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Why Race Matters: Women and HIV

Last updated: February 6, 2026

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

#onewomanatatime

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Why Race Matters

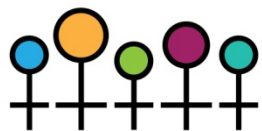


Race matters when it comes to HIV – and not just for women of color

- “Female face of AIDS” = Black or brown woman
 - Mostly sub-Saharan Africa and Asia
- Trans women especially affected

Why Race Matters

- US: Nearly 1 in 5 new HIV diagnoses in women
 - Most of them Black or Latina
 - American Indian/Alaska Native women
 - High rates
 - Asian/Pacific Islander women
 - Not talked about
 - Cultural factors may increase vulnerability
- Decline in HIV diagnoses among women
 - But: rates still highest among women of color



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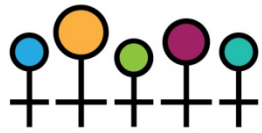
What Are Health Disparities?

Health disparity: “the biological expression of **social inequalities**” – *Paul Farmer (global HIV activist and medical anthropologist)*

- Difference in health linked to unequal or unjust social condition
 - Higher rate of a disease among certain groups despite prevention efforts
 - Differences according to gender, race, education or income level, disability, sexual orientation, region, and more

Social determinants of health linked to health disparities

- Social realities impacting physical health
 - Poverty
 - Lack of education
 - **Racism**



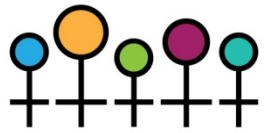
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What Is Race?

- Usually thought of as physical traits or ancestry
 - Skin color, eye shape, region where ancestors are from
 - Doesn't explain health differences in same geographic area
- Race is a **social** category, ***not*** a biological one
 - Way to explain differences in how people live in society
 - Differences affect treatment, which affects social conditions
- **Powerful idea** that has been used to:
 - Separate people
 - Make opportunities available to some but not others

What Is Racism?

- System in which people are **valued differently because of their race**
- – Unfairly **disadvantages** some individuals and communities
 - Provides unearned **advantage** to others
 - **Damages the entire society**
 - Wasted human resources
- Greater likelihood of acquiring HIV related to factors that structure **how** people live
 - Not related to physical differences



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“I Live in the Basement”

*“I live in the basement: the **lowest floor of the social systems** we have here in America.”*

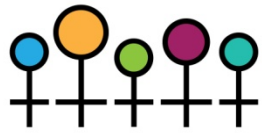
*“I ... first learn[ed] about the **perceived differences in skin color**, notwithstanding our commonality or upbringing.”*

“Women all around me were delegated to the floor below in their homes, at their jobs, and in the public.”

*“When I started transitioning ..., the **basement door became sealed.**”*

– Aryah Lester, [“I Live in the Basement,”](#) on A Girl Like Me

[Trigger warning: The blog entry linked above contains descriptions of sexual violence and discrimination.]



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What Is Racism?

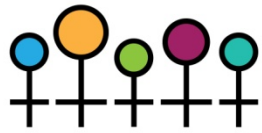
- Racism causes stress; has been shown to be a form of trauma
- ***Racism is not just about individual behavior;*** a person who is white may:
 - Have many friends of different races
 - Have never intentionally harmed someone because of their race
 - Still benefit from a racist system that values lives based on race
- Being **antiracist** (against racism):
 - Does not just mean white people treating individual people of color well
 - Means disagreeing with ways that racial bias shows up
 - Means recognizing ways we may benefit from systems that are biased against others (**privilege**)

What Is Privilege?

"I am a white woman, I have privilege. I recognize that we don't have to have a hashtag for white lives. ... Racism towards white people is up for discussion and it pains me!"

"The statistics of HIV speak volumes don't they? Maybe I need to shout it louder, as my white voice is more listened to!"

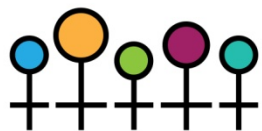
– MelPainter2014, ["#BlackLivesMatter,"](#) on A Girl Like Me



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What Is Privilege?

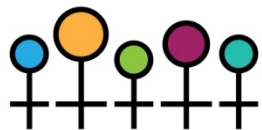
- A set of unearned, often invisible benefits experienced by people who fit into ***social groups that have power***
 - White race; middle or upper class; male; heterosexual; documented citizen; native English speaker (in US)
- For example, people with privilege can assume that:
 - People in history class and textbooks are same race, gender, sexual orientation as you
 - Your failures will not be thought of as being due to your race or gender
 - You don't have to think about race, class, gender, sexual orientation, disabilities, etc., daily



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Things to Remember About Privilege

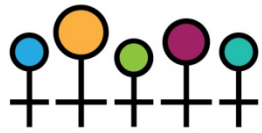
- Often easier to notice **oppression than privilege**
 - Being mistreated leaves deeper impression than fair treatment
- Privilege **doesn't mean you didn't work hard**
 - Your life may not be easy, but may be easier than others' *in certain ways*
- Privilege **isn't "special advantages"; it's basic fairness**
 - Problem isn't that a privileged person gets *more than* they deserve, but that others who don't have privilege get *less than* they deserve
- Privilege is related to **power systems not individual experiences**
 - Having Obama as president didn't end racism
- Privilege and oppression **don't cancel each other out**
 - Can be oppressed by poverty but still benefit from being white



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What Is Intersectionality?

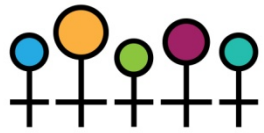
- The idea that **many parts of a person's identity impact their life** at the same time
 - Some aspects give them privilege, some lead them to experience oppression
 - Parts of a person's identity cannot be separated
 - All women experience sexism, but experience different for Black and white women because experience **is also affected by racism**
- Don't treat just HIV, also address intersectional issues



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Taking Action, Making Change

- **Recognize privilege and use it for change**
 - Having privilege is not usually something a person chooses
 - If you have privilege, you can choose not to be silent
- **United we stand**
 - Learn from the HIV community's history of challenging privilege
- **Put those most impacted front and center**
 - When those most impacted by an issue speak about it, ***listen!***
- **Join a community**
 - For example, *A Girl Like Me*
- **Take action**
 - Connect with advocacy groups

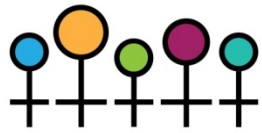


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Taking Action, Making Change

"The HIV epidemic in this country will end when America commits to addressing the underlying conditions which enable HIV to thrive, such as racism and poverty."

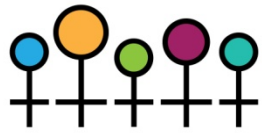
-- Positive Women's Network-USA leaders Vanessa Johnson and Waheedah Shabazz-El, National Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day 2016



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US-Based Advocacy Groups

- [Advocates for Youth](#)
- [AIDS UnitedPositive Women's Network – USA](#) (PWN-USA)
- [Positively Trans](#) (T+)
- [Sero Project](#) (Sero+)
- [SisterLove, Inc.](#)
- [Translatin@ Coalition](#)
- [Treatment Action Group](#) (TAG)



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Learn More!

- To learn more about this topic, please read the full fact sheet on this topic:
 - [Why Race Matters: Women and HIV](#)
- For more fact sheets and to connect to our community of women living with HIV, visit:
 - www.thewellproject.org
 - [@thewellprojecthiv.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/@thewellprojecthiv)
 - www.facebook.com/thewellproject
 - www.instagram.com/thewellprojecthiv/
 - www.threads.net/@thewellprojecthiv
 - www.youtube.com/thewellprojecthiv