



All Women's Action Society (AWAM)
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AWAM RESPONSE to NSTP to the gang rape of 15 year old girl in Kereteh, Kelantan

Malaysians should be outraged. Outraged and on the streets over such incidences. These survivors/victims deserve more than our outrage. They require from us, nothing less than a long term commitment to eradicate violence against women and girls in Malaysia.

We need to re-assess our position on Violence Against Women (VAW) and prioritise it as a national concern. VAW is a societal issue, not just an issue for women's rights advocates. We need to have strategies to address VAW at all levels. Heavier punishments is a lazy way to address this issue. Last year, Malaysia introduced a heavier sentence for gang rape. This has obviously not worked to deter gang rapes.

What we need is to change mindsets and attitudes about the position of women and girls through awareness programs. Today, sexist comments and heckling of women politicians is seen as the norm, women are still expected to be in charge of domestic sphere, and are valued less at the workplace because of such attitudes. Women and girls are blamed for inviting violence or rape on the basis of their dressing. Skirts do not cause rape - rapist do.

Such attitudes devalue women and girls. How then, can we expect men and boys to respect women and girls? Such attitudes in fact reinforce existing unequal power relations and patriarchy.

We do not need protectionist policies that attempt to hold women back, in an attempt to keep women safe. The rape of a female athlete at the SUKMA Games at UPM last year is an example - where the Penang state government stated that it would reconsider sending women athletes to SUKMA in light of the rape incident, presumably for their safety.

What we need, is to make our country safe for women and girls, through education, laws and policies which are implemented in a just manner, and infrastructures that promote safety. We need substantive equality, not protectionist equality.

In 2013, there were 2767 cases of rape reported. In our experience, many survivors do not report cases of rape. This could be due to a variety of reasons. Survivors are often afraid of getting blamed. Last year, a member of parliament reportedly urged the government to prohibit indecent dressing to curb sexual crimes and sexual harassment. What kind of messages are we giving society, when we place the burden of safety on women's shoulders? Other reasons for under-reporting include the stigma around rape, where survivors/victims are afraid of being seen as impure. In some cases, rapes are resolved by marrying the survivor/victim to the perpetrator - as we saw last year with the case of the 12 year old girl in Sabah. Survivor/victims also fear not being believed.

Instead of expecting women and girls to be solely responsible for their own safety by telling them to cover up or to stay at home, we should be expecting measures that empower and foster respect for women and girls, as well as infrastructures that enable safer spaces.