

Headline **Orang asli women get education on HIV**  
Date **09 Mar 2011**  
MediaTitle **The Star**  
Section **Metro**  
Journalist **N/A**  
Frequency **Daily**  
Circ / Read **304,904 / 1,026,812**

Language **English**  
Page No **M15**  
Article Size **774 cm<sup>2</sup>**  
Color **Full Color**  
ADValue **28,965**  
PRValue **86,894**



# Orang asli women get education on HIV

Most of the attendees at the two-day workshop were illiterate

Stories and photos by **LIM CHIA YING**  
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**B**EFORE the workshop recently, the more than 20 orang asli women of Kampung Kachau, Semenyih, did not know how the HIV virus can be contracted or spread.

These women may have heard of HIV/AIDS, but are unaware of how they can be at risk of contracting the disease without sufficient protection to safeguard themselves.

"My husband had previously read to me news of HIV/AIDS in the papers as I'm unable to read myself," said Zila Dahlan, 31.

"But in this village, no one has ever talked about the disease and we really do not know what the virus is, how it is transmitted or where it comes from," she said.

Like Zila, the rest of the womenfolk have little knowledge of a disease that seem 'foreign' to their understanding and vocabulary.

It does not help that all of them are illiterate, although some of the more outspoken ones at the workshop did speak up when asked of their opinions and nodded to show they understood the sessions being taught.

For the rest, though, they remain silent-throughout, sometimes indifferent and expressionless.

Such was the grim situation that faced the trainers of Women's Institute of Management (WIM) who were at the remote village to conduct a two-day workshop titled 'Orang Asli Women on Self-Protection Against Sex and Violence,' in collaboration with the United Nations Population Fund or UNFPA.

The trainers first touched on the different ways that the HIV virus can be spread — through unprotected sex with a partner who is already HIV positive, through blood transfusion or donation and sharing of needles, as well as through breastfeeding from a mother to her baby.

"The first case of HIV/AIDS was in 1986, where three men were infected," trainer Cecilia Chin told her audience.

Twenty-two years later, in 2008, the figure had shot up drastically to 84,630 cases, she said.

"While the majority of the statistics are men in the age group of 20 to 39, about 700 women were actually infected in that same year made up mostly of housewives," said Chin, rattling off statistics extracted from the Health Ministry

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Malaysia 2002.

"There is the biological factor, which makes women more susceptible to the disease due to their body biology, and the factor of economy where women, and more so orang asli, are dependent on their husbands for income and survival and she would stay on for the sake of her kids.

"So even if the husband may be straying outside by having sex with different partners or sex workers, the wife would rather suffer herself and not forsake her family.

"The use of condom is not something practiced by the orang asli men and the wife cannot demand that the husband uses it. And without protection, the womenfolk are dangerously exposed to the virus," said Chin.

For the orang asli women, it became clear that they had not seen a condom, save for one of them who said her husband has previously used it as a family planning measure.

But beyond being a birth control measure, she had no idea that a condom can be worn to protect against possible HIV infection during a sexual intercourse.

The others simply shrugged, not knowing even that a condom can 'prevent' unwanted pregnancies.

"The only family planning method we do is not to have sex (if we do not want babies)," said one.

Trainer Elaine Loh concluded that this is not only the case with rural women but also women in urban cities with limited knowledge about self-protection.

Loh, who showed pictorials of different types of sexually transmitted diseases like syphilis and gonorrhoea other than HIV/AIDS, eliciting awkward moments and responses from the audience, most of whom were too shy to view the very graphic images.

The condom demonstration session, played out with the help of a toolkit, also drew some level of discomfort among the womenfolk given their inhibitions to such an issue.

The consequences of sexually transmitted diseases were also touched on, such as pre-mature birth and defects, in the baby such as blindness in the eyes.

Trainer Sumana Nip said while there is medicine to lengthen the life of those infected by the HIV virus, however, there is no cure to AIDS which is considered the final and most serious stage of the disease.

"The symptoms of

HIV vary with individuals as some may not show evident signs of

being infected," she said.

Zila said she will 'impart' whatever she had learnt from the workshop to her husband at home.

"Now I'll advise my husband to be more cautious if any of his friends happened to get hurt and there's blood. It's not like his friends have HIV but it's a precautionary step," she said.

Dayang Manis, 45, said she has now a more accurate perception about HIV/AIDS.

"I had previous misconceptions that we cannot mix with people living with the disease. But this workshop taught me to not discriminate now that I know how the virus is transmitted," she said, adding that her husband was fine with her attending the workshop.

While topics on the first day covered everything on HIV, the second day workshop stressed on violence, the types of it and the level of seriousness inflicted towards women.

Chin said a lot of time, HIV and violence are inter-related as some husbands have the tendency of threatening and beating their wives when the women do not give in to their demands for sex.

In one of the questionnaire session, the trainers even found that some of the women responded that it is okay and acceptable if the husbands, when they are drunk, hit on them.

"Some of them said it is fine because they think they have made mistakes to warrant the beating," said Chin.

As the literacy level is poor for the womenfolk at this village, the trainers could not carry out some of the sessions that had been prepared in advance as the sessions involved group discussions and projects.

"Reaching out to the orang asli definitely takes time. But at least, we hope they will go home a little more empowered and enlightened where HIV/AIDS is concerned.

"We also do separate sessions for men as they are the first contact point in a husband-and-wife relationship and there must be a degree of responsibility on their part," said Loh.

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**All set:** The orang asli women arriving for the two-day workshop in Kampung Kachau, Semenyih. Some of them came with their kids in tow.



**Time to learn:** The orang asli women listening to one of the sessions; some were outspoken while the rest seemed indifferent.

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**Precautionary measure:** Trainers Sumana Nip (left) and Loh (second from left) showing an orang asli woman how a condom should be worn.