

# Pride Guide | Laos



The Australian Volunteers Program strives to provide a safe, supportive and equitable environment for LGBTIQ+ volunteers, approved accompanying dependents, partner organisations and all program staff. The Australian Volunteers Program has supported volunteers with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) in all program countries and has ongoing connections with community organisations in almost every country we work in.

Diverse SOGIESC program participants must be aware of the country context before undertaking an assignment. This guide is designed to introduce some key issues related to people with diverse SOGIESC and their participation in the program.

## If you are a volunteer with diverse SOGIESC, you will need to:

- Do your own research. You will be required to follow the local laws, even if you disagree with them.
- Understand what the local law says you can and can't do when in-country;
- Be aware of what the legal protections are for LGBTIQ+ people in your destinations;
- Consider whether or not you are comfortable living and working in a place where you may be discriminated against and unable to live as openly as you can in some parts of Australia.

## Language

Terminology may differ across urban and rural contexts, and across provinces or ethnic and cultural groups. Information sourced online can be outdated or inaccurate. For current and accurate information, please confirm with an appropriate diverse SOGIESC Civil Society Organisation (CSO) or ask your in-country team.

There is little information on the language used by and for diverse SOGIESC communities in Laos. The term LGBTIQ+ may not be appropriate, particularly when talking to government officials, who associate this initialism with Western ideology.

## Legal and policy context

Same-sex sexual acts have never been criminalised in Laos. However, same-sex marriage and civil unions are not recognised by the state and there are laws and policies that discriminate against diverse SOGIESC communities. Government policy that recognises diverse SOGIESC communities is almost exclusively focused on HIV/AIDS services, where transgender women and men who have sex with men (MSM) are identified as at-risk groups.

Activists who want to reform the current policy landscape feel they are unable to speak directly to the government. Instead, they seek international support to advocate for the community and encourage the government to understand the issues people with diverse SOGIESC face.

## Discrimination

No legal protections exist for people with diverse SOGIESC in Laos. This includes a lack of constitutional protections and national laws against SOGIESC discrimination, laws that protect against SOGIESC discrimination in employment, and laws that protect against hate crimes, incitement to hatred, violence or discrimination based on one's SOGIESC.

One study found that bisexual and lesbian workers who did not reveal their sexuality did not face issues in the workplace, but knowledge of their sexuality could lead to harassment and termination of employment.<sup>1</sup> Gay men and trans men faced hostility in the workplace and transgender women faced severe harassment.<sup>2</sup> In lowland Laos, despite growing tolerance, most diverse SOGIESC individuals do not apply for government or high-level private sector jobs, because they believe employers will be unwilling to hire them based on their SOGIESC.<sup>3</sup>

## Cultural and societal attitudes

In Laos, the predominant religion is Theravada Buddhism, which is practiced by more than 70% of the population. Theravada Buddhism does not hold explicit ideas about one's gender or sexual orientation, however, some sources note that religion plays a role in shaping negative attitudes towards diverse SOGIESC people.<sup>4</sup>

Laos is a patriarchal society, and marriage and traditional family values are viewed as important to the economic prosperity of the family unit. With 60% of the population dependent on agriculture, there are strong gender divisions based on the farming roles of people assigned female at birth and people assigned male at birth. Diverse SOGIESC children and youth have a difficult time sharing their identities with their families, and many community members hold negative stereotypes about people with diverse SOGIESC.

The government has recently become more open to allowing CSOs to work on diverse SOGIESC issues. Proud To Be Us, the only CSO working on diverse SOGIESC rights in Laos, organised the first pride event in 2017.

## Health and wellbeing

All Lao citizens can access health care for a small out-of-pocket payment, and poorer households identified by their village chief are exempt from payments. However, a person can only access this care if they have an identity card, posing barriers to transgender communities who do not identify with their gender assigned at birth. Fear of stigmatisation and discrimination also limit the diverse SOGIESC community's access to health services, and many within the community do not know where to go to access healthcare.

The government recognises MSM and transgender women as key risk populations for HIV/AIDS. Lesbian and trans men have access to general health care, but not specific care for HIV and sexually transmitted infection (STI).

Gender affirming surgery is not possible in Laos, so some transgender women travel to Thailand for surgery. Diverse SOGIESC groups in Laos identify the barriers to accessing healthcare as poverty, discriminatory behaviour by healthcare professionals and lack of SOGIESC-specific knowledge and care from healthcare professionals.

Most schools in Laos teach life skills to students, including lessons on HIV/AIDS, reproductive health, STIs, gender equality and violence in relationships, but without mention of the rights of the SOGIESC community.



1 APCOM, The State of LGBTQI People's Economic Inclusion. Lao PDR (Bangkok: APCOM, 2020).

2 Ibid

3 Bureau of Democracy Human Rights and Labor, Laos 2013 Human Rights Report (Washington: United States Department of State, 2013), 22.

4 APCOM, The State of LGBTQI People's Economic Inclusion, 11.