

DISMAY OVER PREMIER HEADING WOMEN'S MINISTRY, 10 APR 2012

The Joint Action Group for Gender Equality (JAG) is dismayed to learn that the Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak has taken over the portfolio of the outgoing Minister of Women, Family and Community Development, Sharizat Abdul Jalil.

This undermines the government's purported commitment towards ensuring that women occupy 30 percent of decision-making positions.

It makes a mockery of all the time, effort and resources that have been poured into making this a reality.

Prior to 2001, women's affairs was under the purview of the Prime Minister's Department, taken care of by a deputy minister within this department.

Eleven years later, we are uncertain what it means for women of Malaysia, that this portfolio has been returned to the stables of the Prime Minister's office.

From our experience, women's affairs languished at the bottom of the pile when it used to be located in this office.

What we need is a standalone Ministry for Women, one which can focus its energies on women rather than compete with other equally important concerns of other constituencies: the elderly, children, Orang Asli, persons with disabilities, etc.

Does this move mean that after 55 years of being in power, there is really no one else within the BN component parties who is capable of taking over the women's portfolio?

If so, what does this mean for Malaysian women when women's leadership within the ruling government cannot be entrusted to take charge of our concerns?

We are also surprised that none of the wanita wings of these parties have protested that women's representation in cabinet is reduced, suggesting again that after all these years, they remain subservient to male interests within the ruling political parties in the country.

Or does this mean that after 55 years of being in power, the government, and in particular, the prime minister, is finally taking Malaysian women seriously?

Over the last decade or so, it has become increasingly apparent that more and more authority is being concentrated in the office of the prime minister.

If the prime minister directly taking over women's affairs means that the concerns of Malaysian women will be addressed with greater urgency and efficiency, then JAG looks forward to the following actions:

1. Enact:

- i. Legislation to incorporate the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) into national law;
- ii. A Gender Equality Act;
- iii. A new Muslim Family Law based on the principles of equality and justice to ensure that Muslim women enjoy the same rights as men and as Malaysian women of other faiths;
- iv. A Sexual Harassment Act; and
- v. A Freedom of Information Act.

2. Reform:

- i. Article 15 of the Federal Constitution to give women the same citizenship rights as men with regards to their non-Malaysian spouse;
- ii. Schedule II of the Federal Constitution to allow women to confer citizenship status on their children even when the child is born outside of Malaysia;
- iii. The Law Reform (Marriage and Divorce) Act 1976;
- iv. The Parliamentary Standing Orders to prohibit sexist remarks;
- v. The Penal Code to criminalise marital rape, stalking, and domestic violence which is psychological in nature;
- vi. The Local Government Act 1976 to enable elections at the local government level;
- vii. The Employment Act to recognise informal work such as domestic work and home-based work.

3. Establish a national steering committee on gender equality that aims to eliminate discrimination against women and takes proactive measures to fulfil women's right to equality.

4. Set-up a permanent Select Committee on Gender Equality and Non-Discrimination to review, recommend and advocate for the mainstreaming of gender equality into national policies and budgets.

5. Form a permanent Standing Committee on Integrity and Governance to advocate for legal reforms to bring about greater transparency, accountability and participation.

6. Ensure that at least 30% of decision-making posts be reserved for women, especially in the private sector, in parliament, and statutory bodies like SUHAKAM as well as ad-hoc commissions.

7. Put in place a targeted, bench-marked plan and structure (that includes civil society) to implement Malaysia's international human rights obligations via recommendations of the relevant treaty bodies, and the Universal Periodic Review.

8. Improve the collection of data on women in the country and make this available publically.

This includes ensuring that the data is disaggregated by sex, ethnicity and other relevant variables.

9. Institutionalise a national mechanism comprising enforcement agencies and relevant NGOs that will meet 4 times a year to streamline Standard Operating Procedures on domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment, child abuse and other forms of violence against women and children.

10. Institutionalise regular dialogues between MPs and civil society organisations to bring about substantive democratic and gender responsive policies.

Women's groups in particular should be consulted on all issues relating to women's rights and welfare before any policy decision or laws are formulated in this regard.

We remind the Prime Minister and his government that women make up just under half the population of the country.

With the 13th general election around the corner, we will also not hesitate to take our growing list of grievances to the ballot box when the time comes.

Released by the Joint Action Group for Gender Equality, which comprises:

All Women's Action Society (AWAM)

Sisters in Islam (SIS)

Women's Aid Organisation (WAO)

Perak Women for Women Society (PWW)

Women's Centre for Change, Penang (WCC)

Persatuan Sahabat Wanita Selangor (PSWS)

Sabah Women's Action Resource Group (SAWO)