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## **AWAM's Press Statement on Sexual Harassment in the Workplace**

**KUALA LUMPUR, [July 8<sup>th</sup>, 2015]** - The All Women's Action Society (AWAM) welcomes the statement by Deputy Women, Family and Community Development Minister Datin Paduka Chew Mei Fun that the ministry will push for a standalone sexual harassment bill as reported in The Star on July 5th, 2015. AWAM also acknowledges the role of the Ministry of Human Resources in including a section on sexual harassment in the Employment Act in 2012.

"These are commendable steps. However, women's groups have been calling for a standalone bill since 2001. The Joint Action Group for Gender Equality (JAG) even submitted a proposed bill to the ministry. It's been more than ten years since. While we recognise the need to take time to examine the impact of laws, such a delay means that women have not been able to access justice" says Betty Yeoh, AWAM's Training Advisor.

One concern with the sexual harassment section of the Employment Act, lies with the reporting mechanism. "The complaints mechanism needs to be amended to make it more supportive of complainants. Currently, there is too much power in the hand of the employer to decide whether or not to open an inquiry. All complaints should be investigated. There is also no onus on the employer to put in place protective measures for the victim during the investigation of the complaint," added Yeoh.

As for the proposed Sexual Harassment bill submitted by JAG to the ministry more than ten years ago, it now needs a review. "Our understanding of sexual harassment and laws concerning this issue has progressed since then. The Ministry will need to now ensure that the bill it proposes will be relevant in today's context" explains Yeoh.

A working committee on laws related to Violence Against Women was established by the Attorney General Chambers two years ago. Members includes among others, the women's ministry as well as JAG. "We hope to see the committee push forward a sexual harassment bill, and envision this enactment by 2020" opined Yeoh.

Sexual harassment is not only a health and safety issue, it is a form of violence and discrimination against women. It has the effect of denying a woman her fundamental rights, including the right to equal opportunities at work and in other areas of public activity, the right to freedom of movement, the right to live in dignity, and the right to health.

"It is time for government ministries and agencies to take positive measures to address the issue and make it a priority. Putting forward a sexual harassment bill is one step towards upholding women's human rights," says Yeoh.

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