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Cognizance of women's role

IT is heartwarming indeed for women to hear from Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad that the Government will consider the setting up of a Women's Affairs Ministry. And that efforts will be made to ensure women's rights are not trampled upon. At the very least, it is a recognition and endorsement of the role of women in nation-building.

There is no doubt that more needs to be done but such a move reflects a mature and thinking society. If such a ministry materialises, a temporary phase no doubt, it will probably be among the few in the world that takes cognizance of women's contributions to economic development and women's rights as human beings. Many of today's women are high achievers and do not want to be discriminated against. From science and technology to industry and other areas of endeavour, women have excelled.

Increasingly, female professionals and entrepreneurs are making their presence felt, not just in numbers but in sharing their views and expertise as well. Women, who make up more than half of the total population, comprise about one-third of Malaysia's labour force and there have been calls for more of them to join the ranks and stand tall in the mainstream of development.

But empowerment in the workforce can only come through equitable job opportunities, professional mobility and promotion. More importantly, women will have to continue to speak up for themselves and articulate their thoughts and ideas for their advancement.

Time was when women, due to traditional and cultural conditioning, were considered nothing more than chattels and their place at the hearth. But this gender bias is already crumbling. Thanks to higher education opportunities, exposure and information, male chauvinism is gradually retreating.

While taking feminism to the streets is not the in-thing in this day and age, the fight for gender equality has not become an academic exercise. If anything, it is manifested in the mature manner in which women channel their views to the Government through appropriate channels.

Equality is a subjective matter in different communities, its argument augmented by how deep-seated it is in its practice of cultural norms and traditions. The perceived prejudice against women stems from an inferiority complex that some men have, whether it is from a lack of professional skills or otherwise. Such a lack of wisdom is painfully archaic, and has no place in a developing or developed society.

It is in learning to accept our fellowmen that we will continue to shine in our endeavours through joining hands in all realms. Perhaps, men can take a leaf from the book of Renaissance men who were sensitive, compassionate, creative and scientific.

Women, on the other hand, should be brave enough to make their own choices and equip themselves, if need be, with the working skills they need to continue contributing to society.

The Government's consideration of a proposed increase in allocation for women's activities in the next Budget is yet another step forward for the rights of women. This is progressive thinking that bodes well for a developing nation which believes in harnessing its resources to the optimum for everyone's good. And recognising women's economic contributions only accelerates the pace of developed nation status. In wisdom, hope springs eternal.

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