

BOOK REVIEWS

GLOBAL JUSTICE: WOMEN AND AIDS

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Paul Farmer, Margaret Connors, and Janie Simmons, eds., *Women, Poverty, and AIDS: Sex, Drugs, and Structural Violence* (Common Courage Press, 1996)

The AIDS pandemic has found its most vulnerable victims to date: women living in poverty. For an epidemic that tends to be characterized by the communities it affects, few people have begun to realize the colossal array of problems AIDS and HIV present to women around the world. Paul Farmer, Margaret Connors, and Janie Simmons, the editors of *Women, Poverty, and AIDS*, are determined to awaken an overly apathetic society to this particular impact of the virus and to the numerous factors that are responsible for the current obstacles that faced by far too many of the world's female population.

The editors each have worked with indigent women affected by the AIDS epidemic. Farmer is a researcher and physician at various hospitals, including Boston's Brigham and Women's Hospital, and also has lived and worked in Haiti for fourteen years. Connors is a medical anthropologist who develops HIV prevention strategies for poor communities in Massachusetts. Simmons is a critical ethnographer who has worked at connecting the objectives of academic AIDS researchers with poverty-stricken communities' basic need for disease prevention.

The editors collaborated to publish this book with three specific purposes in mind. The first intent is to "supplement existing scholarly work."¹ The diverse backgrounds of the editors results in the successful arrangement of a comprehensive and accurate collection of facts, data, and personal stories to fulfill this objective. The second aim of the work is to correct the misinformation that has been distributed as "academic literature" concerning HIV and AIDS. The editors feel that much of the information that has been disseminated throughout the evolution of the epidemic does not represent accurately the realities of the disease. The editors' intent is not only to provide the reader with the current data that they have compiled, but also to lay a cultural foundation in which they then are able to translate the trends of the disease. The editors' belief that separating the "culture" from the "science" of the disease results in a skewed perspective of

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1. Paul Farmer & Jim Yong Kim, *Introduction* to WOMEN, POVERTY, AND AIDS: SEX, DRUGS, AND STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE xii, xvii (Paul Farmer et al. eds., 1996).

reality that only serves to harm those whose sociological problems are overlooked.

Finally, the editors intend for this book to provide a foundation for debates concerning the state of the AIDS epidemic. They hope it will promote an awareness of the crisis that impoverished, HIV-infected women face around the world, and they hope to convince their audience of the urgent need for increased action to protect and aid these victims.

The effectiveness of this work arises from the delicate balance created between factual information and emotional appeal. The work begins with the stories of Darlene, Guylène, and Lata, three women from different countries, each with a different history but nevertheless connected by a common thread: they all are HIV-infected. The stories are powerful not only because the women were helpless within their individual circumstances, but also because the reader is made aware of the tragedy of these women's lives. Knowing that their stories would have been lost without this documentation forces the reader, consciously or not, to acknowledge the existence of the numerous other women whose similar struggles will never be recorded.

The editors' theories concerning the ways in which cultural and community pressures help to spread the disease are supported throughout the work. They examine the factors that directly contribute to the epidemic and give honest portrayals of the desperate situations faced by these women. The severity of the problem is epitomized by the reality that for many females, the knowledge that they have contracted HIV is not seen as their primary concern; rather, earning money, caring for family members, or even finding shelter are the daily struggles that these women face. The authors are careful to emphasize that women across the globe are the caregivers of society. Because of women's general roles as mother and wife, they often devalue their own health.

In addition to their often overlooked and unappreciated roles, women frequently are rendered powerless to make decisions regarding their own destinies. Because of their positions in society, many prostitutes, drug addicts, girlfriends, and wives lack meaningful choices about protecting themselves against contracting HIV during sexual intercourse. For this reason, the writers argue that the impending devastation of the AIDS epidemic cannot be arrested through safe-sex education or condom distribution, but rather can be controlled only through social reform. The examples they cite reveal some unlikely, yet powerful oppressors. For instance, in Thailand, the Tourism Authority publishes pamphlets promoting the "escort services" the country has to offer. The government therefore benefits at the expense of the women who place themselves at risk for contracting HIV. Until cultural and community pressures such as these are confronted, the AIDS epidemic will continue to affect women around the world in increasing numbers.