

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE LGBTIQ COMMUNITY IN UGANDA

SEXUAL MINORITIES UGANDA (SMUG)

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Introduction

The current COVID-19 pandemic has had very many different impacts both globally and even on individual communities. It has created a lot of instability in terms of sustainability and other different areas of people's lives.

Owing to this therefore, the LGBTIQ community has also been affected in different ways. The LGBTIQ community in Uganda has faced social, legal and economic challenges given homophobic attitudes and punitive laws. The COVID-19 situation has exacerbated inequalities and inequities experienced by the LGBTIQ community in Uganda. On March 29 2020, a group of LGBTIQ persons staying in a homeless shelter were reported to the authorities by the local villagers and subsequently detained for a long period of time before justice was eventually served to them. The reaction that led to their arrest was mixed, with locals accusing them of being gay and others accusing them of crowding in a house and therefore being susceptible to spreading COVID-19. By-laws that were meant to protect against spreading and acquiring

COVID-19 were therefore also used to arrest persons based on their real or imputed sexual orientation and gender identity as was evident in this case.¹

In response to the pandemic, a lot of things have had to change ranging from ways of living to ways of working for the LGBTIQ community. These changes have emerged as a way of responding to the Presidential Directives that were given as a way of ensuring that the spread of COVID-19 is stemmed and controlled as much as possible. Some of the Presidential Directives included among others a travel ban on both public and private means of transport, a ban on social gatherings such as meetings, a restriction on work to what was categorised as essential workers only and that did not include any private employment or civil society organisational work, and the closure of schools and universities - forcing many LGBTIQ persons to be restricted to staying home, most probably with homophobic and transphobic parents, guardians and neighbours. As such people's lives were impacted not only socially but also economically.²

Sexual Minorities Uganda (SMUG) is a network of different organisations working and dealing with the rights of the LGBTIQ people in Uganda. It mainly does advocacy for LGBTIQ rights. SMUG decided to conduct a survey to find out how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the LGBTIQ community in Uganda and find out how best to handle the issues in the present and in the future. This research will cast a window into some of the challenges faced by minority groups in a nuanced situation such as the COVID-19 pandemic where state measures might get scape-goated in order to violate rights of persons based on their sexual orientation or gender identity but also lead to other rights being curtailed such as Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR) especially when it comes to access to HIV/AIDS treatment and prevention.

Methodology

SMUG designed an online questionnaire consisting of 10 questions using Survey Monkey. The questionnaire was shared on SMUG's social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram as well as in the staff's individual whatsapp groups and also to the member organisations by email. The questionnaire was open from 19th May to 14th June 2020 and solicited 28 responses. The responses make up the data for this report, and this report therefore summarises the findings.

Demographics

Sexual orientation and gender identity

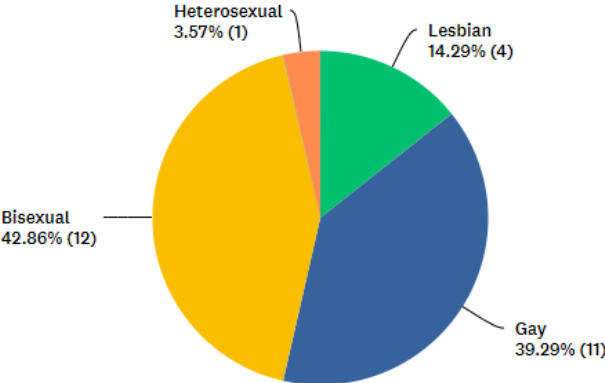
¹ Neela Ghoshal, Uganda LGBT shelter residents arrested on COVID-19 pretext, Human Rights Watch, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/03/uganda-lgbt-shelter-residents-arrested-covid-19-pretext>, accessed 6 August 2020.

² Address by H.E. Yoweri Kaguta Museveni President of the Republic of Uganda to the Nation, Latest updates on matters regarding Corona Virus (COVID 19), 4th May 2020, Nakasero, <http://statehouse.go.ug/sites/default/files/files/presidential-statements/address-corona-virus-4-may-2020-converted.pdf>, accessed 6 August 2020.

The first thing the survey sought to find out was the sexual orientation of the respondents. Sexual orientation is a term used to describe your pattern of emotional, romantic or sexual attraction. Sexual orientation involves a person's feelings and sense of identity, and it may or may not be evident in the person's appearance or behavior. 28 people responded to this with the majority identifying as bisexual with 42.86% and the least as heterosexual with 3.57%.

What best describes your sexual orientation?

Answered: 28 Skipped: 0

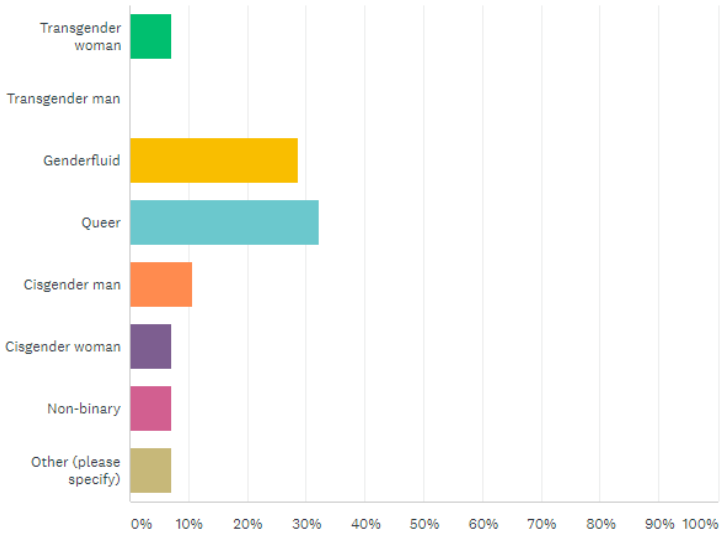


Gender identity

Gender identity describes a person's sense and experience of their own gender. A person's gender identity can correspond with or differ from the gender assigned at birth. The graph below indicates how different respondents identified. Majority identified as queer being 32.14% and the least being transgender man with 0.00% Queer is an umbrella term for sexual and gender minorities who are not heterosexual and cisgender. Transgender man is an adult who was born female but whose gender identity is male.

What best describes your gender identity?

Answered: 28 Skipped: 0



Age

39.29% of the respondents were between the age of 26 to 29, being the majority number. There were no respondents that were 50 and above or below 15.

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Under 15	0.00% 0
15-18	3.57% 1
19-22	3.57% 1
23-25	21.43% 6
26-29	39.29% 11
30-33	14.29% 4
34-37	3.57% 1
38-41	3.57% 1
42-45	3.57% 1
46-49	7.14% 2
50-53	0.00% 0
54-57	0.00% 0
58-61	0.00% 0
62-65	0.00% 0
Over 65	0.00% 0
TOTAL	28

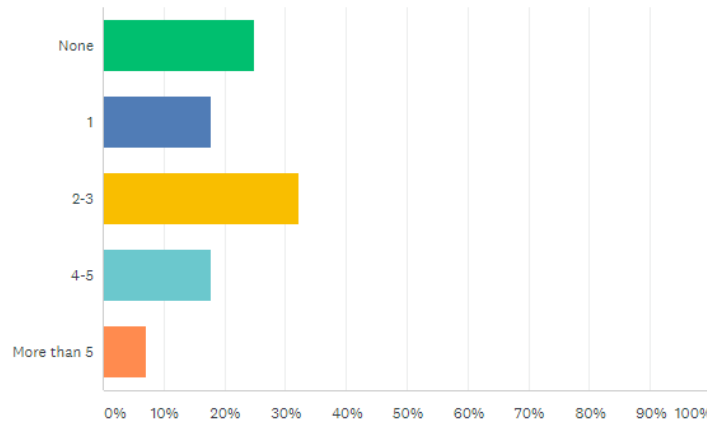
Number of dependents

Bearing in mind the unique problems faced by the LGBTIQ+ persons regarding employment and community attitudes, the questionnaire sought to look at the life of some of the respondents' lives in terms of their dependents and their livelihood. Considering that Uganda's economy is one where people

work for sustenance and survival, most the LGBTIQ+ people were affected by some of the measures since most of them made it hard to have an income.. The numbers show that the majority of the respondents have 2 to 3 dependents which means there's a need for them to be earning to be in a position to maintain their families since most of them are the family breadwinners.

How many dependents do you have?

Answered: 28 Skipped: 0



The impact of the lock down

The greatest and biggest problem that LGBTIQ community faces in Uganda is discrimination³, not only in terms of employment and access to different services but also from family and the community at large. For many LGBTIQ people, the lockdown forced them to go back home and spend time with homophobic family members and relatives. The survey therefore registered the biggest impact of the lockdown as increasing anxiety with 66.6% of the respondents pointing it out , 63.64% pointing out the fear of violence and the least impact with 18.18%being forced to stay with a violent partner.

	TO A GREAT EXTENT	SOMEWHAT	VERY LITTLE	NOT AT ALL	TOTAL
The lockdown forces me to live with a violent partner	18.18% 4	13.64% 3	9.09% 2	59.09% 13	22
The lockdown prevents my	20.00% 4	10.00% 2	15.00% 3	55.00% 11	20

³ SMUG 2018 report on Health Care Discrimination Against Ugandas Sexual and Gender Minorities.

adherence to ARTs, because I do not have access to food					
The lockdown prevents my access to ARTs	29.41% 5	5.88% 1	11.76% 2	52.94% 9	17
The lockdown prevents my access to HIV preventative measures such as PrEP, condoms and lube	23.81% 5	33.33% 7	14.29% 3	28.57% 6	21
The lockdown prevents my access to general health care	28.57% 6	28.57% 6	28.57% 6	14.29% 3	21
The lockdown prevents my access to sexual and/or reproductive health services	33.33% 8	25.00% 6	16.67% 4	25.00% 6	24
The lockdown has increased my isolation	52.38% 1	33.33% 7	33.33% 7	0.00% 0	21
The lockdown prevents my access to food and other basic necessities	54.55% 12	22.73% 5	18.18% 4	4.55% 1	22
The lockdown prevents me from providing for my dependents (if you have any)	60.00% 12	20.00% 4	5.00% 1	15.00% 3	20

The lockdown prevents me from earning money the way(s) I did before	54.55% 12	31.82% 7	0.00% 0	13.64% 3	22
The lockdown makes me unable to pay my rent	61.90% 13	19.05% 4	14.29% 3	4.76% 1	21
The lockdown has increased my anxiety	66.67% 14	19.05% 4	9.52% 2	4.76% 1	21
The lockdown makes me concerned about scapegoating and violence against LGBTIQ people	63.64% 14	22.73% 5	13.64% 3	0.00% 0	22

Negative impact of the measures

Following the COVID-19 outbreak , measures had to be taken to ensure that the spread of the virus within the country is controlled and the number of infected cases left at the minimum . The President therefore issued directives that were to be followed. The questionnaire sought to see how specific measures negatively impacted the LGBTIQ persons. 52.17%pointed out the closure of borders as the one that had the most negative impact and the ban on public transport as being the second most impactful with 48.00% and the least impactful being the ban on public exercise with 23.81%.

	NOT AT ALL	SLIGHTLY	SOMEWHAT	VERY MUCH	EXTREMELY	TOTAL	WEIGHTED AVERAGE
Private transport ban	16.67% 4	16.67% 4	16.67% 4	16.67% 4	33.33% 8	24	3.33
Public transport ban	0.00% 0	8.00% 2	8.00% 2	36.00% 9	48.00% 12	25	4.24
Nighttime curfew	13.04% 3	21.74% 5	30.43% 7	8.70% 2	26.09% 6	23	3.13
Closure of schools/education facilities	12.50% 3	16.67% 4	8.33% 2	33.33% 8	29.17% 7	24	3.60
Closure of borders	26.09% 6	8.70% 2	8.70% 2	4.35% 1	52.17% 12	23	3.48
Restriction on gatherings	0.00% 0	8.33% 2	12.50% 3	33.33% 8	45.83% 11	24	4.17
Public exercise ban	19.05% 4	19.05% 4	33.33% 7	4.76% 1	23.81% 5	21	2.95

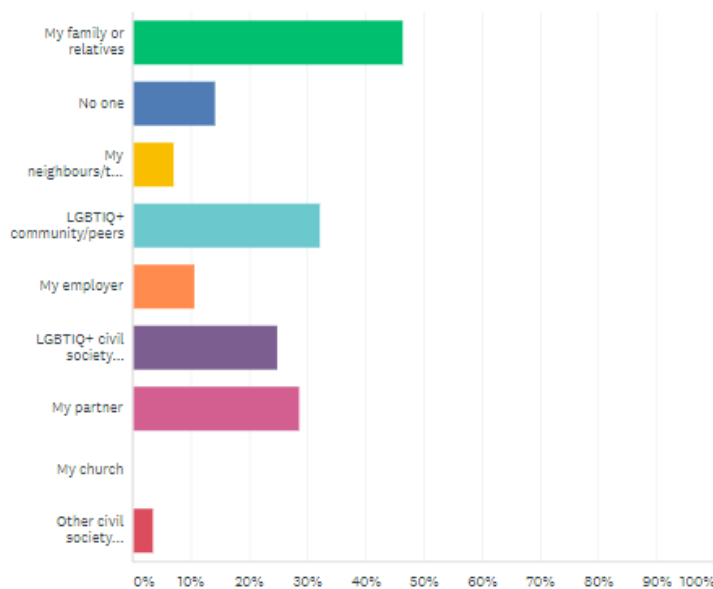
Comments (6)

Who has supported you during the COVID-19 lockdown?

The questionnaire sought to find out where the respondents found the most support during the lockdown. 46.43% pointed out family and relatives as their main sources of support and the church as the least supportive with 0.00%. 32.14% pointed out that they found most of the support amongst the LGBTIQ community /peers and this was second after family/relatives.

Who has supported you during the COVID-19 lockdown? Select all that apply

Answered: 28 Skipped: 0



General commentary on the impact of COVID-19 on the LGBTIQ community

For this part of the questionnaire , different statements were given and the respondents were supposed to respond to how true or false they thought the statement was. The truest statement with 86.36% was "I am concerned about food shortages for myself and others in my community" and the one considered the most false was "I have had to give sexual favours to access food, shelter and /or other basic necessities with 59.09%".

	TRUE	DON'T KNOW	FALSE	TOTAL	
I have to choose between risking Corona infection to earn enough money to pay for food and shelter, or adhering to lockdown requirements and go without basic necessities	68.18% 15	4.55% 1	27.27% 6	22	
I do not have access to the same crisis-related benefits and food support that heterosexual individuals, couples and families may be eligible for in the wake of the pandemic	36.36% 8	13.64% 3	50.00% 11	22	
I fear that COVID-19 is used to target me as a LGBTIQ person	27.27% 6	31.82% 7	40.91% 9	22	
I am concerned about food	86.36% 19	4.55% 1	9.09% 2	22	

shortages for myself and others in my community					
I have lost my main source of income due to the pandemic	66.67% 14	9.52% 2	23.81% 5	21	
I have experienced violence from local security forces and/or police during COVID-19	50.00% 10	0.00% 0	50.00% 10	20	
The lockdown has forced me to move in with family, relatives or friends where I have to hide my sexual orientation/gender identity	42.86% 9	9.52% 2	47.62% 10	21	
I feel like I have had to go back into the closet because of the pandemic	50.00% 11	13.64% 3	36.36% 8	22	
I have experienced violence from family members/relatives as a result of the pandemic	54.55% 12	9.09% 2	36.36% 8	22	
I have had to give sexual	40.91% 9	0.00% 0	59.09% 13	22	

favours to access food, shelter and/or other basic necessities					
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Based on the different issues that were pointed out in the survey, it can be clearly stated that one of the biggest issues of the COVID-19 situation was on accessibility, the ban on movement and travel affected not only access to things like ,food ,health care but also justice owing to the fact that the justice systems were not fully functional which inturn led to very many delays in the execution of justice. There was a lot of police raiding and some of the LGBTIQ persons were targets for and of some of these assaults This also spills over to general socialisation which is a very important aspect of the community at large as it helps individuals to be able to take care of each other. In contrast to this however some individuals pointed out that the community solidarity was boosted since the members tried to ensure that they collectively help each other. The need for more funding was also highlighted by some respondents , pointing out the fact that they were not financially prepared for the crisis and since there was need to carry out activities like food reliefs, most of them were financially constrained and needed support. This also cuts across to personal needs.

Recommendations:

Member organisations

The COVID-19 pandemic has reiterated the need for LGBTIQ organisations to plan more concretely for eventualities and emergencies where possible. This would of course depend on resource availability and the donor community should be part of this discussion. However, planning is key, and to plan for longer-term emergencies similar to the COVID-19 situation, organisations need to start putting together contingency plans that can also be joint contingency plans. These plans need to include financial resources (available and sources), health consumables and other consumables, and also safety and security plans that have a clearly defined modus of implementation and with human resources assigned to the different tasks in the plan. These plans must include both health safety and security considerations but must also be done together with partners that source out different services to the LGBTIQ community such as health providers and the police.

There is also need for all member organisations to have a secure database of community members' contact details so that they can easily be accessed for services like counselling and just checking on their welfare in case of isolation, violence based on sexual orientation and gender identity, sexual and gender-based violence and to be able to make sure that all community members are cared for with no one being left behind.

Policy makers and policy redirection

Post COVID-19/pre-COVID-19 demise of spread, specific studies with qualitative and quantitative data should be put together by policy makers, policy implementers, service providers as well as organisations to measure the impact that COVID-19 has had on the LGBTIQ community (as part of Key Populations - KPs) in order to plan for essential service delivery and respect for human rights in general should a similar scenario arise in future. The key stakeholders in this study should include the LGBTIQ organisations and the LGBTIQ community, health service providers, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the police leadership, the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, local government authorities and the judiciary. This study should be able to inform future ways of handling pandemics and emergencies in ways that do not derogate the rights of minority groups such as LGBTIQ persons. The study recommendations should include concrete directives and policy on handling minority rights during national emergencies.

Sexual Minorities Uganda (SMUG)

SMUG is tasked with the responsibility of mobilising resources and players to come up with the above mentioned study and the outcome of the study in terms of concrete policies, guidelines and directives for handling national emergencies while respecting rights and ensuring access to essential services for marginalised and minority groups.

Donor community

The donor community should put in place national emergency protocols that allow for flexibility in funding priorities for LGBTIQ organisations in times similar to COVID-19. There is a need for great degrees of flexibility in funding targets and outcomes as well. One of the challenges of the LGBTIQ in community in Uganda for example has been the need for safe houses and shelters that are readily available and not crowded due to being few. More funding needs to be earmarked for socio-economic needs and not only human rights programming.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 situation has been one that has impacted the entire world at large. Different nations, communities have all had different experiences of the impact and handling of the pandemic.

The Ugandan LGBTIQ community being one that's already faced with very many challenges therefore, has been impacted also in very many ways, some originating from the already existing challenges and some triggered solely by the pandemic. As already highlighted, the biggest issues were around movement and accessibility emanating from the travel ban that was put among the measures to contain the spread of the virus, leading to challenges of accessing livelihoods as well as essential health services especially for HIV/AIDS. It should therefore be said that this situation has been eye opening especially in terms of the economy of the LGBTIQ+ society and how prepared we are to deal with such emergencies. This should therefore inform future engagements and ensure that the LGBTIQ community starts to work toward preparing ourselves for crises such as these.

