

# Break the bias this year

By MARINA MAHATHIR



IN a bid to up my knowledge recently, I started reading a book by Prof Leila Ahmed who teaches Women's Studies and Religion at the Harvard Divinity School. Prof Leila is one of those hugely qualified scholars who has made it her mission to study the state of gender relations since ancient times to see how we got to some of the attitudes we have towards women today.

I've only just started reading the first chapter which describes civilisations in the Middle East region in the Mesopotamian era starting from about 6000BC which, being so long ago, must have taken many hours of research to get right. She unearthed some interesting information for us to think about.

For one thing, when those civilisations were agrarian rural communities, women were very much held in high esteem, even venerated. However, as the civilisations became urbanised, the status of women began to decline. No scholar has been able to provide a real explanation why this happened.

One historian, Gerda Lerner of Columbia University, theorised that "the importance of increasing the population and providing labour power in early societies led to the theft of women, whose sexuality and reproductive capacity became the first 'property' that tribes competed for. Warrior cultures favouring male dominance consequently emerged."

From then on it was downhill for women through several millennia. According to Prof Leila, as societies became more urbanised and militarised, a class-based system emerged where military and temple elites became the propertied classes. "The patriarchal family, designed to guarantee the paternity of property-heirs and vesting in men the control of female sexuality, became institutionalized, codified, and upheld by the state. Women's sexuality was designated the property of men, first of the woman's father, then of her husband, and female sexual purity (virginity in particular) became negotiable, economically valuable property.

It's amazing how some attitudes can perpetuate through the ages. Elements of these patriarchal ideas about women being the property of men remain to this day in many societies. In some countries, women cannot leave the house, let alone go out to work, without the permission of the men in their family.

The idea that the kitchen is where women belong still lingers, even though we may now go out and work outside the home, even in high-powered jobs.

In this country, we seem to be dual-natured in how we think of women. On the one hand, it is no longer unusual for women to be educated to university level, even post-graduate level, and to drive cars and aeroplanes. But she is not considered whole until she marries and has children. And while she may have a good job outside the home, her primary roles are wife and mother. It still astounds me to see the social media profiles of many young women who describe themselves first as somebody's wife and mother before giving their occupation.

Unsurprisingly then, we still have people who give advice that seems to be stuck in the Mesopotamian era. Since your entire life supposedly depends on your husband, it is therefore imperative that you never do anything to let him invoke a reason to leave you. So always talk nicely to him, even if he's calling you names, and accept his gentle beatings since you obviously deserve them for objecting to his, say, infidelity or failure to provide. I'm so glad that there are Malaysians who have better sense and pushed back at this outmoded way of thinking.

But even when faced with the reality that women are qualified and hold good jobs, Melaka state shared a post on its official Facebook account advising women not to earn more than their husbands to keep them happy. The poor chaps! Given that there are more female graduates than there are male, market forces must surely determine how much each employee makes. Do employers typically ask their potential female employees how much their husbands make to ensure they pay them less just to maintain family harmony?

As it is, there are already many wives who pay more for their household needs than their husbands, husbands who pay nothing towards the maintenance of their children by their estranged wives, and husbands who are quite happy to be kept by their many wives. So if Melaka wants to uphold men's pride, they should really go after those who don't pay up.

Moving the goalposts seems to be the favoured route when men fall behind. Some years ago, somebody proposed lowering university requirements for male students because females were outnumbering them so much. Men could get Ds for instance while women needed to get As. The same person must have also assumed that regardless of their lesser ability, the boys would still graduate and obtain jobs before the girls. Oh wait, that's exactly what is happening.

This year on March 8, we will once again be celebrating International Women's Day. The theme this year is #BreakTheBias, which seems fitting since despite it being 2022, we're still having to deal with biases against women. In fact, often the usual offenders against women contradict themselves. On the one hand, they exult motherhood as the primary role of women. On the other, they won't allow some mothers to bring up their own children. Somehow a mother's love can be threatening to some people's faith.

Luckily there are people with common sense and compassion in this country, especially judges. (Has anyone noticed that those who want to separate children from their mothers are usually men?)

But it's not all bad news. Ever since 2018, women are recognised in our Constitution as an equal parent to their children and must therefore be consulted in any legal decision concerning them. Anyone who says otherwise is violating the Constitution. Malaysian women finally got the right to pass their citizenship to their children born overseas, because our Constitution also says we cannot be discriminated against. We are getting somewhere although there's still work to be done.

The Sexual Harassment Bill is coming up in the next Parliamentary meeting. Dare we hope that our official women's champions in the House will keep up with the 21st century?

**Marina Mahathir wishes that some men would ruminate on how they would feel if their mothers were never allowed to see them. The views expressed here are solely the writer's own.**