

TURNING A BLIND EYE TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE DEATHS?, 11 JUN 2013

Barely one month after a horrific death of a wife who was beaten by her estranged husband, burned with cigarettes and her face stepped on, another death was reported of a Filipino woman who was beaten by her husband and left to die in a parking lot.

Are we as a country – its citizens, government institutions, police, families and communities – turning a blind eye to domestic violence deaths? Sadly, domestic violence is a familiar picture for most Malaysians. Whether it's bravely confronted or kept behind closed doors, chances are that there is a woman you know who has suffered or is suffering from domestic abuse.

In Malaysia, a Women's Aid Organisation's study in 1995 estimated that 36% of women have suffered from domestic violence. A more recent study from the Family Violence Prevention Fund (FVPV) showed that one in every three women in the world has experienced sexual, physical, emotional or other abuse in her lifetime. The World Report on Violence and Health by the World Health Organisation in 2002 suggested that 40 – 70 per cent of women murdered worldwide were killed by their current or former husband or boyfriend, frequently in the context of an ongoing abusive relationship.

Under the law, women who have experienced domestic abuse can obtain protection under the Domestic Violence Act through the issuance of protection orders and prosecution in court. Malaysia has a mechanism to protect survivors of domestic violence, but in reality the enforcement of such protection is inadequate.

In one of the aforementioned cases for example, the woman had lodged a total of eight police reports documenting the abuse inflicted to her by her husband. An Interim Protection Order (IPO) was granted in October 2012, yet another four police reports were lodged after that. Clearly, there was a real threat to her safety, and better protection should have been accorded to her.

Joint Action Group for Gender Equality (JAG) has long voiced out concerns on the systematic failure in the implementation and enforcement of IPO and Protection Orders (PO). Domestic violence is still viewed as a 'family matter' and 'domestic issue,' and is not treated with the utmost priority it deserves. Protection is too often withheld because of the unrealistic requirements for women to prove the abuse. To avoid further abuse, and in some cases death, interim protection orders must be issued and investigations started. At the end of the day, what is the use of a protection law when in reality, the law is not enforced?

These grim reminders of domestic violence deaths need to result in a change of mindset, attitudes and practices by enforcement officers and government institutions in order to implement the laws effectively. Underlying all this, society must move forward and take a stand to reject the notion that domestic violence is a 'private matter', and acknowledge that it is a serious crime that has no place in our homes, or those of our neighbours.

JAG urges that the relevant Ministries and the enforcement agencies review the protocols on handling domestic violence cases so that victims receive appropriate and urgent response. Violence inflicted on one family member fundamentally impacts all other family members in the same home, especially vulnerable children. The government must act now to make a stand against domestic violence and stop this social scourge.