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More than just women's issues

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THE last few days I have been in the midst of so many controversial debates on the setting up of the Women's Affairs Ministry that I have realised something about my fellow Malaysians.

There are two types of Malaysians - the ones who actually do something and those who do nothing but enjoy criticising the government. I feel sorry for the second group because mankind has never erected a statue or a monument in honour of a critic. Besides, it is better to be constructive doers than destructive critics.

But what surprised me was that the ridicule came not only from men but from women as well. The general argument was this: "There is equality in wages, women have equal access to education, have voting rights and are reasonably represented in the higher level professionals. What more do they want?"

What chills me is that women have internalised their marginal roles and are unaware of being discriminated against or exploited by the system.

Tradition, culture and societal expectations, too, have reinforced some of these roles and women have accepted their secondary role without question. Any privileges are seen as a boon.

First and foremost, I must emphasise that this is not a "women's lib" thing. There is nothing radical or feminist about having a Women's Affairs Ministry. Women's problems are also problems involving children, family and the nation. Men should not be looking at them as women's issues but as the issues of their daughters, mothers, wives, sisters or friends - perhaps, then they would be more sensitive.

The position of women in any given society is a mark of the progress or humanisation within that society. I feel that if women are treated well in a society, it speaks volumes about the dignity of such a society.

Hence as a nation, we thank our Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for putting us on the map as a progressive society by setting up a separate Ministry for women. Certainly he has shown us that his Government cares for women's problems.

Although we may have come a long way in women's rights, in changing and enforcing laws, and in protecting women, there are still shortcomings and issues that are demoralising and degrading to women's self esteem and dignity. What we need is a wide-angled lens to focus beyond what is socially accepted as the status of women.

Let us begin with a good look around us. Do we have legislature that is really fair to us and that actually protects women who are single, divorced, separated or those who become second, third or fourth wives?

Does the law actually dignify women with their rights especially concerning marriage and divorce laws in some quarters?

Let us not compromise our lives. Let us live with dignity and not as second- or third-class citizens in our own families. But first we must recognise we have problems instead of sweeping issues under the carpet and suffering in silence.

Women have to believe that no one has any right to abuse them mentally, physically or emotionally. Women also have to start believing that there is nothing wrong in wanting to be treated right by society.

Women who have been battered have been accepting their fate while they are hardly protected under the provisions of the Domestic Violence Act.

I have been counselling battered women and I cannot begin to list the

type of abuse some of them have been subject to but yet that kind of abuse is not even listed in the Act. Besides some of this abuse is NOT SEVERE enough according to the stipulations in the Act.

I stress that abused women should not be seen as an activist's or an NGO's problems. Abused women's issues should be directly under the government. Hopefully from now on, there will be a specific department for these women to report their cases. And their reports would be treated with more respect as opposed to the past humiliation they have suffered. The Ministry should consider transition houses, safe homes and counselling programmes for victims of relationship and sexual violence.

Laws, proper legal procedures and support system for underaged and or mentally or physically-disabled women who have been sexually abused are terribly lacking under our rape laws. Rape among such victims is the most under-reported crime in this country. Not only is there discrepancy in the laws governing rape, it is also impossible to obtain a conviction. the victim suffers while being stigmatised by society.

In the employment area, what about the glass ceiling which effectively but unofficially bars women from promotions, higher salaries while providing inadequate maternity benefits to women who have to juggle families and careers? Once again is family only a woman's responsibility?

I must say that compared to other developing countries Malaysian women have fared well in the employment sector. However, our unskilled and semi-skilled sisters have not been so fortunate. They have been subjected to health hazards, unfair dismissals, odd working hours and poor schemes. What about women's role in financial management and business ventures or in science, technology and trade programmes - are they well represented?

What about the rural women who are undernourished and lack nutritional programmes, immunisation, health checks or ante and post natal care?

What about these women who have not been educated on family planning and other health care? What about safe health care services for wellbeing of rural women?

I can go on and on about women's problems. But the important thing is we have to work together in addressing these issues. Women from all sectors have to work hand with Datuk Shahrizat Abdul Jalil to ensure that these problems are addressed soon.

Shahrizat should start with compiling or updating base line data on the status of women in terms of education, health, employment, marital status and so on. It will be pointless to rely on outdated statistics and figures and try to innovate programmes with that.

She is already on the right track of wanting to work with NGOs involved with women's issues. However her Ministry has to also work in partnership with all government ministries, corporations and agencies, as well as the private sector. Her Ministry should be able provide other ministries with policy advice and gender analysis service to address systemic barriers. She can co-ordinate and monitor various sectoral programmes in self-development, nutrition, health education, literacy, recreation and skill formation.

But most important of all Shahrizat should raise consciousness among both men, women and children on the importance of treating women with respect and acknowledging women's contributions to the nation. There is a need to change attitudes and behaviours through public education, school curriculums and through mass media.

Paradigms for social development have been swiftly changing with greater attention given to women's issues at the global level. All over the world, countries are continuously formulating strategies and initiating processes to bring women into the mainstream. Do we want to be left behind?