

# Creating welcoming spaces

## IN THIS SECTION

- |    |                                       |    |  |
|----|---------------------------------------|----|--|
| 2  | Creating welcoming spaces             | 17 | Acknowledging strength                               |
| 4  | Physical space                        | 17 | Ensuring representation                              |
| 10 | Organizational culture and atmosphere | 18 | Food   |
| 11 | Individual staff actions              | 18 | Centering Indigenous experience                      |
| 16 | Strategies to create welcoming spaces | 20 | 4 Steps to engaging <b>women</b> in welcoming spaces |
|    |                                       | 23 | Moving from planning to change making                |



# Creating welcoming spaces

## INTRODUCTION

Now that we have explored some of the many ways **women** experience stigma, discrimination and marginalization, and how these experiences can impact **women's** health outcomes, it is important to find ways to reduce these experiences and build welcoming, inclusive community spaces. As workers in community organizations, we are in important positions to do this work. This section will explore:

- 1 What a welcoming space is, including the physical space, the organizational culture, and the role of individual staff
- 2 Strategies to create welcoming spaces in our community organizations

## WHAT IS A WELCOMING SPACE?

'Welcoming spaces' is a phrase referring to spaces that help connect people and create a sense of community. Many agencies are oriented to deliver services by professionals in an expert role. Innate in this dynamic is a relationship of "professional" and "client" creating a sense of need, vulnerability and disempowerment rather than acknowledging the strength, skill and expertise of **women**. Welcoming spaces seek to shift this dynamic and build inclusive communities. These are places where **women** can go to foster connections with each other, share resources and information and feel a sense of belonging.

"Wellness should be community wellness. Everyone able to help out and take care of each other, look out for each other and be safe together. No hate."

- Woman who experienced violence;  
impacted by COVID-19, Thunder Bay



**Note:** Many sectors have done amazing work to create safe and welcoming spaces including LGBTQ, violence against **women**, trauma-informed, and Indigenous sectors. In addition, in 1997 the AIDS Committee of Ottawa developed a seminal resource on making space work for communities living with HIV.<sup>1</sup> This toolkit has drawn on much of this great work.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

Check out the **Women and HIV in Ontario: An Introductory Toolkit** resource to find helpful ways to build these skills.

➔ [www.whai.ca/resources](http://www.whai.ca/resources)

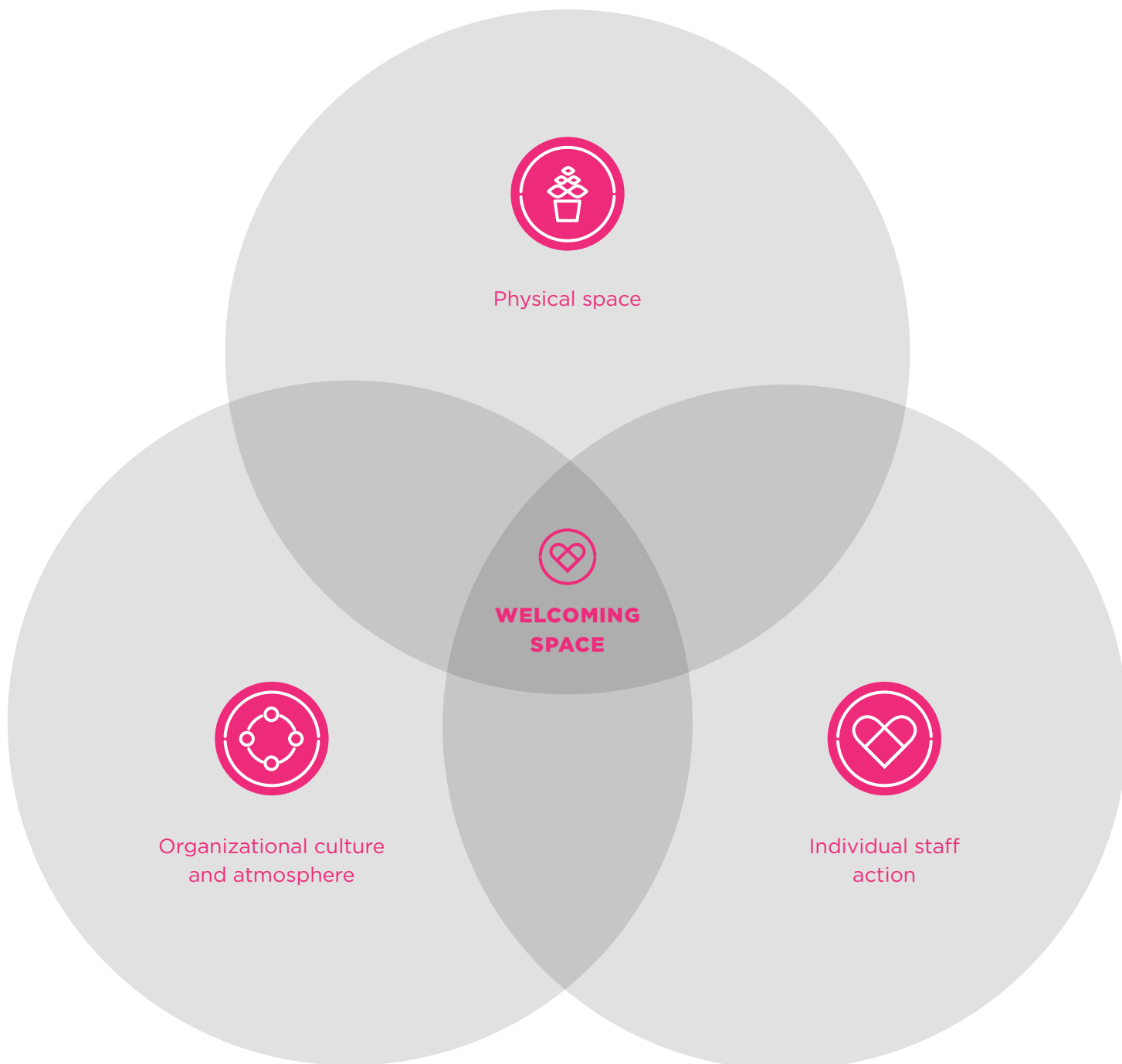




Creating welcoming spaces involves making an ongoing commitment to address the systemic and structural factors that increase HIV risk, becoming informed about HIV prevention, being able to provide accessible HIV resources, being able to make trusted referrals, and committing to reducing HIV stigma and discrimination

## COMPONENTS OF A WELCOMING SPACE

We are working from a model where a welcoming space considers three areas:





# Physical space

One aspect of a welcoming space is the physical environment. The physical space at your organization is important for a few reasons:

- it sets the tone for the impression **women** will have of your organization
- the physical organization of space directs the flow of people, encouraging engagement
- the way space is designed has an impact on how **women** will experience your organization and develop a sense of connection

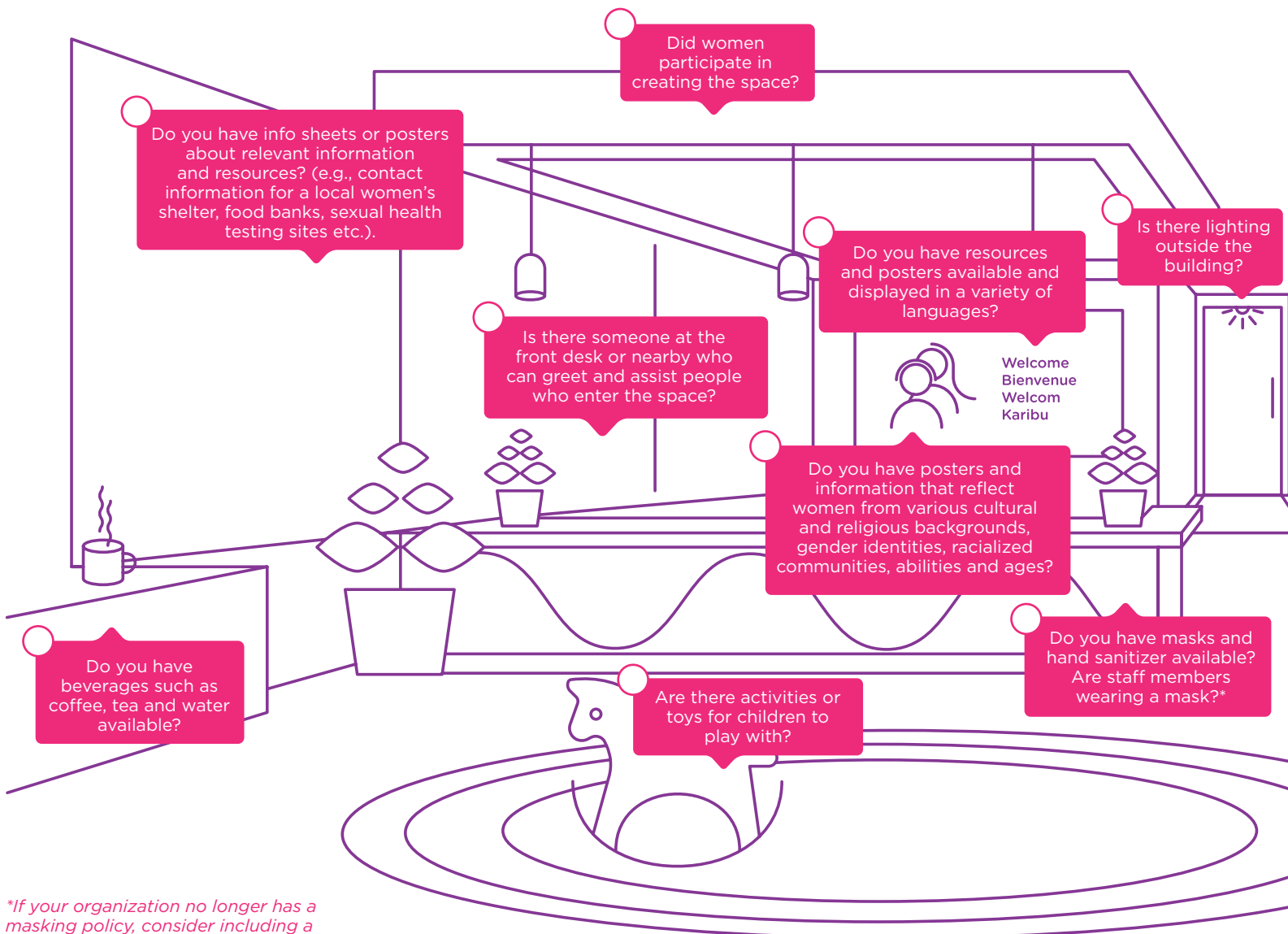


## WHEN YOU LOOK AROUND YOUR ORGANIZATION, WHAT DO YOU SEE?

These are just some of the physical components of space that can affect how welcoming it is to women.



Check off the physical components present in your space.



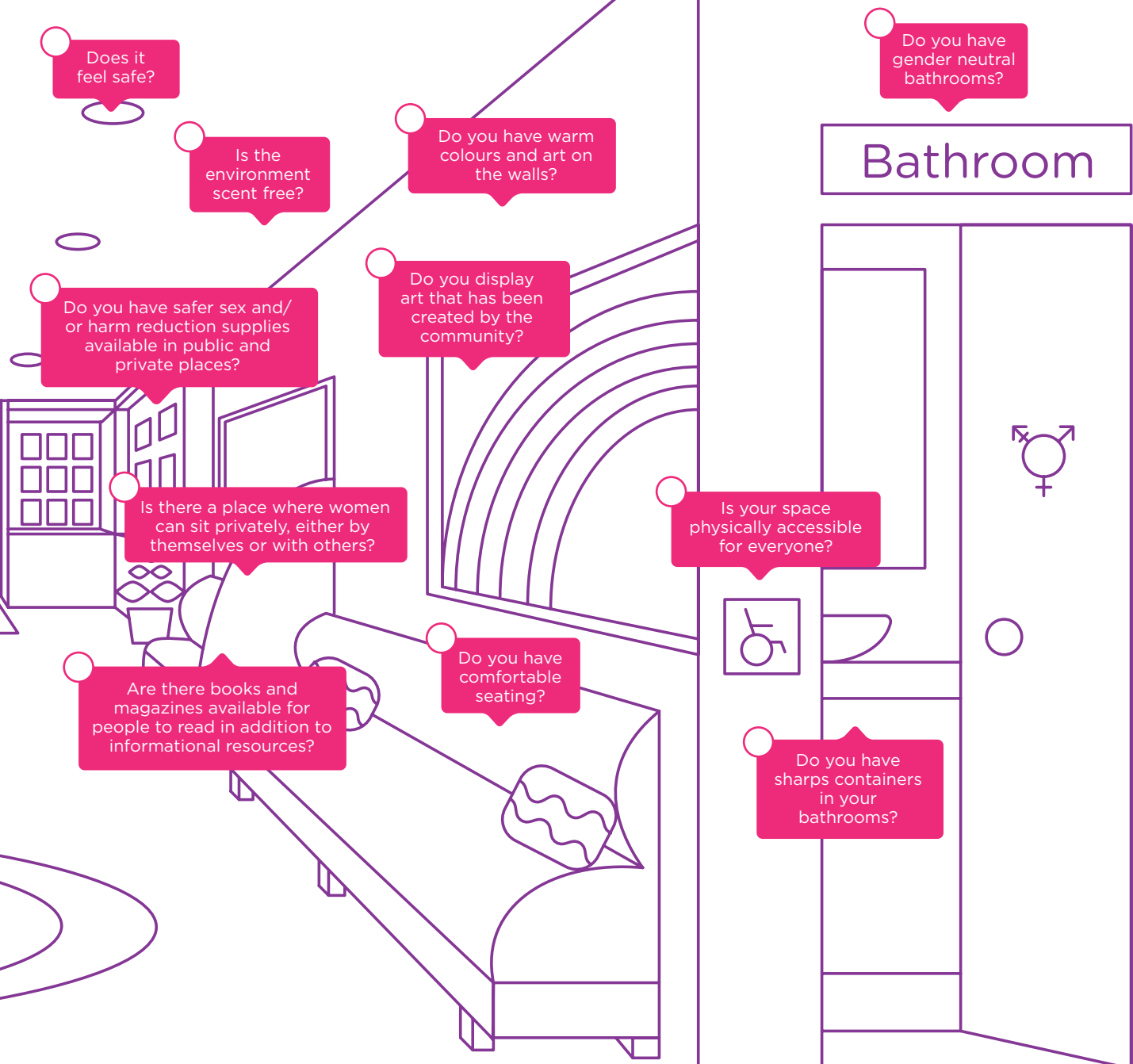
*\*If your organization no longer has a masking policy, consider including a sign indicating that staff will use masks if someone would feel safer in an environment where everyone is masking.*

## ACCESSIBILITY

In many cases, accessibility is not a consideration but a requirement by law for organizations and establishments that are open to the public. Ontario's Building Code Accessibility Standards lays out accessibility considerations for buildings. The sections on barrier-free access paths of travel, seating, and public washrooms might be particularly helpful as you reflect on the physical space of your environment.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

- Check out **Ontario's Building Code accessibility rules**: [ontario.ca/page/accessibility-ontarios-building-code](https://ontario.ca/page/accessibility-ontarios-building-code)
- For more information, check out this link that explains the **Duty to Accommodate under the Ontario Human Rights Code**: [ohrc.on.ca/en/policy-ableism-and-discrimination-based-disability/8-duty-accommodate](https://ohrc.on.ca/en/policy-ableism-and-discrimination-based-disability/8-duty-accommodate)





## PHYSICAL SPACE CHECKLIST

Research has shown that physical environments, when well designed around welcoming concepts, lead to higher rates of engagement and satisfaction.<sup>2</sup> This means that welcoming spaces not only attract more **women** to come and participate in the organization, but that health outcomes for **women** can improve as well. There is also a strong relationship between how safe **women** feel and their use of the space. Included below are a set of guiding questions which have been adapted from work UN **Women** has done on making spaces physically safer to access:<sup>3</sup>

- ☐ Is there easy access to and from your organization (i.e. public transportation)?
- ☐ Is there easy movement within your organization?
- ☐ Is there lighting so that **women** can see and be seen?
- ☐ Are there easy-to-read signs to help **women** find their way?
- ☐ Does your organization maintain clear, well-kept paths where people can easily see each other?
- ☐ Is there general visibility of the entire space, free from hiding places where a person could wait unseen?
- ☐ Does your organization include mixed uses – places to hangout, walk, eat, etc. for diverse user groups at different times of day?
- ☐ Does your organization have provisions for young children and the elderly (because **women** are often caretakers), e.g. wide hallways for strollers, wheelchairs and walkers, and childcare?

“It’s homey and friendly, like a living room in an apartment.”<sup>1</sup>

- Review of a welcoming drop in centre



## FUNDING YOUR WELCOMING SPACE

We recognize that when talking about examining and making changes to your organization’s physical space, concerns can often arise about cost and feasibility. There are several ways to make changes to your physical environment that are low to no cost and can engage **women** in the process.

These are explored on page 16

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

You can refer to the **Women and HIV in Ontario: An Introductory Toolkit** resource for a checklist of other physical components of a welcoming space.

➔ [www.whai.ca/resources](http://www.whai.ca/resources)



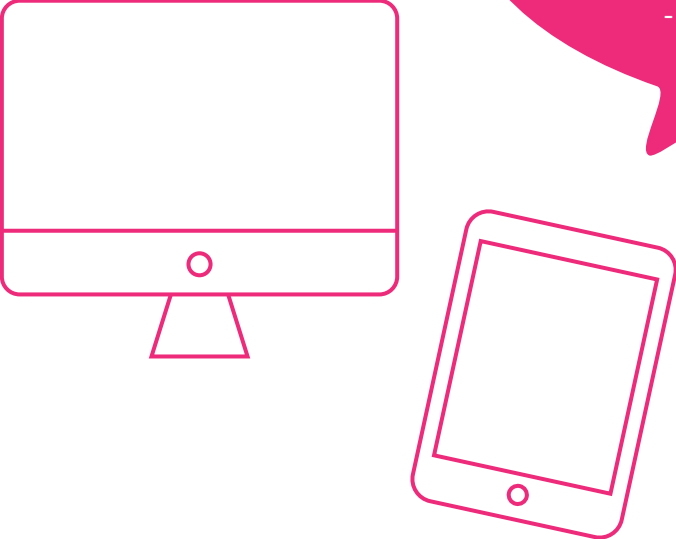


## CREATING A WELCOMING SPACE ONLINE

Since the start of COVID-19 pandemic, a lot of programming and events have shifted to online and virtual formats. While you might not be able to take advantage of physical space, there are still ways to build welcoming online spaces. In this section, we will provide a few tips and considerations to make online sessions more accessible for attendees.

**Zoom** is the most commonly used platform for virtual meetings so our content in this section will focus on Zoom. However, many of these considerations are relevant to other online settings so be sure to consult the user guide for whatever platform you may choose to use. **Plan ahead:**

- Familiarize yourself with the platforms you will be using. Many communications platforms go through regular updates so icons, layouts, and features may change over time.
- Ensure that meeting invites + Zoom links are sent in advance. Resend the link to all attendees 1-2 hours before your session is due to start.
- Be sure to ask attendees about any online accessibility needs they may have in advance. Communicate available accommodations in the week leading up to the meeting so everyone is on the same page day of.
- Ensure that you send the full meeting invite generated by Zoom and not just the meeting link. The full invite contains the unique meeting ID, passcode, meeting link, as well as a phone number to dial into the meeting by phone for attendees who may not have access to the internet or a computer.
- Consider sending out a link to Zoom's "Getting Started" page along with the meeting invite in advance.



"Some women have reported feeling isolated because they don't want others in their community to know they are living with HIV. Attending virtual gatherings with people from other communities across Ontario has really helped reduce isolation and build connection and friendships."

- A community worker



## SOME USEFUL FEATURES ON ZOOM



### WAITING ROOM

This feature creates an online “waiting room”, where attendees have to be allowed into the meeting by the host. It is good practice to enable the waiting room to protect safety and confidentiality and prevent “Zoom Bombers” – i.e., people who enter online meetings uninvited for the purpose of “trolling” or disruption.



### SCREEN-SHARING

This feature allows hosts and co-hosts to share their screen. This is a helpful way to share information, visuals, or facilitate the activities that are included in this toolkit. When using screen-sharing, ensure that no confidential or private information is accidentally shared by only selecting the window that you intend to share with the group.



### BREAKOUT ROOMS

Breakout rooms allow the host to break up the larger group into smaller “Zoom rooms” and assign attendees accordingly. This feature is a great way to facilitate group discussions in meetings where there are large numbers of attendees.



### REACTIONS

Reactions are a great way to “respond” to people’s comments without having to speak or type a response in the chat. As a facilitator, you can ask attendees to respond with a “thumbs up” to things like logistical questions (e.g., “Can everyone see my screen?” “Is this front large enough?”). Additionally, you can use hearts or emoji reactions to show support for someone who is speaking.



### LIVE TRANSCRIPTION/ CLOSED-CAPTIONING

More recent versions of Zoom use an integrated AI feature to provide live transcription – meaning captions are auto-generated when someone is speaking. As the host, you can enable “automated captions” prior to starting the meeting, which allows for attendees to turn on closed-captioning if they need it.



### RECORDING

Zoom has a built-in recording feature which allows for meetings to be recorded and saved to be viewed later. This is an especially useful feature for events like webinars and information sessions. If you plan to record an event or a section of an event, be sure to inform attendees in advance. Let attendees know that if they are uncomfortable being recorded, they can turn off their cameras & change their display name, or leave the session and return when the recording is complete. Be clear about how the recording will be used after the session – i.e., will it be emailed to all registered attendees? Will it be uploaded to a website? Will it be used as a learning resource?

### MORE INFORMATION

- For more information about these features and how to set them up, visit [support.zoom.com](https://support.zoom.com)
- For more information about security and safety on Zoom, visit [zoom.us/en/trust/security/](https://zoom.us/en/trust/security/)
- For a helpful video tutorial on using Zoom, check out [youtube.com/watch?v=QOUwumKCW7M](https://youtube.com/watch?v=QOUwumKCW7M)



## DURING YOUR MEETING

- 1 Let attendees know they can change their display name to protect their confidentiality. They may choose to use their first name, a nickname, or a pseudonym.
- 2 Review and establish group norms, as you would at an in-person event. Here are two suggested norms that might help an online session go more smoothly.
  - Anyone who is not speaking should have their speaker set to “mute” to avoid feedback and background noise that might be distracting for others.
  - Use the “raise hand” symbol before speaking. This can help the facilitator to keep a speaking order if there are multiple people wanting to make comments.

Otherwise, all norms that apply to in-person events, such as respecting the confidentiality of the group & being respectful of the facilitator and the attendees also apply to online settings.

- 3 As a facilitator, it is helpful to keep your own camera on to facilitate engagement. This way, eye contact and body language can still be used to foster a sense of welcoming and belonging. Encourage attendees to turn on their cameras but let them know that cameras can remain off if they are more comfortable that way.

## AFTER YOUR MEETING

Send a follow-up email to attendees to thank them for their time. If relevant, include notes from the meeting or any slides that might have been shared. If the meeting was recorded, provide details on when and how the recording can be accessed. If possible, include a link or document with relevant community resources.

It is good practice to collect feedback after sessions. In a less formal setting, you can ask attendees to respond via email with any feedback or suggestions they may have. Otherwise, you can develop a Google form with specific questions and formats and allow attendees to give feedback anonymously.

- 4 The Zoom chat is a great way for members who may not be as comfortable speaking to engage with the session. The chat can be used to ask questions and respond to comments. Zoom is set by default to message all attendees; however, attendees can choose to message individuals directly by selecting them in the chat. The facilitator or host can also turn this feature on and off. It is important to note the confidentiality of zoom messaging is different based on the different versions. Check the confidentiality settings and make sure participants are aware in advance of the meeting.

As facilitator, be sure to pay attention to the chat so you don't miss any questions or comments. It can be hard to monitor the chat if you are sharing your screen so it may be helpful to have a second facilitator on hand, or appoint a group member to keep an eye on the chat while you are sharing content.

- 5 If you are able to, consider signing on to your Zoom meeting about 15-20 minutes in advance, and remaining on the call for some time after the session ends. This allows for group members to ask you questions privately (or in a smaller group setting), share feedback, or ask for more information or resources. Think of the informal interactions and conversations that take place among staff and attendees in the lead up to and following an event – building in some buffer time around your scheduled online session may allow for people on the call to interact with one another and the facilitator as they would in a physical space.

### MORE INFORMATION

➤ Check out this link for more information on setting up a Google form: [support.google.com/docs/answer/6281888?hl=en&co=GENIE.Platform%3DDesktop](https://support.google.com/docs/answer/6281888?hl=en&co=GENIE.Platform%3DDesktop).



# Organizational culture and atmosphere

Organizational culture and atmosphere also play an important role in creating welcoming spaces.<sup>4</sup> Consider the ways in which the structure and systems within your organization create a culture and atmosphere that normatively governs how people exist and operate in that space and how that can affect **women** living with and facing systemic risks for HIV.



## ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE & ATMOSPHERE CHECKLIST

- ☐ Are the staff committed to working from a feminist, anti-racist, anti-oppression perspective?
- ☐ Do hiring practices foster representation from important communities such as Indigenous **women** and African, Caribbean and Black **women**?
- ☐ Does your organization have policies and procedures that will ensure **women** are safe and included?
- ☐ Do you have policies about disclosure and confidentiality?
- ☐ Do you operate from a strong harm reduction framework?
- ☐ Are staff familiar with trauma-informed work and strategies?
- ☐ Are the staff open to having non-judgemental conversations with **women** as well as with co-workers about HIV and sexual health?
- ☐ Are community members allowed to use the space without engaging in a scheduled program or seeking support? Is the space welcome to people who are looking for somewhere to sit or just be?
- ☐ Do staff work from a harm reduction standpoint?

Having these systems-level discussions isn't necessarily easy. Even when the policies exist, there are challenges in day-to-day practices that can negatively impact the **women** coming through your doors.

Having inclusive policies and making a commitment to working within a welcoming organizational culture makes your organization more appealing to **women**.<sup>5</sup> These policies are the foundation of how people interact with each other in your space.



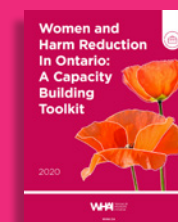
## TRAUMA INFORMED WORK

Many **women** have experienced traumatizing events in their lives. Given the intersecting stigma **women** living with HIV and **women** having systemic risk for HIV face, a trauma-informed approach is particularly important to create a welcoming space.

## MORE INFORMATION

For more information about working from a Harm Reduction framework, check out our **Women and Harm Reduction In Ontario: A Capacity Building Toolkit**.

 [www.whai.ca/resources](http://www.whai.ca/resources)





# Individual staff actions

As workers in community agencies, body language and what we say can impact the experience that **women** have when they come through the door. Being kind, warm, and treating people with patience and dignity can make a world of difference for **women** living with HIV, regardless of whether you know someone's status or not. Individual staff actions can be an important pathway to building trust and in creating space for **women** to share their experiences and expertise. These strategies also foster a trauma-informed approach in your community organization.



## INDIVIDUAL STAFF ACTION CHECKLIST

Take time to evaluate your own capacity to work with **women** who are living with HIV or facing systemic risk for HIV acquisition.

- ☐ Do you feel comfortable in your ability to work from an informed place?
- ☐ Are you prepared to listen and embrace **women's** experience and expertise as part of building inclusive communities and creating community change?
- ☐ Are you able to ask non-judgemental questions when you don't understand something?
- ☐ Are you able to work with **women** to address the stigma and discrimination they may be experiencing as a result of HIV?
- ☐ Are you able to make an ongoing commitment to learning and unlearning your biases?

This means challenging our own ideas of professionalism and expertise as a "service provider" compared to providing support and working with **women** as experts of their own lives. Ultimately, this means switching the dynamic of who has the expert knowledge, and shifting away from "client" to community member. It also means shifting away from the notion of people as broken and in need of expert help.

These individual level assessments can be difficult but it is important for us to work together to create systemic change, and transform **women's** experiences in our community organizations.

"When people come to our organization, we greet each and every person. We want to know everyone, and to create a warm space. And we want people to feel comfortable to talk to us and tell us about what's happening in their life and in the community. This helps us to be aware of what areas of work we need to be doing in our community. We divide our staff time so that there is always someone responsible for greeting people coming in and having a conversation."

- A worker at an HIV service organization in Ontario



## BODY LANGUAGE

Body language can make a significant difference in a **woman's** experience with us. Consider how you approach people who come into your community organization. Speaking gently and calmly, giving physical space, standing slightly to the side, and having relaxed limbs can all help create a welcoming space. Actions such as approaching quickly, speaking loudly or aggressively, standing too close and crossing your arms can all feel intimidating and even confrontational. Keep in mind that body language can differ between cultures and social groups.



## WHAT WE SAY

Words carry power and have the ability to affect the way we see ourselves, others, and the world around us. Language has the ability to empower and strengthen relationships with **women** accessing services. However, inappropriate and disrespectful language can further isolate and contribute to the stigma experienced by marginalized communities. Inclusive and respectful language is an integral part of ensuring a safe and welcoming space.

When working with **women** it is important to use “people first” language.<sup>7</sup> This means that the person is always put before their diagnosis and is not defined by specific experiences. For example, when we say ‘person living with HIV’, or ‘person who uses drugs’ we place the person first and ensure they are not limited to their HIV status or experience using drugs. By defining people first, we affirm and emphasize our shared humanity, and acknowledge that identities are nuanced, evolving, and layered.<sup>7</sup>



## A WARM WELCOME

To help create a welcoming environment in your organization, instead of asking “can I help you?” when someone enters your organization, say a warm hello and let them know where the coffee or drinks are. This will allow people to get comfortable with the space before they actively engage.<sup>6</sup> It can also be a warm way of engaging people who are visibly distressed or upset while offering support.






“Some campaigns use sex positive language that can be seen as in your face or too explicit in certain communities where it is difficult to talk about sex. These campaigns can be important to build sex positivity and starting important conversations about sex; however, they can also be seen as offensive in some communities. It is important for us to be thoughtful about language and how it impacts various groups when we create messaging.”




- A worker at an HIV service organization in Ontario



## LANGUAGE SENSITIVITY

Use the table below to explore how to speak about HIV sensitivity. Language is dynamic and adapts to societal changes, evolving to mirror our shifting perspectives and self-perceptions. Understanding the historical and contextual roots of words is crucial, especially when dealing with terms deemed “inappropriate.” Embracing these linguistic shifts fosters a more inclusive and understanding environment for everyone.

 AVOID USING	 USE	 WHY
AIDS patient, HIV-infected	Living with HIV	It is important to put the person before the HIV status. Further, HIV is an infection that attacks the body’s immune system. Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) is the most advanced stage of the disease. With current medical advancements, AIDS has been largely eradicated in North America and people living with HIV can experience full and healthy lives just like those without HIV. <sup>8</sup>
Mother-to-child transmission	Vertical or perinatal transmission	The term mother-to-child transmission is based on cis-normative gender expectations and assumes the birth parent will be the “mother.” It also excludes the possibility of transmission prior to birth, where the term fetus is used instead of child or baby. It also perpetuates “mother blaming.” <sup>8</sup>
HIV/AIDS	HIV or AIDS	HIV is a chronic illness - most people living with HIV do not have AIDS. <sup>8</sup> It is important for us to be aware of what HIV and AIDS mean, and use the correct language for what we are talking about.
Coloured people	People of colour, racialized people	Using people-first language is important. The term “racialized” is helpful because it identifies groups who experience different economic, political, social and psychological treatment based solely on the racial and or ethnic group they identify with or are perceived as belonging to. Terms such as “coloured people” emerged in contexts of slavery, segregation, and apartheid and are no longer used today. <sup>9</sup>

 AVOID USING	 USE	 WHY
Prostitute, prostitution	Sex Work, <b>women</b> who trade sex, <b>women</b> who sell sexual services, sex working <b>women</b>	Prostitution/prostitute is a deeply-rooted negative and legalistic term. <sup>10</sup> It is also important to use people first language here. <b>Women</b> who sex work often get labelled by their work rather than recognizing them as people.
Drug user, addict, drug abuser, junkie, crack whore	Person who uses drugs / <b>woman</b> who uses drugs	It is important to put the person first and ensure they are not defined by drug-related experiences.
Clean	Sober	The use of the term 'clean' is rooted in blood drug screening; however, it carries a message about people who use drugs being unclean or dirty which is harmful.
Tranny or Transsexual	Transgender or Trans	<p>Tranny is a derogatory term used to describe Trans people. It is considered a transphobic slur as it has historically been used by cis people against trans people, notably trans <b>women</b>.</p> <p>While transsexual was a term that was commonly used, today, Trans communities prefer "Transgender" and often, "Trans". Transgender is a more inclusive and affirming term than transsexual because it includes the experience of those who pursue medical changes to affirm gender as well as those who do not. Additionally, Trans is a broader term that focuses more on identity and sense of self rather than sex assigned at birth.<sup>11</sup></p>

## THREE PRACTICAL TIPS FOR USING INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE:



### Educate yourself

It is your responsibility to stay up to date on anti-oppressive language and practices. Consider presentations from other community partners, have conversations with colleagues, and access the abundant list of online resources available to you.



### Use plain language

Be aware of varying literacy levels and primary languages spoken, avoid 'jargon' that may be inaccessible, and make sure your community organization is connected with interpretation services. Where possible, have resources printed in various languages.



### Listen to **women** and use the terminology they use in defining their own sexuality, gender and family relationships.

**Women** are experts of their own lives and know what terms they prefer to use to express themselves (be mindful that in some situations **women** may use terminology that is not acceptable for individuals not identifying within a specific community to use).

## WELCOMING SPACES FOR STAFF

In community organizations that provide social programs and supports, the morale and happiness of staff is directly linked to the quality of programs we can provide. At the foundational level, we are producing a human product (support, community). When workers feel valued, comfortable and happy at work, the quality of their “product” will improve. When building welcoming spaces, it is important to also consider the needs, wants and strengths of our staff teams.

Ways to do this include asking staff what would make them feel more comfortable at work, asking staff to participate in decision making, allowing staff to personalize their workspace or bring pets to work occasionally (permitting there are no health issues), encouraging collaboration, promoting work/life balance, and creating a culture where staff feel valued for their efforts.

Other key considerations for staff wellness include ensuring staff receive living wages and benefits. Recognize the impacts of burnout, particularly for staff in community organizations and service delivery. It is important to develop strategies to address burnout, such as regular check-ins about workloads and pathways for open communication between staff and managers.

At HIV/AIDS and community organizations, peer workers are individuals who are recruited on the basis of their lived experience and proximity to communities within priority populations. To create a safe working environment for peers, it is important to ensure that peers are fairly compensated for both their lived experience and time. Ensure that role descriptions and deliverables are clear and ensure the work of peer workers is valued within the organization's culture.

# Strategies to create welcoming spaces

Now that we have established what welcoming spaces are, the following section provides practical strategies to build welcoming spaces.



Acknowledging  
Strength



Ensuring  
Representation



Food



Centering Indigenous  
Experience

Learn more >>





# Acknowledging strength

Now that you're comfortable with the framework of welcoming spaces, how do you actually work to improve your own space? The first step is acknowledging that **women** in your community are the experts. It is more impactful to engage **women** from a place of strength and to explore what they would like and what they can offer to the process than to work from a place of need and try to "fix" or "solve" **women's** problems for them.



## ACTION CHECKLIST



Encourage **women** to share their ideas, rather than try to fix or solve **women's** problems.



# Ensuring representation

People feel more connected when they can see people they identify with. If your agency aims to work with **women** living with HIV, it is important to have staff, volunteers, managers and board members who reflect that group of **women**. It is important to ensure there are meaningful ways to be involved. The GIPA and MIPA (greater and meaningful involvement of people living with HIV) principles aim to put people living with HIV at the center. Since approximately 50% of new HIV cases in Ontario are amongst **women** from African, Caribbean and Black communities,<sup>12</sup> it is important to have people from those communities working, volunteering and visiting your organization. This can also help with some of the culture shock for people who are new to Canada. The experience of seeing someone who looks like you can help to reduce some of the isolation and trauma from the experience. Displaying advertisements and posters that include **women** from diverse backgrounds, including African, Caribbean and Black **women**, Trans **women**, Indigenous **women**, and other **women** you serve is also helpful.



## ACTION CHECKLIST



Have staff, volunteers, managers, and board members be representative of **women** living with and facing systemic risks for HIV in your community.



Display art, posters and materials that **women** in your community can see themselves reflected in.

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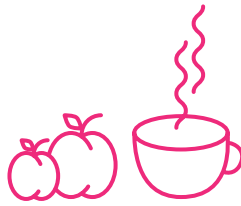
## 50%

of new HIV cases in Ontario are amongst **women** from African, Caribbean and Black communities.<sup>12</sup>

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# Food



## ACTION CHECKLIST

- ☐ If possible, provide warm or homemade food at programs or group sessions
- ☐ Provide nutritious options including fruit, and baked goods
- ☐ Consider cooking together as part of the program
- ☐ At a minimum, try to provide a warm cup of tea or coffee
- ☐ For programs and events where people RSVP in advance, ask about their dietary restrictions as you collect accessibility needs.



# Centering Indigenous experience

Colonization, criminalization, and key service gaps over generations have created significant health disparities among Indigenous communities, resulting in negative social determinants of health outcomes and higher rates of HIV among Indigenous **women**.

In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada released their report which was created from six years of work with Indigenous Canadians who witnessed and/or survived the residential school system. The report emphasizes the need to actively close the gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians.

In the creation of welcoming spaces, we can include this incredibly important work by considering Indigenous culture, knowledge, concepts and how they can be applied to our organizations.<sup>13</sup>

In the context of welcoming spaces, you can help to build space for Indigenous communities through a few key actions. →

“Connection to Indigenous spiritual practices, community, and family, access to appropriate and culturally aware non-oppressive healthcare services. Nature, exercise, movement, fresh air, sunlight. Safe affordable housing, sense of belonging and connection.”

- An Indigenous woman living with HIV Sudbury



## SEEKING TRUTH & UNDERSTANDING

Beginning reconciliation work and creating a welcoming space for Indigenous **women** in your community may not be easy. A good first step is to familiarize yourself with the continued impact of colonialism and the residential school system in Canada on Indigenous **women**. The findings from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada demonstrate that Canadian institutional/government practices result in the health status of Indigenous **women** falling well below that of non-Indigenous Canadians.<sup>14</sup> For example, Indigenous **women** experience significantly higher rates of intimate partner violence, assault, and are more likely to be killed than non-Indigenous **women** in Ontario.<sup>15</sup> In the context of HIV, Indigenous **women** are more likely to contract HIV than non-Indigenous **women**, representing almost 50% of new diagnoses among Indigenous people in Ontario (2015).<sup>16</sup> By seeking to understand the social, cultural and historical contexts that surround the health issues of Indigenous **women**, our community organizations will be better positioned to work with Indigenous communities across Ontario.



## BE THOUGHTFUL ABOUT INDIGENOUS PRACTICES

The creation of welcoming spaces should be a participatory process. As such, it is a way of including Indigenous **women** in the process of planning and implementing this work. Being cognizant of Indigenous knowledge systems and traditions such as smudging, storytelling and oral histories, cultural interpretation and traditional health models will serve to help build inclusionary practices.<sup>17</sup> See the 4 steps to engage **women** in welcoming spaces section on [page 20](#) for ideas and strategies on how to include Indigenous and non-Indigenous **women** in the development of spaces.



## INDIGENOUS RESOURCES ACTION CHECKLIST



Several organizations have created recommendations and guiding principles for working from an Indigenous perspective, some of which may be helpful to you and your organization. All of these resources can help guide the work. Your local WHAI worker can also assist with connecting you to appropriate partners and resources.

### **The Ontario Aboriginal HIV/AIDS Strategy (Oahas)**

 [www.oahas.org](http://www.oahas.org)

### **The Native **Women's** Association of Canada**

 [www.nwac.ca](http://www.nwac.ca)

### **The Truth and Reconciliation Report**

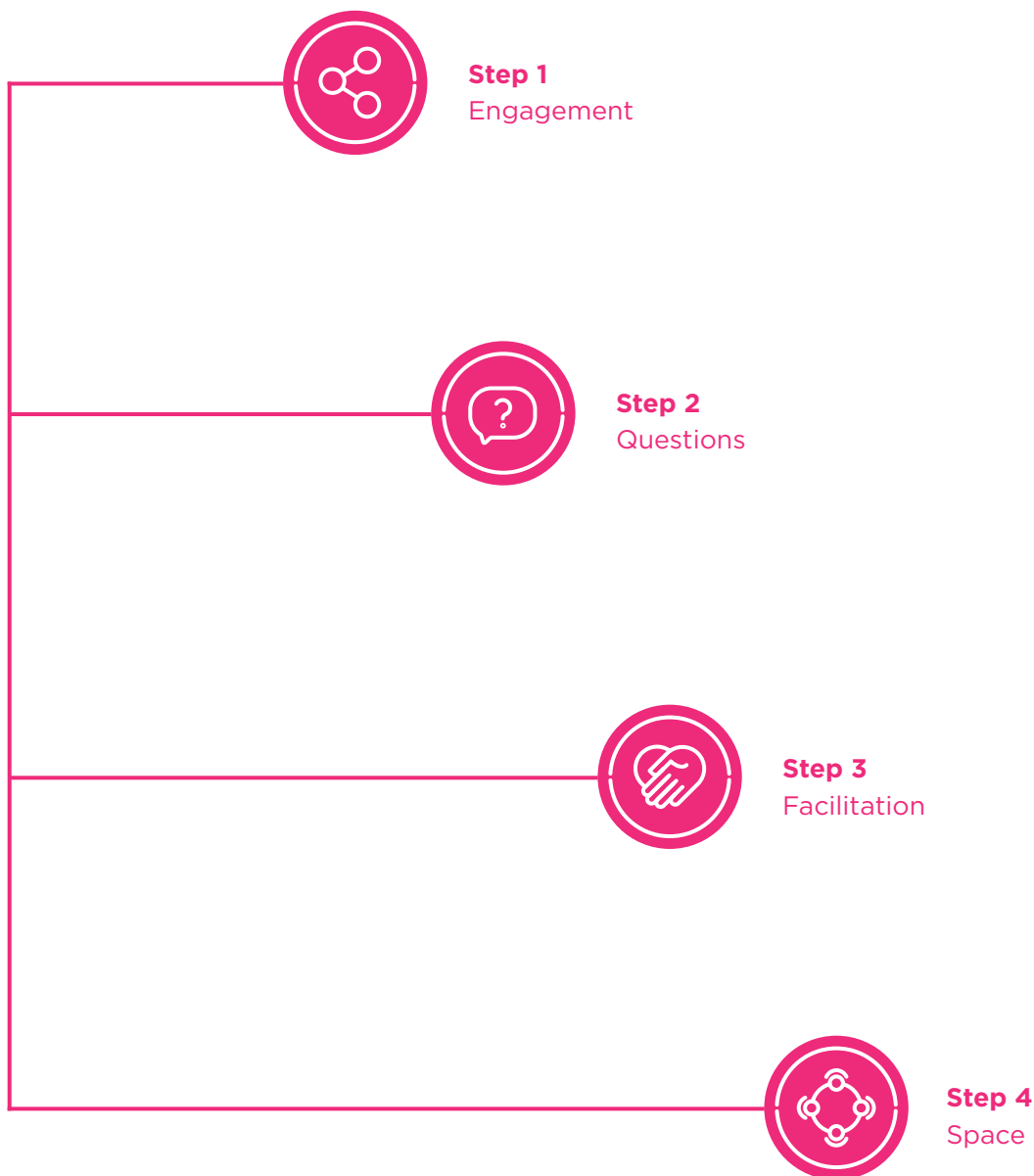
 [www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=890](http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=890)

### **Reclaiming Power and Place: the Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous **Women** and Girls**

 [www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/final-report/](http://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/final-report/)

# 4 Steps to creating participatory welcoming spaces

Creating productive and inclusive dialogues within your space is an important way to build trust, inclusivity and a culture of strength and empowerment. Consider using these four steps to start help spark a dialogue.







## STEP 1

# Engagement

**Women** are often more likely to participate in community organizations when they are valued for their important contributions rather than being treated as passive recipients in need of services.<sup>18</sup> One way to start this process is to hold meetings, gatherings or focus groups with **women** who access your organization and **women** in your community. Include **women** who frequent your organization, key “community champions,” and even volunteers.<sup>18</sup> It is also important to consider inviting some of the **women** you may have a more challenging relationship with. For example, are there **women** who have been deemed “problematic” at your organization? Are there **women** who have expressed frustrations? Having a diverse group of **women** participating is an important part of creating inclusive, welcoming spaces. In these cases it is also important to have strong facilitation skills and be able to build respect into the conversation from all participants.

“Every time we gather becomes a model of the future we want to create.”<sup>18</sup>

“...community is built by focusing on people’s gifts rather than their deficiencies.”<sup>18</sup>



## STEP 2

# Questions

Once you’ve planned your groups, ask questions to assess the strengths and needs of your space. Questions create space for new ideas to emerge and engage **women** in the process of creating change. Ask questions that are open-ended and build engagement.

### QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

- How are people feeling and experiencing your organization?
- What are the key things that could be improved?
- What in your space is working really well?
- Are there other community agencies that people prefer going to and why?
- What is the commitment that brought you to participate here?
- Why is this valuable to you?
- What gifts or skills do you have to bring to this process?

“Questions are more transformative than answers and are the essential tools of engagement.”<sup>18</sup>



### STEP 3

# Facilitation

In addition to questions, it is important to consider the context and how people engage with each other. This means you need strong facilitation skills, and to be thoughtful about the questions you're asking and how you're listening and responding to the answers.

- Are you creating space for unpopular answers?
- Are you capturing answers you may disagree with?
- Are you supporting answers you may feel are not possible?
- Are you finding ways for everyone in the room to participate, even those who are socially anxious, shy, or have varying learning and participation styles?
- Are you able and prepared to respond to difficult comments with respect and thoughtfulness?

Creating a strong introduction that is built on shared values can be important in any shared space. You can also use a talking piece that is passed around the room to give everyone a chance to speak, even if they choose to "pass" or not speak when they have the opportunity.



**Note:** The use of a talking piece, often an item of significance to the group, allows for more balanced participation and facilitates a more democratic use of space.



### STEP 4

# Space

In order for people to engage with each other in this context, the set up of the room is important. If everyone is facing the same direction (i.e. the front of the room), we are not fostering interconnection or collaboration. Having everyone face each other allows **women** to see each other's faces, relate to each other and respond to each other.

Ultimately, this process of engaging **women** in dialogue will identify ways to move forward and build a welcoming, community-oriented space.

"We need capacity building and to create spaces for voices to be elevated, like .... story telling, communication, art tools, and women creating messaging about HIV and HIV prevention and well-being for other women."

*- Reflection from WHAI Coordinator discussions, from the WHAI Collective Action, Community Change Report*

# Moving from planning to change making

“..to create a more positive and connected future for our communities, we must be willing to trade problems for possibilities.”<sup>21</sup>

So you have created space for people to participate, listened to community voices, and identified some next steps. Now what? A good way to keep **women** engaged in the process and foster ownership of the space is to re-engage them in the coordination and implementation of changes.<sup>20</sup> This may also help with some of the costs and logistics of the process. For example, was changing the paint colour in a room a recommendation? Provide some food and put out a call for help painting. Need art on the walls to make the space more inviting? Coordinate a call for art submissions from the community and have a committee select pieces. **Women** can also work together to create artwork that is meaningful to them. This process of engagement helps to build community, and creates a sense of ownership in the space.



## CONNECT WITH COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Throughout this process, you can reach out to and use other agencies in your community as resources. Identify other agencies that may have recently gone through renovations or policy updates. Consult with them about their process and models for change. Use and adapt some frameworks that you think align well with the changes you want to see at your organization. To find places to serve as good examples of welcoming spaces, go back to the **women** in your organization and ask them where they've felt safe and valued.

Additionally, it is a good idea to connect with your local HIV service organization. These organizations can provide your organization with safer sex and, sometimes, safer drug use supplies and provide tips on how to better incorporate HIV into your community organization. Your local WHAI Coordinator can work with you to draft and develop organizational strategies that will make your space more inclusive to **women's** HIV-related experiences, ensure your space is non-stigmatizing, and provide capacity building training to your staff.

Community partners make it so you don't have to embark on this process alone. Use your networks and share experiences and expertise with each other.



## BE INNOVATIVE

Learning from community partners and established research is important because we can learn about successes and we can also learn about strategies that didn't work. But it's also important to try new creative ideas. We often use existing models and try to fit ourselves into frameworks that don't quite fit our needs. If your group comes up with something new and innovative, consider trying it. Engage the community in solving problems. Ask “how” instead of listing reasons why it is not possible. Creativity and innovation can foster important community changes. Remember that the **women** you are working with have a lot of expertise and if they are engaged in the community, they will also be invested in finding ways to create change.

Part of innovation involves consistent opportunities to give feedback. Ask clients how they feel about the space and about programs - better yet, create a suggestion or feedback box for **women** to share their thoughts anonymously. This process will not only improve the space and services but foster a sense of ownership and belonging.



## MOVING FORWARD

People who use your organization are looking for care and assistance; many have had unsuccessful interactions in the past and have been traumatized as a result. Now that you have received training about stigma and discrimination you can facilitate changes in your organization to ensure that women who utilize your community organization feel welcome and can participate without judgment or discrimination.



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**Change  
starts with  
you.**



**WHAI.CA**