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Let's work together to overcome

Fatimah Abu Bakar; Aishah Ali

"WE are all behind you," Puspanita's Sherina Aris assured the Prime Minister at a dialogue on Women and The Current Economic Situation last Friday.

"It seems to me, you're all in front," complimented Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on the women's commitment and show of support. They were representatives of various women's groups, and Bakti (Association of the Wives of Ministers and Deputy Ministers) had organised for them to meet and talk with the Prime Minister.

So for 2 1/2 hours, he stood at the rostrum, and reiterated what he had been saying to them earlier. That "you can all help us (the economy) recover fast or make it deteriorate further. It depends on whether you understand what is happening," he had said and proceeded to explain in detail events in the past six months leading to the present currency problem.

The fact that this dialogue was held shows the Government's acknowledgement of the tremendous role women have played in nation building and how they can continue to contribute to restore the ailing economy.

Never mind that it was initiated by Bakti (helmed by none other than Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah) who felt the need to mobilise the women - representatives from various women's groups including Government agencies and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs).

That he consented to explain and confide in them shows his faith in women's ability to come through as a team player. It is important, he emphasised, for all to play a role, no matter how small, in these difficult times.

Therein lies the significance. The perfect partnership. We are in this together - men and women - and together we will help our nation come out of the slide.

The dialogue, described aptly as a "rare privilege" by chairperson Toh Puan Dr Aishah Ong, was made all the more significant because of these pressing times. Here was the Prime Minister saying in no uncertain terms to women: let us work this one out together hand-in-hand.

Inspired and enlightened by his honesty, the women rallied to reassure him of their ever-present support.

One by one, they came up with suggestions and pledges of support rather than the expected questions during the Q-and-A session. It was obvious that he had succeeded in, in his own words, "lifting the veil of darkness" on the issues and they did not need to ask any more questions.

The rumours were quelled and the women were more interested now in coming up with ideas as to how they could all boost the coffers.

In their anxiety to help, the women spoke of setting up women's funds, and various ways of how they can speed up recovery, including selling their excess jewellery (preferably abroad) and bringing back the foreign exchange to be invested in shares or placed in fixed deposits, buying Malaysian, and changing or adapting current lifestyles to conform with the times.

They had pledged to do this, even if it meant they, and their families, would have to consume less sugar, eat more ikan talapia and locally-grown bananas, as suggested by the Prime Minister.

"You will come out of this crisis, not only wiser but slimmer," said the

good doctor, who despaired at not finding enough local fruits in supermarkets.

Talk of selling jewellery was reminiscent of some wartime situation where the womenfolk pooled all their jewellery to sell them off to buy arms and food for their men at the battlefield.

Then again, we are at war, even if it is a battle of survival of the fittest. So why should excess, idle capital in the form of tonnes of jewellery be left to gather dust in safe deposits and vaults or literally "di bawah bantal" (under the pillow)?

It would also help, he added, if people with overseas properties were to sell them off so that the money, like that made from the sale of excess jewellery, can be channelled back to our coffers.

"Money only has value if it changes hands."

He went on to explain that when it is generated within the economic machinery, our foreign exchange grows bigger, our banks get stronger, confidence is restored, profits are made and the ringgit is buoyed.

"It's all about patriotism," he had said. "If you don't want to sell your property, then leave it there. But if you want to help, bring the money home. Of course, many will ask what's in it for them? A lot. Because if this country goes bankrupt we will all be too."

"Women can also help in increasing liquidity not only by saving but by curbing expenditure. Spend, but spend wisely. Buy local. Cut down on the non-essential goods."

"In Korea, people are asked to donate to the Government. We don't ask you to do that here. Just save."

To make the worst-case scenario clearer, he spoke further of how it was crucial we strengthen the economy because "if we are weak, they (foreign fund managers) will come in and buy us out. They can buy our banks and firms and eventually reduce us to becoming a colony again. Then they decide on our policies and who our leaders will be."

Recognising this appeal for help as a call for more women to contribute to the work force, at least three women took the opportunity to alert the Prime Minister about a related issue - childcare.

Datuk Ng Yen Yen of Wanita MCA appealed for the authorities to take seriously the need to provide support systems for working women.

"In the past, our efforts were met with only lukewarm responses," she said. "Now that we need more women to leave their homes and children to work, it is crucial that the Government shows political will to help."

She said that much as women want to employ local maids, they "are hard to find and so we fall back on foreign maids."

The Government's policies, she added, on foreign maids change all the time.

"We need to know what the real situation is so we can plan our work and home."

It is obvious the women were taking advantage of a golden opportunity to say yes, let's work together, we've always been saying (and doing) that, but first let's get some glitches out of the way before we can be 100 per cent effective like the men who do not have to shoulder these burdens. Let's get the homefront in order first before we head out together to grapple with the nation's problems.

Simply put, Woman's Aid Organisation's Ivy Josiah said, "We want mothers to go to work."

It was good that Liew Sau Pheng, executive director of the Malaysian Child Resource Institute, brought up again the need to train local women to become competent and professional child-minders.

"This is important because whoever looks after the children will determine the kind of citizens they will become."

They were concerned that much as we need the help of migrant workers (in all fields), especially during boom time, their presence poses a big problem, socially and economically, when things change and they become redundant.

At least two women - Datin Professor Jamilah Ariffin, president of Juita (Association of Wives of Johor State Assemblymen and MPs) and Irene Fernandez, director of Tenaganita - took this opportunity to alert the Prime Minister on some of the repercussions.

They warned of the dangers of having a large number of idle migrant workers who either do not want to go home (because the situation in their country is equally bad or worse), or cannot, as their employers are unable to pay the RM3,000 compound fine for them.

In their eagerness to help, the women came up with more suggestions like the setting up of funds, a national health fund (with money transferred from Socso to start off), revival of cottage industries among women's circles, and in general, a change in lifestyle and spending habits.

They also pointed out the fact that there was only one woman on the recently set-up National Economic Action Council (NEAC).

All these earned the attention of the Prime Minister. For this was what it was meant to be - a two-way dialogue session. But much as this was a "rare privilege", it was only privy to a "privileged" few.

Fortunately these few are women leaders in their own right, who will now put on their agenda for their members, the need to spread the PM's message about the economy.

Hopefully, there will be more of these sessions as, much as people need to be informed, the Prime Minister himself can get first hand-accounts of what is really happening at grassroots level.

"We are only scared of the dark because we cannot see (the dangers) ...," the Prime Minister had said. How true.

Now that the darkness has been lifted, they know exactly what to do. And for the fight to be effective, they will have to constantly inspire their members to get down to brass tacks.

The meeting's been held. The bond is strengthened. The man has taken the step to show what can be achieved by forging a strong and effective smart partnership. He and his partner ("my wife") demonstrated it at the dialogue.

Now it's up to all of us.

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