



## **Mission isn't to 'rescue' sex workers**

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Ms Saleemah Ismail Project Co-Chairman Unifem Singapore

WE are writing on behalf of the United Nations Development Fund for Women, Singapore Chapter (Unifem Singapore) and Yayasan Mitra Kesehatan dan Kemanusiaan (YMKK) in response to your article in The New Paper on Sunday on Jun 20.

We are writing to correct what is misleading and untrue in the article.

Your article wrongly extrapolates that because the shelters are empty, the work of Unifem Singapore, YMKK and other NGOs (non-government organisations) in Batam is ineffective. YMKK's mission is not to 'rescue' sex workers. It is to improve reproductive health education and services for migrant women workers in the industrial and sex sectors, through outreach, counselling, public education and policy advocacy.

The work of YMKK, Unifem Singapore and other NGOs in Batam to address the trafficking issue is still in its fledgling stages. The empty shelters are simply proof that much more work needs to be done.

Quotes from Ms Saleemah Ismail, the manager of this project were taken out of context. During the interview, Ms Ismail was never asked why Unifem Singapore was putting its money, and energy, in YMKK despite their unproven track record.

The reporter used information that Ms Ismail gave her about YMKK to extrapolate an answer.

REPLY WOULD BE...

Had the question indeed been posed to Ms Ismail, her reply would be: 'Unifem Singapore has provided funding to YMKK because their mission and programmes are in line with ours. Both of us work towards the economic, political and social empowerment of women living throughout the region, with YMKK specifically targeting sex workers and migrant industrial workers.'

'The empty shelters cannot be a primary measure of YMKK's success in its mission. While a track record is always helpful, an 'unproven track record' may mean that a project is in its embryonic stages and further needs Unifem Singapore's support and aid. It is from this standpoint that we have chosen to partner with YMKK.'

You said YMKK employee Husaini Tarmizi is engaged in an extra-marital affair with a married prostitute. That is a factual mistake.

It was explained to your reporter that prior to working at YMKK, he had an extra-marital affair with a sex worker. Since working at YMKK, he has not engaged in any extra-marital affair with this, or any other, sex worker.

OPEN TO COUNSELLING

Mr Tarmizi now uses his contacts to facilitate YMKK and Unifem to gain the trust of the sex workers so that they may be open to counselling. By wrongly accusing Mr Tarmizi, you have discredited the work YMKK and Unifem Singapore do in Batam.

Your report has been very damaging to the reputation of both YMKK and Unifem Singapore. It has directly impacted Unifem Singapore's ability to raise funds for programmes badly in need of funding.

YMKK's ability to obtain support has also been further jeopardised. By prejudging the

outcomes of the measures and efforts of a project in its fledgling stages and making sweeping statements with little basis, your article further sets back efforts to improve the lives of women industrial workers and sex workers in Batam and, in particular, victims of trafficking.

EDITOR'S REPLY:

We do not agree that the article 'wrongly extrapolates' the ineffectiveness of YMKK's work as it was the NGO's representative, Ms Lola Wagner, who said that the shelters were empty and not effective because of a lack of funding and manpower.

It was Mr Tarmizi who told us of his extra-marital affair with a prostitute. This was verified by our photographer who was present at the interview.

Mr Tarmizi supplied further information - and confirmation - to the reporter during subsequent telephone conversations.

We stand by our report.