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United Nations in Cambodia

OPINION / EDITORIAL: PRIDE WEEK and IDAHOT 2014 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY AT THE HEART OF PRIDE WEEK

Claire Van der Vaeren

Recently, at the meeting of the International Olympic Committee in Sochi, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon took a stand against homophobia and transphobia, declaring, “We must all raise our voices against attacks on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) or intersex people. We must oppose the arrests, imprisonments and discriminatory restrictions they face. Hatred of any kind must have no place in the 21st century.”

As we mark Pride Week this week in the lead up to International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia tomorrow, this message reminds us of the need to promote and protect the rights of all Cambodians, regardless of their sexual orientation and gender identity. It is a message the United Nations family stands firmly behind, informed by the intrinsic value of diversity and its importance to development that is inclusive and sustainable.

Earlier this year, LGBT representatives talked about their experiences of being LGBT in Cambodia at a national dialogue supported by the United Nations and USAID. Many relayed stories of ostracism, intimidation and violence from family members, peers and local authorities. Others talked about how discrimination had prevented them from finishing school, finding a decent job and accessing health care. Shella’s¹ story was familiar to many:

“My family used to scold me because of who I am, they stigmatised me and didn’t like me. They also kicked me out of the house... when they saw me wearing girl’s clothing. In school, there were many problems and classmates insulted, teased and threw chalk at me, the teacher didn’t do anything to stop them, and they didn’t like how I expressed myself, how I walked and talked. I only finished up to fourth grade... I had many difficulties as I didn’t know how to support myself.”

Indeed, family acceptance was one of the main concerns raised. Facing stigma and discrimination, many LGBT persons leave their families at a young age. Like Shella, they are often left vulnerable with few opportunities for education or work.

While Cambodian law does not criminalize same-sex relationships, a recent study found that: “LGBT persons experience high levels of stigma, discrimination, and exclusion in a variety of settings: the home,

¹Shella’s real name has been changed to protect her identity



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school, the workplace, health facilities, and public spaces.”²Such discrimination disadvantages LGBT persons and prevents them from enjoying their full social, political, economic and cultural rights. Government authorities at different levels, parents, teachers, employers, development partners and civil society, we all have a role to play to promote and protect the rights of LGBT persons so that they can participate fully and equally in Cambodian society.

Positive steps have been taken in recent years. There is growing recognition of sexual orientation and gender identity issues among government, development partners and civil society organisations. His Majesty King Norodom Sihanouk, politicians and community leaders have spoken up publicly against discrimination of LGBT persons. Same-sex marriage has been supported by several village chiefs and fifteen lesbian couples are known to have been issued marriage certificates in Kandal, Takeo, Prey Veng and Kampong Chhnang.³

The LGBT community in Cambodia is increasingly active and well-organised. Seminars on LGBT rights are regularly held in universities and Pride Week has been organised every year since 2009. This year, under the theme “Voice to the Voiceless Community,” organizations like CamASEAN, the Cambodian Centre for Human Rights, the National MSM Network and Rainbow Community Kampuchea have organized a range of events and workshops covering issues such as family acceptance, legal protection and HIV. I commend these organizations, which are vital for improving the rights of Cambodia’s LGBT community.

Since the first United Nations resolution on human rights, sexual orientation and gender identity was adopted in 2011, more and more countries in Asia and around the world are taking action to ban discrimination, penalize hate crimes, recognise same-sex relationships, and grant official documents to transgender and intersex persons.

The United Nations is supporting these efforts, launching the ‘Free and Equal’ campaign in July last year to raise awareness about violence and discrimination and promote LGBT rights, including in Cambodia. Eradicating discrimination takes time and education. It requires changing not just laws and policies, but also hearts and minds. Everyone – government, civil society, development partners and individuals – can take part in making these changes to combat violence and discrimination against LGBT persons. Because they share the same dreams as everyone else.

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On behalf of the United Nations Country Team in Cambodia

²Vicente S. Salas and SornSrun, “An Exploration of Social Exclusion of Lesbians, Gay, and Transgender Persons in Families and Communities in Some Areas of Cambodia and Their Ways of Coping,” Research (Phnom Penh: SPCU-CARD Press, 2013).

³Anna Leach, “Lesbians legally married in Cambodia despite no law change,” *Gay Star News*, May 6, 2013, <http://www.gaystarnews.com/article/lesbians-legally-married-cambodia-despite-no-law-change060513#sthash.DAGVRZ.wGjMYdpn.dpuf>.