

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Women Unite for an AIDS-free generation

In conjunction with launch of MOH-UNICEF report on 'Women and Girls Confronting HIV & AIDS in Malaysia'
Thursday, 4 December 2008 • Kuala Lumpur, MALAYSIA

WELCOME ADDRESS BY

Mr. Youssouf Omar

UNICEF Malaysia Representative

Her Highness Dato' Seri Tunku Puteri Intan Safinaz

The Princess of Kedah and Chair, Sultanah Bahiyah Foundation

Yang Berbahagia Dato' Dr Hasan bin Abdul Rahman

Director, Disease Control Division, Ministry of Health Malaysia

Yang Berbahagia Tan Sri Datin Paduka Seri Hajah Zaleha Ismail

Chairman, National Population and Development Board

His Excellency Mr. Kamal Malhotra

Resident Coordinator, UN Malaysia

Representatives of the HIV-positive networks in Malaysia,

Your Excellencies Ambassadors and Heads of Missions,

Our valued Partners from Government ministries and agencies, civil society and corporates,

Members of the media,

Ladies and Gentlemen.

Assalamu'alaikum. Selamat Pagi and Good Morning. Thank you for being with us today as we commemorate World AIDS Day.

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We are honoured this morning by the presence of Her Highness Dato Seri Tunku Puteri Intan Safinaz. Her Highness is an inspiration to us all, as she actively promotes and works towards the empowerment of young people, through the Sultanah Bahiyah Foundation.

Young people are so important in the struggle to control the HIV epidemic in Malaysia. With HIV infections rising steeply among women in the last 10 years, children are the ones who will bear the consequences of this epidemic.

Yet children and youth are the ones who have the power to change attitudes and behaviours, and alter the course of HIV for generations to come.

I am encouraged to note that Malaysia has given HIV a strong focus in the national agenda, in line with the country's commitments to the Millennium Development Goals. The Sixth MDG of combating HIV and AIDS is the critical goal that Malaysia is working on to achieve the MDGs by 2015.

One of the key strategies to achieving the Sixth MDG is by addressing women and children's vulnerability to HIV.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The young female face of HIV

10 years ago, women were those least affected by HIV. Today, the infection is spreading the fastest among them.

As of 2007, women made up half of all people living with HIV globally. In Malaysia, the Ministry of Health's data tell us that:

- In 2007, women made up 16.4% (almost one-fifth) of newly infected people.
- In 2007, an average of 2 women were infected with HIV every day.
- Five times the number of housewives are infected with HIV, compared to sex workers.
- Heterosexual transmission of HIV is on the rise.

If the trend of HIV transmission through heterosexual sex continues on its upward trajectory, the number of HIV-positive women will keep rising as well.

Women are biologically, socially and economically more vulnerable, both to unprotected sex and to HIV infection. Women and girls are also more vulnerable to the effects of HIV infection, as cultural norms dictate that they have less negotiating power to demand for care and support, as well as to fight against discrimination.

Yet they do not stop becoming mothers, heads of households and caregivers. They do not stop caring for their children, or putting their family's priorities above that of their own.

For these women, life has to go on because their children depend on them.

Impact on children

But what happens when these women fall ill? When their condition progresses to AIDS and they succumb to fatality? Women are caretakers of the sick – when they die, the sick are left to fend for themselves. Women are mothers – when they die, their children lose their love, care and support.

It is estimated that close to 2,000 children in Malaysia are HIV-positive (out of total cumulative cases from 1998-2006). Many have been orphaned, with one or both parents dying of AIDS. There are more who live in homes shadowed by HIV, profoundly affected by the stigma attached to the condition.

Even if a child is not HIV-positive, the effects of discrimination, apathy and denial are incredibly damaging, leading to situations where a child cannot enjoy his/her schooling experience ... where friendships fall apart because of misconceptions ... where there is no support even from relatives and others in the community.

These are children who may grow up alone, grow up too fast or not grow up at all.

HIV is our collective responsibility

Today, we witness the launch of a report that highlights the root cause of this problem: the feminisation of HIV in Malaysia.

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This report grows out of the shared belief by the Ministry of Health and UNICEF that there must be a gendered response to the impending HIV crisis confronting women and girls in Malaysia – a response that is sensitive to the unique socio-cultural context of women's lives.

UNICEF commends the Government of Malaysia for recognising the importance of addressing HIV vulnerability among women, young people and children, as identified in Strategy 4 of the National Strategic Plan on HIV and AIDS 2006-2010.

The UNICEF and UNAIDS global campaign, '*Unite for Children, Unite Against AIDS*', provides a framework that complements this Strategy, by addressing four core components of HIV prevention among women, children and young people.

We continue to support the country's response to address women's vulnerability. We must increase women's and girls' knowledge of the infection; expand access to sexual reproductive health education and testing; increase their ability to protect themselves from HIV; as well as fight gender discrimination and violence.

This is also highlighted in the joint UN Third Stocktaking Report on Children and AIDS, launched on World AIDS Day, reinforcing the need to understand and address the vulnerabilities of women, girls and children¹.

We must empower women to make positive decisions in the face of the HIV epidemic – for themselves and for their children.

And we must shed more light on the role of men in this dynamic – to embrace the role that they can play in creating positive change for women and children.

As a man myself, I know that men are capable of being more than caricatures of gender stereotypes. As a husband and a father, I know that we can be worthy of our wives and children, as well as our mothers, sisters, aunts and nieces.

¹ Third Global Stocktaking Report 2008, Children and AIDS. Available at: http://www.unicef.org/publications/index_46585.html

We can advocate for behaviour change, challenge the discrimination of people living with HIV, and create an environment where women, youth and children affected by HIV receive all the protection, care and support they need.

So while we call for women to unite, let us, men, be united with women as well.

To those who provided unflinching support

Before I conclude, I would like to take this opportunity to record my gratitude to a multitude of people and organisations who have been instrumental in our journey towards organising today's event and producing the Report.

- Her Highness Dato' Seri Tunku Puteri Intan Safinaz, for providing us with her leadership at the event today.
- Dato' Dr Hasan bin Abdul Rahman and the Ministry of Health's AIDS/STD section, for their guidance in producing the Report.
- Ministry of Health Malaysia – UNICEF's valued partner of more than 50 years in addressing children's health in Malaysia, as well as sharing knowledge and best practices with other countries.
- Sultanah Bahiyah Foundation, for their guidance and support.
- Puan Jamaliah Sulaiman of the Positive Living programme, for helping us launch the Report, and for her exemplary courage.

To our Sponsors & Supporters:

- Carcosa Seri Negara for helping to co-sponsor the event.
- Arch Heritage Gifts & Collectibles, for donating a special gift to each of our guests today.
- Our High-Profile Supporter Asha Gill, who helped us with our Women Unite video.
- The Media, for their past and continued support in helping to make our world "A World Fit for Children".

And last but not least,

- Azrul Mohd Khalib, author of the Report.
- And Charlotte Taylor, who readily volunteered to help us coordinate and organise today's event.

Thank you.