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Tertiary gender gap worrying

THE gender equation is changing, changing rapidly. At least in student enrolment in some public universities. One news report on Sunday said that at Universiti Malaya, females outnumber males, 65 to 35. Statistics garnered from Universiti Kebangsaan show an even wider gap: 67 to 33. Universiti Putra Malaysia has three young Chinese women to every Chinese man. Is it to be wondered then why the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, posed the embarrassing question: Where are the Malay boys? Emeritus Royal Professor Ungku Aziz had one answer in a lengthy interview aired in a special report over TV3 on Sunday night. Many are at work as young men are more inclined to seek jobs after leaving school rather than endure the rigours of study in tertiary institutions.

The equation changed because times have changed. Until two generations ago, the prevailing ethos in most households, regardless of race, was to bring up boys to be providers. They went out in search of livelihood. Many endeavoured to better their prospects through a university education. Girls were nurtured to be less adventurous. Their upbringing restricted the scope of employment. They naturally gravitated to "soft" but no less skilled vocations of nurses and teachers.

As the country's economy expanded over the years, lifestyles improved, perceptions changed and gender bias, at least of parents, evaporated. The son and daughter were both seen as the apples of the eyes of parents. They were given equal motivation and support to better themselves. So they set forth to seek their fortune as equals.

We now can appraise the results. And they are gratifying. The private sector has many, many women CEOs. The public sector has many female secretaries-general and at least a few directors-general. The nation's currency notes bear the signature of a woman Governor of Bank Negara. And as Dr Mahathir never tires of reminding, the development of Putrajaya was planned, implemented and managed by a team headed by a female civil engineer.

We agree that these achievements and accomplishments are but a silver lining in the cloud that still blights women. Many are still being discriminated against and abused. As wives, some are not treated as equals in the marriage covenant. The number of single female parents is increasing by day, by month and by the year.

Adding to woes is the latest revelation that said more and more middle-aged men are leaving their wives to live with younger women.

We, however, are of the view that these grievances will be resolved over time as more and more women become better educated, more financially independent and empowered by their financial, career and social security. Rather attention and concern should be directed at the gender gap in university enrolment. More women than men graduating portends future social and demographical problems. We might behold a reverse discrimination. How many women graduates would settle for a non-graduate husband? They would be more inclined to build their careers, deferring marriage, perhaps forever. This outcome is not a chimera; it is a real problem Singapore has had to address over the past decade. Surely no one desires the prospect of confronting this problem five or 10 years down the road. The Prime Minister is concerned. Which is why he lamented the gender gap in student enrolment.

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