

## **Women Living with HIV in Australia are Disproportionately Represented in HIV-Related Legal Matters**

**Authors:** Costello J<sup>1</sup>, Stratigos A<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Positive Life NSW

<sup>2</sup> HIV/AIDS Legal Centre

### **Background/Purpose:**

While women comprise 12% of people living with HIV (PLHIV) in Australia, 20% of HIV/AIDS Legal Centre (HALC) clients between 2015-2020 were women living with HIV (WLHIV), rising to 23% in 2021. Positive Life NSW has observed similar trends in our work with women. WLHIV are more vulnerable to HIV-related social injustice and inequalities, often made more complex through factors including societal pressures, motherhood, immigration and domestic violence (DV).

### **Approach:**

We examined HALC engagement data and identified 73.5% of HALC's female clients are overseas-born from a culturally and linguistically diverse background (CALD), with another 14% listed unknown/not stated. 4.5% were overseas-born from non-CALD backgrounds (UK, US, Canada, NZ etc.), and only 8.5% were Australian-born. Most legal matters are immigration-related, followed by DV and discrimination. 16% of women were experiencing/or at risk of DV (another 23% listing unknown), suggesting the overall figure may be higher. Through client engagement and case studies, we identified a need for synergistic WLHIV-focused wraparound services, including legal advice to improve overall health outcomes and reduce stigma.

### **Outcomes/Impact:**

We established *The Women's Room/For Women* to provide safe, peer-based environments utilising different platforms to empower WLHIV to understand and increase awareness of their legal rights/responsibilities; a partnership between Positive Life and HALC. One case study highlighted health/work-related discrimination issues following a routine antenatal HIV diagnosis, subsequent relationship breakdown, refusal of skilled-migration sponsorship and access to Centrelink benefits. HALC's client was granted permanent residency following a complex 3-year Ministerial intervention process.

### **Innovation and Significance:**

While WLHIV are motivated to engage in healthcare, access support, and participate in society, fears around privacy and safety can be a barrier to effective service delivery. Positive Life and HALC have collaborated to deliver education to WLHIV in a supportive, culturally-appropriate environment ensuring WLHIV are aware of their rights, and offer referral pathways to HALC for direct legal representation as needed.

### **Disclosure of Interest Statement:**

Nothing to declare.