

# Study on Perceptions of Stigmatization and Discrimination of Persons with Mental Illness in the Workplace

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# Persons with Mental Illness (PMIs)

Department of Health (2015):

- 13% of Hong Kong residents had common mental disorders:
  - Mixed anxiety and depressive disorder (7%)
  - Generalized anxiety disorder (4%)
  - Depressive episode (3%)
  - Other anxiety disorders (panic disorders, phobias, obsessive compulsive disorders, 2%)
- Most persons with mental illness (PMIs) (87%) did not consult a doctor or seek help from other health professionals

Lam et al., 2015; Department of Health, 2015

# Stigmatization and Discrimination in Hong Kong

- Equal Opportunities Commission received over 300 complaints under the DDO regarding psychiatric disability or mental illness during 2016-2020
  - Mostly related to employment (73.6%)
- Many community members ignore, reject, or isolate PMIs, treating them disrespectfully or unfairly in housing, education, employment, health care, and social services

Chan & Lam, 2018; Mak et al., 2017; Mak, Chong, & Wong, 2014

# Objectives of the Study

- The research objectives of this study include:
  - a) Public awareness and understanding of PMIs
  - b) Prevalence of discrimination against PMIs
  - c) Patterns and practices of discrimination against PMIs
  - d) Factors associated with vulnerability to workplace discrimination
  - e) Difficulties in taking sick leave among PMIs
  - f) Actions taken by PMIs in response to discrimination
  - g) Impact of stigmatization and discrimination on PMIs
  - h) Stakeholders' views in redressing stigmatization and discrimination against PMIs in the workplace

# Study 1: Cross-Sectional Surveys

- Cross-sectional surveys with purposive sampling
  - 593 employed persons
    - Data collected between May and July 2020
  - 265 persons with mental illness (PMIs)
    - Data collected between May and November 2020
- Collaboration with HK.WeCare of Wofoo Social Enterprises and New Life Psychiatric Rehabilitation Association
- Employed persons: questionnaire survey at the participating companies
- PMIs: questionnaire survey at the participating NGOs that provide mental health rehabilitation services

# PMIs Inclusion Criteria

- Different types of PMIs were recruited based on the following inclusion criteria:
  - a) Current employment status: employed, unemployed, or inactive
  - b) State of MI: previously suffered from MI, currently suffering from MI, or recovered from MI
  - c) Types of MI: depression, anxiety disorders, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, or other psychotic disorders

# **Key Findings from the Quantitative Survey of Employed Persons**



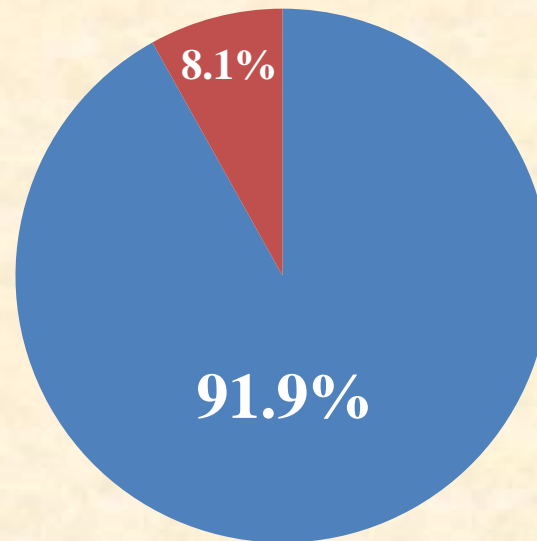
## Demographic Characteristics of Employed Persons

<b>Sex</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Male	211	36.2%
Female	372	63.8%
<b>Age</b>		
25-44	353	59.8%
45-64	166	28.1%
Others	72	12.2%
<b>Industry</b>		
Construction	61	10.5%
Import/ Export, Wholesale and Retail	40	6.9%
Accommodation and Food Services	44	7.5%
Finance and Insurance	24	4.1%
Real Estate, Professional and Business Services	157	26.9%
Social and Personal Services	79	13.6%
Education	70	12.0%
Others	108	18.5%
<b>Occupation</b>		
Managers and Administrators	127	22.0%
Professionals / Associate Professionals	205	35.5%
Clerical Support Workers	143	24.8%
Others	102	17.7%
<b>Company Size</b>		
Small (Less than 50 persons)	151	27.3%
Medium (50-299 persons)	224	40.5%
Large (300 persons or above)	178	32.2%



# Employed Persons' Knowledge of Disability Discrimination Ordinance

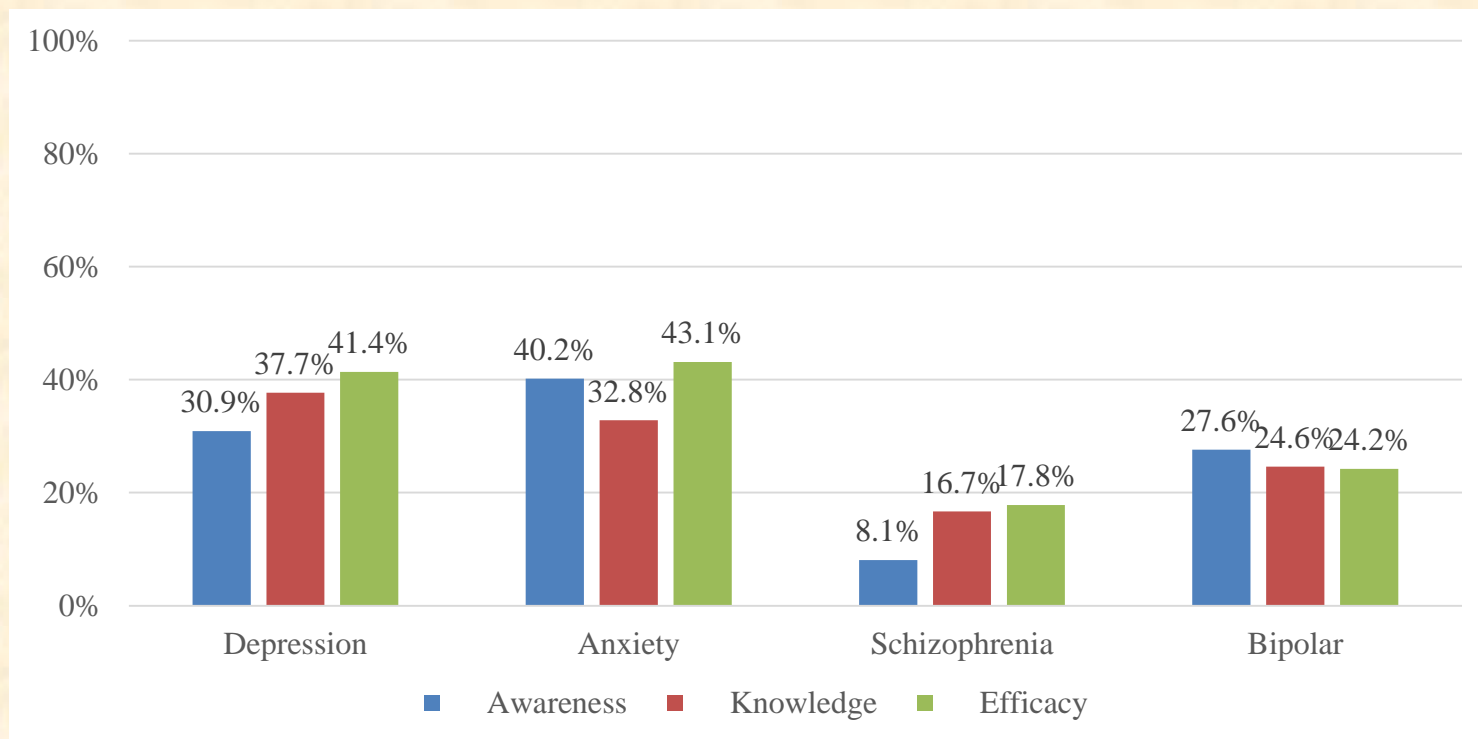
- A total of 91.9% of the employed persons knew about “Disability Discrimination Ordinance (DDO)” in Hong Kong. A majority of the employed persons were aware of DDO, regardless of their socio-demographic background



■ Know DDO (n = 541) ■ Don't know DDO (n = 48)

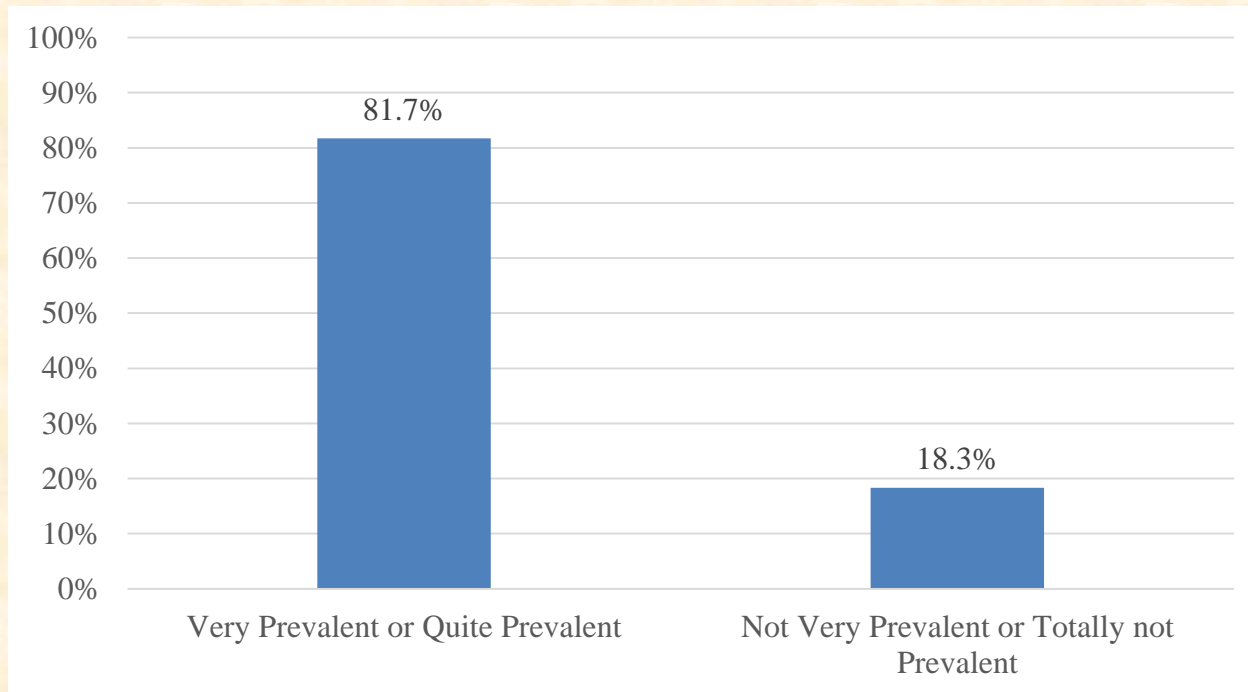
# Employed Persons' Understanding of Mental Illness

- The employed persons had more understanding of depression (37.7%) and anxiety (32.8%) than schizophrenia (16.7%) and bipolar disorder (24.6%)
- They felt more confident to work with people with depression (41.4%) and anxiety (43.1%) than people with schizophrenia (17.8%) and bipolar disorder (24.2%)

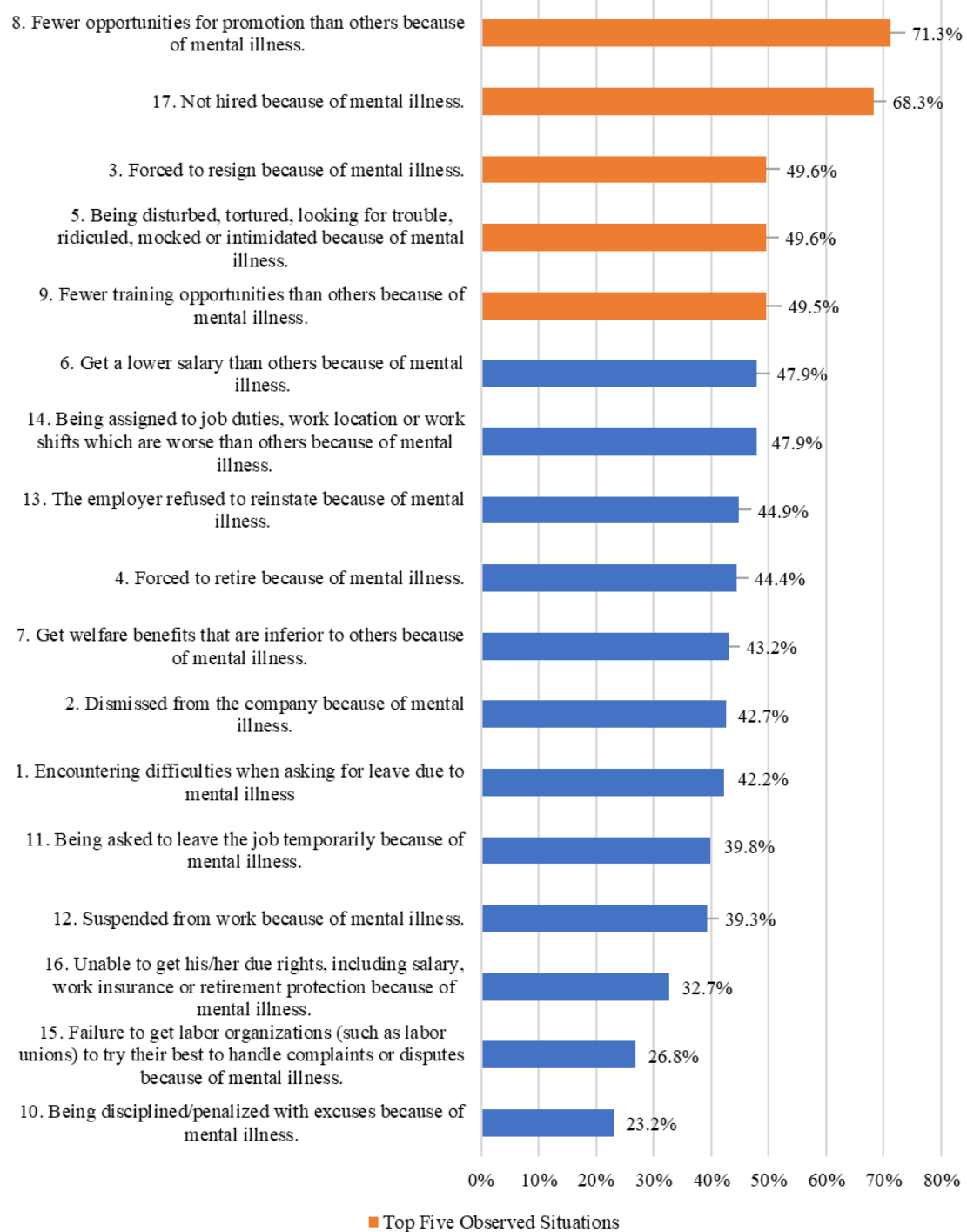


# Employed Persons' Perceived Prevalence of Discrimination in Hong Kong Workplaces

- A majority of the employed persons considered that the discrimination against PMIs in Hong Kong is very prevalent or quite prevalent (81.7%)

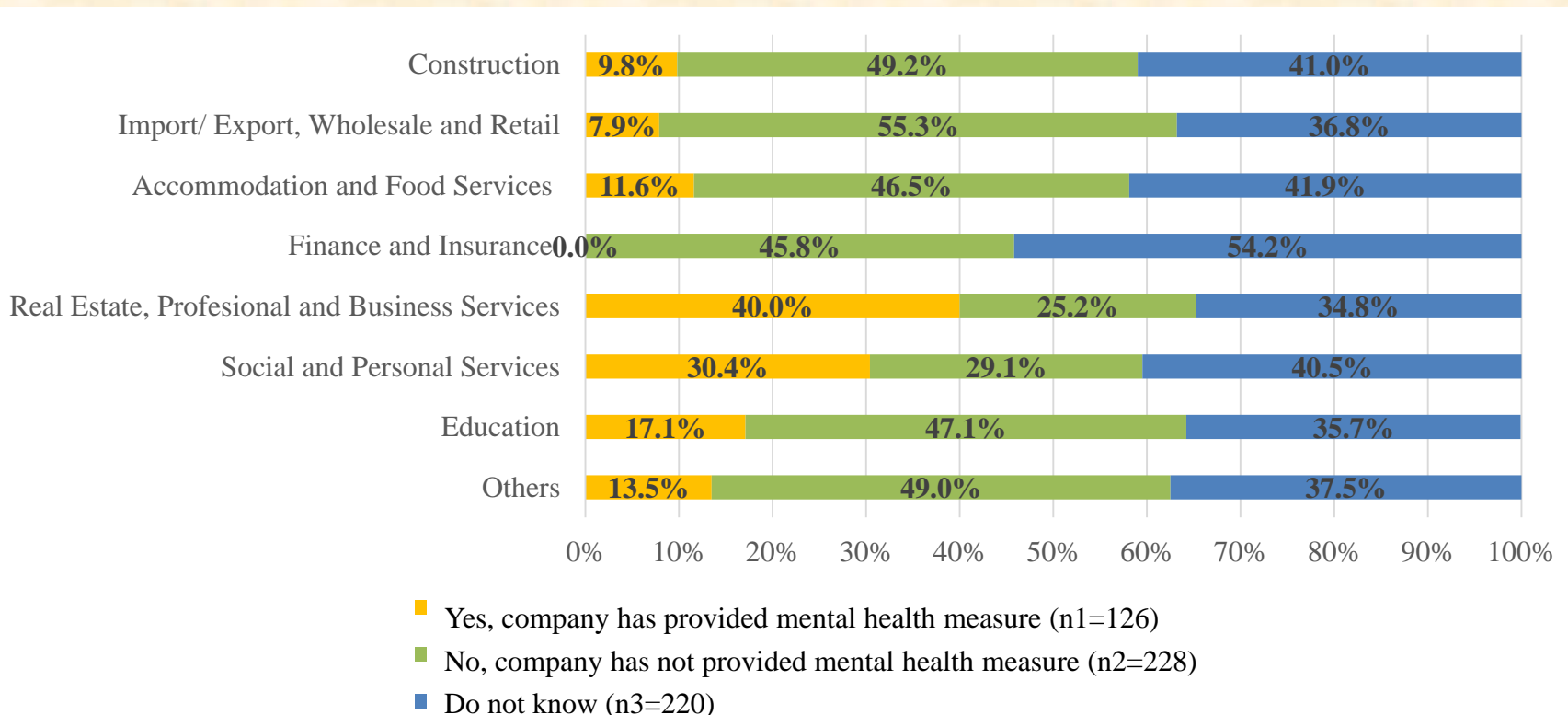


- The most commonly observed situations of workplace discrimination against PMIs was “having fewer opportunities for promotion” (71.3%) and “not hired because of mental illness” (68.3%)



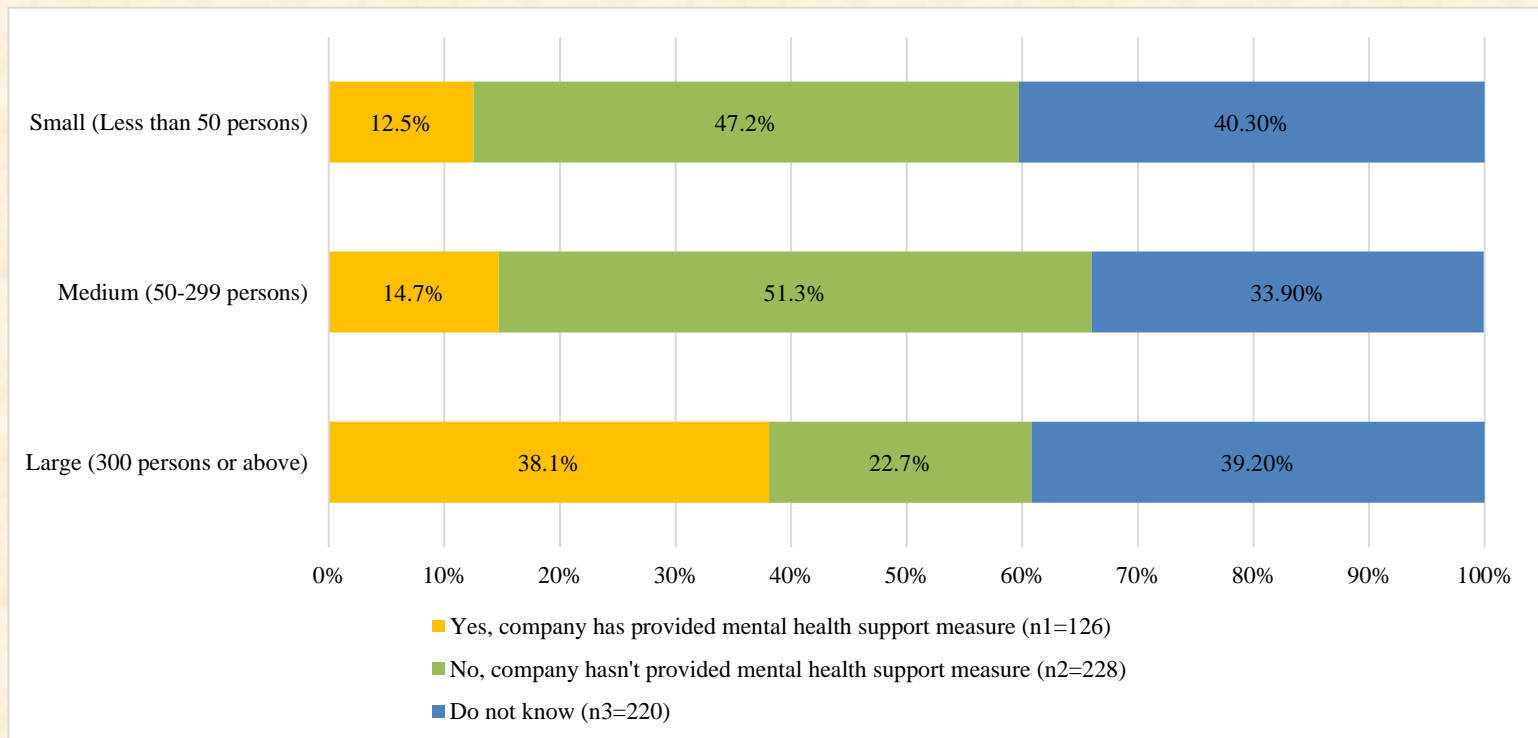
# Availability of Mental Health Support by Industry

- The industry of “Real Estate, Professional and Business Services” (40.0%) and “Social and Personal Services” (30.4%) have provided more mental health support to their employees than other industries
- The industries of “Import/Export, Wholesale and Retail” (7.9%) and “Construction” (9.8%) have provided relatively less mental health support
- None of the employed persons who worked in the industry of “Finance and Insurance” had reported that the company has provided mental health support



# Availability of Mental Health Support by Company Size

- Larger companies (38.1%) with 300 persons or above are more likely to provide mental health support to their employees compared to smaller companies





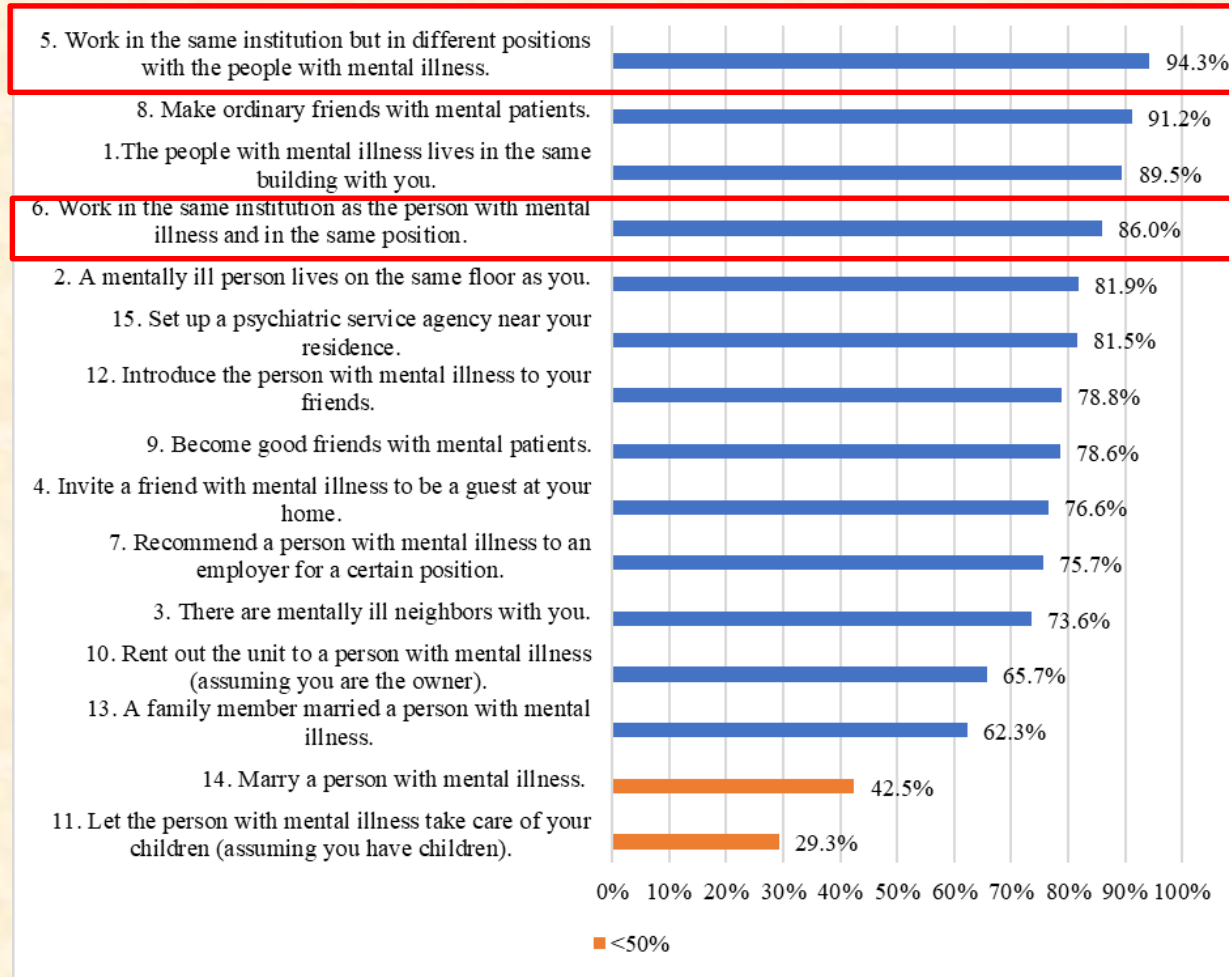
# Stigma and Acceptance

- A majority of employed persons reported to show acceptance towards PMIs (n=515, 89.4%), and one-fifth held stigmatized views against PMIs (n=112, 19.8%).
- For stigmatization, the top three agreed statements were:
  1. “I am worried that people with mental illness will harm others.” (n=329, 55.7%);
  2. “I will try to keep my distance from the people with mental illness.” (n=275, 46.5%);
  3. “I am afraid of being alone with the mentally ill.” (n=257, 43.4%);
- For acceptance of PMIs, the top three agreed statements were:
  1. “People with mental illness deserve others’ attention.” (n=569, 96.1%)
  2. “As long as the outside world gives opportunities, people with mental illness can integrate into society.” (n=562, 95.4%);
  3. “I think people with mental illness should be treated fairly” (n=560, 95.1%);



# Preference of Social Distance

- “Work in the same institution but in different positions with the person with mental illness.” (n=558, 94.3%) and “Work in the same institution as the person with mental illness and in the same position.” (n=509, 86.0%) were among the most commonly accepted statements



# Desired Measures of Workplace Support and Directions for Improvement

- In terms of types of support for PMIs, a majority of employed persons expressed the need for employers to:
  1. “understand the individual needs of the PMIs, assess whether the work arrangement or environment needs to be adjusted” (n=432, 73.7%);
  2. “establish effective and two-way communication channels between the company and employees” (n=401, 68.4%);
  3. “develop an equal opportunity policy to avoid discrimination, bullying, harassment, etc.” (n=387, 66.0%)
- In terms of reducing workplace stigmatization and discrimination towards PMIs, over three-fifth of employed persons agreed with the statements that:
  1. “the Government should enhance its publicity efforts to let more people know about the Disability Discrimination Ordinance” (n=396, 67.3%);
  2. “companies should be required to formulate relevant policies to avoid discrimination, bullying, harassment, etc.” (n=376, 63.9%);
  3. “the EOC should organize more related activities to raise public awareness” (n=354, 60.2%)

# **Key Findings from the Quantitative Survey of Persons with Mental Illness (PMIs)**

## Demographic Characteristics of PMIs Respondents

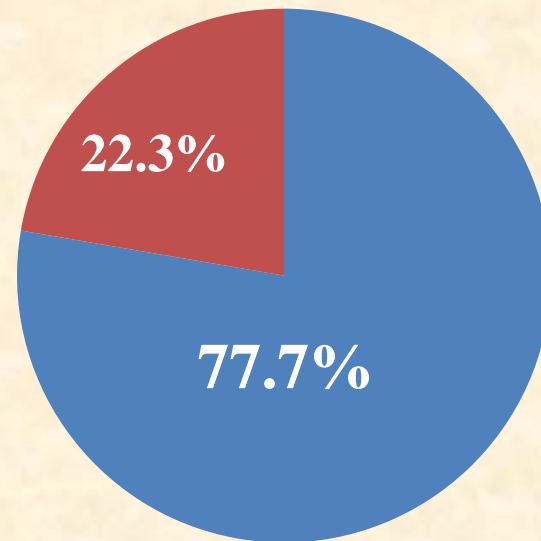
<b>Sex</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Male	131	49.4%
Female	134	50.6%
<b>Age</b>		
25-34	59	22.3%
35-44	78	29.5%
45-54	67	25.4%
55-64	49	18.6%
Others	11	4.2%
<b>Diagnosed Major Mental Illness</b>		
Schizophrenia	127	49.4%
Depression	59	23.0%
Anxiety	25	9.7%
Bipolar	30	11.7%
Others	16	6.2%
<b>State of Mental Illness</b>		
Diagnosed but not Treated	3	1.1%
Under Treatment	251	94.7%
Recovered	11	4.2%
<b>Taking Psychiatric Medications</b>		
Yes	235	95.5%
No	11	4.5%
<b>Whether Had Relapsed</b>		
Yes	121	45.7%
No	144	54.3%

## Latest Job Profile of PMIs by Current Economic Activity Status

	<b>Employed</b>	<b>Unemployed/Inactive</b>
<b>Industry</b>	<b>n (%)</b>	<b>n (%)</b>
Import/ Export, Wholesale and Retail	12(8.5%)	23(18.5%)
Transportation, Warehouse, Postal and Express Services	12(8.5%)	8(6.5%)
Accommodation and Food Services	27(19.1%)	31(25.0%)
Finance and Insurance	5(3.5%)	4(3.2%)
Real Estate, Professional and Business Services	11(7.8%)	11(8.9%)
Social and Personal Services	45(31.9%)	24(19.4%)
Others	29(20.6%)	23(18.5%)
<b>Occupation</b>		
Professionals / Associate Professionals	23(16.5%)	6(4.9%)
Clerical Support Workers	14(10.1%)	9(7.4%)
Service and Sales Workers	43(30.9%)	54(44.3%)
Elementary Occupations	54(38.8%)	41(33.6%)
Others	5(3.6%)	12(9.8%)
<b>Company Size</b>		
Small (Less than 50 persons)	76(63.3%)	64(61.0%)
Medium (50-299 persons)	27(22.5%)	23(21.9%)
Large (300 persons or above)	17(14.2%)	18(17.1%)
<b>Full-/ Part-time</b>		
Full-time	65(46.1%)	51(41.1%)
Part-time	76(53.9%)	73(58.9%)

# PMIs' Knowledge of Disability Discrimination Ordinance

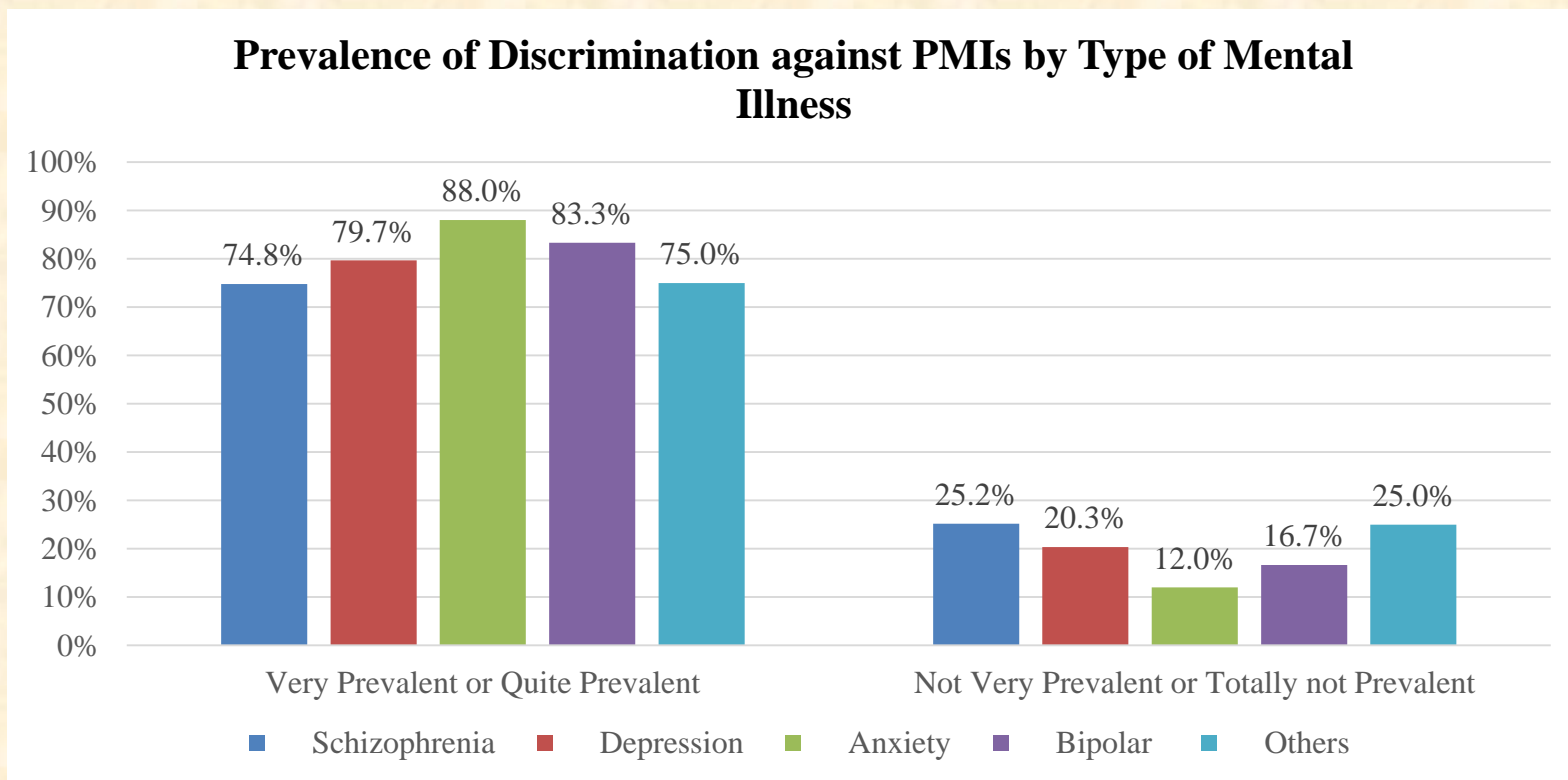
- A total of 77.7% of the PMIs knew about “Disability Discrimination Ordinance (DDO)” in Hong Kong. A majority of the PMIs were aware of DDO, regardless of their socio-demographic background



■ Know DDO (n = 206) ■ Don't know DDO (n = 59)

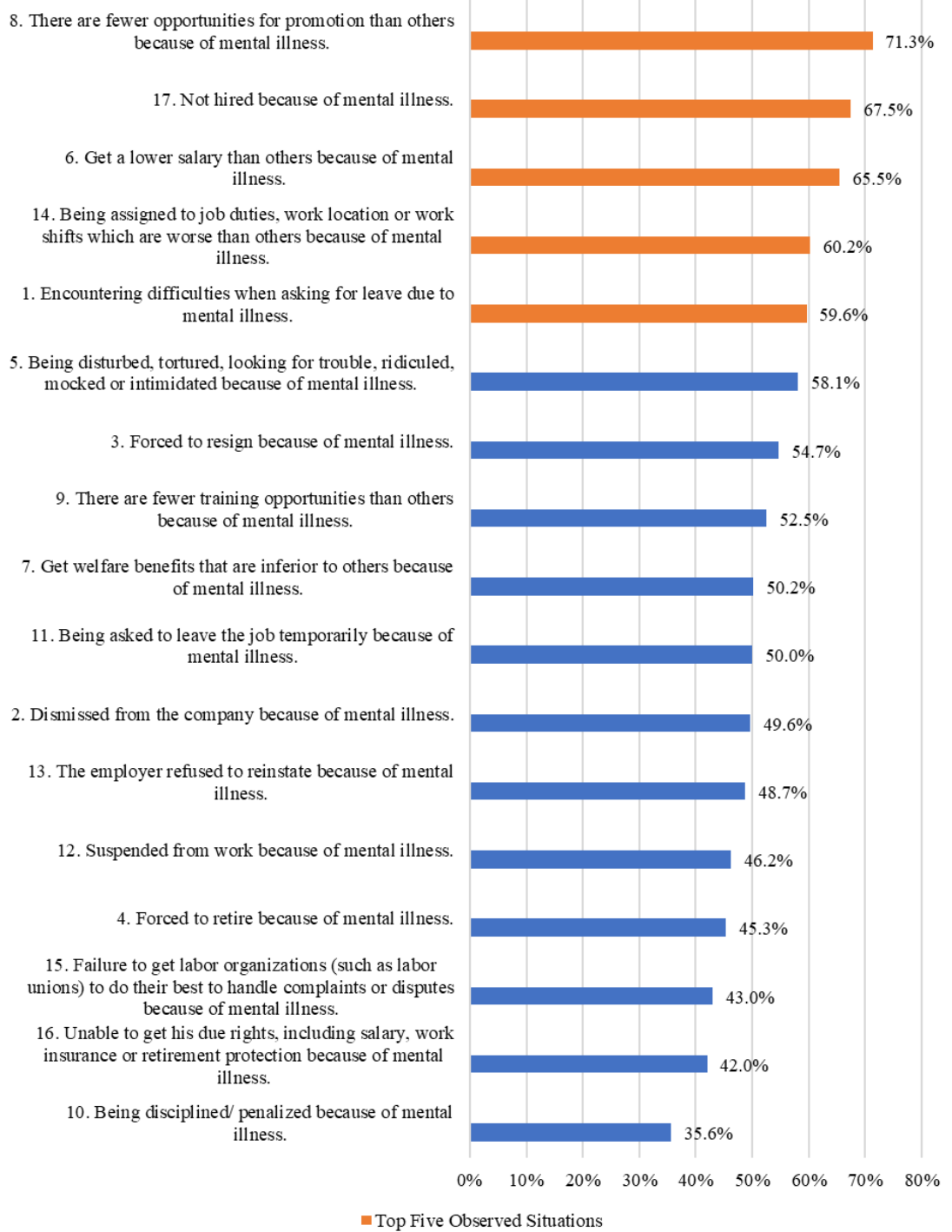
# PMIs' Perceived Prevalence of Discrimination in Hong Kong Workplaces

- A majority of the PMIs reflected that discrimination against PMIs in Hong Kong is very prevalent or quite prevalent (78.5%), especially among people who are diagnosed with anxiety (88%) and bipolar disorder (83.3%)





- The most commonly observed situations of workplace discrimination against PMIs were “having fewer opportunities for promotion” (71.3%), “not getting hired because of mental illness” (67.5%), “getting a lower salary than others because of mental illness” (65.5%), and “being assigned to job duties, work location or work shifts that are worse than other employees” (60.2%)



# Mental Illness Discrimination During the Hiring Process, Quitting/Layoff Process, and at Work

Discrimination faced during	n	%
Hiring process	77 out of 213	36.2
At Work	87 out of 265	32.8
Quitting/layoff process	61 out of 186	32.8
One of the three process	120 out of 265	45.3
All three processes	33 out of 265	12.5

## Mental Illness Discrimination Experienced during the Hiring Process

	n	% out of 77
Was given poor employment terms and conditions because of the mental illness record	33	42.9
Had not been hired due to disclosure of mental illness record during the interview	31	40.3
Did not get an interview opportunity/had not been notified of an interview because of the mental illness record	25	32.5
The job advertisement states that only people with no mental illness record will be considered	5	6.5
Others	8	10.4

# Mental Illness Discrimination During the Hiring Process, Quitting/Layoff Process, and at Work

## Mental Illness Discrimination Experienced at Work

	n	% out of 87
Less salary in the same position (compared with others)	31	35.6
Reduced job duties	23	26.4
Lost the opportunity to get promotion	21	24.1
Employees without mental illness received favorable treatment by the company, being forgiven and not be held accountable	19	21.8
Experienced unfair treatment when applying for leave	15	17.2
Lost/Reduced work benefits	14	16.1
Was not approved for taking leave	13	14.9
Was rejected to attend training	11	12.6
Others	21	24.1

# Immediate Responses and Actions Taken

- Only 14.3%, 16.1%, 21.3%, and of the PMIs took action in response to mental illness discrimination in the hiring process, at work and quitting/layoff, respectively
- Majority did not take action because they deemed it unnecessary or worried about future employers' view on such actions

## Actions Taken in Response to Discrimination in the Hiring Process

	n	% out of 11
<b>Complain to that company</b>	4	36.4
<b>Confront the perpetrator in person</b>	4	36.4
<b>Complain to the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC)</b>	2	18.2
<b>Others</b>	3	27.3

## Reasons for Not Taking Action

	n	% out of 65
<b>It is unnecessary to take actions and I can find other jobs</b>	38	58.5
<b>Worrying about future employer's view on such actions</b>	20	30.8
<b>I do not know the channels of making complaints</b>	18	27.7
<b>Afraid of retaliation by the employer</b>	10	15.4
<b>Others</b>	4	6.2

# Availability of Mental Health Support in the Workplace

- Only 12.5% of the PMIs reported that the company they are currently working at or have recently worked at has provided mental health support to the employees
- A total of 85.9% of the PMIs expressed that it is necessary for companies to provide mental health support to employees. However, 58.4% of the PMIs thought that the company or employer for which they are working for would not or would rarely consider to provide support for PMIs in the workplace
- Among the 203 PMIs who did not express their mental health needs to their company or supervisor, 48.7% reported that it was because they were “afraid of being labeled and discriminated against by the company/supervisor” and 46.2% “worried about how the company/supervisor thought of their mental illness and work performance”



# Desired Measures of Workplace Support and Directions for Improvement

- In terms of the types of support for PMIs, the PMIs expressed the need for employers to:
  1. **“understand the individual needs of the PMIs, assess whether the work arrangement or environment needs to be adjusted” (n=177, 66.8%);**
  2. **“consider flexible work arrangements, such as flexible working hours, short breaks, etc.” (n=166, 62.6%); and**
  3. **“develop an equal opportunity policy to avoid discrimination, bullying, harassment, etc.” (n=157, 59.2%)**
- In terms of reducing workplace stigmatization and discrimination towards PMIs, the PMIs agreed that the Government should:
  1. **“enhance its publicity efforts to let more people know about the Disability Discrimination Ordinance” (n=181, 68.3%);**
  2. **“require companies to formulate relevant policies to avoid discrimination, bullying, harassment, etc.” (n=164, 61.9%); and**
  3. **“strengthen the related legislation against discrimination” (n=137, 57.1%)**

# **Key Findings from In-depth Interviews with Employers and Supervisors**



# Study 2: In-Depth Interviews

- Data collection of qualitative study was conducted from February to July 2021
- A total of 50 employers and supervisors participated in the in-depth interviews
- We contacted various corporates, companies, small businesses, and trade unions from different industries to collaborate with us
- We recruited employers and supervisors from five major industries in Hong Kong (i.e., import/export and wholesale/retail, social and personal services, professional and business services, accommodation and food services, and finance and insurance)

# Solicit Views from Stakeholders in Redressing Stigmatization and Discrimination

- Obtain in-depth insights into the employers' and supervisors'
  1. Awareness of mental health-related issues and knowledge of discrimination against PMIs
  2. Attitudes on hiring and working with PMIs
  3. Policies for hiring and managing PMIs in the workplace
  4. Policies for handling discrimination-related complaints
  5. Suggestions for creating a discrimination-free working environment

## Demographic Characteristics of the Interviewees

<b>Sex</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
Male	22	44.0
Female	28	56.0
<b>Age</b>		
25-34	13	26.0
35-44	17	34.0
45-54	10	20.0
55-64	10	20.0
<b>Industry</b>		
Construction	3	6.0
Import/ Export, Wholesale and Retail	9	18.0
Transportation, Warehouse, Postal and Express Services	4	8.0
Accommodation and Food Services	3	6.0
Information and Communications	3	6.0
Finance and Insurance	3	6.0
Real Estate, Professional and Business Services	6	12.0
Social and Personal Services	11	22.0
Education	3	6.0
Others	5	10.0
<b>Position</b>		
Employer/ Director	5	10.0
Manager/ Department Head	39	78.0
Others	6	12.0
<b>Company Size</b>		
Small (Less than 50 persons)	17	34.0
Medium (50-299 persons)	12	24.0
Large (300 persons or above)	21	42.0
<b>Number of Subordinates</b>		
Less than 10 persons	28	56.0
10-99 persons	16	32.0
100-299 persons	5	10.0
500 persons or above	1	2.0

# Awareness of Mental Health-Related Issues and Knowledge of Discrimination of PMIs

- A lack of knowledge is observed across different industries when employers and supervisors were asked about the prevalence of stigmatization and discrimination of PMIs in the workplace
- In-depth interviews showed that many employers and supervisors may not know what constituted disability discrimination under DDO and had misconceptions about disability discrimination
- For example, they challenged that providing PMIs with more support and care could also be considered as discrimination. This indicates that they do not have a clear understanding of DDO and their legal responsibilities

*I think it is not discrimination; it is the fact that the general public do not accept working with people with mental illness. My current company have not recruited anyone with mental illness, but if I told my colleagues that “I am recruiting a person with mental illness”, I think it may not be acceptable to them. (Female, 35-44, Manager/department head, Transportation, warehouse, postal and express services)*

*Is better treatment considered as discrimination? It depends on how you define discrimination. I am not sure whether or not discrimination only refers to negative action.” (Female, 45-54, Manager/department head, Real estate, professional and business services)*

# Attitudes on Hiring and Working with PMIs

- From the perspective of many employers and supervisors, PMIs are less capable of controlling their behaviors and emotions. They doubted PMIs' ability to handle the job that especially required teamwork and interaction with others. They indicated that PMIs are more suitable for job positions which do not require working with others
- For industries that involve contact with many customers/clients, employers and supervisors tend to be hesitant in considering PMIs for the position. The responses of these employers and supervisors reflect that discrimination against PMIs is very prevalent in customer service or people-oriented industries (e.g., accommodation and food services)



*“I think it depends on the type of industry. In the sales department, it is difficult to include people with mental illness because our work involves communicating with people. If the employee with mental illness cannot control their emotions or behaves abnormally, it is difficult for them to perform well at work.” (Male, 35-44, Manager/department head, Accommodation and food services)*

*It depends on the severity of the mental illness or the current status of the person with mental illness. Is the person seeing a counsellor or a psychiatrist? Is the person taking medication? Does the person have to continue taking medication? I think I need to know more because hiring is not just determining whether or not the candidate is suitable, but also whether or not the candidate will affect other colleagues. (Female, 45-54, Manager/department head, Real estate, professional and business services)*



# Policies for Hiring and Managing PMIs in the Workplace

- There is a lack of clear and concrete policies and guidelines. Many organizations only had vague understanding of hiring and managing PMIs. Even for employers and supervisors who had prior experience in working with PMIs, they stated that there were no policies and procedures available in their company for managing PMIs in the workplace
- Compared to small sized companies, it is viewed that larger companies have more resources and job openings that enable them to hire PMIs in job positions that suit their abilities
- A few large companies have sufficient manpower and resources and they are willing to take up the social responsibility for hiring PMIs and providing them with flexible work arrangements. The employers and supervisors from these companies showed empathy and understanding towards PMIs who voice out their needs by reducing their workload during the recovery period and approving sick leave for them to seek medical consultation

*I normally do not assign heavy or urgent projects to people with mental illness. This could be helpful to them. They can go see a doctor if they need to do follow-up consultation. (Male, 35-44, Manager/department head, Transportation, warehouse, postal and express services)*

*“I don’t think there is any special arrangement. If we know there is an applicant with mental illness that needs special work arrangement, that person would likely not be hired. We should treat everyone equally in the company.” (Female, 35-44, Manager/department head, Import/export, wholesale and retail)*

# Policies for Handling Discrimination-Related Complaints

- Many employers and supervisors reported that they do not know the procedure to handle complaints from PMIs on mental illness discrimination. They simply passed the responsibility to the human resources department for handling complaints and assumed that the human resources department would have the standard procedures to process them
- Other employers and supervisors who knew about the procedures explained that all complaints are handled in the same way and there are no separate guidelines, procedures, or dedicated staff to handle cases for PMIs

# Suggestions for Creating a Discrimination-Free Working Environment

- As perceived by some of the employers and supervisors, a discrimination-free environment should be initiated by the upper management. They agreed that employers and supervisors should take the lead to provide employment opportunities to PMIs, embrace diversity, and provide equal opportunities to cultivate a discrimination-free work culture
- Some employers and supervisors believed that educating the public about mental health and mental illness is an essential step to eliminating stigma. These employers and supervisors suggested different ways to educate the general public:
  1. Using positive psychology in education to help people to build resilience to adapt to stress and crisis in life;
  2. Producing videos on how to support and communicate with PMIs to raise the public awareness about mental health;
  3. Encouraging employers and employees to join a mental health first aid training course to gain knowledge about common mental health problems

# Suggestions for Creating a Discrimination-Free Working Environment

- In terms of the lack of clear guidelines and policies for hiring and managing PMIs, it is suggested that the Government can provide more reference materials with concrete examples of what and how to implement equal opportunity policies in the workplace
- Many employers and supervisors claimed that the management team and staff may not have enough relevant experience to support and work with PMIs. Information and professional advice provided by the Labor Department, social welfare organizations, and psychologists about the procedures for complaint handling as well as the ways to work and interact with PMIs are needed for organizations to create a discrimination-free working environment



# Recommendations

# 1. Public Education about DDO

- Public education initiatives (e.g., community events, educational videos, and online learning resources) should be launched to promote awareness and understanding of disability discrimination and DDO in Hong Kong.
- The Labor Department and Advisory Committee on Mental Health should work together with EOC to provide seminars and talks for both the management of businesses and their frontline staff.
- A better understanding of the requirements of DDO will provide the foundation for equal employment opportunities and a discrimination-free workplace.



## 2. Equal Opportunity Policies in the Workplace

- The Government should consider providing more resources and assistance to the EOC, the Labor Department and employers to proactively facilitate the development of discrimination-related policies and measures for supporting PMIs' recovery in the workplace, such as lining up training for human resources and management of businesses by the EOC, Labor Department, NGOs and doctors.
- Good organizational practices for a discrimination-free work environment can be exemplified and acknowledged by the Labor Department.

# 3. Special Work Arrangements for PMI

- Employers are suggested to offer reasonable work accommodations to employees as a mental health-friendly employment practice, but considerate implementation procedures are important. They should ensure that employees with mental health conditions can attend medical appointments and apply for sick leave to seek medical advice, follow-up consultation or treatment.
- While work practices or arrangements based on the PMIs' abilities are welcomed, employers and supervisors must exercise in caution to avoid discrimination.
- Transparency in decisions related to work practices or arrangements, substantive fairness in distribution of resources and treating PMIs with sensitivity and respect are important.

# 4. Training Workshops for Staff

- Apart from employers, co-workers are the key stakeholders in building a discrimination-free workplace and providing support to PMIs at work. Training workshops for employed persons should regularly be held by mental health associations and NGOs.
- These programs should be given by psychiatrists, psychologists, or counselors to debunk common myths, clarify misconceptions, promote mental health awareness, and teach soft skills for sensitive and respectful communication with PMIs in the workplace.
- Since PMIs are most vulnerable to discrimination in customer service industries and in workplaces that consist of employees with lower education background, more attention should be directed to these workplaces to prevent stigmatization and discrimination.

# 5. Resources for Mental Health Support in the Workplace

- Employers are encouraged to provide an employee assistance program (e.g., 24-hour hotline, psychological assessment, counseling service, and referral to specialists) as a mental health first aid for employees who experience personal, mental or emotional problems.
- These programs are typically company-funded and provisioned by a third-party service provider or vendor because most organizations do not have in-house professionals with mental health training.
- For small and medium enterprises, they may lack the human and financial resources to provide such support for their staff. The Government may consider either providing financial subsidies or centralized support services for subscription by small and medium-sized enterprises.

# Q & A