Empowering and Engaging HIV+ women 50+ through collective dialogue to address stigma and discrimination: An ICW-North America Case Study

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Background

- People living with HIV face multiple challenges related to stigma and discrimination. Women living with HIV aged 50 and older (HIV+ women 50+) face increased challenges in accessing social and professional support. This results in isolation and mental health issues like stress and depression.
- Stigma is often compounded by other systemic and structural challenges from the Canadian society. Stigma hinders women's abilities to participate in community activities, and limits their ability and confidence to disclose. This further limits their access to determinants of health like housing, employment and education.
- To address these challenges, the International Community of Women Living with HIV-North America (ICW-NA) developed a project to engage and empower HIV+ women 50+ as part of the Greater and Meaningful Involvement of People Living with HIV (GIPA/MIPA) principle.

Stigma limits women's ability and confidence to disclose.

Methods

- This project engaged 40 HIV+ women 50+ in group exercises and skills-building activities at workshops The workshops were hosted in Toronto (n=10) and Hamilton, Ontario (n=10), and Montreal, Quebec (n=20). All workshops took place between July and November 2017, each lasting 4.5 hours.
- The workshop participants identified themselves as follows: 87% as female, 13% identified as transwomen, and their age range was 45 – 50 (28%) and 50+ (72%)
- Co-facilitated by two older adult women living with HIV, the workshops topics included:
  - Complexities of HIV stigma and discrimination and reduction strategies;
  - Self-care strategies;
  - Adherence to HIV medications;
  - HIV disclosure to children and other family members,
  - Healthy sexual relationships;
  - Social skills like cooking, knitting and sewing;
  - Basic skills in home-based care
  - English as a second language among others.

Women have adopted more service-seeking behaviour by attending more workshops offered by local HIV service organizations to dispel myths on HIV.

Results and Outcomes

- Women developed strategies to address stigma by bonding and learning together.
- The result has been women taking on leadership roles in the community to become activists and advocates for their communities.
- Women have adopted more service-seeking behaviour by attending more workshops offered by local HIV service organizations to dispel myths on HIV.
- Informal support networks have been created to offer help when need as 'community.'
- Participants shared their reflections on how the workshops had inspired attention to self-care. For example:
  - Going out to restaurants and enjoying food from different menus which makes them forget their constant worries about HIV
  - Better adherence to medication
  - Speaking out about stigma

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Challenges and Limitations

- Limited time constraints (half-day workshop) affected trusting-building amongst participants despite all being HIV+ and aged 50 and over.
- No quantifiable mechanism to track the level of reduction in stigma.
- Financial resources were not enough for follow-up to evaluate knowledge up-take.

Conclusion

HIV+ women 50+ is an innovative program that addresses the needs of HIV+ women +50 by:

- promoting critical community engagement and collective empowerment
- addressing the societal stigma and isolation.
- developing coping skills.

This program can be replicated and integrated in broader settings for other marginalized populations.

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