



He strays, wife ends up HIV+; Unifem hopes to set up 'woman-only' clinic for HIV/Aids testing

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Vinita Ramanivinita@newstoday.com.sg

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FOR THE first time in Singapore, married women may have an avenue where they can go for anonymous HIV/Aids testing, that will act as a more "comfortable" alternative to the existing DSC Clinic at Kelantan Lane.

Initiated by the United Nations Development Fund for Women (Unifem) in Singapore, the organisation hopes to set up the first "woman-only" testing site, where such services can be provided on a weekly basis.

To begin, women can come for free testing on Nov 26 at KK Women's and Children's Hospital between 2pm and 5.30pm.

It is a move that Action for Aids' ex-committee member and volunteer Madam Nooraini Abdul Rahim feels is necessary and timely.

"I've talked to one woman who said she could understand if her husband strayed," she said.

"But the fact that he didn't use a condom, as a result of which she is now HIV+, was something she could not understand."

Madam Nooraini knows of five such cases. Of these, one woman has since died and the husbands of two women she has counselled have also died from the deadly disease.

Marriage counselling and divorce do not seem to be an option for some of these women either.

"As housewives, some of them are financially dependent on their husbands and feel they don't have much say. They worry about what will happen if they reject their partners," said Madam Nooraini.

Despite the enormous personal costs to their health, she also pointed out that the primary concern for married women who are HIV+ is for their children.

"Many are mothers and they're afraid of what will happen if the children are left behind," she said.

According to Ms Saleemah Ismail, vice-president of Unifem Singapore, married women are not getting enough "assistance" or opportunities for empowerment in this area.

A survey conducted by the organisation in August found that only 66 per cent of the respondents assumed that a wife who has only had sex with her husband may get HIV/Aids. The survey also revealed that only 44 per cent of the respondents feel that it is "acceptable" for a wife to insist that her husband should use a condom.

Though the gender ratio of infected people in Singapore is eight males to one female, of the female group, up to 60 per cent are married women, according to figures by the Health Promotion Board.

"They don't seem to realise that women who are faithful to their husbands still have a high risk of getting HIV/Aids," she said.

It is a case of "protecting women against the violence of unprotected sex", she added.

So far, testing at Kelantan Lane can be challenging for married women, said Ms Saleemah, because of the "social stigma" that is still attached to the disease.

"We have feedback that they feel uncomfortable going there because they are seen as 'loose women' who are having casual sex, which is not the case," she said.

It is, she believes, an even more compelling reason to set up a woman-only clinic.

"We're working on it and we hope to get it off the ground very soon," Ms Saleemah said.