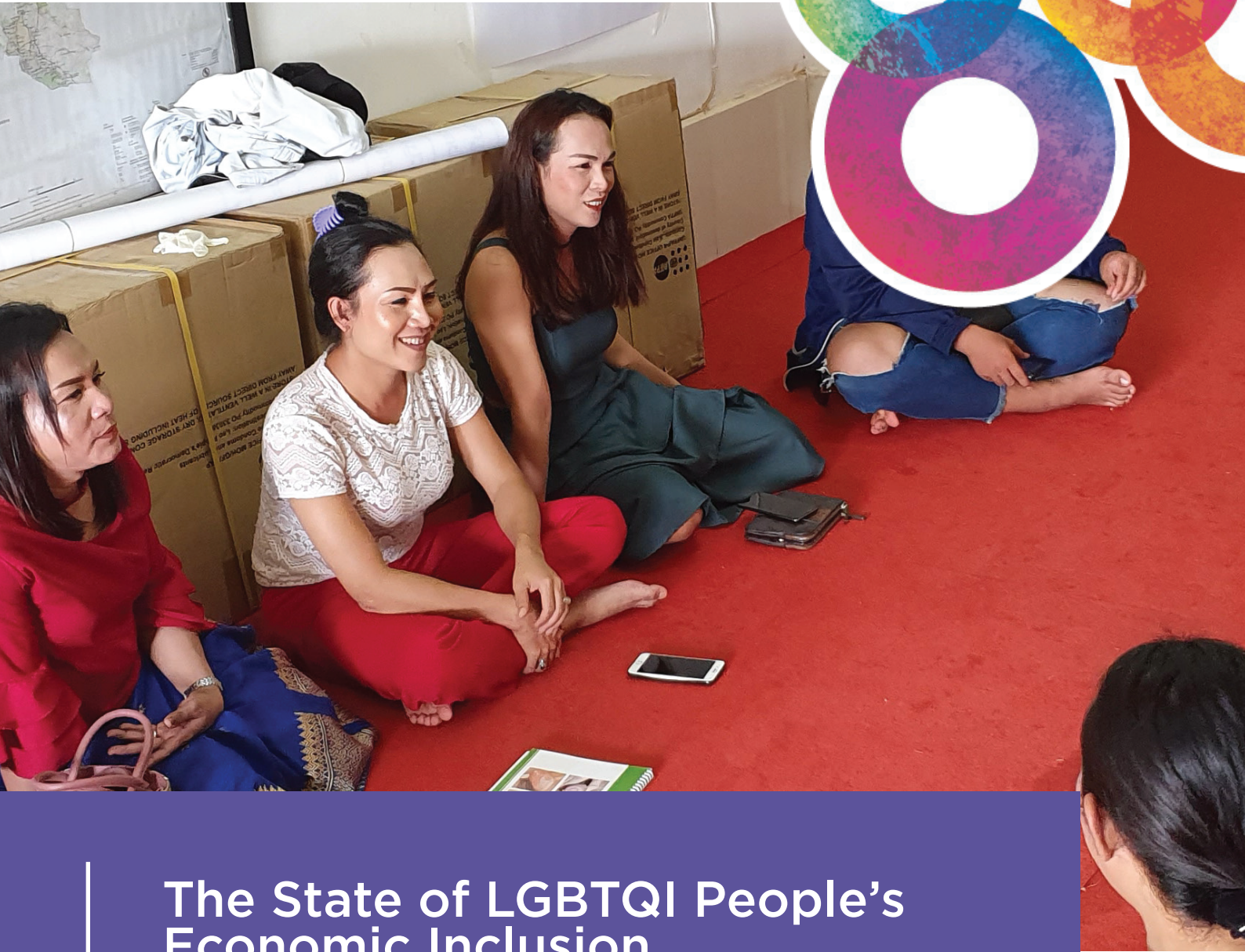


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Equity. Dignity. Social Justice.



The State of LGBTQI People's  
Economic Inclusion  
Lao PDR





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## Acknowledgements

This report is part of Finance Inc<sup>1</sup> - 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 PRD and the Philippines. In addition to the four reports, a short overview report has been produced, summarising common patterns, variations, main findings and recommendations for improved economic inclusion in the four countries.

The reports have been prepared by APCOM<sup>2</sup> in collaboration with with country partner organisations in the four countries. For the Laos report, the research including the focus group discussions was carried out by the Community Health and Inclusion Association (CHias<sup>3</sup>), formerly Lao Positive Health Association (LaoPHA) between 23 July and 3 August 2019 in three locations in Laos. APCOM would like to acknowledge and thank Olam Rasaphonh, Metta Khamthavone and Xayya Souliyatham (Project Coordinators) as well as Sookwai Phommahaxay and Souriyan Silivongsa (Facilitators of the focus group discussions).

We warmly thank the 36 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 Laotians beyond this report.

APCOM would also like to express its sincere thanks to Voice<sup>4</sup>, our funding partner for Finance Inc. project<sup>5</sup>, under which the research reports were done

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

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<sup>1</sup> 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>

<sup>2</sup> APCOM <https://www.apcom.org/>

<sup>3</sup> CHias: <https://web.facebook.com/chiaslaosco.org/?rdc=1&rdc>

<sup>4</sup> 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/>

<sup>5</sup> 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 August 2019. CHias researched and analysed secondary sources and undertook in-depth focus group discussions with 36 LGBTQI Laotians.

The outcome is this report which aims to give an overview of how the human rights of LGBTQI people in Laos 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 36 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 Laos, we believe that it contains important evidence to the current barriers to and opportunities for significantly advancing the economic inclusion of LGBTQI people in Laos. 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*<sup>6</sup> “ as well as the three additional country reports in Cambodia, Indonesia 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.

### LGBTQI people in Laos largely not understood

LGBTQI people in Laos, if at all noticed, are being perceived as people living on the margins of society. LGBTQI people are currently living in a relatively tolerant society in which, however, they cannot express explicitly who they are. As long as they behave as good citizens as any other marginalised populations, by hiding their identities, they will largely be left to their own devices.

The government does, in fact, not officially recognise the existence of LGBTQI people and there is very little research and data on the nature and scope of the problems that LGBTQI people are experiencing - known to national policy makers, other stakeholders and the general public.

Same-sex practices or homosexuality is not illegal in Laos, but there is also no law which protects the rights of LGBTQI people or protects people from discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. However, the Constitution of Lao PDR, Article 35 states that “*Lao citizens are all equal before the law irrespective of their gender, social status, education, beliefs and ethnic group*”<sup>7</sup>.

This could, nonetheless imply that Lao lawmakers and society might be motivated to work towards achieving social equality for LGBTQI people in the long term. In addition, because of Lao's significant young population, there has been an increase in human capital development, although investing in facilitating access to education, there has not been much programs for LGBTQI learners until recently. But with the first ever Lao People's Democratic Republic National Adolescent and Youth Policy (NAYP) which, if approved, will include affirmative action for vulnerable adolescents and youth which, unprecedentedly, will include LGBTQI people, the government's interest in and commitment inclusion of vulnerable groups in policies and practices, could signal new times. Although the NAYP is still in the phase of consideration for approval from the government, the draft of NAYP is expected to be approved very soon. Further, a revision of Comprehensive Sexuality Education in lower, upper and Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), has been signed in a Memorandum of Understanding by The Ministry of Education and Sports and UNFPA.

<sup>6</sup> APCOM (2020): *Economic Inclusion of LGBTQI People in Southeast Asia – A Background Research Report on Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR and the Philippines*. [https://nf3y0tqssvfx.cdn.shift8web.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Report\\_Economic-Inclusive\\_v5.pdf](https://nf3y0tqssvfx.cdn.shift8web.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Report_Economic-Inclusive_v5.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Lao PRD: Constitution of Lao PDR No. 63/National Assembly. (Revised 2015). [https://www.parliament.go.th/ewtadmin/ewt/ac/ewt\\_dl\\_link.php?nid=119&filename=parsystem2](https://www.parliament.go.th/ewtadmin/ewt/ac/ewt_dl_link.php?nid=119&filename=parsystem2)



The 36 participants in the focus groups acknowledged that the overall situation for LGBTQI people in Laos has improved slightly. The government is more open to opening and expanding space for civil society organisations to work on LGBTQI issues; there are now elected transgender, lesbian and gay public officials; many LGBTQI people can access information through social media, and more and more people seem to be coming out.

On the other hand, there are still many forms of violence and discrimination happening every day to LGBT people in Laos. Society's structural focus on binary gender norms<sup>8</sup> and the heterosexual unit of the family prevents people from having a better understanding of LGBT issues.

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

- Significant lack of recognition as individuals with aspirations, potential and agency because of traditional societal and family structures;
- Stigma, discrimination and misunderstanding of LGBTQI identities by society at large, particularly towards lesbians.
- Discrimination in educational institutions, from colleagues and employers in the workplace, and at health facilities
- Lack of mechanisms to report violence and discrimination;

### **Lived Experiences: Economic exclusion of LGBTQI people in Laos** **Employment, entrepreneurship and financial services**

*"I work harder than the other teachers because, as an LGBTQI person, I try to support many activities in the school, beyond my tasks, but I have never had praise from the school director nor been promoted like the other teachers who are not LGBTQI people. I feel I have lost my right to be treated equally because I am a trans man"<sup>9</sup>*

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 significant barrier and that discrimination from employers, colleagues and clients was a common experience. For some, not having enough skills was also an obstacle in their professional life.

When asked if LGBTQI people are able to open their own businesses in Laos, all participants replied yes, but highlighted that they do not have enough financial resources. One participant emphasised: *"We can open a business, but we do not have money and skills to start up"*.

Participants were asked if their sexual orientation and/or gender identity and expression has affected their ability to save money. All 36 participants reported that their gender identities were not barriers, but that they did not have enough money for saving. In terms of financial barriers, participants explained that transgender women may be more vulnerable to poverty due to lower education and higher discrimination than gay men and lesbians.

### **Education and Health**

LGBTQI students, both in urban and rural areas, drop out of school because there are no policies and practices which support LGBTQI students in terms gender identity. The 36 focus group participants identified the main challenges as lack of support from the family due to poverty; discrimination in schools; no policy or practical support to LGBTQI pupils and students, and being forced to hide their identities.

<sup>8</sup> Gender binary is the classification of gender into two distinct, opposite forms of masculine and feminine, whether by social system or cultural belief.

<sup>9</sup> Quote from a trans man Focus Group Participant. 25 July 2019.

Most participants had suffered some sort of discrimination from classmates and/or teachers. 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 become strangers in the mindsets of their classmates and teachers.

When asked about the challenges experienced in accessing health services, poverty and discrimination were frequent themes in participants' answers. Trans people, in particular trans women, faced the most barriers in enjoying their right to health and access to adequate health services.

### Recommendations

Each country report contains a number of recommendations towards government, the private sector, and organisations working on LGBTQI issues. APCOM and CHias, 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 Laotian society.

This report contains a number of recommendations to adopt and implement inclusive policies, practices and programmes. The lived experiences and direct voices of the 36 brave LGBTQI individuals who dared to speak up and out and volunteered their time, knowledge and experiences of economic exclusion in Laos, have informed most recommendations. Below are a few and for a full set of recommendations, please go to pages 22-23:

1. The Government of Laos should include sexual orientation and gender expression in the Constitution of Lao PDR, Article 35, which states that "Lao citizens are all equal before the law irrespective of their gender, social status, education, belief and ethnic group";<sup>10</sup>
2. Employers who are providing inclusive work spaces and welcoming people from the LGBTQI communities on an equal basis with the rest of their workforce, should become champions for the private and public sector to promote non-discrimination against any minorities in the workforce;
3. The government, champion employers and activists should raise awareness amongst private and public employers, parents, the media and other stakeholders on how to respect, protect and promote LGBTQI rights in Laos;
4. Banks should offer LGBTQI-friendly services with more flexible terms and conditions for LGBTQI people living in poverty and train their staff to treat LGBTQI people respectfully.

<sup>10</sup> Lao PRD: Constitution of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Revised 2015) [https://www.parliament.go.th/ewtadmin/ewt/ac/ewt\\_dl\\_link.php?nid=119&filename=parsystem2](https://www.parliament.go.th/ewtadmin/ewt/ac/ewt_dl_link.php?nid=119&filename=parsystem2)

## Introduction

Founded in 2007, APCOM Foundation (APCOM<sup>11</sup>) 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.

CHias (formerly Lao Positive Health Action (LaoPHA)<sup>12</sup> is a community-led HIV, health and gender advocacy and services organisation. It has been operating as a community-based organisation since 2000 and became officially registered as a non-profit association in 2012. CHia's vision is to inspire inclusive communities where all key populations are equally empowered and comfortable to access health and social services and to reach their full potential. CHia's aims to support key populations offering vital programs, fostering unconditional acceptance, and creating platforms for self-support groups and self-expression through leadership, community support and advocacy.

### 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.*<sup>13</sup> The World Bank 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."*<sup>14</sup>

The Laos report aims to give an overview of how human rights of LGBTQI people in Laos 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. This is particularly the case with Laos where research and data on LGBTQI people, in all domains, is scarce. 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 directly with financial institutions and the private sector in and across the four countries to advance the goal of LGBTQI inclusion in terms of policies, practices and programmes.

<sup>11</sup> APCOM: <https://www.apcom.org/>

<sup>12</sup> CHias: <https://web.facebook.com/chiaslaosco.org/?rdc=1&rdi>

<sup>13</sup> The World Bank: Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/sexual-orientation-and-gender-identity>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid



## 2. Research methodologies

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

Three focus group discussions (FGDs) with a total of 36 participants were held on 23 July 2019 in Champasak, on 25 July 2019 in Khammouane and on 3 August 2019 in Vientiane, The FGDs were guided by a set of questions developed by APCOM in collaboration with CHias in order to capture the living realities for LGBTQI people in Laos. The 36 participants were divided into the following groups:

- 6 transgender men and 6 transgender women in Champasak Province<sup>15</sup>
- 6 gay men and 6 lesbians in Khammouane Province<sup>16</sup>
- 6 Queers and 6 Bisexual men in Vientiane<sup>17</sup>

Most participants were 24-32 years old (26 people) while ten participants were 33-35 years old. The youngest participant was 24-year-old transgender women and the oldest was a 40-year-old lesbian.

Regarding their occupations, most participants were vendors, soldiers and teachers. Additional professions included office staff, sex workers, beauty salon workers, hotel staff and tour guides.

The focus group discussions were conducted in a safe space with prior consent of all participants. Participants were asked to give feedback after the FGD and most people were pleased to share their challenges and living context and were happy to learn from each other. They also appreciated the opportunity to have their voices heard in a safe space and to offer suggestions for improving the lives of LGBTQI people in Laos.

## 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 Laos, we believe that it contains important evidence to the current barriers to and opportunities for significantly advancing the economic inclusion of LGBTQI people in Laos. 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*<sup>18</sup> and the three additional country reports from Cambodia, Indonesia, 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, even if the focus group discussions attempted to be representative, the FGDs only took place in three provinces. Second, there was no participation by people identifying as intersex because the research team could not access participants who identify as such. Intersex people are still not very visible in Laos..

<sup>15</sup> Champasak province was selected because it is one of the biggest provinces in Southern Laos where a large number of LGBTQI people live. Champasak is also the economic and commercial centre in Southern Laos.

<sup>16</sup> Khammouane province is located in the central part of Laos close to the Thai border. The province also has a large number of LGBTQI people.

<sup>17</sup> Vientiane is the capital and the centre of commerce and education in Laos. Many LGBTQI people have jobs in different sectors in Vientiane, but a large part of LGBTQI people are unemployed.

<sup>18</sup> APCOM (2020): Economic Inclusion of LGBTQI People in Southeast Asia – A Background Research Report on Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR and the Philippines. [https://nf3y0lqssvfx.cdn.shifft8web.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Report\\_Economic-Inclusive\\_v5.pdf](https://nf3y0lqssvfx.cdn.shifft8web.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Report_Economic-Inclusive_v5.pdf)



## 4. Definitions and Terminology

### Economic Inclusion

We are using the definition of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development<sup>16</sup>: 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.<sup>19</sup>

### 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'.<sup>20</sup>

### 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".<sup>21</sup>

### 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 culture and country contexts in the use 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<sup>22</sup> and also use the abbreviation SOGIESC to describe sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and sex characteristics collectively:

### 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 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.

**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.

<sup>19</sup> European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. <https://www.ebrd.com/what-we-do/projects-and-sectors/economic-inclusion.html>

<sup>20</sup> Badgett, Lee, et al. (2014). The Relationship Between LGBT Inclusion and Economic Development: An Analysis of Emerging Economies. The Williams Institute. <https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/15396/lgbt-inclusion-and-development-november-2014.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> The World Bank. Financial Inclusion. <http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/financialinclusion/overview>

<sup>22</sup> 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/>



**Lesbian** - An individual who identifies as a woman and is sexually and/or romantically attracted to other people who identify as women;

**Gay** - An individual who identifies as a man and is sexually and/or romantically attracted to other people who identify as men. The term gay can also be used in relation to women who are sexually and romantically attracted to other women;

**Bisexual** - A person emotionally, physically, and/or sexually attracted to men and women. This attraction does not have to be equally split between genders and there may be a preference for one gender over others;

**Transgender woman** - Trans woman refers to a woman who was assigned male at birth. She may or may not be identified by others as trans, and may or may not identify herself as trans;

**Transgender man** - Trans man refers to a man who was assigned female at birth. He may or may not be identified by others as trans, and may or may not identify himself as trans;

**Queer** - A term used to describe a range of sexual orientations and gender identities. Although once used as a derogatory term, the term queer now encapsulates political ideas of resistance to heteronormativity<sup>23</sup> and homonormativity<sup>24</sup> and is often used as an umbrella term to describe the full range of LGBTQI+ identities;

**Intersex Person** - Someone whose sex a doctor has difficulty in categorizing as either male or female. A person whose combination of chromosomes, gonads, hormones, internal sex organs, and/or genitals differs from one of the two expected patterns.

## Current Human Rights context in Laos – and how it affects LGBTQI people

LGBTQI people in Laos are living in a relatively tolerant society. While it is observed that the LGBTQI community in Lao can express themselves, there are challenges to being LGBTQI in Lao society. Some of the social, cultural and religious beliefs and norms are connected to LGBTQI people experiencing stigma, discrimination and marginalization.

While there are no laws which criminalize being LGBTQI, there is no specific laws that protect or fully recognize LGBTQI people.. Consequently, there are also no procedures, mechanisms or measures in place to address and report discrimination, harassment or violence based on a person's sexual identity and/or gender expression. Also, there is limited available data on the nature and scope of problems that LGBTQI people are experiencing

In the legislative and policy environment, Article 35 of the Constitution of Lao PDR prescribes that "Lao citizens are all equal before the law irrespective of their gender, social status, education, belief and ethnic group."<sup>25</sup> The term "*Lao Citizens irrespective of gender*", although without explicitly mentioning sexual orientation, gender identity can be interpreted to include LGBTQI people, and that the intent of the law is to achieve social equality for LGBT people in long term.

However, this contrast to Article 37 which states that "*men and women enjoy equal political, economic, cultural, social and family rights*".

Article 151 in the new Civil code of Lao PDR, adopted in 2018, states that same-sex marriage<sup>26</sup> is prohibited. While there have been many instances of marriages of same-sex couples recently, these are, de facto, not legally recognized. This restriction causes lots of disadvantages for same-sex couples such as their rights on shared property, health insurance etc.

<sup>23</sup> Heteronormativity is the belief that heterosexuality is the default, preferred, or normal mode of sexual orientation.

<sup>24</sup> Homonormativity is the privileging of heteronormative ideals and constructs onto LGBT culture and identity. It is predicated on the assumption that the norms and values of heterosexuality should be replicated and performed among homosexual people.

<sup>25</sup> Lao PRD: Constitution of Lao PDR No. 63/National Assembly. (Revised 2015). [https://www.parliament.go.th/ewtadmin/ewt/ac/ewt\\_dl\\_link.php?nid=119&filename=parsystem2](https://www.parliament.go.th/ewtadmin/ewt/ac/ewt_dl_link.php?nid=119&filename=parsystem2)

<sup>26</sup> Lao PRD: Lao Civil Code No. 55/NA dated 6 December 2018. <http://laofficialgazette.gov.la/kfinder/upload/files/%E0%BA%9B%E0%BA%B0%E0%BA%A1%E0%BA%A7%E0%BA%99%E0%BA%81%E0%BA%BB%E0%BA%94%E0%BB%9D%E0%BA%B2%E0%BA%8D%E0%BB%81%E0%BA%9E%E0%BB%88%E0%BA%87.pdf>. (in Laotian only). The law became effective on 26 May 2020.



The current objectives of both the Lao government and international donors focus on achieving sustainable economic growth and poverty reduction. According to a 2014 UNFPA report<sup>27</sup>, Lao's young population, with 60 percent of its over 6 million inhabitants estimated to be under 25 years of age, represents a unique opportunity from which the country could benefit. Increasing investments in human capital development, particularly in the areas of education, health, employment, protection and participation will ensure that every young person's potential is fulfilled. And while gender disparities in primary education have been significantly reduced, disparities still exist along with challenges related to educational quality, efficiency and access, including among the LGBTQI adolescents and youth.

The changes that are taking place in Laos are not affecting all young people and there has been little or no focus on the needs and concerns of LGBTQI adolescents and youth until recently with two initiatives which could signal a willingness to include an LGBTQI focus in government policies and programmes.

The first initiative is the first ever Lao People's Democratic Republic National Adolescent and Youth Policy (NAYP) which, if approved, will include affirmative action for vulnerable adolescents and youth which, unprecedentedly, will include LGBTQI people. Lao People's Revolutionary Youth Union<sup>28</sup> which is one of the mass youth organisations in Laos, has been lobbying to put emphasis on vulnerable adolescents and youth.

Although the NAYP is still in the phase of consideration for approval from the government, the draft of NAYP is expected to be approved very soon.

Access to rights and opportunities are hindered by structural and societal barriers and there is still a long way to go until LGBTQI people can enjoy the same rights and freedoms.

### **Structural barriers and the traditional family unit**

A large number of people in Lao society as well as Lao LGBTQI people themselves, in some instances, are not familiar with the concept of sexual orientation and gender identity and diversity within the structure of SOGIESC. They have been cultivated by a binarised gender social system which consists of male and female only. This leads to additional genders, other than the two binary genders, becoming and remaining myths or social deviations, which happens in many parts of the world. Since the issues of LGBTQI to a vast majority of Laotians is a myth or a taboo in the Lao society, there

is little interest to gather relevant information about rights and wellbeing of LGBTQI people. Without such information, data, evidence and testimonies, it is difficult to advocate for changes in laws, policies and practices, and societal changes in terms of attitudes and behaviour.

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<sup>27</sup> Lao People's Revolutionary Youth Union, LYU, UNFPA. (2014). Adolescent and Youth Situation Analysis - Lao People's Democratic Republic. [https://lao.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Final\\_Eng\\_AYSA%20Report.pdf](https://lao.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Final_Eng_AYSA%20Report.pdf)

<sup>28</sup> The youth wing of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party

Some families both in urban and rural areas are still not open minded and accepting of their LGBTQ children and siblings. In some cases, parents do not find it worthwhile to invest in their LGBTQ children as they believe that they may not be able to get a good job and be successful in their life because they are LGBTQ.

For the same reason, most families rarely support LGBTQ children who want to continue to study at a higher level. Even if families believe that their LGBTQ children can complete higher education, the family still believe that their LGBTQ children cannot get a good job and may not be able to become a success in society. This is especially the case for transgender women and lesbians with both groups not being able to work in government. In poor families, many chose to support children who are not LGBTQ and instead encourage their LGBTQ children to earn money to support the family.

The 36 participants in the focus group acknowledged that the overall situation for LGBTQ people in Lao PDR has improved slightly. The Government is more open to allowing more space for civil society organisations to work on LGBTQ issues; some CSOs have started to promote SOGIESC and undertake awareness-raising activities about LGBTQ to various audiences, including government partners, and Laos now have representatives, including a transgender woman, a gay man and a lesbian in the Country Coordinating Mechanism (CCM)<sup>29</sup> meetings (Global Fund<sup>30</sup>) as CCM members. Which means we have more opportunities to raise our issues and voices to government partners in these meetings to get make them understand and support LGBTQ people in Laos. Further, many LGBTQ people can now access information through social media and more and more people seem to be coming out.

On the other hand, there are still many forms of violence and discrimination happening every day to LGBTQ people in Laos. Focus group participants faced fundamental challenges when wishing to access the labour market in Lao, similar: to the general context for LGBTQ people in namely that the more you hide your identity in the workplace, the better a chance for doing well and being accepted by employers and peers.

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

- Significant lack of recognition as individuals with aspirations, potential and agency because of traditional societal and family structures;
- Stigma, discrimination and misunderstanding of LGBTQ identities by society at large, particularly towards lesbians.
- Discrimination in educational institutions, from colleagues and employers in the workplace, and at health facilities
- Lack of mechanisms to report violence and discrimination;

<sup>29</sup> Country Coordinating Mechanisms (CCMs) are national committees that submit funding applications to the Global Fund and oversee grants on behalf of their countries. In Laos, the national CCMs oversees grants on HIV, TB and Malaria

<sup>30</sup> Global Fund: <https://www.theglobalfund.org/en/>

## Lived Experiences: Economic and Financial Exclusion of LGBTQI people in Laos

### Employment, Entrepreneurship and Financial Services, Education, Health Employment

Article 39 of the Constitution of Lao PDR stipulates that all Lao citizens have the right to work and engage in occupations which are not contrary to the laws. Working people have the right to rest, to receive medical treatment in times of illness, [and] to receive assistance in the event of incapacity or disability, in old age, and in other cases as provided by the laws.<sup>31</sup>

In addition to the Constitution, the Labor Law from 2013<sup>32</sup> defines that the government should support poor people, vulnerable groups, persons with disabilities, those who are unemployed and people with social issues and that those who are able should receive training on skill and labour development and access to employment, financial support income and justice in order to step out of poverty. Further, Article 3 defines that discrimination in the workplace as all actions by the employer that hinders, is biased, or limits opportunities for promotion and confidence on the part of the employee.

Article 96 addresses gender equality in the workplace and states that female employees have the right to employment and professions in every sector that do not conflict with the law, including production, business and management, and may participate in training, labour skills improvement and providing expertise. Female employees shall receive a salary or wages equal to that of male employees, except some forms of work that has negative effects upon the reproductive health of women, which must be protected in every case. However, Article 96 do not address additional gender identities or expressions, nor sexual orientation.

In terms of general protection from discrimination and bullying of employees, the Labor Law states that it is against the law to violate the personal rights of employees, especially female employees, through speech, sight, text, touch or touching inappropriate areas and article 144 also defines prohibitions for employees to prevent violations of the rights of others in workplace.

According to the key findings from a small study from Proud to be Us Laos,<sup>33</sup> conducted in Vientiane in 2019 and based on interviews with 28 respondents in different occupations, including HR, finance, education officers as well as housekeeping staff, 60 per cent of respondents reported that they faced barriers and challenges in finding a job and 20 per cent reported that they were discriminated against by colleagues and employers in the work place. However, 60 per cent of respondents reported they were treated well by colleagues in their workplace, and 52 per cent reported that their employers had a good attitude towards them. Additional interviews with employers, showed that most employers had a good attitude toward their LGBTQI staff and that they also supported LGBT inclusion in their workplace. The employers clarified that they based their decision on recruiting on ability and not whether a person was LGBTQI. The employers were aware of human rights and non-discriminatory practices and it is possible that LGBTQI staff will be promoted as these employers prioritise ability over sexual expression.

Some LGBTQI people are still not confident to come out and express themselves due to some of them working with the government. They are concerned about their job and colleagues and are aware that the working environment might not support LGBTQI people, so many do not feel comfortable to express themselves in their work places as stigma and discrimination are still taking place.

<sup>31</sup> Lao PRD: Constitution of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Revised 2015). [https://www.parliament.go.th/ewtadmin/ewt/ac/ewt\\_dl\\_link.php?nid=119&filename=parsystem2](https://www.parliament.go.th/ewtadmin/ewt/ac/ewt_dl_link.php?nid=119&filename=parsystem2)

<sup>32</sup> Lao PDR: Labor Law (Amended 2013). <https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/MONOGRAPH/96369/113864/F1488869173/LAO96369>

<sup>33</sup> Proud to be Us Laos. (2019). A small study on LGBT inclusion in the workplace. [https://files.fm/u/w7hcvca4?fbclid=IwAR2VrvneNKfpaAMJQWScHX4AI9ntZ3uFo3pJnYzV\\_3ltd6UEJH-RENcfvKfE](https://files.fm/u/w7hcvca4?fbclid=IwAR2VrvneNKfpaAMJQWScHX4AI9ntZ3uFo3pJnYzV_3ltd6UEJH-RENcfvKfE)

Participants were asked to share their experiences of sectors in the labour market in which LGBTQI people are typically employed. See below their answers according to each identity:

- Bisexuals: hairdresser, sales representative, hotel worker, sales person, government staff, hotel staff, company employee;
- Gay men: Doctor, bank worker, steward, civil servant in ministry, tour guide, make-up artist, waiter, construction worker, hotel staff, NGO staff;
- Trans men: teacher, construction worker, farmer, barber, garment factory worker, sales representative;
- Trans women: sex worker, hairdresser, teacher, food seller, masseur, NGO worker;
- Lesbians: teacher, doctor, hairdresser, architect, accountant, sales representative, cook, bank worker, NGO worker, waitress, manager, police officer, soldier, officer.

### Challenges to finding employment

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

All bisexual participants reported that it is always hard to find a job if they disclose their bisexuality. Three of them also had trouble finding work opportunities due to lack of knowledge of foreign languages and other skills. Among the gay men, two had to hide their homosexuality in order to apply for a job with the government as a soldier and government staff, and one was not accepted or respected at their workplace for being gay. Most LGBTQI employees have to hide their identities when working with big state enterprises, including the beer company Lao, Lao Telecom and Electric du Laos. Three 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. And three lesbians reported they were able to work with the government as a teacher and a soldier, but they had to hide their identity.

All trans women reported problems in accessing work opportunities and in staying in jobs. They all struggled to find work because of transphobia and were not able to work in government: If they were identified as trans people, they were asked to cut their hair and dress like men. Many of them have faced serious discrimination when they had jobs, either in private or public institutions. In addition, they have all been discriminated against by their employers and colleagues and did not have a safe and accepting environment at work.

### Treatment in the workplace

It is evident from most of the answers from participants that they have had bad experiences at work, simply for being LGBTQI. One trans shared his experience: *"I am a teacher. I work at a secondary school. I work harder than the other teachers because, as an LGBTQI person, I try to support many activities in the school, beyond my tasks, But I have never had praise from the school director nor been promoted like the other teacher who are not LGBTQI people. I feel I have lost my right to be treated equally because I am a trans man".*

Bisexual and lesbian participants had similar views and experiences: As long as they did not reveal their sexuality, there were no problems. Otherwise, they could face the risk of losing their jobs. The lesbian participants also said that when people find out about their identity, they were usually insulted or asked more personal questions. All gay and



trans men participants revealed that they have dealt with very hostile work environments: either their employers would not trust them or their workmates would not treat them well. For trans women, the reality has also been harsh: six have been insulted at work and seven have suffered severe harassment.

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

### **Entrepreneurship and financial services**

When participants were asked what kind of financial issues they usually face, lack of money was a cross-cutting theme in all answers.

All bisexual participants reported going through financial hardships and not having enough work 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 lesbian participants shared similar experiences: they earn very little, and are not able to afford their living expenses. They also said they cannot find better work opportunities due to lack of skills or knowledge.

All trans men reported low income and stated they cannot afford basic living expenses such as rent, bills and healthcare. All of them said they do not have enough money to support their families. Among the trans women, they wished they had enough financial resources to start a business and some of them believe they do not have enough skills to find better jobs. Similarly, to the trans men, they also revealed that they cannot afford their basic living expense.

Participants were asked if their sexual orientation or gender identity and expression has affected their ability to save money. All 36 participants reported that their gender identities were not barriers, but that they did not have enough money for saving. In terms of financial barriers, transgender women may be more vulnerable to poverty due to lower education and higher discrimination than gay men and lesbians.

Participants were unable to access 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 or because they do not have a guarantor. The same barriers were found while trying to access insurance or credit to open a business. But this situation was more due to economic status, rather than SOGIESC.

### **Education**

LGBTQI pupils and students face a number of challenges in the educational system. Because of Lao's significant young population, there has been an increase in human capital development. But investing in facilitating access to education and creating a safe space for LGBTQI pupils and students in Laos, is not a current priority for the government, although there have been two recent government-led initiatives to focus on LGBTQI inclusion with the first ever National Adolescent and Youth Policy (yet to be approved) and including Comprehensive Sexuality Education in the educational system. And yet, LGBTQI students, both in urban and rural areas, drop out from school because there are few or no policies and practices which support LGBTQI students, forcing many to leave their education, leaving them on the margins of society.





The 36 focus group participants identified the main challenges as

- Lack of support from family due to poverty:
- Discrimination in school:
- No policy and practical support of LGBTQI pupils:
- Forced to hide their identity.

Most of the 36 focus group participants had suffered some sort of discrimination from classmates and/or teachers. 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 become strangers in the mindsets of their classmates and teachers.

Three gay participants reported that they were bullied by friends in school and were called bad names such as “Katoey”<sup>34</sup>. The other three reported they had not come out or expressed themselves as gay men when they were in primary and secondary school, because they were afraid of losing friends if they were found out.

Trans participants reported similar problems. All six trans men said their teachers would not allow them to dress like men and required them to wear female uniforms. All participants also reported discrimination and insults from classmates, especially their fellow male students. All trans women have been discriminated against by their classmates, in particular male students and teachers, who would not allow them to dress like women and required them to wear male uniforms.

When participants were asked about the highest level of education which 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 and some of them able to complete a bachelor's degree. Trans people's levels of education may vary according to when they started their transition, but they normally complete primary school, and only a few complete a diploma's degree.

### Health services for LGBTQI people in Laos

When participants were asked about ordinary health services, they have access to, the most common answers were sexual health services. According to each identity group their answers are:

- Bisexuals: able to access HIV treatment, STIs and general health care, since their gender identity is no issue;

Gay men all participants had access to HIV tests, sexual transmitted disease (STIs) treatment, primary healthcare. Some of them had access to cosmetic/plastic surgery in Thailand;

- Trans men: participants had access to general health care but there is no specific HIV and STIs services for trans men;
- Trans women: All had access to HIV and STD treatment and general health services. Some of them also undertook plastic surgeries in Thailand> Hormone injections were available in Laos but had not been administered by medical doctors;
- Lesbians: participants had access to general health care but there is no specific HIV and STIs services for trans men.

<sup>34</sup> Katoey: A term used for a person who are a man and expresses himself as a woman and/or dresses up like woman.



## Health facilities

Participants were also asked about where they usually access these health services: Bisexuals: public hospitals and private clinics for general health care and HIV testing by outreach workers under the HIV prevention project; gay men: public hospitals and private clinics for general health care and HIV testing by outreach workers under the HIV prevention project; trans men: public hospitals and private clinics; trans women: public hospitals and private clinics for general health care and HIV testing by outreach workers under the HIV prevention project, and lesbians: public hospitals and private clinics.

## Challenges

When asked about the challenges experienced in accessing health services, poverty and discrimination were frequent themes in participants' answers and trans people, in particular trans women, faced the greatest barriers in enjoying their right to health and access to adequate services.

All bisexual participants said that they do not feel comfortable disclosing their sexuality to doctors and they are particularly afraid that doctors will not keep patient confidentiality. All gay men and lesbians also reported fear of disclosing their sexuality to health professionals as well as a lack of financial resources to cover their treatments. All gay men and lesbians said that they were able to receive health services at the hospital without discrimination as long as they do not disclose their identity, but all of them shared the fear of the bisexual focus groups participants, namely that doctors may not keep patient confidentiality, especially for HIV services.

All trans people reported they were unhappy with health services at public hospitals and that health care providers were not friendly to trans women. All trans women also complained about the bad treatment they receive from doctors and receptionists and some have been insulted and bullied by health care providers. Trans women also face particular challenges and dangers as there are no specialist doctors in Laos on sexual and mental health issues, symptoms and diagnoses of trans gender people. Therefore, many trans women have to go to Thailand when they have issues on their sexual and mental health. However, those who cannot afford to travel to Thailand and pay for their consultations or surgeries often make use of illegal and unsafe hormones injections because they did not receive appropriate information.

Also, the transgender population faces the greatest barriers in accessing effective HIV services. This includes stigma directed towards transgender; the economic vulnerability of many transgender persons, caused by limited access to careers due to discrimination; the combination of formal and informal sex work, many transgenders are involved with, and the significant portion of the transgender population who are labour migrants, especially in Thailand.

At the same time, the social visibility and accepted role of transgender population provides a potential opportunity for more effective health service delivery. Nevertheless, this remains an issue of social and political sensitivity.

## Conclusion

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Lao society is pretty tolerant of homosexuality however, until recently, there has not been much discussions about being LGBTQI in Laos. While being LGBTQI or having a non-mainstream gender or sexual identity or expression is not illegal, but there are also no laws to protect this vulnerable group of people and promote their rights and standing in the Laotian society. For the most part, Lao culture is rather tolerant of homosexuality. But only to the extent that LGBTQI people do not disclose their identities. This is particularly the case for lesbians - lesbianism is often either denied completely or misunderstood.

Lack of discussions about being LGBTQI and the issues they face, and the absence in policies, result in LGBTQI people being forced to live on the margins of society and there is only space for participation if they hide their sexual orientation, gender identities, and expressions.

The two new government-led initiatives with the first ever National Adolescent and Youth Policy and embedding Comprehensive Sexual Education in all educational settings, as well as the opening of space for NGOs to raise awareness of the complexities of being an LGBTQI, could pave the way for more inclusion of LGBTQI people in Laos.

The results of the focus group discussions (FGDs) show that many of the experiences of LGBTQI people facing barriers, stigma, discrimination and, in some instances, violence, is due to a lack of awareness and understanding from people in society in terms of sexual orientation and gender identity. Non-recognition of discrimination and barriers to rights and opportunities have a severe impact not only on LGBTQI people's mental and physical health, but also on educational achievements and professional skills. These barriers may stop an LGBTQI person from reaching their full potential and stepping out of poverty, which would not only be in her or his interest, but also significantly benefit the society and to the economies in which s/he lives. Most barriers to full inclusion for LGBTQI people identified in the FGDs are stigma and discrimination from various sources including families, communities, classmates, teachers, employers and colleagues because of lack of understanding about sexual orientation, gender identity and expressions.

### Variations in experiences of discrimination

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

Lesbians and bisexuals are facing less discrimination at school and in the workplace than the other groups if they are able to hide their sexual orientation. However, if they come out, they are more likely to suffer the same experiences of discrimination as other groups. Thus, lesbian and bisexual participants were able to obtain higher levels of formal education.

On the other hand, both transgender women and lesbians are facing big structural barriers, beginning with limited education resulting in restricted opportunities to get a good job. This may force them into human trafficking or they may leave Laos and become migrant workers in entertainment places, in Thailand. They are also at risk of facing harassment, violence and discrimination from their family and society.

Gay men may also experience similar barriers, depending on how visible their sexuality or gender expression is.



Regarding LGBTQI people's right to health and access to health services, FGD results indicate that trans women, bisexuals, and gay men get tested for HIV and STDs more than trans men and lesbians. This might be because services for LGBTQI patients do not include services for trans men and lesbians in terms of HIV/STIs services. Trans women also seem to face higher incidences of discrimination from health service providers because of their physical appearance and gender expression. In addition, health care providers cannot provide appropriate services for trans women due to lack of skills, knowledge, and experience on sexual health for transgender people. Transwomen are also more likely to have their health at risk due to unsafe injection of hormones and surgeries since they do not receive appropriate information. Overall, while the research looked separately into the experiences of LGBTQI people in Lao PDR in relation to access to education, health and employment, what is evident is that barrier in access to one of these rights and services affect access to other rights. Barriers in accessing education based on a person's SOGIESC affects that person's opportunities in relation to employment opportunities and access to health services.

## Recommendations

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The recommendations below, primarily targeted towards government and the private sector, are largely based on the lived experiences and suggestions for improvement from the 36 focus group participants. Some have been drafted by the research team based on existing and new findings.

APCOM and CHias, 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 Laotian society.

### Adoption of non-discriminatory and inclusive laws and policies

1. The Government of Laos should expand Article 35 of the Constitution of Lao PDR to include sexual orientation and gender expression. Article 35 presently states that "Lao citizens are all equal before the law irrespective of their gender, social status, education, belief and ethnic group";
2. The government should draft and adopt a law against discrimination and implement anti-discrimination policies and practices for LGBTQI people in Laos, including in the workplace, with specific provisions to protect LGBTQI people from sexual harassment, sexual violence and other forms of violence;
3. The government should approve the National Adolescent and Youth Policy and include a focus on LGBTQI people in forthcoming Human Capital Development strategies and plans;
4. The new National HIV strategy should have a specific focus on transgender people targeted efforts to increase TG service, access, and to decrease stigma should be explored.
5. Policies which allow transgender students to wear school uniforms according to their gender identity;
6. Educational institutions should implement Comprehensive Sexual Education in their curriculum, and include additional topics related to sexual orientation and gender identity and sexual and reproductive health, and provide for training of teachers on inclusive learning environments including sensitivity and how to support non-heterosexual students;



### **Implementation of non-discriminatory and inclusive programmes**

7. Employers who are providing inclusive work spaces and welcoming people from the LGBTQI communities on an equal basis with the rest of their workforce, should become champions for the private and public sector and promote non-discrimination against any minorities in the workforce;
8. Government, the private sector and national and international NGOs should encourage and provide opportunities for LGBTQI people to increase their professional skills, start up a business and find jobs, and support LGBTQI people in accessing jobs both in Laos and abroad;
9. Banks should offer LGBTQI-inclusive services, and provide for trainings LGBTQI sensitivity;
10. Micro finance institutions and banks should offer facilities and services for LGBTQI people who wish to start a business;
11. Peer Support groups for LGBTQI youth should be established at schools and within communities to address discrimination and mental health issues;
12. The government should support community-led services to provide friendly and safe LGBTQI-oriented health services, with a particular focus on services for transgender people;

### **Awareness raising and training**

13. The government, employers and businesses who are presently practicing inclusion and non-discrimination, and organizations working on LGBTQI issues should raise awareness in the private and public sectors, parents, the media and other stakeholders on how to respect, protect and promote LGBTQI rights in Laos
14. Teachers, health care providers, local authorities and employers should receive training on SOGIESC to raise their awareness on LGBTQI issues;
15. Health professionals should receive training on LGBTQI people's mental and sexual health; and specifically, on mental and sexual health for trans people, including hormonal counselling;
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;

### **Forming, expanding and consolidating partnerships**

17. All relevant stakeholders in Laos working towards inclusion of LGBTQI people, including LGBTQI people themselves, communities, NGOs, local and national government, the private sector, academe and media, should come together and explore and identify comprehensive solutions to full and meaningful economic and social inclusion of LGBTQI people;
18. Partnerships should be fostered between the private and public sectors, academic institutions and other relevant stakeholders working on LGBTQI rights, and funds made available, for more rigorous research to improve advance and expand available data and information on LGBTQI inclusion. This will inform programmes aimed to address and improve the situation of LGBTQI populations in the region.

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