



**International Women's Day:
Shedding Light on Obstetric Violence Against Women Living with HIV
08 March 2025**

On International Women's Day, as we celebrate the achievements of women worldwide, we must also confront the harsh realities many still face, particularly in healthcare. One such reality is obstetric violence, a deeply troubling yet often overlooked form of institutional violence that occurs during pregnancy, childbirth, and the postpartum period. This issue is especially severe for women living with HIV, who not only contend with stigma but also face discrimination and neglect at the very hands of those meant to care for them.

Obstetric violence manifests in various ways: physical, psychological, verbal, and emotional abuse, as well as neglect and humiliation. It restricts women's access to essential healthcare services, undermines their rights and dignity, and exacerbates their mental and general health. Women living with HIV frequently encounter biased attitudes from medical staff, ranging from derogatory language and denial of care to coercion into procedures, including such as sterilisation, often without their informed consent.

Medical professionals sometimes disregard clinical guidelines concerning breastfeeding and delivery methods, depriving women of the right to make informed choices about their bodies and their children's health. Many women are subjected to intimidation, shaming, and undue pressure over supposed risks of HIV transmission, leaving them traumatised and disempowered. Instead of receiving the support they need, they face barriers that could be removed through high-quality, respectful care.

Medical professionals sometimes disregard clinical guidelines concerning breastfeeding and delivery methods, depriving women of the right to make informed choices about their bodies and their children's health. Many women are subjected to intimidation, shaming, and undue pressure over supposed risks of HIV transmission, leaving them traumatised and disempowered. Instead of receiving the support they need, they face barriers that could be removed through high-quality, respectful care.

[A community-led study](#) conducted by the Eurasian Women's Network on AIDS shed light on the alarming scale of this issue across 13 countries in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. The study, which gathered insights from 365 respondents, revealed widespread violations of women's rights in obstetric care:



Psychological violence: 63% of respondents reported experiencing psychological abuse, including humiliation (33%), being ignored or isolated (21%), intimidation (33%), and pressure to undergo medical procedures without consent (14%).



Breach of confidentiality: 47% of women had their HIV status disclosed without consent, either to other healthcare workers (36%) or family members (19%).



Denial of medical services: 46% of respondents were denied necessary medical services, including pain relief (19%), breastfeeding support (15%), and abortion services (12%).

 **Physical violence:** 39% of women experienced physical abuse, such as ill-treatment (27%), being forced into a particular birthing position (9%), or pushing the foetus out (7%).

 **Unconsented medical procedures:** 26% of women underwent medical interventions without their consent, including caesarean sections (10%), amniotomy (5%), and surgical sterilisation (2%).

These figures paint a picture of systemic failures within obstetric care that disproportionately affect women living with HIV. As we mark International Women's Day, it is crucial to recognise that gender equality cannot be achieved without addressing these injustices.

Our call for change is clear: we must ensure that all women, regardless of their HIV status, receive dignified, evidence-based, and compassionate healthcare. This requires systemic reforms, better training for healthcare professionals, and stronger policies to protect women's rights. Obstetric violence has no place in a just and equitable society. Only by confronting these violations and demanding accountability can we create a healthcare system that truly serves and respects all women.

