



NO TRANSPORT, NO TREATMENT

IN SOUTH AFRICA, TRANSPORT COSTS AND LONG DISTANCES PREVENT RURAL WOMEN LIVING WITH HIV FROM ACCESSING TREATMENT



**I DID TRY AND EXPLAIN AND
THEY SAID TRY AND GET THE
MONEY, BUT I CANNOT GET
THE MONEY**

A woman with AIDS-related illnesses, unable to reach a hospital to start treatment, May 2007

Women in South Africa, particularly black women, are disproportionately affected by poverty, unemployment and the HIV pandemic. Where transport costs prevent rural women living in poverty from having access to health services, their right to the highest attainable standard of health is violated.

The South African government has expanded free access to anti-retroviral therapy (ART) and other essential treatments for people living with HIV. However, these services are still mainly provided through hospitals. Rural women without a secure income find it difficult or impossible to reach these facilities, so cannot begin or maintain their daily treatment under medical supervision.

Many women told Amnesty International that their precarious circumstances caused them great anxiety and seriously jeopardized their health. The words of L.K., a woman living with HIV in rural KwaZulu Natal province, were echoed by many: "I have to go to the clinic once a month [to collect anti-retroviral medicine]. It is R40 return. I have to borrow the money every way I can."

Despite recent efforts to decentralize comprehensive HIV and AIDS treatment, care and support, most women in rural areas still have to rely on distant facilities.

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which South Africa has signed, sets out the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. It also prohibits discrimination, including that based on economic status. The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, which South Africa has ratified, states that every individual has the right to the best attainable state of physical and mental health, without distinction of any kind. The UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa require South Africa to ensure the rights of rural women.



POOR PHYSICAL ACCESS IS TANTAMOUNT TO A DENIAL OF ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE SERVICES

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N.D., a young woman with tuberculosis, a common infection in people living with HIV, had tests, known as CD4 counts, to see if she needed to start treatment for AIDS. In May 2007 she said that the last time she was able to go to the hospital had been in January. “I should have returned in March for a further CD4 count, but I was unable to find the money for transport.” She could not find out her test results or begin ART. Both her parents had died, as had the father of her child. N.D. and one of her sisters were supporting six adults and two children on two child support grants of R400 (then US\$52) per month. The cost of the transport to hospital was R30 (then US\$4).

In April 2008, the South African parliament approved a new Rural Transport Strategy that acknowledged “gender differences in transport needs” and the critical role of transport in improving access to essential services, including health services.

Civil society organizations in South Africa are campaigning for a social assistance grant which recognizes the long-term needs of people living with HIV and other chronic illnesses in circumstances of poverty, to help them maintain access to health services and adhere to treatment.

The government – at national, provincial and municipal levels – must now implement plans that give priority to the needs of rural women living with HIV and AIDS. The authorities should improve the regularity and accessibility of rural transport services and minimize the barriers faced by rural women who need to visit hospitals or clinics regularly. The authorities should explore the possibilities of subsidizing transport costs for people with special health needs, without stigmatizing them or reducing support to other groups.

For more information, please see Amnesty International’s report, *‘I am at the lowest end of all’: Rural women living with HIV face human rights abuses in South Africa*, Index: AFR 53/001/2008, available online.

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