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AWAM's Press Statement on Maternity "Aurat" Pants

KUALA LUMPUR, [July 6th, 2015] – Over the past week, various news outlets have reported about the introduction of maternity pants for Muslim women to cover their *aurat* (or intimate parts) through the process of childbirth. The maternity pants in question are purported to cover “thighs, ankles, and knees” with “just enough space” for the baby to make its way out.

AWAM expresses its concern at the introduction of this product in the market. We believe that the central concern in childbirth should be the health and safety of both the mother and the child, and it is imperative that the clothing a woman wears during childbirth is both safe and comfortable, without posing any significant risks during the delivery process. Most medical practitioners recommend clothing that is loose-fitting, comfortable, and breathable which can be easily removed by doctors if necessary.

Following this, the safety of the *aurat* pants is questionable as they may obstruct the movement of the woman in labour. The length of the pants may also pose a problem during delivery as it may interfere in the process of examinations. More pressingly, the fact that the pants in question only provide a small opening for the baby to “make its way out” is a cause for concern as this may compromise on a safe, unobstructed delivery process.

We also need to recognise the fact that how women perceive their own bodies and how comfortable they are with regard to exposure, including during childbirth, is intertwined with politicised Islam and body-shaming in Malaysia, and elsewhere in the world. Women are made to feel shame over their bodies, not because there is anything inherently shameful in the female form or out of an innate sense of modesty, but because of societal forces and systems that seek to dictate what is “acceptable” for women to wear, and what parts of a woman’s body should be visible in public.

AWAM is deeply perturbed by recent incidences of body-shaming in Malaysia. This includes the cases of women being refused entry in public buildings, and the verbal abuse and shaming of gymnast Farah Ann Hadi because her gymnastic wear was deemed “revealing”. We strongly condemn any parties that seek to police what women wear based on archaic notions of “modesty”.

In the context of religion, similarly, we believe that the question of what constitutes “aurat” (or intimate parts) is one that is up to the woman to decide for herself based on her own reading and interpretation of the Quran. In fact, within the global Muslim community itself, there is no universal consensus of what constitutes *aurat*, the definition of which differs from country to country, reflecting different cultural contexts and understandings of the religious texts. We would also like to draw attention to the fact that most Islamic scholars believe that it is morally permissible to expose the *aurat* in cases of emergencies such as medical procedures.

The sale of the aurat pants calls into question its necessity and role. Is this really a choice for women in labour, or are the manufacturers simply exploiting and cashing in on politicised Islam in Malaysia? We find it unthinkable that a business should attempt to profit off the trend of body-shaming and women's insecurities while further perpetuating arbitrary notions of what it means to be "modest". Any attempt to prey off women's insecurities and pander to misappropriated religious ideals needs to be critically examined if we wish to liberate women from this cycle of body-policing.
