

IT IS NOT ACCIDENTAL!, 19 FEB 2009

The Women's Centre for Change (WCC) Penang refers to the article "Schoolboys molest girls in classroom (NST 16/2/09). WCC is shocked to learn of an incident where a group of schoolboys allegedly forced two girls into a classroom and tried to molest them. It is extremely worrying that a group of 14 year old boys felt that they had a right to behave in such a manner towards their schoolmates. We have to ask ourselves what these boys were thinking and why they have such a lack of respect for women.

It is reported that the school disciplinary board will decide on the punishment for the boys. WCC is however disappointed with the Selangor state education director's response who reportedly said, "I was informed that the girls were *somewhat cornered* and that the two boys *accidentally hugged* the girls while trying to prevent them from escaping". Why is molestation or sexual harassment constantly trivialised to 'teasing gone to far' or 'accidental hugging'? Such trivialising

- a) highlights the general lack of respect for women
- b) indicates the lack of understanding of the seriousness of the boys' actions
- c) illustrates the non comprehension and the non recognition of the violation of the girls' personal space and dignity
- d) gives these boys (and others) the permission to keep treating girls/women as sexual objects or play things.

If 'accidental hugging' is the response to sexual molestation by schoolboys, one can only wonder what the state education director's response would be to schoolboys involved in rape?

WCC would also like to stress that these types of incidents are not confined to a particular school or state. Some schools in Penang have also reported similar incidents. 'Accidental knocking' was the term used in some of these instances. In an attempt to address sexual harassment in schools, WCC began conducting a programme "Perlakuan Remaja" (Teenage Behaviour) which helps boys (13 and 14 year olds) begin to think about their behaviour and what it means to respect women. The students come away from the programme knowing that there is nothing 'accidental' about molestation.

We should all be alarmed that schoolboys are becoming increasingly involved in sexual crimes against women. Police statistics have shown that 10% of rape suspects are below the age of 18 years (NST 10/12/06). We should ask ourselves whether this is a reflection of the way our boys regard women. There is an urgent need to change the mindset which encourages or allows our boys to perpetuate crimes against women. The responsibility for doing this lies with all of us.

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