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Rapporteur General's Report  
THE INTERNATIONAL FAMILY CONFERENCE  
"Family First : Bringing the Heart Home"  
25 - 28 OCTOBER 2001



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### Preamble

On the 25th of October 2001, more than 700 concerned people from 27 countries and 6 continents around the world gathered for the start of the International Family Conference (IFC) at the Renaissance Hotel, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The conference was organized by the National Population and Family Development Board, under the Ministry of Women and Family Development. The participants came from all walks of life, sharing one vision : to save the family from further assault, strengthen its weakening fabric and make the world fit for future generations.

The family as a traditional institution performs roles and responsibilities which are critical to the well-being of individuals and the society. As an institution, it has proved itself to be resilient throughout the history of mankind through times of peace and prosperity as well times of trials and tribulation.

Today the changing landscape of the family has affected individuals, communities and nations globally in our borderless world. Increasing social problems in developed and developing countries seem to point to changing values and lifestyles which are making families more and more dysfunctional. In short, the family today is vulnerable and has weakened under the seige of globalization and modernization. The family must be saved through the concerted efforts by all.



### Theme

The theme of the Conference "Family First: Bringing the Heart Home" was selected in recognition of strong families as the key to building peaceful, prosperous and stable communities. It reflects what matters most to all of us and our countries. The family must be given its rightful place in the centre of our lives.



### Objective

The IFC was organized to bring together key players working for the family around the world to discuss the issues and concerns on the family. The conference provided a forum to highlight policy issues, programmes, research and best practices which could help governments, community organizations, the private sector and individuals to respond effectively to family needs. Working group / parallel sessions were designed to be highly interactive with the focus very much on the issues, abilities, strengths and requirements of family members, including the very young and the elderly. The outcome of the sessions was to produce serious and thoughtful recommendations as well as creative and effective strategies to improve and strengthen family life. IFC will result in new research, policy and programme initiatives which take into account the new realities of family life in the 21st century.

## Participant

IFC attracted a total of 725 participants both nationally and internationally from 27 countries in 6 continents. They came from a broad spectrum of professions and individuals including experienced practitioners, voluntary and community groups, academic experts, family representatives, government departments, state agencies and

religious leaders. At a time when thousands of families in other parts of the world are being torn apart by armed conflict, terrorism and violence, it is especially timely and meaningful that these participants gathered together to talk about peace, harmony and lasting relationships.



## Speakers

In all, a total of 67 speakers were sourced locally (41) and internationally (26) to present the sessions in the plenary and workshops. They were selected in recognition of their experience and contribution to

understanding family issues and improving family life. They addressed the key concerns of government agencies, family and community organisations, business organisations and concern individuals who are looking for ways to strengthen family life and ensure it has the protection and support it needs.

## Conference Proceedings

### OPENING CEREMONY ON 25 OCTOBER 2001

The participants were warmly welcomed by the *Honourable Datuk Paduka Seri Hajjah Zaleha Ismail*, the Chairman of the National Population and Family Development Board, Malaysia. As the curtain opened in this Conference, participants were reminded of the paradox of our times. Families have grown smaller, yet less cohesive, often without the family ties that bind when grandparents, aunts and uncles live together under the same roof.

While houses become fancier with modern age facilities, homes get broken. For many, the family is no longer the safe haven for them to come home to and seek solace and support in the face of disappointments or personal crisis. In short, the changing environment of the world today has made it increasingly difficult for the family to function as before.

"How can we help families across cultures? What are the proven strategies and best practices that have worked?"

The growing strength of the non-government sector, especially women's organisations complementing the government sector have made them catalysts for new approaches and strategies to save the family. Through the convening of this conference, Malaysia has brought a new level of participation of people across the globe, building on the richness of diversity to work for the family.

In her keynote address, the *Honourable Dato' Shahrizat Abdul Jalil*, Minister of Women and Family Development, Malaysia, told the audience of the dramatic story of Christina

Noble's struggle against all odds to bring hope, love and commitment to underprivileged children in Vietnam and Mongolia. She expressed her support for the extremely relevant programme and theme of the International Family Conference. With the changing face of the Malaysian family, the newly created Ministry of Women and Family Development sees a clear need to put women and families at the heart of the national social and economic development.

"The International Family Conference has provided an important opportunity for the Ministry, to bring together people who share a belief that we need fresh approaches and a sharing of knowledge, experiences and insights to meet the needs of today's families."

As one of the longest established semi-government organisations in the country, with well-developed networks at grassroots level, the National Population and Family Development Board, is in a very strong position to provide input and research for family friendly policies that will reach into every home and neighbourhood. She reminded the audience that the peace and harmony as enjoyed by Malaysians for several decades should not be taken for granted. Only a nation built by strong and cohesive families can withstand the challenges of our times.

The Minister also noted that IFC marked a major milestone in Malaysia's effort to design a comprehensive national policy framework for family development. Embedded in this initiative is the commitment of the Ministry to work in concert with the NGOs, private sector, research institutions, national and international community and religious organisations, as well as individual groups, marriage and family counsellors, and those involved in efforts to strengthen families. While IFC will not find all the answers and solutions to the problems, it is the beginning of a process of ongoing dialogue, debate and sharing of ideas.



#### Plenary Sessions

Over the three and a half day conference, a total of 6 plenary sessions were conducted. The sessions were presented by a pool of local and international speakers, each of whom had valuable contributions to make from their own unique experience and areas of specialisation in working for the family.

The topics covered were:

#### ♥ The Family In The 21st Century

- A Global Perspective on Family Situation & Policies
- Delayed Marriage and the Changing Family in the East & South East Asia
- Country Perspectives - China, Malaysia & The Philippines

#### ♥ Strengthening Families - Strategies For Success

- Coping Skills - Pressures on the Family (Singapore)
- Building Strong & Stable Families (Bangalore)
- Managing Family Stress with Insight (USA)
- The Importance of Marriage (USA)
- Inner Well-Being - Muslim, Hindu, Christian, Bahai, Buddhist and Sikh perspectives