

Women power in Kelantan
Malaysiakini.com
Sep 24, 2009
Niluksi Koswanage

PAS may not like Muslim women doing yoga, drinking beer or wearing trousers, yet in one of the country's poorest states, going out to work is something they encourage.

Recent headlines over the caning of a woman who drank beer and other religious edicts or fatwas restricting the behaviour of Muslims have triggered concerns that Malaysia was becoming more intolerant.

In Kelantan, however, things are a little different.

Women are a vital part of the economy in the state, which has been ruled by the country's opposition Islamist party for almost 20 years.

"We are better than our men at business. Thankfully, the ulama (Muslim clerics) see that we make a big contribution," said businesswoman Fatimah Mahmud, tending her stall at the Siti Khadijah market named after Prophet Muhammad's first wife, who was a successful businesswoman.

In the market, about 300 women set up stalls just after dawn prayers and close shop in the evening after collecting up to RM1,000 ringgit a day. All were decked out in gold chains and bangles, symbols of their wealth, and of course headscarves.

The women's incomes exceed Kelantan's current GDP per capita of RM8,700, which is 45 percent lower than the national average, according to official data.

Many of the women do not always declare their earnings, economists say.

Initially shy of encouraging mothers to work, PAS now actively encourages it.

"Islam liberates women and with supporting this culture of strong businesswomen, we are legitimising them," said Husam Musa, a PAS official who is part of the state executive council running Kelantan.

"Most of the recipients of state's business development funds are women," Husam said, although he did not specify the size of the fund.

PAS spiritual leader and Kelantan chief minister Nik Aziz Nik Mat had said earlier that mothers should stay at home as long periods of separation could affect the children.

Softer image

Analysts say the move to support Kelantanese women might be a way to soften the image of a party that has said women wearing lipstick and sexy clothes would attract rapists and that hiring beautiful women would be a distraction to men in the workplace.

"PAS is trying to show it can encourage women and business. Perhaps it is shaping itself up for the next general elections in 2013," said Osman Bakar, deputy chief executive of the International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies Malaysia.

PAS, however, maintains some strict laws for women in Kelantan as supermarkets must have separate checkout counters for women and men and concerts are a no-go for females as well.

Billboards across Kota Bharu, known as 'The City of Islam', show how women should wear all-covering headscarves and clothes.

"Women have to cover up because they are like gold. They are important to the family," Nik Aziz said at his weekly sermons last Friday, popular with both men and women who sit in different tents.

The women at the Siti Khadijah agree.

"These laws are a part of Islam and its our duty to follow. But strong women businesswomen are also a part of Islam and that is good enough for us," said Norisah Che Wan who sold vegetables.

- *Reuters*

Copyright © 1999-2007 Mkini Dotcom Sdn. Bhd.
Source : <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/113453>