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## Women's groups happy with generous funds

KUALA LUMPUR, Sat. - Women's organisations said the RM50 million allocation for public and private training institutions and women's organisations to conduct industrial skills and technology training programmes for women was generous given the current economic crisis.

"Although we are talking of a contracting economy, the Government has not forgotten any group," said Women's Institute of Management chairman Datuk Napsiah Omar, who is also Wanita Umno deputy head.

WIM started its first round of training for women in entrepreneurship and information technology in February with Government funding.

"About 2,300 women including those already in business, urban and rural poor women as well as single mothers have benefited from our training programme. Our future courses will include Orang Asli women."

Napsiah, who is also Negri Sembilan State executive councillor, said for next year, WIM's business training module would include marketing, product development and book-keeping.

In his 1999 Budget speech, Prime Minister and First Finance Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said the public and private training institutes should increase their intake of women in industrial skills and latest technology training programmes to meet the needs of industry.

He said it was important that a continuous programme on skills development be made available, especially for those intending to rejoin the labour force or those keen to develop their potential.

Dr Nik Safiah Karim, chairman of the National Advisory Council for the Integration of Women in Development, said in good times and in economic crises, women's contribution was equally important but they would be the first to be retrenched in the latter.

"The Women's Affairs Department (Hawa) which is to co-ordinate the implementation of the training programmes must work closely with the NGOs and be sensitive to the needs of women, especially in industries much affected by the current economic situation.

"We have to look at the retraining of women to enable them to find alternative employment to enable them to continue contributing to the family."

National Council of Women's Organisations secretary-general Ramani Gurusamy said a needs assessment should be carried out to determine the kind of skills needed and where they were needed.

"This is to ensure that upon completion of their training programmes, the women are able to find jobs.

"Skills enhancement training is also important to facilitate women's upward mobility. And in the business sector, there is no point giving out loans to women without complementing it with the necessary skills training."

Gurusamy said training and retraining for women must not be gender-stereotyped but more gender-sensitive so that new doors are open for women to venture into male-dominated areas.

"There is a tendency for women to be largely found in low-paying jobs."

Gurusamy said to encourage women to rejoin the labour force, support facilities like child-care centres and flexi-hours should be provided.

Association of Women Lawyers president, Rasamani Kandiah, praised the Government's recognition of women's contribution to the country's economic and industrial development by providing the allocation for training.

"Training and employing women even in bad times ensures family well-being as all the money they earn go back to the family."

Mariam Abdul, supervisor of Pertiwi's (Muslim Women's Action Society) women's service centre, said Hawa must make known to the NGOs the funds available and how to go about getting them without putting too many restrictive conditions.

"In the past, the Government made similar allocation but it had been difficult for NGOs to get a portion of it for their projects.

"Therefore, Hawa must work together with the NGOs to see how the funds can be fairly distributed and best utilised for the betterment of women's lot."

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