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# Why Race Matters: Women and HIV

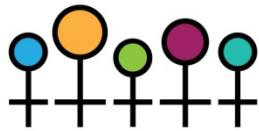
*Last updated: February 6, 2026*

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

#onewomanatatime

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

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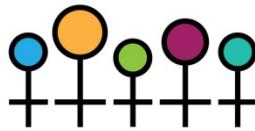


# Why Race Matters



***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



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# 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



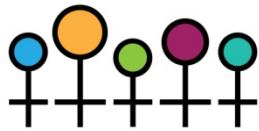
# What Are Health Disparities?

***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

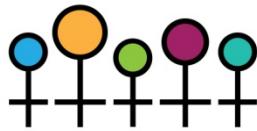
**Social determinants of health** linked to health disparities

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



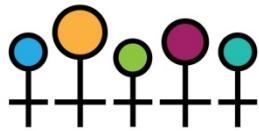
# What Is Race?

- 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



# “I Live in the Basement”

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

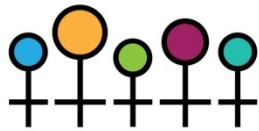
*“I ... first learn[ed] about the **perceived differences in skin color**, notwithstanding our commonality or upbringing.”*

*“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.**”*

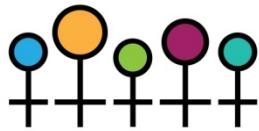
– Aryah Lester, [“I Live in the Basement,”](#) on A Girl Like Me

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



# 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**)

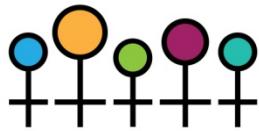


# What Is Privilege?

*"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



# 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



# Things to Remember About Privilege

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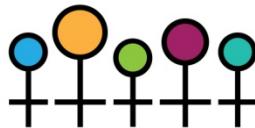
- Often easier to notice **oppression than privilege**
  - Being mistreated leaves deeper impression than fair treatment
- Privilege **doesn't mean you didn't work hard**
  - Your life may not be easy, but may be easier than others' *in certain ways*
- Privilege **isn't “special advantages”; it's basic 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



# Taking Action, Making Change

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- **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

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***"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

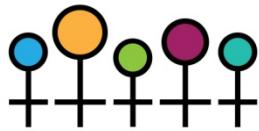


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# US-Based Advocacy Groups

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- [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)



## 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](http://www.thewellproject.org)
  - [@thewellprojecthiv.bsky.social](http://@thewellprojecthiv.bsky.social)
  - [www.facebook.com/thewellproject](http://www.facebook.com/thewellproject)
  - [www.instagram.com/thewellprojecthiv/](http://www.instagram.com/thewellprojecthiv/)
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