

JAG REFUTES WITH PM, 5 OCT 2012

Joint Action Group for Gender Equality (JAG) urges Prime Minister to take his role as the Minister of Women, Family and Community Development seriously

The Joint Action Group for Gender Equality (JAG) is appalled and extremely disappointed by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak's callous dismissal of the need for women's rights groups in Malaysia on the premise that equality was given "from the start".

The Prime Minister is remiss to use women's suffrage as a sole indicator for equality. Despite women having fought equally for independence and gaining the vote, Malaysia's first female Minister, Tun Tan Sri Fatimah Hashim, was only appointed in 1969, a full 12 years after independence. Today, as in 1969, Malaysia only has one female minister in Cabinet, far short of the 30% indication required by CEDAW.

While the right to vote is an important indicator of the state's recognition of women's rights, equality is also measured in other substantive ways.

If Malaysian women were on equal footing as their male counterparts, one telling sign would be a high ranking on the Global Gender Gap Index, which captures the magnitude and scope of gender-based disparities in four key areas of basic rights – economic, political, education and health. As it stands, Malaysia's ranking has dropped from its overall ranking of 72 in 2006 to 97 among 134 countries in 2011. Our country joins the bottom quarter, made up largely of developing countries in the Middle East and Africa.

Laws and policies in this country currently too do not reflect women's equal access to justice. If women were truly beneficiaries of equality since 1957, how is it that women's rights groups had to fight for the Domestic Violence Act in 1994, and gender as a category for non-discrimination was only included in the Federal Constitution in 2001. To this day, a Malaysian mother has no legal right to confer citizenship to her child in the event that the child is born overseas. A Sexual Harassment Bill has yet to be tabled, and Muslim women continue to be sidelined in the continuous regressive amendments made to the Islamic Family Law (Federal Territories) Act 1984 and the corresponding Islamic Family Law Enactment of the States in Malaysia.

Such a statement by the Prime Minister, who is also the Minister of Women, Family and Community Development, belies and belittles the reality women face on a daily basis – the violence, harassment and discrimination – which Government policies have not adequately addressed. The recently released CEDAW alternative report comprehensively documents all forms of discrimination that women in Malaysia continue to face today. For those of us who have to deal with the problems women

face on the ground, the Prime Minister's claim does not inspire any confidence in his leadership of the country and the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development.

We urge the Prime Minister to take his role as the Minister of Women, Family and Community Development seriously and propose substantive measures with corresponding budgetary considerations in accordance with CEDAW principles to ensure that Malaysia is on the march towards equality.

Press statement released by the Joint Action Group for Gender Equality (JAG), which comprises:

Sisters in Islam (SIS)

Women's Aid Organisation (WAO)

Perak Women for Women Society (PWW)

Sabah Women's Action Resource Group (SAWO)

All Women's Action Society (AWAM)

Persatuan Kesedaran Komuniti Selangor (EMPOWER)

Women's Centre for Change (WCC)