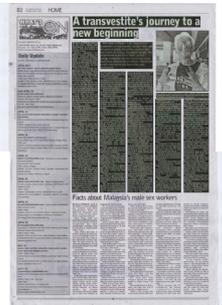


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A transvestite's journey to a new beginning

KUALA LUMPUR: Looking at the face, figure and demeanour, it is hard to believe that this woman is actually a man.

Roslan Hamzah, 52, affectionately known as 'Atuk', admitted without hesitation that he is a Mak Nyah, a controversial term that generally refers to males who love to dress up and behave like women.

"Even now, though my physique may have changed, I'm still a Mak Nyah," said Atuk during an impromptu interview at an HIV conference where Atuk was one of the participants.

Atuk openly voiced his views in the hall and started an interesting debate on society's misplaced judgment on people like himself and how they are unfairly treated.

Atuk, who was born in Kajang, said during his primary school years in Melaka that he was a normal boy. He was active in sports, a sprinter, and even represented his state.

However, he slowly started hearing about his true identity when his performance in sports started going downhill. "Roslan, why are you running like a pondan! Roslan, you just ran like a pondan!" his teacher would say.

According to Atuk, the nasty and unforgiving remarks of his teacher haunted him emotionally.

"Who did see the real Atuk? The teacher or I, myself?" asked Atuk, adding that at the time he was living with his father and step mother in Melaka.

Atuk admitted that he was a 'softie' and was often teased by other students. Soon he started feeling depressed.

To make matters worse, when he was in form one he was sexually assaulted.

The perpetrator was in the army where his father was an officer. He had been assigned to fetch the children of army personnel from school.

"I had to undergo sports training on that fateful day and when it was over, I was left alone as everyone else had gone back. The army truck driver threatened to abandon me on the rubber estate if I did not give in to his demand for sex," he said, describing this dark chapter of his life.

"After sodomising me the perpetrator warned me not to tell anyone of the incident or

else he would harm me, but I went ahead and related the incident to my father.

"I was immediately sent to Petaling Jaya to live with my biological mother, but my soft nature made me the object of ridicule. In fact, only the girls in school befriended me.

"I felt even more depressed. How was I to study when I was taunted every day?

"Moreover, I was separated from my father and step mother. Every time I quarreled with my biological mother, she would threaten to send me back to my step mother.

"My stepmother was fierce, but she had taken care of me since I was very young," added Atuk.

Atuk, who was undergoing emotional upheavals due to the problems within the family and school, also had another problem to deal with - fetish feelings towards the masculine gender that began after the sexual attack.

The solution? To run away from home. And that is what Atuk did. He would loiter at places where teenagers congregated and spent considerable time roller skating.

Atuk claims that he was forced into sexual liaisons with other teenagers.

According to Atuk, his biological mother did come looking for him off and on, but their meetings were often tempestuous and, in the end, both parted ways.

Atuk got to know a Malay lady who worked in a bar in the area where he was loitering.

"I was about 15 years old at that time. I got to know a woman in PJ. Knowing that I was a softie she took me back with her.

"She gave me money and taught me to take hormones. She also invited me to work in the bar where she worked. By then I had already started

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dressing up like a woman and I started growing my hair.

"At the same time, my dad had died and I was no longer in touch with my biological mother. She did look for me, but I had already decided on the path that I would be taking.

"I went where I found consolation. I was still young then, and the work in the pub provided me with a sense of relief.

"I was a victim of circumstances," he says referring to his gender transformation.

Through a Mak Nyah who used to patronise the same bar, Atuk got to know Lorong Haji Taib, notorious for prostitution and drugs.

Atuk said that the Mak Nyah convinced him that he would be able to meet people of 'his kind' there.

"The first time I was there I was already impressed. Why? I was well taken care of. At

that time it never crossed my mind that I was being made use of and the Mak Nyah who took me there was a pimp.

Not only did Atuk start prostituting himself, but he started taking drugs, too.

"I neither smoked nor consumed liquor but was soon hooked to heroin when my boyfriend left me to get married," Atuk continued with his story.

According to Atuk, the boyfriend initially started off as his customer and soon started dating him.

"Slowly we fell in love. We lived together for nine years," said Atuk, commenting on how broken hearted he was.

He even went across the causeway where business was better to seek patrons.

"There were many customers. I was so busy I did not even have time to comb my hair after each session. I earned a lot of money. I remember how crumpled the notes were as I kept them under my clothes. Upon

returning to Kuala Lumpur I used to iron them out.

"I could get between 30 and 40 customers on weekends. I could earn Singapore \$50 per customer," noted Atuk, who was in the flesh trade for almost 20 years.

As age caught up with him, Atuk faced uncertainty and the real blow came when he was confirmed as being HIV positive.

He had been in and out of jail for drug use and only started to repent after his biological mother died.

Atuk was informed of his mother's death by his eldest sister while he was undergoing a 40-month prison term.

According to Atuk, he met his mother several times but there was no real affection between them due to his involvement with drugs.

However, Atuk was grateful for the fact that during their last meeting he received her forgiveness.

"It was Hari Raya then and I wholeheartedly asked forgiveness from her.

"I'm sad that my mother did not live to see the change that took place in me and the social work that I'm doing," says Atuk, feeling the disappointment.

The most shocking moment for Atuk was when he was confirmed as being HIV positive about 17 years ago. He was infected through the sharing of needles when injecting drugs.

Initially, it was difficult for Atuk to accept the fact that he was HIV positive and that there was no cure for him.

"I looked in the mirror and asked myself whether I was going to continue crying or do something about it.

"From then on I was determined to change my fate. At that time, discrimination against transvestites was severe and I needed strength to face the adversities.

"HIV sufferers share the same fate as Mak Nyah. I was chased out of the rented room and had no money. I thought people would sympathise with me," explained Atuk.

Atuk is not alone in repenting. He had the support of a friend called 'Amy' and the Mak Nyah programme of the PT Foundation, the largest community based programme that provides services for HIV high risk groups in Kuala Lumpur.

Atuk's real life story now serves as a good lesson for others in his predicament.

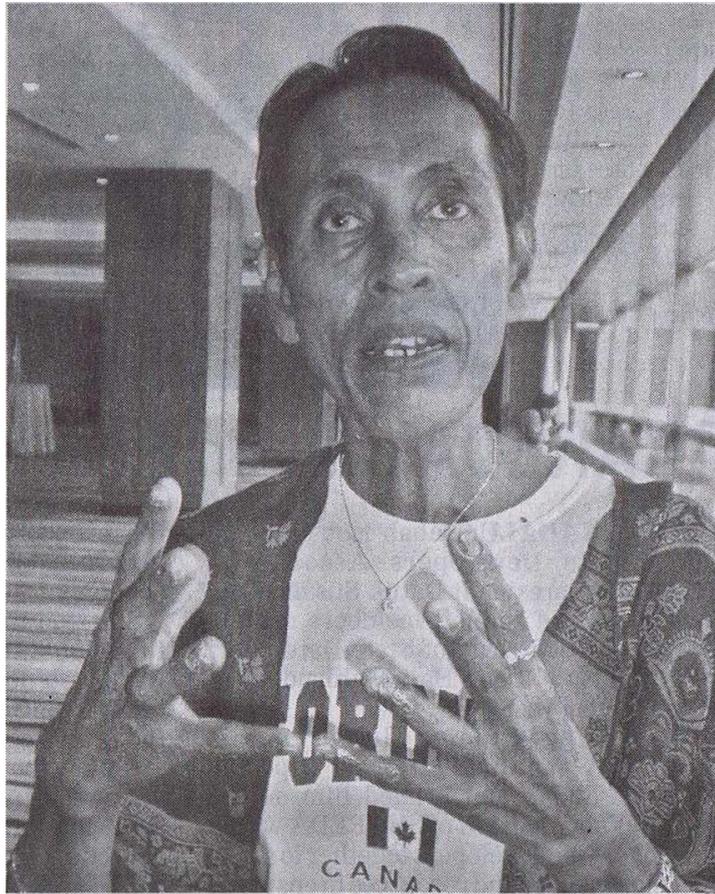
After being with the PT Foundation for 16 years, Atuk has now joined the Persatuan Cahaya Harapan Negeri Kedah (Kuala Muda) as a social worker.

In Kuala Lumpur there are many NGOs and Atuk has a number of friends who live with HIV.

"Cahaya Harapan's focus is on the exchange of needles without sidelining other groups in need of assistance," says Atuk. - Bernama

'Mak Nyah' or 'Pondan' is the Malay term for transvestites or cross-dressers. Society frowns upon this group of people, though they may have their own reasons for living as the opposite gender. This article dwells on the life of "Atuk", an HIV positive transvestite who has experienced sexual abuse, drug addiction and prostitution - but has now turned a new leaf to help those in the same predicament.

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