

UNICEF-THE BODY SHOP REPORT: BEHIND CLOSED DOORS MALAYSIAN LAUNCH

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REMARKS

Gaye Phillips

UNICEF Representative, Malaysia

UNICEF Special Representative, Singapore & Brunei

The Honourable Dato' Seri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil
Minister of Women, Family & Community Development

Datin Mina Cheah-Foong
Managing Director, The Body Shop Malaysia

Dato'-dato', Datin-datin,

Members of the media,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

TWO MALAYSIAN TRAGEDIES

Sixteen years ago, in 1990, a toddler, a boy, was found abandoned in front of toilets in a Kuala Lumpur hospital. His name was Balasundram. His body was covered with bruises and cuts and scars from cigarette burns. He suffered brain and kidney damage. A team of doctors, led by Professor Datuk Dr. Sham Kassim, did all they could to save him. Sadly, baby Balasundram's injuries were so severe, even the best efforts by the best doctors could not rescue him from death. Two years ago, a girl, Nor Iszyani Amylia, also two years old, died as a result of extensive injuries inflicted on her small body by her mother.

These tragedies captured headlines across the country. Malaysians were stunned into disbelief that such a level of cruelty and torture could have been perpetrated against these helpless children.

Unfortunately the story of baby Bala and baby Nor Iszyani Amylia is true. It is also true that their stories are repeated over and over again, day after day, around the world, in every country, city, suburb and village.

Every child has the right to a life free of violence. Yet, each day, millions of children endure violence. They are subjected to physical, psychological and sexual abuse in homes, schools, institutions, on the streets, in work situations, in conflict with the law, and in cyberspace.

All violence against children is unacceptable but the violence inflicted by trusted adults behind the closed doors of the home that should be the safest place for a child to be, must surely be the most insidious and pernicious form of violence against children.

Children are victims of violence in their homes, not just at the hands of biological parents, but also adoptive or step parents, grandparents, older siblings, other relatives, guardians or care providers and neighbours.

The prevalence and extent of violence against children in the home is extremely difficult to gauge. There's a lack of information because most violence in the home goes unreported. Only the extreme cases, like baby Bala and baby Nor Iszyani Amylia, that require hospitalisation or which result in death are reported.

WHY DO WE COMMIT ACTS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN?

It's complex. It occurs in every country, at all levels of society, from poor households to very wealthy households; from illiterate households to the highly educated; in humble homes as well as the homes of the famous and respected.

Children are small and vulnerable; easy targets for our frustration and anger. They can be frightened into silence and no matter how long and painful the abuse, they still yearn for the approval and love of their parents and elders.

Traditionally, children have a subordinate status in the social hierarchy. Children are expected to be deferential to adults, be it in the family, in schools or in the general community. Children are not expected to question or challenge adults, and if they do, such actions can be perceived by an adults as disrespectful. And in most societies, adults see it as their role and duty to physically punish children, for the child's good, to ensure they grow into respectful adults.

And violence in homes is considered a taboo subject and as such many incidents involving abuse against children in the home is treated as a "family matter". In many countries, local officials are reluctant to intervene in domestic disputes even if they involve violence against children.

While access to good data is a challenge, everywhere, in relation to violence against children, there is much more research and evidence on violence against women in the home. Violence against children is most often considered on the margins of these studies since domestic violence against women is often accompanied by acts of violence against children.

The studies on domestic violence against women are very useful indicators as to the numbers of children living in violent domestic settings and child development experts tell us that a child's mental health is affected, not only by direct physical violence and abuse, but also by witnessing abuse and violence against loved ones in the home.

Overall, in this Region, there is a significant shortage of quantitative and qualitative data on violence against children in all its various forms and settings. The level of awareness of what constitutes an act of violence against a child is still very low. And these are sensitive issues, in any society, and as a consequence it's hard to access information. Abuse of very young children is easier to detect than with older children because infants and toddlers more regularly come into contact with health workers

Where surveys have been conducted in the Region about violence and abuse of children in the home, they invariably show that it is very difficult to assess the level of psychological and emotional abuse of children as it is rarely reported. However, the surveys show that physical discipline and punishment of children is generally culturally accepted and widely practiced in the East Asia and Pacific region.

WHAT IS THE EFFECT ON CHILDREN OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE?

Even in the earliest phases of infant and toddler development, research indicates there are clear associations between exposure to violence, and emotional and behavioral problems. Infants and toddlers who witness violence either in their homes or in their community show excessive irritability, immature behaviour, sleep disturbances, emotional distress, fears of being alone, and regression in toileting and language.

As with pre-schoolers, school-age children exposed to violence are also more likely to show increases in sleep disturbances, and less likely to explore and play freely and to show motivation to master their environment. They often have difficulty paying attention and concentrating. In addition, school-age children are more likely to blame themselves for the violent behaviour of adults. The child worries about what he or she might have done wrong to provoke the adult to be violent and the child worries about what he or she can do to make the adult feel better.

Early childhood development experts tell us that exposure to trauma, especially violence in the family, interferes with a child's normal development into physically, emotionally, psychologically healthy adults. There is a link between children who are victims of violence, abuse and neglect at home and their later abuse of alcohol and drugs which may also put them at risk to HIV. In some children, prolonged emotional and physical violence results in a decline into criminal behaviour.

It's no surprise to any of us here, that when children suffer, society also suffers. There is no vision of today or the future that does not include children; children fully grown into healthy adults, ready to take on new challenges.

What is clear from the studies conducted is that we need a shift in fundamental attitudes about children along with an improved understanding of a child's entitlement to be protected from violence.

The United Nations Secretary General's Study on Violence Against Children will be released in the coming months. It is hoped that this global study will shed much needed light on this difficult subject and gradually, hopefully, not too gradually, our attitudes and behaviour towards children will be consistent with our fundamental belief in human dignity and our ability as mature adults to find the means to raise our children without the need to resort to physical and emotional punishment and abuse.

I want to take this opportunity to express my deep appreciation to The Honourable Datuk Seri Shahrizat Abdul Jalil, Minister of Women, Family and Community Development, for her tireless efforts to champion the rights of children in Malaysia.

Datuk Seri, UNICEF is privileged to have the opportunity to work with you and your Ministry to ensure every child has the chance to grow up in a safe home. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child upholds the family's fundamental responsibility for the care and protection of children and it reinforces the role of the State to support families to fulfill this responsibility. Your promotion of non-violent, positive forms of discipline reinforces the important protective role of the family.

And my thanks to Datin Mina Cheah, for so graciously organizing and hosting this morning's press event. The Body Shop International is a good friend and partner with UNICEF. Your personal leadership in the private sector and commitment to take action against domestic violence is an inspiration. Our hope is that others will follow your fine example of social responsibility. The 2006 "Violence in the Home Campaign", puts much needed focus on children as the forgotten victims of domestic violence.

I conclude with the words of Professor Jaap Doek, Chairman of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child:

"Children are not mini-persons with mini-rights, mini-feelings and mini-human dignity. They are vulnerable human beings with full rights which require more, not less protection. It is therefore absolutely unacceptable that when it comes to the protection of their physical and psychological integrity, they should be worse off than adults".

For baby Bala and baby Nor Iszyani Amylia, and for all the children in the world who have died, who suffer disability, who suffer in fear, who suffer because they have been made to believe it is their fault, for all these children and millions more, let us not let them suffer in silence any longer **Behind Closed Doors**. Let us stand together, in the light, and say "NO" to all forms of violence against children.

Thank you.