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'State religious departments should focus on more important issues'

KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - State religious department officials should concentrate on more important issues such as abuses of the Islamic Family law and not pick on women and other marginalised members of society, several women's groups said today.

Saying the abuses under the Islamic family law endangered the well-being and welfare of children and women, Sisters in Islam executive director Zainah Anwar said religious authorities should focus their energies on:

- * enforcing syariah court orders on fathers who fail to pay maintenance to children and ex-wives;
- * serving court summonses and orders;
- * arresting those who ignore court orders to appear in court;
- * taking action against those who repeatedly mock the Islamic Family law by divorcing their wives at their whims and fancies in and outside the court; and,
- * taking action against those who repeatedly marry polygamously without the court's permission and deliberately fail to register such marriages.

Presenting a joint press statement on behalf of 31 endorsees, Zainah expressed concern over a growing trend of intolerance and discrimination against women in the name of Islam in the laws, policies, statements and actions of those in government, opposition and religious authorities.

"We welcome the decision of the Selangor Menteri Besar to drop charges on those arrested (at outlets serving liquor), but the move does not detract from the larger issues of unjust and selective prosecution in enforcing a law with widespread impact on the lifestyle of citizens."

The press statement was endorsed by individuals such as the Prime Minister's wife Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamad Ali and the Deputy Prime Minister's wife Datin Seri Endon Mahmood.

The National Council of Women's Organisations, KL Bar Committee, National Association of Women Entrepreneurs of Malaysia and Persatuan Sahabat Wanita Selangor also endorsed the statement.

Among those present at the press conference today were Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir, NCW deputy president F.R. Bhupalan, Women's Aid Organisation president Meera Samanther and Chinese Assembly Hall (women's section) education head Seng Hoon Kiew.

They asked for the setting up a committee of representatives from women's groups, progressive Islamic scholars and constitutional experts to review Syariah Criminal Offences legislation.

It was decided that a women's group would study the legislation and present its findings to the Malaysian Islamic Development Department and the government.

Meanwhile, those present at the conference encouraged the aggrieved parties among the 31 Muslims detained by the Selangor Islamic Religious Department on June 10 to seek redress.

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