

LIFE&TIMES **FAMILY**

# Borderless support

An online support group is empowering people who are in troubled relationships.

**Aneeta Sundararaj** finds out more

ONCE upon a time, a young professional met a handsome man. He swept her off her feet and, before she knew it, they were married. When their child was born, he became the sole breadwinner; she stopped working to raise their family.

Whenever she was invited out by her friends and relatives, he complained, saying: "You love them more than me." She ended up spending all her time with him. Soon, he was coming home late from work and she suspected that he was having an affair.

One day, stone drunk, he slapped her. The next day, he packed his bags and left. Stunned, she wondered how she had become penniless and alone.

"The story is familiar," says Nik Elin Nik Rashid, 50, the founder of a relatively new online support group called Wibawa WoMen. Using Facebook, this support group aims to empower people who are contemplating divorce or going through one.

Founded on June 18 last year, Wibawa WoMen now has more than 120 members. "This is a 'borderless' group and we accept members of any race, religion or gender," explains the former lawyer.

"Actually, I have been involved in women's rights issues since the early 1980s," says Nik Elin, sharing how the group came to be. "When I went through my own divorce in 2007, I felt as if I was in a dark pit and each time I wanted to get out, things kept falling in. People would say, 'We don't want to get involved', and I felt so alone. There was no one to talk to or tell me what to do. So, I educated myself and studied Syariah law. I accepted what I had to go through was a challenge and decided that when I got through this, I would help others in the same situation."

## SHAMED TO NOTHING

"Many of the people who come to us are at their lowest point. One woman has four children under the age of 12. Her ex-husband sold their house for RM80,000 and gave her RM3,000. Now, he pays her RM75 per month for the children. That's not even enough to feed them," she laments.

Such injustice was precisely what Shareen Iqbal, 41, a peace activist, endured when her marriage ended. "I knew there were laws, but I didn't understand them and didn't know



"I hated it when people said 'sabar'... All that we need, sometimes, is someone to be present."

Shareen Iqbal, peace activist



Lina Esa Oberg insists that **anger** is not necessarily a bad emotion



Nik Elin Zurina, founder of Wibawa WoMen

## Quick facts

1. Wibawa WoMen is an online support group using Facebook.
2. This support group aims to help empower people who are contemplating divorce or going through one.
3. Founded last year, it has more than 120 members to date.
4. Details at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/WibawaWoMen/>

what my rights were. By the time I had figured them out, it was too late and the legal system had let me down. I was shamed to nothing."

Echoing the voice of many members of Wibawa WoMen, Shareen adds, "I was looking for a place where I could find some compassion. I hated it when people said 'sabar' and asked me to sembahyang. I wanted someone to empathise

with me. All that we need, sometimes, is for someone to be present and say to us, 'Yes you are in pain. Let me hold your hand.'"

## RIGHT REACTIONS

Lina Esa Oberg, 43, also a former lawyer and a hypnotherapist from RE: Mind Coaching, points out: "A lot of people don't understand the importance of the mind and our emotions, why we act or react in a particular way, the role of emotions and feelings and how to handle them."

Oberg cites an example: "Say the husband comes back late from work one night. The wife is furious as she suspects that he's having an affair. She screams and shouts. This achieves nothing.

Ideally, she should take a step back and look at the situation objectively. If she asks, 'Is he really having an affair?', she may see that he was genuinely working late and her anger disappears. However, if he is having an affair, then her anger is righteous anger and she will want to be treated fairly. The point is this: Whatever decision she makes at this stage, it must be made in a calm manner and not from anger."

That said, Oberg insists that anger

is not necessarily a bad emotion. "Think of it this way: if you have a physical wound and leave it, it will become infected and gangrenous. Similarly, when someone is angry, not attending to that emotion may make things worse unnecessarily."

Shareen, too, has developed a unique approach to this abysmal state of affairs which involves a search for peace: "We must learn who we are. The way I do this is to ask people to listen to the voice inside their heads. Is it critical? Is it harsh? Is it saying things like, 'You'll never amount to anything'. Then, I ask people, especially women, to consider this: From birth, we're told that we're our father's child. For instance, I am Shareen, daughter of Iqbal. What happens if their surname is their mother's name? I can see the change in them immediately."

## CONNECT, SUPPORT, COMPASSION

"In Wibawa," adds Shareen, "we give you a space to connect with others. There's no judgement. The values of respect, honesty, spiritual values, justice, equality and love will connect us all. Hopefully, we can then work towards creating a compassionate society. Compassion first, ego last."

Nik Elin, however, warns that membership of Wibawa WoMen is not a licence to be dishonest. "Membership is for people who are in need of our help and we have a vetting process that they have to go through. For instance, one lady told us that she had been chased out of her house. When we investigated further, that was not true. Now, we are more wary and ask for verification first."

Ultimately, Shareen sums up all that Wibawa WoMen is trying to achieve when she says: "I hope we can show people how to go from being a victim to survivor and, thereafter, empower them."