

Case Study: Marie's Story

Marie Joseph was born in 1965 in a dusty village. Marie attended primary school somewhat irregularly. By age 19, she had not yet graduated and decided that it was time to help generate income for her family, which was sinking deeper and deeper into poverty. Hunger was a near-daily occurrence for the Joseph family. Marie began to help her mother, a market woman, by carrying produce to the local market on Friday mornings. It was there that she met a soldier, formerly stationed in the capital city, who began to make overtures to Marie. Although the soldier had a wife and children and was known to have more than one regular partner, Marie did not spurn him. “What would you have me do?” she asked. “I could tell that the old people were uncomfortable, worried—but they did not say ‘no.’ They didn’t tell me to stay away from him. I wish they had, but how could they have known? I looked around and saw how poor we all were. It was a way out, that’s how I saw it.” Within a short time, the soldier fell ill and was diagnosed in the clinic with AIDS.

Marie recalled, “he used to force me to have sex after he became ill and would beat me if I refused. Even when he was diagnosed as HIV-positive, he still wanted sex. He refused to use a condom. He would accuse me of having other men. He said he would cut me up and throw me out.” A year later, he was dead.

Shaken, Marie went to another town, where she found a job as a housekeeper for a middle-class family. She began to see a man, also from her region, who chauffeured a small bus between the Central Plateau and the capital city. After a few months, she discovered that she was pregnant. This displeased both her partner and her employer. Without a boyfriend and without a job, Marie returned to her family. She was unemployed and her mother, father and sister were barely making ends meet. Marie and others in the household often went hungry.

Believing herself to be a burden, Marie finally went to another town, where she had cousins. She worked as a servant in their house until her baby became ill. Since free medical care was readily available only in her area, she returned again to her parents’ home. There was nothing the doctors could do. Suspecting that Marie was infected with HIV, the doctors conducted an HIV test. She was HIV-positive.

Later that year, Marie responded to the advances of a soldier who was stationed in a nearby town. Although people said that he had a wife and two children in a large town near the border and that he had a regular partner there in the region as well, Marie continued to see him. She got pregnant shortly afterwards. Then the beatings started. The beatings happened at least one time each month. “He beat me so hard that I lost my teeth,” Marie said. “The first time he beat me, and I almost lost the baby. I was in the hospital. The second time was only a few days before the baby was born, and my face was covered in bruises. He beat me, and I went to my parents. My father refused to take me to a doctor. He said: ‘What will I say, her boyfriend beats her?’”