

Creating Safe Spaces

Creating safe spaces for queer people is critical in the fight for equality and for them to have a voice. It took a police crackdown at the Stonewall Inn — one of the few bars in New York's Greenwich Village that welcomed the queer community — for members of the community to stand against the violence they faced, demand an end to discrimination and spark the global Pride movement.

Decades later, Thida Chhuon, a Cambodian advocate for LGBTQIA+ rights, is inspired to create a safe space for Battambang's LGBTQIA+ community, where people can inspire, learn and support each other. "What we are working for is social justice and intersectionality by using the arts to empower ourselves and everyone," she says.

Thida founded SafeSpaceBTB as a community initiative focused on events discussing queerness in Cambodia, campaigns to raise awareness about the human rights gap and LGBTQIA+phobia issues and podcasts that platform members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Thida chose Battambang because most of the resources available to advocate for the queer community were in Phnom Penh, whereas "a few crumbs" were given to queer people who lived outside the big cities or in rural areas. Thida has passion and commitment to change this because the realities of queer people in Battambang was not always the same as someone in Phnom Penh or elsewhere in the country.

She has seen improvements in how queer people were treated, involved in the wider social fabric and were able to have a voice. But there was still a lot that needed to be done to change longstanding, and often vitriolic, perceptions and discrimination against the community. This includes people thinking that LGBTQIA+ people are "abnormal" or that same-sex couples should not be allowed to be together.

When Thida was younger, she remembers it being

almost impossible to come out and express your gender identity in a community that only acknowledged a binary existence. And while people and society are slowly moving in the right direction, she says there is a long way to go in Cambodia.

"It doesn't mean everything is fixed now. There is still lots to do. That's what we're working on," Thida says.

Seeing how SafeSpaceBTB has worked with queer artists, musicians and authors, Thida wants Cambodia to reach a place where queer people can be happy and live their lives to the fullest.

"Nothing is better than being yourself and living your life without being ashamed."



SafeSpaceBTB founder Thida Chhuon, seated in the front row, with the rest of the organization's team. (Photo Credit: SafeSpaceBTB)



A dancer from SafeSpaceBTB performs at an exhibition opening and public event at Meta House in Phnom Penh.