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Equal rights for women

IT is true that men and women are regarded as equals in Malaysia, but it is equally true that in many fields of endeavour men are more than equal. This discrimination, whether explicit or implicit, is a universal norm. But for the well-being of our women folk who comprise our mothers, wives and sisters, it is timely that a determined effort is now being made to eliminate this prejudice and unfair practice.

To begin with, the Constitution, drafted at a time when women commonly took a back seat in national affairs, will see certain changes to remove any vestiges of gender discrimination. The move to enshrine the equal rights of women in the country is being initiated by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who has made no bones about his distaste for discrimination against women and has promoted the cause to uplift their status.

The Cabinet has already approved the amendment to Article 8(2) of the Federal Constitution to bar discrimination based on sex which will be tabled during the current session of Parliament. Making the legislative revisions is essential to allow women to enjoy the same rights as men in every aspect of human activities. Women have contributed as much as men to the progress of the nation and there is absolutely no reason why they should still be subject to discriminatory practices.

However, while the amendment is welcomed, it can be considered only the first step although a very significant one. To give real meaning and strength to the amendment, efforts must be made to bring other relevant laws and practices in line with this constitutional change for gender equality. What is an even more challenging task is to change the entrenched prejudices against women which, despite the legislative changes, could still persist and discriminate against women at home and restrict the advancement of women in the work place.

Male chauvinists, cultural traditionalists and religious bigots have nurtured the historical misconception that men are superior to women for so many generations that many women themselves meekly submit to their inferior status until their emancipation in recent years. However, cultural norms and attitudes towards women are difficult to change, and certainly cannot be transformed overnight. These still exert a pervasive and lingering influence on society despite the political will to remove the more obvious discrimination against women. Even with the removal of discriminatory laws and practices against women, the fight is not over.

The women themselves and enlightened men who sincerely believe in women's rights must continue to keep their eyes and ears open to ensure that there is strict enforcement of laws that give equal rights to women. It would be unfortunate if stacks of legislation, rules and regulations are passed to give women their equal rights but these rights are not translated into practice because of weak enforcement or misinterpretation.

To see to it that women are treated equally and fairly, there must be close monitoring of the implementation of the laws. If it is found that certain laws and procedures are still unsatisfactory and need to be further revised and fine-tuned to uplift women's rights, then the necessary changes should be made promptly. What must not be allowed to happen is that after the initial burst of enthusiasm and publicity, complacency gradually sets in and gender discrimination continues as it did before but in more subtle forms.

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