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'Don't put off sex education'

MALAYSIA, compared with many countries in the region, is better in the areas of maternal mortality and contraception.

International Planned Parenthood Federation and East and Southeast Asia and Oceanic Region programme director Romy Arca said this was despite the not very high percentage of Malaysians using modern contraceptive methods.

"Malaysia's healthcare system is very accessible and affordable and, thus, the government is able to address the issues sufficiently," he said at a meeting here on Investing in Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights: Sharing of Experiences among Stakeholders.

Parliamentarians, media members and representatives of family planning organisations from Malaysia, Mongolia, Laos, Indonesia, Cambodia, and the Philippines are participating in the meeting, which was organised in collaboration with the Asian Forum of Parliamentarians on Population and Development with the support of the Family Planning Organisation of the Philippines.

Arca expressed concern about

some worrisome issues in Malaysia, such as teenagers giving birth to unwanted babies.

"I think the boys and girls have to be educated on sexuality, relationships and being responsible for the decisions that they make in having sex and being in a relationship."

He said the Philippines faced similar problems and a lot of difference could be made if sex education was implemented as soon as possible.

To have healthy mothers and children, and for young people to have a bright future, sexual and reproductive health programmes were needed, he said.

"The idea of bringing all these people from different countries together

on the exchange visit programme is for them to work with one another and highlight the need for better sexual reproductive health and programmes to the public, policy makers and stakeholders," said Arca, whose office is in Kuala Lumpur.

The meeting was told that there was a dire need for a Reproductive Health Act in the Philippines. A bill on this is now being heard in the House of Representatives.

The participants were taken to

Parliament House, where they heard parliamentarians who were co-authors of the Reproductive Health Bill speak. They were also taken on visits to local councils and health clinics.

The bill is strongly supported by non-governmental organisations and parliamentarians but strongly opposed by the Catholic Church.

Arca said even in Malaysia, the situation was similar, and he asked people not to forget that there was a high proportion of young boys who were sexually active.

"Being sexually active is one of the reasons girls have unwanted pregnancies, and this we have to address," he said, adding that greater awareness of sexual reproductive health would also minimise the spread of HIV/AIDS.

He said both married couples and single boys and girls should be educated on safe sex to avoid sexually transmitted diseases.

