

WOMEN'S RIGHTS HAVE evolved since the days of "bra burning" says, Betty Chew Gek Cheng.

The DAP assemblywoman for Durian Daun is responding to a question about whether the politically correct Western accent of 'women's rights' might be one reason for its seemingly low 'take-up' in Malaysia.

'For example, [Malaysian] single mothers fought hard to be recognised as legal guardian in the passports of their children and finally succeeded. The outrage over abuses women suffer from time to time have also helped to spur new laws and a corresponding change in attitudes towards the women, that's why the DAP encourages abused women to speak out publicly – so that they can be heard and seen.'

Still, 'women's rights' does not appear to enjoy a bedrock of social values from which to build a better place. 'In Malaysia, usually after something has happened, we see ad-hoc remedies introduced... Maybe it's due to the male-dominated society; it is difficult to change values and perceptions towards women if their needs are not understood.'

And values – and then behaviours – are changed by actively engaging with our public representatives and participating in the policy-making process, she observes. 'Rights are never given freely; they must be actively sought. Women themselves must still seek and fight for equal opportunity and treatment.'

That said, Chew sincerely believes that suburban Malaysian housewives are politically aware 'but many choose not to get involved due to family and work commitments until later... Unless of course they have an understanding partner to shoulder the burden together.'

Politics. 'It was something that we – family, neighbours, friends – always talked about,' says Betty. 'It was part of our daily lives; it was always a topic of conversation. Perhaps being Malacca-born and bred had something to do with it, or the fact that we lived in a kampung, and just about everyone we came into contact with every day talked about politics!'

She does admit, however, that when she married her husband, Lim Guan Eng, she was all prepared to be the woman behind the successful man.

Despite the early political baptism ('The whole family was politically aware; I can't remember a time when we weren't') there was little to distract her from her mass communications studies, and subsequently, the law degree she pursued. She was inadvertently preparing herself for a political career; she just didn't realise it. But with Lim's incarceration on sedition charges in 1998, the focus shifted to her, and she assumed the position with grace.

Today, the National Vice-Chairperson of DAP Wanita also runs a legal practice and adeptly juggles being a wife, mother of three, people's representative, legal



IT'S IN THE BLOOD

BETTY CHEW GEK CHENG
BY Majella Gomes & Jason Tan

counsel (sometimes free of charge to her constituents), and advocate of women's rights.

'I can do what I do because of unstinting family support,' she readily concedes. 'For women to be in politics, the family needs to be supportive because this kind of work is incredibly time-consuming. The residents of my old kampung, which is now part of my constituency, have been marvellously supportive too. They even helped out when I was running for election – I think they like the fact that I'm one of their own!'

Even so, Chew has localised her political life in order to accommodate family commitments. She also cuts down on evening engagements to be with the family. Being on her own turf also cushions the rough and tumble of the political arena, and she is thankful that her unpleasant experiences have been relatively few and far between.

One was the dissent that arose from her nomination by the party to stand for election for the Durian Daun state seat in Malacca. There were allegations of nepotism; as Mrs Lim Guan Eng, her father-in-law is no less than Mr Opposition himself, Lim Kit Siang.

Then there were, and still are, the crass statements made by various opponents about politics being no place for women; or worse still, implying that being active in politics meant dereliction of family duties, making her a bad wife and mother; and all manner of comments that demean the status of women in general.

Sexist remarks stopped fazing her long ago. The only regrettable thing about these, she says, is that it reflects badly on the intelligence level of those making them.

Agreeing that gender-sensitization may be necessary for many elected representatives, she indicates that if

anything, unflattering remarks about women in politics have only served to strengthen her resolve to increase women's awareness of their rights, and get them more concertedly involved in issues that affect them.

'Women need to be more aware of issues regardless of ethnicity or political affiliation,' Betty stresses. 'We need to stand together and be aware of the repercussions that we will have to deal with if we don't recognize and handle the issues correctly.'

She cites divorce as an example of how being ignorant can really hurt. For instance, women are often unaware of their rights pertaining to maintenance. Errant spouses get away with not paying, and there is little enforcement to compel them to do so, despite the court order. It is doubly painful when the woman has young children to care for.

There is no way to overcome this other than by moving for greater awareness through better education and information dissemination. But Chew is hopeful because, she says, there is evidence that more women are seeking information and are beginning to understand the issues, if the increase in membership of NGOs – particularly women-centred NGOs – is anything to go by.

'It could be that women are more educated now, and they are more willing to engage in these issues because they understand how they are affected,' she says. 'But I'd really like to see women across the board coming forward, regardless of educational background.'

Ultimately, Chew says, 'It is about choice. Women will come to the realisation that the personal choices they make are not so much the issue, as having the choice to decide and direct their own lives.'

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