

Topic specific recommendations: Supporting Safer HIV Disclosure

The [Key recommendations for developing a national action plan to advance the sexual and reproductive health and rights of women living with HIV in Canada](#) (Kaida et al., 2022) cut across four community-identified topics, including Universal Trauma and Violence Aware Care/Practice; Supporting Safer HIV Disclosure; Reproductive Health, Rights, and Justice; and Resilience, Self-efficacy, and Peer Support. Through an iterative process of analysing stakeholder input across all discussions (webinars, in-person event) and feedback forums, the five cross-cutting key recommendations for action emerged. They are described in the linked paper (**Table 1**). Here, we have shared the discussion specific to the [Supporting Safer HIV Disclosure](#) webinar topic, including topic-specific recommendations for action.

Topic 2: Supporting Safer HIV Disclosure

Co-leads: Jasmine Cotnam (Women’s College Hospital, Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network, Ontario HIV Treatment Network, CHIWOS) and Wangari Tharao (Women’s Health in Women’s Hands Community Health Centre)

Summary of Discussion

Participants acknowledged that language is very important and that we must talk about ‘*safer*’ disclosure rather than ‘safe’ disclosure, as disclosure cannot be guaranteed to be entirely safe. However, this is not to say that we cannot advocate and promote safer sociopolitical and legal environments that would support safer disclosure. As part of this, participants discussed the need to rethink the use of the word ‘**disclosure**’, which is heavily tied to the law and to the criminalization of non-disclosure.

“Safer’ disclosure rather than ‘safe’ disclosure recognizes that disclosure cannot ever be guaranteed to be entirely safe, yet conditions and environments to support safety are essential.”

Disclosure is a personal and individual choice and experience and should be supported as such by respecting the unique needs of women living with HIV. Culturally appropriate strategies are necessary to promote safer disclosure among different communities of women living with HIV. Among Indigenous communities, Elders can be included as peers to support women living with HIV. When discussing safer disclosure, it is important to have Indigenous women’s voices and experience at the forefront, given the legal climate of HIV non-disclosure and child welfare in this community. Disclosure doesn’t solely impact an individual, but impacts entire families and communities. Peer support is integral to promoting safer disclosure and supporting women living with HIV to navigate the complexity of disclosure. The group discussed the need for organizations to meaningfully support women living with HIV who are in peer support roles through stable and equitable employment opportunities.

A safer disclosure environment is not feasible if we do not address intersectional stigma – defined as the manifestation and lived experience of discrimination towards groups of people with multiple social identities. In line with this, it is essential that laws reflect current scientific understanding of transmission, which tell us that that either viral suppression or condom use alone are sufficient to prevent the sexual transmission of HIV. Consideration must also be given to women’s experiences of gender-based violence and to how this shapes safety and

disclosure. Safer disclosure must, therefore, be supported through policy that is integrated at all levels including medical, legal, and social services, as well as within the mainstream media.

Key Recommendations: Supporting Safer HIV Disclosure

I. Meaningfully engage women living with HIV across research, policy, and practice aimed at advancing the sexual and reproductive health and rights by, with, and for all women living with HIV.

HIV disclosure is a personal and individual choice; ‘safety’ looks different for each person, and therefore the individual decision of how, when, and to whom to disclose should be supported.

Intersections of race, culture, class, gender identity, and sexual orientation shape disclosure and safety; acknowledgment of such structural and systemic inequities can inform effective policy and programming.

Integrate social networks and peer systems into existing supports for women living with HIV who are navigating disclosure.

II. Centre Indigenous women’s priorities, voices, and perspectives in all efforts to advance sexual and reproductive health and rights of women living with HIV.

Indigenous-led and culturally safe supports must be available to Indigenous women living with HIV as they navigate safer HIV disclosure. Such supports should respond to the unique needs of Indigenous women living with HIV and should be grounded in culturally-relevant approaches (e.g. through incorporation of cultural ceremony or support from Elders, as appropriate).

III. Use language and terminologies that are actively de-stigmatizing, inclusive, and reflective of women living with HIV’s strengths and experience when discussing sexual and reproductive health and rights of women living with HIV.

Intentional shifts in language used to discuss HIV disclosure is essential; for example, the term ‘disclosure’ is closely tied to the legal system and its continued use may emphasize the legal aspects of HIV disclosure over individual, spiritual, cultural, and relational aspects.

IV. Strengthen and expand Knowledge Translation and Exchange (KTE) initiatives to support access to and uptake of relevant and up-to-date sexual and reproductive health and rights information for all stakeholders.

Ensure that women living with HIV have the tools and resources needed to support safer HIV disclosure, including accurate, up-to-date, evidence-informed information about their health and rights.

HIV-related stigma threatens the safety of women living with HIV - particularly with regard to HIV-disclosure. This is actively challenged by developing and implementing robust KTE efforts that target diverse audiences. Such efforts should be appropriate, applicable, and adaptable to various settings and sectors; for example, KTE efforts should be used to train and educate service providers to maintain confidentiality and promote safer service environments for women living with HIV.

V. Catalyze the reciprocal relationship between evidence and action such that action on sexual and reproductive health and research is guided by research evidence, and research is guided by what is needed for effective action.

Current laws in Canada which criminalize the non-disclosure of HIV to sexual partners threaten the health and safety of women living with HIV; such laws must be updated to reflect the current scientific understanding of HIV transmission, which indicates that either viral suppression or condom use *alone* are sufficient to prevent the sexual transmission of HIV.

Resources: Supporting Safer HIV Disclosure

View *Supporting Safer Disclosure* webinar recording at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=leAlj4pP7HU&feature=youtu.be>

Access additional webinar resources at: http://www.chiwos.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Webinar-resources_Nov16_Resources.pdf