



Commemorating World AIDS Day 2017  
The Women's HIV Research Collaborative

As we commemorate World AIDS Day this year, it remains as vital as ever to recognize the impact of HIV and AIDS on both cisgender and transgender women across the spectrum of prevention and treatment. Women account for more than half of the world's population living with HIV. The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV and AIDS (UNAIDS) estimates that 43 percent of new HIV infections were diagnosed in cisgender women in 2016, and that nearly 20 percent of transgender women across the globe are currently living with HIV. While there are many reasons to celebrate the strides and successes that have taken place across the HIV/AIDS landscape, we can—and must—do better to prioritize women in our efforts to address outreach, advocacy, support, and funding for HIV research.

In the United States, women face a multitude of barriers, including social and structural factors, that differentially affect their access to HIV prevention and care. Among all women in the US, it is resource-limited women, transgender women and women of color who continue to bear the greatest burden of HIV, representing the majority of women living with HIV and the majority of new HIV diagnoses among women. Stigma and discrimination make these women particularly vulnerable to HIV and its effects.

Despite these challenges, much progress has been made in the search for women-centered HIV prevention modalities and in HIV treatment for women across the lifespan. There is now a vaginal ring for HIV prevention under regulatory review. The ring, which uses the antiretroviral drug, dapivirine, continues to be tested in different age groups of women, and it is also being tested for multi-purpose use

as an approach to preventing both HIV and unintended pregnancy. If approved, the ring would be the first biomedical HIV prevention product designed specifically for use by cisgender women.

Momentum is also growing around the inclusion of women in HIV treatment and cure research. Researchers are exploring sex differences in HIV reservoirs, considering the role of the vaginal microbiome in curative strategies, and shifting recruitment approaches to reach more cisgender and transgender women. The REPRIEVE trial's successful ["Follow Your Heart" campaign](#), which examines the role of sex hormones and other factors on heart disease risk, was developed with guidance and input from women living with HIV. This campaign and other women-focused programs like the [Women's Outreach Workers Project](#) led by the AIDS Clinical Trials Group demonstrate that barriers to women's participation in treatment and cure research can be mitigated through adequate funding, creative outreach campaigns, and partnerships with women in the community.

This progress would not be possible without the efforts of women-focused and -led organizations such as SisterLove, Inc. and the Positive Women's Network-USA, among many others. We are grateful for their steadfast efforts to not only address but eliminate HIV and sexual and reproductive oppression against women in the US and around the world. Programs supported by these organizations have resulted in increased HIV testing and counseling for women, gender-specific analysis of HIV/AIDS and other reproductive health issues, and the empowerment of young women of color to become interested and engaged in the fields of HIV and reproductive health. Because of strong and dedicated leadership, organizations such as these have thrived despite limited resources--and often, no resources at all.

This World AIDS Day, let us celebrate our successes. Let us also acknowledge the need for continued efforts to gain greater insights into gender disparities in HIV prevention and treatment. Let us end limited access to health care and services for women living with and vulnerable to HIV. Let us fully embrace the right for all women to live full and healthy lives, free from violence, fear, and stigma.

*The Women's HIV Research Collaborative (WHRC) is an advisory group of the [Legacy Project](#) comprised of women who are leaders in women's health and HIV from around the United States. With community and staff representatives from all five NIH-funded HIV/AIDS clinical trials networks, this group provides culturally appropriate guidance and leadership in development, implementation, and dissemination of information about HIV research focused on and responsive to the needs of women and girls in the United States. The WHRC works to raise the visibility of issues related to HIV in women in the US and promote awareness of scientific research for women in disproportionately impacted communities. The WHRC focuses on advocating for HIV research with women living in the United States but operates with a comprehensive awareness of the potential for American women to benefit from HIV research that is being conducted internationally. To that end, WHRC's focus is domestic, but its interests are both global and optimistic.*

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