“#ShoutOutLoud” brings a collection of stories from young LGBTQ+ people in Asia and the Pacific region focused on their perception of PRIDE.

Youth Voices Count would like to acknowledge all YVC members who enthusiastically volunteered to share their thoughts on PRIDE in their own contexts. These stories share a glimpse of our thoughts, opinions and hopes for PRIDE and its contribution to our presence, our strength and our collective activism.

Youth Voices Count would like to specially acknowledge Justin Francis Bionat, Project Officer – Youth Voices Count for his leadership in developing this publication. Justin has been instrumental in mobilizing Youth Voices Count members for interviews, conducting interviews, drafting stories and finalizing the publication.

We believe that this publication will open a window for all readers to catch a glimpse of young LGBTQ+ peoples’ hopes for a better future. We hope that this would encourage all readers to strive to create a safe and welcoming world where young LGGBTQ+ people can thrive.

Niluka Perera
Regional Coordinator
Youth Voices Count
“Go where you are celebrated not tolerated. In Fiji, it’s hard to be LGBT. My advise would be to bigger LGBT organizations what we can do for young LGBT people? Let us start thinking of spaces where young LGBT people can be safe.”

“I wish I was part of the Pride Month, also. I was quite a bit different for me growing up. I was the only son and I had four sisters.”

Jofiliti comes from the Lautoka in the Pacific island nation of Fiji. For Jofi, it’s a little different in Fiji where culture and society is a big barrier in celebrating the Pride Month. “Looking at other countries, I wish we had it in Fiji.”
Fiji hosted its first pride parade last May 17th in commemoration of the International Day against Homophobia. The march took place in Lautoka, Fiji, where Jofiliti lives.

To celebrate the Pride Month, Jofiliti and a few of his colleagues hosted a transwoman beauty pageant. “We helped mobilize the organizations that held this event. We planned it on a Tuesday and the event was on a Friday.” Reproductive Health & Family Association, Pacific Rainbow Advocacy Network, Red Cross, Rainbow Pride Foundation, FJN Plus were some of the organizations that contributed to their initiative. What made their pageant unique was its alignment with advocacy campaigns on safer sex practices and condom distribution. IEC material were also distributed. As he puts it, “We did awareness on SRHR, Mental Health & Suicide Prevention. We also did referrals to service providers especially to those that needed psycho social support.”

Success was felt when the contestants made an impact to the audience. Above all, “The crowd was very supportive to see the contestants on stage. The contestants are like champions now. They are like heroes. These queens became ambassadors to get tested and to advocate for SRHR.”

Jofiliti sees that the impact of the Pride Month to young people translates to the growing interest of young people on gender rights, violence against women, health issues and LGBTIQ issues. As a young advocate himself, “We help them out in their projects. I work as the coordinator of Youth Champs for Mental Health.”

Reality kicks in when acts of discrimination turn violent and deadly. “We lost one LGBT young person who was murdered last month and justice has yet to be served. I would really say, that the school plays an important role in making the community safe for young LGBTs.” The question that Jofiliti poses is on how we can assure this safety?

One solution is the need for teachers to be sensitized. “When parents can’t fix issues at home, they go to teachers. Teachers can be a good role model in propagating understanding among parents on sexuality.” A teacher’s training on inclusivity and changing the outdated school curricula of schools in Fiji can ensure that young LGBT people are provided safe educational institutions.

Jofiliti Veikoso
Lautoka, Fiji
Muhammad Sarim Imran
Multan, Pakistan

“Be proud of who you are. Raise your voice for rights and justice no matter how powerful the opponent that you are up against”

Muhammad Sarim lives in Multan, Pakistan, where there is a continued intolerance and stigmatization of sexual and gender minorities, he believes that, “The majority of sexual and gender minorities are not strong enough to come out because of the consequences”

“In countries with no laws for the protection of Sexual and Gender Minorities, the pride month has no impact. Even if there is pride month or not it does not change things here.”
As it is already common for discrimination and non-acceptance to exist in a society, Sarim also sees that there is also discrimination existing from the local staff in the National Offices of some international development organizations no matter if the same staff members are attending international forums on Inclusion and Gender Sensitization.

For him, ‘The problem is Power Gap’. We as volunteers are powerless and the staff is powerful. Same mindset with typical people. His first-hand accounts of this issue includes incidences where Sexual & Gender Minority Volunteers are exploited and when they complain, they are victimized, they face threats, character assassination, questioning their family backgrounds and beliefs, dragging their personal lives down, economic abuse and much more. “We need to minimize and address the power gap otherwise the situation will worsen in the coming time.”

Currently with less civil rights legislation prohibiting public or private sector discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity, the status of Sexual & Gender Minorities rights in Pakistan is concerning. However conversations on the subject of sexual orientation and gender identity have begun, especially in light of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

For Sarim, living as a Queer person is still different in metropolitan cities versus small towns as he explains that, “living in a small town, the people here are more rigid.” The impact of celebrating pride month is the cultivation of the mass audience’s consciousness of sexual and gender minorities that, “even if someone is not sensitized about sexual and gender minorities they could learn from the activities and campaigns that reaches out for acceptance.”

With the Transgender Person (Protection of Rights) Act 2018 passed unanimously in the Pakistani Senate in early March 2018, Pakistani Transwomen can now self-identify as male, female, both or neither. They may express their gender according to their own preferences, and they may have their gender identity of choice reflected on their legal documents. This is a huge success after the continuous efforts of the Sexual & Gender Minority Activists and organizations.

As the government is a powerful organization, this law cements transgender acceptance in Pakistan. In Sarim’s opinion, “If a Pride Month celebration is to happen in Pakistan supported by the government, it will probably be for the transgender community only.”

Muhammad Sarim Imran
Multan, Pakistan
Firmansyah Sarbini
Jakarta, Indonesia

“Other countries have many Pride events. It triggers us to have a bigger dream, also. Hopefully soon, young people in Indonesia will have Pride events as big as you guys have in your countries.”

Indonesia remains with no law protecting Indonesian citizens from discrimination or harassment on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity. This is why Firman sees that, “friends and family support system is important as we battle against the oppression of sexual minorities”

“This pride month is very meaningful for me. It is about visibility. I believe that we are not alone in this battle against oppression.”

#ShoutOutLoud
Firmansyah, or Firman for short, is the co-founder and director of Support Group and Research Center on Sexuality Studies (SGRC) located at Jakarta, Indonesia.

SGRC is a non-profit organization established in 2014 by young people who examine issues related to sexuality, such as reproductive health, sexual rights, and access to health and sexual education.

Despite the institutionalized discrimination by the Indonesian government against LGBTIQ+ persons several private discussion have been happening this Pride Month, “most of the discussions are on sexuality. We also had a film screening of the movie Love, Simon.”

However, it is undeniable that despite efforts by activists and advocates in country the community remains in the shadows. During the events organized, Firman said that “Because of the political situation in the country, LGBTIQ+ people are more discriminated that’s why we did the events privately. It is even not anymore as feasible and safe like previous years.”

A number of people attended the events organized by Firman and his colleagues but mostly because they reached out to the community, “We sent personal invitation to people we know. To ensure safety of the participants. We visited a botanical garden and we celebrated a pride event there.”

The community calls for the visibility of sexual and gender minorities in Indonesia. The pride month serves as an avenue for the bigger exposure of the community like all the other countries. The resilient human rights defenders in Indonesia are dedicated to the protection of LGBTIA+ rights.

Firman acknowledges that organizations like Arus Pelangi, the biggest LGBTIQ+ NGO in Indonesia leads the call for equality and acceptance of the community. He also welcomes young people and young organizations to get in touched with SGRC, “our organization is currently working very well with many universities and educational institutions in Indonesia.”

Firmansyah Sarbini
Jakarta, Indonesia
Quỳnh Hoa Đỗ
Ha Noi, Vietnam

“If you feel alone, know that you are not alone. You should try to connect with other people, if you feel like you are hurt. That feeling also happens to other people and it should not happen to you.”

In Vietnam, same-sex sexual acts are not criminalized, however, homosexuality is generally considered a taboo because of Vietnamese traditions.

“We celebrate the pride month in many ways, so when everybody talks about pride month, I feel so proud. I am visible. I feel visible. They talk about what LGBT people do for the community. I feel like people value us, and value what we’ve done.”
In celebration of the Pride Month, Hà Nội queer organized a prom party with a queen and king, “We invited people to join the party. We had some people from other organizations, like NEXTGEN, joining the pride event. In my LBT organization we plan to host a party at the end of the month.”

Hoa sees satisfaction and gratification when, “Everybody celebrates this month. I am proud of the community that I belong to as a young LBQ Woman. When we talk about pride month, it is easier for us to connect to people, do what we love and gain support.”

Making connections and building network are important. Hoa says that on a personal level, “I like hosting a party and people meet up. They chat and play games together. When they come to my party they would know a lot of people. They would feel like they are not alone. They have new friends.”

Coming out has always been an issue in Vietnam, “I like doing research about how LGBT people come out. During my research, I hear coming out stories and this helps people communicate with each other especially for those who are still in the process of coming out.”

The LGBT community is visible in Vietnam, “We show people pictures of queer people and we tell people that we live normal lives and we don’t all look like what is shown in television.” During one of Pride Month events in Ha Noi about 500 people attended.

Vietnam is taking forward inclusive legislations on same-sex marriage and HIV and AIDS. Historically, Vietnam’s first gay pride parade took place in Hanoi on August 5, 2012.

Quỳnh Hoa Đỗ
Ha Noi, Vietnam
Rogie Balino
Laoag, Philippines

“Be brave, be strong and never lose hope! Continue the fight for equality! Let our colors blaze our passion! We are always here for you!”

Rogie, who lives in Laoag, Philippines sees the Pride Month as a realization to, “keep on waving the colors of the rainbow, to be courageous enough to showcase my talents, skills, and my true identity.”

The recognition of the LGBTIQ+ community in the Philippines, proves that the Pride Month is a celebration of “unity in diversity and has made me firm and bold towards the battle for equality.”
In a country that is highly tolerant of the LGBTIQ+ community, the Pride Month is widely celebrated in more than creative ways across the Philippines. Rogie sees the world in such an enthusiastic way that despite facing judgements and intolerance, “this Pride month reminds me that there will always be a rainbow after the rain.”

Rogie considers this celebration as an opportunity to “inspire other people and let them recognize us not only our existence as a human being but also our worth as an individual.”

In celebrating the Pride Month Rogie leads the Project Equality and Equity (Project E) in conducting several activities like Free HIV Screening, Information-Drive Campaigns on Gender equality and sensitivity for youth leaders and advocates, advocacy trainings, gender-related workshops and talks, and so many more. Project E is under the Committee on Sirib Youth Academy and Advocacy Center of Sirib Ilokano Kabataan Association (SIKA) Inc., an active non-government youth organization of in the Philippines.

The LGBTIQ+ community, as a minority sector in the Philippines, face disadvantages in getting hired for jobs, acquiring rights for civil marriage, and even in starting up personal businesses. A large number of Filipinos view homosexuality as acceptable in society and this is in part influenced by the visibility of the Pride Month. “This celebration truly made a great impact to the Filipinos who are members of the LGBTIQ+ community because they get the chance to prove that they are assets of the society who have the right to be recognized and not to be marginalized in the country.”

It is crucial to acknowledge the support of the government, in “achieving the inclusive growth and development for this Pride month would not be possible without the help and support of the government.” Human rights defenders have tirelessly advocated for inclusive legislation to be passed in the Philippines. Rogie see hope that, “our legislators, and the entire people associated with the government here in the Philippines, would approve the passage of Anti-Discrimination Bill to protect the rights of LGBTIQ+ individuals.”

Rogie Balino
Laoag, Philippines
Haseeb Rathore
Lahore, Pakistan

“Pakistan is an evolving country, it is exploring new ways. I encourage people to research about us and to learn about the LGBT community. We are alive and we are great people.”

With the continued persecution of gender and sexual minorities in Pakistan, Haseeb, who lives in the city of Lahore, believes that “It is not necessarily about getting out in public but you can get your friends secretly in an enclosed space and you can build alliances by gathering diverse people under one roof.”

Haseeb sees the security of LGBT persons as a primary concern in organizing events. Small events organized in safe spaces are more feasible.
Pakistan, a highly Islamic state, poses great danger for LGBT people. As for Pride celebrations this month, “there’s actually no celebration, people do not have gatherings openly and publicly, but in private settings things happen. There are a few parties where LGBT people attend but these are not formally organized. It’s just a party where people of different sexualities come.”

Haseeb has attended some of these parties but has yet to take part in grander pride event in public areas. Despite the Pride Month being the season to show yourself and celebrate your existence, Haseeb strongly feels that “gathering friends at your place and making them comfortable in that space is better than going out and doing a pride march.”

“When you do public appearances things can be worse. The police and legal authorities can arrest you.” Subscribing to Islamic teachings, scholars overwhelmingly teach that same-gender sex is a sin and should be punished, as told in the Holy Book of the Koran.

The situation in Pakistan is unfavorable for pride events done publicly. The solution that Haseeb sees to this dilemma is taking to the internet - “We can approach people in using Grindr, Blued and other dating applications, gather them privately and discuss the problems that they are facing.”

Discrimination and violence stems from economic and societal inequalities. Most LGBT people facing problems are low and middle class citizens, not the upper class people. “If you are not rich you have so many problems, like you have to get a job, sustain that job, you have to stay in the closet. We should be more focused on less privileged LGBT people. They are actually living a very difficult life.” Haseeb narrates that life tends to be harder when you belong close to the poverty line. He, at one point in his life, was suicidal because he was thrown out of a job.

In order to sustain the movement for equality and acceptance, Haseeb sees that other youngsters should be our allies in this cause. “Young people can be sensitized. You can make them explore our society. Young people can absorb these things rather than older people.”

Haseeb is determined to continue working for the less fortunate LGBT people living in the low income communities. He believes that through consultations, empowerment and networking we can solve the root causes of these issues.

Haseeb Rathore
Lahore, Pakistan
Brian Par
Manila, Philippines

“Don’t give up. The battle for our equal recognition and respect is long and very tiring sometimes. But at the end of the day, we are all heroes in this advocacy.”

Brian, from Manila in the Philippines, posits that the Pride month “gives an idea that diversity, at least once a year, can be celebrated by all people. It’s not just a day for LGBT to showcase how colorful our life is to the world, but it's a day to celebrate unity, acceptance, liberty, and pride.”

Several provinces in the Philippines prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. However, the country still does not offer any legal recognition to same-sex marriage, civil unions or domestic partnership benefits.
The Pride Month celebration in Manila is known to be very colorful and festive. A collective of LGBTQ organizations come together and invite everyone to enjoy this special day with their family and friends. “For us, young gay LGBTQ, it is our special day to be united and put colors in our city - a place that accepts people's choices in life.”

Young LGBTQ people in the Philippines still face discrimination and oppression on a daily-basis especially in educational institutions around the country.

The impact of the Pride Month celebration is that “whenever we celebrate pride month in the Philippines, I know we encourage young people to step out from their closets and speaks what's on their mind.”

The first pride parade in Asia and also the Philippines was held on 26 June 1994 and since then LGBTQ people have become more organized and visible, both politically and socially.

With the growing visibility of the community, “we promote equality and acceptance and love. That is a huge impact of this pride month for me.”

Brian believes that a strong collaboration between the government and our people will effectively create inclusive and sage spaces for young LGBTQ people to showcase their identity. “The beauty of truth and equality that reshapes a modern and liberated world.”

Brian Par
Manila, Philippines
Tharindi Devasurendra
Colombo, Sri Lanka

“It is clear that not everybody has the privilege to be out and open about their identity and orientation. For those who are going through rough times, my advice is hold on, try to reach out and get help in whatever way you can.”

Tharindi, lives in Sri Lanka’s capital city of Colombo. LGBTIQ persons in Sri Lanka still face legal challenges including the denial of access to health services, education and employment.

“Being an activist doesn’t mean that you have to come out in the open. You can carry out silent activism by sharing a post, spreading information, helping a fellow member of the community to get out of a bad situation or just even by simply being you. We can inspire people.”
The Colombo Pride has been held in the capital of Sri Lanka for the past 12 years but has remained small scale due to the current political climate coupled with the oppressive laws against LGBTIQ persons. Tharindi describes the experience as, “a series of event throughout the month. This consists of a pride bus parade, a pride party, and talent shows and so on. The reason that we are still unable to have a pride march is because of underlying security problems.”

Like many other countries with conservative cultures, “the safety and wellbeing of the community needs to be looked into before organizing anything. That is why it is limited to only a bus parade where the people in the community go around Colombo in a double decker bus to celebrate pride.”

“As a young LGBTIQ person, growing up and seeing pride celebrated so wonderfully with acceptance and love has made me realize that there are people out there who get to love who they want without consequences.”

The Pride celebrations has made Tharindi see a hopeful future for the community. A future, to her, where everyone is accepted and love is not illegal.

Young people even in Sri Lanka face societal barriers and discrimination. The Pride month helps in mobilizing these young people in the community and provide them a chance to express themselves over the course of the month’s activities. Safe spaces are now available for closeted LGBTIQ to get in touch with the community.

For Tharindi, ensuring the safety and inclusivity of LGBTIQ youth, “it is necessary to address and get the aid and assistance of youth parliamentarians, senior activists, and heads of police departments. Human Rights Commission, Youth organizations, the Health Ministry, and the United Nations should be our partners especially in creating policies geared towards equality for all.”

It’s a shame that we lose many young LGBTIQ community members, “my advice is that, good times will come ahead and you need to be there to witness it so hang on to whatever you can till then.”

Tharindi Devasurendra
Colombo, Sri Lanka
Abhipraya Muchtar
Jakarta, Indonesia

“Be patient but never stop telling your stories of struggles to trusted people around you. I believe that a small step today can bring a huge impact in the future. I believe that ‘Pride’ comes from you.”

Abhi is a proud transgender man living in Indonesia’s capital of Jakarta. Indonesia’s tradition disapproves of homosexuality. Similarly, same-sex couples are not eligible for any of the legal protections available to opposite-sex married couples.

In Indonesia’s Aceh Province, flogging of LGBTIA+ individuals still remain as a human rights issues and initiatives are underway to decriminalize same-sex sexual activity but this is hampered by a highly conservative and religious society.
Abhi’s Pride Month story begins when, “10 years ago, I did not know about the Pride Month or even about the LGBTIQ+ community and organizations.” Now with the knowledge of the community and the universal celebration of the Pride Month, “it gives me the power to accept my gender identity and sexual orientation. It makes me realized that there are a lot of people like me out there, I’m not alone.”

Abhi sees the Pride Month as a “liberation of diversity” because to him “SOGIESC is also a part of human diversity.”

Living in a Muslim majority country, Abhi has had to live in a society “where talking about sexuality is considered 'taboo' and transgender people are treated as people with social problems or are 'against God's will'.” The continued crackdown on LGBT rights and anti-LGBT rhetoric has proven difficult for the community to gain visibility and recognition.

Safety and security remains as one of the issues during this year’s Pride Month. “Persecutions are everywhere, even at our private spaces.” According the Abhi, a social media campaign was done during IDAHOBIT inviting allies to post pictures or videos while they hug their LGBTIQ friends. The campaign was called #HijrahMenujuCinta (hijrah for love) and #HugNotHate and “it aimed to show support and raise awareness.”

Abhi recalls that some young LGBTQ+ once asked him, “is there any Pride parade here?”, and all he could think was how impossible that would be in Indonesia. For Abhi, “Pride comes from a fight, a struggle, against stigma and discriminations towards LGBTQ+.” Asserting human rights is to recognize the importance of the Pride Month. Abhi believes that providing young LGBTIQ+ Indonesians historical knowledge of the beginnings of Pride will allow them to better appreciate that, “the first Pride (parade) was a riot and now it’s time to gather our voice and power to bring "Pride" to Indonesia.”

By calling for the support of family, friends, human rights activist, academicians, health providers, religious scholars, legal aid, employers, and other allies, we can better assist them “to improve their knowledge and understanding about gender and sexuality and to speak up and show their support, based on their field of expertise. Together we can make an inclusive environment that free from stigma, discrimination, and violence for young LGBTQ+.”

Abhipraya Muchtar
Jakarta, Indonesia
“Don’t hide yourself. As a community, we are demanding our rights, we are not demanding privileges, just equal right with everyone else. We should be proud and be visible.”

Moon, who lives in Lahore, is the programme director of the Khawaja Sira Society, an organization that advocates for transgender rights, runs a voluntary counseling and HIV testing program and facilitates a literacy program for the transgender community of Pakistan.

Transgender citizens in Pakistan often experience discrimination in educational and employment settings. With the recent passage of a bill that protects transgender persons in Pakistan, the Hijra community now have a legal mechanism that allows them to engage more in social life.
Moon sees the impact of the Pride Month as an opportunity for “the people to come out with their actual gender and sexuality”. In a highly conservative society, many LGBTIQ+ persons in Pakistan are forced into the closet for fear of violence and disownment from the family.

As the Pride Month is known to be a time of protest and celebration, Moon believes that “this is the good way to disclose our gender and sexuality in front of the people and show how proud we are.” The community’s visibility and self-acceptance are key to achieving equality.

There is still danger in being too open and flamboyant in Pakistan this is why Khawaja Sira Society has organized solidarity circles. Led mainly by their transgender women members, the solidarity circle welcomes transgender men and other men who have sex with men (MSM) to their gatherings as they discuss ways “to work together and move forward with the aim of visibility and inclusion of the community”.

Moon sees the recent passage of the Transgender Protection Bill as a gateway for other sexualities and genders to be included in the protection and inclusion that the bill provides. For Moon, “this month is a good opportunity to spread the message of acceptance through best practices.”

With the bill in place, other sexualities have developed a sense of “confidence”. Discussions around HIV and AIDS have shown that the Pakistani government is not alien to conversations revolving sexuality and gender minorities. Especially for health issues, “the government has shown interest in providing support for vulnerable populations” such as the MSM population.

Despite much intolerance, little initiatives are underway. One specific initiative that Moon highlights is the ongoing second round of data gathering of Youth Voices Count’s ‘IGNITE!’. Moon has first-hand experience of visiting health clinics and talking to health service providers about the inclusion of gender and sexual minorities in the health system.

Together with the community at-large, Moon believes that with “the support of embassies, such as the German and Dutch Embassies in Pakistan, the discussion and inclusion of the LGBTIQ+ community is taking massive steps.” Moon sees hope that one day the acceptance of the community can be felt in Lahore and other parts of Pakistan.

Moon Ali
Lahore, Pakistan