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Opening Remarks

SEMINAR ON THE SPREAD OF HIV/AIDS & GENDER BASED VIOLENCE

Jointly organized by AFPPD and UNFPA

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**Yang Berhormat Dato Norzam Mohd Noor
Setiausaha Kerajaan Negeri Sembilan**

**Yang Berbahagia Datin Paduka Hajah Rahmah Osman
Executive Director, AFPPD**

**Prof. Dr. Rusli Ismail, USM and representing MAC (speaker on
HIV/AIDS)**

Ms. Betty Yeoh, AWAM (speaker on Gender Based Violence)

Ahli-Ahli Yang Berhormat Dewan Undangan Negeri-Negeri

Wakil dari semua Parti Politik dan juga NGO

Tuan-tuan dan puan-puan sekalian

Selamat pagi dan salam sejahtera kepada semua. Saya berasa amat gembira pada hari ini dan berbesar hati kerana diberi peluang untuk memberi sepatah dua kata di forum ini.

I would particularly like to thank each and every one of you for being here today on a Saturday morning, right at the end of the year.

HIV/AIDS remains one of the world's most serious development crises. It has far reaching implications on societies, communities and families. HIV/AIDS is undermining economic growth, increasing poverty, destroying human and social capital, and reversing development progress.

Globally, an estimated 40 million people were living with HIV at the end of 2005, with women accounting for 46 per cent. Young people aged 15 to 24 account for half of all new HIV infections.

HIV, like all infectious diseases, transcends geography. In Malaysia, the first case of HIV infection was reported in 1986. Since then numbers of new cases have risen exponentially. By the end of June 2006, roughly 73,500 Malaysians were reported as infected with HIV, of whom some 11,000 had developed AIDS. Over 90 per cent of HIV infections are males and nearly 40 per cent are below 30 years of age. And with the rising prevalence,

adolescent girls and women are increasingly at risk. And these are only the reported numbers.

Halting and reversing the spread of HIV/AIDS in Malaysia remains the only Millennium Development Goal (MDG) yet to be achieved.

Most HIV infections in Malaysia occur among young Malay heterosexuals, and about 75 per cent of HIV/AIDS cases are among injecting drug users. Although HIV prevalence is less than 1 per cent among the Malaysian adult population, it is above 5 per cent among injecting drug users, and is still progressing.

For the most part, HIV/AIDS has not invoked an adequate sense of urgency among Malaysian policy makers. The fact that HIV/AIDS is confined to specific population subgroups - drug users, sex workers, and homosexuals-distances the majority from the problem of HIV/AIDS. Stigma and discrimination lead to inaction. Yet, infectious diseases know no sub-group boundaries. We must strive to overcome a culture of denial and indifference.

HIV/AIDS is not merely a health problem. HIV/AIDS must be positioned as a crosscutting development issue that calls for multi-sectoral and coordinated action, with appropriate resource allocations. We need to study the community, social and economic risk factors that lead to youth taking drugs and the implications for the spread of HIV/AIDS.

The United Nations agencies in Malaysia fully support the bold initiative of the Health Ministry to make available clean needles to drug addicts and condoms to those who are sexually active. This evidence-based approach allows for parallel secondary prevention programmes towards treatment and rehabilitation.

UNFPA is currently working with both government and non-government agencies in the area of HIV/AIDS prevention among young people in schools and factories. One strategy adopted by UNFPA, is the development of behavioural change communication tools to raise awareness of reproductive health and rights,

particularly on HIV/AIDS. UNFPA recognizes that behavioural change is a lifelong process.

Distinguished parliamentarians, ladies and gentlemen:

I move to an equally critic topic: gender based violence. Violence against women and girls is a major human rights and public health concern. Every girl and woman should have the right to live in a home free from fear and the threat of violence. Every girl should be able to attend school without the risk of abuse. Gender-based violence often affects the poorest girls and women the most. They are often exploited by men and have their rights denied. And they often lack access to information and services, especially sexual and reproductive health services.

Domestic violence is the most common form of gender-based violence. Data from the Malaysian Royal Police show that the number of cases of domestic violence reported in 2005 was 3,093, rape cases 1,931, up from 1,760 the previous year, outrage of modesty 1,746 up from 1,661 the previous year (Royal Police,

2006). But like with HIV infection, for each case that is reported many more go unreported and women suffer in silence.

Malaysia's women's NGO movement has been at the vanguard of efforts to combat gender-based violence. They have helped raise awareness about gender issues and support women who have been subject to violence.

Combating violence against women must be given greater priority at all levels and in all sectors including during schooling. Leadership and political will are critical. There is a need for a more strategic approach from all actors, including government, civil society and the international community.

To conclude, meeting the MDG target of halting the spread of HIV/AIDS and reducing gender based violence requires the involvement of people like yourselves. So please tell your constituents that they must teach their children, especially the

boys, to be sexually responsible, and to respect their partners in marriage as equals, and as having rights of their own.

Thank you.