

## International Women's Day Speech – Alison Boughey, Executive Officer

Hello everyone and welcome to Positive Women Victoria's IWD morning tea. I would first like to acknowledge that Coventry House is on the traditional lands and waterways of the Kulin Nation. We pay our respects to their elders past and present, we choose to acknowledge their continuing spiritual relationship and connection to country.

Thank you all so much for taking the time out of your busy day to come along and support this event. The people in this room are Positive Women's greatest supporters. You travel on our journey with us, frequently supporting us more than we are able to support you. You do this in the knowledge that we are one of the smallest organisations in this sector, trying to punch above our weight because what we do is so important. And it is because of you that we are able to do this. So this morning is really about thanking you for that, as well as taking the opportunity that IWD presents to once again remind ourselves of the hurdles still faced by women living with HIV. Before I continue I would like to acknowledge Viiv healthcare who is supporting this event through its Positive Action Program. So thank you to Oonagh and Katy for making that happen.

We do know that IWD was actually Tuesday, but like many a good birthday, we decided to drag out the celebrations for a whole week, so here we are at Friday and still banging on about women.

We have been hearing a lot about women this week. About the barriers to full female participation in the workforce and the 18% pay gap between women and men. We've heard about the institutionalised practices that reduce women's financial negotiating power and the disproportionate and unnegotiated burdens of responsibility we place on women when we make them do most of the emotional heavy lifting in relationships. We've heard about the disproportionate amount of unpaid and carer's work that women shoulder and the low numbers of women populating the board rooms of the ASX200 companies despite the indisputable evidence that companies with more women on their boards are known to outperform those with less. And to our greatest shame we have been reminded again this week about the 33% of women aged 15 and over who have experienced violence, many of these at the hands of those who claim to love them.

But the most alarming statistic I have been exposed to this International Women's day, on which Pledge for Parity is the theme, is that, at the current pace of reform, the World Economic Forum estimates that it will take until 2133 before we see equality between men and women. That's 117 years from today and unless some super life enhancing drug is discovered, is unlikely to occur even in my daughter's lifetime.

What we haven't heard as much about though this week is the layers of disadvantage experienced by women who carry the added burden of chronic illness, or disability. Women who come from cultures in which they are even less well regarded than in our own. Lesbian women and transgender women. Aboriginal and refugee women. We see many women like this at Positive Women and for them there is even one further layer, their HIV status.

As all of you know, the experience of living with HIV is distinctly different for women than men. The modes of HIV transmission, biological susceptibility, geographical accessibility, socioeconomic status, testing patterns, service use, health seeking behaviours, perceptions of risk and attitudes towards treatment are so markedly different for women than for men that we are almost talking about a different epidemic. And despite this, while women are a subgroup of seven of the eight priority populations named in Australia's national HIV Strategy, they are not identified as a priority population in their own right.

The omission of women as a priority population in our National HIV Strategy is seen by us as a further disgrace on this international women's day. As the National Strategy informs research and data collection priorities, funding allocation and development of state strategies this omission has significant implications for services such as Positive Women, the only community organisation that is specifically funded to support and advocate for women living with HIV in Australia. We believe that by continuing the HIV policy cycle based on a partially obscured knowledge of the epidemic, we do so at our peril.

To give ourselves the best chance of achieving the goals of the HIV legacy statement we must give the experiences of women and men living with HIV equal weight and women must be recognized as a priority population in their own right in the Eight National HIV Strategy. This would enable organisations like Positive Women to better plan and implement a tailored, targeted response to the unique needs of women and would be an important step in reducing the impact of gender inequality at a systemic level.

It is an essential step if we wish to narrow the biological, gendered and social disparities between the experiences of women and men and if we want to position our HIV response within the broader context of women's health and wellbeing. It is also essential if we wish to create an environment that will enable women of all backgrounds, cultures, ages and experiences to confidently access HIV testing, prevention, treatment, management & support.

So on this international women's day, Positive Women re-commits to facilitating the achievement of the Legacy Statement goals and to advocating for women living with HIV across the Commonwealth.

Before I finish I would like to invite you all to write down one or two suggestions that you believe could improve gender equality for women living with HIV in the state of Victoria. We will be submitting these suggestions as a part of PWV's submission to the current Victorian Government consultation for the development of a statewide gender equality strategy. So please get thinking and write down any ideas for improving gender equality for women living with HIV.

Once again I would like to thank you all for coming, please enjoy the beautiful food that Viiv has provided and we wish you a wonderful IWD/week.