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Harmful effects of denial of women's reproductive right

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KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. - The denial of women's reproductive and sexual rights can result in various forms of sexual exploitation, abuse and cruelty.

National Unity and Social Development Minister Datin Paduka Zaleha Ismail said more than half a million women died each year because of unsafe abortions and unavoidable pregnancy-related causes, of which 90 per cent occurred in developing countries.

She said frequent pregnancies led to various forms of maternal morbidity and inhibited the development of women.

"The lack of sexual autonomy also contributes to the ideology that men have the right to the sexual services of women," she said at the launch of the panel discussion on the International Planned Parenthood Federation's Charter on Sexual and Reproduction Rights: Setting the Agenda.

Founded in Bombay in 1952, the IPPF is the world's largest voluntary family planning organisation with over 150 member associations, working on a global scale to promote and provide family planning and sexual and reproductive health services. It is active in six regions, including Africa, East and Southeast Asia and Oceania and Europe.

Zaleha said Malaysia, as a leader in the developing world, had a role in the promotion and protection of sexual and reproductive health and rights.

"This is the first conference at which women's rights are distinguished from human rights. It calls for an end to all forms of violence against women, including sexual slavery and forced pregnancy," she added.

The IPPF charter is based on 12 rights which include:

- * The Right to Life which means, among others, that no woman's life should be put at risk or endangered by reason of pregnancy;
- * The Right to Liberty and Security of the Person, which recognises that all persons must be free to enjoy and control their sexual and reproductive life and no person should be subject to forced pregnancy, sterilisation or abortion;
- * The Right to Equality, and to be free from all forms of discrimination, including in one's sexual and reproductive life;
- * The Right to Privacy, meaning that all sexual and reproductive health care services should be confidential, and all women have the right to autonomous reproductive choices;
- * The Right to Decide Whether or When to have children; and
- * The Right to Choose whether or not to marry and to found and plan a family.

She said the translation of the charter into the languages of each country in the region would enable wider accessibility and understanding of its meaning and content.

The panel discussion seeks to come out with recommendations on what could be done to further advance sexual and reproductive rights in the region as well as to explain the legal aspects of the charter and how it could be applied by family planning associations.

It will discuss in depth the charter and provide a plan of action/recommendations for family planning associations.

The panellists were president of Consumers International Erna Witoelar, co-director of the Osaka Women's Centre Sumie Uno, Indonesian Planned Parenthood Federation president Dr Kartono Mohamad, Australia Family Planning vice-president Faileen James and Asian Pacific Development Centre co-ordinator Dr Vanessa Griffen.

Among the guest speakers were National Population and Family Development Board director-general Dr Raj Abdul Karim who spoke on what had been done so far in Malaysia in relation to sexual and reproductive rights, and Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir on how the AIDS Charter was being implemented in Malaysia and what lessons could be learnt from the Malaysian AIDS Council experience.

Also present were IPPF-ESEAO regional council chairman Dr Wu Jieping, its regional director V.T. Palan and the Denmark family planning association executive director Nell Rasmussen.

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