

# CamASEAN: Social Inclusion by Raising Awareness and Capacity of the LGBTIQ

Srom Srun

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**W**HEN THE CAMBODIAN GOVERNMENT decided to host the 21<sup>st</sup> ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) Summit in Phnom Penh in November 2012, a group of young Cambodians became very keen in understanding this intergovernmental institution and its role in promoting and protecting human rights. They saw the ASEAN Summit as an opportunity for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Queer (LGBTIQ) Cambodians to air their views and grievances in public.

There was an observation that Cambodians in general knew little about ASEAN. Nevertheless, the Cambodian youth had become more sensitized in debating ASEAN integration and development.

The group established the CamASEAN Youth's Future (CamASEAN) in Phnom Penh on 3 January 2012. At that time, the CamASEAN members pledged to help realize a people-oriented ASEAN Community by 2015 based on the Road Map for the ASEAN Community (2009-2015).<sup>1</sup>

CamASEAN is independent from any political party. But it is a "People's Political Team" whose members contribute their spare time and professional experience in disseminating existing information on ASEAN covering economic, cultural and political and security issues. The team members are Mr Srun Srom, Ms Pheung Sophea, Ms Phoeng Sophorn, Mr Khuon Sarat, Mr Vin Vichet, Mr Pheng Sahn (transman), Mr Noy Sitha (transman), Mr Chhea Channy and Mr Im Tol.

It has the mission of enabling:

ASEAN activists to participate in promoting and protecting the human rights of ASEAN citizens regardless of sex, gender, sexual orientation, race, nationality, color, religious, language, and other status.

It adopted the following theme: “One Community, Equal Conditions, Corporate Responsibility, Social and Economic Justice among ASEAN Nations.”

## **Situation of LGBTIQ**

The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Queer (LGBTIQ) Cambodians have been suffering from poverty and homelessness.

Reference to diverse sexual behaviors and gender identities in Cambodia dates back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Other ancient descriptions of LGBTIQ people existed, and were likely destroyed during the Khmer Rouge era in the 1970s. There were surveys and studies about same-sex desire between men from the 1950s, as well as newspaper reports on transgender females in rural Cambodia during the 1950-1970 period. Sexual and behavioral studies starting in the 1990s, driven by the global HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) epidemic, resulted in raised awareness and discussion of sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI). Pride events have been celebrated since 2003, and a public statement was made by Cambodia’s former King, His Majesty King Father Norodom Sihanouk, in support of same-sex relations in 2004. The 2000s decade also witnessed the first networking of men having sex with men (MSM) and transgender persons in 2006. Additionally, the first official recognition of a LGBTIQ organization occurred in 2014. Since then, the country has seen growing visibility of the LGBT community and increased amount of community organizing and social activities among its members.

The 2018 “Joint Statement on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression and Sex Characteristics (SOGIESC) Rights and Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) in Cambodia” prepared by Cambodian NGOs for the Pre-Session - Third Universal Periodic Review of the Kingdom of Cambodia (December 2018, Geneva) provides a summary of the problems faced by LGBTIQ Cambodians.

Excerpts from the statement lists the following major problems:<sup>2</sup>

Firstly, LGBTIQ people in Cambodia face numerous forms of discrimination, partly because of a legal framework which denies them basic equality. Four forms of legal discrimination have been identified as priorities by the communities:

1. the lack of legal protection against discrimination and violence against LGBTIQ people;

2. the absence of legal recognition of self-defined gender identity;
3. the absence of marriage equality in Cambodian law;
4. the denial of full adoption rights to rainbow couples.

In May 2018, the communities have raised these issues directly with Ministries' representatives during the First National Dialogue on Public Policies to promote LGBTIQ rights in Cambodia. The result of the public dialog was overall positive and offered possibilities for future progress in relation to these issues. However, no concrete process has been set in place by the government to this day to address the issues raised.

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Secondly, even though the LGBTIQ community is becoming more visible, in part due to a growing LGBTIQ rights movement, Cambodian LGBTIQ people continue to be discriminated against and excluded in several areas of social life. In addition, LGBTIQ people in Cambodia face discrimination in accessing and keeping employment, as well as discrimination and exclusion in the workplace. LGBTIQ people in Cambodia work principally in certain marginalized sectors, which prevents them from escaping the cycle of poverty. This is exacerbated by widespread family rejection and exclusion in schools and the wider community.

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Finally, there is limited knowledge and understanding on SOGIESC issues among health professionals in Cambodia, and sensitization and capacity-building on this issue has been very limited so far. Gender affirming health care services are not available and there are no laws, regulations or administrative documents stating whether such services are legal or illegal.

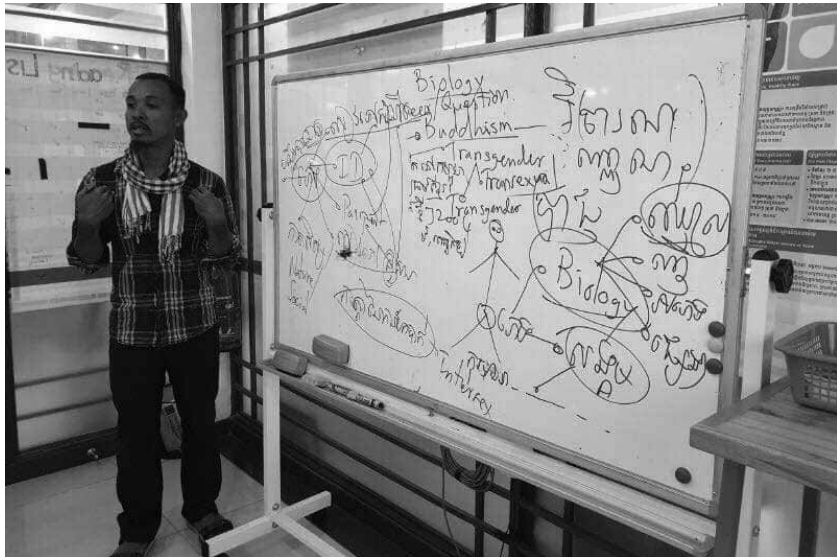
## **Measures to Overcome the Situation**

To address the issues faced by the LGBTIQ Cambodians, CamASEAN developed several measures such as financial support for old sex workers (five hundred U.S. dollars for food) and persons with disabilities (nine hundred U.S. dollar loan for small business).

CamASEAN also developed seven projects to promote ASEAN and human rights that use sessions on sharing experiences, social media (Facebook), meetings, and short film showings:

1. ASEAN & Human Rights Project (AHRP)<sup>3</sup> which aims to share and discuss human rights issues with students at schools and universities, and out-of-school youth;
2. CamASEAN Information Communication & Technology (CICT)<sup>4</sup> which aims to strengthen the use of technology in education. CICT works closely with university students by teaching them the basic use of information and communication technology (ICT) like Microsoft Office program, internet, e-mail, blog;
3. Cambodian Women and Choices Project (CWCP)<sup>5</sup> which aims to share the concept of “choice creators” among the women in the schools, universities and communities. The “choice creators” concept means all women should be able to choose their way to live comfortably as long as it is human rights-based rather than socio-cultural norm-based. Most Cambodian women wait or hesitate to decide on what to do or what they wish to do. They wait for their parents or others to decide; many times others decide for women and girls. Choice creators means confident decision-makers.
4. Children and Choices Project (CCP)<sup>6</sup> is a project on child rights protection and promotion and includes engaging retired persons who teach school children;
5. KYYS Group is a company established in 2012 to support the CamASEAN members’ effort to live independently. KYYS Group buys goods and products from wholesalers to be sold to retailers. After nine months of operation, KYYS Group started to import and export several important products such as scarves, clothes, dried meat, books, juices, and to operate printing and photocopy shops;
6. Cat Café<sup>7</sup> is a business initiative (using the Business Starts with You, not with Money model) which aims to bring the young people who are always focused on snookers and computer games to go back to school;
7. Koh Kong Charity Project (KKCP) supports children and disabled families by telling stories of hope. People from the city and university students share these stories to children in rural areas.

A Capacity Building Project (CBP) was likewise started to help the CamASEAN members to live independently through regular training sessions designed according to their needs. The training session has the following topics: a) Team Building; b) Leadership and Motivation; c) Problem



Srur Soron giving a presentation on sexual orientation, gender identity and expression to university students, Phnom Penh, 21 September 2019.



CamASEAN Team in seminar on sexual orientation, gender identity and expression for NGO workers, Phnom Penh, 17 May 2019.



Training of public school teachers on SOGIE rights in Kampong Chhnang province, November 2015.

Solving; d) Service Marketing; e) Research; f) Sales; g) Business Start-up; h) Project Management; i) Office work, etc.

### **Other Public Education Activities**

CamASEAN undertakes training and uses the social media, photography and arts to convey to the public the human rights issues affecting different sectors of society.

The activities consist of the following:

#### **Capacity-building**

Capacity-building activities are undertaken for secondary and tertiary students, teachers (through teacher-training) and NGO workers on LGBTIQ rights, SOGIE (Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression), rights of marginalized people, children, and women. The capacity-building activities involve training on ways to prevent or stop violence against LGBTIQ, training on the use of visual arts and story-telling to relay their messages to the public, and also training on use of photographs for this purpose.<sup>8</sup>



Training on how to stop violence against LGBTIQ children, 14 February 2019.



Training on visual arts and story-telling method to elderly LGBTIQ from twenty provinces, Kampong Cham province, 20-23 June 2019.



Visual art training for elderly LGBTIQ and their experimental art exhibition, Phnom Penh, 12 December 2019



Twenty-four participants from sixteen provinces discussing their own stories that they would use in their drawings, audio records, and videos, Thbong Knun Province, October 2019.





Group discussion of stories that are safe to be made public through visual arts of gay and transwomen, Phnom Penh, January 2020.

CamASEAN continues to collect photos of LGBTIQ couples who have been living together many years. Some couples have been living together from ten to forty years. It aims to collect the photos of five hundred LGBTIQ couples. These LGBTIQ couples have different backgrounds including having disabilities.

### **Use of social media**

CamASEAN uses several Facebook tools in different local languages to convey messages:

- a. Facebook Live - “Disability and Pride,” “My Life My Story”<sup>9</sup> - positive stories to inspire people and the media;
- b. Facebook Messenger;
- c. Facebook Page – where videos of interviews of members of the police, monks and commune council members are uploaded. These videos have been found effective because they do not engage in blaming people and instead show how they work to support LGBTIQ. The videos provide examples of what they do (actions). They also seek “champions” of human rights and ask the public: “If they can do it, why can’t you?”

CamASEAN uses Facebook tools because they are platforms for sharing, explaining, analyzing, brainstorming, counseling, providing advisory information, knowledge, and professional experiences regarding ASEAN issues and Cambodian social issues that happened in Cambodia and the world. Every member can exercise her/his right to freedom of speech and express personal concern over social problems and legal affairs for the country's development.

### Community activities

CamASEAN holds a number of activities in the communities including the following:

a. Rainbow Life Museum - សារមន្ទីរជីវិតរតន្ត្រី

The Rainbow Life Museum Project aims to explain the history, current situations and the nature of being gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, transgender, intersex and queer in Cambodia. The museum exhibits art works that inform as well as entertain the visitors on the nature of being homosexual and heterosexual from ancient time till the present. These artworks compose the “Rainbow Life Exhibition,” which is part of a social movement to raise awareness of social acceptance by families and communities in Cambodia



Transman and his wife living together since 1983 in Kampong Thom Province. Photo taken in May 2019.



Lesbians with disability in Takeo living together for seventeen years. Photo taken in July 2019.



Photo exhibit of LGBTIQ with different backgrounds, Svay Rieng province, August 2019.

# VILLAGE RAINBOW LIFE EXHIBITION

Showing the real and visible life of LGBTI in city, province and village that the LGBTI is natural and existing anywhere

“*Proud to Be ME, My Life My Story, Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer and Men and Women are ALL HUMAN need the Equal Rights*”

## WHEN

May 21<sup>st</sup> — May 25<sup>th</sup> 2016  
8:00AM — 6:00PM

## WHERE

Takeo province  
Srok Prey village, Tropang Sat  
commune, Bati district

## CONTACT:

Ms. Phoeng Saophorn  
Ph. 069373662  
Email: saophorn.phoeng@gmail.com  
FB : facebook.com/RainbowLifeMuseum

Free  
Entrance

## SCHEDULE

### Opening Day

21<sup>st</sup> May  
4:30PM-7:00PM

### Coming Out Stay Home

(Sharing life of  
LGBTI couples)  
22<sup>nd</sup> May  
9:00AM-12:00PM

### LGBTI & Right to belief and religion

(sharing from monk &  
pastor)  
23<sup>rd</sup> May  
8:00AM-11:00AM

### SDGIE & Human Rights Training

24<sup>th</sup> May  
9:00AM-12:00PM

### Closing Party

25<sup>th</sup> May  
5:00PM-7:00PM

Organized by CamASEAN Youth's Future (CamASEAN)  
and Micro Rainbow International

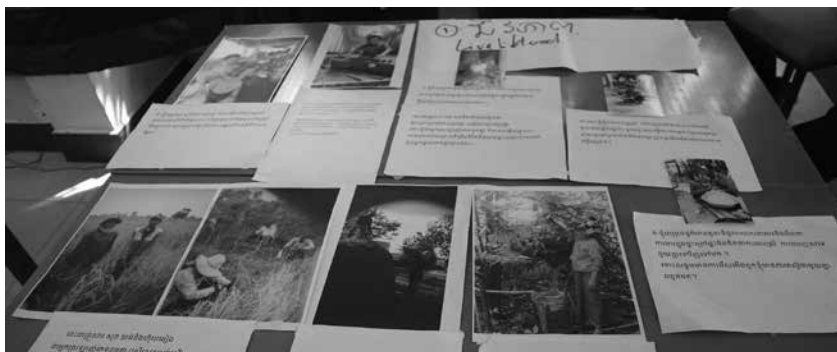




**Exhibition in the house of an elderly transgender man and his spouse, Bakan district, Pusat province, September 2019.**



**Experimental art exhibition, Phnom Penh, October 2019.**



**Photos in the experimental art exhibition.**



Testing public story telling exercise by participants, Siem Reap province, November 2019.

of LGBTIQ people with different backgrounds including farmers, teachers, sports men and women, performers, artists, NGO workers, embassy and government officials. The exhibition consists of several parts: “secret body,” library, sharing word, film room, two drawing show rooms, portrait, performance, workshop with never heard of or seen testimonies from the LGBTIQ communities in Cambodia. Stories from persons who have not been heard previously are given a voice through this exhibition. The museum is a means for story-telling about the positive stories of elderly couples. Photos of the Rainbow Life Museum are uploaded on Facebook.<sup>10</sup>

b. Legal and Love Counselling by Young and Old Activists<sup>11</sup>

CamASEAN has been holding workshops for LGBTIQ people and activists in the rural areas to empower them. Based on these experiences, the following have become their guide in these empowerment exercises:

1. Let them organize their community ceremony according to their religious belief (e.g., Buddhist, Muslim or Christian) and use that occasion to allow them to speak about who they are as LGBTIQ people in their community;
2. Let the local authorities along with the siblings and parents of LGBTIQ people share their perspectives on how they challenge or support their LGBTIQ members;



Community forum among LGBTIQ from thirteen provinces to celebrate the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia (IDAHO), Phnom Penh, 2012.



Buddhism Ceremony for transman couple during the Rainbow Life Museum exhibition in Kampong Chhnang province, March 2019.



Rainbow Life Museum exhibition that gathered neighbors and family members of LGBTIQ from different villages to listen to messages of Buddhist monks and the sharing of life stories by elderly LGBTIQ in Kampong Cham province, July 2019.



Story telling in the community by elderly LGBTIQ couples with young LGBTIQ and commune council members, Long Vek village, Kampong Tralach district, Kampong Chhnang province, December 2019.



3. Always be a good listener rather than a good speaker when organizing any activity in the community;
4. Always make a quick reflection exercise with the people in the community on what they love/like from the discussion and what activities they will do after the activity.

With this guide, we can become their supporters, mentors and of course fans.

- c. Parents and Friends Acceptance Activity - ឪពុកម្តាយ មិត្តភក្តិ  
& ភរិយាប្តីស្រី<sup>12</sup>

CamASEAN established a group that facilitates united action among the LGBTIQ people and their parents, families, friends and other allies to advance equality and acceptance. This is the Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG).

PFLAG promotes the rights and well-being of LGBTIQ people, their families and friends by enlightening an ill-informed public, advocating for an end to discrimination and securing equal treatment on civil rights. It provides the opportunity for dialogue about sexual orientation and gender identity and gender expression, and acts to create a society that is healthy and respectful of human diversity.

PFLAG has the following mission:

We, the parents, families and friends of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons, celebrate diversity and envision a society that embraces everyone, including those of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities & gender expression. Only with respect, dignity and equality for all will we reach our full potential as human beings, individually and collectively. PFLAG welcomes the participation and support of all who share in, and hope to realize, this vision.

PFLAG uses the internet to contact parents, siblings, friends and sometimes classmates and coworkers of LGBTIQ and provide online counselling.

- d. Music<sup>13</sup> - Dontrei Inthanou តន្ត្រីកម្ពុជា

CamASEAN started using music in its educational activities in May 2012 when it mobilized a teacher (Noy Sitha) to identify musicians, singers and dancers during Gay Pride Week who could be asked to participate in their project.

The project is composed of Noy Sitha, a transgenderman and a talented music coach. He received gold medals from the Prime Minister, Minister of Information and Deputy Prime Minister for his work on music. Raya, transgenderman and a talented singer is known for his great rare voice. Chapei, a talented gay musician using traditional instrument is also very good in singing that people love to listen to.

CamASEAN uses art to change social attitude towards acceptance of the LGBTIQ people. Art is considered a non-discriminatory, non-judgmental and peaceful action that exists in the human being to change people's thought and philosophy toward positive social change of accepting LGBTIQ people and their families as well as community.

CamASEAN sees the need to strengthen its music band and management structure. But it does not have enough funds to buy all the needed musical instruments.

It needs to do more marketing and earn income to support the music band and make its activities sustainable. The music band has to maintain the participation of straight people as members. CamASEAN does not discriminate against straight people though some of them probably discriminate against the LGBTIQ people.

But using art in Cambodia is a big opportunity to promote the rights of LGBTIQ people since many LGBTIQ people had played significant part in the development of the arts in the country for over a thousand years. LGBTIQ people have been key actors and teachers in society.

Recognizing the popularity of playing different types of songs (pop, traditional and other modern) during weddings, anniversaries and other festivities, the CamASEAN music band plays music during those festivities whose guests may want to buy their music CDs. They may also be playing and dancing during company events, school celebrations and charity events of government offices and NGOs. Human rights promotion can be done through music and songs on human rights that many NGOs are not capable of doing.

### **Recognition Received**

CamASEAN has received several awards for the work done through the years:<sup>14</sup>

- ASEAN Grassroots People Assembly, 2012;

- Cambodian Grassroots People Assembly, 2013; and
- ASEAN People Forum/ASEAN CSO Conference, 2014.

## **Challenges and the Future**

CamASEAN faces key challenges such as frequent volunteer turn-over every two or three years which requires the training of new volunteers most of the time, and unfriendly working relationship with formally organized non-governmental organizations (NGOs). CamASEAN members have also not been allowed to visit LGBTIQ friends in prison. Lastly, CamASEAN faces the hard challenge of suffering from police harassment in the communities where it organizes events related to political rights and citizenship.

CamASEAN was organized to overcome stigma, discrimination, and all types of human rights violations and war affecting different types of people. Its current projects are civic education through social media, virtual arts activities using digital technology and social media innovation, Facebook live and rainbow life exhibition. Its final aim is political participation of people suffering from these human rights violations. CamASEAN aims to achieve this goal through training of minority and marginalized people to become elected members of a parliamentary body or assume the post of decision-makers or run for a public office.

## **Endnotes**

1 See full document of the Road Map for the ASEAN Community (2009-2015) in [www.asean.org/storage/images/ASEAN\\_RTK\\_2014/2\\_Roadmap\\_for\\_ASEAN\\_Community\\_20092015.pdf](http://www.asean.org/storage/images/ASEAN_RTK_2014/2_Roadmap_for_ASEAN_Community_20092015.pdf).

2 Full statement available at [www.upr-info.org/sites/default/files/document/cambodia/session\\_32\\_-\\_january\\_2019/4.\\_rainbow\\_community\\_kampuchea\\_stmt.pdf](http://www.upr-info.org/sites/default/files/document/cambodia/session_32_-_january_2019/4._rainbow_community_kampuchea_stmt.pdf).

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

4 Facebook page: [www.facebook.com/CamASEANICT?ref=hl&ref\\_type=bookmark](https://www.facebook.com/CamASEANICT?ref=hl&ref_type=bookmark). Facebook group: [www.facebook.com/groups/camaseanict/](https://www.facebook.com/groups/camaseanict/).

5 Facebook group: [www.facebook.com/groups/1399747193606836/](https://www.facebook.com/groups/1399747193606836/)

6 Facebook group: [www.facebook.com/groups/childrenandchoicesproject/](https://www.facebook.com/groups/childrenandchoicesproject/).

7 Facebook group: [www.facebook.com/groups/rainbowcat/](https://www.facebook.com/groups/rainbowcat/).

8 For the photos visit this Facebook account, [www.facebook.com/MyVoiceMyStory/photos/](https://www.facebook.com/MyVoiceMyStory/photos/).

9 Please visit the My Voice, My Story (សិរីគុដ្ឋរឿងឌីអិល) Facebook account for more information, [www.facebook.com/MyVoiceMyStory/l](https://www.facebook.com/MyVoiceMyStory/l).

10 Visit this Facebook page for the Rainbow Life Museum: [www.facebook.com/RainbowLifeMuseum/](http://www.facebook.com/RainbowLifeMuseum/).

11 Photos about the community activities are available on Facebook: [www.facebook.com/CambodiaLGBTIQLegalCounselling/](http://www.facebook.com/CambodiaLGBTIQLegalCounselling/).

12 Visit Parents and Friends Acceptance on Facebook, [www.facebook.com/CambodiaPFLAG/](http://www.facebook.com/CambodiaPFLAG/).

13 See photos and videos on the use of music in the activities of CamASEAN on Facebook: [www.facebook.com/DontreiInthanou/](http://www.facebook.com/DontreiInthanou/) as well as YouTube: [www.youtube.com/channel/UCPFLGkUnGJI5n5IJ\\_RRh1Yw/videos?disable\\_polymer=1](http://www.youtube.com/channel/UCPFLGkUnGJI5n5IJ_RRh1Yw/videos?disable_polymer=1).

14 Visit [www.facebook.com/pg/AHRproject/about/?ref=page\\_internal](http://www.facebook.com/pg/AHRproject/about/?ref=page_internal).

15 Excerpt taken from Voice, <https://voice.global/stories/my-voice-my-story-a-photo-exhibition-2/>.

**This is a report of Voice entitled “My Voice, My Story – A Photo Exhibition”<sup>15</sup>**

My Voice, My Story is a unique project by CamASEAN, a small Cambodian organisation that advocates for LGBTIQ inclusion. It uses participatory photography as a tool for social change.

The project works with largely marginalised and invisible LGBTIQ people in Cambodia and since its start in late August 2017 it has already identified over 100 LGBTIQ couples mainly in rural areas to help document their stories.

Photo stories are displayed at a permanent exhibition space, people's homes or during events in various locations in Cambodia.

The innovation of this project lies in the fact that the exhibitions are organised by LGBTIQ couples themselves who then offer to train others to do the same in a different area. Thus, it becomes a “traveling” exhibition.

The other innovative element is that elderly LGBTIQ couples get trained (and then train others) on using social media from a smart phone. This includes livestreaming the exhibition talks on Facebook as well as messenger to mass announce the exhibits.

“I am so proud that I can share my life story through technology and [with] just couples photos and short captures can change [the] mindset of Khmer people to understand, accept, protect and support us as homosexual people. And more than that I can be part of advocacy to stop hate and defend love.”

Some couples open up their homes as an exhibition space over the course of two days offering an intimate view of their lives.

The exhibitions are accompanied by talks and also use traditional music and theatre to engage the audience in a meaningful dialogue.

Not only people's homes, but also temples are used as exhibition spaces.

The main goal of the project is to raise awareness about and acceptance of this marginalised group in Cambodia, showing mainstream society that LGBTI couples lead “normal” lives. [In t]his way they can advocate for their rights and gain better access to health and social services.

Every exhibition attracts between 100-500 people over the course of two days, including in some cases participation by local authorities. This increases acceptance at local level, which is crucial to enhancing safety at local level for LGBTIQ couples.

The visual narratives are also disseminated on social media to target wider audiences online.

It is hoped that this type of advocacy inspires other marginalised communities within the entire ASEAN region to stand up for their rights.

