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Malaysian Women - AIDS

Malaysian Women Targeted In Fight Against AIDS

MELBOURNE, April 26 (Bernama) -- Malaysia's Health Ministry is providing strong support for the awareness campaign in HIV prevention, but other Government agencies have been slow to realise AIDS is not just a medical problem, the Malaysian AIDS Council President Datuk Marina Mahathir said.

Marina, who presented a paper at the World Conference on Health Promotion and Health Education that opened here today, said extending rights and education for women and giving them choices in their lives was one way the fight against AIDS was being waged in Malaysia.

She said that knowing about the risks associated with AIDS was not sufficient to change behaviour in women.

Women, particularly young women, were the focus of efforts to reduce an increasing rate of diagnosed HIV-positive cases in her country, she said.

Marina said that although women comprised fewer than 1,000 of the 57,000 reported cases, their rate of infection was increasing faster than for males.

Echoing the experience of other countries plagued by AIDS, the indications were that the virus in Malaysia was starting to move out of the drug population -- a counting for 72 per cent of HIV-positive cases -- and into the general population, she said.

"We've done a lot to promote women's rights and options and talk about health because it had been really hard for them to get realistic information," she told the Age newspaper.

"For a long time a lot of women had no idea that they were at all vulnerable. We tried to open their eyes to the fact that women are very vulnerable because you really depend on men using condoms so that you don't get infected."

Safe sex was a difficult issue for women to negotiate with their male partners, she said. Although condoms were widely available in Malaysia, there was great reluctance to use them.

"Some people think it is not allowed in our (Muslim) religion or that it doesn't make it pleasurable," she said.

It was a myth that condom use was forbidden for religious reasons, "so we are trying to get the people to understand that there is nothing wrong with it."

One approach was to run training workshops on safe sex for religious leaders, she said.

-- BERNAMA

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