

YBhg Datuk Paduka Saleha Mohd Ali, patron of HELP Institute and member of the United Nations Association of Malaysia

Ms Chan Kam Yoke, CEO of Help Insititute

Dr Sigrun Roesel, Representative of the United Nations Resident Coordinator, and Officer-in-charge of the World Health Organisation

Committee members of the United Nations of Malaysia

Students and staff of Help Institute

Members of the media

Invited guests

Good morning.

Allow me to begin by saying how pleased I am to be here to launch this publication with you today.

I was appointed the UNDP National Goodwill Ambassador in the year 2002. Since then my work has frequently taken me away from Malaysia for long lengths of time, but I appreciate chances like this when I am home, to speak as Goodwill Ambassador, on issues that concern young people in Malaysia such as HIV/AIDS.

In the short period that I have been Goodwill Ambassador, one of the important things I have learnt concerning HIV/AIDS is that it is not only an issue that concerns medical practitioners or health care providers, it affects every person in every sector of society, especially young people.

50% of new HIV infections worldwide occur among young people aged between 15 – 24 years. More than 7,000 young people are infected every day all over the world. In Malaysia, out of the 20 new HIV cases that are reported every day, 80% are among young people aged between 13 - 39 years.

But these percentages only tell part of the story. There are special reasons to why young people are specially exposed to HIV infection. One is that adolescence and youth are times of discovery, emerging feelings and the exploration of new behaviour and relationships.

As a young person, I understand the challenges young people go through every day to fit in and gain approval from our peers. Often this can involve risky sexual behaviour or experimentation with drugs.

We are often faced with double social standards and expectations calling for virginity in girls but early and active sexual behaviour in boys. We are confronted with media images of sex, smoking and drinking as glamorous and risk-free. We are told to be abstinent, but exposed to a barrage of advertisements using sex to sell goods.

Young people, especially young girls, face issues of self esteem – and we are willing to do silly things to feel that we are worth something. Like having a boyfriend at all costs because culturally a woman is taught that she is worth very little unless she has a man.

Friends

As a teenager, among my closest friends were my fellow squash players. They formed my social support network – they looked out for me, and kept me on the straight and true. My parents were extremely supportive of me, and allowed me access to the necessary knowledge I needed to make informed decisions. Thus, I was able to acquire the life skills I needed to navigate through life as a teenager, in the face of peer pressure, insecurities and self-doubt.

I know that not every young person is able to have this kind of social support. But it's important that we stay true to ourselves, be honest in the decisions we make and most importantly be informed and practice what we know to protect ourselves from infection.

So how do we, as young people, make a difference?

Firstly, we must care. HIV/AIDS causes more and more young Malaysians to be infected each day, and we must be concerned and take action. We must extend our compassion to people who are infected and affected by HIV/AIDS, regardless of how we think they got it.

Secondly, we must take action. Change is only possible when young people themselves call for change. More young people should have access to information and life skills that help them make

informed decisions to protect themselves. There needs to be genuine involvement and participation of young people in developing, implementing and evaluating HIV prevention programmes for youths, especially those relating to sexual reproductive health.

And lastly, we must practice change. Knowledge alone is not enough. For instance we know that consuming alcohol in excess inhibits our ability to make rational decisions. But will we have the conviction to not get drunk at a party when our friends are?

We must use this knowledge to change our attitude and behaviour.

Friends

All over the world, and here in Malaysia, organisations such as the United Nations have recognised that young people too are leaders in reversing the negative effects of HIV/AIDS. Young people have the energy, enthusiasm, positive attitude to make a real difference in the direction of the epidemic.

I am pleased that there is now a publication where the voices, concerns and view points of these young leaders on different aspects of the epidemic, are captured to be shared with adults at decision-making level and by other young people.

I wish to thank the United Nations for inviting me today, and it is my great honour to launch this publication "Listen: Young People As A Force For Change In A World With AIDS".

Thank you.