

## **Modest Attire Will Not Prevent Rape**

The Joint Action Group for Gender Equality (JAG) notes the recent Selangor Islamic Affairs Department (Jais) Friday sermon '*Aurat: Antara Kebebasan dan Maruah Diri*' (Aurat: Between freedom and dignity). One of the points made was that women should cover themselves up to avoid sexual harassment and abuse by men (*Wanita hendaklah menutup aurat supaya terhindar daripada gangguan seksual dan penganiayaan oleh lelaki yang tidak bermaruah dan bermoral*).

For over 25 years JAG has worked on the issue of preventing violence against women including sexual violence, be it directly with survivors or through legislative reform. The reality on the ground is simply that no woman or child is safe from rape or other forms of sexual violence.

The hundreds of survivors we have worked with over the years are mainly women and children from different age groups, religious and ethnic backgrounds, nationalities, disabilities and socio-economic backgrounds.

Their experiences as well as research into rape show that perpetrators of sexual assault choose their victims based on opportunity (i.e., no one around, no one to stop them) and victim vulnerability (i.e., unable to assert themselves, or fight back, unable to report, no one will believe the victim).

It is well-known among those working with victims of sexual violence that modest dressing will not prevent a sexual assault. There are examples all over the world including Malaysia where women and girls, (and also men and boys), are sexually violated irrespective of what they may be wearing.

This is because sexual violence is not about sex but about an abuse of power and the intention to control and humiliate the victim. Sexual violence occurs not because of what a victim wears or looks like but because perpetrators choose to abuse the power they have over their victims.

When modest dressing is promoted as a means to prevent sexual assault, it firstly lulls women into a false sense of security. This is dangerous as women need accurate information to protect themselves. Secondly it encourages victim blaming and in effect will stop victims from seeking the help and support they need because of the fear of being blamed or not being believed.

Thirdly, it removes the responsibility of the assault from the perpetrator who in actual fact should be held accountable for his deliberate actions and not

the victim. YB Chong Eng's statement on this issue reiterates JAG's concern that victims should not be blamed and there needs to be greater understanding on the issue.

JAG welcomes all efforts to put an end to sexual violence against women and children. However we need to address the root causes which give rise to the culture of sexual violence in the country. The way forward should include addressing the culture where male aggression and violence against women is encouraged; where violence is increasingly sexualised; where women are objectified and dehumanised; and where survivors are blamed and perpetrators are excused.

The journey towards ending sexual violence and supporting victims to access redress is a long one. We all need to be moving forwards.

This letter is endorsed by the following organisations:

Women's Centre for Change, Penang;  
Persatuan Kesedaran Komuniti Selangor;  
Perak Women for Women Society;  
Sabah Women Action Resource Group;  
Women's Aid Organisation;  
Association of Women Lawyers;  
Sisters in Islam; and  
All Women's Action Society.