

# “Fear really comes from the unknowns”: navigating ‘unknowable’ stigma and discrimination in Singapore

Jan Dewaele<sup>1</sup>, Rayner K J Tan<sup>2,3</sup>, Sophia Hyder<sup>1</sup>, Chen Seong Wong<sup>4</sup>, Bee Chin Ng<sup>1</sup>, Erik Cambria<sup>1</sup>, Roy Chan<sup>5</sup>, Sumita Banerjee<sup>5</sup>, Ritu Jain<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Nanyang Technological University, Singapore; <sup>2</sup>University of North Carolina Project-China, Guangzhou, China; <sup>3</sup>Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, National University of Singapore & National University Health System; <sup>4</sup>National Centre for Infectious Diseases, Singapore; <sup>5</sup>Action for AIDS Singapore

**Participants highlighted that they were aware of institutionalized discrimination towards PLHIV (or experienced it, for participants who were PLHIV) across various aspects of their lives. These included experiences - overt and covert - of discrimination in education, workplace, and healthcare settings. However, participants disclosed a greater discriminatory impact due to the manifold unknowns; that is, experiences resulting from the need to conceal their status for fear of ‘unknowable’ discrimination.**

## Background

- Structural stigma and institutionalized forms of discrimination towards people living with HIV (PLHIV), especially in the areas of health insurance, immigration, and employment remain pervasive in many settings.
- However, no study in Singapore has qualitatively explored how PLHIV navigate such forms of discrimination, its impact on health/social service seeking behaviour and quality of life, and interventions required to address such inequities.

## Methods

- Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with a total of 73 participants. These included 56 PLHIV (30 men who have sex with men, 23 heterosexual men, 3 women) and 17 stakeholders including healthcare professionals and other allied workers.
- Interviews focused on participant perspectives or experiences of HIV diagnosis, navigating healthcare, attitudes towards and impact of HIV on relationships. Data were analysed through inductive thematic analysis.

## Experiences of Institutionalised Discrimination

Subtheme	Excerpt
Discrimination in immigration laws	I tried to apply PR for her, but it was rejected. I don't think the government will give PR for such a case where you have HIV. What for do I keep a HIV person in my country? For what use? (Heterosexual male, living with HIV)
Discrimination in employment	For example, I am HIV.. But I can't work in this place, that idea is one discrimination. I mean like I am undetectable. So why do you have to do this? Like I cannot work as a nurse, I cannot work in any medication medical areas, and become a teacher you know. Because they will check and everything. So that's kind of discrimination for me, when I thought of that (Men who have sex with men, living with HIV)
Discrimination in insurance policies	Currently I don't have insurance anymore. Because they don't cover all these things. When they, when you find out all these things, they don't cover already. [...] They will reject you. It's what I heard, when you got to handle something around medical stuff for your employment, you can no longer do it. You're not supposed to apply for all these kind of jobs, they definitely will check. (Heterosexual male, living with HIV)

## Characterizing ‘Unknown Stigma’

Subtheme	Excerpt
Not being able to pinpoint the origins of fear	That's exactly the thing that we're trying to analyze. So there is a fear but they don't know for what. There is a fear for what and therefore, they will usually just, not disclose, They will just stay in a so called closet, right? So they will not disclose and I think in many cases, a closet creates stigma... Because they have to understand that some worry. They will never materialize in a way. They're actually not there but you're actually creating a environment for it to materialize. Yes. Do you get what I mean? (Heterosexual male, living with HIV)
Manifold unknowns	Because people mentioned if you do share that you're HIV positive, you will actually get PES F [lowest medical grade in the Singapore Armed Forces] and get thrown out and become a second-class citizen. And you know, you might not get certain benefits, and then this might affect everything. So there's a lot of uncertainty if people were to get diagnosed. Like there's a lot of uncertainty of what will actually happen. And a lot of this information, I had to find online. People will give a lot of comments, like, sometimes you just go to jail or something like that. So there's a lot of, I won't say it's a fear mongering, it's just, because there is no, like, policy or standard operating procedure, of what happens next when you are HIV positive. What can you do, what can you not do, all that kind of thing. What you have to do. Yeah, I guess a lot of people are just, you know, scared. (Men who have sex with men, living with HIV)
Not pursuing opportunities due to unknowable discrimination	I don't have any concrete examples of discrimination that I can highlight. But I think there's a lot of fear of discrimination that I have seen. Amongst my patients, amongst people I know. For example, people are afraid of losing their jobs if their employer finds out they have HIV. Or even afraid of applying for new jobs because they're afraid that when you go for a new job, you have to do a health check up, the new company will send you for a health check out and what if they find out you have HIV. So people may be afraid of moving or changing jobs or finding a new job because of this. Or they are reluctant to get tested because they get found out they have HIV, their employer will find out, they will lose their job. (Healthcare Provider)

## Countering ‘Unknown Stigma’ through Explicit Protections

Subtheme	Excerpt
The need for explicit protections	The actual reason given for the discrimination will always be I mean, no organization is or no individuals is you know, mindless enough to state a reason that oh because you are of this race, I am discriminating you [...] Maybe if I can draw some comparisons, when I see certain job applications from American companies, they state it upfront, 'we do not discriminate based on orientation, gender, your diseases'. I mean, such things that are stated upfront. Of course for local companies, you don't find all that you see. So it's, it's a very different social structure. (Men who have sex with men, living with HIV) Yeah, I think, I think that sounds about right. The lack of a legal framework in Singapore, I think it extends beyond the PLHIV community as well, because generally, we just don't have any anti-discrimination framework. Right. So I think what's interesting is, there are- so in many other jurisdictions, I think HIV is considered a disability. So it's, like, protected under disability discrimination laws. But here in Singapore, we don't have, you know, neither a general one or disability-specific discrimination legislation. So, so I think that definitely is that part of the equation. (Stakeholder)

## Conclusions

- An anti-discrimination framework on the institutional treatment of PLHIV would remove unpredictability and address the manifold unknowns surrounding discriminatory experiences and improve their quality of life. Subsequent elimination of fear for unknown discrimination may also greatly facilitate timely testing, linkage to care and treatment.