

'I' Stories

of Women Living with HIV and AIDS

Sexual Rights and Access to Treatment among HIV Positive Women in Zimbabwe

Contents

Introduction	1
Dealing with Testing Positive for HIV	3
Experiences in Disclosing HIV Status to Husbands and other Family Members	4
Adopting Safer Sex Practices after Testing Positive for HIV	7
STIs in HIV Positive Women	10
Access to Antiretroviral Treatment and Experiences with ARVs ..	10
Poverty and Access to HIV Treatment	11
The Use of Herbs to Treat HIV-Related Illnesses and Opportunistic Infections	13
Prevention of Parent to Child Transmission (PPTCT) of HIV	14
HIV and Changes in Menstruation	16
Young and HIV Positive as a Result of Child Sexual Abuse	16

List of Acronyms

AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
ARV	Antiretroviral
FACT	Family AIDS Counselling Trust
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
PMTCT	Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission
PPTCT	Prevention of Parent to Child Transmission
STI	Sexually Transmitted Infection
TB	Tuberculosis
VCT	Voluntary Counselling and Testing
ZWRCN	Zimbabwe Women's Resource Centre and Network

From research on Sexual Rights and Access to Treatment
Among HIV Positive Women in Zimbabwe:
A Situational Analysis, 2006

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Introduction

Zimbabwe Women's Resource Centre and Network (ZWRCN) is actively involved in mainstreaming the gender dimensions of HIV and AIDS into national development policies and programmes. In line with this, in 2006, the ZWRCN conducted research on *Sexual Rights and Access to Treatment among HIV Positive Women in Zimbabwe*. The aim of the research was to gain an understanding of women's experiences with HIV and AIDS, and their situation regarding access to treatment and safer sex, as well as issues and factors surrounding incidences, reporting and management of the sexual abuse of girl children.

This research, part of the ZWRCN's process of positioning itself to mobilise support for an environment in which women are able to access HIV treatment and enjoy their sexual and reproductive health rights, sought to understand the experiences of women living with HIV and AIDS in relation to provisions guaranteed in various national, regional and international instruments to which the country is signatory. The research was conducted in Chitungwiza, Epworth, Gwanda rural, Esigodini, Zvishavane urban and rural, Rusape urban and peri-urban, and Makoni rural.

Among other findings, the study revealed that most women knew their HIV status before that of their husbands or partners. In some cases, male partners knew their status first, but withheld this information, sometimes until they died. The female respondents to the study reported discovering their sero status during antenatal visits, when newborn babies or husbands became ill and they were advised to take a test, when spouses died and they were prompted to question their status and when they went for voluntary counselling and testing.

With testing for HIV came the immense responsibility to share their results. Women reported facing various challenges in disclosing their results to their spouses and to the rest of the family. There were reports of accusations of witchcraft and bringing HIV into the home, physical violence, desertion or isolation for prolonged periods and strained relationships with spouses and family members after disclosure of status. In a few cases, husbands got tested as well and were supportive of their spouses or partners.

The research noted that, after discovering their HIV positive status, women took on the responsibility of negotiating for safer sex. On the other hand, men used power dynamics to refuse condom use and some partners felt that condoms are for use only during extramarital affairs and with

prostitutes. Particularly worrying are misconceptions that sperms are good for babies during pregnancy and a fear of long term condom use.

Women who reported successfully negotiating for consistent condom use attributed it to persistence, assertiveness, tact, creativity, making sex conditional on using a condom or having spouses attend counselling.

The study also investigated menstruation trends among women living with HIV. The research established that 60.4 percent of respondents had experienced changes in menstruation, especially noticeable in the younger age group (early twenties to late thirties). Changes observed include irregular menses, changes in the number of days and in the flow pattern, colour and thickness of blood, while some women went up to a year without a menstrual period. Most women reported the cessation of menstruation upon discovering their HIV positive status.

The study also found that most women (69.2 percent) had experienced a sexually transmitted infection (STI) at least once. STIs are reported to be more frequent, severe, aggressive and resistant to treatment in HIV positive women. Aggressiveness of STIs was also noted in widowed women, who reported recurring STIs even though they sought treatment and had not engaged in sexual activity after the death of their spouse. Most women reported being unable to convince their partners to go for treatment while some STIs did not present with symptoms early enough to be managed effectively.

Encouragingly, some women reported that their STIs stopped when they began using antiretroviral drugs (ARVs). Unfortunately, many women also reported facing financial constraints in seeking treatment for STIs. Of the respondents, 30.8 percent reported shortages of STI drugs at public health centres.

Women identified the main forms of HIV treatment as ARVs, herbs and Cotrimoxazole prophylaxis. Most women reported taking more than one of the remedies to manage their conditions. About 54.2 percent of respondents were on Cotrimoxazole, 52 percent on herbs and 21.1 percent on ARVs, while 11.5 percent of the women were not on any form of treatment.

Rural women, in particular, reported facing challenges in accessing ARVs. The few women in rural areas who were on ARV drugs obtained them from provincial and central hospitals. While Cotrimoxazole is free in public health institutions, many women reported that they could not afford to pay a consultation fee as per cost recovery regulations. Poverty emerged as one of the main reasons why most women living with HIV or AIDS were not accessing or receiving treatment.

Dealing with Testing Positive for HIV

He had secretly gone for a test

When I went for my HIV test, I was just going there to prove a fact and... the fears I already had. As such, when I got the result that I was positive, I just laughed! My husband was surprised with my response. Previously my husband had fallen ill. Apparently he had secretly gone for a test and kept the result to himself. His behaviour had, however, become peculiar. One day while we had gone to our small field (urban field), he repeatedly emphasised that we needed to work very hard and that if we died we had to leave something for our child (who is ten years old).

Even at home, he would stress the need for us to do 'something' before we died. I questioned the constant mention of death. One day he mustered the courage and asked that we go together for an HIV test just to check our status. I gave in and we went to the VCT centre. While we waited our turn for the couple counselling session, he whispered to me, "I have been here before so do not be surprised with your results."

I wondered what he meant but, when we got our results, I just looked at them, and laughed. What could I do? From there on we started bringing HIV literature home. My ten year old daughter asked, "Mum why do you read so much of these HIV materials these days?" All I could say at the moment was "My daughter, everybody else is living with HIV, that is the way life is." She then asked if she too could be tested as we had. I told her she would one day when the time came. My daughter is slowly accepting our status and she gives us all the support she can.

Married woman, Mufakose

I was still a virgin when I got married

*When I was informed of my HIV status, I cried uncontrollably. When I got home I went straight to bed though it was not dark yet. I could not take the pain because I got married when I was still a virgin and was never involved in any extra marital affairs. **Married woman, Sangano Clinic, Makoni***

Experiences in Disclosing HIV Status to Husbands and other Family Members

*I tested positive during antenatal care and did not know how to inform my husband. The sister at the clinic helped me. She suggested that I not immediately disclose my results to my husband as I was not sure of how he would react. She suggested that I explain to him that it was procedure for a pregnant woman to be tested together with her husband for PMTCT programmes. I was to pretend that I was being tested for the first time when we came together. My husband agreed and we were tested together and the results were positive for both of us. My PMTCT was a success as we were both explained on the importance of practicing safer sex and infant feeding options. Our baby tested negative at 18 months. **Married woman, Mufakose***

My teenage children take care of me

*I disclosed my HIV status to my teenage children. One is fifteen and the other is fourteen. They have no problem with my status as they both took it in very well. My kids are so concerned about my wellbeing. When they see that I'm about to fall asleep on the couch, they remind me to take my pills and when they are playing outside, they constantly come in to check if I don't have any headaches or if my legs are not painful. If so, they get my pills for me and they watch the kind of food that I eat. They always urge me to eat a lot of dried vegetables (mufushwa). **Widow, Tsanzaguru Clinic, Rusape***

My teenage daughter was a sickling since birth

My husband, who used to work in the army, had died of what they called Meningitis as far back as 1994. HIV was not known that much then. One of my youngest daughters is sixteen years old and two are already married. In 2000 I got very sick whilst I had visited my daughter in South Africa. I was taken to the hospital where I tested HIV positive. My daughter was informed of my status by the doctor.

I guess she shared this news with my other daughter in Harare and, of course, with her husband. I was later discharged from this hospital, but I never got better. I became worse. One day my son-in-law came home and instructed me that he was taking me back home with a friend of his and, since my daughter was not yet fully recovered, she had to remain behind. They packed me at the back of the car. We did not experience any hassles at the border, I heard them explain that they had a sick patient and the border official would let them through very fast. All the way from Johannesburg, I first tried to wake up and sit up when we were already in Masvingo. When we got back I got some treatment and I got a bit better.

My sixteen year old daughter was a sickling since birth. She was on and off with illness. My two daughters then decided to have her tested for HIV, especially after their knowledge of my status. This time they knew for sure she could possibly be positive through my status. She tested positive and they did not take long to put her on ARVs. They advised me that she was to go on this medication - ARVs - for a long time. I waited to see what would happen to my daughter on this new treatment. It was amazing how my daughter was getting better on the treatment.

*When my sixteen year old daughter got to know of her status and that she got it from birth, she was angry with me. Our relationship remains strained and it is a hard situation for me to cope with. I do not know what kind of counselling she will need for her to mend her anger against me. Like my daughter, I have since gone on ARVs from Wilkins Hospital. **Widow, Mufakose***

Counselling helped my children to accept my status

I got very sick in 1996 and was admitted at the Esigodini General Hospital. I had TB and diarrhoea and my sheets had to be changed every now and then because I could not go to the toilet on my own. The doctor approached me and asked me whether I wanted him to run some tests on me and I told him to do anything to make me live. He tested me for HIV and the tests came out positive.

Since I was too weak and almost dying, the doctor had to disclose my status to my children. My children received counselling and they accepted my status. I owe my life to my children because, if it wasn't for them, I would be dead by now. They provide me with the right foods which the doctor advised them to give me. I am better now and I can perform a lot of chores. I cut grass which I sell to buy my peanut butter and beans so that I can stay healthy.

Widow, Esigodini

My children will think I am immoral

I tested positive and my husband died. I have three grown up children and am finding it difficult to reveal my status to them. My first child is married. The second one is at University and the last one is in Form 4. I feel very shy to reveal to my son-in-law because he will think lowly of me. "Ko mukwasha anozoti chii, anozofungei pamusoro pangu." What will my son-in-law say, what will he think about my morality?

Married woman, Sangano Clinic, Rusape

I do not know what my HIV positive teen thinks about me

My youngest daughter, who is 14 years, is also HIV positive. Although the daughter has been given a lot of counselling, I have noticed changes in terms of her participation in school and, at home, she is rather quiet and

withdrawn. The relationship between my daughter and myself is very tense as she blames me for having infected her with the virus. **Widow, Rusape urban**

I have stopped sex work

When FACT was offering testing services at their offices here in Rusape, I just decided it was going to be useful for me to know my status. I had been frequenting the beerhall as a sex worker and I just wanted to know my status. I was not afraid. When I was told about my positive HIV result, I just accepted it. I did not cry like others did on their way home from FACT offices.

I also immediately advised my sister to go for the test. She too went and got a positive result. My sister is married. As sisters, we strengthened each other and suggested we disclose to our eldest brother. We called him and shared the bad news. His response was mature. He accepted our status and consoled us, also indicating this was happening to many other people. As sisters we also decided to share our status with our daughters (who are also married). Our daughters now know and they have accepted us. We try as much as possible to follow advice. **Divorced woman, Rusape urban**

I used to patronise bars

I accepted the results as I used to patronise bars. I am not married. I first disclosed my results to my sister, who was also in the same business with me, and informed my sister to go for a test as well. I told my sister that I had been counselled and informed that being HIV positive was no death certificate. My sister also tested positive.

The two of us disclosed our status to our brother who could not accept at first. His reaction was “Asi machine yacho yakafa here?” - “Is there something wrong with what they use to test? How can two people from the same family test HIV positive?” I disclosed my status to my children who accepted it and discouraged me from continuing to patronise the bar. **Single woman, Rusape urban**

I fear losing my partner

I am 39 years old and am divorced. I am involved in a sexual relationship but have not disclosed my status to my partner for fear of losing him. I am not employed and this man is providing for me and my two children. **Divorced woman, Esigodini**

Adopting Safer Sex Practices after Testing Positive for HIV

Challenges women face in initiating and maintaining safer sex practices

*The challenge I met around the use of safer sex practices within my house was that my husband refused to use the condom, which he said was itchy during sexual intercourse. I had to be strong for him to accept condom, as our health was deteriorating, especially during the times we engaged in unprotected sex. As for now, he has accepted to use the condom. **Married woman, Zvishavane***

He beat me and the prophet pronounced me mad, but the condom stays

*My husband refused to use condoms. It got to a stage where it went out of hand such that, on top of the beatings I received for initiating condom use, my husband informed church mates. The prophet at church pronounced me mad and I was bound in chains. **Married woman, Gwanda***

I urge other women to be as assertive as I am

I tested positive for TB in 2005. My doctor advised me to use condoms and to come back with my husband for HIV testing. My husband refused and I went for testing after my TB treatment. I tested positive but did not have anyone to help me disclose the results to my husband. I finally got the guts and disclosed as well as to tell him that I was not going to have sex without condoms.

*My strategy was to be very rude and I also threatened to report him to the police for not using condoms. Now the condom stays. I encourage other women to become strong and assertive. I also attended Choose Life training that trains on proper condom use. Unfortunately, men don't believe they can use condoms on their wives as they believe they are meant for girlfriends. Women are also afraid to be assertive as they fear getting divorced and being chased to their rural home. **Married woman, Mufakose urban***

He paid lobola for me

My husband always wanted it as it is (direct contact during sexual intercourse). In 2005, he had TB, got sick. After his treatment, if I asked for the use of a condom, he would respond, "You are my wife and I paid lobola (bride price) for you." But I insisted on using the condom.

My husband went on to report to my aunt who called a small family court regarding my refusal to have sex with my husband without a condom. I was already pregnant and in the clinic had been told about practicing safer sex

and options for feeding. Eventually, my husband accepted to use the condom but he later died. I successfully went through a PMTCT programme. My husband's relatives were very understanding and enrolled me on an ARV programme. **Married woman, Zvishavane**

A male support group coordinator counselled my husband

I am lucky that we do not have to fight any more over the use of the condom. We use it consistently each time we have sex. This was not without some challenges. I encouraged my husband to join the support group and asked our male support group coordinator to help me with counselling him.

He explained to him the importance of reducing STIs and avoiding secondary infection. When he noticed that the occurrence of STIs decreased with the use of the condom and that we are generally much healthier, the condom is now our daily food for sex in our home. **Young married woman, Epworth**

We use condoms as a family planning method

I was having problems with family planning pills and, as a result, my husband bought condoms after having learnt about their existence from friends. **Married woman, Rusape, Tsanzaguru**

He believes we are bewitched

I tested positive during antenatal care. My husband and I only started using condoms after giving birth, as a birth control method since I wasn't using any other contraceptive method. My husband, however, refuses to get tested as he believes in "chibhoi" (witchcraft).

We use condoms regularly but he believes it is my duty to collect them and ensure we have a supply. My recommendation to other women living positively is to be persistent and insistent on condom use, "Ramba uchishinga nemacondom". **Married woman, Mufakose urban**

Had I been more informed, I could have survived this calamity

Sometimes when my husband came from work in town, he would suggest we use a condom. I think at that time it was ignorance. I did not appreciate why he would ask me, his wife, to use a condom! Now, with the knowledge I have on HIV, I realise that, had I used the condoms as suggested by my late husband, maybe I could have survived this calamity. **Widow, Zvishavane**

My persistence paid off

My husband has now given in and we are now using the condom. However, he always shouts at me, saying "up until when will be using condoms? Now we are just like dead people because I am no longer enjoying sex as I used to

before we started using these condoms of yours.” **Married woman, Sangano Clinic, Rusape**

I stood firm and we use condoms

I started insisting on condom use well before I knew my HIV status. Each time I would have sex with my husband, I would experience severe STIs. I had pain on my side. When I tried to use condoms, I realised the challenge with STIs would vanish and so would the severe pain on my side. I then insisted we use condoms with my husband.

It was not an easy piece for my husband to take in just like that. We had our fights and terrible experiences but I stood firm and we used condoms. This position for me was even stronger when I got to know of my HIV status, when I got tested through the FACT programme. We now consistently use condoms and the fights we used to wage are a thing of the past. **Young married woman, Makoni East**

The importance of the female condom in women's safer sex practices

My strategy for safer sex practice is my ability to use the female condom, which I have control over. I realised that my husband played tricks on the male condoms such as pricking them open. Sometimes he would complain that the condom is tight on his penis or have one story or the other for not wanting to use the condom. I just decided to use the female condom.

What makes me happy is that my husband says he enjoys sex better than with the male condom. He says the inner ring which I fold like an 8 when I insert it tickles him so much that he gets maximum enjoyment from the condom. **Middle aged woman, Mufakose**

I think these men are different. Both I and my husband know our status. We got counselling together and were told the importance of using condoms. I use the female condom and he has no problem with that. **Young married woman, Epworth**

I am single and, before I got a steady HIV positive boyfriend, I used to find dating very difficult. A lot of men would look at me and, because physically I look healthy, they would suggest sex without protection. This would force me to disclose my HIV status and, as soon as I did, I would never hear from them again. I met my current boyfriend through care giving as he was my patient. During the time I was nursing him I discovered that his penis had shrunk and was almost sunken in. Now he is well and his penis is back to normal. I use the female condom and my boyfriend prefers it because he enjoys the feel of the inner ring. **Single woman, Mufakose**

We use condoms for secondary protection

*I am on ARVs. I told my husband about my status and what the counsellor had suggested with regards to the use of condoms. I then explained further to him. Now he uses the condom and it is normal practice in our home. **Married woman, Chitungwiza***

STIs in HIV positive women

*We have different STIs. Thrush is one. You produce white smelling stuff from the vagina. Yes, thrush is common, but we also develop little wounds around the entrance of the vagina. These little sores produce a liquid like water. Sometimes I think the thrush we develop in the mouth goes down until it reaches the bottom. Let me stress that the STIs for PLWHA become a bit worse, especially when the viral load is higher and our soldiers are down. I developed small pimples around my vagina. They took two weeks to heal. You can also get drop as an STI. While drop for HIV negative people is white stuff, for us it is very, very itchy. When it starts, you can scratch your private parts even in public. **Married woman, Chitungwiza***

*I am a widow and I have had the problem of STIs from 1995 to date. It's always on and off and I will be discharging itchy white substances. I develop sores on my private parts and my urine will be blood stained. I have been informed by nurses that I have herpes simplex and it doesn't leave your body completely, even if you get treatment. **Widow, Rusape urban***

*I had what they called genital herpes. It starts with a small pimple on the vagina. The pimples increase around the whole organ. It itches on the vagina. It itches very much. Sometimes the itchiness is so much that, if the husband is near, you may actually want to have sex for the itching to stop. **Married woman, Epworth***

Access to Antiretroviral (ARV) Treatment and Experiences with ARVs

Initial problems with ARVs

*My first two weeks on ARVs were tough. The doctors had warned me that I would feel some pain. I had severe diarrhoea and was in great pain. I also lost my appetite. At one time I felt more pain on ARVs compared to the pain I was experiencing before taking ARVs. I am, however, back to normal and I feel good. **Widow, Chitungwiza***

AIDS is no longer a death sentence

For me, I had almost died. I saw and smelt death when I got too down with illness. My relatives were already making preparations for my funeral. When I started

taking ARVs, (she pauses) I take Trimune and Cotrimoxazole for life, my health started to improve by the day. I could not believe it. I can now do any work and can work from 6 am to 6 pm. **Married woman, Gwanda**

Before going on ARVs I used to have severe headaches, and sweating. I was always sick with several problems. I had two attacks of herpes, problems with mouth thrush and vaginal thrush as well. There was a time when I was ashamed of how I looked. Since taking ARVs, common illnesses are a thing of the past. I am very strong, as you can see. I have put on weight. I wish all of us here could be on ARVs. **Single mother, Zvishavane urban**

Being on ARVs is the greatest gift a woman living with HIV and AIDS can ever have. I feel so good and I know I have a future and can provide for my children. If these ARVs had come long ago, most people would have lived to care for their children. We would not have all these orphans in our homes. **Divorced woman, Makoni rural**

When I tested HIV positive, I thought it was the end of the world for me. I spent most of my time worrying and thinking about death and what would happen to my children. These ARVs, ladies, have changed my whole life!! To me AIDS is no longer a death sentence. **Young single mother, Mufakose**

ARVs offering relief from STI symptoms

I had one big wart on my vagina. My doctor informed me that I would continuously have them sprouting in different areas of my body. He gave me Doxycycline but it didn't disappear. When I started taking ARVs it disappeared and I have not had any growing ever since. **Widow, Mufakose**

I have not suffered from any STIs since I started taking ARVs. **Married woman, Chitungwiza**

Poverty and Access to HIV Treatment

Even if one gets a letter from the Social Welfare, the kind of treatment they get is different from those who would have paid in cash are treated. You will always be the last to be attended to. To make it worse, you will be told that there are no drugs and you are given a prescription to buy from private pharmacies when they know very well that you will not be having the cash. **FGD participant, Gwanda**

I have a letter from Social Welfare stamped 30 May, 2006. When I presented it to the nurses they refused to treat me, saying that the letter does not have enough signatures from officials in Social Welfare. They say the letter should have two signatures from the district and one from the head office.

*My letter, as you can see, indicated that I and three of my HIV positive children should get free treatment. This letter also shows that my husband abandoned me at the birth of my four month old baby. Can I really steal such a letter? **Abandoned woman, Epworth***

*My 22 year old daughter is on ARV treatment and she gets her supply of ARVs from Mpilo Hospital. Her main problem is inconsistent supply of ARVs due to transport costs. In February 2006 she went for five days without ARVs since we could not raise bus fare. Since then, my daughter is bedridden and there is no hope that she will make it. **Mother, Esigodini***

*My other two children, who are six years and three years old respectively, are HIV positive. The three of us are not on treatment because I am failing to raise the consultation fees. At the moment, my mother, who is 65 years old and has no source of income, is looking after us. I have approached Social Welfare for assistance without success. **Widow, Mufakose***

My husband beat me up for suggesting treatment

My name is Susan. I am 34 years and got married in 1992. I have three children and my last born who is seven years old has been on ARV treatment since September 2005. My son gets the ARVs from Shabani Mine Hospital. My husband works for Shabani Mine and in August 2005, he fell ill and had his blood tested at Shabani Mine Hospital. His CD4 was very low and he was asked to bring me along to the doctor before he could be given any treatment. The doctor took my blood for testing and my CD4 was found to be high, such that it did not warrant treatment.

*We were asked to come back in November 2005 so that my blood could be tested again. Since August 2005 my husband is refusing to go back to the doctor. My problem is that each time we have sex I feel severe pains 'pasi peguvhu' (below the navel). I have told my husband about this problem and he has refused me to seek treatment, as he is the one with the medical aid card. Each time I raise this issue he beats me up. If I had money, I would have gone for treatment on my own. My husband says he is not on any treatment as well. He is now coming home late and leaving early every day. **Married woman, Zvishavane***

I have now devised ways of dealing with health officials at White Hospital. I go through all my consultations as if I am a paying patient. When I get to the widow for payment and receipt of pills I present my Social Welfare letter and insist that's my mode of payment. Nobody can remove me from the window. I have created such

havoc that they now know me. These days they recognise me and always give me free service without a problem. **Widow, Maglas, Zvishavane**

The Use of Herbs to Treat HIV-Related Illnesses and Opportunistic Infections

I know we were instructed not to mix herbs with ARVs but before I went on ARVs, I used to rely on moringa. It worked so well for me. I would regain strength. I would mix my ARVs with only a quarter teaspoon of moringa. I think it won't do any harm. **Woman, Chitungwiza**

I had TB and I was losing weight a lot. My son-in-law bought me an herb called Nkoka 11, from the pharmacy, which treats 115 diseases. I started by taking 1 teaspoon three times per day and have now reduced the dosage to 1 teaspoon when necessary. I am now very strong and able to do all my work. I now grow and sell vegetables in my garden. I would encourage others with chest problems to use this herb as I found it to be very effective. **Woman, Makoni**

Herbalists offer me more confidentiality than hospitals

I prefer being treated at the herbalist rather than the hospital because at the hospital when the nurses attend to those with STIs, they do so in a group of three, which means that the issue of privacy between the client and the health personnel becomes non-existent. **Married woman, Esigodini**

Using herbs in the treatment of STIs

My bottom would be so itchy. I would scratch and it would get swollen. I told my sister who also told my grandmother. My grandmother gave me traditional medicine but the itchiness would come back. **Single woman, Zvishavane rural**

Herbs are so effective for herpes. I was attacked twice with herpes. I used chickweed to rub the blisters. When the wound dries it does not leave a distinct trail of scars. **Single woman, Mufakose**

Prevention of Parent to Child Transmission (PPTCT) of HIV

Success story of couple counselling for PPTCT

I got pregnant in May 1999 and at that time I did not know my HIV status. In my third month I got sick with TB and I was treated at Nyahukwe clinic. The doctor took some blood samples and ran some tests and that's how I got to know my HIV status. I told my husband about it but he did not seem distraught about the whole issue. He also went for a test and he too tested HIV positive.

The doctor explained in detail the PPTCT before advising me to enrol for the programme at Nyahukwe clinic. I opted for the normal birth delivery mode. My husband supported me all the way and we even went for counselling together. I finished my TB treatment and I anxiously waited for the birth of my baby.

Since we had been counselled together and told what was at stake, my husband and I practiced safer sex every time. At seven months, I went to Nyahukwe clinic where I got my Nevirapine tablet. I took the tablet when the contractions began. My baby was also given his own dose of Nevirapine syrup soon after birth. I breastfed my baby for two months exclusively and, after that, I gave him cow's milk and other supplements because I had become too weak to breastfeed. My son was tested at three years for HIV and he is negative. He is now five years old.

Married woman, Makoni

Facing PMTCT Alone

I tested positive at the antenatal clinic during my second pregnancy. I was lucky I got a nurse who educated me and advised me on a lot of information concerning the PMTCT programme. However, I did not disclose my status to my husband or his relatives as I was scared to do so because I have always had a bad relationship with my mother-in-law. She claims that I am not an ideal wife for her son as I married him with another child I got from a previous marriage.

My mother-in-law decided I should have a home delivery, as was the case with all her daughters-in-law. I tried to refuse as I knew that my baby had to have Nevirapine administered within 48 hours of birth but it did not work. I went into labour for more than 24 hours and my mother-in-law and relatives accused me of witchcraft. I then gave birth but had complications as some of the placenta remained inside my womb. This actually saved my baby because my mother-in-law and other local midwives failed to remove the placenta from the womb and I had to go to the clinic the following morning for treatment.

I was treated and my baby also managed to get Nevirapine syrup within time. For the baby feeding options, I chose the one on breastfeeding the baby continuously without giving solid food. I later found out that my mother-in-law was accusing me of starving the baby and would give it solid food during my absence. I discovered this late and had to stop breastfeeding my baby at five months. I have resorted to giving her food and am waiting to go for a test with her at 18 months since she is just seven months of age. Her health seems good and I hope that she is negative.

*I have since separated with my husband and returned home after disclosing my status to him and his family who accused me of sleeping around and bringing the virus into my home. **Separated mother, Makoni, Sangano Clinic***

The untold secrets of a mother on the PPTCT Programme

In 2000 I enrolled on a PPTCT programme. My husband then had gone to the rural areas. I did not disclose my status then to him. In the PPTCT programme we had been taught about making feeding options for our babies. I had taken the option not to breastfeed my baby. When my husband came back two weeks down the line, he realised I was not breastfeeding and suggested that we visit a traditional healer because he thought I was bewitched. I took the medication as instructed by the traditional healer. When I was asked to breastfeed, I would press on all the wrong points and indicated that it was not working. Then the traditional healer said I had mudzimu. My husband bought the required blanket and asked me to go to my home for some time to have the situation resolved.

For two months I stayed at my place and my baby continued on formula. He was growing very well. I returned to my home in Harare. My husband was surprised that the baby was healthy and growing well. As a family we agreed that he was a miracle baby and the fight for breastfeeding was ignored. My husband being a lover of a big family wanted us to have our fifth child. I got pregnant for my fifth baby.

As before, I enrolled on PMTCT programme. When it came to the feeding option, I realised my last trick was too close and would put me in trouble. I chose to exclusively breastfeed for six months. After the sixth month, I started indicating that the milk problem had started. I would press on all the wrong points and started my baby on formula.

*At that point, I shared my status with my husband and encouraged him to go for testing and counselling as well. He did and we were advised to use condoms. An opportunity arose at the clinic for those who needed to have their tubes tied. I enrolled secretly. I did not share with my husband. For the operation wound I conserved it saying that I had such pain in my tummy until it healed. I am happy too for my two babies are both negative. It took a lot of strength and the courage to keep a secret to save my children. **Married woman, Epworth***

HIV and Changes in Menstruation

*For five months, I had no period. I was surprised and thought I was bewitched. I went to ZCC (a church). They indicated that I needed serious attention for my problem. They prepared a 20- litre tin of concentrated Tanganda tea. The old woman took me into the bush. She made me bend down. They pushed a pipe like tube through my anal passage and poured all the tea slowly into my body through the anus. Sometimes I would feel like wanting to pass stool and they would allow me to. They had warned me that this treatment would be very demanding on me. After the treatment, I started having my period again. **Married woman, Epworth***

*I had three months with no periods. I was advised to have a female prophet work on me. She brought 2 litres of water. She then scooped a handful of course salt and put it into the 2 litres of water. She stirred the salt and water until all the salt was dissolved in the water. I was asked to drink the 2 litres of salt water only three times, resting for a breath after drinking every third of the contents. She advised that after the salt and water solution I would have my period. In addition she also advised that I get treatment for STIs at the clinic. **Widow, Epworth***

Young and HIV Positive as a Result of Child Sexual Abuse

All because my aunt wanted a child

My name is Theresa Mpofu, I am sixteen years old. My parents are late and I only have a brother whose whereabouts I'm not sure of.

In 2002, I was staying with my auntie who took me from the rural areas to the city in Bulawayo. My auntie, a cross border trader, would be away from home most of the time as she travelled to Botswana and South Africa. This meant I was home alone most of the time with my uncle and their gardener. My uncle took advantage of this time when my auntie was away to sexually abuse me together with the gardener. He would come to the bedroom where I slept and rape me, then the gardener would also come in to rape me after he had left.

After this first encounter of rape incidents, I reported this to my auntie after she had returned from her trip. She beat me up, threatened me not to tell anyone and she also made it very clear to me that the purpose she had brought me to her home was to bear her a child as she was barren. She would smear Vaseline mixed with

lemon juice on my private parts so that I would be fertile enough to get pregnant. So, throughout the year of my stay there, my uncle and gardener would rape me in the absence of my auntie or even when she was there.

I finally went to the police and made a report in 2003 and at this time I was supposed to be in grade 5 but was no longer going to school. My uncle was arrested but the gardener ran away. The police took me to the hospital, where I was found to be three months pregnant, and they did an abortion on me. I was then taken to Girl Child Network in Chitungwiza.

I had two attacks of herpes both on my left and right hand side, stretching from my breast right through to my back. I have warts which have grown on my vagina and naval. I also have pain around my pelvic area and knee joints. My urine is blood stained and I experience pain and heat sensations during urination. I have been taken to the hospital a number of times by the matron at Girl Child Network for a number of tests. However I do not know my HIV status. **Theresa Mpofu, 16 years old**

I was diagnosed as HIV positive when I was 12 years old

I was raped when I was in grade 5 by my uncle (babamukuru). I was twelve years old and staying with my aunt, my father's sister. My mother had passed away. My aunt would go to work. My uncle was a soldier. After work he liked to fondle my breasts.

One day, he came home and found me drinking tea. He closed the door and forced his way and had sex with me. I bled very much. He warned me that if I told anyone, he would kill me. After three days, I gained courage and told my aunt what had happened. I went back to stay with my father.

Two weeks after the rape, I started getting severe pains in my stomach. When I went to the clinic, I was diagnosed with an STI. I had itchy discharge from my vagina. I was diagnosed as HIV positive when I was twelve years old. My auntie would scold me for being HIV positive.

I was started on Stalanev 30 on 24 November 2004. I was referred for ARVs by Island Hospice. I also go to the OI clinic. I am also on Cotrimoxazole. Even though I have not had sex with any other men since that time, I continue to experience STIs. It will be very itchy. I sometimes wash my private part with salt to try and kill the germs. My uncle died in jail in 2004. They say he got very sick. I am now in Form 4. **Vimbai Zvichapera, 18 years old**

