



BUILDING **STRONGER** EQUALITY MOVEMENTS

Executive Summary



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Design: wave.coop

Editor: Cheryl White

Senior Research Manager: Dr Alyson Brody

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ABOUT THE EQUALITY & JUSTICE ALLIANCE

The Equality & Justice Alliance is a consortium of international organisations with expertise in advancing equality, addressing the structural causes of discrimination and violence, and increasing protection to enable strong and fair societies for all Commonwealth citizens, regardless of gender, sex, sexual orientation, or gender identity and expression. The members of the Alliance are the Human Dignity Trust, Kaleidoscope Trust, Sisters for Change, and The Royal Commonwealth Society.

For more information, visit:

equalityjusticealliance.org

Contact: info@equalityjusticealliance.org

ABOUT THE ROYAL COMMONWEALTH SOCIETY

The Royal Commonwealth Society (RCS) is a network of individuals and organisations committed to improving the lives and prospects of Commonwealth citizens across the world. Through youth empowerment, education and high-level advocacy, the Society champions the importance of literacy, equality and inclusion, the environment and connected communities across the Commonwealth's 53 member nations. The Society's unique position within the Commonwealth family allows it to play a pivotal role in convening and connecting the Commonwealth's political and diplomatic representatives, as well as industry, civil society, academic and business leaders, on a wide range of issues. Founded in 1868, the RCS is non-partisan, independent of governments and relies on public generosity to achieve its mission. Since 2013 the RCS has sought to build sensitive dialogue among Commonwealth stakeholders around the need to protect the rights of LGBT+ people, women and girls, and other marginalised groups.

For more information, visit: **www.thercs.org**

Contact: +44 (0)20 3727 4300 info@thercs.org

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INTRODUCTION

In 2018, at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, UK Prime Minister Theresa May expressed deep regret for Britain's role in instituting laws that discriminate against women and girls and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT+) people, many of which remain in effect today. Mrs May also offered the UK government's support to Commonwealth countries that wanted to reform these laws.¹ To catalyse this process, the two-year Equality and Justice Alliance (EJA) programme was launched with the overarching aim of providing support to countries seeking to address the systemic discrimination faced by women and girls and LGBT+ people. The Alliance is a consortium of four international NGOs: Human Dignity Trust, Kaleidoscope Trust, Sisters for Change and The Royal Commonwealth Society.² A key priority of the EJA programme is providing support to diverse movements of activists to work more closely together to advance the shared objective of reforming discriminatory laws.

To support this work, The Royal Commonwealth Society, on behalf of the EJA, commissioned three pieces of complementary multi-country research that would form a series: *Building Stronger Equality Movements*. These three reports each focus on a different critical aspect of movement building:

1. Intersectional approaches to advancing women's and LGBT+ rights in the Commonwealth.
2. Intergenerational approaches to advancing women's and LGBT+ rights in the Commonwealth.
3. Managing backlash against women's and LGBT+ rights movements in the Commonwealth.

A movement is fluid and difficult to define. It goes beyond individual or group activism, conjuring up a momentum and a breadth that sweeps across time, populations and borders. Within and among countries, we find many diverse groupings that include movements, organisations, campaigns and individual activists fighting for women's and LGBT+ equality. Such movements often strive to disrupt existing norms and power relations by introducing new values and social practices, creating space for the voices, opinions and needs of those who are disenfranchised or marginalised and challenging existing political, ideological, cultural, social or economic structures and those who maintain them.³ The process of empowerment can be both personal and collective. Collective action can be focused at a village or neighbourhood level or it can be regional, global or institutional.⁴

Each of the three reports can be read separately, and each draws together the insights of diverse activists who contributed their valuable time and expertise to ensure lessons they have learned from working within equality movements could be shared with colleagues from across the Commonwealth. It is hoped the papers will provide critical insights into how activists can overcome the challenges of working together more effectively, whether that be the challenges of working intersectionally with diverse groups of activists, bridging age divides within movements, or managing the pressures of backlash to progressive ideas and actions mobilised by movements. These lessons are important, as perhaps the biggest message of all from the *Building Stronger Equality Movements* series is that where movements are stronger, more intersectional and diverse in their makeup, and more organised, they are also more effective at bringing about positive change.

BUILDING STRONGER EQUALITY MOVEMENTS



1 THE BAHAMAS

2 ANTIGUA & BARBUDA

3 ST LUCIA

NIGERIA 4

UGANDA 8

ZAMBIA 7

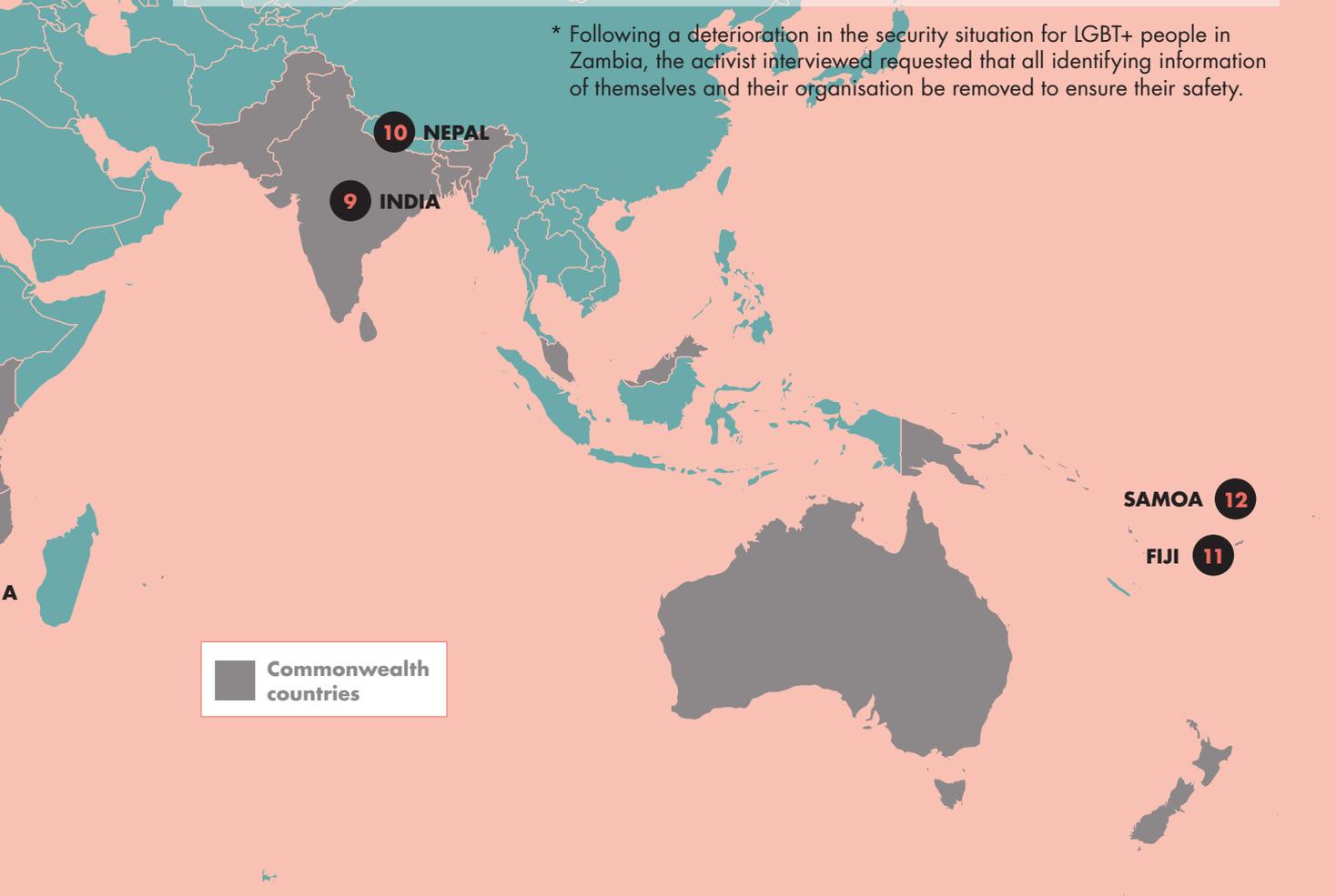
NAMIBIA 5

6 BOTSWAN

PARTICIPATING ORGANISATIONS

- 1** Equality Bahamas
- 2** Women Against Rape
- 3** Eastern Caribbean Alliance for Diversity and Equality
- 4** Women’s Health and Equal Rights Initiative
Stand to End Rape
- 5** Y-Fem Trust
Women Solidarity Namibia
- 6** Black Queer DocX
The Voice of Africa
- 7** *Trans and Intersex Organisation, Zambia**
- +** Commonwealth Youth Gender and Equality Network (CYGEN)
- 8** Uganda Women’s Network
Sexual Minorities Uganda
- 9** LABIA
Ondede
- 10** Women LEAD
Mitini Nepal
LOOM
- 11** Fiji Women’s Forum
Fiji Women’s Rights Movement
Women in Fisheries
- 12** Samoa Victim Support Group
Raise Your Voice

* Following a deterioration in the security situation for LGBT+ people in Zambia, the activist interviewed requested that all identifying information of themselves and their organisation be removed to ensure their safety.



BUILDING STRONGER EQUALITY MOVEMENTS

Why the Commonwealth?

The Commonwealth of Nations is a voluntary association of independent countries largely united by a history of British colonialism, spanning 53 member nations across Asia, Africa, the Americas and the Caribbean, the Pacific and Europe.⁵ The Commonwealth was conceived with the idea that nations formerly under British administrative rule could come together as sovereign equal nations and work together to define and achieve shared priorities.

However, in many cases the colonial past continues to shape the lives of women and girls and sexual and gender minorities living in formerly British-ruled countries, particularly through legislative or cultural changes that imposed colonial patriarchal values. This legacy of colonisation continues to influence social and gender norms as well as legal systems and the processes that reinforce them. Examples of discriminatory colonial laws that remain in force in many Commonwealth countries long after independence include: common law systems that stipulate gender discriminatory legal controls over marriage, divorce, adoption and inheritance;⁶ sexual offences legislation including legal exemptions for rape in marriage or laws that criminalise consensual same-sex relationships;⁷ and discriminatory religious and customary laws,⁸ among others. The introduction and implementation of laws that discriminate against women and girls or sexual and gender minorities was often part of a broader process of influence, through which imported British social and religious norms and attitudes were gradually subsumed into the national consciousness of many colonised countries. It is against this historic and cultural backdrop that diverse equality movements in Commonwealth countries aim to advocate for the human rights of women, girls and sexual and gender minorities.

Intersectional approaches to advancing women's and LGBT+ rights in the Commonwealth

The EJA commissioned Arc International to undertake multi-country research into intersectional movement building. Arc undertook a literature review and gathered case studies through in-depth interviews with leading activists from feminist and LGBT+ organisations in Asia, the Caribbean, Africa and the Pacific region, that are all taking an intersectional approach to movement building. Through the rich personal accounts of feminist and LGBT+ activists in Botswana, India, Nigeria, the Caribbean, Fiji, Antigua, Saint Lucia and Zambia, the paper highlights the vital role of women's and LGBT+ rights movements in offering alternative visions of gender equality, tolerance and freedom of expression, with a focus on intersectional ways of working.

The concept of intersectionality finds its foundation in the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw.

Intersectionality is both a conceptual framework that highlights multiple interlocking discriminations associated with gender, race, class, sexuality, ability and other factors, and a process of working together to seek justice in holistic ways. From its conceptual roots in the feminist and civil rights movements in the United States, it has become a critical lens through which to view both the struggles and collective working of gender rights activists of the global south. Queer theory has also examined what intersectionality means for the LGBT+ rights movement, and how queer identities intersect with class, race, region, disability, caste and gender, which can generate further layers of marginalisation.

“From the outset we wanted the organisation to reflect feminist values. We are working for gender equality and we also understand that the LGBTI struggle is rooted in that.”

Otibho Obianwu, WHER, Nigeria

Key messages include that **an intersectional approach facilitates a more inclusive approach to tackling gender-based discrimination**. Activists including queer organisation Black Queer DocX (BQDX) in Botswana and the LBQ organisation WHER (Women’s Health and Equal Rights Initiative) in Nigeria articulated the potentially transformative value of feminism as a unifying platform and set of principles for all those marginalised or undermined on the basis of gender and/or sexuality. In all the countries represented, solidarity and communities of mutual support have emerged out of the shared struggle against patriarchy and discrimination. Notably, in many cases, women’s organisations have provided a safe and inclusive space for the articulation of lesbian and bisexual women’s needs and concerns.

However, the study revealed that blind spots still exist within the feminist movement which require attention. A notable issue is of membership and recognition of trans women in women’s organisations, since attitudes often remain ambivalent, with unresolved debates around the complex issue of who can and should participate in female solidarity and spaces. This came across particularly strongly in the narratives from the Zambian, Nigerian and Caribbean activists, who noted trans women have played a less integrated role in intersectional alliances with the women’s movement and have sometimes been excluded.

Another key message is that **intersectional alliances can enable the building of a critical mass of activism against gender-based discrimination and violence**.

Chayanika Shah, of the Indian queer feminist LBT collective LABIA, talked about the power of intersectional solidarity between feminist and queer groups whose joint campaigning helped bring about the abolition of section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which criminalised consensual same-sex sexual acts.

Intersectionality also enables the **capturing and representation of complex identities and meeting of complex needs**, as well as allowing the identification of common ground with other groups who have shared experiences of power abuse and marginalisation.

Cases from Zambia and India illustrated this point through discussions of support provided by LGBT+ groups to sex workers lobbying for their rights and recognition. Intersectionality also enables a wider recognition of our shared human vulnerability. The issue of climate change, in particular, raises the question of what we have in common.

“There is a value of knowledge that emerges through networks that supersedes the knowledge that one has if one was not networking. For us the cross pollination of knowledge is important.”

BQDX, Botswana

The activists also outlined **practical strategies for effective intersectional movement building**. Otibho Obianwu from WHER in Nigeria talked frankly about tensions and differences of priority that can prevent LGBT+ and women's organisations from working together effectively but was positive about the potential to move past such challenges. She discussed how shared concerns about sexual health and reproductive rights provide a unifying platform for intersectional working in Nigeria. A Zambian trans activist talked about the value of finding new, more inclusive terms for discussing issues of gender and sexuality – for example not talking about sexual orientation but about what it means to be gender non-conforming.

Several activists mentioned the importance of openly calling out any tensions or differences of opinion and making space and time for negotiation and constructive discussion around shared priorities. Another critical point was the importance of formally establishing working principles, relationships and roles and of identifying a common vision at the outset of any intersectional alliance building process. For example, the Eastern Caribbean Alliance for Diversity and Equality (ECADE) was involved in the development of a shared vision document that resonated with both women's groups and LGBT+ groups as it included a focus on abortion as well as broader issues of anti-discrimination and healthcare. This helped build a strong, sustainable working relationship between the women's and LGBT+ groups.

Intergenerational approaches to advancing women's and LGBT+ rights in the Commonwealth

The EJA commissioned Justice Studio to undertake multi-country research into intergenerational movement building. The research used a mixed methodology of quantitative mapping of 207 movements, organisations and campaigns, a literature review of academic and grey literature, and qualitative in-depth interviews with 16 women's, feminist and LGBT+ activists from Commonwealth countries and others such as Nepal and Zimbabwe with similar experiences of discrimination and colonisation.

Intergenerational movement building is understood in different ways by activists, organisations and movements. At a theoretical level, intergenerational simply means relating to, involving, or affecting several generations. For both women's and LGBT+ movements, the concept expresses the existence and intersection of a generation of older activists who were involved in previous campaigns and social change, with a new generation of youth activists who are more newly involved in activism. How this is practically applied and understood differs. However, it is important to recognise there are power dynamics between generations, and that gaps and misunderstandings across the generations can be accentuated within the context of a social movement.

"A multigenerational approach is a very political decision to question the power that exists within us."

Jyotsna Maskay, LOOM, Nepal

Intergenerational movement building can be the most sustainable and impactful type of action. It promotes inclusion and can amplify younger and older voices.

Because it is able to draw from old and new knowledge and skills, it has an increased capacity and strength, with the wisdom of the older generation ensuring it is able to learn from past successes and challenges, while the vitality of the younger generation brings new thinking and approaches.

Intergenerational approaches can also be a means to promote greater connectedness and friendship.

When embedded in a genuine desire to understand each viewpoint, and learn from each other, intergenerational movements can help bridge divides and unite otherwise polarised views. Mutual respect builds solidarity, collective responsibility and critical mass that spreads across geographies and times to advance the cause and create change at all levels.

Various challenges to bringing different generations together were articulated by the women's rights and LGBT+ activists who participated in the research. For example, religious attitudes were raised as obstacles to intergenerational movement building by activists in the Caribbean, Nigeria, Botswana and Zimbabwe. In the Namibian women's movement, it was noted that if a movement's activity is *"not religious ... then elders will not participate."*⁹ Participants also talked about cultural expectations or norms that affect willingness and capacity of different age groups to become involved in movements. In the women's movement, patriarchal social structures and expectations about respect for elders can discourage young people from participating.

"Because of our socialisation, when we were young we were told not to speak loudly in front of our seniors, not to challenge their views and ideas [...] so when different generations are together the very outspoken group is of a higher age."

LOOM, Nepal

Challenges for younger activists include hegemonic seniority – where older activists exclude and are condescending toward younger activists. A number of research participants also drew attention to the tokenistic inclusion of young voices within the movements. As such, a key challenge with intergenerational movement building is ensuring it is genuine and meaningful rather than tokenistic.

When the barriers to intergenerational movement building can be overcome, activists and community members report significant benefits at both a personal and movement level. In order to improve intergenerational movement building it is important to understand principles of engagement as well as employing certain methods and practices at particular points in movement building and strengthening.

According to the activists consulted, **the key principles to intergenerational movement building are ensuring meaningful engagement, having an appreciation of each generation's experience and perspectives, and respecting each generation's culture and communication preferences.** Biases need to be acknowledged and overcome and older and younger activists must be willing to learn from each other. In this way, it can be ensured that there is *"nothing about us without us"*. Intergenerational learning must *"go in both (or more) directions"* and must be *"mutual and non-hierarchical."*¹⁰ In achieving these principles, one can also aim to expand individual, familial and collective power.

Intergenerational movement building can, and should, be achieved at all stages of a movement's life cycle, from the inception stage to strengthening an existing movement through capacity building and mentoring. For a movement to last, it is crucial to ensure intergenerationality, with succession planning and positive transitions across lifetimes. An intergenerational approach requires people of a range of ages and identities to feel *"a sense of ownership to drive a message that's actually sustainable."*

To be truly meaningful, intergenerational movements must ensure power is shared within, and among, the generations. Younger and older activists must be allowed to flourish and achieve power with each other. Movements should not only seek to be intergenerational, they must be more broadly intersectional within, and among, the generations. Change and adaptation is an important part of building an inclusive and responsive movement, and as one participant explained: *"Change is inevitable and other people inputting into an idea doesn't mean they're not respecting you."*¹¹

"The intention needs to be more focused on the design of the space and the opportunity than on the activity itself. So less focused on specifically inviting older people and younger people and telling them how to make each other comfortable, and more focused on designing a space people will want to come to, and when they get there they'll feel comfortable so they'll communicate and engage."

Alicia Wallace, Equality Bahamas

Despite the challenges faced, the research indicates that many women's and LGBT+ movements have made strides in building intergenerational dialogue and cooperation. **Key drivers of success are finding common ground, trying to set aside resentment and distrust, working towards collective responsibility, and acknowledging and appreciating what each generation can bring to the movement.** Where this has been achieved, activists of all generations report improved experiences, enhanced knowledge sharing and skills development, an enriched understanding of the historical narrative of the movement, and development of personal relationships and support mechanisms. Capitalising on this solidarity can strengthen, and make more effective, the drive towards equality.

Understanding and managing backlash against women's and LGBT+ rights movements in the Commonwealth

The EJA commissioned Edge Effect to undertake multi-country research into how diverse equality movements manage the threat posed by backlash. Their research looked at backlash through the words and experiences of 40 women's and diverse SOGIE rights activists in four Commonwealth countries: Sri Lanka, St Lucia, Tanzania and Tonga. The paper maps different forms of backlash with reference to examples in the four research countries, drawing attention to particular tensions and challenges.

"In Africa [...] we have termites. At first you don't notice them, but they get into things like the wooden materials that houses are made of and start to destroy it from the inside. Backlash [...] is the termites crumbling all the women's rights we have built."

Tanzanian women's rights activist

Every day, women's rights activists and activists asserting the rights of people of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions (SOGIE) live with backlash. The term backlash refers to all tactics that are utilised to stop the advancement of women's and SOGIE rights. Backlash is aimed at activists, the civil society organisations they work within and the movements they seek to build. The study revealed multiple forms of backlash.

Across the world – including in the four countries where the research took place – a notable form of backlash in the face of demands for gender equality and SOGIE rights is the failure to bring into force appropriate laws and other measures. Or, when progressive legislation has been passed, the political will for its implementation is often lacking. For example, although the government of Tonga committed to signing the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in March 2015, there was strong opposition from churches and religious groups, who argued that CEDAW would undermine Christian ideologies. As a result, **Tonga is the only Commonwealth country not to have ratified CEDAW.**

In some countries women's rights and SOGIE activists are finding it increasingly difficult to hold public events such as conferences or Gay Pride because of openly hostile responses and a lack of support from local authorities and the police.

In all four countries, **narratives reinforcing or prescribing specific gender-based norms with regard to behaviours, roles and (opposite sex) relationships are often mobilised by influencers such as governments and religious leaders.** In all four countries stories are used to reinforce notions of nationhood; culture; tradition; gender; womanhood; family; morality; normality; homosexuality; and sin. Narratives reaffirming or prescribing specific gender-based norms, behaviours and relationships are often used strategically by government and other powerful influencers to define national identities, values and practices. These are often disseminated through the media and other channels of communication such as school textbooks, and can significantly shape public attitudes and ideas.

“We get a lot of church groups and religious groups, a lot of groups that say they represent different ethnic traditions that are against us. There is always the thing where they say we are importing a Western lack of morals.”

Woman’s rights activist, Sri Lanka

One implicit form of backlash experienced by many SOGIE and women’s rights activists participating in the study is ostracism from families and community members. This is because their work and lifestyles are perceived as challenging traditional notions of family and gender roles.

Many of those interviewed reported encountering employment discrimination and organisational underfunding because of the nature of their work. When seeking paid work, they noted that potential employees often discriminated against them on the grounds of their gender or sexuality or because of their activism.

Activists reported experiences of multiple forms of violence, including physical, emotional, psychological and cyber-based violence. Social media and email have been used frequently as channels of hate messages directed at activists, with this form of violence having been experienced by 37 of the 40 activists interviewed. In extreme cases, SOGIE and women’s rights activists have been subjected to physical violence. Women’s rights activists are subject to the same types of risks as any human rights activist, but as women, they may also be targeted for, or exposed to, gender-specific threats and gender-specific violence. In Tanzania every SOGIE activist interviewed responded that they had been beaten or raped by police.

Activists noted the value of creating a critical mass of support. In particular, when organisations work in solidarity, this can be a powerful strategy for addressing backlash. For example, in Tonga the divisions over CEDAW have created an opportunity for solidarity between gender and SOGIE-based activists. They have worked together to mobilise everyday citizens to support the international convention. Another approach is to see the police as potential agents in helping to shift discriminatory norms and attitudes, rather than viewing them in a purely negative light. Activists in some countries have recognised that raising the awareness of the police and working with them as allies can bring positive impacts. On a broader scale, globally, women’s rights activists are recognising the value of working with men in the struggle towards sustainable gender equality, rather than castigating them as ‘the problem’ in ways that create tensions and resentment.

“We do sensitisation work with men to bring them on board with us. We don’t use separation tactics because that just reinforces the patriarchy. We ask them to work with us for the benefit of all of us.”

Women’s rights activist, St Lucia

For backlash directed at individuals, reported tactics were more about minimising physical and psychological risks through self-care, mutual support and training. The value of seeking solidarity with international movements, activists and support from international organisations was also highlighted. When individual activists are targeted, appeals may be made to the international community for assistance. For example, in the form of sanctions against those in power or direct support for activists. However, there was a shared feeling that any support needs to be sustained, long-term and backed up with resources such as funding and expertise.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

ARC INTERNATIONAL

Since 2003, ARC International has been advancing human rights related to sexual orientation, gender identity/expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC). ARC plays a unique role in facilitating strategic planning around LGBTI issues internationally, strengthening global networks, providing research, analysis and tools for LGBTI and allied movements, and enhancing access to UN mechanisms. ARC has played a key role in the development of the Yogyakarta Principles and Yogyakarta Principles +10, on the application of International Human Rights Law in relation SOGIESC.

EDGE EFFECT

Edge Effect works to ensure that the rights, needs and strengths of people with diverse SOGIESC are addressed in development and humanitarian programs. Edge Effect works in various countries, including those where backlash, violence and stigma leads to exclusion of people with diverse SOGIESC from development programs and humanitarian assistance. Edge Effect works in partnership with diverse SOGIESC CSOs and community members to strengthen engagement with development and humanitarian actors and to strengthen community-based response. Edge Effect also undertakes participatory research, trains development and humanitarian actors on diverse SOGIESC inclusion, and supports policy and good practice development.

For more information, visit:

www.edgeeffect.org

JUSTICE STUDIO

Justice Studio is a research and consultancy organisation specialised in social justice. Justice Studio is concerned with promoting social change and human rights, their purpose is to create global social equality by assisting and challenging governments and organisations to be the best they can be. Justice Studio's clients work with those in society who are most disadvantaged or who lack a voice. Clients are assisted to solve problems, gather and analyse evidence, understand their impact and manage change. Justice Studio's people are compassionate, knowledgeable and forward thinking, and they are committed to delivering research and consultancy with the end outcomes of client's beneficiaries in mind.

**“Activism begins with the
personal struggle with identity.”**

Akkai Padmashali

Ondede, India



