

Women with HIV in Cameroon still stigmatised

July 24 2017

Blandine, a 28-year-old mother of a baby girl, sits restlessly on a chair in a women's health centre in Cameroon's capital, not knowing how or what to feel as she waits for an HIV test.

Blandine is HIV positive.

But the waiting is not for her—it is to find out whether her one-year-old girl also has the human immunodeficiency virus.

A few minutes later, she has her answer.

"I am so relieved," Blandine said upon learning that her baby's blood tests came back negative for HIV. "I feel like I've won a battle with my child, a battle I was unable to win for myself."

In Cameroon, more women are living with HIV than any other group, and they are also more stigmatised than their male counterparts.

Blandine, a teacher, was willing to share her story but preferred to use an alias to protect her identity and her family, including her husband, who has public responsibilities.

"I have a life to build," she said.

"There is progress but we cannot say that the stigma has disappeared. When you have a certain role in society, you have to defend your

husband and your in-laws.

"You have to protect your children."

Blandine discovered she was HIV positive nearly two years ago, after a long illness. Her husband was the one who broke the bad news to her, as she was too weak to speak to the doctor herself.

She is still not sure how she came to contract the virus. Her husband, like their daughter, does not have it.

"It is really due to my husband's love that I was able to live through that situation," she said.

Blandine said many HIV positive women are rejected by their husbands and families and then isolated from society as a whole.

"Some women don't even dare talk about their status for fear of being abandoned," she said. "They deal with it on their own, without even opening up to their husbands."

'Afraid' of sex

Serodiscordant couples—where one partner is HIV positive—face an extra set of hurdles in a relationship, especially as it relates to personal hygiene and sexual relations.

For Blandine and her husband, adjusting to her status meant regular visits to health professionals and a sex education course at the hospital.

"When you get the results, it's not obvious you can go back to a normal sex life," she said. "You are always afraid at the beginning."

At the hospital, the couple was taught the best way to continue having safe sex, but the most important thing was to remain faithful to each other.

"Fidelity is essential, for him but also for me, because we don't know the (HIV) status of people outside our relationship".

Blandine, whose HIV positive status is "nearly undetectable" because of her continued treatment, never thought she would be able to live such a happy, normal life—with healthy children.

"I was always told that I could be a mother like any other, in spite of the HIV, and I am now just understanding that it is not a dream," she said.

"You can give birth to your child and breastfeed them like the other children. I am really happy."

As soon as she was born, Blandine's daughter benefited from immediate HIV treatment, and her first test at six weeks showed she had no HIV antibodies.

The baby will have to undergo her final test when she turns 18 months.

'We see progress'

In the cheerful waiting room of the women's health centre of the Chantal Biya Foundation, Blandine sits surrounded by other HIV positive mothers and their babies.

Cameroon, a country of 23 million that hugs Africa's Gulf of Guinea, had a 5.75-percent HIV prevalence rate for pregnant women in 2016, making it one of the 10 countries responsible for 75 percent of new paediatric infections worldwide.

"We see progress in the prevention of the transmission (of HIV) from mother to child," said Therese Nduwimana, director of the HIV and AIDS section at the UN's children agency, UNICEF, in Cameroon.

In its efforts to lower the prevalence rate, the country has launched programmes where pregnant women can get tested for HIV during prenatal visits.

According to Nduwimana, "79 percent of those who find out they are positive are immediately started on treatment" and their children also receive treatment as soon as they are born.

Still, 17 percent of pregnant women skip their prenatal visits and about 12 percent refuse the test.

Cameroon has also invested in rapid HIV testing, which delivers results within the hour as opposed to a month.

When Blandine first tested her daughter at six months, the month of waiting was not easy.

"For weeks, you have a feeling of guilt, you cannot stop thinking that maybe you've passed a virus to your child that they'll have to fight for the rest of their lives."

In her work as a teacher, Blandine has been able to advise younger women living with HIV, without revealing her status.

But she hopes one day to be able to live openly with HIV.

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Citation: Women with HIV in Cameroon still stigmatised (2017, July 24) retrieved 10 April 2024

from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-07-women-hiv-cameroon-stigmatised.html>

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