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**PRESS RELEASE FROM SARAWAK WOMEN FOR WOMEN SOCIETY
(SWWS)**

Rape in the Interior

The rape of women and girls in remote areas of Sarawak is in the news again. As the police close their files on the alleged rape of Penan women by logging camp employees on the grounds of insufficient evidence, a new case opens in a primary school where a teacher is a suspect.

To SWWS (Sarawak Women for Women Society), the lessons for society to learn is that rape happens in the interior and will continue to happen until people who commit this crime know they are going to be found out and held to account for their actions.

Change is needed in awareness, attitudes, and in the action taken after a rape has happened. We urgently need to build effective systems to reach out to people who have been raped so that prompt, appropriate responses occur. This is difficult to achieve in the interior but is a challenge we have to meet.

The details of the rapes in the Lubok Antu area are not yet known but it is likely the recent publicity and the willingness of adults to take action has ensured that the primary school pupils have been rescued from their nightmare. We applaud all who helped these girls. The question which now needs to be answered is how to increase such awareness and commitment so the systems work year after year and not just when the issue is in the spotlight.

In the recent training SWWS conducted in the Baram, we met Penan women who did not realize rape was a crime. Without this knowledge how can we expect them to report? Reporting also needs user-friendly, accessible channels to report the crime. How can a woman with little, if any, cash travel to a police station miles away by logging road? We can hardly expect her to ask the logging company to transport her.

She will only report if she feels safe and she can trust the people she meets in the process of relating the assault. Who will protect her from the rapist after she has reported? Will her report be accepted if she has yet to receive her IC or will she find herself in trouble as her status is questioned?

Then there is the issue of how to collect sufficient evidence. Rape survivors are advised not to wash until examined by a suitably trained medical officer able to take samples acceptable to the courts. She should also keep the clothes she had on when raped and not

wash them. How many women will think to do that after a traumatic incident and before setting off on a day's journey to a police station?

Can we resource health clinics in the interior so they can collect preliminary medical evidence? Can we appoint women leaders in the interior to take statements from the survivors that will then be accepted as evidence by the authorities so an investigation can be initiated? We are only going to make an impact on this problem if we can think out of the box and find ways around the practical problems.

For women to report we need to think what they need and then find a way of serving them. For rape of schoolchildren to be reported we need to ensure that teachers, the vast majority of whom would not dream of hurting a child, know how to be alert to this crime and what action is their duty to take regardless of who the suspect is.

SWWS calls for modules on child abuse to be included in the curriculum of all teacher training colleges and for every school in the interior to have a teacher willing and able to conduct personal safety programmes for the pupils so children know where to find help if sexual predators approach them.

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President

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