

WHAI NETWORK 2020- 2021 PROGRESS REPORT

Background

The Women and HIV/AIDS Initiative (WHAI) consists of 17 Coordinators embedded in HIV/AIDS serving organizations across 16 regions in Ontario. Included in this work are the contributions of the Gilbert Centre, Elevate NWO, PASAN and Oahas who continue to extend our reach and impact among women across Ontario. As a network, we build local capacity to respond to the needs of women living with or facing systemic risk for HIV acquisition. WHAI prioritizes* work with women disproportionately impacted by HIV, including women living with HIV, African, Caribbean, and Black (ACB) women including newcomers, Indigenous women, Trans women, women who use substances, women who have experienced violence, and women who are or have been incarcerated.

Over the last year, COVID-19 has had deep global impacts. In Ontario, WHAI Coordinators have shown resiliency, dedication to collective community care and development, critical thinking, and quickly adapting their work to respond to the ever-changing needs of WHAI's priority populations of women. Below is a brief summary of our work in 2020/2021, which focuses on 4 collaboratively defined goal areas. More detailed reports from H1 and H2 can be found at whai.ca/resources.

HEALTH CARE CENTRED ON WOMEN'S NEEDS AND LIVED EXPERIENCES

94% of Coordinators contributed to the Collective Goal of: Communities in Ontario will provide culturally appropriate and holistic HIV prevention and health care centered on women's needs and lived experiences.

Women's voices must be central to effective health care. Across Ontario, Coordinators found ways to build community capacity to ensure health care centres women's voices, autonomy, and experiences in their health care. They worked to increase awareness about PrEP and PrEP access for women, shared CHIWOS' toolkits and integrate OCS and OHESI data into their work to address the intersection of anti-Black racism, COVID-19 and HIV on the health of women. Coordinators also sought new ways to learn from and integrate relevant Ontario based research into their work from a race-based analysis lens.

This year, the WHAI Network worked with 119 local community partners and testing providers across Ontario to build awareness about HIV and STBBI risk factors and service limitations due to COVID-19 and foster access to testing for priority populations of women. Coordinators found ways to adjust their focus and collaborate with stakeholders to plan virtual gatherings and educational sessions to address awareness of HIV and STBBIs prevention, testing, and health care with a focus on women's lived experiences. Across the province, Coordinators have focused their efforts on sharing information and educating community partners on how to refer women to accessible HIV and STBBI testing services, and supported testing programs such as [I'm Ready](#) and [GetAKit](#). Coordinators also worked closely with [ACCHO](#) and other ACB focused organizations to build awareness about HIV and STBBI service limitations due to COVID-19, increase awareness about HIV self-testing and support the health and wellbeing of ACB women.

* The prioritization of these populations within WHAI work, and organizations serving these populations, is based on feedback and data collected during our provincial Situational Analysis (2016), our Collective Impact work, and epidemiological findings from the Ontario Cohort Study, Ontario HIV Epidemiology and Surveillance Initiative and the Canadian HIV Women's Sexual and Reproductive Health Cohort Study (CHIWOS).

ECONOMIC SECURITY

76%

of Coordinators contributed to the collective goal of: WHAI will work with priority populations of women and community partners to help increase community support and reduce harms related to economic insecurity.

While economic insecurity disproportionately impacts women living with HIV and facing structural risk for HIV acquisition, COVID-19 has heightened these realities significantly. Coordinators worked collaboratively with community partners to highlight and address the financial impact of COVID-19 on women within WHAI's priority populations, in particular, racialized and underhoused women. The redeployment of Coordinators resulting from COVID-19 played a key role in community capacity building to support emergency measures as Coordinators moved to support food security initiatives, grassroots organizations, shelters and more to address the impact of intersecting crises such as poverty, gender-based violence, anti-Black/anti-Indigenous racism and overdose crises. Coordinators worked to stay informed about available services and programs and find creative ways to share this information with women and service providers to strengthen the collaborative community response.

WOMEN & HARM REDUCTION

94%

of Coordinators contributed to the collective goal of: Organizations and communities will have increased capacity to work with women who use substances from a strengths-based, harm reduction and overdose prevention perspective that honours self-determination, human rights and choice –and integrate a trauma-informed approach

Gender continues to be an important consideration in how harm reduction and overdose prevention work is structured across Ontario and beyond, integrating the lived experiences of women and femme people. While the COVID-19 pandemic paralyzed service delivery in many communities, harm reduction and overdose prevention continued to be a priority. In the face of these converging crises, WHAI Coordinators [worked with over 80 organizations](#) to increase capacity to work with women who use substances and increase women's access to harm reduction and overdose prevention support. Much of this work was done through participation in working groups across the province to assist shelters and community-based agencies in the development of gender-inclusive programs and collaboration with community partners, including women with lived experience, to strengthen low barrier, culturally informed harm reduction. During the last year (and prior to), Coordinators worked with their ASOs to keep their harm reduction programs open during the pandemic. However, this brought with it a great sense of loss, trauma, and struggle experienced by Coordinators and community members as losses due to overdose grew, Coordinators supported women and community during this time, helping to organize memorials, hold vigils, coordinate community actions, and support people experiencing loss within their own organizations as well as others. Much of this work included collaboration with [ACCHO strategy workers](#), [ACB](#) and [Indigenous organizations](#). It also included capacity-building work with Vikki Reynolds to support ASO workers with loss and crisis, culturally informed harm reduction campaigns, the planning of a province-wide series of harm reduction webinars, and the continued use of the Women & Harm Reduction: A Capacity Building Toolkit to strengthen harm reduction work with women who use substances.

COMMUNITY & EMOTIONAL WELLNESS

100% of Coordinators contributed to the collective goal of: Through an anti-oppressive lens, WHAI will foster the leadership of our priority populations of women and community partners to build community capacity for social connectedness, emotional wellness and positive health outcomes.

Community connectedness is critical in reducing isolation, stigma, and improving women's overall health and well-being. This is especially true with existing public health measures related to the spread of COVID-19. This year, WHAI Coordinators collaborated with over 100 community partners to build opportunities for community connectedness with priority populations of women and service providers. Coordinators worked with women with lived experience, community organizations, coalitions and various stakeholders to guide online discussions and events on topics that influence women's overall health and well-being. This was done through organized events such as paint nights, film clubs, virtual book clubs, and Love Positive Women, Black History Month and International Women's Day events, among many others! Through their work, Coordinators continued to utilize a framework of community and emotional wellness to address the intersections of COVID-19, anti-Black racism, colonial violence, mental and physical health and wellness, experiences of homelessness and current realities of women's lives, while also identifying opportunities for allyship, solidarity and collective community care.

COMMITMENT TO ANTI-BLACK RACISM

WHAI is deeply committed to the dismantling of white privilege, white supremacy and anti-Black racism and addressing the realities and experiences of colonial violence as well as the systems that were created to oppress Black, Indigenous, and racialized peoples. Over the last year, WHAI has been devoted to intentionally reflecting on our role in the community and how we can strengthen our approach to this work and our support of ACB women across Ontario. This has included recognizing deficits and gaps in our work, and strategizing to effectively strengthen our work. In this process, the Network engaged in the following initiatives throughout the year:



- Facilitated conversations with WHAI Coordinators to help identify needs, experiences and a collaborative plan within our network
- a Coordinator survey to better understand experiences, knowledge, and ways we can strengthen our work,
- 2 facilitated sessions with Black, Brown, Indigenous and other racialized Coordinators (led by Dr. Rai Reece)
- 1 facilitated session with white Coordinators (facilitated and co-created by Dr. Rai Reece and Dr. Sarah Switzer),
- A thorough review and evaluation of WHAI's tools and resources using an anti-Black racism lens contributing to the updating of these tools
- The prioritization of learning from and amplifying the work of ACB women and women's organizations throughout WHAI work
- Establishing a workgroup for WHAI Coordinators at ASOs who do not have an ACCHO Strategy worker to strengthen anti-Black racism work locally
- Participation in sector-wide anti-Black racism work to support a foundation for structural and lasting change

This work has been impactful and has led to the identification of further work into the 2021 / 2022 year. We know that there much more work to do and we are committed to learning and unlearning what is required in order to address the broken systems and structures that impact the lives of Black, Brown, Indigenous and racialized women that are at systemic risk for HIV in Ontario.

ENGAGING WOMEN WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE

Though there were many challenges due to the pandemic, Coordinators were able to engage 84 women across the province from our priority populations as leaders and collaborators in this work.

- COVID-19 public health measures made it increasingly difficult to build and maintain partnerships with women, however, Coordinators worked to find creative ways to work with partners and engage women from priority populations, building and strengthening our collective work
- Throughout the network, women were meaningfully engaged as peers, volunteers, speakers, moderators, and advisory members, collaborating in work planning and program development both in local regional work and our provincial work.
Positive feedback from women: the programs and activities have been very rewarding and beneficial as these sessions and activities create opportunity to speak to their life experiences and creates opportunities to engage women from all backgrounds and experiences



KEY SUCCESSES

Despite many challenges during the pandemic, **166 gatherings were held & over 3400 participants were engaged**

- This year, interagency collaboration grew significantly and was extremely beneficial across the province, enabling collective work toward provincial goals, supporting capacity building, increasing audience reach, and fostering greater impact among women and service providers
- Coordinators reported feeling confident in planning virtual events and utilizing various platforms to engage with their communities
- This year WHAI has engaged in work to meaningfully address anti-Black and Anti-Indigenous racism in our communities. This work included thoughtful evaluation of WHAI's resources and tools using an anti-Black racism analysis,
- Increased collaboration and partnerships with colleagues within ASOs and the PPNS in daily work, increasing strength of community collaboration
- Key events: The Intersecting Realities of Gender Based Violence and COVID-19 (Webinar), 16 Days of Activism Campaign, Love Positive Women/Black History Month Panel Discussion and Campaign: Inspiring Solidarity with Radical Love, and planning of Women & Harm Reduction Webinar Series and Sex Work Rights & Advocacy meetings (both continuing into 2021-2022)