

## TREAT WOMEN AS EQUAL CITIZENS, 30 APR 2008

Ms Mabel Teoh's joy of becoming a first time mother in Switzerland turned into shock when she discovered that if her child is born overseas, the child will not be entitled for Malaysian citizenship unless her husband is a Malaysian (New Straits Times, 25 April 2008). The only recourse left for Ms Teoh is to fly thousands of kilometres back to Malaysia to deliver her baby in order for her child to obtain Malaysian citizenship.

The fact is gender inequality still exists for Malaysian women despite 50 years of Merdeka. Malaysian women with foreign spouse face blatant discrimination while this does not apply to Malaysian men living abroad with foreign wives. Underpinning this discrimination is the archaic patriarchal value that sees women as being worth less than men and who can only be dependants on their husbands.

In simple words, Malaysia still treats women as second class citizens. This is an outright injustice and unfairness.

Ironically, the government amended the Article 8 (2) of the Federal Constitution in 2001, which recognizes that women are equal before the law and entitled to equal protection of the law. Internationally, Malaysia ratified the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination of Women (CEDAW) way back in 1995. There has been many proclamations by the government that women in Malaysia do not face gender discrimination, but right at the heart of the matter, women still face gender inequality and discrimination, both overt and covert.

Another area of discrimination is the plight of foreign spouses of Malaysians, both women and men, living in Malaysia. They face many difficulties trying to get permanent residence status to allow them to stay in this country and have the right to work. Currently, for most of them, their stay are dependent on their Malaysian spouses. If the Malaysian spouse does not renew the spouse social pass, s/he has to leave the country or face deportation. Foreign wives who experience domestic violence have to face the daunting decision whether to take legal action to protect themselves and their children for if they do, they face the threat of their social passes not being renewed. Many have no choice but to suffer in the silence of their homes.

The Joint Action Group for Gender Equality (JAG) has been lobbying for the removal of such discriminatory laws in the last two decades.

JAG urges the new Women, Family and Community Development Minister, Datuk Dr Ng Yen Yen to take pro-active steps to review and amend all laws which discriminates women including those on citizenship and immigration.

After all, isn't 50 years of waiting enough? Shouldn't women be treated as equal citizens in this country or do lawmakers still view the issue of women's citizenship as secondary and not to be taken seriously?

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On behalf of JAG

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