

A mannequin is shown from the neck down, wearing a dress that is entirely composed of numerous colorful condoms. The condoms are arranged in a dense, overlapping pattern, creating a vibrant, multi-colored fabric. The colors include shades of red, orange, yellow, and pink. The mannequin is positioned against a dark, textured background.

our bodies

focus on
sexual and
reproductive
health

talk

I am Silvia. I was born in Rome, 37 years ago. I traveled a lot during my 20's, especially around West Africa, after getting a BA in African Arts and Languages in London. I was involved in writing documentaries on African performing arts and music. I could describe my 20's as Sex, Drugs and Afro-beat! However, since my diagnosis in 1997, I had to re-evaluate my life. Calm down. Settle down. Learn to look after myself. I came back to London to study for a postgraduate degree, and started coming to PW, first as a service user, then as volunteer. I am now working full-time in the Direct Services Team, as well as still trying to finish my master's degree.

Could you tell me a little bit about your thoughts on having a child?

When I was a child, I always thought I would have many children. I would ask my mum how I could fit them all inside my belly. But, maybe because my parents were divorced, I always thought I wanted a solid family for my child. My relationships with men have been always a roller coaster and I never had a boyfriend I felt I could share the responsibility of having children with.

In terms of choosing to not have a child, could you tell me about how you came to make this decision? What factors affected your decision?


After being diagnosed with HIV it took me a long time to come to terms with it. It only happened after meeting other women in the same situation here at PW. During the emotional storm having a child went at the bottom of my list. However, after seven years living with HIV and Hepatitis C I feel that my energy levels are going from low to lower. When I see some children in pushchairs sometimes I feel like kidnapping them. But, at the same time I think I would not be able to cope looking after a child. I am already always tired! Moreover, because my parents and my boyfriend's parents have all passed away, I wouldn't have any familiar support.

It would be hard even for a healthy woman! And, maybe because I am Italian I think that it is extremely important to have a large family around you.

How do you think working in such a family-centred environment has made you feel about your decision?

I think that it is great to work with women who have children, because I can enjoy a relationship with a child even if it is not my own. I love peeping into the crèche... Last year a woman I was supporting very closely had a child and I went to see her in hospital a few days after the baby was borne. I was so happy holding this little creature in my hands and thinking that, by supporting her mum, I had helped her to be born HIV free. This service user keeps sending me pictures of the baby growing up and I really treasure them.

Why do you think it is so hard to talk about choosing not to have a child?

I feel I won't leave anybody to remember me in the next generation ... and I will not experience the special love and intimacy of motherhood. Things may still change, but being 37 and living with two life threatening viruses makes me think that I will have to leave a mark into this world in some other way ... 





Let's have a baby

One lazy Sunday morning about a year ago my girlfriend of ten years turned to me and said "lets have a baby". Needless to say, I was shocked, surprised, speechless and a little confused (not sure why as spontaneity has always been her foreplay, I mean forte).

So when I was next at my clinic, I spoke to the nurse who happened to be about seven months pregnant – coincidence or conspiracy I wasn't sure but was going ahead with the questions anyhow. As a HIV lesbian wanting to have children the medical options or care would be the same as for a heterosexual woman. The way in which you choose to get pregnant will alter. With the help of a good gynaecologist and HIV doctor, you can reduce the risks of passing on the virus. Of course the safest option would have been for my girlfriend who is negative to have had the baby. But she wanted me to have the child as she wanted to have a part of me if something were to happen to me. There were other factors, such as financial and practical reasons for me being the one to bear the child.

After the initial excitement of it all, we had to sit down and think of the questions it entails. How would I get pregnant? With donor insemination, you could choose somebody you knew and obviously it would be better if they were HIV negative. Would we want that person to have any responsibility of bringing up our child, or would we want just the two of us to bring it up? If we wanted the father to, how would he feel about me being HIV positive?

There are, of course, many imaginative ways to inseminate oneself, and there are clinics that you can approach to have sperm donated. I have a friend who went through the NHS, they did not ask her if she was positive nor did they ask her to have an HIV test. I would want to tell them that I was but I do not know what their policy is on the subject. There are some private clinics that you can approach, one that I phoned up said they had no fixed policy but that they would look at my case as a whole (with a letter from my doctor listing my t-cell count and viral load) and discuss it with each other before a decision was made. Private clinics are very expensive. Then there is the legal question of guardianship if something had to happen to me ... Other issues came up as well, such as whether I stay on combination therapy while being pregnant?

Then earlier this year I got very ill and had to make the choice of going on combination therapy which I had fought against for so long. I am now after a few months, starting to feel like I am recovering and regaining my strength. So while we are still finding the answers to our questions our baby is on hold. I am still young enough to wait and who knows what tomorrow will bring. **PW**