



# Dignity

## UNDER THREAT

Capacity Building to Address the Safety and Security of LGBT Activists in Bangladesh

## INTRODUCTION

This case study substantiates CREA's ability to address the impact of closing civic space, and in turn, the safety and security risks faced by activists in Bangladesh. In this current moment of retrenchment, such attention to safety and security is crucial to sustaining Bangladesh's LGBT movement.

## CONTEXT

In 2014, against the backdrop of rising religious fundamentalism and anti-LGBT sentiment, and an exponential shrinking of civic space in Bangladesh, CREA began engaging with LGBT organisations in the country. In anticipation of potential attacks by fundamentalist and anti-rights actors, CREA developed a safety and security curriculum that provided activists with the framework and tools needed to assess threats and risk levels, prevent violent aggression (including in online spaces), and improve decision-making around organisational security planning. In February 2016, this curriculum was employed to conduct a safety and security training with 11 LGBT activists, most of whom met in secret for movement-building activities and strategising. After the brutal murders of two LGBT rights activists in April 2016<sup>1</sup>, several LGBT individuals and groups were forced to go underground or flee the country. CREA was also named by an extremist group (al-Qaeda affiliate in the Indian Subcontinent) in a press release denouncing the spread of 'anti-Islamic culture' like homosexuality. The Dutch Embassy in Dhaka alerted CREA to this.

## RESULTS

The key outcome of CREA's 2016 safety and security training was the development of security plans tailored to the specific needs of each participating organisation. After the April 2016 murders, these plans, in tandem with supplementary knowledge and tools from the training, were put to practical use by activists. **As a result, local LGBT organisations were able to ensure the safety of activists who remained in the country as well as secure the safe departure of those who chose to leave. For many at the time, these tools served as the only ones available and on-hand.**



*Training on Gender, Sexuality, and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights with RHSTEP, Bangladesh, 2017*

## EXPERTISE AND EFFECTIVENESS

In order to supplement partners' implementation of tools from the training, CREA leveraged its existing regional partnerships and networks, reputational capital, and technical expertise. Specifically, the organisation: (a) provided technical assistance to organisations to apply for emergency grants by helping them draft and submit their applications; (b) used its reputational capital to serve as a reference for emergency grant applications; and (c) leveraged its partnership with the funding agency to ensure short turnaround times for delivery of funds. Outside Bangladesh, CREA met with its allies within the feminist movement to help strategise around additional safety measures for Bangladeshi LGBT activists and facilitate their safe departure from the country.

## EVALUATION AND LEARNING CAPACITY

After the 2016 murders, CREA made an organisational decision to revisit our advocacy strategies in specific regions where dissent was silenced. Since 2017, we have been in continuous conversation with partners in Bangladesh — and select other regions where civic dissent is silenced — to identify strategies that minimize risk to implementing organisations. CREA has also engaged in an iterative process of refining our safety and security curriculum to ensure that it meets evolving needs — for example, digital security.





*Training of Bangladeshi activists on Gender and Sexuality in India, 2016*

## **TRANSPARENCY, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND PUBLIC SUPPORT**

While harm to LGBT activists is primarily a result of political backlash and animosity, CREA prioritises the safety and security of all our local partners. Within the context of Bangladesh, this has included taking active measures to protect participants of trainings and workshops (for instance, ensuring they travel in small groups), hosting meetings outside the country in question, and keeping the names of organisations confidential in communications materials and reports to donors. Amongst donor networks, CREA has also raised visibility around the unique challenges faced by Bangladeshi activists so as to ensure broad-based support for their advocacy goals.

## **KNOWLEDGE AND ADDED VALUE**

CREA's work with various partners in Bangladesh began in 2014 and the organisation continues to closely engage with partners in planning, budgeting, and implementing of in-country advocacy activities. Additionally, because of its close geographical proximity to Bangladesh and deep-rooted networks in the region, CREA is able to provide immediate support to local LGBT groups in assessing, mitigating, and developing sustainable responses to in-country threats<sup>2</sup>.

## **INCLUSIVE APPROACH**

Before organising a safety and security training, CREA ensures that the curriculum reflects the realities that LGBT organisations and activists function under, their needs, and gaps in capacities and resources. Prior to developing the curriculum used for the 2016 training in Bangladesh, CREA made several planning visits and conducted a needs assessment with 12 LGBT organisations who were key actors in the country's LGBT movement.

## **SUSTAINABILITY**

CREA is deeply cognizant of the twin roles of state censorship and gendered surveillance in threatening feminist organising. This recognition is embedded in our advocacy strategies, and as such, our approach is dictated by political contexts. To sustain country-level movement-building as well as regional mobilisation, CREA strategises with Bangladesh's LGBT groups and organisations to either lay low or push back, depending on the larger political and security context.

<sup>1</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Bangladesh: Investigate LGBT murders", April 2016 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/04/26/bangladesh-investigate-lgbt-murders>

<sup>2</sup> CIVICUS, "The compromised state of civil society in Bangladesh", 2018 <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/re-imagining-democracy/stories-from-the-frontlines/3342-the-compromised-state-of-civil-society-in-bangladesh>



COVER AND ABOVE *New Delhi's Pride March (2017) in which CREA participated as an ally*



**crea**

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CREA builds feminist leadership, advances women's human rights, and expands sexual and reproductive freedoms.

Founded in 2000, CREA is a feminist human rights organisation based in the Global South, led by Southern feminists, which works at the grassroots, national, regional, and international levels.