

Headline	CHANGE STARTS WITH ACCEPTANCE		
MediaTitle	The Star		
Date	24 Jun 2017	Color	Full Color
Section	Supplement	Circulation	338,368
Page No	10	Readership	1,032,000
Language	English	ArticleSize	278 cm <sup>2</sup>
Journalist	KAMINI SINGGAM	AdValue	RM 13,991
Frequency	Daily	PR Value	RM 41,973



# CHANGE STARTS WITH ACCEPTANCE

By **KAMINI SINGGAM**

kamini.singgam@leaderonomics.com

IMAGINE waking up daily, fearful of what lies in store for you when you step out of your own house that's located not in a war zone, but right here in Malaysia.

We have always been grateful for our multi-racial, peaceful and stable environment – politics and fluctuating economic conditions aside – but when it comes to diversity and inclusivity, we are still grappling when it comes to dealing with the marginalised be it the differently-abled, the LGBT community, sex workers, the ill, or other voiceless segments of society.

## PUSHING FOR CHANGE

Internationally recognised transgender activist Nisha Ayub is adamant about making a change in the system, with the intention of ensuring that the transgender community get to live without having to sacrifice their self-worth.

The co-founder of the community-run SEED Foundation says 60% of

transgender people are sex workers, not because they have no other career options but because they are desperate to make a living and have nowhere to go as they are constantly looked down upon.

SEED is a fully crowd-funded organisation that caters to the marginalised community (homeless, people living and affected with HIV and transgender men and women), and provides them a safe space that supports them in establishing sustainable livelihoods, facilitates access to healthcare services and improves their quality of living.

"If you are transgender, you are judged not based on your qualification, race or religion but based on your appeal," Nisha said at a recent women's forum organised

by T-Systems Malaysia. She was commenting on how difficult it is for transgender people to find decent employment opportunities.

"We can talk about women, children and the elderly but we can't

talk about transgender (people) because we are seen as a negative entity," said Nisha who went through a life of seclusion as people, including her own mother (initially) were constantly judging and taunting her.

## BREAKING BARRIERS

As she gained confidence through her advocacy work – which started after her imprisonment in 2000 – Nisha began fighting for the oppressed who, as she puts it, "did not choose to be the way they are".

Hate crime is a frightening indication of the dangers that transgender people face and Nisha deals with clients who have been victims of hate crime on a daily basis.

"People assume we choose to be transgender. If I could choose, why would I choose a life where I'd be ridiculed, called all kinds of names, harassed in so many ways and judged all the time?" she questions.

She adds that people – including parents – do not listen or give a

chance to a child to explain why he or she is different.

"We have transgender girls as young as 12 being dumped by their families because these girls are seen as a disgrace. Listen to what we have to say rather than listening to others," she says adding that a mother's acceptance can change a child's life as it gives the child confidence and courage to face life's challenges.

Nisha, who is the recipient of the prestigious US International Women of Courage Award and the Alison Des Forges Award for Extraordinary Activism, has a day dedicated to her in San Diego (Nisha Ayub Day is

observed on April 5).

## LONELY BATTLE

SEED Foundation, Nisha added, has been sustaining itself without any form of funding from the government or private organisations, and she believes that with awareness and acceptance, the marginalised community can

realise their true potential.

Listening to Nisha absolutely changed my perception about those who are different. Although I do not ridicule transgender people, I am guilty of standing by and watching others – including my own friends and family – laugh at them.

To me, Nisha is an inspiration because it is not easy to fight a battle without a strong support system. Apart from cultural and religious limitations – which in my opinion is a personal choice – there really isn't a justifiable reason to let marginalisation happen. Humanity transcends nationalities, gender, ethnicities, and life's choices. That is what we should aspire to be. Human.

■ *Kamini is the assistant managing editor at Leaderonomics. Calling herself a curious ambivert, she loves engaging people and exploring issues concerning education, learning and development.*