

March 28: Newcomers defeat seasoned members to win nine of 12 positions on the executive committee. Former lawyer Claire Nazar, a member since January last year, elected unopposed as president.
April 8: Mrs Nazar resigns as president.
April 14: Aware's old guard leads 160 members in, calling for an extraordinary general meeting (EGM).

April 15: New exco meets to pick a president. DBS executive Josie Lau is picked. DBS issues a statement saying it does not support her taking up the post.
April 16: Two-time Aware president and former nominated MP Braema Mathi is told by e-mail she is no longer in charge of producing a key report on discrimination against women in Singapore.

April 17: Ms Lau issues a statement questioning the motives of the old guard in calling for an EGM and asks if they harbour another agenda. Old guard issues a statement to say its motives and objectives have been fully visible the past 25 years.
April 18: Veteran member and former president Constance Singam resigns as Aware's adviser.



Mrs Singam, who remains an Aware member, said that the new exco "showed a complete lack of respect" for her, ignored her advice and kept her out of an exco meeting that she had a right to attend.

Not gay v Christian

"I am not at all happy where this is going. This is not a gay versus Christian debate. It is getting away from what Aware stands for. We have spoken up and initiated discussion on a lot of much broader issues – foreign worker abuse, domestic abuse, financial intelligence, education, body image, sexual harassment. We address issues that have large and wide implications which affect society."

What Aware stands for

"Our (Aware's) values are based on the fundamental rights and responsibilities of women as women. These include being treated as informed individuals capable of choice, being deserving of opportunities equal to those of men in education, marriage and employment; and being able to control their own bodies, particularly with regard to sexual and reproductive health."

"By keeping her out of decisions, they are showing her no respect. Any little confidence we might have in them has just been washed away."

Postgraduate student Martha Lee, 32, said: "Constance has been with Aware for more than 20 years, and she would never resign without a good reason."

"She has tried to engage them, reason with them, but they are not listening. They ask why we are being hostile and they said they want to reconcile but I don't think reconciliation is on their agenda."

Ms Lee has been a volunteer on several sub-committees since 2001.

Attempts by The Sunday Times to contact the new exco for comments yesterday were unsuccessful. Mrs Singam said the jolt might have its upside: It has brought Aware members closer together.

It has even rallied new members such as Internet executive Hafizah Osman, 39, who joined Aware yesterday to show her support for what Mrs Singam and the old guard have achieved.

"I was shocked when I heard she was quitting. I think she is obviously making a statement that she does not want the fundamentals of Aware to be compromised," she said.

"The old guard has done wonderful work and it is so shameful that events of the last week have negated everything to just one issue – sexuality and religion."

"It is much more. I don't want Aware's broad agenda to be lost."

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What are your views on the happenings at Aware? Send them to suntimes@sph.com.sg

Constance Singam quits as Aware adviser

Three-time president describes her unhappiness with the new team in a letter to long-time members.
Wong Kim Hoh reports.

One voice had been silent in the controversy currently swirling around Singapore's most well-known women's group – that of stalwart and three-time president Constance Singam.

Yesterday afternoon, however, she broke her silence in a letter – marked confidential – to long-time members of the Association of Women for Action and Research (Aware).

She told them she had quit as adviser to the new executive committee steering the group. As immediate past president, Mrs Singam – under Aware's Constitution – automatically earned an advisory role to the new committee.

The three-page letter, a copy of which was obtained by The Sunday Times, described her unhappiness with the new team, which took office after a leadership grab last month.

Mrs Singam, 72, wrote that although the team had publicly said that they would honour Aware's founders and build on the good work of past members, their private behaviour suggested otherwise.

"In private meetings, the exco showed a complete lack of respect for me, ignoring my advice and keeping me out of an exco meeting when I had the right to be there, as stated in the Constitution," wrote Mrs Singam who has served three terms as Aware president over the last 20 years.

She told members that she was especially unhappy with the new exco's proposal to replace all the heads of Aware's sub-committees with exco members.

There are about half a dozen

sub-groups in Aware working on various women's issues such as ageing, singles, work life, and Cedaw (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women).

Former Nominated MP Braema Mathi was axed by e-mail last week as chair of Cedaw, a position she had held since 2004.

Mrs Singam wrote in her letter: "I protested and said it was Aware's longstanding practice to give more women, especially young women, the opportunity to acquire leadership skills and empowering them through experiences in sub-committee work."

The exco ignored her advice, she said.

When contacted, Mrs Singam confirmed that she has quit as Aware adviser and that she penned the letter.

She told The Sunday Times she was not abandoning ship.

"I am still an Aware member. Being outside the exco gives me more freedom and right to speak up, assert and push for the work that Aware has done all these years."

The events of the last few weeks, she admitted, have been traumatising.

On March 28, the group was tak-

en over by unknown faces who joined Aware only in recent months.

The takeover was like a bolt out of the blue.

"I spent the first two days crying. It makes you suddenly realise the danger of not being vigilant."

However, she added: "But that's not the nature of the society. It's always been open and welcoming and I will continue to fight for it to be open and egalitarian."

"I'm not going to be defensive. It has happened, it's a hard lesson, but Aware will continue."

Mrs Singam is aware that the old guard has been described as sore losers by some who pointed out that the new team was legitimately voted in.

"Why are we sore losers? We are just fighting and defending our values."

"They walked in, took over, and they refused to tell us what they

were going to do with Aware. They say they would honour the work of past Aware members, and the first thing that they do is to fire Braema."

"There are just too many questions they are not answering."

She said their silence has stoked and fuelled too much unhealthy debate, especially online, with speculation about the new team's religious affiliations and anti-homosexual stance.

"I am not at all happy where this is going. This is not a gay versus Christian debate," she said.

"It is getting away from what Aware stands for. We have spoken up and initiated discussion on a lot of much broader issues – foreign worker abuse, domestic abuse, financial intelligence, education, body image, sexual harassment."

"We address issues that have large and wide implications which affect society."

She is concerned about the "pos-

sible ideological opposition of many members of the new team".

She wrote in her letter: "Our values are based on the fundamental rights and responsibilities of women as women. These include being treated as informed individuals capable of choice, being deserving of opportunities equal to those of men in education, marriage and employment; and being able to control their own bodies, particularly with regard to sexual and reproductive health."

Meanwhile, news of her resignation upset many longstanding members.

Lawyer Halijah Mohamad, who is in her late 40s, said she was flabbergasted by the apparent high-handedness of the new team: "Bearing in mind that they are very new members, how could they disregard the advice of someone who has been such a long-time member, and who has an institutional knowledge of Aware?"

"By shutting her out, they are just showing that they have absolutely no interest in continuity."

Madam Halijah was Aware's vice-president in 1999/2000.

"She should not have been put in that position to feel compelled to resign. We were aghast." Counsellor Ravqind Kaur, 24, a volunteer since 2006, agreed.

OLD GUARD SUPPORTERS RALLYING THE TROOPS

Nur Dianah Suhaimi

The intense interest surrounding the Aware saga has translated into a spike in membership.

Last night, the Aware website was even down for a few hours after its server busted its bandwidth limit.

The reason: a possible surge in the number of people accessing the site to sign up for membership.

Since the women's advocacy group hit the headlines after a new executive committee of mostly new faces unexpectedly took office on March 28, supporters of the old members have been canvassing for membership through e-mail and social networking site Facebook.

One can apply for membership by either signing up on the Aware website and paying the annual fee of \$40 with a credit card through PayPal, dropping by the Aware Centre at Dover Crescent, or mailing in a cheque with one's personal particulars. Student membership costs \$25 a year.

When contacted, Aware could not confirm the number of new members in the past three weeks.

But The Sunday Times understands that more than 100 people have since

signed up. Old members of Aware estimate membership to be over 600 now.

A Facebook group was even set up to canvass for new members. As of last night, 591 people have joined this group, but not all may join Aware.

An extraordinary general meeting (EOGM) has since been sought, to vote on a no-confidence motion.

In a letter to the media last Friday, new president Josie Lau noted that of the 160 signatories who asked for an EOGM, some 120 "appear to have been recruited just after the AGM in time to swell support for the requisition".

Last week, graduate student Nur Adlina Maulod received three e-mail messages asking her to join Aware for this purpose. She and eight other friends did so.

She said: "Our responses were mostly instinctive. How do you let past such a situation in which the new leaders could not unequivocally say they believe in the principle of gender equality?"

The Sunday Times understands that one e-mail was from a National University of Singapore sociology professor. She was believed to have circulated it to her students, who then forwarded it to their friends and families.

Her e-mail said Aware's older mem-

bers were trying to get at least 100 members' signatures to call for an EOGM. It said the values of the new team were "at odds with those of Aware's founders and established members".

Several other Aware members and their friends have been using Facebook to urge people to join and support the old guard.

Theatre director Alvin Tan, 44, posted recent articles on Aware on his Facebook page and urged his female friends to join. "As a man, I'm not allowed to vote at Aware's elections. But I'm doing whatever I can to show my support for the group's older members."

Social worker Yap Ching Wi, 41, who has been urging people to join Aware through Facebook, said she roped in three new members in the past three days.

Many others who received e-mail messages have sent in their online membership applications.

Media consultant Natasha Ho, 27, and two of her friends decided to join Aware last Friday after receiving one of the e-mail messages.

Said Ms Ho: "I realise that I have to play a bigger part in such issues that I care about, because they can easily be hijacked. As a member, I hope I can take part in future voting and vote the new exco members out."

Claire Nazar: Why I quit as Aware president

Serene Goh

Former lawyer Claire Nazar quit the presidency of Aware after just 11 days because she "did not want the hassle".

The hassle, that is, of working with the new executive committee, which she felt was "too gung-ho" for her with its "Stormtrooper tactics".

For starters, the new exco did not seem to take kindly to having input from former president Constance Singam or any of the veteran members of the 24-year-old women's group, Mrs Nazar said.

She was also troubled by how at the first exco meeting – a 3½-hour session – about a week after the AGM on March 28, the committee replaced almost all the appointed chairpersons of sub-committees based only on a majority vote.

That broke with Aware's tradition of allowing chairpersons who were doing a good job to continue their work.

Worse, they kept Mrs Nazar, 37, out of the loop on various matters, and even insisted she complete the AGM minutes within days.

The members visited the Aware office so frequently that staff, who had not got used to the idea of the newcomers, were jittery and com-

plained about their requests.

"They come in, take charge – almost every day they're at the Aware office, getting hold of documents, reading them, making their presence felt."

The irony was that Mrs Nazar had nominated six of the current remaining 11 exco members. This came about after Mrs Singam advised her to include fresh blood among the exco members who could then work with older members to ensure continuity.

Of the six, two were old-time Aware members, Ms Chew I-jin and Ms Caris Lim, and another was Mrs Nazar's former classmate, Ms Catherine Tan. The other three – Ms Peggy Leong, Ms Lois Ng and Ms Josie Lau – were acquaintances.

She picked them based on their credentials and "the merit of their previous experience". Besides, she added, "they had expressed keen interest, and I thought they were people I could work with".

Ms Lau was in fact an acquaintance of her husband, lawyer Boaz Nazar, who is also a deacon at Cornerstone Community Church. He had met her in the course of his social work.

At Mrs Nazar's urging, Ms Lau joined Aware at the start of the year. Mrs Nazar said that

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Aware's new exco does not share many of her views, says former lawyer and ex-Aware president Claire Nazar. The irony is that she nominated six of the remaining 11 exco members.

I did not want the hassle: Nazar

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since joining Aware, she had made it a habit of asking women to sign up.

Unlike previous AGMs, where 30 or 40 people would turn up, the March 28 meeting was attended by more than 100. Many were new faces and new Aware members.

Mrs Nazar said she at first put it down to a recent surge in Aware membership. "I just thought, 'Wow this is interesting.' Nobody thought too much about it."

She won the presidency unopposed. But when Ms Chew was knocked out of the running for vice-president, it dawned on her that something was amiss, she said.

Mrs Nazar responded by nominating Ms Chew for the post of assistant honorary treasurer. Ms Chew was returned unopposed.

In the end, all six of Mrs Nazar's nominees got into the exco. Five others – all recent members – were also voted in.

She was shocked at the outcome, she said. "Of course I was. Who wouldn't be?"

It soon became apparent that the new exco did not share many of her views, she said.

Being a member of Aware for only a little over a year herself, she felt that she and the exco's newest members could use the advice of those more senior.

Ultimately, she said, "the majority of the new exco members did not share my views or direction, particularly with regard to their call for an overhaul of existing chairs of key sub-committees to be replaced by new members. I personally disagreed with the exco's approach."

She quit to avoid the "in-house politicking".

"I didn't want to waste my time. Every hour spent at Aware means one hour away from my family and children...I'm quite happy to step out of the picture," said the mother of two young children, who is also a marriage counsellor.

Last Wednesday, the exco appointed

Ms Lau, 48, a DBS executive, as its new president. She had been on the new exco but did not hold any office.

Last Friday, Ms Lau sent the media a statement in which she said, among other things, that the new exco was eager to start work but "there were repeated delays in convening the first exco meeting. Mrs Nazar kept re-scheduling the meeting".

In response, Mrs Nazar said: "What delays are they talking about?"

She said potential meeting dates were being bandied about to accommodate the schedules of both the new and old excos, something that could hardly be called repeated rescheduling.

"In fact, when we finally settled on the date, I wrote to them half-jokingly: 'Can you please be living proof that women can work together?'"

As to whether the new team has what it takes to run Aware, Mrs Nazar said "in terms of their work skills, yes". But in terms of their people skills, she would only say "no comment".

Of the fear among veteran Aware members that the new exco is out to change the group's all-inclusive stand on matters like sexuality, she said: "So far, in my 11 days of dealing with them, I've not found anything negative in terms of their intentions."

"What people are most worried about seems to be whether they are going to be taking an anti-gay stance. In that sense, I highly doubt it. Aware is all about being anti-discrimination."

The Sunday Times tried to reach several exco members yesterday for their comments on what Mrs Nazar said, but all had either their cellphones switched off or were not picking up calls.

Mrs Nazar said she was motivated to join Aware in January last year because it championed women's issues.

"I've always had a passion for advocacy because both my parents were born deaf-mute. I had to learn from a very young age to take care of them and speak up on their behalf," said the only child of a seamstress mother and artist father.

She also wanted to contribute on matters related to family and marriage, especially the plight of working mothers.

Shortly after she joined, Mrs Singam, then Aware's president, invited her to be part of the exco. She accepted.

Earlier this year, when Mrs Singam mentioned she needed a successor, Mrs Nazar offered to stand.

"I wanted to continue the work that Aware was doing. I saw it as my job to review initiatives which had been left on the backburner, and revive the ones that worked."

She said the old guard was supportive, and had urged her to hang on to her position. They also do not seem to blame her for bringing in the new members.

"The first thing I did after I resigned was to call up Constance Singam and apologise."

She added that she would continue to stay an active member of Aware, but said the public fallout since then has been "the most horrible thing that has happened to me".

Indeed, after her resignation, questions about Mrs Nazar were also raised. The buzz surrounded a letter she wrote to The Straits Times Forum page in July 2007 in which she voiced her concerns about same-sex couples.

But she explained: "My letter was against same-sex marriages and the impact on children. It was not anti-gay, which is discrimination against homosexuals."

By association, her beliefs – that she is opposed to premarital sex, abortion and homosexuality – came to the fore.

Sighing, she said: "For the record, I am not anti-gay."

As to the speculation that she was part of a concerted effort by the new guard to oust the old, but who pulled out at the last minute, she replied in a word: "No."

"I just want to see Aware moving forward, and I really don't care who does it, as long as they can account for themselves."

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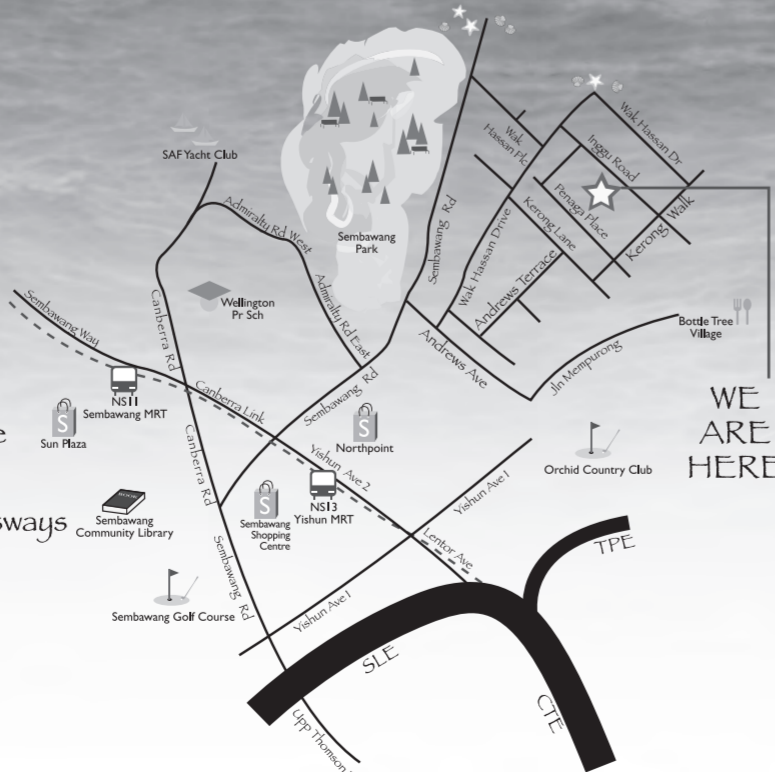
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