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Silent cry of the women drug addicts

PETALING JAYA: The Malaysian AIDS Council is still finding it hard to reach out to women drug users as they go into hiding for fear of being stigmatised by society.

The council's policy manager, Fifi Rahman (pix), told theSun it is difficult to identify these women drug users because they remain silent as they fear of being judged.

"The tendency here is to judge first. People tend to go 'you're not a good woman, or you're not a good mother, or you're not a good Muslim', and this is a misconception," she said.

Fifi, who is one of the main researchers of a report that will be released by MAC soon, added that society needs to slowly come to grip that these women's dependence on drugs is a health condition and should be treated as such.

"Rather than judge them why not offer help and counselling, which is what they need," she said, adding that these women usually have partners who use drugs as well and this makes it harder for them to get access to health services.

Fifi said poverty is also another factor.

"It's a vicious cycle because these women come from very poor families, and in some cases, the whole family – parents and siblings – are also drug users.

When they are in this kind of situation, the women find they are trapped and they feel they can only find solace when they take drugs. Women who grow up in this kind of environment tend to find their partners from the same socio-economic strata too, and the cycle continues," she said.

Another worrying trend that emerged from the research is that many of the women drug-users are also school drop-outs.

She said drug users should be seen as a health issue because harsh punishments such as caning and prison term will not help them.

She said since many of these women drug users are young mothers and putting them behind bars will only make things worse.

We have to find ways to help these troubled women. Citing an example, Fifi said a domestic abuse victim had sought help from the welfare department and was given RM100 instead of resolving the root problem.

"I find this shocking. How can you solve a domestic violence problem with RM100? Money is not going to resolve anything. These are vulnerable women who need help. Many of them also need help to look after their children," she said.

Fifi said lack of health literacy is another worrying factor.

Fifi said a one-stop centre should be set up for these women. The centre should offer services such as health care, day-care as well as welfare assistance. The centre should also provide counselling.

Fifi said these type of centres have already been set up in Australia and Switzerland.

The report is a snapshot into qualitative exploratory research which began in 2013 and was carried out through individual and group interviews.

The yet-to-be-named report will be released by MAC on March 5.