

BRIEF REPORT OPEN ACCESS

Challenges in Advancing LGBTQ+ Equity and Research in Southeast Asian Countries: A Brief Report

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ABSTRACT

This brief report provides preliminary findings on the challenges faced by academics, community workers, and other individuals involved in LGBTQ+ rights activism and research in Southeast Asia (SEA), with larger shares of participants from the Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam. Descriptive statistics showed that the mean number of reported challenges across the region was 4.68 (SD = 3.00; range = 0–11). The most common challenge was “Lack of funding, safe spaces and proper facilities,” followed by “Existing laws and policies that marginalise local LGBTQ+ communities” and “Too reliant on Western knowledge and findings.” While the pattern of common challenges was alike among hostile and non-hostile countries, participants from hostile countries reported higher frequency for most challenges. Fisher’s exact tests revealed no differences in number of challenges in terms of age, gender identity, sexual orientation, country group, academic status, and number of years involved in LGBTQ+ work. Our findings call for more robust investment in comprehensive landscape research on the implications of intersecting challenges in LGBTQ+ rights activism and research across SEA, which is crucial to developing an inclusive regional roadmap for LGBTQ+ equity missions.

1 | Introduction

Over the past decade, international bodies (e.g., United Nations) and Western countries have demonstrated interests in investing in LGBTQ+¹ rights and inclusion for Southeast Asian (SEA) countries (Radics 2025a). Notably, many such parties have promoted the adoption of universal human rights frameworks, which proliferated from the Global North. Studies show that such frameworks are not entirely incongruent with emerging frameworks under which SEA and national stakeholders have together mobilized (Langlois 2025; Weiss 2021). Current evidence, though scarce and dated, highlights a variety of challenges related to LGBTQ+ rights work and research in SEA, such as receding access to international funding, national stakeholders’ indifference, repressive regulations on civil society, or

risks of police profiling (Chua and Gilbert 2015; Kjaran and Naeimi 2022; Ng 2018). There exists a strong need for further investigating challenges related to LGBTQ+ rights work and research in the contemporary SEA context.

Emerging evidence shows that countries in SEA vary in progressiveness on LGBTQ+ rights and inclusion (Manalastas et al. 2017; Radics 2025b), which may entail distinct challenges. While LGBTQ+ research remains more underdeveloped and circumscribed in countries that criminalize sexual and gender diversity such as in Myanmar and Indonesia (Tan and Saw 2023; Wijaya 2025), relevant scholarship in more “progressive” countries (e.g., Thailand, the Philippines) may be hindered in other ways due to their openly accepting yet privately oppressive legislation (Radics 2025a). It is imperative to transcend the mere

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TABLE 1 | Sample characteristics (N = 142).

| Characteristics | N (%) |
|---|-----------|
| Age groups | |
| 18–24 | 31 (21.8) |
| 25–34 | 69 (48.6) |
| 35–44 | 22 (15.5) |
| 45+ | 20 (14.1) |
| Sex assigned at birth | |
| Female | 60 (42.3) |
| Male | 82 (57.7) |
| Gender identity | |
| Cisgender woman | 52 (36.6) |
| Cisgender man | 74 (52.1) |
| Others | 22 (15.5) |
| Sexual orientation | |
| Lesbian | 16 (11.3) |
| Gay | 64 (45.1) |
| Bisexual | 18 (12.7) |
| Asexual | 5 (3.5) |
| Heterosexual (“straight”) | 22 (15.5) |
| Questioning | 7 (4.9) |
| Others | 10 (7.0) |
| Current affiliation in LGBTQ+ work ^a | |
| Community-based ^b | 71 (50.0) |
| Academic | 87 (61.3) |
| Student | 48 (33.8) |
| Government sector | 6 (4.2) |
| Others | 10 (7.0) |
| Country of LGBTQ+ work ^a | |
| Brunei | 3 (2.1) |
| Cambodia | 1 (0.7) |
| Timor-Leste | 2 (1.4) |
| Indonesia | 13 (9.2) |
| Laos | 2 (1.4) |
| Malaysia | 41 (28.9) |
| Myanmar | 6 (4.2) |
| The Philippines | 43 (30.3) |
| Singapore | 18 (12.7) |
| Thailand | 28 (19.7) |
| Vietnam | 24 (16.9) |

(Continues)

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

| Characteristics | N (%) |
|---|-----------|
| Others | 5 (3.5) |
| Number of years involved in LGBTQ+ work | |
| Less than 1 year | 34 (23.9) |
| 1–5 years | 61 (43.0) |
| 6 or more years | 47 (33.1) |

^aVariables for which multiple choices were applicable.^bCommunity-based roles such as activist, community researcher, or non-profit organization support worker.

political polarization among SEA nations and discern their unique differences in terms of challenges related to LGBTQ+ rights work and research.

In this exploratory study, we aim to elucidate the specific challenges encountered by researchers, community groups, and individuals engaged in LGBTQ+ rights initiatives and research in SEA countries while examining potential demographic differences.

2 | Body

2.1 | Method

Data were drawn from a larger cross-sectional, multi-country survey that sought to gather information to identify key research priorities in LGBTQ+ health and related interdisciplinary fields in SEA and to understand the challenges of individuals involved in such areas. Further details on the survey methods can be found in another report (Tan et al. 2026).

2.1.1 | Participants

Included participants were (a) currently or have worked on LGBTQ+ equity and/or research, (b) ≥ 18 years old, and (c) able to complete the survey in English. Table 1 presents socio-demographic characteristics of our sample. Close to half were between the ages of 25 and 34. Over half were assigned male at birth and identified as cisgender men. A large portion (45%) identified as “Gay.” Most (61.3%) performed LGBTQ+-related work as academics. Many participants (43%) had 1–5 years of involvement in LGBTQ+ work. A considerable number of participants were from the Philippines (30.3%), followed by Malaysia (28.9%), Thailand (19.7%), Vietnam (16.9%), and other countries.

2.1.2 | Measures

Participants were asked to select the challenges they experienced when undertaking LGBTQ+ rights work and research in Southeast Asia. These response options (see Table 2) were derived from a prior in-depth collaborative autoethnography of SEA scholars' experiences of conducting LGBTQ+ research in their respective countries and across the region (Bin Ibrahim et al. 2026). Participants were allowed to specify other challenges

TABLE 2 | Frequency of reported challenges in LGBTQ+-related work for the overall sample, hostile and non-hostile SEA countries.

| | N (%) | | |
|--|-----------|-----------|-------------|
| | Overall | Hostile | Non-hostile |
| Challenges in accessing and working with local LGBTQ+ communities (e.g., not knowing how or who to approach to work with local LGBTQ community, experiencing mistrust, etc.) | 68 (47.9) | 28 (52.8) | 40 (44.9) |
| Opportunities for work, study, research, and collaboration are more readily available for cisgender and heterosexual people | 58 (40.8) | 21 (39.6) | 37 (41.6) |
| Existing laws and policies that marginalize local LGBTQ+ communities | 79 (54.6) | 33 (62.3) | 46 (51.7) |
| Lack of funding, safe spaces and proper facilities to support LGBTQ+ work and research projects I undertake or am interested in | 96 (67.6) | 35 (66.0) | 61 (68.5) |
| Lack of localized knowledge and evidence from LGBTQ+ communities in SEA to use in my work | 61 (43.0) | 26 (49.1) | 35 (39.3) |
| Lack of support and guidance from senior scholars, activists or practitioners for the LGBTQ+ work that I undertake or am interested in | 52 (36.6) | 19 (35.8) | 33 (37.1) |
| Lack of institutional training and development opportunities for the LGBTQ+ work that I undertake or am interested in | 58 (40.8) | 24 (45.3) | 34 (38.2) |
| Too reliant on Western knowledge and findings for local LGBTQ+ communities | 71 (50.0) | 26 (49.1) | 45 (50.6) |
| Worried about my personal safety while undertaking LGBTQ+ work in the country | 44 (31.0) | 21 (39.6) | 23 (25.8) |
| Concerned about the social, legal and political repercussions for undertaking LGBTQ+ work in the country | 68 (47.9) | 33 (62.3) | 35 (39.3) |
| Others | 14 (9.9) | 5 (9.4) | 9 (10.1) |

Note: Hostile countries ($N=53$). Non-hostile countries ($N=89$).

in open-text responses if these were not included in the available answer choices.

2.1.3 | Procedures

A purposive sampling strategy was employed including disseminating the survey through regional and local LGBTQ-serving organizations and networks; sending emails to SEA scholars with publication records in related research; the SEA LGBTQ+ Research Network Facebook group; and the inaugural SEA LGBTQ+ Research Symposium that we launched. The anonymous survey was hosted on Qualtrics and made available in English between May and August 2025. Participants who completed the survey had the chance to enter a raffle to win one of ten USD\$20 e-gift cards.

2.1.4 | Data Analysis

All quantitative analyses were conducted in SPSS Statistics v31. Two authors (V.T. and K.T.) independently coded each open-text response on Excel using inductive content analysis (Vears and Gillam 2022) and constantly discussed whether the response should be subsumed under existing challenges or labeled with new categories. The labeling of new categories was directly inspired (sometimes verbatim) from the participants' responses. Descriptive statistics were examined to determine the distribution of total and individual challenges for the overall sample, hostile, and non-hostile countries. Hostile

countries were defined as those with existing laws and regulations that criminalize LGBTQ+ identities, including Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Myanmar. Due to low observations (≤ 5) in certain cells, Fisher's exact tests were conducted to evaluate the differences in the number of reported challenges by sociodemographic characteristics. We used an interquartile categorical variable for the number of reported challenges for this analysis. Missing data (below 1%) were handled by list-wise deletion.

3 | Results

3.1 | Number of Reported Challenges

Figure 1 demonstrates the distribution of total challenges reported among participants. The mean number of reported challenges was 4.68 ($SD=3.00$, range=0–11). The median was 5. Our data demonstrate moderate skewness (0.24) and kurtosis (−0.76). The weighted average for the 25th percentile was 3; that for the 50th percentile was 5; that for the 75th percentile was 7. An interquartile categorical variable for the number of reported challenges was computed using these cut points, including the following levels: Low ($N=54$); Low-Moderate ($N=37$); Moderate-High ($N=22$); and High ($N=29$).

Table 2 shows the percentage of reported individual challenges in LGBTQ-related work for the overall sample, hostile, and non-hostile SEA countries. For the overall sample, the most common

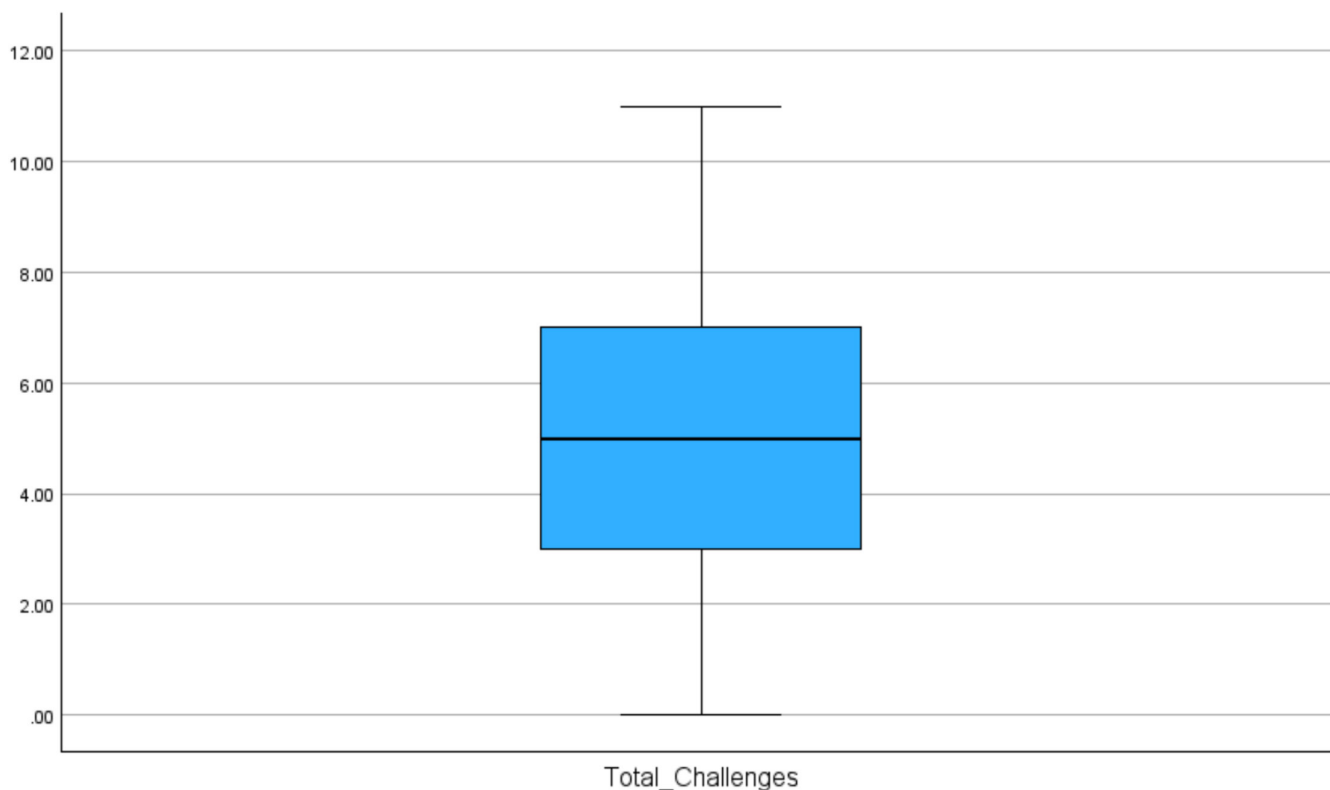


FIGURE 1 | Distribution of reported total challenges for LGBTQ-related work in SEA ($N=142$).

challenge was “Lack of funding, safe spaces and proper facilities” (67.6%), followed by “Existing laws and policies that marginalise local LGBTQ+ communities” (55.6%) and “Too reliant on Western knowledge and findings” (50%). Among the given responses, “Worried about my personal safety” had the lowest percentage (31%). About 10% of the participants reported facing “other” challenges, including limited collaboration between research communities and a lack of long-term focus in LGBTQ+ research. See Supporting Information S1 for the full list of categorized “other” responses.

The percentages of reported individual challenges in LGBTQ-related work in non-hostile SEA countries followed a similar pattern with those of the general sample. In some ways, this pattern also applies to hostile SEA countries; however, participants from these countries generally reported a greater frequency for most challenges (although not statistically significant). For example, “Concerned about the social, legal, political repercussions” (62.3%) as a challenge in hostile countries was exceptionally higher than that in non-hostile counterparts (39.3%).

3.2 | Differences in Number of Reported Challenges by Sociodemographic Characteristics

Supporting Information S2 summarizes findings of our Fisher’s exact tests for the differences in the number of reported challenges by sociodemographic characteristics. No significant differences were found across the examined relationships.

4 | Discussion and Conclusion

In this brief report, we examined the challenges faced by researchers, community groups, and individuals working on advancing LGBTQ+ equity and research in SEA countries. While our findings provided discrete frequencies for each challenge, some of these challenges are, in reality, intertwined. In some SEA countries, government officials have either instructed international bodies to defund human rights advancement work specifically related to LGBTQ+ rights (Ridwan and Wu 2018) or issued policies to curtail non-profit agencies’ access to international funding (Ng 2018). Without adequate funding for research, local stakeholders are bound to a perpetual cycle of resorting to predominantly Eurocentric scientific evidence and epistemologies to explain SEA realities (Offord 2013; Tan and Saw 2023; Wijaya 2025). In some instances, using Western frameworks and findings for activism may intensify current accusations of LGBTQ+ rights as Western propaganda and escalate the SEA governments’ resistance to changing their oppressive regulations (Radics 2025b). Even when funding is sufficient for advocacy work and research, anti-LGBTQ+ sociopolitical censorship exerts powerful restraints on what is considered “appropriate” and inherently contributes to the self-censorship among participating stakeholders (Langlois 2025; Offord 2013).

Our study implied potential differences in the prevalence of challenges for LGBTQ+ rights work and research between hostile and non-hostile countries, which calls for more nuanced, and larger scale research on the heterogeneous sociopolitical and cultural contexts across SEA (Matthews et al. 2025; Radics 2025b). Although many countries in this region received lobbying support from multilateral international development bodies, societal

backlash and governmental opposition have been found to be particularly more pronounced in hostile nations (Radics 2025a). Progress is stalled in certain parts of SEA as frontline stakeholders (e.g., human rights advocates, researchers, community groups) face escalated personal and legal risks for their involvement in LGBTQ+ rights work (Bin Ibrahim et al. 2026).

As stakeholders increasingly coalesce under common advocacy goals in SEA and, even, across Asia as a whole (Capell and Elgebeily 2019; Weiss 2021), there is an emerging need to better understand the influences of merged religion-state structure and political conservatism in particular hostile countries (Langlois 2025). Greater comprehensive investments into research on the SEA landscape can garner important contextualized insights into sub-regional challenges and contribute to the development of an inclusive road-map for LGBTQ+ equity missions.

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Ethics Statement

The Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Māori and Indigenous Studies at the University of Waikato, New Zealand, reviewed the survey and subsequently granted approval for the study (FMIS_25/2_2).

Consent

Participants provided informed consent by beginning the survey after reading an information page outlining the study's objectives, confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of consent, among other topics.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available for access upon reasonable requests.

Endnotes

¹ We chose to use "LGBTQ+" as an umbrella term to encompass the wide range of sexual and gender minority identities (e.g., lesbian, gay, transgender), while recognizing its limitations in representing individuals who use non-Western terms (e.g., Malaysian *mak nyah* and Indonesian *waria*) to describe themselves.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section. **Data S1:** Supporting information.