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Time to tell the true tales

Ladies, do you have a story to tell? If you do, share it with the Herstory Films Project, which aims to encourage Malaysian women to relate their stories and learn from each other's life experiences.

HARIATI AZIZAN and SUMISHA NAIDU

FACED with no other prospects on the estate, a young girl was forced to marry her uncle. Another was beaten blue-black by her parents, all for accepting an ice-cream cone from a Chinese boy.

These "first love" stories were just bursting to come out when we met a group of women from the estate community in Banting, Selangor, recently, says indie filmmaker Mien Ly.

But it was only when they became comfortable that they were able to divulge their lost dreams and unfulfilled desires, she says.

Mien, along with a group of young women filmmakers and artists, is hoping to tell the untold stories of Malaysian women through their *HerStory Films Project*. To do this, they have to collect stories on love, desire and sexuality from women from all walks of life in Malaysia and then translate them into short films.

Leading female artists and activists including feminist Angela M. Kuga Thas, thespian Mislina Mustaffa, writer/photographer Bernice Chauly, and local producer Lina Tan are mentoring the project.

"Many women think their stories are not worth telling. What they don't realise is that by getting their stories out, they will get a better understanding of themselves as well as each other. Women everywhere face the same issues and struggles," Mien says.

"Stories are always important, especially in a country like Malaysia which is diverse and mostly patriarchal," Chauly chips in.

"Many women in Malaysia are marginalised. They are not encouraged, or sometimes not even allowed, to talk about themselves."

The *HerStory* project was initiated by Mien who was inspired by the stories she heard from women at a Knowledge and Rights with Young People through Safer Spaces (KRYSS) workshop on gender and sexuality last year.

Through her work as co-founder of

Filmmakers Anonymous, a group that organises bi-monthly screenings of local short films, Mien realised that there is a real lack of women storytellers in Malaysia.

"We want to encourage more women to share their stories and to learn how to tell them as well," she says.

"We don't have enough stories of women politicians, leaders and fighters, what more ordinary women. We need to start writing and documenting these stories because they are part of our emotional landscape," says Chauly, telling the story of her grandmother who married a stranger a week before leaving China for a strange land (Malaya) as an interesting example.

Chauly feels that many women are too scared of a backlash to write about themselves.

"When you decide to tell a story, whether it is personal or not, you take a risk as you put yourself on the line. Women who write about themselves are often accused of airing their dirty linen in public. So an important thing to remember is that you cannot please everyone," she advises.

Kuga Thas agrees, saying: "Women seem to need permission to tell their story. Even

women who are educated need validation that their story is important enough to be told. We hope that with the project more women will be brave enough to come out of their shell."

Herstory wants to reach out to all women including sex workers, drug users, and those who are HIV positive, she says, adding that they want to focus on them as people, as Malaysians, as "someone whom you would pass by on the street".

Mislina Mustaffa, another mentor, stresses that they are looking for honesty and originality in the stories.

"But the more sexual their stories are the better," she says with a laugh.

Jokes aside, she says they hope to make women more confident about expressing themselves and gain the courage to be honest.

"For the project, I want women to just talk about their sexual desires. Nothing is wrong with saying what you really want.

"Sex is still a taboo and women don't want

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to talk about it. What I've noticed is that many women have issues about their bodies, no matter who they are. Their insecurities about their bodies affect their whole lives," she says.

The project hopes to raise funds for production too, and they are also looking for possible partners for the portable screening nationwide, according to Mien.

HerStory is looking for true stories from women of any age, background or location in Malaysia. They must be submitted by Feb 10, 2010. A total of 20 stories will be short-listed. The selected storytellers will undergo a workshop with the arts and film mentors to turn their stories into scripts. A minimum of five will be made into short films.

Once completed, the films will be screened through a portable film festival that will travel throughout the country. The film screenings will be used as an opportunity to talk to women about their desires and sexuality while encouraging them to tell their own stories.

"Films are a good way to bring in all the issues that are typical in Malaysia, such as race, religion and even class," says Kuga Thas when asked why they had chosen films as the

final product.

Stories can be written or audio recorded in either Bahasa Malaysia or English. To find out more about HerStory Films Project or how you can contribute, visit <http://herstoryfilm-project.blogspot.com/> or contact Mien at 012-696 9455 or Vizla at 017-6318326.

»Many women have issues about their bodies, no matter who they are«



MISLINA MUSTAFFA



Chauly: 'We need to start writing and documenting these stories because they are part of our emotional landscape'