

Attacking Women With Words: Why We Should Rage Against The Ridicule

MalaysianMirror.com

16 March 2012

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I cannot wait to be told that I shouldn't have gotten my knickers into a knot for such "trivial matters". Yes, I said knickers. Maybe now this article will catch the attention of sexist persons everywhere.

On Tuesday, 13th of March 2012, about 30 women activists representing 15 women's rights organisations went to Parliament with two intentions: a) to state in no uncertain terms that a clean, corrupt-free government is essential for the protection and promotion of fundamental freedoms & rights of women, and all persons; and b) to make it clear that women have voices, opinions, thoughts and an inherent power to affect change – and that it is the responsibility of elected representatives to listen to these voices and ensure that women participate in the politics and decision making of this nation.

On Tuesday, 13th of March 2012, the honourable Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, elected representative and leader of one of the most powerful ministries in any government (the Ministry of Defence) demeaned and dismissed the voices and presence of the women he is answerable to. When a respected and passionate activist for the rights of women and marginalized communities handed him a white glove to symbolize 'a clean & corrupt free government', the honourable Ahmad Zahid Hamidi responded by telling her that he 'wouldn't be able to feel his wife if he touched her with gloved hands'. This is not okay.

I repeat: it is not trivial. And it is not okay.

If I stand in front of you, confident, chest out, back straight, looking you in the eyes and speaking words that matter, and all you can think about is touching tits with ungloved hands, then you have no right to stand in this honourable place, speaking on my behalf.

Yes, I said tits. They happen to be a part of a woman's body.

For far too long, women have been belittled and bullied in the playground of politics, power and decision making, I do not intend to speak on behalf of Ahmad Zahid Hamidi's wife, but the use of her body as a joke to dismiss a very serious and relevant act by a woman activist is yet another example of this. How many times have we heard the 'bocor' comments, and written them off as jokes? Or heard the dismissals of women as 'emotional and PMS-ing' when they raise serious issues? Each time we shrug it off, we internalize these notions AND downplay the voices and roles of women. That MP will henceforth be seen (even implicitly) as the one who bocors, while the other is seen as emotional and therefore shouldn't be taken seriously. Is it any wonder then that despite making up 50% of the population, women only account for every 1 in 10 members of Parliament in Malaysia?

Is it also a shocker that we continue to writhe in the swirl of corruption and filthy practices by the State, when elected representatives find it appropriate in the august house of Parliament to spew sexism when met with a challenge for good governance?

This time, a joke about feeling up a woman meant that the MP from Bagan Datoh, Perak didn't have to answer and own up to the issue he was confronted with: corruption and a filthy government. Not so funny, eh?

One of the core calls by the women's movement to Ahmad Zahid Hamidi and his colleagues was for an end to the pervasive patriarchy, discrimination and gendered violence against women in Malaysia. And how did he respond? By making a comment that reflected the notion of control and ownership over a woman's body.

The bodies of women have been used, abused, ridiculed and raped as punch lines of jokes and playthings of men. The reality is that too many women are ignored in the boardroom and controlled in the bedroom; slapped into silence when they express dissent, and stomped into subservience simply for being women. Over and over again little boys are told that it's okay to laugh at 'silly, flighty, emotional girls' ; that men are strong and women are sweet and ready to serve. Maybe that's why many of us have lost the ability to gasp in horror when grown men treat their women counterparts in similarly patronizing ways.

For years, we have fought with the fibers of our being for ourselves and for our sisters – for our bodies, our dignity, our rights & our lives. And yet, the assault on our bodies, thoughts & voices continues ; the violence festers from the hollows of little jokes to the ugly thrust of a rapist into a woman. At what point along this line, do we stop and say 'it's not okay'?

We must refuse to let the voices of women be separated from their bodies ; we must kill the planting of yet another seed of patriarchy.

It is the duty of all of us to fight for justice & equality. It is the obligation of the State to ensure this fight wins the day.

Elected representatives therefore need to understand that should they continue to trample on our bodies, rights and voices, we will use our bodies, our rights and our voices to make sure they are stripped off their powers.

We will resist. We will challenge. We will question. We will demand.

And one day, we will eventually crush the balls of patriarchy, with gloved & ungloved hands.

The honourable Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, and his posse of likeminded lackeys, will do good to remember that.

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