Rally of the Dolls

Activists gather in New York City to commemorate National Women and Girls HIV/AIDS Awareness Day.

March 17, 2009 By James Wortman

“We’re Not Dolls! Don’t Play With Women’s Lives!” That was the rally cry uniting AIDS activists, advocates and public officials March 10 on the steps of New York City Hall in recognition of National Women and Girls HIV/AIDS Awareness Day.

For the fourth year in a row, the awareness day called attention to the growing number of women and young girls who are living with and affected by HIV/AIDS. The New York demonstration served as a call to action, highlighting the need for better HIV prevention, care and treatment services targeted toward women both in the city and across the nation, as well as the need for comprehensive sex education in schools.

Lining the steps of city hall were dozens of dolls of various shapes and sizes, each of which represented 10 women and/or girls affected by HIV or other sexually transmitted infections.

“We were trying to think of a visual image that would capture our concerns about women, and you normally associate dolls with girls. We wanted to take that association and really blow it up,” said Marjorie J. Hill, PhD, the chief executive officer of New York-based AIDS service organization (ASO) Gay Men’s Health Crisis, which organized the event along with a coalition of other New York ASOs and women’s groups. “It was an opportunity to take a common association and challenge our elected officials in government and public health educators to really be inclusive of women and girls.”

Coincidentally, iconic fashion doll Barbie celebrated her 50th birthday just a day before the event, although one doubts that toymaker Mattel will ever market an HIV-positive bisexual Barbie (pictured at right) anytime soon.

According to the National Institutes of Health, of the 1.1 million people living with HIV in the United States more than 278,000 are women and girls, of which 80 percent are minorities. In New York City, about 94 percent of new infections in female teenagers are black and Latina, while one in three New Yorkers living with HIV is a woman.

“These numbers are staggering,” said Frances Melendez, PhD, the director of behavioral health at Iris House, a New York-based ASO that serves women. “More education needs to be directed at

women and girls, in particular groups that may not perceive themselves as at risk. Women over 50, women in monogamous relationships, women who are income-earners and may feel that they are not at risk because they do not run in those ‘risky’ circles.”

And that need for education and empowerment extends to a group not always addressed in HIV programming for women and girls: the transgender community.

“It’s so important that all women of this city, of this country and of this world to include women of transgender experience [in the fight against HIV],” said Moshay Moses, a client advocate at Positive Health Project, another New York-based ASO. “We have to be very holistic about our approach, about helping each other in prevention mentally, spiritually and physically.”

Speakers at the demonstration included New York City Council members John Liu, Annabel Palma, Diana Reyna, Letitia James, Sara Gonzales, Rosie Mendez and Darlene Mealy, all of whom agreed that more funding, effort and support need to be funneled into HIV programs and initiatives that specifically benefit women of all ages.

“The number of women that you see before us this afternoon, some of them are living with this disease. They’re surviving despite all of those out there who have basically consigned them to death,” said James, gesturing toward the women crowding the steps of City Hall. “Government has the responsibility to step up to the plate to provide funds for those who are living with this disease and to let everyone know that you need to be tested, you need to know your status, you need to talk about sex and sexuality to your children and we have to embrace this community—because they are our family.”

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