



Let's Talk About Sex:

Facilitating Engagement about Sex and Pleasure Between Providers and Women Living with HIV

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BACKGROUND

Despite the fact that most women acquire HIV through sexual transmission, and the fundamental role of sex in women's health and well-being, sexual health remains disconnected from HIV prevention, care, research, and policy, contributing to failures in reaching and serving vulnerable women. Sexual agency, pleasure, justice, and well-being for women living with HIV are rarely studied; as a result, providers lack informed practice guidance on these topics and insufficiently address them with their clients. It is essential to examine HIV and sexual justice and pleasure through a lens that addresses the complexity of women's lives, including their resilience, agency, and pleasure-seeking.

“Comprehensive, holistic care for women living with HIV includes healthcare providers discussing sex and sexual pleasure with patients in a sex-positive and non-judgemental way. Guidance and resources for healthcare providers to support them in having these conversations with their patients represents an important step in that direction.”

– Oni Blackstock, MD, MHS, Health Justice founder and executive director

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The Women's Research Initiative on HIV/AIDS (WRI), a program founded in 2003 by The Well Project (a non-profit organization with the mission to change the course of the HIV pandemic through a comprehensive focus on women and girls), is a multidisciplinary and multisectoral effort dedicated to identifying gaps for women in HIV prevention, treatment, and cure research and policy.

“An HIV diagnosis does not take away our sexual desires or our desire to engage in pleasurable sex. It is imperative that we undertake meaningful research on sexual health and pleasure among women living with HIV so that providers feel more comfortable having these types of conversations with those they serve and that women living with HIV are empowered to exchange dialogue in this area.”

– Ciarra “Ci Ci” Covin, The Well Project program manager

In October 2021, the WRI convened a group of expert stakeholders focused on HIV and women to develop recommendations to better integrate HIV into sexual and reproductive healthcare for women living with and vulnerable to HIV. The WRI meeting focused on identifying best practices, gaps, and barriers in research and policy at this critical juncture through a variety of presentations by experts, as well as facilitated discussions, brainstorming, and agenda development. The multi-day discussions elicited a series of recommendations related to education, advocacy, research, and policy that advance overall sexual and reproductive wellness for women living with and vulnerable to HIV. These endeavors would ensure that all women have access to comprehensive information and services around sexual and reproductive health that address the whole woman, with a specific focus on sexual pleasure.

RESULTS


The 2021 WRI meeting engaged 34 thoughtleaders from the US and Canada, representing disciplines including clinical care, HIV research, social science, academia, advocacy, policy, government, the pharmaceutical industry, and women living with HIV. The meeting resulted in the **Fall WRI Virtual 2021 Issue Brief: [Interrogating the Intersection of HIV and Women's Sexual and Reproductive Health](#)**. Below, we describe the recommendations for one of the key areas of discussion: how to better integrate sexual and reproductive health, with an emphasis on sex positivity, into HIV care for women. Recommendations included:

“Despite sharing space with providers professionally, as a Black woman living with HIV since birth, I have noticed that some providers are not able or willing to take a holistic care approach with their clients. By not doing so, they are missing out on key components that enable them to best treat and care for their clients, and they might not even know it.”

– Kim Canady, The Well Project Community Advisory Board member

- **Creating and disseminating educational resources highlighting the intersection of HIV and sexual health for all stakeholders, including women living with HIV, healthcare providers, policymakers, and researchers**
- **Undertaking efforts across HIV research and policy to ensure integration of sexual and reproductive health**
 - Engage with federal policymakers to ensure that HIV policy [including the US government's National HIV/AIDS Strategy (NHAS) and End the HIV Epidemic (EHE) Initiative, and other efforts] addresses the sexual and reproductive health needs of women living with HIV
 - Pursue efforts to improve inclusion of pregnant and lactating people in HIV clinical trials
 - Develop innovative approaches to integrate sexual and reproductive health into community-based service delivery models
- **Highlighting best practices and developing educational resources to help providers better engage women living with HIV around pleasure, bodily autonomy, reproductive freedom, etc.**
- **Incorporating training on sexual health into continuing education programming required to renew clinical licenses**
- **Pursuing efforts to collaborate with medical schools to ensure the early integration of sexual and reproductive health into healthcare provider training and approaches to the HIV care continuum**

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WRI 2021 ISSUE BRIEF:
Interrogating the Intersection of HIV and Women's Sexual and Reproductive Health



CONCLUSIONS

- Opportunities abound to examine the links between HIV, sexual justice, and sexual pleasure through a lens that moves beyond vulnerability to a holistic approach that addresses the many intricacies of women's lives
- In order to optimize care, comprehensive and appropriate sexual healthcare for women living with HIV must acknowledge and address their lives in all their complexities and intersections
- **Positively positioning sex and centering sexual pleasure in non-judgmental, proactive discussions between providers and women living with HIV can start to build trust, improve women's engagement in their care, and ensure that the full range of their needs is being met**
- All of these efforts and interventions must be situated in an anti-racist, feminist, queer- and trans-affirming framework grounded in gender equity
- These actions must also acknowledge the continuing impact of systemic racism and historic mistreatment of women, especially Black women and other women of color, and women who do not identify as cisgender and/or heterosexual