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## **ASPIRATION TO BE MYSELF**

*Transgender people in Vietnam: realities and legal aspects*

Hanoi, 2012

## **Preface**

This study on transgender people in Vietnam is initiated by the Institute for Studies of Society, Economy and Environment and sponsored by Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung and CARE International in Vietnam. As research leader, Pham Quynh Phuong was responsible for designing questions, conducting interviews, doing qualitative analysis, and writing reports. Mai Thanh Tu helped coordinate research and interviews, and analyse the results. Le Quang Binh contributed to conceptualisation and comments for revising the reports. The research team would like to sincerely thank Nguyen Thu Huong, who assisted with reviewing the literature; Nguyen Hai Yen, Vu Kieu Chau Loan, and Nguyen Son Minh, who connected the team with some transgender communities; Hoang Huy Thanh, Nguyen Thi Hong Nhung, and Dao Xuan Trung, who provided support for in-depth interviews. The research team especially wishes to express its gratitude to the transgender communities of LesKing, Thegioithu3, and G3VN, and transgender individuals who participated in this study, trusting and sharing with us their stories. Due to ethical issues, these individuals cannot be named. All the errors in this report are the sole responsibility of the authors.

Phạm Quỳnh Phương

## **Summary**

Transgenderism is a phenomenon that occurs all over the world, and Vietnam is not an exception. Like many other LGB groups (gay, lesbian and bisexual), transgender people in Vietnam are stigmatised by society, family, and friends. Transgender people are in fact worse off than other LGB groups due to misleading information, unequal treatment, violence, discrimination, and poverty. This study focuses on understanding the transgender group in Vietnam (comprising individuals who perceive that their gender identities do not completely coincide with their biological sexes, regardless of whether they have undergone surgery for sexual reassignment), and obtaining insights into the characteristics of both the male-to-female (MTF) group and female-to-male (FTM) group as well as the challenges and issues they face. At the same time, the report offers social and legislative recommendations to cater to the needs of transgender people and to change society's perception of the transgender group in particular and LGBT in general.

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## **List of Acronyms:**

CBOs	: Community Based Organizations
Come out	: Openly express gender identity/ sexual orientation
LGBT	: lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender
FTM	: female to male transgender
MTF	: male to female transgender
MSM	: man having sex with man
TG (transgender)	: transgender
HCMC	: Ho Chi Minh City
TS (transsexual)	: transsexual
Trans	: transgender
US	: The United States

## Part I: INTRODUCTION

*“If only I can afford sexual rearrangement surgery. Even if I had only one hour to live after the operation, I will be happy to die in my female form” (male to female, 19 years old, HCMC)*

### 1. Context of the study

Although transgender and transsexual people are present in every society worldwide, misinterpretations of these concepts are still common,<sup>1</sup> causing confusion even among the individuals themselves in the process of determining their own gender identity.<sup>2</sup>

Originating in the US, the term “transgender” is used to generally refer to individuals whose ways of life apparently deviates from social norms of gender. The term refers to those who cross beyond the normal gender borders in terms of attire or expression, and those who have undergone surgery to attain the same bodies as their desired gender. “Transgender” is a very broad term, essentially comprising of those who are willing to have surgery and those who do not want to have an operation, but simply want to express themselves and live their lives as another gender

#### **Box 1: Differentiating “gender identity” and “biological sex”**

**Gender identity:** An individual’s internal perception or experience that they belong to the male or female categories. In other words, gender identity is self-identified by an individual. These perceptions are related to gender expression or gender role. An individual, thus, may have a gender role that contradicts with their biological form. An individual’s gender expression comprises many factors and may be expressed through attires, behaviours, job choices, and personal relationships among others.

**Biological sex:** An individual’s sex according to their external reproductive organs

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout history, transgender people existed and were treated in a variety of ways, from respect to repulsion, and gender deviations were considered signals of God’s favors or punishments. Back in ancient Sumeria/Akkadia period (around 6,000 BC to 2100 BC), proofs of transgender people have been found. It was common for Inanna/Ishtar shamans to self-castrate or dress like women to pray, make offerings and conduct their duties (Stuckey 2008; Istar Lev 2004; Kaldera 2002). Quite a few gods of ancient religions have both male and female characteristics, or are known to have changed from one sex to another, like Dionysus. Sometimes, the gender change represented a punishment, like the case of Tiresias, who eventually liked the new female form and was changed back to male as a punishment (Istar Lev 2004). A number of individuals were believed to have magical or spiritual capabilities as a result of the mixed gender that they were, while others were thought to be especially suitable for treating illnesses or teaching children (Istar Lev 2004).

<sup>2</sup> There are also beliefs that there are actually three groups of people that do not follow their biological sex, namely:

1) Gender Nonconformity: people who self-identify as their born biological sex, but often behave like their opposite sex, e.g. tomboy, butch. Such behaviors are innate.

2) Transgender (e.g. cross-dresser, bisexual, gender queer, drag queen, drag king, androgyny, transgenderist): people who do not completely self-identify as any specific gender.

3) Conformity to the opposite biological sex (transsexual): people who think, feel and behave like the opposite sex.



(Chambers 2007).

Transgender people are often mistakenly classified in the same group as homosexual and transsexual people. However, “transgender” people can self-identify or be identified as heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual. The term includes individuals who dress according to their biological sex as well as people who wear unconventional attires like drag queens and masculine lesbians. Among the “transgender” group are also straight people – those who have the sense of a new gender through attires (including accessories, tattoos, and other items often associated with the opposite sex), either discreetly or openly, wholly or partly.<sup>3</sup> Such individuals (“trans people” in English) are often described in three ways -- transvestite, transgender, or transsexual. However, people who have a gender that does not adhere to their biological body may have very complex gender identities, and may switch from one identity to another throughout their life.

In Vietnam, the term “transgender” is relatively new, thus the usage of the term may be tricky. A number of Vietnamese terms are currently used to imply “transgender,” such as “*người chuyển giới*,” “*người xuyên giới*” or “*người vượt giới*.” On the other hand, the term “transsexual” is more or less unanimously understood as people who desire to have their bodies changed or have undergone surgeries for sex change. In practice, people usually use the term “*người chuyển giới*,” which causes confusion in both understanding the actual meaning and the subject being referred to. This is because many transgender people do not completely “switch” to the opposite biological sex. Instead, they often have a sense of a vague gender identity, or may change between forms and genders, depending on specific time and circumstances. These individuals are commonly categorized into two groups, namely Male to Female Transgender (MtF) and Female to Male Transgender (FtM).

### **Box 2: Differentiating Transgender and Transsexual**

**Transgender** refers to a person born with a biologically male or female body, but has a strong and ultimate desire to have a gender that differs from their biological sex at birth. Such individuals may or may not have had medical treatment or intervention to transform into their desired gender identity.

**Transsexual** refers to a person who desires or has undergone surgeries to match their reproductive organs with the real gender identity that s/he has in mind.

In this report, to make interpreting and operationalising the term easy, and to limit the scope of the study subjects, the term “transgender” is used to refer to people who clearly perceive that their actual genders differ from their biological ones, regardless of whether they have undergone surgery or not.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For example, in several European scientific and academic references, cross-dressing also refers to behaviors by straight male individuals who dress in female clothing to induce sexual interest or simply for entertainment (Docter & Fleming 2001)

<sup>4</sup> Here, we have not mentioned a broader concept – “transgender” – that applies to people who have vague perceptions about gender, and engage in gender practices that sometimes or often defy their biological

Researches worldwide have shown that the percentage of transgender people ranges between 0.1% and 0.5%. Risk behaviour surveys in Massachusetts, the US, revealed that approximately 0.5% of people aged between 18 and 64 identified themselves as transgender. Recently, population censuses conducted in the US and around the world have included questions to identify gender identity and sexual orientation. According to latest estimates, about 0.3% of the population of the US comprises transgender people (Gates, 2011). It is challenging to collect statistics on the percentage of transgender people because social stigmas inhibit transgender people from expressing their desired gender or coming out. There have also been cases whereby transgender people self-identify as homosexuals. The recorded number of transgender people visiting clinics in the UK has doubled every 5-6 years (Reed et al, 2009). Records in many European countries show that the ratio of MTF people against FTM people is between 6 to 2.5 times. This does not mean that there are more MTF people than FTM. It is simply because FTM people are less likely to visit sex rearrangement surgery facilities. Statistics from medical facilities may not reflect the actual situation due to cultural and social factors, notions about gender role and homosexuality, as well as cost of sex-change surgeries (De Cuyper, 2006).

### **Box 3 : How are transgender people different from homosexuals?**

**Transgender people** desire to have a gender that does not match their existing biological sex. For instance, a person who has the body of a male at birth and thinks that s/he is female, and vice versa. The transgender community comprises two groups, namely male-to-female transgender people and female-to-male transgender people.

Transgender refers to the fact that a person self-identifies as male or female. On the other hand, homosexual, bisexual and heterosexual refer to whether a person is attracted to people of the same or different sex. **Homosexuals** are those who are emotionally and/or sexually attracted to people of the same sex. **Heterosexual people** are those who are emotionally and/or sexually attracted to people of a different sex. **Bisexuals** are those who are emotionally and/or sexually attracted to both men and women. Transgender refers to **gender identity**, whereas homosexual, bisexual and heterosexual refer to **sexual orientation**.

Like homosexuals, transgender people also face a severe stigma and various forms of discrimination in all social aspects in many countries. Transgender is considered a “mental illness”, “mental disorder” or “gender identity disorder”. A major US national survey on violence towards transgender people found that 48% of respondents were victims of assault, including rape and sexual abuse, and 78% opined that they had been slandered (Genderpac, 1997). Compared to other LGB groups, transgender people suffer a greater stigma because of the externalisation of their transgender characteristics. Even in countries where the LGB community has gained specific rights and is less stigmatised, the transgender group faces prejudices and discrimination in society and even from other LGB groups. Although LGB and transgender people are often grouped in the same community or gender, there are differences between the two groups. There are individuals in one group who do not want to be in the same category as those in the other

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gender norms (e.g. cross-dressing). In this study, the authors use the common term “transgender”, which in many cases include “transsexual” people (those who have had sex reassignment surgery to completely become another gender).

group. Even in several LGBT organisations, transgender people are often left out of discussions (Mottet & Tanis 2008).

Furthermore, transgender people are often victims of mental or physical abuse such as sexual assaults and police violence like in Nepal, or forced marriage and crimes like in Guatemala (USAID, 2009). According to a report by USAID (2009), violence towards the transgender group is even more severe due to “homophobic attitudes as well as common fears towards people whose gender identities do not conform to mainstream gender norms”.

In Vietnam, many organisations have conducted multi-dimensional research on the homosexual and bisexual groups. However, except a small study by CCIHP on violence towards transgender people, the transgender group has only been mentioned in some general studies on MSM or LGBT (iSEE 2012, Khuất Thu Hồng 2005; Vũ Ngọc Bảo và Girault 2005; Vũ Ngọc Bảo et al. 2008). Despite the prevalent stigmas, discriminatory treatment and violence against transgender people in Vietnam, there is too little information and few materials on the transgender community and their personal and social challenges. Apart from some Internet forums run by the community itself, there is hardly any information on transgender people in Vietnam. Prejudiced and inaccurate messages in the media and telecommunication channels have created and enforced misleading perceptions and social stigmas. Transgender people are described as “homosexual”, “ridiculous” or “sick”. They are not even regarded as a community. In addition, due to bullying at school and lack of support from family, many transgender people have had to drop out of school, leave home and live in danger (of violence, rape and robbery), poverty and livelihood difficulties. The situation is even worse because security agencies are not willing to cooperate in protecting these people, while few employers are willing to accept them. It is obvious that the transgender group is one of the most vulnerable and stigmatised in society.

Moreover, transgender people face prejudices also from the gay and lesbian community, who think that transgender people are the reason for social stigmas against the LGBT community as a whole. Many homosexuals think that because transgender people wear attires that deviate from their biological sex (e.g. males cross-dressing as women) there is the belief in society that gay people also like to cross-dress and have sexual reassignment surgery. In addition, the media often mistakenly regards transgenderism and homosexuality as the same, which causes the homosexual community to distance itself from the transgender community. Transgender people who are involved with homosexual communities are often isolated or have their nicknames banned if they overtly express their gender identities. This situation needs to be changed, which is also the reason why we conducted this study to help society, law makers, and the LGBT community itself to understand transgender people and achieve the best legal and practical solutions possible.

## **2. Study objectives**

In this study we focus on exploring the transgender group, which comprises of people who have a clear sense that their gender identity deviates from their biological sex, including those who have had surgery or those who simply wish to have a body that is

different from their biological one.<sup>5</sup> This study aims to draw an overall picture of the current situation of transgender people in Vietnam, find answers to emerging issues and **NEED VERB HERE** the possibilities of supporting transgender people. The study will help provide information for policy advocacy for the LGBT community as a whole, especially for transgender people.

The issues of focus for the study questions are as follows:

- i) Who are transgender people in Vietnam?
- ii) What is the current situation of transgender groups in Vietnam?
- iii) How do transgender people identify their gender identity?
- iv) What are the challenges that transgender people in Vietnam face, especially with respect to personal safety, self-esteem, livelihood safety, and reproductive health?
- v) What are the existing legal frameworks for transgender people?
- vi) What are the opportunities and channels for the transgender community to connect with other LGB groups?

### **3. Methodology**

#### ***3.1 Literature Review***

General overview of studies on transgender people (both MTF and FTM), a process through which general knowledge on transgenderism, the current situation of transgender people in the world and researches on transgender people elsewhere in the world and in Vietnam will be collated. This will set the foundation for the research team to design study questions and identify several issues regarding gender identity and challenges that transgender people face in general.

#### ***3.2 Analysis of websites***

Since this study is the first in-depth research into the transgender community, the bulk of available information on transgender people is from the Internet and some online forums. The research team thus studied and analysed several websites meant for homosexual, bisexual and transgender people (such as [lesking.com.vn](http://lesking.com.vn), [thegioithu3.vn](http://thegioithu3.vn)) to understand the general issues of interest to the transgender community, their main activities and how they self-identify.

#### ***3.3 Qualitative research***

The study is a qualitative research, relying mainly on in-depth interviews and the life history method with participants from the MTF and FTM groups. Four interviews were conducted to obtain a preliminary understanding of transgender people and the transgender community, which helped to formulate interview questions.

#### ***Sample***

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<sup>5</sup> For this study, we did not conduct surveys on “transgender” people in general, although they are referred to in some analyses.

This report was compiled based on in-depth interviews with 34 individuals – 10 transgender people in Hanoi and 14 in Ho Chi Minh City, and interviews with 10 transgender street children in Ho Chi Minh City done for a previous iSEE study on LGBT children. The twenty-four participants in this study were aged between 19 and 54, and comprised 14 MTF and 10 FTM individuals. Among the 14 MTF participants, seven have taken hormones and five have had breast surgery, one of whom has also had reproductive organ surgery. In the FTM group, though all wore chest binders underneath, only two have taken hormones, and none has had surgery.

Most of the interviewees were selected using the snowball sampling method, whereby one interviewee will introduce others. The principle of the selection process is to maximise the diversity with regard to network, age, surgery, and willingness to participate in the study.

#### Interview methods

*Interview questions* were semi-structured and included some open questions regarding several issues as follows:

- + experience of gender identity during childhood and at present
- + experience in family, at school and in society
- + love and sex
- + employment
- + access to medical services
- + demand and desire with regards to legal aspects

*Interview venues* were chosen by the participants, and were places where they felt comfortable and least pressurised. Thus, most interviews were done at coffee shops. Each interview took between 1.5 to 2 hours, and was recorded with the participant's consent. In one instance where the subject did not wish to be recorded, researchers wrote down the information immediately after the interview.

#### Data analysis:

All interviews were transcribed. The shortest interview was 10 pages long, and the longest was nearly 30 pages. After transcription, researchers encoded interview materials and changed the names of interviewed individuals. Interview analysis was aimed at answering study questions. As this is a field survey report, we did not engage in theoretical discussion of proposed issues. The report was prepared for the sole purpose of arriving at the big picture of transgenderism and transgender people in Vietnam.

#### **4. Ethical issues**

Prior to each interview, participants were informed of the purpose of this study, asked for consent to record the interview, and informed that they had the right to refuse to participate in or withdraw from the interview at any stage due to loss of interest or inappropriateness.

The research team was aware of the ethical issues involved in this study since many transgender people are vulnerable and victims of discrimination and inequality. Therefore, to minimize negative effects on the interviewees, we did not refer to their real

names in this report. All interview results have been encoded and can only be accessed by the research team.

### **5. Limitations**

\* *Time:* The study was conducted in a fairly short period of time (literature review and website analysis were conducted in May 2012, while approaching, interviewing the community and report compiling were done in June and July 2012). Therefore, the study should be regarded as preliminary findings on the transgender community that have been more or less unknown previously.

\* *Interviewees:* Despite our attempts to ensure diversity in sampling, the research team encountered difficulties in approaching participants. Younger transgender people (aged 18-28) were more willing to share and open up as compared to middle-aged individuals. It was more difficult to approach participants in Hanoi than Ho Chi Minh City. FTM individuals were easier to approach than MTF. Also, it was very hard to approach individuals who have completely changed their sexes. Thus, apart from the 10 interviews with LGBT children in a previous study (aged 14-18)<sup>6</sup>, most of participants in this in this field survey study comprised young individuals aged 20-30, although there were some participants in the 40-50 age group. Therefore, the study results would cover more of the issues faced by younger transgender people than from older generations.

In addition, for our 34 in-depth interviews, although the interviews allowed us to generally understand major common issues faced by transgender people and the transgender community, further studies and interventions are required to cover all perspectives.

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<sup>6</sup> Study on LGBT street children conducted by iSEE and Save the Children International (2012)

## Part 2: MAIN FINDINGS

### I. OVERVIEW OF THE TRANSGENDER COMMUNITY IN VIETNAM

It is difficult to establish the prevalence of transgender people in Vietnam, especially when the concept of “transgender” is not restricted to only those who have had sex change surgery; it also includes people who have a clear sense their true gender differs from their biological sex, and have the tendency/desire to change, though this may not have happened or may never happen. There has been no survey on the number of transgender people in Vietnam. Around the world, surveys show varied results, claiming that from 0.1 to 0.5% of the population are transgender. Latest preliminary statistics show that approximately 0.3% of the US population are transgender (Gates 2011). Transgender people are categorised into two groups, namely male-to-female transgender (Male to Female – MTF, or Trans Girl/Woman) and female-to-male transgender (Female to Male – FTM, or Trans Guy). MTF transgender people in Ho Chi Minh City often call each other “*bóng*” (shadow), “*bóng lộ*” (open shadow). In Hanoi, they often use the word “*Tigi*” (Vietnamese pronunciation of the acronym TG for transgender). FTM transgender people often refer to others and themselves as “trans” and “trans guy”.

#### Box 4: Several terms used among the MTF community in Ho Chi Minh City

<i>Lady boy</i>	male individuals who wear feminine clothes, make up, nail polish, etc like female
<i>Bóng kín</i>	[hidden shadow] homosexual male (gay) but still maintaining a masculine outward appearance
<i>Bóng lộ</i>	[open shadow] wear male clothing but exhibit feminine behavior and voice modulation, or dress in feminine clothes and have had surgery to become a female
<i>Bóng liễu</i>	[willow shadow] wear male clothing but <b>occasionally have feminine mannerisms, sometimes show expressions like a female (what is the diff?)</b>
<i>Bánh bèo</i>	[ <i>beo</i> cake] heterosexual female (straight women)
<i>Cộng</i>	[plus] heterosexual male (straight men), or “straight” men, “pure” men
“ <i>Top thuần chủng</i> ”	[pure top] gay but completely masculine, always play the “husband” role
“ <i>Bot thuần chủng</i> ”	[pure bottom] gay but feminine, always play the “wife” role

#### 1.1. Cyberspace for transgender people

While gay and lesbian people can easily find Internet forums meant for them, there are none yet exclusively for transgender people. Transgender people have to participate in forums and clubs for gays and lesbians. This not only shows that they are confused in

identifying their own gender identity but also that the transgender community has not been established as a separate and independent community.

With regard to transgenderism, LesKing, Thegioithu3 and G3VN are apparently the most mentioned forums.

**LesKing** is a major network for FTM and lesbian people, with its role as an information channel for FTM becoming more and more established. Founded in Hanoi on September 2, 2010, LesKing aims to provide knowledge specifically to people whose biological sex is female (Les & Trans Guy). LesKing has expanded its knowledge base to cover LGBT in general, but its main focus is still individuals born with female bodies. The number of registered members of the forum is 29,607. The portal's Administration has carried out several screenings and deleted inactive nicknames. Thus, the displayed number of members is over 20,000.<sup>7</sup>

LesKing-ers, members of this forum, are from all over the country. They are engaged in sharing information and trading products designed for FTM transgender people. To enhance the community's knowledge, LesKing has undertaken many activities. They include recruiting volunteers to translate terms and documents, concepts and information on sex reassignment surgery, etc. According to the forum's Administration, LesKing also provides other LGBT-related contents (news, pictures of local and foreign Les & Trans Guy, Les & Trans Guy movies, flirting tips and sex, Les & Trans Guy fiction, etc.). The forum has also organised activities to disseminate Les & Trans Guy concepts to the communities, organised contests in different fields for LesKing-ers, and shared knowledge for them to improve their living conditions (health, life, job, etc.). Stories posted in the forum have encouraged many to self-ascertain their gender identity. At the same time, many feminine lesbian members and trans members have made friends online and partnered up.

**Thế giới thứ 3** [3<sup>rd</sup> gender] is a forum mainly catering to gay individuals and MTF people. The forum officially opened on October 1, 2005. In the beginning, only around 20 individuals formed **a group** (??). Later, they decided to found a forum with both local and foreign members. The forum relies on donations from foreign members and advertisements to maintain their servers. At present, there are over 80,000 registered members, including Vietnamese living abroad.<sup>8</sup>

With its slogan of “for a world of mutual empathy, compassion and free of stigma”, in the beginning, *Thegioithu3* was not aimed at any specific group; instead, it was meant as a forum for all lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals. Since transgender people – “open shadow” -- often appear to be more active in organizing performance shows, while “hidden shadow” (*gay*) individuals rarely express themselves, many think that *Thegioithu3* is exclusively meant for the transgender community. *Thegioithu3* has organized talent contests (e.g. beauty contests for women and men, “Thegioithu3 got talent”, modelling contest), from which winners later became key members of *Thegioithu3*'s fashion modelling team. Some members left the team to join

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<sup>7</sup>Information provided by administrator of LesKing in June, 2012.

<sup>8</sup>Information provided by administrator of *Thegioithu3* in July, 2012.



other managers after a while, and the team took new members from *Thegioithu3*'s newer contests.

**G3VN** was established only recently -- in October 2011 -- for both homosexual and transgender people, but is expected to be a major forum for MTF people to find information and compassion. G3VN's main focus is to provide online advice to people belonging to the **community (Singular? So which one?)**. Online advertisement is the portal's source of income.

Many started as members of *Thegioithu3* and later parted ways to create forums specifically for male homosexual individuals (including a number of MTF) like *Gioihan*, *newlife4u.vn*, *retrai.net*, *Giatocong.com*, *G3vn.net*, etc. Members of gay forums like *vuontinhnhhan*, *theboy*, *tinhyeutraiviet*, *ngaytho*, *taoxanh*, etc., also include transgender people. In addition to LesKing, other websites for lesbians include *Bangaivn*, *hihihehe*, etc.

It is safe to say that with the development of Internet and online forums, cyberspace has become a home and open door for individuals belonging to "the third gender", especially young transgender people – those who face serious stigma not only from the society but also from the LGBT community itself. Cyberspace has allowed transgender people to have a common forum, to make friends and find partners. The transgender community has grown due to its members' active participation in forums, especially young people having access to new technology and the Internet. Often these forums are the only source of information for those who are still uncertain about their gender.

## 1.2. MSM clubs and self-help groups for LGBT

Besides forums, homosexuals, including transgender people, also join many MSM (man having sex with man) clubs established by development projects, such as *CLB Ước mơ Tuổi trẻ* [Youth Dreams Club], *Thông Xanh* [Green Pine Tree], *Hải Đăng* [Lighthouse], *Niềm tin Xanh* [Green Hope], *We are students*, etc. Organizations like VINCOMC, LIFE and SHAPC, Global Fund, etc. have undertaken **establishment (??)** and support activities for MSM. For instance, Global Fund has initiated many MSM clubs, and provided training on how to approach target groups to disseminate information on HIV prevention even in provinces like Hai Duong, Bac Can, Son La, Thai Nguyen, Vinh Yen. In the past two years, a project by VINCOMC to approach transgender people, also with a focus on health topics, disseminated knowledge on HIV and apprised these people about facilities that offer free checks and consultation. The project provided details of clinics as well as free condoms and lubricants to transgender individuals, the target audience.

According to an MTF, who is also the administrator of an online portal for gay people, many donors only want to provide support to the MSM network and "hidden gay" (gay) due to issues related to sexual health and HIV, while not much attention has been paid to the transgender group. Thus, often, there is a need to "balance" the support – using resources for MSM to supplement assistance to transgender people, like the case of G3vn offering positions to transgender individuals who are **higher secondary (high?)** school graduates, computer-literate and good at mathematics. Interviews conducted in

HCMC also revealed that many CBOs founded by Global Fund have a main function of disseminating information on health and HIV prevention; quite a few of these CBOs have transgender members. However, there is no group specifically designated for transgender people.

From club activities, a number of MTF groups have formed spontaneously, such as Ruby, Pattaya and Eva in Hanoi. Pattaya, comprising five female members who have had sex reassignment surgery, is the first professed transgender fashion modelling group. The group has become more well-known since 2008-2009. They frequently put up performances at Đêm Vọng café (Vong Street, Hanoi). It was the first transgender “model” group in Hanoi that dared to come out. Another group, Ruby, was formed in 2008, by young individuals who share an interest in fashion. The group often performs at cafés and public events. Initially, the group adopted the name *Đông Đánh [sassy]*, before changing to Ruby. Group members came to know each other through fashion shows and information events organized by Hải Đăng club, and later formed a performing team. At present, Ruby has 10 transgender members, with each performance normally involving 5-6 of them. Their performances are usually full of creativity. Each week, the group presents a different fashion collection designed by the group leader. Last but not least, Eva with 10 members is also actively involved in group information sharing activities and contributing to the transgender community.

### **1.3. Environment for comfortable self-expression**

Besides online forums where transgender people can make friends, express themselves and live true to their gender identity<sup>9</sup>, some opined that transgender people normally do not dare to come out in their hometowns (**it starts with “besides”.. check structure**). Only in big cities like Hanoi and HCMC do they dare to come out. One MTF said that in his hometown, everyone knows everybody else, so if he behaved in an unusual manner word would spread fast and his family would be ridiculed. Therefore, he only dares to “go public” in the city. Whenever he returns home, he dresses like an ordinary man.

There exist differences in attitudes towards transgender people even in the two big cities. In Hanoi, transgender people are conservative and rarely express themselves or go out alone in public. Hence, except those who have had surgery, many MTFs in Hanoi live a double life – they wear male clothing during the day and only dare to wear make-up and female clothing when going out or performing at night. Therefore, it seems there are fewer transgender people in Hanoi than HCMC. The environment in HCMC appears to be more open than Hanoi, albeit there are still stigmas. Life for transgender people in HCMC seems to be less harsh -- their communities are more active, enabling transgender individuals to feel more comfortable to express themselves. MTFs in HCMC are quite active on forums and fashion shows and funeral performances. Many transgender people in HCMC openly dress up like females, even those without surgery. According to some

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<sup>9</sup>As a matter of fact, many transgender members of gay forums still do not dare to share their “open” pictures due to fears of being boycotted by the homosexual community and removed from the forums.

MTFs, there are a large number of “open shadows” (“*bóng lợ*/ transgender) like them in HCMC.

*There are 34 in my CBO group, quite a large number but scattered all around, about 20 or more can be brought together... There are a lot of “bóng lợ” (open shadows) in Saigon [HCMC], it is impossible to estimate how many. But there are only a few hundred who have had surgery because this is not an easy thing. Perhaps the number of those who have completely changed both upper and lower bodies can be counted on the fingers. There are just so many “willows” and “opens”, maybe a few thousands. (MTF, 52 years old, HCMC).*

Compared to Hanoi, it is easier to buy clothes and hormones for transgender people in HCMC, so FTMs in Hanoi often place orders for chest binders to be shipped from HCMC. According to a transgender person who has had comprehensive surgery, despite stigmas, people in the South are more open to accepting gender identity matching outward appearance than people in the North. One transgender woman who used to live in the South and has settled in Hanoi said that though she has completely changed from male to female and got married, she is still not considered a woman due to social prejudices:

*After I had sex reassignment surgery and returned home, all my family members called me Miss without being told to do so. My mom also immediately called me daughter. But here in the North, there are times people still call me Mister, they do not accept that I am a woman. Sometimes this really hurts me. I cannot comprehend, maybe people in the North are obstinate or something. I am obviously a woman, but they still call me Mister. Often, I feel so angry... This place is totally feudal! (MTF, 42 years old, Hanoi)*

#### **1.4. Isolated from the LGB community**

Many transgender people want to self-identify as *gay* and *les* because they have not had surgery and have sex with same-(biological) sex partners. They want to join online forums for homosexual people, but many have been disheartened because of the stigmas that they encounter. The *gay* community itself is very reluctant to mingle with MTF individuals for fear the latter’s image and behavior could create negative impressions of the homosexual community. Many homosexuals who have not openly expressed their sexual orientation do not want to show up at or participate in activities for transgender people. One male homosexual said *gay* people do not want to join clubs that have transgender members due to fear of being considered the same as them. Therefore, in order to achieve their goals of information dissemination, many MSM clubs are not willing to accept transgender people. Similarly, many online forums immediately remove nicknames of members who post their “open” photos online.

The more stigmatised and discriminated against, the more transgender people feel isolated and marginalised even by those who share the same plight, and the more they are induced to form small groups within their own network and only maintain contact internally (transgender people – or “open shadows”); they hardly communicate with

people outside their own network, be it heterosexual or homosexual. They form support groups and help each other in their own groups (like teaming up to sing at funerals), and perform together. However, they still desire to connect with LGB groups. One MTF suggested jointly establishing an LGBT forum with many management levels to strengthen the whole LGBT community:

*Actually, it's a good idea to have a common website, say LGBT.vn. Like les [LesKing], it only needs about 3 people to manage offline events. Just 2 or 3 administrators are enough, they would be like project coordinators to organise offline events. This is also what I've been hoping for – to bring this community together, and then we could organise a parade ... We would be like a bunch of chopsticks, each may be easy to break, but if four communities come together, as a whole we could really be something. (MTF, 22 years old, Hanoi)*

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It can be seen that though there is no organisation exclusively for transgender people, **they (organization? Transgender people?)** still exist and have a presence in many aspects of life. In this context, online forums like LesKing, Thegioithu3 and G3VN have positively contributed to providing knowledge on gender identity and connecting communities. The MTF group has a close relation with the gay community due to their sexual attraction to men. Many individuals of this group are members of forums such as *Thế giới Thứ 3, Tình yêu trai Việt, G3vn, Giới hạn*, etc. and MSM clubs. On the contrary, the FTM group is closer to lesbian forums like *bangaivn, hihhehe, LesKing*, etc. due to their sexual attraction to women. Therefore, transgender people are often confused in self-identifying if they are homosexual or transgender. The MTF and FTM groups often have little communication and hardly know each other.

Based on participation in information forums that have a substantial number of transgender members, such as LesKing, Thegioithu3, G3vn, and activities of transgender groups in fashion, community communication, singing at funerals or weddings, etc., it can be observed that despite being a smaller population than homosexuals, transgender people still have a significant presence and have been facing a lot of even more serious social issues than homosexual people.

## II. TRANSGENDER PEOPLE – WHO ARE THEY?

Transgender people are categorised into two groups, namely MTF and FTM. The MTF community (transwomen) generally comprises of people who have male bodies but tend to have feminine traits, think and behave like women and want to become female. The FTM community comprises of people who biologically have female bodies but have masculine traits and want to become male.

It is safe to say that for transgender people, self-recognition of gender identity is a difficult and long process from childhood through adulthood. Such self-identification of gender is always associated with decisions related to gender expression changes and accepting challenges in life. Hereinafter, we will discuss their process of self-identifying their gender, sexual orientation and also decisions to change.

### 2.1 Process of gender self-identification

#### *Childhood: early differences in non-normative gender expression*

MTFs show their preference to wear skirts and girls' clothes, play girls' games (rope jumping) and befriend girls. Similarly, FTMs have the tendency to prefer boys' games (soccer), wear boys' clothes and play with boys.

*“Since I was very small -- like 4 or 5 years old -- I knew what I was, that I like to wear girls' clothes and play girly games. I only played games like banh đũa [picking up chopsticks while throwing-and-catching a tennis ball] or rope jumping during school breaks. I never joined games that other boys played like marbles or shuttlecock, I did not like such games” (MTF, 52 years old, HCMC)*

*“I've been different from other girls in the commune since I was very young. My mom recalls that I never agreed to wear girls' clothes. For such a simple thing like making me wear a dress, she had to chase after me and resort to caning me so that I would agree...” (FTM, 21 years old, HCMC)*

This shows that unlike homosexuals, who are only aware of their attraction to same-sex people at puberty, transgender individuals express their gender identity at a very early stage. For them, this is a natural “development” that shows on the outside. However, in a society full of clear and stringent norms on masculinity and femininity, such expression is not “natural” or “normal” in the eyes of many people, which leads to correction, coercion or violence that transgender people are faced with, as discussed later in this report.

#### *Puberty: early affections for same-gender people (heterosexual)*

Individuals start to notice their gender differences at quite early stages, especially during puberty, when teenagers have extremely strong desires to express gender identity, to wear and behave like their desired gender. Emotionally, MTFs tend to feel attracted to male friends, while FTMs feel attracted to female. During this stage, transgender people usually do not fully understand sexual orientation and gender identity concepts, making

them confused when realizing the differences between them and their peers. Astounded by their strange affection towards same-sex peers, some start to limit their **entourage (social activities?)**, being reluctant to meet others due to fear of not being able to control their emotions, being made fun of or regarded as odd or sick.

*“I think I started to like girls when I was in grade 7 or 8, those feelings were **only pure emotions** (??) for schoolmates, but I deeply felt that I was a boy. When I played with boys, we called each other ‘dude’ or something like that. My mother thought she could teach me and change me, but I knew it was not the case. I went through puberty like other girls but it was such an uncomfortable period because I never believed I was a girl” (FTM, 24 years old, HCMC)*

*“In 8<sup>th</sup> grade, there was this very cool guy in my class. I fell for him while in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, and loved him from 8<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> grades. Once he was frustrated and raised his voice at me ‘What the hell are you staring at me for?’ I did not dare to confess to him, he would beat me to death if he knew what I was really thinking... I used to ponder but could never figure out why I was like that, but I had to accept the fact. Outside, people show a discriminatory attitude towards me, they call me *pê-dê* [derogatory term for transgender]... In my commune, people humiliate me whenever they see me, it’s so mortifying it makes me cry, but I’m getting used to it now” (MTF, 18 years old, HCMC)*

Many children resort to covering up or feel uncomfortable with their biological bodies. Some FTM respondents said “*if only I didn’t have breasts*”, or “*it’s my height, weight and female body that trouble me most. I want to grow taller, so that when I look more like a guy, people would not be so puzzled*”. **This clearly shows and asserts the desire for sex rearrangement: finding their reproductive organs disturbing and wishing for them to disappear or for reproductive organs of the other sex to develop. (cannot understand! What does “this” refer to? Does it refer to the previous sentence or what is after the colon?)**

### ***Adulthood: Who am I?***

At this stage when early bewilderment has come to pass, all transgender people are faced with self-identification. As discussed earlier, unlike gay and lesbian groups, transgender people are often confused about their identity. As the transgender concept is quite new in Vietnam and used to be understood to include only those who have had sex reassignment surgery (like famous celebrities Cindy Thai Tai, Cat Tuyen, etc.), it is common for transgender people to think that they are homosexual based on the gender of the ones they love, i.e. being *les* (if born with a female body and attracted to women), or *gay* (born with male body but attracted to men). Some respondents self-identify as homosexual or bisexual. Only members of forums or participants in training programmes are aware of the transgender concept and self-identify as “trans guy” (FTM) and “trans girl/woman” (MTF). Self-identification, therefore, significantly depends on a person’s knowledge and their endeavours to acquire knowledge on self-identification:

*“I came to know my gender in 10th grade but I was not aware of the transgender concept back then. I only thought I liked boys, liked to wear*

*dresses, to grow long hair. We [my peers and I] all thought we were MSM or gay. Later when I took part in a project on approaching transgender people for 2 years, I found out I was transgender, not gay. Interesting to know. I used to think transgender means only transsexual. This is such a new concept.”* (MTF, 22 years old, Hanoi)

However, MTFs themselves self-identify as homosexual or feel more comfortable referring to themselves as “open gay” or “open shadow” rather than “transgender”. This is because of their belief that only after surgery can a person be considered “transgender”, similar to FTMs considering that the transition to transgenderism is only complete after using hormones or having surgery.

*“I think transgender means you have to have surgery, meaning there’s androgen in your body. Like, you have surgery and change your body 100%”* (FTM, 24 years old, Hanoi)

Similarly, some MTFs who had surgery to change their biological sex from male to female think that many people stay as “hidden shadows” during the day and only dare to switch to being “open shadows” at night, that these individuals “do not deserve” to be considered transgender.

*“You have to have surgery to be considered transgender. I cannot accept those so-called transgender who are hidden shadows during the day but at night they act as if they are open shadows, they do not deserve to be called transgender”* (MTF, 52 years old, HCMC)

Apparently, gender identity concerns are more prominent among the FTM group than the MTF group. Questions related to one’s own gender identity, like “am I les or trans?”, are frequently spotted on LesKing. Efforts to find out more about themselves emerge as a result of overcoming their personal complex, or, in many cases, being “broken hearted” multiple times because of rejections by heterosexual peers. Some respondents said they “breathed out a sigh of relief” when they found out that they were trans, not lesbian.

*“Only in 2010 did I first get to access information about trans. Before that I didn’t know who I was, I thought I was les, later I found out from my friends that there are other groups besides les. I knew I was different, I kept searching and seeking for a relationship, only to have one broken after another... There were times I felt so depressed I wanted to quit looking and just focus on studying. That was when I stumbled upon LesKing. I spent an entire night reading all the information, and now I can be certain that I am a trans”* (FTM, 21 years old, HCMC)

*“I used to think I was les. Thanks to LesKing, I found out that I’m actually a trans guy. I was shocked at first. Because as a les, I thought I should not like normal [heterosexual] girls, because it’s not right, plus they would never love me back, sooner or later they’ll fall in love with other guys. But when I found out that I’m a trans guy, I feel I’m on equal ground with other guys and feel more confident.”* (FTM, 20 years old, Hanoi)

For FTMs, it is very important to be crystal clear whether they are lesbian or transgender – “trans guy” – not for themselves, but for their partners. “Trans guy” individuals only love straight girls. Many FTM relationships are through online communication, some last for several years, but some straight partners were shocked to find out that the seemingly masculine partners turned out to be “female”. Therefore, according to FTMs, it helps to relieve the confusion for their straight partners by asserting that they are actually males born into female bodies; in that way, the straight partners can be assured that they are in love with males, not females.

*“There are about 10 of us in this group, we’re pretty close, but we all love straight girls (heterosexual girls) so we never wonder if we could love les. Les girls probably may not like us trans guys anyway.”* (FTM, 20 years old, Hanoi)

In the process of looking for information for self-identification, the Internet and online forums have become a comforting place for young people, supporting them mentally and helping them explore themselves. A MFT transgender person said, *“My mom gave birth to me first, and LesKing brought me a second life”* (22 years old, HCMC). This shows that self-identification is of great importance to members of the transgender community.

## **2.2 Live and be true to oneself based on gender stereotypes (it’s a negative word)**

Upon understanding themselves, several transgender people decided to come out and live true to themselves. One FTM said, *“I thought about it very seriously, I thought that when I could support myself, have a job, earn money, I would be able to manage independently in the worst-case scenario”*, but then the desire to be herself induced her to come out right after being admitted to a university:

*“I think I can no longer continue living a life not meant for me... I had nothing back then, just barely started my university life. I might lose everything by coming out, but I took the risk because I was a zero in a new environment. I decided to build a new personal image for myself in the new environment, to be my true self. I started to prepare for it; penniless, I decided to cut my hair first”* (FTM, 21 years old, HCMC)

After deciding to live to their true selves and come out, regardless of their surgery status, all transgender people attempt to change both their outward appearances and behaviours based on gender stereotypes. For example, a “female” has to talk in a gentle manner, keeping the voice low to sound more pleasing to the ear, walk elegantly, stroke the hair often, show femininity by taking care of others and practice self-restraint to avoid arguments or fights. A “male” has to be straightforward, mature, protect and spoil girlfriends and train the voice to sound deeper. One FTM opined that the way to show masculinity is *“to carry heavy items for girlfriends, like carrying buckets of water, and to be very gallant. They say that I’m a sucker for girls. I can do all sorts of things for the girl I like, like print out a photo or buy her flowers”* (FTM, 21 years old, HCMC)

*“In my opinion, personality determines masculinity. Women have some very typical characteristics, which if you don’t have means you are not a*



*woman. Being a guy, you have to treat ladies with more respect, you have to be dependable so they can rely on you, you have to compromise during fights, things like that” (FTM, 22 years old, Hanoi)*

Such perceptions of gender norms have led to a desire to use contraceptives with estrogen and progesterone (for MTF) and testosterone (for FTM) to increase the level of female and male hormones. Surgery and hormone usage are more prevalent in the MTF group. In addition, transgender people have to adopt diets and exercise to maintain their desired body shape. One FTM told us, *“I have to be careful about what I eat to prevent my first measurement [breasts] from growing -- for example no fat, tofu, papaya, coffee, soymilk or other fatty stuff. Also, I have to exercise a lot to look more like a guy” (FTM, 20 years old, HCMC)*

Furthermore, femininity and masculinity are also reflected through personal attires (the FTM group wears male clothing, male shoes and chest binders to hide their breasts and keep the hair short; the “open” MTF group grow long hair, wear female clothing like dresses, shorts, high heels, etc.). The desire to look like their gender of choice has also driven FTMs to lacerate their arms, get tattoos and smoke.

*“Deep within our hearts is this feeling, how should I say, like we can’t tell people how we feel, like no one understands who we are. Others always think we are girls, we cannot prove it so we have to show it somehow in a masculine way, like have tattoos, drink alcohol, smoke or lacerate our arms, to prove that we are men. Eye tattoo, belly button tattoo, tongue too. That way they’ll notice that we’re men. The more painful it is, the better. The more painful it is, the more it proves our masculinity.” (FTM, 20 years old, Hanoi)*

Transgender people’s attempts to conform their outward appearances to gender “norms” are often regarded as “too much”. One MTF said that due to their too strong desire to show femininity her peers often reveal themselves as “*pê đê*”:

*“... They [MTFs] have this bad habit of being overly feminine. Even normal women sometimes don’t wear make-up when they’re out, but these fools keep pulling out their cosmetics, touching up all the time.” (MTF, 52 years old, HCMC)*

Many told us that their personalities changed significantly after surgery. Especially those who had sex reassignment surgery are more self-conscious that their behaviours should align with their new gender -- for example, after changing into a woman, one will become more taciturn, shy and self-restrained.

*“To be honest, since becoming a girl, I’ve been less talkative than when I was a guy. I talk less, express less. Whatever others do I never comment. I just smile at them if they ask me something. But they are very considerate; they never make fun of me or anything” (MTF, 27 years old, HCMC)*

*“There was this time I picked up the phone half-awake, ‘Hello, who’s this?’. Then I heard the caller ask, ‘Sir, can I speak to H please?’ All of the sudden I was called ‘Sir’. But I still replied, ‘Can you call back later? H is in the shower.’ Then*

*I changed to my sweet voice and called that person back, 'Hi, it's me, who was it that called me earlier?' and that moment I was a girl. How would I know who called, I was sleeping, that's the problem."* (MTF, 52 years old, HCMC)

### 2.3 Whether to go for surgery or not

For transgender people, the decision to opt for surgery is a long process of studying information, contemplation and internal debate because it has major influence on their life. Thus, not all transgender people can and want to go for surgery. As discussed earlier in the study explanation section, among 14 MTF participants in this study, 7 have taken female hormones and 5 have had breast surgery, 1 of whom also had reproductive organ surgery. Among the 10 FTM participants, only 2 have taken androgen.

Surgery is the transgender people's hope and yearning to match their gender identity, biological sex and gender expression. This is a journey to find happiness in life, because surgery could change their whole life.

*"I've had surgery for both my upper and lower parts. Below it looks completely like the real thing... After surgery, I feel happier, more confident. Of course there's the pain, it was excruciating when I had it done... Even as an insider, I still keep wondering if it's real or just a dream. Knowing who I was and what I am now, I cannot imagine how it's become like that. Honestly, I worship that doctor like a second mom, it's like he gave me a second life... I regret not going for surgery earlier, why did I never do it when I was still young. I had surgery when I was already over 30. If I had known earlier, I would have gone for it when I was in my twenties"* (MTF, 42 years old, Hanoi)

However, not all transgender people are so lucky; they have to consider many factors before arriving at a decision to go for surgery. Some are concerned about finance – the cost of surgery is quite substantial, ranging from a few dozens to hundreds of millions of VND. Moreover, since surgical intervention for transgender people is not yet popular in Vietnam, most transgender people wish to have surgery in Thailand or South Korea, which drives the costs even higher. Some respondents said they are willing to trade their life expectancy and take risks to become their desired gender if they can afford surgery:

*I know surgery is painful if there's blood loss **and weak body** (HUH?). I know the risks but I still went for it because I want to have breasts. I don't know yet about the lower part, I just want to have breasts first, then I'll think about the rest...* (MTF, 27 years old, HCMC)

*I plan to have full surgery. A good one will cost about 200 million [VND]. That's too cheap a price to be myself. I heard for 200 million the final results will be perfect and stable, this is the priciest. Many just have breast surgery and stop... for me I'll go full-force. I understand they're entitled to their own opinion but I'm entitled to mine too. If I have the money I'll go to Thailand or South Korea.* (MTF, 22 years old, Hanoi)

Meanwhile, many transgender people are hesitant due to health concerns since surgery may have a major impact on their life, or even reduce their lifespan by 20 years.

*There are two parts I want to remove from my body – breasts and uterus. Because I find them very troublesome, I'll never have any use for them, why keep them. But if removing is painful and dangerous maybe I won't go for it* (FTM, 22 years old, Hanoi)

On the other hand, many FTMs believe that surgery has an insignificant influence on their post-operation life. They think obtaining male reproductive organs may even negatively impact on their relationships, such as creating “unfaithfulness”.

*Sex is important, I don't know about now but in the end maybe I'll have to use sex toys. Regarding surgery, it's not certain 'it' will function properly. It only gives me an outward appearance like a man and a male voice, it doesn't change anything in the roles of men and women, never ever* (FTM, 22 years old, Hanoi)

Many transgender people are concerned about job opportunities if they go through transsexual surgery. According to them, even if the body has been completely transformed, the gender registered on paper cannot be changed. It is even more difficult for a person with a female body and male identity card. This mismatch makes society more unwilling to accept them or create fair job opportunities. Therefore, a majority of transgender people have not had surgery despite their strong desire to change as clearly reflected by their activities and behaviours.

*I've thought about it a lot. I told people if someone's brave enough to marry me I'll be eager to have sex arrangement surgery. Same goes for jobs. If there's some company to sign a permanent contract with me and keep me until I cannot work any more, I'll go for sex change. Otherwise, because sex change is a part of your life, if I can't find a decent job after sex change it's impossible to survive. Vietnam is not like some other countries so I don't want to have a complete change yet. Paperwork is such a hassle. I'll do it if there's some way to finish the paperwork, but if not I won't. You can't have everything; you have to trade something for something back* (MTF, 21 years old, Hanoi)

*“Suddenly one day I thought where could I find the money to go for surgery? I don't have any talent for singing, what will happen when I get old? I feel that living as an “open shadow” is so unstable, those who are talented can sing, cook or something, or prostitute... But for me, I can't be so sure. I told myself, for now just stay in the shadow, at night I'll wear makeup and borrow stage clothes to perform, earn a living to get by... Many of us here have tried being a transgender first, and if it goes well they'll have surgery”* (MTF, 27 years old, HCMC).

Many do not see a clear future after operation, because despite having surgery, they still have to “prostitute to make a living”:

*I have a dream, that if I had the money now I would have surgery. But before that, I have to have a stable career. I don't want to be like some friends of mine,*

*they didn't have money so they borrowed to cover their surgery costs. But then what is the surgery for? They come back and become prostitutes. For me, I have to get a job, at least I can support myself after surgery. (MTF, 25 years old, HCMC)*

Difficulties in finding jobs have driven many “open shadow” MTFs, after a period of hardship in making a living, to decide to revert to being “hidden shadows” (wear male clothes, have short hair) and only “come out” (wear make-up and female clothes) when they go out with friends or perform at night.

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It could be seen that, unlike homosexuals, transgender people are puzzled not only about their sexual orientation, but also about their gender identity: who am I? Should I change (my body)? What will happen if I change? Etc. The worries and self-identification process are always associated with experiences of being hurt, of getting their hopes up and being let down, of becoming pessimistic. That transgender people have to hide themselves among the gay and lesbian communities without being recognised (especially the MTF group) shows their confusion in self-identifying and also the issues that the transgender community faces – receiving no attention and being isolated in a society that has not acknowledged them yet.

### III. CHALLENGES FACED BY TRANSGENDER PEOPLE

Once their decision is made to live as their true self and having gender expression that deviates from their biological sex, transgender people embark on a journey full of difficulties and challenges in dealing with family relationships, finding partners who love and accept who they are, coping with social stigmas and unfairness, finding jobs, and issues related to health risks.

#### 3.1 Stigmas and discriminatory treatment

Like homosexuals, transgender people often face prejudices and discriminatory treatment from their families and society. However, unlike homosexuals who can hide their sexual orientation, transgender people are not able to cover up their gender identity because of the strong desire to express themselves. Thus, stigmas and discrimination directed at transgender people are often heavier, more direct and severe.<sup>10</sup> Stigmas include both the way people address them and people's behaviours. The MTF group is often referred to in offensive ways such as *pê-đê* (*pédéraste*), *ái nam ái nữ* (hermaphrodite/half man half woman), *bóng, đông cô, xăng pha nhót, lại cái* (penetrated by the female spirit), while the FTM group is called *ô môi*. Such insulting terms offend and humiliate transgender people. Sometimes, discrimination is not only shown in speech but also in behaviours and intense glares:

*“No one pays attention to a girl wearing breast-revealing clothes, but all turn to look at a pê đê, their hands covering their mouths, even the girls do that too. They think that they're the real things so they look down on us. Educated people nowadays are even worse than those who never go to school. If there's a way for the society to certify us, we'll far outdo men and women.”* (street child, MTF, HCMC)

Among the two transgender sub-groups, apparently the MTF group suffers more from humiliation and discrimination. They are described as “sick”, “queer”, or “grotesque”, etc., and are targets for ridicule and discrimination. On the other hand, FTMs are less subject to prejudice thanks to girls' trend to wear “tomboy” style clothes. Stigmas directed at transgender people vary in degree – within the family, among relatives and neighbours, at school, and in society in general as well as among the LGBT community.

#### *Within the family*

Most transgender people, MTF and FTM alike, encounter difficulties in coming out with their family. In some cases, some have “come out” on different occasions but were ignored by their parents. Some families think that their children are psychologically troubled and choose to send the children to psychologists for treatment, which widens the gap between the parents and the children:

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<sup>10</sup>An MTF thinks that among the three groups G, L and T, the transgender group is the most stigmatized, followed by gays: *“Now hidden gays are less stigmatized than “open”, those “open” are fiercely stigmatized. Lesbians are better, being less stigmatized than even hidden gays. They can nonchalantly make out in public, but hidden and open gays are more hesitant because they are still afraid as they are in worse circumstances than lesbians”* (MTF, 52 years old, HCMC)

*When I came out, I told my dad that night, 'My mind is a guy's but my body is a girl's. I want to change my body to suit the way I think'. Then my dad said, 'OK, we'll take you to the doctor to have your mind fixed tomorrow.' I was sad because my mind is where I store all memories of my family and friends, it is all that makes me myself, not my body. But my dad wanted to change it, which means he's willing to give me up" (FTM, 26 years old, HCMC)*

MTFs recall that they were often the most ill-treated among siblings in the family. They were not loved or acknowledged. One transgender individual from a generation before liberation said among the 7 siblings in her family, she was the most ill-treated: “[My parents] only loved their daughters and sons, they told me ‘You’re neither this nor that’. Before, my parents devoted everything to my siblings. I asked them for money to go to singing class, they rejected; asked them to send me to sewing classes, they did not agree; they denied me everything and anything”. However, later, all her siblings moved abroad and she is currently the one taking care of her old mother. She said her neighbours are more understanding and sympathetic to her now:

*“They said if you were not a pè ðê, you would have got married and only cared for your wife and kids, if you had a husband you would only care for your husband and kids. Perhaps the old woman would be left alone with no one to take care of her. Now that she has you. You’re a pè ðê so you can stay and take care of her. Because I’m open about my gender, I can do everything for her. Normal men never do these things like changing clothes for their moms.” (MTF, 52 years old, HCMC)*

Besides, in Vietnam, a typical social life with many close relationships puts pressure on families of transgender people and creates a fear of being judged by acquaintances. As a result, parents demand that their children not dress or behave in any abnormal manner to keep face for the family. More seriously, due to limited knowledge, many parents think that their children follow their friends to go wild, or that there is no future for transgender people. Thus, they introduce harsh measures to “correct” or force their children to return to their “true” gender. Violence has been observed in various forms, from speech (scolding, insulting) to action (violence). MTFs are often subject to violence more than FTMs.

#### **Box 5: Negative reactions from families towards transgender people**

*Day in and day out my parents bugged me about my gender problem. They scolded me, saying they could not accept a son like this. They said: ‘you’re something else; you’re not a human being’. They insulted me everyday, it was terrible.. (transgender street child, MTF, HCMC)*

*My father cut my hair off when I was sleeping. When I woke up, I found that out and began to cry. I said: you could kill me with your scissors but why did you cut off my hair like this? (transgender street child, MTF, HCMC)*

*At that time I had a job and bought cosmetics, wigs, bras. My mother tore them off, chopped them to pieces. (transgender street child, MTF, HCMC)*

*When my parents found out, my dad beat me up very badly. He beat me and said, 'you're doing this to trouble the family, I gave birth to you to be a normal person, not some sicko.' He insulted me a lot. But I understand, it's somewhat right, no one wants their kids to become like that. (MTF, 25 years old, HCMC)*

*I can only recall when I was in 1<sup>st</sup> grade, my dad scolded me, he used harsh words like 'you're not like anyone else' or 'you wear skirts, you're female, you're not my son'. That's it, that's all I can remember. (MTF, 22 years old, Hanoi)*

*I used to date this guy. When we broke up, my parents found out. Mom searched my room and found the girls' clothes I kept, she shouted at me you're this you're that, then my dad beat me. It was all beating and shouting and insulting. They said they'd be better off not having me, that I was a disgrace to the whole family. I ran away from home for a while after that. (MTF, 25 years old, HCMC).*

*At first they scolded me a lot, like 'you're sick, you're something else, you're not my kid', and chased me out, but I really had no idea where to go. I tried to keep it (??) in and said, 'Now that it's like this, please keep me for 1 or 2 years, when I'm grown up you can kick me out.' It's like I'm just renting a room there. (MTF, 19 years old, HCMC)*

*My family shares the same place with my aunts and uncles. My aunts and uncles insulted me, saying I'm uneducated. I was already sad at heart, yet whenever they saw me they told neighbors that I was pê đê chó [dog homo], pê đê dơ [dirty homo], or 'don't act like you're rich while your family's so poor, don't be so decadent and follow them to become a pê đê'. I was angry so I snapped back, 'it doesn't matter if I'm pê đê or whatever, my parents raise me, not you, you don't have the right to say that'. All my relatives told me I was hopeless, uneducated, it's like I am so distant and isolated from all of them. (MTF, 19 years old, HCMC)*

The usual stigmas and discrimination apart, there is hope in some instances where a few families have come to accept the fact that their children are transgender people. Depending on the family's circumstances and various degrees of acceptance of their children's desire to be live true to their self, parents have different solutions ranging from turning a deaf ear to the matter, creating **separating walls (??)** and accepting their children's desire. Among the two sub-groups, FTMs seem to receive more sympathy than MTFs, despite still facing difficulties when coming out to their families.

*I said I want to settle down abroad with my girlfriend. My parents thought about it for 1 year and told us 'OK, you two can go to Ho Chi Minh city, we'll buy you a house, we'll all move there to avoid relatives. That's far enough distance; children cannot live separately from their parents.' It means my parents want me to be near the family and don't want me to live independently like others. The others are not as lucky because they don't have anyone to support them. (FTM, 20 years old, Hanoi)*

*Compared to others, I'm quite lucky. When they go out, they are always afraid of being found out by their parents, they don't dare to let their parents know. As for me, everyone acknowledges me – my parents, my friends and the society all accept me as myself and I can live as myself. I was not allowed to do so when I was in lower and upper secondary schools, but no longer after I started university. I brought my girlfriend home, my parents only smiled, they did not object. My mom seemed uncomfortable only for the first day, but gradually she started to understand; now she's totally fine. (FTM, 24 years old, Hanoi)*

*Only after getting to know others did I know how fortunate I am. I would have taken it for granted that of course my parents would do that for me. My parents are very kind, they never interfere with how I style my hair. If I ask my dad to buy clothes or shoes for me, he will only choose male items for me and never forces me to take female items. He always goes along with what I like. I remember when I was in 9<sup>th</sup> grade I liked a girl four years older. My mom told me, 'If she already has a male boyfriend, you should not ask her out'. She was afraid I would drag the girl into the third world; she thought I was one of the third world and so did I. So I followed her advice and did not pursue. My mom was only concerned that I should not adversely affect other people... (FTM, 20 years old, Hanoi)*

In general, many parents just do not accept that their children are transgender; even if they do so, it is after a long process of gradual acceptance due to their love for the children. However, they still try to hide the truth from others because they feel embarrassed and want to keep face. It is worth noting that FTMs are more likely to be accepted by their families than MTFs. This also coincides with the general viewpoint of the society whereby people are more open to girls with masculine personalities and expressions than feminine boys (often referred to as “đồng cô” [half male, half female], “ái” [homosexual] or “bệnh hoạn” [sick]).

### ***At school***

At school age, many transgender people cannot hide their desire to express their gender identity (e.g., MTFs wearing girls' shirts with puffed-up sleeves, hanging out with girls and being interested in boys; or FTMs keeping short hair, preferring to hang out with boys and being interested in girls), so they easily became a target for fun and discrimination for teachers and schoolmates. One MTF shared the experience of frequently being “gang-beaten up” at school that the thought of going to school was terrifying, making him skip classes very often. As stigmas against MTFs are much more serious than FTMs, many FTMs are able to go for university or higher education while very few MTFs can get higher education. The dropout rate for this sub-group (due to lack of support from family and acceptance by school) is quite high.

*I also got into university... I majored in restaurant and hotel management, but I dropped out half-way. It was so stressful. Classmates displayed stigmatizing attitudes. They didn't like me. Some made friends with me but it felt distant to me.*



*Some guys in class did not like it when they saw me. It was like PÊ ĐÊ was something contagious, they didn't want to hang out with me or to talk to me. I felt self-pity; on top of that there was also pressure from my family. (MTF, 25 years old, HCMC).*

*When I was at school, teachers and schoolmates alike stigmatized me. I don't know how the others were, but when I tried to be an introvert, female teachers said I was not like any other, they said things like "you wear skirts to school", or "you're the type who doesn't like women", so on and so forth. Schoolmates also stigmatised me for many things. Luckily, I was not bullied. But in my class, if there was some fun they just ignored me, as if I was non-existent. (MTF, 22 years old, Hanoi)*

The FTM sub-group is more fortunate in that they seem to get less pressure from teachers and friends due to their masculine appearance.

*Of course the teacher didn't know I liked girls, she only observed that I looked like a boy. So she often talked to my family about it. Every time there was a parents meeting, she said my parents should tell me to wear more feminine clothes. My parents scolded me when they came home. There was another one like me in my class, but her parents stood up in front of the class to defend her and told the teacher that 'it's my kid's personality, you don't have any right to judge' (FTM, 22 years old, Hanoi)*

*Since I started going to school, every time the teacher called my name and I stood up, she just laughed. She didn't think I was like that. Sometimes she said 'you look too masculine, sit down please'. (FTM, 24 years old, Hanoi)*

Stigmatisation at school has brought about a lot of negative consequences for transgender individuals, especially MTFs, such as depression, dropping out of school or even leaving home to "go dust". Stigmas at school have been obstacles depriving them of opportunities to acquire knowledge and get a job and a chance to develop as discussed further later in the report.

### ***In public places***

In the world as well as Vietnam, the homosexual community, particularly the gay community in many cities, has successfully established common areas/ spaces where homosexuals are dominant. In such areas, a majority of shop owners are gay or people friendly to homosexuals, and clubs and other spaces meet the demand of this population. Transgender people often go to these places during their initial stages of transition, but not all the time do they receive hospitality. Due to the hatred and violence directed towards transgender people, they rarely feel safe in public places, almost all transgender people bitterly recognise that their gender norm-deviating outward appearance has put them at a disadvantage and their community is hardly protected in social spaces (Doan 2007:61).

*"It's very difficult to be an "open shadow". For example, many places do not welcome "open shadows", or even refuse entry. Only some places accept open*

*shadows for money reasons. Even bars are difficult to enter, some do not allow pê đê. Once I wanted to go into an Internet café, they didn't allow me in. Sometimes I obviously saw available slots, but they didn't allow me in, while they allowed someone who came later. I felt extremely angry. (MTF, 27 years old, HCMC)*

In public spaces, transgender people are frequent targets of scornful words:

*"They say I'm neither a guy nor a girl... Or worse, they say I'm gross... Even people passing by say that" (street transgender teenager, MTF, HCMC)*

*"Sometimes I think I still have to live on despite all the self-pity. People used to yell 'hey, it's the pê đê' when I go out. There's this thing about gender - some people understand so they are somewhat empathetic, but some don't understand and consider it repulsive. If I just started to dance they would start screaming and shouting, I didn't know where to hide my face" (MTF, 52 years old, HCMC)*

Some transgender people from earlier generations think the society has become more open and less stigmatising compared to when they were young, when the "open" ones had to hide themselves much harder. They think the current situation for young transgender people is much better: *"In the past, you have to be perfectly upright when you stand. There's no way they would accept girly gestures like those girls [MTFs] wearing male clothes" (MTF, 52 years old, HCMC).*

However, in reality, many MTFs still do not dare to go out during the day for fear of dirty looks. They sleep during the day and only at night do they wear make-up to go out on the street or to public parks to hang out with other transgender peers or to prostitute. This is the daily life cycle of many MTFs that we interviewed. When they encounter civil defence or police officers, even if they commit no wrong, they are treated like criminals or social delinquents due to the stigmas against their outward appearances.

*The police caught me once. The officer asked me if I was male or female. I said, 'I'm gay'. He said, 'I asked if you are male or female'. I replied, 'Male'. Then he asked, 'If you're male why are you wearing girls' clothes? You bunch dirty this society, stink it.' I thought about it a lot, I cannot comprehend. I obviously wear clothes like other people, it's not like I go out naked and dance or something, why did it sound like I did something bad to the surroundings? (MTF, 19 years old, HCMC)*

*Now it is not so bad. If it had been a few years ago I would be beaten or slapped if I went out as a girl. They said 'why would a guy wear girls' clothes outside?' They held me and when I gave them my ID asked 'how come you're like this when your name's this?' I told them to leave my gender alone... I think there should be some laws on this. Even those in authority are like that, let alone normal people. (MTF, 25 years old, HCMC)*

*A guy and a girl staying in the park until 4-5am is OK, but if we sit just for a while they'll tell us it's past the time for gathering or say offensive words like pê đê this pê đê that. They say things like pê đê whores, dog whores. For instance in*

*my cluster, when they come and see me sitting there they say 'fuck you, why are you still not asleep, do you have any idea what time it is?'* (street teenager, MTF, HCMC)

The media often plays a role in delivering a biased viewpoint on transgender people when describing them as “queer”, like satirically depicting “pê-đê variety” while not really understanding the reasons that transgender people have been forced to earn a living that way, or writing about them as if they were “criminals”:

*“Sometimes they have scary headlines about us. Like murder case in Tu Liem guava orchard or something, they use many words I cannot remember now, but the headlines were full of pejorative words. First are the newspapers, second are the authorities”.* (MTF, 22 years old, Hanoi)

One of the major difficulties for transgender people is the use of restrooms. They are often confused about whether to go into the ladies’ or gents’ toilet; many respondents told us they often had to keep it in and never used the toilet at school.

*“When I was still going to school I wore male clothes but I used the female toilet. Some girls noticed this and told my teacher, and then she beat me, asked me to fold my arms and apologize, and said she would not accept me in her class. I urinated sitting, not standing. Initially I made gradual changes. Back then, I was called pê-đê; I thought it was something extremely evil. So the next time I had to go into the male toilet, I still urinated sitting.”* (MTF, 25 years old, HCMC)

*“In amusement areas I don’t dare to use the toilets. It doesn’t seem right to use either the ladies’ or the gents’. It’s happened many times. I normally wait until I’m back home.”* (MTF, 24 years old, Hanoi)

In some developed countries, companies are making arrangements and changing their policies to resolve issues related to toilets for transgender people; however, such policies do not apply to public toilets. In Vietnam, absolutely no attention has been paid to this issue yet.

### **3.2 Coping with stigmas**

Stigmas and discrimination have driven transgender people to depression and into a stalemate. A study on *Street LGBT children* (iSEE 2012), found that out of 23 participants, 21 expressed various degrees of depression, loneliness or self-hatred, and 13 practiced self-laceration or hurt themselves. Thus, it can be seen that during puberty or early youth, transgender people are not used to pressures from families, schools and society so they often resort to negative solutions. In some cases, respondents shared their experiences of mental crises leading to suicidal intentions, drugs and self-laceration. Some have chosen to become monks or nuns (as in the case of an MTF, 25 years old, HCMC), while many attempted suicide ...

*I tried to kill myself by taking aspirin, that drug for headache. I went into shock from taking too much of the drug, my heartbeat went wild but I didn’t die. My*

*friend took me to a hospital. The doctor beat me until I came about, and told me 'don't be so stupid, why did you attempt suicide?'* (MTF, 25 years old, HCMC)

In order to cope with such stigmas, transgender people have found different solutions.

**Covering up:** Envisaging the difficulties in accepting their true gender, many transgender people choose to hide the truth from their family since on one hand they do not want to hurt their parents, and on the other they are scared of negative reactions from the family.

*I don't have the guts to say it out because my mom's having a hard life already; it's hard enough for her to earn a living. If I told her now, she'd definitely be more burdened. I think when life gets better, like after 1 or 2 years, I'll tell her, but this is not simple. My dad passed away, she has only me as a son, as a pillar for her to rely on. If I told her I'm a girl...* (MTF, 22 years old, Hanoi)

There are also those who decide to switch to being a “hidden shadow” or “willow shadow” (wearing male clothes but still giving themselves fine airs like women) after experiencing difficulties in being an “open shadow”, such as unemployment, stigmas, or fears about an unpredictable future.

**Indifference:** In the grown-up stage, many transgender people *become indifferent* towards social stigmas, and many choose their own way to react to mockery and sneers. After being called “pê dê” often, many MTFs become apathetic to social attitudes. Respondents told us there used to be times when they wanted to snap back when they heard that, but they got used to it so they “let it be” and did not bother to react. One MTF told us, “*I don't care if they have an attitude. If the teacher tells me to remove my nail polish I'll do it, but I'll paint my nails again after 1 or 2 days*” (MTF, 22 years old, Hanoi).

*Now if they stigmatise me I just let them be. Why should I care what they think? I work to support myself, I don't rely on them. If I have to compare myself with them, I'll base it on my talents, not my gender.* (MTF, 25 years old, HCMC)

**Religions:** Some transgender people *choose religion as another method to live* in their own world, practice of spirit possession being an example. In this form of expressing belief, people of unusual genders (like feminine men or masculine women) are considered to have the “spirit root” (*căn*) of one of the gods of the Four Palaces (Sky, Earth, Water, Forest). The personalities of the gods are believed to coincide with those who possess their *căn*, so those who have the *căn* for princesses or ladies will be feminine. For example, the “Third Lady” is associated with the white color, gracefulness and melancholy, and the “Ninth lady” with a liking for pink and having singing talents, etc. Those who have the spirit root for Mandarins or Princes will be masculine and strong. Perhaps it is only in the world of mediumship that transgender people are respected and looked up to by gender-conforming people. An MTF (48 years old, Hanoi) told us that she has the spirit root of the Ninth Lady so all her personal items from bed to other stuff are in pink. She used to live in poverty due to her gender, but since she started

“following the holy fathers and mothers” she has been doing well and has money to “buy guys”. Another transgender told us:

*“I have ‘căn’ of the Seventh Prince. Many spirit mediums are transgender, gay or lesbian, very few are normal people. Most are like me, people often call me “fairy lady”. When I play the feminine, graceful part I do everything better ... There’s a lot to talk about this worshipping. Maybe in three years’ time, when you see me again, you’ll be surprised that I look so different; it’s possible that I’ll have become a Master for others”.* (MTF, 22 years old, Hanoi)

**Disappearance from the community:** Of those who have gone through complete sex reassignment treatment, many have stayed away from the community and do not want to have any contact with anyone due to fear of their past being found and stigmatised by society. In this research, we only managed to approach one complete male-to-female transsexual who is married and currently living as a woman. All others refused to talk to us. According to transgender people, except well-known cases like Cindy Thai Tai or Cat Tuyen, as women who are no longer “pê dê”, they are very cautious about their past being revealed.

*“Many have become successful, like BN who stars in TV series, or LP, TK... they are the successful ones who have gone for surgery. After surgery, they no longer want to be active in showbiz, not because they don’t want to act or perform any more, but because now they are female, if they make an appearance people will know. They don’t want others to know their past because they now belong to a different world.* (MTF, 32 years old, HCMC)

### 3.3 Tragedies in love and marriage

For transgender people, emotional damage seems to be a major problem. As they themselves self-identify as female (MTF) or male (FTM), they often feel attracted to heterosexual men or women, which always leads to a feeling of being let down and disappointment. They often encounter difficulties in their love life (e.g. not daring to confess, being rejected, being taken advantage of financially, or their partners being pressurised by the family), causing pessimism also about other aspects in life.

#### Tendency to only like heterosexuals: FTM loving straight female

Unlike homosexuals, transgender people tend to feel attracted only to “normal” men and women, i.e. FTMs are only interested in “straight” girls (heterosexual female) while MTFs are only interested in “manly” masculine men, “real men”, “straight guys” or “plus guys”. Due to this tendency to like heterosexual people, quite a number of MTFs feel uncomfortable when their boyfriends have “willowy” expressions or are gentle like them, or feel scared about having sexual relationships with gay people. On the other hand, many FTMs feel uncomfortable in a sexual relationship with lesbians, or when their girlfriends do not regard them as men and treat them like girls instead.

Many FTMs think that it is normal for “straight” girls, not lesbians, to like them. Especially, due to their understanding of the mentality of same-(biological) sex people, transgender people say that they are very thoughtful, caring and devoted to their partners, even more than heterosexuals are. Their devotion has made many heterosexual people become their partners and accept them as a different gender, even without surgery.

*It is hard at first to date normal girls because they do not accept me. They say they have to consider the family factor, because such a relationship may come to nothing. Love needs a destination; they want something real, not something this virtual. Later we did some talking, and talking got us closer and we fell in love before knowing. (FTM, 24 years old, Hanoi)*

Many FTMs also believe that they have more advantages than heterosexual guys, because “trans guys” are not only more faithful than “real” guys, but also more empathetic towards their girlfriends’ problems.

*As a trans guy, at least I don’t have characteristics that are really like a guy, for example guys cannot commit to being faithful, that’s for sure. It’s because normal men will surely have desires for other girls beside their lovers. This is impossible for trans guys, because we don’t have such hormones. (FTM, 22 years old, Hanoi)*

*Because I have a female body, I deeply understand some girl problems. Like when they have periods, they’re stressed and in pain, I won’t want her to have to do anything, I can do everything for her.*

*Sometimes you can’t be yourself with a normal man or a girl, you still have something to hide. But with me, they can confide in me more, they can tell me what they really think deep within their hearts. (FTM, 24 years old, Hanoi)*

Also because FTMs are both strong and reliable like men, but also sophisticated and understanding like women, according to an FTM respondent, they are often seduced by straight (heterosexual) girls. One heterosexual girl said she was the one who liked her transgender partner first:

*I started to like her even before she did. When I realized my feelings I still wondered to myself ‘why did I like her, she’s my friend, how can it be?’. I don’t think I’m a lesbian, because I have absolutely no feelings for girls. It’s only her that’s special, because I love her as she is, not because she is a guy or something; I just feel that we’re so compatible, I can trust her completely, that’s why I love her. I never decided in my mind whether I have to fall in love with a guy or anything. Perhaps because of this, I got to know her, otherwise... (girlfriend of an FTM TG, 22 years old, Hanoi)*

For FTM couples, a sexual relationship does not seem to be an important factor, with many couples believing in platonic love and being each other’s emotional support.

Perhaps this is also the reason why there are more cases of heterosexual girls liking FTMs than heterosexual guys liking MTFs.

*Actually, I don't like sex, or even kissing. My kind of love is the platonic kind; I rarely hold hands or hug my partner. As for sex, I make it clear to my partner it will never happen, never. In fact, my partner told me, 'well, I have to accept that', 'let's take it like I'm dating a monk' and does not try to do anything. (FTM, 20 years old, Hanoi)*

An FTM told us that prejudices against female homosexuals (lesbians) are more serious than transgender, so when she found out she is transgender and not lesbian, it was good news for both herself and her partner.

*When we started dating, we were not aware of the term trans guy. We only got to know the term after one year of dating. We did some studying and thought it was not a big deal. That was something like a relief, finding out we're not lesbians. Actually, I feel that social prejudices against the third world are heavier than against us trans guys. Like, two girls who are really girls falling in love with each other will be subject to more scrutiny. Near my girlfriend's place, there was this girl who committed suicide because of the rumours people spread about her. It's like girls must not love girls. (FTM, 20 years old, Hanoi)*

However, many heterosexual guys and girls who date transgender people are also subject to worry and depression due to pressures from the family and social prejudices. The girlfriend of an FTM told us, “When I started dating my partner, I was also very confused about my own gender because I didn't know what I was anymore. I wondered if I was lesbian or bisexual. We've had many breakups because I was so stressed out. I felt isolated from my family since I started dating her.”

There are many FTMs who have been hurt by unrequited love, rejections or their partners getting married.

*I've been broken-hearted so many times. When I'm sad or something happens I often go to Long Bien bridge and sit there. The winds cool me down and calm my soul. I can shout out loud there to lighten my emotional burden. Many passers-by think I'm crazy or something; they don't understand that I'm just trying to find some relief. I actually feel somewhat relieved. I don't think it's their fault, it's just how society is. I respect their wish and just let them go. (FTM, 24 years old, Hanoi)*

Some FTMs said that because they do not receive sufficient love and not everyone is willing to accept them, “if anyone accepts us, we'll just go ahead”. Thus, many FTMs have “just gone ahead and become broken-hearted”:

*Yesterday, it happened to my friend, who's a trans guy in love with a straight girl. That girl is really a straight, straight girl; she can never swing this way or that way. She can only love guys. But my friend just went ahead and that girl finally accepted when she was broken-hearted once. But now the two have broken up because the girl chose another guy. What she needed was only someone to cling on to. Trans guys do not understand this. (FTM, 20 years old, Hanoi)*

Facing difficulties in relationships with heterosexual girls, some FTMs turn to loving *les*, after breaking up and being “broken-hearted” many times when their partners decide to end the relationship or get married.

*I think lovers of the same sex understand each other better. Normal girls may stay with us for a while, but in the end they’ll just return to where they belong. Perhaps it could be different if society and their families are more tolerant.* (FTM, 24 years old, Hanoi)

An FTM who is currently in a relationship with a *les* told us that social stigmas make “straight girls” unable to commit themselves to long-term relationships with transgender people. Multiple emotional damages have driven many to turn to lesbian partners. A number of FTMs are pessimistic about their future: “*I think people like us will forever be alone*”.

### *Tendency to only like heterosexuals: MFT loving straight male*

It is common for MTFs to be attracted only by heterosexual men. As they think of themselves as female, many cannot comprehend why “men like men” and feel “gross” if they have to be in a [sexual] relationship with *gay*. Many MTFs think that their advantage over heterosexual women is their devotion and wholehearted caring for sex life and daily needs alike.

For MTF couples (an MTF partnering a heterosexual man), sex is quite important. According to some MTFs, it is also the main factor to make heterosexual men feel attached to them, because “*straight guys say making love with pê-dê like us feels better than with “bánh bèo” [heterosexual girls] as they have “techniques”, understand the male body and know how to please their partners than any heterosexual girl*”. One MTF transsexual also told us her husband is very satisfied with their intimate life.

However, relationships with heterosexual people have also become life tragedies for MTF transgender people because few heterosexual men want to love and share a lifetime with transgender partners.

Majority of MTFs think that people like them will never be loved by heterosexual men. They think that “ordinary” guys will choose “ordinary” girls (often referred to as “bánh bèo” in HCMC), except when they use money to “buy” and “keep” a guy. Thus, MTFs often have to “trade money in exchange for love”, take extremely good care of their boyfriends both materially and sexually. Yet, what they get in return is misery and losing belief in love. Many MTFs think that “straight” men only see them as toys, have sex with them just for some exotic sensations instead of with women, or associate with them just to take financial advantage.

#### **Box 6: Emotionally injured: “straight men are only after money or exotic sensations”**

*“If I have to be honest, there’s no straight guy who really loves us! Think about it, they’d rather take a woman as it’s easier to get married or have kids. We can’t give them those things; we’re just some one-night stands”.* (MTF, 22 years old, HCMC)



*“Our sorrow is about everything. Even if someone loves people like us, it’s just for the advantage. Honestly, transgender people like me are all paying for love”. (MTF, 25 years old, HCMC)*

*“I think people like me will never be loved truly. Guys only stay with me for the money. People like me are very miserable; we’re always betrayed by men however much we spoil them, give them money or cook for them”. (MTF, 48 years old, Hanoi)*

*“I think I’m female, I love plus [straight] guys, but they’re plus, they’re not pê đê, they always change and I’m broken-hearted, so many times, hundreds of times ... it’s usually unrequited love. In 10<sup>th</sup> grade, I got to know him on the Internet. I loved him and could die for him. I gave him money and things but I received nothing in return ... I thought of committing suicide, I cried for a month, I didn’t eat or drink anything, I lived like I was dead, I looked like a skeleton. I thought of taking pills to kill myself but my friend talked me out of it”. (MTF, 18 years old, HCMC)*

*I know this guy who’s totally straight. Once he told me he was dating a pê đê girlfriend who looks very much like a girl and is quite pretty. I felt sad hearing that. I thought how come I’m the same as that girl and I also liked him back then, and this guy is not a pê đê and neither a gay but he dated a pê đê like me. That thought keeps haunting my mind until even today. Only yesterday I learned that that time he owed someone money, so he dated the girl for her money and also asked her to pay his debts, then he even took her money to spend on other girls. That’s when I realised it is all about the money when straight guys date pê đê; it’s not at all out of love. (MTF, 19 years old, HCMC)*

*Sometimes ordinary men become too bored with normal girls, so they turn to us to find new sensations. It’s like they just play around for some time and get bored. They think of us as some toy that they can throw away after they’re done playing (MTF, 22 years old, HCMC)*

Due to inferiority and worries of losing boyfriends, some MTFs (HCMC) are willing to prostitute at night to earn money to support their partners. One MTF told us, for she has been attending to “young boys” many years her junior her whole life. These boyfriends only took advantage of her; one after another, they found girlfriends and got married. Despite knowing it very well, she still chooses to be with someone and use money to keep her man because she cannot commit herself to trivial relationships without feelings.

*“I can get jealous. I get extremely jealous when he’s on the phone or chatting with others on the Internet. But I know my place. Sooner or later he’ll have to get married. I can only get men using money. Also, I need to have feelings to be in a relationship; I can only sleep with someone if I like him”*

*I have to spend money to buy guys. Like this boyfriend I’ve been dating since he was 18, I supported him until he finished university. He just graduated but I still give him 3-4 million a month, buy him a motorbike, cell phones ... What do I have for real men to love me? They only love normal girls, not people like me. So if I want to keep them, I have to spoil and please them” (MTF, 48 years old, Hanoi)*

Some respondents think that as they have not had surgery, they have not become “real girls”, while they are not homosexual either, they are in a very difficult state. However, in reality, among the many transsexuals who have gone through the pains caused by surgery, very few have found true happiness.

*“My friend cried and said now she also has breasts and everything else after surgery but she still cannot be happy. Or like another friend of mine who passed away just yesterday after a butt implant surgery, perhaps some infection. She took care of guys her whole life but when she died she had no one beside her. That’s our fate. We have so many guys in our life but when we die none of them shows up...”* (MTF, 48 years old, Hanoi)

Due to unhappy experiences in relationships with heterosexual men, many transgender people choose to love gay people, especially the younger generations. On one hand, middle-aged people (born in the 70s or prior) feel that they cannot have a relationship with gays, despite their hurt feelings (“*I consider myself a woman, I can’t sleep with gays, it’s gross*”). On the other hand, for younger generations, the disappointment, pains and injuries associated with relationships eventually cause many MTFs to decide to partner with homosexual males because of their mutual understanding, not being demanding or reliant. Moreover, homosexual men do not attach as much importance to having kids as heterosexual men so being in a relationship with the former may be less stressful.

*Recently, for the past 1.5 years I’ve been in a relationship with a gay guy. Gay partners are more easygoing, they can love me as either a female or a male. Actually, it’s best to love someone like yourself, because they can understand you better.* (MTF, 22 years old, Hanoi)

However, even when they are in a relationship with homosexual men, many MTFs told us that it is often very difficult to maintain a long-term relationship because such relationships are only a cover or a temporary cure for their many painful experiences. In reality, homosexual males only love other gay men and do not feel attracted to females, so MTFs cannot stay true to their self. In order to be in a relationship with gays, MTFs have to “act” like men and cannot be themselves – male to female transgender.

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It can be seen that despite being hurt and pessimistic about future relationships, many couples still express a desire to be tied together and share their life lawfully, be it with a heterosexual or a homosexual partner. Some couples live together without registration and adopt children (who are their relatives) or use in vitro fertilization. The longing for love and being loved is always referred to by transgender people as a major obstacle but also their one burning desire.

### **3.4 Difficulties in employment opportunities**

#### ***Employment for the MTFs***

Finding a job is one of the biggest challenges for transgender people, especially the MTF group. On one hand, due to existing stigmas, few are able to pursue higher

education to obtain sufficient certificates that allow them to apply in companies or the public sector. On the other hand, prejudices about transgender people like “queer”, “sick” or “thieves” etc have resulted in a very small number of employers who are willing to accept them. Many told us if they manage to get into companies or restaurants owned by foreigners, the situation is better because foreigners do not hold such strong gender prejudices like Vietnamese. The below experience shared by an MTF may more or less depict the stigmas that this group faces in the labour market.

*Even if there are fewer stigmas in society, I'm not sure if I can find a job. Honestly, I feel that even if the stigmas lessen, people still won't want to employ open shadows. Maybe there are some jobs for us transgender people but most involves hidden shadows; I rarely see open shadow employees. (MTF, 27 years old, HCMC)*

Many transgender people clearly see unfairness as compared to homosexuals. While homosexual males (gay) can hide themselves and appear in public or participate in art contests, transgender people seem to stand hardly any chance and very few can appear openly in public.

*For hidden shadows (gay), they can participate in television singing contests or house of music or drawing sketches. They can also be employed in the public sector. However, for “open shadows”, even if they are qualified and knowledgeable no government entity wants to employ them. Even if open shadows can sing very well, no one will appreciate unless they have money to go for surgery, or have money to bribe to get a job, to release albums, that's when they can rise high, otherwise they're just going down. (MTF, 52 years old, HCMC)*

The main jobs that MTFs can do are often independent jobs like beauty care services (makeup, hairstyling, etc) or performing. However, even when they find the most ordinary jobs they are still subject to stigmas or being sacked.

*I want to be a girl, so it's very difficult for me to find a job. I actually applied to a Korean restaurant and got in. The lady owner liked me and employed me like a normal employee, but her father who's very old does not like it. He didn't agree to employ me. So I quit after working there for just a week. (MTF, 27 years old, HCMC).*

### Funeral singing

Lack of family support and lack of certificates coupled with social stigmas and prejudices have made it even more challenging for the MTF group to find employment. Many MTF groups have to sing at funerals to earn a living. In the context of being stigmatised and given limited opportunities, despite competition and prejudices amongst transgender groups, MTFs within in small groups have become more compassionate towards one another. An MTF told us that after being chased out by the family and leaving home, he gathered other peers in the same situation to form a group to live together and find employment.

*I rent a house near this place. There's a group of people like me who want to be girls but are not accepted by their families, about 7 of them in total. I gathered*

*them into a group living together and sing at funerals at night. Funeral singing is the most mundane job in Sai Gon [HCMC]. The pay is not aplenty. We can get only 80,000 to 100,000 VND a day. There are days when our whole group earned only 200,000 VND per day. This cannot be enough to feed 8 mouths, right? We can only afford tofu or kangkong! I'm in charge of food expenses. I often come back earliest to cook for them so they have energy to sing at night (MTF, 27 years old, HCMC)*

Violence also breaks out at funerals when guests insist on taking the microphone to sing but are not successful, and turn to breaking things and making noise so that “open shadows” cannot perform. It also happens that in the middle of performances the police come to arrest them or deter them from singing due to complaints about noise from neighbours.

*Funeral singing is not very strenuous, just that we have to go wherever people request. We don't have to sing that much, but going out at night is a bit scary. Sometimes I have to go out on the street at 2am, 3am, it's creepy, especially desolated places. People often touch us when we sing. Sometimes they tuck the tips into our breasts or parts of our body. There are times they secretly molest us. (MTF, 27 years old, HCMC)*

#### **Box 7. Funeral singing**

Funeral singing seems to be a job designated for transgender people in HCMC. People believe that singing at funerals will help the living go on being happy and the dead's souls to be released. Thus, many people invite *cải lương* [traditional theatrical] performers to sing at funerals, but majority ask “open shadows” to perform for amusement. In HCMC, funerals normally last 3 nights, the last one being the occasion for people to enjoy performances so that they can carry out burial or incineration services the next day. They invite “open shadows” to perform to excite the crowd and keep them from feeling sleepy. For “open shadows”, many MTFs think of this job as a main income earner because for once, they do not have a job, plus they can wear makeup, dress up and perform the way they like. Performers (often referred to as “*gái*” [girls] or “*gà*” [chicks]) need to at least have some singing talent to be accepted, because they have to go into the audience to ask for tips. It happens frequently that the audience make fun of them or take the microphone so the performers are forced to sing live and cannot use lip-sync.

For each show, there are often a “running leg” and a “pillar leg”. Those who are not “pillars” may join 2, 3 shows in one night if they are invited, while “pillar girls” have to stick to one show. Show managers are “madams” that “girls” often call “moms”. Show managers usually prioritize “pillar girls” for performance invitations. Each manager often manages at least 7-8 and up to a few dozen “pillar girls” or “frequent girls” who are always invited whenever there is a show.<sup>11</sup> Managers only ask “outside girls” to join performances when “pillar girls” cannot perform. There are also cases whereby transgender people ask to join performances on their way for “some money to buy fuel”.

One typical funeral show lasts about 4 hours (normally from 9pm to 1am, 10pm to 2am or 12am to 4am). Each performer usually sings only 2 songs; sometimes if there are many “girls”

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<sup>11</sup>MTFs in HCMC often mention famous “madams” who manage a few tens “chicks” like Mdm D., Mdm Th., etc

performing some may not need to sing but if these are “pillar girls” staying until the end of the show, they will still have a share of the tips. The inviting family normally pays from 500,000 to 800,000 VND. There are some cases where they pay a few million. Some shows are called “sô sũ” by MTFs (bad show, lousy show, e.g. they ask the family to pay 800,000 VND but are only paid 400,000 VND, no one gives them tips, so the amount each member gets is too small to even cover their transport cost), or “sô tươi” [fresh shows] whereby the family pays them 800,000 VND, of which the managing madam gives them 400,000 VND upfront and keep the remaining 400,000 VND. During performances, the MC and also transgender girls will go down into the audience to ask for tips. Many excited or curious guests may pull at their breasts to tuck the tips in (10,000 or 20,000 VND, etc). All these tips have to be handed over to the manager and the money will be counted and divided among girls who stay until the end of the show. Shares are also made in salary grade like A+, A, B, C, etc depending on the individual’s contribution to the show and age (some transgender born before 1975 also perform), e.g. grade A+ salary are transsexuals who have had complete surgery for breasts and reproductive organs. In some cases, although the performer has not had surgery, because she is close to the “madam”, never leaves the show, even with no singing talent, she can still receive a larger share than many others as long as she shows up.<sup>12</sup> After finishing the funeral show, some may go around outside to ask for more tips or to prostitute to earn extra money. They are not required to hand over the after-show money to the manager. In funeral performances, songs are often chosen by the singers, from old songs to dance music.

### Performing at gathering places

Besides funeral shows, some small groups organise performances on stage (normally at cafes). This can be done by managers or sponsored by communication clubs for MSM for publicity purposes. MTFs find joy in performing on stage, plus these are more decent places and the pay is higher. However, they incur higher costs for renting clothes and costumes. In addition, during these self-organised shows they face the risk of being arrested by the police and large fines. Shows organized by *The gioi thu 3* forum or *Gioi han* also attract community attention. Many shows are carried out on a free-entry basis but charge high prices for drinks. Stage performances are often lip-synced whereby performers act or sing in sync with the music.

Transgender stage performers are often selected from contests. For example, *The gioi thu 3* has organized contests like pageant contests, male beauty contests, talent contests and modelling contests and select from among the winners for their shows. After some time, when these performers are recruited by other managers, they will look for new members.

Transgender performers at fashion shows also told us that to indulge their passion they have to spend a lot and their shows usually make losses. However, for their own passion and to create fun events for community members, they want to perform.

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<sup>12</sup>For example, the tips amount to 1 million, being divided by 10 people for 100,000 each, grade A+ will receive 100,000, and others will receive a bit less like grade A receiving 80,000, grade C 30,000 to cover fuel cost, etc.

Nevertheless, they are not granted permits to perform despite applying, so when they perform they are always worried about being fined.

*“We have to prepare a lot for any show. Normal girls only have to wear light make-up and style their hair. For us, we have to wear wigs and other undergarment accessories, it’s not easy. There are a lot of risks when we perform, like police can come any time and intervene. They say we don’t have permits to perform, but when we apply for permits they reject us. We only perform for our community, the audience is not that big, we do it for fun, it’s not like some big show”* (MTF, 22 years old, HCMC)

Despite their constant attempts to find jobs, transgender people are often insulted in their working environment:

*“It’s very hard and pitiful for us to sing. I recall the first time I took part in a long show that lasted over several days, I asked them for just 20,000 VND but they insisted that I folded my arms to take the money. I refused, so they shouted at me, ‘anyway you look at it you’re just a dog PÊ-ĐÊ, you should feel lucky I’m giving you 20,000’. There’s a lot of degrading things! But it’s life!”* (MTF, 25 years old, HCMC)

### Sex work

One of the “jobs” often mentioned by MTFs in HCMC is “làm gái” [prostitution]. An MTF told us “*pê đê like us have only two ways to earn money – one is funeral singing, the other is prostitution; what else can we do*”. Interviewees told us they tried very hard to find a job but wherever they went they were rejected -- “*I sent in applications; they promised to call back but it never happened*” -- even for simple jobs like washing dishes. Some MTFs try to learn the art of make-up and open up their own shop at home if they have some money, or provide make-up, hairstyling and other beauty services. Many said they do not have any jobs to earn a living and were forced to “stand on the street”.

*If you ask 10 prostitute girls, all 10 will tell you they don’t want to do it. It’s not a fun job, it’s full of disgrace. If they get some crazy dudes they’ll be beaten up. If only there’s some place for them to perform, so they can quit prostitution. Am I correct? Because people are not willing to cooperate, they have to go that way.* (MTF, 25 years old, HCMC)

An MTF said that various reasons led her to this job, but mainly because of the need to earn a livelihood as she had no other choices.

*My family was also doing badly back then, I didn’t have any money so I tried it online but it was only trying, I didn’t intend to do it for long. At first I got some good customer who gave me 500,000 VND. I became greedy when I saw the big money, so I got deeper in and stay until now. Now I’m in too deep. I want to quit but then we “husband and wife” won’t have money to live. She can earn enough to cover rents, and I have to make money for our lunches.* (MTF, 19 years old, HCMC)

*I started a few years back, somewhere in 2009. When I first started I still wore male clothes and look for customers online. When someone introduced me to customers, the pay was 300,000 VND for each time and I had to give 100,000 to the introducer, 50,000 to the motorbike rider and I had only 150,000 left (MTF, 18 years old, HCMC)*

In addition to working at night, they also leave their telephone numbers online for “customers” to contact. One MTF said customers are mainly gay and some straight guys: “if they call in the morning I go immediately, at night I stand on the street to invite customers” (MTF, 19 years old, HCMC), but he wears male clothes during the day to avoid scrutinising eyes and girl clothes at night because “I feel more like myself wearing female clothes”, even if the customer is gay.

The money earned from prostitution is barely enough to cover their meals and clothes. An MTF living in public parks told us that her family does not accept her, she cannot find a job and does not have anywhere to go, no money to get a room so she can only wander around in parks and look for customers at night. “On days when I don’t have any customers I have to eat raw instant noodles and drink water to fill my stomach”. At night, she climbs over the fence and sleeps in the park; the next morning she has to climb out again in fears of being arrested by civil defence.

*Looking for customers is like exercising, going round and round. If someone shows signs of interest, I turn to him and blow him a kiss, he’ll stop and point at me. I ask for 400,000, he’ll bargain down until my charge and I’ll agree. For room fees... quickies take about 1 hour. The most I can get in one night is 5 or 6 guests, if I’m unlucky and find no one I don’t have money to eat (MTF, 19 years old, HCMC).*

Being involved in prostitution has made MTFs victims of sexual violence. Some MTFs often have to practice oral sex when they serve customers and “there are violent guys who pull my head for their own pleasure or scratch and pinch me. Sometimes when I’m back at home I find myself full of blacks and blues.” Some MTFs do look for customers online instead of out on the street. One MTF told us she used to date or find customers online for money. However, being insulted by their customers, they quit their “job”: “After we had sex he threw money onto my body as if to insult me. After that time, I no longer did it”. (MTF, 27 years old, HCMC). MTFs confirmed that prostitution is their last resort; they would never do it if they were able to find any other job.

*I wish there are normal jobs for third-world people like me. I’m into prostitution because I can’t find any job. Earlier I applied to a restaurant but they told me straight to my face that ‘we don’t hire pê đê. Pê đê will only bring evil and devils here.’ I just wish everyone would give us pê đê a chance to work” (MTF, 19 years old, HCMC).*

### ***Employment for FTMs***

For the FTM group, there are certain difficulties, albeit not as serious as compared to the FTM group. Many FTMs told us the easiest jobs to find are in the hospitality and tourism sectors, cooking or bartending. For FTMs, it is not too difficult to find jobs because people only think that they like to wear tomboy, masculine clothes. However, according to one FTM, she has been stigmatised a lot of times at her working environment.

*There were several times I went to apply for jobs and heard old employees gossiping this and that. In the workplace, people often mock me or tell me harsh words so that I would resign. I've seen so many of us being treated that way.* (FTM, 24 years old, Hanoi)

Some participants told us that since their registered gender is female, when they apply to hotels they are asked to wear long traditional gowns and wear high heels, which caused them to quit. In some other cases, people think they are male based on their outward appearance and ask them to carry heavy stuff, while in fact their bodies are female.

*It is very difficult for me to find a job. I look tall and healthy but when they refer to my applications and find out that I am female they reject me immediately.* (FTM, 20 years old, HCMC)

*As I work in a hotel, looks are very important, meaning men have to look like men and women like women. That's the problem. For example, when I joined as a trainee waiter, they requested me to wear light makeup, but I surely wouldn't wear a long traditional gown or make-up, so they did not accept me.* (FTM, 22 years old, Hanoi)

It can be observed that for transgender people in general, employment is a major challenge. The self-esteem associated with gender identity has resulted in the fact that both the FTM and the MTF groups insist they would rather stay unemployed than change.

*I'd rather fail than to have to wear long gown and makeup. Because I wouldn't feel confident if I go to work in that appearance, I can't do it. Another thing is I want to gradually let people know what I really am after getting to know them and working with them; I don't want to stay forever in the female disguise. I don't really care about physicality, I mean my body; it's OK to not become male by using hormones or surgery. But I want everyone to know that I love girls and that I'm not a girl.* (FTM, 22 years old, Hanoi)

*If I had to cut my hair and wear male clothes to be able to get a job, I'd rather be unemployed, because if I did I wouldn't be myself any more* (MTF, 19 years old, HCMC)

### **3.5 Risks associated with health**

#### ***Lack of knowledge on hormone usage and health issues***

Reality has shown that transgender people have not received sufficient attention, thus there is still too little information available to them. The lack of information has



caused transgender people to be confused in self-identifying their gender and sloppily use hormones that are illegally sold on the market without any proper instructions. Although there are currently a number of health facilities for homosexual males (gay, MSM) to provide consultancy on HIV and sexual health, there is no health facility specifically meant for transgender people. Hormones are mostly being traded illegally in Vietnam as there is no official supplier. According to transgender people, many travel to Thailand to buy hormones and bring back to Vietnam to sell to others.

A number of issues have been revealed for those who use hormones without proper prescription or instruction. The bulk of related information is circulated by word of mouth in the community and there is no official information available. Transgender people often learn from the experiences of others who have tried. According to words circulated in the community, hormones can be taken orally or injected. Injections should be done once a month, while in the other method 2 tablets should be taken daily. For the FTM group, the main hormone used is testosterone, which helps to increase androgen and generate external changes like voice, face skin and hair and facial hair... One FTM said that initially hormones should be taken orally at one dosage per month (at about 300,000 VND). Higher dosage may cause cancer. According to another FTM, there are four types: drinking, injection, gel and stick-on. Injection is the safest because it is usually done for 3 months. Stick-ons are often used during travels:

*Once you start using you have to continue your whole life. I've just started drinking it for 10 days. I only experience muscle tension and body changes. I'm taking capsules. Actually this has to be prescribed by doctors, but there's no instruction available so we just take the risks. (FTM, 20 years old, Hanoi)*

Many MTFs circulate words that contraceptives might help improve their breast size and reduce muscles. Some only want to increase their breast size so that their breasts can be pushed up with bras. However, some only take medicines for a while to prepare for surgery, as it will cause the nipples to swell up to be cut open for implants. According to MTFs, if they rush into surgery without taking medicines for a while, they will incur pain and the results will not be good. There is also talk that too much hormone could cause bone problems, shock or allergies. There are many types of contraceptives on the market -- some to be taken one daily and others by the tens. According to an MTF:

*"Taking it like that sometimes tires me out. It also puts stress on the heart. I rarely inject hormones because I'm scared of needles, but sometimes when my friend offers to inject it I let her help me. But I drink more than inject because of my fear of needles. I heard taking too much orally could cause bone problems and other things. But I'm not really sure. I want to have breasts, so I do it; who is concerned about the side-effects..." (MTF, 25 years old, HCMC)*

*"Sometimes I get overdosed. After injections I get easily frustrated, turn hot and cold or have a fever for a few days and the injected spot gets swollen... there are a lot of tradeoffs" (MTF, 27 years old, HCMC)*

*We use hormones randomly, there's no prescription. Even injections too, we just do it. We can overdose on hormones if we're not careful about how much we take. I've experienced that before. It became swollen and turned blue; I had to dip it in hot water. It was very painful. I have to learn through trial and error; it'll be so*

*much better if there's some instruction. We did it because of our mentality, not because we wanted to become girls or anything. But when I'm like that, I feel I can live on with more confidence than as a guy* (MTF, 25 years old, HCMC)

*"When I was in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, I went to thegioithu3 website and read that taking contraceptives can help enhance breasts. I took three pills every day, one each in the morning, noon and evening. I just did it on my own, without anyone's advice. After a while, I got allergies with red itchy spots on my skin, so I stopped".* (MTF, 18 years old, HCMC)

A transgender woman told us there are a lot of side effects to injecting hormones, including reducing sexual desire and, even if the desire is still there, they cannot "climax", which badly stressed them out:

*After injecting this, you lose all feelings and don't even bother to desire. Injecting hormones will cause your reproductive organs to reduce in size. It's like if I hug someone I like, I won't feel anything here but the sensation will be in my mind only. If it goes on like that for long I'll go insane...* (MTF, 52 years old, HCMC)

*I tell you, it's a lie if someone says I will still feel sexual desires and have sperms after surgery... That's a lie because you cut it off already, how can it produce sperms. One friend told me that after surgery he can no longer "come", I believe him; unlike those who say they still function and get wet like normal... total liars..* (MTF, 52 years old, HCMC)

Without the support of psychologists or health facilities, transgender people bear heavy mental burdens that affect their mind and could resort to negative solutions that adversely affect their bodies. Not knowing where to have surgery and not feeling confident about being accepted, all transgender participants said they will go abroad (Thailand or South Korea) to have surgery if they can afford it. This not only brings them financial difficulties but also creates a **so-called "foreign currency bleeding" (huh?)** since the money required in these countries is at least 5,000-6,000 USD. Thus, most of those interviewed opined that they wish to have more information, especially about health care.

### ***Mental health***

Pressures caused by social stigma, unemployment and pessimism over love have driven many transgender people into sorrow and depression. Many have thought of or made suicide attempts due to the distant feelings that their family, school and society give them.

*"Outside my mom dares not to acknowledge me, it's like my family has given up on me. I felt very sad and thought of committing suicide"* (MTF, 25 years old, HCMC)

Many of them experience crises before making up their mind on important things like whether to "come out" (wear clothes and have hairstyle like girls or guys), to have surgery; or when they are abandoned by their lovers or fight with families.

*“I use stimulants. I’ve tried everything from synthetic drugs and pills to injections. I cut myself with a razor blade after a fight with my partner. This one is when I burned myself with a cigarette when I had a quarrel with my mother”.*  
(MTF, 19 years old, HCMC)

Even for those who have had surgery, there is confusion or depression for a few years when their outward appearance is not entirely male or female. They have to regularly take medicines to maintain the required reproductive hormones for their bodies to balance the loss caused by surgery, to allow their bodies to adjust to their new life and fight bone issues and early ageing, as well as to maintain their new appearance.

*“We’re sad because we were not born as male, neither were we born as female. Even if we say it out no one will understand; this society does not understand or tolerate us; we can only cry our tears to ourselves”* (street teenager, MTF, HCMC)

Faced with stigmas, some turn to self-stigmatising and become pessimistic about being accepted by society or getting employment or happiness with their loved ones (*“We can never have wedding ceremonies; we can only have funerals”*). They become shy and very few dare to visit health facilities due to fear of being stared at by nurses. They treat women’s illnesses by self-prescribing medicines or allowing them to heal by themselves. However, many transgender people think that it is these stigmas that have made them strong and give them the will to move on. Particularly, FTMs **often show self-confidence and the will to prove their worth to convince their parents to accept them and also to be able to provide support for their partners.** (gosh, this needs to be rewritten!)

### ***Risk of being infected with sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)***

As discussed earlier, while the FTM group has few issues related to sexual health as they are not engaged in many sexual relationships, the MTF group faces a high risk of being infected with STDs. For those who earn money by prostituting, despite having been taught about HIV and infectious diseases, they sometimes still do not use condoms to please their customers.

*“Young people my age or slightly older are not very experienced, so they don’t like to use condoms while those above 30 know things well and have been doing this a lot, so they are very worried and insist that I use condoms”* (MTF, 18 years old, HCMC)

In addition, MTFs mainly practice oral sex so many of them think that as long as the customers do not touch them or if they use condoms it will be alright as oral sex is safe.

*“You can’t wear condoms for oral sex. They pay so we just go along. If they ‘come’ I’ll leave it in my mouth because they like it that way, but after that I wash my mouth carefully. Sometimes it feels so gross I want irritate my throat to throw up and cannot eat the whole day”* (MTF, 19 years old, HCMC)

For those who are not engaged in prostitution, their sex life with their partners is normally unprotected. As mentioned above, because MTFs often feel inferior in relationships they usually have to find all means to please their heterosexual men, including sex, so safe practice measures are often overlooked. Thus, there are high risks

of being infected with HPV (Human Papilloma Virus) or HIV among this group. Meanwhile, they dare not visit health facilities for check-ups and treatment because of their fear of being scrutinised and stigmatised, and they “let it be” to heal by itself or tell each other about cures, which could lead to unfortunate results.

### 3.6 Legal issues

Amid the current concerns about human rights and right to health care, western societies have implemented a health care system for transgender people with focus on those who wish to have sex reassignment surgery. The laws in many western countries as well as medical practices now provide support for sex reassignment surgery and allow modification of personal identification documents after surgery, marriage with post-surgery gender, and prohibition of discriminatory treatment based on gender expression.<sup>13</sup> In Vietnam, as transgender people are not yet considered a group requiring attention, there is no medical system or legal framework for their rights.

#### *Not being allowed to change name and re-identify gender*

Many MTFs find their names too masculine and many FTMs hesitate to tell others their feminine names. In fact, a majority of transgender people currently have to use nicknames. Many MTFs performing in HCMC give themselves “stage names” for both daily life and performances. For transgender people, the fact that they are not allowed to change their names to conform to their outward gender has made it difficult for them to travel and prepare related paperwork.

As prescribed in Clause 1, Article 36, of Decree No. 158/2005/ND-CP dated 27 December, 2005, by the Government on the registration and management of residence, one of the areas for change or correction of residence status is “**Change of surname, given name or middle name as already registered in the birth registration card and original birth certificate, but individual requests to change when providing legitimate reasons in accordance with the Civil Code**” (why is there a “but”?). “*Legitimate reasons*” specified in articles 27, 37 and 38 of the above Decree include having similar names that cause confusion, re-establishing blood relationships and re-identification of gender. However, the re-identification of gender as prescribed in Article 36 of the Civil Law and Decree No. 88/2008/ND-CP on sex reassignment mainly involves “abnormal incidence of reproductive organs”. This decision is suitable for intersex people<sup>14</sup>, but has closed the door for transgender people because clause 1 of Article 4 of the decree clearly prohibits “conducting transsexual surgery for individuals with completely developed reproductive organs”. This has made it almost impossible for

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<sup>13</sup>To date, all members of the European Community are requested to legally prohibit discrimination against sexual orientation and gender identity (Takacs 2006). As at May 2008, 13 states of the US have passed legislation to prohibit stigmatizing and discrimination against gender identity and gender expression.

<sup>14</sup> Intersex refers to all forms that cause nonconforming development of gender and biological features of the body. These forms may be related to abnormal characteristics of external reproductive organs, internal reproductive organs, sex chromosome or gender hormones.

transgender people to apply for new IDs and has become one of the biggest concerns for this community.

*When I have surgery and change into a girl, I want it to be reflected on paper. At least I want to change my name into a female one. I visited the legal department to make an inquiry and was told that I'm only allowed to change my name if I have abnormal reproductive organs requiring surgery to correct; otherwise, I'm not allowed to change my name. (MTF, 25 years old, HCMC)*

Prior to sex reassignment surgery, a proper procedure requires a real life test to determine whether it is appropriate to carry out the surgery, with certification from psychologists. However, even if Vietnamese transgender people want to have surgery overseas, they cannot find doctors in Vietnam to certify for them. Moreover, it is difficult to return to the country after surgery because their body reflects a different gender from their IDs and this is not accepted by customs. Therefore, transgender people wish to be allowed to have surgery and given favourable conditions to have their post-surgery gender acknowledged.

In reality, transsexuals are not able to change their gender as shown in documents like ID, personal profile and residence book. One MTF transsexual told us that even after she has already got married (with a wedding ceremony) and lives completely like a woman, she is still not able to change her documents:

*"I wish some day the government acknowledges transgender people who are really transgender and certified by doctors. I wish the government would allow me to change my name or my ID to reflect that I am female so it could be easier for me in my work or when dealing with government agencies. Currently, I dare not show my ID anywhere I go ... it is too troublesome, like when going to the airport" (MTF, 42 years old, Hanoi)*

*"In my case, for instance, if the police stop me when I'm riding, I'm very uncomfortable showing them my papers because my ID still states that I'm male; I was not allowed to have my female photo on it (MTF, 52 years old, HCMC)*

According to transgender people, not being able to have IDs that reflect their modified gender has caused them a lot of trouble in life, like in trading or owning assets:

*I think they should allow us to change either our photos or our IDs. I think it may be quite difficult to change our name in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. I only need them to acknowledge who I am. Now that I've returned after my surgery, I can't do simple things like buying a car and register myself as the lawful owner with my current ID; same for buying a house. I have to ask my relatives or family members to use their names to buy for me. It's really difficult. (MTF, 22 years old, Hanoi)*

Recently, on July 1, 2012, a new regulation was passed whereby gender has to be mentioned in the ID. Earlier IDs only contained information such as full name, date of birth, place of birth, registered residence address, ethnic group, and religion. However,

according to the new regulation, from now on IDs have to bear names of parents, aliases and gender.<sup>15</sup> This places transgender people in a dilemma as their gender shown in the ID differs from their actual gender. Therefore, many wish to be able to reflect a different gender in the gender category: instead of having only male and female options, they want to be able to say “transgender”.

One MTF suggested that besides IDs, transgender people should be issued another card of a different colour that clearly specifies transgender:

*I think that in the residence registration book, there should be another entry column for transgender as a gender. Or for papers like IDs, maybe they can issue a different type of card or a different colour. Normal IDs are green, maybe they can give us pink IDs and specify transgender, from which to which, for example male to female, with the same photo, address and ID number. No matter how expensive it is, 5 or 10 million, we'll get that card if it's possible to produce it. Because before surgery, we will notify the district office or maybe some office in Hanoi to issue papers for us to go overseas for surgery, and when we return we'll reapply for the card I mentioned, take pictures and get a card similar to the normal ID but of a different colour, pink. (MTF, 22 years old, Hanoi)*

However, many think that if a transgender has had complete surgery, the government should allow this person to remake all personal documents to reflect the new gender. In that way, an MTF transsexual is purely a female and an FTM transsexual is purely a male and there is no need to mention their past of being transgender.

### ***Not being acknowledged for marriage, personal rights and assets***

In the context that there are still many obstacles to carrying out sex reassignment surgery and changing gender on post-operation papers, the transgender community expresses its desire to be legally acknowledged for marriage to same-sex partners or cohabitation of two individuals of the same sex in order to maintain a more long-term relationship as well as protect their personal rights and assets during the cohabitation.

*I also wish to be married once! Once I wrote on my facebook 'seeing others getting on the wedding car, when will it be my turn or will I only be getting on the hearse'. It's the truth. There are many others like me, they never have the experience of marriage in their entire life. People should support and accept those who have such a wish and can do it. You have to give them a chance to achieve peace of mind! (MTF, 25 years old, HCMC)*

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<sup>15</sup>Besides number, full name at birth, date of birth, hometown, permanent address, ethnic group, identifying features, ID also bears the following details: other names and aliases, gender, full name of father, full name of mother. On the ID, the two-dimension black bar code stores some basic information on the person identified by the ID. ID number comprises 12 natural digits and are assigned and managed by the Ministry of Public Security nationwide (Circular 27 dated 16 May 2012 by the Ministry of Public Security).

*We want to be legally acknowledged as two belonging to each other. For example if we own something and something happens to me I want my partner to be the first beneficiary, the first to inherit from me, not my family (FTM, 22 years old, Hanoi)*

Some FTMs are concerned about the laws on marriage though they do not take weddings too seriously, because they have considered having children and worry that their children may be disadvantaged if there is no law:

*“We’re thinking of IVF. We know there are a lot of issues like medicine and finance, but I want to have my own genetic kid and one of my partner’s. Without a legal defence for both to be parents, our kids will be at a disadvantage” (FTM, 26 years old, HCMC)*

### ***Not being protected against gender identity- based discrimination***

Notably, there are many barriers and difficulties for transgender people originating from social stigmas and discriminatory treatment against them while there is no legal framework yet to protect their rights against gender stigmas. It is due to stigmas that they cannot attend higher education to obtain certificates, visit health facilities for treatment or can find employment. Thus, transgender people wish for the society to accept their gender. Many would like some protection under the law so that when they decide to come out with their real gender identity they will not have to fear threats and pressures from families, acquaintances and the society.

Many transgender people think that stigmas and prejudices also originate from the authorities and the authorities are the only one able to change the social mindset:

*To ease their stigmatisation, the most crucial solutions can only be effected by the authorities. If the government issues an anti-stigma law related to transgender, I’m just saying transgender, not transsexual, or I’ll be favouring people like me too much, or let’s say LGBT in general, and gives us some kind of certificates, not really marriage certificates ... but allows us to get married without having to go to the district office or No. 7 Thien Quang to register, it’s fine. If the government has a more open-minded view of the LGBT community society will also have a different view of us; like, OK, the government already accepts it so I have to follow suit. It all depends on the government. (MTF, 22 years old, Hanoi)*

Many participants also proposed ideas to ease social stigmas through publicity programs or on the radio (channel FM99) because they think many people do not have much access to the Internet while the radio is still an effective tool to disseminate information.

*Like charity programs, we can also do some small performances outside of our community. In that way, people can get a more understanding look into the LGBT community; not only transgender people but also gays and lesbians are talented and can perform or do many other things. Or if there’s a chance for a live television show, we can perform something or sing in some big event or charity*

*event, people will look at our community differently. If we do this when the producers are still like that it will be difficult to be accepted by the society, very difficult.* (MTF, 22 years old, Hanoi)

There is no legislation yet to protect homosexual and transgender people. If a transgender person is sexually assaulted, this person is not regarded as a victim because there are no laws yet providing for a “male individual” being raped. An MTF told us a case about a transgender person committing a crime and being arrested. At the time of arrest, this person had already had breast surgery so he could not be imprisoned in the same area with men. However, as he had not had surgery on his reproductive organs, he could not be kept in the same area with women because the police feared he could impregnate female inmates (as many want to be pregnant to avoid the death penalty). The person was kept in an isolated cell, so he hung himself to death. Such cases show that the law has not taken into consideration **all sensitive aspects of gender (??)** of transgender people.

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From our discussion, it can be seen that for transgender people, particularly MTFs, prejudices and stigmas are the biggest issue. **Their openly expressed gender externally (??)** has caused **stigmas to become severe discrimination (??)** and drive them towards risks related to health, rob them of education and employment opportunities and integration into society like other people. In order to cope with these stigmas, beside quite negative reactions (depression, suicide attempts, self-stigmatisation, keeping a distance from the community after surgery, not daring to appear in crowded places), or accepting fate and letting it lead them into any job to make a living (such as prostitution), there are transgender people who have found other ways to live with such stigmas. For example, some resort to religion to feel personal empowerment, or regard stigmas as motivation to move on and prove their worth, or gather together into small social networks and support each other mentally and materially, jointly organizing activities that suit their personal tastes (show off their artistic talents) and at the same time serve as a way to cope with external social stigmas.



## IV. CONCLUSION

1. Transgenderism is a phenomenon that occurs all over the world and Vietnam is not an exception. In Vietnam, the term “transgender” has been used only in the last few years. Before that, transgender people were placed in the same category as “homosexuals” or the “third gender”. Along with the explosion of the internet forums for transgender people (i.e. *LesKing.com.vn* and *Thegioithu3.vn*) since 2008, those who live between the two sexes and are not completely satisfied with being called “gay” or “lesbian” can engage with concepts relating to transgender and gender identity. Many of them feel a sense of relief in knowing they are not “homosexual”. The sharing of information and common interests through internet forums has brought the transgender community closer together into a more visible group. This is especially the case among younger transgender people, who are generally more open and willing to be true to their gender identity and to face social stigma than their middle-aged counterparts.

2. *Transgender people often experience confusion in the process of discovering their gender identity, and face difficult decisions in the process of gender transition* including questions relating to the use of hormones, surgery and open sexual behaviour. Transgender people are more likely to have feelings for straight ones, which often puts them in a tragic situation: being hurt when they get rejected, or being abused both physically and sexually. They are put in a more difficult situation since their relationship is still considered to be “homosexual”, and thus unacceptable and hopeless.

3. *Transgender people have been suffering stigma, violence and discrimination because of their aspiration to be themselves.* Out of a desire to be true to their gender identity, transgender people often face stigma in the public domain (e.g. schools, health care centres, public spaces and working places) as well as from neighbours and members of their own family. Because of this social stigma, transgender people are often severely affected by mental disorders and have little chance of finding work and contributing to society, despite their talents. Those who have undergone transsexual surgery have to hide their past and lead a closed life. The minority status of transgender people is worsened by the prejudice they suffer from the LGB (lesbian, gay, bisexual) community who similarly face the plight of social prejudice because of their gender identity or sexual orientation. However, transgender people feel that they lack understanding, mutual support and sympathy from the LGB community. This lack of connection and interaction makes transgender people even more isolated and compounds the degree of injustice and inequality they face.

4. Despite maltreatment and discrimination, many transgender prove to be resilient. Far from being passive, pitiful victims, they are able to exert a high degree of agency *in asserting their own sense of gender identity*. Many transgender people try hard to lead a **dependent (an independent?)** life and to prove their ability despite the continuing stigma. They *“try to round ourselves, so people will see that there is no reason to stigmatise us”*. It is noteworthy that many of the informants said they wish to be a transgender person in their next life too, because they think that transgender people are

talented and delicate. They are strong-willed enough not only to change their destiny but also to provide a shoulder for others to rely on. They defend their right to be themselves against all challenges.

**Figure 8: Proud to be a transgender**

*“I have never felt pity for belonging to the third gender. I have never wondered why I was born this way. Some friends of mine are always complaining that I’d better be an ugly person, no matter male or female, but not someone in between like this. For me, I don’t care. Even in the next life, I would accept it if I would be a bóng [shadow-slang for transgender] again” (MTF, 42 years old, Hanoi)*

*“I am proud to be true to myself and what I have achieved in this life. I don’t want to change anything about my gender” (FTM, 24 years old, HCMC)*

*“What makes me proud is that not every ordinary girl has my talent. I have never attended any training in make-up, tailoring and cooking but I can do everything. I can make my own clothes. If I was born again, I would choose to be a transgender person. I am proud to be a transgender person (MTF, 25 years old, HCMC)*

*“To be someone in between the two genders, I am given the ability to understand both men and women. It is an advantage” (FTM, 24 years old, HCMC)*

*“Each life is just a raindrop. This drop falls on me and I have nothing to do with it. I am proud of myself” (MTF, 25 years old, HCMC).*

*“If I had been born an ordinary boy, I would not have tried to understand myself so much. I would not have researched my mind and studied my body ... I am proud of what I have achieved in my career at this stage of life. At 25, I live all by myself. I have my own house, job and income... I just try to be a successful person” (FTM, 26 years old, HCMC).*

*“I was asked many times if I can choose my gender, which one would I choose? My answer was that I would choose to be as I am now – a transgender person - because I am proud to be myself despite the stigma. It’s the stigma that encourages me to grow strong and mature. I hunger for parental love. My parents got divorced. My father passed away ... I don’t spend much time together with my parents. No one believes me when I say I’m 22 years old. They always think that I must be 25 or 26 (MTF, 22 years old, Hanoi)*

*“I thought being a transgender person, I had to be independent, otherwise I would be the first one to suffer. This thought conquered my mind. I learnt dancing. I went to tailoring class by bicycle. I am proud that I have never asked for even a penny from my brothers and sisters, and now I am the one to take care of our mother. (MTF, 52 years old, HCMC)*

*In the next life, if I was born as a ‘pede’ I would be happy to be a ‘pede’ as long as I am beautiful and rich. It’s fun to be a ‘pede’. People say that we are abnormal but in fact normal men and women are even worse. There are men who killed their wives and women who killed their husbands to follow their lovers. We are the third gender, not killers (MTF, 19 years old, HCMC)*

*Nevertheless, there is an enormous aspiration to be accepted and treated equally, especially to be understood and supported by family members.* Many people said they do not care how people in society treat them, but they are in need of understanding and spiritual support from their own parents. Those who have to hide their gender identity while living with parents, those who are rejected and cast out by their parents, and those who have to leave home because of unbearable familial pressure all express the desire that family members should understand that they cannot change their gender identity. They long for acceptance and love from other family members.

5. *Among the transgender community, the MTF group is more vulnerable.* The externalisation of transgender characteristics makes them vulnerable to transphobia in a society with heteronormative values. In a patrilineal and patriarchal society like Vietnam, which accords high value to men and masculinity, stigma and discrimination are more severe when these values appear to be under threat. Therefore, "masculine women" who are considered to have a "strong" personality are usually more accepted than men who display "effeminate" and "weak" characteristics. Transgender FTM groups also find that they face fewer stigmas when the difference between their gender expression and biological sex is less apparent. So, FTM groups often face stigma only at the beginning of the transition process, and this stigma gradually fades when their appearance becomes more masculine. On the other hand, male-to-female transgenders (MTF) usually face difficulties throughout their life, including societal prejudice, and limited access to medicine, health care, and surgery to maintain a feminine form in daily life. MTF transgender is thus a vulnerable gender minority group which has to face many risks. Assaults on personal dignity and unwelcomeness in public places and school environments mean that a lot of MTF transgender people drop out of school. Uneducated and stigmatised by most employers, MTFs face a dearth of employment opportunities, which pushes them into earning a living as "cheap entertainers" singing at funerals or selling their bodies for sex. Further, the lack of information and health workers' insensitivity towards transgenderism often cause MTFs to face high risks with regard to reproductive health, sexually transmitted diseases, and HIV.

6. *Due to the lack of a protective legal framework, transgender people are at risk of having their human rights flagrantly violated.* Transgender people have to face difficulties when their gender expression does not coincide with the biological sex recorded on their identification papers. **UP TO HERE** Transgender people are not allowed to change their name or redefine their gender even after sex change surgery, and they do not enjoy the same rights to marriage as heterosexual people. Further, there is no law against stigma and discrimination of transgender people and they are sometimes treated as 'threats to the society' or 'criminals'. Transgender people suffer lack of opportunity, harassment, and violence from every aspect of the society. This often leads transgender people to experience mental health problems and threats to their personal security and livelihood. There is a need for a change to ensure that transgender people have equal rights to health care, job opportunities, personal safety and the pursuit of happiness.

**Figure 9: The transgender people's wishes**

*"I wish that LGBT people will be recognised equally as other human beings. I don't ask them to say that I am talented or pretty. All I ask of them is that they treat me like a normal person, not an ogre"* (MTF, 22 years old, Hanoi)

*"I wish people won't look at us with those eyes. They will be friendly towards us and they won't discriminate and ill-treat us because of our gender identity* (Street children, MTF, HCMC)

*"I wish people won't look down on us when we enter this life. Don't call us by words like pede. That's all I want".* (Street children, MTF, HCMC)

*"I think, after I have breasts implanted, I will have a job like all other women, or will open a small restaurant or hair dresser's, whatever. I'll work in the daytime and go to pagoda at night. What a life!* (Street children, MTF, HCMC)

*My group and I wish to have a permit so that we can perform and be decently recognized. We want to show our talent to a wider audience, not just our community. We feel very happy performing in a room full of people.* (MTF, 22 years old, HCMC)

*"If I have some savings, I will open a nursing home for people like me... As we don't have family and children. We are alone and there's no one to rely on. If we have a nursing home, we will have each other"* (MTF, 25 years old, HCMC)

*"We are like the birds. In the cage, birds still sing. But when freed from the cage, we will sense the relief. Many people think that if we are free, we will do bad things, but we won't"* (MTF, 25 years old, HCMC)

## IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

Putting it all together, transgender people are facing stigma, discrimination in the family, school, work place, society at large. They have to deal with inequality, lack of personal safety and poverty. This group needs legal protection and equal opportunity in education, health care and job access. Based on the above situation, this report sets out a number of recommendations as follows:

### 1. Legal and personal identity rights for transgender people

This is most important for transgender people because they experience many kinds of inequality due to the lack of legal protection. A legal breakthrough will surely bring about equality for transgender people:

- In reality, many transgender people in Vietnam who undergo sex-change surgery cannot change their personal identity in their identity documents. Thus, it is necessary to promulgate regulations allowing transgender people to change their personal identity in all their identity documents.
- Transgender people who undergo sex-change surgery should be allowed to change their name and sex after the surgery in all their identity documents. The transgender community should be consulted on whether to mention the sex change (male to female, female to male) or only the chosen sex.
- There must be an option “others” or “transgender” in identity documents; transgender people who do not undergo sex reassignment surgery should also be allowed to change their name and photo in their identity documents (such as identification card, resident registration book, motorbike/ car registration certificate, ...).
- Health care establishments in Vietnam be allowed to perform sex-change surgery
- Right to marriage:
  - Marriage between a transgender person who has not undergone sex change surgery and a partner can be considered same-sex marriage.
  - Marriage between transgender people who have undergone sex change surgery and their partners, if allowed to change their identity according to their new gender, should be considered heterosexual marriage.
  - If transgender people marry a partner of the same-sex before sex change surgery, after the surgery, they should be allowed to change their name and sex in other documents and for other related issues.

2. **Support the transgender community** to raise their own voice in making policy for transgender people and enhance mutual support among the transgender community.

- *Information support:* Support current forums for transgender people and open more channels for communication; provide public information about gender identity, use of hormones and the transition process to increase health safety.
- *Provide capacity building and leadership:* support the transgender network so that they connect with each other and choose the leaders to represent their community among policy makers to protect their rights.
- *Consult while drafting legal documents* related to personal identity rights (i.e Law of Resident Registration, Law of Family and Marriage and Civil Law) to ensure the rights of transgender people.
- *Connect the LGBT community:* Connect the organisations working on LGBT issues, establish a network for psychological support and crisis mitigation: choose the core of the community as the first point of consultancy and expand to points for specific services

### **3. Ensure equal right of access to public services, especially education, health care and employment opportunities**

- *Medical assistance:* Add new services to the existing healthcare centers so that transgender people's specific needs will be met. Two services to consider include psychological counselling, and health care for transgender people before, during and after surgery.
- *Education:* Gender identity should be taught in schools; promulgate regulations for a friendly education environment against all kinds of stigma and discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation; consider the specific needs of transgender people when building public places such as school toilets.
- *Employment opportunities:* Provide access to appropriate vocational training for transgender people; consider issuing performance licences to transgender people. In the long term, it is necessary to ensure equal rights to education so that transgender people have equal opportunities for employment.

### **4. Eradicate sexual orientation- and gender identity-based stigma and discrimination**

- *Enhance communication to raise society's awareness* about transgender people: impact on family, education environment and advocacy for rights of transgender people.
- *Promulgate laws against stigma and discrimination based on gender identity.* This could be a common law against all kinds of stigma and discrimination based on gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, ethnicity and religion... as in the cases of countries such as Sweden, South Korea.

## **Annex. Literature review**

### **1. Terminology**

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the famous German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld (1868-1935), coined the two terms: transvestites and transsexuals (Hirschfeld 1991). Another pioneer was Havelock Ellis, who used the term 'sexo-aesthetic inversion' instead of Hirschfeld's 'transvestism' in an article published in 1913 (Ellis 1913, cf Bullough 2000:2). Then Ellis concluded that the word 'inversion' was misleading because it refers to 'homosexual' while the individuals he had studied were either heterosexual or uninterested in any gender. So he decided that the most suitable term was 'eonism', which derived from the name of a historical cross-dresser in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Chevalier d'Eon. Ellis argued this term avoids the problem inherent in words like 'cross-dressing' (cf Bullough). However, later researchers prefer to use the word 'transvestism' and rarely use Ellis's concept.

Recently, researchers have begun to use the term 'transgender' as a broader category than 'cross-dressing' as it allows including many diverse behaviours. 'Trans' denotes going beyond and across given boundaries, and 'gender' is considered to highlight a form of identity or special social categories. Accordingly, transgender seem to be appropriate when discussing people regarded as sacred mediums among creatures (Peletz 2006) — which will be back in the later part. Another analysis, however, pointed out that the prefix 'trans' as in 'transgress' refers to deviant behaviours (going beyond inherent lines).. As a result, this term helps to partly explain the experience of social stigma and discrimination of transgender people (Donnan & Magowan 2009).

Gay and bisexual people experience the process of 'coming-out' by the way they break out of their heterosexual assumption for themselves and others. Istar Lev (2004) named the process of transgender as 'emergence'. She stated that the two processes have many similarities, including the initial feeling of vagueness, self-denial and shame, and gradual revelation to the ones closet to them; nonetheless, transgender people have to take another step in order to reach a real new identity (with or without surgery). Many transgender people reach that stage without choosing between 'getting over' and continuing to keep their secret (Istar Lev 2004: 229-234). The emergence process of a transgender person comprises of the following stages (though not everyone experience all steps and some people even feel regret in their identity development process): i) self-awareness; ii) information seeking/outreach; iii) coming-out with close people; iv) identity exploring and self-labelling; v) exploring the problems of converting/ reforming body; and vi) unifying: accepting the change they have gone through and dealing with post-change issues. Unfortunately, during and after the process of transition or emergence, most transgender/ transsexual people have to face the fact that though they may achieve acceptance and resolution, they still have to live in a society that does not understand or accept them, and ignore their rights of equality.

## 2. Why there is transgender phenomenon?

There is still a controversy over the factors influencing transgender/ transsexual behaviours. There are two main opposite points of view: one emphasises the ‘nature’ factor, while the other insists on ‘nurture’. Some researchers also combine both the nature and nurture factors to explain why some people are transgender.

Those who emphasise the ‘nature’ factor not only mention the diversity of chromosomes like XXY, single Y or other factors, but also consider the influence of hormones and other factors on the foetus. It can be the result of numerous factors including adrenal-syndrome which causes ‘pseudo hermaphroditism’ and male sexual identity at different levels in girls (Bullough 2000:4-6).

For those who follow the constructivism factor, the social factor is emphasised. John Money (1973) developed a concept of gender identity by which he wanted to imply the whole personal identity concept of a person, including the basic personal identity as male or female, boy or girl. He also said that the term can be used to point out personal judgment about the level to which a person fits with the social standards of male or female. He called it ‘gender role’ while others called it ‘gender’. The two concepts tightly braided together as most people express their own personal gender conception through their clothes, behaviours and activities. Dressing and body make-up are the main gender symbols, and they help us label a person’s gender immediately. Most of us often gender ‘fit’, which means our gender identity fits in with our gender role, gender expressions, sexual orientation and biological sex. However, there are certain people who deviate from the so-called gender fit and fall under the umbrella of “non-normative gender.” They make up 10 – 15% of any population, depending on how a culture defines “non-normative gender.” Conventionally, men and women must and should express their sexual desires, as well as gender identities, in accordance with their biological nature and the social norms associated with it. If we take a look at this assumption, we will find that it has no value in either past or present. Considering people disobedient simply because they don’t fit into the male and female boxes indicates that they’ve violated social norms. In other words, these people do not totally fit into male or female groups, and their behaviours do not match conform to their society’s regulations and expectations.

Considering two types of factors—those that exist as in nature and those that emerge out of social interactions, Bonnie Bullough (1993) developed a theory of gender identity and sexual preference. She said there are many reasons deriving from both genetics and the socialisation process. In certain cases, the development of one’s pregnancy hormones—which leaves such a strong mark on the fetus’s nerves that his/her cross-gender nature continues to grow after the mother’s birth delivery—excites the baby’s genetic predisposition (Bullough and Bullough 1993). Even if there is no genetic predisposition, the aforementioned pregnancy hormones can directly create an imprint on the baby’s nerves. Accordingly, there are children born with a definite biological sex, but their gender identity leans towards the characteristics traditionally associated with the other sex (the level of such leaning varies from person to person). These children are not born with a typical identity of homosexual, cross-dress, or transgender, but these are formed through the socialization when they grow up. However, the socialization has a different impact to children who have transgender identity from those who are



somewhere in the spectrum. This explanation does not only accept the biological factor but also realizes the importance of cultural, sociological and psychological factor, which are not easy to know.

With the development of psychoanalysis in the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century, transgender phenomenon researchers who mostly are psychologists and therapists wanted to find a cure for those who are gender dysphoria. The well-known of psychoanalysts who developed a theory of transgender, Wilhelm Stekel (1930, see Bullough 2000, introduced the term 'paraphilia' to describe which people simply consider as deviance. A part of his book discussing about cross-dress has distinguished that phenomenon and fetishism. In his opinion, cross-dress is a special form of compel that the patients' desire of the genital part of the opposite sex is expressed by their dresses, making the thought of a phallic female. Even the psychoanalysts tend to explain transgender as a form of homosexual, or a change from homosexual due to some childhood events that created a fear of being castrated. Accordingly, cross-dressing behaviors continue to be considered as an effort to get over the fear of being castrated by creating and formatting with a phallic female (Bullough 2000).

Close to the psychoanalysis explanations, some researchers (Saks 1998) observed and developed the transgender/ transsexual phenomenon and Dissociative Identity Disorder. Accordingly, if a person has experienced sexual abuse, and if it was seriously happened when he/she was a child, the dissociation can be used as a defense mechanism against seriously injured mood. However, most of Freud school's standards concepts were used in many documents for a long time. Even when homosexual is removed from the list of mental disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, the cross-dress phenomenon is still included; because transgender/ transsexual groups are rarely studied, and they do not have political influence as gay and lesbian community.

Besides studies of transgender/ transsexual community experiences and challenges in current society in social health, sociology and social work, there is another way of analysis developed by the anthropologists. This approach concentrates on typical cultural concepts of cross-cultures on the globalization context (see Boellstorff 2005).

The problems of awareness and the paradox resistance in transgender phenomenon mostly focus on spiritual possession discussions. Many recent studies try to learn about the spiritual possession as ways of cross-dress then make assumptions about dresses and gestures that highlight and affect the change from this gender to another one. Pham Quynh Phuong (2007) pointed out in her studies of spriritual possession in Đạo Mẫu [worship of mother goddesses] and General Tran Hung Dao in Vietnam that the spiritual possession allows a woman to act and dress like a powerful man, which she can not do in daily life. It seems to connect with the changing from female to male, often from a low-position woman to a high-position man (Pham Quynh Phuong 2007, Blackwood 2005).

### **3. Discourse and law related to transgender/ transsexual**

In Germany the study of cross-dress was published in 1910 after the term had been widely used. Transsexual is different from cross-dress in 1950 in America. It was not until the 70s and 80s that these terms were popular in Finland (Lehtonen 2000).

Studies of homosexual and transgender the Southeast diversifies in terms of approach from anthropological, cultural, historical, religious, political and social activist aspects (Michael Peletz 2006).

In historical aspect, according to the official discourse of homosexual and transgender issues incorporated with the religious, medical and legal issues (Foucault 1984; Weeks 1986), any sexual activities other than those in heterosexual marriage are considered sin against God. Medical doctors called those who have homosexual sex are sick and psychological degradation. They are also criminalized in law. Those having transgender/ transsexual behaviors are victims of negative reacts from law, medical and religious institutions.

Throughout the history of homosexual liberation movement, transgender/ transsexual are often ignored.<sup>16</sup> In June 2007, New Jersey became the 9<sup>th</sup> state of the USA having the law protecting transgender/ transsexual from housing and working discrimination (Emberger 2008). The language of this law clearly included many expressions of transgender/transsexual phenomenon – transsexual, cross-dress, asexual, gender queer or intersex. Up to May 2008, though 13 states of the USA have passed the legislation banning discrimination on gender identity and gender expression, there are many states against including rights of transgender/ transsexual to federal law banning workplace discrimination which against lesbian, gay and bisexual.

According to England statistics in 2000, the non-official number from passport office shows that there are about 5000 people having sex reassignment surgery and replace their old passport with the new gender (Whittle at all, 2007). However, the common situation is that transgender always have to face with transphobia, inequality and discrimination. Most of transgender studies show that transgender is violated at different levels: harassment by strangers on the streets, insulting, weapons attacking and sexual assault (Hill and Willoughby 2005).

The current context of human rights and medical rights, Western countries's system express attention to the transsexual, focus on those having a desire to undergo sex reassignment surgery – SRS. The Human Right Watch has spent more attention to the human rights of the transgender community in Northern America in recent years. Western law and medical practice now support SRS in special cases; allowing changes in personal papers after the operation and even marriage with the new gender achieved by the operation. Till now all members of the European Commonwealth are legally required banning discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity (Takacs 2006).

There is currently no law against discrimination against transgender people at the national level in any Asian countries (although these laws at least including sexual orientation proposed in Korea and Philippines). Even in India where transgender/ transsexual culture has become part of Indian community for a century with approximately a million transgender people nationally, they are still discriminated in education, career, law, housing and medical (Sanders 2008). Facing with the serious

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<sup>16</sup> For example, the organizers of the events in March 1993 in Washington declined including transgender in the event name, though it had bisexual. In 1994, transgender people are excluded from the organization stage of event to celebrate the 25th of Stonewall gay programs in New York City.

harassment, having no chance seeking for ordinary jobs, most of them have to choose to become performers at Hinduism ceremonies, beggars or even sex workers.<sup>17</sup>

Based on a local long-period anthropological fieldwork research, Peter Jackson (1995) said that though Thailand is well-known as a transgender paradise (“katoey” in Thai language means intersex, feminine male, cross-dress, and transwoman), the tolerance does not mean transgender individual is accepted. Though they are rarely physical violated because of being transgender, *katoey* is estranged by their family and be insulted by strangers. Furthermore, though Buddhism rules do not consider transgender as sin, there is a belief that one is born as *katoey* to pay for their last life debt. Matzner (1999) also pointed out that the attitudes to transgender of Thai people are very diverse, though it’s difficult to deny that they are more tolerant than the Western people.<sup>18</sup>

What makes the Thai society be very distinctive is that there is no serious harassment with *katoey* and the open attitude leads to the increasing number of coming-out people in Thai society. Though the national legal system does not prohibit *katoey* to live and work in their transgender style, it does also influence many aspects of their life. The most serious issue for the transwomen is that they are still considered as man by law. Though the sex reassignment surgery had taken place in Thailand since 1972, the transgender cannot change their gender in such personal identifying documents as passport, identity card and household registration.<sup>19</sup> With the current legal system the

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<sup>17</sup> Recently the Chennai Supreme Court has recognized the succession right of hijras, marry to biological men. Because there is an estimated number of 60,000 transgender/ transsexual in which half of has underwent sexual reassignment surgery in Tamil Nadu. On July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2007, a sexual reassignment surgery was legally operated at a hospital of the state of Tamil Nadu, which carried out part of the instructions of the government in March 2007. By March 2008, Tamil Nadu started to distribute welfare card for people who are transsexual with the letter "T" ("thirunangai" local meaning as "transgender") used to describe his/her gender. May 2008, Tamil Nadu announced that there may be 30% trans-women in girl colleges of science and art. Registration form is reformed three options including male, female and transgender. The development in Tamil Nadu has raised employment needs, maintaining and protection against violence in the state of Maharashtra. However, the social and legal movements aiming at the transsexual rights acceptance in India seem to be still fragmented and separately in some states, not yet created a legal corridor in national level.

<sup>18</sup> The everywhere presence of *katoey* in the social space showed that the transsexual has been merged to Thai social structure, both in urban and rural contexts. However, the fact that the *katoey* is easily publicized contains the complexity of their approval. While the values of Thai culture means *katoey* can express their transsexual practices without any fear of physical violence, many Thai people feel ambivalent about the transsexual phenomenon. For example, in a study conducted finding out the attitude of Chiang Mai University students about *katoey*, most reporters said they would be disappointed if their son is a transgender. Most students believe that boys who are not the real man would be a shame for the family. But many students believe that in general the *katoey* is very creative, hardworking and perhaps most importantly, beautiful (Matzner 1999).

<sup>19</sup> Courts often state that male or female identities must be under the nature and the (physical) conditions at birth. They are not something that lately required as result of surgery. Moreover, the legal gender of someone is totally based on genetic and chromosomes factors. It should be noted that sexual reassignment surgery is not encouraged by any law. Another argument which courts base on is that a woman is someone

governors have full power to deprive the human rights of katoey.<sup>20</sup> The psychology discourses also take a part in impacting katoey's life. Doctors and mental health specialists, as well as public officers consider transgender phenomenon as a mental disease. The less that view is challenged, the more difficult for transgender as there is no group to lobby for them.

In Philippines, Winter, Rogando-Sasot and King (2007) pointed out there is no popular Philippian word for the term transgender. A transwoman is often called as *bakla* (in Tagalog, the Northern nobility language) or *bayot* (in Cebuano, Middle and Southern language). But these words describe many forms of male whose behaviors deviate from the male gender norms. Though accounting a significant amount, the transgender people have to suffer prejudice attitude and discrimination. Many transwomen in Philippines say that family pressure makes them behave as gender norms during their childhood and adolescence, and be punished if they violate these norms, even in some cases they are forced to get out of their house. No matter how long they are women, how successful they are or how feminine they change their body, all Filipina transwomen are considered as man by law. That makes them suffered prejudice whenever they have to show their personal papers: when they apply to university training course, open a bank account, be personal papers checked by police or abroad travel. It is challenge for them when they have to apply for a job. Even employers claimed having no prejudice still have worries about other employees and customers' react when there is a transgender employee. There are also pressures at school. There is a high-standard school reported they require reports must have a masculine evaluation as to seek for those who are sissyish, then impose "normal" regulations for difficultly consulted cases and finally keep their certificates

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who can give a birth. So the transwoman is removed from that identity, even how perfectly they undergo the surgery. Moreover, because they are man based on law, the transsexual who has undergone the reassignment surgery, as well as katoey in general is not protected by law from issues related to rape. It is because of the 276 article that the rapist is defined as someone who has sexual activity with any woman not his wife, contrasting to the will of that woman by any means of threatening, by doing any means of violence, or by taking advantage of the fact that the woman having no ability to resist. Accordingly, though a transsexual is sexual abuse whether anal or vaginal sex, she is not protect by law as she is still legally a man. The only choice for transsexual in this case is to sue personal abused. The punishment for rapist is very different from which of personal abuse. In the first case it would be 4 – 20 years imprisonment and/or Bt 8,000 to Bt 40,000 of fine. On the other hand, the second case punishment is only maximum 2 years in prison and/or Bt 4000 the maximum of fine.

<sup>20</sup> For example, in military service regulation, those who are 18 years old have to register for military service, and at the age of 21 they have to report the specific day of admission into the defense force. Then a military doctor will examine them and those who seem appropriate will try their luck whether would take the period of two-year service or not. Katoey with female breast is rightly removed because of their over-feminine level. It is because of the implicit link between transsexual and psychological disorders, a katoey who is excluded will receive an official document confirms why she is not able to serve in the military is mental illness. This document becomes permanent paper of katoey and she is always asked to show it whenever she applies for some specific jobs like a public sector or business.

(sometimes it is because the student refuse to cut their hair or to wear male uniform). The result there is, the transwomen will face with many difficulties at school. A transwoman said she was on the top of ten national best nurses but cannot be able to have a job after graduated (now she is a dancer). Some are work as servants at coffee shops, beauty salons, travel offices and agents. Some work at increasing telephone and email service centers to avoid public curiosity. However, except those who are ready and able to hide their transgender identity through working hours, rare people can work on the middle class careers. As a result, some of them have to work as sex workers, be attracted of high income (as well as the chance to be self-proved as female), but it's still a forced choice as they have no other choice of careers.

In Hongkong, recent research (King, Winter & Wester 2009) shows the Hongkong Chinese do not keep negative attitude of transgender/transsexual. In general, they support citizen rights of transsexual people. The Hongkong authorities allow many administrative concessions to facilitate transgender to have sex reassignment surgery, but they do not extend to others groups (for example pre-operation or non-operation transgender). In addition to being supported in psychiatric, endocrinal and orthopedic treatments, transsexual can change their personal identifying documents. However, the legal status of transsexual in Hongkong does not include equal rights such as marriage, child adoption and privacy to those of heterosexuals. The report of Department of Home Affairs from a survey conducted in 2006 of social attitude and react, as well as homosexual acceptance level suggested that regional government should not have any move related to banned discrimination to minor groups of sexual orientation in Hongkong. Firstly, the Department of Home Affairs has repeatedly warned that there is still a lack of public support to pursue legislation prohibiting sexual orientation based discrimination, and that public education is the best way to solve the problem of homosexual discrimination in Hongkong.<sup>21</sup> It is likely that the governor explains or advocates the survey result to reflect their point of view that it is not the time for any law against discrimination (King, Winter & Wester 2009).

### **Transgender/ transsexual Researches in Vietnam**

Transgender phenomenon is first mentioned in a research of Elliot Heiman and Cao Văn Lê published in 1975. In this research, the two authors – also two psychoanalysts – based on their observations and experiences a man who was born and grew up in a Southern countryside having transsexual expressions to discuss the social aspect of transgender phenomenon, as well as the way the Vietnamese society react to transgender behavior. They argued these manners of reaction are in a chain. In one side, the reversion of sexual role is mechanized and the transgender-like behavior is expressed in a predetermined cultural pattern. Accordingly, the authors said that the Vietnamese

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<sup>21</sup> The report of the Department of Home Affairs shows a fact that only 33% of the replies agree that the authority shouldn't legalize sexual orientation based discrimination, while 38.8% disagree that and 26.2% of responses are neutral. Secondly, besides the survey result, it is likely the Hongkong authority believe there is a general public disagree about the law against discrimination to minor groups of sexual orientation and gender identity, and a worry of opposing if they continue moving that way.

'shamans androgynous' can be included in this type. In the middle, the idiosyncratic transsexual takes the accepted cultural role, so that he should express it out. Being inferred from that assumption, Vietnamese youth who cross dress can be included in this category. In the opposite side, the role of transsexual is unknown and very weak. There, transsexual continue hide their real gender identity and can be only discovered unintentionally.

Next, there is a very interesting essay of Frank Proschan (2002) considering how the French observers construct Vietnamese male as feminine, androgynous, decrepit, and co-sex work, in contrast to Vietnamese female fiery and prolific. Based on the secondary sources which are mostly personal records, diaries, reports of French officers, missionaries and travelers, as well as Vietnamese bibliographies, Proschan considered four typical cases in which the following image is clearly described: androgynous roles in plays; or the castrated servant serving An Nam royal family for the last days; the little boy, the servant, a compulsory part of all colonial households; and *soldatsmammzelles*. By describing Vietnamese as metamorphosed gender – with feminine male and masculine female – the French colonial officers can easily explain their invasion, slavery, and their mission of civilization for the locals.

Another research of Marie-Eve Blanc (2005) also approached the male homosexuality phenomenon from cultural, historical-social aspects, in which the author mentioned transgender practices in Vietnam. The author analyzed the social perception of homosexuality, as well as different and typical aspects of homosexuality in the Vietnamese context from past to present. By arguing homosexual in Vietnam is not expressed like Western form but totally combined with regional features, Blanc's article follows the current arguments about modernity and regional cultural particularities, considering the link between a colonially affected tradition and reborn by the globalization effect. From this point of view, the article also discuss on a multi-genderism tradition in some of South East Asian countries. However, the article still has some certain limitations. Firstly, the article seems to 'mix' transgender individuals with homosexual ones, as often seen in mistaken discourses nowadays. That mistake does not point out typical cultural contexts and spiritual beliefs that giving the transsexual phenomenon a mean. Moreover, claiming there is 'not any place for the third gender' caused conflicts with the effort of the author to make so many quotes of regional terms related to transsexual people.

From the historical – linguistic perspective, Nguyễn Thu Hương (2012b) has specifically pointed out that the transsexual phenomenon has existed for a long period in Vietnam, with the first case mentioned in the history record since 1351 (Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư [Complete annals of Great Viet]; cf. Đại Việt Thông Sử 1759). For example, a record of history manager about a "Nghệ An woman became man" in 1351, as a later one about the habit of a royal member, An Vương Tuấn, the first son of Hiến Tông, "a smart, strong but stubborn man, *like to dress in female attire*" (italic – stressed by author). Seeking in the first Vietnamese dictionary *Đại Nam Quốc Âm Tự Vị* of Huỳnh Tịnh Paulus Của, published in 1896, the author pointed out that the regional and traditional terms used to talk about transsexual such as *lại cái*, *bóng*, *đồng* are totally different from the Chinese – Vietnamese one *đồng* as in *đồng tính*, appeared in *Từ điển Hán-Việt* (Đào Duy Anh 1931). From this result we can infer that the term *đồng* and/or *bóng* as in folk meaning are used to refer to the intersex, as well as sissyish, and cross-dressed

individuals. With this meaning, *đồng* and *bóng* are totally different from the homonym *đồng* as in '*đồng tính*'. The research showed that the word *đồng* as in Nôm language means the gender identity of those who deviate from biological gender norms as well as behavior standards, while *đồng* in Chinese – Vietnamese meaning is about a type of sexual orientation (same sex attraction). Then we can make an assumption the understanding of transgender according to Nôm meaning is originated from the expression of behaviors going beyond the gender norms in traditional performance *lên đồng* [spirit possession ritual]. In a certain view, though those who have behaviors/expressions opposite from their biological gender are reviled, they still can receive the tolerant attitude from traditional society. More importantly, there is no inference of having same sex sexual activities in the local view of transgender individuals. Research on the link between the lacks of homosexual practice in the traditional understanding of *đồng bóng* and the absence of homosexuality discourse in traditional Vietnamese society embedded with Confucianism values. How the 'absence' (even in local language) emerges in the context of new vocabulary imported to Vietnam during the colonial and later globalization period. Based on Vietnamese and English documented sources, the research studied the new vocabularies, such as *pê-đê* [pederasse]; *ô-mô*; *ô-môi* [homosexuel/mêmesexe], which appeared and rapidly widely used in daily context partly give a help to construct, or point out the sense of sex that used to be covered before to describe transsexual practices. On the other hand, these terms need to be analyzed in the interaction with the popular colonial discourses of gender and sex, which unintentionally lead to the misjudgment between transsexual and homosexual (which still are maintained nowadays). And with that way of view (in the record range of this research, it is clearly expressed in Vietnamese society in the period of colony from late 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which language is an example) these individuals can become objects to be criticized and discriminated because the society did not accept homosexual issue.

Moreover, Donn Colby (2004) pointed out that the misunderstanding of homosexual in Vietnam originated from some viewpoints of the famous sexologist, Dr. Trần Bồn gSon. He published many articles on sexuality in national newspapers and magazines, but his opinions on homosexual are only based on his personal point of view, not scientific evidences. However, in a publication of HIV prevention and gay in Vietnam, Sơn as both author and consultant has concluded that most of Vietnamese gay men are fake homosexual. It is a pity that his opinion is rapidly popularized through the mass media and increased the social prejudice of homosexual issue (see iSEE 2011 for more information).

It is noteworthy that in the past 12 years, there is a considerable number of studies investigating homosexual issue, as well as same sex sexual behaviors in Vietnam, especially Men who have Sex with Men (MSM). The notable point is that most of these studies are within the public health intervention projects or programs, especially within the awareness raising and HIV/ AIDS prevention campaign (see Nguyễn Thu Hương 2012a for the general view of the research). In other words, MSM nowadays is considered as one of target groups of many HIV prevention programs (UNAIDS 2001; Colby 2003; Nguyen et al. 2008; Lê Quang Nguyễn 2010; Sarraf 2010).

In research on male sexuality in Vietnam, MSM is often called *đồng cô* or *bóng* (Khuất Thu Hồng 2005; Vũ Ngọc Bảo and Girault 2005; Vũ Ngọc Bảo et al. 2008). More specifically, Vũ Ngọc Bảo and Phillippe Girault (2005) based on research on MSM

community in Ho Chi Minh City noted two different groups: *bóng kín* and *bóng lộ*. *Bóng kín* is used to describe man who dresses male clothes and is difficult to be recognized as MSM, while *bóng lộ* is often used to describe men who cross dress and express themselves as women. Beside the regular labels of this group, MSMs are also called with stigmatize words such as *xãng pha nhót*, *hai thì*, *hai pha*, etc... (see iSEE 2011 for more information).

The experiences of discrimination, prejudice of transsexual community, as well as their subjectivity are clearly showed in recent evaluating research of Save the Children and iSEE of LGBT street children (Nguyễn Thu Hương 2012a). In the context of this research, it is a notable that some of interviewed individuals have the expressions going beyond heterosexual as well as gender behavior norms do not know the term “transgender” and use the term *third gender* instead. The report also pointed out the link between the reason why the LGBT children in general and the transgender in particular leave their home and participate in the street life.

It can be concluded that there is no in-depth and comprehensive study on the transgender phenomenon in Vietnam. Many aspects of transgender people life are somewhat mentioned in the intervention research on HIV for MSM. Even program officers working in the HIV prevention program can not clearly distinguish between sexual orientation and gender identity; as well as male sex workers, gay men and transgender people. Usually, they are included in the MSM group. To some extent, MSM is referred to as an ‘identity’, while it is a mere behavior in realities. The ambiguous communication misleads the term ‘MSM’, equating it with ‘homosexuality’, causing the misunderstanding and the ineffectiveness of the intervention program.



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