

NOTES FOR PRESS

Women's Group Calls for Action

Sarawak Women for Women Society (SWWS) members met today with Puan Norjanah Hj Razali, the Director of the State's Women Bureau, to present recommendations on how to address the risks of sexual abuse and exploitation of young girls and women in remote parts of the State. These recommendations arose out of the Empowering Rural Girls Project which they conducted in the Baram region over the last 18 months, with the support of the Bureau.

In their report, SWWS raised eight major areas requiring more attention, ranging from improving reporting procedures to preventive measures. For the effective implementation of these recommendations, adequate funding as well as collaborative action is needed.

Key recommendations include:

- One-Stop Crisis Centres, currently only available in hospitals, to be extended to rural health clinics so girls have easier access to help. Police to travel to the clinic to take statements and investigate the reported rape.
- Police to be equipped with vehicles suitable for such travel (4WDs) so they do not have to resort to using logging companies' transportation.
- For the State system of funding the transportation of Penan children to and from school, to be reviewed and strengthened to ensure consistent and effective distribution of these funds so that it meets the objective of providing safe transportation for all students and stops the dependency on logging vehicles.
- For the State to set guidelines to be complied with by companies operating in the interior, pertaining to the conduct of their staff towards people from the surrounding communities and women employees. Such guidelines should include the provision of training on sexual harassment and HIV/AIDS prevention. Compliance to these guidelines to be a condition of awarding contracts.
- To reduce the isolation of remote communities by improving the infrastructure including extending mobile phone coverage to all parts of the Baram so people can reach help quickly.

Ann Teo, SWWS's Vice-President said that, "During the ERG project, the participating schools welcomed the modules on keeping safe for primary pupils and on relationships for secondary school students. The challenge now is how to sustain the programmes. Our

report highlights how this can be done and we are heartened by the recent news from KL that social and reproductive health education has been given the green light nationwide.”

She added: “Like everything in the interior, sustaining programmes need realistic budgets. Financial allocations for training and inspection have to take into account the high cost of transportation in the interior.”

Similarly, SWWS has called for more funding to strengthen the Village Health Promoters scheme run by the Ministry of Health. Ann, who is also the coordinator of the ERG project, commented; “Such people are a crucial link between isolated villages and the clinics but there needs to be a budget which enables them to regularly connect to health personnel. It is good that the Government has recently established a mobile boat clinic to reach villages without roads but there are also communities with road linkages whose villagers cannot afford to make the journey to the nearest clinic unless they are given a lift by logging trucks. It is hoped that this matter can be looked into when the Ministry of Health’s Budget for Sarawak is ‘tweaked’ as recently suggested during the Prime Minister’s visit to Sarawak.”

SWWS’s report draws attention to the danger of increased rates of HIV/AIDS in the interior and calls for more funding to strengthen awareness programmes and treatment. As the disease is mainly spread by heterosexual sex in the State there is a need for people living and working in rural areas to have knowledge and the means of protection from this disease. Ann noted; “Large numbers of men moving into an area is recognised to be a risk factor in any country, especially in rural areas where access to information for locals is limited. Unless more action is taken now, SWWS fears for the future of the young women unaware of the dangers. There are government agencies and NGOs tackling the issue but they need their capacity enhanced.”

Throughout their report, SWWS calls for teamwork between government agencies, NGOs and the local community - including in the important area of issuing identification cards and birth certificates. The ERG project was an example of such collaboration and networking. This was appreciated by the participants who commented how rare it was for there to be such a gathering of people from across their communities, faith groups, government and non-government agencies to discuss issues of shared social concern.

In keeping with this spirit of collaboration, SWWS has requested that:-

- Jabatan Pembangunan Wanita reconvenes an inter-agency committee to consider and act upon the recommendations in the report.

SWWS also calls upon the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development to ensure:-

- Its own Taskforce recommendations arising from the National Task Force Report, released in September 2009, are fully implemented;

- Short and long-term strategies are formed and implemented to bring about the holistic development of Penan women and girls. These strategies and plans must be developed in consultation with relevant State and Federal government agencies, NGOs and the affected Penan communities themselves.

The SWWS Vice-President expressed her thanks to the Ministry of Women, Family and Development for their funding and support. She also thanked the State Women's Bureau and the Sarawak Education and Health Departments for giving their encouragement and full cooperation to the project. In addition she thanked the numerous people from the Baram region who assisted and made the project possible.

Copies of the report are available from SWWS on their website <http://sarswvs.com>

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