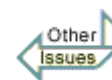


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**Important note:** Information in this article was accurate in 2005. The state of the art may have changed since the publication date.



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## SOUTH AFRICA: Challenging stigma by living positively with HIV

*UN Integrated Regional Information Networks - June 21, 2005*

[This report does not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations]

JOHANNESBURG, 21 June (PLUSNEWS) - In the face of widespread stigma around HIV/AIDS, few people have the courage to go public about their status, but one such person is Mampho Leoma, 28, a mother of two from Mapetla, in the Johannesburg township of Soweto.

Leoma recalled the day she found out she was HIV-positive: "It was the 26th of January last year; I was four months pregnant ... It was very sad - I didn't expect the result. At the time I was not going with anyone else but my husband, and I didn't think he was going out with other girls either."

Leoma rushed to tell a friend, who calmed her down. "She said everything will be alright; she told me to tell my husband. I waited for him to come back from work and I told him. He said, 'No problem - we will live with it.'"

However, Leoma's partner soon took to drinking heavily, became abusive and started staying out late; she suspected him of sleeping with other women.

While her own family in neighbouring [Lesotho](#) was supportive, her father-in-law was not. "We were living with him in his house. I told him about my status and then he wasn't too worried. He said, 'The way you look, you are so healthy - if you get sick, then we'll see.'"

But when she returned from a visit to Lesotho his stance had changed. "He said we must go and look for another place. I don't know why he said that because he is too old to stay alone - we are the only ones who can stay with him, as his other children stay far away."

Leoma's husband still lives in denial, refusing to be tested or seek medical treatment. "He's still healthy; he's not getting sick, but at night when he sleeps the sheets are wet, and he's also coughing a lot but he doesn't want to accept [it]. He drinks too much and when he is drunk he talks about it - he says both of us and our children are going to die."

Although the children, an eight-month-old daughter and a nine-year-old boy, are both HIV-negative, her husband does not believe this.

Leoma shows the same calm resilience in the face of the many other challenges she faces. She insists on using condoms with her husband for fear of reinfection, although this is a source of constant conflict in their relationship.

"Since I've told him that I will use condoms for the rest of my life, he doesn't force me to [have sex] without them, but when we are fighting and I ask if there are other women, he says, 'Yes - you don't want to sleep with me without condoms; I am not satisfied with condoms, I will sleep with the others.'"

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Despite her difficult home circumstances, Leoma has taken on the mantle of AIDS activist and is intent on spreading the word that one can live 'positively' with HIV.

"Stigma is there ... If you're sitting with the other ladies, they will comment: 'Hey, do you see that one? She looks like she's HIV-positive.' But I tell them that living with HIV is not a problem; there is treatment."

Leoma said she had gained strength from attending support groups for HIV-positive mothers run by HIVSA, the psychosocial arm of the Perinatal HIV Research Unit, based at Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital in Soweto.

"Because of [the] support group, I feel that I can teach other people about HIV - I am ready to confront people to say that living with HIV is not a problem. Now I am ready to talk about it to everyone.

"I think we have to go from house to house to teach them about HIV/AIDS - especially the boys and men. The people who have to go there must be the ones who are HIV-positive, but we must take our results. Otherwise, if you go there, they'll say, 'She's lying - she's not HIV-positive, see how healthy she is.' We need to explain why we are still living healthily, so that they will know everything about HIV."

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