

No will, no way...
Malaysiakini.com
April 2, 2007
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Malaysian women marked their achievements in many areas on International Women's Day, but were uniformly worried over a sharp rise in gender-related violence, especially rape and domestic abuse.

Even the government is alarmed by the statistics which show that 6.6 women are raped every day and is urging victims to report such incidents to ensure that the perpetrators are punished.

Women, Family and Community Development Minister Shahrizat Abdul Jalil told a forum on March 8 that the number of rape cases had doubled in the last six years, from 1,217 in 2000 to 2,341 last year.

"Statistics are showing an increasing trend. What is sad is that most of the victims are below 15 years old," she said.

She agreed that abuse of women is often concealed because women are ignorant of their rights or mistakenly act in accordance with cultural practices.

"For too long, women who were beaten up or violated felt that they were in the wrong ... They are accepting of it as a stereotype, as part of the culture of this country," Shahrizat said.

"It is not, I want to say very clearly - violence has never been a culture in this country."

The All Women's Action Society (Awam) said rising violence is a primary concern of many women's groups.

"Violence against women has escalated, going by reported cases alone. Besides rape, incidences of domestic violence have also increased year-on-year," said executive director Honey Tan Lay Ean.

"There are many shortcomings but making the situation worse are political and religious leaders whose attitude towards women is patronising at best and repressive at worst."

In recent months the country has been rocked by a demand from the Islamic quarter to compel women to wear chastity belts to protect their virginity, to set up snoop squads to spy on courting couples and to punish undergraduates who they claim are promiscuous.

Activists also used the occasion to demand stern legislation against what they describe as a "little understood" form of violence - marital rape. They argued that the law is inadequate because marital rape is not considered a crime in Malaysia and fails to recognise the complexities involved.

"Reported incidences of violence against women are only the tip of the iceberg," said Irene Fernandez who heads labour rights group Tenaganita.

"Many cases go unreported because of fear and a conservative value system that pervades

our society."

'Curb trafficking'

With nearly three million migrant workers in the country, mainly from impoverished Asian nations, Fernandez said there is a need to focus on violence against women migrant workers.

"They are the most vulnerable of all women in the country and are constantly at the mercy of the uniformed authorities," she said.

"In 2006 alone we handled more than 200 cases of violence against women migrant workers. It is frightening to note that the violence is being carried out with impunity both by state and non-state actors."

Tenaganita has rescued 128 domestic workers, all severely and systemically abused, she said.

"In fact it is torture, isolation and total servitude. This can happen because domestic workers are unrecognised and unprotected," Fernandez said, calling for major changes in government policies towards women domestic workers.

According to the United Nations and other experts Malaysia has emerged as a major centre for trafficked women from across Asia and as a transit point to receiving countries in Europe.

Human rights NGOs have extensively documented the plight of trafficked women for prostitution who are physically assaulted and raped multiple times by different men and by traffickers.

The research showed trafficked women are forced to consume drugs and alcohol and become dependent users with severe health and psychological problems.

"The women are locked up or confined and closely monitored by syndicate members. The sex trade has expanded with millions of dollars made from these women with the support of certain enforcement agencies who work hand in glove with traffickers," Fernandez alleged, urging the authorities to pay heed and enact a comprehensive law against trafficking of women.

"The government must show strong political will to ensure perpetrators of violence against women especially against women migrant workers and trafficked persons are made accountable," she added.

Behind the country's economic miracle are foreign workers and low-paid and over-exploited Malaysian women, said Kohila Yanasekaran, activist with grassroots coalition Jerit.

"Even in the male-dominated Parliament, lawmakers, in their speeches, poke fun at women in a very disgusting and crude way," she said.

"Equal recognition for women is lacking at every level of society - in the media, the laws, and the workplace and even in universities and government administration."

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