

What women leaders say about the theme 'Women: A Force For Unity'

DE 30/10/2011 8

WE owe it to the women for a great nation like Malaysia which has developed, grown and enjoyed peace and stability for 54 years. We have peace because we are a united people, and unity has a very humble beginning, said Member of Parliament for Batu Sapi, Datin Linda Tsen.

Noting that a country like ours was not born united, she said our forefathers came here to seek their fortunes and to settle down.

"They brought along their traditions and culture together with a deep desire to live in peace and unity in their new homeland. While the menfolk were busy, the womenfolk were left to look after the family. If these women did not teach their children the importance of unity in the family so long ago, we would not be the peace-loving nation that we are today," she contended.

Tsen continued: "Every community, the Malays, the Chinese, the Indians and all others, know that a unified family is a strong, peaceful and loving family.

"Who holds the key to this? Definitely, it's the matriarch, the lady of the house, a wife, a mother...a woman. How true the saying is - The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world!"

Put simply, it is in the humble home that the seed of unity is sown and nurtured.

"Naturally, it is every mother's dream to keep her family united, to see them grow, get married and have lots of children. When these children grow up, they in turn will project the importance of unity to the next generation.

"And so, this unity in the home will grow and spread to the community, to the state and to the nation," she pointed out.

On the other hand, Tsen argued that if the woman sows the seed of discontent, hatred and violence, the children, the family and the country will in turn suffer its dire consequences.

"So no one can deny that the women of today still hold the key to this force of unity. Let us celebrate and give recognition to the women for a job well done.

"Given this borderless global community, it's more important than ever that the woman be aware that they can be and are a force of unity," she concluded.

There are three dimensions that women must embrace in order to become a force for unity as we march forward to become a developed nation by Year 2020.

Advancing this view, Deputy State Secretary (Administration), Datuk Maznah Ghani said women as a driving and unifying force can be an ultimate goal of women in Sabah.

Firstly, she said women need recognition and this had been achieved two or three decades ago when women ministers were appointed to the cabinet at



Linda



Maznah



Mama Anne



Mariati



Adeline



Noni



Mary



Prof Dr Rosnah

the national and state levels.

"So, there is no problem with that and hence, women must be thankful to the Government for the recognition," she said.

However, in the same breath, she reasoned that recognition alone will not ensure women's success.

"What remains certain is that women must not relinquish all opportunities to men easily but must strive harder to get them. In other words, recognition alone will not elevate women to positions of authority but that recognition must be complemented by two other dimensions," Maznah shared.

She said the second dimension called for elevation of standards for status upliftment.

"This is to equip women with knowledge and skills to be on par with or better than our male counterparts. I think this has been achieved too as reflected in women's successful foray into male domains like administration, management, engineering, technology, information & communication technology (ICT) and business. These are the driving sectors in the years to come."

Amidst the current achievements of women and rising number of women role models in a diversity of fields, the Deputy State Secretary cautioned against complacency.

"Strive to be the best in all areas as had been seen in countries such as Australia, Britain, United States and Germany."

Thirdly, Maznah said women must push aggressively and strategically to position themselves as a force to be reckoned with. This can be achieved if the State Government offer them more challenging roles and come up with initiatives.

"I believe in strategic planning for women to be in the forefront. To make this happen, discussion is important among women's associations, pressure groups, activists, and not forgetting the Sabah Women's Affairs Department (Jhewa).

"I reckon that women must demonstrate their capabilities to prove their prowess. Don't struggle on your own as the best in women can be uncovered if we work in unison and not in disarray," said the Deputy State Secretary.

Women can be a force for unity if they possess the qualities of dignity, self-respect, self-worth and consideration for others, said prominent social activist, Anne Keyworth.

She is saddened to see how

some 'heartless' women wreck up marriages and break up families in the process causing a lot of misery, hardship and social ills.

"Sometimes I wonder whether the age-old saying 'The Hand That Rocks The Cradle Rules The World' still holds water. Or are they rocking the chair? By this, I mean they will go out of their way to get what they want, regardless of the devastation caused by their undesirable act.

"We have to be honest with ourselves. Don't destroy another woman's life, don't destroy another family, please. There are many 'fishes' in the ocean," she appealed.

Over the last 40 years, Keyworth, popularly known as Mama Anne, has dealt with numerous cases involving victims of broken homes. "I really feel sorry for the children who have to suffer the consequences of selfish adult behaviour. At the moment, I am handling a similar case," she said without elaborating.

On women competing with one another for positions in the public or private sector, Mama Anne said it is healthy if competition is based on merits. "But don't use dirty tactics to gain what you want at the expense of others who are more qualified."

Chairperson of the Sabah Women's Advisory Council (MPWS), Datuk Hjh Mariati Robert said "Women: A Force For Unity" was chosen as the National and State-level Women's Day theme because it was intended to convey the message that women are natural agents of peace and unity.

While acknowledging that women are indeed so, she felt that it should also reflect that women do so on their own terms.

"Peace and unity are usually achieved when all parties agree on issues, agree to disagree if necessary but are still committed to achieving the common good.

"Give and take are key ingredients to achieve peace and unity," she said.

Mariati, however, felt that women should not just assume the major role in giving but must also rightfully take what is deemed due to them based on merits.

Besides being a force for unity, women, she said, should also unite and their efforts to do so should be visible despite differences in ideology or status.

"Women in authority, power and influence should support

one another without being too focused on what is in it for them. Perhaps they should channel their time and energy to improve the lives of less fortunate women, especially those in the rural areas, in terms of income-earning, health and other social benefits," said Mariati.

Women can be an asset to the nation's goal of promoting unity amongst its people, in the opinion of MPWS Founder Chairperson, Datuk Adeline Leong.

"It is widely accepted that when you educate a woman, you educate a family. So when women see the importance of national unity for our future generation, they will influence and mould their children to live in harmony with other races. As such, women play a pivotal role in promoting national unity," she said.

And from the perspective of women non-governmental organisations (NGOs), Leong observed that these consist of women of all ethnic groups and they work together for a common goal of uplifting women's status and giving them the opportunities for empowerment in the workplace and society.

"In this context, women NGOs are a prime example of how women of all races can gather together and run an organisation in unity towards a common objective. Indeed they are a force for unity," she said.

Citing an example, Leong said in the Sabah Women Entrepreneurs and Professionals Association (Swepa), there are women of diverse racial backgrounds coming together for a common good and that is to enhance the careers and businesses of members.

"What comes into play is the concept of women supporting women, and women helping women to succeed in their professional lives. A sisterhood is thus established whereby the esprit de corps in this fraternity unites all its members under one roof, regardless of differences."

Given the fruitfulness of such sisterhood, Leong believed that what we need is a brotherhood similar in nature that will transcend the existing diversity to forge a unity for a common goal - to see that our country achieves a developed status by the Year 2020. "I hope the men will not hesitate to follow the fine examples set by women NGOs," she said.

Truly, women with their mul-

iple roles in society are not just a force for unity but also a force of unity.

So remarked former Deputy State Secretary, Datuk Noni J. Said who thinks that the intrinsic value of women in the unification of the country, more so today than ever, cannot be ignored.

"Women are already a force of unity. Women's influence and power is reflected in the age-old saying 'Behind every successful man, there is a woman'.

"The influence of women in the home and presence of women in the governing and corporate bodies as well as the arts and media is indisputable.

"The rise of women globally is apparent. More and more women Presidents and Prime Ministers are elected to public office around the world.

"As a proud Malaysian woman, I am indeed happy to see the emergence of more women of influence. This provides an avenue for women's voices to be heard and where women's innate sensitivity and maternal instincts can be utilised beyond the household and into our society," she said.

From her observation, although many women today strive to carve successful careers, like a force of nature, they still manage to nourish the home with their love, care and value system.

"We cannot deny that a person's values are sketched and nurtured at home. And it is from this collection of valued individuals that unity can be forged."

Historically, women took the backseat in all the glories of success stories "but today, recognition for women's accomplishments has gained a foothold in the media and society at large."

Statistically, Noni noted, there are more women graduates than men. However, the number of high-ranking women in the workforce pales in comparison.

"In this digital world nowadays, besides having their say at home and in the workplace, women too want to have more say in how the Government runs the country. They too want to elect leaders whom they can trust to lead the country."

Personally, Noni is a strong believer in the partnership and collaboration between men and women, not only at home or in the workplace but also in the country's administration and governance.

"It would be a great shame if the vast pool of talents among

women is not tapped accordingly in Malaysia's quest to leap to the First World by 2020. In fact, it would be a gross loss if women power is not harnessed in the nation's endeavour to compete successfully among other nations."

However, Noni is convinced that our leaders at state and national levels are gender-sensitive.

"They are leaders who are fair and honourable, brimming with confidence and not at all feel threatened by women. Neither will they ignore women-related issues. On the contrary, they put the interests of the State and Nation foremost in their hearts."

Educationist Datuk Mary Yap Kain Ching looks at the National Women's Day theme in relation to women empowerment in nation-building.

"Women empowerment is a pre-requisite for women to become a force for unity. Unless women are given equal opportunity to empowerment, the concept of women as a force for unity in national development will remain a dream yet to be realised," she asserted.

Quoting the Dictionary of Contemporary English, she defined empowerment as giving power or authority by legal or official means. It also refers to giving one the means to achieve something or giving what it takes to become stronger and more successful.

Asked where and how women would emerge as a force for unity, Yap explained:

"To me, the woman is a citizen, a worker, a professional, a director, a national builder and last but not least, a mother and a homemaker.

"Metaphorically, a nation is a conglomeration of homes and the woman is fully involved from its cleaning to full management.

This implies clearly that women should be granted the opportunity to participate in key decision-making both in the home and in political, public and private structures.

"This is because the well-known old adage which posits that 'when you educate a man, you educate an individual, but when you educate a woman you educate and empower a nation' is still relevant in our time today."

While our country takes pride in the implementation of the Government's Policy of at least 30pc Women's Participation in Decision-Making in the Public Sector

(2004) and Private Sector (2011), Yap noted that the plight of women in general is still in a state of enigma.

"Yes, we all know that education is a powerful tool in the emancipation and empowerment of women. Although women represent half of our nation's population, the growth of women's education in rural areas is pathetically slow," she lamented.

"Even the United Nations and experts in women's liberation movements have argued for women's education as the basic step to improve women's socio-economic status."

Against this backdrop, the inevitable question that comes to Yap's mind as we think about empowering women to be a force for unity is:

"Are we planning and implementing context-specific agendas to bridge the existing educational gap between the urban and rural womenfolk?"

According to her, a disturbing percentage of rural women in our country is still illiterate.

This, she pointed out, poses a grave concern that needs to be addressed "if we desire to see women from all walks of life participate and unite as a powerful force to effect Vision 2020 alongside the concept of 1Malaysia."

"As we celebrate the 2011 Women's Day, let us also spare some thoughts for the rural women population which unfortunately is still not exposed to the privileges of urban life where education is easily accessible and professional development is readily available.

"We must ponder and strategise how we can reach out to our under-served 'sisters'," Yap said in response to a recent call by Minister of Community Development and Consumer Affairs, Datuk Hjh Azizah Mohd Dun.

Universiti Malaysia Sabah's (UMS) Prof Dr Rosnah Ismail described women as powerful agents of peace and unity.

She said women as a wife, mother and worker have the capacity to bring about the family living together harmoniously.

"Even in the workplace, they are able to exchange and share, among other things, knowledge and skills, with one another. So you can see that mutual respect, understanding and tolerance among family members filters down to the multi-racial community and from here to the State and Nation," she said, adding that unity has resulted in great progress for the country.

What keeps women united? "Basically, women are peace-loving and non-confrontational by nature. Their ability to discard differences, to forgive and forget, and collaborate in harmony leads to a state of being a complete whole. That is a plus-point."

• More on Page 11

The award recipients' stories...

DE 30/10/2011
ENTREPRENEUR Dayang Hj Khatijah Datu Hj Bachtiyal, 49, from Sandakan took home the Outstanding Woman Award. She received RM3,000 cash, a trophy, a certificate and a bouquet.

The mother of six is the Manager of Khaleeda Food Products and Sarang Putri Birdnest Industry which processes seaweed and bird's nest for the local and foreign markets.

Notably, the two important men in her life are her father, the late Datu Hj Bachtiyal Datu Tambuyong (former Deputy President of the Sabah Bumiputera Chamber of Commerce), and her spouse, who groomed her to be what she is today.

"I come from a family of business people from whom I learned the ropes of the trade. My Dad trained me from young. In the early years, my family was involved in the construction industry.

"After I had got married, I assisted my hubby in his property agency business and event management," she said.

"Khatijah, who started her own business in 2005, is currently Women Head of the Small & Medium Industry (IKS) Sector, Vice-President of IKS Sabah and a Matrade member. Since then, she has often participated in food expos outside the country.

The former Vice-President of the Association of Women Entrepreneurs in Manufacturing (AWEM) had previously won the State Competitive Entrepreneur Award presented by Yayasan Sabah and the Ministry of International Trade & Industry (Miti).

The Outstanding Women Association Award went to the State Education Department's Women Association (Pewanis) comprising 550 members and led by the President, Datin Nurul Umayra Chong. She received RM2,500 cash, a trophy, a certificate and a bouquet.

The idea of forming Pewanis was mooted by the late Datuk Dr Hamdan Mohamed. It was established on April 12, 2006 with the objective of giving a better deal in terms of career

opportunities, education and training, and meeting the needs of women officials and staff serving in the State Education Department, districts and schools.

Under the dynamic leadership of Nurul Umayra, who is the wife of the State Education Director, the Association has conducted numerous activities such as courses, talks, beauty workshops, seminars and study visits for members. One such talk is "The Rights of Muslim Women and Women's Role in Upholding the Image of the State Education Department".

"Our focus is also on the community, especially children who are important assets in nation-building," she said.

Towards this end, Pewanis is actively involved in charity and welfare activities such as donating basic necessities to needy school children, giving motivational talks to examination candidates, conducting gotong-royong and providing lessons to children who are unable to attend classes due to health problems.

In addition, the association



Chief Minister Datuk Seri Musa Aman (centre) with Minister of Community Development & Consumer Affairs, Datuk Azizah Mohd Dun (4th left), Organising Chairperson Datuk Asnimar Sukardi (left), Director of Sabah Women's Affairs Department (Jhewa), Datuk Siti Sapoo Ahok (right), MPWS Chairperson Datuk Mariati Robert (2nd right) and award recipients - Khatijah (2nd left), Rahimah (3rd left), Nurul Umayra (4th right) and Siti Noraidah (3rd right).

has assisted the Education Department in seeking funds to pay teachers in their bid to upgrade the children's academic performance. Funds were also sought for building rural hostels and school halls.

Pewanis has also applied for funds to assist the community, for example from the Sabah Credit Corporation totalling RM450,000 to build rural hostels for SK Kiawalan, Ranau and SK Bunga Raya, Keningau which are expected to be completed by year end; RM 86,000 from Petronas to organise the 5A Score Seminar for primary

school pupils; and RM135,360 from CIMB to organise English language tuition classes for weak students.

Meanwhile, 48-year-old Siti Noraidah Abdullah, a single mother of three who hails from Kg Lumat, Membakut, walked away with the Rural Entrepreneur Special Award. The accolade carries with it RM2,500 cash, a trophy, a certificate and a bouquet.

Noraidah, who first started her business in 2007, now leads a group that manufactures and supplies between 8,000 to 10,000 packets of noodles a

month. With the brand name "Mee Sit", each packet weighs some 200g, with a retail price of RM1.00 each. For those wishing to buy wholesale, it would cost RM8.00 for ten packets.

Her clients are from Beaufort, Membakut and Kota Kinabalu.

"I received my training from the Malaysian Agriculture Research and Development Institute (MARDI). Initially, there were ten of us who started the noodle making business, but many called it quits along the way due to lack of customers," Noraidah said.