

## ORGANIZATION

TWC2 • MARUAH

## CAUSE

Migrant Workers • Human Rights



LABORING  
*for*  
RIGHTS



Mathi being sworn in as a Nominated Member of Parliament in 2001.



Mathi (right) representing AWARE at CEDAW in New York in 2011.



Mathi (second from right) at an event celebrating International Migrant's Day 2005 organised by TWC2.

In glistening city-state Singapore, it would be easy to overlook the needs of migrant workers. Even as they help to power the economy, they do not have much money, identity, or voice. However, in the world according to Braema Mathi, the founder of TWC2, these workers also have rights. She has worked tirelessly to champion their rights and to uphold their dignity.

It is not just migrant workers who get Mathi's attention. She also cares and fights for abused women, trafficked persons, poor children, the disabled, and the elderly. Throughout her life, this serial social entrepreneur has spoken up for the disenfranchised in parliament, the media, and civil society organizations.

Her focus is advocacy, which she believes is the path towards long-lasting systemic change. A common thread of her work is human rights, a cause for which MARUAH had been created. And by far, making MARUAH work will be Mathi's greatest challenge to date.



### THE RIGHTS SPARK

Muawanatal Chasanah was a 19-year-old teenager from Indonesia who weighed a healthy 50kg when she arrived to work as a domestic worker in Singapore. During the 16 months that she worked for her employers, Ng Hua Chye and his wife, Tan Chai Hong, caring for their home and their two very young children, she was repeatedly, and often violently, assaulted.

Her life finally came to a brutal end on December 1, 2001. Ng punched her in the face and chest, and kicked her hard in the back when he suspected she had eaten some of his daughter's porridge. Chasanah died the following day, her intestines partially perforated. The autopsy revealed over 200 injuries on her body caused by her being whipped, kicked, punched, burned, and scalded. When she left Singapore and the world, she was an emaciated 36 kg, half-starved, and still in her youth.

No one in the Ng family stopped the abuse. Nor did the doctors who examined her during her obligatory six-monthly check-ups. A neighbor, Mr Neo, who was interviewed by the press, said that even if he had known of the abuse, he would not have reported it to the police. "It's not my business. [Ng] can do what he wants; that's his problem," said Mr Neo. "Anyway, God can see."<sup>1</sup>

### TRANSIENT WORKERS COUNT TOO

United by a sense of total outrage on the Chasanah case, four stalwart members of a woman's rights group, Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE)<sup>2</sup>—Braema Mathi, Constance Singam, Dana Lam, and Sara Dean—met at a café to discuss the case that had made headline news. They were outraged especially by the neighbor's disregard for the poor maid's plight and his flippant transference of responsibilities to God. The more these four friends talked, the more convinced they became about the need for citizen action.

They proposed forming a sub-committee in AWARE to examine the rights of foreign domestic workers. But the governing body at

AWARE was then ambivalent about the proposal since this was not directly a women's rights cause; rather, it was about the right of any employee to reasonable work conditions and decent treatment from the employer.<sup>3</sup> Undaunted, the four friends issued an open call for action through their individual networks.

The initiative was initially called The Working Committee 2 (or TWC2 for short) as it was modeled on an earlier civil society group called The Working Committee.<sup>4</sup> As the initiative picked momentum, it was renamed to Transient Workers Count Too, retaining the acronym "TWC2."<sup>5</sup>

Chasanah became a symbol for the marginalized, TWC2 became the voice for the dignity of (migrant) labor, and Mathi emerged as the leader of the group.

Mathi was an ideal candidate. She was enthusiastic and willing to drive the campaign. It helped that she was a Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP)<sup>6</sup> from 2001 to 2003, which made it easier to canvas support for a difficult issue.

The early days of TWC2 were a whirlwind of activities. A platform and an identity were forged. The first public meeting was held on October 11, 2002. Over 120 people signed up. An advocacy campaign for nine projects over nine months was hatched. Key partners were brought in.<sup>7</sup>

With her team of volunteers, Mathi quickly identified the major issues. Tasks were assigned.<sup>8</sup> An additional 30 volunteers joined.

To mark the need to love and offer dignity to one another, TWC2 timed its launch of the campaign "Dignity Overdue"<sup>9</sup> to be on February 14, 2003, which was also Valentine's Day. Foreign domestic workers spoke in public for the first time in Singapore.

When TWC2 was constituted as a society<sup>10</sup> in 2004, Mathi was elected as its first president. Foreign domestic workers were not the only ones that needed help and, in time, TWC2's mission included construction and other low-income migrant workers.

## MIGRANT WORKERS

Migrant workers are globally recognized as a socially vulnerable group. Their vulnerability stems from the fact that their rights are often insufficiently protected by the laws of the host countries. Since migrant workers are typically more desperate for jobs, less organized, and less informed, they are often exploited by middlemen and employers. Their hardships are compounded by both the 3-D (dirty, dangerous and difficult) nature of the jobs available to them, and host countries' policies that are often designed to restrict the numbers of unskilled workers.<sup>11</sup>

Globally, there are some 232 million migrants.<sup>12</sup> Some are documented workers while many fall under the radar. Migrant laborers remit about US\$454 billion to their home (developing) countries.<sup>13</sup> However, many suffer from terrible work conditions, abuse, sexual harassment, exorbitant financial costs, and psychological strains. The UN regards migrant workers as a group that faces undue job discrimination—this despite progress in general anti-discrimination laws.<sup>14</sup>

Singapore has one of Asia's highest proportions of foreign workers. Its high economic growth has been achieved, in part, through an increasing reliance on migrant labor that, in 2014, made up more than 37 percent of the total workforce.<sup>15</sup> One in five Singaporean households has a foreign domestic helper.<sup>16</sup>

Of the 1.3 million non-resident workers<sup>17</sup> in Singapore, the majority is in the marine and construction sectors.<sup>18</sup> These workers come primarily from Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Thailand.

As Singapore revved up its foreign workforce input in tandem with its blistering rate of GDP growth, its laws, policies, and attitudes have not kept pace.

The *Unmet Social Needs in Singapore* report<sup>19</sup> identifies foreign workers as one of six vulnerable groups that deserve urgent attention. In particular, the report noted a tiered approach

to migrant workers in Singapore. Those with better skills are treated as “foreign talents”—expatriates who enjoy positive social status and income, and are often wooed with offers of permanent residency. Those with lesser skills such as foreign nurses have a lower status and fewer privileges, but they still have good contracts in public institutions and private companies. However, those who are unskilled or semi-skilled receive the shortest end of the employment stick. These work permit holders are employed on tight and often one-sided short-term contracts, and are easily exploited and abused by employers and recruitment agents.

On top of this, the working and living conditions of the unskilled or semi-skilled workers leave much to be desired.<sup>20</sup> Employers are known to make improper deductions on agreed wages, pay less than the contracted wages, and dismiss workers at a whim.<sup>21</sup> Most of these workers come to Singapore already indebted to middlemen and recruitment agents for amounts that range from eight to 18 months of their agreed wages.<sup>22</sup> The media occasionally reports about workers experiencing physical if not psychological abuse.

The law has been of some but limited help as Singapore plays catch-up to the increasing campaigning by local NGOs and international organizations for better protection of migrant workers. To date, Singapore is not a signatory to the Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families, and the recent International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention on Decent Work for Domestic Workers.<sup>23</sup>

However, the government has moved on several other fronts. In 2004, the Ministry of Manpower set up a Well-Being Department in its Foreign Manpower Division to address the management and protection of foreign manpower, especially in the aspects of accommodation, working conditions, and physical wellbeing.

In 2009, the Employment of Foreign Manpower Act was passed to regulate the employment of foreign employees and to

protect their wellbeing. Unfortunately, the Act excludes foreign domestic workers because their work is in the informal home setting. Mathi points out that this means a foreign domestic worker is not assured of fair wages, timely payment, and limits to work hours. The employer has the prerogative to cancel the work permit and immediately deport a foreign domestic helper to her home country without having to provide substantive justifications, effectively ruling out any effective and timely official intervention.

### **NGOs TO THE FORE**

Where government and employers have fallen behind, a few NGOs like TWC2 have risen to seek to fill the gap.

Among the first was a Catholic charitable organization, the Archdiocesan Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People (ACMI).<sup>24</sup> It was set up in 1998 to provide social and legal assistance, as well as counseling and befriending services to all migrant workers independent of race, language, or religion. ACMI currently does case work for migrants in need, operates a training centre to upgrade their skills, provides food, and runs an advocacy and public education program.

Another prominent NGO is the Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics (HOME).<sup>25</sup> Founded by Bridget Lew in 2004 with the initial goal of providing direct services to migrant workers in need, it has expanded its services to meet the growing needs of this group. Today, HOME runs shelters, helpdesks, legal services, and training courses, and mobilizes the community through campaigns and education programs.

Other organizations that have emerged include Aidha (micro-business skills training), the Philippine Bayanihan Society (skills upgrading of Filipino workers), HealthServe (health of migrant workers), and the Migrant Workers Centre (fair employment practices).<sup>26</sup>



TWC2 stands out for its unflinching focus on advocacy, research, and public education. It believes that advocacy is required for systemic improvement. Though TWC2 added direct services in 2006 and a food program for migrant workers in 2008, advocacy remains its core purpose.

Advocacy is difficult, particularly in Singapore, but Mathi has never wavered.<sup>27</sup> She consistently engages policy makers, and business and community leaders, to change attitudes, and improve policies and administrative responses.

And she has had some successes, starting with the issue of identity. From the beginning, Mathi sought to banish the word “maid” from the lingua franca for its derogatory connotations. Through block parties<sup>28</sup> and publicity campaigns, “foreign domestic helper” and “foreign domestic worker” are now increasingly common terms. Mathi sees the shift as significant because it focuses employers on the role of the person as a worker, and not a servant waiting hand and foot on her master and mistress.

Perhaps, the biggest success—which came after Mathi had stepped down from TWC2<sup>29</sup>—has been the “One Day Off”<sup>30</sup> campaign, which took 10 years of active campaigning before legislation was passed to mandate a day off a week for foreign domestic helpers.<sup>31</sup>

In retrospect, it is hard to believe that while more than half the foreign domestic workers in Singapore work an average of 14 hours a day, only 12 percent were given a day off per week.<sup>32</sup> The reason that employers cited for not giving a day off ranged from their own household needs (for example, an elderly household member who required round the clock care) to apprehensions about wayward relationships and distractions that these foreign domestic helpers may encounter on their days off.

In 2003, Mathi and TWC2 started the “One Day Off” campaign by literally knocking on doors, seeking to persuade employers to send their foreign domestic helpers to the void

decks at the bottom of the blocks of government housing flats for parties on Sundays.<sup>33</sup> Eventually, the campaign needed to scale up and go beyond this manpower-intensive mode of engagement. TWC2 teamed up with other NGOs, and the campaign went national with media support and a special campaign website.<sup>34</sup>

When the Singapore Government announced the mandatory weekly rest day in March 2012, it said that this would improve productivity and that it was in line with basic international labor standards.<sup>35</sup> There was no acknowledgment of the decade-long campaign by the NGOs. However, in a poignant expression of gratitude, one foreign domestic helper, Juliet Ugay, wrote to a local newspaper, thanking both the government and “the years of campaigning by the NGOs,” adding that “the news brought tears of joy to us all.”<sup>36</sup>

TWC2 also joined forces with HOME, MARUAH, AWARE, UN National Committee of Women, and Project X to advocate against human trafficking in Singapore.<sup>37</sup> This involves foreign men and women who are promised jobs in Singapore but end up being exploited.<sup>38</sup> Many such women are forced into prostitution. Whilst some may have come willingly into sex work, the conditions are often inhuman such as servicing construction workers in the forests.

When the law catches up with many of those trafficked, they are usually classified as immigration offenders (rather than victims) as they often come into Singapore on social visit passes.<sup>39</sup> Various reports from local and international groups as well as the US State Department<sup>40</sup> on the rising number of human trafficking incidents have pushed the government to address the Palermo Protocol (or Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children).<sup>41</sup>

The government finally launched the Singapore Inter-Agency Task Force on Trafficking in 2010, following which, it established a National Plan of Action that covered the four “P”s of

Prevention, Prosecution, Protection and Partnership with 31 initiatives to combat Trafficking in Persons.<sup>42</sup>

Mathi is pleased with the willingness by the government to now recognize these trafficked persons as victims rather than offenders. She notes further that the alignment of the initiatives with the conditions set out in the Palermo Protocol are a step in the right direction towards adopting a victim-centered approach. The government later passed an anti-human trafficking law in 2014 and held many rounds of consultations with NGOs. However, many noted that the protection mandate is still weak.<sup>43</sup> Mathi said that this is just the beginning of tackling “a social problem that has been allowed to stay underground and that the work ahead is still plenty.”

### **THE SERIAL SOCIAL ENTREPRENEUR**

The plight of migrant workers is only one of many social causes that Mathi has pursued in her life. Having a strong affinity for the vulnerable, the rights of women, children, the lower-income earners, and the elderly are all close to her heart.

Mathi’s social activism started early when her mother offered her home as a refuge to women in distress. Mathi grew up learning about the “haves” and the “have-nots.” Her mother may have taught her compassion but it was her father, a principled man, who taught her critical thinking, about world affairs, and the difference between what he calls “propaganda” and reality.

Mathi’s first step into advocacy began in 1979 at the National Institute of Education where she was training to be a teacher. She was in the Student Council and, together with a bold and inspiring council president, she risked the displeasure of the Institute by taking on advocacy-related projects to improve the academic life of students. Nevertheless, she managed to complete her certificate in teaching and went on to teach for a decade before furthering her studies at the University of Nottingham in 1988.

While she served as the President of the Overseas Students' Bureau at the university, Mathi sharpened her skills for advocacy volunteering. She would take this experience back to Singapore where her work with AWARE and the newspapers allowed Mathi's social consciousness to bloom.

After completing her postgraduate studies in 1995, Mathi became a journalist at Singapore's largest English broadsheet, the *Straits Times*. Mathi brought a heightened awareness of social disconnections and income inequalities to her reporting. As a reporter, she saw people's lives as well as the policy gaps and misses that could create havoc in their lives up close.

In the course of her rounds in the community, she came across children who frequently went to school hungry or missed school as they had no money for transport. She wrote about them in the *Straits Times* in 1999. The article "The Comeback Kids"<sup>44</sup> featured four children who overcame tremendous personal odds to do well in school despite hardships and deprivations that seemed alien to most middle-class Singaporeans.

After the story ran, Mathi's phone rang non-stop with offers of support and financial aid. Emboldened, she supported the groups lobbying the Ministry of Education to pass the Compulsory Education Act. In 2003, her efforts came to fruition and the government mandated that young children, with the exception of children with disabilities, need to remain in national schools till they are 15.<sup>45</sup>

Meanwhile, with the newspaper's community pages as a platform and her own considerable voice to articulate the cause of troubled and hungry children in affluent Singapore, Mathi initiated what eventually became known as the *Straits Times* School Pocket Money Fund.<sup>46</sup>

This modest initiative, initially unnoticed by management but staunchly supported by rank and file journalists, was launched on Children's Day in 2000. It raised S\$1.3 million (US\$1 million)

in its inaugural year. Today, the ST Pocket Money Fund is an iconic charity fed by donations from children saving coins in their piggy banks, as well as substantial corporate donations and generous individual gifts. To date, the fund has disbursed S\$42 million (US\$33 million) to over 128,000 children from low income families.<sup>47</sup>

Mathi left her “first love,” journalism, in 2001 after seven years of pounding the pavements and meeting editorial deadlines. She became the head of communications at a hospital for four years, then a gender studies coordinator at a research institute before becoming a freelance consultant juggling several roles and volunteer organizations. All these roles she took on while looking after her ailing mother.

Concurrently, Mathi’s long engagement with AWARE provided a continuing channel for her social consciousness. She first joined AWARE as a volunteer in 1992. She led its Media Watch group, joined its strategy review committee, and was elected president for two terms from 2006. During her tenure, she created a Male Chapter; started the anti-violence White Ribbon Campaign; helped initiate research projects on working women, women’s fertility, marriage agencies, and casinos; and submitted legislative amendments against sex offenders of minors overseas. She also started a CEDAW (UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) Committee within AWARE.<sup>48</sup>

One of Mathi’s most valued experiences has been her role as a NMP. She was nominated to the position by AWARE and selected in 2001.

The position of a NMP, unique to Singapore, was created to add alternative voices in parliament.<sup>49</sup> As a NMP, Mathi was thus expected to speak up. And she did—for migrant workers and women’s rights, of course, but also for older teachers, social workers, the disabled, the elderly and people being trafficked. She raised questions about the charity scene and, in particular,

the operations of the National Kidney Foundation. She spoke on almost all the new bills that were passed. One clear outcome of her lobbying was the setting up of the registry for social workers and counselors through a clear accreditation process.

Mathi says she treasured her time as NMP. She learned to work better with, and in, the system, instead of just lobbying from outside it. She realized she needed to make contacts inside the government ministries in order to effect dialogues for change. She began to appreciate that while frontline and middle management were willing to take risks, they needed the “nod” from those higher up who tended to be cautious and risk averse. As Mathi puts it, “It’s the little people who will take the risks to help because they feel for a cause and want to make things happen.”

### **MARUAH FOR DIGNITY**

One common thread that ties together Mathi’s multiple social causes is human rights.

As she sees it, human rights should not be complex. It is essentially about recognizing the innate dignity of the individual and learning how to treat the person with respect.

From her standpoint, different layers of society should be able to connect with human rights as part of everyday life. For a low-wage cleaner who is struggling for survival, human rights is about knowing that society will prevent him/her from going hungry and that he/she can live with dignity; that he/she has recourse to good policies, not just the charity dollar. For a white-collar worker, it is about the right to be treated well and with dignity at the workplace. Even for a hard-nosed politician, it is about understanding that the majority principle does not work anymore; the new world requires policies that govern redistribution of wealth, accessibility and subsidies.

In Singapore, “human rights” is an unfamiliar term often associated with the West and that the government seems to regard as

ancillary to economic growth. A review of the state of human rights in Singapore is not flattering. As of 2015, it has ratified only three out of nine major international human rights treaties<sup>50</sup> while the Democracy Index ranks Singapore 75 out of 167 countries.<sup>51</sup> It does better in the Global Democracy Ranking, notching position 39 out of 112 countries.<sup>52</sup>

MARUAH is now the main vehicle that Mathi uses to drive the human rights agenda.

It started with Mathi responding to a call in 2007 from The Working Group for an ASEAN Human Rights Mechanism<sup>53</sup> to host a roundtable in Singapore ahead of the ASEAN Summit 2008.

The group had its first meeting on September 1, 2007, and Mathi volunteered to be the interim coordinator to review the structure and approach for a Singapore Working Group. Little did she anticipate that she would be caught in a crossfire from other NGOs such as the Think Centre which, until then, had been the focal point of the mechanism. She was embroiled in controversy and lost a few friends. In the course of this, a mysterious note was circulated in *TR Emeritus*, a local blog, about Mathi being planted by the ruling People's Action Party as a detractor and disruptor. Mathi had her suspicions about the source of that note but felt that she should just push on and not let this become a distraction.<sup>54</sup>

Human rights as a cause was already very difficult work in the political climate of the time with few risk-takers. A pragmatic national outlook also made human rights a very difficult concept to grasp.

But a small and dedicated group finally came together to constitute MARUAH (which means "dignity" in Malay). Mathi became its focal point.

One of Mathi's first priorities was to set up the right organizational structure. She put some well-known activists on the board.<sup>55</sup> She made it clear that MARUAH would have neither

members of nor funding from any political party. She reckoned that MARUAH could sustain itself with member donations and funds from local and international foundations.

Then came a bombshell. In November 2010, MARUAH was unexpectedly gazetted as a political association when it applied to become a society. This placed immediate, severe restrictions on its funding. MARUAH was barred from accepting funds from any foreign source, it had to identify and declare all donations, no matter how small, once the aggregate sum of S\$5,000 (US\$4,000) had been reached, and it could not accept any foreign participants at its events. The gazettement was perplexing to Mathi. MARUAH sent a strongly worded letter of appeal to the Prime Minister's Office, but to no avail.

Undaunted, Mathi and her colleagues continued with their work. They initiated the NGO report for the Universal Periodic Review in 2011 and coordinated a combined report with eight NGOs.<sup>56</sup> They sent out some 50 letters of appeal to potential donors in Singapore and received much positive feedback on the organization. Only one came back with an offer of S\$3,500 (US\$2,800).

Today, the future of MARUAH and Mathi's role are uncertain. Mathi sometimes feels that the Internal Security Act<sup>57</sup> hangs over her and others. "Then you think it is quite egocentric to feel that we are being observed. But such thoughts do come and go." She cannot see why she should ever be arrested but then she never expected MARUAH to be gazetted as a political organization. She worries more, though, about a wrong choice of words and of being sued. She strongly believes in not apologizing if there was truth in what she had said; yet the fate of activists like J. B. Jeyaratnam<sup>58</sup>, an acquaintance of her father, scares her. "This is the constant tussle for all of us. There are good people who have stepped forward to be part of MARUAH; we all have to look out for each other and stay true to the issue at the same time."



Mathi will tell you upfront that she is not sure of how MARUAH will pan out. She plans to stick with it, maybe for another five years, maybe more. For now, there are many daily inspirations, many big stories to tell.

### **BEING HUMAN**

Mathi still remembers the first time she thought about wealth redistribution. She was 10 years old. Enamored by fairy tales, she believed, rather simplistically, that if poor girls married rich men, then there would be no more poor families.

Forty years on, that world view has deepened to include more practical solutions and an understanding of power structures, although her need to right the imbalance has not wavered.

The cause for social justice still burns strong. When she was younger, the instant gratification of seeing a smile when she helped or befriended someone was enough. But as her work broadened to include the kinds of policy changes that could impact more people, she has had to accept more facelessness in her work. What keeps her going is the value of asking for social justice, fair play and ensuring that society willingly and routinely provides those opportunities.

In her words: “How can we sit back and not do something about a child, an old man, a disabled person, a woman who struggles daily without basic necessities, just because he or she was born into a family that has less, or in a country that has less? It is our duty and our opportunity to share what we have. And also, it is more important to ask, if when we took for ourselves, was it also at their expense further down the chain?” ■

## BRIEF FACTS

### BRAEMA MATHI

- 1958 Born in Singapore to Ceylonese Tamil parents
- 1981 Obtained certificate in teaching, Institute of Education in Singapore
- 1991 Graduated with Bachelor of Arts, Nottingham University
- 1992 Post-graduate research student at the Nanyang Technological University as its first research scholar in the School Of Arts
- 1993 Started volunteering at AWARE
- 1995 Journalist, the *Straits Times*
- 1999 Wrote article, “The Comeback Kids,” which led to the setting up of the ST Pocket Money Fund
- 2001 Head of Corporate Communications, Alexandra Hospital  
Nominated Member of Parliament (until 2003)
- 2002 President, TWC2 (until 2007)
- 2004 Visiting Research Fellow, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies  
President, AWARE (until 2006)
- 2007 President, MARUAH  
Rejoined the *Straits Times* as Senior Writer (until 2008)
- 2008 Regional President, the International Council of Social Welfare

### AWARDS & RECOGNITION

- 1981 National Institute of Education Singapore’s Public Spiritedness Awards
- 1991 Nottingham University’s Peter and Elizabeth Marsden Prize for contribution to the University and academic competency
- 1999 *The Straits Times*’ Story of the Year (“Comeback Kids”)
- 2006 Singapore Indian Association’s Woman of the Year (Community Service)
- 2014 Singapore Advocacy Award’s Civil Society Advocate of the Year

## SINGAPORE AT A GLANCE

<b>LAND AREA</b>	687 sq km or 265 sq miles
<b>POPULATION</b>	5 million
<b>GDP</b>	US\$307.9 billion or US\$56,286 per capita
<b>ETHNIC GROUPS</b>	Chinese 74.2%, Malay 13.3%, Indian 9.2%, Eurasian and others 3.3%
<b>RELIGIONS</b>	Buddhist 33.9%, Muslim 14.3%, Taoist 11.3%, Christian 11.0%, Catholic 7.1%, Hindu 5.2%, Others 0.8%, None 16.4%
<b>LANGUAGES</b>	English, Malay, Mandarin & Tamil
<b>GOVERNMENT</b>	Unitary parliamentary constitutional republic
<b>CAPITAL</b>	Singapore

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Karen Ho and Elena Chong, “Starved, Battered, Dead...; Nine Months of Maid Abuse Went Unnoticed,” *Straits Times*, July 20, 2002.
- 2 AWARE is a gender equality advocacy group formed in Singapore in 1985. Its website is <http://www.aware.org.sg>.
- 3 AWARE was also less keen on taking on victim-centered approaches as that was how it saw the foreign domestic worker issue whereas, at that time, AWARE was more focused on nurturing leadership among its women.
- 4 The Working Committee (TWC) was formed at the end of 1998 by an informal group of people to reflect and consider how civil society can be strengthened in Singapore. The process and results were captured in the book by Constance Singam, et al., *Building Social Space in Singapore* (Singapore: Select Publishing, 2002).
- 5 The name change was suggested by Dr Russell Heng who is the current president of TWC2 (2011 to present). The early days of TWC2 are described in the book by John Gee and Elaine Ho, *Dignity Overdue* (Singapore: Select Publishing, 2006). TWC’s website is <http://www.twc2.org.sg>.
- 6 See explanation of NMP in the section, “The Serial Social Entrepreneur.”
- 7 Mathi felt she owed much to Constance Singam, who pulled in others and used her home as a discussion venue, as well as academic activists Brenda Yeoh and Shirlena Huang, and their research assistants, Wong Fang Ying and Elaine Ho.
- 8 The resulting papers were:
  - “Foreign Domestic Workers: Invisible Under the Law; National and International Legal System” (Sucheta Misra and Elaine Ho, with acknowledgements to Chandra Mohan);
  - “Unregulated Business: How Foreign Domestic Workers are Recruited, Trained and Deployed in Singapore” (Tan Hui Yee, Puvaneswari Sundaram, Liew Kai Khiun, with acknowledgements to Mandy Heng and Ng Wei Chian);
  - “Support Systems for Foreign Domestic Workers” (John Gee, with contributions from Sara Dean and Dana Lam). “Reliance on Foreign Domestic Workers: Alternatives to the Problems” (Wong Fang Ying and Braema Mathi); and
  - “Understanding Domestic Worker Abuse in Singapore: The Cultural Aspects of Exploitation” (Constance Singam, Kelly Fu and Christopher Len, assisted by Ng Wei Chian).
- 9 “Dignity Overdue” was the slogan adopted by the TWC2 for the campaigning of foreign domestic workers in Singapore, and which later became the title of the book describing the movement.
- 10 There are several ways in which a nonprofit organization can be constituted in Singapore. One is for a number of people coming together to register as a society with the Registry of Societies.

- 11 “Migrant Labour: Urgent Response Required,” Ethical Trading Initiative, a paper presented at Workshop 2 of the ETI Conference 2008; Piyasiri Wickramasekera, “Asian Labour Migration: Issues and Challenges in an Era of Globalization,” *International Migration Papers* 57, August 2002.
- 12 “Labour Migration,” International Labour Organization, <http://www.ilo.org/global/topics/labour-migration/lang--en/index.htm>.
- 13 This figure is a projection for year 2015 taken from “Migration and Remittances,” World Bank, <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/NEWS/0,,contentMDK:20648762~pagePK:64257043~piPK:437376~theSitePK:4607,00.html>.
- 14 “Migrants and Minorities Still Vulnerable to Discrimination at Work,” UN News Centre, May 16, 2011, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=38398&Cr=migrant&Cr1>.
- 15 Amelia Tan, “1.32m Foreign Workers in Singapore; the Bulk in Construction and Marine Sectors,” *Straits Times*, August 6, 2014. The percentage of 37 percent is computed based on a total labour force of 3.53 million in 2014 taken from “Labour Force,” Ministry of Manpower, <http://stats.mom.gov.sg/Pages/Labour-Force-Summary-Table.aspx>.
- 16 Derived from 2014 figures: 222,500 foreign domestic worker permits and 1,200,000 resident household. Figures taken from “Foreign Workforce Numbers,” Ministry of Manpower, <http://www.mom.gov.sg/statistics-publications/others/statistics/Pages/ForeignWorkforceNumbers.aspx>; “Latest Data,” Department of Statistics Singapore, <http://www.singstat.gov.sg/statistics/latest-data#20>.
- 17 This figure does not include the 539,000 permanent residents (foreigners who are allowed to live and work in the country with much of the same benefits as citizens. They are often given such status because they have qualifications, talents and resources to bring to the country and are usually among the higher income earners in the population).
- 18 Amelia Tan, “1.32m Foreign Workers in Singapore; the Bulk in Construction and Marine Sectors,” *Straits Times*, August 6, 2014.
- 19 Mathi and Mohamed, *Unmet Social Needs in Singapore: Singapore’s Social Structures and Policies, and Their Impact on Six Vulnerable Communities* (Singapore: Lien Center For Social Innovation, October 2011).
- 20 Examples are: Many construction workers are transported to work in open air lorries and sleep in crowded conditions where up to 15 workers can be cramped into rooms meant for eight persons; see “HOME’s Responses to New Foreign Employee Dormitory Act,” *Online Citizen*, February 26, 2015, <http://www.theonlinecitizen.com/2015/02/homes-responses-to-new-foreign-employee-dormitory-act/>. Some domestic workers sleep in bomb shelters on the floor with little boundaries between work and rest periods. See “Include Maids in Employment Act: Letter by Jolovan Wham, Executive Director, Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics

(HOME),” *TODAY*, March 19, 2015, <http://phone.todayonline.com/voices/include-maids-employment-act>.

- 21 From *Unmet Social Needs in Singapore* (see endnote 19). Some of the deductions include medical fees, minor issues such as broken plates, and even a penalty for taking too much time in the shower.
- 22 Foreign workers in the construction or shipyard industry typically pay employment agencies between \$8,000 and \$10,000 worth of fees. Figures are from “Singapore’s Employment Agency Acts and Rules: Proposals for Amendment,” Transient Workers Count Too, May 2010, <http://twc2.org.sg/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Employment-Agencies-Act-Review1.pdf>.
- 23 As of the date of publication, Singapore has either ratified or acceded to only four conventions:
  - CEDAW or Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women,
  - CRC or Convention on the Rights of the Child,
  - CRC-OP-AC or Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, and
  - CRPD—Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.
- 24 Archdiocesan Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People (ACMI), <http://www.acmi.org.sg>.
- 25 Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics, <http://home.org.sg>.
- 26 Websites of these organizations: Aidha, <http://www.aidha.org>; Philippine Bayanihan Society (Singapore), <http://www.bayanihancentre.org>; HealthServe, <http://www.healthserve.org.sg>; Migrant Workers Centre, <http://www.mwc.org.sg>. Note that MWC refers to itself as a nonprofit organization (NPO). As it is set up by the National Trade Union Congress (NTUC) and the Singapore National Employers’ Federation (SNEF), there are some who would not call it an NGO. There are other NGOs/NPOs that support migrant workers as part of a broader group of beneficiaries, but they are not solely or primarily focused on migrant workers in Singapore. For more information on people and organizations involved with migrant workers in Singapore, see [http://www.concern.sg/Migrant\\_Workers](http://www.concern.sg/Migrant_Workers).
- 27 Her other roles and background in AWARE, journalism, and as NMP are covered in the later part of the chapter.
- 28 “Block parties” refers to social parties and gatherings that are held at the void deck of a block of Housing Development Board flats or apartments.
- 29 Mathi stepped down as President of TWC2 in 2007, passing the mantle to John Gee. For a short while, she continued as Vice President to develop the research and advocacy arm. However, after TWC2, she continued to work hard on the migrant cause. She developed the concept to create a unit to help NGOs that work on migrant worker issues. Her idea did not come to fruition as the National Trade Union Congress (NTUC), the labour

movement, set up its Migrant Workers Centre to play that role. She also took up migrant worker issues as a researcher and speaker at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies where she started the Gender Studies Program. She raised the issue in alternative reports, first in 2007, and again in 2011 at the United Nations with the Convention on the Elimination of All Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) committee in New York, and at the Universal Periodic Review in Geneva.

- 30 The “One Day Off” campaign sought to educate and advocate for legislation for Singaporean employers to give foreign domestic workers a day off—which is the same benefit that they themselves are getting from their workplaces.
- 31 While a weekly rest day for foreign domestic workers (FDWs) is required, employers are however given the flexibility to compensate their foreign domestic workers with extra pay if the worker agrees to work on their rest day.
- 32 “Maids to Get Weekly Rest Days,” *AsiaOne*, March 5, 2012, <http://news.asiaone.com/News/Latest+News/Singapore/Story/A1Story20120305-331728.html>.
- 33 According to Mathi, TWC2 wrote to all grassroots organizations to co-organize the Day Off Parties and only two responded. Later, these two declined to proceed; the reason given was that the focus was on foreign workers and not the citizens.
- 34 The “DAY OFF—For a regular Day Off for domestic workers in Singapore” campaign was an initiative involving TWC2, HOME and UNIFEM (United Nations Development Fund for Women) Singapore. The website is <http://www.dayoff.sg>
- 35 The mandatory weekly day off applies to foreign domestic workers whose work permits are issued or renewed from January 1, 2013. See “Maids to get Weekly Rest Days,” *AsiaOne*, March 5, 2012, <http://news.asiaone.com/News/Latest+News/Singapore/Story/A1Story20120305-331728.html>.
- 36 Letter from Juliet Ugay, “Weekly Day Off Will Work with Good Communication,” *TODAY*, March 20, 2012.
- 37 Mathi helped to set up a Trafficking Committee in October 2011 in AWARE to prepare an advocacy document on legislation. In her own capacity, she conducts trafficking workshops for various service providers. She had also initiated a Southern Triangle (Riau Archipelago, Malaysia and Singapore) dialogue to look at synergies to help victims of trafficking.
- 38 See “Women Trafficked to Singapore Lured into Prostitution,” *Agence France-Presse*, September 1, 2008; Radha Basu, “Government Baffled by US Human Trafficking Rating,” *Straits Times*, June 16, 2007.
- 39 On a social visit pass, they are not allowed to work. In addition, some of these illegal foreign workers overstay the period granted on their social visit pass, another immigration offence.

- 40 In the latest report in 2014, Singapore was classified as a Tier 2 country, meaning that it was not fully compliant with the minimum international standards of protecting migrant workers from conditions of forced labour or forms of trafficking. In 2010, Singapore was downgraded from Tier 2 to Tier 2 Watch List, indicating the need to show more evidence of efforts in tackling the problem.
- 41 At the Committee on Elimination of Discrimination against Women 993rd & 994th Meetings (AM & PM), head of the Singapore delegation Halimah Binte Yacob, Minister of State for Community Development, Youth and Sports, acknowledged the “need to continually step up vigilance and strengthen legal measures” in response to questions on when Singapore might accede to the Palermo Protocol, <http://app.msf.gov.sg/Portals/0/Files/CEDAW/PressRelease.pdf>.
- 42 Pau Khan Khup Hanzo and Alistair D. B. Cook, “Trafficking In Persons: Singapore’s Evolving Responses,” NTS Alert, Centre For Non-Traditional Security Studies, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, April 2012; “Joint Civil Society Statement Regarding National Plan Of Action Against Trafficking In Persons,” AWARE, April 17, 2012 at <http://www.aware.org.sg/2012/04/joint-civil-society-statement-in-response-to-the-national-plan-of-action-against-trafficking-in-persons/>.
- 43 Prior to its passage, AWARE and a few other human rights activist responded to the proposed anti-trafficking bill in a joint statement to the inter-agency taskforce. In the statement, the relevant parties felt that the bill was “inadequate in providing protection and support to marginalised migrant workers in certain industries” and suggested ways for the Bill to ensure better protection. See “Civil Society Responds to the Proposed Anti-Trafficking Bill: April 15, 2014,” AWARE, <http://www.aware.org.sg/2014/04/civil-society-responds-to-the-proposed-anti-trafficking-bill/>. After the bill was passed and amidst criticisms, Minister of Parliament Christopher de Souza, who led the drafting of the laws, stressed that prevention was the best way to deal with the problem. See Joy Fang, “Anti-Human-Trafficking Laws Passed in Parliament,” *TODAY*, November 4, 2014.
- 44 Braema Mathi, “The Comeback Kids,” *Straits Times*, December 6, 1998.
- 45 The Compulsory Education Act requires children (except for special needs children) between the age of 6 and 15 and who are Singapore citizens to attend national schools. Exceptions are allowed for homeschooling or full-time religious institutions.
- 46 Also known as the “ST Pocket Money Fund,” at <http://www.stschoolpocketmoneyfund.org.sg/web/index.php>.
- 47 Information from ST Pocket Money Fund website as of April 2015, <http://www.stschoolpocketmoneyfund.org.sg/web/spmf-background.php>.
- 48 After she stepped down as President, Mathi chaired the CEDAW committee. She recently used CEDAW as a framework to develop a blueprint for research and advocacy in AWARE.



- 49 The NMP system was designed to bring more independent voices into a parliament that was almost exclusively dominated by a single political party, the People's Action Party. The NMP does not belong to a political party nor represent any constituency, and he or she is appointed by a parliamentary Select Committee rather than being elected by the electorate. Lim Puay Lim, "Nominated Member Of Parliament (NMP) Scheme," Singapore Infopedia, National Library Board, December 21, 2010.
- 50 Information about treaty ratification can be gathered from the United Nations Treaty Collection, <http://treaties.un.org/Pages/Treaties.aspx?id=4&subid=A&lang=en>.
- 51 "Malaysia Still a Flawed Democracy, says EIU," *TODAY*, January 23, 2015, <http://www.todayonline.com/world/asia/malaysia-still-flawed-democracy-says-eiu>. The 2014 Democracy Index, compiled by the Economist Intelligence Unit, is based on ratings for 60 indicators grouped into five categories: Electoral process and pluralism, civil liberties, the functioning of government, political participation and political culture.
- 52 Compiled by the Democracy Ranking Association in Austria, the Democracy Ranking Index refers to one political dimension and five non-political dimensions: (1) gender (socio-economic and educational gender equality); (2) economy (economic system); (3) knowledge (knowledge-based information society, research and education); (4) health (health status and health system); (5) environment (environmental sustainability), <http://democracyranking.org/wordpress/>.
- 53 With a primary goal of establishing an intergovernmental human rights commission for ASEAN, this coalition of national working groups is composed of representatives of government institutions, parliamentary human rights committees, the academe, and NGOs. The secretariat is based in Manila. Its website is <http://www.aseanhrmech.org/>.
- 54 "Is Braema Mathi of MARUAH a PAP Plant?" *TR Emeritus*, October 25, 2010, <http://www.tremeritus.com/2010/10/25/is-braema-mathi-of-maruah-a-pap-plant/> ; "Maruah's Response To Temasek Review Article," *TR Emeritus*, 25 October 2010, <http://www.tremeritus.com/2010/10/25/maruah%e2%80%99s-response-to-temasek-review-article/>.
- 55 The present office bearers at time of publication are: Braema Mathi, President; Siew Kum Hong, Vice-President; Lee Sze Yong, Secretary; and Sze Yaoas, Treasurer.
- 56 The Universal Periodic Review (UPR) involves a review of the human rights records of all UN Member States. It is a state-driven process, conducted under the auspices of the Human Rights Council. States can declare what actions they have taken to improve the human rights situations in their countries and to fulfil their human rights obligations, <http://www.upr-info.org/en/upr-process/what-is-it>.
- 57 ISA is a Singaporean law that permits the government to conduct investigations into security threats such as terrorism and espionage. Under

the act, the government has the right to arrest and detain individuals without trial for up to two years at a time.

- 58 J. B. Jeyaretnam was a prominent lawyer in Singapore who in 1981 became the first opposition politician in Singapore since independence in 1965; he was re-elected in 1984. The ruling government leaders successfully sued him in 1988 and 1997 for libel. He lost his seat in Parliament in 1986 following a conviction of falsely accounting the party's funds (the conviction was later overturned by the Privy Council). He was again removed from parliament in 2001 after being declared a bankrupt for failing to pay damages to PAP leaders after the libel suit. He died in 2008.

