Turning the tide

One organization, hundreds of women and countless lives saved from HIV/AIDS.

By Alfred Thutloa
When British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan made his historic speech to the parliament of South Africa in 1960, his famous words “[T]he wind of change is blowing through this continent. Whether we like it or not...” his words marked a watershed in the country’s political landscape, on May 31 1961 the new South African Republic was established. Freed from the shackles of colonialism, the Republic entered a new dawn, but catapulted into an era shrouded by the onslaught of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The first antenatal survey, conducted in the 1990s, indicates that 0.8 per cent of pregnant women tested HIV-positive in South Africa. British dominions died, the war of national self-determination was won, but the battle against HIV/AIDS ensued. Initially discovered among males who have sex with males (MSM), particularly in the gay community, by 1985 it was evident that other sectors of society were affected as well. With an HIV/AIDS prevalence of 18.8 per cent in 2004 to 6.1 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa and one per cent globally, South Africa is one of the world’s countries hardest hit by HIV/AIDS. Women account for more than half (58 per cent) of adults living with HIV/AIDS. Over 240,000 children are estimated to be living with HIV/AIDS, without information and support about 40 percent of HIV-positive pregnant women will transmit the virus to their newborns, and each year over half-a-million of these babies will die from HIV/AIDS-related illnesses.

Making a difference, one mother at a time
Faced with such alarming statistics, the country has seen public-private partnerships, NGOs and interest groups join forces against HIV/AIDS. One organization that has come to the forefront as a major player in the fight is mothers2mothers (m2m). An education and psycho-social support programme for HIV-positive pregnant women and new mothers living with HIV/AIDS, m2m was established in 2001 to meet the needs of new and pregnant mothers seeking help at healthcare facilities. Designed to empower mothers and reduce the number of babies born with HIV, m2m trains mothers living with HIV on prevention of mother-to-child transmission (PMTCT) to counsel others. These mothers are known as mentors. Almost all the mothers that go through the programme give birth to HIV-negative babies.

Women of steel
Stigma remains the Achilles heel in the struggle against the virus, and is one of the main issues tackled by mothers2mothers. m2m mentors gain knowledge and strength through the programme, the same women who on a daily basis summon the courage to share their experiences of living with HIV/AIDS, to educate and support newly diagnosed mothers as they take advantage of life-sustaining PMTCT treatment and care services that will save generations of children from the scourge of HIV/AIDS.

“I put my heart into my work at mothers2mothers because I realised that if I can offer support to one person, I would be making a difference in the lives of many.” Former Client now Staff Member of m2m
M2m mentors work alongside healthcare practitioners in healthcare facilities with existing PMTCT infrastructure, supporting the already overwhelmed healthcare systems across central, southern and eastern Africa. M2m offers a necessary new tier of skilled health care professionals to the facilities it works in.

Last Word
South Africa has been battered by the AIDS epidemic. By late 2007, more than five million people were living with HIV, and almost 1,000 AIDS deaths occur every day. It is the work done by m2m that continues to make a remarkable difference in the lives of those infected and affected throughout sub-Saharan Africa.

I see mothers with eyes full of hope, trusting that life can be better. “My child is HIV negative, and I think I would not be alive without mothers2mothers.” (m2m client).

M2m operates in over 340 sites, where mentors reach more than 80,000 HIV-positive women across South Africa, Lesotho, Kenya, Zambia, Swaziland, Malawi, and Rwanda.

The work done by m2m and the difference the organization has made right at the grass grassroots level is embodied in the words of one woman: “I stepped into a room filled with HIV-positive women... I was expecting to see sick people, not happy vibrant women. I thought HIV/AIDS was the end of the world, but it is not at all,” says a client and mother of m2m.

Tell me more: For further information on mothers2mothers call 021 466 9160, or e-mail: info@m2m.org, website: www.m2m.org

What you didn’t know about mothers2mothers
- Almost all babies born to mothers who have been through m2m are HIV-negative
- M2m is helping to create a generation of HIV-negative children
- We reach over 80,000 women across sub-Saharan Africa
- M2m supports maternal health, baby care (infant check-ups), TB treatment, family planning and reproductive health services
- M2m empowers mothers to adhere to medical treatment, stay healthy, and look after their children
- Mentors are regarded as professional healthcare workers and are therefore paid accordingly