

## Drama and psycho-educational support intervention

# Reducing HIV stigma among sexual and gender minority migrants affected by HIV

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### Background

During 2023 the *Be You!* project explored the use of drama and creativity for stigma reduction among sexual and gender minority migrants affected by HIV. This group is disproportionately affected by HIV, and carries a high burden of intersectional stigma and structural inequality (Mehdiyar, et al., 2020). The project was conducted by the HIV NGO Noaks Ark Stockholm in Stockholm, Sweden.

The participants themselves chose whether they wanted to make the productions public, which they decided to do. This was a process that started with stigma-driven insecurity and finished with the group being proud and more open. The main challenge in the project was to balance integrity and disclosure of the participants and at the same time empower them to decrease self-stigma.

### Description

The *Be You!* project was created from ideas and feedback from the target group (sexual and gender minority migrants affected by HIV). The project was run by three leaders, one with a background in drama and two in psychology and social work. The participants were very committed from the start and influenced the project's progress.

The project involved 12 participants and reached more than 700 people. A multilingual work process was adapted combining Swedish, English and Spanish. The activities within *Be You!* were structured in a process-based approach through peer and professional support (based on Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy). Creative activities such as photography, storytelling, embodiment, drama and singing were combined with therapeutic and psychoeducational sessions around self-worth, stigma, triggers, identity and empowerment, with additional individual support offered as needed.

The *BeYou!* workshops focused on identity and the empowering impact of being who you are - with no shame or stigma. The work from the workshops resulted in a photo and audio exhibition at an international HIV conference held in Stockholm, Sweden 2023.

A peer based theatrical group was led by a psychologist and sexologist together with a creative leader. Individual and group psychoeducational interventions, and additional individual support, were intertwined with musical and theatrical rehearsals. The musical theatre *Reborn in Stockholm* is written and produced by Naomi Wiberg and based on the participant's personal experiences and life stories. The musical became a public performance for a one-night show in Stockholm 2023. *Reborn in Stockholm* tells the experience of a group of immigrants who start a new life in Stockholm. Exploring the challenges, triumphs and personal discoveries of migration, sexuality, identity, rejection, community and HIV. The project participants were not professional actors or singers, making this a completely new experience.

### Result and lessons learned

The interventions were evaluated through different tools such as open group evaluations, Client Satisfaction Questionnaire (CSQ-8) and the 12-item HIV stigma scale (Reinius et al., 2017). The results from the CSQ-8 showed a positive result in all questions asked. For example, all the respondents thought that the interventions responded to their needs, would recommend the intervention to a friend, and that the intervention has helped them to better cope with their problems. Results from the 12-item stigma scale concluded a reduction in HIV stigma by 3,5 points (scoring 26 out of 48 at the beginning of intervention and 22,5 points of 48 at the end of intervention).

### Acknowledgments

Thanks to all the brave and inspiring participants of this project. We are so proud of you! A special thanks to Naomi Wiberg for your creative ideas and fierce commitment to telling stories and changing lives. Also we want to thank The Public Health Agency of Sweden for the grant that made all of this possible.

### References

Mehdiyar, M., Andersson, R., Hjelm, K. (2020). HIV-positive migrants' experience of living in Sweden. *Global Health Action*, 13(1), 1715324-1715324. Doi: 10.1080/16549716.2020.1715324.

Development of a 12-item short version of the HIV stigma scale. *Health and Quality of Life Outcomes*. 15. 10.1186/s12955-017-0691-z.

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Reinius, Maria & Wettergren, Lena & Wiklander, Maria & Svedhem, Veronica & Ekstrom, Anna & Eriksson, Lars E. (2017).

"Being part of this project makes me feel that I can celebrate my existence."

The combination of peer and professional support within a drama and creative oriented intervention had a far more powerful effect than anticipated or what could be fully measured through standardized evaluations. The results from the project live on through photos, music, videos, and merchandise from the musical. The participants say that whenever they feel low, they listen to the soundtrack in order to feel empowered.

### Conclusion

The success of this project is an important reminder of how vital it is to combine professional and peer lead support with creativity to make space for individual, collective and organisational empowerment, and stigma reduction. Authentic storytelling on intersectionality and HIV has the power to grow a more inclusive and empathetic community and society. The dual function of presenting, or exposing, the participants' stories to their community was expressed as a somewhat frightening but empowering process that led to decreasing stigma and improving self-worth.

"It's important for all of us. The way we feel, the way we've been supported, **now we can express ourselves** to be who we are. To be who I am."



Digital poster

Play on Spotify!



NoaksArk



Noaks Ark Stockholm is a non-governmental organization working with and for people living with HIV.