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Shahrizat to work closely with NGOs

Sajahan Waheed; Deborah Loh

KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - Newly appointed Women's Affairs Minister, Datuk Shahrizat Abdul Jalil, said she would work closely with non-governmental organisations in her new post.

Stressing the importance of teamwork, Shahrizat, 48, said she saw herself as a "manager" who would consult NGOs who were "the experts" in women's issues and co-ordinate people and resources.

Thanking Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for creating the new ministry and for her appointment as a full minister, Shahrizat said it was "the culmination of a struggle of many years for the advancement of women."

"I will focus on improving policies, advocacy work, including educating women of their rights and creating programmes," she said at her Lembah Pantai constituency office in Bangsar Utama.

"I want to make women's issues mainstream issues. Women's issues take up many fronts, yet none of them can be looked at in isolation."

Among her programmes will be gender-sensitive courses, including for Cabinet ministers. "Such courses were on the agenda when Women's Affairs were under the Prime Minister's Department."

Asked about her "fast climb" to a ministerial post, Shahrizat said: "In both Umno and in government I have been on every rung of the ladder. I have not missed a step in the hierarchy."

Shahrizat joined Umno in 1981 and was first appointed the Youth and Sports Ministry's Parliamentary Secretary in 1995 after winning the Lembah Pantai parliamentary seat.

She was Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department after the 1999 general election, a post which she held until her new appointment today.

As minister and Wanita Umno deputy chief, Shahrizat said she hoped to attract more women into politics.

"Having women in decision-making positions speaks well of Malaysian men. Like it or not, women make up more than half the workforce. The Prime Minister has recognised us as a potent force in nation-building."

Asked if the new ministry was a "tactic" to attract women voters, Shahrizat said political differences should be put aside when solving women's issues.

Penang-born Shahrizat is married to Datuk Dr Mohamad Salleh Ismail. The couple have three children.

"At first I felt shy and uncomfortable about my appointment as I didn't expect it. In politics, anything can happen."

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