

MOTHER'S DAY

Plight of women suffering from HIV needs to be highlighted

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Islamabad

Fighting with the last stages of HIV virus at a private clinic of capital city, the only concern 30-years old Samina was able to communicate despite severe weakness was that she wanted to raise her four children the way she used to when she was healthy.

"I have never let them work when I am home. I just want them to concentrate on their studies," said Samina, a resident of Jalalpur Jatan, a tehsil, notorious for high number of HIV and Hepatitis C mainly due to quacks and free use of unhygienic tools by doctors and dentists. Besides that, a large population of the area works in foreign countries as labourers. These days, her eldest daughter Rabia, 15, is taking care of her siblings. The youngest of them is only 10-years old.

"I wanted Rabia to become a banker. She is very good at mathematics and took the top honour this year," she said proudly, but the next moment she was crying hard, as if in her heart of hearts she knew that she was not going to live long enough to see her dreams come

true. Though she is unaware of the disease behind the prolonged fever and oral thrush she is experiencing since last three months, doctors believe she caught the virus in one of her visit to the dentist as her husband was found HIV negative despite the fact that he worked abroad for couple of years.

As it happens in other HIV positive cases, her family members have requested doctors not to disclose the disease she is suffering from, as it will be a great social setback for Samina as well as the whole family. "It will be a miracle if she survives," said a doctor on duty who requested 'The News' not to disclose the name of the clinic or the patient. Samina's case is unique in the sense that she caught the virus from dentist instead of a husband who worked in the Middle East.

Doctors at Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences (PIMS) told 'The News' that majority of women catch virus from their husbands. "In around 90 per cent of cases, women catch virus from their husband whereas almost 80 per cent of them are widows of HIV positive men," said PIMS counsellor

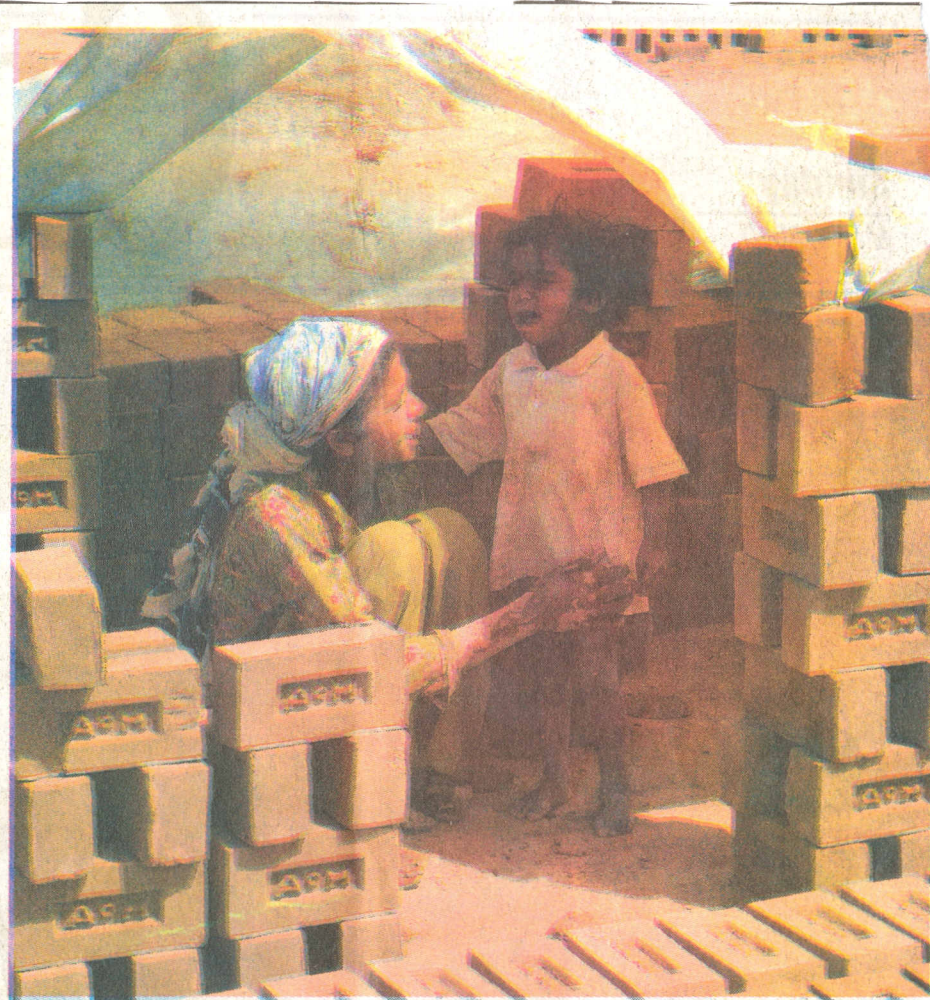
for HIV patients Musarat Jabeen. She was sharing her observations based on her three-year experience. In a recent seminar on 'Locating Masculinities within Gender,' organised by an NGO Rozen, Co-chairman Amal Development Network Imran Rizvi said that gender roles with regard to masculinity are playing very important role in the spread of HIV/AIDS.

He said that 51 per cent of new cases of the fatal disease are of women and children. "More women are catching the disease mainly because they could not demand protected sex with their spouses," he pointed out in the seminar. He said that men are at greater risk of catching the virus because they are more likely to exhibit high-risk sexual behaviour adding that as majority of women are faithful in their marital relationship, they are always the innocent victims catching the virus from their husbands. "Women have less control than their male partners over the use of protective measures such as condoms etc and access to health services," he said Rizvi pointed out that men are more likely than women to engage in substance use, the biggest source of HIV these days.

"Only last month, we received 56 of HIV and among them, 53 caught the infection through intravenous drug use," he said adding that majority of them were unmarried. "They not only become a source of spreading the disease through syringes, but it is also not easy to convince a drug addict for safe sex," he mentioned.

According to the experience of Musarat Jabeen, the biggest challenge she faces with male patients is to take them out of their state of denial. "Men are less likely to seek health care than women, since they are socialised to believe that men do not get sick," she added.

All leads to the increased vulnerability of the women who suffer in silence due to the social stigma attached with the disease. They cannot disclose their illness as it can bring bad name to the family. "I know a 16-years old girl who caught virus from her husband. Her husband died after six months of marriage and now she is detected positive with HIV," said Jabeen. "Only her father knows the reason behind her failing health." As majority of HIV victims are widows, Jabeen said the first reaction of women after knowing that they are HIV



ISLAMABAD: A mother tending to her child during her work at a klin. — Khalid Raja

positive is to keep the news secret as this could destroy the future of her children. "They are so much concerned for their children that we use this tool to make them survive the shock," she said. "The only reason that gives them psychological strength to live is their children." She said that all their questions are related to precautionary measure they could take to save their children. Giving some examples, she said that "they often ask if a mosquito can

transfer virus from their body to the children or can they cook or give bath to their children," she said adding that majority of these fears are based on myths and many problems can be solved if serious efforts are made to end social stigma attached to the disease and the men come out of their out f its state of denial. She said that the HIV patients can even have normal babies if proper medical procedure is followed under the supervision of specialist doctors.

"HIV positive couples have 99 per cent chances of giving birth to a normal child if they take proper medication," she added.

Celebrating mother's day, there is a need to highlight mother's like Samina, who are among the silent sufferers that cannot even come to the society for help and support. We can at least provide them a supporting environment where they can enjoy their motherhood like a normal women. After all it was not their fault.