Poverty of LGBT People in Cambodia

May 2016

Micro Rainbow International

Addressing the situation of poverty of LGBTI people worldwide
Poverty of
LGBT People in Cambodia

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# Poverty of LGBT People in Cambodia

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Micro Rainbow International (MRI) is a not for profit social enterprise founded by social entrepreneur and LGBTI activist @SebastianRocca in 2012.

MRI is dedicated to improving the livelihoods of LGBTI people who are discriminated against because of their sexual orientation, gender identity, or intersex status. It addresses the situation of poverty of LGBTI people worldwide by making policy recommendations and by devising tools and actions that can enable them to step out of poverty.
Micro Rainbow International
Addressing the situation of poverty of LGBTI people worldwide
Acknowledgements

Micro Rainbow International is extremely grateful to the fifteen LGBT people of Cambodia who generously gave their time and energy to participate in this study and shared the very personal details of their lives in order to help us encourage others to understand their situation.

We are also very grateful to MRI's local coordinators Yara Kong and Rachana Chhoeurng who carried out, recorded and translated the interviews from Khmer to English and to Erin Power for writing the report.

This report would not have happened without the support of MRI's local partners, CamASEAN Youth's Future. Since 2013 MRI and CamASEAN Youth's Future have been working together to help LGBTI Cambodians to step out of poverty and have developed a trusting relationship and a mutual understanding of each other's working ethics. For this we are grateful.

Last but not least, we want to thank MRI’s allies: this report was solely produced thanks to the generosity of those individuals who make a monthly financial contribution to MRI or support our work with in-kind services such as legal advice, which frees resources to support more LGBTI people to step out of poverty. This support also helps us to be more sustainable and independent, which contributes to our ability to react quickly to a changing environment. You can become an ally too at micro-rainbow.org/become-an-ally.

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We are delighted to publish this paper on the specific situation of poverty of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) people in Cambodia.

This project is the result of a long period of observation and listening to the stories of many LGBT people in various Cambodian provinces, those LGBT people without privileges, who became poor and/or remain poor simply because of their sexuality or gender expression.

MRI and CamASEAN Youth’s Future have been working together in a strong and trusting partnership since 2013. During the last three years, we have connected and built relationships with dozens of LGBT people who not only want to be equal to the rest of the community, but most importantly need support and opportunities to improve their livelihoods.

As you can read from the case studies at the end of the report, their stories vary, but they all have something in common. They live in a situation of poverty and they lack prospects for the future because of the discrimination and abuse they faced and continue to face in schools, in public spaces, in accessing services, by their families, the government or the community solely because of their sexuality or gender expression.

With this report we want to give a voice and a face to the reality of many LGBT Cambodians, which differs from the common western stereotypes of gay affluence. It shows an uncomfortable truth that is relevant to many countries: not only do LGBT people not have the support of the state, of their families or communities, but also they are abused and discriminated against by them. Many LGBT people are alone and are destined to be and remain poor.

We hope that this report will start a conversation that is desperately needed - a dialogue that includes how to reach the most vulnerable within society and amongst the LGBT community, how to design and implement LGBT inclusive development programs, and last but not least, how to change people’s minds and hearts.

Sebastian Rocca Srorn Srun
Founder and CEO Founder & Resource Person
Micro Rainbow International CamASEAN Youth’s Future
Executive Summary

When looking at the poverty of LGBT\(^1\), \(^2\) people in Cambodia, we can see a correlation with Micro Rainbow International’s previous studies into the poverty of lesbian and gay refugees in the UK\(^3\) and the poverty of LGBT people in Brazil\(^4\). Discrimination based on sexuality or gender identity contributes to poverty.

However, there is also an outstanding difference. In both the UK and Brazil, the struggles for rights for LGBT people have previously made little connection with the issue of poverty. Cambodia is one of the world’s poorest countries\(^5\). In terms of working against discrimination and achieving equal rights for LGBT in Cambodia it is early days – pride events began in 2003, the first networking of MSM and transgender persons was in 2006 and the first official recognition of an LGBT organisation was in 2014\(^6\).

LGBT people in Cambodia believe that by stepping out of poverty they will change the attitudes towards them of their families, their communities and society.

---

1) We have not included intersex people in our research because we could not speak to anyone who identifies as such in Cambodia. For the purposes of this report, we use the acronym of LGBT, whilst acknowledging the invisibility of intersex people in both research and community work – areas that increasingly require more attention from non-governmental and governmental stakeholders.

2) In this report, we use the following definition for trans: “Trans* people include those people who have a gender identity which is different to the gender assigned at birth and/or those people who feel they have to, prefer to or choose to – whether by clothing, accessories, cosmetics or body modification – present themselves differently to the expectations of the gender role assigned to them at birth. This includes, among many others, transsexual and transgender people, transvestites, travesti, cross dressers, no gender and genderqueer people”. See GATE: http://transactivists.org/trans/.


5) Cambodia is ranked 138 out of 185 countries on the UNDP 2013 Human Development Index. According to the World Bank, the poverty rate decreased from 53.2 percent in 2004 to 20.5 percent in 2011. However, a significant portion of the population remains ‘near poor’ as they are still at high risk of falling back into poverty at the slightest income shock. Thus, the impact of losing US$0.30 a day in income would double the poverty rate to 40 percent. Overview, Cambodia, United Nations World Food Programme www.wfp.org/node/3418

Theirs is a strong argument for suggesting that one answer to achieving LGBT equality in Cambodia is to address the issue of LGBT poverty.

This study into poverty in the LGBT community in Cambodia was carried out by Micro Rainbow International in late 2015. Fifteen people were interviewed about their lives – their backgrounds, their education, their experience of discrimination, their finances and their aspirations, using a structured questionnaire. Three of these people told more in-depth stories about themselves.

Although this is a relatively small study, there are findings that are so prevailing we can draw a picture of some of the causes of poverty amongst LGBT people in Cambodia. There are also findings that are so dominant it would not be imprudent to generalise from them. Additionally, there are findings that are so heartening they must be mentioned, even though they are peripheral to the issue of poverty.

Those who were interviewed represent a wide age range. In a country where over 50% of the population is under 25, 60% of those we interviewed are over 25.

In this report we refer to only LGBT as nobody interviewed identifies as Intersex. 47% identify as trans, 27% identify as lesbian, 20% identify as bisexual and 7% identify as gay. However, we cannot apply concepts of identity created in other parts of the world to these self-definitions. Many Cambodian LGBT people define themselves according to their gender norm rather than sexual orientation. In a language where there are no words for LGBTI, the way English words are used is very different from what we might be familiar with. Nobody self-identifying as intersex does not mean that interviewees might not include someone that in another society might identify as such.

Everyone interviewed is aware that education is fundamental to improving their prospects and, for those struggling financially, to a future beyond poverty. However, 87% of those interviewed said they have not completed their education. Although a third of the participants have been to university, only two (13%) finished their studies. In a country where education is not free, the reasons for this are both poverty, cited by 62%, and discrimination, either by the family who stop paying for education or by others at school or university.

Participants in this study live in a variety of circumstances – alone, with partners, with friends, with children or are homeless – but what is notable is that 40% live with family and one third live with seven or more people.

Those interviewed were asked to give detailed descriptions of their experiences of discrimination. One third reported no discrimination because they did not answer these questions or they have not disclosed their sexual or gender identity.

Of the two-thirds who did report discrimination, they reported incidents occurring over a period of 57 years – from 1958 to 2015. Two people talked about family-related discrimination with a duration of 36 years and 30 years respectively, one talked about work-related discrimination with a duration of 21 years and one talked about school-related discrimination with a duration of 10 years.

Everyone reported discrimination by their families. Those reporting discrimination by neighbours and the public said it happened all the time and 70% of family discrimination happened all the time. Discrimination ranged from verbal abuse and threats to being held captive in the home or forced out of home or work.


8) See footnote no.1

We asked about experiences of discrimination specific to school and to work.

Eight of those interviewed said they had experienced no discrimination at school because they were not out. Of the six people who did experience discrimination, four respondents said that the abuse was constant. They were bullied, physically abused and told to change their behaviour or the way they dressed.

Seven of those interviewed are not out at work. Of the eight that are out at work, seven reported discrimination either in their current or previous jobs. They reported bullying, verbal abuse, being told to change their behaviour and the way they dressed and being told to change their gender. Half of those reporting discrimination at work said it was workmates and colleagues who abused them. Three said it happened all the time and one lost their job.

All fifteen respondents said that LGBT people have fewer opportunities than heterosexuals in finding work, citing some form of discrimination as the reason. Thirteen of them said also that being LGBT meant they earn less than heterosexuals because it is difficult to find work.

“People do not like us mostly.”

We asked people for details about their finances – their monthly expenses and whether they can afford them, whether they receive any kind of assistance, whether they have a job and a bank account, what they earn and if they have ever had a loan.

Monthly expenditure ranges from US$83 to US$485. Seven people said they cannot afford their monthly expenses. Of those, two do not have a job and four borrow money to meet the shortfall.

People were asked if their family, partner or any organisation gives them money or support. Ten people said they do not. Three people are totally supported by their families and two are partially supported by their families. This partial support in one case consists of US$5 a month and in the other the selling of a cow in the province when necessary.

In Cambodia, US dollars go a long way!
We asked if people have ever received any social benefits and if they receive any benefit or service due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. Only one person has ever received a social benefit – a scholarship, and only one person receives services as an LGBT person through an LGBT employer.

Eleven people are currently working and earning between US$100 and US$450 a month. 26.66% of LGBT people interviewed are unemployed when the unemployment rate of the general population in Cambodia is 0.3% – the lowest in the world.10

When asked if they think they should earn more, all except the one full-time student said they should. 40% of respondents do not have a bank account, half of them saying they have no money to put in a bank account. Only two people have ever applied for a loan – one for US$6,000 at 1.2% interest to buy a home and land and one for US$600 at 2% interest which they are still repaying.

One of the focuses of the work of MRI is to assist people out of poverty by providing the resources for them to start their own business, so participants were asked if they have ever thought about this. 20% of those interviewed said that their lives are currently too difficult for them to consider this. 60% have thought about starting their own business, because there is less pressure, more independence, they would be self-sustaining and can earn more. However, 89% of them do not have the money they would need – between US$100 and US$2,000 – to do so.

*With my own business “I can live until I get old and even I am old I still can feed my life.”*

Six of the nine people who have thought about starting a business already have the skills necessary.

Although they all believe that people in their communities would buy their products and services and that their families and friends would react positively to them starting a business, their main concerns are financial.

*Participants noted that once they started to earn some money and help the family and the community and society financially, there was greater acceptance. They were then able to exert more influence and power within the family.”*

Everyone interviewed was asked what they thought about loans being available specifically to LGBT people. They all think it is a good idea and 80% think it is also necessary. When asked what they would do with such a loan, 80% said they would start or expand a business.

Participants overwhelmingly have a strong connection with their families and there is a mutual sense of responsibility for supporting each other. Although their ambitions might seem simple and limited to those in more affluent cultures, their desire to be independent and self-sustaining is admirable, especially when that self-sufficiency in fact means myself and my family and encompasses an awareness that the whole community benefits from their improved status. That connectedness is something that many cultures have lost and it is perhaps a reminder of the cost of wealth.

In the many countries more prosperous than Cambodia, how many working with LGBT people take those less fortunate into their homes for indefinite periods as the normal way of supporting someone in need? Rather, many of us live in a culture where a job supporting LGBT also bans staff from doing such a thing. How many people in their sixties are supporting six unrelated adopted children – because those children had no family? How many people stopped their education when still children to take care of ailing parents or siblings? However, there is frequently a cost to this sense of family, community and responsibility – it is poverty.

---

10) CIA World Factbook Cambodia

Background

Modern Cambodia, post-1970, has had a tragic, turbulent history with over two decades of civil war, genocide, massive population displacement, famine and a complete destruction of government, social, family and community structures and institutions. Up to one in four Cambodians perished during these years.

The country has been relatively stable since 1998. There has been high macroeconomic growth, GDP per capita has doubled since 2005 and the percentage of people living below the poverty line decreased by close to 50 percent in three years. In 2008, 38.8 percent were below the poverty line. This decreased to 20.5 percent in 2011. According to the World Bank, however, a significant portion of the population remains ‘near poor’ as they are still at high risk of falling back into poverty at the slightest income shock. Thus, the impact of losing US$0.30 a day in income would double the poverty rate to 40 percent.\(^\text{12}\)

In 2013, the ruling party lost an unprecedented number of seats and the opposition gained popular support, especially among young people.

Since then, there have been major restrictions imposed by the ruling party on demonstrations and assemblies, which effectively curtail the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and free expression. Areas generally considered ‘more sensitive’ by the government are human rights, land rights, economic concessions, anti-corruption, and environmental degradation.\(^\text{13}\)

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**PROFILE**

All fifteen respondents live in Phnom Penh.

**AGE**

Those interviewed represent a wide age range. Six respondents are aged 18-25 years, four are aged 26-35 years, one is aged 36-45 years, one is aged 46-55 years and three are aged over 55 years.

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<td>18 - 25</td>
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<td>26 - 35</td>
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<td>36 - 45</td>
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<td>46 - 55</td>
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**IDENTITY**

This report refers to LGBT as nobody interviewed identifies as Intersex or Queer\(^{14}\).

Four respondents identify as lesbian – one additionally identifies as a lesbian boy, one identifies as gay, three identify as bisexual and seven identify as trans.

However, we should be cautious about applying any of the assumptions that go with notions or labels of identity created in other parts of the world. Lesbian, gay and bisexual have meanings that are constructed within the culture of Cambodia. Trans means a range of things including transgressing the socially acceptable norms for gender.

The concept of ‘homosexuality’ as understood in the West is not necessarily directly transferable or understandable in the Cambodian context. There are no words in the Khmer language to describe homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual, gay or lesbian behaviour. According to Phong Tan\(^{15}\), Cambodians understand gender and sexuality in terms less rigid than the Western categories of ‘male’ and ‘female.’ The concepts of gender and sex are not clearly differentiated and identity is based not on sexual desire but on feminine and masculine traits such as whether a person is gentle or tough. Many Cambodian LGBT people define themselves according to their gender norm rather than sexual orientation. Similarly, society may show disapproval of individuals according to their gender norm rather than an LGBT identity\(^{16}\).

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\(^{14}\) See footnotes 1 and 2.


Poverty of LGBT People in Cambodia
EDUCATION
All the respondents are aware that gaining a formal education is essential to earning higher incomes and to the prospect of a better life.

87% of the people interviewed said that they have not completed their education. All the respondents have completed their primary schooling and attended secondary school. Two-thirds have completed their secondary schooling. Five people have been to university, only two of those having completed their studies.

When asked for the reasons they had not completed their education, 62% said poverty, one of these added that education was interrupted by Pol Pot genocide and war.

-During the period 1975-1979, almost all schools were closed and in many cases their contents were destroyed. Teachers were singled out for persecution in an attempt to obliterate pre-revolutionary modes of thinking-

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Two said because their families stopped supporting them when they came out, two gave other family-related reasons and one is still studying.

All of them had attended public school and one had also attended private school. It is perhaps important to note here something that came out of discussing expenditure. Those who are spending on educating children, spend between 15% and 39% of their income on education. Attending public school in Cambodia costs money.

-The vast majority of Cambodia’s schools are classified as public institutions operated by the government, but in almost all schools a large proportion of the finance comes from households, communities and other non-government sources-

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LIVING CIRCUMSTANCES
Three of those interviewed are living alone, three are living with a partner, six are living with family, one is living with friends and one is homeless. Of the eleven people living with others, five are living with seven or more people, three of those with family.
Five of the people interviewed reported no incidence of discrimination. One did not answer this question and four said this is because they have not disclosed their sexual or gender identity.

Of the ten people reporting discrimination, eight reported at least two incidents and seven reported three or more incidents. These reported incidents occurred over a period of 57 years – from 1958 to 2015. Two family-related reports had a duration of 36 years and 30 years respectively, one work-related report had a duration of 21 years and one school-related report had a duration of 10 years.

All of those reporting discrimination talked about discrimination by their families. Four reported discrimination by neighbours, four reported discrimination by the public at large and two reported discrimination by friends. Those who talked about discrimination by neighbours and the general public said it happened all the time, 70% of family discrimination also happened all the time. What is classed as discrimination ranges from verbal abuse, bullying and threats to being given no food, held captive in the home or forced out of home or a job.

“My past workplace not allow me to work anymore.”

Participants were asked specifically about discrimination at school or university and at work.

Eight of those interviewed said they had experienced no discrimination at school because they were not out. Of the six people who did experience discrimination, two said teachers, one said a principal and four said it was classmates who treated them badly. Four respondents said that the abuse was constant. They were bullied, physically abused, told to change their behaviour or the way they dressed and classmates stopped being friends.

Seven of those interviewed are not out at work, one stating that this is because they fear discrimination. Of the eight that are out at work, seven reported discrimination either in their current or previous jobs. The respondents reported bullying, verbal abuse, being told to change their behaviour and the way they dressed and being told to change their gender. Half of those reporting discrimination at work said it was workmates and colleagues who abused them. Three said it happened all the time and one lost their job.

“Asking the question: Why cut hair short? Do you want to be a man? It is not good, should not do like that, it is no good future, if you love the same sex how you can have baby?…”

When asked if there were any advantages in the workplace to being LGBT, nobody could think of any advantage, including those working for NGOs or LGBT organisations.

Participants were asked if heterosexuals had more, less or the same opportunities as LGBT people in finding employment. All fifteen said that LGBT have fewer opportunities. Nine people said this is because the society or culture does not accept LGBT, five people said that it is because the workplace does not accept LGBT, three cited discrimination, one spoke about the lack of LGBT rights and one said it is because of their unusual appearance. From the way participants describe these reasons for being disadvantaged, we can see the previously mentioned focus on gender norms:
“Job needed man and woman not LGBT.” 19

“Workplace knows mostly about man and woman, and workplaces do not like LGBT.”

“Society needs male and female does not accept middle people like us.”

“Society does not accept LGBT. They respect only female and male.”

Thirteen of those interviewed said they felt that being LGBT meant they earn less than heterosexuals. Two said that the opportunities for earning were the same for LGBT and heterosexuals and depend on your ability and how hard you work. Both these respondents are in the group who have been to university.

All thirteen said the reason they are likely to earn less is because it is difficult to find work. Ten people said that finding work is hard because of society or workplace discrimination, three said it is because they are LGBT, three said it is because they had been rejected by school and lacked education, and two said it is due to family rejection and lack of support.

“All workplace accept all straight people.”

“People do not like us mostly.”

“Parents not accept – no daily money, not supporting in getting a job. Hard to find a job, interviews not accept.”

19) CamASEAN Youth’s Future advises that some companies put no Katey (Transgender) in their recruitment advertising and that all job advertisements say the job is for man or woman and woman is priority.
Participants were asked a number of questions about their finances – what their usual monthly expenses are and whether they can afford them, whether they receive any kind of assistance, whether they have a job and a bank account, what they earn and if they have ever had a loan.

**AFFORDABILITY OF MONTHLY EXPENSES**

Monthly expenditure ranges from US$83 to US$485. The person with the largest expenditure is spending US$100 of that repaying a loan.

Nine of the fifteen respondents pay no rent – four because they live with family and three because they own their own homes. For the remaining six, rent constitutes between 19% and 38% of their spending. Two of those who pay rent live with their families. Water and electricity are listed as small expenses – 6% to 10% of spending – by five people. However, two of those who pay rent are also paying water and electricity and if these costs are combined, they constitute 40% and 43% respectively of their spending. Perhaps living with family, when every person reported discrimination by members of their family, is an economic necessity.

The student who is still at school spends no money on food. The other fourteen respondents spend a wide range – between 16% and 90% of their expenditure – on food. Fourteen of those interviewed spend on transport and again this represents a wide range as a percentage of their spending – between 2% and 46%. Six respondents spend between 15% and 77% of their spending on education, four of them for children.

In addition to rent, water and electricity, food, transport and education, five people listed other expenses, two listing money for their wives and one repaying the loan mentioned above.

It is difficult to draw many conclusions from the details of people’s regular monthly expenses as individual circumstances vary widely. However, we have included a table (Appendix 1) showing these expenses alongside identity, education and employment information.

Seven people said they can afford their usual monthly expenses and seven said they cannot. Of those who cannot afford them, two do not have a job and four said they borrow money to meet the shortfall.

“So so. If not much money, eat less and borrow from other people.”

“No, sometimes I can afford and sometimes can’t and borrow money from people.”

“No – I borrow money from my friend when I don’t have money.”

“No – I cannot and I do loaning.”

**FAMILY OR STATE SUPPORT**

Those interviewed were asked if their family, partner or any organisation gives them money or support. Ten people said they do not. Three people said they are totally supported by their families and two said they are partially supported by their families. This partial support in one case consists of US$5 a month and in the other the selling of a cow in the province when necessary.

Participants were asked if they have ever received any social benefits and if they receive any benefit or service due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. Only one person has ever received a social benefit – a scholarship that paid four years’ university fees, and only one person receives services as an LGBT person – access to counselling, health service and legal advice through an LGBT employer.
Eleven of the participants currently have a job and four do not. Of the four who are not working, one is a full-time student, one is HIV +ve and too sick to work and one having come out, has been forced to leave the family home.

26.66% of those interviewed are unemployed when the unemployment rate of the general population in Cambodia is 0.3% – the lowest in the world.20

Four of those working did not say what they are doing, three are working for NGOs, two of them having additional jobs, two are selling Chinese products, one is a project leader and one is a motorcycle taxi driver. They earn between US$100 and US$450 a month.

When asked if they think they should earn more, all except the full-time student said they should. They suggested a number of ways they might do this. Seven of them see selling – either food, Chinese products or rainbow (LGBT) products – as a way to earn more. The others suggested working for a company, setting up their own business, providing training, photographing models and actors, recycling, renting out a house and their wife working as ways to increase their earnings.

Nine respondents have a bank account and six do not, three of them saying they have no money to put in a bank account.

Thirteen people have never applied for a loan. Two people have applied once – one for US$6,000 at 1.2% interest to buy a home and land and one for US$600 at 2% interest which they are still repaying.

One of the focuses of the work of MRI is to assist people out of poverty by providing the resources for them to start their own business so participants were asked if they have ever thought about this. Three people – 20% of those interviewed – said that the current circumstances of their lives are so desperate they cannot even think about such a thing. Three others said “no” for different reasons:

“I don’t want to do because more people hate me and discriminate me.”

“My family do not want me to do business and I also don’t want to do business because I don’t have experience and doing business is more tired than work.”

“I want to work on LGBT rights as a priority.”

Nine people have considered starting their own business, six of them because there is less pressure, more independence and they would be self-sustaining. One person already has their own business and one person said it would mean they could earn more.

“Business is independent and sustainable income for life. Employment is a job that I will retire from one day.”

“I can live until I get old and even I am old I still can feed my life.”

Eight of the nine people who have considered starting a business said that they would sell – Chinese products, food, street food or LGBT products, one person wants to run art classes and one person wants to open a small shop selling coffee, cake, desserts, flowers and books.

When asked if they have the money to start a business, seven people said “no” and one person said they have some of the money. The amount they need ranges from US$100 to US$2,000 for buying the products and for rent.

Eight of the participants think people in their community would buy their products or services. Four of them said because they are friendly and have good communication with customers, three already have experience of what they want to do and four believe they have spotted a market opportunity.

Seven people do not know what their business could earn, one thinks US$150 a month and one thinks US$300 to US$400 a month.

As part of our programme for assisting LGBT people out of poverty, MRI provides training in the skills necessary for people with plans and dreams to reach their goals. Six of the nine people who have thought about starting a business already have the skills necessary because they already have experience, one has some of the skills and one says they do not have the skills.

All of those who responded said that their main concern was financial, three people said they have no social concerns and one person does have social concerns. One other concern, finding business premises, was expressed.

“Some people might not be happy to see my appearance.”

Only one person gave a detailed response to how to deal with their financial concerns and has thought about researching available rental space, customer and staff relations, use of social media, financial management, obtaining customer feedback and changing products in response.

The person aware that there could be a social concern said they would “smile and always be friendly to clients” as a way of dealing with this.

Everyone who responded believes that their family and friends would react positively to them starting a business.

“They used to say I can’t do anything.”

“We do jobs which do not violate people’s rights, and people are happy when we can do things – they will say we are good at finding or earning money.”

“When I get rich, people are happy.”

“People are happy because I can feed my life and I have jobs.”

“I have a job, and people are happy that I can help myself. I don’t do bad job in society.”

“They are happy because my family are feeding daily by me.”

My family will be a part of this business. I think even though sometimes they still say some criticizing words to me, they still support me with my reasonable reasons of mine.”

United Nations Development Agency research on LGBT in Cambodia found: Participants noted that once they started to earn some money and help the family and the community and society financially, there was greater acceptance. They were then able to exert more influence and power within the family21.

Everyone interviewed, not only those wanting to start a business, was asked what they thought about loans being available specifically to LGBT people. Three people said it was a good thing and twelve people said it was both a good and a necessary thing. Nine

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people said this is because LGBT people have no money to start a business, seven people said because of discrimination in the workplace and four people said because it is difficult for LGBT people to access loans. When asked what they would do with such a loan, twelve people said they would start or expand a business.

Everyone was asked where they saw themselves in five years’ time. Apart from the three people previously mentioned who are unable to imagine their future as they focus on immediate and pressing problems in their lives, they offered a range of thoughts, and so we leave the last words to Cambodian LGBT:

“I will become the big package selling Chinese products because more people need these products in my villages.”

“Successful in doing business. Sell package street fruit to middle sellers and expand business more bigger and art because I sell street fruits in day time and teach art and performance art in the morning.”

“More items and Chinese products, become middle sellers.”

“Have own land, home, and place for selling which have more products.”

“Village middle seller of potatoes.”

“I will be a social worker and a good owner of my business at my home.”

“Biz woman and activist.”

“Having a store to sell it.”

“Have a family and adopt children.”

“Leading on promoting LGBT rights in Cambodia and region.”

“I will become a company staff when graduate.”
Conclusions

In the affluent and privileged parts of the world, what unites LGBTI people is that we are all outside what our societies accept as gender norms and nowadays we discuss the fluidity of who we are and how the labels we use never truly define us. Perhaps Cambodians, who have no words for LGBTI, have something to teach us. Without the words, their struggles for acceptance are blatantly based on their deviation from gender norms to the extent that if a woman cuts her hair, she is attempting to be a man. Is she lesbian? Is she trans? Is she intersex? Is she simply a woman who likes short hair? Cambodian LGBT people currently use English terms in a very different cultural context from those where the terms derived, so we need to be open-minded and careful when listening to their self-definitions. It may be that they will develop words in their own language rather than use foreign ones or they might decide no Khmer words are needed.

The most startling and exciting outcome of this study is that the work of MRI in combatting poverty, could in fact be the route that changes the world for Cambodian LGBT people. The link that the participants clearly make time and again, with improving their standing in society as LGBT people by stepping out of poverty is not something that has been applied elsewhere as a
route to achieving LGBT rights. Nonetheless, this link is valid in Cambodia and possibly in other countries in the region.

Cambodian society holds strong family and community connections as do LGBT people within that society. Although this can be something that hinders progress for LGBT people it can also be an advantage. One person has the ability to influence many so the spread of changing attitudes could be rapid. 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.

All the participants in this study are aware that the road out of poverty is education. However, being LGBT means that route is blocked, by family refusing to pay or using access to education as a control, and by persecution, bullying and violence within the education system.

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.

For those who have passed through that system, they need support to find and stay in work – particularly support to become self-employed and to start businesses where they are free from the fear and abuse they experience in the workplace. The participants in this study estimated that the cost of doing this ranges from US$100 to US$2,000, a very small price for a transformed life and ultimately a transformed society.
Taking into consideration the critical situation of these people’s lives, we list a number of recommendations for employers, policy makers, government agencies, service providers and civil society organisations as a way to effectively improve the lives of LGBT people living in poverty in Cambodia.

FOR GOVERNMENT AGENCIES AND POLICY MAKERS
The Cambodian government must ensure that anti-LGBT bullying programmes are carried out in schools to prevent LGBT people being forced out of the education system and into unemployment.

The Cambodian government must consider introducing anti-discrimination laws that protect LGBT people in the workplace.

The Cambodian government must strengthen and reinforce existing good laws and policies include CEDAW, Neary Ratanak IV policy, National Actions Plan to Prevent Violence Against Women, and Cambodia Gender Assessment.

FOR EMPLOYERS
Our interviews indicate that LGBT people in Cambodia are more vulnerable to poverty than heterosexual people because they face prejudice and discrimination and, as a result, have fewer employment opportunities. Employers should guarantee equal opportunities and treatment of all candidates and employees, regardless of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

FOR CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS
Organisations supporting LGBTI rights internationally should look at the link with poverty in this culture (and probably others in the region) and support work that takes LGBTI out of poverty so that they can change their status within society themselves.

Children’s and young persons’ support organisations should fund LGBT education when families deny access because of gender non-conformity.

FOR SERVICE PROVIDERS
Several LGBT people interviewed for this study would consider starting small commercial activities, often in response to the lack of employment opportunities available to them. However, LGBT people often do not have guarantees to give and are refused credit. Because of the rejection they face by their families and at school, often they are not able to accumulate assets and remain in very vulnerable situations. There is a need to provide credit to those people with entrepreneurial inclinations, in spite of the fact that they might not have the usual guarantees required by banks or micro finance institutions.
Meas Vimeanchan who calls herself Tommy is a woman who changed her gender to a man. Once her family realised she was a tomboy and liked wearing men's clothes they prohibited her from doing such things and pressured her to marry a man. Tommy's family are city dwellers and her parents are prominent people in Phnom Penh society.

In 2011, once they discovered that Tommy was a tomboy her parents prohibited her from having a relationship with the woman she loves, preventing her from going to school because they were afraid Tommy and her girlfriend would meet in secret. They imprisoned her in the home not allowing her to leave accusing her and pressuring her every day to change. They told Tommy they were ashamed of her. When Tommy could no longer cope she left home and lived away for one year until her parents asked her to return home.

Once she returned, they started restricting her again and applying strong pressure on her to marry a man. Tommy refused, but because she would not follow them they were cruel to her and she had to leave home empty handed, not allowed to take anything with her.

Tommy agreed not to wear men's clothes as she wanted, because at that time she was still helping in her family's business. She did not yet have her own job but she refused to agree to the marriage.

Tommy's girlfriend lived in a province. They took opportunities to meet each other sometimes but Tommy's partner was also under pressure from her family although they did not know she was in a same-sex relationship with a woman.

In May 2015, when Tommy's girlfriend was forced from her family in terrible circumstances, she decided to come to live with Tommy in Phnom Penh. Later, her parents convinced her to return home promising not to pressure her anymore on marriage. They still did not realise that she was in a same-sex relationship with a woman. Tommy's girlfriend agreed to return home but soon left again to live with Tommy. They went to live in a different province to avoid meeting her parents. Within about two weeks they were seen by the parents of Tommy's girlfriend and the police brought them to Phnom Penh where they were both held at the Ministry of Interior.

Tommy's girlfriend's parents accused Tommy of kidnapping with an intention to separate their family because they did not want their daughter to be in a relationship with Tommy. However, both Tommy and her girlfriend simultaneously stated that they went to live together because they voluntarily loved each other, neither one having forced the other. The police were not able to reach a compromise as the girlfriend's parents are influential people and Tommy's parents said nothing, siding with the other parents. They tried to force Tommy to write a statement agreeing to stop communicating with his girlfriend but he would not do it. Finally, Tommy's girlfriend was forcibly taken back home by her parents.

CamASEAN Youth's Future tried to monitor the case, referring it to a number of civil organisations in order to get legal assistance for both of them. They could find no support because there is no strong interest from legal service organisations in a group supporting same-sex loving.

Tommy has not returned to his parent's home as they are still ashamed of him and cannot accept who he really is. They want him to change to avoid their being ashamed. Currently, Tommy is living temporarily with Rachana (Tana) who is a staff member of Micro Rainbow International. Tana and the group helped him with mental health counselling and he is working with MRI on his plan to create a small business selling food because he has found it difficult to find a job and he does not have the capital to start the business.

This is a perfect example of how English language and concepts concerning LGBT do not fit well in Cambodia. Tommy is a woman who has changed her gender, is a tomboy, is in a same-sex relationship with a woman and is both he and she.
**CHAI**

Chai, an extremely friendly biological male, identifies as bisexual. In his life in Cambodia he does not face serious discrimination due to his gender expression or sexual orientation because he has not come out and rarely tells anyone that he is bisexual. Chai has a wife as well as a number of male sexual partners although he does not know how to take care of himself. He does not know how to use a condom, meanwhile, there are more partners.

In recent years, he often has recurrent ill health, such as skin disease, coughs, fatigue, diarrhoea, and he is weak and suffers depression after becoming aware he is HIV positive. He sometimes takes ARV, the medicine that HIV patients are required to drink daily. In June 2015, he became more seriously ill because he did not have enough food to eat, was not taking ARV regularly and his occasional skin disease was recurring. Chai does not have family support as his parents and relatives all died when he was young. He has nowhere to stay and sleeps in a small derelict house that villagers allow him to use.

In July, 2015, Entanu Cambodia, facilitated and co-ordinated by CamASEAN Youth’s Future and Micro Rainbow International, supported him with some money. His moto was repaired (he is moto taxi driver), he was given food and taken for treatment for his skin disease.

Nowadays, he is better (he can drive his moto taxi) and he is being provided with counselling for his mental health and advice about his health.

Chai wants to start his own business but does not have enough money.

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**PEPE**

Pepe identifies as a transgender man to woman who likes dressing as gay. In 1990, when she was 14 years old, Pepe’s father died and her family did not have the money for her to stay in school. She became responsible for her mother, two nieces, and a younger brother having to earn enough for daily food, water, electricity, and education fees.

For her family to survive, Pepe collects bottles and cans for recycling in front of the railway, at Kandal Market, Old Market, around Wat Phnom, and Central Market in Phnom Penh. Sometimes, especially during celebrations, she sells boil beans and street fruit in the provinces. When she earns more, they eat more and when she earns less they eat less, sometimes having to borrow from friends.

Pepe has come out to her family who do not discriminate against her. In 1993, she had two partners who both came to Cambodia to organise elections. She did not know how to use a condom and did not know about HIV/AIDs. In 2006, she tested HIV positive.

Pepe says it is hard to find a job in Cambodia. People do not like to talk with her or be with her, especially when they know she is transgender. She says that she suffers double discrimination if people know that she is both trans and HIV positive.

In July 2015, Pepe contracted typhoid and had to stay in hospital for a while. She did not have food to eat. Entanu Cambodia supported her with food parcels. In recent months, CamASEAN and Micro Rainbow International have been providing Pepe with emotional support, helping her to feel less isolated and exploring what income generating activities are possible to help lift herself out of poverty. She wanted to sell street fruit near New Garden in Phnom Penh but did not have money to start up a business. In February 2016 CamASEAN and Micro Rainbow International provided her with $230 to start her small income generating activity.
## Appendix 1 - Monthly Expenses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LGBT</th>
<th>EDUCATION</th>
<th>EMPLOYED</th>
<th>TOTAL MONTHLY EXPENSES</th>
<th>RENT</th>
<th>WATER &amp; ELECTRICITY</th>
<th>FOOD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>Completed primary</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>US$ 83</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>US$ 8</td>
<td>US$ 75 lives with 7 others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>Completed secondary</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>US$ 92</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>US$ 75</td>
<td>US$ 75 lives with 3 others</td>
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<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Attending secondary</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>US$ 130</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>US$ 60 (family cook for me)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Completed university</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>US$ 130</td>
<td>US$ 50</td>
<td>US$ 50</td>
<td>US$ 50 lives with 8 others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>Attended university</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>US$ 140</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>US$ 75</td>
<td>US$ 75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Completed primary</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>US$ 150</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>US$ 60</td>
<td>US$ 60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>Completed primary</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>US$ 160</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>US$ 10</td>
<td>US$ 60 lives with friends 7 others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>Attended university</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>US$ 160</td>
<td>US$ 30</td>
<td>US$ 100</td>
<td>US$ 100</td>
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<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>Completed secondary</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>US$ 215 + $80 wife's health</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>US$ 15</td>
<td>US$ 150 lives alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>Completed secondary</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>US$ 230</td>
<td>US$ 80</td>
<td>US$ 20</td>
<td>US$ 100 lives with 3 others</td>
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<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>Completed secondary</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>US$ 266</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>US$ 150</td>
<td>US$ 150 lives with 3 others incl. partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>Completed university</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>US$ 310</td>
<td>US$ 70</td>
<td>US$ 200</td>
<td>US$ 280 lives with 10 others, partner children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>Completed secondary</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>US$ 388</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>US$ 120</td>
<td>US$ 120 lives with wife and child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>Completed primary</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>US$ 485</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>US$ 150</td>
<td>US$ 150</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Appendix 2 – Poverty of LGBT People in Cambodia**
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TRANSPORT</th>
<th>EDUCATION</th>
<th>OTHER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>US$ 17</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US$ 30</td>
<td>US$ 100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US$ 30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US$ 65</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US$ 40</td>
<td>US$ 50</td>
<td>Wife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US$ 30</td>
<td>US$ 60</td>
<td>For children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US$ 30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US$ 25</td>
<td>US$ 55</td>
<td>US$ 15 Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US$ 50</td>
<td></td>
<td>US$ 80 wife’s health - sometimes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US$ 30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US$ 12</td>
<td>US$ 104</td>
<td>For children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US$ 30</td>
<td></td>
<td>US$ 10 Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US$ 8</td>
<td>US$ 100</td>
<td>For children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US$ 40</td>
<td>US$ 75</td>
<td>US$ 100 Loan</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Micro Rainbow International
Addressing the situation of poverty of LGBTI people worldwide