Women Don’t Need The Strong, Silent Type

March 9, 2011 By Larry Bryant

Black men - in fact, ALL men - should understand that on Thursday, March 10, National Women and Girls HIV & AIDS Awareness Day is as much about us as it is about women and girls.

’In 2009, nearly a quarter of diagnoses of HIV infection in the United States were among women and girls aged 13 years and older. Additionally, almost 184,000 women and adolescent girls were living with HIV at the end of 2008. More than 101,000 women and girls with AIDS have died since the epidemic began.

Women and girls of color--especially black women and girls--bear a disproportionately heavy burden of HIV infection. In 2009, for adult and adolescent females, the rate of diagnoses of HIV infection for black females was nearly 20 times as high as the rate for white females and approximately 4 times as high as the rate for Hispanic/Latino females. The reason women of color are more severely burdened by HIV and AIDS are not directly related to race or ethnicity, but rather to some of the barriers faced by many in these communities across the country.’
- from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) website.

The CDC goes on to describe *’barriers’* as a set of social determinants or *’circumstances in which people are born, grow up, live, work, and age’*. Also health outcomes or disparities evolved by living in an environment that is *’shaped by a wider set of forces: economics, social policies, and politics’*.

Another startling statistic is that 85% of new HIV infections among American women are from infected male partners. Let me say that again...

Eighty-Five per cent of new HIV infections among American women are from men who are HIV positive.

This tragic realization has to placed right at the feet of the male population. We have not lived up to our roles in relationships, family, and community nearly as much as we should or need. Straight, bi-sexual, gay, undecided, or undeclared... We have denounced and denied responsibility and accountability at almost every opportunity and, sadly, the numbers bear it out.

Let’s be real also… These numbers don’t tell us the half of it- not even close. The cases of rape or physical and sexual abuse, domestic or otherwise, is almost as common as picking up dinner at a drive-through. The steady rise of new HIV and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) infections and early pregnancies among girls, especially in South, is not measured in these numbers.

I look at these statistics and see myself. I am a heterosexual Black man living with HIV since 1986 and I have certainly kicked myself in the ass more times than I can remember. There are no apologies that can completely erase mistakes in judgment or decision making that hurt others and/or put individuals at risk.

I look at these statistics and see my son, Dominique, and what role he plays in lives of the people he meets and has relationships with. Or better yet, the role he continues to play in life of his son, Taylor.

I see the faces of the men, young and old, I know in my Washington D.C. neighborhoods as well as similar neighborhoods across the country. Are we willing to define ourselves at a higher standard for those around us? Are we willing to acknowledge and accept our flaws and inconsistencies and work to improve our standing? Are we willing to fight for the lives of those closest to us as well as those most trusting - and forgiving - of us?

I would like to see more men - straight men, in particular - standing up to be more visible, vocal, and involved with rebuilding and repairing our role in addressing the HIV epidemic among women and girls including:

- Elected officials - President Obama, Congressional Members, and city and state leaders - and the commissions and committees they convene to address HIV & AIDS and related issues.
- Professional athletes and entertainers - many of whom reside in the demographic that is most visible in U.S. new HIV infections;
- Male clergy, pastors, and other Faith leaders still serve as the spine and foundation of most communities and most times represent the polar opposites of the HIV & AIDS stigma dynamic;
- Male service providers, health care workers, board members, and executive directors - organizationally, leadership and mentoring is top down and vice versa;
- My Facebook (male) friends, *and you guys know who you are!*

The history of the HIV & AIDS epidemic in the United States has always included us all - even though there are some who seem to want to claim ownership as if ’AIDS’ was trademarked and incorporated, while others throw blame like hand grenades into a crowded church. Effective and healing outcomes can be assured only if we are using each other as support and not target

practice.

As men we must recognize this National Women and Girls HIV & AIDS Awareness Day as the day we become actively involved in the solutions that heal us all. None of us can do it alone.

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