

Unveiling the Guardians of Change

A Report on the
Safety, Care, and
Well-being of
Southeast Asian
LBQ Activists

ASIA FEMINIST LBQ NETWORK





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Adopting a Care-Focused Approach for LBG Movements

The LBG movement's success hinges on prioritizing healing and well-being as integral to the broader work. The LBG individuals and groups that are most vulnerable to harm are those who are marginalized within the activist community, two emphases that have a vital role in ensuring the movement's survival for sustainable and self-organizing. LBG activists must prioritize their own mental well-being to ensure the movement's continuity.

The emergence of LBG activists and leaders in developing care within the movement is a critical step. This involves being intentional about the ways in which care is provided, such as through the creation of safe spaces, self-education, and the provision of direct support. LBG activists should be encouraged to take their concerns, struggles, and experiences into account by allocating time, resources, and commitment to support their well-being.

Creating safe spaces for healing, reflection, and support is essential. Initiatives, activities, and programs should be developed to cater to diverse preferences. A work-life balance practice should be encouraged, and LBG activists should be encouraged to take their own time and space to rest and recharge. LBG activists can pave the way for a brighter future for the movement.

A Report on the Status, Care, and Well-being of Southeast Asian LBG Activists

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Introduction →

“This is the first time in so many months that I've talked about what happened to me, and somebody was interested about what happened to me.”

(Irish, Philippines)

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Dedication

This report is dedicated to every person assigned female at birth who bears the weight of paralysing fear while navigating public spaces; to every LGBTIQ individual who grapples with the oppressive shackles preventing them from fully embracing their true selves; for every trans person who is forced to conceal their identity, haunted by the dread of being exposed in an unsafe world; and for the guardians of change, those resilient individuals who fight tirelessly so that each one of us can live as our true selves. To those who have not found the respite of a peaceful life: may this endeavour pave the way for a future in which your lives are not just bearable, but truly liveable.

Also, a special thanks to all the interviewees, volunteers, Editor XT Koh, our Researchers Yuli Rustinawati and Nahdia Aurelia for their drive and commitment in bringing out the voices of LBQ persons in this research project.





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Care, and Well-being of
Southeast Asian LBQ Activists



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Executive Summary



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Key Findings →



LBQ organising in Southeast Asia

IN THE PHILIPPINES

LBQ activism is still in its nascent stages in Iloilo City. Activists face challenges in raising political awareness among LBQ communities about LBQ activism. In Iloilo City, there are only three openly lesbian activists actively working to bring visibility and change, which highlights the scarcity of representation in the fight for LBQ rights.

IN THAILAND

LBQ organising predominantly takes place in online spaces or friendly associations. LBQ activism has suffered interruptions after the 2014 coup that led to Thailand coming under military and police rule. The younger generation of LBQ activists tends to avoid more established labels such as "lesbian" and "tom" due to negative stereotypes these words have gained from their depiction in the mainstream media. The LBQ movement faces tensions and fragmentation due to differing activism strategies and generational gaps. There is also a lack of LBQ-focused organisations and support, especially in rural areas.

IN INDONESIA

LBQ activists work in secret and adopt a low-profile approach at the workplace, when doing business, and even when appearing in public places due to intense threats and condemnation towards the LGBTIQ community. Activists sidestep the public eye by having their meetings under wraps or under innocuous event names, sometimes even meeting during work-related events to exchange information about activist work.

IN MALAYSIA

Despite some resistance and potential persecution under Sharia law, the LGBTIQ organising landscape has seen significant growth, offering a glimmer of hope. Over the past decade, numerous queer organisations have emerged, a departure from the limited LGBTIQ presence in the past. These groups, although often small and informal, offer various services such as legal aid, shelter assistance, and job support for LGBTIQ individuals who have faced familial rejection or discrimination. Some are also involved in supporting queer refugees, expanding their scope.

Notably, there is increasing visibility and activism within the queer movement in Malaysia, where individuals are shedding their fear of being visible, and participating in public events such as the Women's March. This newfound visibility fosters a sense of community and support among LGBTIQ individuals.

Malaysia's changing LGBTIQ organising landscape reflects a shift in discussions and problem-solving. Language and understanding around coming out and seeking queer-affirming services have evolved, allowing for more nuanced and comprehensive discussions of the challenges faced by LGBTIQ individuals. Despite ongoing challenges, progress in Malaysia's queer movement offers hope for dismantling barriers to community visibility.

However, this growth and visibility does not extend to Malaysian LBQ (Lesbian, Bisexual, and Queer) communities. LBQ individuals often do not feel the need to mobilise due to a lack of funding and support and a perceived lack of pressing issues, contributing to their limited visibility. Additionally, the few LBQ communities that exist primarily revolve around specific regions and topics, not encompassing the broader LBQ community.

IN CAMBODIA

LBQ organisations recognise the importance of collective efforts within the broader LGBTIQ community while acknowledging the need to address individual LBQ identities. While years of collaborative work with NGOs and the media have led to several Cambodian government officials publicly vocalising their support for LGBTIQ rights, LBQ individuals continue to shoulder mental health burdens from injustices built up through their lives, and the expectation for them to fulfil gender roles at odds with their own authentic self-expression.

IN MYANMAR

LBQ activists face heightened threats and challenges following the coup, with security deteriorating, and military checkpoints scrutinising their movements. They operate with caution to safeguard themselves. Individuals from LBQ organisations face community and workplace discrimination, limited mental health services, as well as the threat of police intimidation using laws targeted against LGBT people.

▼ The Legal Protection of LBQ activists in Southeast Asia

The application of social protection laws in Southeast Asia, including those related to social security, sole parenthood, and housing, not only leaves out but also poses significant challenges for LBQ individuals and activists. This is because these laws are often not tailored to accommodate the unique circumstances and needs of the LBQ community.

In many cases, instead of having laws providing LBQ people with protection, there are legal frameworks that could potentially criminalise LBQ individuals and activists. For instance, the implementation of Sharia law which applies exclusively to Muslims, in 13 states of **Malaysia**, and the criminalisation of musahaqah (sexual relations between women) 12 states and the Federal Territory.

Similarly, in **Aceh Province, Indonesia**, Qanun Jinayat applies to both Muslim and non-Muslim individuals in certain cases. This bylaw criminalises consensual same-sex sexual acts as well as all zina (sexual relations outside of marriage) and prohibits liwath (sodomy) and musahaqah (sexual relations between women). While certain legal provisions, such as Article 8(1) of the Malaysian Federal Constitution and Article 27 of the Indonesian Constitution, which assert that all individuals are equal before the law, provide some safeguards, they often apply primarily to cisgender individuals, leaving transgender individuals vulnerable.

This complex situation is compounded by a lack of trust in law enforcement due to the existence of laws that criminalise LBQ individuals. Consequently, LBQ individuals find it difficult to seek legal protection, perpetuating a cycle of invisibility and vulnerability.

On top of these challenges, LBQ communities are often exploited as political scapegoats, leading to a reduction in potential allies' support as their fear of reputational damage takes precedence. Examples of threats that include LBQ activists among their targets are the **Philippines'** red-tagging and **Thailand's** 112 law. Red-tagging is the act of accusing individuals or organisations, usually activists, human rights advocates, or political dissenters, of being affiliated with communist rebels or terrorists, even without substantial proof. This practice, which has sparked significant controversy, is often used to stifle opposition and tarnish reputations. It can have serious consequences for those targeted, including threats to their safety and freedom of expression.

Meanwhile in Thailand, the 112 law, also known as *Lèse-majesté*, makes it illegal to criticise or show disrespect towards the royal family, including the king, queen, heir-apparent, or regent. Violation of this law can result in severe penalties, including lengthy prison sentences. This law can also be used to criminalise activists who take part in demonstrations, as a demonstration can be framed as a criticism towards the monarchy.

The struggles faced by LBQ individuals overlap with those confronting cis-heterosexual women in general; however, the intersections of gender identity and sexual orientation in LBQ individuals also create new and different kinds of discrimination and violence. The decriminalisation of same-sex practices and the establishment of anti-discrimination laws, while essential, falls short of providing comprehensive protection for LBQ individuals living in countries with deeply ingrained sexist policies. Addressing these multifaceted challenges requires an integrated approach that incorporates both feminist and queer perspectives.

However, achieving such integration proves to be difficult as the broader LGBTIQ movement often overlooks the distinct issues that LBQ individuals encounter. Simultaneously, women's rights movements and organisations hesitate to adopt queer lenses due to contextual constraints within their respective countries. Navigating this complex landscape demands collaborative efforts that recognize and rectify the shortcomings of existing legal frameworks while embracing the intersectionality of LBQ and feminist struggles.

Despite the absence of legal safeguards, LBQ activists demonstrate remarkable resilience by employing strategic approaches tailored to their unique circumstances. These strategies encompass patient engagement with government officials, as exemplified by the case we shall discuss from **Cambodia**.

In **Malaysia**, where Muslim LBQ activists contend with additional challenges stemming from societal biases and discriminatory laws, they adopt indirect methods to address their concerns by collaborating with non-Muslim LBQ activists who help their voices get heard second-hand. This indirect approach allows Muslim LBQ activists to address crucial issues through non-Muslim voices while mitigating potential backlash against themselves.

In **Indonesia**, a proactive stance prevails as activists map potential threats, prepare for worst-case scenarios, and develop standard operating procedures for them based on their experiences. Meanwhile, in the **Philippines**, LBQ activists are leveraging the power of social media and local networks to connect with officials and officers who may not be fully informed or may have biases regarding LBQ issues. By utilising these communication tools and local connections, they aim to engage with and educate those in positions of authority.

▼ The Economic Realities of LBQ Activists and Organisations in Southeast Asia

LBQ activists wrestle with significant financial uncertainty due to a lack of sustainable funding. This aligns with a report by Mama Cash, a global fund supporting women's, girls', trans, and intersex people's groups, which notes the substantial disparities in funding between LBQ groups in North America compared to those in other regions. Groups in Europe and Central Asia, as well as Asia and the Pacific, report the lowest median external funding at \$1,150 and \$1,170, respectively. These figures pale in comparison to the staggering median external funding of \$244,202 enjoyed by North American groups¹.

This struggle is exacerbated for those facing displacement due to adverse conditions in their countries, hampering their quest for economic stability. The absence of reliable funding obstructs progress, compelling some activists to utilise personal resources for organisational needs or even to forgo their own income to support their activist organisations' staff and procure necessities.

Short-term grants, though a common funding source, have the side effect of engendering uncertainty and economic

insecurity for LBQ activists and organisations due to their limited nature. Relying on project-based funding makes organisations have to constantly search for new projects, which strains activists' well-being due to the need to juggle multiple commitments simultaneously. Unfortunately, this focus on securing projects detracts from their core programmes and initiatives.

LBQ organisations confront notable gaps in their pursuit of financial stability. Newer organisations particularly struggle to secure funds, hampered by a lack of a clear growth roadmap and prospective donors focused on LBQ and women's rights causes. The dearth of institutionalisation impedes their ability to access larger grants, while the expectation for them to self-sustain also diverts attention from their core advocacy, hindering progress.

A lack of support for general operational costs compounds these funding gaps, leaving little room for overhead expenses, adequate salaries, benefits, or pensions for LBQ activists and their organisations. This financial dearth can impact their ability to compete in the job market and retain staff, driving experienced activists towards larger international organisations. The flip side of working with such sources of funding is that fulfilling their requirements can lead to the fragmentation of local LBT movements and disrupting their collective efforts.

¹ Saleh, L. M., & Sood, N. (2020). (rep.). *Vibrant Yet Under-Resourced: The State of Lesbian, Bisexual, and Queer Movements*. Mama Cash. Retrieved September 4, 2023, from <https://www.mamacash.org/en/report-vibrant-yet-under-resourced>.

Moreover, LBQ activists, particularly those with masculine presentations, confront workplace discrimination when seeking jobs, pushing some towards alternative livelihoods such as online hormone sales. Extortion from employers themselves further thwarts employment and savings for LBQ activists, some of whom are also factory workers. Accessing government assistance proves challenging due to discrimination and biases, and the loss of necessary official documentation among those who've fled home further complicates matters.

To navigate these challenges, LBQ activists employ diverse strategies. Registering organisations in order that they can access funding, building movements for larger grants, and fostering transparent donor communication are vital. Utilising online platforms for cost-effective engagement and prioritising organisational goals over fund accumulation are key financial approaches. Additionally, emergency funds and resource-sharing within the LBQ community foster solidarity, while government engagement and personal connections facilitate access to public support. Some activists also engage in small businesses to empower themselves and strengthen community bonds.

Yet discrimination, workplace violence, limited opportunities, and bureaucratic hurdles persist, creating ongoing obstacles to the financial security of LBQ activists.

▼ Social and Cultural Support for LBQ Activists in Southeast Asia

LBQ activists' pursuit of family acceptance reveals a spectrum of experiences, ranging from finding unwavering love and affirmation to encountering formidable challenges. While some gain a basic level of acceptance, true acceptance remains elusive. Each individual activist's decision to come out or not varies — some tread cautiously, knowing the risks, while others are thrust into openness, often leading to estrangement. In distressing cases, families resort to drastic measures such as conversion therapy or corrective rape to "fix" LBQ individuals.

Within the broader societal context of countries such as **Thailand**, despite the growing attention to LGBT rights issues, genuine societal acceptance remains elusive for LBQ activists and individuals. Negative stereotypes and prejudices persist, with the influence of religion being particularly strong in rural areas, forcing LBQ individuals and activists to remain hidden.

Religious influence on perceptions of LGBT people and conservative tendencies are also evident in **Malaysia**, where the increasing visibility of the LGBT movement has led to heightened societal resistance and discrimination, fuelled by state-led pushbacks. Such negative portrayals of LGBT individuals adversely impact their access to essential healthcare services, as misguided fears and misconceptions hinder critical support.

Similarly, conservative beliefs and social taboos hold strong in **Indonesia**, with hateful rhetoric permeating society, even within educational institutions. Discrimination against LBQ activists and individuals also persists when they seek rental accommodations in Indonesia.

In **Myanmar**, such discrimination in communities and workplaces also continues to present challenges for LBQ individuals. And in the **Philippines**, attempts by LBQ and LGBTIQ organisations to raise awareness among the general public have yielded a positive reception, although discriminatory remarks and counter-efforts by conservative and extremist groups persist. Additionally, within the Filipino LGBTIQ community itself, LBQ activists face discrimination due to factors such as being non-native to the region, gender expression, misconceptions about bisexuality, and sexism. Verbal harassment against LBQ activists remains a concern, and masculine-presenting LBQ individuals are particularly susceptible to discrimination, violence, and harassment due to deeply ingrained societal norms.

LBQ activists employ various strategies to navigate these challenges, including choosing the safest method of registration for their organisations and employing contextual analysis. They develop standard operating procedures (SOPs), crucial for guiding actions and managing difficult situations effectively. Activists also use strategies such as cover stories when organising meeting places and building support networks within their communities, as well as ensuring digital security to protect LBQ individuals' identities and activities.

Despite these strategies, gaps persist, notably in fostering self-acceptance and confidence in terms of sexual orientation among fellow activists. Implementing SOPs, while essential for safety and security, also poses challenges to the consistent execution of activist work. Leaks of information pose a significant risk to activists' organisational safety. Furthermore, the visibility of certain LGBTIQ organisations inadvertently affects those linked to them who attempt to remain low-key for safety reasons. Moreover, the lack of a robust network of queer parents within the LGBT community leaves LBQ activists with children feeling isolated and unsupported.

▼ The Health and Well-being of LBQ Activists in Southeast Asia

Among LBQ activists, a variety of health issues are prevalent, including cysts, diabetes, high blood pressure, severe allergies, and gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD). The demanding nature of activism often exacerbates these health conditions, with stress acting as a contributing factor. As these activists age, the burden on their physical health becomes more pronounced, leading to fatigue and other health challenges that impact their overall well-being.

Accessing healthcare services is a significant challenge for LBQ activists due to systemic barriers and discrimination. In government healthcare settings, they often endure long waiting times and insensitivity towards their sexual

orientation and gender identity. Additionally, economic disparities further influence the quality of healthcare they receive, resulting in varying levels of access. Moreover, LBQ individuals frequently encounter discrimination and stigma when seeking medical attention, particularly concerning sexual and reproductive health. Taboos surrounding LGBTIQ issues and the prospect of invasive examinations deter LBQ activists from prioritising their health and seeking appropriate care.

LBQ activists' mental health challenges are intertwined with their community and organisational struggles, particularly for those who assume the roles of emotional anchors for their organisations' members and staff. Isolation is another pervasive issue experienced by LBQ activists, stemming from migration to new countries, estrangement from families, and a sense of loneliness in their struggles.

Battling burnout is an ongoing concern due to the fast-paced nature of their lives, limited resources, and the non-immediate outcomes characteristic of activism work, which can lead to frustration among long-term activists. Constantly seeking funding and managing ongoing projects amplifies the strain, particularly when funders do not allocate sufficient resources to LBQ activists' projects. While taking breaks is crucial for preventing burnout, some LBQ activists interviewed expressed concern about the continuity and progress of the movement if they do so, often feeling an overwhelming sense of responsibility.

Though some organisations have implemented policies to nurture members' mental health, the demanding workload of

community work and strong sense of responsibility often hinder activists from fully utilising mental healthcare benefits. Accumulated experiences of injustice and trauma, whether personally experienced or witnessed, take a lingering toll on the mental health of LBQ activists, affecting both their physical and emotional well-being. The weight of trauma and the constant struggle for acceptance can become imprinted in the mind and body, resulting in a range of long-term effects.

However, LBQ activists encounter complexities when accessing mental health care due to various challenges. Socio-economic concerns often force mental health to take a back seat, as existing treatment and counselling services are primarily private, creating financial barriers.

Even free mental health services, such as those available in Thailand, have limited availability and long waiting lines, underscoring inequalities. In Myanmar, the absence of free services leaves LBQ activists with few accessible options, and while organisations face difficulties in providing help, grants covering only a single mental health treatment session contribute to the challenge.

Despite the existence of funds and queer-affirming services, not all activists have the privilege to prioritise their well-being and seek therapeutic support due to their demanding workloads involving managing multiple projects simultaneously for their financial stability. Financial well-being is thus tightly intertwined with activists' overall well-being.

Moreover, LBQ activists find it challenging to share their personal stories with therapists due to deeply entrenched stigma and discrimination against LBQ individuals. The lack of mental health professionals knowledgeable about LBQ experiences further compounds the gap. Fear of a lack of confidentiality and familiarity with each other also deter LBQ activists from seeking mental healthcare, as services become shared resources within the tight-knit LGBTIQ movement. A sense of responsibility and a desire to prioritise others also hinders access to available resources.

Strategies employed by LBQ activists and their organisations' staff members to navigate their situation include disengaging from social media to shield themselves from harsh comments and associated health risks. Nevertheless, social media can provide them with opportunities for forging new communities and finding online support – after all, a reliable support system and connections with others sharing similar struggles are crucial. At the same time, feeling needed and assisting others in peer support communities brings activists a sense of purpose.

Some seek solace and guidance in their faith during difficult times, while others find well-being through jogging, yoga, journaling, and engaging in activities they enjoy. Several organisations also prioritise well-being as a collective effort, establishing healthy work conditions and care systems. Recognising personal limitations and the dangers of idealism, some activists take sabbaticals to focus on healing and well-being.

Recommendations →

✓ Adopting a Care-Focused Approach for LBQ Movements

The LBQ movement's success hinges on prioritising healing and well-being, as stressed by Thai lesbian activist Tao. LBQ individuals' mental health is foundational for effective advocacy, requiring deliberate well-being efforts within the activist community. Tao emphasises that healing is vital for sustainable activism, averting internal conflicts and self-doubt. As marginalised individuals with painful experiences, LBQ activists must prioritise their own mental well-being to ensure the movement's continuity.

Tao envisions LBQ activists as leaders in championing care within the movement, acknowledging the necessity of well-being for their survival. She hopes that this care-oriented approach, often sidelined in patriarchal structures, will gain traction. By offering a safe space for directly affected activists to voice their concerns, stakeholders can gain a deeper comprehension of LBQ activists' challenges and experiences by allocating time, resources, and commitment to support their well-being.

Creating safe spaces for healing, reflection, and support is essential. Initiatives promoting well-being, including physical activities, creative outlets, and self-care practises should be developed to cater to diverse preferences. A work-life balance promoting self-care without guilt must be cultivated, safeguarding activists' passion and commitment. By tending to their own well-being, LBQ activists can pave the way for a brighter future for the movement.

✓ Ensuring the Well-being of LBQ Activists through Adequate Funding and Support

Implementing a care-focused approach requires engaging donors. To foster a culture of support and understanding, it's essential that fundraising organisations and their stakeholders engage donors in a way that encourages open dialogue and empathy rather than confrontation or judgement. Since some funders only support established and registered organisations, it becomes essential to communicate to them the reasons why certain LBQ organisations remain unregistered, particularly in Southeast Asian contexts, where being openly LBQ or openly functioning as an LGBTIQ organisation can entail significant risks.

Additionally, dispelling the expectation that activists, working with shoestring budgets, can effectively drive social progress is paramount. While profit isn't the primary objective for LBQ organisations or LGBTIQ groups in general, practical realities dictate that activists require financial resources to lead balanced lives while pursuing their advocacy work. A lack of adequate funding strains these organisations, leaving them with limited time, financial security, and personnel for the well-being of their team members.

Moreover, it is vital to emphasise that the well-being of these activists constitutes the very bedrock of the LBQ movement and should stand as a fundamental pillar of the movement's strategic planning. To this end, it is imperative that LBQ organisations and activists collectively communicate the issues and challenges encountered by LBQ activists working at the grassroots to potential donors, bearing in mind that many donors may lack direct experience in advocacy work. Furthermore, LBQ activists must underscore that movement-building and human rights endeavours are intricate processes, and not always readily measurable through immediate, tangible outcomes, such as legal or social advancements.

✓ Fostering a Culture of Celebration and Empathy

Cambodian activist Pisey shared the significance of celebrating and appreciating LBQ activists' efforts – even small achievements or individual contributions - to enhance group unity and motivation. When leaders and members show empathy and support for each activist, an inclusive environment preventing disconnection and fostering dedication is built. Building such a culture of appreciation and celebration can bridge generational gaps, nurturing dialogue and shared purpose, ultimately bolstering the LBQ movement's impact.

Building Bridges: The Crucial Need for Convening and Dialogue among LBQ Activists in Southeast Asia

To address conflicts between generations of LBQ activists, Anne and Ruang emphasise the necessity of activists conducting dialogue and convening. This serves to bridge generational gaps, learn from shared experiences, and envision a collective future. Convening also offers an opportunity to gather data on the challenges faced by their fellow Southeast Asian LBQ activists, potentially enhancing donors' understanding of LBQ needs, enhancing donor support, improving organisational policies, and services. Additionally, LBQ community discussions should contextualise LBQ issues within their unique Southeast Asian contexts and include activists from LBQ organisations for sustainable impact.

Fostering Empowerment and Solidarity: The Crucial Need for Supportive Networks among LBQ Activists

Anne, Pisey, Irish, Suri, and Ruang all share the importance of establishing a supportive network among LBQ activists across and within countries not only for psychological safety, but also for basic security needs.

Anne highlights the need for an ASEAN-wide network to connect LBQ activists emotionally and mentally, and to address common issues. Pisey advocates for restoring a true sense of sisterhood, transcending location and circumstances, as a source of security and confidence.

She also emphasises community and peer support as vital for cultivating a culture of solidarity – this would not only unite the LBQ community but also fuel significant advocacy. Irish also stresses the importance of feeling connected, valued, and needed within LBQ networks, enhancing self-esteem and worth. Suri points out activists' stress and anxiety stemming from isolation, emphasising the need for a network offering emotional support.

Ruang and Irish further stress the necessity of secure communication systems and networks, especially for LBQ individuals in rural areas or facing threats. Irish suggests small grants for their temporary relocation, underpinned by psychosocial support and understanding.

Collectively, these insights advocate a comprehensive network offering emotional aid, job opportunities, safety, and shelter, fostering empowerment and unity among LBQ activists, and strengthening their communities.

▼ Network of Queer-Affirming Therapists, Counsellors, and Social Workers at a Regional Level

Based on interviews with informants, LBQ activists face substantial barriers accessing mental health services, including economic constraints and a scarcity of LGBTIQ-literate providers. Fears of encountering homophobia and concerns about re-traumatization deter them from seeking help. To address these issues, an urgent comprehensive network of queer-affirming therapists should be established. This network must offer tailored training for therapists, including LGBTIQ competencies, cultural sensitivity, and up-to-date knowledge.

To enhance accessibility, a centralised directory of qualified therapists from each ASEAN country, including those able to provide their services in English, should be created. A referral system and centralised directory, alongside an online platform, would streamline therapist selection and service access. Partnerships with LBQ organisations can expand outreach, and pro bono services can aid those with financial limitations. Diverse mental health practitioners and stringent confidentiality protocols are essential to address individual needs and ensure privacy. Such a network would provide vital mental health support to LBQ activists while respecting their diverse circumstances.

▼ Holistic Well-Being Workshop for LBQ Activists

To address the mental health and overall well-being of LBQ activists, a comprehensive holistic well-being workshop would equip LBQ activists with practical self-healing techniques, including meditation, mindfulness practices, and trauma healing methods. Facilitated by experts in mental health and LBQ-specific issues, the workshop can focus on interactive sessions, learning through group discussions, and experiential activities to build resilience. It would foster a supportive environment where participants can share experiences, seek peer support, as well as knowledge which can be carried forward to their organisations and activists they work with. This will empower participants to become facilitators themselves, ensuring sustainability of the LBQ movement.

Ongoing support, including, but not limited to, periodic check-ins, virtual support groups, access to resources, and continuous evaluation, would enhance the workshop's impact, contributing to improved mental health and well-being for LBQ activists and their broader community.

▼ Inclusive Healthcare for LBQ Activists' Well-Being

LBQ activists' challenges in accessing healthcare services highlight the need for sensitization and inclusivity training for healthcare providers. Creating LGBTIQ-friendly spaces in clinics is crucial to ensure a safe and welcoming environment for LBQ individuals to disclose their sexual orientations or gender identities without fear of discrimination. Targeted education and support programs for stakeholders and advocacy in policy change to focus on the unique healthcare needs of LBQ individuals should be implemented. Accurate health information and resources tailored to LBQ individuals' experiences can empower them to prioritise their health. Additionally, empowering LBQ activists with information about available resources, grants, donor support, and insurance options for their healthcare can help them balance their health needs with their advocacy work.

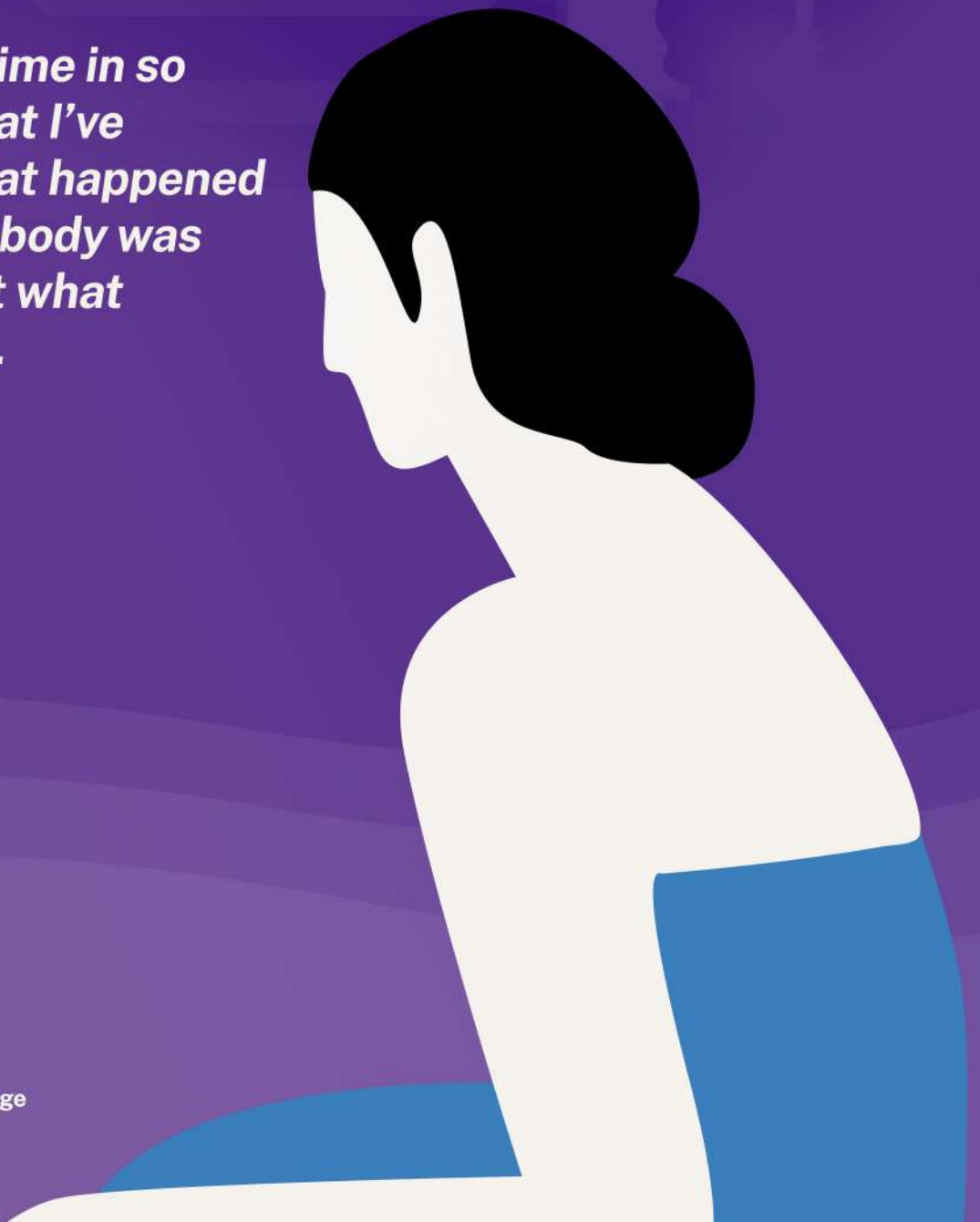
Introduction



This is the first time in so many months that I've talked about what happened to me, and somebody was interested about what happened to me.



(Irish, Philippines)



In the vibrant tapestry of Southeast Asia, LBQ activists stand as beacons of courage and resilience, fighting tirelessly for the rights of our communities. However, more often than not, LBQ activists find their own stories, experiences, and lives shrouded in obscurity even as they are driven by selfless determination to amplify the stories of the marginalised. Their unwavering dedication to amplifying LBQ communities' collective voices comes at a cost. Many LBQ activists find it challenging to discuss their own personal circumstances and struggles beyond their work, community, or organisations. For many, this endeavour to share their own narratives remains uncharted territory as they relinquish the spotlight for the sake of the voiceless.

Due to the lack of opportunity and the difficulty of discussing themselves as individuals, these LBQ activists' needs and concerns often remain unspoken, creating a gap in addressing their well-being.

The weight of their advocacy work, including emotional labour, can take a toll on their personal health, welfare, and security. It is crucial for us to recognise and prioritise the care and safety of LBQ activists to ensure that they have the support, resources, and spaces needed to navigate their own journeys of activism.

As activists wholeheartedly devote themselves to providing care and safety for their communities, a pressing question emerges: who ensures that they, too, receive the care and safety they deserve? By bringing this question to the forefront, our research aims to shed light on the vital need to provide care and safety for LBQ

activists as individuals, not just as advocates for their communities. We endeavour to gain an understanding of the challenges activists face, identify the risks and threats that impede their safety and well-being, establish what the existing systems and support mechanisms available to them are, while also identify gaps and strategies to enhance their well-being. By unravelling the multifaceted dimensions of activists' experiences, ultimately, our aim is to devise strategies to enhance their safety and care within the Southeast Asian region.

We've had the privilege to engage with 13 LBQ activists from Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Thailand. These individuals, with their deep-rooted connections to their respective communities, provide invaluable insights into the unique challenges and triumphs encountered by LBQ activists in their countries. Through their narratives, we aim to honour the multiplicity of experiences and perspectives that shape the broader context of LBQ activism in Southeast Asia.

However, we must also recognise the limitations we faced in our research process. Despite our utmost efforts, we regrettably could not secure informants from Brunei, Laos, Singapore, Vietnam, and Timor-Leste. While this represents a gap in our study, we remain committed to amplifying the voices of LBQ activists from these countries in future research endeavours. It is our aspiration to foster a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of the safety and care landscape for LBQ individuals and organisations across the entire ASEAN region.

Methodology →

This study adopts a qualitative research design to comprehensively investigate the safety and care of activists identifying as lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, queer, or as trans men residing in the Southeast Asian region from April to June 2023. We employ a phenomenological approach centred on the examination of human consciousness and the structure of subjective experience. This approach seeks to illuminate how individuals perceive, experience, and interpret their surroundings and lived realities².

As such, our study places emphasis on the production of comprehensive and vivid descriptions of the subjective experiences reported by our informants. Our aim is to provide detailed, descriptive accounts of LBQ activists' experiences without resorting to theoretical abstractions or speculative interpretations. By doing so, we ensure that the experiences of LBQ activists are faithfully captured in their rich complexity.

We have opted for this approach to authentically convey the real-life experiences of LBQ activists, steering clear of reducing their multifaceted and deeply personal experiences into mere statistical data points. This methodology allows us to delve deeply into the unique and nuanced ways in which our informants perceive and interact with the world around them,

shedding light on the intricacies of their lived experiences, both as activists and as individuals.

To initiate the research process, a survey was developed to identify potential informants and gather a broad understanding of their overall circumstances. Subsequently, contact was established with informant candidates who expressed their willingness to participate in interviews. In-depth interview sessions were then scheduled with these individuals.

The specific focus of this study centres on individuals assigned female at birth who identify as lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, queer, or as trans men. This focus is driven by the recognition that their experiences as individuals who confront the burden of deeply ingrained gender expectations and face various forms of punishment for deviating from or rejecting these norms intricately intersect with their identities as members of historically marginalised social groups, namely sexual and gender minorities.

The activism journey of these individuals becomes more complex due to the intersections of their own identities with the identities of the communities they advocate for. As this research delves deeper into their experiences, it will reveal

² Leavy, P., Brinkmann, S., Jacobsen, M. H., & Kristiansen, S. (2014). *Historical Overview of Qualitative Research in the Social Sciences*. In *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp. 17–42). essay, Oxford University Press.

that their lives are deeply embedded in structural inequalities arising from the intersections of sexual orientation, gender identity, sex, and, in some instances, socioeconomic status.

Our research involves gathering data from a diverse group of LBQ informants who are engaged in advocacy and activism for LBQ rights, LGBTIQ+ rights, and other human rights areas, such as women's and marginalised rights organisations. Our informants consisted of 1 LBQ activist from Cambodia, 3 activists from Indonesia, 2 activists from Malaysia, 1 activist from Myanmar, 2 activists from the Philippines, and 4 activists from Thailand. Each individual represents a unique voice and perspective, enriching our understanding of the varied socio-cultural landscapes in which they operate.

The survey and interviews were complemented by desk research. However, due to our own limitations, the literature review was conducted online, primarily in English. This approach inadvertently favours knowledge production that is written, published online, and in English, while excluding other reports written in different languages within the Southeast Asia region. This exclusion is particularly significant because LBQ communities possess a wealth of knowledge about their experiences which is not adequately represented in formal, English-language written documentation of LBQ+ rights violations, abuses, and encounters. To bridge this gap, the subsequent sections of this report heavily rely on and prioritise the analysis of the oral interviews of the 13 LBQ activists interviewed for this report.

We initiated the research design and began drafting our survey in mid-April 2023. Subsequently, we launched the survey in early May, coinciding with the commencement of our interview process. The interviews continued until the beginning of June. The completion of this report spanned from the end of June to the beginning of July.



Our Informants →

Pisey

Cambodia 

Pisey is one of the co-founders of one of the LGBT+ NGOs based in Cambodia, which was established in 2009. Since 2018, Pisey has been the coordinator of Rainbow Community Kampuchea (RoCK) for five years and counting, taking on a multifaceted leadership role in strengthening her organisation, during which she recognised the importance of caring for the emotional and financial well-being of individual LGBT+ members, including those who might not feel safe coming out. Pisey sees her organisation's role as an "older sister" figure within the LGBT+ community and network in Cambodia, offering understanding, listening, and fostering connections as well as unity within the LGBTIQ community and network.

For Pisey and her organisation, staying true to their vision and values is essential, even in the development-driven sector where NGOs in Cambodia often chase funding opportunities. They believe that women within the LGBT community face additional struggles due to the patriarchal system oppressing women's rights and freedom, while facing challenges expressing these struggles in words. Despite these difficulties, Pisey remains dedicated to supporting the LGBT+ community and rights in Cambodia through RoCK's mission.

Adinda

Indonesia 

Adinda hails from Aceh and has spent a significant part of her life and her journey as an LBQ activist in the city of Banda Aceh. However, she has also spent time as an activist in a province in eastern Indonesia where she had moved to for her studies. Actively involved in supporting the LBQ community in Aceh now, she is dedicated to her work in an LBQ organisation advocating for LBQT rights. Adinda's passion and commitment to this cause make her a valuable and compassionate advocate for the LBQ community in the area.

Leo

Indonesia 

Leo is a trans man from Indonesia. Since 2016, he has also been a member of a trans men's organisation which aims to empower its members to understand their rights, gain self-awareness, and navigate the legal situation in Indonesia. Actively involved in his organisation's management committee, Leo is dedicated to promoting the well-being and security of his fellow members, striving to create a supportive and empowering environment for everyone to learn and grow together.

Donna

Indonesia 

Donna advocates for the rights of Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender (LBT) groups in a region in Indonesia. As the coordinator of an LBT organisation there, she works passionately to address the challenges faced by LBT individuals, particularly those from labour and informal worker backgrounds. Her organisation aims to strengthen its members, promote mutual trust and respect, and boost their self-esteem and self-worth through advocacy on diversity, sexuality, and democracy issues.

Educating the public about sexual and gender diversity, challenging stereotypes, and fostering understanding and acceptance of LGBT groups through dialogue and knowledge-sharing, Donna and her organisation empower LBT individuals to embrace their gender identity and combat discrimination. With Donna's leadership and dedication, her organisation becomes a beacon of hope for LBT individuals in the region and its surrounding areas. They strive to create a more inclusive society that respects and upholds the rights of every individual, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.

Andi

Malaysia 

Andi is the founding director at an NGO in Malaysia that provides legal support for LGBTIQ+ individuals in Malaysia. It focuses on three key pillars: impact litigation, advocacy, and public legal education. While it provides legal support for any LGBTIQ+ activists, the organisation is run by LBQ individuals, with Andi and two others identifying as LBQ. They strive to create programs specifically for LBQ individuals, but they are also mindful of the broader context of LGBTIQ+ issues beyond just access to justice.

For security reasons, the organisation brands itself as a queer-affirming feminist organisation, balancing the need to be known and accessible to LGBTIQ+ individuals while avoiding unnecessary attention. Through their dedication to increasing access to justice, Andi and her organisation play a crucial role in empowering Malaysia's LGBTIQ+ community.

Suri

Malaysia 

Suri is a queer activist involved in multiple organisations in Malaysia, running a feminist consultancy and also serving as the president of an organisation advocating for equal citizenship rights for Malaysian

women. Active in queer advocacy, Suri is a co-founder of an online resource hub for queer folks which is currently on pause as it seeks funds for its activities.

Being an active participant in various human rights areas, including women's rights and queer advocacy, Suri is deeply engaged in the LBQ movement. She acknowledges that many queer activists are multifaceted, contributing across different causes and issues. Through her dedication to feminist consultancy, women's rights advocacy, and queer activism, Suri plays a vital role in advancing equality and human rights in Malaysia.

YuYu

Myanmar

YuYu is an activist and member of Lashio Tomboy and Lesbian Group in Myanmar, and is also a part of its programme management team. Her organisation takes a low-profile approach and focuses on livelihood activities, particularly in the bakery sector. Its members operate from a place called Bakery House, which serves as a hub for projects benefiting the LGBT community.

The organisation has been making significant contributions since its establishment in 2015, providing support, empowerment, and opportunities for the LGBT community in the region. YuYu's commitment to these causes showcases the dedication and resilience of activists striving to improve the lives of marginalised groups in Myanmar.

Anne

Philippines

Anne is the Founder and Executive Director of GALANG, an LBT organisation in the Philippines that has been actively operating since its establishment in 2008. GALANG focuses on capacity building, policy advocacy and partnerships, research and development, as well as institutional development sustainability. It is deeply involved with grassroots communities supporting lesbian, bisexual, and transgender individuals in urban poor communities.

Anne's commitment and dedication to advancing the rights and well-being of LBQ individuals and the broader LGBT community through her organisation has been instrumental in creating positive change and fostering empowerment within marginalised communities in the Philippines.

Irish

Philippines

Irish is a former chairperson of an LGBT organisation in the Philippines. Until December 2022, she was based in the Philippines, but due to being attacked on social media and falsely labelled as a communist-terrorist, she had to leave the country for her safety and seek political asylum in Paris, France. This unfortunate

incident highlights the risks and challenges faced by LBQ activists advocating for LGBTIQ rights in certain regions.

Her organisation focuses on organising activities and workshops focused on education, LBQ women's empowerment, and raising awareness about LGBTIQ rights. The team conducts workshops and training for LBQ women in various areas in the region where it is based.

Her organisation also extended its support to LBQ women during the COVID-19 pandemic, providing psychosocial therapy and organising LBQ women in different communities. The team's efforts contributed to greater awareness and activism among LBQ women, going beyond dating or sports-related activities. Notably, these LBQ women's organisations reciprocated by giving back to their communities that they performed outreach in, such as building bridges in places where infrastructure was lacking.

Irish's collaboration with LBQ women's organisations in the region resulted in the creation of a network of empowered and dedicated activists working within their communities. Despite the challenges she faced, Irish's commitment to promoting LGBTIQ rights and creating positive change shines through her actions and accomplishments as an advocate in the Philippines and beyond.

Patricia

Thailand

Patricia, also known as Pat, is the Founder and Director of GIRLxGIRL Thailand, a women-loving-women organisation based in Thailand. Its dedicated team of 33 volunteers work tirelessly to raise awareness and understanding of queer women and LGBTIQ issues in Thailand.

GIRLxGIRL Thailand's primary aim is to create a safe and supportive space where queer women can connect, befriend each other, seek advice, and share their stories without fear of judgement or discrimination. It was founded on March 4th, 2021, during the challenging times of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Initially, the community started as a weekly session on the social media platform Clubhouse, where queer women could discuss various topics related to their lives. However, as the need for more interactions arose, Patricia created a LINE group, allowing members to engage in text-based chat conversations beyond their weekly voice chat session. The LINE group has both a common chat area for general discussions and various sub-groups for more specific interests, such as movie nights, book discussions, or educational topics.

The community is open to people from across the world, including foreigners living in Thailand. Although the majority of its members are cisgender women, the

organisation also welcomes trans women and others who identify as loving women. GIRLxGIRL Thailand emphasises inclusivity and promotes gender equality in Thai society.

Ruang Thailand

Ruang is a passionate advocate and founder of an NGO in rural Thailand. Her organisation's work revolves around destigmatising menstruation, gender, divorce, disabilities, politics, and mental health – many of which are traditionally taboo topics that are relevant to children and youth. As a lesbian queer person, she understands the importance of addressing issues that are considered sensitive and not openly discussed within families, schools, or society.

She was inspired to start this work because she faced challenges as a young girl when she struggled to find relevant information and resources. Her academic background in children's literature motivated her to shed light on these seldom-discussed subjects, which she considers essential for understanding the reality of life. Her organisation's efforts are particularly crucial in Thailand, where it is rare to find media addressing such topics openly.

Ruang and her colleagues have faced personal challenges, including mental health issues and abuse. This has strengthened their empathy and

understanding of difficulties faced by children and youth in general.

Although their primary focus is on young people, the beneficiaries of their work include individuals from diverse backgrounds beyond just LBQ individuals. Their organisation provides a safe and supportive space for individuals to seek information, guidance, and understanding, regardless of their background or identity. Ruang and her team's dedication to education and commitment to mental health advocacy demonstrate their genuine concern for the well-being and empowerment of young people in Thailand.

Tao Thailand

Tao is a lesbian activist from Thailand who is deeply committed to promoting the feminist movement through her women's organisation Backyard Politics. Its main objective is to create a feminist movement where members feel happy, healthy, supported, and inspired. They work with women and LBQ activists, particularly those who have intersectionally marginalised identities.

Tao played a significant role in setting up a separate organisation which works in collaboration with Backyard Politics. This second organisation focuses on providing support to activists around their self-care, mental health and well-being.

Through her work and dedication, Tao aims to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for women and LBQ activists in different social movements in Thailand.

Tra's dedication to the well-being and empowerment of women activists and LBQ individuals reflects her commitment to creating positive change and fostering a stronger feminist movement in Thailand.

Tra

Thailand

Tra is a dedicated activist and therapist who has been working with women activists and human rights defenders in Thailand. Her previous role involved providing support and facilitation for women activists' community. However, in 2023, Tra shifted her focus to organisation management and joined Backyard Politics.

At Backyard Politics, Tra and her team work with intersectional-minded, marginalised women activists, including LBQ activists. Their main goal is to create a safe, inspiring, and healthy environment for them, emphasising the importance of bridging generation gaps within the LBQ community, and providing support for young activists who may feel lost and lack proper support.

Backyard Politics operates nationwide, and any Thai women and LBQ activists can access their services and support. The organisation collaborates with activists and change-makers from different communities, assisting them in creating safe spaces and working on women's issues within their villages or regions. The group also co-organizes meetings to address health or other problems activists may encounter.

Key Terminology

The following definitions of terms employed in this report have evolved over generations and reflect a shared, current understanding among the activists involved that continues to develop.

BISEXUAL

Bisexual refers to the sexual orientation of individuals who experience sexual and romantic attraction towards people of multiple genders. Once commonly defined as attraction to both men and women, the term has evolved to encompass a broader understanding that can include an attraction to transgender and gender non-conforming individuals, promoting inclusivity and recognition of diverse identities.

BUTCH

Butch is a term frequently employed by LBQ individuals with an outwardly masculine gender expression. Occasionally, it may also be used to depict aspects of sexual orientation or gender identity.

CISGENDER

Cisgender refers to individuals whose gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth. It is a term used to describe people whose sense of personal identity matches the gender typically associated with their biological sex.

FEMME

Femme is a term commonly used by LBQ individuals who exhibit a feminine gender expression, serving as a descriptor for their outward presentation. It can also encompass elements of sexual orientation or gender identity.

FEMININE-PRESENTING

Feminine-presenting pertains to individuals who adopt a visual aesthetic and mannerisms that align with or are culturally associated with femininity. These include body language, clothing choices, haircuts, and patterns of speech that reflect feminine qualities.

GAY

An adjective that primarily refers to someone who is attracted emotionally, romantically, and/or sexually to individuals of the same gender. It is often used to describe men who are attracted to other men. The term “gay” can also be used more broadly to refer to the LGBTIQ community and its culture, as well as to describe things related to same-sex attraction or relationships.

GENDER

Gender refers to the social and cultural constructs, distinct from biological sex, that are employed by society to differentiate between behaviours and attributes deemed “masculine,” “feminine,” or “other.” It encompasses the expectations, roles, and norms that shape and define various expressions of identity within a given social context.

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE (GBV)

Gender-Based Violence (GBV) refers to acts of violence perpetrated against individuals based on their gender or sex. This term encompasses various forms of violence,

such as sexual violence, sexual exploitation, sexual harassment, domestic violence, psychological abuse, harmful traditional practices, economic abuse, and discriminatory practices.

This term initially used to refer to violence against women, but has evolved to acknowledge that individuals of all genders can experience violence based on their gender identity and sexual orientation. It recognizes the diverse ways in which individuals experience and express their gender and sexuality, extending protection to all those affected by such violence.

GENDER EXPRESSION

Gender expression refers to the outward manifestations of characteristics and behaviours that societies associate with categories such as “masculine,” “feminine,” “androgynous,” or “other.” These expressions encompass various aspects, including dress, appearance, mannerisms, speech patterns, and social behaviour and interactions.

It is important to note that gender expression is separate from a person’s sexual orientation or gender identity and may not necessarily align with or indicate these aspects of their identity.

GENDER IDENTITY

Gender identity refers to an individual’s intrinsic and profound sense of their own gender, whether it be as a man, woman, non-binary person, or another gender identity. Importantly, gender identity may not align with the sex assigned to them at birth, highlighting that it is an internal perception that goes beyond societal expectations or biological categorizations.

GENDER NON-CONFORMING

Gender non-conforming describes individuals who exhibit behaviours, appearances, or expressions that defy societal expectations and norms associated with the sex assigned to them at birth.

HETERONORMATIVITY

Heteronormativity is a societal system that reinforces and promotes behaviours and expectations based on the assumption of heterosexuality as the norm, as well as a strict adherence to a binary understanding of gender. It perpetuates the idea that heterosexuality is the default sexual orientation and enforces traditional gender roles and norms, and thus, marginalises and stigmatises non-heterosexual and non-conforming gender identities.

HETEROSEXUAL

Heterosexual refers to the sexual orientation of individuals whose primary sexual and romantic attraction is directed towards individuals of a different sex.

LBQ

LBQ is an acronym that encompasses lesbian, bisexual, and queer individuals. It encompasses cisgender people as well as transgender individuals, non-binary individuals, and people of other genders who identify as lesbian, bisexual, or queer. It is important to note that while the term LBQ is inclusive of all transgender people, this research specifically focuses on trans men or individuals assigned female at birth who identify on the masculine spectrum.

LESBIAN

Lesbian, typically defined as a woman who experiences primary sexual and romantic attraction towards other women, is used in this context to encompass individuals of diverse genders, including gender non-binary people, who identify as lesbians.

LGBT

LGBT is an acronym that stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. In this context, it is utilised as an inclusive term to encompass various groups and identities often referred to collectively as “sexual and gender minorities.”

MASCULINE-PRESENTING

Masculine-presenting refers to individuals who adopt a visual aesthetic that aligns with or is culturally associated with men or masculinity. This includes various elements such as clothing choices, mannerisms, haircuts, and patterns of speech that reflect characteristics typically associated with men or masculine expression.

“OUTING”

“Outing” refers to the act of revealing or disclosing an individual’s sexual orientation or gender identity within the LGBT community without their explicit consent or permission.

QUEER

Queer is an inclusive term that encompasses various identities and is occasionally used interchangeably with the term “LGBT.” Additionally, it is employed to describe deviation from societal norms associated with heterosexuality and cisgender identities.

SEX

Sex refers to the categorization of bodies and individuals, typically assigned at birth, into female, male, or other categories. This classification is determined by various biological factors, including external sex organs, internal sexual and reproductive organs, hormones, and chromosomes.

SEX WORKER

A sex worker is an individual who, as an adult, engages in the exchange of money or goods for consensual sexual services on a regular or occasional basis.

SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Sexual orientation refers to an individual’s inherent sexual and emotional attraction, encompassing attractions towards people of the same gender, different gender, or any gender.

SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Sexual violence encompasses any act, whether it be a sexual act, attempt to engage in a sexual act, or any other act, that is directed against a person’s sexuality

through coercion. It can be perpetrated by any individual, irrespective of their relationship to the victim, and can occur in any setting.

SOGIESC

SOGIESC is an acronym that stands for sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics.

TOM

A term from the English word “tomboy” used to describe someone who was assigned female at birth, but whose gender identity and/ or expression is related to masculinity.

TRANSGENDER

Transgender, also commonly referred to as “trans,” is used to describe individuals whose gender identity does not align with the sex assigned to them at birth.

TRANSGENDER WOMAN

A transgender woman is an individual who was assigned male at birth but identifies as a woman. Transgender women may also identify as lesbian, bisexual, or queer (LBQ).

TRANSGENDER MAN/TRANS MAN

A transgender man is an individual who was assigned female at birth but identifies as a man. Transgender men may also identify as lesbian, bisexual, or queer (LBQ).



Shrinking Space and Invisibility

THE STATE OF LBQ ORGANISING

IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

The journey of LBQ organising and activism in Southeast Asia has been marked by triumphs and obstacles, with each nation grappling with some unique challenges – from a lack of visibility to negative stereotypes on women’s sexual orientation and gender identity labels to accusations of being trans-exclusionary.





In the Philippines, specifically in Iloilo City, LBQ activism is still in its nascent stages, yearning to be nurtured into a roaring force of change.

“So far, yes we have started organising LBQ communities, but there’s still a long way to go to... you know, really politicise [the LBQ community] about LBQ activism.”
(Irish, Philippines)

The LBQ community also faces a concerning reality: only three openly lesbian activists in Iloilo City, the Philippines, are actively working to bring visibility and change. These activists are not just out in their personal lives, but also publicly, through social media, mass media, and their engagement in various activities and educational initiatives. The limited number of out lesbian activists highlights the scarcity of voices and representation in the fight for LBQ rights and equality in the region.

“In Iloilo, we say that there are only three out lesbian activists. When we say out, we mean, you know, really out. Out in social media, out in mass media, taking a stance on issues, talking in activities, giving education. That’s very sad. Because there’s only three of us.” (Irish, Philippines)

LBQ organising predominantly huddles in online spaces or friendly associations, lacking the political cohesion needed to drive significant change. Irish also states that although LGBT organisations exist, their focuses tend to skew towards gay and trans women, inadvertently sidelining LBQ women who deserve equal attention:

“[...] some LBQ are organized under LGBT organisation[s], which are led mainly of [gay men] and trans women. But there’s not much focus given to LBQ women.”
(Irish, Philippines)

This concern echoes even outside of Iloilo City, with Anne mentioning the conspicuous absence of LBQ representation in queer organisations:

“So it’s either LGBT organisations with a handful of lesbians, which is rare, or completely trans and gay men.” (Anne, Philippines)

Anne specifically mentions that:

“It [is] more difficult to find lesbians now.” (Anne, Philippines)

Concerns continue to loom, especially after an organisation that used to put “Lesbian” in their name decided to just use the acronym “LGBT” due to an absence of lesbian members in the organisation.

Meanwhile in Thailand, the activism landscape reveals a mix of progress and complex dynamics. In urban centres, LGBTIQ visibility has surged, punctuated by vibrant campaigns and pride events that ignite hope. However, Tao notes that the gleaming appearance of progress makes many overlook marginalised groups who have yet to be embraced fully within the LGBTIQ rights movement. In addition, LGBTIQ advocacy in Thailand needs to take the impact of economic struggles and the patriarchal oppression of LBT individuals assigned female at birth into account.

“The marginalised groups [in Thailand] are not a part of [the] LGBTI rights movement yet. As probably the same in your country, we have had very difficult years and there are many pressing issues, including economics and increased ... patriarchal practices and violence. And LGBTIQ, rights... the way it’s advocated or promoted...cannot integrate these everyday problems yet.” (Tao, Thailand)

Moreover, the younger generation encounters an additional challenge that complicates their struggle: the pervasive negative stereotypes propagated by mainstream media has tainted the terms “lesbian” and “tom”.

“So what they perceive from [the] word “lesbian”, it is now what mainstream media portray. Which is, in the words, highly sexual women looking to have sex. That’s lesbians. And so... people who look like me are not lesbian sort of and so they struggle to identify themselves. And (the word) Tom is associated quite strongly with...using violence.” (Tao, Thailand)

As a result, many younger activists are circumventing those labels altogether and find solace in identifying as non-binary—a more inclusive identity.

“A young non-binary person once said, –I don’t really know what non-binary is, but so far, this is the most accepting for who I am. Lesbians and toms sound bad.” (Tao, Thailand)

Tao also sheds light on the ongoing struggle to propel the movement forward, with a pressing question: what terms can

unite people within the LBQ community? One promising initiative comes in the form of a small, newly established LBQ group in Thailand that discusses and seeks to define for themselves the essence of being a lesbian. However, this pursuit of understanding and self-definition comes with a price – they face strong opposition from individuals who label them as trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs), the same label that has been pinned on Tao’s organisation Backyard Politics, highlighting the gravity of the situation.

Tao also shared a story about one of the young LBQ activists in Thailand that she met during a workshop that Backyard Politics arranged.

“The young activist said that “I did not tell anyone I came to this workshop... because I am afraid that they would attack me calling me a TERF” because the workshop was declared as an LBQ workshop.” (Tao, Thailand).

Merely identifying the workshop as LBQ-oriented was enough to evoke apprehension and the anticipation of potential backlash. The fear and hesitation, expressed by the young LBQ activists, preventing them from freely expressing their identities and engage in discussion centred around their specific experiences and challenges shows the complex landscape of LBQ activism in Thailand.

Anne from the Philippines also expresses the same concern to us about how her organisation GALANG wants to engage in open and meaningful dialogue, but at the same time they need to tread very carefully with the threat of being branded

as TERFs and as transphobic that continues to loom. This risk contributes to an environment of fear and self-censorship, and could lead to the subsequent weakening of the LBQ rights movement.

Accusations of being TERFs have placed some of the LBQ activists that we interviewed in the crossfire of an intense debate about trans-inclusion and gender identity. While the LBQ movement seeks to foster unity, solidarity, understanding, and mutual respect among its diverse members through open and honest discussions about identity, inclusivity, and the intricate interplay of gender and sexuality, they also face the challenge of being perceived as being trans-exclusionary simply because of their focus on LBQ individuals.

The challenges faced by the newly established group in Thailand, Tra's and Tao's organisation, and even GALANG in the Philippines serve as a reminder of the urgent need to find common ground. Tra, in particular, candidly admitted that a solution to navigate this delicate territory has yet to be found.

Tra further mentioned that there is fragmentation within the Thai LBQ movement, which can make collaboration challenging. Some contributing factors to this fragmentation include differing advocacy strategies, varying work styles, competition for resources, individual and collective trauma experiences, and other variables.

Another notable factor contributing to this fragmentation is the generation gap between older and younger Thai LBQ activists, with loneliness permeating their struggle. While the younger generation often feels lost and unsupported, the older activists who want to join and support the

movement also face difficulties in accessing the younger generation's realm. It's as if the movement has become internally severed — a disconnect exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

While younger activists have formed their own networks, initiating fights against the government with their own friends and comrades without following established paths built by previous generations, older activists are left to grapple with doubts about their own value and relevance, questioning whether they are still essential to the movement. They struggle with feelings of being forgotten, and their attempts to support the younger generation come with their own set of challenges, as the trauma and scepticism harboured by younger activists towards the older ones pose obstacles to genuine connection.

“So, there is [an] attempt... from the senior activists to go and support, and [it] is not easy because young generation feel uncomfortable with elders or seniors, maybe they...have trauma with the older persons like, parents or teachers [...] Yeah, I think senior [activists] probably ... doubt themselves about... [their] value, like, maybe questioning themselves if they are still valuable in the [LBQ] movements. Yeah. So, mmm, like maybe they have been forgotten.”
(Tra, Thailand)

Meanwhile, a different narrative emerges from rural Thailand: one of isolation and scarcity. LBQ individuals yearn for safe spaces to convene and connect, yet they find themselves adrift in a landscape devoid of structured organisations and supportive services.

Ruang's perspective on LBQ organising in rural Thailand finds a striking echo in Adinda, an LBQ activist from Banda Aceh, Indonesia. She expresses a desire for LBQ spaces, highlighting the profound scarcity, if not outright absence, of these spaces in the country. She recognized that this scarcity is caused by the common perception that LBQ individuals are somehow less vulnerable, resulting in their challenges being overlooked in comparison to their GBQ counterparts.

“So maybe my hope is, I hope for LBQ spaces, more space, because I really feel like there aren't LBQ spaces — the space is not small, I don't think there are any. Because sometimes people feel that LBQ [people are] not vulnerable, [but] even though we aren't well mentally, we are affected economically, our safety is affected too, regardless of expression.” (Adinda, Indonesia)

Also in rural Thailand, the spectre of HIV and AIDS looms large, overshadowing other pressing issues faced by the LBQ community. While trans and gay individuals have rallied together and secured funding due to historical AIDS-related concerns, LBQ individuals are left searching for resources and support for their core concerns. It doesn't help that their presence remains elusive.

“In Thailand, is about HIV topic and AIDS topic. Trans people and gay people get fund because we have problem about AIDS and HIV from...from 80s and 90s. So, their community [is] very strong. But about us, you can see only few of us, right?” (Ruang, Thailand)

Pisey from Cambodia also noted that the healthcare sector in Cambodia is primarily driven by development initiatives in HIV and AIDS and tends to focus on sexual behaviour among gay men who have sex with men and straight men. However, just like Adinda, her organisation recognises that women face additional struggles due to the patriarchal system, and thus her organisation aims to address these challenges within their own community, even if LBQ individuals may not always articulate them in explicit terms.

“[...] the rest are working on health, transforming from HIV and AIDS and STD to be LGBTIQ inclusions so, mainly led by gay men or straight men. Sad to say, this is a development driven sector in the HIV sector. Wherever the...trend is moving, the NGO is chasing for funding so that's the reality of development. But for RoCK, we try to work in LGBT+ collectivism in our own vision, while whispering that women are facing extra struggles, because our gender in — in patriarchy system. So, we don't have to speak this giant patriarchy system with our community and anyone, but close to our heart, we know that there's extra layers. We cannot sometimes — we could not find the word or phrase to explain our struggles [...]” (Pisey, Cambodia)

Pisey also mentions that in Cambodia, there are distinct organisations and groups working towards inclusion and support, though a specific focus on LBQ people remains limited. RoCK acknowledges the importance of the power of collective group identity that takes precedence in its approach, while also recognising the need

to carefully address individual identities within the broader LGBT+ community.

By avoiding misunderstandings that arise from divisions within the LGBT+ movement, her organisation RoCK seeks to create spaces where LBQ individuals can openly discuss matters such as sexuality, family, coming out, economic burdens, and domestic violence. RoCK also provides spaces for transgender women and gay men, acknowledging the need for an inclusive environment that accommodates diverse experiences.

“[W]e did not discuss the identity so much, but we discuss the issues they face so that we try to understand. So to summarize, we did not discuss identity as the trans, the LBQ, the gay men, because we want to start with the collective power first, then we slowly and carefully discuss each identity.” (Pisey, Cambodia)

Besides RoCK, there is another Cambodian LGBT+ volunteer youth group called Love is Diversity that focuses on running social media awareness campaigns. Additionally, several other NGOs are actively working to promote LGBT+ rights inclusion in Cambodia. Emerging groups in Cambodia are contributing significantly to the expansion of safe spaces for the LGBT+ community. For instance, Safespace Battambang is an organisation led by two lesbian individuals dedicated to creating a safe space in the Battambang province, in the western part of the country outside the capital city. Another organization, Beautiful Life, led by a gay man, operates a drop-in centre in Siem Reap province in northern Cambodia. This centre offers counselling, sports, and various activities to encourage young LGBTIQ individuals to express their true selves in a comfortable environment.

Within this diverse landscape, just as in other countries, specific priorities, interests, conflicts, and differences of opinion are bound to happen. When expectations are not met, disagreements arise, or certain groups restrict their activities, individuals often choose to peacefully part ways and establish new platforms to pursue their goals. RoCK serves as an elder sibling figure in the LGBTIQ community and network, fostering understanding, creating connections, and providing a platform for complementary and collaborative activities between various groups and organisations.

Meanwhile, Indonesia presents its own unique challenges: the relentless threats that hamper their effort to organise. Adinda sheds light on the situation, noting that while social rights in her region may not be as arduous to achieve as in other areas, LBQ individuals still find it impossible to openly discuss their status and orientation. Those from rural areas even encounter expulsion from their homes and contend with anti-LGBT messages from groups such as Alkhairaat, an Islamic community organisation. Thus, Adinda states that she adopts a cautious approach. She draws from lessons that she’s learned in Aceh to operate underground with colleagues who work in secret, with their organisation maintaining a low profile.

In the midst of widespread hatred and condemnation directed at the LGBT community, Donna, also from Indonesia, highlights the significant vulnerability of the country’s LBQ community. She shared information about the rising hostility in the region, particularly during the challenging COVID-19 pandemic period.

Numerous banners, boldly expressing disapproval of the LGBT community, were prominently displayed throughout the area where her organisation operates. Phrases such as "Stop LGBTIQ" or "Strongly Rejecting LGBT" were emblazoned on these banners. This alarming display has instilled fear and trepidation among LBQ activists operating in the region.

"I organized my friends in the [name of region]. There was COVID in 2021, so my friends and I ... used telephone, video call. I can only visit [name of region] twice a week, and at that time I had to do the antigen and PCR tests [...] well, uh... we needed to continue organising because we saw the vulnerability, we really saw it, we were really vulnerable [...] we had 40 members, there were 40 of us, and because there were those [anti-LGBT] banners, our members were petrified. They were afraid that they'll be on television, afraid that... that... that their parents will find out, afraid that they will be fired from the factory, and so on... uh, all kinds of things. So, at that time 8 members decided to leave the organisation. I [couldn't] force them to stay because I know how vulnerable they were [...]"
(Donna, Indonesia)

The issue of safety was also raised by YuYu, an LBQ activist from the Northern Shan State of Myanmar. Following the coup, her fellow LBQ activists face even greater security threats and challenges – for example, travelling to different townships presents transportation and security challenges as military checkpoints scrutinise their movement and demand explanations about their activities:

"At the checkpoint, at the checkpoint they ask, "Where are you going", "For what", "What did you do?", "What is your job?". And they asking me more and more questions at the side of the military." (YuYu, Myanmar)

Thus, the LBQ activists recognise the dangers associated with being visible targets of the military, and are compelled to adopt a low-profile approach for their safety.

In Malaysia, although there is some pushback and backlash towards the LGBTIQ community and the increasing threat of persecution under Sharia law, the landscape of LGBTIQ organising has showcased remarkable growth over the past decade. There has been a proliferation of queer organisations in the country, a significant shift from the limited presence of LGBTIQ groups in the past.

These organisations, though often small, informal, and unregistered, have emerged with diverse focuses and objectives, such as providing direct services such as legal aid, shelter assistance, and job support for LGBTIQ individuals who have experienced rejection or discrimination within their families. Additionally, some groups now actively support queer refugees, underscoring the expanding scope of their work.

What is particularly encouraging is the increasing visibility and activism within the queer movement in Malaysia. People are shedding their fear of being visible and are actively expressing themselves, whether through their appearances or participation in public events such as the Women's March. This newfound visibility serves as a source of strength, helping

individuals realise that they are not alone and creating a sense of community in which they can find support.

“And so part of part of not going, crazy means, being able to see that you are represented in the community around you, one way or the other, right? Not going crazy is being able to look around and be like, Okay bukan I seorang yang macam (Okay, I’m not alone in), you know, that I’m the only one who kind of looks like this, or dresses like this, or feels like this [...] now, you see more and more people like, when we do even when we do, like, the Women’s March right, to see so many queer bodies publicly come out, even the ones that don’t identify as queer, but identify themselves very strongly as queer allies. It’s great, it’s fantastic. I’m just, you know, and to see that be more and more visible, I think comes with its own pushback, but at the same time, I think helps keep people sane, ironically, but yeah.” (Suri, Malaysia)

The changing landscape of LGBTIQ organising in Malaysia also reflects a shift in how issues are being discussed and addressed. In the past, the language and understanding surrounding coming out and seeking queer-affirming services were limited. Now, there is a growing vocabulary to articulate the challenges faced by LGBTIQ individuals. These discussions have become more nuanced and encompassing, allowing for a deeper exploration and resolution of issues at hand. While challenges and pushbacks persist, the progress made in Malaysia’s queer movement offers hope to gradually dismantle the barriers that once hindered the visibility of the LBQ community.

“[Now] you can talk about the issue because there is language around it. Kalau dulu (before) it was more because you are invisible. Now, you are almost like hyper visible or and used—and used as a political scapegoat, right in so many instances, but, um, but at the same time there’s... yeah. So, I mean the issues are there and I think that’s just part of the course, right? I feel like every issue is like that, if there’s a parallel between LGBT issues and every other issue, like even women’s issues kalau (if), you know, in the 70s and 80s people were like, Oh there are no, like, Gender issues what? Like women’s issues what? Women and employment, like, what? This is not an issue we talk about, everybody’s equal already, but then you know, as it becomes more visible, you talk about it, you talk about gender-based violence, dulu (before), people talk about women–violence against women and now people talk about gender-based violence, right? Like, and the more visible, it becomes, the more you’re able to address it.” (Suri, Malaysia)

Although the queer movement and community in general are gaining visibility in Malaysia, the same cannot be said for the LBQ community. Andi notes that there are two Malaysian LBQ communities on social media, but neither serves as an advocacy group. Her own organisation, while LBQ-led and engaged in services and advocacy, identifies as a queer-affirming feminist organisation instead. This distinction was a conscious choice made for security reasons when it was established.

Andi identifies two primary reasons for the lack of LBQ organisation and organising in Malaysia. Firstly, based on her organisation's recent consultations with LGBTIQ communities in three states, LBQ women remain largely invisible. While they do seek a community for information, support, and socialising, LBQ organising tends to intersect with other groups or larger LGBTIQ organisations.

Despite the absence of visible LBQ groups, many Malaysian LBQ individuals are actively searching for community spaces, both in person and online. Moreover, it's worth noting that from many LBQ person's perspectives, there are no pressing issues necessitating them to come together and organise. This sentiment further contributes to the limited visibility of LBQ organising.

Secondly, the two LBQ communities Andi is aware of are centred in the capital cities of states and are primarily led by individuals from Peninsular Malaysia. The discussions within these groups often revolve around topics relevant to residents of their particular state, including in-person activities that cater only to that state's nuances.

To address these gaps, Andi plans to expand LBQ community organising efforts, encouraging more individuals to become involved in their localities. Her organisation is in the process of conducting a needs assessment among LBQ individuals across Malaysia, albeit with a smaller sample due to budget constraints. This assessment aims to better understand the community's current needs, priorities, and identify any informal, unregistered LBQ groups that may exist.

The LBQ organising in Southeast Asia is a tale of challenges and progress.

Activists in one city in the Philippines stated that LBQ communities have started organising, although there is still a need to further politicise their causes. Other activists in the Philippines and Thailand navigate the delicate issue of gender identity, and Thailand in particular is dealing with a generation gap between older and younger activists. In Indonesia, activists work undercover, yearning for more LBQ spaces in the face of societal prejudice. Myanmar's LBQ community battles joblessness and risks in a post-coup environment. Meanwhile, Malaysia sees a blossoming of queer organisations, while the LBQ community in particular still remains largely under the radar. One Cambodian organisation RoCK acts as an older sibling to other queer groups and organisations, embraces a collective power approach, and gradually addresses the unique struggles of LBQ individuals. Despite obstacles, LBQ activists across the region strive for visibility, safe spaces, and the recognition of their rights.



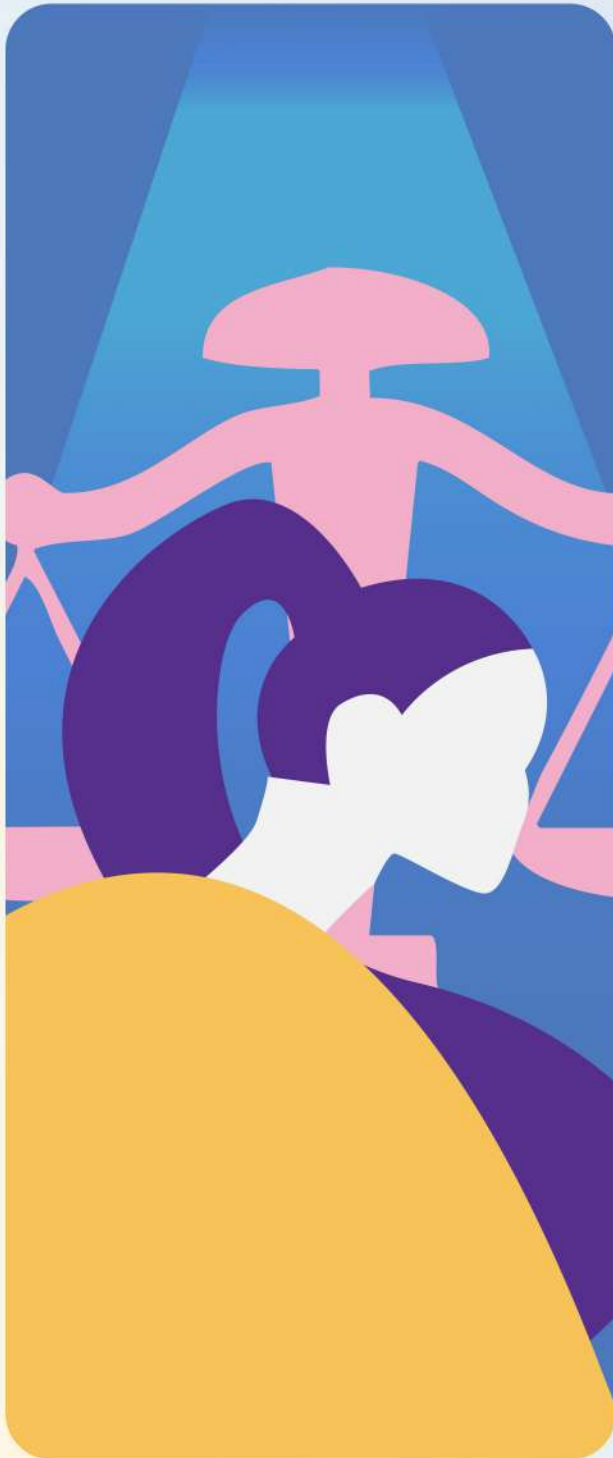
The Right to Have Rights

LEGAL AND POLITICAL PROTECTION OF

LBQ INDIVIDUALS AND LBQ ACTIVISTS

In the pursuit of equal rights and recognition, LBQ (Lesbian, Bisexual, and Queer) individuals and activists find themselves navigating complex legal landscapes that often lack adequate protections and support. This topic delves into the multifaceted challenges faced by LBQ individuals in seeking legal recognition and protection for their identities and rights. We explore the intersections of LBQ struggles with the broader women's rights movement, highlighting the unique obstacles LBQ activists encounter. Moreover, we delve into the experiences of LBQ activists, who often confront intersecting and additional risks and adversities while advocating for change.

Despite the absence of comprehensive legal protections, these resilient activists employ strategic approaches to advance their causes, fostering visibility, awareness, and community support in their fight for justice and equality. Through this examination, we gain insight into the crucial importance of legal recognition, protection, and advocacy for LBQ individuals and activists in their quest for a more inclusive and equitable society.



The Rights and Legal Protections of LBQ Individuals

Anne from the Philippines sheds light on a study examining the social protection landscape for urban poor LBQ individuals³. This investigation delved into various policies, including the Social Security Law, the Sole Parent Law, and the Housing Law, to understand their impact on LBQ families. While these policies are intended to provide government-mandated benefits, applying them to LBQ individuals often proves challenging.

For example, when it comes to government insurance, coverage is typically limited to blood relatives, leaving LBQ partners of the primary beneficiary ineligible. In the context of housing, married couples or siblings can pool their benefits to apply for a loan, but same-sex partners face barriers as they are perceived to be unrelated strangers, making the process considerably more difficult.

³ Lim, A.M., Jordan, C.M. and Tangente, M.G.C. (2013) 'Policy Audit: Social Protection Policies and Urban Poor LBTs in the Philippines', IDS Evidence Report 21, Brighton: IDS The study can be accessed in <https://www.ids.ac.uk/publications/policy-audit-social-protection-policies-and-urban-poor-lbts-in-the-philippines/>.

In the private sector, concerns persist regarding private insurance, specifically life and health coverage. Though the law permits LBQ partners to be beneficiaries of life insurance, insurance companies often resist implementing this allowance in practice. However, progress has been made, as the Insurance Commission of the Philippines has issued a memo affirming the validity of this provision.

On the other hand, health insurance remains a contentious issue. Many employees enjoy private health insurance through their work, with coverage extended to their dependents. Unfortunately, these benefits are frequently restricted to parents, spouses, and children, excluding same-sex partners or individuals with common children in same-sex relationships. While some multinational foreign companies have embraced more inclusive practices, local companies have been slower to adopt such changes. The discretion afforded to companies in implementing these benefits means that not all LBQ individuals have equal access to the protection they deserve.

Moreover, while there have been attempts to pass bills related to same-sex marriage and adoption by same-sex couples, progress has been slow and challenging.

“Right now, we have pending bills on same-sex marriage, adoption by same sex couples, but [there is a] very really long way to go. Because some of these haven't been passed, it's hard to be optimistic about any other laws.”
(Anne, Philippines)

Anne and Irish also reveal the lack of a comprehensive anti-discrimination law at the national level in the Philippines, and this poses another significant challenge for the LBQ community. Moreover, the presidential anti-discrimination commission, known as PADCOM, is seen as a mere decoration, lacking real power or influence. While there are anti-discrimination ordinances at the local level, they only offer limited protection and vary from one city or municipality to another. A recent report by UNDP indicates that such ordinances are currently in effect across 22 cities, 2 municipalities, 3 barangays (small, local administrative units), and 6 provinces in the Philippines, yet their reach remains confined to specific geographic regions⁴. For instance, Irish states that Iloilo City has enacted anti-discrimination ordinances at both the provincial and city levels, but these measures are restricted to those particular areas, leaving the vast majority of regions elsewhere without essential legal safeguards.

Even in the regions where the ordinance is in place, its effectiveness is questionable. Irish shared her frustration with dealing with such ordinances, as they lack an enforcement mechanism and fail to address the discrimination faced by the LBQ community. Irish provides us with instances of discrimination that continue to persist in the Philippines despite the anti-discrimination ordinances, revealing the limitations of these legal measures. For example, even though the Commission on Higher Education has issued a memo

4 UNDP, ODI, & GALANG. (2020, February 6). *Making It Work: Lesbian, bisexual and transgender women's economic empowerment in the Philippines*. In <https://www.undp.org/philippines/publications/making-it-work-lesbian-bisexual-and-transgender-women%E2%80%99s-economic-empowerment-philippines>. UNDP. Retrieved August 9, 2023, from <https://www.undp.org/philippines/publications/making-it-work-lesbian-bisexual-and-transgender-women%E2%80%99s-economic-empowerment-philippines>.

against gender-based discrimination in public schools, when a case of discrimination against trans women students arose in a public school in Iloilo, the response was disheartening. Irish and others brought the issue to the attention of the local government's LGBT desk, but no significant action was taken.

The anti-discrimination ordinance was intended to establish an anti-discrimination board, but due to a lack of budget, it remained non-functional. The presence of these ordinances and memoranda may create an illusion of inclusivity; however, when it comes to combating discrimination, these laws lack teeth. The existing avenues for filing cases are ineffective, as they require going through the non-functional anti-discrimination board.

“So these were all, you know—some of them are just superficial stuff to, you know, ensure that they’re inclusive. Yeah, they’re inclusive in the sense that they want us to have these pride marches, want us to have this festive... festive events, to colour the city, to show that we are the city of love, to show that they are inclusive. But once you fight against discrimination, they are not there, you can’t see them, they—they don’t have teeth.” (Irish, Philippines)

The absence of a national anti-discrimination law is a pressing issue in the Philippines, and thus, a SOGIE equality bill, which aims to provide legal protection for the LBQ community, has become the central focus of activism. The fight for SOGIE equality legislation has been ongoing, with the bill remaining pending for nearly a quarter of a century. Progress

has continued to be hindered by the influence of religious groups within the government.

“That’s right, they’re pushing for the anti-discrimination bill to be passed. And almost every change of administration there’s always a mobilisation pushing for this. Almost always, we’re being blocked by, you know, there’s separation of church and state but there are religious leaders inside the Senate and inside Congress.” (Irish, Philippines)

Anne also voices a tinge of pessimism as she contemplates the potential impact of a discrimination law that could protect the LBQ community, especially those in urban poor areas, which is the focus of her organisation. Anne expressed a mix of cautious optimism and a sober understanding of the realities on the ground, cautiously estimating that perhaps a 60% improvement over the current situation could be expected even if such a law were passed. Her scepticism stems from her intimate knowledge of the Philippines as a country where the law often falls short of its intended implementation. Anne sheds light on a glaring truth: legislation alone does not guarantee practical change.

“Even if we had an anti-discrimination, which says that you cannot discriminate against LGBTs in jobs, when they apply for jobs, it’s easy for employers to say that “Okay, I’m not hiring you because you’re not as competent as this other person”. And so in terms of in principle, you’re laws. Because of there’s more supply of workers than demand. So, yes, things

will be a little better probably and people will think twice about performing or being violent towards LGBTs. But in terms of social-economic opportunities, I'm not very optimistic, I think.”
(Anne, Philippines)

In other nations where anti-discrimination laws exist, these laws also often fall short in comprehensively addressing the persistent discrimination encountered by marginalized groups, such as LBQ individuals. Thailand, for example, enacted the Gender Equality Act B.E. 2558 (2015), which explicitly safeguards against discrimination based on gender expression. Section 3 of the Act defines "unfair gender discrimination" to encompass individuals who "express themselves differently from their inborn gender"⁵. However, Tao reveals that the awareness and utilisation of this law are far from widespread. Many people, unless they are activists, are unaware of its existence, highlighting the need for greater awareness and education.

Ruang also pointed out the limitations of the law in effectively protecting marginalised groups such as LBQ individuals in rural areas. She expresses that the law seems to benefit the middle and upper classes more than individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds. While acknowledging the significance of legal frameworks, Ruang emphasises the need for tangible services and accessible organisations that cater to the specific needs of the LBQ community. She also highlights the disparity between grand campaigns and practical accessibility,

where people may not be aware of how to engage or participate due to barriers.

“[P]eople don't access that campaign, or they want to join, but don't know how, is like very big thing, not like, people who have low income cannot join.” (Ruang, Thailand)

Ruang would rather have initiatives that focus on creating a culture of inclusivity and empowerment with a tangible impact that people can see, touch, and benefit from in their daily lives. This challenges the traditional approach and calls for a more grassroots and accessible form of activism that prioritises tangible support and meaningful change.

YuYu from Myanmar, on the other hand, reveals that Myanmar has no law or legislation that could protect the community against discrimination and violence. Furthermore, as highlighted by global LGBTIQ human rights NGO Outright International, a 2018 Universal Periodic Review report presented to the Human Rights Council draws connections between Myanmar's 1945 Police Act and Section 377 of the Penal Code. This section criminalises sexual activities that are "against the order of nature."

These laws are cited as contributing to instances of police misconduct, whereby they are frequently "utilised to intimidate, degrade, target, and infringe upon the rights of LGBT individuals." Specifically, they are wielded to unjustly apprehend, harass, and extort money from members of the LGBTIQ community⁶.

5 ICJ (2023, July). *Silence But Not Silent: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Persons' Freedom of Expression and Information Online in Southeast Asia. A Baseline Study of Five Countries in Southeast Asia: Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand.* <https://www.icj.org/southeast-asia-new-icj-report-highlights-discriminatory-online-restrictions-against-lgbt-people/>

6 Outright International. (n.d.). Outright International. <https://outrightinternational.org/insights/2021-myanmar-crisis-implications-lgbtq-people>.

YuYu admitted that she has experienced incidents of discrimination both within her workplace and her very own neighbourhood. While the option to report these incidents existed, YuYu's voice carries a hint of resignation as she reveals, "there's no action taken" (YuYu, Myanmar).

LBQ individuals and activists in Indonesia face similar challenges to those in Myanmar, as they lack legal protections, making them vulnerable to discrimination and persecution. In 2018, Indonesia had 45 discriminatory laws targeting LGBT individuals, which marked a significant increase, rising ninefold since 2013⁷.

The enactment of what are known as "family resilience" laws has contributed to a surge in anti-LGBT activities. These laws have been passed in at least 11 local areas, including Tangerang City, West Kalimantan Province, Tasikmalaya City, West Nusa Tenggara City, Bangka Belitung Province, and Banda Aceh.

These "family resilience" laws, while not explicitly mentioning sexual orientation and gender identity, use terms such as "family resilience," "prosperous family," or "quality family," which are exclusively applied to heterosexual married couples adhering to religious norms. The definition of "family" in

these laws is limited to societal units consisting of a husband, wife, and children, or a father and child, or a mother and child. By employing this heteronormative definition of "family," local laws effectively promote discrimination against LGBT individuals. A case in point is the 2021 regulation on family resilience in Banda Aceh city⁸.

Local regulations in Indonesia also have stigmatised and vilified LGBT identities by linking them with the concept of "sexual deviancy"⁹. Donna uncovered a derivative law of the local regulation regarding deviant sexual behaviour in her region, which is used as a weapon to punish and oppress individuals perceived as sexually deviant¹⁰. She acknowledged the magnitude of the threats faced by the LBQ community, identifying the government as the primary antagonist. The weight of its power and influence bears down on the community, exerting control and perpetuating discrimination.

However, the source of the menace extends beyond the government itself. Donna elucidates another disheartening aspect: communities socialised by these local regulations become self-appointed enforcers, taking immediate action without

7 Arus Pelangi (2019). *Catatan Kelam: 12 Tahun Persekusi LGBT di Indonesia*.

8 ICJ (2023, July). *Silence But Not Silent: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Persons' Freedom of Expression and Information Online in Southeast Asia. A Baseline Study of Five Countries in Southeast Asia: Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand*. <https://www.icj.org/southeast-asia-new-icj-report-highlights-discriminatory-online-restrictions-against-lgbt-people/>.

9 In Article 6 of the Regional Regulation (PERDA) of Bogor City Number 10 of 2021, the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender individuals are identified as engaging in 'deviant sexual behavior or activities', along with several other categories, including exhibitionism, necrophilia, and bestiality. The regulation is available at <https://peraturan.bpk.go.id/Home/Details/207080/perda-kota-bogor-no-10-tahun-2021>.

10 This regulation grants authority to the local government to accept and examine complaints filed by the general public regarding actions that "disrupt public order" (stated in article 18). The regulation is available at <https://peraturan.bpk.go.id/Home/Details/207080/perda-kota-bogor-no-10-tahun-2021>.

awaiting explicit instructions.

Under the guise of maintaining public order, the law might be misused by the general public to target and discriminate against the LBQ community. It is this autonomous intolerance that poses the most significant threat to the LBQ community in Donna's region.

Donna admits her own vulnerability, acknowledging the powerlessness she feels when confronted by both the government and those who have been socialised with these discriminatory local regulations.

"[There was this] some sort of mass organisation, right, a local youth organisation or something [...] he took a picture of us sitting down and chatting, you know. Until I finally stood up, and I said "Did... I saw you took a picture of us earlier, please delete it because we feel uncomfortable." He denied it, then I said, "Don't be like that, this is a public space, I'm just here having coffee, not doing anything weird". So, then he said, "People like you are no longer allowed to gather", "What's the reason?" I said, "The reason is because it disturbs public order"." (Donna, Indonesia).

Donna also voices her disbelief, frustration, and even doubt about receiving any form of protection from the government. Rather than extending a helping hand, the wording of the law shows that authorities seem inclined to steer LBQ individuals towards rehabilitation programmes¹¹. The mere

mention of this option carried an undertone of coercion, suggesting an attempt to reshape or "fix" their identities.

As Donna reflects on her own life and the lives of her friends, she highlights their contributions to society. "I sell food, my friends work," she emphasises, showing their active participation in the economy. However, the bitter truth emerged — the taxes they dutifully paid were being funnelled into the construction of rehabilitation centres.

The irony was striking — the very money they contributed was being used to fund their own potential confinement. The absurdity of the situation was not lost on Donna. She questioned the perception of LBQ individuals as being "crazy" or in need of rehabilitation, as this indicated that the government failed to recognise their basic humanity and dismissed their identities as something to be fixed.

During a conversation with her fellow labourers about their basic rights in the workplace, Donna was confronted with a heartbreaking question from one of her friends: "Why is it that there's no law that safeguards people like us?" — a question revealing the profound disappointment and frustration felt by those who face a glaring absence of legal protection.

Adinda also shared her experience of fearing potential dismissal from her workplace due to her sexual orientation. The absence of robust legal protections at work has left her with no recourse, forcing her into silence about this aspect of her identity.

¹¹ Article 18, paragraph 4 of the Regional Regulation addresses the Prevention and Mitigation of Sexual Deviant Behaviours, grants the local government authority to implement rehabilitation programs aimed at queer individuals.

Leo from Indonesia also shares the chilling presence of Sharia law in his region. In September 2014, the Aceh provincial parliament endorsed the Qanun Jinayah, which deems liwath (sodomy) and musahaqah (lesbianism) as criminal acts. It sanctions penalties of up to 100 lashes and imprisonment for a maximum of 100 months for both offences¹². Leo also discusses how the Sharia Police conduct intrusive raids on hotels and boarding houses, specifically targeting individuals who do not adhere to their strict regulations.

“[N]o one is allowed... no one is allowed outside, especially those who do not comply with the regulations in Banda Aceh.” (Leo, Indonesia)

The confines of this legal system breed a sense of vulnerability, where the LBQ community becomes an easy target for scrutiny and potential punishment.

Leo sheds light on the chilling consequences for LBQ individuals living within the realm of Sharia law. With their authority to delve deep and peg the most damning offences within their legal framework on individuals, the Sharia police possess formidable power.

Leo's disclosure of a specific case further highlights this profound injustice: a gay man who, upon his sexual orientation being discovered, endured the brutal punishment of 100 lashes inflicted by law enforcement, a stark reminder of the oppressive and

often inhumane nature of Aceh's Sharia legal system.

Across the border in Malaysia, the implementation of federal and Sharia law also brings with it a cloud of uncertainty for LBQ activists and individuals. Consensual same-sex conduct is criminalised both federally and at the state level. Federally, Section 377A of the Penal Code outlaws "carnal intercourse against the order of nature," specifically defined as "introducing the penis into the anus or mouth of another person." This carries a maximum sentence of twenty years' imprisonment, along with whipping, as stipulated in Section 377B. Additionally, Section 377D criminalises "gross indecency" in public or private, punishable by up to two years' imprisonment.

At the state level, all 13 states and the Federal Territory criminalise consensual same-sex relations and gender non-conformity through state Syariah laws, applicable solely to Muslims. These laws universally prohibit "a man posing as a woman." Moreover, 10 states and the Federal Territory criminalise liwath (sodomy), while 12 states and the Federal Territory criminalise musahaqah (sexual relations between women)¹³.

In September 2018, two Malaysian women were subjected to caning as punishment for their attempt to engage in a lesbian relationship. Each of them received six cane strokes in the Sharia High Court

¹² The law is available at <https://dsi.acehprov.go.id/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Qanun-Aceh-Nomor-6-Tahun-2014-Tentang-Hukum-Jinayat.pdf>.

¹³ ICJ (2023, July). *Silence But Not Silent: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Persons' Freedom of Expression and Information Online in Southeast Asia. A Baseline Study of Five Countries in Southeast Asia: Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand.* <https://www.icj.org/southeast-asia-new-icj-report-highlights-discriminatory-online-restrictions-against-lgbt-people/>

located in the state of Terengganu. Their arrest had taken place in April 2018 when Islamic enforcement officers apprehended them inside a car in a public square in Terengganu, Malaysia¹⁴.

Andi also states that while there is no explicit law that prosecutes individuals for their activism, the broader context of Sharia law criminalises same-sex relationships, leaving a constant sense of unease and vulnerability for LBQ individuals¹⁵.

“[T]here’s no regulation that explicitly persecute[s] LBQ activists, [...] not saying if you’re an LBQ activist you will be under arrest, there’s no such a law. But [...] sexual relations between women, sexual relations between men are offenses against – under the Sharia law in Malaysia. So, Sharia law applies to only Muslims. Um, so there’s always a possibility. Under the Sharia laws, anything can happen. They could also investigate and charge you for insulting Islam. I don’t know, because that happened with [name] before, for wearing female attire. So, under the Sharia laws, you’re almost... you’re very vulnerable for Muslim LBQ. You’re very vulnerable.” (Andi, Malaysia)

Andi’s account of the danger posed by Sharia law finds resonance in Adinda’s

firsthand experience, she describes how she and her ex-partner were arrested and how she was subjected to harassment from the Sharia police.

“I had this experience, right, my ex-partner and I got arrested. From there, I also started getting small harassment from the Islamic Sharia police.” (Adinda, Indonesia)

This deeply troubling ordeal was described by her as “small harassment” because “it is small because I have experienced worse” (Adinda, Indonesia). Her words strike a heartbreaking chord.

Leo’s experience also shows how suffocating the grip of this legal system can be, as individuals risk detention and interrogation at the hands of the Sharia police. Leo vividly recalls a distressing incident from 2015, where the mere act of not wearing a hijab triggered a cascade of events.

“[You can get] detained, taken to the Sharia Police office, interrogated at the BAP (Public Accountability Body) and I mean like, for example, if they deem someone as suspicious, that person will get picked up [...] and taken to the office. Because I personally experienced that in 2015 where I violated the law, because I didn’t wear a hijab. And they

14 BBC. (2018, September 3). *LGBT rights: Malaysia women caned for attempting to have lesbian sex*. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-45395086>.

15 Human Rights Watch also states that Malaysia’s federal penal code imposes penalties of up to 20 years in prison, accompanied by mandatory whipping, for engaging in oral and anal sex. Moreover, each state, along with the federal territories of Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya, has implemented Sharia law codes that usually criminalise same-sex activity and gender non-conformity. These codes include laws that forbid individuals from “posing as a woman” if they are deemed as not biologically so. The information can be accessed at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/01/25/malaysia-government-steps-attacks-lgbt-people>.

immediately put a stigma on me "Oh, they're a lesbian", like that, I was immediately got picked up, and they confiscated my cell phone, and tried to look for evidence of my offence. And they were like, without my consent, they copied [my data] to their computer to make their report, and it really happened." (Leo, Indonesia)

As Suri states, the threat of prosecution under Malaysia's Syariah Criminal Act exacerbates the vulnerability of the queer community, since the burden of proof within this legal framework is considerably lower compared to court hearings under criminal law. The arbitrary nature of charges under Malaysia's Syariah Criminal Act leaves individuals susceptible to arbitrary treatment and creates a stifling environment that, as Suri tells us, might wear away at their resilience.

These accounts paint a grim picture of the perils faced by individuals under the weight of Sharia law. It is a system that wields its power indiscriminately, subjecting LGBTIQ individuals to constant fear and vulnerability. Although Andi states that there is legal protection offered by the abovementioned Article 8(1) of the Federal Constitution, the interpretation and application of the protection, which is frequently viewed from a binary standpoint, leaves people falling outside the scope of heterosexuality and cisgendered presentation precarious. However, it also alludes to the possibility of wiggle room favour of LGBTIQ people¹⁶.

"Because the — unfortunately [...] our legal system is more... it's still binary kan. Even when there's there's — gender is stipulated, [it] is mentioned in our Federal Constitution, which is the supreme law of the land, it's mentioned there as a basis of non-discrimination, gender. But interpretation of gender, unfortunately, by courts, or even by the government in there [is] only male and female." (Andi, Malaysia)

Furthermore, even for cisgender LBQ individuals, the existence of Sharia law that criminalises their very identities creates a profound lack of trust in the legal system. They encounter formidable hurdles to accessing justice - Suri reveals a pervasive scepticism towards law enforcement agencies and police among the LGBTIQ community that contributes greatly to their hesitancy in seeking justice.

Many fear that reporting an incident may result in themselves becoming the target of persecution rather than receiving the protection they seek, including in scenarios where intimate partner violence occurs within same-sex relationships. Thus, LBQ individuals are uniquely vulnerable under the influence of the Sharia law system that not only disregards their rights but also actively enables their marginalisation.

The community also often finds itself in the crossfire of political battles. Suri tells us about how, when a current ruling

¹⁶ Article 8(1) of the Malaysian Federal Constitution emphasises equality, stating that every individual is on equal footing before the law and has the right to equal protection under the law. The law can be accessed in [https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b5e40.html#:~:text=Article%208.&text=\(1\)All%20persons%20are%20equal,equal%20protection%20of%20the%20law.](https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b5e40.html#:~:text=Article%208.&text=(1)All%20persons%20are%20equal,equal%20protection%20of%20the%20law.)

government is accused of being too progressive or supportive of LGBTIQ rights, conservative political parties pounce on the opportunity to score political points. They will then tend to paint the government as an enabler of the "LGBT agenda" to rally their conservative base.

To counter these accusations and distance themselves, politicians take drastic measures by engaging in grand displays of persecution, making a show of cracking down on the very people they should protect. It's a theatrical performance to appease the critics and prove their toughness against the "LGBT threat," with the lives of vulnerable communities seeking acceptance and equal rights on the line.

"[I]n order to kind of distance themselves, what they're doing is, 'No, no, we're not soft on LGBT issues here. Look, we're approving a raid', like, you know? So ...' the authorities, the government raided... [stores belonging to] Swatch, the watch, right? Ah, so they raided Swatch because Swatch had—was displaying...its Pride month, straps — rainbow straps."
(Suri, Malaysia)

The LBQ community in Indonesia is also facing a similar situation where, with each passing election, their existence becomes entangled in a web of controversy and prejudice as they are mercilessly thrust into the roles of political scapegoats. Donna, her voice laden with frustration, reveals the painful truth.

"Usually during elections, groups like us, minority groups, become their political scapegoats."
(Donna, Indonesia)

Adinda further elaborates that:

"[T]he threats are definitely murder, expulsion, sexual harassment. It's about not being able to access social services, health services. Almost all places may receive this kind of harassment, in the end we will be threatened. We are not free to sit and hang out, go to college, school."
(Adinda, Indonesia)

The insidious nature of this violence against the community is further exposed as Adinda explains how hate speech has multiplied.

This predicament is exacerbated by the calculated exploitation of LGBTIQ people's existence for political gain. Adinda lamented about how the arrest of an LGBTIQ individual became a catalyst for the rising fame of homophobic and transphobic local personalities. Those who harbour animosity towards the LGBTIQ community rally behind those who perpetrate hatred, whose popularity then tends to soar as if their actions of eradicating a perceived threat were a commendable act.

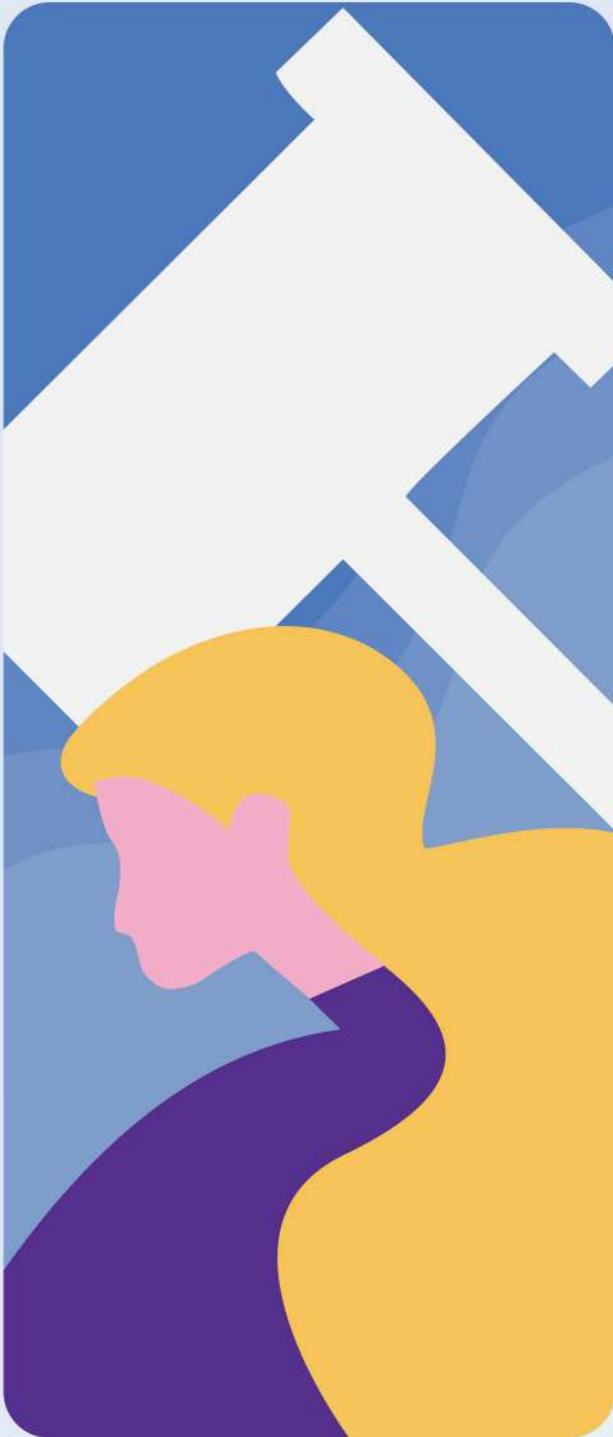
The climate of fear and discrimination has further heightened an already challenging situation. Adinda reveals the hesitancy prevalent among those who want to help. Lawyers, armed with legal knowledge, yearn to extend their assistance. Yet, the

tumultuous political landscape has caused some legal allies to retreat, wary of jeopardising their standing in the political sphere. The result is a diminished pool of support, leaving the LGBTIQ community to navigate treacherous waters largely alone.

“There are indeed people who understand the law, who want to help us. There are also lawyers here who want to help us, help our activist friends. But again, in the end they are worried. [T]he current political situation can have an effect. In the end, our lawyer friends didn't want to help us [...] Because they are in political parties, they joined politics, knew these political actors, and so on. They don't want to ruin their reputation.” (Adinda, Indonesia)

In Cambodia, despite legislative obstacles, Pisey mentioned some hope for legal progress from senior government officials' public statements of support for the LGBTIQ community in a region where few prime ministers openly advocate for such rights. Pisey attributed these achievements to years of collaborative work with allies in various institutions, including NGOs and the media. She emphasises the role of the media in changing narratives and spreading positive stories.

While Pisey recognises that still, there are no guarantees in achieving legal protections for LBQ individuals in Cambodia, she expresses optimism and determination to work within the country's complicated systems. She emphasises the need to focus on finding allies and possibilities for progress rather than assigning blame.



The Legal Protection of LBQ Activists

Our informants' courageous activism often leads them into dangerous situations. Irish shares her experience of being red-tagged in the Philippines, meaning that the government identifies her as communist, a term that automatically equates her with terrorism.

Red-tagging, Irish explains, is a tool employed by the government to suppress activists. The Human Rights Foundation notes that red-tagging, introduced in 1969, began as a government campaign against communist groups such as the New People's Army (NPA) - government critics can be unfairly red-tagged, falsely linking them to the NPA¹⁷. Over time, red-tagging has evolved into a tool for stifling dissent and activists during the rule of the former Duterte government and by the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC).

¹⁷ Thongyoojaroen, Tanyalak. *Red-Tagging in the Philippines: A License to Kill*. Human Rights Foundation, April 10, 2023. <https://hrf.org/red-tagging-in-the-philippines-a-license-to-kill/>.

Irish shared an incident when the government seized activists' profile photos and information from social media, distorting narratives about their work and branding them as communists. Such false accusations were then disseminated through banners displayed across the city, inciting potential harm. Paramilitary forces, lacking the ability to discern truth from falsehoods, become additional threats to LBQ activists' lives.

The consequences of being red-tagged are dire, as targets face a high risk of facing prosecution, false charges, disappearance, or worse, death. The mere accusation of communism becomes a perilous threat to the lives and well-being of activists.

Irish shares the distressing experience of being red-tagged on multiple occasions. The first instance arose when she provided dinner to a former congresswoman during a campaign. This act of support led to baseless accusations of financing the Communist Party. Another incident occurred while she was leading community pantries during lockdowns, which resulted in her being publicly labelled a communist.

The most alarming red-tagging incident occurred when she advocated for trans women students to attend public schools despite their discriminatory hair policies. For four consecutive days, Irish faced relentless attacks and threats online.

What made this particular red-tagging so sinister was the level of doxxing inflicted upon Irish. Her face, social media accounts, real name, workplace, boss, sexual orientation, and even her schedule were maliciously exposed to the public in meticulous detail, leaving her vulnerable to potential harm and surveillance. As she was herself an employee in the court system,

the proximity of law enforcement officers further heightened her sense of unease.

“[W]ho says that these policemen are not antagonistic against me? Even if they’re in uniform, even if they’re not in uniform, they have their orders. Who will they follow? I don’t know them, they don’t know me, I mean in person. Even if they’re friends, they have an order, you know. So every time I pass by a policeman, it really trigger[s]-trigger[s] something.”
(Irish, Philippines)

The dangers faced by LBQ activists extend beyond themselves. Irish's family has also become targets of harassment, with police officers visiting her parents, pressuring them to silence Irish's activism. This intrusion into her family's life makes the family concerned for their safety as well.

“[T]his is alarming because when I go home, I live with my sister in our family home, there’s always the fear of somebody just barging into our house, and you know, just grabbing me in front of my sister. Or worse, me imagining that my sister would also be hurt while they’re trying to get to me. Or when my family comes home [...] so it was really difficult at the time, because you don’t know where you are safe, and you cannot feel safe in the country.”
(Irish, Philippines)

Irish then turned to the Supreme Court for help. She penned a letter to her boss, who subsequently forwarded it to the executive branch of the government, seeking guidance and support in navigating her precarious situation. However, her request for assistance

fell on deaf ears. Irish received no response even a month later, leaving her disheartened.

“[T]he Supreme Court is useless toward helping their own employees getting any response, getting any help, getting any justice at all. There’s not much injustice in the house of justice.” (Irish, Philippines)

With no help extended by the Supreme Court and the ever-present danger in the Philippines, where state-sanctioned killings and violence against activists including in the Visayas region persist, Irish was compelled to leave. Irish thus sought help from several NGOs and pursued political asylum in France.

“[M]y life is truly in danger in the Philippines. They stop at nothing. Killing in the Philippines stop at nothing. They kill old people, senior people, they—just recently, they killed a gay activist in Bacolod [...] violence in the Visayas have been increasing for the past years. A lot of my friends had been killed by state forces. Yeah. And a lot of my friends have also been red-tagged, and some of them have already sought asylum in another countries. Because they are more in danger than I am, I think. So the best of the Philippines are all in asylum in other countries.” (Irish, Philippines)

While red-tagging threatens Filipino activists, unfair accusations under a Lèse-majesté law are used to restrict Thai activists’ work and personal freedom. Patricia from Thailand also sheds light on

the challenges faced by LBQ and LGBTIQ activists in Thailand due to the existence of the 112 law, also known as the Lèse-majesté law. Part of the Thai Criminal Code, this law makes it illegal to defame, insult, or threaten the monarch of Thailand, including the king, queen, heir-apparent, heir-presumptive, or regent. Individuals convicted of breaching Article 112 can be jailed from three to fifteen years for each offence¹⁸.

Patricia mentions her involvement in supporting support1448.org, a website dedicated to collecting signatures in support of a proposed Marriage Equality Law. She explains that as activists engage in protests or advocate for such bills, they often face accusations of violating the 112 law, even if they do not intend to defame or insult the king or the government. She expresses that the police seem biased against the activists, frequently using the 112 law as a means to suppress their efforts and stifle their voices even though the activists are merely trying to build a new culture of acceptance and promote equality.

Patricia goes on to highlight the consequences faced by many activists, with more than half of the Rainbow Coalition of Marriage Equality being issued tickets under the 112 law. These individuals may even be made to wear electronic ankle tags to restrict their movement, preventing them from leaving the country. She expresses her frustration with the situation, contrasting it with the freedom to express opinions and grievances in other countries, such as in the United States.

18 FIDH et.al. *Second Wave: The Return of Lèse-Majesté in Thailand*. Fédération Internationale Pour Les Droits Humains. FIDH, October 2021. Accessed August 10, 2023. https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/thailand_report_second_wave_774a_sg_a_u_210906.pdf.

With the absence of comprehensive legal protections for human rights defenders and the LGBTIQ community, LBQ organisations and LBQ activists find themselves under constant threat. This also applies in Malaysia, where Andi highlights the authority and investigative reach of the authorities, which have previously targeted organisations.

“They might, I mean, they have the authority to go there and investigate. They could, and there was also, there was already precedent in court where authorities investigate mostly organisations. So, it’s very possible.”
(Andi, Malaysia)

These narratives paint a sobering picture of the challenges and dangers of repressive laws and state-sanctioned tactics faced by LBQ and LGBTIQ activists in their respective countries. The existence of the 112 law in Thailand, the red-tagging in the Philippines, combined with the lack of robust legal protection for human rights defenders, enable governments to target activists by branding them as threats and subjecting them to false accusations, endangering their lives and well-being. The absence of robust legal protections for human rights defenders and the LGBTIQ community leaves them vulnerable, and relentless threats and violence force some to seek refuge abroad, highlighting the urgent need for international support and solidarity.



An Incomplete Picture: The Overlooked Intersections of LBQ and Women's Rights

Although the decriminalisation of same-sex practices may signify progress, its impact on the lives of queer women and people assigned female at birth can be constrained in countries where sexist laws and policies persistently deprive them of fundamental rights. Despite the existence of legislation in the form of anti-discrimination laws, these measures often fall short in addressing the unique forms of violence that queer women and those assigned female at birth face, even when they are not open about their full identities.

However, within the realm of LGBT rights, there remains a noticeable gap in incorporating key areas present in women's rights advocacy and policy work such as employment, labour rights, property rights, bodily autonomy, and domestic violence. This failure to address the basic restrictions placed on women's

freedom, autonomy, and economic empowerment serve as significant barriers to the advancement of LBQ rights.

Irish from the Philippines emphasises that being a lesbian involves addressing how one's identity intersects with broader concerns such as labour security, employment, land rights, and climate issues.

“And, you know, being a lesbian is not only about gender politics, but intersectionality of all the issues that we face. You also have to answer the question of... security of labour, security of employment, labour issues, land issues, climate issues [...] our existence itself is being attacked when we cannot go into school or going to work being ourselves, right? So we still have to be activists. So you cannot remove my activism from my gender.” (Irish, Philippines)

Tao from Thailand also highlights the interconnectedness of women's rights with the protection of LBQ individuals. The experiences of LBQ people are deeply intertwined with their roles as women within their families, their tireless efforts often invisible and unacknowledged.

“I feel that... for women... in Thailand, the — the protection when you say protection for LBQ people, I think it's tightly related to protection for women. Because we still live our lives as women in the family, we serve, for example, without acknowledgment [...] Acceptance as being who you are...threat of...this not being safe to walk the street or be in public transportation at night. I think these things matter too. And economy for

women. These, these things matter as well as...mmm, I don't think we can separate that [LBQ protection and women's protection] and have only LGBT legal protection and then women will be fine.” (Tao, Thailand)

These perspectives underscore the need to approach LBQ rights from an intersectional lens, encompassing the wider scope of women's rights, to ensure comprehensive advancements in both domains. If the struggle for LBQ rights disregards the relevance of women's rights, this risks perpetuating the limitations imposed on women's freedom and equality.

Tao's emphasis on the close connection between the protection of LBQ individuals and women's rights resonates with Pisey's description of the challenges faced by LBQ individuals which often mirror those faced by non-LBQ women due to prevailing patriarchal cultures. Pisey states that many LBQ individuals within her community, particularly those who are middle-aged and elderly, have experienced forced marriages. These individuals carry the burden of this painful experience, often choosing not to disclose their stories.

Additionally, the struggle extends to LBQ parents, as Suri from Malaysia shares her own experience. Being a queer parent is rare within the LGBT community in Malaysia, and can lead to feelings of isolation and difficulty finding relatable experiences and support. The lack of representation and shared experiences among queer parents can make their journey more challenging.

These narratives illustrate how LBQ individuals face unique and overlapping challenges due to societal norms and the limited visibility of their experiences, and highlight the need for the integration of feminist and queer lenses in order to address their struggles.

However, such an integration presents significant challenges. Suri tells us about her experience working for a global human rights organisation that focused on Muslim women's rights. There, Suri encountered apprehension when it came to addressing LGBT issues, facing discomfort and resistance when advocating for the inclusion of LGBT perspectives in discussions of Muslim family law and other relevant areas. She found herself caught in a frustrating cycle of constantly highlighting the importance of adopting a queer lens when examining diverse issues.

Within the organisation, there seemed to be a lack of language and capacity to fully grasp the importance of embracing these issues. The concept of making their work more intersectional and inclusive appeared elusive to many.

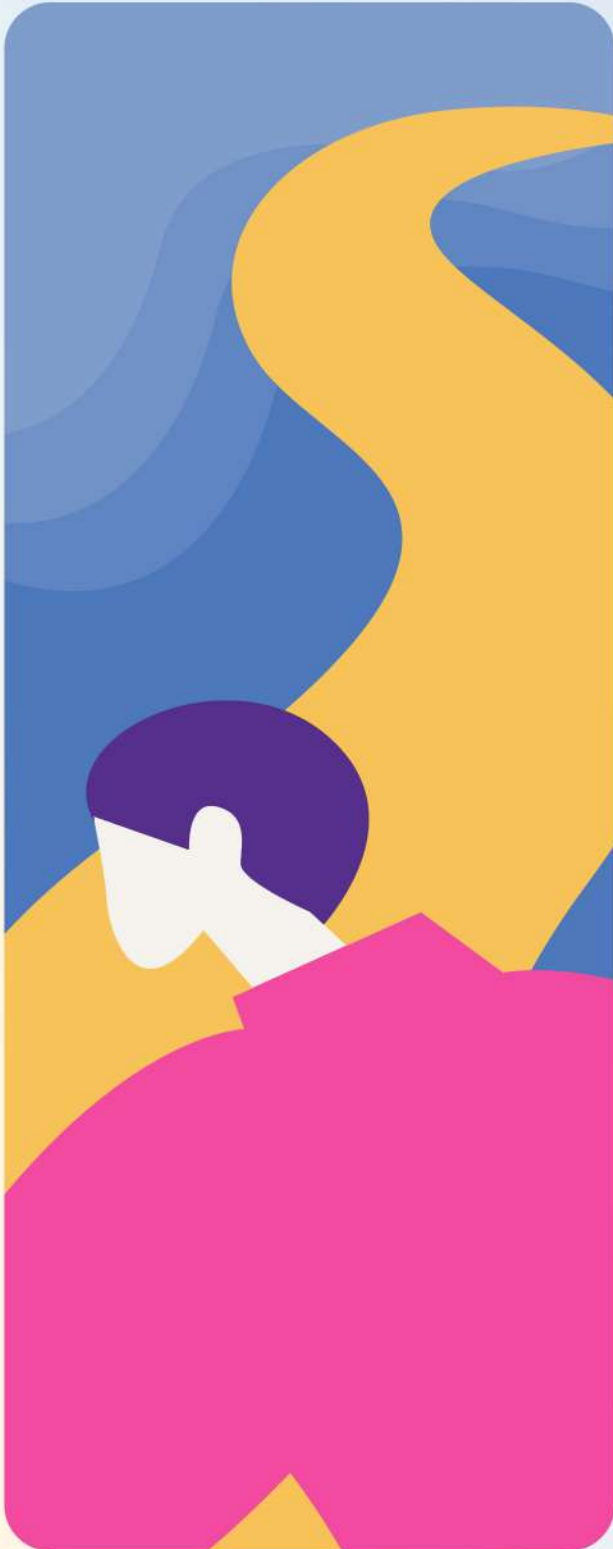
Suri emphasises the intersecting realms of queerness with family law, religion, workers' rights, and more. However, her efforts were met with pushback, as some individuals hesitated to engage with the sensitive topic of LGBT issues.

"[...] and I feel like sometimes queer people in non-queer movements tend to feel like this also where you're constantly raising the LGBT issue, like, "Hey look, there's an intersection. Let's put a queer lens to this. Look at all the intersections of queerness with family law, with religion, with whatever

you're working with, workers' rights, whatever", and then you get that pushback where people are like, "Oh I don't think we're ready yet", like, you know, "internally we're fine, but externally it might not be strategic to talk about LGBT issues because it's so sensitive [...]" (Suri, Malaysia)

Suri's account highlights the fact that despite policies and movements dedicated to a myriad of crucial issues regarding women's rights, there's a perplexing silence that persists when it comes to LBQ individuals, as these efforts frequently fail to explicitly recognise LBQ individuals as rightful bearers of these rights. Women's movements neglect to delve into the unique and harrowing experiences of violence faced by LBQ individuals. Our informants' experiences also show a need for the development of specific laws, policies, and protocols to safeguard their well-being.

The struggles faced by LBQ activists in advocating for their rights are complex and intertwined with broader women's rights issues. Integrating a feminist and queer lens is necessary to address the interconnected challenges faced by LBQ individuals and women. However, achieving this integration proves to be challenging, as highlighted by the experiences of our informants. The struggle for LBQ rights demands policymakers and activists have a more comprehensive understanding of the unique vulnerabilities faced by LBQ individuals and the urgent need for specific laws and support systems to protect their well-being.



“LGBT organisations or individuals are nothing, if not resilient”: LBQ Strategies for a Precarious Journey

LBQ activists, despite facing a lack of legal protection, employ various strategies to navigate the challenging landscape of advocacy and activism. Pisey from Cambodia shares her experiences advocating for legal protections for LBQ individuals, acknowledging government officials’ difficulty in developing an understanding of LBQ people’s needs when these officials are often influenced by heterosexual norms. Nevertheless, Pisey stresses the need for patience and understanding when engaging with the government.

“How do we communicate to make them understand that – who we are, and what we want, and why we want it, in a way that – that [is] non-confronting, and non-judging and avoiding having more labels. You don’t fight or be reactive, you just keep in mind or remind yourself that before I know and could accept myself as a lesbian, I also used [to] reject myself. So how can you expect

someone who are straight to understand you so easily? If you feel pissed off when some people asked, "Why did you become a lesbian?", the truth is "I don't become lesbian, I am a lesbian". Your assignment is to make people understand this. It's the same to make yourself understand your being. It took me many years to know myself and to accept myself. And it's not comfortable." (Pisey, Cambodia)

Pisey also emphasises the importance of discussing fears and concerns surrounding the acceptance of LGBTIQ individuals before delving into policy and laws. Describing the arduous process of advocating for legal protections, she shares those repeated attempts are needed to engage with government officials to build trust between civil society organisations and the government.

"So, LGBT or LBQ women try to work in the bigger system to make sure that we have a voice. It's already hard, but the result[s] we have today tell us it is possible. And we have voices, we manage to have voices. We manage to make some of the senior official[s] listen to us. And then we manage to have access to some services [...] we just try to continue advocating for the equality." (Pisey, Cambodia)

In Malaysia, Andi and Suri shed light on the cautious approach taken by LBQ activists to protect themselves and their organisations, since most of them cannot explicitly state that they are LBQ or LGBTIQ organisations.

"[C]learly with NGOs, we cannot register as NGOs, right? [...] And therefore we have to like figure a way around. I think—I think LGBT organisations or individuals are nothing, if not resilient, you know." (Suri, Malaysia)

As for Andi, she does not explicitly disclose their LBQ identity in her organisation's tagline, using terms such as "queer-affirming" to maintain some level of security.

Moreover, while non-Muslim LBQ activists also face challenges and stigmas, Andi emphasises that Muslim LBQ activists in Malaysia bear additional burdens due to societal biases and discriminatory laws, and risk facing more scrutiny and backlash in Malaysia.

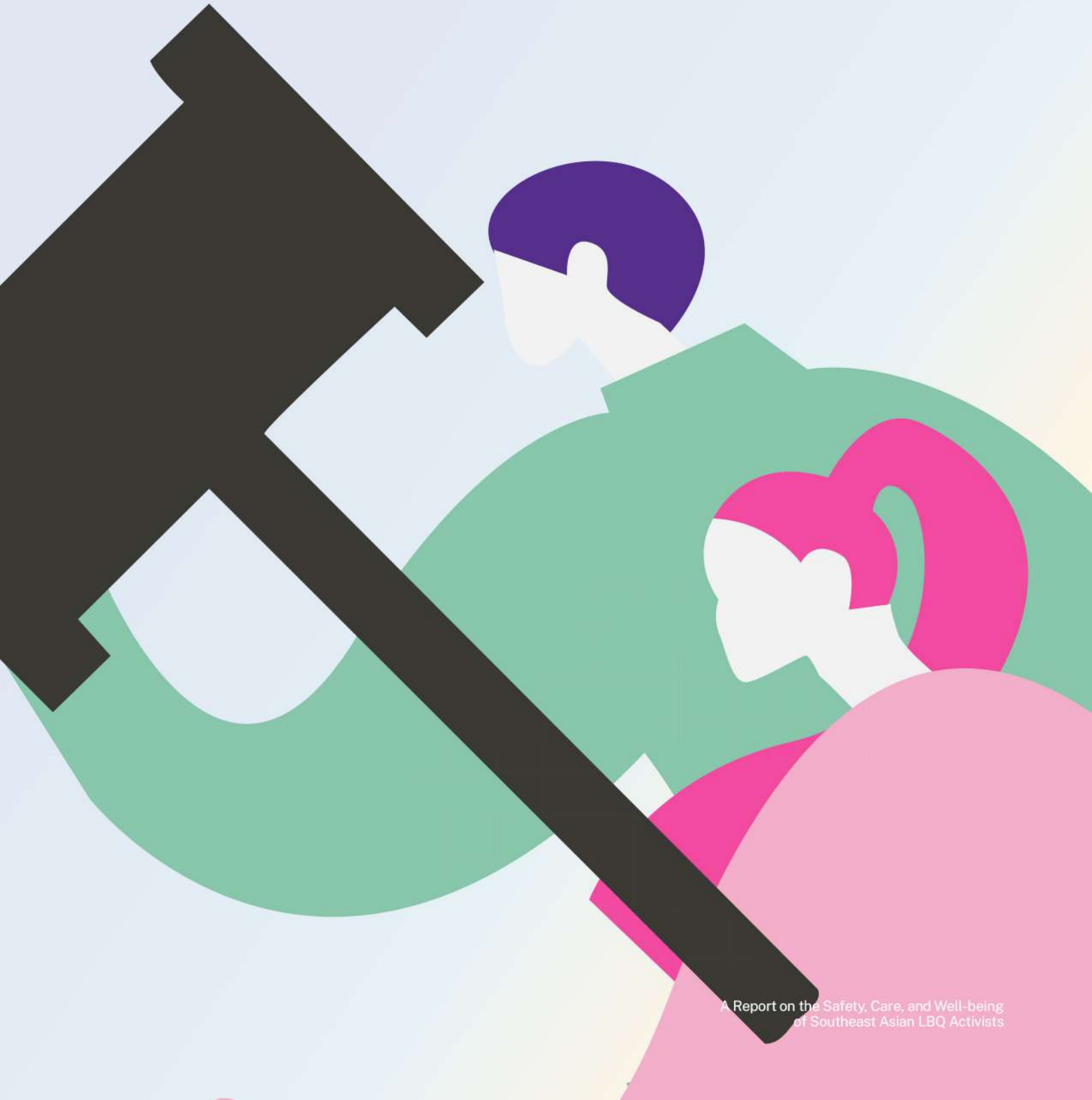
Andi states that one strategy LBQ activists in Malaysia utilise is to indirectly voice issues related to LBQ Muslims through non-Muslim LBQ activists, so they can still address important matters without directly exposing themselves to potential backlash. However, Andi also acknowledges the downside of this strategy: that Muslim LBQ activists are not able to come forward and tell their stories personally.

Preventive measures for personal safety are a priority for activists in Indonesia such as Donna. She contemplates potential threats and prepares for worst-case scenarios as she lives, after all, in a region where harmful incidents have occurred even without specific regulations allowing them. Hence she is now more concerned with new regional regulations, and emphasises the need to be vigilant in dealing with challenging situations.

“Why do I think about these things to such an extent? Well, I personally have never experienced arson in Jakarta, but there was a friend from [name of the organisation] who experienced such a situation in [name of area], where their room was about to be set on fire... that's what we are really worried about. Even in 2017, when there was still no Perda (Regional Regulation) on this matter, such incidents happened. Now, with the existence of Perda, we are even more concerned.” (Donna, Indonesia)

Irish from the Philippines describes her method as well, highlighting the use of social media and their local network's social capital to reach out to erring officers and officials.

LBQ activists display remarkable resilience and resourcefulness as they navigate the challenging landscape of advocacy and activism. Despite the lack of legal protection, they employ various strategies to push for change and safeguard their well-being. Pisey's approach of fostering understanding from government officials and building trust highlights the importance of patience and perseverance in advocating for legal protections. Andi and Suri shed light on the cautious approach taken by LBQ activists in Malaysia to protect themselves and their organisations, while Donna emphasises the need for personal safety measures in Indonesia. Moreover, Irish demonstrates the power of using the mass media and higher authorities to amplify voices and ensure personal safety.



“Every day, we’re living with uncertainty”

THE ECONOMIC REALITIES OF LBQ ACTIVISTS

AND ORGANISATIONS

In this section, we will examine the economic situation of LBQ activists in Southeast Asia through the perspectives of several individuals. Financial security can be critical for an activist to sustain their advocacy work and maintain their livelihood.

While Suri, a Malaysian LBQ activist, discusses how her self-employment within human rights movements has shielded her from direct economic impact due to her sexuality, the experiences of LBQ activists vary across the region. These individuals shed light on the economic challenges they face, such as joblessness, the lack of salaries within organisations, a lack of flexible donors, and the need to work in other fields to sustain their activism.

Discrimination, stigmatisation, and societal attitudes further compound these challenges, emphasising the importance of understanding the nuanced realities of LBQ activists' financial security in Southeast Asia.





The Financial Security of LBQ Activists

As a self-employed individual running her own feminist consultancy and working within human rights movements, Suri from Malaysia believes her sexuality has not directly impeded her earning capacity or denied her job opportunities. Being focused on human rights advocacy seems to have shielded her from some of the economic consequences related to her sexual orientation.

However, for other LBQ activists grappling with displacement due to the dire circumstances in their home countries, the notion of financial security has become increasingly elusive. YuYu highlights how the ongoing political turmoil in Myanmar has severely impacted her organisation, Lashio Tomboy and Lesbian Group, and the broader LBQ community. The targeted reduction of LGBT staff by companies responding to the military coup has left numerous LBQ individuals unemployed, resulting in a loss of livelihoods.

As for Irish, although she received support from a donor for a six-month period upon leaving the Philippines, she realises this amount is insufficient to cover all her financial needs, leading to increasing anxiety as her funds gradually diminish. Being a beginner in the French language

has also made it difficult for her to access job opportunities. These difficulties in navigating a new country, grappling with language barriers, and encountering limited job prospects have all contributed to her heightened financial vulnerability.

Sustainable funding plays a pivotal role in ensuring the financial stability of LBQ activists. A consistent stream of financial support is essential for executing impactful initiatives and addressing the community's pressing challenges effectively. However, according to a report by Mama Cash, the region of Asia and the Pacific lags behind with the second lowest median external funding for organisations at just \$1,170, notably lower than regions such as North America, where the median external funding stood at an impressive \$244,202¹⁹ in the year 2017. These findings align with the experiences shared by our informants, who highlight the persistent challenge of securing consistent and adaptable funding. This hurdle significantly impedes their ability to sustain their crucial work.

Patricia shares that currently, GIRLxGIRL Thailand operates on a volunteer basis, primarily due to the lack of funding. As a result, none of the staff receive a salary from the organisation, requiring them to tap into their own resources and creative solutions to carry out their activities. The absence of adequate funding sources forces Patricia to rely on her personal budget for important tasks. For instance, when GIRLxGIRL Thailand participates in the Pride Parade in Bangkok, she ends up using her own funds to procure necessary items.

Similarly, Adinda states that her organisation's initial support came from her and its director's personal resources to facilitate learning and discussions. Adinda shares that even whenever her organisation finally receives some funding, she faces economic uncertainty since the salary support from donors is often short-term.

Donna's situation mirrors this challenge. Although her organisation receives support from donors, funding falls short of what is needed. At times, Donna must depend on her savings and a dedication fund from her previous organisation to facilitate events and activities as needed. This is due to the financial insecurity faced by her organisation's members, many earning little more than the meagre regional minimum wage while facing an escalating cost of living. Furthermore, the inadequacy of grants prompts Donna and fellow activists to make personal sacrifices regarding their salaries. Donna, for instance, chooses not to take her full salary in order to save money for essential organisational needs such as acquiring equipment such as a sewing machine and a laptop.

On the other hand, Anne faced a lack of funds during the initial stages of her organisation GALANG. As funds eventually arrived, she decided to forgo her salary to allocate more resources for hiring additional staff members. This level of dedication and personal sacrifice reflects the unwavering commitment of LBQ activists to their cause. Nevertheless, this commitment comes at a price for

¹⁹ Saleh, L. M., & Sood, N. (2020). (rep.). *Vibrant Yet Under-Resourced: The State of Lesbian, Bisexual, and Queer Movements*. Mama Cash. Retrieved September 4, 2023, from <https://www.mamacash.org/en/report-vibrant-yet-under-resourced>.

Anne. Balancing her activism with a day job is necessary to make ends meet, and while her family's business provides some financial support, she finds herself working two full-time jobs, each demanding forty hours of her time a week. This situation has taken a toll on her well-being, as the demands of activism, combined with the challenges of securing funding, weigh heavily on her mind.

While the private sector might offer routine tasks, activism presents numerous obstacles, and its impact may take time to materialise. The constant need for funds to sustain GALANG and its projects adds an additional burden for Anne, compounding the complexities of her advocacy work.

YuYu has a similar experience as her organisation Lashio Tomboy and Lesbian Group has received a short-term grant set to expire in 2023. The uncertainty of future funding opportunities presents a daunting challenge as she strives to ensure the continuity of her projects and initiatives in the years ahead. Thus, YuYu finds herself working in multiple organisations as an intern or part-time staff member. This arrangement allows her to earn money to support herself and her own endeavours in Lashio Tomboy and Lesbian Group, although these positions only provide short-term support, making it challenging for her to plan for the future with certainty.

Pisey from Cambodia echoes these challenges, emphasising that LBQ activists often live with uncertainty due to a lack of economic security. Despite their dedicated efforts, most of them are not financially well-off and rely on regular jobs to earn a monthly income. Unfortunately, this often leaves them with little to no savings. Living in a country where many services are

privatised, they experience a constant sense of uncertainty about their financial security and the stability of their lives.

“Most of our RoCK members, both staff and community members, are not better off in terms of economic. Most people are working to get a monthly income. Many of us are not having the savings, and Cambodia is like other country, most of the services are privatised. Every day we are living with uncertainty.”
(Pisey, Cambodia)

Pisey emphasises that this ongoing uncertainty is more worrying than facing direct threats of violence, making it a chronic source of stress and concern for LBQ activists and community members alike.

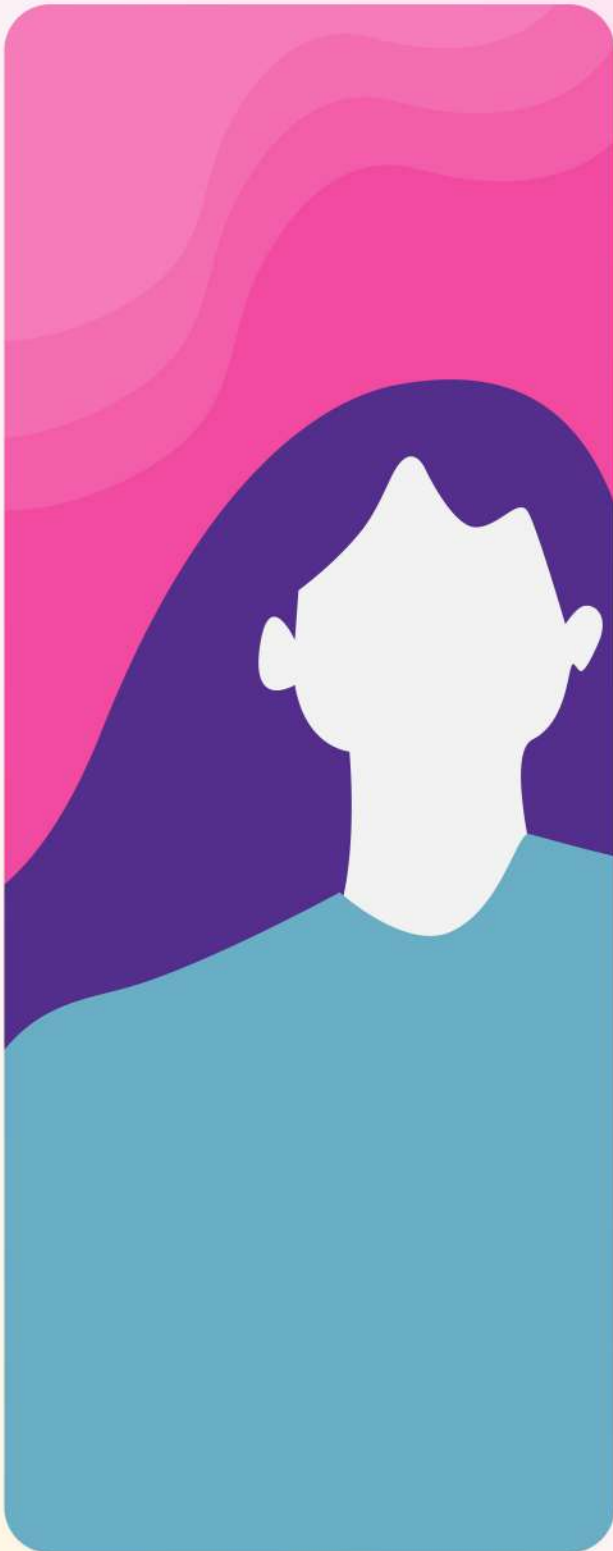
Another aspect of the funding challenge is evident in the plight of staff members in GALANG, in which Anne's staff's salaries are dependent on the availability of projects, leaving them uncertain about their income after each project.

Andi in Malaysia is also facing a similar situation, as her salary is drawn from the projects that her organisation secures. The number and scale of these projects directly impact her income. If there are more projects, Andi's salary increases, offering some degree of financial stability. However, when projects are scarce, Andi faces the difficult decision of prioritising her well-being and finding additional work outside of her organisation to sustain herself financially.

She may take up work such as being a documenter or editorial roles to supplement her income during lean

periods. This highlights the precarious nature of funding for LBQ activists and organisations, where they often rely on project-based funding and private employment that gets funneled back into activist work with no guarantee of their activist organisations receiving continued funding. This lack of stability not only affects their financial security but also adds stress and uncertainty to their lives.

On the other hand, Tra's organisation, Backyard Politics, has managed to secure relatively more substantial funding. However, this also brings its own set of challenges. While having more funds can enable them to work on their goals, it can also create sensitivity and conflicts when collaborating with other LBQ organisations. Hiring other activists from less well-funded organisations to work on their projects can sometimes change the power dynamics between the two groups, as these individuals have to divide their time between their own initiatives and supporting Backyard Politics.



Gaps in Achieving Financial Security

The road to financial security for LBQ activists is fraught with significant challenges, primarily stemming from the difficulties in obtaining grants and funding. Suri laments the fact that most of the financial support for LGBT organisations comes from abroad or from larger organisations, with local Malaysian funders showing little interest in funding LGBT initiatives. This scarcity of local funding leaves many LBQ activists in the region struggling to sustain their vital advocacy work.

Ruang also shares the difficulties in trying to secure funds for projects focused on young lesbians. She states that even proposals for essential work such as creating a cartoon book for LGBT children in Thailand often go unsupported.

The situation becomes even more disheartening for Anne, who reflects on the disparity between the greater financial resources available for HIV/AIDS organisations compared to those available for LBQ causes. Despite decades of effort and activism, the financial landscape remains largely unchanged, leaving LBQ organisations in the Philippines grappling to find funds for essential events and initiatives.

Anne states that her organisation GALANG initially started working with LBT individuals, lesbian and bi women, and trans men, thinking that they all started with at least a common lived experience as women. However, she now notices that there are fewer and fewer people in the Philippines who identify as lesbians. Moreover, Anne's concern about dwindling resources raises questions about the long-term sustainability of these organisations. As the number of people who identifies as lesbians decreases, so does the available funding for organisations representing them, making it increasingly challenging for LBQ activists to envision a stable and prosperous future.

“So we have fewer lesbians, fewer money. So so, I don't know... where that will lead us in 10 years [...] Because why will funders fund people who no longer exist?”
(Anne, Philippines)

Obtaining donors and securing funding is especially challenging for newer organisations. Patricia encounters hurdles in securing financial support since she is currently unsure as to where, when, and how to find the necessary resources to support GIRLxGIRL Thailand's initiatives. Without a clear roadmap or a list of potential donors specific to LBQ, feminist, or women empowerment causes, she finds herself at a loss when it comes to identifying suitable funding sources.

Sometimes, younger organisations also lack the institutionalisation required to secure larger grants. As highlighted by Suri, the stringent conditions set by funding agencies for obtaining substantial grants present a formidable challenge. To be

eligible for larger grants, organisations must meet various criteria, including official registration, a proven track record of at least two years of operation, and successful audits. Unfortunately, many younger LBQ organisations find it difficult to fulfil these requirements, resulting in limited financial support.

Patricia's situation in Thailand exemplifies this challenge. She mentions that in order to obtain funding from the Thai government, organisations must first register their entities. However, the registration process comes with specific requirements and limitations that can pose a challenge for new organisations, such as the substantial financial threshold needed for registering as a foundation, which can be quite daunting for newer or smaller organisations that lack access to significant funding sources. Moreover, Patricia adds that there is no guarantee that being registered as a foundation will ensure sustainable funding moving forward.

Anne also sheds light on the persistent challenge of achieving financial security for small Philippine NGOs such as hers. Over her organisation GALANG's startup phase, for about a decade, they received funding from donors, which was instrumental to their development. However, the issue lay in many funders' assumption that once a small NGO is established for five years or more, it should be able to achieve self-sustainability, as funders expect them to transition into financially independent entities.

This expectation, while well-intentioned, proves unrealistic for small NGOs. Anne reflects that there has been very little

success in social and entrepreneurial ventures undertaken by these organisations, not due to any fault of their own, but rather because their funding model itself is problematic. Small NGOs, such as GALANG, face inherent challenges in becoming financially self-sufficient. The focus on self-sustainability can divert their attention from their core mission and advocacy work, potentially hindering the progress they aim to achieve. Rather than putting undue pressure on these organisations to become fully self-sufficient, there is a need for a more sustainable and realistic approach to funding, ensuring that LBQ activists have the necessary resources to carry out their crucial advocacy work effectively.

Another problem arises due to the lack of support for general operational costs that are not tied to specific projects or deliverables, as pointed out by Anne. This leaves little room for the crucial administrative expenses required to keep the organisation running smoothly. This causes Anne’s organisation to make do with retaining a small administrative fee, typically around seven to ten percent of the total grant amount they receive to execute a project, which is inadequate to cover all necessary expenses, including staffing. As a result, activists may even have to contribute their own money to bridge the financial gap.

This funding challenge becomes more pronounced as Anne’s organisation takes on broad projects, which involves coordinating with 27 other organisations. Convincing numerous partners requires additional resources, but the limited funding options make it taxing to sustain their work effectively.

Anne also points out another issue regarding the lack of dedicated funds to support their core missions, and thus, her organisation GALANG often finds itself taking on projects and research initiatives that may not align with their primary goals and interests.

Tra from Thailand also discusses the difficulties faced by her friends’ organisations which struggle to obtain funding for their desired projects. Without dedicated funding that allows them to sustain their work long-term, they are compelled to accept project-based funding to keep their organisation afloat. This compromises their ability to fully pursue their passions and desired initiatives.

Similarly, Andi shares the difficulty of relying solely on project-based funding for her organisation. While project funding may provide short-term support, it is not a sustainable solution for the organisation’s long-term financial stability. As a result, Andi and her team are forced to seek external sources of income, which puts strain on the organisation and its members, leaving them with a heavy burden to manage multiple projects simultaneously.

Another challenge arises from having to rely on project-based funding, as Anne points out: “You’ll have to be reporting constantly because they need to know that you’re spending it wisely or — and not for yourselves.” With so much of activists’ time being spent on fundraising and reporting, this not only diverts valuable time and resources away from organisations’ core work but also creates additional stress and administrative overheads for the team.

Moreover, a reliance on project-based funding can have a severe impact on the economic security of LBQ activists who live in countries in political turmoil. YuYu and her organisation, Lashio Tomboy and Lesbian Group, for instance, states that the current political situation in Myanmar prevents them from actually running their projects.

The economic situation of these organisations causes them to not have sufficient funds to provide employee benefits for their staff. Andi shares her previous experience with an organisation that offered insurance, Employee Provident Fund (EPF) matching contributions (EPF is a Malaysian government-mandated savings plan), and retirement planning to its employees. However, Andi acknowledges that her own organisation lacks the funds to provide such benefits.

Anne also confirms the difficulty of offering additional benefits beyond Philippine government-required ones, such as private health insurance. The inability to offer these extra benefits poses a challenge for LBQ organisations when competing for and retaining staff, causing many in their community to be drawn to the private sector where better salaries and benefits are provided.

Suri further adds that this lack of financial stability compels more experienced LBQ activists to work with larger, well-established organisations on an international level where they can get paid more and gain broader experience. However, this exodus of experienced activists from younger LBQ organisations fragments the movement, leaving it constantly reliant on new activists who may struggle to effectively advance LGBT rights.

“I think what then ends up happening is it fragments the movement, right? So you don’t have that expertise anymore, so the LGBT movement in Malaysia then is constantly working with young, new, baby activists, right?” (Suri, Malaysia)

There are also complex emotions experienced by LBQ activists when it comes to receiving financial support, as discussed by Tra from Thailand. The culture of social work often discourages activists from seeking profit or high remuneration for themselves, with activists questioning whether it is appropriate to receive higher rates and how to use the funds more beneficially.

Irish also expresses guilt when receiving financial assistance. While she received financial support after being red-tagged, she feels anxious about asking for more help from other foundations now that she is seeking asylum in France. She worries that other activists in the Philippines or other countries might need the funds more urgently than she does, considering the challenging situations they all face.

“I’m still trying to wrap my head to asking them for help. Because I know that there are people who still... who need more, more than I do [...] I feel like I’m stealing money from other projects. And I feel bad about it. Because I have a life here, I mean it’s not that, you know, it’s not that bad, it’s not that good either, but they have it worse in the Philippines, they have it worse in other countries.” (Irish, Philippines)

These experiences demonstrate the complex relationship LBQ activists have with financial security as they navigate the

delicate balance between receiving financial support to address their own needs and advocating for others who might be facing more challenging circumstances. LBQ activists take on an emotional toll and ethical considerations as they seek and manage not just financial remuneration for themselves but also assistance for others.

Moreover, the issues of discrimination in the workplace and while seeking jobs remain as one of the biggest hurdles for LBQ activists in achieving financial security. While NGOs generally exhibit greater acceptance of LBQ individuals — an observation by Anne — this dynamic shifts in other sectors, potentially rendering it unsafe to openly express one’s LBQ identity based on one’s employment level and industry specifics.

Verbal abuse pervades employment tiers in NGOs, while physical abuse is more prevalent in blue-collar roles, particularly under male superiors. Smaller companies and government-related positions, as pointed out by Andi in Malaysia, might also display reduced openness, leading to limited opportunities for and discrimination against LBQ individuals and activists. The decision to reveal one’s LBQ identity in the workplace remains difficult, with many in Malaysia opting for initial nondisclosure due to contextual challenges and the risk of discrimination.

In Indonesia, Adinda reveals that some workplaces do not accept individuals with certain expressions that don’t conform to gender norms, specifically related to growing out their hair. Leo shares his own experience of discrimination when seeking job opportunities.

“When looking for jobs, they ask whether you are a woman or a man, things like that, then how can people like this work? From that experience, I started thinking that it’s better to start my own business rather than being questioned like that.”
(Leo, Indonesia)

Leo’s experience of being questioned in this manner has had a profound impact on his perspective. This has led him to start his own business as an alternative to facing such discrimination in traditional employment settings. However, running his own business proved to be difficult, as Leo shares how running his small business selling fried potatoes led to his establishment being labelled as an LGBT gathering spot, subjecting him to suspicion and scrutiny by authorities.

Adinda in Indonesia also highlights the impact of political and social pressures, forcing many LBQ individuals to abandon their businesses and educational pursuits, resulting in a precarious financial situation. She notes that individuals who are perceived as women expressing themselves in a more masculine way also face threats of job termination. Workplace administrators may perceive their gender expression as harmful or detrimental to their organisation, leading to their dismissal.

Donna also shares her own experiences of facing discrimination in her workplace due to the disclosure of her sexual orientation, with some individuals referring to her as “abnormal”. Donna also states that she is hesitant to talk about her religious practices in her workplace due to the

negative reactions she has received from her colleagues, who might use their knowledge of her religious practices to discredit her. Donna highlights that people have made hurtful comments, questioning whether her prayers and fasting will save her from hell, and questioning the coexistence of her sexual orientation and her religious devotion.

“[W]hen I pray or fast, people don't accept it and say, “Why bother praying or fasting, does God even accept it?” So, I never discuss my prayers. People say things like, “Oh, she prays, but she's already destined for hell.” Since then, I've never wanted to discuss my religious beliefs.”
(Donna, Indonesia)

Donna notes that the discrimination she faces in the workplace is not unique to her alone but may also affect her partner, who is part of a labour union. Donna narrates that when her partner first became involved in LBQ activism and advocacy, she faced significant hostility from her friends and even individuals who hold influential positions within the labour union. These individuals may have appeared accepting on the surface, engaging with her in discussions related to LBQ issues, but when it came to personal relationships and exchanges, they adhered strictly to heteronormativity.

Donna, who organises LBQ labour workers, also highlights the gaps that hinder her members from achieving financial security. One significant obstacle is the prevalence of contractual work contracts, which has become more common in recent times. Unlike in the past, where employees would

typically become regular staff after a three-month training period, many workers in Indonesia now find themselves on short-term work contracts lasting two to six months or even just daily arrangements. Some contracts come with an extortion fee, adding further financial strain to already meagre salaries.

“The contracts are for two months, three months, six months. Some are even daily, and some are contracted for 14 days, and they have to pay 700,000 [rupiah] to the supervisors. Their salary doesn't even amount to 700,000, yet they have to pay 700,000, which is really messed up.”
(Donna, Indonesia)

The extortion fee becomes a burden for many LBQ workers, who struggle to save money due to this additional expense. The practice has become ingrained in local employment culture and traditions, making it difficult to avoid or address. As a result, LBQ workers and all blue-collar workers in general in Indonesia find it challenging to save for their future or even cover basic living expenses, leading to a cycle of financial hardship. The situation is compounded by the presence of loan sharks, with some LBQ activists and workers forced into borrowing money to cover their extortion fees and/or other expenses. This places them in precarious financial situations, as they become trapped in a cycle of debt and struggle to break free.

Even when some of the members of Donna's organisation manage to secure employment through connections or by paying extortion fees, workplace

discrimination persists. They are subjected to uncomfortable and unwarranted transfers within the workplace, creating a hostile work environment for them. This constant harassment and lack of support from their employers eventually drive many of them to the point of resignation.

Adinda’s account of how LBQ individuals in eastern areas in Indonesia cope in the workforce echoes a similar sentiment. Despite being located in what is perceived as a relatively safer region, they still face discrimination in the workforce. There may not be specific laws against LGBT individuals in Indonesia, but they experience intimidation and bullying that forces them to resign.

The discrimination faced by LBQ individuals and activists in their workplaces can be so severe that it leads some of them to take alternative paths to earning a livelihood. As Donna reveals, some members of her organisation resort to selling hormones online as a means of self-employment, as traditional workplaces refuse to employ them due to discrimination. Such self-employment may stem from a lack of formal work opportunities and a need to find financial stability in a hostile job market.

YuYu also shares her experience of discrimination at a former job where her sexual orientation was not accepted, which led her to leave the position. This highlights the detrimental impact of workplace discrimination on LBQ activists’ job opportunities and economic stability.

Accessing government assistance can also become a challenge for LBQ individuals and activists. Donna in Indonesia states that local governments often prioritise support for native citizens of their regions, leaving LBQ activists who are mostly non-native to their current regions without financial aid, food assistance, or other forms of support. This lack of assistance exacerbates their financial struggles and traps some in debt, perpetuating the cycle of economic instability.

Adinda also adds that there is discrimination in the distribution of resources and support, favouring individuals with feminine expressions or those considered more socially acceptable. This biased distribution denies some LBQ activists the much-needed help to improve their financial situations.

Furthermore, Pisey from Cambodia points out the difficulties LBQ activists face in accessing government resources due to their lack of official identification documents. Many have left home to escape discrimination or to look for jobs without the necessary identification, making it challenging to prove their status or to qualify for government support. This hinders their ability to access resources and assistance, further exacerbating their financial insecurity.

The journey to financial security for LBQ activists is far from smooth, as they face a multitude of challenges that stand in their way. From the frustrating struggle to obtain local funding, relying on foreign or larger organisations for support, to the

daunting conditions imposed for securing larger grants, newer LBQ organisations find themselves in an uphill battle to sustain their vital work.

Amidst political turmoil and workplace discrimination, LBQ activists and individuals encounter limited job opportunities, forcing some to resort to unconventional means of earning a livelihood. This not only hampers their economic stability, but also takes a toll on their emotional well-being as some navigate complex feelings of survivor guilt and others, conflicted emotions surrounding financial support.

The hurdles continue as LBQ activists face difficulty accessing government assistance, and are often overlooked and underserved due to a lack of proper documentation or biases in resource distribution. These obstacles further perpetuate the cycle of economic insecurity, leaving many activists trapped in a relentless struggle.



Navigating the Challenging Economic Landscape

LBQ activists employ various strategies to deal with their current financial situations and strive for economic empowerment. One crucial approach is the registration of their organisations, which enables them to access funding opportunities that are more readily available to registered entities. Institutionalising their organisations and building movements allow them to access bigger grants and hire more personnel.

Open and understanding communication with donors is another strategy used by activists to emphasise the importance of financial resources for sustaining their well-being and driving social change.

GIRLxGIRL Thailand also adopts a strategic approach that leverages online platforms for their activities. Due to financial constraints, it has found that conducting operations online is a practical and cost-effective way to engage with its community and fulfil its mission without requiring significant financial resources. Platforms such as a LINE group, a Twitter Space (now known as an X Space), and Clubhouse have become essential tools for connecting with its audience and facilitating communication.

Being selective with donors and learning to recognise what is enough funding for them are vital to other activists' financial strategies. These activists prioritise integrity over accumulating vast resources, opting for sufficient funds that align with their needs and capacity to manage. They also establish emergency funds and share resources within their community, fostering a sense of unity and solidarity during challenging times, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Engaging with the government and utilising personal connections are crucial methods for activists to access public support and resources. Activists lobby and remind authorities of their responsibilities to address economic empowerment, poverty reduction, and sustainable development – that of course, include the LBQ community. Additionally, personal connections play a significant role in accessing economic support, as knowing people within the government can facilitate access to funds and assistance.

Some activists engage in small businesses, such as selling nuts or providing bakery classes, not solely for economic empowerment but also as a means of organising and engaging with their community. Empowering their peers with economic skills, through workshops on topics such as personal money management or investments, is another approach taken to secure their financial futures.

However, despite these efforts, LBQ activists still face challenges in achieving financial security, including discrimination, workplace violence and extortion, difficulties accessing government help, and limited job opportunities. These challenges are complex and require ongoing, dedicated work to create meaningful change, and activists demonstrate resilience and a deep commitment to improving their financial situations, paving the way for a more inclusive and economically stable future.

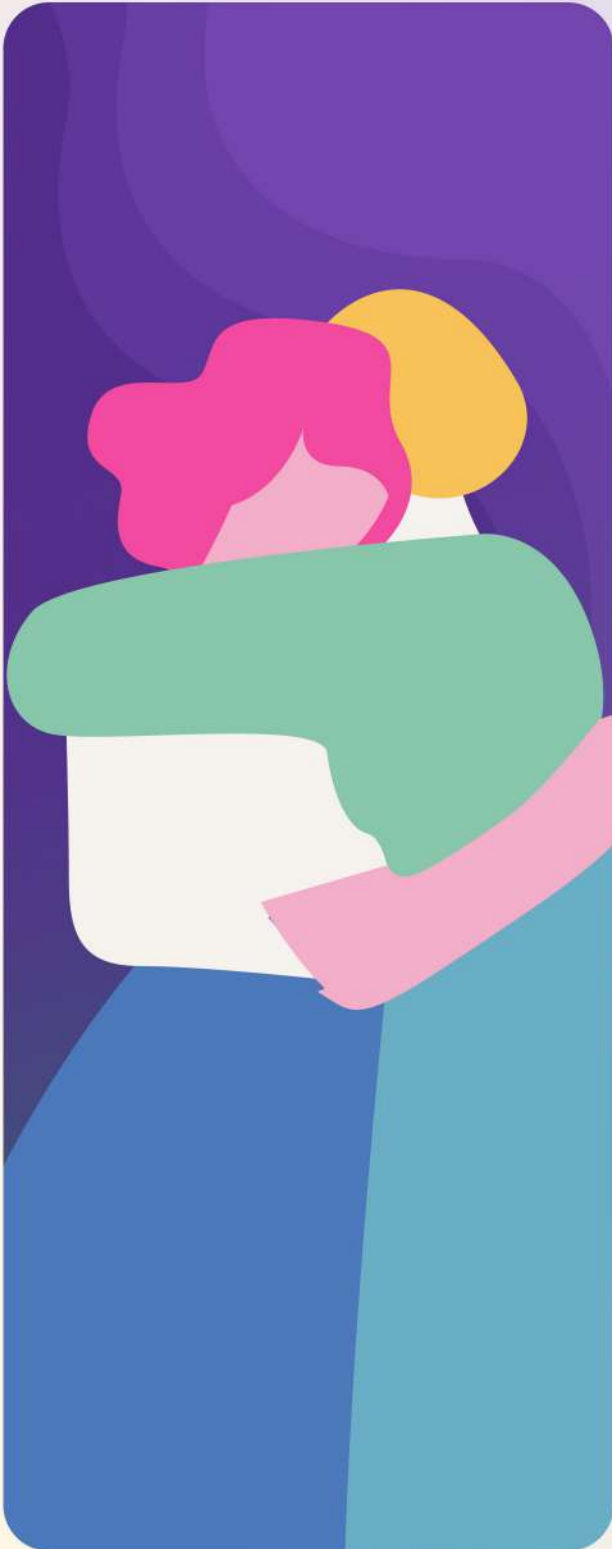




“You're never really treated the same as your heterosexual brothers and sisters”

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL SUPPORT FOR LBQ ACTIVISTS

LBQ activists play a crucial role in advocating for the rights and well-being of lesbian, bisexual, and queer individuals. However, one of the major obstacles they confront while trying to achieve that is the prevalence of heteronormative and patriarchal cultures that perpetuate traditional gender roles. These norms not only marginalise LBQ activists but also hinder broader acceptance and recognition of their efforts. Additionally, religious beliefs and family dynamics can pose formidable barriers to their well-being, as conservative attitudes may reject or stigmatise their LBQ identities, leading to isolation and estrangement from their support networks.



LBQ Activists and Family Acceptance: Embracing Support or Confronting Resistance

The journey of LBQ activists in receiving support from their families is a deeply personal and often challenging one, filled with moments of vulnerability, acceptance, and sometimes unexpected revelations. Irish courageously introduced her girlfriend to her family, planning to build a future together. But the revelation of her mother's support later came through a friend who shared that her mother loved her unconditionally.

"[T]hen my mom was [...] she told that person "Ah, it doesn't matter what my daughter is, I love her", yeah. I still tear up, hearing that. That was the time where I know that my mom accepted me for who I really am." (Irish, Philippines)

Not all receive such emotional support. Anne from the Philippines also opens up about her experience with incomplete acceptance and support within her own family:

“Um, the issue about safety, I can say that I’m safe but I cannot see that I am perfectly happy because I may be accepted at the basic level, but there’s still issues with the family. You’re never really treated the same as your heterosexual brothers and sisters so you’re safe but emotionally sometimes it’s not too safe.” (Anne, Philippines)

Anne’s candid revelation shows that while physical safety may provide a certain sense of comfort, the yearning for genuine emotional support can remain unfulfilled.

The delicate process of family acceptance isn’t unique to the Philippines – while YuYu’s family in Myanmar was initially hesitant to accept her sexual orientation, YuYu’s perseverance and advocacy efforts eventually led to a more welcoming environment.

Amidst the challenges and complexities that come with being a trans man, Leo from Indonesia reveals that his parents do also accept him, even though they may still view him as their daughter instead of seeing him as a son. Despite this, he finds a safe haven at home, where he can be himself without fear of rejection.

In Thailand, although progress may have been made in society’s public perceptions of same-sex relationships thanks to the mass media, Tao emphasises that true acceptance within the intimate circles of family and friends remains a challenge. Coming out to loved ones still requires immense courage for activists, as there may be hurdles and hesitations to overcome.

LBQ individuals often find themselves navigating periods of uncertainty as they reveal their true selves to those closest to

them, and Tao also reveals that the new generation of LGBT activists still grapples with a lack of support from their families. Many find themselves living together with their partners after leaving their family homes without financial or emotional backing, amplifying the challenges they face.

Andi also shares the challenges she faces within her own family and the broader community in Malaysia. Working as an LBQ activist, she navigates a delicate balance between her public advocacy and her personal life. Andi admits that she does not feel safe coming out to her family, choosing to keep her identity as an LBQ person a secret from them. While her friends may understand her work with feminist organisations and the LGBTIQ community, they may not fully recognise her as part of that community, which adds an element of uncertainty to her journey.

The weight of this secret is profound, as revealing her LBQ identity may impact her livelihood and potentially force her to make drastic life choices. The fear of being exposed and doxxed, a distressing reality for many activists, fills Andi with worry. She reflects on the experiences of other activist friends who had to leave the country temporarily to safeguard themselves after being doxxed.

“And then have to deal with your family lah if you’re out, if I’m outed. Which I’m not ready [for]. But I’m like... yeah, it’s a scary thought. I’ve never, I never really... properly sit down and think to myself, why would I do if my family found out about my sexuality.” (Andi, Malaysia)

Suri also unravels the complexities and struggles faced when one's identity is forcibly exposed. Suri's journey took an unexpected turn when she was outed to her family by her ex-husband. The backlash from her family was swift and intense, adding a new layer of hardship to her already challenging situation.

*"I had to deal with the...the backlash from my family. I had to deal with whatever came from him outing—as a result of him outing me to my family. [...] you know, my mother was like, "Oh you cannot live here anymore."
(Suri, Malaysia)*

Furthermore, the deeply ingrained societal norms and expectations of what women should be and do cast a dark shadow over the lives of LBQ individuals. Families, driven by a desire for conformity, may perceive their loved ones' sexual orientation as a flaw that must be corrected. Donna reveals that friends from her organisation were subjected to a harrowing ordeal known as conversion therapy, a deeply troubling practice that seeks to change one's sexual orientation. The catalyst for these threats stemmed from a seemingly mundane aspect of their personal lives—not being married.

*"So, regarding threats... let's talk about threats. Threats from the family, some of my friends, from [name of organisation], were subjected to conversion therapy because they weren't getting married. Those threats come from the family."
(Donna, Indonesia)*

Anne also shares the experiences of others whose families resort to unspeakable acts of violence and violation in misguided

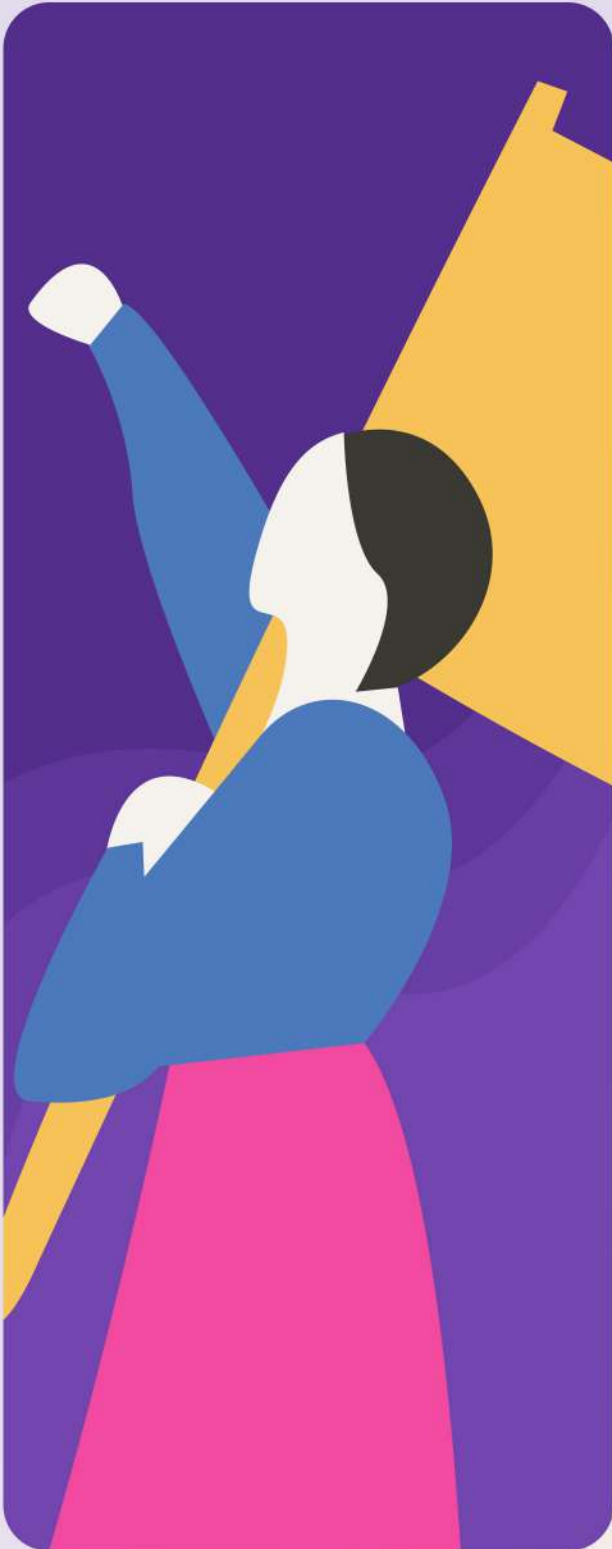
attempts to "correct" their daughters or sisters by subjecting them to rape.

*"I think a lot of families want their — their daughters or sisters to be fitting the mold of the ideal woman and so they feel that it's the only way to correct being lesbian, getting raped, sometimes by their own family members."
(Anne, Philippines)*

The accounts shared by LBQ activists in their journey to seek family acceptance paint a complex and often painful picture. While some, such as Irish, are fortunate to experience the warmth of unconditional love and affirmation from their families, others face significant challenges in gaining genuine emotional support. Anne's honest reflection highlights that while acceptance at a basic level may provide a sense of safety, the yearning for true understanding and recognition persists.

Across different regions, the struggle for familial acceptance remains a common thread, even as there is a diverse range of activist experiences within family circles, ranging from feeling accepted yet misunderstood, to facing rejection, threats, and even violence.

These distressing realities serve as reminders of the work that still needs to be done in creating supportive environments for LBQ individuals, where love and acceptance can thrive, free from fear and judgement. At the same time, these activists shed light on the urgency of dismantling harmful patriarchal societal norms so LBQ individuals can embrace their identities without compromise or danger.



General Public and Community Acceptance Towards LBQ Activists and Individuals

While LGBT rights issues have gained widespread attention in Thailand, Tao believes that substantial changes in societal acceptance remain elusive, highlighting the dichotomy between public discourse and personal experiences.

Patricia further illustrates the prevailing stereotypes and lack of acceptance towards the LBQ community in Thailand. A common misconception among Thai people, she states, is that queer women must adhere to a specific gender presentation: one partner is expected to be masculine and the other feminine. Patricia often encounters questions such as "Who is the masculine one?" when introducing her partner, which reflects persistent heteronormative assumptions within society.

Furthermore, Patricia reveals how disclosing her lesbian identity to co-workers triggers apprehensive and fearful responses. Some even worry that she might engage in inappropriate behaviour with them if they are alone in the same room. These co-workers' discomfort and insecurity highlight the ingrained prejudice and lack of understanding about LBQ individuals.

On the other hand, Ruang sheds light on the level of acceptance of LBQ individuals in rural Thailand, highlighting the unique challenges faced by grassroots communities. There, LBQ individuals encounter barriers to acceptance, particularly due to cultural and religious influences and limited access to education, which contributes to their hesitation to share their experiences and openly embrace their identities in public.

Meanwhile, in Malaysia, the country's dominant religious and conservative cultural values often clash with the aspirations of the LBQ community, leading to increased societal resistance and discrimination. Suri expresses her concern that, despite the increasing visibility of LGBT rights issues in public discourse, overall societal attitudes towards LGBT people remain largely unchanged.

Suri also sheds light on the challenges faced by the LGBT community in Malaysia, particularly during public events such as the Women's March. Even as the Women's March has become a platform for LGBT visibility, some individuals have expressed their disapproval and animosity towards queer representation.

Andi also points out that as Pride Month is celebrated in Malaysia, emotions are

heightened, and perspectives diverge widely across the general public. While many express support and empathy towards the LGBTIQ community, a concerning surge in LGBTIQ phobia occurs due to unfamiliarity and the challenge that ideas around supporting the LGBTIQ community pose to preconceived beliefs.

This sentiment is not only a societal issue but also perpetuated by the state, as highlighted by Suri's insights into government- and politician-led efforts to combat perceived "problems" associated with LGBT individuals. Religious authorities' hostile counter-campaigns and the involvement of right-wing parties hinder progress towards acceptance and equality. Andi also highlights how certain politicians exploit LGBT issues for popularity, aligning themselves with conservative Islamic values, further fanning the flames of prejudice and discrimination against the LGBTIQ community.

Suri adds that this climate of hate towards the LGBTQ community has repercussions for LGBTQ organisations. Simply having the word 'queer,' 'LGBTQ,' or a similar identifier in their name can draw unwanted attention and even subject them to potential attacks from the public. Furthermore, Suri also points out that this naming situation creates difficulties when publicly registering a group as a queer organisation.

Moreover, Suri highlights how the negative portrayal of LGBT individuals affects the community's access to essential health-care services. The backlash against campaigns and initiatives such as PrEP (HIV prevention medication) illustrates how

critical services can be hindered by misguided fears and misconceptions.

“[T]hen, every single thing you want to do, contohnya (for example), you want to roll out PrEP, then you have to deal with the backlash, or if we if you make PrEP available to LGBT people, nanti (then) “all these men will continuously be with men”, “Oh if you roll out all of this then you will encourage more LGBT people.” (Suri, Malaysia)

Andi concludes that the current climate in Malaysia is far from conducive to the well-being and acceptance of the LBQ community. Pervasive LGBT-phobia, fueled by political agendas, creates a challenging and hostile environment for LGBTIQ individuals, making it hard for them to live openly and authentically without fear of discrimination and prejudice.

In Indonesia, LBQ individuals also face significant prejudice and discrimination due to societal taboos and conservative beliefs. Adinda states that certain individuals, particularly those with religious inclinations, intentionally spread hateful rhetoric. For instance, in the aftermath of a recent tsunami in Palu, Central Sulawesi in 2018, a troubling trend emerged where LBQ individuals were framed as responsible for the catastrophe due to their very existence. What’s more, given that LBQ individuals in Palu have higher visibility compared to those in other areas, this prominence makes them particularly susceptible to being singled out for blame and subjected to discrimination.

Adinda also opens up about the discrimination that LBQ individuals might face at university, including severe consequences for speaking in support of

LGBT human rights. According to Adinda, this can lead to immediate expulsion from an institution. She shares an example of a student who submitted a research proposal from a human rights perspective regarding LGBTIQ issues, but the proposal was never accepted, resulting in the student not being able to graduate even after four years of study.

Her own experiences on campus also include exchanges with lecturers who propagate hatred towards the LGBTIQ community. When Adinda tried to defend her community and speak up against discrimination, her efforts were silenced, leaving her feeling unable to be herself and forced to stay silent for her own safety.

“I study law, but my lecturers are teaching me hatred towards the LGBTIQ community. So when I try to speak up and defend my community, they always find ways to silence me. Sometimes, I stay silent because I can't be myself; I have to be silent to defend my community. It's also for my own safety.” (Adinda, Indonesia)

Housing is also a challenge for LGBTIQ individuals, as Donna highlights the challenges that LBQ individuals and activists face while looking for a place to live in Indonesia. After the outbreak of COVID, there were many empty rental houses available, making it less challenging for the members of her LBQ organisation to find places to rent.

However, Donna also mentions that LBQ individuals are considered as disturbing public order by some landlords. During the call to prayer for Maghrib, religious statements and judgements are directed

at them, making some of her friends feel uncomfortable and unwelcome in their living spaces. For instance, during the Maghrib prayer time, people from her friends' neighbourhood would shout, "[It's] Maghrib! Time to repent. Don't only engage in matters of hell."

For Leo, expressing his gender identity comes with challenges in his neighbourhood, where the community is already aware that he got caught by the Sharia police in 2015 for not wearing a hijab, as they perceived him to be female. This has led Leo to avoid any kind of interaction with the people in his neighbourhood, although he still hears unwanted remarks from them.

"They know about the previous issues, like my 2015 case, or they have heard about what happened to me. So, I try to avoid them, actually. When they see me, they will say, "Oh, there goes Leo, the lesbian," and things like that."
(Leo, Indonesia)

Leo also states that threats directed at him might also be directed at his organisation, since some individuals within the community who harbour dislike towards LBQ communities like his might already be aware of his organisation's identity as part of a network of LBQ communities.

In Myanmar, YuYu recounts facing discrimination based on her sexual orientation, particularly when she expresses her true self. While it doesn't happen everywhere, there are instances where people show hate and disdain

towards her identity, and make her the target of hurtful comments and behaviour.

There are attempts by LBQ or LGBTIQ organisations to raise awareness of LGBTIQ equality among the general public. One of them is Irish's organisation, which has been actively organising an LGBT awareness campaign in collaboration with a diverse network of organisations, including student councils, government agencies, and gender and development advocates under the UGSAD Regional Gender Resource Network²⁰.

This broad platform has allowed the organisation's members to connect with various government agencies, businesses, universities, and even the Philippine National Police to provide education on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) and SOGIE. Their efforts have included school visits, community outreach, queer writing workshops for youth, and psychosocial workshops.

When discussing the reactions from the community to these educational initiatives, Irish shares that the response has generally been positive. Instead of negative reactions, the people of Iloilo mainly express curiosity and a willingness to challenge common preconceptions about the LGBT community. The campaigns have been successful in expanding many people's understanding of diverse identities.

Irish further explains that during some events, people have approached her to share personal stories about their own

20 Based on <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1061922>, UGSAD comprises a loose network consisting of government agencies, academic institutions, non-governmental organisations, and grassroots community groups.

experiences and journeys with their sexual orientations. Some have mentioned to her that they believed they were lesbian in their youth, but due to societal norms and pressures, they eventually followed different paths, such as getting married to men. These encounters highlight the impact of the campaign in encouraging individuals to reflect on their pasts and consider the possibilities of diverse identities.

Despite the generally positive reception, Irish acknowledges the persistence of discriminatory remarks and murmurs behind her back, though her resolve remains unshaken. Such a counterforce to LGBTIQ advocacy is wielded by conservative and extremist groups, predominantly within Iloilo's Catholic community.

Reflecting on an incident from an Anti-SOGIE Bill rally, Irish recounts a confrontation with a religious individual who took issue with her raising a rainbow flag. Undeterred, Irish firmly defended her right to peacefully hold the flag by the roadside. Additionally, Irish notes the existence of anti-pride march rallies in the past but emphasises that these groups have failed to gain significant traction within Iloilo.

Regarding the public perception of LGBTIQ individuals in Manila, Anne observes improvements, particularly in the case of gay men, who have gained visibility in the media and with advocacy efforts. However, she underscores a lack of comparable progress for lesbians in achieving acceptance and visibility. Despite this, Anne asserts her current ability to openly engage in LBQ or LGBT work without significant safety concerns, even though unfounded accusations of “converting children” have arisen.

It helps, as Anne believes, that there is a slightly higher level of acceptance for her organisation GALANG compared to other groups. This is due to its focus on intersectional issues such as poverty, violence, and health. By addressing broader societal challenges, GALANG garners increased legitimacy and relevance in the public eye.

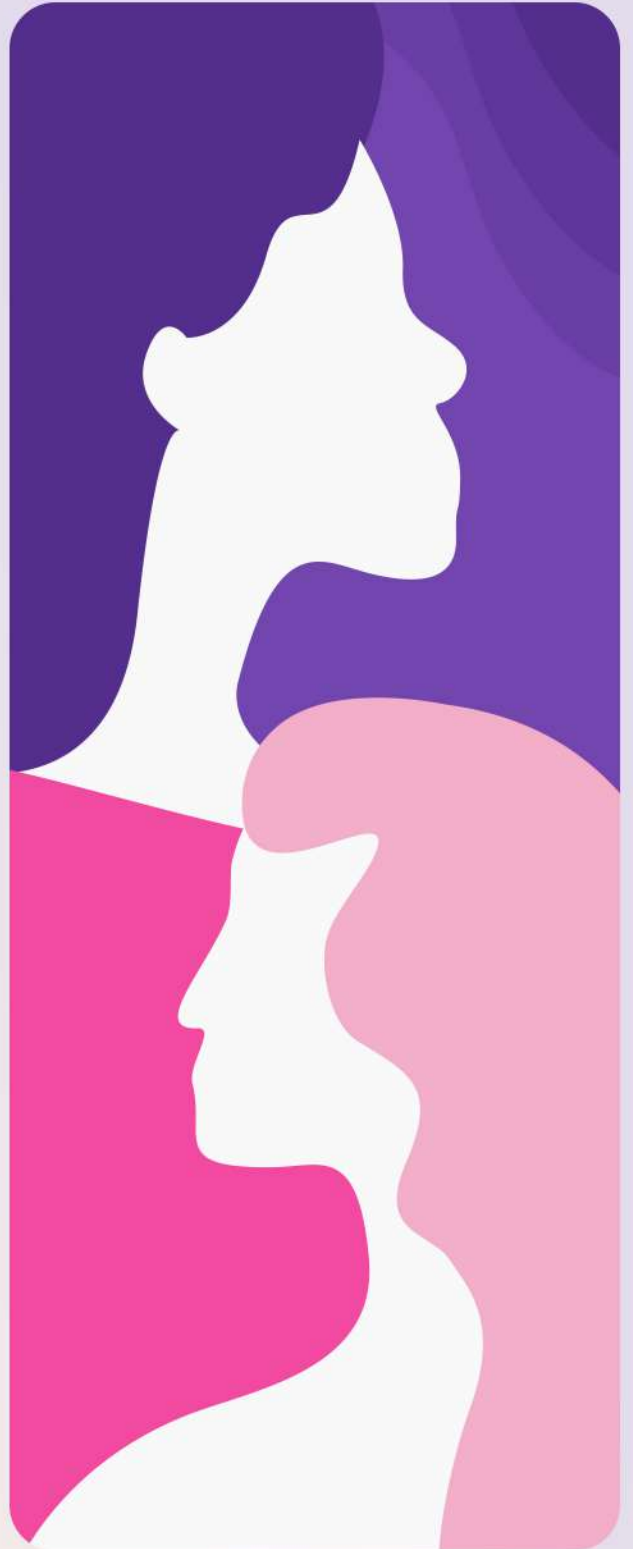
The accounts shared by LBQ activists from different regions provide a nuanced understanding of the social acceptance landscape they navigate. In Thailand, Tao highlights the juxtaposition between public discourse on LGBT rights and the personal struggles faced by LBQ individuals in defining their identities.

Safe spaces are crucial for LBQ individuals in Thailand to gather and connect, fostering support and inclusivity within their community. In contrast, Ruang sheds light on the unique challenges faced by LBQ individuals in rural areas due to cultural and religious influences, hindering the open expression of their identities.

In Malaysia, the dominant religious and conservative values clash with the aspirations of the LBQ community, leading to intolerance and discrimination. The government's involvement further perpetuates anti-LGBT sentiment, impacting access to essential services such as healthcare.

And in Indonesia, societal taboos and conservative beliefs contribute to prejudice and discrimination against LBQ individuals, especially in rural areas, posing challenges for them in expressing their gender identity and causing them to fear harassment and discrimination.

At the same time in Myanmar, LBQ individuals, such as YuYu, confront disdain and hurtful comments when expressing their true selves. Despite the challenges, various LBQ organisations work tirelessly to raise awareness and promote acceptance through education and advocacy efforts.



Challenges of Discrimination Within the LGBTIQ Community

Even within the LGBTIQ community, discrimination can be complex. Adinda shares her experiences of facing discrimination within the LGBTIQ community itself, including a time when some members of the community doubted her ability to fight for the region she was living in because she was not originally from there. Additionally, they questioned her vulnerability and ability to represent the fight for LGBTIQ rights due to her feminine-presenting expression.

Adinda states that she was the leader of the organisation for a period of time, but she eventually stepped down from that position due to a negative reception from some individuals. However, she didn't give up and continued to approach these people, trying to befriend them and gain their trust over time.

In another instance, Adinda talks about her experiences as a bisexual individual in LGBTIQ communication. While she hasn't faced discrimination about this status directly, she mentions that some people may still hold misconceptions about bisexuality, thinking that she could "change" or being unable to fully understand her identity. Adinda sees this as an opportunity for collective learning within the community.

However, Adinda also opens up about a triggering incident that occurred during a Saturday night gathering with her LGBTIQ community friends. A gay friend made inappropriate comments towards her, asking for her WhatsApp number and even joking about impregnating her, leaving her deeply upset.

Adinda's account sheds light on the presence of internal threats within the LGBTIQ community, raising crucial questions about inclusivity and support within the very spaces that should provide solace and understanding. The discrimination she faced based on her origin and expression reflects the need for introspection and empathy within the community. While misconceptions about bisexuality linger, Adinda's openness to education and dialogue exemplifies the potential for growth and acceptance within the community.

Nonetheless, the unsettling incident during the social gathering serves as a stark reminder of the work that remains in cultivating a safe and respectful environment for all LGBTIQ individuals. By fostering dialogue, empathy, and support, the LGBTIQ communities can ensure that they remain a space of empowerment and solidarity for all their members.



Heightened Vulnerability to Discrimination and Oppression among Masculine-Presenting LBQ Individuals and Activists

In our discussion about community acceptance, our informants shed light on the heightened discrimination faced by masculine-presenting LBQ individuals. Ruang attributes this prejudice, present in Thailand, to deep-seated societal norms that demand women conform to specific behaviours and roles. Deviating from these norms is met with disapproval, driven by power dynamics that value masculinity as a symbol of strength and authority while undermining femininity.

Ruang shares that this discrimination is severe to the extent that some attempt to control non-conforming LBQ individuals by punishing them with rape, making threats of violence and even murder. Her girlfriend has experienced hostility and threats directed towards her tomboy appearance and identity.

Her non-conformity to cisgender norms led to disapproval from her colleagues and customers, escalating into life-threatening situations that forced her to relocate. In contrast, Ruang reflects on her own experience as a feminine-presenting lesbian, acknowledging her own set of challenges while highlighting the intensified risks faced by those with a more masculine appearance.

Adinda further reinforces this point, highlighting that threats are more pronounced for LBQ individuals who express their gender in a masculine way. She talks about how some of her masculine-presenting friends who work in the mining industry are belittled and exposed to personal safety challenges because of their perceived gender expression. They are treated as if they should handle harsh working conditions due to their masculine appearance.

“They are treated as “you’re a man,” but it’s meant to belittle them because they think, “you’re a man, so you should be able to handle it,” as in being forced to stay up all night and work until midnight is acceptable for men. But from our perspective, it exposes them to other vulnerabilities in the field, especially when working until midnight.” (Adinda, Indonesia)

Donna also points out that this discrimination occurs not only at the workplace but also in places of residence. She also relates an incident where certain boarding houses have rules against allowing individuals with tomboyish appearances to stay. Only those with long hair and those who do not appear too masculine were allowed to stay in some places. Donna herself was once abruptly kicked out of her rental home at 2 a.m., and

believes that the discrimination she faced was due to her masculine appearance and behaviour.

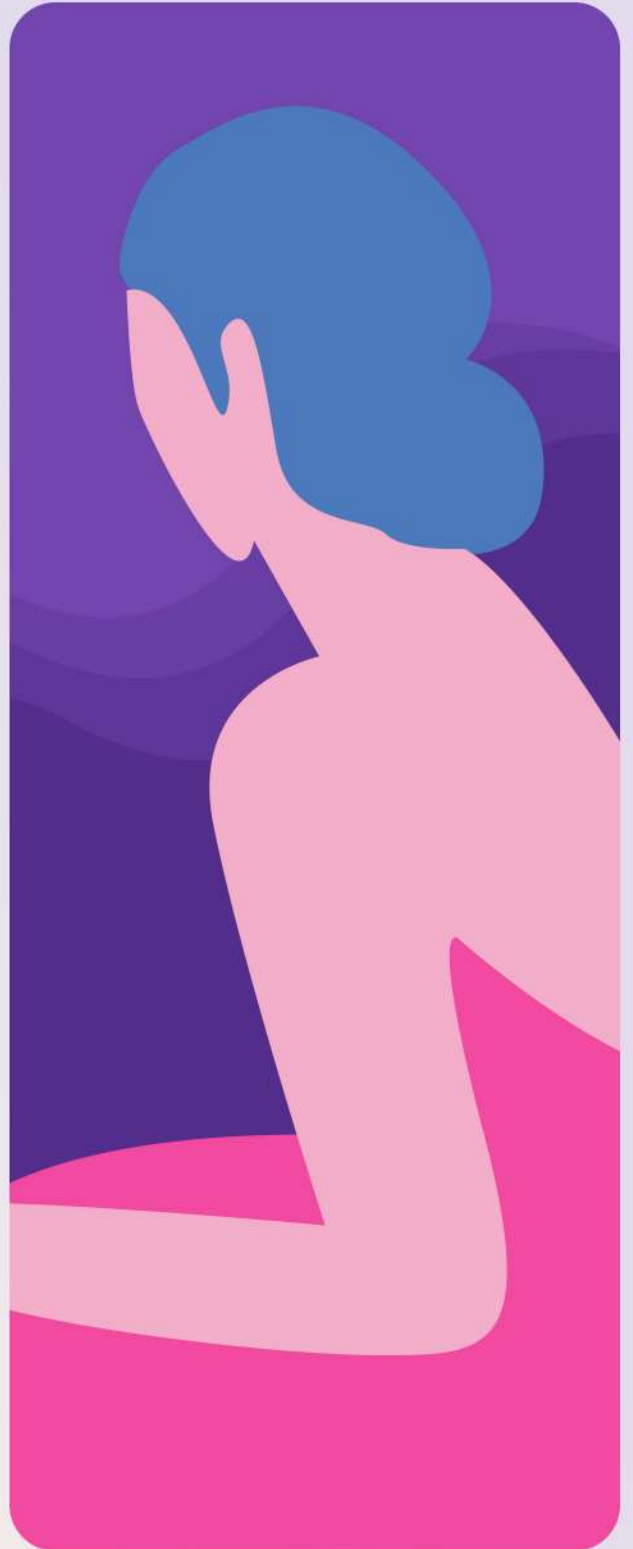
YuYu also remarks on the persistence of gender stereotypes in her country, leading to a lack of acceptance when LBQ individuals express their identity in a way that does not conform to the traditional norm, such as women being feminine and men being masculine. Hence, YuYu believes that the LBQ community, particularly masculine-presenting individuals, are compelled to hide their identities and orientations out of the fear of non-acceptance and potential discrimination. This causes a lack of visibility and understanding for LBQ people.

Irish also shares her experience of discrimination due to her masculine expression, particularly concerning the mismatch between her gender expression and the gender marker on their official identification documents.

“I’m masculine expressing. Yeah, I wear masculine clothes. But when you show your ID, you have female [laughs]. So they look at you up and down [...] you see, when somebody looks at you differently because you have a different ID from your expression, that, for me, is already a discrimination. As it makes you feel like there’s something wrong with you.” (Irish, Philippines)

Donna also narrates a similar experience when using public restrooms. Although her appearance is not extremely masculine, it still leads to assumptions and discrimination. During one instance while she was travelling by train, Donna wore a jacket and a cap, which may have

contributed to her more masculine presentation. As she entered the restroom, she was denied entry to the "Ladies" restroom and was directed to use the one marked "Men" instead. Donna asserted her identity as a woman, but the staff was sceptical. It took her removing her mask and opening her jacket to challenge their assumptions and gain access to the restroom appropriate for her gender identity. This discrimination based on appearances persisted in other instances as well.



Safety Strategies Deployed by LBQ Activists

To ensure safety and acceptance in the community, Andi officially registered her organisation under the Registrar of Companies – a choice that she shares is common among civil society groups in Malaysia. This decision stems from the heightened protection and safety it offers compared to registration under the Registrar of Societies.

During their organisation's establishment, Andi and her team conducted thorough research to determine the safest method of registration. They considered various options, such as a limited liability partnership (LLP) or a private limited company, also known as Sendirian Berhad²¹. While the foundation route appeared to be the safest, they acknowledged its high cost, making it less viable given their capacity and resources at the time.

After consulting with other civil society organisations and law firms that had opted for LLP registration, Andi and her team found it to be the most fitting. This choice enables her organisation to solidify its legal standing, strategically paving the way for greater safety and acceptance in their community, positioning them to better advocate for LBQ rights, and work towards achieving their goals.

Drawing from her extensive activism experience of over 20 years in Cambodia, Pisey emphasises the importance of learning from past lessons and incorporating contextual analysis into their discussions. She highlights that their analysis isn't solely for the sake of donors but rather aligns with activists' own system of logic.

Pisey outlines the complexities of the political landscape, which involves various players such as the government, other movements, NGOs, donors, and influential individuals who can shape perceptions and judgements. Calculating how their organisation should position itself among the interplay between these factors is vital for the success of their advocacy work.

“How do we communicate to make them understand that – who we are, and what we want, and why we want it, in a way that – that non-confronting, and non-judgmenting and avoiding having more labels for LGBT+ communities and activists.”
(Pisey, Cambodia)

Pisey concludes by reiterating the need for caution in her organisation RoCK's approach, emphasising the importance of thoughtful communication to achieve its objectives.

21 A "Sendirian Berhad" (Sdn Bhd) in Malaysia is similar to a private limited company. It offers limited liability to shareholders, meaning their personal assets are protected from the company's debts. A minimum of one shareholder and one director residing in Malaysia is required. The company is a separate legal entity, able to enter contracts and own assets. It must comply with regulations, including filing annual statements. More information can be accessed at <https://relinconsultants.com/sdn-bhd-in-malaysia/>.

In Indonesia, LBQ activists contend with unsafe environments and potential threats. To tackle these challenges, Donna’s focus is on ensuring safety within her organisation. It has developed Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to guide actions and navigate tough situations effectively. Donna explains:

“[W]e focus on how to care for the organisation. One of the things is to create security and care SOPs for the organisation. This is very important.”
(Donna, Indonesia)

She also recounts an incident that took place on February 16, 2022, during which banners expressing anti-LGBTIQ sentiments were erected in multiple locations throughout her region.

“[W]e were scheduled to have a members’ meeting, and our friends quickly gathered at the secretariat. They said, “Hey, there’s a banner installation.” I asked, “Where?” They replied, “At the mosque.” I inquired further, “Which mosque?” They answered, “Near the market, near [name of the area] market.” Alright, we proceeded with the meeting. After the meeting, I went there, and it turned out to be true. There were indeed banner installations that said, “Stop LGBTIQ.” In 2022, it was just “LGBT,” but in 2023, they added “IQ.” This means there was an addition. After mapping it out [...] as of February 16, there were 22 banners in several locations. I can’t mention all the specific locations yet.”
(Donna, Indonesia)

This event led her to consider adopting a new strategy. Thus, to discreetly continue

their work, she cleverly placed a sign reading “How to calculate overtime pay” on the door during activist discussions leading to International Women’s Day. This strategy enabled her activity to continue, yet lingering fear among participants complicated their focus on their goals.

Another security strategy involves using a sewing machine as a cover. By placing it in their meeting space, they can pass off the area as a spot for clothing repairs. This subtle move adds security and presents a low-key image, deflecting attention from their actual activities. Donna acknowledges their ongoing efforts to fundraise for the sewing machine.

Moreover, to minimise potential risks and discrimination in certain settings, Donna emphasises a practice where individuals pair up based on gender expression — femmes with femmes and butches with butches. This strategy aims to mitigate the possible risks of a visible LBQ presence.

Leo also shares a strategic approach to maintain a secure meeting space. Initially, their group used his vendor’s place to meet, but its perception as an “LGBT meeting place” led them to reduce their visits to evade unwanted attention. Leo ensures that official meetings no longer occur there, exploring alternatives for safety. They adopt an infrequent and casual meeting approach.

Leo also invites members to meet during activities at workplaces, sidestepping conspicuous gatherings to lower their risk of being detected. Moreover, as an activist in a highly discriminatory area, Leo stays informed about the Sharia police and joint operation schedules. He remains cautious

and reminds peers to look out for themselves during these times, emphasising personal responsibility for safety awareness.

Leo also stresses the need to be familiar with rules, mentioning limitations such as not sitting at 24-hour stores or coffee shops past midnight due to potential violence, particularly for feminine-presenting individuals. Local adherence avoids confrontation and threats, showcasing proactive safety navigation amid strict regulations. Thus, in regions such as Banda Aceh, staying informed, cautious, and rule-aware guides LBQ activists such as Leo through identity and activism challenges.

Communication and mutual support play a crucial role in safeguarding the safety and well-being of LBQ activists. Irish emphasises the significance of maintaining open lines of communication and checking on each other's safety, such as using online chats and messaging, to convey their situation and seek assistance when feeling unsafe.

Irish provides an example of their support system in action, recounting an incident involving a friend who was red-tagged. In such instances, they rally to support their friends in need emotionally and psychologically, monitoring their situation and helping them navigate the challenges they face. However, Irish also points out that the support provided is contingent on the activists' level of connection to their communities. In some cases, LBQ activists may need to move between different houses or locations to ensure their safety.

***“Those who can support them are actually based in their communities.*”**

“Cause they have to jump from one house to another.” (Irish, Philippines)

Some LBQ activists also implement strategic approaches that involve engaging with their communities and building connections with local authorities. These community engagement efforts play a crucial role in ensuring their well-being and security. Anne emphasises the significance of integration with communities and networking with the local government union, creating an element of protection for themselves.

Moreover, community organisers make a conscious effort to build familiarity not only with the LBQ individuals they work with but also with their families, fostering a sense of safety within the community. Irish affirms that their main threat now comes from the government, particularly due to red-tagging, since LBQ activists have publicly and actively organised for their communities.

Donna also highlights the importance of community engagement. She and her friends engaged in making takjil (food for breaking the fast) during religious observances such as the Ramadan fasting month, and delivered it to local mosques as a gesture of goodwill. Through this act, they aimed to build closer ties with the community and demonstrate their intention to support those in need. Despite their efforts, the activists remain cautious, understanding the need for ongoing awareness and protection.

Digital security holds paramount importance for LBQ activists. Donna recognises Facebook and WhatsApp's roles in communication, maintaining ties with other organisation peers in Jakarta or

women’s organisations to gather updates. Yet she’s cautious about posting publicly on social media platforms, avoiding posts revealing personal information or locations that could attract unwanted attention. Donna stresses phone security too, urging friends to delete compromising photos from their devices.

Leo also underscores vigilance on monitored social media, shying away from official Instagram accounts. While WhatsApp is where most of Leo’s community discussions take place, exchanges on sensitive topics are reserved for in-person meetings. Meanwhile, Pisey highlights navigating social media’s risks and the risk of misinterpretation or information manipulation online. She recommends thorough discussions before sharing information or engaging with others online in order to ensure that they are represented accurately after that. In the digital era, vigilance becomes key.

Ensuring acceptance and support within her organisation is a priority for YuYu when she interviews potential staff. She assesses potential non-LGBT staff members’ attitudes towards the LGBT community to ensure alignment with Lashio Tomboy and Lesbian Group’s values, believing that this cautious approach fosters a supportive and safe working environment.



The Safety Disparities: Gaps in Achieving Security among LBQ Activists and Individuals

In the face of an unsafe environment, LBQ activists have employed diverse strategies to safeguard their well-being and advocate for their rights. They have worked tirelessly to foster understanding within their own community, maintain digital security, and engage with local authorities for protection. Despite their relentless efforts, there remain significant gaps that demand attention.

One of the key issues they face is fostering self-acceptance and confidence in terms of sexual orientation among fellow activists, such as in Donna's case. Some of them still believe that they're sinful or destined for hell due to societal norms and prejudices.

Donna believes that empowering individuals with the understanding that they are not sinners and that their sexual orientation is valid and not condemned is essential for their safety and well-being. This newfound confidence will enable

them to stand up for themselves, fight for their rights, and eventually advocate for others in the future. Donna sees strengthening education and self-empowerment as critical paths to liberate her friends from the burden of self-blame.

Implementing Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), or a Safety and Security Protocol, is essential for ensuring the safety and security of LBQ activists and their organisations. However, there are challenges to consistently implementing these procedures.

Donna highlights the difficulties arising from the oversight and potential neglect of these vital protocols. Similarly, Leo acknowledges the effectiveness of the strategy among friends within his organisation, but points out that when it is extended to the broader membership, challenges arise as some members merely listen to the protocols without implementing them, raising concerns about consistent adherence.

Moreover, in the context of his region, where strict rules govern social activities, some members may knowingly engage in prohibited actions, assuming occasional leniency. This nonchalant attitude towards rules, such as consuming alcohol in restricted areas, can lead to disturbances and community reports against LBQ persons, posing further safety risks for LBQ activists in the region.

Information leaks present a pressing risk for LBQ activists in Indonesia. Leo paints a troubling picture: outsiders attending organisational events can unwittingly expose them to others. Innocent inquiries about their whereabouts inadvertently

reveal their affiliation, sparking curiosity and allowing outsiders access to sensitive details. This spirals into investigations that endanger activists' security.

Adinda also delves into challenges for LBQ and GBQ individuals in her region, spotlighting differing organisational approaches to advocacy and visibility in Indonesia. Multiple Indonesian LGBTIQ groups deem her region safe, openly showing their affiliation to the LGBTIQ movement. However, Adinda notes negative repercussions in the region for those who prefer discretion in order to not draw attention to their sexual orientation or gender identity for various reasons, such as concerns about discrimination, stigmatisation, or safety.

When more visible advocacy takes place, it can inadvertently affect those who are trying to maintain a more discreet approach to protect themselves. Facing threats, Adinda's response remains uncertain due to her newness to the area. Seeking support, she hesitates to involve her organisation in public-facing LGBTIQ advocacy work, since she herself as an individual is perhaps better poised to offer help. This disparity exposes a safety net gap among LBQ activists, who might lack reliable organisational support to address threats effectively.

The safety of LBQ activists also faces a notable gap concerning the lack of a strong network of queer parents within the LGBT community, particularly those who have children. Suri highlights the challenges she encountered as a queer parent in Malaysia, emphasising that there are not many individuals in similar situations who can provide support or guidance.

This dearth of queer parents within the community makes it difficult for LBQ individuals with children to find someone who has firsthand experience navigating the complexities of parenthood while also belonging to the LGBT community. This leaves LBQ activists such as Suri feeling isolated and without access to a support system that can understand and address her unique needs and concerns.

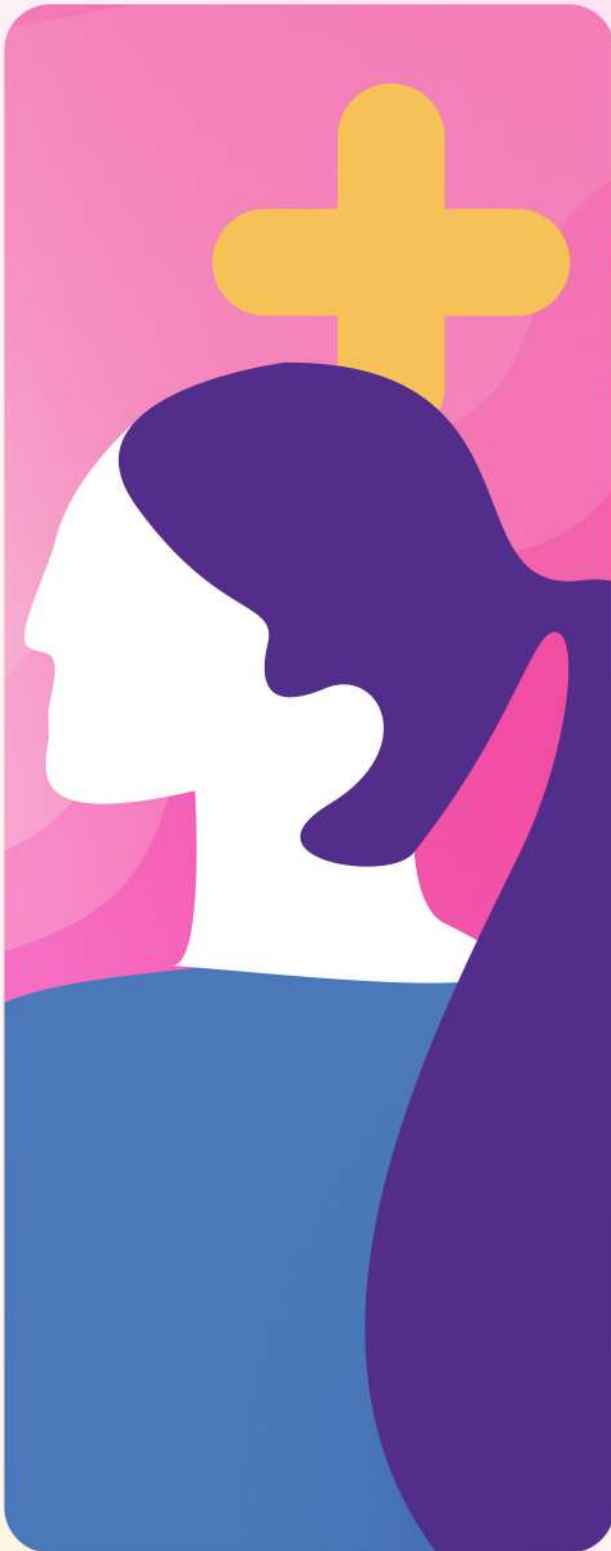


“What’s the point of revolution if we cannot breathe?”

THE HEALTH AND WELL-BEING OF LBQ ACTIVISTS

In the world of LBQ activism, the profound and pressing issue of activists’ physical well-being lingers behind the pursuit of equality and rights. The LBQ activists that we interviewed find themselves grappling with a multitude of physical and mental health challenges. This chapter delves into the health conditions faced by these activists, their access to essential services, the challenges they face in maintaining their well-being, and the strategies they employ to navigate those challenges and safeguard their health.





The Physical Well-Being of LBQ Activists and Access to Healthcare Services

During our interview with our informants, we discovered that good health seems to be an elusive concept, and the words of Tao from Thailand echo a collective sentiment: "Nobody that... in our... the activists — LBQ activists that I know, I don't see anyone that has good health. Everyone has health issues." Their bodies bear the weight of various ailments, casting a shadow on their overall well-being. Cysts or masses within their wombs, diabetes, high blood pressure, migraines, severe allergies — these are just a few of the battles they endure.

Leo's account offers a glimpse into the impact of trauma from lived experiences on LBQ activists' physical health.

“I used to have a really hard time getting to know myself. I experienced that. Then I threw away everything that’s in my room, it doesn’t matter whether I need it or not, I threw it all away, including money. Then there was a time when I was unconscious for 3 days. There was one time when I couldn’t even walk. I also couldn’t pee until I had to attach a catheter.”
(Leo, Indonesia)

Moreover, long-term stress takes a toll on LBQ activists' health. Adinda's familiarity with gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD) highlights how stress exacerbates its symptoms. Stress, an unwelcome companion heightened by her work, intensifies her struggle with her health.

Echoing this sentiment, Pisey acknowledges the influence of stress on her well-being. However, armed with self-awareness, she diligently follows her doctor's advice and engages in various treatments to mitigate its impact.

Activists are also constantly on the move, juggling advocacy work and projects, rarely finding respite. Their bodies, fatigued and depleted, are susceptible to illness. Andi's candid confession about falling sick after a relentless period of travelling and activism highlights the toll that this constant pace takes on her health. Unfortunately, she often finds herself unable to prioritise self-care due to the pressing demands of her circumstances.

“[...] I haven't been sick for this long [...] because I was just back, I was back from... it was a back-to-back travelling. I was in New York for two weeks for an advocacy thing. And I came back a couple of days, and then

after that, I went to Chiang Mai for advocacy project-related stuff. And after return[ing] from Chiang Mai I fell sick. And I haven't been, I haven't been able to get back to my feet, on my feet since then. So it's been four days I've been sick. Yeah, so, but, but I do of course, I would want to prioritise my well-being as well [...] But I don't... unfortunately, it feels to me it's a privilege to prioritise them, considering my current situation.”
(Andi, Malaysia)

As LBQ activists age, the burden on their physical health becomes even more pronounced. Donna acknowledges the toll that age takes on her body, as constant fatigue weighs her down as she navigates her commitments to her organisation. The strain of organising and working late nights on the computer and the physical demands of her activism leave her feeling the strain more acutely over time.

Donna, armed with her National Health Insurance-Indonesian Health Card (KIS), finds solace in knowing that her treatments come at no cost. Though the coverage extends solely to treatment, she recognises the importance of regular check-ups for monitoring her blood sugar levels, haemoglobin (HB) count, and cholesterol. Resourceful as ever, she seeks out discounts offered during odd months, making the most of every opportunity to ensure her health remains a priority.

Andi, acknowledging her privilege, can afford private healthcare that many in Malaysia may not have access to. She opts for private clinics when she falls ill, with their efficient and prompt services enabling her to swiftly address her health

concerns. While she recognises her own advantage, it is a reminder that disparities in healthcare access persist, leaving some LBQ activists in a more vulnerable position.

Pisey, aware of the need to prioritise her physical health, takes a proactive approach to care. She navigates the intricate web of grants and resources available, deftly manoeuvring between her organisation RoCK's funds and donor support in covering her own and her team's healthcare funding. Recognising the importance of preserving resources for her team, she taps into available support, utilising a donor package to cover her medical expenses. In doing so, Pisey fights not only for her own well-being, but also to make such healthcare opportunities available to the rest of her team.

Regrettably, the journey to access healthcare services for LBQ activists is fraught with barriers and disparities within the system. Tra's experience in Thailand exemplifies challenges with free government healthcare, marked by prolonged wait times that discourage LBQ individuals from seeking non-urgent help. Ruang echoes this, emphasising how extended waits for government medical care cause delays in receiving timely treatment.

Thai hospitals' hierarchical structure compounds these issues. Tra notes blame-shifting among staff, while ineffective management contributes to negative experiences for patients and healthcare professionals alike. Overwhelmed nurses might respond harshly towards LBQ individuals, distressing LBQ activists sensitive to inequality. This fear of mistreatment further discourages them from seeking medical help.

Furthermore, the challenges towards finding healthcare extend beyond the LBQ community to other economically disadvantaged people. Anne's observations of the urban poor in Quezon City in the Philippines illuminates the widespread issue of restricted access for the financially vulnerable. Despite Quezon City being a hub for activism and government services in Metro Manila, healthcare accessibility there for LBQ individuals and the broader lower-income population remains arduous.

Donna sheds light on the challenges faced by LBQ activists, many of whom are also garment factory workers, when it comes to accessing healthcare. One significant hurdle arises when attempting to navigate the national healthcare insurance coverage offered by the Indonesian Health Care and Social Security Agency (Badan Penyelenggara Jaminan Sosial, or BPJS), a process complicated by their employment situation. These workers frequently switch between factories on short contracts, lasting just three months each. This continuous movement forces them to repeatedly arrange and manage their BPJS coverage.

Even after they manage to seek medical attention and securing a doctor's note when they fall sick, the situation remains complex. While some workers do receive payment for time off, others have shared that despite having the necessary documentation, they weren't compensated by their employers. However, they accept the reality that they won't receive their rightful compensation for sick leave, even though this also means they avoid being scolded by supervisors.

Discrimination emerges as a significant barrier that LBQ activists face when attempting to access healthcare services. The narratives shared by Leo, Andi, YuYu, and Donna shed light on the discrimination experienced by LBQ individuals, particularly those who identify as trans. Leo's account from Indonesia reveals instances of being put aside and discouraged during visits to healthcare facilities due to his gender expression, which then deterred him from accessing healthcare services.

Similarly, YuYu's experiences in Myanmar underscore how mismatched names and expressions result in mockery and discrimination from healthcare professionals. This scrutiny, coupled with intrusive questioning, hinders trans individuals from accessing medical assistance. Andi's perspective from Malaysia deepens this narrative, underscoring the elevated challenges that trans individuals face. They encounter challenges such as stigma, misgendering, and dead-naming during healthcare interactions.

Donna's insights further illuminate the apprehension that trans men have in healthcare settings. Members of her organisation express reluctance to visit clinics or hospitals, fearing uncomfortable looks, invasive examinations, and the violation of their privacy. The fear of being exposed or subjected to judgement prevents them from prioritising their health needs.

"[I]t becomes an extreme feelings of terror for trans men friends, yes, for transmen friends.[They express the fear that] "I'm afraid that if something were to happen to me on the street,

then I will be taken to the hospital, then without mine or my partner's knowledge, they would immediately take off my clothes, that is my worst fear." (Donna, Indonesia)

Andi also adds another layer to the discussion, highlighting the distinction between seeking healthcare for general ailments versus addressing sensitive matters that may need activists to reveal their SOGIE. While flu or fever may be attended to without exposing one's SOGIE, the complexity and potential discrimination faced by LBQ individuals in healthcare settings are clear.

"But in terms of like, accessing government health care services, if it's flu or, you know, like fever, I think it's — you can access without any issue, I feel. Yeah. Because you don't have to expose your... apa ni (what is it), your SOGIE kan (right), if it's flu or anything you don't have to... to some extent you don't have to, I don't think you have to expose your SOGIE when you are accessing these services." (Andi, Malaysia)

Furthermore, Andi emphasises the taboo and stigma tied to accessing sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services, particularly obstetrics and gynaecology (ob-gyn) services related to reproductive systems. Suri echoes similar sentiments regarding the challenges she faces. Although services such as sexual and reproductive education, family planning, and screenings are generally available, the prospect of disclosing one's sexual orientation to a gynaecologist adds complexity to the experience.

Suri's concern leads us to Irish's perspective. Irish reveals that, for a long time, she hesitated to undergo essential female checkups, such as Pap smears for cervical cancer screening. However, as Irish aged, she recognised the importance of informed healthcare decisions. During a checkup, she encountered an intriguing dilemma when questioned about her sexual activity. The query, "How many times have you had sex?" prompted her to contemplate the nature of the term.

Most healthcare providers in the Philippines only consider penile-vaginal intercourse as medically valid, disregarding lesbian sexual encounters. Meanwhile, informing them of her lesbian identity often leads to further inquiries. Irish's experience sheds light on the lack of inclusivity in reproductive healthcare, which typically centres around cisgender, heterosexual women.

Moreover, Irish challenges the conception that lesbians face a higher risk of cervical cancer due to a lack of heterosexual sexual activity, stressing that cervical cancer risk is influenced by various factors beyond sexual activity.

Anne further accentuates the difficulty LBQ individuals encounter in opening up and seeking SRH services, stemming from issues of confidence and gender identity struggles. One of her butch lesbian friends, for instance, may hesitate to visit ob-gyns, as they may be reluctant to acknowledge their gender as women and uncomfortable with their context.

Irish also reveals that many lesbians and butch women lack knowledge of where to receive essential checkups, and some aren't even aware of the necessity of doing so. This awareness gap underscores a

critical reproductive health deficiency for LBQ individuals.

Irish also highlights a significant challenge in motivating lesbian women to undergo checkups requiring vaginal or cervical examinations, given the stigma and discomfort surrounding these procedures that compounds the complexity LBQ individuals face when accessing reproductive healthcare services.

Furthermore, it's crucial to acknowledge that cases of abuse in the healthcare system can deter LBQ individuals and activists from seeking necessary checkups. While not directly related to healthcare centres, past trauma can significantly impact an individual's willingness to engage in health assessments, particularly invasive ones. Such cases underscore the need to consider the broader context of LBQ individuals' experiences with reproductive healthcare access and education.

The narratives shared by LBQ activists reveal the myriad of challenges they face in accessing healthcare services, from enduring various physical ailments, exacerbated by the demanding nature of their activism and the passage of time, stress and constant busyness that leaves little to no room for self-care.

The journey to access healthcare is fraught with barriers and disparities, particularly for economically disadvantaged individuals and discrimination against LBQ identities. Taboos and stigmas surrounding sexual and reproductive health add further complexity, making both LBQ activists and individuals hesitant to disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity during medical consultations.



“It's a nightmare of your life. It's worse than the government threat”: Exploring Stressors and Mental Health Challenges Faced by LBQ Activists

The mental health of LBQ activists is intertwined with their community's and organisation's challenges, heavily influencing their overall well-being. For example, Donna's worries extend to her organisation's members, who are LBQ factory workers facing an adverse work environment.

Physical exhaustion resulting from the demanding nature of their work is accompanied by constant beration if they fail to meet daily targets. Hurtful comments such as "You're big, yet you can't sew!" not only affect them physically but also disturb them mentally and psychologically. Instances of unjust blame for broken machines being placed on Donna's friends further adds to their distress.

The combination of economic challenges, an unsupportive work environment, and the immense stress experienced by Donna's friends has led some of them to contemplate ending their lives. Necessities such as rent also strain their already stressful lives, as they also have faced personal financial losses due to COVID-19. Being denied pay for their sick leave days exacerbates their difficulties.

Amid these trials, Donna not only leads but also acts as an emotional pillar for the members of her organisation. Feeling the weight of her responsibilities for others, Donna grappled with the struggle of finding someone to confide in. As the leader, she felt the need to project strength and resilience, unable to confide in her peers.

"When I've returned [from the region where the members of her organisation live], when my back is wet from [name]'s tears, from [name]'s tears, whoever tears it is that drenched my back [...] you know that they're still very young. I can't confide in anyone, and I'm embarrassed to confide in someone higher up."
(Donna, Indonesia)

The weight of her responsibilities and the fear of revealing her vulnerabilities also prevented her from shedding tears in front of her friends. She knew that even a simple question such as "Why?" or "What happened?" would cause them to break down in tears themselves, and crying herself would only magnify their pain. So, she remained steadfast, providing them a shoulder to cry on and absorbing their anguish silently without revealing her own. Yet, beneath the surface, she pondered the choices that had led her to this point.

She questioned why she had not pursued higher education, believing that with a well-paying job, she could have supported not just herself but also her friends. These reflections show her desire to uplift others and alleviate their struggles.

"[S]ometimes I was just like, "Why didn't I stay in school, why do I have to be poor, why are my parents poor, if I go to graduate school maybe I can have a good job, well-paying job, my money could benefit many of my friends, but, well." (Donna, Indonesia)

Pisey also provides an insight into the weight of responsibility and the internal struggles faced by Cambodian LBQ activists whose lives carry intricate complexity even as they carry out their activist work capably. As a co-leader of her organisation RoCK, Pisey highlights the heavy obligations, roles, and responsibilities that come with it. At the same time, activists are not always in the best state of health themselves.

Pisey describes this internal balancing act as a fight that transcends even political threats, and can feel even worse than the pressures imposed by the government.

"There's an ongoing fight within us and within me, that's very hard. So it's not political threat, but it's a nightmare your life. It's worse than the government threat."
(Pisey, Cambodia)

Irish's story adds another layer to the discussion, into the complex intersection of identity, geographic location, and belonging. Her situation after having to leave her country to seek refuge in France,

combined with employment struggles, led her into depression. Her education and English-language proficiency, advantageous in her home country, lost significance in France, where fluency in French is key to securing job prospects. For her, they are scarce, and mainly limited to house-cleaning or nanny roles, each with its own difficulties, deepening her financial woes.

Isolation from friends, family, and community becomes a recurring theme in Irish's experience while the foreign environment and language barrier heighten her isolation. This loss of a sense of belonging compounds the challenges she faces in navigating her new life.

“I don’t have the social network here. I don’t have my friends, my family, I don’t have my community here.”
(Irish, Philippines)

Connecting with a supportive community proves arduous due to the language barrier. Without French proficiency, community support and volunteer work remain inaccessible. After all, as an activist, Irish finds immense value in feeling needed and contributing to her community as it provides her with a sense of purpose, affirming her worth, and making her feel like an integral part of something greater. However, her transition to a new country has disrupted this.

“How can we feel needed, like—I need something because, you know, for us it’s our worth, you know. How we’re giving something to the community, and it makes you feel better. Makes you feel like you are needed, that you can contribute, you can still contribute.” (Irish, Philippines)

Moreover, while she acknowledges that she is still an Asian LBQ woman, the physical distance from Asia raises questions about her continued participation in LBQ organisations and her ability to offer insights and perspectives. She wonders if her credibility to speak about LBQ organising in her hometown, Iloilo, is diminished by her physical absence. The struggle to reconcile her current reality with her past involvement fuels her sense of being relegated to history, as if her experiences and perspectives are no longer relevant or actively considered.

The sentiment of isolation, albeit stemming from different causes, resonates with other LBQ activists we've interviewed, impacting their well-being. One form of isolation is estrangement from family. Tra states that LBQ activists, particularly the younger generation, are navigating political movements amid government resistance and hostility. This affects their relationships with family members, parents, and even grandparents who may hold different political views and conservative values, creating a political clash that elevates stress, intensifies isolation, and fosters depression.

Adinda's isolation stems from familial voids, burdened by her becoming the family's sole provider after her parents' passing. While her siblings accept her, Adinda conceals her orientation from her parents' other relatives. This solitude has led her to navigate life independently, recognising a lack of family support and envisioning a future without it.

*"[...] I am not supported by my family at all, not even one percent. I'm truly on my own. It's like I'm living without a family [...] So, when I die, I won't be with my family, they won't take care of me. Since my parents passed away, I have been truly alone, and I'm the only one trying to help my family. Other than that, nothing."
(Adinda, Indonesia)*

Ruang's experience of isolation is deeply rooted in her geographic and cultural context. Hailing from a conservative area in Thailand, she finds herself disconnected from her hometown, unable to freely express her identity as an activist and lesbian there. Together with other like-minded individuals, they have sought refuge in larger cities such as Bangkok, where they can make their voices heard and establish organisations that advocate for their rights.

During a New Year's visit back home, Ruang encountered the familiar scrutiny and mockery from her neighbours regarding her sexuality and personal life. Despite the discomfort, Ruang felt compelled to engage in a conversation with one of her family members, in which she attempted to explain her perspective and challenge the narrow-mindedness surrounding her identity. However, her efforts were met with avoidance and misunderstanding, with her family perceiving her as overly aggressive.

Ruang states that this type of social dynamic is prevalent in rural areas, where the conservative norms and lack of acceptance create significant barriers for LBQ individuals. The collective rejection and avoidance from her family and

community members compound her feelings of isolation, making it increasingly challenging for Ruang to bridge the gap between her activism and her personal relationships.

Another form of isolation for activists is the feeling of being alone in their struggles, a sentiment rooted in their perception of being different, facing societal pressure, and struggling to find acceptance. Donna struggled with self-acceptance when working in an Indonesian factory as a lesbian woman, as she grappled with questions of identity and societal expectations, amplifying her isolation.

Reflecting on her teenage years, Tao from Thailand discloses her battle with depression. Seeking out her own identity, acceptance, and understanding, she sought guidance from a psychiatrist, only to realise that the psychiatrist struggled to comprehend her attraction to girls, hindering her treatment progress and self-discovery. LBQ individuals can be isolated even when seeking such professional help, as mental health practitioners might not fully understand the intricacies of their experiences.

Pisey shed light on the unique sense of isolation she experienced, even when surrounded by other Cambodian LBQ individuals. While they share a common identity, their interactions remain on a surface level, avoiding deeper discussions about their shared experiences. Pisey attributes this avoidance to the complicated and political nature of LBQ issues and the challenges some of her high school friends face in fully grasping the complexities involved.

“Some of my high school friends are lesbians, but we didn’t talk in a deeper way, because this is so complicated and political and it’s not easy for some of my high school friend[s] to understand.”
(Pisey, Cambodia)

Moreover, several LBQ activists interviewed are no strangers to the exhausting battle against burnout, including Suri whose busy and fast-paced life engrosses her in various tasks and responsibilities, so she’s always on the move and rarely taking a break. This busy lifestyle has become an ingrained part of her identity, and contributed to her burnout. Recognising that she is exhausted and overwhelmed by the demands of her job as an activist, Suri grapples with knowing how to address it effectively.

Anne from the Philippines also shares her ongoing experience of burnout, describing it as a constant struggle to keep up with her demanding work while having limited resources. Andi also added to this, stating that the lack of human resources within her Malaysia-based organisation leads to an overwhelming workload for herself and her colleagues.

This burnout also extends to their staff, making it challenging to retain team members to alleviate their burdens or to ensure the continuity of their organisation’s work by appointing successors. Thus, activists have to juggle multiple projects and responsibilities, leaving little time for self-care or addressing their own well-being, which perpetuates the cycle of burnout.

Additionally, Anne notes that activism’s time-intensive nature and delayed tangible outcomes versus more visible private sector gains cause frustration among long-term activists. The disparity between actions taken and outcomes achieved can be disheartening, not to mention the need for constant funding and perpetual projects.

As an Executive Director, part of Anne’s responsibility is to secure financial support for her organisation. However, this continuous need for funding has had a detrimental effect on her self-worth and confidence. Anne expresses how constantly asking for money, reporting, and being held accountable for funding diminishes her self-esteem and negatively impacts her mental health.

“Because it’s not as if you’re spending it for yourself. You’re spending it for the community, but you’re made to feel that that you have to be reporting constantly because they need to know that you’re spending it wisely or — and not for yourselves.” (Anne, Philippines)

The situation is exacerbated by the feeling that activists’ work is not given enough importance or value. When funders do not allocate sufficient financial resources, activists may start questioning the significance of their work, as it seems to align more with the priorities of the funders than their own goals and aspirations.

Anne highlights how this dynamic can erode their sense of self-worth, making them feel like mere checkboxes on a funder’s list. Despite the potential for activist organisations to receive a

significant grant, the underlying sentiment is that funders' involvement with LBQ groups is primarily driven by funders' own need to fulfil certain requirements.

While taking a break is an essential part of preventing burnout, the weight of responsibility might be one of the challenges that prevent some of the LBQ activists that we interviewed from doing so. Andi, Anne, Donna, and Suri express their struggles with taking a break from their organisations and activism due to concerns about their continuity and progress.

As the founding director of her organisation, Andi finds herself caught in the demanding role of leadership, in which she faces the pressure to ensure the continuity of her organisation and the advancement of LBQ rights. This keeps her engaged in her work, making her often neglect her own need for rest. Anne acknowledges that the weight of responsibility and the fear of losing momentum prevent her from fully stepping away from activism.

Donna's concerns arise from the understanding that much work remains to be done in challenging and dismantling the oppressive systems rooted in Indonesia's patriarchy and religions. Suri also acknowledges that, as an activist, her job is deeply intertwined with real-life issues and societal struggles in Malaysia. This intertwining makes it challenging for her to disengage and find respite from the pressures she faces, which can lead to exhaustion. Activists' dedication and commitment to their community make it challenging for them to step away, as they see the ongoing need for their support and advocacy.

Andi reflects on her organisation's commitment to well-being by implementing a policy known as a "mental health break." This policy allows individuals to take a day off every month solely dedicated to their mental well-being, providing respite from work-related thoughts and responsibilities. However, Andi confessed that she hasn't been able to take advantage of this policy personally as her workload demands her constant attention. She also humorously acknowledges that although she has secured funds for engaging counsellors and therapists, she's ironically unable to utilise these resources due to the never-ending stream of tasks.

Similarly, Pisey also shares the struggle with taking breaks despite her Cambodian organisation RoCK's policy of allowing members to take extended periods of rest. She can only recall a few instances where she managed to take a maximum of three days off. Pisey's dedication to her team and the movement makes it difficult for her to detach herself and focus on self-care. While guilt is not a prominent emotion for Pisey, a strong sense of responsibility permeates her mindset. She sees leadership as a conscious choice, and with that choice comes a deep commitment to doing her best.

Pisey's standards and principles constantly remind her to meet her own expectations and those of her team. This dedication can take a toll on her mental health, leading to cycles of stress and moments of depression. Despite the challenges, Pisey remains driven by her commitment to lighten the burdens for her team members and the LBQ community as a whole.

These narratives shed light on the inherent difficulties LBQ activists face when it comes to taking breaks, maintain a sense of normalcy as an individual, and prioritising their mental well-being. The weight of leadership responsibilities, coupled with a deep sense of duty, can lead them to set aside personal rest and self-care. The constant drive to make a difference, combined with the fear of falling short of balancing the personal, professional, and political parts of life, might create a cycle of pressure and stress.

Moreover, the LBQ activists we interviewed vividly expressed the toll that accumulated injustice takes on their mental health. Suri, when asked about the hostile environment towards the LGBTIQ community in her country, candidly acknowledges that the constant exposure to queerphobia and discrimination does affect her. Despite her efforts not to let it consume her on a daily basis, she admits that it lingers at the edge of her consciousness. Suri acknowledges that there is resilience that is built over time within the LGBTIQ community as well, as they continue to fight against a system that often feels as if it's always against them.

“Sometimes it– it broke your heart, you have to constantly deal with their queerphobia kan [...] So it's tiring at some level. But, you know, nobody said it was going to be easy, right. So this is what we do. And I feel like that's why LGBT people are so resilient, you know.” (Suri, Malaysia)

Pisey shares her perspective on depression within the LBQ community in Cambodia, highlighting that it does not stem directly from activism but from the challenges faced on individuals' personal journeys.

Similarly, Tao recognises that the mental health burdens and stress experienced by Thai LBQ activists result from the accumulated injustices they've encountered throughout their lives.

Ruang succinctly captures the essence of this journey, explaining that many in the LBQ advocacy field are driven by their own traumatic experiences:

*“I think people who are working in this area, I mean, LBQ people, it start from their trauma.”
(Ruang, Thailand)*

Many of the LBQ activists we had the privilege of interviewing shared their deeply personal narratives, shedding light on the lived experiences of profound injustices they have personally experienced and/or witnessed within their communities. Adinda, for example, shares the countless injustices that she experienced, starting with her encounter with harassment from her neighbour, a distressing incident that resulted in her being unjustly blamed due to her choice of clothing. This experience reflects the victim-blaming often faced by women and LBQ individuals.

Adinda then discloses the sexual assault she endured from her stepfather. She tells us that she refrained from disclosing the abuse due to her mother's pregnancy and the helplessness that she felt during those times. On top of this, another assault perpetrated by another person led to her own pregnancy. Discovering her pregnancy at the three-month mark, she returned home, only to face physical abuse from her own family, who was oblivious to the fact that her own own stepfather had also subjected her to

assault. During that time, she was also forced to halt her education due to her pregnancy status.

Despite expressing her desire to terminate the pregnancy, Adinda's family refused her request, citing religious and moral reasons. Thus, she was compelled to keep the child against her will due to the family's belief that abortion would be a sin. This decision further exemplifies the challenges faced by individuals who seek reproductive autonomy and choice, as Adinda's agency and right to make decisions about her own body were disregarded.

Adinda's narrative also touched upon her experiences as a sex worker, where she faced yet another form of victimisation. She recounted an incident where a client refused to pay for her services and threatened her with a knife.

Some of our informants also recount the deep-rooted struggles faced by LBQ individuals in the face of a patriarchal society that enforces oppressive obligations upon them, which impact their well-being and cause immense distress. These include the expectation that they provide financial support to their families, and agree to forced marriages.

Tra shared that many individuals within her circle in Thailand are expected to financially support their families. Despite striving to earn their own income, this responsibility weighs heavily on them. In some cases, their partners may be the primary breadwinners, creating an imbalance of power and contributing to feelings of stress and inadequacy within their relationships. Additionally, for those who remain unmarried, the burden of

caring for elderly parents falls upon them due to societal expectations of women.

However, the patriarchal obligations burdening LBQ individuals do not end with providing financial support; these individuals are also expected to conform to traditional gender roles. Donna recounted the story of an Indonesian member who succumbed to family pressure and entered a marriage with a man while she was in a relationship with a woman.

She experienced immense torment and internal conflict, feeling trapped and disconnected from her true identity, with thoughts of feeling trapped in a life she never wanted. The emotional toll became evident through her self-destructive behaviour and the questioning of her own agency and consent.

"[S]he lamented that "Turned out I feel tormented, you see. I was at home with my husband but my thoughts were with my partner, and I was in so much pain. What should I do? Getting married is not what I want. It is what my parents want" [...] So... the thought... the thought that she should... have to... in her mind, the thought of "What if I have to sleep with someone I don't even love on Friday night", like that, "Was I raped, or what?"." (Donna, Indonesia)

Pisey also reflects on the societal pressure placed upon women to meet others' expectations often at the cost of denying their own authentic selves. The weight of fulfilling societal roles as grateful daughters and normal mothers leaves little room for personal fulfilment, and it's

immensely difficult for such LBQ individuals to find someone who truly understands their pain and the toll it takes on their mental well-being. The facade of strength crumbles, revealing cracks in their armour, leading to trauma, depression, and a profound sense of isolation.

“As women, how many more do we have to do to satisfy people around us, to be accepted as . . . grateful daughters, as normal mothers, and then can you just be you? You can’t because [of] the whole ideas of what people want from you. So, you are distressed but you don’t know why you are distressed or who you could talk to, you pretend to be strong all the time, but we are cracked. We are not always strong to be able to pretend in a bigger world, in front of our families and children. That’s why most of us have this trauma, post-trauma, and depression.”
(Pisey, Cambodia)

The impact of these traumatic experiences doesn’t simply dissipate with time but lingers, affecting the physical and emotional well-being of these activists. The trauma of violence and the constant struggle for acceptance can become imprinted in the mind and body, leading to a range of long-term effects.

The toll on mental health is evident, as many LBQ activists suffer from anxiety, depression, or even post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of discrimination, the fear of persecution, and the emotional strain of advocating for rights in challenging environments.

Irish vividly described the heightened state of alertness and defensive mode that

red-tagged activists are forced to adopt. This defensive mindset is not fueled by paranoia but by the real and constant threat to their safety in the Philippines. The presence of motorcycles on the roads, often associated with targeted killings, adds to their psychological burden, leaving LBQ activists such as Irish in a constant state of anxiety, hypervigilance, and emotional distress.

Donna describes the severity of the trauma inflicted upon her team member, caused by the distressing event of their house’s door being forcefully banged on, and receiving terrifying threats of arson. Such acts of aggression and intimidation contribute to heightened anxiety, fear, and a sense of insecurity. Providing support and resources to address the mental health needs of those affected by violence is crucial in fostering their well-being and resilience.

Leo also reveals that he is traumatised by simply being in crowded places, such as cafes or open spaces, due to his past experiences. Recalling a specific instance of being raided by the Sharia police, Leo vividly describes the overwhelming sense of fear and helplessness that accompanied the encounter.

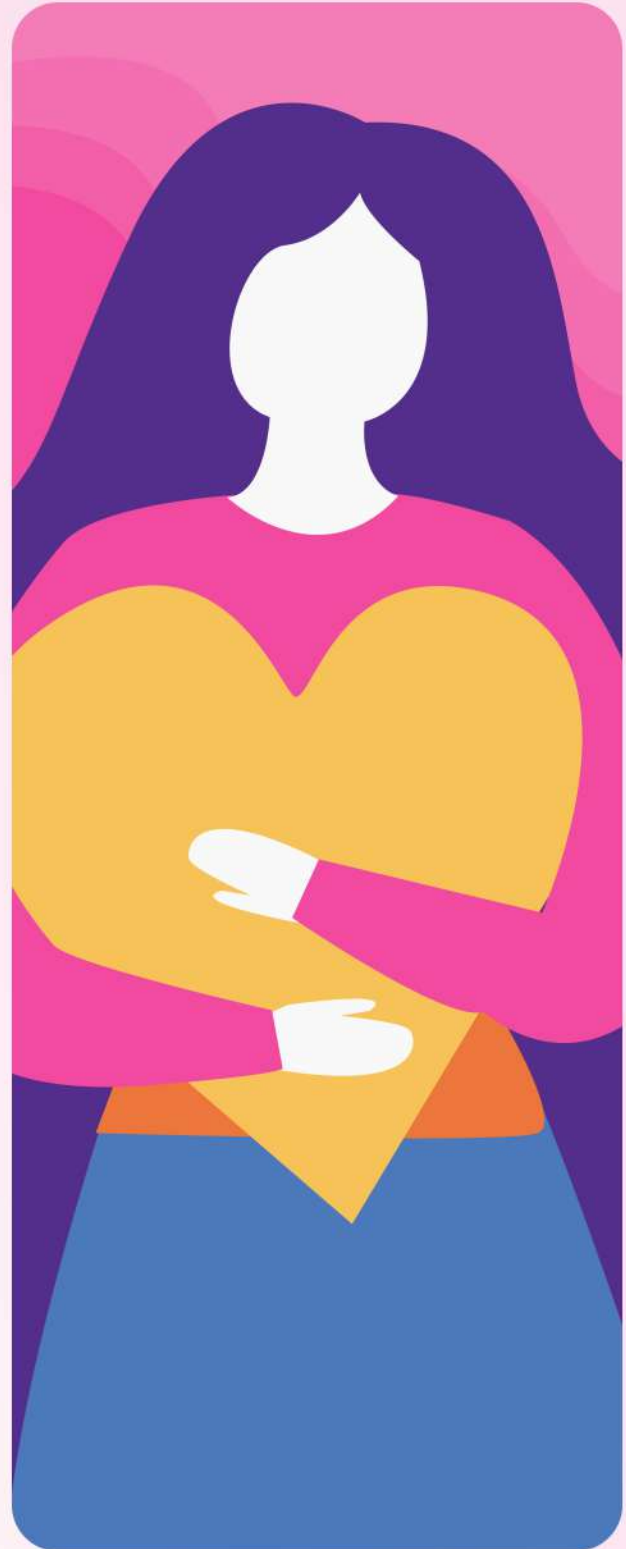
The trauma inflicted upon him during these raids has left Leo with a recurring fear response in seemingly normal situations that causes him to tremble, feel scared, and experience cold sweats, making it difficult for him to function in everyday life. Moreover, Leo disclosed experiencing panic attacks, one of which occurred during a car ride. During this panic attack, he was consumed by thoughts of impending death and felt suffocated in the confines of the vehicle.

Adinda also states that the traumatic experiences she had to endure have significantly impacted her well-being and affect her to this day. She expresses heightened concern when being around individuals who use abusive language, particularly mentioning the distress caused by a cisgender man who attacked her.

This attack may have been a result of either a lack of understanding of harassment, or intentional targeting. Adinda's fear and anxiety in public places stems from these encounters, as situations in public till this day can trigger a flood of memories and emotions in her, further affecting her mental health.

Tao also reveals that she has developed anxiety when it comes to meeting new people, particularly those from different genders, including gay male friends. She articulated a growing sense of unease and increased discomfort in these interactions.

Though she did not explicitly state the reasons behind this anxiety, this situation hints at the complex dynamics and social challenges that LBQ individuals face. Tao acknowledges that she hasn't delved deeply into this matter but recognises that it has become a part of her reality.



Mapping The Challenges of Accessing Mental Health Care and Support for LBQ Activists

LBQ activists face complexities in accessing mental health care, as our interviews reveal. Anne highlights how socio-economic concerns often overshadow mental health:

“[O]bviously there's more awareness about mental health, which is a good thing. We even have a mental health law right now. But of course, among poorer people, the issue of mental health doesn't really come up. It's just — there's too, there are too many problems to think about mental health.” (Anne, Philippines)

As Suri notes, existing mental health services in Malaysia are mostly private, creating financial barriers. Tra's organisation Backyard Politics partners with other healthcare practitioners and community organisations to create a therapist network tailored to activists' needs. Being a therapist herself, Tra can tailor care using her network and her organisation's resources, but

acknowledges the cost of providing this service. Patricia's experience in Thailand echoes this expense.

Tra also reveals the limited availability of mental health services, involving long waiting lines that hinder timely support to LBQ people, highlighting inequalities.

In Myanmar, the absence of free mental health services leaves LBQ activists without accessible options. Even within their organisations, limited budgets often restrict the availability of counselling sessions, with grants covering only a single session. This short-term approach fails to address the ongoing mental health needs of LBQ activists, leaving them without the sustained support required for healing and growth.

Moreover, sometimes, even with the existence of funding and queer-affirming services, the ability to prioritise well-being and seek therapeutic support is a privilege that is not always easily attainable. Andi emphasises the connection between economic well-being and overall well-being. She sheds light on the challenges of finding the time to engage in therapy sessions. As Andi plays the role of managing projects for her Malaysian organisation, her salary is contingent on the availability of project funding. This means she must procure more projects for the organisation to support herself and other staff members, but this divides her time and energy among various commitments, leaving limited space for her personal well-being.

Although Andi acknowledges that the financial stability of her organisation is not a standalone solution to its activists' mental health challenges, she admits that

it has become an essential consideration in pursuing mental health care for LBQ activists, as it provides the necessary foundation to prioritise and invest in their well-being.

Suri echoes this, highlighting the intricate link between economic stability and mental well-being. As an LBQ activist and parent, Suri navigates financial responsibilities and personal well-being. The presence of her dependent child adds complexity, making it difficult to prioritise her own well-being. The financial obligations tied to providing for her child's education and well-being in Malaysia make it difficult for Suri to envision a scenario where she can freely explore alternative ways of living that prioritise her own well-being.

Adinda, like many others, finds it challenging to open up and share her personal stories. She confesses that during the 25 years of her life, she has never accessed mental health care services. The deeply entrenched stigma and discrimination against LBQ individuals in Indonesia often creates an environment in which LBQ individuals feel unsafe, even during counselling sessions, where a sense of safety is paramount for an effective session. This difficulty in opening up inhibits the therapeutic process and prevents them from fully addressing and processing their emotional struggles.

The lack of mental health professionals who are knowledgeable about LBQ experiences and can provide care also creates a significant gap. The fear of not being seen or accepted for who they truly are adds an additional layer of stress to an already challenging process. Leo emphasises the difficulties in finding providers who can genuinely meet his

unique needs in his particular region of Indonesia. Tao also states that:

"I don't go to public services, and we have well-being support system for activists that I help set up, and I don't use this service [laughs]. Mmm. If I don't really, really need help I don't expose myself to therapists. Because, they can help, but at the same time, it...like for certain issues, it helps. But at the same time, it adds to my...stress of not being really seen or accepted as who I am. And who I am is complicated. it's rare to have therapists, who would...who would be able to make me feel, like, they get it. Right away." (Tao, Thailand)

Suri also highlights the need for therapists who are not only knowledgeable about LGBTIQ issues but also affirming and sensitive to their unique experiences. This calls for therapists who are well-versed in discussing sexual orientation, gender identity, and human rights frameworks. Suri points out that encountering therapists who lack this expertise often leads to the need for self-advocacy and education during therapy sessions. It can be disheartening to pay for therapy only to find oneself in the position of educating the therapist on LGBTIQ issues and guiding the conversation to meet one's own needs.

Confidentiality and familiarity also play significant roles in LBQ activists' hesitation to seek mental health care. Within the tight-knit LGBTIQ movement, mental health services often become a shared resource among activists.

Andi acknowledges the presence of therapists and mental health professionals in Malaysia who are genuinely queer-affirming and supportive. However, despite their qualifications, Andi expresses hesitance in utilising these services as she wishes for an anonymous, safe space where activists can freely express themselves, especially when it pertains to their activism and interactions with fellow activists.

Pisey also points out a significant barrier that prevents LBQ activists from accessing mental health care services: a deep-rooted sense of responsibility and a desire to prioritise the needs of others. Despite the presence of sufficient funds and support mechanisms within her organisation RoCK, some members hesitate to utilise these resources, feeling that they should give back and allow resources to be directed towards those they perceive as more underprivileged.

This internal struggle reflects the conscientious nature of LBQ activists, who recognise their own privileges within the movement. Their commitment to advocating for others and ensuring equal access to resources often leads them to prioritise the needs of fellow activists and marginalised individuals. The result is a reluctance to seek mental health care services for themselves, even when such support is readily available.

We've also discovered a gap in the mechanisms of support provided by NGOs toward LBQ activists while they're in crisis. Leo encountered challenges while attempting to access support from an NGO. During that period, Leo was under surveillance and received numerous threatening phone calls. Despite receiving

assistance to connect with the organisation, he lacked concrete evidence to substantiate these incidents, which hindered his access to the organisation's resources. This leaves him feeling helpless and unable to take action.

Reflecting on his experience, Leo shares his perspective on supporting activists and victims in similar situations, calling for a compassionate and patient approach. Rather than immediately demanding evidence or having victims fill out forms, he suggests prioritising the well-being of individuals. Evacuating them from the immediate danger and providing emotional support should take precedence.

Once they have had the opportunity to calm down, victims can then explain their experiences and provide necessary information. Rushing them to collect evidence while they are still in a state of panic may hinder their ability to articulate their experiences clearly.

“If you ask them to provide all the information right away, like filling out a form or providing data, while they are still experiencing panic and fear, they won't be able to think clearly. The victims should be supported and comforted first, and once they have calmed down, we can ask them, and they will say, 'Oh, this is what I experienced,' or 'Oh, this is how it happened,' or something like that”.
(Leo, Indonesia)



Strategies Employed by LBQ Activists to Navigate Mental Health and Well-being Challenges

LBQ activists face unique challenges in accessing mental health care services and maintaining their overall well-being. This exploration sheds light on the strategies employed by LBQ activists to overcome these challenges, the support available to them, and the ways in which they nurture their well-being.

Tao shares her organisation Backyard Politics' approach to maintaining well-being by having individual members disengage from social media platforms and instead focusing on directly promoting their advocacy issues through printed newsletters. Tao explained that Backyard Politics' members avoid accessing social media unnecessarily to prevent staff members from being exposed to the harsh comments and health risks associated with online platforms. Their priority is supporting well-being, and they believe that social media use is not worth the negative impact it can have. This strategy is also employed by Tao in her personal life.

While social media poses challenges for some activists, it can also be an opportunity to forge new communities. Irish, now in France, turns to Facebook to connect with like-minded people due to her language barrier and unfamiliarity with the social landscape. Joining groups of English speakers in France and women living in France aids her in making connections. Recently, she utilised the Women Living in Paris group to assist someone facing violence and homelessness, showcasing community power in crises.

Patricia's organisation, GIRLxGIRL Thailand, has established a supportive online space for open discussions on mental health. It offers a platform for sharing thoughts and feelings, including access to a doctor for consultations if needed, and sharing the contact information of professional therapists. To prevent overwhelming the group, the time allocated to members to share their views is limited. This approach fosters a compassionate environment for addressing mental health needs and the well-being of the community as a whole.

A reliable support system is crucial for LBQ activists as they navigate challenges. Irish draws strength from her friends, especially one who submitted an important report to IE SOGI²² on her behalf. This showcases the impact of a supportive network. Irish also finds backing from individuals who push for financial aid from the Urgent Action Fund. Their emotional support is vital and comforting as she is far from home, affirming her decision to prioritise safety.

Some LBQ activists, such as Pisey, find understanding in women's rights organisations. Pisey confided in a former Director of RoCK, finding compassion and acceptance that empowered her to open up further. Such spaces go beyond operations, becoming safe havens for authenticity. Donna echoes this, highlighting how friends in these organisations have empowered her journey and deepened her understanding of SOGIE.

Having supportive friends becomes paramount for LBQ activists' well-being. Pisey values her close-knit group, finding community and support in casual interactions. She balances conversations to ensure positivity prevails.

Suri highlights such community support as an alternative to therapy, since professional help is not always available due to its cost. A network catering to her needs provides invaluable comfort and responsiveness.

Adinda also finds strength among fellow activists who share her cause. She explains, "Usually, when I meet friends who are also fighting for the same issue, I feel better." Engaging in discussions and immersing herself in the struggles of her friends through reading, Adinda gains a sense of ease and understanding in navigating challenging situations. Occasionally, she seeks solitude in a hotel or her room, using it as a space for reflection and self-dialogue.

²² IE SOGI refers to a United Nations Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. More information can be accessed at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/ie-sexual-orientation-and-gender-identity>

As Irish previously highlighted, the sense of being needed is a powerful driving force for many activists, including Donna. Feeling needed and being able to assist others brings her immense joy and purpose. Donna deeply values the connections she forms with people who rely on her support, stating, "Meeting people who need me. I feel like that person needs me and I am needed. That's what makes me feel alive." This sense of responsibility and urgency to help others, even if it means sacrificing her own comfort, showcases her unwavering commitment to being a pillar of support for those in need.

However, there are times when the weight becomes almost too much to bear. While they may not be facing the violence firsthand in those moments, the constant stream of news about these acts of violence can inevitably exact its toll. In such cases, activists often find themselves not only hearing about others' pain but also internalising it, carrying the weight of that sadness alongside their commitment to change. In those instances when the emotions become overwhelming and there's no one to confide in, Donna retreats to the refuge of her home, seeking solace and guidance in her faith amid her own inner turmoil.

Amidst the silent hours, when the world is asleep, Donna turns to her midnight prayers. These moments become a cornerstone of her coping strategy, providing her with a sacred space for introspection and solace. From the stillness of 1 am to half past 3, she finds herself immersed in solitude, navigates her own emotions and thoughts, and draws the strength required not only to work on her personal struggles but also to continue being the unwavering support her friends rely on.

"I just do Tahajjud (midnight prayer), I pray Tahajjud, I just sit [and] I cry it all out. That's the only thing I can do. I talk to Allah, I talk to Allah, I'm already old, I hope those children won't experience what I have been through. I am content with just doing Tahajjud [...]." (Donna, Indonesia)

Moreover, among our informants, a handful of them have discovered an approach to nurturing their mental well-being—one that involves weaving moments of pure enjoyment into their lives. Tao suggests crafting a personalised routine, piece by piece, incorporating activities that bring joy and serenity, such as morning yoga, journaling, jogging, or meditation.

This approach provides consistency and a shift away from reactive mode, so activists aren't always scrambling for a lifeboat in a metaphorical storm, but rather building a resilient ship, day by day, that can navigate the roughest seas. These seemingly small acts, when woven into the fabric of daily life, can fend off the relentless grip of anxiety and preserve equilibrium.

Andi, on the other hand, reflects on the limited time available for rest and relaxation. With her busy schedule, physical activities such as hiking and jogging became difficult for her. But she still tries to make the most of what life offers with self-care involving moments of what she describes as being a "couch potato," watching Netflix, and enjoying time with friends. Although Andi recognises the concern of not engaging in physical activities as she did before, she makes the most of her available time to unwind and take care of herself.

YuYu shares her preferred activities to alleviate stress, which include reading, travelling, and spending quality time with family and friends. She finds solace in nurturing plants and being surrounded by nature, considering them helpful outlets during challenging times. For Pisey, gardening and cooking serve as therapeutic activities. She also finds comfort and support in spending time with nature, which allows her to explore different ways to enhance her well-being. By engaging in these hobbies, Pisey discovers what self-care methods work best for her.

However, self-care isn't only embraced by individual activists. Several organisations prioritise well-being as a collective effort, establishing healthy work conditions and care systems. Pisey highlights the efforts made by RoCK in this regard, where its board members, being feminist and supportive, recognise the value of such initiatives. They have established a comprehensive care system that includes provisions for health check-ups, access to additional psychological counselling, and a dedicated budget allocation for well-being initiatives.

Regular catch-up sessions are conducted to attentively listen to and monitor the team members' well-being. RoCK offers various options, such as paid breaks and flexible working hours, to ensure the team's health and productivity remain optimal. Pisey stresses how the team's well-being serves as the driving force behind the realisation of their vision.

Additionally, Pisey emphasises RoCK's recognition of the significance of time off during holidays and public breaks. By extending public holidays, such as New Year's and specific days in Cambodia, the

organisation grants its members extended breaks. This allows them to fulfil personal obligations, spend quality time with family, and also dedicate time for self-care and rejuvenation.

Tra also mentions the ongoing effort to establish a healthy organisational structure. Although the process is still incomplete, measures have been taken to reduce stress and create a supportive environment. Work hours are limited to four or six hours a day, allowing for flexibility and menstruation leave. Backyard Politics encourages its members to take time off, support each other, and allocate a budget for their health-related needs. Additionally, two days a month are designated for personal happiness, providing an opportunity for self-fulfilment and exploration. Tra considers these conditions beneficial and conducive to personal growth and well-being.

YuYu describes the collective care sessions conducted once a month in the Lashio Tomboy and Lesbian Group. These sessions resemble counselling or group therapy, and include the presence of a counsellor. This organisation recognises the importance of mental health and actively seeks support and guidance to address the well-being of its members.

Understanding one's own limitations is a vital aspect of taking care of one's mental health and overall well-being, as exemplified in the experiences shared by Pisey. Having battled with depression for an extended period, Pisey recognised the need for a sabbatical and took a year off from activism. Upon her return to her organisation, Pisey discovered that the support of her fellow RoCK members became a source of renewed energy and

purpose. While acknowledging the role of psychologists in identifying and diagnosing her challenges, Pisey emphasises the significance of community and her partner in her journey towards healing.

Furthermore, Pisey highlights the prevalence of guilt among LBQ activists, stemming from a strong sense of responsibility to be part of every movement. She questions the feasibility of sustaining such high commitments without acknowledging personal limitations and the dangers of idealism.

Pisey urges activists to prioritise their well-being and to respect the decisions of individuals who may not be ready or able to participate due to their own complexities and health considerations. Through her reflections, Pisey prompts a crucial dialogue on self-care, honest self-assessment, and the necessity of establishing sustainable practices within activist communities.

"Can you be honest that you have limitations? Can you be honest that it's too idealistic? And, and Yuli, you said, it's not revolution if you cannot dance. If you cannot breathe, if you're not healthy, how can you over-committed? And why guilt, what do you get out of it? And then you repeat yourself again about self-care and collective care. Can you just listen and respect the decision of that person? Can you just listen and respect the decision of that person? Can you just listen to the deeper inner heart that they are not ready, they're not healthy, they're so complicated." (Pisey, Cambodia)

There exists a profound truth often overlooked: taking care of oneself is not an act of selfishness but an essential component of taking care of the movement itself. Irish came to a pivotal realisation: to effectively serve her community, she must first prioritise her own well-being, which is not about retreating or abandoning the fight, but about recognising that one cannot pour from an empty cup.

"So I just had to ensure that I'm safe because like, I cannot do anything when I'm dead. I can only be a symbol and a memory, I won't be able to help other people from the grave, you know? So I had to decide to secure myself." (Irish, Philippines)

LBQ activists employ various strategies to overcome obstacles and support their mental health, such as disengaging from social media to prioritise well-being, building supportive online communities, and creating safe spaces for open discussions within their organisations. Moreover, having a reliable support system, both within women's rights organisations and their communities, plays a vital role in empowering these activists to navigate their challenges.

Recognising personal limitations, promoting self-care, and establishing sustainable practices within activist communities fosters a culture that values celebration, empathy, and collective care for LBQ activists and organisations, reinforcing the notion that taking care of oneself is fundamental to sustaining and advancing the movement.

Nurturing The Movement: Recommendations to Address the Needs of LBQ Activists



From the insights gathered through our interviews, it becomes clear that placing a strong emphasis on the mental health and well-being of individuals within the LBQ movement is essential for its continued growth and effectiveness. With this in mind, we have identified several recommendations that we believe can contribute to achieving these goals.



1 Care-Focused Approach for LBQ Movement



The LBQ movement faces an urgent need for healing, as underscored by Tao. Recognising that the mental well-being of LBQ individuals is pivotal for the movement's success, there must be a deliberate prioritisation of well-being within the activist community. Tao's insight emphasises that healing is essential to foster healthy advocacy and prevent internal conflicts and self-doubt. As a marginalised group with painful experiences, LBQ activists must prioritise their own mental well-being to sustain the movement's momentum.

**“I think our priorities in LBQ movement, I think, first is the right way to heal together as a movement.”
(Tao, Thailand)**

Furthermore, Tao envisions LBQ activists as leaders in prioritising care within the movement. She emphasises that the heaviness of their experiences necessitates their focus on well-being in order to survive, and expresses hope that a care-focused approach, often neglected in patriarchal approaches, will find its place within the LBQ movement.

Believing that activist voices will pave the way for change, Tao highlights the importance of hearing from those who have directly experienced suppression and providing a safe space for them to express their concerns. By doing so, we can gain a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by LBQ activists in organising and advancing our movement.

To implement these vital changes, time, resources, and commitment must be dedicated to focusing on the care and well-being of LBQ activists. Safe spaces for healing, self-reflection, and support should be established. Initiatives that promote well-being, such as physical activities, creative outlets, and self-care practices, should be developed and supported to cater to the diverse experiences and preferences of activists. These initiatives should also be framed as part of everyday activism.

Furthermore, a healthy work-life balance should be promoted within activist culture by framing activism in a sustainable manner that encourages self-care without guilt or hesitation. Activists' commitment is like a flame that will flicker in a storm – so to sustain their passion for their cause, they must protect their own flame. By securing their safety and nurturing their own spirit, they also fortify the very foundation from which the movement can flourish. This would not be an act of selfishness but a courageous act of self-preservation that empowers them to continue their tireless efforts for change.

Personal well-being and collective progress are intertwined. By tending to their own flames, LBQ activists kindle a brighter future for their movement, ensuring that their impact resonates far beyond their own existence.

2 Ensuring the Well-being of LBQ Activists through Adequate Funding and Support

Adopting a care-focused approach would be impossible without the necessary funding. Thus, it is crucial to advocate for it when engaging with donors. Pisey has already outlined her effective strategy for communicating with the government, highlighting the importance of conveying who activists are, what activists aim to achieve, and why activists seek it, in a manner that is non-confrontational and non-judgmental. This approach can be extended to donor advocacy.

First and foremost, it is important to communicate to donors as to why some queer organisations are unregistered and stay completely under the radar, especially within the context of Southeast Asian, particularly in countries where being “out,” be it as an LBQ individual or as an LBQ or LGBTIQ organisation, could pose a significant risk. While there are formal and structured LBQ or LGBTIQ organisations, for unregistered organisations, having this kind of structure is not their end goal.

These less formalised LBQ initiatives often adopt a grassroots approach, focusing on community support, advocacy, and awareness at a localised level. The choice

to remain unregistered may stem from a desire to maintain flexibility, allowing them to swiftly adapt to evolving community needs without the bureaucratic constraints that formal registration might entail. Their primary objective is to address the pressing challenges faced by LBQ individuals and the broader LGBTIQ community, and their strategies reflect the unique socio-political circumstances of their regions.

By avoiding formal registration, these organisations can more discreetly operate in environments where official recognition may expose them to discrimination, legal challenges, or even physical threats. It's crucial to understand that their unregistered status does not diminish their significance or commitment to advancing LGBTIQ rights; rather, it is a strategic response to ensure their continued existence and efficacy in regions where visibility can be perilous.

In supporting these organisations, donors should recognise and respect their choice to operate in a way that prioritises safety and impact over formal structures. By acknowledging the diversity of approaches within the LBQ and LGBTIQ advocacy

landscape, donors can foster a more inclusive and effective support system for those striving to create positive change in challenging circumstances.

Moreover, there's an enduring expectation that activists, particularly those within LBQ organisations, should operate on a shoestring budget. While it's true that profit isn't the primary goal of LBQ or LGBTIQ organisations in general, the practical reality is that activists need financial resources to lead well-rounded lives while continuing their crucial advocacy work.

In instances where there is limited funding available, LBQ organisations may find it challenging to provide competitive salaries and benefits to their staff. This can create difficulties in attracting and retaining talented individuals who are dedicated to the cause. Struggling to attract talent, these organisations might struggle with high turnover which is a constant drain on experienced advocates.

With insufficient funding, these organisations face difficulties in providing adequate resources for their staff. They're stretched thin in terms of time, money, and personnel, making it nearly impossible to prioritise the well-being of their team members. Activists, who are already giving so much of themselves to advance social progress, should not be burdened with the stress of struggling to make ends meet or dealing with inadequate support systems within their organisations.

To address this, there urgently needs to be a radical shift in the culture of funding. Donors must move away from expecting activism to be cheap, self-sacrificial labour. Ensuring that activists lead healthy

and well-balanced lives isn't merely a "reward" for their contributions — it's a fundamental right they deserve as human beings. By providing fair compensation, benefits, and the necessary resources, donors can empower these organisations to create lasting change without compromising the well-being of their team members. Recognising the worth of the work activists do and respecting their needs for financial stability, personal growth, and support is essential for sustaining their passion, dedication, and impact in the long run.

Collectively communicating this issue to donors is crucial. This brings about the next point: the narratives of LBQ activists must be gathered and effectively communicated to donors, recognising that many donors may not have direct experience in advocacy work and may not fully grasp the realities faced by LBQ activists.

Moreover, it is essential to underscore why the well-being of these activists serves as the very backbone of LBQ movements, and why activists' well-being must be an integral part of our strategic planning. To convey this message effectively, activists and fundraisers might need to use language that resonates with donors, for instance, by illustrating the potential consequences of overworking their CEO — and how such a scenario would impact their organisation or business. Furthermore, as Tao has pointed out to us, activists seeking funding need to emphasise that movement-building and human rights work are intricate and not always quantifiable through immediate tangible outcomes such as legal or social advancement.

3

Fostering a Culture of Celebration and Empathy



During our interview, Pisey highlights the importance of celebrating and appreciating every effort made by LBQ activists. Pisey suggests that it is crucial to allow activists the space to contribute in their own way and then for fellow activists to genuinely appreciate and admire their efforts, even if they cannot personally be involved in a particular project or initiative.

Showing empathy and acknowledging the contributions of fellow activists is an essential aspect of collective care. Pisey believes that sometimes activists give up and feel disconnected from the movement because their efforts are not recognised or appreciated. She stresses that even a tiny show of appreciation can make a significant difference in sustaining the movement.

Organisations and activists might begin by actively celebrating each other's achievements, regardless of scale, to create a sense of belonging and motivation within the community. This can be achieved through regular recognition and acknowledgement of individual contributions and milestones. By appreciating and valuing each person's unique contributions, showing them empathy and support even if they can't be directly engaged in activities, the movement can cultivate a supportive and inclusive environment that encourages activists to continue their vital work. Additionally, building a culture of appreciation can help retain passionate activists and prevent them from feeling disconnected or overlooked, ultimately contributing to the long-term success and impact of the LBQ movement.

This might also be one of the ways in which generations of activists can create a sense of unity, motivation, and a space for meaningful dialogue to drive their

movement forward, bridging gaps between age groups.

The younger generation of activists brings fresh perspectives and innovative ideas to the table. They question traditional approaches, challenge boundaries, and aspire to pave new paths for the LBQ movement. Simultaneously, the older generation of activists might grapple with feelings of uncertainty, questioning their place and value in a rapidly evolving landscape.

However, this divide doesn't have to be a source of conflict. We can recognise and appreciate the progress made thanks to the dedication and perseverance of earlier generations that has paved the way for current opportunities and exploration of new directions. This recognition can be a unifying force, and help create a space where both generations can come together to appreciate and learn from each other. The collective wisdom of experience, combined with the fresh perspectives of the young activists, can fuel a dynamic and effective movement that adapts to changing times while honouring its history.

Celebrating every milestone, every initiative, and every effort strengthens the sense of belonging, fosters mutual respect, and inspires everyone to keep pushing for progress. In this way, a culture of celebration can become a unifying force, mending fragmentation, fostering dialogue, and nurturing a collective sense of purpose. It's a way to honour the past, embrace the present, and work together to shape a future where LBQ individuals can thrive, regardless of their age or background, within a movement that values and celebrates each unique contribution.

4 Building Bridges:

The Crucial Need for Convening and Dialogue among LBQ Activists in Southeast Asia



The research data highlights the emerging needs of LBQ activists, particularly in the context of addressing conflicts between older and younger generations within the LBQ community. There is a pressing need for proper convening and discussions to bridge generational gaps and create space for civil dialogue. Anne from the Philippines emphasises the importance of research and dialogue as essential tools for progress.

Ruang from Thailand stresses the significance of bringing together LBQ activists from different generations to learn from each other's experiences, share best practices, and envision a collective future. Building a strong network within the LBQ community in Southeast Asia is vital.

Additionally, the discussions can serve as an opportunity to collect valuable data about the specific challenges and lived realities of Southeast Asian LBQ activists, even those forced to leave their countries. Pisey acknowledges the importance of the expertise and knowledge that each person possesses, irrespective of their educational background, and suggests gathering and sharing this knowledge in a way that benefits everyone. This data can later be used to highlight the unique issues faced by Southeast Asian LBQ individuals, to voice their needs to potential donors.

Ruang also believes that having discussions can help LBQ activists understand their needs better and enable activists to design services and policies that address those needs. By involving LBQ activists in such dialogues, they can advocate for themselves and avoid relying on external perspectives that might not fully grasp their experiences.

Furthermore, the discussions can also focus on effective strategies for safety and care within LBQ communities. Andi from Malaysia points out that these discussions should contextualise the impact of various issues on LBQ organisations and individuals, considering the nuances that differentiate them from other LGBTIQ groups.

To ensure the success of such discussions, it is essential to involve LBQ activists who are part of organisations, as they can mobilise others within their areas. This approach can help integrate the dialogue on activist empowerment into organisational programming and make it a more sustainable effort.

5 Fostering Empowerment and Solidarity: The Crucial Need for Supportive Networks among LBQ Activists



Our interviews highlight the emerging needs of LBQ activists, particularly the necessity for a supportive network that can provide guidance and assistance. Anne from the Philippines emphasises the importance of a network connecting ASEAN LBQ activists, such as the Asia Feminist LBQ Network, emotionally and mentally, not just financially, to address common issues.

Pisey from Cambodia eloquently emphasises the importance of peer and community support within the LBQ community. She believes that genuine acts of humanity and kindness, such as a simple hello to someone in need, are crucial for fostering a culture of solidarity.

According to Pisey, such small acts of compassion demonstrate that unity and support are possible within the community, leading to more significant advocacy efforts. She sees the LBQ community as a collective force with various roles to play, and the support they provide each other is essential to fulfilling their responsibilities.

Irish also stresses the need for a network where LBQ activists can check up on each other, offer support, and feel valued for their contributions to the community. She emphasises the significance of feeling connected and needed, which can enhance their sense of worth and self-esteem. Suri from Malaysia also emphasises the importance of not feeling alone, as this feeling can be a significant source of stress and anxiety for LBQ activists facing personal challenges, such as custody issues.

Pisey places great emphasis on building a genuine sense of sisterhood within LBQ organisations and movements, where individuals feel the energy, empathy, and support of their fellow LBQ individuals, regardless of their location or circumstances. Having this kind of support system gives a sense of spiritual security and confidence, which she considers a resource far greater than money.

Ruang from Thailand also points out that while funding is important, a communication system and network are equally vital for LBQ individuals living in rural areas who may face discrimination and lack access to services and support. Just like Ruang, Irish also discusses the need for a secure communication system that allows LBQ activists to report threats or seek shelter. She suggests a small grant or financial aid to facilitate temporary relocation to safer places, along with an international network ready to accept LBQ refugees when needed. She also highlights the importance of training for those receiving activists, ensuring they create safe spaces that offer psychosocial support and understanding.

Thus, the emerging needs of LBQ activists call for the establishment of a comprehensive network and communication system. This network would serve various purposes, such as offering emotional support, providing information about job opportunities and grants, and ensuring safety and shelter during emergencies. By fostering a sense of belonging, solidarity, and care, this network can empower LBQ activists to continue their advocacy and build a stronger and more resilient LBQ community.

6 Network of Queer-Affirming Therapists at the Regional Level

Based on our interviews with our informants, it is evident that there are many significant barriers in accessing mental health services. Economic constraints prevent some from seeking professional help, while others struggle to find service providers who are LGBTIQ-literate in a field lacking LGBTIQ-affirming professionals. Additionally, the fear of encountering homophobia or a lack of understanding from counsellors and service providers has led to hesitancy among LBQ activists to seek psychological support, raising concerns about potential re-harming and re-traumatizing clients during the help-seeking process.

Moreover, some activists hesitate to access a network of queer-affirming therapists because queer-affirming mental health services often become a shared resource among the tight-knit LGBTIQ movement. This limited availability of therapists creates challenges for activists, who may feel reluctant to use the same mental health providers as their peers.

In light of these challenges, there is an urgent need to establish a comprehensive network of queer-affirming therapists accessible to all LBQ activists. It is important that therapists have a deep understanding of the unique challenges and experiences faced by LBQ individuals to provide effective and sensitive mental health care. Moreover, to further enhance the effectiveness of the network, continuous education and training programmes should be provided for therapists. These programmes should focus on LGBTIQ competencies, cultural sensitivity, and staying up-to-date with the latest developments in LGBTIQ mental health research and practices.

To expand and fortify this network, we propose the creation of a robust referral system and a centralised directory of qualified and trustworthy therapists from the ASEAN region. This central database should not only encompass a list of therapists from each ASEAN country, but also include specific listings for therapists who can provide their services in English. This expansion ensures that LBQ activists are not constrained by geographical boundaries when seeking therapy. It simplifies the process of locating appropriate therapists, eliminating the uncertainty and potential risks linked to accessing unverified providers.

To promote ease of access, the network should incorporate a user-friendly online platform. This platform would empower LBQ activists to effortlessly access information about verified providers, book appointments, and connect with queer-affirming therapists from various geographical locations. By providing this virtual space, individuals in remote or rural areas, as well as those facing mobility

constraints, will be able to readily access mental health services.

In addition to these measures, we recommend forging partnerships with LBQ organisations and mainstream mental health NGOs. Collaborations of this nature would raise awareness about the network's existence and encourage engagement among LBQ activists, ensuring that mental health support is readily accessible to those who need it, regardless of their location or linguistic preferences.

To avoid reluctance to seek help due to shared limited resources, the network should include a wide variety of therapists with diverse backgrounds, expertise, and approaches to ensure that LBQ activists can find the right match for their specific needs and preferences. Moreover, given the potential sensitivity of the issues discussed during therapy, the network must prioritise confidentiality and privacy for all clients. Strict guidelines and protocols should be established to protect the identities and personal information of LBQ activists who are seeking support.

Recognizing that economic constraints can hinder LBQ activists from accessing mental health services, the network should include an option for pro bono services. By providing free or low-cost counselling sessions, activists who lack the financial means can still receive the vital support they need without financial burden.

7

Holistic Well-Being Workshop for LBQ Activists

Patricia from Thailand emphasises the importance of addressing the mental health and overall well-being of LBQ activists, by implementing workshops or learning sessions that aim to increase their wellness and teach effective methods for managing stress and challenges faced in society, as providing a supportive environment where activists can learn and share their experiences will be beneficial for their mental health and overall resilience. Workshops can include programs that offer strategies to cope with stress and depression, especially for those who find it difficult to express their true selves.

Thus, to support the mental and emotional well-being of LBQ activists, we propose the implementation of a comprehensive holistic well-being workshop. This workshop will focus on equipping LBQ activists with practical self-care and safety skills that foster resilience, and providing a safe space for self-exploration and growth. The aim is to enable LBQ activists to apply these methods to their own lives and subsequently disseminate them to their community members.

The well-being workshop should be thoughtfully designed to cater to the unique needs and challenges faced by LBQ activists. It should be facilitated by experienced trainers or professionals who have expertise in mental health, trauma healing, mindfulness practises, and LBQ-specific issues, with customised activities to ensure active participation and engagement.

The workshop can also partner with mental health professionals, including LBQ-specialised therapists and counsellors, to provide guidance and support throughout. Their expertise can offer deeper insights into the mental health challenges specific to the LBQ community, ensuring that the workshop's content remains relevant and effective.

In addition, the workshop should also emphasise building emotional resilience to cope with the pressures and adversities that LBQ activists may encounter. Through guided discussions and activities, participants can explore strategies to manage stress, overcome challenges, and maintain a positive outlook.

Creating a supportive and non-judgmental environment is crucial for the success of the workshop. Encouraging participants to share their experiences, challenges, and successes can foster a sense of community and provide opportunities for peer support.

To ensure the long-term effectiveness of the workshop, ongoing support and follow-up sessions should be provided to the participants. This could involve periodic check-ins, virtual support groups, or access to resources that reinforce the concepts and practices introduced during the workshop.

The workshop's design should also go beyond being a one-time event. It should empower LBQ activists to become facilitators themselves. Interested participants can be trained with the skills and knowledge needed to lead similar workshops within their community. This approach creates a sustainable impact, as LBQ activists can continue to support each other and their community long after the initial workshop, creating a supportive and compassionate community for more LBQ individuals.

Continuous evaluation and improvement are essential to gauge the effectiveness of the workshop, so participant feedback should be collected to identify areas of strength and areas for enhancement, then used to refine the workshop's content and approach, making it even more impactful for future participants.

8 Towards Inclusive Healthcare to Support LBQ Activists' Well-Being

Based on the data and narratives provided by LBQ activists regarding their challenges in accessing healthcare services, several recommendations emerge. Sensitization and inclusivity training for healthcare providers are essential to better understand and support the unique healthcare needs of LBQ individuals. Creating LGBTIQ-friendly spaces in clinics and healthcare centres is crucial to providing a safe and welcoming environment for activists to disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity without fear of discrimination.

"[...] I think we need more of education only focused on them and not mix them with straight or cis-gendered heterosexual women. Yeah. Because even when I was having my self check, I was conscious of the eyes of cisgender, hetero women looking at me [...]."
(Irish, Philippines)

Based on Irish's account, targeted education and support programs should be implemented, focusing on the unique healthcare needs of LBQ individuals, especially concerning their reproductive health. Providing accurate information and resources tailored to their experiences, concerns, and challenges can empower LBQ individuals to prioritise their health.

Empowering LBQ activists with information about available resources, grants, donor support, and insurance options can then in turn help them prioritise their health needs while continuing their advocacy work.



Conclusions

The professional and personal journeys of LBQ activists in Southeast Asia are fraught with significant challenges, from the absence of adequate legal protection to the lack of funding and support mechanisms for their well-being. The struggle to secure laws that safeguard the rights of LBQ individuals as a whole is also a pressing concern, and even in countries with such laws, their weak implementation leaves activists vulnerable. Additionally, the lack of protection for human rights defenders further exposes LBQ activists to discrimination and violence from various sources, impacting their safety and well-being.

The economic situation of LBQ activists is precarious, with many struggling to make ends meet. Their reliance on program-based grants forces them to take on multiple projects, straining their mental and physical health. The absence of flexible core funding – meaning funds that go into operators' budgets for them to use as they deem fit to achieve their mission – adds to the burden, leaving them uncertain about the future and unable to prioritise self-care.

Cultural support remains insufficient, as LBQ activists continue to face discrimination and violence in various aspects of their lives, be it from family, workplace, or the general public. This compounds the challenges of sexism they already endure as assigned female at birth. Masculine-presenting LBQ individuals are particularly vulnerable to discrimination, often feeling compelled to hide their identities and restrict their movements to avoid further harm.

The health and well-being of LBQ activists are significantly impacted by the demanding nature of their activism and the stress it brings. Accessing physical healthcare already proves difficult due to barriers, disparities, and stigmas surrounding sexual and reproductive health.

On top of that, seeking mental healthcare in Southeast Asia is riddled with challenges for activists, including economic barriers to treatment, limited access rights, and common negative views of mental healthcare within society. Despite efforts among healthcare providers to establish queer-affirming therapists, the scarcity of mental health professionals who understand the challenges LBQ individuals face remains an obstacle.

The mental health of activists cannot be separated from their organisational and community contexts, as the weight of responsibilities and societal expectations takes a toll on their mental well-being. Many LBQ activists experience isolation and loneliness without people whom they can trust to understand this, lacking a supportive network to lean on during difficult times.

As a result, LBQ activists often hesitate to seek help due to confidentiality concerns and their sense of responsibility toward the safety of fellow activists that leads them to prioritise other matters above their own healing.



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