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Unique platform

A special programme has resulted in a book that allows young women to air their views.

By MICHELE LIAN

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IT STARTED with the realisation that she had a voice she wanted others to hear, followed by the desire to make a difference in the lives of other women. Then came the discovery of the gift she didn't think she had: the ability to express herself powerfully through words.

Now, Ng Tze Yeng and nine other young Malaysian women will make their collective debut as authors of *Young Women Speak Out* – the first book published by the All Women's Action Society (AWAM), resulting from its Writers for Women's Rights programme.

"I never thought I could write. I could rant when I first joined the programme, but I couldn't write," says Ng, 30.

The programme, which began in 2005 with funding from the European Commission (EC) under a three-year agreement, is open to women between 18 and 32. It requires participants to undergo a three-and-a-half day workshop as an introduction to gender, social justice and media issues, as well as writing, analytical and media relations skills.

Ng, who joined the inaugural workshop in 2005 shortly after quitting her job at a multinational company in Singapore, is now a member of the programme's planning team and will assume the role of coordinator come January next year.

"I wanted to do something different with my life, and somebody referred me to AWAM. At the time, I was just helping out, doing bits and pieces. I thought the programme sounded really cool, but there was a part about feminism that I didn't know much about. It was scary, but I joined anyway.

"The workshop opened my eyes to a lot of issues," adds Ng, who wrote three stories in *Young Women Speak Out*.

Vizla Kumaresan: 'One of the draws of this workshop was learning how to write a good letter.'

Fellow author Hwa Yi Xing, 23, had just graduated from Bates College in Maine, the United States, and was looking for a job with a non-profit organisation in Kuala Lumpur when she stumbled upon an e-mail about the AWAM programme.

"I had taken gender studies at university but had never been involved in the groundwork, so I thought this would be a good way to get in touch with what was going on in Malaysia, since I'd been out of the country for a few years. It would give me the chance to be more hands on," says the freelance graphic designer.

Vizla Kumaresan, a Master's degree student in clinical psychology, had been working at the Women's Aid Organisation (WAO) for a year when she heard about the writer's programme.

"Part of my work at WAO involves writing letters to the editor about issues raised in the media. It's very frustrating to write letters that don't get published, so one of the draws of this workshop was learning how to write a good letter."

Alina Rastam, a senior activist and the programme's coordinator since 2005, says one of its key aims is to get participants to be more visible in the media.

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>
> HWA YI XING

"We want to get women to use writing as a tool for advocacy, so we start off on that basis. When they send in their applications we look for thinking skills and the ability to write.

"We also look for indications of their desire or commitment to social justice and women's issues. We don't just want people to come and waste three days and then disappear. We don't bind them to AWAM but we try to choose people who we think will go on with this work."

By year's end, the programme would have fulfilled all its obligations set out by the EC, but AWAM plans to continue to conduct the workshops with its own funds.

"Because of what we've seen, we will keep looking for funds to keep the programme going," Alina says. "The EC gave us money for three workshops; our fifth is coming up, so we've been able to run two extra workshops through private donations. We're hoping for more of that kind of support."

In *Young Women Speak Out*, the participants tell deeply personal stories of their lives, loves, hopes, families, and the joys and anguish of being a woman.

"We gave them a guideline that their stories should touch on issues of social justice, gender and things like that. But having said that, as editor of the book, I didn't want to tie everyone down to specific forms of writing, so people addressed that in different ways.

"Some wrote poetry, some wrote autobiographical pieces on their experiences as a young woman, or being a child in a family where there was a lot of violence, things like that. One of the issues that came up was how women's lives are still impacted by discrimination and oppression."

Despite the recurring thread of pain, the book offers hope.

"I really appreciate the honesty the writers have brought to the project, where they really dig deep within themselves to talk about issues and things that are happening here, some of which are very disturbing and very personal," says Alina.

"I think it takes a lot of courage to do that. When you see they way they think about these issues and how they try to make sense of what's going on, it gives me a lot of hope in terms of what young Malaysian women have for this country.

"That was what really inspired us to give this book project as much attention and energy as we have. We really feel that Malaysians would benefit from hearing the voices of younger women."

But no one is more familiar with this feeling of hope than the authors themselves. In fact, it's what keeps them going.

"I have a vision of the world where there's no discrimination of gender, race or whatever, and I believe strongly enough about it so I'm going to keep working towards it," says Vizla, 28.

Adds Ng: "I've started a design and advertising company of my own. Everything I've learned at the AWAM workshop, I apply to my work as well. I was feeling very disempowered in the corporate world, but I've now regained a sense of being human and having this ability to make changes. Not in a save-the-world kind of way, but in little steps that amount to something."

For Hwa, carrying on her work in the programme means she gets to help make a difference in the lives of other women. "I saw how the programme made a difference in our lives, so that's my motivation to carry on. I want to see it impact other people as well."

■ *The next Writers for Women's Rights workshop will be held from Nov 22-25. Deadline for applications is Friday. To apply for the programme or find out how you can get a copy of* ***Young Women Speak Out****, call AWAM (*