

# **THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON LESBIAN, BISEXUAL AND QUEER(LBQ) WOMXN IN UGANDA.**



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The COVID-19 Pandemic has affected different groups of vulnerable people in the country. About 85% of Uganda's population consists of people below the age of thirty-five. The COVID-19 pandemic brought along with it several restrictions in accordance with the standard operating procedures ( S.O.P'S), and these affected not just youth but more importantly the vulnerable groups of youth, some of whom are LBQ womxn. Some of the restrictions imposed during total lockdown were banning of public transport, closing education institutions, shut down of malls, and shopping arcades especially in City Centres. Citizens were to adhere to curfew by 7 pm, excluding a few vehicles that had stickers granting them permission to exceed curfew time. Non -essential workers and micro-business owners also had to shut down according to S.O.P'S. Many LBQ womxn are in either one or many of the categories that faced the impact of the above-mentioned restrictions. A dialogue was conducted by Freedom and Roam Uganda (FARUG) on 30/ 01/ 2021 with some LBQ womxn to discuss how the COVID-19 restrictions affected LBQ womxn some of the findings are explained in detail below.

- There was a notable increase in homophobia and transphobia. During the COVID-19 lock-down, many cases of assault by both community members and leaders were recorded. Some of these include; rape and attempted rape by friends and family members, and eviction from homes by landlords.



- This was as a result of a section of the population's belief that the coronavirus was sent to earth by God as punishment for some people being homosexuals. This resulted into increased fear and anxiety among LBQ womxn.
- There was limited access to healthcare and legal aid services. It was difficult for LBQ womxn to travel to health care centers because of the ban on public transport, making it hard to move long distances. As a result of the difficulty in accessing transport many could not reach queer-friendly legal aid service providers or access non-discriminatory health services. Some medical workers who aren't sensitized attempted to out LBQ Womxn or offer mediocre services. This worsened the well-being and health of LBQ womxn.
- Many LBQ womxn were laid off or had their salaries greatly decreased. Womxn doing jobs that are considered non-essential for example those in entertainment, and small business owners had to shut down for purposes of safety. Lack of employment and lower salaries meant many could not afford basic necessities and provide for loved ones, this created strife and anxiety and forced some LBQ womxn to rely on support from the family which oftentimes is not sufficient or available. This lack of financial independence, therefore, endangered the lives of many LBQ womxn. There was an increased cost of living. Income was readily available to many LBQ womxn who had lost jobs and were working in the informal sector.



- There was an increased strain on many LBQ relationships. Womxn had to spend more time with their partners since many were unable to work. Being in the same space meant they experienced many hardships along with their partners including grief, illness and unemployment all of which led to increased stress and frustration within their relationships. Worse still some LBQ womxn experienced intimate partner violence and yet failed to report it. This led to a decline in wellness and mental wellbeing among LBQ womxn.
- There was increased harassment, especially to masculine-presenting LBQ womxn. Many homophobic people had opportunities to interact with queer womxn some of whom are masculine-presenting, this led to an increase in homophobia and transphobia. Our society is very homophobic and what most people don't understand, is disliked or despised.
- The fact that many people were not working and had a lot of time to themselves meant that they had more time to notice LBQ women and this reinstated their homophobia towards masculine-presenting LBQ womxn.
- There was an increase in crime especially theft among those that stayed in crowded areas. Unemployment coupled with high costs of living meant many people living in slums were struggling to get by each day.





- Some product prices increased since borders were closed and some imported goods could not come into the country. Food prices also increased and it was almost impossible for many LBQ womxn to pay rent without a stable income. An increase in costs of many essential items, therefore, made it hard for LBQ womxn to live comfortably, because of limited access to basic necessities.
- There was an increase in mental health struggles. Many LBQ womxn had to return to their homes and too harsh environments in which some of them could have been outed and therefore rejected.
- Some had to relive their trauma returning to homes in which they had formally been verbally abused or sexually assaulted. This led to increased fear which resulted in anxiety and depression, lowering the quality of life of some LBQ womxn.
- Some of the LBQ womxn who had businesses running had to close them. The biggest number of LBQ womxn in Uganda is employed within the informal sector. They have small businesses like building, tailoring, and selling food. As a result of the increased cost of living few people had money to spend on commodities and services offered by LBQ womxn, as a result, their client base reduced and they had to close their business. This culminated in low job security and increased poverty amongst LBQ womxn. As a result, some people resorted to criminal behavior like theft and some LBQ womxn became the targets for these crimes.



- Increased crime, therefore, led to the loss of property and increased insecurity among LBQ womxn.
- There was an increase in substance abuse. Many LBQ womxn who were battling addiction were forced to face their triggers. Some had to return to homes where they formally faced abuse, others had to interface with issues and people that reminded them of their difficult pasts. As a result, they ended up looking for shortcuts to escape their pain, hence using drugs or alcohol. Some who were trying to quit were exposed to their urges and cravings and hence lured to resume alcohol and drug use because they had a lot of time ( many were not working). Increased drug and alcohol abuse led to a decline in the wellness of LBQ womxn.
- There was limited funding for LBQ womxn, both from the womxn's movement and the LGBTQ movement. The Covid -19 pandemic meant normal operations for organizations had to change. This included laying off some workers, and cutting donor budgets.
- There was limited engagement among organizations and limitations in donations. As a result, many LBQ womxn organizations suffered, this meant that they were not able to provide for staff and members as much and as well as they had prior to the pandemic.



- There was an increase in gender-based violence and intimate partner violence. The Freedom and Roam counselor and paralegal reported an increase in the reported cases of violence compared to the norm.
- During the Covid-19 pandemic, people had to stay indoors for long with their partners, this isolation meant that it would be hard for them to report in case they experienced intimate partner violence. It should be noted that the cases reported are usually fewer than the actual number of cases perpetuated.
- Some religious leaders and overly religious people intruded on the privacy of LBQ womxn. Many LBQ womxn were home and this gave the public more room to know who they are and analyze their behavior. Our society is largely heteronormative, religious people felt entitled to ask LBQ womxn personal questions including some about marriage and childbirth. This intrusion of privacy made LBQ feel unsafe and uncomfortable.
- There was an increase in rape cases. Due to increased insecurity in LBQ communities, more idle people and general unemployment, there was an increase in the rate. Many LBQ womxn had to go to their homes during the lockdown, as result, they were exposed to relatives and friends some of whom had sexually assaulted them due to their sexuality and gender identity. Closeness to such people meant LBQ were repetitively exposed to unwanted sexual advances and rape.



On a positive note, the lockdown brought with it some good opportunities which include;

- There was an increase in personal growth and learning of new skills. Due to the need to keep busy and bring in extra sources of income, some LBQ womxn got involved in activities that ended up bringing in some extra cash for them. Some got involved in activities such as baking, farming, decorating and weaving among others, and as a result, we're able to earn a living.
- There were opportunities for employment, especially in organizations like FARUG. During the lockdown period, more labor was needed to cater for emergency cases and challenges like, people that needed relocation, unemployment and sexual assault cases. LBQ organizations needed to get more staff members on board to handle emerging challenges, this created more employment opportunities. Some relationships LBQ relationships grew stronger.

LBQ womxn who were in healthy consensual relationships had more time with their partners during the lockdown. This meant they experienced life with their partners at a much deeper level. They went through highs and lows with their partners and hence strengthened their bond.

It gave room for students to expand their knowledge base and do extensive research. During the lockdown, there were fewer distractions, less noise and chaos, less time to overly socialize.



This meant there were more time and room for creativity to invent and birth novel concepts and ideas. Many LBQ inadvertently had more time to read and create and invent. In conclusion, the Covid -19 pandemic affected LBQ womxn in both negative and positive ways.

However the greatest impact was negative, the livelihood and wellness of many womxn were compromised. They were not ready for the life changes and adjustments that came along with the pandemic.

During this dialogue members and staff of FARUG also discussed one of the major events that occurred during the Covid Pandemic. They talked in detail about the election period and how it impacted LBQ women. Some of these findings are explained below.

### **Political Unrest before and during Voting**

In the months leading to the voting of the new political leaders, there was a lot of unrest and instability. One of the key populations affected during this period was LBQ womxn.

Below are some of the major ways in which the community was affected.

- The LGBTQ community was scapegoated and blackmailed by the president. It was blamed for most of the riots in the guise that it was funding the opposition political parties thereby inciting violence amongst citizens.



As a result, there was increased fear among LBQ womxn, and increase homophobia and transphobia.

- There was a total internet shutdown in the country, later the internet was partially re-opened. This affected communication and kept LBQ womxn blind to any updates about elections around the country. They had to have access to VPN in order to use any kind of social media, yet in many cases VPN was inconsistent. This meant that it was harder for LBQ womxn to keep in touch with each other and thus weakened support systems. It was also difficult to run on-line businesses consistently run without consistent access to social media. This means that in many ways the livelihoods of LBQ womxn were negatively affected.
- There were both verbal and physical threats to anyone wearing political colors and tribal profiling. Anyone wearing yellow or red was under threat of attack as either a supporter of the current regime or the opposition. People that appeared as they belonged to a certain tribe especially from the western part of the country were feared by men. This made the environment unsafe for some LBQ womxn.
- The LBQ womxn living in shelters were on tenterhooks especially after the presidential speeches where he claimed that the LGBTQ community was funding opposition. Threats and claims by the current regime made LBQ fear for their safety due to allegations that they were funding the opposition. This led to increased homophobia by the public towards LBQ womxn.



- There were verbal intimidation and threats by the public. One lesbian reported her experience saying was told that “we are going to beat you rastas”. LBQ womxn especially those who are masculine-presenting were attacked based on their dress code, this made it difficult for them to move from place to place. Fear of unexpected reactions from the public endangered the lives of some LBQ womxn.
- There was homophobia at polling stations. At some polling stations, masculine-presenting LBQ were womxn were stopped from voting. Some of the officials felt like LBQ had no right to vote, and a result stopped them from voting in spite of the fact that they had all the necessary documents. This resulted into embarrassment but also disappointment in being unable to vote because of a warped system.
- Detainees were treated badly for being suspected of being LBQ. They were subjected to bodily checks that intrude on privacy. The fact that beyond their need will some LBQ womxn were checked as a way to ascertain their gender or sexual orientation in police stations meant they were a public spectacle. This inhuman treatment resulted into low self-esteem and poor self-image among some LBQ womxn.
- Those that were arrested for petty offenses ended up facing multiple charges. Some LBQ womxn who were arrested faced other charges like money laundering, financing opposition without sufficient by virtue of their sexuality.





This meant that LBQ womxn had to be twice as careful as the ordinary person and avoid getting involved in a crime of any sort.

- There was homophobia in health centers towards LBQ womxn as a result of election violence. Due to rumors among the general public that queer people were funding the opposition, there was increased homophobia directed towards LBQ womxn in various sectors, the health sector is not an exception. This meant that many LBQ womxn would not receive non-discriminatory health and thus this would reduce their quality of life.
- Some LBQ womxn were coerced to vote for other candidates by family members. During the election period, quite a number of LBQ women had to return to their homes because they were casting their votes in their home areas. This meant that some had to stay with family members who were strong supporters of certain political parties and they tried to influence these womxn to support their candidates. This meant that the freedom to vote any candidate of choice for LBQ women was interfered with.
- Sportspersons no longer play their games for fear of being singled out. Many LBQ women are actively involved in playing different sports. The election period drew more attention to them and other athletes had room to notice that they were LBQ.





- These realizations led to an increase in homophobia as other sportsmen and women associated sexual orientation with opposition support.
- It was hard to work smoothly because of riots, tear gas and gunshots. Daily activities and work for many LBQ womxn were interfered with they could not conduct business as usual due to fear of being arrested by police during riots. Increased instability and insecurity especially in towns near polling stations meant LBQ womxn lives were threatened so much that they couldn't work.
- The army and police all over and these misused their power to threaten LBQ womxn. This caused a lot of tension. There was heavy deployment of policemen close to polling stations and also close to people's residences especially for opposition leaders like Bobi Wine. Police trucks and policemen with heavy ammunition drove through town before elections and this created fear and intimidation. LBQ womxn were among the groups of people targeted by police and hence lived in fear.
- There were travel restrictions that immobilized some people from voting as their voting stations were out of Kampala. Elections happened during Covid-19 and transport fares had already shot high, this made traveling to polling stations hard. In some areas, the public wasn't operating normally so people failed to access means of transport. This compromised LBQ womxn's right to vote.



- The election period was therefore particularly difficult for LBQ womxn. They faced a lot of segregation and isolation during this period.
- The election period and effects were more detrimental to the community and aggravated the impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic.

Below are some personal accounts of some LBQ womxn. Their original names have been concealed for purposes of privacy. During the dialogue some LBQ womxn shared their experiences, pseudonyms were used instead of their real names.

### **Experiences of LBQ womxn during the voting process**

Sue is a masculine-presenting lesbian. The day before voting, she was very excited to vote for who she believed was the best suited to be her president. She had all her clothes and necessary documents prepared. All the excitement came crumbling down when she reached the polling station and people started whispering, she noticed she was the center of attention. She was so uncomfortable and worried for her safety that she considered abandoning voting and going back home. In the end, she decided to go through with the voting but couldn't stay for the vote counting.

Esther escorted her partner Pinto to the polling station the morning of voting. Pinto is a masculine-presenting lesbian. They had both decided to wear black, a color that is not used by any political party so as not to give away their political affiliations, but alas! Things didn't go as well as they thought they would.



As soon as they reached the polling station, a group of men that were gathered together started accusing them of belonging to a certain political party that they hated and that they would beat them. One of the men even commented that to make matters worse, Pinto wants to be a man. They chose to leave without voting. To their dismay, as they were about to get home, a man tapped on Pinto and asked to speak to her.

She refused. He insisted and even asked her if she had any problems with a certain tribe from the west, to which she said she does not and even lied that she belongs to that tribe. The man went ahead and told them how he had been stalking her and knew everything about her, including where they live and where they both worked. They didn't believe him. A few days later, the same man showed up at Pinto's place of work and demanded that she talk to him. He went ahead and claimed that he works for SFC and that he had 3 government cars parked outside. From then on, she was escorted home by her workmates. The same weekend this conversation was heard, Esther called the community paralegal, asking for legal aid. The case is being handled.

Brenda, a bold masculine-presenting lesbian chose to wear a bright-colored pair of shorts and a t-shirt and went to vote. She dressed up that way to dare anyone who was bold enough to walk up to her and say anything homophobic. When she reached the polling station, all attention was shifted to her they started whispering. She did not give a damn. To make matters worse, her surname is a man's name.



That too raised eyebrows, but apart from the looks and whispers, nothing significant happened to her. She says she considered opting out of voting but later changed her mind because she wanted to exercise her constitutional right to vote.

Bree is a feminine presenting lesbian. One would be tempted to think those can camouflage and easily get out of being spotted. Bree found out the hard way when she went to make a line at the polling station to vote and someone behind her commented that she was a lesbian because she had more than one ring on her fingers and an anklet around her feet. She tried to play dumb and pretend like she hadn't heard but other people joined in on the conversation and before she knew it, the polling agent was chasing her out of the line. Bree asked why and the woman just insisted that she wasn't going to vote. She did not vote.

Randy, a masculine-presenting lesbian, had promised her partner that she would vote. But as soon as she reached the polling station, she started wondering if it was a wise decision. Other voters were giving her disapproving looks and whispering amongst themselves. She started contemplating going back home but remembered her promise to her partner and went through with it.



## Observations

One of the main observations made was that LBQ womxn do not report cases of violence. There is a paralegal aid desk for LBQ womxn at FARUG, a toll-free number **0800100093**, and a GBV number, on 24hrs. Despite the fact that all necessary information to report and record cases are available barely any cases of violence were reported during the election period, yet they occurred. There is a need for more dialogue about security and violence. A different approach could help clarify some of these concepts because it seems like the womxn haven't understood the gravity of what violence and what measures of security they have to put in place.

## Recommendations

LBQ womxn are advised to do the following based on what was discussed;

- Seek legal help in case of emergencies or cases of violence and assault. They were advised to contact community paralegals for help. The toll-free number was provided and contact information for the FARUG paralegal was made available.
- LBQ womxn were advised to move with self-defense items. People were advised to walk with items to protect themselves like pepper spray. This would help them have some kind of tool to protect them as they move.
- Members of FARUG are advised to actively participate in collecting information about security cases concerning them.



- Collect as much evidence as possible when faced with a security risk for example; take pictures of the person, number plates, ID. Getting those details is particularly helpful.
- Creation of strong support systems. This means during trying times LBQ womxn will have people to confide and count on in and this will help keep them grounded. Having a good support network promotes wellness and mental wellbeing among LBQ women.
- Investing in self-defense classes. Taking part in self-defense could be helpful because it provides a buffer for physical protection against unwanted attacks. This may enable LBQ to stay safe.

**Compiled by Elizabeth Nabunya based on a report by Freedom and Roam Uganda.**

