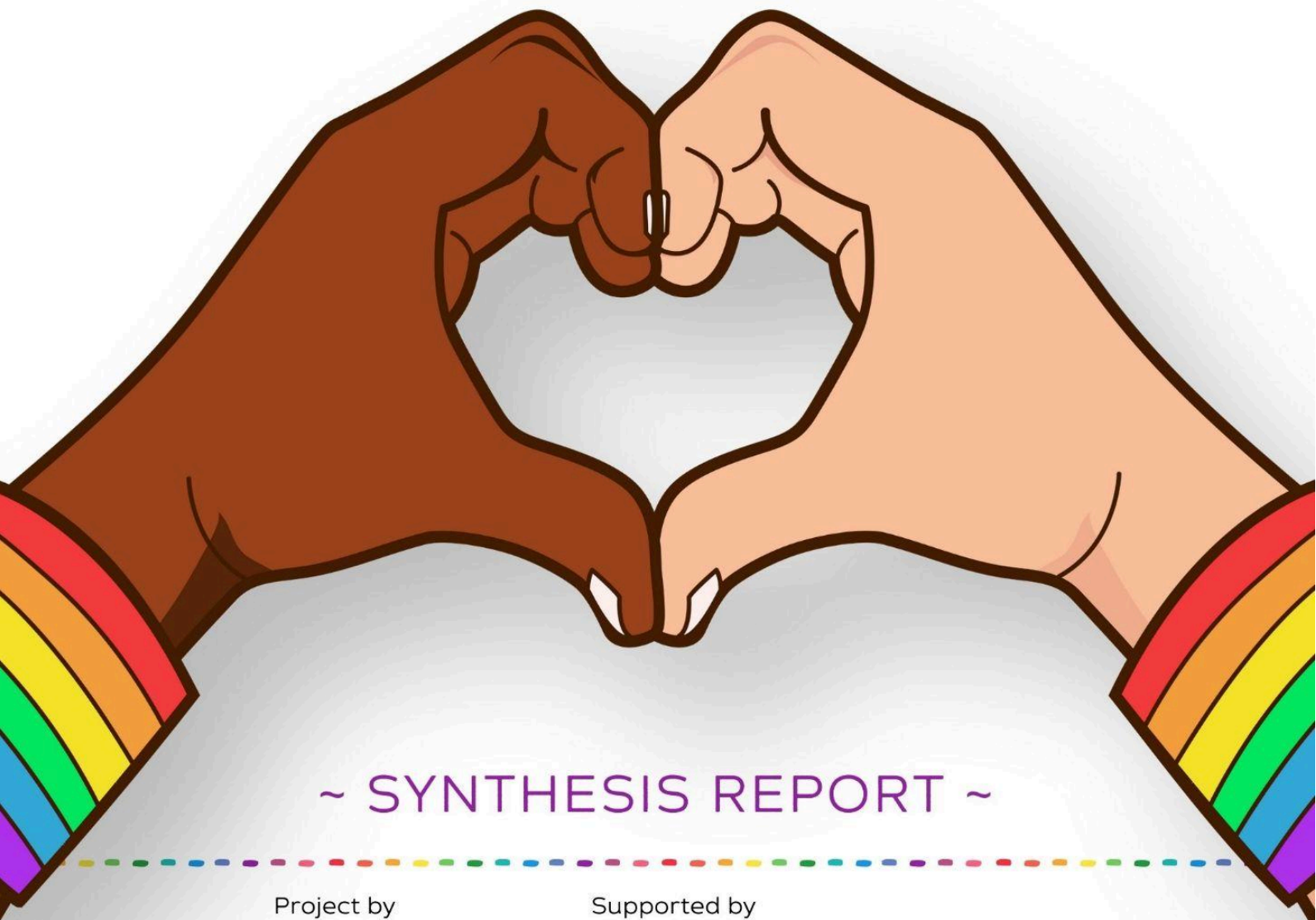




# SHIMMERING

LIGHTS IN SHADOWS

QUEER ACTIVISTS IN  
NON-QUEER SPACES



~ SYNTHESIS REPORT ~

Project by



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# SHIMMERING LIGHTS IN SHADOWS: QUEER ACTIVISTS IN NON-QUEER SPACES — SYNTHESIS REPORT

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# SYNTHESIS REPORT

Marissa de Guzman

## Introduction

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### ○ Background and Purpose

This Innovation for Change – East Asia project, with support from the Australian Government, through the Department for Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Kaleidoscope Trust, focuses on the four Commonwealth countries of Brunei, Fiji, Malaysia, and Singapore. It looks into the lived experiences of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual plus (LGBTQIA+) community engaged in civil society work, but outside of LGBTQIA+-focused organisations.

Though generally regarded as the hub of progressive ideas, innovative solutions, and radically inclusive network building, there are still civil society cultures and practices that exclude full participation and leadership of minority activists. These civil society organisations (CSOs) may be guilty of recreating the same inequalities in broader society, and the queer community finds itself disempowered having to experience the very conditions they commit to change. But where these CSOs may have a desire to create more open, safe, engaged, and democratic cultures within their workplaces, including for people with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC), the intention is for the outputs of this project to contribute to the creation of a just and inclusive civil society environment. The vision is that this initiative offers a meaningful step forward where everyone can confidently and completely be themselves as they engage in transformative development and rights work. One of the eventual outcomes hoped for is having civil society actors and stakeholders put in place better informed and meaningfully evolved policies, practices, and work cultures.

### ○ Context Setting

*This Synthesis Report is based on the findings presented in the four country reports. The Reflections section is offered by the Synthesis Report Writer.*

Three Report Writers identified and selected contributors in the four focus countries and engaged a total of 47 participants through two primary methods of gathering information – individual interviews or focus group discussions (FGDs). Criteria for selection of participants included identifying as part of the LGBTQIA+ community, having worked or volunteered or currently working or volunteering in CSOs that are not primarily engaged in LGBTQIA+-focused rights or advocacy, and willingness to have their insights reflected in these reports. The three Report Writers also employed purposive sampling, choosing their interviewees and FGD participants based on a conscious effort to represent a broad range of LGBTQIA+ individuals serving diverse roles within their CSOs – either as volunteers, members of the programme staff, governance, policy or management teams, or even founders of these organisations or collectives. The overarching goal is to provide a nuanced perspective despite the admittedly limited scope of the project. By sheer number of participants, the views and reflections in these reports are by no means definitive. However, the information, views, and opinions collected still deserve consideration for representing the lived realities and aspirational goals of queer people navigating their lives within a broad spectrum of CSO workplaces that range from being supportive and encouraging, rights-affirming, tolerant, or restrictive of LGBTQIA+ individuals’ rights, identities, and their very selves.

# Their Lives, Their Voices, Their Truths

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## ○ Brunei

The Bruneian contributors are well aware of the security risks involved in speaking out to have a tiny part of their stories told. They live in a country that offers no recognition and no protection of their rights and identities; where there is no space for advocacy and no room for free and safe expression (at least the way most of the world has come to define these). And yet they find value in having their stories told, their truths revealed, even if they have to be shared anonymously for now.

The LGBTQIA+ community constantly wrestles with both direct and indirect impacts of social stigma as queer people live within the confines of an Islamic absolute monarchy system where the constitutional law is based on a stringent legal and sociopolitical framework and where Sharia law is strictly implemented. The country's heteronormative and pervasive influence on laws, cultural practices, and religious beliefs has forced many LGBTQIA+ individuals to live in secrecy. The ever-present cloud of fear dangles the threats of having to contend with legal repercussions, social rejection, and isolation. Bound within this closed civic space, Bruneian LGBTQIA+ individuals must learn every day how to survive, or at least how to live through today (albeit secretly or quietly) to stand a chance to fight again another day – striving to be seen, heard, recognised, respected, protected, supported, and maybe even eventually celebrated for being who they are.

## ○ Fiji

Fiji is the first in the Pacific to ban discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity, and have that codified in the constitution. The 2007 Employment Relations Promulgation also protects Fijians from discrimination in employment. Despite these progressive policies and legislations protecting LGBTQIA+ peoples, members of the community still experience discrimination and witness various acts of violence inflicted on them. This unfavourable treatment extends beyond impacts directly felt by individuals, but also spills over to challenges faced in employment and accessing healthcare and opportunities, among other areas of life. What also sets Fiji apart from the three other focus countries is the existence of a traditional third-gender population referred to as *vaka sa lewa lewa*, primarily identifying as women. One would think that this opens up the

people and the society to be more accepting of LGBTQIA+ individuals, but the reality is that strong and widespread social stigma is more prevalent.

The interviewees and FGD participants identified for the Fiji report shared that even in some CSOs that have already introduced their respective gender policies, the dominant culture in the workplace for LGBTQIA+ individuals is one of self-censorship. As a result, the contributors feel safer not to be explicitly associated with LGBTQIA+-related advocacy work or for them to not be identified as sources of the information and reflections presented in the Fiji report. While everyone believes that it is important for the rest of the world to get a glimpse into the Fijian LGBTQIA+ individuals' lived realities, to have their voices resonated in the pages of the report, the 12 contributors have also agreed to remain anonymous. Cognisant of the social stigma, discrimination, harassment, and potential to be targeted and outed to their families and work colleagues, some of them have come to view self-censorship as their implicitly negotiated safe space. One contributor quipped, ***"It's not that I hide who I am, but I don't make it obvious either"***.

## ○ Malaysia

Malaysia's crackdown on the LGBTQIA+ community, backed by reports of arrest, harassment, and persecution, and the restricted civic space that makes it not just difficult but unsafe for the queer community to freely and safely identify and express their true selves, support the widely held opinion that the government has made little positive change in relation to LGBTQIA+ persons in recent years. Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim even publicly announced in 2023 that the government will never recognise the rights of LGBTQIA+ persons.

Juxtapose this country context with this profound sense of courage that jumps at you when you read through the accounts of the Malaysian contributors. They find themselves othered in a country that openly criminalises same-sex sexual acts and relations between men and between women. When discrimination and violence are the everyday staple, not just as threats to serve as deterrent for the so-called 'criminal acts of carnal knowledge against the order of nature' and 'outrages on decency,' but also as enforced policies and practices, one would expect the targeted, discriminated, harassed, abused, and criminalised people to shrink, be diminished, and be compelled into submission. Such is not the case for 11 Malaysians who participated in this study, among many others in the country who are committed to advocate for rights across intersectionalities. In varying capacities and roles served within CSOs they founded or where they are employed as staff members or entrusted with management posts, these LGBTQIA+ individuals carve their niche while also fully aware that as they do so, they open possibilities for others in the

community to step out, step up, step loud and proud to lend themselves to meaningful causes needing their individual and collective voices.

## ○ Singapore

Where the Bruneian contributors emphasise the importance of valuing LGBTQIA+ persons beyond just focusing on their identities, six of the 11 Singaporean participants recognise the agency that their identities contribute, and these helped shape what began for them as interest and later developed into a commitment toward their respective advocacies. These contributors also intentionally choose to be visible through the media – clearly advocating for intersectional minority rights and voicing their support for initiatives directed at securing recognition and protection for the LGBTQIA+ community.

Visibility as a strategy has proven to be effective in Singapore, with the conscious effort to draw attention to the discrimination faced by marginalised groups. This includes queer individuals, but also others who are minoritised like migrants or those incarcerated. In drawing attention to the oppressed, the intention is also to encourage both community members and allies to never tire of articulating and advocating for their rights.

A contributor to this study is, in fact, credited for filing one in a series of legal challenges against the controversial Section 377A (s377A), which criminalises same-sex sexual relations between men. Though these court cases were dismissed on the grounds that any repeal of the law should be decided by Parliament and not through the proceedings of a legal dispute, the law was eventually repealed in late 2022. Singapore is currently in the midst of negotiating a new Workplace Fairness Legislation (WFL) designed to hold employers accountable in not discriminating against employees based on protected characteristics. Under this proposed legislation, merit-based decisions should prevail over conscious or unconscious biases founded on personal characteristics – such as age, gender, marital status, race, religion, etc. – that are irrelevant to job performance. Unfortunately, the proposed WFL excludes protections against discrimination based on SOGIESC even as a 2024 study revealed that LGBTQIA+ individuals experience some form of harassment and discrimination in the workplace.

Singapore is the outlier, of sorts, in this study and not entirely due to the country's prevailing political-economic or socio-cultural contexts, but because the Singaporean queer activists contributing to this report resist traditional or even expected categorisation. Yes, they are queer and, by all accounts, belong to those excluded from enjoying rights and accessing services, but they are also changemakers in their own right. They feel freer with the repeal of s377A, but they continue to fear for their personal and organisational security

because the government still holds power over CSOs' operations and, sometimes, even funding, among other concerns. They are expert navigators and consider the skill as a queer asset. They speak up. They show up. They challenge legal instruments in court. They launch protests and brave prison terms because of their convictions. There is a lot these queer activists can offer in terms of experience, skill sets, and strategies, but they also recognise that there is still a lot to learn even from among their peers in the community.

Theirs are the stories and the lessons from the struggle that will not be left untold because the storytellers who live to tell the tale will choose visibility over hiding; they will be heard, not silenced; they will be the rainbow flag that signals others to brave their battles.



# Motivations for Engaging in CSO Work and Advocacy

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Despite differences in political and socio-cultural contexts in our four focus countries, the queer peoples' inclination to get involved in civic organisations is a commonly shared experience, and where it is possible to do so, others even establish their own organisations or form coalitions and collectives on intersectional issues.

Civil society operations in Brunei are under close watch of the government. Advocacy, or what is best understood as the country's own brand of permissible civic action or social service, is limited to non-contentious issues. Public advocacy or even discussions on LGBTQIA+ rights, gender identity and inclusion, sexuality and gender expression are considered taboo, offensive to the conservative culture, and opposed to the recognised and upheld social mores. This means there is no organised or publicly operating LGBTQIA+ rights group to raise awareness on queer rights and issues or to mobilise and provide support, resources, and services needed by the community. When the legal and social repercussions drive queer individuals to live in secrecy and where there are no opportunities to freely associate, assemble, or organise around these issues, both individuals and the queer community are denied public visibility and their identities, rights, security, and well-being are disregarded.

Some of the Bruneian contributors shared that they had initially intended to engage in the promotion of LGBTQIA+ rights, but Brunei's laws and culture disallow space for this. Denied the opportunity to advocate for their own rights, they were drawn to seek other avenues that allow them to **contribute to positive societal change**. The motivation is **centered around community** – feeding the need to belong, heeding that resounding call to action, and acknowledging the awakened sense of responsibility for others. Working on youth-focused initiatives, for example, offered LGBTQIA+ individuals the opportunity to still engage in issues of import like sexual harassment or assault and the critical need to find safe spaces. These are some of the same concerns that they cannot openly get involved in for themselves.

A **keen sense of empathy** was also enkindled in them – finding **commonality and affinity with others marginalised or minoritised** by society. There was a **growing desire for allyship** – to build spaces to come together and to engage in critical conversations. Those who worked on climate or environmental issues also found their passion for sustainability

open doors to network and collaborate outside of Brunei. This, in turn, broadens their perspectives and contributes to their deeper understanding of global issues. The contributors working on these issues within the limitations of what civil society looks like in Brunei consider the opportunity as empowering – enhancing their knowledge, cultivating skills, rooting them in community with like-minded people, and clarifying their purpose to find ways to support others with their needs even as society, in general, still struggles to support theirs. ***“If it is not I who will start and create the positive change I want to see in my community, then who will?”***

The Fiji report’s contributors primarily work on women’s rights, climate crises, disability rights, and the humanitarian and governance sectors, but find that intersectional approaches and interests enable them to have a broader work mandate that also includes rights-related initiatives. Similar to the Bruneian participants’ experience, Fijian queer activists consciously choose civil society work with the **desire to give back to the community** and to contribute what they can in **building a stronger sense of community solidarity**. Being part of civil society helped some participants to find their voice and to acquire new skills associated with CSO work – like grant writing and project management. ***“Being in this organisation helped me gain confidence. It gave me the level of confidence and the space I need to improve myself.”*** For the deaf participant, joining the Fiji National Council for Disabled Persons was both a matter of choice and of circumstance. On one hand, the choice affords him the opportunity to touch lives of not just persons with disabilities (PWDs), but also LGBTQIA+ people who find themselves marginalised or excluded. On the other hand, sign language is not commonly learned and understood as a form of communication in Fiji, which limits occupational options for deaf people. Other participants were drawn to CSO movements that have a long history of supporting marginalised or minoritised communities. **Active mentorship within a feminist network** serves as an effective motivator as it demonstrates the importance of sisterhood or of **consciously looking out for others** in the struggle. It is not uncommon for queer Fijians to have well-established careers or secure day jobs, and to still find time to volunteer in CSOs working toward social justice issues. Interestingly, one participant, who admitted to not being fully out yet, opted to join a non-LGBTQIA+ CSO to avoid unwanted exposure or being identified as part of the queer community. One LGBTQIA+-focused CSO was identified to solely work on queer rights and advocacy, without applying an intersectional lens to the programmatic mandate and without recognising the intersectional identities of queer people. The volunteer in this particular CSO was able to contrast the experience while working for another organisation.

The Malaysian queer participants get involved in civil society work primarily to **situate themselves within their own intersectional communities** – where they may be queer and disabled; queer, woman, and Muslim; queer and refugee; queer and invested in climate justice, among others. Driven by a **desire to raise awareness or to advocate for rights** of others just like them, some participants founded organisations to **address the dearth in leadership** around these issues. For other participants, engaging in civic space advocacies and rights-focused initiatives offered a platform for learning where one gains skills and gets informed to more effectively defend their own rights. Simply put, the approach is **to know more, to do more**. Gravitating towards CSOs and rights networks also serves as a melting pot where queer activists can come together to work collaboratively with like-minded rights defenders and allies to help and contribute fellow oppressed, minoritised, marginalised, or discriminated communities. The bottom line for the Malaysian queer activists is that civil society engagement is a consequence of more than just **having queer identities find resonance in social justice issues**; it is also about their being queer coupled with their unique skills and capacities that they can offer these minoritised communities. Some queer participants point to their own **experiences of alienation that spurred their cognisance of the systemic and institutional deficiencies** in the country. For some, being exposed to LGBTQIA+ rights groups awakened “*consciousness about politics and identity*”.

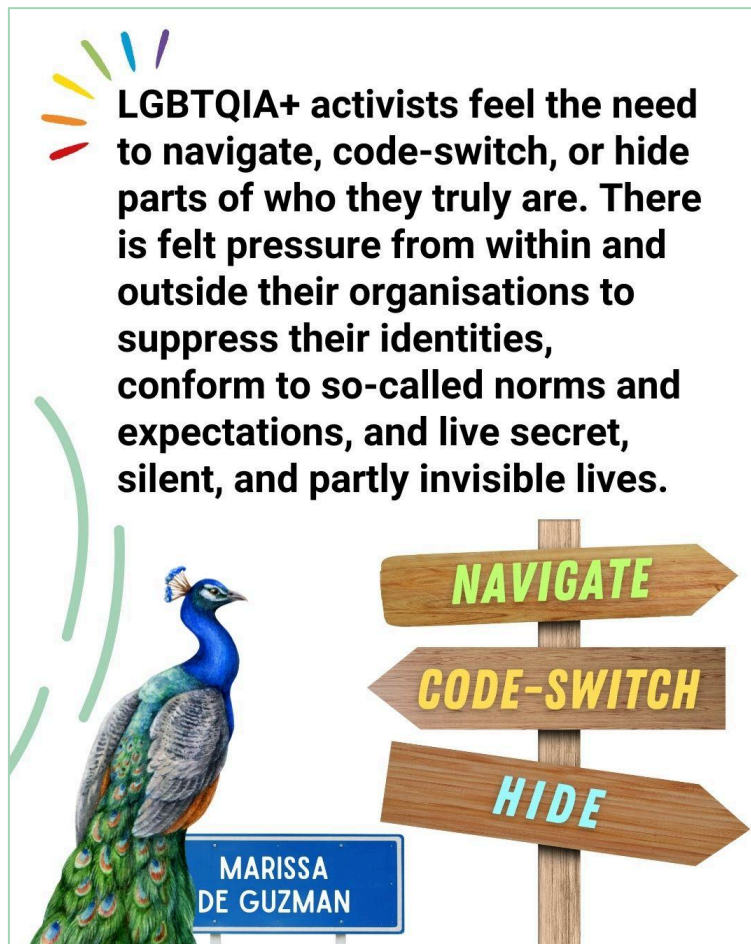
There are currently over 40 organisations and collectives working on LGBTQIA+ rights in Singapore. Many of these focus on the delivery of support services; not really engaged in direct or outright advocacy work. Some receive funding from the Singaporean government too. Queer activists in the country find their way to civil society working on a broad intersection of social justice issues, whether within mainstream organisations or collectives they themselves establish. Similar to what was shared by the Malaysian contributors, queer activists in Singapore generally want **to learn and do more both for others and their own community of queer individuals**. This was the primary motivator drawing them to CSO work, which also offered opportunities to link gender- and identity-related rights with other advocacies. Fueled by outrage over the discrimination and alienation they have personally lived through, these queer activists **developed compassion and empathy for other minorities and oppressed communities**. And because the discrimination they experienced were often associated with the intersections of their identities – queer and neurodivergent, queer and an ethnic minority, queer and woman, queer and poor, etc. – there was also a need to recognise that their knowledge, experience, capabilities, and effort are best focused on initiatives that bring together these intersectional advocacies. Being alienated, discriminated against, and not fitting in were triggers for action, such as the case of one participant whose journey towards solidarity

with other oppressed people in society was inspired by an early personal questioning.

***“Being alienated by the system is a powerful early spark for many queer HRDs.”***

In identifying with others like them – marginalised, minoritised, othered – **a natural solidarity commenced with the common pursuit of dismantling oppressive systems and practices.** Parallels with the Malaysian experience are evident in terms of queer peoples’ motivations to engage in civil society work. The urge to learn more, know more, do more, and be more steered these queer activists **to grow in knowledge, skill, and capacity.** The Singaporean contributors have primed themselves for action, where **their intention is matched by know-how**, and now also **complemented by strategies** gleaned from years of living through oppression.

# Being Queer in the Work Sphere



It is not surprising to learn from the study participants across the four focus countries that underlying acceptance of diverse identities is more common in more inclusive CSO workplaces. Where there are open and safe spaces even for difficult conversations or differing opinions, queer individuals are able to cultivate a sense of community alongside colleagues. In Brunei, participants still felt safe and supported even when sexuality, gender, or gender identity may not be openly discussed, but only tacitly accepted. There is an **implied understanding that one can focus on the work while being surrounded by allies**, who may or may not be secretly navigating their own identities. In CSOs that do not just accept and protect diversity, but also **support LGBTQIA+ staff members' advocacies outside of the workplace**, such as the case shared by a Singaporean contributor, the openness proves empowering not just for the queer individuals in the organisation, but for everyone. The impact on staff morale and overall organisational legitimacy as a

rights-respecting and rights-promoting capacity builder of social organisations is immeasurable.

**Non-hierarchical and flat structures** within organisations also work – with collaboration among equals and the creation of safe spaces to discuss difficult issues. One Singaporean contributor shared that there is a grievance mechanism, an ethics and integrity policy in place in their workplace. Malaysian queer activists feel free, safe, and empowered within CSOs that already **align organisational values with feminist perspectives and SOGIESC rights** or where queer individuals have leadership roles. **Having allies in the workplace** is encouraging and reaffirming – where participants felt secure belonging to a larger activist network.

Queer individuals, however, have to rely on their life-taught survival skills when they find themselves in organisations with no clear policies and no culture that respects diversity and equality for all. Where leadership within the organisations fails to set the tone for acceptance or where conservative values are also compounded by both policy and funding restrictions tied to towing heteronormative principles and practices, LGBTQIA+ activists feel **the need to navigate, code-switch, compartmentalise, or hide parts of who they truly are**. In such circumstances, still present today in the four focus countries, there is felt pressure from within and outside the organisations for the queer people to suppress their identities, conform to so-called norms and expectations, and live secret, silent, and partly invisible lives. Bruneian participants talk about the **constant battle between their desire for authenticity and the professional need to comply** with what society expects and demands. A Fijian participant talked about the need to navigate the workplace, and the political landscape associated with their work. Reputational risk, both for the queer individual and the organisation, is an important factor to consider when **the need to hide parts of their identity determine their ability to maintain job security**. Navigating dual identities is also common, especially when the work focuses on gender rights and the queer activist is faced with the reality of **having to hide their own identities while promoting others**. A Malaysian participant cited a tendency to feel invisible and unsupported when there is a disconnect between policy and practice within organisations, including those that pose to be queer affirming. There are also some who are uncomfortable joining queer CSOs depending on the level of their outness and the fear involved in being outed.

Some participants talk about CSO work cultures that provide a sense of security despite the absence of policies on anti-discrimination or abuse. Where no gender policies are in place and where acceptance may not be explicitly expressed but silently felt, the spaces for

safe conversations and engagement with colleagues in the workplace are quietly negotiated too. **“Don’t ask, don’t tell”** becomes the operative dynamics for some. For others, it seems that not having an explicit policy supporting LGBTQIA+ activists’ rights and identities is acceptable as long as there is also no explicit policy on discrimination or abuse based on SOGIESC.

CSOs in Fiji supposedly have internal gender policies and gender training is made available to staff. In practice, however, the policies do not result in better treatment of queer activists. Policies are not reflected in the actual practices, and neither are they enforced. Challenges in the workplace as well as in Fijian society, in general, expose queer activists to a heightened risk of burnout. **“Sometimes I feel like I’m burned out because of the work that my NGO does. It’s very revolutionary and I like being there, but sometimes, the work also gets to me.”**

Malaysian contributors talked about the compounding burden posed by having to navigate and negotiate between their identities and their work – especially where both personal and organisational risks are involved. Hiding parts of who you are may sometimes be necessary to push advocacies forward or gain support. This form of **self-censorship results in work-related stress** where the queer activist bears the cost of protecting the interests of the organisation. Navigation as a strategy drives queer activists into a **constant state of vigilance** – of always being conscious and cautious – and it may also impact queer peoples’ mental health. **“However, there seems to be a desire from queer activists that their organisations acknowledge this labour, trust them to navigate, and support them through it.”**

For the Singaporean queer activists, navigation, in and of itself, can be stressful and exhausting. But once regarded as a unique contribution to the queer activist’s tactical toolkit, especially within repressed or closed civic spaces, the navigational skill becomes an asset and an offering.

Something that uniquely came up in the Singapore report is **negotiation as a survival strategy between and among CSOs**. Tensions arise when single-issue CSOs push for policies benefiting their primary thematic focus, while possibly sidelining other civil or political rights that may impact other organisations’ advocacies. Tensions within the workplace or even between and among CSOs are not new, not even surprising. But these tensions exist, and they need to be acknowledged if we are to find a workaround that serves the best interests of all stakeholders.

# Queer Contributions to Civil Society

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The Bruneian queer participants generally see their contributions to the work they are engaged in as products of their full selves. They never regarded their queer identities as separate from every other part of who they are, and so the emphasis is to credit persons, in general, for everything they bring to the table, not just particular queer skills, assets, or characteristics. In the workplace, the queer individual's **goal is for the work to speak louder than the identity** as the full self performs and contributes.

Fijian queer peoples' gender lens offers a means to inform programme work that, in turn, ensures gender equality and inclusion in the workplace. Opportunities have opened up for the queer activists because of the unique skills they bring to the roles they serve. ***"I think one of the ways that I've been contributing is continuously reminding and educating colleagues about what the queer experience is like, and how best to communicate LGBTQIA+ issues."***

Rainbow-tinted lenses empower queer people with the all-embracing capability to view, appreciate, and respect the rights of others. In a non-binary world, there is recognition and celebration of diversity. It is freeing to operate with the mindset that the expectation is not to conform or confine to what is familiar or similar to what and who you are. The differences in identities, lived realities, backgrounds, values, interests, aspirations, etc. actually enhance the shaping of a multi-faceted approach to the multiple ways of responding to social justice issues.

Personal exposure to discrimination also arms Malaysian queer individuals with **the sensitivity to feel for others**, to foresee what they need and connect them with the support or resources needed. Empathising is easy, natural, and almost instantaneous for the queer contributors. The ability to relate to common experiences and lived realities is a convenient tool in their CSO work that involves creating safe spaces in the facilitation of discussions, especially on sensitive issues. When these lived realities get shared openly and safely, and when they are amplified to reflect on-the-ground situations, they hold the potential to inform and influence policies – both within civil society workplaces, in particular, and in societies, in general.



One fundamental contribution is worth highlighting. When queer activists feel safe and empowered to openly carry out the work or live out their passions through their advocacies, they become visible doing the good that they do. **Visibility becomes a signal** to other silenced or marginalised queer individuals and communities **to bring their full selves to work** or to wherever they need to be, **to do as they pursue**.

The Singaporean participants talked about conscious and unconscious ways queer HRDs contribute to civil society workplaces and CSO work culture. **Empathy** is the undisputed gift to offer and one that is commonly mentioned by everyone. Awareness of their personal alienation gives them the ability to empathise with other oppressed groups. Knowing that there are others like them that society and institutions have oppressed makes it easy for queer activists to look out for those in need, to spot them where they may be quietly navigating to survive, or to predict the support they need.

Being **intentional in seeking and creating coalitions on intersectional issues** and advocacies also allow the Singaporean queer activists to **make their queer spaces radically inclusive**. Creativity in communication, innovation in implementation, and finding ways around or through seemingly contentious scenarios posed by Singapore's restrictive whole-of-government (WOG) approach comprise a Singaporean activist's advocacy toolkit. Some queer activists have expertly steered paths for decades criticising policy and policymakers, where warranted, while also steering clear of landing in prison for the criticisms made. This is pure testament to **navigation as an asset**, one that has been dearly won through adversity and acquired through learning by discovery. Because of some of the Singaporean contributors' visibility and their openness to oppose discriminatory or oppressive policies, they have opened themselves up to being easily identifiable targets. The concept of being unsafe in pursuing advocacy work should also be considered as a contribution to civil society. Activists coming together and **knowingly being unsafe together** is also a means of forming bonds of solidarity. This, in turn, produces **opportunities to co-create ways to protect each other**. In building this culture of solidarity, of being fully aware of shared risks, they may be discovering another survival skill – of **not having to go through the oppression or being unsafe alone**.

# Aspirational Goals

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What seems feasible for the queer activists at this point? What is hoped for that may require more effort, time, or a confluence of various factors and actors working together?

The lived experiences and realities of the queer activists in the four focus countries reveal that **unspoken acceptance, in the end, has never been enough**. Not being openly oppressed is also not to be equated with tolerance. And any tacit, quiet, silent, assumed, or implied word or act of tolerance is not tantamount to genuine acceptance or inclusion.

**The goal for the queer community is still to be fully recognised and supported**, not just tolerated for parts of themselves that society chooses to see. Part of this support should cover legal instruments and protections, to have them reflected in policies and consistently implemented.

However, the lack of policies and formal safeguards in Brunei, both in society and within organisations, leaves queer people with the unsettling feeling of not being protected while also being left exposed to discrimination, abuse, or other forms of marginalisation without recourse to proper remedies or support. Consequently, **cautious optimism** shapes the Bruneian queer community's aspirational goals for and desired changes within their organisations and workplaces. Though formal legal reforms seem unlikely, the participants are hopeful for **small, incremental improvements** in day-to-day lives and interpersonal relationships in the workplace. Not having local concepts, strategies, or even a culture for advocacy, especially advocacy for change or policy reform, there is an acknowledgment from the queer participants about their limitations and lack of experience in advocacy work or campaigns. The challenge is that they have to look far for support on this and they have to creatively weave their way around Brunei's complex and institutionalised restrictions to receive the support they need. ***"We can only see possibilities from afar, watching how neighbouring countries handle similar advocacy."*** Allies are also seen as potential contributors to the foreseen 'small, incremental improvements' through an **intersectional and intentional approach to casual conversations**. When allies use their privilege to influence shifts in policy, practice, or work culture, voices and acts of support affirming the rights and identities of LGBTQIA+ individuals get amplified and may be replicated in other workplaces. Conversations, even in small circles and closed doors within organisations, are igniters of awareness; and awareness may eventually lead to an understanding of how diversity, equality, and inclusion in the workplace are essential for everyone, regardless of SOGIESC. For the Bruneian contributors, including the Report

Writer, ***“it is important to acknowledge that LGBTQIA+ individuals in Brunei are more than just their queer identities”***.

When asked about aspirational goals or what their current CSO workplaces need to improve to make the space better and safe for them, Fijian contributors had to contemplate whether there is anything beneficial afforded by their constitutional protections and organisational policy documents. Social stigma, discrimination, abuse, and hate crimes still hound LGBTQIA+ people in Fiji despite the laws in place because they are not enforced anyway. Two of the concrete recommendations offered by the Fijian contributors include: one, to conduct **gender sensitivity training and gender mainstreaming in the workplace**; two, to **form more collaborations** between LGBTQIA+ CSOs and others on intersectional advocacies and platforms, including engaging in sustained dialogues to move things forward and effect meaningful change.

The Malaysian contributors seek **genuine inclusion in communications and action** – where queer people are consulted in policy making and in ensuring the creation of safe spaces for such conversations. Inclusion is also seen in **seeking and welcoming less visible queer people** into safer civil society workplaces. Where existing CSOs already support diversity, gender equality, and inclusion, the challenge is to operationalise the support for queer people. These policies must have felt effects and queer activists have to actually feel safe, protected, and supported in the workplace. An openness to new practices, innovative strategies, and adding the intentional and intersectional queer lens in programme building will produce better equipped and more empathetic leaders, including empowered queer leadership. **Representation matters. Institutionalised and formalised care** is a significant ask – one that is also completely substantiated by lived realities and reported experiences of stress and anxiety brought on by layers of discrimination and abuse, including the navigation strategies employed by queer activists to survive society and their workplaces. Policies may take a while to put in place, but civil society can also begin by implementing simple steps. Include SOGIESC in safeguarding practices, introduce personal risk assessment that is separate from assessment and management of organisational risks, raise awareness on gender equality and inclusion... and then be inclusive in practice.

The Singaporean experience shows the **benefits of exploring intersectional interests and advocacies for coalition building**. It is, therefore, a continuing aspirational goal to forge more partnerships, coalitions, and collectives on social justice issues. **Acknowledging differences and disputes** between and among CSOs, or maybe even among HRDs and activists pursuing their respective advocacies, **is essential to grow**

**movements.** Discuss and debate with the intention to discover points for convergence and solidarity, while maintaining respect when you disagree and where plans or strategies may diverge. The Singaporean queer activists yearn for **transparency and accountability** in CSOs and their collectives, for **inclusion and equality reflected in non-hierarchical organisational structures and safe spaces.** Support services should include risk management and the provision of resources and services that cover mental health and well-being. The leadership within CSOs should also articulate organisational values and principles and have these reflected in policies that are clearly communicated and implemented.

# Reflections

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Each of the four country reports is different in terms of the information presented on cultural or political contexts; policies and practices within civil society workplaces and society, and their impacts on the lives of queer activists; lived realities within their CSO work spheres; and the queer communities' aspirational goals based on what seems feasible in their respective contexts.

There is a broad range of what queer activists wish their civil society employers will improve, offer, or contribute to achieve genuine acceptance, recognition of identities and rights in the workplace, and overall security and well-being.

The four country reports show how queer activists' motivations for getting involved in civil society work or engaging in social justice issues are rooted in similar experiences of and exposure to discrimination and alienation. Identifying with the oppressed and marginalised communities often championed by CSOs is driven by the realisation of affinity, then compassion and empathy for having to live through similar systemic and oppressive abuses, and finally, a bond of solidarity towards a shared goal of dismantling these unjust structures and institutions.

Another common thread is the sad reality that LGBTQIA+ individuals still experience discrimination, harassment, or abuse whether anti-discrimination laws in countries are in place or not and whether they fear exposing their true identities or feel safe bringing their full selves to work. They are burdened (because it is an extra ask of them) and sometimes expected to live through these violations of their rights, mostly in silence, by creatively coming up with or weaving context-effective coping mechanisms, such as navigation, negotiation, and code-switching, among others.

The overall lack of protection – whether through legal instruments, organisational policies, or lived and everyday practices at home, in the workplace, and in society – is abominable. Even where queer activists have carved their niche, where they thrive in supportive environments and communities of allies, or where they have accepted their skill in navigation as an asset and offering, the compounded stress from having to live through injustices and discrimination impinge on their general health, security, and well-being.

Ultimately, there is a significantly high price to pay for being queer. The impacts of institutionalised discrimination on the queer community proves too costly. Often, the actual cost is not immediately apparent too. And this does not even take into consideration the often-incalculable cost of losses – lost opportunities, time, resources, relationships, peace, rights, and freedoms.

Fortunately, the 47 queer voices echoed in these four country reports do not just speak of the struggles, but their chorus reverberates a clarion call for the queer community to serve as beacons of light... and for the rest to find and be their own light.

To the queer activists in repressed or closed civic spaces that are intent on dimming the light, the ones whose silence ring loud; to the ones who bring themselves to work – parts of who they are, their true selves, their selves as allies, and the ones who bring their full selves to be seen and recognised; the ones who navigate by conscious choice, who constantly negotiate to harmonise their identities with what is expected of them in the workplace; the ones who stepped up to fill the dearth in leadership roles, who spoke out to support the even more oppressed; to all whose light lights up for others, the ones whose lights shine bright, shimmer, twinkle, glimmer, glow, illuminate, or flicker – let not that light be snuffed out.

# About the Synthesis Writer

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**MARISSA DE GUZMAN** is a Programme Specialist at Innovation for Change — East Asia. She has committed over 20 years in the pursuit of academic training and the honing of professional experience that places human rights and development work at the centre of her vocational purpose. Through both programme management and communications-related roles within civil society organisations in Hong Kong, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and the USA, Marissa has taken on research and advocacy work on civic space, land rights, ASEAN regional integration, migrants' rights, anti-trafficking initiatives, nonviolent conflict resolution, and the political economy of development.