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Seeking acceptance

By **ELIZABETH TAI**

WHEN Sarika was forced to bow out of *She's My Son* because of her second sister's protests, she was furious.

"I'm really mad (at my sister's reaction)," said Sarika when I met her in July.

"She's scared that my relatives will look down on her because of me, that's the main reason," she said, her voice tight with anger.

We met at the Akademi Seni Budaya dan Warisan Kebangsaan campus in Kuala Lumpur in July. She was there to film segments for *She's My Son* in one of the theatres.

Yes, despite her sister's objections, Sarika decided to go ahead and be involved with the documentary anyway. However, this time, as its narrator.



Transsexual Suganya, 30, is lucky as she has the support of her family, particularly her mother, Samsed.

"I'm not afraid of anyone. Anyway, my boyfriend encourages me and says that he's very proud I'm doing this," she said with a smile.

"I'm happy that there's a chance for me to talk about the transgendered in Malaysia. I want to show people that they're accepted by their families."

For Sarika, she knew that she was a girl in a boy's body by the time she was eight.

"I didn't mix with the boys, I was always with the girls," she said.

After finishing her studies in human resource management at a local college, Sarika, at the age of 20, had her sex change operation in Thailand in 2004 which cost her about RM10,000.

It was one of the best moments in her life, as it was her greatest desire to have a sex change operation.

"I must thank God that my mother accepts me and shares everything she has with me, such as sarees, jewellery and especially make-up," she said with a laugh.

Her other siblings (except her second sister) accepted her decision too, but her father was a more difficult case.

"He was a very serious person. We are high caste Indians, he's Ceylonese, and he didn't want to be embarrassed in front of the relatives. Also, I'm his only son," she said ruefully.

But two months before his death, Sarika's father accepted her for who she is.

However, it is rare for other people to do the same.

"Some people look at me as if I'm an animal. No, worse than an animal. They ask me, 'Why do you want to be *this*?'"

"I'm lucky that when I was in college, and at my workplace, people accepted me," she said. But she said that she gets teased almost every day when she walks down the streets.

Most of her transsexual friends are not as lucky. Four years ago, one of Sarika's good friends, Amu, a transsexual, committed suicide. She was 21.

"Her boyfriend made use of her, swindled her of her money, forced her to use drugs and didn't allow her to go anywhere. She was such a beautiful and talented person. If her family had accepted her, it wouldn't have happened. I still can't believe that she's gone," she said, blinking away tears.

In contrast, one of Samsed's happiest moment was when her son Suganya had a sex change operation.

"Finally, she can live a fully feminine life," she told Indrani Kopa, the filmmaker behind *She's My Son*.

Suganya had her sex change operation early this year in Thailand. She works in a factory and has a fiancé.

Samsed, a mother of eight children, had never considered abandoning Suganya, who is her second child.

“Many children are born handicapped, do we dump them? We’ll still make sure that they live as normal a life as possible. This is the same thing I’m trying to do.

“I want to make sure Suganya lives a meaningful life no matter who she becomes,” she said.

Samsed’s husband abandoned the family when Suganya was 13 and she raised her family by running a vegetable stall in the morning and a food stall at night.

To her, there is nothing wrong with transsexuals; the problem is with society.

“No one cares! Relatives, society, the Government, everyone is trying to deny their rights to live a normal life. By denying them of their rights, society is alienating them,” said Samsed.

Sarika wants the Government to give them the right to change their gender on their identity card to overcome the problems they face when looking for jobs, travelling, etc.

She tried to change her name on her identity card once, but was refused.

“The officer told me, ‘History cannot be changed’,” she said.

“Many transgender people are well-educated and talented. Yet, all my friends who are well-educated are prostitutes. Why? Because of their IC.

“Four of them used to be lawyers, architects and engineers. But when they decided to ‘come out’, they lost their jobs and now they’re prostitutes. They didn’t want to pretend anymore. How long can you pretend anyway? We should be who we are.”

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