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Dear Editor,

On International Women's Day (IWD) this year, we at AWAM take a moment to take stock of the state of women in Malaysia.

There are those who claim that Malaysian women have been granted equal rights and equal opportunities, that there is no further work to be done because we have achieved that solid vision of gender equality.

We question such claims in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Equality is a continuous struggle and we have found that women in Malaysia seem to be on the losing end of this struggle over the past few years.

Women in politics

Politics is still a hostile and unwelcoming space for women. Comments made by MP Datuk Bung Mokhtar Radin who advised female MPs to avoid being too aggressive or the continual references made to Dyana Sofya's physical appearance instead of her capacity to contribute to the political life of Malaysia, serve to illustrate the hostile environment that women in politics face. Worse, women who step outside of the rigid confines of expected roles will receive censure and even threats of violence.

Women in employment

We had lauded the case of Noorfadilla, who was awarded damages for the discriminatory revocation of her temporary teaching job as a result of pregnancy. We then found that her damages of RM 300,000 was reduced to a mere RM 30,000, on the basis of the judge's belief that Noorfadilla was profit-seeking and dishonest in not disclosing her pregnancy. This has seriously undermined the progressive nature of Noorfadilla's original case, which was the first time in Malaysia when a court ruling referred to CEDAW. Obviously, women still face discrimination in employment.

Women and the family

From Deepa Subramaniam's and Indira Gandhi's cases, we saw that there has been little justice for victims of unilateral conversion, which tend to be women. Our justice system has failed to protect women from the conversion of and loss of custody to their children. It has also failed to punish spouses who secretly convert their children in order to claim custody. In

Deepa's case, despite her ex-husband's history of violence – despite kidnapping their son, threatening to do the same to their daughter, and converting the children without Deepa's knowledge, which can be seen as a form of domestic violence in itself – he has been rewarded with the custody of their son. In doing this, the judiciary has validated his abusive behaviour.

Girls and child marriage

Child marriage remains alarmingly rife with as many as 15,000 underage girl-brides in Malaysia. As a result, these brides face a heightened risk of physical and emotional abuse, as well as increased infant and maternal mortality rates. They are also often forced to leave school thus limiting their opportunities and independence. And what about this trend of marrying young girls off to their rapists as a 'solution' to statutory rape? How can this be seen as a solution? Nothing should be considered more important than the safety and health of these girls. The government must acknowledge and respond to the 15,000 girls who remain affected by the harmful practice.

Women, sexual violence and victim blaming

When the Selangor Islamic authority equated women who do not cover up to unlocked homes ripe for the picking, we learnt two things.

First, that rape is a consequence of women's own inability to shield themselves. Forget about cases where women can be considered 'covered up' or the fact that fifty percent of rape victims are under 16. And second, men are natural predators who cannot be expected to curb their instinctual urges. This statement is an insult to everyone.

Any form of sexual violence is inexcusable no matter what the victims wear, whether they are sober, whether it is perpetrated by a stranger, friend, or spouse. A person does not need to put up a fight or struggle to indicate they do not consent, and do not need to prove that they are "exhausted" to have the right to say no. Instead voluntary and informed consent should be actively sought. We must shift the blame from victims to perpetrators, and strengthen laws to ensure all forms of non-consensual sex are criminalised.

Women and moral policing

The policing of women's modesty has been another prominent feature of the past year. JPJ's refusal to serve a woman unless she covered her legs with a sarong, the RM 2000 fine or one year jail time facing Muslim women in Pahang who wear dresses considered too short or tight, criticisms of Farah Ann's skin-tight gymnastics attire, and the sexualisation of a former child star – these are merely the tip of the iceberg.

Women's modesty is of paramount importance. Message received. Message deleted.

Women are more than just their bodies. We are people, and we are definitely not houses, unlocked or otherwise. When women are told they must cover up to function in society, they are sexualised, and consequently punished for being sexualised. This is ridiculous! Women should have the choice to dress however they want, without being constrained by social pressure or

fear. It seems almost too obvious to say, but if we seek gender equality the first step is to treat women as humans and not objects.

Violence against transgender women

In the past year, we also witnessed the continued violence and discrimination against transgender women. This includes the appalling assault on Nisha Ayub, and conviction of nine transgender women for “wearing woman’s attire or pos[ing] as a woman.” Such treatment is a violation of their right to freedom from torture and inhumane treatment, freedom of movement and a host of other freedoms and rights. Most importantly, it egregiously denies their identity as women and their right to express their gender identity. AWAM believes that those who identify as women must be recognised as such. We also believe that the law and its enforcers must do all within its power to protect transgender people, and end discrimination against them.

All I ask for this International Women’s Day, is a feminist world

Today, March 8th, marks the International Women’s Day. And we at AWAM, have a wish we would like to share.

Women can and should – be leaders, speakers, contributors, achievers, society-makers. Women *are*. International Women’s Day is a celebration of women’s social, political and economic accomplishments, but it is crucial to pay attention to the struggles that women face. There are stereotypes, discrimination, and safety concerns in wearing what we want, speaking our minds, taking up leadership positions or simply taking up space.

Imagine children, survivors, trans women, and all the marginalized receiving protection from the law, and support from lawmakers, public figures, and general society. Imagine where instead of receiving censure and sexualised threats for speaking our minds, women’s opinions are considered on an equal basis to that of men’s. Imagine women having equal access to resources and opportunities, without fearing for their safety. Imagine women’s achievements being celebrated instead of turning into fodder for sexualisation.

Imagine actualising gender equality, as a practice and as lived experience. That is the world that we hope to live in, and that is the world we are advocating for.

Happy International Women’s Day Malaysia.

Sincerely,
All Women’s Action Society (AWAM)