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## **EMPOWERING RURAL GIRLS PROGRAMME**

As part of its Empowering Rural Girls project, Sarawak Women for Women Society recently conducted training in Long San, located along the upper part of the Baram river. **110** participants attended. They comprised mostly of women and leaders from various Penan and other Orang Ulu communities in and around Long San; teachers from primary and secondary schools in Long San and other rural schools in Baram; health workers and officers from Marudi Health Department & village health promoters, as well as an officer from the Welfare Department. The training was held at Dewan Serbaguna St. Paul at Long San.

Amongst the objectives of the course were:

- To increase knowledge on how to limit and handle sexually exploitative and abusive relationships, ranging from men who cheat to rape.
- To train trainers / local contacts to (i) sustain the sharing of such knowledge and (ii) to provide direct help to young girls who require assistance.
- To facilitate the community to develop (i) systemic and empathetic responses to women and girls who have been abused (ii) constructive channels to involve assistance from outside the area as required.
- To help build supporting networks between the rural communities and helpful networks/services in town.

To meet these objectives the training covered topics such as healthy teenage relationships, teenage development, problems facing youths in the rural areas, range of abuses that can occur, the law in respect of those abuses and HIV/AIDS. Trainers also introduced the basic principles and skills of counselling so that the support offered to survivors of abuse took into account the girls feelings and life opportunities.

An important part of this programme was its Training of Trainers component. **14** primary and pre-school teachers, and some non-teaching staff, observed our trainers conducting personal safety sessions with the primary students in Long San and later discussed the methods shown. Immediately after the core training had finished the teachers went back to their respective schools and conducted similar sessions with other students, some guided by the SWWS trainers. This method of training the trainers allowed the teachers of the respective schools to take ownership of the personal safety programme and use it to reach more of their students both immediately after the course and in the future.

As for the **5** teachers from the secondary school, they too observed sessions. These were aimed at raising awareness on good healthy relationships and the range of exploitative relationships and abuses that any young person living in the interior may encounter. Later the teachers conducted the sessions themselves guided by the SWWS's trainers.

Altogether over 240 primary and secondary students went through the above sessions during the duration of the programme in Long San and SWWS's subsequent visit to Long Sait, a Penan community, deeper into the interior, where there is a primary school.

It is SWWS's hope that the two (2) modules introduced to the schools will be incorporated into the Unit Bimbingan syllabus in the primary schools and similarly into the Unit Bimbingan dan Kaunselling syllabus that is now established in every Secondary school. Such a move will ensure it is part of every school year's activity so future students are given this awareness.

Participants at the course also discussed how to help girls who have experienced sexually exploitative situations as well as how to handle disclosures of sexual abuse in a culturally sensitive and effective manner. They also learnt the important role of support agencies and trusted networks in the handling of disclosures. On the last day each community and agency came up with their own action plans.

A common constraint to the implementation of the action plans for the remote communities was the prohibitive cost of transportation. This was brought up by the communities who were represented at the training course. The lack of decent roads and the communities' low income increased their dependency on companies operating near their areas and made it more difficult for them to be connected to support networks if abuse happened.

As with all kinds of abuses, the vulnerability increases when there is less awareness and in these rural areas of Sarawak it is coupled with difficulties of access and mobility. The isolation and lack of financial resources often means little or no power can be brought to the side of the young person or anyone experiencing abuse or exploitative situations.

Overall the course was well received by those attending and many calls were made by them for further training especially in the more isolated communities so the aim of empowering rural girls could reach more people.

The programme is funded 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.

Phase 3 of the project will consist of follow-up visits to review the progress of the communities or agencies who had received our training and to assess the development of local support networks.

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

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