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Women drug users' silent cry for help

> AIDS council: They are reluctant to seek aid for fear of being stigmatised

BY YEO CHIA HUI

PETALING JAYA: The Malaysian AIDS Council (MAC) 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, Fifa 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.

Fifa, 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 grips that these women's dependence on drugs is a health concern 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

which makes it harder for them to get access to health services.

Fifa said poverty is also another factor.

"It's a vicious cycle because some of 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 socioeconomic strata, and the cycle continues," she said.

Another worrying trend that has emerged from the research is that many of the women drug users are also school dropouts.

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

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

We have to find ways to help these troubled women.

Citing an example, Fifa 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.

Fifa added that lack of health literacy is another worrying factor.

Fifa recommends a one-stop centre to be set up to help these women.

The centre should offer services such as health care and day-care, as well as welfare assistance. Counselling services should also be provided.

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

The report looks into the 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 on March 5.

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