

THE NEED TO THINK DIFFERENTLY, 24 MAY 2007

Two Penang state assemblymen, Shabudin Yahaya (BN-Permatang Berangan) and Datuk Jasmin Mohamed (BN- Sungai Dua) reportedly blamed women's provocative dressing for sexual crimes. Apparently women who dress provocatively "menggoda (lure) and mencabar (challenges) men".

The Women's Centre for Change, Penang (WCC) is dismayed that the stereotype of a woman as a seductress, inciting by her provocative dressing, the poor innocent male to commit a heinous sexual crime, is so deeply entrenched in the minds of some state assemblymen.

The quality of reasoning exhibited by these two elected representatives leaves much to be desired. Men and boys are also victims of sexual crimes. Does this mean that male victims of sexual crimes are to be blamed for wearing provocative trousers?

A person's remarks and behavior reflect his thinking. If a person chooses to think of a woman as a sexual object, he will refer to her and treat her as one. Unless and until he chooses to think differently, he will continue to disrespect women in his thoughts, words and actions. Similarly, the motivation for a sexual crime is rooted in the mind of the perpetrator. Hence, the blame for the sexual crime is and should be with the perpetrator and not the victim. As long as society continues to blame victims of sexual crimes, the perpetrators will get away with the crime and the victims will not be able to come forward and get the help and support they truly need.

It is a fallacy that 'provocative' dressing leads to sexual crimes. And yet this fallacy persists not just in the minds of some men but also in the minds of some women. Society should be aware that to promote the notion that covering up from head to toe will protect a woman from a sexual assault, is to give a woman a false sense of security. There are many examples of modestly clad women who have been brutally raped or sexually assaulted. The cold, hard reality is that a woman can be a victim of a sexual assault at any time, at any place irrespective of her age, dressing, social or cultural background.

The sexist remarks that continue to emanate from elected representatives in Cabinet, in Parliament and most recently the Penang State Assembly are a sad reflection of the existing mindset among our elected leaders. This mindset is unacceptable and must change. We simply cannot have elected leaders who perpetuate myths and stereotypes which have serious consequences for women and victims of sexual crimes in this country.

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