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Is this controversial young activist the future of Malaysian politics?

By Elena Koshy - August 11, 2024 @ 10:00am



There's no stopping Ain Husniza Saiful Nizam. Pix by Elena Koshy.

"I WANT to be prime minister one day!" she quips with a joyful laugh, but it's not as far-fetched as it might sound. Ain Husniza Saiful Nizam has always been driven by a desire to make a difference, and what better way to create meaningful impact than by leading a nation?

From a young age, Ain's aspirations have been fuelled by a passion for change and a vision for a better future. Her ambition isn't just about holding a title; it's about being in a position where she can enact real, positive change and inspire others to dream big and work towards a brighter tomorrow.

"I just want to make a difference," she says simply.

Adjusting her oversized spectacles on her pert nose, the 20-year-old exudes wisdom beyond her years. "I've been catapulted into working with children's and women's rights. Right now, I'm with the Child's Rights Innovation Fund, a group that disburses money and support to help youth activists and their allies," she explains.

Adding, she shares: "I'm also involved with We Are Purposeful, a global group based in Africa that supports girls' activism. We believe another world is possible and is already being built through the ways girls are organising, imagining and pushing for freedom."

When Ain mentions being "catapulted", she's referring to the pivotal moment in 2021 when she drew national attention by exposing her teacher's trivialisation of rape. At just

17, Ain found herself thrust into the spotlight, igniting a powerful online movement with her #MakeSchoolsASafePlace campaign.

This movement shed light on the widespread sexual harassment faced by students, particularly girls, in Malaysian schools. Her courageous actions not only highlighted a critical issue but also sparked a nationwide conversation on the need for safer educational environments.

The fight didn't simply end there. The unflappable youth is continuing to speak her mind and put her efforts into shining the light on issues affecting young people here.

As a Malaysian representative on international foundations, she emphasises the importance of bringing attention to the issues faced by youths — especially young girls — in this region. "There's not much being highlighted, or at least not enough. We don't really talk about what's happening here — children's rights, undocumented children unable to obtain citizenship through their mothers, mental health and much more."



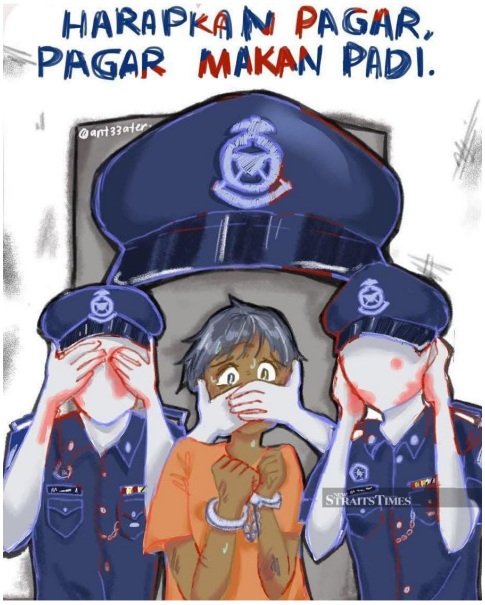
Using art to tell a story.

She's determined to raise awareness and take action. "How can we advocate in creative ways?" Ain muses, adding: "Most of my work involves creating content to raise political awareness. When I launched the #MakeSchoolsASafePlace campaign, I used TikTok and content production to get the message out."

It's very Gen Z, I comment and she nods, chuckling.

"With social media platforms, there's no need to be on the ground anymore. People think they need to be physically present to make changes, but that's no longer the case," Ain explains.

Continuing, she explains: "Digital activism allows us to reach a wider audience, mobilise support and create impactful campaigns from anywhere. It's a powerful tool for advocacy and raising awareness on a global scale."



Ain's artwork for SUARAM, dedicated to cases of death in custody.

Most of her work involves using videos and art for engagement. Recently, she collaborated with NobleDr, a NGO non-governmental organisation focused on marginalised communities, to storyboard and create artwork for a mental health comic aimed at educating students.

Another upcoming project is called #YouthandYourRights, an illustrative workbook that teaches young people about sexual education. "It's very interactive," she shares excitedly. "There's a lot of activities to get young people talking. We're hoping to launch it next year."

Art, videos, content production — Ain's personal arsenal of digital activism has paved her path to becoming a social activist. However, it's been a tumultuous journey for the young woman who has battled against seemingly insurmountable obstacles at every turn.

DIFFICULT BEGINNING



Proudly posing with her parents and brother after graduating A levels.

"I don't come from a well-off family," she admits without hesitation. The struggle to make ends meet saw her family moving from place to place until they finally settled in Puncak Alam, Kuala Selangor. "It was really, really hard," she reflects.

Her educational journey began in Johor Baru, took her to Melaka and eventually, brought her to Shah Alam. "But when my family hit a rough patch, I had to leave school," she says quietly. "It's not something I often talk about, but it had a big impact on me."

As the eldest of four siblings, Ain stayed home to support her parents. In those difficult years, she found refuge in books, borrowing up to 20 at a time using her brother's library card. "I'd devour them all within a week," she recalls proudly.

She pleaded with her parents to enrol her back in school and eventually, she managed to return in Form 3. "It was incredibly difficult," she confides, adding: "I didn't have my UPSR results, so they made me promise not to be a 'difficult' student because they weren't sure about my background."

Placed in the last class, Ain defied expectations by excelling in her first exams and surprising everyone with her remarkable performance.

"How did you do that?" I ask.

"All those books at the library!" she retorts, smiling.

She loved being a student. "It wasn't just about the lessons themselves," she reflects. "I think what I really enjoyed was the process of learning. It's not so much about the content, but more about how your attitude towards learning and being open to new experiences are shaped. I think that made it easier for me to learn at school."

TURNING POINT



Despite facing numerous challenges, the courageous 17-year-old had the chance to meet with then Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakub to talk about her #MakeSchoolASaferPlace campaign.

Ain thrived in school. "I loved English, poetry and things like that. I was quite the teacher's pet!" she shares wistfully. But the carefree years would slowly come to a grinding halt.

According to reports, the then-17-year-old made headlines after posting her experience on during a school lesson involving a male teacher who allegedly made a rape joke while in the presence of his students. Her candid account on a Tik Tok video resonated with many, and the video quickly went viral, drawing widespread attention to the issue and sparking discussions about the prevalence of such behaviour in educational institutions.

She declines to elaborate about the incident that made national news, except to tell me: "It was a confusing time. I received a warning letter from the school and was told not to attend classes for my safety. Police reports were filed."

She grows quiet.

"Everyone was questioning me as if I were a liar," she recalls. "The police asked my classmates for their opinions and of course, most of the boys laughed it off. Since there were mostly boys in the class that day, the majority said they didn't think it was wrong."

Inappropriate jokes and a dismissive attitude towards such behaviour encouraged a classmate to escalate things by posting a violent sexual fantasy about Ain and several of her female classmates online. "I felt so violated. This was a friend I spoke to almost every day at school and to think he could do something so vile was horrifying," she recounts. "I confronted him and he apologised."

From being the centre of unwanted attention, dealing with the media maelstrom and being questioned by the police, to trying to navigate her studies (she was sitting for her

SPM), it was distressing for her and her family. Ain and her family also had to contend with legal battles as well.



With political cartoonist Zunar, whom she credits as both her mentor and one of her staunchest supporters.

"I was a victim and I was just a minor, yet I wasn't protected — neither by the law, the police, nor the school," she stresses. "If I couldn't get the protection I needed, what about other young girls who might go through even more severe situations? Who's going to stand up for them and ensure their safety?" she reflects, her voice thick with emotion.

Ain went on to launch the #MakeSchoolASaferPlace social movement to shine a spotlight on rape culture in schools. Through this broader initiative, other students have bravely shared their own experiences, contributing to a growing dialogue about the need for systemic change.



Ain found unwavering support in her father.

The movement has garnered significant international attention, with coverage by major media outlets, including BBC, Al-Jazeera and Reuters, highlighting the urgent need for reforms to ensure safer educational environments.

Several months after the initial incident, she and her family had to move to a new area after facing social ostracisation as a result of her activism.

Her parents, she tells me, endured a lot during this period. "When this first happened, they asked me if I was truly ready for everything that was about to unfold. They questioned whether I was prepared to take on such a significant responsibility and fight for what's right," Ain recounts. "I told my dad that I wasn't sure if I was ready or capable, but I knew it was something that had to be done."

RISE OF AN ACTIVIST



Ain with Wan Azliana Wan Adnan, founder and president of ASWA, a nonprofit organisation representing women's voices.

Despite the chaos, she excelled in her studies and achieved outstanding results in her SPM. "I resumed school only in Form 3, and still managed to secure 7 As," Ain shares proudly, adding: "It was important to me to succeed. With people already trying to paint me as a problem student and troublemaker, I needed to prove them wrong."

She went on to secure a scholarship for her A-levels and, building on her success, is now preparing to start her degree in Social Administration at Universiti Malaya. "My future plans are centred on empowering education and raising awareness, with a particular focus on children's and women's rights," she explains.



Ain's artwork for SUARAM, dedicated to cases of death in custody.

Her efforts in raising awareness and standing up for what was right garnered significant support from many people. "I never intended to become an activist," she admits. "But I was taken aback when people started referring to me as a student activist. It felt like this new label unexpectedly propelled me into the world of activism."

Ain was also offered the award-winning Global Young Changemakers (GYC) Programme, through which she explains that the programme has assisted her in clarifying her goals regarding how she can actualise her intent to make sexual health education a more comprehensive and effective subject.



In 2022, Ain was invited by the European Union Delegation to discuss her efforts with the #MakeSchoolASaferPlace campaign.

In 2021, Ain was selected as one of seven representatives from the East Asia and Pacific region to speak at the Inspire Conference organised by the United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef). She joined Dr Najat Maalla M'jid, the Special Representative

of the United Nations Secretary-General, as a panellist, alongside six other distinguished speakers.

There's no stopping this diminutive dynamo.

Her desire to make a difference, she shares, has been present since a very young age. "I remember crying when I was just 7, watching a video of climate change activist Greta Thunberg," she recalls.

She pauses, before reflecting: "I was struck by how many enormous problems there are in the world and how small we can feel in the face of them. Greta was speaking about major global issues that seemed so distant and beyond my reach. At that time, I felt powerless. Now I have some semblance of power to push those in power to take meaningful action and make a difference."



In 2021, Ain received the Civil Rights Award from the Kuala Lumpur & Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall for making significant strides in social justice in Malaysia.

She envisions a future in politics as a way to drive policy changes and make a meaningful impact. "I don't want to enter politics to chase power or fame," she says thoughtfully. "My goal is to first establish a stable foundation for myself. When I'm in a position where I can make a difference, I'll be able to accomplish things that the 7-year-old or even the 17-year-old version of me could only dream of. My aim is to contribute positively to my country and ensure that my actions can benefit society as a whole."

Ain for prime minister?

Given her track record and unyielding drive for change, it's certainly a possibility worth considering.

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