Vision of Change: Saving Women's Lives
Malaysian Experience

Both Cairo and Beijing addressed the need for gender equality and equity; for women's empowerment; for male responsibility in reproductive matters and child-rearing; to address the unmet and neglected needs of youths and adolescents and to pay attention to the needs of special and disadvantaged groups such as the poor and the female headed households.

Efforts towards empowerment of women are integrated and incorporated into various development plans. The government continues to address women's concerns and provide the appropriate enabling environment for women to participate more effectively as partners in social and economic development. Following the adoption of a National Policy on Women in Development in 1989, a National Plan of Action on Women has been formulated in 1997. Both are aimed at ensuring an equitable sharing of the acquisition of resources, information, opportunities and benefits of development for men and women, and integrating women in all sectors of development in accordance with their capabilities and needs in order to enhance the quality of life; and to eradicate poverty, ignorance and illiteracy.

Several institutional reforms have taken place in the efforts to strengthen the national machinery for the advancement of women in Malaysia. The Women's Affairs Division (HAWA) has been upgraded to a full-fledged department in 1997 and has been relocated to the Prime Minister's Department. A new mandate has been given to the National Council on the Integration of Women in Development (NAWID) so that it can be more proactive in advocating, advising and influencing senior decision makers on issues pertaining to women in development. An inter-ministerial coordinating body chaired by the Minister in the Prime Minister's Department has been strengthened. It now acts as a forum for accountable working relationships, collaboration and regular communication between and among planners and decision makers of relevant ministries/agencies on gender issues. This body also helps respective ministries to implement gender responsive programmes in each critical area stipulated in ICPD-POA, the Beijing Platform for Action and The National Plan of Action. Consultative bodies have been established in various states and districts to coordinate activities for the advancement of women, particularly at the grassroots levels.

The progress of women's advancement in Malaysia is evident in many sectors. Maternal mortality ratio is currently around 20 per 100,000 and women are expected to live up to 74 years as compared to 70 among males. Primary education is almost universal with literacy rate of 85 percent among females aged 10 and above. The increasing numbers of females pursuing higher education have enabled almost half of the women labour force into the employment sector. Women today are more visible in business with majority being self-employed in small-scale trades and services. Loan and credit is available through the Amanah Ikhtiar Project, aimed at helping to reduce extreme poverty and increase self-reliance amongst women.

The increasing incidence of HIV/AIDS and its effects on women and children has made the Government realise that reproductive health is a life-cycle concept and has intergenerational consequences and therefore requires multi-sectoral approaches. To promote healthy lifestyles and responsible sexual behavior, efforts have been
intensified to promote greater parental and male responsibility. Modular training packages on family life and family development have been developed with emphasis on parenting, adolescent development and reproductive health. A module on fatherhood has been developed by The National Population and Family Development Board aimed at removing gender biases in parenting.

Strategic interventions are being formulated by a technical committee comprising relevant government agencies, schools, NGOs and interested parties. At the same time, educational and training programmes are being conducted for adolescents, in collaboration with selected schools and NGOs, with the aim of instilling greater resilience, positive values and promoting healthy lifestyle.

Since according to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1995, several legal reforms have been undertaken. The Domestic Violence Act passed in 1996 offers greater protection for women and other members of the family and give women equal rights with men. The Guardianship of Infant Act 1961 applicable to non-muslim women, has since been amended in 1999 to make women equal guardians of their children. The government has also launched the Code of Practice on the Prevention and Eradication of Sexual Harassment at the work place in September 1999. To protect the girl child, the Children Protection Act has recently been passed to protect children and adolescents from sexual abuse, incest, violence and moral danger, and including provision for ensuring greater parental responsibility.

To promote greater understanding of gender concerns and eliminate discriminatory perceptions, gender sensitisation programmes are being implemented to effect perceptual and attitudinal changes, the promotion of equitable family and household responsibilities through information dissemination, education and training activities. Realising that it is also important for women to become more aware of their rights since there are laws to protect them, a legal literacy campaign for women has been implemented in collaboration with NGOs. Among the legislations emphasized are those related to marriage and divorce; child protection; domestic violence; and registration of births and marriages.

Weaknesses in the enforcement of legal provisions protecting women's rights in marital and family related issues have continued to be the agenda of most women/family NGOs. These relate to issues such as maintenance, divorce, custody of children, distribution of matrimonial properties etc. With the recent amendment to The Distribution Act (1958), a major milestone has been achieved for gender equality with regards to distribution of matrimonial properties.

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