

## **Rainbow Community Kampuchea: The journey towards marriage equality in Cambodia is full of hope**

**24 January 2025**

Many people wonder when will Cambodia have legal marriage equality for same-sex couples? As a growing number of countries around the world have already recognized legal marriage equality for same-sex couples, and most recently Thailand enacted a law recognizing same-sex marriage, how could this be a further aspiration for Cambodia?



These questions were posted after active media reporting and sharing information on the positive development in Thailand, in which the Government, the National Assembly and the Senate voted from March to June 2024 in favor of approving the Marriage Equality Bill, which was then signed into law and published in the official

Royal Gazette on 24 September 2024, making Thailand the first country in Southeast Asia to recognize legal marriage equality for same-sex couples. After the law entered into force on 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2025, the first same-sex couples in Thailand were able to legally register their marriage at district offices to have their love and marriage equally recognized and protected by the law. The Cambodian LGBT+ communities and supporters, including families, friends, the public, as well as some government officials in Cambodia, have been closely observing and celebrating this key milestone with the LGBT+ communities and supporters in neighboring Thailand.

If we look at Thailand and Cambodia, there are many similarities in culture, tradition, religion, legal system and administration. Instead of directly answering the above questions, we would like to draw your attention to the context and situation of the LGBT+ communities in Cambodia and reflect on how Cambodia could move toward achieving the goal of legal marriage equality for same-sex couples?

Cambodian people are diverse, both in urban and rural areas, most of whom practice good cultural and social values of respect, love, helping each other, and harmonious unity, especially the value and protection of families. The spirit of the Cambodian people and the atmosphere in the community and society are tolerant.

This understanding is also extended to LGBT+ people, trying to be open-minded, understanding, friendly and able to work and live together in peace. Over the past 20 years, the situation of LGBT+ equality and acceptance has been steadily improving year after year through efforts of empowerment, ownership, courage, confidence, ability to build friendship and network of the LGBT+ community members across the

country. We also have proactive collaboration between the LGBT+ communities and supporters from civil society, the media, local authorities, Cambodian Government leaders, development agencies and LGBT+ community networks in the country, regionally and internationally. Our collaboration is made to educate, share information, raise awareness, discuss and support the respect as well as protection of individual people’s dignity and diversity, including diverse gender identity and sexual orientation (diverse love).

Cambodian LGBT+ people are highly regarded and supported by Cambodia's top leaders. For example, [in 2004, His Majesty Preah Bat Samdech Preah Norodom Sihanouk, Preahmahaviraksat, King-Father of the Cambodian National Independence, Territorial Integrity and Unity, spoke in support of Cambodian same-sex marriage.](#)

Seven years later, [on the occasion of International Human Rights Day 2012, Samdech Akka Moha Sena Padei Techo Hun Sen, former Prime Minister and current President of the Senate of the Kingdom of Cambodia, also called on the Cambodian public throughout the country not to discriminate against LGBT+ people because they naturally born this way.](#) This call to non-discrimination, including the encouragement of government officials at all levels, was repeatedly raised at key forums. What is special is that in 2018,

on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the Rainbow Community Kampuchea, Samdech Techo also confirmed in a message through H.E. Mr. Keo Remy, Senior Minister and President of the Cambodian Human Rights Committee [that Cambodia will be a champion in the region for non-discrimination against LGBT+ people.](#)

These meaningful and invaluable support has been historically documented that our LGBT+ communities and families will never forget, and will continue to be remembered from one generation to another.



Within the framework of national policies, plans and programs, the Royal Government of Cambodia, through relevant ministries including the Ministry of Women's Affairs, the National Council for Women, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, has also included LGBT+ people as vulnerable groups for protection from gender-based violence. For example, in the Neary Rattanak VI Policy, the Third National Action Plan to prevent Violence Against Women (NAPVAW) and in the process of developing the Fourth NAPVAW, and the Life Skills Curriculum including Comprehensive Sexuality Education, incorporate the concepts of diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, sex characteristic, and gender equality. The Royal Government of Cambodia had also continued this commitment in 2019 in the 3<sup>rd</sup> cycle Universal Periodic Review (UPR) mechanism of the UN Human Rights Council as Cambodia accepted nine recommendations on the protection of LGBT+ rights on three priorities: legal marriage equality for same-sex couples, legal gender recognition of self-identified gender identity and adopting effective protection from discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity.

Looking at recent progress in the past year, in June 2024, [Cambodia announced it took part in an international joint statement on universal decriminalisation of homosexuality](#), which marked an important renewed commitment to protecting and promoting LGBT+ equality and non-discrimination. Most recently, in **October 2024, Cambodia officially accepted all 12 recommendations on continuing to progress LGBT+ equal rights in the 4<sup>th</sup> cycle Universal Periodic Review (UPR) mechanism**, including **seven recommendations to continue progress towards recognizing legal marriage equality for same-sex couples**, as well as other recommendations to enable legal gender recognition of self-defined gender identity for transgender and gender-diverse persons, and continue progress towards full equality for LGBT+ persons and adopting effective measures protecting from discrimination based on SOGIESC. Cambodia’s decision to accept these UPR 4th cycle recommendations on LGBT+ equality represents an important positive step as **Cambodia makes a continued commitment to progress towards implementing these accepted recommendations and progressing LGBT+ equal rights in Cambodia**. This positive news further strengthens our LGBT+ communities’ sincere hopes and confidence that we could soon achieve full equality for LGBT+ persons within our inclusive and harmonious Cambodian society. We are committed to continue working with all stakeholders through dialogues and cooperation for the way forward to continue progressing LGBT+ equal rights in Cambodia, especially legal marriage equality for same-sex couples as essentially prioritized by Cambodian LGBT+ communities to guarantee non-discrimination, full equality and social inclusion, also in line with achieving the sustainable development goal principle of “leaving no one behind”.



There has been a **growing acceptance and support from parents, families, communities, local authorities, civil servants, and supporters from all sectors of Cambodian society who accept and support LGBT+ people, including supporting the traditional marriage ceremonies and prioritized need to obtain legal marriage equality as key protection for LGBT+ families in Cambodia**. One example of this increasing public support is one [poll by Pew Research Center in 2022 finding that 57% of adults in Cambodia already supported recognizing legal marriage for same-sex couples](#) (this poll was conducted in 2022 with 1502 Cambodian respondents aged 18 and older).

Because of these positive developments, the Cambodian LGBT+ communities have become more courageous, confident, energetic, hopeful, and committed to being open and active. LGBT+ communities continue the proactiveness on providing emotional support, sharing inputs, disseminating information, expanding community networks, strengthening solidarity, and collaborating with relevant stakeholders to soon achieve one of the most important priority goals set by the LGBT+ communities, which is legal marriage equality for same-sex couples.

Voeun Davin, a young person from Kandal province, said, *"I will continue to be a good, active and responsible citizen, use my full potential and solidarity with the community as well as the Royal Government of Cambodia to get the legal marriage equality for LGBT+ people soon. I want to spend time with the person I love, hold hands, and get married with the recognition and support of my parents, and be able to legally register my marriage in front of the authorities."*



*"We both overcame many obstacles until we were accepted by our parents and relatives and have been able to live together for more than 40 years now, and we will hold hands forever until the last breath. Even though we are getting older, we still hope to be able to get married in the future."*, said Pa Yun and Mae Eang, an LGBT+ couple who live in Takeo province.



Despite hardship, struggle, tragedy and trauma of civil wars, including the Khmer Rouge genocidal regime, same-sex couples continued to hold hands and remain loyal to each other until Cambodia achieved peaceful society. They are now aging and having weaker health, yet they are not giving up on each other, instead they are taking care of each other dearly. Many Cambodian LGBT+ couples have been living together for many years, some having been together for 50 years, 20 years, 10 years, or at least 4 years with committed love. Young people under the age of 30 are also inspired by these older LGBT+ couples and now aspire to building their own sweet love and relationship.

Some couples have adopted children of their relatives, from hospitals and orphanages centers, and take care of them, support their study until they grow up, work, have a better life, and have spouses, growing more children and grandchildren for their families. This is the meaning and value of love, life, couple and family respectively which is so admirable. When visiting the local areas, meeting and listening to the stories and experiences of LGBT+ community members, in both urban and rural areas across Cambodia, we have learned the similarities in aspirations of their life journey, endeavor for building life and happiness, legal marriage and family. Some authorities also made civil registration according to the actual family situation in order to be able to use it to some extent and to provide legal protection, especially access to social protection services. Although it is not yet possible to get married in the formal traditional way and registering marriage certificate as required by Cambodian laws, we observe that many LGBT+ couples hold marriage celebrations and ceremonies in some traditional forms (which may officially be

presented as housewarming, birthday party, and engagement). These beautiful ceremonies are attended by parents, family members, relatives and friends as part of the happiness and joy. This is another proof that Cambodian society is open to accepting same-sex couples and families, could live and care for each other as neighbors, communities, citizens and authorities.

Continuing from the acceptance and support, same-sex couples also sincerely aspire to enter the traditional formal wedding hall, bow their heads to the mat in front of their beloved parents and register their marriage certificates in accordance with the law in front of local authorities, so that their spouses and families become fully recognized and protected. Cambodian people in general, especially different-sex couples, are well aware of and recognize that marriage certificates are very important to protect spouses, children and families. Therefore, the goal of same-sex couples to prioritize the legal marriage equality is not uncommon.

Looking at the experiences of other countries, there has been a **growing number of countries from around the world that have recognized legal marriage equality for same-sex couples**. Noticeably, as of January 2025, [38 United Nations member states as well as Taiwan have already recognized legal marriage equality](#) for same-sex couples. The track-record of the experiences from the countries who have already recognized legal marriage equality for same-sex couples shows that recognizing marriage equality has a positive impact in strengthening families, reducing discrimination against LGBT+ people, and contributing to **more inclusive and harmonious societies**. Additionally, global evidence from these countries shows that the **recognition of marriage equality also brings positive economic impacts contributing to economic growth**, notably in contributing to boosting the tourism sector, boosting some key industries (for example the wedding industry), and recognizing marriage equality is also key to fostering LGBT+ inclusive societies which contributes to improving national productivity, fostering innovation and attracting investments.



Our LGBT+ communities, parents, relatives, friends and supporters in all sectors, both public and private, at national and international, continue to work together to successfully achieve the priority needs set by the LGBT+ communities in Cambodia. This priority is an important key aspect of the Sustainable Development Goals principle of **“leaving no one behind”**, which helps prevent and protect the vulnerabilities of all Cambodian spouses and families who could live in Cambodian society with full respect, equality, inclusion, harmony and peace.

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