

27/09/2000

Removing gender obstacles

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KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - Gender-sensitive policies to bring more women into economic activities will be given top priority, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

He said Malaysia had already taken steps to remove gender obstacles and cited as example the success of its micro-credit institution, Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia, with a RM200 million allocation to lend to rural women.

The Government has also allocated RM50 million for smart partnership projects for women with non-governmental organisations representing women.

"Further efforts must be undertaken to ensure gender mainstreaming, of which gender budgeting will be our top priority," he said at the second meeting of the regional steering committee for the advancement of rural and island women Asia Pacific (RSP-AP).

Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, wife of the Prime Minister, chairs the committee which comprises wives of heads of State or government.

Dr Mahathir said gender-sensitive policies to include women in economic activities and to reduce poverty would ultimately help the Government by increasing economic growth.

God had ordained different attributes to men and women to complement each other, to perform duties equitably, in fairness and justice, he said.

"Unfortunately, women get discriminated against because of the differences.

"To be different does not mean to be unequal; yet, women get unequal treatment because they are different from men."

It is unfortunate that the traditional mindset towards women's perceived capability has overridden logic, knowledge and observation of women's actual capabilities and competencies.

Sensitivity awareness training should be a top priority of all member countries as insensitivity of the Government and society had prevented equality and contributed to the "feminisation of poverty".

Dr Mahathir said rural women played a vital role in poverty alleviation and had been the key target of poverty eradication programmes, as evident by the increase in micro-credit institutions in the region.

After the 1997 micro-credit summit, the number of families being reached by 1,965 institutions rose to 14 million from eight million in 1997.

There are 550 million poorest of the poor rural women in the world.

"With micro-credit facility, women have access to money at entry points.

"This will lead to their capabilities not only to lift their families out of poverty but to achieve economic and political empowerment."

Dr Mahathir however noted that gender ideology continued to influence the lives of rural women.

Studies from four micro-credit programmes in Bangladesh showed that 39 per cent of women clients had little or no control over the use of their loans. Some women applied for loans for their husbands and ended up paying the debt.

"This is one example of 'gender' at work."

Women should be included in the information technology revolution, otherwise the digital divide would increase between the urban and rural, and between the sexes.

Dr Mahathir said the RSP-AP, as a non-political entity, had enormous potential to bring positive change as the First Ladies worked hand-in-hand with women and side-by-side with the highest decision-makers in their

country.

"Your access to high-level decision-makers could facilitate input into policy formulation."

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