



E - WAVES

INTERNATIONAL DAY FOR THE
**ELIMINATION OF
VIOLENCE
AGAINST WOMEN**

ISSUE NO. 2
NOVEMBER 2013

NEWSLETTER OF THE
ALL WOMEN'S ACTION
SOCIETY (AWAM)



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ALL WOMEN'S ACTION
SOCIETY (AWAM)

AWAM is an independent feminist organisation in Malaysia committed to ending gender-based violence and upholding equality and rights for all. We are a tax-exempt, non-profit organisation established in 1988.

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AWAM's Desk

For this issue, we noticed that the theme of gender-based violence seemed to crop up in many of the contributions. As such, we saw it fit to release this issue in conjunction with the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence, which begins on 25 November (International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women) and ends on 10 December (Human Rights Day). We are so honoured to have received such a varying degree of contributions and wish to thank all of our contributors for sharing their experiences. To support AWAM's efforts in helping to put an end to violence against women, join the White Ribbon Campaign Run & Walk 2013 on December 8. The registration form can be downloaded [here](#). We hope you enjoy this issue & we look forward to seeing you at the White Ribbon Campaign Run & Walk!

Reader's Comments



ON JULY ISSUE

ANISHA SUSANNA, AWAM MEMBER

Can't wait to read the articles, and glad to have been able to contribute. A suggestion....to also post the articles on a blog site....then readers could comment on the different articles, and give direct feedback to each article – which I as one of the contributors would love to receive.

Ed note: Visit our blog site at <http://www.awam.org.my/blog>

VENTITA LK, SUPPORTER OF AWAM

Found the articles interesting, witty and an eye opener to some subjects that we don't really talk about....well put together. Keep the e-Waves coming in!

Have any feedback on e-Waves? We'd love to hear from you! Write to us at e.waves.awam@gmail.com.

*Shake off that writer's block and bring out the feminist in you because e-Waves wants you to write for us! The theme for the next issue is *The Good Malaysian Woman*. All contributions should be sent to e.waves.awam@gmail.com by 28 February 2014. The e-Waves editorial collective reserves the right to edit or not publish contributions.*

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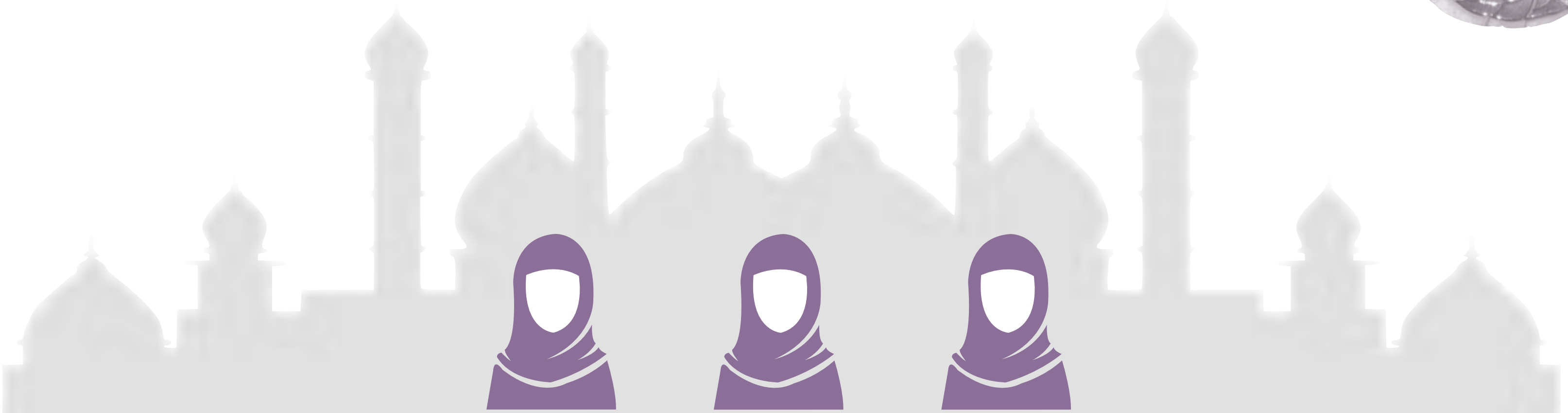
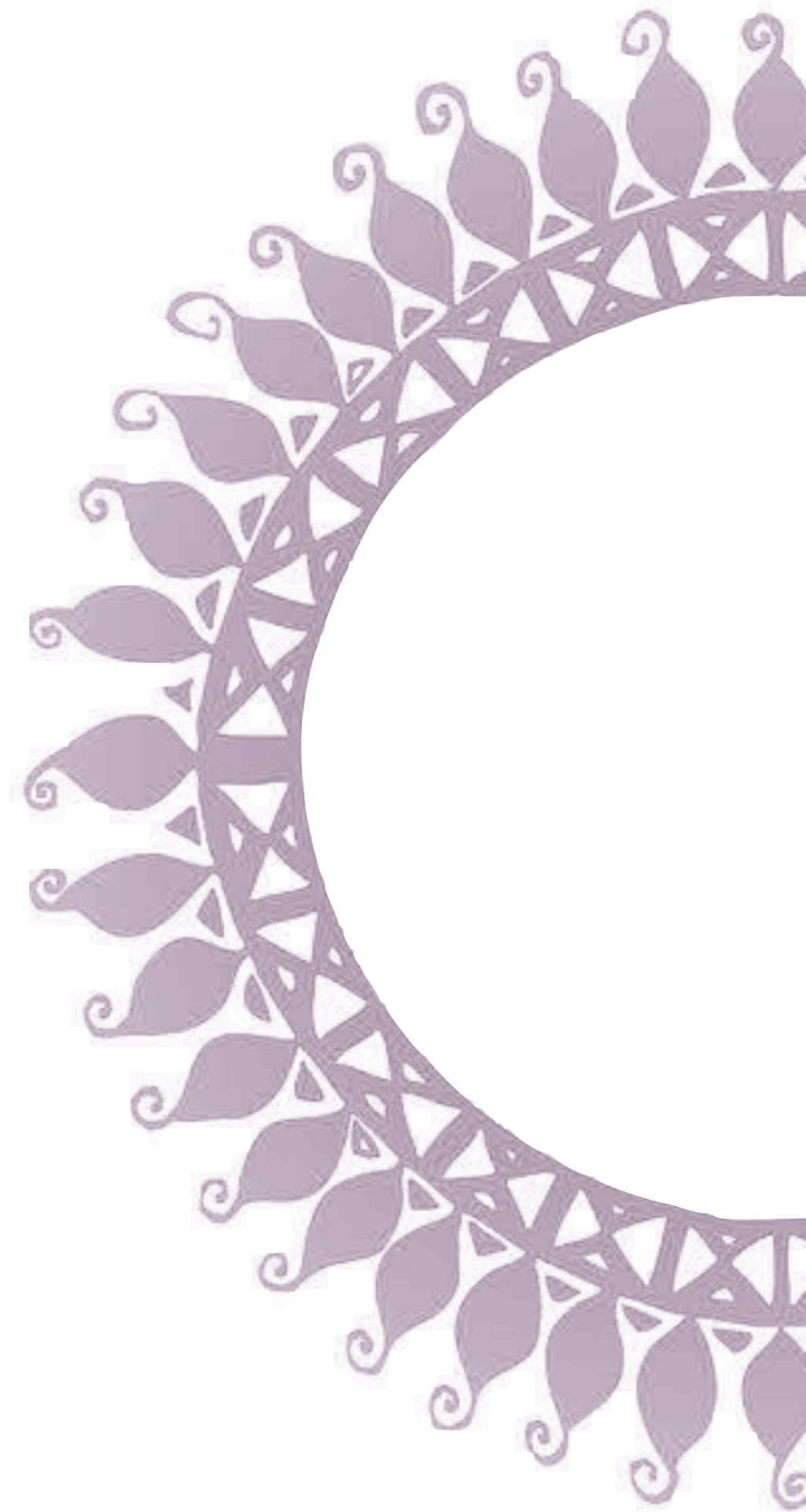
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DEAR 12 YEAR OLD GIRL
FORCED TO LIVE IN THE
HORRIBLE 21ST CENTURY,



*Photo
Source*

SHE GAVE VOICE TO WHAT

WOMEN ARE MADE OF -

STRONG, GENTLE, SENSUAL

AND INTELLIGENT.

Anais Nin

By Joanne Nayagam

“**I**, with a deeper instinct, choose a man who compels my strength, who makes enormous demands on me, who does not doubt my courage or my toughness, who does not believe me naive or innocent, who has the courage to treat me like a woman.” That quote was the first time I fell in love with Anais Nin. “Who was this woman?” I wondered. Who was this woman who recognised that there was no weakness in being in love and having a man by her side? Who was this that in fact demanded a partner who saw her strengths and potential and, as a life partner should, compel them to bring forth the very best in her? Her fire was in fact deep within and she needn’t prove it to any man. The right one would recognise it and want to see it burn brighter.

Nin lived between 1903 and 1977. Born in Paris to a Catalan father and a Danish mother, she spent her life in many places, including Cuba and Los Angeles. She was well-known as a writer, with amongst other literary works to her name wrote novels and critical studies. However, she was most widely recognised as a diarist. Numerous of her journals have been published to date. In an entry sometime in June of 1933, Nin wrote, “I only regret that everybody wants to deprive me of the journal, which is the only steadfast friend I have, the only one which makes my life bearable, because my happiness with human beings is so precarious, my confiding moods rare, and the least sign of non-interest is enough to silence me. In the journal I am at ease.”

The writer also found herself attracted to the sensual universe of erotica writing and she was even viewed as one of the finest

authors of erotica writing. Ever. One wonders if the two connect - the immense pleasure of expressing her voice and her talent for writings of the sensual realm. Nonetheless, Nin was an icon. She gave voice to what women are made of - strong, gentle, sensual and intelligent.

Many women feel either ways about Nin. Some viewed her as a pioneer in feminism - instead of being a “bra burner”, she was embracing her femininity. Moreover, during a time when a woman’s place was frequently thought to be in the kitchen whipping up gastronomical pleasures for her husband, Nin delved into arts and culture, honing her talent. Others felt that she was misusing her womanhood, using her charm and good looks to find her way through the world.

Nin might not be your typical feminist in that sense of the word. No, you probably wouldn’t have found her standing at the frontlines of campaigns, shouting for equality. But in her own way, Nin was an emblem for women. She knew herself and all the characteristics that being born a female had endowed her with. Yes, she loved being a woman and indulged in her womanhood. She knew that she was sensual. She knew that she was strong. And she loved herself. And to me, that is what being a feminist means. Realising that being a woman means being blessed with characteristics that separate us from the other sex. Understanding that these characteristics do not make us weaker or less powerful and accepting them. It is about knowing thyself, and wholeheartedly loving thyself.

WRITER’S PROFILE: *Joanne Nayagam is a woman in progress.*



*Is sexual exhibitionism a good way
to express feminist liberty?*

BY
MIKHAIL
ROSLI



MILEY: WOMEN, CULTURE AND REBELLION

As I watched Miley twerk herself sillily at the VMAs, I couldn't help but wonder how on earth pop culture had arrived here. It's as if raunchy acts are the only legitimate way to gain attention. The worst part is, it's true - it is the only way to get attention in a culture with the attention span of a caffeinated squirrel.

To those wondering what "twerking" actually is, it's the bizarre physical act of swinging the buttocks in a vertical pendulum, and this is supposed to be "cool". But you have to hand it to Miley, her VMA stunt didn't just get the world talking, it dragged feminist intellectuals into the conversation. Yes, Miley Cyrus' VMA performance inspired a lot of feminist literature; from racial to ethical. (Ed note: Watch the video [here](#) and tell us what you think. Email comments to e.waves.awam@gmail.com)

Still, an important part of the conversation

needs to be highlighted. Is sexual exhibitionism a good way to express feminist liberty? Or in looser terms, should Miley's actions be considered a freedom or a vice for womankind?

Before you draw your own conclusions, we really need to start thinking about this question because oftentimes this debate gets sidelined or overshadowed by the immense criticism that comes for these acts. Of course, we all have a sense of why she pulled the VMA stunt, with reasons ranging from breaking away from her Disney past to exploring her newfound identity, but we need to separate the act from the message, and concentrate on what her stunt tells us about society rather than label her disgusting and forget about her in the coming weeks. Regardless of what you think of her stunt, she came with a strong message to send, "we can't stop", we can do anything, be it shaking our behinds to fame. Although she might have aimed more towards teenagers, her message is a powerful signal to women

that women can do anything, a rallying cry you seldom hear anymore. But unfortunately, the message is watered down; solely because of the way she delivered it.

Now, sexual exhibitionism is a complicated thing, it interferes with the common notion of what women should be, especially so in a conservative country like Malaysia - but what you see as excessive, I see as equality. How different on a scale of sexuality was Robin Thicke, also on the stage, with his song “Blurred Lines”? If you’re still perplexed, have a go at reading the lyrics for “Blurred Lines” and imagine what it’s like being a woman listening to that song.

“It says a lot about the society that we live in when women have to sexualize themselves to gain attention and that only women are subjected to scrutiny when male artists can do the same [sexually exhibiting] without the same level of uproar”

Take “I know you want it” as an example, it literally means whatever reaction women have to sexual advances means she welcomes it, or as popularized by meme-based humor, “she wants the D”.

This is rape culture, an attitude we’ve popularized to the dismay of women. If you’ve ever thought or uttered the words “they want it just as much as we do”. Then you should know that’s a terrible way to approach how women see sex, and has in the

past resulted in rape. And it also typifies how pervasive this sentiment is.

“It says a lot about the society that we live in when women have to sexualize themselves to gain attention and that only women are subjected to scrutiny when male artists can do the same [sexually exhibiting] without the same level of uproar” said my friend, Kamilia (ed note: Kamilia Khairul Anwar’s article is also featured in this issue of e-Waves), in a late night Facebook chat. Despite it being the wee hours, she struck a serious point. We treat women with a double standard, a glaring one; we freely denigrate sexually active women while sexually active men have no such negative pressure.

So, as an observer, you’d have to hand it to Miley, if she was trying to garner attention towards feminism, it worked. Not only has it succeeded in sparking conversation, it also succeeded in drawing attention to the double standards that we practice. For that, bravo Miley, your butt-shaking made us think.

Still, not everyone would agree to that. Some see that sexualisation weakens a particular gender since it focuses attention to physical attributes of women instead of much more vital traits like personality [otherwise known as objectification]. Plus, subjecting women to such a demeaning and submissive position is something that should be shunned.

“It’s horrible, how can her father let her do such a thing, that’s not empowering at all, pop culture is making us women into sexual objects.” When another friend of mine, Farah, another self-proclaimed feminist, gave this reply it was to refute my earlier points made when we discussed this thoroughly. She also made a key point when she said

this: sexualizing women made them sexual objects, which places a serious damper on what I said earlier. Plus, it gives us an idea of the chasm even amongst feminists about Miley.

But the disagreement amongst feminists is rooted in the fact that they made no distinction between sexualisation and double standards. Sexualisation and double standards are different things. You don't need a sexualized culture to have double standards. They don't cause nor result in each other. Sexualisation in general is bad for any gender.

Seeing this, it gives the debate much more room to maneuver and react to Miley. So, despite the raunchiness of Miley's performance, Miley exposed a serious thing we should look at, "why are we setting a different bar for women?"

One thing Miley taught us was that if we want to create a climate where being a certain gender doesn't come with necessary connotations like "men should be strong" or "women should be composed" we have to start dismembering our preconceived notions of gender.

Another thing Miley callously showed us was to what extent have we created an environment in pop culture where women are measured by their sexual value.

Again, although we can disagree on how appropriate the shake-butt-naked-to-fame model but we can agree on how influential the acts are and how increasingly close we are to unanimously agreeing that when 20 year old girls start twerking onstage in latex underwear, we should all facepalm.

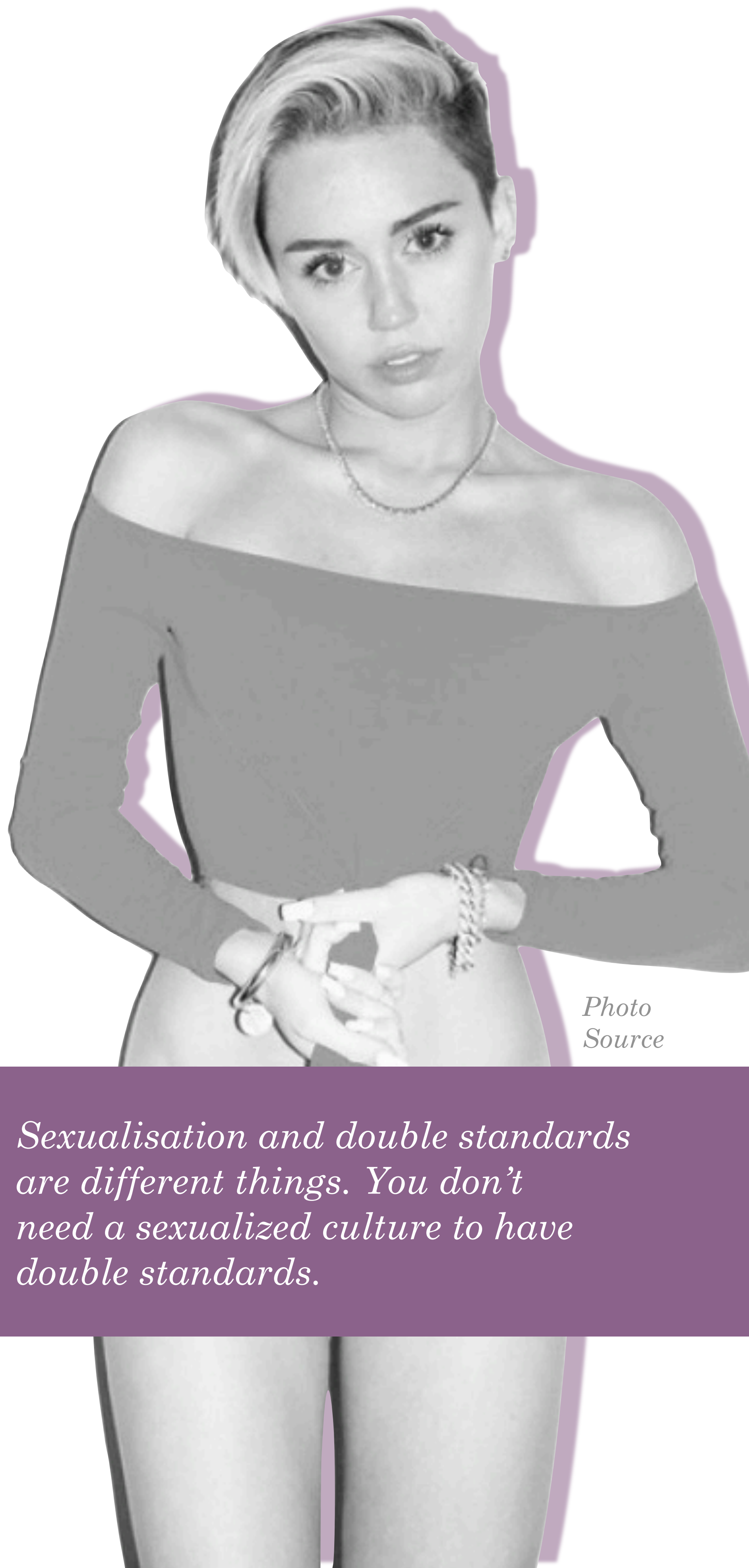
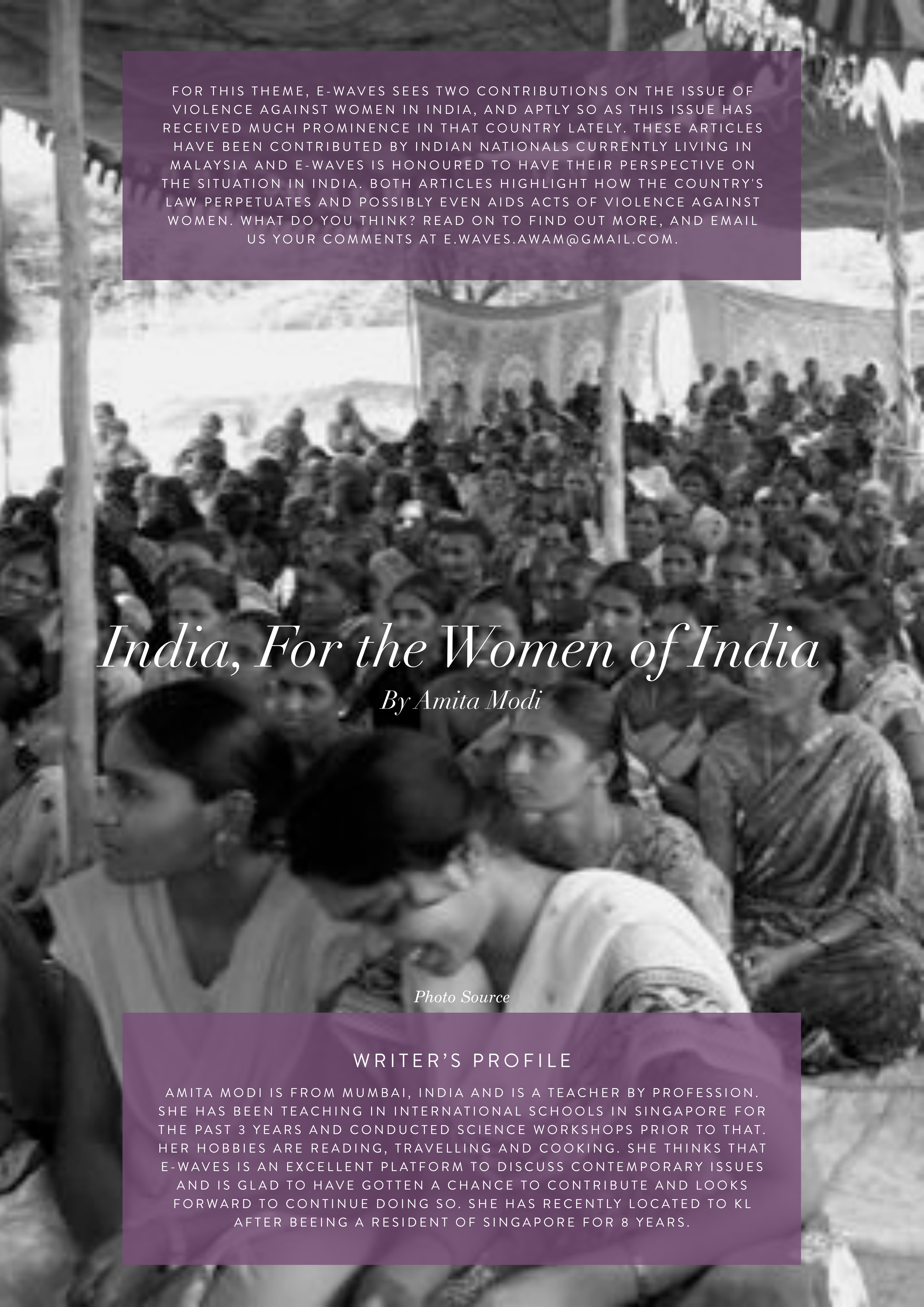


Photo Source

Sexualisation and double standards are different things. You don't need a sexualized culture to have double standards.

WRITER'S PROFILE

"A unicorn", as a good friend would describe. Regardless of how inaccurate the adjective might hold to describe a 20-year old male first-year PPE student at the University of Warwick, the label is able to capture the rarity of aspiring writer-activists, eager and passionate in everyday causes. But unlike unicorns, to think that Mikhail Rosli has a point to make against the idiosyncrasies of the world requires no faith.



FOR THIS THEME, E-WAVES SEES TWO CONTRIBUTIONS ON THE ISSUE OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN INDIA, AND APTLY SO AS THIS ISSUE HAS RECEIVED MUCH PROMINENCE IN THAT COUNTRY LATELY. THESE ARTICLES HAVE BEEN CONTRIBUTED BY INDIAN NATIONALS CURRENTLY LIVING IN MALAYSIA AND E-WAVES IS HONOURED TO HAVE THEIR PERSPECTIVE ON THE SITUATION IN INDIA. BOTH ARTICLES HIGHLIGHT HOW THE COUNTRY'S LAW PERPETUATES AND POSSIBLY EVEN AIDS ACTS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN. WHAT DO YOU THINK? READ ON TO FIND OUT MORE, AND EMAIL US YOUR COMMENTS AT E.WAVES.AWAM@GMAIL.COM.

India, For the Women of India

By Amita Modi

Photo Source

WRITER'S PROFILE

AMITA MODI IS FROM MUMBAI, INDIA AND IS A TEACHER BY PROFESSION. SHE HAS BEEN TEACHING IN INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS IN SINGAPORE FOR THE PAST 3 YEARS AND CONDUCTED SCIENCE WORKSHOPS PRIOR TO THAT. HER HOBBIES ARE READING, TRAVELLING AND COOKING. SHE THINKS THAT E-WAVES IS AN EXCELLENT PLATFORM TO DISCUSS CONTEMPORARY ISSUES AND IS GLAD TO HAVE GOTTEN A CHANCE TO CONTRIBUTE AND LOOKS FORWARD TO CONTINUE DOING SO. SHE HAS RECENTLY LOCATED TO KL AFTER BEEING A RESIDENT OF SINGAPORE FOR 8 YEARS.

India is seen as an upcoming nation, ready to cross over from the ranks of developing nations and join the league of developed countries. But has an average Indian woman really experienced a change, a change for the better?

Today there are numerous opportunities for women to fulfill their dreams and work to their full potential. On the one hand opportunities are being created, but on the other hand, there is a stark failure to provide a secure environment for women to fully avail of them. There is a lot of awareness about crimes against women but nothing concrete has been done to stop these or at least reduce them. Years ago women were scared to speak up on these sensitive issues, the situation is almost unchanged even today. The laws make the victim go through immense mental torture due to endless legal procedures and there is always the social stigma attached to it. Justice delayed is justice denied; only a quick system of dispensing justice will act as an effective deterrent to prevent crimes against women.

It is common these days to have women heading MNCs, banks and reputed educational institutions, but we cannot ignore the fact we have 'Khap Panchayats' issuing harsh judgments that ruin a woman's life in the name of social justice. Child marriages, honour killings and dowry still plague the Indian society and the irony of these practices is that, they are done in the name of family honour and tradition. A recent survey has shown that India has the largest number of child marriages in the world. Unfortunately, it is the women who have borne the brunt of these regressive practices for decades and continue to do so.

The problems and challenges faced by rural and urban women manifest themselves in

different forms but the effect they have are the same. They create a sense of fear, inferiority and frustration, which often leads to suicidal tendencies and depression. Women in the rural areas are often completely denied the right to education, to suppress them, as it is believed that education will make them arrogant. Even today we have women walking miles to fetch water for the family, giving birth in the most unhygienic conditions thereby endangering their lives, facing domestic violence, helplessly witnessing female foeticide and being blamed for every misfortune that falls upon the family.

The urban culture facilitates education for women but they often face harassment at the workplace and are denied opportunities to move up the corporate hierarchy, citing reasons like family commitments that will hamper their performance. Women have time and again proved that they can successfully strike a balance between their homes and careers. Yet, they continue to have to struggle to prove themselves.

Traditionally, the Indian society has worshipped women in many forms. But, our beliefs and actions contradict each other. Problems faced decades ago are still prevalent, no matter how many challenges a woman overcomes, there are more around the corner all the time. It is high time words are put into action, 'We need to walk the talk'.

I feel we would have achieved a milestone when it will be impossible to find a lawyer to defend a person accused of any crime against women, let alone bypassing the legal system and helping the accused get away. Strong political representation and an educational system that sensitizes the next generation towards women is the need of the hour.

Why can't parents teach their boys how to respect women? Most problems of such nature can be resolved if men are taught to respect women.

ARE WOMEN SAFE IN INDIA ANYMORE?

BY GAYATRI SHANKAR

WOMEN'S SAFETY is a big question in India. This is the country which its citizens refer to as the 'Motherland', it is the country where the biggest religion (Hinduism) has got dozens of Goddesses, it is also the country where cows are worshipped as 'gau mata' (Mother Cow). In such a country, the number of sexual crimes against women is increasing day-by-day. 2013 so far has seen the highest number of rape and molestation cases in the past decade. While most of these cases either go unreported or ignored by the media and the public, one recent case got everyone's attention.

It was the brutal gang-rape of a young 23-year-old physiotherapy student in the capital New Delhi in Dec 2012 by 5 young men. The whole world was shocked to hear this news. But unfortunately even after such a sad incident there were many who blamed the girl instead. They attacked her for watching an evening

show movie, they also criticised her for walking with a male friend alone at night. In fact one spiritual leader, who is followed by millions, went to the extent of saying that she should have requested her attacker to let her go, by addressing him as 'bhaiyya' (brother in Hindi).

As the rapists were arrested and produced in court, the whole country prayed for her recovery as she lay in hospital fighting for her life. Many showed their anger over Facebook and Twitter. Many others had candle light vigils and also fought pitched battles with the police over women's safety. Some others suggested that she should get the country's most prestigious bravery awards, while there were others who were of the opinion that strict laws ranging from long periods of imprisonment to death should be introduced.

But were these of any use? After a painful struggle for many days, the girl died of her

attackers. The court case dragged on, though the government and judiciary promised a quick verdict. What made me angrier was that one of the accused got a lawyer to defend their case and he went on record to say that the deed was not a big crime. Secondly another one of the accused, a 17-year-old was considered a minor by law and was therefore eligible for a shorter sentence. It did not matter that he was the most aggressive one. I ask – is the law so blind that it goes only by a criminal's age and not by the nature of his crime? Who says that juveniles cannot commit serious crimes and if they do so, will their punishments be very small?

Third point that got me upset was many political groups offered money to the girl's family. I fail to understand the point of doing that. Rather than just donating money, it would have been much better if they had put pressure on the Government to bring in strict laws so that in the future, no man will have the guts to commit such a dastardly crime. To make matters worse, after a few months almost everyone, including the media, forgot about the incident. I ask why? Is our contribution just to make some noise on social media and then forget about it?

Several months later, the accused were given the death penalty. However, that did not deter other Indian men from committing similar crimes. This means that men are not afraid of committing such crimes. One reason is that the law is not strict enough to stop such men.

But a bigger cause is the way in which women are increasingly looked at, in India. In India a family's honour depends on its women. Even a small mistake committed by the family is considered a big crime. In such cases the women of the family bear the brunt of the punishment, most of the times through rape. Rape has become a way of punishing girls and their family.

For a short period of time after the Delhi gang-rape, things seemed to have changed for the better but now everything has gone back to square one.

The situation has become so bad in some towns and cities that any woman who walks alone is said to be in danger. Parents and well-wishers of a woman insist that she should always have a male companion whenever she steps out. When I discussed this with my parents they simply said “Forget about all these things, you don't step out alone”.

I ask you - Is it really a woman's fault if she gets sexually attacked? Being a woman myself, I can say for sure that no woman wants such horrible things to happen to her. Rather than teaching a girl how to cook or stitch or to take care of the family, why can't parents teach their daughters how to take care of themselves? Rather than asking us to depend on a male from our childhood till our deathbed, why can't they encourage us to learn self-defense skills? Why can't parents teach their boys how to respect women? Most problems of such nature can be resolved if men are taught to respect women.

In summary, I would ask parents of women in India and the world over to give them more freedom to be world-savvy rather than locking them inside the house. But at the same time do educate their sons to respect women and not treat them as objects of pleasure or revenge.

WRITER'S PROFILE: *Gayatri, an Indian national has been living in Malaysia for the past 4 years. Qualified in special needs education, she has been working with children who are affected by Autism, ADD, ADHD or Down's Syndrome. Other than her work which is her passion, she likes travelling with her husband and enjoying the local cuisine of the places that she goes to. She loves travelling since she gets to learn new cultures, enjoy different experiences and also adapt herself to these experiences. A proud Indian, she is constantly on the look-out to learn from other cultures and nations and share these thoughts with others.*



MUSLIM WOMEN & BODY SHAMING

BY KAMILIA KHAIRUL ANUAR

From young, Muslim women are pressured to cover their “aurat”. The concept of the “aurat” is the parts of the body which are said to arouse desire in the opposite sex, and thus should be covered up to tend to the general notion of public morality.

Traditionally, the aurat for the female has always been more restrictive than the aurat for the male. For the male, it is simple – they need only cover the body parts from their waist to their knees. The aurat of the woman, however, is a frequently debated matter in contemporary Islam, both amongst scholars and the everyday Muslim. There appears to be a general consensus that the whole body, excluding the face and

hands, of a female ought to be covered.

In Malaysia, Muslim women often don the hijab or “tudung” as it is known in Malay, as a means of fulfilling this condition of covering the aurat. So widely-disseminated is the idea that this is obligatory for a Muslim woman that Muslim women receive peer pressure not only from their fellow Muslims to cover up, but even from non-Muslims who may be curious as to why some Muslims do not follow this condition.

The existence of a subject in school specifically to educate young Muslims about the (state-approved) version of Islam means that Muslim women are taught from young

to feel guilty about their bodies. When I was in primary school, Islamic Studies teachers were more understanding and told us, “It is up to you if you want to cover up”. They understood that the decision had to come from within, as an expression of true devotion to Islamic teachings on our part, rather than being foisted upon us.

In secondary school however, things were less easy. My teacher would attempt to guilt-trip us into covering up. She would reiterate that it was sinful to expose our alluring female forms, and that, for the good of society it was our responsibility to dress modestly. She didn't quite believe in the concept of donning the veil voluntarily, she was a believer in “merelakan pakai tudung” (make them wear it and eventually they get used to it).

Secondary school, being the place where girls begin to grow into women, was filled with controversy over the aurat. Muslim schoolgirls who wore the pinafore were given questioning looks by the religious teachers, and during Ramadhan we were prohibited from wearing it. The cheerleading squad was a particular battleground – religious teachers scoffed at its existence and the squad was only tolerated as an old legacy and tradition of the school that needed to be maintained, rather than given full support. In my school, allowing Muslim girls to join the cheerleading squad had always been a matter of contention, and on some occasions led to problems with the squad competing in national cheerleading competitions due to tension with the school administration.

Notice the pattern here?

The female body is constantly shamed, perhaps more so in conservative Malay-Muslim culture than it is in other Malaysian cultures. It is a dirty, seductive thing, a devil's helper, luring innocent men to desire it. Muslim women are taught to fear it, hide it, and hate it. It is not enough that the mainstream media instils in us the self-loathing that comes with a less-than-model-perfect body, for Muslim women, their community dictates not only that they must attain this body (to please their husbands or potential mates) but that they must also learn to loathe its very existence. Either way, the Muslim woman's body is portrayed to be the possession of men – Muslim women constantly face the contradictory messages that they need to be both sex goddesses for their husbands and “good” pious Muslim women for the rest of society.

It is saddening to think that Muslim women are taught to loathe their own bodies, forgetting completely the core message that their own religion preaches – love.

Why should we teach our women to hate themselves, when they should be learning how to love? The donning of the hijab should not be an act of compulsion, but an act out of love and true devotion to God – those who choose not to do so however should not be viewed as somehow being less devoted. There are after all many different ways to show devotion to God.

Moreover compliance with popular views on religion should never come at the price of compromising human dignity or freedom of expression. Cultural expectations for Muslim women have greatly limited the capacity for

these women to have autonomy in their lives. These expectations do not just stop at how to dress, but also how to behave. The personality of the “good Muslim woman” has been popularised and widely-disseminated in Malaysia, not only in recent years but going as far back as the “Islamisation” wave of Malaysia in the 1980s. It has forced Muslim women to fit themselves into the mould of the “good Muslim woman” to gain societal approval, completely disregarding the effect that such expectations have on alienating women from truly embracing the original spirit of Islamic teachings.

closely we adhere to religious rituals and cultural practices has not only trapped Malaysians in cultural prisons, but has been co-opted by the political elite in their struggle to gain or retain power.

It is a problematic notion that should not exist for a society that is healthily diverse. We need to rid ourselves of our body-shaming habits; and of the idea that wearing a veil automatically makes one a better Muslim woman.

Spirituality extends far beyond anything you wear – it is immaterial, something we do not

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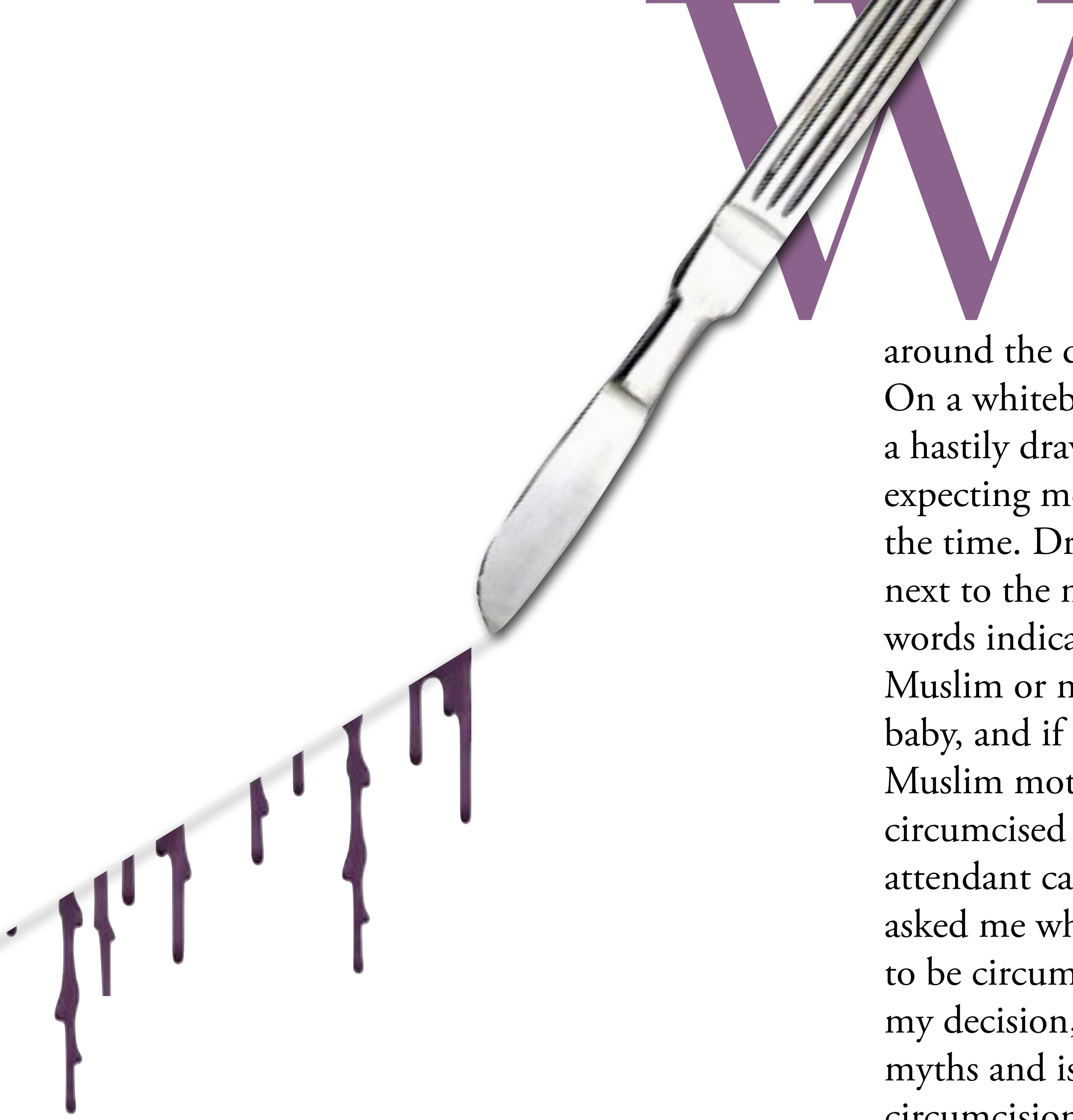
Unfortunately it does seem like religious teachers who believe the wearing of the veil should be imposed are more common than the types who believe the decision to veil has to come from within the women themselves. This perpetuates the idea that being a good Muslim is a largely ritualistic matter rather than a spiritual one.

Beyond the question of “to veil or not to veil” is the underlying assumption in society that true spirituality is material and perceivable. The notion that the strength of our spirituality manifests itself in how

perceive, because it is a question of how strong our own personal connections with God are – and we kid ourselves by saying that that is something humans are capable of measuring.

WRITER'S PROFILE

Kamilia is currently a first-year law student at University College London. She volunteered with AWAM for a month before starting university, and continues to be a part of the e-WAVES editorial collective.



When my daughter was born, I remember there being a huge rush of nurses, doctors, students and various other medical attendants swirling around the doors of the delivery room. On a whiteboard next to the entrance was a hastily drawn-up list of all the various expecting mothers who were delivering at the time. Drawn in smaller fonts right next to the name of the mothers were the words indicating whether the mother was Muslim or not, the expected sex of the baby, and if the baby was a girl born to a Muslim mother, whether she would be circumcised or not. Before long a medical attendant came rushing up to me and asked me whether I wanted my daughter to be circumcised. Before I share with you my decision, let us consider the facts, myths and issues surrounding female circumcision.

Female circumcision is probably one of the least well-known facts about the Malay community. Some non-Malay men who have married Malay women are not even aware of this fact. But it's there, it happens and it is even conducted by medical professionals. There has been a general effort by WHO and various other medical and women's NGOs to eliminate the practice of Female Circumcision (or Female Genital Mutilation as some quarters call it) around the world. These efforts are often met with strong resistance from the local populace due to the strong connection the practice has with local cultures and traditions.

From a cultural perspective, female genital mutilation or FGM has had strong roots in the Middle East, Northern Africa and even parts of Southeast Asia. These roots

FEMALE * CIRCUMCISION

CULTURE AND RESISTANCE

BY SAMIR HARITH

FOUR MAJOR TYPES OF FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION

1. **CLITORIDECTOMY:** partial or total removal of the clitoris (a small, sensitive and erectile part of the female genitals) and, in very rare cases, only the prepuce (the fold of skin surrounding the clitoris).
2. **EXCISION:** partial or total removal of the clitoris and the labia minora, with or without excision of the labia majora (the labia are "the lips" that surround the vagina).
3. **INFIBULATION:** narrowing of the vaginal opening through the creation of a covering seal. The seal is formed by cutting and repositioning the inner, or outer, labia, with or without removal of the clitoris.
4. **OTHER:** all other harmful procedures to the female genitalia for non-medical purposes, e.g. pricking, piercing, incising, scraping and cauterizing the genital area.

even pre-date the coming of the Abrahamic religions (Islam, Christianity, Judaism). As such, the rite of circumcision is one that is culturally ingrained into the very fabric of society, much like it is in the Malay community. WHO has provided a categorization for the **four different types of FGM** widely practiced around the world. (see right)

The extreme Type 3 FGM is typically performed in parts of Africa and has been known to cause bleeding, haemorrhaging, cysts and various other illnesses, not to mention that brides have to be cut open during their wedding night and similarly, mothers have to be cut open to give birth. Type 3 FGM has been strongly campaigned against by many movements in the African Sub-Continent and fortunately, the **numbers are reducing**.

THE NOTION THAT A FEMALE'S SEXUALITY CAN BE VIOLATED IN A MISGUIDED ATTEMPT TO 'DE-SEXUALISE' HER IS SIMPLY BEYOND THE LOGICAL GRASP OF MODERN MEDICINE.

Typically within the Malay community, the majority of circumcisions carried out are of the Type 1 nature, as evidenced by this interesting brief on the practice of female circumcision within the Malay community found [here](#) (website in Malay language). It is said that the practice of female circumcision, while incurring no health benefits whatsoever, helps to dampen the sexual desire of the female, thus preventing

her from succumbing to her baser temptations and giving herself up before her marriage. While research on this matter has been sketchy at best, there is a **rising number** of teenage pregnancies occurring here in Malaysia, which does bring into question the use of circumcision as a preventive measure for early sexual contact. However, that being so, circumcision is still an important aspect of Malay culture. I remember attending a marriage course and listening to an Ustaz sharing his personal experience regarding the birth of his daughters. Apparently his daughters were born in Saudi Arabia, where female circumcision is against the norm. So he shared how difficult it was to find a hospital that would circumcise his daughters and how he had to wait until the whole family

finally went back to Malaysia, only then could he circumcise his daughters, because, as he neatly put it ‘We Malays have to circumcise our daughters’.

From a religious perspective, there seems to be some debate on whether female circumcision is called for by Islam, the religion that forms the basis of Malay culture. To read [this brief](#) from earlier, it seems that there is limited support for it, however, some quarters say it is necessary, nay, compulsory for females to be circumcised, unless the situation disallows it. Scholars from Al-Azhar University have called the practice ‘[disallowed by religion](#)’ and most modern Muslim scholars [discourage its practice](#). However, the practice still persists in Malay communities due to it being a centuries-old cultural practice and also due to the relatively non-hazardous nature of the procedure (as compared to the more dangerous Type 2 and Type 3 FGMs, which involve the use of anaesthetics).

Resistance, especially towards Type 2 and Type 3 FGMs, is strong, most notably so in Africa and the Middle East. Renowned Egyptian feminist physician, [Nawal El Saadawi](#) has strongly spoken out against FGM and has framed it as an attack on basic human rights. In Ethiopia, [efforts](#) by Bogaletch Gebre and KMG-Ethiopia to engage the community leaders have resulted in a drastic decrease in incidences of FGM within certain communities. Both WHO and UNICEF have strongly advocated against the practice of FGM in other parts of the world. In fact, the WHO [strongly urges](#) medical professionals to not provide female circumcision services, something which is still widely done in Malaysia. The notion that a female’s sexuality can be

violated in a misguided attempt to ‘de-sexualise’ her is simply beyond the logical grasp of modern medicine.

Yet FGM still remains a thriving practice. While the more severe Type 3 FGM has been receiving the most focus in terms of elimination efforts, the relatively less hazardous Type 1 and Type 2 continue to be practiced widely in parts of the world, including Malaysia, where Type 1 FGMs are typically conducted on infant Malay females. Resistance towards this practice is thin because, as mentioned earlier, a Type 1 FGM only involves a clitoridectomy, a partial removal of the clitoris or the clitoral hood. The fact that it is relatively harmless and is grounded in the notion of preserving one’s daughter’s purity means that the practice has not yet met any significant resistance.

While I don’t openly call for resistance against the practice of female circumcision in Malaysia, I do believe that the Malaysian people have the right to know that such practices are losing popular support in other parts of the world and that from a religious point of view, it is wholly unnecessary. However, I have made my small contribution towards stemming the prevalence of female circumcision in Malaysia. When the medical attendant asked me if I wanted to circumcise my daughter, my answer was clear: No.

WRITER’S PROFILE

Samir 'Sam' Harith is an aspiring business academic, single dad and amateur writer. He is currently based on the Malaysia-Thai border and wishes our education system had done a better job in preparing our Malaysian undergraduate students for university. When he isn't busy trying to convince his students that accounting and finance are [exciting topics](#), he can be found [cooking topless](#) in the kitchen.

*I used to dream of a life uncomplicated
As straight as the path that leads to home
No hills, no bends, no twists and turns
A life, a fairytale, fit for a tome*

*I used to dream of a love undying
Of sweetness, shared commitments, of respect
Of sunny kitchens and wide open spaces
Of the sound of children and laughter that infects*

*I used to dream of living the high life
Of suits and an office facing the sea
Like a bird I would soar, so high and so far
This is my aspiration, this I would be*

*But my dreams lay shattered and burnt into ash
My shoulders are burdened with expectations
Oh woe is me, because I am but a woman
In a world where patriarchy still exists*

*She came to me one night in a dream,
The girl I should have been but left behind
Accepted by society, but she's in a bind
Her wants, her needs, her aspirations sacrificed*

*I have to wash, clean and cook, she says
I am a wife, a mother, an employee, a homemaker
too
I wish I had ten hands and legs, she moans to me
What would you do dearie, if you were me?*

*I dreamt of perfection, but I could never be
All I ever wanted was to be free
Why do you shout and scream at me so
I am not just a woman, I am more*

*I dreamt of sweetness, of wishes come true
But alas, dreams are just dreams, replaceable
with the new
Like a sunset fusing red, orange and blue
Time passes us by, we could never redo*

*We could choose to be just a brick in the wall
One of many, no different from all
Or we could we choose to be who we wanted to be
For life is too short to remain in malady.*



*Illustration Source
(Credits: Charly Clements)*

Dreams That Used To Be

By Sabrina Aripin

WRITER'S PROFILE

Sabrina Melisa Aripin is the co-founder of Borneo Youth Revolution, a movement of youths focusing on various issues in Sabah, Malaysia. She loves working on Human Rights issues, and has a special passion for women's issues & feminism.

WHY WOMEN RESIST CULTURE

BY
SHERIL A. BUSTAMAN

All my life, I have only known women who are of an independent and dominant nature. Although born a child of two cultures, I was more exposed to my Chinese half as opposed to my Malay half. This is probably due to the fact that my mother is the oldest of seven siblings (six of them being girls) and my father is an only child. I cannot fully express to you the dominance in a partially Hakka household, but to an extent I can tell you that the women can fend for themselves, are skilled multi-taskers and take very little lying down. That's what growing up with my aunties and my mother taught me. This is a massive contradiction however to the traditional Chinese culture, where daughters are considered to be less of a commodity than sons, are raised to be obedient and submissive, first to their fathers and brothers, then to their husbands and mother-in-laws, and told that their purpose in life is to be a domestic & bear sons for their husband's family. Through the years I have discovered however that it is not only the Chinese culture that has gender-biased values. My father has many a time reprimanded me about staying out after sundown, and scolded me about the way a girl is supposed to dress and act. On a large and more general scale, women are traditionally meant to be soft creatures – domesticated, prim, proper and submissive. Some of my female Indian friends also complained about parents who would not let them out at night without being chaperoned by an older male family member, usually an older brother.

It is no surprise then that these girls who are so constrained and bound by their cultural values growing up begin to resist

them when they become women. In today's society, we see an uprising in the shift of gender roles, whereby more women are involved in the workforce, sometimes holding positions that give them more power compared to their male associates. We also see in this new generation the birth of the 'house husband', showing an obvious shift in gender roles where the role of the breadwinner is no longer played by the husband, but the wife. There is also an obvious resistance of culture through the little things such as dressing and body modification. In many Asian cultures, a woman's modesty is a very precious asset that is to be hidden and protected, but walk out to any shopping mall or public space today and you will see an array of flesh being paraded on display via tank tops, strappy dresses, and short shorts. Women also take charge of their body now through methods of body modification, such as piercings in various places and tattoos. This new wave of self-expression can be clearly seen as a form of resistance to the traditional culture that their mothers and grandmothers conformed to.

So with traditional cultural values and "the modern woman" both existing in today's society, the question is: can they both co-exist, and can they both exist in one woman? Between the two extremes, is it possible for a woman to strike a balance between the old and the new? My mother and her sisters would drill into my cousins and I the ideals of the modern woman, imploring us to remember to "study first! Don't think about boyfriend or getting married so early!" and lamenting over and over again that their greatest regrets were not doing everything they wanted before settling down. At the same time, we would also hear them advocate and enforce the values they were taught, like how we should

pull our weight in the kitchen or at home because we were girls and how we shouldn't sleep past midday or eat so much because no boy wants to marry a lazy girl who eats her husband out of house and home. It fascinated me what the females of my family demanded of me, to uphold traditional cultural values but at the same time advocate myself as a modern woman.

It is through these teachings that I have come to believe that the women of today can actually do it all. True, it may take a while for us to get there, but at the end of the day, a woman can still hold a high ranking position and get home in time to make dinner for her family. She can work a 9 to 5 job and still pick up her kids during her lunch hour. She can be successful and tell her male subordinates what to do, but still be kind to her husband and filial to her mother in law. I can understand the fear of the modern woman, thinking she is taking a step backwards by settling into her traditional roles as a woman, hence resisting the culture she has been brought up with, but the point of my article is to let women know that that fear is irrational. With the opportunities that we have been given, women of today are more resilient and capable than we give ourselves credit for. Hence, we shouldn't be resisting our culture or our modern roles, we should be embracing them, just because we can.

WRITER'S PROFILE

Sheril is currently a second year student in the School of Arts & Social Sciences at Monash University Malaysia. She spends most of her time procrastinating things she's supposed to be doing by eating, tweeting her scrambled thoughts and eating even more. She enjoys exploring all sorts of ideas and can be inspired by the quirkiest things, from her new favourite series Rizzoli & Isles to mushrooms in her mother's homemade chicken rice.

this is the time you realize that everyone is grasping for a familiar idea of beauty.



dear 12 year old girl forced to
live in the horrible 21st century,

I'M NO LONGER 12 years old but I really think I need to write to you a letter. Initially I thought of addressing this to a 16 year old, but all of her ideas of boys, girls, morals and sex would have been cemented at the time. You are 12 years old and I know you already have a fairly decent idea of what sex is. Even if you did not, your friends would have hinted it to you and laughed a lot. And if you have no clue, you would probably want to know about it, because you see it on television, you see it in movies, you see it being the most glorified of all things that a woman can give. And yet no one talks about it.

Your friends will start to change. So will you. You may think you are still staying the same with your pretty dresses and stuffed animal friends (I still keep mine, you don't have to grow up don't worry), but you will change.

You will all have different bodies. Everyone's skin, hair and body shape will be affected differently by these changes. There will be a lot of talk about who is changing the best and there will be a lot of talk on how to correct your changes if you are not changing 'according to plan'.

They may take you to dermatologists, to dentists, to dieticians or they may leave you alone to fend yourself and you wish they did take you to those doctors. I don't really know how parents deal with these things. This is the time you realize that everyone is grasping for a familiar idea of beauty. Your friends (and maybe you) will start dressing like great people you know, politicians, actresses, celebrities, musicians, people on TV or you may just dress the way your mother dresses. All great people.

When you get older and people tell you that you (or your friends) are dressing in a provocative way that invites rape tell them this is not true. Everyone usually dresses in a way that best expresses themselves or an ideal of themselves usually borrowed from TV. Call them out, because our society does NOT have a culture of calling out our bullies, telling them they are hurtful and telling them to stop hurting us because our parents are good at tolerating oppressive regimes. We should stop tolerating this.

it is always **acceptable** for men to **objectify women**, to **utilize** them for their own ends, as long as the woman is **not present** during the **decision making process**.

When you are old or young, people will say a lot of things regarding rape that will sound like absolute nonsense to you. This is because as a society, we have not dealt with the harrowing truth, that everyone has the potential to be a rapist. Instead, we behave as if we are a nation under siege, where our women must be boarded up as they were during the war and that women must be kept out of the public sphere as much as possible. Resist this.

We have also failed to take responsibility of the fact that we have created a culture where women are not able to positively indicate

they want to engage in sexual activity. I know, when you're 12 years old and when you tell a boy you like him, he may go into a state of shock because he is unable to process the fact that a girl likes him. Things are still like that now. It is always acceptable for men to objectify women, to utilize them for their own ends, as long as the woman is not present during the decision making process.

This is probably why the question of 'consent' in Malaysia is so alien. If a woman decided to say 'Hey, I like that you are ogling at me, don't you think I'm really beautiful?'. I don't know if people would be so happy to reply that they are beautiful, because that is how things are in Malaysia. You don't say things that you mean, you allow them to hang in the air and things happen. I don't think there are English words to describe this culture, but that's how a lot of things are, in Malaysia, there just aren't enough English words to describe a lot of things.

How can you change things? I guess you can talk to everyone around you, write articles, go into a line where people will hear you and tell people that rape is just not possible to be encouraged. If it is encouraged, then there is consent and not rape. If it is rape and the person perceives encouragement, it is either a flimsy excuse or you need to dig deeper into the situation to understand what has transpired during the interaction between the alleged rapist and the victim. Never assume, because we will never know everything.

If you are faced with people who genuinely believe that it is a tough decision to make between a disembodied voice of a dress that said 'Yes, rape me' and a human voice of a woman that said 'No, please don't rape me', resist those people, because they are clearly very ill on the inside. You could try to change them by picking a fight by making them see how illogical they sound, but illogical people usually don't wake up from their illogical comas. You ease them out of it, bit by bit.

I don't know how old you will be when they start trying to make you realize that you are a woman and start telling you what women 'ought' to be. I think they have always been doing it since you were born when they gave you pink blankets and pink towels or something like that but always remember that it is all a creation of society. There will be girls who do not like pink, boys who want to put makeup on for other people and some people who do not think that boys and girls are the only two ways of looking at their gender.

Read Judith Butler. Read Catherine McKinnon and a bunch of other gender/queer theorists. They may not always be right, but they will make you see that there is more than one way of looking at what a woman is and who a woman can love. And then make your own decision. A lot of people in your church, your family, television and schools will make you aware of your sexuality, your virginity and your beauty.

You probably know my advice for this. Call them out on it. The concept of a woman's

virginity and sexuality existed during a time where women were treated like objects rather than people. That is why the dialogue around rape prevention sounds very much like the protection of private property.

You should decide what you do with your virginity and what it actually is. You can save it, you can give it away to people you know, you don't know, but know that it is yours to give.

I don't really have an opinion about what you do with your virginity, but if you want my advice on it, please do not EVER attach worth or value to it. There will be girls who feel that this is the only thing that makes them a good girl, a holy girl or a good commodity to sell on eBay. I am not saying that it is a morally wrong thing to do, but it is something that may harm you on the inside, because there is nothing more dehumanizing than commodifying an aspect of yourself when you are young and still understanding yourself. You are not an object. You are human. The dialogue of worth and value is always and SHOULD always be reserved for commodities. Do not attempt to value any human life in terms of dollars and cents or the job they will grow into. It is dehumanizing and the fastest way to emotional bankruptcy.

Of course when you grow up, you will have to choose which part of yourself you will have to commodify to earn a living, your brains, your hands, your body, your sexuality. You will have to go through this dehumanizing process as a grown up, and

you will feel inexplicable unhappiness. This inexplicable unhappiness is because you just feel like you don't know yourself anymore or why you're doing things because you've been doing them so often that it has become meaningless and doesn't add value to your human existence. This will happen and it is your duty to ensure that you survive this process, know that you are more than that commodified aspect of your body and if you cannot believe it, then give it meaning.

No, I don't know if you are going to find Prince Charming, or if you will be rich. That is not the important part (I hope). I know that it is what a lot of people will be hoping for you and if someone sings that Que Sera Sera song, please tell them to stop and call them out on it. Find something you love now, you are 12, this is when all your loves are the least pretentious or societally manufactured. And stick to it, no matter how mean people attack you. I know a lot of people say be yourself and you find it hard because we are bombarded with images of how we 'should be'. That is all just marketing. They want to take your money, really and your bad self-esteem is a side-effect.

So all the best on being a woman in the 21st century, where everyone wants to tell you what to do with your sexuality but no one really wants to be with you for the big plunge. Resist all the things that make you feel bad and if you don't know where to go for answers, I'd tell you to read. And read. And read. Read Rosa Luxemburg, read Clara Zetkin, read Engels.

Yours,

Michelle Yesudas

i know a lot of people say **be yourself** and you find it hard because we are bombarded with images of how we 'should be'. that is all just **marketing**. they want to take your **money**, really and your bad **self-esteem** is a **side-effect**.



WRITER'S PROFILE

Michelle Yesudas is the Legal/Campaign coordinator for Lawyers for Liberty and really believes that human rights is not a zero sum game. She thinks that it is easy to think otherwise, since we have been so oriented to believing that rights are dependent on resources and we have been conditioned to fight with each other for these resources, instead of attempting to make each other's lives more liveable. She would like to think that is time we stopped doing that sort of thing and look to supporting each other to create safer spaces, to cultivate stronger voices and to keep on organizing ourselves. She is also going through this phase of being incredibly interested in traditional art around the world, so if you do have any suggestions for art or other things, do email her at michelle.das87@gmail.com