



AIDS BRIEFINGS

These HIV/AIDS Briefings are a process of sharing current information and debates on HIV/AIDS with IPT staff and associates. In this issue we listen to the story of Florence – a true story.

When I was 23 I fell pregnant for the second time. I called my baby girl Nomthunzi, the Zulu word for shadow. At the age of three months she became ill. It was only when she was tested for HIV that I found out that I was HIV positive. My partner George, the father of my child, died of AIDS in the same month that I found out that our baby was HIV positive. People used to come to my house to see a child who was dying of AIDS. Watching her die slowly every day was heart breaking. Nomthunzi died in February 1997; she was five months old. I cried day and night, surviving on little sleep and less food. Fortunately, some of the neighbours let me play and read stories to their children. This was a healing process for me and I continue to be grateful to them. I began to feel that I belonged to the community again and that I could make a difference in somebody's life. I still thank everybody who stood by me during those agonising months.

I feel that there is much that people do not understand or know how to deal with. How do teenage girls and women protect themselves from the shame of the men who cheat, abuse and manipulate them to have sex at the wrong time and in the wrong place? It is not always easy to protect yourself, even from your own husband. As women, we have an inherent trust in others, many of whom will give

us AIDS or leave us for younger women. I am a counsellor in the Perinatal HIV Research Unit at a Hospital in Soweto. As a counsellor I see many infected people each day. Sharing my personal experiences during counselling sessions has helped both my patients and me. People feel that it is the end of the world when they find out that they are HIV positive. I try to help them continue their lives by sharing some of my past with them and help them tread this path of survival gently and carefully. I encourage them to find the courage to report cases of rape and violence and to address issues of gender power by inviting their partners for counselling.

Men and women have different reasons for not disclosing their HIV status. Men deny the fact that they have HIV, and cannot deal with it. Instead, they become aggressive, often fighting with their partners and blaming them for infecting them. Men play a dominant role in South African life, to such an extent that women will often not even report cases of domestic violence because of their fear of being beaten up or even thrown out of their homes by their partners. Sometimes fear of community violence prevents women from publicly disclosing their status. Often they don't even tell their closest friends; talking about it may cause problems for those who try to help. Women need to be empowered to make decisions about their lives and especially about issues relating to sex.

Florence

Florence is an active member of NAPWA, South Africa's National Association of People with AIDS, a board member of the Township AIDS Project in Soweto, Johannesburg, and advises WHO, UNICEF, UNAIDS and other organisations.

Source: IFPP, 2001

