

There's nothing that can't be done if we raise our voice as one!

On behalf of the **National Youth Coalition of Sri Lanka on Sexual & Reproductive Health and its affiliated organizations** it's with great pleasure that, we invite you and your respective organization to be a part of the **International Candlelight Memorial Event 2010** to be held at the **Galle Face Green on Sunday, May 23rd**.

In an effort to raise the bar on Sri Lanka's response to HIV & AIDS, a group of local organizations, *actively* work in the field of HIV & AIDS, Sexuality and Sexual Reproductive Rights (SRH) have come together to form one collective voice! This coalition who have adopted the slogan '**Together We Are the Solution**' as their mantra, believes in consistent and clear messages in terms of advocacy and awareness on HIV & AIDS, Sexuality and SRH.

Whilst Sri Lanka remains "a low prevalence" country HIV & AIDS infections are on the rise, 137 new infections were reported in 2009¹. Moreover, if we are to learn the lessons from other South Asian nations like India, a country that has a "low prevalence" of HIV should strive to *remain* a "low prevalence" country. Awareness, education and advocacy are needed now!

The HIV & AIDS response thus far in Sri Lanka has been focused mainly on most at risk populations (MARPS) e.g. Commercial sex workers, Intravenous Drug users, trishaw drivers, beach boys, etc. however the coalition believes that all populations matter, especially the youth, if we are to arrest the spread of HIV in our country. The marginalization of MARPS, the stigma and discrimination of people living with HIV (PLHIV) results from the silence and ignorance that surrounds issues related to HIV, sex and sexuality.

The coalition wants to go beyond isolated workshops, events that spring up around World AIDS Day, and seeks to challenge the young people and not so young people of our country to LEARN MORE! STAND UP! & SPEAK OUT! To remove the culture of silence and fear that surrounds HIV, sex and sexuality and to move towards and equitable society for all.

"We want to have more than the token World AIDS Day event- this is about continuous awareness raising of HIV & AIDS related issues whilst at the same time to advocate the rights and needs of those who already live with HIV in Sri Lanka," says Milinda Rajapaksha from the National Youth Coalition for Sexual & Reproductive Rights.

Partners:

Currently, with the implemented and coordinated by the National Youth Coalition of Sri Lanka (NYCSL), the coalition includes representation from Positive Hopes Alliance, Lanka +, PWN +, (PLHIV Support organizations), FPA Sri Lanka, Standard Chartered Bank in Sri Lanka, The Salvation Army, EQUAL GROUND, Alcohol and Drug Information Centre (ADIC), Beyond Borders, Companions on a Journey (COJ), The Youth committee of FPA Sri Lanka, National STD & AIDS Control programme (NSACP), Save Lanka Kids, The Women's Support Group (WSG), AEISEC, UNAIDS and UNFPA. It is hoped that more agencies will join as the event-series gathers momentum leading up to World AIDS Day.

¹ Source: HIV/AIDS Surveillance Data in Sri Lanka also can be obtained at: <http://www.aidscontrol.gov.lk/>

Candlelight Event on the 23rd May

With the **technical and financial support from FPA Sri Lanka and Standard Chartered Bank in Sri Lanka, Together We Are The Solution** is to have its program at the Galle Face Green on the 23rd of May 2010 with the aim and objectives of;

Aim:

To create opportunities for SRH awareness (incl. HIV & AIDS and Sexuality) and advocacy on SRH rights, stigma and discrimination of PLHIV amongst society in general with a focus on young people

Objectives:

- To commemorate the people who lost their lives due to HIV and AIDS and was stigmatized as a result of their HIV status.
- To bring together agencies to form a common voice in SRH, HIV & AIDS and Sexuality awareness and advocacy in Sri Lanka.
- To develop the capacity of youth volunteers to use innovative awareness and advocacy tools amongst their peers.
- To create awareness on PLHIV needs.
- To ensure consistent media coverage of Candlelight Memorial Event-Series leading up to World AIDS Day 2010.
- To recruit and train grassroots volunteers as peer educators.

The event will include disruptive theatre, quiz competitions and other interactive games and more! All designed specifically to discuss HIV, sex and sexuality in sensitive and culturally appropriate ways.

Volunteers:

A team of volunteers from across the island will be trained in handling the event and activities, as **Together We Are the Solution** believes in clear and consistent messaging in their education and awareness programmes. **Volunteers will first be trained in Colombo at the FPA Sri Lanka, 37/27, Bullers Lane, Colombo 07 on the 23rd May. The programme at the Galle Face Green will commence at 3.00 p.m. on the 23rd May culminating with the candlelight memorial at 7.30 p.m. in order to commemorate the people who lost their lives due to HIV and AIDS and was stigmatized as a result of their HIV status.**

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About the International AIDS Candlelight Memorial²

The International AIDS Candlelight Memorial, a program of the [Global Health Council](http://www.globalhealthcouncil.org/), is one of the oldest and largest grassroots mobilization campaigns for HIV/AIDS awareness in the world. Started in 1983, the Candlelight Memorial takes place every third Sunday in May and is led by a coalition of some 1,200 community organizations in 115 countries hosting local memorials that honor the lost and raise social consciousness about the disease.

The Candlelight is also much more than just a memorial. It provides opportunities for leadership development, policy advocacy, partnerships, and improvement of community mobilization skills.

² Source: The International AIDS Candlelight Memorial : <http://www.candlelightmemorial.org/>

With 33 million people living with HIV today, the Candlelight continues to serve as an important intervention for global solidarity, breaking down barriers, and giving hope to new generations.

Some facts about SRH, youth and the National Youth Coalition

In Sri Lanka young people aged 10 to 24 years constitute 28% of the total population of 19.1 million, with a majority of them falling within the adolescent age group. Though there are strong cultural and religious traditions against sex before marriage in the country, the age of sexual debut for both males and females has been found to be early: 15.3 years for males while for females at 14.4 years. A national survey on young people aged 10-19 years revealed that a substantial proportion of school-going youth were sexually active. Six percent of those going to school in the 14-19 year age group reported heterosexual intercourse, while 10% disclosed having homosexual relations. Out-of-school adolescents revealed a higher percentage (22%) of sexually active adolescents³. There is a need to promote responsible caring attitudes towards each other, to young persons of both sexes and promote responsible sexual behaviour so that the effects of these social problems and others like STD, HIV and AIDS will be mitigated in the future.⁴

The National Youth Coalition of Sri Lanka is a youth run entity that advocates for the sexual and reproductive health (SRH) rights and needs of youth in Sri Lanka. The coalition includes the membership of youth organizations based in Sri Lanka and is supported by major international and regional youth coalitions and organizations. The NYCSL developed 9 recommendations through a consultative process in October 2008 during the R.E.A.C.H conference.

We would like to urge you and your respective organization to come on board and work as a collective to make this event a success.

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3). National Survey on emerging issues among adolescents in Sri Lanka, Colombo: UNICEF 2004

4). Rationale, Goal 4; "Promote responsible adolescent and youth behaviour", Population and Reproductive Health Policy, 1998, Ministry of Health and Indigenous Medicine