



Fiesta Feminista Organising Committee

# Fiesta Feminista in Malaysia

by Isis International-Manila

*Malaysia's feminists are now setting the stage for a "Fiesta Feminista" to be held on June 15-17, 2007. The event aims to bring in women to discuss issues on feminism, human rights, and democracy in the country. Prior to this, Isis International-Manila had the chance to virtually solicit the insights of the Fiesta Feminista Organising Committee on this event.*

*Isis International-Manila [Isis]: Could you share with us what Fiesta Feminista is all about? How was this event conceptualised? What are its objectives? Who are your intended participants?*

**Fiesta Feminista Organising Committee [FFOC]:** Approximately a year ago, in conjunction with International Women’s Day, the Women’s Development Collective (WDC) organised a talk titled, “Reflections and Challenges of the Women’s Movement.” Out of this surfaced the idea of a regular nationwide women’s meeting in Malaysia, similar to those held in other parts of the world (e.g., the Latin American Feminist Encounters, Indian National Women’s Conference) which have allowed women, activists, and feminists to successfully exchange ideas, strategise, and extend solidarity with one another. This, it was felt, was an opportune time when the local women’s movement faced increasing challenges in terms of organising and addressing issues of inequality and discrimination. It was also deemed an opportunity for movement-building purposes. The idea had been contemplated in the past, but was not pursued for lack of resources and different priorities.

Another important motivation was the socio-political climate in the country. Despite a change in government leadership and its efforts to foster greater transparency and accountability, Malaysia still lacked a democratic space in which ordinary Malaysians can claim their basic human rights. This situation has been aggravated by the practice of ethnicised politics, and the growing backlash of religious conservatism that affects women disproportionately, particularly with regard women’s sexuality.

Subsequently, WDC proposed organising this event in collaboration with other

members of the Joint Action Group for Gender Equality (JAG). JAG is a coalition of progressive women’s groups, many of whom have been working together since the mid-1980s. It comprises of the All Women’s Action Society (AWAM), Sisters in Islam (SIS), Women’s Aid Organisation (WAO), Women’s Centre for Change, Penang (WCC) and the Malaysian Trade Union Congress (MTUC) - Women’s Committee and WDC.

Later, this collaboration extended to include the Gender Studies Programme of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences of Universiti Malaya (UM), Kuala Lumpur. This joint effort between JAG and the Gender Studies Programme of UM marks the first time these two key players in civil society—women’s groups and academia, will join efforts to address common issues facing Malaysian women. The synergy that is expected to come out of this will pave the way to narrow the gap between these two actors, and hopefully, between theory and practice.

Following a series of discussions, it was decided that this national event would be known as Fiesta Feminista, and take place at the university campus from 15-17 June 2007. The broad objectives of Fiesta Feminista are:

- To put feminism in the forefront and popularise it in Malaysia so that anyone who is interested in learning more about inequalities and injustice in society—particularly between women and men—and who want to actively change this situation, has an avenue to do so;
- To bring together a broad range of people, women in particular, to discuss challenges, exchange ideas, evaluate, and strategise around issues

of feminism, human rights, and democracy in Malaysia;

- To create a space in which the next generation of feminist leaders in Malaysia can participate and take charge. Hopefully, the occasion will also be a leadership building activity and contribute to facilitating an effective transition between the current and future leaders of the women's movement.



*Volunteers of the Fiesta Feminista Organising Committee gathered together during "The Political ABC's of Fiesta Feminista" workshop in Petaling Jaya, Malaysia on March 31-April 1, 2007.*

Invited to this event are primarily women (but also some men) who recognise the inequalities that exist in our society, and who want to actively do something to change this. Pursuing our desire to see participants from a diverse range of backgrounds, we have identified several groups of community-based women, half of whom will come from outside the Klang Valley (i.e., the most populous and urban area of the country), and are working to specifically mobilise their involvement at Fiesta Feminista.

These women were identified through the networks that JAG members have built over the last 25 years. These different groups include plantation women from the rural areas; kindergarten teachers from poor communities outside the Klang Valley; indigenous women from both the peninsular and east Malaysia; women urban settlers (squatters); single mothers and disabled women. Special attention is being given to mobilising younger women, grassroots communities, as well as other groups of women through whom forefronting and popularising feminism—can be brought to new places.

This event is not intended as a one-time effort but rather something held once every two to three years. For this year, WDC will serve as the event's secretariat.

*Isis: What is the theme of this event? What are the topics or issues to be discussed?*

**FFOC:** "Embracing Diversity" is this year's theme. In line with efforts to draw women from different identities and backgrounds, we hope Fiesta Feminista will serve as a platform where diversity can be recognised, negotiated, respected and celebrated. The term diversity not only signifies the diversity that exists among women, but also the diversity among religious and ethnic groups, classes, ages, sexualities, locations and organisations. It also refers to the diversity of issues, questions and challenges that will be raised.

This two-and-a-half-day event will see a range of activities never before seen—structured discussions in the form of panel presentations and dialogue sessions; skills building and strategising workshops; open space activities and film screenings. All these will come under four tracks:

- Feminism, gender and development;
- Human rights and democracy;
- Social movements; and
- Women organising.

Fiesta Feminista organising is guided by principles that have been collectively agreed upon by the Organising Committee. This will ensure that messages that come out during the event do not promote patriarchal, fundamentalist, racist or ethnocentric notions nor support neo-liberal policies. The organisers also wish to ensure that the event is environmentally-friendly.

*Isis: Being a “Fiesta,” what approaches would you utilise to facilitate discussions and dialogues?*

**FFOC:** This was one of the first things the Organising Committee discussed because we realised that we would be bringing in a diverse group of women and men, in terms of language, class, location, etc. Thus, we felt it was especially important to adopt approaches that would enhance everyone’s participation and involvement in Fiesta Feminista.

For instance, as many of us know, plenary sessions usually involve invited speakers sharing their thoughts on the main themes of an event. However, often only a handful of people from the floor will be able to engage them and respond to what is being shared because there is seldom time for a meaningful exchange of ideas, between the invited speakers and those from the floor. Thus, we have proposed that the two main plenary sessions of Fiesta Feminista be followed by discussions in smaller breakout groups which will be facilitated in a such a way that maximises audience

involvement. This will provide more people a better chance to share their responses or thoughts to the main ideas from the plenary.

By pitching the structured discussion sessions at three levels—basic, intermediate and advanced—we hope we can make the discussions as relevant to as many people as possible, and thereby facilitate more effective communication. As far as possible, both English and Bahasa Malaysia will be used as the medium of communication. Where necessary, whisper translation will also be provided in Mandarin and Tamil. We hope this will allow us to overcome the language barrier, which in many situations can impede the input of certain groups.



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We are also aware of how creativity can be a bridge between different groups of women. Hence, apart from sessions where people talk and listen, there are also sessions where they can participate through non-verbal means or hands-on activities. We will have activities such as poster exhibitions, street theatre, as well as the screening of films by local independent film directors followed by open discussions with the directors themselves. Suffice it to say that, in general, we are trying to ensure that there is creativity and innovation in as many activities as possible, such that participants will feel at ease sharing their thoughts on issues being raised, even those that might be considered contentious.

Because we have space limitations, given that we expect around 400 participants plus another 100 or so volunteers, we have also discussed the need to enable more than those attending, to reflect and learn about feminism as well. Consequently, outside of the event, we will conduct a media campaign running up to Fiesta Feminista, which will include covering the event's activities. The challenge, however, is reaching out to non-English speaking and rural-based Malaysians. To bring ideas of feminism to places where feminism has never been

discussed, it will be important for us to work with the vernacular media.

*Isis: In terms of the nature of the women's movement in Malaysia and its political spectrum, how would you describe it? Could you share its brief history?*

**FFOC:** The fact that it has taken us this long to organise an event like Fiesta Feminista, the first public activity which highlights and showcases feminism, is perhaps revealing of the nature and political spectrum of the women's movement in Malaysia. The contemporary movement can be broadly divided into three categories of women's organisations: one comprising those predominantly concerned with women's welfare needs; another involving groups that have been built on issues around violence against women; and the third, a much smaller category consisting of those wanting to address issues of women, democracy, and human rights. It has only been in the last five years or so that more organisations—particularly those that traditionally have dealt with violence against women concerns—have expanded their definition of “women's issues” to include women's human rights.

Even so, the whole topic of feminism has been and remains a difficult one. While many individual activists may subscribe to this ideology, much fewer are willing to be publicly associated with it simply because of the immense negative connotations as well as fear of backlash and ostracism. In that sense, organising Fiesta Feminista is groundbreaking. It provides an avenue for us to demystify feminism and demonstrate that this is not something alien, that there have always been women in Malaysia who have believed in the cause of women's equality and also been concerned with larger social

justice issues beyond traditional “women’s issues.”

*Isis: What are your expected outcomes? How could Feminist Fiesta aid in strengthening alliances among feminist movements and in advancing feminist issues in Malaysia?*

**FFOC:** One of the main challenges is getting more Malaysians from all walks of life interested and involved in the women’s movement’s causes and activities. Over the last 25 years, women’s groups have successfully raised public awareness and pushed for legal reforms in the areas of violence against women. Despite this, the numbers of those advocating for women’s equality remain small. It is, therefore, hoped that Fiesta Feminista will be a movement-building exercise that not only consolidates existing strengths within the women’s movement, but also can attract new energies and diversity into its fold, and through this, introduce new ways of learning and doing feminism.

One important coalition building activity will be the inter-movement dialogues with groups such as the sexually-marginalised and workers’

organisations, two important social actors with whom we seek to build better alliances. In so doing, we wish also to uncover and examine existing assumptions, inquire and learn about their issues and perhaps even come to a shared understanding. We plan to strengthen our own understanding of issues such as ethnic relations and abortion, which have not been adequately grasped or discussed by most in the women’s movement. To strengthen linkages with feminists from the region, we will also be inviting some of them to share their insights and experiences from their own countries so we can learn and reflect on these.

While these are our hopes for Fiesta Feminista, we are also trying to be realistic and are more than aware of the many challenges that lie ahead. We do not know exactly what the outcome will be but the fact that many have responded positively is clearly a good start. We are prepared to make this a huge learning experience, one on which we intend to build future collaborations. We want Fiesta Feminista to contribute significantly to the growth of feminism and the women’s movement in Malaysia. ■

*The Fiesta Feminista Organising Committee comprises representatives from JAG and the Gender Studies Programme. It is responsible for the overall coordination and execution of the project and is supported in this by several Working Groups. The Women’s Development Collective is the Fiesta Feminista Secretariat. For further information, contact Shazana or Beng Hui at <info@fiestafeminista-malaysia.org>.*

**Editor’s Note:**

*While the One on One section is envisaged as an interview with an identified personality, the Fiesta Feminista Organising Committee however opted to talk to Isis as a group.*