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Bill on equal rights for women

KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - The Government proposes to amend Article 8(2) of the Federal Constitution to enable women to enjoy equal rights as men and ensure they are not discriminated against, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

The amendment will be tabled during the current Parliament meeting, which will end next week.

"The equal rights will concern laws and policies, and others, except for physical matters in which there are certain reasons why we need to differentiate between men and women."

Asked if existing laws involving women would also be reviewed, Dr Mahathir said: "Well, if there is a need then we will look into them."

"But, at the moment, we think what is necessary is amending the Constitution."

The Prime Minister was speaking at a Press conference after launching the Women Against Violence (Wave) campaign organised by the Women and Family Development Ministry at KL Sentral.

Also present were Dr Mahathir's wife Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's wife Datin Seri Endon Mahmood and Malaysian Resources Corporation Bhd president Datuk Seri Abdul Rahman Maidin.

Under the proposed amendment, the word "sex" will be included in Article 8(2) which currently reads: "Except as expressly authorised by this Constitution, there shall be no discrimination against citizens on the ground only of religion, race, descent or place of birth in any law or in the appointment to any office or employment under a public authority or in the administration of any law relating to the acquisition, holding or disposition of property or the establishing or carrying on of any trade, business, profession, vocation or employment."

Dr Mahathir also said the Government would consider a proposal to amend the laws with a view to imposing stricter ruling on incest, if studies deemed it necessary.

He said women groups could initiate the study and make the proposals.

Dr Mahathir was asked if the time had come for the Government to look into amending the laws that would impose severe punishment on incest in view of the rising incidence of incest.

At present, many women's groups feel that punishment for incest often is not commensurate with the offence.

"We will certainly look into the matter if a study has been done," he said.

Earlier in his speech, Dr Mahathir said parents should instil good values in their children from early age so that they would grow up to become responsible citizens.

"Through early education, children, when they grow up, will not get involved in crime and violence. This is very important as currently parents are very busy with their work and spend less time with their children."

He said working women tended to neglect the task of educating and bringing up their children as their time was taken up at work.

"They have to spend some quality time to concentrate on sowing good values in children. Once nurtured with these virtues, it would be natural for the children to reject unhealthy activities."

Dr Mahathir said the mere enforcement of legislation was not sufficient to ensure the good behaviour of society.

He said when Malaysians themselves rejected violence it would not gain a foothold.

"The present-day students, including undergraduates, indulge in violence and other irresponsible acts because they were not brought up with proper values."

Meanwhile, Shahrizat said the proposed amendment to the Constitution would be a breakthrough for Malaysian women.

"When the amendment is passed, the Federal Constitution would specifically spell out that there shall be no discrimination by virtue of sex.

"This means a lot to women because usually, although not always, women are subjected to discrimination, either blatantly or implicitly," she said.

The Wave programme, a campaign against violence in the society, is the first activity organised by the Ministry since it was formed on Jan 17.

It is aimed at boosting public awareness on the violence that seems to have become commonplace in today's society.

The campaign is intended to educate victims on the actions they can take and guide caring citizens offering their services to curb such violence.

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