

Why AIDS education is needed here, now

Barely mentioned in the media storm following Ofra Haza's death was that women are at greater risk of HIV infection than men, writes Patricia Golan in this interview with a US expert on women and AIDS

Although AIDS is not widespread in Israel, the stigma attached to the disease and misconceptions about it are prevalent.

The death last month of pop diva Ofra Haza from complications of the AIDS virus set off a national debate about her and her family's decision to conceal her illness.

One aspect barely mentioned in the endless media commentary following the posthumous exposure of the cause of Haza's death was that women are at a greater risk of infection than men. In the US heterosexual women make up the fastest-growing group infected with AIDS.

"It took a long time for the public and even professionals to be concerned about women as the ones to get AIDS," says Homensia Amaro, a Distinguished Visitor at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev.

"At the beginning of the AIDS epidemic there was a lot of focus on women prostitutes infecting men or pregnant women infecting their fetuses. We learned that actually the transmission of AIDS from women to men is very ineffective; it's much more effective from men to women," says Amaro, professor of social and behavioral sciences at Boston University and a Boston public health commissioner.

Amaro has been trying to raise awareness of the need for gender-specific HIV intervention for a long time.

Years before it became an established fact, she predicted that women would become AIDS victims — this when most people assumed the disease affected homosexual males and intravenous drug users. She thinks this phenomenon could happen here as well.

There are those who say the AIDS epidemic has crested, at least in the West. Amaro does not share this view.

"It's not over. What's happened in the US is that in the entire population it appears to be dropping off, but among blacks and Hispanics, and especially women, AIDS is clearly still on the rise," she says.

Amaro points out that of young people who are HIV-positive, 64% are girls. "This tells us something about the future of the epidemic," she warns.

And this could become the trend in Israel as well.

"It's happened in other countries, where AIDS has moved naturally from a certain population to others, so there's no reason to think it

wouldn't happen that way here too. It just may take longer," she says.

THE FACT that there is a population of immigrants in Israel who come from places where AIDS is endemic is one factor that could develop into a serious situation, Amaro explains.

But she notes that because AIDS seems to be very contained in Israel,

In the US heterosexual women make up the fastest-growing infected group

"This is the time to carry out serious AIDS prevention education here. It seems that sexually transmitted diseases, which tend to precede AIDS, are very limited here. And so this is the right time to work on prevention."

"I don't know how motivated the Israeli public would be if it doesn't perceive it to be a problem," she adds, "but at least minimally, within

the communities where there are already cases, it is really important to do prevention and education there."

Amaro concedes that AIDS intervention and education in the US has had limited success.

"For women who are at low risk, just giving information on how to protect themselves and how to negotiate sex is effective. But with women who are drug users, who are

in an abusive relationship where they can't really control the situation this hasn't worked very well."

"After all, it's the man who uses the condom. So we try to teach these women how to talk someone else into doing something."

Amaro has introduced a new program of intervention for women who suffer from domestic abuse, which she describes as a combination of trauma recovery and HIV prevention.

"Women who have a history of abuse often end up getting involved with men who are abusive, who are more controlling, and also have high-risk sexual behavior. The treatment of the trauma is very important."

Amaro gave several lectures at BGTU last month, including a presentation at a conference in BeerSheva on "Overcoming Cultural Barriers to Women's Health Promotion" organized by the university's Center for Women's Health Studies and Promotion.

CENTER director Jilite Cwikel says the integrative treatment model described by Amaro should be developed here.

"We should begin to educate people to see the relationships between the different conditions that affect a woman's life," says Cwikel.

ing more gynecological problems that she's had head trauma, that she needs to develop marketable skills so she can get a job, and that she is probably at greater risk of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases.

"What's important is that we begin to see the picture in a much broader focus."

Cwikel says Israel has an excellent source for screening women for sexual and domestic violence at family health (Tipat Halva) centers.

"This is a place almost every pregnant woman comes to at least once, including in the Be'adin and Arab sectors. Here is a way for us to begin to be proactive in finding women early before they become victims of murder or broken bones," she continues.

"We know that the likelihood that a woman in an abusive relationship will be battered when she's pregnant is very high."

AMARO and her team have developed an effective HIV and sexually transmitted diseases intervention program for teenagers. The young people have to be given "booster sessions" as reinforcement, she notes, saying she believes more attention needs to be paid to the males.

"Most of our attention regarding sex education has been directed toward young women. What we've learned is that we need to work with young men and boys... the ones who have to put on the condoms," Cwikel says this is relevant here as well.

Cwikel says another problem in educating teens is that here, as elsewhere, young women tend to date and have sex with men who are several years older than they are.

So girls in their middle or late teens may be having sexual partners in their mid-20s or even older and they're not aware of the fact that these people may be sexually active and already infected with sexually transmitted diseases.

"The interesting aspect of the Ofra Hazza story," adds Cwikel, "is that she was a woman who was considered pure and naive and very trusting.



Cwikel (right) with Amaro at the BeerSheva conference: The fact that Israel has an immigrant population from places where AIDS is endemic is one warning factor. (BGTU)