



**Understanding the
disproportionate
impact of COVID-19 on
LGBTIQ+ persons in Africa**



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Increased vulnerability of LGBTIQ+ persons

The COVID-19 global pandemic has had a major impact on the global public and has disrupted the daily pattern of life for billions of people across the world. As states across the globe impose lockdowns and 'social distancing' regulations to contain the spread of the virus, human rights have become severely restricted even in the most liberal democratic countries.

Within this global upheaval, LGBTIQ+ persons in Africa and their allies continue to face threats to their lives and wellbeing from state and non-state actors. While the emergency limitation of rights broadly targets the general population, there is growing evidence from media reports and NGO statements that LGBTIQ+ persons around the world, who are typically vulnerable and marginalised even in 'normal' times, will be affected disproportionately by the pandemic. In Africa, the usual threats to the rights of LGBTIQ+ persons, combined with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic means that there is also a disproportionate socio-economic impact on LGBTIQ+ persons who are already in a disadvantaged position.

Consequently, it is important that civil society and governments across Africa - both in criminalised and decriminalised contexts - recognise the increased vulnerability of LGBTIQ+ persons in the course of the pandemic and its aftermath and take steps to prevent or mitigate the potential impacts. It is equally important that, in accordance with Resolution 275 of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, governments in Africa should take steps to 'end all acts of violence and abuse ... including by enacting and effectively applying appropriate laws, prohibiting and punishing all forms of violence including those targeting persons on the basis of their imputed or real sexual orientation or gender identities, ensuring proper investigation and diligent prosecution of perpetrators, and establishing judicial procedures responsive to the needs of victims.'

Below are some significant potential risks and challenges to LGBTIQ+ persons in Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic, and suggestions on what you can do to prevent or mitigate these.

Specific challenges to LGBTIQ+ persons in Africa during the pandemic



LGBTIQ+ persons across Africa may experience restricted access to shelters and community centres

LGBTIQ+ persons who have been displaced through discrimination and threats of violence often find protection in community centres and shelters. However, lockdown restrictions across Africa mean that some of these locations are no longer accessible to those who need them. In some instances, government regulations have resulted in the closure of these shelters and community centres. This means that LGBTIQ+ persons in Africa who require these shelters may no longer have access. This has already happened in [Uganda](#), for instance, where 20 community members were arrested and charged in March 2020 for alleged violation of social distancing restrictions by occupying a shelter.



LGBTIQ+ persons across African may experience restricted access to health services

Emergency restrictions across the continent have included limitations to the freedom of movement. Access to health services is often

one of the exceptional instances in which this restriction can be relaxed. However, people are usually required to provide some kind of proof to law enforcement agents before being able to travel to access health services, a situation that can lead to the invasion of privacy. Also, organisations providing health services for LGBTIQ+ persons in contexts where there are laws criminalising consensual same-sex conduct may not be recognised as essential services and so may have to close during the lockdown. Similarly, their clients may be victimised by law enforcement agents in trying to access health services. The potential for disproportionate impact around this issue is compounded by the high prevalence of HIV infections in LGBTIQ+ persons in Africa. The [World Health Organisation](#) has indicated that individuals with underlying conditions and compromised immune systems are more vulnerable to COVID-19.





LGBTIQ+ persons in Africa may experience threats from hostile/homophobic lockdown environments

Isolating in a lockdown environment where other members of that environment are hostile to, or exhibit homophobic, transphobic or biphobic behaviour towards LGBTIQ+ persons has a negative impact on the mental health and physical safety of LGBTIQ+ persons. In view of this, **queer youth have been dissuaded** from coming out at this time, especially while in a confined location with intolerant parents, guardians, or other family members. Similarly, there is also the threat of increased intimate partner violence in same-sex partnerships.



LGBTIQ+ persons in Africa may experience increased mental health impacts in countries criminalising same-sex sexuality

Major socio-economic disruptions, such as the current global pandemic, generally have a negative impact on mental health levels in

society. However, for vulnerable groups such as the LGBTIQ+ community that are already at-risk of mental health challenges, this threat is increased. This usual risk of mental health challenges, particularly for LGBTIQ+ persons living under legal systems criminalising same-sex intimacy, is exacerbated by the impact of social distancing and isolation under lockdown restrictions. This means that access to therapy and other psychosocial support mechanisms will be limited or completely unavailable.



Potential for increased social discrimination and attacks against LGBTIQ+ persons in Africa

Homophobic religious leaders and groups in Africa are likely to take advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to spread moral panics and issue statements blaming LGBTIQ+ persons for the spread of COVID-19. In South Africa and in Ghana, for example, some clerics have already adopted this inciting stance. While the idea is false, it is still capable of perpetuating stigma and discrimination as well as inciting violence against LGBTIQ+ persons in Africa.





Potential use of force and misuse of emergency powers by state actors against LGBTIQ+ persons in Africa

Under emergency regulations, state actors are empowered with special emergency powers to monitor and enforce lockdown regulations. In some countries, military forces have been deployed to ensure that civilians and all non-essential workers are complying with restrictions **and this has led to violent confrontations with citizens**. In highly homophobic contexts where state actors have been known to persecute LGBTIQ+ persons, these powers are capable of being misused to target known LGBTIQ+ persons and to place them under unlawful detention, to displace them, or to mete out violence against them.

What can you do?

You can make a difference by:

calling on African states to comply with Resolution 275 of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights by ensuring that state actors are not misusing emergency powers to displace, arrest, unlawfully detain or launch violent attacks against LGBTIQ+ persons.

calling on local, provincial, and national governments in Africa to permit continued operation of shelters and safe houses for LGBTIQ+ persons and other vulnerable persons during the course of lockdown restrictions.

calling on African states to implement measures that ensure that LGBTIQ+ persons and other vulnerable persons do not fear victimisation or retribution in accessing health services.

calling on African states to implement measures to reduce the socio-economic impact of Covid-19 on LGBTIQ+ persons and other vulnerable people through social grants and other social welfare provisions.

supporting local community based organisations in Africa that provide psychosocial and other support for LGBTIQ+ persons and allies, particularly those that are currently providing services online or remotely.

making donations to initiatives sourcing funding for poorer and at-risk LGBTIQ+ persons and communities in Africa.

reporting any incidents of intimate partner violence or any physical violence attributed to homophobic, transphobic or biphobic attitudes to national human rights institutions, local authorities, or to local community based organisations.

References and resources

- 'COVID-19 and the human rights of LGBTI people'
<https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/LGBT/LGBTIpeople.pdf>.
- 'Resolution 275: What it means for state and non state actors in Africa'
https://www.chr.up.ac.za/images/researchunits/sogie/documents/resolution_275/Resolution_275_booklet_ENGLISH_02_WEB.pdf.
- 'Vulnerable groups'
https://www.who.int/environmental_health_emergencies/vulnerable_groups/en/
- Ending violence and other human rights violations based on sexual orientation and gender identity: A joint dialogue of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and United Nations' (2016) available at https://www.chr.up.ac.za/images/researchunits/sogie/documents/Ending_Violence/Ending_Violence_ENGLISH.pdf.
- 'Ugandan police accused of abusing lockdown laws after LGBT arrests'
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/01/ugandan-police-accused-of-abusing-lockdown-laws-after-lgbt-arrests>.
- 'LGBTQ youth urged to delay coming out during lockdown'
<https://www.mambaonline.com/2020/04/06/lgbtq-youth-urged-to-delay-coming-out-during-lockdown/>.
- 'Nigerian security forces killed 18 people during lockdowns: rights panel'
<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-nigeria-security/nigerian-security-forces-killed-18-people-during-lockdowns-rights-panel-idUSKCN21Y272>.
- 'Christian preacher blames homosexuality for covid-19.'
<https://gaynation.co/christian-preacher-blames-homosexuality-for-covid19/>.
- 'Muslim leaders of Ghana blame coronavirus on 'transgender and lesbianism'. Again'
<https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2020/03/27/ghana-coronavirus-muslim-mission-pandemic-transgender-lesbian-homophobia/>.

For more information on the rights of LGBTIQ+ persons in Africa:

<https://www.chr.up.ac.za/sogiesc-unit>

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