

Najib - a man trying to do a woman's job
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It is wrongly believed that when women speak, men only hear nagging.

The tragic prime minister Najib Abdul Razak, who is under intense pressure at home, should refrain from bringing his domestic problems into the workplace. For him to dismiss the need for a women's rights movement in Malaysia is premature and daft.

Millions of women in Malaysia face violence, intimidation and other prejudices, in private, at work and in public. The instruments of the state and the Syariah Court have failed to deal with their problems.

The PM opined that "equality has been given from the start" for Malaysian women.

In the first instance, neither he nor his party gave women that equality. It was the British colonial administration which gave the women of Malaya schooling. Despite that, they still had to fight for jobs, demand equal pay and battle other forms of discrimination.

What was Najib trying to prove, when he took on the role of minister for women, family and community development? That he is a super-man? Or a super-hero? Or was this a Malay male conspiracy to reduce the increasing influence of women? Women like Ambiga Sreenevasan, Maria Chin Abdullah and Cynthia Gabriel.

Najib is probably unaware that men cannot multi-task. Has he tried to juggle a career and start a family at the same time? Has he put himself in the shoes of a working mother, whose work is never done? Women return home only to continue with household chores, childcare, supervision of homework, shopping and for some, caring for their elderly parents.

A woman is better at listening, is more empathetic than her male counterpart, is able to read between the lines and is a better observer. If Najib had any peripheral vision, he would 'see' the multitude of problems faced by women in Malaysia and rectify them. His tunnel vision prevents him from seeing that the Malay community is beset with the problems of single mothers, abandoned wives and broken families.

Many Malay men will protect their right to polygamy, but reject the responsibilities towards their wives. Some discard their wives with gay abandon, and make no provision for maintenance and childcare.

Many women give up good jobs to bring up their children and support their husbands while they build their careers. When they are abandoned, the women have to depend on hand-outs or part-time work.

Perhaps, as a means of cushioning their daughters from irresponsible men, some fathers have urged their daughters to be financially independent, by giving them a sound education and a head-start in life.

Although studies may show that women comprise 50-60 percent of the tertiary student population, Najib was wrong to criticise women for constituting only 40 percent of the workforce: "It's a waste as we spend a lot of money sending women to university but they quit their jobs later. We want them to have families and still work."

When working women marry, they find that childcare is both expensive and unpredictable. The influx of families to towns and cities means that support from extended families is absent. Furthermore, very few companies provide flexi-time to accommodate the woman's needs for a family life.

Lack of aspiration

If Najib wants something to chew on, he might like to ponder the lack of aspiration of some of today's young Malay women. They have no desire to study hard but instead, target middle-aged and established, married Malay men to become the second, third or fourth wife. They are not bothered if the marriage lasts. They are content provided they have a child from the union, a house, a car and access to the man's pension fund.

If the PM is unconvinced, he should seek the opinions of first and perhaps second or third wives.

A union should be made to last, but in one corner of the Malay world, a union is only till the next sweet-young-thing comes along, or for the modern, material girl, till an old, wealthy man is hooked.

When Najib said the women's rights movement has no place in Malaysia, was he afraid of the growing influence of women, or was he fearful of PKR president Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail's announcement that the opposition would empower women rather than adopt the Umno attitude of enslaving them? Najib has also failed to meet the requirement for 30 percent representation of women in Parliament.

A few years ago, Ahmad Shah Mohd Zin, the secretary-general of the Congress of Unions of Employees in the Public and Civil Service, complained that too many women were in decision making roles in the administrative and diplomatic service.

Soon after this, the National Population and Family Development Board announced that women should have more babies and not put off marriage. They saw that fertility rates had dropped from 3.4 in 1995 to 2.2 in 2007.

In BN, female politicians are allowed to debate a proposed Bill in parliament, but are banned from voting with the dictates of their conscience. They are forced to be subservient and toe

the BN line.

Female politicians like the Umno senior exco member for Perak, Hamidah Osman aka 'Snake Woman', provide poor role models for women. Hamidah rejected the idea of a woman menteri besar (MB) because, "a MB would have to meet religious officers and the sultan".

No reason to fear women

Under Najib, women's issues are swept under the carpet. Fatimah Abdullah, the Sarawak assistant minister in the Chief Minister's Department, failed to speak up for the Penan girls who were raped and sexually exploited by the timber loggers.

Also, in Najib's administration, women continue to be used and abused. Rapists are free to pursue their bright careers whilst victims are hung out to dry.

Of course, Malaysia is seen as a progressive nation when compared to other Muslim countries. Our women can still drive cars, unlike in Saudi Arabia. Our women are merely flogged and imprisoned for pre-marital sex, and not stoned as in Afghanistan.

If men like Najib had their way, it would not be long before women were barred from certain university courses, as the government of Iran announced last month. In the past few days, IKEA had air-brushed women from catalogues meant for the Saudi market.

Najib should stop pandering to the wishes of the male chauvinists and clerics in his political and social circles. Declining birth rates, better educational standards for women and the increasing numbers of female professionals in industry, should not be a reason to fear women.

Najib's lust for control is destroying the rakyat, more than it is ruining him. He cannot fill the shoes of a prime minister. As finance minister, he is careless with money. Is he also drawing the salary of the minister for women?

Najib may have been emasculated by his wife, but he still cannot do the job of a woman.

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