

## Women's Realities...

Luisa Orza

# A new network for positive women in Europe and Central Asia - WECARe+

*'I'm surprised to be sitting here alone', said a bemused Andrea von Lieven, from the speakers' couch at today's launch of a new network for Women living with HIV in Europe and Central Asia (WECARe+). But her short-lived solitude also spoke to one of the needs behind the network. 'Women who live openly with HIV get pulled in so many different directions – especially at conferences like AIDS2010'.*

Happily, Andrea was soon joined on the couch by positive women from Romania, Ukraine, Italy, The Netherlands, the UK, and Germany.

WECARe+ is the brainchild of Harriet Langanke, director of the German organisation GSSG: Gemeinnützige Stiftung Sexualität und Gesundheit (Charitable Foundation Sexuality and Health), and positive activist Wezi Thamm. Their efforts were supported by Abbott Pharmaceutical Company, who have funded the registration of the network and enabled the set-up of the seven-language Women in Europe website ([www.womeneurope.net](http://www.womeneurope.net)), which will provide vital on-going communication support to the network.

The fledgling network has ridden on the tide of momentum generated by AIDS2010, but the conference is just a start. It is important that the network has its roots grounded in real need, commitment and vision for the network to carry this work forward. So what do women want from the network in the future?

*'I would like this organisation to help us to not be invisible any more', said Silvia, a positive woman originally from Mexico, now living in The Netherlands. 'So that*



*women be included and participate in decision-making and policy-making'.*

Isabelle Nunez spoke about the need for solidarity and support among women living with HIV, which in lower prevalence countries is not always easy to find. *'I'm the only openly positive woman with a public position in Portugal and I feel alone'.* Conferences provide a rare opportunity for Isabel to work side-by-side with other positive women. *'I came here and there was Wezi and other women who support me and I felt, oh, I'm ok now. That's what networks for positive women are for'.*

Silvia Petretti, an Italian activist now living in London has been closely involved in the start-up and development of PozFem UK – the UK network of women living with HIV since 2004.

*Women's networks are incredibly important at so many levels. Once you have support from other women in your same circumstances, you find the strength and inspiration to move on and become vocal, to become advocates and to stand-up and claim your rights – and that's crucial if we want to create a world where we are visible and to reduce stigma and discrimination – says Silvia.*

...the conference

is just a start...

...that's what

networks for

positive women

are for...

...create a world

where we are

visible...

The need for such a movement to support women living with HIV across Europe has been born by the initial findings of a survey carried out among positive women living in Europe and Central Asia over the last few months to gain a better understanding of how the epidemic is playing out in the region. Of the 165 survey respondents, only 14% were living openly with HIV; 54% had received no counselling upon receiving their HIV positive diagnosis, including 43% of the English-speaking respondents; about a third of the women had experienced some form of gender-based violence; and only half had chosen to reveal their status to their partner.

The more qualitative elements of the survey produced evidence of a range of mental health issues and lack of support to address these. But they also spoke about a range of tools and resources for overcoming these challenges, which underline the need for networks. One German speaking participant sums it up: *'The most support I got was from other people living with HIV'.*

*Luisa is a womens rights and HIV consultant and the WNZ coordinator*

\* Further results from the survey can be found on [www.womeneurope.net](http://www.womeneurope.net).