

Analysis by Miriam Gathigah

AN African proverb says that every woman who gives birth has one foot on her grave.

Sadly, this is still true today, especially within the context of the AIDS epidemic.

In spite of the huge advances in the prevention of mother to child transmission of HIV (PMTCT) in Africa, experts are concerned that these have not matched other pillars needed to eliminate maternal mortality caused by HIV and AIDS.

Preventing unintended pregnancies among women living HIV, as well as providing contraceptives for women who need them are some of the missing pillars. Another is making motherhood safer for all women.

Pregnant women with HIV die at much higher rates than women without HIV, Mary Pat Kieffer, senior director at Elizabeth Glaser Paediatric AIDS Foundation in Malawi, told IPS.

The risk of pregnancy-related death is six to eight times higher for HIV positive women than their HIV negative counterparts.

Studies have shown that HIV increases maternal mortality directly from the progression of the HIV disease itself, and indirectly through higher rates of sepsis, anaemia and other pregnancy-

related conditions.

This is bad news at a big scale. In South Africa alone, up to 310,000 HIV positive women gave birth in 2012, and 110,000 in Mozambique, says the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS).

While all HIV positive women, whether on antiretroviral therapy (ART) or not, are more vulnerable to sepsis and anaemia because of their compromised immune system, Kieffer says that ART does boost the immune system that protects women from infections.

Another problem is that women become infected with HIV during pregnancy at higher rates compared to women who are not pregnant, alerts Kieffer.

Experts attribute this to biological changes in the woman's reproductive tract, including the increased blood volume and hormonal changes.

In southern African countries, "as many as five percent of pregnant women who tested HIV negative during their second trimester of pregnancy become infected with HIV later in pregnancy or during breastfeeding," Kieffer told IPS.

Rethinking PMTCT

While ART for prevention of mother to child transmission of HIV is key to reducing maternal mortality, "fighting HIV is about more than pushing ARVs into

