Guangxi, China: Under the same sky, we shared such a glittering evening

By Zhen Xin/China Correspondent

It is all crammed with guests in Oct 28th’s Chun Ai Club, where a grand evening show was given by cooperation under Guangxi Kangxing Association, Guangxi CDC, Shanshui Qinghua, Guangxi Yangguang Group, Marie Stopes, Doctors Without Borders and the club itself. This theme show, intending to break the traditional lecture-style HIV/AIDS knowledge preaching, won great praises from the audience.

The performance named “Under The Same Sky” officially kicked off at 10:30 p.m. by a Egyptian Dance, featuring a Cleopatra-dressed boy sexily dancing with her gorgeous blue dresses waving in the night. Followed came a health-related comedy, Go for a doctor, by the most popular performer Ms. Bread and Minaco. Thundering laughter were repeatedly prevalent in the air.

A music drama, drunken queen, was definitely another climax maker in the night, dressing in Tan Dynasty robes, the queen and maid’s breath-taking beauty was stunning and led entire audience into another wonderland. Another highlight is the HIV-prevention theme game, which successfully intrigued most audience in HIV/AIDS awareness. “Does HIV equals to AIDS?” This quiz led to many discussions and the final solution gave the audience a nodding experience.

An interesting game from Marie Stopes and Doctors Without Borders called “Condom the beer bottle” triggered another wave of public participation, in which the winner prize would go to someone who single-handedly wear condom on the bottle in the correct way. The game “Jigsaw Puzzle”, which was to complete anatomical male-genitals picture, also received huge applauds and laughs. The prize, including HIV/AIDS knowledge brochure, condoms, pendants and fluffy toys, along with club’s beer promotion, definitely made the participants more satisfied.

Xiao Le and Xiao Xi, two regular clients of the bar, found tonight’s activity very unique: other than the routine nightclub dances and songs, today’s fun games also made them learn a lot of health knowledge. On the spot, fifty-six straight campus volunteers from Marie Stopes caught some attention, as well. The leader of this volunteer team, Xiao Xin, came with his girlfriend. In their eyes, the only distinction between gays and straights was the sexual orientation, and nothing else.

One official from Guangxi Redcross, Lan Fang stated, according to previous data, MSM community’s HIV/AIDS prevention could have a direct and profound impact on the whole picture.

This event is also the first-time gathering of Nanning’s MSM-related organizations. According to feedbacks after the evening, this form could effectively target at the community and boost the HIV prevention awareness. The solitary force of Redcross and CDC might not be sufficient, then with the co-operation of other organizations, we will absolutely make a difference.
Cambodia: Meeting the real inner needs of MSM

Written by Meghan Lewis
Collected by Mey Sovannara/Cambodia Khmer
HIV/AIDS NGO Alliance

HIV prevention for MSM in Cambodia has started, developed and improved in recent years, but how much impact can HIV prevention efforts have on reducing the rate of new infections when society consistently marginalizes MSM through stigmatization and discrimination?

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs illustrates for us the order in which people require to have their needs met. Basic physiological processes such as breathing, eating and sleeping are of paramount importance. If an individual does not have these basic needs met, s/he will be unlikely to give other concerns the same level of importance.

For example, if someone is worried about whether or not they will have food in the foreseeable future, they are less likely to worry about risk resulting from unsafe sex that may affect them in the future. In fact, using this model, Maslow argues that an individual must have their physiological, safety and belonging needs met before they will be able to address their esteem needs. Low self-esteem has been attributed as a major factor in risky sexual behavior— if someone has low self-esteem, they may not care enough about their lives to protect themselves from the risks of HIV.

In 2003, a study showed that only 14-17% of MSM reported always using condoms, and a recent survey showed that although HIV was a concern for MSM— it was not their biggest concern.

So let’s take a wider view of the challenges faced by MSM. Along with 35% of Cambodians, many MSM in Cambodia are currently living below the national poverty line and this means that it is difficult for their basic physiological needs to be met. Furthermore the homophobia in Cambodia means that many do not feel physically safe, cases of verbal abuse, harassment, physical violence ...and occasional cases of rape.’ (Out of the Shadows-KHANA 2003).

On top of these hurdles, a lack of visibility and acceptance for MSM can result in a lack of safe venues for them to meet each other— which makes it difficult to form relationships, leaving many living isolated lives.

Returning to Maslow’s theory, people working to reduce HIV infections amongst MSM must address all of these needs before they will be able to address the need for MSM to practice safe sex. To a large extent, NGOs working with MSM are now addressing these needs by initiating income generating projects, community drop in centre’s and counseling services, but to work with MSM is simply not enough.

Perhaps the time has come to extend work to the wider community— to work on community education projects in order to eliminate stigma and discrimination, to advocate for equal rights and respect for sexual minorities. This can create the opportunity for all people regardless of sexual partners, gender identity or sexual orientation to meet their needs for belonging in their communities and have the self esteem and respect to make informed, healthy decisions regarding sex.
Cambodia: Men’s Health Social Service helped 365 Kampong Thom Province MSM access VCT

By Phal Sophat
Cambodia Country Focal Point

Mr. Vuthearith, the second son of Samborkrekkob district governor, is currently teaching at Kampong Thom high school, but in spare time, he volunteers for Men’s Health Social Service as peer HIV/AIDS educator among MSM, by individual and group contact.

Every day, Vuthearith would meet his MSM friend in various communities, knowing them might be rather afraid to meet or even contact him personally to discuss sexual health, due to the possible discrimination induced by “coming out”.

To solve this, Vuthearith shared with his friends his personal secret, and also raised the question “why you have to worry to talk about your own stories?” “I know it is never easy, but if we do not express our felling to someone you trust, then at least talk with ones who understand this whole situation.”

Vuthearith have been sharing his experience to his friends, including this important VCT among men who sex with men, “because VCT can help us to avoid HIV/AIDS transmitted from our sexual partner”.

Vuthearith is still contacting and meeting his MSM friends, persuading them to access VCT at health center, whilst keeps telling them the importance of VCT.

Mr. Lan Youngsary, a hidden MSM lives in Kokrakor village, said this is his first time doing a blood test, because previously he never had any information of blood test and thus scared of things like a test.

“But after having met Vuthearith the peer educator in my village, and learning a blood test can save my life, than I started thinking of having one test. However, when meeting counselor in counseling room I was afraid and almost scared at that time, but afterwards, he provided me with good counseling, which made me feel so much better. Then I understand that having a blood test is the only way that could make me feel comfortable of my health, now I feel so safe.”

Mr. Lan Youngsary in a group discussion with MSM community.
Pic 2: Mr. Lan Youngsary, a previously hidden MSM is having blood test at Steng Sent Health Center.
Myanmar: Donation for the Chronic Contagious Disease Patients
(Especially HIV-Positive MSM & TG)

By Kyaw Myint
Myanmar Country focal point

On August 27, 2009, by the invitation of Dr. Myint Maw, I attended a meeting with members of Healthy Living Helping Society at Marga missionary school at Ward “Nga”, Corner of 15th Thandar Street, North Okkalapa.

Last November, I celebrated my birthday by donating 100,000 kyats through make up artist Ko Mar to the chronic contagious disease patients whom Healthy Living Helping Society has been supporting. This year, instead of dedicating it for my birthday, I personally met with the patients, talked with them and donated 100,000 kyats, health magazines and rice bags.

Regardless rich or poor, male or female, old or young, everybody must go through a life cycle of birth to aging, and last, to death. It is an inevitable journey.

Therefore, it is a privilege to help each other out while everyone is going to the same path. There are so many ways to help them, like those who are healthy can support those who are not and those who have money can offer kind words or give hands to those who are in need. I believe it is better to see a region with fewer floods but has more caring rain to make the place growing healthy green plants which can help support each other.

Donations for chronic contagious disease patients can be made at the above mentioned address and telephone numbers 01-699632, 09-510-7106 (Dr. Myint Maw), 09-508-9622 (Ko Tin Win).

Thailand: Male Sex worker needs support too

By Kieratikarn Techavadranakool

Phensiri Srichan, head of the AIDS and Venereal Disease Control Agency in Udon Thani, says the agency only recently included men in their programmes. Previously, it focused mostly on female sex workers, in this northeastern Thai province.

After some study, the agency revised its policies and started including male sex workers in its target. The men receive advice on how to protect themselves from infection, and are given condoms and information on where they could go for blood tests, etc.

Still, the agency’s health programme focuses only on commercial sex workers in gay bars, but not freelancers. Because freelance sex workers are not easy to reach and often remain largely ignorant of safer sex practices and can inadvertently transmit HIV and other diseases, which can be dangerous.

The owner of the gay bar where Neung works, a former sex worker in her thirties called Ying, says she reminds her employees to use condoms and lubricants for comfort and safety. “Not all of them listen though,” she says of her employees who end up with STDs.

In the end, Phensiri, the Udon Thani health official, says it is important that health workers and programmes also focus on the behaviour and lives of sex workers, regardless of their gender. “Only then will we succeed in freeing them from the prevailing myths in society that strip them of their self-esteem. We will keep on persisting even if it takes us a lifetime of work to do so”, she says.

By Frits van Griensven, PhD et al.

Between 2003 and 2007, 3 biennial cross-sectional HIV prevalence assessments were conducted among MSM in Bangkok, Thailand, using venue-day-time sampling. Oral fluid was tested for HIV infection.

The acquired data suggest that after a strong increase from 17.3% in 2003 to 28.3% in 2005, the HIV prevalence among MSM attending venues in Bangkok may have begun to level off at around 30% in 2007. This pattern was consistent across all age groups and at all recruitment venues. This may imply that the increased preventive interventions in the past several years may have been able to decrease HIV incidence.

Despite some indications for a possible stabilization in HIV prevalence, the continued high estimated HIV incidence in the youngest MSM is a reason for grave concern. These men have been sexually active only for a short period; and the combination of strong sexual desires, sexual opportunities, and HIV risk factors and behaviors in this population is likely fuelling this epidemic.

Moreover, the stabilization might point to the equilibrium between the number of new infections and the number if HIV-infected men exiting the population. As Thailand is rolling out its universal access to antiretroviral treatment program, MSM will become less and less likely to exit the population for reasons of HIV and AIDS-related morbidity and mortality.

Normally, this would lead to an increase in HIV prevalence, unless fewer people become HIV-infected. Future studies are needed to confirm or reject the hypothesis that the HIV prevalence in MSM in Bangkok is stabilizing.

As for the risky behaviors, the proportion of men reporting anal sex and casual or steady male sex partners in the past 3 months significantly decreased, whereas the proportion reporting drug use and drug use during sex significantly increased, and an increasing proportion of men reported ever having had an HIV test. No increase was observed in the proportion of men reporting consistent condom use.

The absence of an increase in condom use is disappointing, particularly in combination with the increasing trend in self-reports of STI. Lack of condom use and STI are closely related to each other and are strong risk factors for both the acquisition and transmission of HIV infection. Drug use in general, and particularly drug use during sex, is widely known to impair judgment and to increase the risk for HIV infection among MSM, particularly if combined with erectile enhancement drugs.

The increase in drug use observed in this study is likely due to the increased availability and demand for methamphetamine crystal (ice) on the Thai market, these increasing levels of drug use during sex in the Thai MSM community should be closely monitored for timely intervention.

In the absence of proven biomedical interventions, efforts should include improved access to HIV testing and treatment, programs for behavioral risk reduction and promotion of condom use, drug use education, STI control, destigmatization of HIV infection, community mobilization, and emphasis of individual responsibility. Whether these, or the combinations of these interventions, will be enough to reverse the ongoing HIV epidemic among MSM remains to be seen.

Feature: Equal Right to Kiss? Why Even Gay-Friendly People May Be Disgusted by Gay Behavior without Knowing It

By Jesse Bering

Nobody in most of the world is stopping gays from holding hands in public, or kissing and hugging: it’s not illegal. But the problem here is a psychological one. Not only do gay couples wish to avoid being pummeled by homophobic thugs, more simply, we’re just wary of making those around us uncomfortable.

In a Harvard Univ. experiment, half of the participants were asked to see a music video with gay men French-kissing in public. The remaining participants watched the “straight” version. The participants were then asked the following questions: (1) Did the director intentionally encourage gays [or straights] to French-kiss in public? (2) Is there anything wrong with gays [or straights] French-kissing in public? (3) Was it wrong to make a video encouraging gays [or straights] to French-kiss in public?

As predicted, these college-aged participants agreed that there’s nothing wrong with either straight or gay couples kissing in public, nor wrong to encourage such behavior in either case. Intriguingly, however, in response to the first question, participants viewed the director’s actions as being more intentional when he encouraged gays to kiss in public than straights.

Individuals belonging to unfamiliar groups, especially those who engaged in unusual practices regarding food, cleanliness and sex, posed a higher risk of carrying novel (and therefore particularly dangerous) infectious agents. Perceiving such individuals would thus activate the behavioral immune system and cause avoidance behavior and the accompanying emotion of disgust…This hypervigilance may be especially acute in those individuals who are especially sensitive to disgust, the emotion that drives the behavioral avoidance system. Because gay people almost by definition engage in “unusual” sexual behavior, one would expect more negative reactions to this out-group on the part of those who are particularly disgust sensitive.

All of this is actually very good news for gay people. Studies also showed that people can be habituated to stimuli that trigger disgust over time. The key to gay people feeling comfortable expressing their affection for one another in public places, therefore, is simply to engage in such behavior more routinely.

So, hold your partner’s hand! Kiss him (or her)! We’ve got to put our love in people’s faces, not confine it to “the privacy of our own bedrooms.” That tradition of secrecy is precisely the problem. As long as we remain out of sight, we remain foreign.

Source: www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=bering-in-mind
PSN Face Story: Stand up and do something!

By Le Minh, My linh Nguyen
PSN Vietnam Focal Point

“No, I will never come out” – This is the answer of many MSM or those who are HIV positive in response to the question of disclosure.

There is a special case. My first impression on Tai in a Hanoi writing workshop is a small and slim man with fragile voice. But his strong and determined attitude in disclosing himself at the age of 20s is phenomenal. “I am a MSM and also HIV positive. I am living a happy life and being useful to this society”, Tai confidently told us, with a proud smile.

Tai was growing up in a difficult environment. At the 11th grade, he had to get out of school to take a massage job due to a family financial difficulty. Having worked one year, Tai was so destructed to discover he was HIV positive.

“I was desperate and miserable, yelling like a mad man.” Tai talked about his feelings when he got the test result.

Before finally recognized by surrounding society, Tai has undergone huge pressure, stigma and discrimination from family and neighbours. His mother told him ‘You are dying because of your ignorance’. Tai even imagined that he would fall down and nobody would accept him. Finally, he realized that he needed to stand up and assert himself.

Currently, many MSM don’t have enough courage to live with a real life. A HIV positive MSM will surely experience a much more profound stigma. But Tai has been much stronger than many people: he is standing up, and fighting this social stigma.

Tai established his own self-help group ‘LIVE’. Regardless of the small participants’ number, the meaning and contribution of this group can be very significant. The group provides psychological support and advocacy.

At this moment, T’s group is developing an advocacy proposal to submit to CARE for a small grant. Tai hopes that the needs and voices of HIV positive MSM community will become more visible in HIV response in Vietnam.

PSN Faces: Li’s life as a volunteer

Having started his volunteer experience since the college sophomore year in Chengdu China, Li always appreciate that time “as fascinating and challenging as it could be”, the two-year volunteer life also brought him a brand new academic interest: human rights law.

Pursuing his interest and a dream to help the person inflicted by discrimination and stigmatization, Li is currently studying in a law school.

Meanwhile, Li continues to work as volunteer on the HIV/AIDS field, reaching out for MSM community and spreading scientific knowledge on the sexual health and sexuality issues to his surrounding people: law students, professors, even judges he met in the internship.

You can contact Li at this address: 85010148@qq.com.
Purple Sky Network is the network of governmental organizations, NGOs, community-based organizations and international organizations working with MSM and transgenders in the Greater Mekong sub-region, including Cambodia, China (Guangxi and Yunnan provinces), Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam.

Vietnam: When MSM write for themselves

By Pham Van Tam – Can Tho
Vietnam Correspondent

We are MSM ourselves or those who work on MSM issues. We come from different corners of the country to participate in the writing workshop for Key Correspondents of the Purple Sky Network – a regional network of organizations and individuals working on MSM and HIV in the Sub-Mekong region.

Fourteen participants come from different backgrounds: pharmacist, teacher, monk, club bosses, peer educators, members of self-help groups and even those who are not MSM.

Some participants already had writing experience for MSM websites, while others have gained rich experience from their work in MSM clubs such as Blue Sky, Light House, Green Field, Star Sparkling etc.

What’s more is a HIV positive gay who is also a member of the self-help group, he came out and advocate for the rights of PLHIV. Regardless of the differences, we all share one common point: working to raise the voice of the entire MSM community.

The trainer is Ms. Nguyen Thu Ha, the Deputy Director General of the television channel O2TV. Having produced several television programs on MSM and HIV issues, Ms. Ha facilitated the workshop with her empathy and open heart. She guided us on how to write for ourselves as well as for the whole society.

We hope that through our articles, local and international organizations will know better about our activities. We want to advocate for more HIV policies and programs for the MSM community. And we hope that our writing will help community people understand us better and change their prejudiced attitudes towards MSM. At the end of the workshop, each of us completed one article, all feeling grateful to be a part of the workshop.