



[SDDirect COVID-19 Pandemic Blog Series](#)

Three reasons why we need to make the COVID-19 response LGBTIQ inclusive

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The COVID-19 crisis is not a homogenous experience. Pre-existing structures of inequality and exclusion leave some groups at disproportionate risk of adverse health, social, economic and political consequences – including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer people (LGBTIQ). As the pandemic grows and global response unfolds, there is an urgent need to plan for an *inclusive* and *intersectional* crisis response.

1. LGBTIQ people risk being excluded from health care and other COVID-19 response services

[Accessing health care is often challenging for LGBTIQ people](#), even in stable times. LGBTIQ people face negative attitudes and discrimination, are often denied care and treatment, and fear being reported to authorities in countries that criminalise sexual and gender minorities. The structural barriers that underly these challenges threaten to block LGBTIQ access to COVID-19-related healthcare.

[Human Rights Watch](#) warns that prevalent anti-LGBTIQ discrimination in the health sector (such as limited access to HIV testing and treatment as well as care for other medical conditions), puts LGBTIQ people at risk of serious illness or death from COVID-19. Men who have sex with men and trans people, who are disproportionately affected by HIV, are particularly at risk. More than 100 LGBTIQ+ organisations in the US have called upon public health officials to ensure [an LGBTIQ-inclusive health response](#) that addresses these risk factors, including the specific barriers experienced by older LGBTIQ people.

The COVID-19 crisis is exposing inequalities within and between societies. While some people stockpile food and have access to unlimited clean water to wash their hands, many others will remain or become dependent on food aid and have little or no access to water. Beyond health services, the COVID-19 response must ensure that food aid, sanitation and other essential services reach all those in need.

We know from [previous experience of crisis and emergency response](#) that LGBTIQ people are often excluded from service provision. Without intentional measures to address this, the COVID-19 response risks being no different. [In Pakistan](#), transgender people report discrimination when trying to access meals from food distribution points. *Sanggar Swara*, a transwomen's organisation in Indonesia, warns that [trans people will not be able to access food and sanitation assistance from local governments](#) as most of them lack ID cards that

match their gender identity. An effective, inclusive COVID-19 emergency response requires measures to mitigate such risks.

2. LGBTIQ people face increased exposure to violence during stay-at-home measures and lockdown

As countries impose more drastic measures to slow the spread of COVID-19, people find themselves confined to their homes. LGBTIQ organisations across the world warn that quarantining and lockdowns will put LGBTIQ people at higher risk of violence and abuse, with inevitable negative consequences for their physical and mental health and wellbeing.

The [UK-based LGBT Foundation](#) reports that calls to its helpline during five days in March, shortly after the country entered into lockdown, were more than double the number received in the same period last year. Some calls were from [LGBTIQ teenagers stuck at home with abusive parents](#), while others were from people who are isolated with an abusive partner.

In the Middle East, LGBTIQ organisations warn that [lockdown measures will have an adverse effect on LGBTIQ people](#), as many live with families who do not accept them. As organisations are forced to stop face-to-face counselling and other support services, online and phone-based services will become a lifeline for LGBTIQ people.

In many countries the police and the military are enforcing lockdown rules, such as bans on social gatherings. In Uganda, [20 LGBTIQ people were arrested by police](#) in late March. The police claim that they are charged with disobeying rules which risk spreading the coronavirus. However, human rights activists were quick to call it a targeted attack on the LGBTIQ community. The police are accused of capitalising on temporary restrictions to target LGBTIQ people – yet another setback in the deteriorating situation for gender and sexual minorities in Uganda.

3. LGBTIQ people risk losing their livelihoods – and LGBTIQ organisations fear losing their funding

The COVID-19 crisis has forced businesses to close and transport to stop. As livelihoods are threatened and funding and resources are re-directed, LGBTIQ individuals and their organisations are feeling the economic impact.

Globally, homophobia, biphobia and transphobia prevent or [limit LGBTIQ people's access to the job market](#), resulting in unemployment and underemployment. In many countries, LGBTIQ people have few options other than looking for work in the informal sector. The Indian organisation *Pratyay Gender Trust*, which works on transgender livelihood rights, says that the current [lockdown will have a dramatic impact on transgender people's livelihoods](#). Many transwomen in India, known as *hijras*, make money from performing at social functions, begging and sex work. Restricted movement and social distancing mean that many have lost their sources of income, pushing transgender people who already live in poverty into further marginalisation.

As structural LGBTIQ exclusion is exacerbated by the health, economic, political and social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, LGBTIQ grassroots organisations and activists are best

placed to recognise the needs of LGBTIQ people and scale up their support (as highlighted by examples above). Already, they are quickly adapting their ways of working and will continue to provide lifesaving support to LGBTIQ people whose lives are affected by the COVID-19 crisis. However, LGBTIQ organisations fear that [the unfolding global economic crisis will hit the LGBTIQ civil society sector very hard](#). Globally, LGBTIQ organisations are already underfunded, especially in the Global South and East. Several initiatives, such as global emergency funds set up by [OutRight Action International](#) and [GiveOut](#) have emerged to support the ongoing and crisis-response work of LGBTIQ organisations.

However, it should not be the responsibility of LGBTIQ organisations alone to mobilise support and provide services to sexual and gender minorities in times of crisis. As the international community and governments prepare emergency response plans for countries in the Global South, where the pandemic is expected to hit next, they need urgently to consider the unique impact of the COVID-19 crisis this on sexual and gender minorities – [as part of their international commitments to ‘leave no one behind’](#).

International experience confirms that an inclusive COVID-19 response requires meaningful, direct engagement with LGBTIQ-led organisations and the diverse sexual and gender minority groups who are affected. Asian Disaster Preparedness Center in collaboration with UN agencies has produced [a useful good practice paper on LGBTIQ inclusive emergency response](#) in the Asia-Pacific. As well as stressing the importance of LGBTIQ voice and participation, it highlights the need for LGBTIQ awareness and inclusive practices among frontline workers.

For more resources on inclusive approaches to the COVID-19 crisis response, see the following links:

- [Gender Alert for COVID-19 Outbreak: March 2020](#) by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC)
- [COVID-19: Inclusive programming – Ensuring assistance and protection addresses the needs of marginalized and at-risk people](#), by the International Committee of the Red Cross

We welcome constructive feedback on this blog and are keen to collaborate with organisations that share our values and our commitment to ensuring no one is left behind as part of the COVID-19 response. If you would like to share feedback or explore opportunities for collaboration, please email laura.martineau-searle@sddirect.org.uk.