



## **Media Release**

### **World No Tobacco Day – 31.05.2024**

#### **"Empowering the Future of Our Nation: Safeguarding Children and Youth Against Tobacco Industry Tactics and Promoting a Life Free from Tobacco Use."**

The theme for this year's World No Tobacco Day is '**Protecting children from tobacco industry interference.**' In Sri Lanka, cigarettes contribute to approximately 50 preventable deaths daily, totaling around 20,000 preventable deaths annually. The tobacco industry predominantly targets children and youth as replacements for the declining customer base, emphasizing the urgent need to safeguard this vulnerable demographic.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), tobacco consumption contributes to an estimated 8 million preventable deaths each year worldwide, with 900,000 fatalities attributed to secondhand smoke exposure. It is evident that neither civil conflicts nor any other factor have led to such a tragic situation within contemporary society. Thus, the use of all forms of tobacco-related products is clearly unprofitable for developing nations, serving only to enrich wealthier countries. As a global response to the economic, social, health and environmental damage caused by tobacco, and to free the world from tobacco use, the WHO adopted and introduced the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC) in 2003. As of today, 180 countries worldwide have ratified the WHO FCTC, with Sri Lanka being among the earliest adopters of the treaty, having ratified it in 2003.

The tobacco and allied industries are intensifying their efforts to target children and youth. This World No Tobacco Day, there is heightened focus on protecting children from the interference of the tobacco industry. This concern arises from the promotional strategies aimed at enticing children to become consumers of tobacco products, through fostering a positive perception of such products from an early age. Notably, tobacco companies allocate approximately \$ 8 billion annually towards these advertising endeavors.

Even at present, multinational tobacco companies are actively engaged in implementing extensive deceiving tactics in our country, to encourage children and youth to initiate tobacco use. Examples of such strategies include;

- Creating an appealing image of tobacco products among children and youth via social media platforms, newspapers, television, and radio.
- Encouraging youth initiation of tobacco use through social media channels (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube) by utilizing influencers compensated by the tobacco industry.

- Introducing electronic cigarettes (e-cigarettes) for the youth population to sustain the already declining market for tobacco products, especially cigarettes.
- Marketing tobacco products by introducing diverse brand names and flavors.
- Offering cigarettes for low prices while maintaining consistent pricing strategies.
- Generating interest and curiosity in tobacco products through targeted advertisements and packaging displayed in locations frequented by youth and children, alongside disclaimers such as "Not for sale to minors."
- Promoting tobacco products through conferences and events advertised via social media.
- Attracting shop owners through the provision of various advantages and privileges under the brand 'Abhisheka,' and obtaining their cooperation for the purpose of increasing the sale of cigarettes.

The tobacco industry is implementing diverse strategies to ensure the sustainability of its operations, while focusing on attracting more customers towards its products. Through deceptive and unethical marketing approaches, the industry focuses on attracting vulnerable groups into tobacco use. E-cigarettes are often promoted as "safer alternatives," "less harmful," and "socially acceptable," while creating a perception of novelty and sophistication, thus appealing to a broader audience. Moreover, introducing cigarette filters and products with varied flavors and aromas are similar strategies employed by the industry to allure new individuals into tobacco use. Consequently, children and youth, who are susceptible to experimentation by nature, become attracted to these products, leading to more initiations in the long run. Therefore, this trend necessitates increased regulatory measures to combat deceptive advertising practices and protect vulnerable populations from the adverse effects of tobacco use.

Even under such circumstances, our country shows a declining trend in tobacco use over the years. According to the Global Adult Tobacco (GAT) Survey - 2020, the prevalence of smoking in Sri Lanka was reported as 9.1%, making it a leading nation in reduced tobacco usage. However, even at present, a significant proportion of the country's population amounting to approximately 1.5 million still use cigarettes. The significant health impacts associated with tobacco use have positioned it as a primary contributor to the health burden within a country. The substantial economic burden imposed on the national economy due to tobacco use is equally noteworthy, and therefore, requires careful attention. In addition, tobacco poses a great threat to the environment, causing air, water and land pollution.

With the increased awareness regarding the harms of tobacco use, the youth population is also increasingly distancing itself from using tobacco products. The Global Youth Tobacco Survey (GYTS) and similar national studies also support this declining trend of tobacco use among youth in Sri Lanka through their findings. In addition, based on reports from tobacco companies, there has been a 19% decrease in cigarette production over the past year. This trend reflects a positive shift, indicating a notable effort among smokers to cease their habit

as well. Particularly among the youth, there is a growing awareness and opposition to the unethical practices employed by the tobacco industry. This awakening is accompanied by a recognition of the futility and senselessness of smoking, as well as an understanding of the deceptive tactics utilized by the industry.

Building upon this scenario, the Alcohol and Drug Information Center provides the following recommendations aimed at mitigating youth and children's engagement in using tobacco products.

- Banning single stick cigarette sales.
- The seizure of all types of e-cigarettes that have been banned from the market, with law enforcement against individuals involved in their sale.
- Banning the sale of cigarettes within 100 meters of an educational institution.
- Introducing a scientific pricing formula for cigarettes.
- Stop selling cigarettes at low prices by setting a minimum price for cigarettes.
- Introducing plain packaging.
- Implementing a systematic program through the school system to educate children about the various tactics used by the tobacco industry.
- Prohibition of sale of all types of cigarettes and tobacco-related products over the internet.
- Adoption of the proposed amendments to the National Authority on Tobacco and Alcohol (NATA) Act.
- Enhance the enforcement procedures of the NATA Act for cases involving violations.
- Single use of plastic is banned in Sri Lanka. Hence the ban on cigarette filters should also be implemented. (Cigarette filters release more than 7,000 chemicals into the environment. In Sri Lanka, more than 6.3 million cigarette filters are disposed daily, amounting to 2300 million cigarette filters annually).

We must promptly take action to safeguard the children and youth of our nation from the detrimental effects of tobacco use, ensuring that multinational tobacco companies do not profit at the expense of our country's valuable resources, most importantly, our children and youth, the future of our nation. It has become a timely need to empower our children and youth by exposing the deceptive tactics employed by multinational tobacco companies and enhancing their awareness of the harmful impact of these products.

It is incumbent upon all of us to expose those responsible for influencing our children and youth to initiate and continue tobacco use, irrespective of their race, religion, or political affiliations.

## **Alcohol and Drug Information Centre**