

W.A.O - 1ST ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

22ND JANUARY 1984

W.A.O TELEPHONE NOS: 526366 AND 523969

A D D R E S S

Madam Chairperson, Tun Tan, Toh Puan, Ladies and Gentlemen - or may I address you all as friends with a common cause, interest and concern. Welcome to our first A.G.M.

Our patron, Tun Tan Siew Sin, deserves a great deal of credit for what he did in 1980 when he was honoured with the conferral of the Tun Razak Award of \$30,000/- for his invaluable contributions to this country. I am sure he pondered hard and long before deciding what he felt was the most useful and needed objective or service towards or within which he could best put those funds to use. He decided on giving the funds for the foundation of an association to assist physically or mentally abused women, and of necessity their affected children, and offered these funds for such use. A number of people, including myself, had great concerns in this area because either we had personal experience of victims in these distressing circumstances or we firmly believed that the problem existed. For myself, I had watched and tried in the limited way that I could as a private legal practitioner, to give assistance, advice, support and guidance to those who came to me for help. It seemed particularly sad to me that many of those looking for help had to come to a lawyer as a last resort, there being no other facilities or amenities available to them.

One of the greatest difficulties that I found was faced by these women, who walked through my office door by the week, by the month, was that they had nowhere to turn to for protection, accommodation or moral support. In most cases their families and close relatives refused to be involved or to shelter them, either considering the problem to be a natural one in marriage or one which would bring "shame" to the family and therefore should be hidden. The establishment of the Women's Aid

Organisation and the opening of its refuge, the Women's Aid Centre in September 1982 provided what was probably the first ray of hope to many such women. Setting it up was no easy job, it took some nine months or so to lay the groundwork, form a core of volunteers and establish a network of supporters. The effort on the part of all concerned and involved was well worthwhile, even though it is a small beginning, which was disparaged and discouraged at its initiation by many sectors and individuals.

The need for such an organisation and the refuge was amply demonstrated by the fact that within the first six months of opening the centre, with only minimal publicity in the English press, thirty four women sought refuge at the centre. The telephone and counselling services provided have been extensively used by women throughout Peninsular Malaysia. Significant numbers of women and children have made use of the Centre's facilities, staying for periods ranging anywhere from one night to one year. Encouragement by way of letters and telephone calls of support has poured in from many directions, certainly from all over Peninsular Malaysia, from the abused and non-abused alike and we should take heart that we have managed the small beginnings of a service which has proved itself to be sorely needed.

Lest we be misunderstood the philosophy of the W.A.O deserves a little consideration. The W.A.O. does not assume that either one party or the other to a marriage is responsible solely for an unbearable situation. The W.A.O. does however concentrate on services to battered women and children, principally because they are unable to protect themselves from further assault. In this respect, it affords them a refuge, and the support and information necessary to a resolution of the problem. It endeavours to restore to these women their self-respect and dignity and their belief in and recognition of the fact that they can have some control over the conditions that shape their lives.

The W.A.O. believes in self-help. Residents are encouraged to take an active part in the day-to-day running of the Centre, the daily domestic chores etc., but in addition they take on other responsibilities, e.g., they can admit others in need to the Centre, whether by day or by night, and they take part in discussions on policies and problems. Equally they give support to one another by sharing experiences. A most encouraging sign is that we now have ex-residents stepping in as volunteers to assist and advise current residents.

The W.A.O. has an "open-door" policy. No woman is turned away in a time of crisis. Even in the middle of the night, a woman (and her children, if applicable) will be taken in, no matter how crowded the conditions, at least for that night, and if necessary alternative arrangements will be made the next day.

The aims and objectives of the W.A.O. are summarised in your Annual Report. You will note that we are quite ambitious. We accept that these aims and ambitions will not be achieved overnight. Whilst we are pleased with our achievements so far, we are not complacent and we accept that the organisation is still in its infancy and has far to go. As to our progress so far, I would like to make special mention of the contributions made by Simryn, our first full-time worker, whose youth and energy have been a prime asset, and Thanam who joined us in November 1982. They have shared a heavy workload and have coped remarkably well. Additionally W.A.O. has tremendous appreciation for its volunteer workers who regularly give of their time and particular expertise without complaint and without stint. We are deeply grateful to them for all their efforts.

The W.A.O. believes in decentralised decision-making and regular meetings are therefore held with all involved in the W.A.O. This includes workers, volunteers and residents alike. In this way, problems are collectively resolved.

Problems and Needs

A woman in need who comes to the Centre will be given the opportunity to stay at the Centre free of charge until the problem is resolved.

Additionally she will be given support aimed at encouraging her to assess her own situation and regain her self-confidence and self-esteem which in most cases has been considerably undermined. She will also be informed of all her rights and options. Sadly, more than half of W.A.O. callers are unaware of their legal rights, but we have quite a panel of lawyers and agencies willing to help in this area and W.A.O. assists battered women in making police reports and medical records or injuries which will be essential if future legal action is to be taken.

One of the most difficult problem areas, in the case of women who decide not to return to their family homes, is that of suitable employment and housing at an affordable price. Many of such women have no work skills other than domestic, others have theirs diminished through disuse. Rents are high, especially in Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya and are frequently beyond their means. W.A.O. sometimes mobilises a whole team of volunteers to assist in locating suitable accommodation. In addition W.A.O. helps women moving out with small loans to tide them over pending payment of salary. This area of employment and accommodation is one we are still unhappy about.

Children

At any one time we may have as many as 16 children at the Centre. Schooling is often interrupted either by changes in district or to avoid harassment from the fathers. We are presently hampered by shortage of labour and time but would very much like to be able to provide tuition on a regular basis. This will be one of our future aims. In the meantime the children are well-supplied with toys and trips and outings are organised for them as often as possible.

Disseminating Information

The W.A.O. considers making the public aware and concerned about the prevalence of domestic violence in Malaysia an important function to help dispel some of the guilt and shame experienced by affected women. Additionally it is desirable to publicise the services of the W.A.O. to make it easier for women in need of help to contact us. Pamphlets on the services provided by the Centre have been produced and a booklet on the rights of battered women including emergency advice and legal issues is being planned. Talks on W.A.O. activities have been given to various social organisations.

Working with Other Agencies

It is obvious that W.A.O. would have great difficulty in carrying out its activities in the absence of co-operation and understanding from various other governmental agencies. There has been established an excellent working relationship with the Ministry of Social Welfare whose positive report facilitated W.A.O.'s obtaining full registration. A system of mutual referrals has evolved. Some residents at the Centre are direct referrals from Welfare on monthly welfare payments. W.A.O. has referred some cases to Social Welfare and they have been afforded financial assistance.

Close co-operation has also been maintained with the Legal Aid Bureau. Again this is a two-way traffic - the Legal Aid Bureau provides its services to those women who need legal services and refers to the Centre those women who need its help.

Excellent relations have also been established with the Petaling Jaya Police who are active in referring women to the Centre. This is quite a change from the old attitude that domestic violence is a personal problem outside the realm of police work.

The hospitals, both U.H. and G.H., have also been extremely co-operative. Their records are invaluable and a number of cases have been directly referred by them.

To sum up, a great deal of progress has been made and we may all be justified in feeling pleased with the results. However, these are small beginnings and we must not permit ourselves to sit back and rest on our laurels too readily. We should not be satisfied until we have established a network of centres and refuges all over the country, for the need for them has been clearly established.

Datin Paula Vohrah
22nd January 1984

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