

Shattered dreams – Sriramulu's story

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Photo: Annelies van Brink

I was born to illiterate parents at Koulepalli village in Anantapur district, India, in 1969 and I am the youngest of five siblings. My parents were agricultural labourers. All my family members, except me, are illiterate. When my father died in 1985 aged 55, the burden of providing for the family fell on my mother's shoulders.

When I was young, I migrated to the nearest city and found a job as a cycle-rickshaw puller, and later as an auto-rickshaw driver. I owned the rickshaw. Unfortunately, in the first half of 1997, my auto rickshaw ran over a boy causing him serious multiple injuries. I sold my rickshaw to pay for the boy's hospitalization expenses. After the incident, I did not want to stay in the city and returned back to my native village.

Back in the village, my family forced me to marry Rajeswari, an illiterate 12-year old girl closely related to my family. At the time of our marriage, I was jobless and had no source of income. However, the parents of the bride and my relatives were hopeful that my skills in driving auto rickshaws would enable me to get a job.

Quarantined

My wife and I spent a pleasant marital life for almost a year. I was totally dependent upon my mother's earnings. When doctors disclosed to me in 1999 that I had tested positive for HIV, I did not even have a faint idea of what it meant. The only thing I knew was that HIV/AIDS was a fatal disease. I had never imagined that I could be infected with HIV.

I did not disclose my HIV status to anyone, not even my pregnant wife. Instead, I told my family and neighbours that I was suffering from acute tuberculosis. About one year later, my relatives found out about my HIV status during a medical check-up in Tirupati government hospital. When I returned to my village, I was quarantined along with my wife and newborn son, in a house

in the outskirts of the village. When the villagers inquired about our health condition, my family told them that doctors at Tirupati hospital had advised them to keep us in isolation so as not to infect people with TB.

Drastic changes

Currently, I am unable to work. At one point, I even had to beg for money so that I could go to Tirupati for treatment. I am now totally dependent on my wife's earnings for everything, including food and medication. My wife

“When I was unable to pay the rent for five months, the landlord sold off all our belongings and threw us out of his house”

earns a paltry sum of Rs 150 (USD 3.40) a week. My in-laws are also poor and unable to provide for my family. They think that I have TB and I am on the verge of dying. They are illiterate and ignorant about HIV/AIDS.

I have no resources. When I was unable to pay the rent for five months, the landlord sold off all our belongings and threw us out of his house. When I requested accommodation from my mother, she gave me one room and then moved to Hyderabad to live with my sister. I visited my sisters to request some kitchen utensils. But I was shocked when I was rudely told not to visit them again as they “consider me to be dead”. They even refused to touch me. It is as if I do not have a family any more. All my family members have rejected me.

I have experienced drastic changes in my life since I contracted HIV. It is a story of, as it were – from grace to grass! After being a high-earning auto-rickshaw driver, I have been reduced to a mere beggar. ■

This case study was compiled by CWS (Centre for World Solidarity), India (see the article on the next page).

