

Women silent challenges in Nigeria

The Millennium development goal to halt the spread of HIV/AIDS by 2015 is a very ambitious one as HIV is a developmental, political, as well as socio-economical issue. This clearly means that we need to be very serious and more focused on the issue which we already have the existing lists of problem diagnosis.

Infection with the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) has posed a great health and social problem both in developed and developing countries.

In Nigeria, the prevalence of HIV infection in pregnant women has increased from 1.8% in 1991, to 3.8% in 1994, to 4.5% in 1996, to 5.4% in 1999 and to 5.0% in 2003. It is approximated that 6,000 women of childbearing age, mostly living in developing countries like Nigeria, acquire HIV infection everyday. Women's biological vulnerability and lower social status in the society at large and in sexual relationship has made them to be more susceptible to HIV infection.

HIV/AIDS usually raise difficult and personal issues such as health, relationships, financial security, death or emotional feelings about sexuality. Other people's prejudices, discrimination and wider social and economic issues also cause many problems for the people living with or affected by HIV.

Nigeria Community of Women living with HIV/AIDS (NCW+) is formed as an intervention to alleviate the suffering of positive women and to develop strategies to reduce some of these pressures. We believe that working together and sharing ideas and problems can help us in many emotional and practical ways.

NCW+ as a follow-up to a successful implementation of the project titled People living with HIV/AIDS making a difference in AIDS prevention in barracks community funded by Macarthur Foundation. There has been evidence that more HIV positive women are seeking services, treatment and PMTCT services.

The report goes on to show that women represent 67% of the affected persons. This was traceable to certain socio-economic realities that have placed women at the receiving end for a very long time. The advent of HIV/AIDS has worsened the already bad situation as reports show that more women are losing their jobs because of their HIV status.

It is the interplay of biological, cultural and economic factors that makes women to be particularly more susceptible to HIV infection. Women are more likely than men to be coerced or raped or to be enticed into sex by someone older, stronger or richer. Sometimes the power held over them is mainly that of greater physical strength. Sometimes it is the social pressure to acquiesce to elders. Sometimes it is a combination of factors, as may be the case with older "sugar daddies" who offer school girls gifts or money for school fees in return for sex.

The signatory nations resolved to “support a greater involvement of people living with HIV/AIDS through an initiative to strengthen the capacity and coordination of networks of people living with HIV/AIDS and community-based organizations.

This resolution was prompted by recognition that these groups had played a leadership role in increasing society’s acceptance of those living with HIV, in reducing their peers’ infection rates, in mitigating the personal and social impact of the disease, and in fighting for their right to health.

The Nigeria Community of Women living with HIV/AIDS (NCW+) is that missing link as it is an association of women living with HIV, which is a good example of community mechanisms that provide both psychological and social support.

It has been formed to counter the social isolation often experienced by HIV-positive persons with focus on women and to allow them to share and discuss their experiences and problems openly and safely. These mutual support mechanisms provide peer support and help members cope with discrimination and stigma.

It is quite obvious and understandable that support groups are generally unable to meet one of the most important challenges facing people in developing countries; lack of income. Most people with HIV or AIDS especially the women, are or become unemployed, and the stark reality is that they need more than just counseling but a comprehensive support programme that addresses both their psychological and social needs. This issue would be addressed through provision of micro credit facility by this project.

The United Nations Joint Program on AIDS (UNAIDS), which succeeded the GIPA, has continued this tradition by including PLWHA on its Coordinating Board.

This move was based on the understanding that personal experience is the single most effective tool in counteracting discrimination. People lose much of their prejudice against those infected with HIV when they personally interact with them. Likewise, personal experience is a powerful tool for promoting prevention as this means giving human face to an issue though very real, has been subjected to an abstract postulation by a greater number of people who live in communities where stigma holds sway.

Some of our stories are quite touching:

Imagine you are pressurized by family at the age of 15 to marry a 68 years old peasant farmer who already has 3 wives.

Or better still, imagine you are expected not to challenge your husband as a woman even if you know that your husband has extra marital affairs that endanger your health and expose you to HIV infection.

Imagine the scenario where you are stigmatized in the hospital and nobody will attend to your sick and dying child or tend to your pregnancy because of your HIV positive status. Knowing that the child is seriously begging for attention to be free.

Imagine you won a visa lottery but the visa officer told you categorically that because of your HIV positive status, you have a communicable disease, so he can not grant you your green card.

The truth is women are still subjected to all kinds of maltreatment in the event of death of their spouse while men are seen as superior by culture. It is a challenge of our cultural structures which may take time to reposition. But with the right kind of policies, we should be able to educate and empower women on their sexual reproductive rights. The trend may likely remain so until women are economically empowered. Although, policies driven consultative forums aimed at reducing the impact of AIDS related stigma against women have been held across the country. The subject is how far reaching these policies are being translated into behavioral change to a common man on the street.

Gender & HIV/AIDS: Key Issues

- Feminization of HIV/AIDS, especially in developing countries like Nigeria.
- Contributing factors include:
- Biological vulnerability of women
- Low educational level of women
- Economic constraints
- Low placement of women in the society (culture and tradition)

Peculiarities of the Armed Forces

- Uniformed men and their families are often at high risk of HIV infection due to:
- Foreign missions
- Routine domestic postings
- Field medical emergencies
- Highly socialized barracks environment

The NCW+ Project

- Obtained funding from CEDPA to conduct HIV/AIDS programming in Navy Barracks, Ojo in 2003, with focus on women and men of reproductive age
- Overall goal is “To improve the quality of life of women and their children/families infected and affected by HIV/AIDS in Navy Barracks, Ojo, Lagos State.

Strategies Adopted

- Adoption of a Social Mobilization Approach using Behavior Change Communication (BCC) tools
- Advocacy visits to the Barracks authorities
- Behavior Change Communication (BCC) Adoption of the Greater Involvement of Persons Living with HIV/AIDS (GIPA) Principle by recruiting HIV+ women
- Training of HIV+ women as HIV/AIDS Counselors, Home Based Care givers and public speaking
- Formation of a Support Group for HIV+ women
- Home Based Care Visits

- Support Group Meetings
- Counselors Monthly Meetings
- Sensitization Rallies & Seminars

Lessons Learnt (1)

- PLWHA are still in hiding largely because of the stigma and discrimination associated with HIV/AIDS.
- Greater Involvement of PLWHA remains a key tool in stigma reduction and BCC
- Need for more gender-sensitive media program
- Working through women who are HIV+ is a good way of sensitizing men
- Support Groups of PLWHA/PABA and caregivers provide opportunities for:
 - Information/Experience Sharing
 - Strengthening Psychological Well being of infected and affected persons
 - Counseling and medical referral services
 - Meeting basic needs of Support Group members

Recommendations

- More programs for women and adolescent girls are needed in Nigeria as women are more prone to HIV/AIDS than men, and as women have a key role to play in HIV/AIDS prevention, care and support
 - Standard pre-cost and on-going counseling should be incorporated in all HIV testing centers. Consent prior to testing should be the norm for all HIV testing
 - There should be linkages for Anti Retro Viral (ARV) therapy, Family Planning (FP), and Comprehensive Prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission (PMTCT) services for HIV+ women
 - Need for programs that makes HIV positive women financially independent
 - There is need to accept and incorporate house-to-house visits in HIV/AIDS interventions
 - To get the delivery right we need proper budget tracking and monitoring.
- To end my speech, if women are not properly and meaningfully involved in programming and implementation, the sciences of this world will not solve the problem of the epidemic.

I sincerely thank you all.