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Marina: Educate rural folk on AIDS

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KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - There is a need to give proper education on HIV and AIDS to women and young girls in rural areas, so that they can prevent the worst effects of the epidemic.

Malaysian AIDS Council president Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir said rural women were at great risk just as their sisters who lived in impoverished and marginalised circumstances in urban areas.

"The factors that put them at risk are economic and social, and both need to be tackled concurrently to reduce their vulnerability."

She said this when delivering her paper on "Rural Health and Empowerment (A Special Focus on HIV and AIDS)" at the Second Meeting of the Regional Steering Committee on the Advancement of Rural and Island Women in the Asia Pacific Region today.

She said gender inequalities had a powerful impact on women's health especially when HIV took hold because of these inequalities.

"The devastation of HIV in many African countries has been seen already and in Asia, the same pattern is becoming visible."

Quoting a World Health Organisation report in 1994, she says, "when a mother dies, it doubles the death rate of her surviving sons and quadruples that of her daughters".

"Thus keeping women healthy is imperative," she added.

Marina also said people should alienate the stigma and discrimination attached to HIV/AIDS as it prevented many people with HIV/AIDS from coming forward for help and treatment.

She cited an example, where in 1998, Gugu Ndalani, a South African woman living with HIV/AIDS, was stoned to death by her neighbours after she came forward on World AIDS Day to help educate people about the disease.

Her death could deter other women from coming forward to help themselves.

Meanwhile, Pakistan First Lady Begum Sehba Musharraf said that although HIV/AIDS was not yet a serious problem in her country, the people were exposed to the risk and this called for effective action.

Among the speakers were the First Lady of Papua New Guinea, Lady Roslyn Morauta, United Nations Development Programme resident representative Phillips Young and Indonesia's First Lady's personal representative, Atashendartini Habsjah.

The afternoon session was chaired by Tonga Special Envoy Eseta Fusitu'a.

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