

Press Statement: Ending Child Abuse requires a strong political will

EMPOWER

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EMPOWER reads with interest the sudden awareness of the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development on the increase in child abuse cases in Malaysia, with 2012 registering almost 4,000 cases. The response from the Ministry also reflects usual standard actions which have been in the pipeline since it discovered child sexual abuse.

While short term shelter for abused children and inter-agencies' cooperation may work, there are also fundamental issues that need to be dealt with urgently.

The need to expand the definition of child abuse

In order for any child protection programme to work, the government has to review and redefine its definition of child abuse and to recognise the spectrum of abuses faced by children. To start with, the government needs to recognise that male children do get abused besides females and that abuses occur more in particular geographic location and race. And that programmes dealing with males and females, and other specificities do need to be managed differently.

Secondly, child abuse in Malaysia is being dealt with in a narrow manner – limited to sexual abuses and neglect, where the perpetrators are family-related, strangers, relatives, neighbours and those in power. These abuses are separated from the commercial abuse, violence and exploitation faced by children, especially in a fast growing industrialising country like Malaysia. Issues such as child trafficking, child labour, children abused in institutions and unlawful detention may appear to be separate but the government has to start connecting these as important issues to be handled and dealt with together.

The need for transparent and access to data and information on child abuse

There is a strong resistance from the Ministry as well as the police to release any public information on violence and abuse. Anyone seeking such information has to go through a bureaucracy and this excludes trying to make sense of the data collected. Access to data and information is a right of every Malaysian citizen – we have the right to know and it is the duty and responsibility of the government and police to provide us with the information.

The child abuse data released to UNICEF's report by the Royal Malaysian Police showed the following:

Year	Total Cases	Monthly Ave
2005	2,236	186
2008	5,744	479
2011	3,428	286

So, child abuse has been increasing and therefore the 4000 cases should not be a surprise but a challenge which policies and actions have not addressed.

The other issue with the data is that there is no breakdown to tell a deeper story of what kind of abuses, income background, gender, location, race, who are the perpetrators, cases brought to court and their successes, etc. Such basic information not only will give a fuller picture of the depth of the problem but will shed light to develop appropriate policies and actions to deal with the challenges.

The government has to stop being caught in a time capsule and begin seeing the fact that access to information will enhance its work in stopping child abuse and it will also mean that by involving the citizens they become part of the solution.

The urgent need for sex education for the young

This solution cannot be underestimated and be treated as a repetitious record player. The government, when it promised to implement sex education, has failed in bringing about an appropriate and much need sex education for the young. Sex education is not about increasing sexual activity among the young but it is an education that brings about not just the biological connection between males and females but the concept of respect and treating each other as human beings. By inculcating such concepts into our young, it not only brings about equal and healthy relationships between females and males but most importantly it helps to reduce, if not to eliminate, abuses, violence and child mortality.

The time to address present challenges is now and it requires strong political will to do the right thing. EMPOWER urgently urges the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development and other related agencies to act appropriately and with the aim to promote justice and equality.