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Suzanne (left) and IIW Immediate Past President Kamala Ramakrishnan (second from left) presenting a mock cheque for 155,000 pounds to Steen. At right is Ho.

Illiteracy link to child marriages

Mary Chin

KOTA KINABALU: Both Unicef Denmark Executive Director Steen M. Andersen and International Inner Wheel (IIW) President Suzanne Nielsen see education as the best weapon against child marriages.

Reacting to a front page *Daily Express* report on child marriages happening in remotest parts of Sabah, they said only when girls are better educated would the prospects of marriage be delayed.

It was reported that in Pitas, Nabawan and Tenom, many girls leave school after the Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah (Primary School Assessment Test or UPSR) for economic and social reasons.

Nielsen said mothers must ensure that their daughters do not stop schooling after completing Primary Six.

"When girls are well-educated, they will pursue their careers and marry later. With knowledge, they have a lesser risk of getting AIDS," observed Steen.

While acknowledging the difficulties in many countries, Nielsen asserted continued impressing upon mothers and fathers on the importance of education.

"Parents must play their role. Education is the key to a better future. The community will benefit from it," she said after the closing ceremony for the 14th IIW Convention, Saturday.

Nielsen noted that child marriages are happening in many countries, although none in hers. "It all depends on culture and traditions. Of course, it is more common in rural areas because access to schools and other education facilities are more difficult."

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Aiding girls' education

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Nielsen said IIW is trying to help, especially in rural areas, through its Social Project for 2006-2009 in collaboration with the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (Unicef), dubbed Unicef Education Programme for Girls.

"We are raising funds for education. From 2006 until today, we have supported girl's education in Madagascar together with Unicef. To improve the standard of education, we educate teachers as well, build up their capacity and give them teaching aids and school books."

Many countries through their governments have supported Unicef with "a lot of money" for education projects.

According to Nielsen, IIW's representatives as a NGO at the United Nations, are trying to give their input on the rights of the child. "Hopefully, we will be able to make a difference that way."

Earlier, in her address, she said that as an organisation of women, IIW pays a lot of attention to women and children.

Saying IIW's representation at the United Nations is of great value, she described non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as the voice of civil society.

"They can give critical evaluation of the work of governments as they are able to draw attention to problems which are neglected and sometimes even ignored."

According to Nielsen, IIW's six representatives work hard on the different committees. These are on the Rights of the Child, Human Rights, Rights of the Family, Narcotic Drugs, the Status of Women and Aging. "The reports our representatives send to IIW are of great importance. We therefore owe them a big 'thank you'."

Meanwhile, Steen said Unicef's emphasis are on HIV/AIDS and children "both in helping orphans and also in trying to help prevent the spread of the disease as well as giving anti-retroviral medicines to victims to stay alive as long as possible."

Saying the focus is on children and mothers, he said the best way to keep a child alive is to have a mother. "So we certainly also focus on women in that way."