

Frankly Speaking by M. RAJAH

Equally capable, if not better

Nothing is impossible for Sarawak women as they have proven their mettle as leaders in what is still known as a man's world to some.



Caring lady: Fatimah comforting a child during her visit to the Sarawak General Hospital. — Bernama

AS today is the state-level Women's Day celebration, I have decided to pay tribute to some of our women politicians whom I have had the honour of knowing over the last four decades, especially in the course of my career as a journalist.

They are as equally capable, if not better, as their male counterparts when it comes to politics. Never doubt that.

One name that comes to my mind is Datuk Ajibah Abol. And it is most likely that many Kuchingites will immediately relate the name to Jalan Ajibah Abol, located near the old state mosque in town.

Very few Kuchingites, or Sarawakians, for that matter, remember her.

To enlighten the younger generation in particular, Ajibah was the first woman in Sarawak to become a minister in the Sarawak Cabinet, holding the portfolio of Welfare Services from 1970 to 1976.

Even before becoming a minister, she was a prominent figure in Sarawak politics. She was the assemblywoman for Samariang and was the PBB Women leader until her death in 1976.

Ajibah was the first Malay woman to contest in the state elections and also was the first woman to receive the Panglima Negara Bintang Sarawak title. And she was instrumental in setting the scene for women in Sarawak's development in years to come.

Unknown to many, women have played an important role in the development of our state.

I have great admiration for these women who have broken the glass ceiling, so to speak, to become leaders in what is still known as a man's world to some, simply by being eloquent, driven, determined and passionate in what they do.

I met her during one of her working trips to Sibu in the 70s while I was still in secondary school. When I shook hands with her, the first words she uttered were: "Ada juak orang India di Sibu tek? Sik sangka ada bangsa India sitok." (Got Indians in Sibu too? Didn't realise there is an Indian community here.)

I answered her: "YB, kamek tok orang Sibu. Diam di Kampung Nangka." (YB, I am from Sibu and I live in Kampung Nangka).

Ajibah was stunned by my reply. I guess she didn't expect me to reply in fluent local Malay. She patted me on my shoulders and moved on.

Sorry for diverting a little.

Anyway, Ajibah was one who was way ahead of her time. She dared to lead at a time when the role of a woman was largely stigmatised to being housewives, or at most, teachers and nurses.

Another woman who was also equally ahead of her time was the petite Datuk Tra Zehnder who boasts the envious record of being the first woman member of the State Legislative Assembly or Council Negri in 1960.

She might not have been a minister, but she was the first woman Temenggong in the state for the Iban community from 1988 until 1996.

Since the days of Ajibah and Tra, women have come a long way in Sarawak's political scene.

Among them, the likes of Doris Sophia Brodie who made history for being the first to be appointed Deputy Speaker of Dewan Negara last year.

Then there is Rosie Yunus, who did her community proud when she became the first Kedayan woman to be appointed an assistant minister.

Being soft spoken, kind and with a nurturing aura about her, she was aptly given the portfolios of Early Childhood Development and Family Development.

Going back in time to my days as a junior reporter on the beat, I have fond memories of the hardworking and hands-on Datuk Hasfah Harun who served as an assistant minister in the Chief Minister's Office and Social Development and Women's Affairs Ministry between 1976 and 1987.

She personally helped a group of women register a society that we know today as the Sarawak Women for Women Society (SWWS), simply because she understood the urgent need for a women's non-governmental organisation (NGO) to look into and address women's issues.

Let us also not forget Datuk Sharifah Mordiah Tuanku Fauzi, Sarawak's longest serving woman politician.

Everyone who has met her will agree with me on what a jolly sport she is. She has this amazing natural ability to interact well with everyone she meets and pretty soon you

end up talking to her like old friends and talking about almost anything under the sun.

I had the opportunity to cover several of her functions and she's such an obliging person that whenever I asked for some comments on issues, she would say: "Yah, pandei-pandei aja kitak, asal sik sensitif gilak; polah jak bagus-bagus." (I leave it to you lah, so long as it is not too sensitive. Make a good job of it.)

Other notable women politicians from Sarawak and who are currently serving in the Federal Cabinet are Women, Family and Community Development Minister Datuk Rohani Karim and Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Nancy Shukri.

Both are hardworking, straightforward and sincere in their efforts to help the rakyat.

Yet, my favourite Sarawak woman minister is none other than Datuk Fatimah Abdullah, the Welfare, Women and Family Development Minister.

On a personal basis, I find her affable and approachable. Among all the women ministers I have gotten to know and respect, she scores a perfect 10.

She is the epitome of what a lead-

er should be — someone who understands that in needing to communicate with the people, the ability to listen is very important.

And listen she does! She will somehow find the time to spare to listen to her constituents, and to the groups of people close to her heart — the women and children.

She is very caring too and takes the trouble to call people up to offer advice and comfort, whatever the situation might be.

I have also heard of NGO leaders singing praises of her as she is one of few ministers who would take a special interest in the organising of events that she has been invited to officiate, and try to make the time to meet with the people behind the event, no matter how tight her schedule, or how tired she seems.

At a recent press conference, she announced that the National University of Malaysia (UKM) Tun Fatimah Hashim Women's Leadership Centre would collaborate with Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (Unimas) to conduct an extensive research on leadership among women in Sarawak.

I believe this is timely, as the women leaders in Sarawak, be it from the public or private sectors, have long been overshadowed by their male counterparts.

With the personal involvement of Fatimah in this research, the role of women in Sarawak will no longer remain cast in the shadows of the men.

To many of us Fatimah is a sister or mother figure too.

This charismatic woman has many more good years of politics in her. She is an asset not only to Chief Minister Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud in his efforts to improve the lot of womenfolk but also to the people of Sarawak.

I have this hunch that one day, in the not-too-distant future, this illustrious woman from Kampung Teh, Oya, will go up the next rung to become the first woman deputy chief minister.

After all, nothing is impossible for Sarawak women. They have proven their mettle.

Happy Women's Day!