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Treat them with compassion

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"Only when you stop thinking that AIDS will not happen to you or anyone you know, do you begin to understand the real dimensions of the problem."

- Marina Mahathir

THE frail woman with anaemic skin sat behind a silent wall in shame. No one wanted to occupy the seat next to her. Not even another AIDS patient.

What was unusual about the picture was this - It was a HIV/AIDS clinic.

Everyone who came there was either an AIDS patient or accompanied a loved one who was.

But yet, a woman is judged a little harsher than the rest. She is deemed to have broken some female moral rules. Whatever the reason, the woman becomes the enemy; not the disease.

A social worker who told me this story, explained that women with AIDS are always looked with mistrust when they came for treatment. "In my experience when it comes to women, AIDS is all about sexual deviancy," she explained.

Somehow, while AIDS activists have been trying to educate the public, many still associate AIDS with illicit sex, promiscuous men, gay men and prostitutes.

By stigmatising women and blaming them for their condition, the world at large unwittingly ignores pertinent womens' issues related to AIDS. This silence matters a lot because it sends a dangerous message.

Any woman watching the news could conclude that the AIDS epidemic poses no threat to her - so long as she practises safe sex.

Today, we know millions of people get AIDS through channels unknown to them.

One person who has given AIDS here an international identity is Malaysian AIDS Council president Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir. She reaches out to everyone including those with low literacy levels, disseminating information on HIV/AIDS, appealing gently in simple language.

Her message is about compassion and care: AIDS does not discriminate!

AIDS offers no moral high ground. AIDS knows no race or class. It has no colour prejudice. AIDS is not a gay man's disease. It can happen to anyone.

Care for those affected.

The horrifying fact is that women are biologically more vulnerable to HIV infection than men. Studies show that male to female transmission is nearly four times greater than from female to male.

Sometimes affected men may come out with negative test results. But being tested negative for HIV does not necessarily mean that the virus is not in the body. It is just not detectable.

Hence, an affected male may still spread the virus to others, including his innocent wife - and if she were pregnant, to that unborn child.

It is quite apparent, therefore, that women who may contract HIV virus are not restricted to sex workers. They could be anybody, even mothers with children.

Sadly, impoverished women have little access to health care. Millions of women depend on public-funded health care. Even diagnosis of AIDS is often out of reach. Due to the lack of awareness, they do not understand the symptoms and so do not seek treatment. And even if they are aware, their fear of stigma prevents them seeking treatment.

In the eventuality that they do seek treatment, many face the lack of

funds because AIDS requires expensive treatment. They worry about the financial burden for the children and family.

We shall be thankful that people like Marina are trying so hard to lessen the impact of AIDS on our people by stressing on th need for further research, good monitoring and help for women with AIDS.