

Anti-racist change needs solidarity

From Joan Chun

USA/Cambodia - The rhetoric in the Corona crisis has again highlighted parallels between anti-Asian and anti-black racism. As a consequence, many groups began to show solidarity and unite their struggles, for example the Cambodian American Literary Arts Association

The alarm signal for more solidarity among each other was heard loud and clear this year. While the world is fighting a global pandemic, many of us are still involved in the fight against racial discrimination. With masks put on and handwritten posters or signs panned high in the air, communities from around the world, including those from the Cambodian diaspora, are choosing to stand together in solidarity. The adrenaline that is released and sloshes through the streets is literally tangible.

Anti-Asian racism during the Corona pandemic

Getting involved and participating in the current social movements requires a lot of courage, sacrifice and the conscious taking of risks. At the beginning of the pandemic and due to increased racist rhetoric, Asian Americans* were repeatedly attacked. People with Asian roots served as targets and became victims of hateful acts. Anti-racist movements, which already existed before, wanted to counter this and make clear that Asians - contrary to what is often claimed - are not a virus.

The tension was already high. When George Floyd was murdered on May 25, 2020, the anti-racist movement grew once again, as the demonstrators were now also fighting against the brutality of the police. Many people from the Cambodian diaspora in America stood up alongside the black population to protest against these injustices. However, this did not always happen without criticism from members of our own community. "You are not black. Why are you committed to this?" was often said. Our answer is: "The lives of Cambodians are important. But all lives are equally important."

Connecting struggles against discrimination

However, we were often told that we should first help our own community. These reactions to the Black Lives Matter Movement (BLM) were sometimes very discouraging. But they did not stop those who understand that the liberation of Asian Americans and African Americans are interrelated from demonstrating further. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "No one is free until we are all free. Would the Cambodian diaspora in the United States have the same freedoms without the sacrifices that the black community has made throughout history and without the civil rights movement? We must remember those who paved the way for us to protect our own human rights long before we could.

Another aspect of the debate is that we need to be clear about the prejudices we have been taught. The moment some of us looked back on our own upbringing, many of us realized that anti-black racism had been taught to us at a very young age. People looked down on darker skin, and lighter skin was admired. It became clear that exactly this is part of the problem. In order to build a stronger community and become allies in the fight against racism, we must acknowledge the problem and actively unlearn the toxic narratives we have been taught. To do this, we must be able to communicate with each other and be willing to learn new things.

Becoming aware of language to unlearn racism

The Cambodian American Literary Arts Association (CALAA) has taken active steps to support and promote discussion about anti-black racism and the Black Lives Matter movement. Thanks to the dedication and leadership of CALAA's Executive Director, Lena Sarunn, the association began working

with community partners* in Massachusetts and Minnesota to develop the Black Lives Matter Translation Project. The first step that people in our community can take is to learn the various words and phrases needed to communicate and have meaningful conversations about racism and anti-black discrimination. The Black Lives Matter Translation Project offers Khmer and English words and phrases with explanatory audio tracks in Khmer to aid in these conversations. There is also the possibility of a literal translation into English, as it is sometimes difficult to translate word for word. For example, the literal translation of Black lives matter in Khmer is: Black lives are just as important.

Users can also learn what terms such as 'racism', 'white privilege' and 'allyship' mean and how they are pronounced. The hope of CALAA is that this tool can have a useful effect, whether in conversations with family, friends or other acquaintances. By defining one word at a time, we can bring about positive, desirable changes for a better, anti-racist future.

Important words and phrases on the subject in Khmer can be found at <https://www.calaalowell.org/black-lives-matter-translations>.

Sharing common diaspora experiences

In addition, CALAA collected various perspectives from the Cambodian diaspora throughout the country on the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM) and compiled them in a publication <https://southeastasiaglobe.com/khmer-diaspora-black-lives-matter-movement/>. The main goal of this publication is to make the topic better known in Southeast Asia. If you have the opportunity to write down how you feel and exchange these thoughts, it is an effective way to make connections with each other. As the Cambodian-American poet Sabrina Im notes as part of her view of the BLM: "We are all experiencing a pandemic and a historical break. But if our Southeast Asian communities can come together, united against injustice, I hope that we all remember what hope and collective solidarity mean".

What do solidarity and allyship look like in times like these? Much of it consists of actively listening to thought leaders of black movements and people in black communities. This form of solidarity highlights black writers, artists and creative people. It uses your power as a consumer to support businesses run by black people. It also strengthens their political voice and goes to the ballot box to vote for those who condemn racism.

Changing educational patterns to create community

Another important aspect is understanding how closely our communities are intertwined. An African proverb says: "It takes a village to raise a child." All children, even those with a bicultural or multicultural background, need to know that we all stand by each other and that they are accepted in all spaces. No matter if they see themselves as Cambodian, black or black Cambodians*.

Racism will not disappear overnight. We can protest, we can write articles, we can donate. But most importantly, we must always stand together in solidarity so that a real anti-racist change can take place in our near future and for future generations.