

INVISIBLE CHILDREN AND THE RISK OF HIV INFECTION

“Millions of children (around the world) make their way through life impoverished, abandoned, uneducated, malnourished, discriminated against, neglected and vulnerable. For these children, childhood as a time to grow, learn, play and feel safe is, in effect, meaningless.”

State of the World’s Children 2006

INVISIBLE CHILDREN

- Hundreds of millions of children around the world continue to suffer from severe exploitation and discrimination and have become virtually invisible to the world they live in. They include:
 - Undocumented children
 - Refugees, asylum-seeking, migrant and displaced children
 - Children who have one or both parents who abuse drugs, are sex workers or living with HIV
 - Street children
 - Children in contact with the law
 - Children in early marriages, hazardous labour or combat
 - Trafficked children
 - Disabled children, particularly those who are mentally challenged
 - Indigenous children
 - Orphans

- Children become invisible when their rights, as enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, are violated. According to UNICEF’s State of the World’s Children 2006, firm evidence of the extent of these violations is hard to acquire, but several factors appear central to increasing the risk of children becoming invisible:
 - Poverty
 - Going uncounted in statistics and being neglected/overlooked by communities and the State
 - The lack or loss of formal identification
 - Family breakdown (separation, divorce, imprisonment of one or both parents)
 - Cultural norms and societal attitudes that fuel stigma and discrimination against gender, migrants, non-citizens, drug abuse, sex work and HIV and AIDS.
 - Exploitation of children through trafficking and forced labour
 - Premature entry of children into adult roles such as marriage
 - Urban-rural divide and geographical remoteness

- Social, economic and geographical exclusion places almost all of these ‘invisible’ children beyond the sight and reach of laws, budgets, programs, and research. They are also outside the sight and reach of the Millennium Development Goals.

- Denied their rights to identity, protection, formal services, economic resources, information, education and participation, these “invisible children grow up illiterate, malnourished and in poor health, increasing their risk to violence, exploitation and diseases such as AIDS.

INVISIBLE CHILDREN IN MALAYSIA

- The last three decades have witnessed impressive gains for Malaysian children in terms of child survival, maternal health and completion of primary education.
- However, some 200,000 children in Malaysia of primary school-going age are not attending school¹ for a variety of reasons. Reasons for their lack of enrollment or non-attendance include family lifestyle and attitudes, non-citizenship, lack of official documentation, geographical remoteness and extreme poverty.
- Invisible children in Malaysia include undocumented children, children of sex workers and drug users, children living in extreme poverty both in urban and rural, remote outposts, as well as refugee, migrant and stateless children.
- Their invisibility is often the outcome of social exclusion borne out of stigma and discrimination linked to identity and status, health and family lifestyle.

INVISIBILITY INCREASES RISK OF HIV INFECTION

- Ignored and/or shunned by communities, excluded from databases and overlooked in policy formulation and program development, invisible children miss out on education, healthcare and protection, with little opportunity to claim their rights and their future.
- One of the most pressing health and social problems invisible children face is drug abuse, which offer them an escape from the harsh daily realities of their lives, poverty, hunger, violence, family break-up and homelessness.
- Their lifestyles and struggle to survive land them in the highest-risk categories for getting infected with HIV, with their sexual exploitation and drug use putting them at particular risk.
- Young girls may also become invisible due to gender inequalities that place them at higher risk of getting infected with HIV than boys. Social attitudes to sex and sex education are often barriers that make it more difficult for girls to get the information and tools they need to protect themselves from the virus. Girls are also more likely to be pressured into having sex and less likely to be able to control with whom, when and how they have sex.
- Once infected, HIV further exacerbates violations of their rights.

¹ Committee on the Rights of the Child Concluding Observations to Malaysia, 25 June 2007 (CRC/C/MYS/CO/1)