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Women ministry revs ahead

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"THERE is nothing the Malaysian woman cannot do!" declared Datuk Shahrizat Abdul Jalil, the Minister of Women and Family Development, in her speech at the National Women's Day celebrations at Putra Stadium, Bukit Jalil.

In response, some 15,000 women, clad in purple and white (the unofficial colours of the ministry), cheered and the applause grew louder when she highlighted some of the achievements of her ministry.

"Since its establishment, the ministry has worked continuously towards educating women of all ages and sectors, especially in the field of ICT," she said. "We're also exposing them to other fields such as law and business as well as expanding their knowledge in family development, marriage and parenting."

Other milestones include granting automatic work permits to foreign men married to Malaysian women and allowing widows to receive their late husbands' pension even when they remarry.

But perhaps the most important victory the ministry scored for Malaysian women was when Article 8(2) of the Federal Constitution was amended to include "sex" to enable women to enjoy equal rights as men and ensure they are not discriminated against.

Previously, the Bill of equal rights only protected citizens from discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, descent or place of birth. Including gender in this Bill was an issue the ministry had been championing for since its establishment.

This year's National Women's Day on the theme "Nur: To Nurture An Educated Generation" was launched by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

The ministry, now 19 months since it was set up, is set to take on more challenges to fight for women's rights and to promote a better quality of life for women.

With this spirit, and in conjunction with this year's celebrations, the ministry has embarked on a smart partnership with the publishing house Karang kraf Group and launched Nur, a women's magazine.

With every purchase of the magazine, 10 sen will be channelled into the Nur-Karang kraf fund, which will aid single mothers.

"For Nur, our target is the modern Muslim woman," says Karang kraf managing director Hishamuddin Yaacob. "She dresses conservatively, prides herself on being a wife and mother, yet at the same time, she is aggressively career-minded."

For the ministry, Nur will not only generate revenue but will also be another means of reaching the masses as it will highlight gender-related issues and publicise important events and activities.

Nur can now be bought at a promotional price of RM1 but will be sold for RM5.90 from next month.

To further aid single mothers, the ministry has come up with a unique concept called the Nur Bikerz. This venture is in collaboration with The Bikerz, a company selling motorcycles.

Under this project, single mothers are encouraged to supplement their income by buying specially-equipped machines through an easy payment scheme. With these motorcycles, they will be able to start a hawker business.

They will be provided with food to sell, training on how to handle the motorcycle as well as basic business skills.

"The main concern of single mothers is their children," says The Bikerz executive chairman Teoh Soo Cheng. "Their working hours should be flexible to accommodate this and there is nothing more flexible than a mobile hawker business."

Her company has set up a central kitchen from which food can be collected to be sold during breakfast, lunch and dinner. So far, over 100 single mothers have signed up for the programme.

Nur Bikerz co-organiser Datuk Fauzi Omar, of Platinum Publishers, says: "In previous years, the ministry gave money to single mothers but this year, Datuk Shahrizat wants them to venture into the food business to earn income and to be independent."

Before tucking into a special lunch sponsored by the ministry, the audience was treated to cultural shows and a performance by Camelia. Before leaving, many of them took the opportunity to shop at the many booths set up outside the stadium.

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