

SALZBURG GLOBAL LGBT* FORUM:

GLOBAL IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 CRISIS FOR LGBT COMMUNITIES

April 30, 2020

Forum Chair Klaus Mueller

** LGBT: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender. We are using this term as it is currently widely used in human rights conversations on sexual orientation and gender identity in many parts of the world, and we would wish it to be read as inclusive of other cultural concepts, contemporary or historical, to express sexuality and gender, intersex and gender non-conforming identities.*

INTRODUCTION

The meeting was the second of its kind to strengthen online engagement with the Salzburg Global LGBT* Forum Fellows during the COVID-19 emergency. The prompting question of our meeting was: **What do you identify as the most challenging impact of the COVID-19 crisis for yourself and for the LGBT communities globally? What short and long term challenges are we being presented with?** Our meeting lasted 90 minutes and we utilized the Zoom platform to connect us around the world.

Three of our Fellows presented the challenges that COVID-19 poses to their regional communities, followed by commentary and feedback from the rest of the group.

FELLOWS' PRESENTATIONS

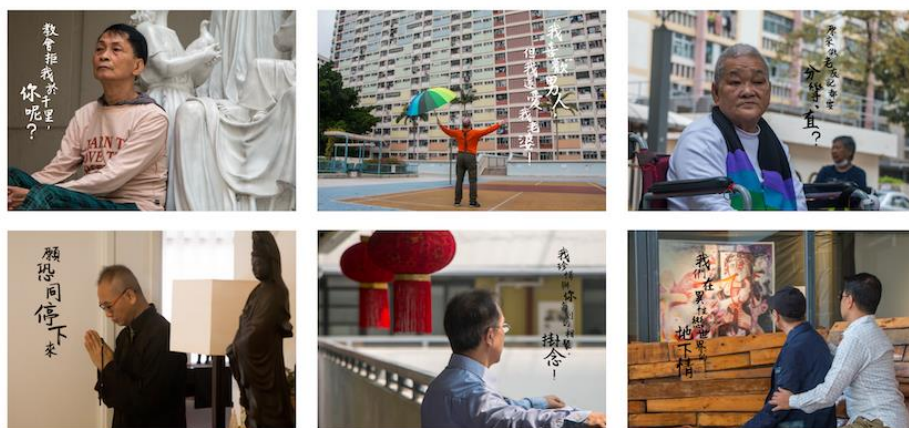
LGBT ELDERS IN HONG KONG

Travis S. K. Kong, *Hong Kong*

With the COVID-19 crisis, LGBT elders in Hong Kong are vulnerable in a specific way, not only due to their age and pre-existing chronic illnesses, but also because many of them are

not yet open about their sexual orientation. The Gay and Gray organization in Hong Kong offers as the first and only social group a space for older gay men to experience belonging and community. Gay and Gray normally organizes meet ups and face-to-face interactions.

Now, their isolation is exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis. The COVID-19 crisis has put a stop to these meet ups as everything “non-essential” begins to shut down. Many of the gay community hubs, including gay bars and saunas, have also had to close in Hong Kong due to the pandemic, with an unclear outlook if they will open again due to financial loss triggered by the pandemic. The LGBT communities lose their safe-spaces.



The older generation often lacks access to social media and communication technology which also means that they can't access peer information regarding valuable resources that are available to them. Access to healthcare is also a concern as LGBT individuals may feel uncomfortable seeking medical attention if there is a risk that their LGBT status, or the status of their peers, is identified. Will LGBT individuals seek medical treatment if they are afraid that they might be outed as LGBT? Travis' book *Oral Histories of Older Gay Men in Hong Kong: Unspoken but Unforgotten*, published in 2019, tells the intimate oral history of life of thirteen men as they came to terms with their sexuality and adulthood in the margins of Hong Kong society. The book inspired the film *Suk Suk*, a 2019 Hong Kong drama film written and directed by Ray Yeung, and won two major awards at the 39th Hong Kong Film Awards. All of the profit from the film will be donated to the Gay and Gray organization in Hong Kong.

Travis shared a variety of post cards which feature some of the men in the Gay and Gray organization. When translated into Chinese, “Gay and Gray” translates generally to “We will

walk together with smiles” attesting to the connection and bonding formed within this organization. Each of these postcards features captions that many other individuals can relate to including:

- Does God reject me because I am gay?
- I love men but I also love my wife!
- My wish is to stop homophobia
- We still love in secrecy
- We used to be friends, but now you have left me

These postcards highlight the challenges and difficulties that many older gay men face in Hong Kong.



LGBT IN JAMAICA

Angeline Jackson, Jamaica

As a result of the COVID-19 crisis, Jamaica has implemented a 6am to 6pm curfew in response to the spreading virus. With an enforced curfew, LGBT youth lost access to their families of choice and were enclosed in their families of birth, who may not accept them. Some trans youth sought shelter in storm drains in an attempt to escape persecution from their local communities. Many LGBT persons work in the tourism industry and now find themselves in economic uncertainty. They do not have the paperwork necessary to apply for government aid. Information, however, how the LGBT people come through this crisis remain sparse. The largest LGBT organization in Jamaica, JPLAN, has used infographics on social media to detail the resources that individuals can use if they are in trouble or are struggling in a vulnerable situation.

Healthcare has been a challenge in Jamaica and the COVID-19 crisis continues to highlight and exacerbate the pre-existing difficulties. Many LGBT individuals are apprehensive about accessing the help they need in fear that their LGBT status is exposed.

Angeline nevertheless chose to include happy photos of the LGBT community in Jamaica to highlight the progress that is being made within the country toward greater LGBT inclusion and acceptance over the last years. Among these photos was one photo from when money was raised through the Montego Bay Pride to paint a local police station. Photos also highlighted bus station protests that were organized to support the LGBT community. The last photo on some of the individuals who live in storm drains show them happy and dancing



at PRIDE.



LGBT REFUGEES AND DIASPORA COMMUNITIES

Faris Cuchi Gezahegn, Ethiopia/Austria

Faris Cuchi is an LGBT refugee himself and one of the co-founders of the House of Guramayle, which supports LGBT individuals in Ethiopia. Here, LGBT individuals find a safe space where community and connection can be developed and resources can be accessed.

Faris discussed how LGBT individuals in Ethiopia are being affected by the COVID-19 crisis and how networks such as theirs can help. The House of Guramayle is extending its network, also in regard to raising funds and broad social media campaigns. It is very important during this time to foster a sense of belongingness: Reading sessions, interviews, religious gatherings are some of the ways in which the House of Guramayle has provided a space for the LGBT community. Recently, they celebrated Orthodox Easter together on Zoom.

This crisis has brought out the adaptability of activist organizations as they find new ways to reach each other. Sometimes an individual may not feel safe showing their face but may join a meeting with their camera turned off. Organizations also have used informative videos on social media to help individuals access resources. Faris Cuchi shared a photo with us from their Orthodox Easter Celebration, with 14 Habesha, Eritreans and Ethiopians, attending via video and nine more obscuring their face.



GLOBAL CONNECTIONS

Kaoru Aoyama, *Japan*, as the first commentator, highlighted the “connection points” between these three presentations, focusing on areas of commonality and sharing challenges/opportunities/anxiety during a pandemic which has affected the world unlike any other in memory. As different as our conditions are, she reminded the group that many LGBT individuals are still in the closet, isolating them and endangering their access to support and health care.

She also raised the effects of the gender gap through which men and women are affected differently by the pandemic, and in general, how the effects of the pandemic are differently felt across the world and within our LGBT communities? Kaoru also suggested looking closely how the crisis affects us long-term, mentally and economically.

In the following discussion, many points were raised:

- **Klaus Mueller**, *the moderator of the session and the Forum’s Founder and Chair*, pointed out how the question of access to social media and communication technology connected the three presentations and showcase how vital the turn to digital media is for LGBT communities across the globe to secure information and a sense of connectedness.
- **M.V. Lee Badgett**, *USA* raised the question of to what extent people are still imbedded into their heteronormative families and roles. The new requirements of social distancing have now made it sometimes impossible for closeted LGBT individuals to leave the house and connect with their peers affecting them deeply. Another question that was raised was how people who suffer from chronic illnesses access healthcare?

- **Mariano Ruiz**, *Argentina* asked how forced migration will be affecting communities after COVID-19. Mariano works with communities of Jamaican and Russian LGBT refugees in Argentina and has seen how people reach out to learn about how they can get out of their situations. It is difficult to predict how LGBT refugees will be affected by this crisis. Faris Cuchi described how COVID-19 has put a light on pre-existing problems such as mental health, anxiety surrounding access to healthcare in fear of discrimination, and the damages of staying in an unhealthy environment with those who are unsupportive.

Marc Pachter, *USA*, as the second commentator, gave us a larger frame on how to look at the drastic changes caused by the pandemic. He wondered whether these new circumstances will bring back old challenges that LGBT individuals had faced for decades, for example with the AIDS crisis. These problems include queer youth being enclosed in families who do not support them, forced to remain closeted, or unable to develop their own families of choice in their communities.

As medicine and health care potentially are now requesting more information from citizens, would that be a *roll-back* scenario where medicine again took on a larger role in determining and defining queer lives? Rising nationalism, renewed borders, and the fear of “the other” already have shown how quickly mistrust can turn into discrimination and violence in a pandemic.

As countries consider using smartphone surveillance of individuals to track COVID-19, how will that affect LGBT individuals and their sense of being tracked by the government?

CONCLUSION

A THANK YOU TO HEALTHCARE WORKERS AROUND THE WORLD

Bisi Alimi, *Nigeria/UK*, guided the group in producing two messages of support and gratitude. We thanked frontline healthcare workers around the world for their amazing work, and also held up a message of love to LGBT individuals in isolation around the world who are struggling during these uncertain times.

We each wrote “Thank You” and “Love” in our respective languages and posed for a photo so that our support could be spread far and wide via social media.

Moving forward, a small team of Fellows will be taking on more responsibility in designing and planning of the next online engagements.

