

# Meeting women where they are at

## A CALL TO MAKE HIV ORGANIZATIONS MORE WOMEN-FRIENDLY

### Women-specific HIV services are lacking in Canada

#### WOMEN LIVING WITH HIV FACE SPECIFIC CHALLENGES:

- ◆ biological vulnerability to infection
- ◆ sexual stigma
- ◆ invisibility as part of the population with HIV
- ◆ responsibilities as caregivers with little time for themselves
- ◆ power imbalances in relationships
- ◆ the dangers of HIV disclosure

**POSITIVE WOMEN'S NETWORK** is the longest-running HIV organization for women in Canada and the only women-specific HIV organization in British Columbia.

A community living with and affected by HIV, we provide leadership, support, and education on HIV-related health, social, and prevention initiatives for women.

An estimated **16,600** women in this country are living with HIV, making up **23%** of the national population living with HIV.

As demand grows for gender-specific approaches to HIV support, how can organizations provide women with **PHYSICAL** and **EMOTIONAL SAFETY, VALIDATION,** and **CONNECTION?**

#### DATA GATHERING

In 2010, PWN conducted a needs assessment. We interviewed 34 women living with HIV from throughout BC about their experiences seeking services, as well as staff at HIV organizations about providing services for women living with HIV.

In 2014, PWN conducted a member engagement survey. We sent the survey to 301 members (those for whom we had a postal or email address), with a 12% return rate. The survey included questions to evaluate access to and quality of PWN programs and resources.

### Suggestions

HIV organizations can become more women-friendly by doing the following:

- ◆ implement a childcare and transportation policy with subsidies
- ◆ offer individualized support
- ◆ engage women living with HIV as peer workers
- ◆ arrange for staff training on issues of gender and inclusivity
- ◆ create women-only safe spaces
- ◆ develop a best practices procedure for supporting women living with HIV

### Challenges

Organizational apathy to gender-specific approaches stems from the following:

- ◆ sexism
- ◆ lack of funding
- ◆ lack of clients who are women
- ◆ underrepresentation of women living with HIV at all levels

### HIV organizations

need to consider and implement strategies to help women living with HIV navigate and overcome the barriers they face when seeking and engaging with support services.