

Health and Human Rights for LGBTIQ Communities

“Laws that criminalize vulnerable sections of society – and the abuses that accompany their enforcement – compromise the ability of affected people to protect themselves against HIV.”

– UNAIDS

The Stephen Lewis Foundation’s work with LGBTIQ organizations is part of our broader work of supporting community-based organizations in sub-Saharan Africa who are working at the intersections of HIV and human rights to provide holistic care and support to their communities.

The mainstream response to HIV and AIDS in much of sub-Saharan Africa has left LGBTIQ communities behind. HIV prevention programs often provide education relevant only to heterosexual relationships, and discrimination within the healthcare system can have life-threatening consequences. There are many documented cases of healthcare workers refusing assistance to LGBTIQ folks, or disclosing personal information to the wider public. The stigma and danger attached to the disclosure of a person’s sexual orientation and HIV status has become a profound obstacle for LGBTIQ people accessing the HIV information, prevention, care and treatment that they need. The threat of violence and in some cases, death can lead to LGBTIQ folks self-medicating, and seeking out professional care too late, which leaves those living with HIV particularly at risk.

Over the last three years, the Stephen Lewis Foundation has partnered with more than 15 community-based LGBTIQ organizations in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, and Democratic Republic of the Congo. Last year, we supported our LGBTIQ partners to reach more than 40,000 LGBTIQ individuals with vital human rights and HIV services. In addition to supporting programmatic work, we support organizations with their core costs – office rent, staff salaries, audit costs, safety and security measures, etc. This core organizational funding makes the work of our partners more effective and more sustainable.

In the face of discrimination and violence, our partners’ impact has been wide reaching. They are working toward the long-term goals of repealing homophobic and transphobic laws, building inclusive communities, and ensuring the holistic health and human rights of all LGBTIQ individuals. At the same time, they are running programs and offering services that have immediate and lasting benefits for LGBTIQ community members. Supporting community-based LGBTIQ organizations in sub-Saharan Africa has lasting impacts at the governmental, societal, familial, and individual levels.

Connect with our team

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Additional Information

LGBTIQ legal and political context

Of the 54 countries on the African continent, more than 30 have laws that criminalize sexual relations between men, and 24 countries have similar laws that apply to women. These laws, which are often the legacy of colonialism, are reinforced by political, religious, and community leaders who promote homophobia and transphobia.

Hate crimes against LGBTIQ people – including physical and sexual assault, blackmail and extortion – are common in many communities, but most victims are too fearful to go to the police. The law is used as justification for discriminating against LGBTIQ people, making it harder for them to get a job or promotion, rent housing or access health and education services. LGBTIQ activists and community members live with high levels of insecurity. There is an ongoing risk of violence from police, raids on LGBTIQ offices, and random illegal incarcerations. In addition, stigma and discrimination against LGBTIQ communities creates socio-economic barriers to accessing healthcare, housing, employment and social services, which has significant implications for HIV testing, care, treatment, and support.

In the face of legally enshrined and politically supported homophobia and transphobia, LGBTIQ organizations are often quite literally a lifeline for their communities. LGBTIQ activists are putting their own lives on the line to provide vital health and social support services to their communities and to advocate for human rights.

Security

Our LGBTIQ partners operate in hostile environments, making security a primary concern for the organizations and their leaders. At the SLF, we believe that having an emergency fund is essential when partnering with LGBTIQ organizations that face security threats, violence, and persecution. Whether it is raids on offices that necessitate relocation, arbitrary arrest and detention that require bail and legal fees, expenses for prominent activists and leaders to flee in cases of mortal peril, or medical care following attacks, every year there are unanticipated, albeit inevitable, situations and expenses that occur and that constitute genuine emergencies.

Our partners have adopted a range of policies and practices to promote the safety of staff and community members including:

- Officially registering under organizational names that do not disclose their work with LGBTIQ communities
- Conducting regular risk and security assessments
- Using codes rather than names to identify clients
- Offering STI services to the broader community to be seen as a valuable addition to the neighborhood
- Receiving security training and equipping offices with cameras and biometric technology



- Storing staff CVs and personnel files offsite in secure locations
- Changing office locations
- Building relationships with key law enforcement personnel
- Working with neighbours to build rapport and supportive relationships
- Employing non-LGBTIQ community members to increase understanding and sensitization in the community

We support our partners to put their security and that of their communities first.

Mental health and well-being

Our partners have shared multiple stories that show how violence, stigma, discrimination and abuse have left many LGBTIQ individuals with physical scars and deep emotional trauma. Members of LGBTIQ communities, especially transgender individuals, often face extreme pressure to conform to expected gender norms. They are forced to constantly “act out” their lives in order to portray what society requires, to the detriment of their mental health and well-being. In addition, the socioeconomic impacts of stigma and discrimination (including unemployment, insecure housing, poverty, isolation, and discrimination in healthcare) often have negative impacts on mental health.

There is an urgent need for mental health and well-being services for LGBTIQ communities, but psychosocial support initiatives at our LGBTIQ partners are significantly underfunded. One of our Ugandan partners has a wait list of 381 people for its mental health sessions, and those individuals who do receive support are often limited to two sessions. In the face of this, our partners are working in innovative and strategic ways with the limited funding available to support the well-being of their communities. They have trained their peer educators in basic mental health support skills, organized peer support groups, and worked to make their offices comfortable, safe spaces for members of the LGBTIQ community to be themselves and gather openly with other LGBTIQ individuals. None of this, however, makes up for the need for increased investment in LGBTIQ-led mental health services.

COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened the level of violence and discrimination LGBTIQ communities are facing. LGBTIQ communities are being blamed for coronavirus; LGBTIQ people who are isolated in transphobic and homophobic families and communities are facing emotional and physical harm; and lockdowns and social distancing policies have interrupted access to food and HIV medications.

Our partners are advocates for the human rights of LGBTIQ community members in the face of COVID-19 by providing safety and support to those who face abuse. In addition to this, they are playing a key role in sharing information about how to best protect oneself from COVID-19 and distributing critical supplies so that vulnerable communities are able to stay safe and healthy.



In the face of service interruptions, increased transportation and food costs, and restrictions on movement, LGBTIQ organizations are working in resourceful and innovative ways to ensure the continuation of the HIV services LGBTIQ communities need. They are increasing the availability of HIV self-testing kits, distributing three month supplies of ARVs, mobilizing their peer support networks to provide phone-based support, buying food staples for HIV-positive community members whose livelihoods have been impacted by lockdowns, and securing motorbike transportation and personal protective equipment for staff distributing food and medical packages.

Finally, our partners are responding to the increased need for mental health services during COVID-19 among LGBTIQ individuals facing homophobia and transphobia, extreme financial hardship, stress and anxiety, and disruption of HIV services. Our LGBTIQ partners are using social media, SMS, phone hotlines, and video sessions to support their communities even as it is harder to meet in person for traditional counselling sessions or peer support meetings.

During these precarious times, it is as important as ever to get vital funding into the hands of LGBTIQ organizations in sub-Saharan Africa so they can mitigate the spread of COVID-19; respond to violence and discrimination; deliver vital HIV services to LGBTIQ communities; and provide psychosocial support to marginalized community members. 🏳️‍🌈

