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## **Spotlight on Sonia Rastogi: Women Making a Difference**

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Image



*Sonia Rastogi is a Community Advisory Board member for The Well Project and is currently the Special Project's Manager with the Women's Protection and Empowerment Unit at International Rescue Committee in New York, NY. She previously worked with Positive Women's Network – USA, a network of fierce advocates.*

### **What is the goal of your advocacy work? Do you have a specific focus?**

The goal of my advocacy work is to ensure that there is a basic standard of humanity, dignity and respect given to all people, especially the most marginalized. I focus on women and girls because I am passionate about addressing gender inequalities and the conditions that increase vulnerability such as HIV status, disability, class, immigration status, gender identity and sexual orientation, among others.

### **Do you think HIV positive women face unique challenges? What are they?**

Women and girls living with HIV in the United States and globally often lie at the crisscross intersections of race, class, gender identity, sexual orientation, political disenfranchisement and geography. In the United States, the epidemic among women and girls is staggering in Deep South states; these states also contend with controversial voter identification regulations and poor health infrastructure. Violence against women and girls can increase after diagnosis as well. In Malawi, I frequently heard about women being forced out of their homes when they disclosed their status or girls engaging in sex work to make ends meet. These patterns are all too familiar in my own country and around the globe. Significant strides in service delivery and policies have been made due to committed grassroots women's groups, coalitions and networks, the people living with HIV movement, dedicated funders and a dedicated workforce. Yet, services and policies writ large still deprioritize the needs of women and girls, especially those living with HIV.

### **What advice or information would you offer a woman newly diagnosed with HIV?**

In your own time and when you are ready, reach out to other women living with HIV, women-friendly HIV clinics or providers, organizations with specific women and HIV programming, women living with HIV networks or another person that you trust. Oftentimes, this connection can help you cope, can look out for you, can develop into friendship and community, can assist in advocating for you at the doctor's office and can lead you to building your life in a way that works for you.

By the same token, I would push advocates and service providers to fill the core social support, economic and educational gaps that are often the missing link for women and girls to build their lives.

### **What difference has The Well Project made in your life and work?**

Over the years, The Well Project has been a constant source of reliable information on health, treatment, prevention, living well, families, mental health, getting back to work and a ton of other issues critical to the lives of women living with HIV. Furthermore, I've seen The Well Project develop a global community and communication interface for women living with HIV around the world that transforms how we think and talk about HIV. To me, The Well Project has given me high-quality tools to advocate for women living with HIV and a platform to stand on.



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