

Women's Empowerment?

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Letter to the editor

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The Prime Minister's recent appointment of an advisor to oversee the development of women entrepreneurs and professionals is a piece-meal action to fulfill the government's commitments made in the Tenth Malaysia Plan.

Having an advisor duplicates the portfolio of the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development. It is inefficient and appears to undermine the Ministry's authority. In the past, the Ministry has conducted programmes to develop women entrepreneurs. Instead of appointing an advisor, the government should evaluate the effectiveness of such programmes. How many participants became entrepreneurs? Are they making profits? What business sectors produce the most successful women entrepreneurs?

In the Tenth Malaysia Plan, the Government commits to the empowerment of women by increasing "its efforts towards addressing issues confronting women to enable them to realise their full potential and participate more effectively in the new economic and social development of the country." A major issue confronting women is crime. Bukit Aman statistics show that victims of crime are predominantly women. Crime disempowers women and limits their participation in the nation's economic and social life; it limits where they go, how they travel, what they wear, and so on.

Cultural and social barriers also prevent women's participation in leadership positions. The current education system (both formal and informal) train women to follow rather than lead and there is very little support for women who show that they have leadership ability.

The focus on developing women entrepreneurs and professionals alone will not help women to achieve 30% in decision-making positions, nor increase their labour force participation. It will not resolve other impediments to women's full participation in the life of the country.

Instead, the Government should incorporate the Women's Convention (CEDAW – the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) into national law; remove reservations to international conventions; practise gender budgeting; gender sensitise the public and private institutions; reform discriminatory laws, policies and practises.

Respect for women as an equal partner in nation-building, enabling conditions and affirmative actions will go a long way to enable women to realise their full potential and participate fully in the country's development.

This is real empowerment.

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