

Headline **Transsexual tells of how sex work led to HIV**  
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# Transsexual tells of how sex work led to HIV

SHE looks older than her 19 years and is pencil-thin.

Fatin (not her real name) is fidgety and plays with her sweater while she furtively looks around to see if anyone nearby is listening in.

It doesn't matter that the interview is being carried out in a poorly-lit corner of a religious school compound at her village in Johor.

The orang asli transsexual is cautious at first and speaks quietly.

But as she warms up, Fatin, who was confirmed HIV-positive last year, lets her guard down. She says she also suffers from tuberculosis.

## All in the name of fun

"It all began when I started hanging out with my friends at the bus stop," she says, smiling shyly as she relates how she became involved in sex work, which led to her being infected with HIV.

"Guys would drive by, stop, look and then choose whoever they liked."

An "ice-cream" costs RM50 while the whole "play" would cost the men between RM70 and RM80.

Of course, Fatin says, it depends on the kind of men who "took them out". Sometimes she would just settle for being taken for karaoke and a night out.

"They would run out of money and couldn't pay us," she adds.

"At first, it was just for fun. I used to do it with the villagers without charging anything. Then, after following my friends, I found out that I could earn some money."

Fatin left her home when she was 13 for Penang where she worked as a tea lady.

She started having sex when she was about 12 and started "experimenting" in sex work about four years later when she returned from Penang.

A good night's earning came to about RM250, but RM100 was the average.

She says she did not know she was infected with HIV until she fell ill and went to a health clinic where she was tested.

Although she did not want to tell her family about her status, a nurse from the clinic informed them.

"They were angry at first. After all, three of

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FATIN

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my older brothers had died from HIV," says Fatin, who is the fifth among eight children.

"But I don't do drugs. I don't drink. The only vice I have is smoking. I never thought I would get the disease. I just followed my friends to do stuff."

Since the diagnosis, she has given up sex work and earns money by helping to transfer goods bought from Singapore to the village.

She also doubles up as a driver sometimes, which pays more.

Fatin is comfortable with her sexuality, saying that she started dressing up as a girl when she was young and doing household chores from when she was about eight years old.

Recently, she has taken to spending her time at home where she is unable to do much because she feels unwell with headaches and dizzy spells attacking her frequently.

"I feel like something is gripping my brain. Sometimes I can't even see straight. And I don't feel like eating. I have to force myself," she says.

She confides that she ended a relationship about two weeks ago. "I didn't want to give him sex. So, he broke up with me."

### Heartbreak for mum

Fatin's mother, Ros (not her real name), 49, spends her days trying to juggle part-time work, looking after her children and attending school for older people three times a week. She helps to load goods from Singapore to the village, earning about RM290 for each trip.

Her husband, 60, does not work as he suf-

fers from pains around the waist.

There is a look of defeat in her eyes as she talks tearfully about her children.

"I looked after all my three sons before they died. I scolded them all the time. But they still wouldn't stop doing drugs. Even my other son hasn't stopped despite being caught by the police," she laments.

Her sons died at ages 26, 20 and 17 respectively. They were injecting drug users, having got hooked when they were introduced to the drugs by traders.

She says her fourth son who refuses to give up drugs feeds his habit by going out to sea with fishermen, and earns about RM160.

"He spends everything on drugs and doesn't give a sen to the family," she says.

"This is a case where the mother loves her children but they don't love her."

It is this mother's love that made Ros willingly care for her children after being taught the precautionary measures to take when looking after them.

"Which mother does not love her children?" she sighs.

She also claims that six of her siblings died from HIV/AIDS.

Her other three children are girls aged between six and 13.

"Now, this one (Fatin) is sick. I was so angry and fed-up when I found out. I have lost three sons already. And this one (Fatin) has always been the *manja* (spoilt) one," she says. — **BY AUDREY EDWARDS**