

We Shall Overcome: Remembering Irene Fernandez

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Media Statement, 3 April 2014

Persatuan Kesedaran Komuniti Selangor (EMPOWER) is deeply saddened by the passing of Irene Fernandez. Many of us knew her as a comrade and friend, stretching back years to the beginnings of our lives as activists and human rights defenders.

Irene Fernandez has had a long and vibrant engagement with human rights since the 1970s. She worked tirelessly for the rights of people whose causes were unpopular even among more sympathetic Malaysians: migrant workers, domestic workers, sex workers, and people living with HIV. She was there at the birth of the women's movement in Malaysia in the 1980s and became a founder member of All Women's Action Society (AWAM) as well as Women's Development Collective. EMPOWER and Tenaganita, under her direction, collaborated on a one-year project in 2010. We were looking forward to many more such collaborations with Irene before her unexpected passing.

Irene was a hero to many for her deep commitment to her principles. She could be stern and unyielding, but these were qualities that served her well in fighting against relentless State persecution. Neither the 13-year criminal trial nor the 2012 sedition case succeeded in breaking her will. EMPOWER regrets that should her harassers be one day brought to account for their actions, she did not live to witness it.

We must believe, as she did, that the struggle to reaffirm our democratic rights is universal. It is our right and our responsibility to stand up for justice and equality. No human being is unimportant, no matter the gender, ethnicity, wealth, or social status. In carrying her legacy to the future, we must find in ourselves the courage she showed in standing up to those who deny the common humanity of our brothers and sisters.

EMPOWER wishes her family strength and comfort in this time of grief.



Irene Fernandez [in purple, fourth from the right] with the Joint Action Group for Gender Equality — of which Tenaganita is a member — at the UN Malaysia Awards 2013.