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More women, young girls infected with HIV

> **Seventy percent contracted virus through heterosexual transmission**

PAULINE WONG

KUALA LUMPUR: More women and young girls are falling prey to the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), with 16.4% of all new HIV infections in 2009 being among them – the highest ever proportion recorded since the first case of HIV was reported here in 1986.

The 'State of the Malaysian HIV/AIDS Epidemic 2010' report by the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) found that of roughly 500 new infections among women and young girls in 2009, 70% had contracted the virus through heterosexual transmission, with housewives being the largest group infected (40%).

The report, launched here yesterday in conjunction with the World AIDS Day on Dec 1, is a yearly report on the AIDS and HIV epidemic around the world. Present at the launch was National Population and Family Development Board director-general Datuk Aminah Abdul Rahman representing Women, Family and Community Development Minister Heng Seai Kie and World Health Organisation representative to Brunei, Singapore and Malaysia Dr Corinne Capuano.

Worldwide, Malaysia is one of the 56 countries that has managed to stabilise or reduce the number of new HIV infections, with the number of new cases dropping from 7,000

in 2002 to 3,080 in 2009.

However, this is tempered by the rise in new infections among women and young girls, which has seen a steep increase over the past decade and a half.

According to the report, women and young girls were 2.5 times more likely to be infected by HIV compared to men, as women are "biologically, socially and economically more vulnerable to infection through unprotected and coercive sex".

"In 1995, 4% of all HIV infections were among women, but by 2009, that number increased to 18%," said Aminah, who pointed out that this presents a new gender-specific problem which needs a gender-specific solution as well.

"We have to address the needs of this group – how can we increase awareness? What are the roles of their husbands in terms of safe sex and lifestyles?" she asked.

Capuano also touched on the impact of HIV infection on the family structure.

"An increase of infections among women and young girls means that the virus is no longer concentrated among drug users. It has affected the community at large. That is why the stakeholders – UNAIDS, the ministries, and non-governmental organisations – continue to raise awareness that prevention is the key.

"Behind all the numbers and statistics, each infection is a tragedy to the family and to the individual," she said.