

Trong mắt tôi

In my eyes

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FOREWORD

When faced with difficulties, we – transgender people – often remind ourselves that: *"We have to survive!"*, that we will overcome them, and that those are just trivial things compared to hardships of others.

Some of us have already quit, giving up the desire to lead our own longed-for life.

Some struggled on, only to look back insightfully how we managed to make it.

Therein lies not only our moments of despair and hardship, but also how radical changes crop up for the better. Upon having the opportunity to appear in newspapers, attend conferences and public events to share our own stories, not only do we each become more self-confident, but we are much more cared and supported as well.

In the making of this photo book, we were often asked judgmentally: *"What are the photos for?"* Our reply *"To send to newspapers."* was met with *"What's the damn use of you gangs appearing in newspapers?"* To be honest, we do not ask for anything special but a stable job and bare essentials to make ends meet. However, life is not a heaven on earth. Try as hard as we might, we still need the society to understand and respect us, especially create equal career opportunities for us.

This photo book, voices of insiders, harbours our dream of sharing and helping everybody understand and get proper perspectives on transgender people. Long may our life be easier and better worth living.

PORTRAITS



Cat Thy ***(MTF)***
She is living in District 8, Ho Chi Minh City. She is a self-employed circus performer, following touring music groups of her transgender friends. They often perform at parties, funerals or weddings. She can also do the make-up and sing.



Lam Thanh Vinh ***(MTF)***
She is nicknamed Lo Lo. She is a peer educator, founder and operator of *"Living My Life"*, providing information about HIV/AIDS prevention and sexual heath for LGBT community.



Yuki ***(Ai My - MTF)***
She is now living with her family in Phu Nhuan District. She does not have a stable job. She is self-employed and helps her family with domestic sales.

Trong mắt tôi

In my eyes



My transgender friends and I set up a group of singing-performing circus. We are skilled at *acro dance, object manipulation* (table, bicycle), and *balancing* (using mouth to hold a table's leg and keep it balanced). I have been practising for over one year. I am adept at object manipulation, burning joss stick or coal swallowing, fire breathing,… I can also take the place of a speaker at the show, each of which I am paid from 400,000 to 500,000 VND. Our group perform at various places: funerals, birthday parties, weddings, death anniversaries, etc.

When I started doing the job, I got badly burnt and grievously wounded. Now I'm accustomed to it. The audience like to see such extreme acts rather than singing, which annoys the neighbours and gets us scolded.

Photo by a friend of Cat Thy







Xi Teen had just done her make-up, waiting for her turn to appear on the stage at a birthday party. She's a member of our circus. She's also the breadwinner, earning income to feed her big family. She was sad because it had been raining that night. There was a poor turnout at the party and she had to wait at length. At such ones, singers like Xi Teen have to do as they are asked so as to get bonus. As for her, Xi Teen is in a four-year course of hormone therapy and medication for sex reassignment surgery.

Photo by Cat Thy





Bong Bay, a MTF, lives with her family in a small boat anchored near Chanh Hung Bridge, District 8, Ho Chi Minh City, nearby which unemployed transgender people like her often gather. She doesn't have a stable job and is on the dole. Whenever she applies for a job, she is rejected because of her transgender identity. Her good sense of humour seems to redeem her misfortune. This photo was taken when she was doing her make-up to hang out, or simply wander around pubs and music coffee shops nearby. She will do any jobs to earn money. *"If I don't have anything to do tonight, I will starve tomorrow."*

Photo by Cat Thy



We often call them “Bong Men”, who are in teens, intelligent and love to help the elders. She is Bong Men, 14 years old, lives in District 6, Ho Chi Minh City. She can do both the hairdressing and make-up very well. She joins the circus to help us with such stuff and sometimes get paid. Transgender people often express their identity early on.

In the picture, Bong Men is doing hair for two sisters Truc Lam – Truc Linh, also transgender, before a show at a funeral in Dam Sen, Ho Chi Minh City.

Photo by Cat Thy



To Phuong Nhi is singing at a birthday party near Pham Van Hai Market, Tan Binh District. She's 22 years old, Miss Angel of a transgender beauty contest in Ho Chi Minh City. Her family supports and accepts her identity. She is also a member of our circus. She is smart and owns a beautiful voice, so she is frequently invited to perform.

"Attendees don't often notice us singing but enjoy the parties. Only when there are requests from them do we get paid."

To Phuong Nhi used to major in Tour Guide, but she quit out of unsuitability.

Photo by Cat Thy



I took this picture at a birthday party of Jessica (25 years old) in October 2012. She is highly spoken of among LGBT community in Ho Chi Minh City.

On her birthday, she also shared information on HIV prevention in the community, attracting many transgender attendees. It was also a chance for them to meet and connect with one another through music and fashion performances. Such occasions are becoming less frequent on account of authorised permission, organization and finance from transgender members.

Photo by Lo Lo



I snapped this away at a sharing session on HIV prevention and sexual health in mid-March of 2013 by G3VN and The Boy.

The model in the picture is Nha Ky – most MTFs use female names in everyday life. Nha Ky, 23 years old, is performing at a catwalk show with self-confidence, in front of self-absorbed audience. Such events have often been combined with music and fashion shows by transgender groups in so far as they are the most long-waited for.

Photo by Lo Lo




WWW.G3VN.VN






Happy Birthday
Jessica


Fresh
& Cool


G3 Quán
Thiêm



Some of my friends, who are peer educators on sexual health, and I invest in a small café, teaching cookery and creating career opportunities for our transgender friends. The café is small but warm, a small home for us to gather and share our life.

Photo by Lo Lo



My name's Yuki. I'm 20 years old. I live in Phu Nhuan District, Ho Chi Minh City. I help my aunt sell such snacks as *bot chien* (fried rice flour cake) and *ca vien chien* (fired fish balls). The café opens late at night, so my aunt often takes her children with her for care and let them play nearby. After tidying up and doing the washing-up, I get them to sleep, waiting for their parents to close the café and go home, ending a hard long working day.

Photo by a friend of Yuki (Tra My)



After helping my aunt with the sales till midnight, I get up at 4 o'clock in the morning to help my mother deliver newspapers to nearby news-stands. I'm always happy to help my mom every morning, and then I take my niece to school. The girl sits behind, and her young brother wants to go together for fun.

After appearing in the video clip "Pe De" made by ICS Center, I am known by more people, I more often teased, but I feel very happy. I wish to expose all my very day-to-day routines so that everybody understands I am as humane as all others.

Photo by a friend of Yuki (Tra My)





My friends and I are enjoying ourselves at Quan Khu 7 swimming pool. The place is very friendly and unprejudiced against LGBT, so it attracts a lot of people in the community. However, we don't always have a chance to buy ticket to get there. Sometimes and only when there are few people can we come. The pool used to be well attended. Unfortunately, some customer's scandals caused negative repercussions on LGBT community, making us uncomfortable to go in groups.

Photo by a friend of Yuki (Tra My)



My group is having fun by a lesser-known riverside of SaiGon River, Bach Dang Harbour. We use a rope tied to the river bank as a lifebuoy. This is the place where we often visit either when we can't afford the tickets or when we want to go in groups. There, we are not discriminated or pried into our private life. Because the wind is quite strong, we keep our outfit when going under water.

Photo by a friend of Yuki (Tra My)





Same as many other MTF friends', my hair needs utmost care in that it expresses cogently the femininity, the gentleness of a female. I can wear my hair in plaits or any styles myself.

The day I went to renew my identity card, the police asked me to get my hair cut so that it matches my biology sex in the birth certificate. I walked away, leaving it unfinished. My hair must be untouched, or just kill me!

Photo by Yuki





Bo, 18 years old, is my neighbour. In the daytime she works for a coffee and tea shop nearby. At night, she makes up herself, dresses beautifully and waits for being called to perform in the circus. Bo likes gathering around her friends, hanging out, performing in female clothes and living true to herself. She doesn't like being snapped in male outfit.

Bo wishes someday she can set up a small café together with her transgender friends to settle and earn more income.

Photo by Yuki (Tra My)



Bo is crying in her hands. Her partner and she have been cohabitating for 4 years. Their relationship has just been exposed to their family. Bo was retained. On hearing the news, we came and try to comfort him, but sadly we didn't know how to. We only looked at her house across the river, feeling in depth of despair. I was deeply sad when I took this picture. Many families don't accept their transgender child, attempting to abandon her.

Photy by: Yuki (Tra My)



Huynh Thi Ngoc Linh ***(Lesbian)***
She is a staff member of Hard Rock Café. She leads an easy life with her family and her partner in Binh Tan District, Ho Chi Minh City. She is also an enthusiastic collaborator of ICS Center.



Luong The Huy
Technical Office of iSEE
(The Institute for Studies of Society, Economics and Environment)
The Huy graduated from the University of Law in Ho Chi Minh City. He is truly dedicated to human rights promotion and advocacy of transgender community. From January 2011 to April 2013, Huy was a project officer of ICS Center.



Đinh Hồng Hạnh
Project Office of ICS Center
After graduating from the University of Law in Ho Chi Minh City, she works as a project officer, promoting and protecting human rights for transgender people.


ICS
www.ics.org.vn
www.facebook.com/icsvn



I'm working for Hard Rock Café, an exclusive place whose principle is celebrate diversity and identity, respect the staff's being themselves. Among my colleagues, I'm impressed by Sammy, a member of LGBT community. She always feels comfortable and free to express herself when working here. Sammy likes dressing beautifully before every shift. Friendly and happy she is with colleagues and customers. Through an image of beauty and optimism, I hope she can show the self-confidence of transgender people when they are respected by the society and work in an open and safe environment.

Photo by Huynh Thi Ngoc Linh



This captured Sammy before her shift at Hard Rock Café in Ho Chi Minh City (mid-May, 2013).

About 27 years of age, Sammy often puts on light make-up to be more attractive and confident. Being in such an open and comfortable working environment at Hard Rock Café, where everyone is free to express themselves, she is always perfectly content and excited at her job.

Photo by Huynh Thi Ngoc Linh



- What is your innermost desire?
- Should I have enough money, I will build a worship place, to worship my parents and Buddha.

Photo by Luong The Huy



She is strong, independent, outspoken and utterly determined. Yet, her strength has nothing to do with her male body. On the contrary, it has brought out the best in her as a strong female.

Photo by Luong The Huy





Gia Dinh Park is a place that many people prefer to come and play when the night falls. Most transgender people have to be independent early in their lives and more mature than their real age. Notwithstanding, once in the park, they feel free to play all kid's stuff. There doesn't seem to be much discrimination here, or perhaps it was just because I was overcome with their happiness that I didn't even notice other things.

Photo by Luong The Huy



It was midnight and I asked if there was a place to shelter from the rain. They took me to a soya milk inn right at the corner of the street. We sat under the eaves, enjoying cold milk in the middle of the night and share one another the stories only expected to be told after 12. Those went on and on, without much laughter or teasing, and were grief-stricken and elongated like the rain.

Photo by Luong The Huy



The Sing Together Café was poorly attended with only a few regular guests and transgender groups. Just order some drinks and you have a shelter to stay overnight. The way they took turns to sing, chose their songs and sang convinced me that they'd sung those many times, in exactly that order, with those jokes.

Yet I could feel their free minds. While transgender people usually make use of their beautiful voice to get paid, now their paying to sing for themselves can also be a satisfactory way to be happy.

Photo by Luong The Huy





Photo by Luong The Huy





Some all too real stories were told at the cramped and damp corners under some bridges or in sparse parks. As for The Huy, at such time, there was no room for business, but for friends to confide in each other.

Having been advocating for the community, only in those times, nights invading, could he actually sense the deepest whispered confidence and the truly genuine moments of transgender people.

Photo by Luong The Huy





Cat Thy was being interviewed about her photos at the *"Mot Toi Khac"* exhibition (Another Version of Me), supported by iSEE, ICS and more than 13 NGOs. She, along with many of her transgender friends, was telling her very own life through the snaps. This was the second time she'd been to Hanoi. Without any personal papers identical to her identity and expression, Cat Thy was not able to fly from Saigon to Hanoi and had to go by train.

Photo by Luong The Huy



Jessica (MTF, Ho Chi Minh City) and many other transgender friends gave their speech at the National Conference of LGBT Community held by ICS in 2013. Through beautiful paintings, she talked about the burning desire to live true to herself and wished that the law and society would recognize transgender community.

Photo by Dinh Hong Hanh



Two FTMs, on behalf of trans men groups in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, raised their voice at the National Conference of LGBT Community held by ICS in 2013.

Photo by Dinh Hong Hanh

VietPride is a series of events celebrating the presence and pride of LGBT community in Vietnam, taking place simultaneously in August 2013 at 14 provinces and big cities. In Ho Chi Minh City, transgender people from Tiffany's group had a passionate night of splendid fashion shows. These moments were captured when they were 'burning themselves' at the shows in the warm welcome from friends in the community and attendees. Tiffany's group takes charge of many shows in community events as well as performs in other bars. They are full of happiness in precious moments when they can be themselves and entirely devote to their avid passion for art.

Photo by ICS Center









Photo by ICS Center





Photo by ICS Center


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Photo by ICS Center

TRANSGENDER PEOPLE IN VIETNAM

Transgender persons have been documented in many indigenous, Western, and Eastern cultures and societies from antiquity until the present day. However, the estimated percentage of transgender population at 1-2% may vary from country to country due to the fact that stigma and discrimination towards transgender individuals have still persisted without adequate support ensured.

In Vietnam, the existence of transgender persons from previous eras has also been recorded by some studies. Since 2000 there have been webforums for Vietnamese transgender, providing much safer spaces for sharing and support within their own communities as compared to hardships outside the Internet.

When the LGBT rights movement started in the country in 2008, transgender community became a part of this movement as they all share the need to dialogue, increase public awareness and reduce stigma against sexual minorities. Activities specifically targeted transgender rights have been conducted at the same time, including the 2012 conference "Aspiration to be yourself", presenting first-ever research about Vietnamese transgender people and where transgender laws on identity change were mentioned and shared with lawmakers in Vietnam for the first time in history.

"My childhood was a time of dreary days. Every days of schooling posed threats of being teased by friends. I was subjected to name-calling, jokes, bullies at my expense."

Study on "Sitgma, discrimination and violence towards LGBTI at school" (CCIHP, 2011)



Transgender people typically express a strong desire to live as the other gender. They could be, therefore, subjected to outward and severe kinds of discrimination. Discrimination comes at many levels: family, neighbors, school, and the society.



When transgender people finally come to terms with their gender, many wish to change their names. Names on ID papers not matching gender expressions caused much trouble for them in everyday life.



According to a study by iSEE, employment has been one of the biggest challenges these people face. Stigmatized views of transgender persons as 'sick', 'following trends' or 'criminals' prevent them from seeking jobs. Some had temporary jobs in street food stalls or private businesses, and most of them had to leave after a while due to bias and stigma at work. Furthermore, stigma often stems from intolerance in their own families, exposing them to a total disregard of their study and career paths. Employment opportunities shrink in consequence of lack of family support and formal education.



Health is another major difficulty, especially when it comes to their sex change. Currently, there have been no health care facilities being allowed to carry out sex change procedures for transgender persons. Receiving hormone treatments and operations without any professional consultation has put their health and well-being at great risks.

"Many male-to-female transgender persons didn't dare to go out during daytime since they feared curious looks of people. This has become something of a ritual in these people's lives: They sleep during the day, put on their make-up and go out at night, hang out in parks with other transgender persons, or do sex work."

Study on "Aspiration to be yourself: life and legal issues of transgender people" (iSEE, 2012)

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