

Minding the children

STIMES0020060928e29t0002I

Review - Insight

682 Words

29 September 2006

Straits Times

English

(c) 2006 Singapore Press Holdings Limited

With Children's Day just two days away, SUE-ANN CHIA speaks to three activists and advocates passionate about children's affairs, on how they raise awareness or engage the Government on issues from child neglect to child-sex tourism and protection from cybersmut.

Making S'poreans sit up over child sex in Batam IN SINGAPORE, 14-year-olds worry about homework and acne. In the Indonesian Riau islands such as Batam, 14-year-olds worry if their next customer will be kind or kinky in bed.

This contrasting picture was drawn up by Singaporean students for a media campaign to raise awareness about child prostitution.

It was done in the form of diary entries. In one entry, the Singapore teen is depicted living a comfortable life. The other teen in the Riau Islands leads a hellish life, forced to have sex with strangers.

The project came about after Unifem Singapore, the local chapter of the United Nations Development Fund for Women, gave talks to schools about the issue of young girls being forced into prostitution in Batam or surrounding islands, to service Singapore men.

'It's good to get them young; tell them what is happening to children in other countries because we lead such sheltered lives here,' says Unifem Singapore president Saleemah Ismail.

'They are the same age, live in the same geographical location, but lead different lives.' She knows. She has visited shelters in the region, where the girls rescued from sexual slavery are as young as eight.

Some have shared their stories with her.

One Indonesian girl says she prefers to have sex with older Chinese men as they cannot speak her language and do not ask questions.

This way, she can maintain an emotional distance from the clients. That is better than catering to younger males who ask her about her family and feign interest in her life, but leave her after the weekend romp.

Another recalls how her knees were shaking after a long session with a customer, an older man on Viagra.

Their plight was not lost on children here. After Unifem's talks in schools, students responded. They produced posters, and even an amateur documentary about this issue. Beyond raising awareness in schools, the group which concerns itself with violence against women and girls, has also lobbied policy-makers to criminalise sex acts with minors overseas.

Far from being an issue 'external' to Singapore, the group reckons Singaporeans are key to the issue.

After all, the men who go to those young Batam girls for sex are Singaporean.

A study by John Hopkins University says Singaporeans form the largest group of sex tourists in Indonesia's Riau Islands. About 600 men go to Batam each weekend for sex with girls as young as 14.

Their sexual trysts also occur in Cambodia and southern Thailand, where Singaporeans and Malaysians are the sex trade's biggest clients.

Unifem Singapore's success in putting the issue of child sex in Batam on the national consciousness springs from its multi-faceted approach to the issue.

Ms Saleemah says the group works with a ground-up approach of engaging the community, MPs, ministries, and other non-governmental organisations.

Sitting at a hotel lobby for the interview, the 37-year-old marketing manager confesses she is no stranger to violence.

Growing up, she witnessed neighbours' fights where husbands battered wives, one with a flower pot. Two close friends were gang-raped at 14.

But what she remembers most clearly is her father who opened their three-room flat in MacPherson to those in need. 'We were not rich. But he said, as long as there was space on the floor for someone to lie on, they were welcome.'

That is why she says the fight to help the Batam girls will not end with Singapore's new law. 'It is not enough. We must continue what we're doing and get the community to take responsibility for its actions. We must make sure people don't turn a blind eye to such issues,' she says.