

Voices of courage in throes of death

HT Correspondent

Kolkata, August 31

THEY HAVE been rejected by their families, left alone by friends or forced to quit their jobs by the bosses. And, all because they are HIV positive. The numerous awareness campaigns notwithstanding, AIDS patients are today fighting a double battle — one against the killer disease and the other against the mindset of the society.

At the Press Club on Wednesday, there were a host of people infected with the killer virus, who had stories to tell — stories of humiliation and rejection. Take Farzana Begum, for instance. Four years ago, she married a man, completely unaware that he had been infected with the HIV virus. She got the virus from him. After her husband died, her in-laws threw her out of the house.

"I came to know that my husband was HIV positive when his visa to Dubai was rejected after blood test at the UAE embassy in Mumbai. Within a few days, my husband was admitted to SSKM. My in-laws threw me out after my husband's death," she said.

Farzana is lucky. Her parents have stood by her for the past four years. But others like her are not. Some have been left alone by their families and denied treatment even at govern-



HT PHOTO

BNPL members Jiban Kumar Brahma and Madhuri Adhikari at the rally.

ment-run state hospitals. "We have faced humiliation and rejection at every step. So, we have decided to speak out. We know that after seeing us on television or going through our stories in print, some of our friends may lose their jobs or may be thrown out of their homes. But it is better to speak out," said Tarit Chakraborty, president of Bengal



Network For People Living with HIV and AIDS (BNPL).

A huge amount of money is being spent in campaigns across the country but the 2397 HIV infected and AIDS patients in the country are dying in neglect, without proper treatment, said Chakraborty, whose wife and son left him after he was infected with the virus.

"The government's assistance doesn't even reach 20 per cent of the people fighting the disease. In Kolkata, only the School of Tropical Medicine and Calcutta Medical College have facilities for treating AIDS patients. HIV positive patients from across the state have to travel to Kolkata every month for their tests," said Nisha Ray, BNPL secretary.

Nisha and her husband are HIV positive but their son is normal. A city school, however, denied admission to the boy after the authorities came to know that his parents were HIV positive. "Government agencies and NGOs regularly hold road and talk shows but nothing much has come out of them. We are not getting any financial assistance. The mindset of the people hurts us all the more. We want to live with dignity. Help us," Nisha said.

BNPL, with a membership of 2100, has tied up with the Sukriti Foundation to voice its problems on screen. It has also formed a media cell to ensure that the government and private benefits reach the target. "The first case of HIV/AIDS was reported in India in 1986. Today, according to National AIDS Control Organisation, there are 2397 people infected with HIV positive virus. The alarming statistics is 40 per cent of the HIV infected in this state is 20-30 age-group," said Tarit.