

## **“HOW DID YOU GET IT?” - Gender dimensions of HIV-related stigma**

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Two decades ago, I conducted the first regional study of HIV-related discrimination. (Later adapted by GNP+ as the *Stigma Index*.) Most people experienced discrimination in health care setting, and women faced consistently more than men did. Later research I conducted, highlighted astoundingly high levels of rights violations among HIV-positive women in several countries.

It took me a long time to realise why stigma towards women living with HIV was markedly different from that experienced by men, and it came about through my personal; experiences.

When I was about to undergo my first angiogram and was partly tranquilised, the doctor asked me, “A druggie, are we?”. At that moment, I was terrified that I might be treated differently, less caringly. The question felt insidious, deeply personal, and judgemental. I have since been asked the same question many, many times.

Late last year, before another day procedure, the anaesthetist again asked me, “How did you get HIV?”. I gave him my now stock response, “The same way your mum and dad got you”. I challenged why he had asked that. He said it was to determine whether I was an injecting drug user. As I had already answered questions on drug use, it was redundant, and intrusive. Almost every woman in Australia contracts HIV sexually.

Asking how one contracted HIV is intimidating, inappropriate, and implies judgment – we are either innocent victims or evil carriers. It has no relevance as to how one should be treated subsequently. This question is rarely asked of males. Why are women asked this so frequently, and not men? It is another example of the misogyny women experience in society. Women are to be judged as either virgin, mother, or whore.