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A State of Ambivalence: Feminism and a Singaporean Women's Organisation

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There has been some interest in recent years in identifying the features or characteristics of an 'Asian' or 'Third-World' feminism (Moraga and Anzaldua 1983; Jayawardena 1986; Grewal et al. 1988; Mohanty 1991; Basu 1995; Alexander and Mohanty 1997). Part of this concern has focused on a costs-benefits analysis of Asian women 'coming out' as feminists in overtly hostile political climates. For many women embracing the identity 'feminist' continues to be a difficult process. Caught within multiple and shifting discourses that serve to inscribe place, allegiance and behaviour, being a feminist is not only an expression of individual political belief, but is often perceived as a rejection of dominant group identity. Within their own communities, women have often been forced to make a choice between their race, class or ethnic group, and their gender (see hooks 1981; Enloe 1989; Accad 1991). Where feminism is inscribed as part of an unreconstructed colonial discourse, 'choosing' to be a feminist becomes an even more dangerous exercise (see Phillip 1978; Mernissi 1987; Kandiyoti 1991; Heng 1997). The strong association of feminism as a Western ideology attractive to a group of elitist, middle-class women also acts as a barrier to more popular involvement (Aquino 1985; Jhamtani, 1991). At best, women may be ridiculed or derided as cultural dopes, at worst they may be beaten or killed for challenging dominant cultural practices (see Wieringa 1988).

Geraldine Heng (1997, 45) argues that it is the intervention of the state and those who wield the discourse of nationalism that most characterises the development of Third World feminisms. In the steadily growing literature on particular localised women's movements and organisations in Asia (see for example Croll 1978; Karim 1983; Jayawardena 1986; Wieringa 1988; Tantiwiramanond and Pandey 1991), the fraught relationship between the state and feminism is now beginning to be told. While some groups have sought to reinvoke traditional texts or histories in the service of feminism (see Mernissi 1987), others have begun to trace local genealogies of feminism by drawing

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on cultural history and folklore (see Shahani 1975; Marr 1976). Many have called upon the ruling elite to honour the discourse of equality implicit in the rhetoric and practice of nationalist struggle, a discourse often forgotten or overturned in the post-independence period. Few such accounts, however, have focused on the everyday practices of 'Asian feminists' as they negotiate the complex meanings of feminism for their personal and political lives. This paper contributes to this research by exploring the decisions made by women in a Singaporean women's organisation about whether or not to self-identify as feminists. In doing so, I examine the strategies such women employ in pursuing a feminist agenda in an often hostile political environment.

Singaporean women and feminism

There has been an unprecedented interest in 'Singaporean feminism' in recent years (see Heng, 1997; Weiss 1997; Lyons-Lee 1998; Lyons 1999; PuruShotam 1998). While a number of scholars have examined issues related to women's status in Singapore since the 1970s (see Chan, 1975, 1985; Goldberg 1987; PuruShotam 1992; Wee 1987; Wong 1974, 1980), little of this work explicitly addresses the issue of feminism. The Singapore state itself has taken a central role in telling the history of women's movement through the publication of two books, one published under the auspices of the People's Action Party's (PAP) Women's Wing (Wong and Leong 1993) and the other by a government sponsored umbrella group the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations (SCWO) (Lin 1993). Geraldine Heng (1997, 44) argues that this interest in recounting Singaporean women's history is yet another act of cooption on the part of the PAP, in this case coopting feminism "to subserve the party's political purposes". Both texts adopt an up-beat account of women's present day status; Singaporean women, they argue, 'have come a long way'. It is a view, which is shared, to varying extents, by both Singaporean women and the organisations that represent them (PuruShotam 1998, 136). At the same time, however, a number of groups have sought to articulate a range of what could broadly be defined as 'feminist' or 'women's rights' demands (see Weiss 1997, 685-6). The most publicly recognisable of these is the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE). AWARE's ability to negotiate the treacherous path between state suppression and/or cooption has made it the focus of study by scholars documenting the history of Singapore's emerging 'civil society' (see Rodan 1993, 1996; Weiss 1997), as well as writers examining the possibilities of feminist social change in Singapore (see Heng 1997; PuruShotam 1998).

This paper seeks to complement this research by focusing on the way members of AWARE negotiate the difficult path of adopting a feminist identity in the current political context. In deciding whether to openly identify as 'feminists', such women are confronted with public/media perceptions of feminists as man-haters, lesbians, and 'radicals', and the political association of feminism with encroaching 'Western values'. In response, AWARE adopts a shifting and fluid identity that changes to suit public and state constructions of feminism, women's rights, equality, and social change. AWARE is thus both feminist and non-feminist, while individual members may be 'out' or 'closeted' feminists, non-feminists or anti-feminists. This strategy of being many things at once has proven to be an extremely successful means of negotiating a range of interconnected discourses - civic responsibility, westernisation, multiculturalism, and women's place. It is a strategy that relies upon a practice of ambivalence in which AWARE chooses not to clearly position itself in relation to feminism. Nirmala PuruShotam (1998, 145) argues that this 'moderate' face of feminism is a,

> selective feminism in which certain ideas and ideologies cannot be publicly admitted. In this way middle-class women's politics arises and takes shape within a constantly shifting continuum of compliance with and resistance to patriarchal ideologies and practices.

It is a feminism which has delivered some of its 'radical' potential, but which is inevitably supportive of the state's own social vision, precisely *because* it is a vision which middle-class women share. In recent years, however, AWARE's version of 'Singaporean feminism' has faced some challenges from within.

The Association of Women for Action and Research

Formed in 1985, AWARE is an openly multi-racial organisation with research, service and advocacy arms. Full membership is open to female Singaporean citizens and permanent residents over 21 years of age. Male Singaporeans, as well as foreign men and women without permanent residency may join as associate members or 'Friends of AWARE'. After AWARE's first year of registration, membership stood at 78. This figure remained fairly stable until 1992 when it jumped to 270. Thereafter it rose rapidly to its current level of approximately 700. Although AWARE does not keep records on 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 not actively involved.

Singaporeans make up approximately 81 per cent of the entire membership. While AWARE does not collect data on the 'race' of its members, women from all major ethnic groups are reflected in the membership - Chinese, Indian, Malay[2], Eurasian, and 'foreigners'. Occupational data from the membership records shows that 65 per cent of members are employed in professional, technical, administrative, executive and managerial positions (middle-class). Another 22 per cent are employed in clerical, sales and service areas (working-class), with 13 per cent 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 as such. The majority of AWARE members are aged below 50 years (88%). This pattern is replicated when age is distributed according to Singaporean nationality and is a reflection of Singapore's generally younger population (see Wong and Leong 1993). Non-Singaporean members tend to be older than the local women. Over half of the membership is married.

AWARE's formation coincided with the People's Action Party's (PAP) first steps towards the creation of a 'civic' or 'civil' society (Rodan 1993, 1996). The PAP's absolute hold on all parliamentary seats began to decline in 1981 (although the number of opposition held seats has only ranged between one to four). Amongst the leadership the loss of seats, combined with a decline in the PAP's share of the vote, was attributed to alienation amongst the middle-class. In an effort to win back the support of these voters, the PAP embarked on a range of initiatives intended to provide alternative avenues for public involvement in policy debate, thereby undercutting other potentially threatening political alternatives (see Rodan 1993, 87). The emergence of non-government organisations (NGOs) such as AWARE is seen as one example of such 'loosening up' on the part of the PAP.

A more specific catalyst for AWARE's formation was what has been termed the 'Great Marriage Debate'. The debate grew as a public reaction to a series of statements by then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. In 1983, Lee called attention to a trend in which graduate women were delaying or forgoing marriage and children for their careers. Lee feared that in a country whose only resource was its people, a decline in birthrates amongst the well-educated would result in a 'thinning of the

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[2] Observation indicates that Malay women are under-represented in the organisation.

gene pool', and thus national economic disaster (Chua 1995, 21). So concerned was the government with the declining birth rate, that a series of incentives (including reduced personal income tax and priority education schemes) were developed to encourage graduate women to marry and have more than two children. In addition, incentives were implemented to encourage less educated women to 'stop at two' (Saw 1990). The schemes deliberately targeted women with secondary school education and above, based on Lee's eugenicist belief that well educated mothers would produce more intelligent children. It was in response to these comments that AWARE was formed. Up until this time, the women's movement in Singapore consisted of a loose affiliation of interest or service-oriented women's groups who were largely supportive of the government's vision of socio-economic change (Lin 1993). This period was characterised by what Nirmala PuruShotam (1998, 141-2) calls a 'modern not feminist' or 'modern/liberated' perspective amongst women. It was a position which asserted that 'equality' based on gender complementarity had already been achieved. Lee's comments challenged this view.

The formation of AWARE was pivotal in sparking a renewed interest among Singaporean women in women's rights and it continues to be recognised locally as one of the few women's groups which directly addresses the status of women. AWARE describes its role as primarily one of research, discussion and support, with the stated aim of 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.

These objectives are pursued via a range of public education, research and publishing activities (for a detailed discussion see Weiss 1997). AWARE produces a membership newsletter and journal, and has published a number of books. In addition it runs talks and forums for members as well as the general public. As well as conducting research on issues such as women's health, the media, the law, domestic violence, parenting etc., the organisation is also involved in basic literacy classes and computer training for working-class women. AWARE also runs a telephone Helpline service and in-person counselling and legal consultation programs. In establishing the Helpline in 1991 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.

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. 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; AWARE's existence continues to be conditional upon acceptance of the government's own ground rules of 'consensus' ahead of 'confrontation' (Rodan 1993, 94). 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 reform on matters related to family violence and discrimination, but the losses continue to out-number the gains. AWARE's greatest role, however, has been in the area of consciousness-raising and continuously putting 'women's issues' on the political agenda.

Are these 'feminist' goals?

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.[3] Some of the words and phrases attributed to 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.[4] As former President Constance Singam (1993, 2) says, "Feminists? Loud-mouthed man-haters with unshaved legs. Feminists are lesbians and just not nice". 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, [it] into a dichotomy. 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, Chinese, 30s][5].

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).

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[3] This research is based on extensive study of 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. 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.

[4] This collection of terms and phrases has been extracted from the interview transcripts.

[5] All names used are pseudonyms chosen to reflect the use of ethnic language or Christian based names.

The press is equally 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). Individual members are not the only ones to be targeted. In an article on divisions that emerged between AWARE and the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations (SCWO) during the lead up to the Beijing Conferences Wang Hui Ling (1995, 32) wrote:

> Critics say that the feminist group [AWARE] has become more strident and confrontational. They also accuse it of being too loud, often provoking negative and counter-productive reactions from the establishment.

In order to understand the significance of these statements, it is necessary to keep in mind that the press adopts an unapologetically pro-government stance (Chua 1995, 198). This is compounded by a government-encouraged monopoly which publishes all the national language newspapers. In addition, television and radio are state-owned. In the absence of an independent media, there are few opportunities for promoting alternative views. This does not mean, however, that the press always adopts an anti-feminist or anti-AWARE stance. AWARE's achievements, particularly the provision of direct community services, are well publicised and AWARE's letters to the editor are often published. Some journalists have even contributed to a re-definition of the meaning of feminism based on AWARE's statements and actions:

> The women's movement here is a balanced one. With sensible and impressive leaders (Veloo 1994, 5).

> Unlike more vocal feminists elsewhere, the women [AWARE members] used facts to back their calls for change (Nirmala 1995, 6).

Any attempts to re-define 'feminism' in this way are necessarily limited by its association with 'Western values', and in particular the state's own usage of the political discourse of Western versus 'Asian values'. This powerful discourse represents an important context for public scrutiny of the private - family values, sexuality, morality, and even creative expression. Singaporean sociologist Chua Beng Huat has argued that 'the discursive construction of an East/West divide is

continually mobilised by the Singaporean political leadership in its attempts to control the population through mechanisms of moralisation' (in Ang and Stratton 1995, 180). It is a discourse which reverberates through all policy making. These two sets of values are considered to be mutually exclusive and necessarily dichotomous (Ang and Stratton 1995, 180). In picture-cut out style, Western/Asian values represent bad/good; decadent/pure; economically weak/economically powerful; disorder/order; crime/peace; sexual promiscuity/morality; individualism/communalism. The rhetoric of Western versus Asian values is constantly reinforced through a public campaign of comparison, in which the Singapore government is represented as the archetype of Asian traditions and values. But, as Ang and Stratton have argued, this public display of 'Asianness' is a contradiction in terms: 'On the one hand its very existence as a modern administrative unit is a thoroughly Western occasion, originating in British colonialism; on the other hand the Republic of Singapore now tries to represent itself as resolutely non-Western by emphasising its Asianness' (Ang and Stratton, 1995, 181).

This only begs the question of what does it mean to be 'Asian' in a multi-racial, multi-cultural context? In order to understand the place of Asian values in the construction of national identity, it is necessary to return to the years prior to independence in 1965. Originally a Malay fisher settlement, the island of Singapore became an important site of British trade and administration in the mid-1800s. During this period, large numbers of Indian and Chinese men migrated to Singapore as indentured labourers or traders. By the 1920s the ethnic mix of the population had stabilised around present levels: 78 per cent ethnic Chinese, 14 per cent Malay, 7 per cent Indian, and the remainder a mixture of 'Others' including Eurasians and Europeans (Brown 1994, 66). In the early days of colonial rule, the British colonial government adopted a policy of 'divide and rule' in its management of the multi-racial, multi-ethnic population (Wu 1982). Interaction between the major ethnic groups was circumscribed by both space (the formation of ethnic enclaves) and occupation (which in turn influenced class location and access to administrative power). The government encouraged different groups to retain their own cultural practices and languages. Conflict between the major groups was not uncommon. More often, conflict occurred between different Chinese dialect groups. During the struggle for independence, racial conflict became more pronounced, and Singapore's position as a predominantly Chinese state in a 'sea of Malays' made its brief federation with the Malay states extremely tenuous (see Brown 1994). It is against this background that we can understand the role of the PAP government in the management of ethnic politics in Singapore.

The state's management of ethnicity and potential ethnic conflict is dependent upon a strategy which emphasises selective race/ethnic identities and down-plays others. As a nation which lacks a sense of collective 'history', Singapore relies on a sense of shared access to 'great (Asian) civilisations' to provide a sense of collective identity (Wee 1995, 140). The threat of ethnic chauvinism, interracial conflict, and cultural hegemony requires a careful balancing between ethnic and national identities. Paradoxically, the very act of inscribing a Singaporean identity (read as explicitly 'Asian' in tradition and values) requires a strengthening of ethnic cultural identity in the face of increasing westernisation.

> Ethnicity has been lifted out of the realm of unselfconscious, lived culture - that is, the domain of everyday practices and rituals - and into the sphere of ideology: it has become politicised, the site of official political intervention In the Singaporean context, Chineseness, Malayness, and Indianness are constructed as sites of authentic Asianness designed to invest the national culture with substance and originary solidarity, what in Singaporean discourse is called 'cultural ballast' (Ang and Stratton 1995, 185-6).

These three 'races' are inscribed as 'Asian' through their opposition to all that is 'Western'. In the process, there is a tendency to equate culture with race. But, not all cultures/races are equally valued for their contribution to the Singaporean national identity. The four 'Asian Tigers' (Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore) share in common Confucian-based cultures based on communitarianism, industry, thrift, and social cohesiveness (Heng and Devan 1995). However, this does not preclude the transformation (Asianisation) of some Western values or systems for the benefit of the Singaporean community.

Women are intrinsically tied to the debate over Asian values through their role as mothers. As Nirmala PuruShotam (1998, 145) says, "Asian-ness is importantly located in the normal family, the core of which is patriarchal". Such a family structure and form is located in antiquity, is Chinese, ageist, sexist, and retains a powerful morality (PuruShotam 1998, 135). But, mothers are not simply the imparters of Asian culture, they are (re)producers of the 'Asian family'. More specifically, in a country with declining birth rates among the upper and middle-classes (predominantly Chinese), they are the mothers of the (Asian as Confucian) nation. This is clearly evidenced in the furore that developed in 1983 around the then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's call for graduate mothers to have more children (see Heng and Devan 1995). Heng and Devan point out the underlying racial motivations of this policy when they argue that graduates tended to be Chinese, and that the Chinese birth-rate had been declining. Encouraging Chinese to have more children was vital to the maintenance of the ethnic balance.

Feminism is clearly seen as a threat to women's culturally inscribed role as mothers. It is characterised as a Western movement understood in terms of a 1970s caricature of free love and immorality. In the 1990s this has been transformed into a continued preoccupation with sex, single motherhood and the breakdown of the American social fabric. Hence, its political usage in the debate over Asian family values. Feminists are dangerous because they could encourage women to remain single, become lesbians, or have children outside of marriage. Women who are feminists are thus not only considered to by unfeminine and undesirable, but also irresponsible.

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.

AWARE's public face

Rather than representing itself as feminist, AWARE uses the language of 'women's rights' and 'gender inequality'. 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 (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).

In presenting itself to the public, AWARE projects an image of strong, capable women borrowed from the traditional imagery of mothers, wives and social leaders. In an interview in a local women's magazine in 1992, then AWARE President Claire Chiang used this imagery to counter negative associations by claiming that "People see feminists as unhappy, ugly, and single. Feminism is a lonely cause. You are always met with disagreement and disfavour. I prefer the term 'woman centredness'" (in Saini 1992, 102). 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. 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.

AWARE's private face

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 per cent of the interview respondents and almost 70 per cent of the survey respondents self-identified as feminist. Some members used the term to describe themselves openly and brazenly:

> I very openly and very proudly… call myself a feminist. And I have no qualms about giving a piece of my mind… whether as a table topic or as a conversation in a pub or as a very serious discussion with people. You know, whether or not they are my friends or acquaintances or whatever. So you can imagine the wide range of reactions [Ng Soo Chin, Chinese, 30s].

As a self-identifier, 'feminist' becomes a proudly worn badge, used with full knowledge (and perhaps anticipation) of others' reactions. When used openly in this way it signifies confrontation - 'this is who I am, what do you have to say about that?' The women who used the identity 'feminist' in this way, however, were a small minority. They were typically self-assured, confident women, known for speaking their minds. These tended to be women who had reached the heights of their chosen professions, had close contact with the government through various boards or organisations, and were married to publicly supportive husbands.

Others were more wary of using the label outside a limited circle of close friends. They admit to not yet being ready to open themselves up to the inevitable criticism or derision of others. The term has many negative connotations and they feared that by using the label openly they may become the targets of ridicule or even abuse.

> I don't think I'm at that stage yet. I wouldn't. I don't think I have a problem saying that I'm a feminist, but … because I'm so conscious of how people react. And I'm conscious of not

having worked out an appropriate reaction. … I'm still trying to handle that, and … until I feel that I can put the point across without being pushy and offensive, I guess I'm not ready in that sense to declare "I am a feminist" [Anna Lee, Chinese, 30s].

What remains unspoken in this quotation is feminism's association with Western values and behaviours. Anna fears that if she openly declared a feminist identity she would open herself up to additional labels such as lesbian, promiscuous, or man-hating. Her decision not be disclose a feminist identity is a sign of her fear of social disapproval and is a manifestation of a social system in which 'face' becomes the overriding consideration in social contact. To 'lose face' is not only to feel embarrassed, but in the active sense to 'be shamed'. When AWARE women spoke about being afraid or having a problem with openly calling themselves a feminist, they could be expressing a fear of either losing face themselves or causing those around them to lose face on their behalf. One of the factors that determines how badly one loses face is initial reaction to critique or ridicule. It is possible to salvage the situation with an appropriate response that indicates strength of character and moral conviction. Several women indicated that part of the problem was not knowing how to react without making offensive remarks or reinforcing negative stereotypes. If they could develop an appropriate reaction, they would become much more adept at fending off unwelcome comments and criticisms.

One way the term can be negotiated in public is by prefacing the label with statements such as 'I'm a feminist which means . . .' or 'When you say I'm a feminist, what does that mean to you?':

> Every time I say I'm going to AWARE people say "Oh, you're a feminist" and my reaction to that is "define feminism", because I don't think people know what it is all about. I still would have trouble saying "Yes, I'm a feminist" ... I don't have trouble accepting feminism or saying I'm a feminist if this is what I consider feminism to be, [if] it is right for me. There are a lot of different meanings of feminist [Geetha Chettiah, Indian, 30s].

A third group of largely older women, stated that the use of the label feminist was always conditional upon distinguishing between Western feminism and feminism with Singaporean characteristics.

> I have no qualms about calling myself feminist but I think what we have to do is to define feminism as a Singapore term. I know that basically we are all feminists, Western, eastern. And … fundamentally the ideology is the same. But, having said that… maybe our methods and our approach is different… We have to define feminist in our Singapore political culture and in our Singapore context. I haven't resolved whether it is a good thing to call yourself feminist or not! … Whether to openly call oneself feminist, but I'm told that I'm a radical. That outsiders consider me a radical. And, I don't know what that means. In Singapore it is

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easy to be a radical, you know. All you have to be is a little outspoken and vocal and you are radical [Faith Chaudhri, Indian, 50s].

For these women, use of the label 'feminist' is therefore contingent upon an ability to redefine it in opposition to a publicly conceived 'Western model'. Opportunities to (re)define 'feminism' in normal social contact may be minimal. In considering whether or not to self-identify as a feminist, these women weigh up the occasion, the opportunity for elaboration, and the significance of the meeting. These members used the label to describe themselves when they thought it would be strategically valuable and/or would not cause them harm. More often, however, they would abstain from using the label in order to achieve their goals more quickly or more decisively. For example, among policy makers or business leaders it may be more profitable to refrain from the label feminist and adopt a more 'neutral' position. Because of the negative connotations associated with 'feminist', describing oneself as a 'mother' or 'professional' would allow all individuals to focus on the substantive issues rather than be carried away by the emotive ones.

A small minority of women within AWARE shun the label 'feminist' completely. Instead, they prefer to substitute this label with another - humanist or equalist were the most common. These women were older and married.

I'm not a real women's lib person but I've always believed in equality. That's really the ultimate. I think most of us feel like that. We're not militant. We're really feeling women should have their fair share in things [Amy White, Eurasian, 60s].

I found the use of the term 'women's lib' quite interesting in this last quotation. When pressed to explain the meaning of a 'women's libber' and 'feminist', Amy White remarked that 'women's libbers' were more militant, and fit the bra-burning image of feminists - they were trying to change women's characteristics. Amy said that she was happy the way she was, but she thought that everybody deserved the same opportunities. At the same time, however, she thought that the term 'feminist' was increasingly being distinguished from women's libber, and thus more closely mirrored her own feelings.

A State of Ambivalence

This seeming contradiction between AWARE's avoidance of the label 'feminist', and the frequency with which the term is used internally amongst members points to the constraints that NGOs face in the current political context. AWARE is never completely sure how its statements will be received and is forced to respond cautiously:

> It's a fine balance. You want to say something but you kind of have to know where the markers are. In anything you need to know where the markers are, except in anything you don't really know where they are. So you err on the side of caution. You are always very careful [May Wong, Chinese, 30s].

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

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

> Sometimes guerrilla warfare is more successful than outright war. Especially if you are in the minority. When the 'enemy' advances, you retreat. And it's only when you have the chance to come out and do something that is effective. You don't want to be charging into battle and getting killed. How does that help the cause? And I would like to be in it for the long term. For long term gains. Maybe working very slowly but making gains in the long term. Because women's problems will be here for decades. Long after we are dead and gone. Somebody else should be able to continue the work for AWARE. We are not just here for your term or my term. Or my life time [Joan Fung, Chinese, 60s].

Fear of being 'closed down' or de-registered is constant within the organisation, particularly amongst older members. Bracketing or putting aside some issues is a tactic that enables AWARE to continue its activism in other areas. Many younger members are sceptical of the government's desire to close AWARE down. Some argue that AWARE is too vocal and too visible for de-registration to occur without any fuss. Other members, however, point to the 'Marxist conspiracy' and its ramifications.[6]   These fears are not totally unfounded. At the 1993 Woman of the Year

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[6] In May 1987, 22 people (including several AWARE members) were arrested under the Internal Security Act for threatening the state and national interests (see Rodan 1993, 92; Heng 1997, 40-41). They were detained without trial.

award ceremony Acting Community Development Minister Abdullah Tarmugi warned that some younger women preferred a more aggressive approach to social change. His advice was to "continue to be moderate and avoid being confrontational" (in Nirmala 1995, 6). But, as Nirmala PuruShotam (1988, 150-1) argues, the state wields both the stick and the carrot: "Each win is a powerful example that you can, and must, negotiate. It also shows how to negotiate with the ruling elite". Women thus spend enormous amounts of time formulating and re-formulating their strategies in anticipation of the state's response.

As a result of these constraints, AWARE chooses to adopt a 'don't ask, don't tell' strategy in relation to its political colours. But, AWARE's refusal to identify as feminist is not simply a matter of avoiding the label and getting on with the job at hand. At an organisational level, the executive must also deal with the beliefs and sentiments of individual members - in particular, the views of those who openly identify as feminist, and those who may adopt an anti-feminist stance. It is a problem that has been dealt with via a practice of ambivalence in which AWARE seeks to become encompassing of all views. In this way, AWARE attempts to become 'all things for all people' - to be both feminist and non-feminist. Internally, this also means providing room for all women to pursue their own visions of feminism (or women's rights). Consequently, some women become involved in Helpline or counselling services, others focus on research and education, and others concentrate on advocacy and policy change. In addition, there has been little attempt to delineate or define 'Singaporean feminism' or 'AWARE feminism' except in the broadest sense - what AWARE does. There are few opportunities for the wider membership to engage in discussions of different forms or types of feminism.

In recent years, this ambivalent stance towards the label 'feminist' has been challenged by some members. During 1994 and 1995 a group of women within AWARE wrote a discussion paper titled "AWARE Blueprinters Suggestions for Future Directions and Strategies" (hereafter Blueprint) aimed at addressing AWARE's future orientation. 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 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" (Blueprint 1995, 2). While several general recommendations were made about

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Some later 'confessed' and were rehabilitated with an agreement not to enter into 'politics'. AWARE was silent on the arrests, and many members still believe that they narrowly escaped arrest and the closure of the organisation.

committee procedure, membership, and administration, the most contentious issues proved to be the development of an AWARE Manifesto and a programme of conscientisation. The Manifesto was to be based on the Constitution and would act as a 'reference point' in AWARE's day-to-day activities. The conscientisation programme would be developed as a workshop series to be undertaken by all members (including in the first instance the Executive Committee) aimed at "educating members on what feminism is about" (Blueprint 1995, 5) and solving a number of problems identified in the brainstorming session:

> cohesion of membership, getting people more involved and active, ensuring a ready supply of members willing to stand for elections to the Executive Committee, and ensuring continuity and expansion of programmes and services with reference to AWARE's constitution and adopted manifesto (Blueprint 1995, 6).

The Blueprint was rejected on the basis that it seemed to insist on a rigid feminist identity or a 'party line'. The Blueprinters denied this, arguing instead that conscientisation was not about creating commonality but exploring diversity and raising awareness.

The tensions that emerged over the Blueprint rested on two divergent 'styles' which were in turn linked to goals and objectives. The division was understood by many women I spoke to as one between the 'radicals' (those pushing for faster, more overt change) and the 'conservatives' (those taking a slower, behind the scenes approach). The conservatives felt that AWARE should move carefully with one eye continually on government feeling and public sentiment. The threat in talking about feminism in an overt manner was that it could alienate women who were wary of the term, as well as send potentially dangerous messages to the government about AWARE's interests and agenda. The radicals felt that AWARE was pandering too much to the patriarchs and should take a more vocal stand. The 'old guard' were worried about the implications for AWARE if the organisation was to adopt a more vocal stance in relation to feminist issues. This included closer scrutiny of the feminist practices of individual members. It was not only this group's radicalism that posed a threat to AWARE's stability, but also their potential to undermine the basis of AWARE's organisational success. The Blueprinters were calling for an organisation-wide conscientisation program designed to examine gender issues and explore different feminist beliefs. They believed that such a program was necessary to achieve both organisational continuity and clarity of objectives. This program proved to be the sticking point of the whole document. Many women objected to what they saw as an homogenising tendency (one way of being feminist) while others argued that AWARE was not and had never been a 'feminist' organisation. While the Blueprinters

argued that they wanted to explore 'feminisms' not feminism, they were shocked by the latter suggestion. They argued 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.

When the 'old guard/conservatives' claimed that AWARE was not feminist (although the majority believed that it was), they were arguing that AWARE had never publicly identified itself with the label. They believed that in adopting an openly 'feminist' conscientisation programme AWARE was inevitably embracing such an identity. And this, I think is why the Blueprint was so threatening to them. The practice of ambivalence precludes members having to push a 'party-line' on feminism within the organisation, thus allowing some women to reject totally the label for themselves and others. 'Difference' is promoted above 'social change' in AWARE's internal objectives. In an effort to hold all women together, AWARE becomes 'everything to all women'. At the same time, ambivalence acts as an important mechanism in AWARE's own internal self-regulation. The Singapore government uses group and individual self-regulation as a means of control because it is so efficient. Fear of negative perceptions or closure means that the organisation tempers its public statements or limits its activities to avoid criticism. In failing to engage in a debate over the meaning of feminism, AWARE contributes to the maintenance of those very stereotypes that it hopes to dislodge through its own actions. While the AWARE Executive Committee is too afraid to use the 'f' word for fear of being tainted; in failing to use it, AWARE precludes important attempts to redefine it. And while AWARE may not use the term to describe the organisation, individual members, as representatives of AWARE, describe themselves as feminist in public forums. This cannot but reinforce the public's association of AWARE with feminism.

In its outright rejection of the Blueprint, AWARE's 'old guard' did in fact alienate a section of its membership. In this sense, they broke their own ethical practice and failed to accept the divergent views of others. In this situation, the value of acceptance (accepting diversity of opinion within AWARE) came into conflict with the need to temper public statements (not to be too radical). While the matter was dealt with in a typically 'open' and 'non-hierarchical' manner by calling a meeting of those concerned and asking them to express their views, conflict was heightened rather than diminished. A number of women consequently left the organisation.

Conclusion

In negotiating the meaning of feminism for their own lives the women of AWARE walk a constant tightrope between their knowledge of public/media perceptions; political usage of the label 'Western values'; and their own beliefs. In Singapore, as elsewhere, one can never simply 'be' a feminist - it is an identity built on contingency and compromise. The state actively promotes an anti-feminist agenda by supporting 'Western', anti-family visions of feminism. When Singaporean feminists overstep the invisible boundary markers of 'appropriate' civic engagement the state rapidly calls upon such 'radical' imagery. Alternatively, when the actions of Singaporean women support the state's own vision of acceptable social change, the PAP is quick to both coopt and appropriate such actions. As an organisation AWARE has successfully negotiated the possible pathways between suppression and cooption. It actively seeks to present a publicly mediated and hence palatable definition of feminism based on indigenous tradition, tolerance and strategic conservatism. In doing so, it faces a constant need to preface and footnote its comments in order to legitimate the spaces that it has opened up. The most prevalent of these strategies has been a 'don't ask, don't tell' response. The labels feminism/feminist are eschewed in favour of 'women's rights', 'woman centredness', and 'pro-woman'. Where possible the terms are sometimes redefined in AWARE's own image, producing a discourse of 'Asian' or 'Singaporean' feminism. As Nirmala PuruShotam (1998, 150-1) argues, however, such an approach is inherently conservative because it fails to challenge underlying assumptions about either Asia or the West, and thus supports the state's own version of the threat posed by 'westernisation'.

AWARE's official voice, however, does not always reflect the views of its members. Not all women in AWARE negotiate these spaces in the same way. The decision to 'be' a feminist is an intensely personal one. Some provocatively embrace the label, while others use it as a personal reference point rather than a publicly identifiable badge. These women are worried about the negative impact it may have on both their public and private lives. Another group, generally older and more conservative, follow AWARE's organisational lead. Such women adopt a 'give or take' attitude with a continual focus on ends rather than means. These women are also more inclined to re-define feminism according to its Asian or Singaporean features. A small minority of women reject the label altogether, a view that sits rather uneasily beside the public statements of the organisation itself. Given these women's common membership to AWARE, a widely recognised 'feminist organisation', their choices are inevitably contradictory. It is a problem 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. While such a strategy may work in the public arena in terms of AWARE's organisational presentation of self (a view that I have questioned), it inevitably produces internal conflict amongst women who hold competing views on the pace of social change. It was this ambivalence that was called into question by the Blueprinter's manifesto. The success of this strategy in the future will depend upon AWARE's ability to manage organisational tension.

Evacuated of sustained attention to 'feminist' goals and objectives, AWARE's activities remain essentially reformist and consensual in character. And this, I believe, is the nub of the matter. As Heng (1997) argues, states (particularly authoritarian ones) play an over-determinist role in the activities of Third World feminist organisations. But they do so not only through coercion or cooption. The Singapore government's management of feminist civic engagement is successful because its discourse of social transformation is ultimately supported by a large segment of AWARE's membership. Even those AWARE members who question the government's vision recognise that their constituents may not necessarily share their view. Radicalism is thus replaced with the language of moderacy.

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