



**OUTRIGHT**  
ACTION INTERNATIONAL

## **COVID-19 and the Increase of Domestic Violence**

### **Submission to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women**

#### **Introduction**

[OutRight Action International](#) is an ECOSOC accredited civil society organization working at the international, regional and national levels to research, document, defend, and advance human rights for lesbian, gay, transgender and intersex (LGBTIQ) people. This submission is a response to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women's call for submissions on the increase of gender-based violence and domestic violence in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. OutRight published the report [“Vulnerability Amplified: The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on LGBTIQ people”](#) on the impact of COVID-19 and the responses to the pandemic on LGBTIQ persons lives around the globe. One of OutRight's key findings was the heightened risk of family or domestic violence LGBTIQ people are facing in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, the impact of the pandemic and the responses to it have disproportionate implications on those who face multiple and intersecting forms of marginalization, including lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex (LBTI), and gender non-conforming (GNC) women and people.

#### **“Vulnerability Amplified: The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on LGBTIQ people”**

The global pandemic of Coronavirus disease-2019 (COVID-19) declared by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020, continues to sweep across the globe. The potential for human rights violations is escalating in some regions under the guise of disease control measures, and fear and a search for answers are leading to a proliferation of myths and rumors about causes and cures.

The pandemic remains a moving target: we still don't know how many people ultimately will be stricken or when this pandemic will end. Yet we do know, as history has shown us, that in times of crisis those most marginalized tend to suffer disproportionately compared to the broader population. Among the most marginalized groups in societies across the world, even in the absence of a global pandemic, are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ)<sup>1</sup> people, who experience higher levels of violence, exclusion, and deprivation, especially where stigma, discrimination, and criminalization of same-sex relations or transgender identities prevail. In times of crisis these vulnerabilities are amplified.

OutRight's findings point to specific challenges being faced by LGBTIQ people globally during this unprecedented pandemic. One of the main themes which emerged from OutRight's research was LGBTIQ people's elevated risk of family or domestic violence and disruptions in access to health care access, shelter, and other vital services. LGBTIQ people who face discrimination

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<sup>1</sup> OutRight Action International uses the acronym LGBTIQ to denote the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex community. We believe this acronym is inclusive of a broad range of people across our community. It is not exhaustive, nor is it universally accepted or used. Where interviewees have used a different version of the acronym, or where quoting sources which use a different acronym, we have opted to use the version used by the source.

from family members due to actual or perceived gender identity or sexual orientation are at higher risk of domestic violence during a time of lockdown and quarantines.

## **Elevated Risk of Family or Domestic Violence**

Domestic and family violence was a crisis before the pandemic began, with about one third of all women globally experiencing physical or sexual violence during their lifetimes.<sup>2</sup> Previous studies of emergency health situations reveal significant increases in domestic violence, with women and girls experiencing high rates of sexual violence and abuse.<sup>34</sup> LGBTI and GNC youths and adults forced to isolate in hostile family homes, and who do not have the means to go elsewhere, are at particular risk. Situations are worse in countries where sexual orientation and gender identity and expression are directly or indirectly criminalized, limiting the ability of those experiencing violence or harassment to access justice or support for fear of persecution. State policies limiting movement and assembly and of COVID-19 at large, will also hinder the ability of NGOs offering support services and shelters to respond to intimate partner, domestic and family violence cases.

With nearly four billion people across 90 countries sheltering at home, domestic violence “has become an epidemic within an epidemic.”<sup>5</sup> For people at heightened risk of domestic violence, including LGBTIQ people, mandatory lockdowns to curb disease transmission may trap them in homes with unsupportive families or their abusers, isolated from the people and the resources that could help them.

While literature is limited on the impact of past crises on the incidence of family or domestic violence perpetrated specifically against LGBTIQ people, OutRight has documented that LGBTIQ people are at a heightened risk of domestic violence even in the absence of a crisis.<sup>67</sup> As such, the current pandemic-related rise in domestic violence, generally, no doubt signals heightened risk for queer people as well.

Soon after the first COVID-19-related lockdowns and curfews were implemented, reports started to emerge from various countries about steep increases in domestic violence. For example, in Jingzhou, Hubei Province in China, the number of domestic violence cases reported to one police station doubled from the previous month when cities were put on lockdown.

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<sup>2</sup> World Health Organization. “Global and regional estimates of violence against women: prevalence and health effects of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence.” 2013. [https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/85239/9789241564625\\_eng.pdf?sequence=1](https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/85239/9789241564625_eng.pdf?sequence=1)

<sup>3</sup> Enarson, Elaine. “Violence against women in disasters: A study of domestic violence programs in the United States and Canada.” *Violence Against Women*, 5(7), (1999): 742-68, [Violence\\_against\\_women\\_in\\_disasters.pdf](#)

<sup>4</sup> International Rescue Committee (IRC), “Private Violence, Public Concern,” IRC, January 2015, <https://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/document/564/ircpvpcfinalen.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> MADRE et al. “A practical approach to prevent, address, and document domestic violence under COVID-19: briefing paper.” April 22, 2020. <https://www.madre.org/sites/default/files/PDFs/From%20Global%20Coordination%20to%20Local%20Strategies.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> OutRight Action International. “Enhancing domestic violence protections for LGBT people in the Philippines and Sri Lanka.” June 2018. <https://outrightinternational.org/reports/project-executive-summary-enhancing-domestic-violence-protections-lgbt-people-philippines>

<sup>7</sup> McLean, Neish. “Combatting gender-based violence against LGBTIQI and women in the Caribbean.” OutRight Action International, August 29, 2019. <https://outrightinternational.org/content/combatting-gender-based-violence-against-lgbtqi-and-women-caribbean>

During February 2020, at the height of the crisis in China, the number of domestic violence reports tripled compared to February 2019.<sup>8,9</sup> In Kosovo, the Ministry of Justice reported a 17% increase in reported cases of gender-based violence, with one city registering a 100% increase, compared to the same time period in 2019.<sup>10</sup>

LGBTIQ people who face discrimination from family members due to actual or perceived gender identity and/or sexual orientation are at higher risk of domestic violence during this time. Indeed, OutRight's 59 interviewees from 38 countries reported either feeling at increased risk themselves or knowing others at increased risk of violence and abuse within their homes due to forced cohabitation with unsupportive family or abusive partners during quarantines or lockdowns. Some noted that this particularly affects younger people, who have been forced to return to their families of origin due to cancellation of school or to job loss.

### **Limited Access to Support Services**

LGBTIQ people often have limited access to shelters, healthcare, and social support services, and where they do have access, they often face discrimination. COVID-19 related containment policies further limit the ability of NGOs to provide services in response to domestic violence. For example, OutRight's interviewees reported that counseling or other services are now shut down or are far more limited, leaving victims of abuse without support.

While many countries have established various forms of helplines to offer support, very few are geared to the specific issues facing LGBTIQ populations. For example, Nivendra Uduman, a psychologist and ally to the LGBTIQ community in Sri Lanka, noted that there is a national COVID-19 counseling hotline provided by the National Institute of Mental Health staffed by nurses, as well as three private hotlines. While a positive resource for many, he stated that although private hotline counselors have received some basic orientation on LGBTIQ issues, government hotline counselors have not been trained.

LGBTIQ and people living in places where they are directly or indirectly criminalized are particularly vulnerable. They may fear persecution for reporting domestic violence, further hindering their access to justice or support services. LGBTIQ people also experience higher rates of housing instability, and when combined with the risk of criminalization, this may further hinder their ability to escape a violent situation and seek help.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Allen-Ebrahimian, Bethany. "China's domestic violence epidemic." Axios.com, March 7, 2020. <https://www.axios.com/china-domestic-violence-coronavirus-quarantine-7b00c3ba-35bc-4d16-afdd-b76ecfb28882.html>

<sup>9</sup> Wanqing, Zhang. "Domestic violence cases surge during COVID-19 epidemic." Sixth Tone. March 2, 2020. [https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1005253/domestic-violence-cases-surge-during-covid-19-epidemic?campaign\\_id=10&emc=edit\\_gn\\_20200324&instance\\_id=17029&nI=in-her-words&regi\\_id=39188407&segment\\_id=22743&te=1&user\\_id=474dc6950b5365b0dbf25f88c4dd2546](https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1005253/domestic-violence-cases-surge-during-covid-19-epidemic?campaign_id=10&emc=edit_gn_20200324&instance_id=17029&nI=in-her-words&regi_id=39188407&segment_id=22743&te=1&user_id=474dc6950b5365b0dbf25f88c4dd2546)

<sup>10</sup> UNFPA. "Gender-based violence spikes amid pandemic, shelters need support." April 3, 2020. <https://www.unfpa.org/news/gender-based-violence-spikes-amid-pandemicshelters-need-support>

<sup>11</sup> MADRE et al. "A practical approach to prevent, address, and document domestic violence under COVID-19: briefing paper." April 22, 2020. <https://www.madre.org/sites/default/files/PDFs/From%20Global%20Coordination%20to%20Local%20Strategies.pdf>

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Alarmed by the global rise in violence associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, has called on governments to take action to stem “the horrifying surge in domestic violence” and ensure that judicial systems continue to prosecute abusers.<sup>12</sup> Given that violence and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) are now recognized within global human rights bodies as violations of human rights, the Secretary General’s call must be considered inclusive of all LGBTIQ people.

The picture painted by the interviews conducted by OutRight Action International is both grave and hopeful. The COVID-19 pandemic is posing unprecedented challenges to human resilience and the world economic order. While everyone is susceptible to infection, the world will not experience the pandemic equally. Among those hit hardest are many LGBTIQ people, whose lives in numerous places across the world are already shamefully devalued by stigma, discrimination, exclusion, and criminalization. The interviews also shed light on the strength, determination, and selflessness of many within LGBTIQ communities who are finding ways to continue supporting each other in the wake of increasing oppression, including domestic and family violence.

Such support should not only come from within the community. We must insist that LGBTIQ people around the world are included in all health, humanitarian, and economic relief efforts to mitigate the threats of hunger, homelessness, and health impacts brought on by the pandemic. Drawn largely from the narratives of the 59 people interviewed, the following recommendations map out specific areas that governments, UN agencies, relief organizations, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) must address to stem the domestic and family violence LGBTIQ people are currently facing.

### Recommendations

- Consult LGBTIQ and other marginalized women communities in all planning and implementation of national pandemic control strategies.
- Ensure access to justice for all those enduring family or domestic violence.
- Ensure law enforcement agencies provide SOGIESC inclusive, appropriate, and sensitive services.
- Ensure law enforcement agencies provide SOGIESC inclusive, appropriate, and sensitive services.
- Condemn anti-LGBTIQ hate speech and scapegoating.
- Prioritize decriminalization and anti-discrimination provisions in law and policy.
- Engage community leaders to promote zero-tolerance for domestic violence.
- Build men’s and boy’s capacity to act as allies within families and the community and publicize their positive practices and views.
- Create systems to track the quantity and nature of calls for help. Document all forms of domestic violence to better address specific needs of marginalized persons and communities
- Fund services that are tailored to meet the needs of all persons vulnerable to domestic violence. Fund local organizations responding to domestic violence, including groups adapting their programming to address rising violence in the context of COVID-19.

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<sup>12</sup> United Nations News. “UN chief calls for domestic violence ‘ceasefire’ amid ‘horrifying global surge.’” April 6, 2020. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061052>

- Incorporate a gender-based violence analysis into government and global health institutions' responses to COVID-19, including in public policy, economic, and health solutions.
- Ensure inclusive emergency relief health services by engaging LGBTIQ communities, understanding their needs, forging partnerships, and tailoring programming to LGBTIQ realities.
- Develop safe, respectful, sensitive, and secure approaches to ensuring access to relief commodities and services.
- Collaborate with LGBTIQ communities to develop tailored information that addresses infection control, availability of safe health services and safe spaces, and availability of social support.
- Include LGBTIQ issues when describing the gendered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Document lessons learned from inclusive emergency relief and pandemic control efforts.
- Develop global guidance on ensuring an inclusive response to pandemics and other health emergencies.