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HRW – Human Rights Watch

Vietnam Adopts Global LGBT Health Standard

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New Health Ministry Order Upholds Dignity, Nondiscrimination

(Bangkok) – [Vietnam’s](#) Health Ministry officially confirmed on August 3, 2022, that same-sex attraction and being transgender are not mental health conditions, Human Rights Watch said today. The decision brings Vietnam’s health policy in line with global health and human rights standards.

Vietnam’s [new directive states](#) that “the American Psychiatric Association and the World Health Organization (WHO) have confirmed that homosexuality is entirely not an illness, therefore homosexuality cannot be ‘cured’ nor need[s] to be ‘cured’ and cannot be converted in any way.”

“The Vietnamese Health Ministry’s recognition that sexual orientation and gender identity are not illnesses will bring relief to LGBT people and their families across Vietnam,” said [Kyle Knight](#), senior health and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights researcher at Human Rights Watch. “LGBT people in Vietnam deserve access to health information and services without discrimination, and the Health Ministry’s new directive is a major step in the right direction.”

Vietnam has made some progress on LGBT rights in recent years, Human Rights Watch said. In 2013, the government removed same-sex unions from the list of forbidden relationships, but the update did not allow for legal recognition of same-sex relationships. In 2015, the National Assembly updated the civil code to make it no longer illegal for transgender people to change their first name and legal gender, but the revisions did not create a legal gender recognition procedure.

In 2016, Vietnam, while a member of the United Nations Human Rights Council, [voted in favor](#) of a resolution on the need for protection against violence and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. The delegation made a statement of their support before the vote, saying “the reason for Vietnam’s yes vote lay in changes both in domestic as well as international policy with respect to LGBT rights.”

However, as Human Rights Watch documented in a [2020 report](#), factual misunderstandings and negative stereotypes help fuel human rights abuses against LGBT people in Vietnam. The belief that same-sex attraction is a diagnosable, mental health condition is pervasive in Vietnam. This false belief is rooted in the failure of the government and medical professional associations to effectively communicate that same-sex attraction is a natural variation of human experience.

Researchers [have written](#) that Vietnam never officially adopted the initial position of the WHO, which introduced a diagnosis for homosexuality in 1969. Since the homosexuality diagnosis appears to have never officially been on the books in Vietnam, therefore the government never officially removed the diagnosis, as [many countries around the world](#) did when the WHO declassified it in 1990. The government’s treatment of homosexuality as deviant behavior, combined with prominent medical figures promoting this view, fueled the widespread belief that same-sex attraction was pathological.

Pervasive myths about homosexuality have an impact on children and youth. “There’s a lot of pressure on kids to be straight,” a school counselor in Hanoi told Human Rights Watch. “It’s constantly referenced that being attracted to someone of the same sex is something that can and should be changed and fixed.”

The anthropologist Natalie Newton wrote in a 2015 article that, “Vietnamese newspaper advice columns have also featured the opinions of medical doctors and psychologists who have written about homosexuality as a disease of the body, a genetic disorder, hormonal imbalance, or mental illness.”

International health bodies and a growing number of national health authorities and health professional associations around the world have issued policies to affirm that sexual orientation and gender identity are not illnesses, as well as LGBT nondiscrimination policies. These include Thailand’s Public Health Ministry, which stated in 2002 that

“persons loving the same sex are not considered mentally abnormal or in any way ill.” National health professional associations in [Hong Kong](#), [the Philippines](#), and India have affirmed that position and supported nondiscriminatory health rights for LGBT people.

The Health Ministry issued the following instructions for all medical centers across Vietnam:

1. Enhance information propagation and dissemination so that the medical doctors, staff, and patients at medical examination and treatment centers have a correct understanding about homosexuality, bisexuality, and transgender people.
2. While administering medical examination or treatment for LGBT patients, health workers need to ensure gender equality and respect to avoid discrimination and prejudices against these groups.
3. Don't consider homosexuality, bisexuality, and being transgender an illness.
4. Don't interfere nor force treatment upon these groups of patients, if any, it must be in the form of psychological assistance and performed only by those who understand sexual identity.
5. Enhance internal review and inspection efforts for medical examination and treatment centers and practitioners to ensure compliance with the professional codes in medical services according to the law.

The directive follows a civil society-run petition that garnered more than 76,000 signatures and a [letter](#) from the WHO's Vietnam office confirming that the “WHO firmly holds the view that any effort to convert the sexual orientation of a non-heterosexual person lacks medical justification and is morally unacceptable.”

“Vietnam now joins the growing number of governments around the world affirming that same-sex attraction and gender identity are both natural variations of human experience,” Knight said. “Vietnam's Health Ministry has boosted fundamental rights with this directive, and LGBT people now have increasingly firm grounding for expressing themselves without fear of negative reactions.”

ecoi.net summary:

Government recognizes that
LGBT people don't suffer from
mental health conditions

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Vietnam

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