

PRESS STATEMENT

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EMPOWERING RURAL GIRLS

Sarawak Women for Women Society will be launching the second phase of its *Empowering Rural Girls* programme next month when it conducts training in Long Lama for community leaders keen to help youths, teachers, health workers, village health promoters and members of women groups working in the outlying villages.

The aim of the course is to enable the participants to conduct discussions with teenage and pre-teen girls so that youths are more able to protect themselves now they live in an environment where they will meet men from outside their own communities. Part of the programme will involve conducting such personal safety sessions with local school students both in Long Lama and schools in Long Pelutan and Long Bedian.

Participants at the course will also discuss how to help girls who have experienced sexually exploitative situations; ranging from men who cheat to rape. Such help will need to be culturally sensitive, effective and feasible given the communication challenges in the interior, therefore the involvement of the community in establishing such systems of support is essential –just as important is how they link into the relevant governmental and non-governmental agencies. During the course, participants will plan how to develop such support systems and what could be done to make the environment safer.

Ever since the allegations of Penan girls being raped was made, SWWS has stressed the need for such a proactive stance for all ethnic groups in the remote interior of Sarawak. The risk is there for all teenage girls but as with any abuse, vulnerability increases when there is less awareness, more opportunity for the perpetrators to go unchecked and when reaching help is difficult.

The programme is sponsored by the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development and has the full cooperation of the Sarawak Women's Bureau and the Departments of Education and Health. Training is also planned for the Long San and Suai areas. All these areas were visited to discuss the project last July during the first phase of the programme. **The third phase of the project will consist of reviewing the response at the community level and providing additional training.**

Those interested in finding out more about the training can contact SWWS on 082-416053 or email sarswws@po.jaring.my

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