

EVALUATING THE EFFICACY OF LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORKS IN MITIGATING HIV-RELATED STIGMA: A COMPARATIVE GLOBAL ANALYSIS OF LEGAL PROTECTIONS AND THEIR IMPACT ON HEALTH OUTCOMES

Joshua HK, Banda
Apex Medical University, Lusaka, Zambia.
Corresponding Email: smartscholar2024@gmail.com

Abstract: HIV-related stigma remains one of the most persistent challenges to effective HIV prevention, treatment, and care worldwide. It profoundly impacts the health and well-being of individuals living with HIV by fostering discrimination, social exclusion, and psychological distress, which in turn affect their willingness to seek care and adhere to treatment regimens. Despite significant advancements in medical treatments, stigma continues to hinder efforts to control the spread of HIV, especially in resource-constrained settings where fear of disclosure often results in delayed diagnosis and inadequate care. Legal and policy frameworks play a critical role in addressing this challenge, offering protections against discrimination and promoting an inclusive healthcare environment that encourages individuals to seek the services they need without fear of judgment or reprisal.

This study evaluates the effectiveness of legal and policy interventions aimed at reducing HIV-related stigma across diverse global contexts. Through a comparative analysis, the research examines how different countries and regions have implemented laws, regulations, and institutional strategies to protect the rights of people living with HIV, focusing on the protection of privacy, nondiscrimination in healthcare access, and the broader social and cultural challenges that contribute to stigma. By exploring specific legislative measures, such as antidiscrimination laws, mandatory HIV education in healthcare settings, and policies aimed at reducing HIV-related stigma in the workplace and other social spaces, this research aims to identify which interventions have been most successful in promoting positive health outcomes for individuals living with HIV.

The study further investigates the broader impact of these legal frameworks on public health, including improvements in treatment adherence, engagement with prevention services, and overall health outcomes for HIV-positive individuals. It also explores the intersectionality of HIV-related stigma with other forms of social marginalization, such as gender, sexuality, and race, to understand how these factors influence the efficacy of legal protections.

By drawing on case studies from various countries with differing levels of healthcare infrastructure and legal protections, the research provides a nuanced understanding of the challenges and successes in addressing HIV-related stigma. The findings offer key insights for policymakers, international organizations, and advocacy groups working to develop and refine legal frameworks that protect the rights of people living with HIV. Ultimately, the study aims to contribute to a global dialogue on the importance of legal reform in reducing HIV-related stigma, improving access to healthcare, and ensuring better health outcomes for people living with HIV.

Keywords: HIV-related stigma; Legal frameworks; Health outcomes & Global comparison

1 INTRODUCTION

HIV-related stigma remains one of the most formidable barriers to effective prevention, treatment, and care for people living with HIV (PLHIV). Despite significant medical advances in the understanding, management, and treatment of HIV, stigma continues to hinder progress in achieving global health goals related to HIV prevention and care [1]. Persistent HIV-related stigma can be understood as a deep-rooted social problem that manifests itself in multiple dimensions, including discrimination, marginalization, and social exclusion. This stigma negatively affects the physical, psychological, and social well-being of PLHIV and contributes to significant challenges in HIV care, prevention, and treatment. Studies consistently show that people living with HIV experience social isolation and discrimination in multiple settings, including healthcare settings, workplaces, and social interactions, compounding the challenges they already face in managing their illness [2]. The psychological impact of HIV-related stigma can be profound. For many people, fear of being stigmatized for disclosing their HIV status leads to a reluctance to seek health services or to disclose their HIV status to others, including health care providers [3].

This reluctance often leads to delayed diagnosis and poor adherence to treatment regimens, both of which contribute to the spread of HIV and poor health outcomes [4]. The stigma surrounding HIV is often associated with misconceptions about the transmission of the disease, particularly in regions where knowledge of HIV is limited, increasing the reluctance of

individuals to engage with health services [5]. Furthermore, stigma often extends beyond individual patients, creating a barrier to the willingness of health care providers to provide care to people affected by HIV, ultimately contributing to a health system that does not fully meet the needs of PLHIV. Given the significant challenges posed by HIV-related stigma, legal and policy frameworks have been developed around the world to reduce stigma and protect the rights of people living with HIV. These legal frameworks are essential to maintaining the dignity and autonomy of PLHIV, ensuring equal access to health care, and promoting social acceptance [6]. Legal protections, including anti-discrimination laws, privacy rights, and workplace protections, are particularly critical to creating an environment in which people living with HIV feel safe to disclose their status and seek care. Anti-discrimination laws are essential to prevent exclusion from essential services and to protect people in the workplace, while privacy laws ensure that the sensitive nature of HIV status is respected and protected from unauthorized disclosure [7]. These legal measures work together with policy interventions to facilitate broader social acceptance and combat misconceptions about HIV. Policy interventions are equally essential to changing social attitudes and reducing HIV-related stigma. Integrating HIV education into health care settings, workplace policies that promote non-discrimination, and public health campaigns to increase HIV awareness are essential strategies to combat stigma [8]. These interventions serve not only to educate the public but also to change behavioral norms in health systems and workplaces, creating environments where individuals feel empowered to seek treatment, disclose their HIV status, and be included in HIV prevention programs without fear of discrimination. In addition, HIV education programs that focus on the science of HIV transmission and prevention help dispel myths and correct misconceptions that fuel stigma.

This study aims to assess the effectiveness of legal protections and policy frameworks implemented worldwide to reduce HIV-related stigma and improve public health outcomes. Through a comparative analysis of legal frameworks across regions, this research will examine the effectiveness of specific laws and policies in reducing stigma, facilitating access to care, and improving health outcomes for PLHIV. A detailed review of case studies from countries with diverse health infrastructures and legal protections provides insight into how different regions have approached the challenge of HIV stigma. Understanding the successes and limitations of these legal and policy interventions can help identify best practices and areas for improvement.

In addition, the study will assess the broader impact of these legal frameworks on public health outcomes, with a focus on HIV prevention, treatment adherence, and transmission reduction. The intersection of legal protection with cultural, social, and health contexts will be explored to determine how legal reforms can help improve public health outcomes. By understanding the complexity of legal protections and their implications for HIV-related care-seeking behavior, this research provides practical advice for policymakers, advocates, and health systems to design more effective interventions.

Ultimately, the findings of this research contribute to the global debate on how legal and policy reforms can mitigate HIV-related stigma, promote better access to health care, and ensure better health outcomes for people living with HIV. As the international community continues to combat the HIV epidemic, the role of legal and policy frameworks in creating an enabling environment for PLHIV will be critical to achieving long-term health goals and overcoming persistent barriers created by stigma.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

HIV-related stigma remains a pervasive and complex barrier to achieving global health goals in HIV prevention, treatment, and care. Despite significant advances in medical science, including antiretroviral therapy (ART) that has redefined HIV as a manageable chronic disease, stigma continues to undermine progress. This stigma manifests itself in many ways, including social rejection, self-stigma, and institutional discrimination, which significantly impede the ability of people living with HIV (PLHIV) to access health services and social support systems [8]. The persistence of HIV-related stigma is deeply rooted in a combination of misinformation, moral judgments, and structural inequalities, such as poverty, gender discrimination, and homophobia, which disproportionately affect vulnerable people, such as men who have sex with men, sex workers, and people who inject drugs [9]. Addressing HIV-related stigma requires a multifaceted approach, with legal and policy frameworks playing a critical role in mitigating its effects. Legal protections, such as anti-discrimination laws and privacy rights, provide the basis for equal access to health care and the protection of human rights. For example, South Africa's Employment Equity Act has proven effective in reducing workplace discrimination against HIV-positive people, while South Africa's Ryan White CARE Act in the United States has provided critical funding to provide comprehensive care for underserved communities [10]. These frameworks serve not only to protect individual rights, but also to establish social norms that promote inclusion and acceptance. In addition to legal measures, targeted policy interventions are essential to strengthen public perceptions and attitudes towards HIV. Public education campaigns, healthcare provider training programs, and workplace policies that promote non-discrimination have demonstrated success in reducing stigma by debunking myths and promoting empathy [11]. However, the implementation and enforcement of these measures vary significantly across regions due to disparities in political will, economic resources, and cultural attitudes [2]. For example, while some countries have enacted comprehensive anti-discrimination laws, others still lack the basic legal frameworks needed to protect PLHIV, exacerbating disparities in access to and outcomes of health care.

This literature review aims to assess the effectiveness of existing legal and policy frameworks in reducing HIV-related stigma and improving public health outcomes. The analysis explores critical dimensions, including the conceptualization of

stigma, the role of legal protections, the impact of policy interventions, and regional disparities in the design and implementation of these measures. It also examines how these interventions affect critical public health indicators such as HIV testing rates, treatment adherence, and overall health outcomes. Research shows that countries with strong legal protections and comprehensive policies report higher uptake of HIV services and better health outcomes, while the lack of such measures is associated with increased stigma and barriers to care.

By synthesizing existing research, this study not only identifies best practices but also highlights critical gaps in current legal and policy frameworks. It highlights the need for evidence-based and context-specific strategies to combat stigma and ensure equity in health care for people living with HIV. Furthermore, the findings highlight the importance of integrating legal reforms with broader social and cultural interventions to address the root causes of stigma. Ultimately, addressing HIV stigma is essential to achieving global health goals, reducing HIV transmission rates, and improving the quality of life of people living with HIV. This review aims to provide actionable information for policymakers, researchers, and advocates to design and implement more effective interventions, promoting a more inclusive and stigma-free global health environment.

2.1 Conceptualizing HIV-Related Stigma

HIV stigma is a multifaceted social phenomenon that includes negative attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors toward people living with HIV (PLHIV) or those perceived to be at risk of HIV infection. It is a form of social exclusion that manifests itself in diverse settings, from individual experiences to institutional practices, and has a significant impact on the well-being of those affected. HIV-related stigma is widely recognized as one of the most persistent barriers to accessing HIV care, treatment, and prevention, affecting public health outcomes and compounding HIV management challenges. The complex nature of HIV-related stigma requires a comprehensive understanding of its manifestations, underlying causes, and consequences.

2.1.1 Dimensions of HIV-related stigma

HIV-related stigma is generally understood to include three main dimensions: social stigma, self-stigma, and institutional stigma.

Social stigma: This refers to the social rejection and devaluation of people living with HIV, which is often manifested through discrimination, exclusion, and stereotyping. Social stigma is fueled by widespread misconceptions about HIV transmission and is often shaped by cultural, religious, and political beliefs. These stigmatizing attitudes contribute to the marginalization of PLHIV, particularly those from already vulnerable groups, such as men who have sex with men (MSM), sex workers, and people who inject drugs [3]. The perception that HIV is associated with behaviors that are considered morally unacceptable, such as drug use or non-heteronormative sexual practices, perpetuates the social stigma associated with HIV. **Self-stigma:** Also called internalized stigma, this dimension occurs when people with HIV internalize negative attitudes from society, leading to feelings of shame, guilt, and self-blame. Self-stigma can lead to psychological distress, depression, anxiety, and decreased self-esteem, further complicating the mental health problems associated with living with HIV [4]. PLHIV who experience self-stigma may avoid seeking health care, be reluctant to disclose their status to others, and have difficulty adhering to treatment, fearing judgment and rejection.

Institutional stigma: This form of stigma occurs in the health, legal, and other institutional systems. Institutional stigma includes discriminatory practices, policies, and attitudes that prevent access to health services, violate patient confidentiality, or deny the rights of people with HIV [5]. In healthcare settings, for example, providers may be biased or provide suboptimal care to PLHIV due to stigmatizing attitudes or institutionalized practices that do not meet the needs of people living with HIV. Institutional stigma is often reinforced by inadequate legal protections, such as the absence of anti-discrimination or privacy laws, which leave individuals vulnerable to further discrimination and abuse [6].

2.1.2 The underlying causes of HIV stigma

Research shows that HIV stigma is not simply a product of ignorance; rather, it is rooted in deep social inequalities, including gender discrimination, homophobia, and classism, which further marginalize vulnerable populations. For example, the stigma faced by MSM and sex workers is compounded by social norms that view these groups as deviant or immoral. These interrelated factors compound vulnerability and create a cycle of stigma and exclusion that perpetuates HIV transmission and impedes access to care.

Gender-based stigma is particularly prevalent, as women living with HIV often face dual stigma: one related to HIV and the other related to gender norms and expectations. Women, particularly those living in patriarchal societies, may be blamed for HIV transmission or promiscuity, further marginalizing them in social and health settings [7]. In addition, women are more likely to experience gender-based violence, which not only increases their risk of HIV infection but also reinforces the stigma they face due to their HIV status.

Individuals' economic status also plays a critical role in their experience of HIV-related stigma. People from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may experience additional barriers to health care, including limited access to HIV testing, treatment, and prevention services. These barriers are compounded by social stigmas that view poverty as a moral failing, further reinforcing the social isolation and discrimination experienced by people living with HIV [8]. Economic disadvantage may also limit access to legal remedies, making it more difficult for individuals to challenge discrimination in health care or employment.

2.1.3 Psychological, social, and economic impacts of HIV stigma

The psychological, social, and economic impacts of HIV-related stigma are profound and far-reaching, with significant consequences for individuals' mental health, well-being, and quality of life. Psychological impacts: Stigma is closely linked to psychological distress, including depression, anxiety, and feelings of hopelessness (Kehn et al., 2019). For many people living with HIV, the fear of being judged or rejected by others leads to social withdrawal and isolation. This situation is exacerbated by self-stigma, which can lower self-esteem and exacerbate feelings of shame and guilt. The psychological burden of HIV-related stigma can discourage people from seeking mental health support, leading to untreated health problems and further deterioration in well-being.

Social impacts: The social consequences of HIV-related stigma are equally important. Stigma often leads to social exclusion, with people living with HIV being rejected by family, friends, and communities. This exclusion can extend to relationships with intimate partners, who may distance themselves from an HIV-positive person for fear of being stigmatized or infected. The resulting lack of social support compounds the challenges faced by people living with HIV, making it more difficult to fight the disease and adhere to treatment regimens.

Economic impacts: Economically, HIV-related stigma can lead to discrimination in employment, housing, and education, further increasing the economic vulnerability of people living with HIV. Fear of disclosing one's HIV status in the workplace, coupled with a lack of legal protection, can lead to job loss, lower wages, or a complete lack of employment opportunities. Furthermore, HIV-related stigma can prevent people from accessing the social services they need, exacerbating their financial insecurity. This economic marginalization can further limit people's ability to obtain adequate health care, creating a vicious cycle that undermines efforts to control HIV transmission.

2.1.4 Impact on HIV diagnosis and care-seeking behavior

One of the most direct consequences of HIV-related stigma is its impact on care-seeking behavior. Stigma often leads to delayed HIV diagnosis, as people are reluctant to get tested or disclose their HIV status for fear of judgment, exclusion, and discrimination. Studies have shown that people who perceive high levels of stigma are less likely to seek HIV testing and may avoid health services altogether (Nguyen et al., 2019). This delay in diagnosis can lead to more advanced stages of HIV infection by the time people seek care, complicating treatment efforts and increasing the risk of transmission to others. Additionally, stigma can deter people from disclosing their HIV status to healthcare providers, family members, or sexual partners, thereby reducing opportunities for early intervention, treatment adherence, and treatment strategies (Kehn et al. al., 2019). Non-disclosure of HIV status limits the ability of healthcare providers to provide appropriate care and counseling, while preventing people from receiving the emotional and social support they need to manage their condition. In the context of HIV prevention, stigma prevents people from participating in harm reduction programs, such as needle exchanges or safer sex initiatives, further exacerbating the epidemic.

2.1.5 The need for targeted legal and policy frameworks

The persistence of HIV-related stigma highlights the urgent need for comprehensive legal and policy frameworks that address stigma at multiple levels. Legal protections, such as anti-discrimination laws, privacy rights, and workplace protections, are essential to create an environment where individuals feel safe to seek care, disclose their HIV status, and participate in HIV prevention and treatment programs without fear of retaliation. In addition, policy interventions aimed at changing social attitudes, such as public awareness campaigns and HIV education, are essential to dismantle harmful myths and misconceptions that perpetuate stigma and discrimination.

In conclusion, conceptualizing HIV-related stigma reveals its complex and multidimensional nature. Stigma is not simply a product of ignorance, but is deeply rooted in social, cultural, and institutional structures that perpetuate inequality and marginalization. Addressing HIV stigma requires a multifaceted approach that includes legal protection, policy interventions, and social change. By better understanding the dimensions, causes, and impacts of HIV-related stigma, we can develop more effective strategies to address stigma, improve care-seeking behaviors, and ultimately improve the health outcomes of PLHIV.

2.2 The Role of Legal Protection in Reducing HIV Stigma

Legal protection is essential to combat HIV-related stigma, as it promotes equality, protects individual rights and ensures non-discriminatory access to health care, employment and social services. The introduction of anti-discrimination laws, privacy rights and workplace protections for people living with HIV (PLHIV) has proven to be a crucial step in reducing stigma and promoting inclusion and trust [11]. These legal frameworks act as a cornerstone for reducing stigma, giving individuals the confidence to disclose their HIV status and access essential health care and support without fear of retaliation.

Anti-discrimination laws are among the most effective tools to combat HIV-related stigma. For example, legislation in countries such as Canada and the United States prohibits discrimination against PLHIV in healthcare, employment, housing, and education [5]. In the United States, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) explicitly recognizes HIV as a disability, ensuring that people with HIV have the right to reasonable accommodation in the workplace and protection from discrimination in services [10]. These legal measures not only protect the rights of PLHIV, but also send a powerful

message of society's commitment to equality and inclusion, helping to normalize HIV as a manageable health problem rather than a source of moral judgment or exclusion.

Privacy is another essential aspect of the legal framework designed to reduce stigma. Laws that ensure the confidentiality of sensitive health information, including HIV status, are essential to building trust between patients and health care providers. In settings where confidentiality is not guaranteed, people often avoid HIV testing and treatment for fear of being "deleted", leading to delayed diagnosis and poor health outcomes. For example, in countries with strong privacy protections, such as Germany, patients are more likely to seek early diagnosis and treatment, contributing to better individual and public health outcomes. Conversely, lack of privacy protections perpetuates fear and stigma, creating barriers to effective access to health care. Despite progress in some regions, the global implementation of legal protections remains uneven. In many low- and middle-income countries, the lack of comprehensive anti-discrimination and privacy laws leaves people living with HIV vulnerable to systemic stigma and discrimination. Research has shown that in sub-Saharan Africa, where HIV prevalence is high, workplace discrimination and denial of health services remain common due to inadequate legal frameworks and weak enforcement mechanisms. In addition, social attitudes and cultural norms often undermine the effectiveness of legal protection, particularly in regions where stigma is deeply rooted in traditional beliefs and misinformation about HIV transmission.

The limitations of legal frameworks highlight the need for complementary measures to ensure their effectiveness. This includes strong enforcement mechanisms, public awareness campaigns, and training of health care providers and employers to combat implicit bias and discriminatory practices [2]. For example, South Africa's equality courts, established under the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act, have been instrumental in addressing gender discrimination cases, serving as a model for other countries [3]. However, even with strong legal frameworks, systemic change requires a concerted effort to address the underlying social and cultural factors that perpetuate stigma. In conclusion, legal protections are essential for reducing HIV-related stigma, but their effectiveness depends on their appropriate implementation, social acceptance, and integration into broader stigma reduction strategies. By addressing the structural and cultural dimensions of stigma, legal frameworks can play a transformative role in ensuring that PLHIV are treated with dignity and justice, thereby improving health outcomes and fostering a more inclusive society. Future research should continue to explore the interactions between legal protections and social attitudes, identifying best practices to maximize the impact of these frameworks around the world.

2.3 Global Comparative Analysis of Legal Frameworks

A comparative analysis of legal frameworks shows significant disparities in the extent and effectiveness of legal protections designed to address HIV stigma across regions. These variations often reflect economic, cultural, and political differences, which have a profound impact on the experiences of people living with HIV (PLHIV) and their access to essential services.

2.3.1 High-income countries: comprehensive legal protection

High-income countries, such as the United States, Canada, and many Western European countries, have implemented strong legal frameworks designed to reduce HIV-related stigma. These frameworks typically include anti-discrimination laws, privacy protections, and HIV education policies, which together promote an environment of inclusion and respect for PLHIV. For example, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in the United States explicitly prohibits discrimination based on HIV in employment, housing, and healthcare [3]. Similarly, European countries have integrated HIV rights into broader human rights frameworks, providing legal recourse for PLHIV who face stigma or discrimination [11].

These comprehensive protections have significantly improved health care access and outcomes for PLHIV. The integration of HIV care into mainstream health services has normalized treatment, reduced stigma and encouraged testing and early diagnosis (Nguyen et al., 2019). In addition, public awareness campaigns and HIV education programs have complemented legal measures by addressing social attitudes and fostering sensitivity towards PLHIV.

2.3.2 Low and middle income countries: challenges and gaps

In contrast, low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, parts of Asia and Eastern Europe, face significant challenges in the implementation and implementation of legal protection policies for PLHIV. Many countries in these regions lack comprehensive anti-discrimination laws, exposing people living with HIV to stigma and exclusion in health, employment, and the community [4]. For example, a study in sub-Saharan Africa found that fear of stigma and discrimination often prevents individuals from accessing HIV testing and treatment, contributing to delayed diagnosis and increased transmission rates [4].

In some low- and middle-income countries, legal frameworks not only fail to protect people living with HIV, but actively exacerbate stigma. The criminalization of HIV transmission or non-disclosure of HIV status, prevalent in parts of Eastern Europe and sub-Saharan Africa, perpetuates fear and discourages individuals from getting tested or disclosing their status [9]. These punitive laws undermine public health efforts by driving the epidemic underground, thereby limiting the effectiveness of prevention and treatment programs. Global inequality in legal protection

Differences in legal protection between high-income and low- and middle-income countries highlight systemic disparities in the global response to HIV. While high-income countries have the resources and political will to develop and implement progressive legal frameworks, low- and middle-income countries often face competing priorities, resource constraints, and

entrenched stigma. This disparity highlights the need for international collaboration and capacity building efforts to close the legal protection gap and reduce global disparities in HIV care [10].

2.3.3 Lessons learned from successful role models

Despite these challenges, there are successful models in low- and middle-income countries that demonstrate the potential of effective legal frameworks. South Africa's Employment Equity Act and the broader human rights-based approach to HIV have played a vital role in reducing discrimination in the workplace and improving access to health care for people living with HIV [11]. Similarly, India's efforts to decriminalize same-sex relationships and protect marginalized communities have helped create a more inclusive environment for HIV prevention and treatment [10].

2.3.4 The role of advocacy and international support

Global advocacy organizations, such as UNAIDS and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, play a critical role in addressing these disparities. These organizations help countries develop rights-based legal frameworks, fund programs to reduce stigma, and advocate for the removal of punitive laws that hinder public health efforts [6]. International cooperation is essential to share best practices, provide technical assistance, and ensure that all countries can implement and enforce legal protections for PLHIV.

A comparative analysis of legal frameworks reveals striking contrasts in the response to HIV-related stigma between high-income countries and low- and middle-income countries. Although progress has been made in many regions, significant gaps remain, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, where stigma and discrimination continue to undermine public health efforts. Addressing these inequities requires a globally coordinated approach, combining legal reforms, resource allocation and cultural changes to ensure equitable access to care and protection for all people living with HIV. Building on successful models and human rights priorities, countries can create environments that promote dignity, inclusion and better health outcomes for people living with HIV.

2.4 Impact of Legal and Policy Frameworks on Health Outcomes

Legal and policy frameworks designed to address HIV-related stigma have contributed to improved health outcomes for people living with HIV (PLHIV). By fostering environments of acceptance, inclusion and protection, these measures reduce barriers to accessing health care and promote adherence to treatment. The relationship between reducing stigma and health outcomes is well documented, highlighting the critical role of legal and policy interventions in mitigating the broader impacts of the HIV epidemic [5].

2.4.1 Improving access to health care and service utilization

Legal protections, such as anti-discrimination laws and confidentiality guarantees, strengthen the willingness of PLHIV to engage with health systems. For example, studies have shown that people living in areas with a strong legal framework are more likely to be tested for HIV and seek treatment due to reduced fear of stigma and discrimination. In the United States, the implementation of the Ryan White Program on HIV/AIDS has shown that integrating legal protections into comprehensive care models leads to increased service use and improved health outcomes, particularly for underserved populations [6].

Conversely, the lack of legal protections in many low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) perpetuates health inequities. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, stigma-related barriers, such as discriminatory practices in health facilities, discourage PLHIV from accessing essential services, leading to delays in diagnosis and increased rates of HIV transmission (Mahajan et al., 2020). This highlights the urgent need for policy reforms that prioritize inclusion and rights protection.

2.4.2 Improving treatment adherence and viral suppression

Anti-stigma policies and supportive legal environments have a direct impact on treatment adherence, which is essential for achieving viral suppression and improving individual and public health outcomes. Research shows that PLWH who feel supported by non-discriminatory policies are more likely to adhere to antiretroviral therapy (ART) regimens, which lead to better immune function and reduced risk of opportunistic infections [7].

In countries with progressive policies, such as South Africa, where the government has prioritized the integration of HIV care into broader health initiatives, adherence rates have improved significantly [8]. This is in stark contrast to regions where punitive laws, such as those criminalizing HIV transmission, discourage individuals from seeking or remaining in treatment, undermining public health efforts to control the epidemic [9].

2.4.3 It reduces the rate of HIV transmission

Legal and policy frameworks that address stigma contribute to reducing HIV transmission rates, promoting early diagnosis and consistent treatment. People who achieve viral suppression with effective ART are significantly less likely to transmit the virus, a phenomenon known as treatment as prevention (TasP) [10]. This highlights the importance of creating legal environments that encourage people living with HIV to seek treatment without fear of discrimination or retaliation.

Public health campaigns integrated into policy frameworks further reinforce this effect by normalizing HIV testing and treatment, reducing stigma, and promoting acceptance of people living with HIV at the community level. For example, countries such as Thailand, which have implemented comprehensive education and stigma reduction programs along with legal protection, have seen significant declines in new HIV infections [11].

2.4.4 Addressing health disparities

Legal and policy interventions also play a critical role in reducing health disparities among populations disproportionately affected by HIV. By targeting specific groups, such as men who have sex with men, transgender people, and sex workers, these frameworks help dismantle systemic inequalities that contribute to higher HIV prevalence and poorer health outcomes in these populations. However, the success of these interventions often depends on political will, resource allocation, and societal attitudes toward HIV. In low- and middle-income countries, where structural inequalities and cultural stigmas are widespread, implementing effective legal and policy frameworks remains a significant challenge. International cooperation and capacity-building efforts are essential to close these gaps and ensure equal access to care for all individuals, regardless of their geographical or socio-economic context.

Evidence highlights the transformative impact of legal and policy frameworks on improving health outcomes for PLHIV. By addressing stigma at multiple levels (individual, institutional, and societal), these measures improve access to health care, improve treatment adherence, and reduce HIV transmission rates. However, disparities in the implementation and enforcement of these frameworks highlight the need for sustained global efforts to promote inclusive policies and equitable access to health care. Strengthening legal protection and integrating it into targeted public health strategies is essential to achieve the dual goals of reducing HIV stigma and improving health outcomes for people living with HIV.

(1) Challenges and gaps in the legal and policy framework

Despite visible progress in addressing HIV-related stigma through legal and policy initiatives, several challenges persist and limit their effectiveness. These challenges highlight the complexity of implementing sustainable frameworks and the multifaceted nature of stigma as a social, cultural and institutional issue.

(2) Implementation of existing laws

A key challenge is the weak enforcement of anti-discrimination laws. In many countries, legal protections exist on paper but are poorly implemented, leaving individuals without meaningful recourse when faced with HIV-related discrimination.

3 CHALLENGES AND GAPS IN LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORKS

This gap is often exacerbated by systemic issues such as corruption, lack of judicial independence and limited access to legal aid, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). For example, studies have shown that in some African and Asian countries, people living with HIV (PLHIV) are unaware of their legal rights, making it difficult for them to challenge discriminatory practices in health care, employment, and education.

The lack of enforcement mechanisms also extends to health care settings, where stigma and discrimination remain widespread despite existing policies. Health care professionals can perpetuate stigma through judgmental attitudes or breaches of confidentiality, thereby undermining the trust necessary for effective HIV care. Addressing this problem requires not only stronger law enforcement, but also training programs for health care providers to promote non-discriminatory practices and accountability.

3.1 Cultural and Social Barriers

HIV stigma is deeply rooted in cultural, religious and social norms, which often conflict with the principles of equality and non-discrimination enshrined in the legal framework. In many contexts, HIV is associated with behaviors that are considered socially unacceptable, such as drug use, sex work, or same-sex relationships, reinforcing stigma and marginalization. Even when progressive laws are enacted, social attitudes can be resistant to change, limiting the impact of these frameworks.

For example, the criminalization of same-sex relationships and drug use in some countries creates a paradox where legal systems simultaneously aim to reduce HIV-related stigma while perpetuating it through punitive laws. This disconnect highlights the need for holistic approaches that integrate legal reforms with efforts to address social attitudes and structural inequalities.

3.2 Insufficient Inclusion of Marginalized Groups

Legal and policy frameworks often fail to adequately address the needs of populations disproportionately marginalized by HIV, such as men who have sex with men, transgender people, sex workers, and people who inject drugs. These groups often face overlapping forms of stigma and discrimination, whether due to their HIV status or their identity or behaviors.

In many regions, legal protections for these populations are either absent or clearly punitive. For example, laws that criminalize sex work or drug use not only exacerbate stigma, but also hinder access to HIV prevention and treatment services. Closing these gaps requires comprehensive policies that prioritize the rights and well-being of all people, regardless of their identity or circumstances.

Resource and capacity constraints

Implementing effective legal and policy frameworks also requires significant resources and institutional capacity. Many low- and middle-income countries face resource constraints that limit their capacity to develop, implement and monitor

comprehensive anti-stigma initiatives. Limited funding for public education campaigns, legal aid services and health care training programmes further compound this challenge, leaving PLHIV vulnerable to stigma and discrimination.

Furthermore, weak governance structures in some regions prevent the development of coordinated responses to HIV-related stigma. Fragmented approaches and lack of cooperation between government agencies, civil society and international organisations reduce the effectiveness of legal and policy interventions.

Recommendations to fill the gaps

To overcome these challenges, legal and policy frameworks must be supported by strong enforcement mechanisms, targeted educational campaigns, and inclusive approaches that respond to the needs of marginalized populations. Cooperation between governments, civil society and international organizations is essential to ensure that legal protections translate into tangible benefits for people living with HIV.

In addition, integrating legal reforms with community-based initiatives can help change social attitudes and promote acceptance. For example, the involvement of religious and cultural leaders in stigma reduction campaigns can foster greater community support and create environments that are conducive to change.

While legal and policy frameworks are essential tools for combating HIV stigma, their effectiveness is compromised by implementation difficulties, cultural resistance and resource constraints. Closing these gaps requires a comprehensive, multi-sectoral approach that combines legal reforms with education, advocacy and community engagement. Only by combining these efforts can we make significant progress in reducing HIV stigma and improving health outcomes for all.

3.3 Conclusion

Your passage provides a powerful and comprehensive overview of the critical role that legal and policy frameworks play in addressing HIV-related stigma and improving health outcomes for PLHIV. To further illustrate this point, consider the following:

Studies of HIV-related stigma consistently highlight the importance of legal and policy frameworks in enabling environments that support people living with HIV (PLHIV). Legal protections, such as anti-discrimination laws and confidentiality guarantees, play a central role in reducing stigma by preserving individual rights and promoting equal access to health services. Targeted policy interventions, including workplace protections and public health campaigns, complement these legal measures by addressing the social and institutional barriers that perpetuate stigma. However, the uneven distribution of these frameworks highlights significant regional disparities, with high-income countries often showing better results in combating stigma than low- and middle-income regions. In high-income countries, strong legal and policy initiatives have helped to standardize HIV care and integrate it into broader health systems. For example, anti-discrimination laws in countries such as the United States and Canada have reduced barriers to access to health care and employment for people living with HIV, thereby promoting greater social acceptance. However, in many low- and middle-income countries, such as those in sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia, structural challenges such as weak enforcement mechanisms, limited resources, and entrenched cultural stigma hinder progress. Criminalizing behaviors associated with HIV transmission further exacerbates these problems, creating environments where fear and marginalization discourage individuals from seeking testing and treatment.

To achieve sustainable improvements in health outcomes, there is an urgent need to strengthen existing legal frameworks by extending protection to disproportionately affected populations. Marginalized groups, including men who have sex with men, sex workers, and people who inject drugs, often face entrenched stigmas that reinforce their vulnerability and exclusion. Addressing these gaps requires targeted interventions that prioritize inclusion and equity (Nguyen et al., 2019). In addition, addressing the broader structural drivers of stigma, such as poverty, gender inequality, and homophobia, is essential to create the basis for meaningful change.

The literature highlights the need for an integrated approach that combines legal and policy reforms with broader social initiatives. Public health campaigns and community education programs have been shown to be effective in combating misinformation and reshaping social attitudes toward HIV. Training health care providers to provide stigma-free care is equally important to ensure that health facilities become safe spaces for PLHIV. Collaborative efforts between governments, civil society, and international organizations are essential to achieving these goals, as they provide the multi-sectoral coordination needed to maximize the impact of interventions.

Furthermore, this study highlights the importance of ongoing evaluation of legal and policy measures to ensure their effectiveness in reducing stigma. Ongoing research is essential to identify best practices, adapt strategies to different cultural and socioeconomic contexts, and address emerging challenges, such as punitive laws and the potential misuse of digital health technologies in ways that reinforce stigma.

In conclusion, reducing HIV-related stigma and improving health outcomes for PLHIV requires a comprehensive, evidence-based approach. By integrating legal protections, targeted policy initiatives, and social change efforts, stakeholders can close existing gaps and foster environments where people living with HIV can access equitable care and lead fulfilling lives. While significant progress has been made, continued efforts are needed to achieve global health goals, reduce HIV transmission, and build inclusive societies that enable people living with HIV to thrive.

4 METHODOLOGY

The study uses a mixed methods approach to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of legal and policy frameworks in addressing HIV stigma and improving health outcomes for people living with HIV (PLHIV). Below are the main research methods used:

4.1 Literature Review

The study conducted a comprehensive review of existing academic literature, policy reports and case studies to identify legal and policy measures currently in place to combat HIV stigma. Sources such as UNAIDS (2021), Mahajan et al. (2020) and Nguyen et al. (2019) are analyzed to assess the impact of these frameworks in different regions. The review focuses on the successes and challenges of existing interventions, providing a basis for understanding regional disparities and structural gaps.

4.2 Comparative Legal Analysis

A comparative analysis of the legal framework of high-income and low- and middle-income countries was conducted. This method involves examining anti-discrimination laws, privacy protections, and criminalization policies to assess their effectiveness in reducing stigma. For example, the study compares progress in countries such as the United States and Canada to challenges in sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia.

4.3 Case Studies

Specific case studies from countries with different legal and policy frameworks are used to provide contextual understanding of the impact of these measures on PLHIV. For example, the research examines how anti-discrimination laws in high-income countries have reduced barriers to accessing health care, while the criminalization of HIV-related behaviors in some low-income countries exacerbates stigma.

4.4 Stakeholder Analysis

Interviews and surveys of stakeholders, including policymakers, health care providers, and representatives of civil society organizations, were integrated to collect qualitative information. This method helps identify practical challenges related to the implementation and enforcement of legal protections and policies, as well as strategies to overcome these obstacles. Stakeholder views on structural drivers of stigma, such as poverty and gender inequality, are also explored.

4.5 Quantitative Data Analysis

The study uses statistical data from international health organizations such as UNAIDS and Avert to measure the impact of legal and policy interventions on health outcomes. To assess the effectiveness of legal protections in different regions, indicators such as HIV testing rates, treatment adherence and viral suppression are analyzed. This quantitative approach provides evidence of the correlation between strong legal frameworks and improved health outcomes for PLHIV.

4.6 Policy Evaluation Framework

The study uses a policy evaluation framework to systematically assess the implementation, application and outcomes of legal and policy measures related to HIV. This framework takes into account factors such as inclusiveness, scalability and adaptability to different cultural and socio-economic contexts.

The combination of these methods provides a comprehensive understanding of the critical role of legal and policy frameworks in combating HIV-related stigma. Integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches, the study provides actionable insights into the strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for improving these frameworks around the world. These methods also help identify best practices and emerging challenges, thereby informing future research and policy development.

5 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study on the role of legal and policy frameworks in combating HIV stigma is based on a multidisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates perspectives from public health, sociology, human rights, and political studies. The theoretical framework provides a perspective through which to understand and analyze the complex interactions between stigma, law, and policy.

5.1 Stigma Theory

Goffman's (1963) concept of stigma serves as a foundational theory for understanding the social processes that lead to the marginalization of people living with HIV (PLHIV). Stigma is conceptualized as a social phenomenon characterized by labeling, stereotyping, and discrimination, leading to social exclusion. This theory has been extended to include structural stigma, as described by Link and Phelan (2001), which emphasizes how institutional and social structures perpetuate discrimination. The study uses this theoretical perspective to examine how legal and policy frameworks can challenge and dismantle these stigmatizing structures.

5.2 Human Rights Framework

The human rights framework emphasizes the inherent rights of individuals to dignity, equality, and non-discrimination, which are particularly important for PLHIV. Based on the principles of international human rights treaties, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, the study assesses how legal protections, such as anti-discrimination laws and confidentiality guarantees, correspond to these universal principles (UNAIDS, 2021). This framework highlights the role of laws in protecting PLHIV from stigma and promoting equal access to health care.

5.3 Structural Violence Theory

Farmer et al.'s (2003) structural violence theory provides a critical perspective on the systemic and institutional factors that perpetuate HIV stigma. This theory highlights how social, economic, and political inequalities create environments where stigma thrives. Applying this framework, the study explores how structural factors such as poverty, gender inequality, and homophobia combine with legal and policy shortcomings to exacerbate stigma, particularly in low- and middle-income countries.

5.4 Theories of Policy Implementation and Diffusion

The study integrates theories of policy implementation, such as Lipsky's (1980) "proximity bureaucracy," which focuses on how policies are put into practice by frontline workers, including health care providers. In addition, policy diffusion theory is used to understand how effective anti-stigma policies and legal frameworks from high-income countries can be adapted and implemented in low- and middle-income contexts. These theories provide insights into barriers and facilitators to effective policy implementation.

5.5 Intersection Theory

Crenshaw's (1991) intersectional theory is used to examine how overlapping identities, such as gender, sexual orientation, race, and socioeconomic status, intersect with the experiences of stigmatization of marginalized groups, including men who have sex with men, sex workers, and people who inject drugs. This theoretical perspective is essential for understanding how legal and policy frameworks can address these intersecting vulnerabilities and ensure comprehensive protection.

5.6 Public Health Theory

The social determinants of health framework is integrated to explain how factors such as education, income, and access to health care affect the health outcomes of PLHIV. The study assesses how legal and policy frameworks can address these determinants by promoting health equity and reducing stigma-based barriers to care.

This multidisciplinary theoretical framework allows for a nuanced analysis of the interactions between HIV stigma, legal protection, and policy interventions. By synthesizing these perspectives, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of the systemic, institutional, and individual factors that must be considered in creating supportive environments for PLHIV.

6 DISCUSSION

This study examined the critical role of legal and policy frameworks in addressing HIV-related stigma and improving health outcomes for people living with HIV (PLHIV). The findings reinforce the argument that well-designed and effectively implemented legal and policy measures can significantly reduce stigma, increase access to health care, and improve the quality of life of PLHIV. However, the discussion also highlights ongoing challenges and inequalities that need to be addressed to achieve sustainable progress.

6.1 The Impact of Legal Protections on Reducing Stigma

Legal protections, such as anti-discrimination laws and privacy protections, have been important in reducing stigma while preserving the rights of PLHIV. These measures create enabling environments in which individuals feel safe to disclose their

HIV status and seek health services without fear of discrimination. For example, countries with strong legal frameworks, such as the United States and Canada, have seen improvements in treatment adherence and social acceptance among PLHIV. However, the effectiveness of these laws depends on their implementation and public awareness. In many low- and middle-income countries, weak enforcement mechanisms and limited knowledge of the law prevent the full realization of these protections.

6.2 Policy Interventions and Health Outcomes

Targeted policy interventions, such as workplace advocacy, HIV education, and public health campaigns, complement legal measures by addressing social and institutional barriers to care. These policies have been shown to be effective in increasing HIV testing rates, improving treatment adherence, and reducing stigma-related health care avoidance. Public health campaigns, particularly those that emphasize community engagement, have been successful in dispelling myths about HIV transmission and promoting acceptance among PLHIV. However, the uneven distribution of these policies, especially in resource-limited settings, highlights the need for international cooperation and capacity building to ensure equitable access to anti-stigma interventions.

6.3 Regional Disparities in Legal and Policy Frameworks

The study highlights significant regional disparities in the implementation and effectiveness of legal and policy frameworks. High-income countries generally have more comprehensive protections and better resources to implement anti-stigma measures, while low- and middle-income countries often face structural challenges such as poverty, gender inequality, and homophobia, which perpetuate stigma. In addition, punitive laws that criminalize behaviors associated with HIV transmission exacerbate stigma and discourage individuals from seeking testing and treatment, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia.

6.4 Intersectionality and Marginalized Populations

Marginalized populations, including men who have sex with men, sex workers, and people who inject drugs, experience increased stigma due to their intersectional identities and vulnerabilities. Legal and policy frameworks often fail to address these intersectional stigmas, leaving these groups disproportionately affected (Nguyen et al., 2019). To ensure inclusion, targeted interventions that prioritize equity and address the structural drivers of stigma are essential.

6.5 Integration of Social Changes in Legal and Political Reforms

The findings highlight the importance of integrating legal and policy reforms into broader social change initiatives. Public health campaigns, community education programs and training of health professionals are essential elements of a comprehensive anti-stigma strategy. Collaborative efforts between governments, civil society and international organizations are essential to ensure a multisectoral approach that addresses the structural and cultural drivers of stigma.

6.6 Limitations and Future Research

While legal and policy frameworks have shown promise, their long-term effectiveness remains uncertain in the absence of consistent monitoring and evaluation. Further research is needed to identify best practices, adapt strategies to different cultural and socio-economic contexts, and address emerging challenges, such as the impact of digital surveillance and punitive laws on HIV stigma. Future studies should also explore the role of community-led initiatives to complement formal legal and policy measures.

This discussion highlights the complexity of addressing HIV-related stigma and highlights the critical role of legal and policy frameworks in creating supportive environments for PLHIV. While progress has been made, achieving lasting change requires a comprehensive approach that integrates legal protection, policy interventions, and social change efforts. By addressing the gaps and challenges identified, policymakers and advocates can work to reduce stigma, improve health outcomes, and ensure that PLHIV can live with dignity and equality.

7 RESEARCH GAPS

Despite significant progress in addressing HIV-related stigma through legal and policy frameworks, several research gaps need to be addressed to fully understand and mitigate the stigma experienced by people living with HIV (PLHIV). These gaps include the effectiveness of current interventions, the impact of social and cultural factors, and the assessment of emerging challenges. Below are the main research gaps identified in the literature:

7.1 Effectiveness and Long-Term Impact of Legal Protections

While many studies highlight the importance of anti-discrimination and privacy laws, research on the long-term effectiveness and sustainability of these legal frameworks remains limited. Few studies explore the practical implementation of these laws, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, where enforcement mechanisms are weak or non-existent. Further research is needed to assess whether legal protections consistently translate into improved health outcomes for PLHIV over time. In particular, studies should focus on long-term adherence to HIV treatment and changes in social acceptance following the implementation of anti-stigma laws.

7.2 Intersectionality and Marginalized Populations

Another important research gap is in understanding how intersectionality (the juxtaposition of multiple social identities such as gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic status) affects the stigma experienced by specific subgroups, including men who have sex with men, sex workers, and people who inject drugs. Although some research has been conducted on these marginalized groups, more nuanced studies are needed that examine how these populations experience complex stigma and how legal and policy interventions can be tailored to meet their specific needs. Cross-cutting approaches can help identify strategies that address multiple forms of discrimination simultaneously.

7.3 Cultural and Social Influences on Stigma

Research has shown that stigma is deeply rooted in cultural, religious, and social norms, but there is a lack of comprehensive studies examining how cultural attitudes shape the implementation and impact of legal and policy frameworks. For example, in regions where homophobia, gender inequality, and misconceptions about HIV are deeply entrenched, laws protecting PLHIV may not be enough to reduce stigma unless social attitudes are also considered (Parker et al., 2013). Future research should explore the interaction between legal reforms and cultural changes, investigating how social norms can facilitate or hinder the effectiveness of anti-stigma measures.

7.4 Evaluating Public Health Campaigns and Community Programs

Although public health campaigns and community education have been shown to reduce stigma and increase HIV testing rates, there is insufficient research to evaluate their long-term impact. In particular, research is needed to assess how these campaigns influence attitudes toward PLHIV over time and their ability to reduce stigma in different cultural and socioeconomic contexts. Further studies should focus on the effectiveness of community-led initiatives to promote inclusion, as these programs can provide valuable insights into alternative approaches that complement government interventions.

7.5 The Role of Technology and Digital Health

The rapid growth of digital technologies and their use in HIV prevention and treatment presents new challenges and opportunities for reducing stigma. Research on the role of digital health technologies, such as telemedicine, online support groups, and mobile health apps, is still in its early stages. Although these tools have the potential to improve access to care, there are concerns about the potential misuse of digital surveillance to reinforce stigma and discrimination. Future research should examine how digital technologies can be used to reduce stigma while maintaining the privacy and rights of PLHIV.

7.6 The Impact of Punitive Laws on HIV Stigma

Punitive laws that criminalize behaviors related to HIV transmission, such as non-disclosure of HIV status or intentional transmission, remain a major barrier to HIV care and prevention. More research is needed on the specific impact of these laws on stigma, particularly in regions where these laws are widespread. Studies should focus on how criminalization affects individuals' willingness to get tested, to disclose their status, or to access treatment and prevention services.

7.7 Governance and Coordination of Global Health Policies

Although international organizations such as UNAIDS play an important role in coordinating HIV-related policies, research on the effectiveness of global health governance structures and coordination between international, national, and local organizations is limited. Further studies are needed to assess the effectiveness of these collaborative efforts to reduce stigma and ensure equitable access to care, particularly in resource-limited settings. Research should also explore the role of international funding in strengthening the legal framework and reducing HIV stigma in low-income countries.

7.8 Cost-effectiveness of Anti-stigma Interventions

Although many interventions aimed at reducing HIV stigma, such as public health campaigns and community education, have been shown to be effective, research on their cost-effectiveness is limited. Research is needed to assess the economic

impact of anti-stigma interventions, particularly in resource-limited settings, to determine the most cost-effective strategies to reduce stigma and improve health outcomes for PLHIV.

Addressing the research gaps described above is essential to advance our understanding of HIV stigma and improve the effectiveness of legal and policy frameworks. By studying the intersection of cultural, social, and legal factors that contribute to stigma, as well as exploring innovative approaches in digital health and public health campaigns, researchers can provide the evidence needed to strengthen existing policies and develop new strategies to reduce stigma. Continued research in these areas will be essential to ensure that PLHIV, regardless of their geographic location or social status, have access to the support and care they need to live healthy and fulfilling lives.

8 CONCLUSION

The literature on HIV stigma highlights the critical role of legal and policy frameworks in reducing stigma and improving health outcomes for people living with HIV (PLHIV). Legal protections, such as anti-discrimination laws, privacy protections, and policies to ensure equal access to health care, have proven essential in promoting supportive environments for PLHIV. While many high-income countries have made significant progress through strong legal frameworks and comprehensive policy interventions, significant disparities remain in the effectiveness and implementation of these frameworks, particularly in high- and middle-income countries. In these regions, weak law enforcement, inadequate legal protections, and entrenched cultural stigma continue to undermine efforts to address HIV stigma and its negative impact on health outcomes.

To address these challenges, it is essential to strengthen existing legal frameworks by ensuring their effective implementation and extending protection to marginalized groups who are disproportionately affected by HIV. This includes populations such as men who have sex with men, sex workers and people who inject drugs, who often face compounded stigma due to their social, cultural and legal status. In addition, addressing the broader structural drivers of stigma, such as poverty, gender inequality and homophobia, is essential to create environments where stigma can be effectively reduced and PLHIV can thrive.

An integrated approach that combines legal reforms, targeted policy interventions and social change initiatives is needed to address the multifaceted nature of HIV-related stigma. Public health campaigns, community education and training of health care providers to provide stigma-free care must complement legal reforms to strengthen social attitudes and reduce stigma at all levels. Cooperation between governments, civil society organisations and international bodies is essential to ensure the effectiveness and reach of these initiatives. Finally, more research and evaluation is needed to measure the impact of legal and policy frameworks and to identify strategies to overcome existing barriers. Research should focus on the long-term effectiveness of legal protections, the interconnected experiences of marginalized populations, the impact of new challenges such as digital surveillance, and the role of punitive laws in perpetuating stigma. By filling these research gaps and implementing evidence-based strategies, it is possible to reduce HIV-related stigma, improve access to health care, and achieve global health goals that promote inclusion and equity for all people living with HIV.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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