

## **Negotiating silence**

By Petra Gimbad

"Just because a woman is silent does not mean she agrees..." – Clarissa Pinkola Estes

Sometimes, two seemingly unrelated matters can all of a sudden make sense in the same way. For a long time, I knew intuitively that similarities exist between disability and feminist issues – and not just because both the disabled and women have been acknowledged as marginalised minorities.

These two have recently come together for me: through my work with Taihen, a theatre group by the physically disabled; through my work with AWAM, a feminist organisation.

The underlying theme that ties the two lies in the violence of silence.

Today, I left the office and walked to the shops nearby to grab a bite. I heard some whistling and teasing. There was a man to my right grinning beside the tree he was chopping, long knife in hand. I looked at him, and his grin did not fade.

Perhaps it was because I was tired that it took me a while to realise that his lips did not move as the catcalling continued. Finally, I heard someone telling me to look up. I did, and there was another man crouched in a tree, also with a large knife.

I just looked at them, and then continued walking. It occurred to me that perhaps I should tell them off. Support was nearby – my workplace, a feminist organisation, was just a few houses away. But I was tired and numb. Instead of fighting the good fight, I walked on.

Later, I took a slightly longer route back to the office to avoid a re-encounter. I was too exhausted to stand up for myself. A small part of me also wanted to avoid having to make the choice again of whether to do something so that they will never humiliate or frighten another woman again, or to decide that I was not going to fight this battle today.

Even now, I am too numb to feel anger or guilt or shame. But a new awareness is growing, of how one can feel so beaten down, that you surrender to whatever life throws at you.

When I worked with disabled performers, I realised within the same week how easy it is to sexually abuse a person with a severe disability. At least half of the troupe consisted of actors who were wheelchair-bound, quite a few had difficulties pronouncing normal speech.

Although I now think of the way they speak as their unique style of pronunciation, it took me a few months to understand what they were trying to say. Even now, I still struggle. It frightens me how they are mentally so conscious of what surrounds them, and yet, may be denied a chance to be heard just because of the way they speak.

I shall point out the obvious: it is hard as well for a wheelchair-bound person to escape from those intent on inflicting physical or sexual abuse.

One lesson that I shall always be grateful to Taihen for is teaching me to respect the bodies of others. I see parallels between the disabled and women: to gain acceptance, we swallow our voices and aim to please. Too many of us would rather receive a pat on the head for being docile even at the risk of losing who we are, than expressing what we truly feel, need and think.

I am sure that this too applies to many non-disabled boys and men. However, I am a woman and I can only write what I know.

Japanese trainers encouraged the physically disabled performers to voice their discomforts. Able-bodied volunteers assisting the performers were reminded constantly not to impose our views on them. For they knew their bodies better, we were told. Time proved this.

It was a joy to see them blossom enough to tick me off when I neglected their needs. Recently, a volunteer twisted a performer's neck by accident. She used to keep silent when I squeeze her sides too hard when we lift her. This time, she cried out in pain and told me, again and again, in the speech of not-normal people:

“You must tell the volunteers not to pull us by our necks. We are already handicapped. We don't need to be disabled further and become a bigger burden to our families. I must take care of myself.”

Today, I met this woman again. She was determined to soldier on in theatre.

“There are many disabled people who are locked up at home. I am not doing this for me. I want to do this for them.”

Such vulnerability, strength and dignity; all at the same time.

It is from her whom I am slowly learning to live in a way that combines all three - with a voice that is mine, and that can break through the violence that surrounds us.

*Petra is learning that silent support of individuals fighting for constitutional rights breeds more violence. She hopes that more Malaysians will throw their voices beyond the mamak stalls to affect social change.*