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# Manila Women's Forum

A Network of Women Professionals

March 2005

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## Tackling HIV-AIDS Globally and Locally

By Irene Oudyk-Suk

The Philippines' astonishingly low rate of HIV-AIDS infection, estimated at 0.1% of the population, must be re-examined. This was agreed upon by many of the participants at the Manila Forum on Aids in the Philippines held February 21-23. The Swedish Embassy, Asian Development Bank, United Nations AIDS program, World Health Organization, and Philippine National AIDS Council jointly sponsored the Forum.

Sweden's overseas development program is especially focused on the fight against HIV-AIDS. While in Manila for the conference, Mr. Lennart Hjelmåker, the Swedish HIV/AIDS ambassador, signed an agreement with ADB to set up a multi-donor trust fund to help developing countries in the Asia Pacific region fight HIV/AIDS. And on Feb. 24, he also addressed the Manila Women's Forum (MWF).

Ambassador Hjelmåker spoke to MWF about the worldwide status of the HIV-AIDS crisis, and specifically about HIV-AIDS in the Philippines. The information he presented was ominous—a stark contrast to his gracious and gentle demeanor. Hjelmåker told how in the early 1980s a friend of his died from “a strange blood disease, a disease-that-had-no-name-yet.” In the 1990s Hjelmåker was part of the Nordic Reform Effort in the United Nations system that was instrumental in establishing the UNAIDS program. During the late 1990s Hjelmåker was Sweden's Ambassador to Zimbabwe, where the prevalence rate of HIV-AIDS was an astonishing 30%. Mr. Hjelmåker said he would be walking down the street in Zimbabwe, see a group of three

young people walking together and wonder which of the three would soon be dead. In 2003 he was appointed the first European ambassador for HIV-AIDS.

“HIV-AIDS is a silent emergency of pandemic proportions,” the ambassador declared. Currently, 20 million people die of HIV-AIDS every year, and 40 million more live with the disease. Worse, the numbers continue to trend upwards. “These numbers are so large they're hard to grasp,” said the ambassador. “Just be aware that today 14,000 people died of HIV-AIDS.” And Africa is not the only continent struggling with unimaginable numbers. HIV-AIDS is spreading rapidly to Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe.

HIV-AIDS is also no longer a white, gay man's disease. A disproportionate number of women—especially poor women—suffer from HIV-AIDS.

Women are biologically more susceptible to HIV-AIDS than men<sup>1</sup> (see footnote on page 2). Women do not have ready access to female-controlled HIV-AIDS prevention methods. Power inequities between men and women make it difficult for women to insist on safe sexual behavior from their partners. Economic, political, social, and religious policies often do not promote safe sex practices. As long as women in poor countries are not entitled to sexual and reproductive health and rights they will continue to be susceptible, in great numbers, to HIV-AIDS.

Other risk factors for the rapid spread of HIV-AIDS include ignorance about the disease, ignorance about transmission risks, and

misguided beliefs about curability. Mr. Hjelmåker reported that a survey among Philippine youth showed that 73% believed they have no chance of ever contracting the HIV-AIDS virus, 28% said HIV-AIDS is curable (it isn't—it's treatable, not curable), and 35% believed HIV-AIDS was God's punishment for sexual activity outside of marriage.

In the Philippines the reported prevalence of HIV-AIDS is quite low. The government's estimate of 0.1% is unusually low, especially given the presence of risk factors such as the sex industry, the migration of workers in and out of the country, the use of injectable drugs, and the relative ignorance of youth about HIV-AIDS. “Is the spread of HIV-AIDS in the

*(Continued on page 3)*

### Next MWF Meeting

**When:** Monday, March 21, 6:30 p.m.

**What:** The Philippines boasts a myriad of collectibles. Interior designer/decorator, Miguel Rosales, will speak to us about building a collection and the art of display.

**Where:** Tricia Hoban's home, 1415 Campanilla, Dasmariñas Village, Makati

**Bring:** A contribution to the potluck dinner

**April meeting:** Monday, April 18

## *AIDS (From page 1)*

Philippines low and slow or is it high and hidden?" was a question discussed at length during the Manila Forum on AIDS.

Mr. Hjelmåker also noted that treatment for HIV-AIDS is compromised in the Philippines—as it is in other countries in the developing world—by a lack of affordable medications and a lack of skilled medical workers. The ambassador shared a conversation he had earlier in the day with a Philippine doctor at one of the local hospitals. The doctor was bemoaning the exodus of skilled health care workers to developed countries. Mr. Hjelmåker shared an interesting tidbit about nurses in South Africa. He said that for every four trained South African RN's, one had already died of HIV-AIDS, one worked in the private sector, one had been recruited to the United Kingdom and one stayed to work in the local health care field.

"Leadership, leadership, leadership," is the key ingredient to combating the HIV-AIDS crisis, both globally and locally, said the ambassador. Leaders willing and able to speak the truth are needed in government, business, youth organizations, development organizations and faith-based organizations as well. Ambassador

Hjelmåker made special note of the many ways in which churches, including the Roman Catholic Church, are instrumental in caring for the victims of HIV-AIDS. However, he also questioned the lack of church involvement—and especially Roman Catholic Church involvement—in the promotion of prevention by means of safe sex practices.

Ambassador Annika Markovic of Sweden, our host for the evening, noted in closing that the Philippine National AIDS Council was very encouraged by the two-day forum and is well-positioned to provide leadership and direction as the Philippines seeks to forge a response to HIV-AIDS in this country.

<sup>1</sup>One of the women at the MWF meeting explained why women are more susceptible to receiving the virus than men during heterosexual intercourse. Sex often causes microscopic tears in the vagina, which increases the chance the HIV-AIDS virus will enter the woman's bloodstream. Though plausible, the explanation has not yet been clinically proven.

**Advocates for Youth**, a group founded by MWF member Cyndy Tan-Jarabata, has been awarded a grant to do STD and HIV/AIDS prevention work among the in- and out-of-school youth in Muntinlupa, which will also include training of health and school officials to ensure the sustainability of the program. For information on how you can get involved, e-mail Cyndy at [cyndytjarabata@yahoo.com](mailto:cyndytjarabata@yahoo.com).

### **The Manila Women's Forum**

The Manila Women's Forum (MWF) is a cross-cultural network for women. It provides opportunities to build friendships, to talk to women of various cultures, and to share information about resources. Our meetings are intended to provide intellectual stimulation and lead to personal and professional development. All women are welcome to join. The current officers are: **Lisa Lumbao**, Chair, Programs, Treasurer, and Newsletter. **Susan Nishihira**, Programs. **Beulah P. Taguiwalo**, Newsletter, Website.

Cost of membership is P300 per year. Members receive a copy of the current mailing list in addition to the newsletter. A contribution is collected at each monthly meeting: P20 for members, and P40 for non-members. Please contact Lisa 0917-892-2989 or at [lumbao@mozcom.com](mailto:lumbao@mozcom.com) for more information about MWF or check the website at <http://www.geocities.com/manilawomensforum>

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