

## JOURNEYING FOR CHANGE, 8 MAR 2011



*WCC executive director Loh Cheng Kooi*

She leads a determined little outfit in the north of Peninsular Malaysia in the fight to reduce violence and discrimination against women and children.

MY life as a student activist in the United Kingdom in the late 1970s had the greatest impact on my life. Being exposed to the Malaysian student movement and the women's movement there enabled me to develop a strong sense of social justice and gender equality. These lay the foundations for my journey through life.

When I returned to Malaysia in the early 1980s, I became involved with the Women's Aid Organisation (WAO). The 80s was an exciting period for the women's movement in Malaysia as it sowed the seeds for the formation of women's organisations. As my commitment to feminism grew, I went back to the Netherlands to pursue my Masters in Women's Studies to deepen my theoretical knowledge on women's issues. I subsequently took up a job with a regional women workers organisation in Hong Kong and travelled extensively in Asia working with workers and women's groups.

In the 1990s, I came home to Penang with my family: my husband, a two-year-old daughter plus a son on the way. In 1997, I was offered the post of executive director in the Women's Centre for Change (then called Women's Crisis Centre). It was a challenge for me since my previous work experience had been largely at the regional level. Accepting the job turned out to be one of the best decisions I have ever made. It is in WCC that I learnt about great friendships; working with an amazing range of women; from homemakers to lawyers, for the sole purpose of reducing violence and discrimination against women and children. Amazingly I have been with WCC for the

past 13 years, the longest I have stayed in any job! The challenges and the unfinished work keeps me and the dedicated staff and volunteers going. Every year we ask: what more can WCC do to improve women and children's lives?

Today WCC is well known for our counselling services for domestic violence clients. Our child sexual abuse prevention package Bijak Itu Selamat (Be Smart, Be Safe) has travelled to five states educating thousands of children on differentiating good and bad touches and saying "No" to sexual abuse. Hundreds of teachers have been trained with this package. Similarly, for secondary students WCC has produced a program entitled Respek (Respect) focusing on the prevention of gender violence and exploitative relationships. It is through both WCC and Joint Action Group for Gender Equality (JAG) that I learnt about meaning of passion and activism – women activists who have dedicated their lives to the women's cause. Through campaigns and joint efforts, I learnt that a small group of committed people are capable of achieving big things.

It is through the sheer determination of women's groups who have relentlessly highlighted and campaigned for women's issues over the last two decades that women's issues are now part and parcel of our lives.

Since 1994, domestic violence is a criminal offence. Sexist remarks by politicians and leaders are no longer acceptable and discrimination on the grounds of gender is a thing of the past as guaranteed by in our Constitution. Women themselves are taking steps to change their lives if they experience violence. These are the positives that Malaysian women have gained.

Yet the challenges are still many. Violence against women and children continues to rise alarmingly. Despite existing laws, enforcement is still lacking. There are still police officers who are not aware of the Domestic Violence Act, rape victims receive little support and their access to justice is minimal; the One Stop Crisis Centres for abused victims in hospitals are often poorly equipped and not properly staffed. Women who are sexually harassed at the workplace do not have proper redress.

At the national level, the UN Women's Convention (Cedaw) has not been incorporated into our legal system to ensure that substantive equality is implemented. Women's interests would seem to be of low priority in the Government's agenda.

As a small NGO, WCC's mission is to reduce violence and empower women and children so that they can have access to social justice and enjoy their full potential as human beings. We shall continue to counsel and shelter abused women, educate children and youths and advocate for changes to reduce violence and improve the lives of these communities.

New programmes that WCC has initiated such as a Rape Survivors Support Network in collaboration with the Penang Hospital provide new avenues for work. We also support rape survivors when they go for the rape trials because not only have they been traumatised by the rape but the court process itself can be an extremely distressing ordeal.

In 2010, WCC took a giant step to purchase a three-storey building due to our expanding work and growing staff. The building costs RM1.5mil and renovations will cost another RM800,000. We have initiated a WCC Building Fund to raise money for both the building and the renovations. Our plans include having more counselling rooms, conducting training to equip disadvantaged women with skills and knowledge and build quality service for our clientele. As a tax exempt, non-profit body, we appeal to the public and corporations to donate generously so as to enable WCC to continue our dedicated service for women and children.

***Loh Cheng Kooi is the executive director of the Women's Centre for Change Penang***