

Connecting women

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Women in Singapore are getting more organised and networking to nurture and support themselves at professional and personal levels, says PARVATHI NAYAR

THERE'S a growing number of women's only associations in Singapore, and what's more, the newest of such women's networks show a rapidly growing membership rate: the Women's Register, launched earlier this month, already has more than 200 women members and at least four corporate members, including executive search companies; while the Singapore Women's Initiative for Ageing Successfully (Wings), which started seven months ago, has 3,000 members.

Perhaps it's the feeling of Singapore not being an equal opportunity playing field - and the lack of enough women in top management positions - that's fuelling this growth. But counter-intuitively, 'the existence of women's organisations is independent of there being a level playing field or not', says Trina Liang-Lin, who heads the Asia Fixed Income Research at ABN Amro and is current president of the Financial Women's Association (FWA). Rather, she sees them as shared interest groupings with synergistic benefits.

The popularity of such networks is because they connect 'women with a common interest, be it charity, a hobby, a particular sport, or a profession', elaborates Tan Su Shan, head of private banking at Citigroup Singapore. 'A women's network provides a safe, trusted environment to network, share issues - or grievances - or seek help'. Ms Tan founded the FWA in 2001 as both a networking and self-improvement platform.

Wee Wan Joo, president, Singapore Council of Womens Organisations (SCWO), is more blunt in her assessment: 'There is still no gender equity and in view of the prevalent unsatisfactory status of women of different communities, women's organisations were formed to attempt to safeguard the interests of women.' The SCWO was set up in 1980 as a coordinating body for all women's organisations in Singapore, to promote women's status in fields including education, economics, social welfare and culture.

Lawyer Arfat Selvam, chairperson of the Women's Register launched by SCWO, explains it is an online resource tool, open exclusively to all women. 'It is a secure database of women with experience and skills who can register their interest in taking up leadership appointments in the public and private sectors and voluntary organisations.' Undeniably, it's also a place where organisations can find the right woman for the job.

A leg-up in the professional world is no bad thing. As Ms Liang-Lin points out, 'the professional Singaporean woman is a relatively new identity, albeit a rapidly evolving one, particularly over the past 10 or so years. It is important for younger women in our country to see and identify with generations of women in Singapore who have achieved success. This is one of the top three topics that younger women in my industry - global banking - ask and think about'.

Drawing a more macro picture, Ms Selvam says that 'culturally, Asian women hesitate to promote themselves. The Women's Register serves to put them on a platform where their talent can be displayed, so they can contribute to society and build networking opportunities'.

The Register is designed with confidentiality in mind; only registered corporate members

have access to the database, but even they don't have contact details of the registrants. For example, says Ms Selvam, 'if a corporate member initiates a database search for a speaker on health issues, women who fit the profile are automatically notified; these women can then choose whether they wish to make contact with the corporate member making the search'.

As to the exclusion of men from women's networks, Ms Tan points out the obvious: That men have long had their old boys networks - originating from army days, golf and other shared activities - which may be informal but are nonetheless very powerful. Adds Ms Tan: 'I think women are just well-organised creatures, so if we network/socialise with each other, we decide to do it 'properly' with a full-fledged, properly set up society.'

While there are women's associations based on nationalities, from a more personal/business development point of view, you could say the women's organisations are set up either around specialised business interests, or to help community, or with a mixed agenda to help themselves and community.

Eminent orthopaedic surgeon and former NMP Kanwaljit Soin has been instrumental in the creation of many prominent local women's organisations such as the Association of Women's Doctors; most recently, she co-founded Wings, which depends on grants from organisations such as the Tsao Foundation.

'Wings,' says Dr Soin, 'was started by some of us who were concerned that older women in Singapore did not have access to information that would enable them to age successfully.' Wings's triple aims - the promotion of health, wealth and happiness - is achieved through means such as workshops, counselling, financial intelligence training and support groups. 'We offer knowledge and hope that knowledge will change behaviours, but that takes time,' says Dr Soin.

For example, the Association of Women for Action and Research (Aware), founded in 1985, might have initially come under criticism for its outspoken advocacy of women's rights and issues; however, as Dr Soin says, 'by persisting in its message, Aware has seeped into public consciousness. It has been a catalyst in making the society understand gender issues, and can unabashedly take credit for preparing the ground that enabled many women's networks to spring up'.

Which brings us to the question: Have far too many such networks sprung up? In terms of professional women's organisations, Dr Soin feels there can never be too many, because 'they are formed organically when there is a sizeable number of women in a particular profession, and the need is felt for answers to common problems'. The sizeable and/or growing numbers are also cited as proof that such organisations answer a need.

'It's important for women to have networks,' continues Dr Soin, 'because women operate under specific constraints. They have more juggling to do than men, and benefit from sharing information on their means of coping.' As Ms Wee adds, within the context of a women's group, 'issues and programmes can be much more focused'.

Noteworthy and unusual in this respect is Shell Singapore's Network of Women (NOW); starting out as an informal group in 2000, it was formalised as an employee network in 2003. Though not, strictly speaking, a 'women's only' network, NOW strives to bring up gender differences in the workplace and create greater awareness among all staff, of issues related to female employees.

Ngiam Siew Wei, president of NOW, cites many examples of how the network has made a positive impact. For example, 'NOW launched the first mothers' room - for breast-feeding mothers to express milk - in Shell House on Mothers' Day 2005. The room proved to be overwhelmingly popular; by the beginning of 2006, it was at full capacity. With the support of NOW, volunteers banded together to successfully set up additional mothers' rooms in Shell House; this facility is now included in every new renovation of floor space'.

Some also query whether the large numbers of women's networks act to splinter rather than cohere women's groups. But women who are members of more than one women's

professional network say it actually facilitates ways for them to work together. At one level, 'as a group we are far more effective in getting funds raised and doing good, rather than individually', says Ms Tan. Also, FWA members 'have found that we truly enjoy the ability to do some good together, especially to support other women's causes, from helping Unifem to working with Aware'.

Unifem Singapore's president Saleemah Ismail agrees. She explains that the organisation was set up with the purpose of working towards women's empowerment and gender equality in Singapore and South-east Asia; towards this goal, 'we work very closely with many women's organisations such as the FWA and the SCWO. There have been many outstanding women who have readily offered their shoulders for us to stand on. We stand tall and reach higher and further because we stand on shoulders of giants.'

Junie Foo, director of Global Corporates at Standard Chartered Bank, has found that networks such as the FWA 'encourage protegee-mentor relationships that are so useful in shaping our careers. Beyond that, we also find solid friendships and personal support. When I held my solo art exhibition last year, for example, many of the members were very encouraging and came to support it in full force'.

And then there's the emotional/psychological level, where such organisations can actually make a life-changing difference. A Wings member says how a woman she met in an exercise class organised by Wings told her that 'she was suffering from 'empty nest syndrome', and had had suicidal tendencies. But she's been to a psychiatrist and after joining Wings, made new friends and is finally coming out of her shell'.

Battlelines may still be drawn over the gender divide, but it's a misconception to think that women's organisations are primarily created to engage in those battle-fields. Rather, women's networks exist to nurture/facilitate/support women - in professional and personal playing fields.