

19/03/1999

It's not a man's world after all

IF THE Government ever decides to only admit men into the job market, the hedge fund managers and global currency speculators would all be out of a job. The economy will be more than "affected", as Human Resources Minister Datuk Lim Ah Lek put it, in his usual polite way, in response to Kelantan Menteri Besar Datuk Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat's statement about banning women from employment. The economy will fall through the floor boards and come to a rest six feet underground. The hedge funds and speculators were never quite as destructive.

The state government of Kelantan should look at the statistics and get a grip on reality. It is not a man's world, not the way James Brown saw it in the song, anyway. Women make up 47 per cent of the country's working population and they are on production floors, in plantations and hotels. They are in the army and the police forces, they work offshore and 40,000 feet up in the sky, they are in the government, head trade unions and take part in board meetings. Of course, women also cook, care for the children, do the laundry and make beds - all unremunerated tasks. However, they also supplement a household's income and this has enabled Malaysia to keep improving the standard of living. They contribute to the economy. In some developed countries, they make up more than half the labour force. They have worked in British coal mines since last century and they head many governments and states. Among the few exceptional human beings who have been to space and climbed Mount Everest are members of the fairer sex. Malaysian women have come a long way in the workplaces. The chief executive officer of one of the largest banking groups in the country is a woman. A domestic airline was once headed by a woman. Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz's reputation as an orator, politician and trade minister is familiar to the Japanese, Europeans and Americans. To suggest that individuals like these should be prohibited from working, not only insults their capabilities but also denies the nation of some of its best brains and guts. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said that prohibiting women will erode the strength of the Muslims. It will also erode the strength of the Malaysian economy and people.

If it wishes to champion women's rights, the Kelantan Government will be contributing greatly just by dropping the idea of prohibiting women from working. The 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing four years ago recognised that women faced serious problems in achieving full equality and advancement because of their race, age, ethnicity, culture or religion; because they are indigenous or due to some other ridiculous notion. Women encounter obstacles related to their family status, particularly as single parents; and to their socio-economic status, including their living conditions in rural, isolated, or impoverished areas. According to the United Nations, more than a billion people live in poverty today and a great majority of them are women.

In Malaysia, the issues facing female workers are not as serious as the Beijing conference put it. Still, many employers are not helping to make it any easier on their women workers or to encourage more women to join the labour market. For example, many workplaces have continued to ignore calls to set up nurseries at workplaces. As a result, a household where the woman is also a breadwinner is forced compelled to hire foreign maids to mind the kids at home, eating into disposable incomes.

The country's labour laws adequately protect the interests of women

workers against discrimination and abuse of any kind. It is good that Lim has made it very clear that prohibiting women from working is against the law. Malaysian society used to frown on women who went out to earn their own living or a living for their families, but that was generations ago. And that is not the way forward if the nation wants to get out of the current difficult times and charge on towards the objective of joining the ranks of the industrialised nations by the year 2020.

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