

MOTHER TO CHILD

by Jane Lipman
40 minutes, South Africa

The prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV – the statistics, the people – come vividly to life in this astounding documentary, which follows the lives of two pregnant and HIV-positive women lucky enough to be on a drug trial at the Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital in Soweto. The film charts the lives of Pinkie and Patience as they approach the delivery of their babies. It reveals their exceptions, hopes, and inevitable fears concerning not only the health of their babies, but the trauma around the disclosure of their status to their families and partners as well.

Synopsis:

The prevention of mother to child transmission of HIV - the statistics, the facts, the people — come vividly to life in this astounding documentary, which follows the lives of two pregnant and HIV-positive women lucky enough to be on a drug trial at the Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital in Soweto.

The facts are terrifying. The conditions in maternity wards throughout South Africa are now at a crisis point. One out of every 3 babies born is HIV-positive. Seven thousand babies are dying as a result of the virus every month. The number of babies born positive can be cut in half if their mothers are given nevirapine, but at present the drug is available only in a limited number of centres across the country.

The film charts the lives of Kholiwe (Patience) and Ntombekaya (Pinkie), who have made friends at the clinic's support group for HIV-positive mothers, as they approach the delivery of their babies. It is about their exceptions, hope, and inevitable fears concerning not only the health of their babies but also the trauma around the disclosure of their status to their families and partners. It is also about the unrelenting commitment of the people at the HIV perinatal clinic who are trying to make a difference.

As the film starts Patience is getting ready for one of her last visits to the Chris Hani clinic before the birth of her second child by caesarian section. She tells us how devastated she was when she found out only a few months ago that she was HIV+ and how she wanted to die.

At the Chris Hani Clinic, women are arriving at the hospital for the support group and clinic for HIV+ mothers. We meet Florence Ngubeni, a straight-shooting, charismatic counsellor, who because of her own HIV status, and the fact that she lost her own baby, has a huge impact on these women's lives. Nevirapine was not available when she gave birth. We listen to her giving a pep talk and medical advice. Patience stands up and tells the group how she

disclosed her status to her family and boyfriend. Fortunately for her, they have been incredibly supportive.

Sitting near Patience is Pinkie, who has not disclosed her HIV-positive status to her boyfriend or family. She wants to, but is worried about their reactions.

The next main player is Doctor Boris Jikov. He tells us about nevirapine, how it works, and the clinical trials underway at the Chris Hani Clinic. Back at the support group Florence reminds the women of the importance of not breast feeding as this will wipe out all the benefits of nevirapine, and increase the odds that the baby will be positive.

Once the characters have been established, we follow the drama of the births and subsequent post-natal care of Patience's son and Pinkie's daughter. Facts regarding HIV transmission are provided as the two patients are kept informed every step of the way.

Scenes of the two women and the people close to them, shot in extreme and unblinking close up, reveal the enormous anxieties, tensions and courage of everyone involved. We are spared very little. Pinkie's disclosure to her family and boyfriend is particularly moving. The unconditional support of Patience's sisters and friends and the admiration of her husband for her strength are powerful indictments of a society in denial. It becomes obvious how both the support of loved ones and the vigilant care of the clinic's staff are so crucial to the two women's well-being. They both know, for the sake of their babies, they need hope in order to stay strong.

The film produces an incredible sense of empathy in the viewer - one's own hopes and fears for the safety of the babies builds to an almost unbearable point as first Patience, and then Pinkie, give birth. We are as anxious as they are for the results of their six-week blood tests.

It is with enormous relief that we learn both their babies have tested negative. But, in the face of governmental intransigence with regard to the availability of HIV drugs and little space in our culture for speaking out, can we afford the luxury of catharsis? This incredibly powerful film cannot fail to change attitudes when viewed both by policy-makers and the public alike.

Director s Biography:

Jane Lipman returned from exile in 1997, after nine years with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation as a respected news and current affairs producer and director. Her award winning films on Bosnia and South Africa won Director s Awards at Monte Carlo s Golden Nymph News and Current Affairs Awards at the Columbus Ohio Video and TV Awards. Since her return, she has directed and produced numerous documentaries for the SABC and etv locally, including the 48-minute drama documentary ***The Great Escape*** for SABC1 (November 1998). Jane continues to contribute to the Canadian Broadcasting Corporations News and Current Affairs programming. She runs her production company, ***Current Affairs Films***, with her partner, Beata Lipman. They are currently in pre-production on a feature film, films for CBC, and documentaries/dramas to be shown in Europe and South Africa.

Director s Comments:

Mother to Child is the emotional journey/real life drama of two HIV-positive pregnant women who become friends at the support group at the HIV perinatal support group at Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital Soweto, and their own dramatic journeys, which take unpredictable turns, through the births of their babies, HIV testing of their babies, disclosure of their HIV status to family and partner (in one case) and the confrontation of their own realities and their status, in a relatively hostile environment.

It was a journey for me, the director, as well, through the ups and downs of Pinkie and Patience s lives for two months and the pain of their situations. Although I will never fully experience the trauma they know and expect, we have experienced much together in the last two months.

We hope that this film will explain the tragedy that has been and will continue to unfold in South Africa, for the majority of HIV-positive pregnant women that have no access to drug treatment. We hope it will bring attention to the crisis we are facing in South Africa, where only 10 % of all HIV-positive pregnant women have access to drug treatment and at least 7000 babies are dying every month.

We are facing a pandemic, a disaster of horrifying proportions we hope in a very small way to try to make many aware of the pain and deprivation that HIV-positive women in South Africa face, and to try to make a difference, soon.

It was a very important film for me, and the STEPS project is very courageous.

Credits

Production Company
Director
Producer
Cinematographer

Sound
Editor
Music
Professional Support

Current Affairs Films
Jane Thandi Lipman
Beata Lipman
David Forbes
Brian Green
Mike Zidel
Mike Ntshobodi
Avril Beukes, SAGE
Philip Miller
Jennifer Fox
Catherine Olsen