Facing Double Discrimination: Cambodian Lesbians Are Breaking the Silence

by Meghan Lewis
-Cambodia-

"Feelings, oh feelings, please accept this. I have not wronged - even in law. We wish to have a place in this world and to love one another freely." -Noy Sitha, 58, Women’s Network for Unity

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people exist in all countries yet in many places they remain largely invisible and subject to discrimination and human rights violations. In more than 80 countries homosexuality is punishable by law and in several of those countries the punishment for same-sex love may be death. Even in "progressive" countries like England or the United States, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people are still fighting for equal rights including the right to employment, to marry, and to have a family.

Since I came to Cambodia in 2008, I have been part of the formation of a small group of local and international LGBT volunteers who organized Cambodia Pride 2009 and 2010 – two week-long Pride events in Cambodia.
emphasizing love, diversity, and acceptance. These events included workshops on lesbian sexual health and family acceptance as well as a community day, an art exhibition, and a film festival. The group, Rainbow Community Kampuchea, is still young but very active. Furthermore, my work at the Khmer HIV/AIDS Alliance is an advocacy role focusing on raising awareness about gender and sexuality in the response to HIV and AIDS in Cambodia. Through this work, I am friends with many Cambodian LGBT and we are working closely together to change the way LGBT are viewed in society. In Cambodia, lesbians are subject to double discrimination – they fight first for their rights as women and then for their rights as lesbians.

As a result of Pride, a local human rights NGO recently initiated a three-year project focusing specifically on LGBT rights. The LGBT community is strengthening organically and for the first time in Cambodia it is inclusive of lesbians, who until now have remained largely invisible. Lesbians are breaking free of the shackles of shame that have kept them silent for so long and are speaking out against the misconception that only heterosexual relationships are valid or natural.

As part of the HIV response, Cambodia, like many developing countries, in recent years started providing services for men who have sex with men (MSM). Although this helps raise visibility of non-heterosexual people and provides much needed health education, this focuses attention entirely on men and thus lesbians remain invisible. In addition, MSM refers to a behavior rather than an identity, so the term can be problematic as it does not address other aspects of sexuality such as love, communities, and feelings.

The lack of visibility for Cambodian lesbians often leaves them feeling isolated not only from heterosexual society, but from the more visible gay and MSM communities as well. An LGBT workshop facilitated in
March by Rainbow Community Kampuchea, sought to redress this issue and invited lesbians to anonymously submit questions to a female health advisor about sexual health.

Their questions included, Can lesbians get STDs and how? If we have a lot of sex does it affect our health or not? How can we protect ourselves from diseases? And, If MSM are at high risk from HIV, does that mean lesbians are too?

The basic nature of these questions indicates an overwhelming lack of information and advice about lesbian sexual health. There is confusion as lesbians are often forced to look at information tailored for heterosexual couples and MSM and then draw conclusions about their own health.

Cambodian society places a high value on family. Because of this, most gay men, lesbians, and transgender people feel pressured to marry a partner of the opposite sex. Society deems it acceptable for men to keep their autonomy and independence after marriage; they can go out at night, drink, stay out with their friends, and even have other sexual partners.

In this way, many gay men who are married to women are able to have relationships with men outside the marriage. For women however, this is not the case. Women are expected to bear children, carry out housekeeping duties and often have less freedom to go out alone and meet friends.

When lesbians do make the brave decision to come out publicly, they face discrimination from friends and family. Lesbians who are more masculine in appearance often have difficulties finding and keeping employment and housing.

Noy Sitha, 58, is an outreach volunteer for Women’s Network for Unity, a collective of sex workers, lesbians, and garment workers in Phnom Penh. Sitha shares with me how she was discriminated against at her workplace, “I worked at the Department of Classical Arts and they would only let me speak on the radio. One of the reasons they did not let me perform visually is because of my masculine appearance. I did not wear skirts.”
Pheang Sanh, 57, identifies as a lesbian, but like many Cambodian lesbians believes she is both male and female. “In my previous life, I was a girl and I died at age seven. My previous parents did not love me as a daughter, so when I died, they wrapped me with a red mat and left me on the base of Rang (name of tree), located in a stream. My spirit cried silently and wished that if I could be born again, I would be a boy whom my parents love,” she says.

The main religion in Cambodia is Theravada Buddhism, and the teachings influence a wide range of beliefs in Cambodia. It is not unusual for queer sexual identities to be explained through past lives lived as the opposite gender, as illustrated in Sanh’s beliefs. It has also been said by some who are critical of homosexuality that it is karmic retribution for an individual’s past life. There are conflicting opinions within Khmer Buddhism as to the morality of homosexuality. While some texts condemn homosexuality as immoral, there are others that say it does not conflict with Buddhist ideology. During a recent workshop for LGBT people and their families, a highly regarded monk explained that Buddhist teaching simply asks that people live good lives, regardless of who they loved.

Although as a teenager, Sanh wore men’s clothes and had a girlfriend, her parents arranged for her to marry a marine officer in 1969. She was deeply unhappy about it, but she had to honour her parent’s wishes.

Sanh and her husband had a daughter before he was killed during the Pol Pot regime, “I was happy because I finally had my freedom, yet I pitied him. He used to be a monk, he was kind and he knew about my true identity.”

Sanh has lived her whole life experiencing discrimination from her family and her community. Speaking about one relationship with a woman she said, “We were so afraid, we contemplated committing suicide.” Now she is trying to promote acceptance
of lesbians in Cambodia so that the next generation does not have to suffer as she did.

Women like Sanh and Sitha are taking action to change the way that Cambodian society views lesbians. "I have educated fellow lesbians to be aware of their rights. I persuade them to be brave and to take control of their lives," says Sitha. "We ourselves must be conscious of who we are. We must make society recognize us as human beings even though we are lesbians. Our hearts are created by blood and flesh as all others are. We do not destroy our country and do harm. We only want to live our lives with our families. Why does society discriminate against us?"

It will take a long time for Sanh and Sitha to reach their goal of a society that does not discriminate against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, but small changes are already visible and they remain hopeful that more change is on the way.

Srun Srorn, who has organized several Pride events in the Kingdom, says, "Pride is all about love, and demonstrating that we are the same as everyone else and have the right to have everything that straight people have. Sometimes gays and lesbians are seen as almost sub-human by many people in our society but we want to tell those people that we are human beings- and we love who we are."

**About the Author:**

**Meghan Lewis** is the Policy, Advocacy and Communications Officer for the Khmer HIV/AIDS NGO Alliance and works to reduce discrimination against marginalized groups in the response to HIV and AIDS. She has been a key actor in the formation of Cambodia’s first LGBT group, Rainbow Community Kampuchea (RoCK). Throughout her personal, academic and professional life, her primary passion has been to reduce the inequalities that exist in so many areas of society and work towards a future where opportunities are accessible to all people regardless of ethnicity, economics, gender or sexuality.

**TAGS:** Cambodia Discrimination Homosexuality Human Rights LGBT

ADD A COMMENT | RECOMMEND THIS! (3) | more from THE WORLD | EMAIL THIS ENTRY | PRINT THIS

| ADD TO DEL.icio.us | ADD TO TECHNORATI | ADD TO DIGG | ADD TO NEWSVINE |
LEAVE A COMMENT

You must be logged in to comment.

Username:

Password:

Submit