

Violence against women 'up sharply'
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Violence against women is rising at an alarming rate, a minister warned today, adding that victims should not conceal acts of abuse.

Shahrizat Jalil, minister of women, family and community development, said the number of rape cases in the country had doubled in the last six years, up to 2,341 cases in 2006 from 1,217 in 2000.

"Statistics are showing an increasing trend ... What is most sad is that most of the victims are below 15-years-old," Shahrizat said at a forum in conjunction with International Women's Day.

The minister said abuse against women was in many ways concealed because women were ignorant of their rights or were mistakenly acting in accordance to local cultural practices.

"For too long, women who were beaten up or violated against felt that they were in the wrong ... They are accepting of it as a stereotype, as part of the culture of this country," Shahrizat said.

"It is not. I want to say very clearly, violence has never been a culture in this country," she added.

Shahrizat said a holistic approach must be taken to combat violence against women, including promoting gender equality and educating men "to view women as valuable and meaningful partners."

Government to unveil new policy

The government will unveil a new policy on women's issues this year, following a review of the last one drafted in 1989.

"It is going to open a new exciting era for women. We are also positioning women to be global players," she said.

Sharizat said the new policy will address all women's issues including violence. She declined to elaborate.

"(But) the thrust is ... no women's development: no development of the nation," she said.

The forum titled attracted some 400 participants.

In a message to mark International Women's Day, UN chief Ban Ki-moon said on Wednesday violence against women continues unchecked "in every continent, country and culture," because it is frequently concealed or tacitly condoned.