

EXPLORATORY RESEARCH ON LGBTQIA+ INCLUSION IN THE SOUTHEAST ASIAN CREATIVE ECONOMY



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Exploratory Research on LGBTQIA+ Inclusion in the Southeast Asian Creative Economy

Quezon City, Philippines
ASEAN SOGIE Caucus
2025

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ASEAN SOGIE Caucus (ASC) is a regional organization that dynamically engages diverse actors to collectively advocate for the human rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, non-binary, and gender-diverse (LGBTQIA+) persons in Southeast Asia. Its mission is to empower, to develop capacities, and to expand spaces for leadership of LGBTQIA+ persons in defending their human rights. ASC is legally registered in the Philippines as Southeast Asia Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression Caucus (ASC), Inc.

Our organization is in Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) since 2021.

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Executive Summary

This exploratory report investigates LGBTQIA+ inclusion in Southeast Asia’s creative economy and maps how legal, economic, and social barriers shape the precarity of queer creatives. The creative economy is a regional priority—contributing significant GDP, employment, and export value—and it greatly benefits from LGBTQIA+ participation. Yet queer exclusion from Cultural and Creative Industries (CCIs) persists. Criminalization (in Brunei, parts of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Myanmar), piecemeal anti-discrimination and censorship regimes continue to constrain expression, involvement, and mobility in national cultural sectors. These legal gaps interact with economic exclusion—limited access to inclusive finance and grants, and weak workplace protections—and with social stigma that push LGBTQIA+ creatives into informal, precarious livelihoods or underground platforms.

Country findings highlight variation across the region. Thailand has moved furthest on formal recognition—legalizing same-sex marriage on January 23, 2025—while rapidly integrating queer culture into tourism and creative-economy strategies. Bangkok Pride and other public–private “Pride” activations exemplify deliberate soft-power plays to attract creative investment and visitors. The Philippines shows strong civic and grassroots cultural activity (large Pride events, film festivals) yet lacks national SOGIE anti-discrimination legislation, leaving artists exposed to censorship and legal risks (e.g., prosecutions under obscenity/offending-religion statutes). Vietnam and Singapore provide targeted institutional support (residencies, grants, festivals) that creates pockets of safe practice. In contrast, Brunei, Malaysia, Myanmar, and parts of Indonesia demonstrate how criminalization and censorship suppress both visibility and formal participation.

Across the region, queer creatives rely on adaptive survival strategies: digital platforms, regional residencies and festival circuits, international grants and diaspora networks, and coded or metaphorical artistic expression. These responses showcase resilience but remain precarious—dependent on external funders, difficult to scale, and vulnerable to policy shocks (Franklyn, 2021; UNCTAD, 2024b). Compared with

jurisdictions that embed SOGIESC in policy, Southeast Asia's mixed regimes undercut the inclusive growth the creative economy is meant to deliver (ASEAN, 2022, 2025a, 2025b; World Bank, 2018).

Key recommendations are layered:

- ∞ Integrate explicit SOGIESC inclusion into ASEAN and national creative-economy roadmaps, creating cross-national incentives and targets.
- ∞ Enact and enforce comprehensive anti-discrimination protections in employment, education, health, and public services.
- ∞ Establish dedicated financing (micro-grants, inclusive lending, transparent criteria) and capacity-building pipelines for LGBTQIA+ creatives.
- ∞ Strengthen grassroots and digital safe spaces and scale regionally connected residencies, festivals, and market-access programmes.
- ∞ Leverage soft power to develop “rainbow tourism” circuits and cultural exchanges that generate economic returns alongside social inclusion.
- ∞ Commission continuous, disaggregated research and transparent public data to track the impact of inclusion policies on GDP, jobs opportunities, and sector resilience.

If implemented collectively by governments, civil society, and private actors, these measures can shift the creative economy from one that merely tolerates queer presence to one that recognises LGBTQIA+ contributions as drivers of innovation, cultural vitality, and sustainable growth.

Introduction

In recent decades, the creative economy has emerged as a powerful driver of economic growth, innovation, and social inclusion, particularly in developing countries (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development [UNCTAD], 2024a). Considered both a catalyst for development and a reflection of diverse cultural identities, the creative economy comprises sectors that rely on creativity, cultural knowledge, and intellectual property (United Nations, n.d.). Collectively, these sectors are often referred to as the cultural and creative industries (CCIs).

Various classifications for the CCIs have been developed, partly to measure the creative economy's impact, such as the European Union cultural and creative sectors, the IDB "orange economy," UNCTAD's creative economy, UNESCO's cultural industries, and WIPO's copyright industries (UNCTAD, 2024a). One of the most widely used frameworks in Southeast Asia is UNCTAD's, which defines CCIs to include: advertising and marketing; architecture; audiovisual, multimedia, and photography; books and publishing; cultural and natural heritage; design (product, graphic, and fashion); manufacturing of crafts and design goods; music, performing and visual arts; software, video games, computer and web services; and research and development (UNCTAD, 2024a).

These CCIs contribute significant economic value. In 2022, UNESCO estimated that they generate roughly US\$2.2-2.3 trillion in annual revenues (UNCTAD, 2024b) and contribute about 3.1% to global gross domestic product (GDP) (UNESCO, 2022). UNESCO (2022) likewise reports that these industries provide approximately 6.2% of global employment. Global creative services exports reached about US\$1.4 trillion in 2022, while creative goods exports reached about US\$713 billion (UNCTAD, 2024b). In countries with available data, CCIs account for roughly 0.5–7.3% of GDP and employ 0.5–12.5% of the workforce (UNCTAD, 2024b).

Southeast Asia has also embraced the creative economy as a key pillar of development. In the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) policy, the creative economy is explicitly highlighted. In November 2021, a working definition was created during the 2nd ASEAN Regional Workshop on Creative Economy (ARWCE): “The ASEAN Creative Economy (ACE) is added value emanating from human creativity based on heritage, culture, the arts, design, science, technology, and innovation, that promotes sustainable, resilient, equitable and inclusive development by way of jobs, wealth and value creation. The ACE encompasses activities related to production, consumption, distribution and trade of intangible assets such as intellectual property rights and tangible assets such as goods and services.” This definition has since appeared in the 2022 Siem Reap Declaration (ASEAN, 2022) and informed wider regional initiatives.

In 2025, both the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 and the ASEAN Creative Economy Sustainability Framework were released. The first envisages ASEAN as “an enterprising region as well as a hub and centre of excellence, that is able to leverage on advances in sciences, technology and innovation, and harness new sources of competitiveness, including creative economy and advanced industry, to elevate its economic integration agenda and create a thriving ecosystem” by 2045 (ASEAN, 2025a). The second proposes a sustainability framework to achieve this vision of inclusive growth and ethical, environmentally conscious development, outlining objectives, guiding principles, strategic outcomes, priorities, enablers, and the implementation approach (ASEAN, 2025b). These frameworks identify culture and creativity as critical to post-COVID recovery and long-term competitiveness.

Individual countries in the region have also launched policies and institutions to nurture their CCIs. Indonesia was among the first to define the creative economy as “economic activities founded upon the creativity, skills, and talents of individuals in order to foster creative capacity and creative output that possess economic value and contribute to the welfare of the people of Indonesia” (Instruksi Presiden Republik Indonesia No. 6, 2009). Since then, the country has developed several policies relating to the CCIs, including the Film Law (No. 33 of 2009), the Copyright Law (No. 28 of 2014), the Law on the Advancement of Culture (No. 5 of 2017), the Law on the Legal Deposit of Printed and Recorded Materials (No. 13 of 2018) and—most significantly for this report—the Law on Creative Economy (No. 24 of 2019) (UNESCO, n.d.; Asia IP Law, 2023). These laws have contributed to Indonesia’s creative economy generating roughly US\$82 billion in 2021 (UNCTAD, 2024b).

Elsewhere, the Philippines passed the Philippine Creative Industries Development Act (PCIDA), or Republic Act No. 11904, in 2022. The country describes the creative industries as “trades involving persons, whether natural or juridical, that produce cultural, artistic, and innovative goods and services originating in human creativity, skill, and talent and having a potential to create wealth and livelihood through the generation and utilization of intellectual property.” PCIDA also defines participation in the CCIs as “those directly or indirectly involved in the creation, production and manufacturing, performance, broadcasting, communication and exhibition, or distribution and sale of

works and other subject matter, in accordance with existing laws, rules and regulations on intellectual property rights protection” (Republic Act No. 11904, 2022, sec. 3). Implementation has boosted the Philippines’ creative sector, which now has over 7.51 million employed individuals, a 7.3% contribution to GDP, and US\$34.3 billion gross value added in 2024 (Department of Trade and Industry [DTI], 2025).

In Singapore—an important creative-goods exporter—the creative industries are classed under knowledge-based sectors, which also include research and development and interactive digital media (Infocomm Media Development Authority, 2024). The Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth defines Singapore’s creative economy as the arts and culture, media, and design sectors (2024).

In Thailand, where Royal Decree B.E. 2561/2018 established the Creative Economy Agency (CEA), the creative economy is defined as the systematic integration of creativity and innovation into national economic development by “adding value to products and services to obtain prices and returns on investment,” thereby strengthening Thailand’s competitiveness (Creative Economy Agency, 2022). In 2025, the CEA and the Department of Intellectual Property (DIP) began collaborating with the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) to adopt the Creative Economy Data Model (CEDM), a comprehensive instrument designed to measure the creative-economy ecosystem (Thai Public Broadcasting Service, 2025).

Beyond macro-economics, the CCIs have significant social impact, intersecting with broader conversations about diversity and inclusion—particularly LGBTQIA+ inclusion. Evidence increasingly shows that LGBTQIA+ acceptance enhances innovation and productivity, especially in creative and knowledge-based sectors. For instance, cities with higher queer tolerance and diversity tend to have stronger economic performance (Mercado, 2018). Creative hubs in the Philippines have become safer spaces for LGBTQIA+ expression and entrepreneurship despite wider structural inequalities (Ormston et al., 2020). Thailand’s booming entertainment and design industries likewise draw heavily on queer talent and culture (Jewell, 2019; Sonobe et al., 2022).

Yet despite the benefits of LGBTQIA+ inclusion in the CCIs, LGBTQIA+ communities continue to face exclusion. While ASEAN-level creative-economy frameworks (ASEAN, 2022, 2025a, 2025b) contain language supporting inclusivity—for instance, Guiding Principle 5 of the ASEAN Creative Economy Sustainability Framework states, “Creative economy policies seek to promote social inclusivity, not exclusivity”—there is no explicit mention of Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Gender Expression, and Sex Characteristics (SOGIESC), perpetuating policy gaps. Within each country, LGBTQIA+ individuals face legal, economic, and societal barriers that limit participation—from criminalization and state-sanctioned discrimination to exclusion from education and formal employment (Badgett et al., 2014). Exclusionary laws can cost a country up to 1% of GDP by undermining the talent pool and productivity on which CCIs depend.

Research Objectives

This exploratory report provides a preliminary overview of how LGBTQIA+ people are—or are not—included in Southeast Asia’s cultural and creative industries, with implications for both human rights and economic development. Specifically, it aims to:

- a. Establish a baseline understanding of the subject;
- b. Identify legal, economic, and social barriers to LGBTQIA+ inclusion in each country;
- c. Highlight existing initiatives and emerging trends of queer inclusivity in the CCIs; and
- d. Identify advocacy opportunities and potential avenues for future research.

Methodology

This report draws on qualitative data obtained through:

- a. A desk review of literature produced by international development organizations as well as national/local NGOs on LGBTQIA+ inclusion in the creative industries and economy; and
- b. Semi-structured interviews with three (3) LGBTQIA+ artists, creative practitioners, and rights advocates in Brunei, Cambodia, and Singapore. Participants came from diverse socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds and responded to open-ended questions on experiences and perspectives regarding LGBTQIA+ inclusion in the creative economy.

Country Findings

1. BRUNEI

a. Legal Barriers

“Maybe the presence of queer artists is there, but the visibility of it... it’s just not there, unfortunately.”

- Bruneian queer creative practitioner living in Singapore

In 2019, the Syariah Penal Code Order (SPCO) was fully enacted, criminalizing all same-sex conduct. Under the SPCO, consensual sodomy between men is theoretically punishable by death by stoning (if married) or, in practice, up to seven years’ imprisonment plus 30 lashes; sexual activity between women carries penalties of up to 10 years’ imprisonment, caning, or fines (ECNMY, 2019; Green, 2020). There is no legal recognition of same-sex partnerships or SOGIESC, nor any anti-discrimination protections in employment, education, health care, or public services. This effectively prevents LGBTQIA+ creatives from working openly or forming registered associations within Brunei’s creative sectors (ECNMY, 2019; Green, 2020).

By official policy, no public events or organizations may promote LGBTQIA+ themes. A recent report states that authorities “would not issue permits for events on LGBTQI+ topics.” There are no LGBTQIA+ organizations or public gatherings permitted, and critics face intimidation (U.S. Department of State, 2023).

All films and public shows also require prior censorship-board approval under Brunei’s Censorship of Films and Public Entertainments Act (Cap. 69). Exhibition without clearance is a crime, punishable by up to 12 months’ imprisonment and heavy fines

(Brunei, 2002). This enables authorities to ban content deemed “indecent.” Although explicit lists of banned categories are not public, official guidance forbids depictions of premarital sex or homosexuality. A recent report noted that “some movies were censored or not permitted,” often due to LGBTQIA+ content (U.S. Department of State, 2023).

One Bruneian filmmaker, whose short film explores queer lived experiences, recalls how, within fifteen minutes of the film’s online release, family members questioned the subject matter. The film later screened at the Southeast Asian Queer Cultural Festival (SEAQCF), providing a wider and safer regional platform.

b. Economic Barriers

In the absence of workplace non-discrimination protections, LGBTQIA+ individuals in Brunei’s CCIs face heightened risk of harassment, dismissal, or exclusion from formal employment. Stigma-driven exclusion pushes talented creatives into informal, low-paid, or underground work, reducing innovation and growth. Brunei’s criminalization regime thus undermines its goal of diversifying beyond oil and gas through a robust creative economy (Vu, 2022; Sonobe et al., 2022).

c. Social Barriers

“Queerness has to be on the very fringes just to make it safe.”
- Bruneian queer creative practitioner living in Singapore

Beyond the government’s defense of the SPCO as protecting Islamic values and family “sanctity” (Human Rights Watch, 2019), Brunei’s national philosophy, *Melayu Islam Beraja* (MIB), explicitly links Malay cultural identity, Islam, and the Sultanate; it shapes norms of “proper” behavior and frames non-heteronormative sexualities as incompatible with national identity (Mahaseth et al., 2023).

These dynamics foster taboo, surveillance, and fear of legal repercussions, compelling many LGBTQIA+ creatives to conceal their identities, limiting networking, collaboration, and visibility (Abdul, 2021). With no sanctioned community spaces and strict censorship of LGBTQIA+ content, artists lack peer support and platforms, reinforcing isolation and mental-health challenges that impede participation in the creative economy (Outright International, 2025; ASEAN, 2025). In 2019, qualitative accounts indicated that social media was the primary—and often only—avenue for community building (Stuart, 2019).

“At the time, we shot it as a fashion film. So, no, I didn’t have to film it in secret. We didn’t see the risks at the time. Because when we shot that, that was before Sharia law. So, it was fine, you know? We were just filming and it was fine.

But by the time the film was edited and came out, that was when Sharia law came out as well. So that’s when it got a bit dangerous.”

- Brunei queer creative practitioner living in Singapore

d. Existing Initiatives and Emerging Trends

Despite severe restrictions, grassroots and community-led efforts have pioneered discreet yet impactful inclusion. The Brunei Project (est. 2015) organized private gatherings—most notably intimate IDAHOT celebrations—that provided safer spaces for LGBTQIA+ creatives to network and share work (Wikipedia contributors, n.d.).

Some multinational entities operating in Brunei implement global diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) frameworks that benefit local employees. Embassies such as the Australian and German embassies have provided safer venues for LGBTQIA+ events, especially around human rights and Pride Month.

At the regional level, Brunei participates in ASEAN’s people-centred development initiatives—namely ASEAN Community Vision 2045 and the ASEAN Creative Economy Sustainability Framework—which call for inclusive participation of marginalized groups, implicitly encouraging members to integrate LGBTQIA+ voices in creative-economy planning (ASEAN, 2025a; 2025b). Non-governmental toolkits, such as UNDP’s *Inclusion Toolkit for Organizations and Business*, offer concrete guidelines for adopting LGBTQIA+-inclusive practices (UNDP, 2024).

Digital platforms also amplify Bruneian LGBTQIA+ creators beyond national borders. Instagram and YouTube enable young artists to join pan-ASEAN collectives and showcase work in online exhibitions (de Guzman, 2022). The growth of BL dramas and queer film festivals has created virtual circuits where Bruneian directors and performers can screen shorts under ASEAN umbrella events (de Guzman, 2022).

2. CAMBODIA

a. Legal Barriers

“There’s still limited space for queer people in the creative economy... limited access, discrimination, and limited funding because of stigmatization and the lack of legal protection.”

- Cambodian queer creative practitioner

Private, consensual same-sex relations are not criminalized, but there is no comprehensive legislation protecting against discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity, nor recognition of same-sex partnerships or gender-affirming procedures (OHCHR–Cambodia, n.d.; ILGA Asia, 2021). The Constitution implicitly bans same-sex marriage by defining marriage as between “one man and one woman,” and specific anti-discrimination laws remain absent despite repeated UPR recommendations (ILGA Asia, 2021; UNDP & USAID, 2014). Police and local authorities routinely harass LGBTQIA+ people under public-order or “morality” provisions, and arbitrary detentions of sex- and entertainment workers—many of whom are LGBTQIA+—persist under municipal by-laws (Hoefinger & Srun, 2017). This legal vacuum forces creatives to self-censor, undermining freedom of expression and participation in cultural industries.

b. Economic Barriers

LGBTQIA+ practitioners face exclusion from formal financial and institutional support. A 2020 APCOM assessment found no Cambodian financial institution with explicit LGBTI-inclusive lending or grant programs, pushing many creatives into informal economies with limited capital (APCOM, 2020). Without non-discrimination laws, LGBTQIA+ Cambodians in creative fields face hiring biases and job insecurity (APCOM, 2020), often moving into precarious freelance work. Persistent stigma prevents equitable participation in formal CCIs (Vannarin, 2019).

c. Social Barriers

“To be honest, in Cambodia, we don’t have a lot of space for queer artists to show themselves. If you were to ask me two years ago, I wouldn’t know there’s a queer scene in Cambodia.”

- Cambodian queer creative practitioner

Rainbow Community Kampuchea's (RoCK) 2019 research reveals rigid gender norms leading families to punish gender non-conformity, including forced marriages or attempts to "cure" LGBTQIA+ people via traditional healers (RoCK, 2019). While Theravada Buddhism is not doctrinally homophobic, cultural interpretations, community expectations, and occasional negative comments by local religious authorities can justify exclusion (UNDP & USAID, 2014a; CCHR, 2015). Public attitudes remain mixed: surveys show low support for equal rights and high levels of family violence against lesbian and transgender women; safe spaces are scarce and often informal (RoCK & TNS Cambodia, 2015; Hoefinger & Srun, 2017). Bullying in schools and online is also reported (CCHR, 2015).

Deep-rooted stigma compels many LGBTQIA+ creatives to conceal their identities, limiting community building, mentorship, and visibility (UNDP & USAID, 2014). Intermittent censorship of LGBTQIA+ themes in media and festivals restricts visibility and inclusive market development (ASEAN, 2022). Media portrayals are often sensationalist, and community events are vulnerable to shutdowns (Hoefinger & Srun, 2017). Grassroots groups like RoCK provide vital support but face funding and recognition constraints (CICADA, 2023).

d. Existing Initiatives and Emerging Trends

Pride parades date back to 2003 in Phnom Penh, organized by groups such as CamASEAN and RoCK, creating safer public spaces for visibility and artistic exchange (Wikipedia contributors, n.d.). Since 2022, Pride Fest Cambodia has rotated between Siem Reap, Battambang, and Phnom Penh, integrating artist-in-residence calls, vendor markets, film screenings, and performance stages that directly fund local LGBTQIA+ creators (Khmer LGBT, 2025). Meta House, with the Heinrich Böll Foundation, has hosted "Remork Pride Race" art competitions and an Asia-wide Pride Film Fest, including residencies and outreach workshops (Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung Cambodia, 2023). These events generally cannot take place in the open, limiting reach.

APCOM's regional digital hubs support MSME-focused toolkits and virtual mentoring for queer entrepreneurs, integrating financial-sector inclusion guidelines adopted from the *Cambodia: Integrating LGBTI Inclusion into the Financial Sector* report. These online solidarity networks connect Cambodian LGBTQIA+ creatives with peers and donors across ASEAN.

3. INDONESIA

a. Legal Barriers

Same-sex activity is not criminalized nationally, but there is no law protecting against discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity, and no recognition of same-sex partnerships or legal gender change. From 2016 onward, an "anti-LGBT

panic” was fed by politicians, some officials, regulators, and conservative groups (Human Rights Watch, 2016). In certain provinces—most notably Aceh and parts of North Sumatra—local Sharia bylaws criminalize same-sex conduct, prescribing caning for “sexual deviations” (Human Rights Watch, 2016; Badgett, Hasenbush, & Luhur, 2017).

Indonesia’s revised Criminal Code (effective January 2026) introduces penalties for consensual sexual activity outside marriage and for cohabitation by unmarried persons; both are “complaint offenses” (prosecutable upon a family complaint) (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Because same-sex marriages are not recognized, these provisions effectively criminalize all same-sex relationships (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

Censorship is also a concern. In 2018, several provinces banned the award-winning film *Memories of My Body* after conservative petitions claimed it would lead youth to “imitate LGBT behavior.” A regent called it “against religious values” and approving of “deviant” activity (Harsono, 2019). The Law on Pornography (No. 44/2008) defines “pornography” broadly and prohibits creating or disseminating material containing “deviant sexual intercourse” (UU 44/2008). Since 2016, authorities have used the law to justify raids, arrests, prosecutions, venue closures, and online takedowns targeting LGBTQIA+ individuals and content (Amnesty International, 2025; Article 19, 2013; Human Rights Watch, 2017, 2018). Proposals to ban “LGBT content” in media and online platforms further threaten queer expression (Reuters, 2024).

b. Economic Barriers

Widespread stigma and the absence of workplace protections expose LGBTQIA+ creative professionals to harassment or dismissal (APCOM, 2020). The Williams Institute estimates that discrimination against LGBT people costs Indonesia approximately US\$12 billion annually in lost productivity, health expenses, and tax revenue (Kilpatrick, 2017; Badgett et al., 2017). A 2020 APCOM report found no major financial institutions offering LGBTQIA-inclusive loans or grants, constraining access to credit for independent creatives and startups and forcing many to rely on precarious informal networks (APCOM, 2020; Vu, 2022).

c. Social Barriers

Public fatwas and statements by the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI) frame LGBTQIA+ identities as deviant, calling for criminalization or “rehabilitation,” which legitimizes stigma (MUI, 2014; Muthmainnah, 2016). Stigma manifests as family pressure toward heterosexual marriage and conformity, sensational media coverage, and claims by some psychiatric professionals that SOGIESC are “illnesses” (Human Rights Watch, 2016). Many LGBTQIA+ creatives conceal their identities, inhibiting collaboration and public performance (Kelly et al., 2024). Underground zine movements and grassroots festivals provide vital platforms but operate without formal support and risk raids or backlash (Franklyn, 2021; JP Staff, 2021; Wijaya, 2022). In early 2025, at least three “gay party” raids were reported (Mikelionis, 2025).

d. Existing Initiatives and Emerging Trends

Lambda Indonesia (1982–1986) laid groundwork for community organizing and creative workshops in Solo and Jakarta; GAYa Nusantara continued this legacy with research, publications, and education programs (Wikipedia contributors, n.d.; Ikawati, 2015). The Q! Film Festival (2002–2017) was the first LGBTQIA+ film festival in a predominantly Muslim country and, for a time, Asia’s largest, screening 50+ features annually and hosting residencies and panels before pausing amid moralist pressures (Wikipedia contributors, n.d.). Independent collectives in Yogyakarta and Bali have sustained queer zine exchanges and micro-exhibitions (Franklyn, 2021).

City-level efforts such as Yogyakarta’s “Creative City Roadmap 2030” reference inclusive programming and open-call residencies, enabling small grants for queer theatre and public-art commissions (ASEAN, 2025a). APCOM’s digital hubs offer mentoring and micro-grants (APCOM, 2020b). Some multinationals maintain non-discrimination frameworks locally (Röell, Özbilgin, & Arndt, 2024). Digital platforms (YouTube, Spotify, Instagram Live, TikTok) expand reach and crowdfunding options (The Jakarta Post, 2024; UNCTAD, 2024b). Diaspora groups (e.g., Nusaqueer Diaspora) organize exhibitions and exchanges in Europe, feeding back into domestic scenes.

4. LAO PDR

a. Legal Barriers

Lao PDR does not criminalize same-sex relations, and the Constitution guarantees equality “irrespective of ... gender” (Pha Tad Ke Project Space, 2023). However, there are no national policies explicitly safeguarding LGBTQIA+ people in the workplace, education, healthcare, or public life (APCOM, 2020). Same-sex marriage is expressly prohibited under Article 151 of the 2018 Civil Code, and there is no legal pathway for transgender people to amend identity documents (Pha Tad Ke Project Space, 2023). The 2018 Decree on Access to Legal Aid names “under-represented populations” but does not specify sexual minorities. This legal invisibility creates systemic barriers to participation in the creative economy (Williams Institute, 2014; Outright International, 2023).

b. Economic Barriers

Stigma and the absence of employment protections expose LGBTQIA+ professionals to harassment, dismissal, or non-renewal of contracts (APCOM, 2020). Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs)—where many creatives work—have limited access to formal financing, and there is no evidence of LGBTQIA+-inclusive banking programs (APCOM, 2020).

c. Social Barriers

Theravada Buddhism is dominant; while doctrine is not uniformly prohibitive, local leaders and conservative readings can justify exclusion. Family pressure (e.g., to marry and continue lineage) is a major source of stigma and coercion (Pha Tad Ke Project Space, 2023; APCOM, 2020). Gender non-conformity often leads to bullying and exclusion in schools and communities (APCOM, 2020). Many creatives therefore hide their identities, limiting networking and visibility (Outright International, 2023). Civil-society space is narrow, curtailing open dialogue and the potential of LGBTQIA+ individuals to contribute openly and fully to the creative economy (ASEAN, 2022; Vu, 2021).

Some multinationals have signed the UN Standards of Conduct on LGBTI inclusion, but few have translated commitments into locally adapted policies (UNDP, 2021). Community organizations like Proud to Be Us Laos provide critical support but remain under-resourced (ASEAN, 2022; 2025).

d. Existing Initiatives and Emerging Trends

Small grassroots festivals and residencies in Laos have begun carving out safe creative spaces. Pha Tad Ke Project Space hosts queer-themed exhibitions and performance nights in Vientiane, pairing local LGBTQIA+ artists with visiting ASEAN peers (Pha Tad Ke Project Space, 2023). APCOM's MSME-financing pilot provides micro-grants, business training, and mentorship for LGBTQIA+ entrepreneurs in arts, crafts, and design (APCOM, 2020a; 2020b).

5. MALAYSIA

a. Legal Barriers

Malaysia's federal Penal Code criminalizes "carnal intercourse against the order of nature" (Sections 377A–C), with penalties up to 20 years' imprisonment; Sharia laws in several states further forbid same-sex relations for Muslims, punishable by fines, caning, or imprisonment (Cheah, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2022). There is no recognition of same-sex unions or legal gender change. Recent actions include proposals to ban "LGBT propaganda" in schools and media (Reuters, 2024) and endorsements of conversion therapy (CSO CEDAW Coalition, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2022).

Censorship is pervasive. In 2018, authorities ordered an exhibition to remove portraits of two LGBTQIA+ activists (Reuters, 2018). The Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA) of 1984 has been used to ban or restrict LGBTQIA+-themed materials; 13 LGBTIQ-themed publications were banned between 2020 and May 2025—nearly

42% of all bans in that period (Justice for Sisters & Amnesty International Malaysia, 2025). Police have investigated Pride-themed workshops under blasphemy and communications statutes (Article 19, 2023). Films with LGBTQIA+ content are routinely censored; online content has been blocked under the PPPA and the Communications and Multimedia Act. After an on-stage same-sex kiss at the 2023 Good Vibes Festival, the event was cancelled and a ban on LGBTQIA+-related music videos followed (Equaldex, n.d.). Section 7 of the PPPA was also used to raid Swatch stores and seize 172 rainbow-themed “Love is Love” watches in 2023 (Lim, 2023).

b. Economic Barriers

Systemic discrimination drives LGBTQIA+ talent out of formal employment and funding. A qualitative study found that arts and media employers frequently exclude openly queer applicants to avoid backlash, leading to underemployment and reliance on precarious work (Nelamagan, Suppramaniam, & Dada, 2022). Without non-discrimination laws, hiring bias, contract non-renewal, and unequal access to funding persist (Nelamagan et al., 2022). Comparative estimates suggest Malaysia may lose up to 1% of GDP due to exclusionary policies (Badgett et al., 2017; de Guzman, 2023).

c. Social Barriers

Nationalist narratives and religious conservatism create a hostile environment. Federal and state-level rules criminalize gender non-conformity and same-sex conduct; some leaders promote conversion practices (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Family pressure to marry and conform is common (Cheah, 2020). These dynamics force many artists to conceal their identities, lowering visibility, mentorship, and collaboration (Jerome, 2022; Kelly et al., 2024). Queer narratives are marginalized despite a growing underground movement (Jerome, 2022; Yan, 2013). Public figures such as Pang Khee Teik advance visibility through the arts but face harassment (Shimada, 2018; Khoo Su Yen, 2023). Fear of surveillance and career repercussions deters participation; queer events risk raids and hostility (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

d. Existing Initiatives and Emerging Trends

Seksualiti Merdeka (founded 2008) is a pioneering sexuality-rights festival featuring talks, workshops, theatre, visual art, and film screenings foregrounding LGBTQIA+ practice (Wikipedia contributors, n.d.). PT Foundation (formerly Pink Triangle) hosts community art events and “Queer Joy” celebrations and co-runs artist-in-residence workshops with partners such as Matahari Books and Purple Lab (Wikipedia contributors, n.d.). *Kuala Lumpur as a Cultural & Creative City* (Think City) and the British Council call for open-call residencies, public-art commissions, and grant schemes that explicitly welcome marginalized voices, including LGBTQIA+ artists (USM, 2023). Hybrid residency models (brief in-person stays plus extended virtual mentorship) can broaden access.

6. MYANMAR

a. Legal Barriers

Same-sex sexual activity remains criminalized under Section 377 of the 1861 Penal Code, punishable by up to 20 years' imprisonment; there is no recognition of same-sex partnerships or legal gender change (International Commission of Jurists, 2019). Since the 2021 coup, the junta has intensified censorship—banning books, films, and exhibitions it deems “obscene”—and uses broad laws to arrest queer activists (Frontier, 2025; Outright International, 2025).

b. Economic Barriers

No national laws prohibit employment discrimination based on SOGIESC; LGBTQIA+ creatives therefore face harassment, terminations, and exclusion from CCIs (Myanmar Centre for Responsible Business & Colors Rainbow, 2020). Stereotypes persist—for example, that gay men can only be makeup artists, entertainers, or *natkadaw* (spirit mediums) (Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, 2016).

c. Social Barriers

Deep-rooted stigma and fear of persecution—amplified by conservative norms and curfews—force many creatives into secrecy (Outright International, 2023). Interviews suggest artists conceal identities to avoid family rejection, raids, or violence (International Commission of Jurists, 2019). Grassroots initiatives such as &PROUD Yangon Pride and Colors Rainbow's spaces provide rare platforms but operate under threat of shutdown and have limited reach (Outright International, 2025). The exodus of artists into exile or underground networks has fragmented community support, while military raids on private gatherings stifle emerging queer-led art collectives (Banki, 2024).

d. Existing Initiatives and Emerging Trends

&PROUD's annual Yangon Pride includes an LGBTIQ film festival with Burmese subtitles and post-screening Q&As, fostering mentorship (FilmFreeway, 2025). The Myanmar Centre for Responsible Business and Colors Rainbow published a bilingual *LGBT+ Equality in the Workplace* resource (2020). International forums such as the British Council's “Arts for Change” in Partnership with Colors Rainbow convening artists, cultural policymakers, and civil-society actors to strategize how inclusive arts programming can strengthen social cohesion and support marginalized creatives (Colors Rainbow, 2020). Another example is Canada's Programme for International Foundations which has convened stakeholders to strategize inclusive programming; small grants (e.g., Canada's 2013–2014 programme) enabled pilot residencies and networks outside Yangon (Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, 2016).

7. PHILIPPINES

a. Legal Barriers

Despite relatively high social tolerance, the Philippines lacks a national anti-discrimination law covering SOGIE. The SOGIE Equality Bill has stalled since 2000, leaving LGBTQIA+ individuals—including those in creative fields—vulnerable to harassment, dismissal, or censorship without legal remedy (APCOM & Babaylanes, 2020; UNDP & USAID, 2014). Legal ambiguity also affects access to public benefits, identity documents, and recognition of same-sex partnerships.

Some cities and provinces (e.g., Quezon City, Cebu City) have local ordinances prohibiting SOGIE-based discrimination, but coverage remains fragmented (Cheah, 2020; APCOM & Babaylanes, 2020).

Censorship persists. The arrest and prosecution of drag artist Pura Luka Vega show how laws on “obscenity,” “immorality,” or “offending religious feelings,” and *persona non grata* declarations, can be used to constrain queer artistic expression, creating chilling effects across the creative community (Human Rights Watch, 2023; Al Jazeera, 2023).

b. Economic Barriers

A 2020 assessment found substantial workplace discrimination against LGBTQIA+ workers (APCOM & Babaylanes, 2020; Williams Institute, 2014). While tolerant urban centers like Metro Manila score highly on “creative economy gay indexes,” informal tolerance does not translate into equitable funding, social protection, or representation necessary to sustain arts-based enterprises (Mercado, 2018; APCOM & Babaylanes, 2020). LGBTQIA+ creatives often find opportunities in informal hubs but face obstacles to scaling and accessing mainstream platforms; some industries employ LGBTQIA+ people in stereotyped or low-status roles, limiting stable, well-paid opportunities.

c. Social Barriers

Homophobia and transphobia rooted in religious and traditional perspectives continue to affect LGBTQIA+ people despite growing visibility. Discrimination persists in workplaces and schools, and queer identities are underrepresented or stereotyped in mainstream media (UNDP & USAID, 2014). Inclusive creative hubs exist, but many artists rely on personal networks and informal communities for support, limiting institutional recognition (Ormston et al., 2020; Mercado, 2018). Grassroots initiatives and safe-space hubs improve well-being and entrepreneurial capacity yet remain under-resourced (Ormston et al., 2020; Outright International, 2023). This informalization limits access to institutional support and national recognition. Cities with more inclusive cultures tend to attract creative talent and thrive economically, reinforcing the need for greater SOGIE inclusion in urban and cultural policy (Mercado, 2018).

d. Existing Initiatives and Emerging Trends

Pride Month is widely celebrated. The annual Metro Manila Pride March, established in 1994 and reorganized under Metro Manila Pride (MMP) in 2016, is among Southeast Asia's largest Pride events; organizers partner with local governments to integrate public-art installations and performance stages for LGBTQIA+ creators (Wikipedia contributors, n.d.).

The Pride PH Festival, launched in 2022 in Quezon City, integrates a parade with an open-call art market and pop-up galleries; in 2023 it introduced the Right to Care proxy card for LGBT couples (Wikipedia contributors, n.d.). Pride PH coordinates a country-wide network of local marches and events, illustrating the importance of LGU support (logistics, small grants, venues).

Queer-led initiatives include Bahaghari Philippines (public-art interventions such as murals and street performances), That Elephant Party (queer raves platforming LGBTQIA+ musicians), and The Sunny Club PH (events by and for queer women, including talks, book clubs, screenings, and art afternoons).

Outside explicitly queer events, space exists for LGBTQIA+ creatives. Since 2021, Komiket—the country's largest self-published comics fair—has run a “Komiket Pride” track, spotlighting queer illustrators, zine-makers, and graphic novelists and facilitating “zine-swap” networking (ABS-CBN Lifestyle, 2025).

While there are no funding programs exclusively for LGBTQIA+ artists, they are eligible for national and international support (e.g., Film Development Council of the Philippines, British Council, Goethe-Institut Philippinen).

8. SINGAPORE

a. Legal Barriers

Section 377A (criminalizing sex between men) was repealed in November 2022, but Parliament simultaneously amended the Constitution to define marriage as between a man and a woman, foreclosing near-term recognition of same-sex unions (Reuters, 2022). There is no national legislation prohibiting discrimination based on SOGIESC, and no legal recognition of non-binary identities or a standardized process for transgender status on official documents (American Chamber of Commerce in Singapore, 2022).

Content regulation remains strict. In 2014, the National Library Board pulped three children's books with queer themes; after public outcry, two were moved to the adult section (France-Presse, 2014).

“In the 90s and 2000s, there was a lot of news of creative works being banned.”

- Singapore creative practitioner

Creators working on LGBTQIA+ themes must navigate the Films Act and Broadcasting Act, which prohibit “undesirable” portrayals of sexuality and incentivize self-censorship (Goodfellow, 2021). The Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA) often imposes higher age-ratings or restricts perceived “promotion” of queer lifestyles. Some filmmakers release work online to avoid cuts (Sarkar, 2019).

b. Economic Barriers

Workplace bias and a lack of formal protections affect participation. A 2022 American Chamber of Commerce survey found LGBTQIA+ respondents experienced harassment or felt compelled to hide their identities at work, undermining career progression and innovation (American Chamber of Commerce in Singapore, 2022).

c. Social Barriers

Public gatherings celebrating queer culture face permit requirements and sponsorship constraints, limiting scale and reach (Oswin, 2012). While acceptance has grown, an Ipsos survey (2024) found that despite majority support for anti-discrimination protections, only about half support recognition of same-sex couples (Jau, 2024). In CCI, practitioners report subtle biases (e.g., code-switching to heteronormative language), exclusion from informal networks, and reluctance to feature explicitly queer narratives (Goodfellow, 2021). One queer publication was temporarily withheld from mainstream bookstores following a complaint, then reinstated after review. These dynamics constrain visibility, mentorship, and robust queer-led collectives (Yue, 2007; Tan, 2024).

d. Existing Initiatives and Emerging Trends

Since 2009, Pink Dot SG has drawn 20,000–30,000 participants annually to Hong Lim Park’s Speakers’ Corner, combining concerts, artist booths, and corporate activations (Wikipedia contributors, n.d.). Since 2005, IndigNation has run a month-long Pride season of talks, workshops, screenings, and community salons, pioneering indoor LGBTQIA+ dialogue and funding research awards (IndigNation, n.d.).

The Out & Loud film festival and The Arts House’s Queer Arts season curate works by local and ASEAN LGBTQIA+ filmmakers, pairing screenings with residencies and panels (Goodfellow, 2021). Groups such as Proud Spaces and Q Chamber run

“community x corporate” roundtables and micro-grant schemes (Q Chamber, 2024). The National Arts Council’s grants (Presentation & Participation, Creation, Production) are open to all; NAC has funded queer-themed performances and co-productions (National Arts Council, 2025). Many multinationals include SOGI in non-discrimination clauses and maintain employee networks and inclusive benefits (American Chamber of Commerce in Singapore, 2022).

9. THAILAND

a. Legal Barriers

On January 23, 2025, Thailand became the first Southeast Asian country to legalize same-sex marriage, amending the Civil and Commercial Code to replace gendered terms with “individuals” and “spouses.” The Gender Equality Act B.E. 2558 (2015) bans discrimination on the grounds of “gender.” However, there is still no legal recognition for non-binary identities or standardized procedures for legal gender change.

b. Economic Barriers

Thailand’s creative economy—bolstered by globally popular BL/GL dramas and a strong music-export sector—contributes over 8% of GDP (Thai PBS World, 2025), yet LGBTQIA+ professionals report uneven access to capital and institutional support (Creative Economy Agency, 2024; de Guzman, 2022). A 2024 Channel News Asia survey found that while corporate “rainbow washing” has increased, many queer respondents in creative sectors report being overlooked for grants or sponsorships due to perceived reputational risks (Board, 2024; World Bank, 2018). Marriage equality is projected to generate 152,000 full-time jobs and add 0.3% to GDP via “rainbow tourism” (Cheng, 2024), but financing gaps and weak D&I practices in SMEs still impede careers (AmCham Singapore, 2022).

c. Social Barriers

Despite the popularity of BL/GL, some artists self-censor “political” or “sexual” themes to avoid backlash or permit refusals, limiting diversity in galleries, festivals, and digital platforms (Nation Thailand, 2025; Yue, 2007). Pride Month celebrations in Bangkok boost tourism revenues by up to US\$50 million annually, yet gaps persist between visibility and everyday acceptance: reports document micro-aggressions, hiring biases, concealment at work (45–46%), and a 77% rejection rate for transgender applicants (Thongnoi, 2024; Chandra, 2024; Somhar, 2024).

d. Existing Initiatives and Emerging Trends

Thailand is arguably the region's most advanced on LGBTQIA+ inclusion in the creative economy. With marriage equality, public and private sectors are embedding LGBTQIA+ narratives into cultural-diplomacy strategies, positioning Thailand for events like World Pride and attracting creative-economy investors (Board, 2024). Bangkok Pride (since 2003) is Southeast Asia's largest, attracting 200,000+ participants; it combines marches with art fairs, installations, pop-ups, and panels showcasing LGBTQIA+ creators (Nation Thailand, 2025).

The CEA's "MY PRIDE THAILAND" campaign with the Federation of Thai Industries leverages LGBTQIA+ creativity as soft power to boost tourism and cultural exports (Travel and Tour World, 2025). Central Pattana's "Pride for All" activates 39 malls annually, engaging 1.3 million+ visitors with installations and vendor markets prioritizing LGBTQIA+-owned businesses (Central Pattana, 2025). Initiatives like ALL ABOUT QUEER: Performance Art Lab Showcase (BACC, Aug–Sep 2024) and the Homohaus Queer Performing Arts Festival (HOMOHAAUS) interrogate political and cultural norms through a queer lens using mediums such as queer theatre, dance, exhibitions, and workshops—actively confronting patriarchal norms and builds solidarity within Thailand's queer creative community while supporting emerging queer artists. (Bangkok Art and Culture Centre, 2024; Bangkok Post, 2025).

10. VIETNAM

a. Legal Barriers

Vietnam decriminalized same-sex relations in 2000 and, in 2015, removed the ban on same-sex cohabitation from the Law on Marriage and Family; however, same-sex marriages are not legally recognized (UNDP & USAID, 2014). There is no national law expressly prohibiting SOGIESC-based discrimination, and transgender individuals lack a standardized, accessible process to amend legal gender (UNDP & USAID, 2014; Nguyen, 2022). These gaps leave creatives vulnerable to permit refusals for exhibitions, festivals, or performances. While there is no special ban on homosexuality, queer imagery in art is often systemically rejected (Nualart, 2016).

b. Economic Barriers

Many LGBT individuals conceal their identity at work due to fear of discrimination, limiting advancement and networking—especially noticeable in collaboration-dependent creative professions (UNDP & USAID, 2014c). Transgender people face pronounced hiring bias and are pushed into informal/low-paid sectors. Without statutory workplace protections, hiring bias, non-renewal, and barriers to grants or loans persist (Perlov et al., 2024).

c. Social Barriers

Despite a flourishing underground queer art scene since the early 2000s, many creatives remain closeted, limiting visibility in galleries, festivals, and media (Nualart, 2016). Mainstream media underrepresents or stereotypes queer narratives; public discussion is constrained by self-censorship and fear of backlash (Nguyen, 2022). A 2012 advisory urged galleries to avoid work “that opposes the party and the government, or goes against traditional customs,” leading to blanket censorship; some spaces closed residencies under pressure and displayed rejection letters where works should hang, effectively silencing queer voices (Brown, 2012). In Oct 2023, drag performers were removed from a televised music event at the request of Ho Chi Minh City’s Department of Culture and Sport, illustrating shifting, unofficial boundaries (ArtsEquator, 2023).

d. Existing Initiatives and Emerging Trends

Hanoi Pride (since 2012) brings NGOs, artists, and allies together for two weeks of events consisting of parades, panels, and workshops. The 2024 Opening Ceremony, hosted by UNDP Vietnam, emphasized policy advocacy and community well-being (UNDP, 2024). LumiQueer curates the Hanoi International Queer Film Week, pairing screenings with talks and forums (Vice, 2022). The Vietnam Art Collection (VAC) Residency Hanoi (launched April 2024) supports cross-disciplinary projects, including those by LGBTQIA+ practitioners (VAC Residency, 2024). Meta House (with the Heinrich Böll Foundation) has hosted regional Pride-linked art programmes; the Goethe-Institut Vietnam’s HAN Residency encourages proposals from marginalized groups (Meta House & Heinrich Böll Foundation, 2023; Goethe-Institut Vietnam, n.d.).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Southeast Asia's creative economy stands at a crossroads. While it holds great promise as a driver of innovation and inclusion, LGBTQIA+ individuals are still systematically marginalized by interlocking political, legal, economic, and social barriers that undermine livelihoods and expression.

No ASEAN member currently has comprehensive SOGIESC-inclusive legislation: criminalization remains in Brunei, Malaysia, Myanmar, and parts of Indonesia; anti-discrimination protections are absent or piecemeal across Cambodia, Lao PDR, the Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam; only Thailand has legalized same-sex marriage as of January 2025. The absence of robust national frameworks leaves queer creatives vulnerable and incentivizes self-censorship. Even in relatively permissive environments, gaps in protection and recognition enable censorship and restrict opportunity.

Economic exclusion compounds legal gaps. Without workplace non-discrimination and inclusive financing, many queer artists are pushed into informal, precarious livelihoods. Despite evidence that discrimination can cost up to 1% of GDP, formal inclusion efforts remain insufficient. Many artists self-finance, seek residencies abroad, rely on global queer networks, organize underground shows, and use digital platforms to reach audiences—ingenious but personally taxing strategies.

Social stigma remains pervasive. Even as grassroots collectives and digital spaces carve out safer and braver spaces, scale and formal recognition are lacking to convert isolated successes into systemic inclusion.

Recommendations (advocacy-focused):

- ∞ **Integrate SOGIESC into regional frameworks.**
Explicitly reference SOGIESC inclusion in ASEAN and national creative-economy roadmaps and set measurable targets for queer participation.
- ∞ **Enact and enforce anti-discrimination laws.**
Adopt comprehensive SOGIESC-inclusive protections across employment, education, health care, and public services, with accessible remedies and public-sector training.
- ∞ **Support LGBTQIA+ artist guilds and collectives.**
Pilot in countries with higher political will and private-sector openness to consolidate advocacy for fair treatment and access.
- ∞ **Create dedicated funding and capacity-building.**
Require inclusive lending and micro-grant programs for LGBTQIA+ creatives; develop transparent pipelines via NGO–finance–arts partnerships and mentorship networks.
- ∞ **Strengthen grassroots and digital platforms.**
Fund community-led festivals, residencies, hubs, and regional digital platforms that elevate marginalized voices.
- ∞ **Leverage soft power and rainbow tourism.**
Build regional circuits for queer cultural exchange and residencies; use Thailand’s momentum as a context-sensitive model (with peers like the Philippines and Taiwan, beyond ASEAN).
- ∞ **Invest in research and data transparency.**
Commission regular, disaggregated studies on LGBTQIA+ participation and outcomes in CCIs; track indicators on employment, financing, censorship, and festival/residency participation to enable evidence-based policy.
- ∞ **Sustain regional collaborations and festivals.**
Support pan-ASEAN events such as SEAQCF to align arts, culture, and advocacy.

By pursuing these steps, governments, civil society, and the private sector can transform the creative economy into an engine of equitable growth—where LGBTQIA+ voices are not merely visible but foundational to innovation, cultural vitality, and sustainable development.

Acknowledgements

ASC acknowledges with appreciation the generous support of the following partners: GiveOut, RFSL, and Women Fund Asia, whose contributions made this initiative possible.

We thank the core team whose labor shaped this publication: Sari Katharyn for being the lead researcher and writer; Solimar De Castro for editing the manuscript; Ryan Silverio for their guidance on the design of the research; and Ariel Manuel for the layout.

We are grateful to everyone who participated in interviews and exchanges across the region—artists, cultural workers, creative-industry practitioners, organizers, and advocates—whose generosity of time, experience, and analysis strengthened both the evidence and the spirit of this study; we also honor the broader community of queer artists and activists in Southeast Asia, whose courage, craft, and solidarity breathe life into the region’s creative future. This report is for you, and because of you.

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