

Why hold back, Shahrizat?
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COMMENT The lack of ambition shown by the Wanita Umno chief Shahrizat Abdul Jalil, who pledged to lead the women delegates in the fight for a greater role in the government, is worrying.

At the Wanita Umno general assembly last week, Shahrizat vowed to "spread its leadership wings" and said, "This will be my legacy for Wanita Umno". She told members of the movement to become 'menteri besar, chief ministers, state Umno liaison chiefs and other senior posts'.

Is this the best that Shahrizat aspires to? Why stop at menteri besar? Why not try for 'Prime Minister' of Malaysia? Why stop short of the most coveted prize in politics? Does Shahrizat doubt the ability of women or is she unsure of her own potential?

Shahrizat said, "I've been an Umno member for 30 years and I know that there are many among Wanita Umno members who are talented and have the potential, if only they are given the chance".

What's preventing women from grabbing the opportunities available? If Shahrizat believes women to have the ability, then why 'wait' for men in politics to 'give them a chance'? Shahrizat must endeavour to be more assertive.

Moreover, Shahrizat should not encourage women to strive harder and then impose limits on what they can or cannot do. Political life is not a test of physical strength (apart from the grueling time canvassing during elections).

It is an occupation that includes courage, imagination, credibility, honesty, integrity and sincerity. It is about caring for the people they lead and of inspiring others to do good deeds.

Typically, news about women in politics has been dominated by the wasteful shopping extravaganzas and temper tantrums of wives of senior politicians and the lavish all expenses paid trips of the few women politicians. Is it any wonder many Malaysians are sceptical about women in politics?

Then, when the opportunity presents itself to defend the rights of women, our women politicians fail to act decisively.

Sexist MPs have brought shame and ridicule to our parliament on several occasions. Male MPs' comments in parliament, have ranged from "women wear indecent clothes to invite rape", "uniforms of Malaysia Airlines female cabin crew could arouse male passengers", "women, but not their issues, are supposed to be touched by men", "women divorcees are randy", to Samy Vellu's analogy of the parliament building to a 50-year-old woman with faded looks.

In 2007, MPs Bung Mokhtar and Mohd Said Yusuf made derogatory sexist remarks about the female parliamentarian, Fong Po Kuan. After protest from women's groups and a public condemnation, the cabinet instructed Shahrizat to resolve the problem.

However, all Shahrizat received (and appeared to be content with) was a half-hearted and insincere apology from the two sexist MPs. She should have demanded a retraction of the crude remarks, insisted that Fong be given a public apology, compelled them to issue a public statement regretting their sexist remarks and requested that they be fined and suspended from parliament for 10 days.

How can women be given the respect they are due, if the woman who should have acted decisively, disappointed everyone with her own lack of self-respect? Shahrizat's lacklustre performance in dealing with this serious problem provided no deterrent.

Need she be reminded that when this incident occurred, Najib who was the deputy PM at the time, said that "the remarks were not supposed to be taken seriously and that no one should make a big deal of the issue."

And yet, last week, Shahrizat had praised Najib for being a "visionary leader". Najib lacks vision for he appears to cherry-pick the issues which he feels is worthy of his attention.

If Najib cannot acknowledge that sexist remarks have been made, then is he as receptive to the needs of the people as he claims? If Najib brushes aside these insensitive comments about women, then is he really concerned about women's issues? Women make up about 50% of our population and a majority of our work-force and bread-winners.

Shahrizat was wrong to allow both Najib and those two male MPs to be let off lightly.

Women in Malaysia's public and corporate sector have proven themselves, by holding important positions and responsible roles compared to our women in politics. Women perform better at school and many excel at university, with degrees in engineering, the sciences, medicine and architecture.

It is Malaysian men who lag behind.

Thus, women know what they are capable of and are not afraid of working hard towards their goals. They have to, because for many, to earn a living, is both a lifestyle and career choice.

Malaysian women are familiar with struggles and hardship. They know the challenges that they face, chief among which are the policies that discriminate against women. Political will needs to forcefully push through these policies, to recognise the importance and contribution of women in today's society.

However, Shahrizat's most important task is to reach out to her own women delegates first and convince them.

Undoubtedly, Malaysian women know what they are capable of. However, it appears that some of Shahrizat's flock may need convincing and dragged into the 21st Century. Some women still believe that females are inferior to males. They appear stuck in the middle-ages.

Earlier this year, the Perak BN state executive councilor Hamidah Osman claimed that 'female politicians cannot become menteri besar because in the course of her duties, the female menteri besar would have to meet the Sultan and also religious officers. Therefore, in such situations, it would not be possible for a woman to become the head of a state government'.

Does Hamidah represent an isolated case, or is she atypical of the Wanita Umno mould?

Ah well! That puts paid to Shahrizat's lofty goals set last week for Wanita Umno to have someone from its ranks to be menteri besar or chief minister.

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