



Irene R. Chia

OUT of the CLOSET

Sharifa 'Ifa' Sabarudin is a 46 year-old lesbian feminist who teaches criminology at the University of Indonesia. Ifa is a founding member of Kalyanamitra, a women's resource center, and Serikat Perempuan Ante Keberuan (SPeAK) or Union of Women Against Violence, a women's crisis center. In this interview with Irene R. Chia, she speaks about her views on lesbianism and feminism.

Irene: How did you become a feminist?

Ifa: I was a lesbian before I became a feminist. In 1981, I went to the Netherlands where I met a lot of lesbian feminists who shared their ideology, feelings, and experiences as lesbian feminists. It gave me a different kind of impression so when I returned to Indonesia in 1984, I and four other women formed Kalyanamitra. We saw the need to have a women's information and communications center for women, especially grassroots women. Up to now, Kalyanamitra is the only women's organization in Indonesia which offers this service. I first worked as the library coordinator and then moved to the research division. I left Kalyanamitra in 1993 because I've been there

for a long time and I have to give a chance to other women. I felt it was time to leave. I do not believe in staying with an organization for so long because then you might develop vested interests and you tend to treat the organization as your property.

Q: What does feminism mean to you?

A: Feminism is an ideology where women work towards the betterment of the lives of women. In feminism, we want to break a male-defined society and put women on an equal status with men.

For me, feminism means eliminating all forms of discrimination. As a woman, I am very vulnerable to many kinds of oppression, like

sexual harassment for example. Men think of me as a sex object. No woman can be immune from any oppression because we are treated the same as women. That's why I say feminism is a way to free people from any oppression. It is not only anti-capitalism, anti-imperialism or anti-colonialism.

Q: As a feminist, what issues did you take up during your work? What issues were you most passionate about?

A: My main interest is sexuality. When I was in Kalyanamitra, rape, prostitution, and lesbianism are the issues that I worked on.

internal discussions on lesbianism. We never tried to launch it publicly because it's very difficult. I really get angry about this situation sometimes.

Q: Is there a lesbian organization in Indonesia?

A: No, there isn't one because the lesbians are still in the closet. We have an informal group of about five lesbians and we know some other lesbians in the university. My friends do not want to come out because they can lose their job, their friends, and their parents. Coming out can be dangerous because it may subject them to violence. It takes time. No one can force you to come out, it must be based on your own terms and consciousness. It's your business. I don't force my friends to come out because they also have the right to choose to be in the closet.

No one should force a lesbian to come out. Coming out must be based on your own terms and consciousness.

Q: Are you out as a lesbian?

A: Yes. I'm out with my family, my friends, and the women's movement. The women's movement know my political identity. Lesbianism is not only a sexual preference. It is also my political identity and political commitment. Lesbianism is a personal issue if it is a sexual preference only but I don't want to look at it that way. It is a political, cultural and social issue because we are struggling for our right to choose our own identity.

Q: Is there a family member who's significant to you?

A: My mother. I find her a very radical person



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Ira, now on sabbatical, clowns around.

Sometimes I wonder why feminists can talk about rape, sexual harassment, incest, wife battering, and prostitution so easily. However, they don't talk about lesbianism as openly. Perhaps, they do not consider lesbianism as a feminist issue. When it comes to lesbianism, the lesbians are the ones who have to talk about it. I see this as some kind of discrimination among feminists because if lesbianism is seen as a feminist issue, heterosexuals should also talk about it. In Indonesia, we have small

because she accepts and understands me. She knows I'm a lesbian. I'm very close to my mother and I love her very much. I cannot imagine living as a lesbian if I have very traditional parents. She would like me to get married and have children but she would never force me. She doesn't ask me if I have male lovers. I introduce my women friends to her.

Q: How do women in the women's movement see lesbians and lesbianism?

A: I'd like to speak about it in my context. The women don't take it seriously, sometimes they are afraid of lesbians and lesbianism. I feel discriminated by the feminists in Indonesia. They can tolerate me but that's not what I need. What I need is for us lesbians and heterosexuals to come together and talk about lesbianism. We cannot put lesbianism as a minor issue, it should be equally important to other issues.

Lesbianism is not only a sexual preference. It is my political identity and political commitment.

Q: How are you being discriminated by women?

A: For example, whenever they see me they always ask me when am I going to get married to a man when they know I am a lesbian.

I tell them it's against my ideology and I don't have that kind of energy. It's like spending my energy for nothing because I don't find any satisfaction in relating with men. I felt harassed by those questions.

They also keep asking me about the way I dress. I usually go to the office in jeans and shirts. Then women will ask me "Where is your lipstick? Where is your eyeshadow, eyeliner?" I also feel harassed when women ask me these questions. If they don't know that I'm a lesbian,

at least they know I don't like to wear makeup. I think these women are afraid of lesbianism.

Q: Why do you say that?

A: They think lesbianism is just about sex. For me, sex can be or may not be a part of a lesbian friendship.

Q: Are there other issues you are passionate about?

A: I studied female spirituality for a long time before I became a feminist. I studied and am still studying female spirituality.

Female spirituality is an issue that is very close to me. When I open myself to that kind of power, I don't feel threatened. It feels different. I feel close to female energy because it's non-violent. When I'm angry or depressed, I open myself to it and I feel peaceful.

In Indonesia, they believe the male spirit is higher and more powerful than the female spirit. They think gender relations exist in the spirit world. I don't believe it, I think female and male power are equal.

Some of my friends think female spirituality is irrational thinking, that it's just my hallucination. But I have a lot of experience when it comes to this matter so they cannot just dismiss it.

My parents believe in spirituality. I asked them a lot of questions when I was a child and they never discouraged me from thinking about it.

Q: What controversial or popular issues are women taking up in your country?

A: One is marital rape. There are many women who cannot assert their rights in the institution of marriage so very few will say that marital rape happens. Another one is family planning, there is a current debate on whether the family planning policies of the Indonesian government are safe and beneficial to the women.

Q: What difficulties did you experience in campaigning against rape among other issues?

A: It is difficult to challenge the myths on rape. Myths like men get sexually aroused more easily and that women invite men to rape them

are predominant.

Q: Is the feminist movement in your country widespread? How do women in general understand feminism?

A: Feminism is not popular in Indonesia. Even among women in the women's movement, feminism is seen as a western concept and therefore, irrelevant. This is the first barrier in popularizing feminism. They think feminists are unnatural, are man haters and that feminists want to be like men. They understand feminism as women working outside the house. Generally, women still believe that they should get married to and serve men.

There are many women's organizations in Indonesia but you have to differentiate between the mainstream and the feminist organizations. There are a lot of women's organizations who support the mainstream ideology.

Q: What do you think has the feminist movement in your country achieved for the past 10 years?

A: More people are now paying attention to issues like rape and reproductive rights. We criticized government policies on family planning and the government is becoming sensitive to women's needs.

Q: Are young women being attracted to the women's movement? Are there more and more young women joining the movement?

A: There are young women joining the women's movement but not a lot. Usually, they are students, around 21 to 26 years old. They prefer joining mixed groups.

I talked to one of my female students once, she was an activist and a leader. I asked her if she was interested in joining a feminist organization and she said she wanted to be involved

in a group which deals with social issues. By doing this, she is serving both men and women.

Q: What do you think are the advances, accomplishments and contributions that feminist ideas have had socially and culturally in the last 20 years worldwide?

A: More women now have a new consciousness about their identity as human beings. There are more women who realize that they need to be more economically independent. More women are now rejecting arranged marriages.

Q: Working in the women's movement can be very tiring and stressful. How can women prevent burnout so that they can stay and work longer in the women's movement?

A: Just go and take a break. Doing other things help a lot. It doesn't mean that you're leaving the movement. In my case, I don't get involved in any women's organization at the moment. I am not leaving my feminism, I am just working on it in a different way. Taking a break is good for the soul. I don't think people should stay for such a long period with all that kind of frustration and depression. We need a break. We need to laugh and refresh our mind and our soul. ☺

Irene R. Chia is a Communications Program Associate of Isis

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Spirituality is an issue I
is most interested in.

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