Understanding the concept of women-specific HIV/AIDS services: A literature review

A.J. Carter^{1,2}; S. Bourgeois³; N. O'Brien⁴; K. Abelsohn³; W. Tharao⁵; S. Greene⁶; S. Margolese³; A. Kaida¹; M. Sanchez⁷; A.K. Palmer^{1,2}; A. Cescon²; A. de Pokomandy ⁴; M.R. Loutfy³; CHIWOS Research Team

1. Simon Fraser University, Faculty of Health Sciences, Burnaby; 2. British Columbia Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS, Vancouver; 3. Women's College Research Institute, Toronto; 4. McGill University Health Centre, Montreal; 5. Women's Health in Women's Hands Community Health Centre, Toronto; 6. McMaster University, Faculty of Social Work, Hamilton; 7. ViVA, British Columbia

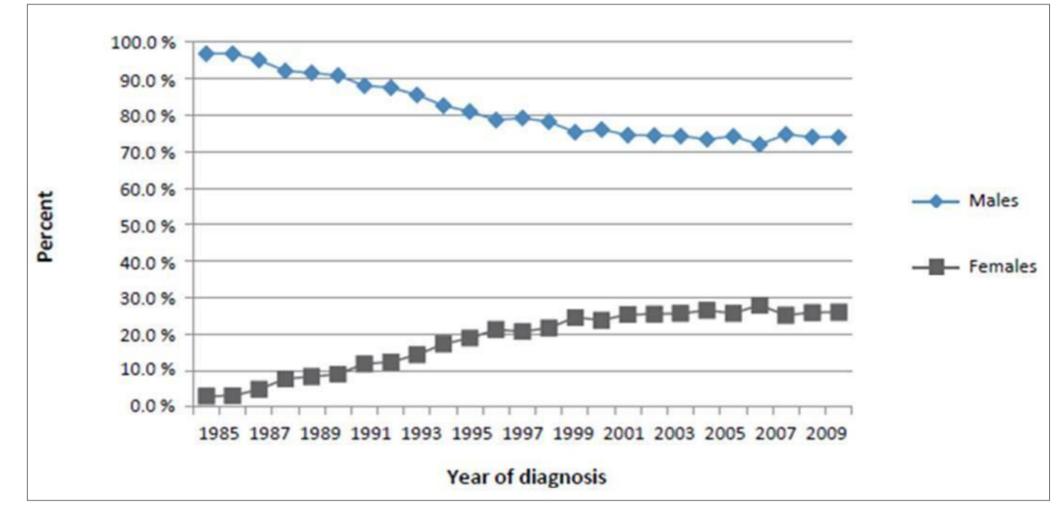
BACKGROUND

The proportion of women living with HIV in Canada has increased over the past three decades (Figure 1). Differences in the biological and social realities of men and women are key drivers of this shift and also contribute to gender variations in HIV care and treatment outcomes.

This has evoked calls for tailored services that are responsive to women's specific needs. Thus, the primary objective of this investigation was to explore the **concept of women-specific HIV/AIDS services** to identify and define what key elements underlie this approach to care.

This review was undertaken as part of the formative phase of a new community-based research project entitled the Canadian HIV Women's Sexual and Reproductive Health Cohort Study (or CHIWOS).

FIGURE 1: Proportion of HIV+ test reports by sex, 1985-2009¹.



METHODS

A comprehensive review was conducted using online databases (CSA Social Service Abstracts, OvidSP, Proquest, Psycinfo, PubMed, CINAHL), augmented with an Internet search for grey literature.

Articles were included in this review if they had women-specific services as their central focus. Articles were restricted to English language publications with no limit set on the date or place of publication.

In total, 84 articles were retrieved and 30 included for full review. Fifteen were specific to HIV/AIDS, 11 mental health and addictions, and 4 came from other disciplines.

RESULTS

Women-specific HIV/AIDS services were defined in multiple ways in the literature. We distilled this concept into it's defining features and additional dimensions.

DEFINING FEATURES:

Women-specific HIV/AIDS services often include services provided to women only and services delivered by female providers in order to better serve women and address their needs.

ADDITIONAL DIMENSIONS:

Women-specific HIV/AIDS services also often adopt approaches to care that are different than the traditional care typically provided in mixed-gender settings. These services:^{2,3}

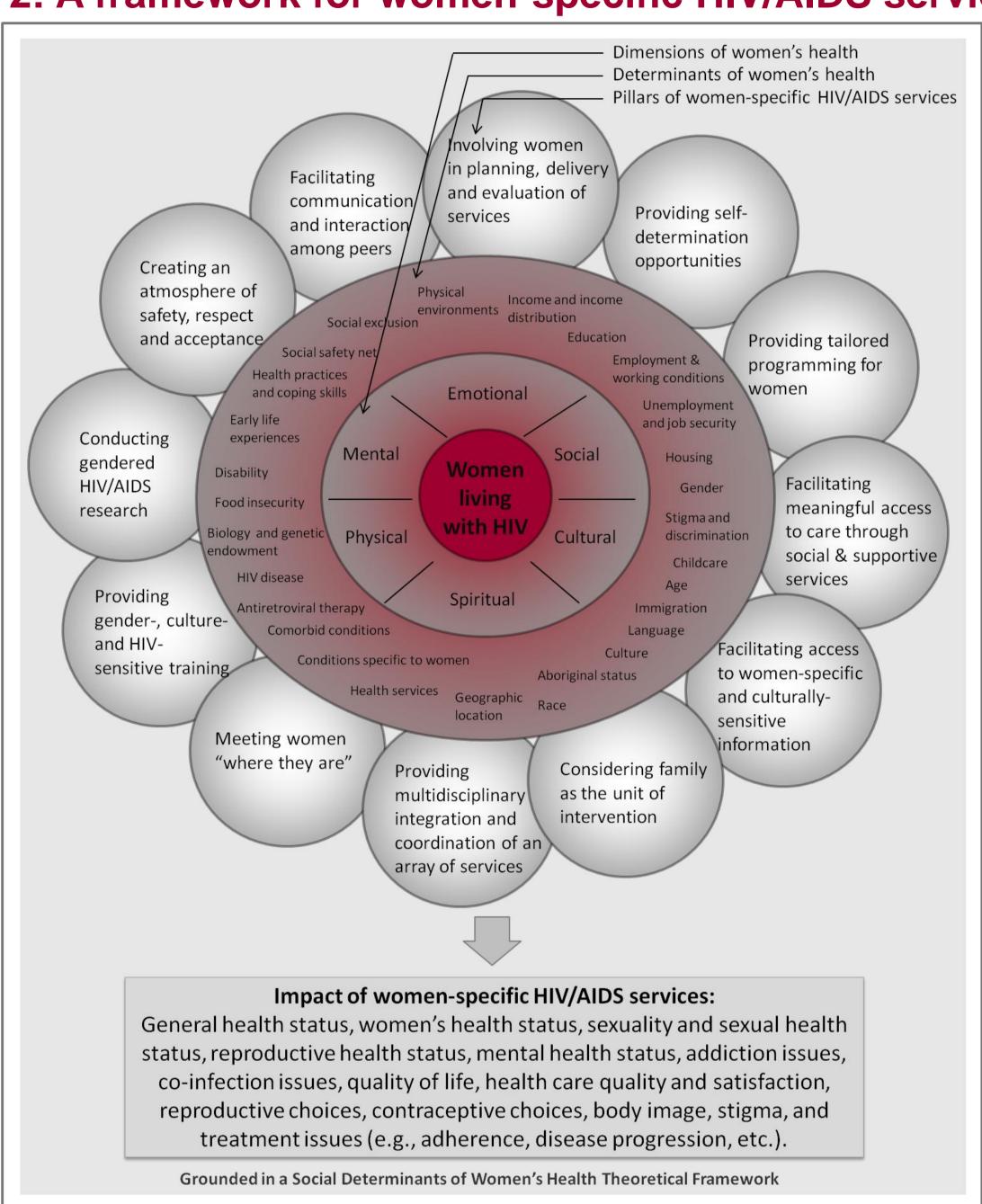
- recognize that women are unique and diverse and therefore have health/social care needs that require specially designed programs;
- understand the close connection between women's health and their whole lives and therefore address women's non-health concerns;
- give women the tools and know-how to achieve optimal health for both themselves and their family members;

RESULTS (CONTINUED)

- •respect the values, choices and preferences of the woman and her family and uphold women's rights and dignity; and
- are holistic, integrated, non-stigmatizing, peer-based, gender-sensitive and culturally relevant.

Following from this, we identified 12 specific components of holistic service delivery for women living with HIV/AIDS (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2: A framework for women-specific HIV/AIDS services.



CONCLUSIONS

Our findings indicate that the concept of women-specific HIV/AIDS services is a complex and multidimensional one that has been shaped by diverse theoretical perspectives.

Further research is needed to better understand this emerging concept, and ultimately assess the effectiveness of women-specific HIV/AIDS services in achieving optimal health outcomes for women.

This work will be undertaken in the next phase of CHIWOS, which will enroll 1,050 HIV+ women from BC, ON and QC. Study findings will help to improve the care, health and wellbeing of HIV+ women in Canada.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We gratefully acknowledge all the women living with HIV who participate in CHIWOS, the national team of co-investigators and collaborators, and the provincial Community Advisory Board (CAB) and CHIWOS Aboriginal Advisory Board (CAAB) members. For more info, please contact a Coordinator in your region or connect with us online:

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NOTES:

1. Source: Public Health Agency of Canada. (2010). HIV & AIDS in Canada. Surveillance Report to December 31, 2009. Surveillance & Risk Assessment Division, PHAC.

2. These principles may be available to women in both women-only and mixed-gender settings.

3. Some features of good HIV/AIDS service delivery may apply to women only and others may be universal to both men and women. While we explore all the potential aspects of HIV/AIDS services for women, we appreciate that they are not necessarily exclusive to women-specific services and may be important in the care of men as well.



