

JAG DEMANDS LONG TERM SOLUTION TO END ALL SEXISM AND GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN PARLIAMENT, 17 MAY 2007

Press Statement by Joint Action Group for Gender Equality

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The Joint Action Group for Gender Equality (JAG) is disappointed with the poor response from the two Members of Parliament (MPs), Datuk Bung Mokhtar Radin (BN-Kinabatangan) and Datuk Mohd Said Yusuf (BN-Jasin) and the statement made by YB Datuk Sri Mohamed Nazri Abdul Aziz (BN-Padang Rengkas), chair of the Parliamentary Human Rights Caucus. Their responses clearly show that they have not fully understood what being gender sensitive is all about.

Yesterday, YB Datuk Bung Mokhtar Radin (BN-Kinabatangan) made an apology to all Malaysian women for his “unintended remarks” but promptly retracted his statement following a Cabinet directive to discuss the matter with the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development. (Star, 16 May 2007).

YB Datuk Sri Mohamed Nazri Abdul Aziz (BN-Padang Rengkas) made a statement in support of YB Datuk Bung Mokhtar, stating that “to apologise to Fong is not on. I don’t agree...”. YB Datuk Sri Mohamed Nazri further defended the remarks made by the errant MPs by saying that he was “sure they didn’t have an agenda against Fong”. Excuses were also made that in Parliament, emotions sometimes run high and at these moments, it is, according to Datuk Seri Mohamed Nazri Abdul Aziz, acceptable for such statements to be made (Star, 17 May 2007). Meanwhile, Datuk Mohd Said Yusuf (BN-Jasin) cancelled his press conference yesterday and said that he will make a statement after he met up with YB Dato Shahrizat Abdul Jalil. (Sun, 16 May 2007)

Unfortunately, by these actions, the following messages are being sent to the Malaysian citizens:

1. Sexist remarks are deemed to be a “women’s issue”

The fact that the Cabinet is not able to make a clear stand that it is against sexism, which is a form of gender discrimination, raises doubts as to the role of the Gender Cabinet Committee in upholding gender equality and women’s rights in the country. JAG is seriously concerned, as recent events have suggested, that the Gender Cabinet Committee has been set up as a mere showcase and is practically toothless.

Equally worrying is this: both the Cabinet and Parliament have dealt with an incidence of misconduct of its members, a disciplinary issue which they ought to act upon immediately, by passing it over to the Women's Ministry. This only goes to show that sexist remarks are regarded as a "women's issue". The failure to appreciate that such remarks affect both men and women shows a lack of gender sensitivity and again reflects the underlying culture of patriarchy in these institutions.

JAG views such sexist remarks as not only a violation of women's dignity but also an infringement of the human rights principle of non-discrimination. Therefore, these issues are the concern of all citizens.

2. Disrespectful behaviour is tolerated in Parliament

Malaysian citizens have voted for our Members of Parliament to represent our concerns. Our understanding is that they will do so in an intelligent, rational and sensitive manner. By excusing the behaviour of the two MPs, Datuk Sri Mohamed Nazri Abdul Aziz has effectively condoned the use of low level coffee shop talk, including foul language and sexual innuendoes, in the august Dewan Rakyat.

Healthy political debate includes basic respect and courtesy for women as fellow human beings and MPs. Therefore, an unconditional apology is called for when one MP has breached these basic rules against a fellow MP, irrespective of gender or political affiliations.

The performance of our Members of Parliament is, sadly, a far cry from the National Mission under the Ninth Malaysia Plan. Thrust 2 of the Plan describes the need to nurture a "First Class Mentality", which is supported by a "progressive outlook as well as strong morals, ethics and values..." (9MP, p.33).

As a promoter of the National Mission, the Prime Minister, himself, has to show leadership and break the silence against violators of human rights which includes women's rights.

3. Promotion of an entrenched patriarchal culture

The defence of the sexist remarks made by prominent MPs and the Deputy Prime Minister himself reflects an underlying, deeply entrenched patriarchal culture that thrives on gender discrimination. Such a culture, which upholds male domination in society, is systemic and ingrained in our social structures and institutions.

In this context, the sexist remarks that were made recently are not an isolated case. Such remarks have been tolerated with no disciplinary actions taken by the Parliament since 1995. In 2002, we met up with the Parliamentary Speaker to work towards ending sexism and discrimination in Parliament. As we can see, all these efforts have come to naught.

We regret to note the government's reluctance to resolve these long standing issues.

JAG therefore calls upon the Prime Minister, who is the Chair of the Cabinet Committee on Gender Equality, to take immediate action to put into place long-term mechanisms to end all forms of sexism and discrimination in Parliament.

We sincerely hope that the Cabinet and Parliament will heed the demands of JAG, civil society and Malaysian citizens at large and take immediate action to suspend Datuk Bung Mokhtar Radin (BN-Kinabatangan) and Datuk Mohd Said Yusuf (BN-Jasin) without pay and allowances until their suspension is over. For that matter, any Member of Parliament who behaves in such a manner in Parliament should be similarly penalised.

Malaysians deserve better quality representatives in Parliament. Enough is enough!

Signed by

Maria Chin binti Abdullah

Executive Director

Women's Development Collective

For and on behalf of the

Joint Action Group for Gender Equality

Women's Development Collective

All Women's Action Society

Women's Aid Organisation

Sisters In Islam

Women's Centre for Change

Malaysian Trade Union Congress

Women's Committee