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# Pondering Malaysia's Socio-economic Pessimism

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## Being There for Needy Families

*The Penang Family Health Development Association has been offering crucial help to infants, mothers and the aged since 1961.*

By Emilia Ismail

The Penang Family Health Development Association (PFHDA), formerly known as the Family Planning Association, was established in 1961 to provide services exclusively for women's health. Today, its primary mission is to be an effective NGO caring for community health, and promoting sexual and reproductive health rights in Penang. Their motto? "My Body, My Responsibility".

According to PFHDA chairperson, Yeap Meng Chee, effective family planning helps women to achieve what's best for their families. "We want to give time, love and care to our family. We want to give every child the highest possible education, adequate love, shelter and food. So women must be empowered to plan for the number of children they want, and when they want them," Yeap says.

Access to family planning is a human right. Family planning is central to gender

equality and women's empowerment, and it is a key factor in reducing poverty. Lack of information and of proper guidance by medical professionals, however, has limited safe access to family planning for women in Malaysia.

Last year, Kumari\*, a 37-year-old engineer, became pregnant due to failed contraception. She felt she had the right to decide, seeing that already had two children. To her, her small family is complete.

But her regular gynaecologist would not terminate her pregnancy.

There is a lot of confusion about the legality of pregnancy termination in Malaysia, threatening women's abilities to build better futures for themselves, their families and their communities. The termination of pregnancies has been permitted by law since 1989, but there is a general perception that it is not encouraged by the authorities.



➤ Yeap Meng Chee.

## feature



Christine Low Bee Cheng

A new official guideline on abortion was approved in September 2012, but this may take some time to be effectively implemented.

According to Christine Low Bee Cheng, manager of PFHDA, many health providers in the public and private sectors wish to avoid the stigma associated with abortions. "Abortion is legal, yet many women have unwanted pregnancies because of the stigma attached to abortions. That's why even married women like Kamari could not terminate her unwanted pregnancy."

Health and education policies continue to be strongly influenced by public religious views, and these often work against the effective implementation of existing family planning services. "The current belief is that religions are against abortion," Low says, "but the National Fatwa Council allows abortion if the pregnancy is below 120 days, if the baby or the mother has an illness, if the pregnancy is harmful to the mother, or for socio-economic reasons."

The termination of unwanted pregnancies is not always the solution. Through counselling, PFHDA has managed to open up doors for adoption. "There are times when women come to PFHDA with an abortion-related issue; some leave our place with hopes of putting their babies up for adoption instead. We have had eight cases so far where we helped pregnant mothers find suitable foster families for their child. We take that as a small win," Low says.

Through counselling, women are also taught safe sex and various contraceptive methods to prevent future unwanted pregnancies. "Some women think that the emergency contraceptive pill is a foolproof method to prevent pregnancy, not knowing that when emergency contraceptive pills are used too often, its effectiveness decreases. So, we help them find the most suitable contraceptive method."

## Caring for Sexual Health

Conversations about family planning and safe sex often lead to other sexual health-related topics, such as sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and HIV/AIDS. According to the Ministry of Health, 70% of HIV infections recorded in 2010 were transmitted through heterosexual relationships, mainly from female sex workers to male clients.

To that effect, PFHDA has reached out to high-risk groups – transgender sex workers, female sex workers and men who have sex with men – with a STI/HIV harm reduction programme by bringing the clients for medical treatment. PFHDA also conducts sexual and reproductive health screening services in brothels with the cooperation of brothel owners and gate keepers.

"Some might think that we are enabling our clients by providing free condoms

and lubricants to sex workers, but reminding and lecturing them will just drive them further away, and nothing gets solved. The main problem to address here are the sex workers who belong to the high-risk group. We not only provide condoms and lubricants, but also equip them with information on reducing barriers to condom use, such as condom negotiation strategies.

"For example, we advise our clients to be paid before the sexual encounter so that their clients cannot refuse to pay if a condom is used, or to simply refuse to provide service if a condom is not used. We also provide them with skills to correctly and consistently use condoms. Most of our clients now can negotiate condom use with their clients. We don't judge what they do for a living; we aim only to prevent the spread of STIs and protect innocent victims, such as the partners of the sex workers' clients," Low says.

Babies born of infected mothers are as much victims as their mothers, so PFHDA established an initiative to provide free milk powder to infected mothers. "Infected mothers are unable to breastfeed their babies because HIV can be transmitted through breast milk," Low says. "As most of our clients come from poor socio-economic backgrounds, they cannot afford to buy milk powder for their children. The free milk powder initiative has been a

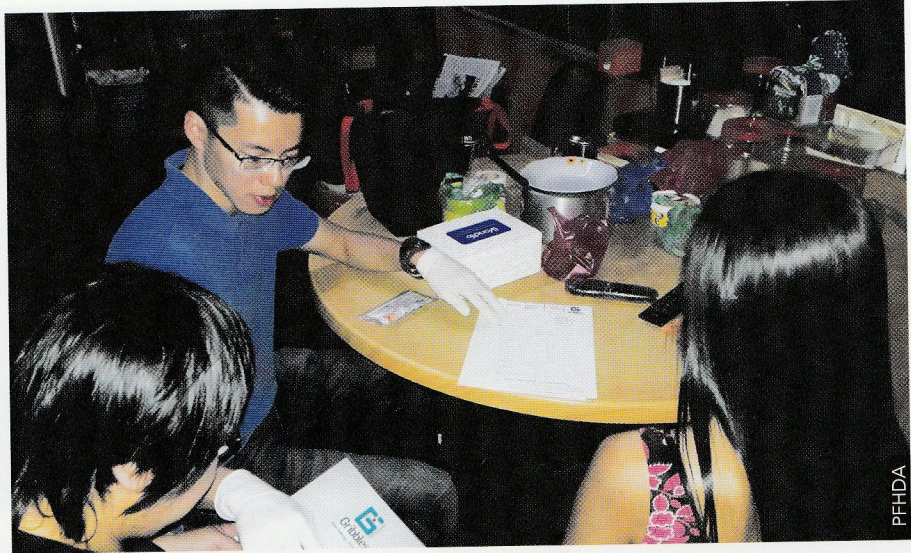
PFHDA teamed up with Peow Eng Medical College to provide better services to PFHDA's clients.



success as we managed to hit zero mother-to-baby transmission. This initiative was adopted by the Ministry of Health; the government has since provided free milk powder to HIV-positive new mothers.”

Low admits that it is a challenge to keep HIV-positive clients on their treatment: “We have clients from as far away as Kedah, and for them to travel to hospitals can be costly. So, some choose to drop out of treatment. What they do not understand is that their health will be severely compromised if they stop their treatment. Realising that money is an issue to our clients, we started an initiative to partly fund the logistics cost.”

Clients who knowingly continue to transmit the infection to their partners also pose a threat to PFHDA’s relentless efforts to contain the spread. Ilham\*, a HIV-positive client, knowingly transmitted the virus to four of his wives. “We empowered and supported Ilham’s second wife to take legal action against him, which she did. Ilham subsequently died of AIDS. Sadly, his second wife passed away soon after. But through our involvement, all seven of his children are not infected and a relative is now taking care of them.” PFHDA’s tireless efforts to address the growing HIV epidemic in the community bagged them the prestigious Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Award in 2012.



➤ Health screenings are important to obtain the health status of sex workers.

Looking ahead, PFHDA wishes to extend its services to another neglected community in our fast-paced world: the elderly. PFHDA has secured funding from the Family Health Foundation Malaysia to conduct activities at two old folks’ homes. Through another separate project, the PFHDA Silver Thread, PFHDA conducts home visits to the elderly to access, refer, and advise the carers regarding health care. “This is in tandem with our strategy to provide reproductive health services to the ageing,” Yeap says. ■

*\*To protect the privacy of the people in this article, names have been changed.*

**The Penang Family Health Development Association is located at 333, Jalan Perak and can be contacted at +604 282 5191 or +604 281 3144, or via email at [info@fhdapenang.org](mailto:info@fhdapenang.org). PFHDA is a not-for-profit organisation with charity status and encourages the public to help fund their activities.**

➤ Condoms and lubricants are distributed for free to sex workers.



Emilia Ismail is a freelance writer, and snot wiper and bedtime story narrator for her two-year-old son. Her works can be found in *The Star*, *Penang Monthly* and most recently, *Eksentrika*.

Emilia Ismail