



Gracia Violeta Ross, Bolivia
An interview with **Alice Welbourn**
www.stratshope.org/d-audio.htm

In 1998 I was raped. I didn't want to go for check-ups or support because I was really traumatized. I just wanted to forget.

In 2000, I was finishing my studies in anthropology and doing my final research in a rural area in Bolivia. I came back very sick. I thought I had yellow fever. My sister told my uncle to test me for HIV, but I didn't know. The next day she knew before me that I was HIV positive. When they told me I was really not expecting the news.

All the HIV messages I had received when I was younger was that gay men, sex workers and drug users were the ones who would be infected. The person who gave me my HIV test was not an expert. He told me, "You don't have yellow fever, but you have HIV". He asked if I was in a gang, and if I had sex with all of them as an initiation.

Because of my experience as a rape survivor, I made some connections. I was thinking of my own story and I tried to analyze how things went on my life and I made a connection between gender based violence, gender inequality and HIV.

I decided then to speak about my experience as a rape survivor because many women around the world are living with the same experiences. People are more shocked when they hear that part of my story than the fact that I am living with HIV.

Someone has to break the silence on violence against women. It puts women at greater risk of HIV, but also men because they think they are so powerful not even HIV will affect them. The level of violence against women and girls for me is just a symptom of how much also men need to change.

Extracts from the PozFem UK report: 'Women, HIV and Sexual Health'
www.poz-fem-uk.org/resources.html

I was taken to A&E for head injuries after he had punched me and I passed out. I could not tell anyone because he kept threatening to tell friends and family about my HIV status so I remained with him and the abuse. (Patience, Positively Women Magazine, 2002)

I disclosed my status on arrival at the Accident and Emergency to make the staff aware [...] I woke up to find everyone was looking at me like I was an alien. [...] I was only in hospital for two days, but it seemed twenty years. (Anon, Positively Women Magazine, 2007)

A woman from my group told her partner immediately after she got diagnosed... He pushed her with her head inside the toilet and flushed it. (PozFem UK member, January 2008)

Violence of different forms is a reality for women in the UK and internationally. Violence combined with an HIV diagnosis is a particularly potent mix.

Other recommendations:

Dragonslippers: This is what an abusive relationship looks like by Rosaline B. Penfold

The Woman who walked into doors by Roddy Doyle

Once in a house on fire by Andrea Ashworth

ICW factsheet (2008), Violence Against HIV Positive Women at www.icw.org/files/Violence.pdf

Sophia 



A UNAIDS initiative

In 2004, UNAIDS launched the Global Coalition on Women and AIDS (GCWA)
www.womenandaids.net

SOPHIA Forum is the UK branch of the Global Coalition on Women and AIDS.

The Coalition is a loose alliance of civil society groups, networks of women living with HIV, and United Nations agencies. It works at global and national levels to highlight the effects of AIDS on women and girls and to stimulate concrete and effective action to prevent the spread of HIV.

The SOPHIA Forum Network is an initiative founded to engage prominent players from a range of UK institutions to address issues related to women and AIDS.

Do you have a story to share? Contact us on info@sophiaforum.net

www.sophiaforum.net/



Health AND Safety: the challenges for women of HIV and Gender Violence

One of our key goals at Sophia is to promote HIV awareness. Our aim is to keep you informed about news and policy updates, to provide a resource which you can forward to friends and colleagues. "Join the network; Spread the word; Call for action"

Editorial

November 25th is the International Day to Eliminate Violence against Women. It is also the start of the internationally-observed "Sixteen Days of Activism Against Gender Violence", which takes in World AIDS Day on December 1st, and culminates with International Human Rights Day on December 10th.

The Sophia Forum's November 25th event at the House of Commons will highlight the links between violence against women, human rights and HIV.

In this edition of the Sophia newsletter, we explore a range of different types of violence against women. From India, we report on research into HIV positive women's experiences of sexual and reproductive health services, particularly abortion and sterilisation. The women involved in the research faced a panoply of human rights violations: from abusive marriages, to bad treatment by in-laws and relatives, to physical and verbal abuse by health workers, to denial of adequate health care in state facilities.

We hear from Chani, an African woman living in the UK. Immigration policy

prevented Chani from leaving her abusive husband, and forced her to endure the violence. Chani shares her story to give hope to other women in her position.

Gracia Violeta Ross explains why as an HIV positive survivor of rape, she decided to break the silence on gender violence. And finally, we include quotes of HIV positive women taken from PozFem UK's report on Women, HIV and Sexual Health in the UK.

There has been progress on violence against women: international declarations, national laws and greater awareness of the issue. Gender guidelines and audits have extended the understanding of the gaps and problems. But violence is still a harsh reality for too many women in the UK and abroad. And violence increases women's vulnerability to HIV; prevents women getting treatment for HIV; makes HIV positive women reluctant to access health services, or to seek legal support when current trends are to criminalise them for being HIV positive.

More progress is needed. Urgently.

The Sophia Team



Institutional violence in India: Positive women's experiences of reproductive health services

By Anandi Yuvaraj

In 2008, the International Community of Women living with HIV/AIDS (ICW) interviewed twelve HIV positive women in Tamil Nadu and Delhi, India, about their experiences of making reproductive choices and accessing reproductive health services, including contraception, abortion, sterilisation or hysterectomies. In this article we explore the abuse, violence and discrimination faced by HIV positive women at home and in health services.

Difficulties controlling reproductive lives

The interviews capture the difficulties women face controlling their reproductive lives. One interviewee, a 38 year old woman who has had six pregnancies, tries to insist on condom use with her husband. He refuses. Neither does he want her to go for sterilisation, as he fears she would sleep around and he would lose control of her sexual life. The women received little advice on contraception. One woman was told by health workers to use female condoms, but they were too expensive for her to buy.

'I just do not care what you go through'

One 29 year old interviewee has had four pregnancies. She also looks after her husband's two older children. (His first wife killed herself.) She is physically and verbally abused by her husband, who has tested for HIV but not revealed his status. *"You have HIV because you are not spiritual. Nothing will happen to me, because I am a pandit [Hindu scholar] and I do pujas [offerings] every day".* Sent to hospital to deliver her baby, she was told by staff to wait until 70 patients had been seen first, saying, *"If I touch you and then I deliver other women's children, the virus will be transmitted to them. I just do not care about what you go through"*

Pressured to terminate or be sterilised

A number of women were pressured to terminate pregnancies or be sterilized by family members and health workers. In some cases, women were not

given their HIV diagnosis by health workers, and so they were unable to make an informed decision. Fear of being beaten by their husbands led at least two interviewees to keep their abortions secret.

'Sterilisation will affect your brain'

Health staff gave misleading information about the impact of HIV and how HIV is transmitted. They gave incorrect information about family planning methods. In one case, a husband was told not to use condoms as *"they cause skin allergies"*. They also gave incorrect information about the impact of abortion and sterilisation on HIV positive women's health, telling one woman, *"Because you have HIV we cannot perform sterilisation: the operation will affect your brain."*

Scolding, punching and pinching

In Tamil Nadu we heard that health workers abused two of the interviewees, scolding them and punching and pinching them during procedures. Women are blamed for their HIV infection and for putting others at risk – children, health staff or sexual partners.

In Delhi 5 out of 7 of the women were scolded and denied abortion or sterilization services at government hospitals because of their HIV status. Abuse and refusal to provide services led most women to go to private clinics for abortions, and to say nothing about their HIV status.

Pre-abortion counselling, follow-up and advice are either non-existent or inappropriate. This includes advice around the implication of procedures, follow-up on possible complications, sexual health services and advice about family planning. Discriminatory attitudes by health care staff meant HIV positive women did not get appropriate follow-up and counselling. In some cases, women simply did not return for follow-up because of their mistreatment. Most of the interviewees not only suffered traumatic experiences within health centres but went on to have more unwanted pregnancies.

ICW's recommendations

The research led to a series of recommendations to improve HIV positive women's experiences, including the need to address HIV positive women's sexual and reproductive health in a holistic, unbiased and confidential way. Better training is needed for health workers and HIV positive women, to enable them to make informed decisions about their reproductive choices. Of course, the underlying issue is that attitudes to women need to change, so that violence and abuse become unacceptable.

See www.icw.org for the report of the study

Living with violence and abuse in the UK

By Chani

a member of PozFem UK (www.poz-fem-uk.org.uk)

Chani came to the UK in 2000 with her husband.

I met my first husband when I was a teenager. First boyfriend, first husband. I believe he knew about his HIV status in the mid-1990s and did not tell me. I only got to find out in 2005. He didn't show any remorse, and did not want to talk about it at all.

An abusive marriage

It was a very abusive marriage. I wasn't allowed to go out with friends. Then one time he really beat me up. He nearly killed me, because he started beating me up in my sleep. He also sexually abused me twice. I went out with my friends and when I came back, he pinned me down and had sex with me. When I said that's sexual abuse, he laughed.

I had to make a decision. If I divorced him, if he said, 'Go', I would have no right to stay in the country. I didn't want to have to leave my children. So I made a decision to stay in the marriage. It went on for another 3 years, until I got my indefinite leave to remain.

In the last year I started planning to leave the relationship. I didn't know how to leave, so I went to a women's refuge for advice. I told them about the sexual abuse. The solicitor said he could go on the sex offenders register for that. But I just wanted to get out of his life.

I told him I was going to divorce him. He went back to Africa and told everyone how much of a "prostitute" I was. He turned things against me, saying it was me who had made him sick.

'He was very angry'

I had a friend that I'd known for 2 years. Things seemed to be heading towards a relationship. Before anything could happen, I decided to disclose my HIV status. I hadn't done so before as for me there hadn't been a need. He was very angry. He said I had led him on, that I had planned to infect him, and that I had turned a good man into a racist. He said he couldn't stand the sight of black people any more because this is what we did, come here to infect people. He didn't want to see me again, and it was very hard because I had started to fall in love with him. I felt it was the end of the world. It was a traumatising experience. I even felt suicidal.

While I was grieving, I thought, 'OK, I will concentrate on my work and my children'. Then I met someone through work. He started getting close. Before anything could happen, I said, 'Hey, if you are thinking of having a relationship, forget it because I'm HIV positive.' No preparation for me, none for him, I just blurted it out.

'You are a very strong woman'

Two days later, this lovely man came back and said, 'I've never thought about this HIV, and I've never had a test – but I've done some research. So educate me a bit more.' So we talked, and from time to time I was in tears. He said, 'Look, I'm a bit scared, but you are a very strong woman and I'd like to go on with it if you would.' He also said he wanted to have an HIV test himself. I escorted him to the GUM clinic, and he came out negative. I have now been seeing him for just over 6 months, and there's no sign that he's going to backtrack. So there is hope – bad things happen, but it's not always the end of the world.

In my situation, I was lucky to be a professional woman who could look up what the law said. I'm sure there are many women who find themselves in very vulnerable situations because they are not able to do that.

'We should not have to endure abuse'

With immigration, the law doesn't make it very easy. In my abusive marriage, if I knew I could be supported if I left him, I would probably have left him. If a woman is married to a violent man with a British passport, they can get help, but otherwise it's a different ball game. We should not have to endure abuse.

'Disclosure is not easy'

There is also the issue of disclosure. I knew I had to disclose. But disclosure is really not as easy as people seem to say it is. Sometimes women put themselves at risk by not disclosing, because they love someone - and could find themselves criminalised for it. Every situation is different, and women should do what is in their best interests to protect themselves and those around them. If you disclose and get a bad response, don't despair - there are some reasonable people out there.

For more on HIV and immigration status, see [Asylum Aid, ICW and Positively Women: A Positive Partnership, 2003-2009](http://www.asylumaid.org.uk/data/files/publications/95/A_positive_partnership.pdf). Report available at www.asylumaid.org.uk/data/files/publications/95/A_positive_partnership.pdf

Southall Black Sisters campaigns on domestic violence and immigration. For more information, see www.southallblacksisters.org.uk/campaigns.html#oneyear

