

The Edge of Queer



Lessons in
Liberation from
Bisexual Asian Women

“This is the
longest conversation
I’ve ever had about being
bisexual, without someone
telling me I’m not.
So, thank you.”

–Bisexual Woman Human Rights Defender, Thailand

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Your Journey Through This Report

This report plays with the idea of edges. It documents bisexual women's perpetual relegation to the edges of community life, interrogating the "how" and "why" and "to what consequence" of anti-bi discrimination. It also centers the testimonies of bisexual Asian activists who are charting new feminisms, building new futures, and living at the cutting edge of queer.

For that reason, the report begins, rather than ends, with recommendations. The 18 bisexual Asian women we interviewed know that their freedom will not come from short-term interventions, but from transforming the systems that constrain their lives. Their recommendations include creative, concrete steps towards justice and liberation, alongside repeated calls to fund the long-term, exploratory work needed to deliver that transformation. Having had the distinct honor of learning from these 18 women over the past eight months, our advice is to read closely. If you are invested in women's autonomy, queer joy, Indigenous rights, land reform, eradicating housing precarity, or thwarting authoritarianism, these recommendations are for you.

We continue with a letter from AFLN's executive director and the methodology section, which collectively ground us in the why and how of this project.

Next is the Anti-Summary. It offers reflections, political framing, and key investigative findings, but does not attempt to "summarize" the diverse and radical expertise of the women featured in the following chapters.

The literature review details seven months of research and data analysis conducted by the Senior Researcher and Research Assistant, analyzed thematically, geographically, and across numerous other axes. We hope, in the future, to secure the resources to publish and further analyze the results of our background research. To our knowledge, it was the first in depth survey conducted which maps existing research on bisexual women's rights in Asia.

(In the meantime, those interested in the nitty gritty of our data collection and analysis are very welcome to contact us.)

Parts 1 through 6 feature the stories, expertise, humor, and trauma of 18 bisexual Asian women and non-binary human rights defenders from 15 countries. We sought to create a journey for readers akin to the one we had while conducting this research. We walk through what we asked, why we asked it, and the incredible conversations that followed. We also collaborated with artist Sravya Attaluri on a design and layout to tell these stories in color. Think of Parts 1 through 6 as a look-book into the lives of powerful activists, supplemented by our written analysis and brought back to life through Sravya's incredible art.

The testimonies from interviewees are longer than you might expect to find in a human rights report. This is intentional. We consciously rejected the impulse to pick and choose – as we so often do in these types of reports – a tiny snippet of text that proves our point but divorces it from the fullness and richness of the life of the woman who spoke it. A testimony we placed in one thematic section could likely fit just as readily in another. What is a bisexual project, after all, if not a self-aware affront to norms of categorization.

That said, we had to organize this somehow because we promised Jean a report. The thematic selection of topics is our own. These include bisexual women and the care economy; land, property, and housing rights; the emotional labor of bi women in human rights movements; motherhood; and bisexual dating across castes and ethnicities. We readily acknowledge that these are imbued with our biases and perspectives. There are countless other themes, titles, and narrative strands to explore. We invite you – the reader, the funder, the policy maker, the movement leader – to continue this work.

In solidarity,

Erin & Nhi

Bisexual Asian Women's Expertise & Recommendations

This section details the recommendations, demands, and creativity of 18 bisexual Asian women and non-binary interviewees. The research team crafted additional recommendations based on our literature review, data collection, and systematic analysis of interviewee testimony.

Justice and freedom for bisexual people require systems change.

This means removing the economic, social, and legal barriers that prevent women from leaving unsafe homes, renting their own apartments, or traveling without a male chaperone. It means developing a radical politics of marriage that grapples with both the desire for companionship and the fury of women who learn that their personhood is not complete until it is legally bound up in another. It means dismantling the idea that unmarried women should rightly inherit care responsibilities that could be shared across siblings.

It means rejecting the idea that bisexuality is retrograde or dated, dismantling the notion that bisexuality is inherently transphobic, and interrogating why some members of the queer community are made to hold the projected prejudices of others. It means upending the idea that bisexuality is a lesser middle ground between two legitimate identities – the thing left over when someone is neither gay nor straight. It means recognizing bisexuality for the radically destabilizing force for liberation that it is and always has been.

But how, exactly? Start with the below.

Recommendations for Donors

1. Establish long-term, sustained funding for bisexual women's rights work, supporting projects that focus on structural change, capacity building, and movement resilience ensuring that bisexual funding is not limited to short-term events or reactive programming.
2. Fund and support participatory research which addresses the intersection of bisexuality with other identities held by women in Asia, especially those traditionally underrepresented in discussions and narratives about bisexuality. This includes, among others: transgender bisexual women; young bisexual women and girls; older bisexual women; bisexual AFAB non-binary people; bisexual women who hold specific caste, Indigenous, and ethnic identities; bisexual women in exile; bisexual women rights defenders; bisexual women from rural areas; and bisexual women with lived experiences of various disabilities.
3. Establish and promote, in multiple languages, the existence of emergency funds specifically for bisexual activists and communities, with distribution mechanisms managed by bi-led groups who understand the diverse and often overlooked forms of crisis bisexual people face.
4. Create dedicated mental health and care funds to support bisexual activists, recognizing the unique emotional labor they perform in sustaining both queer movements and broader social justice spaces.
5. Include dedicated funding streams and budget lines in annual grant-making strategies for bisexual-specific research and data collection, ensuring studies disaggregate findings by SOGIE, and document bi+ women's unique needs in housing, health, labor, and other rights areas.
6. Direct funding to bi-led organizations and initiatives as standalone priorities, rather than as subsidiary components of broader LGBT funding streams.
7. Invest in intersectional, community-rooted bisexual organizing, particularly groups working at the intersections of gender, class, caste, ethnicity, land, housing, and Indigenous rights.
8. Support cultural projects in local languages, including storytelling, arts-based activism, and public education led by bi activists, scholars, and community organizers.
9. Proactively contact bisexual organizers to offer physical spaces to meet, gather, and host community events. Work with bisexual women human rights defenders (WHRDs) to design program plans that include free transportation, risk assessment, security planning, and post-event self-care for both participants and organizers.

Recommendations For Policymakers

1. Work closely with bisexual Asian WHRDs at the local, national, and regional level to ensure their expertise is incorporated at all levels of decision making.
2. Meaningfully consult bisexual Asian WHRDs at all stages of the design and deployment of services and policies related to economic justice, cultural rights, Indigenous rights, land and property rights, family law, women's rights, parental rights, and marriage equality.
3. Integrate queer-specific analysis and frameworks in gender-based violence programs and policies, ensuring that bisexual and queer women's experiences are recorded, recognized and addressed.
4. Remove barriers to accessing judicial and legal aid systems for bisexual women, ensuring they have access to domestic violence protection orders, custody rights, and legal recourse regardless of marital status or the gender of their partner(s).
5. Expand LGBT and women's rights policy reforms to include issues that disproportionately impact bisexual women, with clear policy goals, budget allocations, and accountability mechanisms that track bisexual-specific outcomes. Include bi WHRDs in the design of national LGBT and women's rights policy frameworks, and them with the funds and security necessary to meaningfully participate at all stages of these processes.
6. Under the guidance of local bisexual WHRDs to determine appropriate language, recognize bisexuality in national anti-discrimination and health legislation as a protected category to prevent discrimination and violence in legal protections, healthcare, and social service provision.
7. Collect, report, and disaggregate data on sexual orientation, with specific attention paid to bisexual populations. Use this data to inform evidence-based policy and address gaps in housing, employment, health, and safety outcomes. National statistical agencies should consult with bisexual organizations at the local and national level to ensure options for self-identification align with community language (ex: bisexual, pansexual, etc.) and local languages.
8. Reform housing, inheritance, and property laws to recognize women's autonomy, same-gender partnerships, and non-marital partnerships, ensuring bisexual women can establish homes independently and/or with partner(s) of any gender.
9. Reform healthcare-related laws, hospital regulations, and social security policies to recognize women's autonomy, same-gender partnerships, single parents, and non-marital partnerships, ensuring bisexual women can make healthcare decisions for themselves, their partners and their children without legal barriers.
10. Train sexual and reproductive health and IPV service providers on issues related to bisexuality and bi-inclusive practices, eliminating heteronormative assumptions in healthcare and crisis services.
11. Fund sustained public education campaigns, led and designed by local bi movement leaders, to counter stereotypes about bisexuality, challenge harmful myths, and promote public understanding of bisexuality.
12. Fund and support efforts that build cultural legitimacy for bisexual identities within diverse Asian contexts and histories.

Recommendations for Future Research

Interviews conducted for this report repeated indicated that future work on bisexual women's rights in Asia should address major data gaps and build stronger foundations for policymaking, funding strategies, and advocacy. Donors, governments, and researchers can play a crucial role in supporting this next phase of work by investing in targeted research and more systematic data collection. Together, the below three areas, and others suggested by interviewees throughout the report, would promote structural change and translate bisexual women's experiences into concrete policymaking, resource distribution, and program design across Asia.

Bisexuality & The Care Economy

There is a pressing need for comprehensive research on how care responsibilities impact bisexual and pansexual women, especially in contexts where family and social expectations are defined by gender, marital status, and sibling birth order. Governments and researchers should prioritize studies that disaggregate data on care work by sexual orientation, single women, single mothers, divorced women, eldest daughters, and unmarried daughters, who often carry disproportionate caregiving burdens. Donors should fund long-term research projects that map how these overlapping responsibilities restrict bisexual women's autonomy, economic security, well-being, physical health, and ability to participate in public life and activism.

Data Analysis & Visualization

There is a clear lack of accessible, disaggregated data on the forms of violence and discrimination bisexual women experience. Researchers should be supported to conduct regional data analysis to deepen qualitative findings and build accessible visual representations of trends in exclusion. Governments must ensure that national datasets on health, education, employment, and violence prevention include disaggregation by sexual orientation and that bisexuality is counted and analyzed as a distinct category. Donors should invest in data projects that highlight how bisexual women are uniquely impacted by bullying in schools, harmful sex education practices, denial of sexual and reproductive health services, family or intimate partner violence, attacks in public, and other forms of violence and discrimination. There is also a need to interrogate public funding patterns, including in (but not limited to) HIV/AIDS and SRHR sectors, to track where resources are being allocated and why bisexual women are often excluded from funding priorities and programming.

Feminist Legal Analysis

Legal analysis that centers bisexual women's rights within broader human rights frameworks is deeply needed. While rights-based approaches should be treated as the baseline or "ground floor" for advancing justice for bisexual women in Asia—as this report reveals, projects centering joy, pleasure, and resisting cultural erasure are also urgently needed—current legal research often fails to meaningfully include bisexual experiences at all. Donors and governments should support legal research initiatives that map and critically assess existing laws, examining not only legal protections but also areas of neglect and exclusion. Researchers should compile and analyze available national and regional legal reports, identifying which rights are included, where bisexuality is ignored, and where queer women are acknowledged only in generalized terms.

In addition to LGBT-specific laws, future legal analysis should examine women's rights frameworks in each country, including family law, inheritance rights, guardianship, and protections against violence, to understand how bisexual women are impacted as both women and queer people. Researchers should trace how laws treat unmarried and single women, whether rights frameworks reinforce compulsory heterosexuality, and what precedents or legal gaps exist for recognizing diverse partnerships and family structures. This kind of legal mapping would offer a foundational tool for advocacy and policymaking, while revealing where bisexual women's legal needs are systematically ignored. Donors should invest in long-term, cross-country legal analysis projects that equip bisexual activists in Asia with concrete evidence of legal discrimination or ambiguity and provide clear targets for reform.

Gender Diversity & Bisexuality

Researchers for this project explicitly asked interviewees about both gender expression and gender identity,¹ but the project overall centered bisexual women (broadly understood) to address urgent gaps in feminist and human rights documentation. Our documentation revealed, however, an urgent need to specifically interrogate how gender diversity shapes experiences of violence, healthcare access, family pressure, employment discrimination, safety, and public visibility.

Future research should examine how bisexual people who identify or are perceived as gender-diverse experience specific forms of discrimination and exclusion, including within feminist, queer, and human rights movements. This work should intentionally challenge the categories through which bisexuality is normatively understood, aiming to expose how social, legal, and medical systems across Asia enforce narrow gender norms that erase or endanger gender-diverse bisexual people. Donors and governments should fund research that traces these intersections, documents patterns of medical and bureaucratic violence, and highlights community-led strategies of resistance and care. Expanding this lens would strengthen bisexual, transgender, feminist, and medical research in Asia, aligning it with decolonial, intersectional frameworks that account for the full spectrum of bisexual lives.

¹ This report's methodology took the most expansive view possible of the terms "bisexual" and "women." The use of each term is discussed in the **Methodology** section. Interviewees' answers regarding their SOGIE are included and discussed at length in the section **How Bisexual Women in Asia Speak About Their SOGIE**.

Letter from AFLN Executive Director

This report was born from a simple but urgent truth: bisexual women in Asia have always been present, yet their lives, labour, and leadership are rarely recognized or resourced. Again and again, research from both feminist and LGBTIQ movements has left bi women at the margins. Our communities treat bi women's experiences as an afterthought, or as a bridge between "real" categories, rather than as people with distinct experiences and demands for justice.

The testimonies gathered here expose that this erasure is not abstract. It produces real harms. Bisexual women across Asia navigate family pressures to marry men, discriminatory legal systems that deny their partnerships, health services that ignore or dismiss them, and queer movements that question their validity. They perform immense emotional and community labour to hold our movements together, while carrying the daily weight of being misunderstood, sidelined, or rendered invisible.

The demands raised in this report come directly from their expertise. They are not appeals for visibility alone but calls for structural change. The right to housing, land, and inheritance; recognition in laws and policies; access to safety and justice; funding streams that sustain bi-led organizing; and the freedom to love without coercion or penalty. These are not "special issues." They are the building blocks of autonomy, dignity, and a queer feminist liberation.

For donors, the message is clear: resourcing bisexual women's organizing is not optional. It is essential if we are serious about advancing women's rights, queer rights, and social justice in Asia. Short-term visibility campaigns or piecemeal inclusion will not suffice. What is needed is sustained investment in bi-led groups, intersectional research, and long-term strategies that confront patriarchy, heteronormativity, and biphobia head-on.

This report rightly frames bisexuality not as a halfway point, but as a transformative vehicle to move beyond rigid categories and towards new futures. To support bisexual women in Asia is to invest in "the cutting edge of queer." It is messy, complicated, and profoundly transformative.

We invite everyone to read these pages with care, and to meet these demands not as favours to a marginalised group, but as commitments to the very heart of a future for queer feminist justice.

Jean Chong

*Executive Director
Asia Feminist LBQ Network*

Methodology

Bisexual, Pansexuality, and Language

This research did not seek to define the terms “bisexual” or “women.” The interviews and drafting process took the most expansive and inclusive understanding possible of both words. The research process also organically explored how pansexuality intersects with bisexuality.

Given the varied cultural, social, historical, and political understandings of sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression across the 15 countries included, our use of specific terms depends on the testimony we are discussing. Interviewees were asked about the specific words and phrases they used to describe their sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression, and these were used throughout the remainder of their interview. The report uses the identity markers that each interviewee specified during their interview and approved again during drafting. Their answers to these questions are included and analyzed in ***Navigating Self Identification***.

Some interviewees have had long-term relationships with men, some have children from those relationships, and some do not use the term “bisexual” at all. As with any identity, self-identification is shaped by personal history, political context, and available language.

The report uses the terms “bisexual” and “women” when making analyses about the collective of interviewees, as this was the original motivation for the research, but recognize the limitations of both words. Our methodology involved a collaborative process to think through how to use “bisexuality” and “women” *in the context of this report*.

Our approach reflects the distinct and varied ways in which participants, interviewees, and partner organizations engage with these terms. It does not attempt to rectify or subsume these differences. We acknowledge the tension between the need for sameness in donor-driven frameworks and the diverse realities within communities. Based on their expertise, the recommendations offer guidance on how donors can better align their resources with movement frameworks.

Desk Research

The background analysis examined existing literature and documentation on bisexual women in Asia, alongside broader studies on lesbian, bisexual, and queer-identifying (LBQ+) women. A total of 50 academic publications, NGO reports, human rights investigations, and community-based studies were compiled, supplemented by media sources, blogs, and activist writings.² Of these, 29 focused specifically on Asia, 11 had a global scope, and 10 addressed Asian diasporas³ in Canada, the UK, and the US. Sources were categorized by type, geography, and SOGIE focus, and then assessed for methodological approaches and patterns in findings.

The desk research provided a foundation for the fieldwork and helped identify gaps in the documentation of bisexual women’s rights. It refined the focus of subsequent interviews and field research, ensuring the methodology built on existing knowledge.

²See **Literature Review**.

³While this report concentrated on experiences in Asia, the prevalence of diaspora studies relative to the overall body of research reviewed is an important area of future analysis.

Research Assistant

A paid research assistant assisted with interview preparation, conducting the interviews, data analysis, thematic analysis, background research, and drafting the Literature Review. Responsibilities included organizing interview transcripts; collaborating on the design on questions and interview flow; coding qualitative data; conducting background research on bisexual women's rights in Asia; and identifying areas for in-depth exploration according to her own priorities and interests. The research assistant joined and participated in 11 of 12 interviews conducted remotely. She received individualized coaching regarding trauma-informed interview practices and support regarding self-care for feminist researchers dealing with potentially traumatic material.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted with 18 feminist organizers who identify as bisexual and/or pansexual from the 15 countries listed below. All interviewees are currently living in their country of origin except for three interviewees from Malaysia, China, and Myanmar. They are currently living and working in Thailand, the US, and the Thai-Burma border, respectively.

Interviewees were selected from bisexual organizations, LGBTQ+ organizations with a significant bisexual presence, and human rights organizations focused on bisexuality; movement leaders, activists, and human rights defenders working in areas such as land rights, racial justice, migrant rights, Indigenous peoples' rights, environmental rights, anti-mining, and economic justice; scholars, legal professionals, and journalists specializing in bisexual women's rights.

Interviewees ranged in age from 22 to 44. Fourteen lived in urban areas, while the others lived in rural regions or did not disclose their specific location. One participant identified as a member of an Indigenous community in Nepal and spoke specifically about these intersections; another from India highlighted the role of caste in shaping perceptions of queerness and expectations of marriage. One participant identified as a person with a disability. Two participants identified as non-binary or gender non-confirming people.

These interviews were conducted remotely (12) and in-person (6), depending on the availability of participants. The ILGA Asia conference in February 2025 served as a key opportunity to conduct interviews, where a range of bisexual activists and human rights defenders from grassroots, national, regional, movements were. Six in person interviews were conducted at ILGA Asia Conference and 12 additional interviews were conducted online in April and May of 2025. Of the online interviews, 11 were conducted in English. One was conducted with a Thai interpreter.

Southeast Asia

- Indonesia
- Malaysia
- Myanmar
- Singapore
- Thailand
- Vietnam (3)

South Asia

- Bangladesh (2)
- Bhutan
- India (2)
- Nepal

East Asia

- China
- Mongolia
- South Korea
- Taiwan

Peer Reviews

Peer reviews were conducted by several experts from across the queer feminist movement in Asia. They include: Apurupa Vatsalya, Jyotsna Maskey, and Joyce Teng. Paid peer review is a critical process to ensure alignment with various movement priorities, a closer examination of issues and perspectives which may conflict or diverge, and a diversity of in-depth critique ahead of publication. These feminist expert perspectives on the language, framing, recommendations, and political orientation of the report were core to its feminist methodology. In the selection of peer reviewers, the researchers aimed to include a diversity of perspectives from national and regional movements.

Ethical Considerations & Limitations

Informed Consent & Trauma-Informed Practices

All research adhered to strict standards and processes of informed consent, confidentiality, and trauma-informed interview techniques. Researchers began all interviews with a detailed explanation of informed consent to ensure that interviewees understood the nature and purpose of the interview, as well as the background, experience, and identities of the researcher and interpreter with whom they would be speaking. The team informed all interviewees about the upcoming report on bisexual women in Asia and obtained consent from all interviewees to participate in the interview. Every effort was made to abide by best practice standards for ethical research and documentation of queer and feminist issues, including all efforts to avoid re-traumatization of survivors.

In line with best practice and LBQ-led research standards, the opening questions of the survey asked interviewees about the words and phrases they use to describe themselves and their work (e.g. bisexual, pansexual, WHRD, activist, etc.), and researchers used these specific words for the remainder of each interview. Interviewees were encouraged to inform the AFLN research team if the words, phrases, or concepts used in the interview did not match their experience. Interviewees were told they could stop or pause the interview at any time, decline to answer any question by saying “next,” and skip any question they feel is irrelevant.

Positionality

The project was supervised by a queer woman from Singapore; the lead researcher was a queer white woman from the United States; and the research assistant was a queer youth activist and feminist researcher from Vietnam. The limitations of this research being led, in part, by a non-Asian woman include but are not limited to gaps in understanding of cultural, religious, racial, ethnic, caste, and social concepts, language barriers, and the potential for discomfort of interviewees.

Researchers named and explicitly asked interviewees if they were comfortable continuing the interview given the research team’s identities. Participants were offered space to ask questions about the researchers’ roles, request changes to the methodology, or decline to continue the interview.

Each interviewee was sent the full report after it was drafted and provided the opportunity to review not only their direct quotations, but to see how these quotations were used in context. Changes were then made to language, framing, tone, and structure to ensure that interviewees’ stories retained their intended meaning. Interviewees’ direct quotations reflect what they wanted to say, how they wanted to say it, and the specific thematic narrative they wanted their words ascribed to as of August 2025.

The positionality of the lead researcher also represents a missed opportunity to fund, sustain, and bolster the work of Asian researchers who were not hired to conduct this research. Given the limitations of donor timelines and recruitment capacity, AFLN asked the senior researcher to manage the report after receiving a small number of applications from the region. The senior researcher hired a paid research assistant from the region to ensure that the project, at least in part, provided an opportunity for a feminist researcher from the region to publish a report in her name.

It is the sincere hope of both AFLN and the research team that this report will serve as an evidence base for increased funding and movement resources for bisexual women’s organizing across Asia, allowing AFLN and other feminist organizations to conduct and sustain regional hiring processes in the future.

Representation

AFLN and the research team worked with the confines of budget, time, language, and capacity to assemble a core of interviewees with a diversity of age, gender, race, class, ethnicity, Indigeneity, geography, ability, caste, and other markers of identity which shape bisexual Asian women’s experiences. In a shared spreadsheet over the course of several months, the team recorded,

analyzed, reviewed, and addressed representation gaps by inviting more interviewees and making connections through trusted feminist and queer networks.

At the same time, the team is conscious that inviting an activist with a certain identity to take part in the interviews does not inherently make the report more inclusive, and as such refrained from tokenistic attempts to make the interviewee pool appear “more diverse.” Instead, the recommendations for future research include several calls for research which addresses the gaps in diversity that we could not capture in this report. Among these, we include research which centers transgender bisexual women; young bisexual women and girls; older bisexual women; bisexual non-binary people; bisexual women who hold specific caste, Indigenous, and ethnic identities; bisexual women in exile; and bisexual women with lived experiences of various disabilities.

Written Forms of Knowledge

The interviews were supplemented with desk research, which inevitably privileges knowledge production that is written, published online, and available in English. It inherently excludes and perpetuates the invisibility of other modalities, such as oral traditions and intergenerational storytelling. These are especially critical because formal, written documentation of bisexual Asian women’s rights violations and abuses represent only a fraction of the knowledge that communities hold about these experiences. To address this gap, subsequent sections of this report draw heavily on and prioritize the analysis of the 18 bi and pan WHRDs interviewed for this report.

Expressions of Trauma in Interviews

Global data has long shown disproportionately high rates of suicidal ideation and self-harm among bisexual populations. Our interviews demonstrated how close to the surface many bisexual Asian women carry this pain. In Nepal, where several interviews were conducted in person, the emotional intensity of these conversations was immediate and unfiltered. The anxiety of conditional belonging and permanent self-surveillance was present in the room.

Interviews were structured according to trauma-informed principles, which generally call for gentle, open-ended introductions, allowing people to settle into their bodies and physical environments before asking questions that are likely to produce anxiety or invoke traumatic recall. In this research, however, several interviewees began crying in the opening minutes of the interview. This section of the conversation contained general questions about interviewees’ organizations and if they focused on bisexuality in their daily work. This prompted, for many, the difficult realization that they do not feel safe, justified, or worthy of doing so.

The depth and immediacy of their grief stood in contrast to the way bi exclusion is often discussed publicly: as an externally imposed issue of invisibility or erasure. What emerged in interviews was something more internal and acute—an embodied sense of invalidation so persistent that many described never feeling

safe anywhere. Others described living in a constant state of anxiety, always monitoring what could be said, where, and to whom. Several explained that this interview was the “first opportunity” they had ever had to explore the immense weight of isolation, loneliness, and being profoundly misunderstood.

Vulnerability & Care

This report was written and researched by human rights investigators and feminist researchers, not psychologists or mental health experts. It intentionally refrains from extrapolating and labeling (either with hyper-medicalized terminology or country-specific frameworks around mental health) interviewees’ experiences of trauma.

To retain the fullness of interviewees’ experiences, we have indicated, (where possible and with their permission), specific moments where interviewees laughed, cried, rolled their eyes, asked for a hug, second-guessed their own expertise, or apologized for expressing pain. In doing so, we hope that these testimonies may allow other bisexual women—in Asia and globally—to see themselves represented in print. We further hope that retaining the complexity and fullness of their words will serve as the evidence base for an immense and immediate increase in resourcing for the WHRDs growing and protecting bisexual women in Asia.

Anti-Summary:

“Our biggest struggles? The idea that bisexual individuals have more options, that they can just turn straight anytime they want because they’re into men as well, that the exploration of one’s identity is not as soul-crushing as it is for gay men or lesbian women. It is invalidating.

If someone is in a relationship with a man, this becomes their identity in LGBT spaces. But then outside the community, they are not straight enough.”

– Zee, Bangladesh

Bisexual women in Asia are building, leading, resourcing, reforming, and radicalizing movements for rights and justice across the region and globe. This report brings readers inside in-depth conversations with 18 bisexual women⁴ from 15 countries in Asia, charting their trajectories as dynamic, creative human rights defenders.⁵

The language interviewees use to describe themselves, their lives, their movements, and their partners varies widely. What emerged consistently was an assertion of the right to choose partners without coercion or penalty, and the recognition that such choices are constrained by systems that value women’s heterosexual compliance over their sexual, romantic, and political autonomy.

The testimonies are at turns heavy and comedic; empathetic and exasperated; deeply self-aware and frequently self-deprecating. They point to recurring themes across contexts: the imposition of mono-sexual categories; the harmful impacts of the widespread notion that bisexual women have “options” and can align themselves with heterosexuality at will; immense psychological trauma; exclusion from mainstream movement discourses such as those surrounding marriage equality; unique experiences of marital expectations in the family, ethnic group, caste, or Indigenous community; and the infuriating denial of full personhood for women whose sexuality is deemed invalid but for the presence of a partner.

⁴ This report’s methodology took the most expansive view possible of the terms “bisexual” and “women.” The use of each term is discussed in the **Methodology** section. Interviewees answers regarding their SOGIE are included and discussed at length in the section **How Bisexual Women in Asia Speak About Their SOGIE**.

⁵ In addition to asking about the words used to describe their SOGIE, researchers also explicitly asked about the words and phrases that interviewees used to describe their human rights work. Their answers are included and discussed at length in the section **How Bisexual Women in Asia Speak About Their Work**. “Human rights defender” is one of many phrases that interviewees use. It is used here and throughout the report to explicitly connect bisexual women in Asia to the resources, funding, and emergency protection measures available to human rights defenders at the regional and international level.

“It Should Be Starting with Bi People”

During each interview, researchers asked an open-ended question about what forms of discrimination bisexual women face. This was an intentional way to document patterns from the perspective of bi women, rather than filtering their experiences through pre-set categories. Interviewees described the ways in which discrimination is not confined to interactions with state authorities or explicit legal restrictions. Rather, it operates through social norms, exclusion inside movements, the minimization of violence, and a deeply confusing sense that one part of you has access to rights and freedoms that another part of you does not.

Normative LGBT Frameworks

This report extends beyond, and in some cases leaves out entirely, some of the traditional categories normally included or expected in an LGBT report. It is not tethered to frameworks that are “accessible” to an LGBT policy or funding audience. This is, in part, because confines of predetermined forms, manifestations, and categorizations of anti-LGBT violence restrict the possibilities of seeing, let alone documenting, vast amounts of harm experienced every day by bisexual women.

It is also because any bi person involved in LGBT movement building can probably relate to the feeling of slotting one’s community into boxes and concepts that grate on us like ill-fitting pants. (They work, and we need them to go outside, but they were not made for us, and we do feel like ourselves in them.) As one interviewee from Myanmar explained:

“We should really be speaking about discrimination of LBQ and bi women coming from ideological people and patriarchy. We need to address structural issues that we face.

Even when you talk about intersectionality and how we focus on bi or other minorities, it’s all about how they can interact with the rest of the LGBT movement. It always starts with the LGBT movement overall and how bi people can fit in.

It should be starting with bi people, where do they want to engage and intersect, not just how they can intersect with the LGBT movement.”

– Chit, Myanmar

This report focuses on themes such as the care economy, gendered housing precarity, the emotional labor of bi women in LGBT movements, and how Indigeneity and caste are intimately bound up in bi women’s relationship to marriage and marriage equality. As with the recommendations, the report’s key topics represent those explicitly voiced by interviewees and those crafted through a systematic analysis of participant testimony.

Beyond Erasure & Invisibility

Erasure and invisibility are commonly discussed themes in past reports on bisexuality. The phrase bisexual invisibility, in Asia as elsewhere, serves as shorthand for the under-recognition of bisexual relationships, contributions, and realities in political movements, industries, family histories, and community narratives. It often refers, more specifically, to the lack of research, funding, and programming dedicated to bisexual people within LGBT movement spaces.

At the request and guidance of bisexual Asian WHRDs (WHRDs) consulted in the design of this report, the methodology, interview questions, data analysis, and drafting intentionally diverged from the attention commonly paid to the “(in)visibility” of bisexual women within LGBT movements. This is for several reasons.

First, one cannot speak about bisexual women’s invisibility without speaking about the violent enforcement of rules and regulations related to women’s autonomy and sexuality. Across Asia, bisexual women navigate both the structural barriers imposed on women and the distinct marginalization attached to a nonnormative sexual identity. Their ability to live openly or maintain same-gender relationships is constrained by pressures to marry men, whether through family coercion, economic dependency, or discriminatory legal systems. These constraints are reinforced by property and inheritance laws that disadvantage women, as well as social norms that render women’s same-gender relationships illegible or dismissible.

Rather than naming and addressing these violations of bi women’s autonomy, “erasure” and “invisibility” naturalize and anonymize structural oppression.

Second, the programmatic outputs resulting from these conceptual and analytical frameworks are insufficient. “Inclusion” (the apparent remedy for erasure) often refers to nominal inclusion in interventions that do not fit bi experience. “Visibility,” meanwhile, often results in short-term campaigns that stop after announcing the existence of bi people. While interviewees agree that visibility is a critical part of the work that needs doing, several also discussed the harmful downstream impacts of a hyperfocus on (in)visibility:

“*[Our organizations] do not focus on bi issues enough. Many years ago, when I decided to say publicly that I’m bisexual, it was because LGBT groups called themselves gays and lesbians — bisexual was kind of invisible then. I presented myself as bi to make it visible.*

But now, how can we work on bi issues when we have a lot of issues that are still considered ‘more important’? When we talk about bisexuality, visibility is brought up the most, or biphobia. Our campaign about bisexual women is only on Bi Visibility Day. I feel sorry that there’s no bi-only project.”

— Sadie, South Korea

Third, the invisibility framework undermines the task of investigating the violence that bisexual women experience because of their visibility. The report *Violence Through the Lens of Lesbians, Bisexual Women and Trans People in Asia* by Outright International found that “greater visibility of non-conforming sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression resulted in a greater frequency of violence against LBT people in Asia.” Framing bisexual women as chronically invisible furthers the harmful myth—discussed below—that they are immune to anti-LGBT violence and violence sparked by queer visibility. It reifies the presumed irrelevance of bisexuality, not only the in perpetration but also the documentation of violence. Discourses of invisibility make it impossible to see bisexuality as a trigger for violence. Subsequently, to speak of invisibility as fact (let alone as the primary injustice bisexual women face) reifies and justifies harmful methodological gaps in legal, historical, and human rights documentation—each of which has largely failed to examine the (bi)sexuality of victims and survivors of a wide range of abuses.

⁶ Outright 2016, 35

Interrogating SRHR & IPV

This report includes analysis and testimony related to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and intimate partner violence (IPV). Readers with traumatic or discriminatory experiences in these areas may wish to approach these sections with care or skip them entirely.

In LGBT rights spaces and queer feminist circles, the exclusion of bi women from SRHR and IPV services, programs, and advocacy initiatives is well established. The prominence of these two acronyms in discussions about bisexual women (when they occur) borders on cliché. Yet, when asked about the key forms of violence, discrimination, and marginalization that bi women face, very few of this report's 18 interviewees named either SRHR or IPV. Recalling that these interviewees span 15 countries, dozens of human rights movements, and two decades in age, this was surprising.

Later in the interview, researchers explicitly asked about both SRHR and IPV. Participants offered specific experiences and recommendations—because these issues undoubtedly do impact bisexual women—but their answers overwhelmingly indicated that SRHR and IPV frameworks are ill-fit for a report that explicitly centers the lived experiences of bisexual women in Asia. This is for two main reasons.

The Need for Discussion & Storytelling Spaces

First, many interviewees explained that the limited language on offer to name and address issues related to bisexuality directly impacts their experience of and recourse related to sexual and gender based violence. For example, several explained that the lack of cultural awareness, storytelling, and exposure to unique forms of violence experienced by bi women leads to many young bi women not recognizing IPV when they experience it. (A recurrent example was that of young bi women invited to join heterosexual couples and subsequently subjected to severe emotional and psychological abuse and dehumanizing treatment. This is also discussed in the **Literature Review**.)

Interviewees spoke more often about the need to fund community discussion spaces than they did for immediate policy interventions. They said that private spaces to name and describe specific forms of abuse are equally, if not more, lifesaving than policy or other programmatic interventions when it comes to IPV. This is because discussion, storytelling, and constructing bi-specific narratives around shared experiences can help other bi women recognize and address early signs of abuse. As such, the chapter **Visions & Limits** is as relevant to IPV discussions as the IPV section itself. **Visions & Limits** discusses the impact of persistent gaps in bi frameworks and the need for more community spaces to develop language that properly describes shared experience.

The Biphobic Roots of “Bi Issues”

Second, the relatively infrequency with which interviewees raised SRHR and IPV (until prompted) calls into question why these two acronyms have become virtually synonymous with bi women's exclusion. Many interviewees told stories about being called “promiscuous,” “greedy” or “a slut.” When viewed in light of the emphasis placed on SRHR and IPV as top “bi issues,” these slurs appear as more than insults. Rather, they appear to be part of the very foundation on which bisexual women's alleged policy, research, and advocacy priorities are set.

What is it, specifically, that makes it easier to associate bisexual women with abortion than with unpaid care labor?

What caricatures of bisexuality reside our collective imagination and justify the importance of birth control, but not land and property rights, for bi women?

How is it, exactly, that LGBT advocacy narratives manage to affirm bi women's vulnerability to physical abuse in violent relationships, but persist largely unchecked in denying the

relevance of marriage equality to those same women?

These questions are not posed to simply invert a hierarchy of rights deemed most important to bi women in Asia. People do not live single-issue lives. Rather, this report interrogates such a hierarchy's existence, its causes, and its consequences. One clear consequence is the near complete lack of data and discussion regarding issues that interviewees did raise repeatedly. As an intervention into this research gap, those issues take priority in this report.

Validity & Labor

Several interviewees said that they do not feel “valid” in LGBT spaces. In many LGBT advocacy, policy, and funding spaces, legitimacy and validity are established through experiences of violence. “Which forms of discrimination, marginalization, violence, or abuse does your community face?”, activists might be asked. “Does it look like the violence that other LGBT people face?”

Interviewees repeatedly expressed their belief that they do not face violence as severe as other LGBT people. Several interviewees described a form of internalized guilt that shaped how they understood their place within movements, relationships, and even our interviews. Several spoke explicitly about the belief that their pain was less valid, or less worthy of recognition, than that of other LGBT people. Some explained that they felt they had no right to speak openly about discrimination or exclusion, because others — trans men, trans women, lesbians, gay men, and

others — appear to suffer more.

These hierarchies of perceived violence, which emerged in every interview, produce subsequent hierarchies of legitimacy. These hierarchies of legitimacy, in turn, dictate how bisexual Asian women spend their time, energy, and labor, including in their human rights movements.

Researchers asked each interviewee if they had a focus, broadly defined, on bisexual women in their work. This could include formal programming such as educational workshops with donor-funded budget lines, or quieter community-building and wellness activities for small groups of bisexual women.

Their answers indicate that limited space exists for bi Asian women to grow, support, and sustain bi community. This is despite the clear enthusiasm of bi women to attend queer events, as Zee from Bangladesh describes below.



“Do you have an explicit focus on bi women in your work?”

3.

“We always have the feeling that other groups in the LGBT community have it worse.”

– Reina, Bhutan



1.

“We cannot focus on bi situations because there are ‘worse’ [air quotes] situations.”

– Sadie, South Korea

2.

“No, actually. I think it’s because we need to communicate with the public, with people from the mainstream. I think the current framework still isn’t deeply involved in the differences and experiences within the LGBT community. For now, our work is broader — when we do research or advocacy, social communication — it’s still a broader way to raise awareness. Lesbians face something different: parents trying to force you not to be gay. For me, it’s that my mom still holds the expectation I will go back. She does not force. This is what I mean — we tell broader stories. TEC’s approach is more about structural change, for example legal reform and the social communication around this.”

– Joyce Teng, Taiwan

4.

“We have a focus on LBQ women, but bi women are complicated because when they’re in a relationship with men, they’re presumed straight, and when with women, they’re presumed lesbians. We have a few bisexual women around the community, but we can’t force anyone to come and join us. When I started dating my current partner, Nasia was the first person to come tell me, “Hey, you’re not not a part of the community if you’re dating a man.” And that’s when I realized it was even a risk. And it was a fight within the community and in myself. It was a fight; it was a journey. I was isolated from it for a while. But power brings access; once Nasia made me officially a person in the organization, then I’m in.”

– Taara, Bangladesh

5.

“There is this guilt and hesitation. Many people who identify as bisexual feel that maybe our issues are not as heavy or worthy of attention. Maybe we do not suffer as much as trans men, or trans women, or lesbians.

In my organization, we focus LBQ+ women, not specifically bi women. But we’ve noticed bi women are the most enthusiastic about it and becoming the majority. Out of 18 members, there are 4–5 lesbians, 3 trans women, and the rest are bi women. This speaks volumes about how organizations, platforms, and spaces focused on bi women are so necessary.”

– Zee, Bangladesh



6.

“There is the notion that you’re not really real, and your struggle is not real. And honestly, I do find myself agreeing with it a bit. If there is a bi woman and she’s with a man, and you have the markers of being married, this gives you a certain seat at the table and allows you to have easier access and mobility in social, professional, and cultural spaces.

“In India, Hijra women are among the most visible gender-diverse communities. This visibility marginalises them and excludes them from education, jobs, housing and even basic safety. For me, it looks different. As a nonbinary bisexual person with passing privilege, I don’t face constant scrutiny. My struggles appear in family and social spaces, where my queerness is invisible. I feel distress and guilt -almost like survivor’s guilt -knowing others face harsher realities while I am assumed to fit in. I think some of this is tied to cultural ideas of gratitude, which push you to stay thankful even when you are hurting. It is only now that I am able to recognise how harmful this invisibilisation has been. Invisibility is not safety; it is violence for bi folx.”

– Apurupa Vatsalya,
Global Interfaith Network, India

9.

“[Laughs.] Honestly, no. In ILGA we have a bi position, but it’s very limited. Meetings I attend don’t talk about bi women or bi women’s needs, or the discrimination we face. I never hear about bi women. Even in the bi pre-conference, we talk about introductions but not real issues.”

– Chit, Myanmar

7.

“I have an LBQ project, meant to be 25% focused on LBQ women in any way I can contribute to their legal advancements — 25% intersex, 25% trans, 25% LBQ, and 25% anything I want. So far, I’ve been doing queer-affirming circles and conducting LBQ legal research in places that have gaps in protection and policy. Most laws probably have a gap because they are blind to LBQ women. The majority of laws around the world are just blind. I’ve been attending LBQ events in the region — I’m new to it — and I’m usually the one bi person they call for representation. The pre-conference here was nice because usually I’m the only bi person.”

– Apple, Thailand

8.

“Not yet. My work at the local level focuses more on movement building for youth and GBV. GBV is the topic that I chose to found the grassroots organization in 2019. After that, we focused on a youth-led movement. In my full-time work, it’s broadly LBQ, not bisexual.

Starting from last year, me and the other co-leader of our grassroots organization wanted to do something about bi women and people in our city. We’re planning to do something like a sharing circle and workshop at the end of this year. Partner organizations see us as a group of lesbians. Last week, during Lesbian Visibility Week, someone reached out to me for an interview. I thought it was funny because so many people think this. For a queer women’s organization like AFLN, everyone thinks we’re all lesbians. This has become so frequent I don’t feel much about it anymore.

One time a friend asked if I would feel more sad being assumed to be a lesbian or a straight girl. This question stuck with me. I would love to be a lesbian. I love lesbians. It is more sad to be assumed to be a straight girl.

– Ngoc Nguyen, Vietnam

Mythologies of Bisexual Modernity

Women throughout history have had sexual and romantic relationships with people of more than one gender. They lived, loved, had sex, worked, made money, and built lives in ways that did not map neatly onto modern categories. Just as “gay,” “lesbian” and “trans” did not always exist as concepts in their current form, neither did bisexuality.

In background research, media reviews, and interviews conducted for this report, the issue of bisexuality being subsumed into historical narratives about gay, lesbian, and transgender people emerged repeatedly. Ngoc Nguyen, a bisexual activist from Vietnam, explained that bisexual people in her context experience a kind of historical minimization. “In our history, there are no stories of people being bi,” she said. “There are stories of people being gay and trans.”

Several interviewees shared that when women in their cultural history are discovered to have queer relationships, the presence of a husband is dismissed as a predictable byproduct of compulsory heterosexuality and the women are pronounced lesbians.

While mainstream historical narratives often discount women’s sexualities entirely, queer assumptions about the impact of compulsory heterosexuality may inadvertently dismiss indications of sexual fluidity. According to interviewees, the heterosexual, asexual, or monosexual reading of historical women means that both straight and queer histories often ignore bisexuality as a possibility.

The failure to consider, imagine, or record the (bi)sexuality of Asian women in history functions to create a mythology of bisexual modernity. It contributes to the persistent expectation experienced by interviewees that they will eventually find their way to a more recognizable, historically grounded identity.

Mythologies of Bisexual Safety

In one sense, the violence and discrimination bisexual Asian women face often looks different from what is most visible in local, national, regional, and global LGBT discourses. This means it is imperative to record, interrogate, and address the forms of violence and discrimination bisexual women are known to face, and better center these issues in policy, funding, and advocacy spaces. As such, as discussed above, this report explores forms of violence and discrimination that differ and diverge from mainstream LGBT narratives.

However, it is also critical to acknowledge that if sexuality was accounted for in diverse histories of violence—including against women, Indigenous peoples, ethnic minority groups, and WHRDs, for example—it may reveal higher rates of violence against bisexual women. This would likely include significantly higher rates of killings, physical attacks, medical mistreatment, and other forms of violence that are typically associated with other LGBT groups, and to which bisexual women are largely presumed not to suffer.

The concept of “violence against women,” for example, is bound up in the notion that women are—first and foremost—women. Any violence they experience is at best “intersecting” with their other identities. Women of color, queer women, Indigenous women, and other multiply marginalized groups of women have long argued that a homogenous conceptualization of violence against women fails to encompass or account for the unique forms of violence they face. When a woman is killed, sexually assaulted, or physically attacked and her sexuality is not considered relevant to the historical or legal record—as has so often been the case in documentation of violence against women—that violence is stripped of its queer context. The result is a dangerous fiction: that violence against women is unrelated to their sexuality, and that bisexual and queer women are somehow safer than others in the LGBT community.

This is just one example. Background research conducted for this report and testimonies from interviewees indicated persistent “sexuality gaps” in documentation of violence related to ethnicity,

caste, Indigeneity, armed conflict, land reform, and other issues across multiple geographies in Asia.

The widespread failure of historical, legal, NGO, and state documentation to name the sexuality of bisexual women in history, compounded by contemporary documentation of violence which largely ignores women's sexual orientations, hides patterns of abuse. The rates at which bi women are killed, for example, cannot be said to be "low." They are categorically unknown.

These absences have consequences. They distort and preclude current and future analyses of the ways in which women with bi, pan, and queer sexualities invoke fear and violence in perpetrators. They simultaneously deny bisexual victimhood and rob bisexuality of its power. They also shape the design of services, priorities of advocacy movements, and allocation of resources.

In response, this report intentionally centers bisexuality as a modus of investigation and potential trigger for discrimination, harassment, rebuke, and violence that Asian women face.

The Cutting Edge of Queer

In an interview conducted for this report, Ngoc Nguyen, a bisexual feminist activist from Vietnam, explained that "the idea of women loving more than one gender is hard" because it disrupts and violates multiple interlocking social codes that govern bisexual Asian women's lives.

"Patriarchy says we can't love more than one gender. Bi women, Vietnamese women, and women in general are expected to be calm and collected and listen to orders and follow traditional values.

[Queer people have also] been oppressed with a lot of standards, and they project this on us. People say queer people should be successful and have a stable job, have a stable marriage, and be loyal to their partner one-on-one just like the heterosexual relationships that we see. I feel like a lot of people think you need to prove these things to be valid and exist as a queer person. Maybe this is why they project it on us — to be stable, loyal, and have a perfect marriage. I think bi people are more open to sexual fluidity, we think more about how we don't want to follow the structures that are already set. You can love two genders or more, so maybe love is even bigger. I just feel like that — I don't know."

— Ngoc Nguyen, Vietnam

When asked about the most important forms of violence and discrimination that bisexual women in her community face, Ngoc Nguyen said:

"The first form of discrimination against bi women is, to be honest, discrimination against bi women in the [LGBT] community. That's what I think about first. Whoever they are dating, bi women are assumed to be monosexual orientation. If girl, lesbian. If boy, straight. The queerness is never seen and accepted. Some people can't take fluidity as an answer."

The othering, mockery, discrimination, and contempt that interviewees described indicates that bisexuality is not "invisible". Rather, its visibility poses a threat to norms of categorization that disturbs both heterosexual and queer communities. Bisexual Asian women's sexual fluidity is an affront to patriarchy's demand that Asian women "be calm and collected and listen to orders and follow traditional values." Simultaneously, they have projected upon them the trauma of broader queer communities whose rights are held hostage to heterosexual conceptualizations of stability: "be successful and have a stable job, have a stable marriage, and be loyal to their partner one-on-one just like the heterosexual relationships that we see."

Queer, in its most literal sense, means strange, peculiar, or abnormal. Many campaigns for LGBT rights demand normative rights for people who proudly declare themselves abnormal. Queer communities are systemically required to place limits on their own expressions of queerness to achieve these rights. Bisexual Asian interviewees repeatedly explained that their form of queerness, which resists and refuses and challenges static categorization, is often deemed too messy, too complicated, too contradictory to fit a public image of LGBT people who deserve rights.

Despite the multiplicity of biphobias which deny and diminish their queerness, bisexual women are, it would seem, too queer.

Sadie, in South Korea, explained:

“We are focused on same-sex marriage in Korea, but in that movement, there’s no space for bisexuality. We cannot show bisexuality to the public [because for the campaign to succeed] they need to think about pure [monosexual] women in love.”

Bisexuality is a threat. To deny this is to entrench and minimize anti-bi discrimination and gaslight those who endure it.

Instead, this report takes as its premise that rejecting static categorization is itself a queer project. In its refusal to stand still in one fixed and knowable place, bisexuality resists norms, standards, and systems which demand static and regulated identities.

In the queerest way possible, bisexuality resists imperatives of categorization and knowability. It is a site of friction, disruption, progress, and powerful queer possibility.

Literature Review

This section was drafted by Phương Nhi, AFLN Research Assistant. It was co-researched, supervised, and edited by the Senior Researcher for the project. The research team kindly requests that any future attribution, citation, or credit clearly name Phương Nhi as the author of this analysis.

This background analysis reviews existing literature and documentation on bisexual women in Asia, including sources that studied broader groups of lesbian, bisexual, and queer-identifying (LBQ+) women. The purpose of this review is to assess what information is available, how that information was produced, whose voices were included and what methods were used.

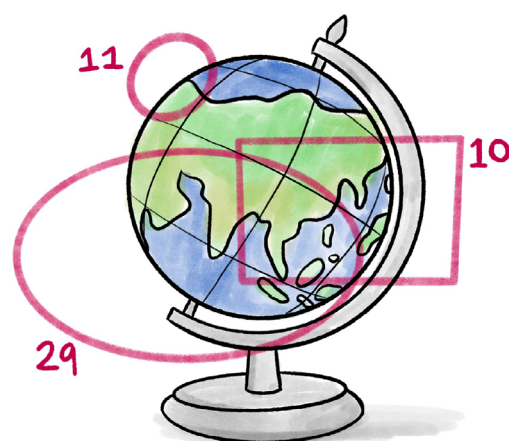
To do this, we identified and compiled a set of 50 relevant academic publications, NGO reports, human rights investigations, community-based studies from across Asia and worldwide. In addition to formal studies, we also incorporated additional sources such as media outlets, online blogs, and activist writings, to provide nuance.

We categorized these sources based on the publication type, geography, and the SOGIE on which the report focus. From there, we reviewed the methodological approaches and analyzed patterns in findings across sources, including recurring issues that bi+ women are facing across the region.

Geography

29 are about people who live in Asia

10 are about Asian queer diasporas



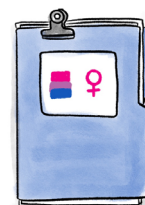
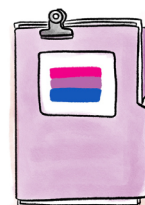
11 are global pieces of research which include, but do not center, Asia

SOGIE

19 are about LBW

11 are about LBT

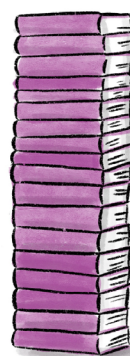
4 are about LGBT



7 are about bisexuality in general

12 are about bisexual women

Source



19 are academic research

11 are reports from NGOs and International Bodies

17 are op-eds and media articles

3 are blogs

Analysis of Existing Research Methodology & Scope

Scope of Existing Research on Bisexual Women in Asia

The literature we reviewed encompasses a diverse range of studies, which we categorized across three axes: SOGIE focus, type of source, and geography.

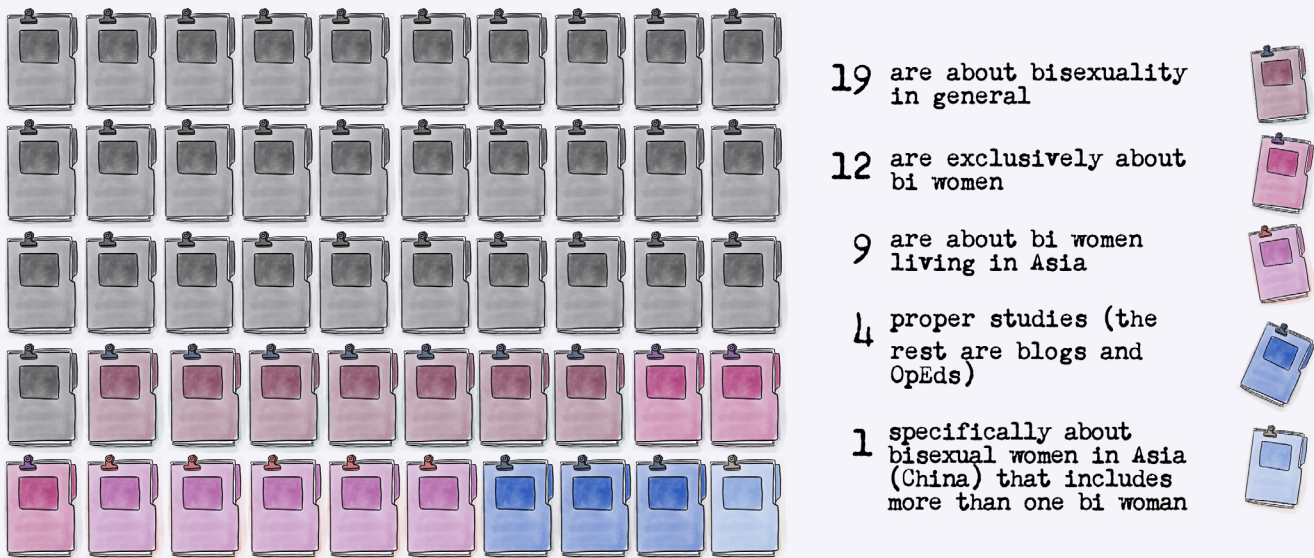
The SOGIE categories are based on the language of the research reviewed. Out of 50 sources, 19 have a stated focus on bisexual people, 16 on lesbian and bisexual women, 11 on lesbian, bisexual, and trans (LBT) people, 4 on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people. Among the 19 sources that examine bisexual people, 12 are specifically about bisexual women.

Regarding the type of source, 19 are academic research articles, 11 are reports from NGOs and international organizations, 17 are media op-eds or news articles, and 3 are online blogs.

In terms of geography, 29 of the sources focus on people living in Asia, 10 examine Asian diasporas, and 11 are global in scope but do not center Asia. Among the 29 studies focused on Asia, 19 are country-based and 10 are regional.

Of the 19 national publications, six were written by civil society organizations to examine violence against LBQ+ people in Asian countries in the Philippines,⁷ Nepal,⁸ Sri Lanka,⁹ Cambodia,¹⁰ Timor-Leste,¹¹ and Singapore.¹² We also found eight relevant pieces of academic research carried out in Hong Kong,¹³ China,¹⁴ the Philippines,¹⁵ Malaysia,¹⁶ and India,¹⁷ looking into different life aspects of bisexual women in their workplace, schools, sports environment, family and relationships. The five remaining sources are media op-eds and blogs discussing varied topics.¹⁸

50 Sources



⁷ UNDP 2020
⁸ Blue Diamond Society 2018
⁹ EQUAL GROUND 2023
¹⁰ Rainbow Community Kampuchea 2019
¹¹ Rede Feto & ASEAN SOGIE Caucus 2017
¹² Sayoni 2018
¹³ Tang 2021
¹⁴ Meng et al. 2023; Yang et al. 2023
¹⁵ Manalastas 2016
¹⁶ Bong 2011
¹⁷ Bhattacharya 2014; Chithrangathan 2017; Varma 2022
¹⁸ Tan 2014; Laxman 2022a; Laxman 2022b; Vohra 2023; Tan 2024

Of the 10 regional sources, four are media op-eds that discuss issues of fetishization and visibility of bi people.¹⁹ The six additional regional sources are human rights reports and academic studies which detail:

- violence against lesbian, bisexual women and trans people in Japan, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka.²⁰
- sexual and reproductive health and rights of LBQ+ people in the Malay Archipelago, including Brunei, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, and the Philippines.²¹
- promoting and protecting the rights of lesbians, bisexual women, transgender and intersex persons in Asia Pacific.²²
- how older Chinese lesbians and bisexual women born between the late 1930s and late 1950s across Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan redefine romantic and sexual desires amid intersections of history, gender norms, and marginalized identities.²³
- how older Chinese lesbians and bisexual women born in the 1940s and 1950s living across Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan experience desires and intimacy within dense urban environments, navigating gender norms and social expectations.²⁴
- mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal behaviors among lesbian, bisexual, and queer women in Southeast Asia.²⁵

Methodologies of Existing Research on Bisexual Women in Asia

We reviewed the methodologies used by the existing research and found a wide range of qualitative and mixed methods approaches. Common methods included in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, online surveys, and participant observation. Some studies employed multiple tools. For example, *Making It Work: Lesbian, bisexual and transgender women's economic empowerment in the Philippines* combined 18 focus group discussions with an online survey (159 respondents), 4 key informant interviews, and 8 validation workshops.²⁶ Some others relied on ethnographic or archival methods, such as analyzing data from national surveys²⁷ or documenting lived experiences through long-term fieldwork.²⁸

Some of the referenced studies do not specify the gender identity or assigned sex at birth of bisexual participants. In such reports, bisexual women are assumed to be cisgender.²⁹ Some do recognize diversity in gender identity among bisexual women and explicitly account for it in their methodology or participant description. A country-based study in Japan described their transgender interviewees as “twenty-one respondents identified as transgender with diverse sexual orientation.”³⁰ Another report in the Philippines also noted that they examine “bisexual women, regardless of their gender identity.”³¹

¹⁹ Poore 2013; Vohra 2024; Kuku n.d.; Dimuthu 2023

²⁰ Outright 2016

²¹ AFLN 2024

²² UN Women 2016

²³ Tang 2022a

²⁴ Tang 2022b

²⁵ Alibudbud 2024

²⁶ UNDP 2020, 3

²⁷ Manalastas 2016

²⁸ Tang 2022

²⁹ Meng 2023; Yang 2023; Tang 2021; Rede Feto & ASEAN SOGIE Caucus 2017; Rainbow Community Kampuchea 2019; Blue Diamond Society 2018; Tang 2022

³⁰ Outright International 2016, 74

³¹ UNDP 2020, 14

Among the 29 sources that study people currently living in Asia, 14 relied on primary data from interviews or surveys.³² Together, these 14 studies included 529 participants. Within this sample, 95 were bisexual women (17 percent), compared to 231 lesbians (44 percent). Four academic papers focus specifically on lived experiences of bisexual women in Asia. All are country-based: two in India,³³ one in Malaysia,³⁴ and one in China.³⁵

The paper *Beyond Queer: An Epistemology of Bi Choice* (2011) from Malaysia is a theoretical and reflective essay that uses the author's own experiences to explore bisexuality as a way of resistance. The article situates bisexual identity within broader queer discourse, developing a philosophical epistemology of bisexual choice that both extends and challenges mainstream queer theory. It situates bisexuality within the tensions between identity, choice, and survival in a Muslim-majority context, emphasizing that bisexuality is not merely as identity, but a distinctive way of knowing and relating to sexual difference. The research *Journey of a Bisexual Indian Woman: A Case Study* (2022) from India, which presents a single-case study focused on the lived experience of a bisexual woman navigating societal pressure, family expectations, and emotional struggles in a more individual, therapeutic framework. *Mapping the bisexual experience of a Keralite woman: glimpses into India* (2017) also focuses on India but uses a narrative case study method to trace the biographical trajectory of a Keralite woman. It emphasizes the intersection of region, caste, and cultural identity with bisexual experience, offering rich, qualitative depth. Finally, *The Experiences of Female Bisexual Student-Athletes in China: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis* (2023) adopt an in-depth, experience-based approach in China, analyzing the narratives of female bisexual student-athletes to explore how bisexuality is performed, perceived, and negotiated within institutional spaces like university sports.

Three of four papers present a single case-study of one bisexual woman. Only one research, conducted in China, included more than one person. The China research, however, also noted that they failed to contact 5 potential interviewees for the study because they were scared of disclosure.³⁶ Several reports, especially those include a broader group of queer people, noted in their methodology that bisexual women make up lesser number in the research sample due to their "invisibility." For instance, a country-based report in the Philippines from a cross-country work *Violence: Through the Lens of Lesbians, Bisexual Women and Trans People in Asia* (2016) included 9 percent bisexual women compared to 58 percent transgender and 29 percent lesbian interviewees. The study noted that "the small proportion of interviews with bisexual women can perhaps be attributed to them being less visible in the Philippines."³⁷ In the same regional analysis, research team in Malaysia, who interviewed 4 bi+ women out of 45 LBQ+ participants, reported that they faced "difficulty locating bisexual women for this research because they are more invisible, partly due to discrimination that they face within the lesbian community."³⁸

While this observation reflects a valid challenge, later chapters of this report discuss the problematic nature of framing bisexual women as inherently "invisible." Regarding research methodologies, specifically, such language shifts responsibility away from researchers and institutions and onto bisexual communities themselves. It problematizes the subjects rather than questioning the methodologies, outreach strategies, or implicit biases that contribute to this lack of representation. In doing so, the concept of bi invisibility can serve to justify a failure to engage bisexual voices more proactively.

³³ Chithrangathan 2017; Varma 2022

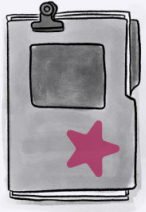
³⁴ Bong 2011

³⁵ Meng et al. 2023

³⁶ Meng et al. 2023

³⁷ Outright International 2016, 168

³⁸ Outright International 2016, 106



Across 50 texts, only 1 explicitly situates bisexuality within a broader cultural and historical context.

A Missing Historical Context

Across the 50 texts we collected for the background analysis, only one explicitly situates bisexuality within a broader cultural and historical context. *A Love That Dare Not Speak Its Name: Exploring the Marginalized Status of Lesbians, Bisexual Women, and Trans-men in India* notes that India's culture has always been diverse and heterogeneous, with no single unified set of norms, taboos, or practices until British colonization.³⁹ The study points out that depictions of homosexual acts appear in early Indian temples and literature, and that bisexuality was present in ancient Hindu mythology.⁴⁰

To further situate bisexual women within broader queer histories of the region, we explicitly searched for studies on the history of sexual fluidity and bisexuality in Asia. As this was additional research after our seven month study concluded, our capacity was limited to reviewing three pieces of research on this issue. All three focused on rituals or belief systems involving what would contemporarily be regarded as transgender figures⁴¹ or male same-sex relations.⁴² Searching within the found documents using keywords like “bisexual,” “bisexual women,” and “bisexuality” produced no results, except for mentions in the reference lists.⁴³

Additional relevant sources likely exist in local languages and archives, using alternate words, phrases, and concepts related to bisexuality and sexual fluidity. At the same time, our experience in this research still reveals a significant gap in knowledge production. Contemporary literature and reporting on bisexual women rarely connect to the deeper historical and cultural roots of bisexuality in Asia.

³⁹ Chithrangathan 2017, 1

⁴⁰ Chithrangathan 2017, 1; Doniger 2005, 50

⁴¹ Peletz 2009; Jackson & Baumann 2022

⁴² Reyes & Clarence-Smith 2012

⁴³ Peletz 2009; Reyes & Clarence-Smith 2012; Jackson & Baumann 2022

Key Findings in Existing Research

The 2016 UN Women report *Promoting and Protecting the Rights of Lesbians, Bisexual Women, Transgender and Intersex Persons* notes that “when bisexual women are in same-sex relationships or express gender non-conformity, they may experience similar forms of discrimination, ostracism and abuse as lesbians,” and that such discrimination can occur in all areas of life.⁴⁴ At the same time, the report emphasizes that bi+ people experience the system of patriarchal heteronormativity in ways that differ from monosexual people. Building on this, this section examines existing studies on bisexual women in Asia, reviewing both the frameworks used to discuss bi+ issues and how a specific focus on bi women can shape research findings.

The section identifies five prominent recurring themes in the literature and briefly lists additional themes which occur but with less frequency.

Bi+ inhibition & invalidation

One recurring theme across the reviewed studies is the invalidation of bisexuality, especially in those that focus on bisexual women. Rather than “invisibility,” the study *The Experiences of Female Bisexual Student-Athletes in China: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis* (2023) used the term “unrecognized identity” to capture how bisexuality is overlooked and rejected in both heterosexual and queer context, while *Mapping the bisexual experience of a Keralite woman: glimpses into India* (2017) uses the word “inhibition” to describe the silencing of bisexual identities.

The 2017 study in India highlights that references to bisexuality (and homosexuality) are almost entirely absent from academic curricula, and sexuality remains a taboo subject in both educational settings and popular culture. This cultural silence is shaped by India’s unique history of colonization, complex demographics, and volatile socio-political climate, all of which create an environment where open discussion of sexuality is actively discouraged. As a result, many queer individuals, including bisexual women, remain “closeted,”⁴⁵ with some never fully realizing or naming their own sexual orientation. This form of “inhibition” is not unique to India. In Singapore, for example, a bisexual participant in Sayoni’s report *Violence and Discrimination Against LGBTQ Persons in Singapore* (2018) recounted being deliberately isolated⁴⁶ by her parents, who feared the extended family discovering her sexuality. The family’s strategy for avoiding potential shame was to exclude her from major social events, including Hari Raya gatherings, effectively erasing her presence from family life.⁴⁷

Within heteronormative institutions, bisexual women’s experiences of coming out are often met with denial or rejection. The 2018 report from Singapore included a testimony from one bisexual woman who was told “there is no such thing as bisexuality” and that she “had just haven’t found a man yet” after she came out to her mother.⁴⁸ Another bisexual person in the same report faced hostile at work as she was asked to make up her mind about whether she liked men or women.⁴⁹

The denial that bisexual women encounter often carries a different nuance compared to the experiences of lesbians. According to the 2016 report by UN Women, families and broader communities may perceive bisexual women as more easily “cured,” maintaining a persistent “hope” that they will eventually leave their female partners and settle with a man at the end of the day.⁵⁰ The 2020 research by UNDP in the Philippines found that some bisexual respondents reported their families “hoped” they would soon move past the “phase” of being bisexual soon.⁵¹ Such conditional acceptance, rooted in the belief that bisexuality is temporary or fixable, compels bisexual women to suppress the queer aspects of their identity and align with cisheteronormative expectations. Their families appear to maintain the hope that they could fall in love with and marry a man. This

⁴⁴ UN Women 2016, 27

⁴⁵ Chithrangathan 2017, 2

⁴⁶ Sayoni 2018, 21

⁴⁷ Sayoni 2018, 21

⁴⁸ Sayoni 2018, 21

⁴⁹ Sayoni 2018, 68

⁵⁰ UN Women 2016, 28

⁵¹ UNDP 2020, 59

puts them in a difficult position, as their sexuality will be dismissed no matter what decision they make. For example, a bisexual Chinese American woman shared on a blog that she faced a dilemma: dating a woman would disappoint her parents and bring them shame, while dating a man would lead them to assume her bisexuality was merely a “phase.”⁵²

Bisexual women also encounter exclusion and invalidation within queer spaces, where their identities are frequently questioned or dismissed. Research in India found that queer people in social networks of a bisexual participant demonstrated strong negative attitude towards bisexuality, framing her as “not being queer enough.”⁵³ A study concerning bisexual athletes in China illustrated how these student-athletes faced rejection by their teammates when they come out as bisexual. One interviewee shared that her teammates think her bisexual identity was “not real,” “not think clearly,” “unimportant,” or “for fun,” and that “if you fall in love with a woman, you are a lesbian; if you fall in love with a man, you are a heterosexual; sexual orientation is a binary division, and there is no middle identity.”⁵⁴ AFLN’s *Queering the SRHR in Southeast Asia: An Examination of LBQ Realities in the Malay Archipelago Report* (2024) also documented one respondent from Malaysia who described how her friends dismissed her bisexuality as a temporary phase and questioned her authenticity.⁵⁵

As the UN Women’s 2016 report pointed out, bisexual women can experience exclusion and discrimination from both mainstream heteronormative society and homosexual communities, as they are often viewed as “too gay” for one and “too straight” for the other, leaving them without a clear place in either.⁵⁶ Similarly, the research study *Beyond Queer: An Epistemology of Bi Choice* (2011) noted that bisexuality is often framed, defined, and treated (though not always experienced) as “almost-straight-almost-gay-but-not-quite” when absorbed into the broader queer category. As a result, at this in-between line, bisexuality is portrayed as inherently lacking – they are not only invisibilized but also subject to suspicion, seen as “not-truly-straight-not-truly-gay.”⁵⁷

The limited recognition of sexual fluidity in both heteronormative institutions and queer spaces often leads bisexual women to be presumed to be either straight or gay, heterosexual or lesbian – with little space for their bisexuality to be acknowledged or affirmed. An academic study in China described how Chinese bisexual student-athletes described felt compelled to present themselves as lesbians to fit into their sports teams and navigate the teams’ environment – an experience the authors term the “lesbian mask.”⁵⁸ While it allowed them relative acceptance – since lesbian identities were more legible in sports contexts – it also concealed their authentic bisexual selves and perpetuated identity invalidation.

Psychological distress

A notable body of research highlights the mental health burdens faced by lesbian and bisexual women. The 2023 study about student athletes in China found that those identifying as lesbian or bisexual reported a higher risk of depressive symptoms compared to their heterosexual peers.⁵⁹ Similarly, a national analysis in the Philippines showed that young lesbian and bisexual women experienced higher rates of suicidal ideation than other female youth.⁶⁰ At the regional level, *A systematic review of the prevalence and associated factors of mental health conditions among lesbian, bisexual, and other sexual minority women in Southeast Asia* further documented elevated levels of depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts among queer cisgender women compared to heterosexual women.⁶¹ Importantly, this review also noted that bisexual and polysexual women reported even higher rates of depressive symptoms and suicidal behaviors than lesbian women.⁶²

A 2017 investigation into a bisexual woman’s experience in Kerala, India found that the lack of proper awareness about bisexuality (and other queer sexualities) leads to bisexual women’s lack of

⁵³ Varma 2022, 47

⁵⁴ Meng et al. 2023, 9

⁵⁵ AFLN 2024, 194

⁵⁶ UN Women 2016, 27

⁵⁷ Bong 2011, 41

⁵⁸ Meng et al. 2023, 8

⁵⁹ Yang et al. 2023

⁶⁰ Manalastas 2016

⁶¹ Alibudbud 2024

⁶² Alibudbud 2024

knowledge regarding their own sexuality, leaving them in “a web of doubt, confusion and identity-related crises.”⁶³ According to research studies conducted in India’s Keralite and Bangalore, lack of social recognition and understanding of bisexuality often leads to bisexual people enduring significant emotional and psychological strain.⁶⁴ Participants in these studies report feelings of guilt, shame, identity confusion, and loneliness. Meng et al. (2023) also noted that negative feelings about bisexual identity can have serious mental health implications, including depression and anxiety.⁶⁵ The struggle for acceptance -both internally and socially -creates ongoing emotional labor for bisexual women, especially in environments that only tolerate binary sexual identities.

Mistreatment in healthcare settings

Sexual and reproductive health services in many Asian contexts are structured around heteronormative and patriarchal assumptions that leave little room for the realities of bisexual women’s lives. In Sri Lanka, for example, EQUAL GROUND reports that both state and private SRH services operate on the belief that sexual health is only relevant to married couples.⁶⁶ This framework excludes unmarried women and queer individuals altogether, disregarding their health needs and reinforcing stigma against same-sex relationships. For bisexual women, this exclusion means that preventive care, sexual health advice, and reproductive services often fail to address their actual circumstances and risks.

In mental health care settings, similar patterns of neglect and misunderstanding persist. Varma (2022) documents the case of an Indian bisexual woman who found her psychiatric care deeply “dissatisfactory.” She had hoped for understanding and support in addressing struggles related to her sexual orientation, but her psychiatrist downplayed the seriousness of her concerns and offered little constructive help. This left her feeling unsupported and incapable of moving forward.⁶⁷

The 2024 AFLN report provides examples of clinical settings as sites of compulsory cisheterosexuality. Bisexual women in testimonies report being subjected to invasive and irrelevant questions, such as why they were not married to men, or whether gynecological examinations were necessary if they were not married.⁶⁸ One respondent recalled being asked presumptuous questions about her sexual behaviors, as the doctor assumed that she “must have had an encounter with a man.”⁶⁹ The research also highlighted the under-recognition of bisexual individuals who have children from previous relationships with cisgender men. These assumptions about a person’s sexual orientation, based on their family structure or past partners, often cause healthcare providers to overlook or dismiss the individual’s bisexuality and the specific challenges they may encounter in their sexual and reproductive health care.⁷⁰

Sayoni’s 2018 report in Singapore also discussed misunderstandings of bisexuality in healthcare institutions. One participant reported that healthcare workers conflate bisexuality with other sexual identities, saying things such as “you’re either straight or a lesbian.”⁷¹ The hostility leads to many lesbian and bisexual women choose not to disclose their sexual orientation to healthcare providers due to fear of discrimination, which can raise the risk of misdiagnosis.⁷² The research team also highlighted intersectional struggles of a Chinese queer woman with a disability, who described how providers tended to focus on her disability and treated her “as if she was fragile” because “people in general never saw her sexuality as foremost, but “maybe saw the chair before anything else.”⁷³

Taken together, these findings show that healthcare settings often operate within a framework that presumes fixed, heterosexual, and gender-normative life paths. This not only results in the misrecognition of bisexual identities but also fosters an environment where bisexual women’s needs are deprioritized or misunderstood. Across mental health, general medical care, and reproductive health services, the cumulative effect of erasure, intrusive questioning, and biased assumptions can dissuade bisexual women from accessing care altogether, thereby exacerbating health disparities.

⁶³ Chithrangathan 2017, 5

⁶⁴ Varma 2022; Chithragathan 2017

⁶⁵ Meng et al. 2023, 7

⁶⁶ EQUAL GROUND 2023

⁶⁷ Varma 2022, 27

⁶⁸ AFLN 2024, 106

⁶⁹ AFLN 2024, 108

⁷⁰ AFLN 2024, 111

⁷¹ Sayoni 2018, 73

⁷² Sayoni 2018, 75

⁷³ Sayoni 2018, 75

Sexual Violence, Harassment, and Intimate Partner Violence

Women who live under violent patriarchal systems are often subjected to multiple forms of gender-based violence - ranging from harassment in public spaces to coercion, assault, and control within intimate or family settings. Respondents of a country-based 2016 report in Japan stated that the reason for the sexual violence they experience was “because of being woman” or because “their perpetrators perceived them as women.”⁷⁴

For queer women, this structural violence often takes on distinct and intensified forms. Several reports from international organizations and non-government organizations found that many bisexual women are physically, emotionally and mentally abused by family and community members after disclosing their sexual identities.⁷⁵ Two distinct forms of violence that LBQ+ people face that are repeatedly highlighted in reports are “corrective” or “curative” violence and violence that is driven by jealousy and/or revenge to denigrate LBQ person’s status, gender identity, gender presentation, and/or sexual orientation.⁷⁶

Across multiple Asian contexts, reports from non-government organizations document so-called “corrective”⁷⁷ violence as a systemic tactic to erase queer women, specifically bisexual women’s identities. In religious settings, bisexual women encounter confrontation and hostility justified through faith-based arguments. For instance, a report in Malaysia noted that Muslim friends of a bisexual woman tried to convert her in the name of saving her and bringing her to the right path.⁷⁸ A Singaporean study included the case of a bisexual woman whose parents threatened to send her to an exorcism as they believed she was possessed.⁷⁹

A 2016 report by Outright International noted that according to their research in Sri Lanka, “when one is bisexual and with an opposite-sex partner, one’s past homosexual experiences can be used against them.”⁸⁰ A report by a non-government organization in Singapore documented the case of a bisexual woman who was sexually assaulted by her male partner. He called her “disgusting” and “shameful” and claimed she “owed him” because of her “sexual past.”⁸¹ The research team highlighted that male partners sometimes use sexual violence to exert control over queer women’s sexuality, leaving them fearful, ashamed, and isolated, and ultimately denying their right to live free from violence and harassment.⁸² Similarly, a country-based report from the Philippines recorded the experience of a bisexual woman whose former male partner used physical and sexual violence to denigrate and humiliate her sexual orientation.⁸³ This shows a pattern where perpetrators use bisexual women’s sexual identity to delegitimize their humanity and to justify abusive behavior.

The 2024 AFLN report documented a case of a Filipina polyamorous pansexual woman who experienced unwelcome sexual advances and inappropriate assumptions about her sexuality and relationships.⁸⁴ Research in India reported that a bisexual participant was unfriended on Facebook by several friends after coming out publicly, with some asking if she was “out hunting for prey.”⁸⁵ Another report from a non-government organization in Pakistan found one bisexual participant experienced online sexual harassment by strangers, as many people assumed that bisexual and lesbian women are “sort of whores.”⁸⁶ It is stated in AFLN’s 2024 study that equating bisexuality, pansexuality, or polyamory with “sexual promiscuity” is a harmful stereotype stemming from ignorance and misunderstanding of these identities.⁸⁷ Such assumption can be dehumanizing and emotionally distressing for those targeted, as it reduces them to perceived sexual orientations, failing to acknowledge the fullness of their humanity.

⁷⁴ Outright International 2016, 81

⁷⁵ Outright 2016; Sayoni 2018; AFLN 2024

⁷⁶ AAFLN 2024; Sayoni 2018; Outright International 2016; UNDP 2020; Rede Feto & ASEAN SOGIE Caucus 2017; Blue Diamond Society 2018

⁷⁷ Rede Feto & ASEAN SOGIE Caucus 2017; Sayoni 2018; AFLN 2024

⁷⁸ Outright International 2016, 119

⁷⁹ Sayoni 2018, 21

⁸⁰ Outright International 2016, 214

⁸¹ Sayoni 2018, 32

⁸² Sayoni 2018, 32

⁸³ Outright International 2016, 178

⁸⁴ AFLN 2024, 195

⁸⁵ Chithrangathan 2017, 5

⁸⁶ Outright International 2016, 154

⁸⁷ AFLN 2024, 196

In 2022, an Indian magazines reported on the concept of ‘unicorn hunting’ – a dehumanizing practice rooted in the objectification of bi+ women – stating that “bi women are often fetishised, commodified and hypersexualised as people with a primary attraction to men, alongside harboring a willingness to experiment with women in order to appease the male gaze.”⁸⁸ Within this dynamic, heterosexual couples seek out a bisexual woman to join their sexual relationship, but frequently disregard the autonomy, emotional needs, and identities of the bi+ women involved. This dynamic constructs bisexual women not as equal sexual partners, but as props or exotic accessories to supplement an existing relationship between two other people.

Some bisexual women also face abuse in relationships with queer partners. Although this issue does not arise as frequently in the studies we reviewed, there were still several reports that raised it as a concern. Sayoni’s 2018 investigation included a testimony from a bisexual woman who was abused by her transgender partner. Because of their unmarried status, she was unable to obtain a protection order against domestic abuse and was not taken seriously by the police.⁸⁹ Academic research in India also highlighted a pattern that was observed by activists that “violence mostly happens among same-sex couples who share hetero-typical relational dynamics,”⁹⁰ where such culturally masculinist dominance manifests in physical and psychological violence.

Economic insecurity

Financial struggles are a recurring and critical theme in the lives of queer women across Asia. For many, unequal access to economic opportunities and essential services such as housing and healthcare creates persistent vulnerabilities.⁹¹ In the Philippines, for instance, a bisexual woman recalled voluntarily marry a man to retain her employment, as there were no bills or laws protecting queer women at that point.⁹² This situation highlights the structural barriers queer women face, reinforcing economic dependency on male partners and deepening gender-based inequalities, especially for those who lack family or community support.

Employment-related discrimination and invisibility compound these struggles. According to a UNDP report on the Philippines, LBQ+ women are entirely absent from official employment statistics, rendering their specific challenges unaddressed in labor policies.⁹³ The report by Sayoni in Singapore echoed this issue, noting that although discriminatory hiring practices were not explicitly reported, LBQ+ women were frequently found in low-wage and precarious jobs, often under short-term contracts.⁹⁴ Their financial instability often forced them to rely on informal lending systems to meet basic needs, further entrenching economic insecurity.

In addition to paid work, queer women often shoulder unpaid care responsibilities, especially in societies with strong expectations on women to be responsible for reproduction. According to reports in Singapore and China, lesbian and bisexual women are frequently expected to be caregivers for aging parents, a role that is often assigned to fulfill traditional family duties.⁹⁵ *In the uncharted water: Meaning-making capacity and identity negotiation of Chinese lesbian and bisexual women* (2023) stated that this pressure in China is magnified by cultural expectations to continue the family lineage, which disproportionately affects queer women who are assumed to deviate from these roles. This dynamic not only reinforces gendered labor norms but also places emotional and financial burdens on queer women.

In Nepal, these vulnerabilities intersect sharply: LBQ+ women who faced discrimination reported being forced out of their jobs and homes, compounding both economic and housing insecurity.⁹⁶ The 2018 human rights investigation in Singapore outlines how lack of access to independent home ownership exposes queer women in Singapore to significant risks. Many live in fear of being outed and subsequently evicted from family homes, especially in conservative and religious households.⁹⁷

⁸⁹ Sayoni 2018, 34

⁹⁰ Bhattacharya 2014, 110

⁹¹ Sayoni 2018; UNDP 2020

⁹² UNDP 2020, 39

⁹³ UNDP 2020, 5

⁹⁴ Sayoni 2018, 68

⁹⁵ Sayoni 2018; Tang 2022

⁹⁶ Blue Diamond Society 2018, 9

⁹⁷ Sayoni 2018, 51

Homophobic landlords and systemic housing policies that prioritize heterosexual nuclear families make it difficult for LBQ+ individuals to access secure rental or subsidized housing.⁹⁸ According to the same report, in high-cost housing markets like Singapore, this often leaves queer women with few safe or stable options, compounding their vulnerability and isolation.

Additional Themes

There are several other important themes that appear across studies, though less frequently discussed. These themes nonetheless shed light on the diverse challenges bisexual and LBQ+ women face in everyday life:

- Discrimination and harassment in workplace: Reports from India⁹⁹ and a cross-country analysis¹⁰⁰ show that bisexual women experienced fear of discrimination in working environment and harassment by colleagues.
- Bullying in schools: Reports from India,¹⁰¹ Timor Leste,¹⁰² Singapore,¹⁰³ the Philippines,¹⁰⁴ and other Southeast Asian¹⁰⁵ contexts highlight the prevalence of bisexual people being bullied by their peers in educational institutions.
- Difficulties in navigating dating lives and romantic relationships: Reports from UN Women¹⁰⁶ facing insecurities within their personal relationships, which stem from the stereotype that their sexuality cannot be ‘trusted’. An Indian paper also noted that bisexual women can meet challenges in finding same-sex partners,¹⁰⁷ which also resonates with some of our interviewees’ experiences.

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⁹⁸ Sayoni 2018, 93	¹⁰³ Sayoni 2018, 55
⁹⁹ Varma 2022, 27	¹⁰⁴ UNDP 2020, 45
¹⁰⁰ Outright International 2016, 216	¹⁰⁵ AFLN 2024, 90
¹⁰¹ Bhattacharya 2014, 111	¹⁰⁶ UN Women 2016, 27
¹⁰² Rede Feto & ASEAN SOGIE Caucus 2017	¹⁰⁷ Varma 2022, 27

Part 1: Visions & Limits

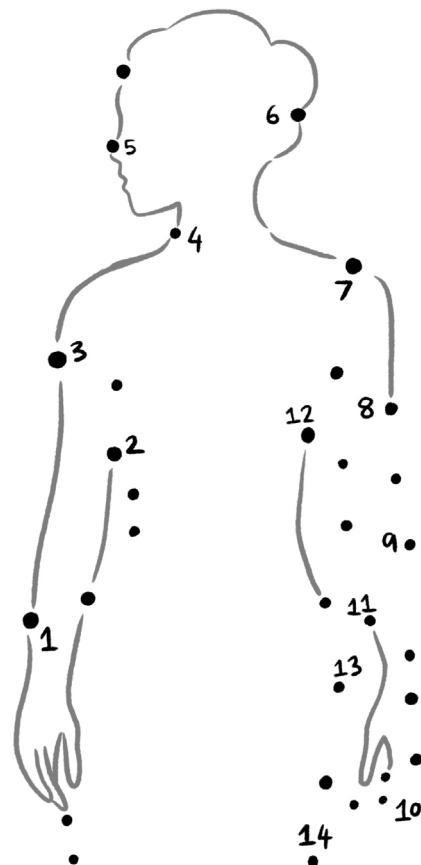
In contexts across Asia, there is a severe disparity between the rights that bisexual Asian women are afforded depending on their relationship status and, if applicable, the gender of their partner(s). These rights are discussed in other sections—including those on land, property, housing, SRHR, access to IPV services, and marriage equality—but it is first important to note that these barriers do not just prevent women from dating or establishing lives with other women. For some, the radical disparity in rights afforded to them—based on whether they are single women, women partnered with men, or women partnered with women—hinders or even defines their ability to imagine, envision, explore, and understand the fullness of their sexual and romantic desires.

Across interviewees, bisexual women also described a corresponding disjuncture between their lived experiences and the frameworks available to describe, explore, or politicize them. Collectively, their testimonies revealed a harmful cycle: gaps in linguistic and conceptual frameworks related to bisexuality make it difficult for bisexual women to explore, think, and speak about their identities; barriers to self-expression hinder community building efforts, as the word “bisexual” does not adequately convey shared experience; limited community spaces preclude collective interrogation and analysis of key bisexual rights issues; this, in turn, leads to gaps in (or nonexistent) policy frameworks specific to bisexual women; policy spaces marginalize or ignore structural abuses that bi women face; the lack of rights for bisexual women again hinders their ability to envision full, expansion lives for themselves.

A key goal of this report is to make an intervention directly into this cycle, by carving out space for an exploration of how bisexual Asian women think and speak about themselves across contexts and geographies. This section first discusses the impact of gaps in language and conceptual frameworks on self-discovery, family dynamics, community building, and activism. It then explores the specific words, phrases, and concepts related to sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expressed used by interviewees; their strategies for self-expression; and how their use of language has developed over time.

The Impact of Gaps in Language & Conceptual Frameworks

Bisexual women interviewees discussed an interlocking web of gaps in language, rights, and conceptual frameworks that negatively impact many aspects of their lives, from family relationships and community building to activism and advocacy. Notably, before discussing the impacts on community building and activism, several interviewees stopped to first explain that gaps in language, rights, and conceptual frameworks related to bisexuality had also prevented them from exploring and learning about themselves.



“I find India to be a deeply homoromantic country. From a very young age, we are discouraged from being close to the so-called ‘opposite sex,’ which makes same-gender intimacy more acceptable, even expected in some settings. You’re allowed to hug, kiss, touch with women in ways you aren’t with men—not in overtly sexual ways of course, but it’s still acceptable to be affectionate. And the same goes for men with other men. I remember once being catcalled by two men holding hands, and it was honestly more cute than threatening. How am I to get upset at this?”

So, there is access to this kind of closeness, but when it comes to language, the gap is enormous. In most local languages there isn’t even a word for bisexuality, or if there is, it is framed as something derogatory, like ‘slut.’ On top of this is digital erasure. At one point, Google’s autocomplete function had blocked the word ‘bisexual,’ so unless you already knew the term and typed it in completely, you would never see suggestions appear. For me, that meant even the act of searching for myself -for language, for representation, for community -was met with silence. The only representation I stumbled upon was porn and felt that bisexuality was visible only through hypersexualisation and never as a community or an identity I could take pride in. Even after Google lifted the block in 2012, many related phrases like ‘bisexual help’ or ‘bisexual support’ still did not autocomplete. When we cannot find the words for ourselves, we disappear not only in daily life but also from health surveys, legal documents and protections we should already have.”

– Apurupa Vatsalya, Global Interfaith Network, India

Interviewees demonstrated shared recognition that frameworks shaped by monosexual, binary, or Western-centric assumptions are not only insufficient, but actively obstruct the ability of bisexual Asian women to build both a sense of self and a community. Some spoke about holding a bi identity without connecting to bi community; others emphasized the importance of collective space but noted that terms like “bi” felt too narrow or inaccessible to be useful across different audiences. One interviewee described bisexuality as a personal rather than communal experience, as it is deeply intertwined with her relationships and gender identity. While she holds the identity, she does not actively seek out bi community. This is not out of apathy, but because the existing language and structures do not reflect her experience. For her to participate in a space, the terms used must resonate; language must grow from community, not be imposed upon it.

In response to these barriers, some bisexual women interviewees choose to refrain from attending community events. Others organized under alternate or broader subgroups (for example, LBQ+), while some turned to cultural documentation or storytelling in hopes of bringing awareness to shared experience.

Stephanie Wang, from China, shared that her group used storytelling as a strategy to document bi and pan experiences in ways that identity-or rights-based frameworks could not capture. The narratives they collected reflect forms of survival, reconciliation, and navigation within institutions like family and marriage. These experiences that are underrepresented in narrative frameworks demanding outness, rupture, or assimilation.

Several interviewees also discussed the impact of linguistic and conceptual gaps on their relationships with their parents and families. Mei, from Singapore, spoke about the absence of shared concepts within her family not as a failing on their part, but as a structural disconnect that made disclosure feel irrelevant. Rather than attributing this disconnect to a form of repression, she explained that bi women’s lives can remain unspoken because the terms available simply do not reflect how they live. Such accounts largely reject the notion that local communities are too conservative to accept or understand bisexuality. Instead, they propose a shift in the frameworks used to build community—away from rigid categories and toward forms of knowledge rooted in lived, relational experience.

The Impact of Gaps in Language & Conceptual Frameworks on Community Building

“There is a bi community and group called Bi The Way. I don’t engage much. I told Jean I couldn’t participate in your study because I am not part of that — I can only speak as me. When I say ‘engage,’ I mean I have a high level of interest and seek to connect. I hold the identity, but I don’t seek to connect. Why? I’ve never thought about that. But now I’m thinking — being bi is a personal experience for myself. It’s very mixed with my other identity, as a lesbian, as a woman dating women.

When I’m seeking community building, I want people with the same experiences. There is no word to describe this experience. Like you said, I am a woman, I have a wife. There is terminology to describe this experience. I get it, and you get it [gestures at interviewer]. Within bi, we don’t have enough clear terminology to describe the bi experience. Somehow it reminds me of the beginning of feminism — why storytelling is always the crucial core research method to feminism or any kind of outsider — because we need to find the terminology.

For me to want to come, the event needs to have terms I can understand. We need research and community building to gradually have terminology — something from that to build up even bigger group conversation, to group research, to community meeting, to even bigger discussion. What I mentioned is about public awareness, but in the community, we also need awakening and awareness.”

– Joyce Teng, Taiwan

The Impact of Gaps in Language & Conceptual Frameworks on Activism & Advocacy

“It seems like we only two types of activism. There is policy, where we need general language and so ‘bi’ is too specific. Then we have community work, where the bi community has unique and special needs. We don’t have the resources to get to know what those needs are. Our limited bi terminology and ideas of bisexuality limit our knowledge of what bi needs even are. Maybe we need to develop political statements, detailed needs assessments, or have more emotional support available to the community between public actions [so they want to participate].”

– Joyce Teng, Taiwan

“We received funding to organize a self-help group workshop online, a focus group, to create a space for bi/pan people to talk about their issues. We transitioned to working on cultural documentation and storytelling and understanding, to push back against the cultural erasure and think about how we can challenge monosexuality. We do historical documentation. We talk about histories with intimacy and family and workplace, and all kinds of different contexts growing up. We don’t identify specific types of discrimination, because we wrote it as a story.

Once you read the story, you see their identity surface in a way that is hard to capture in a rights-based or identity-based framework. A lot of people don’t use these words, but they do want to be included. There are people who don’t identify loudly as bi/pan but have different experiences compared to lesbian/gay people. I think this is a different form of subjectivity that is easily overlooked in human rights documentation.

In many stories, bi/pan people negotiate their way through heterosexual institutions like the family, and don’t have the intention of leaving, but they don’t want to lose themselves. So, this process is reconciliation.

But how do we translate these very messy processes into rights-based documentation of human rights violations? The existing framework cannot capture fully the whole picture of the people. We have to translate to another language for the Western audience. Sometimes, we’re tired of doing these kinds of translations.”

– Stephanie Wang, China

"I feel like wherever I go, activists need to have more gender education — including what gender identity actually means and how it links to bisexuality. If you make legal changes but people's attitudes and language don't change, we will still be discriminated against."

– Dina, Thailand

The Impact of Gaps in Language & Conceptual Frameworks on Family Dynamics

"I have not come out to my family. I don't know if they have suspicions. I don't want to open a can of worms or have a big emotional, high-strung argument. I didn't date until 29; until then, if I talked about being queer, I wouldn't have a partner or date, so what would be the point?"

After that I was dating a guy — I am still with him now — so now I come across as heterosexual on the surface. My dad has a high school education, and my mom just finished elementary school. A lot of concepts are not in their vocabulary."

– Mei, Singapore

"I have very religious, very conventional Bangladeshi parents. They are quite old too. I don't share a lot of my life with them. I live with my partner, and we have been together for four years. My mother knows I am in a relationship with another woman, but she stays in denial. One of my sisters I am out to — sometimes she asks questions, sometimes she's in denial. I don't have a close relationship with my father; he doesn't know much about my life. Another sister I am not out to.

My nieces and nephews know, though. I find it is much easier to speak to the younger generation because they have access to TV, etc. so they understand queer relationships better.

Throughout my teenage years I resented my family for not understanding me, but now the resentment has subsided. I am lot more sympathetic towards them because I understand that they don't have a reference point. My mom literally asked me once what two girls do in a relationship, how we have sex — she can't even wrap her head around how you can have sex without a penis."

– Zee, Bangladesh

"I come from northern Vietnam. There are stereotypes that we are more conservative than other people because the North is historically more influenced by Chinese ideologies. Confucian things, very conservative things, putting women in second class. But in the South, there was the war with America and the previous French influence, so they are more influenced by Western ideas and less conservative. I moved to the South in grade 5. As a queer person, I thought I was more Southern because I was living here for many years, but I see that my values are Northern influenced.

My parents are very conservative, very queerphobic, very transphobic. We don't have queer people in my family so it's probably a very foreign term to them. My girlfriend has a lesbian aunt, so it was really easy for her to talk to her mom, and her family is from the South. Her family is not so easy, but more open to these ideas. My family likes traditional values and marriages, man and woman. I'm not out to my family. I don't feel like it, and I have a complex relationship with my parents. They were foreign workers. We didn't have a lot of contact until I was in grade 5, when they returned from Russia and moved our nuclear family to the city where I live now. I also have other conflicts about their expectations on me as the older daughter and grandchild of a bigger family. So, we are not close, and I don't want to share anything. I tell them I work for a women's rights org. And I worked on a project for LGBT kids, and I said I worked on children's rights."

– Ngoc Nguyen, Vietnam

How Bisexual Women in Asia Speak About Their SOGIE

Researchers asked all interviewees about the words they use to they describe their sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression, and used those words throughout the conversation. For bisexual activists, whose identities are frequently flattened, misread, or erased, being asked to define themselves on their own terms opens space to understand how these identities are negotiated on a day to day basis, how they shift and change, and how they operate in different contexts for different people.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Most participants named more than one term when asked about their sexual orientation. Several described the weight of using certain words in different social or political contexts, navigating between pansexual, bisexual, queer, lesbian, and poly depending on context and comfort. Some described strategies related to legibility in family spaces; some choose words to make others more comfortable; some offered generational or reclamatory reasons for changing their identity labels over time. Several interviewees named their gender identity at the same time (ex: “cisgender bisexual woman”) while others answered each question individually.

Their testimonies demonstrate how bisexual Asian women’s identities are lived relationally and contextually. They are not fixed in a single term but shaped by language, culture, memory, age, politics, and relational status. This section does not seek to categorize participants, but to document the pluralistic, shifting, and expansive ways they move through language.

“Lesbian felt very wrong and dirty when I was younger. I tried telling my friend I was lesbian, and she said, ‘Please be bi, lesbian is disgusting.’ She is supportive now, but that happened when I was 18, and I thought, okay, bisexual seems easier to tell people. Now, [in 2025] it’s different. Now, it feels heavy in my chest when I think about people thinking I’m bi, because people will eye-roll.

Poly was the hardest. I was okay with being queer, but poly was hard to accept. I felt that I was not enough because I can’t live with and be faithful to one person. Whenever I tried, I ended up cheating. I actually like the stereotype that bi and pan people are poly.

I mostly identify as a lesbian, but one of my partners really wants to be called a boyfriend — not a cis man, sort of non-binary and trans man, pronouns they/he. Whenever I try to use the word boyfriend, it feels really weird. People will think I’m now bi, and if I try to use lesbian, I think I’m erasing them. As a non-binary person, I know how it feels if you’re not supportive of their gender identity and pronouns.”

— Kenn, Mongolia

"I'd say cisgender bisexual woman. Bisexual is easier, but I also say queer, sapphic, or use Vietnamese slangs — bê-đê (queer people in general), or ô-môi (lesbian). It feels unfair that I only dated women and I don't intend to date a man anytime soon. I've never dated a cis man before. I think it fits me [to date women because there is a] level of mutual understanding with people with the same experience, even though we might have different backgrounds."

The beautiful thing about bisexuality is that it's an umbrella term for a lot of sexuality, but in the cishet community, it can be difficult to talk about, and there are still toxic homosexual communities trying to downplay your sexuality with narratives like 'you'll eventually leave us and end up with a man.'"

— Ha Phan, Vietnam

"I am pansexual right now, but if people are confused, I also say bisexual and queer. I think the word pansexual is quite problematic in Thailand. When people hear it, they don't understand what it means. My friends who are pansexual face the same problem. People just don't get it."

We often have to say we're bi. Then people ask why we didn't just say bi to begin with. Then I have to explain that I feel more comfortable with the word pansexual."

— Dina, Thailand



"Growing up, I had never heard the term bisexual, only lesbian, and I knew that as a derogatory word, so I didn't use lesbian because it was bad. I was also attracted to men, so that was confusing. As I started having relationships with other people at 18 or 19, I discovered the word bisexual — I found it online. When I met communities and started dating, I found a lot of biphobia. People had the usual stuff about not being committed, going to cheat, this is an experiment, etc. So, then I went back to lesbian publicly, but knew I was bi personally. I would say for political purposes I was lesbian."

Then I found that "pansexual" was more accepted. Queer communities understood pansexual to mean people who are attracted to women and other genders but not cis men, while "bi" included cis men. "Pan" was much more accepted. When I started working with an NGO and would say I was bi, they would say 'you're just a lesbian.' It was really tough — there was a lot of erasure."

I said woman a minute ago, but genderfluid is better. Within genderfluid, I'm comfortable with woman and non-binary. My pronouns are she/they. In my local language, it is gendered in a very different kind of way, so I feel comfortable also adapting masculine pronouns. But in English, I am not comfortable with 'he.' In my local language, a lot of masculinization is a symbol of love. But in English, the gender rules are far more rigid, and I may come across as patriarchal. It feels patriarchal to me."

I used to be really intentional about [my gender identity] when I was in youth activism and advocacy. If anyone asked me my pronouns, I said she, and I never brought up non-binary, nor brought up the masculinization thing in Hindi language. I had a funny thing going where in public I would use 'she, but in my relationship, in the local language, I would be using 'he.'"

Pronouns have become very rigid — you pick a preferred pronoun and stay there. For gender fluid people, it isn't that important. In the end, it's the fluidity that matters, but we have little space to address complex sexuality, especially with limited time and space to do it."

— Ruhab, India

Gender Expression

In a 2023 global report on violence against LBQ+ women and non-binary people published by Human Rights Watch, testimonies from WHRDs in Indonesia, Kyrgyzstan, and Sri Lanka) among other non-Asian countries) demonstrated that gender expression shaped LBQ+ women's access to education, exposure to violence, and vulnerability to state abuse. Several accounts deal specifically with violence against LBQ+ people with more masculine, gender non-conforming, or androgynous gender expressions. The Human Rights Watch report called for a greater focus on gender expression—historically less addressed than sexual orientation and gender identity—in future research related to LBQ+ women and non-binary people's rights.

Interviewees for this report on bisexual women in Asia were specifically offered space to share how they described and experienced their gender expression. They described several factors which impacted their experience of their gender expression and their decisions related to how to speak about it. These included state-imposed biopolitical expectations related to the structure and legibility of nuclear family units; gender binaries imposed by the English language; national “development” projects; the influence of Bollywood; and attempts to mitigate incorrect assumptions about their sexual orientation and gender identity. Specifically for feminine presenting bisexual women, the use and strategic deployment of hairstyles, clothing items, and mannerisms is an important tool to affirm and demonstrate their queerness.

“The way I present myself is quite feminine, so I feel I am treated as a straight woman, which isn't okay with me for people to treat me this way. I feel in society, where I am right now and wherever I go, that we have to explain that we are bisexual or even lesbian just so people will have a glimpse of understanding of what we are. Pronoun ‘she’ if needed is okay, but in Thai our pronouns are very gender neutral. Never thought much about [gender expression], but we have the ending sound in Thai for man and woman to use. When I speak, I would prefer to use the one for men (krub), which is maybe not what you would expect.”

– Dina, Thailand

“In my childhood, there was a poster family plastered everywhere by the national family planning movement. My parents already had a girl, so they really thought they would have a boy and wanted a boy. I was given short hair and trucks and guns; my sister was given Barbies, and I was given trucks and guns. Then I hit puberty and suddenly had to have long hair and be a girl. I think this really messed me up.

The family planning movement forced this on a lot of families, like my cousin who was a boy but was made to dress like a girl. It was very common for a family to want two children to be two genders, and if they didn't get biological male/female, they raised the child into the gender expression they lacked. Being a tomboy was very much inside the norm. Many of my friends identified this way. Now, many of them identify as trans men or with no gender at all. Growing up, they were made to cut their hair.

In past generations, women had short hair, and it was a sign of femininity, but I think with the introduction of Bollywood, short hair was definitely for boys. So, for people like us who were made to cut their hair, teachers treated us like boys. This whole thing is really happening as part of national development. Our constitution is copy-pasted from India. All these national movements take place abruptly without having much of a connection with people's real lives.”

– Reina, Bhutan

Part 2: Human Rights Work & Struggles in the Movement

How Bisexual Women in Asia Describe Their Work

Researchers asked interviewees which words they used to describe their human rights work, activism, and community building efforts, broadly defined. Responses included activist, advocate, comedian, “editor doing the background work,” faith-based advocate, feminist activist, gender activist, human rights activist, Indigenous feminist human rights activist, LGBT movement worker, organizer, political worker, public health professional, scholar activist, sexuality educator, SRHR programmer, visual activist, was an activist, woman human rights defender (WHRD), queer feminist, queer feminist activist, and community server.

Several women described their work as temporal part of a larger continuum. One interviewee said she was a “former HRD,” while another said, “I was an activist.” The latter is now engaged in what she calls “background” activities that feel safe, politically aligned, and fit her capacity for additional care work at home.

Other participants explained that the words they use to describe their human rights activities vary based on social context. One Vietnamese interviewee said she would describe herself as a “queer feminist” or as a “queer feminist activist, sometimes.” She explained that in Vietnam, the addition of the word “activist” can be at turns dangerous, political, or powerful depending on the context and audience.

Interviewees demonstrated a deep and thoughtful consideration of how and why they described their work. The detailed answers participants gave were linked not only to their emotional wellbeing and sense of being respected by others, but also to their physical safety. However, many interviewees told researchers that this AFLN interview was the first time they had ever been asked by another person or organization how they wished to be described in the context of their human rights work. Interviewees made clear that they appreciated these questions as much as –if not more than– than those related to how they described their SOGIE.

This demonstrates an urgent need for more documentation of how queer and feminist activists, WHRDs, and community leaders in Asia identify their work. This documentation should directly inform how donors, international NGOs, and governments structure their partnerships and support with these WHRDs –not only for their comfort and out of respect, but for their safety.

“For me, the term ‘human rights defender’ feels very serious and heavy. In other organizations, I’ve noticed that a lot of people managing or leading work often have degrees, like a master’s in anthropology or something closely tied to their role. I don’t have a social science degree. My BA is in education. When I describe what I do, calling it HRD work feels too formal, because HRDs are usually full-time activists. That’s not what I’m doing right now. It’s not the only thing I want to do in life. Sometimes I do art, sometimes other things. I see myself as a bit of an activist and a bit of an organizer.”

– Refani, Indonesia

"I **was** an activist.
I don't think I am
anymore ever since
I left my country."

– Apple, Thailand

"Activist. I used to
be a human rights
defender, but my
work is not only about
advocacy. It's also
community service,
community building."

– Sadie, South Korea

"For me, the term 'human rights defender' feels very serious and heavy. In other organizations, I've noticed that a lot of people managing or leading work often have degrees, like a master's in anthropology or something closely tied to their role. I don't have a social science degree. My BA is in education. When I describe what I do, calling it HRD work feels too formal, because HRDs are usually full-time activists. That's not what I'm doing right now. It's not the only thing I want to do in life. Sometimes I do art, sometimes other things. I see myself as a bit of an activist and a bit of an organizer."

– Refani, Indonesia

"Feminist queer activist, sometimes. Women's rights or human rights defender. I don't feel comfortable using 'activist' usually, because there are so many people doing much more, and visibility is hard."

Bangladesh is a developing country, a Muslim country, and many national laws are very conservative. The interim government's Women's Reform Commission recommended things like acknowledging marital rape and sex workers as laborers. The country is in turmoil because people feel like these things are against central tenets of Islam. You can imagine how these people react or what space there is to discuss LBQ rights."

The things we do have to be very underground and quiet. I have discomfort around 'activist' and haven't been able to figure out entirely why. I'm just part of the community and allied to sex workers. I'm attached to these communities, but identifying as an activist is difficult. If someone asked, I would say, 'I work with sex workers.'"

– Zee, Bangladesh

"Activist, visual activist, comedian. I do standup and my jokes relate to my work, challenging patriarchy, heteronormative things, and toxic compulsory monogamy. I want to speak about what I think, and I need space for that."

– Kenn, Mongolia

"I used to call myself a feminist and I was unapologetic about it. In the LGBT scene now, I'm just an editor, doing background work, helping Jean Chong [laughs].

I have a full-time job and I'm the caregiver for my parents. I don't have time to go run around so much. At home I can do editing and freelancing. This fits my schedule — otherwise there is too much going on in my life.

Caregiving is really a lot. My mom has Parkinson's, which is a progressive disease. Now she's still able to get up and go around, but I have to get her to medical appointments. My dad has what we call the 3 highs in Chinese: blood pressure, sugar, cholesterol. He also has bipolar disorder –suspected not confirmed. He just came off his episode, so I can do this interview.

Physical activism is impossible for me right now. Another reason I'm not in the scene is because there was a huge trend here of taking people's photos and posting them without consent. Because of the exposure and not being out in my private life equally, I don't want to have to dodge

– Mei, Singapore

"Advocating for LGBTQI+ rights. I will use any and every method: youth activism, media, community building, research, whatever it takes. It's easier to say 'inclusion' than LGBTQI+. Community building, research, diversity, inclusion, gender. Based on who I'm talking to, I'd say I work with marginalized communities. In advocacy language, I don't use words. I use experiences. I don't use 'lesbian,' I describe two women loving women. For the public and visibility, I was 'lesbian' intentionally because there was a lot of homophobia."

– Ruhab, India

"I'm a political worker, working in LGBT movements. I would agree if someone said HRD, but for myself, I sometimes use activist. More often political worker or LGBT/gender movement worker. It's a rough translation.

I think it's a personality thing. I choose more neutral terms to describe my work. To defend something, to fight something, is quite exhausting (laughs). When I describe something, I'm working on, I'm saying I'm interested and want to do more on that, rather than there's something bad happening that I need to prevent or do something to stop. It's a more positive thing and perspective. I'm trying to do something *for* –not always against."

– Joyce Teng, Taiwan

Reflections on Becoming Activists

After interviewees explained how they identified their human rights and community building work, their specific language was used for the remainder of the interview. For example, in the next question, “How did you become an [activist]?”, researchers replaced “activist” with the exact word the interviewee had used to describe their work. (For example, “How did you become a visual activist?”.)

Many participants started their feminist and human rights work through a desire to create spaces that they lacked growing up. Kenn, from Mongolia, described first going to an LGBT Center to learn how to live as a queer person. Not seeing any young, out activists, they began working there as part of the staff and developed her activist identity through human rights education, comedy routines, and community building.

Other interviewees said their identities as bisexual WHRDs evolved from early involvement in a wide range of social movements during their time as students. Dina, from Thailand, became involved in feminist and environmental activism after participating in protests during high school. Though the protests were, at the time, organized and linked to a national political party, her interest stemmed from a desire to act in solidarity with environmental and Indigenous causes.

Others came into activism from professional fields or unexpected volunteer opportunities. Zee, in Bangladesh, was a lecturer and journalist before she began working as an interpreter for a sex worker organization during a community training. Her support during that event led to an invitation to join the organization in a full-time role.

Apurupa Vatsalya, from India, transitioned from gender justice legal work into sexuality education because she “wanted to be the person I needed growing up.” Ngoc Nguyen, from Vietnam, echoed this sentiment: “It would have been easier to identify myself from an early age if I had role models or any bi women to see”. Refani, in Indonesia, sought out an opportunity to provide critical support to survivors of sexual and gender based violence, which she said deeply needed and could not access when she was younger.

“I never decided I needed or wanted to be an activist. I needed to come out to myself, I needed to find community, and it was hard to find information and queer young people. I went to the LGBT center in Mongolia when I was 18 and found many activists.

I didn’t know what activism was or what queer movements were, I just needed some stories about how to live as a queer person in Mongolia. No one cut their connection with me for being queer, but many people told me to go abroad. I didn’t want to; I wanted to be with my friends and family.

Most of the stories I got from elders were really sad, saying you can’t live out and be proud. It was heartbreaking. I also couldn’t see young, out queer people and activists in Mongolia, and I felt alone. I started to work at the LGBT center, learning about human rights and mechanisms and challenging society.”

– Kenn, Mongolia

“When I first joined the movement, I noticed there were a lot of bi women who don’t highlight these experiences. Discriminatory narratives within the community: bi and pan women in China were regarded as traitors, impure. People use horrible terms for people who are not pure/gold lesbians. As I got deeper into activism, I realized it was important for bi women to organize, and we want our issues to be heard. I cofounded a bi+ group with bi/pan friends in 2013; it was at a La La camp.”

– Stephanie Wang, China

“I’ve spent 18 years working for different NGOs, including Umang and LGBTQ networks. I was a senior advisor for an HIV program with the UN, and I’m also a filmmaker — interested in media representation — but I’m currently not associated with any organizations. I’m in touch with some bisexual groups. I co-founded the largest youth group and Umang, a support group for LBT people.”

– Ruhab, India

"I studied for a law bachelor in Taiwan. I was not so keen on social justice issues, but when I got into graduate studies, studying my law master's, I started to focus on multiple social issues, including the farmland movement in Taiwan. The government needed that land, so they used a low price to forcibly buy it from the citizens. I helped people there to read the documents they received from the government, and some lawyers, because they were already helping those people to sue the government. It was in my father's hometown. My father's family does agriculture. They raise rice."

– Joyce Teng, Taiwan

"In the first year of university, I started hearing more about social issues, mostly because during the summer between high school and university, a lot of political events happened. There were demonstrations and peaceful protests for clean water. I started caring more and felt like gender issues aligned the most with me at the time. I joined training courses for young activists. I didn't have to care about financial situations, so I had time."

– Ngoc Nguyen, Vietnam

"I wanted to be the person I needed growing up."

– Apurnpa Vatsalya, Global Interfaith Network, India

"I experienced years of sexual abuse from my family and ran away from home in 2012. I was having a hard time coping. I found an organization focused on sexual abuse in relationships. I came to know the roots of my problems and trauma and the hard times, and I learned a lot. I found a safe space to learn and ask for support. I started therapy from that organization before later joining as a volunteer."

I worked with them for 3–4 years as the program officer and peer counselor. I handled the hotline for the sexual abuse reports, did intake for the cases, and sent them for support. I also was a peer counselor, which is like a friend.

It is difficult work, but in Indonesia especially it is hard to find people who understand your struggles. It's very difficult to find access to organizations and how to report sexual abuse."

– Refani, Indonesia

The Human Rights Work of Bisexual Women in Asia

The human rights work of bisexual women in Asia spans local, national, and international contexts.

Several bi women interviewed have founded or grown organizations that address critical gaps in movement infrastructure. These include dedicated LBQ+ organizing spaces, sex worker rights networks, emergency finance systems for queer people facing economic precarity, nationwide youth groups, and LBT support collectives. Bisexual Asian women shape the human rights landscapes of their unique contexts through labor that is strategic, relational, and deeply rooted in the needs of their communities. Many are building expansive, intersectional visions of justice that include sex worker rights, caste equity, queer parenting, economic redistribution, and collective care. Their human rights work is not supplemental to the queer movement. It is, in many cases, what keeps it alive.

Nyima's work in Nepal integrates art and storytelling to challenge caste stereotypes and gender norms in women's and queer movements; Zee in Bangladesh built a collective that holds space for rest and belonging for LBQ women alongside her organizing on sex worker's rights to work; Refani in Indonesia co-organized a cooperative-based organization focused on the needs of low-income LBQT communities.; and Kenn's Mongolian comedy routines creatively carve out public space for diverse sexual and romantic identities. Their work resists the assumption that bi experiences are too niche, too complex, or too confusing to organize around. Instead, they reveal bisexuality as a grounding political identity through which many women are building new systems of support, knowledge production, and structural change.

"I'm a stand-up comic and I also have an Instagram account and blog for polyamorous knowledge. I'm sure it's the only one in Mongolian. [I feel like I am] the only poly person who is out in Mongolia right now. I feel so alone (laughs). With my being queer and out, I have a lot of followers; it is part of my identity. I also defend and fight with biphobic people a lot."

– Kenn, Mongolia

“Twenty-five percent of my time is spent creating LBQ-affirming legal networks. I’m also trying to set up something in South Africa and Latin America. The program is very deeply ‘global south.’ I know people don’t like this word, but I do, because I identify as a global south person. Learning that LBQ is a safe space can be nice, but I also feel very strange about it because I feel uncomfortable that the T is out. I don’t think anyone is intentionally being TERFy, but I’m navigating this in my work.”

– Apple, Thailand



“My work is about integrating art and creativity with human rights and social justice movements. I’m part of a queer collective in Kathmandu, where we organise the Annual Pride, which takes place in June every year. Recently, I have also been a part of a South Asian LBQ persons collective, where we noticed that there was too little visibility of bi women, not just in women’s movements but also in queer movements. We created a design to visibilize ourselves. We made a collage. Four of us shared our experiences and talked about how we are shadowed under the rainbow within the queer movement in Nepal. A lot of this work is about expanding the standards of [what it means to be] an activist.

Why did you think you had to rightly call out [in the HRW report] the invisibility of LBQ+ women in the women’s movement? Nepal has many Indigenous movements and tribal movements, and certain people are always at the top because of caste and hierarchy. But who is a woman? In Nepali movements, at the top you see people from the upper class and upper castes, with certain facial structures, bigger eyes, straighter noses, and traditionally femme-presenting.

When you really look for representation, there are none. Yes, the larger women’s rights movements do question patriarchy, do question the norms and traditions, but it’s difficult for them to see themselves and understand there are women who do not look like what you say women are, and who don’t conform to the normal concept of women.”

– Nyima, Nepal

“BEDI is a pejorative term for women in Bangla; it is used to look down upon women. It’s the name of a collective I co-founded last year; we chose the name to reclaim and redefine the word. We are currently expanding membership. We hope to reach 40 members by the new year. Right now, we are 18. We don’t ‘work’ there in a formal sense and we don’t have registration. The structure is very informal and flexible.

We’re focused on community organizing. I was reading *This Is Why We Became Activists* and some other things and realized how few LBQ and bi organizations we have. There are many LGBT organizations focused on trans women and even trans men, but nothing specifically for LBQ women.

Being a woman in Bangladesh is very difficult because of the socio-political situation and the fact that it’s a Muslim-majority country. There’s double marginalization. There’s almost no space to express ourselves. I always felt the need for a dedicated safe space for LBQ women, especially during my time with Oboyob, where I coordinated one or two meetups for LBQ women. Those were the most fun events and the ones I felt most excited going to. My sense of belonging was most prominent at those events.

After attending regional LBQ events, I committed to founding a group here in Bangladesh. We meet once a month, and the focus is mostly on collective care and well-being. We meet to rest and have a good time – screen movies, hold drumming sessions, yoga sessions, art sessions. Resource and funding is an issue. Every time we try to meet, it’s very difficult to access safe spaces. Most of our work is conducted through collaboration with other LGBT organizations or feminist groups. There are no formal LBQ organizations in Bangladesh right now.

I also work with Sex Workers and Allies South Asia as the country program coordinator of Bangladesh chapter, focusing on sex workers’ rights to work. I’ve been working with them since 2023. SWASA operates in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. It works to strengthen national networks where they exist – three of these countries have such networks – but in Sri Lanka there is no dedicated network of sex workers, so SWASA’s focus there is to strengthen the community.”

–Zee, Bangladesh

“Since 2020 I have been working with Cooperative Akar Rumpot. I handle proposals and am a supervisory board member. Previously I supported the foundational work to get it started as an organization. We are an LBQT organization that focuses on economic resilience and mental health resilience; savings and loans; and skills workshops. For our organization, savings is important so people can access emergency loans and also, we are working on small ventures. A lot of queer people have a hard time accessing loans because they have low economic status, and also because they often lack a safety net from their families. This makes them especially vulnerable, so they use our emergency loans if they have an emergency with their family or need help with rent.”

– Refani, Indonesia

“My first job after my law master’s was to be an assistant to an MP in parliament, a long-term women’s rights lawyer. When I joined the Taiwan Equality Campaign, it was a marriage equality coalition, and I was responsible for anything related to lobbying in parliament and other similar political things. Now it’s the sixth year of the legalization of same-sex marriage. I still do local-level gender policy and advocacy. We do have a workplace equality project, though I don’t get involved in that much. I do have work related to LGBT political participation training. We have election observation work, PrideWatch. Now I’m shifting to international work.”

– Joyce Teng, Taiwan

Emotional Labor Bi Women Perform in their Movements

Bisexual women play crucial roles in sustaining social movements. These roles are grounded not only in public activism but also in organic and continuous acts of care, trust-building, and emotional labor. Their unique contributions on the interpersonal level operate in the background and are rarely recognized as political work, but they serve as connective tissue across movements, ensuring that queer, trans, and other multiply marginalized people remain present in collective struggles.

Dina's reflections on her past relationship with a prominent environmental organization in northeast Thailand exemplifies this dynamic. Though she did not share what she described as the group's "male-centric" approach to organizing, she supported the work by providing materials, assisting with advocacy, and acting as an emotional anchor for other queer environmentalists who did not feel safe being "out" within the organization. One young queer activist confided in Dina that he was queer but explicitly asked that Dina not share this with the environmental group's leader.

"When I was in high school there was a political party called Future Forward involved in a big court case, and my friend and I came out to protest. Since then, I have been involved in environmental activism and feminist activism. I have done a lot of activism protesting mining and protecting waterways in the northeast. There is a group in the northeast that is powerful and important because they have access to real people on the ground. I helped with advocacy and background but not interviews or protests because I had limitations in travel. I've known them since high school, but our ideology didn't match in terms of gender and feminism. They are a very militant, martial, and male-centric organization. I still wanted to help them though, providing signage and background support for anti-mining protests. When they organized a month about democracy five years ago, I also supported that. They primarily work on environmental issues, except during the period when the democracy movement was strong.

I didn't feel extremely uncomfortable in the space because I'm quite strong, but I've had people come to me and say they couldn't be out in that group or didn't feel safe to be honest about themselves. I know several queer people organizing with them. One long-time friend who I've done activism with for years confided in me this year that they're queer and asked me not to tell my organization. I was very glad to learn I'm someone people can confide in, because I used to think I wasn't that person. But when friends have issues, they can't talk about elsewhere, they come to me. It shows they trust me and that makes me very happy. At first this friend didn't want to say anything, but I made a soft joke about how everyone in the world is queer and we're just attached to the binary. After that they came out to me."

- Dina, Thailand

Her story reveals how bi women often occupy an inside/outside role in movements, bridging gaps in acceptance and understanding while protecting the safety and comfort of other queer people who wish to engage in more mainstream or heteronormative organizing spaces. ***Her role and labor in this dynamic emerged as a kind of superpower in our interview:*** Dina had the ability to operate at the thresholds of multiple movements, holding contradictions and sustaining others across political, personal, and emotional terrains.

This form of labor is also evident in Ari's experience navigating misunderstandings about her identity within her movement space in Indonesia. As a visibly queer and openly pansexual woman, she is subjected to persistent sexualization and stereotyping. Her visibility carries emotional and

reputational costs that others in her movement do not face. She said that the lack of SOGIESC education in women's rights and other spaces means that even as non-queer people begin to accept gay, lesbian, and trans identities, she has been told she is "greedy" and accused of promiscuity. Ari continues to educate, engage, and support her colleagues. Performing the labor of enduring, translating, and continuing to show up in these spaces is critical to the survival of more expansive and inclusive movements. As with Dina, this is not just about bi and pan women staying inside movements, it is about how their presence transforms them.

"My colleagues know, but our members have limited access to SOGIESC education, so they don't always understand. I do have the privilege of looking feminine sometimes. So, when I say I am pansexual, usually what they understand is bisexual persons that can go with a lot of people, and can date a lot of people at one time, like I'm automatically polyamorous and they always ask "do you do threesomes? Do you do orgies?" They say it as a mean thing. They put me in a demonization. If I happen to have an ex in another space they know, they say things like it's just Ari being greedy. I know they don't always have access to education on this topic, but it's still hard."

— Refani, Indonesia

Lack of Respect in the Movement

Despite their centrality to diverse human rights movements, bi women are rarely recognized as leaders in their own right. As multiple interviewees emphasized, they are often forced to organize from the margins, navigating stigma around bisexuality, pressure to align with more legible identities, and exclusion from existing structures shaped by caste, class, race, or normative ideas of womanhood.

The contributions and leadership of bi women are not always met with support or validation. Instead, bi women activists are often treated as reputational risks by their own communities, and some bi women activists who live openly as bi women described professional isolation and social scrutiny, even as they carry out the labor of movement-building.

Participants were each asked if their colleagues, within their respective human rights movements, coalitions, or collectives, were aware that they identified as bisexual. Though it occurred relatively early in the interview, for several participants this was the most emotional question to answer. Several began crying while describing offensive, hurtful, and traumatizing experiences they had endured within their own queer organizations and communities.

Their testimonies indicate that bisexual WHRDs in Asia must often fight to be included in the spaces they create. Interviewees described feeling unwelcome or disrespected by peers, colleagues, and institutions, not based on the substance of their work but on assumptions about their identities and relationships. Their

testimonies reveal biphobia and monosexism not as abstract concepts but as concrete experiences of workplace hostility, dismissal from leadership positions, and alienation in community spaces. For many bi women, visibility is met not with solidarity, but with suspicion.

Chit, a bi woman from Myanmar, described being repeatedly accused by colleagues and even leadership of "not being from the community" because she is feminine, dates men, and does not visibly align with dominant queer aesthetics. Despite her contributions, she was accused of taking up space meant for "real" queers and subjected to ridicule about being "confused."

"[Queer activists] keep saying gender is fluid and a spectrum," Chit said, "but in reality, it's just like — fit this binary system and categories." Her experience is echoed by Apple in Thailand, who was told she was not "really queer" because she had not dated a woman recently enough. This impacted not only her ability to date openly and comfortably, but diminished the weight and value given to her contributions to LGBT advocacy conversations.

Polysexual interviewees described similarly harmful experiences and mistreatment in movement spaces. Kenn, a Mongolian activist, described the rapid shift from admiration to disgust when a fellow activist realized they was dating more than one person. "They looked at me like I was really disgusting," they said. "I was shocked at how fast they shifted from respect and admiration to hatred." Such reactions often follow bi and pan women who

are openly polyamorous, gender-nonconforming, or gender fluid. This “disgust” is a further barrier to identifying bi women’s needs and advocacy goals. As Chit put it, “It’s not safe to be out, so how could we possibly discuss what we need?”.

It is important to note that some participants, although far fewer, had positive experiences of discussing their bisexuality with queer and feminist colleagues. Apurupa, for example, said of their experience in India:

“In the Indian organisations I worked with—even those that described themselves as youth-led, feminist, intersectional, rights-based, etc.—there was little space for bisexuality to be recognised as real. Either the openness wasn’t there, or bisexuality was brushed aside as less legitimate. Organisational culture decided whose identities mattered, and it was largely monosexist. Now, in a global organisation led by queer and trans people, the atmosphere feels entirely different. I am out in every way, even in my confusion on many fronts and my colleagues are accepting and open. It feels almost nonchalant, as if queerness is simply taken as matter of fact.”

However, for most interviewees, community legitimacy appears linked to conformity. Bisexual women’s fluidity is regularly demeaned, and their labor is dismissed, even in movements which promote gender expansive visions for the future.

“I’m poly and some people really don’t get it. I was dating my ex for 3 years. We were out as a lesbian couple for the community, and I was also dating another girl, she was really trying to understand polyamory. Someone came up to me to thank me for my activism. I introduced my date, and they started asking about my partner, I tried to explain, and they looked at me like I was really disgusting. I was shocked at how fast they shifted from respect and admiration to hatred and disgust. I’m also a vegan activist and sometimes people think I’m trying too hard to

– Kenn, Mongolia

“I think maybe also people are in denial that I am bi. In some queer spaces, people would say I’m not really LGBT or queer — mostly in Malaysia. They’d ask, “So when was the last time you dated a girl? Was it within a month?” If you’ve not done this specific thing, you’re not lesbian enough and it’s a waste of lesbians’ time. It’s exhausting. I’ve also dated men and trans men.”

– Apple, Thailand

“The way bi people are excluded here also makes us not safe. It’s not safe to be out and discuss what we need. Usually, they are quiet and only a very few do it, because they are already well known. I don’t feel safe to talk about bi issues in regional LGBTIQ space or LGBTIQ organisation.

The experiences I am facing — [starts crying] sorry, I’m being emotional — I face so much discrimination here. They say I’m only here to take money. Our colleague is bi, and even our board member says, “we want people from the community, not a straight woman.” She is bi. But they say this way. They say I’m confused, that I don’t like women, that I’ve never been with one. But how do you know my feelings? When I got officially accused of just being here to take money, they kept saying I was a straight woman here just to get money. The ED even said he cannot work with a person who is not from the community. You keep saying gender is fluid and a spectrum, but it’s just like “fit to this binary system and categories”: you are feminine, look like a female, and you mainly date men, so you cannot be bi. Even my colleagues say I am confused.

People’s judgment — I keep hearing in my mind them saying I am confused. They will watch and judge if I talk to women. I feel like I’m more attracted to feminine women. If I do this in public, people will sexualize it: two women making out — it would be sexualized, maybe it comes from porn. I don’t talk to my friends. I try to date women, but if I tell my friends about it, they say I’m confused. My straight friends just say I’m confused. But also, my LGBT colleagues make jokes about me not being from the community.”

– Chit, Myanmar

Part 3: Desiring Partnership, Defending Autonomy

Bisexual Asian women's unique struggles related to dating, partnership, and companionship were recurring themes in interviews. Participants raised this subject often and in relation to numerous different topics and questions. Interviewees described a set of barriers to partnership that operate simultaneously in families, queer communities, and public life, producing what one activist in Bangladesh called "a very small dating pool" for bisexual women. These barriers often intersect with other forms of discrimination documented in this report, including family expectations, stigma within LGBTQ spaces, and safety risks in public.

At the same time, several interviewees expressed exasperation at the societal expectation that they should be always seeking partnership. Several women explained that while they do, in fact, desire partnership and companionship, they have a simultaneous desire to carve out space for the legitimacy of being single. Many interviewees share a sense of having full adulthood perpetually withheld from them because they are not partnered or married. This is especially painful for bisexual women, given the common experience of having their sexuality denied if they do not have a visible

partner. Partnership, for many bisexual women, confers either proof of queerness or evidence to the contrary, depending on the gender of your partner.

In this way, bi women are forced to contend with both their own desire for partnership and their rightful rage at being perpetually viewed as adolescents (if they do not have a male partner) or not queer enough (if they do not have a woman partner)

This chapter discusses key struggles raised by interviewees related to dating and partnership. This includes suspicion and distrust rooted in biphobia; women's unequal access to land, property, and inheritance; social and familial expectations related to Indigenous traditions and caste systems; motherhood; and forced marriage.

In many cases, the barriers that prevent bisexual women from forming relationships are rooted in a denial of women's autonomy. The barriers discussed in this section reveal the interplay between structural compulsory heterosexuality and the denial of women's autonomy.

Biphobic and Homophobic Barriers to Partnership

In some cases, bi women were told directly by partners — both men and women — that their sexuality made them untrustworthy. Others described projected assumptions about sexual experience, a fear of being seen publicly with a partner of a certain gender, and a limited options for dating women due to only knowing queer women from their organizations. These dynamics constrain who, how, when, and for how long bi women can date, resulting in feelings of precarity, hopelessness, futility, and discouragement related to partnership.

For many, the constraints are rooted in the fear of exposure and its consequences. An activist from Nepal, for example, said she could not speak openly about queer relationships in her family without jeopardizing the relationship itself, while also fearing gatekeeping and erasure from queer spaces if she were partnered with men. Others described self-censoring in public, avoiding holding hands, or introducing partners as "friends" to avoid being outed. In Bangladesh, a lack of safe and acceptable dating options meant avoiding colleagues, other activists, or anyone outside the movement altogether. These restrictions are compounded by internalized pressures — from family, partners, or the broader community — to conform to heteronormative expectations. Some visibly queer, out, and masculine-presenting women fear of being "cast as the person who can convince a daughter to come away with me and be gay." Feminine-presenting interviewees described a dismissal of their sexual legitimacy by lesbians, and a concurrent suspicion from "queerphobic" men. Reina, in Bhutan, also described a sense of responsibility in dating women — she wants to be in a stable and secure emotional and psychological place to avoid projecting trauma onto a woman partner. She does not feel that same pressure dating men but acknowledges it takes "more emotional labor" on her part to date men.

“People say, ‘Oh, you’re pan, so you like people regardless of gender, so it’s easier for you.’ And it’s like, NO.

If I’m in a queer relationship, my family will see them as just a friend. The relationship becomes difficult if I can’t even, with my family, ever talk about it. That impacts the relationship with my partner, because as much as I would feel not accepted in my family, my partner would feel the same. I also want my freedom to be who I am, to express who I am, to express things the way I am, to not censor things, to not have to introduce my partner as my friend. I have a constant fear when I’m holding hands. Women holding hands with a woman is normalized in Nepal, but I’m still terrified someone will see me.”

If I’m with a cis man, the difficulty would be whether they would understand the dynamic and who I am internally and what I’m trying to bring into the relationship. Many people are queerphobic, cis men, to be specific. They want their partner to just be with [men]. I also fear that if I’m in a partnership with a man, other queer people won’t see me as queer. People gatekeep in queer spaces. Then, regarding dating women,

I’ve also had experiences where I wanted to explore the dynamic of more than one person — monogamy. It’s a lot to think about. And sometimes I’m just confused.”

– Nyima, Nepal

“I’m actually technically on strike. I’m just tired. I’m tired of dating men and women and everybody. Men are tiring because they’re often married and learning how to gaslight you. Lesbians are often married too, and some accuse me of not being out. Then they say you don’t have enough experience with women. Then they tell me to date white women because white women at least know what to do [implying I still need to learn]. If you want to date a foreigner in Malaysia, it’s hard. If someone has a racial preference, it freaks me out. Then I was dating a Malaysian who said I would leave her for a man. She basically told me every cliché biphobic thing.

Sometimes I think I have internalized the need to have a male partner. It is assumed that we all want a male partner. But also, have we internalized it? I thought I clearly communicated [that I am bi]. I am about to be 40. If I needed a male partner in my life, I would have one.”

– Apple, Thailand

“[I defend bisexual women a lot in my public activism], but the funny thing is, bi women don’t date me. I defend and fight for bi women, but when I’m dating women it’s mostly lesbians. Sometimes I think this is because I look feminine, so I must be more into mascs. Or because I’m really out — that intimidates people. I think bi women are more afraid of being out.

People expect bi women to get married to men at some point and have a “normal” family. If they are seen with me, it will be hard for them, and people will think, ‘Okay, they are gay now.’ I’m kind of like a virus to people.

I know a lot of proud bi women and friends, but they can’t really be out. They can be seen in the community, but being with very out lesbians is different. Or maybe it’s because I’m poly? I am very out. In Mongolia, being an activist and outed means you sacrifice your dating life.”

– Kenn, Mongolia

“I dated my first partner for seven years; they supported me in my journey. My other partners are not open about their queerness in public, like on social media and in public spaces like restaurants. [Due to homophobia] cis men are more likely to make a move first, willing to date me publicly and establish a serious relationship. [The people who want to date me are] either very young girls or old men.

So, I’m not flirting, and the dating pool is super small. My mom said I can’t handle a woman, that I’m not in a good state and I don’t want to dump it onto a woman. If my partner is a cis man, I’d feel less guilty compared to a woman. There’s more emotional labor to date a man, but less guilt. I’m self-aware. For internal reasons that you want to be different for a woman.”

– Reina, Bhutan

“Why was it a problem to date a man? Because it was a betrayal. We were supposed to be a team, supposed to go through the struggles together. But my options for dating women were slim. I can’t date someone I work with. I can’t date the other women in the movement because they are my colleagues.

If I get caught [dating a woman], the blame will fall on me, and I’ll be cast as the person who can convince a daughter to come away with me and be gay [because I am visibly out]. This kept me away from dating and socializing, that fear. If we had the access and the option, we would also be like our brothers [bi men], but we didn’t. Just because we have multiple queer women doesn’t mean it will work for a romantic relationship.”

– Taara, Bangladesh

Land, Property, Inheritance

Across the region and globe, land ownership, inheritance, and housing access are structured in ways that reinforce compulsory heterosexuality and limit women’s autonomy. In all interviews, bisexual women described severe financial, legal, and societal limitations on their ability to form households as single women or with women partners. For many, these limitations are the reason they cannot move out of their family homes, cohabit with a woman partner, or leave unequal or emotionally unsustainable relationships. Inheritance laws often treat female partners as irrelevant, and interviewees described how queer couples are systematically denied the benefits, protections, and recognition that are afforded to heterosexual marriages.

This structural exclusion is intensified by several factors, including familial pressure to remain at home until marriage; housing policies that only recognize married couples or families with children; and deeply gendered expectations around caregiving and financial support. Bisexual women who remain legally single — often because their partnerships are not recognized — shoulder economic burdens alone and without state support. Interviewees described how difficult it is to rent housing as an openly queer couple, how the absence of legal cohabitation options forced them to choose between safety and autonomy, and how family members exploit assumptions that women will remain at home until marriage. These systems deny both women’s autonomy and queer partnership as legitimate foundations for adult life. The testimonies below reveal and reinforce the broader constraints mapped across this report: queerness is structurally unrecognized, relationships are rendered non-serious, and the path to adulthood through property, privacy, and family formation is functionally closed.

“The housing situation for single women is okay; there are a lot of systems we can use. But for queer people, like a masc/femme couple, it would be difficult because they would have to fake that they are siblings or that one is a man, which can be hard.

I am in a poly relationship with two non-binary persons, one more feminine-presenting and the other more masculine-presenting; we have this fear that someone may see us being physical with each other, so we have to be very careful. When searching for housing, we said we were [colleagues] looking for a coworking space, not living there. If you visit, the first part of the house is set up to look like a coworking space as a security strategy. Sometimes the strategy we use is to wait until someone else from the community has lived in a building or neighborhood for a while and says it’s safe for others.”

– Refani, Indonesia

“There is a complete inability for women to be safe in public and in their own homes. I couldn’t rent a house in an area in Dhaka before [I married my husband]. I used to live in NGO houses and shelters and the office. The way he proposed was, ‘You won’t have to think about the house, you won’t have to rent a house, you won’t have to worry about walking on the street.’ My feminism was destroyed, but it was the best offer I could have had freedom and security. Now, I am a safe place for others in the movement. I have a home and resources, and my husband does drive and pick up for our queer group. I support LBQ+ people now in ways I simply couldn’t before.”

– Taara, Bangladesh

“As long as you are under age 35, the housing system here says you need to form a family unit to qualify for government housing, which is good housing. If you aren’t married, you’re with your parents. You can also form a family unit if you are single with one kid. This all only applies to public housing. If you have a lot of money to buy a private house, you can do that.”

If I were married today, we could ballot for an apartment together. Instead, it’s just a two-room apartment, which is what singles 35 and above can get. As a couple we could get 3 or 4 or 5 rooms, we could get a resale and move in immediately. And maybe even have kids immediately. Marriage would give kids a lot of rights, if I had them. Having a house is seen as a prerequisite to having kids.”

– Mei, Singapore

“In India, succession and inheritance are governed by personal laws that differ across religions. The country calls itself secular, but in practice family rights are dictated both by religion and by heteronormative ideas of what counts as a legitimate partnership. For example, if a bisexual woman is out and living with a female partner, she can be disowned by her family. This not only cuts her off from inheritance but also prevents her partner from sharing in her wealth or income. The denial extends into healthcare too, where a female partner is not legally recognised and cannot provide consent on one’s behalf. These laws and practices structurally deny bi partnerships across law, inheritance, and family systems.”

– Apurupa Vatsalya,
Global Interfaith Network, India

“My mom and I are very close, but I was ready to move out and not be asked why I was opening the fridge. I kept telling her I wanted to move somewhere else, to rent a place. She said, “How can you afford this?” I said there should be some cheap choice. Eventually she said, “There will be someday you will be away from me because of marriage [to a man]. You will move away; we will grow old alone. Why are you so keen to move away? You don’t have many years with me — stay with me.” It was like emotional blackmail. It would have been valid for me to move out if I was getting married to a man.

My [woman] partner at the time was an NGO lawyer studying for her PhD. She lived in a place which was cheap but only had one room she shared — not even an apartment. Above the higher level of apartments, people build extra rooms with less heat and more cold. She lived there, in the extra-level. I knew it was too much of a struggle for us to both live there, in one room. That was the struggle between us for a long time. She wanted me to move in with her, but I thought if we really wanted to move in together, we probably needed to find someplace else, which we couldn’t afford. We didn’t have the time or energy to figure that out. It became that situation where I kept staying with my family, and she had the need to have a closer intimacy, but I could not fill her needs.”

– Joyce Teng, Taiwan

Indigeneity & Caste

For some interviewees, barriers to partnership are reinforced by family systems, community traditions, and social hierarchies that extend far beyond the individual relationship. In the families, societies, and country contexts of several interviewees, marriage is not only about forming a household or securing access to housing. It also determines who will carry out religious rites, uphold ancestral obligations, and maintain the integrity of the family’s lineage. For some, the belief that certain rituals “must be done by a man” serves as an unwritten but constant pressure to marry one. Others received explicit warnings that failure to do so would harm their family and disturb the peace of deceased relatives. Interviewees described how these expectations create rigid boundaries on who they can partner with, narrowing an already restricted dating pool and further entrenching the idea that their lives must ultimately conform to heteronormative marriage.

Interviewees also discussed caste-based restrictions on marriage, which layer gendered pressure with an equally strong prohibition on marrying outside prescribed caste groups. Caste hierarchy dictates not only who is an acceptable partner, but also the degree of social freedom and mobility a person can expect within their own family while trying to date. Apurupa, from India, explained that those further from the “charmed circle” of caste, gender, and class privilege faced the fewest

choices. Some interviewees said they pre-emptively sabotaged relationships they felt could never be socially recognized. These pressures link back to the broader patterns related to bisexual women's possibilities and responsibilities: they limit the possibility of open, self-determined partnerships, make it harder for bisexual women to establish relationships that confer social legitimacy, and, in turn, block a key pathway to being recognized as a full adult in the eyes of both their community and state institutions.

"We can't even marry outside of our caste. That's another layer. It's not just gender; it's also related to the caste group that we marry into. The queerness and Indigeneity, I connect them a lot. I come from a minority group and a marginalized group, so the idea of marriage is so heavily put on women to support the population. There is pressure to expand the family tree. I don't know what to do. The only thing I can do is to be away from them for a certain time."

My family is very loving, if I am within their set of rules and boundaries, I am a very good daughter for them. To be honest, they are very loving, and I'm also coming from an Indigenous family. And I would like to relate to my indigeneity and queerness.

The need to always be with a man comes from the fact that, in a lot of cultures in my community, if I'm to be married, the son-in-law has a higher duty during the death of the in-laws' parents. If I marry a man, my husband has a lot of rituals related to death. For the community I belong to, Acali, our rituals from birth to death are mostly done by a man, which is why there is a need for, and importance given to sons and sons-in-law. It is very difficult for me, because when death comes, in Indigenous culture and in my culture, we have high regard for our land, our belonging.

In death ceremonies, if you don't do the ceremony properly, the souls will keep haunting the living. My parents would keep haunting me. Their souls would haunt me. This is why there is so much preference for the son-in-law, which is why they are constantly telling me — with the marriage thing — it is my time, and you have to marry a man, and if you don't, when I die, I won't die in heaven.

In the past year or two, I've started to feel [the pressure to marry a man] a lot. As I'm more involved in family gatherings and rituals, I feel the pressure more. I've just been telling them my focus right now is work, and it's more important than marrying. Honestly, that's where I'm struggling most right now, especially with my mom. My mom is the only daughter, and she's also heavily involved in community work and my Indigenous community and going to death rituals. Death is such a huge part of who we are. My mom is always being present, and she forces this pressure upon me too, to be that person for the community. She's married and has two kids; she wants me and my brother to marry off within the tribe."

- Nyima, Nepal

"Caste and religion shape almost every aspect of life in India, including who you can love or marry. The closer you are to the charmed circle (cis, heterosexual, upper caste, upper class, able bodied, urban, etc.), the more choices you appear to have. Each step away means lesser possibilities and more punishment. It also decides how much privilege or stigma a family carries depending on who is part of it. This is the first barrier built into the system.

In my own family, there is a rigid order of acceptable partners. At the top is a Hindu Brahmin man, and at the very bottom would be a Muslim Dalit woman, with everyone else placed in between. The hierarchy has been clear to me from a young age, even though no one ever sat me down and spelled it out.

This is how caste hegemony operates - as common sense that does not need explanation. Even with my proximity to the charmed circle, as a bisexual woman the easier path is always to marry a man. I have had feelings for people on the other end of this hierarchy, but I ended up sabotaging it. It feels predetermined that it cannot last, so I hyper fixate on the barriers from the very beginning, even when I know it is not logical. This is why any policy conversation on marriage equality that ignores or is neutral about caste and religion will always miss the reality in India."

- Apurupa Vatsalya, Global Interfaith Network, India

Forced and Coerced Marriage

This report does not offer a comprehensive investigation into the forced marriage of bisexual women in Asia. In addition to the information on forced marriage contained in this report's Literature Review, this section is grounded in testimonies gathered for this study, rather than in a dedicated, systematic inquiry into the practice.

Forced and coerced marriage manifest differently in different contexts, countries, societies, and cultures, but several themes arise frequently when bisexual interviewees discussed these topics: compulsory heterosexuality as a social and political force; the ways family and community pressure to marry shapes the lives of queer women; the long-term impact on women who enter heterosexual marriages after having relationships with women or queer partners; the unique struggles and experiences of bisexual women raising children from previous marriages to men; and the ways extended family and community surveillance restrict bisexual women's autonomy.

While several interviewees referenced family and societal pressure to marry men, Zee's testimony stands out for the level of detail she provided related to forced marriage, specifically. Zee named forced marriage as one of the top forms of discrimination and violence facing bisexual women in her community, and talked about four separate instances of bi, LBQ+ and trans people in her community enduring immense familial pressure and "blackmailing" in an attempt to force them into a heterosexual marriage.

Zee discussed several ways that women and trans people in her community have tried to "escape" forced marriage. Some turn to lavender marriages (in which two queer people enter into a heterosexual marriage) to cope with the pressure. While this may relieve a degree of external pressure from their families and societies, it binds them to a social and legal relationship that is, often, not romantically or sexually aligned. Others run away from home; many disappear from community life; almost all are forced to end any romantic relationship they are currently in.

Because forced and coerced marriage of bisexual women is so rarely discussed in human rights reporting, and because Zee's account offers nuanced insight into the dynamics and consequences of such marriages, her testimony related to this practice in Bangladesh is included in full.

Forced and coerced marriage are a violation of bisexual women's rights. For some, these violations present an insurmountable barrier to their ability to live full and free lives. In addition to violating bisexual women's rights to education, health, and freedom of movement, forced and coerced marriage also rob them of their ability to participate in queer life, advocacy, movement building, and community care spaces. More bi-centered research is urgently needed to address the gaps in not only how, when, and in what circumstances bi women are subjected to forced and coerced marriage, but also the unique and harmful impacts of these violations on their lives. When bi women in Asia are denied access to queer community, as discussed in other chapters, they are hindered in their ability to grow and experience themselves fully. Queer movements, correspondingly, as denied the benefits of bi women's transformative leadership and creative approach to community care.

“Forced marriage is one thing that bisexual women in Bangladesh go through a lot. In Bangladesh, it is expected that women will get married. For bi women and LBQ women, it’s very difficult to tackle that pressure from family and society. Even if the parents are willing to let you be, the relatives and neighbors and all the parents around us will not leave you alone.

In the past, this meant once you turned 20–21, but recently it has changed. Parents are more willing to let their daughters finish school and then find a job and start a family. Most women now, especially if they come from less well-off backgrounds or where family values mean a lot, are expected to marry by 24 or 25.

Many go through lavender marriage to deal with it. One example is my friend. She didn’t want to get married. She was in a long-term monogamous relationship with a woman. She is an only child, and her parents did emotional blackmailing, making her life hell until she agreed to get married. She said she would choose a husband, and she asked for help from the [queer] community. There was a gay man who was facing similar issues from his family. They married each other. Now she is living in Germany, but legally she is married to a gay man who is in the U.S. right now. Constantly, her family asks her when they will move home or at least live together and start a family.

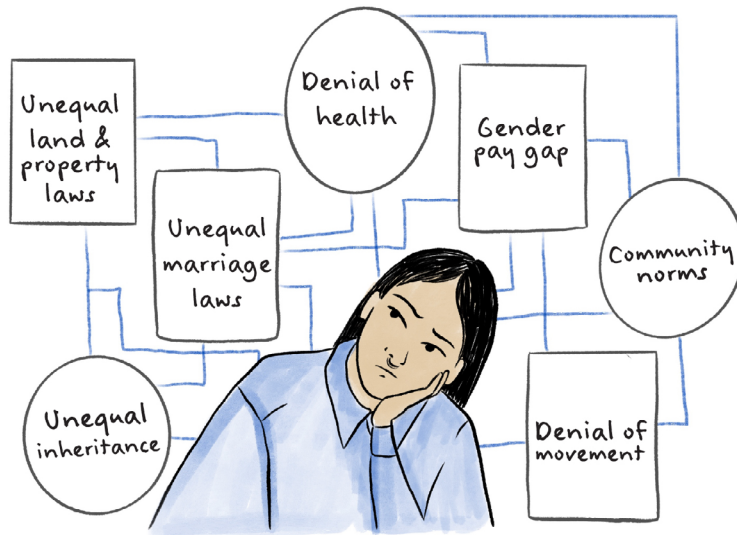
Not everyone can have that choice, to choose who they marry. In most cases the family chooses the husbands, like an arranged marriage. A trans man was in a relationship with a girl for 5–6 years. He was facing intense pressure to get married because ‘who will take care of the family?’ Usually, as is the case with this particular trans man, the person cuts ties with their partner and goes under the radar. It then becomes very difficult to check up on them.

There is a lesbian woman named [redacted]. I heard from her that her parents were trying to marry her off and she couldn’t fight the marriage off. She couldn’t tolerate the idea she would have to marry a man. She was just starting university, but she gave up. On the day of the marriage, she couldn’t handle it. She ran away from home.”

– Zee, Bangladesh

Part 4: Bisexual Women & the Care

Structural issues and violations of women's rights & autonomy

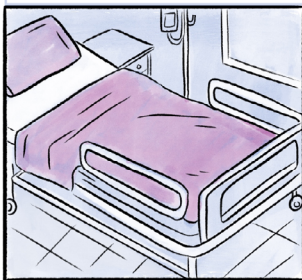


These directly lead to

- > Being prevented from living alone
- > Being prevented from living with a woman partner
- > Pressure to marry man to access rights

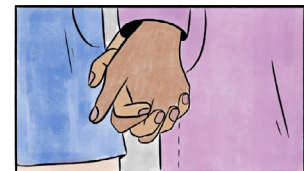
Care Burden

- > Emotional labor
- > Expected bearer of extra care work
- > Burnout from sustained pressure & scrutiny



Bi women who do not want to marry men remain unmarried & often living in their family home

- > Exclusion from protections (land, property, health)
- > Seen as unfinished
- > Constant scrutiny & questioning
- > Infantilized



Less time in community

Cyclical impacts

Less time dating

Unique care responsibilities

Fewer relationships

Unmarried

Fewer organizing spaces

Barriers to funding

lack of shared language

Barriers to advocacy

Infantilization & Queer Time

Across interviews, bisexual Asian women described the enduring social perception that they are in a transitional, incomplete, or undecided state of identity. This results not only in a denial of legitimacy in their partnerships, but also in familial and institutional infantilization denying them full adulthood.

Benchmarks of maturity, such as marriage, home ownership, or child-rearing, are systematically denied to queer people but remain central to how adulthood is measured and recognized by others. A 2023 report on LBQ+ people's rights globally explained:

“[P]opular conceptualizations of “growth” depend on a linear, normative understanding of what becoming an adult means, which is a path ill-fit or inaccessible for many LBQ+ people. While the specific expectations vary by context and culture, getting (and staying) married seems universally present as one of the “objective life events” used to judge if a woman has entered adulthood. ... [T]he concept of ‘queer time’ [describes] a way of living that does not follow the normative progression of heterosexual life steps.”¹⁰⁸

Testimonies collected for this report on bisexual women's rights in Asia, while they echo past works on LBQ+ people more generally, also reflect a very specific *bisexual* experience of “queer time.” For bisexual interviewees, societal assumptions or family hopes related to their eventual heterosexuality keep bisexual women living in a liminal space economically, socially, and legally. Bi women described being subjected to a perpetual projection that they may (perhaps ... someday in the future ... probably ... most likely ... when she's older) end up with, marry, and have children with a man.

This dynamic produces both conflict and precarity: interviewees recounted being outed by acquaintances, pressured to abandon queer relationships for the sake of family harmony, and infantilized by loved ones who interpreted their identities as childish phases or moral threats. The result is a prolonged and often painful state of externally projected in-betweenness. Bisexual women – confident, bold, and powerful women leading radical movements and organizations across Asia – have their relationships, identities, and even careers treated as less real, less permanent, and less meaningful than those of their heterosexual or monosexual peers.

Several interviewees expressed an exasperated belief that telling their families they were lesbians would be easier than existing under the multi-decade expectation of eventually heterosexually. While this hypothetical is not possible to assess, it is noteworthy that for at least two bisexual interviews who married women partners, some family pressure did subside. This dynamic is not presented for the sake of ranking or even comparing experiences of discrimination and hardship, but rather to elucidate the importance of analyzing bisexual women's experiences of marginalization and exclusion on their own terms.

“The second worst form of discrimination [after rejection from other queer people] is family acceptance. For a lot of people, family acceptance is even more important than social acceptance. They are your family – they should know who you are. It would be easier to come out as a lesbian, because my parents won't say you can marry a boy then.

I feel [the expectation to marry a man] clearer the older I get. A few years ago, it was not like that. Two years ago, they started asking when I would have a boyfriend, and when will I get married, and when would I have a kid, what would I do. I feel like saying I don't want to have a kid. Not because I'm queer but because I'm sure I'm going to pass my traumas to my kid, I'm sure I'm going to be a very bad mom. They say it's ok if you don't want to get married but please have a kid. Please bring us grandkids.”

– Ngoc Nguyen, Vietnam

¹⁰⁸ ““This Is Why We Became Activists”: Violence Against Lesbian, Bisexual, and Queer Women and Non-Binary People.” Human Rights Watch, 14 Feb. 2023, www.hrw.org/report/2023/02/14/why-we-became-activists/violence-against-lesbian-bisexual-and-queer-women-and-non.

"I was outed to my family. [An] uncle reached out to my parents and said 'oh your daughter can still be saved, she's only bi, just make sure she's dating a man. I remember wanting to use they/them pronouns, it always felt right to me. But I kept using she/they because of my family. They think they can pray the gay away. Especially since I'm bi, they think they can just pray the gay part away. When I go visit or am on a call, the blessing is always may you get married and have a son. I have therefore largely dated men.

"This kind of dismissal happens inside our movements too. Bi women are erased twice, once in straight spaces and again in queer ones. When I worked at a big LGBT organisation led by cis gay men, my bisexuality was dismissed, and I was read as gay because I presented androgynous. Another bisexual woman worked there too. She was more femme-presenting, married to a man and carried all the visible cosmetic, clothing and jewelry markers of marriage. Her bisexuality was taken more seriously, not because anyone valued bisexuality, but because marriage and caste gave her built-in respectability. It made me wonder if bisexuality is only recognised when it wears the mask of marriage. People even seemed to admire her and asked how she was 'making it work.' Interestingly, even when I dated men, it did not make my bisexuality more valid.

Most of us in India are first-generation daters, while our parents' lives were structured by caste-hegemonic arranged marriages. Because my colleague carried the visible weight of caste and marriage, it gave her a kind of twisted legitimacy. Respectability politics decides whose bisexuality is recognised and whose is erased."

– Apurupa Vatsalya, Global Interfaith Network, India

"My parents know about my identity, and they are just hoping it's 50/50 and we'll see. They mostly cared that I didn't date anyone until finishing my honors degree, and I needed to do it [be queer] away from home so I didn't bring trouble back home. Even that is a privilege, that they decided to deny it and just say this is the person I'm obsessed with right now. Not so much a partner, just the person I have in my life right now.

They knew she wasn't just a friend though. I can bring a girlfriend home, and she even stayed with them for a few months. She prayed five times a day, and they said she was a good Muslim and a good influence. But people don't want me to talk about that, because it's a good experience."

– Taara, Bangladesh

"I come from a religious and Islamic family from Central Java. I am not living with them since 2012. I'm the oldest and I have a younger brother; he is 28 by now. I was a religious person growing up, I'm agnostic now. I started questioning it in middle school a lot about how the religious system works. I think my family is kind of in denial. I never say no if they ask whether I'm dating a woman, but they really think it's a phase and just tell me to date men.

They say men can help me. There has always been an expectation that I would marry a man. They still ask and they still introduce me to men, even though they know I'll say no. My mother is a very difficult person, so I try to take it as a joke. When they ask me who I'm dating and to bring home whoever I'm dating, I tell them they won't be okay with it."

– Refani, Indonesia

"My parents wanted me to get married to a man. They've seen my relationships, but I didn't tell them my sexuality. They expected me to get married in my 30s because they had seen my boyfriend before and therefore believed that I could marry a man someday. Whenever they talked about marriage with me, I said no, so they kind of gave up. My mother said she wanted grandchildren; I said I can carry a child myself, and she said no. They started to believe that I would not get married in my mid-30s."

– Sadie, South Korea

“When I ended my relationship with my ex (a girl) and started my relationship with my wife, I had a close relationship with my mom, so I told her. She burst into tears and said, ‘I know you’re probably happy about the new situation here. Sorry, I can’t really share your happiness. I feel disappointed.’

My mom had some expectations going very high [hand gestures upwards on a scale] that when my relationship ended, I would finally be with a man. I said I started seeing someone else — the expectation goes higher [hand gestures higher on the scale] and then I said it was a girl, and it goes very, very deep [hand plummets down]. I appreciate that she was honest. She described her own feelings about being disappointed.

The expectation is different for bi people. In the LGBT community, people say ‘if you’re bi, never let your parents know, just tell them you’re a lesbian or gay, because it will bring a different reaction.’ They will try to deny and stop you at first, but eventually they can accept, and not be always holding the expectation that someday you’ll change, or someday it will be a situation they feel comfortable with.

I think some lesbians do also experience this, but my feeling is it’s not exactly the same. The denial is the same. For example, if I’m a lesbian, I will feel completely denied when I hear my parents tell me they wish I had someone, even though I just told them about my girlfriend. But as a bi woman, I feel pressure when my parents tell me, ‘You could do that — you just choose not to.’

My mom views my activism the same way — that I could be a lawyer, but I choose not to, and someday I will. And she holds out hope that I will. I think my mom worries that she will always need to provide me with a house and support, for example, when I’m not developing my career. Also, because I’m born and raised in Taipei, I moved out from my parents’ house at age 35, at the end of 2019.

I kept living with my parents and feeling like my career and my relationship are not recognized as official. I resonate with this idea that I’m not a full grown-up, fully adult. If I had been dating men, I would have been forced to consider marriage and then not to live with my parents.”

– Joyce Teng, Taiwan

Expectations of Care Work

Across interviews, participants expressed a deep respect and care for their families of origin, and a strong empathy for the ways in which their families did, or did not, understand or accept their sexuality. At the same time, interviewees also described patterns of erasure regarding their independence and adulthood, stemming from a misunderstanding of bisexuality, that directly impacted the care work they are expected to perform in their families of origin. It is critical to note that participants did not express resentment or a desire to cease the care work they described. Instead, they were exploring the why and how of their place in the care economy, and — often for the first time — directly connecting their care labor to their bisexuality.

In societies where marriage to a man is treated as the default path out of the family home and into adulthood, remaining unmarried is seen as implicitly signaling availability for family service that their married siblings. Even when bisexual women have left home, are in long-term partnerships, or are financially supporting others, they are not always perceived as having achieved adulthood. As such, interviewees described being expected to continuously fulfill caregiving roles — emotionally, logistically, and financially — that their heterosexual or monosexual peers are not. Most often, this came without recognition or support, and often at the expense of their own personal development or partnerships.

Mei, in Singapore noted that one of her siblings’ absences from the country allowed him a reduction in caregiving responsibilities. Her relationship status — perceived as single despite her long term relationship — often makes her the presumed caretaker of aging parents. This was not enforced by law or explicit demand, but by a set of gendered and familial expectations that were, in her words, “not optional.” She attends a peer support group for caregivers with a presence of queer women

providing care for relatives with chronic or mental health needs, suggesting an informal channeling of bisexual and lesbian women into unpaid care labor. Across contexts, not being in a sanctioned heterosexual partnership often marks women as appropriate or inevitable caregivers. This, in turn, limits their capacity to form partnerships, live independently, or access housing designed for family units, reinforcing a cycle of economic dependence and delayed social recognition.

While these expectations and experiences are likely shared with other LBQ+ women, the perceived temporality of bisexuality makes bisexual women's experience unique. The "hopefulness" described in the previous section—in which bisexual women's families believe they are en route to a recognizable heterosexual marriage—serves to validate their status as not yet married and thus available for disproportionate shares of care labor.

"I have two parents, regular heterosexual parents. Two siblings, not in the picture when it comes to caregiving. One migrated abroad. He pays me an allowance to offset the daycare and medical expenses—medical care in Singapore is really, really good though, and they have a good pension plan. We don't have to pay a lot for medication, but daycare and physical therapy and food delivery, there are many expenses. And transport. Another sibling is not in the picture. I read some things from the US about how you aren't obligated to be a caregiver, and this makes sense to me, but someone has to do it.

You can talk about caregiving, but at the end of the day someone has to do it. There is no arguing your way out of it. I'm the oldest. You could call it oldest daughter syndrome. My parents say I can go out, but I look at them and think, how will you manage? It's a duty. When my dad's bipolar is acting up, he says nasty things. I need to think it through and have to remember it's the disease, not the person, and he doesn't actually believe in what he's saying. I just need to remember that it's not going to be forever.

At one point my mom wondered out loud why none of the kids are getting married, but I think it was just wondering. [My parents] don't enforce the expectation [to marry and have children with a man], even if they have the expectation. My mom doesn't have many friends, so she is not exposed to all those pressures from other people.

I would imagine that single, unmarried, queer women are involved in caregiving if they have siblings who are married or have moved away. This is just a feeling; I don't have evidence to back it up. I am in a caregiver support group, organized by a charity that helps caregivers of people with mental health issues. At least two or three lesbians in that group. It's online sessions, but the gaydar works—it's clear these are queer women who are also in the same boat.

If you are married with kids, you are expected to visit parents once a week in Singapore, at the weekends. I see this in my apartment complex. The houses are full of grandkids over the weekend. Singapore is a small country and it's easy to visit. People ask you about kids and school and enrichment classes, which are very big in Singapore. Whether or not you are caring for your parents is not as big of a topic. If you're not married, you'd think you would live with your parents, especially due to housing here."

Financial struggles are a big issue. If you are legally single, you might actually be the breadwinner for your household, which is your parents' household, but your income isn't higher income than average woman. And you don't have a dual income. And having kids and being able to afford luxuries like domestic help from the Philippines, Indonesia, and Myanmar—I know it would be considered quite shocking in the US—but it's a big help if you have caregiving duties, if you have any elderly people at home, if you have someone who can look after them when you're at work. To be able to do this, you have to have dual income. Bisexual people are, I think, probably quite a lot with a woman or with someone of the same sex, and this isn't recognized in Singapore, so they're living apart. And they are still responsible for families of origin. The expectation of parents is also part of this."

— Mei, Singapore

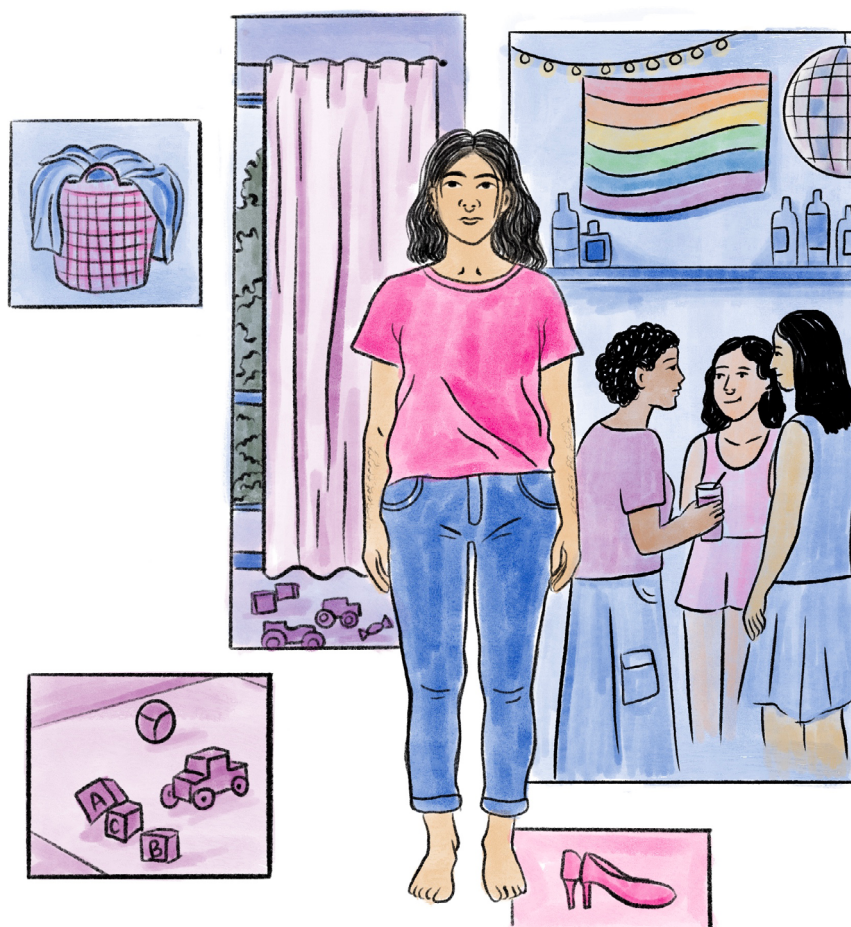
Motherhood

Several bisexual women interviewed for this report described how their own or their partners' identity as mothers, with children from past marriages to men, shaped, restricted, and in many cases entirely obstructed their ability to participate in queer life. Early heterosexual partnerships, often entered into before a bi identity could be named or explored, result in long-term care responsibilities that pull women further away from queer spaces. Many interviewees explained that bisexual women are likely to become parents earlier than their lesbian peers, often through previous relationships with men, and are then left navigating single parenthood or complex custody arrangements without legal or community support.

Care work related to motherhood often leaves little time or energy to explore dating, friendship, or queer culture. As one interviewee explained, this disconnect often meant that bisexual women felt too inexperienced or too "late" to claim a place in their local queer women community. Additionally, instead of being met

with recognition or support, some bisexual women's attempts to explore their sexuality after heterosexual marriage were met with mocking or dismissive comments. In digital spaces, for example, women questioning their desire for other women were rarely affirmed as bisexual; their identities were misinterpreted as demeaned as suppressed promiscuity, eventual lesbianism, or adolescent curiosity.

The outcome is an amalgamation of structural forces — early marriage, motherhood, legal precarity, and exclusion from both queer communities — that work together to push bi women with children to the fringes of multiple social groups. Even when bisexual women re-enter queer spaces with female partners, they face systemic obstacles to shared parenting, legal recognition, and community integration. One interviewee raised the lack of queer-affirming legal frameworks related to adoption and second-parent adoption in many Asian countries as an example of the structural barriers that prevent bisexual women mothers from forming queer partnerships later in life.



"I bring up adoption as a key issue because I have a bisexual friend who got married to a man before and they had a child. Her husband passed away. Now she has a woman partner, and they want to raise their child together, but it is very difficult to be her legal guardian as a woman partner. This is a big issue for bisexual women. And for single women to adopt children, it is almost impossible. For single men it is also almost impossible, but more possible than for women if they have money."

— Sadie, South Korea

"Women give birth really early, on average at 22 in Mongolia. I know a lot of bi women with a child, who came out after 30. Coming out must be so hard with the care work and traditional gender roles. Because of so many reasons, for them queer culture is really new and even hard to know, how to date women or how to flirt. She feels like she is already really old and can't date women anymore. It's like now she thinks she doesn't have any experience with a woman, and that means she can't be gay because she's already almost 30 and doesn't have enough experience dating or having sex with women. It's a really new and different world for her, and she doesn't have time for this.

Lesbian life, in contrast, we can see elder lesbians. They have so much free time, they can hang with friends, go to the countryside, party, gather at someone's house and talk about exes and women and lesbian life and sex. They already have their friends and lesbian group to hang with. Without that, if you go to lesbian bars, places, and parties, it's all people in their 20s, so many young people.

On queer groups there are also a lot of posts about being married to men but now attracted to women and not knowing what to do. Some people say, "Oh, you're a lesbian," some people say, "It's just about sex," and some people say, "Oh, let's meet." No one ever says, "Oh, you're bi." If I could answer them, I would tell them it's okay. Either you want sex, you're bi or lesbian, anything is possible. Also, you could be poly and have multiple gendered partners at the same time. But if this was an ideal world, they wouldn't need to question it anonymously on Facebook. They could just say, "Hey, I'm a woman and I want to explore my sexuality." They seem very desperate to find a community."

— Kenn, Mongolia

Part 5: “We Aren’t Recognized, But We Aren’t Protected”

“I forgot to tell you the biggest thing.
We are not protected by law. We aren’t
recognized, but we aren’t protected.”

– Ngoc Nguyen, Vietnam

Criminalization, Suspicion, and Legal Limbo

Across all contexts, bi women are not only underserved by legal systems, but also by the data and frameworks that shape those systems. Legal protections, where they exist, often do not address the unique vulnerabilities of bi women, including in contexts of domestic and intimate partner violence, police reporting, and family-based harm. Several participants noted that while bisexuality is not explicitly criminalized in their country, legal systems often default to binary categories that exclude or harm bi and polyamorous individuals. The lack of disaggregated data, legal precedent, and targeted funding make it difficult to advocate for policy changes or protections that address violence and discrimination.

This report does not include a systematic review of individual legal systems across Asia. Interviewees were asked about forms of legal discrimination, legal ambiguity, or criminalization that most impacted their lives. The testimonies below demonstrate the lived impacts of “gaps” in data and legal frameworks and point to a critical need for more nuanced legal analysis, context-specific data collection, and intersectional policy research that centers the lived realities of bi women in Asia.

Interviewees discussed bi women facing suspicion and a denial of credibility when seeking legal recourse for gender-based violence, especially when known to have had partners of multiple genders. In Vietnam, although abortion and other reproductive health services are legal, bi women report limited access and systemic exclusion from GBV services designed for heteronormative families. Bangladeshi activists describe the lack of legal criminalization of same-sex conduct for women as a double-edged sword: bi women are not prosecuted, but are also unprotected, unnamed, and excluded from rights-based narratives. An interviewee from India detailed how compulsory heterosexual marriage, legal ambiguity around adultery, and the taboo around non-monogamy combine to restrict bi women’s freedom of expression and movement. In South Korea, the narrow framing of sodomy laws excludes lesbian and bisexual women from public legal discourse. In Bhutan, the mismatch between national realities and regional databases further isolates bi women from funding and research opportunities.

“Bhutan is rather unique compared to South Asia. Other countries in South Asia — Bangladesh, India, etc. We called ourselves an advocacy group because we don’t want to risk. There are only two queer organizations, and we get neglected in terms of funding. Regional databases don’t align with situations in Bhutan, which can be highlighted in the recommendations for funding and further research.”

– Reina, Bhutan

“We don’t even have a context for bi women. Their female identity is explicitly connected to the law, but the sexuality of women is not connected to the law. We don’t have criminalization of bi and lesbian women, we don’t have.

– Taara, Bangladesh

“The legal framework is extremely restrictive in terms of expressing who you are. You’re hyper-aware that what you’re doing might be considered immoral or could cause you harm — this is especially difficult for poly folks. There are no rights, no equality in terms of benefits or recognition. If you’re polyamorous, it becomes even more nonexistent. If the system were more rights-respecting, whether you had one partner or multiple, there would be recognition of those partnerships. I could adopt children, share property, extend insurance or benefits to more than one partner, and transfer inheritance.

There’s also a social aspect — being able to have ceremonies, be free and open in public, be acknowledged in the workplace, have people get to know you instead of dismissing you. When you’re poly, things like childcare and co-parenting are more complex — but manageable. Still, it’s easier for men: polygamy is allowed, but polyamory is not. Earlier, some cultures allowed women to have more than one husband. That’s gone.

The result is a deep restriction on freedom of expression. You feel constantly surveilled. I’m noticing that for many bisexual women in marriages, what’s framed as polyamory is often not truly polyamorous — the husband controls the terms of the relationship and doesn’t let them date other men. In India, women are expected to marry men, selected by the family. Masturbation is taboo, inter-caste dating is discouraged, and honor killings still happen. People have been killed for non-conformity.

Adultery was only recently decriminalized. There’s constant talk about cheating, and bi people are often blamed, but no one talks about the pressure to be monogamous. I’m not justifying cheating — better communication is essential — but for some queer people forced into marriage, what choice did they have? There’s a strong pressure on bi people to practice serial monogamy. I don’t think that’s what most would choose if they had options. I’ve seen much healthier relationships when people can be who they are. As a bi person, you come face to face with these struggles more often than gay or lesbian people — you’re constantly questioned.”

– Ruhab, India

“It’s not just legal protection; it needs to be practiced. In Vietnam we have laws which are not practiced well — things like abortion and sexual and reproductive health for women. Even though abortion is legal in Vietnam, for example. It is already hard for women to exist; we need a lot of structural changes. In conversations about LGBT rights brought to a higher level, we don’t see bi women being mentioned a lot. Of course, there are more urgent issues that the movement chooses to prioritize at the time, because we need to do things one by one, like trans issues or legal marriage, but focusing more on lesbians and gays, these conversations don’t mention bi women. When we speak about GBV on other platforms, we don’t talk about LGBT issues. When we speak about LGBT with the government, you speak about marriage and trans recognition law. But when we speak about GBV you are speaking to women’s rights lawmakers and bodies, who only understand straight marriages and violence. I wouldn’t start talking about bi women first, because it would feel a bit privileged.”

– Ngoc Nguyen, Vietnam

“We have an anti-sodomy law in Korea but no discussion about lesbian sex. And even if there is a discussion, it would be ‘lesbian sex.’ Where does this situation put bi women?”

– Sadie, South Korea

Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

Researchers specifically asked about access to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). While bisexual women are often cited in global public health literature as a key demographic for SRHR interventions, interviewees across South and Southeast Asia consistently described feeling excluded from actual programs, services, and funding priorities. Several noted that SRHR infrastructure for queer communities is often narrowly targeted toward cisgender gay men, trans women, and sex workers, with virtually no recognition of bisexual women's needs. Interviewees repeatedly described being denied STI testing or care unless they cited recent sex with a man, being turned away for not being married, or being forced to lie about their sexual history in order to access care. For bi women with female partners, healthcare settings often operated with the assumption that no pregnancy risk meant no SRHR relevance, leading to denials of service or severe barriers to self-advocacy. Conversely, some interviewees described that the presence of a male partner, even if unrelated to the health issue, often granted easier access to services. These dynamics reflect a layered exclusion: bi women are ignored in many donor frameworks and actively turned away by service providers, who appear trained to deliver care only through narrow categories of risk and recognition.

In addition to institutional exclusion, bi women also described how stigma, funding priorities, and cultural norms block access to reliable information and safe care. SRHR discourse in many countries was described as highly medicalized, donor-driven, and deeply entangled with patriarchal and heteronormative assumptions about sexuality. Interviewees highlighted a lack of information about safe sex between women, no access to basic items like finger condoms, and the near-total absence of public conversations about queer people's access to abortion services or fertility services. Several activists explained that SRHR services often remain inaccessible unless framed in ways that appeal to donor expectations or disease-focused interventions, which often means programming that centers transgender women and gay men. As a result, bi women's health is deprioritized in funding, policy, programming, and even movement discourse. This exclusion reinforces the false perception that bisexuality carries "less risk," and downplays the urgent and distinct health needs of bi and pansexual women and nonbinary people.

"In Indonesia's healthcare system overall, and in reproductive health and sexual health, care for bi people is very limited. A lot of organizations that do SRH are limited to gay men and HIV. For bi and pan people, who have very specific sexual activity, we will fall under women's services. We don't have finger condoms in Indonesia, and even access to screening and education and how to take care of ourselves in a sexual manner ... this is really hard to find in Indonesia. I mostly learn through Instagram. But when I really seek the services, like for STI, I have to explain a lot that I do not have sex with men, but I have sex with other genders, and sometimes the healthcare providers won't give me the screening."

I had a doctor tell me they won't do the screening. I went to get a health service from the government, but if you are not married you cannot access STI testing. If it's HIV, I just have to say yes, I'm sexually active. But for a screening in your vagina, you cannot do it because it's related to your virginity. If you want it, you have to get it in a nongovernmental clinic and it's very pricey, too expensive for most of us. The last time I tried was in 2021. I haven't talked about this openly in public but have spoken about it with friends and others have experienced it. They have very similar stories, especially if they aren't married."

- Refani, Indonesia

“SRHR is a huge pain point in both public health and women’s health spaces. I worked with a health startup, and the same problems came up again and again for bi women: access to services, reliable information, competent providers, affordable resources, and proper follow up care. Cost is a huge barrier. For instance, in India you can get STI testing done at home and receive a smart report the next day, but this is expensive and out of reach for most people. Discrimination is another barrier. The way your sexuality or gender expression is read often shapes the care you receive. In the public health system, this bias is everywhere. For example, if you do not have a husband or male partner, you may be asked whose consent you have to undergo an abortion, even though that requirement is illegal.

When I’ve had a male partner, it has been much easier to access care, even when he wasn’t relevant to the situation. Just having him in the space made things smoother. That was invisibilising, and at the same time it gave me huge privilege. With a woman partner, the experience is completely different. If she is introduced as a ‘friend,’ her presence doesn’t carry weight and if she were to be introduced as a partner, the situation can become openly hostile. The assumption is also that if you’re with a woman you won’t get pregnant, so what could you possibly need in terms of SRHR care? Bi women’s health needs seem to vanish in systems built for husbands and wives.”

– Apurupa Vatsalya, Global Interfaith Network, India

“In Bangladesh, the discourse around SRHR is primarily focused on trans women and gay men. The discourse doesn’t include bi women or LBQ women in general. There is no discussion around safe sex, how to maintain toys, how to use them, how to not transmit STIs. These are not at all on the table for discussion. Testing for STIs are donor-funded programs, and resources are mostly for gay men; there is nothing for bi women or LBQ women in general. Not really talking about abortion because we can’t speak about this in general in Bangladesh. People do get abortions, but it’s very quiet. There are qualified doctors who do it, but they don’t do it very legally. I heard a story about a woman asking friends to accompany her to this one clinic that provides abortion. Health care facilities and services run by NGOs and donor-funded programs are mostly for gay men.”

– Zee, Bangladesh

“I studied global health as my master’s and worked at an STI clinic treating female sex workers and MSM [men who have sex with men]. My realization is that we can be very clear about using protection, protecting yourself, but if they don’t break their own stigma of themselves, it won’t work. We have to address this more broadly to change these barriers.

“We need to present our needs in such a way that matches the expectations of the donors. They select the people who serve their purposes. To get bi women to those points, we need more bi women in the field who have access to donors. Even for bi women to know what their issues are, we need to talk about SRHR. We need to talk about STDs.

There is no specific focus on bi/pan health [in my organization]. It’s just an [LGBT] umbrella. LBQ women perhaps, but not bisexual specifically. We have an intersex-specific focus. I think the LGBT movement started in terms of resources — it was for HIV. This has a more trans and MSM and SW focus. When you look at the LGBT movement overall, gay men and trans people and resource. The infrastructure is pretty strong. This is why LBQ is not the priority, because big funders like the Global Fund are more focused on disease, a pathological focus. Now the LBQ movement and queer feminism are getting attention because of the overall intersection with the feminist movement. I would say until now it’s very donor-driven.”

– Chit, Myanmar

We need to talk about specific issues and not downplay them with the stereotype around our privilege. We need more access to information about health and condoms and menstrual cups. We still can’t get tampons. The way female health and technology moves, we don’t move as a community with that. South Asian communal medicine and herbal medicine is more common for PCOS. But when we think about fertility issues, for some reason we don’t think about flowers we can bring, we think about pills we have to take.”

– Taara, Bangladesh

Intimate Partner Violence

Multiple interviewees described high rates of intimate partner violence (IPV) perpetrated against bisexual women in multiple types of relationships. In Mongolia, for example, one interviewee described IPV between queer women as a serious and underreported problem, compounded by the small size of the community, social stigma, and the absence of services or safe reporting channels. Attempts to speak openly about domestic violence, she said, were met with pressure to protect the image of queer communities rather than support survivors.

Interviewees described patterns of emotional and physical abuse, jealousy, control, and coercion that bi women in Asia face from partners of all genders. Several women described experiences of IPV that were shaped by patriarchal expectations in heterosexual relationships or with queer partners who “weaponized masculinity.” In India, Ruhab described witnessing several instances of lesbian women responding to a bi woman’s past or present relationships with men through jealousy, surveillance, and physical violence. Several said that bisexual women were particularly vulnerable in “unicorn-seeking” arrangements, often coerced into relationships with heterosexual couples who treated them as expendable or unworthy of care. These arrangements are sometimes framed as empowering opportunities to explore queerness for bi women who have been marginalized from queer life but concealed severe power imbalances and manipulation. These dynamics were especially harmful for bi women who lack community support or access to knowledge about IPV, limiting their ability to recognize, report, and leave abusive relationships.

The interviews indicate a deep absence of recognition, protection, and language for the violence bi women experience in relationships across genders. Violence is often endured silently, without recourse or even acknowledgment. As Ruhab noted, “There is no conversation around GBV for bi people.” This erasure isolates survivors, denies the abuse they are experiencing, and creates conditions in which abuse can continue. It contributes to and produces the extremely poor documentation of violence against bisexual women, as discussed in **Hierarchies of Violence & Legitimacy**. These testimonies underline the urgent need for bi community spaces to discuss such violence. As explained in **Visions & Limits**, bi women need spaces to produce community knowledge around what, specifically, IPV looks like in their relationships and to pass this knowledge across and through generations. The inability to do so contributes to weak institutional documentation of

“Services for GBV are catered towards women who are married to men, whether they are straight or bi or queer. It’s limiting how bi women can be protected. It’s going to be really hard for someone who is bi who has been beaten up by their family or husband to say, “Yeah, my husband or parents beat me up because I’m bi, attracted to multiple genders.”

– Ngoc Nguyen, Vietnam

“I haven’t looked at raw data of things, but I can only think about ways bi women are affected. Things related to being a stereotypical woman. Patriarchal values that a bi person is seen to be going against, for example, like not being monogamous or having partners of multiple genders. I think the stigmas that manifest specifically for bi people are related to these things.

If you’re seen with a man or woman and you go for a domestic violence complaint, it impacts the weight of your complaint if you are known to have partners of different genders. Police are always looking for reasons to discount you. I haven’t found many concrete examples in terms of the law. I haven’t done this type of work yet. I’m not working on creating specific protections for bi people because my legal work really focuses on immediate and urgent protections. The most urgent LBQ+ legal protection issues are access to affirming counsel, police reports, etc. I do this work with the understanding of what it is to be a bisexual woman, such as the many pre-trial issues.

You can’t infer data [about sexuality from general IPV reporting]. This is why LGBT research is really hard.”

– Apple, Thailand

“I think Mongolian people have so much pressure to marry and then it’s also very secure, finding someone and being in a relationship for queer people is really hard, and our population is really small. Finding someone is really hard. I think when they find someone, they just want to trap them, and this is why queer relationships can be so toxic, and why DV and IPV is really high. It is not studied and talked about. When I talk about these things, activists say you can’t do this. We’re fighting to have a really good name. It’s really toxic. Friends have called me in the middle of the night and said they were stabbed by their girlfriend but couldn’t go to the police.”

– Kenn, Mongolia

“Bi women in India experience intimate partner violence and a lot of control from partners. Also, gender-based violence. You are told to be accommodating because they are doing so much for you.

There is no conversation around GBV for bi people. It’s very common for a bi woman to agree to be part of an existing marriage with two people who want to bring her in, but they will treat her really badly. It is really common in India for couples to hunt for unicorns and expect her to love them both equally. Bi women are the primary target — not the bi men — because the men in the relationship don’t want another man. The bi women end up being hurt badly and there’s no proper care system.

I experienced this in the early days of trying to explore. I didn’t know at the time it was problematic. I knew it hurt, and I knew it was wrong, but I didn’t have words for it. I had no community or resources or access to conversations. Bi men can experiment and experience themselves completely differently and without these risks, including if married. There’s pressure from your partner, as they don’t understand your identity. It’s a lonely space if you’re bisexual.

Bi women all the time experience physical violence. Men will beat you up if you are curious about women. Jealousy leads to violence. Women can also get emotionally violent if they know you’ve been with men previously. ... If they see her chatting with a man, because they see her as their property in their mind, they will hit you or beat you up just because they felt insecure. This is very normal. Because India is very patriarchal, [not all lesbians have access to] queer spaces where you can discuss gender norms and GBV, you also have some who think masculinity and violence is the right way to be. I’m not saying this doesn’t also happen to lesbians, *but patriarchy looks different for bi women.*”

– Ruhab, India

Part 6: The Trouble with Marriage Equality

Why Discuss Marriage Equality in a Feminist Report?

In many feminist communities, queer organizations, LGBT advocacy circles, the fight for marriage equality is as much a subject of critique as it is an advocacy goal. Queer and feminist theorists have long challenged marriage as a patriarchal, heteronormative institution. The focus on marriage rights risks reinforcing systems of control rather than dismantling them. Tightly controlled, metered access to state-sanctioned rights and benefits can push marginalized communities deeper into oppressive structures. Feminist legal scholar Chao-ju Chen at the National Taiwan University College of Law, for example, has written of Taiwan's same-sex marriage legislation: "Taiwan's diverse family movement [has] collapsed into a marriage equality movement for same-sex marriage that prioritizes marriage, leaving out and marginalizing people subordinated in or living outside of marriage."¹⁰⁹ The institutionalization of "same-sex marriage" risks normalizing certain formations of queerness at the expense of others.

These critiques are well established and beg the question: why give it space in a feminist report?

Marriage equality was selected as a topic for this report for three reasons.

First, because it arose with unexpected frequency in the interviews. This report aims, first and foremost, to reflect interviewees' experiences and priorities. Marriage equality was repeatedly raised – in both affirmative and critical terms – as an issue that is deeply related to bisexual women's concurrent desires for autonomy, companionship, and rights. Issues raised include:

- how a societal hyper-fixation with marriage equality legislation overshadows other structural barriers (such as housing policy, economic precarity, or care responsibilities) that prevent bisexual women from partnering with people they fall in love with;
- the ways in which the fight for marriage equality reifies the stigma of being single and compounds the pressure the bi women feel to have a public partner in order to validate their own sexuality;
- the confusing and traumatizing experience of having the right to marry only if you partner with a man;
- the ways in which this "half right" prevents bi women from fully exploring, knowing, validating, and acting on their own desires;
- the profound sense of guilt that bisexual women feel for having this "half right" and how they limit or deny themselves joy in response to that guilt;
- how marriage, including to another woman, has provided social legitimacy in families that otherwise infantilize bi women;
- how the lack of legal rights compounds the trauma of loss for bi women who have lost partners to illness;
- how internalized or inherited messaging about "not wanting" marriage is – for some queer people – a survival mechanism, not a reflection of actual desire; the impossibility of forming desires or goals around marriage when legal recognition is not an option, and the long-term effect this has on bi women's self-conception and relationship possibilities.

Second, marriage equality is included in this report because it exemplifies the ways in which access to rights can inform and even dictate the limits of desire, being, and possibility. As Sadie, a bisexual woman human rights defender in South Korea, explained:

"I brought up marriage equality as a key issue because bisexual women can also want to marry a same-sex person, yes. But the biggest reason it is a key issue is because the *lack of marriage equality narrows and makes smaller the space of what people can be. Having it – even if we don't want to use it – gives us a more expansive understanding about living a life.*"

¹⁰⁹ Chen, Chao-ju (2019) "Migrating Marriage Equality Without Feminism: Obergefell v. Hodges and the Legalization of Same-Sex Marriage in Taiwan," Cornell International Law Journal: Vol. 52: No. 1, Article 4. Available at: <https://scholarship.law.cornell.edu/cilj/vol52/iss1/4>

Third, marriage equality discourses have historically sidelined bisexual women. Interviewees said that this happens for several reasons. One is an apparent belief that marriage equality is somehow less important for bisexual women than for other queer people. Another is the explicitly stated belief that bisexuality is too complicated for public consumption and may impede the campaign for marriage equality if included in public messaging. Both reasons arose in interviews as a source of hurt, trauma, and frustration for bisexual women interviewees—including those married to women—who have been excluded from national campaigns for marriage equality.

As such, this chapter discusses:

- critiques offered by bisexual Asian women of normative marriage equality campaigns, which provide a bi-specific perspective on long-standing critiques offered by feminist and queer activists globally;
 - the impact of marriage inequality and why some bisexual Asian women have decided to fight for marriage equality;
 - and bisexual Asian women's experiences of being sidelined in marriage equality movements.
- The voices in this chapter include single bi women; bi women in long-term partnerships who do not want to marry; women in long-term partnerships who *do* want to marry but cannot, due to the gender of their partner; women who are married to men; and women who are married to women.

Notably, the second set of conversations—those related to why some bisexual Asian women have decided to fight for marriage equality—were often had in quieter voices. Interviewees indicated or explicitly named their fear that discussing marriage equality as a legitimate movement goal may lead to them being perceived as less radical, less in line with feminist thought, and—the ever present threat to bi women—less queer.

Bisexual Critiques of Marriage Equality

Marriage equality, as a phrase, arose as a more gender-inclusive way of discussing what used to be called same-sex marriage. The reframe removed sex-essentialist language and aimed to intentionally include transgender, gender non-confirming, and non-binary people. What it didn't do, however, was address the fact that an immense web of other inequalities prevents most women from legally, economically, and socially joining their life with another woman. For bi women in Asia, their ability to partner with other women is as much, if not more, a matter of housing policy, wage disparity, classism, caste-based hierarchies, and gendered care labor as it is an issue of marriage equality legislation.

Marriage will never be “equal” while inequalities exist between people of different genders, races, classes, castes, abilities, languages, nationalities, and Indigeneities—in part because these inequalities map directly onto bi women's ability to choose their partners. As Nyima, from Nepal, explained in a previous chapter: “We can't even marry outside of our caste. That's another layer. It's not just gender.”

Refani, from Indonesia, said that marriage equality discourses also reinforce patriarchal and misogynistic structures already entrenched in her country. She explained that marriage is a dangerous demand if it is not preceded by public critiques of polygamy, state-sanctioned male dominance, or the commodification of bi and lesbian women. She said queer women are fetishized and reduced to spectacle, and the current fight for marriage rights risks validating that oppression rather than undoing it.

“I don’t believe in marriage. I know it is important for our community to be acknowledged, but I think it will be strange regardless. In Indonesia, it is a (majority Islamic) country, and (in Islamic values) they allow men to have more than one wife. If we have marriage equality, it would be contradictory to the Islamic value of letting men legally have more than one wife. It’s interesting because if you fight for marriage equality, you’re also going to be fighting with polygamy. In a lot of cases men have more than one wife, but women do not. It’s part of the misogynist and conservative agenda.

People also fetishize bisexual and lesbian women. We see this on dating apps, men constantly asking to watch us have sex with other women so they can invite us to join their sexual activity. If we were to suddenly call this equality, it doesn’t work. We have to first fight the misogyny in relationships.”

– Refani, Indonesia

Nyima, in Nepal, said that marriage equality rhetoric also compounds a specific kind of trauma for bi women: the pressure to be partnered to be seen as valid. For bisexual women, the fight for marriage equality can feel like yet another reminder that you are only legitimate if someone else is willing to stand next to you. Nyima’s critique reflects both the feminist insistence on being whole without a partner and the uniquely bi experience of having your identity constantly questioned unless it is externally “proven.” She described this pressure as something she consciously rejects — but also something she knows others need, because rights are real and survival matters. Her reflection reveals a complex and painful dynamic: that being unpartnered in bi life is not just a personal state, but a political liability.

“There is a lot of pressure in queer movements towards same-sex marriage and marriage equality, but for me, I don’t adhere to the idea of marriage as an institution. The push is always there — it compounds the push on bi women to have someone to validate your sexuality, and that validation will only come if you are in a partnership and if you are married. I don’t agree with it because I can still be myself without a person. But I’m also recognizing that rights are important to people. Also, it cannot be the end goal.”

– Nyima, Nepal

The Impact of Marriage Inequality

Imagination & Self-Limiting Beliefs

Several interviewees explained that the absence of marriage equality distorts how desire is formed and expressed, arguing that when a right is not available to one’s whole, full, and most expansive self, this denial limits the growth and development of that self. Bisexual women explained that as people who are offered a sort of partial access to the institution of marriage, they have an acute sense of how the pieces of you which cannot access the rights and benefits of marriage is at once freed from these mental confines and limited in its expansiveness.

In one sense, the queer desires of bi women open their imaginations to more and different futures, because they simply cannot enter into a traditional married life if they want to be with a woman. Queer people have the liberatory responsibility of building new traditions and expectations about gender, labor, and care in long-term partnerships. But in another sense, the denial of marriage equality robs bi women of both public and private visions of what long-term partnership can look like. Kenn, in Mongolia, said the lack of public space available to affirm queer couples has resulted in young queer communities believing they are not actually capable of long-term partnership.

“It’s not even on the table, and we don’t think it’s for us. Queer people don’t believe that queer couples can be with each other for a long time because we don’t have representation.

We don’t have outed couples. They just think they will live with each other and that’s it. But in Mongolia, the young lesbians so believe in marriage, even if it’s symbolically, because I feel like when I date younger women, 24 or 25, they just say, “I want to marry you.”

– Kenn, Mongolia

Grief, Loss, and Full Personhood

Some interviewees said that while they agree the institution of marriage is inherently patriarchal and rooted in discriminatory structures, it also offers financial, social, and psychological benefits they simply cannot access otherwise.

Sadie, in South Korea, said her decision to fight for marriage equality is deeply rooted in past experiences of grief. She said when her partner of 13 years passed away, the lack of marriage equality left her demeaned and excluded from key moments in her death, care, and funeral. For Sadie, the demand for marriage rights was not about conformity, but about being able to proactively prevent such a traumatic experience from ever occurring again.

For Sadie, marriage to her wife after her first partner passed away also offered something rare: an end to the perpetual hope from her family that she might someday stop being queer. She explained:

“Getting married to my wife was a helpful thing in getting my parents to stop their hopes [that I would one day be heterosexual] because it’s a socially recognized situation. We only did the registration. My both parents, brother and auntie came to the registration office as witnesses. There’s a bit of help here in no longer thinking I will arrive someplace else, and I can just have arrived here.”

Her interview conveyed immense relief over no longer being perceived as indecisive or adolescent. In her story, the value of marriage was not only about rights and access to state institutions, but about finally being seen as a legible adult. Paradoxically, through entering an institution rooted in patriarchy, Sadie was able to free herself of persistent and damaging attacks on her autonomy as a woman.

“I lost my partner of 13 years four years ago. She brought me a new type of life because she had cancer. I didn’t think about the meaning of marriage, being a guardian, or this type of care. Until I could not be her legal caretaker. During Covid, only one person could access the hospital to see my partner, and that could only be her legal partner.

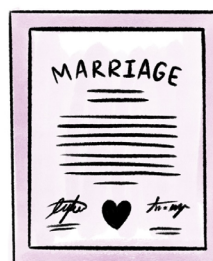
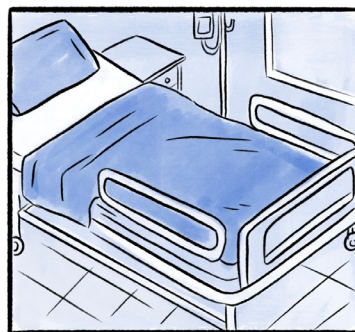
If I had been legal, I would have been the one there. My biggest fear was that her mother would not contact me when my partner passed away.

The whole time during the funeral, I realized that I didn’t have any wife, only a good friend. I wasn’t able to do anything. I couldn’t introduce my friends to her parents or show them our life.

Luckily, she didn’t write down a will. Her mother might have found out she wanted to leave me everything and been angry and not allowed me to attend the funeral.

Because of this, I got married to my wife last year. I came out to my parents right after. I got married in Copenhagen, got the marriage certificate, and showed it to my parents.”

– Sadie, South Korea



“If we had been legal, I would have been the one there.”



Navigating Desire & Survival

Some interviews expressed their belief that within queer spaces, the political disavowal of marriage is a survivalist, preemptive rejection of something the state has already denied. None of these women were defending the institution of marriage. They were questioning – as Reina from Bhutan asked pointedly – what it means to say you don’t want something you were never allowed to have.

“Could you marry a woman in Bhutan? No. There is a national equality law to include LGBT in education, health, economics, etc., but not this. So, what does it mean to say I don’t want it?”

– Reina, Bhutan

“I have had girlfriends, and then they leave and marry horrible, ugly men with horrible wedding hashtags because I couldn’t give them that. And they call me when their babies do strange things, and I always answer, “I had no idea babies could do such strange things.” And obviously I answer, because lesbians, right? I think women like me are not allowed to speak about this – not measuring up to men – there is no space for these feelings if you are femme. So, you just have to act like you don’t want all these things you can’t have. Watching everyone else have families and children and you can’t... I mean, not that I want to.

I skipped Chinese New Year this year because I can’t deal with being asked, ‘Why haven’t you found a man yet? What’s wrong with you?’ My dad asked if I’m mentally retarded. I’m the first to go to college. This person at the conference asked me why I’m in such a hurry to get back to Nepal because there’s no one waiting for me. I feel like I’m not allowed to want anything. I’m not going to any after-event, because it’s going to be my fault for just looking at somebody. Like no one is safe or available or anyone I could be with for a very long time. It’s like you have to be free from everything, including wanting. And then you’re even judged for not wanting.”

– Apple, Thailand

Apple further explained that the expectation to reject marriage equality as a political demand functions as a form of silencing within queer movements. Bi women in Southeast Asia, she said, are told that talking about marriage delegitimizes their queerness – especially if they are in relationships with men or still believe in marriage’s personal value. Several other interviewees echoed reports of this phenomenon: activists copy each other’s public disavowal of marriage not because it’s not needed, but because saying otherwise would brand them un-radical or not queer enough.

“I would never bring my male partner into queer spaces. I’m also anti-marriage. I don’t [believe in the] institution. I realized when I found [lesbian] colleagues at Outright marrying women and having kids, I realized I was denied a whole... [begins crying]. Sorry. I’m not supposed to cry. The reason a lot of us don’t go for marriage equality stuff is because it’s not going to happen for us. People in that space say to us that we’re not really queer if we discuss wanting marriage equality. In Malaysia or Indonesia, our country, we’re forced to admit that we’re not going to seek marriage equality. I see [other queer activists talk like this], so I copy them. We say we fight for the right to exist, not seek marriage. I think we should stop saying this because we’re compromising the future of other activists to get married. [I know someone else who] agrees with me, but it feels like we are the only two from these countries.”

– Apple, Thailand

Exclusion from Marriage Equality Campaigns

In interviews with AFLN, bisexual women married to men and bisexual women married to women described sidelined in marriage equality campaigns, despite the very clear relevance of this issue to their lives. While most said that marriage equality is not the top priority in their human rights work and agreed with the feminist critiques raised throughout this chapter, their exclusion from marriage equality campaigns and narratives is a critical issue.

Navigating Desire & Survival

Bi women's exclusion from marriage equality campaigns also signals a belief within queer communities that marriage to a man is, for bi women, the end of queerness. We don't need you here – the movement is effectively saying – because you could leave at any moment and abandon us. Marriage to a man becomes falsely constructed as the point at which bi women cease to be traumatized by, and invested in fighting against, the denial of rights to their queer communities. This collective fear of bisexual abandonment relies on tropes of bisexual betrayal, instability, and inconsistency – the same tropes bi people face in their relationships, organizations, and family lies. These mythologies of bisexual betrayal leave bi women who marry men with little room to contribute to queer human rights movements or express their solidarity, even as they remain deeply connected to queer desire, politics, and struggles.

“People tend to outcast you. There is no support system for married bisexual people. If [a bi woman] is even dating a cis man, the relationship is not queer in mono-normative spaces.”

– Ruhab, India

The Fallacy of Choice

The exclusion of bi women from marriage equality campaigns also points to the belief that bisexual women can align themselves with heterosexuality at will, and therefore equality for queer people is somehow less relevant for them.

Bisexual women marry men for many reasons. Some fall in love. Some are in pursuit of long-denied “protection and security” or shelter during conflict. Still others were pushed into marriage through cultural expectations and structural barriers to queer partnership.

“In my life, I feel like the masculine energy, or male figure, or needing a male – it's like I want this sense of protection. Like a father figure and sense of protection – it makes me feel comfortable. If I'm with a woman, the sense of protection and security is not so fulfilling. Maybe it comes from childhood trauma. My father left when I was five. Throughout my life, in my house, it was a female-dominated home. Inside me there is a need for male energy or protection. I want to be protected and secure, protected from physical violation and for financial security. I grew up with the belief that this can be gotten from men.”

– Nyein, Myanmar

“I did marry a man. I knew I wanted someone in my life. During the bombing and shooting in Myanmar, I didn't have anyone to call home to, and that left a bit of scars. When I met my partner (the man) – and this is where my parents think I married this poor guy out of trauma – but it's not entirely true, because he is very safe. No one has to know anything else. I am safe with this person.”

– Taara, Bangladesh

Marriage to men can offer social protection, legal recognition, physical safety, and access to rights that are systematically withheld from single women and those in LBQ+ partnerships, but these relationships can also be shaped by trauma, constrained choice, and emotional isolation. Various forms of IPV experienced by bisexual women are discussed in the section Intimate Partner Violence. Interviews explained that the lack of access to marriage equality pushes some bisexual women into heterosexual marriages despite warning signs of abuse. Colloquially, constructing bi women

who marry men as having “chosen” a simpler or safer option minimizing both the immense societal pressures bi women experience to marry men and the very real harms bisexual women experience in heterosexual marriages.

Several interviewees said that frameworks of choice also ignore the ways in which some bi women lose their ability to explore themselves and their queerness after marrying a man. This is especially harmful when viewed in light of early, forced, and coerced marriage. These dynamics prevent some bi women from accessing queer community later in life, feeding directly into the cycles of compulsory heterosexuality, isolation, and rejection in queer spaces discussed throughout this report.

“Among women, I think it’s very common to know their sexual preference very late in life. And forced marriage and child marriage is so high, we know that if people were really educated and knew how to talk about it, we would have a wave of LBQ women coming out. But we only have a western way to talk and think about it. The communities who had female-oriented power have been destroyed.

– Taara, Bangladesh

“So many of the women I work with are married to men, often at a very young age, in their late teens or early twenties. A lot of them only later begin to say, ‘hey I might be bi, and this is something I’ve figured out now.’ I feel like the older I get, the more of these conversations I hear, but I know there are many more women whose stories we may never hear. Compulsory heterosexuality steals time from bi women and makes our self-discovery delayed and costly.”

– Apurupa Vatsalya,
Global Interfaith Network, India

“I do know bi women married to men who are able to engage [in queer community], but it’s easier if you already have a queer group before getting married.

In queer online forums there are also a lot of posts about being married to men but now attracted to women and not knowing what to do. Some people say, ‘Oh, you’re a lesbian,’ some people say it’s just about sex, some people say, ‘Oh, let’s meet.’

No one ever says, ‘Oh, you might be bi.’ If I could answer them, I would tell them it’s okay. Either you want sex or you’re bi or lesbian or you could be poly and have multiple gendered partners at the same time. Anything is possible.

In an ideal world, they wouldn’t need to question it anonymously on Facebook. They could just say, ‘Hey, I’m a woman. And I want to explore my sexuality.’

– Kenn, Mongolia

“We Cannot Show Bisexuality to the Public”

The exclusion of bi women from marriage equality campaigns across Asia is important for one more reason: it typifies the ways in which bi women are treated as too complicated for mainstream LGBT narratives, regardless of their partner’s gender.

The Anti-Summary of this report features Sadie, from South Korea, explaining that her bisexuality rendered her unfit for a national marriage equality campaign—even although she is married to a woman.

“We are focused on same-sex marriage in Korea, but in that movement, there’s no space for bisexuality. We cannot show bisexuality to the public [because for the campaign to succeed] they need to think about pure [monosexual] women in love.”

Her story exemplifies that of bisexual Asian women interviewed for this report, who are simultaneously told they are not enough and too much; too quiet and too loud; too visible and too invisible.

Too
complicated,
too radical,
too strange.
Too queer.

The equality for which they are struggling far surpasses that of marriage. Their movements demand rights, justice, and liberation across and beyond norms and standards of social categorization. Calls to fund and sustain and nurture bi women’s organizing in Asia are, therefore, not niche at all. They are the foundation and future of queer liberation in its most expansive sense.

“If I had all the money, time,
and human resources in
the world, I would do bi women’s
community building.”

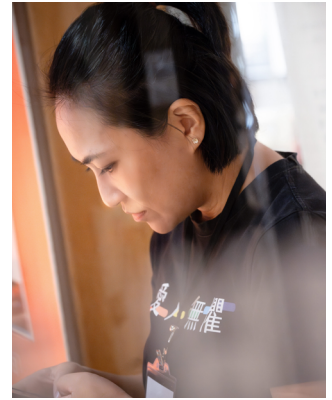
Acknowledgements

The Asia Feminist LBQ Network and research team are grateful to the 18 bisexual and pansexual feminist organizers, human rights defenders, and movement leaders who contributed their knowledge, insight, and memories to this report. Their incisiveness, trust, humor, and generosity are the spirit of this report. It was honor co-creating with them.

They include: Stephanie Wang, scholar-activist, r&B bi+ group, China; Apurupa Vatsalya, Advocacy Officer, Global Interfaith Network, India; Kenn, feminist activist, Mongolia; Nyima, indigenous feminist, Nepal; Zee, Bangladesh; Refani, community worker, Indonesia; Ha Phan, independent LGBTQ+ rights activist, Vietnam; Ngoc Nguyen, queer feminist activist, Vietnam; and Joyce Teng, LGBTQ+ advocate, Taiwan; Mei, Singapore; and Taara, Bangladesh.

This report was researched and written by Erin Kilbride, AFLN Senior Researcher, and Phuong Nhi, AFLN Research Assistant Intern. It was reviewed by Jean Chong, AFLN Executive Director, and several expert peer reviewers from across the queer feminist movement in Asia. They include: Apurupa Vatsalya, Jyotsna Maskey, and Joyce Teng. Their expert perspectives on the language, framing, and political orientation of the report were core to its feminist methodology. Sravya Attaluri created the thoughtful visuals, illustrations, and layout that enriched the report with color and compassion.

AFLN and the research team also extend their gratitude to the organizers of the 2025 ILGA Asia conference in Nepal, where several in-person interviews were conducted.



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