**A SURVEY ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF LESBIANS, BISEXUAL, QUEER AND TRANSGENDER PERSONS DURING THE LOCKDOWN IN UGANDA:**

*“****Mental Health*** *is a state of well-being in which an individual realizes her/ his/their own abilities can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully and is able to make a contribution to her/his/their community.” It includes our emotional, psychological, social and economic well-being.*

**Introduction:**

Deterioration of Mental health among Lesbians, Bisexual, Queer and Transgender (LBQT) persons in Uganda has increasingly been registered due to the discriminative and rigid society, cultural and religious constructs and exclusion from government projects that would be of benefit to all it’s citizens. One’s Mental Health status can be determined by all that surrounds them and that within us. With the high level of poverty, homelessness, lack of assurance for proper medical care, discrimination, rejection, exclusion, to mention but a few. There has always been mental health issues amongst LBQT persons in Uganda.

With the COVID – 19 outbreak globally, there was no chance that LBQT persons would walk out of the situation without worsening effects on their mental health. With the different restrictions like the lockdown which were adopted by countries, came with double or triple effects that added unto the already affected mental health of LBQT persons in Uganda. The past 2 years have been so difficult ever since the outbreak of COVID 19 globally. LGBTQ persons faced uniquely difficult challenges given that the Pandemic found us already marginalized.

Our survey provides data on the impact of the Lockdown on the mental health of LBQT persons in the central region of Uganda; Wakiso, Kampala and Mukono. Uganda resorted to Lockdown as a measure to reduce the spread of the pandemic. Many restrictions were put in place since the outbreak because of an increase in the death rate and number of infections of COVID 19. On 6th June 2021 the president of Uganda ordered another lockdown after the outbreak of the second wave of the pandemic. However with all the restrictions, the death and infection rate still rose which led the president to announce an abrupt total lockdown for 42 days and more strict measures were put in place. 75 LBQT persons participated in the survey of which; 12 identified as Queer, 24 identified as Transgender persons, 5 identified as Bisexuals and 34 identified as Lesbians.

**Pie-chart showing different identities of the respondents**

Given the first lockdown and second lockdown because of the first wave of COVID – 19, the second wave found an already shaky ground. When the world was hit byCOVID-19 and all countries went into lockdown, countries like Uganda that were found unprepared, its citizens suffered more from the Lockdown restrictions since they were caught off guard.

Our economy had not yet recovered from the experience registered from the 2020 lockdown which included among others, loss of jobs and income, increase in Gender-Based Violence, lack of food and access to medical services, mental health issues, and homelessness and then the second wave of COVID – 19 broke out and the country was put under strict measures and a lockdown again. All these negatively affected the mental health of all citizens however, the most marginalized citizens like the sexual minorities suffered more and our mental health deteriorated more since the pandemic and the lockdown found us already with mental health issues and all that came with the pandemic took a toll on mental health of all LBQT persons in Uganda.

**Objectives:**

The purpose of the study is to provide data on the status of LBQT persons Mental Health from the 3 districts during the lockdown due to COVID – 19 in Uganda. Our objectives of the survey are:

* To identify the effects of the Lockdown on the mental status of LBQT persons in Wakiso, Kampala and Mukono
* To identify the gap in accessing mental health support among the LBQT community
* To have an evidence based report on the effects of COVID – 19 and the lockdown on LBQT persons
* To identify the coping mechanism of LBQT persons during such challenging times like the lockdown

**Methods:**

The survey was carried out in October 2021 to December 2021. Due to lack of enough funds, we managed to conduct the survey amongst 75 LBQT persons in 3 districts of the central region of Uganda; Wakiso, Kampala, Mukono, who agreed to participated in answering the questionnaire that aimed at understanding the state of mental health for LBQT persons during the lockdown after the outbreak of the second wave of COVID-19 in Uganda.

20% of the respondents where from Mukono (15 respondents), 36% of the respondents where from Kampala (27 respondents) and 44% of the respondents (33 respondents) where from Wakiso.

**Pie-chart showing sample survey for the districts**

**Results:**

We found that it was cutting across that the lockdown affected greatly the mental health of LBQT persons in Uganda since most of them were already found in vulnerable stat. Many LBQT persons:

* Experienced Gender Based Violence,
* many lost income, homes
* Ended up homeless
* Using drugs or substance abuse to survive
* Got into depression
* Felt anxiety
* Felt trauma
* Wanted to committee suicide
* Lost families

***All that and a lot more from the already existing unconducive environment contributed to the decline in mental health of LBQT persons during the lockdown.***

Among some of the key findings of the survey from the sample group;

* 100% of the LBQT persons faced different mental health challenges.
* 73% resorted to using drugs as a means of coping up
* 100% reported symptoms of anxiety
* 29% attempted suicide
* 60% got immediate help/support
* 20% got involved in other activities during the lockdown to divert them
* 60% had organizations come through to check on their wellbeing and mental status
* 0% knew of mental health programs put in place by the government of Uganda for its citizen.
* 20% believed that the lockdown affected the mental health of all citizens in the same way regardless of their sexuality
* 85% Had mental health problems even before the lockdown
* 64% believed that the survey was needed and useful

**KEY**

**Category 1**

* 100% LBQT persons faced different Mental Health challenges
* 60% Got immediate support
* 20% Believed the lockdown affected all citizens

**Category 2**

* 73% Started using drugs to cope up
* 20% Engaged in other activities to divert their attention
* 85% Had mental problems before the lockdown

**Category 3**

* 100% Reported symptoms of anxiety
* 60% Had organizations come to help check their wellbeing and mental status
* 64% Believed that the survey was needed and useful

**Category 4**

* 29% Attempted suicide
* 0% Knew of mental health programs put in place by government for its citizens

 **Conclusion:**

 In our findings, there is need to strategize well on how best we can handle or face challenging times like those of the lockdown that come unexpected. Given that our country Uganda, already criminalizes same sex relationships and societies, cultural and religious norms fuel hate, oppression and discrimination LGBTQ persons, there is need to aggressively start empowering and building the skills of LBQT persons given that they are vulnerable.

And for us to have productive LBQT persons in Uganda, we n to invest a lot in protecting our mental health and building structures that contribute to our mental wellness.