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# More women get HIV/AIDS

## Fatimah: Crucial for couples to undergo testing, counselling before marriage

ZORA CHAN

**KUCHING:** Women with HIV/AIDS in Sarawak are increasing in number and this is setting off the authorities' alarm bells.

Minister in the Chief Minister's Department Datin Fatimah Abdullah said the average percentage of women with the disease in the state was higher than the national average and according to the State Health Department, it was "rising rapidly".

In 2006, the department's statistics showed women accounted for 28 HIV/AIDS cases out of 114 total cases or 24%, 34 cases or 31% in 2007, 42 cases or 31% in 2008, 53 cases or 37% in 2009 and 33 cases or 23% in 2010, she said.

"In Sarawak those infected are mainly due to heterosexual transmission and therefore, it is important for couples, particularly women, to protect themselves before marriage so that preventive measures can be taken," she said.

Hence, couples intending to get married and start a family should undergo HIV/AIDS counselling and screening sessions as a preventive measure since the number of those infected with the disease was on the rise.

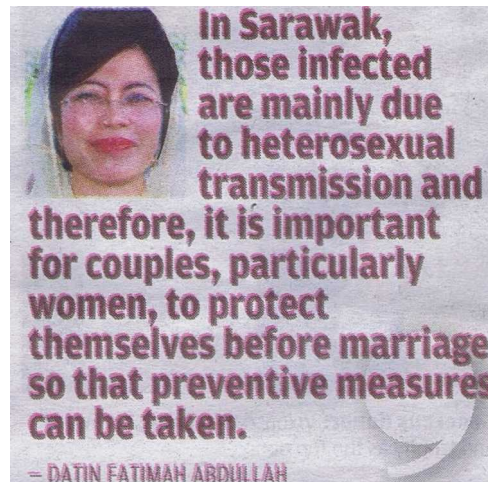
Otherwise, future husbands could be passing the disease to their wives and children either knowingly or unknowingly, she told reporters after chairing the Sarawak Women and Family Council's retreat here.

Fatimah, who is the council's chairman, said at present, HIV/AIDS counselling and screening was not mandatory in the state but couples should take the extra precaution.

Men and women need to be educated on the importance of such screening for their own good and in future their children.

This was one of the council's recommendation after a long deliberation on the matter and four others, namely rape cases, snatch and break-in cases, divorce and poverty, she said.

On rape cases, Fatimah revealed that police



- DATIN FATIMAH ABDULLAH

records showed that most rape cases happened to girls aged 16 years and below.

"Another observation is that many cases happened in the suspect's or victim's houses," she said.

Out of the 120 rape cases in 2006, 88 involved victims aged 16 and below, 84 out of 134 cases in 2007, 70 out of 145 cases in 2008, 141 out of 206 cases in 2009 and 139 out of 200 cases in 2010.

As of end of June this year, the state recorded 67 rape cases out of which 40 involved girls aged 16 and below, she said.

Besides, Fatimah said over the years a number of cases happened on those who were either with physical or mental disability.

"Although the number is small, this should not be happening," she pointed out.

To address rape cases, the council had recommended that parents, teachers, NGOs and the community to share the responsibility in protecting the fairer gender through education, religious and moral guidance and enhancing the family institution.

Boys must be taught to respect and be responsible towards girls, she added.