

THE RADICAL NOTION

A Feminist Journal

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THE RADICAL NOTION was founded in 2020 to create a space for the resurgent wave of feminist thinking and activism. This not-for-profit biannual magazine is run by an all-women collective of radical and socialist feminists. We are committed to the materialist analysis of sex-based oppression, and to challenging the material and symbolic structures of male dominance. This moment is a historic opportunity to deepen and widen the analysis of all aspects of women's political condition, and its foundational role in all systems of extraction and domination. We welcome words and images from women of all nationalities, classes, ethnicities and backgrounds to illuminate the meaning of feminist politics in their lives, and to create a global picture of this political moment. Our current battle, and the social, political and environmental unravellings we see all around us, are, at their root, crises of patriarchy. We want to seize this moment to speak that truth.

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ESPECIALLY THE GIRLS

BY JESS CHUA

“Some of you don’t have your priorities right,” the camp counsellor proclaimed. “Especially the girls.”

What did that even mean?

I was 15 during this small youth camp organized by our Catholic church in Singapore. My surroundings were like a scene from the Theatre of the Absurd. It was profound to coolly observe one of the basic laws of attraction.

One minute, the prettiest girls were wrangling all the boys’ attention—the top girl parading her ample chest through a fuzzy knit pink tank top, with pillowy lips, a flawless complexion, and freshly cut and highlighted hair on full display. To the invisible girls, this show of power was so near and yet so far. Would we ever get the chance to wield this glamour?

The next minute, all of us girls (invisible or not) were chastised for having questionable morals.

The task at hand? We’d been given a seemingly innocuous assignment in the form of a worksheet that asked us to rank a list of sins, from most to least severe. I don’t recall what I listed as the greatest sin, but I distinctly remember writing down ‘birth control’ as the least. I quickly glanced at my gal pal’s worksheet and saw that she’d placed birth control on the same line.

I remember the look in the counsellor’s eyes: slightly forlorn, frustrated, perplexed, and deeply disappointed. As my mom’s friend—a fiery Irish nun—would say, ‘What do these male leaders know?’ They weren’t the ones getting periods, getting pregnant, or having to experience childbirth.

There were other moments during that camp which made me deeply uncomfortable with the different ways men and women were allowed to behave. A catechism classmate from an elite school laughed out loud at a suction abortion photo because it reminded him of a plate of minced meat. I didn’t know whether to report him or slap him across the face, and I was worried about repercussions if I did, so I said nothing.

It wasn’t the first or last time that I didn’t stand up for myself

when I should have, and that’s exactly the type of behaviour that institutionalized patriarchy breeds and encourages. I could sense its violence with the attempt to crush the wild feminine in me, the sacred energy and power within a feminine body and soul. I was supposed to be nothing more than an unseen, unheard vessel. It made me aware of one of the institution’s core tenets—that it’s ‘good’ to be quiet and complicit, and ‘bad’ to go against the grain and cause trouble.

There were the skater boys who bragged about a girl from a notorious convent school freely giving them blowjobs. Was any of it true? It didn’t matter as I still felt steadily erased, listening to this group that basked in the warm glow of the Virgin Mary painting hanging on the wall behind them.

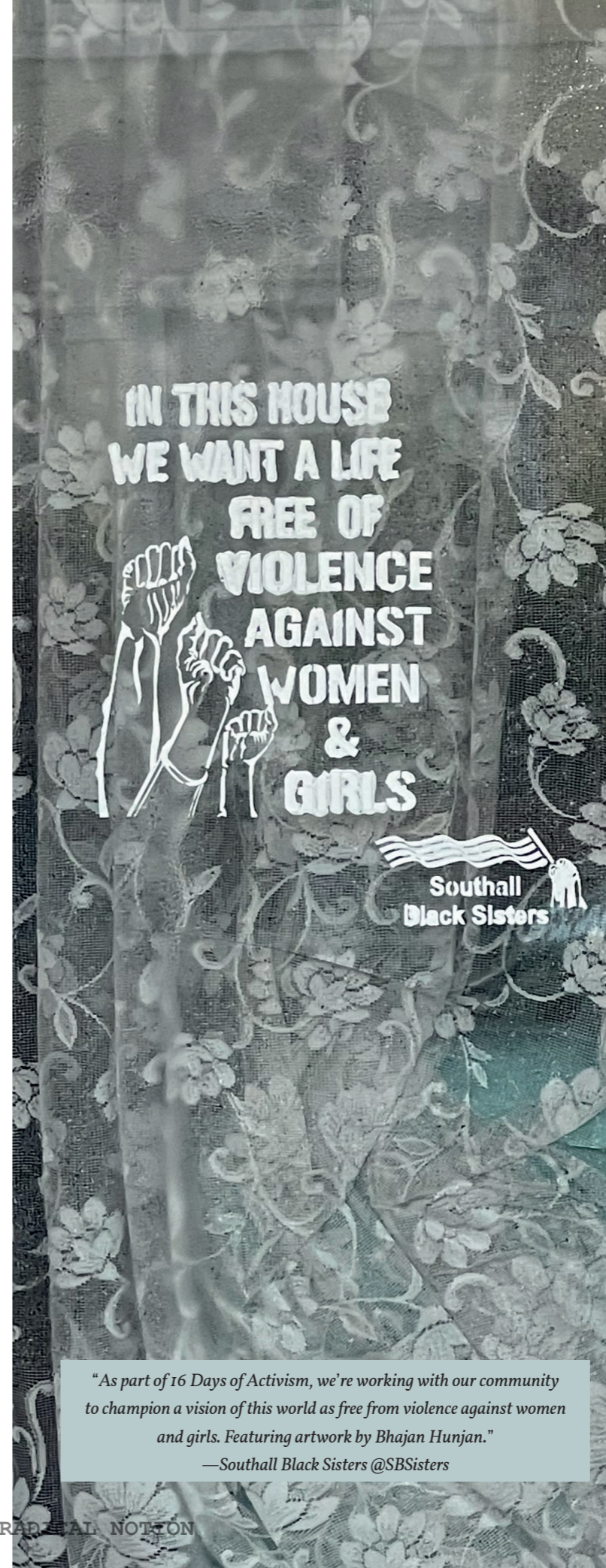
I stared at the ceiling when I went to bed that night. My 15-year-old self couldn’t fathom why taking birth control was a sin if I had no intention of getting pregnant. It’d take me another 15 years to understand the concept of bodily autonomy. For decades, I’d been taught that a woman should simply give birth and give an unwanted baby up for adoption. But I instinctively knew that forced pregnancy or forced motherhood was akin to a murder of the self. Anti-abortionists are hell-bent on saving the life of the unborn. What about the body carrying the foetus? Did that body waive away all rights to their own mind or choices from the moment they had intercourse?

“It’s a matter of Faith,” I was told repeatedly when I brought up hard topics. “Don’t ask questions.”

I remember the silent hush, the complete evaporation of conversations, in person or digitally, whenever an uncomfortable subject was broached. What was so bad about sex, and women in particular having sex? Mixed messages and dichotomies about doing it right versus doing it wrong abounded everywhere: in the media, at school, amongst friends, amongst adults. There was always a strong undercurrent of its power, how it was something dangerous or controlled by others. It seemed like women couldn’t be trusted with their own sexuality and sex lives. I had an insatiable desire and curiosity to know more.

I eventually learned about some very real potential horrors related to pregnancy and childbirth. Third-degree lacerations, incontinence, tooth and hair loss, prolapse. No one could guarantee the mental health or wellbeing of a newborn, and the mother’s health always seemed to be an afterthought.

Why were these subjects always shrouded in an air of mystery or disdain? I wasn’t questioning to be a troublemaker—I was



“As part of 16 Days of Activism, we’re working with our community to champion a vision of this world as free from violence against women and girls. Featuring artwork by Bhajan Hunjan.”
—Southall Black Sisters @SBSisters

questioning to try and make it make sense. It was terrifying to realize that many people weren’t aware of risks associated with maternal and foetal complications. Being well-informed is vital for women to make the right choices for themselves and be thoughtful about their sexual and reproductive health.

This questioning during my teens was really about freedom. I couldn’t speak for others, but I couldn’t willingly be part of a belief system that made me feel subjugated. Beyond the muddied territory of morals, ethics, religious beliefs, and defining when life starts, it was about the very basic need to feel like my rights as a human were being respected.

There’s a reason if something doesn’t feel right deep down inside.

After several years of wandering in the metaphorical wilderness, I slowly pieced together all these different concepts that weren’t talked about or mentioned during my growing-up years: bodily autonomy, patriarchy, internalized misogyny, gender inequality, gender bias, the motherhood penalty.

Patriarchy is reinforced to keep women in submission to male authority. Women’s rights, diverse experiences, and wisdom are oppressed to stick to the status quo. It’s unfair to take away women’s ability to make choices that matter to them, that are vital for their physical and mental wellbeing.

All of us deserve to have agency over our own lives and how we choose to live, who we love, whether we choose to reproduce or become parents.

We deserve to be treated with decency and dignity when it involves our health.

We deserve to know we’re more than our reproductive anatomy.

We deserve to know that our bodies should belong to us.

Especially the girls.

Jess Chua is an award-winning essayist and sketch artist. Her creative writing has appeared in Musepaper, Mystery Tribune, and a microfiction anthology by Vine Leaves Press. Her interests include healthy cooking, yoga, and spending time with her pets. She’s currently working on some essays and a couple of chapbooks. Her website is www.jesschua.com.