

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Navigating Constraints: Activist Strategies in the Vietnamese LGBT+ Movement

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## Abstract

In the past decade, the Vietnamese lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and other sexual orientations and gender identities (LGBT+) movement has succeeded in repositioning this population from the stigmatising label of “social evils” to a more positive social representation. Despite the limited space for civil society in this authoritarian environment, Vietnamese activists and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have effectively changed public attitudes, improved visibility, and gained legal recognition for this marginalised community. This study uses qualitative data from interviews with twelve activists and fieldwork observations to explain how activist strategies in this setting align with the “service delivery” function of civil society. By examining how activists have addressed healthcare and education deficits, I demonstrate that activism in authoritarian regimes can be effective when it assists instead of challenges the government. The findings contribute to scholarship on global queer activism by demonstrating how a service delivery approach can achieve social change, highlighting the role of NGOs and international development in this process. Additionally, the findings expose existing challenges that hinder these activists’ efforts, showing how funding dependency and inadequate legal recognition can significantly limit the creativity and autonomy of grassroots activist groups.

**Keywords:** LGBT+ activism; Vietnam; authoritarian; civil society; social movement; international development

## Introduction

The summer of 2022 witnessed a big win for the Vietnamese lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and other sexual orientations and gender identities (LGBT+) community. Within 72 hours of its relaunch, the marriage equality campaign *Tôi Đồng Ý* [I Agree] achieved its initial target of 250,000 supporting signatures, showing significant public support for legalising same-sex marriage (Cao 2022). In the same month, Vietnam’s Ministry of Health officially declared that homosexuality is not a disease, instructing medical practitioners to stop treating it as such (Snell 2022). This declaration helped dismantle the once-prevalent “social evils” discourse that state-run media in the early 2000s attached to this population.

In elevating public recognition for LGBT+ people, activists and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have helped rebrand queerness away from the discourse of pathology and towards a more normalised identity. Despite operating within an authoritarian regime where civil society is highly restricted, Vietnamese activists have managed to shift public attitudes about LGBT+ people, promote this community’s visibility, and increase their recognition in the laws. With such momentum, the Vietnamese LGBT+ movement is a case of successful civil society actions in an authoritarian context.

Zooming into activist strategies and shedding light on the potential and challenges of their approach, this paper explores how activists can affect changes even within regimes that provide limited space for mobilisations or resistance to the state’s hegemony. It adds to the existing literature on queer activism in Asia, where scholars have shown that despite operating within political restrictions, civil society activists can nevertheless “bargain with the state” (Yang 2019: 662) or engage in a form of “pragmatic

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resistance” (Chua 2012: 713) and “quiet politics” (Jung 2022: 863) to advocate for social change. A key part of this paper draws from Young’s (2000) framework of conceptualising civil society functions, showing that activists can drive societal change forward without clashing with the state by taking on the role of service deliverers. This discussion also considers the role of international development assistance in shaping Vietnamese civil society and LGBT+ advocacy after the country’s 1986 economic reform.

This article’s basis is data compiled from interviews with twelve Vietnamese activists between 2016 and 2017 and observation notes at an activist training program. I begin by providing a historical overview of queer marginalisation in Vietnam and addressing different cultural influences that shape contemporary Vietnam’s interpretation of gender and sexuality. I then discuss the changes in the societal atmosphere towards this population in recent years, revealing the role of civil society and NGOs in shaping the Vietnamese LGBT+ movement. The findings will illuminate activists’ strategies to achieve change in this authoritarian setting and their ongoing struggles in NGO-driven advocacy. I conclude by highlighting the contribution of this study to the scholarship of global queer activism.

### Queer Marginalisation in Vietnam

The marginalisation of queerness in contemporary Vietnamese society traces back to several cultural influences throughout the nation’s long history. First and foremost, due to the prolonged period of Chinese dominance, Confucianism and Taoism gained prominence in Vietnam as major ideologies that shaped social interactions and relationships. Confucianism is crucial in shaping societal notions of morality (Rydström 2001), emphasising patrilineal reproduction as a familial obligation (Horton and Rydström 2019; Rydström 2006a). Similarly, Taoism conveys that life involves a balance of opposing yet inherently complementary forces known as “yin” and “yang”. It associates the “yang” element with men, superiority, and positivity, while attributing “yin” to women, passiveness, and inferiority (Rydström 2006a). Both philosophies promote a gender binary perspective, treating heterosexual unions as the standard and deeming sexual relationships and activities outside of this framework as “immoral” (Rydström 2006b: 295). Confucianism, in particular, holds a significant place in Vietnamese society: the state relies on its philosophical values to regulate intimacy and maintain social order (Charton and Boudreau 2017).

French colonialism in Vietnam during the late 1800s represents another cultural force influencing the marginalisation of queerness. Specifically, we can attribute the use of homophobic terms like “pê đê” in the Vietnamese language to colonial legacies rooted in the French term “pédéraste” (meaning: a man who desires or engages in sexual activity with a boy). As noted by Proschan (2002b), colonial French literature often demonised the locals, portraying Vietnamese sexes and sexualities in opposition to the “normal” sexual and moral order associated with civilised Frenchmen. These writings often depicted the Vietnamese locals as vicious and immoral, who lured the otherwise innocent Frenchmen into pederasty, syphilis, drug use, and prostitution (Proschan 2002a). Consequently, the introduction of the term “pê đê” into the Vietnamese language via these writings was not merely linguistic; it also instilled a stigmatised perspective of homosexual acts, associating them with diminished moral values. In contemporary Vietnamese vocabulary, aside from terms such as “đồng” or “bóng” which can be traced back to mediumship practices and the spirit possession ritual “lên đồng” (Nguyễn 2016; Trần 2022), “pê đê” is considered “the most enduring one in the Vietnamese cultural lexicon” to indicate queerness (Trần 2014: 16). Often used in derogatory ways (Ly *et al.* 2020), the term is seamlessly adopted by the Vietnamese public to describe gender inversion and non-heterosexuality.

In 1996, the state campaign against “social evils” [tệ nạn xã hội] further marginalised LGBT+ individuals (Rydström 2006b). This campaign launched shortly after Vietnam’s 1986 economic reform, commonly known as Đổi Mới, marking the transition from a centrally planned to a market-oriented economy. While Đổi Mới was a success economically, its increased global integration also triggered notable shifts in Vietnamese culture, evoking general anxiety among the public. State-controlled media made frequent reports about the prevalence of a global and “poisonous culture” [văn hóa độc hại] (Rydström 2006b: 289), claiming that modernisation following the reform also led to the rise of “social evils” and the endangerment of Vietnamese traditional values. Following this, the state-launched campaign declared the need to eliminate all “social evils” due to capitalism excesses and Western moral degradation at all costs (Wilcox 2000).

“Social evils”, however, had an arbitrary definition; the category seemed to encompass any “aspects of society considered unhealthy” by the state (McNelly 2003: 114). The state lumped several practices into this category, including but not limited to “premarital and extramarital sex, homosexuality, pornography, prostitution, drug and alcohol addiction, gambling, theft, abuse and violence” (Rydström 2006b: 284). This campaign constructed homosexuality as antithetical to Vietnamese traditional values, leading to frequent police raids of gay bars to eliminate “social evils” (Phạm 2022).

As the HIV-AIDS epidemic emerged in Vietnam during the 1990s, public discourse quickly linked sex between men and sex work with HIV-AIDS (Horton and Rydström 2019; McNelly 2003). The influx of international funding aimed at addressing this public health concern compelled civil society groups engaged in queer advocacy to redefine their focus through the lens of HIV and men-who-have-sex-with-men to secure funding (Horton *et al.* 2015). Consequently, diverse queer groups found themselves inadvertently lumped together into a single stigmatised category, facing increasing hostility and societal prejudice. In this way, the state-launched campaign against “social evils” and the HIV-AIDS epidemic actively linked queerness to discourses of public health and pathologies in Vietnam (Khuất *et al.* 2009), framing queerness as a “social disease”.

During this period, while homosexuality faced severe social prejudice and discrimination, the laws did not mention it (Phạm 2022). In the absence of legal grounds, local authorities intervened in some gay marriage cases but did not prosecute them. A change in the law soon came in response: In 2000, Vietnam amended its 1986 Marriage and Family Law, prohibiting same-sex unions. Thus, this modification reinforced the exclusion of homosexuality through a process of legal outlawing (Horton and Rydström 2019). Soon after, the 2005 Civil Code stipulated that an individual has the right to redetermine gender only in the case of birth defects or if their gender has not accurately formed (Bùi 2018). In other words, only individuals with atypical congenital sex anatomy could undergo sex reassignment surgery. Vietnam’s legal frameworks in the early 2000s provide clear evidence of the state’s hostile stance and unwillingness to accept its LGBT+ population.

### Vietnam’s LGBT+ Advocacy, International Development, and Civil Society

While the early 2000s witnessed significant prejudice against queerness in the Vietnamese constitution, it was also during this decade that a stream of international NGOs entered Vietnam to assist the country (Salemink 2006), which eventually paved the way for LGBT+ advocacy (Phạm 2022; Rydström *et al.* 2023). Following Đổi Mới reforms, international aid agencies and NGOs brought their development models to Vietnam and funding to establish several advocacy groups based on Western concepts of democracy (Hannah 2007). Thus, this decade was closely linked to the formation of the neo-form of Vietnamese civil society (Norlund *et al.* 2006; Waibel 2014).

Commonly understood as a realm of social life distinct from the state, civil society can be seen as an autonomous sphere capable of energising resistance against oppressive regimes (Seligman 2002) or bringing citizens together to foster cooperation (Putnam 2000). Non-state associations such as NGOs play an essential role in civil society functions; they are often seen as watchdogs that balance state power (Mohan 2002). However, civil society in post-Đổi Mới Vietnam does not truly fit into any definition of “civil society” characterised by autonomy from the state or resistance to state ideology (Hannah 2007). Given that Vietnam is a one-party, authoritarian state, civil society and the state in this setting are “enmeshed together in a complex and multilayered network of material transactions, personal connections, and organisational linkages” (Lewis 2013: 326). State restrictions and constraints on activities organised by non-state actors are also pervasive (Waibel 2014). An example of the Vietnamese state’s pervasive control and restriction of civil society activities is the lengthy and costly bureaucratic measures that hinder the forming of citizen associations (Rydström *et al.* 2023). This convoluted process has led to several advocacy groups in Vietnam operating without legal registration, or registering as private companies or production cooperatives instead (Horton *et al.* 2015).

Despite such state-imposed constraints, the arrival of international aid agencies and NGOs after Đổi Mới has led to the formation of several civil society groups in Vietnam. Prominent registered associations that promote LGBT+ rights, as Rydström and her colleagues (2023) have identified, include The Institute for Studies of Society, Economy and Environment (ISEE), Information, Connecting, Sharing (ICS),

Institute of Social Development Studies (ISDS), Center for Studies and Applied Sciences in Gender–Family–Women and Adolescents (CSAGA), and Centre for Creative Initiatives in Health and Population (CCIHP). On the non-registered front, several more advocacy groups and networks are working on LGBT+ issues (Phạm 2022). Together, these groups have mobilised and advocated for progressive change, running successful campaigns that promote societal acceptance of the LGBT+ community (Nguyễn and Rydström 2022). In other words, the Vietnamese LGBT+ movement is a result of NGO-driven advocacy with support from international development initiatives.

In a decade, the movement has yielded significant progress. In 2012, initiated by an activist at the NGO CSAGA, the first Việt Pride parade was launched in Hà Nội with financial support from the Swedish and Canadian embassies (Oosterhoof *et al.* 2014). In 2014, after several months of consulting with NGO activists, Vietnam’s National Assembly voted to revise the Marriage and Family Law, lifting the ban on same-sex marriage (Phạm 2022). In 2015, Vietnam’s National Assembly passed the Civil Code legalising sex-reassignment surgery. It granted those who had undergone such procedures the right to register their new gender and personal rights under the reassigned gender (Đỗ and Nguyễn 2020). The most recent win for the movement occurred in the summer of 2022 when Vietnam’s Ministry of Health made the official statement that homosexuality is not a disease and thus does not require medical treatment (Snell 2022). This statement helped nullify the discourse of homosexuality as pathological from the 1996 state-launched campaign against “social evils”.

Notably, these victories are not without setbacks. For example, while Vietnam no longer prohibited same-sex unions in 2014, it remains unrecognised in the laws (Horton *et al.* 2015). In the new reality of “no prohibition” yet still “no recognition”, gay couples could live together or get married without fear of interference from authorities, yet such unions would not grant them legal rights or obligations (Phạm 2022). This legal revision thus reflects the Vietnamese state’s ambiguous stance on LGBT+ issues: for Horton and colleagues (2015: 1066), through such “lax legislation”, the state could “sidestep” controversial issues such as same-sex marriage, resulting in a stalemate position. In a way, this ambiguous outcome is part of the trend of contradictory dynamics in LGBT+ advancement in Southeast Asia, whereby “great leaps forward in protecting the rights of LGBT people have occurred in parallel with substantial setbacks” (Wilkinson *et al.* 2017: 5).

Despite such setbacks, the changes in the laws and increased public support for LGBT+ in Vietnam show that opportunities for social change still exist even in a setting where civil society is legally and practically “entangled with the state” (Norlund *et al.* 2006: 36). Namely, the mixed success of the Vietnamese LGBT+ movement demonstrates that even with the lack of autonomy, civil society groups in this authoritarian setting still retain the ability to affect social change when given international aid assistance. Scholarly investigations reveal that, in this context, Vietnamese activist networks pursue advocacy by framing issues through a human rights lens (Horton *et al.* 2015), employing sentimental language to garner sympathy (Phạm 2022), and promoting positive portrayals of LGBT+ individuals in the media (Oosterhoff *et al.* 2014). These strategies reframe queerness as a natural identity instead of a disease or corrupted lifestyle (Faludi 2016), thereby challenging the stigmatising frame linking queerness with “social evils”. Notably, these strategies represent an overall non-confrontational approach to social change, promoting cultural recognition through symbolic subversion frequently observed in international LGBT+ activism (see Taylor 1992; Whittier 2012; Wieringa 2014).

Another useful framework for understanding Vietnamese LGBT+ advocacy strategies is in Young’s (2000) distinction between two sets of functions within civil society: “service delivery” and “public sphere”. While the “service delivery” function pertains to providing services to marginalised populations and facilitating mutual aid, the “public sphere” involves mediating institutions that gather interests and concerns from citizens, fostering autonomous spaces for diverse discourses. In authoritarian regimes, the state may perceive the “public sphere” as a threat; thus, it devotes considerable resources to restrict civil society’s capacity to create public forums for discussion and labels overtly dissident voices as “regime opposition” (Thayer 2009). By contrast, civil society groups acting as service providers can help the state fulfil functions it cannot or is unwilling to perform. Dai and Spire (2018: 75), investigating NGO work in China, refer to this as the “not blaming but assisting the government” approach, which can legitimise and even reproduce elements of authoritarian structures rather than challenging them (Jamal 2008). In other words, the authoritarian state does not see civil society’s function in providing services as a threat to its hegemony.

Young's model aptly describes the push–pull dynamics in state–civil society relationships within authoritarian regimes, where cooperation and contestation coexist. This model also explains how civil society can survive and thrive in such contexts (Lewis 2013). Using examples from Vietnamese LGBT+ advocacy, this paper clarifies the role of activists as “service deliverers” in their efforts to promote LGBT+ equality, showing an informal pathway for social change (Wells–Dang 2014) in settings where public displays of resistance can face severe repression. The findings also reveal the role of international development and NGOs in creating a repertoire for Vietnamese LGBT+ advocacy, problematising the effectiveness and implications of adopting NGO-driven approaches.

## Methods and Data

This research employs in-depth interviews conducted with a diverse group of twelve activists advocating for LGBT+ equality. The informants include three female-to-male transgender individuals, two bisexual women, one bisexual man, two lesbian women, two gay men, one cisgender-heterosexual woman, and one individual identifying as genderqueer.

A registered association specialising in promoting LGBT+ equality in Vietnam facilitated the fieldwork for this research, which I choose not to name here to preserve confidentiality. Through this organisation, I connected with an activist gatekeeper who helped me enter a specialised training program for activists in Hồ Chí Minh City in December 2016. My participant observation in this four-day program allowed me to meet the activists interviewed later for this study. I interviewed seven activists at the program's end in December 2016, and five in July and August 2017. These activists belonged to smaller youth activist networks from different regions in Vietnam. While they had received support from civil society organisations such as ICS, ISEE, and CSAGA to implement their activist projects, these organisations did not formally employ them. In other words, these activists were volunteers in unregistered youth activist networks.

I conducted the interviews in a location of the informants' choosing and obtained their consent to record and present their narratives. My interview data analysis followed the abductive coding approach with three steps proposed by Tavory and Timmermans (2022). Step one, familiarisation, involved transcribing the interviews and becoming familiar with the data, which helped form the foundation for a deeper analysis. Following this step was defamiliarisation, which entailed examining assumptions I had taken for granted to remain open to new perspectives and unexpected insights. Finally, the last step allowed for reevaluating the same observations from alternative perspectives. I also incorporated my observation notes during the fieldwork into the analysis to help contextualise the findings.

The following sections present the results of my analysis, along with notes derived from my fieldwork observations. I assigned pseudonyms to all informants to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

## Activism as service delivery

### Example 1: Addressing healthcare deficit

As a result of the flood of donor funding for HIV prevention (Horton *et al.* 2015), Vietnam has several health facilities that offer sexual health counselling to men-who-have-sex-with-men. However, the country still lacks facilities that can accommodate the needs of transgender people. While the Civil Code granting those who have undergone sex-reassignment surgery the right to register their new gender passed in 2015, guidelines to operationalise this legal revision are still missing (Đỗ and Nguyễn 2020; IJsendijk 2023). In the absence of a supporting framework, Vietnamese transgender people continue to face identification challenges (Oosterhoof *et al.* 2014), which can lead to treatment refusal in healthcare settings. An activist cited a case:

The [transgender] person was in an emergency, but the doctor refused to help him. He has a masculine appearance but is still a “female” on paper. The doctor refused to admit him, even when his family was explaining that he was a transgender man. (Duy, transgender man)

This cited incidence is not an isolated case. A nation-scale survey of 2363 LGBT people highlighted that discrimination in medical settings is prevalent, with 7.9% of the respondents having experienced



treatment denial or difficulty with regular medical care (Lương and Phạm 2016: 16). For the transgender group especially, this can result in a reluctance to seek emergency assistance at hospitals (Nguyễn 2019), leading to lower utilisation of medical assistance among the transgender than other population groups (Lương and Phạm 2016).

The lack of LGBT+-friendly medical facilities was a well-known topic among the activists I interviewed. An activist explained:

Vietnam's medical scene is not ready for this. You talk to doctors or nurses, and they don't know what LGBT is about. I had a chat with a doctor recently, and he mentioned that whenever the LGBT topic comes up at the Ministry of Health, it gets awkward. People in healthcare are kind of skittish about that topic. Even those studying to be general practitioners have, like, zero knowledge about sexual orientation. So, for sure, they're not up to speed on LGBT people or the specific health concerns that our community might have. (Khoa, gay man)

Khoa's concern is not unfounded: studies have demonstrated that the Vietnamese healthcare environment is underprepared to meet the complex health needs of its LGBT+ population. Transgender people are especially most vulnerable to this (Đỗ and Nguyễn 2020), given that their gender presentation does not match the sex on their identity card. This often hinder them from accessing social services (Hoàng and Oosterhoff 2016; Oosterhoof *et al.* 2014). Additionally, medical settings often subsume transgender women under the category of men-who-have-sex-with-men, associated with the HIV stigma (Ly *et al.* 2020).

While the lack of policy addressing this concern constitutes a factor that certainly influences the ill-equipped provision of medical services to this group, other factors such as lack of organisational training and guidelines and lack of LGBT+ awareness among healthcare providers also play a role (Đỗ and Nguyễn 2020). It is this gap that an activist and his team attempted to solve in their advocacy work:

There is a need to equip medical practitioners with LGBT+ awareness, gender sensitivity, and specific medical needs. What [our group] does is reach out and offer training for healthcare practitioners. The challenge is getting them to attend these sessions. (Phong, transgender man)

Thus, training medical practitioners is an activist strategy to fill an existing gap that would make healthcare more accessible to this vulnerable population. This strategy constitutes its challenge, given that these activists belong to a small-scale group lacking authority. Phong concluded that the group would need a credible figure or an organisation (in his words, "someone with authority") to convince more medical practitioners to participate in the training. In the meantime, Phong said his group was building a list of LGBT+-friendly facilities to distribute among the community, helping facilitate treatment for those in need.

Phong's solution to the problem of healthcare mistreatment shows a service-delivery approach to activism. Fulfilling this function means that civil society actors attempt to fill a service gap that the state is incapable or unwilling to fulfil (Young 2000). In the Vietnamese context, the state's lack of guidelines on how to translate the 2015 Civil Code on transgender into practice means that several transgender people, whether having undergone sex-reassignment surgery or not, are stuck with an ID card that does not reflect their gender (Đỗ and Nguyễn 2020; IJsendijk 2023). Without sufficient guidelines, healthcare settings remain "unsafe" for this community (to use an activist's word). Phong's activist group thus attempted to bridge this gap by providing training to medical practitioners and assisting transgender people with healthcare needs. In addition to these strategies, Vietnamese LGBT+ activists and NGOs have also worked closely with government stakeholders and policymakers over the past decade to develop a Draft Law on Gender Transformation [Luật Chuyển Đổi Giới Tính]. This draft law will reach the National Assembly for review in October 2024 (Sơn-Hà 2023).

On the subject of healthcare, the interviewed activists also shared the concern that many transgender people attempt gender transitions without medical supervision. An activist described:

They use hormones without a license, self-inject drugs, and use silicone without a doctor's supervision. It is not uncommon for transgender people in Vietnam to take risks like that. It's dangerous, but it's the reality. (Phong, transgender man)

In the absence of information resources and transgender-friendly medical facilities, many Vietnamese transgender people attempt gender transitioning independently (Phạm *et al.* 2018). People with financial means can undergo sex-reassignment surgery in Thailand, while those without can take birth control pills, inject hormones, or inject liquid silicone into their bodies to achieve their desired appearance (Nguyễn 2019). Without an official supplier, they get their supplies from other transgender people and attempt the process without medical guidance, which can result in unwanted complications or even death.

Taking note of these health risks, an activist established an online page addressing various medical issues and cautions related to gender transitioning. Based on his experience with gender transition, he noticed the lack of information available for transgender people in the Vietnamese language:

After researching, I wondered why other countries met this need but not ours. How is it that transgender people in other countries know about hormones? They know about how many doses they need to inject for the transitioning, but in our country, we have to do it “underground”? [. . .] So I created a group on social media to share everything I know. At first, only about ten people joined the group; then, the group grew to thousands. I received a lot of responses and questions, so I eventually started a public page to post this kind of content. (Duy, transgender man)

On this page, Duy detailed his transitioning journey, including when he began hormone therapy, what dosage he used, and what kinds of surgeries he underwent. Duy used his English skills to translate medical-related content about gender transitioning to compensate for the lack of similar content in Vietnamese. It is apparent from his growing number of followers that this information is in high demand.

Another activist explained his work of translating relevant medical content as “helping others establish an action plan”:

Let’s say you need to learn about an STD—it’s crucial to know the statistics, how it spreads, treatment options, and where to get help. Information should be presented with a solution-oriented approach, not with biased assumptions about homosexuality. (Khoa, gay man)

In the interview, Khoa elaborated that most Vietnamese medical websites tend to present homosexual people in a stigmatising light, associating this group with the spread of HIV. Some could consider this to be the legacy of HIV prevention funding, which links men-who-have-sex-with-men to the spread of the epidemic and lumps all queer groups together with this subset (Horton *et al.* 2015). Wary of consulting with websites that portray homosexuality as an “illness”, Khoa utilised his English skills to make solution-oriented information more accessible to others.

In the same manner as activists training medical practitioners, translating and broadcasting medical knowledge relevant to the LGBT+ community can be viewed as activism taking on the role of service delivery. Duy and Khoa aimed to facilitate informed decision-making in the LGBT+ community by providing accurate and accessible health information. Their strategies for filling the gap in Vietnamese healthcare infrastructure consisted of providing tailored information to the population in need, thereby “not blaming but assisting” the state (Dai and Spires 2018: 75) in a matter it has been unable to solve.

### **Example 2: Creating safe schools**

In December 2016, I conducted participant observation in a training program for LGBT+ activists. The program assisted activists in developing independent projects to make schools safer for LGBT+ students. The participant activists were all college students; many of them have been bullied and threatened upon coming out, making the subject relevant to their activism and personal experiences. When interviewing these activists afterwards, I often encountered the remarks that schools are “unsafe spaces” (Quỳnh, bisexual woman), that LGBT+ students “face a lot of danger in schools” (Tuấn, bisexual man), and that “school violence is a daily thing” (Bào, transgender man). An activist shared:

My high school life wasn’t easy. You know, those school confession pages on social media were a big deal back then, and multiple posts were insulting me online. They were all anonymous, never

directly stating they were about me but dropping enough hints for others to connect the dots. They said I was trying to be “trendy” because I was dating a guy in my sophomore year and then dating a girl in my senior year. It was triggering and painful. (Quỳnh, bisexual woman)

The Vietnamese mainstream media has portrayed the LGBT+ community as young people mirroring a Western lifestyle and expressing themselves differently than the norm to appear fashionable (Mai 2016). “Trendy” [phong trào] is thus a common homophobic rhetoric used to stigmatise this population as “faking” against an “authentic” or “real” identity (Newton 2012). Quỳnh explained that bisexual people are particularly vulnerable to this accusation; she believed it is due to “the widespread perception that bisexuality isn’t real, that it is something absurd and humiliating” (see also Mai 2017).

Quỳnh’s experience of being verbally harassed in high school was not an isolated incident. Several forms of aggression against LGBT+ students in Vietnamese schools have been documented, including name-calling, insulting, isolating, physical abuse, harming personal property, or forcing these students to change their self-presentation (Huỳnh *et al.* 2022). Not only peers but teachers and school administrators also bullied and harassed LGBT+ students (Lương and Phạm 2016). In addition to the lack of information about LGBT+ caused by teachers’ reluctance to address the topic, misrecognition also occurs when teachers broadcast stigmatising information, such as the belief that homosexuality is pathological (Horton 2014). As Minh (genderqueer) said, “Many teachers believe LGBT+ are abnormal”, which further increased LGBT+ youth isolation.

Acknowledging this problem and the lack of institutional support for LGBT+ students, the activists I interviewed were working on projects to make schools more welcoming to LGBT+ students. One activist team focused on making SOGIE (sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression) knowledge available and accessible to students:

We hope to make schools safer so LGBT students can feel comfortable and safe while studying. We organise SOGIE training workshops to provide students with a better understanding of sexual diversity, and hopefully, this will reduce prejudice and bullying. (Tùng, gay man)

Tùng elaborated that their training targeted both cisgender-heterosexual students and LGBT+ ones, emphasising that the lack of understanding of one’s identity and sexuality could also result in isolation among LGBT+ students. Similarly, another activist talked about the power of knowledge and representation, which motivated her team to “invest in training and broadcasting” non-stigmatising information about queerness (Thúy, bisexual woman).

As for Quỳnh, having experienced cyberbullying, her method was to make use of online space to share relevant information and provide emotional support for LGBT+ youth. As part of an NGO-funded project, Quỳnh’s team compiled posts about gender and sexual diversity using information from several English sources, such as the World Health Organisation website and academic journals. They also administered a social media support page for LGBT+ youth and offered SOGIE training workshops for young students to address the lack of sex education in schools.

In a similar effort, another activist’s team utilised photo exhibitions to raise public awareness about the discrimination LGBT+ students face at school. Different universities in Hà Nội held their exhibition featuring narratives of LGBT+ students, their struggles, and their experiences of bullying and harassment. The activist leading this project explained:

The idea of an exhibition is to give people the opportunity to hear different stories so that we can start thinking about our actions and learn to respect the diversity of everyone, not just LGBT. Because if a society is intolerant, it will push people to the brink. (Bảo, transgender man)

Bảo stated that peer and teacher intolerance could negatively impact the mental health of LGBT+ students, echoing the notion that misrecognition can inflict harm on marginalised groups (Taylor 1992). Several months before this exhibition, Bảo filmed a video discussing his struggles as a transgender man, which gained a lot of online attention and started a dialogue about transgender youth. Bảo’s



strategy, using the exhibition and video storytelling, focused on sharing personal narratives to raise public awareness about LGBT+ lives and struggles.

This strategy resonates with other social movements capitalising on the politics of cultural recognition (Taylor 1992) and finding “a source of power” in visibility and representation (Fraser 1999:14). Moreover, the emphasis on personal narratives helped establish public sympathy by creating a sense of connection and common ground in human experiences (Phạm 2022). In Bảo’s words, the strategy intended to raise public awareness about transgender people’s struggles “to discuss later with lawmakers.” His approach implied creating a pathway towards productive dialogues with the state rather than challenging the state’s hegemony to achieve social change.

### LGBT+ activism in the era of international development

In both examples above, strategies for change include translating content, broadcasting information through training workshops, social media, or public exhibitions, and sharing personal narratives to reach a broader audience. To offer different forms of support for the LGBT+ community, Vietnamese activists adopt what Young (2000) referred to as a service delivery approach: trying to fill the roles and functions that the state could not address. In this role, they function similarly to social workers assisting the state, organising all public events that promote queerness, such as training workshops or photo exhibitions, within the boundaries of what the state deems acceptable.

Thus, this section critically examines the strategies employed in their service-delivery advocacy approach. I argue that these activists’ emphases on translating English content, broadcasting information and training align with the broader trend of utilising education as a venue for social change in international development practices (Mizzi 2018). As Swidler and Watkins’ (2009: 1182) maintained, “teaching a man to fish” has become a prevalent strategy among aid workers, reflecting the emphasis on capacity-building and awareness-raising in international development.

In the context of post-Đổi Mới Vietnam, the growth of local NGOs, largely funded by development agencies in North America and Europe, has a close link to LGBT+ activism (Rydström *et al.* 2023; Newton 2012). The fact that NGOs often drive advocacy campaigns on LGBT+ issues in Vietnam (Phạm 2022) can explain the strong presence of educational elements and strategies similar to those used in international development. As Phạm (2022) noted, NGO advocacy plays a major role in advertising the term “LGBT community” [cộng đồng LGBT], which aims to replace local expressions for queerness, often associated with stigma, such as “pê đê” or “bóng”. In other words, global LGBT+ human rights movements have largely shaped Vietnam’s LGBT+ advocacy landscape, as exemplified by the adoption of the concept of “LGBT” and the use of the SOGIE system (Newton 2012).

In this study, while the activists were not employed by donor-funded NGOs, they belonged to youth networks trained by these NGOs on conducting activism. Aside from SOGIE training, the LGBT+ activists at the training program where I conducted participant observation also learned how to write project proposals to obtain funding for their advocacy. Thus, this explains why translating, broadcasting, and teaching strategies were prevalent among the interviewed activists. However, the fact that these young activists adopted NGO-driven models in their everyday activism does not mean they do not recognise the limitations of their work. Several activists expressed the need to expand their activism and provide service in more areas, such as the following:

We need to expand our scope. It’s not just about providing training for LGBT+ individuals; it’s also about being there for them in their everyday life challenges. What if they find themselves in financial distress, being kicked out of their homes, or suffering harassment? There are so many situations where they need solid support, and we need to build a stronger support system for them. (Châu, lesbian)

Châu frequently translated and broadcast content about the lesbian community and gave presentations at public awareness events such as Pride. However, she felt this was not enough. Having been trapped in her home as a teenager when her mother found out about her sexuality, Châu felt that LGBT+ youth needed a broader range of support.

Likewise, Duy's experience of becoming homeless after being involuntarily outed motivated him to launch an SOS helpline. He leveraged his social media network to find assistance for youth needing immediate shelter or a source of livelihood. Despite his efforts, he struggled to sustain the helpline due to funding and legal limitations. He explained:

It can't be helped that international funding only goes to large NGOs with official registration, not community-based or grassroots groups without legal standing. You know, obtaining legal standing in Vietnam is quite the ordeal. (Duy, transgender man)

To register as official associations in Vietnam, activist groups and networks must comply with a lengthy and most often convoluted process involving several certificates (Rydström *et al.* 2023). Without legal standing, small-scale groups cannot operate legally or apply for international donor funding (Pallas and Nguyễn 2018). Thus, many grassroots groups depend on NGOs' funds "trickled down" to implement their projects. Even so, as Newton (2012: 306) pointed out, these groups find themselves in a situation of "access denied" to NGO resources" due to insufficient social capital, such as lacking educational qualifications, the ability to write grant proposals, or English skills.

In this study, the activists identified another lack of capital that severely restricted their advocacy. As Phong (transgender man) explained, youth activists are rarely taken seriously in the Vietnamese context. He explained the difficulty of getting doctors to participate in his group's training workshops, noting that the medical practitioners might have perceived his team of college students as inexperienced. He said, "The doctors probably thought, 'Why do we have to listen to these kids'".

In societies influenced by Confucian values, youth are traditionally placed in a subordinate position within the social structure (Trương *et al.* 2017). As a result, when youth networks operate independently, as Phong suggested, they may encounter scepticism about their credibility and authority. Youth activists thus seek collaboration with more established NGOs and leverage research-based knowledge to gain legitimacy and recognition. However, this also means that they become increasingly dependent on NGO-driven projects, which can restrict their autonomy and the ability to develop novel approaches. An experienced activist, having collaborated with NGOs for several years, expressed this concern:

The creativity of the movement depends a lot on large organisations that can obtain funding from international bodies. Once these organisations have secured funding for a project, it becomes the main focus that every group zeroes in on, sidelining other ideas. Another thing to consider is that whatever you want to do, whatever ideas you have, you need funding. Without funding, your only option is to align with those with the funds. So, it puts a damper on the creativity of the whole movement. (Quên, lesbian)

Quên stressed that despite the abundance of ideas among activists, funding and conditions from international development bodies often confine their activities. Most activists I talked to concurred with this notion, voicing concern about the lack of resources and freedom to implement what they needed. While small amounts of funding trickle down from well-funded NGOs to these unregistered youth networks, it most often applies to certain "project outcomes" with clear guidelines of what these activists must follow. Quên worried that this funding structure does not nurture space for creative initiatives.

This concern aligns with broader scholarly observations. Scholars investigating the NGOisation process have pointed out how dependency on funding from Global North agencies can significantly disrupt social movements in the Global South (Moreau and Currier 2018). Namely, the need to secure funding means that activists divert significant time and resources towards meeting donors' demands (Oswin 2007), leading these local groups to frame their practices to mirror approaches adopted by mainstream NGOs (Currier 2010; Dearham 2013). Thus, the fact that many LGBT+ advocacy strategies outlined in this article seem limited in scope and resemble international development's focus on awareness-raising and capacity-building (Mizzi 2018) is not coincidental. Rather, it reflects how funding is something Southern NGOs "cannot not want" (Spivak 2009: 50): their activities are intimately tied to this funding scheme.

While international development practices can constrain and dictate activists' strategies, opportunities for change still exist. In Vietnam, the gradual change in societal attitude and increasing legal acceptance

towards the LGBT+ community shows that these advocacy strategies, while limited in scope, still garner positive influences. By taking on the approach of “not blaming but assisting” the state (Dai and Spires 2018: 75), activists can help provide services to marginalised communities while not being perceived by the state as “trouble-maker”. In this way, their approach resembles development agencies operating in authoritarian settings that prohibit political contestation (Morgan 2016).

## Conclusion

This paper outlined a set of strategies Vietnamese activists employ to advocate for LGBT+ equality as they tackle the deficiency in healthcare and education. In raising awareness for and assisting LGBT+ people in need, these activists take on various roles aligned with civil society’s “service delivery” function. Rather than challenging the state’s hegemony, their strategy involves aiding the state by filling infrastructure gaps and providing services that the state has failed to provide. By serving as translators and workshop trainers, they address a gap in Vietnamese formal education, which does not give adequate space for discussing sexuality and gender. By translating relevant medical content, establishing support helplines, and assisting LGBT+ individuals in vulnerable situations, they address a gap in Vietnamese healthcare, which lacks facilities to assist this marginalised population, especially transgender people’s unique needs.

This study also highlighted the crucial role of international development and NGO formation in establishing and expanding the Vietnamese LGBT+ movement, providing insights into the potential and challenges of NGO-driven advocacy. In this context, activist initiatives face severe limitations due to state restrictions and expectations set by international funders. The findings showed how funding dependency and inadequate legal recognition severely limit Vietnamese youth activists, restricting their advocacy scope. This dependency may explain why the tactics employed by the Vietnamese LGBT+ movement bear striking resemblance to LGBT+ activism and development practices on a global scale.

As a contribution to the literature on global queer activism, this article clarified why strategies to promote LGBT+ equality, adopted and driven by NGOs, can be effective in an authoritarian setting. However, the findings also urge us to question the international teaching models underlying international development practices. The focus on awareness-raising and capacity-building can exacerbate hierarchical dynamics in knowledge sharing. In addition, the demands and conditions set by funding initiatives in the Global North can marginalise perspectives from the Global South. As a result, this situation can hinder grassroots movements in the Global South from pursuing independent agendas and achieving autonomy.

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