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Lessons in life

BY **PETRA GIMBAD**

TWO years ago, I became a yoga instructor by fluke. The organisation that certified me was offering a course free to women in need. I was a child protection officer at the time, and so I wrote to ask whether they could take two refugee girls from Burma. The organisation generously agreed.

I arrived with the girls to help them settle in and serve as interpreter because the course was in English and the girls spoke their Burmese dialects and Malay.

This was when I was invited to register. "You're going to be here anyway, might as well get certified," they offered kindly.

I was delighted. Years ago, I had read about the transformative powers of yoga to bring peace to the minds of persons suffering guilt and trauma. The article dealt with a woman who eventually escaped the dual traps of substance abuse and unhealthy relationships, to teach the art to women in prison. She wanted to show the women how even within the four walls of their cells, they could be free.

Little did I know that the certification would serve in so many ways, two years later.

I came to Indonesia – where I still reside – to embark on an internship with an organisation that works with lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgenders (LGBTs), persons living with HIV, sex workers and street communities. Contrary to the evaluation that I had planned for the NGO, upon discovering that I held a yoga instructor's certificate, they hoped I would work with the staff who were distressed by the harrowing



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aspects of their work.

This extended to activists from the communities themselves – such as activists who are also sex workers and activists who are living with HIV.

My first class with lower-income sex workers was moving. One of the participants had asked whether she could bring her daughter, as she had

nowhere to place her during the class. How similar are we as women, I reflected; it was such an ordinary conversation, akin to the discussions I would have with friends with children, who need babysitters when invited to places where children are unwelcome.

During that first lesson, we asked around the room: "What do you hope to obtain from this practice?"

One of them answered: "The peace and courage that I will need to make a decision." I never asked what that decision was, for our lives are our own, and a sex worker is no less entitled to her private space.

In the weeks to come, I discovered several things. How sex workers also wear *hijabs* within the brothel community, how many still pray.

One community has a HIV infection rate of more than 12%. Yet, clients refuse to wear condoms. The women have no choice but to agree to put food on the table.

During a discussion, I asked the activists what were their main concerns for their community. They replied that their main concern was violence, which explains low condom usage.

Try to negotiate wearing a condom with a man who would not hesitate to

beat you simply because you are a sex worker. When you are trying to save your life, bread and butter issues do not even come into the picture. Paid or not, this is rape.

One of my classes was near empty one Sunday. "Why?" I asked. "It is Easter Sunday," replied my colleague, "and they are attending church."

Praying for the people whom they love became a part of the class, according to whatever religion they embraced.

The programme has come to an end. However, this was not before I discovered that one of the sex workers had been using Depo-Provera for more than 10 years to protect herself from pregnancy given that not all clients wanted to use condoms or even cared whether they fathered babies. Her bones were brittle from prolonged use of the drug. Also, for whatever reason, it was injected into her spine instead of her buttocks as is the usual practice of properly trained doctors.

What moved me was her confession to a friend who came one weekend to massage the sex workers, as a way of introducing and remembering positive touch in a manner that had nothing to do with clients. This woman, despite her years of working in brothels, still hoped to find love someday.

Someone commented simply, "Sex workers are no different. They need love too."

It was through that world of brothels that sex workers re-taught friends and me the lesson: that regardless of work or class, no person is exempt – from the human hunger and need to be loved.

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