

Asia/ Malaysia

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The power of knowledge

Men, women and children of fishing communities in Malaysia come together to learn about drug addiction and HIV/AIDS

By P Balan, Advisor/Coordinator of the Penang Inshore Fishermen Welfare Association (PIFWA)

In the tranquil village of Batu Kawan, the Penang Inshore Fishermen Welfare Association (PIFWA) brought together inshore fishermen, youth, children and women for a workshop on HIV/AIDS and Drug Abuse. PIFWA invited distinguished speakers from the State Health Department, the National Drug Agency and the Police Department to speak to the group on these two social issues. Even the woman representative from the state assembly of the area was present to lend her support to the workshop.

The workshop provided a good opportunity for fishermen and their families to learn more about these two issues. In some fishing villages the incidence of drug addiction among fishermen is quite high, and authorities conduct frequent raids to arrest drug traffickers and drug addicts. Wives and children are negatively affected when their husbands and fathers become involved in such activities. The workshop also strove to raise awareness on HIV/AIDS among the fishing community—women, youth and children. The possibility of contracting this deadly disease is real considering the use of injected drugs and the low level of education in the community.

Women—mostly wives of fishermen—contract HIV/AIDS as a consequence of the sexual escapades or drug habits of their men and are then shunned by society. It was definitely a turning point in PIFWA's activity when the women, with their husbands and children, came to learn about HIV/AIDS and drug abuse.

It is hoped that this workshop will be a turning point in their lives enabling them to take control of their health and their families. By giving these women the power of knowledge, it is hoped that they will be empowered to speak out against the negative activities taking place within their communities. It is well established that women in fishing villages have always had a strong family and community tradition. Their active involvement on any issue could certainly make a difference.