SHIMMERING

LIGHTS IN SHADOWS

QUEER ACTIVISTS IN NON-QUEER SPACES

~ SINGAPORE REPORT ~

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NAVIGAYTION: SINGAPOREAN QUEER ACTIVISTS PAVING ALTERNATIVE PATHWAYS FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

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NAVIGAYTION:

Singaporean Queer Activists Paving Alternative Pathways for Civil Society

Pang Khee Teik

Introduction

Country Contexts

Singapore's queer communities have travelled a long way out of the dark times of the 90s when, amidst rising HIV cases and police entrapment of gay men under Section 377A, Singapore's first gay organisation People Like Us (PLU) attempted to register officially — and failed. This milestone in queer history is not marked by the failure, but by the fact that a bunch of gay men dared the Singapore government to register them. Other imaginative queer movements and moments have since come along that forced the government and the public to confront and accept queer people's existence in the island state. These events include the coming out of Paddy Chew as an HIV-positive person, arts festival IndigNation, public gathering Pink Dot, the community blueprint to end HIV, the AWARE Saga, the repeal of 377A, among others. Alex Au, one of the leaders of PLU responsible for the registration attempt and a participant of this project, observed that with every subsequent event, new queer communities joined the movement: executives and professional office workers, artists and writers, advertisers and filmmakers, families and parents, health workers and social workers, queer women, lawyers, and activists, reflecting an informal coalition of queer people from different fields and backgrounds. These intersectional queer movements pushed the envelope inch by inch in a country known to be wary of social movements, culminating in the repeal of 377A, the sodomy law it inherited from the British.

Singaporean queer communities had been trying to address 377A since the days of PLU, including a challenge by Ivan Tan in 2010. The move to repeal gained further momentum following the 2018 repeal of Section 377 in India, the law upon which Singapore's 377A was based. The next year, three Singaporean gay men, including Bryan Choong, one this report's participants, decided to mount a series of legal challenges against 377A in Singapore. In March 2020, the high court dismissed all

three cases. The Attorney General's Chambers argued that the repeal "should be decided by Parliament, not the judiciary." Consequently, it was indeed the Parliament that repealed the law on 29 November 2022. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong justified that "there is a significant risk of the law being struck down by judges in future legal challenges."

Legal changes resulting from court challenges is par for the course in the history of humans figuring things out anywhere in the civilised world. In Singapore, however, this appears to be a risk. This might explain why this historical moment for queer liberation had to be dampened by a second announcement unnaturally coupled with the repeal, as a means to curb queer activists' enthusiasm to legalise same sex marriage next. "To prevent such legal challenges, the Government said last week that we will amend the Constitution — to make sure that what a "marriage" should be, is decided in Parliament, and not through a challenge in the courts (International Bar Association, 2022)." In this example, it appears that the Singapore government wants to ensure any change results from what the government decides rather than citizen-led advocacy.

Meanwhile, the Singapore government allows the use of Hong Lim Park as a speaker's corner or for demonstrations, but subjects it to many conditions. Pink Dot is perhaps the most successful demonstration held at Hong Lim Park. It is an annual rally in Singapore where attendees are invited to wear pink to "promote greater understanding, inclusion and acceptance of the LGBTQ community in Singapore." Its numbers every year mark the growing support Singaporeans have for the cause, an indicator of the public's appetite for change.

As of today, there are over 40 organisations and initiatives in Singapore serving the rights of people with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) that are relatively open about their existence. They include groups that support intersectional communities such as queer Muslims, Buddhists, Christians, asexual people, and so on. A few of these groups receive funding from the government too.

Nonetheless, many of them have to tread carefully given the Singapore government's reputation for carrying out acts of reprisal against critics, which range from withholding grants from organisations to suing and arresting those whom it perceives as dissidents. This has not stopped activists like Jolovan Wham, also one of the participants of this report. Jolovan, who works in migrant workers' rights but is known for his advocacy on freedom of expression, has participated in public demonstrations to show support for various causes, including climate change, political detainees, and abolishing the death penalty. In 2021, he famously held a placard with a smiley face in front of a police station in a one-man demonstration to show support for two activists who were being investigated. For this, he too was investigated. Though the charges were later dropped, he was subsequently fined for other Public Order charges. But Jo opted to go to prison in lieu of paying the fines. While he occasionally protests alone, Jolovan is a part of different collectives that he formed with his peers, including some of the queer activists in this report who are active in fields beyond SOGIESC rights.

Some of these human rights defenders who happen to identify as part of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, non-binary, and more (LGBTQIAN+) communities hope to look beyond identity-based rights and build wider solidarity to dismantle exploitation and oppressive systems. In exercising their right to civic participation in other fields, they find themselves having to navigate the rocky terrains of Singapore's closing civic space. This report speaks to some of them and looks at how they contribute to these fields, how they navigate, and how they wish to be supported.

Through them, civil society in Singapore is also emerging through the cracks, in the spaces where queer activists are navigating, mobilising movements, and creating cultures. As this report demonstrates, queer people are expert navigators, making them powerful leaders in any terrain.

○ Methodology and Overview of Participants

This report is a mapping of Singaporean activists of diverse SOGIESC working in civil society but outside of SOGIESC rights. It is based on one-on-one interviews with six persons and a focus group discussion with another five. They were selected to ensure wide representation of sexual orientation and gender identities. Singapore's queer movement has a reputation of being dominated by gay cisgender men, and ethnic Chinese people, according to a few of the participants, so the report made sure to include lesbians, queer women, and one pansexual person, as well as those from Malay and Indian ethnic minorities.

Care was taken to ensure they represented different causes. Among the 11 participants interviewed, some occupy leadership positions in well-established organisations, while a few founded their own organisations or collectives. Most of them work on minority rights such as migrants' rights (three), women's rights (two), labour rights (two), disability rights (one), and sex workers' rights (one), providing both direct assistance as well as doing advocacy. One participant works for a social enterprise, and another founded a theatre company in order that he may address all social issues rather than focus on one theme, and by extension, fights for freedom of expression. A few formed collectives and mobilised movements on issues such as abolishment of the death penalty, women's bodily autonomy, and migrant workers' rights.

At least six of them are out publicly in the media and have formed advocacy around their identities. Meanwhile, two participants, Felicity and Iman, will be addressed by their pseudonyms. Both are from ethnic Malay minorities.

Where possible, a link is provided for the reader to learn more about them. The links are mostly to entries within the The Singapore LGBT encyclopaedia Wiki that was initiated by Singaporean gay doctor Roy Tan.

○ Terminologies

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

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

Motivations

This chapter asks the participants, “What led you to your current field of work?” and if they considered joining SOGIESC rights organisations. It explores how personal experiences of discrimination, combined with understanding of political theories and witnessing of social ruptures, lead many of them to develop solidarity with others who are oppressed in Singapore. Whether lending their skills to mainstream organisations or forming alternative collectives, our queer activists found themselves exactly where they needed to be to make a difference.

○ Fuelled by a Wish to Learn and Do More

Leadership within queer movements has enabled queer activists to learn valuable skills. However, a few have found themselves feeling “stuck” in a safe bubble, unable to learn more. Wishing to remain in civil society, they chose to develop their capabilities by moving into adjacent fields. For a few, however, it was also the opportunity to step up and bring their capabilities into a field where they felt needed.

Avin Tan spent 12 years supporting people living with HIV while Bryan Choong was executive director of Oogachaga. Both felt stuck in an LGBTQIAN+ bubble, having reached roadblocks in terms of self-development. Venturing away from public health but “still feeling the need to change something,” Avin ended up at Special Olympics Asia Pacific, where he was attracted by the possibility of having a good mentor. Meanwhile, Bryan hopes that the present consultancy work he is doing with social enterprise Empact can help him to pick up skills needed for running a registered SOGIESC rights organisation.

Alex Au and Corinna Lim, bringing years of skills with them, stepped up into leadership roles when they were called. For Alex, it was literally answering a phone call from an old friend, PLU founder Russell Heng, asking him to help with bookkeeping at Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2). Alex, who initially went in to clean up the accounts, decided to stay to develop the organisation's digital database and its corporate communications. He is now the vice-president of TWC2.

Corinna, who had stepped back from active involvement with AWARE for a few years, felt a strong calling when the organisation faced a crisis and needed an executive director. In 2009, conservative Christian women who opposed AWARE’s stance on SOGIESC rights had organised a coup by voting each other into the committee. This galvanised the LBTQ+ women and women’s rights movement to seize back the organisation. The crisis, now called the AWARE Saga, forced the organisation to professionalise and hire an executive director. “When you were so close to losing something,” says Corinna, “you realise how precious and how dear it is. So that is when I gave up my job as a lawyer to do this full time.”

○ Alienation x Theories = Political Awakenings

Some of the responses to the question on motivations highlight how the intersections of identities, such as being queer and also part of a minority ethnic community, or being queer and woman, or being queer and neurodivergent, compounded the discrimination they experienced. For some, the alienation resulting from the friction between their identities and social systems, whether family, civil society, or wider political structures, made them feel an empathy with other minorities and oppressed communities. The empathy and outrage sparked their younger selves into deeper exploration of larger social problems beyond themselves. This is the point in their lives when the political theories and the political history they read in university were reinforced by news of daily injustices they witnessed around them.

For two of the participants, the part of their personal identity that drives their politics is being a woman. Being denied their bodily autonomy and dealing with “the discrimination, the sexual harassment, the sexual objectification” lead both Vanessa Ho and Felicity into action, the former to protect sex workers’ rights at Project X and the latter to found her own women’s rights movement. Project X represented an intersection — or “marriage”, as she calls it — of various threads of Vanessa’s experiences and passions, including gender, sexual autonomy, queerness, racism, and class. Another powerful intersection at play for the queer activists is poverty. Growing up poor, Iman found herself feeling more comfortable when volunteering with migrant workers at TWC2: “TWC2 helped me feel normal. Like, yes, poverty is my home.”

The feeling of not fitting into society also triggered explorations to find knowledge. For Jolovan, being gay led him to read more: “When you start questioning your role as a gay person in this world, you start questioning gender, you have to start reading about feminism and women’s rights.” For community organiser Kokila Annamalai, being neurodivergent meant that she was frequently punished and in trouble, suffering through the education system and society in general. This made her “question who society and systems work for.” For both Jolovan and Kokila, their questioning led them to a journey towards solidarity with others who are oppressed by the system. So, when Jolovan saw the petition for death row inmate Syed Suhail a few years ago, he invited journalist Kirsten Han and Kokila to form the Transformative Justice Collective. It was formed to scrutinise a range of issues related to criminal punishment in Singapore, including the death penalty and prison conditions.

Being alienated by the system is a powerful early spark for many queer activists. But what seems to fuel them is the knowledge that they are not alone. Learning about injustices in the past and witnessing them happen in the present became critical to the formation of their motivations. Four of the queer activists found the theories they needed to understand what they were observing and formulate their respective strategies.

Vanessa Ho recalls being outraged by the 377A debates in Parliament, as members of Parliament argued for retaining the law criminalising sodomy in Singapore. “I was very angry about the whole

thing. But I felt very stupid, like I didn't know how to argue back. I just knew that it was wrong, but I didn't have the language or the tools to say it." Taking up a master's degree in Gender Studies at the university gave her the language to talk about gender equality and gender issues. At university, Kokila also learned about the history of violence against leftists and socialists, leading her towards "organising as a mode of political action and change." Meanwhile, Felicity was able to interview women like her for her thesis, allowing her to organise with them to start their movement.

Theatre director Alvin Tan (not to be confused with Avin Tan) remembers studying sociology at the university and reading the seminal Marxist book Pedagogy of the Oppressed by Paolo Freire as well as text on liberation theology. The seeds planted by these books prepared the ground for his politicisation in 1987, when the Singaporean government conducted Operation Spectrum (22 individuals, including members of a theatre group, were detained without trial under suspicion of "Marxist conspiracy"). Alvin founded The Necessary Stage that same year with resident playwright Haresh Sharma. Over the next few decades, they would stage original plays featuring themes such as mental illness, HIV, sexuality, and even political detainees. Theatre became their way of creatively addressing multiple issues and giving a platform to otherwise silenced voices in Singapore.

○ Queer Solidarity to Dismantle Oppressive Systems

Many of the participants found solidarity with other minorities, particularly those impacted by socio-economic inequalities. Keenly aware of the limitations of single-issue rights, some of them started forming coalitions and collectives, mobilising with each other to dismantle exploitation and oppressive systems.

These queer activists found that the socio-economic inequalities experienced by the poor, the migrants, and the marginalised to be a more powerful motivator than what they experienced for being queer. For this reason, many of the participants have at some point worked or volunteered with organisations supporting migrants such as HOME or TWC2.

Jocelyn volunteers at HOME as a caseworker because she sees how badly Singaporeans treat migrant workers. "People die, they don't give a shit," she says. Similarly, Iman was radicalised and politicised from experiences volunteering at HOME and "going to hospitals and seeing migrant workers with amputated fingers who weren't getting compensated, whose salaries weren't paid." What they were witnessing also led them to volunteer. Meanwhile, Jolovan was not interested in advocacy, press conferences, and a lot of talking. So, he gravitated towards community-related work and ended up today as the manager of HOME's shelter.

Besides the three gay men who spent years in SOGIESC rights (or SOGIESC adjacent) organisations, the rest of the participants did not join one. When asked if they considered joining, some felt that at least in Singapore being queer is still more privileged compared with other minorities. In other

words, from the onset, they were more interested in an intersectional lens than what was available within gay organisations in Singapore at the time.

Vanessa says, “I felt like migrant workers’ rights or gender equality issues were queer issues at the end of the day — they are people who have also been excluded by the structures set up by the state and are punished for being different from what the state wanted them to be, they are also incarcerated or disenfranchised and marginalised.”

For Kokila, the vehicle for the liberation of queer people and people with oppressed identities is the ending of hetero patriarchal racial capitalism. “My convictions guide the work I do, not my identity. It’s a shared politics or desire for a particular future, rather than because we’re queer or because we’re brown. We can come together on those identities as a community. But for me, your comrades are the ones who share your political values.” For this reason, Kokila was not content with the politics of organisations she had joined and was more interested in grassroots work and mobilisation on cross-cutting issues on labour, migrant rights, and abolishing the death penalty.

For these intersectional queer activists, not fitting in society led to questions about society. Questions led to new knowledge. Knowledge combined with capacity sublimated into action — the desire to do something about injustices is then armed with strategies. And now they are not alone.

Queer Contributions

Asking the participants how being queer contributes to their work provided insights into what queer activists in Singapore bring to their movements. This question, however, represented the first time some of them considered their own queer contributions. In fact, a few of their initial answers are “Not at all” as they do not think that being queer made them special. But upon probing, they revealed both conscious and unconscious ways that queer activists contribute.

○ Empathy

Queer activists’ ability to empathise with other oppressed groups comes primarily from their experiences of social alienation. Corinna feels that her being gay, coupled with her experiences of having to hide a part of herself in order to be accepted, contributed to her ability as a civil society organisation (CSO) leader to understand the impact of exclusion. She has seen how exclusion impacts the people who come to AWARE for support, as well as many of AWARE’s volunteers and staff, regardless of their SOGIESC. Having been excluded makes her care about people who are excluded.

Queer Visibility as a Rainbow Flag

Being queer meant they were able to look out for other queer people in the same movement who may be less visible. When Felicity realised that people who no longer identify as women are still impacted by issues of bodily autonomy, she changed one of her organization’s key messages to ensure they are not excluding trans men. Looking out for other queer people is also about sharing opportunities and resources with each other. Through Project X, Vanessa was able to ensure that “queer people can have queer paying jobs.”

Jolovan, working within migrant communities that are heteronormative, wants to make the space safe for queer domestic workers as well as queer people in the organisation. In fact, Jolovan being openly gay at HOME is the reason Jocelyn said she feels safe when volunteering there. By being out where they are, queer activists reclaim these spaces. “I am just a huge flag waving to say that this is an extra accepting space,” says Alex.

This visibility not only protects other queer people, but provides a safe space for allies too, who might feel safe to ask questions about how to be better allies. Kokila sees her queerness as an opportunity. Through open conversations, she is able to invite those around her to be gentler with their own queer children. “I’m someone where it is less loaded for them to ask questions. It becomes a helpful entry point to healing family relationships with people who are queer.” This suggests that queer visibility reaches far and offers ways to protect even queer people they cannot see.

○ Making Queer Spaces Radically Inclusive

Even while experiences of discrimination lead to empathy, Jocelyn reminds herself that empathy alone is not enough: “I remind myself that it's not about me. Honestly, compared to them, I am privileged. I am safe at work. They are not safe at their employment.” This compels her to exert greater effort toward resolving the migrant workers’ cases.

By itself, empathy is only a lens through which to see the shared pain of others. It does not translate into solidarity without purposeful actions. One of the ways queer solidarity has happened is through the expansion of queer spaces for others who have been excluded. Kokila feels she is able to introduce radical ideas into queer spaces this way. “My queerness gives me a passport to more politically conservative queer spaces, then I can just say things and they have to listen to me because I’m queer.”

For Vanessa, the queer space she wanted to expand is Pink Dot. In the early years of the rally, the organisers avoided any forms of sexual imagery as they wanted to project a wholesome family-oriented depiction of the LGBTQIAN+ communities. As a result, they had to reject applications by Project X and even HIV/AIDS organisations promoting safe sex and condoms. “There was a lot of censorship,” says Vanessa. “I was like, isn’t this the same form of silencing that we experience anyway? Why are we silencing each other? I was very disturbed.”

However, Vanessa did not give up. After a few years and several conversations, Project X became a fixture at Pink Dot. For Vanessa, this is important because “there is safety in accessing institutions. Project X being part of Pink Dot means that the sex work community feels like they’re being validated by the wider LGBT community.”

○ Queer Capacities Through Queer Activism

In the next section, this report will look at how queer activists must constantly navigate the civil society spaces they are in, balancing their identities with their strategies. Sometimes, this can be stressful and exhausting. But when viewed through the question of queer contribution, navigation is seen as a skill, as suggested by both Avin and Alex.

Queer organising in Singapore requires a lot of creativity as one navigates the many limitations and conditions placed by the government. When Avin was working with Action for Aids, he had to figure out how to communicate about HIV testing and safe sex with queer communities while working within official guidelines. “As marginalised persons, we are forced to become a little bit more creative to solve problems,” says Avin. The creativity he learned through HIV/AIDS organising has since become his strength for his new role at Special Olympics Asia Pacific. “Because of the HIV movement in the 80s, we have been able to mobilise ourselves very efficiently. Therefore, there is a lot of knowledge there that I can bring to the table.”

Similarly, Alex feels that his 20-year experience in queer activism provided him with the navigational skills necessary for corporate communications at TWC2, where he needed to be critical of the government without getting into trouble. “As queer activists, we ran with risks,” says Alex. “So, we learned how to dodge and duck and yet speak up. Queer activism was a school for learning how to speak up.”

Work Situation

In the previous section, participants were asked how being queer contributes to their work. Their answers include showing empathy, making queer spaces more inclusive, and bringing queer navigational skills into other fields. But how freely and fully are they able to contribute all these? How safe, comfortable, and empowered are they to express all their ideas or identities at work? These two questions are attempting to uncover how the space they work in impacts their lived experiences as queer activists.

○ Enabling and Supportive Culture

This section begins by first examining what works — what makes their organisations safe and empowering, where they are able to contribute fully. Alex, however, offered a reframing: “You seem to speak of it as a one-way street, that the environment defines what your boundaries are. But isn't it also equally true that who you are changes the environment?” Throughout this section, readers will see how queer people collaborated with allies to change their organisational cultures, whether it is providing safe spaces within the office to talk about difficult personal issues, or creating non-hierarchical structures, or putting protective policies in place.

Supportive spaces can evolve too. Acceptance that may have started out implicit can eventually become more explicit with queer leadership. Corinna, who felt excluded from Singaporean society and was contemplating leaving the country in the beginning, stayed because she found inclusion within AWARE. Even so, she remained in the closet for a long time. While she knew of other queer people in AWARE, she didn’t come out as nobody else did. However, as we established in the previous section, the presence of other queer people in an organisation do signal some tacit safety for each other. It takes leadership to turn what was tacit into policy and practice. “I would have left Singapore were it not for the fact that I did find an inclusive space and that I did find a cause that spoke to me. And so, I stayed in Singapore and in civil society. And so that is why I talk about the need for inclusion in order to make our Singaporeans feel like this is their home too.”

Safe Spaces and Flat Structures

Participants believe that leadership matters. And leadership can come from allies too. Avin describes how the president of the organisation where he works sets the tone as he encourages diversity and makes it safe for everybody.

Meanwhile, the queer activists with leftist leanings wanted to create organisations that are non-hierarchical. It helps that they are either founders or in leadership positions there. Felicity’s women’s rights organisation wanted to “work in a way that is anti-capitalist,” so they opted for a flat, egalitarian structure, like a cooperative. Everyone has specified roles but chose to regard each other as equals.

Alvin dislikes how capitalism prompts specialisation, especially in the arts. For him, specialisation of creative roles stifles the organic nature of theatre, “You want to build an environment that allows you to create that work, to be innovative, to be able to take risks. Working in fixed categories can place us in silos whereas creativity needs more fluid working states.”

So, Alvin tries to change the social relations of the production crew, “to ensure that the relationships between the creatives and the crew, and also between them and the administrators, do not plateau at fixed hierarchies without flexibility.” But he admits that sometimes he must struggle with his own theatre management. He worries they can be “templated” by funding agencies with their key performance indicators (KPI). Meeting these KPIs could be stifling for an arts company wishing to experiment, hence the feeling of being “templated”.

Policy Best Practices

Some of the more established organisations where the participants are in have clear policies in place. Some of the best practices here include communicating the policies clearly, providing training on the policies, and regularly reviewing the code of conduct as a team.

One organisation does not believe in a diversity policy but has an audit committee for receiving and addressing complaints. It also has an Ethics & Integrity Policy that guides behaviour of staff to protect both caseworkers and clients.

Another participant suggests that many organisations and companies in Singapore simply adopt the “Tripartite Alliance For Fair and Progressive Employment Practices”. According to the guidelines, “employers must recruit and select employees on the basis of merit (such as skills, experience or ability to perform the job), and regardless of age, race, gender, religion, marital status and family responsibilities, or disability.” Sexual orientation and gender identity are notably absent from this list. This participant believes that adopting this guideline is inadequate. “If you gonna say it, you gotta do it,” she says, hoping that organisations turn their good intentions into actions, manifesting tacit acceptance into explicit policies.

○ Unsupportive Conditions

After celebrating what works, we look at what conditions are not safe, enabling, or supportive for queer people in civil society. A few examples emerge: toxic environment, lack of resources, and lack of mental health awareness. Volunteering at charity services provided by the church was also cited as being particularly tricky for queer participants. Finally, we consider how an organisation could be safe, but without explicit queer representation, does not invite openness from queer staff.

Overworking seems to be commonplace. CSOs often cannot afford to hire more people when they are so under-resourced. Avin says that he learned the meaning of “burnout” when he suffered a breakdown in his previous organisation. “There wasn’t that structure put in place for the staff to receive help when they needed it.”

Meanwhile, Jocelyn faced burnout twice. Due to the toxic work environment and the constant overtime at a charity where she was working, she quit in less than a month. She later volunteered at a soup kitchen at church (at least three of our participants have volunteered at churches at some point in their lives). However, volunteering during the COVID pandemic, on top of all her other church commitments as a leader in church, proved too much for Jocelyn.

Another complication for Jocelyn was being a bisexual woman with leadership position in a homophobic church. Jocelyn's church made its position clear when it invited an "ex-gay" person to speak. If her church knew of her sexual orientation, she was convinced they would strip her of her leadership positions and she did not want that humiliation. She eventually left her church. Subsequently, Jocelyn was able to access therapy to help her with her burnout. Currently, she works full time at a corporate job — for the money and the work-life balance — which means she now has time to volunteer occasionally at HOME.

○ Navigating the Civic Space in a Post-377A Singapore

While 377A was declared unenforceable in 2007, its continued existence had an impact on Singapore's queer communities, silently enforcing a barrier on what they could and could not do. Immediately after its repeal, Alvin Tan felt more comfortable with featuring LGBTQIAN+ themes in his plays without needing to conceal them in subtleties, and Corinna felt more ready to come out the way she did during a government forum.

Despite how freely and fully queer activists feel, they must still navigate the spaces carefully, balancing personal desires with organisational risks. The repeal of 377A seemed to have opened up the civic space for some queer people in Singapore. But even without 377A, there are many ways for activists to get into trouble in Singapore.

As some mainstream organisations are funded by the government, they need to be more selective of the causes they support, lest they appear to bite the hands that feed. This has resulted in frustrations by a few of the participants who wish mainstream organisations can show more solidarity to smaller and more marginalised groups.

One thing is clear. Whether they are mainstream or not, individuals or a collective, activists in Singapore need to watch their steps as they navigate the treacherous landscape of Singaporean politics. This section explores how queer activists must learn to "dodge and duck" to protect themselves as well as their organisations.

But for Kokila, navigation does not need to be seen negatively. She proposes that we view queer navigation in an agentic way. Where she is concerned, queer people should be the ones to figure out their own needs at any given time. She says, "I don't complain about having to navigate. I want

to navigate. I want to figure it out. And from that we'll build culture. It's more important to build culture rather than structures. Structures that evolve with culture are more protective."

Survival

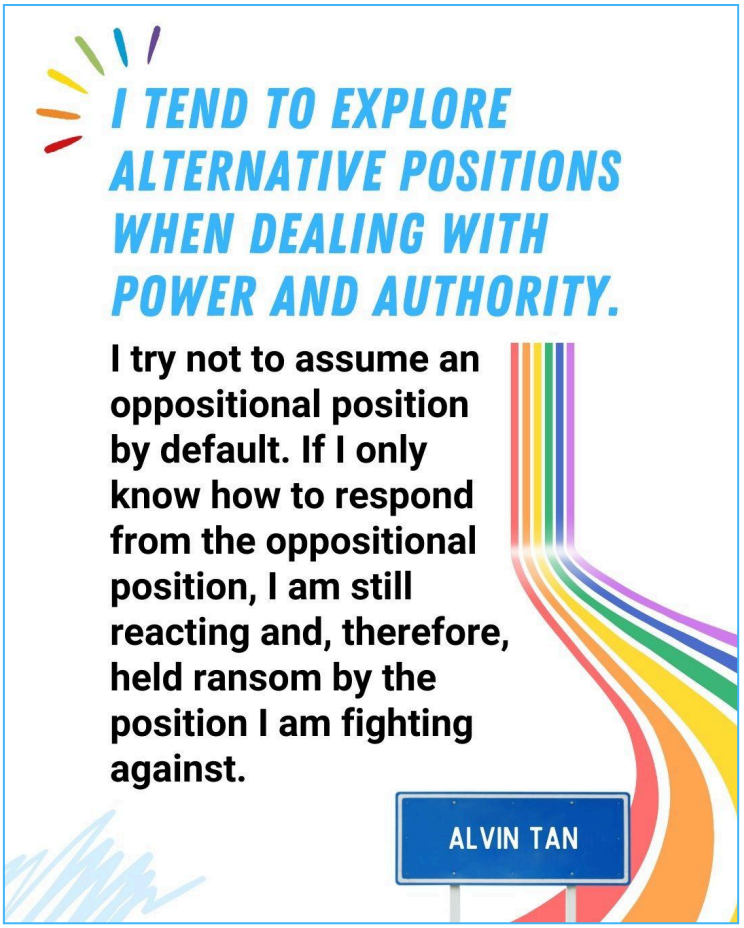
No matter how out they may be, queer activists regularly find themselves in situations of uncertain safety, like when dealing with strangers or when travelling, where they must self-regulate how out they need to be. For the sake of surviving prison, Jolovan had to act straight, talk about girls, and yes, watch the way he holds his wrists. But even outside of prison, Jolovan finds that he conducts himself differently "especially when you're trying to wear a hat that allows you to have some kind of acceptability in the mainstream." He learned this the hard way when some churches discovered he was dating a man and decided not to donate to HOME. He wishes he could be himself but knows it will pose a challenge for his organisation. As he works in homophobic and transphobic spaces, he must suppress that part of himself for the sake of a larger objective.

Online spaces can be even more challenging, especially when one is confronted by strangers one cannot see. Felicity, who is not out, presents herself as an ally by making posts in solidarity with LGBTQIAN+ people. Even the implied allyship has led strangers online to say, "Oh, you know, she's one of them," as they become increasingly abusive with their comments. These trolls are not inconsequential. Allies had to distance themselves from her movement, so as not to appear to support an organization supportive of SOGIESC rights. As a result, she "stopped being such an agitator online, because then I'm making it unsafe for other people."

Navigation, however, is also about making choices for oneself. Bryan believes it is important for him to figure out what he is comfortable with: "So the introvert part of me decides how I would do my gay activism work." Avin sometimes takes off his rainbow badge when meeting government or embassy members from conservative countries. "It's not like I am going back into the closet. I know how to weave in and out, so I don't feel unsafe."

For Alvin Tan, navigation becomes a creative process, relying on the aesthetics of ambiguity to get around censorship. He recalls what legendary Singaporean theatre maker Kuo Pao Kun told him once. "Just keep focusing on what you still want to say. And if you cannot, can you use the obstacle to innovate?"

Constant innovation seems necessary for Alvin as being a martyr in Singapore could impact one's ability to continue doing transformative work. With that in mind, he offers this insight: "I tend to explore alternative positions when dealing with power and authority. I try not to assume an oppositional position by default. If I only know how to respond from the oppositional position, I am still reacting and, therefore, held ransom by the position I am fighting against." With this reflection, he finds he needs to take on multiple positions and discern which position to occupy that would be "wise and strategic."



From the examples above, queer activists seem to have to balance both personal and organisational risks. Corinna explains that she did not come out publicly earlier “because we really didn't want to feed this idea that AWARE was an LGBTQIA+ organisation. I kept that quiet for a long time to prioritise the organisation while considering the social context at that time.”

When she eventually came out at a government forum, she recalls feeling some tension. “There were board members who felt I took a significant step without giving prior notice. I understand their concerns — they wanted to ensure clarity in AWARE’s mission as a women’s rights organisation, especially in navigating perceptions in the public eye. I know they were generally supportive of the LGBTQIA+ cause but they were also very mindful of protecting the organisation’s reputation.” Reflecting on the experience, Corinna adds, “I wish I had felt more safe to have consulted and gained their support beforehand.”

Institutional Limitations

Jolovan believes many organisations are concerned about funders which have connections with the ruling party, or fear the ruling party even if they have no connection. As a result, organisations transfer those fears onto their staff, being extra cautious in ensuring their staff do not endorse risky positions. “Institutional organisations have a lot of limitations, it’ll cramp your style,” Jolovan says.

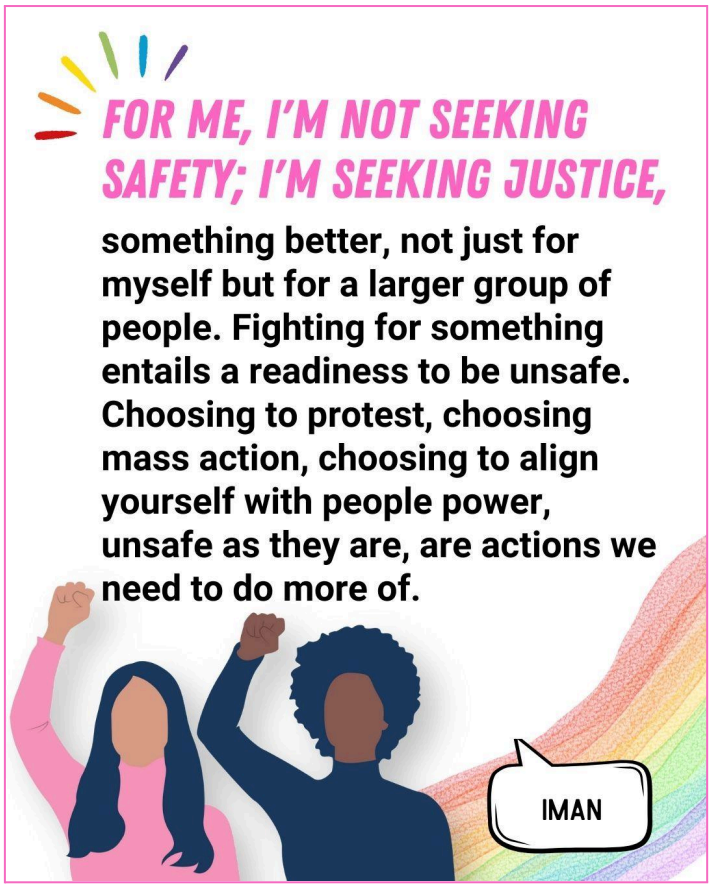
While Kokila was working with more established organisations in the past, she recalls getting into trouble for the work she was doing outside. She jokes, “Now people get in trouble for being friends with me, that’s how I know I’ve come of age!”

But what happens when organisations support its staff’s activism outside? Over at Empact, Bryan mounted his constitutional challenge of 377A just six months into his employment there. His boss used a company town hall to inform colleagues what was about to happen and discuss how best to handle questions. This support for Bryan’s activism outside of work has powerful consequences; it contributed to his ability to push the parliament towards repeal. So, why is it hard for more organisations to be supportive?

Jolovan believes it is the problem with atomisation, when organisations are only interested in very specific areas like migrant workers’ rights or SOGIESC rights. They only want concessions in their thematic areas while they overlook civil and political rights that impact everyone’s collective freedom. “But these are the constant tensions. We need to have these quarrels,” says Jolovan.

Vanessa cautions that such tension, if unmediated, can go wrong. **“**The conflict within civil society about strategies may be necessary. But when people talk over each other and say hurtful things, they may end up fighting. These conversations need to be mediated, so we learn to see each other’s perspectives.”

○ Problematising Safety: Safe for whom?



Some of the younger participants in the FGD problematised the notion of safety for queer activists, given that any kind of advocacy is generally unwelcome in Singapore. Some of the participants we interviewed who have been arrested or charged for organising are familiar with this feeling.

“For me, I'm not seeking safety; I'm seeking justice,” says Iman, “something better not just for myself but for a larger group of people. Fighting for something entails a readiness to be unsafe. Choosing to protest, choosing mass action, choosing to align yourself with people power, unsafe as they are, are actions we need to do more of.”

Thinking about how activists can be unsafe together also creates opportunities to think about how to protect each other. “We’re all unsafe, not just queer people. A lot of people under the oppressive systems are unsafe,” says Kokila. “When activists of all causes build a culture of solidarity, we share the risks together. A lot of work, then, goes into how to support each other as comrades — how to manage risks, how to prepare for a police investigation, etc. Comradeship means we don’t face it alone. And it makes us stronger to bear the costs.”

Recommendations

Finally, this report asks participants, “What are the improvements you desire in principle, policy, or practice in your organisation? In civil society?” Below are some recommendations that queer activists have for Singapore’s civil society.

Recommendations for organisations:

- ★ Create safe space to support queer activists, so that they can pursue advocacy outside of the organisation. If a queer member of the organisation chooses to come out publicly, the board should be a safe space for consultation.
- ★ Professionalise the movement by instituting policies. “If you're gonna say it, you gotta do it!” Don’t just adopt the government’s policies if the government’s policies are not inclusive.
- ★ Include risk management for queer activists. Ensure that staff can receive mental health support when needed.
- ★ Create openness in sharing information and knowledge with each other.

Recommendations for movements:

- ★ Leaders of the queer movement can be more diverse.
- ★ Organisations and individuals should develop broad base resistance to authoritarianism. They can form coalitions that allow everyone to build and expand on common grounds.
- ★ Organisations need to learn to disagree: “there’s no need to shit on one another.” Movements must create spaces for contestations which are well-mediated. Look out for minorities as such tensions can lead to stress and poor health.

Recommendations for individual activists:

- ★ Activists should be supportive of each other and not make these differences personal.
- ★ Individuals should make time and space for themselves to figure out what they want to do, how to do it, and what pace to move at.
- ★ Senior activists should learn from the younger generations

“I am curious as to how the new generations wish to inspire change in a society like Singapore. I want to learn from their impulses and strategies and make room in my imagination to include or interact with their ideas because I want to plug into drawing from wisdom across time.” — Alvin Tan

Conclusion

In order to protect their organisations, some queer activists had to navigate between what can be said and what can't. According to Taiwanese scholars Liu Jen-peng and Ding Naifei, "The order of things whereby some things are more speakable than others and therefore allow those unspeakable things to remain in the shadow 'where they belong' — this order is what is preserved". In their paper titled 'Reticent Poetics, Queer Politics', they compared being closeted to living as a ghost amongst people. Liu and Ding believe that "[t]his ghostly position demands of shadow beings the responsibility (at their expense) for the upkeep of the wholeness and harmony of the very continuum wherein they do not have a place." In other words, civil society can inadvertently end up preserving the order imposed by the authorities as they place burdens on queer activists to know their place and say what is right. As queer activists perform these invisible tasks, how much of their value is being recognised by their organisations?

Without 377A looming over their heads now, queer activists feel a little freer to speak out or come out. They are now better able to protect themselves even while they defend the rights of others. But the civic space in Singapore remains repressed. Whether they are arrested, barred, or templated, activists in all these spaces have to navigate carefully — and boldly. This report demonstrates that queer activists taking part in advocacies beyond SOGIESC rights are capable of taking multiple strategies and positions, sometimes even using their queer identities to their advantage.

Due to Singapore's growing acceptance of LGBTQIAN+ identities, many participants have been able to be more open about their identities. But the ones who are publicly out might still need to watch themselves when speaking with conservative stakeholders or worry about censure from their own organisation's board or management. Meanwhile, those who are not out may face more risks and have to be careful in all spaces; for them, even showing allyship with a rainbow iconography could compromise their movement.

Personal experiences of intersectional discrimination provided queer activists with insights into the systemic nature of marginalisation. They could see that discrimination is also an outcome of capitalist exploitation and state enforcement. So, these activists have chosen to align their personal causes with those even more marginalised. Several of this report's queer activists are in fact mobilising with each other to form collectives that support other marginalised groups. By appealing for collaboration and support from more established organisations, queer activists hope to work together for common goals, build a culture of resistance, and share the burden of risks collectively.

Some of their hopes for improvement include having safe spaces within movements to quarrel and fight over different tactics. Some also want safe spaces within their organisations to find support to do what they feel is right for themselves. One good example of this working took place at the social enterprise where Bryan Choong is working. When Bryan was ready to challenge 377A, his organisation organised a townhall to discuss how they shall answer questions from the public. Bryan's constitutional challenge against a discriminatory legislation should be viewed as him exercising his right to his identity. In that light, his organisation's support for him was highly consequential, as he was able to hammer another nail into the coffin of a cruel colonial law.

To survive, queer activists are in an endless dance with different forms of power, including power within their organisations. But they also bring with them sharp political analysis, creativity, boldness, and hard-won wisdom. Queer activists were able to bring unique perspectives developed through years of navigating Singaporean civil society and the spaces between what was said and unsaid. For Singaporean queer activists, navigation is not a burden, it is an asset, an expression of queer agency.

But queer navigation is often an intuitive process internal to the individual activist, as they figure out how out they need to be, what they need to say, and how they can advocate for themselves without exposing themselves. Queer navigation can also happen within a group, as they agree on how to navigate Singapore's moral and political climate to gain public acceptance, for example. The tension between the Pink Dot organisers and Project X reveals the conflict when two navigational systems collide. The sex worker organisation had hoped to gain the support of the wider queer community while the Pink Dot folks wanted to be family-friendly. Would it have helped if both parties understood each other's goals and kept each other informed in regular dialogues about their strategies, and found a way to disagree productively?

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