

*"I married a man to satisfy my parents"*



**Family Violence towards Lesbian, Bisexual and TransgenderMan (LBT)People in Cambodia**

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**June 2019**

**Rainbow Community Kampuchea (RoCK)**

## **Acknowledgment**

First and foremost, I would like to thank all of the lesbians, bisexual women and transgender men (LBT) who participated in this study by sharing their very personal stories of suffering. Without their openness, kindness, and willingness to share their experiences, this research would have been impossible. I would also like to thank the stakeholders from the Cambodian government authorities, United Nations (UN) agencies, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO), and academics who shared their professional and personal views about LBT people in Cambodia.

This report is the result of a collaborated effort by the Rainbow Community Kampuchea (RoCK) staff members, RoCK board of directors, and the research team led by Kasumi Nakagawa, Gender academic at Pannasastra University of Cambodia, with the research team members including Lean Chhorvon, Say Sysoma, Monileak Sokunthika, Nou Sambath, and Mon Meng Ean.

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I hope that this report on family violence against LBT people in Cambodia will serve as a valuable guide in directing future actions to address and rectify the current social injustices, gender based violence and domestic violence from their families that oppress this marginalized group on the basis of their sexual orientation and gender identity and expression. RoCK strongly requests government officials, national and international organizations, academic institutions, and development partners to continue to advocate for the rights of LBT people so that they can live free from prejudice, discrimination and violence.

**Ly Pisey**

**Coordinator**

**Rainbow Community Kampuchea**

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*Note: All the names used in this study are pseudonym*

## Executive Summary

This is the first research paper to document personal stories of family violence perpetrated against lesbian and bisexual women and transgender men (LBT) in Cambodia. Many LBT people in Cambodia confront discrimination and violence based on their sexual orientation or/and gender identity and expression, and this study focuses exclusively on forms of violence that have been overlooked in mainstream discourse: violence by family members.

The research was carried out by an external independent research team, led by Kasumi Nakagawa, gender academic from Pannasastra University of Cambodia. For the research process, RoCK staff members participated in the design, logistics, and analysis to produce the report.

In total, sixty-one LBT people (23 lesbian women, 4 bisexual women and 34 transgender man) were met, and amongst them thirty-one LBT people (51%) were under 35 years old. Additionally, seventeen stakeholders (3 parents of LBT people, 8 officials from state authorities, 3 UN staff members, 3 academics and 3 NGO staff members) were interviewed across eight provinces and the research was conducted from February to April 2019.

### Key findings

A high prevalence of violence targeted towards LBT people by their own family members was identified (81% for LBT people under 35 years old). LBT people identified that as compared to non-family violence towards them, family violence is the form of violence that most negatively impacts their lives.

#### Key findings

- 81% of LBT people under 35 years old faced emotional violence
- 6 LBT people (10%) experienced sexual violence, commonly forced marriages
- 35% of LBT people under 35 years old (n=31) in this study have, at some point in their lives, have thought about/attempted suicide due to their family's denial of their sexual orientation or gender identity and expression.
- Depression and stigmatization were also common amongst LBT people

- **Emotional violence:** The majority of LBT people (81%, n=25) under 35 years old faced emotional violence which often accompanies other forms of violence (such

as being beaten or having their liberty taken away). Starting from the transition period when LBT people are starting to disclose their sexual orientation/gender identity and expression, their family members' harsh comments about LBT people make it almost impossible for LBT people to come out of the closet. Once LBT people disclose their sexual orientation or/and gender identity and expression, severe forms emotional violence are used to attack them, including a complete negation of their presence within the family unit.

- **Physical violence:** In total, two transgender men and two lesbians reported having been seriously beaten by their family members. Their family members did so in order to "fix" them or to make them conform with the "female gender role".
- **Sexual violence:** Six LBT people reported that they had been forced or coerced to marry a man. Two LBT people reported that they married a man to satisfy their parents (by hiding their own sexual orientation or gender identity and expression).
- **Economic violence:** LBT respondents reported the destruction of their property by parents and that they were prohibited from attending school by parents by refusing to pay tuition fees.

## Causes of violence

The causes of violence from LBT people's family members vary based on intersecting factors, including traditional parenting methods, rigid social norms, religion, and/or ethnicity.

- Cambodian parents feel ashamed when their daughters do not conform with the normative gender roles (as girls/women) and in an attempt to get rid of such family shame, they may perpetrate violence against their children.
- Parents of LBT people are influenced by rigid social and gender norms for girls and women in Cambodian society, therefore, they try to "fix" their daughters to conform to rigid social norms.
- Many parents do not understand sexual and gender diversity, therefore, when people see their daughter is "different" from other girls, they may blindly criticize them.

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### Abbreviation

CCHR	Cambodian Center for Human Rights
CCWC	Commune Councilors for Women and Children
DV	Domestic Violence
LBT	Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Men
MOI	Ministry of Interior
MOJ	Ministry of Justice
MoSVY	Ministry of Social Affairs, Veteran and Youth Rehabilitation
MOWA	Ministry of Women's Affairs
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
UN	United Nations
UPR	Universal Periodic Review

#### Who are LBT people?

This study focused on Lesbian, Bi-sexual women and Transgender men (LBT) who were all born biologically female, but do not conform with socially prescribed, heteronormative gender roles as a result of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity and expression. It is important to note here that LBT people do not form one homogenous group, rather they are diverse. Therefore, in this study, each introduced individual is first identified as “who they are” as identified by them and when addressing the entire participants (total 61) to the study, the term “LBT people” is used.

## 1. Introduction: Family violence against Lesbian, Bi-sexual and Transgender (LBT) people

Chetra, a 24-year-old lesbian, was harshly criticised as “crazy” when her sexual orientation became known to her close friend. All her friends suddenly stopped communicating with her and blocked her out of her friend circle because “she is strange”. At such a difficult time, the house was not a warm place for Chetra as she said, “Several times my parents gossiped about our neighbour’s lesbian daughter by saying ‘If we had such a child in our family, I would rather die’. So, I cannot tell my truth to my own parents. I am now about to have a good job, but I am still not sure about myself and my identity. Sometimes, I feel that I am dying inside myself.”

This research study focuses on four types of violence (emotional, physical, sexual and economical) towards Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender (LBT) people that were perpetrated by their own family members, as experienced by Chetra (above) and Khemara (below box), and interviews were conducted with 61 LBT people (24 lesbian, 4 bisexual and 34 transmen).<sup>1</sup> Those four types of violence are categorized as domestic violence in the Cambodian Law on the Prevention of Domestic Violence and Protection of Victims (2005). Existing evidence shows that many LBT people confront discrimination and violence based on their sexual orientation or gender identity (CCHR 2015; ROCK 2016; CCHR2016; CCHR 2017), but this study focuses exclusively on forms of violence that have been overlooked in mainstream discourse: violence perpetrated by family members.

### **Run away from home**

#### **A story of Khemara, a 24-year-old transman and professional Casino card dealer**

“When I informed my parents of my gender identity, they did not accept it and they treated me so harshly. My life back then was filled with suffering and I was upset all the time. I was so depressed and stressed because I felt distressed that my parents didn’t accept me as who I was. But they are the people that I trusted, loved and respected the most. Also, they had been the main supporter to me in my life, so I could not understand why my parents couldn’t understand and accept me as who I was. So, I ran away from my home in Phnom Penh and moved to a new place with my girlfriend.”

The purpose of this research paper is to enable LBT people share their experiences. Also, general readers can learn about social inequality that is rarely visible in public

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<sup>1</sup> Details of the study purpose, methods and target groups/locations is in Annex 1-3.



and can reflect on their own privilege. This research paper also aims to contribute to, challenge and reduce multiple forms of discrimination and violence in Cambodian society.

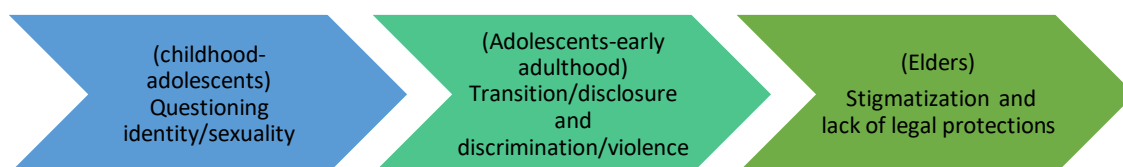
## 2. Violence from family members

“Daughters are continuously pressured to act in an appropriate manner and then to be a good woman in the eyes of their parents. Despite the fact that those expectations may not be directly said to their daughters, such pressure is actually huge. Therefore, LBT children may hold back and keep their identity secret for fear of disappointing their parents, especially their mothers. LBT people are vulnerable because they are sensitive to pressure regarding gender “norms” in our society.”

- **A female UN staff member**

**Has the situation surrounding LBT become better?** Many non-LBT participants to this study noted that conditions surrounding LBT people have improved in recent years, and LBT people have benefited from a decline in public homophobia. A government official said, “There is discrimination against LBT people in Cambodia; we cannot deny that. However, we see some LBT’s networks and platforms such as RoCK are now available to enable them to support each other, which did not exist before.” However, based on the findings from this study, many LBT people do not see it in that way. LBT people perceive that the public discriminate against them, hate them, even exclude them from the community, and they see that the same structured discrimination can occur even from their own family members. As a UN staff member said, “In Cambodia, discrimination against LBT children first starts within their own family”. Violence within homes has been overlooked because attention has been focused on the public sphere, such as verbal or physical violence based on prejudice or LBT bullying in schools.

**Figure 1 Violence experienced by LBT people in their life cycle**



**High prevalence of violence against LBT people by family members:** Alarmingly, 81% (n=25) of LBT people under 35 years old in this study have experienced violence by their family members, mostly while they were still children. In this sense, LBT people’s homes are not safe places for them. Many LBT people have been forced to

make a tough decision to leave their home when they could not endure the suffering any more, or others were kicked out of the house by their own family.

### **2.1. Family violence is the harshest form of violence against LBT people**

The forms of discrimination and violence that LBT people experience vary greatly depending on the stage of their life; in schools, the work place, in the community, or in public spaces, such as at a park or the market. However, many noted that the discrimination by strangers or non-family members is not as serious as violence by their own family members. Family violence is by far the harshest violence experienced by LBT people because it can force displacement from the family home, concealment of an individual's true identity, and can cause severe mental distress.

Lon, a 29-year-old transman, left his family for fear of being rejected, and said, "I moved out from my house because I wanted to hide my gender identity from my parents." Ratha, a 32-year-old transman and NGO staff member, said, "When I suffered from a broken heart from a romantic relationship, it could be cured. On the other hand, the harsh words by my own mother are extremely painful as I have only one mother". A 37-year-old lesbian, Sarath, was also pressured by her parents to "fix" her sexual orientation, said, "Sometimes, my neighbours gossiped and discriminated against me, as well as my co-workers. But I still think that my parents not accepting me was the most painful to me. It hurts me so much because they are the people whom I love and care about the most."

#### **Married to satisfy his mother**

##### **A story of Tim, 68-year-old transman**

Tim started to notice his gender identity when he was in primary school. Tim said, "Back then, I loved playing boy's games and played with other boys. I always cut my hair short." But he grew up as a girl and married a man that his parents arranged for him. "I had hidden my gender identity and married my husband and had some children. But all children died during Khmer Rouge regime." He kept his gender identity secret for more than 25 years and then he decided to disclose it, mainly because his husband and his father passed away. Those deaths in his family made him rather keen to express his own identity, because he thought that "at least, I would not put my father in a difficult position [because of my gender identity]." However, his gender identity shocked his extended family members, and he was teased, mocked, and discriminated by his own relatives who lived in the same district. He said, "My family members often called me "Mi Kteuy" meaning you're "a gay woman". It is painful to me because I cannot change my identity anymore."

## 2.2. Emotional violence by family members

More than half of all the LBT people participated in this study (56%, n=34) reported that they have experienced emotional violence by their own family members because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Also, it is worth noting that other types of violence, such as physical, sexual or economic as described later, are frequently accompanied by emotional violence. Alarming, the prevalence of emotional violence becomes much higher amongst the LBT people under 35 years old and 81% (n=25) of people surveyed reported to have experienced emotional violence because of their sexual orientation/gender identity.

***Fear of denial or non- acceptance by their parents:*** Commonly, LBT people have to keep their sexual and gender identity secret for many years because of a fear of rejection by their own family members, especially by their own parents. Sokleang, 23-year-old who still keeps her identity secret said, “when I hear my parents criticizing other LGBT people and generalize ‘all LGBT people are bad people’, it hurts me. And I feel that my parents would not accept my choice [to be bi-sexual].” A strong social norm of the gender binary system in Cambodian society is one of the main factors that oppresses LBT people. When they decide to tell parents about their sexual identity, they might face denial that their identity is valid.

“In my opinion, most families do not accept their children [if they are LBT].

– a local government officer

***Ignored by family members:*** Some transmen reported that their family members started to ignore them in the house. An example is Sokha, a 24-year-old transman, said, “I feel so hurt when my parents won’t listen when I want to talk to them.” Also, Ratana, 26-year-old transman and a school teacher said, “I have been discriminated against by my family. Even now, I am prohibited to tell anyone that I am a child of my parents. Whenever I go outside with my family, if people ask my mother ‘who is this person [me]?’ , she replies that I am her nephew or someone else but do not belong to her own family. Also, my elder sister (who lives in the same house) never tells others that I am her sibling.” Denial of “belonging to a family” leads to the destruction of personal dignity of LBT people who experience such pain in their home which should be a refuge.

**Forced to separate from a partner:** Parents forcing their LBT children to separate from their partners was very common amongst the people interviewed in this study. Kim, 50-year-old lesbian, said, “My mother tried to separate me from my partner several times and to force me to get married with a man.” Kim did not agree, and she decided to leave her home and started to stay with her partner who still lives with her. Parents of LBT people who participated in this study also reported that they sometimes intervened to attempt to separate their LBT children from their partner.

#### **Detained in a rehabilitation center**

##### **A story of Sam (27-year-old, transman)**

Sam grew up in Siem Reap with seven brothers/sisters. His mother was a medical doctor and his father was a village chief. He started to notice his gender identity in grade 6, and his mother never accepted him as he was and always tried to “fix” him. Sam said, “My mother always said horribly harsh things to me, such as ‘if I knew that you would become like this (a transman), I would have killed you when you were born’”.

Despite all pressures and struggles, Sam studied very hard and enrolled at Royal University in Phnom Penh. However, in his second year in university, his mother forced him to go back to Siem Reap as she found out that he was having relationship with a girl. Sam said, “At that time, I tried to explain my mother who I was, but it did not work out.” Then, Sam’s mother forced him to stay at a drug rehabilitation centre for the purpose of ‘fixing his gender’, but Sam escaped after 3-months in detention there and ran away from his mother and settled his life in Phnom Penh again.

### **2.3. Physical violence by family members**

This study documented 4 LBT people (11 %) who experienced physical violence. Physical violence such as parents kicking children or forcing LBT children to be locked in the room which are rarely reported. No one may talk about it in public, mostly because family members regard it as “a family shame” that needs to be kept secret, and so LBT children dare not disclose such violence to outsiders as they may regard them as a cause of the violence.

**Beaten by family members:** Common perpetrators were fathers beating their daughters but brothers may also use violence. Keth, 37-year-old transman working at the garment factory said, “My brother hated me and beat me so hard”, and three other LBT people who had experienced physical violence also reported that they were harshly beaten by their family members. Even though the sample is small, evidently, transmen experience harsher physical violence, including hitting and beating (all those

experiences also include emotional suffering) mostly because transmen tried to show their masculinity through their appearance and parents (especially fathers) are unhappy about their children's masculine attitudes.

***Forced to stay home or forced to leave the family:*** Parents of LBT people prohibiting them to go out of house and detained in their rooms was also reported by many. Pech, a 20-year-old lesbian and a university student said, "When I wanted to go out with my girlfriend, my parents used violence to prevent me from going out with her. My parents imprisoned me at home and restricted my right to meet with my friends." Many LBT people, regardless of their age, were pressured to be "normal" by conforming to the dominant notion of gender in Cambodian society, and when they could not tolerate it, they decided to leave their home and to be independent.

#### **Kicked out of home by his mother**

##### **Maneth, 29-year-old transman, Phnom Penh**

Maneth grew up in Phnom Penh and has been working as a NGO staff member after his graduation from the university. He noticed his gender identity at around 8 years old but kept it a secret from his family members until he became 20. One day, he finally decided to cut his hair short to show his identity. "The most painful experience for me was when I first disclosed my gender identity to my mother; the worst situation happened. My mother got so angry at me and gave me two choices, either I could listen to her and be 'a good daughter or be the "real me". It hurt me so much to choose only one choice but then I said to her while crying 'I choose the second choice, to be the real me.' After she heard this, she said, 'leave my home now and take off all my jewellery here!' So I had to follow her orders. This was the most painful experience in my life."

## 2.4. Sexual violence

Arranged marriage is still practiced in Cambodian society and under such a cultural context, unknown number of LBT people would have been forced to marry against their will; some were forced by their parents and some forced themselves to follow their parent's decision in order to serve as "a good daughter" to their parents.

### Forced to marry a man

#### A story of Ro-Ath, a 34-year-old transman and lottery company employer

When he was in lower secondary school, Ro-Ath noticed he liked to wear boys' clothes. However, he knew that people around him were gossiping about LGBT people in a discriminatory manner, and therefore, "I was afraid to come out of the closet because people might gossip about me or talk badly about me. My mother did not like it because she also disapproved of the LGBT community." In order to satisfy his mother, he agreed to marry a man that his mother had chosen for him. He recalled that painful experience by saying, "I married a man by following my mother's decision but it did not change me from who I was. Because I was doing so [getting married] only to satisfy my mother. During our 3-year-marriage, I was really devastated because I had to keep my gender identity a secret". At the end, he divorced his husband and went to another city to start a new life as a transman. He said, "I love myself as who I am now, and finally feel so free to live as I am."

**Forced to marry:** Six LBT people reported being pressured to marry (and two were actually married) and to end same-sex relationship by their parents. Also, there is a report by an LGBT activist that one transman was forced to marry and then got pregnant, and thereafter he decided to have an abortion. Sany, 38-year-old bike-taxi driver transman, said, "I just followed my parent's decision to marry to satisfy them". He is now living with his wife and his own children born from the previous marriage. Also, Mey, 35-year-old transman, and a single parent of 3 children after divorce, said that he feels more free now after divorcing his "irresponsible husband" and he now enjoys a new partnership with a person with whom he could find peace of mind.

## 2.5. Economic violence

Economic violence includes destroying property of LBT people or prohibiting LBT children from attending school, as parents have financial power over their children. In this study, a few LBT people reported experiencing such abuse of power. Emotional pain will have occurred as a result of some combination of different forms of violence, including economic violence.

***Prohibited from buying the clothes they needed, or having their phones taken away:*** Many transmen experienced abuse of power that prohibited them from wearing what they needed for their gender expression (men’s clothes), and instead were provided with female clothes and forced to wear them. Pich, a 26-year-old nurse, said, “My mother took my phone away, and confined me in the house”.

**Prohibited to wear what he wanted**

**Heng, a 24-year-old transman**

Heng felt that he was “different” from other girls when he was 14 years old. He said, “First, I was pressured by my family members because I always dressed like boys. My family [parents] started to throw away my clothes and forced me to dress like a girl. Most of the time, they blamed me for not following what girls should do.” His life was a struggle to make his family members to understand who he was, but it was very difficult for his parents to accept him as he was. He said, “I was depressed due to the pressure and denial [about myself] by my parents; what hurt me the most was the harsh words from them, such as my mother shouting at me ‘I wish I never had a child like you [transman]’.”

***Prohibited from going to school:*** Some LBT people gave up schooling due to their sexual orientation/gender identity and expression, although no direct correlation between dropout rates and family violence was found in this study.<sup>2</sup> Seila, a 24-year-old transman, said, “My family forced me to change schools because they thought schoolmates were one of the reasons that I became a lesbian.” Also, Malin, a 26-year-old transman and interior designer, said, “My parents threatened me with not allowing me to go to school because they were ashamed that I was like this.”

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<sup>2</sup> Giving up schooling were identified as directly attributed to school bullying or teachers’ negative attitudes towards LBT students, and it was also assumed that many parents prohibit their LBT children from attending school; however, this study did not collect enough evidence to analyse which reason is the strongest factor that prevented LBT children from attending school. Most probably, a combination of multiple forms of oppression and violence deprives LBT children’s access to education.

### 3. “I know nobody wants to be like me”: Impacts of violence

Alarming, 35% of LBT people under 35 years old (n=31) in this study have, at some point in their lives, considered attempting suicide due to their family’s denial of their sexual orientation or gender identity and expression. Depression and stigmatization were also common amongst LBT people.

#### **Ignored by parents, mother embarrassed to have him**

#### **Keth, a 25-year-old transman and medical professional**

Keth, a medical professional, spent 10 years living a lie until he was brave enough to publicly express himself as who he was. When he disclosed his identity to his parents, they told him to try to “fix” his gender to be a girl. Thus, he tried several attempts, but always failed and those attempts simply confirmed that he could not change his identity. Recalling back to those experiences, he said, “Most of the time my parents ignored me for being different from other normal girls. Especially, my aunt, uncle, and people in surrounding environment ignored me.” Even when he pursued higher education and started a career as a medical professional by running his own clinic, he still felt discriminated against by his parents. He said, “My mother still feels embarrassed by having me as her child, and sometimes my parents [say that they] want me to be normal”.

Tika, a 38-year-old transman, who was forced to marry a man as his parents wanted to separate him from his partner, said, “I would rather have died than be forced to marry a man. So, committing suicide was the only option for me.” Depression and stigmatization are also a significant factor that LBT people must endure. Chhineth, a 25-year-old transman said, “I know nobody wants to be like me (transman), but I can’t change myself. This is who I am.”

### 4. “I have tried, but....”: Coping strategies

LBT people reported using various coping strategies to deal with the external or internal stress and oppression they faced; the most visible strategy is to change to conform with the dominant notion of gender roles (as females) or leave their homes and start living independently, while some used network/social media, and a few LBT people reported using medication for the extreme depression from which they suffered.



**Table 1 Coping strategy**

<b>Coping strategy</b>	<b>Actual actions taken</b>
<b>Trying to “change”</b>	Many transmen tried to change themselves by wearing feminine clothes or make up, but most of them reported that despite making several attempts, they failed as they realized they could not change their identities.
<b>Physical separation from family</b>	Many LBT people made the tough choice to leave their parents to be free from oppression or violence. Within the Cambodian cultural context, children leaving their parents requires huge amount of courage and it is a big decision to make.
<b>Social media and Networking (such as RoCK)</b>	Many LBT people in this study reported that the RoCK network enabled them to share their suffering and find friends, which can allow them to have a feeling of “belonging”.

## 5. “My daughter does not obey me”: Causes of violence

This study identified that the main causes of violence by family members is shameful feeling amongst LBT people’s parents at having LBT daughters. This is because they are influenced by the rigid gender norms in Cambodian society and a lack of understanding of sexual/gender diversity. Those factors are also interlinked or combined and reinforce and maintain the patriarchal system in Cambodia where male dominance is accepted and thereby excludes people who do not conform with the strict gender norms.

“I disapproved (of daughter being a transman) and I tried to separate her from her lover.”  
-A mother of a transman, 68-year-old

### 5.1. Violence due to shame

Cambodian parents feel ashamed when their daughters do not conform with normative gender roles (as girls/women) and in an attempt to get rid of family shame, they may perpetrate violence towards their children. Additionally, the Cambodian Domestic Violence law (DV law, 2005) allows parents to use violence against their children for the purpose of “giving advice or reminding them of social norms, using appropriate measures... to follow the good ways of living with dignity and the nation’s good custom and tradition” (Art. 8). With such a tradition, when parents see any act of their child that might cause a sense of shame or to damage family reputation, and perpetration of violence towards their children can be justified by them.

## 5.2. Violence due to rigid social and gender norms for girls and women in Cambodian society

### **“My daughter stopped obeying my orders”**

#### **A story of Ms Serey, 65 years old, a mother of a transman**

Ms Serey lost her husband during the Khmer Rouge regime and raised her three children alone until they became independent, for almost 30 years. As a single mother, she struggled to make a living for her children and for herself, and “I didn’t notice that my daughter’s behaviour was different from other girls when she was a child.” Ms Serey was informed by her daughter about her gender identity that she wanted to dress as a man and behave as a man. Recalling this incident, Ms Serey said, “At that time, I was really angry and upset with my daughter because she suddenly changed to someone different. Especially the way she dressed shocked me [as it was masculine] and she also cut her hair short like a man. It was really hard for me [to understand] because my daughter didn’t listen to me at all. She never obeyed my order [to behave as a normal girl]. After all, I decided to leave as it is because its best for her to be happy with herself. That’s all.”

The patriarchal society, where heterosexual norms are maintained, forces Cambodian girls and women to follow social norms, such as to be submissive, be respectful to their parents and maintain their family reputation (MOWA, 2014). Therefore, parents of LBT people try to “fix” their daughters to conform to such social norms. Many LBT people met in this study feel that they are being punished for being “different” and they were instructed by their family members to avoid gender nonconformity. Lineth, 20-year-old lesbian also said, “Family violence against us occurs because of culture and social norms of the society.

## 5.3. Violence due to limited understanding about sexual and gender diversity

Although information about sexual and gender diversity have been spread in Cambodia, mainly through social media, the elder generation can still be conservative, and some of them cannot understand people who do not conform to heteronormative gender norms. This is the same with younger parents (in their 40’s to 50’s). Therefore, when people see someone who is “different”, they may blindly criticize them, including LBT’s parents.

## 6. Recommendations

“The MOWA always acknowledges challenges and concerns of LBT people, and we will ensure to have a strong plan to support them. We always question, ‘what are the problems faced by LBT people?’, ‘what are their needs?’ and ‘what can our ministry do for them?’. For effectively supporting them, we need more research studies with evidence in order to develop a plan/strategy for creating positive change in our society.”

- A representative from the MOWA, Cambodia

Despite the fact that there has been significant efforts to improve the situation of LBT people in Cambodia, there still remains many challenges that continue to oppress them and deprive them of their fundamental rights to live as who they are. This study recommends nine actions to be considered by the state and relevant stakeholders so that the public can also be influenced to understand sexual and gender diversity. Those are divided into two categories; (1) short-term action-oriented recommendations which must be urgently put in practice, and (2) long-term action-oriented recommendations, which can be achieved by 2023 in alignment with the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) which addresses gender equality (goal 5), alongside the fundamental SDG principle that no one is left behind. Recommendations 7-9 were also recommended by the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in February 2019.<sup>3</sup>

### 6.1. *Short-term recommendations*

#### **(1) Increase capacities for social workers who can support sexual orientation and gender identity and expression**

This study identified a high prevalence of violence towards LBT people, and as a result they are stigmatized, isolated, and feel ignored. They need professional and rights-based counseling to recover their self-esteem and feel positive about their lives; such services should be available and accessible across Cambodia. Practicing social workers employed by Ministry of Social and Veteran’s Affairs (MoSVY) urgently need to obtain additional professional skills on trauma counseling related to sexual orientation and gender identity and expression.

#### **(2) Expand counseling services availability and accessibility**

On the ground at the village-commune level, Commune Councilors for Women and Children (CCWC) play an important role to support women and children who are in need of help in a variety of ways. Thus, Ministry of Interior (Ministry

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.upr-info.org/sites/default/files/document/cambodge/session\\_32\\_-\\_octobre\\_2018/a\\_hrc\\_41\\_17\\_e.pdf](https://www.upr-info.org/sites/default/files/document/cambodge/session_32_-_octobre_2018/a_hrc_41_17_e.pdf)

of Interior) in cooperation with MOWA needs to take an urgent action to empower CCWC to obtain knowledge on related to sexual orientation and gender identity and expression.

**(3) Utilize media (national TV/national radio) to raise awareness on sexual orientation and gender identity and expression for positive attitude change**

Changing social norms, that exclude diversity, should be addressed. In the fourth industrial revolution, media is a powerful tool which can appeal to all people to gain more understanding about differing sexuality, gender identity and expression, and to become allies in supporting diversity. As the Cambodian government owns its national TV station and national radio station, it is highly recommended that they take immediate action to spread information about sexual orientation and gender identity and expression by cooperating with NGOs such as RoCK and CCHR that have been conducting advocacy to promote understanding about those issues across generations. Additionally, the ministry of information needs to consider enforcing its media code of conduct to ensure that no negative speech/actions that humiliate and discriminate LBT people are viewed or aired.

**(4) Publicize available complaints mechanism for LBT people and make it accessible**

The governmental Cambodian Human Rights Committee (CHRC) has established a complaints mechanism for anyone to bring cases of human rights violations, however, this mechanism is unknown to many LBT people. Although it may be extremely difficult for LBT people to report human rights violations perpetrated by their own family members, at least, CHRC can take more proactive approaches to enable LBT people to know its services and its mechanism, so that LBT people have access to justice through existing national mechanism.

**(5) Expand training on family violence against LBT people to law enforcement officers and judicial officers**

Family violence is a part of domestic violence, but this violence is underreported and unknown to many law enforcement officers or judicial professions (judges, prosecutors, and lawyers). As a part of legal training courses for them to learn specialized legal knowledge on domestic violence law, MOJ needs to ensure that the training for them always include some sessions on sexual

orientation/gender identity and expression and family violence that occur due to LBT people's sexual orientation/gender identity and expression.

**(6) More research on LBT issues by state authorities, academics and NGOs**

More research is needed to explore the problems that LBT people have been subjected to, and such research needs to be conducted by the state authority, especially by MOWA, in order to build evidence for an effective and strong policy formulation which may reduce discrimination and violence towards LBT people. Additionally, very little is known about health problems that transmen face (they never check their reproductive functions as they perceive themselves as men). Furthermore, no study has been done about domestic violence within same-sex couples, and no specific analysis was ever done about religious influence on sexual diversity in the Cambodian context. Not only the state institutions but also NGOs working for the empowerment of women can integrate the perspectives and experiences of LBT people into their research studies. Additionally, academics such as university need to consider taking some proactive actions to conduct researchers to enable their students to learn about LBT issues that are not often examined amongst academics in Cambodia.

**6.2. *Long-term recommendations***

**(1) Adoption of an anti-discrimination law which explicitly prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity and expression**

Although discrimination is prohibited in the Cambodian constitution and other national laws, as well as in international human rights laws that Cambodia has already ratified, Cambodia has not adopted a comprehensive anti-discrimination law which prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Adopting such a special law can enable the general public to be aware that the state is taking proactive measures to eliminate any discrimination towards LBT people and other marginalized populations. MOJ needs to host more discussion on the matter, and initiate with NGOs to draft such a law in a transparent manner.

**(2) For transmen, allow them to change their gender identity in ID card**

Many transmen have requested the state authorities to allow them to change their gender identity from female to male on their identity card so that they can live as who they really are, and are able to marry the person of their choosing. Many other countries have enabled such a legal process, and Cambodia can

follow their steps to enact such legislation. MOJ urgently needs to consider initiating such a process.

**(3) Allow people to legally marry the person of their choosing, regardless of sex or gender**

The majority of LBT people request that they want to be allowed to legally marry someone that they love, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. The Cambodian constitution ensures equality in its article 31 and such a principle should be applied to everyone. Allowing LBT people to form legally recognized families can also enable them to adopt a child, which was also a strong desire amongst the LBT people. MOJ needs to initiate discussions about amendment to the necessary law, including civil code, so that LBT people's rights are protected in a same manner as of others.

## **7. Conclusion: Multiple system of oppression**

Many personal stories of LBT people in this study provide evidence that members of the LBT community faces tremendous challenges and violence in their own homes. Narratives outlined in this study reveal how homes can turn into an unsafe place for LBT people. For many LBT people in this community, the family was identified as the primary sphere where they experience violence. Power dynamics and systems embedded in a patriarchal society in Cambodia has led to the oppression of LBT people in many different ways and they cannot find a safe place even at home.

Previous research has emphasized the discrimination and violence against LBT people in public places, and in doing so they can play down the prevalence and effects of family violence. However, as this study has documented, the majority of LBT people are widely subjected to various forms of violence by their own family members. The family home should be a safe space for everyone, especially children who need love and affection from their parents for their personal growth. More effort is essential to empower the Cambodian family to embrace diversity by understanding that people all are different and it is wrong to discriminate against LBT people simply because of who they are, or whom they love.

*I hope that the younger generation are provided with information to understand who they truly are, to have confidence in themselves and to freely express themselves.*

- **Rath, a transman, 44-year-old**

## **Annex 1 Objective, Target and Methods of the study**

### **1. Objectives of the study**

This research study aims to document stories of family discrimination towards lesbian, bisexual women, and transmen to bring evidence of discrimination to advocate to the policy makers and legislators to increase their attention to this matter, and to positively influence policy and legal changes to protect their rights. More specifically key objectives of the research are;

- To share stories and experiences of family violence towards lesbian, bisexual women, and transmen amongst the member of the Rainbow community for their empowerment and encouragement,
- To inform the public about family violence towards LBT and its consequences so that they gain more knowledge about the universality of human rights and principles of non-discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity,
- to bring evidence of discrimination towards the LBT community in order to advocate for them to the policy makers and legislators, which may draw their attention to this matter, and to positively influence policy and legal changes to protect their rights.

### **2. Geographic coverage and Scope of work**

#### **2.1. Target areas**

In this study, 8 provinces were selected as priority areas by ROCK to be the research site: Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, Stung Treng, Tbong Khmom, Preah Sihanouk, Prey Veng, Pursat, Kandal.

#### **2.2. Target Groups**

Initially, the research was expected to engage 80 LBT people (18-35 years old) and 10 family members who have positively changed their attitudes towards their LBT daughters. However, despite the fact that RoCK managed to mobilize more than 80 LBT people, at the end, only 61 LBT people agreed to meet with the team. Also, it was very difficult to reach out to parents of LBT people, and only 3 were met.

Additionally, the research team also planned to interview representatives from UN agencies, NGO and state authority to produce strong recommendations for policy/legal changes. The name list of stakeholders met in the study is included in Annex 2.

No	City or Province	LBT	Family members	Key stakeholders *	Total
1	Phnom Penh	25	2	12	39
2	Kandal	2			2
<b>Tonle Sap</b>					
3	Siem Reap	4	0		4
4	Pursat	5		1	6
<b>Plain</b>					
5	Prey Veng	11			11
6	Tbong Khmom	5		1	6
<b>Coastal</b>					
7	Preah Sihanouk	5	1	1	7
<b>Plateau</b>					
8	Stung Treng	4			4
<b>Total</b>		<b>61</b>	<b>03</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>79</b>

### 3. Methodologies of the study

#### 3.1. Approaches for data collection

Methodology of data collection was inclusive, participatory and followed a rights-based approach. Special attention was paid in regard to the child protection policy and code of conduct of ROCK in interviewing the target groups. This study was participatory as it engages LBT people in the design of the study (from ROCK team), as well as data collection process (ROCK's focal people greatly contributed to this) and data analysis with ROCK staff members.

In this study qualitative method (semi-structured interviews) was utilized to collect information, providing participants especially LBT, with an opportunity to describe happiness, joy, sadness, challenges and hopes for their future. Additionally, some quantitative data was collected to show magnitude of the issues amongst the participants to the study, but those are rather limited due to a small sample size of the study.

Mainly the below different methodologies for data collection outlined below were applied;

- **Desk review:** Key research documents on LGBTQ
- **In-depth interview/Key-informant interview (KII):** LBT and their family member, local authorities, and national key stakeholders who have been engaged in the empowerment of LGBTQ



### **3.2. Data collection tools**

The research team consulted with ROCK for interview tools below.

- Semi-structured questionnaires for individual interview for LBT, family members and stakeholders (authority and NGO/UN)- total 3 types

All the interviews were conducted in Khmer (except one interview with the representative from the Cambodian Human Rights Commission, who preferred to take an interview in English). All the tools were first developed in English for consultation with ROCK team. After the draft tools in English was agreed upon, the consultant team did four testing/piloting and modified the tools, by mainly cutting the original tool to be short.

### **3.3. Data analysis approach and process**

Coding as the progressive refinement of data was applied in the data analysis process. It went through several levels. The transcript of all KIIs were produced from tape-recordings. This research applied roughly three levels in coding:

**Level 1: Analysis:** This process aimed to make voluminous data into organized data with a manageable focus. A code was likely to be a word or short phrase that sums-up or captures the essence of what someone or a group of people have said in KII. The aim of this level of coding was to produce rough and basic concepts that seem to fit the data. In this level one coding, open coding was used which 'opens up' the data fracturing them along the way if necessary and breaking the data down so that conceptual implications could emerge in the later steps. This process was done by researchers' reflections and discussion amongst the researchers to identify key issues.

**Level 2: Coding re-organized into Categories:** This process was category development. Categorization is analytical in nature (rather than descriptive). Categorization was done based on Coding 1 in order to have indicatives of some emerging findings/themes in the field research. A lead researcher developed and organize key categories in relation to the thematic areas (violence, coping strategy/impact of violence, and causes of violence).

**Level 3: Analysis-Developing Key Findings:** After the categories were finalized, the key findings were identified for each of the thematic areas.

The key findings became the basis for the final analysis amongst the researchers with guidance from the lead researcher and a summary of findings will be written based on

the interpretations and analysis of the data. This method was applied as it is a participatory and systematic way of analysing data. Also, the field research team was de-briefed after the work in each province was completed, had been discussed and verification of the main issues in each province, combined. This was then consolidated into a report which also highlighting if there was significant difference amongst provinces

#### **4. Ethical Consideration**

Throughout the evaluation process, the evaluation team strictly followed and respected the protection policy and code of conduct of ROCK and the researchers operated on principles that were in line with the vision, mission and values of ROCK and followed ROCK's standards when interacting with the LBT community. Photos of participants were taken only when they allowed the research team to take them, and no photos were used in the report which were not had permission granted by the participants to the study.

In doing data collection and data analysis, no real names of the LBT respondents/participants were used but aliases (researchers asked them what name they prefer to be used; some could have provided their own names but the researchers noted the names provided by the participants with an agreement that those names are used in the report), and for transcript making and data analysis code (numbering such as "ST-LBT-TGM-KII23") is used. Only the research manager kept the lists of an original name and alias/codes.

After the research was completed, tape-recordings and transcripts (English) were handed over to ROCK and the research team members destroyed all information collected in the study (hand-writing memos on questionnaire and tape-recordings).

#### **5. Limitation of the study**

This study is a small-scale qualitative study, therefore it encountered some challenges and limitations as below;

- The vast majority of participants to the study were ROCK network members, therefore, they are in a "safety net" where they can exchange and share their sufferings and concerns. In reality there are an unknown number of LBTs who have no access to such a network and are thus may be more isolated, but this study could not document such personal stories.
- No parents who were using violence against their LBT children were met; all

parents except were recommended by RoCK network members, therefore, they were open and accepted their children as they are.

- The study identified a significant difference between older LBTs and younger LBTs (below 35 years old) in terms of their experiences of family violence, however, a comparison to identify reasons was impossible as a general sample because the sample is so small (n=61, LBT people over 35 years old is 50%, n=30).
- Many LBT people who took interview were trying to protect their parents, by blaming themselves that they provoke family problem; therefore, actual prevalence of physical violence could be higher.
- The Cambodian population consist of approximately 90% Buddhist, and 10% who are Christian, Muslim and other religions. A variety of ethnic minorities also varies from the Khmer (the majority), Vietnamese, Chinese and other ethnic minorities (mostly in eastern-northern areas). However, the vast majority of LBTs who participated in this study identified as themselves Khmer/Buddhists, and only one identified himself as Chinese-Khmer. Thus, intersecting discrimination and violence based on race and religions was not thoroughly examined.
- There could be different experiences in terms of violence in urban areas and rural areas, however, due to frequent migrations occurring in the Cambodian society in last decades, it was impossible to compare urban/rural differences.

## **Annex 2 Terminology used in this study under the Cambodian context**

Sexuality/gender related	
Bisexual woman	A biological woman who identifies herself as sexually attracted to both men and women.
Homosexual	In this study, “homosexual” is often used by LBT people to identify themselves, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identify; homosexual was often used to refer to biological women who are in a same sex relationship.
Lesbian	A biological woman who identifies herself as sexually attracted to transmen or women. Commonly they identify themselves as “homosexuals” in the Khmer language, including opposite-gender/same-sex relationship.
Transmen	A biological woman whose gender identity is a male, who is attracted to biological women.
Violence related	

Violence (“gender-based violence”)	“(Gender-based) violence is a form of discrimination that seriously inhibits a women's ability to enjoy rights and freedoms on the basis of equality with men (General recommendation No 19 to CEDAW). Violence that is examined in this study includes 4 categories as below: economic, emotional, physical and sexual violence, and all forms exclusively perpetrated due to sexual orientation and/or gender identity. “Fear of violence” is also included in this study, as such oppression inhibits LBT’s personal rights.
Economic violence	Provided the fact that LBT children are protected under the care of adults/caregivers, economic violence in this study refers to the deprivation of financial means to LBT children due to their sexuality/gender identity, such as forcing children to change schools, destroying personal property such as clothes, phones, or their PC for the purpose of denying communication with their friends.
Emotional violence	Any violence that LBT felt that they are emotionally hurt due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. Other types of violence almost always accompany emotional violence.
Physical violence	Any violence where LBT are attacked physically; acts such as beating, hitting, kicking, as well as forcing LBT people to stay inside their room/house by prohibiting them from going out of the house.
Sexual violence	Commonly sexual violence is forced marriage to “fix” LBT’s sexual orientation or gender identity.
Social norm related (MOWA 2019)	
Gender	Gender refers to the socially constructed differences and relations between males and females, including their roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women. It varies widely across societies and cultures, as well as varying and changing over time.
Gender binary	A concept or belief that the human being can be divided into two gender/sexes (male or female) and a person’s gender/sex is alignment with their social constructed gender roles (masculine or feminine).
Gender stereotype	A gender stereotype is a generalised view or preconception about attributes or characteristics, or the roles that are or ought

	to be possessed by, or performed by, women and men. A gender stereotype is harmful when it limits women's and men's capacity to develop their personal abilities, pursue their professional careers, and make choices about their lives.
Patriarchy	Patriarchy is a social system and traditional form of organizing society which often lies at the root of gender inequality. This social system positions men, or what is considered to be masculine, as more important than women, or what is considered to be women.
Masculinity	Masculinity is either an identity or pattern of practices associated with the position of men in various gender systems. There is no one masculinity; constructions of masculinity vary over time and across and within cultures, creating multiple masculinities. It is not based on biological factors. The term relates to perceived notions and ideas about how men should or are expected to behave and is furthered by men and women alike.

### Annex 3 Questionnaire for LBT

**ROCK Study**  
**A Participatory research on Family Violence**  
**towards Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Persons in Cambodia**  
**Questionnaire for LBT**

- Ensure attendance sheet/consent form is signed before interview starts, and confirm consent again at the end of the interview and provide cooperation fee
- Ensure safety of the interview location
- Do not concentrate on writing memo, as we will translate all interviews, but focus on eye-contact and having a good conversation

Interview date		Interview location	
Main interviewer		Category (LBT)	
Name/alias of interviewee that can be shown in the report (can be fake name)			

Interview completed? (interviewer self-assessment)	%	Follow up necessary?	No Yes (write details- such as she needs urgent medical attention) (if yes, report it to Kasumi to take next action)
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**Introduction: (Read out the sentence)**

We would like to ask your kind cooperation to accept our interviews as a part of the ROCK’s study about “*Family violence against LBT*”.

Confidentiality that your identity will be maintained, and your name will be never appear in any report in regard to your comments today. For the purpose of accuracy, we hope that you allow us to tape-record our interview. (Ask if she can agree, and if yes write down yes as a record that her oral consent taken\_\_\_\_\_)

We will have a set of questions to ask your opinions. We are here today to collect your opinions and recommendations for analysis, please feel free to ask us if any question is not clear.

If there are no questions, let us start. There are some questions that we want to ask about your experiences and opinions.

**Section 1: General Question**

1. (Migration) Where were did grow up?
2. How old are you?

18-24	25-29	30-35	36-49	50 up

3. How many brothers/sisters do you have?

0	1	2	3	Over 4

4. With whom are you currently living?

Parent(s) and	My siblings	My	My	My	Alone
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siblings	(no parent)	relatives	friend(s)	partner	

If any other reply, specify here below.

5. Are you currently employed?

Yes, I am employed	Yes, I am self-employed	No, I am out of job	No, I am a student

If you do not mind, tell me what kind of work you are doing or want to do in future?

6. In your daily life, can you live off your income?

100% I can pay	Yes, I am self-employed	No, I am out of job	No, I am a student

7. How many years did you attend school? (click the level the interviewee attended, she does not have to complete but the level she ended up or now)

1		8	
2		9	
3		10	
4		11	
5		12	
6		University level	
7		Graduate university	

8. Are you currently married?

I have a partner (but not yet married)	Yes, I am married (with a certificate)	No, but I want a certificate of marriage with my current	No, I do not have a partner	Other answer (specify- write down)
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		partner		

**Section 2: Gender/Sexualities**

9. Could you let me know, around how old were you when you noticed you were different from others?

Before primary school	Primary school grade 1-3 (age 6-10)	Primary school grade 4-6 (age 10-12)	Lower secondary (age 13-15)	Upper secondary (age 16-18)	University up	I am not sure

10. Approximately how long did you keep secret about your gender identity/sexuality?

Shortly I noticed	Half year	One year	1-3 years	4-5 years	More than 5 years	Until now	I do not remember

Why? (ask if there is any reason of non-disclosure related to family issues?)

11. Who was the first person you talked to about your gender identity/sexuality? (multiple choice)

Friend	Parents	Brother/sister	Partner	Work mate/boss	Still secret	Do not remember	Others (specify)

Why did you choose that person to talk about your sexuality/gender identity?

**Section 3: Discrimination and Violence**

Now I would like to ask you about your experiences of discrimination with your family members. It is not about your current partner/family but about problems you faced when living with your own parents/siblings/relatives who were taking care of you.



12. \_Have you even suffered any violence from because any of your family member?

Yes, many times	Yes, several times	Yes, a few times	No, never	I do not want to reply/do not remember

13. If yes, amongst all sufferings, which one was the most serious?  
(Who did what?)

14. (***Ask only missing information here, do not repeat the question if she has already told you***) In addition to above problems, did you also encounter other types of discrimination, such as (1) your family emotionally hurt you, (2) your family do not give you money (economic), (3) your family physically used violence (4) sexual abuse? (researcher click)

emotional	economical	Physical	Sexual

(If a respondent wants to share more suffering after you ask this, continue to ask additional suffering, just listen)

#### Section 4: Impact/seeking help

15. When you were suffering from **that serious** discrimination/violence because of your family, that you told me above, to whom did you ask for help?

Father	Mother	Sister (elder)	Brother (elder)	Sister (younger)
Brother (younger)	Male relatives who were living together (Specify who)	Female relatives who were living together (Specify who)	Grandmother	Grandfather

Male relatives who are not living together (Specify)	Female relatives who are not living together (specify)	Someone living together but not related by blood	Other person (friend, partner, workmate, boss, through SMS)	I had no one to ask help

Could you explain why you asked help from that person?

16. If you compare discrimination by schoolmates/workmates and discrimination by family members you experienced, what are different?

17. Have you ever thought about committing suicide?

Yes, many times	Yes, several times	Yes, a few times	Yes, at least one time	No, never	Do not remember/do not want to talk about it

(If yes) If you do not mind could you tell me why you felt so? (is it related to your family?)

18. (If your parents still do not accept you as you are now), If your parents/family member would become happier if you changed, would you try to change?

I have not told them about the true me	My parents accept(ed) me as I am now so I do not have to try	No 100%, I can not change as this is me	Not sure, depends	Yes, I try 100% (trying)

(If answer if she will try to change or not sure, ask) Why?

## **Section 5: Recommendations**

19. From your view, what should be done so you can feel freer?
  
20. From your view, what must the government do to protect you from discrimination in your family?
  
21. Do you have any recommendations how ROCK can better assist you when you face problems such as discrimination from family members?

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For More Information:

Rainbow Community Kampuchea (RoCK)

Address : #47E1, Street 350, S/K Boeng Keng Kang III,  
Khan Boeng Keng Kang , Phnom Penh

Tel : (+855)12 481 561/(+855)90 875 929

Email : [contact@rockcambodia.org](mailto:contact@rockcambodia.org)

Website : [www.rockcambodia.org](http://www.rockcambodia.org)

Facebook page : [Facebook.com/RoCKHMERLGBT2009](https://www.facebook.com/RoCKHMERLGBT2009)

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