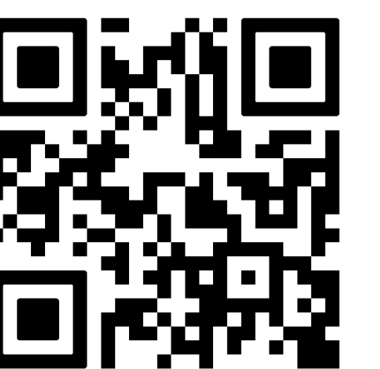


Public Awareness towards the U=U Statement: A Multi-Country Survey (Austria, Greece and Switzerland)



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Conclusions

- U=U is a message with limited recognition that is not well understood by the public across 3 European countries.
- This lack of knowledge is accompanied by HIV-associated stigma and misperceptions and in some cases limited understanding of HIV transmission routes.
- Effective awareness campaigns are needed to spread the U=U message and help foster a more informed and supportive public stance towards PWH.

References 1. WHO. <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/360860/9789240055179-eng.pdf> (accessed TBC) 2. DHHS. <https://clinicalinfo.hiv.gov/sites/default/files/guidelines/documents/adult-adolescent-art-guidelines-adult-adolescent-art.pdf> (accessed Jun 21, 2024); 3. IAS. <https://www.iasociety.org/ias-statement/ias-statement-uu-putting-science-into-action> (accessed Jun 21, 2024); 4. EACS guidelines v.12, Oct 2023 <https://www.eacsociety.org/guidelines/eacs-guidelines/> (accessed Jun 21, 2024)

Background

- People with HIV (PWH) on effective antiretroviral therapy who achieve and maintain undetectable viral load cannot sexually transmit the virus. This message known as U=U (Undetectable equals Untransmittable) has the power to reduce HIV-associated stigma. Stigma is a significant barrier impacting early diagnosis, retention in care or access to specialized services, and negatively impacts quality of life for PWH¹.
- Suppressed viral load during pregnancy, delivery and breastfeeding reduces the chance of vertical HIV transmission to <1% and there is no risk of transmission if the mother is taking ART and has undetectable VL prior to and throughout pregnancy and delivery¹.
- U=U Is Supported by Major Worldwide Guidelines²⁻⁴

Objective

- Evaluate public awareness, understanding and acceptance of U=U in three European countries: Austria (AT), Greece (GR) and Switzerland (CH).

Methods

- We conducted three HIV public opinion surveys, using a similar questionnaire with closed-ended questions, to understand public opinion towards HIV transmission, PWH and U=U in 2021 (GR) and 2023 (AT, CH).
- Participants (age ≥18 years) were randomly selected and representative quota sampling across demographic variables such as age, gender, educational level, and geographic location within each country was ensured. Participants were recruited by a panel institute able to provide representative population surveys in each country.

Table 1. Demographic data

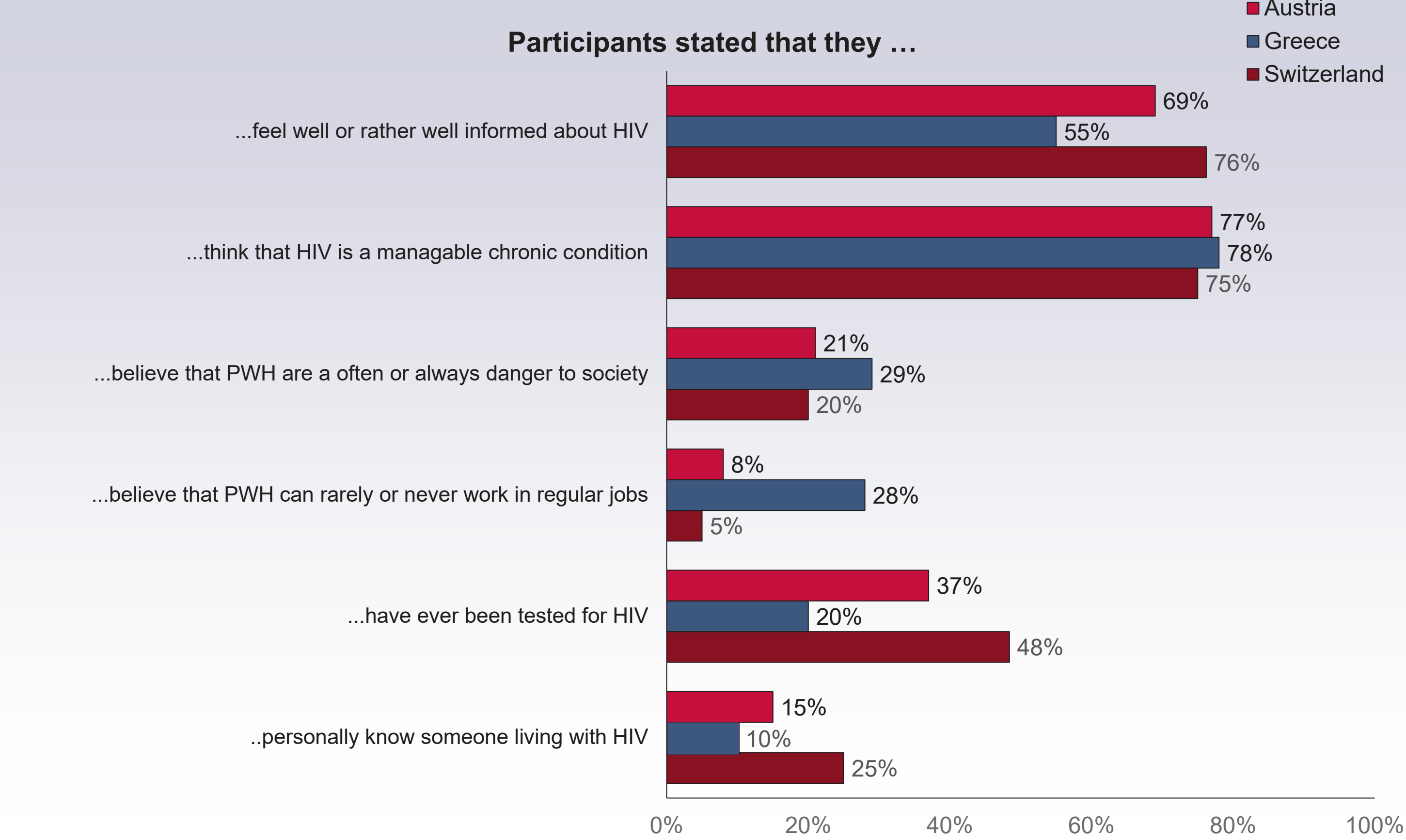
		Austria	Greece	Switzerland
Participants	number (n)	1000	1954	1015
	male (%)	49,0%	48%	49,1%
	female (%)	50,5%	52%	50,7%
Age Group	≥18 - 30 years (%)	20%	16%	17%
	31 - 40 years (%)	17%	8%	17%
	41 - 50 years (%)	15%	18%	17%
	51 - 60 years (%)	19%	21%	18%
Living area*	urban (%)	83%	84%	81%
	rural (%)	17%	16%	19%
	Educational level			
Educational level	school/completed compulsory school (%)	17%	30%	16%
	apprenticeship / secondary school without leaving exam (%)	48%	40%	46%
	secondary school with leaving exam / university degree (%)	35%	30%	35%

*urban: in a city or close to a city; rural: far away from a city

Results

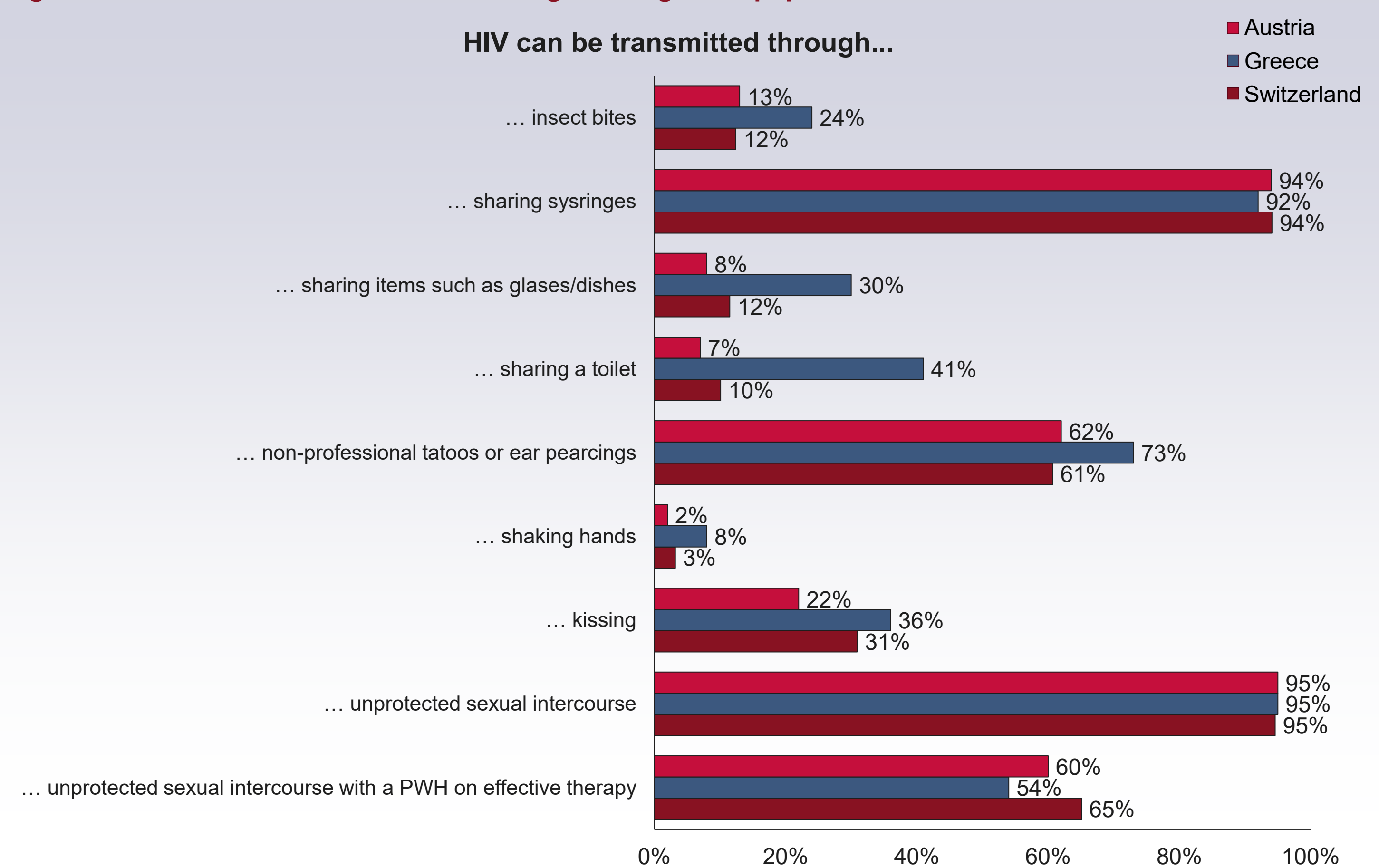
- A total of 3969 individuals (AT:1000, CH:1015, GR:1954) participated in the surveys (Table 1, demographic data). On average, 64% of participants (AT:69%, CH:76%, GR:55%) stated that they were informed about HIV and 77% (AT:77%, CH:75%, GR:78%) agreed that, due to modern ART, HIV is no longer a deadly but a manageable chronic condition. In contrast, 21% (AT), 20% (CH) and 29% (GR) believed that PWH are often or always "a danger to society" and 8% (AT), 5% (CH) and 28% (GR) "not able to work at regular jobs", (Fig.1)

Figure 1. Knowledge of the general population towards HIV and PWH



- Participants were asked whether they agree, disagree with or do not know about specific statements on how HIV is transmitted (Fig.2 presents agree responses as %). While >90% agree that HIV can be transmitted via sharing syringes and unprotected sexual intercourse, 54%-65% still agree that it can be transmitted with unprotected sexual intercourse with PWH on effective treatment.

Figure 2. HIV transmission routes – knowledge of the general population



Results

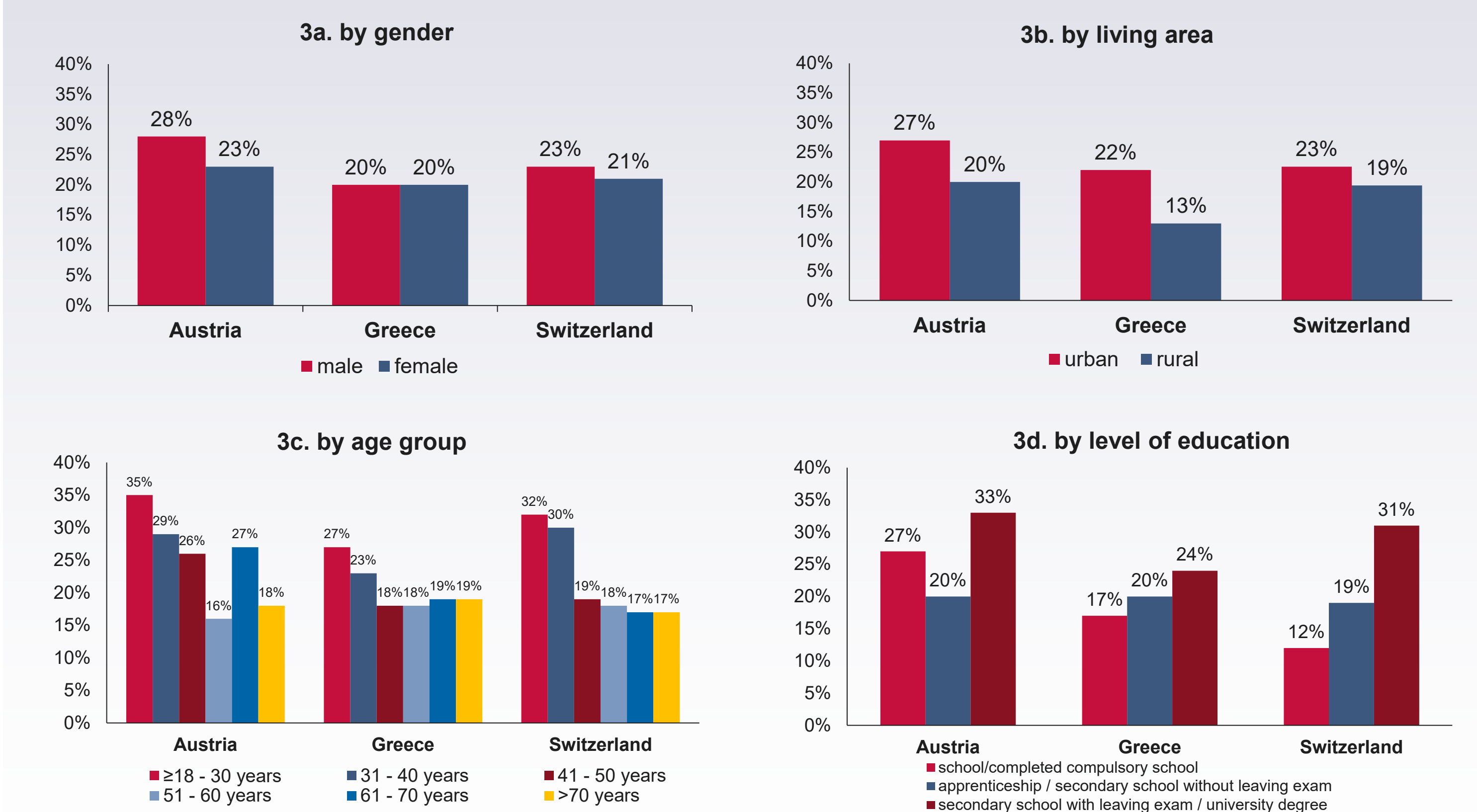
- Approximately 22% of the participants agreed with the U=U message (AT 26%, CH 22%, GR 20%). On the other hand, a similar proportion does not agree with the U=U message and 54% in AT, 56% in CH and 63% in GR do not know about it (Fig.3).
- Understanding of U=U is higher in younger people, people living in urban areas and those with higher education (Fig.3a-3d)

Figure 3. Understanding U=U by subgroup (All participants per country)

Do you agree with the statement that people with HIV who take HIV therapy and achieve and maintain an undetectable viral load cannot sexually transmit the virus to others?



Figure 3a-3d. Understanding U=U by subgroup



Percentage of participants agreeing with the abovementioned statement on U=U. The other participants either disagreed or did not know. Data presented as % of participants or % of subgroup of participants agreeing with the U=U statement for each individual country. Living in a city or close to a city was defined as urban, living far away from a city as rural living area.

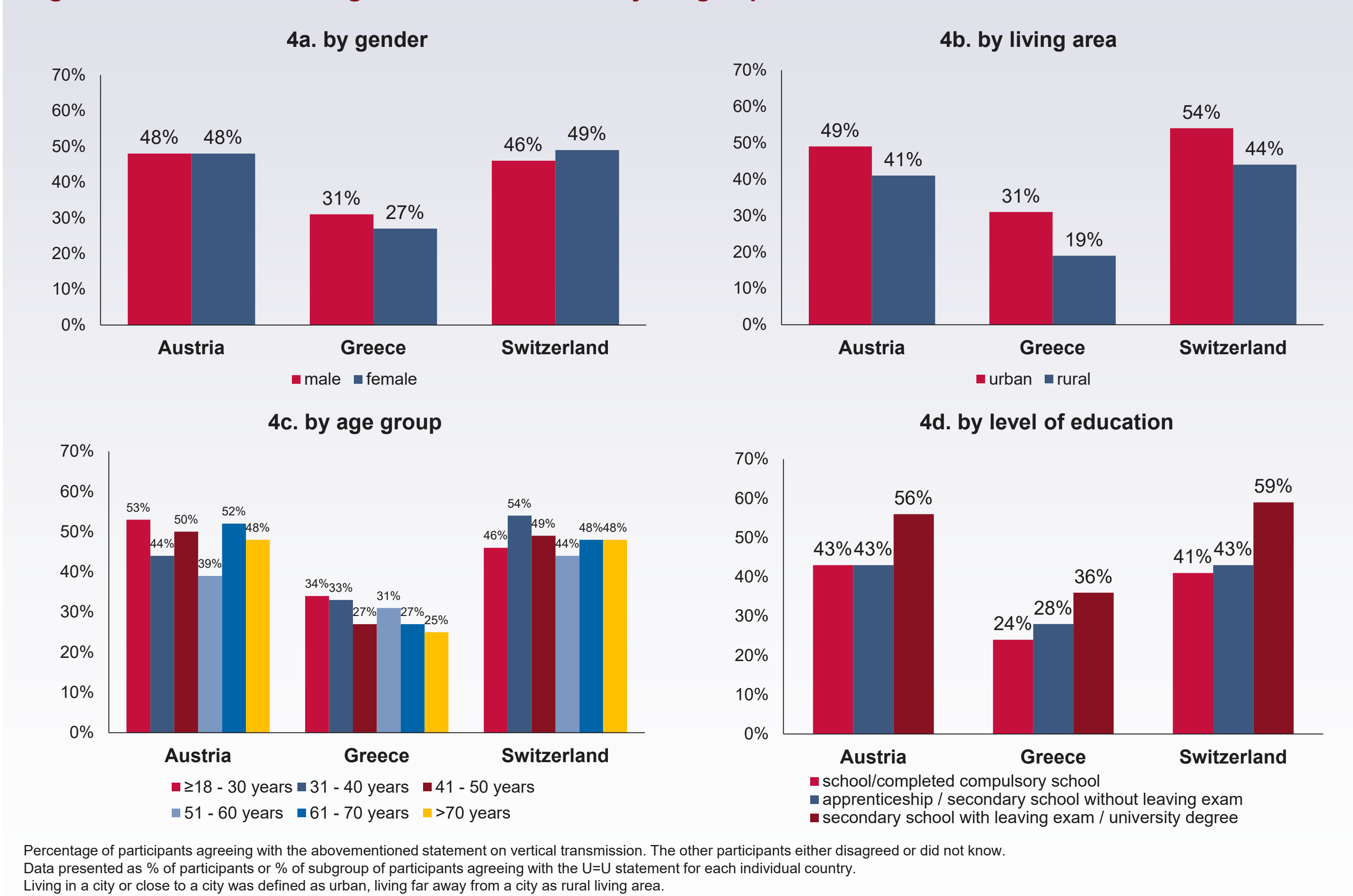
- 48% of Austrian and Swiss and 29% of Greek participants agree that women with HIV on effective therapy can give birth to HIV-negative infants. On the other hand, 45% of Swiss, 47% of Austrian and 64% of Greek participants do not know about this statement (Fig.4)
- Understanding of vertical transmission is higher in people living in urban areas and those with higher education (Fig.4a-4d)

Figure 4. Understanding vertical transmission (All participants per country)

Do you agree with the statement that women with HIV who take HIV therapy and achieve and maintain an undetectable viral load can give birth to healthy children without HIV?



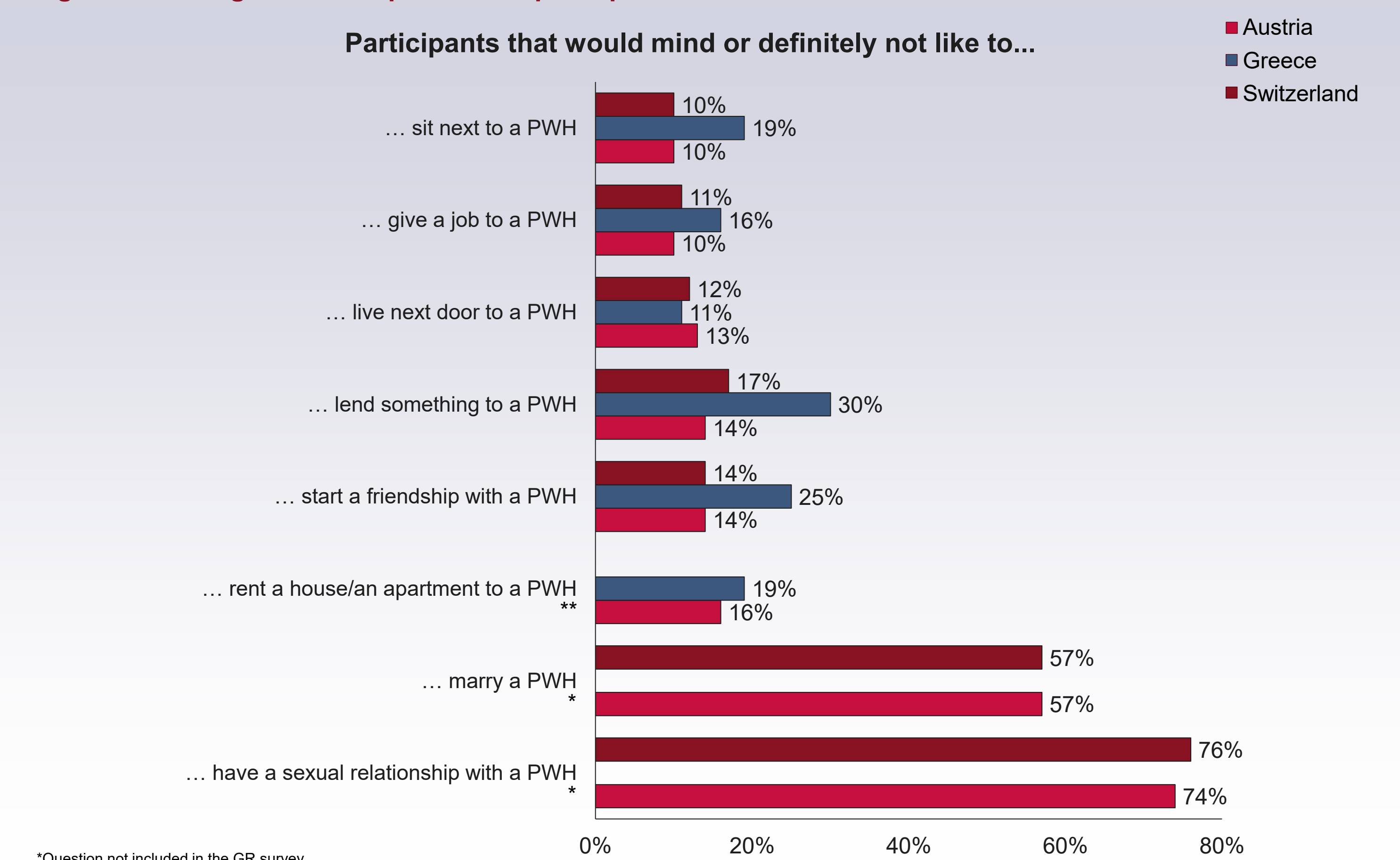
Figure 4a-4d. Understanding vertical transmission by subgroup



Percentage of participants agreeing with the abovementioned statement on vertical transmission. The other participants either disagreed or did not know. Data presented as % of participants or % of subgroup of participants agreeing with the U=U statement for each individual country. Living in a city or close to a city was defined as urban, living far away from a city as rural living area.

- In Fig.5 results from HIV stigma-related questions are presented, specially referring to personal and social connection and distance.
- 14% in Austria/Switzerland and 25% in Greece would mind/not like to start a friendship with a PWH.
- In Austria and Switzerland 57% of participants would mind/not like to marry a PWH and 74-76% would mind/not like to have a sexual relationship with a PWH. In Greece 68% would mind/not like to have a relationship with a PWH.

Figure 5. HIV stigma-related questions to participants



*Question not included in the GR survey
**Question not included in the CH survey