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`Mama Fida' passionate about her cause

KUALA LUMPUR, Sun. - Mention women's and children's rights and Puan Sri N. Saraswathy Devi's eyes immediately flash with steely determination.

It is clear to all that the senior Malaysian lawyer is passionate about their rights.

The mother of four girls, all of whom are lawyers in her firm, has found a new vehicle to promote her stand on women's and children's rights - the International Federation of Women Lawyers (Fida), of which she is the newly-elected president.

Hailed as "Mama Fida", Saraswathy is set to take aggressive steps to spell out their rights.

"I want to make sure that every child is entitled to rights. I also want to combat trafficking of women and children for the purposes of prostitution," she told the New Straits Times.

Saraswathy, the wife of Malaysian Hockey Federation deputy president and former Selangor CPO Tan Sri P. Alagendra, was elected president at the Fida biennial congress in Manaus, Brazil, on Sept 8.

"It troubles me that children increasingly require psychiatric treatment for depression when their parents divorce or during times of war. It's mental violence. What about the rights of the child?"

"Children's hearts are like flowers and they should not be crushed. The impression will forever remain."

She said children were unable to cope "so I strongly feel that some rights for a child have to be spelt out, and we are looking into this".

"I require assistance from anybody to formulate the rights of children. People talk about fighting for human rights, but I believe that when you uplift a human through education and awareness programmes his or her rights will come automatically."

Fida is an international non-governmental organisation with consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations.

It raises the legal awareness of these rights via advocacy and lobbying through conferences and workshops, networking with other NGOs and co-operating with governmental organisations when necessary.

Saraswathy recently proposed a United Nations-sponsored treaty for the extradition of serious criminal offenders, apart from war criminals, to the countries where the crime was committed.

These include drug trafficking, trafficking in women and children for prostitution or slavery, sale of children, child pornography and Internet crimes involving children.

The paper Judicial Co-operation in Criminal Matters - A Global Perspective was presented at the Third European Congress of the European Women Lawyers' Association and French Women Lawyers' Association.

Saraswathy said Malaysia had good laws in place, like the Child Act, Young Women and Girls Protection Act, with support from the Women and Family Development Ministry.

"Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has led the country beautifully. Malaysia has everything for one to live comfortably," she said.

Her personal philosophy? "You have to keep your mind very free. Don't let your thoughts clash. Never feel tired in your mind, then you will never feel tired in your body."