



Keynotes Address by

**Her Highness Dato' Seri Tunku Puteri Intan Safinaz binti KDYMM Tuanku Sultan
Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah, DKH., DKYR., SSDK., JP.**

Princess of Kedah and Chairperson, Sultanah Bahiyah Foundation

Excellencies, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

I would like to thank you all for setting aside the time from your undoubtedly busy diaries to be here this morning.

We have been invited here this morning because of one common quality that we share. Leadership.

Everybody in this room is a leader. Each of you has the ability to influence others, and make a real difference in your fields. Your voice is heard, your decisions turn ideas into reality – and you have the capacity and opportunity to amplify the voices of those who are never heard, and yet who may well have something to say that can teach society some very profound lessons.

I have been asked to highlight a few issues : firstly to highlight the increasing feminisation of HIV and AIDS both globally and in Malaysia, and secondly to inspire each of you to make a difference, to take on the concept of Women Unite! as your personal and professional challenge.

Female Infection as a Global and National Issue

According to UNAIDS, an estimated 2 million people died in 2007 due to AIDS. Statistics also indicate that women account for half of all people living with HIV worldwide, with young people aged 15-24 accounting for an estimated 45% of new HIV infections worldwide - yet another generation being irreversibly damaged by HIV and AIDS.

Malaysia unfortunately has one of the fastest growing AIDS epidemics in the East Asia and Pacific region with an average of 12 people testing positive for the virus each day. While Malaysia's epidemic continues to be dominated by injecting drug users; we are seeing a worrying trend emerge in recent years: HIV is gaining a feminine face, and it is heterosexual transmission that is the cause of these new infections.

The proportion of women reported with HIV has increased dramatically in the last decade. In 1990, only one in every 86 new HIV infections was amongst women and girls. As of end 2007, the numbers whittled down to one in six new infections. Shockingly, surveys show that in 2006, more housewives tested HIV-positive than sex workers.

Beyond each of those statistics – each of those women, you will find tens of thousands of children who are living in homes shadowed with HIV. These children are the invisible faces of HIV and AIDS, and their plight is often forgotten. Their rights are sadly neglected in the tangled web of morality that we have woven around the issue.

The Impact of Stigma

For a family affected by HIV and AIDS, the disease itself is not the issue that has the biggest impact. With effective treatment it can be kept under control for many years, ensuring that families remain united – ensuring that mothers can continue to love and nurture their children.

The biggest impact comes from stigma. Mothers I have met whose families are affected by HIV and AIDS are most frightened by the people around them. They are frightened about the reaction from their friends, from their extended family, from their work colleagues and from their communities. I have heard a case where a shopkeeper in Kedah refused to allow a woman with HIV to enter his shop.

Fear of HIV and AIDS has been allowed to shape our thoughts, cloud our judgement, and to hurt people beyond what the disease can do to them. Stigma can shroud a person with shame and cast the shadow of disgrace upon his or her family. Stigma can cause a person to be ostracized by friends and neighbours – ostracized by those who would normally love and care for them in troubled times.

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Stigma can cause a child to be shunned by their teachers and school friends because they are HIV-positive. Stigma can force children orphaned by AIDS to live on the streets because no one will care for them. These issues are real, and they happen every day.

Stigmatisation inspired UNICEF and UNAIDS to launch a global campaign on children and AIDS called *'Unite for Children, Unite Against AIDS'* This campaign calls for urgent action from everyone involved in the fight against AIDS, to strengthen the protective environment for children and ensure that the next generation of children is AIDS-free.

Parallel with UNICEF Malaysia's mission to protect children, this campaign focuses on four areas to stop HIV in its tracks: preventing primary infections, preventing mother-to-child-transmission, providing paediatric treatment, and providing protection, care and support to children affected by HIV.

Women Unite!

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As for myself, the Sultanah Bahiyah Foundation is collaborating with Malaysian AIDS Council, Ministry of Health, Kedah Family Planning Association and University Utara Malaysia to establish an NGO called 'Persatuan Cahaya Harapan'.

Its objective is to act as an outreach centre, primarily to conduct the "Needle and Syringe Exchange Programme" as well as voluntary HIV testing, counseling, wound dressing and referrals to 'Methadone Maintenance Treatment'. Our other objective is to give greater awareness to the drug users on the dangers of their drugs habits.

This programme is supported by the Ministry of Health and supervised by the Malaysian AIDS Council. This outreach centre is located at Jalan Putra, Alor Star and managed by nine fulltime employees.

This project is the outcome from discussions with the Malaysian AIDS Council looking at the urgent needs in Kedah and worrying statistics of HIV and AIDS in the state. The organization is hosting 'World AIDS Day' on 13th December 2008 in Alor Star to further inform the public on issues relating to HIV and AIDS.

Reducing the impact of HIV requires that the needs and issues of women be addressed globally, nationally, and on the community level. We need to work together to reverse the underlying socioeconomic factors that contribute to women's HIV risk— gender inequality, poverty, lack of economic and educational opportunity, lack of legal and human rights protections – overcoming all these challenges is critical for success.

However we cannot adequately address these inequities without the support and involvement of men and boys. Strong male voices are needed to speak out against violence towards women, strong voices to urge others to refrain from sexual behaviour that puts women and girls at risk, and strong voices that are committed to educating their daughters.

As a generation, what are we going to do to ensure that our children do not continue adding to the rising statistics of those infected and affected by HIV and AIDS? How is Malaysia approaching the fight against HIV and AIDS - what are the best-practice examples we can share to inspire others on the world stage? As a parent, how are you going to ensure that your child understands the facts and the risks and the preventative measures that must be taken to avoid infection?

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Reducing the impact of HIV requires that the needs and issues of women be addressed globally, nationally, and on the community level. We need to work together to reverse the underlying socioeconomic factors that contribute to women's HIV risk— gender inequality, poverty, lack of economic and educational opportunity, lack of legal and human rights protections – overcoming all these challenges is critical for success.

However we cannot adequately address these inequities without the support and involvement of men and boys. Strong male voices are needed to speak out against violence towards women, strong voices to urge others to refrain from sexual behaviour that puts women and girls at risk, and strong voices that are committed to educating their daughters.

As a generation, what are we going to do to ensure that our children do not continue adding to the rising statistics of those infected and affected by HIV and AIDS? How is Malaysia approaching the fight against HIV and AIDS - what are the best-practice examples we can share to inspire others on the world stage? As a parent, how are you going to ensure that your child understands the facts and the risks and the preventative measures that must be taken to avoid infection?

Each of us must ask ourselves whether we are prepared to allow ignorance to sway public opinion, whether we will continue to permit ignorance to fuel the flames of fear and stigma, and whether we are prepared to stand aside and watch fear smother compassion – the most wonderful of all human traits.

Thank You