

REPORT

Salzburg Global LGBT* Forum

Asian Fellows Discuss Global Visions: A Workshop by Salzburg Global LGBT* Forum

November 30, 2022

Moderators

Brenda R. Alegre, ILGA Asia Executive Board Member
Gurchaten Sandhu, Director of Programmes, ILGA World

Speakers

Cha Roque, Filmmaker; Communications Director, Dakila – Philippine Collective for Modern Heroism, Philippines

Sukhdeep Singh, Founder and Editor-in-Chief, Gaylaxy Magazine, India

Bao-Chau Nguyen, Co-Founder and Co-Director of LumiQueer, Vietnam

Tashi Choedup, National Coordinator (India) at Foundation for Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition, India

Attendees

Rofiqul Islam

Aabhyaz Moustaff, Pakistan (Guest)

Matcha Phornin, Director, Sangsan Anakot Yawachon, Thailand

Maruf Rahman, Human Rights Defender, Bangladesh

Marianne Faith Sadicon, Lawyer, Philippines

**LGBT: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender. We are using this term as it is currently widely used in human rights conversations on sexual orientation and gender identity in many parts of the world. We wish it to be read as inclusive of other cultural concepts, contemporary or historical, to express sexuality and gender, intersex and gender non-conforming identities.*

Introduction

The Salzburg Global LGBT* Forum and [ILGA Asia](#) have developed a close partnership over the past few years. More recently, ILGA Asia has supported the Forum's work on LGBT and Faith, culminating in a podcast series featuring [16 leading voices](#) from the [Global Online Forum on LGBT* and Faith](#), a program held from 2020 to 2022 by the [LGBT* Forum](#).

The LGBT* Forum and ILGA Asia are now discussing how to strengthen their future work together, focusing on how to support the next generation of LGBT leaders. Both organizations are exploring creating a global, intergenerational space where young leaders are offered the support and community they need in an increasingly complex and often polarizing world.

Salzburg Global Seminar and ILGA Asia share expertise in curating meetings, building large communities, and nurturing vocational and advocacy skills. Young and established leaders can engage, learn, and support each other to turn their visions into a reality.

The LGBT* Forum and ILGA Asia share a vision that a stronger connection of global networks of LGBT human rights defenders helps to confront urgent international and regional challenges that a new generation of leaders is facing. This vision is also currently being discussed as a joint project with the ILGA World leadership.

To expand the discussion, the LGBT* Forum and ILGA Asia invited Salzburg Global Fellows to discuss this vision in an in-person workshop at the ninth ILGA Asia Conference. Ahead of the workshop, staff working on the LGBT* Forum helped brief Fellows on key questions to answer during the workshop.

The conference occurred in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, between November 28 and December 2, 2022. The workshop title was "Asian Fellows Discuss Global Visions: A Workshop by Salzburg Global LGBT* Forum."

Fellows' voices help identify urgent challenges and guide the LGBT* Forum's plans to connect more extensive global networks to respond to their needs. The LGBT* Forum considers the following questions: How can the LGBT* Forum strengthen upcoming leaders and their international exchange with each other? How can our networks work together to advance their vision of LGBT equality?

Contemporary Asian debates on decriminalization, transgender liberation and heritage, intersexuality, marriage equality, and the need for intersectional approaches have long been under-represented in global discussions on LGBT equality.

To counter this lack of global inclusion of Asian perspectives, the LGBT* Forum conducted two international gatherings in Asia, in [Chiang Rai, Thailand, in 2016](#) and in [Kathmandu, Nepal, in 2019](#). Both meetings are examples of our growing cooperation with ILGA Asia.

The joint workshop held by the LGBT* Forum and ILGA Asia toward the end of 2022 brought together Fellows from the Philippines, Thailand, Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Vietnam, and the United Kingdom.

Brenda R. Alegre, executive board member at ILGA Asia, and Gurchaten Sandhu, director of programmes at ILGA World, moderated the workshop.

In the report that follows, we share the reflections of those who attended.

How Do We Strengthen the Engagement of Young Leaders Who Could Participate in LGBT* Forum and ILGA Asia Initiatives?



To bring people together, not only to share professional experiences but personal experiences and stories, is key to building long-lasting connections. Deeply personal gatherings allow Fellows to collaborate and help inspire new ways to tell stories through art and cinema that reach a wider audience. A cooperative structure that enables Fellows to meet again at ILGA Asia conferences would strengthen these connections.

One Fellow conveyed how, after the LGBT* Forum's program in Nepal, an Asian Fellow group started conceptualizing a website on different mediums they work in and a directory of queer artists to disseminate their work better.

While current work often is focused on policy, the arts can and should be integrated to inform and shape policy. Art becomes a sharing experience, suggested one Fellow. They reflected on how, in their experience, university students worked on film and podcast projects that could be shared with legislators.

Another Fellow underlined the relevance of continuous engagement and better networking on all levels. Leaders build their vision in connection with activists, both local and global.

Many Fellows emphasized the need for intersectional approaches. Conference spaces like those curated by ILGA Asia or the LGBT* Forum can create learning opportunities to discuss and exchange intersectional approaches.

How can people confront groups fighting LGBT rights advancement using (or rather hijacking) the same rights-based language? Are there ways to bridge the dominant use of English and support those who do not speak English? One Fellow raised these questions, as many of the indigenous communities they work with do not speak English.

Questions were also raised as to how organizers could further involve marginalized communities in discussions, expand beyond the focus of grassroots activities, and more strongly address the experiences of displaced people.

What Are the Most Urgent Themes?

Several themes were put forward by Fellows. One suggestion was that post-decriminalization debates should not only focus on marriage equality but also broaden the conversation around health, labor rights, and de-stigmatization.

One Fellow questioned how people talk about the abuse and harm caused by some religious institutions, especially in countries with growing right-wing extremism.

With growing global polarization, right-wing movements use attacks against queerness as an easy road to gather followers, often using religion to make and break movements.

Being part of a global network can be daunting. Still, ILGA Asia, the LGBT* Forum, ILGA World and others could help to build a global intergenerational global community of human rights defenders. In addition, podcasts could be used to invite people from other movements to make a larger coalition. There is an opportunity to exchange knowledge on national processes and evaluate what progress still needs to be made.

Fellows also discussed the urgency of working on disinformation and improving media literacy to counter hate crimes. Traditional and social media continue to generate hate yet remain platforms to connect human rights defenders.

Why is a Combined Global Network Important? How Can this Network Support the Engagement of Young Leaders?



Global networks allow us to clarify nuances. There is still much disconnect between communities and, thus, a need to understand each other's realities.

The communities on the grounds are diverse not just in terms of celebration but also in terms of conflict and diverging opinions. However, the discussants pointed out many connections exist between local, regional, and global levels. One does not exclude the other; Fellows can find comfort in sharing their experiences, the misery, but their vision and hope too.

Global networks make you feel part of a bigger family, especially in a hostile region which can make you feel lonely, added one Fellow. Different energy comes together when the networks collaborate: one network can only do so much with limited resources. The same Fellow argued for creating spaces for a younger generation while also working intergenerationally.

Larger connected networks could mount their joint capacity to offer spaces for young leaders to learn together. They could also address difficult and complex global topics: de-colonialization; power relations created by race, gender, or class; environmental issues; violence against human rights defenders, and resilience. In addition, these conferences could provide spaces to imagine a world that is habitable.

Regarding the structure of these sequential meetings, one Fellow proposed a structure to plan meetings on a one to two-year schedule, bringing together new and old Fellows with a focus on global and regional mapping.

Looking Ahead

Gurchaten Sandhu, director of programmes, ILGA World, emphasized: "Technology today has built our capacity to connect virtually. Yet, despite these technological advances, our world has become more and more polarized.

"Against this backdrop, this workshop of Salzburg Global Fellows at the ILGA Asia Conference was critical to strengthen dialogue across regions and generations and equip leaders within our communities at all levels to build a legacy for more just, equal, and fairer societies. We look forward to creating more such opportunities for our global family together."

Henry Koh, executive director at ILGA Asia, said, "It is heart-warming to witness this reunion of Asian Fellows of Salzburg Global LGBT* Forum at ILGA Asia's most historic regional conference to date."

He added, "Bringing Fellows together is a testament of our fortified cooperation over the years, and especially during the challenging times through the pandemic, such as our joint efforts with the LGBT* Forum in the LGBT & Faith discourses.

"ILGA Asia and Salzburg Global LGBT* Forum aim to foster collective actions together in ensuring growth and opportunities for LGBTIQ activists across all sectors and localities. Our joint goal is to create aspirational spaces for emerging LGBTIQ leaders across Asia and across the globe to enact solidarity and model effective advocacy."

Klaus Mueller, founder and chair of Salzburg Global LGBT* Forum, said, "We feel reinvigorated by our Fellows' support for our ambitious plans to create new forms of cooperation with ILGA Asia to support the next generation of LGBT human rights leaders.

"Their task is enormous, and they need, above all, a sense that they are not alone but part of a supportive global group that will turn our world into a more just and equal place. We hope we can provide spaces where they meet, exchange and refuel the enormous talent they all bring to the table."

Fellow Reflections

Below, Salzburg Global Fellows Brenda R. Alegre, Sukhdeep Singh, and Tashi Choedup share their experience of attending the ILGA Asia Conference. All three Fellows took part in the LGBT Forum's Global Online Forum on LGBT* and Faith between 2020 and 2022.*

Brenda R. Alegre, *Executive Board Member, ILGA Asia*

"The reunion of the Fellows during the ILGA Asia Conference in Ho Chi Minh is momentous in some ways.

"First, it was like a healing process for us being able to do this in person after our long hiatus from face-to-face sessions. The feeling of connecting was even more powerful now that we're in person.

"Second, the discussions affirmed how effective and transcendent the platform and fellowships provided by the Salzburg Global LGBT* Forum are: that LGBTQI people from different walks of life and different parts of the world can come together and share narratives.

"Finally, we look forward to more collaboration and strengthening these efforts so, apart from education, we can help move the agendas forward towards promoting acceptance and protection for us LGBTQI with faith and religion at the center."



Sukhdeep Singh, *Founder and Editor-in-Chief, Gaylaxy Magazine*

"I would like to begin by thanking Klaus for having invited me to the ILGA Asia 2022 Conference as a Salzburg Global Fellow to discuss the different issues at the roundtable. I think, post-COVID, the conference was the perfect morale boost that I needed.

"First of all, it was a pleasant surprise for me to find many other Salzburg Global Fellows at the conference as well. It was good to reconnect with them after so many years and create new memories.

"I ended up spending a lot of time together with one Salzburg Global Fellow, maybe also because our rooms were next to each other. But thanks to the Salzburg connection, they invited me to be part of a panel that they were moderating regarding South Asia's shared history, faith, and culture and how that influences LGBTQ rights across the region.

"Another Salzburg Global Fellow was supposed to be on the panel, but, as she couldn't make it, I was asked by them if I could be there and share insights, and I was more than happy to oblige. This was partly made possible because both of us were Fellows at the 2019 Nepal Salzburg Global LGBT* Forum program and were aware of each other's work as well.

"Apart from that, another Fellow held an art workshop at the conference. I think it was one of the best sessions. While I didn't draw much, it was fun to see the creativity of others and see them

paint an empty canvas with such beautiful messages and art. I met other Salzburg Global Fellows, too.

"Given that the rooms for different Fellows were on different floors, I think most of us formed smaller Fellow groups during the conference. But again, there was so much happening at the conference, all in parallel, that it was sometimes difficult to choose which session to attend and which to miss.

"But, as always, it was a great learning experience to hear stories from different parts of Asia. For example, I got to know how some of the religious groups are fighting LGBTIQ rights advancement by using (or rather hijacking) the same rights-based language – choosing to change your sexuality is also a choice of the individual; and that in some countries, there are 'ex-gays' who are being used by such groups to advance their agendas. We have not seen such things in India yet, but I believe that as LGBTIQ rights advance in India, such pushback will be seen here as well.

"One thing I would like to stress is that such international conferences are not just a great way for activists to learn from each other's strategies, struggles, and stories, but often also serve as a good means to recharge your energies.

"Many of us are fighting for LGBTIQ rights in very hostile environments, and this can be very exhausting, and it is easy to feel both burnt out and lonely. If I may say, it sucks the energy out of you.

"The collective energy at these conferences is something that has always motivated me and left me feeling energized, and I have executed new projects after returning from such conferences.

"As you know, in 2020, I released my first documentary, "Sab Rab de Bande," which is also the first-ever documentary from India exploring sexuality and Sikh faith.

"The strength and confidence for me to work on this project came after attending my first Salzburg Global LGBT* Forum program in 2017. And, even for its crowdfund, the Salzburg Global network has helped a lot. Soon after returning from there, I began shooting for it.

"The ILGA Asia Conference was the first physical conference that I attended post-COVID (thanks to Salzburg Global). During the two years of COVID, I personally felt disconnected a lot from the community, and that has also affected my work as an activist. But the conference has helped bring the energy back. I can understand bringing so many people together is an expensive task, and I think it is important that donors are able to learn that they are making these things possible.

"One concern among some Fellow activists (as well as me) was how many anti-LGBTQ groups are using the same rights-based language to deny rights to people. Maybe this is something that can be some food for thought for a future conference."

Tashi Choedup, *National Coordinator (India) at Foundation for Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition*



"Traveling makes me anxious, international travel more so! With a missed connecting flight, it certainly didn't help! Finally, in a new city, among a lot of new people, the slow realization of all the learnings that could happen here and how it could help me and my fellow queer friends back in Hyderabad brought a sense of relief and also something to look forward to.

"By the end of the first day, I was perplexed to see that many queer and non-queer participants looked at me as some religious community member participating, but not as a queer monastic, although it is not new to me. I was a bit unsure how to see my queerness being once again dissolved into my religious robes in one of the largest queer gatherings I have been to in recent times.

"This once again reminded me how it is not just religious people/leaders who aren't the only ones who cannot imagine queer-trans people in their spaces; even queer folks who are so traumatized by the queerphobic aspects of religion cannot imagine a non-conflicting existence of queerness with religion and faith.

"This reinforced the reality of the humongous task in front of us to make more interaction happen between queerness, religion, and faith. To make more conversations aiding in a systemic change and to queer all the religious and faith communities across the globe.

"Another interesting and pleasantly surprising thing about the conference was how I made new friendships and strengthened the existing ones with folks from my home country. This struck me how we have to have such huge continental gatherings to spark friendships and working partnerships that are even so close to home. Probably we are missing something in strengthening local networks. I want to think and invest more in understanding and changing this.

"All of these thoughts and more have found a reflective space in the Salzburg Global Fellows meet that was organized as part of the ILGA Asia Conference. Even though it was a small group, it was diverse and nurturing. It was reassuring to see that we are not alone in our struggles, and it is, after all, not a lonely fight against the growing fascism in the world.

"Often, in this kind of work, there are more disappointments than encouragements. If only we had more spaces like this where we could come together, holding each other in love, hope, and solidarity, the struggle for equal rights and human rights wouldn't feel like such a struggle.