

RESPECT WOMEN AND END ALL SEXIST COMMENTS, 22 MAY 2007

Barely has the dust of the “bocor incident” settled in the House of Parliament when we are jolted with yet another gender insensitive statement. It is outrageous that the Works Minister, Datuk Seri S Samy Vellu finds it necessary to draw a parallel between the dilapidated state of the 43 year old Parliament House which is in need of maintenance and renovation to the looks of a woman of 50 years. This is not the first time the Minister has made such statements. In October 2005, he was quoted to have compared “toilets to new brides”.

The Joint Action Group for Gender Equality (JAG) finds it is inexcusable that one of the longest serving Cabinet Ministers in the country chose a sexist comment to make his point on the need for renovation works on the Parliament House. His remarks reinforce the gender stereotype that a woman’s worth lies with her extrinsic attributes (looks) and not with her intrinsic qualities as a human being. His statement and comparison are demeaning and an affront to women of all ages as they reduce women to objects of beauty, depreciating in value over time.

The Works Minister’s comment taken together with the recent ‘bocor’ remark, also makes a mockery of the role and function of the Gender Cabinet Committee on Gender Equality and the government’s ratification of the international Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) as well as the Federal Constitution which prohibits discrimination on the basis of gender.

JAG calls upon the Prime Minister as Chairperson of the Gender Cabinet Committee to take this matter seriously and put an immediate stop to sexist comments from Cabinet and Parliament in general. JAG further urges the Prime Minister to ensure that all elected representatives undergo training on gender sensitivity on a regular basis.

For far too long, elected representatives have repeatedly made derogatory remarks against women, ranging from comments on their bodily functions to statements on their physical attributes, and have gotten away with such sexist language. Why are women constantly made easy targets and objects of ridicule, equated with a problem or used as a comparison whenever something goes wrong? These comments show a complete lack of gender sensitivity and reflect a deeply ingrained culture of patriarchy as well as a total lack of respect for women.

One can only wonder what it would take for our elected representatives to understand that gender insensitive and discriminatory remarks about women violate women’s dignity and basic rights. Perhaps all it needs is for the public to send a clear message at the next elections. Gender insensitive leaders should just be voted out.

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On behalf of Joint Action Group for Gender Equality

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