



**Risk Behavior and
Adversity of Male PrEP
Users in Ukraine during
the COVID-19 Pandemic:
Pre-War Needs
Assessment.**

Results
and Recommendations



The study "COVID-19, sexual behaviour and intimate partner violence among PrEP users in Ukraine" was conceptualised as a part of "PrEP in EECA project" supported by ViiV Healthcare's Positive Action Programme.

ECOM — Eurasian Coalition on Health, Rights, Gender and Sexual Diversity is an international non-governmental association based in Tallinn, Estonia. We are a membership organization open to non-profit organizations and activists working in the response to the epidemic of human immunodeficiency virus among men who have sex with men and transgender people in the Eastern Europe and Central Asia region. The network currently has 76 members from 19 countries, stretching from Estonia to Tajikistan.

The authors would like to thank case-managers who helped with the data collection and demonstrated outstanding commitment and support to their clients and PrEP programs in Ukraine. Specifically to: Heorhii Moiseiev, Ivan Bielasnyk, Nikita Lisovskyi, Oleg Krishchenko, Vasyl Malikov, Vitalij Balabash, Volodymyr Shepard.

Primary investigators: Nikolay Lunchenkov, Prof. Dr. Janina Isabel Steinert

Co-investigators: Andrii Chernyshev; Vitaly Djuma; Oksana Kovtun; Maria Malakhova; Roman Marchenko; Vira Yatsyk

Executive Summary

The study's original aim was to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic affected mental health, substance use and intimate partner violence among gay men who take pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) for HIV prevention in Ukraine.

We identified a high rate of depression and anxiety symptoms as well as increase of substance use behavior and intimate partner violence. We anticipate a continuing increase of these trends, and an acute need to address those, in the near future as a result of the war of Russia against Ukraine.

This Policy Brief aims to identify key policy implications and suggest recommendations for Ukrainian authorities, international donors and organizations, and Ukrainian non-governmental organizations (NGO) in order to strengthen existing and establish new services to address the health needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people in Ukraine.

Background

This research Project has been conceptualized as a part of the "PrEP in Eastern Europe and Central Asia" program led by ECOM — Eurasian Coalition for Health, Rights, Gender and Sexual Diversity, in cooperation with the Alliance of Public Health and ALLIANCE.GLOBAL and with scientific support of the Technical University of Munich.

Data collection for this study was completed just four days before Russia's large-scale invasion in Ukraine on 24 February 2022. The attack became a sharp escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian War, which began in 2014. This illegitimate act of aggression has caused Europe's largest refugee crisis since World War II with more than five million Ukrainians leaving the country and a quarter of the population displaced. (1-3)

While the current war has devastating impact on all Ukrainians, this Policy Brief puts focus on a group that has already been highly vulnerable during, and as a result of, the COVID-19 pandemic: young gay men and other men who have sex with men - specifically, those who take pre-exposure prophylaxis for HIV infection prevention in this study.

Previous evidence has documented detrimental impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of the LGBT community, including increases in depression, anxiety, and general stress. (4-7) In addition, a large body of literature has revealed increases in the prevalence of intimate partner violence during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, Steinert et al. note that home quarantine, financial distress, and pandemic-related emotional distress can significantly increase the risk of intimate partner violence among heterosexual individuals in Germany. (8) However, only a few studies explored how the pandemic might affect intimate partner violence among men who have sex with men. (9)

Approach and Methods

The **online survey** was conducted among PrEP users in Ukraine between January and February 2022. The data collection was finished on February 21, three days before the war. Participants were recruited by case managers of the PrEP programs in Ukraine. Case managers reached out to the program clients by email and followed up by phone to invite them to participate in the survey and to make sure that the participants had access to email and received a link to a data-encrypted website.

Eligibility criteria included a) being 18 years and older; b) currently residing in Ukraine; c) currently participating in the PrEP program, and d) having had any form of sex in the past 6 months

Over a five weeks period, 1303 PrEP users took part in the study. After excluding those who did not complete the survey or were younger than 18 years, **1,289 participants were deemed eligible.**

The questionnaire was composed of four blocks. The first block covered **basic sociodemographic information** of study participants, including their sexual and gender identity, educational level, and age. The second block captured information on how **COVID-19 pandemic affected participants' quality of life**. Specifically, the survey collected information on whether participants had experienced any job losses, income shortages, increased food insecurity in a consequence of the pandemic. The third block was focused on capturing the main outcome variables of the Project. Firstly, we measured **changes in sexual behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic**, including changes in the number of sexual partners and a range of sexual risk behavior (e.g., use of condoms, participation in group sex). Secondly, the survey recorded **substance use and binge drinking** behavior. Lastly, we asked about **access to HIV and STIs prevention methods** during the pandemic. In the fourth block, we measured participants' experience with violence, including various forms of violence by an intimate partner (emotional, physical, sexual, economic and psychological violence).

Characteristics of Study Participants

Almost half of the sample was aged between 25 and 34, and a third were aged 18–24 (*Figure 1*). The sample was largely educated (59% college-educated or higher), gay identifying (74%). While approximately ten percent of the sample reported being single, 82% reported being in a relationship and 7% reported being married to a female partner. (*Figures 2,3,4*) At the same time, we identified that over 80% of participants were taking PrEP during the pandemic. (*Figure 5*)

AGE

- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45+

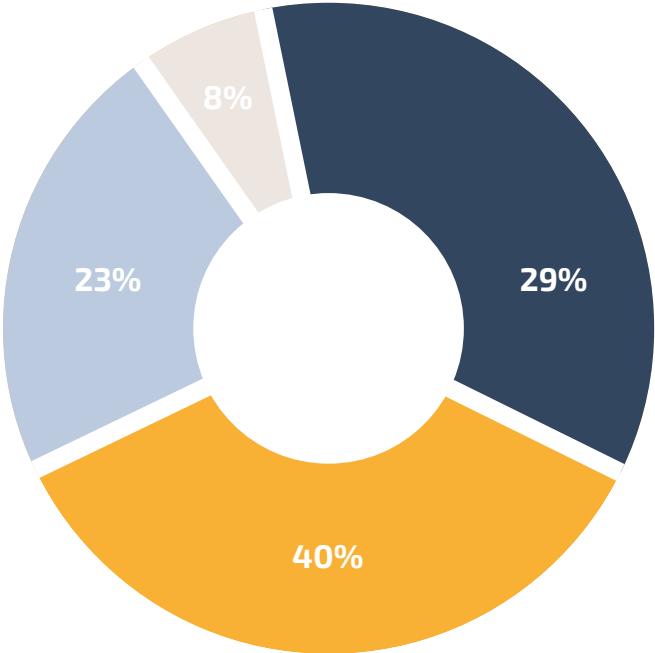


Figure 1. Age distribution of the participants

RELATIONSHIP STATUS

- has patner (i.e. boyfriend)
- married to female partner
- single

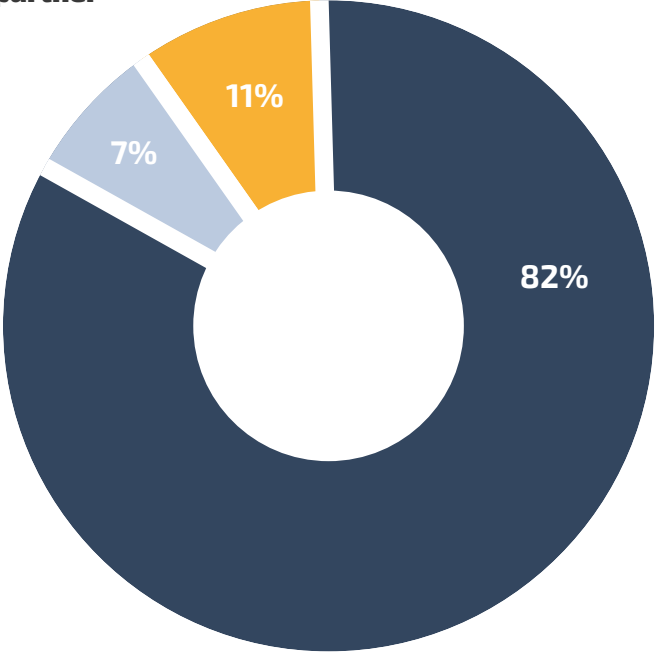


Figure 2. Marital status of the participants

EDUCATION LEVEL

- high school
- college graduate school
- some college

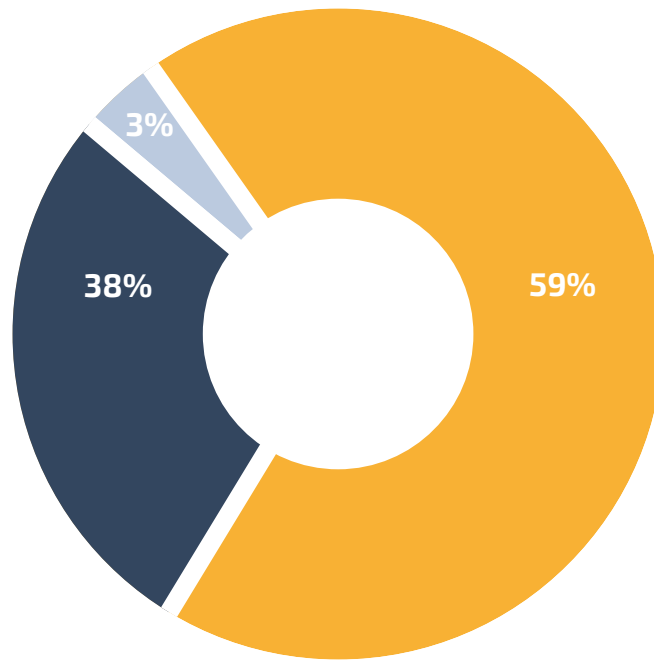


Figure 3. Education level

SEXUAL IDENTITY

- gay
- bisexual
- other

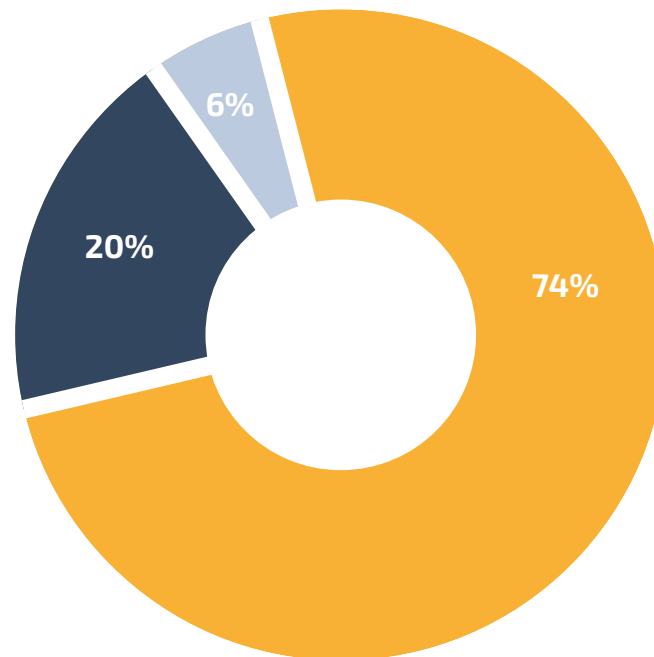


Figure 4. Sexual identity

HAS THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC STOPPED YOU FROM TAKING PREP?

■ taken PrEP
■ stopped PrEP

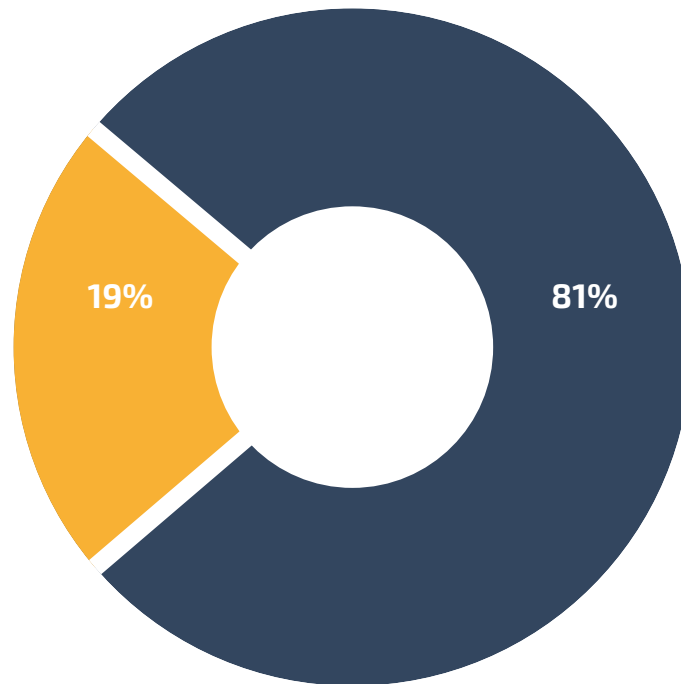


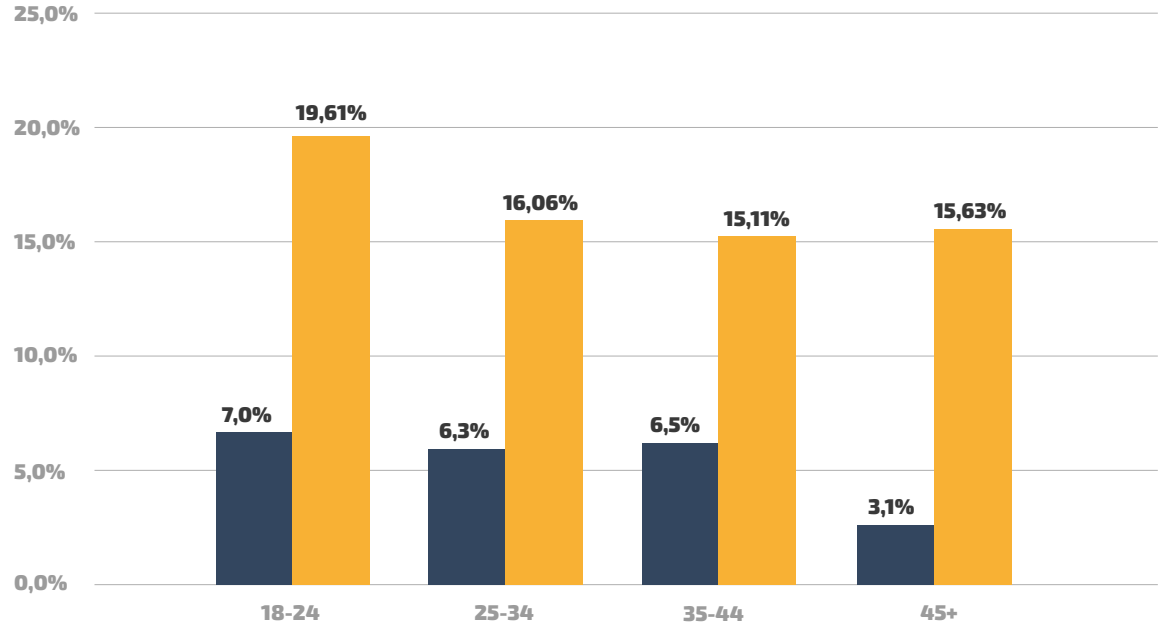
Figure 5. The impact of COVID-19 pandemic on PrEP intake among users

Substance Use Behavior and Mental health

7.4% reported their substance use had increased, and 17.3% reported their binge drinking had increased (Figure 6). The most considerable increase in substance use and binge drinking was observed in the age group between 18-24 years, 7% and 19.61%, accordingly. While, the mental health symptoms (Figure 7) described by increase of level of depression, anxiety and general stress level was found among the age group of 35-44 years. Nevertheless, 43.32% reported depression, 40.5% anxiety and 28.77% increase in the general level of stress in the age group of 18-24.

SUBSTANCE USE BEHAVIOUR

- recreational drugs
- alcohol

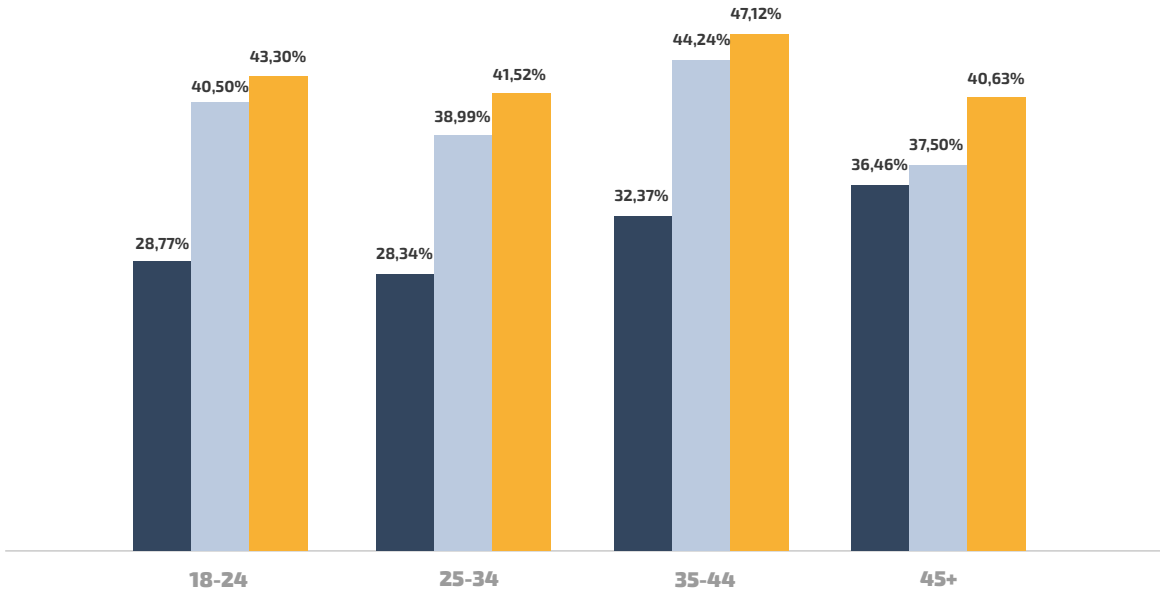


Age of participants

Figure 6. Substance use behaviour reported by PrEP Users

MENTAL HEALTH SYMPTOMS

- level of depression
- level of anxiety
- level of stress



Age of participants

Figure 7. Mental health symptoms reported by PrEP Users

Experiences of Intimate Partner Violence

40.5% of participants reported having experienced some form of intimate partner violence (IPV) in the past six months (Figure 8). Of these, 12.2% reported forms of controlling behavior by a sexual partner, 11.2% reported sexual violence, 10.8% experienced emotional and physical violence and 9.7% reported economic violence. 7.6% of survey participants indicated that their sexual partner had pressured them to have unprotected sex. The majority of those affected by IPV, report it as a relatively new phenomenon that they had not experienced before (e.g., 54.6% of those who experienced sexual violence in the past six months indicated that they had not experienced this before). This might imply that intimate partner violence has become both more prevalent and more frequent during the COVID-19 pandemic.

PREVALENCE OF INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

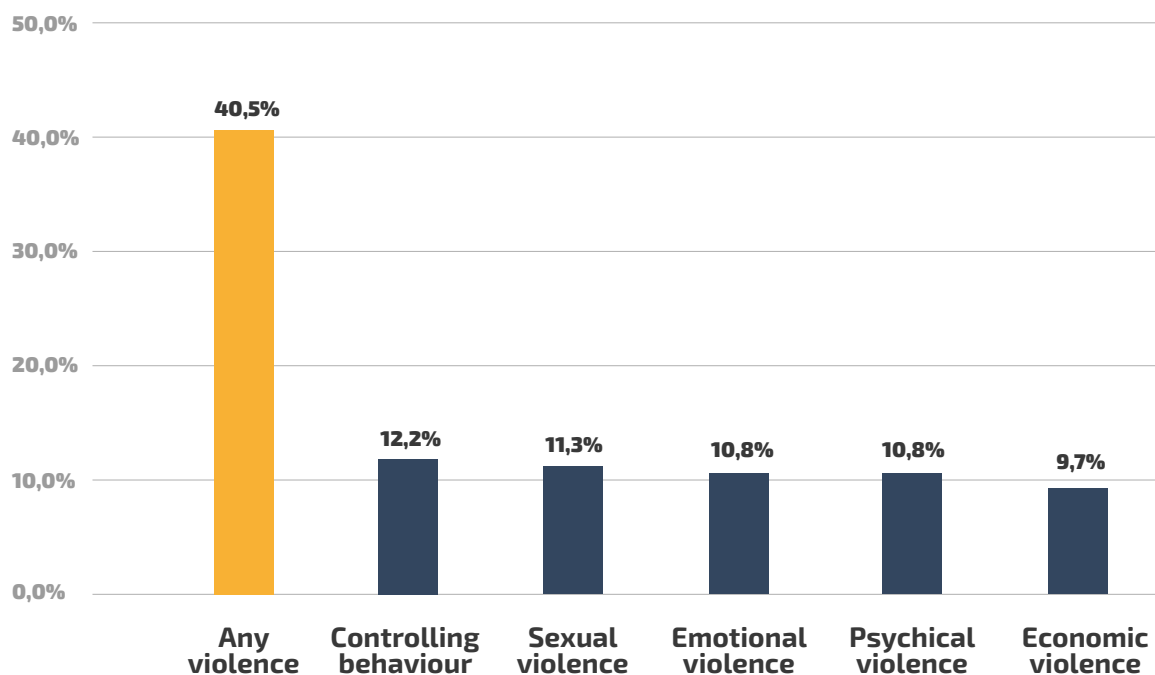


Figure 8. Intimate Partner Violence experienced by PrEP Users

Key Policy Implications

The findings of our study on risk and adversity among male PrEP users during the COVID-19 pandemic pose several immediate policy implications and recommendations.

PrEP projects in Ukraine need increased commitment and support in order to continue building their capacity and providing services.

PrEP users in Ukraine receive a high quality assistance, including adherence support, from NGO staff and case managers. That is attested by the fact that only a small percentage of clients stopped taking PrEP during the pandemic. This program quality level should be maintained and increased despite the war of Russia against Ukraine.

Provision of mental health services specifically for LGBT people in Ukraine should be scaled up.

The study showed a high rate of depression and anxiety symptoms among LGBT people. During the ongoing war, these disorders are very likely to affect more people in Ukraine: those who defend their homeland on the frontline, or stay in their homes, or are internally displaced.

There is an urgent need to address the issue of intimate partner violence in LGBT relations.

As intimate partner violence became both more prevalent and more frequent during the COVID-19 pandemic, there are concerns that the issue might be further exacerbated during the ongoing war. Ukrainian LGBT community and NGOs can benefit from approaches and best practices in intimate violence prevention developed in other countries.

Internally displaced LGBT people should not fall off radar of health services.

It is imperative to ensure continued provision of PrEP, HIV/hepatitis testing, mental health services to LGBT who are internally displaced persons as a result of Russia's war against Ukraine.

More extensive research is needed on the impact of war on social and health-related areas.

As the war is still ongoing, its full impact on health and well-being of LGBT people is yet to be known. The relevant research and findings will assist Ukrainian NGOs and communities in developing and adjusting relevant policies and work.

Recommendations

1. To the Ukrainian government:

- Strengthen commitment to PrEP programs for gay men and other MSM;
- Ensure provision of health services to LGBT people who are internally displaced as a result of the war with Russia;

2. To international donors:

- Increase financial and technical support to PrEP programs in Ukraine;
- Establish and scale-up support to mental health services for LGBT people;
- Support research in impact of war on health of LGBT people;

3. To the LGBT community and NGOs:

- Maintain and build capacity and skills of social workers and case managers on PrEP;
- Advocate for and establish services in mental health for LGBT people;
- Start discourse on intimate partner violence in LGBT community and provide prevention and support on intimate partner violence;

4. To academia:

- Initiate research in intimate partner violence among LGBT people;
- Conduct research in impact of war on social and health-related aspects of lives of LGBT people

References

1. Blake, Daniel Keane, Elly (15 March 2022). "What is the Homes for Ukraine refugees scheme and how do you apply?". *Evening Standard*. Retrieved 15 March 2022
2. "Ukrainian exodus could be Europe's biggest refugee crisis since World War II". *El Pais*. 3 March 2022.
3. "Situation Ukraine Refugee Situation". *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*. Retrieved 15 March 2022.
4. Kamal, K., Li, J.J., Hahm, H.C. and Liu, C.H., 2021. Psychiatric impacts of the COVID-19 global pandemic on US sexual and gender minority young adults. *Psychiatry Research*, 299, p.113855.
5. Santos, G.M., Ackerman, B., Rao, A., Wallach, S., Ayala, G., Lamontage, E., Garner, A., Holloway, I.W., Arreola, S., Silenzio, V. and Strömdahl, S., 2021. Economic, mental health, HIV prevention and HIV treatment impacts of COVID-19 and the COVID-19 response on a global sample of cisgender gay men and other men who have sex with men. *AIDS and Behavior*, 25(2), pp.311-321.
6. Kneale D, Becares L. The mental health and experiences of discrimination of LGBTQ+ people during the COVID-19 pandemic: initial findings from the Queerantime study. MedRxiv. 2020 Jan 1.
7. Holloway IW, Garner A, Tan D, Ochoa AM, Santos GM, Howell S. Associations between physical distancing and mental health, sexual health and technology use among gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Homosexuality*. 2021 Mar 21;68(4):692-708.
8. Ebert, C., & Steinert, J. I. (2021). Prevalence and risk factors of violence against women and children during COVID-19, Germany. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, 99(6), 429.
9. Walsh AR, Sullivan S, Stephenson R. Intimate partner violence experiences during COVID-19 among male couples. *Journal of interpersonal violence*. 2021 Apr 18:08862605211005135.
10. Guruge, S., Ford-Gilboe, M., Varcoe, C., Jayasuriya-Illesinghe, V., Ganesan, M., Sivayogan, S., Kanthasamy, P., Shanmugalingam, P. and Vithanarachchi, H., 2017. Intimate partner violence in the post-war context: Women's experiences and community leaders' perceptions in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka. *PLoS One*, 12(3), p.e0174801.
11. Goessmann, K., Ibrahim, H., Saupe, L.B., Ismail, A.A. and Neuner, F., 2019. The contribution of mental health and gender attitudes to intimate partner violence in the context of war and displacement: Evidence from a multi-informant couple survey in Iraq. *Social Science & Medicine*, 237, p.112457.
12. Alleyne-Green, B., Kulick, A., Grocher, K. and Betancourt, T.S., 2021. Physical and sexual violence experienced by male war-affected youth: Implications for post-conflict functioning and intimate relationships. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 36(9-10), pp.NP4874-NP4890.