

MARCH 6, 2015

Former drug user helps others as outreach worker

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KUALA LUMPUR — Having been a drug user for two decades, Yatie Jonet knows only too well what a struggle life can be.

With that in mind, she is now helping others in her capacity as an outreach worker with AIDS Action and Research Group (AARG).

She serves under the Needle Syringe Exchange Programme (NSEP) and is based in Taiping, Perak.

"I know it is difficult. But speaking from experience, I believe anyone can go into recovery," said the 40-year-old at Malaysian AIDS Council's (MAC) launch of its report on drug addiction among women. The report is titled *Everything on my own: A policy report on women who use drugs in Malaysia*.

"I try to help friends from my former life as a user by giving them information on different approaches they can take to recover.

"I managed to help some of my friends who are now in recovery and leading healthy lifestyles but there are still those I couldn't help and were found dead on the streets."

Yatie said she was among the lucky ones to have a supportive family.

"Other families might kick them out of the house, but my mother has always been accepting," she said.

Yatie began experimenting with drugs at 15 as she was influenced by her friends. "It began with cigarettes and marijuana and even heroin. I dropped out of school when I was 15," she said.

Yatie married when she was 17 after being persuaded by her family, who thought it would help her find the right path.

The marriage proved to be a bad idea as her husband turned out to be an alcoholic and a drug user as well.

When Yatie gave birth to her son the



Yatie tries to help her drug addict friends by giving them information on different approaches they can take to recover. — Picture by Firdaus Latif

following year, she left her husband and took her son with her to seek help from her parents.

However, she could not stop using drugs and decided to leave her son under her parents' care as she moved from town to town over the next few years.

"I even dealt drugs from time to time to pay my bills but I never had a proper

job," she said.

She was imprisoned twice for possession, and also sent for rehabilitation twice.

Yatie said it was during her second stint in rehabilitation at 35, that she realised she did not want to use drugs anymore.

"I was just tired of it. I couldn't stand waking up every day and the first thing I felt was the urge to take drugs," she said.

After finding an experienced mentor in the centre who was also a former drug user, she was determined to kick the habit.

"He proved to me that I could do it. And now I want to prove to others they can do it too," she said.

The MAC, meanwhile, called for the decriminalisation of drug use and to treat addiction as a medical condition.

Its policy manager and principal investigator Fifa Rahman said sending drug users to prison only exacerbated their condition and would lead to further drug use.

"Criminal records result in people not being able to get jobs. You increase the trauma and isolation, the mental health risk and the possibility that they won't get a job," she said during the launch.

"That means you keep them in the same socio-economic strata, making it difficult for them to improve their quality of life."

Fifa said discrimination by the public only worsened the problem as families and even welfare workers stopped providing support to drug users, pushing them into a cycle of drug abuse.

Fifa urged that drug addiction to be treated as a medical condition without judgment.

It was reported yesterday the issue of female drug users was hidden and treatment services for drug addiction and harm reduction were not geared towards addressing their needs.

MAC also recommended that policies should involve counselling services tailored for women, as well as conducting further research on follow-up processes and intervention for school dropouts, and increasing public awareness to the socio-economic factors contributing to drug use.

The study involved 38 participants aged between 21 and 56, with the median age of initiation into drug use by the participants being 18.

The youngest age of initiation among its participants was nine years.