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Miracle babies

Today is International AIDS Memorial Day. We take a look at how we can protect the rights of mothers and babies who are affected by the virus.

LIKE all mothers across the world, Aini* yearned for a healthy baby. Her daily prayers though were full of anguish since receiving the "good news" of her pregnancy. For it was on this very same day that Aini also learnt she was HIV-positive, with a one in three chance of passing the virus to her child during pregnancy, birth, or breastfeeding if she failed to receive proper treatment.

Thankfully for Aini, her prayers were answered. Her son Amir*, today two years old, has been confirmed to be free of the virus.

"Alhamdulillah," Aini praised God. "It is a miracle. When I was told my son would not suffer the painful fate shared by his parents, I was overjoyed. I am grateful to the Government for giving me medicines to save my son's life."

PMTCT, a baby's saviour

In an AIDS-stained era, Prevention-of-Mother-to-Child-Transmission (PMTCT) is a baby's saviour and every HIV-positive mother's miracle. Since it was introduced in 1998, Malaysia's PMTCT programme has screened some 4.1 million women across the country, providing hope to countless HIV-positive mothers like Aini.

Under this programme, pregnant women who visit Government antenatal clinics are tested for HIV (voluntary as an "opt-out" option) and those found positive are offered counselling and free treatment throughout their pregnancy and for life. Their newborn babies are also put on treatment and given regular tests for HIV.

According to Malaysia's 2010 report to the United Nations, PMTCT coverage of mothers through public facilities had improved from 49.7% in 1998 to 99% in 2009. With near universal coverage today, the programme has been able to successfully reduce the incidence of mother-to-child transmission of HIV to 4% among women enrolled in the programme.

"When mothers and babies get the full course of drugs on schedule, from pregnancy through breastfeeding, PMTCT is highly effective to ensuring an AIDS-free generation," explained UNICEF representative to Malaysia,

Hans Olsen. "The risk of the baby becoming infected with the virus drops from around 40% to about 2%."

Stigma kills a mother's hope

Despite Malaysia's dedicated efforts to protect babies from HIV, a recent Ministry of Health and UNICEF review of the country's PMTCT programme reports that this life-saving intervention is mainly reaching highly motivated mothers as well as those at lower risk of acquiring HIV infection.

Socially and occupationally mobile groups, injecting drug users, sex workers, as well as immigrant populations are unfortunately not accessing the PMTCT programme, afraid of reprisals in the home, community, and workplace.

"I was scared," murmured HIV-positive Sharmila* who felt powerless to protect her unborn baby from HIV for fear of rejection. "When I was pregnant, I was scared to go to the hospital. What would I do if someone found out (I was positive)? I could lose everything – my family, my friends, my job. Where would I go? Who would help me?"

Eyes downcast and shimmering with tears, Sharmila added, "... now my beautiful baby has lost everything. Because of me, Malini* is also HIV-positive."

To women like Sharmila, HIV is a death sentence, both for themselves and their babies. Despite years tackling the disease, the stigma and shame fueled by HIV and AIDS continues to create a fatal silence, denying many women and children their rights.

Protecting and upholding rights

"There are a number of things that must be done to reduce the burden of HIV and AIDS amongst pregnant women," stressed Olsen. "These include promoting and protecting women's human rights, increasing education and awareness amongst women, and providing simple solutions to HIV-positive pregnant women to overcome their fear of stigma."

A recent innovation to help HIV-positive pregnant women overcome the challenges of distance and stigma is the UNICEF and WHO Mother-Baby pack. Inspired by the Lesotho Government, the colour-coded take-home box will be rolled out to five countries in eastern and southern Africa by July 2010. Mothers-to-be will be provided with clear instructions on what medicines they need to take – and when – and what medicines they

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need to give to their babies after their birth to protect them from HIV.

In Malaysia, UNICEF is working with the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development to set up a task force to advocate for universal access to HIV prevention, treatment, and care to meet the special needs of girls and women in the country.

Under this programme, UNICEF, in collaboration with other UN agencies in Malaysia, supported a seminar recently that deliberated and proposed policies and programmes which will not just protect the rights of women and girls living with HIV, but also protect women and girls from HIV infection.

"The best strategy to protect babies from the virus is to ensure parents are HIV-free," Olsen pointed out. "Programmes that focus on men are equally important in protecting women and babies from HIV, as they can transform men's attitudes and behaviour towards their partners, families and women in general."

** Names of HIV-positive mothers and their children have been changed to protect their identities.*



Sister Rusnah, a nurse from a Ministry of Health hospital, regularly visits Siti (name changed) and her children to ensure they are alright. She is seen here playing with Siti's youngest child, who has tested HIV-negative as a result of PMTCT.