

Group fears law may be more unjust towards women

PETALING JAYA: Sisters in Islam (SIS) has called on the Government to form an inter-agency committee to review the draft standard Islamic family law that state governments have been told to gazette.

"We welcome the effort to unify Islamic law in the country but we do not want the draft to be gazetted until there have been consultations between women's groups and government agencies," SIS executive director Zainah Anwar said in an interview yesterday.

"We are very concerned about the amendments that have been made and do not want a unified Islamic family law that is even more discriminatory and unjust towards women than the existing one," she added.

Zainah said women's groups had submitted several memorandums to the Government over the past six years and "the concerns raised in them must be included in the amendments to Islamic family law.

"The well-being of women and children will be affected by these amendments, and so our views and realities must be reflected in them," she said.

Zainah was commenting on Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's directive to state governments on Tuesday to gazette the standard Islamic family law, which has already been agreed to by the Rulers' Council, as soon as possible.

Political scientist Farish Noor said it was good to have a consistent legal system but there needed to be a "thorough interrogation" of the form and content of the Islamic law especially in the light of regressive laws affecting women.

He stressed that the questioning of the contents of the law should not be seen as trying to stall the process of unifying Islamic family law.

"If there are in-built biases in the law, the impact will be an uneven one," he said, adding that these questions should not be seen as being anti-Islam but rather as a way to ensure that the law would result in the Islamic justice that it espouses to represent.

International Movement for a Just World president Dr Chandra Muzaffar said the contents of the draft law should be made public because it would affect everyone.

"The very least the Government can do is to make public the draft law and provide a time frame for public comment before it is gazetted," he said.

Abim president Ahmad Azam Abdul Rahman said it was timely to unify and gazette Islamic family law in Malaysia, adding: "We don't need so many laws for a small country."