Speaking Out on Unintended Pregnancies and Abortion.

A publication by
Reproductive Rights Advocacy Alliance Malaysia [RRAAM]
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Introduction and acknowledgements.

The women who have shared their stories are aware of this project and have given their consent for them to be published. The following stories were written by eight women who participated in a two-day RRAAM workshop in December 2010 titled ‘Communicating Women’s Stories of Abortion and Access To Abortion Services’. They agreed to be story tellers as they believed this would help people to understand women’s need for abortion and the difficulty of some women in finding a doctor and an affordable service. The women are members of women NGOs and reproductive health NGOs committed to improving women’s lives.

The stories told are true stories about abortion in Malaysia and Malaysian women’s experiences. Some are experiences of the women themselves so they have told their own stories. Some are the experiences of other women whose lives the story tellers were involved in. Others are stories women who have had an abortion told. All the women have given their permission for their stories to be told and shared towards helping other women. Their names and other aspects have been changed.

The stories were strengthened through review and editing by women who also contributed stories. The images used in this publication are for illustration purposes only and bear no resemblance to the women involved.

The story tellers and writers have reflected, cried, laughed, smiled and breathed sighs of relief in telling and writing these stories. We hope these stories are also meaningful for you, touch your heart and inspire you to promote women’s needs and rights for compassionate and affordable, quality abortion services.

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Vindicated
The dreaded annual spring-cleaning came early for her in 2010. She didn’t mind it this year as they were making room for an addition to their family – their first born. As she picked up a tin of old appointment cards, one stood out for her: Marie Stopes International. She flipped open the card, and the appointment date 27th August 2001 jumped at her.

She had met the Irish man just five months earlier. He, at 32, was a mature-age student when they found out that they were pregnant. She nonchalantly told him she missed her period. He then insisted that they do a pregnancy test as he noticed mucus and her complaints of tender breasts. “It must be due to the stress of the final dissertation”, she muttered. Despite her confidence that her contraceptive pill regime was intact, she eventually conceded. Just to be sure, she thought.

Knowing what she had to do, “I have to finish my degree. My parents will kill me.”

He tried to persuade her to keep the baby; for it was the second time he was going through an abortion and did not want the feeling of having lost a child again. But he knew the decision could not be forced on her. They weren’t sure about their relationship; their post-student lives. She made the decision to have the abortion. She sought an extension from her department citing the abortion. “I’m sorry,” the administrator sympathized. “I’m not,” she thought, but instead, she blurted, “Thank you.”

They rode the train to the East end of London in the morning. He warned her that there might be pro-life demonstrators outside the clinic. “They’ll call you the most hideous things, just look ahead and walk,” he cautioned. They paid the 600 pounds fee. It was split down the middle from their hard earned savings. At the reception, there were women of diverse ages; a middle aged woman impatiently flipping through a magazine; a nervous looking teenager; her mind went blank and she looked at the floor. She was relieved when her name was called out. He told her he was going to explore the neighborhood whilst she had the procedure. He promised he’d bring back the fried chicken and coke that she requested. She was brought to a ward to get ready. A friendly nurse came to check on her. She confirmed that she had not eaten since midnight, and not had breakfast either. She waited. And she listened. She heard a woman talking to another woman. ‘I want this baby, but, my husband, he thinks that it’s not a good time. I think it should be alright, after all, I’m only 30. I can wait.” She heard the woman sobbing, and vomiting.

She closed her eyes. Wishing it will all go away. Her wish soon came true as she was wheeled into the operating theatre. The woman doctor warmly greeted her. “This is not what a baby killer looks like,” she thought wryly. The operating team introduced themselves. “We’re going to put you to sleep, and then use the vacuum. It won’t be long before you wake up”. The last she remembered was the gas mask over her face as she fell into deep slumber. As she woke, the first thought that came to her head was, “Thank god I have the choice”. They went for the scheduled counseling the following week. “Everything’s fine,” she curtly told the counselor. Physically, she recovered wonderfully. He wanted to have a “goodbye” ceremony for the child that could have been. She grudgingly went along to the river bank. Sneering at the melodrama, she barely participated as they both walked up the steps. They did another test, which confirmed the pregnancy. They sat with a counselor who calculated the stage of the pregnancy, and consulted them on the options available to them with a seven week pregnancy. They were told to come back within a few days with their decision. She left knowing what she had to do. “I have to finish my degree. My parents will kill me.”

They eventually built a life in Malaysia. As she built her career, she was convinced with each passing day that she made the right choice. At the same time, she began to share her abortion story. She began to get more stories too. Like the story of a girl in her late teens, with only the help of her equally frightened friend frantically and clandestinely dialing number after number to get hold of a doctor who was willing to carry out the abortion. Then the shame of having to borrow the money as she did not have. The two frightened girls riding a motor-cycle to and from the clinic, smothered by fear. As more stories surfaced, she realized how lucky she had been to have a different experience. An experience that was free from judgmental doctors, nurses, friends, free from the difficulty in getting information – a general experience that was free from fear.

In 2007, she had an ectopic pregnancy. It was an intended pregnancy. She was wrecked. Guilt, turning into a stormy sea, repeatedly rose and crashed down on her, wave after wave. In the madness, her normally rational mind was convinced that she was being punished for her choice for not wanting to become a mother before. The inability to get pregnant “proof” that she had “damaged her body”. They did get pregnant after two more heart-wrenching years of trying. To her, it was a vindication of sorts. An unfounded victory that she was again, right, and deserved that right, to make that choice for her body and life.

Or perhaps it was the cosmic forgiveness she did not want to admit that she needed, for then; it meant that she believed their arguments that the unborn baby’s life was more important than hers.
Pregnant starting college.
Haslinda’s hands were cold and shaking. She was terrified, but she came too far to fail now. This decision was right for her. She told her best friend that morning: Nina, who kept talking, as if words could make everything better. She let Nina’s voice and Nina’s warm comfort wash over her.

She looked around the clinic. There was an older woman there, the only one waiting at 9am, sharp. That must be her: Atifah – wasn’t it? Haslinda couldn’t smile. She must be Atifah. They hadn’t even talked on the phone, how could Haslinda know for sure? It was a month since Haslinda saw Atifah’s first e-mail in her in-box, saying that the organization Haslinda contacted had directed Atifah to her.

It was such a great risk, to send that message in 2003 to an unknown NGO in a country she hadn’t even stepped foot on. She was afraid that she would open her door to find they had forwarded her e-mail to someone who would arrest her for asking about abortion. But she was desperate and after three weeks, Atifah had convinced her in the exchange of e-mails that help would be offered.

Haslinda told Atifah about her boyfriend and her studies. She was from a town in East Malaysia and worked hard to get into university. There was a bright future within reach, but she was only at the beginning of the path towards it. She had no money and was a first-year student. She knew she didn’t want to marry her boyfriend. Nor was it possible for her to have a baby and still continue studying. She wanted to end the pregnancy.

It was indeed Atifah, waiting patiently for her. They went for breakfast. Nina talked. Haslinda didn’t ask whether abortion was legal, and Nina too didn’t offer any judgmental arguments. Her heart was set.

Finally they made their way back to the clinic and saw the doctor, who was kind and professional. Haslinda’s hemoglobin count was four, he said. A normal healthy person would have a count of at least 11. The heart palpitations – tachycardia, he said – worried him. Haslinda was in a bad shape.

She was starving herself so her pregnancy wouldn’t show, Haslinda confessed. Nobody, even her closest friends, could know that her boyfriend had got her pregnant.

The doctor did a scan of the fetus. “Oh, it’s quite big,” he said. It was more than 12 weeks old, maybe even 14. “I’m sorry, it’s too late, and it’s too big. If only you’d come two or three weeks earlier.” It was too late for an abortion and she would have to continue the pregnancy against her wishes. Haslinda didn’t cry as the doctor went on: he would give her a letter so that she could be excused from her studies for medical reasons. He gave her iron tablets for her anemia, some medication.

She didn’t cry either when Atifah asked her what she would do, over lunch at a nearby restaurant. Everything felt so overwhelming. Haslinda decided, then and there, she would stay at home and not go out until she gave birth. Then she would give up the baby for adoption.

And yes, she said, she could take care of herself during her pregnancy with the help of her boyfriend and Nina.

“I don’t want my parents to know,” she said, quietly. “I don’t want anyone to know. I’ll just live like that.”

Atifah made good on her promise to help: she paid for the medication and Haslinda’s pre-natal check-ups, because Haslinda didn’t have any money. By the second visit, she looked better. Nina’s support and her own strength had carried her through. Haslinda told Atifah she was eating two eggs every day and was taking the iron tablets prescribed by the doctor. Atifah also set up a meeting with a social worker, attached to a government hospital, who could handle the adoption.

Finally a family was found for Haslinda’s baby. Coincidentally, Atifah was acquainted with the family in question. “Will you make sure that they’re doing a good job?” Haslinda asked. She thought about the baby she was carrying, of all the bad things that TV and the newspapers said could happen to an adopted child.

“She’ll make sure they’re okay people,” Atifah reassured her.

One weekend, Nina made an excited phone call to Atifah: Haslinda was finally giving birth! Atifah’s assertiveness convinced the hospital staff to let her and Nina into the room to be with Haslinda during the labor. It lasted for four painful hours, though having people who cared about her there to welcome her and the baby made a big difference for Haslinda.

In the quiet time that followed the excitement, Haslinda’s boyfriend came to see her and the baby. There was pride felt at this beautiful baby they made together – but deep sadness too, at giving up the child.

Atifah and Haslinda saw each other again about a month after the adoption. Atifah picked her up at a train station, for they were going to visit Haslinda’s child with the adopted family. Haslinda had insisted, despite the adopted parents’ fear that she would take the baby away.

She had to make sure her child was all right, and then she would break off all contact. Haslinda knew she had to move on. She had made her decision and would go through with it, as with her initial decision to have an abortion. This decision would not be prevented by the silence around her on what she could’ve done and where to get what she needed.

“It’s probably best that we don’t see each other again after this,” she said in the car, as they drove towards their destination. She knew where Atifah lived and worked, and she could have found Atifah again, but she didn’t want to. It was the last time Atifah saw her.
Walking Tall
30 years have gone by since she made the decision to abort her baby. She was married and had already had two children – boys – who were a handful. Her mother-in-law was living with her then. She was not an easy woman to please. Her marriage had been a traditionally arranged one. Her parents had chosen the groom based on what they were told by a mutual friend. She had had such dreams of married life, and looked forward to the day with such anticipation.

She had been groomed for life as a housewife. That was all there was for women her age then, she had told me. Married life started out well – there were long drives where sometimes they talked of anything and everything, and sometimes they quietly watched the world go by.

At first, she enjoyed cooking for her husband and his mother. She was always excited and eager to try out new dishes. But, she was quickly told to just stick to the basics. Her mother in law was not adventurous when it came to her food choices.

Then, the first blow came. He told her what her mistake was after he had beaten her. She had spoken to the milk vendor. Her husband said that she should not speak to other men. She should instead pass messages through her husband or his mother. That was how a respectable woman behaves, she was told. It still did not make sense to her after her headache subsided.

Appels to her mother in law for help were useless as she sometimes egged on the beatings. Her mother in law seemed to act as her husband’s cheerleader and also informant. The daily happenings of her life were conveyed with rich, and sometimes concocted, details to her son as accompaniment to his evening meal.

Things got a little better when she was pregnant. She opted to spend the last three months at her parents’ home. It was custom for the expectant mother to return to her family home during the last month of pregnancy. She rejoiced that the baby was a boy. For a while, things seemed to be normal. Then, the baby fell sick for the first time. It became all her fault and she was beaten again. Her mother in law blamed every rash, scratch and whimper from the baby on her inept daughter in law and this opinion was seconded by her husbands’ beatings.

She lived with it quietly and patiently. Then, she became pregnant again. She opted to return to her parents’ home again, but it was denied. She was sent back in the last three weeks. Enjoying the respite from husband and mother in law, she did not complain. The second son was born.

She told me that she entertained fantasies of her husband rejoicing happily. He would surely appreciate two sons born successively – a feat few women can accomplish. Her dream bubble quickly burst when her husband beat her while she was recuperating in her parents’ home. The crime? She had been in the bathroom when the baby woke up. She does not know how it happened, but she said that the anger welled up in her and she refused to be quiet. She fought back.

She is a few inches taller than him and decided to stand up to her full height when he spoke to her. The psychological emasculation infuriated her husband. It affected his mother even more. She engaged in direct battles against her mother in law. Some nights were spent at her sympathetic neighbors’ house when she was kicked out for arguing with her mother in law. The situation was very tense.

At this time, she became pregnant again. That was the last thing she wanted. She could not handle the stress. Her older son was 4 and the second 2. While she loved them to bits, she knew she could not handle another baby and see to their needs and deal with her husband and mother in law. She cried and wept and prayed for God to show her a way. She goes quiet and then she looks up to tell me that she knew what she had to do. It was the guilt that she could not handle and prayed for God to take away. She found some old jewellery her mother in law had given her and had it pawned. She went to the doctor who performed the procedure after making sure she could pay the bill. She was alone.

She was back home in time for her husband’s evening meal. He never knew about her decision.

Her mother in law moved out soon after. Still, she controlled her son from afar and beatings continued to be a regular part of life, albeit less often. She had 2 more children after the abortion. All 4 children are grown up now and leading their own lives.

She is still married to her husband. They celebrate their 36th wedding anniver-sary soon. She still stands at her full height when he is near her.
My Survival ???
“Oh, God, no! I am late this month. This cannot be happening. I have got to do something about it.” That was the first thought that came to my mind. We were from a middle class family and my father struggled to bring us up. This dammed Romeo came from into my life from nowhere when we were just scraping through with life. He swept me of my feet despite my parent’s wishes.

He was so nice, caring and loving, as most men were. When we became a bit more comfortable financially, he entertained friends and enjoyed life. He was an occasional drinker, and soon after started taking designer drugs to get even higher.

Then, we had our lovely precious son; our lovely bundle of joy. We basked in his cuteness and shopped like there was no tomorrow for him. We did not enjoy such luxuries when we were young “So why deprive our son when he could have it?” we thought. What a lovely feeling it was; of buying and giving to our son.

Without realizing it, my husband’s credit bills increased. He panicked and took to stronger drugs and stole money at work to cover our expenses. He was fired immediately after being found out. Since then he never managed to get a job, or rather he chose not to get a job that was suitable to his so called new “status”. I had to go to work to make ends meet. Being a Form Five qualifier only, there were not many opportunities for me besides working as a clerk. It was hard - balancing household chores, a small baby, a drug user and work.

Sex was irregular and not at all what I wanted at the moment. However, occasionally, he would force himself on me and I just gave in for the sake of peace in the house. I had no more energy to fight him.

When my child was 7 months old, I discovered I had missed my menses.

What an accident - more like a tragedy. I was horrified, No! No! I have enough problems to battle with. I cannot have another child. I decided to have a D&C. I informed my husband of my decision and he was furious. He said I was depriving him of another son.

“Yeah! When you cannot even afford to buy a packet of Maggie noodles, you want another child?” I thought.

I was quite sure of my decision. I did not consult anyone as I was deep in debt because of my husband. When I was younger, my father was in a similar situation and I remembered how hard it was for my family. We did not have enough food for our meals. Sometimes, we missed school, as we had no money to travel and we could not have proper text books to study. That feeling of being poor and deprived of basic things was just too much. No child should experience what we went through. It was the most awful feeling in the whole wide world. I went to a well known maternity clinic in town. I had my first delivery there and knew of the services they offered. It would be “legal”. The woman doctor checked me and said I was only a few weeks late. I told her I did not want the baby and wanted it removed. She was aghast and refused. She told me that I was too young. I had just turned 26. She explained about the procedure and warned me, again, against it.

I begged her. I lied to her pathetically that my husband was a heart patient and that he was sickly and had to spend hundreds on his medication.

“I have one child and if I had another and something should happen to this man, who will provide for the children?” I asked her.

She was sympathetic, pondered for a while and decided to help me. She explained the procedure again and also informed me of the post procedure follow-up. She also advised me to take contraceptives after that. The procedure cost around RM700. What? Where am I to get that amount?

Shamelessly, I went to my brother for the money. He himself was suffering with his wife and kids but he knew he would have to pay more later if he did not help me now. He told my mother, who was such a religious person. She was so upset with me I didn’t know then, and perhaps even till now, if it was because I got pregnant amidst the domestic problems or because I was killing the baby which was against our faith.

I myself was in a dilemma, torn between spirituality and practicality. I know it was a sin, the utmost sin one could do, but I also knew that I was responsible for the quality of care for my son and myself and all future children. My bigger sin will be not providing for them; not giving them enough nourishment, figuratively and spiritually. I must bring them into this world with love and affection consciously. The child must be wanted in all sense of the word. I cannot do that with an ‘accident’ during the hardest time in my life.

My parents did not speak to me for more than a month. My husband was even more abusive. I couldn’t care less. It was about my survival.

I went alone to the clinic that fateful day in May ten years ago. I felt scared at first but the doctor was so gentle and caring that my fears flew away. She took a scan. She said the baby looked weak, not healthy. I was so glad. I could not bear it, if it was big and lovely. My decision was substantiated.

She administered the GA and I knew nothing of what happened to me. After about midday, I woke up and started vomiting. She came to see me and explained the vomiting – it was a reaction to the GA. She said everything went well, and that I had no complications. She however, reminded me to come back for a follow up to ensure I was a hundred percent alright. What a lovely doctor, so gentle and so caring, no judgment, no scolding. I was so relieved- yes that’s the word- so RELIEVED.
Finding the Right Doctor and an Affordable Abortion
When I ask Divya if learning about her mother’s decision has influenced her perspective about abortion, Divya shares that she has always been pro-choice. “I strongly believe that every child brought into this world should be a wanted child. If I was ever in a position where I wanted or needed to have an abortion, I would exercise my right to have one. I realize that having an abortion is not an unusual thing. Generations before me have had abortions. And my own mother has had one.”

Divya is now in her early thirties and happily married. Her husband’s religion forbids contraception as well as abortions. But Divya shared that she made it clear to her husband about her intention to practice family planning so that they can raise a family within their means.

I can tell how Divya is her mother’s daughter. They are both strong and independent women who are aware of their rights and not afraid to exercise (claim) those rights. They know that choosing an abortion does not make any woman a bad person, and that many circumstances lead women to that choice. Surely Divya’s parents made the best decision for their family, and were able to raise Divya and her siblings in the best way they knew how.

As Divya finishes her story, one sentence of hers stands out in my mind. Every child…a wanted child. Such a simple sentiment, but one that can make so much difference to women, men, and children everywhere.
Every Child - A Wanted Child
When Roslina missed her period she was worried straight away. She and her boyfriend had had sex a few times but the last time he refused to wear the condom. She had tried to stop him but he insisted. She was devastated when the pregnancy test results from the pharmacy were positive. She felt very angry with her boyfriend whom she blamed. What was she to do? She talked to her boyfriend, a close girlfriend and finally to a distant relative whom she knew had liberal views. Initially, she wanted to keep the baby and get married as at 22 years of age, she thought maybe she wouldn’t have another chance to marry. But she felt her boyfriend didn’t truly love her. They hadn’t been thinking yet about marriage after knowing one another for only six months. She was scared that marriage might be a big mistake and she could become a single mother which she didn’t want. She wanted her child to have two parents to care for it. Finally, Roslina decided to have an abortion. The relative had told her abortion was legal and that she would help her find a suitable doctor.

It wasn’t an easy decision and that is why it took her a month or so to make up her mind. She had nausea and vomiting which she found tough especially as she had to hide that she was unwell from her family and work colleagues.

She didn’t want to have an abortion in Kuala Terengganu as she thought her family may come to know so she came to Kuala Lumpur. It took a whole day of three visits to clinics in Kuala Lumpur for her to find a suitable doctor. At the first clinic she found the nurses and gynecologist friendly and no questions were asked. The gynecologist did a scan and showed her the fetus on the screen. Then he asked, “See the baby is quite formed at 9 weeks—are you sure you want to do an abortion?” Roslina felt terrible at seeing the fetus and hearing this from the doctor. She was thinking of the fetus as a baby already and had been feeling sorry for it. But she replied stoically, “Yes, I still want an abortion”. She didn’t ask the doctor about costs as her relative had said it would be about RM 600. She had RM 800 in her purse which came from her and the boyfriend’s savings. The clinic nurse said she could have the procedure the next day and it would cost RM 2,000. Shocked, Roslina asked if the cost could be reduced as she had just started working and couldn’t afford it. She was told that only the doctor could decide on this and she didn’t feel up to seeing him again. Dismayed, she and the relative went to another clinic they had heard about, fortunately only a couple of kilometers away. The nurses were friendly and quickly she felt comfortable. The abortion could be done the next day and it would cost RM 800. But Roslina didn’t feel confident about the clinic. It was in an old building with clearly mouldy walls compared to the first clinic which was brightly painted and very professional looking. She decided to go to one last clinic recommended. Roslina found the woman doctor very warm and caring—the best so far! The cost would be RM 900 which she was told was higher as she was 9 weeks pregnant and costs varied according to the stage of the pregnancy. After a full on day of telling her story three times to three different sets of clinic staff and worrying about the cost, Roslina went back to the relative’s house to recover for the next day. The relative said she would contribute the extra money. She chose the last clinic. Roslina found the actual abortion experience not too bad the electrical vacuum aspiration wasn’t painful at all as she was under a light anaesthetic. The nurses and doctor were friendly. But she had a long time to wait during all the procedures and was at the clinic for eight hours. The first two hours was for the medication to dilate the cervix and then another hour for the gynecologist to arrive. Then, there were a few hours for recovery during which she was thirsty and hungry due to fasting after an early lunch. She was not offered anything and even had to ask for pads. The small room was a bit bleak with posters of mothers and babies which disturbed her and there was nothing to read. Without her relative who waited and came in and out, she would have been miserable, she said.

Perhaps it was because the relative was around, that no nurse came to ask how she was after the procedure. In this way, she didn’t feel cared for enough. When she saw the doctor before she went home, it was Roslina who brought up the topic of contraception. She wanted something safer than the condom since her boyfriend she said was not responsible. Without hesitation the doctor advised her on the best oral contraceptive. She found out at the pharmacy this cost RM 50. She had also heard about emergency contraception and asked for some pills in case the same thing happened. The doctor gave these but reluctantly. A week after the abortion, she had her checkup but in Terengganu. The GP did a scan and told her the abortion was only partially successful. He could do a repeat procedure for RM 1,000. She was very upset that she had to go through the whole thing again. She called and spoke to the Kuala Lumpur gynecologist who was very understanding. Taking time off from work again, she went to Kuala Lumpur on the overnight bus and hardly slept. She was feeling really disturbed and worried. “I don’t know if I can go through this again” she thought. The Kuala Lumpur gynecologist was friendly. He did a scan and said everything was fine and there were no remnants.

She couldn’t believe it and asked him to check again. He even called in his senior nurse to give her view. What a relief it was. Roslina realized that money motives could have been one of the reasons for the false diagnosis and she was very angry. She also had wasted precious leave days and felt emotionally exhausted from this second experience. Roslina had asked for her fetus as she wanted to bury it just like the Malays buried placenta. The doctor agreed and gave what looked like blood and remnants in a small bottle. The relative gently told her the fetus didn’t have a soul which Muslims believe enter at the right time for a baby to come into her life and she hoped there would be other babies waiting for her. This ritual she said would help those babies to come in the future to find her.
In all my visions it was always a she…a slender young woman that was never meant to be. But there was no way I could have known. She could have been a ‘he’ or a human being living in a sexual limbo.

Fate, Karma, Kismet, Destiny… Words such as these could inflame the debate, but it was really a man-made disaster. He walked away, saying “no” to responsibility. Because he could, he did.

But where did it leave me? Should I pay the price? A conflicted part of me did want her. And yet the prospect of a life-long commitment in a society that is rather quick to condemn than to offer a helping hand, the possible estrangement from a family that was still grieving for a departed parent. Asking the little one to bear the shame, the rejection, and the stigma of illegitimacy… that would have been a greater tragedy.

Real life lacks fairy tale endings. So I alone decided that ‘she’ deserved better. ‘She’ should not have to shoulder the guilt of two somewhat irresponsible adults who engaged in moments of frenzied madness. Yet one conflicted week followed another … hoping against hope for some good omen. But feckless he was gone and I, with an almost depleted bank account and a job on the horizon that might be jeopardized, took the most logical step of consulting a doctor. Strangely, there was no problem finding one that was sympathetic - the perks of a good education and networking.

I waited till the window of opportunity was about to close. It wasn’t easy to step over the threshold but the waves of nausea, the inadvertent starvation (sorry but this is unclear) became the determinant of ‘her’ fate. The window was about to close when finally I said “yes”. Scraping together RM300, I faced what needed to be done. The Act was performed. It wasn’t a walk in the park. There was pain, there was discomfort for a while, there was emotional hands wringing for slightly longer.

I felt no regrets. I had come to a fork in my life’s path. I chose the one that opened a whole new chapter or several new chapters in my life.

Perhaps ‘her’ destiny – the green-eyed girl’s – was never to be part of my life. Perhaps she is me in a parallel universe, in another incarnation.
Journey of Life with Mimi
I was drawn towards Mimi. I wanted to know more about her. I sat and listened to her story. She is the fourth of five siblings from Kota Bahru, Kelantan. Her father was an abusive man who frequently flew into fits of temper and was violent towards the family. No one in the family questioned him. Mimi did not have a close relationship with her mother either. Growing up, she did not have a familial environment of support and care. She suffered academically and barely managed to complete her form 3. She built a survival method based on a defense mechanism which included anger. The more she turned to her friends for support, the more estranged she became from her family. During the chat, I learnt that Mimi left Kelantan and arrived in Kuala Lumpur at the age of 17 to work at a restaurant in Sunway Pyramid and stayed in the hostel provided by the employer. Unfortunately, the restaurant closed down after a week.

By chance, she met a childhood friend who introduced her to work as a domestic helper at Sunway. Being a young woman from the village, she had trouble adjusting to life in the city and frequently argued with her housemates.

During her year working as a domestic helper, her employer realized that Mimi’s tummy was getting bigger. She brought Mimi to the clinic for a medical check only to discover that she was 6 months pregnant. Mimi was shocked as she did not know how she got pregnant. Her first thought was that she had been possessed. Mimi told the doctor she wanted an abortion. The doctor scolded her, “An abortion is not easy; it is dangerous for your health because the baby had grown bigger”. She felt ashamed and frustrated, and blamed herself. She was deeply disappointed with herself. Her guilt intensified when her parents came to the city to bring her back to Perak. At home, she was psychologically and physically tormented her family – they used abusive and vulgar language on her, and accused her of stealing money. They also beat, slapped and kicked her. Nobody in the family showed her any affection. She was constantly unhappy and depressed. After the birth of her child, her aunty voluntarily adopted her baby. After a few months, Mimi left for Kuala Lumpur to restart her life. Back in Kuala Lumpur, she fell in love with a man that her family did not approve of. Although their relationship got more intimate, the couple did not pay attention to contraception and never used it. Mimi felt that she could not get pregnant because her friend told her that if a couple had sex a week before and after ovulation, the chances of getting pregnant is very low. But unfortunately, she did. The aunt who adopted her first child adopted her second child. She was forbidden from visiting her children. When she recovered from her birth, Mimi found out that her boyfriend was happily married to another woman. Mimi forced herself to accept the pain, and to slowly move on with her life. She felt nothing but loneliness and emptiness. She soon met another man. Their friendship bloomed into love.

During a period of crisis with her landlord, her boyfriend offered her the option to stay with him. Mimi was overwhelmed by the attention, care and support this man gave her. It was a far cry from the horrible childhood experiences where violence, tears, pain, disappointment and frustrations were a constant feature in her life. Her yearnings of love and attention caused her to blindly, whole-heartedly trust him. Mimi started having sex with him without thinking about taking precautions. She got pregnant with her third child. She found out that her boyfriend had another woman in his life. When she questioned him about it, he got angry and beat the 8-month pregnant Mimi. After the beating, he threw her out of the house. She spent a night at his friend’s girlfriend’s house who then brought her to the Jabatan Agama Islam. That was how she ended up at WAO for temporary shelter and assistance. During her stay at the WAO shelter, she went for her ante-natal check-up at University Hospital. The doctor was confused with the stage of her pregnancy and insisted that she go back to her previous doctor in Klang. Mimi tried to explain that she could not afford to go back to Klang for the check-up. The doctor steadfastly refused her plea. Finally, with the help of WAO, she managed to travel to Klang to consult her previous doctor. When Mimi finally gave birth, she was told that she had syphilis. When the doctor asked her “Do you know what syphilis is?” Mimi could only shake her head. This was the first time she’s ever heard of the word. The doctor then asked “Is this your first baby?” Mimi felt embarrassed and ashamed. The doctor proceeded to tell her that she’s been diagnosed with syphilis and patiently explained to her how to take care of herself, and to prevent the diseases from spreading. The doctor left Mimi stunned and dazed, Mimi contemplated her daughter’s future, her princess, her ray of sunshine. Having lost two children, she was unwilling to go through the traumatic experience again. She felt that if she lost this child, her life would be meaningless. Her thoughts were abruptly interrupted when she heard a staff nurse ask “Do you want to give your child for adoption?” Mimi hesitated. It pained her that she would not be able to provide for her child. She decided to give her child up for adoption.

After a month at WAO, Mimi left for her new job at Johor. She set off towards her new life with a cup of emptiness and a blanket of loneliness. Although she is more aware about her reproductive health and is informed about contraceptive usage, I still wonder about Mimi as the last I heard, she is getting “help” from a man in finding a job.
No one can tell me what's best for me
I am angry because they don't think it's important enough for a woman to know to have that much control over her body. This torments her each time she discusses sexual reproductive health with the young girls and women in the marginalized community where she works. No one knows better than her the utterly traumatic consequences of not knowing, and not having control over her body. It happened to her ten years ago. She was young and studying at a local university. She was dating her first boyfriend. The relationship had been going on for the past five years, and they were having sex. No, she was not from a dysfunctional family. Coming from a lower middle income home at the fringes of a big city, she had a caring family. No, she wasn't aimless. She aspired to graduate from university and move on to a bright career and future. And, no, she wasn't careless. She thought nothing of it when she missed her period at the time. She just never thought with. The first doctor who had confirmed her pregnancy was moralistic and judgmental. The doctor piled onto her layers of guilt that has left her almost emotionally scarred for life. This doctor's barrage of questions, ten years ago, still reverberated in her head:

"Is that your mother outside…does she know?" I said, "No!"
"So what are you going to do?" I said, "I haven't decided."
"Are you married?" I said, "No!"
"Do you plan to marry him?" I said, "I don't know."

The doctor's eyes went wide! "Do you know it's illegal to have an abortion…you're doing something wrong!"

The second doctor she went to, after having examined her, suddenly told her he could not perform the termination as he was fully booked! She had no choice but to proceed to the next clinic that this doctor recommended. After he finished with the usual tests, this third doctor asked her whether the 'father of the baby' (her boyfriend) knew about the termination as he said the 'father must give consent'. That was indeed the last straw for her.

I said NO. It's MY body. I actually said that to him. I've decided I'm going to have an abortion. He (doctor) takes out a pen and writes T O P (termination of pregnancy). He sounded so strong but she did not feel empowered at the time. Instead, then, she felt guilty, and had always felt guilty since. Why? The fact was I didn't feel empowered from the situation although I was making a very big decision. Nobody told me you're empowered to make decisions about your body, you have control over your body, you can make this decision based on the current situation and it has nothing to do with guilt… I took ownership of the decisions; I had self-agency, I dealt with the issue… I had to survive, an act of preserving myself… because there was no way I could be a mother, there was no way I could have stopped studying. Ten years have passed. Yet, no one can tell her what form of protection would work best for her.

I am 36 today, I still have to consider if a doctor is open-minded enough for me to talk to her about what kind of contraceptives I can use… I make my partner use a condom and I also take the morning after pill – I don't want to be on a permanent method… but what's best for me? No one gives you sensible advice… no one can tell me – HERE are your options and you make a choice. That would be so easy. If it can come in a CD, it'll be great. It's a CD. You're not propagating free sex; you're not propagating reduction in the country's population. You're really propagating an understanding of rights of your body.

She wishes that by the next April 22, she will finally have connected her mind with her heart, and that she is healed. She has come a long way since that traumatic experience a decade ago. But for the 16 and 18 year olds today, she wishes there is more open discussion on sexuality and contraception. She also wishes that people, society and the State will stop being so critical of women who decide to have sex outside of marriage.
About RRAAM and Abortion in Malaysia

The Reproductive Rights Advocacy Alliance Malaysia (RRAAM) was established in 2007 as an alliance of NGOs and individuals committed to increasing the reproductive rights of women and young people to access legal, safe, and affordable abortion and contraceptive services. The NGOs include the feminist groups of Women's Aid Organisation (WAO), All Women's Action Society (AWAM), Sisters In Islam and ARROW (Asian and Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women), and the health NGOs of FRHAM (Federation of Reproductive Health Associations of Malaysia and Health Equity Initiatives (HEI). Individual members include feminist health researchers/activists and social workers, gynaecologists and specialists, and a lawyer. Through RRAAMs' seminars, research and monitoring reports, dialogues, memorandum and letters to the editor, many policy makers, doctors, nurses, NGO leaders and the media have now learned about abortion law correctly and women's problems accessing abortion and contraceptive services. The legal conditions for abortion in Malaysia, as provided for under Section 312 of the Penal Code, are considered progressive and Malaysia is positioned within the three fifths of countries with least restrictive laws globally. Section 312 allows for an abortion in a case where there is:

(i) risk to the life of the pregnant woman,
(ii) injury to her mental or physical health, greater than if the pregnancy were terminated, and

Only one registered medical practitioner needs to decide on this.

Many women and health providers still do not know that abortion is legal for these reasons and both women who seek services and doctors are stigmatised. Even women pregnant due to rape find it hard to have an affordable abortion.

At the same time, the contraceptive use of around 52% of married couples is low for a country with Malaysia's level of development. Few unmarried people use contraception also. No wonder the number of unintended pregnancies, especially for young people is increasing. In 2010, there were officially 52,000 babies born outside of marriage. Very sadly, about 100 of these babies are known to be abandoned annually. Many of the young mothers under 18 years end up in welfare homes, disrupting their education and hopes for the future.

Fortunately, the Ministry of Health (MOH) has recently recognised the problems and now has a strategic objective to increase contraceptive use and reduce teenage pregnancies. The MOH released in September 2012 Guidelines on the Termination of Pregnancies which RRAAM hopes will lead to increased access of women and young people to affordable abortion services in hospitals.
