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Bias in the balance

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WOMEN were up in arms. Sleeves figuratively rolled up, they toiled in preparation for the two-day Wanita 2000 Special Conference beginning Aug 17.

"We're bringing groups together to discuss issues relating to women," said member of the National Advisory Council for the Integration of Women in Development (NACIWID) Datuk Mohaiyani Shamsudin. "At the end of the conference," she continued, "we hope to gather concrete recommendations to be included in the Eighth Malaysia Plan."

Why is this necessary?

"Some," she explained, "contend that national development planning has been carried out without input from women, and that this must be remedied by formulating from the perspective of women's requirements - with a gender bias."

Equality in the eyes of the law is enshrined in Article 8-1 of the Federal Constitution. Royal assent was granted the Domestic Violence Act on June 24, 1994. Malaysia is signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women, 1979; the Jakarta Declaration, 1994; the Beijing Declaration, 1995; and a host of other international agreements advocating the protection and progress of women.

And yet ... and yet.

"The Constitution does not forbid discrimination on the basis of gender," said president of the Women's Aid Organisation Meera Samanther incredulously. Sure enough, a perusal of the same yields: ... there shall be no discrimination against citizens on the grounds only of religion, race, descent or place of birth ... (Article 8-2)

"Women," explained Meera, "will not AUTOMATICALLY benefit from development strategies, as women labour under existing disadvantages. "Neutral approaches cannot be used."

The term genderbudgeting has thus been coined - denoting, said Mohaiyani, "the consideration, in the budgeting process, of issues important to women."

Issues such as housing; employment; education.

"The number of single mothers in the country is rising," said Datuk Dr Nik Safiah Karim, NACIWID chairperson. "Yet aid to them is ad hoc, duplicatory, and frequently misses its mark."

"There are 680,000 female-headed households in the country," said Samanther, "and they are not entitled to low-cost housing because they don't constitute the traditional - male-headed - family."

"Exceptions are made in the case of those who produce a certificate of divorce. But female victims of domestic violence, for example - and 39 per cent of Malaysian women are beaten by husbands or boyfriends - leave abusive husbands, haven't the means to engage a divorce lawyer and are petrified to confront their spouses."

"Forty-five per cent of the women who visited the WAO refuge last year ended up in squatter areas, or in a single room inhabited by themselves and an average of four children."

"Criteria enabling them to qualify for low-cost housing," she said urgently, "must embrace the realities of women's lives."

Lost opportunities due to childcare responsibilities ensure women face obstacles to employment which are different from those confronting men.

Typical of WAO cases, said Samanther, is the housewife with an SRP or SPM and no employment experience. Fleeing a violent marriage, she finds work in a factory or as a salesperson, at a monthly salary of RM700. On this she is expected to manage rent, food and the needs of four children.

"The face of poverty," said Samanther sombrely, "is a woman's face."

The problem is exacerbated, said Mohaiyani, by the fact that "data is not disaggregated according to sex. This, of course, is a major requirement!

"We have simple data - how many women are in the workforce, for example. But if you were to ask, 'How many companies are owned by women? How many female directors of companies are there?', we don't have this information."

So, although Malaysia's 1995 National Policy on Women states: ... a large proportion of the female labour force is concentrated in low-income groups and in unskilled or semi-skilled work ..., we have no means of gauging how far the country has - or has not - progressed in this area since.

Issues with regard to education encompass not just the education of women, but the education of others ABOUT women. "NACIWID," said Nik Safiah, "receives numerous complaints from women regarding their dealings with Islamic Affairs departments and the syariah courts. Among the problems they encounter are a lack of personnel, unsatisfactory counselling facilities and the postponement of cases."

The records of Police and Welfare officers assigned to female victims of violence, too, are - according to Samanther - "dismal.

"In the Petaling district, for example," she said, "there is just ONE welfare officer in charge of domestic violence cases; and the district's sexual assault unit consists of just four police officers.

"But the variety of tasks for which they are responsible," she continued, "indicates we need more officers."

The Wanita 2000 Special Conference was organised by NACIWID and by the Women's Affairs Department. Finance Minister Tun Daim Zainuddin officiated at closing ceremonies.

The conference suggested - among other things - the creation of a Ministry for Women's Affairs and Family Development, headed by a full Minister; the drafting of a Gender Equality Act; the correction of the image of the woman as sex object, victim, cruel or vicious; the effective enforcement of the Domestic Violence Act; and - with regard to sexual exploitation - prevention, intervention, prosecution and rehabilitation.

NACIWID is, even now, compiling suggestions into a brief, to be entrusted to Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, Datuk Shahrizat Jalil. She, in turn, will hand this to the Minister-in-Charge - the Prime Minister himself Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

The Prime Minister has, according to Nik Safiah, undertaken to "consider" the suggestion that women's affairs be headed by a full Minister. "Though the formulation of the Eighth Malaysia Plan (for the period 2006-2010) is in its final stages," she finishes, "we very much hope the views expressed at the conference will therein find a place."

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