

“You Take What I Take, so You’re Dead”: external and internal HIV stigma in migrant transfeminine communities in Paris in the age of PrEP

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BACKGROUND

- In France, migrant transgender women (M-TGW) involved in sex work are among the populations most affected by the HIV epidemic (Balhan et al., 2025; Santé publique France, 2025).
- M-TGW-SW have long been linked to AIDS in public and media narratives, contributing to their social stigmatization (Espineria & Thomas, 2014).
- Despite major biomedical advances (TasP, PrEP, PEP) and extensive scientific knowledge regarding HIV transmission, HIV-related stigma remains pervasive in France and elsewhere (Yvon et al., 2023; Rzeszutek et al., 2021).

The application of intersectional approaches to PrEP-related stigma remains limited. Little is known about how PrEP-related stigma interacts with other systems of oppression, including transphobia, racism, and sex work stigma.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

- HIV-related stigma** (internal and external) (Parker & Aggleton, 2007; Pantelic);
- PrEP-related stigma** (Golub, 2018);
- Lateral violence** (Whyman et al., 2021);
- Magical contagion** (Rozin, Markwith & Nemeroff, 1992).

METHODS

- Community-based qualitative study.
- Data combined from Trans&PrEP (2021–2023) and PrEPàPorter (2022–2026) studies.
- Semi-structured interviews (n = 15), focus groups (n = 4), and ethnographic observations.
- M-TGW mostly from Latin America and North and West Africa / Mostly Sex workers / PrEP users.
- Data were audio-recorded, transcribed, anonymized and analyzed thematically.

RESULTS

The archaeology of stigma

Participants accumulate HIV-related stigmatizing social experiences in their pre-migration contexts:

- Painful and tabooed lived experience of losing friends and family to the virus during the 80s and the 90s;
- Direct and stereotyped association between HIV and M-TGW identity in their social circles.

Past participation in clinical trials is a source of further mistrust towards HIV-related issues.

The symbolism of language

Participants have developed a discriminatory and stereotyped language to talk about HIV-related topics:

- HIV = “The disease” (*la maladie/el bicho/o babado*);
- Semantics of fear, religion, destiny.

HIV is still associated with death. M-TGW living with HIV are referred to, and they call themselves, as “death”.

Discriminatory language is also applied to PrEP, which is frequently associated with assumptions of promiscuity, sexual risk-taking, or HIV positivity.

The logics of magical contagion

M-TGW-SW’s bodies are seen as inherently “contagious”:

- Intracommunity judgments** between PrEP users and M-TGW living with HIV:
 - Among PrEP users condomless sex is often seen as irresponsible;
 - PrEP users accuse M-TGW living with HIV of receiving preferential treatment from the French state;
 - M-TGW living with HIV allege that PrEP users are HIV-positive.
- External stigmatization** from work-related settings, healthcare professionals and sexual partners.



Le Parisien, 1985 Le Matin, le quotidien romand, 1990 Le Figaro, 1992
(Materials collected by Louve Zimmermann at the Grisélidis Réal Archive in Geneva)



CONCLUSIONS

In the context of PrEP, HIV-related stigmatizing logics are rearticulated, intersecting with broader systems oppression:

- Internalized and enacted stigma contribute to forms of lateral violence within transgender communities;
- The “personification” of HIV further reveal how symbolic understandings of disease persist, in which stigma is imagined to spread through association with stigmatized individuals.

In a landscape booming with biomedical innovations for HIV prevention, it is more critical than ever not to lose sight of the social dimensions of HIV combined prevention, therefore imagining prevention programs that explicitly address stigma, social inequalities, and community relations alongside biomedical risk.

*Lava que lava,
Al maricón no hay que mirar.
Lava que lava,
La peste te va a pegar.
Lava que lava,
Los ojos hay que tapar.
Lava que lava,
El maricón te va a matar.*

(La misteriosa mirada del Flamenco, Diego Céspedes, 2025)

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