




## HIV stigmatization in relationships and forms of work: An integrative literature review

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### ABSTRACT

The objective of this research was to analyze the stigmatization of HIV in relationships and forms of work. To this end, an integrative literature review was carried out, using databases such as PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar and SciELO. The search terms were selected based on key concepts related to stigma, discrimination and rights of HIV-positive workers, using Boolean operators AND and OR. Only scientific articles published in Brazilian journals between 2019 and 2023, written in Portuguese and available for free, were included, followed by a data analysis categorized according to the emerging themes in the selected studies. As a result, it was possible to verify the stigma faced by HIV-positive workers in the workplace, emphasizing that many of them suffer discrimination during hiring processes and in the course of their work activities. This discrimination manifests itself through practices such as HIV testing requirements and differentiated treatment, contrary to existing legal protections that prohibit discrimination on the basis of health conditions. Persistent stigma around HIV in the workplace not only undermines the psychological and emotional well-being of HIV-positive workers, but also contributes to a less inclusive and productive work environment. Despite the existence of HIV stigmatization in relationships and forms of work, the studies analyzed emphasize that constitutional laws and judicial decisions have been fundamental in defending the rights of HIV-positive workers. Thus, the implementation of effective public policies and ongoing educational programs are essential to challenge these misperceptions, promote a culture of respect and inclusion, and ensure a fair and equitable work environment for all employees.

**Keywords:** Stigmatization, HIV, Work.

### INTRODUCTION

HIV, or Human Immunodeficiency Virus, is a virus that attacks the body's immune system, compromising its ability to fight infection and disease. Transmitted through bodily fluids such as blood, semen, vaginal secretions, and breast milk, HIV can be transmitted primarily through unprotected sex, sharing contaminated needles, and mother-to-child sharing during pregnancy, childbirth, or breastfeeding (Pinto Neto et al., 2021).

As reiterated by Sciarotta et al. (2021), the first decades of HIV discovery were characterized by a response predominantly based on discrimination and fear, especially in Western countries. The

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emergence of HIV as a disease affecting marginalized populations, including gay and bisexual men, injecting drug users, and sex workers, has been accompanied by a significant burden of social and political stigma.

The stigmatization of HIV in interpersonal relationships and in the workplace is a phenomenon that reflects not only the medical and social challenges associated with the HIV/AIDS epidemic, but also the cultural and political attitudes that have shaped the global response over the decades. Since the initial identification of AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) in the early 1980s, the HIV epidemic has been a milestone in the history of global public health (Mandu et al., 2022).

According to Malta and Santos (2018), the stigmatization associated with HIV is one of the biggest challenges faced by people living with the virus. Stigma stems from persistent myths, unfounded fears, and a lack of education about HIV transmission and management. People with HIV often face social exclusion, employment discrimination, verbal and physical violence, and even rejection by family and friends.

In the context of work, people with HIV often face discrimination and barriers to employment. Many employers have unfounded concerns about workplace safety and may refuse to hire candidates with HIV based on stereotypes and a lack of up-to-date knowledge about the virus. In addition, even when employed, people with HIV may face harassment, intimidation, or differential treatment in the workplace, which can lead to a hostile professional environment and hinder their career opportunities and advancement (Gunther; Baracat, 2021).

Discrimination in the workplace can extend beyond hiring practices and include a lack of adequate support for the physical and mental health of people with HIV. The lack of effective non-discrimination policies and workplace education programs can perpetuate stigma and make it difficult for people with HIV to access resources and benefits that are crucial to their health and well-being (Vieira; Silva, 2011).

In this context, the objective of this research was to analyze the stigmatization of HIV in relationships and forms of work. The rationale for conducting this research lies in the importance of understanding the impacts that HIV stigma has on individuals and communities. This research seeks to explore not only the manifestations and causes of HIV-related stigma, but also its tangible consequences on the social and economic dynamics of HIV-positive professionals.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **TYPE OF RESEARCH**

Regarding the type of research, an integrative review was carried out, which is a methodological approach that allows the synthesis of knowledge from different sources of evidence.



The integrative review is particularly suitable for exploring a complex topic such as the stigmatization of HIV in relationships and forms of work, as it allows an analysis of the manifestations, causes and consequences of this phenomenon.

## SEARCH STRATEGIES AND SURVEY

To conduct the integrative review, databases such as PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar and SciELO were used. The search terms were selected based on key concepts related to HIV stigma, work environment, discrimination, rights of HIV-positive workers, among others.

The keywords were used in association with AND and OR search descriptors, in order to increase the sensitivity and specificity of the search. The Boolean operator AND was used to combine terms that needed to be present simultaneously in the retrieved results, while the OR operator was used to include synonyms or alternative terms that could represent the same concept. This strategic combination allowed us to explore various facets of HIV stigma in the workplace, ensuring that no relevant aspect was overlooked during the integrative review.

The search strategy was developed iteratively, adjusting terms as needed to ensure the comprehensiveness and specificity of the search. In addition to the electronic databases, bibliographic references of selected articles (snowballing) were also consulted for additional identification of pertinent studies not initially found in the electronic searches.

## INCLUSION CRITERIA

The research included only scientific articles published in Brazilian journals, written in Portuguese and available in full for free. In addition, only studies published between 2019 and 2023 were considered, aiming to capture the most recent academic production on the subject.

## DATA ANALYSIS

After selecting the articles through the established inclusion criteria, the data were analyzed according to the objectives of the integrative review. Initially, the articles were organized and categorized according to emerging themes related to HIV stigmatization in the workplace. This categorization allowed an analysis of the manifestations, causes, and consequences of the stigma faced by HIV-positive workers.

The articles have been read in full for a deep understanding of the content. During this stage, the main concepts, theories and findings presented by the selected studies were identified. Next, information was extracted on the different forms of stigmatization faced by HIV-positive workers,

including reports of discrimination in the hiring process, in the work environment, and in HIV-related social interactions.

To better organize and synthesize the data, content analysis techniques were applied. These techniques involved coding and categorizing the data according to the themes and subthemes identified in the reviewed articles. Coding allowed us to group similar information and identify recurrent patterns in the treatment and perception of HIV-positive workers in the work environment.

Finally, the conclusions were formulated based on the results of the data analysis, highlighting the main findings and contributions of the reviewed studies to the knowledge about HIV stigma in the workplace. At the end of the integrative review process, a sample of four scientific articles was obtained.

## RESULTS AND DATA ANALYSIS

By performing the integrative review, a sample composed of four scientific articles that met the established inclusion criteria was obtained, as shown in Chart 1.

Table 1. Selected articles

| Authors         | Objective  | Methodology  | Main results  |
|-----------------|--|--|---|
| Carvalho (2020) | To analyze the stigmatization of HIV in the labor market through cases of dismissal of HIV-positive workers, with regard to their labor rights   | Literature search  | The article discusses the stigma surrounding HIV in the workplace and the role of legislation in protecting the rights of HIV-positive workers. Despite extensive debates, doubts persist about the proper treatment of these workers. It is emphasized that carriers of the virus have the same rights and duties as other employees, and it is illegal to require HIV testing or discriminate based on health status. Constitutional legislation guarantees equality for all and prohibits any form of discrimination, supported by judicial precedents that presume the dismissal of employees with serious diseases such as HIV to be discriminatory. These decisions aim not only to protect individual rights but also to promote an inclusive and just society, benefiting both workers and companies that commit to equitable employment practices. |
| Sousa (2021)    | To analyze the experience of people with HIV virus and their corresponding need for State benefits, in addition to the legislative implications in the field of fundamental norm, their problems and | Hypothetical-deductive research by data collection, and bibliographic and documentary analysis | Stigma around HIV in the workplace persists as a significant challenge. In addition to directly affecting workers and their families, HIV/AIDS also negatively impacts companies and the national economy, resulting in decreased economic development and increased public spending on health and social security. Despite existing legal protections, such as Precedent 443 of the Superior Labor Court (TST) that presumes the dismissal of HIV-positive employees to be discriminatory, stigma persists, resulting in denial of employment, unfair dismissals, and other forms of discrimination. This highlights the ongoing need for effective public policies and education to combat the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS and ensure an  |

|   |  |                                   |  |
|---|--|-----------------------------------|--|
|   | meanings   |                                   | inclusive and fair work environment for all.   |
| Campos, Silva and Freitas (2023)        | To understand the problems arising from the stigmatization of HIV on the professional life of HIV-positive workers.  | Qualitative research              | This study aims to understand the complex impacts of HIV stigmatization on the working lives of people living with the virus. The barriers start from the hiring processes, making it difficult to access formal employment and encouraging informality or unemployment. Even with protective legislation, the negative perception around pre-employment tests persists, exacerbating fear and vigilance to keep HIV diagnosis confidential in the workplace. Discrimination and fear of dismissal due to stigma keep HIV-positive workers in a constant state of alert. The survey also reveals the need for ongoing education about the rights of this population, promoting a more welcoming and respectful work environment. Practical difficulties, such as limited access to Testing and Counselling Centres (CTA) due to inadequate public transport, stand out as additional obstacles that need to be overcome. This study proposes a deeper dialogue between occupational health and HIV research, aiming to address knowledge gaps and challenge the social stigmas rooted in work environments through methodologies such as action research and ethnographic. |
| Pereira, Szwarcwald and Damacena (2019) | To analyze aspects related to discrimination against HIV-positive people in Brazil in access and/or work environment | Pesquisa quantitativa-qualitativa | The study addressed the discrimination faced by people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) in the Brazilian labor market, using qualitative and quantitative data. The survey revealed that PLWHA face direct and indirect discrimination in employment, such as dismissals after the diagnosis is revealed, pressures to resign, and difficulties in obtaining INSS benefits. The lack of information about HIV/AIDS among employers and colleagues contributes to stigma, affecting the mental and economic health of these individuals. Recommendations include intervention programs to reduce stigma and promote inclusion in the workplace.   |

Source: Survey data (2024).

The article by Carvalho (2020) offers an analysis of the stigma faced by HIV-positive workers in the workplace, along with the role of legislation in protecting their fundamental rights. The discussion emphasizes how HIV-positive people often face discrimination, reflected in practices such as HIV testing requirements or differential treatment at work based on their health condition.

Brazilian constitutional legislation is identified as a central pillar in ensuring equality for all workers, prohibiting any form of discrimination, including that based on health conditions such as HIV. The article emphasizes that HIV-positive workers have the same rights and duties as their colleagues, and it is illegal to require specific tests for HIV or any type of discrimination during hiring processes or in the workplace.

In addition, Carvalho (2020) highlights judicial precedents that reinforce this legal protection, presuming that the dismissal of employees with serious diseases such as HIV is discriminatory,



unless there is valid legal justification. These court decisions not only seek to protect the individual rights of HIV-positive workers, but also to promote an inclusive and fair society.

By ensuring equal treatment in the workplace, laws have the potential not only to improve the well-being and safety of HIV-positive workers, but also to benefit businesses. Adopting equitable employment practices can contribute to a more diverse, inclusive, and ethical work environment, potentially boosting employee morale, reducing stress-related absenteeism, and improving overall productivity.

Under the same umbrella, Sousa (2021) emphasizes the persistent stigma surrounding HIV in the workplace, highlighting its consequences for both workers and companies, as well as the broader impact on the national economy.

A central point discussed is how HIV/AIDS stigma not only directly affects HIV-positive workers and their families, but also has significant economic repercussions. This is because discrimination in the workplace can lead to denial of employment, unfair dismissals, and other forms of unequal treatment, despite existing legal protections, such as Precedent 443 of the Superior Labor Court (TST) in Brazil, which presumes the dismissal of employees with HIV to be discriminatory.

Stigma contributes to a less inclusive work environment, which can negatively impact companies' performance and productivity. Misperception about HIV also results in additional costs for the public health system and social security programs, exacerbating the economic challenges facing the country.

The author highlights the crucial importance of effective public policies and ongoing educational programs to combat the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS. These initiatives are critical not only to protecting the rights of HIV-positive workers, but also to promoting a fair, inclusive, and respectful work environment for all employees. Therefore, there is an urgent need for a holistic and integrated approach to dealing with HIV stigma in the workplace, aiming not only at legal compliance, but also at cultural transformation and the promotion of a more just and egalitarian society.

The study conducted by Campos, Silva and Freitas (2023) explores the complex impacts of HIV stigmatization on the professional lives of HIV-positive people. The survey reveals a series of barriers that begin already in the hiring processes, where the negative perception around pre-employment exams makes it difficult to access formal employment. This situation often encourages forms of informal work or even leads to unemployment.

Despite the existence of protective legislation, as highlighted in the study, the persistence of stigma in relation to HIV testing contributes to a work environment where HIV-positive workers feel obliged to keep their health status confidential, for fear of discrimination and even dismissal. This





constant vigilance and alertness negatively affects the psychological and emotional well-being of these individuals.

In addition to legal and social issues, the study by Campos, Silva, and Freitas (2023) also identifies significant practical difficulties faced by HIV-positive workers, such as limited access to Testing and Counseling Centers (CTA) due to problems with inadequate public transportation. These additional obstacles exacerbate the challenges faced by this population, making it even more difficult to properly manage their health and well-being.

In view of these complexities, the authors propose an integrated approach that includes ongoing education on the rights of HIV-positive workers. This is not only aimed at ensuring compliance with existing laws but also promoting a more welcoming, inclusive, and respectful work environment. The research suggests the need for a deeper dialogue between occupational health and HIV/AIDS studies, using methodologies such as action research and ethnographic research to address knowledge gaps and challenge entrenched social stigmas in work environments.

Among the forms of discrimination identified by professionals with HIV in the labor market, Pereira, Szwarcwald, and Damacena (2019) highlight dismissals that occurred after the revelation of the HIV diagnosis, subtle or explicit pressures for HIV-positive workers to resign, and difficulties in obtaining benefits from the National Institute of Social Security (INSS). These challenges are exacerbated by the lack of information about HIV/AIDS among employers and co-workers, which contributes to the perpetuation of stigma and exclusion of these individuals in professional environments.

Pereira, Szwarcwald and Damacena (2019) also underlined the significant impacts of stigma on the mental and economic health of HIV-positive workers. The constant worry about the possibility of discrimination and the difficulties faced in keeping a job or accessing social security benefits generate additional stress, negatively affecting the general well-being of these people.

Based on the findings, the authors recommended the implementation of intervention programs aimed at reducing HIV/AIDS-related stigma in the workplace and promoting the effective inclusion of these individuals. These interventions can include educational initiatives for employers and co-workers, as well as organizational policies that ensure the protection of the rights of HIV-positive workers and promote a more welcoming and respectful work environment for all.

## **FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Research on HIV stigmatization in relationships and forms of work reveals a complex and challenging panorama for people living with the virus. Since the emergence of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, especially in the early decades, stigma has been a significant force that permeates both social interactions and professional settings. This phenomenon not only reflects cultural and political



attitudes towards HIV, but also directly impacts the lives of HIV-positive individuals, their employment opportunities, emotional well-being, and economic stability.

In the workplace, HIV-positive workers often face discrimination during the hiring process and in the work environment itself. Misperceptions about HIV transmission and unfounded concerns about job safety often lead to discriminatory practices, such as refusal to hire or differential treatment at work. This reality violates the fundamental rights of workers, as well as harms the organizational dynamics and productivity of companies.

Despite existing legal protections in many countries, including norms prohibiting discrimination on the basis of health status, as evidenced by Precedent 443 of the Superior Labor Court in Brazil, stigma persists. The lack of adequate HIV education among employers and co-workers contributes to the perpetuation of these discriminatory practices, which negatively impacts not only HIV-positive individuals but also society as a whole.

The survey emphasizes the need for effective public policies that ensure legal compliance and promote an inclusive and respectful work environment for all employees. This includes ongoing educational initiatives, both to raise awareness of the rights of HIV-positive workers and to challenge entrenched social stigmas. In addition, it is crucial to develop and implement intervention programs that reduce the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS by providing adequate support for both the physical and mental health of these individuals.





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