

IDS

EVIDENCE REPORT

No 167

Sexuality, Poverty and Law

Transgender at Work: Livelihoods for Transgender People in Vietnam

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February 2016

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AG Level 2 Output ID: 214

TRANSGENDER AT WORK: LIVELIHOODS FOR TRANSGENDER PEOPLE IN VIETNAM

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February 2016

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First published by the Institute of Development Studies in February 2016

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Acknowledgements

The project discussed in this report was jointly undertaken by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and the Center for Creative Initiatives in Health and Population (CCIHP), Vietnam.

We thank Simon Colmer (IDS) for the visualisation of the online data and valuable contributions to the development of the online survey.

We also thank Tran Khac Tung (ICS Director), Dinh Hong Hanh (ICS Project Officer), Nguyen Tam (VietPride Director), Nguyen AnhThuan (Safe Living Social Enterprise Director), Bao Huy (National MSM-TG Network Chairman), Trung Anh (Head of Ruby group), Nguyen Son Minh (National MSM-TG Network Steering Committee's Member), Nguyen Tuong Vi (Living My Life Co-founder), Hoang Khanh (Head of Cau Vong Cong group) and Le Son (Head of G3VN) for their support in the implementation of the research fieldwork.

The authors would like to acknowledge valuable comments from Nguyen Tan Thu (Hoa Ho), Hoang Khanh, Nguyen Tuong Vi and Trung Anh on the draft questionnaire.

We also would like to thank the participants who took part in the two workshops in Hanoi on 29 September and in Ho Chi Minh City on 30 September 2015 for their valuable comments and discussions on the research findings. Additional thanks go to Tran Khac Tung and Nguyen Tam for their insights on the draft report.

We would like to thank Dinh Thi Nhung, Le Hoang Minh Son and Nguyen Thi Thao for their help in conducting the fieldwork in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.

Last, but not least, we are grateful to all of the transgender people and employers who took part in the in-depth interviews and online survey.

Terminology and abbreviations

Transgender people are 'individuals whose gender identity and/or expression of their gender differs from social norms related to their gender of birth. The term... describes a wide range of identities, roles and experiences which can vary considerably from one culture to another' (definition adopted from USAID and UNDP (2010), cited in Winter (2012)).

Transmen/FtM are birth-assigned females identifying and/or presenting as male or as another broadly masculinised gender.

Transwomen/MtF are birth-assigned males identifying and/or presenting as female, or (in those cultures in which it is accepted that there are more than two genders) as members of another broadly feminised gender.

CCIHP	Center for Creative Initiatives in Health and Population
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
ID	identification
IDI	in-depth interview
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
iSEE	Institute for Studies of Society, Economics and Environment
LGBT	lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender
MSM	men who have sex with men
NGO	non-governmental organisation
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VND	Vietnamese dong

1 Background

The laws in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam promote equality for all citizens and refer to 'persons' rather than 'men' or 'women'. However, because of traditional gender norms, transgender people in Vietnam are facing severe stigma and discrimination in public, in schools, at home and in the workplace (CCIHP 2011; Hoang 2012; ICS 2015; iSEE 2013). Parents, teachers and policemen are among the most common perpetrators (CCIHP 2011, 2012a, 2012b). Before 1975, homosexuality and transgenderism were considered 'social diseases', 'social evils', and were targets for elimination in government health and public policies; after 1975, there was a higher emphasis on this as the public saw them as remnants of American neo-colonialism (Blanc 2005). People who were found to practice same-sex sex could be sent to an education centre (Blanc 2005). Transgender people have difficulty accessing services and rights as they cannot change their personal identification (ID) card, which is an obstacle to obtaining social services, housing and work. Gender roles and norms affect the employment practices, options and preferences of transmen and transwomen differently.

Research has highlighted the lack of family support, and the stigma and discrimination that transgender people face in employment. The lack of options has been highlighted as a reason for why transwomen work in the female-dominated sex industry or perform at wedding and funeral ceremonies in southern Vietnam (UNDP and USAID 2014). However, transwomen such as Cindy Thai Tai, Huong Giang Idol and Lam Chi Khanh have attained prominent positions in Vietnamese entertainment, suggesting that performing can be economically viable and an avenue to a successful public career. Yet gender norms that discriminate against women underlie the ridiculing and exclusion of transwomen in many other formal employment situations. There are historical and cultural differences between northern and southern male-to-transwomen: in the south, transwomen can engage in singing and dancing at funeral and birthing activities, similar to *hijras* in South Asia. This option is not available in the north. Although data suggest that transmen have difficulties finding jobs, their situation appears to be better than that of transwomen. Transmen find employment in more traditionally male work, such as manual labour and construction.

Difficulties in negotiating safe sex have resulted in high Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) prevalence rates among sex workers. Transgender people are now considered a 'key population' in HIV prevention programmes. But data for transgender people are not gender segregated, which makes it impossible to see whether transmen and transwomen are equally affected. There are also more and more public examples of transmen and transwomen who are not working in the sex or entertainment industries. It is clear that transgender people are highly diverse, which raises the issue of who can represent them.

This study, undertaken by the Center for Creative Initiatives in Health and Population (CCIHP) and Institute of Development Studies (IDS), does not claim to report on behalf of all transgender people in Vietnam, but we hope to gain more insights into both the opportunities and the obstacles that transmen and transwomen face and to understand how they could be supported to increase their livelihood options.

1.1 Research objectives and questions

First, the research involved a case study on transgender people and livelihood opportunities which sought to answer the following questions:

- What are the different employment options and preferences for Vietnamese transmen and transwomen?
- What are the links between stigma, education and employment?

Second, it involved testing an integrated application of new quantitative online participatory methodologies on young transmen and transwomen communities, alongside qualitative face-to-face methods to reach elderly transgender people and employers who are not members of online communities. Qualitative interviews also help understand these communities better and provide information that can inform their development.

The case study informed the design of one or more interventions to develop transgender-friendly workplaces in a collaboration with Vietnamese civil society and private sector respondents.

2 Method

This case study used mixed quantitative and qualitative methods for data collection.

2.1 Literature review

The study built on the work of a methodological review of research methods and visualisation tools for online lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) communities (Oosterhoff 2014). A further literature review was conducted on transgender livelihoods, education and employment in Vietnam. Owing to the paucity of peer-reviewed published articles on this subject, we included grey literature, such as research and policy-oriented reports that contained original and recent data by Vietnamese non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as CCIHP, the Institute for Studies of Society, Economics and Environment (iSEE) (Phuong, Binh and Tú 2012), ICS and United Nations (UN) agencies (Winter 2012). These provided some relevant background information on transgender issues and knowledge gaps. Considerable research had been conducted with HIV-related funding on men who have sex with men (MSM) and transgender females engaged in sex work, but the reports did not provide disaggregated data on the class and education status of transgender people. Other examples of online livelihood surveys on transgender were also collected, mostly from resource-rich countries.

2.2 Online survey

Based on the literature review we developed a questionnaire that the CCIHP team translated into Vietnamese. Two group meetings were held with transgender people in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City to refine it. Participants suggested changes in the job options and in sources of income to better reflect Vietnamese conditions. Money lending, for example, was not listed on surveys from other countries but is significant in Vietnam. The questionnaire was put online using the SurveyMonkey service, and we asked four transgender people to pre-test the questionnaire.¹ After testing, the questionnaire was finalised and advertised. We advertised through email and Facebook and used different networks to reach transmen and transwomen. For transwomen, we disseminated the information through the Vietnam MSM-TG national network.² The chairman of this network and the heads of the northern and southern networks introduced the survey through their mailing lists. They also posted the survey on their personal Facebook pages and invited friends and network members to take the survey. For transmen, we disseminated the information through personal contacts as there is no formal network for this group. We also posted the survey on a Facebook group named Transcore, which has more than 1,500 members.³ We left the survey open for one month, sending reminders twice during this period. Most responses were collected in the first week, however, with the reminders not succeeding in generating further responses.

In total, 334 people who identified themselves as transgender agreed to take the survey. Among them, 259 (77.5 per cent) were transmen and 75 (22.5 per cent) were transwomen. 177 people completed the questions on livelihoods, including 147 transmen and 30 transwomen.

¹ We asked two transmen in Hanoi and Hai Phong and two transwomen in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.

² The Vietnam MSM-TG national network was established in July 2013, with 95 members from 35 provinces of Vietnam. The core of the network was the former MSM national technical working group on HIV prevention. The establishment was supported by the Vietnam Civil Society Platform for HIV/AIDS Prevention (VCSPA) and was part of the Global Fund programme in Vietnam: www.scdi.org.vn/msm-tg/msm-tg-viet-nam-14-nam-mot-chang-duong-phat-trien.html (accessed 30 November 2015).

³ This group was initiated by transgender people who participated in the leadership course to promote leadership and empower LGBT youth in Vietnam: see www.facebook.com/groups/transcore (accessed 30 November 2015).

2.3 Qualitative interviews

Online research had age, education and internet access biases. We therefore conducted in-depth interviews (IDIs) with 24 transgender people from Hanoi, Hai Phong and Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam. These 24 transgender people (12 transwomen and 12 transmen) were purposively selected to reflect diverse income levels. They were recruited through different individual and network contacts of the research team.

Six employers in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City who had supportive attitudes towards LGBT workers were also interviewed. These employers were recommended by VietPride in Hanoi and ICS in Ho Chi Minh City.

All respondents are ethnically Kinh Vietnamese except for one international employer.

Table 2.1 People participating in IDIs in Hanoi/Hai Phong and Ho Chi Minh City

	Hanoi/Hai Phong		Ho Chi Minh City		Total
Transgenders	Transwomen	Transmen	Transwomen	Transmen	
Low-income	2	2	2	2	8
Middle-income	2	2	2	2	8
High-income	2	2	2	2	8
Total TG	6	6	6	6	24
	Hanoi		Ho Chi Minh City		
Employers	3		3		6
Total					30

IDIs were conducted using the interview guides. Out of 30 interviewees, 24 agreed to digital recording of their interview; five of the remainder consented to notes being taken. One interviewee gave answers through an email exchange. After each interview, researchers produced a brief note (about 1–1.5 pages) which summarised the main content with some important quotes. The note was also translated into English.

2.4 Consultative workshops

Two consultative workshops were conducted in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City to discuss the research findings. Fifty people participated in the workshop in Hanoi and 12 in the workshop in Ho Chi Minh City. Participants in the workshop in Hanoi included representatives from UN and government organisations, research institutes, NGOs, and transgender networks and groups from Hanoi and seven other provinces.⁴ The workshop in Ho Chi Minh City was more informal, held in a teashop with 12 transgender participants including ten transwomen and two transmen. In total, 15 transwomen and five transmen were presented in the two workshops.

2.5 Study limitations

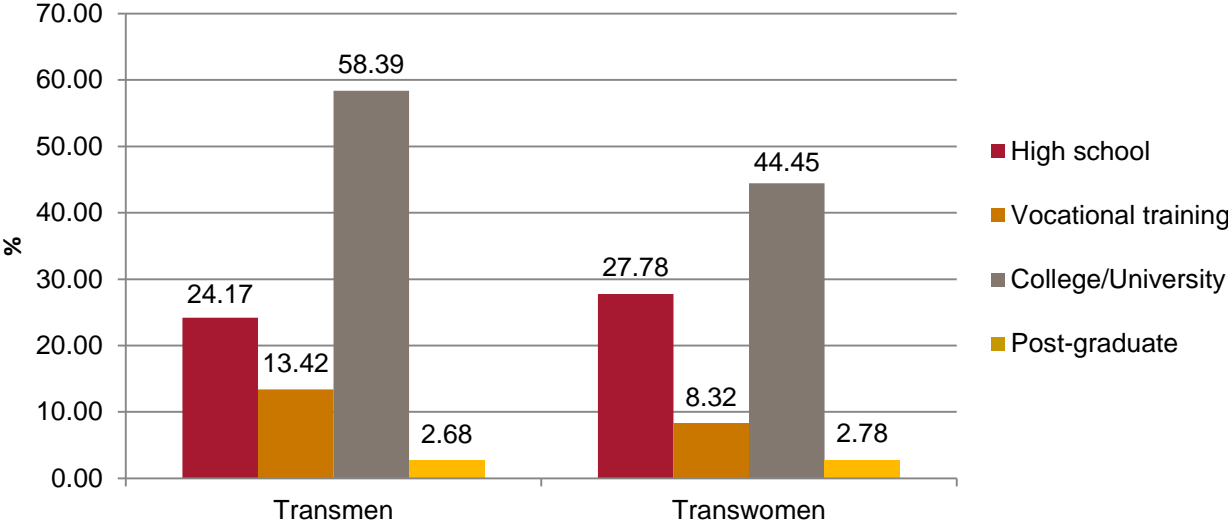
Transgender people in the two consultative workshops in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City said that the uneven response between transwomen and transmen reflected real issues. They thought that an online survey was not convenient for transwomen, especially older

⁴ Hanoi, Hai Phong, Thai Binh, Nam Dinh, Hung Yen, Thai Nguyen, Nghe An and Son La.

transwomen, as many of them were not able to access or use the internet. Even the ones who could access the internet only knew how to use it for Facebook, not for job searches or other more direct livelihood-related activities. They were unfamiliar with using online questionnaire forms and their typing was often poor, which made them nervous about doing the online survey. Workshop participants also reported that transwomen, especially poorer and less educated ones, were often in a depressed financial situation and would not be able to attend to things such as participating in research. Transwomen also said that they felt that a side effect of hormone therapy was a reduced ability to concentrate. Transmen, by contrast, often have more education and better access to the internet. Although there is no formal network of transmen, there are many groups. They get together to share experiences of bodybuilding, hormone therapy, and other issues. The groups are often small and allow people to have good exchanges. If one sends a request, others tend to respond. Among the Transcore Facebook group, there are also more transmen than transwomen, and they are more active.

These explanations corresponded with the demographic profiles of the survey. The data showed that about 94 per cent of the transwomen and transmen who took the survey were younger than 30 years old. They were also quite educated: more than 60 per cent of the transmen and 47 per cent of the transwomen had a university degree.

Figure 2.1 Educational level of online survey participants



3 Findings and discussion

3.1 Livelihoods and transgender people

For many transgender people in Vietnam, earning a living is not only about having an income but is also an opportunity to prove themselves and be recognised and socially accepted. Many transgender people work hard to contribute to their family income. Just like other people, they may not always succeed in getting well-paid work, but for many respondents having money is the only way to show their family that they are as valuable as anyone else. Having money counters the stigma associated with the stereotype that transgender people only know how to sing, dance and pay attention to the way they look but cannot make a living.

If I can make a living and contribute money to my family, my family will feel OK about me. They would think 'he is a pede,⁵ but he knows how to earn money and does not turn into a bad person'. Now, I contribute monthly utilities to my mother and gave my nephews and nieces their school fees. I contribute about 50 per cent of my income to my family. If I have high income and I am the breadwinner of my family, they will not say that I am a pede and dependent. Thus, having good income makes me more acceptable to my family.

(LS, transwoman, 29 years old)

Transgender people who make a good living get the respect of their families. J, a 29-year-old transwoman who was not accepted by her family when she came out when she was 18 years old, is highly respected now by both her family and her neighbours after her success in business. She runs a transwomen fashion show group of 10–15 people. Her monthly income is VND 50m (Vietnamese dong), which means she can support her parents and her brother financially. Her parents often ask for her opinion when they want to make important decisions. Her neighbours come to her to ask for help.

However, precarity of this respect is important to note. Transgender people, especially transwomen who do not have a stable job and income, mention fluctuation in their family members' attitudes when their contribution to family expense drops. This kind of attitude hurts many of them as it makes them feel that there is no real family relationship and emotion as should be between parents and children and between brothers and sisters in the family. Families seem to expect more of transwomen than transmen in terms of financial contribution. This can be related to the traditional role that boys have in Vietnam of taking care of their parents.

In general, Vietnamese parents have high expectations of their children. A recent study of 100 parents in Hanoi finds that 94 per cent of the interviewed parents expect that their children will be successful, with 86 per cent of them hoping that their children will have a grateful attitude towards their parents. 81 per cent hope that their children will have good manners, 90 per cent hope that they will have a stable job, and only 28 per cent expect their children to earn a lot of money (Bui 2015). However, the expectation regarding financial contributions held by the family of transgender people seems higher than for others. For example, in non-transgender familial situations, an elderly brother would not ask for a contribution from a younger brother. According to the Vietnamese tradition, the eldest brother (and his wife) should take care of parents and younger brothers and sisters. In this research,

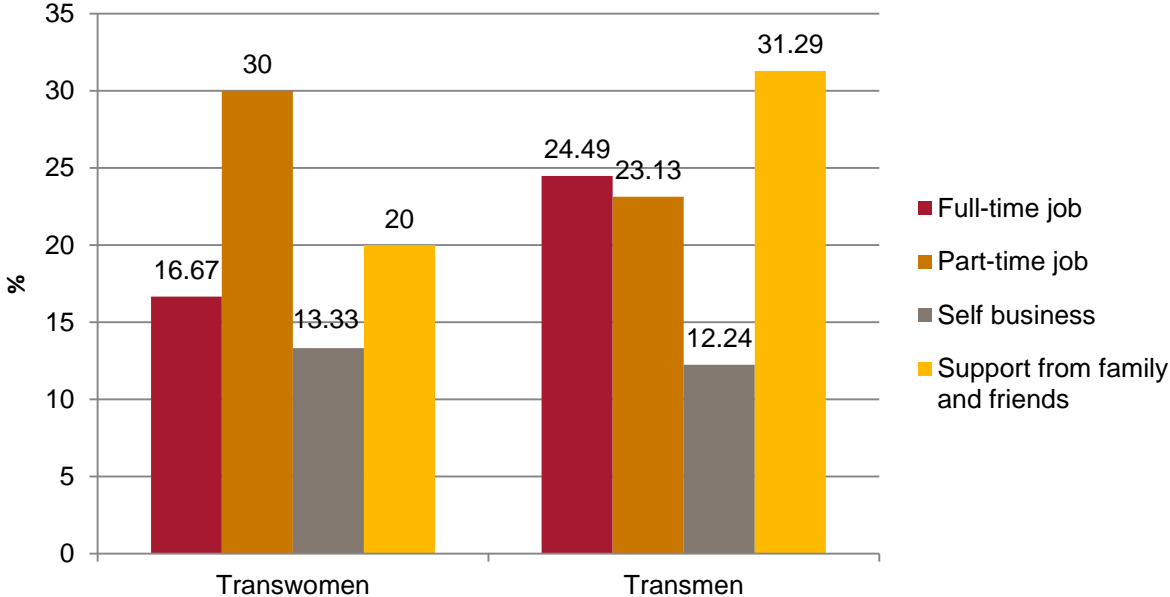
⁵ 'Pede' is a commonly used slang term for both gay men and transwomen in Vietnam. It comes from the French word 'pédérastie' – same-sex relationship between an adult man and a boy – reflecting the influence of French colonialism in Vietnam. For a more detailed history of the term and its contemporary meaning, see Blanc (2005).

young transwomen share that they are often expected to contribute money – buying food and fruit for elder brothers and sisters and their children if they live with them.

Experiences like these are possibly the reason why transgender people may not disclose their feelings and practice open transvestism before they have stable economic circumstances. For example, T, a 22-year-old transwoman, said that she would come out only when she had a firm position at work and a good income. Though not at that point yet, she is proud that she has been able to finance herself since she was a student, and less than a year after graduation she was able to buy a motorbike with her own money.

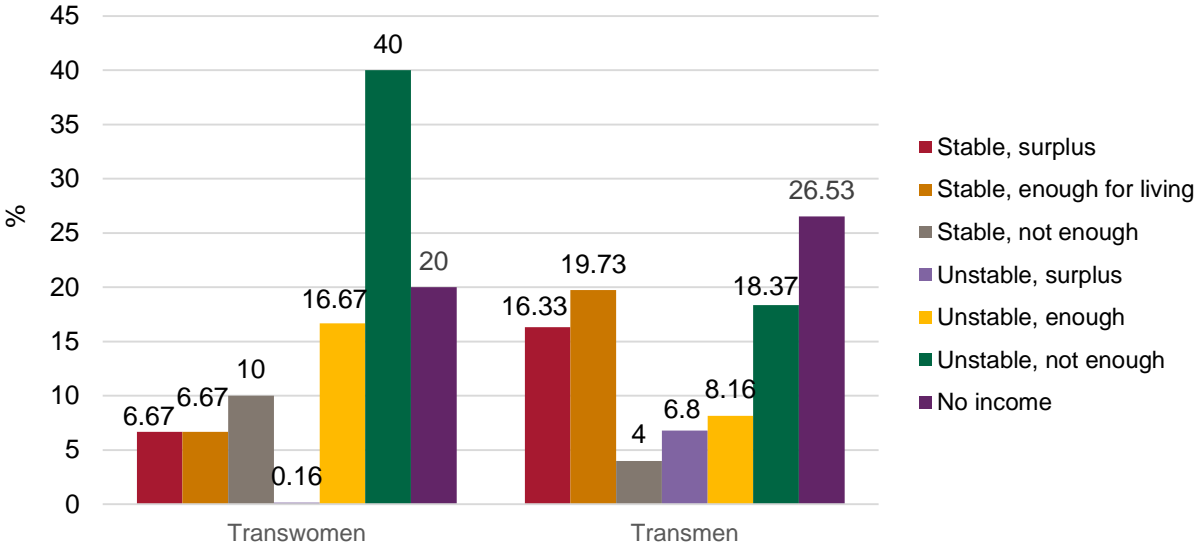
Among the 177 transgender people who answered the livelihood questions in the survey, 41 (23.2 per cent) have a full-time job, 43 (24.3 per cent) have a part-time job, 22 (12.4 per cent) run their own business, while 52 (29.4 per cent) said support from family members and friends was their main income – a number that included people who were still in school. There was not much difference in this aspect between transwomen and transmen. In the most recent government report on employment, the unemployment rate among youth of 18–24 years old in Vietnam is 6.68 per cent (MOLISA 2015).

Figure 3.1 Main source of income in the last six months



Among the 177 respondents, 84 (47.5 per cent) had sufficient income to satisfy their needs. Of these, 36 were able to save. This means, however, that over half of the transgender people had no secure income, including 45 people (25.4 per cent) who had no job that brought in an income at all. Transwomen had more unstable economic situations than transmen.

Figure 3.2 Self-assessment on level of income



About half (47.4 per cent) of the transgender people in the survey worked in companies of ten people or less. More transwomen worked in small companies/enterprises than transmen. *Doi Moi*, the market reforms that opened up the economy in the late 1980s, and the expansion of the internet have both been responsible for creating new livelihood opportunities of this type.

Many transgender people, especially transwomen, manage to generate an income by starting a business. People who have resources can open up a shop on the street but this requires interpersonal connections and investment. Online shops are becoming more popular among younger people, including transgender people, as an affordable alternative. These online shops sell goods ranging from clothes to accessories to food. Some people do related jobs such as logistics and shipping goods. Online businesses often bring in VND 6–8m a month, and in some cases, up to VND 20m. This is well over the minimum wage, which is a little over VND 3m in the highest-earning regions.⁶

Other transgender people, mainly young and educated ones, prefer to look for opportunities in more formal companies. There seems to be no difference between transwomen and transmen. Just as in many parts of the world, many people feel that working in this sort of environment is the way to develop their skills and give them a sense of worth and recognition.

Transgender people took part in a wide range of job options. There were sectors that attracted more transgender people than others. Sixty-four people (36 per cent) were involved in food businesses such as restaurants, coffee shops and teashops; 32 people (18 per cent) ran a business. More than 30 per cent of the transwomen said that they had been a sex worker at some time, and half of these were still doing this job currently. No transman admitted to having been a sex worker (although this may owe something to the small sample size), which was the main difference found between transwomen and transmen respondents. A review based on data from the United States shows that the number of transwomen selling sex is 24–75 per cent, while this number from data in Asia was found to be 54–80 per cent (Cohen *et al.* 2011; Bauer *et al.* 2012).

⁶ See www.wageindicator.org/main/salary/minimum-wage/vietnam (accessed 12 January 2016).

More than 20 per cent of the employed transgender people were in managerial positions (20 per cent among transwomen and 24.5 per cent among transmen). This is impressive as most of the people in the survey were less than 30 years old, although some of them are in managerial positions in the sense of running their own businesses. Interviews with some transgender people show that they have worked very hard to achieve this recognition. One 22-year-old transwoman, who is currently sales manager at a popular international cosmetic company, shared her story:

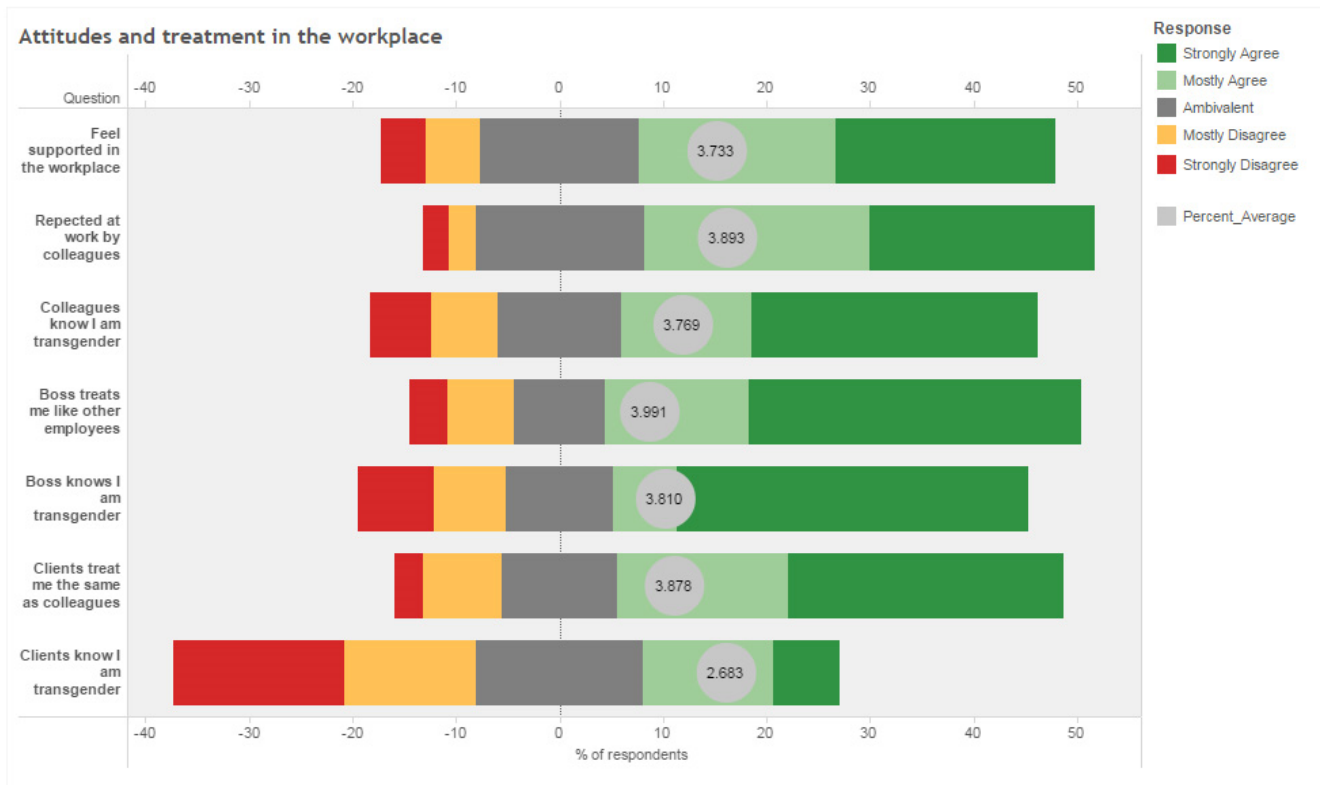
I came out when I was at school. At first, I was afraid and other children in the class often teased me but then I took my courage and ignored all their attempts to frustrate me. I even fought back so they were scared of me. I did not hide myself when I was at university. When applying for this job, I wanted it very much. I had dreamed of working in the make-up and cosmetic industry for long time. I knew that I had the capacity and I could do this. I just needed an opportunity. So I insisted to the person who received the applications that he give me an opportunity to interview. When I was at the interview I asked them to give me an opportunity and I promised that I would not disappoint them. I knew that some of them did not like me as I wore make-up and was effeminate. However, the team leader supported me and gave me a chance. I worked very hard and after a while I got this position as sales manager.
(B, transwoman, 22 years old)

3.2 Attitudes about transgender people and work

In general, the transgender people involved in the survey had positive attitudes about themselves. 74 per cent of them very much agreed or mostly agreed that being a transgender person had positive effects in their life, and 72 per cent of them very much agreed or mostly agreed that they felt comfortable in a crowd. This percentage seems to give a positive picture of being a transgender person in Vietnam. However, this number may be related to the limitation of the research which recruited participants based on self-identification. The research could leave out people who might have internalised transphobia to the degree that they do not feel comfortable identifying themselves as transgender or taking part in the research.

The survey also showed that both transmen and transwomen received support from their employers and their co-workers even when it was known that they were transgender. However, when working in public places and having contact with clients they did not feel as well received. Clients had more positive attitudes towards the respondents when they did not know they were transgender.

Figure 3.3 Attitudes and treatment in the workplace



In-depth interviews with transwomen and transmen suggested that it is more difficult for transwomen to find jobs than transmen. It is harder for employers, co-workers and clients to accept an ‘effemised’ male person. They are not only associated with vice but also seen as weak and incapable of doing work. Meanwhile, transmen will be viewed as ‘strong’, ‘special’ and ‘stylish’, which can be an advantage in some sectors. However, on the other hand, the survey showed that more transwomen (56.67 per cent) see being transgender as giving them an advantage in their work than transmen (45.44 per cent).

3.3 Factors related to livelihood options of transgender people

3.3.1 Stigma and discrimination

Stigma and discrimination are mentioned by many transgender people as the main factors that prevent them from gaining employment opportunities and promotion. Transgender people experience discrimination in recruitment and in fair payment and benefits. Both transwomen and transmen said that they had had job applications refused several times because they were transgender.

I applied for jobs in coffee shops, fashion shops, factories they said they just wanted normal people. I failed after 3–4 times.
(CT, transwoman, 24 years old)

H, a transman currently working as an intern in an international NGO, said that he had at least ten interviews before he got this position. He said that ‘it was very hard and very difficult feeling. They often found reason for not recruiting me. Though they had never said that it was because I was a transgender but I could feel that’.

When recruited, transgender people often experience unequal treatment in terms of pay and other benefits. Kiu Kiu, the founder and leader of Ruby (a transwomen's group performing fashion shows in Hanoi), said that despite being increasingly recognised and getting more business, her group still often gets lower rates than the other female models:

Many people like our group as our performances are unusual and changed frequently. Some places even prefer us to female models. It is true that we get lower payment: just half or sometimes a third or a quarter of what the female models get. But we accept that. We think for now it is more important that we get show and get recognised. We also hope that our show can change people's perception about transgender people in Vietnam. Later, when we are more popular and when social perceptions change, we will be treated equally.

(Kiu Kiu, transwoman, Ruby group)

The differences in pay can be very large. CT says that while female actresses get VND 500,000–600,000 per performance, she gets only VND 50,000.

Though being recruited by her dream company and acknowledging the support of company managers, B experienced unfair treatment from her direct line manager. Her salary was decided based on her performance and company scale, but she received unfair treatment in other ways. She and her team often did not get access to the most favourable bonus package for clients, so they were at a disadvantage in terms of competing with other teams. When doing programmes in the provinces, their travel expenses were often cut, so they had to use public transport while other teams could travel by aeroplane or hired car. B also faced difficulties in recruiting people for her team because some people do not want to be in a team with a transgender person, especially as team leader.

QA, a transwoman who is now a member of a fashion show group, graduated from tourism college and quit her job as a tour guide because of the discriminatory attitudes of clients. She had long hair and wore *ao dai*, a traditional Vietnamese gown. International clients did not discriminate so much, but among domestic clients the attitude was 'unbearable'. They would pay more attention to her appearance and voice than her tour commentary, making rude comments.

T, a 22-year-old transwoman graduate currently working as an executive manager in a restaurant, still hides her identity. She does not know if the general director would still support her if he knew she was transgender. She is also afraid that even if the general director supports her, she may lose the respect of her staff. She has been cautious as she noticed negative comments from her staff when they suspect others to be gay.

If they know who I am they will not follow my orders any more.

(T, transwoman, 22 years old)

HK, a 32-year-old transman, used to be a highly skilled worker in a jewellery company but quit his job because of discrimination from his manager and co-workers. People had treated him nicely before they knew who he was.

It was difficult to tell but it was very frustrating. They knew that I was capable but they refused to increase my salary while other people got promotion even though they were not as good as me. My co-workers used to be very nice to me and then they turned their back to me. They talked about me behind my back.

(HK, transman, 32 years old)

In the online survey, more than half (56.6 per cent) of transwomen said that they had had to leave their job at least once because of being transgender. The share of transmen saying the

same was 26.5 per cent. The survey also showed that 6.8 per cent of transmen and 33.3 per cent of transwomen had been sexually harassed at work. 43.3 per cent of transwomen and 17.9 per cent of transmen faced difficulties in complying with company regulations of working time. Almost 50 per cent of the transgender people in the survey did not feel comfortable with the company's sex-specific uniform. 46.7 per cent of transmen and 61.9 per cent of transwomen did not feel comfortable with sex-specific restrooms at the company.

3.3.2 Company policies on transgender

While stigma and discrimination prevails, very few companies have a publicly available policy on anti-discrimination. Even international companies that do have anti-discrimination policies often do not make them openly available to staff in the Vietnam office. Interviews with LGBT-friendly company managers show that the companies have not done so because they do not see it as necessary. They confirm that there are LGBT people working in their companies and they have not had any complaints. In the few cases where the company received a complaint, they managed to deal with the case internally. It should be noted that the absence of an anti-discrimination policy can itself be the reason for people not filing complaints. In the case of B, she said that if her company had such a policy, she would definitely have made a complaint about her direct line manager.

Many companies are still not sensitive to transgender issues. Employers and co-workers sometimes discriminate against transgender people under pressure from their clients.

The employers were afraid that people would laugh at their business so they rather hired someone who looked less beautiful than someone who was considered violating traditional norms, like a transgender woman.
(VTP, transwoman, 24 years old)

J was refused a job by a bridal fashion shop because they were afraid that brides would not dare to change clothes in front of her. TV lost her job in a small food shop because the clients put pressure on her employer. M, director of an LGBT-friendly company, used to be reluctant to have a co-worker who was a transman or to be seen with him in public. She could not face the curious looks and questions from other people, including their business partner. Since her company has been more involved in supporting LGBT rights, however, she has come to feel happy about having LGBT people in her company.

3.3.3 Education

As is typically the case for everyone, attaining a higher level of education is likely to expand a transgender person's employment opportunities and increase their confidence.

Unfortunately, many transgender people feel forced out of schooling because of transphobic bullying and violence. The online survey shows that 17 per cent of transmen and more than 60 per cent of transwomen experienced bullying in their primary school, rising to 40 per cent and 82 per cent respectively in secondary school, 51 per cent and 71 per cent in high school, and 44 per cent and 54 per cent in college and university. About 18 per cent of transwomen and transmen in the survey were dismissed or disciplined at school for reasons related to being transgender.

Some transgender people have to leave school not because of transphobic attitudes but because of the gender stereotype regulations at school. For example, TV, a 27-year-old transman, changed high school three times and dropped out of school because the school asked him to wear *ao dai*, the school uniform for girls. TV tore up his *ao dai* in front of his parents and asked the school not to apply this regulation to him, a request it rejected. LS, who dropped out at secondary school due to homo/transphobic bullying in school said:

As I did not finish the school, it was more difficult for me in looking for other jobs or preparing proposals. If I was in school again, I would not drop out. I wish to have a brighter future in which I have a stable job.
(LS, transwoman, 32 years old)

She is now taking an evening English class three times a week. She hopes this will lead to more livelihood opportunities. Learning English is also the number one training need for transgender people in the survey, identified as such by 55 per cent of the respondents.

Transgender people can be successful in work despite lower education levels. For example, J left college in her second year because of the transphobic attitudes of her fellow students. She worked hard to get the money for her sex change, doing all kinds of jobs from performing at weddings and funerals to washing dishes in restaurants. After her sex change in 2012, she formed her own performance group called the J's band. This now earns her an income of VND 50m a month and income of about VND 5m for a further 15–20 transwomen. She is now an active transgender activist.

3.3.4 ID cards - ‘*chứng minh thư nhân dân*’

In the online survey, only 45.3 per cent of transgender people said that they had a personal identification (ID) card that reflected their current appearance. The figure is 40.5 per cent among transmen and 67.9 per cent among transwomen. Many transmen change their appearance through physical exercise and hormones but do not update their ID card as they do not feel their existing ID causes them difficulties in getting work. Transwomen seem more bothered about their ID card and are more likely to keep it updated. One reason may be to do with gender-related expectations around image and beauty which mean that they will be more willing to engage in complicated administrative procedures to have an updated photo on their ID card.

An ID card is an essential personal paper in Vietnam to certify the legal existence of an individual. An ID card is needed for application to get an education, job, visa, voting, travel by aeroplane, going to hospital, getting married, getting admission to state buildings, etc. According to the law, Vietnamese citizens from 14 years old should go to the local authority to get their ID card (Socialist Republic of Vietnam 1999). This applies to all Vietnamese citizens who live in Vietnam except people who are in prison, rehabilitation education centres and people with mental disorders. This decree also states that people who change their name and identifiable characters should renew their ID card. However, changing ID card for transgender people has not been easy as the reasons for changing should be in accordance with other laws.^{7,8} For example, the Civil Code regulates that a person can change their name under certain conditions but none is applied in the case of transgender people.⁹ The change of outlook of transgender people may not be justified for changing their ID as sex change is not allowed in the current laws of Vietnam. In addition, not many transgender people know about the possibility of changing name and ID card in the law, and among those who do, many hesitate to change their name for reasons to do with family reputation, family relationships and administrative bureaucracy.

Not having an updated ID card can lead to transgender people not being hired. The difference between the appearance and name on the ID card is also a challenge. The ID card does not have a ‘sex’ category but the name often gives an indication: traditionally, Vietnamese names have the middle name ‘Van’ for males and ‘Thi’ for females.

⁷ <http://news.zing.vn/Anh-chung-minh-nhan-dan-la-nu-ten-van-nam-post359275.html> (accessed 30 November 2015).

⁸ www.tienphong.vn/xa-hoi/nguoi-chuyen-gioi-muon-lot-tay-cong-an-de-lam-lai-chung-minh-thu-852568.tpo (accessed 30 November 2015).

⁹ According to article 27, Civil Code 2005, an individual has the right to ask for a name change when ‘the use of that family name and given name causes confusion and negative affect on the family relationship, reputation, rights and legal benefits of that person’.

The administrative procedure can be more complicated when the person has immigrated from another province.

To me, the most difficult thing is lacking a proper ID card... I have long hair and I do not have any identification or any papers. My family is a KT3¹⁰ residential household, so my family papers are not suitable for me to getting new ID. Now if I want to have ID, I need to have a family who has the city household document. But who would I get to do it without giving them some money? It is tiring and expensive, so I just do not care about it. Whenever I need to do any paperwork with the government, it is frustrating.

(CT, transwoman, 24 years old)

Not having an ID card raises the possibility of having to pay extra, or go through third parties or do other unpleasant things to access services.

3.3.5 Networks and information

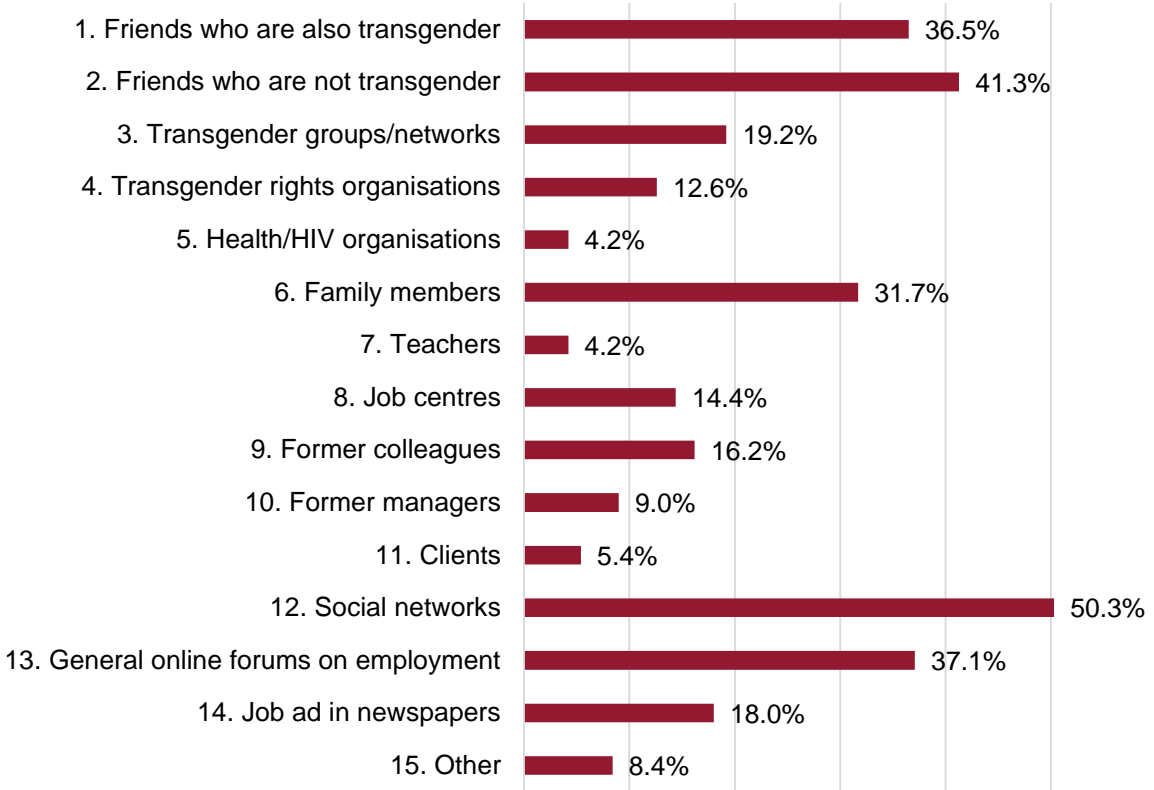
The online social media network Facebook plays an important role in the employment searches of the transgender people in the survey. More than 50 per cent of the transgender respondents look for employment opportunities by using social networks such as Facebook. This makes it more common than searching through normal employment forums, which are used by 37.1 per cent of the survey respondents. While 41.3 per cent seek help from friends who are not transgender, 36.5 per cent seek help from friends who are transgender. 31.7 per cent look for help from family members. 19.2 per cent seek help from groups and networks of transgender people, and 12.6 per cent seek help from organisations working for the rights of sexual and gender minority people.

There are differences between transwomen and transmen in how they seek support and information. While social networks seem important for both transwomen (46.7 per cent) and transmen (51.7 per cent), only 20 per cent of transwomen look for employment opportunities through specific forums, compared with 40 per cent of transmen. Transmen seem more confident about interacting with other non-transgender groups or appearing in public than transwomen. Only 6.7 per cent of transwomen (compared to almost 15 per cent of transmen) go to job centres. 26.7 per cent of transwomen look for help with employment opportunities from non-transgender friends while 42 per cent of transmen do this. In contrast, 33.3 per cent of transwomen (compared to 17.7 per cent of transmen) go to transgender friends. For organisations working on the rights of sexual and gender minority people, these numbers are 26.7 per cent and 11.6 per cent, respectively. Due to the history of HIV prevention programmes for men who have sex with men, which often include many transwomen in this category, 26.7 per cent of transwomen find help at organisations and groups working on HIV and health, compared to only 1.4 per cent of transmen.

Qualitative interviews suggest that transgender people, especially those with low education levels, may be more likely to find a viable livelihood if they are in a network or group of transgender people. In these groups, people support each other both financially and emotionally.

¹⁰ Residence status in Vietnam is divided into four categories depending on the location and duration of residence: KT1 (số hộ khẩu) is permanent residence registration, KT2 is long-term residence registration which is in a different district but in the same province/city of the permanent residence registration, KT3 is long-term residence registration which is in a different province of the permanent residence registration, KT4 is short-term (fixed duration) residence registration. The residence registration status very much affects the accessibility of individuals to services and rights such as health services, health information, education, housing, loans, etc.

Figure 3.4 Source of employment opportunity information



The relationship between networks and transgender people is mutual. Leaders of these groups see that helping other members to have a livelihood – even one that does not pay much – is important. It can help to build relationships and networks between transgender people which helps to generate other business.

LS has worked for many years as a HIV peer educator and is now running her own group on HIV prevention education while also running an online business to generate income for members of the group. She also uses the income from the group to help the group members with their other needs. For example, she lent money to TL, a group member, so TL could have a breast implant. TL uses her salary to pay back the loan every month. LS gets an income of about VND 20m a month but what she values more is gaining the respect of her peers and helping them to have an income.

Kiu Kiu, who leads the Ruby group, joined the Runway contest¹¹ in 2013 and got through to the fourth round, which made her very proud. She was offered a job at a big fashion company in Ho Chi Minh City, but she did not take up the offer and returned to Hanoi to her Ruby group as ‘this is for me like a family and all of them are like my sisters’. After a lot of challenges, her group has won recognition in Vietnam. The fashion shows and the fashion shop give her income of about VND 10m a month. These jobs also provide income for another ten members in the group. Some shows may involve 20–30 transgender people. She is always transparent about the income and its division, and the others in the group trust her to represent them. Sometimes people contact one or several group members directly about a show as they think that they may get a better price that way, but the members always direct

¹¹ A national reputable fashion design contest, see <http://vietnamnexttopmodel.com/index.php/tin-tuc/3077-the-le-tham-du-project-runway-nha-thiet-ket-thoi-trang-vietnam> (accessed 30 November 2015).

the communication to Kiu Kiu and let her deal with the contract. She feels very proud about this.

J is a popular transgender in Ho Chi Minh City. She worked as an entertainer at weddings and funerals for several years. After getting advice from a gay friend, she established J's band, an entertainment and fashion show transgender group of about 20 people. J sees this band as an opportunity to help other people in the community and change the perceptions of transgender people.

3.3.6 Emerging and diverse communities

The online survey and in-depth interviews in the study showed the importance of networking for self-confidence and the joy that comes from feeling a part of something that is bigger than one person. But the survey also shows that these kinds of connections and networks among transgender people are still limited.

People under 30 years old find it hardest to connect with older people: 'we often connect with each other through the internet such as Facebook, but this is not common among older transgender people.' Similarly, an older transwoman said:

We are old already. We also have our own group and we do things we like together such as going to the pagoda or doing charity. Younger people may like going to the bar, dancing, singing, beauty contests, etc. We are not interested in these things any more.

(Th, transwomen, 50 years old)

Transgender people do not feel that they have much information available to them about job opportunities or transgender friendly employers. Only 21 per cent of the transgender people in the survey knew about recruitment information that is relevant to transgender people, but 91.5 per cent expressed an interest in receiving information about transgender friendly employment.

Though some groups and networks have tried to help transgender people find livelihoods, networks/groups of LGBT people in general have not been very helpful in this regard. Transwomen seek help from other transgender people, networks, groups of transgender people and organisations working for LGBT rights. Transmen seek help from non-transgender friends, transgender friends and family members. Searching the internet and looking for help on social networks such as Facebook are also popular among both transwomen and transmen. Transgender people find that non-LGBT friends, family members and the internet are the most useful sources for job opportunities.

The weak connection between younger and older transgender groups may not be helping with job opportunities. Older transgender people who are successful in their business can be a good source of employment. S, a 53-year-old transwoman running a well-known chain of teashops in the old quarter of Hanoi, said:

I have had this shop for five years. I need people to work here but I have not seen any transgender person come for job. I need people who can do the work. I can recruit other people so why not people in the community? The main thing is that the person is suitable for the work.

Although many transgender people, especially transwomen, find running their own business the most suitable livelihood option for them, many lack the social and financial capital to start one. The online survey showed that about 50 per cent of the survey participants wanted to run their own business and already had a business plan but could not implement this due to

lack of start-up money. Perhaps these activities would be feasible, in which case micro-credit or other types of loans might be helpful. Assessing the economic viability of business plans would require access to advisors which is something transgender people also lack. Some plans do get delayed but are materialised eventually. Kiu Kiu from the Ruby group said that she had had the plan for the fashion show shop for a long time. She would have opened the shop after winning the Runway show in 2013 to take advantage of the publicity, but she could not mobilise enough funds and had to wait until August 2015 to get the shop of her dreams.

These are well-known problems for entrepreneurs in many parts of the world (Hormiga, Batista-Canino and Sánchez-Medina 2011; Spiegel *et al.* 2015) but they may be more pronounced for transgender people. None of the transgender people participating in the study have access to a formal loan scheme from the government. A report from the Vietnamese government shows that about 24.4 per cent of small and medium entrepreneurs get loans from a bank; almost 70 per cent of which are short-term loans.¹² In addition to the lack of proper ID card, most of the transgender people who want to run their own business do not belong to a formal organisation which can give them legal status to access a loan. In addition, loan access is limited because many transgender people who live in big cities such as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City have migrated there from other provinces and so do not have permanent addresses.

In 2014, the government issued the decision 29/2014/QĐ-TTg on credit loans for vulnerable groups including people living with HIV, post-detox drug users, post-treatment drug users and returned sex workers.¹³ In Hoa Binh – a province in the North – alone it is estimated that about 1,500 people who belong to these groups received a loan in the first six months of 2015.¹⁴

There are some loan schemes among transgender people such as revolving loan funds known as *hụi*.¹⁵ In her group, LS gave a loan to her peer for breast implants and the borrower pays the money back by working for LS. However, this loan type often entails a lot of risk. LL, for example, got some funds for her project, but her co-worker who was responsible for accounting took all the money. LL is now in big debt and facing a legal case. Transgender people are aware of these risks and are keen to avoid them. More than one third of the people who participated in the survey (34 per cent) want to have training on starting up small businesses and managing loan funds.

3.3.7 Motivation for employment and desire to be recognised

Despite many challenges, the successes of some transgender people show that strong belief in their own capacity can make the difference. The case of B is one example. B experienced discrimination in school, at university and at work but she has gradually begun to fulfil her dream of working in cosmetics and make-up and be recognised as a capable and useful transwoman. Without her strong belief in herself, she would not have convinced her current employers to give her a job.

T has not come out yet, but less than a year after graduating she has been able to buy her own motorbike. She would not have achieved this without hard work and a burning desire to prove herself to her colleagues, friends and parents.

¹² See <http://tapchitaichinh.vn/nghien-cuu-trao-doi/trao-doi---binh-luan/kha-nang-tiep-can-von-cua-doanh-nghiep-nho-va-vua-trong-aec-63825.html> (in Vietnamese).

¹³ See www.chinhphu.vn/portal/page/portal/chinhphu/hethongvanban?class_id=1&mode=detail&document_id=173563 (in Vietnamese).

¹⁴ See <http://solaodong.hoabinh.gov.vn/index.php/site-map/articles/351-tan-dang-u-ai-ai-vai-nham-ada-ba-tan-th-nga-c-hai-mai-cho-ng-ai-sau-cai-nghien-ma-tay-va-ng-ai-ban-dam-hoan-l-ng-a-tanh-haa-banh> (in Vietnamese).

¹⁵ People group together to raise the funds. Each member pays a fixed amount every month or week and they take turns to collect the funds. This is helpful for many people. However, if someone cheats or one or more member makes a late payment, the group will not be sustainable.

J is another example of this strong motivation. Despite being discriminated in many places at first, J believes that she can do anything that she wants.

I can do whatever women do and even much better. Compared to men, I am just not as physically strong, but my mind and determination is much stronger than theirs. I told my parents, 'if you do not accept me, I will work and live independently on my own'. If I was an ordinary man, I would have not been strong like this. I am even stronger than my brother.

(J, transwoman)

Without a university degree but with a strong belief in rights and justice and support from a close friend, she started up her drag queen band and has met with success:

I just observe and learn. I am not afraid of learning. If someone says that 'I do not know how to do something', I would say 'you have not tried hard enough'. Nothing is too difficult. If you fail the first time, practice ten times. You will do well.

(J, transwoman)

Running drag queen shows in Vietnam can bring legal problems. However, her belief in being strong and being able to stand on her own helps her learn the laws and use them to protect herself and her band when the police try to interfere.

Despite the success stories there are still many transgender people who feel desperate about their futures. Livelihoods are still often limited to singing and dancing at weddings and funerals:

I sang and performed as an MC at weddings and funerals even when I was small. I thought that as I am a pede, this is the type of job for me when I grow up because what kind of company would accept someone like me?

(CT, transwoman, 24 years old)

Not everyone feels negatively about this, however:

I like my job. There is nothing bad about it. It helps me earn a lot of money. I enjoy singing, dancing and doing performance in front of other people.

(TL, transwoman)

3.4 Discussion

3.4.1 Transgender diversity

Before the fieldwork, a research team member met with several transwomen, transmen and gay people, most of them self-employed, in Hanoi, Hai Phong and Ho Chi Minh City to introduce the research. When she asked them to introduce her to transgender people with a university degree or higher who work in an office, they answered that it would be hard to find any. They also said that it would be difficult to find transgender people with high incomes, except for some celebrities or people in show business. In the consultative workshops, many transgender people, especially transwomen, had other doubts about the study. The most common questions were: 'Have these people come out yet?', 'How early did they come out?', 'Have they had the operation yet?' Some thought the findings might be biased by disproportional representation of transwomen in the sample. Some transwomen even wondered why the study was looking at female-to-male people: 'We are transgender as we are male and we have something to cut to become women. For these women, how can they transform to become men? They have nothing to be cut.' These discussions show that there are important gender, age and class dimensions to issues of representation. There are

transgender people who are successful in the online world but seem to lack any interest in linking up with others offline.

The questions about different transgender groups (operation vs non-operation and transwomen vs transmen) suggest that it would help to have more information available to the public in general on transgenderism to different transgender people. The information should explain the concept and the diversity of transgenderism. This can help to increase awareness and empathy with transgender people.

3.4.2 Livelihood: risk and opportunity

The opportunities for transgender people to realise their rights – including economic rights – are changing but many people are not yet aware of this. Making information about diverse livelihood options available to different transgender groups could help widen the view of many transgender people about their own community, increase their self-confidence and self-esteem, increase job opportunities and strengthen the connection between different groups in the community. As one key informant said: ‘Let the transgender people inspire themselves.’ But it is also possible that class and gender issues will continue to divide people, stymieing some and leaving others behind.

Findings from the research also show that transgender people do need training, critical advice and access to start-up funds to make livelihood through business a viable option for them. Although micro-credit and self-employment are not a panacea for all livelihood problems of poor and marginalised people, several research findings showed that this can be an option (Oosterhoff *et al.* 2008). This research also did find the success stories of Kiu Kiu and J that show that when transgender people have a feasible business plan, practical and financial support such as training on small business management and access to loans for a normal interest rate can help to reduce challenges. During discussions on loan schemes for transgender people during the consultation workshops, many transgender people, especially transwomen felt wary about taking out loans. They were afraid that if they are not successful in their business, they will be in debt. The fact that transgender people express such concerns regarding the feasibility of their business plan highlights the importance of the need for a social and practical network of people who can provide advice and coaching. English language skills are important not just financially but also socially for transgender people. Transgender people of various economic backgrounds including people who run their own business, have part-time or full-time jobs, or even unstable jobs, shared in the consultative workshops that they are attending English classes. When asked ‘What do you learn English for?’, their answer was ‘It is natural. Anyone should learn English in this globalised and economic situation. For us, it is even more important. It gives us for chance.’

4 Conclusions

Transgender people face restricted livelihood opportunities but they are also able to use the new economic opportunities generated by the internet and the opening up of the Vietnamese economy. While several studies have emphasised the discrimination against transgender people that prevents them from accessing employment opportunities and promotion, we found that some transgender people have found ways to circumvent this. We found successful young managers as well as many entrepreneurs who are working in internet-based, creative and non-sex based hospitality professions. This study clearly had an online bias, but the results do suggest that there are many livelihood possibilities for transgender people that seem to be unimaginable for the people in the offline community.

A lack of education, start-up capital and weak social networks remain important barriers. Education is a requirement of the labour market in Vietnam and educational institutions are still transphobic and homophobic. Anti-discrimination laws and policies on recruitment and employment could be strengthened and better implemented.

Self-discrimination on what transgender people can or cannot and should or should not do is also another important factor that may limit transgender people from learning and trying in areas that are not considered suitable work for transgender people. This view is also influenced by traditional Vietnamese gender stereotypes around what women and men do or do not do. As a consequence, and reflecting the gender equity situation in Vietnam, transmen often feel under less pressure than transwomen regarding physical freedom and livelihood options.

Similarly, 30 years after Vietnam's economic reforms, traditional labour market perceptions prevail and many people see a position in a state-owned company as the only kind of 'proper job'. This view not only limits transgender people from other livelihood opportunities but also influences their self-esteem.

When given an opportunity, even in a not totally fair environment, transgender people can prove their capacity and can climb to leading positions. But many people are not aware of such positive experiences, even in the transgender community. This limits people's views on livelihood opportunities and deprives them of a sense of empowerment.

Furthermore, connections among transgender people have been weak, especially among different transgender sub-groups in terms of age, sex, gender, education level and other social and economic status, and between individual transgender people and organisations.

The lack of legal framework that recognises transgender people as a specific category contributes to preventing transgender people from accessing employment opportunities, partly because of the lack of suitable identity documents. The same problems prevent them from accessing loan schemes for helping them establish their own business. To date, Vietnam does not have any law or policy that protects workers from discrimination on the basis of gender identity and sexual orientation.

4.1 Recommendations

To organisations and groups supporting transgender people

- Strengthen the connection between transgender groups of different ages and social economic status.
- Increase dissemination of information about positive experiences of transgender people at work.
- Create forums on employment opportunities and the knowledge and skills necessary for successful employment.
- Provide training and other support to help transgender people to assess the viability of and develop their own businesses.
- Provide guidance on equal recruitment and best practice at work to relevant state agencies and employers.
- Produce an annual transgender friendly employer index and monitor discrimination in workplaces.
- Implement communication campaigns and education to mass media to raise public awareness on transgender people and their rights and reduce stigma and discrimination.

To the government

- Recognise transgender people in law as a specific gender category and/or allow transgender people to obtain necessary documents with their changed appearance and name.
- Legislate to prevent workers in general and transgender workers in particular from being discriminated against in recruitment and employment. Require organisations to publicise and disseminate these laws and policies properly to all managers and workers in their facilities.
- Include transmen and transwomen in the development and monitoring of laws and policies relevant to them.
- Recognise transgender people as a vulnerable and disadvantaged group and make policies that help transgender people access loan schemes and financial skills training.
- Introduce regulations to protect transgender people from transphobic bullying and violence in school. Provide sexuality education early before secondary school.

To the private sector/chamber of commerce

- Develop policies and guidelines on equal recruitment and anti-discrimination in the workplace and make these policies publicly available.
- Train managers and other staff on equal recruitment and anti-discrimination in the workplace.

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