

## **Social Influences on HIV Services Engagement among Sexual Minorities Experiencing Intersectional Stigma and Discrimination during COVID-19 Pandemic in Uganda**

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**Abstract :** Introduction: In Uganda, sexual minorities experience exacerbated intersectional stigma and discrimination that exposes them to elevated HIV infections and impedes access to HIV testing and PrEP with low treatment adherence. We contribute to the lack of information about sexual minorities living with HIV in Uganda by using modified social-ecological theory to explore social influences impacting HIV services engagement. Findings from focused group discussion (FGD) involving 31 sexual minorities, ages 18-25, recruited through urban HIV clinics in Kampala reveal the protective and promotive social influence within the individual and interpersonal relationships (sexual partners and peers). Further, inhibitive social influences were found within family, community, societal, and healthcare settings. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these adolescents strategically used promotive social influences to increase their engagement with HIV care services. Interviews were recorded in English, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using Dedoose. Conclusions: The findings revealed that young people (identified as sexual minorities) strategically used promotive social influences and supported each other to improve engagement with HIV care in the context of restrictive laws in Uganda during the COVID-19-Pandemic. Future HIV prevention, treatment, and care responses could draw on how peers support each other to navigate the heavily criminalized and stigmatized settings to access healthcare services.

**Keywords :** HIV/AIDS services, intersectional stigma, discrimination, adolescents, sexual minorities, COVID-19 pandemic Uganda

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