

# Sustaining stress management and burnout prevention efforts in organisations

Supporting the wellbeing needs of organisations working on gender and sexuality in India

**TARSHI & NAZARIYA**

## CONTEXT

**We envision** a world in which spaces and conversations are built on feminist principles, where self-care, collective-care and wellbeing are understood as being integral for communities to thrive.

Informational and knowledge resources that address the relationships between nonprofit grantee organisations and funding organisations tend to present an approach which is generally meant only for grantees. This is inherent to the way in which this relationship plays out. Often, due diligence is based on predefined parameters that are important to risk assessment and mitigation from the perspective of a funding organisation.

**There is a sense of limitation when one goes out to find information specific to the following:**

- resources for stress management, self-care and wellbeing of
- non-profit organisations / candidates for grants
- organisations working on issues of human rights and gender and sexuality.

**We are advocating for** a fundamental shift in the current mainstream practice and perspective for the strategic management of resources in a way that enables activists and organisations working on issues of gender and sexuality in India to sustain themselves and their own health and wellbeing.

Resources need to be understood as an interconnected bundle of tangibles and intangibles.

Resources are material and infrastructural, financial, work methods and processes, a sense of security, human and relationship connection, time, energy, emotional, spiritual and mental freedom and wellbeing, space to celebrate one's life choices and decisions.

Since 2018, TARSHI and Nazariya Foundation have collaborated to map and document:

- **self-care and burnout prevention needs** of human rights activists, caseworkers, and community members who work on gender, sexuality and rights, with a particular focus on issues of sex work, LGBT\*QIA+ issues, gender-based violence and/or Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR);
- **unique stressors** faced by people working in areas related to sexuality, across different socio-political and regional contexts.

Speaking at a consultation organised by us to discuss self-care needs of activists in 2019, Ratnaboli Ray (Founder, Anjali - Mental Health Rights Organisation) said: **"For us, defenders, activists, social workers, whatever you may call us, articulation of stress is very difficult".** She clarifies that **"when we are talking about stress, we also have to think largely about the location where we are coming from, and the community and the society; and what it does to you as a person."**

*"Wherever we go, to whichever programme, there is never a discussion on stress. It is easy to say, laugh a lot, laugh with an open heart, but no one talks about how to take care of oneself. And even if this is talked about at times, it is mostly for men - do yoga, do pranayam. There is nothing for women. And for women, even if they go to religious ceremonies - they mostly sit silent or at the most clap - but they cannot even dance."*

Bandana Sharma from Akanksha Seva Sadan, speaking at the same event as above

## STRESS, BURNOUT AND SELF-CARE

### What is stress?

Familiar ways of referring to stress are - feeling tense / pressured, mentally, emotionally or physically stretched, under-resourced, and unsupported. This may be experienced by an individual due to many life factors.

### What is burnout?

Burnout may be best understood as the result of prolonged stress, leading to feeling fatigued, not just physically, but mentally and emotionally, a state of exhaustion and an inability to maintain interest, or motivation, in areas that the individual has been deeply committed to.

**Stress and burnout are particularly relevant to activists, rights advocates, and social workers who:**

- are often exposed to stories and experiences of trauma, helplessness, and injustice
- don't have adequate resources or capacity to address these at their root
- are able to connect it to their own life, as survivor or as ally/ supporter and witness
- have to meet unrealistic expectations that are associated with their work
- have to contend with constraints and threats particular and unique to India and regional contexts, especially in rights-based work and activism.

*"When I say burnout, it is one stage ahead of stress, when we are not able to function properly. Because we have exhausted ourselves so much, trying to achieve a particular goal or task, that it creates a state of burnout in your mind, within yourself."*

Jayati Mathur - LGBT activist and Founder, Wajood Society.

## What is self-care?

Advocate of self-care, feminist activist Ginger Norwood says, "research is available and clear on who will experience stress, burnout, compassion fatigue, and secondary/vicarious trauma by virtue of their work. What is missing from the existing literature by and large are the complexities of identity in terms of how and why people experience these stresses with regards to socialisation and expectations based on our multiple identities, in particular gender and ethnicity."

*~ from "Promoting self-care and wellbeing among feminist activists and women's rights defenders: Reflections from Burma and Palestine"*

We understand that the term "self-care" appears to imply that the entire responsibility for self-care rests upon the individual. This is a myth.

We know that:

- Self-care connects to the individual, community, environment and a spectrum of relationship engagements. It involves not only the self but also others.
- It is about the uniquely personal, physical, social, work related, psycho-social, and also emotional and spiritual components of life experiences.
- Self-care is both an indicator, and a component, of thriving and sustainable communities.

***"Gauging these things and having these conversations will enhance the potential of the trickle down effect that this kind of thing is intended to do. [We] felt more activated to advocate for mental wellbeing, of colleagues, of our fellow activists and so on. And I think that is immeasurably valuable."***

Karthik Teja, participant at our workshop in Hyderabad, 2019



## NEEDS OF THE ACTIVIST / THE RIGHTS ADVOCATE

From our work with activists, case workers, counsellors and human rights advocates working on issues of gender and sexuality to assess their self-care and burnout prevention needs, we learnt that they need and want

- non-judgmental, safe spaces where stress and burnout can be discussed.
- to learn how to manage stress and thrive.
- multiple support systems and a variety of easy self-care tools/ techniques.

These are simple to articulate but demand an unapologetic, resource-centric approach in our conversations, and our vision.

Sonal Giani (LGBTQ activist & Co-founder of the support group Umang, participant at our workshop in Hyderabad in 2019) points out that when you talk about stress and anxiety, people end up thinking about it a lot, **"and suddenly when you create that awareness, and if you don't leave them with a tool to equip themselves to handle it, is it a disservice that you are doing? It's an ethical dilemma."**

**In our engagements with activists and social workers in this context, we hear words and themes that repeat themselves. We highlight three of these:**

**Identity:** Grappling with issues of identity is hardwired into activism – an accepted part of a human rights worker's vocabulary. When these concepts are turned upon the self and identity of the activist, the resource requirements to address stress, trauma and healing include, at the very least, space, time and supportive connection.

**Unique stressors:** When using an intersectional lens to understand critical gender and sexual identities, unique and diverse circumstances and socio-cultural contexts emerge. It is important to acknowledge that there are certain stressors unique to particular groups, communities and environments. These unique stressors require to be identified and addressed in ways that are context-appropriate.

**Financial security:** Money and salary are rarely ever spoken of, being words associated with a self-stigmatising guilt. Many activists and social workers being from the communities that they work with, particularly in the case of LGBT\*QIA+ communities, live under the weight of the assumption that they work for a cause and money shouldn't be important to them. As a participant pointed out, a single therapy session costs money and therapy is one of the oft-mentioned tools in the self-care toolkit in this field.

We know that the environment, at work, in the family, and in the larger society, does not make room for much of this. As activists and rights workers deconstruct existing frameworks in the effort to create a new vision of justice, ignoring their own self-healing and self-care has serious consequences. These consequences are not only for a handful, or at an individual level, but impact entire communities and the movements we are striving to grow.

*"I'm holding a mic right now, tomorrow I'll be sitting in a panel and I'll be talking - but I'm generally curious and at the same time, anxious, that am I even being listened to? Are people even willing to at least try to understand?"*

Kumam Davidson, writer, editor and Co-founder of The Chinky Homo Project, speaking at our consultation in 2019

## A NOTE TO FUNDING ORGANISATIONS

Funding and support from funding organisations is crucial to helping civil society and non-government organisations integrate and sustain wellbeing-related activities, policies, and practices. Here are a few questions that could help approach this support.

- How can funding organisations encourage grantee partners to integrate wellbeing in policies and practices?
- What platforms for cross-learning, contextualising, and training on wellbeing can funding organisations offer grantee partners?
- How can funding organisations offer grantee partners flexibility in how they use funds for staff wellbeing?

## RESOURCES

- Find our report “A Needs Assessment: Stress management and burnout prevention for case workers and human rights activists working on issues of gender and sexuality in India (2019)” at [tinyurl.com/TARSHI-Nazariya-report](https://tinyurl.com/TARSHI-Nazariya-report)
- Check out our short films “Me, We, Us – Discussing activist and caseworker stress (2021)”, developed by TARSHI and Nazariya. Available at [tinyurl.com/me-we-us-films](https://tinyurl.com/me-we-us-films)
- Visit TARSHI's website Self-care Essentials: Resources for people doing people work and check out this section - Create your own toolkit. Available at [tarshi.net/selfcare](https://tarshi.net/selfcare)
- Read “Promoting self-care and wellbeing among feminist activists and women’s rights defenders: Reflections from Burma and Palestine” (2013), by Ginger Norwood



## TARSHI

TARSHI, founded in 1996, has firmly held an affirmative and rights-based approach to sexuality. Our perspective is sex-positive, non-heteronormative, pleasure-affirming, and not fear-based.

Stress and burnout are important topics that usually take a back seat with activists, case workers and members of marginalised communities. TARSHI has consistently integrated initiatives on stress management and burnout prevention into its programmes on sexuality, sexual and reproductive health and rights, for internal teams as well as clients/callers/other NGOs etc, for over two decades. Maintaining the focus in this area has resulted in building a base of knowledge and engagement both within the organisation and externally, on a journey of critical learning. The organisation has had a strong component of Burnout Prevention as part of helpline counsellor in-house training from the early years and has reached out to other individuals and organisations to focus on this aspect of sustainability.

Over the years, TARSHI has been invited by feminist organisations to conduct sessions on burnout prevention and self-care for counsellors, activists and NGO staff. With the belief that self-care is radical, that it is feminist, that it goes hand in hand with collective-care, and everyone, including those who do people work, have the right to self-care and wellbeing, we have created resources to encourage and support the self-care journey. We invite you to visit our website, Self-care Essentials: Resources for people doing work at [tarshi.net/selfcare](http://tarshi.net/selfcare).

## Nazariya Foundation

Nazariya was formed in October 2014 by a group of queer feminist activists. Located in Delhi/NCR with a South Asian presence, Nazariya was started to sensitise the work and culture of groups and individuals that are working on issues of gender-based violence, livelihoods, education and health from a LBT perspective through research & evaluations, capacity building and advocacy. Working at critical intersections of gender, sexuality and rights, the organisation has a strong understanding of the unmet mental health needs of individuals and the mental health issues that emerge in organisational environments across queer spaces of advocacy and services.

We believe that queer perspective with a focus on LBT issues will help build linkages between issues of people marginalised on the basis of gender and sexuality with the existing work on violence, livelihoods, education, health etc. and thereby impact the discourse on pleasure, desire, rights and entitlements.