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Long and winding road to achieve gender equality

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IN these days of so much talk about the global perspective, lessons are learnt from far and near. Equally instructive is the attitude of some, including neighbours, that they are smart alec city slickers and that Malaysians are country hicks or village yokels.

In contrast are constructive efforts by others to promote what has been termed by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamed as "smart partnership" which brings mutual benefits. Effected at various levels they include measures to heighten gender equity/equality awareness.

Such terms on equality of status were discussed at length in the Conference on Women in September 1995 in Beijing which was attended by representatives from 186 countries, United Nations-agencies and non-governmental organisations. In addition was the NGO-organised forum. Some 50,000 participated in both meetings, thus setting a new record in the history of conferences sponsored by the world organisation. It was a measure of the insistent demand from women the world for equality.

Agreed then was that decisions in all spheres of society shall have a gender equality perspective. Also agreed was that they be implemented "in different ways for different people because of the specific religious and cultural features of a country".

That the collective decision is not easy to implement has again been attested by warnings such as those sounded earlier this week by Libyan President Muammar Gaddafi who spoke on the danger of theocratic rule for women.

Speaking in a ceremony to mark the declaration of the rights of women in his country, Gaddafi spoke about women being the very first victims of the Taliban rule in Afghanistan. Women have been arrested, executed and barred from work and education under the pretext that they were against religion and morals. "Any political system, which is based on religion or has justified being in power with religion, is the most dangerous system for women's freedom".

Surely noted by women is that the Beijing conference was the fourth organised by the UN. The first was in 1975 in Mexico City after which the Declaration for Women was proclaimed. The second was in 1980 after announcements a year earlier of a Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. The third in 1985 in Nairobi, Kenya, gave birth to a Programme of Action up to the year 2000.

Also borne in mind is that in some Muslim countries, women do not have the right to vote or enjoy equal status with men in places of work. They are at a disadvantage too in divorce cases

In socio-conservative societies such as Malaysia, women entrepreneurs for instance, face a host of problems. These then were the topics of discussions in two seminars jointly organised by the Canadian International Development Agency and the Asian Institute for Development Communication: the first in Sarawak last month and the second earlier this month in Malacca on "Development of Communication Skills for Enhancing Women's Entrepreneurship".

On an encouraging note, therefore, were the opening remarks by Cida director Victoria Sutherland who touched on Dr Mahathir's "smart partnership" concept when she spoke on successes attained by women in Canada.

Highlighted was the increasingly dominant role of women in the country's

business scene. Quote: "More than 700,000 companies in Canada are led by women and they provide jobs for 1.7 million workers. Women-led firms are providing more jobs than the top 100 Canadian companies combined. Women own and operate 30.3 per cent of all Canadian companies. This number of women-led companies is increasing, twice as fast as the average, 19.5 per cent versus 8.7 per cent. Employment in companies led by women has grown by 13 per cent, well above the national average of 3 per cent."

These achievements provide the impetus for Cida to support women's groups in other countries. For Malaysia, the aim has been to support Malaysian women's integration into economic development through the Women's Initiatives Fund. Through aid to women's business organisations and linkages between Canadian and Malaysian institutions, "gender equity awareness", as Sutherland puts it, is heightened.

Undoubtedly helping to firm such links is that over 75,000 Malaysians students have studied in Canada over the years. Admission that Malaysian women entrepreneurs face problems came from Deputy Transport Minister Datuk Mohamed Ali Rustam when speaking at the Malacca seminar. They include the inability of most of them to obtain access to loans and aid from banks and establish linkages with large corporate organisations.

Rustam suggested the formation of a National Women's Business Development Centre to provide business information, referral and procurement assistance for women entrepreneurs. Also recommended was a Women's Association for Self-Employment.

Underlined was the need for women entrepreneurs to be skillful in communication and be able to master commercial languages in both speech and writing.

Most of the participants in the two seminars were Malays and in the one organised in Sarawak almost every district was represented. As a participant later remarked: "On the one hand, we face religious-minded persons who say we shouldn't be going out, much less venture into business."

And another chipped in: "On the other hand, we face government and bank officers, all males, who do not believe we can make it. I applied for a computer which should have been approved in just one month. But the approval came some six months later."

Certain attitudes and prejudices entrenched in the psyche of society die hard, and the fight for gender equality and equity must be sustained. Statistics show that 50 per cent of the population of many countries are women. Denying their contributions means robbing a country of half its potential.

Surely Malaysia isn't doing that.

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