



Sarawak Women for Women Society

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PRESS STATEMENT

ABUSE CLAIMS BY PENANS: SWWS CALLS FOR DIALOGUE

Sarawak Women for Women Society strongly supports the decision taken by Suhakam and the Women, Family and Community Development Ministry to investigate the alleged abuse of Penan girls in the interior of Sarawak. All relevant parties should fully cooperate. Wherever any deliberate acts of abuse have occurred the culprits need to be charged and appropriate, culturally-sensitive help given to the girls affected.

But this should not be the only focus. The authorities need to be proactive and tackle the underlying power differentials which can give rise to sexual exploitation.

SWWS therefore urges the State authorities to convene a series of dialogues to develop long-term strategies to prevent the sexual exploitation of these girls in rural settings wherever there is an influx of a large, male workforce from outside the area. There is a need to go beyond investigating specific incidents. Only by putting in place effective systems of enforcement and assistance can such exploitative acts be minimized. Given such circumstances, there is a danger that the girls' lack of experience of the wider world will make them vulnerable in a variety of ways - from manipulative abuse to broken hearts. This is an age old problem which can affect any community, not just the Penans. SWWS believes the long-term answer requires action from various parties. The focus should be on increasing awareness, empowerment, support networks and enforcement. There should be zero tolerance of any sexual abuse, intimidation or disrespect of local cultures.

Such dialogues should involve the local community leaders, employers, women groups and those working in the field of HIV/AIDS in addition to appropriate State and Federal Departments like the Department of Welfare, Education and Health, the Police as well as the Women's Bureau . It is thus imperative upon all concerned to come up with urgent and constructive measures which address any negative social impact on communities. By so doing the State can ensure projects geared to developing the economy do not inadvertently harm the very people whose lives they are meant to uplift.

END

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