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## **Dignity Overdue:**

### **Women's Rights Activism in Support of Foreign Domestic Workers in Singapore**

Lenore Lyons

Globalization is a two-edged sword. While it has created unprecedented economic opportunities, it has also intensified social inequalities within and across national borders. The increasing rate of transnational labor migration has left unskilled migrant workers especially vulnerable to abuses and exploitation. One group that faces particular problems are migrant women working as domestic workers. The global demand for female domestic workers has grown exponentially and women from Southeast Asia have joined the ranks of transnational female migrants working as domestic maids in North America, the Middle East, Japan, Europe, and Southeast Asia. While there are no precise figures on the numbers of transnational female migrants from Southeast Asia working as domestic maids, it is estimated that they number in the millions.<sup><1></sup> This group of workers faces numerous problems, including low wages, high debt repayments, harsh working conditions (including the absence of rest days), constant surveillance by employers, and physical and sexual abuse (see Anderson 2000; Chin 1998; Constable 1997; Parreñas 2001). Sending and receiving states, as well as traditional labor organizations, have been slow to respond to these issues, and it has been left to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to campaign for the women's right to better working conditions.

The most visible migrant worker NGOs are Filipino migrant worker groups based in Hong Kong, Japan, and the Philippines (see Ball and Piper 2002; Gurowitz 1999; Law 2003; Law and Nadeu 1999; Piper 2003; Piper and Uhlin 2002; Sim 2003). This visibility reflects the significant proportion of female domestic workers from the Philippines who work in the region, pre-existing social and political movements (particularly those associated with the Catholic Church), and the Philippines' strong history of trade unionism. Migrant worker organizations are also becoming

more active in other major receiving countries in the region, including Malaysia (Chin 2003; Gurowitz 2000), Indonesia (Ford 2006) and Singapore (Lyons 2005b). Despite the growing scholarly interest in migrant worker activism in the Asia-Pacific, there has been little attempt to explore the links between organizations that support the rights of female migrant workers and feminist or women's rights organizations. Such an analysis can contribute to a better understanding of the barriers and possibilities for cross-border gender activism. Migrant work is a particularly useful site from which to explore this issue because it brings the nation-state to the fore and compels us to consider the extent to which feminist concerns transcend national borders. Migrant workers are archetype transnationals, crossing borders to live and work outside the protection of their "home" nation-state. As women these workers face gendered forms of oppression in the workplace (typically the private space of the home), and as migrants they are caught within class-, race-, and nationality-based hierarchies that structure transnational migratory flow. These issues create a range of challenges for both local and international activists as they seek to address the needs of female migrant workers. Foremost among these challenges is the question of whether the plight of migrant workers can be understood as a feminist issue, and if so, how differences of nationality, class, and ethnicity can be successfully bridged in order for gender-based migrant worker activism to be successful.

In this essay I examine the extent to which migrant women have become the target of women's rights activism by focusing on two organizations advocating for women's rights in one of Southeast Asia's major migrant labor-receiving countries. Singapore is an important case-study because it hosts a large migrant worker population, representing approximately one-fifth of its total population of 4.48 million (Singapore Department of Statistics 2007). Female domestic workers make up a significant proportion of this total. There are estimated to be over 150,000 foreign domestic workers, made up of a third each from the Philippines and Indonesia, and a significant minority from Sri Lanka (Almenoar and Tan 2004).<2> In a country where women's labour force participation is 54.3 percent (Singapore Department of Statistics 2006), this equates to

approximately one foreign domestic worker to every seven households (Yeoh, Huang, and Devasahayam 2004). The first part of the essay provides an overview of the history of the migrant worker activism in Singapore with particular emphasis on the constraints of working within an authoritarian, patriarchal state. Turning to the issue of migrant worker rights, I present case studies of two Singaporean-based NGOs--the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE), an avowedly feminist organization; and Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2), a network of men and women with a pro-feminist outlook. Through these two case studies, in this essay I seek to develop an understanding of the problems that feminist activists face in building effective campaigns that address the rights of both citizens and “others.”

### **Advocating for the Rights of Migrant Workers in Singapore**

Although Singapore is a major receiving country for female migrant labour in the region, migrant worker organizations are noticeably absent (Lyons 2005b). This absence can be explained by the presence of a strong, authoritarian state and a relatively weak NGO sector. After achieving independence in 1965, the Singaporean government embarked on a program of widespread social and economic transformation aimed at boosting economic growth and maintaining social and political stability. This effort has seen Singapore enter the ranks of the world’s most economically developed nations. However, the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) has demonstrated little tolerance for public discussion of issues that cast its policies in a negative light. The PAP expects civil society organizations to support state-defined national values and to accept that some subjects are always “off limits” or fall within what the governing elite refers to as “out-of-bounds markers” (OB markers). Ho (2000, 186) describes these as “issues that are too sensitive to be discussed in public for fear of destabilising or jeopardising public peace and order.” The ruling PAP elite is responsible for determining the limits of the OB markers, a task that it largely performs retrospectively with the result that what actually constitutes “unacceptable political engagement” is

often unclear. Faced with the prospect of inciting government wrath, most NGOs adopt a cautious approach in their activities.

The state also limits the parameters of civil society through legislation. While the Singapore Constitution guarantees freedom of association (Article 14) in principle, organizations with more than ten members or committees with more than five members are required to register under the Societies Act or the Companies Act (Tanaka 2002, 208). The Registrar of Societies is empowered to exercise discretion with regard to registration and accreditation and requires all registered groups to have a formal organizational structure and membership. Groups whose activities are related to religious, ethnic, civil and political rights, or the governance of Singapore are carefully screened because, according to the government, they may potentially give rise to “law and order” problems and carry out activities that may be prejudicial to the national interest. In addition, all NGOs are scrutinized closely to ensure that “foreign elements do not hijack [them] to serve a foreign agenda which is contrary to our national interests” (Senior Minister of State (Law and Home Affairs) Ho Peng Kee cited in Parliamentary Debates Republic of Singapore: Official Report 2004, 37). All registered organizations are expressly prohibited from engaging in “political activity.” Individuals who participate in groups that are not officially registered face the threat of arrest and imprisonment for participating in “illegal assemblies.” The government also uses the Internal Security Act (ISA) to discipline the actions of groups seen to be politically threatening. The act allows arrest and detention without trial for up to sixty days and unlimited extensions beyond the initial detention. This combination of legislation and government policy has restricted the emergence of activists groups (Lyons and Gomez 2005). As a consequence, most registered societies tend to be professional associations or welfare-oriented groups.

For many years in Singapore the rights of foreign women working as domestic maids have been identified as off limits to civil society activists. Like many topics deemed “too sensitive” or “taboo” for activist intervention, the issue has never been publicly identified by the state in its official statements as an area that is out of bounds. Its association with the so-called Marxist

Conspiracy, however, has meant that few NGOs were willing to address it. “Marxist Conspiracy” is a term used to describe the arrest and detention under the ISA of twenty-two people in May 1987 for threatening the state and national interests (Rodan 1993, 92). Among those arrested were Catholic social workers and lay workers from the Geylang Catholic Centre for Foreign Workers. This group advocated for higher wages, social security benefits, job security, and decent employment conditions for all foreign workers (Mauzy and Milne 2002, 130). At the time of the arrests, the government claimed that Catholic organizations were “a cover for political agitation” to “radicalise student and Christian activists” (Haas 1989, 59). Those arrested were detained without trial. Some later confessed and were rehabilitated with an agreement not to enter into “politics,” and the Geylang Center was closed.

This brief overview of the political landscape in which NGOs operate provides the context for a closer examination of the intersection between women’s rights activism and advocacy in support of female migrant workers in Singapore. In the following section I present case studies of two organizations--AWARE and Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2). I briefly describe their origins, their aims and objectives, and the nature of their involvement in migrant worker issues. I then examine the extent to which they have been able to work together in support of two common interests--combating violence against women and supporting women’s reproductive health rights. By focusing on the factors that have hindered the establishment of a successful alliance between these two groups I explore the reasons why the rights of female migrant workers working in Singapore have not been constructed as a women’s rights issue.

### **Association of Women for Action and Research**

The political and legislative environment described above has been a significant deterrent to the emergence of a broad-based and diverse feminist movement in Singapore. Women’s rights activism is centred around the activities of AWARE, thus giving rise to the characterization of feminism in Singapore as a “one organization movement” (Lyons 2004b). AWARE was established in 1985

with the aim of promoting equal opportunities for all women. It has advocated for equal employment opportunities for women, access to equal educational opportunities for girls, and changes to laws on domestic violence. In addition to its research work, AWARE runs workshops and seminars and operates a volunteer helpline service. Its membership is open to all Singaporean citizens and permanent residents over the age of eighteen, and men and foreign women may join as associate members. Currently, the membership stands at more than five hundred, of which less than 10 percent are men and less than 20 percent are foreigners. AWARE does not keep records on the ethnicity of its members, reflecting its concern that the PAP's policy of multiracialism seeks to emphasize the "difference" between the major ethnic groups. Survey work that I conducted in the organization in the mid-1990s demonstrated that the ethnic makeup reflected the major racial categories used by the state--75 percent Chinese, 14 percent Malays, 9 percent Indians, and "Others"--with the exception that the proportion of Indian and Malay members were effectively reversed (Lyons 2004b).

AWARE works within the framework provided by the OB markers and adopts a cautious and conservative approach to its activities (Lyons 2000b). Issues of sexuality, including the rights of lesbians; religion and the role of Shariah law; and class-based social divisions are all designated as off limits. In deciding whether to openly identify itself as "feminist," AWARE has been confronted with public/media perceptions of feminists as man haters, lesbians, and "radicals" and with the political association of feminism with encroaching "Western values" (Lyons 1999, 2000a). In response, AWARE often adopts a shifting and fluid identity that changes to suit public and state constructions of feminism, women's rights, equality, and social change. Consequently, AWARE has often chosen not to clearly position itself in relation to feminism, leading to a paradoxical situation in which everyone "knows" that it is feminist, but no one says so (Lyons 2000c). These concerns were most pronounced in its first decade of activism; however, as the organization has matured and the state's interaction with civil society has become less heavy handed, both individual

AWARE members and the Executive Committee have been more willing to describe the association as feminist. By this, they mean a political commitment to gender equity for all.

AWARE was established in response to a series of government policies known as the Great Marriage Debate, aimed at encouraging graduate women to marry and have more children (Lyons-Lee 1998). These policies prompted a backlash among middle-class women who were angry at the government's promotion of traditional sex roles. One of the organization's earliest activities was the publication of a research report on Singapore's population policies, which presented an alternative view to the government's "fertility crisis" (AWARE 1988). Over the past twenty years, AWARE has waged a continuous campaign against the PAP's pronatal policies, which paradoxically encourage women to have more children while at the same time insisting that Singapore's economy is dependent on women's labor force participation (Lyons 2005a). The introduction of a guest worker program for domestic workers is an integral part of the state's response to these competing demands--women can continue to work and also be "home managers," supervising the work of a foreign maid. AWARE has argued that employing domestic workers is not the solution to the "crisis in the home"; instead, the government should encourage employers to introduce family-friendly policies and encourage men to take greater responsibility for housework and childcare (AWARE 2004).

From AWARE's perspective, eliminating the foreign-domestic worker program would be an indicator of the success of its campaigns to change traditional gender roles. Consequently, until very recently, problems faced by female migrant workers were in themselves not conceived of as a feminist issue by AWARE. Some members were caught up in the Marxist Conspiracy and many still believe that AWARE faced possible deregistration at that time (Lyons in press). The arrests were interpreted by AWARE's Executive Committee as a signal that domestic worker rights were clearly off limits. This partly explains the group's reluctance to address the needs of foreign domestic workers (FDWs). Its failure to engage with the maid issue since the late 1980s, however, cannot be solely attributed to a fear of state power. The majority of AWARE members are middle



class and many members are employers of maids. For these busy women, hiring a live-in domestic worker is a prerequisite for juggling their careers; family responsibilities; and involvement in community activities, including their work in AWARE. Engaging with the question of maids would require AWARE members to address the fraught topic of class location and demand for cheap domestic labor, issues that cut to the core of their own life experiences.

AWARE's silence is also consistent with its claim not to speak on behalf of "other" women (Lyons 2000c, 2001). Employing the concept of "respect," AWARE's executive argues that it has no right to speak about the rights or status of women in other countries--in other words, AWARE members can only speak about women like themselves.<4> Paradoxically, on one of the few occasions in which AWARE broke its self-imposed silence on women overseas, it found itself the target of a backlash against its own failure to take a stand on the issue of FDWs in Singapore. In 1998, AWARE presented a petition to the Indonesian embassy decrying the treatment of ethnic Chinese women in Indonesia who were raped during a series of racial clashes that year. In receiving the petition, a spokeswoman for the Indonesian embassy pointed out that Indonesian women were frequent victims of violent abuse while working as domestic workers in Singapore, an issue that AWARE had not addressed (Zakaria 1998). On this occasion, AWARE was put in the awkward position of explaining why it had not included the rights of foreign domestic workers in its campaigns against violence against women. Following this embarrassing episode, AWARE began to make public statements in support of migrant workers, particularly in relation to the need to punish the perpetrators of violence against FDWs.

### **Transient Workers Count Too**

In 2001, the brutal assault and death of a nineteen-year-old Indonesian domestic worker by her employer sparked a national outcry in Singapore. A neighbour of the accused employer was reported as saying, "Even if I knew, I wouldn't have called the police, it's not my business. He can

do what he wants, that's his problem" (Ho and Chong 2002). These comments prompted the establishment of a network of concerned Singaporeans who met to discuss the issue of attitudes toward and treatment of domestic workers in Singapore. The group called themselves the Working Committee Two (TWC2)--a reference to the short-lived civil society network the Working Committee (TWC), formed in 1998 (see [Singam et al. 2002](#)).<5> Like its predecessor, the TWC2 was an ad hoc group with a one-year limited life span. Its aim was to "promote respect for domestic workers through education, and secure better treatment of domestic workers through legislation and other means" ([The Working Committee 2 2003](#)). AWARE was involved as an affiliate organization, and the TWC2 Web site and bulletin board were hosted on the AWARE Web site. Throughout 2003, TWC2 undertook a very successful media campaign aimed at raising public awareness about the range of issues faced by foreign domestic workers (see Gee and Ho 2006; Lyons 2005b). As the yearlong program reached its conclusion, a new group consisting of former TWC2 members announced that they would be seeking registration under the Societies Act for an organization called Transient Workers Count Too and that they would retain their original acronym (TWC2). The group applied for formal registration under the Societies Act in January 2004 and received approval in August 2004. In its constitution, Transient Workers Count Too signaled a broadening of its objectives beyond the needs and interests of foreign domestic workers to all "transient workers."

TWC2 is chaired by Braema Mathi, a former Nominated Member of Parliament and former president of AWARE.<6> Membership is open to all Singapore citizens, permanent residents, and work permit holders over the age of eighteen years. There are currently fewer than one hundred members, and although a large number of these are men (and men occupy some of the executive roles), the TWC2 is predominantly made up of women. Like AWARE's, the membership is mostly middle class and predominantly Chinese. Less than 20 percent of members are FDWs. Unlike for AWARE, foreigners who do not hold permanent residency may not join the TWC2 unless they hold a work permit (issued to lower-skilled migrant workers such as domestic workers), thus nonresidents and employment pass holders (skilled migrant workers) are excluded. The decision to

restrict foreign membership reflects the government's concern that groups such as the TWC2 with an explicit focus on "foreigners" may be "hijacked" by outsiders (member of the TWC2 executive, confidential interview with the author, 3 April 2006).

The TWC2's focus on the feminization of transnational labor migration, and its strong association with AWARE, have meant that it is commonly perceived as a profeminist organization. In the Singaporean context, this refers to an organization that is supportive of women's equal rights but chooses not to use the term "feminist" to describe its work. In the case of the TWC2, avoidance of the "feminist label" appears to be linked to two concerns: first, that feminism is perceived to be exclusive of (or even antagonistic toward) men and that this would preclude men from joining the organization, and second, that because of the widespread public association of feminists as "radicals," the broad base of FDW employers would resist listening to or engaging with an organization that described itself as feminist. It is also important to recognize that although there is a significant overlap in membership with AWARE, many TWC2 members would not describe themselves as feminist or feel comfortable being associated with AWARE. The organization has therefore consistently avoided using the terms "feminist" and "women's rights" to describe its activities and has instead described itself as a "migrant worker" organization that opposes all forms of discrimination.<7>

TWC2's work is focused on addressing extreme forms of abuse against domestic workers as well as bringing about improvements in their conditions of work. This includes the standardization and regulation of working hours and tasks, equalization of wages, the incorporation of domestic workers into the Employment Act, and implementation of the right of domestic workers to "live out." These campaigns are informed by a critical assessment of globalization and the local, regional and global factors that have led to increasing labor migration. This is evident in the group's decision to describe maids as "workers," as well as in its campaign to improve "conditions of work." Both these terms (and the claims that underpin them) draw on international labor rights discourses that are common to many migrant worker NGOs elsewhere in the region. The organization has been

silent, however, on the link between the demand for domestic workers and state pressure for women to manage the competing demands of paid and unpaid work. Its focus has been on the problems FDWs face in the workplace rather than the factors that compel them to travel overseas in search of work, or the reasons why middle-class Singaporean women demand their labor.

### **Opportunities for Alliance Making**

Several prominent members of AWARE were actively involved in establishing the TWC2, and Braema Mathi was president of both organizations during 2004–5. For those AWARE members who wanted to address FDW issues, their involvement in the establishment of TWC2 was a means to test the OB markers without jeopardizing AWARE. It also provided them with the basis to establish a broad-based movement of men and women and thus move beyond the characterization of the conditions for maids as a “women-only issue” or indeed a “feminist issue.” Keeping the two organizations distinct in the eyes of the public was therefore very important. The strong connections between them did not result in formal alliances or joint campaigns. Instead, the TWC2 remains largely focused on migrant women and AWARE on local women, thus reinforcing an “us and them” divide in public understandings of migrant worker issues.

This separation is evident in the maintenance of separate campaigns to eliminate violence against women. In its first year of activism, the TWC2 pursued a vocal antiviolence campaign that linked the culture of abuse toward domestic workers to a wider system of abuse toward all women. A cornerstone of this campaign was Singapore’s first White Ribbon Campaign.<8> Unfortunately, this message received little public attention and was not supported by the state.<9> In the press, “maid abuse” was largely understood as an isolated, individual act by “sick employers.” Although AWARE has had a long-term interest in action against violence against women, it did not join the TWC2 to highlight the structural basis of gender violence against FDWs or include women as perpetrators of violence in its own campaigns. This separation of activism in support of “local

women” versus “foreign maids” continues, even though the White Ribbon Campaign has subsequently been taken over by AWARE’s male chapter.

Similarly, in calling for other alternatives to Singapore’s reliance on the labor of female migrant workers, the TWC2 could have joined with AWARE in questioning the state’s dominant discourse of nation building that relegates women’s primary role as mothers and wives. Although both groups are critical of the state’s promotion of FDWs as a solution to Singapore’s fertility crisis, this issue has not been pursued jointly. Neither has AWARE’s interest in women’s reproductive rights been extended to foreign nationals. Thus, although Singapore’s pronatalist policies are understood to drive demand for FDWs, AWARE has not made a link between the state’s interest in controlling the reproductive capacity of Singaporean nationals with its intrusive monitoring of FDW sexuality. Under current labor laws, any FDW found to be pregnant or to have contracted a sexually transmitted disease during her employment contract is forcibly repatriated. The regulation of domestic worker sexuality is enforced through a program of compulsory six-monthly medical checkups. This issue, however, has largely been ignored by AWARE and the TWC2, because both groups recognize that the issue would gain little sympathy from either the government or the public, which is supportive of the restrictions placed on Singapore’s guest worker program. Similarly, while AWARE has voiced some support for those who argue that FDWs are a poor substitute for full-time care by a parent, it has not joined with the TWC2 to campaign for the rights of all mothers to be involved in raising their children. Under current laws regulating the FDW program, women cannot bring their families with them to Singapore and must serve a minimum two-year contract before returning home. Many women spend years apart from their families and leave their own children in the care of extended family. In failing to take up this issue, the two groups missed an opportunity to make an important connection between the reproductive and employment rights of all women.

## Conclusion

The reasons why Singapore's women's rights movement has not taken up the issue of foreign domestic workers are many and complex. The categorization during the late 1980s of migrant worker issues as out of bounds and thus politically sensitive undoubtedly had a profound effect on AWARE's decision to avoid issues related to foreign workers. State control of civil society, however, is not the only explanation for AWARE's long-term silence on female migrant workers. The differences posed by class, ethnicity, and nationality have proved significant barriers to understanding the "problems" faced by migrant women. Thus, although AWARE's twenty-year campaign against the state's pronatalism has focused its attention on the factors that drive demand for FDWs, it has not addressed the issues that face domestic workers on arrival in Singapore or the forces that drive poor women to leave their families and travel abroad for work.

Like AWARE, the TWC2 has adopted a cautious and conciliatory approach in its dealings with the state. The initial establishment of an informal network with a limited life span was a deliberate strategy used by the group to test the OB markers. When the state responded positively to its efforts, the group then took the next step of formal registration. Nonetheless, the new TWC2 recognizes that its interest in issues faced by foreigners will always make it potentially suspect in the eyes of the state. This partly explains why the group's efforts are grounded in "national" issues--its focus is on improving conditions for migrant workers while they are in Singapore, rather than on addressing the forces of globalization that compel women to travel overseas to work.

The presence of joint memberships and long-term activist links between the two groups has not led to sustained or deep alliances between them. While this is partly reflective of their concerns about making overt links between national and international issues, it is also tied to the construction of migrant women as "other." There has been an unsurprising lack of class consciousness within AWARE and TWC2 in relation to their own members' employment of foreign workers. Although TWC2 recognizes that the problems faced by migrant women are not unique to them, it is cautious

about making too many strong links with issues perceived by the public to be the fringe concerns of “radical feminists.” This explains why the group has been more willing to address the issue of violence against women and less able to deal with women’s traditional reproductive roles.

Feminist scholars and activists have long argued that class, ethnicity, and nationality are significant barriers to recognizing the problems faced by “other” women. This essay shows that even when organizations share common memberships and experiences, the division between “we citizens” and “those foreigners” can be insurmountable. The problem of recognition arises not because members of AWARE and the TWC2 occupy different class positions or have different national origins, or because they have different understandings of what constitutes gender inequality, but because the focus of their efforts--local women versus foreigners--shapes their perceptions of what “the problem” is and how it can be solved. Nationality blinkers their advocacy efforts even when they are engaged in campaign efforts that address the same phenomenon. This research demonstrates the complex ways in which citizenship and nationality continue to shape the character of feminist activism and highlights the problems that emerge when feminists attempt to advocate on behalf of noncitizens.

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## Notes

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1. Data on transnational migration in the region is extremely difficult to verify because of the large numbers of “illegal,” “unofficial,” or “undocumented” migrants. As an indicator, however, it is estimated that the largest sending country, the Philippines, has between 4.2 to 6.4 million women working abroad as domestic helpers and entertainers (Wee and Sim 2003, 2).

2. Because of the sensitivities surrounding the presence of such large numbers of foreign workers, the Singapore government is reticent about releasing data on the precise numbers of migrant workers and their occupations.

3. In addition to the foreign-maid scheme, the government has introduced a range of tax measures to encourage women to have more children and stay at work. The fact that women who do not work cannot gain access to these schemes has proved to be an enormous motivator for women to enter and stay in the workforce (Lyons 2005a).

4. AWARE uses the same explanation when describing why the organization has not addressed the issue of Muslim women’s status under Shariah law in Singapore. It argues that only Muslim women (and by extension Muslim AWARE members) can do so.

5. The original TWC operated as an informal network of individuals and representatives of NGOs and voluntary welfare organizations with the goal of building links between differently situated civil society actors, to reinvigorate the sphere of civil society in Singapore. By deliberately limiting its life span to one year, and focusing its activities on “network building” rather than pursuing the interests of a particular client or membership group, the TWC was able to avoid the



otherwise restrictive requirements of registration under the Societies Act. Several members of the original TWC joined together with other activists to establish TWC2.

6. The Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP) scheme was introduced in 1990 to co-opt alternative nonpartisan voices into parliament. NMPs are nominated by members of the public, NGOs, or voluntary welfare organizations and appointed by the government for a term of three years. While NMPs enjoy the same parliamentary privileges and immunities as those of normal MPs, they have limited voting rights and do not play a role in the running of town councils.

7. TWC2 lists under its objectives “Everyone is entitled to be treated with respect and dignity, with no discrimination of any kind, such as along lines of race, colour, gender, language, religion or class” (TWC2 2007). The issue of sexuality is noticeably absent, reflecting the enormous sensitivities that surround this issue in Singapore (Lyons 2004a).

8. The White Ribbon Campaign is an international program organized by men whereby ribbon wearers pledge “never to commit, never to condone and never to remain silent about violence against women” (White Ribbon Campaign 2003).

9. For example, in one attempt to speak out, the TWC2 applied repeatedly to the Singapore police department to hold a public event to mark International Day Against Violence Against Women on November 25, 2003. Its application to stage a public walk against violence against women was rejected on the grounds that it could pose law-and-order problems. Its second attempt, to stage an outdoor public performance and talk about violence against women, was rejected on the grounds that speeches were not allowed outdoors except at Speaker’s Corner. In its third attempt, the TWC2 applied for a public entertainment license to stage a song and dance performance but this was also turned down (Tan 2003).

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