

Feminist Interventions and Emerging Issues in Southeast Asia

In the Time of COVID-19

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Foreword

The pandemic and its ongoing economic and social crisis of unparalleled proportion continues to affect almost every aspect of people's lives. Class, gender, race, and ability as well as access to education, infrastructure, technology and vaccines shape how well groups as well as individuals are getting through the fallout of the pandemic and the new normal. The pandemic amplified and exacerbated inequalities and injustices worldwide. Women and marginalized groups were hit particularly hard.

However, women and feminist groups are at the forefront of building support and solidarity in creative ways despite numerous obstacles. This Scoping Paper maps how COVID-19 affected the activities and interventions of feminist movements in Southeast Asia (SEA). The pretext of the pandemic serves to limit freedoms beyond emergency measures and digital access became more important than ever. Already before, access to technology was no longer a want, but a need. What are obstacles to transboundary feminist interventions? Did the COVID-19 situation present new opportunities as well? How to reach and include marginalized groups and individuals? How to deal with access to technology and mental health issues? What is the impact on negotiating power and advocacy for social justice? These question and more are explored in this publication.

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We hope that the Scoping Paper contributes to fruitful discussions and provides valuable insights for future initiatives.

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List of Acronyms & Terminologies

ARROW	— Asian-Pacific Resource & Research Centre for Women
ASEAN	— Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CEDAW	— Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
COVID-19	— Coronavirus disease 2019
CRC	— Child Rights Convention
CSE	— Comprehensive Sexuality Education
IWRAW	— International Women's Rights Action Watch — Asia Pacific
LGBT	— Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender
LGBTIQ+	— Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer + all people who have a non-normative gender identity or sexual orientation.
SDG	— Sustainable Development Goals
SEA	— Southeast Asia
SOGIESC	— Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, Sex Characteristics
SOP	— Standard Operating Procedure
SRHR	— Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
UN	— United Nations
UNFPA	— United Nations Population Fund

Definition of Terms

Doomscrolling	— Scrolling through the internet and consuming a lot of bad news.
Feminist	— Person, self-identified or otherwise, who works in challenging gender injustice and towards equality.
Lockdown	— A state of isolation or controlled movement of people through government restrictions on mass transport, economic activities, and social gatherings.
Mainland SouthEast Asia	— Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam
Maritime SouthEast Asia	— Brunei, Timor-Leste, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, and Singapore
OGBV	— Online gender-based violence, a term used to describe or how structures of violence and inequality manifest in digital spaces.
Southeast Asia	— The 11 countries that stretch from eastern India to China and are divided into “mainland” and “island” zones. These countries are Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor Leste, and Vietnam. West Papua is also included as a country seeking independence from the central government of Indonesia. Not all Papuans identify as Southeast Asian and beyond the scope of this paper, there is limited international recognition of Papua as a country.

1. Introduction

This is a Scoping Paper that has mapped out how COVID-19 impacted the activities and interventions of feminist movements in Southeast Asia (SEA).

It aims to serve as a starting point for two audiences: those interested in gaining a broad overview of what is happening within this region and those looking to inform future strategies or discussions within the feminist movement. This report is a snapshot of many interventions, how they spread out, and brought networks together or brought them apart. Within this wide net that has been cast lies opportunities to further explore the new ways to collaborate across borders.

This Scoping Paper is divided into four main parts. The first part serves to introduce Southeast Asia as the geographical location of this study and the general nature of feminist movements in the region. The second part provides a discussion of formal and informal organizing as ways of implementing COVID-19 interventions. The third part outlines the commonalities across the SEA feminist movements and discusses how activists navigated challenges. This Scoping Paper concludes with a list of recommendations moving forward.

Southeast Asia: A region responds to a global pandemic

This study covers the countries in Southeast Asia, which comprised of Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor Leste, and Vietnam. As a region, Southeast Asia is largely held together by geographical proximity, mutual trade interests, and ease of cross-border movement among its nationals as outlined in the treaties among the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states. West Papua is also seeking independence from Indonesia. However, it is important to note that not all Papuans identify as Southeast Asian and beyond the scope of this paper, there is limited international recognition of Papua as a country.

Across the region, there are differences in modes of governance, languages, levels of progress in feminist advocacy, as well as vast differences in power, wealth, and influence.

In terms of governance, there are various limitations on freedom of expression, which inhibit critical voices and press freedom. In this context, Southeast Asia has been characterized and criticized for its weak political institutions where

authorities are quick to clamp down on activism, especially the kind that is readily branded as brought by “Western influences”. Because of its diversity, the SEA region largely defies attempts of a unifying approach or “one-size-fits-all solutions”.



In the early days of the pandemic, the low infection rates in Southeast Asia were equated to its effective public health response. However, one year into the pandemic by mid-2021, most governments in the regions struggled to adequately vaccinate their populations while trying to curb the spread of new more infectious variants of COVID-19.

Governments in SEA have demonstrated that they are administratively willing and able to help formal sectors. However, they are also worsening the compounded socioeconomic effects of the pandemic as a result of longstanding issues that governments have shown little will or ability to address. In many parts of SEA, democratic processes and rights are suppressed. The outbreak of COVID-19 became an opportunity and justification to further tighten restrictions. Informal sector workers and other marginalized groups were further pushed to the peripheries and faced increased barriers in voicing dissent. Feminists took to the internet to push back against the authorities, albeit with varying limitations and results.

Feminist movements pivot to online spaces



Global reports show that lockdown measures meant to control the spread of COVID-19 have compounded existing gender inequalities when it comes to livelihood, education, and have increased the risks of gender-based violence (GBV). In November 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) published a [statement](#) calling for urgent action across SEA to protect women and girls from this shadow pandemic of rising violence.

‘Ever since the pandemic began last year, a lot of our work has been very much informed by all the different ways that people’s lives have been made more difficult and how our rights have been suppressed further.’

— Activist working in a SEA feminist organization

Lockdowns to control the spread of COVID have caused many to turn to digital spaces and services where able. Feminist activists have also pivoted to digital spaces, although various levels of access, digital literacy, and infrastructure cause notable differences within the region. In contending with multiple sites of oppression, similar issues can be influenced by varying local contexts to produce diverse responses.



These are the dynamics that shaped the feminist movement in SEA during COVID-19:

- Many of the new initiatives in response to COVID-19 were digital events or mutual/emergency aid fundraisers.
- Funders impacted the nature of the interventions. While some feminist organizations worked with reflexive funders, many reported that activity-based funding was tied to unchanging or restrictive conditions.
- Larger collective efforts for advocacy emerged to address gaps made more urgent by the pandemic. As of the writing of this report, many efforts were still in the early stages of internal collaboration and coordination.

All activists interviewed reported feeling drained or overwhelmed. Those in high conflict zones dealt with trauma on a daily basis. Burnout was especially noted amongst activists in countries with high rates of COVID-19 infection and those working with marginalized communities.

Even before the outbreak of COVID-19, many feminists were embedded in broader activism struggles and community care projects. On a personal level, the pandemic compelled majority of the respondents to bear additional and unpaid domestic duties in their households. Some activists made initial short-term sacrifices or compromises to be primary caregivers. However, as the pandemic dragged on, it became evident that caregiving arrangements transitioned into longer-term responsibilities with no immediate viable alternatives. For the feminists who have been in crisis mode since the pandemic, it was harder to focus on the broader scope of activism in the national context when immediate needs like security, shelter or hunger had to be dealt with first.



2. Research design and limitations

This qualitative scoping paper was conducted using a combination of conversations with feminist activists working across SEA and desk research. A series of standardized questions looking at broad national contexts, tools, emerging issues, COVID-responses and more were asked. Where possible, deeper conversations followed, probing more into individual expertise and to lift the veil behind how communications are planned and executed.

Participants included respondents based in each SEA country and West Papua. Also interviewed were six communications officers from five feminist SEA or Asia Pacific organizations, three feminist digital workshop facilitators, and two disability rights activists. The names and identities of the participants interviewed in this paper have been kept anonymous for security reasons.

Selection of research participants was done through purposive sampling and based on the author's network of feminists working in digital rights, Sexual Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR), and queer activism across SEA. Due to the intersectional nature of their work, most of the respondents are involved in more than one form of activism. Collectively, the interviewees work in advocacy that include but are not limited to gender and sexuality, labor rights, sexual health, queer rights, climate justice, data feminism, land rights, democracy activism, digital rights, safety and security, mental health, sex worker rights. As power is interlaced with all layers of their work, these feminist activists are bound together by challenging unequal power structures and distributing power where it is needed. They are guided by the knowledge that voices of dissent are louder when they speak together, but have the greatest impact when those in the margins are able to speak for themselves.

All interviewees are multilingual; they speak English in addition to their mother tongue though fluency in English varies. Most of the interviews were conducted in the English language. In instances where conversations were conducted in Bahasa Brunei, Bahasa Melayu, or Bahasa Indonesia translations to English were interpreted based on the meaning of the content.

Most interviewees are connected to the broader movement of 4th wave of feminism which focuses on women empowerment, digital tools, and intersectionality. A few activists are strongly aligned with feminist principles, but do not identify as part of the 4th wave, or even the broader feminist movement largely due to entry points in feminism that do not involve personal contact with other activists.

While some of the respondents identified as neurodiverse, the majority of those interviewed were not significantly disabled persons. Two disability rights activists were interviewed, but they were cautious to note that much of their advocacy focused on immediate needs. Additionally, while they are approached on matters of inclusivity by feminists, inclusivity interventions do not form a large part of their daily work. They do not frequently organize alongside feminists and thus, face barriers of participation in “mainstream feminist activism”.

This gap is highlighted to demonstrate that feminist online organizing does not regularly include those with sight or hearing disabilities. Although improvements have been made especially in democracy activism, particularly in Thailand and Indonesia, there was a glaring lack of non-medicalized data or research of disabilities available to interviewees. One researcher shared that she could not find relevant country-specific disability studies.

In terms of desk research, this paper draws on news and reports in the English-language. Reports from larger organizations with archives of publications available for downloads were also used as references. Similar to the interviews, news reports and research studies in Bahasa Brunei, Bahasa Melayu, or Bahasa Indonesia, were interpreted in English based on the meaning of the content. Findings from two reports in other languages were translated to English by researchers who are native speakers.

Lastly, this scoping paper does not claim to cover every issue or illustrate all the nuances of the feminist movements across SEA. While this paper shares insights on how particular issues manifest in SEA, it is not designed to be used as a singular guide that captures an entire region. However, this study hopes to serve as one of the many knowledge pathways into this region that is home to a plurality of vibrant feminist movements.



3. Structural context of responses

3.1 Respondents

How organizations and individuals respond to trends and challenges depends on the contexts they work in. Context refers to but is not limited to the structure of their organizations and their politics, which range from reformist to radical. This paper focuses on the structure of formal and informal organizations as this was identified by interviewees as a major factor that influenced the speed and scale of their responses during COVID-19.

Interviewees questioned on the differences between reformist and radical approaches could appreciate the necessity and pragmatism of advocacy of both approaches. Some even occupied both spaces through a combination of work and side projects. Part of trying different approaches was a matter of seeing what works.


As one interviewee explained, *"Trying new methods may not be because a person or organization has identified an issue, and hence, a method as a solution."* Another interviewee said, *"Sometimes, the organization or even movement itself prevents solutions."* These statements indicate how experiences from working in reformist activism can inform the work in radical activism, and vice versa. This leads feminists to seek out spaces where their ideas can be explored.

Those able to implement more radical communication approaches within an organization attributed it to having gained more trust and autonomy over time. However, they recognized that this was not the case for their peers. Thus, formal organizations were seen as more reformist in nature. Some of the informal collectives were also seen as reformist in nature, although as a whole, radical political approaches were more likely to emerge among them.

3.2 Formal and informal organizations

There were key patterns noted in how informal and formal organizations operate within their given structural contexts. These patterns are outlined below to further differentiate the structural contexts formal and informal organization move in and illustrate how it shaped their COVID-19 responses.





Formal organizations provide the most formal and familiar idea of feminist action and are more likely to:

- Work with multi-stakeholders and focus on policies, governance, inter-governmental processes, and international legal instruments like Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Child Rights Convention (CRC).
- Participate in spaces like ASEAN People's Forum or the Generation Equality Forum.
- Focus on campaigning and public education as secondary to engaging with decision-makers.
- Collaborate on heterogeneous issues with a loose international network of feminists. Signal boosting each other's content on social media and signing solidarity statements in support of each other's advocacies can sometimes almost be perfunctory.
- Employ Communications teams who work with a set year-on-year content calendar. Communications teams are likely to be overwhelmed. While the ability to plan ahead helps the teams manage timing and scale of campaign content, this also presents limitation in their ability to respond to new issues. In effect, Communications teams are seldom able to immediately scale up to meet urgent needs.
- Have program officers who have a seat at many tables, however, the ability to fully engage in all initiatives is limited.



Informal organizations are characterized by:

- Various online publishing spaces which have allowed many more voices to join the feminist movement or start their own.
- Informal collectives which are more likely to be unregistered.
- Anonymity as both a tool for personal safety and credible objectivity.

- Influential individuals can be anonymous. This is mostly a privacy/security measure as being an outspoken feminist can have broader social repercussions outside of the movement.
- Some have found an audience by creating anonymous online accounts. Anonymity is seen as lending an air of objectivity to statements.
- Individuals who tend to approach activism personally. They discuss identity politics and locate social media as a space where they can be their authentic selves and educate others about their lived experiences of issues, for example, transphobia.
- Quick responses to needs and events of public interest as they are not limited by an organization's strategic goals.
- Collectives which tend to self-identify as younger and more in favor of radical politics.
- Radical political views that emerge in informal organizing where there is more room to voice out these views.
- Actors who see themselves as filling a gap in activism gap left by organizations and governments. Public education and advocacy were areas identified as having a gap in activism.
- Passion projects which are implemented by partners who have shared affinities and have more control over decisions. Gatekeeping is used to prevent people with different views from participating in projects.



- Underfunding and the incapacity to access larger frameworks of support.
- A thin line drawn between digital and physical advocacy.
- Lived experiences as the basis of their establishment as frequently seen in marginalized communities such as the Migrant Workers Federation in Thailand.

Some of the informal collectives interviewed were in a transitional phase where their larger goals were beyond the limits of available resources. Some had existing experiences from organizational work and were considering formalizing processes to gain more access to grants and opportunities and thus, position their collective among larger feminist networks. Others were hesitant to register through the government and wary of the implications of funding on independence and credibility. They also worried about increasing liabilities if unable to cope with requirements of formalization such as annual general meetings, taking minutes, having a secretary or maintaining an office address. There is also resistance to the idea of a radical organization participating in the decidedly un-radical processes of formalization.



4. Emerging trends in COVID-19 responses

Commonalities across Southeast Asia in feminist responses to COVID-19

This section draws from the work of importance to interviewees and their networks, especially those that share commonalities across borders, and are more clearly linked to the impacts of COVID.

The most immediate change involves enforced restrictions to physical movements, which noticeably limited communications. Urban activists are often isolated from under-resourced communities, but advocacy continues online. In these spaces, activists wind up speaking on behalf of communities, which are now treated as beneficiaries instead of partners. These are pre-existing concerns exacerbated by COVID. Workarounds involved exploring numerous communications avenues, none which interviewees found satisfying in terms of efficiency or security. Many more voices are now missing from digital conversations, but the scale of important conversations being held can make it easy to forget the case.

The section looks at a selection of topics that have been prominent amongst the work of interviewees of this paper as the pandemic unrolled across the lands.

4.1 Democracy Advocacy: Feminists in the people's movements

Across the region, democracy activists pushed back against the mishandling of the public health crisis, the erosion of rights under the guise of pandemic management, and other abuses of power. No government escaped scrutiny. Human Rights Watch [reported](#) that the authorities in Cambodia, [Indonesia](#), [Malaysia](#), Myanmar, Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam used COVID-19 related measures to [criminalize and suppress](#) media coverage and prevent people from [expressing opposition](#) to government policies enacted during COVID-19. In countries like the Philippines or Myanmar, militarist policies undermined fundamental freedoms of its citizens.

Additionally, the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to peaceful assembly and association also [called](#) on governments to consult civil society in its enactment of laws to respond to the pandemic and cautioned against the use of sweeping emergency laws and rule by decree.

Calls for solidarity across SEA countries cut across numerous platforms and borders. The #MilkTeaAlliance, an online democratic solidarity movement is a

famous example that called for unity among countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand with Taiwan and Hong Kong. While the #MilkTeaAlliance has its [roots](#) in the collective trolling of nationalist China accounts by Thai, Taiwanese, and Hong Kong supporters, it has since evolved to a call for [pro-democracy solidarity](#). For example, [posts](#) from organizations in Myanmar's General Strike Committee claimed solidarity with protestors in Thailand carrying country-specific hashtags such as [#WhatsHappeningInMyanmar](#). The hashtag later became a centralized source of information amidst decentralized algorithm-driven social media platforms. #WhatsHappeningInThailand also carried the #MilkTeaAlliance hashtags.

Democracy activism can be marked by specific [demands](#) and milestones. When these are achieved, it is implied that the goal of democracy has won. This makes some activists feel that democracy is more [achievable](#) than feminism. However, both movements are constantly negotiating with power. Thus, democracy needs to be feminist in its approach as it is incomplete when it is only available to some. It is more likely that each generation of activists will face [new challenges](#) and every step forward for the feminist movement is a step towards equality and social justice within democracy.

In Thailand, the lively democracy movement notably included many strong and young feminist voices at the forefront of mobilizing and organizing. The movement employed an inclusive and intersectional feminist lens. Embedded within the movement were mechanisms to seek redress for violence and sexual harassment experienced during protests, mental healthcare, inclusion of marginalized groups like the homeless, trans persons, disabled protestors, wheelchair users, sex workers, among others. Multiple forms of activism appeared in online spaces and on the streets. The fear and anxiety brought by COVID-19 was managed alongside other immediate threats such as violence from the armed authorities.

In Indonesia, various groups including feminist collectives took turns leading protests against President Joko Widodo's (Jokowi) administration. The protestors effectively functioned as the only form of political pressure against Jokowi, as political rivals had allied with his administration. Broadly speaking, the pushback against Jokowi came from the political right, which employs a conservative religious lens and the political left, which employs a social justice lens. While both movements have women leadership, feminist interpretations were much stronger on the left. Gender mainstreaming can always be improved across student movements, labor rights groups, and democracy advocacy, however, there were many feminists who enriched the movement by using an intersectional approach in all levels of democracy activism in Jakarta and Jogjakarta. Other urban areas were noted to have varying levels of feminist participation. Jokowi's increased crackdown on internet spaces over the years, implementations of omnibus laws

affecting mass jobs, and other actions have caused wide [coalitions](#) to form and to criticize his administration. These resistance movements covered intersections that included but were not limited to women's rights, disability rights, digital security, climate justice, labor rights and more.

In Myanmar, feminists and women's rights activists were at the frontline of protests against the violent military junta. [Garment workers](#) in factories were among the first to lead strikes against the coup. Many continue to endure great risk to their safety. There were reports that families of activists were being targeted and those who remained in the city lived in a state of constant surveillance and extreme vulnerability. The elected and then ousted National Unity Government has since declared war on the military junta. ASEAN's response to the political turmoil in Myanmar has been tepid, reflecting its non-interference [policy](#).

In Malaysia, youth-led democracy movements utilized a feminist lens under its members, which included young women in leadership positions and feminist lawyers. In the western Malaysian state of Selangor, the climate justice and indigenous rights movement was backed by feminist principles participation and intergenerational participation in its push back against a state attempt to degazette a forest reserve or remove its official preservation status through the publication of an official gazette. The success was seen as monumental as the state monarchy reportedly had financial interest in the declassification of the forest reserve.

4.2 Creativity

Feminists have a long history of exploring art and creativity as tools of expression in safe spaces or as a means of communication. Creative output has a way of energizing a movement and drawing public attention to issues. As one interviewee said, *"A lot of creative solutions are born out of scarcity."*

Another participant noted, *"We try to bring out reproductive health messaging in different forms. So it's not really stagnant, like one-way workshops or trainings. As much as possible, we try different routes like art exhibitions, films, and podcasts."*

Art therapy: *Project X*, a Singaporean sex worker advocacy organization offered free art therapy sessions for stress relief and self-empowerment built on confidentiality and respect. These art therapy sessions were free of charge and provided materials to participants. Due to Singapore's relatively effective control of the pandemic, the workshop was offered over both a video call and in-person.

In Myanmar, in the wake of violence from the military coup, art therapy sessions organized in Ayathakan were made available to all, including activists.

Storytelling: In West Papua, prior to the pandemic, group storytelling sessions were held to help individuals to process traumatic events, especially trauma accumulated by living in active conflict zones. This sentiment was echoed more broadly in light of human rights issues in West Papua. After the start of the pandemic, noting the importance of having someone listen to the stories on mental health, facilitators visited households of storytellers individually as most households did not have the means to conduct group storytelling sessions online. Examples of storytelling initiatives included [PapuanVoices](#) by [EngageMedia](#), and *Mari Cerita Papua (Let's Tell Stories of Papua)*.

Protests, performance, placards: Feminism looks to uplift voices of the oppressed through collective action. When an event takes place, purpose combines with creative practices to unleash forms of expression such as protest art distributed online and political placards seen in street rallies. Some interviewees, for example, organized art jams or made such placards for demonstrations. In some ways, it was a natural part of the process to have protests preceded by creative jam sessions and group placard activities, which are both therapeutic and good for building a sense of community.

Feminist creative expression sits within a larger history of protest art and extends to examples like Thai youth feminists livening up rallies with rapid-response artwork and K-pop dance moves. K-pop fans also raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for the movement. In Indonesia, pandemic street art in Indonesia shamed the authorities in general and President Joko Widodo in particular. In Jogjakarta, the People's Movement Alliance launched a mural [competition](#) where the mural that is "most hunted" would be declared the winner. Climate justice demonstrations also frequently used a gender equality lens in its messages.

In Thailand, the youth feminists within the democracy activist movement were noted for their creativity, incorporating K-pop dances, and a range of rapid-response artworks in their protests. In West Papua, a network of women artists, activists and art students is currently established.

While these prominent examples are linked to broader movements, there is much room to center a feminist lens in protests that are fast gaining scrutiny and media attention.

4.3 Gender- based violence

Global studies have shown that the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in an increase in the number and intensity of gender-based violence. According to interviewees, their respective governments have been slow to respond to the urgent need for survivor services.

Inadequate emergency shelters: Organizations began negotiating for better conditions for women's safety during lockdown. Women's Aid Organization (WAO), Malaysia's most prominent shelter provider for domestic abuse survivors, publicly called on the government to lift travel restrictions for domestic abuse survivors escaping unsafe situations and to make a strong public stance against domestic violence.

Advocating for victim-survivor rights across ASEAN: On a wider front, feminists advocated to address legal gaps in national laws against sexual violence. Organizations like Weaving Women's Voices in Southeast Asia (WEAVE) pushed for ASEAN to enforce regional standards for women's rights and set protocols for cross-border cases of sexual violence. WEAVE's call for an ASEAN judicial mechanism for human rights claims, similar to the European Court of Human Rights, will have wider implications for human rights and victims - survivors of sexual violence in the region.

Emergency fundraisers: Shelters have seen a marked increase in shelter residents and the number of distress calls received by hotlines. *"And these are just the people who know about the existence (of such services)."* In response, organizations have launched emergency fundraisers to meet the increased costs of legal fees, raising shelter capacity, recruiting more workers, and training hotline responders and case workers.

Response gaps: More infrastructure was focused in addressing GBV in physical spaces rather than online spaces. One interviewee gave an example where an underaged sex worker was unable to remove her images from pornography channels. The country's main sexual assault care center did not have the expertise to counsel minors or handle complex cases that were not classified as "traditionally sexual assault."

Gender-disaggregated data: The uptick in GBV cases emphasized the need for SEA to collect gender-disaggregated data to generate evidence of what is seen globally and on-ground on the added impact of COVID on women, as well as to investigate circumstances that may be unique to SEA. According to the WHO, women need to be included in all aspects of economic recovery and stimulus plans to ensure sustainable, rapid and inclusive recovery for all. Gender-disaggregated

data will help in examining the circumstances that contribute to or are unique to GBV in SEA and compare it to global GBV trends. Civil society needs to ensure that governments uphold their commitment to end GBV and advocate for the collection of gender-disaggregated data to inform GBV prevention strategies.

Marginalized: Beyond women and children, stigmatized and vulnerable groups have emerged in interviews as at increased risk for GBV. These groups included but were not limited to LGBT people, sex workers, and persons with disabilities, undocumented locals, migrants and refugees, and low-income persons.

4.3.a Call-out culture

The spike in GBV violence around the world as a consequence of lockdown measures have prompted activists in Indonesia to ask: What now after [#MeToo, the global feminist movement that exposed the magnitude of the normalization of sexual violence?](#)

In particular, activists [discussed](#) the [culture](#) of [calling out](#) predators or ["spilling the tea"](#) and asking if these actions contributed to transformative justice? What is the cost and does it achieve intended outcomes? Do they deter predators? Do they help or harm survivors? How do these actions impact others, like partners or relatives of perpetrators? When is it [inevitable](#)?

These discussions required delicate navigating around trauma and justice, but also shame, which can be weaponized against all parties. In general discourse, there can be a flattening of all forms of sexual violence as having equal impact. This means actions identified as unintended sexual harassment can be held to the same standards as sexual assault. There needs to be a more robust discussion about differentiating forms of sexual violence.

Three young interviewees noted the value of these conversations, but also highlighted the tension in having these discussions with older activist, who are generally more invested in preserving status quo could divert such conversations. Specifically, a few interviewees observed that veteran feminists prefer to focus advocacy efforts on more specific forms of GBV prevention such as domestic violence laws and legal definitions of rape. This can lead to overlooking or even shielding allies facing allegations of sexual violence. There were also observations that there are feminists who are keener to interrogate the harms of "cancel culture" without an equal emphasis on survivor-focused recourse.

One participant in Malaysia noted, *"Older activists don't do that, confront each other on social media."* While a demand for accountability may be happening in

other spaces beyond public view, the perceived lack of support within the movement has prevented more feminists from speaking up about their own experiences with sexual violence. They fear clashing with veteran activists who have more credibility because of their longer history of human rights work. In most cases, these veteran activists have gained power within the movement over time, have vast networks, have seniority within organizations, and other pillars of support.

The minimization of other people's experiences within organizational processes compels survivors to take their grievances elsewhere such as the public sphere. However, using other channels of communication other than social media to demand accountability forces some younger survivors outside the few spaces where they hold power and can be heard. Compounding the stigma and disproportionate scrutiny that survivors experience when stepping forward is the possibility of accusations of libel or slander. Existing standards in the judiciary system place the burden of proof on victims-survivors and thus, favor accused perpetrators. In Indonesia, for example, the UU ITE (Law on Electronic Transactions and Information) law has been used to prosecute and silence survivors under a broad accusation of "causing offense". Outside of organizational structures, these processes are notably more radical than reformist, but subject to vulnerabilities within the judiciary system.

It is important for veteran activists who hold power not to downplay experiences by others and be aware that they might be treated differently due to their relative privileges.

Sometimes going online is not only to hold an organization accountable, but also to expose both the risks of submitting to a process that is flawed and the barriers in seeking justice, even amongst feminist organizations. Collective action is needed to expand access to justice, shift cultural views of violence towards women, and call out allies who are also perpetrators.

Info box: Interviewees are particularly disenchanted with feminist movements/ organizations when internal processes to address GBV do not match external advocacy.

Gaps surfaced by call-out culture in existing mechanisms to deal with sexual violence in the movement:

1. Limited available resources: tends to be met with resistance when allies are the ones under scrutiny.
2. Seen as a tool for employees of formal organizations, and unavailable to activists in informal collectives, individuals, and anonymous persons.
3. Recognized as an important process, but one that is limiting and may create other forms of harm. Survivor needs are not centered in its execution.

4.4 Mental health

How can feminists harness the energy needed for transformative change if they are running on empty? Everyone interviewed had different needs, but a recurring factor that arose in conversations was mental health. Nearly all interviewees noted declining mental health on a personal level and within their communities.

Work requires and affects mental health: As described by one interviewee, *"Everyone is progressively being very drained,"* adding that this particularly affected their volunteer-driven advocacy. Another participant quit their full time job to focus on unpaid labor doing community care in Indonesia, adding, *"Losing work is not losing work. I'm just gaining sanity."*

Online self-care service: Some use social media to share positive messages or mental health self-care advice. A few organizations in Mainland SEA run ad hoc mental health peer counselling through Facebook Messenger. However, many participants said digital alternatives were inadequate. As one interviewee said, *"A lot of medicine is actually social medicine."*

Scale of expected success: Not all efforts need to be scaled up. In particular, the assumption that scaling up is natural follow-up to success needs to be challenged. Some projects can be downsized so resources can be focused on improving outcomes and making projects more sustainable in the long-term. The need and desire to replicate successes are sometimes conflated. Several program managers said this added to their mental burden, as success is both crucial and punitive.

Concerns: Concerns raised about mental health advocacy online, included addressing stigma, and lack of expertise. One participant noted it might also compromise organizations to legal liability on healthcare advice. Part of the discussed solution was to include certified mental health practitioners within the team, but it was not explored.

Advocacy: There is a mental health advocacy gap within the movement. While many feminists individually recognize its importance, it is usually weighed against competing interests and seldom prioritized. It can be difficult to authentically advocate for change that is not an internal priority for the organization. Mental health concerns most frequently arose only in extreme cases, such as the impact of state-sponsored incarceration, torture and abuse of protestors, and sexual violence.

Digital security: A participant noted that mental health is an important component of a holistic approach to digital safety and security: *"You don't want to scare people into being digitally secure. Scaring them puts a toll on their mental*

health.” They noted that in workshops, many raised existing concerns about using the internet. This was further exacerbated by COVID-19-driven anxieties, such as doom scrolling or consuming too much/little information. They linked mental health to stress and trauma when people do not feel a sense of control over a situation digital safety and security.

Informal sector: Informal sectors are primarily made up of women whose vulnerabilities, particularly unemployment, increased over the course of the pandemic. Mental healthcare solutions, along with other necessary aid, were totally absent for women in the informal sector.

Handling COVID-19 disinformation: A pilot mental health project, Jaga Rasa Jaga Karsa (between Indonesia and Malaysia, with a view of expanding across SEA) explored the impact of COVID-19 on mental health. COVID-19 disinformation and hoaxes were listed as key influencing factors. Participants decided that information toolkits on how to identify disinformation and hoaxes needed to be created.

Online memorials: COVID-19 memorials were established for people who have died from the virus. In Malaysia, the c19 Memorial project features inclusivity aspects such as dyslexic-friendly layouts available in three local languages, monitoring testimonials for hate speech, and the decision not include gender to prevent accidental outing of queer persons. In the US, transnational feminist organization AF3IRM set up [Kanlungan](#), a memorial for people of Philippine ancestry who make up a huge sector of lives lost in global healthcare during the pandemic. According to their website, *Kanlungan* is meant to “*remember them as human beings, not simply as a labor statistic, a disease statistic, or an immigration number*”.

4.5 COVID-19 interrupted responses

The outbreak of COVID-19 affected the feminist movement on all levels. Face-to-face activities were immediately suspended.

The pandemic further underscored the magnitude of existing inequalities. However, COVID-19 dominated nearly all available resources such as but not limited to funding, healthcare, and media coverage that could have been channeled to address or call attention to emerging urgent needs. The scramble to deal with the series of emergencies brought by the global outbreak led to burn out among activists and not only hindered the implementation of their existing work but also prevented new projects from taking shape.

The most immediate change involved enforced restrictions to physical movements, which noticeably limited communication. Urban activists were often isolated from under-resourced communities, pushing advocacy efforts to continue online. In these online spaces, activists wound up speaking on behalf of communities, who were relegated to the status of beneficiary instead of partner.

Respondents across the region cited the following ways that COVID-19 altered the way they formulated and implemented interventions.

Wider divide between urban activists and rural communities: COVID-19 interrupted physical gatherings, community and grassroots work, and altered funding. In Cambodia, for example, the funding for some community outreach projects was withdrawn because lockdown measures prevented activists in cities from accessing rural areas. For grassroots organizations still in their nascent stage, the importance of face-to-face interactions is an invaluable process of building trust within their communities and could not simply be substituted by online activities.

Online spaces inaccessible to analogue activists: Not all activists had personal digital devices or access to a stable internet connection. This group of analogue activists had to adapt, adopt, and shift their activities to the digital space. When they had evaluated their implementation strategies, participants noted that many activities they had designed were better suited as offline activities.

Labelled as non-essential: Survivor services that were classified as “non-essential” struggled to continue their operations. One glaring example is how domestic violence shelters were closed, though cases of domestic violence were increasing. In Lao PDR, an on-going research on sexual health and reproductive was interrupted when funding for the project was abruptly re-channeled to finance the COVID-19-response.

A participant noted that due to funding limitations, fewer communications officers were available to publicize abortion services in 2021 compared to 2020. Despite on-the-ground reports indicating that abortion services had become more essential, the organization noted fewer texts and calls from women. The organization presumed that it was because many people did not know of the availability of the medical abortion services and probably assumed services were discontinued because of lockdown measures.

In many cases, a pattern emerged where feminist work was deprioritized and resources were re-directed to support COVID-19 interventions.

Sex workers alliance: In one country, efforts to form a sex workers alliance in

several states outside of the capital were halted due to lockdowns and secondary impacts of COVID-19. WhatsApp emerged as the only common platform that had free bandwidth. However, shifting discussions to WhatsApp proved futile because of the inability to balance equitable access with privacy concerns. Organizers were eventually pulled into other advocacy projects meant to address COVID-19. The resulting lack of coordinators to build a sex workers alliance negated the original intent of the project to form an alliance where sex workers could determine their needs independent of outsider perspectives. The pandemic relegated them again to rely on CSO partners to speak on their behalf.

Indonesia democracy protests move online: Democracy advocates took to the streets in Indonesia against the new provisions in the labor law in 2019. However, by March 2021 COVID-19 conditions pushed protests to migrate online and use “any platform, or cross platform” to communicate their message.

Hesitancy to call out government lapses: Interviewees voiced difficulty in criticizing the authorities when governments were perceived as performing well during the public health crisis. In Singapore and Vietnam, for example, interviewees reported that the high nationalist pride at containing the virus resulted in an atmosphere of presenting “a united front” against all forms of criticism. There was a tendency for activists to contain efforts to call out government lapses. In 2021, Vietnam’s rising number of infections clashed with low vaccination rates, opened up a space for activists to again voice out dissent.

Overall, respondents said that while activists and community members were cut off from their networks, access opened up for others. Travel costs, documentation/visa limitations, and accessibility issues prevented some activists from participating in feminist networks. Some lamented that the current trend of convening online would be temporary. Other organizers stated that COVID-19 imposed digital/hybrid events were a compromise and they “couldn’t wait” for things to “return to normal”. In this sense, ‘normal’ is exclusive.

Interviewees also noted that moving online had reduced their ability to reach some government officials. Before the pandemic, discussions with government officials were in spaces that are more neutral. During the pandemic, those in power exerted more control over communication channels and set the rules of engagement, making them more difficult to reach and hold accountable. The lockdown compounded already bureaucratic waiting times, that is, if activists succeeded in reaching government officials at all.

When possible, workarounds to the limited access to online spaces involved exploring other communication platforms. However, none of the interviewees in this study found the alternative communication platforms to be sufficient in

terms of efficiency and security. As a result, activists noted that though there were a large number of important conversations taking place online, many voices were missing from these digital conversations.

On the other hand, due to the increase of audiences spending time online, interviewees also noted more opportunities to apply pressure to governments and harness popular public support for campaigns.

4.6 COVID-19-specific responses

As COVID-19 continued to spread across the region, feminist movements conceptualized and launched improvised interventions designed to address urgent needs as they arose.

Funds to meet urgent needs: Many mutual - emergency and direct aid - funds were set up to deal with the rising vulnerabilities of various people across all SEA countries. While feminists alone did not lead this, interviews conducted for this research revealed that funds set up by feminists addressed gaps in other funds. These gaps included standardizing practices to protect the privacy of recipients who are part of high-risk security groups like refugees, allocating resources for sanitary kits and family planning, and identifying marginalized groups who needed assistance. There were numerous examples of trans people, in particular, being excluded from government aid. One example was Timor-Leste, where participants said cash aid provided to low-income households excluded queer households, especially among households headed by trans men. As one interviewee added, *"From our experience, since flooding and the first lock down, our (queer) community has always been excluded."*

A notable exception was Brunei, which generally had low incidents of COVID-19. Some mutual aid initiatives do exist in Brunei, but this mostly targeted migrant communities.

Vaccine access for underserved populations: As vaccine drives were rolled out across the region, feminists organized vaccine drives for refugees, migrant workers, and undocumented persons. Not all feminist groups were working with entire communities. Some worked with small families or individuals. Many of these voluntary projects took place outside of city centers where there were fewer vaccine outreach programs led by activists or health organizations in collaboration with the authorities.

Feminists were also seen as safe personal hotlines to solve myriad problems as they arose. Interviewees described instances where cases were brought to their

attention even if they did not live in the same state. According to interviewees, there was an assumption that because of the value they placed on human rights, feminist activist networks would provide the persistence and motivation needed to resolve problems. Some used mutual aid networks to provide essential information. This included translating government announcements and materials into other languages, addressing vaccine hesitancy, and providing the latest updates on vaccine access as well as new lockdown procedures.

Long-term advocacy: Feminist movements have long been working in solidarity with other activists to improve the understanding of partners and allies of their work for better law and policies. COVID-19 has resulted in more feminist participation across various forms of collective action.

Feminists are demanding better representation among policymakers and drawing more attention to the shadow pandemic of violence, and how COVID-19 impacts women and children. One example is the upcoming global initiative #EmptyChairs campaign which is being developed to address the absence of CSOs in decision-making in policy spaces such as the Human Rights Council and the absence of women in COVID-19 task forces.

A critical feminist lens applied to advocating for vaccine equity emerged in #Fem4PeoplesVaccine, led by DAWN and TWN, a coalition, which includes SEA feminist organizations. There were also efforts to explore the intersection of healthcare with climate justice and women's rights. Youth feminists also mobilized on various intersections of sexuality, climate change and mental health on platforms and apps like Discord or Telegram. While these platforms are regional, they are less likely to be open to public.

Although the initiatives involved SEA activists, none were specific or exclusive to the region.

Interviewees participating in these alliances were frequently involved in many different initiatives at the same time. More than a year after the outbreak of the pandemic, many of these initiatives were still in the process of research, developmental conversations, and initial soft launches. Some were also seeking representatives from countries like Cambodia, Lao PDR, Brunei, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam. English-speaking feminists from Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia were most likely to be present as SEA representatives in these coalitions.



5. Negotiations & challenges

Many interviewees pointed to the need for feminists to reflect on who is being left out of conversations. Considering the feminist principle of active inclusivity, there must be more focused efforts on how the voices of people in the margins can be brought to the center.

This section looks at some of the more common ways that COVID-19 has affected feminists in building solidarity, forming alliances, and taking collective action and aims to answer the following questions:

- How do we amplify the voices of those who are unheard?
- How do we ensure intergenerational transition of knowledge in digital spaces?
- How do we negotiate the contradiction between the need for digital spaces, the desire to connect with wider audiences, and the problematic platforms?

5.1 Funding

Funding inadequacies have long been an issue for the feminist movement, with funding for LGBT and LBQ issues being even direr. COVID-19 has further affected funding and surfaced new issues. The development framework of funding frustrated activists in countries with developed or upper-middle income status like Singapore, Brunei, Thailand, and Malaysia. These country categorizations prevented underfinanced movements from accessing funds.

There is a need for more reflexive funders to trust that grantees, especially those that have existing working relationships with communities, are best positioned to understand the needs of the community, especially during a pandemic. Funders need mechanisms that recognize that emergencies create different outcomes and allow organizations the flexibility to choose when and how to spend. During a global pandemic, funders must remove financial penalties for non-delivery of services as these are directly affected by COVID-19 lockdowns as well as other circumstances directly affecting the personal lives of activists.

Feminist funders must find ways to include more informal collectives looking to expand their efforts. Funders must reduce the need for extensive grant proposals and cap requirements of impact reports or other structures on smaller grants. Examine the inclination to solely work with those who speak the lingo of grants applications — there is good work being done beyond it.

Working *exclusively* through local partners may further enforce echo chambers and bubbles. Mechanisms such as utilizing open calls may open up opportunities for others previously excluded from groups who have more access to regional and international funding. For example, in West Papua, implementing quotas for diversity among grantees according to different locations, languages, religious denominations, and ages would enable more diverse causes to surface and be funded. Local translators who can work on grant applications should be hired to encourage applications from organizations whose first language is not English.

Funders have to allow funds to be channeled to crisis response or mutual aid as this is where the most urgent needs lie. Similarly, vulnerable communities may be similarly overlooked.

Funders should also take care to not restrict funding to politically volatile regions and issues such as feminist responses in Southern Thailand and Lao PDR. Funds should go towards feminist and human rights movements and care should be taken not to channel them through coup or military governments. Diplomatic missions and foreign development aid agencies should also refrain from funding repressive governments as a means of claiming engagement.

Public donations: A few large organizations reported receiving more donations from the public in the early part of 2020 during the early stages COVID-19. This was especially true for organizations that are well-established and run survivor or crisis services. However, in 2021, the surge of public donations plateaued.

Fundraising: All countries have activists working on fundraising, either within their organizations, or as individuals or informal collectives collecting mutual aid funds for community care. This includes pulling activists away from other areas of focus, like research or case work, into fundraising.

Reflexive funders: Some feminist organizations have the benefit of working with reflexive funders. This allows them to divert program funding into emergency funds for partner organizations or grantees. One participant from a small SRHR organization noted that funders lifting activity-based clauses and allowing them to reprioritize as they saw fit had a positive impact. As an example, the participant noted that while some levels of trust can be built through webinars, nothing is as effective as being able to directly fund needed healthcare services like abortions.

Burdensome funders: Some organizations remain tied to activity-based funding with conditions that were stipulated before the restrictions by COVID-19 could be anticipated. In some cases, failure to deliver on existing agreements resulted in threats of financial penalty, which could be reduced (but not removed) if the organizations delivered services at a later time. Some funders also wanted refunds for activities that could not be delivered but the organization may have already rechanneled funds to other uses.

Withdrawn funding: Some participants had funding withdrawn. The justification for this included COVID-19, but may have been motivated by other reasons. Others lost funding as lockdowns restricted their ability to work on activism projects that could not be transferred online.

Capacity: Some participants noted that smaller/younger organizations consistently faced barriers in accessing international grants for emergency COVID-19 relief. These funds require specific skills on writing proposals/reports, and certain organizational structures such as official registration with a government, having a physical address, or a bank account.

Dubious/opaque conditional funding: Some participants noted that funding can be influenced by hidden powers such as political sources imposing undemocratic caveats. One interviewee said politicians offered to raise their issues in Parliament only if they would be exempted from any negative publicity. Some grantees were also expected to have materials examined and vetted before publishing. In these instances, the need to "*maintaining good relationships*" is implicit. Parties with conflicts of interest directly fund some with the grantee's communities and in other issues that cannot be easily raised by the organization in intersectional work.

One participant mentioned that one of their organizations signed an NDA to receive certain funding, but the nature of the agreement could not be disclosed especially in digital conversations. Another participant noted that they were surprised by some collaborations. Specifically, they thought the organization was more radical in nature, but ultimately quite tame in communications. This example remains one of the few in this paper where commonality could not be found across the region, although the opaque nature of these agreements could also produce the same results in other countries. The extensive nature of audits and reports organizations that have to be submitted also suggests this practice is not commonplace.

Control via funding: Some groups are prevented from engaging in other forms of activism because the only major and consistent source of funding available is from the government. This allows governments to exert undue control and influence over advocacy. For example, on top of the usual barriers of accessibility, disabled

activists may not be able to organize or join broader democracy protests as this may threaten the already scant funding their disability advocacy organizations can obtain from the government. This in turn limits the inclusivity of other movements. Disability rights needs much more support than it currently has to overcome the structural barriers in each country.

Some interviewees reported attending workshops where participants were clearly selected by their government to present and accept only positive views of their country. The interviewees noted that these government-assigned spokespersons are more difficult to identify in digital workshops.

The overall impact is that while individual state-sponsored spokespersons struggle to gain credibility, conflicts of interest arising from funding combined with NDAs can make an otherwise credible organization appear more conservative in its positions.

5.2 Digital Spaces: Safety, security, & surveillance

One of the key aspects of feminist events is the idea of establishing spaces that are safe, participatory, and inclusive. However, digital alternatives presented numerous challenges to facilitators because of the varying degrees of autonomy and agency in their platforms.

5.2.a Zoom & webinars

Webinars, particularly those hosted on Zoom, formed a major part of digital events organized over the pandemic. While some Zoom webinars were also streamed to other platforms like YouTube or Facebook, this paper focuses more on the issues presented by Zoom

Unfeminist: Feminists notably found the webinar forum unappealing due to the inherent power and control it gave to speakers and moderators who facilitated the question and answer portions. Interviewees described the webinar format as *"hierarchical and (a form of) gatekeeping,"* and *"not necessarily feminist in its approach."*

This problem was evident in feminist spaces, but more so when feminists entered other spaces, like those related to advocacy or policymaking. [Sivananthi Thanenthiran](#), Executive Director of ARROW, noted that high-level political forums like the SDG reporting in Bangkok and the Asia Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development in New York had become virtual events. She added, *"Holding your government (accountable) in an online forum — it's impossible."*

Although it was hard to do so previously, it seemed far more manageable or better. Right now, it's very difficult." Organizers have also limited time for verbal statements, comments or submissions, making the overall process less accountable.

Tiring: Participants also found it difficult to measure attention or create meaningful engagement with the audience. One participant noted, *"Zoom fatigue is real"*. Large attendance numbers with robust discussions were also more tiring. Another added that after a year of webinars, their organization was still searching for meaningful ways to evaluate impact.

Lack of personal connections: A participant said, *"Organizing online is fundamentally different than organizing offline. It's harder to establish that kind of connection that you can have when you're face-to-face. I think a lot of times what we do relies on that connection, right?"* Another participant who had similar experiences with the limitations of networking online said, *"Intimate personal connections have been altered. The work is still valuable and the connections are meaningful. But these kinds of adjustments have been a challenge."*

Accessibility: Users with visual disabilities were more familiar with Zoom compared to the decentralized nature of digital workshops, which usually require navigation on multiple unfamiliar and inaccessible platforms. One facilitator noted, *"That immediately puts them in a webinar."* Some organizers found closed captions handy, although most noted the quality greatly varied across SEA accents. Additionally, Zoom's limit of manual closed captions to one user also inhibited multilingual translations.

Bandwidth: Varying internet infrastructure in SEA resulted in Zoom being a comparatively stable experience compared to other common video call services. Users cited preference for its bandwidth use, latency, compression rate, and ability to deal with lag. This was evident during events with SEA-wide convening.

Positive thinking: An Indonesian participant noticed that internet blackouts and Zoom fatigue came as a *"blessing in disguise"* because activists are *"reconsidering these sudden online shifts, trying to rely on Zoom for everything. Now we're trying to find out if we can still do it old school style, like writing letters."*

Security: Zoom bombing was a major concern for some organizations. Security presented tensions between wanting to provide a digital space as accessible/inclusive as possible to everyone versus enabling gatekeeping measures to keep trolls out.

5.2.b Emerging and established platforms: Clubhouse, Discord, Instagram, Telegram, Twitter, Whereby

Activists viewed overall, social media and other communications platforms with some distrust. What requires more exploration is how feminists can engage with problematic platforms as spaces of advocacy and not just tools of communications with audiences and existing networks.

Social media: Emerging social media platforms include Clubhouse and TikTok. The most common platform that emerged in this paper, by far, is Facebook.

In countries like Lao PDR, Timor-Leste, and Cambodia, Facebook was the primary means of updates on COVID-19 matters. Users formed smaller communities on other platforms, but these were frequently distinguished as privileged. A regional organization noted that Twitter was successful as a space for radical forms of expression. However, the platform has limited reach across SEA. An activism account started in Lao PDR only succeeded in gaining two followers, both personal friends of the account creator who was from the international and English-speaking activism scene.

This raises questions that activists must reflect upon when working within the SEA contexts. If an organization must reach people through existing and problematic spaces, what are the feminist engagement approaches that can be employed?

Workshop spaces: Big Blue Button, Whereby, Padlet, Miro.

Community/communications spaces: Mattermost, Discord, Telegram, Facebook Messenger

5.2.c Access

Cost: All participants that worked with rural, homeless, or low-income communities noted that data was costly, especially so for webinars or all-day platforms. Not everyone could afford the cost of necessary devices or may be sharing them with children, who use devices for online schooling.

Data lock: Some data providers had “free” quotas for limited services like Zoom or WhatsApp, which also limited the options of organizers. An exploration into workshopping via WhatsApp, the only common platform amongst participants, proved unsuccessful.

Stipends: Four participants discussed stipends as an inclusivity practice since the cost of engaging in online events was largely shouldered by participants. Larger

organizations became increasingly aware of this and were able to commit to stipends. Examples of costs covered by stipends included time, renting/creating a conducive space (e.g. buy a coffee in a cafe), hiring a caregiver to temporarily take over domestic duties, equipment cost, and purchasing data quotas.

One small organization also considered subsidizing data packages for sex workers, but upgrading data packages required long-term contracts, which were beyond the means of the organization who saw the need as a short-term barrier.

Power: Two community activists noted the difference in power when entering someone's space versus inviting them into an online space hosted by an organization. One participant who works in community building and education of youths noted that in the current attention economy, there was a gap in how older activists expected younger audiences to get to know speakers and issues by participating in a webinar without making the effort to introduce the relevance of either beforehand.

Observation: Not everyone wants to show their environment or faces online. Some might be under surveillance of abusers and unable to do so while survivors may be under surveillance when online. Casework sometimes required physical visits to accurately assess a situation and to determine potential security risks.

Less effective: A participant noted that building a digital audience was a shift from their strategic objective to liaise with local decision makers and stakeholders who were unreachable during the pandemic. *"We have to shift the objectives to become more general instead of being more focused."*

Urban-centric: Transferring activities online also surfaced the on-going and long-standing gap of the lack of support systems for activism outside of major urban settings. Organizations also lacked the resources to build a better digital ecosystem for grassroots people. Among activists working on climate justice, land rights, and rural sex worker rights, the shift online combined with infrastructure issues have *"intensified existing issues"* of *"treating communities as beneficiaries instead of people with their own agency and autonomy"* as more privileged activists from outside the communities wound up speaking on their behalf.

Larger audience: More people, especially those outside of major city centers, are now able to participate in activism as activities move online. New audiences include those who could not afford to travel outside of the country, people with visa/official documentation issues (e.g. undocumented, trans person not matching passport photo and name), or people living with disabilities. Attending online events from home also takes up less time and travel resources, which is valuable for many participants. For organizers, this meant a wider pool of speakers/

facilitators, thus strengthening national/regional networks and improving knowledge.

Disabilities: Some disabled users, like those with sight disabilities, may not have smartphones or other forms of technology. As events move online, they face more barriers in participation. Deaf users may be unable to participate because they did not sign up early enough to alert organizers to the need of sign language interpreters, which may not be provided anyway. Others with disabilities, like wheelchair users, are abler to attend digital events than physical events.

One participant noted that there was an assumption that wheelchair users would wholly appreciate the accessibility of online events, but said the visibility of disabled participation online is not as effective in generating awareness. Overall, online events reduced connections and interactions with able-bodied persons, which are key opportunities to increase awareness and reduce stigma. For example, a point is more effectively made when an able-bodied organizer is asked to help a wheelchair user travel *"over 2 kilometers from the closest available train station to a selected protest site"*.

Hybrid events also demonstrated that accommodations could have been made to present more choices to address different needs. However, organizers did not consider them until COVID-19.

5.3 Online communities: Trust & authenticity

Activists across the board reported trouble with trust and authentication of digital connections.

Inclusive?: A workshop facilitator cited security as the main reason why organizations they worked hesitated going online and said, *"A lot of feminist organizing and movement building is built on trust. It's built on knowing people face-to-face and experiencing something together in the same space."* They added that a safer and more effective way to organize online may be to *"work with people that we already know and trust instead of trying to bring in (new people). This is the tension. You want to be inclusive, but at the same time, it's much harder to bring in new people into closer circles."*

Unauthenticated online stories: Some solicit and publish community stories that may be controversial as learning points, but are not always able to fact-check the stories they share. In one case, an account claimed to be in contact with a democracy protestor who was the subject of police investigation to provide his side of the story, however, the account's identity could not be established. A few also shared allegations of sexual violence, usually only as corroboration of other verified stories.

Data collection: A clear limitation of replicating case work online is that more inexperienced case workers had not learned the intricacies of various on-ground realities. Thus, they were unable to identify barriers faced by survivors, or adequately prepare survivors to handle the police, hospitals, vaccine centers, and so on. Other research mechanisms like focus group discussions also felt less effective online.

Risk assessment: It was difficult to gauge if someone is in an unsafe environment over a virtual call.

Surveillance: Sex worker rights advocates cautioned that joining digital spaces could expose the identities of undercover sex workers to bad faith actors, including the authorities. One participant noted that a government representative exposed their sex work history at their current workplace and suggested that their record, which was previously unknown to employers, stood as a potential threat to the organization's funding.

Censorship: Online surveillance and censorship faced by feminists and activists also reduced the ability of individuals to speak as their authentic selves or discuss issues out in the open.

Advocacy: Some activists worked with authorities (e.g. state governments) at levels of decision-making where officers were not able or willing to work online and had little incentive to change. This forced physical meets to get things done or not at all.

Fundraising: Some participants cautioned that a few bad faith actors in mutual aid fundraising can negatively affect public perception. Others noted that there were efforts by political actors on a local level (e.g. village heads, representatives of political parties on lower tiers) to claim credit over work done by women's groups. Due to lockdown, some actors in mutual aid were in touch with community leaders to handle the logistics of distributing collected aid within inaccessible areas.



6. Opportunities and recommendations

6.1 Internal transformations

Interviewees identified some issues that required more action. Although next steps were loosely divided between internal revisions and external action, there were overlaps that organizations had to decide on. Some of these suggestions are not new, however, the reasons they have not been adopted need to be examined.

Ways forward: Some experiences through COVID-19 can be used to better inform the Feminist Principles of the Internet framework, particularly in disabilities and access. As this becomes the 'new normal', efforts must be made to remember the voices that are not included in digital conversations, whether because of disabilities, infrastructure, language, and time zone differences.

Lessons learned: There needs to be more resilience built into communications processes. As the COVID-19 pandemic is expected to drag on, organizations must adapt accordingly. Collective action and power can be used online to successfully advocate for better changes. Online advocacy can be a useful space for shifting hearts and minds and works best when there is popular support from wider audiences. The movement must push for legal protections and a holistically safe environment to do so.

Growth and adaptations: Chief amongst interviewee feedback is the need to increase access, resources, and data literacy amongst communities in meaningful ways. There is room for discussions of community networks or access to the internet as commons, and negotiations to be held on legalities. In some societies, more conversations need to be generated around the gender gap in access, to tackle perceptions that increasing the agency of women through tech can lead to vice, which must be controlled.

6.2 Accessibility

More effort is needed to mainstream accessibility in all programs, including on-line activities. Majority of interviewees who had evaluated their own efforts said they or their organizations could be more inclusive in their activism and consider limited resources. Disability rights activists corroborated this.

Currently, practicing inclusivity and intersectional feminism is reliant on individuals. However, the lack of a formal framework often results in practicing inclusivity as an afterthought. Most of what is lacking in inclusivity is not just the issue of limited resources, but the privileges and majority of the abled overlooking the needs of others.

In relation to this, these are some suggestions that emerged:

- Maximize the opportunity to make work more accessible. One organization made renovations during lockdown when employees were working from home to make their space more accessible for wheelchair users.
- Hire accessibility specialists to look at making spaces wheelchair-friendly.
- Have restrooms that are inclusive to all genders and persons with disabilities.
- Include more resting areas. Enact policies so people with various needs and abilities can work from home.
- Examine the surrounding areas of offices and assess the need to speak with local councils about increasing accessibility via implements like tactile indicators or wheelchair ramps.
- Make digital content and events more accessible. This includes auditing existing websites and content for screen readers and adherence to web standards. In organizing public digital events, accessibility should be considered at the start and communicated in promotional materials as persons with disabilities may face more barriers in the other aspects of their daily life and need more lead time to prepare before joining digital events.
- Consider long-term contracts with service providers like sign interpretation to lower costs. Invest in hearing colleagues learning sign languages. Although resources are stretched, accessibility should not be the first to be sacrificed.
- Retain infrastructure gained during COVID-19 to host online events to continue engaging audiences who would like to have on-going access to discussions, events, and content. Consider making more events hybrid in the future so online participation is an option but not mandatory.
- Be mindful of inclusivity when looking at physical attendance. Minority activists, for example, have flagged that being made invisible online as audiences can have a negative impact offline.

• Disability activists are fellow organizers and peers. Both movements would benefit from more intersections between them. Lessons can be learned from Indonesian democracy activists and Thai activists working with disability rights coalitions who have effectively included people with different disabilities online, not just as audiences, but decision makers and co-organizers. More needs to be done to bolster the resilience and work done by these activists within these groups.

6.3 Explore digital feminist facilitation

Remote feminist movement building and consistent organizing needs digital feminist facilitation. What does that mean?

Questions organizers should consider: Is a workshop organized mainly to comply with key performance indicators (KPIs) and funder goals, leaving participants as an afterthought? How can preparatory processes include a participatory process so a workshop reflects the needs and objectives of participants? How can digital workshops present opportunities to divert from the status quo and hierarchies of knowledge exchange? How can timelines be managed to prevent “Zoom fatigue” from overwhelming participants/organizers? How can preparations for the workshop be delivered?

Different learning methods: One method of learning should not be privileged over another. Wherever possible, a diversity of options for workshop participants to learn should be provided and different modes of communications recognized as valid. For example, some prefer video, others prefer audio; some are only comfortable sharing their views via chat. A person should be assigned to every space to direct the main facilitator’s attention to the conversations happening in these spaces.

Facilitate the facilitators: Most feminist workshop facilitators are improvising spontaneously creating ways to create more equitable and feminist conditions for digital gatherings. However, the information needed to create equitable digital gatherings is mostly available within the organization. There is an opportunity to develop the pool of knowledge and best practices on using the tools and principles of digital gatherings and managing them with digital security concerns.

Service providers: Platform and online tool developers can engage feminist facilitators to get insights on developing a richer suite of tools and features that would improve their services. Platforms should also consider bandwidth limitations of diverse users and ways to increase accessibility. Additionally, platforms can

also explore sponsoring access for CSO individuals as many platforms currently charge facilitators a fee per workshop participant.

Resources: Sometimes the quickest route to get the necessary technology into a woman's hands is to fund it. Funders should consider paying stipends for data, devices, and time. Given women's role as primary caregiver, a stipend to hire others to temporarily take over their domestic duties would alleviate women's caregiving responsibilities and give her time to attend digital workshops. Spreading out a digital workshop over an extended period of time, such as two one-hour slots per week, as opposed to a few all-day sessions will allow more participants to join the workshop. In the longer term, more advocacy is needed to ensure equal distribution of care labor in the home.

6.4 Mental health as priority

Organizations that prioritized the mental health and well-being of their staff even before the pandemic were better able to retain staff and continue their relief efforts without having to train new personnel during the course of the pandemic. Additionally, the employees of these organizations were better equipped to avoid burn out or personal crises. Overall, organizations would be in a better position to respond to complex emergencies like COVID-19 if they focus on improving the mental health and well-being of their staff.

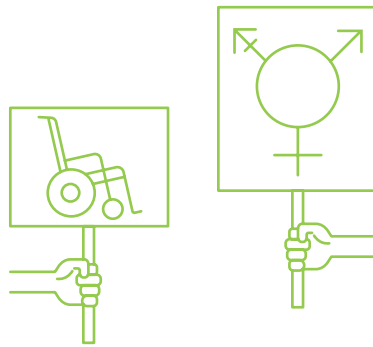
Mental health forms the first line of defense in protecting and prioritizing workers. The integration of mandatory mental healthcare provisions for well-being of employees should be included in the funding criteria for larger organizations. Some organizations include mental healthcare provisions such as including claims for therapy sessions, medication, and days off in its employee health benefits. Mental healthcare claims should be made available to employees and the inclusion of mental health practitioners as roles within the organization are helpful.

Activists can also work with mental healthcare practitioners to create community access to queer-inclusive professionals. A community research conducted by one of the interviewees revealed that although LGBT respondents reported a sharp increase in need for mental health services over the pandemic, mental health practitioners did not see this increase reflected in the clients accessing their services.

Alongside mental health practitioners, young activists should also be included in the decision-making process. Young activists frequently list the inclusive and progressive practice of mental health as a rising concern. This includes working in a safe space with a clearly defined code of conduct on issues like gender identity and sexual harassment, and aspects of transformative justice.

Managing mental health should also be considered when planning an organization's day-to-day activities. Some suggestions included:

- Limiting the frequency of meetings
- Managing the number of attendees as socializing online with many people can still be tiring.
- Managing workload distribution. Burn out is harder to spot and living in a pandemic can be a mental burden already. The act of facilitating and documenting these meetings should be seen as labor. Transcription services should be considered to allow participants who speak English as a second language to follow the discussion.



7. Advocacy needs

7.1 Cases of Urgent Action: Myanmar and West Papua in violent spaces of conflict

In Myanmar, there are reports of the military junta targeting not only activists, but their relatives. SEA needs to show regional solidarity and push back against the targeting and political harassment of activists. Digital campaigns using online democratic alliances #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar and #MilkTeaAlliance can be seen as a start by civil society for advocacy.

Government leaders expressing their solidarity in upholding the rights of activists within the region must be critically examined. For example, Indonesian President Joko Widodo may condemn military violence in Myanmar against pro-democracy protestors in Myanmar, but his government's actions in West Papua have also been criticized as going against the principles of democracy and humanitarianism.

In West Papua, violence and crisis can go unnoticed on a regional level. SEA activists need to advocate for regional governments to pressure Indonesia into easing violence perpetrated by armed forces towards locals in the region, and to recognize West Papua's efforts at self-determination.

7.2 Gender-disaggregated data

Civil society needs to monitor their governments and ensure gender disaggregated data is collected. On a policy level, this will help better inform gender mainstreaming efforts and advocate for inclusive and focused policies that will serve the community. This need has been voiced numerous times in higher-level multi-stakeholder events, but has yet to be reflected in government action plans or programs.

ASEAN member states have already committed to the Declaration on the Gender-Responsive Implementation of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5, which both include collecting high quality data disaggregated by sex, age, and other relevant qualities. ASEAN member states must be held accountable to ensure they honor the commitments outlined in these documents.

7.3 Equal access to digital space

Throughout the region, the interviews conducted for this study showed that the ability to access the new spaces for interactions was unequal. Recommendations to improve access to digital spaces as well as public facilities:

- Reduce cost barriers to accessing mobile connections and internet.
- Invest in infrastructure to provide safe and accessible public access facilities.
- Improve network quality and coverage.
- Increase education of digital literacy and safety among children.
- Train communities that need education in digital literacy such as older persons, rural communities, etc.
- Give space for and recognize community networks and communication channels.
 - o Raise awareness about the gender divide in accessing the internet for women and girls. Surface the specific security and safety issues women face when accessing digital spaces.
 - o Target women in programs to bridge the gender divide in accessing technologies.

7.4 Going green

All ASEAN member states are party to the Paris Climate Agreement. There is an [opportunity](#) for governments to incorporate a green agenda in its fiscal policy tools for pandemic recovery. These [discussions](#) emerged as early as 2020 during the outbreak of the pandemic. Interviewees warned of a [narrowing](#) gap of opportunities to transition to greener economies in the pandemic recovery stage.

The issues of technological expansion and consumption are complex and need to be discussed within the wider context of sustainability practices, specifically, the lack of extensive [regulation](#) and the impact of the [technology](#) and the gadget economy on the climate.

Interviewees also highlighted there was a lackluster response to [climate change](#) in comparison to the emergency response COVID-19. The ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework highlighted climate change as a [fundamental risk](#) to the region. Additionally, a [report](#) by the ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights

found that green policy measures in Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Timor-Leste fall “far short” of opportunities.

Interviewees shared that [toolkits](#) and [resources on climate change](#) used in approaching regional discussions were from international or Global North sources and adapted internally but not shared with others. There were also few discussions on reparations for SEA, as advocacy to own governments were seen as an immediate need and most of the feminist climate movement is under resourced.

There is room for improvement in strengthening each other’s networks and work. For example, within Brunei, feminists working on climate issues in Temburong may not be working with feminists in the capital, Bandar Seri Begawan. Stronger movements on a country level would allow for more regional alliances so civil society can collectively apply pressure within ASEAN and push specific [recommendations to Parliament](#).

This is not to say that regional organizing on climate justice does not exist, however, there is both room and a need for more growth. Even during COVID-19, there was a noted rejuvenation in SEA collective movements advocating for climate justice. The [Asia Solidarity Lab](#) with SEA participants within its Asia-Pacific network is just one example. Other examples include the November 2020 launch of RISE, a SEA Alliance for Health and Climate, which includes women, gender advocates and environmental justice allies, and Southeast Asia Climate Alliance, a loose collective of SEA youth climate organizations formed after the Asia Climate Rally in November 2020.

7.5 Healthcare: Sexual Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR) and vaccine equity

SRHR: Governments listed reproductive healthcare as non-essential during the pandemic. Advocates have rightly pointed out the importance of access to reproductive healthcare in national healthcare services as crucial during a pandemic. This advocacy must include the needs of trans persons in reproductive healthcare (e.g. abortion rights for trans men). National healthcare services also need to ensure a resilient supply chain of hormones for patients on Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT), especially for trans persons who are incarcerated. Efforts to [digitize](#) healthcare access with SEA also need to be examined.

Discriminatory vaccine processes: Advocates need to push for walk-in COVID-19 vaccination processes that do not rely on documentation or [penalize](#) those without documents. This includes emphasis on people whose gender identities and

gender expressions do not match their existing documents. Trans women have been [denied access](#) to vaccines. In rural areas, priority should be given to bring vaccine services to residents.

There is also a rising concern that [vaccine passports](#) heighten discrimination and threaten human rights. Additionally, [contact tracing](#) apps deployed during COVID-19 leave users at risk of mass surveillance. For example, in [Malaysia](#), app users were urged to surveil each other and report on rule breakers to the authorities. In Indonesia and the Philippines, apps examined by Citizen Lab Toronto [revealed](#) deeper security issues such as the collection of unnecessary information.

Long-term alliances with wider vaccination equity efforts: Support is needed for the Feminists for a People's Vaccine Campaign, which advocates for equitable, accessible, and affordable COVID-19 vaccines, drugs, therapeutics, and equipment. Legislation against profiteering from the pandemic is also needed.

In Indonesia, groups like Lapor COVID-19, Kawal COVID-19, and Pandemic Talks emerged to scrutinize the government's handling of COVID-19. This is an example of how feminists can work with wider vaccination equity efforts to strengthen their activism.

7.5 Increase capacity to deal with GBV and OGBV

Governments need to support GBV service providers and respondents to both on-line and offline forms of GBV on various levels. For example, shelters and hotline respondents need more funds. Additionally, data gathering remains an issue even with rapid response surveys.

People need to be more aware of options when faced with GBV or domestic violence themselves or in their surroundings. Governments must also make a strong public stand against domestic violence and enact policies that allow people escaping unsafe conditions to travel during periods when movement is restricted.

Governments could alleviate the parallel problems of tourism decline and domestic violence shelters breaching their capacities by negotiating affordable or reduced rates for long term rental of hotel rooms. When this research was done, domestic violence shelters were renting these spaces at full commercial prices.



8. Conclusion

Given the limitations of this scoping paper, the issues raised here should be regarded as a snapshot of the complex and simultaneous challenges feminist movements faced and are still facing during the pandemic. Other intersectional issues surfaced by this scoping study require further exploration and analysis.

Specifically, more research is needed on COVID-19 recovery mechanisms utilizing the lens of labor, unions, and migrant rights. Discourse on economic justice within SEA is rising as the poor faced multiple hardships over the pandemic. Migrant laborers faced severe oppression. Many lost sources of income and could not return home due to travel restrictions. Many of those who lost their only means of income in the informal sector, garment industry, and tourism sector were women who were sometimes the sole financial provider of their family. They must balance survival with having their voices heard through collective action or activism. That is to say, that these women were also part of other groups mentioned in this paper, such as recipients of mutual aid funds, sex workers, or other activists. At the time of this paper, interviewees working on labor rights met the more immediate needs of their community through mutual aid. However, it was noted that advocacy on policies and rapid response measures would also be necessary.

Within the realm of digital rights, there is an urgent need to look at digital safety and security for activists and marginalized groups. Authorities can target specific persons. There needs to be more training and awareness on security and privacy. SEA technology users are also frequently less aware of their privacy rights as covered by various privacy and data protection agreements across the region, which immediately affect them, or even voluntary standards like APEC Cross-Border Privacy Rules (CBPR). In most countries with COVID-19 surveillance apps, PDPAs may not apply to data collected by governments through these apps.

Finally, additional COVID-19 related topics that need further intersectional analysis include: economic justice, climate justice, migration, digital laws, contemporary creative movements in activism, people's vaccine, democracy advocacy, youth advocacy movements, and disability rights. Many people, women or otherwise, have become faceless statistics over the course of the pandemic. May the creativity and solidarity within the movement uplift the humanity of these people, through storytelling, empowerment, and more.

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