



# Invisibility Amplified

*A report on the impact of Covid-19 on  
the intersex community in Asia*



Prashant Singh  
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2020



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A Report on the impact of COVID-19 on intersex community in Asia

**Insights from Intersex Asia's COVID-19 Urgent Fund**

**2020**

This report is a part of a global study on the situation of intersex people and their families in times of COVID-19, initiated by OII Europe and conducted by the International Intersex Community in different regions of the world. The global report will be published in 2021.

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## Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic is continuing to severely impact people around the world socially and economically since early 2020. Intersex people in Asia, as a marginalized community, faced even worse impacts. In the Asian region, several organisations conducted surveys to measure the impact of the pandemic on wider LGBTI population groups during the early stages. It was observed that the distinct concerns of the intersex community were not reflected in the survey findings. To address this gap, the global intersex community decided to conduct its own survey focusing on intersex people.

OII Europe took the lead and prepared a comprehensive questionnaire for Europe which was made available as a template for other regions. Each region revised and tailored the questionnaire as per their respective regional context.

After suitable revisions, Intersex Asia launched the online survey in the Asian region. With the support from our member organizations, we overcame the linguistic obstacles and were able to invite intersex people associated with our member organizations to participate in the survey. Our member organizations played a crucial role in the data collection process for the survey. This is the first survey of its kind and scale which aims to measure the impact of COVID-19 for intersex people in Asia.

The survey findings have highlighted the specific issues faced by intersex people in Asia and allowed us to connect and compare the impacts of the pandemic with the global intersex community. The report also includes some insights from the two rounds of the *Urgent Fund*, a fund set up by Intersex Asia during April and July 2020 to support intersex people who were facing financial challenges. It strengthened our connection with intersex communities on the ground and helped us listen to their voices and needs more closely.

Insights from this survey remind us of gaps within the legal and welfare systems that existed even before the pandemic for intersex people and have only been exacerbated since. It reaffirms the need for the inclusion of intersex voices in the policymaking process through a broader lens that accounts for intersectional disadvantages and does not leave intersex people behind.

The publication of this report is a significant milestone for Intersex Asia as it is the first independent report of the organisation. We are proud of the collective effort of our member organisations who ensured that we were able to reach community members. We are immensely grateful for the support of Dan Christian Ghattas and Irene Kuzemko from OII Europe in preparing this report. We hope that it is the first of many more research publications to come from Intersex Asia in the coming times.

Hiker Chiu



Intersex Asia Chair/Executive Director

June 2021

## Methodology<sup>1</sup>

The survey was launched on the 10th of September 2020 and was disseminated through multiple channels within the Asian intersex community, including IA's website and social media channels. The survey link was open for around 50 days until 30 October 2020.

### Questionnaire

Intersex Asia used OII Europe's questionnaire as a template. This questionnaire was based on an exploratory qualitative pilot, based on one-on-one and focus group interviews with intersex individuals and their families from the Council of Europe region, starting from the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis and continuing throughout the development of the questionnaire. The exploratory study led to the development of a comprehensive set of questions and predetermined responses to many of these. The questionnaire was then sent for review to six intersex people from all Council of Europe sub-regions, to allow for maximum inclusion of the diversity of issues relevant to different European regions.

In addition to the predetermined answers, 40 out of 46 questions had an open text option, which was used by the participants to give more details or, in some few cases, to add additional responses. Many of the questions were set up as multiple choices to allow respondents to capture different parts of their experience.

The questionnaire developed by the OII Europe team was reviewed by board members of Intersex Asia and was suitably revised as per the Asian context.

The questionnaire consisted of a set of 46 questions, which cover the impact of Covid-19 in the following areas of life:

- Physical and Mental Health and Wellbeing (including e.g. questions about general access to health, access to health-related to a possible Covid-19 infection, access to medication)
- Access to Support (including e.g. questions about peer support, financial support, another kind of support)
- Financial Situation and Housing (including e.g. general questions about income shifts and the reasons for it, shifts of expenses, governmental financial support)
- Travelling (including e.g. the possible impact of restrictions on intersex activism)
- Education (including e.g., the impact of online learning)
- Personal Safety (including e.g., at home during lockdowns, when seeking access to health services)
- Intersex Activism

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter and the following one, Limits of the Survey, are based on the respective chapters of the OII Europe (2020): Covid-19. A report on the situation of intersex people in Europe and Central Asia survey and, with OII Europe's approval, quote relevant text while adding and changing information for Asia where required. See <https://oiieurope.org/covid-19-survey-report/>

In addition, the questionnaire asked about

- Whether the respondent was an intersex person or a family member of an intersex person
- Country of residence
- Areas of life that the respondents felt were most impacted by Covid-19
- Aspects of the respondent's life that add to their vulnerability
- Challenges regarding participating in the "new normal" (i.e., online-based communication and internet access)
- Perspectives on future developments, access to vaccine and specific sub-regional issues

A special focus was put on the area of health and the area of work, as these had been identified already before the development of the questionnaire as being particularly challenging for intersex individuals in times of Covid-19. In order to protect the privacy of intersex individuals and their families, we abstained from collecting any demographic data that was not directly needed for the purpose of the survey. In addition, the three last questions of the survey asked for consent to quote from the open-ended responses in reports; only the responses of those who consented are quoted in this report.

### **Self-selection of respondents and dissemination of the questionnaire**

The questionnaire was brought to the attention of intersex people within the Asian Intersex Community. It was disseminated via email and other instant messaging platforms to member organisations of Intersex Asia, participants of the first and second Asian Intersex Forum and partner organisations from different countries where there were no intersex-led organisations. These individuals furthered the dissemination of the questionnaire within their organisations and networks (social media as well as in-person) of intersex individuals and their families (snowball sampling).

The decision to not publish the call openly, e.g., on social media, was taken to prevent the questionnaire to be misused by interest groups like the anti-gender movement - a risk that has become increasingly prominent in the past few years for surveys addressing the needs of the LGBTI spectrum in general. Furthermore, intersex people are repeatedly conflated with transgender people in the Asian region and therefore, it was critical to ensure that the survey reaches the target population group effectively.

Intersex people, as well as parents, partners, caretakers and close family members of intersex individuals, were encouraged to fill out the survey based on the rationale that, for example, intersex children are directly affected if their parents and caretakers suffer from, e.g., income loss as a result of the pandemic. For instance, medications may become unaffordable due to decreases in family income. The same can be true for intersex adults, especially if a partner of an intersex person is the main earner (due to impairments the intersex person may have acquired due to unwanted medical treatment, for example), or if a partner provides health insurance for both.

### **Technical tools used**

Survey Monkey Pro was used as a tool to set up the questionnaire and to collect results. Final calculations of percentages were done in Excel to circumvent some of the limitations set by Survey Monkey.

## **Definition of “intersex” used for this survey**

The survey focuses on the situation of intersex people/ people with variations of sex characteristics and their families. The terms intersex people/people with variations of sex characteristics were defined as follows and the definition was communicated during the dissemination of the survey:

The term “intersex” is an umbrella term for the spectrum of variations of sex characteristics that naturally occur within the human species. The term intersex acknowledges the fact that physically, sex is a spectrum and that people with variations of sex characteristics other than male or female exist. Intersex individuals are born with sex characteristics (sexual anatomy, reproductive organs, hormonal structure and/or levels and/or chromosomal patterns) that do not fit the typical definition of male or female.

The fact that someone has an intersex body can become apparent to them at different times in their life: at birth, during childhood, in puberty or even in adulthood. Depending on the specific life circumstances and the degree of taboo in their environment, a person might learn that they have an intersex body at a very early age or later in life. Some intersex people never find out at all.

## **Denominator used in the report**

The denominator used is always  $n =$  total number of respondents unless specifically otherwise noted.

## **Use of bar-charts in the report**

The bar charts aim to allow for an easy overview of trends and not to be construed as an assessment of the entire intersex population of the region.

## Limits of the Survey

### General limits of statistical validity

From a statistical point of view, the sample size of the survey was too small and the necessary statistical randomness was not given, to begin with. Additionally, a snowball sampling method has inherent limitations in generalisability. As a result, the quantitative findings are not applicable to the general intersex population. However, the numbers and percentages can be treated as indicators for trends. They are a signal and indicate areas of concern where more research is needed.

### Unit non-response

As shown below the response rate of the sub-regions, for example, differs substantially. The exploratory character of this survey does not allow any meaningful use of statistical methods like applying sampling weight and an unknown response probability. While the smallness of the sample size and the lack of initial statistical randomness does not allow for statistical weighting and valid comparison between different countries, some findings of gaps may still be important food for thought and further research.

### Item non-response

Missing answers or item non-response are a well-known issue with quantitative data collection and this survey is no exception: survey respondents skipped questions, including questions that provided a box “not-applicable”. Different statistical processes exist, like imputation or complete case analysis, to handle missing values. However, the exploratory character of this survey does not allow to use these processes in a meaningful way. Therefore, skipping a question is dealt with as if the respondent had ticked the box “non-applicable”.

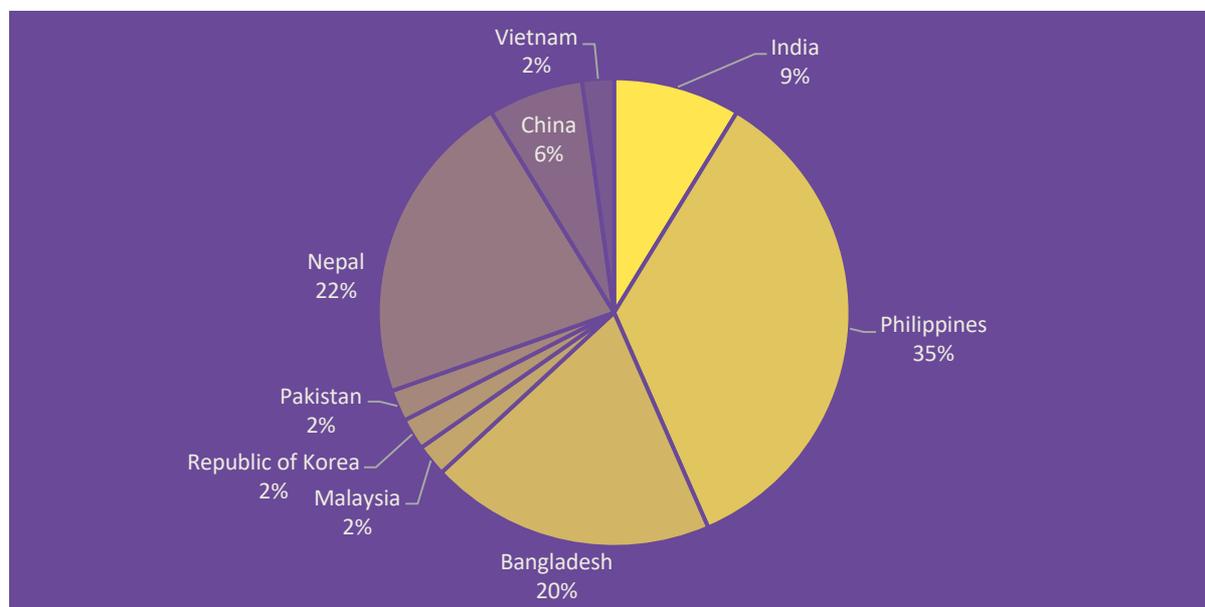
### Accessibility of the survey

The survey was prepared in an online format and in English language only. Hence, there were significant challenges in reaching out to the respondents. To reach intersex people with limited or no internet connection, Intersex Asia sought the help of its member organisations. Senior activists and volunteers from IA’s member organisations reached out to the respondents over phone. They also provided an oral translation of the questionnaire to the respondents in their native language. In regard to diverse accessibility needs, the survey, unfortunately, depended on the technical means provided by the available online tools: Survey Monkey allows access for screen readers; hence the survey was available to persons who use this device.

## Findings from COVID-19 Survey

### Regional representation and respondent matrix

The COVID-19 survey was filled out by 45 intersex people coming from 9 countries in the Asian region:



### Intersectional Realities and Aggravated Challenges

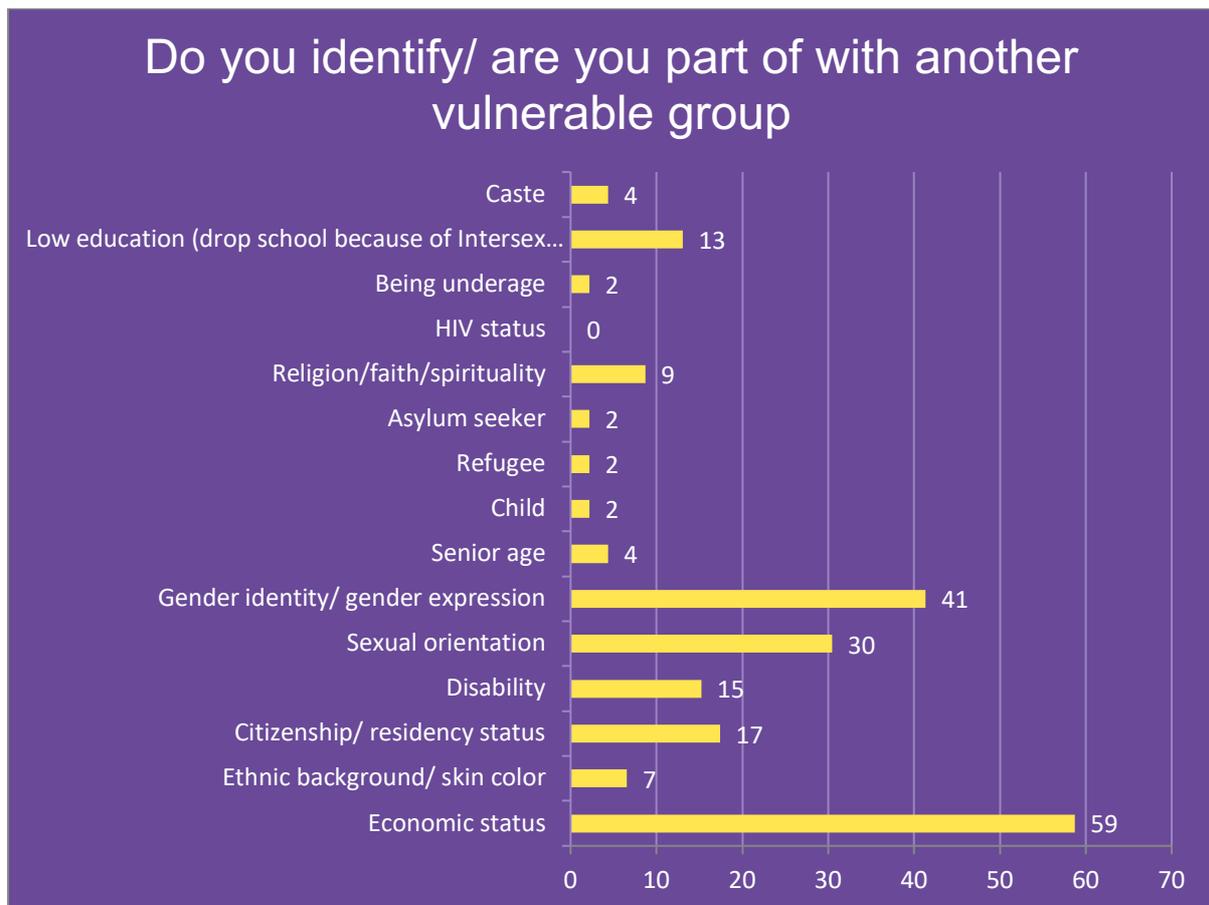
The Covid-19 pandemic is continuing to impact people all over the world. To control the spread of the virus, serious containment measures were taken by governments across the world. Marginalised parts of the population, like intersex people, who already faced a range of challenges in all areas of life before the Covid-19 pandemic, were hit especially hard by Covid-19 and the subsequent policy measures. Even in the best of times, intersex people face legal and social vulnerabilities in areas such as employment, education, healthcare, housing, etc.<sup>2</sup> With Covid-19, people who were already part of a marginalized group find it even more difficult to cope with the situation, and this, in turn, affects their livelihood.

This is especially true for people who face multiple forms of discrimination. In addition to their experience as intersex people, respondents were asked to point out other aspects of their identity as well. While economic vulnerability affects most intersex people (59%), other vulnerabilities such as gender identity and gender expression (41%), sexual orientation (30%), disability (15%), citizenship status (17%), etc. also result in aggravated vulnerabilities for intersex people.

International human rights instruments such as the Yogyakarta Principles +10 call upon all the States to ensure that people who face such discrimination enjoy their right to state protection like the non-marginalised part of the population. States have to make sure that marginalized groups are not made victims of abuse, or discrimination, and that their livelihoods do not get hampered

<sup>2</sup> Suzanne B. Goldberg et al., *Covid - 19 and LGBT Rights*, COLUMBIA LAW SCHOOL SCHOLARSHIP ARCHIVE (2020), [https://scholarship.law.columbia.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3691&context=faculty\\_scholarship](https://scholarship.law.columbia.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3691&context=faculty_scholarship).

on account of sexual orientation, gender identity or sex characteristics etc.<sup>3</sup> Intersex people are victims of multiple forms of human rights violations including abuse and discrimination, and this further affects their life on account of them not getting jobs, refusal of medical support, danger to personal safety, and access to basic necessities that are integral for living one's life. The *Covid-19 Guidance* released by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (United Nations) states: "COVID-19 is a test of societies, of governments, of communities and of individuals. It is a time for solidarity and cooperation to tackle the virus, and to mitigate the effects, often unintended, of measures designed to halt the spread of COVID-19. Respect for human rights across the spectrum, including economic, social, cultural, and civil and political rights, will be fundamental to the success of the public health response and recovery from the pandemic."<sup>4</sup>



## Areas of life affected due to the Covid-19 pandemic

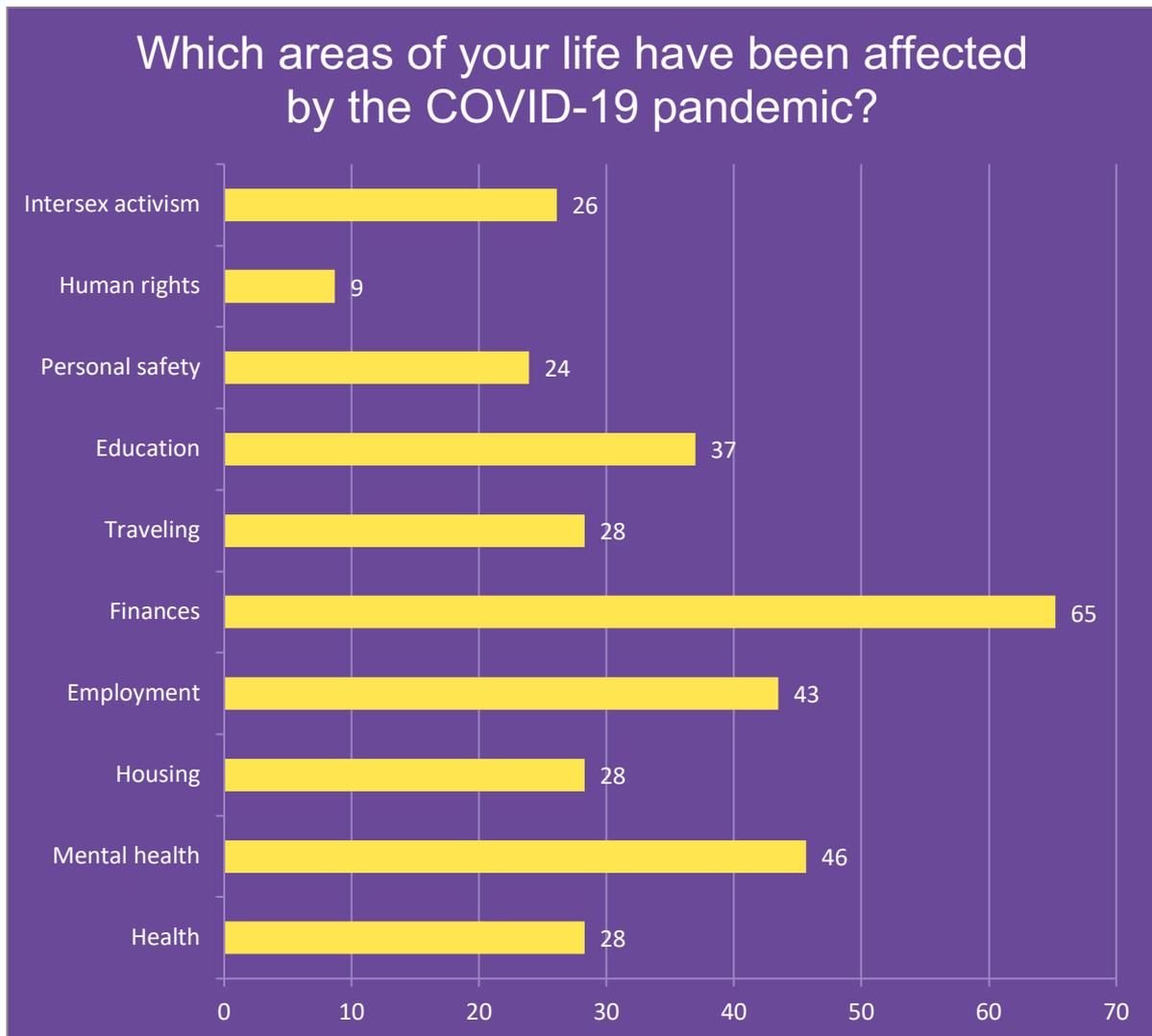
Measures adopted by states to ensure that their population do not suffer from the side effects of the pandemic, need to include specifically those groups of people that already are marginalized and face difficulties in accessing the social welfare schemes. Vulnerable groups, including but not limited to, intersex people, persons with disabilities, or religious and ethnic minorities, as in such

<sup>3</sup> The Yogyakarta Principles plus 10, (Adopted on 10 November 2017), Principle 30.

<sup>4</sup> *Covid - 19 Guidance*, OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS (UNITED NATIONS) (last accessed 24 December 2020), <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/COVID19Guidance.aspx>.

times of crisis, marginalized community tend to suffer more compared to the broader population.<sup>5</sup>

While intersex people already faced a number of challenges on account of being part of an already vulnerable group, Covid-19 has massively amplified these challenges. During times of crisis, serious restrictions are placed on fundamental rights. The Covid-19 pandemic has proven to be a crisis that has affected almost all aspects of intersex people’s lives.



Out of all intersex people that have been part of this survey, more than 65% have stated that Covid-19 has exacerbated their economic vulnerability. As mentioned above, poverty was already highly prevalent among intersex people before the pandemic. Apart from finances, areas including Health (28%), Mental Health (46%), Education (37%), and Employment (43%) are other aspects of their lives that have been affected because of the pandemic.

In Asia, which is already considerably less economically developed than Europe, or other regions from the Global North, the economic aspect of intersex people’s lives have been hit the hardest. As noted above, more than 65 % of the people surveyed have expressed that the pandemic has

<sup>5</sup> *Responding to a Crisis: Insights from OutRight’s COVID-19 Global LGBTIQ Emergency Fund*, OutRight Action International (17 July 2020), [https://outrightinternational.org/sites/default/files/7x9.75\\_BriefingPaperRevised\\_2.pdf](https://outrightinternational.org/sites/default/files/7x9.75_BriefingPaperRevised_2.pdf).

caused a downfall in their economic capabilities, which in a number of cases, has negatively impacted other aspects of intersex people's lives, such as healthcare, access to education, loss of livelihood. The *COVID-19 and the Human Rights of LGBTI People* Campaign, launched by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has emphasized that the LGBTI community would be at a heightened risk of getting affected by the socio-economic impact of Covid-19.<sup>6</sup>

## Access to Healthcare

Healthcare strategies need to be addressed by the states to not just counter the Covid-19 Pandemic, but also the immediate, medium and long-term human rights and sex/gender-specific consequences of measures taken as part of the health response.<sup>7</sup> Intersex people were already facing a number of challenges in Asia with regard to getting access to healthcare, especially in rural areas. With the Covid-19 Pandemic and the resultant closure of the majority of hospitals for routine check-ups and of outpatient clinics, access to healthcare has been shut down almost completely.

As it can be seen from the graph below, approximately 37 % of intersex people faced problems because they were unable to access the medical institutions that are equipped to address the specific needs of intersex people. Another 17% of the respondents did not have access to a doctor with the required expertise, and another 15% faced problems on account of them living in the rural areas. Doctors postponing the appointments (13%) and worsening of health conditions (13%) were other major issues that intersex people faced during the pandemic.

A survey respondent from Philippines said- *“There's no detailed list of specialists that really caters to the intersex community in the country, not to mention the health system is quite shy from rendering effective programs regarding health concerns for the general population, so it's quite tedious and draining when an intersex individual looks for specific treatments and or attention.”*

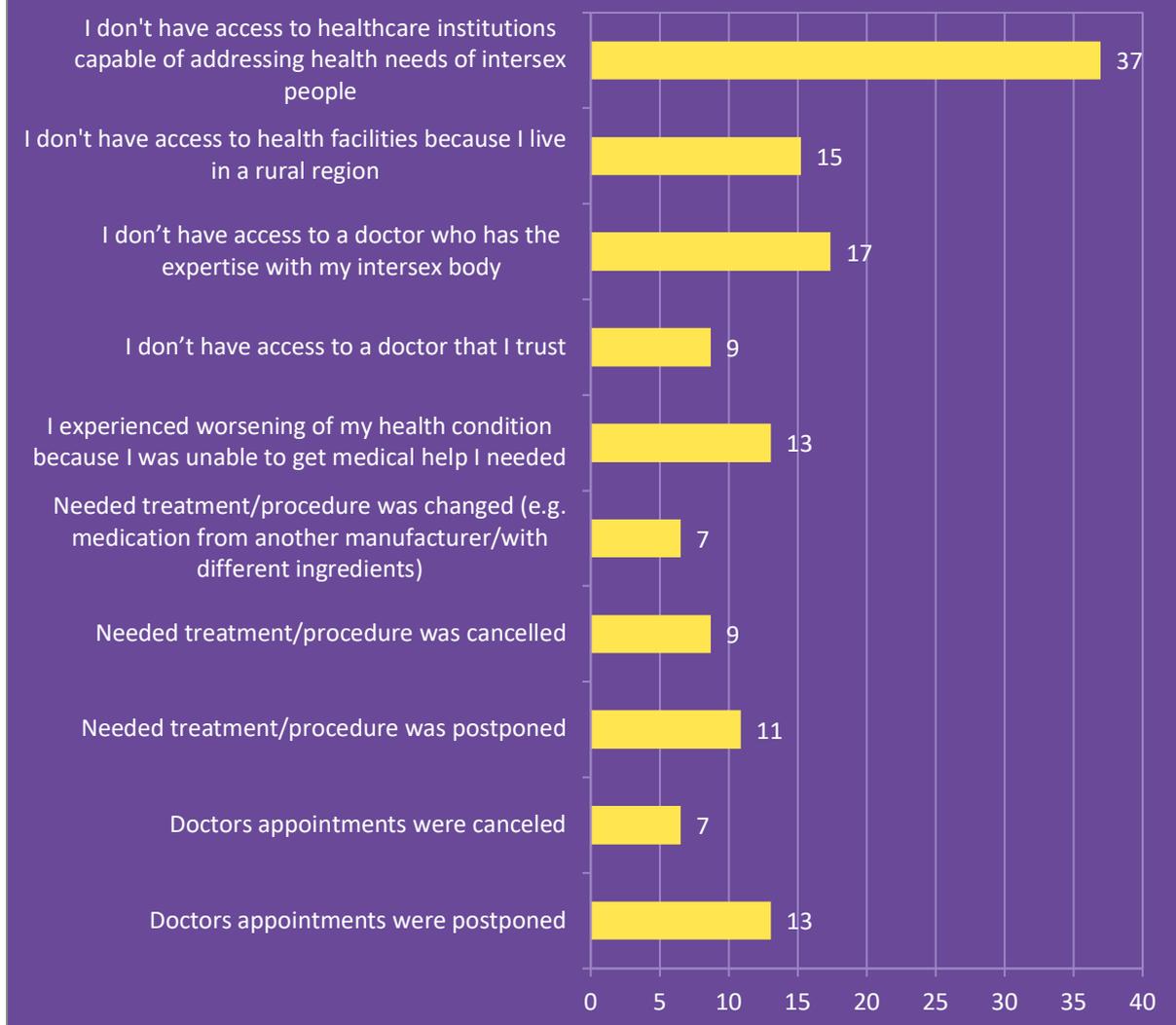
Speaking about the lack of awareness within the medical professionals, an intersex person from Pakistan said: *“There is just not enough medical knowledge. Doctors either view you as a male or a female.”* It is deeply concerning that such notions are still being fostered by medical professionals.

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<sup>6</sup> Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights. *COVID-19 and the Human Rights of LGBTI People*. OHCHR (April 17, 2020) <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/LGBT/LGBTIpeople.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> *Covid - 19 Guidance*, OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS (UNITED NATIONS) (last accessed 24 December 2020), <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/COVID19Guidance.aspx>.

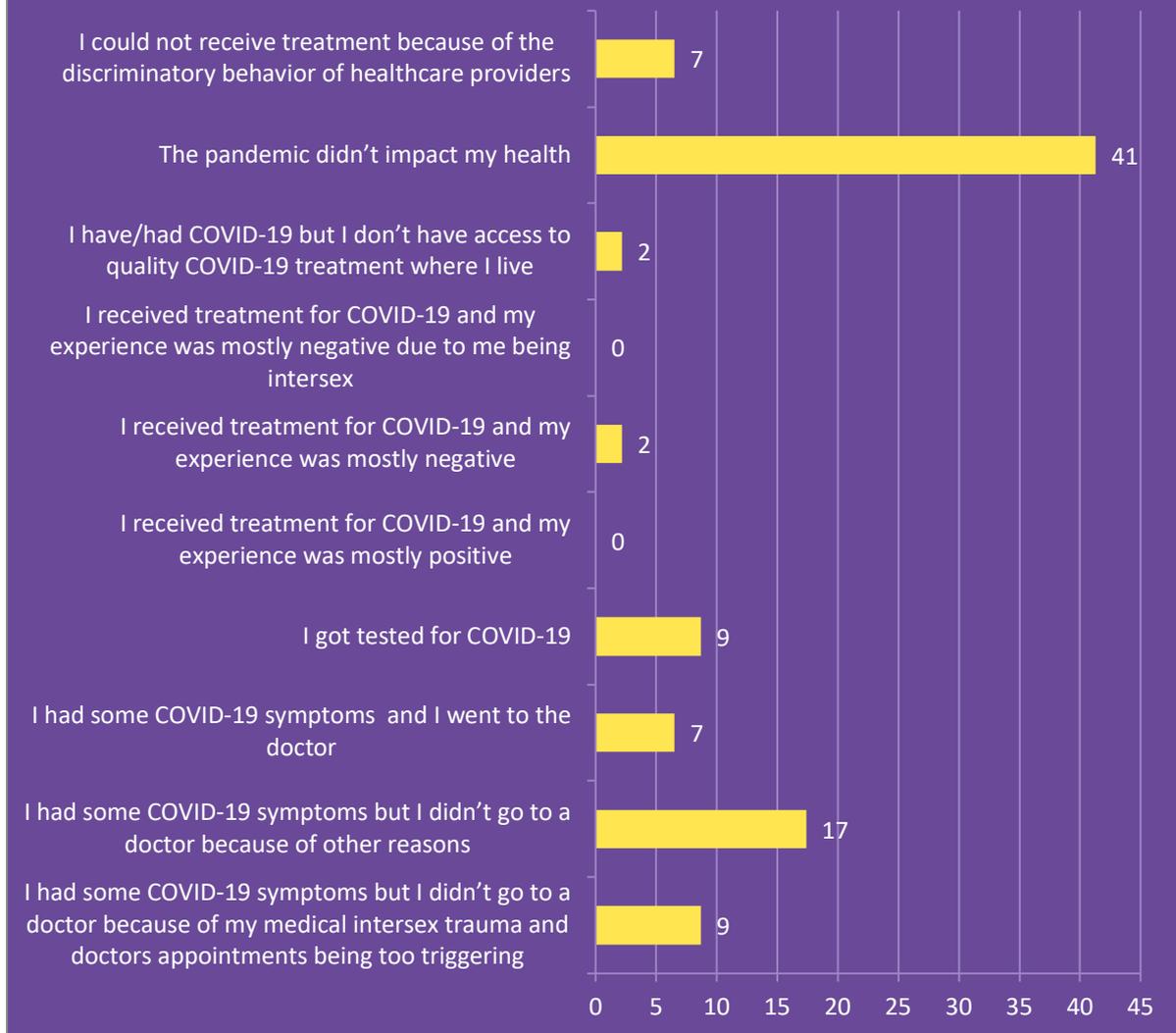
## General access to healthcare



However, these were not the only reasons for the observed worsening of intersex people's health. As is already known, there is an established discriminatory behaviour towards intersex people in society. In a number of cases, respondents reported discriminatory behaviour displayed by medical professionals including doctors. In other cases, respondents avoided going to hospitals or clinics themselves recounting earlier instances of discrimination they had to face because of their intersex body. An intersex person from Mongolia highlighted this point further saying- "*Physicians still make jokes about intersex people that they are "treating" intersex people by making them real male or female.*"

Treatment in medical facilities, especially those that are run by the state needs to be made available to everyone irrespective of their sex characteristics, gender identity or sexual orientation. The fact that a significant number of intersex people were unable to get medical support indicates the poor health infrastructure in Asian countries.

## Access to health related to a possible COVID-19 infection



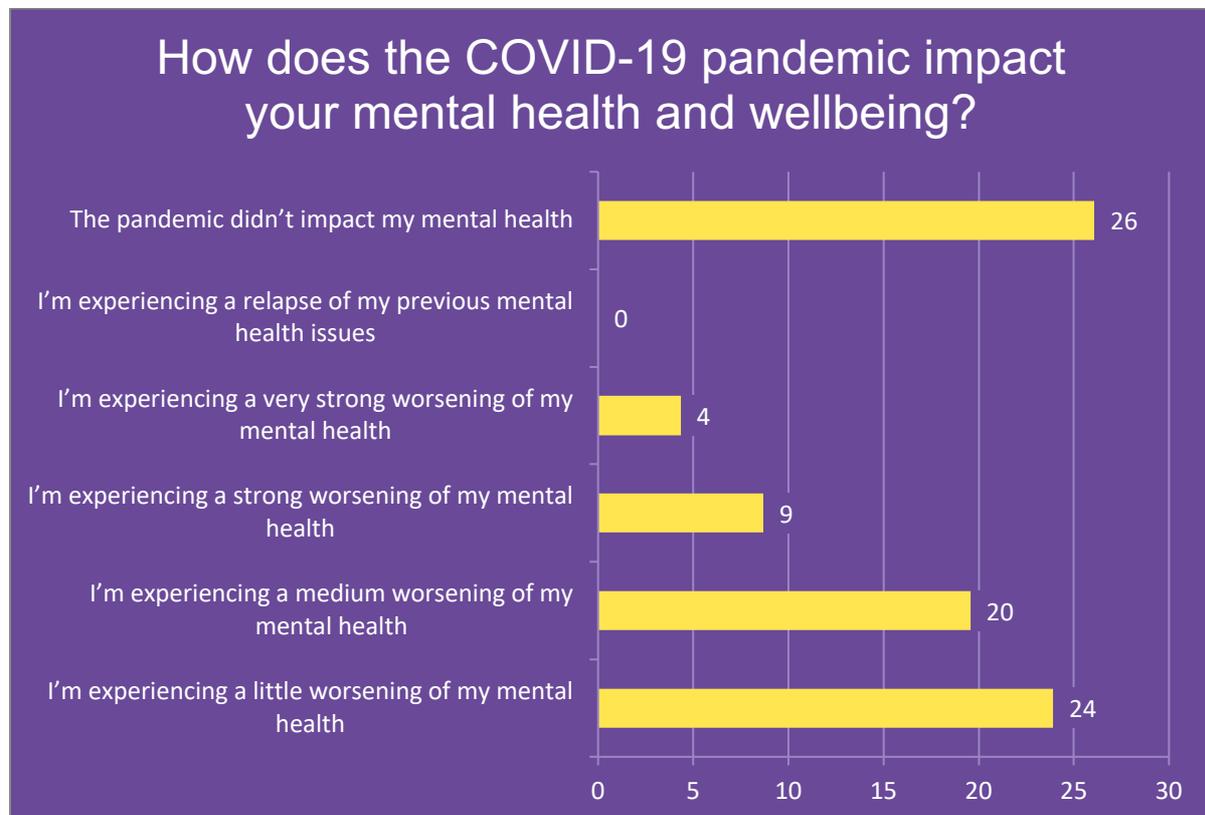
While it is a positive figure that more than 40% of the surveyed people did not get directly affected by Covid-19, however, an alarming rate of people did not see a doctor despite having Covid-19 symptoms either because of their medical intersex trauma (9%), or other reasons (17%). Furthermore, more than 7% of the people stated that they did not receive the necessary treatment because of the discriminatory behaviour of the healthcare workers. While around 9% of the respondents got tested for Covid-19, only 7% went to a doctor. Many others reported refusal of healthcare professionals to provide them with the needed healthcare because of them being intersex. This is a blatant violation of intersex people's fundamental right to health and, in addition, impacts on other areas of their lives. A person who had to leave their job because of medical reasons stated – *“Due to personal medical complications and low-immunity, I had to leave my job. Along with myself, I also take care of my old parents. During the lockdown, I could not find any work and didn't have any savings.”*

This is clearly indicative of the fact that lockdown made it difficult for people to look for jobs, and in turn, it also impacted their physical and mental well - being as well.

## Mental Health and Wellbeing

“Human behaviour is fraught with irrational, illogical, aggressive, and impulsive decisions during a crisis, as shown by behavioural research during disasters.”<sup>8</sup> As a consequence, several incidents of insensitive and discriminator behaviour was reported by intersex people. As has been shown in the second graph, mental health is, after finances, the second most affected aspect of intersex people’s lives during Covid-19. The notion of stigma attached with intersex people perpetuates discriminatory behaviour against them. This is one of the primary contributors to the vulnerable situation of intersex people within Asia. Even without a pandemic, finding necessary help for their mental health issues is a challenge for intersex people. During Covid-19, it became a bigger challenge particularly due to the fact that the intersex people are still not strongly organised as a community and hence, it is even more difficult for them to find support. Our survey shows that Covid-19 has further impaired their mental health.

Out of the total number of people who participated in the survey, more than two-thirds of the respondents of them stated that they experienced worsening of their mental health during the pandemic. The degree by which they experienced this however differs, with around 24% of people stating that their mental health worsened during the pandemic, around 20% of the respondents said that they suffered a medium impact on their mental health. 9% and 4% of the respondents stated that they suffered a serious and very serious worsening of their mental health respectively. Numerous factors such as financial incapacity, unavailability of doctors, postponement of appointments, etc. during lockdowns have led to such deterioration in the mental well - being of intersex people.



<sup>8</sup> Siegrist, M, Zingg, A. THE ROLE OF PUBLIC TRUST DURING PANDEMICS. *Eur Psychol.* 2014;19(1):23-32.

In the current situation, research has also shown that with their emotional and social vulnerabilities, LGBTI people as a whole are at a greater risk for uncertainty, discrimination, and harm to mental well-being. Intersex people are equally vulnerable to those risks if not more.<sup>9</sup>

Speaking about mental health challenges, Esan Regmi (Executive Director of Campaign for Change, Nepal and Board member, Intersex Asia) said: *“Mental health has continued to remain a challenging issue for intersex people in Nepal since there are no psychologists or therapists who are aware of peculiar issues faced by intersex people. This is why everyday intersex people rely solely on intersex activists to share their mental health concerns with.”* An intersex activist from Bangladesh also echoed the challenges highlighted by Esan Regmi saying- *“All the members of my organization are in a lot of trouble for Covid 19. They all tell me about their problems, and I have to solve these problems myself, so I am always under stress.”*

Adding on the same subject, Jeff Cagandahan (Co-chair, Intersex Asia and Officer-in-charge, Intersex Philippines) said: *“The challenges brought about by the pandemic have taken a huge toll on the mental health of our members. The last year was particularly difficult for us given the multiple natural disasters that affected us in the Philippines. Intersex people did not have a social security net to mitigate the impact of the twofold blow of pandemic and disasters.”* Sharing their personal experience, Myla Escultura from Intersex Philippines said: *“Since immobilization really hits its height due to the covid scare most of the time I feel frustrated, tired, no personal interest in doing whatsoever on some occasions... and worrying about my life due to the facts that it's uncertain when the virus going to reach me.”*

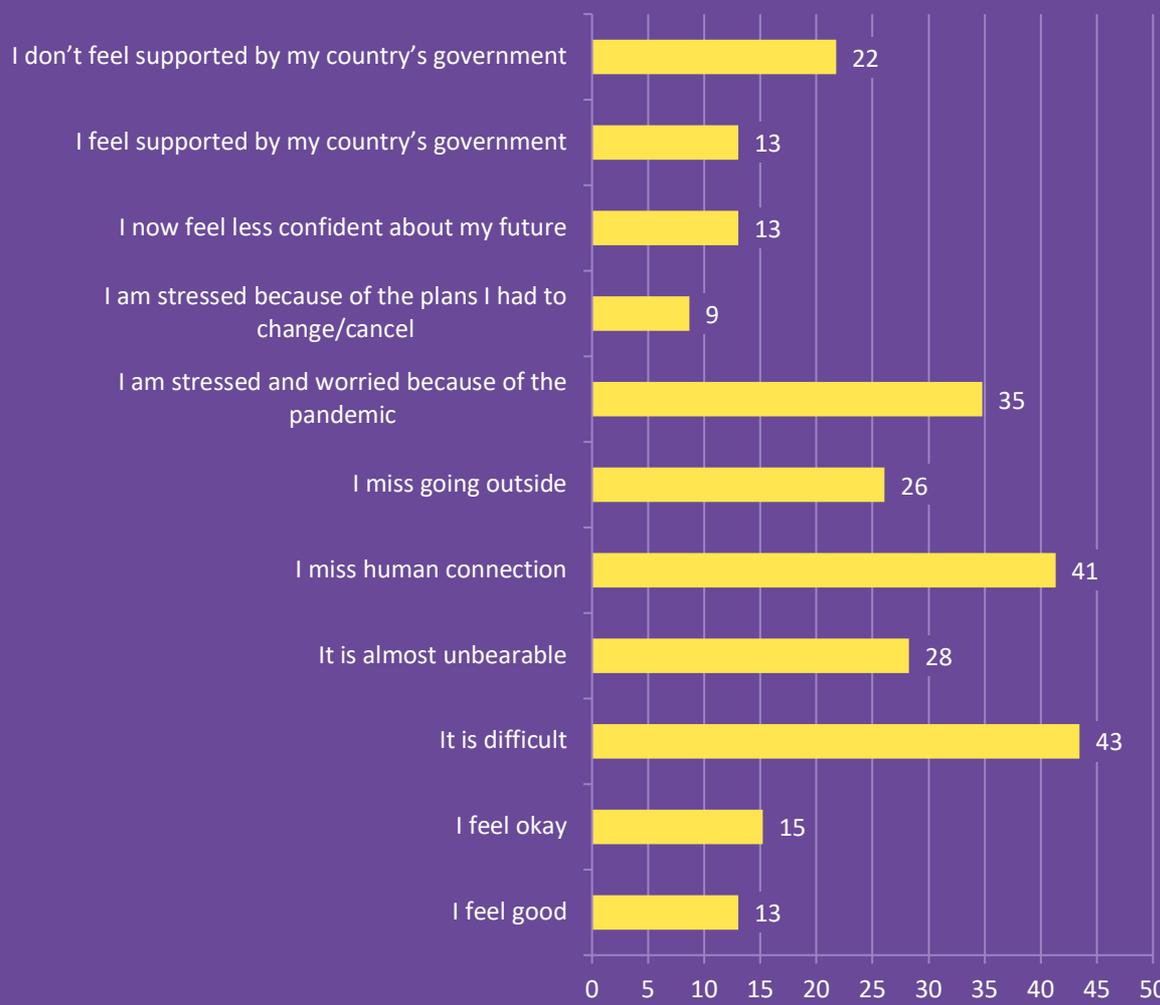
During the pandemic, lockdown measures have become another aggravating factor for the mental health of the people. Lockdowns, social distancing and self-isolation affect human connections which are considered to be an essential aspect of a person's life, and to an extent, help maintain a balance of an individuals' mental health. The lockdown measures have resulted in the reduction in these human connections, and thus, it has further affected intersex people's well-being. In this regard, an intersex person from India stated: *“Confinement at home and not being allowed to move out is suffocating and leads to various daily thoughts, some positive and many negative ones.”*

With regards to access to mental health professionals and options available to take care of their mental well-being, a respondent stated *“As an intersex person, I am a victim of social and family discrimination. I'm mentally depressed but can't see a doctor.”* Another survey-taker said: *“I face high-level stigma and discrimination in the society but cannot speak about my needs/problems due to shame.”* Intersex people in most countries do not have space to share their experience and therefore, it is critical to support the intersex community get more organised.

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<sup>9</sup> Lathan, C. *Fight for LGBTQ rights is more important than ever during Covid-19 pandemic.* THE PRINT. June 6, 2020. <https://theprint.in/opinion/fight-for-lgbtq-rights-is-more-important-than-ever-during-covid-19-pandemic/435783/>.

## How did social distancing and self-isolation impact your mental health and wellbeing?



While more than 40% of the surveyed people stated that the lockdown measures and the consequent loss of human connection have been difficult on them, around 28% have stated that it has become almost unbearable for them. Another 26% have stated that they miss going outside. More than 35% of the respondents were stressed because of the pandemic and 22% felt that they were not adequately supported by the governments of their respective countries.

One of the survey respondents said - *“Being intersex, people in my locality are usually not interested to meet with me for social reasons. After the lockdown was initiated, I had no food and no medicines. I really faced a very difficult situation which I never thought I would before.”*

Social distancing and self-isolation had a negative impact on the socialization of intersex people. Speaking about this, an intersex person from Pakistan said- *“My social circle, which was already very small, has reduced even further.”* Another intersex person said- *“Work productivity decreased in a significant manner during lockdowns. I started worrying about the future a lot.”*

## Role of Local Organisations

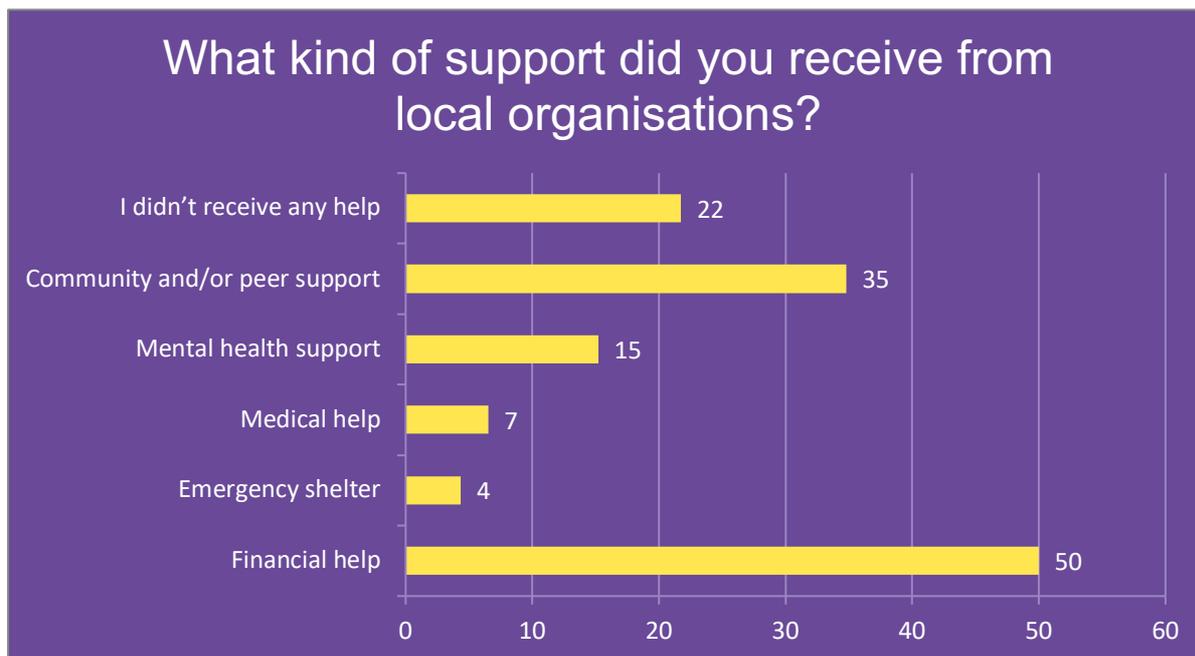
The role played by local organisations that help intersex people cannot be overestimated. Local organisations that focus on the welfare of intersex people work in a number of areas to improve the health and living condition of intersex people. This was already prominent even before the pandemic and has become even more important during the pandemic.



59% of the people who participated in the survey stated that they received financial and other kinds of help from an intersex organization, and another 17% of people stated that they received similar help from LGBT (I) organization. 76% of intersex respondents have stated that they received help, financial or otherwise, from these organisations.

For instance, Intersex Asia created an urgent fund to support the emergency needs of intersex people. With the help of its member organisations, Intersex Asia was able to provide financial support to 95 intersex persons from six different Asian countries. This was the first instance when an intersex-led organisation was able to provide emergency support at such a critical time.

With regard to the approach adopted by local organisations in relief work, Esan Regmi (Executive Director of Campaign for Change, Nepal and Board member, Intersex Asia) said: *“Even the civil society organisations were prioritizing the needs of mainstream sections of the population. Sadly, most civil society organisations working in the human rights space do not follow an approach based on justice and equity. Consequently, they do not prioritise catering to the needs of most marginalized sections such as intersex people.”*



With regards to the nature of support received by the people from local organisations during the pandemic, 50% of the people have answered that they received financial help, 35% said that they received community and/or peer support to deal with their emergency, medical, and mental health needs. Medical and mental health support, along with peer support also forms part of the basic elements that the local organisations have tried to provide to intersex people. The support given by regional and local intersex-led organisations has been essential to ensure that the impact of the pandemic is mitigated to an extent. Still, the support could only reach a small section of intersex people on account of the dearth of financial resources.

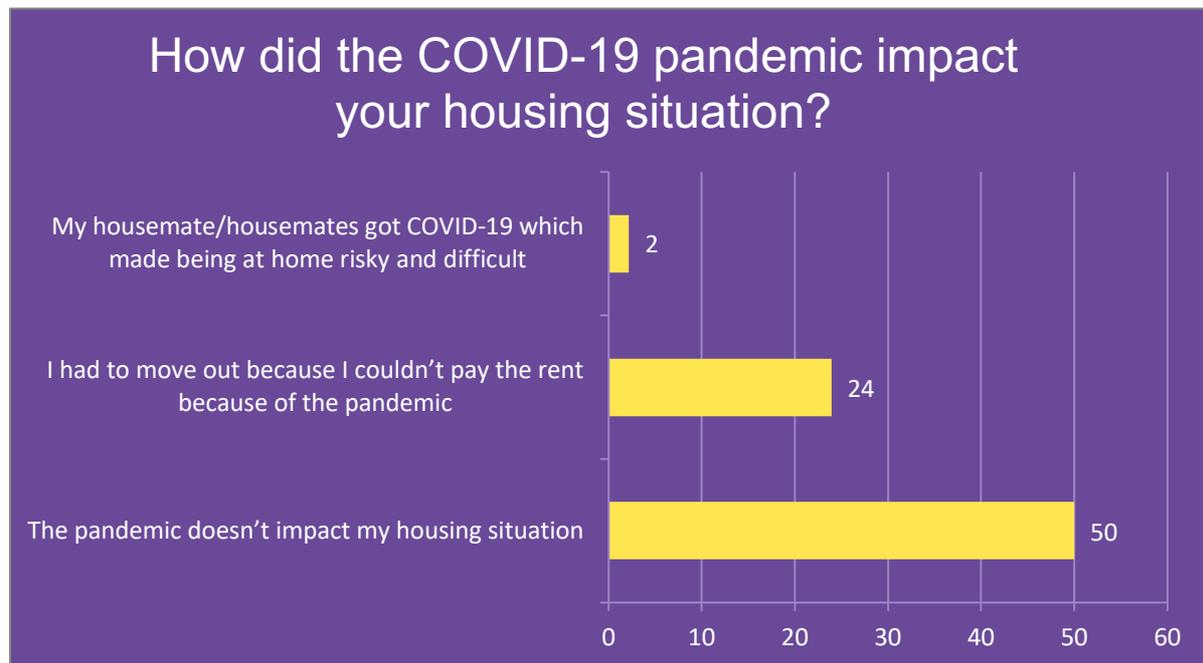
## Housing

The very fact that the government called upon the people to stay at their homes makes it a vital task for the government to ensure that everyone has access to proper housing facilities. Homeless people living in overcrowded shelters and those who lack access to good living conditions, clean water and sanitation facilities are at greater risk from Covid-19 than the others.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, it becomes imperative on part of the authorities to make sure that these issues are dealt with before imposing lockdown restrictions. For those marginalized groups who already live in inadequate, informal and temporary housing, Covid-19 has made life even more difficult. While the governments of a number of countries have ordered that no person would be evicted during this phase,<sup>11</sup> the inability to pay rent due to financial hardships caused by the pandemic has greatly affected people. Finances, jobs, reduced pay are the factors that indirectly have a major impact on the housing facilities that a person can afford.

<sup>10</sup> Covid – 19 Guidance, OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS (UNITED NATIONS) (last accessed 24 December 2020), <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/COVID19Guidance.aspx>.

<sup>11</sup> No eviction on grounds of non-payment of rent if tenant poor: Delhi HC, THE ECONOMIC TIMES (18 June 2020), <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/wealth/real-estate/no-eviction-on-grounds-of-non-payment-of-rent-if-tenant-poor-delhi-hc/articleshow/76438167.cms?from=mdr>.

In a report published by OutRight Action International on the insights received from the use of their emergency funds during the Covid-19 Pandemic, 9% of the LGBTQI people had expressed housing and shelter as their priority needs during the pandemic.<sup>12</sup>



In our survey, we found that 24% of intersex people were unable to pay their rent because of reduced financial capacity during the Covid-19 pandemic. Additionally, around 2% of the people found it difficult to stay at home because their housemate had been infected with Covid-19. On the whole, around 50% of the people stated that the pandemic had an impact on their housing situation.

A teacher in our survey stated with regards to their rent, *“I teach students. I cannot teach during the lockdown. So, I don't get any salary. This makes it difficult for me to manage my rent and other expenses.”*

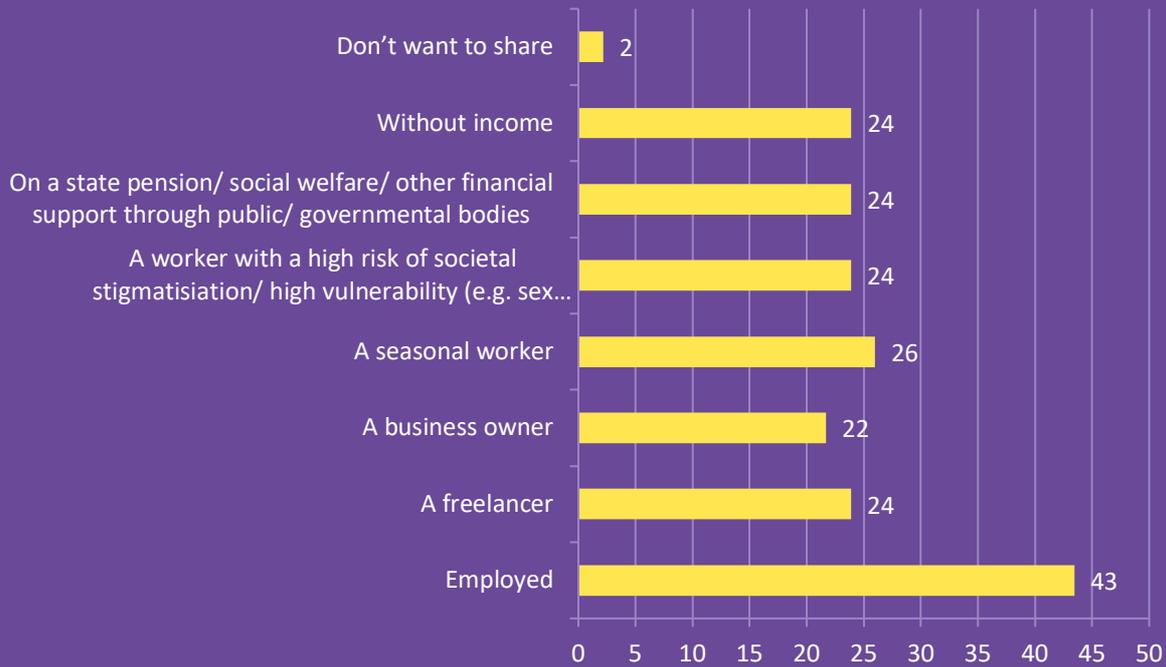
## Finance

Food, shelter, health, clothing, and other important aspects of a person's life, all ultimately depend on their financial situation. And it is this area of life that has been hit the hardest during the pandemic. Offices were closed down, businesses were not allowed to operate, and jobs were lost. All these factors came down heavily on the financial situation of intersex people, many of which had, as a marginalized group, been struggling already before the pandemic.

For a better analysis of the effects of the pandemic on the economic situation of intersex people, it is imperative to first look at the type of employment that intersex people were engaged in.

<sup>12</sup> Responding to a Crisis: Insights from OutRight's COVID-19 Global LGBTQI Emergency Fund, OutRight Action International (17 July 2020).

## Employment status before the pandemic:



As can be seen from the graph, not even 50% of the people who participated in the survey were full-time employees, with some working as a freelancer (24%), business owners (22%), seasonal workers (26%), and more than 20% of the people not having any income. In the Asian context, freelancer can also be understood to mean those who are engaged in daily-wage labour. Taking this figure into consideration, it can be estimated that the majority of the freelancers and the business owners would have suffered because of the lockdown measures that were put in place. Adding such people to those without any income already, the number of people who were without any income because of the Covid-19 Pandemic comes out to be shockingly high, with the figure climbing as high as more than 50 %.

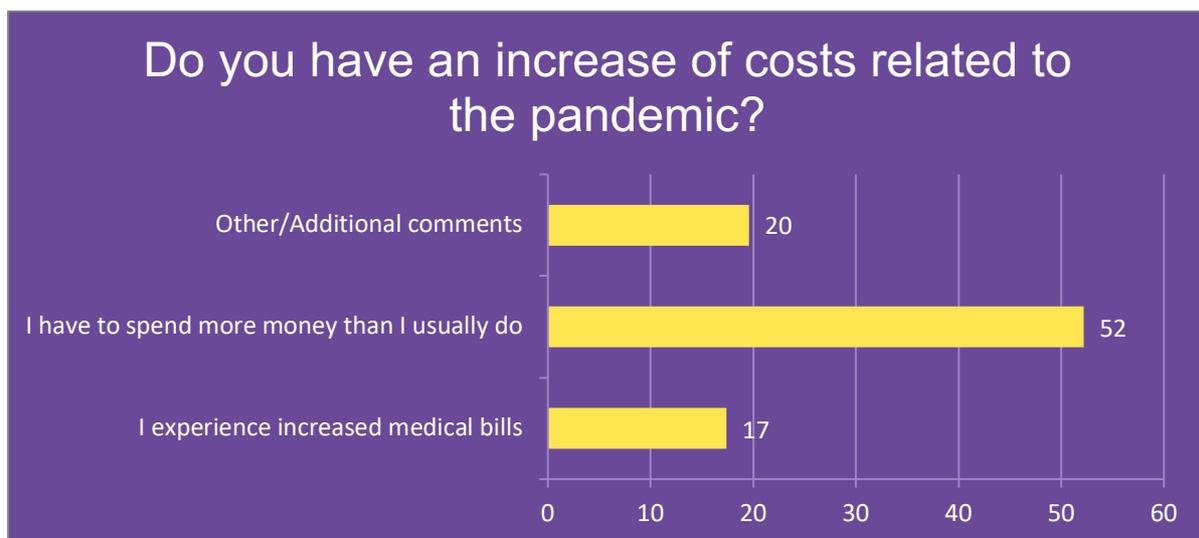
## How does the COVID-19 pandemic impact your financial situation?



This graph paints a dismal picture for intersex people, with a majority of them experiencing a reduction of their income because of the pandemic. Approximately 30% of the participants stated that their income was severely reduced during the pandemic. Around 17% said that they experienced some income reduction due to Covid-19. The most concerning response has come from 24% of the people who stated that they were struggling to survive.

In the countries from the South Asian region, particularly those of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, a majority of *hijra* people (which also sometimes include intersex people) depend solely on seeking alms on traffic signals, in trains, wedding ceremonies, and other such public gatherings. With the Covid-19 pandemic putting a halt on most of such events and gatherings, intersex people in these countries have taken a double hit during this time.<sup>13</sup>

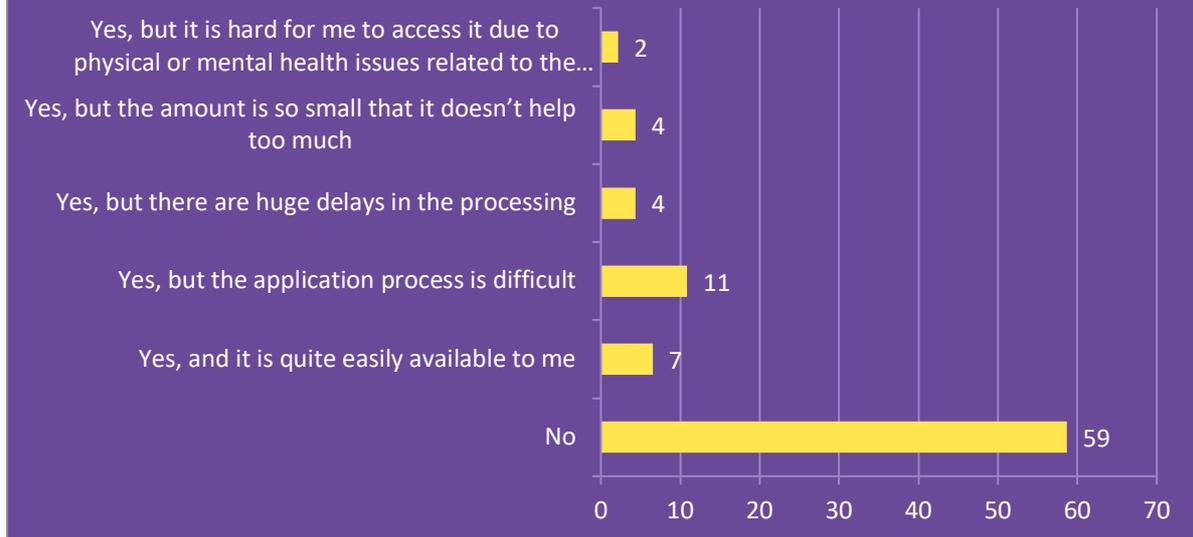
Intersex people who depended on others for their livelihoods were also affected. A respondent said the following in this regard: *“My father works daily labour work. Due to lockdown, everything was closed. My father could not work. It affected our daily life.”* Another person stated: *“I work as a daily wage labourer. I am the only person to earn in my family. Due to lockdown, everything is closed down and it has directly affected our daily life because working as a daily wage labourer, we don't have any stable savings. During this lockdown, it has become very hard to manage food and other essential things for my family.”*



As discussed above, the finances of a majority of the population had taken a hit because of the Covid-19 Pandemic, with around a quarter of the people stating that they were struggling to make ends meet. At the same time, participants of the survey reported that their daily costs have gone up, thereby putting more pressure on them. Approximately 17% of the respondents stated that their medical expenses have gone up during the pandemic; while another 52% expressed that they had to spend more money than usual during this time. With regard to the medical expenses, it needs to be pointed out that intersex people were already facing a number of difficulties in getting doctors' appointments and facing other healthcare-related problems, and the fact that their medical bills had also increased during this time has put a heavy burden on their livelihood.

<sup>13</sup> Aastha Ahuja, *LGBTQ Community Faces the Double Whammy of Coronavirus Pandemic and Stigma*, NDTV (05 October 2020), <https://swachhindia.ndtv.com/lgbtq-community-faces-the-double-whammy-of-coronavirus-pandemic-and-stigma-51188/>.

## Does your government/ any public body provide you with financial COVID-19 response funds?



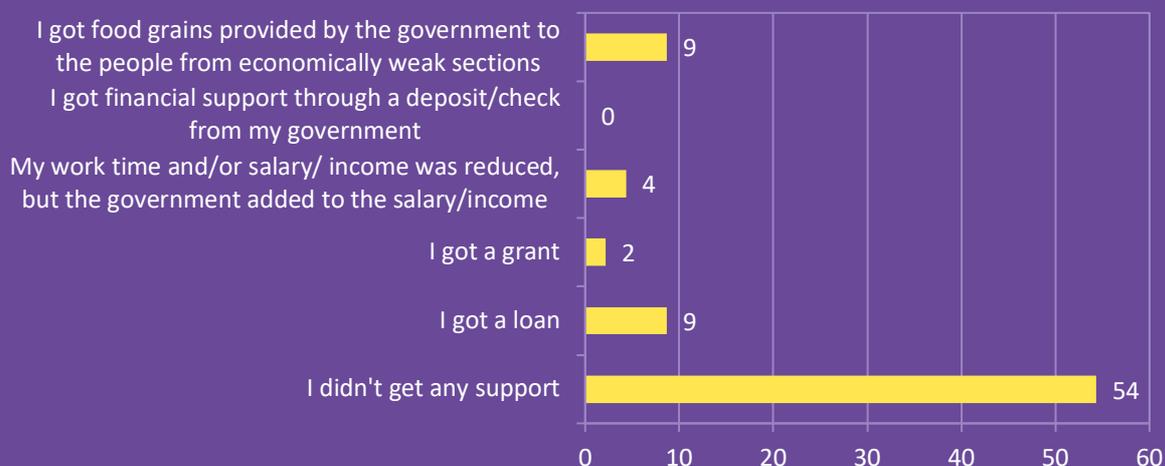
During the pandemic, because of the lockdown measures and other similar measures that were undertaken by the governments to reduce the spread of the pandemic, the finances of the people have suffered. In such scenarios, a number of governments across the globe have helped their citizens financially. For example, Singapore provided its citizens with a one-time cash payout of \$1,200 to tide through Covid-19,<sup>14</sup> the Greek Government paid Euro 800 to the private sector workers as a one-time payment. Recently, the United States government was reported to have provided \$600 as a one-time payment because of Covid-19.<sup>15</sup> Such steps were taken by governments across the world to point out the fact that because of the pandemic a large portion of the population needed such financial assistance from the governments.

These measures were targeted at the general population, but additional support is required for already marginalized groups that are most often left behind. It is therefore imperative that authorities make sure that appropriate financial assistance is given to these groups, including intersex people. However, taking into consideration the responses received from the survey, around two-thirds of respondents stated that they did not receive any financial assistance from either the government or from other public bodies. Those participants who did receive financial assistance encountered many challenges. More than 10% of the respondents stated that the application process was difficult, and other people expressed their problems with the delay in the process (4%). Around 4% reported that they only received a minuscule amount. Therefore, this is further indicative of the hardships that were faced and are still being faced by intersex people because of lack of government support during the Covid-19 pandemic.

<sup>14</sup> Bryan Lim, *Government increases cash payouts to help Singaporeans tide through Covid-19*, ASIA ONE (23 April 2020), <https://www.asiaone.com/singapore/government-increases-cash-payouts-help-singaporeans-tide-through-covid-19>.

<sup>15</sup> *How government COVID-19 cash handouts compare around the world*, LOVE MONEY (23 September 2020), <https://www.lovemoney.com/gallerylist/96488/how-government-covid19-cash-handouts-compare-around-the-world>.

## How did your government/ any public body support you in regards to the pandemic?



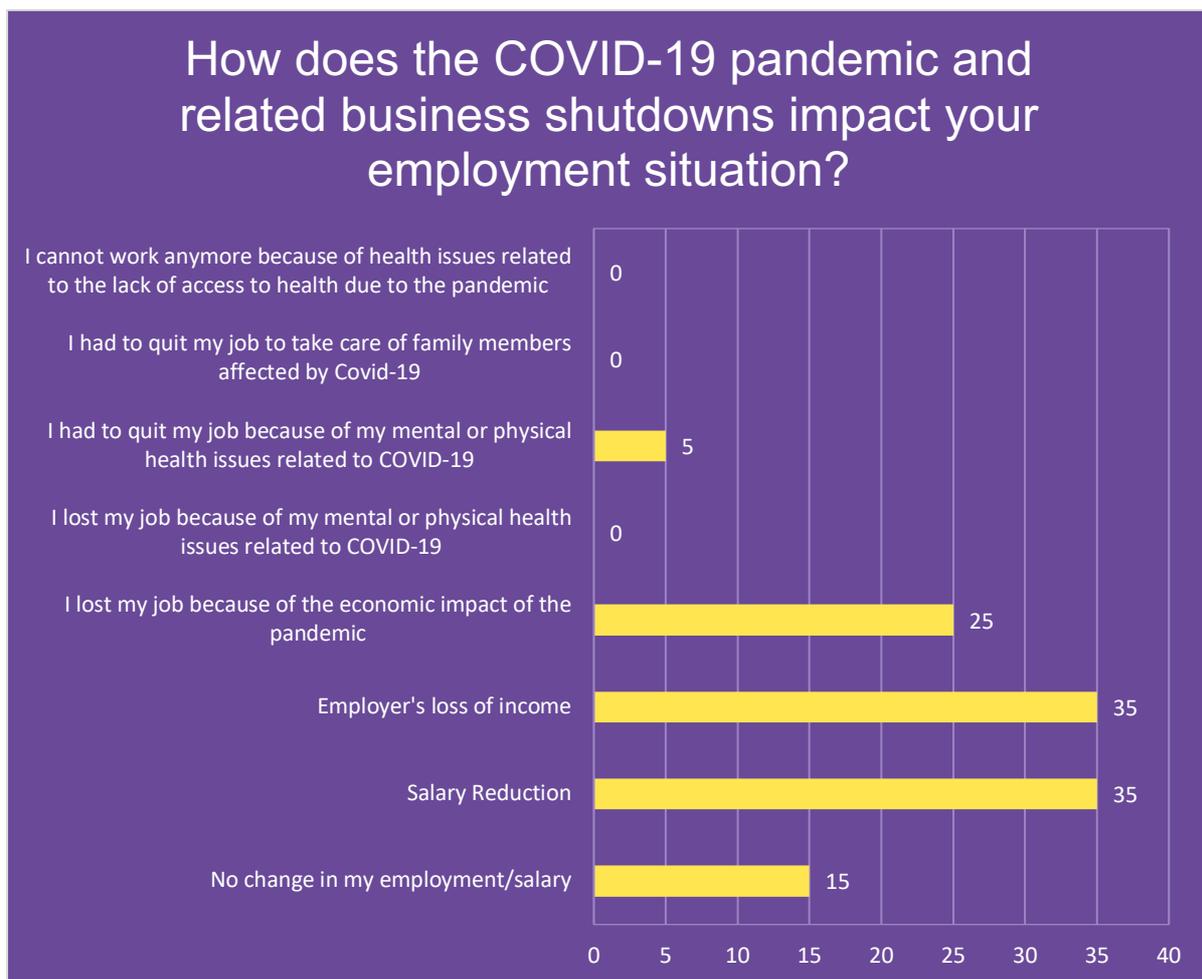
On similar lines, with regards to support other than cash payouts, 54% of people have said that they did not get any support from the government during the pandemic. 9% of the people had to get a loan to meet their expenses. Only 9% of the respondents received food grains from the government. Intersex people employed in the informal sector were amongst the worst affected sections. Therefore, governments and other public bodies need to ensure that the people who have been the most affected by the pandemic get the required assistance so that their livelihood doesn't get hampered further.

In this regard, a participant stated: *"It's so hard to find money to feed my family. There is a lot of stress emotionally. I don't know what I'm going to do to earn money. The support of the government is not enough for our daily needs in terms of food."*

## Impact on your state pension/ social welfare/ other financial support through public/ governmental bodies?



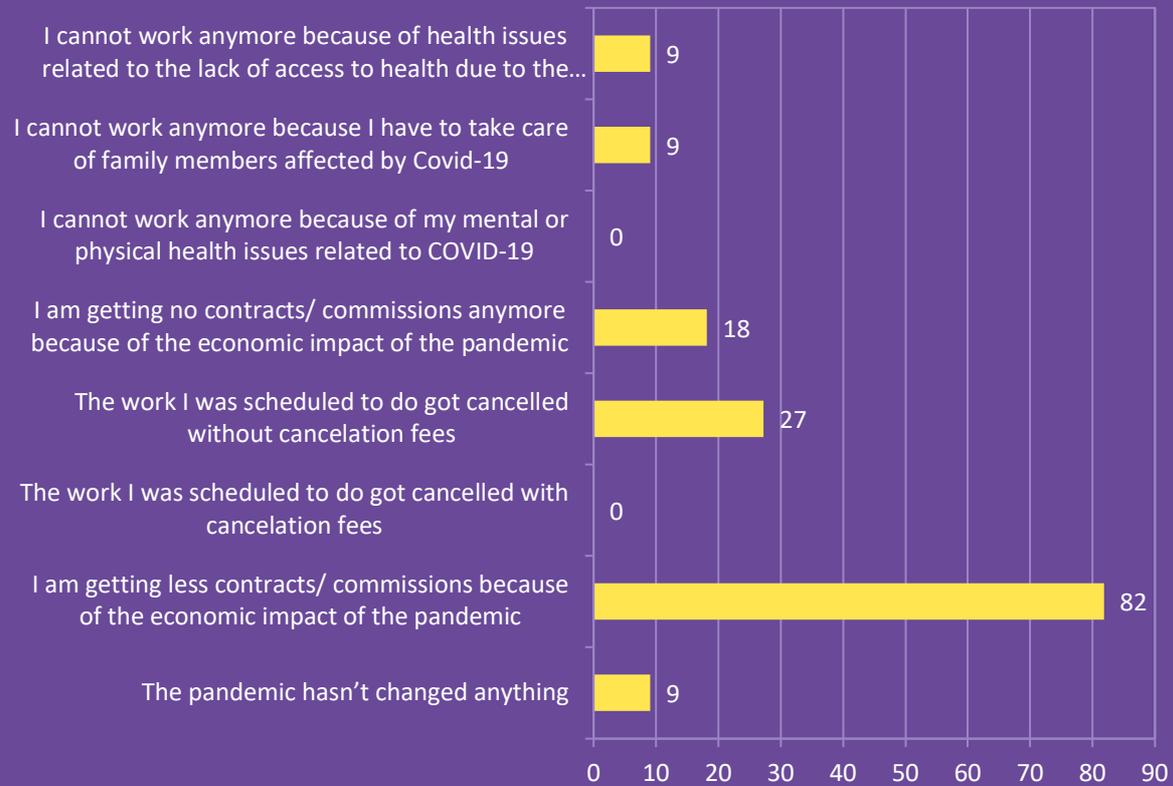
With regards to pensions / social welfare / and other similar support, approximately 36% of people of people receiving such support stated that such support was discontinued during the pandemic, and 18% stated that there were reductions. While it was expected that the governments would increase the support through such welfare programmes, it was found that welfare schemes were reduced further affecting the financial situation of intersex people. These welfare schemes are a huge financial support for a number of intersex people in the region. As has already been mentioned above, intersex people often find it difficult to get a job, to open a business, to freelance, majorly because of the discrimination faced by them by the society, and thus, such welfare programs by the governments are a lifeline for a number of people. The fact that in certain cases these welfare programs have been either stopped or reduced from the pre – covid times, paints a difficult scenario for intersex people.



While losing jobs and the shutdowns of businesses affect not only intersex people, however, taking into consideration the above-mentioned factors, it becomes clear that the effect of such shutdowns was particularly devastating for intersex people. 35% of employed participants experienced salary reduction, the employers of 35% of the people had to temporarily shut down their business, 25% lost their jobs, and several others had to quit because of physical and mental factors attributable to Covid-19 (5%).

Responding to this question, an intersex person stated: *“Luckily my financial situation didn't change. But my family's (mother and father) situation became really serious that I started supporting them. It's been a lot of pressure.”*

## Impact on intersex people working in the informal sector

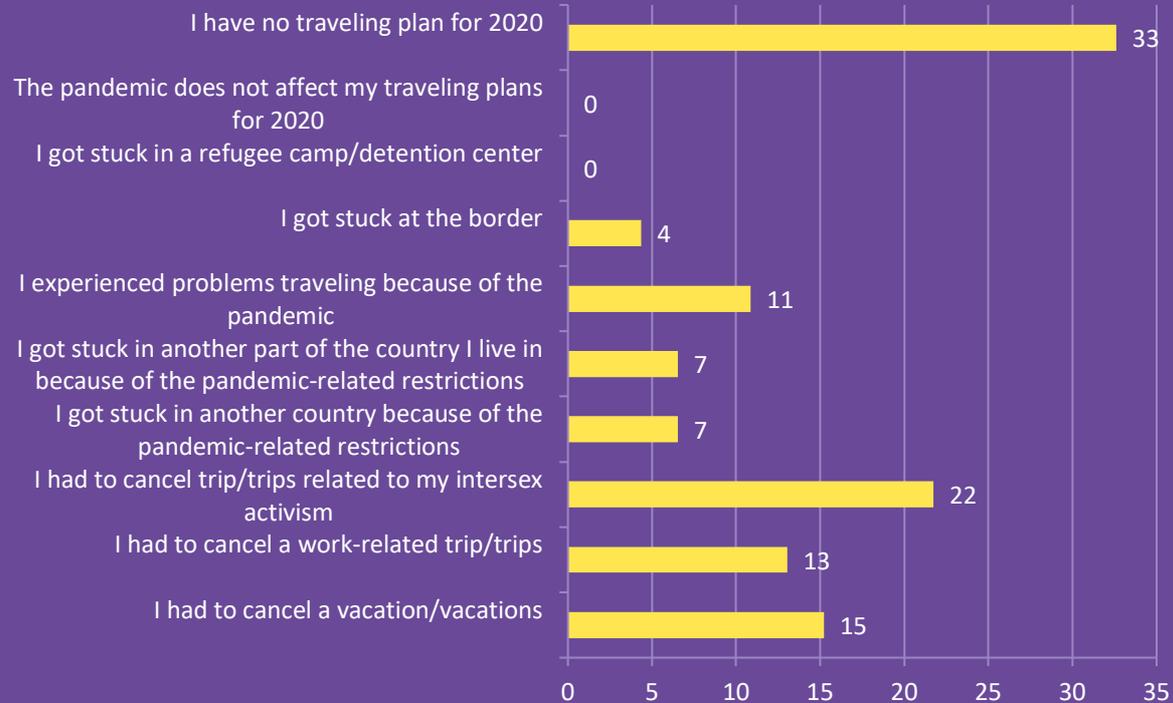


With regard to freelancers, they are either getting fewer contracts/commissions because of the prevailing economic situation in the pandemic (82%) or are not getting any such contracts (18%). In addition, 27 % of freelancers have stated that the work that they were already doing got cancelled because of the effects of the pandemic, be it the lockdown measures, or the bad economic conditions during the time. Recounting their experience, an intersex person said- “I have a small home business that provides my daily needs and it's customer-based printing, so it ceased operation due to Covid-19.”

## Travel and Well Being

Travelling has a strong correlation to an individual's well-being and state of mind. It is known to help people relax and unwind after work. Engaging in social discourse and the exchange of ideas among peers is a proven way of improving one's mental health. In such situations, even the general population can experience a negative emotional impact due to travel cancellations. This impact is likely to be higher among the intersex community as this is one way in which they connect with peers from their community. A travel ban can take away most of their social engagement and has the potential to affect their emotional state in a negative manner.

## How does the COVID-19 pandemic and related travel bans impact your traveling plans for 2020?



The survey shows that while approximately 33% of people from the community had no travel plans for the year 2020, around 22% had to cancel travel plans pertaining to intersex activism. Such plans are important not only from the point of view of spreading awareness about the community but also as a means for the intersex community to engage with each other and share their experiences. This helps the community to shed off some of the stress experienced by them as a marginalised community largely ignored by mainstream society.

Travels for the intersex community and their relatives also is a way of relieving the trauma that comes with bearing the unwarranted social stigma of being with or raising an individual from the intersex community. In this regard, an intersex person from Pakistan said: *“Intersex friends are scattered around different places, say in one state there may be one or two intersex person. So, restrictions in travelling didn't allow us to meet in person with other Intersex friends.”*

Approximately 15% of respondents of the survey state that they had to cancel their travel plans for vacations due to the pandemic. Such cancellations can create a hostile domestic environment for those who have to remain within the confines of the house with the persistent stress. 13% people cancelled work-related trips, 7% of people got stuck in another country due to the pandemic while the same percentage (7%) reported being stuck in another part of the country due to pandemic related restorations. 11% said that they experienced problems during travelling due to the pandemic, while around 4% were stuck on the border. Overall, the travel bans seem to have largely disrupted the activism of the intersex community coupled with a disruption of general travel plans for community meetings.

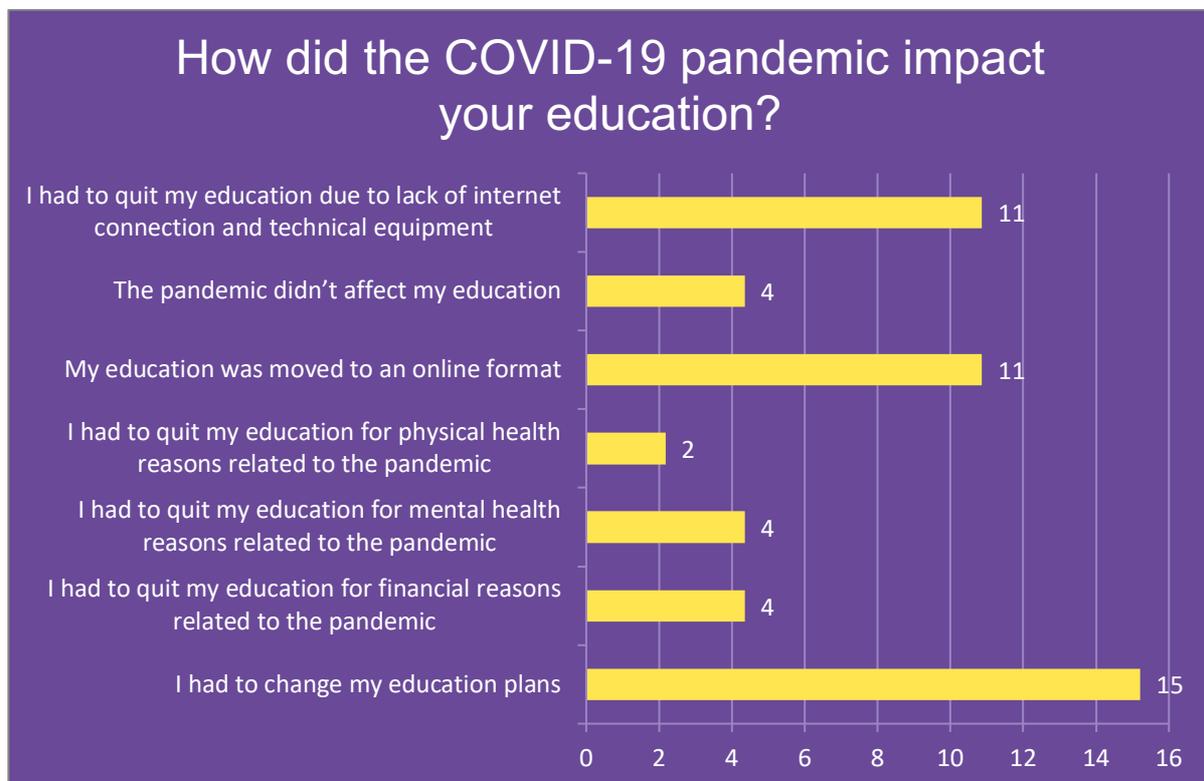
One participant said: *“I was very keenly waiting to join the first International Intersex Forum in Asia to meet intersex activists from around the world. I was so disappointed that it had to be postponed due to the Covid-19 Pandemic.”*

## Education

Due to the lack of adequate technological infrastructure, the field of education experienced most disruptions. With schools shutting down for a large part of the year due to the pandemic and initial hiccups in the execution of online classes, academics have suffered a major setback, with children and teachers alike struggling to come to terms with the new normal of online classes.

However, for every setback experienced by society in general, all vulnerable groups experience it to a higher degree. The intersex community is already underrepresented in the education system. The discrimination against the community is rampant and has heavily affected the possibility of inclusivity of the intersex community within mainstream society.<sup>16</sup> Some intersex individuals have pursued higher education in the field of law, medicine and other vocations despite the institutional biases. Still, the long-standing discriminations and ill-treatments against the community continue to create hurdles in their social growth.

With education moving online, many minority communities experienced an unexpected halt in their education, because of economic hardships, lack of adequate technology or simply due to the inadequate infrastructure of the government education system.



<sup>16</sup> Nayantara Raja et al., *As the World Comes Together, India's Transgender Community Fights Covid - 19 Alone*, Amnesty International (01 April 2020), <https://amnesty.org.in/as-the-world-comes-together-indias-transgender-community-fights-covid-19-alone/>

The survey results show that the question about the impact of a pandemic on education was not applicable to approximately 41% of the people surveyed. This is indicative of the challenges pertaining to access to education for intersex people. 15% say that they had to change their education plans due to the pandemic.

While 11% moved to an online platform to continue their education, the same percentage, i.e., 11% had to quit education altogether, due to lack of internet services and technical equipment. 4% quit education due to mental health issues, while 2% had to quit due to physical health reasons with all of the affected respondents referring to the pandemic as the cause for this development. 4% of students also quit their education due to financial limitations caused by the pandemic. While the same number (4%) report no impact on their education whatsoever.

Esan Regmi (Executive Director of Campaign for Change, Nepal and Board member, Intersex Asia) said: *“Education of school-going intersex children was badly affected since most parents could not afford smartphones or internet. Continuing with their education was even tougher for people living in the rural regions where high-speed internet is yet to reach.”*

## Safety

During the lockdown, cases of domestic violence increased exponentially at a global level. With the forced isolation within the household, coupled with unemployment, financial hardships and increasing mental breakdowns, physical violence became increasingly prominent.<sup>17</sup> Most countries in the region have glaring shortfalls in their legal systems when it comes to protecting those within the vulnerable sections of society. The criminalisation of prostitution and same-sex relations give uninhibited liberty to discriminate, harass and exercise violence on this section of people, at the same time isolating Young Key Persons (YKPs) and denying them access to key services.<sup>18</sup>

The Covid-19 response is further exacerbating prevalent inequalities among genders which further add to discrimination, taboo and gender-based violence. Increased confinement periods and prohibition on movements during an already stressed time has led to creating a toxic and violent atmosphere for the socially vulnerable groups, which includes women, people from the intersex community and YKPs<sup>19</sup>.

Speaking about the issue of safety, an intersex person said: *“I think, many of intersex teenagers/young adults are struggling with their family. Most of them live with their family, so they don't have safer space to spend their time (work, school, friends, even searching for the information). They may feel isolated and alone a lot more than ever.”*

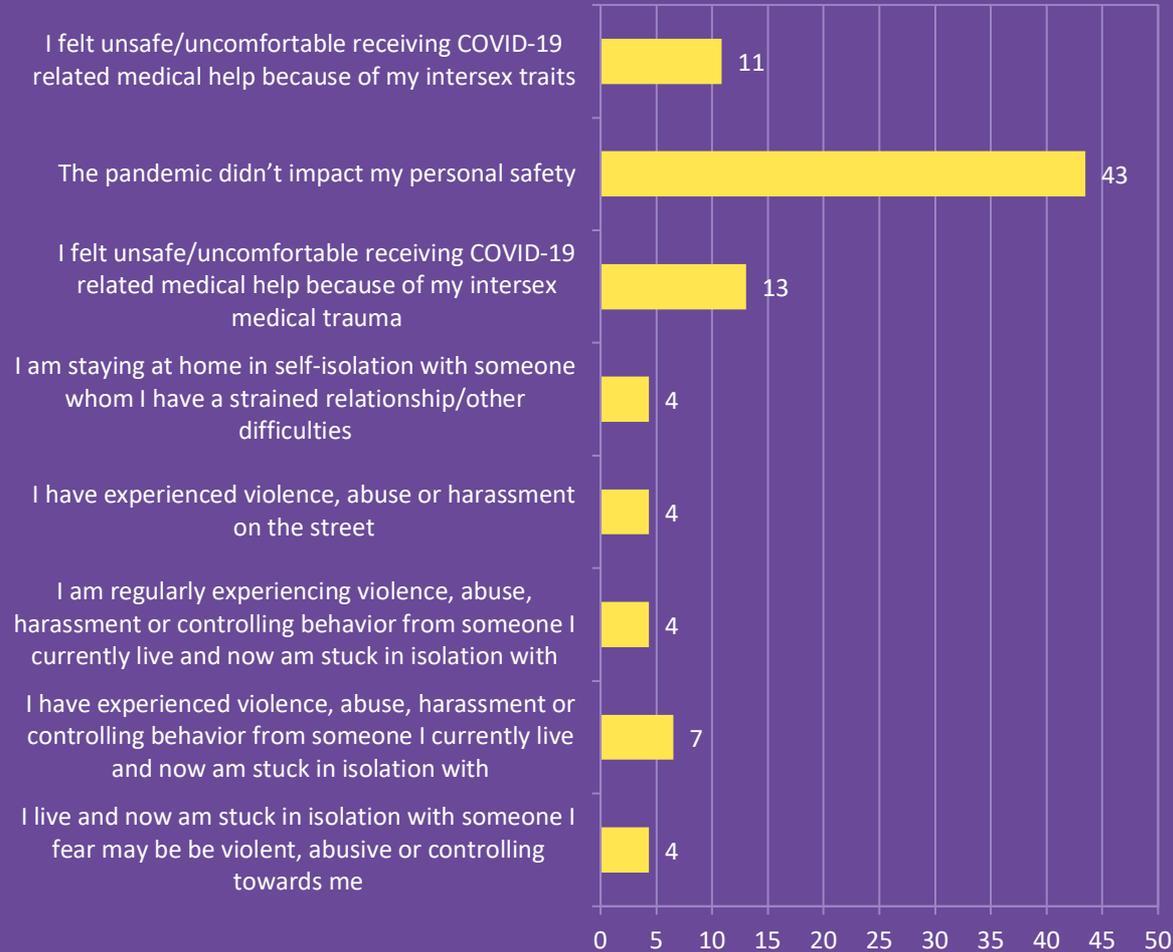
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<sup>17</sup> Mittal S and Singh T (2020) Gender-Based Violence During COVID-19 Pandemic: A Mini-Review. *Front. Glob. Women's Health* 1:4. doi: 10.3389/fgwh.2020.00004

<sup>18</sup> Stigma, discrimination and gender-based violence in the COVID-19 pandemic: young key populations in Asia and the Pacific, ILGA Asia (Last accessed 23 December 2020), <https://www.ilgaasia.org/news/2020/8/12/stigma-discrimination-and-gender-based-violence-in-the-covid-19-pandemic-bst9h>.

<sup>19</sup> M Carpenter, *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters*, (2020 Vol. 28 Issue 1).

## How did the COVID-19 pandemic and related home lockdowns impact your personal safety?



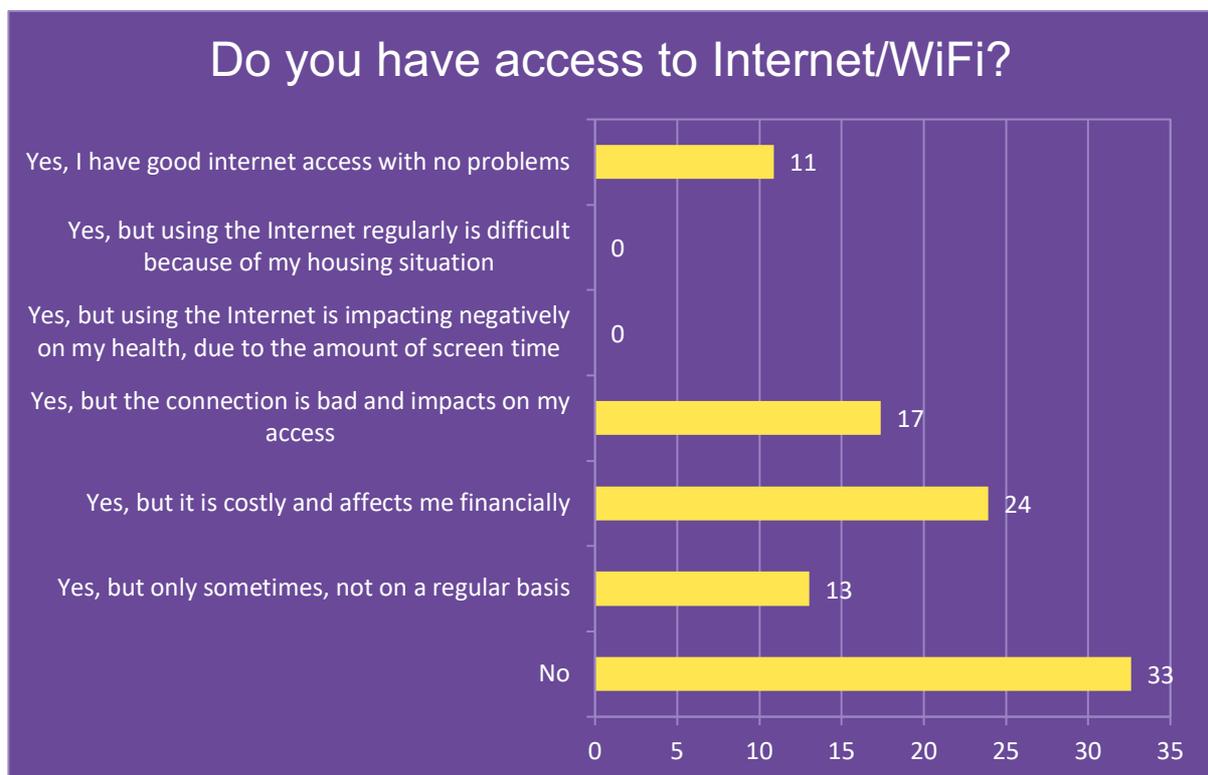
While the survey shows that among those surveyed, more than 40% of people state that the pandemic has not affected their safety, 13% have expressed a fear of receiving Covid-19 related medical help due to an existing intersex medical trauma. 11% of the respondents said they were uncomfortable receiving Covid-19 related medical help on account of being an intersex person. 7% have expressed that they experienced violence, abuse and harassment within the confines of their homes by someone they currently reside with.

4% of the respondents fear that they are stuck in a house with someone who may have violent tendencies. The same percentage (4%) say that they have experienced abuse or harassment in the streets and another 4% say that they are currently living with someone with whom they have a strained relationship. A respondent described their personal experience while responding to the question: *"I lost my parents. My brother and sister-in-law kicked me out of the family during the pandemic, because they see me as a burden to them and they fear discrimination from others with me at home."*

There continues to be a glaring void of effective policies to curb the discrimination against the marginalised and vulnerable groups. There is a need for sensitisation and awareness-raising about intersex people, but also other vulnerable minorities, and the challenges they face in society as well as a strong need to train professionals, especially health professionals.<sup>20</sup>

## Internet Access

Online interactions have become the ‘new normal’ during Covid 19. However, access to the online world hugely depends on the availability of technological equipment such as hardware, software and other such devices that allow one to be able to attend online conferences and video calls. Since almost all the important activities had been moved online, from academics to office and even social gatherings, having internet access became a matter of basic necessity.



Eleanor Sarpong, Deputy Director and Policy Lead, Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI), in one of her articles proposes the Internet as the basic right<sup>21</sup>. In her article, she talks about how the pandemic has revealed that only 54% of the global population has access to the internet today, with people from poor countries, elders, women and other subaltern classes having no access to the internet. Among those who do have access, most have it through public spaces only.

This survey shows that 33% of the respondents had no access to the internet. That means a majority of the people surveyed did not have the basic means to communicate or socialise during the pandemic. 24% stated that while they, theoretically, did have the option to access the internet, it was financially not feasible for them. 17% of the people mentioned having a poor connection

<sup>20</sup> Nikoletta Pikramenou, *Intersex Rights Living Between the Sexes*, Springer Link (1st Ed., 2019).

<sup>21</sup> *Covid-19 shows why internet access is a basic right. We must get everyone connected*, webfoundation.org (15 April 2020), <https://webfoundation.org/2020/04/covid-19-shows-why-internet-access-is-a-basic-right-we-must-get-everyone-connected/>

despite having access to the internet. 13% say that their access to the internet was very irregular. Only 11% of people had proper access to the internet without any complaints about connections or any other aspect.

*“Most of the community members in Nepal did not have the capacity to adapt to the new “normal” and faced technical difficulties. Further, being able to afford a smartphone and internet is financially impossible for most people due to high-costs.”* - said Esan Regmi (Executive Director of Campaign for Change, Nepal and Board member, Intersex Asia). Access to internet largely depends on the financial capacity of the individual as well. In this regard, an intersex person from Philippines said: *“Less financial capabilities means less instances in of being digitally connected since data connection requires funds to purchase subscription either postpaid or prepaid.”*

Internet access during the pandemic is not a question of privilege or luxury. It needs to be considered as a basic infrastructural necessity by governments. Lack of internet connection can be detrimental to the academic future of a child as well as the possibility of employment for an adult. For the intersex community, the majority of whom do not have access to the internet, this amounts to setting the clock back in their progress towards inclusion in mainstream society. For those who did have access to internet, there are also reports of growing stress due to long hours spent in front of the screen. In such a situation, their **access to medical treatments without any discrimination** becomes yet another concern that requires attention from the policymakers.

## Conclusion and way forward

The Covid-19 pandemic is a continuing crisis for intersex people in the Asian region and it has unleashed serious challenges for the community on multiple fronts. Covid-19 has exacerbated inequalities globally for all vulnerable population groups. At the same time, it is important to mention that it has disproportionately affected intersex people with regard to their financial situation and their health needs. During the lockdown phases, a significant number of intersex people reported the loss of employment. As a consequence, their financial condition was further weakened making them unable to handle their everyday needs. Respondents from our survey have also mentioned increased stress during this period on account of economic and health concerns.

The survey findings have highlighted the importance of the community support systems in mitigating the impact of the shocks created by the pandemic. Due to their weak financial position, intersex people in the region were inadvertently relying on external support systems. However, a significant section of respondents in our sample reported that they did not receive any support from governments or civil society organisations. They mentioned that the financial support provided by Intersex Asia was crucial and helpful during this period.

It is evident from the survey findings that the role played by intersex-led organisations in emergency situations is incredibly important. Currently, most intersex-led organisations in the region have limited access to sustainable funding. As a result, their ability to support the community members in crisis situations like Covid-19 gets severely hampered. Intersex people in the Asian region heavily rely on the support provided by intersex organisations and therefore, the health of intersex organisations has a direct bearing on the well-being of intersex people as a whole.

The pandemic has also severely affected the organising capacity of intersex organisations at the regional as well as local level. Due to the lack of internet access and internet-enabled devices, it was extremely difficult for intersex activists to reach out to the community members. Adapting to the digital world has led to increased stress for intersex organisations since they had to restructure their functioning style and also make adequate provisions for working from home.

The survey has given us the opportunity to understand our community on the ground more. Livelihood and homeless issues are amplified that many of our people face during the pandemic. It creates mental health issues. And these issues are related largely to social discrimination, the social pandemic for a long history. What we need is systematic change, not only financial support.

While the findings of this report are limited to experiences of a sample from 9 Asian states, it provides a direction to think about the socio-economic vulnerabilities of intersex people in the wider Asian region. The pandemic must be seen as an opportunity to address the long-standing demands of the intersex community to be consulted in the legal and policy-making processes. It is critical that governments and policymakers consult with members of the intersex community in order to meaningfully include the concerns of intersex population in their policy responses. The currently implemented and available relief measures do not include intersex people and their specific needs and show a direct correlation to the still prevalent invisibility of intersex people in the political discourse. Governments need to rise to the challenge of tackling discrimination based on sex characteristics and take steps towards the inclusion of intersex people in the delivery of welfare schemes aimed at reducing poverty and inequalities.



