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# NGOs lash out at religious body

**> Muslim women's groups concerned over move to lower age of consent for marriage in Malacca**

**NATALIE HENG AND ALYAA ALHADJRI**

**PETALING JAYA:** Several Muslim-based women non-governmental organisations have lashed out against the Malacca Islamic Religious Council's decision to lower the age of consent for marriage in the state.

Muslim women's rights group Sisters in Islam (SIS) said the decision to relax conditions for Muslims to marry young contradicts the letter and spirit of the Child Act 2001, as well as human rights treaties ratified by Malaysia.

The council had said it would allow male Muslims below age 18 and female Muslims below 16 in the state to wed but that leeway would only be given upon gaining consent of the Syariah Court as well as the teenagers' families.

SIS strongly criticised the decision which was reportedly spurred on under the presumption that it will help reduce the number of babies born out of wedlock.

Other concerns voiced by SIS include the negative impact of child marriages on the well-being of minors and their educational and economic opportunities.

"Instead of encouraging child marriages, the state government should support the establishment of sexuality education and awareness-raising for students to empower them to make choices based on knowledge of their rights and mutual respect," SIS said.

In the Quran, marriageable age is linked to "sound judgment" and "maturity of mind" (*Surah An-Nisa*, verse 6), making the case that puberty alone is not sufficient, SIS said.

Pertubuhan Tindakan Wanita Islam Malaysia (Muslim Women's Action Association) president Datuk Dr Rafiah Salim said: "At such a young age, the human mind has not fully developed yet and as such it

is not biologically suitable for them to get married."

She said young teenagers also lack knowledge on basic reproductive health, a factor which she attributed as a main reason for them to have sex before marriage.

"They need to be taught the right values and the danger of having sex at a young age before getting married," she said.

On claims made by Malacca Chief Minister Datuk Seri Ali Rustam that early marriage is a way to resolve the issues of babies born out of wedlock, Rafiah said there are many other alternatives, beginning with introducing a class on reproductive health in schools.

"The class is not meant to teach students how to have sex, it is about providing them with the necessary knowledge so that they will make the right decisions," she stressed.

Meanwhile, Rumah Solehah project-coordinator Fathiah Hamzah called for more discussions on the issue, before the decision is taken.

As coordinator at the shelter home for women and children with HIV, Fathiah said the ruling for Muslim couples to undergo a HIV test before getting married should not be seen as a "stumbling block", if it was done according to set procedures.

"If one or both parties are tested HIV positive, they would be advised to go for a counselling session and from there, they can decide whether to go ahead with the marriage or otherwise," she said.

She said while there has been an increase in the number of women patients handled by the home, the number of babies and children have decreased due to new medical advancements.

"There are medicines that can be taken by a pregnant mother who is HIV positive to prevent the virus from being transmitted to their unborn babies," she added.