

Leadership Begins Within: Healing as a Trans Activist in Thailand

Atittaya Asa is a trans man activist, co-founder and Organization Manager of TransEqual, working to advance the rights of toms, trans men, and nonbinary people in Thailand. His work focuses on strengthening grassroots leadership and networks across four regions, raising public awareness on gender-based rights, and driving policy and legal reform including marriage equality, legal gender recognition, and trans-specific health services. He also leads efforts to document discrimination and violence to support legal protection and promote long-term gender equality in Thai society.

My name is Nook Atittaya Asa, a trans man activist from Thailand, and the co-founder and Organization Manager of TransEqual. After completing my master's degree in Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Thammasat University, I co-founded TransEqual in 2023 to address the lack of safe spaces, visibility, and legal recognition for toms, trans men, and nonbinary people in Thailand.

For me, leadership is a lifelong process of growth and practice. Being a trans leader working for trans communities is particularly challenging in a society that continues to frame trans people as abnormal. We must not only overcome personal obstacles and constantly strengthen our leadership skills, but also push through a binary social structure that has never made space for trans people to step into leadership roles.

This article reflects on my experience in the Amplify Trans Fellowship, which expanded my knowledge of global human rights reporting mechanisms, writing and project management skills, funding analysis, and leadership development as a trans masculine community organizer in Thailand. Learning from international trans rights experts and exchanging experiences with participants from diverse countries each facing different human rights contexts has strengthened my perspectives, strategies, and commitment to advancing trans rights in Thailand.

One of the most impactful parts of the Amplify Trans Fellowship for me was the mental health workshop that focused on leadership beginning from within. This workshop gave me space to pause from constantly looking outward, and instead turn inward to confront myself. It helped me realize how, in the past, I had been fighting working to change laws and push political agendas without understanding how the wounds and exhaustion inside me were silently affecting my leadership.

The workshop emphasised inner leadership, guiding me to revisit my life experiences and the wounds shaped by violence, oppression, and social rejection. It helped me understand how emotional, physical, and spiritual pain is shaped by relationships and surrounding structures. Confronting these memories allowed me to discover an inner resilience that I had overlooked, and recognize that the strength keeping me standing comes not only from the outside world, but from within myself.

The workshop also taught me to view old wounds differently to see people and past events not as forces that broke me, but as teachers who helped shape my growth. This was deeply important,

because before this, I focused mainly on analyzing external structures and neglected to examine how my inner world had been hurt or exhausted.

The idea of leadership growing from within is like a large tree with deep roots beneath the ground; strong roots keep the tree standing firm even in strong winds. I learned that inner stability nurtures mindfulness, gentleness, and compassion toward myself and others and these are leadership qualities I aspire to build.

As a trans leader, we face multiple challenges at both personal and structural levels. In a world where trans people are marginalized and our dignity constantly questioned, having inner grounding is crucial for our struggle and our movement. Without this inner foundation, it becomes difficult to stand for our community sustainably, to listen, to forgive, and to see the human beings beneath conflict and pain.

The Amplify Trans Fellowship was not only a program that developed skills and knowledge for trans leaders, but also a space that revealed to me that “changing the external world must begin with healing the world within.” This is the most valuable lesson I gained from this fellowship one that will stay with me throughout my journey as a trans leader in Thailand.

Advancing trans rights in society cannot rely solely on knowledge, policy, or external activism. It must begin with healing and inner grounding creating a safe space within ourselves first. When our inner world is strong, we can listen to others more deeply and see one another’s humanity more fully.

