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`Treat AIDS victims with dignity'

THE law must treat AIDS victims with dignity and respect to enable it to play an effective role in controlling the disease.

Malaysian AIDS Council president Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir said the law was a relevant factor in HIV prevention, yet it still had much to do to "empower" groups at risk.

"Countries with the most marginalised communities, including women, are also the countries which have the highest number of victims," she said when presenting a paper on AIDS and The Law, Does Protection Exist for the AIDS Victim?

Marina said the reason for this co-relation was largely due to the stigma and discrimination attached to the victims, which makes them alienated from any rights.

She said because of this, vulnerable groups such as gays and transsexuals, have been ignored and access to treatment limited.

The lack of rights is also the cause for the lack of access to information and services for HIV prevention.

"The lines between community and these groups are blurred."

Marina said because of the stigma and discrimination, there were AIDS victims who have kept quiet over their condition.

"Even in Malaysia, we have executives and religious people who have tested HIV positive, but who hide the fact because of the fear that they face action such as being removed from their jobs."

She stressed that women also need to be empowered to avoid exploitation that can perpetuate the AIDS problem.

"If you lose a woman, a whole family and society are pulled along with it."

She said the highest number of infected people came from developing countries (90 per cent) out of the 33.4 million worldwide known to be infected.

"By end 2000, it is estimated 60 to 70 million people will be infected."

Samoa's Minister of Health Misa Telefoni Retzlaff said laws must be sensitive to the plight of the HIV positive people.

"The law must approach with love and compassion or else you will not achieve anything."

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