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Slow but sure progress for women

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WHEN signs of the economic crisis manifested late last year, the Government continued to support the RM50 million fund that helps non-governmental organisations involved in women's development programmes.

When the economy continued to deteriorate this year, one expected a cut in this allocation, but it didn't happen. The latest budget saw the Government pledging another RM50 million for public and private training institutions and women's organisations to conduct industrial-skills and technology-training programmes.

This is considered as one of the best news for Malaysian women. It is an indication of the Government's support of women and its recognition of their contribution to socio-economic development.

Also, it reflects the Government's trust in NGOs and its awareness of their activities. Naturally, women's groups are happy with the "generous fund".

Yet another piece of good news is related to another fund. The Tabung Ehsan Wanita, initiated by Wanita Umno head Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman in March, is specifically for women. It has now been turned into a unit trust, the Amanah Saham Wanita, or Asnita.

Asnita, launched by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in May, recently announced an eight per cent dividend.

More on funding. Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia, an NGO, is offering micro-credit loans to poor single mothers who want to support themselves and their families through business or other income-generating activities.

The Rural Development Ministry is supporting this NGO and Minister Datuk Annuar Musa said it has committed RM500,000 to AIM.

This scheme is timely as single mothers form a sizeable part of the population. An estimated 630,500 single mothers head 16.6 per cent of families.

For battered women, another milestone was achieved. With the enforcement of the Domestic Violence Act in June 1996, more women are now aware of their rights.

The National Unity and Social Development Ministry reported 852 cases of violence, of which 502 have been solved.

In Syariah issues, a uniform text was recently drawn for use nationwide.

Early last year, women's groups came out with a memorandum calling for reform of the Islamic family law and efficient and uniform administration of the Syariah system.

They said problems faced by women have been unresolved for far too long. As a result, mothers are subject to unfair treatment.

An example would be the case of a father who has custody of a child. A mother's visitation rights from a court in a State amounts to naught if the father goes on a holiday to another State where the order is not effective.

Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Abdul Hamid Othman said the text was prepared by the the Malaysian Islamic Development Department and Perak's Sultan Azlan Shah as the Ruler's representative.

The cabinet will review it before it is taken to the Rulers' conference early next year for their consent.

However, there could be a damper to this. State Governments have a choice whether or not to accept the standardised version of Syariah law.

"We will not use force as we believe in introducing things gradually.

I'm sure States which are hesitant to introduce the law will do so after other States have implemented it," Hamid said.

Indeed, while there are positive signs that point towards more just and equal treatment for women, they are slow in coming.

For example, take the Guardianship of Infants Act 1961. Women's groups started campaigning for amendments to the Act, deemed discriminatory towards women, since the 1960s.

Until today, however, only a father can apply for his children's passport, identity cards and school registration. This situation poses problems for the mother, especially when the father is sometimes nowhere to be found.

Only now, three decades later, will the amendments, to give women equal parental rights and thus make them legal guardians of their children, be tabled in Parliament.

National Unity and Social Development Minister Datin Paduka Zaleha Ismail calls this move "timely", in view of the large number of women who are joint breadwinners in the family and the crucial roles they play in bringing up their children

To help women advance in sports, the National Unity and Social Development Ministry, through its Women's Affairs Department, is working with the Women's Sports And Fitness Foundation and the National Archives to set up a database of Malaysian women who have excelled in this area.

The database seeks to inspire other women and with the hope that more women will succeed in sports.

Meanwhile, the All Women's Action Society has called on the private and public sector to formulate a clear policy against sexual harassment in the workplace.

Its manager of campaigns and administration, Zaitun Mohamed Kassim, said the policy was vital to define sexual harassment and to take steps to eliminate it.

She said less than one per cent of companies had a clear policy on sexual harassment. The society launched a video to educate and raise public awareness about sexual harassment.

Another inspirational situation for women involves Aida Melly, who was seeking a divorce because her husband was allegedly beating her. After being asked by her Syariah lawyer to "get a reconciliation with her husband", she took things into her own hands by representing herself.

However, it could be a while before she gets her divorce. After the lower Syariah court granted her the divorce, her husband went to a higher court to appeal against the decision.

She has counter-appealed. It may take longer for her to settle this problem but this is an enlightening story of empowerment, one that could help other women in similar situations.

All in all, it was a slow and arduous process for women to change things for themselves and society. The road to fairness, often peppered with discrimination, is long, but it appears that Malaysian women are making some headway, slowly but surely.

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