

# The Ongoing Struggle for LGBTQ Equality in Vietnam

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**LGBTQ rights in Vietnam have improved in recent years, but traditional social norms and stigmas still make life difficult for queer individuals in the country.**

“Everyone push together, please! Make room for each other!” the organisers shout above the chatter of over a thousand people cramming into a hotel ballroom clearly too small for their number. It’s mild chaos as they rush to find somewhere to sit or stand, and all free space in the room quickly disappears.

Although squashed together, the attendees of the final day of VietPride 2017: Saigon in late September are excited and enthusiastic. Waving rainbow flags and sporting matching face paint, the young crowd—most of whom appear to be under the age of 30—cheer the oncoming acts on stage: dance groups are followed by same-sex couples playing games of “how well do you know your partner?”, the US ambassador to Vietnam introduces his husband and gives an uplifting speech in broken Vietnamese, and drag queens, in dazzling attire, march proudly up and down the room.

With its over-the-top colours and styles, VietPride’s big day is living up to the expectations of any gay pride event around the world, but behind the scenes, the organisers are becoming increasingly anxious. The venue’s lack of space has forced attendees to congregate at the front of the hotel while waiting for the upcoming street parade. The crowd has attracted the attention of the authorities, who have threatened to shut down the entire event. It’s a situation the organisers are already familiar with, having experiencing something similar just two days ago.

“The Rainbow Night [musical show] was cut short by the police,” says one of VietPride’s organisers, Nguyen Thien Tri Phong, a project assistant from the Ho Chi Minh City-based lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) rights group Information, Connecting and Sharing (ICS). “They cut the music midway through, even after we showed them the permits, saying they would punish [fine] us, and the venue we hired too, if we didn’t go home. They gave some vague reasons, like they were worried we were going to spread ‘bad propaganda’.”

## Progress?

On paper, the last decade has brought big changes for Vietnam’s LGBTQ community. Headlines in the international media paint an image of a more progressive country, decriminalising same-sex weddings (even though legal recognition of same-sex marriages or civil unions has not yet materialised) and allowing those who have undergone gender-affirming surgery to legally register under their assigned gender. These developments are even more pronounced when compared to Vietnam’s neighbours—such as Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia—where restrictions range from laws forbidding male-on-male sex, to the public floggings of alleged homosexuals.

Although the communist country is often lambasted for its woeful human rights and free speech records, Vietnam has sometimes been portrayed as a shining light for LGBTQ equality in Southeast

Asia.

“Back in 2007, LGBTQ people were considered a social evil, a bad influence or a disease which could be fixed,” says Vuong Kha Phong, an LGBTQ Rights Program Officer for the Institute of Study, Economics and the Environment (iSEE). This largely changed via the Internet, which offered a space for LGBTQ people to share stories and compare ideas. From there, friendships and communities evolved into groups that organised and steadily worked their way into the public eye. “It happened from the bottom up, starting from the community, then the public, and then the government.

“LGBTQ issues are often seen in the government’s eyes as peaceful—it’s not politically sensitive for them. We don’t want to fight or to start a revolution, so they are often supportive or ready to listen to us.”

We recently had a suicide of a young transgender guy because he couldn’t handle the pressure of his family telling him to dress up ‘normally’, as a girl

Vietnam’s LGBTQ movement has come a long way in a short time. But despite progress on the legal front, LGBTQ people in Vietnam still face widespread discrimination and harassment, often stemming from social stigmas. At home, at school and at work, people who are openly gay or transgender face daily reminders that they are somehow “different”, or living outside of acceptable social norms. “There are strict gender roles placed on the male and the female [in Vietnam],” says Vuong. “The male has to be strong; he has to be the breadwinner. He has to get a wife and be financially reliable. The female has to bear children, she has to have a family, she has to listen to the husband.

“We see a lot of problems, especially for young transgender people. They dress as their gender identity and face a lot of abuse—verbal abuse—from their family and their friends. We recently had a suicide of a young transgender guy because he couldn’t handle the pressure of his family telling him to dress up ‘normally’, as a girl. It’s very upsetting.”

### **At home, in school, at work**

Bullying against LGBTQ students remains rampant in Vietnam’s schools. Over 70% of gay or transgender high school students surveyed in 2016 said they had suffered from physical and/or verbal abuse. The problem runs deeper than childish or adolescent teasing, as there are few incentives among educational establishments to teach inclusivity or offer information on different sexual orientations. Many LGBTQ students drop out of school early as a result.

These attitudes often continue into the workplace, with few domestic businesses are wary of hiring openly LGBTQ employees. There are also currently no provisions in Vietnam’s Labour Code to prevent discriminatory employment policies. Studies show that many gay men and women choose to remain closeted so as not to draw attention or ire from their colleagues.

Even gay or gay-friendly bars are often hesitant to make their support for the LGBTQ community widely known. “Our Rainbow Night—a very peaceful musical night—was cut short by the police just because it was LGBTQ-themed,” says Nguyen. “Make that comparison to a local business, and they wouldn’t stand a chance. If you market [your establishment] as a gay bar the authorities will notice you and that might make a lot of people afraid, not to mention the fuss you’ll get [from the authorities]. They can just come to your place and ask for a bribe or give you a hard time.”

These problems are magnified in provinces outside of the country’s urban centres. Over 60 million people—about two-thirds of Vietnam’s total population—live in more conservative rural areas, which the largely urban-based LGBTQ groups struggle to reach. “A lot of our resources and a lot of our

events are happening in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City or Danang,” says Vuong. “So the people living in other far away provinces don’t really have access to resources or information.”

“Oftentimes, [LGBTQ activists] from the cities go to the provinces, but they don’t listen to us. To them, LGBTQ rights are pretty much a Western value or ideology—they say that in Vietnam we don’t have LGBTQ people; we don’t have these Western values.”

The thing that will change their minds is the personal stories—of their friends, of their families, of their neighbours—who are LGBTQ

Targeting the rural areas has become one of the focal points for LGBTQ activism in Vietnam, a goal aided by the economic growth the country has experienced in recent years. The boom in urbanisation has led to more people moving from the provinces to the cities, where they come into contact with established support and advocacy groups. They later bring the knowledge that they’ve picked up back to their hometowns, thus extending the reach of these city-dwelling groups.

“I think this is crucial to the movement... if we want to target people who are living far away,” says Vuong. “The thing that will change their minds is the personal stories—of their friends, of their families, of their neighbours—who are LGBTQ.”

### **The challenge of organising**

There has been tangible progress in advancing the cause, but LGBTQ activists are quick to acknowledge that the nuts and bolts of Vietnam’s legal statutes still presents a major obstacle.

Although LGBTQ groups aim to work with, rather than protest, the government’s authority, the movement is still a challenge to the status quo. The country’s authoritarian system—which curtails the ability of advocacy groups to increase public visibility or organise properly—essentially hobbles the movement’s long-term progress. “In Vietnam we don’t really have freedom of speech, we don’t have freedom of association or of assembly,” says Vuong. “LGBTQ groups still can’t legally register, they can’t legally march, they can’t legally protest. So a lot of legal framework prohibits the LGBTQ groups [which] can’t really develop into an organisation or an institute without the law allowing them.”

Events such as VietPride are a very recent occurrence. While officially permitted, large assemblies of people remain a contentious issue for the local authorities, and continue to run into difficulties on the street level. “We’ve been ‘pinged’ by the authorities since 2015,” says Nguyen. “VietPride [that year] attracted thousands of people in a public space, and they were afraid of large gatherings. As a result, in 2016 we couldn’t hire any outdoor public space whatsoever! There’s no document or order prohibiting the event, but the authorities could be interfering ‘behind the scenes’ so that every location is scared of having us.”

### **Getting bigger every year**

As one of 2017’s main VietPride events draws to a close, the attendees proceed outside; despite the threat of police closure, the street parade is about to go ahead as scheduled. For about an hour, hundreds of people, making show of support for LGBTQ equality, parade up and down the main boulevard in Vietnam’s biggest city. This is something which would have been unheard of in Vietnam barely a decade ago.

The community is still very much in a nascent stage, working to change entrenched societal norms and a conservative legal system. It’ll be a long, uphill battle, but despite the obstacles, LGBTQ activists remain cautiously optimistic, and hopeful that the networks which have been established

will allow the movement to gather momentum.

“We do have a good position; we have a good foundation,” says Vuong. “There are a lot of the community-based groups all over Vietnam... which I think is a good foundation for the movement. It is getting bigger and bigger every year.”

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**Calum Stuart** is a Scottish-Welsh journalist who was previously the Vietnam correspondent for Thomson Reuters based in Ho Chi Minh City and briefly a copy editor at the Democratic Voice of Burma in Chiang Mai. He has worked in both print and broadcast journalism.

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