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Equal rights come with responsibility

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THE CABINET decision to accord equal rights to women by amending Article 8(2) of the Federal Constitution is highly commendable (NST, July 24).

This will put an end to gender injustice and enable women to enjoy equal rights as men in every respect of human activities.

As a matter of fact, the initiative to uplift their status should have been taken long ago when they were given equal pay as their male counterparts in the early 1970s.

The move to give equal rights to women should be seen as a reflection of the Government's confidence and faith in their administrative skill, capability, experience and talent as have been demonstrated by them in various callings ever since the country achieved independence.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad once reiterated that "it is not a question of gender but performance and qualification that count in the appointment of women to high positions".

Their active participation in politics and economic activities despite many obstacles is a clear sign of their grit and determination to serve the people and the nation.

Britain's Sex Discrimination Act 1975 made it unlawful for an employer to treat a woman, on the ground of her sex, less favourably than a man in respect of employment and other matters.

It is interesting to note that an advertisement in a London daily - "Man wanted, lorry driver" - caused such a furore among women that the prospective employer had to re-word it to "Person wanted, able to drive a lorry".

The setting up of the Women and Family Development Ministry is a step in the right direction.

It reinforces the Government's commitment to do away with male chauvinistic prejudices and to give women their rightful place in society so that they can play a more meaningful role in Government's efforts to eradicate poverty, overcome social ills and other problems plaguing the country.

It is sad that some of our women have been subjected to much ordeal, scandal, humiliation, agony, violence and even mental torture by merciless and unscrupulous husbands. Through sheer grit and indomitable courage most of them have overcome these problems.

Successful single mothers are a shining example of their ability to face challenges.

However, a word of caution is necessary. As has been rightly pointed out in your editorial in the NST on July 26, while laws, policy, rules and regulations provide the framework to ensure women receive equal treatment, to translate that into practice, proper implementation and enforcement are vital.

Implementation and enforcement divisions of the various ministries are the most important branches of the Government machinery.

The provisions in the said article should be given liberal interpretation and every possible assistance should be given to women including treating them with respect and dignity. Lacklustre performance on the part of these two divisions will not bring about the desired results and will only make a mockery of the legislation.

A case in point was the painful and traumatic experience of Jamilah Awang who was searching for her two-and-a-half-year-old son.

After failing to get assistance from all the relevant Government agencies, she finally sought the help of the Malaysian Chinese Association's Public Services and Complaints Bureau headed by Michael Chong.

Her son was taken away from her by her husband whom she had divorced.

Although the Syariah Court had given her the custody of their son, all efforts to trace the boy had failed.

Her plight was highlighted in all the leading local dailies including the NST in June 1996.

I suppose till now she has not been re-united with her son. There are many other unfortunate victims who are in a similar predicament for lack of effective enforcement.

Men should be reminded of William Congreve's couplet: "Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned, nor hell a fury like a woman scorned".

While we talk of equal rights, women should also heed the advice of International Trade and Industry Minister and Wanita Umno chief Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz that women seeking equal treatment and opportunity should also be able to accept the responsibility that comes with it.