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A good way to better appreciate the simpler things in life

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FIRED by the need to serve, non-governmental organisations have always made themselves very accessible to the community.

Those who work specifically with and for women, have been instrumental in championing many women's issues.

Now, as the country grapples with an ailing economy, who better to persuade housewives to make prudent decisions on daily household spending, than our network of women NGOs?

In recognition of this, the Association of the Wives of Ministers and Deputy Ministers (Bakti) organised a dialogue between women's groups and the Prime Minister, titled "Women and the Current Economic Situation", held at the National Institute of Public Administration in Bukit Kiara on Friday.

During the dialogue, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad gave a lengthy explanation on the current economic problems and clarified issues which many were in the dark about.

Although both the Prime Minister and his audience were in agreement to pursue the common cause of alleviating economic pain through cost-cutting measures, the audience had different expectations. Naturally, some women left the two-and-a-half hour-long dialogue somewhat dissatisfied.

This was mostly because they entered the dialogue, expecting a comprehensive list of steps to be drawn up, rather than just be told that they should form consultative partnerships with their husbands in household and investment matters.

Women are undoubtedly the "guardians of domestic coffers", yet some felt that the issues were relevant only to married women and did not take into account single women, single mothers, nor the myriad other roles that women play in today's Malaysia.

However, the fact that the Prime Minister did not propose a list of guidelines should be appreciated. This indicates that he had enough confidence in his audience to be able to grasp the complexities of the economic situation.

He decided not to tell them exactly what to do, but gave them the whole economic picture, leaving the women themselves to make their own decisions since they know best, the nature of their problems and that faced by their communities.

To answer the question of what lessons should be learned from this economic experience, the Prime Minister stressed the most significant lesson to be learned, was "never to rely on anybody" besides learning to maintain discipline and knowing how to work together.

However, some felt that there were many issues which the audience could have brought up during the dialogue but did not.

For instance, when an economic situation worsens, many know that women are the most vulnerable. In retrenchment agendas, pregnant women are usually the first to go. The elderly and sickly are seldom spared. Men, on the other hand, can still find jobs as drivers or office boys.

Lawyers feel that many will use the economic situation as an excuse not to pay alimony to their ex-wives nor provide for the family - which has already started to happen.

Some feel that women have to become more self-sufficient and learn simple plumbing and electrical jobs so that they will not have to pay someone else to do the job.

Although some see it as untimely to be setting up a business, maybe it is time that resources are pulled together to form viable ventures such as a used baby goods centre.

Baby goods which are quickly outgrown, such as car-seats, toys, books and even clothes can be recycled.

Since everyone will be increasing their consumption of local goods, this gives ample incentive to local producers to create good quality products which will rival imports in cost.

This would be the first step in curbing the problem of being too dependent on "imported goods".

Although tightening the belt on food is widely accepted as an important cost-cutting measure, some women feel that more importantly, the campaign to reduce spending should also include "accessories and non-essentials".

In a way, this situation is a good way of re-examining ourselves and our priorities. Perhaps, we will come to better appreciate the simpler things in life.

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