

Organizing in Asia

A presentation by Grace Poore, OutRight Action International

As part of the Roundtable Convened by the Asian Pacific Institute on Gender-Based Violence which focused on gender-based violence in Asian, Middle Eastern, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander LGBTQ communities.

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The Asian Pacific Institute on Gender-Based Violence convened a roundtable in September 2019 with the purpose of growing the Institute's capacity to represent issues affecting Asian, Middle Eastern, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander LGBTQ¹ communities experiencing gender-based violence, and creating space in our work that is explicitly queer and trans inclusive. The roundtable's goals and outcomes will serve as a forum to:

1. Acknowledge the range of LGBTQ, trans, and gender non-conforming identities present in our API² communities;
2. Identify how API LGBTQ/trans communities experience gender as a site of oppression;
3. Inform the Institute's learning and strategies in order to strengthen advocacy for API LGBTQ survivors of gender-based violence.

The following report is a write up of the Grace Poore's presentation, which was meant to set the context by describing the work of OutRight Action in Asia and the Pacific Islands. To reach more about the Roundtable Discussion that followed, please go to: <https://www.api-gbv.org/resources/api-lgbtq-roundtable/>

(1) Setting the Context: Organizing in Asia

The Roundtable started with setting the context of struggles and activism in Asian counties where OutRight Action International, an international LGBT human rights organization, provides research and documentation to activists addressing LGBT rights. Grace Poore, Regional Program Coordinator for Asia and the Pacific Islands, presented on the critical analysis, research, discussions among activists, backlash and its impacts, societal contexts, and movement strategies infusing the work for LGBT rights and safety in Asia.

¹ LGBTQ is used to refer to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Queer throughout this document for consistency; except in the section on Asia where the presenter uses LGBT.

² Although API is technically an abbreviation for Asian and Pacific Islander, the Institute includes West Asians/Middle Eastern and Native Hawaiians – the report uses the abbreviation and the full list interchangeably.

OutRight provides training to develop LGBT inclusive programs for frontline domestic violence and family violence (DV/FV) responders and domestic violence service providers; resources and expertise to develop protocols for LGBT inclusive DV/FV services, and learning and advocacy exchanges to change implementation of existing laws that address domestic violence so they are LGBT inclusive/responsive. Partnering LGBT organizations work with NGOs addressing domestic violence to link LGBT people to counseling, legal services, and other intervention services for DV/FV.

a. OutRight's Analysis of Gender-Based Violence

OutRight works to ensure that sexual orientation and gender variance are not offered as explanations and rationale for GBV; that family violence is recognized as GBV; and that a narrow understanding of what constitutes a family or a couple is not used as an excuse for minimizing DV/IPV faced by LGBT people. The prevailing critical issues are as follows.

Family Violence

- When violence is committed by family members against LGBT people, it is usually not considered violence. There is reluctance to consider family perpetrators as abusers.
- Advocates addressing gender-based violence (GBV), even self-styled feminist ones, tend to think of family violence against LGBT people as inevitable or justifiable as the actions of worried parents.
- This analysis of family violence has contributed to a lack of documentation about abuses in the home (beyond IPV between couples) that LGBT people are exposed to.
- When asked about their greatest fears, many LGBTQ groups in Asia respond that forced marriage, forced pregnancy, family violence and family eviction from the home and family rejection/condemnation hurt them the most, and had long-lasting impacts.

Heteronormative Patriarchy

- Hetero-normative understanding and approaches to addressing GBV /DV/IPV have split off women's movements and left advocacy gaps, feeding into a cycle of silence.
- Women are heavily policed to conform to gender roles; LGBT people are criticized for defying family expectations or offending family.
- Governments rely significantly on family to enforce gender and sexual conformity.
- Some LGBT people also tend to believe that GBV is a personal problem that individuals need to be resilient about and that they should deal with it themselves and not utilize or go to systems for help. This attitude feeds into

reluctance to seek outside help for dealing with DV/FV. Such reluctance does not occur in a vacuum. There are many factors that severely impact an individual's willingness to risk homophobia and transphobia in addition to the violence. These factors include past negative experiences of seeking help as well as hearing from word-of-mouth about other LGBT people's negative experiences from service-providers or police.

- One of the criticisms from LGBT victim-survivors of DV/FV is that their sexual orientation or non-conforming gender becomes the focus, rather than the gender violence they are experiencing. Such shifts leave them feeling as if they are under a microscope and that their sexual orientation and gender identity were reasons for the violence.

b. LGBT Movements in Asia

LGBTQ movements in Asia have been successfully mobilizing for LGBT rights and protections and their assertion of a human rights framework has furthered their regional and international reputation and credibility, as evidenced by some of the examples below.

- The Yogyakarta Principles released in 2006-2007 and updated in 2017, are a compendium of human rights for LGBT people that can inform service provision and can be used to link advocacy around GBV, women's human rights and LGBT human rights.
- In Myanmar, LGBT activists are trying to get LGBT protections included in the Prevention of Violence Against Women Law and they are working with the Gender Equality Network (a coalition of women's NGOs). One thing they are trying to do is change the gender binary definition of women which is being used in the draft law. They are also trying to include same-sex partnerships so that the law can be used by people facing violence in LGBT relationships.
- One strategy to raise awareness is to "queer" existing campaigns, such as the 16 Days of Activism, which tends to be a heteronormative space.
- At the regional level, the SOGIE (Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression) Caucus formed by LGBT organizations in 10 ASEAN³ countries put out online statements signed by allied orgs, pushing for ASEAN inter-governmental accountability, and protections for LGBT people in the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration. While the ASEAN governments have refused to include SOGIE in the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration, the presence of vocal and visible LGBT activism is vital, not only for raising LGBT concerns but to build alliances with other movements also fighting for human rights in the ASEAN region.

³ ASEAN: Association of Southeast Asian Nations has 10 member states: Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Brunei, Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia and Vietnam.

- In the international arena, LGBTQ organizations have been raising their concerns at the UN, and have brought international attention to national issues. The UN is a space to try to hold national governments accountable by pushing other governments or treaty bodies like CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women) and the Human Rights Committee to make recommendations on anti-violence and non-discrimination protections for LGBT people.
- Cross-movement activism of LGBT groups has strengthened alliances with other movements such as disability rights, indigenous people's rights, child rights and protections, etc., and demonstrated the reach of LGBTQ rights movements.
- National events, pride marches, conferences and other solidarity actions have been gaining a lot of online and offline news and social media coverage and national, regional and international attention. For example, in 2015, about 78,000 people attended the pride march in Taiwan, which grew to over 200,000 in 2019.
- In Sri Lanka, China, Philippines, activists are working to educate women's organizations, counseling organizations, and mainstream domestic violence service organizations to see the connections between GBV and transphobia/homophobia. In Sri Lanka, an NGO is doing workshops with sexual and reproductive health and rights organizations and grassroots women's organizations. The aim is to get people to see that DV/FV is not only a heterosexual women's issue but that it affects lesbians, bisexual women and trans women, as well as trans men.

c. Backlash in Asia

Since 2014–2015, the sociopolitical climate in many countries began to shift against LGBTQ people as a reaction, in part, to the successes of LGBTQ movements and the visibility of their advocacy for their rights. This has increasingly been viewed as threatening traditional gender norms and concepts of family and relationships. There has also been a concomitant attack on women's rights in many ASEAN countries on grounds of morality – where intimacy outside marriage is seen as punishable.

While backlash can be seen as positive evidence that movements are doing something right; in reality, it means that movement resources and energies get diverted, if not exhausted; and it means that LGBTQ communities and individuals live with and suffer the repercussions of backlash. Another effect is on cross-movement allies who can become ambivalent about their support for LGBT rights (referred to as the 'greying' effect) where previously supportive allies retreat, withdraw from or become cautious about solidarity actions.

Backlash actions include attacking LGBT websites, disrupting convenings including human rights trainings. Backlash actions target groups and individual leaders to undermine support for LGBT people and LGBT rights. At the practical level, such attacks mean NGOs have to use more expensive venues with better security, including

budgeting for emergency evacuations; and they have to repeatedly caution participants not to post photos, locations, “like” photos, etc. until after they go home and even then to be discreet. Living and working in an environment of backlash takes a toll on the well-being of activists and on movements.

Religion is playing a significant role in organizing backlash. Substantiated and unsubstantiated claims about religious laws and teachings by Hindu and Muslim fundamentalists, Christian Evangelicals, and orthodox Buddhists are being used to subvert LGBTQ rights. They are co-opting the language of women’s rights, of human rights and further legitimizing their positions by claiming that they are saving country and society, using religious laws to influence and impact secular laws.

Examples of backlash organized by religious groups include:

- A group of ultra-orthodox Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka targeted LGBT people as anti-Sinhala, anti-Buddhist, anti-Sri Lankan – effectively giving permission for anti-LGBTQ vigilantism. For example, men wrote to newspapers advocating for the rape of lesbians.
- In Singapore, a small, but very influential, minority of conservative Methodists in Parliament singlehandedly prevented the repeal of their sodomy law, using the rhetoric that this would corrupt family morality. A group of conservative Christian Singaporean women attempted, unsuccessfully, to oust the leadership of Singapore’s largest LGBTQ organization because they had shown a film about lesbians.
- In some countries, self-proclaimed “citizen watchers” are disrupting LGBT convenings. They are showing up at hotels and other private venues hosting LGBT activities – taking and sending photos to anti-LGBT conservative religious groups that are monitoring LGBT activities; influencing police to shut down trainings on LGBT human rights; and/or attacking trans people for how they dress etc., on spurious grounds of disrupting public order.
- In countries like Hong Kong and Taiwan which fought for and won rights/protections for LGBT people, South Korea, Singapore and Hong Kong, Christian conservatives make up a small minority but they mobilize against LGBT rights, domestic violence protections for people in same sex relationships, and shelter services for LGBT people fleeing violence in their homes.

d. Dynamics Related to Identity

- Many sodomy laws do not mention lesbianism; they only reference the criminalization of sex between men. However, the very presence of the law impacts lesbians and trans individuals because it is used as a justification for police to intimidate and harass lesbians. Families for instance can use the anti-sodomy law to break up lesbian relationships and to have the police chase down and arrest lesbian couples who have run away from home.

- Laws regarding gender impersonation, vagrancy laws, and laws against cross-dressing make trans people, particularly trans femme and trans women, vulnerable.
- The spread of homophobia and transphobia promulgated by different religions in the region is like the spread of misogyny and curtailment of women's rights on grounds of religion and culture. Those who bear the brunt of morality-based rigidly enforced laws are women and LGBT people.
- Men (including gay men) interact with public spaces more than women do in Asia. That is why we hear more about mass arrests of gay men from saunas, parks, public events etc. Lesbians, bisexual women and transmasculine people engage less with public spaces so state violence against lesbians and transmasculine people is less visible. However, lesbians and transmasculine people are more likely to experience violence in the home, which is often hidden.
- Trans people are fighting for legalization of changed gender.
- In Asia, there is often conflation between homosexuality, lesbianism and gender identity.

e. Questions/Discussion about Organizing in Asia

Q #1: What are the effects of significant gains, like same sex marriage legalization in Taiwan?

Grace Poore cautioned about assuming that LGBT rights are mainly about same-sex marriage. There are other areas of people's daily lives that matter more, such as: the right to safe, non-discriminatory housing and employment; legal protections from rape and sexual harassment; protections against street violence; and laws that afford recognition to same-sex couples e.g., allowing them to live as a family, have hospital visitation when one partner is sick, to share property, etc.

The push by some American LGBTQ organizations to make same-sex marriage the priority for LGBT people in Asia is undermining their other priorities (listed above); and also endangering people because it whips up hostility from anti-LGBT political leaders and groups. Making same-sex marriage an all-encompassing focus means other critical rights get overshadowed and resources get diverted. Rather than same sex marriage, perhaps the focus is on the freedom to create rainbow families.

Q #2: Can you speak to conversations around "going back to our roots" where many Asian cultures had a lot of gender fluidity before colonialism?

- Gender fluidity predates colonization in many Asian countries. There are many more terms for gender variance in Asia, and they are not usually pejorative the way terms for gays and lesbians are.

- There is (uneven) progress to recognize trans rights by supreme courts and parliaments. For instance, in Pakistan, the supreme court directed welfare benefits to Hijra⁴ communities while not recognizing their right to be in same sex relationships.
- Many governments that recognize a “third gender” still have sodomy laws – which effectively means that trans people are supposed to be heterosexual.
- Moreover, recognition does not transfer to all LGBT communities: e.g., though India’s Hijras are becoming recognized, it is not so for transmasculine people. Transmen are still in danger of forced marriage, rape and physical violence to change them. There are marginalized identities of trans people who are outside of recognized trans communities (e.g., Hijras are almost all transfemme, not transmasculine). These marginalized groups within LGBT communities still do not have recognition and rights.
- The hetero-patriarchal mindset that trans individuals are just trapped in the wrong body and they need to be saved medically, is still prevalent; therefore, not recognizing what being trans means. Forced sterilization, mandatory or compulsory surgery are examples of how patriarchy forces medical interventions to enforce conformity of the gender binary.

Q #3: Why are transmasculines in Asia seen as threatening? Generally, in the U.S., they are considered more privileged because of existing patriarchal frameworks.

- One observed trend is that some members of lesbian groups think that by transitioning, transmen are betraying women, and they are now the people that lesbians have to fight with for equality and safety. They equate being transmen with wanting to claim male privilege and power.
- In many Asian countries, transmen do not organize; they do not join LGBT movements and groups. Most do not identify as trans, but simply men. They want to assimilate for safety reasons. There is so much misogyny prevalent in Asia that transmen do not want to have to deal with it anymore. When they transition, they leave LGBT networks and the old neighborhoods they were a part of. To be identified/discovered as a transman puts people at risk for all kinds of violence, including sexual violence.
- We need to find ways to bring transmen into the movement and ask them how we can be inclusive of them. We need feminist transwomen and feminist transmen who can be visible and vocal, and change the feminist model so that we do not just replicate the same problems of patriarchy and misogyny.

⁴ In the Indian subcontinent, the term *Hijra* refers to eunuchs, intersex people, and transgender people. They are officially recognized as a third gender in Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan, being considered neither completely male nor female.

Q #4: How do we build solidarity given competition and overlapping layers of oppression and privilege experience by different groups? Should we respond to backlash?

- Solidarity means different things in different countries at different times, depending on what sociopolitical changes are happening. We have to convince allies of the importance of acting in solidarity.
- It is imperative for movements to deal with backlash, because it can spiral out of control. Advocates need to convince funders that they need to fund ways to deal with backlash.

Q #5: How are LGBTQ rights conversations happening on the global political stage?

Pink-washing is one strategy that is being used effectively and dangerously. In the context of LGBTQ rights, it refers to the practice of a state or company presenting itself as gay-friendly and progressive in order to downplay their negative behavior. For example, Several protesters, many of whom said they were Jewish, invoked what they called **pinkwashing**, Israel's alleged touting of its progressive stance on gay rights as a way of deflecting global attention away from its treatment of Palestinians.

In the Netherlands, anti-immigration politicians oppose migration claiming that immigrants are homophobic; ostensibly using an LGBTQ rights agenda to push anti-immigration policies. In Thailand, the LGBTQ movement is split – some activists are willing to work with the military junta to push for civil union/same-sex marriage; arguing about taking any opportunities that arise, even if it means working with an oppressive government. Other LGBTQ groups do not want to legitimize the military government by working with them.

Q #6: There's a lot of pushing on the governmental policy front. What about indigenous, stateless, and refugee folks who are not even recognized as part of the state, or afforded documentation?

- There are organizations that are working on rights for LGBTQ people escaping their home countries, especially in Iran, Iraq, and Syria.
- Many refugees will not disclose that they experienced homophobic violence because it is dangerous to do so and safer to focus on other types of violence they have experienced.

f. Closing Reflections about Organizing in Asia

Role of the State and Religious Institutions:

- How can we address the ways that religion and religious fundamentalism affect LGBT folks in Asia?

- Asian states are using families to police sexuality and enforce gender identities, especially through religious condemnation
- The presence of laws that criminalize LGBT are being used to perpetuate intimate partner violence and family violence

Philosophy/Politics

- What will it take to make principled collective action a more compelling option than privilege?
- What does solidarity within and between LGBT Asian communities groups look like? What is the backlash being experienced by each specific group?
- How do we articulate the intersection of genders and sexualities in ways that resonate for APIs?
- How do we differentiate – or do we? – between GBV against gay men, trans men, or male identified individuals vs lesbians, trans femme, or female identified individuals?

Gender-Based Violence

- Culture and state sanctioned violence show up as family violence
- How can domestic violence, which generally focuses on intimate partner relationships, shift to include family violence, in order to support Asia's LGBT folks?

Local + Global = "Glocal"

- GBV issues permeate different fields, affecting issues on a global scale.
- How can the demands for housing, medical access, safety, etc., in the countries of origin of LGBT API communities in the U.S. be integrated into our work here?
- How do we, as folks based in the US, support the work of LGBT activism abroad?
- It is important to recognize that simply following the lead of the U.S. LGBT rights movement's agenda for marriage equality can end up hurting LGBT people in Asia.

Chic Dabby authored this report based on her notes and those of Shirley Luo. Grace Poore Review and edited this write up of her presentation on Organizing in Asia. To reach more about the Roundtable Discussion that followed, please go to: <https://www.api-gbv.org/resources/api-lgbtq-roundtable/>



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