

## The Protection and Inclusion of LGBTQI+ Communities in COVID-19 Government Aid Programmes in South Africa

Statement by South African Political Leadership Learning Institute (PLLI)<sup>1</sup> Alumni  
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On December 31st 2019, the first documented case of coronavirus (Covid-19) was identified in the city of Wuhan in China. The cause of the outbreak remains unknown and since then, Covid-19 has spread worldwide, causing destruction in the lives of billions of people, and has forever changed the way people live and interact with each other.

To date, coronavirus has infected nearly 14,7 million people and has taken the lives of over 600 thousand people worldwide. On March 3rd 2020, South Africa reported its first case of coronavirus and subsequent developments surrounding the spread of the pandemic have severely impacted the lives of close to 60 million South African citizens. Currently, South Africa has reported over 360 000 infected cases and over 5 000 deaths, and as a result, the country has become the epicentre of the virus on the African continent.

South Africa's president, Cyril Ramaphosa, announced a nationwide lockdown on the 23rd of March and since then, stringent measures have been instituted to flatten the curve of Covid-19 in the hope of reducing the rate of infections in South Africa. The regulations included closures of non-essential service businesses, the closure of schools, international and provincial travel bans, closure of churches and many others. In particular, the South African government announced relief measures in helping the poor and other marginalised people in resource-deprived communities affected by Covid-19.

South African LGBTQI+ communities are heavily impacted by the coronavirus pandemic. The national lockdown, social distancing and other strict regulations mandated by the government have had major negative consequences for LGBTQI+ communities and SOGIESC human rights. In pre-Covid times, LGBTQI+ people already faced pervasive systemic injustice, discrimination and hate crime. Violence, poverty and exclusion had been the lived realities of many members of our communities. These circumstances have been exponentially exacerbated by the pandemic.

Over the past few months, we have taken the time to listen to the many issues that LGBTQI+ communities have raised regarding the outbreak of coronavirus and the national lockdown.

Safety has been a primary concern during this time for LGBTQI+ individuals. LGBTQI+ people still experience intense discrimination in South Africa and major efforts to sensitise and educate the South African public about issues and human rights related to sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) remain imperative. Too often we hear about another LGBTQI+ person who has been attacked or killed as the result of the homophobia, transphobia and intersexphobia that still persist in South Africa.

Lockdown has meant that mass gatherings cannot take place. Because of this regulation, schools, universities and university residences have had to close. Although restrictions are currently being eased,

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<sup>1</sup> The Political Leadership Learning Institute (PLLI) is a training programme co-hosted by [Triangle Project](#) and [LGBTQ Victory Institute](#) to train LGBTQI+ activists in civic and political engagement.

including phased reopening of educational institutions, many young LGBTQI+ people have had to leave their safe spaces and move in with their families because of the outbreak. This includes students who live in big cities and have had to move back home to families and communities that discriminate against them and are not accepting of their sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression or sex characteristics. Many of these young people find themselves subjected to domestic violence, physical, sexual and psychological abuse, bullying, and other forms of ill-treatment.

The issue of mental health and wellbeing is one of concern. Many LGBTQI+ individuals suffer from mental health issues due to past traumas of being attacked, abused, and discriminated against because of their sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression or sex characteristics. The lockdown has made it nearly impossible for LGBTQI+ people to access mental health and psychosocial support services. Because of the lockdown, many individuals find themselves without their support structures and ways to express themselves, thus making them face feelings of loneliness, hopelessness, depression and thoughts of suicide.

Prior to and during the lockdown, several LGBTQI+ organisations have been working hard to provide mental health and support services, but this has proven not to be enough. Many organisations cannot handle the high demand of providing these services and the lockdown is putting strain on an already overworked system. The South African government needs to come up with a working solution of offering mental health and psychosocial support services whilst still adhering to physical distancing and related safety measures during the pandemic.

We've received reports that many LGBTQI+ people have been kicked out of home and are struggling to find accommodation as there is a shortage of LGBTQI-friendly shelters and housing. We are calling on the government to increase the number of LGBTQI+ shelters and housing solutions that are inclusive and affirming of people's diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, gender expressions and sex characteristics. This will help to ensure that our people are not left out in the cold and prone to contract coronavirus and other illnesses due to homelessness.

Many people in LGBTQI+ communities are afflicted with HIV, STIs and other immune-compromising diseases, thus making them more vulnerable to contracting and becoming severely ill from the Covid-19 virus. Numerous transgender people require access to gender-affirming hormones, and during this period they have been battling to get appointments with their medical practitioners and obtain these hormones, given that the health care system has geared its focus predominantly to the Covid-19 crisis. Appointments for gender affirming surgeries have also been postponed indefinitely. This has made many trans people increasingly vulnerable to depression, anxiety and other health challenges.

Many NGOs have been helping with providing healthcare services to LGBTQI+ individuals, but because many of these organisations are located centrally in cities and because of the lockdown regulations, it has become almost impossible for LGBTQI+ individuals living in townships and rural areas to access these services. It is in the light of these challenges that we ask that health care delivery be made a priority for LGBTQI+ communities and for health care professionals to treat them with the utmost respect and without any prejudice.

Several LGBTQI+ organisations have reported that many LGBTQI+ people are struggling to attain food and basic necessities like toiletries, sanitizers and protective masks. The coronavirus pandemic has shut down businesses and has resulted in unemployment of many LGBTQI+ individuals, which has led to financial hardship. Many LGBTQI+ people were already unemployed and living in poverty. Entrepreneurs and

informal workers who provide services like hairdressing, waiting tables at restaurants and sex work are unable to work and are robbed of an income due to the strict lockdown regulations. We ask for the government to include the LGBTQI+ community in the distribution of food parcels and other relief measures.

Transgender sex workers who live in extreme poverty and are among the most marginalised sections of the population, are at the greatest risk of loss of life. We demand as a matter of utmost urgency that food, housing and other support services be made available to them, and that sex work be immediately decriminalised to protect trans sex workers against loss of their livelihoods and lives, and to end police brutality against them.

LGBTQI+ civil society organisations have been dealt a heavy hand of having to work under pressure to make sure they serve their communities during this time. Most LGBTQI+ organisations depend on donors to fund the work they do in communities to fight homophobia, transphobia, biphobia, intersexphobia, hate crime and discrimination. Because of the coronavirus outbreak, many LGBTQI+ organisations are struggling to stay afloat as many funders are choosing to focus predominantly on combating the pandemic, leaving the future of many organisations uncertain. At present, government relief measures have not focused on supporting LGBTQI+ organisations and this needs to be addressed.

Education is pivotal in most LGBTQI+ people's lives. Many LGBTQI+ people focus on getting an education so that they can empower and set themselves free from the homophobic, biphobic, transphobic and intersexphobic clutches of their families. It is through education that many of us can gain independence and build new lives where we are comfortable and safe. The pandemic has caused closures of schools and universities, thus causing many LGBTQI+ learners and students to be home with discriminatory and abusive families. While the phased reopening of educational institutions has started, many schools are temporarily closing again due to Covid-19 infection. We are calling on government to ensure that education is delivered to all learners and students in safe circumstances, and the academic year recovered to allow students to complete their studies and qualifications. We need the implementation of a clear, efficient plan on the issuing of data and laptops to all learners and students, and accessible arrangements allowing for learning to continue on online platforms where needed.

These are some of the key issues affecting LGBTQI+ communities in South Africa during the Covid-19 pandemic. Extreme hardship and increased struggles for survival are faced by LGBTQI+ people under conditions where the general public's desperation often fuels greater prejudice and hate crime against marginalised groups. We call for decisive government action to affirm, protect, support and aid LGBTQI+ communities in this time.

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