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# Women of Transgender Experience Living with HIV

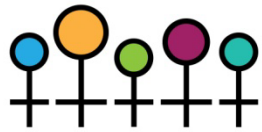
*Last updated: November 6, 2023*

*Together, we can change the course of the HIV epidemic...one woman at a time.*

#onewomanatatime

[www.thewellproject.org](http://www.thewellproject.org)

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# Overview

- **Transgender:** A term for people whose gender identity is different from what is typically associated with their assigned sex at birth
- **Trans woman:** A term for a transgender individual who currently identifies as a woman
- **Gender identity:** An individual's internal sense of being male, female, or something else; because gender identity is *internal*, it is not necessarily visible to others



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# Our Lives Tell Stories of Broken Systems

*"I live in the basement: the lowest floor of the social systems we have here in America. ... I am a transgender woman of color, and my lot in life has been to continue striving towards access above the basement of this country ...*

*"[Being diagnosed with HIV] did matter to my psyche, it mattered to my pride, and it mattered to my future. Most importantly, it mattered to my resolve: to help my sisters get their minds out of the figurative basement, and to see their worth. The worth of their bodies. The worth of their femininity. The worth of their color. Their worth. My worth."*

~ Aryah Lester, "I Live in the Basement" (From *A Girl Like Me*)



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# Our Lives Tell Stories of Broken Systems

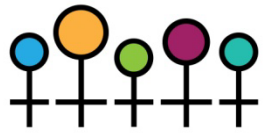
*“[T]he impact of HIV on the transgender community cannot simply be addressed by programs that work to affect individual behaviors; we must address the systemic barriers our community members face ... Our communities need substantive and dramatic change in the hearts and minds of people writing and enforcing public health policy, providing health care, and making hiring decisions.”*

~ Positively Trans Needs Assessment Survey Report

# Bearing a Huge Burden



Across the globe, women of transgender experience (transgender/trans women) are affected by HIV to a **much greater degree than other groups**



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# Living with HIV

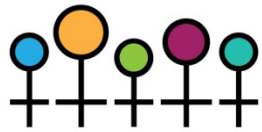
- Worldwide, rate of HIV among trans women is 13 times higher than in general adult population
- In US, 4 in 10 trans women are living with HIV
- People of color – both trans- and cisgender – more likely to live with HIV than white people



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# Not Being Seen or Served

- Despite these numbers, trans women historically have not been well addressed in HIV efforts
- They are often not even 'seen' (or counted) because they are combined with groups like men who have sex with men
- Trans women may choose not to identify as trans when seeking services due to past negative experiences and/or anticipated stigma and discrimination
- Data systems and care providers need to ask the right questions about sex assigned at birth/gender identity in order to count trans women appropriately



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# The Good News

Global changes are slowly being made:

- Organizations becoming more aware of how ill-served trans people have been in global HIV response
- WHO guideline on HIV prevention and care includes recommendations for trans people
- Policy encouraging decriminalization of nonconforming gender identities
- Impact of WHO policy, especially in separating trans women from men who have sex with men





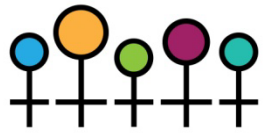
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# Issues Common to Trans Women

Many intersecting issues can negatively affect the health outcomes of trans women living with HIV:

*“Transgender and gender non-conforming people face injustice at every turn: in childhood homes, in school systems that promise to shelter and educate, in harsh and exclusionary workplaces, at the grocery store, the hotel front desk, in doctors' offices and emergency rooms, before judges and at the hands of landlords, police officers, healthcare workers and other service providers.”*

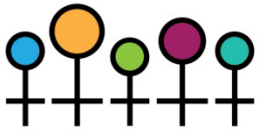
~ National Center for Transgender Equality



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# Stigma and Discrimination

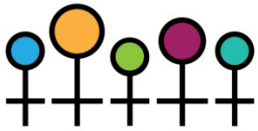
- Keep people from:
  - Getting tested for HIV, linked to care, or having access to care
  - Staying in care
  - Getting HIV drugs, and/or taking them correctly (adherence)
- National Transgender Discrimination Survey: 2015 survey of more than 27,000 US transgender women
  - Almost 1 in 10: physically attacked in the past year
  - Almost half: verbally harassed in the past year
  - Trans women of color bear heaviest burden
    - Due to combined effect of anti-transgender bias and structural racism



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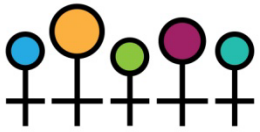
# Stigma and Discrimination Can Be Traumatic

- Trauma can lead to lasting negative effects on a person's functioning in the world – physically, mentally, emotionally, socially, and/or spiritually
- Negative feelings from experiences of stigma and discrimination can lead to low self-esteem, social isolation, depression, and even thoughts or acts of suicide
- 40% of National Center for Transgender Equality survey participants had attempted suicide



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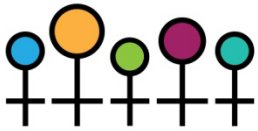
- *If you are thinking of hurting yourself or committing suicide, please tell someone immediately. In the US, you can call or text 988, or call 1-800-SUICIDE (1-800-784-2433) or 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255). To find a suicide hotline near you, try <http://www.suicide.org/suicide-hotlines.html>; this website lists US hotlines by state as well as hotlines by country (click on the "International Hotlines" link at the top of the main page).*



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# Violence

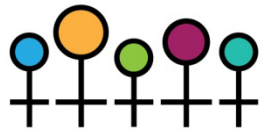
- Transgender people worldwide face extraordinary levels of physical and sexual violence
- Violence, like stigma and discrimination, can result in trauma and have lasting negative effects on a person's ability to function and remain healthy



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- Important: if you are feeling threatened right now:
  - National Domestic Violence hotline at 800-799-SAFE
  - Text START to 88788
  - Call 911 if that is a safe option
  - Chat with counselor at [www.thehotline.org](http://www.thehotline.org)
- Trans Lifeline (US, 877-565-8860; Canada, 877-330-6366)
- Search for a safe space, shelters and services:
  - [Domestic Shelters](#)
  - [SAFE \(Stop Abuse for Everyone\)](#)

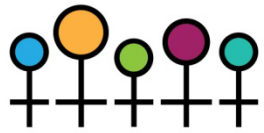
**Remember: If someone threatens you, it is NOT your fault**



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# Socioeconomic Realities

- Negative employment experiences
  - Job loss due to bias about their gender identity
  - Many hide or delay their transition or quit their job to avoid mistreatment
  - They experience 3x the unemployment rate of general population (NCTE survey 2015)
- Negative outcomes of unemployment and poverty
  - Homelessness
  - Drug work to survive, cope with stress
  - Sex work



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# Socioeconomic Realities

*"People whom I thought loved me and were truly my friends have repeatedly mis-gendered\* me at my job, jeopardizing my livelihood. Arkansas is a state with no legal protections for transgender people in employment. ... Losing my job would put me in a position of possibly losing my apartment and having to do what is necessary in order to survive."*

~ Tiommi Jenae Lockett, "I Could Be Broken, but I'm Not Defeated"  
(From *A Girl Like Me*)

\* *Mis-gendered*: person is referred to by a gender with which they do not identify (Ex.: someone assigned male at birth whose current gender identity is female is referred to as "he" after letting people know that their pronoun is "she")





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# Impact of Lack of Social Support

- **Accepting response from a trans woman's family can protect against many of these injustices**
- Rejection by family can make things worse
- Social support from friends and family found to help people living with HIV avoid or cope with depression
- Social support (or lack thereof) even more important for trans women living with HIV
- May be helpful to connect with others who share your situation



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# Legal Barriers and Public Accommodations

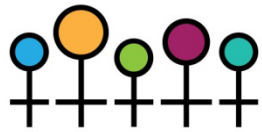
- Disrespect and denial of service during daily lives
- Half of survey respondents who interacted with police reported mistreatment
  - May avoid seeking help when faced with violence
- Trouble getting/updating official documents
- Lack of documents may affect job applications, access to medical care, travel, etc.
- State prohibitions against gender-affirming care
  - Human Rights Campaign, ACLU, Lambda Legal fight back
  - To get involved: check list at [them](#) for local organizations



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# Health Issues

- Compared to cisgender people, transgender people are less likely to:
  - Be on HIV treatment
  - Be adherent when on treatment
  - Have positive experiences with healthcare providers
- Anticipating discrimination may keep trans people from seeking health care:
  - “Gender-affirming and non-discriminatory healthcare” number 1 health concern in 2015 survey



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# Health Issues

- There is a general lack of knowledge among providers about transgender health
  - Many providers are ignorant about hormones for gender transition/gender-affirming surgeries
  - For example, they may not know about the higher risk of blood clots among women taking estrogen – either to transition or to replace hormones after menopause – who also smoke
    - Therefore may not counsel trans women about the need to stop smoking or explain the signs of blood clots



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# Negative Impacts of Poor Healthcare Access

- Fewer trans women living with HIV receive and take HIV drugs
- Trans women often access hormones through unregulated channels, can result in:
  - Buying unsafe hormones, giving themselves wrong doses
  - Infection, scarring from unsterile technique
  - Chronic inflammation, disfigurement or migration elsewhere in body from free liquid silicone
  - Sudden death from emboli (getting an air bubble or bit of foreign material in the bloodstream)



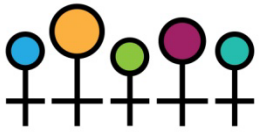
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# Resilience

Despite obstacles, trans women living with HIV have faced harassment and violence with ***determination and grit***

- Trans women living with HIV can thrive and contribute to their communities in the face of multiple injustices

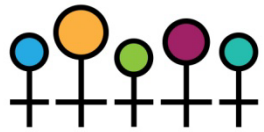




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# Resilience

- While transgender people had major barriers to accessing health care:
  - More than 3/4 still got the hormone therapy they sought
  - Many returned to complete their education after bullying that caused them to drop out
  - Majority of trans people reported being currently employed and housed, despite having lost previous jobs/homes due to bias

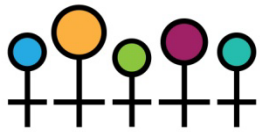


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# Additional Resources

- [Positively Trans \(T+\) \(Transgender Law Center\)](#)
- [Center of Excellence for Transgender Health](#)
- [National Center for Transgender Equality \(NCTE\)](#)
- [TransLatin@ Coalition](#)
- [Transgender Europe \(TGEU\)](#)
- [National LGBTQ Task Force](#)





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# Learn More!

- To learn more:
  - [Trans Women Living with HIV](#)
  - [Transgender Women: HIV Prevention as a Priority](#)
  - [Mujeres trans viviendo con VIH](#)
- For a full list of topic-specific resources:
  - [Resources for Trans Women](#)
- For more fact sheets and to connect to our community of women living with HIV:
  - [www.thewellproject.org](http://www.thewellproject.org)
  - [www.facebook.com/thewellproject](https://www.facebook.com/thewellproject)
  - [www.twitter.com/thewellproject](https://www.twitter.com/thewellproject)