

SEVENTH EDITION

BOMBASTIC

MAGAZINE

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**COVID-19: The Pandemic that
Marginalized us further.**

DR. FRANK MUGISHA

OUR VOICES, **OUR STORIES**, OUR LIVES



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Kasha Jacqueline Nabagesera

Mbalamusiza Nnyo mwenna mu bita byamwe
I greet you all in your different capacities

To say that the LGBTQ+ community was living in a utopia before COVID 19 is a factually incorrect statement as you can see from following the work of Kuchu Times over the years. However when any catastrophe happens guess who the first and most affected persons are-yes your guess is as good as mine; minority groups. Due to world spread propaganda regarding sexual and gender diverse persons, we find ourselves being further marginalized among an already marginalized group.

March 2020 when Uganda recorded her first COVID-19 patient was a moment where the whole world stopped moving for me and other leaders in the movement. Owing to the kind of work I do, I find that I have family and friends all over the world therefore I knew the effects the virus had had on other countries. Naturally my first point of panic was the LGBTQ+ community, I quickly thought of how there is institutional discrimination in all the areas that we would need help from starting from the medical fraternity.

This edition is a reflection of all those struggles, how for the first time no one on earth heard the answers to the questions we were all asking. This is a celebration of all the brave people who survived, going through COVID-19 especially the tough SOP period is something worth celebrating. We also focus on all the people and organizations that served our people in different capacities. We are especially careful to remember all the lives that we lost, personally when I think about that period the first emotion I can identify is grief.

The introduction of the Anti Homosexuality Bill that later became a law has taken the LGBTQ+ community of Uganda back to that period, mirroring the heightened anxieties experienced during the COVID-19 era. The emotional toll is immense, as individuals grapple with the weight of societal judgment, legal repercussions, and the constant need to conceal their identities to ensure personal safety.



FOR E W O R D

Economically, LGBTQ+ individuals find themselves disproportionately affected, much like the broader population during times of crisis. The economic fallout, compounded by the social and legal challenges they face, places an additional burden on an already marginalized group. Employment discrimination, reduced access to economic opportunities, and limited financial support further contribute to the economic crisis experienced by many LGBTQ+ individuals during this period. The resonance between the Anti-Homosexuality Act era and the COVID-19 pandemic extends beyond the immediate struggles. Both periods highlight the systemic vulnerabilities and discrimination ingrained in societies, emphasizing the urgent need for comprehensive and inclusive policies that protect the rights and well-being of all individuals, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. The call for support, both in terms of understanding and solidarity, becomes even more crucial during this time. Advocacy, awareness, and compassionate outreach are essential in combating the fear and anxiety that pervade the lives of LGBTQ+ individuals under the shadow of discriminatory legislation, echoing the global call for empathy and unity experienced during the pandemic.

As with any pandemic, we can never really say that we are out of the woods and the effects of COVID-19 on our community are still very much present and with this law has sent the community into another pandemic. I would love to end on a note of gratitude first of all for the team I work with at KTMG that worked to put this together. Secondly, I would love to extend my deepest appreciation to our sponsors that have ensured that these stories are told. In a special way, to everyone who shares their story with us that took brevity and we are honored and to everyone who continues to live their lives bravely even in a period such as this; we shall overcome.

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COVID-19: A pandemic that birthed bigger plagues for the already marginalized

DR. FRANK MUGISHA

Dr. Frank Mugisha is the Executive Director of Sexual Minorities Uganda (SMUG), a position he has held since 2007. As the chief steward of the organization that advocates for justice and equality for sexual and gender minorities in Uganda, Dr. Mugisha has overseen various projects and programs that have eased service delivery to Uganda's LGBTIQ+ population. However, the past 3 years have seen Dr. Mugisha and his team get back to the drawing board as the COVID-19 pandemic took over the world. We spoke to the resilient activist about the COVID-19 pandemic, its effects and lessons, and how SMUG has pushed through this global crisis.

KT: The LGBTIQ+ community has always been able to rely on SMUG for a number of services; but with the outbreak of COVID-19 there was uncertainty regarding continuity of service provision. Tell us about your first reaction to the news of the COVID-19 outbreak

FM: When the pandemic hit, I was confused and did not know what to do. As a leader, I expected all kinds of calls from the community like food crises, increased police arrests, mental breakdown due to the uncertainty that came with COVID-19, hunger and homelessness. Personally, I was going through all the things people mentioned when they called but as a leader you cannot disclose your personal fears and struggles to people calling you for solutions. I purposed to find out more information about this disease that was changing everything as we knew it. Seeking counsel of doctors and running to Google for gaps helped me get a rough picture of what we could be dealing with and with that information; I held a Facebook Live session to 1. calm people down, 2. analyse people's expectations, 3. reach out to community members, even those who are in the closet, and reassure them that we were going to get through this together. The one thing SMUG could guarantee was its availability to the community in whatever form they required. As SMUG, we noticed that majority of the queer community survives on their daily income and in this situation all the survival methods were not viable, and we had to find a way of supporting individuals with food, yaka (electricity) and minimal funds for their basic needs. I did not have most of the answers but knew that we had to counter the panic since many of us earn by leaving our homes.

KT: How did SMUG change its strategy when you realized that the two-week lockdown was turning into a more prolonged period characterized by a daily increase in both death and infection rates, with no sign of things getting better soon?

FM: We started holding crisis meetings every Monday for updates and follow-ups on individuals who were arrested and the shelters that were raided. To control the spread of the virus, robust standard operating procedures (SOPs) were put in place by the government; and while these could have curbed the spread of the virus, they came with 'viruses' of their own. To demand that LGBT+ persons stay at home for months on end, in a homophobic country, was exposing them to new issues altogether. Within a few weeks of the lockdown, there was prevalence of issues like; black mail, extortion and the biggest of them all-mental health maladies. Depression, anxiety and paranoia were on the rise as questions continued to outweigh answers. Personally, I was a victim of some of these mental health issues since I was not used to staying at home. To offer mental health support, we hosted an online workshop on understanding the aspect of mental health in the concept of COVID-19, dissecting issues of poverty and mental health, living with unaccepting families, and living in isolation as an already marginalized community. I also used my personal social media to post positive messages and carry out one on one online follow-up with friends and anybody who reached out. In that period, it did not matter if I knew you or not, when you called and needed help that I could give, I was there. SMUG as an organization had to restructure because food relief is not something we had ever thought about and now here we were in a pandemic with starving community members. We forged ways to get transportation during the total lockdown and distributed food to community members; all hands had to be on deck-I personally distributed this aid. Our eyes and ears were on ground to the extent that we even reached out to people who asked for food on their social media platforms

KT: Amidst the challenges of the pandemic, the whole community was shaken by the arrest of the 44. Briefly tell us about that incident and the part SMUG played in ensuring the release.

FM: The 44 were arrested during the total lock down with strict SOPs in place. It was also the period where COVID-19 deaths and infections were so high and everyone was afraid of exposing themselves to the virus. It was important to reach out to our partners, allies and friends who could support in any way possible. What kept us going was the communication from the team leader which unfortunately was later cut off when they were remanded to prison. Nobody knew where they were, not even their lawyers and this coupled with restricted movement caused more panic. It was indeed community effort, and our donors worked so hard to secure permits and stickers to enable the lawyers' easy movement to their clients who we later learnt were in Kitalya prison. We kept having meetings with different people to forge ways on how to get them released. Finally, all the charges were dropped in court and the next step was to assess what support they needed at that very moment. We purchased emergency groceries and booked them into a hotel to help them relax. We listened in agony to the torture stories and the demeaning things they were subjected to while in prison, and it became obvious they would need mental wellness support as well as relocation.

KT: What are some of the lessons SMUG has picked from this experience and are you better prepared for anything like this in the future?

FM: SMUG is now better positioned for another pandemic or any other life stalling occurrence because we have widened our risk management strategy to put in place structures like an online psychosocial support system comprising a team of counsellors and a centralized monitoring mechanism. We now understand the importance of relief aid for the LGBTIQ community when approaching donors since underemployment is predominant in our community due to the existing stigma, discrimination, homophobia and transphobia that lead to many of our community members losing jobs. Issues of emergency and security in terms of the legal environment have some gaps with regard to funding, but we are also re-strategizing to address these. We have also learnt to live in a digital world so providing resources to enhance technology in the community through trainings and provision of materials will help our community harness the power of technological solutions for example, we currently have our own software that helps us document our cases. We have also adapted to encouraging economic empowerment of our own. On a personal level the pandemic gave me time to myself to work out, reflect and rethink.

KT: Thank you very much for your time.

FM: Always a pleasure!





Service above Self amidst a pandemic that paralysed the community.

SANYU HAJJARA BATTE

Sanyu Hajarrah Batte is the Executive Director and one of the founding members of Lady Mermaid Empowerment Center, the first sex worker led organisation in Uganda. She is also one of our COVID-19 heroes because of her efforts that ensured both the LGBT+ and sex worker communities remained afloat at the height of the pandemic. Our team spoke to her to understand what this period was like for her both as an individual and community leader.

KT: The work that you did for the LGBT and sex work community did not go unnoticed and as one of the individuals who were the first respondents as COVID -19 ravaged the community, we would love to know about this experience.

HB: Thank you so much for this opportunity and selecting me to be among your COVID-19 heroes or in my case she-ro. Thank you KTMG for being bold enough to document our stories and lived realities even in a society that is fighting hard to erase us. I remember Uganda documented its first COVID case in March 2020. When I heard about the first case of COVID in Uganda coupled with the little information I'd gathered about the disease, my first emotion was panic. I called for an urgent staff meeting and informed my staff that their lives were very important and if we were to keep doing the work we set out to do, some things needed to be adjusted. We had a meeting to strategise on how to continue serving our communities even in this period. As an organization, we run a drop-in clinic which is the first sex worker clinic in Uganda; we had to find ways to continue serving in this capacity. We have a lot of sex workers on antiretroviral therapy and pre-exposure prophylaxis who needed their refills regularly among other health needs. I was the first to volunteer to stay behind and serve, and asked the rest of the staff to take some time off and decide whether they wanted to be at the forefront to combatting the health needs of our community amidst a pandemic. I assured them that whatever decision they took would not affect the status of their employment.

KT: We see your mind was quick to consider the health of the community, what else did you prioritise after the President revealed our first registered case and tightening of the SOPs?

HB: The minute the President announced a lockdown, the first thing we thought of was poverty. It is true that there are so many ways that sex workers carry out their work, but the majority of sex workers use transport, bars and other night time facilities that were now locked down. With poverty comes poor nutrition and most of our members are either on ART or PREP, so we had to find ways to provide nutritional support. The other issue that came up was mental health not just for the community but even for us the leaders. Panic calls from different members in the community looking up to us for some sort of answer about a disease that no one had information about caused a lot of anxiety in the beginning and as time went on and the initial two weeks turned into months, anxiety also quickly turned into depression among other mental health issues. We then started fundraising activities to raise funds for the above needs, but it was not easy. COVID-19 was a global issue and donors were receiving requests from all over the world. We wrote proposals day and night to acquire some emergency relief for our members; we even set up a crowdfunding campaign on Facebook with an activist called Paula from the Netherlands to help raise funds for nutritional support specifically.



KT: With some funds and emergency relief raised, how were you able to reach the grass root community members given the strict SOPs?

HB: We needed to get creative with our service delivery because we understood the need to enforce for the SOPs to save lives, but we also appreciated the fact that there were other pandemics within the pandemic like poverty and poor mental health. We hired an ambulance in the first few weeks because these are some of the cars that were exempted. We used this to distribute ART, PREP, STI drugs, condoms and this strategy worked excellently. We later launched a campaign, Ride to 95 95 95, where we used boda bodas to deliver food to hotspot leaders in the community. One of the individuals I remember vividly from this campaign is Bulky from FARUG who rode daily to deliver food to those in need. We also worked with KP led and leaning organizations to distribute food to their members. The DIC remained open daily except on Sundays, and we worked up to 5:00pm each day. We received support from Urgent Action Fund which we used for nutritional support. Our first priority was community members who were living positively due to issues of adherence to medication and the role played by nutrition in this. We have always had a toll-free line for counselling but with the pandemic, we had an influx of community members seeking for this particular support; we recruited more counsellors to be able to effectively offer this service. Some sex workers refused to get off the streets and were often found past curfew hours and arrested. We worked with legal officers to secure police bond for those who were arrested. I personally made a promotional message on Bukedde TV calling on sex workers to leave the streets and follow SOPs to protect themselves from COVID-19. We believed that using a fellow sex worker, myself, to run this media campaign would be better received, and we were right-the use of a familiar face to run this two months long campaign helped reduced the number of sex workers that were still risking their lives to work.

KT: Key population work is not easy even during regular times because it comes with a lot of resistance. COVID-19 made an already bad situation terrible, and we would love to know some of the major challenges that you faced.

HB: The biggest challenge that I faced personally was contracting COVID-19. I have no idea where I could have contracted the virus because as much as I was actively involved in community work, I was cautious to adhere to all the SOPs. I started out feeling feverish and I communicated to my team that for that particular day, I would not make it, but they should continue working without me. I reached out to the chairperson of our Board of Directors and asked him to support the team while I dealt with this persistent fever. He was the one that brought to light the fact that I might have COVID. I tested and found that I was indeed positive; the news did not hit me as hard because I had been prepared me for this news. I tested my entire household including my children and thank God they were negative. My eldest daughter insisted on staying with me to take care of me and I took her sister to my mother's place. To summarize my experience, I have never felt as vulnerable as I did then; I could not stand, walk, talk, eat or do anything on my own. Flashes of my family, my mom, and the community that I serve kept flooding my mind. However, this experience made me realize and appreciate the impact I'd had on people's lives. I could hardly hold the phone, but community members would call in to pray for me on loudspeaker. The LGBT community and sex worker community showed me immeasurable love. I remember Kasha sending me herbs to boil. I was smothered by love during that period and I believe that was the only reason I survived. On a community and organization level, we were challenged by the numerous arrests of our members. Even after I made that promotional message on TV, some sex workers still went to the roads targeting long distance workers. Also, with the COVID-19 pandemic, donors have changed their funding priorities and this has made resource mobilization in KP led/leaning organizations very difficult.





KT: Is LMEC better prepared to handle any future uncertainties similar or differing from COVID-19?

HB: Yes, LMEC has now put in place programs that will ensure that we are more prepared to handle situations like this. First, we have integrated economic empowerment in all our programs so that sex workers can develop what people are calling side hustles in the event that sex work is not an option, but also to compliment the earnings from sex work. We have also integrated financial literacy skills like saving, opening bank accounts, and management of expenditure. LMEC also carried out the COVID-19 resilience and recovery strategy for sex workers all over the country to further investigate the impact of COVID-19 on sex workers so as to find relevant solutions.

KT: Thank you so much Hajarrah for your time and the wonderful work you are doing in the community.



**A Frontliner looks back at the
struggle to mitigate the risks of the
Pandemic.**

SANDRA NTEBI

KT: Please tell me about yourself

SN: My name is Sandra Ntebi; I am a human rights defender, activist, and community paralegal. I also chair the national LGBT+ community security committee which has different units that deal with security work for the minority community.

KT: What was life like before the pandemic?

SN: Before the pandemic, it was work as usual because I deal with rapid response, and emergencies. Because of the nature of my job, I gave in my personal phone number as a hotline for the entire community in case of an emergency and I tried as much as I possibly could to avail myself to all community members that needed assistance.

KT: As the head of the security committee, what challenges have you faced as a result of the pandemic?

SN: We have had to deal with high expectations from community members who think that we have money at our disposal; people expected us to provide food relief alongside a monetary token which we, were of course, unable to do. Before the pandemic, we had cases like office break-ins, and evictions etc. but during the lockdown, we had to deal with more grave cases of rape and suicide. People were really exhausted, with no jobs, no friends, and nowhere to go. After the lock down, cases of eviction have become rampant again. You see, before the lockdown one could just enter their house, dress up and go and people wouldn't know where they were going but during the lockdown, people suddenly had all the time to study their neighbors which has led to increased insecurity for our community members. We've also seen an increase in suicide cases especially when the victim is already on drugs. Society also generally assumes LGBT+ identifying individuals have money and with the lockdown, this caused a security threat as many were attacked because their neighbours were under the impression that they had money. There was also the issue of some leaders staying in their comfort zones and not showing up to support the community members, other leaders contracted COVID and some community members even faked having COVID; for every phone call I received about a new infection in the community, I went to the hospital to check on them and make a case assessment. There were about four cases that turned out to be people faking the disease to make a quick buck. There was one who I found drunk and was begging the doctors to put him on oxygen so that I could believe he was sick. We also faced a challenge of lack of total commitment from some organisations. There were instances where organisations sent me out to make case assessments with the promise of facilitating my movements and they didn't live up to their word. I found myself helping many organisations in this capacity because I had a frontliner's access card that allowed me to move during the lockdown when transport was restricted. Additionally, we had a major challenge with main stream organizations/ allies who work with LGBT+ organizations; they were constantly taking over everything that had to do with the community under the guise of "we as a community do not have the capacity to handle our own issues." They in turn took over the few funding opportunities that were available at the time and this further hindered service delivery because no matter the good will, these people will never fully understand our needs better than we do. On a community level, LGBT+ organizations weren't really cooperative, and were scrambling for the limited resources instead of coming together to address the needs of the movement and community members. People that were not affiliated to organisations were also sidelined because organisations were prioritizing their members when it came to food and financial relief. We also saw people that have started on the asylum process or have already been granted asylum suddenly wanting to come home. The general pressures of the pandemic in a foreign land sent many into depression and they voiced their desire to return and face the harsh homophobic life they had been forced to flee instead of the loneliness and mental breakdowns they were facing during the lockdown. With all these challenges, the community of course also dealt with the very issues that the rest of the world was dealing with during the pandemic like joblessness, and poor access to services.

KT: Is there a mental health component in your line of work?

SN: Having to constantly handle security threats inevitably presents dealing with mental health related issues. I have handled so many of these cases that it is very easy for me to now pick up on the signs of someone dealing with a mental health problem. The problem that I face the most is how to recommend these individuals or advise them to seek psycho social support; they suddenly feel like you are creating a bigger issue for them or even discriminating against them. This particular issue became even harder to navigate at the height of the pandemic. We have also identified LGBT+ friendly /accommodative counselors who are now finding it difficult to handle our community members because some show up for counseling or therapy sessions but will not have transport to go back home or expect the counselor to provide food. Unfortunately, whilst dealing with these concerns, we also recognize that mental health complications increased during and after the lockdown and as a movement and community, we need to come together and find solutions.

KT: How did the pandemic affect your work?

SN: There was a major challenge of reaching everyone because we all had needs; even when an organization was offering food relief, it was difficult for them to transport this food to the people that needed it. Because of the frontliner's card, I stepped in to make these deliveries. Most people expected more than we could realistically give or even afford, some shelters locked us out of their premises because we had not brought everything they had requested for, others were simply demanding for money and others sold the food that we provided. The lockdown being an extended period made it harder to sustain handouts because there was no funding coming in which rendered some of these relief programs impossible to continue.

KT: What coping mechanism has the security committee adopted, and which strategies have you put in place if we are ever faced with such a situation again?

SN: One of the strategies that we are advising organizations to adopt while writing proposals is incorporating a security component so that they have their own security plan to support their members. We have also advised service providers to have security trainings with mainstream organizations in order to create practical organization plans. Personal security is also very key and we have advised community members to make this a priority. Being a sexual minority doesn't make one a special citizen—we must still adhere to the laws of the land. Most community members assume that the law and constitution does not apply to them since they are discriminated against by the same laws. As a community leader, I am also taking it upon myself to advocate for family reconciliations because I have witnessed time and time again, LGBT persons that run away from their families and go to shelters where there's free accommodation and food. This issue escalated during the pandemic and it has resulted into too many people refusing to work and depending on these handouts- which is not sustainable in the long run.

KT: Do you think you're in better position to handle any future uncertainty?

SN: On a personal level, it's been a clear lesson learnt that I should be prepared for anything. On a leadership level, I've also learnt a great deal. Most importantly, I've learnt to take a step back and first analyze a situation if I'm to offer any assistance or advice. I feel like as a community, we have greatly benefited from the behavioral change that resulted from the lockdown and that puts us in a position to realize that we are adaptive beings and can definitely concur anything. Have we died from not going to the bar for 2 years? Didn't we find alternative means of movement when all transportation was halted?

KT: Do you have any last remarks?

SN: If there's something I've learnt throughout this pandemic, it is the need to check in with one another; people are really struggling financially, emotionally and psychologically and a simple phone call could save a life or make someone feel like there's still reason to live and they're cared for.

ORGANIZATIONS

Re-Strategizing to combat COVID-19 induced mental health breakdowns

THE TAALA FOUNDATION

To assume that pre COVID-19 was a mental health utopia for the LGBT community of Uganda is to make a very false assumption, as this has been an on-going issue in the past years. Concerns like homophobia, discrimination and injustice were not as popularized as they are now, nor were they grave linked to the community's mental health. Kuchu Times Media Group spoke to **Severus Hama Owamparo** the Director and Co-Founder of Taala Foundation which was established in 2017 to offer mental health services, education and the use of law for strategic litigation. Taala was born out of an urgent need to provide quick mental health services to the community by creating a safe liaison with competent mental health practitioners that understand the needs and context of the LGBT community.

Taala also realized that there were increasing links between social injustices and the mental health cases they were handling; this birthed the education and litigation programs to not only offer psycho-social education and support but to also offer vocational training opportunities.

KT: With Taala having opened its doors for operations in 2017, this uniquely positions you to share the contrast; could you take us through Taala's mental health services experience pre COVID-19?

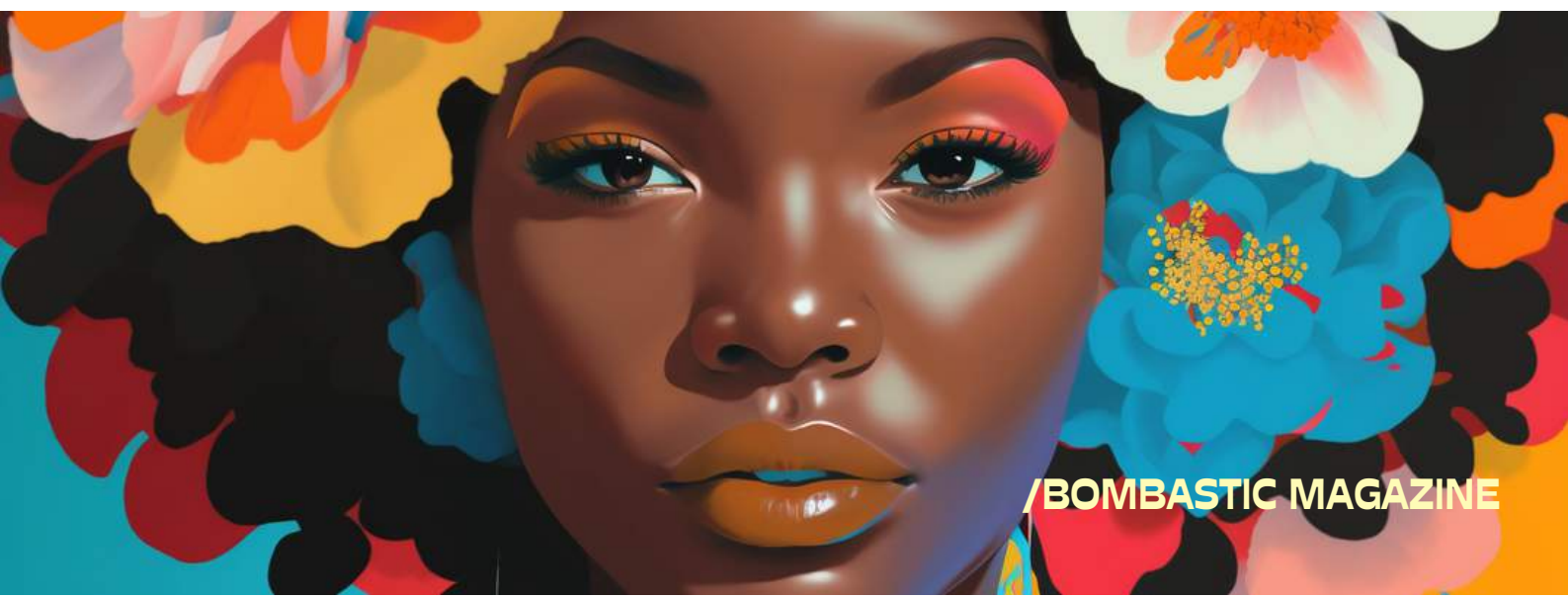
SHO: Pre-COVID-19, people knew about Taala Foundation, but our services were definitely more sought after during the pandemic and in the post-COVID era. This could be attributed to a number of factors for example, people had different avenues to deal with mental health issues but with the lockdown and curfew, these spaces started to shrink. However, because of our cohort model, it was not easy to access Taala. Between 2017 and early 2020, we had about 50-60 cases of people requesting for services but with the pandemic, we were handling cases in the hundreds. It has been tough because people from the LGBT+ community found themselves stuck with families that are not accepting, those who have no homes moved to shelters but even in these shelters, they were not safe because we had to respond to shelter raids. Unfortunately, we do not have data from before 2017 to compare the exact statistics, but it is very clear that the pandemic made the need for mental health services much greater.

KT: What would you say were the biggest mental health challenges for the community during the lockdown and the strict SOP COVID-19 period?

SHO: I will start at homelessness; before COVID-19, people had different meeting places as a community. Our community members need such spaces because here, they can be themselves, and share their concerns which eases the pressure of dealing with a society that is not welcoming. SOPs also restricted people, and they were stuck with their unaccepting families, people lost their jobs, and some were outed. Shelters were raided, people with chronic illnesses that require regular medication run out of medication and could not move for refills because of the SOPs. There was also increased violence faced by the community like gender based violence, intimate partner violence, and community violence like lynching. These issues further led to a spike in mental health issues among LGBT+ persons. Sadly due to SOPs, we could neither move to the people in need of the services nor carry out the cohort sessions as this only works by gathering.

KT: What challenges did you face as you offered mental health support services to the community?

SHO: We creatively adjusted to the situation and mitigated the challenges. Our biggest challenge has been funding; we do not have adequate funding to reach the numbers that we get. We have an overload of people that need services, but we do not have the resources to reach them. Organisations that knew we provide mental health services as well as shelters were also reaching out for support for both their shelter inhabitants and staff, but we unfortunately did not have the funds to help. We are now doing psychological first aid trainings because of COVID-19; we realised that mental health professionals who are competent and readily available are few and cannot be easily accessed. In light of this, we developed a psychological first aid training program to give the community a first point of contact and only come to us with more severe challenges.

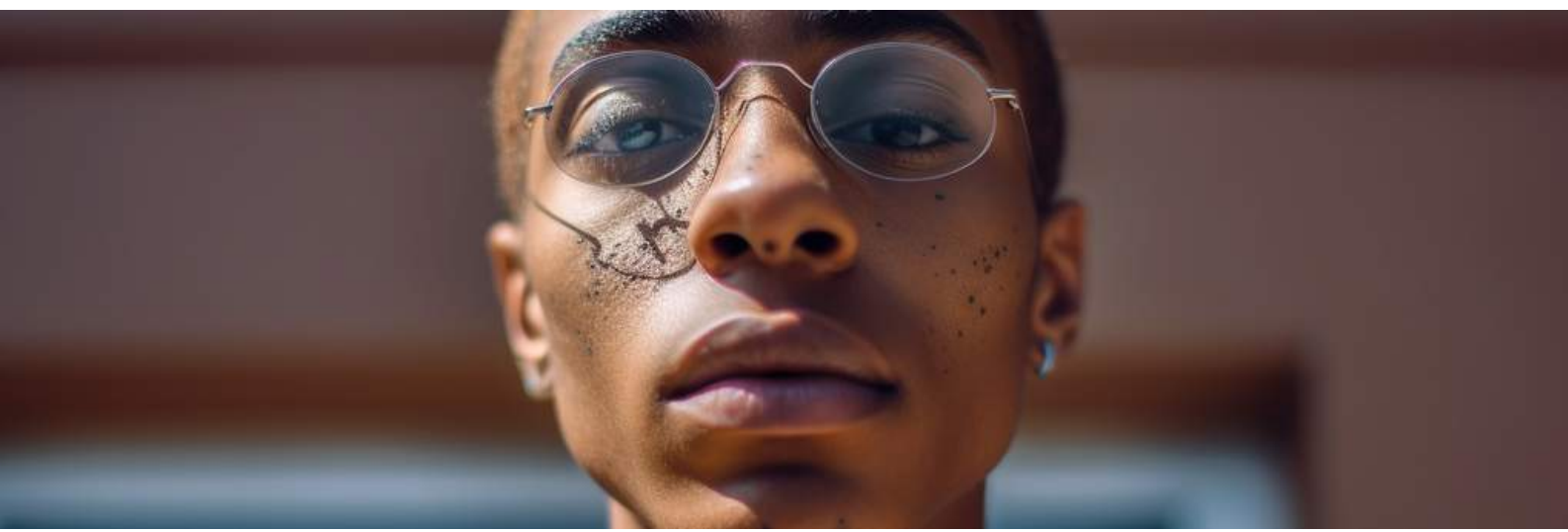


KT: Do you think Taala foundation is better prepared to deal with another incident as life halting and altering as COVID-19?

SHO: Yes, definitely! The psychological first aid training is one of the strategies we are using to better prepare; we are training more people and equipping them with skills to help their peers, as those currently equipped to handle mental health problems are few and far between. Taala has also adopted a remote-physical work hybrid; we began doing remote work before the pandemic so adjusting in this particular area has not been difficult as we already had systems in place for remote work. We have also explored virtual therapy which, of course, has its limitations but with the restrictions, it was a welcome strategy.

KT: In your professional opinion, is the community out of the woods from COVID-19 related mental health side effects?

SHO: Not quite yet. Mental health awareness has been a general challenge in Africa and on a global scale; there has not been enough cognizance of the issue and for the longest time, has gone unaddressed, underfunded, and stigmatised. However, COVID-19 put a spotlight on mental health challenges and exposed the gaps especially within the gender and sexual minority community, and now we must find ways to deal with the problem. One of the positive things that came out of this is how awake and mindful the LGBT community is to mental health now; they are actively seeking help and most organisations are including solutions to this issue in their programs. I have seen organisations adopt wellness strategies for their employees and self-care is becoming a priority for many even on an individual basis. With the new information-age, mostly aided by the internet, many things get watered down, yet you do not see anyone watering down other issues like cancer or HIV/AIDS, but mental health is still not receiving as much attention as is required. We also live in an era with a lot of information but most of it is not credible, so I beseech the community to always seek professional opinions and help. You are not your own professional, don't 'self therapise'! Please do not self diagnose and do not diagnose other people if you are not a professional. We must treat mental health the way we treat physical health; if you brush your teeth daily to avoid cavities, practice self-care to avoid poor mental health.



ORGANIZATIONS

Re-Structuring to continue our Mandate during a pandemic

MEN OF THE NIGHT UGANDA (MONU)

Men of the Night Uganda(MONU) is a community based organization initiated by sex workers, with the sole aim of supporting and championing social change, justice, and rights of men who have sex with men for commercial purposes. Our mission is to empower, advocate and educate sex workers as well as diminish stigma towards male sex workers and sex work in general. Our work ensures that sex workers remain the core initiators and beneficiaries of all our projects. MONU is a membership based organization with 1028 members registered across Uganda; these are currently receiving healthcare and nutrition services, financial literacy and economic empowerment skills through our referral/membership benefit systems.

CHALLENGES

Throughout 2020 and 2021 as the COVID-19 pandemic caused spikes in mortality and untold suffering, we witnessed governments worldwide introduce preventive measures like physical distancing, bans on public gatherings, workplace and school closures plus systematic lockdowns all in a bid to suppress transmission of the disease. Immediately, the lockdown itself created a huge challenge for us because the SOPs that were introduced were preventing our members from accessing health services, and left many of them jobless because of the curfew regulations that generally halted the night life and nightclub/bar scene. There was also the matter of funding; with the little funds available, we were not able to effectively counter the emergencies that arose in light of the systematic lockdowns. Communication with both our donors and members was also disrupted since we were all adjusting to working remotely and heavily relying on the internet and new technology to support our projects. Because of this, there were so many delays in communication which caused a deferment in some projects and cancellation of others. At the same time, we also had to deal with the ever widening stark of society and health inequalities as some of our members living in safe houses were arrested, others became homeless, or became victims of domestic violence. Our HIV positive members faced an all-time rock bottom moment as they had difficulty in accessing their life saving drugs. The health inequalities were further intensified when the government of Uganda rolled out its COVID-19 vaccination drive in which KPs were not represented.

INTERVATIONS

Over the past year, we have mobilized to better the HIV/AIDS response and protect people living with HIV by providing nutritional support to our positive members. We have also taken bold steps to push back the coronavirus with a vaccination campaign and drive that was geared towards bringing the inoculation closer to KPs. Even in the face of considerable adversity and with limited financial assistance, we made sure to provide continued HIV prevention services to community members but also supported measures to prevent COVID-19 and manage its consequences. To overcome the constraints imposed by pandemic related restrictions, we campaigned for multi-month dispensing of medicines and supplies, organized delivery and brokered financial support, food and temporary shelter for our members. We also took advantage of virtual platforms to continue meeting the multiple needs and concerns of our beneficiaries, by sharing knowledge and resources that relate to COVID-19 prevention and management. MONU is now in a better position to handle future uncertainties having gone through this pandemic because we have learnt to be proactive in our overall approach. We have also been able to create, and innovate in using social media, and phone calls to continue our mandate of causing social change, care, support and development.



ORGANIZATIONS

A story of Hope, Resilience and Purpose

RELLA WOMEN'S FOUNDATION

KuchuTimes talks to **Joan Amek Eoju** from Rella Women's Foundation on their experience during the pandemic.

Please introduce yourself and briefly tell us about RELLA

My name is Joan Amek Eoju and I work with Rella Women's Foundation. Rella is an LBQ feminist led organisation working for and with LBQ women. Our main focus is creating safe spaces and empowering LBQ women to work, advocate, and seek justice and social services whilst creating a sense of belonging for themselves.

What was your experience at RELLA pre-COVID-19?

RELLA is a co-founded and co-directed organization that I started together with our former Programs Director Kemigisha Sandra. We established the RELLA House OF Hope along Gayaza Road but pre-COVID, we were not very busy since very few people sought shelter services.

The Pandemic

Kemigisha, my co-founder decided to take a different life route during the pandemic. A lot happened during the first year of the pandemic with the exit of our co-founder, an attempted merger with another organization that didn't quite work out and having to re-establish ourselves with me running the organization as a single director. Previously, Kemigisha handled the programs on healing, reconciliation, well-being and vision building for our shelter members. We quickly had to restructure in order to keep this very vital aspect of the shelter ongoing; on top of the individual sessions, we introduced the Hakuna Matata program where we hold monthly fire spaces. This program also has referrals to different mentors and several SRHR service providers who offer our shelter occupants medical services, lubricants and condoms. However, with this initiative, we identified the need to raise awareness about LBQ sexual health among health workers. For example our occupants were given male condoms instead of female condoms, finger condoms and dental dams. We are now working on a plan to follow up on this and provide the right information to the health service providers we work with. On top of this, we realised that there was a big gap in the economic sphere and we embarked on a skills enhancement program dubbed The Hebwa Program, where we trained our members in making tie and dye fabrics as a means to earn an income. Others were trained in construction and were able to find odd jobs at different building sites during the pandemic. This program also focused on computer literacy which saw a number of our members trained in basic computer skills to better position them for the competitive technology driven environment we are living in. To minimize costs and provide opportunities for our own, we decided to tap into the skills of the members staying at the shelter. We recruited a wellness manager and nurse from within our membership since they were trained in these particular areas. We also registered an increase in the number of violence cases especially towards the masculine presenting women and transgender persons. For instance one of our occupants had started a business frying and selling chips and eggs by the roadside. For a while, things were going well and then, people started heckling and calling her names. We soon received a letter threatening her life; therein, the locals said they were aware she was a man posing as a woman and if she didn't stop wearing feminine clothes and acting like a woman, they'd beat her up. They argued that she was a bad influence on their children and they were willing to protect them (the children) by any means necessary. With the raids on COSF and Let's Walk Uganda, we decided to sensitize our members on how to protect themselves. We trained them on security and cautioned them against being rowdy and engaging in behavior that draws unnecessary attention them.



Challenges

The majority of LBQ women are social butterflies and our existence is boosted in social settings. We love to gather and talk to people, especially those who can relate to our own experiences; therefore the lockdown was a very tough period for most. Our social existence was completely shut down and this resulted into many people spiraling into anxiety and depression. Intimate partner violence also became a huge issue because there was no emotional release for partners; we were together 24/7 for weeks on end. Eventually, people started to fight a lot- we saw many couples breaking up and others going through tough patches. The financial strain on people only worsened an already delicate situation. The raids were of course, another big challenge especially for shelters. We were constantly in fear that we would be next. We were comforted by the knowledge that there are organisations doing legal organizing to ensure that in the event a raid happened, they would follow up and make certain that our members are released. One of the things that posed a big challenge was the inadequate access to health care services for our shelter members. Most of the clinics they normally go to for free medical care are far, and it was impossible to get there during the lockdown. While we appealed to various organisations for assistance in this particular area, we didn't receive much feedback.

Numbers of shelter occupants during the pandemic

We had more people coming to us during the lockdown in comparison to pre lockdown. The numbers skyrocketed; we even noticed that the people that we had housed after the ram raid were coming back. Also, with more people losing their jobs, we started seeing an increase in the rate of homelessness which, of course, added to the numbers at the shelter. We were the final resort for people who found themselves without a place to live and our doors were wide open to make sure no one slept on the street.

Donor funds

The pandemic greatly affected donor funding; most donors we approached said that organisations had no running activities and programs during lockdown therefore they could not release any funds. Shelters were an uncharted territory and donors didn't quite know how to navigate the process of providing assistance to us. We did get a few donors that understood our position and were willing to assist us, but there was the issue of unavailable signatories. Because it was lockdown, most of the people that were supposed to sign off on these donations were not easily accessible which stalled the transfer of funds. The processes and documentation for proposals were also tightened, for example a donor would request for an audit report which was impossible to get during lockdown since all our auditors were unable to move. All pleas to loosen some of these requirements fell on deaf ears.



Coping Mechanisms

One of the first things we implemented during lockdown was monitoring and assessing the shelter occupants; we acknowledged the hard truth that a collective healing process isn't only based on one person but the support that the community is giving. We then set out to create a space that fostered a sense of belonging, and had continuous conversations with local chairmen, police, and chief magistrates. We sensitized them about the needs of LBQ women as well as the urgency to protect them both communally and constitutionally. We also focused our effort on ensuring that our shelter members acquired job readiness skills through the Hebwa and Hakuna Matata programs as earlier explained. With the number of legal and police cases we handled, we resolved to create a legal desk where we are continuously monitoring the crises that LBQ women undergo as well as tracking the human rights violations we have endure on a daily basis. We have also established partnerships with more health facilities to widen the base for medical care within our community. The two places we referred our members to before lockdown could no longer handle the numbers.

ORGANIZATIONS

Recounting the COSF-20 Kitalya Ordeal

CHILDREN OF THE SUN FOUNDATION

Henry Mukiibi shares the story of the COSF 20 and their detention at Kitalya Prison during the COVID 19 lockdown.



Henry Mukiibi is an openly bisexual man living in Uganda and is the team leader at Children of the Sun Foundation, a shelter that provides temporary accommodation to LGBT persons who may find themselves homeless for various reasons. Our team met up with him and he opened up about life at the shelter during the pandemic, and the raids that left many of his members incarcerated during the lockdown.

THE RAID AND POLICE DETENTION

Before COVID-19, we had a normal life. When the pandemic struck, it distracted and disorganized our work because we became an easy target for the authorities. On the 28th March 2020, our lives came to a screeching halt. I remember that day vividly because we didn't have food at the shelter, so I approached Sexual Minorities Uganda-SMUG who gave me some funds to support the COSF members. In the wee hours of the morning, I received a call from the shelter administrator informing me that we had been raided by police. I immediately recollected myself and called Human Rights Awareness and Promotion Forum (HRAPF) and they advised me to go to the shelter in order to gather more information. As soon as I got there, I was put under arrest; I then called Richard, our board chair for him to be aware that we were all under arrest. It was at this point that the mayor arrived with uniformed personnel. They started beating our shelter members, and ushered in several members of the media to take pictures. He went as far as forcing them to surrender their parents' contacts which led to a whole ripple effect of multiple outings. They started questioning me about where I get money; I told them I make money as a social worker, and I have businesses that support these people. At about noon, the police officers started calling the members, one at a time, to perform anal tests—they would wear gloves and force their fingers up the anuses of our members. Many people were forced to undergo these tests that day. People were now starting to gather around and they quickly tied us up with ropes, and marched us from the shelter to the police post where we were detained. As we moved, people were spitting at us, boxing us and throwing stones. Unfortunately I was the last person in the line and many of the stones ended up on my back. Upon reaching the police post, they tried to make me give a statement which I refused to do without my lawyer. I asked the Officer in Charge to give me my phone to call my lawyer. Thankfully, someone from HRAPF was calling; their team had arrived at the shelter and been detained. Justine spoke to the OC who then authorized for the release of all the people that were being held at the shelter. The police issued a warrant and I was taken back to the shelter where they searched the entire building. At the end of the lengthy search, they had only found condoms, PREP and other general medical supplies. Some members were now visibly weak and others were coming down with infections. Most of these were granted bond and released with our medical officer to seek remedial assistance. In the morning, we all had to make statements. All they wanted was for us to admit to the 'crime' of homosexuality but I told all my members not to put ink to paper regarding their sexuality or gender identity. Since there was no evidence to pin homosexuality to our charge sheets, the Kampala metropolitan police spokesperson told us that we were going to be charged for defying a presidential COVID-19 directive. As our lawyers were trying to figure out how to get us out of prison, the president declared a national lockdown and we lost all physical contact with our legal team. We were then driven in a truck to Nsangi Magistrate court where the magistrate read us the case; she said we had defied presidential directives and were to be taken to Kitalya for 28 days.

KITALYA PRISON

At Kitalya, we registered our belongings and we were given food- I don't know if what we ate even qualifies to be called food'. The beans were rotten and the posho was coarse and barely ready- this was chicken feed! Initially, we refused to eat and the other inmates laughed and said we would eventually come around. They out rightly told us, "You are joking. You will eat it!" The first night wasn't so rough but by the next morning, everyone knew that we were LGBT+ identifying persons and the horror began. The prison religious heads and the wardens led the discrimination campaign against us. They told us not to go to the bathroom because according to them, a bathroom break would be an opportunity for us to have sex. I was being called the leader of all homosexuals and while I am not embarrassed about who I am, this kind of constant hazing left me mentally drained. People went as far as making death threats- they told us they would find ways to put steel wire in our food to kill us off. I vividly remember that Easter; we did not eat anything and the other prisoners kept chanting death wishes upon us. I noticed that the situation could very easily spiral out of control so I asked the COSF members to remain calm and not give the other prisoners a reason to turn physically violent. There was also the medical aspect; we had recently carried out a circumcision drive and some of the people who were now in jail had raw wounds that needed proper medical attention. Their wounds started getting infected, those on ARVs were not taking their medicine as religiously as they need to, others contracted dysentery, and all they were given was paracetamol. There was also an incident where a trans woman was burnt. First, they removed her pants to see what her genitals looked like and the OC Wanyhala Philemon ordered another officer to sit a burning log of wood on her privates. He said, "You want sex, so you enjoy it!" They put that hot piece of wood up her anus and burnt her thighs too. When the 28th day reached, we thought we were heading to court but unfortunately we didn't go. On the 49th day, we finally went back to court. The Executive Director of HRAPF, Adrian Jjuko was present which gave all of us hope and we signed papers authorizing them to be our legal counsel. The second appearance that we had to make in court was slated to take place in the screening courts within the prison (these were transmitted virtually between the Nsangi court room and the prison). When we were all settled, the signal went off! Please note that the signal was working perfectly during the court sessions for other people. Immediately, the other inmates started saying that the homosexuality curse we carried was delaying our hearing and interfering with the progress of our case. A few weeks later, we got word that our case had been dismissed! Oh the joy! Our legal team came to pick us but the prison officers refused to hand us over claiming we still had some paper work to complete before they could release us. That night, we all crowded into a small room because we were scared of being harmed by the other inmates, we were not willing to risk our lives by staying in the same place with people who had been threatening us during our entire stay yet they now knew that we would be released soon. We were released the very next day! We all had infections; some of us had lice, others were all covered in strange rashes, people had sepsis from untreated wounds. It was awful but we were still very excited and grateful to be leaving Kitalya after 52 long and painful days. Sexual Minorities Uganda (SMUG) and HRAPF got us a nice hotel where we stayed for two weeks. We were finally receiving adequate health care as well as counseling to help us deal with the trauma we had undergone. After the two weeks, HRAPF provided funds for us to relocate. In order to avoid getting into more trouble based on defying presidential directives, they advised that we find individual residencies for each of the formerly incarcerated members. I was tasked with finding rentals, which I did and paid three months' rent upfront for each. Another donor also offered enough funds to cover food, medical care and basic necessities during the transition time. While this was a very welcome initiative, there was also anxiety among the COSF20 because they did not know how they would sustain themselves after the 6 months they had paid for. I had to reassure them that they should look at this as a catapult for their lives since the shelter is only a transition space as well. Besides, COSF would always be available to welcome them back should they fail to figure things out. Because most of them were outed in such a public way, it was difficult for them to find employment; that's why some of them are back here now. With my meager savings, I decided to set up a restaurant in an area where people didn't know us and I have employed as many of the COSF20 as I can. COSF is also currently re-establishing the clinic where we hope to employ more members.

LIFE AFTER KITALYA

I came back from prison and had to rebuild my whole life. Everything near and dear to me was affected especially my marriage. My wife was abroad during this whole ordeal but the first message I received from her, as soon as I had access to my phone, was her asking whether I was gay. She had seen the news on the internet and was devastated. After what must now be the hardest conversation of my life, she resigned herself to me being myself as long as I shielded my sexuality and work from our children. She was hurt because her entire village and all her friends knew I was bisexual and they were constantly calling her about the same. She did her best to shield me because we have little children to protect, and for that, I am very grateful to her. We are not separated but she has put an end to any sexual relationship between us; I understand her pain and know that I must be patient with her to fully process the new dynamic of our relationship. Once while hosting a birthday party for our daughter, her sister said, "I was told by our Ssenga that you are one of the bisiyaga." This was right in front of all our guests. While I was dealing with backlash from different people, my 94 year old grandmother was very happy that I was home. She loves me like a son because she raised me, so all she cared about was my freedom. With all this to deal with, the media witch hunt has continued and of course, it has spiraled down to my children; they were being treated very badly at school because the other kids had been told that I am gay. I am currently looking for money to take them to a different school where they will be at peace; I am looking for a school where they will not be judged because of who their father chooses to love. I am also dealing with the problem of accrued arrears for the shelter. The landlord is demanding for three months' rent in back payments. If I don't pay the three months' arrears plus a fee of 500,000 UGX to his lawyers, we are going to court. I looked for that money myself. We are in urgent need of a stable financial donor if the COSF work is to continue- this is a space that took in vulnerable and homeless LGBTQ+ youth to help them get back on their feet so the work we do is crucial. However it is impossible to continue if we do not have funds to sort basic things like rent, medical care and food.





C  **VID**
DIARIES

Andrea Minaj



I am 23 years old and a member of COSF; I was raised by my grandmother because my biological father wanted nothing to do with me and to this day, he doesn't recognize me as his child. When I was introduced to COSF, the hospitality and acceptance I experienced healed a big part of my emotional trauma. For the first time in my life, I was not seeking attention or yearning for parental love because I knew I belonged. When the lockdown was announced, I was unable to go to the village where my grandmother lives- that's how I ended up staying at COSF during that period and was taken to Kitalya prison after the raid. We were accused of defying presidential orders but we all know that was just to cover up the real reason we had been arrested. Throughout our stay in the prison, we were beaten and burnt with firewood because they wanted us to confess that we were homosexuals. They even constantly accused us of trying to recruit other inmates. We were eventually released from prison with effort from HRAPH and SMUG but by the time we came back, my employer informed me that he could no longer have me working in his company since I am gay. And just like that, I had no job! Fortunately, we were given transitional accommodation for two weeks and funds to help us find places to live. While I am thankful for all that was done to ensure that we smoothly transitioned back to our normal lives, I don't think this was the best move. Many of us had lost our jobs due to either the pandemic or being outed, and had no source of income to make this sustainable. With restricted movement and most businesses shut down, I was unable to find another job and I quickly found myself back at the shelter. I hope that opportunities come up so that I can be able to earn a living and go back to living a normal life.



Peace

My name is Akello Peace, I am transgender woman. Before COVID-19, I did odd jobs to earn a meager income that supported me fairly well. During the pandemic, it became increasingly difficult to find jobs and soon, I was thrown out of my shack and found myself on the streets of Mbale. I was sleeping under trucks and begging strangers for money just to afford my next meal. Unfortunately, going to my family was not an option because they disowned me because of my gender expression and during this season of homelessness, I was arrested a number of times. What was already a bad situation only got worse with the pandemic and I had a mental health breakdown while living on the streets. Being on the streets, with no source of income or prospective employment put together with the rejection from my family led me into depression. At the time, I was not even aware that the community was organized and there were shelters or organisations I could approach. The restrictions on movement meant that I spent most of my time alone which worsened my mental state but as luck would have it, a Mbale based transman bumped into me one day. Seeing that I was in desperate need of help, he put me in touch with Rella House of Hope in Kampala. After doing a background check on me, they transported me to Kampala and that is how I started rehabilitation. I have recently secured a job at Rights for Her Uganda as a care taker and my plan is to save up enough funds to go to beauty school so that I can eventually open up a saloon.



Phiona

I tracked what was happening among the LGBTQ+ community in Masaka district during the pandemic and it was appalling. There was poor adherence amongst Kuchus who are on ART and PREP because transport was very expensive and most of them were not near their health facilities. Those that managed to get to the health centres in one way or the other were mostly disappointed because their drug regimens were out of stock. However, after realizing that many people were not adhering to their medication, TASO Masaka put in place a programme where they put effort toward home deliveries for their clients. This initiative saved many Kuchu lives. Most Kuchus lost their jobs eventually had no food or shelter. YIHCOE, a Masaka based organisation collaborated with Queer Youth Uganda and salvaged the situation by providing relief food and other basic needs to the Kuchu youth. Intimate partner violence was also on a volatile rise because some partners were not ready for marriage but because they had no option but to be in the same space 24/7, many wrangles ensued. Others had to look for people to stay with and ended up being mistreated; we saw quite a number of rape cases that led to STD and HIV infections. To counter this, counselors were brought on board and a community Sunday program was initiated. The goal was create safe space for dialogues so people could offload and share with their peers as well as bring a socialization aspect into the picture in order to break the lock down monotony. Cyber stalking was another effect of COVID because most Kuchus were idle and ended up on social media and dating apps. The interactions they had led to several outings in the community. Queer youth Uganda organized digital security trainings and we learnt how to carefully use the different internet apps without compromising ourselves. Inadequate information by health workers and lack of consumables like lubricants, also affected some Kuchus in Masaka because these very crucial sexual health items were unavailable. This led to a lot of sexual infections and disease transmissions in the area. To deal with the rising problems of unemployment and theft, economic empowerment programs were introduced and many Kuchus gained skills in tailoring, making masks, baking, poultry farming etc. We also experienced a spike in the rate of alcoholism and substance abuse because most of us were stressed and resorted to drinking and smoking.

Papiyon

My name is Papiyon, I am a new member of Rella Women's Foundation. I came on board to provide professional assistance to the many young women that come in with trauma. I help them navigate their triggers and together, we strategise on how to heal as well as lay a solid foundation on how to move forward. All this is done through counseling, individual development programs and mentorship. The height of the COVID-19 pandemic was a very scary time; it had shown up abruptly and affected every facet of our lives. The shelters played a very big role in giving these young girls a sense of security as well as keeping them away from the streets. Many people had their sexuality or preferred gender identity exposed before they were emotionally ready to come out. Having safe spaces like RELLA and other shelters helped people within the community understand the value of such initiatives. Most people actually got to know, for the first time, that there were shelters that took in destitute and homeless persons within our community.

COPING MECHANISMS

We noticed that the lockdown severely affected our community especially the youth. Since we had taken in many people that were outed or came out prematurely, we knew it was imperative to create an environment where they felt safe enough to share their emotions and thoughts. It was a healing process as they interacted, forged friendships, and unwound. The individual counseling sessions also uncovered very many fears amongst these girls. From my analysis of the cases I dealt with, most of these were embedded in religious or cultural beliefs that made them feel like they were sinners or were unworthy simply because of their sexual orientation. We dug deeper and by the time that particular program ended, we had come up with strategies on how they could better themselves and how to safeguard themselves in a society that doesn't fully accept them. We also had career talks where the girls were encouraged and affirmed to realize that their sexuality had nothing to do with how or what they could deliver on a professional level. The one factor that constantly came up was their desire to fully embrace who they are individually, in an environment that continues to question and belittle them. Some of these issues, we realize, are not things that can be fixed in a day or a couple of sessions but we are committing to walk this journey with them if only to ease the pressures of being a functional gender minority in this country. Of course like most people during the lockdown, we suffered several mental health issues and these cases had to be handled. We also had to ensure that these challenges were addressed by people who are professionally equipped to handle mental health matters.

PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

The pandemic was an eye opener because we haven't had something that has hit us all in this way. Initially, most of us thought this was something that would pass but after about a month, it became very obvious that we had to re-strategise and adapt. We now had time to think about what we're doing wrong on both individual and organizational level. We had to come up with ways to better ourselves—work plans had to be amended and we incorporated a savings scheme that will now be helpful in case of any eventualities or unplanned occurrences. Most of us also had to start pondering on different ways to earn a living because of the number of people that were laid off. In the event that something shakes the world up again or one suddenly loses their job, they must still be able to meet their needs; that's why many people currently have side businesses.

What is your name, tell us a little bit about yourself.

My name is Amias and I identify as they/them. I'm a non-binary transperson.

What was your life like before the pandemic hit?

I can't say my life was completely perfect before COVID-19 because living in a homophobic environment where people make it clear, daily, that you are unwanted is quite tough. The pandemic only made things worse. We were always hearing about people who were being attacked and this made me fearful. Most of us went into hiding in order to be safe.

You say you needed to hide, please elaborate

Before the pandemic, I was doing odd jobs to get by. My friends would connect me to different gigs so that I could earn from these part time jobs. With the increase in violence towards LGBTQ+ persons, it became increasingly difficult to move around freely especially for us trans persons. I needed to be safe and could no longer be up and about.

What kind of jobs were doing before the lockdown?

I have taken part in a number of research projects. I also used to occasionally work with an advertising company that would send us to do different regions to collect data on the different tourist attractions and picturesque areas there.

How did you initially feel about the lockdown?

At first, it was okay. I thought they were protecting us. We all felt it was useful for that lockdown to be there. We thought it would last a month or two but when it went into months, that's when things started becoming hard and life started changing.

Where were you during this period?

Lockdown found me with my family but living with them wasn't so easy because I didn't have much privacy. I had a boyfriend at the time and we were in close communication by phone and they started to get curious.

Did they ever find out about your sexuality/gender expression?

They know, they found out during the lockdown. My boyfriend walked all the way to see me at home and I guess it was easy to see that we were lovers because we hugged and our body language was obvious. Previously, I had been expelled from school because I had been caught kissing a boy. Although I denied these accusations, my family already had their doubts. After my boyfriend's visit, I was pressured to get married in the hopes that this would curb my attraction to boys as well as stop the rumors in our village.

With all this going on, were your parents thinking about your education?

No, they didn't. When the marriage conversations started, they made it clear they would not be paying my school fees. That is how I went out and started hustling; I met a number of people who introduced me to the art of freelancing.

Are you or your family open to the idea of reconciliation?

Never! They told me they would rather kill me. To them, I'm better off dead than them having a son who is gay.

Where do you see yourself post-COVID?

Right now I would say I have no future. I know I have to start afresh but I realize that to move forward and forge a successful life, I must cut ties with most people from my past. I do not want people hunting me down. I am also thinking of a way to raise capital and start a business.

What kind of business are you thinking about?

I want to start any casual business; maybe buying shoes from a wholesaler and reselling them.

A portrait of Golden Tatiana, a Black woman with short, dark, curly hair, wearing round glasses and a floral patterned shirt. She is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression.

Golden Tatiana

How would you describe your life before COVID-19?

Before COVID-19, I was staying at home. My brother called me up when he found out that I am a lesbian. I went home immediately and a fight followed; this ended with me being chased away from home. My partner and I decided to get a place together but because I was unemployed, the entire financial burden fell on her. I eventually got a job but this too was short lived because I was fired as soon as my boss heard that I am a lesbian.

How did your boss get to know?

Gossip gets around plus my workmates had always overheard the arguments with my brother over the phone.

To take you back a little bit, how did your brother find out about your sexuality?

My brother always saw this particular girl coming to see me at home but he thought she was just my friend. He started to hear rumors about us and that's when all the trouble started. The day he found out, he destroyed all my property in the house and beat me up. As the lockdown days went by, my partner and I started to have issues and soon, I was homeless. A friend within the community gave me a contact of someone who connected me to a shelter in Mbale. Another good Samaritan helped find means to get to this shelter and that's how I relocated.

Do you think you would be okay if another wave of COVID-19 happened?

I don't think so.

What plans do you have for the future?

I want to start my own business so that I can take care of myself.

Tell us about your life before COVID-19?

Before COVID-19, I was a florist- professionally trained but with the increased spread of COVID and the lockdown, we were completely out of jobs since people having parties were our biggest clientele.

How did that solitude and restriction affect you?

I faced a number of challenges; within the first couple of months, I had used up all my savings and was unable to pay rent. I could barely afford food let alone medical care. When I realised that staying in my rental house was only accumulating debt, I moved to a shelter.

Why didn't you go back to your parents?

First, I am the one that was taking care of my sisters' financial needs before the pandemic and being out of work, I could no longer support them. There was no way I was going back home to burden my parents who I was well aware were also struggling.

Are you still living at the shelter?

No. I found a place to rent after lockdown. Rights4HER Uganda took me on as a Wellness and Administration officer, so I am earning decently. I have also resumed helping out my sisters.

What coping mechanisms did you use during the lockdown?

I actually had no support during lockdown and dealt with all my issues by myself. However, I love music so I found myself singing most of the time and this would calm me down. I also prayed a lot.

Now that we are all recovering from the effects of the lockdown, what are your plans for the future?

I am thankful that I have a job and my plan is to save and start a business to supplement my current income.

What kind of business are you looking at?

Being a florist, that is the same line of business I'd like to go into.

If ever another pandemic hit, would you be able to cope?

I pray this never happens but if it did, I learnt a lot on how to survive as minimally as possible and I think that would help a lot.



Jero
Kabogoza

/BOMBASTIC
MAGAZINE

Charles Ssenabulya

Please introduce yourself and share how you been fairing during the COVID19 pandemic as a health centered organization

My name is Charles Senabulya, I am the Programs Director at Children of the Sun Foundation Uganda (COSF). This is an organisation that offers medical and shelter services to our community. First of all, the health center was shifted from Kyengera to a new location after the raid. We have been working within our limited budget to meet the demand for accessible health care but we are still falling short.

What lessons did you learn from the pandemic?

The pandemic has taught us that anything can happen at any time. We have learnt to live within our means and to adjust quickly to change. In that sense, we have also learnt how to prepare for a crisis. We had our members detained and services halted and yet we had beneficiaries who still expected services. It is difficult to say how smoothly we can face another pandemic or a lockdown, but truthfully I think we are in a better place and better prepared for something like that. We have learnt how to prepare and act fast.

When your colleagues were arrested, how did that affect you? Were you arrested?

I was not arrested but the whole experience was traumatising. Because both the Executive and Creative Directors were arrested, everyone was looking at me for support but I too, was going through the shock of the raid. I was emotionally unable to help as much as people expected me to. I also had to support the children and dependants of those who had been arrested, and that added a financial aspect to an already difficult situation. I was the liaison between those who had been detained and the legal team, therefore I had a big load to carry too. The court was in Nsangi and I remember when HRAPH wanted to submit papers for bail, but they couldn't because the offices were closed. Making that phone call to inform my colleagues that we hadn't submitted the paperwork was a very low moment and hearing the disappointment in our ED's voice made it even worse.

How did you take the news of their release?

I was relieved! Extremely happy! These feelings didn't last long because as soon as I saw them, my heart sunk. They were all visibly thinner, you could tell some were sick and they were all traumatised. There were many tears that day, some were joyful but most people cried because they could not believe the level of suffering they had endured yet they had not committed any crime.

We all watched as the organisation regrouped and rose again! What was that process like for you?

Just like I said earlier, there was still need on the ground; we had beneficiaries who hadn't accessed services for 55 days and as a community drug dispensing point, we had to quickly get back on our feet because health is a crucial matter. We were not going to allow ourselves to sit down and cry, there was work to be done and that is exactly what we focused on. Fortunately, we found some partners to support us through the process of reorganising to serve our community.

What are some of the successes that you would say you have achieved so far?

We have established a clinic. Previously, it was a small center with no drugs or professionals but the clinic is now well established with qualified LGBTQ health workers who can relate with our specific community needs. We have also tried to empower the community through income generating projects like a restaurant where the staff is 95% LGBTQ. We have also been able to re-establish our shelter in a safer place. Initially, people would come to the shelter without a clear plan for their future but currently, when someone joins us, they are not supposed to be there permanently. It is a place to rejuvenate and find yourself. If one is too young, we reach out to their family and have a professional counselor initiate a reconciliation process. We have also empowered people with skills to earn an income, and have linked some people to technical schools. To address COVID-19 itself, we have been able to do vaccination here in collaboration with Men of the Night Uganda (MONU). We have also provided nutritional support to a number of individuals.

A close-up portrait of Ntale Mark Farida, a Black man with a beard and mustache, wearing a blue jacket. He has silver eye makeup and a diamond earring. His eyes are closed, and he has a serene expression. The background is a soft, out-of-focus mix of purple and pink light.

Ntale Mark Farida

I am called Ntale Mark Farida but I prefer being called Mark. I am 23 years old.

[Tell us about your life before COVID-19?](#)

I was in my senior four vacation, and living with my mother and two sisters. We were struggling to make ends meet; my friends had found gigs where we would paint buildings and get paid between 20,000 and 15,000 UGX per day.

[How did people find out about your sexuality?](#)

I had a very close friend who always questioned why I had passcodes to all the apps in my phone. I simply said I loved my privacy and didn't want people in my business. One day, before my Whatsapp locked, she went through my chats and listened to an audio from my girlfriend. All hell broke loose and my anger and disappointed mother chased me from home immediately.

[Besides being chased from home, what other challenges did you face during the lockdown?](#)

I was introduced to drugs because I needed to drown the pain and depression. The drugs numbed me of all emotion. Because of the drug use which has now escalated into an addiction, I can barely eat even when I am hungry.

A portrait of a young man with braided hair, wearing a red hoodie with a rainbow-colored stripe on the sleeve. He is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. The background is dark red.

Shankxkhana Mbabazi

Please tell us about your life before the pandemic?

Before COVID-19, I was living with my mother in Kireka. Life was pretty normal until people in our area started to question my dress code. They were constantly making fun of me and calling me names; I was not only embarrassed but also very uncomfortable. The bullying and criticism got so bad that I could no longer live there and ended up going to a shelter. At the shelter, I found some peace but that was quickly snatched from beneath me. People started writing letters and slipping them under the gate; they were threatening us and telling us they knew we were homosexuals and we were not wanted in their village. We reported these incidents to the police but they did nothing. At the station, the police insisted on checking us because they were curious about why we behave like girls. Thankfully, we had gone with Winifred Mugambwa and a lawyer who insisted that such acts were illegal.

What happened after that?

I soon found a job as a shop attendant but that didn't last long too; the boss hadn't even paid me but let me go. I had no money and ended up seeking help from a community member who referred me to the shelter I am currently at. I reached an extent of self-harming because I was very depressed. I hope that my mental health gets better soon so that I can go back to living normally.

How have you been coping with the effects of Covid-19?

Most of the time, I listen to my music and I write a lot- this gives me a sense of calm and helps me think through my issues logically.

What are your plans for the future?

I hope to learn some skills that will help me to earn some money for example making bangles that I can sell.

Please share your name and briefly tell us about yourself

My name is Oketch Joel Edwards, I am a Japhadhola and one of the COSF20.

What was your day to day life like before the pandemic hit

Honestly, life before COVID-19 wasn't that good. I left home before the pandemic and was going through a rough patch; it was the first time I was on my own, trying to figure things out, experiencing the world by myself and lockdown only worsened the situation.

Please elaborate

Well, my parents always told me that I should be a good person because the world treats people differently. I was also raised to be hardworking and social; these are all values that I appreciated when I left home. I was willing to do any job where I was getting paid and I was always respectful towards people.

Please share your lockdown experience

By the time government announced the lockdown, we were home i.e. the COSF shelter. We were raided only 3 days into the lockdown! If I remember right, it was a Sunday morning and I had just woken up. I suddenly heard commotion in the compound and someone ordering everybody to gather outside. I was so confused and unsure of what was happening. We had planned to do general cleaning that morning so I didn't understand what all this was about. Then I saw the policeman and knew right there and then that this was going to escalate very quickly. We all gathered outside and we were ordered to sit on the ground.

Do you remember what was going through your mind at this particular moment?

My mind was blank but I remember being very scared. I had never experienced anything like this in my life. Have you ever been so scared that you freeze? That is exactly what happened to me. The police officers were very rude and they were asking all sorts of questions. "What do you do here? Which people fund you? Who supports you?" It was almost like an out of body experience for me.

After the arrest, did it cross your mind to reach out to your parents for help?

Actually, the police were asking people for their parents' contacts. Like most of my colleagues, I refused to give them my parents' phone numbers. The few people who gave in the numbers watched as the police called their parents to say that their children were homosexuals and were being arrested. They said they had been caught red-handed having sex, which wasn't even true.

Tell us about your experience at the police station

I was scared because I was very unsure about what would happen next but there was a sense of relief for me, because they put us in one cell. Being surrounded by people I knew made it a little easier on me. The following morning, the police spokesperson came with journalists and they paraded us and took pictures! We stayed at the police station for two days.



What happened thereafter?

We were taken to Nsangi Magistrates Court but were not even allowed inside; we stayed on the truck while our case was being read. From there, they drove us to Kitalya Prison.

Did your parents ever hear about this ordeal?

Yes they did. The first thing I did after being released was call my mother and all she said was, “So, you’re out!” She was crying and asking why I was doing this to her and our family. My family has cut off all communication with me although I am aware, through one of my cousins, that they are always checking on my WhatsApp status to see what I am up to. However, they all don’t pick my calls or even respond to my texts.

If you had a message for your family, what would you say to them?

I would ask them to try to understand that my sexuality does not define or make me a different person from the child they lovingly raised. I’d ask for patience and support as I navigate this journey to fully understand myself as well because their actions have had a tremendous impact on my life and mental health.

Please tell us about life in Kitalya

We were beaten the very day we arrived. I still have scars from that beating. (Shows scars) There were times the lawyers would come to check on us or follow up on the case, but whenever we would return to the general population area, we would be interrogated by the officers and our fellow inmates. They always wanted to know who had come to see us and what we talked about. In their minds, these were the people who ‘fund’ us to be homosexuals. During one of those interrogations, some of us were burnt with hot firewood, and the torturing went on for an entire afternoon. Prison authorities were aware of what was happening but they did nothing to protect us.

What happened when you were eventually released?

We were taken to a hotel to help us process and rest after the hardships of prison. We were also taken to hospital for assessment and those who needed medical care received it. All this was done by HRAPF and SMUG. Eventually, they gave us money for three months’ rent but that was hard to sustain for most of us since we were unemployed. Some people moved in together so they could use the rent money for longer periods of time. Currently, most of us are back at the shelter because we had no means to continue to pay rent after the three months elapsed.

What are some of the lessons you learnt during the COVID-19 period?

I have come to realize the value of what my parents used to tell me-to always be strong, respect people, work hard and not take anything for granted. I have had many opportunities with people within the community asking me to help out when they have trainings or workshops in exchange for a small pay. I believe this is because of the values I exercise daily. I am also very grateful to be alive; I could have died from Kitalya or even of COVID-19 but here I am, alive and well despite the punches life has thrown at me.



Economic Focus



Twena Organics

If anybody had told us that we would be running a business in early 2020, we would have laughed in their faces. There was always the belief that some people are born with business minds while others flourish better in employment spaces. When we moved to Lira with our bags full of more anxiety than hope, duty was calling and all sense of self was forgotten. It is true what they say; people from the North really do put 'odi' and 'mooyaa' on everything, 'odi' being peanut butter and 'mooyaa' being shea butter. We had never used or eaten shea butter until we moved to Lira. We started out using these products on ourselves and making concoctions for different things. We had essential oils for wellness that we started mixing with the shea butter for different remedies and we actually started seeing results. Whenever one of us would travel to Kampala, we carried a few products for friends and family. A very close friend kept pushing us to officially open the body butter business alongside the snacks business we were trying to establish. She was adamant and always told us we had figured out how to cure actual skin infections, but we never took her serious. The cost of production was also very high compared to what people were willing to spend on the products so for a while, we carried this on as a hobby. The turning point was the death of our supportive close friend. Grief pushed us to finally see what she had been saying to us and this birthed Twena Organics. The stories of business and COVID-19 vary, from closure to expansion or change but ours is of a loss that led to birth. We hope to carry our friend in every tin, every purchase and with each client we make, we are reminded of everything she saw in us before we even saw it in ourselves. We have invested in learning more about African skin and hair to make products tailored specifically for our skins and hair. Our products in the skin category are: body butter, body oil, vitamin C serum, sun screen, body wash, and soap and lip balm. In the hair category we have hair shampoo, leave in conditioner, detangler, hair oil and an edge serum. We also have beard oil and beard shampoo which are all paraben free and 100% organic. You can find our products on our social media accounts Twena on instagram and Twena organics on face book.



Faya Kombucha

Kombucha is a sweet drink made out of sugar, tea leaves and a scoby with a previously made kombucha raspy flavour. One needs to be very diligent to make it. As an activist cum entrepreneur, I had written several proposals. I was part of the leaders who pushed for economic empowerment and social skills as a change from the activism that relied entirely on donor funding. As an influencer in our community, I thought if my peers witnessed me start a business, many would also get encouraged to do something for themselves. As my business continues to grow, I will be able to train people with the sole aim of pushing them towards financial independence. The very first time I put up this product for sale was at a Mother's Day market. I was very skeptical and anxious about unveiling it but I couldn't withdraw my attendance because I had already paid for the setup space. My strategy was to give the attendees a sample of the drink for tasting, and slowly people started coming to my tent to purchase the drink. Strangely, most customers were Asians and Americans but it took a while for Ugandans to get used to it. Kombucha is used for different purposes but most use it as a mixer for strong alcohol. My hope is that I will have acquired better equipment by the end of the year to produce in large quantities. I also have a dream of participating in mixer competitions as a marketing strategy for kombucha. Currently, there are about two other companies producing this product although each has its own unique taste.

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Diaspora

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My pre COVID world was exciting. I didn't have to be back in the house at a designated time. I did not have to wear a mask. I did not have to get through road blocks to meet friends. COVID-19 changed all that.

On a personal level, I was, at first grateful that we could slow down and recenter. January to March 2020 was one of the heaviest times for me as my mental health was at its worst. I was crying, and trying to hold onto this life. My anxiety was at its all-time worst. When the pandemic came, it was a moment of calm and rescue for me.

Finally, I had reason to be with my family without missing school; being with loved ones for those months between March and November of 2021 helped me regain myself. I was also able to refocus on life and made a decent number of queer friends during this period who have become a core part of my life and support system. I am definitely in a better place to tackle future uncertainties.

A close-up portrait of Muriithi Kariuki. She has her hair styled in numerous braids, some of which are wrapped in orange and red fabric. She is wearing round, thin-rimmed glasses and large hoop earrings. Her eyes are closed, and she has a serene expression. She is wearing a red jacket over a teal top. The background is a solid teal color.

**Muriithi
Kariuki**

BEING A GAY IMMIGRANT IN THE WAKE OF COVID-19
OUTBREAK IN CANADA

It has been two years since the COVID-19 outbreak plagued the earth, and tissue paper became a currency. Initially, there was misinformation about what was really happening before the vaccine that seems to have restored and renewed hope for the world even though there is no cure yet. I have had two shots and one more booster shot which puts me at an advantage of surviving a COVID-19 infection but this would have not been the case for my friends and family back in Africa because of the vaccination hoarding which has left Africa as the most affected area. I cannot even begin to imagine what it is like to have a new variant and hospitals that are not equipped to handle the outbreak. I have lost friends and relatives because of COVID-19. I may have not caught Covid-19 but I have been affected in others ways. I had just arrived in Canada as an immigrant and was beginning to explore and have an adventure visiting cities, learning about church, the food, fashion, and school when it was all suddenly cut short by the pandemic. I lost my job and had to rely on well-wishers to get by. I could not even go to gym and grocery shopping became an uphill task. I was confined to the four walls of my house as the lockdown restrictions were toughened. Even though I managed to fly to Calgary from Ontario to participate in the Black Trans Lives Matter in Edmonton, we were restricted to wearing masks, isolations and distancing before, during and after the flight. Things were a little different in 2020 as I got to attend the same event BTLM Stonewall Symposium online where I performed for an audience that comprised of delegates across several countries around the world.

A portrait of George Barasa, a Black man with short braided hair, wearing a dark patterned shirt. He is looking slightly to the left of the camera with a neutral expression. The background is blurred, showing some greenery and a building.

**George
Barasa**

BEING A GAY IMMIGRANT IN THE WAKE OF COVID-19 OUTBREAK IN CANADA COT'D

Trying to cope with isolation as a new comer in Canada had me develop addiction temporarily and I was admitted to the hospital six times in one year. Six times I was at the emergencies in several hospitals and each time, it was about an overdose. It has been a journey trying to get better and keeping up with my education. While I was battling addiction, I lost everything to a fire that torched my residence. I lost most of my memorabilia that I had brought with me from Africa except for one picture. I was affected so much by the fire that I had to be admitted to the hospital for more than a month and I had to postpone my studies which were adversely affected for one semester. I could not attend my lectures as I was in shock. I struggled a lot with the fact that I had lost everything and occasionally relapsed but above all this, I got better as I learned to start afresh and I could not have done it without the help of my former landlord and my new friends who have held my hands since the fire tragedy. I also received considerable support from my online followers and I raised substantial amount of monetary support which helped in re-establishing myself.

While there has been fire that razed my house that nothing was saved except myself, dropping out of school for a whole semester, battling addiction for many months; I have been keeping myself busy doing other things. I have been travelling around Canada with the LGBTIQ Human Rights crusade and most recently, I attended a youth summit for queer men in Kingston, Canada. I have been engaging in several projects on LGBTIQ rights not just in Canada but in selected African countries away from Republic of South Africa, Kenya, and Eastern and Southern Africa. I have also maintained an online presence where I continued to highlight LGBTIQ grievances through online talks and conferences. I am even lucky that I am prioritised given that I am immunosuppressed with HIV, I continue to access the best medication available to manage my health—something that would have been hard to get. Recently, I have been approved for the injectable HIV regimen which is administered once every two months as an alternative to the one a pill day regimen. I have also started my new job at Black CAP, an organisation that offers HIV services to Black people living with HIV/AIDS in Toronto. Somehow there is a silver lining amid this COVID-19 nightmare!

“I am reminded that my decision to seek asylum in South Africa and subsequently being resettled in Canada has accorded me the benefits of being lucky to be in a country where vaccination is possible and where there are so many support projects in place for those who are struggling with various hardships during COVID-19.”-Jojibaro




MY COVID STORY: SURVIVING LOCKDOWN AS A NEW IMMIGRANT

The first case in Germany was reported on January 27, 2020, in Bavaria and by March 10th, mass gatherings were prohibited, schools started close and gradually a total lockdown was upon us. At the time, I was staying in a shared apartment with a German but he was in and out of hospital for his transition surgeries. Basically at the beginning of the pandemic, I thought that things would get back to normal in a period of a year or less because as an active social person, the quarantine restrictions became a big challenge to me. I had to stay home by myself 24/7 in a foreign land and I missed the clubs, malls, cafés, movies, theaters, my friends and family. During that time I longed for company, I wished for social places to open, I was terribly homesick, I was missing our hot steamed matooke at one point that I ended up having a zoom dinner date with a friend who was in Nairobi Kenya. During the pandemic, I was also studying and attending school online. It was not easy as I always missed having physical interactions with my classmates; this eventually affected my mental health and I often got destructed just being online. I also continued to volunteer with an Organization called People like Us (Plus) a queer refugee's organization and we used to have online meetings other members of the organization which kept me busy. I was also able to help MONU fundraise for money to buy food for its members during the systematic lockdowns and to carry out COVID awareness campaigns.

When it came to accessing health care services, there was an over load of patients in hospitals so getting an appointment with a doctor was a tag of war unless it was an emergency. Priority was basically given to COVID patients. Sometimes you would speak to the doctor by phone and they would send you a prescription. I felt like I was in a vacuum, I missed my family and friends, I had issues with the language and had to always look out for someone to accompany me for my appointments like the city registration or doctor's appointments.

/BOMBASTIC MAGAZINE



**Cameron
Kakande**

MY COVID STORY: SURVIVING LOCKDOWN AS A NEW IMMIGRANT CT'D

As the lockdown eased, I was able to move into a one occupant apartment but it's hardly possible to find someone whose life has not been changed in one way or another because of COVID-19. Challenges and restrictions posed by the pandemic have been especially difficult for young people, considering the rapid lifestyle changes brought about by the need to follow protective measures and self-isolate. The pandemic has taught its lesson to almost everyone, including those who didn't get sick or lose loved ones. I realize that death is a normal part of life but that fact doesn't minimize the pain of losing people that I used to see daily, talk with and love. I'm grateful for the people surrounding me, the people who help me, and I'm especially appreciative to my family and all my friends. This pandemic has taken its toll, on me, physically, emotionally and spiritually. I realize that life, as I knew it, will never go back to the normal I knew before this pandemic's rage and as I fixate on this new normal, I continue to seek safe and uplifting ways to move forward.

**Cameron
Kakande**

Who is Queer? Who Isn't?

OPINION

I write this to openly bring out the scary, uncomfortable, unspoken queer traditions that have caught on and have created boxes, stigma, and setbacks in coming out, and free expressions for queer beings. If one identifies as a lesbian, I have noticed the queer community expects you to live up to a certain standard and yet as you grow, you continue to discover self.

Our society sometimes puts us in a bubble where you are not supposed to be curious about yourself and it has led to not only queer persons closeting and hiding from the community to experience a new growth but also increased mental health issues.

If you find a lesbian who has made a choice to have a child by having sexual relations with a man based on their own personal reasons, then they are not lesbian enough; this is especially true for butch lesbians and trans persons who choose to have children. The community may even stop engaging with you and alienate you completely.

Are we losing our humanity, are we bullying each other to feel more vulnerable than we already are, are we adding onto the mental health traumas we are already dealing with on top of the patriarchy structures that have pushed us down for years? How did we arrive at this point where we question if other people are queer enough?

We forget in our queerness, there is choice; there is a step we have all made to break free on the heteronormativity that the African society has embedded in us. This was hard on its own, and we are now fighting battles of being accepted. We need to be kinder to each other, we are all we have, and cannot afford to be fighting one another.

I believe that apart from being queer, you are a human being first with your own different and unique needs /choices to make in life so, we need to be more open minded to each other. If I choose to have children, in whatever way, it should be fine. If I choose love instead of identity or a label, that too should be fine. If I choose to be fluid, I should not be alienated, questioned or judged. Can we please respect each other's choices? We are not all about our identities. We are human beings that believe in living and loving fellow humans, with or without labels.



Poetry

Quarantine Lover

Quarantune

A likklequarantune for my quarantine lover
 It's funny how it took the world end for the madness in my head to end
 To realize that you're where I would love to end
 It took the whole world to stay away from me for me to crave to come closer
 Social distancing directives led to my heart craving some zero distance
 I don't think I've ever used my phone quite this much
 It's like every time my phone vibrates or pings in my pocket
 It's like a way close to you
 Somehow I feel like it can defy the laws like you are LDU proof
 I had never made a sound louder than the mess in my head until my phone
 started ringing when you call
 The when the whole world was locked down, you finally chased down this wild
 heart of mine and locked it down
 That of everything finally we've managed to self-isolate with love
 I work out now, you know
 My heart lifting and dropping at everything you say
 My fingers running 180mm/ sec across my keyboard
 My doctor will proud of all the cardio vascular exercises I'm doing
 Getting excited over seeing you, texting you
 I think we have all the symptoms
 But of all of them the biggest is shortness of breath
 I see your face and I am short of breath
 Human beings really shouldn't be this beautiful especially when there are
 respiratory pandemics roaming the earth
 So quarantine lover I guess all I'm asking is do you wanna come over
 Maybe when all this is over, yeah
 You could kiss me all over

e.stripper





what's all this then?

to begin
 early am
 Jehovah has switched me back
 to the top-top pre-menstrual funk
 of before I got covid
 agony/ecstasy
 I'm back to being a witch
 back to baking
 and
 melting
 I,
 weighed
 156lbs on Tues.
 then 160lbs on Friday
 tues.
 ongoing staffing crisis /work related fatigue
 had me pick an outfit to wear to work at 11p
 then
 I put the tee-& boy-shorts in the backpack (somehow)
 then
 after showering
 shea-butter-ed my face/lotion-ed body
 spent 5 minutes tossing the bedroom
 1:30a (at work)
 I found the tee & boy-shorts wedged in Wired
 like pages
 wed.
 7:59a
 scheduled paid call to NN
 she says "I'm not downloading another app, Barbara naawe."
 I've got to re-install WhatsApp
 on her birthday
 Ok?
 ok.

1p

running on fumes & 1.5 hours of sleep
 driver's license falls out of windbreaker
 disappears or gets chewed by treadmill(s)

3:45p

onions follow cooking oil
 dammit

well, I add cooking oil to the saucepan
 100% extra-virgin cold pressed olive oil
 should be good

from the bottom of the stairs, I'm hollering
 how do you make this thing?
 what goes in first?

beat

hello? what goes in first? sim-sim paste? or spinach?

no response

the way I see it

sim-sim paste goes in first. you stir it. liquify it. then add spinach
 footsteps of someone coming down the stairs or an elephant
 that's not sim-sim paste. that's g-nuts paste
 say what now?

ye, why didn't you tell me we don't have sim-sim paste?

I've been going on about buying spinach & making sim-sim paste sauce
 all week!

I thought you had a secret stash of sim-sim paste I didn't know of
 (contemptuous staring inside the saucepan)

what?

scoop it out

it's all mixed with the onions and oil

just take it out

I balance it 'tween a wooden ladle and a plastic spoon

now put spinach

I put spinach

put it back after the spinach is ready

what the fuck, even?

what's it going to be after? g-nut sauce takes a lifetime to

we start on baluguyams right out of the saucepan

the oven will figure out the what what of the g-nut sauce mess

more yam is eaten

I feel nothing

let's call that place on Mill street

order something & bang-bang cauliflower

to go with the yams?

nooo!





call goes to voicemail
 I'm looking at a
 dirty pile of pans and other things
 plus
 kitchen needs tidying
 doong
 Netflix starts in the living room
 (kitchen)
 call's still going to voicemail
 (living room)
 have you tried switching to another number prompt?
 (kitchen)
 like, say, press 9 if you are crowning?
 (living room)
 sometimes picking an unrelated number you know...
 what's the number?
 845-485...ask for
 bang-bang cauliflower & fig and "pig"
 beat
 beat
 got them? (kitchen)
 (living room)
 Not yet.
 beat
 eat a slice of yam and calm down (sudden shouting)
 (startled) pan drops in a sink filled with sudsy water
 crap!
 now I'm wet,
 everywhere.
 (living room)

I'm looking for the new Idris Elba movie
 (standing in kitchen/living room divide)
 the what?
 the latest Idris Elba movie?
 speaker phone
 voice mail prompts
 get up, get dressed, we are going out.
 beat
 beat
 ignition

it's cool outside
 the paved ground got patches of wetness
 after yesterday's downpour
 wait. let me get more balugu to chew on while we
 at the place we find an empty parking lot
 there is a man on the roof. another is seated on a bar stool on the raised patio
 & another one standing in the parking lot with his hands on his hips looking at
 the man on the roof near the chimney
 engine idling
 man on the patio leans over & explains that they are installing a new kitchen
 so much for not changing their voicemail
 he says bulletin was posted on restaurant website
 (yeah) and not the church flier (which I do read) from months ago
 there is a place on Raymond Avenue
 alright,
 car is put back in drive
 we get to Raymond avenue and K parks the car too far from the curb
 you've parked too far from the curb
 leave me alone. I'm hungry
 a parking supervisor would happily give you a ticket
 here, call 911 and ask for Town of Poughkeepsie Parking department
 tubireke

we enter the restaurant
 (good evening, have you got a reservation?)
 no
 (it's just the two of you?)
 yes,
 (you can sit here or over there by the bar)
 let's sit here where we can see the chef
 someone brings water
 (would you like a beverage or something else, like wine)
 one of us can't hear properly
 K repeats what's being said
 no, I don't want alcohol. have you got tea?
 (be right up)
 you should have brought your hearing aids. I don't have to function as your
 back-back-up hearing aids



I don't wish to hear everything that is going on in this establishment
 hearing aids make me feel like an FBI wire-tap
 beat
 this is how you know New York City is ruthless
 that time we were standing in the line, in NYC they hand you the menu while
 you are waiting to be seated
 wait, there's 50 ways of eating pesce
 (breadsticks are delivered. what will you have?)
 we haven't gotten beyond the Italian. give us calamari & five minutes
 what are you having?
 this?
 okay, I'm too hungry to be adventurous
 I'll have the sea roaches
 one of us examines the breadstick, gives the establishment a roving eye
 these are Sicilians
 the mafias?
 I said, Sicilians
 eat a breadstick. what's wrong with you?
 beat
 (here's your 'primi'. ready to order?)
 yes.
 I'll have, this.
 and I'll have, that.
 (okay, be right back)
 beat
 foot steps
 chatter
 welcome to Savona's Trattoria
 a party of five has a reservation and birthday balloons
 a little girl is excited
 traffic
 beat
 what do you mean the new Idris Elba movie?
 it's a Black Western
 everyone is talking about it
 ah, you mean the new Regina King movie.
 The Harder they Fall
 the what?
 The Harder They Fall
 The bigger they come,
 --what?
 The bigger they come, the harder they fall. it's a saying
 I just told you the title of movie you can't find on Netflix
 o-ooh. ok. got it
 oh, okay.
 beat
 beat
 I should have got more yam to go.



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