

22/09/2003

Kudos to a woman-friendly Budget

Vasanthi Ramachandran

I'M GRATEFUL for the woman-friendly 2004 Budget. Even more touching was its special focus on rural women. This is surely an indication that we are indeed a progressive society.

This is what gender budgeting is all about, said Women and Family Development Minister Datuk Seri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil.

It enables the generation of income by women, thus making them more self-sufficient and independent.

No country can eradicate poverty if it cannot address the needs of women.

"Instead, we have to make them realise their self worth to generate their own income. Allow them to tap their own potential and be financially independent. They will also be contributing to the overall development of the nation," added Shahrizat.

And that is exactly what the Prime Minister has done. To enable single mothers in rural areas to increase their income, he has allocated a sum of RM100 million from the Micro-Credit Scheme for loans to them.

Micro credit to rural areas is gaining ground in many parts of the world. Rural women now have difficulty in accessing financial services because of their lack of collateral, particularly land; they are not perceived as creditworthy by bankers and the financial sector.

Credit schemes operated by banks in Malaysia are based on the evaluated risk of the applicants, both men and women. The requirement of collateral has proved to be an obstacle for women seeking loans. The "ikhtiar" project is one micro-credit scheme without the prerequisite collateral for loans up to RM10,000 which both men and women have access to. But this is not enough.

There are also some existing programmes such as Yayasan Malaysia, an NGO venture, which has several ongoing projects. These include flower cultivation by single mothers, cultivation and the manufacturing of essential oil products and the weaving of cane objects and furniture.

Such projects, though noble, are spread out. There are too many rural women who head households and are compelled to work due to divorce, or the death of a husband. These women are often semi-skilled and illiterate and cannot get employed easily.

However, just providing credit doesn't ensure progress. Independent studies show that with no training, micro credit is normally spent unproductively.

Shahrizat has initiated skills training programmes to enhance and facilitate the growth of businesses managed by women.

To this end, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has allocated RM105 million for training and education.

The Grameen Village phone system used by Bangladesh women has been a very successful example of a micro-credit scheme. Villagers are given loans for handphones with which they can conduct business transactions. Hence, a woman who sells rice is able to call Dhaka to confirm the market price and ensure that she is not fleeced by the middleman. Our women too should be kept up to speed with technological advances.

Social policies have also been implemented to support mothers in balancing their work and family responsibilities. Tax incentives have been given to establish childcare centres at the workplace.

Mothers who use such creches will be spared the dilemma of having to

choose between their careers and their children.

Proposals on extending maternity leave are also on the cards.

Fortunately, women are in a better position today than ever before because of the elevation of women's issues on the national agenda.

Unfortunately the misinterpretation of laws and policies on women, especially by Pas leaders, has adversely affected the progress of women.

\* The writer can be contacted at [woman@nstp.com.my](mailto:woman@nstp.com.my)