



INSTITUTE FOR STUDIES OF SOCIETY, ECONOMY AND ENVIRONMENT

Situation Assessment of LGBT Street Children in Ho Chi Minh City

to be submitted to

Save the Children in Vietnam

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My life is like a water hyacinth drifting along aimlessly, no matter where

(17 year old lesbian-identified female, Ho Chi Minh City)

This assessment was commissioned by Save the Children in Vietnam. The views and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author and the participants and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or positions of Save the Children in Vietnam or the Institute for Studies of Society, Economy and Environment.

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I am solely responsible for any errors that may exist in this assessment report.

Nguyen Thu Huong.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

CRC Conventions of Children Rights
DOLISA Department of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs

FGD Focus Group Discussion

FTM Female-To-Male (Transgender)

HIV/AIDS Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome

ID Identity Document

IDI In-depth Interview

iSEE Institute for Studies of Society, Economy and Environment

IVF In-Vitro Fertilization

LGBT(I) Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, Transgenders, and Intersexed

MSM Men who Have Sex With Men

MTF Male-To-Female (Transgender)

MOLISA Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs

NGO Non-Governmental Organizations

NVIvo Qualitative Data Analysis Software

SCiV Save the Children in Vietnam

STI Sexually Transmitted Infections

UNICEF United Nations Children's Fund

VND Vietnam currency, *đồng*

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GLOSSARY

Vietnamese	English
ăn chơi	decadence
bi	butch
bà tám	madam eight
bụi đời	dirty life
dân phòng	civil defense member
du đãng	vagrancy
đi bụi	going to dust
đồng tính	homosexuality
Đổi mới	reform, renovation
đua đòi	imitations of extravagance
giới thứ ba	third gender
gọn thẳng	straight girl
không có giáo dục	lacking in education
nhập nha	break-ins
nô một	straight girl
ô mô	homo(sexual)
ô môi	homo (esp. lesbians)
pê đê	transgender
phem	fem
sẹc-bi	soft butch
tám vía	'eight spirits'
thu gom	collecting
thằng cu	little penis boy
xuyên giới/vượt giới	transgender

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The assessment is part of an international study, which aims at improving the understanding about street children of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities in urban and semi-urban Nepal and Vietnam, as well as exploring the reality of rights and needs of this group. The assessment report highlights the situation of LGBT children who left home and were living on the street (in Vietnamese *đi bụi*, literally ‘going to dust’) in Ho Chi Minh City.

LGBT children who considered “going to dust” the best choice usually came from families with extreme economic difficulties, divorced parents and absence of care. The choice of ‘going to dust’ was often made at about the time a young person came to realize his/her gender characteristics and sexual orientations, particularly when circumstances of disclosure were aggravated by harsh reactions from family members and the community beyond. Parental hostility toward homosexuality coupled with intra-familial discord often led to maltreatment and abuses within the home. At the community level, prejudices from heterosexual people and social stigmas often created an ambience of unbearable oppression. In cases where there was no family objection, the decision to go to dust was motivated by a desire get away from the stifling rural or small-town environment to join the network of fellow LGBTs in metropolitan Ho Chi Minh City. The overriding reason to go to dust was a desire to externalize one’s own gender orientation and/or sexual identities.

For those children who went to dust, life spent in the streets and public parks were full of hazards: irregular meals and shifting sleeping places, lack of health care, constant threat of violence and harassment, potential dangers of HIV and other diseases. Experiences of sexual violence and harassment were common among specific group of LGBTs. A number of participants reported instances of psychological crisis, which led to suicide attempt, drug abuse, and self mutilation. Some were subjected to sexual harassment or assault by regular males.

LGBT children often subjected to discriminatory treatment by the police and civil defense force, which regarded them as risky elements or elements at risk. This was caused mainly by their queer visibility through their way of dressing, hairstyle, body language, etc. In the eyes of local authorities they were suspect individuals, likely to be involved in prostitution, or commit theft or swindling. This situation not only reinforced deeply rooted social prejudices, but also made it even more difficult for LGBTs to gain access to the job market and secure basic social and health services. The end result was that some LGBT ended up selling their bodies to survive with inherent risks of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases.

This assessment highlighted opinions and attitudes of the parents themselves and other social gate-keepers. Among parents who did not accept same-sex orientation, the reason given was that homosexuality was a vice, a disease that had to be rid of. Even the few parents who more or less accepted their children’s gender identity, tended to regard these sexual preferences as a misguided choice, hoping one day their children would change course and return to *normalcy*.

A common belief among gatekeepers—including government officials to police officers and parents—was that homosexual practices were undesirable because of adverse effects on the continuation of the family institution and the stability of the population of the nation as a whole.

This is where the right to live one's life as homosexuals ran against mainstream opinions upholding the larger interests of the family institution and the nation. These conflicting standpoints are contested in the daily exchanges between street LGBTs and their gatekeepers, with police authorities at the front line.

Regarding the question of rights, LGBT street participants indicated that they were aware of their children's rights, including the rights to express their gender identity. But in real life LGBT street children often had to negotiate with other social players, often at a disadvantage. At the family level they felt being oppressed because of parental objection to their gender identity/sexual orientations, without being given a chance of a meaningful dialogue. In their local communities they had to bear the brunt of ridicule and suffer abuses from relatives, neighbors and schoolmates. Even after 'going to dust' they were subjected to the same prejudices and discrimination, only on a larger scale, and were denied access to basic social and health care because of their LGBT identity.

It is remarkable that the LGBT community in Vietnam in general and LGBT children in particular, share a common global language in designating particularities in the realm of gender identities and sexual orientations. The participants who took part in this assessment made up an interesting, variegated group; thanks to them we were able to catch more than a glimpse of the complexities inherent in the process of development, recognition and conversion of same-sex orientations that were inextricably linked with notions of masculinity and femininity and gender relations in the socio-cultural specific context of Vietnam. Another important contribution of this assessment was offering a new and flexible look at the phenomenon of '*đi bụi*'. While the official policy of *thu gom* ['collecting'] might help reduce the phenomenon of sleeping rough in public spaces, it created new risks for the personal safety of young street people, especially LGBT children.

It is noteworthy that despite family and social pressure, young street LGBT proved to be quite resilient. Far from being passive, pitiful victims, they were able to exert a high degree of agency in making choices, in asserting their own sense of gender identity and/or sexual orientation and in shaping their social relations in a volatile and sometimes dangerous city environment. It is the strength of their self-confidence and perseverance that helps them as homosexual individuals to survive in a predominantly homophobic society.

Based on our working experience with a number of street children self identified as LGBT in this assessment, we also propose some practical intervention programs for promotion and protection of the rights of LGBT street children in Vietnam, as follows:

- Ensure understanding that LGBT are expressions of sexual orientation of human beings; help increase children's self-esteem and create a positive sense of the future
- Create trainee jobs for LGBT street children, for instance at beauty parlors, clothing shops, cafés, restaurants, etc. Provide practical training together with accommodation facilities
- Provide education on sexual orientation and gender identity, guidance to help parents understand how to support their LGBT child (information provided in various forms of brochures and fliers)

- Counsel to help families reconcile values and beliefs that homosexuality is wrong with their love for their LGBT child
- Set up support groups for families that have LGBT children
- Training courses and capacity building for dealing with LGBT-related issues designed for court officials, the prosecution office, the police as well members of mass organizations.
- An elaboration of guidelines for implementing judicial procedure concerning LGBT-related cases should be provided for people engaged in the legal professions at various levels.
- Advocating for creation a law on LGBT, in particular legal protections for the LGBT community.
- It is our hope that this assessment will pave the ways for even more empirical research on the topic of LGBT in Vietnam in the near future.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the early spring of 2010, Viet Nam—the first country in Asia and the second in the world to have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)—celebrated the 20th anniversary of this important event at a ceremony held in Hanoi. The UNICEF Viet Nam Representative, Jesper Morch reminded the audience that “there are still far too many children on the margins of Viet Nam’s impressive socio-economic development”. Taking this as a point of departure, this assessment report delves into the lives of one group of these marginalized children in Vietnam: street children who self identify as LGBT.

1.1 Concept Explication

Who are Street Children?

In the ‘Situational Report on Children in Vietnam’ (2010), UNICEF has defined three types of street children as follows:

- street children living with families are those who live and work with one or two of their (migrant) parents or their guardian on the street and in public places;
- street working children are those who spend most of their time working in the street to earn income for their families or for themselves (they have a home to return to and do not usually sleep on the street);
- street living children are those who live on the street, public places such as park, under bridge in metropolitan areas without their parents or their guardian.

Discussing street children in this assessment, the author refers to children whose living and working conditions fall into one of the three categories mentioned above.

Definition of LGBT

LGBT—the most common abbreviation for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender community— is intended to emphasize the diverse sexual orientations and identities. The authors refer to only LGBT community due to the fact that we did not come across any case in which the individual self-identified as intersexed (I). The authors recognize the importance and multiplicity of self-identification, both in terms of naming oneself and claiming one’s rights, and hopes that the reader will accept the constraints in relation to the usage of the term in this assessment. Internationally recognized terms such as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (MTF transgender and FTM transgender) are used in this study, so are local expressions such as *bi*, *seç-bi*, *phem*, and *pê đê*. The term “third gender” is also used, which translates to “*giới thứ ba*”.

Concepts Used in the Report

Homosexual: A person who feels physically and emotionally attracted to people of the same gender.

Bisexual: A person who feels physically and emotionally attracted to people of both genders.

Transgender person: A person whose gender identity does not match the biological sex.

Sexual Orientation and Sexual Identity

Sexual orientation is defined by the gender to which an individual is emotionally, physically and intellectually attracted, and is thought to be not entirely fixed (cf. iSEE 2011).

The term ‘sexual identity’ has generally been used to describe an individual’s internal sense of sex in the relation with other people. Specifically, it is one’s awareness about one feels attracted towards. People possess many social attributes and characteristics such as sex, gender, race, nationality, geographical area, language, etc. Sexual identity is at the intersection of many of such attributes, and has intrinsic relations with sexual orientation, gender identity and gender role.¹

Figure 1. Operationalization of local terms

<i>Bi</i>	Is a person whose biological sex is female, loving another female, displaying outward appearance of a male person. This appearance is seen in a person’s manners of walking and talking, hair styling (short, brushed back) dressing (tight clothing, tomboy look), body language, etc.
<i>Sec-bi</i>	Is a person whose biological sex is female, loving another female, having more of a feminine side compared to <i>bi</i> but still listed in the masculine category ²
<i>Phem</i>	Is a person whose biological sex is female, loving another female, usually alleged to love <i>bi/sec-bi</i> . <i>Phem</i> tends to have a more feminine appearance compared to that of <i>bi</i> and <i>sec-bi</i> . In lesbian relationships, a <i>bi/sec-bi</i> plays a male role and a <i>phem</i> plays a female role
<i>Nô một/gon thẳng</i>	means straight girls
<i>Bai</i>	refers to those who have emotional and sexual relations with both males and females
<i>Pê đê</i>	a derogatory term popularly used to refer to male homosexuals and transgenders. Besides there are several vernacular – and often

¹ It is important to note that gender role is defined as the outward manifestations of personality that reflect the gender identity (Ghosh 2010). Since gender identity is self-identified, gender role is manifested within society by observable factors such as dress, speech, and mannerisms (An Activist Guide to the Yogyakarta Principles 2010).

² For example, as explained by lesbian informants in this assessment, *sec-bi* can wear *đồ bộ* (the same top and bottom set) and adopt a longhair style at times while most *bi* would never be caught in such kind of outlook.

	degrading – terms that refer to homosexual people such as <i>bóng chó</i> [dog shadow] or MTF transgenders such as <i>bà tám</i> [madam eight], <i>tám vía</i> [eight spirits]. There are two main divisions: <i>bóng kín</i> [hidden shadow] and <i>bóng lộ</i> [open shadow]. <i>Bóng kín</i> are male homosexuals who outwardly appear masculine and therefore "hide" their sexual orientation. <i>Bóng lộ</i> are those who often freely express their transgender identity by ways of behaviour, body language, clothing, hairstyle, etc.
<i>Gay</i>	are those who recognize themselves as males (in terms of gender as well as biological sex) and profess a sexual preference for other males
<i>Giới thứ ba</i>	Literally <i>third gender</i> , referring to identities that exist outside traditional binary constructions of gender and heterosexuality ³
<i>Đồng tính</i>	<i>Homosexual</i> , explained above.

1.2 Overview of LGBT research in Vietnam

Over the past quarter of a century, Vietnamese society has undergone drastic social, cultural and economic changes since the introduction of *Đổi Mới* [reform, renovation] which allowed the country to be integrated into the world economy, culminating in its accession to the World Trade Organization in 2007. While LGBT issues have become more visible in Vietnam due to the changes brought about by Renovation, the topic is still surrounded by shame and silence. This is where NGOs and other agencies could lend a hand in carrying out advocacy programs.

In general, the topic of LGBT in Vietnam is usually approached from perspectives of public health and HIV prevention programs, usually emphasizing same-sex sexual activity of men who have sex with men (MSM). A number of authors have dealt with various aspects of this topic, for example HIV knowledge and risk factors among MSM, including some street children⁴; sex work in male migrant group (Dinh Thai Son 2007). Others focused on socio-cultural and historical aspects of homosexuality (Blanc 2005); transsexualism (Heinman & Cao Van Le 1975), or representations of homosexuality in both the print and online media (iSEE 2011). Nevertheless, apart from an in-depth study on the lesbian community in Hanoi (iSEE 2010) and little research has been done on various sub groups of the LGBT population. And practically little is known about LGBT street children, one of the most vulnerable social groups. In this situational assessment paper we engage with, listen and give voice to street children who self identify as LGBT.

³ In the context of this assessment, it is worth noting that many interviewed individuals who deviate from biological sex norms as well as behavioural gender norms did not know the term ‘transgender’ (or *xuyên giới/vượt giới* in Vietnamese); instead they self-identified as belonging to *giới thứ ba* (‘third gender’).

⁴ Colby 2003; Colby et al. 2004; Colby et al. 2008; Vu Ngoc Bao et al. 2008; Ngo Duc Anh et el. 2009; Le Quang Nguyen 2010; Sarraf 2010.

2. CONTEXT AND METHODS

2.1 Objectives

- To improve knowledge and understanding about LGBT street children in urban Vietnam;
- To get insights into the state of LGBT street children's rights infractions, and define their needs for support, protection and services; and
- To inform advocacy and programming initiatives by including a set of concrete proposals for promotion and protection of the rights of LGBT street children in Asia in general and Vietnam in particular.

2.2. Sample

Settings:

The assessment was conducted from November 2010 to April 2012 in four selected districts of Ho Chi Minh City.

Mapping

Participants were recruited through existing peer youth support groups of Save the Children in Vietnam (SCiV) in Ho Chi Minh City. Four peer assistants including two males and two females were recommended by SCiV. These peers are in their early 20s and used to live the street life, so they were able to access a local network of LGBT street children. The assessment team (including seven iSEE research staff and two SCiV program coordinators) worked closely with these four peers to find informants for interview. It was a diverse team because three members of the assessment team self identify as lesbian and gay. Five members were living in Ho Chi Minh City. The assessment was led by two principal researchers residing in Hanoi, who were trained in anthropology with expertise in gender, sexuality and especially LGBT.

Before proceeding with data collection, all the research staff were provided a full-day training on research guidelines, tools and research issues including field training and pre-testing the questions as well ethical concerns with street sexual minority youth (such as gaining informed consent).

In order to determine whether the wording of the sample questions was appropriate, the peer group carried out a pre-testing with some of the potential participants. The Vietnamese version of the sample questions was adjusted accordingly.

Participants' eligibility

Aged 14-18;
Self identified as LGB or T;

Children who run away from home or have no home;
 Children who sleep on the street or sleep on the street with their family or guardian;
 Children who have a family or guardian and often sleep at home, but work and spend most of their time on the street.

Figure 2. Street children participants in accordance with gender, sexual identities (G/S ID) and age⁵

Age \ G/S ID	15	16	17	18	Total
Lesbians	1	2	3	3	9
Gays		1	5	5	11
Bisexuals	1	1			2
FTM Transgender			1	1	2
MTF Transgender			5	3	8
Total	2	4	14	12	32

2.3. Data Collection

Thirty two in-depth interviews with LGBT street individuals were conducted by experienced and trained interviewers/researchers with four trained peer assistants. In-depth interviews were digitally recorded with informed consent, and were conducted in places and locations where the participants felt at ease and safe to talk (i.e. side street cafés and public parks).

In providing supplementary information to the IDI, eight focus-group discussions with LGBT street children were moderated by trained researchers. The focus groups discussed children's rights and needs and recommendations for the next phase. The discussions followed a semi-structured guideline and were digitally recorded with informed consents.

Fourteen in-depth interviews were conducted with gatekeepers who were in regular contact with street children and as a result of that contact, they have been in position to assist in identifying needs of street children. Parents and family relatives were presumed to often become involved in supervising children's social relations, especially among those children who work on the streets but often sleep at home. Several participants did not want us to have direct contact

⁵ It should be made clear at the outset that some of these children participants have been involved either as street educators and/or peer educators in Save the Children's Project NAM – HIV Prevention Project for Street Youth in Ho Chi Minh City.

with their family members and teachers. Apart from interviewing a very limited number of parents and family relatives currently living in Ho Chi Minh City, we did not have the opportunity to talk to teachers of the LGBT street individuals given the fact that most of these children left school a long while ago. We did interview some para-police in charge of public order in the neighborhood; who street children have daily interactions with. Other interviewees include an employer who had working experiences with LGBT street children and some policy makers involved in developing social plans that benefit this group.

Figure 3. Gatekeeper Participants in accordance with gender

Gatekeepers	Number of participants	Gender	
		Male	Female
Police and parapolice	4	4	
Employers	1	1	
Parents, family relatives	6	1	5
Policy makers	3	2	1
Total	14		

2.4. Data Analysis

In the context of this assessment, we examined how LGBT children left their home or choose to live on the street, focusing on their interactions with families and communities in the wake of disclosure of sexual identity and orientation, and the consequences of the street life that followed. A competent SCiV staff familiar with social sciences was entrusted with the task of transcribing the interviews. Two principal researchers and other two members of the research team were in charge of data analysis and report writing. Msc. Le Quang Binh, Director of the Institute for Studies of Society, Economy and Environment (iSEE) helped coordinate and contribute ideas to the research.

2.5. Ethical Issues

At the beginning of the interview, potential respondents were told explicitly about the purpose of the assessment, stressing such matters as the confidentiality of personal information, the voluntary nature of participation, including the right to withdraw from the interview at any stage. We stressed that such decisions would not affect their accessibility to services that are being offered by SCiV and other similar organizations in Ho Chi Minh City.

All personally identifiable information, such as names or addresses was to be removed from the transcribed data in the coding process to ensure the anonymity of respondents in the remaining information. This was to protect the confidentiality of personally identifiable information concerning research respondents. All audio files were erased soon after the transcription had been completed. All transcribed materials were kept in locked folders in a secure computer and only authorized researchers were allowed access to them.

2.6. Limitations

It is necessary to mention that due to the highly sensitive nature of the subject, the assessment was bound to encounter some problems of interpretation.

This was a qualitative research project with a small number of participants. Although the interviewees were chosen with different backgrounds, ages, genders, and sexual identities in order to represent the variety of LGBT street children in Ho Chi Minh City, there are limitations on the generalization of our findings. The scope of the study did not allow us to include persons from other ethnic groups apart from the majority Kinh people.

Also, several difficulties in life of street children have been pointed out in other studies, and in many cases we cannot clarify whether these difficulties could have been worsened due to sexual identity and orientation of street children.

3. FINDINGS

3.1. Sexual identity and orientation around the time of disclosure

In this section we show the process of self identification as experienced by LGBT street participants in this assessment project: how they interact with their families and communities in the wake of disclosure. In particular we examine how reactions to the disclosure impact on their own perceptions about becoming part of the ‘sexual minorities’ and on their mental health.

Process of Self Identification

The development of gender and sexual identities evolves in two phases: childhood (0-14 years of age)⁶ and adolescence (10-19 year age group).⁷

Childhood Phase

A number of respondents recalled that they began to engage in non-normative gender behaviours in early childhood. One of the manifestations was a desire of cross-dressing as a MTF transgender told us:

My sister told me that by the time I was able to speak I began to show signs of femininity. When I saw little girls sing and dance on TV I imitated them and wanted to put on girl’s clothes.

Another confided:

When I was in class 5, I already wanted to wear girl’s clothes. One day my parents went out, I stayed home with some cousins about the same age. I put on my mother’s *áo dài* [Vietnamese traditional long-dress] and went out in the street.

Family and neighbours usually did not pay much attention, seeing it as a child’s play. The mother of a MTF transgender said:

When he was about 10 or 12, he showed rather strange signs, but I told myself it could not be so. We made jokes about it, he said it wasn’t so, just having fun. He often put on bras...I paid no mind, thinking he was just a kid playing around.

A number of *bi* and *sêc-bi* told us their parents or relatives encouraged them to take up ‘cross dressing’ from an early age. This was the case of girls who had their hair cut short and were dressed as boys by their parents. A childless couple wishing for a son may dress a niece in boy’s clothes or parents with no sons may dress one of their daughters like a boy as a substitute. This reflects the desire for having sons in the patriarchal society of the majority Kinh population⁸. The question is whether and/or to what extent this dressing habit initiated by a child’s parents may facilitate a lesbian identity development later on. As a *sêc-bi* told us:

⁶ It refers to the period of one’s life from birth to the onset of puberty.

⁷ WHO. http://www.searo.who.int/en/Section13/Section1245_4980.htm. Retrieved March 15, 2012.

⁸ See studies on son preference and practice of selecting baby’s sex in Vietnam conducted by UNFPA (2011).

Sometimes I feel I owe much to my parents. If I was left alone as an ordinary girl I would be worse off by now. But since I've been this way much earlier on, it's easier.

Moreover, this study showed that even when individuals discovered at a very early age their gender identities they tend to deny and minimize their 'cross-gender' feelings to avoid stigma, while having gender expressions that meet social expectations, as shown among a number of MTF transgender persons.

When I was five I knew I was a girl but I was so scared, I tried to hide myself as a boy, wearing boy's clothes. But when I reached class 4 (about age 10) I could not stand it any more. I had to be true to myself

It should be noted that cross-gender manifestations occurred at a very early age among transgenders and *bi* and *sec-bi*, and did not occur among gays and bisexuals. This assessment revealed that gays, bisexuals along with some *phem* only experienced non-hetero sexual orientation during their teenage years.

Adolescence Phase

Most participants informed us that they began to have same-gender feelings at the start of their adolescence. To many gay participants in this assessment, it was not until the puberty stage that they began to have strong same-sex feelings, although some of them had dated straight girls. A gay told us:

I can say that from age 12 onwards. I remember when still at school I used to bring girl friends home. I liked girls a lot. But when I reached puberty I began to like boys. I no longer liked girls.

As for transgenders and lesbians, they feel an estrangement toward same age people belonging to 'the other gender'. A lesbian recalled:

When I was still at school, I had the feeling that I disliked boys. Didn't want them to come close. With girls I got along OK.

However, this did not mean an eventual break in relations with other females (in case of transgenders) or with males (in case of lesbians). Some MTF transgenders found it interesting to form close friendship with a female—like a close bond between two 'ordinary girls.' A MTF transgender described:

The girls all call me big sister, asking me all kinds of advice and I always try to oblige.

One thing is certain. These transgender individuals affirm their sex preferences:

I'm close to these girls but I'm not interested in them (sexually)

Likewise, a number of lesbians maintained friendships with males for various reasons:

I often hang out with boys. We chat about flirting this girl or that girl.

It is worth noting that lesbian participants who have gender expressions such as dressing, hair style, mannerisms and verbal expressions that meet social expectations - *phem* and some *nô môt/gon thắng* - told us they had experienced a phase of identity conversion, usually at age of 15 and 16.

A *phem* can turn into a straight girl or bisexual to contact hetero boys. Likewise a straight girl could turn into a *phem* to attract *sec-bi*.

It is important to remember that *phem* or *nô môt/girl thắng* is sexual identity that these children self-identify based on many factors. Accordingly, years of adolescence may be characterized by sexual experimentation as well as by ambiguities about sexual identity (Bilodeau and Renn 2005). It is also consistent with the argument that bisexuals experience identity processes differently from the way lesbians and gay men do (Wilchins 2002). For example, some individuals may come to bisexual identity after self-labelling as lesbian or gay. Still others may become aware of bisexual feelings only after having experienced heterosexual relationships or marriages. This does not mean a homosexual has tried to become a heterosexual, but reflects the relativity of sexual orientation in various stages of life, especially in adolescence.

Disclosure of sexual identity and orientation

In our assessment, disclosure often occurred in two ways. For those who already showed cross-gender signs since early childhood like *bi*, *sec-bi* and MTF transgenders as discussed earlier, the process of non-normative behaviours had been going on for a long time and had been noticed by families and community members who often took it for granted or shrugged it off as a childish anomaly. However, for those whose disclosure occurred accidentally and usually at a later stage (e.g., at puberty) family reactions could be painful. Example of an accidental disclosure:

At school I knew a classmate who was a gay. One day we went to a park together. Someone saw us kissing and told my mother. The news spread out in the local community and my sexual orientation became public knowledge.

Disclosure could occur indirectly, for example by taking a partner home and let the parents 'judge' for themselves. A lesbian told us:

The first time I took my friend home, I said: Mom, now you guess, is this a boy or a girl?
Mom said: A girl, right? So that's how she found out.

The second way occurred mostly among self-labelled gays, bisexuals and *phem*, who normally carry themselves as heterosexual persons biologically. Families and communities only found out when they intentionally revealed their same-sex feelings. A self-labelled gay told us:

I took my boyfriend home. My parents asked: 'who's that?' I said: 'well, an important person.' I guess the family got the message.

In the scope of this assessment, children of groups with gender expressions compliant with social expectations were subjected to objection and discrimination from their families and communities at a later stage as compared to persons who self identified as transgenders, *bi* and *şec-bi*.

Reactions from the family

How did families react to the fact that their children are LGB, or Ts? This depended on many factors such as the degree of disparity between gender expression and biological sex, parent – child relationship, parents' perception, etc. For instance, several among transgenders faced severe, sometimes violent, reactions when showing signals of the other gender via dressing and hairstyling. A MTF transgender recalled:

At that time I was having a job, I bought cosmetics, wigs, bras. My mother tore them off, chopped them to pieces.

Family verbal abuse as in the case of another MTF transgender:

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.

Focus of intense family criticism, as a *şec-bi* recalled:

They insulted me even when I was eating, when I was talking, (they criticized) the way I walked.

Unequal treatment:

My family still pay for my upkeeps but less than for other siblings. First the boys then the girls, people like me come last. That makes me sad sometimes.

Corporal punishment:

My father beat me, saying: I don't accept a homo in my house. You were born a real boy, I care for you like the rest of them, why do you do this to me?"

Other harsh measures:

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?

Family reactions seem to be more severe to gays or MTF transgenders. This may reflect the higher expectation to male members of family. iSEE's study on social attitude toward homosexuals finds that people are more tolerant to lesbians rather than to gays.

In the community

All participants told us they had at one time or another experienced discrimination/prejudices from neighbors and people around. These were explicit by the way they stared at them, the words they said to them, and their gestures. For example a FTM transgender told us:

They stared at me in passing and said loudly this is a girl disguised as a boy.

A MTF transgender recalled:

When I was about 9 or 10, kids would call out: hey you *pê đê*. I couldn't take it and started a fight.

Discrimination in community activities was common. Experience of a transgender:

There was a sort of a youth voluntary programme in my residential cluster. I wanted to sign up but they refused to let me in because I am a *pê đê*.

Phem and bisexuals, whose gender expression is up to social expectation, were specific objects for gossips:

They said she's so pretty. It's a shame she doesn't date any boys but only likes girls.

It is worth noting that attitude of community members toward these children depended to some extent on the social relations of their parents in the community. There were cases where hostile attitudes were rebuffed thanks to parents' tough posturing.

My mother was very tough. If she heard a bad word from the neighbors she would retaliate in her own way, that's why no one dared to say bad things about me.

Generally community reactions more or less affected the process of gender identity formation of an individual, facilitating the recognition and affirmation of his/her gender identity. All participants told us from hearing others call them *ô mô* or *pê đê* they came to realize their own sexual identity. This was most evident in cases of participants coming from the provinces where they had little access to information on related topics such as homosexuality. This is an important point of reference in comparing experiences of naming and labeling before and after LGBTs' arrival in Ho Chi Minh city.

At school

Beside being victims of discrimination in their social environment, a number of participants told us their experiences of harassment and discrimination at school. Being labelled as a *pê dê* was the most common occurrence among transgenders as one told us:

At that time I had a classmate aged 14 or 15. One day he asked whether I would want to do it with a girl. I said I didn't like that kind of dirty thing. From then on he kept harassing me, at school he would shout out loud (about me being a *pê dê*) I felt so ashamed. The incident still haunts me to this day.

We encountered two cases of leaving school that are related to individuals' gender emotions. A MTF transgender left because "to stay in school at grade 4, I would have to cut my hair (to look like a boy)." A *șec-bi* left school at grade 9, the reason mentioned was that "my math teacher touched my hair and asked: how comes a school girl dye her hair blond and cut it so short like this?"

It should be added that not everyone suffered discrimination at school. A lesbian told us:

I suspect the teachers knew about it but most of them said nothing. On the contrary they showed concern and gave extra help with my school work.

Without meeting their teachers and school mates, we did not have enough data to connect dropout rates among LGBT participants with individual gender characteristics.

3.2. LEAVING HOME

Most LGBT children left home to lead a rough street life in the big city – literally 'going to dust' – because of external factors such as conflict in family relations and/or internal factors such as personal mental stress.

External factors

The major factors were discord due to parents' divorce, and conflict caused by objection from parents and other relatives regarding children's gender and sexual identities.

Most participants reported unhappy family situations: divorced parents, lacking parental care, living under custody of grandparents. Some felt being left out when their fathers remarried or had conflict with a stepmother. Others suffered from an alcoholic father, an absent father working away from home or a mother too busy with her daily chores to care for her children. Briefly most participants agreed that family love was lacking. Broken family relationships and lack of parental love and care are major causes for these children's psychological wounds. Quite a few of them reported to leave school under these circumstances. These were also the common causes that made street children in general leave their homes and try to earn their living elsewhere. In the context of this assessment we came across many LGBT children cases where the emotional turmoil created by domestic chaos was aggravated by conflict concerning their gender and sexual identities. The resulting atmosphere was so stifling that they saw no choice but leaving.

By examining children's motives in leaving home, we did not find any instances of families slamming their doors in their children's faces, or renouncing them outright. In the scope of this study, only one was expelled due to sexual orientation, but told upon returning that no parent wanted to abandon his/her child, the act was spontaneous and stem from feeling powerless. Usually, parents adopted a "go ahead, who cares" attitude bordering on rejection. As a FTM transgender recalled:

My father said: 'if you can manage it, just go. Once you're gone don't come back.'

A lesbian recalled:

I had a fight with my father. He asked 'you always want to live like that, is that true?' I said: When you let me come back I shall return.

In fact, their decision to leave home was partly accepted by parents, because of economic difficulties, lack of time to care, or because parents believed their children had somehow grown up and should work if no longer going to school. Therefore, these children also visit their families now and then, and the frequency depends on the parent – child relationship. A MTF transgender reasoned:

Anyhow he's still my father. When I have money I would bring him some. He rents a house in District 8. When I see him, he scolds me: 'you don't want to work. Now you look like neither a human being nor a devil.' Usually I don't stay for long, only 5 or 10 minutes then leave.

Feeling lonely

If family conflict and parental objections were the main reasons causing a number of LGBT children to 'go to dust,' others who faced no such problems decided to leave home because they could not bear the mental stress caused by their gender identity and sexual orientation. In this assessment, we also met with lesbians whose families had no objection to their lesbianism (acceptance of their daughters' "girlfriends") or a number of lesbians who officially 'came out' and introduced their "boyfriends" to their families without problems. Then why did these children decide to leave home?

The answer we often heard from individuals in this group was that they were 'fed up' with life at home. Feelings of emptiness could be explained by the psychological turmoil associated with puberty among teenagers, which is worsened by having no one to share and understand their different sexual orientations. In the countryside surroundings where information of sexual diversity and mates of similar gender inclination were hard to find, they felt lonely in the community, and troubled themselves with questions and puzzles. Once in the big city they found a brand new world where access to LGBT community was easy and networking often provided opportunities to scrape a more balanced, though meager, living. A gay shared:

In the beginning I was very worried about my sexual orientation, thinking only me having this inclination. But when I arrived in Sai Gon, I met so many friends just like me. Why couldn't I live just like them? So I have lived true to myself since then.

The need to exchange with “alike” community is particularly important to them. Most MTF transgenders in the scope of this study have families in Ho Chi Minh city, many do not suffer from adverse family conditions, but they gradually choose the street life after meeting transgender friends who live on the street. Only when they lead a street life, without parents' scolding and neighbourers' rumours, could they feel free to do what they considered appropriate to themselves, and to have gender expressions that they wish for.

It is fair to say that the salient trait of LGBT children participating in this study is their choice of street life. Although many of them keep in touch with their families, the relation was quite loose, limited in some financial support or exchange of news. The relation was even looser as they were stigmatized when visiting families. A lesbian told:

I don't want to return home because whenever I return people would say “How miserable that family is, they are poor but their daughter is useless”.

Their life on the street is also rather solitary, detached from family and educational environment. Their material life and psychological and mental health are under huge influence of friends and street community. According to street children in Ho Chi Minh City (2002), group of children who leave home is the most vulnerable group among street children since they do not have either family support or necessary skills and experience.

3.3. Street Community

From this part on, the report documents experiences and coping strategies of LGBT children related to their street life. These experiences include both advantages and disadvantages, typical to forms of participation in the street life. In general, informants of this study have following forms of life:

- The majority of lesbians and female bisexuals live and work totally on the street, in a rather closed community that strongly supports its members. This community is also where they face many risks.
- Many of the gays and male bisexuals have more stable shelter, with financial support from partners. Many earn living by doing sex work.
- Many MTF transgenders still live with families, but gradually join deeper into the street life, so do not suffer sudden psychological impacts that happen to the other two groups.

This is also a limitation of the study because informants usually introduce other people from their own community. Therefore the research findings would not reflect all the diversity of LGBT street children.

Supports

As mentioned above, the community of street children is virtually the only community of LGBT children who have separated from family life. LGBT street children tended to form loosely-knit, hard-to-identify group. This kind of network appeared to be more beneficial to street children since it served their practical needs and lent flexibility to their life style. Even the children, who work on the street and regularly return home at night to their families, tended to report their friends as a source of support more frequently than their own parents. A mother of a MTF transgender child rationalized:

Those who belong to this (third) gender are very keen to get together. Interesting, isn't? The person would feel depressed at times but no one in the family understands him. He needs to find someone like him to talk with.

They tended to seek for sympathy from friends with similar sexual orientation and identity. Many only feel their different sexual identity and orientation being respected when living with street friends. They also share knowledge of sexual diversity, sexual formation, and confirm their own sexual identity and orientation. Many have found lovers as well as mental and emotional mainstay here. A *seç-bi* stressed this reality:

My friends showed me around and educate me about my sexual identity

Some participants told us that they got to know 'proper' ways of naming and labeling their gender and sexual identities only after they entered the world of street life, especially the LGBT community in the city and through the mass media. For instance, lesbians from the countryside who migrated to Ho Chi Minh City explained that they used to be called '*ô môi*' (homo)—for some of them this was the first slang words describing sexual identity they ever knew—by people in their home community. Soon after joining the LGBT community and through internet exposure in the city they came to learn other terms or slang phrases such as *đồng tính*, *let*, *bi*, *seç-bi*, and *phem* in referring to their lesbian identity. They would feel offended if someone called them an '*homo*' because they found the term highly degrading with the social stigmas attached to it, especially in the provinces of the Mekong delta. For those who chose to migrate to Ho Chi Minh City and entered the street world living as migrants in a big city was a truly eye opening experience. They felt free from small town prejudices and spatial restrictions. It indicates that discrimination and stigmatization of homosexuality is expected to be more pronounced in rural areas than in the big cities, given that rural people tend to hold more conservative values and are less tolerant to homosexuality than their counterparts in urban areas (Khuat Thu Hong 2005).

Most children's decisions to leave home were made without preparation, so their life afterwards was everyday coping process. All of them experienced the shortage of materials, and all received friends' support, especially for essential needs like meals. A lesbian reflected:

Going to dust means together being hungry, together being full, and sleeping together as well. We are very closed to one another, never abandoning any one. I never let any one down when I have money. In the park I would ask my friends "Have you had anything to eat?" then I ask them to eat with me, even entreat them to come. I am afraid they are hungry. Because I was hungry sometimes before and the feeling was unbearable.

This is the case of a lesbian who sometimes received money from her father. With an amount of 1 – 2 million dong, she could have better meals and shelter in a few days, but she wanted to share it with friends in the community.

Risks

It is common that adolescents tend to suffer from psychological crises, so a living environment with many spaces and relations such as family, friends and relatives is helpful for them to find balance. For LGBT children within the scope of this study, the community of friends is the only place where they can trust and live true to themselves. Therefore, when break-ups happen, mental pressure is enormous. A lesbian said:

I am so scared, if I was betrayed now I would have no one to trust. I wish my friends would never let me down. I wish I had a house, however small it was, where I had both parents and their love. I wish I had money, a little amount of money to care for friends, not for myself.

Many children have committed self-harm and even had suicide intention when facing conflicts with lover or friends in the community. Mental hurts caused by the community were seen more commonly in lesbians, female bisexuals and MTF transgenders since these groups live much in the community. Mental hurts were also seen, though less commonly, in gays and male bisexuals, who in general have better income and more stable housing (see *Health*)

Just like general street children communities, LGBT street children communities are hard-to-define. The departures and arrivals of members with different backgrounds can bring about harmful practices that other members can acquire. A gay shared the instance of a friend who urged him to steal things. A lesbian said:

There are some *sec-bi* using drugs in my group. They keep calling on me "want to try?"

In interviews, all informants said they tried to keep themselves away from illegal acts, but quite a few lesbians and female bisexuals had actually used addictive substances. This occurred less frequently in gays, male bisexuals and MTF transgenders. Data from this research is not sufficient for analysis of this difference.

Through observations of informants, we found that lesbians quite frequently smoke tobacco and drink alcohol, a phenomenon confirmed in other studies as well. It is clear in this study that living circumstances have an influence. Many gays who are sex workers have high awareness in keeping fit and well. So do MTF transgenders, who tend to avoid practices that jeopardize their beauty. Meanwhile, lesbians tend not to care much about appearance or health condition, partly because they have to worry more about meals and shelters every day.

Lesbians and MTF transgenders are at high risks of sexual abuse by members of the street community. A MTF transgender admitted being forced by her lover to prostitute herself when they were in need of money.

A lesbian told about risk of sexual abuse as they depend on friends' support for sleeping places:

That night I did not have a place to sleep. He was a friend's friend. He rented a room for both, then tried to offend me. I was fighting, I pushed him out, I kicked him down to the floor, but he continued. I was too angry, I flapped my hand onto the wall until it was moist with blood.

(See *Risks of Exploitation and Sexual Harassment and Abuse*)

3.4. Right Situation

Stigma and Discrimination in Vocational Training

Among the respondents, three reached high school level, ten stopped at secondary school. Most left school early. In some cases, the circumstances of leaving school coincided with family events such as parents' divorce, the arrival of a stepmother or moving in with grandparents or other relatives. Given the limit of sample size of this assessment, we only came across two cases of high school dropout because of verbal and physical abuse. Most participants showed a reluctance to go back to school. One explained:

I left the school for a while now, so it feels weird to get back to study. Also I am already 17, 18 years old, I don't feel comfortable sitting in the same class with younger kids.

Another rationalized:

If I go back to school I will not be able to make a living. It means I will have to rely on my parents financially, then I will be under their thumbs.

The majority preferred vocational training programs rather than formal schooling. Ideally this vocational training should also include free accommodation. Some participants reported experiences of discrimination during their application.

The school manager told me they'd only take male or female candidates. As I appeared to be 'in-between' he was afraid that I would have problems getting along with other students.

Stigma and Discrimination in Work

Regular job prospects among LGBTs were very limited, particularly among those whose gender expressions are against social expectation. For example, a *sec-bi* was told 'we only accept girls with long hair,' when she applied at a clothing shop. Other *bi* and *sec-bi* found temporary, low-paid jobs as waitresses at food stalls or as seasonal workers in private enterprises. Most experienced discrimination and unfair treatment at their workplaces. Most left their jobs after a short time.

Job opportunities for MTF transgenders were especially scarce. They usually wished to get jobs in service industry, including beauty service. However, their families were all poverty-stricken and could not support, while service employers declined their applications most of the time. Majority of MTF transgenders would form small groups and earn their living as funeral singers. Sex work was also a situational job they chose.

Interviews with some employers provide interesting insights suggesting a connection between gender identity/sexual orientation, and job preference/opportunity. An employer who expressed tolerant attitudes toward homosexuals stated:

Lesbians are likely to be more straightforward and direct. This however makes them less at ease and 'flexible' in negotiating (in job application). Transgender persons (*pê đê*) appear to be more outspoken, highly flexible and open to negotiation.

We took up this point and discussed it among some *bi* and *sec-bi*. The finding was that *bi* and *sec-bi* were less likely to conform to the stereotypically feminine traits, of which verbal negotiation was perceived as less preferable.

Just as in the situation of job application. If they say 'no' then I just take it without further insistence or negotiation.

We came across a few cases where *bi* and *sec-bi* persons showed a keen interest in being peer supporters or volunteers in some projects sponsored by some NGOs for street people in their community. They wished to be involved more regularly in such projects (focusing on HIV/AIDS prevention, Reproductive Health or Life Skills). Taking part as peer supporters would help enhance their self-esteem and at the same time provide them a more stable source of income. However, these *bi* and *sec-bi* were not in a good position to apply for such jobs since they were required to have a permanent residential address. This selection criterion did not work for those who were practically homeless. This confirms the fact that LGBT people in general and street children who self identify as LGBT face widespread discrimination in their search for job and educational opportunities.

Risks of sexual exploitation, sexual harassment and rape

There is a high risk of exploitation of street LGBTs by pimps who tried to lure them into illicit activities, especially commercial sex. These pimps operated mostly in public parks, acting as 'agents' in arranging sexual encounters for prospective 'clients' in exchange for a cut of the agreed fees.

Lesbians who spent much time in parks were often sexually harassed by middle aged males. The problem arose when these attempts failed and the men began to badmouth about a particular lesbian, spreading the word that he had slept with her, thus discrediting her in the eyes of the rest of the LGBT community. Notably, there is an unwritten code among LGBT that if a self-identified lesbian dating another lesbian is found out to have relation with a 'straight' male (except in case of commercial sex for survival), he/she would be a disgrace in the community.

Five among lesbian participants reported being sexually harassed, for instance:

I was strolling around on the street when a guy brushed his hand at my breast

Or

A male workmate stroked my back asking 'would you like to try?'

(Straight) boys in street groups often took advantage of sharing sleeping space to force sexual intercourse. Some lesbians told us that a number of straights believed that since lesbian's preferred same sex, they could still be virgins.

In reality a few lesbians were obliged to serve male clients in commercial sex and many gay and bisexual sex workers experienced sexual violence.

Transgenders also experienced sexual abuse and sexual harassment.

When I was a child I looked absolutely like a girl. At around 7 or 8 an evening when I went out to buy something, a neighboring guy, above 20 at that time, undressed me. Mine was the same as his, so he couldn't do it. He squeezed my bust and kissed me but his mouth was smelly. Then he kept squeezing me and ejaculated.

Another MTF transgender said:

I think I am a girl but my body is still a boy's body. I felt like a toy when playing with boys and they embraced me. If I were a real girl would they dare to do that? They did it because I was a *pê d'ê*. I didn't like it, I beat them. I warned them if they kept on I'd beat them.

Harassment by heterosexual men was frequent, regardless of their age.

Once I went to a swimming pool. When I was taking a shower an old man opened the door and rushed in. He pushed me to the floor, I managed to hit his face. He felt ashamed and left. From that experience I always go swimming with a friend.

Sexual harassment can also come from public security forces. A lesbian shared:

I showed my ID and motorbike riding license, but no motorbike registration which my parents kept. The policeman said I had to wait until the morning when my parents could come to show the registration. Then he brought the bike to police station, and arrested my two boy-friends and beat them. I was not beaten. He called me in, asking me “do you want to go home now?” I asked “how could I?” He said “pleasure me then you can go”.

Being Insulted

All LGBT children experienced stigmatizing attitude and behaviour from people around, just like all street children: “People on the street comment how comes girls go to dust. They looked down on us. Or else, when we hang around in parks, they thought we were “chicken” so they gave us very mean look”. Besides, many lesbians and transgenders were insulted for their sexual identity and orientation:

I told them I was born like that. They can scold me but don’t insult my parents. They said things like parents failed to educate these girls, letting them go and couple with whomever. I wish we were not looked down on as such. Les are more stigmatised than gays. So I only wish people looked at us the same way they looked others.

Violence

Lesbians whose gender expression is similar to men (*sec-bi*) are particularly subject to physical violence from public security force, while gays, MTF transgenders and lesbians with female expression are less likely to be victims. Violence usually comes for two main reasons. First, homosexual children living in parks rarely have identification cards. Some did not take it along when leaving home, some were ... some lost, and some left it home for not losing it. Second, *sec-bi* look very much like men, with tattoo on body or scars on arm, making ... consider as public risks. A lesbian told about her partner:

They thought K was a boy, so they intended to undress K to see whether K has tattoo. K said “I am a girl”, then they let her be and asked if K has tattoo. K said no. They asked “Are you a gangster? You are girl but look like boy”, then slap on her hands with their ruler.

All street children may have to deal with the abovementioned forms of violence, stigma and discrimination. It is found through this study that LGBT street children, especially those whose gender expression is against social expectation, would face higher risks of violence and being abused. One of their tactics is ignoring:

I do not take serious those stigmatizing attitudes. Anyone wants to pry into my life, just do it. Because I only care about myself. I don't care about those who do not give me any meals.

The more they are stigmatized and discriminated, the more they close down to live in their isolating community. This once again shows the significance of community to street children, and partly explains their limited access to social services when being in need.

3.5. Surviving on the street

Almost no incomes

Most LGBT street children leave school early and have no occupational training, so most of them are unable to find a stable job. It is even harder for MTF transgenders and lesbians who look like men to find jobs as they are more stigmatised. Several MTF transgender participants started out assisting family's business, but they gradually spent a lot more time for the street life, and eventually earned income from only two "jobs" left, which are funeral singing and prostitution. At the time of study, quite a few lesbians are unemployed. To provide themselves with basic necessities like sleeping places and medicines in case of illness, LGBTs often pooled their resources together, relying on one another for survival. Usually one or two 'rich' individuals would provide for the rest of the group. Where did this financial support come from?

Primarily the money came from parents of some group members, since a few lucky ones relied on their rich parents. Some who still maintained family ties went home for occasional visits, and brought back the money their parents gave them. This they shared with others. We met a *phem* whose father was a hotel owner. He would dispatch a messenger with ready cash to help his daughter at her request. But these cases were exceptions and most LGBTs were in dire poverty. One *bi* said she had to pawn her mobile phone to scrape through another day. To survive practically all participants were engaged in prostitution with varying frequency. Among MTF transgenders and *phem*, sex work was a routine matter. Even a number of *bi* and *sec-bi* sold sex to meet basic necessities. In desperate situations some even joined youth gang and committed break-ins (*'nhập nha'*).

Being scared of hunger

All these children had to rely on some sources of support to have meals. Generally, their eating schedule was irregular. A lesbian said: “I am used to constant hunger”. However, gays who are sex workers seem to suffer from hunger more than other groups:

It could be so bad when having only ten thousand dong, or even five thousand dong for the whole day. Standing all the night on the street. No money to eat, even just a cob of corn.

Compared to other groups, gays and male bisexuals who are sex workers have more isolated life, without community support. Although they usually have financial assistance from partners, the amount is not much. Most of them have to sell sex to pay debts, house rent, or to send money home. Being alone with financial difficulties, they learn to plan for the worst ... by saving

Seeking safe sleeping places

For many lesbians and female bisexuals, sleeping place is usually not anticipated, and solutions are also flexible. According to available budget, they would rent a room together by month, or by day. Having no identification is also a reason why they are not allowed to rent a long term accommodation.

‘Go to dust’ is an expression referring to living rough on the streets, including sleeping on sidewalks or in public parks. All of them have experienced sleeping in parks when the whole group together cannot afford a night at a guest house. If they have to sleep alone, they would wait until dawn when people start to go to parks for exercise to have a decent sleep. If they are in group, they would not worry about where and when to sleep. A lesbian told:

We are not scared. We go in group so we feel secured.

Apart from the dangers they may face in parks at night, all street children involved in this assessment expressed a great fear of police arrest. Police can check guest houses at any time they suspect of prostitution, so street children without proof of identification can be transferred to police stations or forced to leave the guest houses in the middle of the night. A lesbian shared:

Take yesterday an example. I had money to rent a room. When we started to sleep, the police got in to check, and found that we did not have identification cards. They kicked us out at 1 am. We went around and around, til the morning.

Thus, even when they have money, street children can hardly have good sleep. They also have to deal with many other circumstances. A FTM said:

We had to get into an internet shop, but the price was 10.000 an hour, so we could not afford. We then went out for a café, sitting there til the morning with two drinks.

When it rains:

If we are sleeping in park and it rains, we will run every where and climb up to the trees, each clinging to a branch, that's it.

Or as told by a female bisexual:

When it rains we would stand under some roof, but just a little while for fear that civil defence would come and check.

However, they seem to be unaware that sharing sleeping space with other peers might entail the added risks of sexual harassment and sexual assault, especially for lesbians. FTMs usually sleep at home with family, and gays often have long term rented accommodation, so safe sleeping place is not a concern to these groups.

Health problems and risk of HIV contraction

Due to irregular eating and sleeping habits most participants reported symptoms of stomach problems and fatigue. Often they bought the medicines themselves if they could afford them or asked friends to buy them. Most pharmacies sold medicines without prescription, dispensing them over the counter following the buyer's descriptions of his/her illness. MTF transgenders and lesbians who look like men usually avoid health check, as they are afraid of being stigmatised for their gender expressions. A MTF transgender participant told us when asked whether she would see a doctor if the medicines did not work:

Troublemakers like us are very apprehensive to take off our clothes (for examination) in front of a doctor. There are many people at the hospital who would watch us, many discriminate against us.

A *sec-bi* recalled:

Once I passed out, friends took me to the emergency ward. I vaguely heard the doctors asking each other: 'Is this a boy or a girl?'

A lesbian shared her hospital experience:

If you have money they treat you first, if you have no money, just forget it.

For fear of being stigmatised and for lack of money, they tend to ignore health problems or health services.

As mentioned earlier since most interviewed LGBT more or less were engaged in the sex trade, the risks of catching HIV/AIDS and other STIs were high. Despite the fact that 23 participants possessed basic information about these diseases, there were cases where proper precautions were waived by some MTF transgenders to please their customers. In this research the majority of MTF transgenders involving in sex work preferred oral sex to anal sex as a safer way. This implies that they are practicing risk reduction behaviors as oral sex is considered to contain lower risk of HIV contraction.

Able to tell transmission routes, but practically lesbians have limited knowledge of this issue as they may consider their risk to be low. A lesbian was told that HIV test would cost 700,000 – 800,000 dong so she never took a test for not having that amount of money. A teenage lesbian told us she had been tested HIV positive and was pregnant at the time of the interview. Another risk no less serious was stepping accidentally on used syringes or needles. These accidents occurred so frequently as an informant told us: “If you look at the feet of children hanging around this park, you will find their soles full of scars from used needles.”

Gays who were involved in the sex trade told us they often relied on personal experiences to protect themselves. These included looking at the client for tell-tale signs or how the client approached safe-sex precautions. They also adopt some strategies to make clients accept condoms. One informant said:

If the client asks me to use condom, that means he is free [from HIV and STIs]; if he says nothing I will have to use it. With my partner I never use condoms.

They also had better knowledge of HIV and STIs risks, so they had health check and test quite regularly.

Mental health and stimulants

Feelings of being unloved were prevalent among ‘go to dust’ LGBT, with twenty one participants expressing some degrees of mental depression and loneliness.

When I left home I also tried to work, but without family it was very difficult. Many things made me feel tired and unstable. I wanted to have a job, to have this and that. But being away from family, without family acceptance, going and going... that was very tiring.

Up to thirteen interviewed children told us that they practiced self laceration, often cutting their hands with a razor blade. A bisexual told us:

When I feel sad I cut my hand but I didn’t feel any pain. Seeing blood, I’m happy. Only my heart hurts, physically I feel no pain at all.

The reasons cited for self-laceration were feelings of sadness about family, life, and about oneself. It was also a way to get rid of one’s momentary anger, or forget an ongoing conflict in personal relations. This phenomenon was quite common among lesbians. A *bi* or *sec-bi* had a quarrel with a ‘*phem*’ partner but could not use violence on her; cutting one’s own hand was a gesture of self-hate. As one *bi* said ‘When I see a boy beat a girl, I don’t like it. So why should I allow myself to beat her (*phem* ‘wife’).’ Likewise a number of *phem* resorted to cutting their hands to show their anger toward their partners. There were others who cut their hands for apparently no reasons at all. These acts were seen as a demonstration of toughness, a way to project oneself as macho.

Attempts at suicide also occurred among LGBTs when facing seemingly insurmountable set backs: desperate lack of money, blatant discrimination, etc. Four participants reported having suicidal thoughts at one time, but only one MTF transgender confessed to have actually attempted to commit suicide.

They said “what on earth made a boy like me *pê đê*, and why on earth did I choose to live on the street instead of going home?” They criticized a lot. This really turned me off. I just wanted to give up and lay down. I took medication to commit suicide four times already.

In connection with this, some parents told us they had second thoughts about pressuring their children too hard. The mother of a transgender told us:

If we tried too hard to prevent him (from ‘homosexual’ practices), he may get worried and do foolish things like using narcotics, etc. He’s deeply in love with that *pê-đê*. We adults can restrain ourselves but he’s still a kid. If we push him too hard he may kill himself by taking sleeping pills or cut his hand, bleeding himself to death.

The majority of LGBT used substances: tobacco (fifteen), alcohol (eighteen), marijuana and glue (ten). Most did not use hard drugs like heroin, being aware of their damaging effects on health. The gatekeepers that we interviewed—mainly parents and police authorities— believed that narcotics use and HIV infection represent a real danger to children ‘going to dust.’ One of the reasons behind some parents’ acceptance of their children’s non-normative gender and sexual identities was that if they objected too strongly, the children would ‘go to dust’ with all the consequences that entail, including the risks of drug addiction and HIV infection.

Risk of police arrest, being at risk and being risky

One of the important findings is that practically all participants were obsessed by fears of being picked up by the police or civil defense; twenty one participants said they had been taken to a civil-defense post, eight participants were taken to a precinct police station and two participants were brought to a transit station to be sent to re-education or social service centers. Experiences with police and parapolice included being checked for ID, being reprimanded, insulted, beaten and fined.

Police officers regarded their actions in ‘*thu gom*’ [collecting] street children and other vagrants including LGBTs as part of the public efforts to keep the city clean and beautiful. As a police officer told us:

(Our actions are) to keep public parks in good order... The *bụi đời* [life dusts] live there, sometimes they defecate all over the place, making the parks dirty. Our policy is simply to make the city civilized and beautiful. That’s why we organize these collecting actions.

In general the police consider street children including LGBT as both being ‘at risk’ and being ‘risky.’ According to police officers and civil defense members interviewed in this assessment, groups of street children were considered as ‘at risk’ because of their poor living conditions and vagrant life style. However, these groups were also perceived as being ‘risky,’ capable of getting involved in illegal activities. LGBTs were seen as a ‘risky’ group in the eyes of the police, first and foremost because of their ‘queer’ visibility (body language, dressing, hairstyle, tattoos, etc.) reinforced by prevailing social prejudices about homosexuality that in turn affect police and LGBT street children interactions. As a civil defense member explained:

It’s all very clear. Boys and girls sit and talk at night is one thing. But two boys embracing each other, murmuring and kissing, what is it then if not evil?

From the vantage point of the police as public authorities, these downtrodden street children living in poor conditions are ‘at risk,’ and ought to be ‘collected’ and handed over to state-run social welfare centers where they would be given shelter and other basic necessities. It is not our intention to discuss the realities on the ground of these centers, but such a blanketing policy applied for all without taking into account the specific needs of LGBT street children would be ineffective.

Social support services

Some participants appeared to be well informed about services and resources available to street children such as Catholic charities, humanitarian shelters, and other NGO and governmental programs supporting homeless and vulnerable people. However, the assessment revealed that these shelters did not appeal to these children even for emergency accommodation. There was a common fear that they would be put under control of the service providers who usually imposed strict discipline in these shelters. They feared that their social life would be radically curtailed. Some explained that they would feel uncomfortable in shelters run by Catholic nuns because of the Church anti-homosexual attitudes.

3.4. PERSPECTIVES ON RIGHTS

Right to be heard

Regarding citizens’ rights in general and children’s rights in particular, most participants expressed concern over their right being violated.

The first right that they considered to have been taken away was the right to be heard. According to them, because they are adolescents parents ignore their opinions, blaming them on the bad influence of the internet or peers. A lesbian shared her thoughts:

They proclaim these children's rights but in fact children have no rights. Whatever we say is always considered as childish, adults always think they are right. They don't listen to us. Take the case of my girlfriend and me. Her family thinks I'm still a kid, thoughtless. They just don't listen.

When the right to be heard was not respected, conflict are unresolved leading to a climax when children 'go to dust.' In families where parents accepted their children's gender identity, this right was more or less respected. The mother of a transgender told us:

I heard that they should have their own right, we should not intervene.

Another mother who was tolerant to her transgender child shared this view:

I think children have their rights, we cannot force them. My child said mom, you are a human being, I am a human being too, now I am grown up I also have the right to decide for myself.

Right to equality and acceptance

In addition to the right to be heard, children showed their desire for the right to live true to their gender identity. Most of them thought that gender differences are something they were born with, something "God-given", or "in the blood". They wanted to live according to these "obvious realities".

I must say that I wish I were the President, so that I can grant the best things to the third gender, for them to raise their voice and enjoy what they deserve.

There are just a few parents supported these views.

He has the right to be a *pê đê* or *ô môì*. Because it's in his blood he would think that he has the right.

A police officer offered a different perspective:

I think we should not abandon these cases because they were born with that chronic disease. And as they were born with it, treatment is very difficult.

While accepting homosexuality as an 'obvious reality', this police officer shared the popular belief that it is a disease (iSEE 2010) that could be cured, albeit with much difficulty. This only goes to show there still a long way for society to recognize homosexuality as a manifestation of human sexual orientations.

Another concern is the right of gays, lesbians and transgenders to become fathers and mothers, as a transgender put it:

Why in other countries 'third gender' people can officially get married but not in Vietnam? 'Third gender' people (in this country) have no rights to become fathers and mothers. Why the law does not allow same-sex marriage? I am not satisfied with this.

The assessment shows that there is a diversity of attitudes regarding the rights to be parents and differences in gender configuration among sub-groups. While a number of transgenders were content with their current biological makeup, others wished to change it by undergoing transgender surgery:

I want to go to Thailand to have my sex changed, then I will feel completely like a girl.

However, regardless of whether they wanted to change their sex or not, they shared the same wish:

To live with a person of the same gender and if possible we will adopt a child together.

Among lesbians there was a willingness to look for medical intervention such as IVF to exercise their rights of parenthood, and some even would accept relations with a male person to become pregnant. Here we see the gap between the opinions of LGBT and those of parents and communities on this subject. In our discussions with gatekeepers (including parents and police officials) we heard negative opinions about homosexuals: these do not marry, do not share the burden of continuing the family tradition and do not have children. Accordingly most gatekeepers considered homosexuals as a (social) risk. In the words of a policy maker:

Homosexual relations do not help perpetuate the nation's population, these relations are in themselves abnormal.

Social policy fails to meet their needs

The right of children to live in security and have access to basic necessities is recognized by the state, and in the case of LGBT in this assessment, this was reflected in the 'collecting' policy of local authorities as an official explained:

We cannot let them loiter in the street; first, there's the hygiene problem, then we have to feed them, they have no rights, no access (to the system). That's why the DOLISA organized campaigns to collect them, bring them back, sort them out, feed them and send them to school.

However, as mentioned earlier, the intervention measures did not take into account of the situation of LGBT whose needs went beyond those of ordinary street children: the right to exercise their gender and sexual identities.

Coping strategies

Mental crises and material deprivations occurred regularly among LGBTs. However, they did not seem to deter them from expressing revealing thoughts about themselves and their conditions. As a transgender put it strongly:

Even if in the next life I can become a girl or a boy, I do not want any change. I want to be a *pê dē* because I want it that way. Because a girl is so ordinary, a *pê dē* is more special, more talented since she possesses both male and female characteristics.

In her way of thinking the way her gender identity is constructed gives her an edge over others whose gender identity is conventionally constructed as male or female.

Another transgender was proud of asserting herself:

In the street if you are a *pê dē* you want people to pay attention to you. An ordinary girl wouldn't want to attract much attention to herself.

Another participant regarded social discrimination as an open recognition of her distinctive gender:

My motto is that if people curse me for being a *pê-dē*, then they must know I am a *pê dē*.

Some found positive aspects in social curiosity about transgenders:

I just want to open a humble restaurant. I think customers may want to come to a *pê dē* place to poke fun at a *pê dē*, it's kinda funny. I think it could be a success.

The positive attitude shown by some transgender was based on personal observations of heterosexual marriage lives. A transgender rationalized:

If I have to live the life of a girl, and later on I get married to a man who is violent, who beats me then it is miserable. And if a man gets married to a woman who is rough and doesn't love him then there is no fun either. That's why I think I'm luckier than others, having found someone who loves me.

Here the element of agency plays a role in the way an individual comes to terms with his/her non-hetero identity and how to deal with it in order to survive in a basically homophobic society.

Wish to integrate in the society

At a more practical level LGBT wanted to be integrated into the wider society. And to achieve it, society needs to accept them without discrimination. A *şec-bi* told us:

Those like us suffer a lot from family pressure, and when we enter into the society, the people there, in general ignorant people, do not accept us. We are isolated, that's why we stick with people like us, and so we are unable to integrate. If I can have a message to everyone then I would ask everyone to accept us and look at us in a different light.

Most wished to have opportunities to be trained for suitable jobs. They believed that by doing concrete jobs they would be able to prove their own worth and help change social prejudices.

We need to have a steady job and a stable place to live. We want to show this world that (people of) the third gender is ordinary human beings, capable of making a living like the rest of them.

They also wished to be connected with other LGBT communities in Vietnam and to take part in social activities and exchange information on legal rights and health related issues.

From gatekeepers, some mothers expressed the desirability of organizing activities for the benefit of their LGBT children to give moral support and provide information on productive health, HIV prevention, etc.

As for those in charge of maintaining public order like police officers and civil defense members, some expressed the need for a clear policy regarding how to deal with the LGBT problematic in concrete terms. A police officer told us:

According to me in our society there are no policies in this subject, how to solve the homosexuality problem. That's why I think the state should have a policy with concrete provisions assigning responsibilities at different level. The fact is that we are stuck at the moment, we don't know how to handle this.

From the standpoint of those involved in social work, educating the public is highly recommendable. A DOLISA staff suggested:

I think experts and policy planners should first work out training programs for the community and for social worker; later on these could be expanded into society, educating people about the challenges of being homosexual.

For their part, policy planners contended that it would be necessary to ascertain whether the homosexuality problem had reached a considerable level and how did this affect society. As a MOLISA official reasoned:

(you have to see whether) the challenges of being homosexual has become a social phenomenon, then we will make necessary law to adjust (to the situation). Regarding the laws in Vietnam if that behavior (homosexuality) has not appeared in society then there can be no legal regulations for adjustment.

Obviously there is a need to ascertain whether homosexuality has become a social phenomenon in Vietnam, which requires an in-depth comprehensive study on the subject.

4. DISCUSSIONS

In recent years in line with official policy to keep Ho Chi Minh City “civilized – clean – beautiful”, there have been campaigns to remove homeless people from the streets and relocate them to state-run social welfare centers. The police in collaboration with the civil defense force at ward level have intensified their efforts in monitoring and controlling homeless people to maintain security and social order. Any groups of people who assemble without notice in public places during the night are subjected to police’s inspection and ID control. Those who fail to show proper ID document as proof of identity will be taken to the nearest neighborhood police station to be detained and questioned by a duty officer. The detainee is expected to provide information about family background. If the case involves an adolescent the police will try to identify the contact address of his/her family and keep the parents or immediate family members informed of the detention. The adolescent detainee will be released only if the family comes up with a bail. That is stipulated in the written law.

However, in practice interactions between police and street children especially LGBTs are more complicated. At any rate street children can no longer sleep on the streets or in public parks at certain hours; instead they find accommodations in cheap guest houses and sleep-inn for those who can afford to pay a sum of 70.000 - 100.000 VND per night per room for two or three persons. For those who cannot afford it, they would assemble in groups of three or four and wander about trying to avoid the police. Alternatively they may come to a so-called night café, order a cup of tea and try to catch some sleep without having to lie down. Early in the morning they could join some city early risers making their way to the park and while the citizens began their daily exercise, the vagrant street children would find a stone bench for a nap before sunrise. Children going to dust completely go through different experiences from those who have a place to sleep at night. Children belonging to the latter group generally can rely on their families in case of illness or other emergencies whereas those of the first group have to fend for themselves and face immense difficulties. As this assessment points out, children going to dust completely do not have a fixed place to sleep, their living conditions are extremely precarious, most are school dropouts and have no access to education and healthy recreation. On the question of rights, children who go to dust completely are deprived of their minimum necessities as stipulated by Vietnam’s 2004 Law on Child Protection, Care and Education to the effect that “children have the rights to be cared for and brought up to develop physically, intellectually, mentally and ethically; the right to live with parents; the right to health care and to study” (Articles 11-14). Furthermore as stated in the nation’s Constitution, “it is the responsibility of the State, society, the family and the citizen to ensure care and protection for women and children” (Articles 40). In their efforts to maintain public order, some local authorities seem not to have taken into account the specific circumstances of LGBT street children with regard to their psychological and social characteristics. Efforts on the part of local authorities to ‘collect’ these children from the street for their own protection have the adverse effect of making them even more vulnerable to violation and abuse as pointed out earlier in this assessment.

Despite the hardships and deprivations of their daily lives in the big city, most LGBTs held that this was the price they had to pay— having decided to ‘go to dust’— in order to live true to their gender and sexual identities. This is precisely where the gap between state interventions and

LGBTs' needs becomes most apparent, and we could see why most LGBT dread the idea of having to deal with the police for fear of being taken to state-run social service stations or worse yet, re-education centers. However, there is a popular perception that homosexuals (in particular transgenders and gays) are somehow connected with commercial sex, and state regulations stipulate that activities in the sex trade are liable to administrative sanctions. Queer visibility is often regarded by police officers as being associated with *ăn chơi* [decadence], *đua đòi* [imitations of extravagance], *không có giáo dục* [lacking education], *du đãng* [vagrancy], etc. The recent high publicity about violent crimes involving several homosexuals certainly does not help the advocacy for LGBT rights (iSEE 2011).

Looking at the experiences of discrimination of LGBTs in their interaction with the social environment (notably neighbors and school), we think that the core problem lies at the family level—generational gaps and cultural entanglements that eventually lead them to leave home and choose the path of street life. While most participants agreed that they chose to go to dust in order to live 'true to themselves,' the circumstances of opting out were diverse. It is this diversity that gives a distinct color to individual experiences of street life. Children's motives in leaving home are based on external factors and internal factors. It is during the early adolescence phase that an individual gradually recognizes and tentatively accepts gender feelings as they come to terms with the fact that these feelings are not heterosexually oriented or fitting the gender binary distinction. If disclosure occurs during this period, LGBT individuals can expect strong reactions from their families and communities. On the question of recognition of LGBT rights, hostile reactions from parents and community toward LGBT as shown in this assessment run counter to the spirit of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam's Constitution, which states unequivocally that "all citizens shall enjoy the protection of the law with regard to their life, health, honor, and dignity; and all forms of harassment, coercion, torture, and violation of a citizen's honor and dignity are strictly forbidden" (Article 71). Additionally children "have the right to be respected and have one's life, body, dignity, and honor protected" as stipulated in the nation's 2004 Law on Child Protection, Care and Education (Articles 11-14). Viewed from the larger context of universal human rights discourse, these young LGBT have been subjected to acts of violence and discrimination because of their sexual orientation and gender identity.

Generally gatekeepers look at parental rights and the rights of homosexuals against the background of family and community interests. Since gatekeepers place emphasis on family obligations and social stability, homosexuality is considered to be an act of selfishness. In the transitional context of Vietnam and in official discourses, it is associated with 'unhealthy influences' of 'individualism' coming from abroad. The scope of this assessment does not allow us to deal with these aspects. However, we would like to point out that such things as individual rights in general and rights of young homosexual in particular manifest themselves in different ways, and the levels of these manifestations are often mediated through 'negotiations', not always smooth with other social groups and public authorities.

It is worth noticing that most participants among lesbians, transgenders and bisexuals consider gays as those enjoying a higher status than *pê đê*, and associate gays with high income, elite groups, etc. While the number of participants who identified themselves as gays in this assessment is rather limited, they were rather better off, working as professional actors and film

producers, etc. The general perception was gays are male physically, thus ‘stronger’—whereas a *pê đê* embodies a mixed identity— a ‘female’ spirit in a ‘male’ body, thus weaker. Such attitudes in placing gays over other (MTF) transgender groups may reflect social-cultural biases about masculinity and femininity when it comes to categorizing gender identity and sexual orientations in the Vietnamese context. Because of space limit, we would not get into the discussion of how Western notions of same-sex desire and eroticism, imported into Vietnam at different periods of time (i.e., during the French colonial rule in the nineteenth century and the *Đổi Mới* period in the mid 80s) have served as a buffering factor to the historical antipathies towards homosexual identities in Vietnamese society.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In concluding we should like to sum up the main results of this assessment.

From a practical point of view, this assessment pointed out the particularities of the experiences of street life of LGBT children, which can be examined at three levels: a) circumstances of going to dust; b) experiences of street life; (c) interactions between experiences of street life and those of sexual orientation and gender identity.

Regarding circumstances surrounding the process of ‘going to dust,’ most children chose this alternative as a result of conflict in family relations and personal mental stress. More importantly, the assessment pointed out a linkage between circumstances of ‘going to dust’ and sexual orientations among LGBT children. Accordingly, the choice of ‘going to dust’ was often made at about the time the young person came to realize his/her gender characteristics and sexual orientations, particularly when circumstances of disclosure were aggravated by harsh reactions from family members and the community beyond. Parental hostility toward homosexuality coupled with intrafamilial discord often led to discrimination and abuses, both mental and physical, within the home. At community level, prejudices from neighbors, teachers and schoolmates and the accompanying stigmas, only heightened the pressure on the young individual, creating an ambience of unbearable oppression. A number of participants reported instances of psychological crisis, which led to suicide attempt, drug abuse, and self mutilation.

The researchers also ran into cases of individuals who ‘went to dust’ and moved to Ho Chi Minh City as way to solve their personal dilemma despite the fact their families did not object to their non-hetero sexual orientations. The decision to ‘go to dust’ was motivated by a desire to get away from the stifling rural or small-town environment to join the network of fellow LGBTs in the big metropolitan areas. Thus regardless of whether their motives were based on subjective or external factors the overriding reason to go to dust seemed to link to a desire to externalize their gender and sexual identities.

The LGBT community is of great significance to the thoughts, actions and lifestyles of these children, especially transgenders. The solidarity and empathy within the community is the backbone that supports street children both mentally and financially. This is the only space they can confirm their sexual orientation, live true to themselves and find the peers’ respect. A school offered by the “collecting” policy, therefore, cannot replace the street community that means a lot to them.

However, the street children community is also loose and unstable due to the move of individuals. Children also face risks of sexual abuse and involvement in illegal acts. Living in a relatively close and isolated community, being inexperienced, many children use stimulants or injure themselves (cutting wrist, committing suicide) when they have to face conflicts and crises. LGBT is the most vulnerable group of street children.

LGBT street children is composed of many sub-groups with different sexual identities, different living circumstances, and thus peculiar risks apart from common risks of the street life.

The MTF transgenders usually stay at home, facing no difficulties in meeting everyday needs of meals and shelter. However, because their families did not accept their sexual orientation, they had to approach the street community and gradually detached themselves from family life

and spent more time for the street life. They are subject to stigma and discrimination due to gender expressions, especially in job opportunities, so they had little chance later on to lead a financially independent life.

Gays and male bisexuals who earned living by commercial sex usually did so as a result of family difficulties, so most of them maintain a close connection with their families. They rented house by months and led an ordered life compared to other sub-groups. However, they usually lived with their partner, or in very small group, so got little support from friends. Many of them suffered from hunger when income decreased.

Majority of those who constantly moved without stable jobs and shelters were lesbians and female bisexuals. They faced hardships everyday. For those who went to dust, life spent in the streets and public parks were full of hazards: irregular meals and shifting sleeping places, lack of health care, constant threat of violence and harassment, potential dangers of HIV and other diseases. Experiences of sexual violence and harassment were common among specific group of LGBTs, for example a number of lesbians were subjected to sexual harassment or assault by 'regular' males in search of 'new sensation,' believing that lesbians were still 'intact' or 'hardly used.' Transgenders were often harassed because of their outward appearances.

An important finding was that LGBT children whose gender expressions are peculiar like *bi*, *sec-bi* and MTF transgenders were often subject to discriminatory treatment by the police and civil defense force, who regarded them as 'risky' elements or elements 'at risk.' This was caused mainly by their 'queer' visibility through their way of dressing, hairstyle, body language, etc. In the eyes of local authorities they were 'suspect' individuals, liable to commit crimes such as prostitution, theft or acts of swindling.

While the problem of not carrying identification papers was the main cause that got them into trouble with the police, seen from LGBTs' position this was a deliberate choice for self protection. Not carrying an ID card could save them the problem of having it stolen or having it confiscated (by the local police). Then they would have to apply for a new ID with all the hassles involved, like having to explain their 'biological' nature or reveal family connections—something they tried to avoid, fearing that the police might try to contact their families thus making their existence even more precarious.

It should be added that 'queer visibility' as shown, for example, by MTF transgenders, *bi* and *sec-bi* individuals often created unfavorable impressions and even open hostility among ordinary people in the predominantly 'straight' society. This situation not only reinforced deeply rooted social prejudices, but also made it even more difficult for members of these groups to gain access to the job market and secure basic social and health services. In the context of this assessment, a large number of interviewed lesbians and transgenders ended up selling their bodies to survive.

The assessment was also able to highlight how experiences of 'going dust' interact with those of developing sexual orientation and affirming gender identity in a number of LGBT. For them, going dust was the only sensible solution to resolve family pressure and relieve social stigmas in order to 'live true to themselves.' For those from small towns or rural areas, Ho Chi Minh City with its relative openness was a magnet that irresistibly attracted them. Coming to the great metropolis was truly a liberating experience. There they were able to integrate themselves into a large network of fellow LGBTs, and gain access to a wealth of information in naming and

recognizing gender particularities including their own, hoping to make a fresh start with all the available ‘freedoms’ and inherent risks that exist.

This assessment was able to highlight opinions and attitudes of the parents themselves and other social gate-keepers. Among parents who did not accept same-sex orientation, the reason given was that homosexuality was a ‘vice,’ a ‘disease’ that had to be rid of. Even among the small minority of parents who more or less ‘accepted’ their children’s gender identity, they tended to regard these sexual preferences as a ‘misguided choice,’ hoping one day their children would change their course and ‘return to normalcy.’ Thus family reactions to children’s non-hetero orientations were bound to have a considerable impact on children’s psychological and physiological well-being.

A common belief among gatekeepers was that homosexual practices are undesirable because they would have an adverse effect on the continuation of the individual family and the stability of the population of the nation as a whole. Regarding the question of ‘rights,’ participants including gatekeepers indicated that they were aware of children’s rights, including the rights to express their opinions and to express their gender identity. But in real life situations LGBT children often had to negotiate with other social players, often at a disadvantage. At the family level they felt being oppressed because of parental objection to their gender identity/sexual orientations, without being given a chance of a meaningful dialogue. In local communities they also had to bear the brunt of ridicule and carry stigmas from neighbors and schoolmates. When the situation became desperate they had to relinquish the family’s protective shield in exchange for the rights to live according to their gender and sexual identities, hence the decision to ‘go to dust.’ Yet in the wider social environment of the big city they were to face new realities, and had to make new readjustments in order to live out their aspirations. In this second round they were again subjected to the same prejudices and discrimination, and denied access to basic social and health care.

From a theoretical perspective, this assessment made a contribution to the subjects of LGBT and street communities in urban studies.

It is remarkable that the LGBT community in Vietnam in general and LGBT children in particular, share a common global language in designating particularities in the realm of gender identities and sexual orientations. For example they have invented a Vietnamese version of original English slang terms to depict lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender identities. The participants who took part in this assessment made up an interesting, variegated group; thanks to them we were able to catch more than a glimpse of the complexities inherent in the process of development, recognition and conversion of same-sex orientations that were inextricably linked with notions of masculinity and femininity and gender relations in the socio-cultural specific context of Vietnam. Another important contribution of this assessment was offering a new and flexible look at the phenomenon of ‘*đi bụi*.’ While the official policy of *thu gom* [‘collecting’] might help reduce the phenomenon of sleeping rough in public spaces, it created new risks for the personal safety of young street people, especially LGBT children.

It is noteworthy that despite family and social maltreatment and discrimination, young LGBT proved to be resilient. Far from being passive, pitiful victims, they were able to exert a high degree of agency in making choices, in asserting their own sense of gender identity and/or sexual orientation and in shaping their social relations in a volatile city environment. In the end it is the

strength of self-confidence and perseverance that helps them as homosexual individuals to survive in a predominantly homophobic society.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on our working experience with a number of street children self identified as LGBT in this assessment, we propose some practical intervention programs for promotion and protection of the rights of LGBT children in Vietnam as follows:

Building capacity and supporting the LGBT street children community: Establish close relationship within the LGBT street children community, training these children so as to improve their awareness and enable them to transfer the knowledge to the community; providing them with information of social support to ensure their rights

Reducing the rate of children leaving home: improving the communication on LGBT for those in need can access information and be supported; enhance the communication work towards families and schools for them to understand LGBT correctly; supporting counseling services for families to keep children stay home or return home.

Prioritizing certain social supports: Establishing networks of psychological support and crisis management; selecting core members of the community to be frontline counselors who will connect their peers to in-depth supporting services.

Creating an environment that recognize minority groups: raising public awareness on LGBT, especially in families, schools and workplaces; increase communication and advocacy for LGBT rights, raising awareness of policy implementers on rights and sexual diversity.

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