups in Singapore were doing at the time of the Great Marriage Debate. AWARE's pro-tem committee spent time considering whether Singapore needed a women's rights organisation. They reviewed the activities of women's groups and decided that not only was there no existing women's rights organisation, but that infiltration or transformation of an existing group would prove troublesome. In their assessment, AWARE would become Singapore's only women's rights organisation.

Being the only women's rights organisation in Singapore carried with it tremendous responsibility. Founding member Vivienne Wee uses the term 'one-organisation movement' to describe this role:

This is the peculiar thing about AWARE. It is a one-organisation movement that contains within itself [everything] ... In other countries [these women] would ... divide off and be their own thing, but in AWARE the space isn't there ... If you come out and say you are a feminist, of one kind or another, whatever kind, it's like you have to join AWARE. What other organisation is there in Singapore to join?<sup>16</sup>

Very quickly, AWARE found itself to be not simply 'a' Singaporean women's organisation, but 'the' Singaporean women's movement. Not only did this require AWARE to become a place in which all women found their natural (feminist) home, but it also put pressure on the organisation to succeed. To many founding members, collapse would be more than the failure of a women's organisation, it would signal the demise of the entire Singaporean women's movement.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, for an organisation that owed its existence to a seemingly all-powerful state, the possibility of de-registration was always just around the corner. It is to this second foundational narrative that I turn next.

### **The Struggle to Overcome**

The narratives that are told about AWARE's early years are replete with the imagery of struggle. One founding member reflects:

We felt that our main struggle was just to keep going, that we had to keep going. If we were not allowed to continue, if we were

deregistered as a society, nobody would pick up the pieces and try again. It is like that in Singapore. Once it is gone that is the end of it. So we said, whatever the cost we must keep going, and if it means sometimes we compromise or tone down our demands then we have to do it. We have to be very tactful and we have to think carefully. That we were being reasonable people and that we were making reasonable compromises.<sup>18</sup>

Throughout AWARE's first decade, fear of being 'closed down' (deregistered) was constant within the organisation. Many of these fears had their origins in the Marxist conspiracy, a term used to describe the arrest and detention under the Internal Security Act of 22 people in May 1987 for allegedly threatening the state and national interests.<sup>19</sup> Among those arrested were Catholic social workers and lay workers from the Geylang Catholic Centre for Foreign Workers. This group advocated higher wages, social security benefits, job security and better employment conditions for all foreign workers. At the time of their arrest, the government claimed that Catholic organisations were 'a cover for political agitation' to 'radicalise student and Christian activists'.<sup>20</sup> Those arrested were detained without trial. Some later confessed and were rehabilitated with an agreement not to enter into politics.

Some of those arrested were also members of AWARE. At the time of the arrests, the association's small membership of less than 100 chose to remain silent in order to avoid any suspicion of the organisation's activities. In the weeks that followed the arrests, AWARE's Executive Committee (Exco) was unclear how or if the organisation would be implicated. The government

released few details about who had been detained and on what grounds, so fear was rife among the detainees' circle of family, friends and colleagues. The organisation took a low profile, and individuals tried to assess whether they or their fellow members were at risk of being arrested. Some members of the Exco burnt international feminist publications on radical and Marxist feminism for fear that these would taint the organisation with the Marxist brush. Some public forums were cancelled and the release of AWARE's important research report on population matters was postponed.<sup>21</sup> Not all members agreed with the Exco's response, but even though some left AWARE in protest, these internal debates were never made public.

In the mid-1990s, memories of the Marxist conspiracy were still fresh in the minds of founding members, several of whom also served on the Exco at the time of the arrests. During my interviews few were willing to talk about the event and what it meant to AWARE. Their consistent response: 'We can't/don't talk about that.'<sup>22</sup> Despite their refusal to talk about the specifics of the Marxist conspiracy, it was clearly still on their minds and was often alluded to in their discussions about possible threats to the organisation. Many believed that a government crackdown was a real possibility and pointed to the detentions of 1987 as proof of both intent and means. They supplemented their accounts with references to other events. For example, one member related the following story:

We have these monthly forums and one was on 'Women in Politics', and we had one of the pioneer women [a woman involved in the early women's movement]. She is in her 70s, and she said, 'I hope one day we will see a woman Prime Minister.' So the very next day, the

Minister called me up and said ‘Who is this woman?’ He didn’t even know his history, he didn’t even know who she was. So I said she was in her 70s and she had been in the city council. A perfect innocent, she wasn’t going to start a new party or an opposition, or whatever. But you could see how suspicious they were.

By 1992 AWARE’s membership had trebled, from less than 100 members a few years earlier to almost 300. This jump in membership was due to the organisation’s growing public profile, aided by the establishment of a volunteer Helpline service to assist victims of domestic violence, and media attention directed at a number of high-profile AWARE presidents. The organisation’s growing size, its recent establishment of a women’s centre and administrative office, and its ability to use the print media to promote its cause, increasingly attracted government attention. At the 1993 Woman of the Year award ceremony, Acting Community Development Minister Abdullah Tarmugi, in a veiled reference to AWARE, 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’.<sup>23</sup> Over the next year, as AWARE campaigned publicly for a change to the medical benefits legislation for civil servants,<sup>24</sup> members of the Exco received phone calls from various unofficial emissaries warning them that the Prime Minister’s Office was watching them and that they should tone down their strident criticisms of the government.

In response to these warnings, throughout 1993 and 1994, AWARE’s Exco modified its own behaviour and counselled its more vocal members to modify their public statements. Increasing credence was given to self-

regulation as a mode of organisational behaviour. As the earlier quotation on survival suggests, the Marxist conspiracy became a trope for an organisational culture in which compromise and moderation became the hallmarks of self-regulation. By the end of 1994, these fears had a more immediate reference point. In November 1994, *The Straits Times* published a commentary by well-known Singaporean novelist Catherine Lim, in which she claimed that Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's promise of a more consensual leadership style had been abandoned in favour of the authoritarian style of Lee Kuan Yew.<sup>25</sup> Goh's response a fortnight later began what is known as the Catherine Lim Affair, in which Lim was publicly chastised for undermining the authority of the Prime Minister. In his response, Goh outlined the central tenets of a new era of civil society activism — based on out-of-bounds markers. These markers identify subjects that the ruling elite considers to be off-limits. They have been described as 'issues that are too sensitive to be discussed in public for fear of destabilising or jeopardising public peace and order'.<sup>26</sup> While the PAP is ultimately responsible for determining the limits of the OB markers, it does so retrospectively, with the result that what actually constitutes unacceptable political engagement is often unclear.

Within AWARE, the OB markers had already become a way of life. Fear of closure, sparked by early warnings, meant that the organisation had already tempered its public statements or limited its activities to avoid criticism. The following quotations highlight the speed with which the language of the OB markers spread from Goh's initial comments in December 1994, through to the Exco and then to other active members. Both quotations come from interviews with non-Exco members in February 1995.

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.

To be very 'careful' in this context meant employing a strategy of self-protection:

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?

In my discussions with members of the Exco, bracketing (putting aside some issues), was extolled as a tactic that ensured AWARE's continued existence. Importantly, while the Catherine Lim Affair and the phrase 'OB markers' were never used in any of our conversations throughout 1995, the Marxist conspiracy was often mentioned in order to demonstrate the PAP's ability to deliver on its threats to deal with unruly NGOs. The significance of the 1987 detentions cannot be underestimated. AWARE was one of the few politicised NGOs in the 1990s that had direct experience of detention and brutal interrogation. When its founding members considered the implications of overstepping the PAP's unspoken markers they thought about the Marxist conspiracy and not the public knuckle-rapping of Catherine Lim. Throughout the 1990s, AWARE certainly spent considerable time formulating and reformulating its strategies in anticipation of the state's response. The Exco began to set AWARE's own internal OB markers somewhere within the

invisible circle marked out by the state. This proved to be a successful form of state control — AWARE ended up policing its own behaviour without the need for state intervention. This strategy only works where there is a strong organisational ethic that ensures that the majority of members toe the party line. In the case of AWARE, this was made possible by a strong ethics of respect based on the bonds of friendship that tied the Exco and its wider circle of active members together. Used in this context, the concept of respect implied that the views of all AWARE's members were equally validated even though the beliefs of a minority were used as the basis for the organisation's actions.<sup>27</sup> By 1995, however, these bonds were beginning to show signs of strain.

### **Reinforcing the OB Markers**

By April 1995, AWARE's membership stood at 670 and although a large number of these new recruits were 'passive members',<sup>28</sup> it became increasingly evident that fault lines were appearing between some of AWARE's active membership. In mid-1995 a group of members wrote a discussion paper titled 'AWARE Blueprinters Suggestions for Future Directions and Strategies' (hereafter Blueprint). The formation of the Blueprinters working committee occurred after a brainstorming session in 1994 in which members indicated that the organisation was at a crossroads. The Blueprinters presented their ideas to the Executive Committee and a small group of key individuals (mostly founding members or ex-presidents) in April 1995. Despite many reservations from this group, the Blueprint was presented to an Extra-ordinary General Meeting (EOGM) in June 1995.

The Blueprint was presented as a discussion paper which would ‘provide a means to chart future directions by providing signposts and reference points to members and the leadership’.<sup>29</sup> The Blueprinters recommended the creation of an AWARE Manifesto and a programme of conscientisation. The manifesto would act as a ‘reference point’ in AWARE’s day-to-day activities, while the conscientisation programme was aimed in the first instance at the Exco in order to educate committee members ‘on what feminism is about’.<sup>30</sup>

The Blueprint was rejected by the majority of members who attended the EOGM. Many women objected to what they saw as a homogenising tendency within the document — that is, it prescribed one way of being feminist. Others argued that AWARE was not and had never been a feminist organisation. While the Blueprinters rejected the first claim by arguing that they wanted to explore feminisms, not feminism, they were shocked by the latter suggestion. They claimed that while AWARE had always adopted a ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ strategy with regard to the feminist label, everyone (members, non-members, the state, the media) knew that it was in fact a feminist organisation. When their opponents stated that AWARE was not feminist (although the majority believed that it was), they argued that AWARE had never publicly identified itself with the label. They also believed that in adopting an openly feminist conscientisation programme, AWARE was inevitably embracing such an identity.<sup>31</sup>

The imperative to avoid the negative connotations associated with the term feminism was also linked to wider concerns to ensure that AWARE did not disappear. In the early 1990s the PAP had already warned AWARE in

public and in private to tone down its public comments about government policy. Within the Exco, concerns that AWARE might become another victim of government anti-Marxist rhetoric were heightened when the Blueprinters began to use terms such as ‘manifesto’ and ‘consciousness-raising’.<sup>32</sup> The Blueprinters, and some of their younger supporters, were sceptical that the government would want to close AWARE down. They argued that AWARE was too vocal and too visible for de-registration to occur without any fuss. Their more cautious colleagues, however, pointed to the Marxist conspiracy and argued that the government would have no compunction in detaining a small group of radical members and then forcing the deregistration of AWARE on a trumped-up charge.

In the case of the Blueprinters, AWARE’s foundational narratives came together to shape the Exco’s response to internal conflict. As the one face of feminism in Singapore, AWARE had to necessarily incorporate a range of different views about women’s rights activism. In attempting to become all things to all people, it insisted on a policy of ambivalence towards feminism – the organisation provided room for those who openly identify as feminist, as well as those who adopted an anti-feminist (but pro-women’s rights) stance. As the Blueprinters pointed out, this strategy also required silence about what feminism means in the Singaporean context. The Exco were concerned that women who were wary of the term could be alienated from the organisation if it were discussed more explicitly.

In addition, the Exco were worried that the language of conscientisation might send potentially risky messages to the government about AWARE’s interests and agenda. The additional burden that AWARE

carried as a one-organisation movement was that it had a wider social responsibility to all women (as well as its members) to ensure that the organisation was not closed down. Drawing on historical memory of struggle against a paternal (and sometimes malevolent) state, AWARE constantly counselled its members to monitor and modify their behaviour. The Marxist conspiracy and other unspecified warnings became part of the mythology of survival into which all members were inducted. In most instances, these threats did not need to be spelt out — they were part of a wider political culture that younger members were expected to accept. Goh Chok Tong's public treatment of Catherine Lim reinforced the Exco's message that the state had the power to shut AWARE down whenever it liked. His comments regarding OB markers merely provided a common language with which to name an already internalised mode of behaviour.

## **Conclusion**

The narratives that founding members tell about AWARE's first decade reveal an organisational culture built on fear and self-regulation. The first foundational narrative, by drawing on the central role of the Great Marriage Debate in AWARE's formation, served to emphasise the association's status as both a subordinate by-product of the state, and as the exclusive face of the feminist movement in Singapore. In taking on these roles, AWARE became all things to all women, and this required a cautious and ambivalent stance towards feminism. It also placed pressure on AWARE to succeed, because to fail would be to throw away women's chances of achieving gender equality in Singapore. Success, however, was always tenuous. The state's heavy hand in

matters of civil society meant that AWARE constantly monitored its own behaviour for fear of attracting the state's wrath. For AWARE, these threats were not unfounded. They had their origin in the second foundational narrative — the fear of de-registration. In recounting the story of AWARE's birth, the central role played by the PAP served to re-inscribe the state's power. When combined with the imagery of struggle, the state became omnipresent. These threats can be overcome, however, when women rally together and put their friendships (and the future of the organisation) before their own needs and interests.

These foundational narratives served as a model of how best to deal with the more politically contentious aspects of the organisation's activities. As the example of the Blueprinters shows, an insistence on compromise built around the bonds of friendship allowed few spaces for alternative voices to be heard or for strategies that question dominant discourses to be developed. Internal tension, because it called into question the ambivalences surrounding feminism and provided the state with an excuse to crack down on the organisation, was to be avoided. Members were reminded that the future of AWARE, and by association the Singaporean women's movement, lay in their hands. More significantly, however, restricting the emergence of alternative voices served to entrench the state's discourse about acceptable civil society activism. By establishing AWARE's own internal OB markers, these foundational narratives demonstrated that having such markers was an acceptable practice. In the case of AWARE, not only did the Marxist conspiracy serve as a trope for the more politically contentious aspects of the organisation's activities (that is, it exemplified self-regulation), but AWARE's

response to it further legitimised the organisation's mode of engagement with the state (that is, it entrenched the state's own discourse about acceptable civil society activism). AWARE began to embody the state's rhetoric about a model of civil society in which some topics were always already off-limits.

Internal self-regulation dominated AWARE's activism through the late 1990s, but by the turn of the century, as the founding members adopted a less prominent role in the organisation and as the Marxist conspiracy became a distant memory, AWARE's Executive became more willing to challenge existing orthodoxies. The OB markers have given way to a more inclusivist style of state-civil society engagement built around the rhetoric of active citizenry. This study remains significant, however, in demonstrating how state rhetoric is internalised within the inner workings of one of Singapore's NGOs, and how organisational behaviour in turn legitimises broader patterns of civil society engagement. As AWARE and other NGOs look forward to a new era of state-civil society engagement under the leadership of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, the lessons of the past continue to shape the face of civil society activism.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Terence Lee, 'Gestural Politics: Civil Society in "New" Singapore,' *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 20, 2 (2005): 132–54; Terence Lee, 'The Politics of Civil Society in Singapore', *Asian Studies Review* 26, 1 (2002): 97–117.

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<sup>2</sup> Using a purposive sampling strategy, I interviewed 34 AWARE members in 1994. Initial interviews took between 1–2 hours. I conducted follow-up interviews with most respondents a year later, and again in 1997. For a discussion of the methodological issues associated with this project, see Lenore Lyons, ‘Re-Telling “Us”’: Researching the Lives of Singaporean Women’, in *Love, Sex and Power: Women in Southeast Asia*, ed. Susan Blackburn (Clayton: Monash University Press, 2001), pp. 115–28; Lenore Lyons and Janine Chipperfield, ‘(De)Constructing the Interview: A Critique of the Participatory Method’, *Resources for Feminist Research/Documentation sur la Recherche Feministe* 28, 1/2 (2000): 33–48.

<sup>3</sup> AWARE, ‘Association of Women for Action and Research Declaration and Constitution’, (Singapore: AWARE, 1990), p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> For further discussion, see Yayoi Tanaka, ‘Singapore: Subtle NGO Control by a Developmentalist Welfare State’, in *The State and NGOs: Perspectives from Asia*, ed. Shinichi Shigetomi (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2002); Garry Rodan, ‘Embracing Electronic Media but Suppressing Civil Society: Authoritarian Consolidation in Singapore’, *The Pacific Review* 16, 4 (2003): 503–24.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of these campaigns, see Lenore Lyons, *A State of Ambivalence: The Feminist Movement in Singapore* (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> *The Straits Times*, 15 August 1983.

<sup>7</sup> For further discussion, see Stella R. Quah, *Family in Singapore: Sociological Perspectives* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1994), p. 136.

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<sup>8</sup> The Women's Charter covers laws dealing with marriage, divorce, custody, maintenance, inheritance, property rights and protection against violence (although it is unevenly applied to Muslim women, who are also covered by *Shariah* law).

<sup>9</sup> Aline K. Wong and Wai Kum Leong, eds., *Singapore Women: Three Decades of Change* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1993).

<sup>10</sup> Jenny Lam Lin, ed., *Voices and Choices: The Women's Movement in Singapore* (Singapore: Singapore Council of Women's Organisations, 1993).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>12</sup> Phyllis Ghim Lian Chew, 'The Singapore Council of Women and the Women's Movement', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 25, 1 (1994): 112–40.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Geraldine Heng, "'A Great Way to Fly': Nationalism, the State, and the Varieties of Third-World Feminism' in *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, ed. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 44.

<sup>15</sup> It should be noted, however, that through its research programs AWARE has played an important role in bringing the work of these women's groups to light.

<sup>16</sup> Personal communication, February 1995.

<sup>17</sup> It could also be argued that AWARE was also the first politicised NGO to emerge post-independence. Constance Singam points out that the

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implications of AWARE's survival extended beyond its impact on the women's movement to the sphere of civil society as a whole (personal communication, August 2005).

<sup>18</sup> The founding members are a small group, and the majority requested anonymity. The use of pseudonyms would potentially identify these women and consequently I have chosen to use the quotations without identifiers.

<sup>19</sup> See Michael Barr's chapter in this volume.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Haas, 'The Politics of Singapore in the 1980s', *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 19, 1 (1989): 59.

<sup>21</sup> AWARE, *Population: An Issue of Current Concern* (Singapore: Association of Women for Action and Research, 1988)..

<sup>22</sup> None of those detained would agree to speak to me, even though the purpose of my interview was to talk only about their involvement in AWARE, and not about their detention.

<sup>23</sup> *The Sunday Times*, 19 February 1993.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, *The Straits Times*, 25 May 2002; *The Straits Times*, 8 September 1997.

<sup>25</sup> Lee, 'Gestural Politics: Civil Society in "New" Singapore', p. 143.

<sup>26</sup> Ho Kai Leong, *The Politics of Policy-Making in Singapore* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 186.

<sup>27</sup> This interpretation of an organisational ethic is based on a series of interviews with AWARE members conducted between 1994-1998. It is developed more fully in Lenore Lyons, 'Negotiating Difference: Singaporean Women Building an Ethics of Respect', in *Forging Radical Alliances Across*

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*Difference: Coalition Politics for the New Millennium*, ed. Steven Schacht and Jill M. Bystydzienski (London: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2001).

<sup>28</sup> A term I use to describe members who join but do not take part in any organisational activities.

<sup>29</sup> Blueprinters, 'Aware Blueprinters Suggestions for Future Directions and Strategies' (Singapore: AWARE, 1995).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>31</sup> For a discussion of the meanings associated with feminism in Singapore, see Lenore Lyons, 'Believing in Equality: The Meanings Attached to "Feminism" in Singapore', *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 5, 1 (1999): 115–39.

<sup>32</sup> While consciousness-raising has a long history in the western feminist movement, it is also strongly associated with the politics of radical Marxism.