



**Positive Women's
Network**

Why are women - exclusive HIV services needed?

In spite of discrepancies in wealth, resources, and access to treatment, Canadian women face similar fundamental issues to women internationally. Decades into the AIDS pandemic, women remain at disadvantage to men and are disproportionately impacted by HIV infection.

Challenges women face the world over:

- There is no prevention method that women can control without the cooperation of her sexual partner.
- Acute biological vulnerability to infection during unprotected heterosexual intercourse.
- Controlling partners who limit safer sex, access to health care and support, money, financial resources.
- Social expectation of centralized caregiver role to immediate and extended family members that limits women's self-care opportunities
- Unequal economic power.
- Treatments are still tested mainly in men.
- Disclosure equaling disaster for women, their children, their safety.

Social and cultural customs worldwide promote male dominance economically and socially, but women are expected "To carry all the weight without complaint and with a smile" (Veronica, woman living with HIV). Services exclusive to women are necessary.

Yet still we are asked, "Why does Positive Women's Network exclusively serve women?" The answer is complex and multi-layered, much like women's lives, much like the profound effects of HIV/AIDS. Women specific services are a necessary response to the gender imbalances that exist worldwide in social, community and healthcare settings. Women-centred services based on recognition of multiple barriers can support women in attaining optimum levels of care in their communities. Advocacy is key, and women need other women advocates.

Positive Women's Network (in Vancouver, Canada) provides a safe, comfortable women-only space for women living with HIV/AIDS to come to find sanctuary and validation. At Positive Women's Network (PWN), women support and listen to each other. Programs offer women chances to connect with peers and support workers for information, advocacy and education – in a support group, at a retreat weekend, or over a cup of coffee.

Women specific services offer space and time for HIV+ women to feel respected and accepted, regardless of race, class, education, economic or health status. "Even HIV + women themselves look around and see HIV is in all walks of life. It can happen to anyone." (Funke, woman affected by HIV).

Disclosure and connecting with other positive women are pivotal. "When I disclosed to the women at PWN, I was loved and appreciated as a human being, a positive woman and mother. I knew that I was not alone. I knew that after meeting many women who have been HIV+ for many years that death was not knocking, it was actually life telling me that I need to engulf myself in healing." (Veronica, woman living with HIV)

Women need support "where they are at," without judgements. Disclosure, economic security, relationships, community support and treatment are all topics of discussion at PWN, and each woman is offered information and respected for her decisions. Women need room to do this. "I was nervous starting new meds knowing that only a handful of women were ever in the clinical trial. I feel invisible in the HIV/AIDS research world." (Kath, woman living with HIV)

In addition to services for women with HIV, PWN offers education and prevention information to health care and social service providers. Programs are informed specifically by HIV+ women's reported experiences of risk, infection, diagnosis, daily life, disclosure, treatment and life decisions. "I was injected in a long term monogamous relationship by a man who refused to wear condoms... Female controlled prevention methods could change the world." (Margarite, woman living with HIV)

At Positive Women's Network, infected and uninfected women work together: "It's not us and them. We are all vulnerable and we all need to be in this together." (Funke, woman affected by HIV) Together, we embrace the vision: action and leadership on women and HIV/AIDS. We believe that women know the answers, and that a space to speak honestly and frankly is a keystone in improving things for women. "Every time a parent discloses her status, she has to take into consideration the possible repercussions for her children." (Margarite,

woman living with HIV)

Every time a woman speaks about her life with HIV, change can happen.

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Positive Women's Network Mission Statement:

Positive Women's Network, a partnership of women living with and affected by HIV/AIDS, supports women in making informed choices about HIV/AIDS and health. We provide safe access to support and education/prevention for women in communities throughout British Columbia. The Positive Women's Network provides leadership and advocacy around women's HIV/AIDS health and social issues in the national and local health care communities.

"Women heal women"

Veronica, woman living with HIV

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