

# LGBTIQ

## VOICES

Exploring gender diversity and same sex relationships in Cambodia.



An Initiative of  
Our Turn



This publication is a collaboration between LovelsDiversity and Women Peace Makers.

The photos in this publication have been taken of and by advocates from the LGBTIQ community with members of LovelsDiversity and Women Peace Makers who wish to share their identity in support of this work. Images do not reveal the identity of participants who shared their opinions and stories in conversations.

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# A Rocky Journey

## Finding happiness and seeking acceptance in a society of misunderstanding

*Thida Kuy* (he/him)

A lot of this collaborative work initially began with marginalised women. Our inclusion, however, pushed these women to think about gender in a deeper and more complex way. Our community represents a far wider range of gender identity and we have faced marginalisation in similar but unique ways.

This qualitative research brings something incredibly important to our evolving knowledge about LGBTIQ in Cambodia. The participants of this research (known as “Sharers”) shared very personal aspects of their life experiences. Through conversations and intimate storytelling with the community researchers (known as “Listeners”), the knowledge that was created in that space has contributed to a beautiful and nuanced picture of our world.

I grew up unsure about myself. I didn't like wearing dresses or skirts. In all honesty, I really just wanted to wear my brother's clothes. I was born a girl, but I began liking oth-

er girls at around 10 years old. It was strange. Puberty is hard enough, but for us, it's so much harder. We are desperately trying to figure out who we are and who we like. When I was 17 years old, I had my first relationship. She turned my world upside down. Although we stayed together in secret, I began to follow my heart. For another eight years, I embarked on a journey defined by lesbianism, learning more about my sexual orientation. I felt happy and excited to be with women, but I also felt terrified and fearful of what would happen if others found out. As I discovered more and more about who I loved, I also began questioning my own gender identity as a woman. I couldn't see my future. My true coming out day was when I was 24 years old. After deep reflection and many experiences, I decided to be true to myself and others. I was a man. This transition from a lesbian woman to a transgender man got me closer to who I really was and what I imagined my ideal life to be.



The findings in this work carried out by our own community members share insightful information about how LGBTIQ are navigating their lives in Cambodia. One of the more shocking findings relates to violence, and particularly the danger and fear that transgender women sex workers are facing. Although our research sample is too small to make definitive conclusions, our snapshot shows that this specific population needs more focus. They are facing unimaginable violence and have no recourse to report what is happening to them without risk to themselves. One of the most discussed issues in conversations was the overall lack of legal recognition that LGBTIQ face in the country. This includes not being recognised by their gender identity as well as having no legal rights in same-sex relationships – including the inability to marry the person they love. Policy-makers must take note of the injustice we face and how that affects so many aspects of our daily lives. Ensuring that our gender identity is not decided by someone else and providing the basic right for same-sex marriage are fundamental starting points for LGBTIQ in Cambodia. Equally important was the theme that emerged on discrimination for all members of our community. Discrimination starts for most of us in our families but stems from the broader society in which we are misunderstood, treated unequally, pressured to conform to social norms, and not accepted for who we are or for who we love.

Reading through these pages may not always be comfortable. You may or may not fully understand the complexity of our gender identities or why we may love someone of the same-sex. I ask you, however, to be open-minded enough to hear what our community is saying and the experiences we've had. Maybe even imagine what if you were forced to act as the opposite gender or love someone of the same-sex if that wasn't you. We are all discovering our identities throughout our lives, and LGBTIQ are no different. Join us to make the necessary changes in our society so we can live to our fullest potential, achieve our dreams, and find the happiness we all deserve.

*Thida Kuy*

Co-founder, LovelsDiversity



# Facilitative Listening Design Steps

1



Listener recruitment

2



Customising tools

3



Coaching and Training Lab

4



Trial conversation and reflecting

5



Fieldwork and recording

6



Info-Space Lab

7



Information verification and analysis

8



Writing and planning relevant outputs

Design: Valentina Rivero

# The Study

This study was implemented and led by members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer (LGBTIQ) community. It provides a snapshot into the reality that individuals with diverse or non-binary gender identities or couples in diverse relationships face on a daily basis in Cambodia. As part of a larger endeavour to capture narratives of intersectionality among people who are marginalised in multiple aspects of their identity, this subsection of the study explores the lives, experiences, and perspectives the LGBTIQ community through a qualitative information gathering methodology known as Facilitative Listening Design (FLD). An evolving peace research approach, FLD was chosen for this work largely for its advantage in providing the space for informal sharing on sensitive issues in local community contexts.

# The Methodology

Facilitative Listening Design is an “insider” human-to-human centred approach to better understand prevailing dynamics and explore sensitive topics that make for difficult conversations. It encourages deeper critical thinking and leverages the process to bring together groups at odds with each other or among those with little to no contact and find solutions to protracted negative attitudes, stereotypes, or sentiment. It maintains the rigorous procedural and information-checking steps in conducting listening research but puts a stronger emphasis on gaining relatively in-depth insight into a topic as a snapshot at a given moment.

The advantage in this context is that it can be carried out quickly and respond to situations in a timely manner. It is also discreet. Conversations can happen in private or can be informal in nature to provide anonymity to the participants. There is no need to connect any recorded information to the individuals who participated as all documentation happens after and away from where conversations took place. The conversational style of information-gathering can be employed nearly anywhere, even in extremely sensitive environments where conducting more traditional research, using audio recording or questionnaires, may not be feasible. With no need for papers or devices, participants can blend into different environments and engage with people simply as people rather than research participants. It can also be adapted to a range of cultural needs and communication styles depending on the context and the groups involved.

Over the years in this context, FLD has been carried out with groups facing multiple marginalisation including Indigenous women, women with disabilities, rural-to-urban migrant women, and women facing violence. This time, minority women including Cambodian Muslim, ethnic Vietnamese, and Khmer Krom as well as members of the LGBTIQ community worked together to conduct FLD in with their own communities. This publication shares the findings from the LGBTIQ study. Eight general steps from the FLD approach guided the process from design to implementation.

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed understanding of FLD methodology, refer to The FLD Handbook: Using Facilitative Design For Your Project (October 2017) provided at <http://wpmcambodia.org/project/the-fld-handbook>.

# The Demographics

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This study included ten conversations with 20 individuals in intimate relationships that identified themselves as members of the LGBTIQ community. The conversations were carried out by two information gatherers referred to as Listeners. The Listeners, both lesbians and active members in the community, engaged with couples in unstructured conversations. With the wish to make the study widely national, they connected to people, referred to as Sharers, across the country in four areas including Phnom Penh, Battambang, Siem Reap, and Kampong Thom. Through existing contacts and networks of LovelsDiversity, Listeners reached out to their Sharers to engage in conversations with a diverse range of people who identified as lesbian, gay, transgender, and queer. Sharers also represented diverse aspects of their own communities, including both younger and older individuals and from a variety of professional backgrounds. The group of Sharers ranged from the ages of 21 to 74 years old.





## A Profile of our Listeners

FLD is a chance for Listeners to lead the work in their own contexts. They connect with people from their own communities, and they try to put aside their own biases to listen directly to people who may or may not be in the same situation as they are. In this initiative, two lesbian women joined to connect to other lesbian Sharers, and also engaged with gay men and both transgender men and women. The Listeners, Anotra and Tharvy, are both activists and are members of the LovelsDiversity network that promotes rights for the LGBTIQ community in Cambodia. Both women come from rural provinces but live in the capital city of Phnom Penh and worked together to carry out FLD across the country.

Tharvy feels that promoting LGBTIQ rights is very challenging because there is so much discrimination and little support for her community. She feels that the most difficult aspect of being a lesbian is when others say negative comments towards her and others. She wanted to become a Listener to try a different research method that might help to generate new knowledge on the issues that are so important to her. Anotra identifies herself as someone in a same-sex relationship and sees same-sex couples with unique issues and challenges. For her, becoming a Listener was an important way to better hear from others about their stories and experiences, but also to be able to find better solutions to the challenges that most LGBTIQ people in Cambodia face.



# The Findings

Initial findings of FLD were analysed by the Listeners themselves based on the data they collected and the themes they heard the most during their fieldwork. Through a process of early analysis, the following findings emerged among the conversations between Listeners and Sharers.

## LGBTIQ individuals in Cambodia **Emerging themes**

- 1.** We cannot get any recognition of our relationships.
- 2.** We face many problems without ID that properly designates our gender identity.
- 3.** We want protection from violence and for LGBTIQ to be recognised as a vulnerable group.
- 4.** We continue to suffer rejection and misunderstanding in our families.
- 5.** We want society to better understand us and end discrimination against LGBTIQ.
- 6.** Societal stereotypes and difficulties faced from our identities lead to limited job opportunities mainly in certain sectors only.

## **We are together!**

Finding 1 - We cannot get any recognition of our relationships.

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*I went to the local authorities and asked them to register as a family in the family book and they said they couldn't do it as a couple, but only put us together as sisters since there is no law to allow it.*

- Said in a conversation with a lesbian woman and a transgender man who have been together in a relationship for over ten years





The Cambodian Constitution defines marriage between a “husband” and a “wife.” Although there has been support for same-sex marriage over the years from the Cambodian government, legal recognition of same-sex couples remains limited.

Same-sex couples in Cambodia having FLD conversations discussed at length the difficulties of not being able to get married or have their relationships recognised. Without a marriage certificate, couples expressed that they worried about the future of a surviving partner after death since their wealth would not likely be transferred as in the case of married individuals. They lamented the inability to adopt children since being married is one of the requirements in the process of adoption. They also brought up the issue of joint-ownership, and the impossibility to buy land together in a union.

Beyond legal recognition as a marriage, same-sex couples also shared about being unrecognised by their own communities or by their families, and the difficulties that led to in their daily lives. Some shared stories about their families trying to separate them to marry somebody else of the opposite sex.

Sharers stressed that it was necessary in the future to recognise same-sex couples and for laws to evolve to allow for marriage so they could be treated equally. Many were confident that such changes would eventually come to Cambodia and felt that it was important for the next generation of LGBTIQ individuals to be able to be with their partners openly and legally.



*“I want local  
authorities  
to allow us to  
get a marriage  
certificate like  
other couples and  
have a family book  
based on law so  
we can have a  
family.”*

- Brought up during an FLD conversation by a  
33-year-old lesbian who sells food and is in a five-year  
relationship with her partner

## **It's our identity, our gender**

Finding 2 - We face many problems without ID that properly designates our gender identity.

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*We are scared to vote or to meet local authorities because we're required to cut our hair to match the identity on the card.*

- Said by a transgender woman and her gay male partner who have been in a relationship for seven years in Battambang



Gender identity in Cambodia is mostly separated by sex of either male or female for all legal purposes. Although there are no laws prohibiting a person from defining their own gender identity, there are neither any provisions for allowing the legal recognition of self-defined gender identity on official identity documents.. This leaves gender designation on identification mainly at the discretion of the authority in charge of issuing it. Such discrepancy affects individuals who may not conform to the gender identity assigned to them by others.

Mainly transgender Sharers in the study discussed their struggles with ID and gender identity. For some, the inability to define their own gender identity in legal documents and identification left them feeling they did not know who they were themselves. One of the Sharers talked

in detail about her experience of being misgendered on her ID. As a transgender female with the designation of male on her passport, she was stopped at immigration when she was travelling from Thailand back to Cambodia after her sex reassignment surgery. She said she faced harassment and delay at immigration for having an identity on her passport that did not conform to her physical appearance. In essence, she was stopped because she appeared as a woman but was holding the passport of a male.

Other Sharers mentioned the difficulty when applying for a job when the gender in their IDs were different from how they were seen in person. For example, those who were interviewed at a factory or a restaurant as the gender that they lived later faced problems when they had to show their ID with a different



*"I really want to get an ID card that identifies me as a man, but I'm worried it will affect my work since I've been a woman on all my IDs since 1975."*

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- A transgender man in a 47-year relationship in Phnom Penh

## **We need special consideration**

Finding 3 - We want protection from violence and for LGBTIQ to be recognised as a vulnerable group.

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*As sex workers in the park, they never meet any good people. Sometimes they meet with drunks or drug users. Sometimes they take them in the middle of the forest and have sex with them without paying...*

- A 27-year-old gay man in a relationship with a former transgender female sex worker

For many LGBTIQ individuals in Cambodia, violence begins at an early age, sometimes from family members or later when they are bullied in school. In fact, in research conducted in 2019 by Rainbow Community Kampuchea, researchers found that 81% of participants from the LBT community faced violence in their lives. Another study carried out by the Cambodian Centre for Human Rights in 2016 showed the situation for transgender sex workers to be particularly grim. A quarter of the transgender women surveyed had been raped in public and 43% of them had been physically abused. 40% of them had been arrested by authorities with most of them stating they were arrested simply because of their transgender identity.

In the FLD study, violence was most associated with LGBTIQ working in the sex industry. A former transgender sex worker spoke about many experiences of violence with customers. She was frequently hit, beaten, and choked. She said she faced the most violent attacks usually around 2 or 3am. Listeners also mentioned during the data analysis that transgender sex workers were sometimes targeted when people would attack them after having sex and leaving them without paying.

Sharers most often felt isolated and unprotected in society because of their gender identity. They expressed desire to be protected and to be able to reach out to authorities without worrying whether their gender identity would be an issue.





*“When I was sex worker at the park... one day I was called by a customer who was high and got violent and tried to kill me... he put a rope around my neck and beat me, almost killing me, but I managed to escape.”*

- A 33-year-old transgender woman who worked as a sex worker in Siem Reap

## **The black sheep of the family**

Finding 4 - We continue to suffer rejection and misunderstanding in our families.

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*When my wife and I did not yet know each other, I was forced by my mother to marry a man in order to honour my parents, even though I wasn't attracted to men. I've known that I'm gay since I was a child.*

- A 35-year-old lesbian who works at an NGO in Phnom Penh

Members of the LGBTIQ community often suffer growing up in families that do not fully accept their gender identity or sexual orientation. In Cambodia, there are quite traditional roles for family members as well as for gender. Males are often seen as the income earners while women are usually primary care givers and homemakers. Not fitting into the traditional norms can be challenging for young LGBTIQ individuals.

Several Sharers discussed the lack of acceptance they faced in their families in being themselves. They talked about their parents expressing shame towards them or insulting them. Some gay participants discussed the pressure they had to

leave their same-sex relationships or had parents that would not recognise their partners. There were some stories by those who had been forced into heterosexual marriages by their parents despite identifying themselves as gender diverse, gay, or lesbian. Others shared about experiences having their parents or relatives try to break them up.

All Sharers included in the study wished to be accepted for who they were and to have the freedom to choose their partners and spouses. They wanted their families, communities, and the general public to allow them to love the people they loved, regardless of gender norms and societal pressure to conform.



*“My father hates me so much and says I don’t honour him and is so ashamed of me. He says I don’t listen to what he says as my father or follow him. He says he only has three children, two boys and a gay, and that I am the sick one. It hurts so much when he says those words.”*

- A 36-year-old lesbian from Phnom Penh  
who now lives in the USA

## It's time for change

Finding 5 - We want society to understand us better and end discrimination against LGBTIQ.

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*A long time ago when my wife went to Thailand it ended up being a disaster when she had the passport with a photo as a man with short hair that didn't reflect her and her long hair when she entered.*

- A 31-year-old gay man with a transgender partner from Battambang

LGBTIQ people in Cambodia constantly face issues in society. From within their communities to encountering inequity in laws, they often feel misunderstood and treated as unequal by others. In a 2014 UNDP report, it was noted that Cambodia is a relatively neutral country for LGBT citizens in the sense that they are not specifically targeted, but they are neither positively affirmed. For many members of the LGBTIQ community, being tolerated is one thing, but sometimes feeling invisible or unrecognised is another.

Many Sharers lamented the lack of legal provisions to protect people of diverse gender identities or in non-binary relationships. Beyond legally recognised marriages, LGBTIQ individuals also desired many other rights like adopting children and owning land together. They also expressed their wish for more social acceptance in Cambodia. They wanted their communities and their neighbours to accept them and not question their ability or inability to have children with their partners or create lifestyles that matched the majority. Most of all, they wanted discrimination against them to stop.





*“When buying land, we want to have our names together, but we can’t because we do not have the same documents as other couples. We struggle together, live together, and earn money, but when we want to put our land in our names together, we can’t so I just named my spouse as the owner. We think that if Cambodia changes and has laws recognising LGBT people, and is more civilised, we can finally register together.”*

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- A 31-year-old gay man in an unrecognised marriage with his partner in Battambang



*“When I was working at a printing shop in Siem Reap, some other staff said that I was abnormal and that I wasn’t natural. I told them I was natural but that I was just following my heart, but they still couldn’t understand me.”*

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- A 33-year-old transgender man who now lives in Phnom Penh

## Unequal job access

Finding 6 - Societal stereotypes and difficulties in understanding our identities lead to limited job opportunities in specific sectors.

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*Some of the male co-workers  
bullied me at the workplace.*

- A 31-year-old lesbian from Siem Reap who now works as a restaurant singer

LGBTIQ community members in Cambodia face limitations in the sectors they can work. Due to stigma, stereotypes, and discrimination, many feel they can only fit into certain industries or environments. Some gay male Sharers felt that they faced specific challenges to get certain jobs due to the perception of gay men being connected to specific industries. For example, a gay man might be stereotypically associated with working at a beauty salon or in the make-up industry. A transgender woman, however, might be fired as a teacher if her identity is found out by parents or the school administrators.

Some Sharers also felt that the LGBTIQ community had less educational opportunities in their lives and subsequently could not gain better employment compared to others. For example, for young LGBTIQ individuals that did not conform to gender norms as students, they were not able to continue attending school or ran into problems with their teachers. This put them at a great disadvantage when seeking employment without higher levels of education.





*“I was never happy to work in the sex industry, but I did it because of the money and to support myself. As a transgender woman without education, sex work was my only choice.”*

- A former sex worker



**This initiative would not be possible without the generous support of Voice.**



LGBTIQ Voices takes a look into the lives of people in Cambodia who live outside the gender mainstream and heterosexual norms that define society. Part of a collaborative initiative known as Our Turn, this work seeks to better understand the challenges, struggles, hopes, and dreams of LGBTIQ individuals in same-sex and non-binary relationships. It has been led by members of the LGBTIQ community through a participatory approach to not only generate new knowledge on these issues, but to also explore connections with other groups facing multiple marginalisation.

This publication shares the findings based on conversations with 20 LGBTIQ individuals in relationships across Cambodia. Leveraging Facilitative Listening Design (FLD), a participatory community information gathering approach that connects “Listeners” to “Sharers” in a deep conversation, these findings paint a more comprehensive human picture of those living in Cambodia with diverse gender identities or in diverse relationships. The messages from the community itself push readers to consider their issues and learn about how the law and societal norms affect them in their everyday lives.



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