



PATHWAY TO PARENTS

After six years of working with the LGBTIQ+ community, Beautiful Life Organisation (BLO) has learnt that one of the biggest problems Khmer LGBTIQ+ individuals face is rejection from their families. In 2023, BLO had no parents or caregivers access their free counselling service, set up in order to help them come to terms with and better understand their children. So, BLO tried reaching them in a different way.

Inclusive Child Protection: Srolanh Kon Chea Kon. That’s what we named the workshop that we specifically designed to reach parents and caregivers in Cambodia. Our idea was to get as many of them together as possible, teach them about the acronyms, LGBTIQ+ and SOGIESC, and to also learn from them. We wanted to ask them: “What would be your biggest concerns if your own child identified as LGBTIQ+?” We wanted to identify and then address their concerns so they could leave feeling more open to and accepting of diversity. And that’s exactly what we did!

We hosted our workshop at the beautiful Amatak Boutique Hotel in Siem Reap and welcomed 38 participants who have a combined 59 children (and who collectively work with more than 3,000 children through their various positions).

I find that so sad. That we, their community, get to see them in all their glory, fully themselves - and they are so beautiful - and their own families miss out on that.

**Opening speech by BLO Director, Jason Argenta*

We started by introducing our organisation and the services that we offer. Then we went through each letter of the acronym, LGBTIQ+, mentioning also the slang words that some Khmer people use for different identities (like “sim pii” for bisexual people- which is a reference to phones which can accept two SIM cards) and why it can be harmful to use them. We then went on to explain the meaning of SOGIESC (sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, sexual characteristics) and how it relates to LGBTIQ+, and asked if our participants knew why it was better to use this acronym when talking about or referring to children.

Children are too young to know if they are LGBTIQ+, so we should not label them as such.

It can affect a child’s rights if we label them as LGBTIQ+!



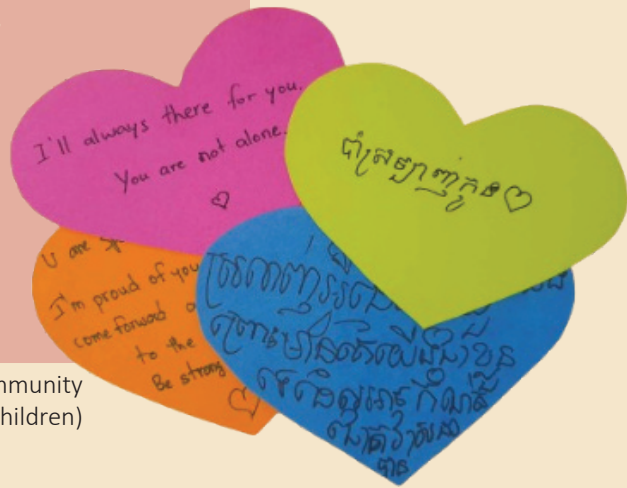
Once the acronyms were clear, it was time for some group work! We broke into six groups and asked our participants to talk amongst themselves about what their biggest concerns would be about having a child with diverse SOGIESC. They could list as many as they wanted, but they had to choose three main ones to present to the group.

CONCERNS THAT WERE RAISED & ADDRESSED:

1. "I'm worried that my child will be discriminated against!"
2. "I'm worried about what others will say about me / my family!"
3. "LGBTIQ+ people cannot be successful, contributing members of society (and may destroy our culture)!"
4. "LGBTIQ+ people cannot have their own families!"

ADDITIONAL CONCERNS RAISED:

- lack of legal support and protection
- they may be pressured by those around them
- about their health



Notes written by the parent/caregiver participants to our community (who they now understand could very well be their own children)

How did we address these concerns?

1 "I'm afraid they will be discriminated against!"

We reminded our participants that it was natural to want to protect their children from facing bad things, but ultimately impossible. Our role as parents and caregivers is to teach the necessary skills to stand up to discrimination that we will inevitably face, and to be part of their support network.



A video we had made featuring parents of LGBTIQ+ individuals



2 "I'm afraid of what people will say!"

Just like we cannot stop our children from potentially being discriminated against, we also cannot stop others from gossiping about us or our family. We encouraged our participants to ask themselves what they would prefer people say about them? That they rejected their own children, or that they love and support their children despite their identity/sexuality?

3 “LGBTIQ+ cannot be successful, contributing members of society (& threaten our culture)!”

We had strategically organised post-break entertainment throughout the day, including a fashion show and drag performances, and included a rainbow kroma in the participants’ resource packs handmade by a 70-year old, rural transgender man. We used these individuals and a slide full of influential, inspiring, queer Khmer people to show this is not the case. We also discussed the fact that LGBTIQ+ people have the same potential as everyone else, but often face more challenges which can limit their opportunities (rejection from their families being one of the biggest ones).



4 “LGBTIQ+ people can’t have their own families!”

To dispel this myth, we hosted a brief panel discussion with three LGBTIQ+ parents who shared intimate details about their relationships (one of which spanned 50 years and the Khmer Rouge) and how they started their own families. The three families represented gay people, lesbians, and even transgender people, both younger and older generations. We delved into adoption and IUI; but the main message was, “We can have families! We want the same things as you! The ways we get there are different and often more difficult - which is exactly why we need our family’s support to help us through!”



Before leaving for the day, participants thanked our team profusely. One woman asked if it would be possible for BLO to help their organisation be more inclusive in their policies and practices, and another two expressed enthusiastic gratitude, saying they had previously hated LGBTIQ+ people and looked down on them - but that our workshop had helped them to understand our community clearly and had changed their minds. And it would not be long before local organisation, REACH Siem Reap, who had sent three of their staff and ten of their beneficiary’s parents, reached out to say their families **loved** the workshop, and actually recommended that all of their families take part in it in 2024 (all 140 of them).

So, what do you think? Was this workshop a success? We think so!

A big thank you to our the donors, sponsors and performers who made this event possible:

