

Still a long way to go on the road to liberty
New Straits Times (Columns)
26 Aug 2007
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IN 1928, when not a single girl went to school in Kelantan, Wan Abdul Rahman sent his daughter Halimah and niece Wan Mas to an all-boys school. The villagers were outraged about girls going to school. To put an end to this trend, they taunted the girls and even threw eggs at them.

Today, in a dramatic turnaround, female students are pouring into universities in larger numbers than males! Last year, 70 per cent of the university undergraduates were women.

In the hype and excitement of National Day, it is timely to take stock of how far women have come, not only in education but in other areas as well. While International Women's Day is on March 8, Malaysians celebrate it on Aug 25. Our first prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, wanted women to enjoy their liberation for an entire week leading to National Day.

Almost 50 years ago, while Western feminists were walking the streets with banners screaming, "Equal Rights for Women", Tunku opened doors with the Equal Pay Act 1969, appointment of senators Aishah Hamid Don, Aishah Ghani and Dasimah Nasir and even a woman minister, Fatimah Hashim.

When his male colleagues disapproved, saying even Britain did not have women in the Upper House, Tunku replied: "We have to do what is best for our country and not follow others."

Though Tunku helped pave the way, women today owe a lot to the women's movement which challenged conventions. It was these women who have paved the way for future women leaders and set the trend for a leadership that was feminine on the exterior and yet hard as steel on the interior. It was this unthreatening image hidden behind coiffured hair that laid the basis for future women leaders to emulate.

Their journey was traversed with peaks and valleys till 40 years later, when the movement was resurrected and legitimatised as the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development in 2001. With this ministry, several quests from the 1960s were sorted out and other hidden issues came to public view.

Today a Malaysian woman can choose almost any field of education, train for a job, get employed and get almost equal access to promotions. She can marry, have children, space her children, get a divorce, own property, or travel.

All these liberties look good on paper. However, how far can she really go and at what expense? There are no clear answers to all these questions because the status of Malaysian women is so diverse.

On one hand, we have women as vice-chancellors, chief justices, chief executives of big corporate firms, successful entrepreneurs and we even can boast of a woman central bank governor.

On the other hand, we have the struggling single mother who lives below the poverty line and desperately tries to keep afloat doing odd jobs.

Sandwiched between these extremities is the working woman who goes on a roller coaster of guilt while she scurries between work and home. She may be bypassed for promotions or may forego a more demanding job to focus on the family.

But one thing remains unchanged — male resistance to women's change.

While some men consigned women's problems to a fixture that they did not want to see, most professed neutrality and watched from an objective distance.

Others have openly denounced women's progress by using religion. This is reflected in a certain group's advocacy of chastity belts for women to avert perpetrators of rape.

Even the corporate sector's liability fears outweighed its voice of reason like in the Beatrice Fernandez vs Malaysian Airlines System case, where a pregnant woman was dismissed. The courts of justice upheld this decision.

It became evident that laws do not function in a social vacuum. Neither can we legislate caring and concern.

Even in parliament, some male members ridiculed women's dignity with outlandish and offensive remarks much to the amusement of other male colleagues.

Thankfully, the media has helped hang out effigies of such insensitive men but how do we ever completely erase such prevailing attitudes?

This should not happen to our daughters. We do not want them to be like the ballerina stuck in a music box with a key that is wound by men. We do not want them to scurry into a rabbit hole because of culture, religion or outdated laws reinforced by men.

We have to reshape our daughters' destinies. We can no more sing to them, the song our mothers sang to us — Que Sera Sera... whatever will be will be... They want a better song, better music and certainly a better orchestra.

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