

# Correspondence

## ‘We are not the virus’: stigmatization and discrimination against frontline health workers

### ABSTRACT

During the current COVID-19 pandemic, several forms of stigma and discrimination have been reported worldwide mainly from toward Asian descent, those with international travel history, and frontline health workers. In response to the situation of stigmatization and discrimination against frontline healthcare workers, the author proposes several ways on how the public and the Philippine government might create safety guidelines by revisiting the international and local laws. Thus, there is an urgent need to end the stigma, discrimination and other forms of inhumane treatment against our frontline health workers. They are not the virus.

**Keywords** COVID-19, discrimination, frontline, health workers, stigma

The current public health crisis in a recent correspondence, the authors have rightly expressed the need to prioritize our frontline healthcare workers (FHW) since they ‘are at the top of the list to be infected because of their exposures to patients, they have been deprived of fair salaries, proper training, personal protective equipment (PPE) and psychological and emotional interventions’.<sup>1</sup> Studies have shown that FHW have been victims of stigma and discrimination.<sup>2</sup> In the Philippines for example, reports of FHW being attacked became news and trending topic in the social media, with many experiencing eviction, ridicule, and harassment even within their workplace and boarding houses.<sup>3</sup>

During the current COVID-19 pandemic, several forms of stigma and discrimination have been reported worldwide mainly from toward Asian descent, those with international travel history and FHW.<sup>4</sup> Professional psychosocial and psychological support must be available to all stigmatized individuals including FHW. Indeed our frontliners are considered wounded healers, because they also need to take care of themselves.<sup>5</sup>

In response to the situation of stigmatization and discrimination against FHW, the author proposes several ways on how the public and the Philippine government might create safety guidelines by revisiting the international and local laws. Freedom from discrimination, as stipulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and enshrined in the 1987 Philippine Constitution, states that all individuals are entitled to human rights ‘without distinction of any kind,

such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status’.<sup>6</sup> The anti-discriminatory provisions of the statutory laws, including Article 9 of the Magna Carta for Public Health Workers, are in effect.<sup>7</sup> Several laws and ordinances have been implemented. In Metro Manila, the City Ordinance No. 8624 or the ‘Anti COVID-19 Discrimination Ordinance of 2020’ prohibits any form of harassment or discrimination against the above-mentioned persons as well as government forces in the frontlines. As a result, stigma and discrimination or harm against FHW and patients suspected of having COVID-19 are now prohibited in all 17 cities and municipalities in Metro Manila.<sup>8</sup>

The scale and severity of the COVID-19 pandemic clearly rises to the level of public health threat. There is an urgent need to end the stigma, discrimination and other forms of inhumane treatment against our FHW. COVID-19 might result to other psychosocial and structural burdens, including xenophobia, misogyny, homophobia, homelessness and mental health.<sup>9</sup>

It has been said that the COVID-19 does not discriminate any person. ‘COVID-19 not an Asian problem, it’s not a European or even an American problem. It’s a global problem that involves each of us and we should all be invested in coming up with solutions for ourselves, our neighbors, and for the world’.<sup>10</sup> Thus, let us support our FHW in the fight against COVID-19. As one human family, we must commit ourselves to work together for a just and humane society in the new normal and the future.

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## Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest in this paper.

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Jeff Clyde G. Corpuz<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Theology and Religious Education, De La Salle University, Manila 1004, Philippines

Address correspondence to Jeff Clyde G. Corpuz,

E-mail: jeff.corpuz@dlsu.edu.ph

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