

AIDS is a women's issue. AIDS was killing women before it had a name and before anyone knew what caused it. By the late 1980's, AIDS had become one of the main causes of death among women between 15 and 49 years of age in many parts of the world. **SPEAK** looks at how women who are HIV-positive cope.

HIV is the virus which leads to AIDS. There is a lot we still have to learn about it, especially when it comes to women. Stories of women who have HIV or AIDS give us a sense of how the disease affects women. They question their whole lives. They worry about the future and about what will happen to them, their close relationships and families.

Two women, living with HIV, told **SPEAK about their lives**

Lerato is a 23-year-old woman from Soweto. She lives with her husband and their two children. Lerato is a housewife.

This is her story:

“I did not know I was HIV-positive until I went to the hospital to book for delivery — I was seven months pregnant. The doctor asked me if I would agree to an AIDS test. I did. I agreed to the blood test because I wanted my baby to be safe.

When I went back to get the results, I was told I was HIV-positive. I wanted to die. Later I realised it was no use killing myself because I had this thing all along.

I did not tell my husband I



Photo: Elmond Jiyane

People who are HIV-positive need support

Learning to live with AIDS

am HIV-positive. I told him the hospital had taken blood tests and that maybe we should start using condoms for the safety of the child. I think I got it from him. My first born is five years old and is he not HIV-positive. I hope my baby is not positive. If she is and there is no cure by the time she grows up, I'll teach her about HIV and AIDS.

I'm a strong person. I don't worry about myself but about other women who don't know. I don't give a damn about men. They are the ones giving this to us because they sleep around and refuse to use condoms.

I'm not going to be sad. I'll live with HIV and I won't let it kill me.

My advice to women who know they have HIV is they should keep it a secret. Do not tell your partner or you will end up alone. Be strong and have courage. You can still

live. It all depends on the way you live. Remember you are not alone.

I thank all the doctors and nurses at Baragwanath Hospital. If everyone who is positive listened to them, they'd be as strong as I am. ”

Thembi Zintle is a young woman from Empangeni in Northern Natal who now lives in Durban. Thembi is a sex worker (prostitute).

This is her story:

“I came to Durban because of my boyfriend. He told me he was coming to work here. When I came to join him, I found out he was here because wanted to continue with his schooling. Life was very difficult for me. I had no money. I decided to sell my body so I could survive.

I first learned I was HIV-positive in October this year. I



At Soweto's Baragwanath Hospital, one out of every 25 pregnant women is found to be HIV-positive

One of the banners women held high at a march in Johannesburg recently

The PPHC National AIDS Programme helps communities fight ignorance about AIDS. If you need the support of a community worker or if you have any further questions contact the PPHC National AIDS Programme. The telephone numbers of their offices are:

National office: (011) 337 8539

Eastern Transvaal:

(01315) 41 181

Northern Transvaal:

(01521) 91 4221

Southern Transvaal:

(011) 337 7126

Orange Free State:

(057) 396 5509

Natal: (031) 301 2582

Natal Midlands: (0331) 45 0453

Northern Natal: (0354) 74 181

Border: (0431) 43 6733

Eastern Cape: (041) 41 1618

Transkei: (0471) 31 0757

Western Cape: (021) 696 4154

felt worried when I found out. I knew I could get Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STD's), but I did not think I would get AIDS. I'm scared because there is no cure for this disease. My doctor was very nice to me and I still visit him.

I do not have any idea how I got HIV, but I think I got it from one of my clients. I haven't told my boyfriend, because he will leave me. If he found out he is HIV-positive, he would say I gave it to him.

At the moment I am coping. I go to the PPHC AIDS Programme for counselling and I am still working as a prostitute. I'm able to do everything I used to do except have sex with a man without a condom.

I'm not angry any longer. I have accepted my situation. I don't have any choice. You know, life is tough. When you are HIV-positive you need sup-

port. Choose good people to help you deal with your situation. The people at the PPHC AIDS Programme helped me.

Many people think HIV is a disease only 'loose' women get. Yet, the majority of women with HIV are not prostitutes."

Blaming sex workers only encourages blame and discrimination against all women. As a result, women are often told they are responsible for spreading HIV, whether as sex workers, wives and sexual partners, or mothers.

We must remember that HIV does not discriminate against your sex, race, class or nationality. We should not think we are divided into those who have HIV and those who do not. The fact is, we are divided into those who know they have it and those who don't. ★

These pages have been made possible by NPPHCN National AIDS Programme

