

Headline	Nisha dedicates award to transgender community		
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# Nisha dedicates award to transgender community

By Nurul Huda Jamaluddin

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**PETALING JAYA** — “This is for the community”.

This is what transgender activist Nisha Ayub said after global rights watchdog Human Rights Watch (HRW) announced she was one of four recipients of the Alison Des Forges Award for Extraordinary Activism.

Although Nisha, who has put the spotlight on the plight of the community in Malaysia was glad for the award, she said the whole community deserved it.

“I only opened the space for the discussion for them. The ones who are supposed to receive the award are the (transgender) community in Malaysia. This is for them,” she said.

HRW said it was honouring Nisha for “challenging the discriminatory laws that prevent transgender people in Malaysia from living free of violence, fear, and oppression.”

Nisha, who is part of rights group Justice for Sisters (JFS), will receive her award at the Voices for Justice Human Rights Watch annual dinner in Amsterdam on Nov 5, one of 20 such dinners to be held worldwide this year.

The 36-year-old said she did not expect to win the award, even though she felt honoured the work by the Malaysian transgender community had been recognised internationally.

Thinking her chances of winning were slim, she did not tell anyone when she was informed by HRW Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Rights Programme advocacy director Borris Dittrich she was one of the award nominees two months ago.

“When I found out who my fellow contenders were, I felt very small,” she said.

“I really did not expect to win. I feel very honoured just to be nominated. It is a huge acknowledgment.”

The Malacca-born’s interest in activism began after she was released from prison in 2000.

It had been previously reported she spent three months with male inmates for impersonating a woman after she was found guilty by a Shariah court.

“Before prison, I led a normal life. I had a normal job, working in a hotel at the front office. However, after thinking of my experience in prison, I wanted to fight for my rights,” she said.

“Then, I met the community and started volunteering. The more I volunteered with the non-governmental organisation (NGO) fighting for transgender rights, the more I realised this was a crucial issue.

“It makes me very angry to see how transgender people are being treated. I find my calling in this. In a way, being imprisoned made me stronger.”

Nisha has worked with various NGOs on transgender issues for eight years.

“I hope more transgender people will speak up for their rights. My main priority is empowering the community. We are not going against the government. We are only asking for equal rights. We are part of the culture and the system,” she said.

Friends and acquaintances also celebrated her achievement.

JFS colleague and transgender advocate Sulastrri Ariffin, 55, a pioneer in transgender rights, said Nisha deserved the award as she had been working hard to give a voice to the community.

“I feel this is not just her achievement, but also the community’s,” she said.

Constitutional lawyer Nizam Bashir, who worked with Nisha on the case involving transgenders in Negri Sembilan, said Nisha’s win would bring attention to the issues faced by the community such as discrimination.

Besides Nisha, the three other recipients are Syrian journalist and human rights activist Yara Bader, investigative journalist Khadija Ismayilova from Azerbaijan and human rights lawyer and founder of the human rights organisation Chapter Four Uganda Nicholas Opiyo.

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The award is named after Dr Alison Des Forges, a senior adviser at HRW who died in a plane crash in New York in 2009. She was a leading expert on the Rwandan genocide.

In April, Nisha was awarded “Hero of the Year” at the second Asia LGBT Milestone Awards in Bangkok.

Nisha and JFS gained prominence last

year for assisting three Muslim transgender women in their constitutional challenge of a Shariah legislation in Negri Sembilan that outlaws men from cross-dressing, a watershed case that they won in the Court of Appeal.

The state is contesting the decision in the Federal Court, with the hearing scheduled for tomorrow.



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**Nisha (second from right) says she only opened the space for discussion for the community. — Picture by Saw Siow Feng**