

## PROTECTING OUR CHILDREN, 18 NOV 2007

The Women's Centre for Change (WCC) Penang welcomes the recent announcement of a Child Protection Policy in light of the recent brutal murders and sexual abuse of children. WCC also notes that the Child Act 2001 is to be amended so that in addition to medical practitioners and child care providers, it will now also be mandatory for teachers to report abuse against children. While WCC supports the reporting of abuse against children, we would like to highlight some concerns which need to be addressed.

**Support for family members:** Many people find it difficult to report child sexual abuse for a variety of reasons including the perpetrator being a family member, the family being financial dependent on the perpetrator, fear of retaliation from the perpetrator or feelings of shame and embarrassment. To encourage people to come forward and lodge reports there should be i) sufficient emotional support for the child/the family during and after the process of reporting, i.e., follow-up support and ii) some sort of financial support for a family if they are required to report an abuser who is the breadwinner in the family. It is vital that society as a whole is sensitized to the issue so that neighborhood communities can play a role in supporting the family when an incident happens or is reported.

**Support for those reporting:** Many concerned individuals are not sure what to do when faced with a complaint of child sexual abuse. Some are uncertain of the agencies to contact, the procedures to follow or are fearful of retaliation by the perpetrator. One teacher complained of being accused by school authorities of embarrassing the school when she highlighted the sexual misconduct of a teacher towards his students. There must be clear guidelines for reporting as well as support and protection for teachers and other professionals if mandatory reporting is to be implemented.

**Support for the victim:** An abused child can continue to suffer trauma long after a report has been made or the abuse has stopped. The healing of the abused child is an important area which needs attention. Time and again, WCC comes across children who have been traumatized by past events of abuse. Avenues for these children to access help to heal are extremely limited. There is a desperate need for trained therapists in this area, not just for child victims but also for child perpetrators (young offenders).

WCC urges the government to take a more holistic and integrated approach towards mandatory reporting and child protection as a whole. Unless and until reporting procedures and support structures are in place and are implemented properly, policies and legislation relating to mandatory reporting will continue to remain as mere words on paper.

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