

The Star (Malaysia): September 9, 2007

He's my daughter

By ELIZABETH TAI

Appalled by how transsexuals are generally mistreated by society and even their families, the third winner of *FreedomFilmFest07* hopes to change mindsets by showing how a mother's love and acceptance can make all the difference.

IT was an assignment that seemed straightforward enough: do a video clip on transsexuals in Malaysia for a news website. But after meeting and interviewing transsexuals and learning about their lives, Indrani Kopal, 28, could not get them out of her mind.

The *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* defines a transsexual as a person who feels that they should have been born the opposite sex, and therefore behaves and dresses like a member of that sex, or a person who has had a medical operation to change their sex.



Despite enduring daily insults from some inconsiderate people because she's a transsexual, Sarika, 23, is confident about her femininity.

In real life, that's much harder to do. The transsexuals Indrani met told her stories of how they were harassed and abused by strangers when they walked down the street. Some were turned out by their loved ones. As a result, many became sex workers because they could not fend for themselves as no one was willing to employ them. And this led to the arrests by the police.

Indrani quickly realised that her short video clip for *Malaysiakini* was not enough. She kept in touch with the many transsexuals she had come to know and looked for the chance to tell their stories in a bigger and more profound way.

She first thought of highlighting the injustices faced by transsexuals, because "in the Asian region, our country is the worst for transsexuals to live in," but that angle did not feel right nor new to Indrani.

Then, she got to know Sarika Samalakrishnan, 23, a university graduate who works in a human resource department of a company.

After hearing numerous tales of how transsexuals were turned away by their families, she was astounded to find out that Sarika's family accepted her for who she was.

“Her mum went to the extend of buying her clothes and cosmetics! I was amazed, and thought, ‘Wow, that’s a cool mother!’ And I thought, why not document it?” said Indrani.

Indrani knew that she had found the perfect angle for her documentary.

And when the FreedomFilmFest judges received her documentary proposal, they thought the same and Indrani became one of three winners who were awarded a RM5,000 grant.

Her documentary is called *She's My Son*. It wasn't easy to juggle her busy work as a video journalist and find time to film and direct her project as well.

But nothing prepared her for the crisis that hit the production. Three weeks after pre-production in April, one of Sarika's sisters feared that the documentary would make Sarika's “issue” public and thus harm the chances of their younger sister getting married.

Sarika had to withdraw from the documentary.



A transsexual walks into a non-profit organisation's office for transsexuals in Kuala Lumpur August 4, 2007. Transsexuals say they are slowly gaining acceptance although physical abuse and verbal harassment by the public, police and religious authorities are still routine.

“It was a moment of complete panic for me,” said Indrani, shuddering at the memory.

For two weeks, Indrani frantically searched for a new talent. Then Sarika introduced her to Suganya, 30.

“I wasn’t so sure about her at first. Then, at a party held by transsexuals, Suganya came to me and said, ‘Don’t worry, you will love my mother.’ And when I met Suganya’s mother Samsed, I realised that she was godsend. Everything I had in my mind, she just laid it out. She was expressive, confident, and cooperative,” said Indrani.

The relationship between Suganya and Samsed, 49, was just beautiful, she added.

When Suganya went through a sex change operation recently, the whole family celebrated it.

“It was a huge ceremony for them and they invited their relatives to the party,” said Indrani.

One thing you will not find in her documentary is religious debate because Indrani feels that the focus should be on families instead.

“The root of the problem is the family. If the family respects a transgendered child, then they will educate society (into accepting transsexuals). Why do you want to blame the authorities when you can educate the family? And who can educate the family? The media.”

The real star of the documentary, she said, is Samsed.

“I want people to know that there are mothers who accept their transsexual children,” she explained. “When I was young, I didn’t give them any attention. I thought they were normal, but I wasn’t aware of what was happening to them in society.”

Society needs to realise that transsexuals have the right to live, to have shelter, to earn money and have an education, she added.

“Even if only one person changes after the documentary, I think I’ve completed my objective,” she said.

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