

## Spotlight

# Stigma and HIV-positive children in Thailand

Niparueradee Pinyajeerapat, Thailand

An article from the HDN Key Correspondent Team

The stories told here, of children growing up with HIV in Thailand, may be similar to the stories of affected children from all over the world. The psychosocial impacts of HIV-related stigma and discrimination compound the difficulties of their lives, which are already burdened with HIV.

Deang is a seven-year-old boy who became infected with HIV after being sexually abused. His neighbours and relatives know about his positive status but none of them has ever said a word about it and have never treated him differently. Deang feels safe and is free of stigma in his small community; however, he has never wanted to inform other people, even his friends in school, that he is HIV positive. He is afraid that his disclosure would invite stigma and rejection. He has heard that HIV-positive children are ill-treated, isolated and bullied. He does not think he could face the consequences of stigma so he would rather keep quiet about his HIV status. He tries to live as calmly as possible, but deep inside his anxiety will not go away. He worries about the future and what will happen if his status is discovered. The fear of being 'nobody' haunts him every day.

Daam is a seventeen-year-old girl who contracted HIV from her mother at birth. Her mother died when she was very young and her father married another woman and moved out to live with his new family. Her grandmother, who is now over 80, has been taking care of her ever since.

Daam found out that she was HIV positive when she was nine years old. She became very sick and had to visit the hospital often. She began to lose weight and had skin problems. When her neighbours found out she was HIV positive they told their children not to play with her. In school, she was teased, called names and rejected by her friends. "What my friends did to me did not hurt me as much as what they said about my mother. I cried a lot at that time. I was angry and also blamed my mother for giving me this disease."

Daam became aggressive and started to stand up to those who bullied her. "I gradually learned to fight back and never let anyone abuse me anymore."

Now, Daam is studying at a vocational training school and has received a scholarship. No one knows about her positive status except her teachers. However, she still feels that she is different from her friends. She is worried that she will never get a job if people find out she is HIV positive. Daam also has to look after her grandmother who is getting old now.

"I must live and cannot die before my grandmother because nobody will look after her." Daam has never enjoyed her childhood as much as her friends of the same age because of HIV. What lies ahead of her, she does not want to think about.

Kwaw is a fifteen-year-old girl who also contracted HIV through mother-to-child transmission. She is skinny and looks smaller than her age. Her mother died when she was young and her father looked after her and her older sister who was not infected. Kwaw found out that she was HIV positive when she was ten years old.

She was far behind her classmates at school. She could not concentrate on her studies and often slept during classes. Finally, she dropped out of school when she became sick and started to develop AIDS-related signs (the dark spots on her body), because she and her

father did not want anyone to know that she was HIV positive.

Kwaw has had no friends since she left school. Even at school she didn't associate much with the other kids because she was often too sick to play. Now she stays at home and plays with her little niece and wonders if she will ever get the chance to study again.

Listening to these children, one of the things they share is the personal impact or fear of HIV-related stigma. None of them are willing to disclose their positive status for fear of rejection and exclusion.

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