

# COLUMBIA SPECTATOR

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Columbia Daily Spectator, Volume CXIV, Number 22, 3 October 1990 — AIDS and minority women discussed  
[ARTICLE+ILLUSTRATION]

## AIDS and minority women discussed

By Elizabeth Berke

Four speakers criticized the state of affairs that has led to an increase in the number of minority women with AIDS and the lack of concern on the part of health care administrators at a panel discussion last night, which was attended by about 30 students.

The discussion, entitled, "Multi-Generational AIDS: The Impact of AIDS on Women of Color and Our Families" was the second lecture of the Second Annual Minorities in Public Affairs Conference, which was sponsored by the People of Color Alliance (POCA). POCA is a student organization in the Graduate Program in Public Policy and Administration at the School of International and Public Affairs.

POCA member Anna McLaughlin opened the discussion by calling attention to the underrepresentation of women of color and their children in AIDS statistics, and asking what can be done to prevent the spread of AIDS in this particular group.

"We don't have good, hard statistics on how many people are HIV-affected because the disease has a latency period, and many people are suspicious of testing and don't want to give blood samples," said Joyce Howard, a graduate student in socio-medical sciences who moderated the discussion.

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Panelist Annamarie Lewis, coordinator of the Women and AIDS project of the New York State Division for Women, said AIDS has had a profound effect on women.

“The AIDS issue has become a woman issue,” she said.

For five years, women have only been discussed in the AIDS issue as “vectors of the disease to children, not as women who suffer,” Lewis said, adding, “this keeps us in blame. It makes the disease horrible, something we can’t fight in a logical way. We have to remember that it is a virus, not a bad, horrible thing.”

During the last 10 years there has been an increase in the number of women infected with the AIDS virus as more women became addicted to crack, according to Lewis. Crack gives people a “hypersexuality” which increases prostitution and the spread of AIDS, she added.

A rising dependence on drugs among minority women is starting to destroy family life, Lewis said.

“Women exchange sex for drugs or money to buy drugs, then abandon their children,” Lewis said. “Unless we change the way we handle things, racism, sexism, and homophobia will keep us from handling the problem,” she said.

She also said that protection must be stressed as a necessary part of sexual education.

“Young adults need to know how to use condoms,” said Lewis. “If they choose to have sex, they should choose to do so in a way that they will be protected. We need more education, on family, city, and state levels to fight problems in the

system.

Panelist Luz Towns-Miranda, administrator of Child and Adolescent Services in department of psychiatry at Bronx Lebanon Hospital, addressed the problems of

“Within the Hispanic community, people are willing to talk about AIDS contracted by substance abuse before discussing homosexuality,” Towns-Miranda said.

Referring to her experiences at Bronx Lebanon Hospital, she said called for more clinicians to do mourning and grief work with AIDS victims. Also, mothers with AIDS need help with facing their impending death and planning for the possible adoptions of their children, she said.

For members of the Caribbean community, discussing personal matters, especially those dealing with sex, is “dangerous ground” according to J & B General Health Consultants Founder Marilyn John, another panelist.

“Talking about sex is taboo,” she said. “People who provide information but are not representatives of the culture can’t break through to people.”

Part of many of the immigrants problem stem from their unfamiliarity with modern medicine, she said.

“Immigrants have more troubles than others,” John said. “They don’t know how to access health services, and some would rather use folk medicine before going to a clinic.”

She also said women are more willing to accept condom use than men.

Panelist Jerry Nessel, HIV ser-

vices manager of the Puerto Rican Organization to Motivate and Enlighten Substance Abusers (PROMESA), said the way communities are handling AIDS illustrates the general attitude of community members towards problems in general.

“The way we handle the HIV issue is an indication of how humanity faces problems,” said. “We need to include people who are high risk into the solution (of AIDS).”

Nessel then introduced several PROMESA participants to support his views.

Abdul, a PROMESA participant who introduced himself as an HIV positive, recovering addict, said that he got AIDS after having sex with a woman who was infected by the disease. He found out he was infected when the women’s doctor informed him that she was HIV positive.

“I didn’t flip out when when I tested positive. I accepted it when I found out she had PCP pneumonia. I had already undergone psychological changes,” he said. “There is life after positive HIV, as long as you know how to live.”

Abdul said he is now going to college and taking sociology and psychology courses to help other AIDS victims.



**WOMEN AND AIDS: Panelists discussed the impact of AIDS among minority women last night.** SPECTATOR/PAT SCHULTZ