



Positive Women

Support and advocacy for women living with HIV

Celebrating Women

Michelle Wesley, PWV Peer Support Coordinator, Speech for the Annual General Meeting, December 2012

Gender inequalities in personal relationships, in the community, within the workforce, and in political circles affect women all over the world. Inequalities increase women's vulnerability to poverty and vice-versa: both impact harshly on our ability to enjoy full human rights. Gender inequality and poverty not only increase the risk of HIV but also leave women more vulnerable than men to its impact

Globally, women and girls now make up more than half of all people living with HIV. In Australia, however, women living with HIV are a minority within a minority, making up about 10% of all HIV diagnosis in this country.

Women living with HIV still experience social isolation and discrimination, facing barriers to social participation and can have difficulty accessing healthcare and welfare services, housing, insurance, employment and education. The fear of disclosure, stigma and discrimination, make forming and maintaining relationships more complex and challenging.

On top of the fact that there are low numbers of women living with HIV in Australia, stigma prevents many women from being open about their status. Who would want to disclose their HIV status if they were going to be stigmatised and discriminated against, or rejected? If women don't disclose their status they are liable to miss out on information, treatments and support

HIV affects women quite differently to how it affects men, physically, as well as psychosocially. There is a higher rate of transmission from a man to a woman during vaginal intercourse. In some instances, being married is often a risk factor, rather than a protective factor. Women who become pregnant must take special precautions to prevent transmission of HIV to their children, and may also become sole parents after being abandoned by the partner who infected them. Women are significantly more likely than men to have experienced unwanted disclosure. Women may experience different illnesses and treatment side effects. Mounting evidence indicates that metabolism of certain drugs varies in men vs. women, and side effects that interfere with adherence to these medications may also manifest differently. Even though women comprise nearly half of the HIV positive population worldwide, these 15.5 million women tend to be under-represented in clinical trials of HIV drug therapies.

Women are also vastly under-represented on Governments and governing bodies, when it comes to drafting policy that addresses our distinct needs around living with HIV.

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Many gay men living with HIV in Australia, are part of a community familiar with HIV. There is no such community for heterosexual women, who tend not to know other women living with HIV. Once a woman recovers from the absolute shock of diagnosis, she may find HIV to be a profoundly isolating experience.

Women living with HIV have had to create our own community. A place where we can get our issues raised and represented, our questions answered, and somewhere to get emotional support. A place where our voices can be heard and we know we're not alone.

It's amazing to realize that we're just a stone's throw from an era when being HIV positive at any age usually meant you should start getting your affairs in order. Just 15 years ago, the idea of seeing age 50 was a distant dream for many people with HIV.

Today, living out a full, long life with HIV is not only common; it's *expected*, provided you're able to access modern HIV treatment and quality health care.

We are lucky in Australia, we can access quality HIV treatment and care. Today, HIV is referred to as a chronic manageable illness. And for many living with HIV it is. Women living with HIV are now working, caring for families, studying, running marathons.

Just as the Scientists and Doctors have worked to make progress with treatments and understanding HIV, Women living with HIV have worked hard to understand how to live with HIV.

Positive Women Vic is a peer support group. A peer has "been there, done that" and can relate to others who are in a similar situation. We have an understanding of what supports us and what doesn't, we know what challenges we've had to meet, and what skills we have needed to develop, and what resources support us in living with HIV.

Peer Support is also the mechanism used for identifying the priorities and needs of our members. This feeds into our Health Promotion strategies, and enables PWV to provide a proactive and holistic approach to our activities to empower women living with HIV to, not just survive, but thrive in their lives.

Through *Positive Women Vic*, women are able to participate in group peer support activities and important discussions around living with HIV, including managing health and treatments, positive pregnancy and family life. Members also have opportunities to get involved in group activities around personal development, creative expression and relaxation.

After recovering from the shock of diagnosis, most women feel like they must be the only woman on the planet to have HIV. The feelings of isolation and loneliness are extreme. Meeting another woman living with HIV is just so reassuring – "I'm not the only one."

In November, *Positive Women Vic* held a "Well-being Weekend" for our members. We asked "What has been the highlight of the weekend for you?" Overwhelmingly, "Being with other women." was the most common response.

One member commented that it was "uplifting to be with other positive women, not feeling isolated, inspiring weekend to not lose hope and let virus dominate my life. The support and activities were outstanding"

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In my capacity as PSC I have the privilege of working with an amazing group of women. The strength and resilience shown by this group has been phenomenal.

Together we share our stories. We cry and laugh together, we share friendship and love. United we have hope.

Positive Women Vic will continue to find new ways to respond to emerging issues for positive women. And in doing so, we will continue to support women's voices and women's business. It's at the heart of who we are.