



MENTAL HEALTH STRESSORS FOR LGBTIQ ADVOCATES WORKING ON GENDER BASED VIOLENCE IN ASIA

Grace Poore, May 2022

Background

In 2020 and 2021, members of the Asia LGBTIQ Network on SOGIE & Gender Based Violence,¹ flagged the glaring lack of mental health support mechanisms for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ) advocates working on gender-based violence (GBV)² issues in Asia. Network members spoke of sharply increased stress, anxiety, depression, and fatigue mostly due to impacts of the COVID pandemic, including rise in emergency requests for assistance from LGBTIQ people facing income loss, food and housing disruption, and rising GBV from families and partners while under household quarantines and neighborhood lockdowns, often enforced with militarized type of policing.³

While the pandemic exacerbated and intensified mental health stressors for LGBTIQ advocates, the stressors themselves preceded COVID. For instance, there was lack of mental health support services for LGBTIQ crisis responders, lack of organizational mechanisms for mental health check-ins with GBV peer counselors and early responders, lack of organizational funding to provide free or subsidized mental health services for LGBTIQ advocates who cannot afford this on

¹ The Asia LGBTIQ Network on SOGIE and Gender Based Violence was established in 2020 by OutRight Action International as a platform for expertise, learning, and advocacy exchanges on LGBTIQ inclusive responses to gender-based violence intervention and prevention. It currently has 40 members from 13 countries in Asia. The Network convenes annual regional forums, theme-based webinars, and undertakes research. An online hub is managed by OutRight and is available for Network members and non-members (restricted access).

² Gender Based Violence (GBV) is violence rooted in systemic patriarchy. It involves violence against people on grounds of their female sex and gender, as well as against individuals and groups who do not conform to heterosexual, gender-binary norms. Forms of GBV include domestic violence, intimate partner violence, sexual assault, homophobia, and transphobia.

³ "LGBTIQ protection and service gaps exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic," verbal country reports presented by members of Asia LGBTIQ Network on SOGIE & GBV for the online regional forum, August 3-7, 2021. Report on forum proceedings and outcomes and Zoom recording on file with OutRight Action International.

their own, and improper implementation of stress management.⁴

At the conclusion of a regional forum of the Asia LGBTIQ Network on SOGIE & GBV in 2021, a recommendation was made to develop regional wellness mechanisms to support healthy, sustainable LGBTIQ activism in general, but specifically and urgently for anti-GBV work. Forum participants wanted GBV programs and organizations to support mental health and wellbeing of workers. This was seen as a step towards improving mental health and wellbeing of LGBTIQ advocates working on GBV, which in turn, would strengthen resilience of LGBTIQ activism and anti-GBV work.⁵ In response to the recommendation, OutRight convened a wellness collective of volunteer Network members and OutRight Asia program staff. The seven-member wellness collective agreed to carry out a preliminary study on mental health stressors of members of the Network and their cohorts working on GBV in LGBTIQ communities. Findings would be presented in a paper, disseminated to Network members and their organizations/networks, and used to design a mental wellbeing workshop. The workshop would inform the development of a regional wellness mechanism to be pilot tested by Network members.⁶

About The Study

In collaboration with the wellness collective of the Asia LGBTIQ Network on SOGIE & GBV, OutRight conducted a rapid assessment of 27 individuals in India, Indonesia, Nepal, Philippines, Singapore, and Sri Lanka.

The aim of the study was to gather some insights on mental health stressors for LGBTIQ advocates doing GBV work in Asia before and during the COVID pandemic, specifically to identify social, legal and cultural contributing factors for mental health stressors, impacts of the stressors on activists and implications for their activism, and availability and access to mental wellbeing resources for LGBTIQ activists doing GBV work. The study also looked at self-care practices in the context of LGBTIQ activists' lived realities.

⁴ Participant sharing, Asia LGBTIQ Network on SOGIE & GBV, 2020 regional forum, October 5-9, 2020 and 2021 regional forum, August 3-7, 2021. Reports on forum proceedings and outcomes and Zoom recordings on file with OutRight Action International.

⁵ Regional forum, August 3-7, 2021 on Zoom. Report on proceedings and outcomes and Zoom recording on file with OutRight Action International.

⁶ Internal meeting notes of wellness collective, September 1 to October 21, 2021 and January 28 to March 25, 2022. On file with OutRight Action International.

Criteria for inclusion in the study: individuals who are on the LGBTIQ spectrum and work on GBV (i.e., they self-identify their sexual orientation, gender, and sex characteristics as being lesbian, gay, bisexual, gender diverse, or intersex), and individuals who are non-LGBTIQ allies who advocate LGBTIQ rights and work on GBV in LGBTIQ communities.

An interview questionnaire jointly developed by wellness collective members was used to obtain quantitative and qualitative information. Seventeen of the interviewees were members of the Network and ten were recommended by Network members for their work on SOGIE & GBV.

Participants in the study have diverse GBV expertise, including crisis responders, hotline and peer counselors, victim-survivor advocates, emergency shelter providers, support group facilitators, community educators, human rights commissioners, and documenters of GBV violations. Some also manage non-government organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs). All interviews were conducted on Zoom except in Nepal, where interviews were done in-person. Language translation was provided as needed. Five of the six wellness collective members who conducted the interviews were themselves part of the study.

This paper is authored by OutRight. It is based on 25 of the 27 interviews—two cis-het individuals were excluded as they did not themselves work on SOGIE and GBV. Pseudonyms or first names are used where requested for safety and security.

Study results will be used to raise awareness and promote wellness and wellbeing supports for LGBTIQ advocates whose work involved responding to GBV.

I. Demographics

Sub-regional representation of interviews

- Southeast Asia participants: 5 Indonesia, 6 Philippines, 2 Singapore
- South Asia participants: 5 India, 4 Nepal, 5 Sri Lanka
- Northeast Asia: activists in Japan and from China were invited but unable to participate.

SOGIE of respondents

Individuals chose from a list of disaggregated SOGIE options. Some also provided clarifying information for their answers.

- **Sexual orientation**
5 identified as lesbian, 6 gay, 3 bisexual, 2 pansexual, 3 queer, 3 heterosexual, 5 did not answer.
- **Gender**
2 identified as trans men, 1 trans woman, 1 third gender, 7 cis gender, 14 did not answer
- **Sex characteristics**
None identified as intersex.

Four respondents identifying as cisgender-heterosexual (cis-het) working on SOGIE and GBV were included as LGBTIQ allies. Two other cis-het individuals did not meet study criteria and were excluded.

Age of respondents

Individuals ranged from 30 to 70 years.

Age 70	1
Ages 51-55	5
Ages 46-50	6
Ages 31-45	12
Age 30	1

Number of years worked on Gender Based Violence

2-5 years	5
6-10 years	6
11-20 years	7
Over 20 years	7

Other current activism and expertise in addition to SOGIE & Gender Based Violence

Gender equality, women's rights, sexual and reproductive health and rights, sex worker rights and protections, healthcare justice, child rights, peace building, mental health of marginalized communities, LGBTIQ human rights.

II. Self-Care And LGBTIQ Activism

Respondents were asked for their definition of concepts central to the study—self-care and mental wellbeing. Many acknowledged their own discomfort with taking time off to rest, reboot, rejuvenate mostly because of too much work and not knowing how to step away from the expectation to always be available and accessible. However, as Table 1 shows, respondents have awareness and aspirations for activism that centers self-care, wellness, and wellbeing.

Ritu, India	State of mind where you feel safe, secure, able to talk about your feelings, cope with your feelings, cope with everyday ups and downs. ⁸
Saman, Sri Lanka	Practical solutions instead of getting depressed when faced with challenges. ⁹
Shila, Nepal	Cleanliness, regular health check-ups, getting medical treatment as needed. ¹⁰
Kanjeng, Indonesia	It means I can protect myself from violence, anything external that disturbs my privacy, my personality, my soul, my heart. ¹¹
Sasha, Singapore	It's inner work—psychological, emotional, spiritual. Thinking about who you are in positive ways and what kind of meanings life holds for you. ¹²
Maya, India	Very early on, one was taught not to care about oneself and that if you did so, you were selfish. Now, in my organization we have started doing counseling amongst ourselves... A lot of people have issues with family, and this is really hard. We meet to share our collective experiences. There is no formal mental wellbeing mechanism as such. We are looking for queer friendly psychiatrists and psychologists who can support us. ¹³
Ging, Philippines	It's part of my human rights, my right to self-expression. ¹⁴
Jean, Singapore	Being an effective activist is to have mental wellness. If there's no mental wellness you make risky decisions, your risk profile goes up, which makes your anxiety go up. ¹⁵

⁷ OutRight Action International, 2022 study on mental health stressors for LGBTIQ activists working on gender-based violence in Asia.

⁸ OutRight Zoom interview with Ritu, Delhi, 1 November, 2021.

⁹ OutRight Zoom interview with Saman (pseudonym), Sri Lanka, 12 November, 2021.

¹⁰ OutRight in-person interview with Shila, Kathmandu, 29 October, 2021.

¹¹ OutRight Zoom interview with Kanjeng (pseudonym), Indonesia, 5 November, 2021.

¹² OutRight Zoom interview with Sasha (pseudonym), Singapore, 4 November, 2021.

¹³ OutRight Zoom interview with Maya Sharma, Gujrat, India, 12 November, 2021.

¹⁴ OutRight Zoom interview with Ging Cristobal, Quezon City, Philippines, 5 November 2021.

¹⁵ OutRight Zoom interview with Jean Chong, Singapore, 9 November, 2021.

Views on self-care expressed by study participants tended to defy norms and practices of their work and activism spaces, including feminist organizations, LGBTIQ groups, and human rights organizations. Many respondents felt that the activism culture in both Southeast Asia and South Asia demanded/expected self-sacrifice over self-care, duty to fulfill external obligations over personal wellbeing, and personal/individual responsibility for handling mental health issues and wellness needs (Table 2).

Table 2: Asian culture of activism and mental wellbeing ¹⁶	
Faith, Philippines	One of the biggest and strongest movements here, the socialist movement, is hinged on the concept of sacrifice. It influences how activists think about activism. If you're an activist, you have to sacrifice parts of yourself and your personal life. You expose yourself to state violence, hunger, and lack of resources, not being able to build a career or an abundant life...Personally, I think it is the responsibility of movements and organizations to provide the space for activists to be activists, but their mental and physical wellbeing are still taken care of. ¹⁷
Twyla, Philippines	You have organizations that are highly demanding, that ask if it might be destructive for you to take a break. Given that the personal is political for us, it should be recognized that people do need to recharge. Otherwise, what we do will not be sustainable. I think that activists feel guilty as a default every time they take a break. ¹⁸
Kiran, India	I was constantly on edge, had difficulties going to sleep... It's made me question the wisdom of doing broader activism work like dealing with the Right Wing, while also doing first responder crisis response, and also doing grant writing. The combined roles take a toll. Non-profits are sort-staffed, especially for handling LGBT crises, which need a lot of additional skills like dealing with police and family. ¹⁹
Sasha, Singapore	NGO policies say that activists can access mental health services... but in a meritocracy, only productivity counts. ²⁰

¹⁶ OutRight Action International, 2022.

¹⁷ OutRight Zoom interview with Faith, Philippines, 10 November, 2021.

¹⁸ OutRight Zoom interview with Krissi Shaffina Twyla Rubin, Philippines, 3 November, 2021.

¹⁹ OutRight Zoom interview with Kiran, Chennai, India, 3 November, 2021.

²⁰ Sasha interview, 4 November, 2021.

Carol, India	Many of us are survivors of violence or trauma and it's part of our impulse to do the activism. Sometimes we end up engaging in this process because it helps us in our own struggles, and sometimes because they are social problems, not individual problems.... You can get triggered by things that take you back to your own issues or you can transfer your issues onto other people. Part of self-care for activists is to have time and space to be self-aware, go through self-reflection, and processing what that means. ²¹
Ephraim, Sri Lanka	I was part of a team that was documenting women who had been internally trafficked. Documenting their experiences and reading about it was quite overwhelming for me. I had a mental breakdown and few weeks after I was reassigned to another work. Growing up I had a very sheltered life, so I have not learned to cope with hearing someone else's trauma. ²²
Luther, Philippines	Second-hand stress and second-hand trauma from engaging with survivors... sometimes you are told horrific details about the abuse that they've encountered. We need guideposts for how to protect ourselves. Personally, I don't really know how I cope with it other than just powering through. ²³
Anita, Indonesia	LGBT activists I know have a lot of violence since they were children, even sexual violence. We need professional psychotherapy for activists, but no LGBT organization can provide it. Activists in my country cannot afford to pay for one-to-one counseling. ²⁴

Clearly, respondents feel that mental wellbeing is critical for sustainability of individual and collective capacities to continue responding to gender based violence. They do not see self-care as selfish but as a step towards building communities of care by and for activists. In this context, self-care becomes a renewable resource to sustain GBV interventions, GBV evidence-gathering, and GBV policy work.

III. Environmental Factors Contributing To Mental Health Stressors

Three environments contribute significantly to mental health stressors for LGBTIQ advocates responding to GBV. The first environment, according to the study, is working under COVID conditions. The second environment is working in hostile conditions under conservative governments. The third environment is working for organizations with limited or no mental health supports.

²¹ OutRight, Zoom interview with Carol (pseudonym), Kerala, India, 14 November, 2021.

²² OutRight, Zoom interview with Ephraim Shadrach, Sri Lanka, 3 November, 2021.

²³ OutRight Zoom interview with Raymund Luther Aquino, Philippines, 3 November, 2021.

²⁴ OutRight Zoom interview with Anita (Pseudonym), Indonesia, 12 November, 2021.

Mental Health Stressors Under COVID

a) LGBTIQ advocates responding to GBV experienced the following:

- elevated anxiety, sleeplessness, stress, over-thinking
- sadness and grief from loss of family members, friends, and co-workers who lost close family members
- sadness for not being to travel for funeral ceremonies and say goodbye
- constant uncertainty of health and safety of self, colleagues, friends, family, community
- fear of getting COVID from having to go into offices and handle crisis cases during lockdowns without guidelines for COVID protection.
- near psychological meltdown from increased work obligations
- overwhelmed from urgent requests for help with no resources to respond
- mental exhaustion because boundaries for break times broken
- stress of being on call 24/7
- stress of organization expectations with no staff backup or mental health supports.

b) LGBTIQ advocates suffered additional impacts due to COVID lockdowns and community quarantines:

- excessive anger
- feeling paralyzed, fear
- loss of focus
- increased household and relationship tension
- depression from social isolation
- heavy guilt for prioritizing self-care over going outside to help the community
- loss of paid work and financial struggles.

c) LGBTIQ advocates also experienced new mental health stressors and impacts of increased online obligations, such as meetings, trainings, and webinars:

- Zoom fatigue, lack of motivation
- burnout due to no separation between work and home

Overall, 11 activists in the study said that COVID worsened their stressors due to increased work obligations—mostly

- more GBV requests for help
- more emergency calls at night
- no staff backup to cover their work even if they needed a mental health break from case overload or secondhand trauma related to difficult GBV cases.

Table 3 presents personal experiences of the pandemic shared by some LGBTIQ activists in the study.

Table 3: LGBTIQ activists' personal experiences of COVID²⁵

Santa, India	I had a sense I was losing everything. I was fearful the pandemic wouldn't end and how would the community survive, earn a living, re-open beauty parlors? Community members kept calling me to find a bed for them in the quarantine center. ²⁶
Luther, Philippines	A lot of LGBTIQ activists join activism to be with other people who are like them, in a space where they feel respected, safe, and nurtured. The pandemic has separated a LGBTIQ activists, torn them away from welcoming spaces. ²⁷
Maya, India	I had COVID. There was pain everywhere. I didn't know what was happening to me. It seemed like I escaped death. It was very depressing. I had people around, but I felt isolated. I couldn't talk to anyone or reach out to anyone. I couldn't muster the courage to get help from a counselor. ²⁸
Fransis, Indonesia	A lot of people didn't want to wear masks or get vaccinated...some government stakeholders didn't want to use Zoom for human rights training, so I had to conduct it offline, in person. I was afraid of getting COVID. ²⁹
Jonta, Indonesia	Some of the trans activists in grassroots communities lost their jobs and income, and they were screaming for help. It was a community crisis and there was nothing I could do to help because of COVID restrictions. ³⁰
Sasha, Singapore	Pre-COVID there was a slow death rate of older persons I worked with. Now every day there's a funeral for someone who died. It's devastating thinking about an entire generation of people gone and going. ³¹
Twyla, Philippines	I had to go out even in the first three months of the pandemic for my job. Rising GBV during the pandemic was a stressor because of the number of counseling sessions we had to go through a day. ³²
Kiran, India	I had to do increased peer counseling with 4 queer women callers a week, 15 a month. It was very difficult for me. There was extreme family violence on the women, forced to return to their parents' homes. ³³
Anita, Indonesia	I haven't recovered from the loss of my sister and friends to COVID. I don't answer the phone right away now because I'm so stressed and I can't listen to people's stories when they call... With so many COVID deaths, I couldn't really pray. My mind gets blocked. ³⁴

²⁵ OutRight Action International, 2022.

²⁶ OutRight Zoom interview with Santa, Manipur, India, 24 November 2021.

²⁷ Aquino interview, 3 November 2021.

²⁸ Sharma interview, 12 November 2021.

²⁹ OutRight interview with Fransis (pseudonym), Indonesia, 4 November, 2021.

³⁰ OutRight Zoom interview with Jonta Saragih Indonesia, 3 November, 2021.

³¹ Sasha interview, 4 November, 2021.

³² Rubin interview, 3 November, 2021.

³³ Kiran interview, 3 November 2021.

³⁴ Anita interview, 12 November, 2021.

Mental Health Stressors In Hostile Conditions Under Conservative Governments

Country conditions contributed to how safe activists in the study felt about disclosing their SOGI in their work and/or activism spaces. Out of 25 LGBTIQ activists in the study, only 16 (mostly in India, Philippines, some in Sri Lanka, and one in Indonesia) were safe to be Out as LGBTIQ people at work and in other activism spaces; 6 (mostly in Sri Lanka, Indonesia and Singapore) could be Out in their NGOs and CBOs but not in other spaces where they did their activism, e.g., the broader women’s movement, with government officials, or with professional colleagues in their field of expertise, such as, mental health profession; and 7 (in Indonesia and Nepal) were not out where they worked. Most of the non-LGBTIQ allies in the study could be open about their support for LGBTIQ issues/people in non-LGBTIQ workspaces (3 in Philippines and Indonesia), but 1 cis-het ally (in Indonesia) absolutely could not reveal their LGBTIQ allyship.

Working on GBV exposed many LGBTIQ advocates in the study to prejudice, hostile speech, even physical attacks. The following examples speak to some of these vulnerabilities.

Sri Lanka

- When activists intervene in SOGIE-based violence, they are always at risk of being threatened, harassed or intimidated by the perpetrators, with no help from police/other authorities.³⁵

India

- Family members of a lesbian client brought kidnapping charges against a lesbian activist and her organization.³⁶
- Police threatened activists who intervene in LGBTIQ GBV cases.³⁷
- Parents of a lesbian client sheltering in a lesbian activist’s home, broke in, and damaged the property in retaliation.³⁸
- A lesbian first responder in a family violence case was accused of obscenity.³⁹
- A lesbian activist lost her housing and was labeled a “bad person” because of “who was coming to her house.”⁴⁰
- Transmen seeking assistance from a women’s organization were outed to their families. The organization was also outed and all risked “insult, injury, abuse.”⁴¹

³⁵ OutRight Zoom interview with Thiyagaraja Waradas, 21 January 2022.

³⁶ OutRight Zoom interview with Ritu, 1 November, 2021.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Carol interview, 14 November, 2021.

⁴¹ Sharma interview, 12 November, 2021.

Singapore

- A queer woman activist from the LGBTIQ community was shamed in the press for making statements against the government.⁴²
- A lesbian activist was physically and verbally threatened by men in public because she looks queer. She also experienced online threats of rape.⁴³
- Changes in the law have severely altered how LGBTIQ people organize. For instance, the 2021 Foreign Interference Act and 2020 Protection from Online Falsehoods And Manipulation Act can be used against LGBTIQ activists—e.g., the friend of a queer cis activist who questioned police treatment of ethnic minorities, was charged with “inciting racially insensitive remarks and promoting ill will.” Those charged under this law can be fired from their jobs and, if convicted, can be fined or face prison. Also, their family members can be denied job opportunities.⁴⁴

Philippines

- The Villanueva religious group, which has 40 bishops from different Christian churches across the country and one of the largest mega churches in the Philippines, pretends to be an LGBTIQ ally. It held a gathering advertised as “religious inclusive,” and drew “previously LGBT” people that the Church “converted.” The group “goes out of its way to make LGBTIQ activists feel excluded from society.”⁴⁵

Nepal

- LGBTIQ activists working on GBV face most threats from families of GBV victims who blame activists “for manipulating their children.” One family threatened physical destruction of an LBQT organization’s office.⁴⁶
- A bisexual woman activist lost many friends and community members to suicide because their families disowned them. She received crisis calls, sometimes at midnight, from some of these individuals desperately seeking assistance.⁴⁷
- The father and brother of a queer indigenous activist denied her all rights to the family’s ancestral property because she “broke the rule of the house.”⁴⁸ She also faces caste discrimination from her same sex partner’s higher caste community.⁴⁹

Indonesia

- Anti-LGBT sentiment is widespread across the country. All state policies restrict LGBT activities. LGBTIQ activists face threats. The government and law enforcement can charge them for criminal activities.⁵⁰
- A report on LGBT issues was attacked online by a radical Muslim group and barraged with negative comments.⁵¹

⁴² Sasha interview, 4 November, 2021.

⁴³ Chong interview, 9 November 2021.

⁴⁴ Sasha interview, 4 November, 2021.

⁴⁵ Rubin interview, 3 November, 2021.

⁴⁶ OutRight in-person interview with Laxmi, Kathmandu, 24 December, 2021.

⁴⁷ OutRight in-person interview with Sarita, Kathmandu, 13 December, 2021.

⁴⁸ Laxmi interview, 24 December, 2021.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Saragih interview, 3 November, 2021.

⁵¹ Fransis interview, 4 November, 2021.

- A cis-het woman who is an ethnic and religious minority, working with trans communities, was labeled “full of the devil” by Catholic activists. She says: “I don’t have my church network anymore. They became more and more fundamentalist and there were disagreements about my activism on LGBTIQ rights. I didn’t want to fight with them anymore. I got tired of talking about God’s punishment.”⁵²
- A gay cis man who is an ethnic minority, working in the psychology field, receives online hate speech because he does LGBT education. He also receives hate speech because of his ethnicity and sexual orientation.⁵³

A related mental health stressor flagged by study respondents in India, Sri Lanka and Singapore is intra-community “isms” (Table 4). In some instances, the “isms” were premised on unchallenged stereotypes and prejudice of LGBTIQ groups from one (usually ethno-religious) dominant majority community against LGBTIQ groups from marginalized communities (e.g., ethnic or religious minorities, indigenous people). In other instances, tensions were related to the climate of distrust within activist communities working under authoritarian governments, where some activists were in favor of collaboration with government (e.g., for law and policy change), and others refused to engage with an authoritarian State. Both situations fragmented political solidarity and efforts to counter nationalism and racism in Asia, and efforts to obtain LGBTIQ protections for GBV—domestic violence/intimate partner violence/family violence.

Table 4: Intra-community “isms” and mental health stressors⁵⁴

Kiran, India	The queer activist community is a small community, and everyone knows everyone. Warring ideologies affect resilience... between queer activists on the Left and on the Right, between trans and cis communities, and between lesbian identified groups that are not comfortable with trans women. Transmasculine people don’t have support systems because of patriarchy, and they are ignored by trans women communities who resent trans men. Queer cis women are mostly invisibilized. Queer people with connections to politicians are Hindu and other queer people fall behind... Doing intersectional activism with people facing intersectional oppression needs forgiveness for each other because we are taking on a world that’s far more hostile and we need to be resilient. ⁵⁵
Wara, Sri Lanka	There have been number of situations, where there was an incident where I was attacked because of my ethnicity by the people in my own movement. It wasn’t necessary. The stress made me want to quit, the frustration that I felt because of my own people. ⁵⁶

⁵² Anita interview, 12 November, 2021.

⁵³ OutRight Zoom interview with Benny Prawira, Indonesia, 15 November, 2021.

⁵⁴ OutRight Action International, 2022.

⁵⁵ Kiran interview, 3 November 2021.

⁵⁶ Waradas interview, 21 January, 2022.

Jean, Singapore	There's social media and government surveillance that could lead to punitive responses... These are vertical threats but there are also horizontal attacks from other civil society who are not in sync with you... activists who say, you are betraying human rights by working with the government on GBV. Even if our advocacy brought big wins, some activists say, you are selling out. ⁵⁷
Carol, India	The calling-out culture where someone wants to blame someone when something happens... sometimes we go so far in that direction and don't think about people needing care and understanding. I advocate kindness and compassion but that doesn't mean I'm apolitical or that I don't see power structures and oppressions in society... Being compassionate to other people... I don't see the point or possibility of doing this work if I don't have that. ⁵⁸

Mental Health Stressors Of Working In NGOs/CSOs Without Mental Health Supports

Total 19 of the activists in the study are employed by NGOs or CSOs, 4 activists are employed by quasi-government institutions like National Human Rights Commissions and universities, and 2 activists freelance. All 25 respondents were unanimous that program budgets should incorporate funds for staff mental health services, have a time-off policy for mental health breaks, and designate long-term mental health and wellness activities within the organization. They acknowledged that although lack of funding is a challenge for organizations to provide mental health supports, the notion of “selfless” activism more likely contributes to deprioritizing staff self-care, not providing back-up to cover staff who need mental health breaks, and use of staff retreats to talk about work outcomes not wellbeing. Table 5 is a snapshot of employee “benefits,” barriers, and needs.

Table 5: Medical and mental healthcare supports provided through work⁵⁹
22 of the 25 activists in the study receive paid employee sick leave; 20 have access to medical doctors.
7 can access peer counseling; 2 can access private, individual mental health counseling from a trained professional in-house through the job.
6 receive and use annual vacation leave; 10 take 1 day off from work per week; 11 don't take any work breaks unless they fall ill or have an emergency because they have no paid time off or have heavy workloads. 1 activist works for an organization that offers days off for mental health reasons, including breaks to recover from traumatic GBV cases.

⁵⁷ Chong interview, 9 November, 2021.

⁵⁸ Carol interview, 14 November, 2021.

⁵⁹ OutRight Action International, 2022.

Difficulty accessing mental healthcare services. Main reasons:

- no monetary compensation from the job for seeking mental healthcare
- high cost of private psychological counseling
- lack of GBV trauma-trained peer counseling or support groups for LGBTIQ activists doing GBV work
- not aware of mental wellbeing support systems.

Needs include: high quality staff capacity building to deal with mental health stressors, free mental health counseling services for staff especially activists responding to GBV, affordable and language accessible mental health counseling that's SOGIE sensitive, a mental health program within organizations to spot burnout and secondhand survivor trauma, help-seeking peer supports, and designated wellness and mental health retreats at least once a year.

IV. Good Practices

Four activists identified good organizational practices (Table 6) ranging from in-house access to trained mental health professionals to changes in how direct services were delivered during COVID. These practices were implemented because of staff intervention (Indonesia), a legal mandate (Philippines), and grant funding (India, Sri Lanka).

Table 6: Some good practices of Civil Society Organizations and National Human Rights Institutions⁶⁰

Indonesia	[At first] there was no support system from our office [Human Rights Commission]. They don't really care about our mental health because they are in denial about the psychological impact of our work on us. During COVID we spoke to management and asked them to maximize online platforms. We tried to switch from in-person to online trainings or do a hybrid. We used social media to receive victim complaints, so people didn't have to come to the office. ⁶¹
India	My organization, a queer feminist resource group, has a part-time counselor supervisor who is a mentor for our counselors. It's costly but important... There's a rule in our office, 'Don't talk shop after 8PM to 9AM unless it's urgent.' There's leave of absence for staff who need mental health break from work. There's no expectation that people work on weekends. ⁶²
Sri Lanka	My organization [LGBTIQ focused CSO] has befriending services provided by professional counselors. The organization pays counseling bills for staff. ⁶³
Philippines	The Commission on Human Rights is giving focus to the Mental Health Law. They've hired an in-house psychologist who can be available to counsel staff. ⁶⁴

⁶⁰ OutRight Action International, 2022.

⁶¹ Fransis interview, 4 November, 2021.

⁶² Ritu interview, 1 November, 2021.

⁶³ OutRight interview with Nathasha Edirisooriya, Colombo, 15 November, 2021.

⁶⁴ Rubin interview, 3 November, 2021.

Possibilities for individual self-care were also assessed in the study. Participants were given multiple choice questions about regular physical activities, regular fun and relaxation activities, and social activities, or could provide their own information (Annex 1, quantified responses). The survey indicates that despite heavy work and time obligations, many activists in the study have a life outside of their activism work (Table 7). In fact, one activist in the Philippines described self-care as revolutionary, referencing a 1988 statement by Audre Lorde,⁶⁵ a black lesbian feminist U.S. civil rights activist.

Table 7: Self-care practices of LGBTIQ activists working on GBV before and during COVID⁶⁶

Ritu: Playing with my cats, going to therapy regularly, taking kathak dance lessons regularly. My partner and I did crazy Tik Tok videos that were not about activism. A lot of fancy cooking really helped because we couldn't go out during COVID.⁶⁷

Luther: I disconnect from the Internet and read or watch Netflix without guilt. I make sure I have sacred time which I don't disturb just to send an email.⁶⁸

Kiran: Teaching is actually a kind of self-care practice. It gives me a high. I do it 2 or 3 times a month. Playing music is also good, it centers me. Before COVID I would go away once a year from the city into nature, to forests and mountains. It put into perspective the struggles of humans. Having a life outside activism helps me stay grounded and in the long term, sustains me. But during COVID the only mental healthcare was pre-arranged online monthly counseling sessions with a professional psychologist and talking with peer counselors.⁶⁹

Jean: During COVID, I learned to cook chickpea curry from my neighbors. I tried baking a cake. It was quite useful to pick up these skills. I took walks alone. I watched YouTube videos by travel influencers. I joined zoom get-togethers with friends and played online strategy games like 'Find The Assassin'. I went for a physical and changed my diet.⁷⁰

Anita: I watch Chinese dramas about reincarnation and old ancient beliefs to help me connect to myself. Also, sad movies that make me cry. Sometimes crying is good... I bake bread and cook a lot when I'm stressed. I invite two good friends over to my house for coffee and food... I meet once a week or once in two weeks with I people from my meditation network and we sit together. We don't need to talk. It's very healing for me.⁷¹

Carol: There are two more generations of activists after me now, so I allow other people to do more frontline crisis intervention work and I focus on other areas of activism...Therapy gave me a lot of tools for dealing with issues. I make sure now to alternate a 'me thing' with a 'work thing'.⁷²

Twyla: To me, self-care means loving yourself, giving yourself time to recharge. Audre Lorde was mother of self-care being rebranded as resistance, as something revolutionary, and as something that needs to be discussed. Otherwise, activists would have nothing to draw from.⁷³

⁶⁵ Audre Lorde's original quote was, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence. It is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare." *A Burst Of Light And Other Essays*, Firebrand Books, 1988.

⁶⁶ OutRight, 2022.

⁶⁷ Ritu interview, 12 November, 2021.

⁶⁸ Aquino interview, 3 November, 2021.

⁶⁹ Kiran interview, 3 November, 2021.

⁷⁰ Chong interview, 9 November, 2021.

⁷¹ Anita interview, 12 November, 2021.

⁷² Carol interview, 14 November, 2021.

⁷³ Rubin interview, 3 November, 2021.

Slightly more than half of the activists in the study had received emotional support from friends to cope with mental health stressors (Table 8). One fifth also sought private individual psychological counseling, which they paid for personally—and considered an important support mechanism.

13 activists received emotional support from personal networks of friends.
6 activists had animal companions.
5 activists accessed emotional support from their intimate partners.
5 activists paid for their own individual mental health counseling from professionals.
3 activists obtained emotional support from other activists in their networks.
1 activist received emotional support from family members.

At the 2020 regional forum of the Asia LGBTIQ Network on SOGIE & GBV, many activists voiced strong concerns about not being able to financially afford sabbaticals/time off work without income. The study confirmed this (Table 9).

- 11 activists had no financial cushion (no personal savings or access to family support) to take time off without income.
- 9 activists had personal savings to cushion them between 2 and 6 months without income. Of these 3 could seek financial help from family members or their intimate partners if unpaid time off was needed.
- 5 activists did not respond.

The implications of not having extended time off to recharge is an added concern for LGBTIQ activists working on GBV when financial insecurity compounds mental health stressors.

⁷⁴ OutRight Action International, 2021.

Table 9: Navigating Barriers For Mental Health Breaks⁷⁵

Ritu: I feel lot of sadness, hopelessness, irritability. I feel like running away. These feelings were pre-COVID. With COVID it's exacerbated. Stressors make me feel like leaving activism so many times but where do I go? I can't work in the corporate world... If I go back to my village, it is difficult to live as a queer woman. It's a small tribal community. There will be no life of my own... I wouldn't want to go back.⁷⁶

Anita: LGBT activists who are old and not married and don't have families, they become poor when they are old. They die alone with health conditions. There is no program for old activists. How do we face our elderly time?⁷⁷

Maya: Activism facilitated my queer identity...it is like a safety wall for me... Being lesbian, being old, and becoming an activist later on in my life means you are very insecure about your medical issues... Would there be enough people to care for you? I had to move away from family so I lost social capital that I could bank on... In India, there is a whole circle of community which can be a source of support, even financially. So, relocating yourself means rebuilding everything from scratch... Your relationship also feels very unreal because of the alienation from the larger cis-het community... I would like to take a break and perhaps travel and stay with my friends, their homes, and get back to reading, watch movies in the theater, just sit back, retreat, sleep may be. It's nice to think that I can leave my work but where can I go? There is no way.⁷⁸

Kiran: I may be taking a four to six month pay cut because my organization is not doing well with grants. If I stopped working altogether with no income, I can manage for six to twelve months but it would put a dent in my savings. To some degree my partner could support me but with the pay cut as well, it would be a factor.⁷⁹

Ging: I really saved to ensure my survival for at least six months while I was on unpaid sabbatical with no income. There was no community or family support to provide a financial cushion... Every month when I settled my monthly bills, I would feel an anxiety attack coming on... I owe a lot to my psychiatrist. She gave me tools to identify heightened stressors, know my triggers, and how to breathe... At night I listen to sounds in the frequency that's aligned with my chakras and wills my subconscious to relax and heal internally.⁸⁰

V. Strengths And Limitations Of Focusing On Adversity Versus Resilience

Some study respondents felt that focusing on LGBTIQ stressors and adversity instead of resilience reinforces the negative (Table 10). They want data that represents the positive and strengthens the resolve to keep going. Other study respondents felt that acknowledging and confronting mental health stressors for LGBTIQ advocates sheds light on State and society's failure to ensure safe conditions for LGBTIQ people instead of placing the responsibility for wellness on the individual. Naming the problems was seen as a start to advocating mental wellbeing as a human right (Table 11).

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ritu interview, 1 November, 2021.

⁷⁷ Anita interview, 12 November, 2021.

⁷⁸ Sharma interview, 12 November, 2021.

⁷⁹ Kiran interview, 3 November, 2021.

⁸⁰ Cristobal interview, 5 November, 2021.

Table 10: Strengths of focusing on resilience over adversity⁸¹

Jean, Singapore	If you focus on harms, it's a cup with lots of holes. Focusing on resilience is more sustainable and it increases our safety. Focusing on resilience is focusing on solutions. Our governments are authoritarian. One way to cope with oppression is to put yourself in a mental space of resilience, otherwise the dangers could crush you. ⁸²
Benny, Indonesia	We already have so much research on the impact of discrimination, trauma, anxiety, depression. But what makes LGBT people so resilient, what makes them still able to love their self in a hateful situation? I think we need to go deeper with this so non-LGBT activists out there have role models they can replicate. ⁸³
Jonta, Indonesia	The comments of society about LGBTIQ topics on YouTube or podcasts are very cruel, full of anger, very full of hate, and it may create instability in your mental health, affect your mental wellbeing as an activist. A lot of my friends cannot accept LGBTIQ people. It's the same thing with extended family members. I distance from them. I don't focus on what I've lost being LGBT. I do my activism to change the narrative. ⁸⁴

Table 11: Strengths of focusing on mental health stressors⁸⁵

Wara, Sri Lanka,	I get tired and overwhelmed helping LGBTIQ people deal with violence in their lives. I have felt so much anger and frustration because people feel unsafe and there's no help from laws. It can discourage you and also make you feel insecure working in activism. ⁸⁶
Luther, Philippines	Sometimes, the thing that contributes most to burnout is the feeling that you're not good enough or not doing well enough... I think activists fail to see the difficulty of their work and can be harsh on themselves. ⁸⁷
Twyla, Philippines	I know that the way we help survivors greatly impacts the way that they heal... We may be navigating being survivors ourselves and being expected to respond [when] we are backed up with work and unsupported for what we need. ⁸⁸
Shila, Nepal	I left my government employment as a staff nurse because I had to wear sari during my working hours. I am a third gender man, thus I did not choose to wear sari. Quitting the job was better for me at the time but now I believe if I kept that position, my life would be financially secure. ⁸⁹
Sasha, Singapore	The word resilience shifts responsibility of care to the individual... Wellbeing can't be individualized or pathologized if the environment burdens people. Not everyone has cognitive abilities to deal with burden of disenfranchisement. ⁹⁰
Ritu, India	Resilience has to be taught... Resilience also comes from understanding stressors and reasons for stressors like stigma, violence, discrimination. ⁹¹

⁸¹ OutRight Action International, 2022.

⁸² Chong interview, 9 November, 2021.

⁸³ Prawira interview, 15 November, 2021.

⁸⁴ Saragih interview, 3 November, 2021

⁸⁵ OutRight Action International, 2022.

⁸⁶ Waradas interview, 21 January 2022.

⁸⁷ Aquino interview, 3 November, 2021.

⁸⁸ Rubin interview, 3 November, 2021.

⁸⁹ OutRight Zoom interview with Shila, Kathmandu, 29 October, 2021.

⁹⁰ Sasha interview, 4 November, 2021

⁹¹ Ritu interview, 1 November, 2021.

VI. Recommendations For Improving LGBTIQ Activist Mental Health and Wellbeing in Asia

Based on the study, several recommendations emerged to address mental health stressors and barriers to wellness supports for LGBTIQ activists working on GBV. The recommendations responded to 3 challenges for mental health and wellbeing of LGBTIQ activists: change the culture of activism in Asia, change NGO and CSO policies and practices, and change advocacy priorities (Table 12).

Table 12: LGBTIQ Activist Recommendations For Addressing Mental Health Stressors ⁹²		
1. Change culture of activism	2. Change NGOs/CSOs policies and practices	3. Change advocacy priorities
a) Promote and practice self-care in activism Challenge the stereotype of selfless activism culture in Asia. Promote wellness as a renewable resource for sustainable activism.	a) Secure more donors who support self-care in activism as a radical practice.	a) Educate funders about wellness as a renewable resource required for sustainable movements and activism to improve GBV protections for LGBTIQ people.
b) Promote self-compassion to improve mental wellbeing of LGBTIQ activists and facilitate intra-community interactions. Promote accountability in activist communities as it's hard for activists who are GBV survivors to get help if perpetrators are within communities.	b) In addition to salaries, provide staff with funds for mental wellbeing activities (including massage, in-person counseling, online counseling, yoga, group hikes, art therapy). Provide sabbatical grants for 6-12 months so LGBTIQ activists can recharge with financial security.	b) Strengthen alliances between mental health professionals and LGBTIQ activists working on GBV. Create a rainbow network of counselors and psychiatrists trained in LGBTIQ affirmative counseling.
c) Educate LGBTIQ activists to improve help-seeking for wellness, selfcare, mindfulness, and mental health to be integrated in daily lives, work, and activism. Apply for 6-12 month sabbaticals to take a break from GBV work and recharge.	c) Establish and implement a fully organizational framework of support for mental health and wellbeing— e.g., staff care committees, run by trained mental health consultants, who can identify burnout and secondhand trauma and offer emotional/psychological check-ins, supervisors who can help staff unburden triggers and debrief traumatic GBV cases.	c) Advocate and secure state and civil society recognition of LGBTIQ people as a vulnerable and marginalized group eligible for free mental healthcare services.
d) Institutionalize mechanisms where staff/board members/advisors/ volunteers can leave and come back when they are ready and can contribute.	d) Provide more organizational funding to hire support staff, provide proper salaries, provide income generation programs for activists – as these support mental wellbeing.	d) Educate GBV NGOs and funders to provide long-term solutions for wellbeing of LGBTIQ activists who are GBV survivors working on GBV intervention and prevention.

⁹² OutRight Action International, 2022.

VII. Next Steps

OutRight in collaboration with members of the Asia LGBTIQ Network on SOGIE & GBV will use findings of the study to—

- Raise awareness about mental health stressors for LGBTIQ activists in Asia working on GBV and the implications for anti-GBV movements—webinars, workshops.
- Advocate supports for LGBTIQ activists, including funding for wellness.
- Validate concerns and needs raised by LGBTIQ activists working on GBV.
- Develop a regional wellness framework that integrates self-care and mental wellbeing mechanisms, policies, and practices.

Study findings will be released in May 2022 at a workshop on individual and collective wellness and wellbeing for members of the Asia LGBTIQ Network on SOGIE & GBV. The workshop will explore the intersectionality of SOGIE and mental health, the history and concept of self-care as an act of political resistance, interpretations, and definitions of self-care by different feminists and human rights defenders, adopt and promote individual and collective wellness as a human right, and build collaborations between LGBTIQ activists and mental health experts to improve wellness support mechanisms for those responding to GBV in LGBTIQ communities.

Acknowledgements

The author thanks members of the Asia LGBTIQ Network on SOGIE & GBV for their significant contributions to this paper. Special thank you to members of the wellness collective: Benny Prawira, Rituparna Borah, Faith Sadicon, Nathasha Edirisooriya, and Sarita KC, who helped develop the interview questionnaire and conducted most of the interviews, and themselves participated in the study. Thank you also to everyone who provided interviews: Anita (pseudonym), Benny Prawira, Carol (pseudonym), Ephraim Shadrach, Faith, Fransis (pseudonym), Ging Cristobal, Jean Chong, Jonta Saragih, Kiran (pseudonym), Kanjeng (pseudonym), Laxmi, Raymund Luther Aquino, Maya Sharma, Nathasha Edirisooriya, Neelam, Ritu, Saman (pseudonym), Santa, Sarita, Sasha (pseudonym), Shila, Thenu Ranketh, Thiyagaraja Waradas, Trish, Krissi Shaffina Twyla Rubin, and Yeng. Where requested, first names only or pseudonyms are used for safety and security reasons. Participant consent forms are on file with OutRight.

Annex

Self-care survey responses of 25 LGBTIQ advocates working on GBV in Asia ⁹³	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18 activists eat meals regularly • 7 activists do not eat meals regularly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 11 activists get enough sleep • 15 activists do not get enough sleep
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 23 activists get medical care when needed • 2 activists cannot afford medical care 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 activists get physical therapy for injury
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 11 activists do manual housework 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 activist does manual work outside their home
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 activists climb stairs regularly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 15 activists regularly walk at least 20-30 minutes a day
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 activist jogs/runs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 activists go swimming
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 activists go biking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 activists go hiking
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6 activists do yoga 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5 activists do gardening
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 10 activists listen to music 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 8 activists read – fiction, poetry
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 activist plays videogames 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 17 activists watch movies, Netflix, TV
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 activists have sex 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 activists do visual arts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 activists play musical instruments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6 activists write fiction/poetry or journal
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 10 activists socialize outside work (in-person pre-COVID or on Zoom during COVID) • 4 activists do not socialize with friends since COVID 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 activists spend time with family members
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 activist does recreational drug use 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 activists get massages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 activists used to go dancing (pre-COVID) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 activists go to the gym (pre-COVID) • 3 activists do regular exercises (pre/during COVID)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6 activists have animal companions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 12 activists cook/bake for themselves, friends, family

⁹³OutRight Action International, 2022.