

Education, Empowerment, Environment: Taking Community Engagement to the Grassroots

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Abstract

At the turn of the millennium in Year 2000, amidst the beginnings of what was seen as gripping changes in Malaysia's socio-political landscape, an idea to tackle deeply entrenched cultural views and perspectives of Malaysian Indian women was seeded. In Year 2000, a 'truth' campaign began, which has since evolved into a series of sustainable direct-benefit community engagement programmes within Malaysia and abroad, aimed at improving the self-image and self-esteem of the young Malaysian Indian woman via the PEP Program and its associated unique empowerment programs. This article examines the evolution of the PEP programme which was conceived in year 2000 on an ad hoc basis and the impact it has had on its stakeholders in the community, especially the young Indian woman.

Keywords: *self-image, community engagement programmes, Malaysian Indian woman, PEP, self-esteem*

Introduction

In late 1999, a random survey unearthed a shocking discovery. Malaysian Indian women were no longer on the job priority list after Malays and Chinese. If they were hired, their salaries were 20-30% lower than their peers from other races despite qualifications being equal. At the time more than 55% of Malaysian Indian girls were said to be pursuing diplomas or degrees. Further investigation revealed the reasons behind employers reluctance. Among them being the view that Malaysian Indian women: i) lacked confidence, ii) had poor communication skills, iii) had poor self image, iv) were not dynamic or motivated, v) were hindered by social cultural limitations. This unofficial findings seeded the need for a drastic change.

In August Year 2000 a workshop focusing on 3 core topics was organised – Public Speaking, Grooming, CVs and Interview Skills. The workshop was a runaway success with participants wanting to know where to go from here.

Having understood the need and vanity, we decided on a unique approach to capacity building. We developed the country and community's first Personal Empowerment Pageant (PEP) and called it the *Miss MalaysiaIndian*.

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PEP is a series of 'truth' workshops that delve deeply into the reproductive health and wellbeing of women, career identification and growth, communication skills, community and environmental awareness, poise and deportment.

The PEP workshops were made compulsory prerequisites for entry into the pageant and each level of qualification had its own issue-focused capacity building programmes with the grandfinal being the stage where Her absolute skill and knowledge was displayed in terms of articulation, poise and confidence – the very reasons why the Indian girl was left behind by employers.

To further enhance her marketability, the winners were contracted to develop a project each from scratch complete with project paper, target audience, branding and promotions and delivery. Profits from the projects were channelled to shelters or needy & marginalised programmes and communities. Her journey developing her project is a human story of hiccups, failure and eventual success. She had learnt the fundamentals of how to develop, market and implement a profitable project.

There was no social media or hardsell internet at the time so word of mouth spread fast and participants poured in. In Year 2002, the Miss Malaysia India Care Association (MMICARE ASSOCIATION) was formed to formalise the grassroots empowerment programmes. Better known by its acronym MMICARE, the association established a charity chest and called it the GIFT HER WITH LIFE FUND. All grassroots community care and capability building programmes were carried out under GIFT HER WITH LIFE FUND. The FUND has consistently focused on empowering, educating and rebuilding lives in communities in Malaysia and abroad.

The reality in Malaysia today is that 68% of Malaysian women go to universities, a third of them will at some point in their lives consider taking up studies at the Masters level. But the native socio-cultural issues such as marriage, childbearing and domestic demands hold them back. Patriarchal Malaysia is not generous towards the bold and dynamic girl. MMICARE has been seeding the minds of young women between the ages of 15 and 30 years since the Year 2000 through its PEP Talk programs which are now also held in schools, colleges and public universities in Malaysia through student clubs and associations.

In Year 2001, a Community and Environment Awareness (CEA) Programme was developed with the assistance of Wetlands International. In 2005 this programme evolved into a 4D/3N semi-academic bootcamp with the support of the School of Biological Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia. The CEA is today the SEMI-FINALS round of the annual Miss Malaysia/Indian Global pageant.

The core focus of the collaboration with USM allows for the uninhibited display of scientific research and knowledge made simple for the layman, an exchange of ideas, view and knowledge of self, community and environment. Each bootcamp since Year 2005 comprise 50 multiracial participants allowing for a refreshing exchange of spirit and camaraderie. In year 2001 following the GUJARAT earthquake, the group mobilised the collection of essentials for the hospitals in Gujarat. This was spearheaded by the winners of the Year 2000 pageant and volunteers. This was also the beginning of our work in Disaster Relief and Rehabilitation. In 2004, following the tsunami, MMICARE mobilised essentials and sent it to Aceh via the Royal Malaysian Navy's KD Mahawangsa. MMICARE also sent volunteer teams to Aceh, Phuket and Sri Lanka. On April 25, 2015 Nepal suffered an extreme earthquake measuring 7.8 on the Richter scale setting off an avalanche from Mount Everest. It experienced a second earthquake measuring 7.3 two weeks later.

Over 3 million people were displaced and NGOs - local and foreign - are now racing against time to provide some form of shelter and comfort for these traumatised communities even as tremours continue to be felt in Nepal and the monsoons and winter loom ahead. On May 1, five days after the earthquake, MMICARE Association called out for Level 1 mobilisation of dignity kits for women and child victims in Nepal. Together with the assistance of the Royal Malaysian Airforce they sent out hundreds of packets of sanitary towels, antiseptic wipes, baby and adult

diapers, also throwing in hundreds of boxes of colour pencils to aid children deal with the trauma. On June 7, a four member team of volunteers left to Nepal to help build temporary shelters and provide provisions for single mothers and aged women victims identified by volunteers of the Yasodha Devi Trust and the Lalipur Bishop's House. Even as this is written, MMICARE Association is building more temporary shelters of recyclable zinc to provide women victims with a some comfort. In addition MMICARE has also simultaneously begun working with communities to rebuild small businesses run by women. To this end a tailoring community in Sindupalchowk, the epicentre of the second earthquake, received eight sewing machines, threads and bales of cloth to restart their lives. 24 women worked in in this community centre.

Methodology

Due to the limitation of MMICare Association being a self-funded NGO, the methods and programs employed herein were on a needs basis in a qualitative manner, conceptualised and developed following discussions held with the participants in an ongoing manner over the past 15 years. MMICare Association held discussions with approximately 25 -30 participants a year, who provided various insights into the issues facing the community. Participants undergo a 3-month program that includes empowerment workshops, seminars and practice activities conducted by trained facilitators. They are exposed to issues facing the young Indian woman in Malaysia and are given the opportunity to network with her peers and seniors in order to relate to others in her community. After the 3 month program which culminates in the grand finals, follow-up sessions are conducted every other month by engaging them in community service activities and projects.

To achieve its aims, MMICARE took a bold step to breakaway from convention and openly engaged women's views and opinions on social and community misconceptions and fallacies at all levels. In a study on Malaysian girls, Joseph, C. (2014) drew on the concepts of identity and resistance to examine the ways in which a group of academically high achieving young people understand, construct and experience "success".

Maltz, M. (1960) in his principle of psycho-cybernetics, emphasised the importance of self-image and its strong link to empowerment and success, stressing that changing the person's self-image was a crucial start to any kind of empowerment. Hence, we took a unique approach of engaging the participants first on a vanity level, ie a pageant, and then reeled them in (much like a fisherman) with each workshop, slowly opening their minds and kindling their awareness of the multitude of support, changes and challenges around them at home, in community and in society at large. The first step in capacity building was understanding hidden issues behind every smile and tear. Understanding this the PEP Talks were insightful first then decisive and gently guided the girl towards self appreciation. In the journey towards capacity building, the single biggest challenge is sustaining change. MMICARE assured them of constant 24/7 moral and emotional support.

The next step was ensuring that these women were self-reliant. To this end we introduced new opportunities and where needed we retrained these women and taught them new marketable skills and set them in jobs. MMICARE engaged with partners at both grassroot and policy levels as well as the corporate sector to achieve its aims in empowering girls and women.

To date MMICARE has variously engaged with the Malaysia's Prime Minister's Office, Ministry of Women Family and Community Development, Ministry of Youth and Sports, Ministry of Science and Technology, Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources, Ministry of Education as well as ground level NGOs such as the Girl Guides Association, Rotary, Lions, NGO Hubs, Malaysia Nature Society, Wetlands International, World Wildlife Fund, University Putra Malaysia (student societies and professors), NGO Hub Asia, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Asia Europe institute (UM), Help University, Lim Kok Wing University, Brickfields Asia College,

Malaysia Official Designers Association, Malaysia Bumiputra Designers Association, Mercy Malaysia, Malaysia Association of Rehabilitation Physicians and corporates such as Price Waterhouse Coopers, Astro and Maxis. In addition MMICARE is also constantly open to working with both registered and unregistered ad hoc groups actively working in the epicentres of various communities.

Results and Discussion

The past 15 years has seen generations of 'lost' girls who are now anchored women readily choosing to contribute back towards MMICARE's philosophy that 'hands that serve are mightier than lips that pray'.

Participants of the PEP and pageant programme over the 15 years all indicated an improvement in self-esteem and self-image, which were identified as crucial factors in their personal and professional development. Participants who most benefitted from the programme, i.e. the finalists indicated an average of 50% improvement in self-image and self-esteem at the end of their 3 month programme.

An examination of the audio-visual recordings of interviews with the top 5 winners are testimony to the impact programme has had on their individual self-development. This is further aided by the impetus they had in developing their own community service programmes over the following one year.

Conclusion

MMICARE runs its capacity building workshops on public donations and funds from its members. It's main fundraiser is the annual Miss MalaysiaIndian Global pageant. The biggest challenges we face today are changing media landscape, rising cost of living and the misconceptions associated with community care and voluntarism. A decade ago the internet was fledgling and today the landscape has changed. Social media has shaped the behaviour, thoughts and actions of millennials. It has seeped so far deep into our lives that the challenge is how to reach out to the younger group of people who although appear 'collected' are in fact 'lost'.

There are several limitations in the work being carried out by MMICare Association, most notably its full dependence on volunteers and reliance on public funding. A larger quantitative study is also lacking in the area of women's empowerment programs and its impact. There is a need for further research in the actual reasons behind the low-self esteem and poor self- image of these MalaysianIndian women.

Understanding this, MMICARE Association and its charity chest, GIFT HER WITH LIFE FUND, has remained focused on the core aspect of social and community responsibility and is finding ways to address the challenges. Community service is not a business and NGOs should never see it as a profit-making activity and Corporate Social Responsibility is not another name for advertising.

References

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