

Spotlight

Pushing back against HIV-related stigma in Viet Nam

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An article from the HDN Key Correspondent Team

H is a 28-year-old woman who found out that she was HIV positive six years ago, just before she delivered her first and only child. She remembers what a surprise it was when the district hospital referred her to Hanoi obstetric hospital without telling her the reason.

In Hanoi the doctors and nurses behaved strangely towards her and shouted at her. She was discharged from this first hospital in Hanoi at 12am and told to go to the central obstetric hospital, without anyone explaining where to find it. This pregnant woman, who could go into labour at any time, had to wait for three hours outside the gates of Hanoi obstetric hospital until her husband was able to come and take her to the next hospital.

H didn't get any counselling or support and the only advice her doctor gave her was that she should bottle feed her child, if it was financially possible for her. As was common in Viet Nam at the time, the whole community knew about her HIV status before she came home.

Because of financial difficulties and lack of support from both families, H had to breastfeed her child. And because nobody gave her any information about HIV and how the HIV test works, when she took her daughter for an HIV test at six months of age she was given a positive result.

H continued to bring up her child without any knowledge about how to avoid transmission. When the child was 3 years old, H tried to send her to kindergarden but she was refused. The teacher told her that there were too many children and her child was too young. H told the teacher "I will keep my child at home if other children of the same age stay at home as well".

Finally, the child was allowed to attend a kindergarden, but she was made to sit outside the classroom. The girl cried a lot and didn't want to go back. H had to talk with the teacher again. "A child is similar to a blank page", she told her. "Whether the paper becomes pure or black depends on the adults around her. You have to think carefully, before you exclude a child"

Even though the girl was finally allowed into the classroom, the other children would not play with her because of the fear of transmission. H asked the teachers why they had disclosed her daughter's status to other children and threatened that if the situation continued she would pursue it at a higher level.

At the time, H thought only that going to school is the right of all children - she didn't know anything about the rights of people living with HIV.

H didn't receive any support or advice from family members. She continued to think that her daughter was HIV positive until she was four years old when the central obstetric hospital encouraged H to take her child for a second test. H cried a lot when she found out that her child was in fact HIV negative.

The strength that keeps H living and fighting for the right to be treated equally for the whole family, is her love for her daughter and husband.

H and her husband joined two self-help groups two years ago. They received a loan (5 million Vietnamese dong, equivalent to around US\$300) to raise pigs and cattle. Her husband

sometimes takes seasonal jobs and receives an ad-hoc income. Their lives are still very tough and most of their money is spent on school fees for their daughter. But H feels happy and comfortable now because she knows more about HIV and other people living in the same situation from weekly meetings at the self-help group.

H does outreach, provides care and support to other people, and participates in different trainings and workshops. Both H and her husband get free antiretroviral (ARV) treatment. They also get more support from the community because the whole community has a better understanding of HIV these days. Representatives from the commune's women's union have even offered to provide a loan to H's family if they need it. This is because of the 'positive living' attitudes of H and her husband. They work hard for a living and don't wait for other people's support.

Stigma and discrimination toward PLHIV are decreasing in some communities where intensive efforts by the local authority and development organisations have been made over past years. It is notable that the first HIV prevention programme was implemented in H's district about 10 years ago. Stigma and discrimination still strongly exist in other places.

H said that in her self-help group, which has around 100 members, all women, nobody dares to fight for their rights. Some children are going to school because their HIV status is still unknown to the community. But lots of children have to stay at home because teachers are under pressure from parents who show stigmatising attitudes. They incorrectly believe that their child could be infected from bites or scratches when playing with HIV-positive children.

The government has just passed a new law on HIV, but it will not become effective until January 2007 and thus guidelines for implementation are not available.

According to the Institute for Social Development Studies in Hanoi, some 2,800 out of 2 million babies born annually in Viet Nam get HIV from their infected mothers. The country is estimated to have around 8,500 HIV positive children aged 1-15, and some 22,000 orphans due to AIDS.

Recently, the government rejected a proposal that tried to build a separate school for HIV-positive children. However, not enough is being done to protect the right to education and the right to be free from discrimination for HIV-positive children. In Ba Vi district, which is 40 km from Hanoi, there is a class for children of HIV positive mothers who are living in the rehabilitation centre. Some HIV-positive mothers in Hanoi have to send their children to this class as a temporary solution. At the moment, it seems to be the only official place for HIV-positive children to get a basic education.

Meanwhile, H's daughter is starting primary school in September and is finally enjoying her childhood. We can only hope that all children in Viet Nam will one day have the opportunity to access education without stigma.

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