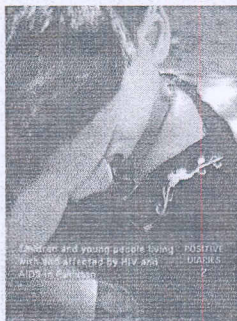


The first step

The second edition of *Positive Diaries* brings together testimonies from real children and young people in Pakistan, both infected and affected by HIV and AIDS.



Excerpted with permission from **Positive Diaries 2, 2008: Unite for children, Unite against AIDS** By the National AIDS Control Programme, UNICEF and UNAIDS (In Urdu and English)

ALMOST 795 times each day a child under 15 years of age dies of AIDS. 1,150 times each day a child under 15 becomes HIV positive. These figures seem very distant from the reality in Pakistan where the prevalence rate of HIV amongst young people is still very low.

We have not seen the faces of young people living with HIV, dying from AIDS. But there are young people in Pakistan today living with HIV and AIDS. And there are young people living in families where their parents are living with HIV.

Those living with HIV have contracted the virus in different ways — no one young person has exactly the same story. Although their stories are unique, there are common underlying factors that we come to recognise as contributing to these young persons' becoming HIV positive: early marriage, lack of a family support system, lack of education. There are also common themes of stigma and discrimination, of families rejecting them, of health care workers afraid to care for them.

All names in the booklet have been changed to protect the young people documented here from the stigma and discrimination that they face on a daily basis.

The National AIDS Control Programme in partnership with UNICEF and UNAIDS considers it critical to bring a greater understanding of the complex socio-cultural factors that contribute to increased vulnerability both to and because of HIV. Understanding the underlying factors will help us develop more effective measures to prevent young people from becoming infected with HIV.

Prevention is still the priority in Pakistan's response to HIV and AIDS. At the same time, as long as there is one child or young person living with HIV or AIDS, we all have a responsibility to ensure that they receive the care and support that they deserve; that any young person deserves to fulfill their lives.

In a 2005 report of Life Skills and HIV Knowledge of Adolescents in 14 districts of Pakistan conducted by the National AIDS Control Programme with the support of UNICEF, only 45 per cent of Pakistani adolescents knew about HIV and AIDS.

Three per cent of all injecting drug users mapped in the second round of the HIV and AIDS Surveillance Project were under the age of 20.

TESTIMONY:
HAMEEDA, MARRIED AT 19 YEARS

I was 19 years old when I got married. I am the only sister of my five brothers.

My husband was in the armed forces. He looked so graceful in the uniform. He was in Somalia for many years on an army assignment sent by Pakistan to fight. I had two children by him, a girl and a boy but both died within one year.

I was married to him for five years but then he committed suicide. He was running a constant fever and had chronic diarrhoea. He got so tired of his illness. He never told me he was HIV positive or had AIDS. It was after his death that I came to know that he had AIDS.

When I was asked to get myself tested, I had no clue about HIV. My test was positive, I was very angry at him for not telling me. He was my own husband. All these years I lived with him and he didn't disclose anything.

He destroyed my life. I experienced a strange feeling of anger and grief combined. I didn't know whether to mourn his death or curse him for deceiving me. Two years I stayed a widow. Then I met Rizwan, my new husband.

He works in an office. He loves me a lot and wanted to marry me. I told him I was HIV positive, but even then he insisted. We've been married for three years and a few months. He is HIV negative.

Your status is the first thing that you should tell. I thought my life had come to an end, but my husband, knowing everything, pulled me through.

My in-laws are also very caring and supportive. My entire family knows about my status. I thought I would be discriminated against, but they proved me wrong. They provide me all the support and care I need. Life and death is God's will. Although I feel weak and aged within the last few years, I want to make the best of it. ■

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