

24 August 2020

Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus
Director General
World Health Organization
Avenue Appia 20
1202 Geneva
Switzerland

Re: **An Open Letter to World Health Organization to integrate effects of COVID-19 on the LGBTQI communities and for SOGIESC Inclusive strategies and response to COVID-19**

Dear Dr. Ghebreyesus,

We, the undersigned, represent civil society organizations working to advance the rights of LGBTQI communities in Asia and the Pacific. And we write to urge you to include aspects of sexual orientations, gender identities, expressions and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) into your policies, programs and response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has highlighted, and in many instances exacerbated the discrimination and lack of legal protections faced by LGBTQI people, communities and their families.

While the COVID-19 pandemic affects the general population, it disproportionately affects vulnerable sectors, including LGBTQI communities, due to SOGIESC-related stigma and discrimination.

In a joint statement issued by human rights experts on May 14, 2020, this disproportionate effect was highlighted as: **“In all latitudes, LGBT persons are disproportionately represented in the ranks of the poor, people experiencing homelessness, and those without healthcare, meaning that they may be particularly affected as a result of the pandemic[.]”** The statement also highlighted how COVID-19 and the responses to address it have contributed to existing inequalities and discrimination. In relation to the LGBTQI communities, the statement outlined that criminal laws add to the vulnerability of LGBTQI because of police abuse and arbitrary arrest and detention in relation to the restriction of movements. Also, LGBTQI people who are required to stay at home experience prolonged exposure to unaccepting family members, and this exacerbates rates of domestic violence and physical and emotional abuse. Without a doubt, this affects their physical and mental health.¹

The UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights also outlined the effects of COVID-19 to LGBTQI people and communities in its guidance document on COVID-19 and the human rights of LGBTQI people. The document highlighted that the existing stigma and discrimination based on SOGIESC while seeking health services, laws which criminalize same-sex relationships and those which target transgender and gender diverse persons due to their gender identities and expression “can elevate the risk for LGBTI people from COVID-19.” The same document also highlighted the possibility of interruption and de-prioritization of health services in the context of overload on healthcare systems as a result of COVID-19.²

These scenarios, together with present and possible effects of COVID-19 on LGBTQI people and communities, have been identified in various surveys conducted by organizations working on LGBTQI rights and health issues. For example, [a survey conducted by APCOM](#),³ a regional organization based in Bangkok representing and working with a network of individuals and community-based organizations across Asia-Pacific, indicated that organizations and communities were concerned about the effects of COVID-19 on the delivery of health services, including HIV-related services. Access of LGBTQI people to mental health services, for those who need them, has been affected by the pandemic. These issues are in addition to the stigma and discrimination experienced by service users during normal times.

The effect of COVID-19 to the livelihood of LGBTQI people has also been identified in an [OutRight Action International paper](#), which stated that LGBTIQ people are predominantly engaged in the informal sector, reliant on daily wages and without the safety nets of protections in many countries, they are especially susceptible to the effects of economic slowdowns and limitations on movement.⁴

There are also narratives where LGBTQI couples and families are not able to access programs and responses which aim to alleviate the effects of the pandemic as these programs and responses are designed with heteronormative assumptions about what constitutes families. [A survey conducted by Marriage For All Japan](#)⁵ suggested fear of same sex-couples about not being able to participate in making medical decisions in cases related to COVID-19 due to the absence of legal recognition of same-sex relationships. This illustrates worries among LGBTQI couples where they will be denied the ability to care for and make decisions for each other in times of emergencies. Trans and gender diverse people can also experience exclusion in state-sponsored health programs due to requirements of legal identification documents⁶.

We are also cognizant that LGBTQI communities and organizations bring with them a wealth of knowledge about their situations and experiences which can be instrumental in crafting inclusive responses to the pandemic.

It is in this context, we, the undersigned individual activists; organizations; and networks working on LGBTQI and health issues, ask the World Health Organization to:

- Ensure that the challenges being faced by LGBTQI, MSM and people and communities of diverse SOGIESC during the COVID-19 pandemic will be given due attention, and policies, programs, and responses are inclusive and do not add to the exclusion and discrimination experienced by LGBTQI people, communities and families.
- Integrate a SOGIESC-inclusive approach in their COVID-19 related guidance documents, situation reports, briefs, strategies and response.
- Work closely with LGBTQI organizations and communities towards a more inclusive responses to the pandemic.

Integrating a SOGIESC framework will contribute to our collective goal of addressing impacts of COVID-19 on vulnerable populations and take us closer towards the goal of “**leaving no one behind**” as envisioned by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Sincerely,

Name	Position	Organization	Territory
Midnight Poonkasetwattana	Executive Director	APCOM	Asia Pacific
Ryan Silverio	Regional Coordinator	ASEAN SOGIE Caucus	Southeast Asia
Joe Wong	Executive Director	Asia Pacific Transgender Network	Asia and the Pacific
Shale Ahmed	Executive Director	Bandhu Social Welfare Society	Bangladesh
Suben Dhakal (Manisha)	Executive Director	Blue Diamond Society	Nepal
Esan Regmi	Executive Director	Campaign for Change	Nepal
Rima Athar	Coordinator	Coalition for Sexual and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies	Asia and North Africa
Lieu Anh Vu	Executive Director	ILGA Asia	Asia
Ishita Dutta	Program Manager	International Women's Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific	Asia Pacific
Prashant Singh	Coordinator	Intersex Asia	Asia
Gopi Shankar Madurai	Coordinator	Intersex India Forum Srishti Madurai LGBTQIA Student Volunteer Movement	India
Jeff Cagandahan	Officer in Charge	Intersex Philippines	Philippines
Hiker Chiu	Founder	OII Chinese	Taiwan
Isabelita B. Solamo	Executive Director	PILIPINA Legal Resources Center	Philippines
Jerome Yau	Chief Executive	Pink Alliance	Hong Kong
Evelynne Gomez	Program Officer	The Asian-Pacific Resource & Research Centre for Women (ARROW)	Asia Pacific
Raful Alom Rahman	Founder	The Queer Muslim Project	India
Tahir Khilji	Board Member	VISION	Pakistan
Naila Awwad	General Director	Women Against Violence	Palestine
Justin Francis Bionat	Executive Director	Youth Voices Count, Inc.	Asia Pacific

[1] COVID-19: The suffering and resilience of LGBT persons must be visible and inform the actions of States. Statement by human rights experts on the International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia. Accessed from <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25884&LangID=E>

[2] COVID-19 and the human rights of LGBTI people. UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights. Accessed from <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/LGBT/LGBTIpeople.pdf>

[3] The COVID-19 Effects Series, APCOM. Accessed from <https://www.apcom.org/the-covid-19-effect-series-part-1/>

[4] Vulnerability Amplified: The Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on LGBTIQ Persons. OutRight International. Accessed from https://outrightinternational.org/sites/default/files/COVIDsReportDesign_FINAL_LR_0.pdf

[5] 'I want them to be treated as the same family: The difficulty that LGBT faces with the new Corona. Accessed from <https://www.buzzfeed.com/jp/saoriibuki/marriage-for-all-corona>

[6] Recognize the need of trans and gender diverse communities during Covid-19 pandemic. Asia Pacific Transgender Network. Accessed from <https://www.weareaptn.org/2020/03/31/see-us-support-us-recognise-the-needs-of-trans-and-gender-diverse-communities-during-covid-19-pandemic/>