



Building a Contextual Approach to Holistic Well-being: Sustaining LGBTIQ activism in SSEA

Rima Athar, CSBR
(March 2018)

Note: The following is an updated contextual summary prepared by CSBR, for the development of Project CARE: Continuous and Responsive Empowerment through well-being initiatives for LGBTIQ human rights defenders in South and Southeast Asia. CARE is a collaborative initiative between 5 regional networks in SSEA: [Coalition for Sexual and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies \(CSBR\)](#), [Asia Pacific Trans Network \(APTN\)](#), [ASEAN SOGI Caucus \(ASC\)](#), [Asia Pacific Coalition on Male Sexual Health \(APCOM\)](#), [ILGA-Asia](#), supported by COC Netherlands.

Background

Across South and Southeast Asia (SSEA), lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) human rights defenders (HRDs) are under extreme pressure and heightened threats, as we navigate the intersections of rising authoritarianism and patriarchal politics, increased religious fundamentalism, expanding neoliberal trade policies that increase austerity and income inequality, and forced migration and displacement due to conflicts and climate change across the region. While these forces impact multiple and various dimensions of our lives simultaneously,¹ perhaps the most immediate and obviously felt threat across LGBTIQ movements in SSEA is the increasingly vocal and successful coordination between conservative and fundamentalist state and non-state actors, working across the national and international stages, with the explicit attempt to deny rights to abortion, sexual & reproductive health, legal gender recognition, same sex relationships.² A cornerstone of this anti-rights advocacy is support for gender-based violence as “culturally, morally or religiously acceptable”, working to promote hetero-patriarchy as the basis for familial, social and political life, and suppressing the capacities of feminist and LGBTIQ activists to organize publicly and proactively. The rapid increase in frequency of intimidation, threats and violence against LGBTIQ communities across SSEA is well-documented and alarming, as our governments stand by in silence, or worse, actively participate in violating LGBTIQ people’s basic civil liberties and human rights.³ As under-resourced, marginalized activists, our time and energies are often subsumed by putting out fires, as the fundamentalist opposition grows increasingly coordinated, strategic and vocal. At the same time, rising religious fundamentalism is both supported by and fuels other systemic problems, including a growth in reprehensible ‘strong-man’ politics, closing space for human rights civil society, and an economic system that fuels austerity, unchecked corporate power, environmental destruction and climate change. LGBTIQ+ defenders are active across these issues.

¹ See for e.g. recommendations to address diverse impacts on lesbian, bisexual and queer women and trans people across Asia—including regarding gender-based violence; criminalization; physical, sexual and mental health; feminist organizing and movement building and the security of LGBTQ human rights defenders—from the **LBTQ Caucus Statement** in Phnom Penh: <http://www.csbronline.org/?p=2066> (December 2017)

² For a mapping of these trends internationally in the last 20 years, see for e.g. **Rights at Risk: OURS Trends Report 2017** (<https://www.oursplatform.org/resource/rights-risk-trends-report-2017/>)

³ See for e.g. CSBR and civil society statements on a series of escalating threats, intimidation and attacks on LGBTIQ communities by state representatives and non-state actors in Indonesia (www.csbronline.org/?p=1247) and unchecked violence against civil society actors in Bangladesh (<http://www.csbronline.org/?p=1278>) in 2016.



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Legal Protections for HRDs and LGBTIQ peoples

In this climate where gross violations against LGBTIQ communities are happening with increased frequency—access to justice and redress remain out of reach. This is due in part to a near total absence of effective regional and national protection mechanisms for LGBTIQ people and human rights defenders in SSEA, despite the increasing proliferation of international agreements.

International Frameworks

In the last two decades, strides have been made to establish a framework for the protection of human rights defenders internationally, which have placed increasing attention and focus on the importance of gender-sensitive approaches and responses.

In 1999, the UNGA adopted the *Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognised Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms*, which spurred the establishment of the [UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders](#) (UNSRHRDs) at the Human Rights Committee in 2000. In 2008, the European Union (EU) established its [EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders](#), building on the international frameworks and norms.

In 2010, the UNSRHRDs submitted [the first report focusing exclusively on the situation of women human rights defenders](#) (WHRDs), documenting the added and specific forms of violence that women working towards the realization of gender equality, sexual and reproductive health rights, and human rights face. In November 2013, the UNGA adopted the first ever resolution on [protecting women human rights defenders](#). The call was taken up as well by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, first through a 2015 report on "[The Situation of Women Human Rights Defenders in Africa](#)", and then through [Resolution 336 on Measures to Protect and Promote the Work of Women Human Rights Defenders](#), adopted in February 2016. In November 2016, the Human Rights Council adopted a landmark [declaration on the protection of human rights defenders working to protect social, economic and cultural rights](#), with specific reference to women human rights defenders.

In September 2016, the [UN independent expert on protection from violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity \(SOGI\)](#) people became active for an initial 3-year term at the Human Rights Council. Progressive mechanisms to affirm protection on the basis SOGI are proliferating in regional forums. This includes the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights appointing the [Rapporteurship on the Rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Persons](#) in February 2014, and Resolution 275 of the African Commission on "[Protection against violence and other human rights violations against persons on the basis of their real or imputed sexual orientation or gender identity](#)", adopted in May 2014. Additionally, the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process has provided an important avenue to address protection for LGBTIQ+ people and human right defenders, with as of March



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2017, a total of 113 UN member states “having voluntarily accepted at least one recommendation to address violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity”.⁴

Frameworks in SSEA

Despite these trends, in SSEA limited protections exist. The ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) has limited power and scope,⁵ and no similar commission exists for SAARC. While national movements work towards various forms of decriminalization, anti-discrimination and gender recognition legislation on the basis of SOGIESC, in some cases supported by National Human Rights Commissions and other bodies⁶—LGBTIQ human rights defenders remain at heightened risk and vulnerability to violence, reprisals and violations.

Even as groups work to develop legal protection mechanisms across the region, we recognize that effective access to justice will remain an on-going, long-term struggle. **In this political moment, fostering sustainable, thriving, community-led mobilization as the cornerstone of transformative social movements becomes a clear imperative.** Yet social movements are only as strong as the individuals who make up the greater collectives—when individuals suffer from personal burnout, we see spill-over stagnation and fragmentation in collectives, organizations, and the wider movement. This is significantly heightened in movements that are newer, younger, already under-resourced, and which lack access to power, decision-making and political influence. Such challenges are acute within LGBTIQ human rights organising. LGBTIQ defenders need to experience continual and responsive support, in social and professional life, in order to strengthen & sustain our activism towards transforming systems that enable discrimination and violence to occur.

Existing Programs and Resources to support Well-Being

A preliminary scan of programs and resources on well-being for human rights defenders shows two main focus areas: (a) digital security, physical security and emergency response to such threats, and (b) integrated security and holistic well-being for feminist activists. The first often takes the form of technical support, rational mappings of security risks, and emergency funds for temporary relocation after threats or violations occur. The second often looks at the political economy in which women human rights defenders work, and the specific & disproportionate threats WHRDs face as a result of their human rights organizing, as well as the power of community knowledge and healing that often starts with women. While many of the

⁴ See: http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/72/172

⁵ See for e.g. a look at the AICHR’s protection mechanisms in “[The Rainbow in Context: An Overview of the Situation of LGBTIQ persons in Southeast Asia](#)” (ASEAN SOGI Caucus, 2017).

⁶ See for e.g. the infographic “[Mapping the Rainbow in ASEAN](#)” on legal protections for LGBTIQ peoples (ASEAN SOGI Caucus, 2016).



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existing resources include LGBTIQ defenders as participants in the programs from which they emerged, few resources seem to have a specific focus on LGBTIQ communities within SSEA. Below is a summary of some of the more relevant initiatives for LGBTIQ defenders.⁷

(a) Digital Security, Physical Security, and Emergency Response

Forum Asia [Human Rights Defenders Protection Support Program](#) offers case-by-case temporary relocation services and urgent assistance services, alongside trial observation in the case of criminal charges brought against HRDs in Asia. **Urgent Action Fund for Women’s Human Rights (UAF)** provides women and trans human rights defenders rapid response grants either for security or urgent advocacy opportunities. UAF has an international office, and 3 regional offices, for [Africa](#), [Latin America](#), Asia Pacific. **Freedom House** [offers emergency assistance to frontline defenders globally](#), in various forms including legal aid, access to medication for political prisoners, digital security, emergency relocations, and urgent advocacy opportunities—including a specific program for LGBTIQ+ HRDs. The **Euro-Mediterranean Foundation to Support Human Rights Defenders**, provides [strategic financial assistance to human rights organizations and defenders for urgent responses, capacity building, time-sensitive advocacy](#). **East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Program** focuses on [emergency relief, physical and digital security trainings, and legal aid](#). Similar initiatives and foundations continue to proliferate, as attention to security and human rights defenders becomes a higher priority and framework for action. While these programs importantly respond to urgent needs in moments of crisis, they are effectively time bound and limited to financial, legal and technical support after threats arise.

Digital security resources for HRDs abound, though some of those with a specific inclusion of LGBTIQ communities includes **Tactical Tech’s** a 2013 guide [“Security in a Box” for LGBTI communities in MENA](#) and [Holistic Security Manual](#) website, and the **Association for Progressive Communication’s** [Take Back the Tech campaign](#) and research on [End Violence: Women’s Rights and Safety Online](#). These focus on prevention and potential redress from more immediate digital and physical threats, while also including a political analysis of digital and physical surveillance and its impacts on human rights organizing.

(b) Integrated Security and Holistic Well-Being for Feminist Activists

Existing praxis that takes a political and integrated approach to well-being has been most visibly conducted by feminist activists working across a range of human rights issues—including gender-based violence, SRHR, sex worker rights, disability rights, sexual orientation and gender identity, climate justice, peace & security and more.

⁷ The recently launched website [Resources for Resilience](#) collates a very wide range “tools to promote mental health and well-being for human rights advocates” from around the world. It includes research studies, commentary and reflections, and toolkits from around the globe. To date little has sourced from SSEA region.



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In 2007, Jane Barry and **Urgent Action Fund** published [*What's The Point of Revolution if We Can't Dance?*](#), drawing from over 100 activists lived experiences, information from 9 years of UAF work and over 2000 grantees experiences, including extensive inputs from LBQ WHRDs. The authors note that while a wide array of literature informed their program, finding useful work on activists' mental health and well-being was rare. This included Marina Bernal's 2006 **Spanish language Self Care and Self Defense Manual for Feminist Activists**, which was [translated into English in 2008](#) by CREA. Building on momentum of frameworks on WHRDs in 2015 a number of toolkits were published, including:

- [*Echoes of the Sound of the Conch*](#), a practical toolkit by Jane Barry & UAF on running workshops on holistic well-being for feminist activists, drawing from work with Latin American WHRDs.
- [*Strategies for Building an Organisation with a Soul*](#), by Hope Chigudu and Rudo Chigudu, focused on feminist organizing across the African continent; which links well-being directly to how we build collectives and organizations and carry out the work of feminist organizing for rights and justice.
- [*Making Feminist Leadership Sustainable and Transformative*](#), by the Institute for Women's Empowerment, draws on a 4-year program on women's empowerment & leadership development in Indonesia—making it one of the very few resources from the SSEA region.

Such work begins with the personal and reaches outwards to communities. It recognizes the importance of the body and soul of feminist activists, and the importance of indigenous knowledge and community healing practices.⁸ It also reflects on the vast *“breach between our discourse on human rights and social justice, and the reality of the labour practices adopted by our organizations and work spaces.”* It situates its analysis within a structural look at well-being, and the political economy of the work of women human rights defenders, and continues to inform feminist organizing.

(c) LGBTIQ-specific Initiatives in SSEA

In 2009, **Protection International** developed a [Protection Manual for LGBTIQ+ defenders](#), that draws on the experiences of LGBTIQ+ activists from across the SSEA region, including experiences of Boys of Bangladesh, Blue Diamond Society (Nepal), Equal Ground (Sri Lanka), and Arus Pelangi (Indonesia). It explores existing international legal protection on the basis of SOGI, strategies for assessing risks, addressing gender normativity and added discrimination of trans and intersex persons,

⁸ A foundational toolkit on community healing practices, well-being and resilience was developed by the [CAPACITAR network](#), and in 2005 they released the “**CAPACITAR Emergency Response Toolkit**”, available for download in over 20 languages: <https://capacitar.org/capacitar-emergency-kit/>.



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secure communications, and best practices for organizing securely. This manual emerges as one of the only LGBTIQ specific initiatives to date, and primarily focuses on rationalizing security and risk assessment.

Research from York University (Canada) on [Navigating Risk, Managing Security, and Receiving Support, and Civil Society Networks of Protection](#) was carried out from 2015-2016, and takes an integrated look at the levels of the personal (emotional, mental and physical) well-being, building formal mechanisms of support, and strengthening trainings for HRDs. It includes input from LGBTIQ+ HRDs, and a country report on Indonesia.

Bridging the Gaps

As LGBTIQ activists, we often fail to recognize the intense mental and physical health effects of depression, anger, burnout, illness as manifestations of the realities of our work as human rights defenders. Too often, our work centers on bearing witness to violations and violence daily, inflicted upon people we know and communities close to us, that could be or is inflicted on us as well. Repercussions on our mental and physical health are also a result of intra-movement tensions and dynamics, considering that the political spaces within which LGBTIQ activists engage are highly contested. Additionally, when organizational leadership and accepted movement practices (re)produce structural violence, this compounds on access to agency, self-empowerment and well-being of those most marginalized from within—which includes lesbian, bisexual, queer women, trans people and intersex people, in the spectrum of LGBTIQ+ HRDs. Addressing patriarchy and cis-privilege, and the perpetuation of structural violence, gender-based violence and discrimination specifically against LGBTIQ peoples from within movements, must also inform our understandings of well-being and resilience for human rights organizing.

Organizationally, few of us have any adequate, sustainable resources and mechanisms to help deal with this—to hold space with us for healing, to help build our resilience, and to increase our abilities to access our agency, and to articulate and realise our needs. Beyond technical, logistical and financial gaps in moments of heightened crisis, there is a need to focus on prevention from within—mobilizing LGBTIQ+ HRDs to shift power dynamics, to identify the sources of oppression, and to take continued tangible steps to sustain the solution. The imperative of addressing “internal cause and effects” has been developed by the [Institute for Women’s Empowerment \(IWE\)](#), whose trainings reflect that

“A holistic understanding of “security” takes into consideration the internal as well as the external threats that feminists have to confront, on a daily basis, and at multiple levels in their lives and in the course of their work....These internal elements may affect an individual’s (and consequently her collective’s) safety if not brought into the calculation of the risk factors, and in the assessment of the personal and group vulnerabilities that affect the real level of risk involved in any specific situation. Ultimately, the same process of “internal work” is necessary to



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build the emotional, spiritual and mental strength to resist, and hopefully, transform the oppressive patriarchal institutions and relationships that continue unabated to limit, obstruct and punish women, especially those who visibly and actively confront them.”⁹

While LGBTIQ groups in SSEA are beginning to carry out more holistic well-being work internally, there is little intra-movement conversations on experiences, outcomes, synergies and the potential to scale up efforts and share resources, knowledge and practices. Even amongst the networks involved in CARE, little knowledge exists about the presence of friendly and affirming professional health services for LGBTIQ+ activists across the SSEA region, nor of LGBTIQ+ organisational practices and policies that prioritize well-being for activists. Vulnerabilities are also related to the lack of networks and shared responses among defenders.

Within this context, Project CARE seeks to build a bridge with existing work. CARE will take a research-action approach to respond to the clear and urgent need to integrate well-being for the sustainability of LGBTIQ organizing, and to create a stronger network and platform for shared action across the region. Drawing on the resources available, CARE also aims to address the gaps within existing human rights well-being research & initiatives by focusing on the specific needs and experiences of LGBTIQ HRDs in SSEA.

⁹ See the IWE's summary of their approach to [Well-being, Self Care and Integrated Security \(WeSIS\)](#).