

Stigma, affirmation, and safer sex: The experiences of overseas-born trans and gender diverse people in Australia

Budi Sudarto¹, Eric PF Chow^{1,2,3}, Denton Callander⁵, Percy Gutler⁶, Tiffany R Phillips^{1, 2}, Jason J Ong^{1,2,4}

¹School of Translational Medicine, Faculty of Medicine, Nursing, and Health Sciences, Monash University, Victoria, Australia; ²Melbourne Sexual Health Centre, Alfred Health, Victoria, Australia; ³Melbourne School of Population and Global Health, University of Melbourne, Victoria, Australia; ⁴London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, London, United Kingdom; ⁵The Kirby Institute, UNSW Sydney, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia; ⁶Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health, and Society, La Trobe University, Victoria, Australia



MONASH
University



MSHC
MELBOURNE SEXUAL HEALTH CENTRE
Part of Alfred Health



Acknowledgement of Country

We would like to acknowledge the traditional custodian of the land that we gather, the Kaurna People, and pay our respect to the Elders, past and present.

We acknowledge the on-going cultural and spiritual connections to the land and waterways that have spanned for more than 60,000 years as the oldest continuing culture in the world.

Disclosure of Interest

We do not have any interests to disclose.



MONASH
University



MSHC
MELBOURNE SEXUAL HEALTH CENTRE
Part of AlfredHealth

My Positionality

- I am non-binary presumed male at birth.
- I am tertiary educated.
- I am able to communicate using the English language.
- I have access to Medicare.
- I am middle class background.
- I am a queer Muslim person.



MONASH
University



MSHC
MELBOURNE SEXUAL HEALTH CENTRE
Part of Alfred Health

Definitions

Social Stigma

- A social construct whereby trans and gender diverse people have been made to feel inferior to maintain a system of power that privilege cisgender people. This is an on-going process through negative stereotyping, exclusion, dehumanisation and emancipation among others.

Internalised Stigma

- The process of internalising negative messages around trans and gender diverse people, often result in self-blame and believing that the minoritisation of trans and gender diverse people are justified.

Gender Dysphoria

- The distress and discomfort that a person is experiencing because their presumed gender at birth (i.e. the gender that is presumed of them based on external sex characteristics) does not match with their affirmed gender (i.e. the gender identity that speaks to them).



Definitions

Body Dysphoria

- In trans and gender diverse communities, body dysphoria often caused by a self perception that their physical attributes are not aligning with their gender identity. It can be influenced by the social and gender expectations of the male and female bodies and appearances.

Gender Euphoria

- The feeling of elation, comfort, and peace with one's gender after affirming their gender identity.

Gender Affirmation

- An individual, social, medical, and systemic process, and any of their combinations, of affirming one's gender. Each individual has their own version of gender affirmation.



About the Study

- Our aim is to explore the experiences of overseas-born trans and gender diverse people with HIV and other STI prevention strategies, including testing, treatment, and post-diagnosis care.
- Trans and gender-diverse communities as an often-overlooked population in the sexual health sector.



MONASH
University



MSHC
MELBOURNE SEXUAL HEALTH CENTRE
Part of Alfred Health

Why Overseas-born?

- Overseas-born trans and gender diverse people are facing unique challenges in relation to HIV and other STI prevention strategies, which include:



MONASH
University



MSHC
MELBOURNE SEXUAL HEALTH CENTRE
Part of AlfredHealth

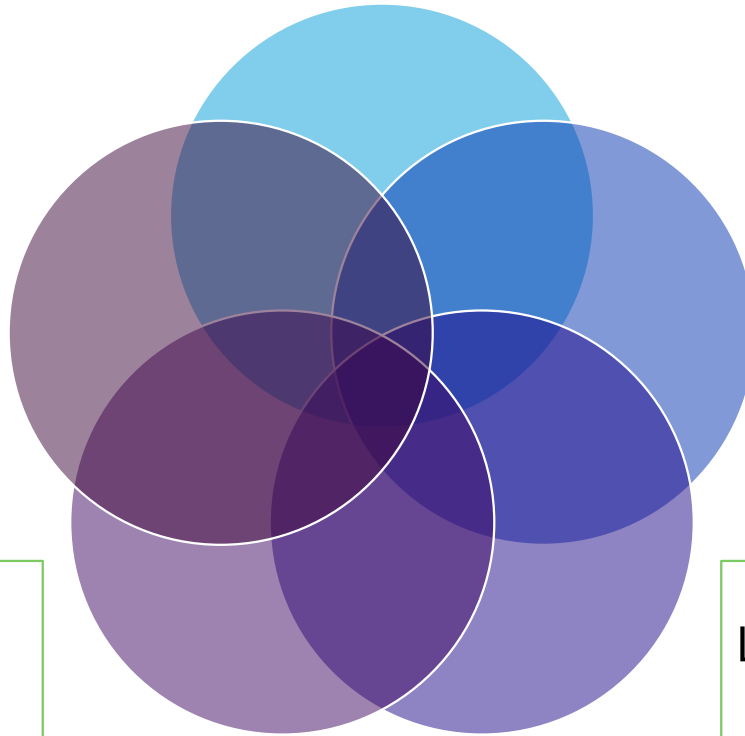
Unfamiliarity with the Australian healthcare system, especially in accessing sexual health clinics

Internalised stigma due to the persistence of transphobia, racism, and other forms of discrimination

Medicare ineligibility and concerns over cost

Perceived and real stigma and discrimination from health professionals relating to their gender, race, ethnicity, and profession (e.g. sex work)

Lack of knowledge on HIV and other STI prevention strategies



Our Methods

- We conducted a semi-structured in-depth qualitative interview between September 2024 and June 2025.
- We used a reflexive descriptive qualitative analysis to interpret the data.
- Reflexive due to my own position as a non-binary researcher with lived and living experiences navigating the sexual health services, and knowledge in HIV and other STI prevention strategies.



MONASH
University



MSHC
MELBOURNE SEXUAL HEALTH CENTRE
Part of Alfred Health

Our Participants

- Thus far, we have spoken to 12 overseas-born trans and gender diverse people :

Characteristic	Number (n)	Characteristic	Number (n)
Age		Gender	
20s	1	Trans women (incl. women with trans experience)	5
30s	9	Trans men (incl. men with trans experience)	4
40s	2	Non-binary	3
Region of Birth		Length of stay in Australia	
Southeast Asia	7	< 6 months	1
East Asia	1	6 – 12 months	1
South Asia	2	1 – 2 years	1
South America	1	3 – 5 years	4
West Europe	1	>5 years	5



Participants' Stories

- Intersecting stigma that influences their decision-making process in relation to HIV and other STI prevention strategies, including testing and treatment.

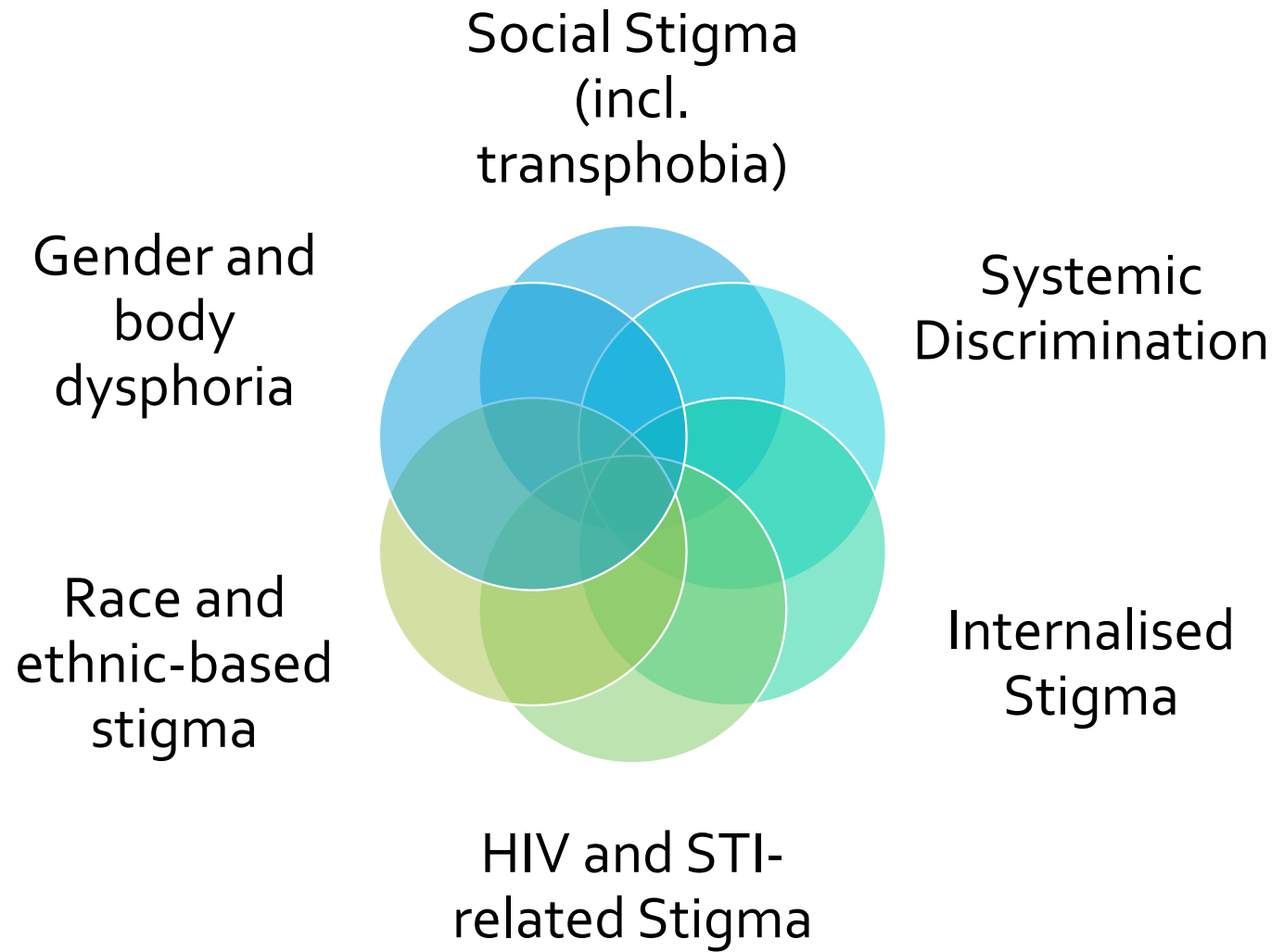


MONASH
University



MSHC
MELBOURNE SEXUAL HEALTH CENTRE
Part of AlfredHealth

Intersecting Stigma



Intersecting Stigma

'When I went to a public hospital for emergency, **they were very rude and transphobic and cis-normative.** They made a lot of mistakes, and I went back, and I said, "You are so cis-normative. In your hospital, **your nurse wouldn't even take my name as a preferred name. You would only [use] my passport name.** What is all this? I may be male, but my gender identity is different. **Male is not my gender identity. Male is my sex**"' (PA07, 30s, trans woman, South Asian, heterosexual)

Social Stigma
(incl. transphobia)

Gender and body dysphoria

Dependent and internalised stigma

HIV and STI-related Stigma

Systemic Discrimination

Internalised Stigma



MONASH
University

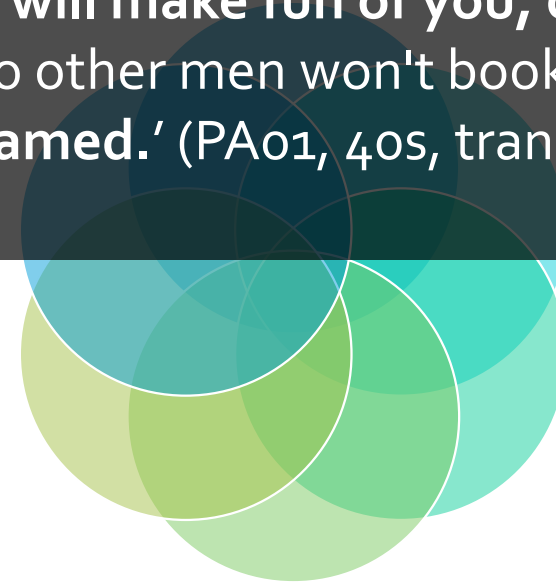


MSHC
MELBOURNE SEXUAL HEALTH CENTRE
Part of **Alfred** Health

Intersecting Stigma

'When you have STI or HIV, people will see you differently, because I've seen it, and I think I'm guilty of it [as well]. Working in a brothel, the girls are the same, too. If you have an STI or something, the girls will make fun of you, or even spread the news, like gossips, so other men won't book you. I guess that is the fear, of being shamed.' (PA01, 40s, trans woman, Southeast Asian, heterosexual)

Race and
ethnic-based
stigma



Internalised
Stigma

HIV and STI-
related Stigma

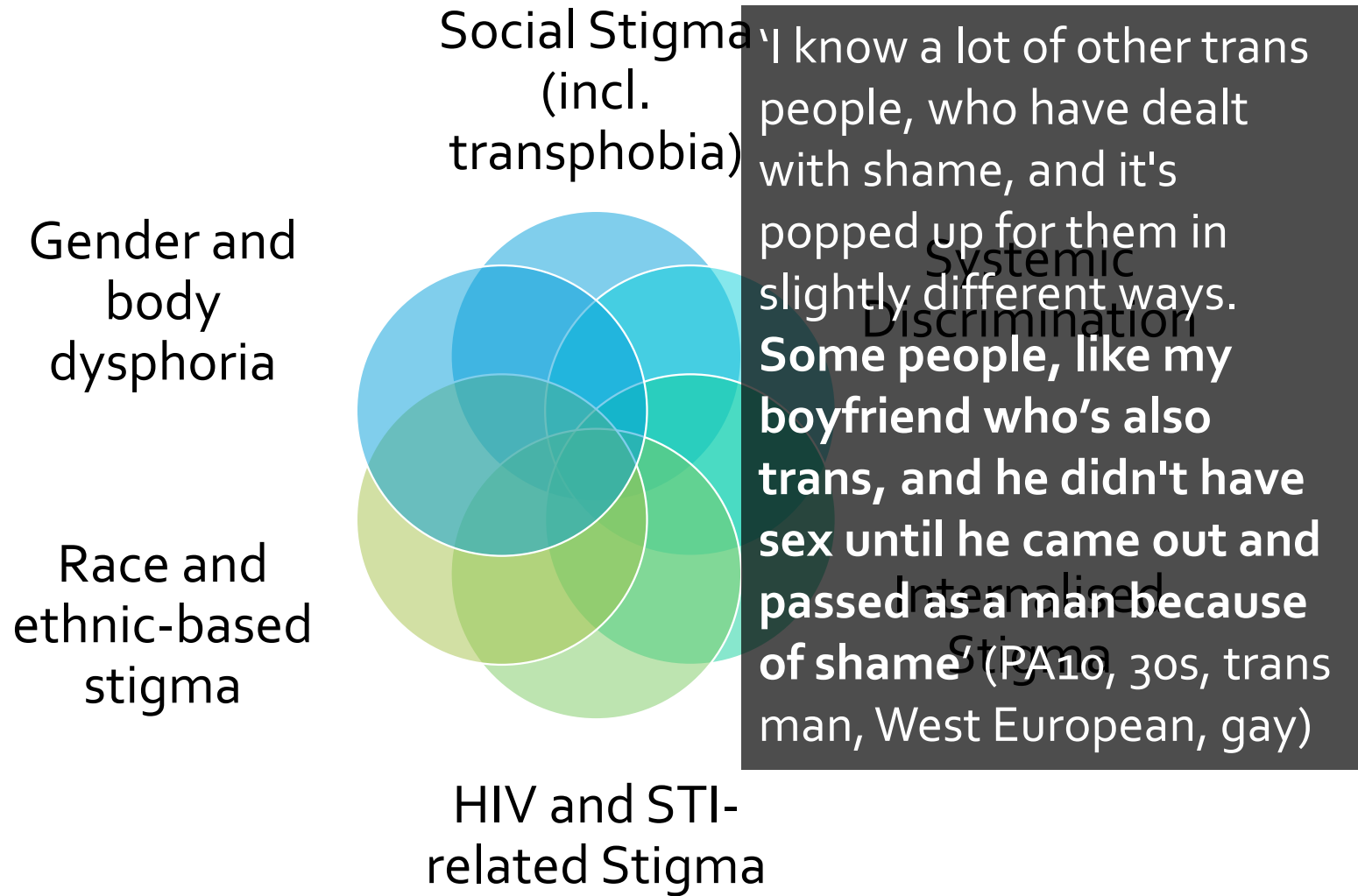


MONASH
University



MSHC
MELBOURNE SEXUAL HEALTH CENTRE
Part of Alfred Health

Intersecting Stigma



Gender Affirmation

- Despite experiencing stigma and discrimination, many participants shared a sense of affirmation and euphoria after embracing their gender identity.



MONASH
University



MSHC
MELBOURNE SEXUAL HEALTH CENTRE
Part of AlfredHealth

“My head
finally looked
like it fits into
the body”

‘I’ve always had incongruence with my gender, ever since I was a little kid. I just didn’t know what it was. It wasn’t in the foreground because of the fact that I had no words to describe it. It’s like a dark cloud in the background. It wasn’t until the first time I dressed up in a full men’s suit, and my friends took some photos, and I looked at the photos, and the only way that I can describe the experience would be, my head finally looked like it fits into the body.’

(PA03, 40s, trans man, East Asian, bisexual)



MONASH
University



MSHC
MELBOURNE SEXUAL HEALTH CENTRE
Part of Alfred Health

Sex as an Affirmation

- Some participants felt a sense of affirmation when others desired them as their affirmed gender.
- For a participant, being wanted as a man increased not only his self-esteem, but also his gender identity:



MONASH
University



MSHC
MELBOURNE SEXUAL HEALTH CENTRE
Part of AlfredHealth

“Simultaneously affirming for both gender and [sexual] attraction”

‘Connecting with other men on Grindr definitely [has] helped me [to] feel a lot more attractive, because I was finding that people were interested in me in a way that they didn’t when I was a woman. And secondly, it was affirming, **because I was connecting with them as a man.** It's been interesting to connect with many different types of men and to see the way that they responded to me, **a way that's simultaneously affirming for both gender and [sexual] attraction.'**

(PA12, 30s, trans man, Southeast Asian, bisexual)

Stigma and Safer-sex Practices

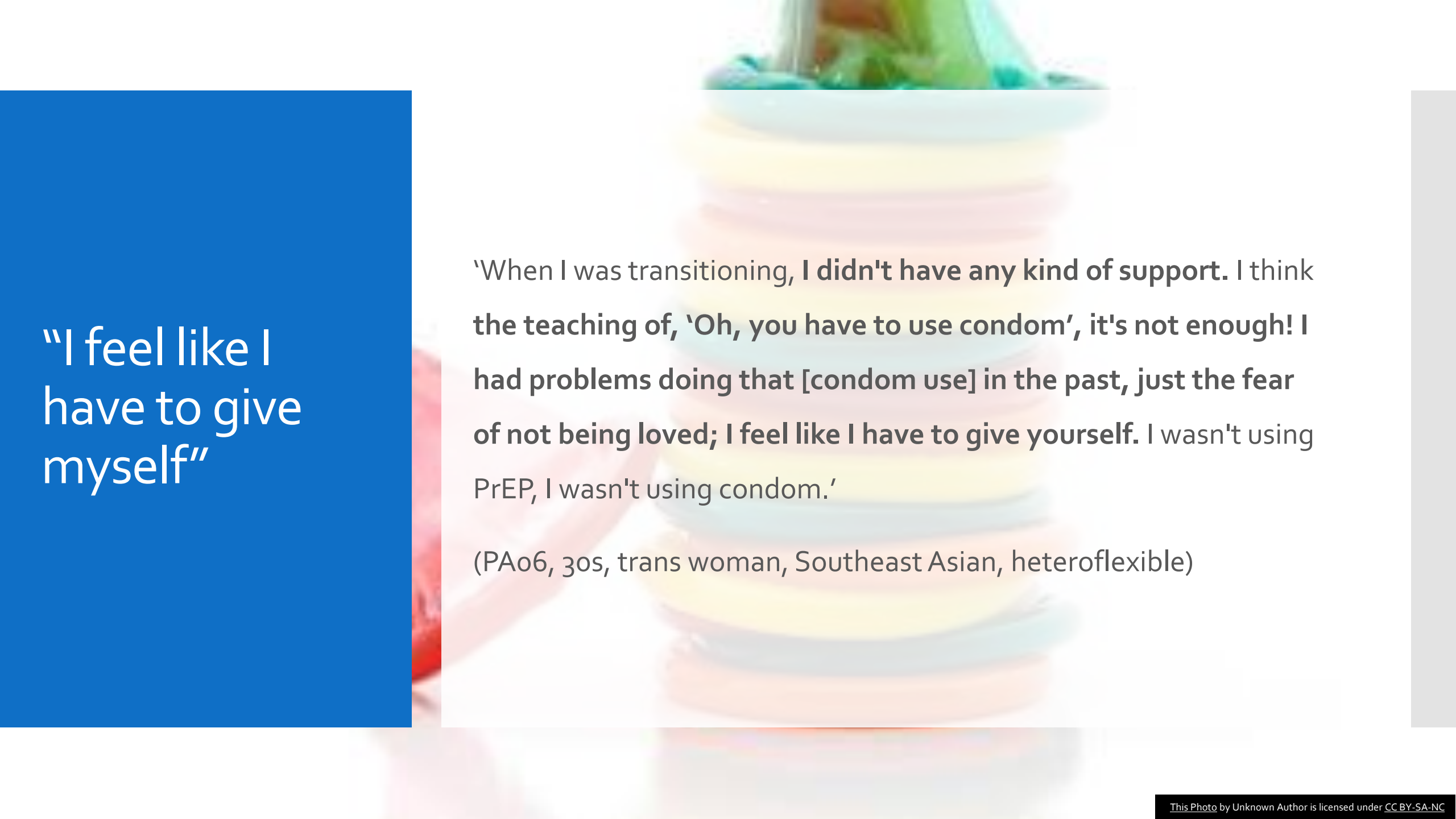
- A few participants made a connection between safer-sex practices with stigma, gender and body dysphoria.
- For a participant, safer-sex messaging around condom use was not relevant to her, as she sought validation from her sexual partners in relation to her gender:



MONASH
University



MSHC
MELBOURNE SEXUAL HEALTH CENTRE
Part of AlfredHealth



“I feel like I
have to give
myself”

‘When I was transitioning, **I didn't have any kind of support.** I think the teaching of, ‘Oh, you have to use condom’, it's not enough! I had problems doing that [condom use] in the past, just the fear of not being loved; I feel like I have to give yourself. I wasn't using PrEP, I wasn't using condom.’

(PAo6, 30s, trans woman, Southeast Asian, heteroflexible)

Dysphoria and Safer-sex Practices

- Another participant reflected on the impact of gender dysphoria on safer-sex practices, and felt that some people engaged in chemsex to lower their inhibition due to both stigma and dysphoria:



MONASH
University



MSHC
MELBOURNE SEXUAL HEALTH CENTRE
Part of AlfredHealth

“To get super wasted and drunk in order to feel OK having sex because of gender dysphoria”

‘I know a lot of people who **take drugs and have sex** or even **get super wasted and drunk in order to feel OK having sex because of gender dysphoria and because of shame**. So, if people are engaging in that type of behaviour in order to lower their inhibitions, to get over their dysphoria, **it can put them at higher risk of unsafe sex practices**, or doing things that they wouldn't normally agree to, or with people they wouldn't normally agree to [have sex with].’

(PA10, 30s, trans man, West European, gay)

Sex Work-related Stigma and Safer-sex Practices

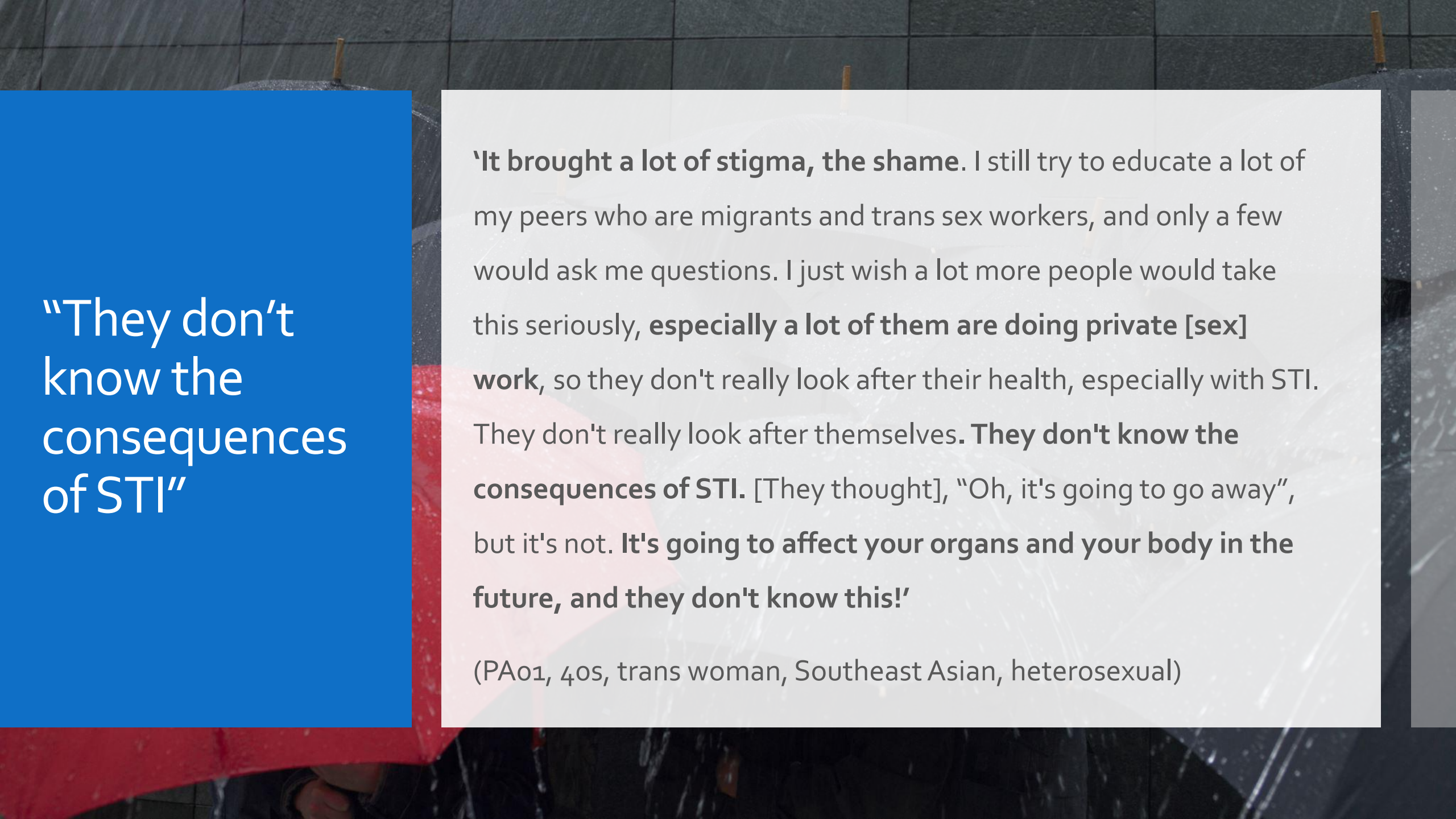
- For another participant, stigma around sex work could also influence safer-sex practices, especially for overseas-born sex workers with little to no awareness around HIV and other STI:



MONASH
University



MSHC
MELBOURNE SEXUAL HEALTH CENTRE
Part of Alfred Health



“They don’t
know the
consequences
of STI”

‘It brought a lot of stigma, the shame. I still try to educate a lot of my peers who are migrants and trans sex workers, and only a few would ask me questions. I just wish a lot more people would take this seriously, **especially a lot of them are doing private [sex] work,** so they don't really look after their health, especially with STI. They don't really look after themselves. **They don't know the consequences of STI.** [They thought], “Oh, it's going to go away”, but it's not. **It's going to affect your organs and your body in the future, and they don't know this!’**

(PA01, 40s, trans woman, Southeast Asian, heterosexual)

Recommendations

- HIV and other STI prevention strategies, including campaigns, are to include intersecting stigma in its messaging based on real-life scenarios.
- Destigmatising trans and gender diverse identity, sexuality, sex, HIV and other STI, alcohol and other drugs, and sex work are to be included in the messaging.



Recommendations

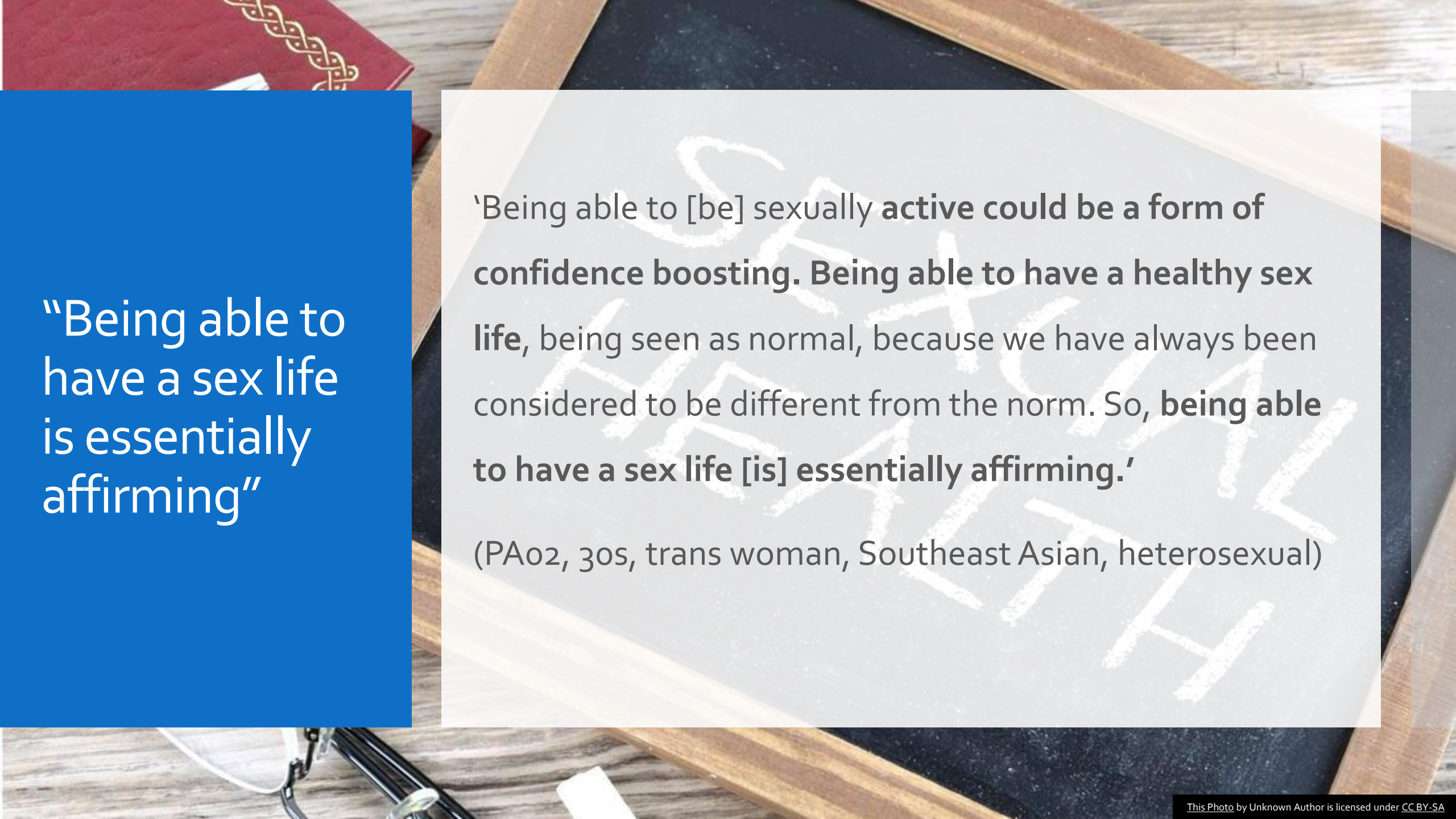
- Campaigns to be co-created with overseas-born TGD people: we are to set the direction, create the messaging, and be involved in the production, distribution, and evaluation of these campaigns.
- Engage with us before you get the funding and pay us accordingly.
- Gender affirmation and euphoria as a part of safer-sex messaging:



MONASH
University



MSHC
MELBOURNE SEXUAL HEALTH CENTRE
Part of Alfred Health



“Being able to have a sex life is essentially affirming”

‘Being able to [be] sexually **active** could be a form of **confidence boosting**. Being able to have a healthy sex **life**, being seen as normal, because we have always been considered to be different from the norm. So, **being able to have a sex life [is] essentially affirming.**’

(PA02, 30s, trans woman, Southeast Asian, heterosexual)

Conclusion

- Stigma, dysphoria and discrimination are a daily reality for overseas-born trans and gender diverse people.
- Experiencing intersecting stigma could affect their safer-sex practices, especially when sex is seen as a way to affirm their gender identity.
- HIV and other STI prevention strategies, including campaigns and education, are to incorporate stigma, dysphoria, as well as euphoria to make the messaging relatable to this specific population.



Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the participants for their generosity in sharing their lived and living experiences, opinions, and wisdom to improve the overall health and wellbeing of overseas-born trans and gender diverse people in Australia.

Thank You

Budi Sudarto

budiadi.Sudarto@monash.edu

School of Translational
Medicine, Faculty of
Medicine, Nursing and
Health Sciences, Monash
University

Melbourne Sexual Health
Centre



Budi Sudarto

Trainer | Consultant | Researcher |
Agitator | Guncle | Cheeky



MONASH
University



MSHC
MELBOURNE SEXUAL HEALTH CENTRE
Part of Alfred Health