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No stopping these women of substance

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IN those days, girls didn't go to school. They weren't allowed many of the privileges boys were accorded. If they worked at all, it was in menial positions; to clear the sump in the bowels of an organisation.

But several formidable women broke through the barriers, both psychological and man-made. In Malaysia, several names immediately come to mind: Tun Fatimah Hashim, Datuk P.G. Lim, Toh Puan Uma Sambanthan, Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali and F.R. Bhupalan, to name just a few of the illustrious women of substance who etched names for themselves then. They helped open the doors for others.

As Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad observed in his talk on "Women's Role in Nation-Building" at the JW Marriott Kuala Lumpur on Tuesday: "There's been no stopping them since."

Dr Mahathir, sharp in his trademark Nehru jacket, had the rapt attention of attendees, mostly women, at the talk organised by the NAM Institute for the Empowerment of Women Malaysia. It was full-house — the ballroom was packed end-to-end — and it was not the smoked salmon, fava beans and lightly-crusting apple pie that drew the crowd.

With a perpetual half-smile on his preternaturally young face, Dr Mahathir peppered his half-hour talk with humour, advice, a good-natured poke or two at men, and an acknowledgement of all that women have achieved.

The Daughters of Eve are not only capable of taking care of the roost and its demanding occupants, but also ministries, constituencies, corporations and entire galaxies if that were possible.

Their march forward has been relentless. Dr Mahathir noted that where once women had constituted



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just 10 per cent of undergraduates, now they were 70 per cent. "If I were younger," he said, "I would like to go to university now. We had only 10 per cent (of women) then, so we didn't really have that much of a choice."

Dr Siti Hasmah smiled broadly, while the rest of the hall resounded with laughter.

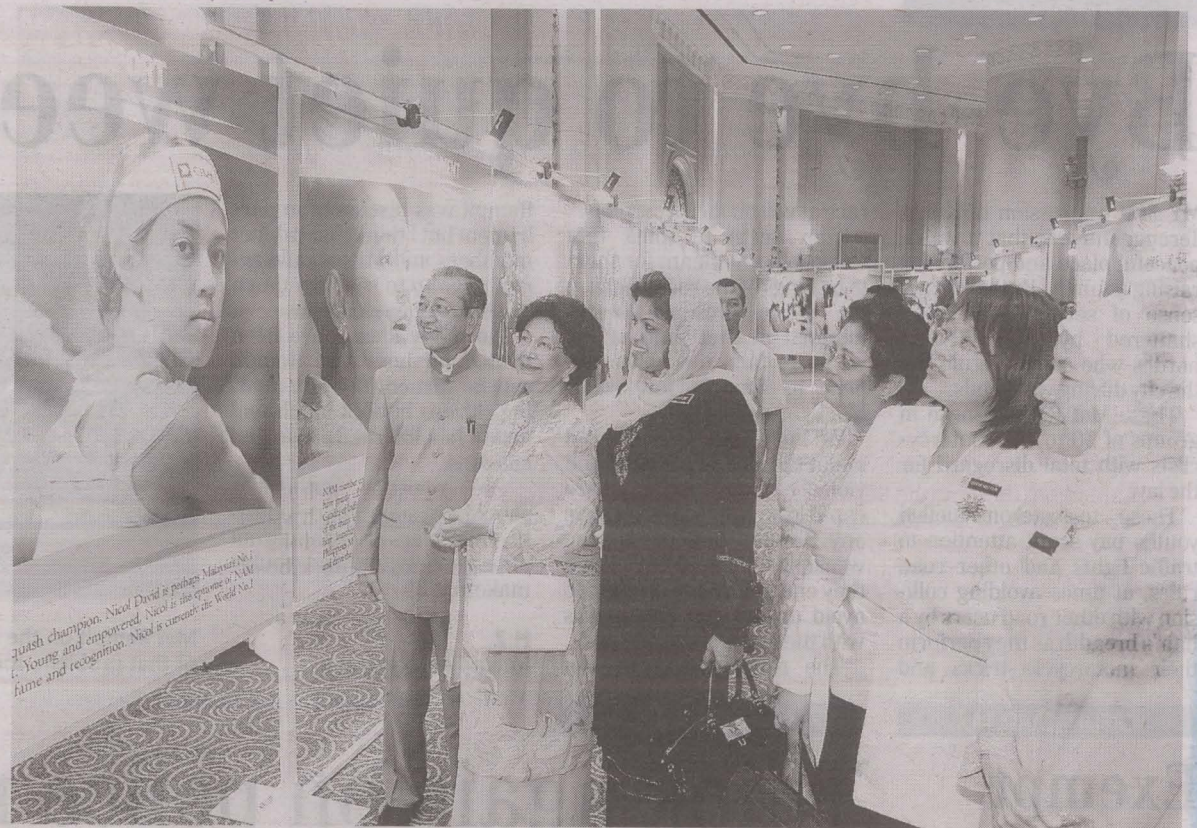
On a more serious note, Dr Mahathir pointed out that women were far more meticulous in what they did, and had demonstrated an admirable willingness to face up to challenges.

But as participants observed — and as expressed by Women, Family and Community Development Minister Datuk Seri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil in her speech — much of what women in Malaysia now enjoy has been made possible largely through his efforts.

Under Dr Mahathir's tenure, the National Policy on Women was formulated; a special chapter on Women and Development was incorporated into the Sixth Malaysia Plan; and the Women, Family and Community Development Ministry was established.

Indeed, much has been done, and women have a lot to be thankful for. But everything that is good and all the progress that has been achieved comes with a price. Is it too high to pay? Women now juggle careers and family. It is difficult, if not impossible — one or the other will inevitably fall, no matter how skilled the juggler.

A high-flying CEO once admitted,



(From left) Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, Women, Family and Community Development Minister Datuk Seri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil, Director of NAM Institute for the Empowerment of Women Datuk Rafiah Salim, Senator Datin Paduka Chew Mei Fun and Tan Sri Faizah Mohd Tahir admire a portrait of Datuk Nicole David at NIEW Gender Series Exhibition show at the JW Marriott Hotel, yesterday.

off-the-record during an interview, that she hadn't been there through much of her children's growing-up years. She would return home when they were already asleep on most days, and left their care largely to the maid. She endeavoured to spend quality time with them during the school holidays, but could usually only accommodate a five-day break abroad at most.

She was grateful that they had

"turned out well" despite it, and were now pursuing their studies in prestigious universities abroad.

But not everyone is as lucky. Not many can have their cake and eat it too. Boorish, indiscipline children, rising numbers of adolescents seeking psychiatric help, and all manner of decadent behaviour among pre-pubescent previously only seen in horror movies, attest to this.

Flexi-hours, telecommuting, and

the setting up of creches at workplaces may help alleviate the burden to a certain extent. But it remains that it is difficult to follow in the footsteps of high-achieving women. Not impossible, Dr Mahathir stressed. But certainly very tough. Onerous. Backbreaking even. Something always has to give in the end.

The question is, which is it?

■ sling@nst.com.my