

## 25. Building rainbow community resilience among the queer community in Southeast Asia

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When the COVID-19 pandemic hit Southeast Asia, all state leaders in the region imposed measures to tackle the novel coronavirus. By the end of 2020, the measures taken had failed to recognise the intersectionality of the issues that exacerbated the pre-existing vulnerability of marginalised groups (FORUM-ASIA 2020). The queer community, which had been subjected to persistent discrimination and exclusion stemming from the embedded patriarchal, religious, and hetero- and cis-normative values within societies across the region, were among the groups most affected by the pandemic (Hanung 2020).

Queer communities in Southeast Asia faced various challenges and neglect by governments as well as the public on a daily basis owing to negative attitudes towards their sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC). The situation was perpetuated because no country in Southeast Asia has anti-discrimination provisions as part of their constitutions or national policies that specifically protect people with diverse SOGIESC (Outright Action International 2017). Furthermore, findings in Indonesia (Saputra 2020), Malaysia (Pillai 2020), and even the relatively more queer-friendly Philippines (Thoreson 2020) in early 2020 revealed a worsening trend of negative sentiments in the region, which blamed the queer community as the source of coronavirus and subjected them to degrading treatment under the pretext of reinforcing COVID-19-related protocols.

In the context of COVID-19, bias and negative attitudes from the governments of Southeast Asian countries resulted in the neglect of the pre-existing issues faced by queer communities, leading to their suffering from mounting physical health, mental health, psychosocial, and socio-economic challenges (Silverio 2020). To survive, queer communities

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in Southeast Asia had to rely on their own capacities to help each other. This chapter seeks to explore various strategies taken by queer communities across Southeast Asia to empower themselves and foster resilience in terms of economy, well-being, and advocacy during the first year of the pandemic.

### **Community-led initiatives in boosting queer economic resilience**

Many queer individuals in Southeast Asia, due to fear of stigma and discrimination in workspace, have relied on jobs in the informal sector as their main source of income. When government measures for COVID-19 subsequently affected that sector, their living conditions worsened, as many of them could not access government assistance. In Thailand, for example, direct assistance provided by the government excluded those who worked in creative industries, nightclubs, and bars, as well as those who were engaged in sex work (Bohwongprasert 2020). In the Philippines, the relief package could only be obtained by people who were married and had families with children (Chong 2020).

As government interventions ignored the specific needs and conditions of queer people, various civil society and community-based organisations helped queer communities to survive by creating initiatives to alleviate the economic distress brought about by the pandemic. One example was the Give.Asia 2020 fundraising by Brave Space and Sayoni in Singapore, both of which were local organisations with specific focuses on empowering marginalised and queer women. The fund provided small grants to queer individuals who were struggling to support themselves and their family due to the loss of their jobs and income.

In Indonesia, communities of transgender women across the country conducted a series of local initiatives such as setting up food banks, distributing food to community members and other people in need, and providing cash assistance to cover rent payments in order to help alleviate the community members' economic burdens. They even enrolled as volunteers in their neighbourhoods to remind people about COVID-19 health protocols in public spaces (Rodriguez 2020).

To meet daily needs, queer and trans women who worked in the nightlife, bars, and sex work sector in Thailand decided to move to online platforms when the government ordered curfews and social distancing as part of its COVID-19 response. For example, they hired remote DJs to perform on Instagram Live and organised drag shows via Zoom. Although the efforts could not cover the full salaries of waiters,

bar staff, night taxi drivers, and other secondary jobs that relied on the industry, it at least helped queer-led entertainment businesses stay afloat in the absence of economic assistance during the first six months of the pandemic (Kenyon 2020).

## **Addressing psychosocial well-being through community-led support**

Apart from economic resilience, social and emotional connectedness (both in-person and virtual) helped maintain queer individuals' psychosocial well-being and subsequently strengthened the resilience of queer communities (Anderson and Knee 2020). The isolation imposed by pandemic restrictions compounded existing psychological burdens, and it was further amplified by a heightened risk of discrimination and violence at the hands of their own family members and partners.

The earliest responses by queer community organisations to address the issue of social and emotional connectedness took place through online platforms. In the first three months after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic, various virtual meetings – ranging from webinars and podcasts to community cyber spaces – were convened to discuss the effects of the pandemic on local queer communities in the region. These approaches, however, could not provide sustained and continuous support to facilitate total healing. Therefore, community-led initiatives were focused on providing peer support and counselling that could be accessed anytime by those in need. One of the examples of such a strategy was that implemented by Sayoni in Singapore, which cooperated with AWARE, a local women's organisation, to provide online peer support and a hotline for psychosocial counselling services that could be accessed by queer women in the country.

To support the well-being of caregivers who worked directly with the community, local queer community organisations also cooperated with think tanks, psychosocial institutions, and private donors to establish care programmes for caregivers. For example, the Community Health and Inclusion Association (CHIA), a community-based organisation for HIV-affected populations in Laos, cooperated with various agencies to support their workers by providing them with personal protection equipment, capacity-building for online communication skills, and regular counselling so that they could still conduct outreach to queer communities in need while maintaining their well-being (APCOM 2020).

Realising the paramount importance of providing mental health and psychosocial support for queer communities in pandemic times, community-based organisations and collectives also established online databases of service providers that were available and accessible for queer communities. Such databases were created by Youth Voices Count (YVC Secretariat 2020), an organisation dedicated to queer youth in Asia and the Pacific, and Queer Lapis, a queer community collective in Malaysia.

Although effective in terms of providing immediate support, it should be noted that online platforms had their limitations. As argued by Silverio (2020), there was the possibility that utilising online platforms for building connectedness was exclusionary, as they could only be accessed by communities in urban areas with the privilege of easy access to technology. Finding creative ways to reach the most marginalised of the already-marginalised queer community has yet to be explored.

### **Addressing stigma and discrimination in pandemic times**

In addition to economic, social, and psychosocial supports, the risk of victimisation based on SOGIESC was one of the key determinants for building resilience among queer adults (Shilo, Antebi, and Mor 2014). This challenge was also prominent in the Southeast Asian context, as queer communities in the region remained disproportionately more vulnerable to prejudice or discrimination than their heterosexual or cisgender counterparts.

In commemorating the 2020 International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia, United Nations special rapporteurs on human rights warned the public about the imminent threat of queer victimisation and its effects on resilience during the pandemic (OHCHR 2020). The rapporteurs highlighted the increased frequency of hate speech explicitly or implicitly inciting violence against queer persons and blaming the pandemic on their existence. In Southeast Asia, the trend manifested in statements by government officials, political leaders, and religious leaders, as well as in discriminatory treatment and violence carried out by the public.

Many queer community organisations adopted three-step approaches to ensure human rights protections for queer communities. These steps entailed: (1) monitoring and documenting the pattern of violations experienced by the community; (2) providing responsive and restorative interventions to influence law and policy based on the recommendations

synthesised from the documentation; and (3) creating an enabling environment through coalition-building (Jaspars, O’Callaghan, and Stites 2008). The community had to take comprehensive steps to ensure the availability of judicial infrastructure and support for victims to obtain justice, even during the pandemic.

A notable example was provided by the Sangsan Anakot Yawachon Development Project, an organisation working to empower queer indigenous and stateless women in northern Thailand. As one of its responses to serve affected community members during the pandemic, it conducted monitoring and documentation on the impact of COVID-19 on women, children, and LGBTIQ youth in indigenous communities. The report was presented at subdistrict and national levels to influence policy interventions. The organisation also submitted the findings to the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples, who later issued an official report on the impact of COVID-19 on the rights of indigenous peoples incorporating the voices of the Sangsan community (APWLD 2020).

### **Conclusion: lessons for moving forward**

The examples discussed in this chapter show how queer communities across Southeast Asia, despite various degrees of pre-existing challenges, managed to survive by relying on community-led initiatives as the government’s responses failed to address their specific needs. It was not the first time that queer communities had been excluded from discussions related to emergency responses. In 2018, a coalition of civil society organisations in the Asia-Pacific region convened a groundbreaking meeting – ‘Pride in the Humanitarian System’ – to discuss the continuous exclusion of queer identities from humanitarian and disaster management responses. The organisations called for the inclusion of SOGIESC and the adoption of a feminist lens in recovery, relief, and rehabilitation efforts (UN Women 2018) to avoid further discrimination against the queer community. It was evident that governments in Southeast Asia failed to implement the recommendations in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Queer communities in Southeast Asia demonstrated resilience by performing adaptive actions during the time of extreme adversity (Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker 2003). The success of such actions stemmed from the essential roles of civil society and community organisations. The cases of queer community-related programmes in Southeast Asia discussed

in this chapter show how local actors, who were well-equipped with the knowledge of economic, social, legal, and cultural dynamics, contribute to identifying the needs and developing the strength of queer communities, bolstering agency and self-organisation for queer communities to build resilience. Local actors proved themselves to be able to provide immediate, tailor-made solutions to alleviate burdens and reach out to those in need (Berkes and Ross 2012).

At the time of this chapter's publication, challenges remained. The first was sustainability. Building resilience is a continuous process to enable people to adapt during times of adversity. As there has been no certainty about the end of the pandemic or its re-emergence in the future, fostering resilience should also be accompanied by the availability of sustainable resources. Most of the community initiatives documented here depended on funding from civil society and private donations. There are huge risks associated with putting an additional burden on usually underfunded local organisations (Silverio 2020). This concern led 61 organisations and 142 activists across Southeast Asia to issue a statement calling on donors and funders operating in the region to focus more on building 'rainbow resilience' (ASEAN SOGIE Caucus 2020).

In addition to funding scarcity, civil society and community-based organisations faced a heightened risk of stigma and discrimination. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, pushed them to refocus their efforts on providing direct assistance to queer community members at the cost of reducing resources previously allocated for activities related to the promotion and protection of human rights. Many organisations thus conveyed concerns about juggling the two priorities.

The last challenge was how to plan for recovery. Most of the initiatives discussed above focused on the resilience of the queer community. At the time of publication, however, there was no definite plan for how to assist the queer community to fully recover from the pandemic in a sustainable manner. In October 2020, the governments of Southeast Asia adopted a regional framework of action to help the economic recovery of the region. Reflecting the continuous neglect of the needs of queer communities, the recovery plan did not specifically address the situation of these marginalised communities. With the recovery framework failing to address the specific challenges faced by the queer community, community-led interventions remained the only viable solution to alleviate the burdens on queer individuals and demand a more active role for governments during the recovery period in providing proper remedies for the community.

**Figure 25.1.** Civil society statement in Southeast Asia calling for donors and funders to focus more on building ‘rainbow resilience’



Source: ASEAN SOGIE Caucus.

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