



HIV & ISLAM

Responsible Religious Response
to **HIV & AIDS** in Malaysia

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This publication is made possible with support from the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM), Federal Territory Islamic Council (MAIWP), Selangor Islamic Council (MAIS) and Ministry of Health Malaysia (MOH). Our appreciation also goes to the volunteer photographers and other contributors who put their efforts in this publication.

HIV ISLAM

Responsible Religious Response
to **HIV & AIDS** in Malaysia



And what will explain to you the path that is steep?
(It is:) freeing the bondman; or the giving of food in a day of privation,
to the orphan with claims of relationship or to the indigent (down) in
the dust. Then will he be of those who believe, and enjoin patience,
(constancy, and self-restraint) deeds of kindness and compassion.
(Qur'an 90:12 - 17)



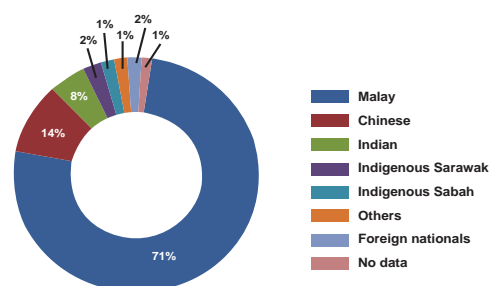


Background

The national response to the HIV and AIDS epidemic in Malaysia, which hits the predominantly Malay Muslim population hardest, calls for greater involvement of religious authorities to enhance the roles played by the public health sector and lateral grassroots partners in addressing the issues faced by people living with HIV (PLHIV) and other most-at-risk populations (MARP). Since the epidemic was first established in 1986, a total of 65,235 cases of HIV have been cumulatively reported in the Malay Muslim community, which constitute 71% of the total caseload. Injecting drug use, the main driver of the epidemic in Malaysia, is another factor that predisposes Muslim Malays to the risk of HIV infection. The profile of injecting drug users (IDU) in the country has been, through the years, predominantly male, young, of Malay ethnicity and heterosexual. Strict and prohibitive legal, religious and socio-cultural environments also negatively impact on access to appropriate HIV and AIDS education, and treatment, care and support services in the Muslim Malay population.

Recognising the low level of engagement of Islamic religious authorities in the community-based responses to HIV and AIDS, Malaysian AIDS Council (MAC) took the pragmatic approach of building strategic partnerships with national and state level religious departments. What was born out of this initiative was the **HIV & Islam** programme in 2009, which broke new grounds in amplifying the visibility of Islamic authorities leading the efforts to address the needs of Muslim PLHIV and other MARPs. Partnership with principal collaborator, the religious policy-making Department of Islamic Development (JAKIM) in particular has successfully opened doors of opportunities for, inter alia, more meaningful engagement with religious leaders and other key players in open intellectual discourses to advocate for evidence-informed public health approaches to effectively respond to the HIV and AIDS epidemic. As a result, principles previously founded on staunch conservatism have now been replaced with pragmatism.

Cumulative Reported HIV Cases in Malaysia by Ethnic Groups (1986 - 2010)



Source: Disease Control Division, Ministry of Health, Malaysia (2010)



Objectives



To increase political leadership among Muslim leaders to address issues related to HIV and AIDS in Malaysia



To educate religious officers and leaders and the greater Muslim public on HIV and AIDS and issues affecting people living with HIV and other most at-risk populations



To harmonise efforts with relevant stakeholders and partners to address the gaps in the socio-economic and healthcare needs of people living with HIV and other most at-risk populations in the Muslim community



To provide a review of policies related to the management of HIV and AIDS to reduce stigma and discrimination that negatively impact on access to appropriate HIV and AIDS treatment, care and support services in the Muslim community



Activities & Achievements

The HIV & Islam Manual

The goal of the development of the **HIV & Islam** manual was to institutionalise HIV and AIDS education into the formal training of new Muslim leaders. JAKIM and the Ministry of Health (MOH) jointly undertook the initiative, with MAC assuming advisory role over the content of the manual. It was officially launched in August 2010.

The manual discusses, inter alia, the role of religious leaders in spreading messages of HIV and AIDS awareness, principles of HIV and AIDS prevention from the perspective of Islam, and HIV and AIDS related healthcare and welfare services available for the Muslim community.

It also outlines principles of HIV and AIDS management for a number of Islamic rituals such as the guideline for performing funeral rituals on deceased PLHIV. Noteworthy is the key message of Islam's intolerance for stigma and discrimination, the greatest barrier to access to HIV and AIDS treatment, care, and support services in the Muslim community, which is consistently repeated throughout the manual.

Following the launch of the manual, JAKIM has since been proactively conducting **HIV & Islam** education training workshops to sensitise state religious council officials and other religious and community leaders nationwide.



International AIDS Memorial Day Celebrations

The Malaysian national level celebration of the International AIDS Memorial Day (IAMD) in 2009 held in the capital Kuala Lumpur was monumental on two accounts. One, it served as a landmark of the beginning of strategic partnerships between religious authorities and grassroots HIV movements, in particular that of JAKIM (which had traditionally shied away from addressing HIV and AIDS related issues) and MAC's; and two, it was the first time ever that such an event was held at a mosque complete with mainstream media coverage. The event, marked with mass Islamic prayers and Qur'an recitals to remember lives lost to the epidemic and a panel discussion on HIV for a popular religious television talk show (*Forum Perdana*), united some 1,000 guests comprising religious leaders of various faiths, key government stakeholders, health officials, families and members of the communities affected by HIV and AIDS as well as the general public.

The following year, the memorial was brought over to the predominantly Muslim Malay populated east coastal state of Terengganu – aptly so, as it was one of the states hardest hit with the HIV and AIDS epidemic. The celebration coincided with the establishment of the first community-based organisation (CBO) in the state to provide direct HIV services to IDUs and other MARPs, which has successfully harnessed the full support of the Terengganu State Islamic Council.

The tradition of Islamic memorial celebration continues this year in Selangor, another state which is heavily impacted by HIV and AIDS. Led by the Selangor State Islamic Council (MAIS), the event aims to highlight the plight of Muslim PLHIV in the state.

BILIK REHAT / SOLAT

POSITIVE LIVING PROGRAM
PT FOUNDATION

SEMUA KLIEN YANG MENGGUNAKAN FASILITI PUSAT
SINGGAHAH DIMINTA MEMATUHI PERATURAN BERIKUT:

DI LARANG MEMBAWA BARANG TERLARANG CONTOHNYA:

- **DADAH!!!**
- **PISAU**

- BARANG BARANG YANG BOLEH MENCEDERAKAN ORANG
LAIN KE DALAM D.I.C



Shelter Care for People Living with HIV

An array of socio-economic disparities and socio-cultural determinants have rendered a substantial number of Muslim PLHIV vulnerable to familial abandonment and subsequently become deprived of home-based care for HIV and AIDS management. Recognising the gap in provision of treatment, care and support services for Muslim PLHIV, several religious authorities took the lead in the effort to improve the availability and delivery of home-based HIV services.

As a result, the first shelter home project for Muslim PLHIV, Istana Budi, opened last year in Kuang, one-hour drive outside the capital city of Kuala Lumpur. Construction and operations of Istana Budi project was entirely funded by the Selangor State Islamic Council (MAIS). The 10,000

sq. ft. facility can accommodate up to 50 residents at one time. The facility is run by professional caregivers and offers rehabilitation services and basic nursing care.

The next shelter care facility for Muslim PLHIV, which is already in the pipeline, will be jointly built and operated through a tripartite collaboration with MAC, JAKIM and the Federal Territory Islamic Council (MAIWP). The RM 15 million (USD 3 million) facility, scheduled for operations next year, is designed to be a hub where high-quality treatment options will be made available to clients. This includes nursing and palliative care, counseling, job placement, family reunification and hospital follow-up services.



Employment Training Programmes for Most at-Risk Populations

Muslim MARPs in Malaysia face great difficulties in gaining employment, due to the prevailing stigma strongly associated with non-conforming risk behaviours and gender norms. One MARP greatly affected by such stigma are the transgenders (TG), who are commonly regarded as sexual deviants and often shunned by society. TGs who are bereft of employment opportunities would often resort to sex work, which intensifies the risk of HIV infection and other STIs, and vulnerability to gender-based violence.

In an unprecedented move to improve the livelihoods of Muslim TGs lacking social support to gain employment and to ultimately reduce the vulnerability to risks associated with HIV infection in this population, Dagang Halal, a food products and services enterprise, through a joint collaborative effort with JAKIM and MAC just recently in March 2011 piloted an employment training

programme for TGs. The programme, which additionally purported to promote greater societal acceptance of TGs in the highly conservative Muslim community, was lauded for the adoption of the non-judgmental “embracing gender diversity with no restrictions or impositions” principle. The pilot was much appreciated by the TG participants themselves who, through this programme, received HIV and AIDS education and religious and spiritual lessons in addition to professional skills development training. At the end of the programme, participants were given the opportunity to apply for positions that suited their skills and qualifications.

Following the success of the pilot, this programme will be replicated in other parts of the country gradually, and expanded to include other MARPs such as former inmates, IDUs and single mothers.



Outreach to Most at-Risk Populations

JAKIM and other state religious councils and authorities periodically work in partnership with the various CBOs under the MAC umbrella to provide basic HIV education to MARPs such as sex workers, TGs and IDUs, and to address their spiritual needs through outreach activities. This forward-thinking initiative has helped improve the previously strained relationship between grassroots communities and religious authorities. The renewed synergistic working relationship between both parties has also facilitated the process of knowledge and experience sharing.

One positive development that has emerged from this initiative is JAKIM's consideration to expand

the function of the mosque, which has conventionally been regarded strictly as a house of worship, to being a delivery point for Harm Reduction services (i.e. methadone maintenance therapy) for drug users. A mosque located in one of the country's most prominent universities in Kuala Lumpur is currently being used by a research institution as service delivery point to administer methadone to IDUs for a study on treatment of drug dependence. Based on the findings from this study, JAKIM will develop a protocol to standardise operational procedures and package of services. The pilot project is expected to commence by the end of 2011.



Continuous Awareness Campaigns of and Intellectual Discourses on HIV and AIDS

One of the more cost-efficient approaches with high target coverage to communicate key HIV prevention and awareness messages to the Muslim public is through Friday sermons. Friday sermons, which involve a large congregation of men, are delivered by persons considered to be community or religious leaders. JAKIM has now made it practice for the Friday sermon closest to World AIDS Day to be about HIV, addressing related issues such as stigma and discrimination, and prevention.

To encourage intellectual discourse from an Islamic standpoint on issues linked to vulnerabilities of MARPs to HIV as well as issues faced by PLHIV

especially stigma and discrimination, JAKIM in partnership with RTM 1, the government-owned terrestrial television station, periodically organises panel discussions for the highly popular long-running top-rated television talk show programme, *Forum Perdana*. The panellists who appear on the television show comprise distinguished personalities, public figures and highly-revered community or religious leaders. Since the inception of the **HIV & Islam** programme in 2009, a total of four one-hour HIV centric episodes of *Forum Perdana* have been recorded and broadcasted on RTM 1 which were met with positive reviews from viewers.



The Way Forward

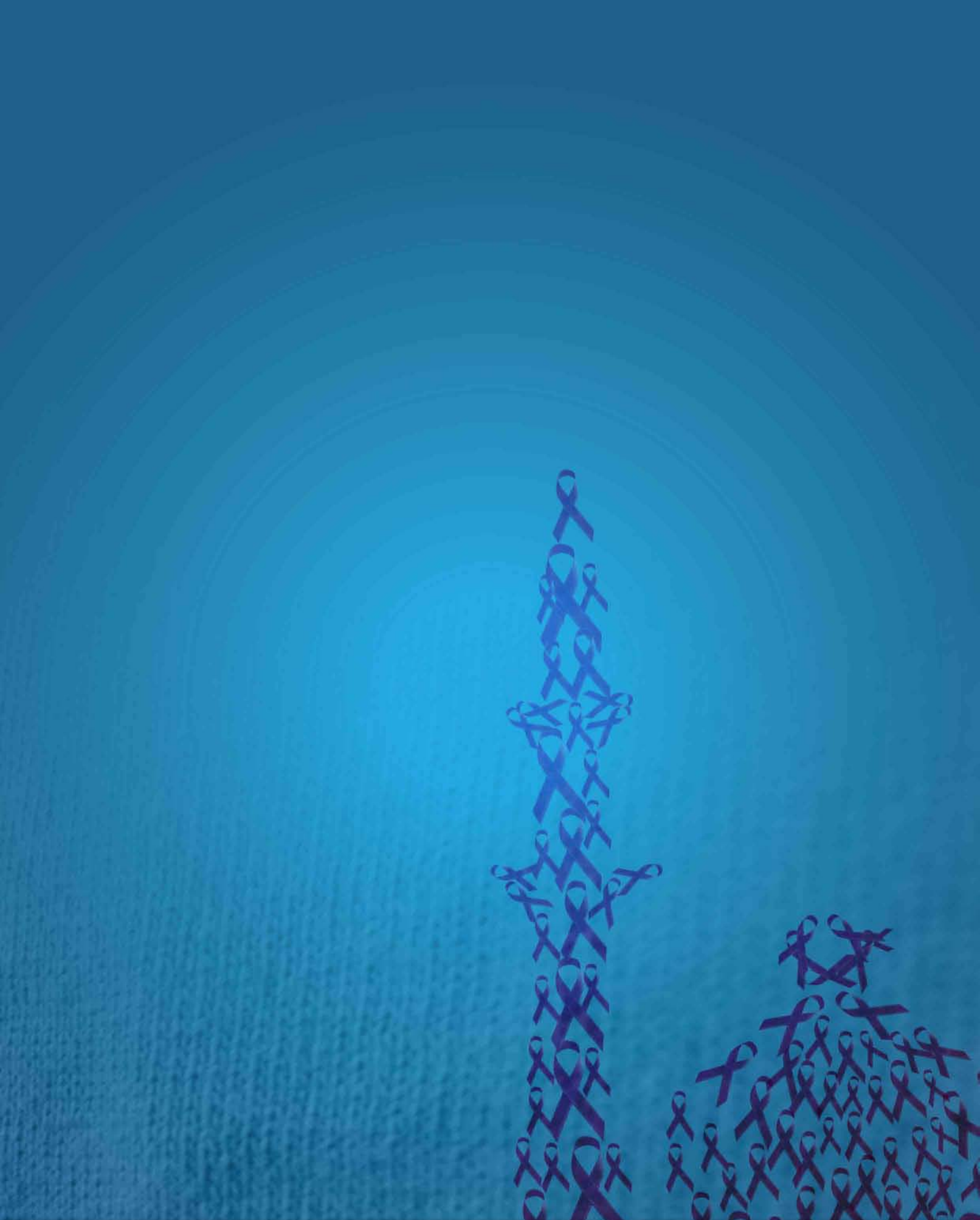
The **HIV & Islam** programme, while still in its infancy, is steadily gaining momentum in achieving its objectives. The institutionalisation of the **HIV & Islam** manual in formal training for new religious leaders, which is effective in addressing barriers to acceptance of PLHIVs and other MARPs in religious settings, will need to be expanded aggressively to all relevant religious authorities. Strategies to address the barriers for PLHIVs and other MARPs to access HIV services, especially those brought about by stigma and discrimination and socio-

economic disparities, will remain at the forefront of targeted interventions in the Muslim community in Malaysia. Incorporation of principles of the Harm Reduction programme, which has contributed significantly to limiting HIV transmission via the injecting drug use route, into the **HIV & Islam** framework will also be another area of focus for the coming years. However, efforts to create an enabling legal environment through systemic review of religious policies, which requires extensive research on interpretation of central texts of the Islamic faith, still remain a challenge.





**So, verily, with every difficulty, there is relief:
Verily, with every difficulty there is relief.
(Qur'an 94: 5 – 6)**



Published by
Malaysian AIDS Council
in Collaboration with

Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM), Federal Territory Islamic Council (MAIWP), Selangor Islamic Council (MAIS)
and Ministry of Health Malaysia (MOH)