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Call for more HIV awareness programmes

Peter Boon

SIBU: Lost jobs caused by the impact of the global economic slowdown might be the tip of an iceberg to a more pressing social problem — a probable increase in HIV cases.

"This is because some women after losing their only means of livelihood might end up going the fast way to make ends meet by becoming sex workers," said chief matron Fu Choon Kee of Sarawak General Hospital (SGH) yesterday.

"They are forced by the environment to do something which they are not willing to do," she said when asked to comment on the impact of the economic crisis on HIV cases.

Some, she added, might opt for such employment on a part-time basis to meet the immediate financial needs of their families.

Citing an example, she said, hard pressed by the environment, these ladies might engage themselves as

part-time guest relations officers (GROs) in entertainment outlets.

"And owing to their lack of awareness on how human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) is transmitted, they can easily become victims of risky behaviour," Fu told The Borneo Post in an interview.

This, she stressed would make them vulnerable to HIV infection.

According to her, the response to AIDS is all about preventive measures.

As such, she said, it is important to press for more HIV awareness programmes to make people understand how it is transmitted and what the preventive measures are.

Awarded the Dr Siti Hasmah Award 2004 for her active role in the voluntary counselling work with HIV/AIDS patients, Fu advocated that people should not engage in risky behaviour that makes them vulnerable to HIV infection.

The HIV-positives, she

said, should refrain from having unprotected sex with their partners.

Meanwhile, Raymond Tai, the acting executive director of PT Foundation (an NGO providing care and support services for communities affected by HIV) said there is no indication of an increase in HIV cases due to the economic crisis.

"We have not seen any increase in sex work activities or the number of sex workers based on the work we do with this community," he told The Borneo Post in an email.

Elaborating, Tai said the sex workers whom PT Foundation reaches out to are mainly women from disadvantaged backgrounds, such as those in abusive relationships with their husbands and many of whom are already homeless, uneducated and/or unemployed.

He pointed out that what is more pertinent is the likelihood of public funding being affected by the effects of economic slowdown.

"We fear that funding for HIV and AIDS work will be affected, as funders cut back on grants and people may not donate as much to them,"

he said.

Youssef Oomar, United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef) Representative to Malaysia and Special Representative to Brunei acknowledged that the financial crisis can lead to great pressure on families and individuals especially those in the lower economic bracket.

"Trapped in poverty, desolation and desperation, people heavily affected by the crisis are vulnerable to high-risk social behaviours, such as drug and alcohol abuse, unsafe sex practices and violence," he said in his email.

In this connection, he felt women and girls are particularly vulnerable to household income shocks and crises.

Girls, he said, might be forced to stop education and instead work for the family.

Women and girls are also at higher risk of violence and exploitation during times of financial hardship, Youssef added.

For that, he reckoned that social budgeting and social protection will be critical to shield poor households and vulnerable children from the effects of these shocks.

"As such, it is crucial to invest in health systems that will be able to serve people during the economic crisis, by ensuring that those affected and infected by HIV continue to have access to

health facilities and free anti-retroviral treatment, and that children affected by HIV can continue their education uninterrupted," he explained.

Unicef commends the move by the government of Malaysia to increase its healthcare budget allocation to RM13.7 billion in 2009, which is an increase of 5.35 per cent from the previous year, he noted.

Asked about the likely measures taken by Unicef, if there is an increase in HIV cases, Youssef said they will continue to empower and support communities, particularly women, young people and children, to reduce their vulnerability to HIV.

In Malaysia, the government is conscious of the threat of the epidemic and has undertaken a series of proactive measures, including the setting up of a country coordination mechanism to facilitate a coordinated response to HIV, he explained.

And owing to their lack of awareness on how human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) is transmitted, they can easily become victims of risky behaviour.

Fu Choon Kee, chief matron of Sarawak General Hospital



Fu Choon Kee



Youssef Oomar