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MALAYSIAN WOMEN GETTING MORE RECOGNITION THIS YEAR

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KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysian women are continuing to make their presence felt in all spheres of the nation's life.

Gone are the days when they were regarded as "belonging to the home" to merely care for the husband and family.

Though they still play the key role in the carrying out their traditional duties as wives and mothers, their involvement in various national activities is being given due recognition and acknowledgement by the Government and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs).

This is evident from the appointment of women to key posts in the public sector. One example is the appointment of ACP Koraiza Abdullah, 52, as Georgetown OCPD in Penang last August, making her the first woman to hold such a high ranking post in the 189-year-old history of the Royal Malaysian Police Force.

Women, her appointment implies, can also handle the tough and challenging job of battling crime.

Indirectly, the appointment of Koraiza, born to a police officer in Alor Gajah, Melaka, has also given women officers the impetus to strive for high posts in the police force.

But one is tempted to ask why it took nearly two centuries for a woman officer to become an OCPD and whether there were no capable ones previously.

The answer, in the words of Deputy Director of Management (Administration) SAC II Syed Abdul Rahman, was that the appointment was made based on the outstanding performance by Koraiza since joining as an officer in 1961.

He said the force gave equal opportunities to all its personnel including women, but the problem was finding suitable candidates for the important post of OCPD.

As OCPD Koraiza has 70 officers and 1275 other ranks under her charge with the task of stamping out illegal lotteries, secret societies, dadah, and deaths on the road besides the other common crimes.

Perhaps dedicated women police officers are more content with the added roles as wife and mother, instead of being serious career women.

Another woman who is often in the limelight these days is Marina Mahathir for her involvement in social activities, especially the anti-AIDS programme.

The daughter of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, Marina has won admiration from NGOs, both locally and overseas, for her relentless contributions to the AIDS awareness campaigns.

On the political front, the role played by women has long won recognition with their appointments as Ministers or Deputy Ministers, Parliamentary Secretaries and Supreme Council members of their respective parties.

A significant development was in UMNO when a veteran women leader of 12 years, Rafidah Aziz, lost the Wanita top post to Datuk Siti Zaharah Sulaiman in the recent party elections.

Is this ouster of Rafidah an indication of the changes that women are seeking? The reply by Siti Zaharah who is Deputy Health minister is that "women need a change in direction for a better future and it is the responsibility of the Wanita head to lead the way."

According to her, the movement will be given a "jolt in the arm" to

meet the new challenges facing the nation.

In the past, she said, the directions for Wanita UMNO had been vague making it difficult to fulfil the needs and aspirations of members in particular and women in general.

Another challenge facing women is to ensure that their rights and welfare continue to be protected and given due attention. In this context, the government is leading the way by reviewing all laws that discriminate against women.

As for those under the Hukum Syarak or Islamic laws, especially the one pertaining to the age of consent, they are being studied.

Another testimony of the changes to protect women was the directive issued by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim last August, calling for a review of the enforcement of Islamic laws in Mahkamah Syariah. What was most significant was that he made the announcement during Hari Wanita celebrations.

The controversial topic has been discussed for a very long time without firm action though women have been saying that the issue of divorce and maintenance has not been favourable to them.

Among their common grouses against the Syariah Court is that they have to wait a long time to get justice. They also found the treatment unfair and the decisions usually in favour of the men.

The government's efforts to seriously review these problems faced by Muslim women, especially divorcees without trial and failure to get maintenance allowance, are therefore considered timely.

Although Malaysia can be proud of the practice of Islamic laws, there will be no meaning if they fall short in justice to women.

Malaysian women on the whole can be proud of their involvement in various fields but there is still room for further progress.

Admittedly, many hold high posts but when counted against the men their involvement in key decision-making portfolios is still lacking. Women leaders have to address this matter seriously, and quickly too, as the gap can only widen if allowed to continue. -- Bernama

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