

SPEECH
BY
YB DATO' SRI ROHANI ABDUL KARIM
MINISTER OF WOMEN, FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
AT THE
CHILD, EARLY AND FORCED MARRIAGE EXHIBITION
“GIRL’S VOICES- SPEAKING OUT AGAINST CHILD MARRIAGE”
ON
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AT
LOWER GROUND CONCOURSE, BERJAYA TIMES SQUARE

[SALUTATIONS]

INTRODUCTION

1. Terlebih dahulu saya ingin mengucapkan syukur kerana dapat bersama-sama menghadiri perasmian pameran “Girl’s Voices-Speaking Out Against Child Marriage”. Setinggi-tinggi penghargaan kepada Pesuruhjaya Tinggi Canada di Malaysia iaitu Her Excellency Judith St. George kerana sudi menjemput saya menjadi sebahagian daripada isu penting yang melibatkan Kementerian Pembangunan Wanita, Keluarga dan Masyarakat iaitu perkahwinan kanak-kanak. Izinkan saya untuk meneruskan ucapan saya dalam Bahasa Inggeris.

Excellencies, distinguished guests, members of the media, ladies and gentlemen.

2. I am indeed honoured to be here today at Berjaya Times Square to be a part of the launching of this photo exhibition on ending child marriage entitled “Girl’s Voices-Speaking Out Against Child Marriage”. Allow me to register my utmost gratitude to Her Excellency Judith St. George, High Commissioner of Canada for inviting me to be a part of this global call to end child marriage. It is rather disturbing when two beautiful words ie “child” and “marriage”, when combined together becomes a horrific vision. This exhibition is definitely a timely reminder to our society about the harmful practice for the child, which is child marriage.

Key Focus on Children via International Commitments, National Policy and Relevant Plans of Action

3. In Malaysia, children are defined as those below the age of 18 and currently we have 9.9 million of them, which is about one third of our population, a figure that I think is definitely worth investing for the future of Malaysia. May I add that this is not a single “Ministry Mastermind” but a commitment the Government of Malaysia has long committed to and continues to be “faithful” since we ratified the Convention on The Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1995.

4. Based on the key principles of the CRC, the National Policy on Children was developed with focus on the rights to survival, protection, development and participation of a child. This policy became the main reference in drawing up relevant and specific action plans focusing on child protection, reproductive health and education as well as the current child online protection action plan.

5. As a signatory to the CRC, Malaysia is with the international community in upholding the rights of a child to be protected, to be represented, to be given the opportunity to participate and most importantly, their rights to be upheld. As we see the exhibition today, child marriage in the global context ie when a 9 year old child marries a 40 year old mainly to pay off family debts, it is clearly a form of violence against children, a hindrance and a threat towards the development of a child and worst, a “strip off” their right as a child.

6. Commitment that Malaysia has acceded at the international level including the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) as well as adopting the United Nations resolutions to end child marriage, is never just a “lip service”, but a message that child, early and forced marriage is a violation of human rights. At the current alarming rising number of this sort of marriage, globally, it is literally “a scream” to push all efforts to prevent and eliminate this harmful practice.

Protecting Child and Early Marriages in Malaysia

7. Coming back to the Malaysian context, marriage is protected under several laws namely the Syariah Law for Muslims, the Law Reform (Marriage and Divorce Act) for non-Muslims and the State Ordinance that governs native marriage (customary marriage) to cater the diverse and rich culture in Sabah and Sarawak. Generally, the legal marriageable age in Malaysia is 18 years old for boys and 16 years old for girls, however for girls under the age of 16 and boys under the age of

18, approval from the court is needed together with a letter of consent from the parents.

8. In my Ministry, we stand guided by the principle of “**Developing the Full Potential of the Child**”. Full potential consist of the educational, health and social perspectives. In 2014, the National Fatwa Committee published a Fatwa that concluded, early marriages do more harm than good, especially with regards to the health and psychology of the children involved, which is very much in line with our principle.

9. Above and beyond that, any forms of violence in a marriage are addressed not only in the Penal Code but the Domestic Violence Act as well, which addresses both physical and emotional abuse. All the above mentioned law implies legal governance is “alive and kicking” in both entering marriages as well as during the marriages including early marriages.

10. The Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development Malaysia will continue to promote the full development of a child. Society and parents should be aware about the state of mental and physical preparedness when there is such a request from their child to get married early. Awareness on sexual abstinence and mechanism to delay marriage until a child is fully prepared should be in place. Our girls and boys should be taught of responsibility when entering marriage at an early stage by sharing necessary preparations to get into a marriage. A marriage has a lot more elements such as mutual responsibility and financial stability, to make it a beautiful unison.

11. One should not see the delay as a negative call especially when it comes to building family, but an assurance that our children gets married at the appropriate time and surely age. The issue of child and early marriage in Malaysia may differ from what is happening globally ie child getting married to pay off family debts, but the urge to support the full development of their potential, full rights of a child is similar. Let's not tarnish the beautiful institution of marriage as I mentioned earlier, a unison and a start in building a family.

Closing

12. As a conclusion, I definitely support the move to create awareness on the harmful practice of child marriage. Not only because it is my duty as the Minister of Women, Family and Community Development Malaysia but also as a mother, a grandmother for this matter. The idea that child marriage is happening all over the world, is deeply disturbing and I believe actions need to be taken by all. Let us all continue to ensure each and every child receives the full development and protection, so that they can unleash their potential and to take over our responsibility to make this world a better place for our future generations. Awareness programmes such as this exhibition today are among actions that can be taken to ensure our public is aware of current issues with regards to children. Let us all pledge to protect our children from all harmful practices, including child marriage!

13. Let me end my speech with the quotes from Madam Marian Wright Edelman, founder and President of the Children's Defence Fund:

“If we don't stand up for children, then we don't stand for much”

Thank you.

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