

**By Anjulika Thingnam Samom**

**General secretary of the Manipur Network of Positive People Sorokhaibam Thoibi Devi has individually approached and coaxed 230 HIV–positive women in Thoubal town to declare their positive status, join the network, and learn to re–live their lives**



**Sorokhaibam Ongbi Oinam Ningol Thoibi Devi or Thoini** Sorokhaibam Thoibi Devi, or Thoibi as she is called, understands the anguish of Rani, 36, an AIDS widow who, until a short while ago, struggled to earn a living for herself and her three young children by selling pakoras (fried savouries) by the roadside.

Thoibi, 36, is an AIDS widow too. With two young children and no family to call her own, she has been a victim of the stigma and discrimination that comes with the illness. But since 2005, she has been trying to better the lives of others like her, serving as general secretary of the Manipur Network of Positive People (MNP+) at the Thoubal district unit.

Thoibi's life as an AIDS widow has been traumatic, to say the least. This is her tale.

“When I learnt that my husband, Ibosana, was hooked on drugs I had an argument with him. Subsequently, our quarrels would become violent,” recalls Thoibi, who, as a young bride worked as a weaver and farm labourer to support her husband and her family. Thoibi and Ibosana were married when they were just 19.

Due to the frequent heated arguments, their marriage went through a rough patch and Thoibi chose to return to her maternal home. But she was soon back, as her husband became ill and needed care. “We lived in a room in Imphal and rented out cycle–rickshaws for a living. For a while we were happy. But then he had a relapse... it was around the time I was expecting my second child,” she recalls.

The couple decided to return to Wangjing, in Thoubal district, only to discover that Thoibi's brother–in–law had usurped their land and house. Intervention from the local community ensured that the couple was able to build a new house on the land.

Unfortunately, despite wanting to make a fresh start, Thoibi's troubles continued to dog her.

Ibosana was plastering the bamboo walls of their new home with straw and mud when he fell seriously ill.

A visit to the voluntary counselling and testing centre at RIMS Hospital in Imphal confirmed Ibosana's HIV-positive status. Ibosana concealed his status from Thoibi and continued to have unprotected sex with his wife, beating her up if she declined. "I refused one night... he beat me so badly that my kneecap fractured. Fed up with life, I tried to hang myself but I couldn't even stand up due to the pain in my leg," she says.

In the midst of the domestic crisis, her in-laws decided to boycott the couple. With no support, Thoibi was left to care for the ailing Ibosana and make ends meet.

The familial – even societal – discrimination lasted much after her husband's death.

Ibosana was just 26 when he died. "I was so traumatised by the stigma that accompanied my husband's death (in April 1998) that I couldn't bring myself to step out of my own house... and within its four walls I was losing my mind and my strength," says Thoibi.

"One day, I was cooking in the kitchen with my two young daughters studying beside me. Suddenly, one of Ibosana's cousins barged in and dragged me out by the hair, abusing me – all because someone had mentioned my name in a family argument. I was innocent, yet the degree of suppression I had endured sapped me of the courage to defend myself."

Thoibi tried to kill herself once again but her daughter's cries alerted everyone and she was saved. She was then accused of trying to defame the family by trying to take her own life. But it wasn't as if they were helping her to live either. "I did manual labour for about three years after my husband's death, to feed my family. On one side of my house was Ibosana's younger brother, and on the other side was his cousin's house. Both families were on bad terms with each other. They didn't speak to me either," she says.

In 2001, three years after her husband's death, Thoibi took the test once again and was declared HIV-positive. On the advice of counsellors at the testing centre she began interacting with the MNP+ head office in the Yaiskul area of Imphal. Meeting other women like herself helped Thoibi come to terms with her situation.

But the discrimination and accusations continued, with her in-laws going out of their way to malign her. "When I went for Indian Network for People Living with HIV/AIDS (INP+) programmes, my husband's relatives accused me of going to search for a 'Son', meaning that I was prostituting myself. I thought disclosing my status would make things better. But things only got worse. They banned me from taking water from the family pond, stopped me from going through their courtyard, and even threw empty medicine bottles at me. They said I intended to spread my sickness to their children," she says.

Undeterred, Thoibi began to organise awareness programmes in Thoubal, encouraging HIV-positive women to reveal their status.

Thoubal, with a total land area of 514 sq km and a population of 41,149 (2001 census), ranks second to Imphal (Imphal east and Imphal west districts) in the HIV–positive sero–surveillance tally, with 2,309 cases, according to the February 2008 epidemiological analysis report of the Manipur State AIDS Control Society (MSACS). The total number of HIV–positive people in Manipur stands at 28,917.

Largely a result of Thoibi's mobilisation, MNP+ Thoubal now has 230 women among its total of 400 members. Thoibi has individually approached and coaxed AIDS widows to declare their HIV status, join the network, and learn to re–live their lives. Exemplifying the impact of Thoibi's efforts is Rani, who is now an executive board member of MNP+ Thoubal and an outreach worker for the Access to Care and Treatment (ACT) project by the NGO ActionAid. It was on Thoibi's insistence that Rani disclosed her status and joined the network. When she was selling pakoras, Rani's daily earnings were around Rs 100–200. Now she draws a monthly income of Rs 8,000–10,000. "Today my eldest daughter has completed high school. That, for me, is achievement enough," says Rani proudly.

"The fact that I have been able to help other women like me is what makes me happiest," says Thoibi, who is also joint secretary and state women coordinator, Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA), Manipur. The network has representatives from nine districts in the Manipur and Sugnu areas.

Thoibi has also helped many women become self–reliant. As general secretary of MNP+ Thoubal she runs income–generation programmes – in food preservation, weaving, embroidery and traditional mat weaving – for HIV affected and infected women. Most women used to work in self–help groups, but as they find the fare to and from the unit an additional burden they are now encouraged to work from home.

Thoibi also contested the panchayat elections last year but lost by a minuscule margin of 14 votes. She says: "Nothing pleases me more than the fact that I am helping others realise that there is life after HIV/AIDS."

**Women's Feature Service, July 2008**

**Source:** [infochangeindia.org](http://infochangeindia.org)