

Combating HIV Transmission in Rwanda

By Sam Nkurunziza

December 2010: It has been a decade now since a joint program to prevent the transmission of HIV from mother to child was introduced at Muhura Health Centre in eastern Rwanda. And the results have been impressive.

At the health center where hundreds of couples turn up every month to receive counseling and antiretroviral, both residents and health workers admit that a significant change has taken place. "When the program started 10 years ago, it was mostly women who were conscious about spreading HIV to their unborn children. Now the trend has changed and men are also concerned," explains Marie Clair Uwimana, a health worker at the clinic. She attributes the change to a family based approach where partners are helped to understand the importance of knowing their HIV status along with other important issues such as breastfeeding, nutrition, immunization and family planning.

Uwimana explains that community health education also helps to create awareness, emphasizing that the more educated parents are, the less likely it is that their children will contract HIV.

Gad Rwamungu, a 50 year old male, is married to 47 year old Jeannette Kibukayire. They are the parents of six children. But unlike his wife and their children, Rwamungu is HIV positive.

He regrets that had it not been his repeated cheating on the wife, he would not have contracted HIV and would be a happily married man. "But when I learned that I was HIV positive after the birth of our last child seven years ago, I agreed with my wife never to engage in unprotected sexual intercourse."



"We have even talked about HIV with the children and there is absolutely no problem. What we have learned at this clinic, all married couples should know about," he continues. "If other couples elsewhere follow suit, future generations will benefit around the world," he adds.

In Rwanda, available statistics show that over 300,000 people live with HIV. Rwanda's Government has taken a very aggressive stance to preventing, caring and treating people living HIV and with the support of UNICEF has been able to model a comprehensive approach to PMTCT in seven health centers around the country.

Gad and Jeannette ©UNICEF/Rwanda/2010/ Nkurunziza