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## **Believing in Equality: The Meanings Attached to 'Feminism' in Singapore**

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## **Believing in Equality: The Meanings Attached to 'Feminism' in Singapore**

**Lenore Lyons**

The early feminists of the western women's movement asserted that the act of becoming a feminist is always a political event. So too is the act of labelling oneself a feminist. In Singapore, claiming the identity 'feminist' is dependent upon continuous negotiation of public and international perceptions of an 'Asian versus Western model' of feminism. The negotiation of such a contentious label also involves reference to a state determined model of 'Singaporean womanhood' and acceptable civic engagement on issues related to public policy making. Each side in this debate over identity has a heavy political and moral investment in inscribing its own vision of feminism. Consequently, being a feminist is never simply a matter of personal belief, but is by necessity an assertion of autonomy and authenticity in the face of a series of international attempts to describe 'Singaporean' or 'Asian feminism'. Within these debates, few accounts have made reference to the views of Singaporean women themselves. What does it mean for Singaporean women to be 'feminists'? How do they understand and present the quest for 'equality'? This paper explores the many meanings that Singaporean women attach to the term 'feminist'. By drawing on interviews and surveys of women who belong to the Singaporean feminist organisation AWARE (Association of Women for Action and Research), I describe a continuum of feminist beliefs - from those that may be described as 'radical', to those that are much more 'conservative'. Amongst women who 'dare' to be feminists there are a diverse range of practices; some women openly embrace the label, while others adopt it more cautiously. I argue that 'Singaporean feminism' is as contentious and transitory as other national or group defined 'feminisms'; it is marked by both diversity and complexity. Within the overlapping discourses of 'Asian feminism' and 'Singaporean womanhood', however, such complexity is often overlooked.

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

This research is based on an extensive study of the Singaporean women's organisation the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) both as a member and an 'outside' researcher over a four-year period (1994-1997). The data is gathered from a lengthy survey questionnaire of the entire membership, interviews, a focus session, and documentary analysis.<sup>1</sup> This paper grew from an interest in women who espouse a range of pro-women views, ranging from those that could be described as feminist to those which argue for a more moderate 'equalist' or anti-discriminatory position. In examining the views of women who belong to activist organisations, the question of belief origins inevitably arises: did they join because they held certain beliefs or did their views change as a result of joining the organisation? The issue of belief origins remains outside the scope of the present study. What this study does provide is some insight into the ways in which members of AWARE define the meaning of 'feminism' in light of their own activism.

Formed in 1985, AWARE is an openly multi-racial organisation with research, service and advocacy arms. Full membership to AWARE is open to female Singaporean citizens and permanent residents over 21 years of age.<sup>2</sup> Male Singaporeans, as well as foreign men and women without permanent residency may join as associate members or 'Friends of AWARE'. In this paper, the views of male members will not be considered, and hence the category 'Friends of AWARE' refers only to non-Singaporean women.

AWARE describes its role as primarily one of research, discussion and support. This is to be achieved by making both men and women aware of the barriers that they face in their everyday lives as a result of gender discrimination. Thus, the AWARE Constitution (1990:1) states the following three general objectives of the society:

- 1) to promote the awareness and participation of women in all areas;
- 2) to promote the attainment of full equality;
- 3) to promote equal opportunities for women.

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

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

This is a standard clause inserted into the constitutions of all officially registered societies in Singapore. For an organisation such as AWARE which sees itself performing an important role in civil society, this clause is instrumental in determining both the association's public 'presentation of self', as well as its internal decision-making. Delineating the boundaries of the political and non-political is a difficult exercise. In the first instance, being barred from making political statements means that AWARE cannot comment on issues outside the interests of its specifically defined constituency. But, as Singaporean sociologist Chua Beng-Huat (1995:208) comments, associations such as AWARE cannot avoid 'political' issues when speaking on women's status. The constraints of the Societies' Act mean, however, that such statements must remain reformist in character. For this reason, the term 'promote' is interpreted by many AWARE members in its most passive form. These then are long term goals, to be worked towards rather than actively pursued. The language of 'promotion' is thus overtly non-political in contrast to the alternative 'achieve'. Change is not for AWARE to achieve, but is an individual choice to be made by women and men themselves. AWARE's functions are more clearly described in the Constitution as:

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

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

acceptance of the government's own ground rules of 'consensus' ahead of 'confrontation' (Rodan, 1993:94).

Although AWARE does not have a formal recruitment arm and does not actively solicit new members, numbers have increased steadily since the early 1990s. In 1986 AWARE's membership stood at 78. This figure remained fairly stable until 1992 when it jumped to 270. Thereafter it rose rapidly to 670 by April 1995. AWARE does not keep a record of the level of active participation by its members in sub-committee work. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the majority of members who joined after 1992 are in-active. Attendance figures amongst survey respondents to a general membership questionnaire that I conducted in 1995 show that only 10-20% are actively involved in AWARE committee work or activities. Almost one third (29%) of the respondents had never attended an AWARE event or activity, and 27% indicated that they attended only once a year.

Singaporeans make up approximately 81% of the entire membership. Women from all major ethnic groups are reflected in the membership - Chinese, Indian, Malay, Eurasian, and 'foreigners', but observation indicates that Malay women as a percentage of the population are under-represented.<sup>3</sup> The desire to appear multi-racial also influences the selection of Presidents and members of the Executive Committee. Occupational data from the membership records shows that 65% of members are employed in professional, technical, administrative, executive and managerial positions. Another 22% are employed in clerical, sales and service areas, with 13% not-employed for a wage (including unemployed, retired, home-makers, and students). None of the women are employed in production or labouring positions. Based on predominant identifiers of class labels in Singapore - occupation, income, education, English speaking - these women are firmly located within the middle-class and upper middle-class and the majority of women self-identified in this way. The majority of AWARE members are aged below 50 years (88%), although non-Singaporean members tend to be older than the local women. Half of the women are married.

## **Is AWARE 'feminist'?**

While AWARE is commonly recognised as the first Singaporean feminist organisation, neither the terms 'feminist' nor 'feminism' appear in the AWARE Declaration and Constitution (AWARE, 1990). Instead, AWARE is advertised as a 'women's' or 'women's rights' organisation. At the same time, however, the majority of the membership agrees that the organisation is feminist in both

goals and orientation. This seeming contradiction stems from an astute political awareness of the negative connotations that the term 'feminist' holds in the public consciousness. The women I spoke to were keenly aware of the negative images the public associated with the term feminism. Some of the words and phrases associated with public perceptions of feminism include: militant, lesbian, bra-burning, anti-men, Western, high-brows, Western educated, middle-class, man-hating, sexually promiscuous, feminists are people who are really not women, really aggressive, women who don't shave their legs, liberals, radicals, women with a chip on their shoulders, ranting and raving, making noise.<sup>4</sup> By association, feminism becomes tied closely with the debate over Western/Asian values:

So the word feminist, feminism is being taken out of the context of its actual meaning. It is purported as a certain type of lifestyle. Promiscuous maybe, liberal, and all this are all dirty words right? So it made, I think in our thinking, into a dichotomy, you see. So if you are not necessarily Asian and you don't have all the good Asian values, then you are necessarily promiscuous, liberated, Western women who most probably would support feminism [Ng Soo Chin]<sup>5</sup>.

Press reportage of AWARE events and personalities relies on these time-worn tropes. A 1990 feature article on then President, Constance Singam was titled "She's feminine and a feminist". The article said that,

Ms Singam defies everything one would expect from a hardline feminist. *She wears a bra.* But no shoulder pads or trousers. She laughs girlishly, sometimes with a hand cupped over her eyebrow. So gracious. So full of feminine charm (Ng, 1990:10, emphasis added).

The press is quick to play up the 'feminine' qualities of high profile members. During her term as AWARE President, attention was often drawn to Claire Chiang's beauty. In a 1993 article she was described as an "Activist of silk and substance" (Ibrahim, 1993:3). But, the media have not always portrayed AWARE members in such a favourable light. During the early Mediawatch campaigns of the mid-1980s, the high-profile co-ordinator of the Mediawatch Sub-committee, Zaibun Siraj, was described as "Singapore's most vocal feminist ... a fervent feminist. A spitfire, outspoken and unconventional" (*Sunday Times*, 1988:21).

In light of the highly emotive language used to describe feminists, as well as the strong association of feminism with an encroaching Western value system, it is not surprising that AWARE has chosen not to identify as feminist. Being associated with negative images could reflect on AWARE's public statements and policy papers such that they may be dismissed, not on the quality

of their argument, but on the negative perceptions of the public. In the same way, the provision of direct community services may be jeopardised. The decision not to identify as feminist is one which is based on both strategic conservatism and political astuteness.

While AWARE avoids representing these goals as 'feminist' in the public arena, within internal documents, however, the term 'feminist' is used frequently. For example, in describing the philosophy behind the Helpline, the 1993 Annual Report (unpublished) makes the following points:

Our pro-woman stance reflects feminist ideology and values. These values include self-determination, economic independence, freedom to choose, social justice, fairness, equality and equal opportunity.... We are cognisant of the fine balance between respecting caller's choice and offering her an alternative option. Ultimately, she is the one who has to make up her own mind and our primary role is to 'stand by her' (AWARE, 1993:3).

In addition, the majority of members describe themselves as feminists. Data from my own research shows that more than 80% of the interview respondents and almost 70% of the survey respondents self-identified as feminist. It is important to recognise, however, that the meanings and definitions attached to 'being feminist' varied widely amongst individual members. These differences will be explored in the next section.

## **Believing in Equality**

Rather than representing itself as feminist, AWARE uses the language of 'women's rights' and 'gender equality'. The organisational Declaration makes the following points:

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

both women and men be made aware of these barriers. However, it is ultimately women who will have to decide if they want changes and how change can be brought about, for it is women who are more hindered by these barriers. It is AWARE's role to clarify gender issues through research and discussion and to support efforts by women to realise their visions for an equal and just society (AWARE, 1990:[i]).

In an obviously carefully worded opening sentence, AWARE establishes important historical and legal antecedents for itself in Singapore's Constitution. In this way, AWARE adopts a non-confrontational stance vis-a-vis the state. AWARE affirms its belief in the principles of democracy, justice and equality and situates itself as an important partner in their achievement. It is this affirmation that signals AWARE's role as overtly uncritical, in the sense that it does not question the place of the government and accepts present day constraints on its activities. AWARE concerns itself instead with "gender-based barriers" which affect both men and women, and which have emerged "because of the way human society has evolved". AWARE's goal in removing these barriers is to allow all Singaporeans "to develop their talents to the fullest and realise their personal visions and hopes". AWARE thus reaffirms the goals of "happiness, prosperity, and progress for our nation". Only when both men and women achieve their fullest potential will they be happy and productive citizens.

In this way, AWARE makes two important points - it constructs women's disadvantage not as the product of men's domination of women, but rather the product of history and tradition. Secondly, it describes gender inequality as a circumstance that affects both men's and women's life opportunities. In this way, an important distinction is established between modern democracy (the Singaporean state) and ancient traditions (the source of gender bias). AWARE's actions are thus both modern and democratic (and thus supportive of the state) at the same time that they are non-political (they are directed towards the private sphere of culture).

AWARE attributes differences in performance and achievement to a society that does not give women the same opportunities as men. Women's choices are restricted by dominant constructions that constrain women to the roles of mother and wife. Not only are women contained within the home, but the jobs that they perform there are considered secondary to those performed by men in the public sphere. These roles are debilitating for both men and women - it puts unnecessary strain on men and stops society from taking advantage of women's talents. In expressing this idea, the women I spoke to made reference to the concept of allowing both men and women to 'realise their fullest potential':



Women face a lot more obstacles in realising their fullest potential. I am a feminist because I want to help the process of women overcoming these obstacles. Maybe it could be the fault of the policies, the government, it could be family tradition, culture. So my goal is really for women to achieve their fullest potential [Stella Kok].

The phrase ‘develop to their fullest potential’ has strong political overtones. Singapore is devoid of natural resources; its only resource therefore is its people. The government uses this idea to promote the education and re-training of all citizens, especially the re-introduction of mothers into the work force. It is a citizen’s responsibility to the nation to constantly improve herself in order to achieve Singapore’s development goals. The women of AWARE consciously use this rhetoric to substantiate their own actions to both the government and the public. They are fulfilling their civic duty by advocating greater equality between the sexes. Feminism is therefore a movement designed to build the nation by changing gender stereotypes and opening up greater opportunities for both men and women. It is about achieving equality in the context of the laws of the nation state.

### ***Equality before the law***

I believe that women have to be treated as equals. I see it as an equality issue and a question of justice really. That you cannot discriminate against people, discriminate on the grounds of religion, race or colour, and also on the grounds of gender [Hannah Kassim].

For Hannah Kassim an unequal society is one in which individuals are discriminated against on the basis of some shared attribute - gender, race, religion. This view of equality is also reflected in the women’s responses to an attitudinal survey contained within the membership questionnaire. For example, almost all of the survey respondents said that “Girls and boys should receive the same education” (99%). This was consistent with statements related to the relative value of sons and daughters, for example “Sons are important because they take care of parents in their old age” in which the women indicated that daughters were just as important as sons (94%). In employment, equality means ensuring that women are provided with the same employment benefits as men. For example, 96% of the survey respondents agreed that: “Women civil servants should be given the same medical benefits as men”. Currently, only male civil servants may extend their medical benefits to their dependents. AWARE argues that if women are performing the same job as men, with the same qualifications, then they should receive the same remuneration, including employment

benefits. The matter has been taken up by the press and has received widespread public support. The government's response so far is to deny women these benefits on the grounds that they undermine the role of men as 'heads of households', for if women could extend their medical benefits to their dependents, men would become superfluous and lose their sense of identity. The family, as a central social institution, would be weakened.

In education, equality means that both boys and girls should study home economics and woodwork/metalwork, and that quotas on women's entry into university are revoked (88% of respondents were in favour of lifting current restrictions on the entry of women into medical school). These quotas have been put in place in order to avoid what the government sees as an important social problem - women medical graduates retiring after the birth of their children and thus 'wasting' their education.

The respondents showed stronger support for these statements than they did in any other section of the questionnaire. The majority of women, regardless of their membership type, frequency of attendance or use of the self-identifier 'feminist', supported the idea of formal equality. In interpreting these responses, I consider that in situations where women are denied access to resources or equal employment opportunities, AWARE members use an argument based on merit: men and women should be treated equally on the basis of individual ability and not on gender. This belief in formal equality also extended to policy and legislative change on issues related to men. For example, 84% of the survey respondents believed that paternity leave should be granted to fathers; a just and democratic society ensures that all citizens are provided with the same opportunities and the same benefits regardless of who they are. In this conception of 'equality', AWARE relies on the principles of justice and democracy that are enshrined in the Singapore Constitution, and which they hope to extend to discrimination on the basis of gender.

Equality before the law does not mean, however, that women will become more like men. This position is best summed up in the following quotation from a former president of AWARE which indicates the extent to which such views were expressed and promoted within the organisation:

We are fighting for equal access. Which doesn't mean that I want to be equal to men or that I want to be like men, that I want to dress like them, I want to act like them, I want to command and direct people like men do. I don't want to be like a man. But I want to have equal access that the men have. I think that is the line that I draw . . . Because I think where women have been disadvantaged, the men on the opposite side of the coin have been equally disadvantaged. Right? I mean if I am discriminated against from certain professions, the

men are equally discriminated against from entering certain professions. I think if a man became a nurse or a maid in a household, a housekeeper, they would be equally scorned and ridiculed. And so the men are bound by gender preconceptions as much as we are, If I free myself from that I am also freeing the men [name withheld to ensure anonymity].

While the majority of women supported this view of equality, disagreement emerged on the means to attain these legal changes. For example, only 37% of the women agreed (and 43% disagreed) with the idea of a quota system to allow more women into parliament. When type of membership is taken into consideration, a higher level of support for the quota system is registered amongst student members (57%) and Friends of AWARE (67%) - reflecting both age (in the case of student members) and cultural background (in the case of foreign 'Friends'). In addition, there was a strong correlation between identifying as a non-feminist and rejecting the quota system.

**Table 1 Support for Parliamentary Quota System among Women Respondents by Membership Category, January 1995\***

Membership Category	Agree (%)	Unsure (%)	Disagree (%)	Total (%)
Ordinary	31.5	19.0	49.5	100.0
Student	57.1	28.6	14.3	100.0
Life	28.5	28.5	43	100.0
Friend of AWARE	66.7	16.7	16.6	100.0

\* There should be a quota system to allow more women into the government.

Source: AWARE Membership Survey, January 1995

### ***Traditional sex roles and gender socialisation***

While the majority of women I spoke to seek equality based on merit, this does not mean that they also advocate change in the roles performed by men and women. For example, on questions related to men's and women's responsibilities towards their families, the survey respondents were roughly divided in half, between those who supported a traditional understanding of sex roles, and those who did not. A slightly higher percentage disagreed with these traditional roles. Friends of AWARE registered a higher level of uncertainty in relation to these questions. It is possible that Friends were more uncertain about traditional sex roles because they were unwilling to comment on Singaporean cultural values. Student members tended to be much more conservative, with 57% of students

supporting both male and female traditional sex roles. In contrast, Life members showed higher levels of disagreement on questions related to women's duties and responsibilities, with 75% disagreeing with the view that a woman's primary duty was to care for her family. Similarly, frequent attendees showed a higher degree of lack of support (79%). Non-feminists also showed a higher degree of support for traditional roles (54%) than feminists did (36%). These figures would indicate that women who have been more deeply involved in organisational activities, either through a lengthy membership (Life members) or frequent attendance (indicating involvement in committee work) are more likely to reject traditional sex roles. Similarly, women who see themselves as 'feminists' are also more likely to reject such values.

**Table 2 Support for Traditional Male Sex Roles among Women Respondents by Membership Category, January 1995\***

Membership Category	Agree (%)	Unsure (%)	Disagree (%)	Invalid (%)	Total (%)
Ordinary	46.7	3.8	47.6	1.9	100.0
Student	57.1	0.0	42.9	0.0	100.0
Life	37.5	25.0	37.5	0.0	100.0
Friend of AWARE	33.3	16.7	50.0	0.0	100.0

\* A husband's primary duty is to support his family.

Source: AWARE Membership Survey, January 1995

**Table 3 Support for Traditional Female Sex Roles among Women Respondents by Membership Category, January 1995\***

Membership Category	Agree (%)	Unsure (%)	Disagree (%)	Invalid (%)	Total (%)
Ordinary	44.8	6.7	47.6	0.9	100.0
Student	57.1	0.0	42.9	0.0	100.0
Life	12.5	12.5	75.0	0.0	100.0
Friend of AWARE	22.2	27.8	50.0	0.0	100.0

\* A woman's primary duty is to her family.

**Table 4 Support for Traditional Female Sex Roles among Women Respondents by Frequency of Attendance, January 1995\***

Frequency of Attendance	Agree (%)	Unsure (%)	Disagree (%)	Invalid (%)	Total (%)
Several times a month	14.3	7.1	78.6	0.0	100.0
Once a month	50.0	8.3	41.7	0.0	100.0
Several times a year	33.3	16.7	47.2	2.8	100.0
Once a year	51.4	5.4	43.2	0.0	100.0
Never	42.5	7.5	50.0	0.0	100.0

\* A woman's primary duty is to her family.

Source: AWARE Membership Survey, January 1995

In addition to questions about traditional sex roles, the respondents were also asked a range of questions about mothering and childcare. While initial frequencies showed a high degree of support for the statement: "Childcare centres are never a substitute for family care" (60%), when these figures are broken down by membership type, it is apparent that ordinary members tend to be the most conservative (71% support), and Friends the most radical (17% support).

**Table 5 Support for Family Care among Women Respondents by Membership Category, January 1995\***

Membership Category	Agree (%)	Unsure (%)	Disagree (%)	Invalid (%)	Total (%)
Ordinary	70.5	14.3	13.3	1.9	100.0
Student	42.9	14.2	42.9	0.0	100.0
Life	37.5	12.5	50.0	0.0	100.0
Friend of AWARE	16.7	11.1	72.2	0.0	100.0

\* Childcare centres are never a substitute for family care.

Source: AWARE Membership Survey, January 1995

When use of the label 'feminist' is considered, 80% of non-feminists supported this view, with only 3% disagreeing. In contrast, only 57% of feminists agreed, and 31% disagreed. Once again, the

tendency to self-identify as feminist is an important variable in these women's attitudes towards mothering.

**Table 6 Support for Family Care among Women Respondents by Label Feminist, January 1995\***

Label Feminist	Agree (%)	Unsure (%)	Disagree (%)	Invalid (%)	Total (%)
Yes	56.7	12.4	30.9	0.0	100.0
No	80.0	16.7	3.3	0.0	100.0
Unsure	50.0	0.0	0.0	50.0	100.0
No response	40.0	20.0	30.0	10.0	100.0

\* Childcare centres are never a substitute for family care.

Source: AWARE Membership Survey, January 1995

The differences between the conservative and radical groups was even stronger in relation to questions such as "Children need a mother's full-time care in their first five years", and "There are some jobs that women are not suited for". Despite the large number of ordinary members who supported the view that children need a mother's full-time care and that childcare is not a substitute for this care, they nonetheless recognised the inevitability of the dual income family and thus the need for alternative childcare arrangements. In response to the question "A working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a woman who does not work", 80% of the women agreed. This level of support was not affected by membership type, frequency of attendance or use of the label 'feminist'. The more conservative members of the group were caught between knowing that women had to work and believing that a mother's care was better.

AWARE recognises that women, because of their difference to men (their ability to bear and raise children), have needs which are not always met because of these responsibilities. This does not mean a simple relegation of all women to traditional wife/mother roles but necessitates changes to the social structure that allow for greater sharing of this burden within the household and by the state. In present day society, responsibility for the family falls largely on the shoulders of women. Women can thus never be truly equal until this burden is shared by men, women, the state and private companies. In employment, equality means that working parents are provided with adequate

childcare. In the state sector, equality means that single parents can receive government housing. In this model of equality, it is the state's role to ensure that advances in the public sphere (more working women) are not hindered by unequal conditions in the private sphere (work place practices that ignore workers' private responsibilities). Equality therefore comes to mean something very complex. All the women argued that the law should recognise the intrinsic equality of intelligence and talents between men and women. At the same time, however, approximately half of the women surveyed supported traditional views of women's roles within the family.

## **Feminism as identity or practice?**

In western feminism, the claim is often made that only those involved in activist work are ever 'truly' feminist. In contrast, for some AWARE women being a feminist means nothing less than living one's life in accordance with feminist ideals and principles:

If you don't put your thoughts and beliefs into action then I don't see the justification there to be called a feminist. But of course when we talk about being an activist, I can be an activist if I practise in my personal life. You know, making a philosophy in life, my own personal life. That's fine. That's being an activist [Theresa Lim].

Being a 'real feminist', that is, living one's life according to one's beliefs, can be very difficult. On one hand it involves treating others as you yourself would wish to be treated. It includes being conscious of sexism or discrimination and working to overcome this in one's own actions and behaviours. At the same time, practising feminism means trying to live by principles that may not be shared by the wider community. It involves struggle and challenge - with employers, partners and family members. Many women recognised that transforming one's personal life in accordance with feminist beliefs may in fact be more difficult than trying to achieve concrete policy change - precisely because it deals with emotions and interpersonal relationships. All of the women spoke of the challenges they faced in re-defining their personal relationships around feminist ideals.

In contrast to those who describe feminist identity as a matter of personal life choices, other members replied that it meant doing something to advance the feminist cause. This may include lobbying for changes, being involved in research or advocacy, or helping other women through counselling:

I would take the view that a feminist is somebody who is conscious of her gender and conscious of some of the disadvantages that her gender brought to her. And one step further would be that I am prepared to take up certain issues, to fight those issues, make my own views known on those issues and to try to bring a correction of that imbalance. I think that for me would be feminist [Joan Fung].

I mean, I would say very neutrally, a person who cares about women's issues and who wants to try to help women a little bit. I suppose it is more like coming from the community service angle rather than standing very strongly against any imbalance or sort of paradigms that there is [May Wong].

For these women, feminism is much more than a belief system, it is a programme of action. Being a feminist means doing something to empower women, to change their lives. Joining AWARE is obviously the first step to fulfilling this criterion. The second step is active engagement in Executive Committee or sub-committee work. Reflected in these comments are two interrelated notions of what it means to 'help' women. For Joan Fung helping women means fighting for the cause - bringing about important changes in women's status. May Wong uses a service notion of 'help'; helping women physically and emotionally to overcome their positions of disadvantage. These differences reflect the choice of AWARE members to be involved in two areas of feminist activism - those who engage in research and advocacy work, and those who work in the provision of services.

Given that the women I spoke to were all AWARE members, it would be invalid to suggest that those women who proposed an image of feminism as a life-style choice did not see activism as an important part of their lives. Rather, I see these two sets of views as part of the same practice, with individuals giving one side greater emphasis than the other. For some women activism was a key element of what it meant to be a feminist *in their lives*. For others, it was less important - depending on their place in their life course as reflected in the movement of some women in and out of 'active' membership over several years. For example, some women spoke of 'dropping out' of active involvement in AWARE to concentrate on their personal lives or careers. For these women, living their lives according to feminist principles then became the key signifier of their feminist identity.

The question of activism versus life-style also raises the issue of AWARE's large 'sleeping' or inactive membership. These women's decision not to be directly involved in AWARE's activities can be explained by their busy lifestyles, but also the constraints of living in a patriarchal society:



They are not sleeping members because they are uninterested but the fact is that we are still living within a very patriarchal society and women do have multiple careers and it is very difficult to make it to meetings, to make it to forums etc [Mehta Vasil].

Another explanation for their levels of inactivism is the constraints of the Singaporean political culture:

In Singapore they say that you don't have to be active. But I know elsewhere, to be a feminist, you have to be active in changing the situation. You have to be actively involved and live your life, and speak up. But I suppose in Singapore you don't speak up. And we seem to define feminism rather more, a bit wider definition, more general, so that it does embrace a lot more people than it would elsewhere [Faith Chaudhri].

Faith Chaudhri applies the notion of activism much more specifically to Singapore's political culture. She argues that a wider definition of feminism (personal life as well as direct activism) must be employed in Singapore because of the constraints placed on political action and political mobilisation. In a society where it is difficult for men and women to speak up in public in opposition to the state or dominant practices, and where vocal opinions are often labelled 'political' and thus crushed, being an activist can be a tricky path to follow. For Singaporean women, being a feminist in their own lives is a more appropriate (but not necessarily easier) choice.

## **Conclusion**

Given the current political constraints AWARE avoids the language of feminism and instead projects an image of strong, capable women borrowed from the traditional imagery of mothers, wives and social leaders. Accordingly, the 'women's rights movement' is (re)translated as a movement of strong, feminine women concerned to strengthen society by ensuring that both men and women, within the constraints of their own culture, realise their fullest potential. While AWARE as an organisation may avoid the label, at a personal level the women differ in their decision to embrace or reject the identity 'feminist'; it is a label which is to be negotiated and defined by the individual. Some women adopt it openly, while others are more circumspect. Their decision is based not only on an astute political awareness, but also their personal belief systems and interpretations of what feminism means. Despite differences in their usage of the label 'feminist', the women nonetheless share many beliefs. Foremost amongst these is a common concern for

affirming women's choices and ensuring legal equality. There is often disagreement, however, over what equality might look like and the best way to achieve it.

Most women support a legal understanding of equality based on merit. In particular, they support equality of access to education and employment for both men and women. This includes a perception that men are similarly disadvantaged by patriarchal values. Disagreement emerges, however, over the question of sex/gender differences, with some women supporting traditional sex roles and others rejecting them as inherently oppressive. There is some correlation between these 'conservative and 'radical' views and the frequency of attendance, tendency to self-identify as feminist, and membership type. What is significant, however, is not so much the diversity of views, but the way in which such differences become reconciled within the organisational structure as symbolic of 'women's choices'. As a 'women's rights organisation', AWARE's role is to affirm women's standpoints and offer opportunities for change through the slow process of education. It is a decision that AWARE has dealt with at an organisational level through an insistence on ambivalence; a strategy of partial silence in which AWARE attempts to become all things to all people. In this model, simple prescriptive accounts of what feminism is or what feminists believe are shown to be inadequate. For the women of AWARE, believing in equality comes to mean something quite complex.

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<sup>1</sup> Using a purposive sampling strategy I interviewed 33 women according to four key indices – ethnicity, length of membership, age, and membership category. My intention was not to establish an interview sample that was representative of the entire organisation but to interview as diverse a group as possible. Perceptions of difference and interaction with others who were different to oneself were the key areas of interest to me; thus I sought to speak with women who were largely 'different' from each other. In the interview I asked the respondents to talk about how they came to join AWARE and their reasons for joining. I wanted to know how they saw themselves in relation to the category/label 'feminist', whether they embraced or rejected the term in describing themselves and AWARE, and how they would define the term.

<sup>2</sup> There are three membership categories - Ordinary, Student, and Life Members.

<sup>3</sup> The current ethnic mix of the Singaporean population is 78% Chinese, 14% Malay, 7% Indian, and the remainder a mixture of 'Others', including Eurasians and Europeans.

<sup>4</sup> This collection of terms and phrases has been extracted from the interview transcripts.

<sup>5</sup> All names used are pseudonyms chosen to reflect the use of ethnic language or Christian based names.

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