

#CopingWithCOVID

The Well-Being of LGBTIQ Adolescents and Youth during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Asia and the Pacific



Youth
Voices
Count



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This publication is based on the regional dialogues and surveys conducted by Youth Voices Count from April 2020 to May 2020.

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The cover features the mandala designed by Youth Voices Count member, AJ Rence Vinas, during the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia (IDAHOT) 2020 #HealingAndEquality Mandala Campaign. Mandalas are geometric figures representing the universe in Hindu and Buddhist symbolism. Mandalas have concentric circles that grow outwardly which represent harmony and fullness of the mind. Known to reduce anxiety, tension, and stress as a form of art therapy, mandala drawing was added as a relaxation activity during the webinar “#CopingWithCOVID: Sexual and Gender Minorities in Asia-Pacific” co-organized by Youth Voices Count, UNICEF Headquarters, the United Nations Secretary-General’s Envoy on Youth, and the World Health Organization.

Prefaces

The LGBTIQ community is immediately affected by this pandemic as it reduces job opportunities, health care provision, livelihood development as well as creating a huge stigma in our community. Fortunately, governments in ASEAN countries have made every effort to ensure the safety of each citizen, but these policies make a considerable concern about the impact on the mental health, sexual health, civil and political life, and social and economic status of LGBTIQ youth people. The cooperation of the community to reduce the effect of the pandemic towards LGBTIQ people is very important.

Finding out about the situation of the LGBTIQ community in the COVID-19 pandemic is a meaningful achievement. These recommendations in this report are very useful for governments, related donors and partners, and community-based organizations to implement so many practical proposals & activities in the next time. This paper also shows that COVID-19 pandemic prevention has some harmful effects on LGBTIQ youth people, so we will need more innovative ways to prevent the impact of this pandemic on our community.

The findings and recommendation in this report are valuable to support organizations and related partners in providing more understanding to the existing gaps in the community. With the lack of post-pandemic resource problems, the research is also a basis for the community to gain more interest from donors & government. As Regional Board Chairperson, I hope that the collaboration in the community will always be stronger together and more developed towards creating more values for LGBTIQ people around the world in this time of the pandemic.

Doan Thanh Tung
Chairperson, Regional Board
Youth Voices Count

The effort to come up with a regional report capturing the situations of LGBT youth at the time of the global pandemic is not only apt and relevant, but in itself historical in documenting our lived experiences, and in organizing young LGBTs of the Asia-Pacific at the time of the global pandemic. This is the first pandemic that will be captured by the digital spaces. We are particularly placed at a time where the young LGBT people of our generation capture center-stage of an increasing and considerably political movement based on identity. The digital spaces, coupled with a generation that has an alternative virtual life, enabled the formation of this report.

We are once again reminded that our battle as gender minorities lies within our most intimate spaces, the right to perform our sexuality without threat and prejudice, the right to an environment and to relationships of love and acceptance within those we consider to be family. As not all biological families welcome non-heterosexual gender minorities, microaggressions take on the toll of young LGBT people forced with homophobic families. This is amid the similar case of the rising number of Gender-Based Violence committed at home. The public space that has instead granted us to choose family and relationships, was taken away with the need to stay at home to keep safe from the virus.

In the Philippines, the recent passage of the Anti-Terror Bill in both houses of Congress, allows state authorities to execute warrantless arrests and surveillance. It is a potential threat in invading our digital privacy and security in the web and in LGBT organizing. For most LGBT youth, that relies in the remaining spaces of digital intimacies in expressing their sexuality, private spaces hold prime importance. The new normal of LGBT organizing is virtual. This situationer is one of the important previews to the report prepared by Youth Voices Count Asia-Pacific. This is a living document that is a preliminary and exploratory inquiry to our lives at the time of the pandemic.

On behalf of the Board of Trustees of the Philippines, we thank all who participated in our survey. Congratulatlulations to our secretariat team, the publication and research of Youth Voices Count Asia-Pacific.

Reyanne Joy P. Librado
Chairperson, Board of Trustees - Philippines
Youth Voices Count

Acknowledgments

This discussion paper is a collaborative output of several youth-led and youth-serving organizations that have remained dedicated to ensuring that the rights of LGBTIQ individuals are respected and fulfilled as we are facing an unprecedented health emergency that affects the world as a whole. Youth Voices Count is grateful for the support and collaboration of various organizations and individuals in bringing this discussion paper together. As you will later read throughout this paper, you will come to find that the information herein was taken from various webinars, survey results, key information interviews, and resources provided to us by our partners and member organizations.

Our organization is thankful for the technical support of partner organizations during our webinars which allowed us to dialogue with LGBTIQ youth from various countries and learn from their experiences as we together survive the lockdowns and quarantine measures imposed by our countries due to COVID-19. In particular, we are thankful for our collaborations with Office of the Secretary General's Envoy on Youth, UNICEF East Asia and the Pacific, World Health Organization, United Nations Major Group on Children and Youth, Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in the Philippines, Embassy of the Kingdom of Belgium in the Philippines, Asian Youth Peace Network, One Future Collective, Mindanao Pride, and Terre de Hommes through the Girls Advocacy Alliance.

Youth Voices Count also thank our partners for our regional survey which generated crucial information that you will further read about in this discussion paper. The results came from 543 respondents across various countries in East and South East Asia. These responses helped build the integral component of this discussion paper as these provided us with information on the well-being and mental health concerns of adolescents and youth LGBTIQ individuals. Our partners for the survey include the UNICEF East Asia & Pacific Regional Office, Equal Asia Foundation, Prism Chat, and QUV; Solidarity of University & Youth Queer Societies in Korea. Additionally, the following regional and international

partners have also provided technical support and resources for this discussion paper: Office of the UN Secretary General's Envoy on Youth, UNICEF East Asia & Pacific Regional Office, ILGA World, the Inter-Agency Task Team on Young Key Populations (IATT YKP), and the Diversity and Inclusion Group on Networking and Action (DIGNA) of CIVICUS.

The organization is also grateful for the organizations that have contributed to this report by either sharing case studies or agreeing to be interviewed. Thank you for allowing us to tell your stories of coping with the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, we are thankful for ASEAN SOGIE Caucus, Equal Asia Foundation, One Future Collective, MYRainbow, Queer Youth Group Nepal, Rainbow Alliance - LGBT Youth Empowerment Programme, Sayoni, Inclusive Bangladesh, and Equite Sri Lanka. We acknowledge the contribution of short case studies by Seong-Jo Jeong, Tushar Kanti Baidya, Adhil Suraj, and Alfred Candid Jaropillo.

This discussion paper was also reviewed by members of the Youth Voices Count Regional Governance Body and colleagues from other regional organizations. Their inputs contributed in strengthening this report.

Finally, we are thankful for the contribution of Abigail Gonzales Amon in adding design and color to this discussion paper with her layout work. Most of all, we are thankful to the ardent work dedicated by the main author of this discussion paper, Jeffry Acaba, in ensuring that the voices and experiences of LGBTIQ adolescents and youth are heard.

Justin Francis Bionat
Executive Director, Youth Voices Count

Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly altered the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ) youth around the world.

In Asia and the Pacific, pandemic-related measures have limited the movement and public gatherings that have negatively affected social interactions as well as resulted in loss of economic opportunity and work of many LGBTIQ youth. Similarly, these measures have also magnified the inequality and have furthered the stigma and discrimination that LGBTIQ youth persons experience.

As COVID-19 continues to threaten societal and social norms and cohesions, this discussion paper examines how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the overall state of well-being of LGBTIQ youth people. Specifically, this discussion paper aims to: (a) explore the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health, sexual health, civil and political life, and social and economic status of LGBTIQ youth people; (b) identify mitigating and coping mechanisms that LGBTIQ youth individuals exercise during this pandemic situation; (c) showcase interventions that LGBTIQ-led organizations do to address these challenges faced by their communities; and (d) provide policy and programmatic recommendations in responding to the needs and challenges faced by LGBTIQ youth.

The recommendations set forth in this paper are drawn from online surveys, webinars, small group discussions, key informant interviews, and story submissions with and by LGBTIQ youth across

Asia and the Pacific, conducted and co-organized by Youth Voices Count together with several partners.

Consolidating and analyzing the results drawn from an online survey jointly conducted by Youth Voices Count (YVC) in partnership with UNICEF East Asia and the Pacific Regional Office (EAPRO), Equal Asia Foundation (Equal AF), and Prism Chat; and were complemented with the discussions that transpired in a series of webinars co-organized by YVC, this paper shows how the overall state of well-being of LGBTIQ youth, as described by their state of mental health, sexual health, social and political lives, and socioeconomic situations, were affected by COVID-19 pandemic situation. Evidence gathered shows that LGBTIQ youth individuals were aggravated with the minority stress that they experience in their households. Access to sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services including HIV services and products such as condoms and lubricants remained a priority to some LGBTIQ youth, albeit accessing these services have been disrupted by the quarantine measures. Some LGBTIQ youth experienced confinement with abusive partners, increasing the risk of intimate partner violence, including sexual violence, during pandemic lockdowns. This paper also shows how the COVID-19 pandemic and government measures to contain it have exposed LGBTIQ youth to targeted stigmatization and discrimination: blaming sexual minorities as the cause of spreading the virus in the communities, bad-mouthing, and even abuse. Specific sectors of LGBTIQ youth, such as those working in the informal or gig economy, have lost their incomes due to the COVID-19 pandemic. And while governments have provided aid to augment their economic losses, interviews conducted showed that LGBTIQ youth were excluded because of their SOGIESC.

With these findings, this discussion paper offers the following recommendations:

For governments

1. Immediately adopt measures to ensure uninterrupted access to and delivery of existing mental health services, sexual and reproductive health services, and HIV services following UN and WHO protocols and guidelines at the onset of health emergencies, such as the COVID-19 pandemic
2. Ensure availability of quick response hotlines for LGBTIQ youth, particularly for those who are in situations of possible gender-based or sexual violence and abusive environments, including immediate opening of crisis centers following local government quarantine protocols
3. Classify community-led organizations that provide services for LGBTIQ youth as essential workers, and ensure their security, protection from COVID-19, and authorization to move freely to provide service where and when needed
4. Invest in and adopt mental health, sexual and reproductive health, and HIV programs that are gender-responsive, youth-friendly, and tailored to the specific needs of LGBTIQ youth populations, especially in the context of health emergencies and humanitarian calamities
5. LGBTIQ-led initiatives should be recognized and supported as these are considered the most effective means of response delivery and information sharing within the LGBTIQ community

For donors and bilateral partners

1. Provide flexible emergency funding for LGBTIQ organizations that can support forward financing for smaller LGBTIQ organizations that respond

to the immediate and mid-term needs of their community members

2. Support grantees and fund recipients in reallocating existing and available funding to address immediate and long-term needs of their staff and their community partners, release additional funds to support organizations without further delay
3. Support governments in adopting measures, guidelines, and protocols to enable differentiated response for LGBTIQ youth and respond to their needs

For LGBTIQ organizations and civil society organizations

1. Explore multi-platform channels for LGBTIQ youth who are in need of counseling or other mental health-related support services
2. Provide proper referrals to service delivery networks to ensure linkage of specific and essential services to the needs of LGBTIQ youth people
3. Ensure linkage to access to justice or legal services that can cater to LGBTIQ youth
4. Provide proper referral mechanisms for LGBTIQ youth who may be concerned about COVID-19 and ensure proper linkage to testing and care services without prejudice to any form of stigma and discrimination
5. Develop tailored messaging for LGBTIQ youth individuals on various coping mechanisms and techniques in times of health emergencies
6. Encourage collaboration and cross-movement activism with other grassroots and civil society organizations in time of health emergencies through joint initiatives and platform-building





Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly altered the lives of everyone around the world. Lockdowns, stay-at-home orders, physical distancing, and other quarantine measures to prevent the further escalation of COVID-19 involved limitation of movement and public gatherings, isolation especially in cases of possible COVID-19 infection, and loss of economic opportunity and work. In Asia and the Pacific, 34 of the 47 countries have enacted several policies and regulations that restrict movement of people that range from travel bans to nationwide lockdowns^{1,2}.

Despite the limited information available due to the evolving situation of the pandemic, COVID-19 is often seen to be more fatal in people above the age of 60 or who have comorbidity such as lung or health disease, diabetes, or those that affect the immune system³. While adolescents and young people may be at lesser risk, the impact that they face due to the mitigation measures that are put in place can be damaging to the lives of around 750 million young people living in Asia Pacific. With members of families losing their jobs,

young workers losing their sources of income, and young entrepreneurs being forced to close their businesses, more young people will find it harder to enter the labour market, which can lead to a significant and persistent earning losses that can last their career⁴. This is coupled with the stresses that they are expected to experience as they return to their homes due to the closure of education systems, and the vulnerabilities that they would face in spaces where isolation and lack of social engagement would impact their mental health and sexual and reproductive lives.

Young lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ)^a people are not spared from these experiences. COVID-19 and its measures would heighten their feelings of anxiety and distress due to COVID-19. Physical distancing, for instance, is found to decrease access to positive interactions and increase negative social interactions⁵. And while countries have rolled out social and financial assistance programs to support the poor and those who have been affected by the economic disruptions brought about by the quarantine measures,

a Youth Voices Count recognizes that there may be various nonheteronormative and non-cisgender identities and terminologies existing in the Asia-Pacific region apart from "LGBTIQ". However, for the purposes of clarity, "LGBTIQ" will be the standard term used in this publication.

these austerity measures against COVID-19 that were sometimes coupled with a militaristic approach has also magnified the inequality and has furthered the stigma and discrimination that LGBTIQ persons experience. In the Philippines, for instance, a group of LGBTIQ persons were publicly humiliated by forcing them to perform lewd and degrading acts⁶. In South Korea, online harassment and discrimination targeting a gay man has sparked a firestorm after the said person was reported to have visited gay clubs and exposed people to COVID-19 after the government relaxed its restrictions in early May⁷. South Korea's measure that discloses the identity and location of people with COVID-19 in an effort to control the pandemic raised not only serious privacy concerns, but has exposed the LGBTIQ community to further discrimination and possible harassment, both as being part of sexual minority and a person with possible COVID-19.

There were also instances where LGBTIQ people experienced severe economic impacts and were left alone due to the lack of non-prioritization by the government. In Indonesia, for instance, it was found that more than 600 transgender people in Greater Jakarta were unable to support themselves and also unable to access food distribution packs because they do not have identity cards due to their gender identity⁸. More than the health disparities that LGBTIQ individuals are already experiencing, the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures to control it exacerbate the stigma that LGBTIQ individuals face. Even further, this pandemic has also become a human rights crisis for LGBTIQ community.

As COVID-19 continues to threaten societal and social norms and cohesions, it is important to examine how this pandemic situation has impacted the overall state of well-being of LGBTIQ youth people. Specifically, this discussion paper aims to:

1. Explore the impact of COVID-19 in the mental health, sexual health, civil and political life, and social and economic status of LGBTIQ youth people;
2. Identify mitigating and coping mechanisms

that LGBTIQ youth individuals exercise during this pandemic situation;

3. Showcase interventions that LGBTIQ-led organizations do to address these challenges faced by their communities; and
4. Provide policy and programmatic recommendations in responding to the needs and challenges faced by LGBTIQ youth

The discussion and analysis presented in this paper are drawn from the results of an online survey jointly conducted by Youth Voices Count (YVC) in partnership with UNICEF East Asia and the Pacific Regional Office (EAPRO), Equal Asia Foundation (Equal AF), and PrismChat. Titled, "COVID-19: Impact on LGBTIQ Adolescents and Youth in East and Southeast Asia", this survey collected information on the disproportionate impact towards the human rights and physical and psychological well-being of LGBTIQ communities due to the ongoing quarantine and state-of-emergency measures in East and Southeast Asia. This survey was able to gather 543 respondents during the period between 26 April to 15 May 2020.

It is also important to note that while this survey generated ample information on the mental health and well-being of LGBTIQ adolescents and youth in East and Southeast Asia, this may not be generalized to reflect the actual realities, experiences, and situations of various communities in the countries captured by the survey. The results provide a surface level outlook from countries in the region.

The survey results were complemented with the discussions that transpired in a series of webinars co-organized by Youth Voices Count (YVC), namely:

- "*Gender and Sexuality amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic: South Asia Dialogue*", co-organized with One Future Collective. This dialogue, which invited individuals and groups from six South Asian countries (Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Pakistan, India, and Sri Lanka) hoped to discuss the challenges faced by LGBTIQ persons in this subregion, and identify

current steps being taken by individuals and organizations to address gender and sexuality-related issues during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- *“Our Response: At the Nexus of Human Rights, Gender, and Health in the COVID-19 Humanitarian Response”*, co-organized with the United Nations Major Group for Children and Youth, Asia Youth Peace Network (AYPN), and the Medical Students Association of India. This webinar explored the nexus of human rights, gender, and health in the humanitarian space, with the COVID-19 exposing the weaknesses of states in responding to a global and national health crisis.⁹
- *“#CopingWithCOVID: Sexual and Gender Minorities in Asia-Pacific”* webinar on Young People and Mental Health, with the Asia Pacific regional webinar focusing on LGBTIQ youth, co-organized with UNICEF Headquarters, the United Nations Secretary-General’s Envoy on Youth, and the World Health Organization. This webinar, which is part of a series providing a platform for young people to connect virtually to share their stories, interact with experts, as well as learning about practical tips on how to approach their mental well-being. The series aims to generate greater mental health awareness and strengthen demand for critical integrated mental health and psychosocial interventions.¹⁰
- *“#PrideAgainstPandemic: Gender Inclusive and Responsive Disaster Response: The LGBTQ+ Community’s Role in Policy and Decision-making in combatting the pandemic”* national webinar organized in partnership with Mindanao Pride, Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, Terre des Hommes / Girls Advocacy Alliance, and Embassy of the Kingdom of Belgium. This webinar aims to explore the meaning of gender inclusivity and responsiveness and its importance in times of crisis management and to know why the LGBTQ+ community has a crucial role in ultimately ending the pandemic.

YVC also conducted two key informant interviews with Diversity and Inclusion Group for Networking and Action (DIGNA) CIVICUS (Fiji) and Kaushal Ranasinghe (Sri Lanka); and incorporated story submissions from individual and organizational partners.

This discussion paper will propose recommendations for governments, technical agencies (e.g. United Nations), and civil society organizations to consider in realizing the immediate and long-term needs to ensure the well-being of LGBTIQ youth during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is also envisaged that this paper will provide insights into how LGBTIQ organizations have responded to their peers and communities amid the pandemic and its lockdowns, and demand that these interventions be supported and sustained as part of the broader support towards LGBTIQ communities.

Well-being of LGBTIQ during Health Emergencies

There is currently no internationally agreed definition of well-being, but we can refer from the definition by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that well-being is “a positive outcome that is meaningful for people and for many sectors of society, because it tells us that people perceive that their lives are going well”¹¹. It is important to note that one’s perception of their state of living or health is key to defining one’s well-being, based on this definition. Thus, what is perceived to be “positive” may be subjective despite the presence or absence of any infirmity, or regardless of one’s state of health. CDC further explains that there are several instruments that are available to measure well-being but at the minimum, well-being must include the “presence

of positive emotions and moods” and “absence of negative emotions”, “satisfaction with life”, “fulfilment”, and “positive functioning”¹². The World Health Organization (WHO) also defines mental health as a “state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.”¹³ This definition acknowledges that a good state of mental health is key towards a good overall state of well-being. At the same time, this definition underlines the role of individual action in responding to stressors and how individuals cope in various situations.

Youth Voices Count on the Well-being of LGBTIQ youth

Youth Voices Count believes that all adolescent and LGBTIQ youth people in Asia and the Pacific deserve a life where their fullest potential is realized in order to achieve their optimum state of well-being. While no concrete definition has been presented in so far as their Strategic Plan 2017-2020 is concerned, it is clear that well-being is synonymous to an “improved mental and physical health”, which can be attained by recognizing LGBTIQ youth people’s right to sexual and reproductive health information, services, and supportive and health environment. It is important to underline how environments shape LGBTIQ youth people’s well-being, as the collective experience of stigma, discrimination, marginalization, coupled with poor health service access and uptake, may lead to poor social, emotional, mental, and physical well-being.

Source: *Youth Voices Count 2017-2020 Strategic Plan*

Various definitions of well-being also suggest that several factors influence one's state of well-being, including how well-being is influenced by culture^{14 15}. In looking at the state of well-being of LGBTIQ youth, we can examine how this is affected by internalized and externalized discrimination brought about by systemic challenges that affect their health¹⁶. The systemic forms of oppression brought about by homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia, as well as the societal pressures to conform to the binaries of gender norms manifest in both internalized forms of self-stigma, such as feelings of guilt, self-isolation, low self-esteem; and externalized forms, such as violence, bullying, harassment, refusal to accessing services. As a result of these internalized and social exclusions, LGBTIQ people experience higher rates of suicide, higher rates of depression, and higher rates of STI and HIV than non-LGBTIQ people¹⁷.

On the other hand, research shows that participation of LGBTIQ in the community may provide positive outcomes in their well-being¹⁸. One research among LGB individuals shows that despite being stigmatized, greater connectedness to the LGB community were associated to greater social well-being¹⁹. For LGBTIQ youth, it is thus important to look into how their participation in the broader LGBTIQ community can impact their overall sense of well-being.

Individuals' state of well-being is challenged during humanitarian and health emergencies, and the unprecedented situation brought about by COVID-19 is no exemption. In these situations, people experience several forms of distress due to the sudden loss of normalcy, aggravated by the disruption in accessing various services brought about by the quarantine measures, such as access to healthcare, food, sanitation and water, and economic opportunity²⁰. With the disruptions in social systems brought about by COVID-19, individuals are exposed to various types of internal and external stressors affecting their state of well-being. In terms of mental health, for instance, prevalence of depression and anxiety appear to be very common during these situations²¹.

Apart from the more direct, disruptive situations that transpire in a health emergency, several emergency-induced, and humanitarian-induced problems also arise that complicate an individual's well-being²². Populations may experience loss of safety and family separation, which may trigger post-traumatic stress disorders and grief. While humanitarian responses are often immediately put in place to respond to these situations, overcrowding, lack of privacy, and anxiety due to the lack of access information about the emergency may further an individual's experience of anxiety.

There is limited research done that examines the impact of pandemic situations on the well-being of LGBTIQ youth. However, we can refer to reports conducted by organizations such as OutRight International and Human Rights Watch with regards to efforts under emergency situations wherein LGBTIQ individuals have either been denied access to shelters and excluded in food aid provisions²³. These pre-existing structural and systemic forms of oppression targeting LGBTIQ individuals are magnified in situations of health emergencies, and the COVID-19 pandemic is no exemption. A regional consultation conducted in 2018 also showed that oppressive legal environments, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristic (SOGIESC)-blind humanitarian plans and policies, relative invisibility of diverse SOGIESC communities in existing assessments, data and evidence in crises, and a lack of capacity and dedicated partnerships in humanitarian system contribute to barriers that excludes LGBTIQ people in humanitarian responses²⁴.

For purposes of discussion, this paper will focus on four areas of well-being: (a) mental health, (b) sexual health, (c) civil and political life, and (d) social and economic status. The identification of these components were based on themes covered and the results from both surveys and thematic webinars.

The *Mental health* concept will explore the introspective experiences and realities of LGBTIQ youth as they interact with the changing situations

in their environment, particularly around the closure of schools, and the dynamics within their families.

Sexual health is a state of physical, mental, and social well-being in relation to sexuality. It requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination, and violence²⁵. This definition will also include the ability to access sexual and reproductive health services, including HIV services, and how these impact their sexual health.

The *civil and political life* component will operate within the definition of civil and political rights based on the definition of the United Nations, as a class of rights that protect individual freedoms from infringement by governments and ensures the participation of individuals free from discrimination²⁶. Several elements under this component will look at the COVID-19 measures that have been put in place that have directly or indirectly ostracized LGBTIQ youth.

The *social and economic status* will present living situations of LGBTIQ youth during the COVID-19

pandemic that increases their vulnerability. This includes the state of employment and financial situation of LGBTIQ youth and the economic burden that they face, the difficulties in sustaining their social and economic needs, and the mechanisms that LGBTIQ youth undertake to adapt in this “new normal” situation. This will also present the effects of COVID-19 to formal and informal economic activities, drastic disruption of their economic and social lives, and the marginalized situation of LGBTIQ youth in urban areas and remote rural areas²⁷.

While these areas will be presented separately, this paper argues that these four elements interact with each other and shape the state of well-being of LGBTIQ youth (Figure 1). This means that one’s state of mental or sexual health, as impacted by COVID-19, is affected by the current state of civil and political life and the burdens that one experiences socially and economically. Lockdown measures due to COVID-19 can also curtail the freedom of expression of LGBTIQ youth, or delimit their social spaces to express themselves, and thus impact their mental and/or sexual health.

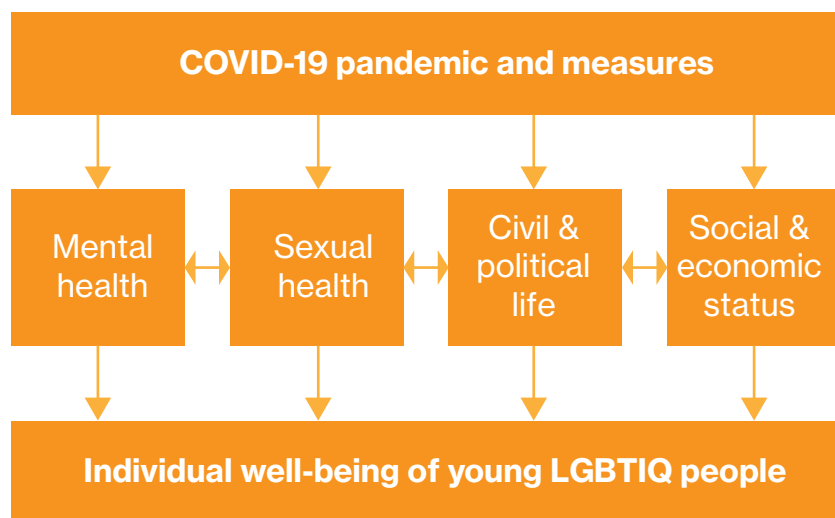


Figure 1. Operational Framework on the state of well-being of LGBTIQ youth individuals during COVID-19

Impact of COVID-19 to Mental Health of LGBTIQ youth



As the COVID-19 pandemic loomed across Asia and the Pacific region in early January 2020, several governments adopted measures to try and prevent its further spread. Of the 487 respondents aged 15 to 35 years covering 31 countries across Asia and the Pacific, around 80% showed that their countries mandated

physical distancing in public spaces, while 7 in every 10 required wearing face masks and 5 in every 10 being in partial lockdowns (Figure 2).

With many social spaces such as schools, parks, workplaces, and drop-in centres closing due to country or local-wide COVID-19 lockdown

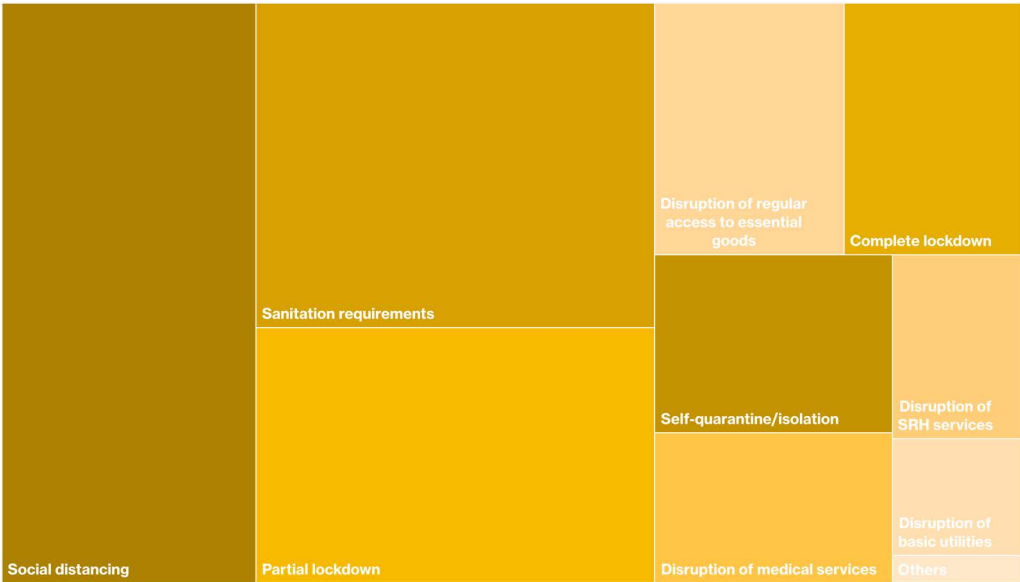


Figure 2. COVID-19 quarantine measures in place (1,638 responses)

measures, LGBTIQ youth have been deprived of social connections that can provide a positive sense of belonging. This social connectedness is considered important for LGBTIQ youth, as these spaces are known to provide supportive and accepting environments that contribute to preventing suicide ideation and attempts due to social isolation²⁸. Of the 259 respondents who responded to the question, “do you identify as a person with disabilities?”, 74% of the respondents mentioned that they were already experiencing feelings of insecurity, anxiety, worrisome,

sadness, or depression that affected their work or daily activities prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, at the onset of the pandemic-related lockdowns, more than half of the respondents mentioned of their uncertainty, and 1 in 2 said that their mental health state have been affected making them feel unsafe and worried (Figure 3).

There are a multitude of concerns that LGBTIQ youth experience that heighten their anxiety and depression during the COVID-19 pandemic. Adding to the feeling of isolation and disconnection from

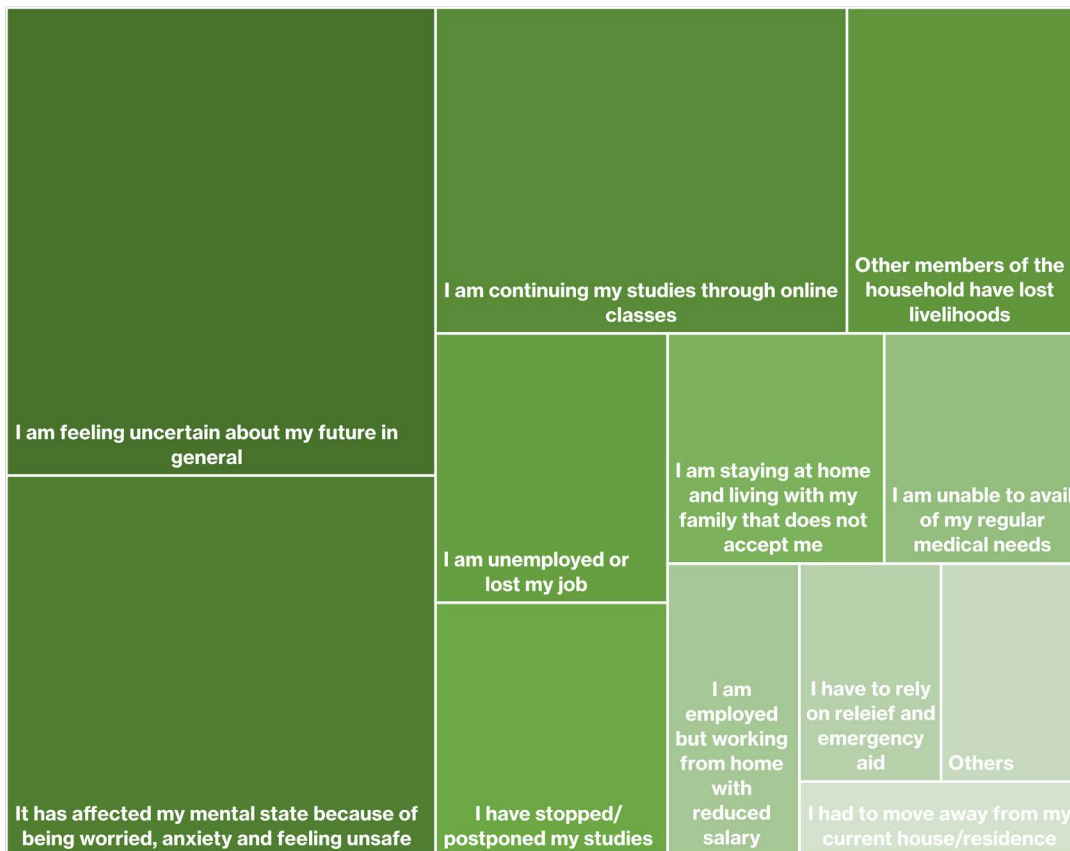


Figure 3. Effects of COVID-19 and preventive measures (1,298 responses)

social peers due to the stay-at-home orders, many LGBTIQ youth are concerned about their or their family’s physical health and psychological well-being, which is aggravated by their or their family’s loss of financial income and the added burden that they or a family member would not be able to

go to work or study as they normally would. This sudden disruption of their normal lives and forcibly shifting into a “new” normal without the certainty of the future puts many LGBTIQ youth in a state of temporality and can put additional stresses in their daily lives. In the survey conducted, around 37% of

the 487 respondents struggle with social isolation and lack of social connections with friends, which reflects the difficulty to adapt into this new mode of normality brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The other striking situation that adds to the level of distress that LGBTIQ youth experience is the anxiety brought about by being forced to live back to their families who do not accept them. In the survey conducted, more than 70% of the

respondents experience higher vulnerability towards family members, such as concerns about being disclosed to other members of household, stigma and discrimination, and hostility or disagreement with family due to sexual orientation or gender identity (Figure 4).

These interactions within the household could result in re-exposure to what is called a “minority stress” – a relationship between minority and dominant values that results in conflict with the

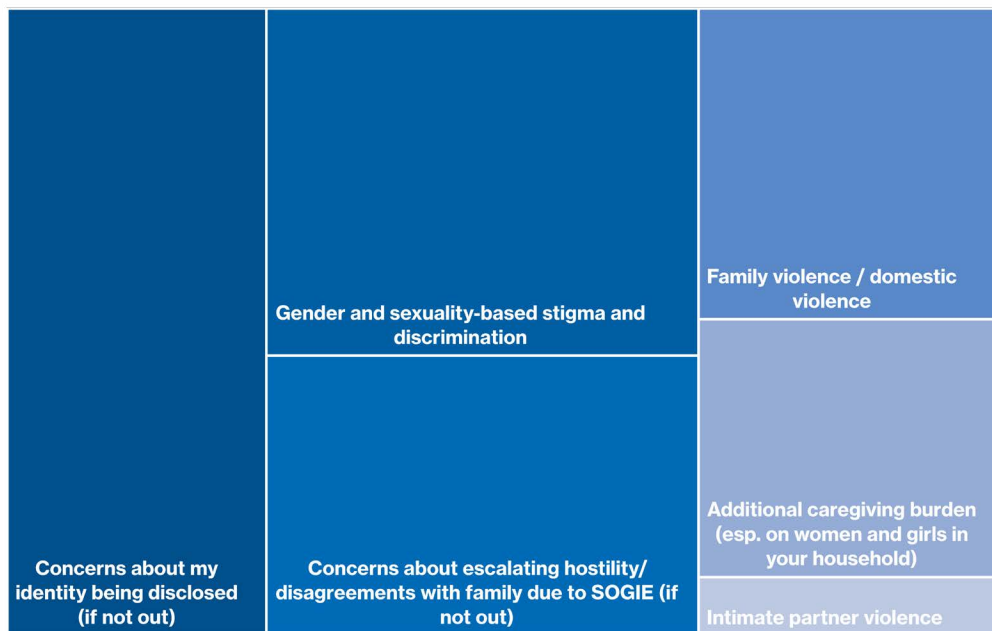


Figure 4. Effects of COVID-19 and preventive measures

social environment experienced by minority group members²⁹. These stressors can lead many LGBTIQ youth to leave their homes³⁰. However, those who are forced to return and stay at home with family members who do not accept their sexuality may experience subtle or overt experience of rejection, concealing, and

hiding their identities, or coerced to subscribe to the dominant values that may be driven by homophobia, transphobia, or biphobia, and are manifested through violence or abuse. Interviews from LGBTIQ youth in Singapore and Thailand describe what usually happens because of these dynamics:


“In terms of LGBTIQ specific issues, it has definitely impacted mental health, and also driven more people back into unsafe family environments.”
 – Mandy Chng, Singapore

“I think the biggest issue may be staying with families who aren’t supportive and feeling inescapable. This could definitely increase anxiety or depression for a lot of LGBTQI persons in our area.

– Palis Pisuttisarun, Thailand

Research in Singapore also revealed that young transgender men and women may face extreme experiences of physical violence, especially as

they are forced to come out while transitioning, requiring them to leave home³¹.



A PARENT'S GREATEST GIFT
But figuring out how to show support for your LGBTQ+ child can be difficult

PATIENCE
And take your time to process your newfound understanding of your child.

With these simple steps, you can show your LGBTQ+ child that you love and you support them!

A Parent's Greatest Gift #IDAHOT2020

The Inter-University LGBT Network is a network for organizations in Singapore universities to collaborate in fostering safer and more inclusive school communities for everyone regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity and expression.

“The global COVID-19 pandemic and circuit breaker measures put in place in Singapore have had a great effect on our lives. According to research, these measures have had an even more profound impact on the LGBTQ+ community as many are stuck in non-affirming households. In such situations, individuals may face threats of hostility and violence that stem from homophobia, transphobia and biphobia, but are unable to leave their homes to find safety.”

- Love: Communicate with your child to find the best way to express your love for one another.
- Listen: Listen to what your child has to say without judgement. Prioritise trust, understanding, and openness.
- Support: Supporting them in their expression and their identity.
- Learn: Keep yourself open to learning about the LGBTIQ community.
- Patience: Be patient with your child as they figure out how to express themselves.
- Action: Get informed and connect with parents of other LGBTIQ children.

“Particularly, we wish to celebrate what it means to be a nurturing parent towards LGBTQ+ individuals. Parents play a huge role in the lives of LGBTQ+ individuals, and have the capacity to help their children navigate their queer identities with the right support and guidance. We hope that this video will give parents of LGBTQ+ children a better idea of how they can support their children in the most effective ways, and be effective allies to the LGBTQ+ community.”

[Full video here.](#)

In the #CopingWithCOVID webinar that YVC organized, one speaker highlighted that violence also tends to increase in the household due to the pressure to conform to dominant values.

“In this pandemic, there is a higher vulnerability towards LGBTIQ because of the heightened anxiety that results in heightened violence that pressures LGBTIQ to conform.”
 – Sabrina Gacad, Philippines

These experiences in spaces perceived to be safe and inclusive for LGBTIQ youth become spaces where further discrimination and even internalized

stigma are amplified, resulting to feelings of helplessness and fatality. As spotlighted by one of the speakers during the “Our Response” webinar:

“There is an unreported case of a young transwomen from Nepal who committed suicide because of harassment from her family which she experienced during quarantine.”
 – Lieu Anh Vu, ILGA Asia

School closures have also disrupted academic learning and face-to-face interaction with peers, significantly impacting behavioral and social development³². While some educational

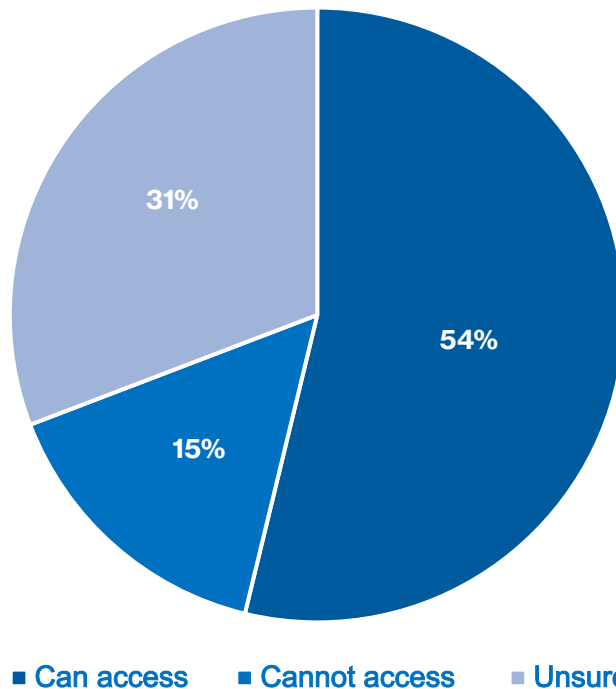


Figure 5. Proportion of LGBTIQ youth who can access online peer support (n=383)

institutions have tried to shift to online learning, the loss of important and safe social connections that schools provide for LGBTIQ youth through peer and friend support could significantly affect their mental health³³. As an alternative, some LGBTIQ youth shift to seeking information and social interactions through social media. In the survey conducted, half said they can access peer support online (Figure 5).

The demand to always stay online, however, provides additional stressors in the daily lives of young LGBTIQ people. As shared by webinar participants from India, because information on or related to COVID-19 are always happening live online, some LGBTIQ youth become overwhelmed with information.

“We are now in a situation of physical distancing and not really social distancing. Most social media content is overwhelming and it’s live all the time.”

– Melita, India





“My screen time is increasing, watching out for the news. I’m incapacitated to do things so I can’t function.”

– Vandita, India

While mental health-related services are somehow available in some countries, many of these health centers, including drop-in centers, have been closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As shared in one focus group discussion (FGD) in Singapore,

drop-in counseling centers have been closed for some time and while some counseling centers remain open, the waiting time and reservation for counseling became too long that one has to book an appointment 2-3 months in advance.

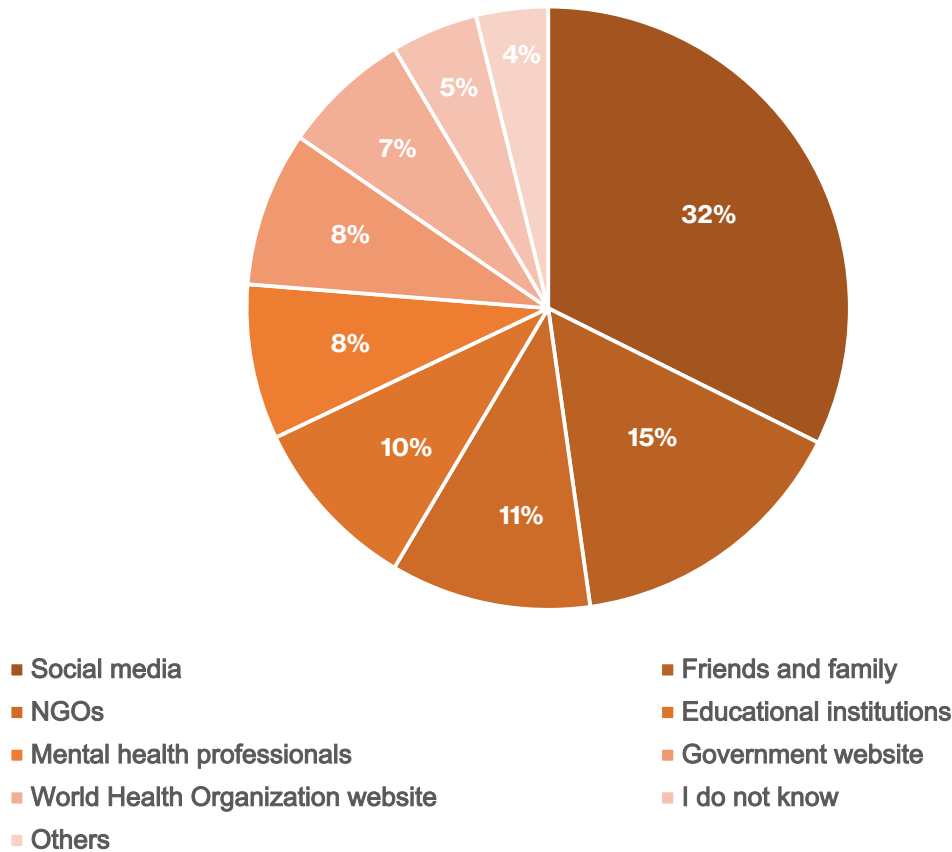
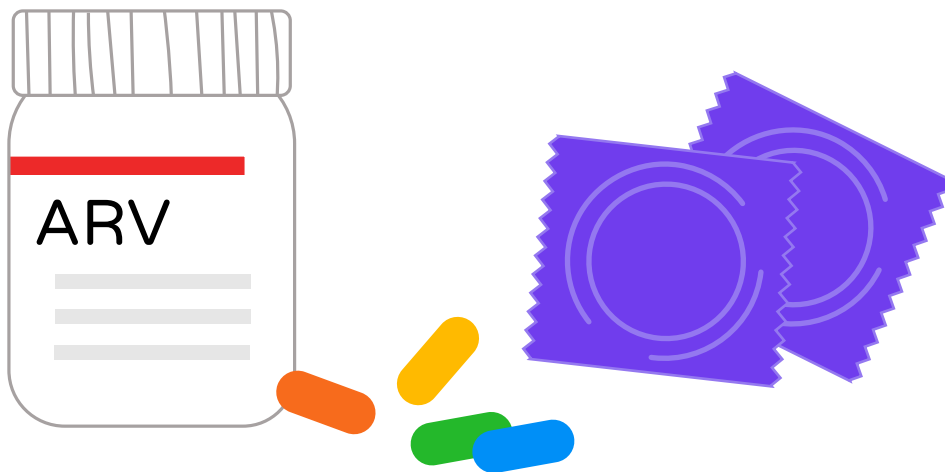


Figure 6. Source of information on mental health and well-being support (986 responses)

Fear of stigma and discrimination also delay LGBTIQ access to delay mental health services, exacerbating the health issues that they face³⁴. LGBTIQ-friendly or affirming mental healthcare was already sparse before the pandemic, and most relied on psychosocial support from friends and community resources, which they are now cut off from. In the survey conducted, around 17% or 83 respondents indicated difficulties accessing medication for their depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues. As a result of the pandemic, most young LGBTQ are currently getting information on mental health and well-being support mostly online (Figure 6).

Availability of services online does not directly translate to LGBTIQ youth accessing them. As one interview pointed out, while some NGOs are providing online and mobile counseling for LGBTIQ youth, these services may not be affordable and accessible at all due to the lack of the necessary bandwidth or limitations in internet connectivity. Another key deciding factor is the safety of the physical spaces where LGBTIQ youth live or stay in. Many LGBTIQ youth live in places where they are not accepted or in environments that they consider abusive. As such, counseling and discussions may not be possible or may even expose LGBTIQ youth to further violence and harassment.



Sexual health issues and challenges during lockdowns

The measures that were introduced to prevent COVID-19 required LGBTIQ youth to navigate new ways to experience healthy and satisfying sex without the risk of acquiring SARS-CoV-2. These range from looking for sexual partners to ensuring accessibility to sexual health services, including antiretroviral (ARV) drugs for people living with HIV (PLHIV).

Recent studies on whether SARS-CoV-2 is sexually transmitted or not is still unclear to science, but what is clear is avoiding the virus would mean avoiding contact with saliva or blood of a sexual partner³⁵. While measures such as

physical distancing has become part of the restrictions of the government to avert the spread of COVID-19, several LGBTIQ organizations and the academe have developed IEC materials on COVID-19 prevention to ensure that LGBTIQ youth are protected from acquiring the virus as they continue to exercise pleasurable sex^{36 37}. And as virtual sex is becoming more common, there are concerns about the privacy and security of LGBTIQ youth who resort to this mode of sexual practice, particularly the threat that some may accidentally be outed or extorted.

“People use a lot of virtual sex. Now that sexual thing came to a virtual platform, [they] are getting threats to their privacy and confidentiality because people are doing masturbation in front of the camera.”

– Kaushal, Sri Lanka

“[LGBTIQ youth] are still looking for sex partners on different dating sites without being conscious about the pandemic. Since we are only focusing on hand sanitizers, we are kind of overlooking that [sexually transmitted infections] might also be on the rise. As the organizations are closed, supplies of lubes & condoms are also in shortage. So community people are prone to practice unsafe sex in the days of lockdown.”
 – Rezwanur, Bangladesh

Despite these government-initiated lockdowns, LGBTIQ youth continue to look for sexual partners.

Available data on whether HIV or STI transmission have increased over the course of the COVID-19 related quarantine measures remain limited, but

survey results show that 1 in every 4 LGBTIQ youth need access to sexual and reproductive health services and provisions such as condoms and lubricants, but are having difficulty accessing them during the pandemic (Figure 7).

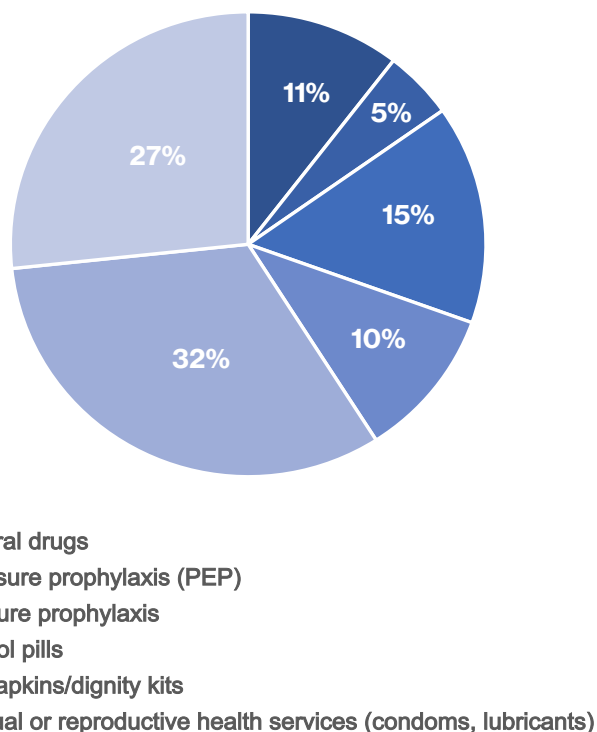


Figure 7. Sexual and reproductive health needs that LGBTIQ youth youth are struggling to secure (n=105)

Access to sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services, as shown in the figure above, has been difficult among LGBTIQ youth. As pointed out by one of the speakers during the “Our Response”

webinar, the travel restrictions, the distance to the nearest SRH facility, and the closure of many SRH centers serve as further challenge to LGBTIQ youth.

“Challenges exist in accessing sexual and reproductive health information services - including contraception, safe abortion and HIV medications, cervical cancer screening and treatment, also gender affirming surgeries and routine SRHR services.”

– Sai Jyothirmai Racherla,
Deputy Executive Director, Asian-Pacific Resource & Research Centre for Women (ARROW)



“In Lao PDR, LGBTIQ people who live with HIV have a problem accessing HIV services, especially those who are in rural areas.”
– Tui, Lao PDR

“Whether they are Taiwanese stuck in foreign countries or foreigners who work in Taiwan yet often fly to Thailand buying ARV, [or going] to home country [to retrieve] free meds, it is now difficult due to travel restrictions.”

– Fletcher, Taiwan

This data complements the report that was released by the Interagency Task Team on Young Key Populations (IATT on YKP), wherein 27% of the 113 respondents experienced delays or disruptions when accessing condoms, 14% experienced delay in accessing PrEP, and 26% experienced delay in accessing HIV testing³⁸. In the same survey, distance to ARV clinics and lockdowns have both been identified by PLHIV as challenges in getting ARVs. Two in every 10 also registered their concerns about ARV stockouts in their locality.

These concerns will likely aggravate the level of anxiety and distress among LGBTIQ youth, further impacting their mental health. The difficulty to access the SRH services they urgently need add to the layers of concerns that they have,

in addition to the places wherein they may feel unsafe along with further social disconnection. Existing issues in accessing sexual health services of LGBTIQ youth have been exacerbated as the pandemic complicates access. The reasons behind this include enforced stay-at-home measures, financial concerns rooted in loss of employment resulting to the inability to purchase essential sexual health needs, closure of sexual health clinics, and non-disclosure of HIV status to family members or peers whom these LGBTIQ youth are currently forced to live with.

During these lockdowns and in a context of overall social distress, adolescents and young people are at high risk of domestic violence and gender-based violence (GBV)³⁹. Sexual exploitation and abuse may also become more apparent in

What is Domestic Violence?

It is gender-based abuse that happens within **intimate** or **familial relationships**.

This may include **physical assault**, **verbal intimidation**, **sexual abuse** and **control of financial resources**.

The perpetrators often:

- **justify their abusive behavior** as a normal part of the relationship
- **shift the blame to the victim**

Lunas Collective
facebook.com/LunasCollective

Domestic violence is **never justified** and it is

Lunas Collective is a feminist, inclusive, and volunteer-powered chat service based in the Philippines. Lunas Collective seeks to respond to women and people of different identities who may be in need of some, any form of social support. We are powered by the passion and talents of our volunteers or vollies.

Visit the Lunas Collective Facebook page here.

pandemic situations, as economic problems can push people to take advantage of the weakness of other people, especially children⁴⁰. In times of stay-at-home restrictions, many LGBTIQ youth will be confined to and unable to escape these abusive environments⁴¹. In the survey conducted,

one in every 10 of 487 respondents stated concerns about family or domestic violence.

LGBTIQ youth are perceived to be more at risk to domestic violence, according to an interview.

“In some instances, the rising cases of domestic violence are experienced by women and girls, but are actually higher for LGBTIQ persons. There is a rise of rape cases during the last month.”

– Kalis, Fiji

It has also been noted that more than 37% of women in South Asia, 40% of women in South-East Asia, and up to 68% of women in the Pacific have experienced violence at the hands of their intimate partners during the period of the pandemic⁴². Hotlines for survivors of domestic violence in Malaysia have reported a 57% increase in calls while orders aimed at controlling movement are in effect⁴³.

Unfortunately, services that respond to domestic and sexual abuse have been disrupted due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviews gathered in Nepal and Fiji revealed that some shelters have remained closed during the course of the lockdowns. While few crisis centers were identified to be open, they are only dedicated to victims of abuse from heterosexual relationships, and excludes LGBTIQ individuals and other key populations such as sex workers. A survey confirmed this, showing that 14% of 384 respondents needed access to national or local domestic violence support during this pandemic.

Alongside concerns about the safety of victims, abusers may experience heightened anxiety which reinforce power, abuse, and control, leading to sexual and gender-based violence⁴⁴. Apart from mental health, LGBTIQ youth are also exposed to other health concerns such as sexually transmitted infections including HIV, sexual dysfunction, unintended pregnancies, miscarriage, and unsafe abortion⁴⁵.

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EQUALITY

all for love
AND
love for all

Love is a
human right.
PASS THE CADB.
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NO HATE.
JUST LOVE
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State of civil and political lives of LGBTIQ individuals

As the numbers of COVID-19 rise in various countries across the region, states are proactively creating measures to curb the further spread of the virus in their territories. While this is clearly a health emergency that affects us worldwide, we cannot deny that this also brings about human rights issues. Typically treated as a health issue, gender distinctly cuts across various challenges and manifests specific gendered and human rights concerns during the pandemic.

Some measures taken by governments have also been called unjust by civil society organizations. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed much of the weaknesses of states in responding to national health crises. It has also brought to our attention some glaring human rights violations being perpetuated by states during this time. The lack of sustainable and reactive health and

humanitarian policies has left many marginalized communities unattended and suffering from the effects brought about by COVID-19.

CIVICUS reports that most victories of the LGBTIQ movement over the past years, including progress in policies in Asia, is the result of an open, vigorous and vibrant civic space that allows for movements to lobby for legislation that benefits the LGBTIQ community⁴⁶. Despite the pushback from conservative groups and deliberate silencing from states, the human rights of the LGBTIQ community is fought on various levels of society and international community.

COVID-19 and the imposed safety measures has limited civic space movements and revealed some shocking vulnerabilities which the LGBTIQ community continues to face. Cases

of homophobic attacks under the guise of health security measures have been reported in the Philippines⁴⁷. Police brutality and housing insecurity have also been reported in small towns in India sparking a community-led fundraiser for transgender communities in West Bengal⁴⁸. The enforced quarantine measures have drastic effects on various aspects of the daily lives of LGBTIQ adolescents and youth especially as limited mobility constrains their freedoms, limits access to safe spaces, and cuts them off from their peer circles and support systems.

Looking into dimensions of age as an additional layer of vulnerability, children, particularly those from poor communities warrant special attention as their safety and development are presently at

risk. Children without parental care are especially vulnerable to exploitation and domestic abuse. The closure of schools brings about challenges in distance learning, on-line learning, and reduced access to essential learning resources. Issues to the child's nutrition, mental health, and physical development has also been reported⁴⁹.

The effects of COVID-19 on the civil and political lives of LGBTIQ adolescents and youth intersects with other issues presented in this report. As quarantine measures are put in place, issues such as increased domestic and intimate partner violence and the loss of employment and other sources of income significantly alter the ways LGBTIQ adolescents navigate their social and political lives.

“As an organization, [we] have also received a lot of calls from queer individuals who have been forced to stay within their homes due to the lockdown situation. This is speaking from a point of view of those that do have the privilege to have a roof over their heads, however it is creating extremely abusive environments within some households.” – Kuhoo, India

“The key issue during this critical moment is keeping everyone safe but LGBTIQ community is most vulnerable due to the practice and social exclusions. Due to shut off all the trans people are suffering most in terms of health care and wage issues.” – Rokonol, Bangladesh

Several other issues were also brought to the spotlight by the statement of ILGA Asia on LGBTIQ youth in quarantine. Specific recommendations on ensuring proper measures to ensure children and youth in abusive households are provided care and support have been laid out⁵⁰.

One youth participant during the *“Gender and Sexuality amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic: South Asia Dialogue”* noted that posters have surfaced

in India blaming transgender people for spreading the virus. In Pakistan, one participant noted that there is a whole campaign blaming sexual and gender minorities, particularly women and LGBTIQ people for spreading the pandemic. Similar cases of the LGBTIQ community being scapegoated as probable COVID-19 positive have been witnessed in South Korea⁵¹. This divisive rhetoric has produced tension among societies as the propagation of false information is rampant.

How COVID-19 became an issue of LGBT?: Homophobia and LGBTQ movements in South Korea
By: Seong-Jo JEONG

The number of COVID-19 cases in South Korea has increased rapidly since January when the first confirmed cases occurred. Fortunately, the upward trend is slowing due to the effect of the strong 'social distancing' policy. South Korea is considered to have been quite successful in the prevention of COVID-19. However, the success of the COVID-19 quarantine promoted the patriotic sentiments and paradoxically increased the social reproach of confirmed patients. The quarantine system in South Korea particularly relies on strong epidemiological investigations using ICT, which poses a risk to the LGBTQ community being socially exposed.

In early May, when daily confirmed cases converged to zero, it was reported that a confirmed patient had visited a gay club. After this day, the number of COVID-19 cases began to grow rapidly again. Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC) tried to consistently emphasize that hate does not help in quarantine, but this effort was not very successful. Some local governments exposed the gay community by revealing the path of the confirmed patients through emergency texts, and the yellow media continued to report sensationally about gay establishments. In the chaos reminiscent of the AIDS pandemic, many LGBTQ members in South Korea not only suffered mental distress but were also vulnerable to COVID-19.

According to a survey conducted by QUV and YVC, half (50%) of Korean respondents are worried about their mental health as well as being infected with COVID-19. Besides, worries about discrimination based on gender and sexual identities (43.75%) and concerns about social isolation and lack of social connection with friends (47.92%) have also been reported highly. This demonstrates the complex challenges LGBTQ people face in South Korea, where a strong social distancing policy is maintained, accusations against the confirmed patients are stronger, and hate speech against sexual minorities is tolerated.

As soon as the media coverage of gay clubs began, South Korean LGBTQ human rights organizations began to respond in earnest. In just a few days, many organizations formed a coalition, and Queer Action Against COVID-19 (hereafter 'Queer Action') was established. Queer Action, composed of 23 groups, has met with KCDC, Seoul Metropolitan Government, and Gyeonggi Province Government to reform the quarantine system in which human rights of sexual minorities are violated. Also, Queer Action is committed to monitoring media reports containing hate speech against sexual minorities and providing emotional and economic support to the LGBT community. In this situation, voices deploring the absence of anti-discrimination laws are also increasing. In Korea, there are no laws or institutions that protect sexual minorities from discrimination and human rights abuses. Human rights groups have been working for decades to enact a comprehensive anti-discrimination law that includes prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. However, the enactment of the law is being delayed due to opposition from a conservative Protestants group that promotes homophobia. COVID-19 is a confirmation of social stigma against sexual minorities in South Korea. Using this as a momentum, many activists are trying to change society so that the human rights of sexual minorities can be guaranteed.

In Fiji, the Rainbow Pride Foundation for LGBTQ Rights and Equality, provided a report on the impact of COVID-19 to LGBTIQ persons in Fiji. The report highlighted several key issues such as decreased mobility which resulted in challenges to provide assistance to communities, safety online and offline with the increase of bullying, aggressive behaviors, and discrimination, and food security due to stocks of food items running out in supermarkets⁵².

The increased cases of domestic violence has also brought about issues for sex workers in the Pacific. The ineffective response of the police to these cases has left many survivors to seek support to civil society led shelters and facilities. However, with the sudden spike in the number of cases this proves to be a challenge to these shelters, as well as, ensuring sensitized social workers and sufficient facilities to cater to these individuals.

“To some extent, **the LGBTIQ community is so resilient in the Pacific**. In some instances, the rising cases of domestic violence are experienced by women and girls, but are actually higher for LGBTIQ persons. There is a rise of rape cases during the last month. The system is also biased because the police do not properly deal with the situation. LGBTIQ persons are being tormented by their own families. There are a few cases when trans sex workers and LBT women sex workers are harrassed out of their homes because of their job and head over to the center. More than 20 people are gathered in the center right now because of the situation. Last month there was a tropical cyclone, so many LGBTIQ individuals also couldn't come to the center plus [there was] the fear of contracting COVID-19 at that time.

– Kalisto Biaukula



“It becomes so difficult because the center is their refuge but because of the typhoon and COVID-19, the services have stopped or slowed. This brings forward sexual health and rights problems.”

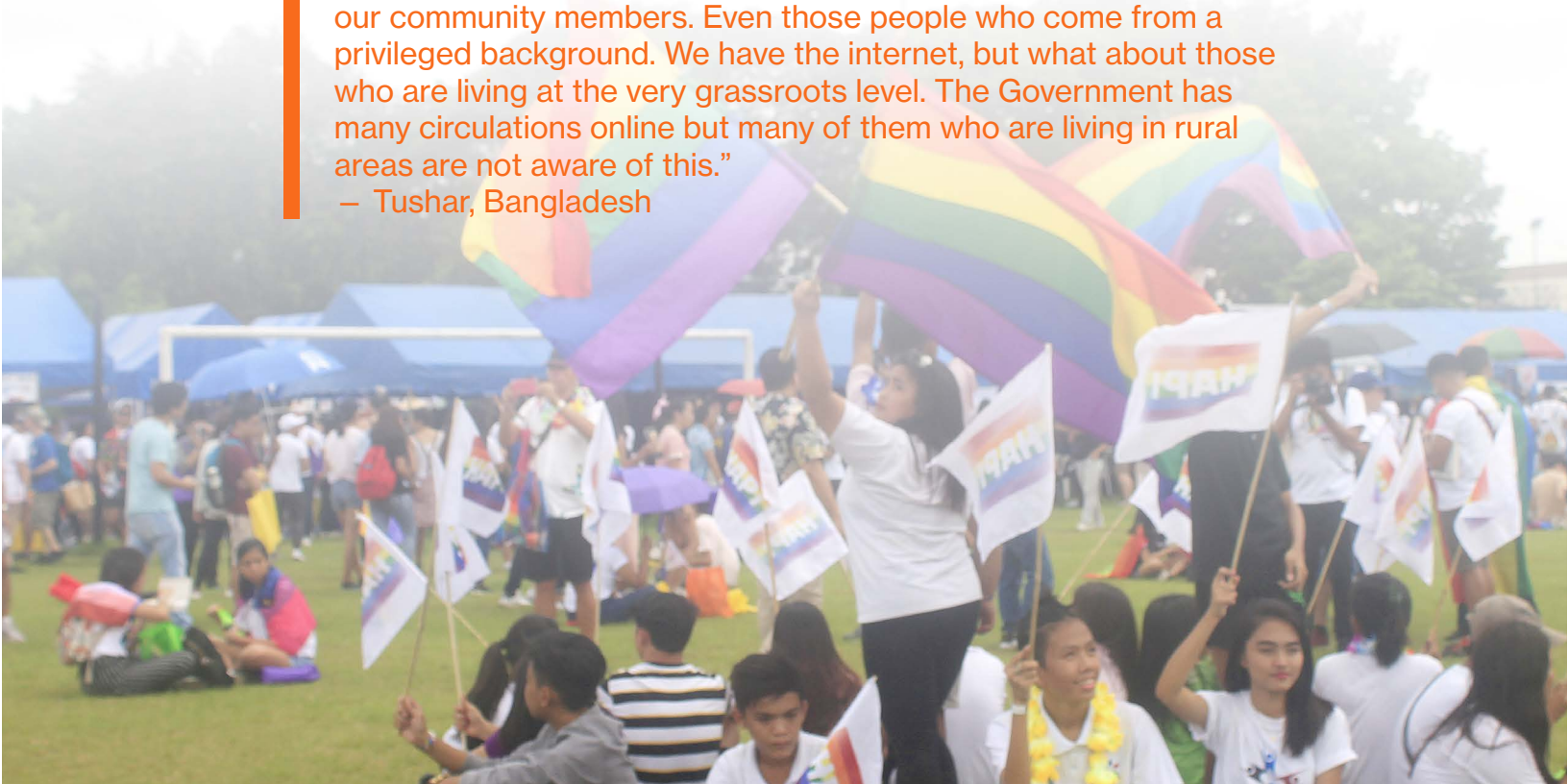
– Kalisto Biaukula
Advisory Group, Diversity and
Inclusion Group for Networking
and Action (DIGNA) CIVICUS

On an organizational level, the country-wide lockdowns, imposed ban on mass gatherings, and strict quarantine measures has substantially decreased the mobility of human rights organizations to operate. This is evident in the cancellation of projects, rescheduling of meetings and conferences, and the diminishing of the productivity of staff. Therefore, organizations have resulted in providing basic necessities and emergency responses to their constituents or members⁵³. However, what is concerning is that reports of state actors barring or dispersing these community-led responses have been shared from various countries, including neglect of health workers and complications in mitigating the disruption in learning and education for students⁵⁴.

The freedom of assembly and expression as civil and political rights should remain respected during this time. However, warrantless and unjust arrests of civil rights defenders have been reported in various countries during the May 1st Labor Day demonstrations as they allegedly violated quarantine protocols. State authorities have dispersed rallyists in Hong Kong⁵⁵ and the Philippines⁵⁶. Unjust arrests and detention of migrant workers and refugees have also been reported in Malaysia⁵⁷. These arrests are clear violations to the freedom of assembly and are worth mentioning in this report as state authorities have used COVID-19 as an excuse to illegally detain civil rights defenders.

“We are conscious about **privacy and individual protection** (of personal information) so we talked about storing contact information, vulnerability levels and financial status. This problem showed us how **we are not aware of the community and how we are neglecting the storage of contacts and information**. Now we are contacting everyone at the same time and double checking data. Many of them don't have mobile or mobile banking numbers so we have to contact their brothers, sisters, or shops that open at particular times. **We faced this for the first time**. We resolved to have a database of our members so that at this time we can check those documents so we can reach them within a short time. For structure, many of us go physically to contact members, but now we have seen that the virtual structure is required to help our community members. Even those people who come from a privileged background. We have the internet, but what about those who are living at the very grassroots level. The Government has many circulations online but many of them who are living in rural areas are not aware of this.”

– Tushar, Bangladesh



As the “new” normal has also required us to be dependent on internet and network connectivity to maintain communication with our social circles, this has also surfaced digital rights violations. With most day-to-day activities shifting to online

platforms, possible surveillance of individuals may lead to infringement on the private lives of LGBTIQ individuals⁵⁸. The rights to information and expression have been violated as journalists and activists have been deliberately silenced

“In Sri Lanka, information technology (IT) literacy is low so people don’t know about Zoom or WhatsApp. So when we tried starting the sessions in the virtual level, it was not effective. People don’t have devices capable of doing these virtual engagements. People don’t have enough knowledge about IT. We are struggling to get people connected and it is very hard.”

– Kaushal Ranasinghe,
Youth Activist/Volunteer, Sri Lanka

and arrested in Bangladesh⁵⁹. Free, accessible, accurate, and reliable information is crucial during this time and similar large-scale emergencies. Our survey evidenced that 89.02% of the respondents rely on social media for COVID-19 related information, while 77.64% of the respondents also rely on the government for the same information.

In terms of accessing information, one of our key informant interview participants noted: Safe spaces during this pandemic requires reconceptualization as we now shift to atypical platforms to continue interacting with communities. The pandemic limited the mobility

and access to the conventional safe spaces that are frequented by LGBTIQ populations. These are usually the same safe spaces that become temporary refuge for those experiencing abuse at home, in the workplace, on the streets, and elsewhere. These safe spaces are also vital in championing the human rights of LGBTIQ communities. Two anonymous responses from our survey when we asked about additional needs of adolescent and youth LGBTIQ highlighted the need to reimagine our safe spaces as the world adapts to the evolving context.



“A safe space, whether it be a concept, or just a virtual one. LGBTIQ youth would need platforms to freely express who they are without prejudice, which usually some physical places have provided but are closed because of the pandemic. Example: Gay Bars, Queer Spaces, etc.”

– anonymous respondent
from Philippines

“A sense of community and belonging, especially for those who may have to live with family that is not accepting of them. Perhaps more telecommunication or online activities for the LGBTIQ community.”

– anonymous respondent
from Singapore

Apart from the human rights issues affecting social political lives, other issues that have been exacerbated due to the lock down measures, including the perpetuation of negative perceptions and the increase in discrimination, violence and

other human rights violation on the basis of SOGIESC has been laid out by various groups⁶⁰. The present pandemic does not diminish the fact that our civil liberties and freedoms are not up for debate.

To respond to this, several youth-led organizations have started sharing key messages online to support LGBTIQ youth communities, especially those in lockdown situations or stranded in unsafe environments. For instance, One Future Collective, a feminist youth led not-for-profit based in India whose mission is to nurture radical kindness through gender justice, feminist leadership and mental health, shared infographic on being a good queer ally.



What can we do as queer allies?

A lot of queer persons are currently forced to be in spaces where they cannot be themselves or in abusive spaces during COVID-19. What can we do to support them?



Check in on them. Ask them if they're going to be okay during this time and how they would like to be supported.



Provide a safe living space. If you're in a position to, offer your queer friends who are in abusive spaces a place to stay for the next couple of weeks.



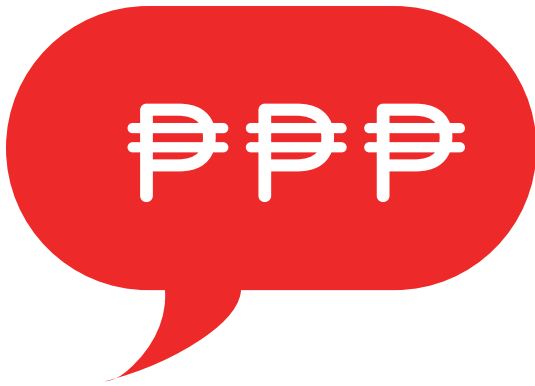
Support them financially. Many queer persons in India don't have access to the same resources as non queer persons. Offer to pay for their groceries, internet, parts of their rent, as per your capacity.



Be a safe space. Encourage them to keep in touch with you and be there for them without judgement. Ensure you communicate your boundaries and capacity to support them clearly.



www.onefuturecollective.org



Shifting social and economic status

In an earlier report by the Human Rights Campaign Foundation, it pointed out that “LGBTQ people are employed in sectors that will be heavily impacted by the COVID-19 crisis” and

already face pre-existing economic disparities which proves as an additional barrier as the crisis progresses⁶¹.

“LGBT+ community face a big challenge to have job as many employers do not accept their sexuality or gender identity. The COVID-19 pandemic brought another layer of challenge as can be seen on reports of job loss or reduced income. Some areas of work that are open to LGBT+ persons, e.g. make-up artistry, design, performance art, restaurants and sales are forced to close due to government’s preventive measures. Businesses catering to such fields work was closed for prolonged periods of time. Despite such employment concerns, LGBT+ persons remain to have responsibilities to support themselves and their families. Such economic concerns also had an impact on LGBT+ youth’s mental health, with respondents characterizing their situation as “getting more anxious” or “lost hope.”

“The Online Survey Data of LGBT + Unemployment Under COVID-19 Outbreak in Myanmar”, Rainbow Alliance – LGBT Youth Empowerment Program

In an article by CIVICUS, it was noted that COVID-19 has exacerbated multiple class, race, gender, and geographical inequalities that were already stark, with the informal, self-employed, and non-salaried workforce taking the biggest

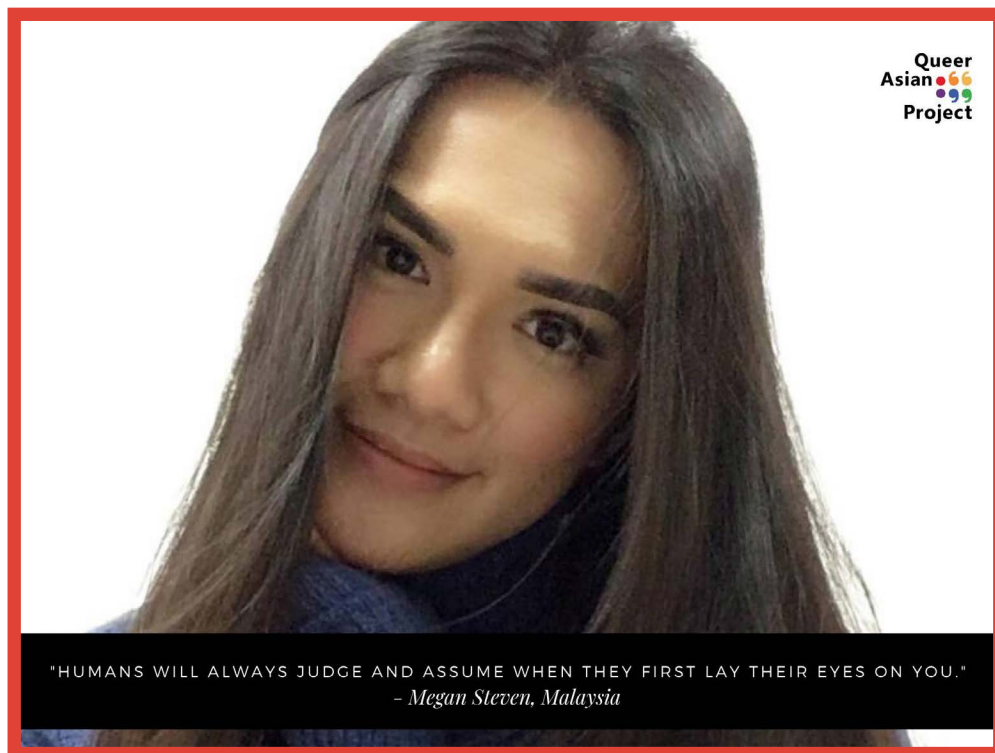
economic hit⁶². The International Labour Organization (ILO) also noted that there is a 60% decrease in the income of informal workers globally translating to 21.6% in Asia and the Pacific⁶³.

During the South Asia dialogue, various participants from youth-led LGBTIQ organizations from the sub-region noted that in terms of loss of employment, the financial burden to support their daily needs, and capacity to adapt to new modes of working (i.e. working from home), LGBTIQ community members are highly affected, especially those living in rural areas of the country. Participants noted that transgender sex workers are not only economically affected but also struggle in accessing social services like healthcare. The burden of sustaining their daily needs has proven difficult for community members who make a living begging on the streets⁶⁴.

In YVC's LGBTIQ adolescent and youth well-being survey, 355 respondents or 65.38% of the total number have indicated that they are living with their parents. Additionally, 57.27% of that number indicated that they are able to support themselves, to some degree, but experience varying levels of difficulty in providing for their basic needs. The reality of living at home with parents and needing to find means to self-support

leads to adolescent and youth LGBTIQ from being reliant on people whom they live with. When issues of domestic and intimate partner violence are lived realities of these individuals, then reliance on their family members for support may become problematic.

In the report by Queer Youth Group Nepal, it was noted that there are preexisting stigma and discrimination of the LGBTIQ community in various sectors of employment. Particularly for queer, transgender, and gender non-conforming individuals they *"make an income through informal daily wage labour, and working in the entertainment sector or as sex worker. Discrimination and stigmatization also exists in these informal work and profession. The transgender and gender diverse persons are also not paid equal for equal work."* So as COVID-19 affected the formal and informal employment sectors in Nepal, these groups were heavily affected because their sources of income were no longer accessible.



“Back in high school, I was a cool kid but most of the boys didn’t like me because I was sissy. They bullied me – pouring water on me when I entered the toilet; throwing my stuff from the third floor; teasing me in front of everyone. Because of these experiences, I developed a bit of a phobia towards men. Besides that, my parents never felt proud of me whenever I received an award.

Being the best in everything was never good enough for them, all because I was sissy.

My father didn’t approve of me being a transgender. He cut up all my wigs and dresses. He even burned them too. I’m the eldest of all; I had to always try my best to be the role model for my siblings.

Life isn’t easy as a transgender woman. I’m always being rejected for job interviews due to my gender. An interviewer who was the owner of the company once said: “I would rather hire a stupid girl instead of a smart transgender”. I have also experienced sexual harassment by men a few times. Trying so hard to protect myself, I sometimes worry about my safety living in this country. The more you try to protect your rights, the more you need to worry about your safety, even though we have laws.

They say being transgender is a sin.

They say COVID-19 is caused by there being too many transgender people and they are against God’s will.

They say catastrophes are caused by the transgender community.

They look down on the capabilities of the transgender community.

They say transgender people don’t belong in this world.

They say transgender people shouldn’t exist.

They want to banish the transgender community from this country.

They want the death penalty for the transgender community.

They put the blame towards the transgender community.

The transgender community has been a sex object for the society here. Humans will always judge and assume when they first lay their eyes on you. It’s sad to know how society is being brainwashed by culture and religion. To make things worse, the way that they describe being transgender is horrific. We all want to be normal, to be treated equally. We don’t want to be unseen, but sadly this is how life is.”

Story written by Megan Steven, Malaysia.

Similar issues in employment which stem from COVID-19 have been evinced in Myanmar through an online survey on “LGBT+ Unemployment under COVID19 Outbreak in Myanmar” conducted by the youth-led organization, Rainbow Alliance - LGBT Youth Empowerment Program, of the 367 respondents majority are employed in industries around sales and marketing, office staff, and clothing/industrial workers. As the lockdown measures were implemented in Myanmar, there was reduction in the rate of employment of youth and loss of income due to the suspension or closure of workplaces.

In Indonesia, an LGBTIQ coalition initiated an assessment to which 640 transwomen were left with no source of income and the financial loss prevented them from being able to provide daily sustenance. Majority of these individual are found to be working in industries related to beauty, arts, sex work and other services industries⁶⁵. Uncertain economic futures and loss to income affects the population quite diversely depending on one’s socioeconomic status but certainly for LGBTIQ persons belonging to the informal sector,

those working in non-regularized positions and those already unemployed prior to the pandemic will experience the full burden of economic effects brought about by the pandemic⁶⁶.

With the loss of opportunities and employment, the burden to support its populace falls upon the state. Several countries in the region have initiated emergency relief support to its citizens. These came in the form of the provision of cash assistance, grocery items in food packs, and distribution of personal protective equipment. In the Philippines, one city provided cash assistance to LGBTIQ families who have children⁶⁷. However, as it was noted during our #PrideAgainstPandemic webinar, many of these government-led programs are exclusionary and very selective in nature.

As it is the government’s role to ensure responses to the pandemic have a multidisciplinary approach which looks into social and economic realities, frameworks need to be reviewed and reassessed so that policies and interventions are inclusive. This approach begins by ensuring that marginalized groups are part of the conversation.

“[We] actually have to talk to people on the ground to actually get the viewpoint and perspective of stakeholders. For marginalized groups to actually be part and ensure that they are actually included as stakeholders. Research has actually shown that marginalized groups know what is affecting them, as well as, how to solve problems.”

– Dr. Marie Aubrey Villaceran, University of the Philippines Center for Women & Gender Studies

Many responses are led by LGBTIQ populations, themselves, and are provided directly to the most affected and marginalized communities in urban and rural places⁶⁸. National and local governments have not prioritized providing relief support to LGBTIQ groups, therefore, reports have shown that those from the same community have taken responsibility for supporting other LGBTIQ individuals that are most affected by COVID-19 and the restriction measures.

However, many cultures and systems that have pre-existing prejudices of LGBTIQ populations, avert any support provided to the community, or outrightly neglect the needs of LGBTIQ populations as they are deemed unimportant members of society. Many young transgender and gender nonconforming individual are also exposed to humiliation and threats when trying to access these emergency responses because of their gender identity and gender expression,

especially when the provision of such responses is reliant on having a identification card⁶⁹. If possession of identification documents that do not reflect the person's gendered realities pose a

hindrance in accessing relief services, measures need to be in place to ensure that LGBTIQ communities are not outrightly neglected⁷⁰.

“In Nepal, the citizenship certificate is regarded as a universally useful document. In the context of Nepal, the citizenship certificate is required for even small and minor tasks. The citizenship certificate was also found to be essential during the COVID-19 relief support distribution. In Nepal there is no law for citizenship, identity card and other documents that addresses the specific need of trans and gender diverse people. While many trans and gender diverse people have a citizenship card that mentions their sex assigned at birth and the name given to them by their parents/guardians which differs from the name they introduce themselves and their lived gender, they are deprived of the relief and other support services.”

“Report on issues and concerns of queer people during the corona pandemic: A report from Nepal”, Queer Youth Group

Therefore, it is apparent that humanitarian responses to COVID-19 affected communities require a gender responsive and human rights based approach. This includes the disaggregation of data for accurate and sensitive reporting of the effects of COVID-19 to LGBTIQ adolescent and youth populations. This will ensure that specific community needs like sanitary pads for menstruating people, Antiretroviral Therapy (ART) medication for PLHIV, and hormone medication for transgender men and women are included in relief support.

The alarming effects of COVID-19 and the quarantine measures to the LGBTIQ community affects much of their social and economic lives. The disruption of daily lives, limited mobility to navigate essential services, and the lack of reliable and inclusive responses, along with the complexities brought about by the unjust policing of persons and activities leading to human rights abuses, infringes on the welfare of LGBTIQ communities.

“The framing of the pandemic, in the earlier days and weeks, there is still the perspective that COVID-19 is a great equalizer. However, if we see COVID-19 as a great unequalizer then we are able to disaggregate realities and data that we can use in order to inform policy and action from these governments.”

– Joel Mark Barredo, Strengthening Human Rights and Peace Research and Education in ASEAN/Southeast Asia (SHAPE-SEA)

The well-being of adolescent and youth LGBTIQ during the pandemic is therefore reliant on their capacity to be financially stable and to provide for their immediate households. When business and service sectors are temporarily shut down and

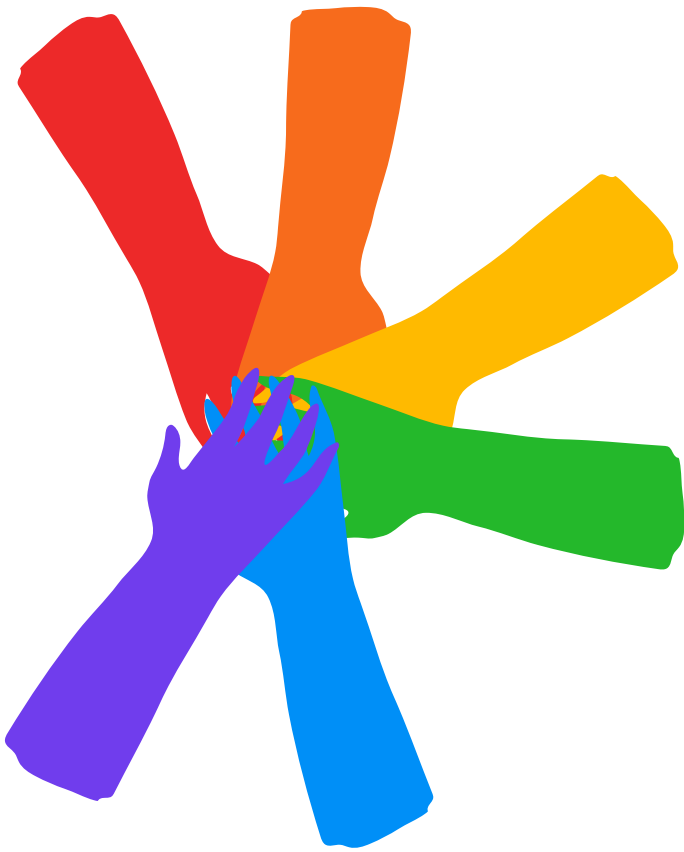
become inaccessible, it then becomes the state's duty to enact measures to provide assistance to their populace. This emergency assistance and relief support has to, therefore, be impartial, transparent and non-discriminatory.

There are several organizations that are conducting community fundraisers and engaging their communities through crowdfunding sites to support the economic needs of LGBTIQ persons..

The screenshot shows a crowdfunding campaign on the 'OUR DEMOCRACY' platform. The campaign title is 'Can you imagine how Sex Workers & Trans People would be dealing with lockdown? Contribute!'. The campaign has raised ₹ 19,20,347 towards a goal of ₹ 20,00,000, which is 96% complete. There are 558 supporters and 0 days left. The campaigner is Arundhati Ghosh from India. The main image is a collage of photos showing people in various states of distress and need during the lockdown. Below the image is a caption: 'During this pandemic of COVID-19 with lockdown and physical distancing, the most affected are the most vulnerable in our communities - sexworkers and transpeople - among them.' There are social media sharing icons for Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp.

Sangama is a non-government organization working for the rights of the working class, non english speaking gender and sexual minorities, sex workers and people living with HIV since 1999. (www.sangama.org)

“During this pandemic of COVID-19, the worst affected are those whose lives and livelihoods are severely affected by the lockdown and physical distancing. Sex workers and transpeople in our country have always been at the margins ignored and ostracized by society. Today, during this crisis they find it even harder to make ends meet and provide for those who are dependent on them. Sangama’s plan is to provide 350 family units of sexworkers and 150 transpeople whose livelihoods also depend on begging, with a monthly package of Rs 2000.”



Our Response: How LGBTIQ Organizations Cope and Support

In the midst of these challenges faced by LGBTIQ youth during these COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, many LGBTIQ youth-led organizations and civil society organizations that cater to LGBTIQ youth communities have stepped up their efforts to immediately respond to these needs. Some LGBTIQ organizations in Asia and

the Pacific have paved the way in ensuring that the most pressing needs of their communities and community partners on the ground are immediately addressed. Some of these LGBTIQ-led responses are presented in this section.

Conversation with The Asian LGBTQ+ Front-Liners

This interview was conducted by MYRainbow through their '*Queer Asian Project*'.

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has become a worldwide concern. While we may be bounded at home, many front-liners are on duty and working tirelessly to keep the virus at bay.

Here's a heartfelt conversation with one of our hard working Asian LGBTQ+ front-liners that shares a snippet of his experiences amid his busy schedule in the combat against the COVID-19 pandemic. Queer Asian project conducted this interview with "*Gentleman*" from Malaysia.

Question: We wanted to check-in with you. How are you feeling in terms of working in the current COVID-19 Pandemic?

Gentleman: Initially, I felt quite overwhelmed. I am currently a paediatric medical officer in a tertiary hospital in the Klang Valley. As a frontliner in the medical field, it was the worst for me during the first two waves of COVID-19 infections in Malaysia. We constantly received patients who were children from as young as a few months old to about 12 years old. Things in my workplace also changed exponentially. We had sudden changes to our SOPs, and less personnel in the wards. Some of my colleagues were even suspected to have COVID-19! Thankfully, they tested negative. Going to work everyday felt full of anxiety and slightly depressing; I kept on questioning, "Why did I get myself in this field in the first place?" The start of the pandemic really did not give me hope for any improvement. Eventually, after the Movement Control Order (MCO), there was a slight reduction in the number of the suspected COVID-19 cases. We had less patients as most people living around my area were compliant to the MCO. That's when I thought to myself: "Okay, we can win this!"

Q: What are some of the challenges that you face at work and how do you deal with them?

G: Having to change into PPE (personal protective equipment) multiple times a day was a challenge. It was even more challenging and tiring when I had to wear the PPE and perform procedures such as blood taking, line setting, and lumbar punctures on small kids. I felt bad having to poke them multiple times but I had to because it's so difficult to do the procedures while in full PPE. The other challenge was dealing with patients who weren't honest with their exposure to anyone who was suspected to have COVID-19, or who were tested positive, as they could have put all healthcare workers at risk of infection. Thankfully, we always donned our PPEs when we saw patients, regardless of what illnesses they were having.

Q: Why do you still choose to serve despite knowing the risk and fear?

G: What still keeps me going is seeing my lil' munchkins – my patients – from the first day of admission – when they'd appear very ill – to the day they're discharged from the ward, when they can run around happily, and ask to play with me. To me, that'll always be the cherry on top of this profession.

“Serving LGBTIQ community is our responsibility and duty”: Equite Sri Lanka’s Narrative

The number of COVID-19 cases in Sri Lanka is on the rise, and the government fears that the situation may worsen. In response, the government took a number of actions including imposing island-wide curfew, restricting inter-district travelling, and introducing precautionary measures or health practices. Although these actions helped Sri Lanka to minimize the spread of the virus to a certain degree, they also resulted in disruption of people's daily lives.

In this context, a large number of LGBTIQ persons contacted Equite Sri Lanka to seek assistance to manage their expenses and needs since almost all workplaces except essential service providers have been closed. Members of the LGBTIQ community are facing the risk of losing their jobs and/or not receiving their salaries, especially LGBTIQ persons who were engaged in professions that involve close contacts with people, such as commercial sex work, spa therapy jobs, among others. Those that did not have any permanent job are also facing severe financial issues. Most LGBTIQ persons who got in touch with Equite Sri Lanka said that they were unable to procure even the most basic needs such as food and medicine/ hygiene products.

A large number of LGBTIQ persons who have left their families due to discrimination within the family on the basis of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity are also in a very difficult situation. Some are not in a position to go back to their families as their families are not ready to accept their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

In light of this situation, Equite Sri Lanka has initiated a number of activities to assist LGBTIQ persons. Among these activities include conducting online counseling service for the LGBTIQ community; forming a network of People Living with HIV (PLHIV); providing essential food items, medicine and hygiene

products; connecting LGBTIQ persons to relevant institutions and officials to protect their identity and privacy; building networks with institutions/groups capable of providing financial assistance to LGBTIQ and PLHIV communities; liaising with public hospitals and assisting PLHIV to obtain medicine and/or delivering essential medicines to their homes; writing articles and social media contents with to address myths and misconceptions towards LGBTIQ and PLHIV communities; and sharing positive and informative messages via social media.

Equite Sri Lanka has also planned to launch several activities to assist LGBTIQ and PLHIV communities in this difficult situation, such as: gathering information about LGBTIQ persons facing difficulties due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and creating a database for assistance; assisting LGBTIQ persons by providing them with essential food items with support from Youth Voice Count grant; encouraging and assisting LGBTIQ persons to take HIV or STI tests, and expanding ongoing awareness raising activities about these tests; and launching a social media campaign to raise awareness on how to act in an emergency, who or what institutions to contact for aid, and how to manage available resources wisely.

**Minimizing COVID-19 Impact: Bangladeshi Marginalized People's Effort in Frontline
(Contributed by Tushar Kanti Baidya)**

Many people in Bangladesh were affected right after the shutdown announcement. As educational institutions got forcibly closed on 17th March, many day wage earners like rickshaw pullers, street food sellers, hawkers, and auto rickshaw drivers had to encounter trouble in managing their daily food.

Due to the traditional policy and multi-layer processing, political initiatives of the government and other large-scale NGOs were not instantly available. However, as the pandemic news was inadvertently creating panic and unrest among the people, the price of daily necessary food and vegetables were also on the rise. On other hand, masks, hand sanitizer and other essential hygiene products were vanished from the overcrowded market.

When such situations inevitably made everyone crazy and fearful, a talented bunch of local youth, along with the active members of marginalized communities and their key allies came sensibly diminishing the legitimate fear. Social organizations like Inclusive Bangladesh, Shomporker Noya Shetu, Shada Kalo, Shocheton Hijra Adhikar Shangha, Shomoy, Diner Alo, Noboprovaat, Brihonnala, etc. immediately started helping not only marginalized communities but also ordinary people of day wage earner category and slum areas.

Many marginalized individuals were also managing crowd funding from home and abroad to enthusiastically support marginalized people in this situation.

Some of these marginalized organizations produced hand sanitizer and masks on their own while others arranged rice, lentils, onion, oil, soap, puffed rice and spices to cover up 7-14 days of the affected and deprived marginalized people. These logistical supports are being distributed to cover-up this interim period of lockdown so that the marginalized people can stay at their house for safety without worrying about their daily food.

Hosemin Islam, one of the well-known transgender members of Bangladeshi marginalized community is working very actively to equitably distribute initial food supply for the transgender community in distinct parts of the country. On 1st of April, four of the food supply bags were snatched by some slum boys, while she was on her way to deliver them. “People are starving in many places, and we cannot see the actual face of the situation and need more help now to tackle the upcoming days if the problem takes longer to fix,” said Hosemin while asked about her personal experience on this pandemic.

The key challenge, among many, was to create a list of beneficiaries of these crowdfunding initiatives, as none had faced this situation before and many organizations were not ready with the updated database of the vulnerable people. Many of the organizations, despite being large-stake, had to request for a fresh donation from local and international donors because there was no scope to create an emergency fund for marginalized population saving from the small number of grants they had received for previous projects and activities. Presently, every one of us recognizes the urgency to create a “Marginalized Community Emergency Fund”, especially for those countries where marginalized communities are unacknowledged or not recognized.

Apart from that, this pandemic is also revealing us, how disconnected we are from one to another and how the social organizations’ plea to the general people, for help, are creating the dilemma among those common people to choose the right organization for help.

A Call for Inclusion in Christian Faith: the stand of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP) (Contributed by Rev. Alfred Candid Jaropillo)

The LGBTs, as a group of people, have long been an object of ostracism and judgment, ridicule and condemnation by so many in our society. This is largely due to cultural ethos and values that are so patriarchal in nature, legalistic in perspective, pharisaic in world view and self righteous in outlook. From such a perspective world view and outlook, the LGBTs have no place, since this is a dichotomous world of only either male or female. There can be no gray areas. It is either black or white. (UCCP Statement on LGBT Concerns, 2014)

The LGBT community is silenced in the church and in the society when it comes to their own sexual identity and gender expressions. More gays and lesbians, bisexuals and transgender sisters and brothers from the United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP) are silenced because of the fear of being bullied, marginalized and ostracized by the community of faith and even by their own family. The attitude of the church is in the level of tolerance and not acceptance or inclusion. Most of the church councils and ministers tolerate LGBT young people as long as they are useful and multi-talented in the church. When it comes to decorating the church, singing in the choir, organizing church programs and events, the LGBT young people would always lead. However the LGBT are exhorted by their own Christian community not to express their love towards the person whom they are attracted to. "Homosexual relationship and homosexual behavior and practices" are forbidden.

Probably no institution has done more to impose "otherness" on the LGBT population than the church. It has historically condemned and demonized individuals and regarded them as variants or deviants, whose sexual orientation is other than convincingly dichotomized heterosexual. Oftentimes preachers and so-called "Christians" would say this rhetorical admonition that one should "hate the sin but not the sinner." The more heterosexist the church is on the plight of the LGBT, the more the church struggle with homophobia, sexophobia and heterosexism that are deeply ingrained in both the church culture and the secular culture of the Philippines.

Historically, our church the United Church of Christ in the Philippines took a prophetic stand at the last 2014 General Assembly on welcoming the LGBT. The UCCP has unanimously approved "Let Grace Be Total" a policy statement on LGBT people in its 10th Quadrennial General Assembly and 66th Founding Anniversary in 2014. The statement means that LGBT's should not be discriminated against but should be unconditionally accepted in the fellowship and membership of the Church. This affirms that all of us regardless of any category are under the grace of God.

Since then, the UCCP as a faith community have seriously engaged in theological and biblical core pertaining to the issue of LGBTQIA through designing inclusive curriculums on human sexuality, discussions regarding SOGIE from the National level to the Conferences and Local Churches, design inclusive liturgies and create safe worship spaces for the LGBTQI people in order for the church to become an all-embracing, loving, safe, nurturing community that allows everyone to celebrate their real, God-given selves.

The hopes and prayers of our LGBTQIA+ sisters and brothers is respect and acceptance, full inclusion in the ministry of the church, representation in higher judicatories of the church, and equality, equity, and rights in society as a whole. Basically, we clamour for the restoration of our dignity as children of God and as bearer of the Imago Dei. The church should speak for the LGBTQIA in legislative bodies for the passing of Anti-discrimination Bill and Marriage Equality bill.

In the same way the UCCP has contributed to providing essential relief support to its LGBTIQ members, including those LGBTIQ youth in its ministry. A symbol of solidarity and unity between the LGBTIQ community and those from the faith community. The UCCP has remained a strong ally of the LGBTIQ community especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

These examples show that despite lockdowns, the work of LGBTIQ youth organizations continue. However, as noted in the South Asia Dialogue, the COVID19 pandemic is an eye-opener that our communities are not ready for this kind of emergency.

A glaring finding in these LGBTIQ-led responses were the insufficiency of support and the limited means to extend or augment targeted support⁷¹. LGBTIQ-led organizations have also experienced cancellation of their existing funding, which gravely impacted their response to support their

“We see now the Achilles heel of our governance and we have to work together to address these concerns. What are these feminist strategies and systemic change can look like and how we can integrate that in policies.”
– South Asia Dialogue participant

grassroot partners in this state of the pandemic⁷². Very few donors, funding partners, and LGBTIQ-led organizations provide emergency funding to address the urgent needs of LGBTIQ youth during this pandemic, despite the spike in the demand to address food insecurity, homelessness, and access to health services⁷³. At the same time, the fast-changing policies that curtail the rights and freedoms of sexual minorities, including LGBTIQ

communities, may curtail the efforts led by the communities themselves. Without ensuring that LGBTIQ youth participate in the governance and accountability of national COVID-19 responses, the arbitrariness of these policies will continue to abuse LGBTIQ youth people⁷⁴.



Recommendations

“Nothing about us, without all of us.”

Youth Voices Count joins the Asian Youth Peace Network for a collective reading of the statement delivered during the #UN75PublicForum originally delivered by Thinzar Shunlei Yi at #UN75Townhall.

The statement includes the following line:

“Without over-simplifying double marginalization, it is important to note that gender minorities are often the last to eat, or to speak, during these times of crises. In addition, many refugees and IDPs continue to starve, stranded in the sea, victims of human trafficking.

COVID-19 is a wake-up call for regional and global communities to come together—our generation wants to inherit a world where everyone is free and equal – both offline and online.”

Full video here.



The COVID-19 pandemic as a health emergency and preventive measures that the government has imposed to control the rising cases have affected all populations in places where these measures are in place. However, data and narratives presented in this discussion paper show that LGBTIQ youth were disproportionately affected. The isolation and separation from social connections and safe spaces due to stay-at-home measures were aggravated with the minority stressors that LGBTIQ youth experience in the households. As LGBTIQ youth find ways to still enjoy pleasurable, healthy, and safe sex despite

the quarantine measures, access to sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services such as condoms and lubricants, birth control pills, HIV prevention drugs, and ARVs remain a priority. Shifting to virtual means in finding sexual partners have also become the “new” normal, leading to online privacy concerns. Further, some LGBTIQ youth remained confined with abusive partners, thus increasing the risk of intimate partner violence, including sexual violence, during these pandemic lockdowns.

This paper also showed how the COVID-19 pandemic and its measures have exposed LGBTIQ youth to targeted stigmatization and discrimination: blaming sexual minorities as the cause of spreading the virus in the communities, bad-mouthing, and even abuse. Specific sectors of the LGBTIQ youth, such as those who belong to the informal economies, have lost their incomes due to the COVID-19 pandemic. And while governments have provided aid to augment their economic losses, interviews from this paper showed that LGBTIQ youth were excluded because of their SOGIESC.

Several LGBTIQ organizations have expressed their struggles in adjusting towards the “new normal” to respond to the most immediate needs of their community members. What was becoming apparent were the insufficient and inflexible funding sources to leverage in responding to immediate needs such as food insecurity and economic losses. At the same time, with the rise of inequalities, inequities and neglect that LGBTIQ youth individuals and communities experience at a time of health emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic have given LGBTIQ youth organizations the impetus to sustain the activism - from providing the necessities and immediate care to those who are in need of support, to provision of lifesaving drugs, to documenting and responding to human rights violations and staging campaigns through social media,, while ensuring that their communities are aware of preventing COVID-19.

The recommendations found here are in conjunction with previous recommendations that were laid out by an earlier publication by Youth Voices Count and partners, “*Our Response: At the Nexus of Human Rights, Women, LGBTIQ, and Health in the COVID-19 Humanitarian Response*” which was submitted to the ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights and APRCEM.

With these findings, this discussion paper recommends the following:

For governments

1. Immediately adopt measures to ensure uninterrupted access to and delivery of existing mental health services, sexual and reproductive health services, and HIV services following UN and WHO protocols and guidelines at the onset of health emergencies, such as the COVID-19 pandemic
2. Ensure availability of quick response hotlines for LGBTIQ youth, particularly for those who are in situations of possible gender-based or sexual violence and abusive environments, including immediate opening of crisis centers following local government quarantine protocols
3. Classify community-led organizations that provide services for LGBTIQ youth as essential workers, and ensure their security, protection from COVID-19, and authorization to move freely to provide service where and when needed
4. Invest in and adopt mental health, sexual and reproductive health, and HIV programs that are gender-responsive, youth-friendly, and tailored to the specific needs of LGBTIQ youth populations, especially in the context of health emergencies and humanitarian calamities
5. LGBTIQ-led initiatives should be recognized and supported as these are considered the most effective means of response delivery and information sharing within the LGBTIQ community

For donors and bilateral partners

1. Provide flexible emergency funding for LGBTIQ organizations that can support forward financing for smaller LGBTIQ organizations that respond to the immediate and mid-term needs of their community members
2. Support grantees and fund recipients in reallocating existing and available funding to address immediate and long-term needs of their staff and their community partners, release additional funds to support organizations without further delay
3. Support governments in adopting measures, guidelines, and protocols to enable differentiated response for LGBTIQ youth and respond to their needs

For LGBTIQ organizations and civil society organizations

1. Explore multi-platform channels for LGBTIQ youth who are in need of counseling or other mental health-related support services
2. Provide proper referrals to service delivery networks to ensure linkage of specific and essential services to the needs of LGBTIQ youth people
3. Ensure linkage to access to justice or legal services that can cater to LGBTIQ youth
4. Provide proper referral mechanisms for LGBTIQ youth who may be concerned about COVID-19 and ensure proper linkage to testing and care services without prejudice to any form of stigma and discrimination
5. Develop tailored messaging for LGBTIQ youth individuals on various coping mechanisms and techniques in times of health emergencies
6. Encourage collaboration and cross-movement activism with other grassroots and civil society organizations in time of health emergencies through joint initiatives and platform-building

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