

Speak up!



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# It's not just you and me

by Ng Tze Yeng

A YEAR ago, I took part in a visionary feminist programme in Taiwan. It was conceptualised by Unninetwork, a Korean feminist group that aims to build solidarity among Asian feminists.

"Unni" is a term used by Korean women to refer to an elder sister, or another woman whom a woman is close to. The amazing story of this feminist organisation started off as a woman-friendly web-portal where women could connect with each other in the male-dominated cyberspace. They then established themselves as an NGO, running consciousness-raising activities such as feminist camps, discussion sessions, and publications.

Unninetwork's main agenda is to raise awareness on the barriers and discrimination non-married women face in Korean society. Part of the strategy to claim dignity for non-married women is to change the term "mihon", not-yet married, which connotes undignified abnormality; to "bihon", non-married, which indicates choice and, more importantly, self-agency.

As a continuation of the programme, we met in Seoul this year. Being on their "home ground", I understood the courage these women have in challenging the



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oppressive structures they work in.

Rejecting the idea of needing a man threatens the patriarchal structure and its benefits that heterosexual men and women enjoy. For example, in Korea, this is supported by the rental system that requires a large deposit. This money is often considered start-up

money for a young heterosexual couple that is assumed to live "happily ever after". A young woman choosing otherwise will not be able to access housing as easily as the heterosexual couple is able or even a man for that matter, as the average male earns 38% more than the female.

The women of Unninetwork challenge their society by asserting their sexuality. They choose how they want to look; with long-hair, short-hair, dressing in skirts, pants, blouses, looking masculine, feminine, androgynous - coming in all shapes and sizes. In a society where there is immense pressure for women to look thin and feminine, the women of Unninetwork celebrate their sexuality by choosing to celebrate their body the way it is. They too assert who they are and how they choose to love; their members consist of lesbian women, single heterosexual women, women married to men

and women in a lifetime commitment to other women.

My prejudices of the Korean feminists having it easier because their country was "developed" and "democratised" were stripped away with this visit. They too have to battle religious fundamentalist forces working to denounce them and their mobilisation. They too have financial constraints that are a result of their ethical considerations in accepting donations and the economic crisis. They too have members who are overworked as they try to balance family, work, life and their quest for a just society. They too have to defend their shrinking democratic spaces, uphold their dignity as citizens against a neo-liberal government, fight against the concentration of the media in the hands of a few, stand up against enforcement agency's brutality and suspicious deaths at the hands of the powerful. They too have to battle self-doubt and diminishing hope. They too are human beings wanting a better place for themselves and others.

As I sat on the grounds of the Kelana Jaya Stadium at a rally for justice for Teoh Beng Hock, I looked around at all the Malaysians who were there to define themselves firstly as Malaysians. For me, they were Malaysians not defined by their religious beliefs, cultural practices, ethnic origins, nor their

We believe that the young should have a say in how things are run, because they have everything at stake in our future. This column creates that space for our panel of bright young sparks to debate a whole range of issues that they feel strongly about.

"mother tongues". They were there because they were outraged at the systemic injustices most Malaysians face. They are battling the same oppressive forces, just as the Korean feminists were, whether they saw it or not.

Whether this was envisioned at the conceptualisation of the Korean feminists' programme, it solidified for me a sense of connectedness with human beings. While the past few days have been dark, I have found much solace in Malaysians, the Koreans and the Iranians that have stood up to be counted. Paraphrasing Martin Luther King Jr, I am able to articulate my incredible empowering experience of hope in "knowing that there are many individuals, who have started living, having risen above the narrow confines of individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity. And it is these creative, dedicated minority that will make the world better by demanding justice."

*Tze Yeng is moved by Malaysians' solidarity in seeking justice for Teoh Beng Hock. To them, he is a Malaysian citizen. Comment: letters@thesundaily.com.*

## letters

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### Top officer holds the cards

"TIME for cool heads and reflection" (Down2Earth, July 24) was interesting. Other than the change of name from ACA to MACC and the formation of five advisory panels, it seems nothing much has changed in the way the MACC is conducting its business.

The changes I presume are just cosmetic, PR exercises. The top is managed by the same people. I feel the five advisory panels are a waste of public funds.

I agree with Terence Fernandez that Datuk Seri Abu Kassim, is a sincere hard working officer. But there is nothing much he can do. He can be the number two in the MACC but he has his limits too. I had the opportunity to know him when he was a young investigating officer in Penang some 20 years ago. He was an officer dedicated to his work.

**Amba Penang**

### Breath of fresh air

IT WAS refreshing to read Tunku Abidin Muhriz's column, "Believing in Malaysia" (Abiding Times, July 24).

It is unfortunate, though, that these days, there are too few who share similar sentiments and similar beliefs in Malaysia.

And it is unfortunate as well that too few speak out with such conviction. May the Almighty save us from ourselves.

**KMH Via email**

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