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Knowing our wants

Zakiah Koya

"IT is time for women to stop whispering and tiptoeing. It is time women issues are politicised and are heard. No more tiptoeing. Ballerinas tiptoe, not women who want to make a change."

And with that, ex-parliamentarian Kanwaljit Soin from Singapore managed to more or less summed up the overall sentiment of women who attended the "What women want" forum, jointly organised by Marie Claire and Body Shop. This was despite the opening statement by International Trade and Industries Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz that women issues not be politicised.

Nevertheless, Rafidah also called on women to stop wallowing in self pity.

"We should not just talk and not follow up with actions," she said.

Rafidah asked that the resolutions of the forum be sent to her later as she could not stay for the rest of it.

The public forum, which was participated by about 200 women and men, dwelt on five main topics - political representation, health, financial independence, syariah laws and women's rights in general.

Singaporean parliamentarian Claire Chiang managed to convince the audience that we need not win big to win the battle.

"Small wins can make a difference," said Chiang, who focused on the roles women can play to influence society and make changes to the normative culture, which is normally patriarchal.

Taking Singapore as an example where women have come far in both education and breaking into the male bastions, Chiang talked of how women activists have managed to gender-sensitise the police force by talking and working with them.

"We first started by holding weekly meetings with the police force.

"The police thought that it would be no harm listening to us. So we brought in women from various fields to talk to them. Slowly, their mindsets changed over time.

"It has been four years now. We could more or less be assured that when they deal with rape cases and domestic violence, the police would be more gender-sensitised," said Chiang.

Closer to home, Sisters in Islam executive director Zainah Anwar captured the audience's attention by focusing mainly on one issue that still needed to be resolved using the existing laws.

Zainah said that the Quran explicitly spells out laws concerning polygamy.

"Why is it that only half the verse is taken into account while the rest of the verse is left out?" she said, referring to the Quranic verse that states, "Marry women of your choice, two, three or four; but if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one or that your right hand possesses. That will be more suitable, to prevent you from doing injustice".

Zainah also urged the laws be amended to avoid Muslim men from getting away with mere fines for marrying more than one without a valid reason.

"They cite the example of Prophet Muhammad, but even the Prophet was monogamous for 15 years with his first wife, Khadija, and after her death - except for Aishah - the other wives were either widows or divorcees. He also married to unite the tribes. There were reasons." At one time, the prophet even forbade his son-in-law from taking more than one wife.

Syariah laws should also be implemented justly so that women are not victimised.

"SIS reads the Quran as it is and interpret it with women in mind. God is never unjust and the more we go back to the true teachings of Islam, we are more convinced that Islam is just," says Zainah.

In response to Zainah's comment on philandering husbands who get away with not paying maintenance, DRB-Hicom senior group director of corporate finance and advisory Datuk Maznah Abdul Jalil gave sound advice on how not to end up penniless when you are divorced. The advice also goes for singles and widows.

"Manage your finances when you are still single. List down everything that you own and save for the rainy day," says Maznah.

"When you are facing divorce, make sure you get the best legal advice. List down what you both own and update all joint accounts.

"When you are widowed, the best thing you can do is to do nothing for at least a year." She said it was pertinent to put one's emotions in order after the death of a loved one.

"But save the money in a fixed account and enrol in a finance management course or attend an investment seminar," said Maznah.

Maznah was very practical when she warned divorcees and widows to be "very, very careful" of unsolicited advice from "good-hearted advisors".

"These people can even be close relatives. But you might end up losing everything," says Maznah.

Being able to manage finances, however, does not mean that a woman will be able to live well in the later years of her life.

It was here that Kanwaljit and Marina Mahathir of the Malaysian AIDS Council told those present that although women live longer than men, it need not necessarily mean they live better.

"We live longer but we do not have good healthcare that caters to women. Thus in the last years of our lives, we suffer," said Kanwaljit, an orthopaedic surgeon.

"If there were better healthcare for women, then we should be able to outlive the men 20 to 30 years," says Kanwaljit, putting across the glum statistics.

Marina said that even with HIV-positive couples, it is the woman who would forgo her medication for the sake of her husband.

"Even in the cases of pregnant HIV positive women, the AZT dose that stops the foetus from being infected with the virus is only administered up to the time of birth.

"After birth, what about the mother who is still infected? She would suffer and later die. The child would then be orphaned," she said.

Kanwaljit said that given the fact that women hold top medical positions only recently, clinical studies on women have either been minimal or not given any attention at all.

Kanwaljit cited the view of a 19th century physician that stated "a woman is a pair of ovaries attached to a human being; a man is a human being furnished with testes".

"Health is a human right and women should demand for it," says Kanwaljit.

Her view was supported by Monique Widyono of Equality Now, an NGO based in New York.

"Equality Now works as a chain that links women support worldwide to pressure governments to protect women from dangers like genital mutilation," says Widyono.

"Women admit to holding up half the sky but in actual fact, they hold up more than half," said Kanwaljit, trying to understand the woman nature of suffering in silence.

Kanwaljit ended with a very interesting story, "Before I came to the forum, I asked a middle-aged woman what she wanted. Her answer was, 'I fantasise wanting two men at the same time.' I asked her "Why?". The reply was, 'One to do the cooking and the other, to do the washing.'"

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