

COVID-19 SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT

LGBTIQ+ on Lockdown in Zimbabwe

**A GALZ report on the socio-economic challenges experienced by the
LGBTIQ+ community in Zimbabwe during the Covid-19 Lockdown
Isolation period**



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THE LOCKDOWN REALITY

Many people globally are learning rapid implementation of social distancing and quarantine. Several African countries have taken precautions some declaring national disasters and implementing lockdowns to slow down the virus. Last month South Africa, Zimbabwe, Namibia and Botswana implemented lockdowns in efforts to reduce spreading of the corona virus. Zimbabwe's lock down period began on the 30th of March 2020. Mostly the strategy is essential to reduce transmission of the COVID-19 virus and protect those most vulnerable, particularly older adults and individuals with underlying medical conditions. However, without question, there are ripple effects of this crucial strategy that include an exacerbation of social isolation and loneliness. COVID-19 has threatened an economic recession, as well as "social recession." Simultaneously the two are inseparable. The global Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic has heightened the socioeconomic vulnerabilities of the most marginalized people in our societies, among them members of the LGBTIQ+ community.

The quarantine period has Zimbabwe security state agencies manning the urban, peri-urban & rural areas. They have a history of violating people's human rights politically, socially and economically. A record of instilling fear, brutality and torturing its citizens among them homosexuals. This paper briefly gives an account of the experienced socio-economic challenges by the LGBTIQ+ community in Zimbabwe during this isolation period. It suggests ways that could alleviate their suffering.

GALZ laments the inadequate resources for LGBTIQ+ members in Zimbabwe that include men who have sex with men, sex workers, transgender, lesbians, bisexual and queer. HIV/Aids is prevalent in the LGBTIQ+ communities and covid-19 has tripled the vulnerability of the population. There has been absence of policies affecting the sexual minorities in this Covid-19 lock down period. There is need for LGBTIQ+ advocacy to quickly petition for their needs during this period.

Interrupted access to sexual & reproductive health:

There has been diversion of resources to Covid-19, that has exacerbated already limited services resulting in suppressed Immune systems due to HIV, HPV as revealed by the diversion of Wilkins Hospital for Key Populations (KPs) to a center designated for Covid-19 patients according to GALZ Case Reports (16-31/03/20).

What is GALZ?

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GALZ, an association of and for LGBTI communities, is one of the earliest and most highly regarded Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex advocacy organizations in Southern Africa. The organization promotes LGBTI Human rights, good health, and mental and psychological wellbeing of sexual minorities in Zimbabwe and other countries. It has a dedicated Counselling and Psychosocial Support Unit which collates material on mental health and rights violations in the Community.



There have been adjustments to less operating hours for KP friendly places such as Newstart, Newlands Clinic and this has affected the LGBTIQ+ community against a background of limited freedom of movement, time and amid infested state agencies (police and the army positioned in the cities, town and streets of Harare, Bulawayo, Chinhoyi, Banket, Karoi, Mutare, Masvingo, Gweru among other towns and cities, reported a GALZ Counsellor in her report (16/4/20). This has resulted in a lot of fear and inability for LGBTIQ+ to refill their Anti-Retroviral (Arvs), Post Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP), Post Exposure Prophylaxis (PeP) or go for testing. Wilkins in Harare is the best model clinic where sexual minorities feel free and without being judged and where they receive adequate attention to their health needs. Unfortunately it has been turned into a quarantine center by government without alternative quality facilities identified and designated considering they are vulnerable and marginalized community pointed out site Counsellors in their weekly telephone debrief (4 April 2020).

Streamlining Services:

In an audio interview with a community coordinator one female client explained that (02 March 2020) New Start Centre are only focusing on drug resupplies such as PrEP & ARVs. They are not treating any other ailments which an LGBTIQ+ member might present with. Before they could be treated; STIs, headaches, diarrhea or any other related health challenges. There are fears of increase in STIs infections during this Covid-19 period. Most of the LGBTIQ+ cannot afford a private doctor, they have become expensive even with a medical aid scheme short falls are often realized.

Mental Health Challenges:

Depression, anxiety has increased in the LGBTIQ+ community in Zimbabwe, responding to Covid-19 virus as a challenging health, social and development issue affecting people across the globe. The LGBTIQ+ community explained how their social spaces have shrunk. How they have spent time in the home with the family but in reality, alone because no one talks to them they are considered an outcast. They are viewed and labelled as disgrace in the family, as bad omen, satanic, demonic and causing deaths in the family. Already marginalized with no strong support system, one explained how they wished they could silently take a sleeping tablet and die alone quietly.

The problems community members face are both on individual and group scale including, but not limited to:

- *Verbal abuse*
- *Limited access to health facilities diverted for the Covid-19 national mission*
- *Intimate partner violence*
- *Loss of income*
- *Alcohol and substance abuse*
- *Loneliness leading to depression*
- *Hate speech and social media harassment*

Social spaces are an intervention in that LGBTI persons can hangout, share stories, have a picnic, admire nature, watch football, dance, drink, wine and dine, but the world has shut down on their effective social platforms. Humans are social creatures, moreso the LGBTIQ+ as birds of the same feather flock together. Hanging out in groups for the LGBTIQ+ community gives a sense of connectedness and belonging.

“Covid-19 isolation has created ‘loneliness epidemic’ in Zimbabwe among LGBTIQ+ persons that might lead to severe mental disorders and suicidal cases.”

Absence of social spaces, clubs, pubs, bars, hotels, lodges and motels have resulted in reduced leisure activities, reduced going out and local tourism which have been good therapeutic safe spaces for the LGBTIQ+ away from the madding crowd.

Increased Alcohol & Substance Abuse :

Alcohol bans by government have created brewing of illicit alcohol which is detrimental to the health of people. The cheap alcohol is consumed by the LGBTIQ+ population as a way of coping, function and deal with marginalization in the home. Gender based violence verbal insults are perpetrated. Some have resorted to buying smuggled beer which is not ISO certified for consumption. These pose serious health challenges such as addiction & deteriorating mental and physical challenges.

Illegal Shebeens, (Illicit Bar/club) Groupings:

The LGBTIQ+ has teamed up with Female Sex Workers (FSW) workers and drink in groups of 3+. There has been an increase of illegal shebeens in homes; Waterfalls, Mbare, Banket in Mashonaland West Province, as reported by MSW & MSM (April 2, 2020) in a telephone interview. GALZ’ concerns are that the LGBTIQ+ risk being infected with Corona Virus because of absence of social distancing or risk being arrested and pay huge fines of RTGS/Bond 500+ which some of them cannot afford and that gives more work on community investigation and counselling for psychosocial support. Some have reported to having drinks in the backyards with friends whilst braaiing and drinking disregarding the social distancing to curb loneliness especially those in the suburbs or with big yards. No one is likely to knock at their private property. ‘Not much information is available to the sexual minorities on the stakes of seriousness of Covid-19 virus issue and what it means to prevent and reduce,’ comments Grace, GALZ Counsellor et al (31 March 2020).

Depleting Economic situation:

The high pricing of commodities has not spared the LGBTIQ+ community who are already stigmatized & discriminated towards employment. Most of them are unemployed and those who are employed do not have a month’s salary during this quarantine period because there is no production and some are paid on commission. Those that rely on trading have been prohibited from their points of business, whilst prices have shot up during this isolation period, affecting the vulnerable LGBTIQ+ community with the high cost of living.



Loss of income to sustain livelihoods:

“Hairdressing is my source of livelihood. I feel happy to see my customers who are tolerant of me, we chat & laugh. A day well spent and that continues for a week until weekend when I frequent social bars and clubs to relax, dance and share drinks with friends. That is no more because of corona virus. I do not have a social life anymore.” - GALZ member

Closure of South African and Botswana Borders:

Some LGBTIQ+ rely on self-employment, cross border trading has been disrupted and are anxiously waiting for the lockdown period to be over.

Travel Bans:

One MSM explained in a WhatsApp platform he could not travel as planned after securing a flight ticket to Australia to visit his ailing mum suffering from cancer. He is very worried he might not see her alive, in the event that she gets infected by the Corona Virus. Already that is a bereavement issue of time lost, plans derailed.

Restricted Freedom of Movement:

“I have a one room lodgings, of late I feel like the space has reduced in size, I cook, eat sleep and spend the whole day inside. The weekend activities that GALZ used to offer us are no more. It could have been a space we can go but because of Corona Virus we are having these restrictions.”

“My freedom of movement has been restricted. The police are in every street in the ghetto, because of the unfriendly laws and fearing questioning of my sexuality by law enforcers, I do not dare go out.”

Halting of GALZ physical programs & activities has affected the sexual minorities. The safe spaces at the Drop In Centres are a support system and offer comprehensive & holistic services to the LGBTIQ+.

Insensitive Reporting & Hate Speech:

One female on social media commented, “this Corona Virus if it was not for gays would not have been here. The bible demonizes homophobia.” An MSM questioned why every disease or pandemic is always blamed on gays.

In the *Masvingo Mirror*, a local newspaper, a column known as *Hot on the Heels* (HOTH) recently published headline (March 2020); “*Woman deserts lecturer husband for lesbian partner.*” It described the issue as (*Incest*), *mashiripiti* (*magic*), *mashura paunch* (*mysterious in the community*) and *unheard of*. This has been blamed by the writer to have promoted and influenced the coming of Corona Virus, that a woman leaves a learned husband for another lesbian.

Gender Based Violence (IPV):

Experiences have demonstrated that that forms of GBV exacerbate in crisis contexts; for example, the economic impact of Ebola (2013-2016) in West Africa placed women and children at greater risk of exploitation and sexual violence (IASC 2015). Due to real or perceived homophobia, biphobia and transphobia LGBTIQ+ survivors can face specific challenges when attempting to access specific support services. Barriers are structural and cultural, individual and interpersonal. The way services are currently designed and delivered during this Covid-19 period is less accessible and inclusive of the LGBTI, with a lack of knowledge and skills of service providers at key critical health institutions. Negative LGBTIQ+ perceptions of themselves and the lack of support system, amplify the abuse the relationship with the perpetrator/s.

Increased financial dependency, unemployment, increased sustained periods of partner & family time together due to quarantine have heightened violence. Survivors have a reduced ability to flee violence because of reduced access to support because most are closed for containment. Those that are cohabiting have suffered bruises or ruptured anus due to sexual exploitation as payment for shelter during this quarantine period. Minority stress may be experienced in the form of ongoing hassles, hearing anti-gay jokes, verbal abuse and hate speech.

Shortage of protective barriers:

Movement restrictions have caused inadequate condoms in outlying towns such as Karoi, Kariba, Chirundu Rusape, Zvishavane, Mount Darwin, Guruve among other areas. The police and military police have mounted roadblocks, where one has to have a pass stating reasons for travel. There has not been any good established coordinated systems for accreditation to allow for key services to provide services to vulnerable groups during this Covid-19 isolation period (mentioned in the GALZ Monthly Report 31 March 2020).

Sneaking out for Sex:

Some are prioritizing sex hence sneaking out. There is absence of expertise by individuals to screen out for sex, thus the risk of getting infected by the Corona virus, not only that but HIV/STIs infections, ruptured and bruised anus.



Inadequacy in satisfying double sexual orientations:

Married bisexuals reported anxiety, edginess & guilty conscience & fear stemming from not being able to satisfy their double lives because of limited and restricted movements. This has led to a lot of alcohol intake in homes, verbal abuse and limited family time & spending a lot of time on social media especially on WhatsApp.

Speculation & theorizations:

Even though accurate information is being publicly updated and disseminated every minute, people's perceptions and behaviours are still sensitive to other factors, including political language and actions & the disease's origination, (the derogatory term Chinese Virus constantly used). Conspiracy theorists tend to have thriving social media pages where unregulated information filters to those of a less discerning nature. This leads to not only the ineffectiveness of controlling strategies but also substantial damage to the LGBTIQ+ society as a whole in a longer term, as they are often subjects of unsubstantiated theories.

Covid-19 Phobia:

There is infection fear, paranoia and discrimination among the LGBTIQ+ community. Migration of LGBTIQ+ community from Zimbabwe across regional borders such as Botswana, Tanzania, Zambia, South Africa, Mozambique to South Africa is evident. Jules Maaten cited in Passop (2019), pointed out that South Africa itself has liberal attitude toward gays and lesbians, with a constitution which guarantees gay and lesbian rights legalizes same sex marriage, which is why many queer refugees come to South Africa. Victor Mdluli Chikalongwe further comments in Passop (2019), there a large number of immigrants living in South Africa, estimates varying between one and three million, the most vulnerable which are LGBTIQ+ asylum seekers and undocumented. The LGBTIQ+ community reported that prior to lockdown there were people coming from neighboring countries especially South Africa, which has recorded to date more than 2000 cases (eNCA, March 2020) as opposed to Zimbabwe with 19 cases to date (16 March 2020) according to MoHCC report. The sentiments should be taken seriously as most of the Zimbabwe LGBTIQ+ are in South Africa because of the laws that tolerate homosexuality as well as better economy. Those who were previously in the diaspora working and have returned, have taken advantage of this period they are not at work to spend time with their partners, families, friends and perhaps go back later after the social isolation period is over. However, there are also fears of job security being compromised in these cases.

Water & Sanitation:

Some GALZ members are in highly water-rationed high density & developing suburbs in Bulawayo, which do not have proper drainage systems. They expressed difficulties in protecting and prevent Covid-19 in the absence of clean water to wash hands and proper

reticulation systems. They emphasized the high risk of getting infected by the Corona virus and not being able to control the spread (GALZ Case Report - Bulawayo, 31 March 2020).

Lack of confidence with Public Transport Safety:

Bulawayo GALZ community officer reported (April 4, 2020) that the LGBTIQ+ that rely on ZUPCO transport allocated by government is ferrying people to and from their destinations. However, some LGBTIQ+ felt unsafe to use the public transport system as it is still crowded though not to full capacity but also lack of screening tools such a temperature checks and sanitization of hands when entering the buses.

Misuse of hormonal drugs to address Minority Stress:

The trans community are buying hormones and injections from the illegal black market and streets and are being charged exorbitant prices.

“It was my first anniversary on the 1st of April 2020, I ran out of hormones. I get my testosterone hormone from Zambia Livingstone but now the borders have closed. I had my last shot a week ago and am due next week Monday. Now I am in a fix. I am hoping that after 21days there won’t be any extension.”

“I am stressed out that this might slow my trans sexual process, it is so frustrating and agitating if I do not inject in time. I have mood swings.” narrated one transgender person.

Limited Access Psychosocial Services:

Face-to-face individual & group counselling sessions and counsellors have been limited to brief WhatsApp, emails and phone calls. They are not very practical because of lack of adequate resources and the high cost of data and airtime in Zimbabwe. Counsellors strive to consider relative levels of safety and psychosocial support that the client experiences in their environment to plan for interventions accordingly, (American Journal of Psychology, January 2012). Among digital interventions, counsellors and psychologists are urged to consider increasing the client’s sense of safety reducing stress, assessing what personal and social resources can be leveraged to resolve residual trauma, and finding ways to empower the client to resolve social stigma and discrimination.

Prey to Fake News:

The LGBTIQ+ community is falling prey to false news and myths, especially where individuals have limited literacy. Most of the youths are illiterate having been marginalized and vulnerable at a young age.



They have difficulty in distinguishing true from false/fake. An example is the recent spreading of a false myth that Africans or Black people do not suffer Corona virus which is ignorance, and more sensitization should be done to curb the spread of false information.

OPPORTUNITIES

Whilst there are challenges, some LGBTIQ+ have resorted and dedicated time to designing clothes, to writing and those in tertiary institutions are researching and writing their dissertations. A few have kept themselves busy in the country harvesting crops. Those in illegal mining have been dispersed by the police and soldiers.

It is thus important that GALZ together with Health and law enforcers work together as key partners in identifying and responding to GBV.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- GALZ to come up with Covid-19 pack that includes:
Protective Barriers (Condom, Lube),
water guard,
torch,
salt,
sanitizer,
mask,
Help/GALZ numbers in case of emergency,
memory stick branded GALZ Covid-19
- A Covid-19 information memory stick with all resource stakeholders needed by LGBTIQ+, whom to contact on a visual format. Visual communicates better than writing and also to cater for the illiterate youths/LGBTIQ+.
- Stickers by GALZ Wash your Hands, Sanitize THEM!
- Social Welfare Package for those in need or who have lost an income (A Basic Social Welfare Pack can be Designed (Peanut butter, mealie meal, sugar, chunks, beans, cooking oil, salt.... bar of soap,
- It is important for any LGBTIQ+ to know that violence is not OK, no matter the circumstances and adverts and flyers should be made available for the community to be able to utilize available resources without fear.
- Messaging through Covid-19 t-shirts, caps & mi-bands that have GAZ LGBTIQ+ colors. **'Covid-19 is REAL' 'Social Distancing Works' 'Let's Prevent by Protecting.'**
- Memory sticks with movies on pandemic viruses, Gender Based Violence, GBV or documentaries to improve understanding of Covid-19 Virus, GBV issues. Movies such as the "Contagion" among many other related, other LGBTIQ+ GBV, IPV movies & documentaries.

CONCLUSION

As Zimbabwe responds to Covid-19 pandemic, GALZ among other CSOs should ensure that human rights principles are entrenched, relying on the best available evidence to inform decision making, and the fostering of global collaboration to fuel innovation and equitable access while ensuring the allocation of adequate financial and other resources needed to mount an effective response. A rights-based response to COVID-19 contains many important aspects, among them, the right to health, equality and non-discrimination, freedom of peaceful assembly, association and movement, an adequate standard of living, as well as the right to benefit from scientific progress. This viewpoint focuses on the right to health as underpinned by principle of transparency and Universal Health coverage for ALL. (UHC).

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