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# Many gays, lesbians repented: Minister

KUALA LUMPUR: The Government's efforts to heal the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) communities in the country have received great response.

Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department (Islamic Affairs) Datuk Mashitah Ibrahim said many LGBT individuals had repented, thanks to government workshops that helped bring them back to normality.

Mashitah was responding to a question on whether the government's activities to curb LGBT activities had borne fruit.

Mashitah had told the Dewan Rakyat previously that the Government was considering setting up a rehabilitation centre for LGBTs.

However, she said that while no centres had been opened yet, short-term courses were being carried out.

"Some of the transgenders who enrolled in our course repented and chose to become trainers in courses for others."

Mashitah said the LGBT movement was a direct result of European civilisation. "It is not so much about individuals, rather about a movement, an after-effect of globalisation."

She said the movement gave the perception that LGBTs were being discriminated against in the country.

"When we talk about fundamental liberties in Malaysia, we talk about not discriminating someone due to his or her gender.

However, it does not refer to LGBTs," she said.

She said that when it came to the law, even if an individual underwent sex change operation, he or she would still be meted out punishment according to the original gender.

"Only individuals born as hermaphrodites can be allowed to have operations. They can choose their gender," she said.

Her statement, however, drew flak from civil liberties groups, saying this would lead to the community going underground, hampering efforts to educate them on safe sex practices.

In response to her claims that the government's programmes had successfully led to many from the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community to "repent", PT Foundation chairman Hisham Hussein said groups advocating sexual health would find it more difficult to access the LGBT community to educate them on protection from sexually-transmitted diseases (STDs).

"The more we do not accept them, the more they are driven underground, which makes it difficult for us to identify and educate them," he said.



Mashitah

"We need to work with them, not condemn them," he added.

He also said when driven underground, STDs like HIV would only be exacerbated.

"It is a fact that HIV transmitted via sex has overtaken the transmission of HIV via drugs.

"It has been going on since 2010. We really need to acknowledge this," he added.

Seksualiti Merdeka co-founder Pang Khee Teik said studies on the conversion of LGBTs have been discredited as being harmful.

"Those who have undergone rehabilitation programme and claimed to have repented of their sexual orientation or gender identity may have done so because they feel compelled to do so."

"The need to be accepted has made some of us good at lying, even lying to ourselves," he added.

He said social acceptance of the LGBT community would help stave off depression, suicide and sexually transmitted diseases.

"There are many people presently suffering because they have been forced to express their gender in a way that is not true to who they feel they are," he said.

Pang said the government's role is to ensure all individuals are treated equally before the law, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.

"When we don't have to worry about being arrested, being fired, being rehabilitated, being forced to marry who we don't love, we can live as productive citizens," he added.

On the lack of constitutional protection for LGBTs, lawyer Syahredzan Johan said the Constitution should not be read narrowly.

Article 8(1) of the Federal Constitution stipulates that all persons are equal before the law and are entitled to equal protection of the law.

Meanwhile, Article 8(2) of the Federal Constitution prohibits discrimination on citizens on grounds only of religion, race, descent, place of birth or gender unless allowed by the Constitution itself.

Syahredzan said: "It is true that the provision states 'gender'."

"But Article 8(1) is clear — it mentions all persons are equal before the law and should have equal protection of the law, regardless of his race, religion, creed, gender or sexual orientation."

"So the word 'gender' in Article 8(2) should be read to also mean 'sexual preference or sexuality,'" he added.

He also said edicts issued by the National Fatwa Council have no bearing on secular laws. "Fatwas do not have force of law, either substantively or procedurally."

"Is the National Registration Department a 'person professing the religion of Islam'?"

"No. So there is no reason for the NRD to comply with any religious edict," he added.

Mashitah had said Malaysia prohibits men or women who have had sex-change surgery to change their gender in registration documents as the operations has been proscribed by the Fatwa Council in an edict.