

Malaysia: Women Ministry's 'Household Happiness' posters fuel gender stereotypes

Saturday 4 April 2020, by [JUN Soo Wern](#) (Date first published: 31 March 2020).

Women's rights group have condemned the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development over Covid-19 awareness posters that promote gender stereotypes and blame women for domestic violence.

In a statement, Empower Malaysia said it was shocked at the ministry's lack of gender sensitivity and knowledge of women's rights.

"At a time when women in Malaysia fear losing their jobs due to Covid-19, it is shocking that the ministry's advice is for women to be more concerned about the way she looks and that she should wear makeup?

"Empower Malaysia views the series of Instagram graphics by the ministry to be in poor taste and continues to perpetuate harmful gender stereotypes.

"This is an unacceptable conduct by those in public office. This also showcases the fact that the ministry is not up to the task of protecting and promoting women's rights," Empower said.

Earlier today, the ministry released a series of posters promoting "*Kebahagiaan Rumahtangga*" or Household Happiness. One of these was directed at mothers working from home.

The poster appeared to stress the importance of one's appearance, advising work-at-home mothers to "groom as usual" and always look neat.

The ministry did not stop there.

In a subsequent poster on ways to educate one's spouse on doing household chores, to presumably avoid quarrelling, wives are advised to adopt a "Doraemon-like" tone and giggle coyly as opposed to "nagging".

Instead of producing such material, Empower said the ministry should study the implications of Covid-19 on women and develop a strategy together with civil society groups and other stakeholders to address this.

The Women's Centre for Change (WCC) also agreed that the tone of the poster reinforced negative gender stereotypes of both women and men.

"It implies that women are ultimately responsible for getting domestic chores done when the duty should be a shared one.

"It makes women the ones who need to persuade their partners to chip in, and worse, asks that women downplay a rightful request by using infantile language and mannerisms — so as not to

offend the apparent sensitivities of men.

“The implicit message is that men are allowed to slack off on domestic work and it’s women who must follow up with them — but they should only do so nicely.

“In short, it sends the message that women are subordinate in the home and are not allowed to function as equals to men,” said WCC in a statement.

The ministry should instead be sending out a message that domestic or household duties are a shared responsibility to be respectfully negotiated between partners as adults, said WCC.

“This can be done through a mature discussion without the need to resort to ‘manja’ tactics.

“Women have the right to speak up about how they feel without having to be labelled as nags and certainly without needing to stoop to becoming cartoon characters,” said WCC.

WCC added that negative stereotypes of women as subordinate to men were at the root of gender inequality in society, which led to discrimination and violence against women.

“It is the ministry’s responsibility to stay well away from such stereotypes and instead to focus on empowering women’s agency and self-confidence whether in the home or in the public sphere,” WCC said.

Warning against the poster’s implicit message, Women’s Aid Organisation advocacy communications officer Tan Heang Lee said it put the responsibility solely on women to alter their behaviour at home in order to avoid domestic conflict.

“It’s very one-sided. What about men’s responsibility? So if fights or abuse were to happen, do these posters imply that it’s women’s fault?

“Additionally, given the increased risk of domestic violence during the MCO, the ministry should be doing more domestic violence prevention PSAs (Public Service Advertisements). This includes emphasising that there is no excuse for abuse and that domestic violence is not the victim’s fault,” she told *Malay Mail* when contacted.

The All Women’s Action Society (AWAM) expressed dismay at the lack of sensitivity and awareness displayed by the poster produced by the Women Family and Community Development ministry on how mothers should behave while being stuck at home due to the MCO.

“The poster that suggested women used an infantile voice imitating a popular kids cartoon character to placate their husbands (who may have to do housework) is extremely condescending both to women and men.

“The posters also suggest that gender roles in the households are such that women are housewives and men are breadwinners.

“It lacks respect and awareness of society in the modern times,” said AWAM’s programme and operations manager Nisha Sabanayagam.

She pointed out that many men actually do perform household chores and do them well and many women are breadwinners.

“The posters promote the concept of gender inequality and perpetuate the concept of patriarchy,

which over time can have overall negative effects, i.e. gender-based violence,” she said.

All about Coronavirus on this website

The Covid-19 pandemic has generated interlocking crises at multiple levels. ESSF is providing thematic and geographic coverage in English and French.

View all articles using keyword [Coronavirus/Covid-19 \(EN\)](#). To display English and French articles, use [Coronavirus / Covid-19 \(EN, FR\)](#).

Our regional and country pages include articles on labour and community struggles, the abuse of emergency powers and other topics. Use the continent tabs at the top of the page to find the country or group of countries that interests you.

Public health issues are mostly in country-specific health/epidemic pages ([European Union](#), [Great Britain](#), [France](#), [USA](#), [Pakistan](#), [India](#), [Philippines](#), [Malaysia](#), etc.) This page presents a selection of articles of regional or global relevance.

We have also selected a few articles with a global [political](#) analysis, as well as a few articles tracking the emergence of global progressive [movements](#) related to the pandemic.

We are increasing our coverage of left parties’ and movements’ declarations and proposals. See for example these pages for the [European Union](#) countries.

ESSF is raising funds for the [Labour Relief Campaign in Pakistan](#) which supports workers and families impacted by the pandemic. We will announce other solidarity initiatives in the coming days and weeks.

New articles on our site are highlighted in periodic [updates](#) by [Mark Johnson](#).

Soo Wern Jun

[Click here](#) to subscribe to our weekly newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

P.S.

Malay Mail

<https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/03/31/women-ministries-household-happiness-posters-could-fuel-gender-stereotypes-a/1852073>