



Creating CARE and
Sustaining Well-Being:
REFLECTIONS from QUEER
ORGANIZING across SOUTH
and SOUTH EAST ASIA



THANK YOU FOR THE FLOWERS

*You opened my airways
to flowers again. I was drowning
in unknown humours, I was
sleeping with fishes but
you called across the ocean
– you always call, there's
always an ocean –
and up I came from
underneath the world.*

Kyla Pasha

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This publication shares conversations & reflections on building a framework for action on holistic well-being for activists, which emerged at the CARE Regional Synthesis Meeting organized by CSBR & APTN in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in November 2018.

CSBR | the Coalition for Sexual and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies (<http://www.csbronline.org>) is an international solidarity network that supports the integration of a holistic approach to sexual and bodily rights as human rights across Muslim societies—through feminist knowledge building, strategic convenings, and strengthening activists' capacities and resources.

APTN | the Asia Pacific Transgender Network (<https://www.weareaptn.org>) is a trans-led organisation that supports and advocates for the rights of trans and gender diverse people in Asia and the Pacific.

The convening was co-facilitated by Rima Athar (CSBR), Hua Boonyapisomparn (APTN), Lin Chew (IWE--the Institute for

Women's Empowerment) and Ginger Norwood (IWP--International Women's Partnership for Peace and Justice). The methodology was collaboratively developed, drawing from each of our existing work on self & collective care, well-being, integrated security, and feminist leadership praxis.

While CARE was rooted in the experiences, needs and challenges of LGBTI activists across South and Southeast Asia, we hope this publication can inform conversations, workshops and strategic action to advance holistic well-being for activists across other regions as well.

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Questions? Reflections?
Want to Support Our Work? Get in touch.
Email: coordinator@csbronline.org.



How we got here

CARE: Continuous and Responsive Empowerment through well-being initiatives for LGBTI human rights defenders in South and Southeast Asia, was a year-long regional program, launched in February 2018 by the Coalition for Sexual and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies (CSBR) in partnership with the Asia Pacific Transgender Network (APTN), ILGA Asia, ASEAN SOGIE Caucus, and APCOM.

CARE took an interdisciplinary approach, integrating action-research, surveys, publications, joint trainings, and exploratory workshops. The program aimed to open conversations on under discussed topics, and advance strategic action to strengthen and sustain LGBTI organizing.

While CARE focused primarily on South and Southeast Asia, opportunities for additional support expanded rapidly so that our combined interventions engaged over 180 LGBTI activists across 29 countries in Asia and the Pacific.



HIGHLIGHTS



FEBRUARY 2018: CSBR and ILGA Asia collaborate to integrate sessions on holistic well-being into the Asia Intersex Forum held in Bangkok, with 15 activists from India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam.

APRIL 2018: ASEAN SOGIE Caucus holds a 4-day workshop in Tagaytay City, on 'Wellness and Well-being for LGBTIQ Activists in Southeast Asia', with 14 activists from Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam.



MAY 2018: CSBR and ILGA Asia collaborate to integrate sessions on holistic well-being into a Human Rights Mechanisms training for East Asian LGBTI Defenders in Seoul, with 21 activists from China, Hong Kong, Japan, Mongolia and South Korea.

JUNE 2018: APCOM launched a survey on mental health & well-being for LGBTI defenders, gaining responses from over 108 activists across 23 countries in Asia Pacific. CSBR and QBUKATABU launch research on allies and movement building support for LBT people in Indonesia.



JULY 2018: CSBR and PLUHO organize a 2-day workshop on holistic well-being for 19 LBQ women, trans and intersex activists in Malaysia.

AUGUST 2018: CSBR organizes a workshop on 'Pleasure, Imagination and the Sexual Self' for 10 LBQ women, trans and non-binary activists in Malaysia.



NOVEMBER 2018: CSBR and APTN host the CARE Regional Synthesis Meeting in Chiang Mai.



21 activists from across Bhutan, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Philippines, Taiwan, Thailand, Timor Leste and Vietnam.

Building CARE & Sustaining Well-Being

CARE emerged from a conversation amongst the five regional networks as a response to how we often fail to recognise the intense mental and physical health effects manifesting from the realities of our work as LGBTIQ+ defenders, such as depression, burnout, and chronic illnesses.

Our work often requires us to bear daily witness to violations against our communities and people we know, while being at risk ourselves. External threats are also compounded by intra-movement tensions and dynamics, considering that the political spaces within which activists engage are highly contested. Few of us have adequate, sustainable resources or mechanisms to deal with this at an organisational level. How do we build structures and practices that hold space for healing, and strengthen personal and collective resilience? Beyond rapid responses to technical, logistical, and financial gaps in moments of heightened crisis, we need to focus on prevention from within—inviting LGBTI human rights defenders to shift power dynamics, identify sources of oppression, and take continued tangible steps to sustain solutions.

We also realized that a lack of networks and systems of collective support across the region exacerbates vulnerabilities. As such, CARE sought to address these gaps through a series of interdisciplinary interventions, resource exchanges, and joint strategizing by activists across South and Southeast Asia.

The CARE Regional Synthesis Meeting

For the program's final convening, CSBR and APTN's approach to holistic well-being began with the personal: recognizing the importance of our bodies and spirits as feminist, queer, trans, and intersex activists. Somatic practices were integrated across the days, which drew on local, historical, and rooted community knowledge primarily from Asia. From the personal, we then reached outwards to explore what it means to be well in our relationships, practices, and cultures within and across communities. We located our analysis within the political economy of our human rights organizing, including engaging with questions of power and the perpetuation of structural and systemic violence across the fields of international development and human rights advocacy.


We recognized that across contexts, when organizational leadership and accepted movement practices reproduce systemic forms of violence (patriarchy, racism, sexism, cis-privilege, gender-based discrimination, xenophobia and more), this compounds on access to agency, self-empowerment and our collective strength and well-being. We mapped how structural violence manifests in varied ways. This includes through capitalist and competitive approaches to funding, power struggles, and a lack of accountability and transparency. We also noted a vast disconnect between our advocacy for rights and justice, and the realities of many labour and programmatic practices imposed on



and adopted within our organizations, collectives, and networks. Such challenges continue to undercut our collective capacity to organize as movements, and burden the most marginalized of us from 'within'. How do we create and strengthen structures of solidarity, compassion, and care in response?

Our five days in Chiang Mai created the space to pause and reflect, to reclaim personal and collective power, and to strategize the well-being of our movements. Our conversations explored diverse topics, including: personal trauma, healing and resilience; solidarity and sustainability; activist cultures and deep structures; risk analysis and strategic networking support; as well as conflict resolution from the interpersonal level to cross-movement organizing. We also identified priority actions to advance holistic well-being across LGBTI organizing in Asia.

The rest of this report strolls through the convening as it happened, with minimal narration. We offer the following three broad process themes as points of departure: **1) Identifying activist cultures and deep structures, 2) Unlearning, reflecting, and healing, 3) Emerging ideas and ways forward.** Each section reflects snapshots of questions we explored, responses, and reflections. It also includes some exercises you can practice on your own or with others. We hope this report sparks ideas and the development of applied practices in your context.



Identifying Activist Cultures
and Deep Structures

Unlearning, Reflecting and Healing

Emerging Ideas and
Ways Forward



the
CONVENING

**IDENTIFYING
ACTIVIST
CULTURES &
DEEP
STRUCTURES**

DAYS 1 and 2

EXPLORING THE SELF and Well-Being

Deep Listening

“Deep listening” is a practice of listening to learn. It requires focusing on another person, seeking to understand them and their experiences. For us, deep listening encourages self-affirmation, awareness, support, intimacy, and connection.

As the listener, we are invited to hold space, without intervening or asking questions. We aim to be present and empathetic through body language and

non-verbal cues. We also get to experience the pleasure of listening without distractions.

As the person being listened to, we are encouraged to be comfortable taking up the space we need to share our stories and experiences. We are encouraged to practice vulnerability only as far as we want to go, and to express the needs we have from the person listening to us.

Try it out

Sit with a partner in a comfortable position facing each other. Decide how close you choose to be in this exercise. If you're seated on the ground and cross-legged, and you are both comfortable with it, allow your knees to gently touch and keep them in contact throughout the exercise. If you are both comfortable, you could place your hands gently on your partner's knees and allow them to rest there.

In pairs, take turns answering a series of questions. As the listener, your job is simply to listen. Not to ask questions, not to prompt, but to focus on acquiring the information and understanding their experience, without bringing yourself into the conversation verbally. As the speaker, try to share your story as much as you feel safe sharing.

We Asked These Questions

Who is the most influential person in your life?
How have they influenced you?

What is one of your fondest experiences growing up?

What was a time you felt uncomfortable
and how did you overcome it?





LANGUAGE BARRIERS, WANTING TO
ASK QUESTIONS, EXTENDED EYE
CONTACT, PRACTICING VERBAL
COMMUNICATION

HOW DID IT FEEL TO BE LISTENED TO?

respected,
cared for,
responsible,
support,
communication,
connections,
empathy,
understood,
AFFIRMATION,
vibrations

attention,
love,
deeper,
connection,
trusted,
intimacy,
discovery,
journey,
LEARNING,
OPPORTUNITY,
ENERGY TRANSFORMATION,
TRYING NOT TO absorb
fear

HOW DO YOU FEEL WHEN YOU LISTEN TO SOMEONE CAREFULLY?

DID YOU HAVE ANY DIFFICULTIES
LISTENING TO THE OTHER PERSON?
WHY?

DID YOU HAVE ANY DIFFICULTIES
EXPRESS YOURSELF TO THE OTHER PERSON?
WHY?

defense mechanisms,
fearing lack of empathy,
HOLDING back emotions, DISCONNECTING
FROM experiences shared, FIGHTING THE NEED
TO SHUT DOWN, BEING TRIGGERED, LEARNING TO
HOLD & RETRIEVE UNCOMFORTABLE MEMORIES,
FINDING IT HARD TO ALIGN EXTERNAL EXPRESSION
WITH INNER TURMOIL, DROPPING MASKS

What is true for you?

What is True for You? is a guided exercise from the WeSIS methodology developed by Lin Chew and the Institute for Women's Empowerment. It involves body movement, collective discussions and reflecting on our personal life and activist experiences.

At our workshop, guided by a facilitator, we gathered in a circle and explored our commonalities and differences by responding to the following statements. If the statement rang true for us, we were invited to move forward into the circle. We have included the number of people who felt the statements were true for them below, and more statements on the following page. We invite you to take your own pulse wherever you are: Which of the following is true for you?



- I am not afraid to openly fight for justice and human rights
- I sometimes keep silent about violations I see because I am afraid of repercussions
- There is no attention in my organisation to problems of staff fatigue and burnout
- I have been harassed and threatened because of my sexual / gender identity and activism
- Sometimes I feel so much anger, it frightens me
- I cannot let myself cry, so I try to ignore my feelings when I feel discouraged or overwhelmed
- I have constant headaches, back aches, or stomach aches due to the mental stress I experience
- Even more painful was the violence and humiliation I suffered from family members because of my sexual / gender identity
- I feel guilty that I cannot fulfill my family's expectations
- I feel I can never live up to society's image of a perfect man or woman
- I wish there was some place I could go where there are people who understand and accept me as I am



Reflections on our Needs at the Workshop

“The world is becoming more fascist. Feminists around us are passing away and getting disappeared by the state. We’ve been through a few suicides in the past couple of months. It’s really hard to deal with, let alone help anyone else.”

“I have seen activists shutting down, disappearing, not replying. I wonder if I am too ignorant to their personal life. Too focused on hitting targets without caring about who I am working with.”

“I think it’s common thinking that activists don’t need support, or have their own issues. I feel it’s hard to ask for support, because people look up to me and seek support from me.”

“My body and mind are so out of sync. I’m very disillusioned with this sector. I want to understand collective care, and I want to take care of myself—I’m really bad at it.”

“Can you really know your own limits? How do I know if something is harmful for me if it makes me feel better?”

“As a child until now, I have issues with being known by other people, because I feel powerless when somebody leaves me. I always see myself in the subordinate position, because I will do anything if they won’t leave me. I know I have my own power, but sometimes I don’t use it because I am afraid.”

“It seems we’re never making enough sacrifices, working hard enough, meeting our own expectations. That we need to prove our worth by being an activist who is sacrificing. Those are very deep ideas. We’ve internalised that we are not enough.”

“I think that stress and secondary trauma, and all the violence against women & girls that I’ve had to swallow for so many years is still very much with me, and I need to find ways to release it that are transformative. Ways that allows me to heal that rage and anger and hurt, and turn it into something joyful and loving and beautiful, so I can keep going.”

“I want a ‘self-care’ plan for our communities and the movement itself. That is the discussion about collective care.”



Jin Shin Jyu: Finger Holds Exercise

Jin Shin Jyutsu is an ancient healing technique that harmonizes the energy flowing through the body, through the gentle use of touch. It centers on the body's innate capacity to heal when in balance, and can easily be practiced at home.

The Jin Shin Jyutsu Fingerholds support restoration of energies through the pressure points that exist in the fingers. While the fingers are said to regulate thousands of energies within the bodies, in simplified terms the the five fingers regulate the following basic attitudes: **worry (thumb)**, **fear (index)**, **anger (middle)**, **grief (fourth)**, and **self-doubt (pinky)**.

Try it out

Gently hold each finger for 1 minute on each hand.

As you do so, try to notice any sensations in your body, and any changes to them.

Take light notice of your emotional state before, during and after the 10 minutes are complete.

What has shifted?



Realms of Well-Being

We posited that there are 5 core realms of well-being, which overlap and interplay in our daily lives. We asked the question and spent some time exploring what does it mean to be well in each realm: emotionally, physically, mentally, relationally, and spiritually?



Defining Spiritual Well-being for Ourselves

Some tension emerged at our workshop when defining well-being in the realm of the spiritual. Each person in the room had vastly different interpretations of and relationships to spirituality. As facilitators, we offered that spiritual well-being at its core is about deeper engagement with the ways we work to maintain inner peace. The modalities and routes to this vary and are deeply personal. So an important question remains when conceiving of collective care: How do we stay open with ourselves and each other's spiritual practices, even when they seem co-opted and reduced by regressive, repressive, and capitalist forces? How do we reclaim them and find strength in expansive and transformative spiritual practices?

"I'm curious about why we constantly make references to spirituality and religious practice when talking about wellbeing. Is it important to do it? I have some discomfort with religion: my family uses it against me with very much the same language of compassion and empathy."

"We speak from experience. If my experience and understanding of compassion comes from what I've learned in a religious framework, that's my way of understanding something. As a queer person who engages with Islam on a regular basis, I understand, acknowledge and recognise that saying religious things is very triggering for people who are queer and trans.

But I also want to hold the space for those of us who want to stay in our traditions and struggle with them as part of our fight to be more of ourselves. There's an imagination that all progressive people are really secular and all religious people are really conservative, and those of us who speak from within the tradition are saying this is a binary that doesn't work. In all queer spaces it's a hard thing to balance those who are spiritually inclined and those who are saying 'I don't want this, it hurts me, and I'm not into it.' That's a tension we all have, I think."



Integrating psycho-social support & holistic well-being in Rapid Response Models Layout

"I have experienced a shelter for two months. We were moved from a hotel, to another hotel, and then a house. We were not allowed to go near the windows, go out anywhere, and every week groceries would arrive for the community kitchen. There were six of us from very different backgrounds. All of us were very stressed at what will happen tomorrow, what had already happened, news coming in. We were also thinking about our future, what we did wrong, should we think of relocation, go to another country, things like that. In situations like these you need a passport, you need money, you need space. But you also need to talk to someone who will just listen. I think the people who provide that support, people like us creating those spaces, we should also think about psychosocial support that people in immediate crisis also need, such as counsellors who can help them in thinking. Those are crucial moments where you need to decide, to leave or stay in your country. These are decisions you can't make alone. This is ignored in many models I see around."

"I also experienced evacuation, I was moved from Aceh to North Sumatra and into a house with a very negative energy because everyone is so stressed. One by one, we all fell sick. A counsellor did arrive, but after two weeks. The other problem is when we are evacuated we remember our house, our family, which makes us more stressed, especially with no solution in sight. The psychosocial help comes and then we do three days counselling activity but we still think of our families there. It is necessary when moving people from place to place that we take that into account."

UNPACKING DEEP STRUCTURES

The “deep structure” can be thought of as the invisible power operating in the relationships between the cultures, motivations, roles and practices of how people make decisions and take action in an organization. An organization may have policies that specify how they intend to work and achieve their goals, but policies reflect the surface level. Unpacking deep structures requires a look beneath. What is the motivation for the way an organization or collective operates? Why have policies and programs been designed a particular way? What is the impact of operating practices, beyond what policies say? Deep structures reflect the often unspoken, taken-for-granted and unnamed values underpinning ways of thinking/working. When left unexamined, they can lead to informal norms that prevent well-being and perpetuate discrimination & inequality. The impacts of deep structures can be felt both within an organization, and in its external relations.

“I find there’s a sense of **obligation or shame** in the workplace.

Even with explicit policies to use up all your leave days for example, there is still an **internalised sense of propriety** that is going to be a stumbling block for many workers within organisations.”



“You’re bringing up something called **deep structures**. Part of our unlearning and reflecting on our internalisation requires that we question the deep structures of the organizations we’re a part of. Even if organizations have explicit policies intended to support certain aspects of well-being, the deep structures underlying activist culture say things like, “Yeah, but really to be a committed activist you won’t take that annual leave; you won’t leave the office at 5pm, even if the policy says you can. To be a “real” activist, you have to be committed, push through, and keep going”.

These structures are not explicitly named anywhere, but they pervade social norms and they contribute to our actions. Looking at how the cultures we create and also internalise work against us is a really important part of unlearning. For organizations or collectives, having policies is a critical step, but we need to build deeper practices that look at what’s keeping people from accessing and giving themselves the rest, support and other tools they need for their well-being.”



BLOCKS in ACTIVIST CULTURES

INTERNAL

- Neglecting body and physical health
- Shrinking personal space and time
- Burnout and exhaustion
- Doubting and self-worth
- Lack of understanding from non-activists (family/friends)
- High expectations of ourselves to be perfect
- Fear of saying/doing the wrong thing at work
- Work isn't always emotionally rewarding

LEADERSHIP

- Complex hierarchies in organisations
- Trying to fill in other's shoes
- Admin and finance excluded from decisions
- Solidarity is hard to maintain in intersectionality (politics, biases, agendas)
- Funders' agenda not aligned with needs



DEEP STRUCTURES

- Guilt/shame for taking time off
- Internalised resentment
- Personal life linked to activism
- Cultural/social expectations
- Rockstar/hero/celebrity culture
- Image of an ideal activist
- Saying "no" = bad activist
- Deprioritising security
- Unpaid or underpaid labour

WHAT MAKES A "REAL" ACTIVIST?

"The idea of good vs bad activist, when a good activist is defined as putting their personal life aside. Who is an activist if not somebody who is ignoring their own crisis? How do we as a group define who an activist is?"

"We're not easily satisfied, and it's hard to manage our expectations."

"Once I have different ideas/views/goals, what if I lose the only family/community I have? I've been through a lot, but I feel guilty I that now have a paid job and a home."

"There have been points in my life where my entire or the primary conception of self came from the activism, organizing and work I do. Ten years on, I've accomplished so much, and I'm looking back and asking, how do I really want to continue? I've learned through a deeper attention to myself and my needs, that yes, my activism will always be part of who I am, but it's also just one part of who I am. Instead of my primary conception of self stemming from the organizing work I do, my activism has become one of many spaces of possibility in shifting and recreating a more expansive sense of self."

"It seems we're never making enough sacrifices, never working hard enough, never meeting our own expectations. We are not enough. For me 'being enough' is underlying all these things. Needing to prove our worth by being an activist who is sacrificing—those are often very deeply held ideas. We've internalised that just being here is not enough."

"Culturally, at least for me, we always try to emulate the idea of a person who gives to people who are more 'in need'. To be the one who should not think about themselves because they are thinking about others, always compromising and adjusting. I think this has to be unlearned and this workshop was the beginning of it, where I learned that it's okay to not be selfless all the time. I have responsibilities first and foremost to myself to take care of my wellbeing physically and emotionally. I have to take care of myself first and not allow that to be compromised. I can only contribute if I am healthy and taken care of."

"We often undermine the significance of the work we do just because it doesn't fit the widest demographic possible"





STRESSORS

What are some of the common stressors that activists experience, across the personal, community and organizational level?



ORGANIZATIONAL

- ✍ Workload, multiple deadlines at once
- ✍ Deadline passed but nobody responds
- ✍ Partner orgs are in crisis
- ✍ Lack of trust and alignment in teams
- ✍ Management uses different standards for staff
- ✍ Adhering to outdated/ineffective systems
- ✍ Readiness of second line of leadership
- ✍ Dominating a team effort, spotlight activists
- ✍ Uneven/poor holding of a space
- ✍ Lack of ability/capacity to deliver
- ✍ Pressure to not take a break

PERSONAL

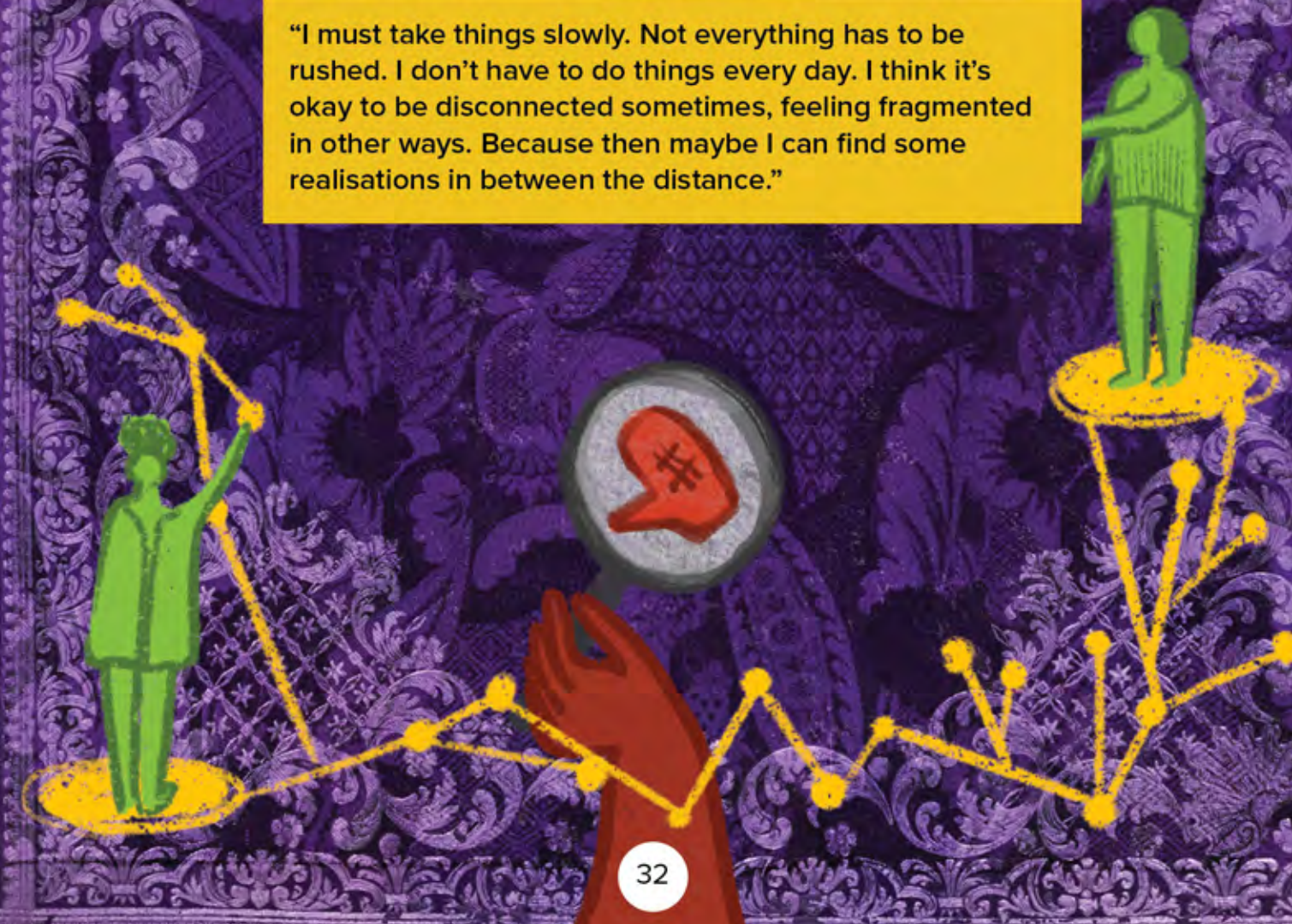
- ✍ Confronting/challenging people who oppress
- ✍ No boundaries between personal and work life
- ✍ Lack of resources and funds
- ✍ Family interference, withdrawal, violence
- ✍ Bad listening in all interpersonal situations
- ✍ Lack of community support
- ✍ Crowded commutes (traffic, trains)
- ✍ Trolls on social media
- ✍ Pain, body aches and exhaustion
- ✍ Safety of loved ones



ENVIRONMENT

- ✍ No accountability for corrupt leaders
- ✍ Lack of resources and funds
- ✍ Lack of community support
- ✍ Eurocentricism
- ✍ Muslims policing muslim bodies, words and practices
- ✍ State crackdowns on dissent and difference
- ✍ Managing community conflict/ethics
- ✍ Unsupportive role models, unethical activists
- ✍ Security
- ✍ Unexpected online visibility

“I must take things slowly. Not everything has to be rushed. I don’t have to do things every day. I think it’s okay to be disconnected sometimes, feeling fragmented in other ways. Because then maybe I can find some realisations in between the distance.”



CONFLICTS : VALUES and PRACTICES

Power

- ✍ “What if distributing decision-making is just not practical?”
- ✍ “We have to challenge the cult of personality—our tendency to idolise and champion a figure instead of upholding values and principles.”
- ✍ “What if you and I disagree on what the movement needs and what will destroy it? If nobody runs the movement and nobody is in charge of it, who decides?”
- ✍ “When money comes, it can help things happen of course, but it can also destroy movement building. Access to money and power creates a form of hierarchy, and donors often flood situations of conflict through their top-down agendas or cherry-picking organizations, without deeply knowing the situation on the ground”
- ✍ “It’s hard when our communities are used for other people’s agendas.”
- ✍ “What is stopping us from being transparent about budget issues and decision-making and sharing that with staff and even partners outside our organizations? How do we build transparency and accountability with each other? What causes lack of transparency in decision making?”

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

- ✍ “If someone is creating trouble and we do not agree with it, what are our strategies to deal with that? Are they punitive? Retributive? What does justice look like to us?”
- ✍ “A deep part of what contributes to our conflict, stress, and burnout is the lack of time we take to pause and reflect. When I think back on years of this, so much of it could have been resolved if people were just willing to pause, slow down, and trust that we were going to come out of this conflict in a way that makes the most sense to the community.”
- ✍ “Can we have certain processes and mechanisms within our organisations, networks, and communities, that make it possible for us to communicate our stressors, and not let it fester for so long that explosions happen?”



GATEKEEPING

✍️ “A question I feel like we have to ask ourselves as part of the movements we’re trying to build is: Are we allowing people to take a break and come back when they’re ready? Are we doing enough to get a new generation into our movements? What are we doing with our friends and allies when they want a time out?”

✍️ “The language of the idea is interesting: Do we ‘allow’ others to step out? Who am I to let someone in and out of movements, and welcome them back? We need to feel a sense of ownership in whatever we are involved in for ourselves—but it’s also about balance, collaboration, and connection. I think we need to shift ‘ownership’ in the capitalist sense, towards affirming our contributions and being accountable in how we show up in our organizing, but recognizing we’re always in connection, and we cannot be gate-keepers.”

✍️ “We are often so myopic as LGBTI activists. I know there is so much good work being done in small

communities on so many issues. Like in one township in the Philippines, an LGBT organization is working on psycho-social support for those who’ve committed abuse, so they change their responses & behaviours. It’s powerful. And yet all I hear about LGBTI activism in the Philippines is that we don’t have a SOGIE law yet. I don’t hear about the great things that are going on in the pockets of community. I don’t know if it’s something about the way we write our messages that obscure this good work, or if it’s just how people put us in boxes”.

✍️ “In activist culture we can be so focused on the problems. Younger people are asking me ‘What’s the solution? Give us something else to do or other ways forward.’ I feel like we are really good at identifying problems and know them intimately, but we don’t do as much work on the solutions— probably because our institutions are also replicating the same problems.”

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURES

✍️ “Since we’re from the Global South, our reporting is not for ourselves. We’re constantly being told to report violence, harm, rape, and channeled into making the situation look really grim. No situation is absolutely grim, it cannot be”

✍️ “Our organisation employs staff who are not community members, so they don’t always understand our issues and won’t commit to spending our budget on the key needs.”

✍️ “When we’re in informal networks and voluntary collectives, even if there is some functional structure—the burdens continue to be unevenly

placed. There is an enormous offloading of care for a project onto the core staff or organizers in formal leadership roles. How can we better offer collective care and support in our structures?”

✍️ “What is the culture of resistance that exists? Maybe that’s a question that isn’t addressed enough in activist cultures, especially when we get institutionalized and dependent on funding. That focus inwards on ourselves is a real challenge to change our practices to match our values.”

UNLEARNING, REFLECTING

and

HEALING

DAYS 2 and 3

WILD GEESE

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
For a hundred miles through the desert,
repenting
You only have to let the soft animal of your
body
love what it loves.
Tell me about your despair, yours, and I will tell
you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of
the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean
blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and
exciting—
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

- *Mary Oliver*

Strategizing Security – Risk, Vulnerabilities & Capacities

One of the tools to support our well-being is various ways to assess our risks & vulnerabilities, in order to better understand where and how we are vulnerable, and what capacities we would need in order to become safer and more secure.

One formula that helps us work through this is the following:



Try it out

Can you identify each variable in words?

- ✓ Try and identify one specific threat at a time.
- ✓ Reflect on what makes you vulnerable in the face of that one threat?
- ✓ What capacities/strengths do you already possess, to reduce those vulnerabilities?
- ✓ What capacities/strengths can you develop, to reduce those vulnerabilities?

Essentially if we can increase our capacities, we directly decrease our vulnerabilities – putting us in a stronger position from which to respond to threats and mitigate risks.

Healing the Body

Our approach offers that understanding and healing the body is central to holistic well-being. In order to really know “well-being”, we need to be able to feel it within our bodies.

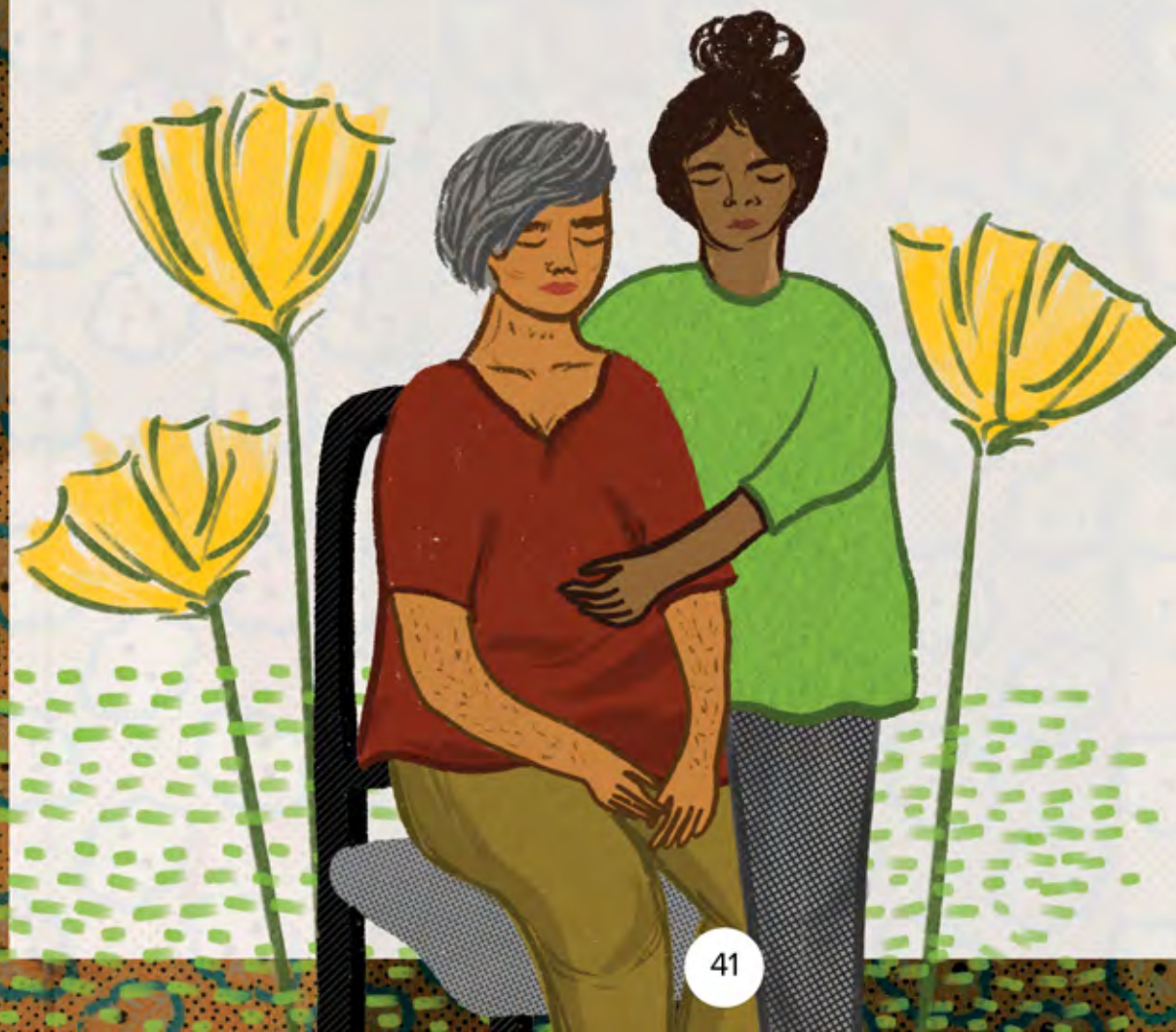
Part of this process involves attuning into our inner landscapes. How do stress, anxiety, sadness, and insecurity—for example—show up in our bodies? Where do we hold these tensions? Can we trace how continued and prolonged exposure to stressors contributes to mental and physical illnesses we experience? Similarly, have we been able to imagine and experience our bodies in a resourced and resilient state? Can we track how joy, pleasure and affirmation resonate through our bodies? How do we increase our capacities to really listen to, hear, and act upon what our bodies tell us about our needs for rest, relaxation, connection, and care?

To work through these questions, we explored varied techniques. This included body scans, guided meditations, visualizations, breathwork, individual and partnered energy holds, massage, dance and more.

"I have sleep issues and a lot of pain in general. So I tend to hate body scans, because it means I am aware of my body, and therefore I cannot ignore the pain I'm having. But here, every time a part of my body started to hurt, I found myself saying 'I recognise you are in pain and that's okay.' I've never done that before."

"While working, we are so harsh to our body. I drive a lot, or walk a lot, and my eyes are constantly on screens. I realise I am not doing this with my body enough, giving it attention. I don't carry it, I don't listen to it. So when I lay down and scanned my body, I gave importance to each part, and that gave me a lot of energy and satisfaction."

"The difference between what you believe and what you're able to do, and bridging that difference, requires actually talking about labour, pain, the body, and suffering. It requires talking about politics on the inside."

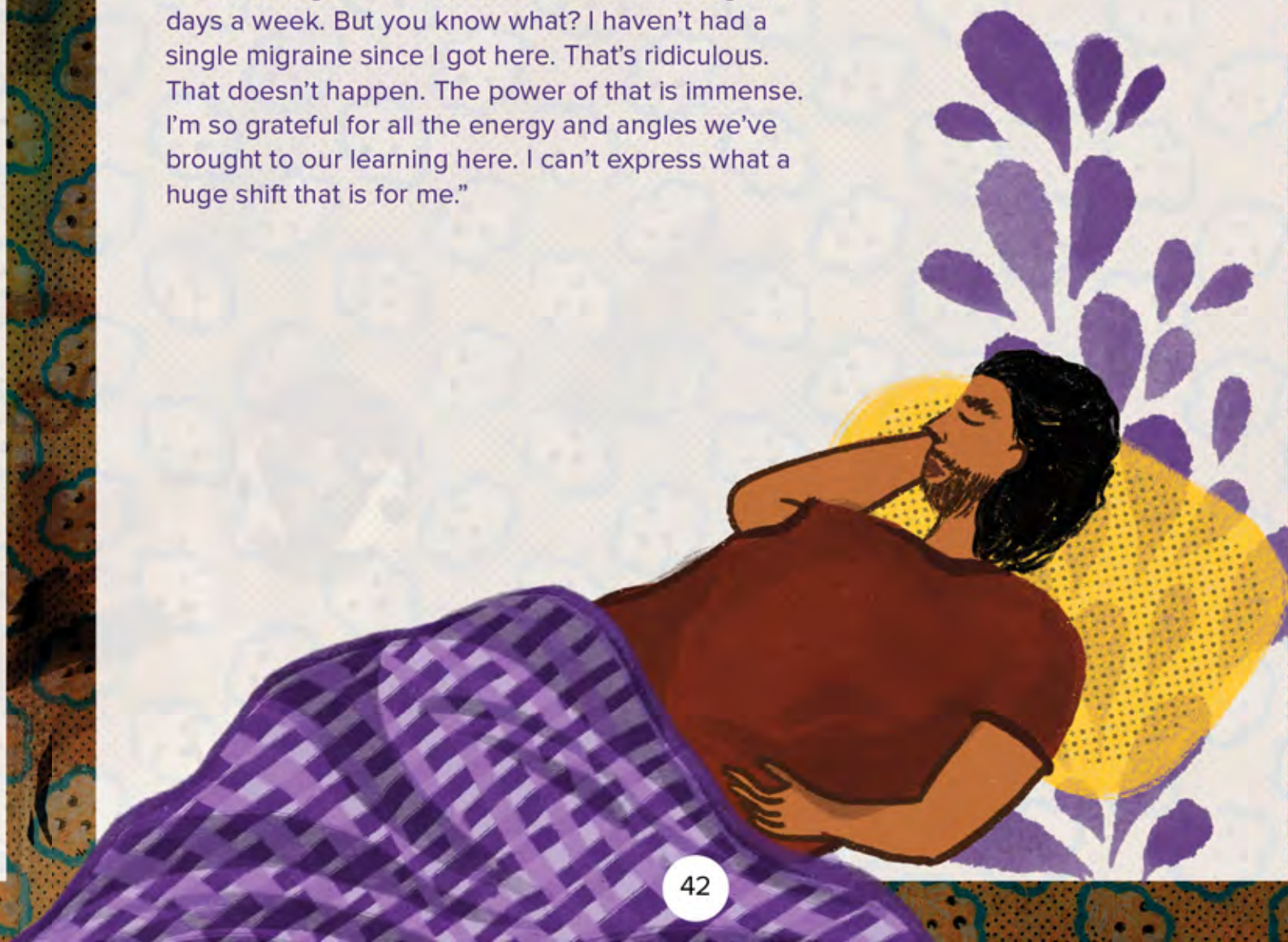


"My breathing was slow until we moved to the heart, and then mine started beating really fast. It was like I have not acknowledged my heart in a while, and my heart was protesting by beating faster and calling my attention to it."

"If I can find my own inner peace, it's a complete contribution to the whole. And I really want to. What the facilitators are trying to do is helping people find their inner peace, and I think this is a core value behind everything we do. It is also I think a most critical thing to do in our community. I feel it is more important and powerful to change the mind & body right now than to change the law."

"Our bodies want to heal and feel well, and the more we learn to listen to our body, the more we understand what it needs to feel well. This is why exploring different techniques is important—so we can find what works for us."

"I have a lot of chronic illnesses, the most difficult of which is migraines. I'd say I spend about half of the month in migraine. Sometimes I'll have 4-5 migraine days a week. But you know what? I haven't had a single migraine since I got here. That's ridiculous. That doesn't happen. The power of that is immense. I'm so grateful for all the energy and angles we've brought to our learning here. I can't express what a huge shift that is for me."





Try it out

Reflections on Power & Leadership

What is Our Relationship to Power? *

an exercise developed by Lin Chew & IWE.

Try it out at home: Do a short journaling in response to the following questions, and see what arises for you.

- ✓ Remember the time you first became aware of “power” between people. What was the occasion? How did you feel?
- ✓ Remember a time you felt “powerless”. Describe the feeling.
- ✓ When did you become aware of your own power? How did you feel? What could you do with that awareness?
- ✓ In which position do you feel most comfortable:
 - dominant
 - equal
 - subordinateWhat makes you comfortable in that position?

Questions for Reflection: What came up for you, in the process of answering these questions? What is one new insight you have learned about yourself? What is one thing you can do with this insight?



THE EMPRESS

“When you have certain power, you should be aware of the responsibility that comes with it, including reflecting on the sources you get power from”

“When I was younger, I was an activist protesting against power. Years later I’m inhabiting positions of power. I was more comfortable railing against it, because having power makes me anxious. I worry I’ll abuse it, think about the steps I took to get here, if a younger activist should be in my place. Coming from a point of being critical of power also means not wanting to perpetuate the cycle.”

Growing up trans, I identified differently from how others see me. I had to question the challenges I dealt with, in terms of acceptance from family and friends. I had to question my self love and self worth. The ideology of not being good enough, as a family member, a friend, a member of society and community. I realised that’s all power around me. Being in activism, I have learned about the concept of power, and I have it in my mind all the time now. After growing up powerless, being in a position of power actually makes me feel really good. But, I am in mixed power positions all the time. I am on the board of a powerful regional network, but I am also working at a Thai restaurant in the USA serving food to survive. In all this, I realise what is most important is power within. I like to have conversations with my trans sisters and brothers about developing this power within to deal with people who try to subordinate you all the time.

“My personality has really been shaped by coping with real or perceived struggles against power and powerlessness. This has made me into an introverted extrovert, or extroverted introvert. It has made me subversive in groups, manipulative to get what I want out of a situation. It has closed me to relationships because I am afraid of dealing with power dynamics. It fills me with a fear of being left behind, not counted, ignored, and not good enough. It has given me a drive, but at the same time has not allowed me to go into places that could develop my full potential.”

“Activists give me power and positions of power. People look up to me and recognise me and work pays off. I feel like if the time comes, I should provide space for other young people to do the work. Claiming the agency to let go is something I realise is very important.”

“I think of inner power. Some of the people who reach out to me are so young. They call me mother and father, in a way. I enter this position of power because my inner power was acknowledged and accepted by my community. That is a hard thing to take away, and I believe this is what we can develop.”

“I hope that while we consider all these relationships we have with one another— the very real abuse and power that tries to destroy us— that we also try to be with each other and remember that we have the power to create wonderful things, regardless of how hurt we are as individuals.”

“It’s a question of care. Whether the movement ‘allows’ people to step out and ‘allows’ them to return, we need to remember that they’re still your people. But conflict breeds all this acid and yucky stuff, especially when we’re small communities and constantly under threat. How we remember collectivity in moments of conflict is also sustainability. Even if we disagree and I can’t work with you anymore, can we hold onto that sense that there’s fundamentally a connection between us. I think that’s what care also is—I care about you whether we agree or not.”

“When trust is broken around deeper values that we hold true, our capacity to hold space again and unlearn has to include a desire for self reflection and a willingness to admit when we’re wrong. To recognize how something I did may actually have been harmful—and people may rightly call it racist or violent or something else—and also to recognize that even if I’ve been wrong or acted in ways that are harmful, that doesn’t mean I can’t move beyond and through that, with the rest of this movement.”

“When we were drafting the bill in Pakistan, we didn’t only listen to ourselves. We intentionally went door to door, asking what are the expectations from grassroots communities and movements. Each time their expectations were a bit different, their priorities were a bit different. And not only in one particular city. Moving from city to city. To villages. Every time the responses were different. It’s important to listen to each and every one, and make it more inclusive. Sustainability is also about a kind of shared collective listening. It takes a lot of time and requires a lot of resources, yes, but when you have good intentions and you put in the effort, there are things we can learn to allow us to succeed.”

How to move through blocks?

“One of the things we need to reflect on is the activist culture we all create as activists. My experience being part of activist communities is that they are very, very, supportive. They help me find my sense of purpose, and find my people as we were talking about this morning. Yet I also feel like there’s a lot of activist culture that limits our collective sustainability, my personal sustainability and our well being. It’s

really looking at what we internalise as what it means to be an activist, challenging that in our community and organizations, and unlearning those harmful pieces of that activist culture that we’re creating. Because if we create that culture, we can shift them. And they are constantly shifting. It’s about taking that time out, that pause. What in our activist culture is supporting my sustainability and what needs to shift?”

Ignoring security

Shrinking personal space + time

High expectation (from self)

Activists do not need support

Fear of saying something wrong (effects on work, self, community)

Guilt when taking time off

Work without pay

How to move forward

- ✗ Trying to source funds to involve more people/ mobilising community, and involve more activists
- ✗ Value ourselves, our work, our expertise
- ✗ Advocate for donors to value and acknowledge our work and expertise
- ✗ Security and features in homes. Set boundaries and think before deciding
- ✗ Capacitate / raise knowledge about existing security protocols for activists (including digital security)
- ✗ Acknowledge small changes / victories
- ✗ Acknowledge that we can only do so much
- ✗ Mechanisms for support to facilitate dialogue
- ✗ Value self-care
- ✗ Value more voices
- ✗ Acknowledge that there are times when we don’t know
- ✗ Open and honest communication

BLOCKS





EMERGING IDEAS *and* WAYS FORWARD

DAYS *4 and 5*

THE INVITATION

It doesn't interest me what you do for a living. I want to know what you ache for, and if you dare to dream of meeting your heart's longing.

It doesn't interest me how old you are. I want to know if you will risk looking like a fool for love, for your dream, for the adventure of being alive.

It doesn't interest me what planets are squaring your moon. I want to know if you have touched the center of your own sorrow, if you have been opened by life's betrayals or have become shriveled and closed from fear of further pain. I want to know if you can sit with pain, mine or your own, without moving to hide it or fade it or fix it.

I want to know if you can be with joy, mine or your own, if you can dance with wildness and let the ecstasy fill you to the tips of your fingers and toes without cautioning us to be careful, to be realistic, to remember the limitations of being human.

It doesn't interest me if the story you are telling me is true. I want to know if you can disappoint another to be true to yourself; if you can bear the accusation of betrayal and not betray your own soul; if you can be faithless and therefore trustworthy.

I want to know if you can see Beauty, even when it's not pretty, everyday, and if you can source your own life from its presence.

I want to know if you can live with failure, yours and mine, and still stand on the edge of the lake and shout to the silver of the full moon, "Yes!"

It doesn't interest me to know where you live or how much money you have. I want to know if you can get up, after the night of grief and despair, weary and bruised to the bone and do what needs to be done to feed the children.

It doesn't interest me who you know or how you came to be here. I want to know if you will stand in the center of the fire with me and not shrink back.

It doesn't interest me where or what or with whom you have studied. I want to know what sustains you, from the inside, when all else falls away.

I want to know if you can be alone with yourself and if you truly like the company you keep in the empty moments.

- *Oriah Mountain Dreamer*

Visioning

“Let’s continue today with a visioning process. Make yourself comfortable. Find a little space in the room so you can fully listen, and as you’re fully listening embody the visioning process and take it for yourself.”

Imagine LGBTIQ activism in South and Southeast Asia five years from now. That vital sense of solidarity and chosen family, that sense that we are each other’s people—it’s stronger than ever. You feel centered and resilient. You rest in a deep knowledge: you are enough, you are worthy of love and support just as you are, and your efforts for justice and freedom for LGBTIQ people are deeply valued contributions for the greater good...”



Collective Care Systems

“We are stronger when we come together and pool our resources. We create better protection when we are a network. Well-being is the core of a collective and communal care system.”

✍ Communication methods and processes within the network

✍ Accessible transportation and mobility support

Resources to provide these include:

- ✍ A network of compassionate people with a diversity of skills, eg. translators, companions for accessibility support, well-being practitioners.
- ✍ Space and venues for rest, shelter, temporary relocation, safe houses, activities, and events
- ✍ Information in the form of documentation of human rights abuses, employment opportunities, skill development, digital security and self-care education

To move forward, a lot of the work will be preparing these initial resources for activists. This can first take place in mapping resources known to be safe for the community, and then building a collective support system weaving them together. When we know what resources are not available, are we able to fill those gaps? It’s also a question of scale. Can we start at the neighborhood level, and move outwards? When we look at our networks as activists, where are we located? Who are our primary support people? Who are our allies? What roles can each reasonably play?



Reflections: on Collective Care Systems

“In our context, we have a short running away guide. When someone gets in touch with us and they want to run away from home, we don’t suggest running immediately. The idea is to first prepare. Get your documents together, certificates, medication, get that description, to take care of whatever important documents that you need to put in place, try to those put those things in place, but not run away with assets or jewellery or money that your parents given you cause it can be held against you if you run away. It’s necessary to prepare the person in advance before they run away. In those cases, therapy and counselling play important roles. It’s a good idea to refer to someone who is in distress to a professional rather than to tell them that coming out is more important.”

“In my experience, I worked with a collective care initiative in Mesoamerica who needed separate spaces for those who need a very secure site, and activists who need to retreat. I was working with them on the latter, to create safe spaces for rest. What I find important is that they clearly articulate the values of their initiative, including that women human rights defenders define what protection means to them in their own contexts.”

“I think it’s also important to help those who apply for that security and safety because sometimes their standards of assessments and technical requirements are so high. Recently I was writing a proposal for security support for a march in Pakistan. I was asked for so many technical things in the applications, I didn’t know where to start. I think a collective care network should be able to support the complicated process of applying for funding when its needed.”

“Challenging these existing structures of access, who and how. If we’re thinking of expanding support what does that look like? What would more localised versions of it look like at different scales, especially in this region?”

“After learning what activists across the region are working towards and aiming for, my vision is not limited to an individual vision now. I am able to be more collective in my imagination.”

Emerging Ideas: What Can we Create in Asia?

- ✍ Creating a database of local, accessible, activist friendly well-being spaces and services across Asia, and globally
- ✍ Developing guidebooks, curriculums, and workshops around community conflict and ethics for movement building
- ✍ Networking and capacity-strengthening support for activists in Asia interested in increasing their own capacities to facilitate and take this work forward
- ✍ Increasing access to queer-friendly psycho-social support workers and somatic practitioners across Asia
- ✍ Regional trainings for peer-to-peer counselling and support
- ✍ Developing a toolkit on activist well-being, rooted in Asia
- ✍ Creating a well-being resource, retreat and support center for activists

“The future can cause a lot of anxiety, a lot of unknowns--yet we want to think about change and possibility in the future as well. I’d really like our intention to be holding both anxiety and possibility at the same time. We can do that from the present moment. This is the moment where we can laugh, and we can be together, right now. Let’s use this moment where we’re feeling grounded and centered to think about what habits we can shift, in what ways we can shift, that helps to influence the future.”

FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION ON WELL-BEING

