



# **ENDING HIV IN CEECA THROUGH GLOBAL SOLIDARITY AND SHARED RESPONSIBILITY**

**POSITION PAPER**





As the World AIDS Day 2020 approaches, the global health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasizes the challenges we have faced and learned in the HIV response.

While the entire global citizenship has been hit by COVID-19, it is the most vulnerable that have been hit the hardest — as it is the case with the HIV epidemic.

COVID-19 has, yet again, revealed the profound inequalities, expanding the rift between the privileged and the disadvantaged. Among others, gay men and trans\* people, including those living with HIV, became victims of disregard as governments focused on COVID-19 mitigation.



LGBT NGOs working with HIV prevention in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia (CEECA) reported a 50-70% drop in clients turning for various HIV-services after the initiation and during the quarantine measures in Spring 2020<sup>1</sup>.



Number of clients of HIV and other STI testing dropped by 39% and 30%, respectively<sup>2</sup>.



Only 48% felt confident they could sustain their activities and employees during the following 3 months; most feared they would have to lay off their employees if quarantine continued; 2 NGOs stopped functioning completely<sup>3</sup>.



Trans\* people report that they lost access to hormone therapy (20%), came to live in abusive situation with psychological and physical violence (16%), lost access to other drugs and satisfactory living conditions due to finances and logistics, and lost access to trans-friendly doctors (1/3)<sup>4</sup>.



CEECA countries widely repurpose governmental AIDS Centres into COVID-19 testing sites and laboratories, rendering national HIV prevention mechanisms paralysed<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> ECOM conducted an online survey of 33 LGBT NGOs who work in HIV prevention to assess the impact of COVID-19 measures on respective key populations in Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, and North Macedonia.

<sup>2</sup> COVID-19 Situation Assessment: Impact of Quarantine Measures on LGBT NGOs Working in HIV Prevention. Tallinn: ECOM; 2020 (<https://ecom.ngo/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/COVID-Report.pdf>, accessed 23 November 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Interruption and Innovation: Impact of COVID-19 Measures on Key Populations in EECA. AFEW International; 2020 (<http://afew.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/AFEW-International-COVID-19-Report.pdf>, accessed 23 November 2020).

<sup>5</sup> Interruption and Innovation: Impact of COVID-19 Measures on Key Populations in EECA. AFEW International; 2020 (<http://afew.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/AFEW-International-COVID-19-Report.pdf>, accessed 23 November 2020).



On the World AIDS Day 2020, UNAIDS calls for global solidarity and shared responsibility because pandemics like COVID-19 and the global HIV epidemic demonstrate that the right to the highest attainable standard of health for everyone can be achieved only through solidarity, peer-support, tolerance, and respect for human rights<sup>6</sup>.

COVID-19 measures affect gay men and trans\* people in various ways. Only 55% of Europeans report they would be comfortable living with their LGB child<sup>7</sup>. This number exponentially drops in CEECA countries, resulting in key population members being stuck with abusive family members due to loss of income, jobs, and residence.

Existing criminalization laws (e.g., in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan) and other anti-LGBT legislation (e.g., the so called «gay propaganda» law in Russia) make LGBT persons more vulnerable to police abuse and arbitrary arrest and detention in the context of movement restrictions and curfews<sup>8</sup>. Many LGBT in CEECA rely on informal economies, being forced to resort to unsafe earning choices due to absence of state support<sup>9</sup>.

Religious leaders scapegoat LGBT persons for bringing COVID-19 as divine punishment on humanity<sup>10</sup>. Such religious scapegoating is ardent in CEECA<sup>11</sup>. As a result, LGBT are subjected to elevated discrimination, stigma, and violence from general public which takes its frustration out on vulnerable gay men and trans\* people.

These figures and facts, along with an entire array of other intersectional results, indicate that unless everyone unites and acts to respect the right to health of all universally, delivering the world from COVID-19 and HIV will be impossible.

Communities cannot be the only ones to carry the burden of helping themselves out in dealing with HIV prevention. Governments must not use COVID-19 as a means of retaliating against key populations, pulling funding and other HIV services out from them under a pretext of COVID-19.

<sup>6</sup> World AIDS Day 2020. Geneva: UNAIDS; 2020 (<https://spark.adobe.com/page/OdplRTRApOghp/>, accessed 23 November 2020).

<sup>7</sup> COVID-19 and Specific Impact on LGBTI People. ILGA-Europe; 2020 ([https://www.ilga-europe.org/sites/default/files/COVID19%20\\_Impact%20LGBTI%20people.pdf](https://www.ilga-europe.org/sites/default/files/COVID19%20_Impact%20LGBTI%20people.pdf), accessed 23 November 2020).

<sup>8</sup> COVID-19: The Suffering and Resilience of LGBT Persons. Geneva: OHCHR, 2020 (<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25884&LangID=E>, accessed 23 November 2020).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> LGBTQ Inequality and Vulnerability in the Pandemic. Human Rights Watch, 2020 (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/06/18/lgbtq-inequality-and-vulnerability-pandemic>, accessed 23 November 2020).

<sup>11</sup> Ukrainian Church Leader Who Blamed COVID-19 on Gay Marriage. NBC News, 2020 (<https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/ukrainian-church-leader-who-blamed-covid-19-gay-marriage-tests-n1239528>, accessed 23 November 2020).



## ECOM CALLS UPON COMMUNITIES AND PARTNERS TO



Put key populations, including gay men, other MSM and trans\* people, at the forefront of national COVID-19 responses, as they are highly vulnerable to SARS-CoV-2 outcomes;



Ensure continuing implementation of comprehensive HIV programs especially aimed at key populations, including gay men and trans\* people;



Ensure that HIV programs for gay men, other MSM and trans\* people are realised by the communities themselves and that unnecessarily strict regulations for LGBT NGO activities are reversed or mitigated to support the HIV response;



Include gay men and trans\* people as separate categories into social protection programs that would help to overcome labor and financial adversity without discrimination during COVID-19 measures;



Organize shelters for gay men and trans\* people specifically to help those who have lost their income source, residence, and those affected by violence from their discriminatory environments;



Include gay men and trans\* people into the national healthcare decision-making processes to ensure that respect for human rights and healthcare access is carried out in the spirit of respect and tolerance for each and every person.