

# **LGBTIQ+ Youth & COVID-19 in Botswana**

## **1.0 Introduction**

COVID-19 has brought unprecedented challenges to all aspects of life for Botswana. This is an additional layer to complexities and vulnerabilities of young Botswana with variant sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics. This brief highlights the biggest concerns and insights of community members amidst the precautions of a country wide lockdown and state of emergency. Having experienced a loss within the community just before precautions were implemented, experiences are as reflected as raw as possible. The importance of voice and visibility of LGBTIQ+ Youth is critical, in any shape or form. Adding to a limited body of knowledge, advancing the need to ensure inclusion in policy making and leave no one behind, crisis or not.

## **2.0 Context**

Botswana recently decriminalised same sex relations, with other favourable litigation developments in changing gender markers for transgender identifying individuals.<sup>1</sup> As at 27 April 2020, two days before the end of the initial lockdown date, the Government of Botswana reported one (1) death and twenty-two (22) confirmed cases of COVID-19. Success Capital Organisation had already assisted several young people in seeking counselling, psychiatric and psychological support. Suicides have been reported in media, with attempts largely underreported and directly averted by several civil society organisations across the country. Although rapid response mechanisms have emerged globally, scarcity reflective of normative

---

<sup>1</sup> Success Capital & Sisonke Botswana 'Intersecting Decriminalisation in Botswana' 2020

emergency funding remain the same. Formal recognition and provisions of support to civil society remains limited to those with health related in-person service provisions and within the fold of government favour. This does not include LGBTIQ+ led or underserved organisations.

Some of Success Capital's experiences are highlighted below:

### **3.0 Approach**

A virtual consultation was held for ease of access and comfort for LGBTIQ+ Youth. It was held three weeks into the countrywide lockdown. Participant confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed, with an overview and rationale for future advocacy work, linking other initiatives led by Success Capital and its community partners. Submissions were submitted in text and audio where best comfortable, without any limits of language to allow for free expression. A snowball recruitment was used to safeguard trust and in-depth insight. Intersex, androgynous, gender non-conforming, lesbian, transgender, gay, and queer individuals participated in the data collection process. All perspectives were validated virtually and are shared as community experiences for purposes of this review and are not exhaustive of country experiences.

### **4.0 Findings**

#### **4.1 Biggest Concerns**

Botswana announced a six-month state of emergency in early April. This exasperated an already anxious and economically insecure community. Initial thoughts on the state of emergency include worries about bills, their informal businesses, completing school and changing personality and becoming phlegmatic introverts. Others ranged from helplessness about the situation, imagining how things will never be normal again, where to get food and

acknowledging that it is needed for the good of Batswana. However, there were those that called out possible corruption and compromises to rebuilding the economy. This reflects the many variants of discomfort and uncertainty. The most glaring are concerns for others; being conscious of their poor relatives, family and peers who must face the crisis without means. Those who further having to experience economic vulnerability with emotional and sexual abuse in their homes.

Some have taken refuge in their rented student accommodation or preferred to stay with friends away from home. Others resorted to extended family or either parents where there would be separate homes. The most harrowing are having to face isolation with their own thoughts or children, where relevant. Both cannot be controlled or managed without some form of personal care time, social protection and economic certainty. The freedom of movement for community members is important. It cannot be replaced by virtual means of navigating triggers to their trauma or connecting with those that they identify with. The ability to connect and be in a space with someone who understands your experiences because they have lived them is irreplaceable. Body language feel and the presence of souls in person connects community members in a way that cannot be replaced. The only thing that has not changed as a result of the precautions is the suffering. Only aggravated by economic and social uncertainty.

#### 4.2 Connectivity

Slow internet was a common challenge. Regardless of network provider, all participants access the internet through their phones. This is reflective of the over 160% cell phone penetration of

Botswana's population.<sup>2</sup> Over 50% of Botswana are on social media, aligned to community members resorting to different platforms to pass time whilst on lockdown. Social media has helped keep connected with friends and family. Internet access is costly.<sup>3</sup> Social media packages are more reasonable given the length of time needed to remain online for meaningful connecting with others. Downloading tutorials or entertainment wasn't even an option as it is too expensive. Others have taken up exercising, reading novels, watching television and exploring different ways of cooking with their limited options.

#### 4.3 Maintaining Relations

Relations with friends and family have not changed much aside from social media and direct calls. Those that have been in long distance relationships have not had a negative impact to the lockdown. It has only restricted opportunities to meet. The fact that it is no longer a possibility is the most difficult part. Others have given up on loving relationships. Being alone is viewed as critical to mental wellbeing, thus in a crisis it might not be desirable. Others simply have no interest in getting into a relationship. One has a sexual partner within the same residential compound, making easy to meet when needed. It is not a conventional exclusive relationship but more of an arrangement strictly for sexual pleasure. Those in relationships that are apart during the lockdown period are not worried that they would change. It's even better for those who decided to live together through the lockdown. These relationships have not had much

---

<sup>2</sup> Botswana Communications Regulatory Authority 'BOCRA does Deliver on a Connected and Informed Society' 2016; Fast Market Research 'Botswana - Telecoms, Mobile and Broadband - Market Insights and Statistics' 2015

<sup>3</sup> Sunday Standard 'Botswana's Broadband costs is the highest in Africa – Report' 2018

<https://www.sundaystandard.info/botswanaoccos-broadband-costs-is-the-highest-in-africa-report/>

change since the crisis started. Only one feels like the relationship has ended as there is a lack of communication.

#### 4.4 Maintaining Sanity

There has been no psychological or counselling support available to most participants. For the minority, support structures such as family, friends and their relationships have been helpful to navigate distancing and isolation precautions. Most lament the boredom they face. Although they understand the need for precautions, some would prefer working and going out dancing or socialising at night. Coping mechanisms include lots of sleep and watching entertainment series. Those in the informal sector or underemployment are not sure what they will eat. They are not sure on whether they qualify for state social food parcels.

One has had several meltdowns whilst others cannot cope. Sleeping patterns have changed and there is some grieving on plans made. The cycle of not being productive is depressing. Interviews have been postponed in uncertainty and limited movement only worsens the situation. It is difficult to not do anything. Others have relinquished their anguish or turned to prayer. The only consolation is that most events and opportunities are postponed or on hold. Those in multi-residential compounds are not used to staying home. There is no desire to connect with other residents. Only one viewed the lockdown as an opportunity to introspect and explore future career options.

#### 4.5 Coping during lockdown

Passing time needs entertainment and recreation, even if only at home. Many having been unemployed or out of school, usually visit friends or go out. Since these are not possible under lockdown, they have resorted to social media, video downloads and where possible, spending time with a sexual partner. For one this is a key aspect of confidence. It helps them feel wanted and away from thoughts about their problems. For some the latter is possible due to proximity or having a travel permit as an essential service provider – normally working in a retail store. Eating has also become a large aspect of one's day. Whether in meal preparations or exploring how and what to eat. The added time is perceived as more of a burden than an opportunity or break from life, work or school – because they perceive they don't have much of those if any.

Those in tertiary institutions still have some assignments to do. It has not been an easy transition, especially in navigating internet access and bandwidth. Only a few institutions have found ways to providing counselling support, but financial support remains a challenge. Although students received their allowance early, those renting are in a predicament as a significantly smaller amount was paid out by the government. This has compromised safety of shelter for many with no solution or alternative save for the mercy of landlords. Most are stressed due to the unavailability of alcohol. It has often provided a confidence boost, recreation, distract from or helped one cope with troubles. One is pregnant as is not sure how she will purchase baby clothes, like most, she did not have the means to prepare for the lockdown, never mind the six-month state of emergency.

#### 4.6 State of Emergency

Anxiety has taken over since the announcement of the state of emergency. Uncertainty on possible employment or making an income are the biggest fears. Depression had already set in for many of them. Community members feel that responses and precautions should take everyone in consideration. That there is a more participatory and inclusive way to engage the public. Those enrolled in school are not sure how they will complete or graduate. Many postponements make it difficult to picture how the coming months will look like. Poverty is real. Even if some had an income, not having means for essentials or something to do over that period only exasperates depression. Not having a laptop or smartphone further isolates others. The screening of updates in spite of having limited data makes it all the more difficult. For those who watched the parliamentary debate on approving the state of emergency, they were disappointed. The lack of evidence, rationale and objectivity takes voters for granted.

#### 4.7 Changing Regulations

The COVID-19 task team is comprised of elderly men. The lack of diversity reflects in the contradicting, elitist and compromising decisions made or altered. Since the crisis started, leadership advised of no travel and staying home. Whilst travelling themselves and continuing to provide briefings or engage in public spaces. Although distancing was observed, it reflected how leaders do not practice what they preach. The travel permit processes further contrasted what was practical for most Batswana. Where an approval would be a significant distance further away from an essential service provider. Similarly, the lack of use of protective equipment of law enforcement in the earlier weeks as if they were immune from the virus. Community members found processes impractical and at times, simply impossible. Those living

in multi-residential properties or those who already had no income but were yet to be assessed by social workers for food parcels.

Those who have no cars or smartphones could not do any essentials trips in bulk or access online travel permit application portals. In some instances, travel permits would be limited to ten people or households per authority per day. Making it difficult for community members to access essential services – especially those who had already been heeding precautions prior to the change in regulations. Similarly, with masks, without access and the impracticality of expecting community members to either dispose or have more expensive ones made of cloth. Leadership has failed to provide guidelines, practical tips and alternatives for community members and the public at large to comply. Seeking health services has been conflicting for many. If it is not having transport, it would be not being able to secure travel permits. Expecting learners to continue learning or finding alternatives makes it difficult without adequate infrastructure. Others simply had no more money since their informal businesses had been shut down.

#### 4.8 Civil Society

Civil society organisations have largely been excluded from precautions or response measures. Only those providing food parcels, health services and communications support have been engaged in some way by the government. Government announcements have impacted organisations supporting survivors of violence, people who use substances, people with disabilities and LGBTIQ+ individuals. Only a few have received government support despite regulations prohibiting the receipt of any COVID-19 related support. Thus, many have been left

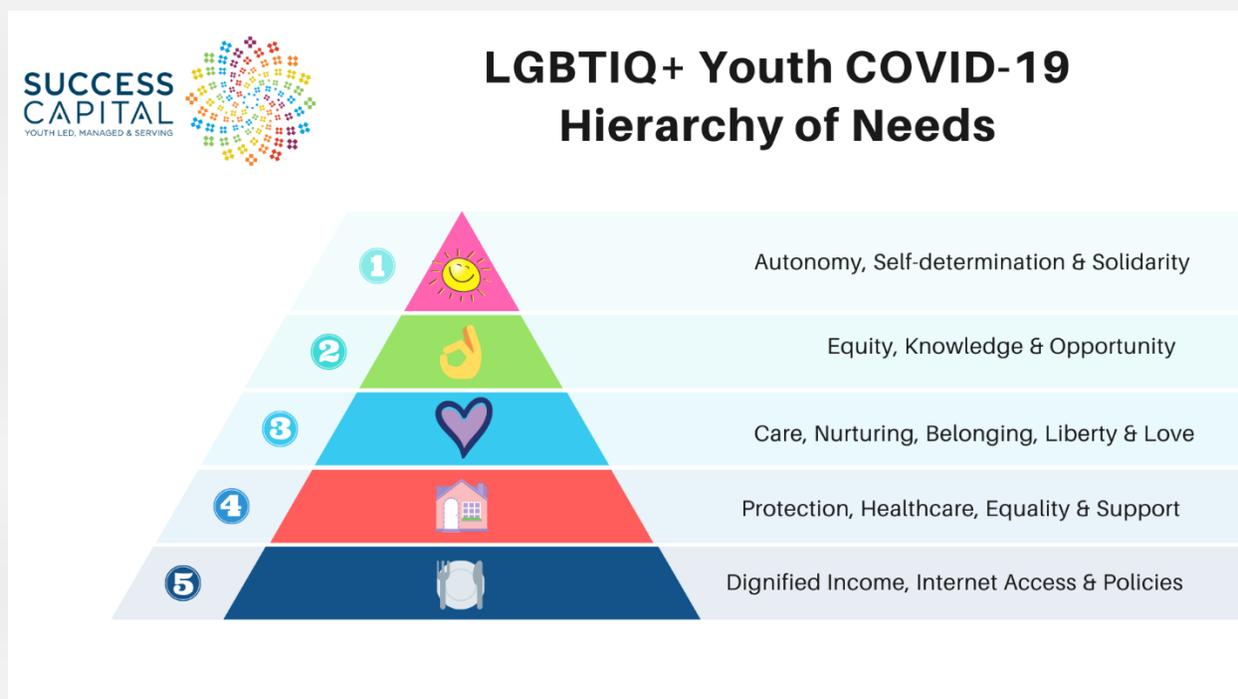
to navigate the complexities of limited funding, difficult conversations with donors on pre-approved projects and limited inhouse personnel. Further exasperating the crisis is the closure of the psychological department at the main public hospital. This left many to either turn to school or tertiary provided counselling, other civil society organisations or virtual support. Bureaucracy, patriarchy and exclusion shall impede fulfilling the country's human rights commitments, development aspirations and cultural value of botho.

## **5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations**

### **Conclusion**

COVID-19 has had an unprecedented impact across the world. The unprecedented precautions have illuminated the inequalities that LGBTIQ+ youth experience across Botswana. From village communities, leasing in multi-residential property, unemployment to unsafe homes. The social, structural, and economic complexities have only aggravated mental health. This reflects the need for preparedness in any environment for LGBTIQ+ youth, crisis or not. Preparedness in security, psychosocial support, unemployment, underemployment, homelessness, violence prevention and mitigation. Just as colonial laws posed a threat of persecution; harmful norms influence discriminatory practices in society, spaces of spiritual refuge, support structures and policy making. Civil society, development and government need to do better to improve lives.

The below illustrates an iteration of Maslow's theory of needs, for community members during and beyond the crisis:



### Recommendations

- Accelerate provisions for mitigating all physical and psychological limits of precautions to prevent or mitigate COVID-19. This includes safeguarding civil society and LGBTIQ+ youth in COVID-19 recovery efforts and relief funds.
- Comprehensive mental health should be a key provision within primary health care services. Inclusive of LGBTIQ+ sensitisation and issues.
- Community representatives should be engaged in consultative processes and decision making during and beyond the crisis.

- Exceptions in business as usual, practices and policies should be made in reflecting of the exceptional circumstances of COVID-19. Rapid response mechanisms, governments and philanthropy alike cannot adopt the same tools, processes, and people they deploy to address gaps in human rights and social protections.
- Ensuring accountability and transparency in actions, expenditure and decision making regarding COVID-19 and beyond.
- Post COVID-19 should ensure that the basic needs of LGBTIQ+ Youth are met for them to have fulfilling lives that they can succeed and thrive in.

## **6.0 Acknowledgements**

In loving memory of Kutlwano 'Bubbly' Selaledi.

This report was prepared by Success Capital Organisation.

Success Capital Organisation is an LGBTIQ+ Youth led, managed and serving organisation.

Draft Version 1 – 30.04.2020