

Helping African Women with AIDS: A First-hand Report

By Cassilde Ntamamiro

Reprinted from Friends Bulletin, December 2004.

["God has led me through many difficult situations," observes Cassilde. She credits God with helping her to go to school and become literate—a rare achievement in Burundi, where over 80% of women cannot read or write. After graduating from high school, Cassilde was accepted into the Great Lakes School of Theology. For the past 20 years she has worked as a nurse. Now, thanks to the help of Friends, she is following her leading to help women suffering from AIDS. She is both the Coordinator of Friends Women's Association and also the nurse in the clinic. Editor.]

Deep in my heart, I've been carrying a heavy burden of trauma, a burden of not knowing what to do because "it's too much": too many deaths due to war and the ravages of AIDS, and too much deadly silence, especially among women.

I often think of my sister Angelique and her husband Basile, and how they both died of AIDS.

One Sunday Basile took me aside and confessed his terrible secret: "Cassy, I have to tell you: I have AIDS. You're the one I want to tell this thing. When I came back in Burundi, I planned to care for my brother's children. I was hoping to finish the house I'm building, so that they could live in it and then I could send the children to school. Now I feel a very big pain in my chest and my breathing is very painful. I want you to take my car out of here, because I don't want people to know that I'm around. I need to be alone."

When it came my turn to speak, I tried to pretend that I was not shocked, that I was strong, but all I could think of saying was something like, "Thank you for telling me."

Days later, my sister Angelique called asking me to take her to the hospital because of another problem with her pregnancy. We had never talked together about AIDS before, but finally, in her hospital bed, she told me: "Cassy, I know why this has happened to me. Basile and I have contracted the affliction."

I searched hard to figure out what to respond. At the time, I was not trained in conducting an AIDS counseling session, so I finally said: "AIDS is one of many other sicknesses. Many people will be dying tomorrow with malaria and by car accidents. Now that I know, I will help you to feel better. Nobody will be able to tell the cause of his death."

In our society, AIDS is a disease that no one wants to talk about, or admit to. It's a burden that we carry silently in our hearts.

AIDS as a Woman's Crisis

Burundi officials report that 15% of the population has AIDS. But since the country has been at war for more than a decade, the figures probably are much higher. Women have become infected for several reasons.

First, women lack information about AIDS transmission, or basic knowledge about health care. Why? Many women in Burundi cannot read. Their parents don't have funds to send their children to school; and if they do, it's usually only enough to educate sons so that they can continue the family name and resources. As a result, over 80% of women in Burundi are illiterate.

Secondly, the wars have turned many women into sexual targets. As refugees escaping and living in camps, many become victims of their presumed protectors who take sexual advantage of them. Other women experience rape and sexual assaults by night assailants and roving rebels.

Because of the social stigma, women with AIDS must hide their disease. Unfortunately, even the church stigmatizes those with AIDS because religious leaders view AIDS to be the consequence of sinful behavior and of promiscuity.

Finally, poverty is another factor. Women sometimes have to turn to men who promise money or protection, particularly if they have lost their husbands and sons during the war. We hear many women saying: "We prefer to die tomorrow from AIDS, rather than dying today from hunger by refusing the offers we're given for food."

Daily Rounds at the FWA Clinic

For the past few years, I have been working at the FWA clinic, helping women with AIDS. My day's work begins around 8 a.m. The young man, who is our guard, greets me with the traditional "amahoro," meaning peace. We need a man here because in this patriarchal culture, a man needs to be part of one's enterprise at least for security reasons. The clinic, like other houses in Kamenge, had the impact of war-mortars and bullets. This suburb of Bujumbura, one of the most destroyed by fighting, stands as a visual reminder of the last eleven years of war between the rebels and the army. The clinic is one of the nicest buildings, but it still needs some repairs to meet the health care standards.

In a day I regularly treat many opportunistic diseases related to AIDS/HIV and to general health, among them malaria, digestive troubles such as diarrhea and worms, coughs and colds, pain and fever. I also give blood tests for AIDS/HIV and teach basic health principles. I offer birth control assistance.

In one room of the clinic, we have a little shop. We sell dry beans, sugar, rice, manioc flour, complete cream flour, soap bars, and candies. From the small financial gains that we earn, we then can afford to give some basic food to our hungry AIDS clients. Because the number of shoppers from the neighborhood is increasing, we're hoping for a donation to increase the shop assets. We want to help more AIDS patients.

Today I'm expecting ten women or more depending, whether or not there are newcomers. My first patient is a woman, 33 years old. She looks skinny and worried. On her

forehead, I see many papules. She is coughing a lot. I say: "Welcome; please have a seat." She sits down, puts her right forehead under her chin as if she wants to prevent her head from falling off her neck, an indicator that she is not physically or morally strong.

"How are you doing today?" I ask.

A middle-aged woman arrives and speaks briefly, directly: "I'm a widow. I care for my mother who is sick. My daughter lives with me too. I know she has AIDS, but she refuses to go to clinics and she's not taking any medicine. I worry for her.-And I don't know in what way you can help me."

A seventeen year old girl arrives with a swollen, black eye. Somebody had beaten her during the night. She confides: "We're abused by those who want to have sex with us. We don't choose our partners. They force us. If we refuse, we're beaten. Sometimes they don't pay us the 500F [This is less than 50 US cents—DZ] they promised-but instead-a slap."

A sixteen-year old girl, complaining of stomachaches, comes for medicine. Talking between repressed sobs, she explains: "I came down to Bujumbura at the age of eight. I was born in Ngozi, north of Burundi. I couldn't go to school because while I was in first grade, my mother died. We were living, crowded in a refugee camp in the Congo. A woman brought me to this town to help her care for her new baby. I hoped she would pay me, but she didn't give me a penny. I moved from family to family, from place to place. At the age of fourteen, I became pregnant from the houseboy. People advised me to have family planning shots and I accepted. Would you help me get those now? I miss my mother a lot. I don't want to have children to take care of. Myself I am a child. This is the reason I decided to give back my son to his father. I wish you would take me home with you. I'd work for you and you could give me food."

I wished I could help, but my home is already filled with relatives who lost their houses and parents due to the war.

How You Can Help

The Friends Women's Association isn't just for Quaker women in Burundi. We're also trying to help other women as they deal with the wounds of war. We will do the work. But we need your prayers and your financial support. Please listen deeply to these stories, hear these cries for help, and answer. You can send funds for the Friends Womens Association by writing to the African Great Lakes Initiative of the Friends Peace Teams, 3031 Laclede Station Road, St. Louis, MO 63143; or call 314-645-0336 or send an email to davidzarembka@juno.com.