

Safe havens for the newborns

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PREGNANCY is a scary experience for any unwed mother, but more so for a teenager. In dealing with feelings of fear, anger, disappointment and confusion, many pregnant teenagers resort to the easiest and fastest way out of their predicament — abortion.

Unaware that there are other options, young girls choose to handle the problem on their own, under frighteningly dangerous conditions, sometimes in the back room of clinics.

Are they evil? Are they killers? No, they are just frightened teenagers looking for a way out of a scary predicament.

What they don't know is that there are many shelters willing to help them get through this experience, give them a second chance at life and give their babies the right to live.

For instance, in a small housing area in Gombak, a married couple is housing pregnant teenagers who have nowhere else to turn.

The couple clothe and feed them, and, more importantly, they provide the emotional support needed to get single girls through pregnancy.

When the *New Sunday Times* visited Kursus Asas Pembangunan Integriti Wanita Dan Moral Insan (Kewaja) last Wednesday, there were 60 pregnant teenagers living in the houses. Most were students between the age of 16 and 23.

"Many of the teenage girls who come to us are at the lowest point of their lives. They

Teenage pregnancies are on the rise and many mums-to-be are estranged from their families. However, AUDREY VIJANDREN learns that there are shelters willing to provide a family environment in which to bring a child into the world

don't know where to turn to and whom to talk to.

"In the past six months alone, we have taken in 164 pregnant women. Some as young as 14, others as old as 40.

"Most walk into our centre on their own but some are brought here by their boyfriends or parents," said Kewaja director Yahya Yusof.

"When we started in 1996, we had 101 girls. But every year since then this number has increased. It is not a disease and it is not an epidemic. Teenage pregnancy is a social disaster.

"Some of the girls come to us because their parents are too embarrassed to keep them at home. This is a hiding place so the parents *tak malu* (are not shamed). But, some girls are here because they come from broken homes and can't afford to pay the medical bills."

For whatever the reason the girls end up in Kewaja, they are cared for and their babies are brought safely into the world.

"We encourage the families to keep the baby after delivery, but if they want to give the baby up for adoption, then we try to find suitable families."

He said many teenage girls were easily coaxed into having premarital sex because they were naïve.

"Society should not only blame the girls. Most of them are in this situation because they were told they had to prove their love to their boyfriends. They were cheated. None of these girls wanted to be in this situation."

Kewaja, Yahya said, was a place teenage girls could go to instead of sitting alone in a room, waiting to go into labour.

"When a teenager gets pregnant, she starts thinking of the worst-case scenario. She starts wondering 'who wants me?', 'how do I keep this a secret?'"

He said some girls tried all sorts of ways to abort the babies themselves.

"They take over-the-counter medications not meant for pregnant women in hopes of aborting the baby. But these ways backfire as the babies are born deformed and disfigured."

He said it was important that these young girls were with people who knew how to handle their situation from an objective and mature point of view.