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Now we're talking!

Fatimah Abu Bakar

THE words of NCWO's immediate past president Mrs FR Bhupalan probably say it all. It is "the fulfilment of a dream."

After 37 years, she says, of campaigning for, first a women's bureau and then a Women's Ministry, this has come to pass - the birth of the Women's Affairs Ministry. "A fantastic achievement, even though long overdue."

Good news like this, coming so early in the new year can only augur well for Malaysian women.

Call it historic, momentous, a wonderful legacy left us by the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the creation of a Women's Affairs Ministry is the culmination of the toil and labour of the champions of women's rights.

These are the women, and men, from all walks of life who selflessly serve the NGOs and various bodies associated with working for the betterment of all women. These women have also repeatedly said that their efforts to better the lot of all women is ultimately an effort to better the lot of all Malaysians.

The creation of this new ministry has pulled the rug from under many of our feet. For just before the announcements about the new cabinet were made, reports had it that there would not be any new ministries.

"The Prime Minister is amazing and full of surprises. This is wonderful for Malaysian women. A good start to year 2001," says Azalina Othman Said, herself an appointed member of the Umno Supreme Council.

"Truly this shows he recognises our worth. The ball is at our feet. It is now up to us," she says.

It certainly does look that way. For the significance of this new ministry is stupendous. For one, it has given that much needed leverage for women's issues. The odds are better now in the battle for the betterment of women.

But this ministry is not just about women's issues. For women's issues are never just about women alone. It is almost always about the family. That means everyone. So this one small point for women is a big one for all.

Heavy, therefore, is the responsibility of the person in the chair. For the list of what must be done runs long and varied. Right now that person is Datuk Shahrizat Abdul Jalil, who was, till the announcement, Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department in charge of the Women's Affairs Department (Hawa).

Her appointment is a good start for this new ministry, say many. She is young, capable, vibrant and has already made the right move by touching base with NGOs ever since Hawa was placed under her.

But she cannot do it alone. Again, smart partnerships will have to be built and maintained.

For as Puan Sri Dr Fatimah Hamid Don, vice president, National Council of Women's Organisations (NCWO) says, this "sincere move by the Government must not be an isolated one. It has to have the cooperation of all the other ministries.

She adds, "Hopefully, this will not be a small ministry but one with linkages with all the other ministries that are relevant. With a full ministry, issues can go straight to the cabinet and this will expedite things for women."

And, echoes Datuk Dr Nik Safiah Karim, chairman, National Advisory

Council for the Integration of Women in Development (Naciwid), "There should be concrete support both in planning and financial from the government. Let this not just mean a rename for Hawa but a substantial increase in all aspects.

"My heartiest congratulations to Shahrizat. She and her team must now play a bigger role and get full confidence from the Government. I am anxious to see the structure of this ministry and hope that it will expand to equal the other ministries."

"Datuk Shahrizat has a participatory attitude which I like," says Mrs Liew Sau Pheng, executive director of the Malaysian Child Resource Institute (MCRI), a passionate campaigner for the child, and who hopes fervently that "in the spin-off, children too will benefit".

"She invites input from women and lets women share in the governance. But the success of this ministry will also depend on women themselves," she adds.

Well said. For even as we rejoice in this "epoch-making event and red letter day for all Malaysian women," as stated by Mrs Bhupalan, we must hold our jubilation in check and know that this is just the beginning. Of the fulfilment of a larger dream. One that can only benefit us all.

And as Azalina says, we now have no excuses. For once the machinery has been set in place, there should be "no excuses for any delays in enacting laws and implementing them, no more excuses about men not understanding us... This is a challenge we have to rise to."

Much of the groundwork has been done. A good start would be the implementation of the recommendations made in the Women's Agenda for Change. Within it is the framework of the bulk of the responsibility of this new ministry.

Yes, the workload seems mammoth. But Shahrizat, herself no novice to hard work, must take comfort in knowing that where her teammates are concerned, she will not be alone.

For, tired of having women's issues being relegated to the sidelines for so many years, there will be many who will willingly come forth to work hand in hand. For these many, this new ministry will be like the ever elusive light at the end of the tunnel.

Whether this light shines bright or remains still very much in the distance will depend on all of us.

"We must not be afraid to face this challenge," says Azalina. "We must brace ourselves for the changes that we will be making for ourselves and work hard to make this the best ministry.

"Can you imagine, and this is only the start, women directors at all levels... There's so much we can do now! I am ever willing to assist Kak Ijat (as Shahrizat refers to herself as)."

Yes, this is starting off to be a good year. A more hands-on one for especially the women. And it can only be good for all.

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