

The importance of sex for women living with HIV in Canada

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BACKGROUND



In this analysis, we sought to challenge two assumptions embedded within sex research:

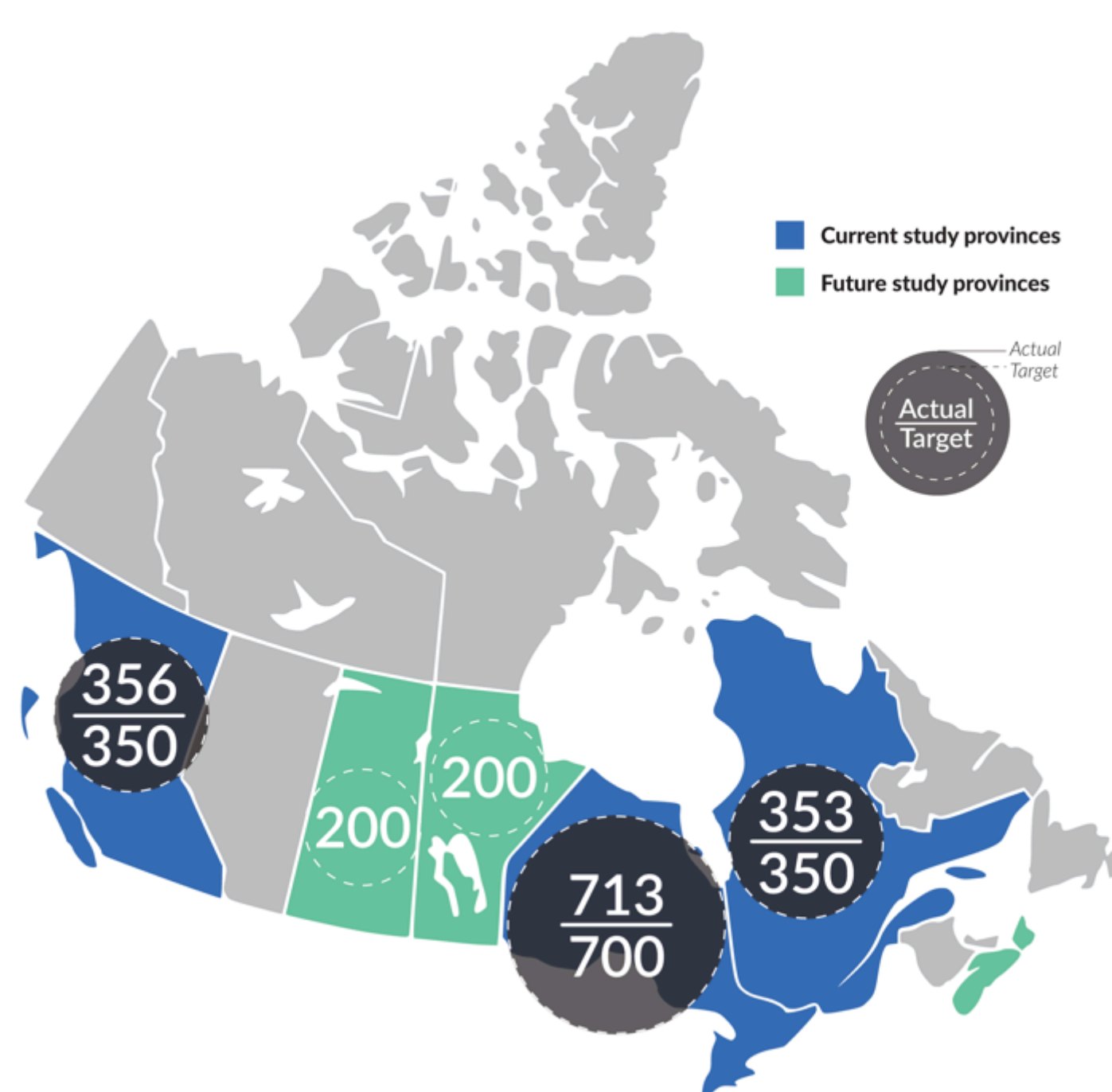
1. Sex is not important to women living with HIV
2. Sex is normal and necessary for healthy sexuality

We measured the importance of sex in the lives of women living with HIV in Canada and the factors influencing their viewpoints.

METHODOLOGY

Canadian HIV Women's Sexual and Reproductive Health Cohort Study (CHIWOS)

- We hired and trained 40 women living with HIV as Peer Research Associates across BC, ON and QC to recruit and survey 1,422 women living with HIV aged 16 years or older.



- Baseline questionnaire data was collected between August 2013 and May 2015.
- **Primary outcome:** "Overall, how important a part of life is your sexual activity?" Sex was defined for participants as partnered oral, anal or vaginal sex.
- **Statistical analysis:** Multinomial logistic regression was used to identify associated factors (e.g., physical health, mental health and violence, relationships, social context).
- Feminist theories and research practices informed virtually every stage of the project.

RESULTS

Table 1: Women's perspectives on how important a part of life their sexual activity is (N=1,189)

	N	%
Very important	252	19.6
Somewhat important	416	32.3
Neither important nor unimportant	284	22.0
Somewhat unimportant	69	5.3
Not at all important	268	20.8

Table 2: Bivariable associations with sexual importance (n=1,189), row percentages shown

	Very important	Somewhat important	Neither important nor unimportant	Somewhat unimportant/Not at all important	p-value
Continuous variables - Median (Q1, Q3)					
Age at interview	40.0 (34.0, 46.5)	41.0 (33.0, 48.0)	40.0 (34.0, 48.5)	49.0 (40.0, 55.0)	< .0001
Physical health (SF-12)	47.7 (34.4, 55.6)	51.4 (36.3, 56.5)	49.4 (36.6, 54.9)	41.4 (27.0, 53.9)	< .0001
Depression	8.0 (3.0, 14.0)	8.5 (3.0, 14.0)	9.0 (3.0, 14.0)	11.0 (5.0, 17.0)	0.0001
HIV stigma	57.5 (42.5, 72.5)	55.0 (40.0, 67.5)	62.5 (50.0, 75.0)	55.0 (42.5, 70.0)	0.0002
Categorical variables - N (%)					
Regular Sex Partner					
No	67 (9.4)	166 (23.3)	197 (27.7)	281 (39.5)	<.0001
Yes	181 (32.0)	245 (43.3)	87 (15.4)	53 (9.4)	
Ethnicity					
Indigenous	86 (15.9)	187 (34.6)	111 (20.6)	156 (28.9)	0.0005
African, Caribbean, Black	45 (15.5)	92 (31.6)	80 (27.5)	74 (25.4)	
White	96 (26.4)	113 (31.0)	76 (20.9)	79 (21.7)	
Other/multiple ethnicities	25 (26.6)	24 (25.5)	17 (18.1)	28 (29.8)	
Education					
Less than high school	29 (14.5)	51 (25.5)	35 (17.5)	85 (42.5)	<.0001
High school	98 (17.7)	181 (32.8)	142 (25.7)	131 (23.7)	
Greater than high school	124 (23.4)	183 (34.5)	105 (19.8)	118 (22.3)	
Aware of prevention benefits of ART					
No	69 (15.8)	125 (28.7)	82 (28.9)	159 (36.6)	<.0001
Yes	181 (21.4)	288 (34.1)	200 (23.7)	176 (20.8)	
Illicit drug use					
Never	135 (20.0)	218 (32.2)	181 (26.8)	142 (21.0)	<.0001
Previously	75 (20.9)	117 (32.6)	55 (15.3)	112 (31.2)	
Currently	40 (16.9)	77 (32.5)	41 (17.3)	79 (33.3)	
Violence					
Never	45 (19.1)	74 (31.5)	78 (33.2)	38 (16.2)	<.0001
Previously	141 (19.1)	229 (31.1)	148 (20.1)	219 (29.7)	
Currently	55 (20.3)	97 (35.8)	49 (18.1)	70 (25.8)	

Table 3: Factors associated with sexual importance using "somewhat unimportant/not at all important" as the reference (n=1091), showing AORs and 95% CIs

	Very important	Somewhat important	Neither important or unimportant
MULTIVARIABLE RESULTS			
Covariates associated with HIGHER odds of sexual importance			
Regular sex partner	13.46 (8.36, 21.66)	7.48 (4.94, 11.34)	2.62 (1.67, 4.13)
African, Caribbean, Black (vs. White)	2.07 (1.13, 3.80)	0.96 (0.57, 1.63)	0.76 (0.44, 1.30)
Greater than high school educated	2.47 (1.31, 4.66)	2.06 (1.21, 3.49)	1.62 (0.91, 2.89)
Aware of prevention benefits of HIV treatment	1.88 (1.21, 2.92)	1.46 (1.01, 2.11)	1.72 (1.16, 2.55)
Physical health related quality of life*	1.02 (0.88, 1.19)	1.14 (1.00, 1.29)	1.06 (0.93, 1.22)
Covariates associated with LOWER odds of sexual importance			
Age*	0.68 (0.54, 0.85)	0.72 (0.59, 0.87)	0.70 (0.58, 0.86)
Current illicit drug use	0.57 (0.28, 1.16)	0.46 (0.26, 0.83)	0.38 (0.21, 0.71)
Previous violence in adulthood (vs. never)	0.57 (0.31, 1.05)	0.68 (0.40, 1.16)	0.51 (0.30, 0.87)
Current violence in adulthood (vs. never)	0.60 (0.29, 1.26)	0.93 (0.49, 1.76)	0.55 (0.28, 1.07)

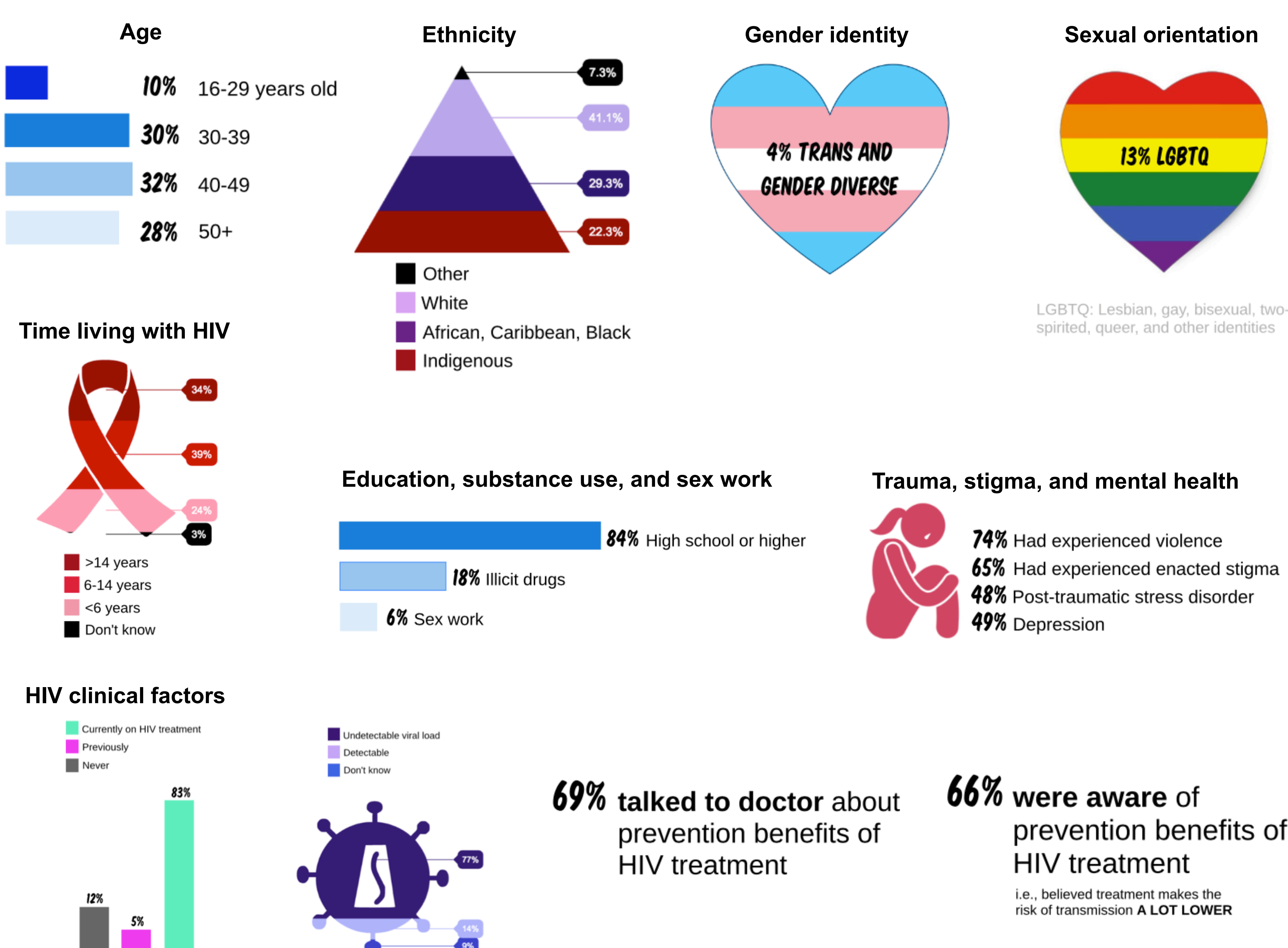
*Continuous variable (10-point increase)

DISCUSSION

Findings challenge stereotypes that women living with HIV are non-sexual, without propagating the notion that all women must be sexual, and illustrate the influence of contextual factors on women's perspectives about sex. For women living with HIV who place great importance on sex, they should be supported to construct more positive, rewarding, and confident sexual experiences. Those who feel sex is unimportant and prefer not to have sexual experiences must also be supported—and their sexuality needs beyond sexual activity should not be neglected.

RESULTS

Figure 1: Cohort Profile



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