

DON'T WAIT, INVESTIGATE SEXUAL ABUSE OF PENAN GIRLS AND WOMEN, 26 SEP 2008

The Women's Centre for Change (WCC) Penang is deeply concerned over the recent newspaper reports of Penan girls and women being sexually abused by timber workers in Sarawak as sourced from the Bruno Manser Foundation website. The victims, some of whom are students, were allegedly used as sex workers on a weekly basis by timber workers from two logging companies, one of which is Interhill Logging Sdn. Bhd. It is also alleged that the Penan communities have been intimidated by armed thugs. It has been claimed that, as a result of this sexual exploitation, there have been several cases of pregnancy among these Penan women and girls.

The Borneo Resources Institute's (BRI) Sarawak coordinator, Raymond Abin was quoted as saying that he has on several occasions been informed of the abuses, pregnancies, and "forced marriages" of the Penan girls and women but hardly any action has been taken.

WCC is worried about these allegations and their impact on the physical and long-term emotional wellbeing of these victims of sexual abuse. These underage school girls and women would be at risk not only of becoming pregnant but also of being infected with sexually transmitted diseases or worse still, HIV/AIDS. Given that these women are isolated in the interiors of Sarawak, how will they gain access to medical help?

The sexual exploitation of girls and women is a serious matter, all the more so for vulnerable groups like the indigenous communities who have far less access to resources. Their location in the rainforest and hence isolation from the public, places them at further risk of exploitation of unscrupulous individuals in the interior. Given the distances of the indigenous communities from town areas, travel into town to lodge a police report would be difficult.

WCC is dismayed at the dismissive comments made by the authorities, requesting proof or police reports before they undertake any investigation. The sexual exploitation of women and girls is a grave matter. Under the Child Act 2001, authorities must take action if they suspect child sexual abuse has taken place. It is crucial that the Welfare Department and the Police take immediate action and not wait for greater public outcry or more police reports. The communities who reside in the rainforests should not be deprived of their rights or be treated differently from those who live in cities of Peninsular Malaysia.

WCC urges the Minister of Women, Family and Community Development, Datuk Dr. Ng Yen Yen to ensure that these allegations are investigated thoroughly. Prompt action must be taken to ensure the welfare, safety, and health of these girls and young women. If sexual exploitation has taken place, then the perpetrators must be charged in court.

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