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On the occasion of IDAHOT 2016, civil society and businesses call for full equality for Cambodia's vibrant LGBT population

On the occasion of the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia (“IDAHOT”) 2016, we, the undersigned civil society organizations (“CSOs”) and businesses, join together with others around the world to take part in Pride 2016, which celebrates the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (“LGBT”) members of our societies. In Cambodia, civil society and the government have made great strides toward the advancement of LGBT rights and inclusion in recent times. However, there are still significant steps that need to be taken to ensure equality for all. The theme of this year’s IDAHOT is ‘mental health and wellbeing’, drawing attention to the harmful effects that discrimination and stigma have on LGBT people.

A recent research report entitled *Opinions, Attitudes and Behavior Toward the LGBT Population in Cambodia*, published by Rainbow Community Kampuchea (“RoCK”) and TNS Cambodia, showed a perception among both straight and LGBT people (86% and 82% of respondents, respectively) that the biggest problem LGBT people face in Cambodia is discrimination based on their sexuality. One third of LGBT people surveyed reported suffering from a lack of concentration, sleeping disorders and feeling hopeless or helpless. These feelings are both caused and made worse by widespread discrimination in society, creating a dangerous negative spiral that too many fall into.

There is evidence that this discrimination against LGBT people begins as early as in school. A report by the Cambodian Center for Human Rights (“CCHR”) entitled *LGBT Bullying in Cambodia's Schools* shows that bullying is widespread by both peers and authority figures such as teachers and police, causing many LGBT students to leave education prematurely. Over half of the LGBT individuals who reported bullying in their school also reported flashbacks of the events, and 80% reported experiencing depression “sometimes,” “often,” or “always.”

We welcome the move by the Ministry of Information to ban LGBT discrimination in the Cambodian media, as well as the cooperation from the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport in including language that is inclusive of sexual orientation and gender identity / expression (“SOGIE”) in school curriculums. We further welcome the inclusion of LGBT issues in the Ministry of Women’s Affairs’ Strategic Plan 2014-2018. These are steps toward a culture of acceptance and understanding which will go a long way towards improving the situation for LGBT people in Cambodia. We implore teachers to become informed of LGBT issues and act as role models for their students.

As well as being essential for Cambodia’s progress as a society, inclusivity and non-discrimination for LGBT people is a key cross-cutting concern in the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), set out in 2015. The SDGs are grounded in the fight to end inequality and injustice with goals to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and to end poverty in all of its forms everywhere. CamASEAN and MicroRainbow International’s eye-opening new report titled *Poverty of LGBT People in Cambodia* demonstrates how the more LGBT people can be allowed to step out of poverty and become contributing members of society, the more social attitudes towards them will improve. Moreover, it is crucial to achieving the goal of sustainable development generally that no

sector of society is excluded, and the report shows how supporting LGBT people to set up small businesses and complete their studies are concrete actions that will contribute to the SDG of “leaving no one behind”. As a society, we must strive for this change and actively work to support the LGBT members of our communities. Despite the positive trend of cooperation by Cambodia’s ministries with civil society organizations in the promotion of LGBT rights, there is still much more work to be done to ensure LGBT Cambodians have equal access to all areas of economic, social and political life, and are not excluded from employment and the exercise of their basic rights because of their SOGIE.

This week, representatives of CamASEAN and CCHR are attending the International Ministerial Meeting on LGBT and SOGIE issues in Paris. This meeting, to be attended by representatives of the Cambodian Ministry of Youth, Education and Sport, will be a global exchange of experiences and solutions, and we look forward to hearing and developing exciting new ideas for LGBT advocacy.

This is the 11th year Cambodia is celebrating the LGBT community through involvement with Pride and IDAHOT. The motto “I am what I am” speaks to the positive mindset of LGBT Cambodians in accepting and celebrating their SOGIE, and serves as a call to Cambodian citizens to embrace the SOGIE of all individuals.

We, the undersigned civil society organizations, stand in solidarity with this call and urge greater acceptance and inclusion from Cambodian authorities, families, schools, workplaces and society. We must:

1. **Stop discrimination:** Stop discrimination against LGBT people based on their SOGIE whether at home, school, workplace, healthcare settings or in public areas. While changing the law might take time, more immediate actions can include circulars from relevant ministries being issued and implemented across all sectors.
2. **Educate:** Sensitize students and the general public to LGBT issues through awareness-raising and education programs such as: a) including SOGIE topics in public education curricula and b) portraying realistic and positive aspects of LGBT life in the media.
3. **Legalize same-sex marriage and adoption:** Enable same sex couples to get married and adopt children to ensure greater equality among Cambodian citizens regardless of SOGIE.
4. **Include gender identity in legal documents:** Have the option for transgender and transsexual individuals to be able to change their gender in legal documents such as national ID cards or passports to match with the gender they identify themselves as.

These steps will ensure Cambodia continues to work towards equal rights for all and a fairer, more inclusive society.

This joint statement is endorsed by:

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