



# SHIMMERING

LIGHTS IN SHADOWS

QUEER ACTIVISTS IN  
NON-QUEER SPACES



~ MALAYSIA REPORT ~

Project by



Supported by



## THE UNWAVERING RAINBOW WARRIORS OF MALAYSIA

PANG KHEE TEIK

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# THE UNWAVERING RAINBOW WARRIORS OF MALAYSIA

Pang Khee Teik

## Introduction

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### o Country Contexts

When the dust settled on the 2022 Malaysian General Elections, it would appear that the man who served prison time twice for the crime of sodomy has finally become [prime minister](#) of Malaysia. Anwar Ibrahim, fired by former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad in 1989, thwarted multiple times from his bid for premiership, was able to form a [unity government](#) led by his own multi-ethnic coalition Pakatan Harapan.

It is unsurprising that Anwar would have thoughts about the anti-sodomy laws, also known as Sections [377A](#) and [377B](#) of the Malaysian penal code. During interviews he gave after his pardon in 2018, Anwar suggested that the anti-sodomy laws with which he was charged should be struck down. His justification was that they were “archaic” and “[unjust](#)” as they could be used to target innocent people like himself. However, this was not mentioned again during the 2022 elections. In fact, [Centre for Independent Journalism](#) noted that during the elections, there was a particular escalation of online rhetoric against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, non-binary plus (LGBTQIAN+) people: “Hate speech against the LGBTIQ community was, by contrast, clearly a political tool, often coupled with terms such as “liberal” and “anti-Islam”, and used largely to discredit Pakatan Harapan (PH), the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Anwar Ibrahim.” Anwar’s response to this was to assert his government would [never recognise](#) LGBT people.

Consequently, since Anwar took power, LGBTQIAN+ people continued to be targeted by agents and institutions of his purportedly more democratic government. Drag queen events have been [raided](#)

or cancelled, trans women are regularly harassed and [arrested](#), [rainbow watches](#) and a [book](#) have been banned. Meanwhile, federal and state departments are [setting](#) up rehabilitation centres for people of diverse sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sexual characteristics (SOGIESC), with [programmes](#) promoting queer [conversion practices](#) endorsed by the Ministry of Health.

These state-sanctioned acts are supported and enabled by many [legislations and policies](#) targeting people of diverse SOGIESC. Not only has Malaysia retained colonial era laws on sodomy and sedition, but it has also introduced [anti-LGBTQIAN+ Shariah enactments](#) across all 14 states and federal territory. The country's anti-LGBTQIA+ stances are also [driven](#) by anti-colonial, anti-West, pro-Asian, and pro-Islamic sentiments, which are also deployed to curb the freedoms of other marginalised groups and dissenters.

What these bans and raids reveal, however, is that LGBTQIAN+ folks in Malaysia continue to exist, resist, and organise. Despite, and perhaps due to, these suppressive forces, LGBTQIAN+ activists have kept at it for [decades](#). In the 80s and 90s, trans women and gay men started organising themselves in response to the HIV/AIDS crisis, particularly through [PT Foundation](#) (originally known as Pink Triangle). Even if their advocacy was limited within the “right to health” framework, they were successful in consolidating different queer communities across the country. Queer writers and artists also found that they could use artistic spaces to tell stories of queer lives and hopes, but had to frame them creatively and subtly. Women's rights groups started expanding discourse on gender and sexual identities, creating inclusive spaces where queer people can advocate for their rights through a gender lens. These movements taught the queer community how to navigate and create safe spaces within hostile terrains.

In the new millennium, artists, HIV groups, feminist activists, and other human rights organisations came together to push boundaries and foster different spaces for queer expressions: sexuality rights festival Seksualiti Merdeka, queer-themed books, drag performances, poetry and spoken word platforms, as well as online spaces and communities. Even if some of these were banned, these spaces brought young people and queer folks together to organise the next generation of queer movements. Some of these people have gone on to create organisations doing critical work to promote SOGIESC rights through strategic litigation, United Nations processes, and community support.

These SOGIESC rights organisations continue to establish their presence in civil society, just as LGBTQIAN+ folks have been part of democratic movements for decades in Malaysia. They were there in the street demonstrations for free and fair elections by [BERSIH](#) as well as women's rights and labour day marches. They were part of various coalitional efforts to expose [human rights abuses](#) and massive [corruption scandals](#). In fact, it can be said that the change of government was made possible by reforms forged by these civil society movements composed of diverse Malaysians. Among them are LGBTQIAN+ activists who saw their fates tied to the dream of

democracy in Malaysia and answered the calling to be a part of civil society, even if they knew it is unlikely that their rights will be recognised any time soon.

This report maps these rainbow warriors working in Malaysian civil society but outside of SOGIESC rights, aiming to understand why they are where they are, how they contribute there, how they navigate, and how they can be better protected.

## ○ Methodology

For the purposes of this report, six persons were interviewed while five were invited to be part of a focus group discussion (FGD). They were selected to ensure a diversity of various factors, including gender identity, sexual orientation, level of outness, age, thematic area, and position in their organisation. The selection tried to avoid those working in HIV organisations, due to its proximity with SOGIESC rights. It does, however, include a trans woman working in one such organisation because her work involves supporting stateless and undocumented people.

## ○ Overview Of The Report's Participants

A total of 11 queer activists residing in Malaysia and actively contributing to civil society were selected for this report. The advocacy thematic areas they represent can be divided into minority rights, which are identity based (Deaf advocacy, children's rights, women's rights / feminism, refugee rights, youth), as well as cross-cutting issues (statelessness / citizenship, climate justice / environmentalism, rural communities, freedom of beliefs, freedom of expression, democracy). Four of them founded their own organisations. Among those who are hired or engaged by others, two are in management or leadership roles, and the rest are employed as officers, staff, or volunteers.

The participants come from different parts of the rainbow. There are five cisgender men, three cisgender women, two non-binary persons (one of whom is transmasculine), and one trans woman. Among them, five identify as gay, one as bisexual, one as lesbian, one as pansexual, and the rest as queer.

Seven of them are Muslim, including one who is Indian Muslim. Two of them are from indigenous communities from East Malaysia, and two are ethnic Chinese. One is a refugee from a country where being LGBTQIAN+ is similarly criminalised.

The three who chose to use their real names in this report are Megan Stevens, who supports stateless people in the course of her work with an HIV/AIDS organization; Anthony Chong, who runs his own Deaf advocacy organisation, and Kaiser, who runs a queer space while volunteering at a child rights organisation. The rest will be using pseudonyms. However, it must be noted that their desire to be anonymous does not indicate that they are not out among peers in civil society.

## ○ Terminologies

This section aims to clarify the usage of terms and their variations within this report.

- **SOGIESC:** This is an abbreviation for sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sexual characteristics. Unlike LGBTQIAN+, which refers to identities, SOGIESC refers to the broad categories under which all these identities are subsumed. Therefore, for this report, SOGIESC rights will be used instead of LGBT rights. In other words, it will refer to the rights of people to their sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sexual characteristics.
- **LGBTQIAN+:** This abbreviation for folks who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, non-binary, and others, is the report's preferred usage when referring to identities or the queer communities at large.
- **LGBT:** This abbreviation for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender is sometimes used in quotations when participants refer to it, or in reference to historical groupings that precedes the usage of the LGBTQIAN+ term.
- **Queer:** Queer is used sometimes interchangeably with LGBTQIAN+, but particularly when participants refer to themselves as queer, or where a specific identity has not been specified.

## Motivations

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In order to appreciate Malaysian queer activists' motivations for joining their current fields, this report also explores the journeys they might have taken to get there. Hence, this report asks them, "What led you to your current field of work?" as well as "Did you consider joining a SOGIESC rights organisation?" Their answers follow a few different trajectories. While many of them identify with multiple marginalised identities, some of them ended up with the community where they felt they were needed. A few discovered their sexuality while growing up in environments that alienated them, pushing them to seek out alternative knowledge and political ideas, and eventually their own communities. Meeting other queer activists and feminist allies were important moments in their journeys that solidified their activism.

### ○ Supporting their own intersectional communities

Firstly, some queer activists want to look out for or work with queer communities in thematic areas where queer people might be neglected. Yusri, in particular, was interested in how queer folks were impacted by climate change. When he was younger, Yusri volunteered at primate rehabilitation centres and even joined a climate protest. But it was during the time he volunteered to help victims of the 2021 Kuala Lumpur floods that Yusri realised "LGBTQ persons were left behind when it comes to flood assistance and relief." This led him to conversations with others, including queer people, interested in the same issues. "I got to this point because of my passion in volunteerism, but also through meeting other people, and them educating me, and then deciding for myself that I can't do this alone, and then proceeding to join different NGOs, and then start my youth-led organisation."

Meanwhile, for many of the Malaysian queer activists, their primary motivation is to support communities they identified with. Both Sue and Wani got involved in women's rights to learn what they could do about the religious laws that affect them. Wani says, "I wanted to know how you can counter religious arguments, or how you can build a response to them."

Anthony Chong, with the help of a BIM (Malaysian Sign Language) interpreter, shares that he was practically forced into his role as a leader of the Deaf community, due to the lack of Deaf leaders in Malaysia with qualifications similar to his. While studying at [Gallaudet University](#), an American tertiary institution for the Deaf and hard of hearing, he saw what was lacking in Malaysia. Upon his return, he decided to become a Deaf advocate working with and supporting the Deaf community to develop members' awareness of their own rights.

Queer refugees in Malaysia have no one to turn to as "they cannot go to their communities," says Jo. Initially, Jo wants to support refugee youths by working with other young refugees. But queer refugees started coming to them for support. Being queer, Jo was able to predict the needs of queer refugees, and connect them with the support they need, whether it is mental health support,

HIV treatment, or supportive communities. When colleagues disagree with Jo's stance of helping queer refugees, they simply ask their colleagues not to attend any meeting that discusses SOGIESC issues. "Sometimes I inform them, when I'm talking about this issue, just leave me alone, just close your ears." When Jo gets criticised by others for this, they defend it by saying that they are assisting all refugees, regardless of their SOGIESC.

### ○ Helping another community

For others, it was the ability to help another community that inspired them. Josibotu, who builds the capacities of rural communities, says, "I find joy in talking with them and listening to their struggle and watching them become agents of change for their own environment." As a result of her work, these communities were able to simultaneously protect their own environments and utilise their natural resources creatively and sustainably for their livelihoods.

Megan, who formerly worked at an HIV/AIDS service centre, found herself moved to help a community whose access to rights were worse than hers. The stateless in Sabah have no access to HIV treatment without proof of citizenship. Stateless persons could not even risk complaining: "If you speak up, you will be detained, or arrested, or deported." Megan found herself in the right place to speak up for them, to help them obtain their citizenship, and in that process, their access to healthcare, education, and justice.

### ○ Political education in youth driving curiosity

A few of the participants cited how education, university, and knowledge acquired outside of school, played a role in developing their curiosity about politics and activism. Z grew up in a family that is politicised. But he only received "one version of politics" until he went to secondary school. "So, I started to learn about human rights, progressive democracy, and LGBTQIA+ rights, all the progressive issues in Kuala Lumpur. From having a conservative mindset or narrow worldview about politics, I started having a more inclusive view and being passionate about democracy." Arol studied public policy at university, which led him to intern at a political party upon graduation, and subsequently at an education NGO.

Meanwhile, Kaiser recalled an unexpected moment of encouragement in school. One instance had them standing up to a teacher who was bullying a child with autism, and then the teacher attempted to have Kaiser expelled. However, during the conversation with the school counsellor, Kaiser was asked instead, "Did you think of pursuing law?" They eventually did.

Some received their political education through exposure to non-governmental organisations (NGO). Women's rights organisations, particularly those that are founded on progressive, feminist values, were important milestones for many young Malaysians who found they could not fit within the mainstream narratives. One particular organisation was mentioned by almost half of the



participants. When Z and Rahmat witnessed the demonisation of this organisation, it led them to “*nak tahu lagi, who are they?*” (“want to know more about who they are”). Arol attended a workshop by this organisation and was surprised to find the organisation to be very accepting and accommodating towards them as a non-binary person, leading them to opening up more.

Meanwhile, Rahmat recalled joining activities organised by NGOs. When he visited churches and religious communities not sanctioned by the state, his university administration and lecturers questioned him. “It was such a traumatising experience,” he said.

## ○ Experiences with LGBTQIA+ rights groups

Several of the queer activists cited the writer of this report as responsible for inviting them to collaborate in SOGIESC spaces such as Seksualiti Merdeka, which he also co-founded. Seksualiti Merdeka was a sexuality rights festival in Kuala Lumpur, taking place annually from 2008 until 2011, when it was banned by the police. This invitation to collaborate represented their earlier forays towards including sexuality in their advocacy. For Z, he remembers learning of Seksualiti Merdeka as early as 2008, while he was at school. Coupled with his own awakening awareness of his attraction towards the same sex, knowledge about the festival triggered his “consciousness about politics and identity”.

Meanwhile, some have dreams of working full time with a SOGIESC rights organisation but are unable to, due to fear of exposure. Z has been an active member of a SOGIESC organisation focused on queer men. At the moment, however, he is unable to be open about his involvement: “I’m discreet about my identity. I don’t feel brave enough or empowered enough to come out to my family.” Meanwhile, he continues to volunteer at a SOGIESC organisation while working at an organisation promoting democracy.

## ○ Is queer identity a driver for social justice?

For some participants, being queer made them realise that they wanted to work with other queer people or another marginalised community. However, for those whose queerness conflicted with their family, school, or workplace, the impact takes them in different directions. A few seem to gravitate towards movements where they could still follow their passions without focusing on their identities, while others seem driven to find safer spaces for themselves and their communities.

## Queer Contributions

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The previous section demonstrated that having the right tools to build their own communities is a motivation for queer activists. Sue used her legal background for the faith-based organisation; Anthony used his tertiary education in the USA to support the Deaf community; and Yusri used his connections to recruit more queer people into climate justice. These queer activists found themselves with the right knowledge and skills for these roles and stepped up to the plate.

This section follows up with the question: “How does being queer contribute to your work or organisational goals?” The aim of this question is to understand from the perspective of queer activists what they bring to the civil society table.

When you ask what queer people bring to the table, they bring the table, the tablecloth, and the playlist. Denied of spaces, queer activists learned how to make new spaces wherever they are. They are ready to host anytime, anywhere.

## ○ Being Queer Comes with a Rainbow of Lenses

On the surface, it appears that being marginalised enables the marginalised to empathise with others similarly marginalised. Deaf advocate Anthony agrees: “Straight people are more ignorant, but a queer person’s heart might empathise better with the Deaf community.” Sue, however, believes that one does not need to be queer to empathise with others. Her human rights and feminist lens make her aware of the marginalisation of others.

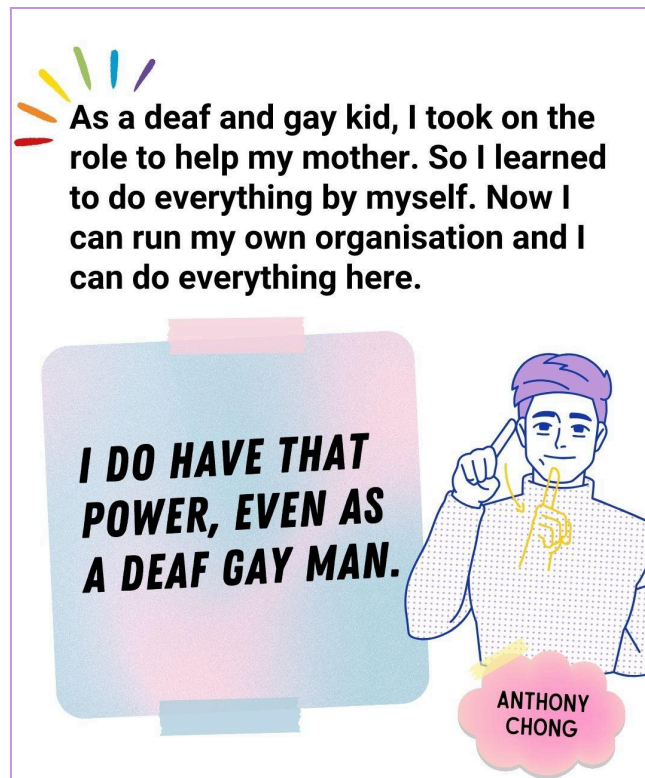
Many queer activists have in their arsenal a case of lenses with which to see through the barriers of the world. Diversity and inclusion lens, gender lens, and transformative lens: these [lenses](#) highlight the way systems and structures are marginalising queer people, and by extension, all others. Besides aiding in understanding historical prejudices, these high powered lenses also help propose the paths ahead.

Having the diversity and inclusion lens helps Josibotu to look for ways to meaningfully include the marginalised. “It’s a non-binary world,” she says, “and people have different identities, like background, upbringing, ethnicity, economics, background, sexuality. All these shape how they respond to environmental injustices, environmental degradation, and the climate change crisis.” A case in point: When doing consultation with rural communities, she notices that women, youth, and the elderly tend to sit at the back. For her, the solution is not simply to invite them to speak more in the public forum: “Maybe they are not comfortable to discuss it openly with others, but we can conduct FGD or one-on-one interviews with them.”

Wani was able to convince her clients to include a [gender lens](#) focusing on queer people in a study she was commissioned to do. When her clients were apprehensive, due to concerns about the government’s reaction, she told them, “Look, I am going to give it to you. Whether or not you choose to redact it, that’s on you. You can choose what is politically strategic for you as an international development leader. But I will provide it to you. That’s our added value as a feminist consultancy.” In the end, her client published the study just as she submitted it, with a SOGIESC-focused gender lens integrated in the recommendations. “So, as a queer person, I am able to do that, and that is how it influences my work — it provides intersectionality.”

Kaiser believes that queer people do not have systems that work for them. This led them to ask: “How do you create a transformative, independent system that works? Because many rely on the system, when there are a lot of existing gaps. So that transformative lens helps with queering the system in different organisations and policies.” Thinking transformatively led them to consider the leadership needed to rebuild traumatised communities. “The LGBT community at large is traumatised, which means a lot of their responses are also trauma-driven. How do you build community in that kind of state? Thinking about that led me to think about the kind of leadership needed in civil society.”

## ○ Being Queer Means Learning to do Everything



Growing up with rejection, bullying, or [violence](#), many queer people realised early on in life not to trust those around them. Social alienation has been a teacher to queer people, who had to learn to be more self-reliant. This is why the queer activists here are masters of all trade and can single-handedly coordinate campaigns, design posters, build communities, facilitate forums, and still have time to plan a party.

Anthony signs, “As a deaf and gay kid, I took on the role to help my mother. So, I learned to do everything by myself. And now I can run my own organisation and I can do everything here. I do have that power even as a deaf and gay man.” Learning to do everything taught him to be so independent and capable that he does everything for the Deaf community. He admits that this strains his energy.

## ○ Being Openly Queer = Positive Role Model

Being in the closet, however, can provide opportunities as well. Sometimes, queer activists may find themselves in rooms where harmful anti-LGBTQIAN+ narratives are being created and could, therefore, challenge them.

While being openly queer in Malaysia has great personal costs, some activists risk it for the sake of bigger outcomes. For Wani, being openly queer enables her to mobilise support from other queer people when she fights for workplace inclusion. Similarly, Yusri and Rahmat say that being queer enables them to recruit other queer persons into their field. They want to be intentional about intersectionality, ensuring that queer people who are interested in these fields have a platform for

them to volunteer. “It’s more interesting and fun talking to queer people about climate change,” Yusri says, especially when they can use pop culture references to make environmental campaigns more accessible.

For Megan, being visible allows people to see the good things that queer people are doing for the wider community. She hopes this helps to eliminate discrimination and stigma. Being from the Dusun Indigenous community, Megan hopes to embody Huminodun, a mythical figure who, according to their creation stories, sacrificed herself in a season of drought for the earth to become fertile. Seeing herself as a representation of her culture, Megan says, “I embody the spirit of Huminodun. Huminodun is a spiritual woman who sacrificed herself for the people. Not that I am sacrificing myself, but in a way, I am contributing to my society.”

Once, she was invited by her former organisation to talk about being trans to the Indigenous community. While she initially felt unsafe, she had to remind herself: “If I don’t overcome that, if I don’t show who I am to these people, they won’t understand what I’m going through. I want to do it because I want to be visible.”

But most queer activists in Malaysia operate somewhere in between being fully in the closet and fully out. While ensuring safer spaces for all, they often have to do it without compromising their own safety too.

Arol was bullied in university when they befriended a trans woman. As a result, they look out for queer people and bully victims in spaces where they are facilitating. When they see someone being teased for being different, they will let the students know that it is okay to be different by using “a friend” as an example: “I bring up my own lived experiences when I facilitate, but, of course, I don’t disclose that it’s about me. I just say that I know a friend who’s like this, and that leads people to share their own stories. At least they know that this is a space where we are accepting of other views and aspects of their identity.”

Beyond facilitating safe spaces, however, Arol wishes to participate in policy recommendations. They had been unable to do so at previous workplaces where they did not feel safe to be out. Though they are now with an organisation that is supportive, they still feel the need to hide who they are when they go out to meet government representatives. “I look forward to the day when I don’t have to hide parts of my identity,” Arol says, “I want to be able to talk about my experiences as a pansexual, non-binary person, especially with government stakeholders. These policies, then, wouldn’t just be recommendations from international best practices; they would be based on our own lived experiences.”



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AROL

## Work Situation

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Having heard how Malaysian queer activists contribute to civil society, or wish they could contribute, the participants were also asked: “How freely and fully are you able to contribute the way you wish to? How safe, comfortable, and empowered are you to express all your ideas or identities at work?”

As a few of them run their own organisations, they determine how safe they want them to be. A few work in organisations with feminist values. While none of their present workplaces seem actively hostile or overtly discriminating, they do not feel entirely supported either. Queer activists find themselves worrying that their identity could potentially jeopardise their organisation’s goals, which leads to constant navigation and anxiety.

### ○ Positions of Power

Being in a position of power has allowed queer people to use their power for good. When Anthony noticed more educated members of the Deaf community bullying others, he was able to tell them to stop. When Megan noticed there were gaps in her previous organisation’s policies, she initiated conversations in her capacity as the Vice President to ensure that People Living With HIV and SOGIESC diverse people have safe spaces in her organisation.

Even when they are not in charge, queer activists feel protected to a degree in organisations founded on feminist values. Sue felt safe and empowered because the founding members of her women’s rights organisation “were already very progressive in their thinking” — their feminist values align with SOGIESC human rights.

However, a feminist or queer-affirming organisation is not necessarily free of blind spots. Kaiser previously worked with an international organisation which was Global North-led in leadership and management. “Their idea of queerness, queer safety, and queer identity drastically differs from that of Southeast Asia,” meaning they could not anticipate issues experienced by queer people in this region. Furthermore, Kaiser, who identifies as trans-masculine and non-binary, also felt “trans invisibilisation and non-binary invisibilisation in queer organisations, particularly to trans masculine voices in decision-making spaces.”

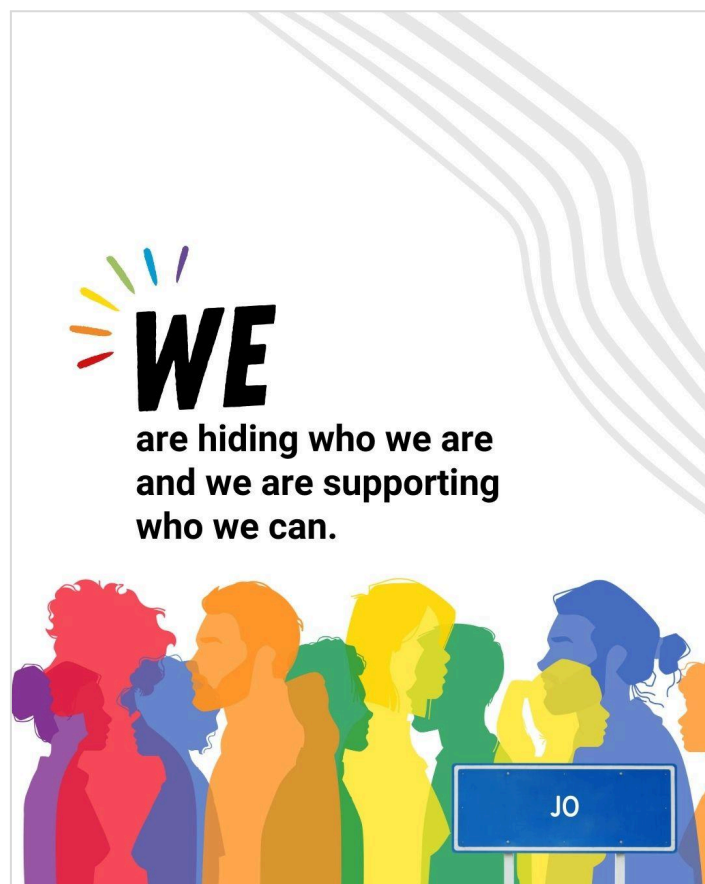
### ○ Network of Queers and Allies

Beyond organisations, networks of allies are an important source of affirmation as well. Through their current role, Arol found a community in their friendship with younger people from other organisations. “Ever since joining civil society, I feel I’m learning to accept all parts of my own identity.”

Meanwhile, Megan said that thanks to her engagement with SOGIESC organisations, she has increased her knowledge on human rights and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This, in turn, enables her to support other organisations in need of such knowledge. Here, SOGIESC organisations play a role in supporting queer activists in other organisations, thereby fostering a collaborative and mutually supportive environment in civil society.

Being part of a supportive network also provides a safety net when one faces rejection elsewhere. Yusri recounted how someone discovered his queer advocacy on social media and thereafter dis-invited him from giving a [TED talk](#). After he posted about this incident, a private university reached out to offer him a platform to give the same talk. Another time, a senior at university who was active in climate change called him homophobic slurs on social media. While his university did not provide any redress, the climate change group that Yusri was part of removed the bully from the group.

Sadly, there seems to be no nets for queer refugees. According to Jo, many local NGOs do not include refugees in their services, many local refugee groups don't know how to support queer people, and many local SOGIESC groups seem to prioritise Malaysians. They wish for better support from other NGOs in Malaysia. Meanwhile, they remain in the closet while they help others. "We are hiding who we are and we are supporting who we can," they say.





## ○ Playing Games

Many of these human rights organisations say they uphold all human rights and are inclusive. But to navigate the Malaysian civic space, they mostly avoid addressing SOGIESC rights openly. As a result, many human rights organisations can only be tacitly accepting of queer people with an unwritten “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy. As these organisations don’t address SOGIESC issues, queer activists working with them do not always feel secure to be fully who they are. Z says, “I’m empowered enough to express my ideas, especially on human rights and queer rights in general, because some of the team members are really human rights defenders. But I’m still not comfortable expressing my personal identity because we are part of a big coalition. Half of them may not be comfortable with LGBT issues.” Z could only ever defend queer rights as an ally, never as a gay man.

It is equally challenging when he goes out to meet other stakeholders. Z gauges his strategy depending on the politicians’ political leanings. With those who are conservative, he finds he has to frame SOGIESC rights within broader human rights or basic voters’ rights, but never SOGIESC rights directly. He says that ultimately, the goal is “to have a better community and society, and a better life for all in general, including myself.” But to defend his rights, he first has to censor himself; it is like “playing games.”

A number of the Malaysian queer activists also mention the anxiety of having to meet government or conservative politicians. Wani says: “You can’t advocate for LGBT rights to the government as a queer person yourself because then you’ll be discredited for anything you say.” Case in point: A ministry rescinded its support of Wani’s organisation after she tweeted in support of LGBTQIAN+ people. In Malaysia, even small acts of allyship have great costs. Consequently, queer communities will find themselves isolated and without allies who dare to speak out.

Meanwhile, Josibotu says she does not actively hide who she is, but does not feel safe to be out at work. She worries that the rural communities she works with might no longer want to participate in her organisation’s programme. Even though she has been with her organisation a lifetime, she is uncertain if her organisation will back her in the event that she gets outed.

Whether or not the queer activists are supported within their organisations, many felt that outside, when they have to engage with stakeholders, they are on their own. They have to bear the burden of their own risks and their organisations’ risks. When juggling these two risks, they would inevitably prioritise their organisations’ goals over their own.

When organisations navigate without including their queer activists, the queer activists are left to navigate on their own. Almost all our interviewees express the need to find a balance between their identities and their organisation’s work, forcing them to constantly navigate.

“Sometimes, I think that our organisations think we’re stupid,” says Wani, “They think we cannot distinguish between policies and strategies. If our organisations think that it is not strategic to publicly say they are pro-LGBT, we understand. What’s important is that their values and principles are LGBT-inclusive — and we can demonstrate that in different ways. We know the difference between policy, strategy, and values, right? We know because we negotiate this all our lives in every setting.”



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***WHAT'S IMPORTANT IS THAT THEIR VALUES AND PRINCIPLES ARE LGBT-INCLUSIVE***

**— and they can demonstrate that in different ways. We know the difference between policy, strategy, and values, right? We know because we negotiate this all our lives in every setting.**

WANI

# Recommendations

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Finally, the Malaysian queer activists were asked, “What are the improvements you desire in principle, policy, or practice in your organisation? In civil society?” Below are some of their recommendations for Malaysia’s civil society.

## ○ Consult queer people in policymaking

- ★ Engage all members of the organisation and ensure safe spaces for such engagements
- ★ Avoid tokenism: do not expect one queer person to represent all
- ★ Resourcing queer people and training them on developing policies

## ○ Go beyond tacit acceptance – make it safe for queer activists to work

- ★ Institutionalise and formalise care and safeguarding policies
- ★ Include SOGIESC as part of environmental and social safeguarding of a project
- ★ Include risk analysis at the individual level, not just at the project or organisational level
- ★ Raise awareness of target constituencies on gender equality and inclusion in order to make engagement safe for queer activists
- ★ Engage with other CSOs to ensure safe spaces for such conversations through civil society and beyond urban centres

“Organisations should conduct more comprehensive security training with a gender lens. The training should cover all, not just Muslims, though they are faced with double-discrimination. It should also cover conversations such as ‘Do you want to be acknowledged as a queer person?’ and ‘What are the considerations as you represent yourself or your organisation?’” — Rahmat

## ○ Enable intersectional queer leadership

- ★ Enable and acknowledge queer leadership on developing new practices and policies
- ★ Ensure more women, trans women, and trans masculine persons, are in leadership
- ★ Create access and outreach to less visible queer people, such as those in rural places, to provide opportunities for them to be part of the movement.

# Reflections

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This report concludes that queer activists are indeed active defenders of civic space. However, civil society still has inclusivity blind spots that need collective action. As queer activists have vulnerabilities that they often have to bear alone, organisations can learn to acknowledge them and be more supportive.

## Can values be the pathway to policies?

There is a lack of clarity of what protective policies exist in the organisations represented in this report. If an anti-discrimination policy exists but is not effectively communicated, then it remains ineffective in protecting those who have experienced discrimination.

Despite the lack of policies, some participants suggest they feel safe and empowered enough to share their ideas or be themselves. The factors might include that the founders or leaders are queer themselves, or a belief that the organisation is founded on values that they can fall back on. However, as was pointed out, a queer-run organisation is not a guarantee that all queer people are equally protected. Some queer identities remain under-represented or invisibilised. Can feminist and human rights values form the necessary foundations to build inclusive policies?

## Are queer people always navigating – and are they expected to do so silently?

Queer activists mention a need to constantly assess risk and navigate the tricky political terrain of working in Malaysia. As one participant puts it, this has been the reality for queer people “all our lives”, constantly assessing safety, learning how to read people’s reactions and faces for signs of acceptance or hostility, even within their own families. As adults working in civil society, queer activists continue this navigation in daily professional engagements – code-switching, adapting strategies on the fly, choosing the right frames through which to fit the goals. 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.

## Is tacit acceptance enough?

Queer scholar Carlos Decena who studied Dominican gay men in New York for his research refers to them as [tacit subjects](#). These gay men may be living in New York, but they are still part of conservative families and communities. To survive, they have inhabited a space within which they are understood to be gay without them ever coming out. This allows them space to be who they are, within limits. Tacit subjectivity is an act of collaboration between the subject and those around him and is not necessarily a negative experience.

Queer activists operate similarly within organisations that go by a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy. By remaining tacit subjects, acceptance of them must be tacit too. Is this dependence on unspoken understanding sustainable? Without a policy or open acceptance, when push comes to shove, will the queer person be thrown under the bus?

By no means do these questions imply that organisations should go around asking and queer activists should start telling. Sometimes the choice to be in this state of ambivalence feels safer for queer people because it is something they have learned to navigate, and there are worse outcomes they cannot afford to risk.

### **Do queer activists bear the risks of their organisations on their shoulders?**

For many queer activists working in Malaysian civil society, being out (or outed) proves too big a risk. Both the individual and the organisation stand to lose. The organisation could lose critical engagement with government stakeholders as well as lose funding, sustainability, connection, and support. Meanwhile, the individual could be bullied, be excluded from the programme, have their safety threatened, lose their jobs, get ostracised by families and community, and have their entire life’s worth of work discredited. Yet in this equation, the queer activists are often inordinately more concerned about their organisations’ risks than their organisation seemed to be concerned about them in return. In other words, queer activists often bear the burden of BOTH the risks of their organisation and their own, but will inevitably prioritise their organisation’s goals over their own. And they do this silently. Does this emotional labour need to be acknowledged?

### **Constant Vigilance = Minority Stress**

All the navigation and games queer activists have to play means that they have to be constantly vigilant. Psychiatric epidemiologist Ilan Meyer who formulated the [minority stress model](#) suggests that this constant vigilance can lead to stress and health disparities among LGBTQIAN+ people. The model suggests that besides the stress of living as a minority, people with diverse SOGIESC also face daily stressors that come from internal factors. These factors include self-rejection, vigilance towards discrimination and stigma, or hiding one’s queer identity to protect oneself. According to Meyer, “[Concealment](#) may be protective in some environments, but it also limits access to social support and affirmation, complicating its role in minority stress theory.” Queer activists may seem used to navigating all the time, but it does not mean it is not impacting their mental health. How can organisations pay attention to this? How can organisations share these risks collectively?

### **Can this report be a catalyst for change?**

When asked about how her organisation can protect her better, Josibotu realised that she could start by including SOGIESC lens into her organization’s impact assessments. Z shared that the interview questions have triggered strong emotions and new ideas for him. For some participants, this project itself seems a catalyst for potential change. It will be worth following up with them in a few months to track their progress and see what support they may need.

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