

apcom.org

Equity. Dignity. Social Justice.



The State of LGBTQI People's Economic Inclusion

Cambodia



MICRO RAINBOW INTERNATIONAL
FOUNDATION



include.innovate.influence.



Design and layout: www.hidayahsyahputra.com

Cover Photo: Micro Rainbow International Foundation

© APCOM 2020

Map Disclaimer: The designations employed and the presentation of the material on this map do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of APCOM concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries. Every effort is made to ensure this map is free of errors but there is no warrant the map or its features are either spatially or temporally accurate or fit for a particular use.

This map is provided without any warranty of any kind whatsoever, either express or implied.



Contents

Acknowledgements	4
Executive Summary	5
Introduction	7
1. Rationale behind the report and next steps	8
2. Research and focus group methodologies	9
3. Scope and limitations of this report	9
4. Definitions and terminology	10
Current human rights context and how it affects LGBTQI people in Cambodia	11
Lived Experiences: Economic exclusion of LGBTQI People in Cambodia - Employment, Entrepreneurship and Financial Services, Education, Health	14
Conclusion	21
Recommendations	23
Bibliography	25

Acknowledgements

This report is part of Finance Inc¹ - a three- year multi-country initiative (2018-2020) which aims to engage financial institutions focused on international development as well as the private sector in the Asia Pacific region to be more inclusive of LGBTQI people's rights, concerns and potential. The project which, in addition to this research series, consists of additional components, including advocacy, partnership building, and capacity strengthening, is being implemented by APCOM and partner organisations in Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR and the Philippines. This report was prepared as part of a series of four reports titled "The State of LGBTQI People's Economic Inclusion". The reports focus on the experiences of members of LGBTQI communities with regards to economic and social inclusion: their enjoyment of rights to employment, access to financial resources and services, education and health. The research was conducted in four countries in South-East Asia, namely: Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR and the Philippines.

The reports have been prepared by APCOM² in collaboration with country partner organisations in the four countries. For the Cambodia report, the research was undertaken by Micro Rainbow International Foundation³ (MRIF) between July and October 2019.

APCOM would like to acknowledge and thank Lucas Paoli Itaborahy (author and coordinator), Yara Kong and Rachana Chhoeurng (facilitators of the focus group discussions) and Erin Power (proof reader).

We warmly thank the 32 focus group participants who dared to speak up and out, and who volunteered their time, knowledge and experiences. We thank them for sharing their stories, feelings, personal and common challenges with facing stigma and discrimination based on their sexual orientation, gender identity or expression. It is those lived experiences and the direct voices of participants which are at the core of this report and have informed most recommendations. Their participation was crucial and will hopefully contribute to improving the lives of LGBTQI Cambodians beyond this report.

APCOM would also like to express its sincere thanks to Voice⁴; our funding partner for Finance Inc. project,⁵ under which the research reports were done.

APCOM and MRIF have joint responsibility for the content of this report, including any errors or misrepresentations.

¹ APCOM (2018). Finance Inc: Developing an LGBTQI Inclusive Approach for the Asian Development Bank. <https://www.apcom.org/storage/2018/12/Compass-Series-Finance-Inc-rev-2-10122018.pdf>

² APCOM <https://www.apcom.org/>

³ Micro Rainbow International Foundation <https://mrifoundation.global/>

⁴ Voice, an initiative by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, is an innovative grant facility that supports the most marginalised and discriminated people in ten countries in Africa and Asia. It aims to amplify and connect thus far unheard voices in efforts to leave no one behind. <https://voice.global/>

⁵ APCOM (2018). Finance Inc: Developing an LGBTQI Inclusive Approach for the Asian Development Bank. <https://www.apcom.org/storage/2018/12/Compass-Series-Finance-Inc-rev-2-10122018.pdf>

Executive Summary

The research was conducted between July and October 2019. Micro Rainbow International Foundation Cambodia researched and analysed secondary sources and undertook in-depth focus group discussions with 32 LGBTQI Cambodians.

The outcome is this report which aims to give an overview of how the human rights of LGBTQI people in Cambodia have been framed and upheld and the current main challenges and opportunities for LGBTQI people's social, economic and financial inclusion. Set against this context the 32 people directly affected by the current policies, practices, attitudes and behaviours, provide a much more detailed picture of their lived experiences; the barriers they face, as LGBTQI people in improving their livelihoods and reaching their full potential, and their suggestions for changing the current situation.

While we acknowledge the limited scope of the research and would like to make clear that the research does not purport to be comprehensive, nor paint a full picture of the situation for all LGBTQI people in Cambodia, we believe that it contains important evidence to the current barriers to and opportunities for significantly advancing the economic inclusion of LGBTQI people in Cambodia. When combining previous research findings, including the 2018 report: "Economic Inclusion of LGBTQI People in Southeast Asia: A Background Research Report on Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR and the Philippines"⁶ as well as the three additional country reports on Indonesia, Laos and the Philippines, a pattern emerges, which should be explored in much greater detail by undertaking more data generation and in-depth qualitative and quantitative research.

The human rights situation for LGBTQI people in Cambodia improved, but many challenges remain

The 32 focus group participants acknowledged that the general situation of LGBTQI people in Cambodia has improved a lot in recent years. The Royal Government of Cambodia has begun to show more support for the cause and there are signs of the government acting on the outcomes of the recent United Nations Universal Periodic Review (UPR) (Third Cycle) which involves a review of the human rights records of all UN Member States, including the human rights situation of minorities, which include LGBTQI people.⁷ The government in 2019 accepted all nine recommendations in relation to sexual orientation and gender identity or expression.⁸

In addition, the number of NGOs, donors and allies has increased and there is now more positive information about LGBTQI issues through social media and more and more people seem to be coming out. At the same time, there are still many forms of violence and discrimination happening every day to LGBTQI people in Cambodia and society's focus on binary gender norms and the heterosexual unit of the family prevent people from having a better understanding of LGBTQI issues.

The most common forms of violence and discrimination experienced by the participants are:

- Discrimination by families, communities and some local authorities;
- Lack of mechanisms to report violence and discrimination;
- Lack of support from local authorities;
- No laws to protect LGBTQI rights;
- Misinterpretation and misconception of LGBTQI identities by society at large. As highlighted by many participants: "we are bad evils in the mindset of Cambodian people".

⁶ Link to report when ready

⁷ For more information on the outcome of the UPR, see letter dated 19 August 2019 from the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, to the Cambodian Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, H.E. Mr. Prak Sokhonn. https://lib.ohchr.org/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session32/KH/HC_letter_Cambodia_ENG.pdf

⁸ United Nations Human Rights Council. (2019). Universal Periodic Review (UPR) (Third Cycle), 2019: Cambodia. Matrix of recommendations (English). <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/UPR/Pages/KHindex.aspx>



Evidence collected through the 32 participants' answers correlates with previous and current research and emphasises the discrimination patterns experienced by LGBTQI Cambodians. The participants reported suffering a series of prejudices

- from their families and communities;
- at school;
- in the workplace;
- at healthcare facilities;
- from financial institution.

All these layers of discrimination have serious implications, not only for LGBTQI people's mental and physical health, but also for their educational achievements and professional skills and thus jeopardize their chances of improving their livelihoods, stepping out of poverty and achieving their full potential.

Lived Experiences: Economic exclusion of LGBTQI people in Cambodia

Employment, entrepreneurship and financial services

Participants unanimously reported that their LGBTQI identity usually stops them from finding or keeping a job. Employers and colleagues do not seem to respect their sexual orientation, gender identity or expression and they are often victims of insults, harassment and abuse in the workplace. Moreover, many participants said that early interruption of their studies stopped them from obtaining the necessary knowledge and skills to secure better jobs. All participants expressed a wish to open their own small businesses as an alternative means of income, but they rarely have financial resources to do so.

Financial hardships were a common reality for all participants, due to a mix of poverty and discrimination. LGBTQI people are stuck in a poverty cycle because of discrimination from their families, at schools and in the workplace, and therefore, cannot meet their living expenses. Moreover, they cannot access banking services because they do not have the necessary documentation or do not have a guarantor.

Education and Health

All participants have suffered bullying and discrimination at school at some point, either from teachers or students or both, suggesting that schools in Cambodia do not offer a safe and inclusive space for LGBTQI people. This rather hostile environment has frequently forced people to interrupt their studies, resulting in poor living conditions and financial hardships. In some cases, family rejection has also led to lack of financial support, which in turn, has jeopardized LGBTQI youth's chances of obtaining higher levels of formal education.

The participants' experiences in health facilities are also quite problematic and insensitive. All participants seem to share a feeling of mistrust of public health professionals because they are often inadequately or not at all trained to offer sensitive treatment to LGBTQI people. Due to experiences of poverty, it is unlikely that LGBTQI people can afford private health care.

Recommendations

Each country report contains a number of recommendations towards government, the private sector, and organisations working on LGBTQI issues. APCOM and MRIF, with partners, will continue to advocate for those recommendations to be acted on with a view to address structural and other barriers for full economic and social inclusion and participation for LGBTQI people in the Cambodian society.

The recommendations call for adoption and implementation of inclusive policies, practices and programmes. The lived experiences and direct voices of the 32 brave LGBTQI individuals who dared to speak up and out and volunteered their time, knowledge and experiences of economic exclusion in Cambodia, have informed most recommendations. Below are a few and for a full set of recommendations, please go to pages 25-27.

1. The government should implement the nine recommendations in relation to sexual orientation and gender identity or expression in the 2019 United Nations Universal Periodic Review (UPR) (Third Cycle). This includes introducing an anti-discrimination law that guarantees equality and explicitly prohibits discrimination of all kinds, including on the basis of religion, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression or sex characteristics. It also includes adopting effective measures to combat discrimination and violence of people because of their sexual orientation or gender identity and bringing perpetrators to justice;
2. Teachers, health service providers, local authorities, employers and financial service providers should receive training to raise their awareness and being able to offer LGBTQI-friendly and sensitive services, and developing more inclusive policies. This includes training teachers on how to support non-heterosexual students and to offer guidance to private employers on how to respect and protect LGBTQI rights in the workplace;
3. National and international NGOs should encourage and provide opportunities for LGBTQI people to increase their professional skills, start up a business and find jobs;
4. Micro-finance institutions and banks should provide loans with flexible conditions and terms to LGBTQI people who wish to start a small business.

Introduction

Founded in 2007, APCOM Foundation (APCOM) is a Bangkok-based not-for-profit organisation representing and working with a network of individuals and community-based organisations across the Asia and the Pacific region. APCOM works to improve the health and rights of gay men, other men who have sex with men, and people and communities of diverse sexual orientation, gender identities and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) in the Asia and the Pacific region.

APCOM has a primary focus on HIV because it is a key health issue for gay men and other men who have sex with men in Asia and the Pacific region. APCOM aims to contribute to addressing other related health issues for our communities such as sexual health, mental health and drug use. APCOM also focuses on improving relevant human and legal rights across the region as discrimination, stigma, criminalisation and exclusion impact on the health outcomes of the communities we serve.

Micro Rainbow International Foundation's (MRIF's) vision is to create a world where lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex (LGBTI) people are free from discrimination, persecution and have equal opportunities in life, including in accessing employment, training, education, financial services, healthcare, housing, places of faith, and public services.



MRIF's mission is to create tools, programs, and policy recommendations that enable LGBTI people to step out of poverty, everywhere. MRIF believes that many LGBTI people across the world are more vulnerable to poverty because of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity or intersex status. Since 2012, MRIF has run poverty reduction programs exclusively for LGBTI people.

1. Rationale behind the report and next steps

Narratives of stigma and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identities of LGBTQI people abound globally. These narratives are replete with experiences of challenges and issues in enjoying basic economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to employment, education, health care and access to economic participation and financial resources.

The World Bank states that *[d]espite some legal and social advances in the past two decades, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) people continue to face widespread discrimination and violence in many countries. This discrimination and violence lead to exclusion, and this exclusion has adverse impacts on both the lives of LGBTI people as well as on the communities and economies in which they live.*⁹

The World Bank has also states that *increasing evidence indicates that LGBTI people suffer lower education outcomes due to discrimination, bullying and violence; higher unemployment rates; and a lack of access to adequate housing and health services and financial services.*¹⁰

The Cambodia report aims to give an overview of how human rights of LGBTQI people in Cambodia have been framed and the current main challenges and opportunities for LGBTQI social, economic and financial inclusion.

Much more evidence gathering is needed as the area of economic and financial inclusion of LGBTQI people is under-researched. In addition to the insights of this and the three other reports which will form the basis for new learnings and strategies, report findings will also inform additional project components including advocacy with the private sector, government and other stakeholders. Similarly, the initiative will aim for future scale up.

The research and voices of those LGBTQI people who participated in the project will contribute to and inform future actions in engaging with financial institutions and the private sector in and across the four countries towards the goal of LGBTQI inclusion in terms of policies, practices and programs.

⁹ The World Bank: Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/sexual-orientation-and-gender-identity>

¹⁰ Ibid.

2. Research methodologies

The research consists of a literature review and focus group discussions undertaken and conducted between July and October 2019. The research part includes reviewing existing country specific data and previous research relevant to LGBTQI inclusion.

Three focus group discussions (FGDs) were held, guided by a set of questions developed by APCOM in collaboration with MRIF, in order to capture the living realities for LGBTQI people in Cambodia. One focus group consisted of gay men and bisexual men; another of transgender men and lesbians, and another of transgender women. A total of 32 members of the LGBTQI community participated: 3 lesbians, 7 gay men, 5 bisexual men, 4 transgender men and 13 transgender women.

A majority of FGD participants were 22-30 years old (10 participants) and 31-45 years old (16 participants). The youngest participant was a 21-year-old lesbian and the oldest was a 74-year-old transman. Regarding their occupations, most participants work in beauty salons (16) or were activists (12). Other professions included sales assistant (3), artist (2), farmer (2), student (2), hotel staff, government official, factory worker, cook, tailor and carer.

The focus group discussions were conducted in a safe space with prior informed consent of all participants. Consent was also obtained by some participants to have their photos taken to be used in future material on the LGBTQI communities in Cambodia. Anonymity was respected for those who wished to be anonymous.

Participants were asked to give feedback after the FGDs. Most people were pleased to share their challenges and living realities and were happy to learn from and about each other, even though some topics were very sensitive to discuss. They also appreciated the opportunity to have their voices heard in a safe space and to offer suggestions for improving the lives of LGBTQI Cambodians.

3. Scope and limitations of this report

While we acknowledge the limited scope of the research and would like to make clear that the research does not purport to be comprehensive, nor paint a full picture of the situation for all LGBTQI people in Cambodia, we believe that it contains important evidence of the current barriers to and opportunities for significantly advancing economic inclusion of LGBTQI people in Cambodia. Combining previous research findings, including the 2018 report: “[“Economic Inclusion of LGBTQI People in Southeast Asia: A Background Research Report on Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR and the Philippines”](#)¹¹ and the three additional country reports on Indonesia, Laos and the Philippines, a pattern emerges, which should be explored in much greater detail by collecting more data and undertaking more in-depth qualitative and quantitative research, surveys, data generation, and analysis.

For this report it is also relevant to underscore two further main limitations of the research: First, we acknowledge that the number of participants is relatively small, that a majority are from city and urban centres, and that we cannot claim that their lived realities are representative of all LGBTQI communities in Cambodia. We wish to point out that one of the aims of this report is a call to collect more data on the experiences of LGBTQI exclusion in Cambodia, rather than creating a large statistical analysis on the topic.

Second, there was no participation by people identifying as intersex or queer in the FGDs because the research team were unable to access participants who identify as such. Intersex and queer people are still not very visible in Cambodia and our partner organisation is not working with these groups yet.

¹¹ [Link when ready](#)



4. Definitions and Terminology

Employment, entrepreneurship and financial services

We are using the definition of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development:

“Economic inclusion, the opening up of economic opportunities to under-served social groups, is integral to [...] sustainable market economies. An inclusive market economy ensures that anyone regardless of their gender, place of birth, family background, age or other circumstances, over which they have no control, has full and fair access to labour markets, finance and entrepreneurship and, more generally, economic opportunity.¹²”

Exclusion

In defining exclusion, we take inspiration from the definition used by Prof. Lee Badgett as ‘the structural manifestations of stigma in institutional settings, reducing LGBT people’s access to equal treatment and participation in a wide range of social institutions, including schools, workplaces, health care settings, the political process, the financial system, the criminal justice system, families, government programs, and other laws and policies.’¹³

Financial Inclusion

We are using The World Bank definition: “Financial inclusion means that individuals and businesses have access to useful and affordable financial products and services that meet their needs – transactions, payments, savings, credit and insurance – delivered in a responsible and sustainable way.”¹⁴

LGBTQI

We are using the acronym LGBTQI to refer to lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender, queer, and intersex populations and communities. APCOM recognises that there is diversity across cultures and country contexts in the use of those and related terms, and that some languages do not have exact words to describe sexual orientation and/or gender identity and expression.

We are basing our terminology on the Yogyakarta Principles +10 and use the abbreviation SOGIESC to describe sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and sex characteristics collectively:¹⁵

SOGIESC

Sexual Orientation - each person’s capacity for profound emotional, affectional and sexual attraction to, and intimate and sexual relations with, individuals of a different gender or the same gender or more than one gender.

Gender Identity - each person’s deeply felt internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond with the sex assigned at birth, including the personal sense of the body (which may involve, if freely chosen, modification of bodily appearance or function by medical, surgical or other means) and other expressions of gender, including dress, speech and mannerisms.

Gender Expression - each person’s presentation of the person’s gender through physical appearance – including dress, hairstyles, accessories, cosmetics – and mannerisms, speech, behavioural patterns, names and personal references, may or may not conform to a person’s gender identity.

¹² European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. <https://www.ebrd.com/what-we-do/projects-and-sectors/economic-inclusion.html>

¹³ Badgett, Lee, et al. (2014). The Relationship Between LGBT Inclusion and Economic Development: An Analysis of Emerging Economies. The Williams Institute, Los Angeles, USA. November 2014. <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/lgbt-inclusion-and-development-november-2014.pdf><https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/lgbt-inclusion-economic-dev/>

¹⁴ The World Bank. Financial Inclusion. <http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/financialinclusion/overview>

¹⁵ Yogyakarta Principles Plus 10 (YP+10) (2017) is an authoritative statement of the human rights of persons of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. <https://yogyakartaprinciples.org/>



Current human rights context in Cambodia – and how it affects LGBTQI people

Sex Characteristics - each person's physical features relating to sex, including genitalia and other sexual and reproductive anatomy, chromosomes, hormones, and secondary physical features emerging from puberty.

Social Inclusion

The process by which efforts are made to ensure equal opportunities – that everyone, regardless of their background - can achieve their full potential in life. Such efforts include policies, practices and actions that promote equal access to (public) services as well as enable citizen's and residents' participation in decision-making processes that affect their lives.

Cambodia is one of the poorest countries in the world with a very recent democratic foundation. After decades of civil war, armed conflicts, totalitarianism, foreign occupation and upheaval, the first national elections were held in 1993, thanks to a peace keeping operation by the United Nations.¹⁶ The first commune¹⁷ elections were held in 2002 and only in 2006 was the Senate elected for the first time.¹⁸ Since then, civil society and NGOs have gradually increased their participation in the country's political system and human rights debate, which are still marked by post-conflict and conservative elements.

Despite being known historically as a conservative country in relation to human rights, Cambodia's democratic landscape has been gradually changing over the last two decades and the debate around the rights of LGBTQI people has gained more attention from the government and other sectors of society. There are also signs of the government acting on the outcomes of the recent United Nations Universal Periodic Review (UPR), (Third Cycle) which involves a review of the human rights records of all UN Member States, including the human rights situation of minorities, including LGBTQI.¹⁹ The government accepted all nine recommendations in relation to sexual orientation and gender identity or expression.²⁰ It remains, however, to be seen whether these recommendations will be put into practice.

Contrary to most countries, homosexuality has never been illegal in Cambodia. Same-sex marriage, however, used to be prohibited by the 1989 Law on Marriage and the Family which stated that "marriage is a solemn contract between a man and a woman" (Article 3) and that marriage should be prohibited between "a person whose sex is the same sex as the other" (Article 6).²¹ Such provisions have been abrogated by the 2008 Civil Code and the subsequent 2011 Law on the implementation of Civil Code, though these changes have not been widely disseminated to the general population, including to local government officials who issue marriage certificates.²²

Although Article 45 of the Constitution still defines marriage as "mutual consent between one husband and one wife"²³, there have been reports of same-sex couples who were able to obtain marriage certificates by registering as 'husband' and 'wife'.²⁴ In fact, this tactic was supported by a Ministry of Interior official who claimed that Cambodia did not ban same-sex marriage and suggested that "when there is a marriage between a woman and a woman, you can register one as a man and the other as a woman"²⁵, thus reinforcing heteronormative standards which dominate Cambodian society.

¹⁶ United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC). <https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/past/untac.htm>

¹⁷ Communes are the third-level administrative divisions in Cambodia (after District and Province). Communes consist of between 3 and 30 villages.

¹⁸ The World Bank (2005). Country Assessment Strategy (CAS) for the Kingdom of Cambodia. <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/117651468212979440/pdf/32118.pdf>

¹⁹ For more information on the outcome of the UPR, see letter dated 19 August 2019 from the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, to the Cambodian Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, H.E. Mr. Prak Sokhonn. https://lib.ohchr.org/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session32/KH/HC_letter_Cambodia_ENG.pdf

²⁰ United Nations Human Rights Council: Universal Periodic Review (UPR) (Third Cycle) 2019: Cambodia; Matrix of recommendations (English). <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/UPR/Pages/KHindex.aspx>

²¹ Cambodia: Law of 1989 on the Marriage and Family. <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b55c0.html>

²² UNDP, USAID. (2014). Being LGBTI in Asia: Cambodia Country Report. Bangkok. https://www.undp.org/content/dam/rbap/docs/Research%20&%20Publications/hiv_aids/rbap-hhd-2014-blia-cambodia-country-report.pdf

²³ Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia. <https://www.wipo.int/edocs/lexdocs/laws/en/kh/kh009en.pdf>

²⁴ Kunthea, M and Drennan, J. (2013). Laws can't stop lovers marrying. Phnom Penh Post, 20 May 2013. <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/laws-can%E2%80%99t-stop-lovers-marrying>

²⁵ Ibid.



This implicit legal recognition of same-sex relationships somewhat corroborates Cambodia's omission in relation to the rights of LGBTQI people. None of the government ministries have programmes or policies targeted at the LGBTQI community. There are no anti-discrimination laws or any other legislation to protect citizens and residents against homo and trans phobia or which recognise important rights for LGBTQI Cambodians such as marriage, inheritance, pension, joint adoption or gender reassignment.

Without legal protection, LGBTQI Cambodians are subject to stigma, discrimination, police abuse, domestic and sexual violence, and rejection by their families. According to UNDP, USAID (2014)²⁶, local NGOs have reported random arrests and harassment of LGBTQI persons by the police, who normally use general anti-crime laws and policies to persecute LGBTQI persons and associate them with criminality, misconduct and drug use. There are also reports of same-sex couples who have been victims of forced separation by local authorities in response to pressure from their own family members.

Discrimination and prejudice against LGBTQI Cambodians seem to be driven by society's strong emphasis on traditional family values and not necessarily by religious beliefs, as is often the case in other countries. A 2010 report from the Cambodia Center for Human Rights claims that "because the culture is predominantly Buddhist, homosexuality, whilst seen as an oddity, does not attract the kind of aggressive reaction as can be seen in Christian or Muslim cultures."²⁶

Therefore, hate crimes may not be very common in the country but there is pressure towards (heterosexual) marriage and procreation which is still viewed as ultimate life goals, both from moral and economic points of view. Many LGBTQI individuals choose to stay in the closet out of fear of bringing shame to their families and losing their financial support. Those who decide to express their sexual or gender identities are most likely to be ostracised by their family members or forced to marry people from the opposite sex and, in some cases, even undergo psychiatric treatment or so called "cures" by traditional healers, as highlighted by the 2014 UNDP, USAID report. The Cambodia Center for Human Rights explains further in their 2010 report:

*"Pursuing a homosexual relationship is a path most individuals cannot socially or economically afford to take. The risk of ostracism from a close family network and economic difficulties posed by living alone may mean that LGBT persons do not live the lives they wish to or have to conduct homosexual relationships in secret. Economic survival and practicality therefore will often prevail over the expression of personal and sexual identity"*²⁸

²⁶ UNDP, USAID (2014). Being LGBTI in Asia: Cambodia Country Report. Bangkok. https://www.undp.org/content/dam/rbap/docs/Research%20&%20Publications/hiv_aids/rbap-hhd-2014-blia-cambodia-country-report.pdf

²⁷ Cambodia Center for Human Rights (CCHR). (2010). Coming Out in the Kingdom: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People in Cambodia. p.16. https://chrccambodia.org/admin/media/report/report/english/2010-12-09%20COMING%20OUT%20IN%20THE%20KINGDOM%20LESBIAN%20GAY%20BISEXUAL%20AND%20TRANSGENDER%20PEOPLE%20IN%20CAMBODIA_EN%20.pdf

²⁸ Ibid.

In a survey carried out by MRIF in Cambodia in 2016, all 15 participants in the survey reported having suffered discrimination by their families, ranging from verbal abuse, bullying and threats to being given no food, held captive in the home or forced out of home or a job.²⁹ Much larger-scale studies by the Cambodia Center for Human Rights in 2010 and UNDP and USAID in 2014, with 60 and 59 participants respectively, confirm common experiences of domestic violence by family members, including physical and psychological abuse, disowning threats, home incarceration, forced separation from partners and forced marriages.

Another major challenge for the LGBTQI community in Cambodia is the fact that there are no words in the Khmer language to describe sexual orientation, whether homosexual or heterosexual. According to a 2008 UNESCO report “the concepts of gender and sexuality seem not to be clearly distinguished and a person’s identity is determined in relation to their biological sex (male or female) or their gender expression (feminine or masculine)”³⁰. Such linguistic omission of sexuality seems to have serious implications on society’s understanding of LGBTQI issues, although activists, over the last two decades, have been challenging these binary gender (and heterosexual) norms both in sexual health and human rights debates.

Cambodia’s Pride celebrations began in 2003 and activists have been increasingly organising since that time. Although mainstream human rights organisations and informal LGBTQI organisations had been working on those issues in the interim, the first official registration of an LGBTQI organisation as an NGO (RoCK - Rainbow Community Kampuchea) was not until 2014.³¹ In the same year, the country held its first National LGBTQI Community Dialogue between the government and civil society. The second one was held in 2019.³² During that dialogue, the Secretary of State, H.E Keo Remy made a public commitment to improve the human rights situation for LGBTQI people in Cambodia by accepting all nine recommendations relating to the rights of LGBTQI people of the 2019 Universal Periodic Review (UPR) (Third Cycle). Activists, campaigners and advocates are currently lobbying the government to include LGBTQI people in the draft of the new Registrar law, (which provides birth, marriage and death registrations and to implement an Action Plan in response to priority needs for the LGBTQI population. The government has shown support and indicated willingness to collaborate with civil society but emphasised that it may take some time as more work is needed to raise awareness of LGBTQI rights in the country.

Participants in focus group discussions acknowledged that the general situation of LGBTQI people in Cambodia has improved a lot recently. The Royal Government of Cambodia has begun to show more support for the cause and the number of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), donors and allies has increased. Also, there has been an increase in positive information about LGBTQI issues through social media and more and more people seem to be coming out.

At the same time, however, there are still many forms of violence and discrimination happening every day to LGBTQI people in Cambodia and society’s wide focus on binary gender norms and the heterosexual unit of the family prevent people from having a better understanding of LGBTQI issues.

²⁹ Chhoeurng, Rachana; Kong, Yara; Power, Erin. (2016). Poverty of LGBT people in Cambodia, p. 17 London, UK: Micro Rainbow International C.I.C. <https://microrainbow.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/CambodiaReportEN.pdf>

³⁰ UNESCO (2008). HIV/AIDS Prevention Programme: Ethnography of Male to Male Sexuality in Cambodia. Phnom Penh. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0016/001630/163077E.pdf>

³¹ Rainbow Community Kampuchea (RoCK). <http://www.rockcambodia.org/?page=detail&menu1=224&menu2=273&ctype=article&id=273&lg=en>

³² RoCK, MRIF. (2019). Second National Dialogue on Legal and Public Policies to Protect LGBTQI People in Cambodia. Joint Press Release. 27 June 2019. Phnom Penh. https://cchrcambodia.org/media/files/press_release/716_fprpde_en.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1EXzAMx6-oofncSAus0xfk0MRbjg8EKmYewNUBSLbpYefl-L_YQsAJRxc

Lived Experiences: Economic exclusion of LGBTQI people in Cambodia

The most common forms of violence and discrimination experienced by the participants are:

- Discrimination by families, communities and some local authorities;
- Lack of mechanisms to report violence and discrimination;
- Lack of support from local authorities;
- No laws to protect LGBTQI rights;
- Misinterpretation and misconception of LGBTQI identities by society at large. As highlighted by many participants: "we are bad evils in the mindset of Cambodian people."

Employment, Entrepreneurship and Financial Services, Education, Health Employment

There is no legislation against LGBTQI discrimination in the workplace. Cambodians who do not adhere to heteronormative gender expressions and identities face a series of barriers in the job market: from discrimination and rejection in job application processes to harassment and bullying at work. LGBTQI participants in the 2016 MRIF study revealed that they were verbally abused by current or previous colleagues and told to change their behaviour and the way they dressed.³³

This may explain why LGBTQI Cambodians do not feel comfortable to disclose their sexuality or gender identity in the workplace, as evidenced in the 2014 report by UNDP and USAID. The report claims that, given widespread workplace discrimination and lack of government and corporate policies addressing diversity and inclusion, there are limited employment opportunities for LGBTQI people, particularly for those with low educational levels who often resort to sex work as a source of income. Sex work, however, is an illegal activity in Cambodia.

This is the case for many trans women whose formal job opportunities are restricted to the beauty and entertainment sectors. However, even those working as entertainers may be victims of further abuse. There are reports of trans women in Siem Reap who, despite working in cabaret shows, are not allowed to walk in main tourist areas because they are presumed to be thieves and may be arrested by local authorities.³⁴ Trans sex workers are also subject to police abuse, bribes, exploitation and random arrests. Research shows that after the government passed the 2008 Law on Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation,³⁵ arrests of trans women and men who have sex with men increased threefold, thus decreasing their income opportunities and access to health and social services.³⁵

In a country where 35 per cent of the population live in poverty and job insecurity is prevalent,³⁷ guaranteeing work and income generating opportunities for LGBTQI people may be a major socio-economic challenge, but it is also key to reducing discrimination and achieving equality. Participants in the first Cambodia National LGBT Dialogue, held in 2014, reported that they felt more empowered and accepted by their families and communities once their financial situation improved and they were able to earn more money.³⁸ This was later corroborated by the 2016 MRIF study which concluded that: *"The more LGBT people who step out of poverty and thereby become important and influential members of their families and communities, the wider the change in attitude becomes"*³⁹

³³ Chhoeurung, Rachana; Kong, Yara; Power, Erin. (2016). Poverty of LGBT people in Cambodia. London, UK: Micro Rainbow International C.I.C. <https://microrainbow.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/CambodiaReportEN.pdf>

³⁴ UNDP, USAID (2014). Being LGBTI in Asia: Cambodia Country Report. Bangkok. https://www.undp.org/content/dam/rbap/docs/Research%20&%20Publications/hiv_aids/rbap-hhd-2014-blia-cambodia-country-report.pdf

³⁵ Cambodia: Law on Suppression of Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation. 2008. https://www.unodc.org/res/cld/document/khm/2008/law_on_suppression_of_human_trafficking_and_sexual_exploitation_html/Cambodia_03_-_Law_on_Suppression_of_Human_Trafficking_and_Sexual_Exploitation_15022008-Eng.pdf

³⁶ Cambodian Alliance for Combatting HIV and AIDS (CACHA) & National AIDS Authority. (2009). Research Report: "Policies environment regarding universal access and the right to work of Entertainment Workers in Cambodia". pp. 65-67 http://www.haccambodia.org/download_publication.php?file=CACHA%20Action%20Research%20final_English%20version.pdf

³⁷ Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (2018). Global Multidimensional Poverty Index 2018: The Most Detailed Picture to Date of the World's Poorest People, University of Oxford, UK. <https://ophi.org.uk/multidimensional-poverty-index/global-mpi-2018/>

³⁸ UNDP, USAID (2014). Being LGBTI in Asia: Cambodia Country Report. Bangkok. https://www.undp.org/content/dam/rbap/docs/Research%20&%20Publications/hiv_aids/rbap-hhd-2014-blia-cambodia-country-report.pdf

³⁹ Chhoeurung, Rachana; Kong, Yara; Power, Erin. (2016). Poverty of LGBT people in Cambodia, p. 24. London, UK: Micro Rainbow International C.I.C. <https://microrainbow.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/CambodiaReportEN.pdf>

Since 2013, MRIF has been implementing a poverty reduction programme in Cambodia, through which members of the LGBTQI community receive financial and technical support to set up income-generating activities. Many people who had been rejected by their families noticed a significant increase in social acceptance of and respect for their LGBTQI identities after they started their own small businesses, and some were even able to re-establish family ties and support their relatives.⁴⁰

Until September 2019, MRIF supported 70 LGBTQI people to step out of poverty and 31 were able to start their own small businesses and increase their income. 20 people have received micro-loans, thanks to partnerships with local micro-finance institutions. 35 people reported an increase in social acceptance and family support after becoming business owners. In a society which places strong emphasis on family relations, economic empowerment of LGBTQI people has proven to be an effective tool for reducing exclusion and marginalisation of sexual and gender minorities, changing conservative social values and challenging oppressive heterosexual norms.

Typical jobs and sectors for LGBTQI people

Focus Group participants were asked to list sectors in the labour market where LGBTQI people are typically employed and share their experiences. They replied as follows:

- **Bisexuals:** Masseur, hairdresser, artist, sales rep, hotel worker, bar and club staff, waiter;
- **Gay men:** Doctor, civil servant in ministries, NGO worker, decorator, masseur, make-up artist, waiter, construction worker;
- **Trans men:** construction worker, farmer, tuk tuk or taxi driver;
- **Trans women:** sex worker, hairdresser, teacher, food seller, masseur, artist, NGO worker;
- **Lesbians:** teacher, doctor, hairdresser, architect, engineer, accountant, sales rep, cook, bank worker, NGO worker, waitress, manager, police, army.

Challenges to finding employment opportunities

When participants were asked to describe which challenges, they have come across in accessing work opportunities, they were unanimous in their answers that their LGBTQI identity was a huge barrier and that discrimination from employers or clients was a common experience. For some, not having enough skills was also an obstacle in their professional lives.

For all bisexual participants, it is always hard to find a job if they reveal their bisexuality. Four of them had trouble finding work opportunities due to lack of knowledge of foreign languages and other skills. Among the gay men, four had to hide their homosexuality in order to find a job and four were not accepted or respected at their workplace for being gay; two revealed they suffered harassment from clients (they were forced to have sex or were victims of physical assaults) and six admitted they could not get a job because they did not have enough skills. All lesbian participants reported difficulties in finding a job due to lack of skills and discrimination by their families, which undermines their confidence and work aspirations.

All trans women reported problems in accessing work opportunities and keeping jobs. They all struggle to find work because of transphobia and all have faced discrimination when they held jobs, either in private or public institutions. A 31-year-old trans woman told us: "Employers usually stop the interview when they notice that I am a trans woman". For the trans men, the situation is similar: they have all been discriminated against by their employers and did not have a safe and accepting environment at work.

⁴⁰ Micro Rainbow International (2018). A wave of LGBTI acceptance in Cambodia. <https://mrifoundation.global/a-wave-of-lgbti-acceptance-in-cambodia/>



Treatment in the workplace

When participants were asked about how they were treated in the workplace, it became evident that they have had bad experiences in the work place, for simply being an LGBTQI person.

Bisexual and lesbian participants had similar views and experiences: as long as they did not reveal their sexuality, there was no problem. Otherwise, they could face the risk of losing their jobs. The lesbian participants said that when people find out about their identity, they are normally insulted or are asked more personal questions. All gay and trans men participants revealed that they have dealt with very hostile work environments: either the employers would not trust them or their colleagues would not treat them well. For trans women, the reality has also been harsh: ten have been insulted at work and seven have suffered severe harassment.

Entrepreneurship and Financial Services

When participants were asked if LGBTQI people are able to open their own businesses all of them said yes, but highlighted that they do not have enough financial resources. One of them emphasised: "We can open a business, but we do not have money and skill to start up".

Lack of money was a cross-cutting theme in all replies when the 32 Focus Group Participants were asked what kind of financial issues they usually face.

All bisexual participants reported going through financial hardships and not having enough employment opportunities or enough income to support their families, partners or even themselves. All gay participants revealed they do not have enough financial resources to start a business and five of them said they do not receive financial support from their families. All lesbians had similar answers: they earn very little and are not able to meet their living expenses. They said they cannot find better employment opportunities due to lack of skills or knowledge.

All trans men reported low income and stated they cannot meet basic living expenses such as rent, bills and healthcare. Four of them said they do not have enough money to pay their debts. Among the trans women, ten wished they had enough financial resources to start a business and seven believe they do not have enough skills to find better jobs. Similarly, to the trans men, 11 revealed they cannot meet their basic living expenses.

Participants were asked if their sexual orientation or gender identity and expression has affected their ability to save money. The majority of participants (30) agreed that, as a result of discrimination they have faced at work or in the educational system, they cannot earn enough or secure well-paid jobs to enable them to save money. A 35-year-old gay man said: "I do not have money; how can I make savings?". Others said they do not see the point of saving money, probably because they live in poverty and have other urgent needs and priorities.

Participants discussed the challenges they have found in accessing banking services in general. The main challenge for all participants is obtaining a loan from the banks either because they do not have the necessary documentation (identity card, family book⁴¹, birth certificate and/or proof of address) or because they do not have a guarantor. The same barriers were faced while trying to access insurance or credit to open a business.

⁴¹ A family book is an official document holder which contains copies of marriage and birth certificates etc. Usually given to couples when they marry, or to unmarried couples when their first child is born.



Education

LGBTQI youth in Cambodia usually face a series of challenges while accessing formal education, which may hinder their chances of having decent job opportunities and earning an income. Given the country's strict morals based on binary gender norms, LGBTQI children are forced by their families and school authorities to behave and dress according to their biological sex and are often victims of bullying and discrimination by their classmates. Consequently, many do not complete their studies, particularly members of the trans population, who often end up turning to sex work to make a living.

Evidence from the Cambodia Center for Human Rights suggests high drop-out rates among LGBTQI youth, due to "not only economic hardship resulting from non-acceptance by families, but also name-calling and bullying by their classmates in connection with to their sexuality."⁴² This was confirmed by participants of MRIF's 2016 study. 87 per cent of those interviewed had not completed their education and only two per cent obtained a university degree. When asked why they could not finish their studies, 62 per cent said poverty, while others mentioned discrimination, either by their families (who stopped paying for education) or by others in school or at university (who engaged in bullying or physical abuse).⁴³

The 2013 Social Exclusion report from the Cambodian Social Protection Research Fund showed that 52 per cent of lesbian, gay and trans participants in the study had suffered discrimination in schools and only 43 per cent had reached university (20 per cent of gay men, 17 per cent of lesbians and 6 per cent of transgender women). Participants also revealed an alarming finding: 30 per cent of trans women and 7 per cent of gay men had suffered pressure from their families to stop their studies or jobs.⁴⁴ This indicates that family acceptance also plays a crucial role in LGBTQI people's formal educational levels and that some parents and relatives may still have prejudicial and misconceived ideas that their LGBTQI offspring will bring shame to their families. It also shows that more efforts are required to tackle diversity and inclusion in the Cambodian education system.

One important step in this direction was taken in 2015, when MRIF partnered with a local NGO - CamASEAN and the Ministry of Education (Department for Youth and Sport) to train teachers and pedagogy students on sexual orientation and gender identity issues in nine provinces. A total of 3,100 teachers were trained in 16 Cambodian schools. As a result of this collaboration, in 2017 the ministry invited LGBTQI activists to develop school curricula on sexual health and education for primary, secondary, and high schools. The material is currently being produced and will be incorporated in school curricula in 2021.

⁴² Cambodia Center for Human Rights (CCHR). (2012). Rainbow Khmer: From Prejudice to Pride. https://cchrcambodia.org/index_old.php?url=project_page/project_page.php&p=report_detail.php&reid=85&id=3

⁴³ Chhoeurng, Rachana; Kong, Yara; Power, Erin. (2016). Poverty of LGBT people in Cambodia. London, UK: Micro Rainbow International C.I.C. <https://microrainbow.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/CambodiaReportEN.pdf>

⁴⁴ Salas V & Srun S. (2013). An Exploration of Social Exclusion of Lesbians, Gay and Transgender Persons in Families and Communities and their ways of coping. Research report. Social Protection Coordination Unit, Council for Agricultural Research and Development (SPCU-CARD), Phnom Penh



MRIF suggests that “the road out of poverty is education” and therefore it is extremely important to increase access to education for the LGBTQI population so that they can have better employment opportunities and living conditions:

“For the future of LGBT rights in Cambodia, education is the key – both helping LGBT people stay in an education system that is extremely expensive for the majority of the population who are very poor, and working to change attitudes within the education system so that LGBT people do not drop out when they can no longer cope with the abuse they suffer”⁴⁵

Focus Group participants were asked to describe their experiences in accessing education. Most participants had suffered some sort of discrimination from classmates and/or teachers, though bisexual and lesbian participants reported suffering less discrimination because it is easier for them to hide their identity. However, all three lesbian participants agreed that if their friends found out they were lesbian, they would stop talking to them. Some bisexual participants also reported the same fear and one of them confessed: “A few people stopped talking to me when they realised that I was bisexual”.

All seven gay participants had suffered insults at school and were called bad names such as “Ah Katey” or “Ah Jheak”⁴⁶. Five of them also admitted losing friends when they found out they were gay and four of them had dropped out of school because their teachers would not allow them to express their homosexuality.

Trans participants reported similar problems. All four trans men said their teachers would not allow them to dress like men and required them to wear female uniforms. Two of them reported discrimination and insults from classmates. They said many students would refuse to sit close to them out of fear of being infected by a disease and becoming trans, too. All trans women have been discriminated against by their classmates and teachers and three of them reported being beaten up by male students. When participants were asked about the highest level of education that LGBTQI people are able to access, the answers varied according to the participants’ identity and experience. Bisexuals and lesbians seem to be able to complete high school or even a bachelor’s degree, if they are not open about their sexuality. Those who are out, normally drop out during high school. Gay men are usually able to complete high school. Trans people’s levels of education may vary according to when they started their transition, but they normally complete primary school.

When asked what other forms of education LGBTQI people can access as alternatives to formal education, all participants mentioned upskilling courses in private schools, such as computer or language courses - for those who can afford them. 13 participants mentioned training opportunities at the Ministry of Labour and vocational training and 23 mentioned working or volunteering for NGOs as a way of acquiring knowledge and skills.

⁴⁵ Chhoeurng, Rachana; Kong, Yara; Power, Erin. (2016). Poverty of LGBT people in Cambodia, p. 24. London, UK: Micro Rainbow International C.I.C. <https://microrainbow.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/CambodiaReportEN.pdf>

⁴⁶ Derogatory terms in Khmer often used to insult LGBTQI people.

Main challenges and difficulties

All participants reported going through a series of challenges and difficulties while accessing formal education, ranging from poverty to discrimination at school or in the family. Among the bisexual participants, two had to quit school and start working because their families are very poor; two dropped out of school due to depression and discrimination by their families and communities; and three reported having fewer friends at school due to their bisexuality. All gay participants reported suffering discrimination of all kinds and five reported feeling isolated at school due to the non-acceptance of their homosexuality. All lesbian participants said they cannot afford to pay for education, and all reported discrimination by their families. One of them reported insults and bullying from teachers and students.

All trans men reported discrimination by their classmates and all trans women said they have been forced to wear male uniforms at school. Nine of them had to stop their studies because they did not have enough money or financial support from their families and three revealed that they suffered constant bullying from their teachers and classmates. A 22-year-old trans woman said: "Some classmates do not like to sit next to me because they are afraid of becoming trans, too, when they touch my body".

Health

As in many other countries, acceptance by family members is perhaps one of the biggest barriers that the LGBTQI community face in Cambodia and family rejection may have serious implications for the mental health of individuals who do not meet heteronormative expectations. Participants of the 2014 National Dialogue reported widespread incidences of depression, suicide attempts, low self-esteem and other psychological issues among LGBTQI youth. They also noted a general lack of LGBTQI friendly services and practitioners, particularly for lesbians and trans people, as well as a lack of adequate counselling and mental health care. Some people have been forced to undergo psychiatric treatments or conversion therapies, while others were told by their counsellors to change their behaviours.⁴⁷

The 2019 report by Rainbow Community Kampuchea (RoCK) on family violence against lesbian, bisexual and trans (LBT) people in Cambodia revealed that 81 per cent of participants in the study have suffered emotional violence by family members; 11 per cent have suffered physical violence and 10 per cent have suffered sexual violence, including forced marriages. Such violent behaviour has caused serious mental health issues among LBT people and many reported experiencing depression. 35 per cent of the study's participants have thought about or attempted suicide due to their family's denial of their sexual orientation or gender identity and expression.⁴⁸

It is important to note that subgroups within the LGBTQI community are disproportionately affected by the lack of adequate health services and that trans people are subject to greater risks. Gender reassignment surgeries and related procedures, such as use of hormones and other medication, are not available in Cambodia and those who have the financial resources often travel to Thailand for their gender transition according to the 2014 report by UNDP and USAID. The report also highlights that some trans women suffer dangerous complications or even death from unsupervised and ill-informed use of injections and oils.

⁴⁷ UNDP, USAID (2014). Being LGBTI in Asia: Cambodia Country Report. Bangkok. https://www.undp.org/content/dam/rbap/docs/Research%20&%20Publications/hiv_aids/rbap-hhd-2014-bla-cambodia-country-report.pdf

⁴⁸ (RoCK (2019). Family Violence towards Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender (LBT) People in Cambodia. <http://www.suarakita.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Family-Violence-towards-Lesbian-Bisexual-and-Transgender-LBT-People-in-Cambodia-Report.pdf>



HIV prevention seems to be the only inclusive health service in Cambodia. Trans persons and men who have sex with men have been target groups of HIV studies and public policies since 2000 and were both included in the National Strategic Plan for AIDS.⁴⁹ Although networks of these populations have been established since 2006, they still face stigma and discrimination from health professionals and are still listed among the most-at-risk populations in the country's HIV epidemic.⁵⁰ Moreover, they have, for a long time, been treated as a homogenous group in the public health sector, though recent efforts have been made to address their specific needs. UNDP and USAID stated in 2014:

*"The HIV prevention needs of diverse target groups must be comprehensively addressed beyond HIV testing and condom use. Major gaps in the availability and access to sexual and reproductive health services remain, as well as in general and primary health services. Differences within the sub-groups of MSM and transgender persons need to be recognized and accounted for such as age, education, sexual practices and peer groups"*⁵¹

When Focus Group participants were asked about typical health services, they have access to, the most common answers were sexual and mental health treatments. According to each identity group their answers were:

- **Bisexuals:** HIV treatment and general health care;
- **Gay men:** All participants had access to HIV tests, sexual transmitted disease (STD) treatment and primary healthcare. Three had access to cosmetic/plastic surgery and one had undergone a drug user treatment (rehab);
- **Trans men:** Participants had access to health services to treat hand ache, foot ache, stomach and intestine problems;
- **Trans women:** All of them had access to HIV and STD treatment, general health services and mental health treatments. Ten also undertook plastic surgeries and hormone injections;
- **Lesbians:** All had access to blood tests, mental health treatments, and women's sexual health care.

Health facilities

Participants were asked about where they usually access these health services:

- **Bisexuals:** Chouk Sor⁵² and Men Health's Cambodia (MHC);⁵³
- **Gay men:** Chouk Sor Health Center, private clinics, public hospitals;
- **Trans men:** Private clinics;
- **Trans women:** The Reproductive Health Association of Cambodia (RHAC),⁵⁴ private clinics;
- **Lesbians:** public hospitals and private clinics.

⁴⁹ National AIDS Authority, (NAA). (2010). National Strategic Plan for a Comprehensive and Multi-sectoral Response to AIDS for 2011-2015. p. 29. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-/ed_protect/-/protrav/-/ilo_aids/documents/legaldocument/wcms_177742.pdf

⁵⁰ Salas V & Srun S. (2013). An Exploration of Social Exclusion of Lesbians, Gay and Transgender Persons in Families and Communities and their ways of coping'. Research report. Social Protection Coordination Unit, Council for Agricultural Research and Development (SPCU-CARD), Phnom Penh.

⁵¹ UNDP, USAID (2014). Being LGBTI in Asia: Cambodia Country Report. p. 49. Bangkok. https://www.undp.org/content/dam/rbap/docs/Research%20&%20Publications/hiv_aids/rbap-hhd-2014-blia-cambodia-country-report.pdf

⁵² Chouk Sor is a clinic which provides services on testing and treatment on HIV/AIDS: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/category/Medical-Research-Center/Chhouk-Sar-Clinic-131924400738356/>

⁵³ Men Health's Cambodia (MHC) is a local non-profit non-governmental organisation working on HIV-AIDS prevention intervention for men who have sex with men and transgender women across Cambodia. MHC aims to promote HIV prevention messages, HIV testing and PrEP. <https://www.facebook.com/MensHealthCambodia>

⁵⁴ The Reproductive Health Association of Cambodia (RHAC) is a Cambodian non-governmental organisation which was established in 1996 with a strong determination to bring quality health services to the community. <https://rhac.org.kh/en/about-us-2>



Challenges

When asked about the challenges experienced in accessing health services, poverty and discrimination were frequent themes in the participants' answers.

All bisexual participants said that they do not feel comfortable disclosing their sexuality to doctors. Two of them are particularly afraid the doctors will not keep patient confidentiality and four have already been discriminated against by doctors.

All gay men and lesbians also reported fear of disclosing their sexuality to health professionals as well as lack of financial resources to cover their treatments. A 21-year-old lesbian said: "I am afraid of being discriminated against if I tell the doctors that I am lesbian". Four gay men also reported transportation difficulties, since the hospital is far from their homes and three believe the doctors are not adequately qualified.

All trans people reported that they could not afford to pay for their health care. Seven trans women complained about the poor treatment they receive from doctors and receptionists and seven have been insulted by health professionals. Trans women face dangerous health risks since gender reassignment procedures are not legal in Cambodia. Thus, those who cannot afford to travel to Thailand and pay for their surgeries often make use of illegal and unsafe hormones injections. A 25-year-old trans woman admitted: "I have injected street hormones which I got from my friends and now I have an ugly chest".

Conclusion

As the results of the focus group discussions show, the evidence collected through the 32 participants' answers correlates with previous and current research and emphasises the discrimination patterns experienced by LGBTQI Cambodians. Similar to findings of other studies, surveys, data gatherings and reports, FGD participants reported suffering a series of prejudices:

- **from their families and communities;**
- **at school;**
- **in the workplace;**
- **at healthcare facilities**
- **by financial institutions**

All these layers of discrimination have serious implications not only for LGBTQI people's mental and physical health, but also for their educational achievements and professional skills and thus jeopardize their chances of improving their livelihoods, stepping out of poverty and reaching their full potential.

It is relevant to mention that sex work was not a recurring theme in the FGDs, despite being mentioned in previous and current literature as a common activity among the trans community. This is because sex work is illegal in the country and participants do not consider it as an actual job or occupation, although many were or still are sex workers.

The following is an analysis of the common themes which emerged from the FGDs and resonates among all participants. An examination is also made of the issues which affect them differently, considering sensitive particularities and privileges that certain identity groups have over others.



Common themes

The focus group discussions were conducted in a way which allowed for disaggregation of answers according to each LGBTQI identity. Nonetheless, it was evident in the accounts of participants that they share common challenges and obstacles, regardless of their sexual orientation, gender identity or expression.

When it comes to employment, participants unanimously reported that their LGBTQI identity usually stops them from finding or keeping job. Employers and colleagues do not seem to respect their sexual orientation, gender identity or expression and they are often victims of insults, harassment and abuse in the workplace. Moreover, many participants said that early interruption of their studies stopped them from obtaining the necessary knowledge and skills to secure better jobs. Moreover, all participants expressed a wish to open their own small businesses as an alternative means of income, but they rarely have financial resources to do so.

Financial hardships were a common reality for all participants due to a mix of poverty and discrimination. LGBTQI people are stuck in a poverty cycle because of discrimination from their families, in school and in the workplace, and therefore, cannot meet their living expenses. Moreover, LGBTQI people cannot access banking services because they do not have the necessary documentation because of family rejection and, in some instances, because the family keep their identity documents.

In relation to access to education, all participants have suffered bullying and discrimination at school at some point, either from teachers or students or both, suggesting that schools in Cambodia do not provide a safe and inclusive space for LGBTQI people. This rather hostile environment has frequently forced people to interrupt their studies, resulting in poor living conditions and financial hardships. In some cases, family rejection has also led to lack of financial support, which in turn, has jeopardized LGBTQI youth's chances of obtaining higher levels of formal education.

The participants' experiences in health facilities are also quite problematic and challenging. All participants seem to share a feeling of mistrust of public health professionals because they are often inadequately or not at all qualified or trained to offer sensitive treatment to LGBTQI people. Due to poverty levels, it is unlikely that LGBTQI people can afford private health care.

Patterns and levels of discrimination vary according to Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics

Although participants of the focus group discussions face similar experiences, it is important to underscore some issues and situations which specifically affect certain identity groups.

Lesbians and bisexuals are subject to less discrimination at school and in the workplace if they are able to hide their sexuality. However, if they come out or are perceived to be lesbians it is more likely they will suffer the same experiences of discrimination as other groups. It is not surprising, therefore, that lesbian and bisexual participants were able to obtain higher levels of formal education.

Trans people, on the other hand, are most likely to complete education only to primary school level due to their transition, which makes them much more vulnerable to discrimination and forces them to quit their studies sooner. Their visibility and physical appearance also prevent them from finding employment opportunities and/or leave them subject to further harassment and abuse in the workplace.



It is relevant to notice that gay men may also experience similar challenges, depending on how visible their sexuality or gender expression is, as gender expressions often determine what kind of treatment LGBTQI people receive in Cambodia.

With regard to health services, the answers of participants indicate that trans women, bisexuals, and gay men get tested for HIV and STDs more than trans men and lesbians do. This might be because of trans women, bisexuals and gay men having more sexual partners, and thus, higher risks of transmission. Trans women seem to face higher incidences of discrimination from health service providers because of their physical appearance and are more likely to have health risks due to unsafe injections of hormones and surgeries.

In terms of financial hardships, it was not possible to identify different challenges among identity groups, except that trans people may be more vulnerable to poverty due to more frequent incidences of discrimination.

Recommendations

The recommendations below, primarily targeted towards government and the private sector, are largely based on the lived experiences and suggestions for improvement from the 32 focus group participants. Some have been drafted by the research team based on existing and new findings.

APCOM and RMI, with partners, will continue to advocate for those recommendations to be acted on with a view to remove structural and other barriers for full economic and social inclusion and participation for LGBTQI people in the Cambodian society.

Adoption of non-discriminatory and inclusive policies

1. The government should implement the nine recommendations in relation to sexual orientation and gender identity or expression in the 2019 United Nations Universal Periodic Review (UPR) (Third Cycle). This includes introducing an anti-discrimination law that guarantees equality and explicitly prohibits discrimination of all kinds, including on the basis of religion, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression or sex characteristics. It also includes adopting effective measures to combat discrimination and violence of people because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, and bringing perpetrators to justice;
2. The government should adopt the new Registrar law which provides birth, marriage and death registrations and implement an Action Plan in response to priority needs for the LGBTQI population;
3. Schools, health centres, the Ministry of Labor and Vocational Training (MoLVT), and private businesses should develop and implement non-discrimination policies and ensure that practices are sensitive towards LGBTQI people;
4. Multilateral development banks and financial institutions should strengthen LGBTQI inclusion by developing, integrating, and implementing LGBTQI-focused workplace-, financial-, health- and educational policies and practices and foster effective alliances with multiple state and non-state actors for multilateral cooperation to promote LGBTQI inclusion;
5. Transgender students should be able to wear school uniforms according to their gender identity;



Implementation of non-discriminatory and inclusive programmes

6. Micro-finance institutions and banks should provide loans with flexible conditions and terms to LGBTQI people who wish to start a small business;
7. Banks should offer LGBTQI-friendly services with more flexible terms and conditions for LGBTQI living in poverty;
8. The government should urgently establish, with adequate funding, effective, anonymous and easily accessible mechanisms for LGBTQI people and others to report violence and discrimination;
9. The government should fund programmes for the establishment of support groups for LGBTQI youth at schools and within communities and foster a network of parents, carers and families of LGBTQI people to join forces and advocate for the rights of opportunities of LGBTQI people;
10. Educational institutions should include themes related to sexual and gender education in their curriculum, including sexual and reproductive health;
11. The public health system should have adequate LGBTQI-oriented services and LGBTQI professionals;
12. The government should provide Equity Cards – also known as poverty cards and cards for the poor – to those LGBTQI people in need; and public health facilities should offer free services and treatment to those LGBTQI people in need, including hormone treatment to transgender people;

Awareness raising and training

13. Teachers, health service providers, local authorities, employers and financial service providers should receive training to raise their awareness and be able to offer LGBTQI-friendly and sensitive services. This includes training teachers on how to support non-heterosexual students and to offer guidance to private employers on how to respect, protect and promote LGBTQI rights in the workplace;
14. The government, the private sector and other stakeholders should partner with LGBTQI organisations for SOGIESC inclusion and diversity and raise awareness about LGBTQI issues;

Bridging the data gap on LGBTQI inclusion

15. Partnerships should be fostered between the private and public sectors, academic institutions and organisations working on LGBTQI rights, and funds made available, for more rigorous research to improve and expand available data and information on LGBTQI inclusion. This will inform programs aimed to address and improve the situation of LGBTQI populations in the region;
16. The research capacity of LGBTQI organisations should be built and strengthened so that they are able to meaningfully design, implement, evaluate and participate in qualitative and quantitative research projects on LGBTQI-related issues;

⁵⁵ Equity Cards - also known as poverty cards and cards for the poor - is a government poverty identification programme which gives vulnerable people access to free health care and social support.



Forging Partnerships

17. All relevant stakeholders in Cambodia working towards inclusion of LGBTQI people, including LGBTQI people themselves, communities, NGOs, local and national government, the private sector academia and media, should come together and explore and identify comprehensive solutions to full and meaningful economic and social inclusion of LGBTQI people;

Bibliography

Badgett, Lee, et al. (2014). The Relationship Between LGBT Inclusion and Economic Development: An Analysis of Emerging Economies. The Williams Institute, Los Angeles, USA.

<https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/lgbt-inclusion-economic-dev/>

Cambodia: Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia.

<https://www.wipo.int/edocs/lexdocs/laws/en/kh/kh009en.pdf>

Cambodia: Law of 1989 on the Marriage and Family. (1989).

<https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b55c0.html>

Cambodia: Law on Suppression of Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation. (2008).

https://www.unodc.org/res/cld/document/khm/2008/law_on_suppression_of_human_trafficking_and_sexual_exploitation_html/Cambodia_03_-_Law-on-Suppression-of-Human-Trafficking-and-Sexual-Exploitation-15022008-Eng.pdf

Cambodia Center for Human Rights (CCHR). (2010). Coming Out in the Kingdom: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People in Cambodia.

https://cchrcambodia.org/admin/media/report/report/english/2010-12-09%20COMING%20OUT%20IN%20THE%20KINGDOM%20LESBIAN.%20GAY.%20BISEXUAL%20AND%20TRANSGENDER%20PEOPLE%20IN%20CAMBODIA_EN%20.pdf

Cambodia Center for Human Rights (CCHR). (2012). Rainbow Khmer: From Prejudice to Pride.

https://cchrcambodia.org/index_old.php?url=project_page/project_page.php&p=report_detail.php&reid=85&id=3

Cambodian Alliance for Combatting HIV and AIDS (CACHA) & National AIDS Authority. (2009). Research Report: Policies environment regarding universal access and the right to work of Entertainment Workers in Cambodia.

http://www.haccambodia.org/download_pub.php?file=CACHA%20Action%20Research%20final_English%20version.pdf

Chhoeurng, Rachana; Kong, Yara; Power, Erin. (2016). Poverty of LGBT people in Cambodia. London, UK: Micro Rainbow International C.I.C.

<https://microrainbow.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/CambodiaReportEN.pdf>

Micro Rainbow International (MRIF) (2018). A wave of LGBTI acceptance in Cambodia.

<https://mrifoundation.global/a-wave-of-lgbti-acceptance-in-cambodia/>

National AIDS Authority, (NAA). (2010). National Strategic Plan for a Comprehensive and Multi-sectoral Response to AIDS for 2011-2015.

https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---ilo_aids/documents/legaldocument/wcms_177742.pdf

Kunthear, M and Drennan, J. (2013) Laws can't stop lovers Marrying. Phnom Penh Post, 20 May 2013.

<https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/laws-can%E2%80%99t-stop-lovers-marrying>

RoCK. (2019). Family Violence towards Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender (LBT) People in Cambodia.

<http://www.suarakita.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Family-Violence-towards-Lesbian-Bisexual-and-Transgender-LBT-People-in-Cambodia-Report.pdf>

RoCK, MRIF. (2019). Second National Dialogue on Legal and Public Policies to Protect LGBTIQ People in Cambodia. Joint Press Release. 27 June 2019. Phnom Penh.

https://cchrcambodia.org/media/files/press_release/716_fprpde_en.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1EXzAMx6-oofncSAusOxfkOMrbig8EkmYewNUBslbpYefl-L_YQsAJRxc

Salas V & Srun S. (2013). An Exploration of Social Exclusion of Lesbians, Gay and Transgender Persons in Families and Communities and their ways of coping. Research report. Social Protection Coordination Unit, Council for Agricultural Research and Development (SPCU-CARD), Phnom Penh.

The World Bank (2005). Country Assessment Strategy (CAS) for the Kingdom of Cambodia.

The World Bank. Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity.

<https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/sexual-orientation-and-gender-identity>

UNDP, USAID (2014). Being LGBTI in Asia: Cambodia Country Report. Bangkok.

https://www.undp.org/content/dam/rbap/docs/Research%20&%20Publications/hiv_aids/rbap-hhd-2014-blia-cambodia-country-report.pdf

UNESCO (2008). HIV/AIDS Prevention Programme: Ethnography of Male to Male Sexuality in Cambodia. Phnom Penh.

<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0016/001630/163077E.pdf>

Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (2018). Global Multidimensional Poverty Index 2018: The Most Detailed Picture to Date of the World's Poorest People. University of Oxford, UK.

<https://ophi.org.uk/multidimensional-poverty-index/global-mpi-2018/>

United Nations Human Rights Council. (2019). Universal Periodic Review (UPR), (Third Cycle), 2019: Cambodia. Matrix of recommendations (English).

<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/UPR/Pages/KHindex.aspx>

Yogyakarta Principles Plus 10 (YP+10)

<https://yogyakartaprinciples.org/principles-en/yp10/T>



Equity. Dignity. Social Justice.



We are united in advocating for issues around HIV and those that advance the rights, health and well being of people of diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics.

apcom.org

Equity. Dignity. Social Justice.

APCOM Secretariat | 59/50-51 Udomsuk Soi 13, Sukhumvit 103 Rd.,
Bangna-Nua, Bangna, Bangkok 10260, Thailand
+66 2399 1145 / +66 2399 1146 | www.apcom.org | apcom@apcom.org



[/apcom.org](https://www.facebook.com/apcom.org)



[@APCOM](https://twitter.com/APCOM)



[/APCOMorg](https://www.youtube.com/APCOMorg)



[/APCOMorg](https://www.instagram.com/APCOMorg)



[/apcom](https://www.linkedin.com/company/apcom)