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An unending struggle

In conjunction with World AIDS Day on Dec 1, individuals involved in the fight

against HIV/AIDS in Malaysia remind that the war still needs to be fought on all fronts.

AUDREY EDWARDS

UP to June this year, there are more than 86,000 Malaysians who are infected with HIV, and there seems to be no let-up in sight.

Throughout the years, our war against HIV/AIDS has been fought by many individuals from different walks of life, doing things like raising funds and creating awareness about the virus.

Some of them have been there since it began and others have come in just recently. As World AIDS Day dawns upon them again on Dec 1, they take time to reflect on what has been done so far and, more importantly, what still needs to be done.

Selling condoms

Datin Mina Cheah-Foong unfolds a dark brown package and picks up three packets from it. Waving the packets about, she says: "See? There are two packets of condoms and even a lubricant."

Sold at The Body Shop outlets, the packets also come with a guide, in English and Bahasa Malaysia, on the correct way of using a condom (pictorial included) and information on safe sex.

For every one sold, RM3.75 goes to the PT Foundation, a partner organisation of the Malaysian AIDS Council (MAC). Another 25 sen goes to purchasing the packaging material.

"We have been selling these for about 18 years. The reason is because it is sometimes difficult to buy condoms and in the fight against AIDS, you need prevention and protection for yourself," says Cheah-Foong, managing director of Rampai-Niaga Sdn Bhd, the franchise holder for The Body Shop in Malaysia.

Besides the condoms, it also sells T-shirts and earrings to help the HIV/AIDS cause.

Cheah-Foong is also the Malaysian AIDS Foundation (MAF) honorary secretary and is on its board of trustees.

She says she has been chastised before about selling condoms at The Body Shop outlets but her rationalisation throughout the years has been that she is not encouraging anything negative.

She stresses that she is just trying to get people to be more responsible in their

actions and that the outlets provide young women a comfortable environment to get what they want and not be judged negatively.

"Back in the early days, there were people who didn't allow their daughters to come into my stores. But then again, they were not speaking to their children about safe sex either," she recalls.

This chirpy and upbeat woman's "entry" into HIV/AIDS began when her young son needed blood transfusions. Confused, she realised there was little access to information about the virus.

"My staff are also made up mostly of young women. What did they know about it?"

She proceeded to organise talks carried out by the then Pink Triangle.

Cheah-Foong laughs as she jokes about being left with very few friends over the years because she kept bugging them for donations every other year for the MAF Red Ribbon Gala.

"The foundation makes sure there are funds available. People forget that there are real people in the NGOs who need to live. Money is needed to pay salaries. We cannot rely on volunteers all the time," she says pointedly.

One has to have "thick skin" when it comes to raising funds, especially since Malaysians do not like to say "No" when their help is sought, she says.

And HIV/AIDS is a "hard sell" as people generally associate the disease with sex workers and drug users.

"Instead, they dodge your calls and faxes. But I'm duty bound to call until they tell me to get lost."

Money, money, money

Ensuring that money is well invested besides keeping track of every ringgit and sen is Datuk Maznah Abdul Jalil's role at the MAF.

She has been taking care of the foundation's accounts since 1996, back when the term "corporate social responsibility" (CSR) was not even coined yet.

"It was for a good cause and I wanted to do something," she says.

Money from the MAF supports the activities of the MAC and its partner

organisations in their work to prevent the spread of HIV, education activities, support Malaysians living with HIV and children orphaned or made vulnerable by AIDS, and protect people living with HIV.

The foundation also provides financial support to Malaysians living with HIV and families made vulnerable by HIV through its Business Assistance Scheme, Medicine Assistance Scheme and the Standard Chartered Paediatric AIDS Fund.

To ensure that the foundation's reserve funds are healthy, Maznah says it is important to ensure matters like returns from investment are maximised and that there is enough cash for the next three to five years so the MAC and MAF can continue to be financed.

"We also bought property to house ourselves back then and the value of that investment has skyrocketed," she says.

Maznah, whose day job is executive vice-president at Kenanga Investment Bank Bhd, observes, among others, that there needs to be safe capital and return of investment to keep the foundation running.

Every contribution is important because it all adds up to something, she emphasises.

"We never turn away money," she quips.

Her involvement in HIV/AIDS also saw Maznah driving home the message of prevention and awareness to employees at her former work place, the DRB-Hicom Group.

"There were 20,000 to 40,000 workers at the time. And they were told not to take anything for granted about HIV. More information and resources were given. I felt proud that something was done on that aspect," she says.

Close to retirement now, Maznah says she will continue being involved in HIV/AIDS work as it will give her something to do besides "just staying at home".

"It has been my 'baby' all this while. And it's time to give back to society."

Making a difference

Now in her second term at the helm of both the MAC and the MAF, Prof Dr

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Adeeba Kamarulzaman never seems to run out of steam. If she isn't doing this, she is doing that, including most recently being one of the scientific chairs for the upcoming International AIDS Conference and guest editor for the *Lancet* medical journal.

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Women on a mission: (From left) Cheah-Foong, Thilaga, Maznah, Dr Soraya and Dr Adeeba discussing strategies.

Soldiering on against HIV/AIDS

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In recent years, the MAC has managed to extend its reach outside Kuala Lumpur to other states, including Sarawak, and is now receiving support from government agencies like the Health,

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and Women, Family and Community Development ministries, police, Jakim and the National Anti-Drug Agency, she says.

The MAC has also drawn up a strategic plan which concentrates on marginalised groups.

"It is hard being an NGO in Malaysia because the work is not valued that much," she says.

"And you can't just leave it all to the MAC or the Health Ministry. Others, like the business community, have to step up to the plate as well."

Being the Universiti Malaya Medical Centre infectious disease head helps, says Dr Adeeba, as she can see what her patients need and what the MAC can do to help them, such as providing peer support.

"What pushes me to go on is knowing that we can make a difference in people's lives. It's a passion and we are giving back to society," she says.

To make a bigger impact in Malaysia, especially in reducing infection among women, we need to increase the harm reduction coverage, educate sex workers and their clients, and also

teach women on how to protect themselves, she stresses.

"But as long as women do not have equal status, including financially, and cannot negotiate for their rights etc, it will be very difficult," she says.

"Often, they know about condoms but if the man says no, there's not much they can do."

Politics and activism

Dr Soraya Azmi, an MAC exco member, decided to make her return from the United States a few years ago meaningful by doing two things: joining politics and becoming involved in NGO work.

"I wanted to make the most of my time and capabilities," says Dr Soraya, who is Perlis Wanita Umno treasurer and also an exco member of the National Council of Women's Organisation.

While in the US, she had been roped into volunteer work, helping at the American Lung Association. It was a good experience, she says.

She is now involved with Wanita Umno in helping to spread awareness about HIV.

"It is important for those with a political background to understand the issues as they might be

the future leaders of Malaysia," she says.

"Last year's general assembly saw the start of spreading the message with a 'little booth'.

"It's sad to grapple with the problems we are facing. But there has been enough sweeping under the carpet. The time has come to remove the carpet and vacuum the floor."

While stressing the importance of getting the message across to women, she says HIV/AIDS education has to go out to both males and females to be effective.

Volunteer and trainer

While some teenagers were doing, well, "teenage stuff", S. Thilaga was busy cutting and making ribbons. Red ribbons, that is.

"The edges had to be perfect," she says as she reflects on her early days as an MAC volunteer.

She was roped in by MAC training and education officer Datin Salmah Mohd Noor who met her during an awareness talk at Thilaga's school.

Now an international relations and gender studies student at Universiti Malaya, Thilaga has since evolved from ribbon cutting to being a trainer at partner organisations under the MAC.

She works with mainly young people, giving talks about the virus and sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

"It is easier for them to relate to someone who is in the same age range," she says.

"They are able to relate to me. They realise it's okay to talk about sex. I enjoy doing the talks."

She says such talks help her spread awareness, especially to marginalised youths who have no idea that they might be infected with STIs.

"It is important, especially to those who are infected with HIV, because they need to know that it's not the end of the world," she adds.

»Often, they (women) know about condoms but if the man says no, there's not much they can do«



DR ADEEBA KAMARULZAMAN