Lockdown: many LGBTQ people are stuck in extremely hostile households

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Introduction

A couple of days ago I was on the phone with Rajesh (not his real name). Rajesh, 25 has just had to move back with his parents in Birmingham and described his situation as “dire”. He is devastated that the job he had started in London no longer exists and that he was back in the town which he had been so desperate to leave behind. Rajesh’s parents are strict Hindus who threw him out of the house on learning he was gay. Rajesh made the move to London less than a year ago but with the lack of new jobs and difficulty finding accommodation since the COVID-19 lockdown he has reluctantly had to move back in with his parents.

Rajesh’s story is far from unique. Many LGBTQ individuals are being forced to move back into unsafe domestic spaces. Charities such as the Albert Kennedy Trust have recently advised young people to “press pause” on coming out “until you get support”1. While the crisis has raised significant concerns for the entire population, it has brought additional barriers for LGBTQ people, especially those coming from BAME backgrounds who face disproportionate levels of homelessness. Insecure employment brings further levels of marginalisation2. Debanuj Dasgupta and my research on the LGBTQ muslim community in the United Kingdom for instance found the importance of having access to LGBTQ spaces to combat mental health crisis, racism and access to cultural specific safe spaces is vital3.

The crisis has created an unprecedented situation which has seen many LGBT people isolated without any support structures. Several BAME LGBTQ people I have spoken to in the last few days all told me of their dread at having to move away from their families of choice as they are forced into self isolation.

Poverty and Precarity

LGBTQ activists and friends in India and Bangladesh who have been long time academic collaborators have cried to me over the phone about the uncertainty coronavirus is creating in their communities. Trans activists in particular are worried about how self isolation could be a “death knell” for their community. Dr Paul Boyce and I have conducted extensive ethnography in small towns in India and discussed the importance of kinship and friendship structures for LGBTQ people especially those living in rural/suburban areas where isolation is a significant issue for well being. This is very much true also of the LGBTQ population in the United Kingdom. Several of them who are also sex workers have described this as a life and death situation because of lack of pay and government support4.

Pawan Dhall of the Varta Trust, a gender and sexuality advocacy organisation in India, told me that queer activists and support groups have thrown themselves to help others.
in the community who are facing survival challenges – from access to antiretroviral therapy, food rations to care services. He has started an audio blog where activists across Eastern India have been sending updates. Pawan and I were part of a Wellcome Trust grant two years ago which explored how digital media can be used for health interventions within the LGBTQ community. The audio blog is one of many ways in which not only is health information being disseminated but also creating a space for interaction and archiving this moment.

In the UK the situation has been especially difficult for LGBTQ people of faith and those coming from BAME backgrounds- there is an urgent need for befriending services, social media spaces to combat social isolation and above all keeping a tab on possible issues around homophobia and violence they might be facing having moved back home and in hostile community spaces.

Isolation, Social Media and Resilience

Beyond the obvious issues around income, housing and food there is also the social aspect. LGBTQ people are significantly more susceptible to mental health issues due to discrimination and inequalities which has been exacerbated through the COVID lockdown. For those LGBTQ people moving back into unsafe spaces where they are either having to go “back in the closet” or remain silent about their sexuality, the loss of being able to socialise with their queer friends and allies who provide a safe space is very concerning.

Jack Harisson Quintana, Director of Grindr for Equality (Grindr's corporate social responsibility arm) has pointed out that during this time of crisis those in the West should look to examples abroad where social apps like Grindr are used not just for hook ups but also friendship and mutual support. My own research in this area has also argued that digital and social media spaces can often be lifelines for LGBTQ youth especially in conditions of isolation. In UK and in India there has been a significant increase in people calling up charity helplines for support. Advocacy and peer outreach work is taking place online now more than ever before to help those cut off from vital support. But more can be done.

While faith groups have been excellent in helping individuals and supporting community groups, LGBTQ people of colour continue to feel unable to access these resources due to fear of stigma and backlash. Anjum (not her real name), who lives in East London and is currently self-isolating, told me:

I am lucky to have faith groups in my area who have been coming round and buying essentials for me. I am always worried though how it would be if they found out about my sexuality. I don’t know many people in this city.

This is not the first time a virus has threatened the LBGTQ community. Most people will remember the AIDS crisis, which swept through the community, killing tens of thousands of people. While most government and health officials were too slow to respond or deliberately obfuscated facts it was the resilience of the LGBTQ
community that got us through it: by coming together and taking to the streets to demand healthcare.\textsuperscript{10}

Loss and grief is not something new for our community – we have raged against oppression, celebrated in our victories and above all survived. This time it is different as there is no judgement on people infected. Even as we face this crisis together it is imperative to continue sharing resources and be conscious of those who might be more vulnerable than us.

Going Forward

Going forward the government needs to urgently address the following issues

1. Housing- LGBT people especially BAME LGBT individuals face a threat in having to go back in to homophobic households which with possibilities of mental and physical violence
2. Health- Social isolation will have an adverse effect on the lives of LGBTQ people. How can digital media be harnessed better to combat this?
3. Faith- Faith groups have sprung into action but for many LGBTQ people of faith they are having to conceal their sexuality in order to receive this support. Post this COVID crisis how can we continue addressing this
4. Poverty and precarity- Many in the informal sector, migrants and asylum seekers and those on zero hour contracts or sex work face destitution. They cannot access the government support
5. Healthcare- Access to therapy, antiretroviral medication

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\textsuperscript{2} https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/lgbt-rights-movement-marriage-coming-out-disregard-queer-trans-people-ethnic-minorities-a8200346.html
\textsuperscript{5} https://vartagensex.org/vartanama/2020/03/coronavirus-outreach-news/
\textsuperscript{7} https://www.stonewall.org.uk/system/files/lgbt_in_britain_health.pdf
\textsuperscript{8} https://www.advocate.com/commentary/2020/4/06/flirting-chatting-connecting-hookup-apps-without-hookup