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First Ladies not taking a back seat

FIRST Ladies are not taking the back seat at international forums - the First Lady of Malaysia Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali joins the First Ladies of Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Lesotho and Namibia to use their roles to champion the struggle against the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

While their Presidents and Prime Ministers were engrossed in a deep discussion on smart partnership, the First Ladies held a lengthy lunch work session last Monday to discuss ways to battle world's killer diseases.

Despite her absence due to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's engagement in London today, Dr Siti Hasmah prepared a working paper which was presented at a special session on Building a smart partnership agenda: Children of the missing generation - impact of killer diseases yesterday.

The Prime Minister's wife, briefing Malaysian reporters on her paper before leaving for London, said the HIV/AIDS epidemic had caused devastating effects on the personal lives of people, families, communities and economies of nations.

She told the session that the disease was a developmental crisis and rapidly becoming a security risk.

Now ranked as the top killer in Africa (it had killed nearly 15 million people since the early 1980s), it would make the majority of the 10.4 million African children below the age of 15 orphans by the end of this year because their parents would have died of AIDS.

So far the disease has infected more than 34.3 million people in the world, 15.7 million of whom are women and about 11.4 million or one third of them youths.

These numbers are horrifying because death and funerals are becoming a daily affair, said Dr Siti Hasmah.

"The effects are far-reaching as the family loses one or both parents or even several members of a household who are in the prime of their life and permeates every social and economic sphere of a country's progress and development.

"In fact, all the progress we have gained will be negated with high death rates, lower life expectancy and a huge social cost which most Governments cannot afford to bear, thus resulting in the disintegration of the society and families," she added.

Dr Siti Hasmah called for the implementation of multi-pronged and synergistic approach and shared experiences to deal with the epidemic.

"While there remain many gaps in policy issues, we have enough evidence and information to advocate for more equitable care for the marginalised groups, for universal access to health care and for medical treatment to be less costly."

Dr Siti Hasmah also said that "we need supportive social policies and we need to balance human rights with HIV/AiDS strategies".

"It does not matter whether we work from top down or from bottom up. What matters is that we must recognise that the HIV/AIDS epidemic has threatened the entire socio-economic structure of a country."

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