

## I know, so I am not afraid

### Fighting the stigma of AIDS in Gaza

The stigma and discrimination associated with HIV and AIDS represent a significant impediment to prevention efforts. They discourage people at risk from doing voluntary testing, delaying detection and hence, treatment and protection of partners. They also compound the suffering of people living with HIV.

50-year-old Umm Mohammad<sup>1</sup>, a mother of nine children, has been living with the HIV virus for 16 years in the Gaza Strip. She was nursing her baby girl when she found out that she is HIV positive.

"We found out that I got the virus while I was still breastfeeding my youngest. I got it from my husband," she recalls. "The doctors requested that I do some tests and I was shocked when they told me that I have the virus" she added. "I was scared for my baby girl but thank God it was not transmitted to her. I was so relieved".

Um Mohammad spoke at a training workshop targeting journalists organized by [the Global Fund Programme to fight HIV and AIDS \(GFATM\)](#) through the United Nations Development Programme in the occupied Palestinian territory. The training aimed at reducing stigma and conveying accurate messages and facts on HIV and AIDS.

Today, Um Mohammad leads a normal life with her family. A number of doctors are following her case in the Gaza Strip, giving her the necessary treatment. Um Mohammad refuses to give up and is optimistic that she will overcome the disease.

Many people are not aware how HIV is transmitted, Um Mohammad explained. "I know that the Virus is transmitted through unprotected sex, transfusion of contaminated blood or sharing needles between infected drug users"

"I know, so I am not afraid," she asserts. "I am able to share with my children their food and utensils and I kiss them good night like every mother. I do the same with my neighbours and relatives"

Um Mohammad's husband died four months after he was diagnosed with the Virus and she was left to provide for her family. "I became the mother and father of my nine children. I brought them up the best way I can".

According to the Ministry of Health, the cumulative number of patients with HIV or AIDS since 1987 has reached 72 cases in the occupied Palestinian territory. There are 29 cases in the Gaza Strip, eight of whom are still alive and receiving treatment and support through the UNDP Global Fund programme.

The Global Fund to fight HIV and AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (GFATM), which UNDP implements, aims at scaling up prevention, treatment and care services of HIV and AIDS in the occupied Palestinian territory over a five year period to the amount of almost USD 11 million.

The programme includes raising awareness sessions and stigma reduction activities, procuring medical equipment and supplies, improving access to anti-retroviral treatment, and providing psychological support.

"It is time now for our society to treat people living with HIV and AIDS like any person who has the right to live, work, learn and receive treatment when being sick" said Um Mohammad.

### Highlights

- 2153 people in the occupied Palestinian territory received HIV testing and counselling (through programme funds)
- 21 people with advanced HIV are receiving anti-retroviral (ARV) treatment (14 in West Bank and 7 in Gaza) and 20 persons living with HIV are provided psychosocial support
- 22 NGOs/ CSOs provide HIV/AIDS prevention, awareness and support services

<sup>1</sup> All names have been changed to protect the clients' privacy and the photographs used in this story are from UNDP/PAPP archives.

