

27/04/2001

Need to enhance well-being of poor

Ramlah Sulaiman

I AM appalled to note that Ruhayati Muda, a 30-year-old housewife has been sentenced to a six-month jail sentence for locking her nine-year-old son in a cubicle.

She is poor and uneducated. She has no religious knowledge. She is without a proper job that could provide her with a regular income. She has three other children to take care of. But, she was punished for "not ensuring that her child lives comfortably and is safe", as said by the learned judge who passed the sentence.

Indeed, it's a tall order for a woman already so poor and deprived of a comfortable quality of life for herself. One might ask where was her husband, who is also the father of the children, at the time the offence was committed? Why wasn't the husband punished for abandoning the family in the first place?

While Ruhayati stays in prison, who is looking after her children? Thus, it comes as no surprise when studies indicate children from single-mother families fill the juvenile prisons and drug centres.

What happens to society's conscience? Where is the caring society we are supposed to establish by year 2020 under Vision 2020?

Where are the Islamic organisations (Baitulmal bodies, for instance) that were set up to provide financial aids to the poor? What happens to the ministries in charge of women? Aren't these ministries, high-powered women departments that should look after women's welfare and family well-being?

Malaysia spends billions on infrastructure. The Eighth Malaysia Plan is timely because people's quality of life is said to be the country's priority in implementing socio-economic programmes.

Can we start looking at those poor women with children, particularly in the rural areas, and assist them in enhancing their family well-being? These poor people are not interested to be part of a country that boasts the world's tallest building or the best Formula One racing track. These people merely need a good quality of life.

The Economic Planning Unit in the Prime Minister's Department (1999) defines the Malaysian Quality Of Life (QOL) as personal advancement, a healthy lifestyle, access and freedom to pursue knowledge, and a standard of living which surpasses the fulfilment of basic needs of individuals and their psychological needs, to achieve a level of social well-being compatible with the nation's aspirations.

As we have seen, Ruhayati's current QOL does not even reach what could be called the basic human needs of Maslow's Human Needs Theory.

It's most unlikely she could achieve the QOL defined by the PM's Department by year 2020.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad once said politicians should go down to the people more often (turun ke padang dan lihat sendiri) to see for themselves what needs to be done and not wait until outbursts of anger explode at the slightest instigations by irresponsible persons.

I hope fellow Malaysians do wake up and contribute in whatever manner possible to enhance the well-being of the poor.