HIGHLIGHT SERIES





APCOM's Highlight Series profiles the often unheard voices from our communities across Asia and the Pacific.

The Highlight Series form the evidence-based information to be shared across the region and globally on issues that affect their lives and their communities including health, rights and well-being.

This Highlight Series was made possible with the support from UNAIDS

Lead writer: Geoff Manthey Edits: Midnight Poonkasetwattana



Design and layout: Vaness Silpakhon Kongsakul

© APCOM 2021

Map Disclaimer: The designations employed and the presentation of the material on this map do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of APCOM concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries. Every effort is made to ensure this map is free of errors but there is no warrant the map or its features are either spatially or temporally accurate or fit for a particular use. This map is provided without any warranty of any kind whatsoever, either express or implied.

APCOM COVID-19 EFFECT SERIES :

Reflecting the current realities faced by the communities we serve The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged us all as never before, and #CoronaAPCOMpassion would like to acknowledge the many organisations and individuals whose collective energy has made this moment and our momentum possible – you are all **HEROES**; supporting MSM, transgender and LGBTQI individuals - one intimate relationship, one community, one society, one country - at this time. APCOM thanks you.

The COVID-19 Effect Series, a **newsletter that profiles issues, challenges and solutions from the LGBTQI communities and key populations across Asia and the Pacific,** would not have been possible without the close collaboration with our partner organisations, including Micro Rainbow International (Cambodia); Gopi Shankar, founder of Srishti Madurai (India); Suara Kita, Yayasan Gaya Dewata (Indonesia); Lao Positive Health Association (Lao PDR); Youth for Health (Mongolia); Blue Diamond Society (Nepal); Dareecha Health Society (Pakistan); Babaylanes (Philippines); and Palitha Vijayabandara (Sri Lanka). APCOM thanks you.

The COVID-19 Effect series sheds light on the pandemic's impact among diverse SOCIESC communities and key populations and their access to HIV prevention and treatment services. Communities and their organisations continue to face the situation where it is still difficult to deliver essential services; where scheduled workshops, meetings and trainings are no longer possible in agreed timelines; where social distancing and masks, essential measures to prevent COVID-19 - have challenged our very essence of emotional support with families and friends; where many couples have been stranded without each other; and where there is no or limited optimism that we can celebrate our strength and diversity physically together any time soon.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, LGBTQI people often faced difficulty accessing health and other health-related services in many countries across Asia and the Pacific. Since the beginning of the pandemic, LGBTQI communities and key populations have reported being denied access to services, suppressed, curfewed, locked-down or made unaffordable. This is the COVID-19 effect. The purpose of this document is to share some of the outstanding facts and issues that have emerged through the collection of stories published in the APCOM newsletter.





FOREWORD A reflection on APCOM Covid-19 response

The Covid-19 pandemic indiscriminately affects the world at large. With the many restrictions and security measures enforced by governments, governments inevitably pose a particular challenge to the LGBTQI community and individuals in Asia and the Pacific. Covid-19 seriously hampered outreach activities, and services are now even more difficult to access. Covid-19 negatively impacted HIV services and advocacy, LGBTQI organisations' work on human rights, counselling, hospital visits and training. LGBTQI individuals face financial hardship, especially those working in the service sector and the informal economy, which results in economic hardship. Many in our community are looking at an uncertain future.

Through the Covid-19 Effect series, APCOM reflected on the current challenging situation and the short term and longer-term impact of Covid-19 on the community we serve. We are all dealing with the consequences of Covid-19, such as services being unavailable, denied or unaffordable because of restrictive measures to curb the pandemic. We call this the Covid-19 effect. As Covid-19 exacerbated discrimination and marginalisation of LGBTQI communities and key populations, the Covid-19 Effect series documented the work of APCOM, some partner organisations, communities and individuals. This introspection enriched us with inspiring stories on overcoming challenges and working together to tackle HIV and advocate for LGBTQI rights.

During this transition period, we are closely monitoring the human rights of LGBTQI as the "new normal" triggered increased stigma, discrimination of marginalised communities and legal restrictions. Together with the United Nations Human Rights Council, we should watch countries' human rights records with a vigilant eye to ensure that human rights issues are dealt with appropriately and timely. The Covid-19 Effect series focused on protecting people, initiated discussion with key allies, and listened to people affected during the pandemic to better identify and understand the needs of our constituents, prioritise actions, and advocate for the rights of the LGBTQI community.

We would not be able to carry out our joint mission without donors and the support of others. Hence, we make a collective call for flexible programme implementation and timelines, operational mechanisms and organizational needs to protect our staff and empower them to carry out their responsibilities during the pandemic. Last but not least, APCOM wishes to thank all of you, our HEROES, who worked tirelessly during this pandemic to support LGBTQI individuals and organisations. I would like to say a special thank you to UNAIDS Asia Pacific for the collaboration with APCOM on this issue of the Highlight Series. We would like to also extend our thanks to other donors that have supported APCOM and our community to have a voice during such an unprecedented time.

Midnight **Executive Director** APCOM



FOREWORD Amplifying the impact of community-led responses to COVID-19

When the COVID-19 pandemic began to spread across the globe, it became clear that fears of contracting COVID-19, misinformation and subsequent stigma were major factors deterring people seeking HIV prevention and treatment services. In response to these insights, UNAIDS supported APCOM to develop and promote access to relevant and timely information about COVID-19 targeted to LGBTQI people, and record best practices from community-led responses.

COVID-19 increases the vulnerability of groups that are already disproportionately affected by HIV. For some LGBTQI people, self-isolation and physical distancing can be particularly challenging. Many LGBTQI people face violence and/or ill-treatment while sheltering in homes with unaccepting family members. Isolation can also exacerbate pre-existing mental health challenges, including loneliness, depression, and anxiety. The COVID-19 pandemic leaves many gay men and transgender people without adequate tools for taking control of their sexual health and rights. Lockdown and movement restrictions compound the difficulties these groups already experience in accessing antiretroviral therapy and HIV prevention services.

Human-interest stories included in APCOM's newsletter are meant to raise the visibility of human rights violations and challenges faced by LGBTQI people and people living with HIV in accessing health services. The stories are also a channel to convey advocacy messages calling for flexibility in donor funding for activities that are needed by the community. The series amplifies community voices that have often been unheard in COVID-19 narratives.

History has shown that communities must be engaged in governance, policy-making and service delivery in order to respond to community needs during an epidemic effectively. The leadership and engagement of communities, instrumental in the success of the AIDS response, has also been key in responding to COVID-19. APCOM newsletter has engaged LGBTQI communities in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, ensured frequent sharing of information, directed people to available health services during lockdowns and shared best practices and lessons learned that can be replicated across the region.

Leaving people behind is not an option if we are to succeed. Eliminating stigma and discrimination, putting people at the centre and grounding our responses in human rights together with the meaningful engagement and the leadership of the communities are key to ending the colliding pandemics of HIV and COVID-19.

Eamonn Murphy **Regional Director UNAIDS Asia Pacific**

WHAT IS THE COVID-19 EFFECT SERIES ABOUT

During the pandemic, APCOM has provided a platform to leverage the voices of people living with HIV and LGBTQI to share stories, highlight challenges, showcase innovation and build strength within these communities. These stories have been compiled in the COVID-19 Effect Series, a newsletter that serves as a virtual collection of available resources and testimonies from community members. Nineteen episodes have been published since April 2020 and disseminated through mailing lists to various partners and social media channels collecting over 25,000 views. Each episode consists of 3 or 4 stories profiling the work of activists, leaders and organisations in the HIV and COVID-19 response.

During the pandemic, from Ulaanbaatar to Tokyo to Bangkok to Suva, individuals and communities stepped up to deliver services in the face of this once-in-a-lifetime health challenge. The stories included in the newsletter show how community-led organisations have leveraged the structures and networks from the HIV response to ensure timely access to information about COVID-19 while preventing the disruption to HIV services. Examples of these initiatives include how community-led HIV services provide antiretroviral therapy (ARV) and pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) to key populations and showcase fundraising efforts for food packages.

The newsletter includes a combination of stories written by APCOM and its community partners at the country and regional levels.

"It's my honour to be part of others in your platform – so thank you for the opportunity. Please continue doing your wonderful and important works for our community!", Ly Pisey, Executive Director, RoCK, Cambodia.

"I saw it published in the newsletter, and it has been useful for me - [an organisation] reached out to us recently for consultation and they were asking me how things were in Singapore. I just sent them the link to the article!", Leow Yangfa, Executive Director, Oogachaga, Singapore

"Seeing our story, the grassroots community of Pakistan, being amplified along with other communities across the region are so much delighting and also empowering at the same time. It's not the spotlight that really matters, but the fact that we can learn from each other and be strong together during these hard times," Muhammad Usman, Dareecha Male Health Society, Pakistan.



THE FRAMEWORK OF THE COVID-19 EFFECT SERIES:

Tenacity delivering HIV, rights and COVID-19 services together Tenacity is part of APCOM's strategy and framework that promotes innovation. Tenacity is about 'doing something new' and promotes gathering stories and testimonies from LGBTQI communities and key populations to bring visibility to key causes. This framework guides APCOM's core work and contributes to improving the health and rights of gay men, other men who have sex with men and SOGIESC people and ensuring vulnerable communities are not left behind as nations work to deliver on their commitments to sustainable development goals. Tenacity continues to guide APCOM in response to COVID-19.

"I wish everyone well in these uncertain times and encourage us all to work on the transition towards a leaner, more efficient coalition tackling HIV in all its aspects and LGBTQI rights amid the COVID-19 pandemic. What is great about the series is that our APCOM team also contributed their stories of vulnerability and resilience to share with our community at large – we are not immune to the pandemic but we also want to demonstrate that we are indeed stronger together."

Dédé Oetomo, APCOM Regional Advisory Group Chair

Tenacity has three core pillars:

1. HIV is Not Over

strengthening the HIV response for gay men and other men who have sex with men

- 2. Our rights
 - protecting gay men, other men who have sex with men and SOGIESC people
- 3. Our strength

stronger interlinked communities and broader partner networks.



KEY CHALLENGES AND ISSUES EMERGING FROM THE COVID-19 EFFECT SERIES

Challenges raised by the communities through the different articles published in the newsletter include the inability to access methadone services for people who use drugs; limited or no government support for youth including homeless, undocumented or internally displaced LGBTQI youth; loss of income; increased gender-based violence; restriction of movement for key populations and people living with HIV in accessing HIV prevention and treatment services; limited or no access to personal protective equipment (PPE) for PLHIV; and closure of support services for LGBTQI people and PLHIV.

The series highlights the loss of rights with warrantless arrests, increased discrimination and re/criminalisation of key populations. Articles in the newsletters show that daily life for many LGBTQI people has gotten worse as they have been dislocated from their support networks, lost access to HIV services, and lost their employment, income and housing. The situation for many LGBTQI people is that their family and community have rejected them – so COVID-19 has now left them stranded without support in dire straits and without a discernible future.

Some episodes from the series explore the challenges of being newly diagnosed with HIV during COVID-19. Struggling to understand their diagnoses, some men and women from the region have experienced greater forms of stigma and discrimination, and because of enforced isolation and seclusion - internalised stigma related to HIV is on the rise.

The APCOM COVID-19 series also highlights the impact that lockdowns have on the livelihoods of intersex people, transgender people and gender non-conforming people.

"Millions of unemployed people, including our LGBTQI communities, have moved to their hometowns because they don't have jobs. Some might be lucky to live in friendly environments, but most of us will be in uncomfortable, unacceptable or unsafe environments!" taken from 'A Complaint Letter to COVID-19'

To listen to what issues LGBTQI people living with and affected by HIV were facing in Thailand and in other countries, APCOM has organised regular online discussions with HIV and LGBTQI community organisations. The main issues that emerged during these discussions are featured in different episodes of the newsletter.



Many of APCOM's partner organisations have faced new challenges, such as efficiently managing day-to-day business, reimagining and adapting to the challenges brought by COVID-19 and identifying new ways to support the community and addressing COVID-19 misinformation.

Asked

"What has been the immediate impact of COVID-19 in your organisation and in your community?"

Micro Rainbow responded

"We can't mobilize, organize trainings, and meetings. We can only do work at home and meet few people (not large groups)."

"Some NGOs do not dare to ask for help from others, as they are so used to helping others." Taken from Virtual Powwow with Thai LGBTQI and HIV community on the effects of COVID-19.

APCOM has provided technical support and outreach to organisations that have struggled with the juxtaposition of providing services to the communities while prioritising their paid and unpaid workers' health and safety.

To protect and safeguard APCOM's staff in the face of COVID-19, APCOM implemented safeguarding measures which include adopting flexible work arrangements or alternative working arrangements/ schedules; working from home; cancellation and postponement of consultations, meetings and gatherings; and promoting COVID-19 protective measures set out by the World Health Organisation when in the office. These measures have been included in the "Precautionary Protocol", an initiative that is part of APCOM's Business Continuity Plan, which has been profiled in one of the newsletters:

This set of protocols informs community partners at the country-level to implement similar policies to safeguard staff from COVID-19.



COMMUNITY-LED INITIATIVES DURING COVID-19

"Our strength – facing more adversity has only shown we are strong, strong as individuals and stronger as communities," Midnight, APCOM Executive Director.

Community-based organisations across Asia and the Pacific have played a critical role in supporting gay men, other men who have sex with men, sex workers and SOGIESC people during COVID-19 and continue to operate and provide essential services to communities on a smaller-scale.

APCOM's highlight series included a <u>published article about Youth for Health</u> (YFH) and their work to provide sexual health programs in Mongolia during the pandemic. YFH, in collaboration with People in Need, an NGO in Mongolia, prepared and distributed survival kits to elderly MSM and transgender people in poor living conditions and organised four training events for MSM in smaller and manageable capacities. The training focused on educating MSM on HIV, safe sex and HIV testing, and YFH provided counselling services and medical advice in person and online.

The series also highlighted an interesting initiative by Suara Kita, an LGBTQI organization based in Indonesia that started a fundraising initiative by selling preloved bags and clothes. Suara Kita has donated all the profit from this initiative to LGBTQI people who are most affected by the pandemic and started selling products online in March. In April, the organisation received 10,450,000 rupiahs (USD669.00) from sales to buy basic food supplies, hand sanitizers and masks for LGBTQI people and was distributed to 75 LGBTQI individuals in three cities: Depok, Tangerang, Bekasi. Suara Kita also supports the Kitchen in East Jakarta by providing free food from the sales.

Moreover, in Cambodia, APCOM's partner, Micro Rainbow International Foundation, dedicated themselves to <u>addressing poverty inequality among Cambodian LGBTQI</u> <u>people</u> and in India, <u>Committed Communities Development Trust (CCDT)</u> staff organised outreach activities and programmes on alternate days, to supply essential food packages and PPEs to key populations. In their efforts, CCDT held fundraising events to support migrant workers and daily-wager communities, donated medical equipment and 3,000 PPE kits to hospitals units in Mumbai and supplied nutrition kits or bags to the 500 individuals and their families and those who are living with and affected by HIV/AIDS.

APCOM has used the COVID-19 Effect Series to promote fundraising initiatives to support sex workers and LGBTQI people across the region. For example, in Thailand, APCOM collaborated with SWING, the Thai sex workers organization, based in Bangkok and Pattaya, mobilised 20,000 baht to purchase basic food and supplies for sex workers. Also, APCOM donated 9,000 baht to the Bangkok Rainbow Organization to support the health and wellbeing of LGBTQI people in Thailand.

All these examples demonstrate that civil society organisations play a critical role in providing essential safety-nets for vulnerable communities and to protect the health and well-being of the community members they serve.

VOICES FROM THE PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 Effect Series focused the attention on more than just numbers and the responses to protect people in this crisis. It creates a platform to make the voices of the communities heard across the region and share personal experiences and testimonies.

The 9th edition of the series focused on boosting the voices of the transgender community from Southeast Asia. The transgender community has expressed difficulty in buying groceries, accessing health care during lockdowns, access to medication, including hormone therapy. In this edition, APCOM wanted to capture community members' voices and bring attention to their specific challenges and needs. In <u>one of the stories, we hear from Khartini Slamah</u>, a transgender woman from Sarawak, Malaysia, advocating for HIV issues and transgender and sex worker rights for over three decades. During the pandemic, Khartini has reached out to TGW/MSM/FSW community members to encourage sexual health screening and testing and raise awareness of HIV and STI on social media. In Malaysia, many TGW and FSW have experienced hardship due to loss of employment, and many businesses have closed down because of lockdown.

"Many are unable to pay rent and utility bills... unable to do sex work, conduct their usual businesses. Some even lost their jobs," says Khartini Slamah.

Although the past year has been extremely difficult for many people, especially for the transgender community, Khartini reflects positively on gaining new experience with social media outreach and fundraising.

To showcase a variety of different perspectives, APCOM also published <u>Confession from</u> <u>a Male Escort in Vietnam during COVID-19</u>. Quan Nguyen, is from Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam. Quan is a male escort, adult film star and PrEP and condom advocate.

"I have been on PrEP for two years now, and always use condoms. I know PrEP only protects against HIV, but not STIs. I go to an LGBT community clinic every three months to take an HIV test and get my PrEP refill," says **Quan**, as he reflects on how easy it is to access PrEP in Vietnam and how far LGBTQI visibility has come.

Restrictions in movement and lockdowns have made it difficult for sex workers to meet clients. During COVID-19, *'customers became worried about their safety and wanted to protect themselves from COVID-19, so there was not much demand for sex work'* explains Quan Nguyen. With all the spare time, Quan focused his attention into personal fitness and learning English and to pursue his dreams of being a cabin crew.

The 11th COVID-19 Effect Series refocused attention on people affected by the pandemic – artists. Six artists from Asia and the Pacific related the realities that isolation and closed doors had on their art, their 2020 plans and adapting to life in a world with COVID-19.

Another important voice that APCOM profiled through the Effect Series was that of sex workers. From Vietnam, the personal story of life for one sex worker before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, and then future dreams, brought attention to the many issues that face sex workers, their intimate partners and their clients.

APCOM RESPONDING TO COVID-19 THROUGH #CoronaAPCOMpassion

To address the effects of the COVID-19 outbreak, APCOM started a fundraising and response mechanism called #CoronaAPCOMpassion. Launched in April 2020, the fundraiser was jump-started with APCOM staff voluntarily donating part of their salaries to #CoronaAPCOMpassion. The initiative aimed to provide support to key populations and LGBTQI communities in Asia and the Pacific region.

As part of this initiative, APCOM supported Dareecha Male Health Society, an organization that works on health, health restoration, and social welfare of MSM and transgender communities in Rawalpindi of Pakistan and Suara Kita, an LGBTQI organization in Indonesia. Both organizations used this fund to procure masks, hand sanitisers, basic food, and medicines.

"The Covid-19 Effect Series helped us promote the #CoronaAPCOMPassion but also, it helped us identify local partners that need our support," says Midnight, APCOM Executive Director.

The newsletter profiles several initiatives supported through the APCOM emergency relief fund.

FLEXIBILITY IN DONOR FUNDING AND FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY DURING COVID-19 While recognizing the important role of donors during the COVID-19 pandemic, the stories from the newsletter served as an advocacy channel to call for flexibility in donor funding for activities that are needed by the community.

APCOM has initiated discussions with donor organizations to reassess 2020 indicators for project delivery. APCOM has also advocated with donors and supporters (to consider recommendations specific to health services and programs, and the operational and organizations needs of regional networks and community-based organizations.

"APCOM appreciates the agreed deadlines pre-COVID-19 for program/project delivery but for community-based organizations under lockdown – they cannot possibly deliver outreach services – they have been closed down or cancelled as a result of government lockdowns; HIV testing benchmarks – no one is able to visit clinics, or behaviour change actions in the middle of this pandemic," says Midnight, APCOM Executive Director

"APCOM has and will continue to advocate for flexibility and understanding by donors that targets will not be met in 2020 and beyond – but at the same time, 'do not rob Peter to pay Paul' – do not strip HIV or LGBTQI programs of money to fund COVID-19 responses. APCOM strongly advocates that both are needed now, more than ever," adds Midnight.

APCOM and partner organizations have called on donors and others to

- Ensure promised and obligated funding for communities remains the same and not significantly reduced;
- Allow flexibility for regional key population networks and country-based networks and CBOS to create and broaden online-based activities aimed at key populations;
- Allow community-based organisations who are working with at-risk-populations to procure COVID-19 rapid test kits for mass COVID-19 testing;
- Heighten the support to community-based organisations providing testing and ART to key populations;
- Allow flexibilities for timelines and project implementation;
- Provide tools on precautionary and preventive measures to guide organisations in protecting and safeguarding its staff, partners and clients amid global pandemic;
- Organise online trainings or webinars on emergency life-saving protocols, technical guidance and support on navigating uncertain circumstances;
- Provide basic preventive materials such as hand sanitizers and masks for the staff and clients of HIV and LGBTQI community-based organisations.

The details of this advocacy effort by APCOM has been included in Series 4 of the newsletter.

REFLECTIONS The focus of APCOM during this time has been on multiple and interlinked communities – people living with HIV, sex workers, women, transgender people, people who use drugs, young people, homeless people and ethnic minorities – and how we can respond to COVID-19 and emerge stronger and more resilient, consistent with the Sustainable Development Goals. As part of these efforts,

- APCOM has always recognized the need to listen to our constituents and this is paramount in these extraordinary times.
- APCOM's HIV/AIDS Ambassador, J.V.R. Prasada Rao reflected on similar issues emerging around COVID-19 that were seen in the early days of the HIV pandemic. There have been difficulties gaining an accurate picture of the epidemiology of COVID-19; difficulties making testing available to those who need it; and COVID-19-related stigma. For PLHIV and LGBTQI people, some now face double or triple stigmas.
- APCOM has continued its regular Highlight Series with editions on "Legal Recognition of Same-Sex Relationships in Asia" and "China Case Study – Using the internet for mass mobilization of the MSM community for the purpose of HIV testing". Both publications can be found at <u>apcom</u>.
- APCOM supported a webinar on how best to address the well-being of LGBTQI people in the face of curfews and lockdowns that have led to job losses and income loss. The webinar was organized on 9 June 2020, with the title Health and human rights for sex workers in Asia and the Pacific in the time of COVID-19, by the ASHM's Regional Advisory Group of the ASHM Taskforce on BBVs, Sexual Health and COVID-19 in partnership with Scarlett Alliance and APNSW.
- In partnership with LINKAGES, APCOM continues its outreach, support and caring to our constituents in the region. Our COVID-19 webinar series has kicked off with a focus on communities in Asia-Pacific. We stand with you and together we will conquer new obstacles and deliver quality rights-based services across the Asia-Pacific region.

REGULAR BUSINESS IRREGULARLY

APCOM has continued its regular work as set-out in Tenacity. One of these was the Webinar "<u>Bringing Progressive Faith Voices toward Diverse Gender and Sexualities</u>" to mark IDAHOBIT 2020

APCOM also organized an event "IDAHOTB 2020: Bridging the LGBTI Inclusion Data Gap" in partnership with the Asian Development Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the Inter-American Development Bank, and the World Bank.

Recognizing the importance of resources for community-based organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic, APCOM has used the COVID-19 Effect Series to alert communities and individuals to emergency funding support. **#CoronaAPCOMpassion** needs your support – <u>watch our video here</u>



MORE STORIES

APCOM continues to encourage contributions from the community – share your COVID-19 experience with us.

How it is affects your communities and your loved ones. APCOM will be your voice!

Please send us your contribution piece to apcom@apcom.org with the subject line "COVID-19 Experience".



APCOM would like to acknowledge support from the following for enabling APCOM to do our regular Covid-19 newsletter, and ensuring that our community in Asia Pacific continues to have a voice during such an unprecedented time.

Thank you to our community partner organisations and networks, and individual activists and allies that have contributed their stories to our Covid-19 series.















AUSTRALIAN FEDERATION OF AIDS ORGANISATIONS





SKPA





We are united in advocating for issues around HIV and those that advance the rights, health and well being of people of diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics.

apcom.org Equity. Dignity. Social Justice.

APCOM Secretariat | 48 Soi Udomsuk 13, Bangna Bangkok 10260 Thailand +66 2399 1145 / +66 2399 1146 www.apcom.org | apcom@apcom.org







