



## A sorry lack of respect

Regina William

*In response to a crying need to protect women and children from domestic violence, the Women's Crisis Centre (WCC) was set up in 1985. Soon, its work grew beyond immediate intervention into troubled families to include the promotion of gender equality in society. In 2002, this was reflected in a reworking of its name to the Women's Centre for Change. Gender sensitivity was in the spotlight recently in parliament when two Barisan Nasional MPs compared the legislature's leaking roof to an opposition MP's menstruation, and also in the Penang state legislative assembly where a representative linked women's dressing to sexual crimes. WCC director **Loh Cheng Kooi**, who has been committed to the cause for over two decades, speaks her mind to **REGINA WILLIAM**.*

**theSun:** Tell us about the work of the Women's Centre for Change



**Loh Cheng Kooi:** The centre was set up in 1985 primarily to look out for abused women and children. We are 22 years old and now have very clear objectives - one is the elimination of violence against women, hence all our work on sexual violence etc and, the other is of course the promotion of gender equality.

Our fundamental belief is that women, men and children should strive to live in a society free from violence and discrimination. I think that is very important now that we are heading towards developed nation status.

Last year, 40% of our clients were domestic violence cases, which is actually quite a striking figure. About 30% are marital breakdowns, etc. Our crisis intervention work is giving counselling, we have hotlines, we give shelter. We do community outreach, awareness work with schoolchildren, teenagers to teach them about gender awareness and gender equality, how to be respectful.

That's very interesting because we came down from first doing counselling work and we realised that this was the tail end. When the woman comes to us it is always too late, so we decided to move our programmes down to the younger generation. We need to teach boys and girls to be respectful of each other, so we have a programme called "Respect". Right at the other end is where we have our lobbying for legal reforms.

**So you don't only deal with women. Your education programmes are tailored even for the men?**

Definitely. Men are very much part of society just like women and children are. Our whole outreach work takes this into account. Even when we counsel women, if they ask that we counsel their abusive husbands, we would do it. We believe very much that this struggle for gender equality is not a women's issue, it is a people's issue. It is a very basic human rights situation where we talk about people having the right to be free from violence. I think it is a very fundamental right. So our teenage and school programmes are always for boys and girls. I think

society should be more conscious about teaching boys - their behaviour, mindsets, attitudes. We need to teach our sons, there is no question about that.

**What is the mindset of men generally in society about these issues?**

I think on the bright side, since I have been involved with this for so long, over 20 years. I'll give you an example, domestic violence. Twenty years ago when we didn't have the Domestic Violence Act (DVA), a woman coming to a centre for help would not be able to just go to a police station because the response from the police then would have been "Ini masalah rumahtangga" ('This is a domestic problem'). You have to resolve it, it is a private matter.

Today with the DVA the police cannot but take on the issue and have to take in the report and support the woman through the welfare department, through the hospitals. So there's a whole series of government agencies responsible to help this issue of battery which is no longer a private matter but has now turned into a public concern.

Now, in the issue of domestic violence, people still tend to see it as a private family matter. But when a woman is affected, it affects the whole family. It affects the psychology, the wellbeing of the whole family. It affects the woman, the husband when he goes to work, it's a whole community business, so it's extremely important. We must try to deal with it whether in legislation, service or at home so that a child grows up alright.

**So, how successful has your programme been?**

One thing, if you're looking at domestic violence, a woman now has more recourse, more agencies and more support to go to. Twenty years ago, she hardly had any. Then it was a new issue, people were beginning to talk about it, women campaigned hard to get the issue exposed, and then campaigned hard to get the legislation. There are still problems in the DVA. A whole lot of amendments have been submitted by women's groups, which I believe the Attorney-General is studying. Hopefully we will move towards amendments to the DVA.

The other is of course the whole issue of rape. Twenty years ago when women's groups talked about rape and all this, it would be very much a campaign by women's groups. Today an issue like rape, or even dressing, everybody will come in, letters to the press, etc. I'm so pleased to see when I look at the letters to the press, the general public, when there are people making sexist comments, then immediately, men and women write to the press.

It is no longer a women's concern, it is everybody's concern, the public is responding. I find it all very exciting, that people are now made to be aware that all these are societal concerns, that is something we all have to deal with.

We have moved to a certain level, but, of course given the current situation (laughs), the sexist comments that have been made both at parliament and the Penang state legislative assembly sitting, we are looking at where are we, how long do we have to struggle.

How does WCC view these remarks by leaders which the men themselves don't see as being sexist?

Women's groups have always been highlighting these issues. We are very clear this is a sexist remark. It has been happening in the parliament house for many years. This time it constituted another very serious insulting remark to a fellow MP. And yet what is most disappointing is the way it was handled.

I think that itself shocked the public. Here we are in an august house where we expect an appropriate response and appropriate disciplinary action to be taken on the two MPs. And yet it was very slow and the two MPs supported by other ministers were told don't apologise, you know, women must be able to take jokes like that in their stride, because you are in parliament, you're immune from such things.

It is very sad. It is like you've been very naughty, you've done something wrong, but at the end they were forced to go to a minister from a women's ministry and forced to do the apologies. I thought this was really pathetic.

It indicates there are still actually many, many people, right from the very top level, we're looking at ministers and MPs, who show very little regard for women. I think this is totally disrespectful. The language is insulting, it is sexist and to turn the tables around to say the press played it up, this is against the opposition, when clearly this is a gender issue. Again, they are trying to manipulate. We are no longer in the dinosaur age where people cannot read. I mean look, you are telling us that the MPs and cabinet ministers can tell us how we should be thinking. We're no longer like that. You can only mislead people so many times. So definitely, the final outcome of it is definitely unsatisfactory.

**What should have been the appropriate action to take against those making these sexist remarks?**

WCC being part of the Joint Action Group for Gender Equality (JAG), I think, given what this MP Bung Mokhtar had said, we are asking for a suspension. I think someone has to be told that this is wrong, there has to be some discipline or penalty to be imposed on the person so that the rest know that these are very serious remarks.



This is something sexist. We are actually the chair for the Sexual Harassment Bill. It constitutes nothing less than sexual harassment in the workplace, this workplace being parliament. One of the things we did when we pushed for the Sexual Harassment Bill was to include parliamentarians, because we were so aware in 2001 parliamentarians often made sexist remarks within the workplace. So MP Fong (Po Kuan) has been subjected to this over the years. People are taking it so lightly. I think there was even an issue of ageism inside. If you actually look at it, she's young and all that.

If people start looking at sexism like racism, where racism is not allowed and it is examined in a stringent way, then we must be able to deal with sexism.

When sexism is being practised again and again in parliament house, we must have some mechanism where there has to be discipline, there has to be punishment and then people will know this is very serious. Because it was not taken seriously, we had this replayed in the Penang state legislative assembly sitting. We're back to square one. How

many more comments, how much time? The whole week was gone, just statements after statements, so it is difficult.

**What about the comments that women should dress appropriately? How do you see such remarks from people who are supposed to be representing women as well who form at least half or even more of their constituents?**

The issue of dressing keeps cropping up. This is something to men, they see all the time. But most important it doesn't matter if it is dressing, or her physical attributes. Recently the whole issue of (Works Minister Datuk Seri S.) Samy Vellu and his sexist comment came out, then the assemblyman about women and their dressing. This is not something new and we are sick and tired of these sexist comments replayed all the time and nothing being done.

Now when you look at this whole blame-the-woman syndrome, where are we leading to?

It actually shows where some men or women (come from). You have some women who agree with the men, basically saying, women need to be dressed properly to that person's standards. You are looking at the whole issue - because she is not dressed properly and therefore she is the cause of the sexual crime. So you definitely are blaming women, that you are responsible for causing men who are supposed to be innocent. You are now claiming that men are lustful and cannot control themselves. They might not rape the woman today but might rape the woman on another occasion.

This whole blame-the-woman syndrome is very, very serious. So it doesn't matter, today it is dressing, the next day it can be something else. Whether they are comparing a person to a whole building, whether you're pointing at the woman for causing rape or divorcee being gatal, all this has the same issue.

Why is it, we constantly ask, that certain men, I say certain because some men came up in support of women when all these comments were given really condemning this É the whole question is what is in the minds of these men when they blame women? In the recent assembly, they had so many assemblymen coming up and condemning his sexist remark and yet he stood by it. This (Penang State Legislative Assemblyman) Shahabudin Yahaya, even to the press, he was still steadfastly making his stand and saying yes, women are responsible because of their provocative dressing. What is frightening to us is Shahabudin is a Syariah judge, he is a counsellor, he is the president of the Penang Islamic Religious Council. If a team leader holds such gender bias against women, then we are in deep trouble for women in this country.

I ask myself what happens when a woman who suffers from domestic violence goes and sees him? How would he be? He would blame the woman for causing the husband to hit her, just like he is blaming woman for dressing provocatively outside.

When the mindset is perpetuated this is actually looking at a very chauvinistic mindset and saddest and most frightening to us is these are leaders in this country. What's the difference between the normal person who individually might have that opinion? But these are not ordinary individuals, they are leaders of the country. They are MPs, they are cabinet ministers and assemblymen and they are religious department heads. And when they hold such attitudes, how are we ever, ever going to have a situation where women will get the respect and justice they need?

This is really frightening for us.

### **What do you think needs to be done in this respect?**

Women's groups are always calling for gender sensitisation. We have set up a women's ministry, but I think the way we look at women's issues is that it's like handed over to Datuk Seri Shahrizat (Jalil) because it is a women's problem and therefore her ministry's headache. It does not matter if a ministry is headed by a man or woman, it's the way she's going to gender sensitise men in this country.

Gender means streaming, means that it is at every level, in every ministry. It does not have to be narrowed down to a women's ministry. To force the two MPs to go back to the women's ministry and then to get that apology, is laughable. The issue is not treated seriously. It's like okay, you're naughty so you're sent to your teacher, see how teacher is going to punish you.

It happened in parliament, it happened in the state legislative assembly and yet when people come and tell them, look this is sexism, make your apologies, they are so steadfast that they are not wrong. So definitely the country needs many, many gender sensitisation trainings. The leaders in this country need to be sent for courses. They need to understand today that it is women's basic right to ask for respect and their rights are not to be violated which is so basic now. There are international laws and we are signatories to all this international laws and at the same time when it comes out from our honorable MPs and assemblymen, their behaviour is dismal. I am very saddened, when will all this end?

### **Do you think these problems are prevalent in other countries as well especially the West?**

No, no, you can be sure, in the west if anybody were to make a comment like this, he will be forced not only to apologise, but often would be forced to resign. Here the person is forced to apologise, and that too not properly, or in the Penang case, he stood by what he said and he is proud of it.

If this man thinks like this, how do we translate it to the different levels of society that we are dealing with. These are the very people who are going to amend policies and pass laws. What kind of laws, policies, ideas? It is supposed to be leadership by example, and what do these people have to show to our country?

I'm glad all this is highlighted and people are taking note that this has been highlighted. But I'm very sad that the government is taking a hands off approach and not doing anything to actually tell these people that it is wrong, these are sexist remarks, this is gender discrimination and you are blaming women for all the problems in this world and country and men come out clean.

Yet nobody in the government is coming out with a clear policy, that is why in our statement we said Pak Lah (Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi) is the chair of the cabinet committee for gender equality, he should do something. He should gender sensitise his cabinet ministers, his MPs and assemblymen. It has to be done at the different levels. NGOs have limited resources while the government has all the resources.

### **Maybe the government should do more to nip this in the bud at school level and emphasise on gender equality from the very beginning?**

We must teach people, when they are young, right from the outset. Definitely, right now we are far from it. We must teach our children that it is wrong - sexism, racism, discrimination, all these are wrong in society.

So how do we instil it at every level, meaning in education, and the family and how do you teach all this so that the child grows up to understand that it is sexist to talk about things like that.

### **Do these men actually think that women are inferior to them and hence should be treated this way?**

There is no question that when women get blamed it is because they see women as the weaker sex. When you blame someone, and you take advantage of someone, it is because you know that person has less authority than you, this person is weaker than he is and therefore he can say

anything that he wants. There is nothing to stop him. It is like an arrogant boss, when you have that attitude. But my question is where did that attitude come from, at what point?

When you go to school, 14 to 15-year-old boys are already holding the same attitude as our leaders today, that rape happens to girls because of their dressing. In schools, both boys and girls are saying that. Where are we going in society when as young as 14 and 15 they are like that? It is because the adults are translating ideas to younger people so it has been very rampant.

Again and again evidence has shown that it doesn't happen because of women's dressing but you can tell them a million times it doesn't change their opinion.

### **What do you do in schools on gender equality?**

In the last 10 years or so, we have developed a good programme called "Respect" and building healthy relationships. We go to school where we teach both boys and girls about how to be respectful of each other. We believe that if we don't teach our children young, they will be stereotyped by the time they become adults, when they think they have the right to hit their wives, and when they think they can make sexist remarks and get away with it. Often when you're an adult, it is very difficult to change you. So, we have to move to the younger generation and teach them what is right.



So we run the "Respect" programme in schools and that's where we are frightened when we hear the same attitude from these young people.

When we ask these young boys, like if a person blames your sister, or something happens to your mother or sister, and a person blames them, how would you feel. Then it strikes them their mum or sister wasn't the one dressed provocatively, so if something happens to them and then they think twice.

So we must start teaching our boys that instead of blaming women, men must certainly take responsibility. There are no two ways about it. Society is not functioning if men just keep blaming women. Men must take responsibility. It is very clear that the majority of sexual violence cases happening to women and sexual violence is gender oriented, so we're looking at the case where men must look at themselves and ask where is society going?

We are still living in a very entrenched patriarchal society where everything is blamed on women and I think that's where we are now. The efforts done by WCC are very small, so we're always saying we train with teachers and the state education department but what we want ultimately is we want all this as part of the curriculum for our children so that our children grow up being aware that the opposite sex deserves as much respect as themselves.

We want our children to grow up to have the same opportunities, not to be discriminated upon and that's all what we are asking for.