

## Betty Yeoh Oral History Content Summary

### Track 1 [duration: 1:36:36] [Session one: 28 May 2013]

[00:00] Yeoh Siew Peng, Betty [BY] Story of being frightened by rubber snake as child. Family history, mother and father first cousins, paternal grandmother “given away” for better life. Describes grandfather as typical Chinese man quitting sea merchant life to work in bank in Penang, Malaysia. Move to Kuala Lumpur and BY’s father taken to meet mother, marriage, birth one year later. Childhood in “notorious” area, Tiong Nam Settlement, now site of Putra World Trade Centre. Little memory of growing years. Eldest of five siblings, one sister died as toddler. Describes trade unionist uncle as greatest influence in life.

[05:48] Describes father coming home via back door when heard BY was a girl, using this experience today when talking about gender. Describes mother as “idol”, little education but very wise, ensured best education for BY. Story about mother’s advice when working for company with conflicting values, BY’s response joining All Women’s Action Society (AWAM). Describes attending all girl secondary school, Assunta and weekly prayer of ‘Make Me An Instrument’. Reflects on earlier insecurity in not attending university though has given talks in almost all. Primary school in Bahasa language, mastering through reading Malay paper, mentions teacher of favourite subject, History, Lily Goh. Describes relief of financial burden on parents when left school at form five. Explains school system using Senior Cambridge Level. Set about teaching herself accounts, typewriting, shorthand.

[14:24] Father’s pledge to see all children through basic education. Recollection of family living in back corner of a double storey house divided and rented in quarters at the time, as happiest days with father playing harmonica, BY the mini accordion, siblings singing, mother cooking. Describes mother supplementing income by washing clothes, father mechanic. More stories about siblings and move to house full of array of animals.

[18: 40] Description of neighbourhood during in period surrounding 13<sup>th</sup> May 1969 racial riots, uncle working in University of Malaya Medical Centre in ambulance, picking up dead bodies. Recalls childhood glee at school closures. Describes sophisticated wiring system created between the houses by multi-racial neighbourhood community to alert to any activity, first house on the look out, sounding alarm reaching each including end house. Mentions Sceiclene laundry company providing rations. Discusses lasting fear and political manipulation of citizens from 1969 racial clashes.

[23:57] Describes earning money growing up, to buy books and extras, ironing job as positive memory. Explains that brothers helped mother with domestic chores and washing job outside home after school, with outlook that girls in family would marry and have to work in household then. Criticism from others about damage to boys’ future. Describes party held for father as adults showing community otherwise, and instilling gender awareness by example. Brother caring for mother after stroke, and impact on his son, BY interviewing him for gender awareness course.

[32:22] Story about importance of having a choice, lesson learned from sister. Inspiration for return to study and gaining Human Resources Certificate, then Diploma in Industrial Relations, and BA in Applied Social Science. Describes dynamics of family.

[37:32] Describes leaving home using involvement in Trade Union as Secretary of the Women's Committee and project running hostel for women workers of electronic industry. Story about fallout with father. Describes involvement with Trade Union, discussions with uncle.

[41:17] Training funded by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung at The Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (LO) school, Sørmarka, Norway and first introduction to Karl Marx. Discusses reading and relevance of Marxism today. Mentions Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC). Unionist tip for negotiating.

[45:22] Describes trip to Norway, first time abroad, carrying Malaysian food products. Impressions of foreign country and reflections on learning and passing on knowledge. Mentions T.Pathma, MTUC Chairperson and effective emphasis on issuing public statements about women workers every week.

[48:47] Describes involvement in Joint Action Group (JAG) with Malaysian "returnees" knowledgeable on world conferences and issue of Violence Against Women. Mentions Cecilia Ng as gathering different groups dealing with issue – University Women Graduates Association, Women's Aid Organization (WAO), The Selangor Consumers Association (SCA), Federation of Women Lawyers (FOWL), and MTUC Women's Section, to create JAG in 1980s.

[51:35] Attributes mother's focus on women's independence on violence experienced from mother-in-law. Story about grandmother as family matriarch not allowing BY and siblings to call their mother 'mother'. Own influence coming from trade union training on activism for women workers and involvement as only woman in Chemical Workers Union. Appointment to MTUC Women's Section as start of activism in Women's Rights.

[55:17] Regard from worker's perspective, laws that should protect women, fighting for maternity rights since 1980s. Discusses compromises and restrictions of work structure to union membership and ethics of role in Human Resources (HR). Mentions working for Malaysian Oxygen Berhad (MOX).

[1:01:25] Explanation of Chinese names and meaning, story behind English naming, Betty, ancestral naming by generation, boy's names and meanings.

[1:07:03] Describes learning about feminism on association with JAG and AWAM and slow shift to rights-based thinking. Discusses the need to reach understanding through personal journey. Mentions 'Feminism and the Women's Movement in Malaysia: An Unsung Revolution' by Maznah, Ng, and Tan. Mentions Mills & Boon romances.

[1:10:30] Describes first focus on Sexual Harassment, process of drafting bill. Mentions Women's Centre for Change. Domestic Violence Act, campaign, draft,

complications in seeking criminal and civil domestic violence law applying to both Muslims and non-Muslims. Mentions Deputy Minister of National Unity, Datuk Alex Lee and necessary negotiations, attachment to Penal Code, hard to accommodate mental abuse cases. Discusses importance of services in drawing attention to forms of violence and gaps in system. Describes round table meetings with Ministry of Welfare and National Unity, acknowledgement of advice on gender and subsequent training of Ministry of Women, illustrating links between discrimination and imbalance of power using United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

[1:17:52] Describes first impressions of women's collective work. Mentions working with the Red Crescent, story about community praise for activity dispelling family's concern for BY's safety. Comments on religion as first challenge in work, promoting self-censorship. Gives example of managing beef and pork presented at weddings with Hindu and Muslim guests, and respect for no-beef observation in own home.

[1:23:57] Discusses fear as barrier to goals, 'Black 505' post-election rallies, May 2013 and use of fear, laws on peaceful assembly. Discusses society as root cause of all violence and opportunity provided when giving talks, regardless of political leaning of audience because main drive is advancement of women.

[1:29:04] Describes work with male groups, importance of reaching one man over 10,000 women, difficulty of working with different levels of understanding of feminism. Sees key area of contribution through services. Mentions One Stop Crisis Centre (OSCC), Dr Mary Cardosa, Dr Abu Hasan, AWAM instrumental in creation of services for women facing violence in all hospitals. Discusses ongoing work to train service providers in gender sensitivity, doctors, nurses, police officers nationwide. Mentions SUHAKAM. Remarks that achievement will be in sensitization of service providers and raising awareness of sexual harassment.

[1:33:27] Describes placement as trainee volunteer in Psychiatric Department, Klang Hospital during study, and visit to Sexual Assault Center, Ottawa, Canada, basis for setting up counselling unit at AWAM, rights-based focus to empower women beyond dealing with immediate issue.[Pause]

## **Track 2 [duration: 48:02] [Session one: 28 May 2013]**

[00:00] Discusses progression of work on Violence Against Women, patriarchy at root of inequality and control, amendment of Constitution, 2001 to prohibit gender based discrimination after CEDAW. Describes various articles and Sharia law. Remarks on rapid change in Women's Ministry means women trained do not remain in position to make difference.

[5:01] Describes conflicting approaches to issue of violence, Women's Ministry campaign 'Waves' Women Against Violence, and international campaign VAW, Violence Against Women, denoting that everybody's agenda. Remarks on self-promoting focus of previous Minister for Women. Describes succeeding Minister in post for one year as progressive, attempting to introduce sex education. Discusses non-holistic approach to sex education in Malaysia and development of manual for students collaboration with LPPKN, Population Board, AWAM and WAO,

repackaged as 'Healthy Lifestyle' before implementation. Describes AWAM's journey to contextualize violence and talk about women's rights as human rights. Involvement with Universal Periodic Review and story about justifying presence.

[12:26] Describes beginnings when all volunteers, meeting in each other's homes and progression in buildings and people, current breakdown of staff and volunteers. Broadening of focus, gender equity and social, economic and cultural impact, and since 2009 ethnicity and religion. Discusses circumstantial focus on Islam but applicable to all religions. Developing manual for understanding impact of religion on women. Discusses status of women as indicating marker of whole society. Remarks on generation gap in understanding violence against women. Discusses amendment of laws to be Sharia compliant, case of gender sensitivity working against women. Mentions Zainah Anwar and Family Law. Discusses Muslim women as most oppressed of all religions.

[19:21] Describes AWAM's strict funding principles.

[21:46] Defines largest setback as membership, discusses responsibility of commitment. Describes current membership and invisibility of leadership in collective. Discusses society's socialization to expect hierarchy.

[26:43] Mentions project, BY heading Gender Violence team, and work set up.

[28:08] Discusses Women's Learning Partnership (WLP) in Malaysia. Mentions Sisters in Islam and Women's Development Collective (WDC) and translation of 'Leading To Choices' manual into Bahasa. Mentions Persatuan Kesedaran Komuniti Selangor (EMPOWER). Describes partnership with WLP and understanding of training as advocacy tool. Broadening of AWAM strategy to incorporate political participation, first successful example of Penang. Mentions Chong Eng.

[35:32] Discusses balancing strategy with relationship and budgeting commitments. Mentions The Asian-Pacific Resource & Research Centre for Women (ARROW). Describes training and use of 'Leading to Choices' as core base adapted. Remarks on manuals as greatest impact of WLP. Mentions Asma Khader and Lina Abou Habib.

[41:07] Describes AWAM's counselling services and development of programme to incorporate feminist perspective, rights perspective and evolution to empower women. Remarks on three-fold return of personal investment.

[44:49] Describes aim and vision as related to the woman as human being with choices, not imposing goals. Comments on radio programme and callers, patriarchal nature of society.