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**BEING WOMAN
AND LIVING WITH HIV/AIDS
IN NEW ZEALAND:
A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE**

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirement

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Abstract

HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) and AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome) was first diagnosed in the early 1980s. It was constructed in the western world as a 'male disease' affecting predominately gay men. At the same time women were identified as having HIV/AIDS. They, however, have figured very minimally in the unfolding discourse surrounding HIV/AIDS.

Nine New Zealand women took part in this study which explores and describes their experiences of being HIV positive. Participants described feeling 'invisible' within a 'male disease', and a sense of not being taken seriously. Participants felt they were influenced by the social construction of women with HIV, which defines them as 'carriers' of the virus to men and 'transmitters' to the 'innocent' unborn foetus. Women's role in society, and gender social and power inequalities have led these participants to believe that HIV/AIDS is experienced as a different disease for women than it is for men.

Nursing discourse related to HIV/AIDS in the early 1990s supported the notion that HIV/AIDS patients were people who were deviant and/or addicted. Nurses were influenced by the social and medical construction of HIV/AIDS and many have contributed toward negative attitudes with bias and prejudice and lack of understanding. This attitude in turn has contributed negatively to the quality of care given to women with HIV/AIDS.

Women's stories have yet to emerge as a significant contribution to the HIV/AIDS issue. This thesis plays a part in the beginning of that contribution.

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	i
ABSTRACT	ii
CONTENTS	iii
CHAPTER ONE: Introduction	1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Aims of the Study	2
1.3 Background to the Study	2
1.4 Feminist Critique of HIV/AIDS	5
1.4.1 Feminist critique of HIV/AIDS prevention programmes	6
1.4.2 Feminist critique of women and pregnancy	6
1.5 Justification for the Study	8
1.6 My Position in this Study	9
1.7 Conclusion	11
CHAPTER TWO: A literature Review	13
2.1 Introduction	13
2.2 International Statistics	13
2.2.1 New Zealand statistics	14
2.3 Medical Discourse and HIV/AIDS	15
2.3.1 The first decade; 1980 to 1990	15
2.3.2 The 1990s and masculinist bias in medical research of HIV/AIDS	19
2.3.3 Medical research of woman and pregnancy and HIV/AIDS	21
2.4 Feminist Discourse of Women and HIV/AIDS	25
2.4.1 HIV/AIDS education programmes	26
2.4.2 HIV/AIDS and androcentric research	30

2.4.3	HIV/AIDS and paternalistic health care	32
2.4.4	Lesbians with HIV/AIDS	33
2.5	Nurses' Discourse of HIV/AIDS	35
2.6	Conclusion	37
CHAPTER THREE: The Research Methodology and the Research Method		38
3.1	Introduction	38
3.2	Qualitative Approach	38
3.3	Feminist Research	39
3.3.1	Validating women's experience	40
3.3.2	Non-oppressive research	41
3.3.3	Interpretations discussed and shared with participants	43
3.3.4	Reflexivity	44
3.3.5	My position	44
3.3.6	Gender	45
3.3.7	Reliability, validity and rigour in feminist research	47
3.3.7.1	Construct validity	48
3.3.7.2	Face validity	49
3.3.7.3	Catalytic validity	49
3.3.8	Nursing and feminist research	50
3.4	Research Method	52
3.4.1	Participant selection	52
3.4.2	The participants	53
3.4.3	Ethical issues	53
3.4.4	Interviews	55
3.5	Method of Data Analysis	57
3.6	Conclusion	61

CHAPTER FOUR: Our Daily Lives with HIV	62
4.1 Introduction	62
4.2 To Reveal or Conceal?	62
4.2.1 Stigma	63
4.2.2 Dirt and contagion	65
4.2.3 Deviant behaviour	67
4.2.4 Significant others	70
4.2.5 Forming new relationships	73
4.2.6 Employment and work environments	76
4.3 Summary	78
4.4 What do I have to do or say to be taken seriously?	79
4.4.1 The medical profession	79
4.4.2 The nursing profession	85
4.4.3 Social services	87
4.4.4 Public perception	89
4.5 Summary	90
CHAPTER FIVE: Observe our Gendered Lives and HIV	92
5.1 Introduction	92
5.2 The Invisibility of Women in a 'male disease'	92
5.2.1 The educational message for women and HIV/AIDS prevention	94
5.2.2 Sex specific research	101
5.3 Summary	104
5.4 Women's Experience of being HIV Positive Mirrors Women's Place in Society	105
5.4.1 Support services for people living with HIV/AIDS	106
5.4.2 Political environments for women and HIV/AIDS	112

5.4.3 Women and pregnancy and HIV/AIDS	115
5.4.4 Blame and shame	122
5.5 Summary	125
CHAPTER SIX: Discussion and Concluding Statements	126
6.1 Introduction	126
6.2 Restating the Aim	126
6.3 New Identities and the Risk of Disclosure	126
6.4 Prevention of HIV/AIDS and the Messages for Women	128
6.5 Social Service Provision for Women with HIV/AIDS	131
6.6 Male Bias Research	132
6.7 Implication for Nurses	135
6.8 Limitations of Research	137
6.9 Recommendations for Further Research	138
6.10 Concluding Statement	139
REFERENCES	140
APPENDIX 1: Flyer	156
APPENDIX 2: Consent Form	157
APPENDIX 3: Information	158