

RAPE, A GROWING STATISTIC, 2 AUG 2010

Rape is on the rise nationwide and needs to be curbed immediately.

THE horror stories are enough for any parent to lock up their daughters and throw away the key so that they will be safe.

A short ride home from school became a ride of terror for a Year Four pupil when the driver stopped the van to strip her in front of her friends and schoolmates before forcing himself on her.

The police believe that many more schoolchildren could have been raped by him in his van over the last few months.

Last week, two men were arrested for stalking and raping more than five teenaged girls living in their neighbourhood.

And only last month, a 54-year-old taxi driver was charged with raping and molesting several secondary schoolgirls aged between 15 and 17. He also video taped the crime and used the incriminating clips to blackmail the victims for further sexual exploitation.

According to the police, sexual crimes have escalated nationwide in the last few years, and rape tops these offences.

In 2003, 1,479 police reports were lodged by rape victims. The figure doubled to 3,098 in 2007.

Statistics compiled also show that sexual crimes against the young have jumped, especially rape involving girls aged 16 and below.

According to DSP Zaiton Che Lah; head of the Sexual Crimes Unit under the Sexual Crimes and Children Investigation Division (D11), about 50% of the total number of rape cases each year involve victims aged 16 and below.

A check with various women's groups, however, reveals that this is far from new and may very well be a conservative figure.

As Women's Centre for Change (WCC) Penang executive director Loh Cheng Kooi highlights, although the number of rape cases reported has increased, there are many cases that are still unreported.

One reason for this, she says, is because about 80% of sex offenders are either close or known to the victims, such as family members, relatives, neighbours or school bus drivers.

And as these sexual predators hide behind unassuming personas or keep a low profile among the adults in the community, many parents are caught unawares when they “attack” their targeted victims.

This, says Loh, makes it difficult for the young victims to come forward for help as they worry that they will not be believed.

Loh believes the crux of the problem is the lack of communication between parents and children.

“Most parents now are too busy working and don’t spend enough time talking or just listening to their children. When there is no rapport between them, how can there be trust?” she says.

Abby de Vries, programme officer at the All Women’s Action Society (Awam) warns that we should be worried about this phenomenon.

“Usually, the younger they are, the more difficult it is for them to convince the adults that they were raped or sexually abused. Why is this happening? Why do they feel like they cannot tell anyone?”

Most sexual offenders are not only familiar to the targeted victims but they are also good at manipulating them.

Befriending the victim and luring her with gifts or money are classic tactics among sexual predators, she says. However, combined with the inherent culture of shame in our society, it only leads to victims’ reluctance to seek help.

“The tool of guilt and shame is very common for victims of sexual crime

“It is a strong barrier preventing them from seeking help and it is a powerful weapon to keep them quiet. Especially if they took money like in the recent cases in Ampang, they will probably think – ‘Who will believe me because I took money from this guy?’ ”

Social works manager with Women’s Aid Organisation, Wong Su Zane argues that whether the victims have received a gift or money from the perpetrator is irrelevant.

The issue is whether a crime has been committed against them, she says, or whether the victims have been forced to perform a sexual act without their consent.

“If a person gave you a gift, or asked you out, or bought you a meal or a drink, it doesn’t mean that you have to have sex with the person. If you don’t give your consent for sex but the other person forces himself on you, then it is a crime.”

She believes the fear to report is deeply entrenched in victims due to the lack of a system that is supportive of them.

“Whenever a rape happens, the police will ask the victims about what they have done or what they didn’t do to lead to the crime. So the first thing that comes to the mind of most victims is that it is their fault and they could have done something to prevent it.”

The fear is further exacerbated by the advent of technology, she shares.

“Now, when I advise those who seek help from WAO to lodge a police report, their reaction is always: ‘If we do that, the whole world will know!’ They say reporters will be there or someone will blog about it.”

Loh agrees that living in the age of the Internet and mobile technology has created new challenges in the fight against rape.

“The same cases of rape may have been happening before but in different permutations. I feel that people are definitely getting more violent – in shopping malls, at school or at clubs – there is danger everywhere, you can get drugged and raped anywhere and anytime.”

At the same time, she opines, the constraints and pressures of the world that are forcing parents to spend most of their time working are also boosting this rising violence.

“The world’s situation is no longer simple – it has become more dangerous. There are many different types of abuse and violation too because of this development.

But most parents either don’t know how to prepare their children to deal with these changes or have no time to prepare their children.”

Sophisticated methods

De Vries agrees that sexual offenders have indeed moved on to new technologically sophisticated modus operandi to trap and force victims into sexual submission.

Like the taxi driver “uncle” case in Ampang, she points out, pictures and video clips were used to force the victims to continue the sexually abusive “relationship”.

“The victims already felt ashamed after being raped and then they found out that the perpetrators have embarrassing evidence to use against them.”

Worse, she adds, the growth of mobile technology and social media network have made it so ubiquitous in our daily life that many young people are unaware of the risks.

“Now, more and more sexual offenders are using the internet as a way to prey on victims but many young people are unaware of the dangers.

“Just go online and you will see many websites for young people to exchange pictures and post personal details. They don’t realize how this can be exploited by the unscrupulous out there.

“For them, when they post their sexy picture to share with their friends, it is just for fun. But for sexual predators, it is the weapon they have been waiting for,” she says.

We are to blame for the hike in the violence against women and young girls, says women’s rights activist and Empower executive director Maria Chin Abdullah.

As she sees it, Malaysian society has failed to respond to the new wired world where children have a wider accessibility and exposure to violence and sex.

“The adults are too shy to broach the subject, so we now face the consequences as a society because we kept quiet on the issue.”

She says it goes back to education. For one, she adds, no one is giving the girls the right education to protect themselves.

“We are either overprotecting and controlling them; restricting their movements and telling them that they need to stay home or cover up. We need to teach them self-respect and self-defence skills to empower them.”

Need to change mindset

She stresses, education is about changing the mindset and there is a need to change the mindset of young people about their relationship with each other – how to be mutually respectful – as well as how to defend themselves.

“We need to teach them about their rights and boundaries. If we fail to do that, then we will not be able to stop the violence,” she argues, adding that one measure is having sex education in schools.

“But you cannot have a piecemeal one like what we have at the moment. Sex education is a process and builds on the most basic information – good touch and bad touch for a five year old – up to a more complex and detailed knowledge of consequences and responsibilities of sex. It needs to be comprehensive and holistic,” she says.

DSP Zaiton is another who believes in going back to school.

“It starts from home and school. We can only monitor and curb the violence but young people need to be taught gender sensitivity and equality.

“For example, boys need to learn to respect the girls. If the boys respect the girls, they will not force themselves on the girls or pass them around among their friends. In most of the gang rape cases we get, we see how the boys hate or look down on the girls.”

The police are also keen to work with schools in raising students’ awareness of the crime, she adds.

“We don’t just want to arrest offenders. We can go to schools to give talks and counsel students. Prevention is always better.”

Most importantly, she urges parents and schools who suspect that something sexually insidious is happening to their children to come forward to seek help from the police.

“Don’t try to hide the problem. My advice is for the victims to report immediately. Don’t be scared. The longer you take to report a rape, the more difficult it is for us to help you,” she says.