

Intersex Bodies | Global South Alliances

Memoir

We, the intersex people from the Global South

Asia Edition





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Editor | Vidda Guzzo | Suggested citation | Global Action for Trans Equality (2022) Intersex Bodies, Global South Alliances: Asia Memoir. New York: GATE.

About GATE

GATE is an international advocacy organization working towards justice and equality for trans, gender diverse and intersex communities. Rooted in our movements, we work collaboratively with strategic partners at the global level to provide knowledge, resources and access to international institutions and processes. Our vision is a world free from human rights violations based on gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics. Our strategy is to transform the landscape of global advocacy, knowledge creation and resource distribution through critical inclusion of trans, gender diverse and intersex movements at all levels of political, legal and socio-economic processes.

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We, the
intersex
people
from
the
Global
South

Asia Edition

Our bodies Our alliances

Preface



Our bodies are our first experience in the world, and not only for intersex people. Our bodies are conditions for our very possibility. They represent our chance to take action. Instead, for intersex people, our bodies are an impossibility, our first struggle to be and exist in this world. That is why speaking on intersex bodies is the same as debating intersex politics.

For **GATE**, it is vital to foster alliances between intersex bodies from the Global South. Compared to intersex groups in the North, data suggests that intersex groups in the global South and East regions are much less likely to receive funding, have access to community-building initiatives, and regional and global advocacy entry points.

Despite so many constraints, through activism we have found a way to survive, in this life, in this time and space, as long as we live in our bodies and territories. Over the past few years, our way of being and resisting has gained more strength and momentum against the force of a world that mutilates us since birth.

Their secret has become our public issue. An issue that catalyzes an activist movement and interconnects multiple agents. We have been building a complex network of alliances to save our lives; to ensure our integrity. That is a task only possible within the dense network of alliances we have articulated with increasingly greater insistence, in order to save our lives and ensure our bodies' integrity.

Articulating more alliances with brothers, sisters, and siblings with lived intersex experiences is a step in pursuing ways to survive while affirming and honoring our bodies in the precise ways we exist in the world.

Intersex Bodies Global South Alliances

Memoir



GATE hosted a conference to discuss the trajectories of intersex-led movements in the Global South. In its first iteration, we invited activists from five different countries of Asia.

The **Asia Seminars** are the third of a three regional webinars series, one for each great region of the Global South, aimed at producing a space where local, national, and regional organizations working to the promotion and protection of the human rights of intersex people can encounter to discuss their experiences when it comes to their political engagement.

With this project, we cover a great variety of topics regarding intersex issues in the Global South. By providing a safe space for intersex Global South movements and activists to meet, we intended to foster peer-learning processes on advocacy and capacity development strategies while tracking down recommendations and priorities for human rights advocacy for intersex people. In stimulating the debate on sex variations and intersex issues at the regional level, we would like to assess national and regional trends and best practices, and persisting challenges regarding sex variations and intersex issues, while providing an encounter opportunity not very common for intersex people in Asia.

Participants were invited based on regional and background diversity, meaning we hope to hear from a range of actors about their experiences and projects on intersex matters. Each panelist produced a five-page article on the topic presented and their articles are now together and public in this final publication **We, the intersex people from the Global South**.

Contents & Authors

We, the intersex people from
Asia

Asia

Hiker Chiu

Oii Chinese, Intersex Asia Network
Founder, Executive Director



Hiker Chiu is a pioneer of the intersex human rights movement in the Asian region from Taiwan who founded **Oii-Chinese**, the first human rights advocacy organization and information platform for Chinese-speaking intersex people in 2008. Hiker Chiu was the first intersex person to come out in Taiwan publicly, initiating the **“Global Free Hugs with Intersex Movement”** in 2010. Since 2013, Hiker has been devoted to building intersex connections in Asia, founded Intersex Asia, the first and only regional network of intersex-led organizations in Asia, and serves as the current Chair and Executive Director for Intersex Asia.



**Raising the intersex
community in the
Philippines**

Philippines

Jeff B. Cagandahan

Chair

Jeff Cagandahan is the first Filipino intersex who was allowed by the Supreme Court of the Philippines to change name and gender marker. He co-founded **Intersex Philippines**, the only intersex-led organization in the Philippines with the vision of creating a safe space for intersex people. Currently, he is also the co-chair of **Intersex Asia**, an autonomous regional network of intersex-led organizations and individuals from Asian countries.

India

Mohammed Ali Khan aka Duha

Intersex Human Rights India
Co-Founder and Coordinator for events and Social
Media Manager

Duha(they/them) is a molecular biologist, facilitator of **Queer Campus Bangalore** (a queer youth led space for young adults and working professionals from Bangalore, India). Duha is also one of the cofounders of Intersex Human Rights India, a Pan Indian Collective for Intersex people across the Indian subcontinent. Duha current research focus is on integrating queer rights and STEM and primarily focus on Body Autonomy and self determination.



Nepal

Esan Regmi

Campaign for Change (Nepal's 1st intersex-led organisation)
Executive Director

Esan Regmi is an intersex activist based in Nepal. He is a co-founder and the executive director of **Campaign for Change** (the first and only intersex-led organization in Nepal). Esan hosted the first national intersex meeting in Nepal in 2016 and published the first intersex storybook in Nepal. Not only on the national level, but Esan has also raised intersex issues on the UN level. He had proposed CRC and CEDAW reports condemning Intersex Infanticide & Genital Mutilation in 2016 and 2018, respectively. He is also a board member of **Intersex Asia**.

Bangladesh

Md. Shihab

Bangladesh Intersex Forum
Founder and Executive Director

Md. Shihab is the founder and Executive Director of Bangladesh Intersex Forum and has been working as an intersex rights activist for the past 8 years. This is the first intersex led organisation in Pakistan.

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We, the intersex people from the Global South



Being Intersex in the Global South, ASIA

Hiker Chiu
Intersex Asia

What has your experience of intersex activism been like in your territory?

Being an intersex activist in Asia is a lonely journey because intersex awareness and intersex visibility are still lacking: most intersex people may not know they are intersex, or they choose to hide themselves for safety. Social discrimination against intersex people is pervasive and unnecessary, and unconsented medical interventions are still happening in Asia. Oftentimes intersex activists are alone in their countries; that's why we need to build an Asian intersex network to support intersex individuals to become intersex activists, so we can build at least one intersex-led organization in their countries in the future. Intersex Asia Network was established in 2018, with the support of all participants at the First Asian Intersex Forum in Bangkok.

I was lucky to be born in Taiwan, which values democracy and freedom of speech. Such a system supported me to come out as an intersex person publicly with less social impact, giving me the opportunity to initiate intersex movements to support my intersex community in Asia.

What is the relationship of your activism to the Global South?

Global South countries mean countries are weaker socio-economically and politically. I just discovered that there are Global North and Global South countries within Asia. Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore in Asia belong to the Global North. The rest of the countries in Asia belong to the Global South. Intersex people based in Global North countries may have more resources for medical services. They may have more chances to face impacts from unnecessary normalization surgery without consent and medical treatments than countries in the Global South.

The population of intersex people in the Global South contains the highest number of intersex people in the world, which means most intersex people are from the Global South. Intersex people from Global South countries in Asia face severe social discrimination, which creates a vicious circle for intersex people in all aspects in terms of education, employment, and healthcare, impacting livelihood issues.

But in terms of resources for intersex movements, intersex communities in both the Global North and South countries lack resources. Compared to Global South countries, intersex groups from Global North countries may have less opportunity to receive grants from donors to support the intersex movement to grow because they are considered to be richer. Intersex Asia sees the gap and is working to fill the gap.

From a global perspective, the intersex movement is a more collaborative globally than other movements. This is because intersex activists are very few compared to LGBT or other movements. Whether Global North or South, the resources for the intersex movement is not enough. It strengthens our solidarity and collaboration. The International Intersex Forum, since 2011, plays a key role in building the global intersex movement as a globally collaborative movement.

Why is what is done here in Global South different from what is done in the North?

During Covid-19, Intersex Asia discovered that livelihood issues were common in Nepal and the Philippines, and intersex people are not included in any support system by the government. This is the result of a vicious circle of social discrimination and a lack of intersex awareness. When intersex people can't survive daily life, it is hard to encourage them to engage in the intersex movement. To address this issue, Intersex Asia initiated a livelihood project to support intersex people to receive career skills training to help them self-support gradually. Currently, the law to protect intersex children from unconsented surgery in the Global South countries only exists in the state of Tamil Nadu in India.

Although the intersex movement in Asia was initiated in Global North Japan in the 1990s, it did not reach outside Japan. It was paused after the anti-intersex movement around a decade ago. Intersex movements in the Global North countries in Asia is still difficult to mobilize. Most intersex people are still hiding and have almost no community to support one another. OII Chinese based in Taiwan includes online members from the global Chinese-speaking community. Although the intersex population is relatively smaller in Taiwan, we have a recommendation from the Ministry of Welfare and Healthcare to medical professionals on not performing unnecessary surgery for intersex children under 12 years old, giving them the right to consent and self-decision when they grow older. The movement in the Global North countries in Asia still depends on a few individual activists. Few members and less engagement in the movement are the weakness of the intersex movement in Global North countries in Asia.



What are the differences?

Currently, within Asia, the intersex movement in the Global South is more active than in the Global North countries. More intersex people from Nepal and the Philippines have joined the national intersex-led organizations in recent years after the continued efforts of raising intersex awareness by senior intersex activists in those countries.

Most East Asian countries share traditional Confucianism. The line between male and female is stricter in the Global North countries in Asia. It hinders the development of gender equality and the intersex movement. Intersex people identifying as LGBTQ are marginalized in the intersex community and LGBTQ movement. Intersex people living in Global North countries may have more access to healthcare but most are not human rights-based or from intersex affirmative perspectives, which creates difficulties for intersex people in getting obtaining healthcare in the medical environment.

What are the challenges in intersex activism in the Global South?

Intersex visibility and awareness are still rare in most Asian countries. Most intersex people have no information about being intersex in their languages. Social discrimination and some cultures make the family of intersex people feel ashamed and feel the need to hide or lie to their intersex child. Psychological trauma is not handled properly for intersex people and their families. In South Asia, intersex is misunderstood as Hijra and transgender, which creates conflicts between these communities regarding policies.

Livelihood issues are challenging for intersex people in the Global South. Intersex people need support for their livelihood before considering engaging in the intersex movement.

Most Asian governments do not understand intersex human rights issues, and no Asian countries except India supports intersex statements submitted to the UNHRC.

What are the main lessons of intersex activism in our context?

Intersex movement in Asia must start from scratch in Global North and South countries. Addressing language barriers is key to reaching out to more intersex people who speak different languages in Asia.

Social discrimination that impacts the livelihood of intersex people needs to address by advocating for the inclusion of intersex people under anti-discrimination laws.

Research about Intersex issues is a huge gap to be filled.

Nothing about us without us. We need to incubate more intersex activists to start the intersex movement in their countries in order to help the community speak on their specific issues.

To build the base for intersex protection law, intersex awareness and intersex human rights are needed to be promoted to intersex people, lay people, and policy-makers in Asian governments.



How do you see the future of intersex activism and intersex politics in your country and region?

In Taiwan, the government values human rights improvement. The difficulty now is too few intersex people are willing to engage in the movement and share their experiences. OII Chinese is expecting to have more intersex people join and express their opinions and share their demands with the government.

Regarding the Asian region, the intersex movement is still in the process of community building. Without a strong community base, it will be hard to mobilize any positive policy change for intersex people.

How can intersex politics be continued and promoted in Global South contexts?

Again, nothing about us without us. It is too difficult for individual intersex activists to do the work alone. We need to build a base for intersex politics through the following practices:

1. Reaching out to intersex individuals, building their capacity.
2. Supporting intersex individuals to become intersex activists.
3. Training intersex activists to do advocacy work with their countries.
4. Building intersex support groups in different Asian countries.
5. Educating intersex people about intersex human rights.
6. Mobilizing the intersex community to build intersex-led organizations.
7. Organizing the intersex forum to solidify intersex-led organizations in Asia.
8. Building a regional collaboration mechanism to support moving intersex politics forward at the regional level.

How to address recent challenges in the Global South (e.g. de-democratisation, anti-LGBTI actors, conservatism, neoliberalism, COVID-19)?

We need to be clear that democracy is the base for freedom of speech, expression, and human rights. We must stand up to support and secure democracy for our countries and demand our governments show their position to secure the value of democracy, and to practice it internationally. It is the responsibility of all to secure mechanisms that value freedom of speech and human rights. We are intersex human rights activists, but we don't only defend human rights for intersex people; we support human rights for all. And we must solidify and support each other's human rights.

We, the intersex people of the Global South, are also beautiful human beings who need love and to be loved.

We, the intersex people of the Global South, demand the same human rights as everybody else.



Philippines

Raising the intersex community in the Philippines

Jeff B. Cagandahan

Intersex Philippines

I was assigned female at birth as Jennifer Balahadia Cagandahan. But for as long as can I remember, I always felt dissociated from my assigned sex at birth. You see, I was born with ambiguous genitalia, so I knew I was not like the other girls I grew up with; I saw how different my body was while playing – as kids do in various places in the Philippines – in the buff.

No one really knew about my condition, so no one – at that time in particular – was able to articulate to me what I was going through.

But everyone gossiped about me.

Neighbors who heard of my physical difference taunted me, calling me “The person with two genitals.” I was also forced to wear the uniform assigned to women. And since my family is devout Roman Catholic, I was forced to attend Sunday masses wearing women’s clothes, complete with a veil, a symbol of feminine purity in the eyes of God and society.

I repeatedly asked my parents about the difference in my condition, but they couldn’t provide any answer.

So when I was about to enter my fourth year in high school, I had myself tested by an endocrinologist in a hospital in Metro Manila. After an ultrasound, it was found that I had an infantile uterus. I remember being told by the endocrinologist that “It’s easier to dig a hole than to build a pole”; that’s something I would never forget. But since I didn’t agree to be operated on, they couldn’t do anything.

The hardships continued for me, however. For instance, after finishing my Bachelor in Physical Education at the Polytechnic University of the Philippines, I had difficulty in getting a job because my physical appearance did not match the name given to me at birth, and the sex marker in my legal documents.

At that point, I asked a relative who happened to be a lawyer about the steps I could take to remedy my situation. And so, on December 11, 2003, I filed a petition at the Regional Trial Court to allow me to change the name and sex marker given to me at birth. I underwent rigorous physical and psychological tests, including chromosomal analysis and other laboratory tests; all the results were submitted to the court. It was nerve-racking as it was the first such case filed in the Philippines at that time.

The RTC released its decision siding with me on January 12, 2005, the day before my birthday. But the amenable decision did not last long, with the Office of the Solicitor General immediately seeking a reversal of this decision. The case, therefore, landed at the Supreme Court of the Philippines.

On September 12, 2008, the highest court of the Philippines released a decision siding with my petition.

In its decision, the Supreme Court of the Philippines stated that "Ultimately, we are of the view that where the person is biologically or naturally intersex the determining factor in his gender classification would be what the individual... thinks of his/her sex... The Court will not dictate on respondent concerning a matter so innately private as one's sexuality and lifestyle preferences, much less on whether or not to undergo medical treatment to reverse the male tendency due to CAH... Respondent is the one who has to live with his intersex anatomy. To him belongs the human right to the pursuit of happiness and of health. Thus, to him should belong the primordial choice of what courses of action to take along the path of his sexual development and maturation."

I was happy then; I felt free, finally, even if the narrative that made the news still mocked my condition, with headlines stating that a woman with two genitals was backed by the Supreme Court to change gender.

My story may have taken a somewhat favorable route, but this story is not shared by many other intersex people in the Philippines. Because here, what is more noticeable are issues plaguing the intersex community.

To capacitate members of the intersex community to respond to issues affecting intersex Filipinos, Intersex Philippines was formed in 2016, first as an online support group and then as a formal organization in 2017. This also stresses that the best responders to deal with intersex-related issues would be intersex people themselves, and so capacitating them would be ideal. Because understandably, the intersex community still has a lot of issues to deal with.

To start, even if the decision of the Supreme Court of the Philippines now allows intersex people to change their names and sex markers in legal documents, this continues to be a difficult process. Those who wish to do this still have to get medical and psychological tests, which many in a limited-resource setting like the Philippines are unable to afford. Hiring legal practitioners to file cases is, similarly, costly and – again – not within reach of common Filipinos. This, therefore, continues to be a pipe dream for many intersex Filipinos.

Seeking medical care for intersex people is also challenging in the Philippines, mainly because none specialize in intersex people's medical concerns. And those who may be able to render services related to intersex conditions may not be accessible to all. The lack of care and support services for intersex people can be life-threatening, and yet this lack has long been normalized.

And then there's the continuing lack of education on intersex variations. And so here in the Philippines, there remain numerous misconceptions about being intersex.

For example, there's this belief that intersex people are – using an antiquated term – “hermaphrodites”, insinuating that intersex people have the genitals of both sexes. That there are over 40 variations of the intersex condition, with true hermaphroditism (or someone with ovarian and testicular tissues) being only one of them, is hardly recognized, largely because this is not properly discussed. And this includes many medical facilities, so medical practitioners continue to remain unfamiliar with intersex concerns. I have heard of intersex Filipinos who were treated as specimens in hospitals, seen as subjects to be studied. This dehumanization stems from a lack of knowledge, of awareness, which stems from the lack of education on intersex conditions.

There, too, is this misconception that being intersex is very rare, with even doctors saying this. According to data, though, 1.7% of the general population are born with intersex traits. In the Philippines, this totals an estimated 1.7 million people who are born with intersex traits. And yet people still don't hear about the intersex community largely because of discrimination that forces us to hide.

There is also this belief that intersex is a condition that needs to be corrected. Not surprisingly, many intersex children are forced to undergo surgery in an attempt to “normalize” them. But these surgeries are performed on people still too young



to make informed decisions about their own bodies. Similarly, surgery is often done only to amend the body aesthetically for it to fit the 'normal' perception of male or female bodies. In most cases, these surgeries are not needed. Intersex people should be given agency over their own bodies.

With regards to activism, only the most passionate one takes the lead and act, because it's purely volunteerism. The majority of our members have financial difficulties. How can we expect them to fight for our rights as an intersex person when the basic right of eating at least 3x a day haven't been met. Intersex Philippines and Intersex Asia are finding ways to help our members through our socio-economic empowerment program. National grassroots movements lack funding, some funders are focused only on regional organizations or big organizations, but what about us, the emerging organization? We cannot do something big if we don't have any funding.

With the Philippine government not really doing anything right now to address the issues of intersex Filipinos, the task to effect changes now lies on the intersex community.

Intersex Philippines, as an example, has been helping raise awareness about the intersex community through campaigns and face-to-face discussions. This – of course – includes teaching families and friends of intersex youth who may encounter issues while looking after a loved one who belongs to the intersex community.

Intersex Philippines has also been building the capacity of members of the intersex community. This is to empower them to deal with issues that they think deserve to be attended to. The best people to deal with intersex issues are intersex people, and here, an empowered intersex community is in the best position to make the changes needed to better the lives of other intersex people.

There, too, is connecting with medical professionals to educate them about intersex issues. If medical professionals were aware of the issues faced by intersex people, they'd be better equipped to serve us.

Meanwhile, on the legal front, Intersex Philippines has also been pushing for:

1. Passage of gender recognition law to hasten – not just make affordable – processes for intersex Filipinos to amend their gender markers, as needed. Current limitations are affecting the ability of many intersex people here to be recognized for who they really are, and so this is something that has to be changed with the making of a law.
2. Consultations with the intersex community when lawmakers draft laws or policies, particularly those that affect the intersex community.
3. The study of making laws that will identify intersex as a third sex category in legal documents to limit surgeries on intersex babies just so they'd fit the sex binary of male or female.

For me, though, intersex people also need to step up.

Various contexts may not always be supportive of the intersex community, so I say that intersex people do not need to come out to help the cause. Instead, start with small steps – like reaching out to family and friends, and educating them about being intersex, even if it's just through your personal stories. If you just hide, if we hide, then our stories won't be heard. And it is in being heard that we are seen, and only when we are seen will we be able to demand all these changes we deserve.

My life as an intersex person has not always been easy. And so is the life of many other intersex Filipinos like me. But thankfully, no matter how small these may seem for now, changes have been happening, thereby helping to raise the intersex community in the Philippines.

India

Mohammed Ali Khan aka Duha,

Intersex Human Rights India

Hello! I am Duha (they/them) and I am from Bangalore, India, in the South of India.

I am an intersex person, and I am also Pansexual and Polyamorous, two of the most important identities in my life.

I want you to specifically think of a journey through various seasons of life when you read this write-up. I will try to take a different route of appreciation and activism in the few years of life that I have engaged in it.

Having said that, let's get on to those questions that I answered in the panel talk but let's understand the perspective a little more in-depth.

Q1. What challenges do you face as an intersex activist in India?

A: To begin with, I don't know that there's just one answer that can sum this up: the challenges are many, and the solutions are too limited. It's so vital that we understand that the cost of intersex activism and visibility comes at the cost of being out there publicly, and visibility gives rise to issues within the queer safety spectrum.

Safety of intersex activists is also a challenge. Consider this situation like that of oil and water; whatever we face in terms of accessing space, resources are sometimes very limited. People in positions of power and with resources are tired of "giving more rights to more groups".

In India, particularly in my city, there is constant erasure of intersex voices in all mainstream queer narratives, and it's so disheartening to see that dwell in our spaces. Not only does this lead to the invisibilization of our voices and existence, but it also puts our existence and liberation under the mat, as they aren't considered important enough. Having mentioned that LGBTQ+ places to date in many parts of India refuse to acknowledge intersex and intersex trans folks. This erasure is particularly harmful because it causes oppression, and violence is normalized on intersex bodies and people, especially children, because they cannot consent to the damages that are being pinned on their bodies by experts in the name of "fixing" the non-binary characteristics.



Interestingly enough, there's some empathy in some spaces for intersex people, but there's more of a curious, creative, and gross lens to how our bodies function. We cannot decry or call on the banners of battle cries or war, or cry out "intersexphobia" because, according to the majority of LGBTQ+ spaces, anything beyond the definitions of what is already there is not of the natural order.

Now, the messy work of building solidarity, engaging with people and the diverse communities we have around us, is also very difficult because of social taboos and culturally different aspects to identities and how we see people's bodies.

Community engagement is one of the biggest challenges I have faced in regards to intersex movement engagement and community building. Furthermore, medicalization and pathologization through surgeries to fix and hormones to boost certain traits is surely the norm.

Another challenge that we also face is the limited legal protections, and we are often overlooked in conversations on law, gender, and policy making/building.

Another factor of our challenge is the limited data and outreach that we have in our spaces, there is a lack of comprehensive data and research on intersex variations in India, and this absence of data hampers efforts to understand the needs and challenges faced by intersex people. Further, it leads to the formulation of evidence-based policies and guidelines meant for the protection of intersex people.

Q2. What is your experience in building collaborations and coalitions to counter anti-queer and gender movements?

A: My collective that I was part of during its cofounding: IHRI, Intersex Human Rights India, focuses on building collaborations and coalitions around the country, but we need to remember all of this takes time, patience, and active resource distribution and participation.

Placing intersex voices and experiences of intersex individuals at the forefront of all efforts, and promoting a culture of inclusivity and respect, is vital for us to grow as individuals.

Some things we can do with our current resources:

1. Advocate for legal reforms and protections;
2. Collaborate and engage with healthcare professionals;
3. Raise public awareness and be present during Pride meetings;
4. Forge alliances with queer organizations;
5. Foster an inclusive and safe space for people to come together.

A brief history of how the intersex movement in India has panned out for the following years is summarised below:

The intersex movement in India is a growing movement that aims to raise awareness, advocate for the rights of intersex individuals, and challenge discriminatory practices. While still relatively nascent, the movement has made significant strides in recent years. Here are some key aspects of the intersex movement in India:

- **Awareness and Visibility:** Intersex activists and organizations in India have been working tirelessly to increase awareness about intersex variations and the challenges faced by intersex individuals. They have been actively engaging with the media, conducting awareness campaigns, and organizing public events to bring intersex issues into the spotlight.
- **Advocacy for Legal Reforms:** Intersex activists and organizations in India are advocating for legal reforms to protect the rights of intersex individuals. This includes pushing for legislation that bans non-consensual surgeries and other medical interventions on intersex infants, as well as seeking legal recognition and protection of intersex rights in anti-discrimination laws.
- **Support Networks and Resources:** Intersex organizations in India are creating support networks and resources for intersex individuals and their families. They provide a safe space for intersex individuals to share experiences, offer peer support, and access accurate information about intersex variations and healthcare options.
- **Collaboration with LGBTQ+ Movements:** Intersex activists often collaborate with LGBTQ+ organizations and movements in India. They recognize the shared goals of challenging societal norms and fighting for the rights of marginalized communities. By joining forces, they amplify their collective voices and advocate for inclusive policies and practices.
- **Engaging with Healthcare Professionals:** Intersex activists [23]

organizations actively engage with healthcare professionals to raise awareness about intersex issues and promote ethical and supportive care. They advocate for a shift away from harmful and non-consensual surgeries and interventions, and emphasize the importance of respecting intersex individuals' autonomy and bodily integrity.

- **International Connections:** Indian intersex activists and organizations maintain connections with global intersex movements and engage in international advocacy efforts. This helps them exchange knowledge, share experiences, and collaborate on initiatives that promote intersex rights at the international level.
- **Challenging Stereotypes and Stigma:** The intersex movement in India works to challenge stereotypes, stigma, and discrimination surrounding intersex variations. We aim to create a more inclusive society where intersex individuals are respected, accepted, and provided with equal opportunities.

Q3) Challenges specific to Global South for intersex rights.

A: Addressing the challenges requires a multifaceted approach involving education, advocacy, legal reform, and the promotion of inclusive healthcare practices. It is essential to raise awareness about intersex variations, challenge cultural stigmas, and foster dialogue among communities, healthcare professionals, policymakers, and human rights organizations. Collaboration with international intersex movements and sharing best practices can also contribute to advancing the rights and wellbeing of intersex individuals in the Global South.

1. **Lack of Awareness and Understanding:** Intersex variations are often poorly understood and surrounded by stigma and misinformation in many parts of the Global South. Limited awareness among the general public, healthcare professionals, and policymakers contributes to a lack of recognition, support, and appropriate care for intersex individuals.

2. **Cultural and Social Stigma:** Intersex individuals in the Global South may face deep-rooted cultural and social stigma, which can lead to discrimination, marginalization, and exclusion. Cultural beliefs, traditional gender norms, and conservative attitudes towards sexuality and gender diversity often contribute to the challenges intersex individuals face in their communities.

3. Limited Access to Healthcare: Intersex individuals in the global South often encounter barriers to accessing quality healthcare services. These may include a lack of trained healthcare professionals who are knowledgeable about intersex variations, limited access to specialized care and resources, and financial constraints that prevent them from seeking necessary medical interventions or support.

4. Human Rights Violations: Intersex individuals in the Global South may be subjected to human rights violations, such as non-consensual surgeries and medical interventions, forced sterilization, and other harmful practices aimed at normalizing their bodies. These violations infringe upon their bodily autonomy, integrity, and right to self-determination.

5. Legal and Policy Gaps: Many countries in the Global South lack specific legal protections for intersex individuals. Laws and policies related to gender identity, healthcare, and anti-discrimination often fail to recognize and address the rights and needs of intersex people. This lack of legal protection can lead to challenges in accessing education, employment, housing, and other basic rights.

6. Limited Support Networks and Resources: Intersex support networks and resources may be scarce or non-existent in the Global South, making it challenging for intersex individuals to connect with peers, access accurate information, and seek emotional and practical support. This isolation can exacerbate feelings of alienation and negatively impact their well-being.

Q4) We the intersex people of the Global South are:

**Not Invisible, we are here, not going anywhere else.
We have existed before, and we will exist today,
tomorrow, and in the future to come.**

[25]



EXPRESSIVE

NEPAL

Esan Regmi,

Intersex Nepal

Namaste!

My name is Esan Regmi. I am currently serving as the Co-Founder and Executive Director of Campaign for Change, Nepal's first and only intersex-led organization. Thank you for giving me this opportunity to share my personal journey, which coincides with the journey of the Nepalese intersex movement as well. In this presentation, I would like to give a brief overview of the challenges faced by intersex people, the history of the intersex movement in my country, and the challenges faced by intersex people in building the movement at the national and regional levels. Also, I would like to reflect on the importance of building coalitions and meaningful partnerships in advancing the rights of vulnerable groups like intersex people.

I would like to start by giving some context to the intersex movement and the challenges faced by intersex people. The intersex community in Nepal and elsewhere faces a range of human rights violations. The most serious violation is that of their right to bodily integrity, which is violated as a result of unnecessary medical interventions performed by medical practitioners on their body during childhood. Stigma and prejudice against intersex people is the cause behind such medical interventions.

Further, this stigma also affects the access of intersex people to education, employment, health services, and public spaces. In Nepal, the laws regarding legal gender recognition are also deeply problematic. They do not understand the needs of the intersex community. Invisibility in public discourse and law also continues to affect intersex people. There is no inclusion of intersex people in any laws and policies. In the Census and official data, the government doesn't specifically include questions to count the intersex population.



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I have been working on intersex issues for more than a decade now, in various capacities. I was the first intersex person in Nepal to come out openly. In the initial phase of my activism, I was looking to understand my own identity. I felt that LGBT organizations could help me in this regard and also provide me with a space to create more awareness about intersex rights. Therefore, I began contributing to the work of national-level LGBT organizations by sharing my experience as an intersex person with the hope of getting to meet more intersex people. Very soon, I realized that the tokenistic approach of LGBT organizations was doing more harm than good. I observed that Nepal's LGBT movement (which began in the early 2000s) has always consciously added 'I' in the acronym since the beginning. This approach resulted in the assumption that a grant made to an LGBTI organization would be utilized for the benefit of all identity groups. The reality is far from this assumption. In reality, none of the organizations that got such grants took any significant steps to ensure that intersex issues are given due prominence. In my personal experience also, I didn't receive support from LGBT+ organizations for building the intersex community, raising intersex awareness, or increasing the capacity of intersex activists to lead the cause.

The appropriation of intersex issues by LGBT organizations also resulted in another set of challenges for intersex people. As a community, all intersex people are not always comfortable being associated with the LGBT organization and movement. They wanted to have a distinct identity of their own. It doesn't mean that the intersex community doesn't acknowledge the intersectional challenges faced by intersex people and other marginalized groups. However, we wanted to have a distinct identity to ensure that our issues were not ignored or invisibilized in the public discourse on gender and sexuality.

As a consequence, I realized that it was critical that intersex people took charge of the movement themselves. Keeping in view this thought, I co-founded Campaign for Change (CfC) as an informal group in 2016. The organization was registered in 2017. We celebrated CfC's 6th anniversary on 11th May 2023.

Over the last six years, we have faced some of the most unique challenges being an intersex-led organization, given the absence of any supporting mechanism at the national level. As a newly set up organization, we managed to stay afloat and do the best that was possible. We did not just managed to carry on with our work, but we were also able to provide support to our community members, continue our advocacy efforts, and provide emergency funds to the community during emergency situations.

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Our organization is comprised of intersex people coming from diverse cultural, socio-economic, educational, and family backgrounds. Before CfC came along, most of us weren't very active in social activities and movements. Due to lack of exposure, we recognized that we even had initial hiccups in socialization for work. We are also placed in various parts of Nepal, and that distance creates its own set of challenges, especially when not all places have direct connectivity. Another big challenge for us is reaching out to people about intersex issues. There is an acute lack of knowledge on this subject. Most people assume that intersex is 'the third gender', so our community needs are diverse. While the scope of work is so vast, we have limited capacity and resources. Our Board Members and Members of the Executive Body are intersex individuals, and they do not have the educational backgrounds and skills to manage this scope of work. Scaling up or expanding is necessary but also difficult at this point. Our current capacity and resources do not allow us to hire experts to help us. Some organizations manage a smooth sail in this regard - if you have the resources, you can hire the expertise. There are many reasons behind the funding challenges faced by intersex organizations.

Raising awareness about intersex issues has remained the foremost challenge for us since the beginning. Even though we started engaging with UN mechanisms, the Nepali civil society and the Government continue to remain unaware of intersex issues, despite several years of LGBTI activism in the country. They still have misconceptions about intersex identity, and they continue to have notions that intersex is 'the third gender' or transgender. To establish the distinct nature of intersex issues, we have been conducting awareness workshops on intersex issues in different educational institutions and organizations. We have also published important knowledge resources on intersex issues in the Nepali language.

In 2016, we organized the first Intersex Workshop, which was the first time that intersex people gathered together in Nepal. This was the starting point of the history of the intersex movement in Nepal. Later in 2016, we submitted a report on intersex issues to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). They reviewed our report and made recommendations based on it to the Nepal Government. This was our first big achievement in terms of advocacy. This brought us recognition. We also submitted a report to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and they sent their recommendations and concluding observations to the Nepali government. Since then, we have supported several intersex individuals in terms of healthcare, surgeries, livelihood, and education.



In 2019-20, our organization and the intersex movement in Nepal saw several important milestones. Our years of community organizing efforts resulted in the adoption of the National Demand Sheet for Nepal's intersex movement in 2019. We have left no stone unturned to promote intersex issues at the national, regional, and international levels. In the process, we built great partnerships with several stellar individuals and organizations.

At the organizational level, we have been constantly reflecting on our work while asking ourselves why we do what we do and how we can make our work scalable. As a step in this direction, last year we developed our first Strategic Plan, which continues to guide our work into the future.

We have come a long way since our inception. However, the pandemic and post-pandemic situation has shown us the extent of challenges that lie ahead of us. Intersex people are still struggling to find a space to share their perspectives in formal legal and policy spaces. Access to funding sources continues to be a major challenge for us, which negatively impacts the scale of the projects we undertake.

Bangladesh

Md. Shihab,

Bangladesh Intersex Forum

Story 1

Cannula

I have started facing discrimination since the nurse was confused about my sex during my birth. A long time after that, I realized that I am an intersex person and my gender identity is woman. In Bangladeshi patriarchal society, my family removed my uterus and ovaries when I was a minor. After that, I was given testosterone hormone therapy for many years. Those days were so horrible that I still cannot sleep at night. Because of this wrong treatment in Bangladesh, I have been so sick mentally and physically. Right now, I am getting treatment at Elmhurst Hospital in New York City. For the treatment, a cannula has been inserted in my hand, and my friendship with this cannula is long. I had to go through many medical diagnoses, and once, a nurse broke a cannula inside my nerve. Those days were so painful!

I am feeling so good at seeing Rainbow flags everywhere in New York. I don't want to tell about the hardship of my life anymore, I just want to talk about the new possibilities of my life from now on..

Story 2

STORY OF AN INTERSEX PERSON BY WOODROSE (PSEUDONYM)

I am Woodrose, and I am 22 years old. I grew up in the heart of Gopalganj city on the banks of Madhumati in the midst of the strict rule of a single-family.

The memory of my childhood is that my relatives thought I was a Hijra. They used to crowd around me to see this strange zoo animal called Hijra. There are many who wanted to open my pants by showing greed for chocolate. My childhood was spent in extreme panic, this society and family took away all the joys of my childhood from me for my sexual mark.

Since my childhood, I liked my sisters' small saris, their clothes, cosmetics. I also don't feel comfortable with my pet yet. As a child, I used to cut tree flowers, paper and make jewelry, wear saris secretly and apply my mother's lipstick. Every lipstick has a scent, in that scent I find my essence.

One day my little uncle saw me in such a situation and complained to my father. My father beat me severely. The five fingerprints of my father's hand on my cheek and back are very obvious. He grabbed me by the throat and threw me on the wall. Blood flowed through one corner of my head. With my two eyes, the stream of endless tears and the blood coming out of my head seemed to merge into one. Seeing my blood coming out like this, my mother hugged me and said, "Woodrose's father, for God's sake, you don't want him anymore." He is a small man and doesn't understand so much, then he also beat my mother. I was very scared then, when I heard the sound of my mother's crying my eyes were getting dark. When I regained consciousness, I was in a hospital bed.

Since then, you know this sari, when I see cosmetics, I get scared and I get the smell of blood in the middle of lipstick.

When I was in 8th class, my classmates were having physical changes like beards and mustaches. My classmates look at me and laugh and say, is your machine small or not

A few classmates come from time to time and say, "I'm sorry, my friend." I never used my school bathroom, it was broken and dirty. I had to stay at school from 10 am to 4 pm. All in all, it was very uncomfortable and painful for me. I was always terrified that if anyone saw my sex sign they would laugh and tickle me more. I may not be able to attend this school.

I enjoyed participating in cultural activities in addition to my studies. I regularly practiced recitation at the Children's Academy. One day, on the verandah of Shishu Academy, a crowd of people were looking at a notice saying that the presenter would be selected through an audition to conduct the National Children's Day program. I also gave my name in this competition. On the day of the audition, he handed me a paper in front of the judge and asked me to read it. I tried to read correctly with my mind. The results were released a few days later and I was selected to present this National Children's Day event. It's one of the happiest moments of my life.

We rehearsed for two months in a row. The country's best presenter, talkative artist has trained us so that we can present a beautiful ceremony to the Honorable Prime Minister.

In the same year, I became the first in Bangladesh to recite poetry. On the day of the ceremony, the Prime Minister handed over my medal to me for reciting poetry. Again he saw that I was presenting. I and the Prime Minister were very close. At the end of the ceremony, the Prime Minister gestured with his eyes to come here. I ran to the Prime Minister but her bodyguards blocked my way and said there was a security threat I said I will provide security to the girl in my area and her bodyguards stared at me. The Prime Minister is listening to me from a distance and smiling, then he said "I called him, let him come here" then the Prime Minister said "you have presented very well, Woodrose." He looked at my card and said "where do you study, what is your home area?" ... He asked me about my identity. Then he asked me about my dream, what I want to be when I grow up. I said I want to be a Prime Minister. The Prime Minister put his hand on my head and said "you will be a good Prime Minister, I pray". Then he invited me to go to Ganobhaban.

Our program was broadcast live on different channels in Bangladesh. Everyone, including Sir Maam of my school, has seen the program. The next morning, a picture of the Prime Minister with me was published in some of the popular national dailies of the country. In school, I became a celebrity. A few days later, DC called our headmaster K to take me to the DC office. We went to the DC office. DC Sir appreciated the presentation of the program and gave me many more pictures with the Prime Minister.

From then on, I never had to look back. I was regularly presenting school, district administration, art programs. It was as if I was finding myself in the middle of this presentation.

But that happiness did not last long. Everyone started saying that if the presenter doesn't have a beard, it doesn't look manly, it feels good. It would have been better if the neck was a little thicker. I could not find my nature in their words. So I squeezed my throat and gave up my love, that is, I left the presentation. I have repeatedly killed my being, never for family or for people in society. O people of the society, my family, do you understand the pain of my self-sacrifice? Yet I get lost in the stage of any presentation.

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We, the intersex people from the Global South

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