



L Talk: Eileena Lee on the Challenges of GLBT Activism in Singapore

by Rodelyn Marte

From Manila to Singapore, WIA connected virtually with lesbian activist Eileena Lee, founder of “RedQuEEN!,” Singapore’s first and largest e-group for queer women. Eileena talks on pockets of resistance against the rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) people; identifies opportunities for overcoming such resistance; and shares her reflections on GLBT activism in her country.

WIA and Eileena started their virtual chat at 10:11:19 AM (2/28/2006).

Laying out Singapore

WIA: *To start with, how is Singapore as a society for lesbians?*

Eileena: Contrary to popular belief, Singapore is not all that much of a hell for lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (LBT) women. As compared to some cities that I've been to, we've actually got a rather vibrant social scene for GLBTs. In terms of societal tolerance/intolerance toward lesbians and gays, here's an entry in the website of People Like Us (PLU), the gay rights advocacy group that I am a part of:

Increasing numbers of gay men and women are out and open about their sexuality. But in official eyes, gay people are still treated as outsiders and, with the Victorian law on the statute books, potential criminals. It's hardly any wonder that gay aspirations look beyond Singapore, and gay people here find more reason to be cynical about our country than want(ing) to be part of our future. This isn't good for Singapore's future, to have a segment of our population write off their homeland in their minds. The government says this must change; it wants every Singaporean to be engaged. So does People Like Us.

The Law and people of diverse sexualities in Singapore

WIA: *Let's talk about LGBTIQs (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer people) and the law.*

Eileena: Here's something about government attitude and laws; also on the PLU web...

Section 377 [of the Singapore Penal Code]

"Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animals, shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment for a term which may extend to 10 years, and shall also be liable to fine."

Explanation:

"Penetration is sufficient to constitute the carnal intercourse necessary to the offence described in this section."

Section 377A [of the Singapore Penal Code]

"Any male person who, in public or private, commits, or abets the commission of, or procures or attempts to procure the commission by any male person of, any act of gross indecency with another male person, shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to 2 years."

Our [PLU's] comment:

Section 377 potentially makes any sexual activity an offence, except the insertion of the penis into a human vagina. It is based on the archaic Christian concept that sex is only for procreation. Pleasure is an illegitimate motivation for sex. Thus, any kind of sexual act that does not permit the possibility of conception, e.g., oral sex, anal sex, even masturbation or sex with rubber toys, is "against the order of nature."

Section 377A broadens it further to encompass mutual touching, even a situation of "if you show me yours, I'll show you mine." Section 377A is specific to a situation involving males only.

In both sections, consent or age or majority is immaterial. Furthermore, the law applies even if the activity takes place in private.

Legally, we only exist in the Penal Code 377 and 377A. Since gay marriages are not recognised in Singapore, usual normal benefits like housing subsidies and the surviving spouse inheriting the estate of the deceased—in the event of death of a spouse (without a will)—are not accorded people in same-sex committed relationships.

WIA: Singapore criminalises homosexual acts. How much teeth does this provision in your law has, in reality?

Eileena: Well, the law has not been used in a while, although entrapment did exist years ago. Thus technically speaking, Penal Code Sections 377 and 377a are just there but not often policed. But at PLU, we feel that it is incongruent to the government's public declaration² that Singapore is open to gay people.

WIA: Yes, we have read how Singapore's lesbian and gay rights activists have found an entry point for fighting for equality through that declaration. How has the government reacted to this? How does it deflect your claims of their being contrary?

Eileena: It's a fact that the Penal Code still exists, and the government has rejected our attempt to register ourselves as a legal entity/organisation. On the other hand, ex-gay organisations like Liberty League (LL), which specialises in reparative therapy and CHOICES (which is really ChoiceLESS) are legal organisations. They are registered organisations going to schools to preach, whereas organisations like PLU are still pushing for registration. In a multi-religious country like Singapore, it is not right that the Christian fundamentalists like LL and

CHOICES are allowed to go into our schools to impose their agendas on our kids of multi-religious backgrounds. The government also recently offered to fund LL.

However, as much as I would want them (ex-gay organisations) to disappear forever, I am of the belief that in a truly open society we should co-exist.

WIA: How big, do you think, is the influence of the anti-gay law so as to cause such bias in your government? Do you think things would really change if the law is changed?

Eileena: I think that would be a good start. Finally, people cannot say homosexuality is illegal. As well, the penal code is a colonial hangover that we inherited from the British. Former colonies like Hong Kong have since made the law redundant.

It's a bit of everything. In Singapore, everyone takes hint from the government, and, so, decriminalisation will be a huge declaration to the population—that being gay is no longer illegal, no longer abnormal.

WIA: Decriminalisation—do you ever see that happening—in this lifetime?

Eileena: I am optimistic. When I came out eight years ago, I never thought that we would have a pride centre, but now we do.

The work can be really negative because we are constantly fighting. There's never a win-win situation because homophobes will and can turn anything around to put down your cause. But that's really okay because when people are expressing their

homophobia, they are begging to be educated. :) That's my way of keeping positive.

WIA: :) Are there lesbian and gay groups in Singapore working on decriminalisation?

Eileena: PLU is.

Love, sex, and religion

WIA: What about religion, how does it view LGBTIQ people?



Pelanggi Pride Centre file photo

The Gay Buddhist Fellowship group 'Heartland' meets regularly at Pelangi Pride Centre for its group sessions.

Eileena: Buddhism does have a precept to refrain from sexual misconduct. Basically, it means that if we use trickery, emotional blackmail, or force to compel someone to have sex with us, that is sexual misconduct. Adultery is also a form of sexual misconduct because when we marry, we promise our spouse that we will be loyal to them. When we commit adultery, we break that promise and betray their

trust. Sex should be an expression of love and intimacy between two people, and, when it is, it contributes to our mental and emotional well-being.

But some Buddhists may often use this precept against homosexuals although it's really about responsible behaviour. If you speak to different monks and nuns, you will probably get very different answers. The culturally entrenched ones will tell you that homosexuality is wrong—but having two to three wives is okay for a man! However, I have met monks and nuns who will tell you that that for as long as you are in a loving, committed relationship (be it heterosexual or same-sex), then sex is just a form of expression of love.

The good thing about Buddhism is that we are taught to always ask questions. It's not about following a set of rules.

Linking: Role of ICTs

WIA: What are the opportunities you see for furthering Singapore's LGBTIQ rights advocacy?

Eileena: The Internet, and information and communication technology (ICT). I think the Internet is something that has done us a lot of good. It brought Singapore to a completely new era where people are able to choose for themselves to what they want to be exposed. We were previously exposed to only what the government deemed appropriate. Now, we have a population of people that is able to discern, rather than go by and agree perpetually with the government.

WIA: Can you say something on how the Internet could be especially helpful or useful to LGBTIQ women? To lesbian and gay rights activists?

Eileena: Especially in Singapore when the Internet came about and the government actively worked toward having every household own a computer, the computers and the modems became a lifeline for lesbians and gays fearing to be outed, whose safety is threatened (real or perceived) if they acknowledged openly that they are queer. In a way, that helped with the formation of identity. It also allowed some of these gays and lesbians to come out virtually. With this newfound empowerment, more gays and lesbians were able to eventually and bravely come out in real life.

For us activists, ICT was a space where we gathered virtually and shared our thoughts and opinions, and to rally people. I used the Internet to do support work to empower gay/bisexual/queer women. If it hadn't been for the Internet, I wouldn't have been able to do all those things that I've done over the last seven to eight

years. I wouldn't even be speaking to you right now.

WIA: Have you explored other ways of making the Internet work for LGBTIQ women?

Eileena: The Internet will always be a valuable medium or tool. There's just no limits to using it. The only limit is that because we use English in the Internet as a common language, we're unable to reach people who do not speak English. We also can't reach people without computers.

WIA: But that's not much of a problem for Singapore, right?

Eileena: There are people who are not comfortable communicating in English, and there are people who are unfamiliar with the Internet. There is also a population that is not digitally linked.

WIA: Would you say advocacy and activism through the Internet is elitist, then, even in such a "techy" country like Singapore? How do groups there resolve this, how do you reach out to those who are not Internet-savvy or not comfortable in English?

Eileena: Activism, in my opinion, is elitist. :-P

WIA: Aiyoo!!! :)

Eileena: There are some who have other things to worry about. I'm not saying that they have better things to worry about, but in the order of importance to their lives, activism is the last thing on their mind. Other things that may come as priorities are finances, work, children, and many other concerns.

I have to qualify that I do not see "elitist" as that bad of a word, though.

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L rights and activism

WIA: Taking off from your previous message on the tendency of people to prioritise other needs over their right to be lesbian, happy and gay—this is the tendency of institutions as well, that is, to keep people fed, give them jobs, then forget their sexual rights. How do you see a way around this, especially for Singapore, which, from an outsider's point of view, takes good care of its people (at the expense of some personal freedoms)?

Eileena: It's a complex situation, sort of like a chicken-and-egg situation. At the expense of personal freedoms, but in whose opinion? If you were to speak to some gay people, they think they have freedom.

What I mean is that this is how I feel about my own freedom as a Singaporean gay woman, but I am not saying that every gay Singaporean woman agrees with me. So therein comes the order of importance/priority. Just because I see that as an important thing for myself, I cannot assume that all gay women feel the same way.

WIA: So, in your advocacy, how do you make people feel that LGBTIQ rights are as valid as any other rights, even for non-LGBTIQ women?

Eileena: I don't. I can't make people do anything. I can, as myself, give visibility to something that has been

rendered invisible. I can provide positive visibility to oppose the negatives and, hopefully, normalise homosexuality. I believe, too, that people are able to discern for themselves. If people still maintain that I am a freak, nothing I do will change their bigotry. It has to come from within themselves.

Additionally, I do feel that people's negative opinion of gay people will change once they befriend someone who is gay. Thus, my solution to end bigotry is simple—if all of us gay people can just come out to our parents or work, that's half the problem solved!

WIA: How would you describe the lesbian/gay activism in Singapore? How effective do you think has it been?

Eileena: I reckon that it's a situation whereby we try to push boundaries, but, at the same time, being mindful not to break any laws. How effective have we been? It depends on what you mean by "effective." I think we've been quite effective in creating visibility in a country where there's very little gay/lesbian visibility, and, if at all, it's usually negative.

Lessons

WIA: How about lessons on movement-building: issues within the movement?

Eileena: The male and female divide—it exists not just in the heterosexual community. I have to say that my own experience with gay men has been good. Working experience that is... (LOL). But as in any part of the world, the world we live in is very patriarchal. I think gay men are brought up to be men. I don't want



Pelangi Pride Centre file photo

I know how it feels like to grow up feeling isolated and wrong. It is an area we are treading very carefully as well. In the Pelangi Pride Centre Resource Library, we are able to provide a de-sexualised neutral space for young people to come to for reliable information.

We work in tandem with certain gay-affirmative social workers/mental healthcare workers to address the issues faced by younger GLBTs.

WIA: *Are there efforts to engage younger lesbians not only as “clients” or “targets” but as activists in the movement, to strengthen the movement?*

Eileena: We have people who are running our monthly women’s nights who are in their early and mid-twenties. However, I don’t know if age is an accurate gauge. I think it all boils down to the individuals’ life experiences and how they feel about the situation, and whether their lives allow them to work towards the betterment of their fellow womenkind.

I think older women (some, not all) have issues to deal with that are so different from those of the younger ones in terms of “gay age” and “gay maturity.” Although they are older of age, they may not be necessarily more mature in terms of gay identity. And for those who have spent a longer time living in the closet, internalised homophobia does work into them in very insidious ways. The key is that we must be aware of how it makes us behave in very unconscious and acceptable but unhealthy ways—acceptable because this has always been the case.

to sound like I think gay men are terrible people to work with—they aren’t—we just have to acknowledge that men and women are different.

I also want to talk about FEAR. I think fear stops us from doing a lot of things. Fear stops us from being ourselves. Fear works in very insidious ways. I mean, there are gay-affirmative people out there in influential positions, working toward helping better the lives of GLBTs. But because of the perceived repercussions of being found out, many of these people aren’t able to openly do their work.

WIA: *Would you want to speak about engaging young(er) LGBTIQs in the movement? Is that a concern?*

Eileena: Younger GLBTs have always been a concern. After all, personally,

WIA: :) ... Any final words?

Eileena: *thinks...steps onto soapbox...* I yearn for the day when all this will no longer be an issue, when no one blinks an eye about gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender/

transsexual/intersexed/queer. *steps off soapbox* :)

WIA and Eileena both signed out of their virtual chat at 1:11 PM (2/28/2006). ☺

Eileena Lee is the founder of "RedQuEEen!," Singapore's first and largest e-group for queer women. She is pro-tem president of the Singapore-based gay rights advocacy group, PLU (People Like Us), and one of the pioneers of the Pelangi Pride Centre, Singapore's first community space for people of diverse sexualities.

Endnotes

1 PLU is a Singapore gay and lesbian group focused on advocacy and public education. It believes that everyone should have a full and equal place in Singapore society regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, and to this end, works for more informed understanding, the removal of barriers and a fuller integration of sexual minorities with the larger community. PLU remains an informal group until present as the Registrar of Societies of Singapore repeatedly refused to grant it registration since 1997.

2 Then Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's statement to the *TIME* magazine, and current Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's statement.

