Breaking HIV barriers in South Sudan

Many women fear disclosing their HIV status, which often results in social exclusion by their family and community. A project to reduce the impact of HIV by South Sudan Red Cross has led to an increasing number of people getting tested and treated.

Barriers to HIV prevention and care
For most women in South Sudan, being told they are HIV positive is like getting a death sentence. They fear violence or abandonment by their husbands and communities. Some are too afraid to test while others fear stigmatisation if they seek treatment. As a consequence, they live in constant fear of how their family will react, if one day their secret is disclosed.

The fear of stigma and discrimination often prevents women from seeking treatment in a country where the health system is weakened by years of conflict and insecurity. Health facilities are short of personnel, medical equipment and medicine. Moreover poverty prevents people who live with HIV from meeting basic needs for food and other necessities to survive.

FACTS ABOUT HIV IN SOUTH SUDAN

- 190,000 people are HIV positive among them 20,000 children below the age of 15
- 70,000 live as orphans and vulnerable children of which more than 2,500 aged 10 to 14 have lost both parents
Alice, a widow and volunteer of South Sudan Red Cross tells: “I found out, I was HIV positive at the same time my ailing husband was tested. I was pregnant at that time and didn’t know of any PMTC [Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission] services. No one could offer me medication – only counselling. Unfortunately my husband soon died and a year later my co-wife [her husband’s first wife] followed, leaving me to run a household with ten children by myself”.

Red Cross action
In 2011 South Sudan Red Cross began a five year project to help reduce the impact of HIV/AIDS on women and strengthen prevention and care. An important activity was to recruit volunteers as home-based care providers, which turned out to be difficult since stigma prevented many from volunteering.

Despite the stigma, Alice bravely volunteered to become home-based care provider. She also joined a group of people living with HIV (PLHIV) who had access to psychosocial support. Most of the volunteers trained by Red Cross are women with similar stories to Alice. Either they have tested positive for HIV or have lost their husband to the virus.

The home-based care volunteers are trained to provide basic nursing care, nutritional counselling, psychosocial support, advice on antiretroviral drug adherence, and assistance with household upkeep. They raise community awareness and understanding to reduce the stigma of HIV, sharing their own stories during outreach sessions, and through radio talk shows that educate the public.

Achievements
The home-based care volunteers’ efforts to educate communities in South Sudan on the importance of HIV testing, counselling and treatment is clearly reflected in an increasing number of people now wanting to know their status.

From 2011 to 2015, the project reached almost 177,000 people with prevention, care and support services. Almost 5,200 people went for voluntary counselling, HIV testing including 1,920 women and girls and 1,870 women received Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission services.

Red Cross volunteers like Alice have provided 1,151 HIV positive people with home-based care, a majority of which were other women. Anti-stigma campaign messages have reached almost 10,500 inhabitants in targeted communities.

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