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Already making WAVes

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GENDER discrimination, the struggles of single mothers, delays at the syariah courts in dealing with problems faced by divorced Muslim women, violence against women and sexual harassment are but just a few in the long list of issues that still beset the female population in Malaysia.

The formation of the Women and Family Development Ministry (previously known as the Women's Affairs Ministry) on Jan 17 last year was understandably greeted by a huge sigh of relief from concerned quarters.

Importantly, it reflected the Government's seriousness at solving problems faced by our women - and that was encouraging.

Women leaders and women's groups felt that the new Ministry, headed by Datuk Shahrizat Abdul Jalil, would be able to ensure speedier resolutions to women's issues and concerns.

They felt that with a Minister representing the gender, women's issues will deservedly be profiled at the Cabinet.

(Previously, women's issues were handled by the Women's Affairs Department or Hawa which was placed under the Prime Minister's Department. At the time, the role of Hawa was huge but its capacity was limited as its functions covered every possible aspect of women's development on a national scale. With the establishment of the Ministry, Hawa's responsibilities have become more demarcated and it is now able to concentrate on implementation of programmes and provision of support services to women in need.)

Operating as a separate entity, the Women and Family Development Ministry has decided to focus on long-term strategies such as paving for changes in laws and policies that affect women.

On July 23, the Ministry succeeded in its role as a central co-ordinating unit for such policies and scored a victory for Malaysian women when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir announced that the Government proposed to amend Article 8(2) of the Federal Constitution to include "sex" to enable women to enjoy equal rights as men and ensure they are not discriminated against.

Prior to this, the Bill of equal rights for women was an issue the Ministry had been championing for since its establishment.

At the same time, the Ministry decided to tackle the problem of violence against women by launching its Women Against Violence or WAVE, its first campaign.

Aimed at educating victims of violence on the action they can take and getting caring citizens to curb violence, the campaign attracted some 50 volunteers within the first week of its launch.

To date, there are 262 volunteers. The Ministry's secretary-general Datin Faizah Mohd Tahir said: "We're working very hard to keep the WAVE campaign alive. Only volunteers based in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor have been trained so far. The Ministry will hold a training session for trainers at the end of this month and conduct a separate session for volunteers at the end of February. Once trained, volunteers will be placed at one-stop crisis centres in general hospitals."

Two other major accomplishments of the Ministry are the issues of foreign spouses and for widows who remarry to be paid their husbands' pension.

On Aug 7, the Ministry urged the Immigration Department to consider giving automatic work permits to foreigners who accompanied their

Malaysian wives to the country. Three weeks later, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi announced the Government's decision to abolish with immediate effect immigration regulations which discriminated against Malaysian women married to foreigners.

At the 2002 Budget last October, a milestone for women was marked when the Prime Minister proposed that widows receiving their late husbands' pension can continue receiving it even if they remarry. This meant a widow who used to receive her husband's pension but had the benefit withdrawn after remarrying could have it reinstated.

In May, the Ministry announced its plans to establish family service centres nationwide to provide more integrated family services.

Aimed at strengthening family institutions in the country, the setting up of kompleks kasih keluarga is being done through the National Population and Family Development Board.

Its director-general Fatimah Saad said: "This is one of our biggest challenges, to set up 29 family service centres or kompleks kasih keluarga across the country. Currently, only one centre in Shah Alam has been launched. The next centre to be opened is in Seberang Perai.

"It's a centre that will serve families by providing programmes: in productive health, family development and basically, any programme that caters to the family. Counselling will also be offered and a childcare centre will be included. Apart from this, we are also looking at the family unit itself and how to build character into a family."

In November, Shahrizat officiated the second phase of WAVE and announced that pusat khidmat wanita or service centres for women will be set up in all States by the middle of next year. A project under Hawa, the centres will have computer rooms and be run by a supervisor and counsellors trained by the Ministry and various NGOs.

Service centres have already been set up in six States including Penang, Selangor and Malacca; four more are under construction.

Hawa director-general Norasmah Samsudin said that although centres have yet to be constructed for the rest of the States, support services such as counselling are accessible to women nationwide from temporary locations such as rented shophouses.

She added: "We are planning to provide temporary shelter for abused women. Five or four rooms at each centre will be set up for this purpose. The service centre will also act as information centre for women where they get information about loans to start businesses."

As a follow-up to the WAVE campaign, the Ministry declared an all-out war against incest. Its goal - to not only make incest a separate crime from rape but to also ensure that those convicted get a stiff punishment - is very much alive and the Ministry is planning to achieve this through legal advocacy.

Recently, after 10 months of occupying the LPPKN building, the Ministry moved to its own offices at Block E of Bukit Perdana Complex, the former Prime Minister's Department.

To celebrate its move to the refurbished five-storey building, Shahrizat and her staff held a luncheon at which 82 underprivileged single mothers were given RM200 each.

At a Press conference later, she said she was happy with the Ministry's considerable achievements thus far and that many things are lined up for the coming year.

Included in the Ministry's agenda are the setting up of a family court, which will ensure that family-related cases are heard in camera to prevent the media from highlighting them, pushing for gender budgeting which incorporates gender variables into the models on which planning and budgeting is based, and starting a gender disaggregated database which

will enable the Ministry to collect data on women in a systematic way.

Said Shahrizat: "We are working with Datuk Rais Yatim, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, to ensure that the family court or mahkamah keluarga will become a reality. It will not be an easy task as laws will have to be studied prior to setting it up. The committee chaired by Rais will be looking into this and will get feedback from the Ministry.

"We're looking very seriously into gender budgeting and how to influence other Ministries to do it as well. The idea behind starting a gender disaggregated database is so that we can collect important data on women such as how many women are working in a particular sector or industry."

Other tasks include setting up the Ministry at State level and monitoring the performance of syariah courts and studying the implications of their decisions on women.

In addition, the Ministry will continue concentrating on laws and regulations pertaining to women and monitoring their implementation.

"Hopefully, there will be more things to come in 2002. I am very positive about the future of women in Malaysia and will make sure that the departments under the Ministry will achieve a lot for women too, especially the National Population and Family Development Board and Women's Affairs Department," she said.

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