

Special Feature

Pushing Boundaries

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Anything related to gender and sexuality in general is regarded as a taboo subject in Bangladesh. On the off chance that sexual minorities such as women, homosexuals, hermaphrodites, trans-genders (hijras) and sex workers are given a platform to speak about their issues, it is usually about just that -- issues. Such platforms are usually entrenched with stereotypes and negativity. Forget tolerating and giving equal rights to these minorities, it is difficult enough for most people in Bangladesh to accept that these issues exist, that they are real, that these people are a part of our society and that they, too, want to live a life free of stigma and sexual repression.



A picture by participant and presenter Rubaiyat Hossain, featured in her slide show presentation.

In trying to take steps towards eliminating the ignorance and indifference towards these groups, BRAC University's James P Grant School of Public Health hosted the first International Workshop on Gender and Sexuality from July 28-30 at the BRAC Centre where not only were there participants and presenters from Bangladesh but also hailing from different parts of the world including India, Kenya, Pakistan, Turkey, the U.K. and the U.S. The Dean of the James P Grant School, Dr. AMR Chowdhury, made the welcome address. The workshop and the James P Grant School are both a part of a larger DFID-funded project called the Research Programme Consortium (RPC) 'Realising Rights,' which "addresses neglected areas of sexual and reproductive health and the factors underlying their low priority in policy and practice." The purpose of the workshop was not only to move the Realising Rights agenda forward, but also to "make people aware, initiate research and bring the things we usually don't talk about out in the open," according to Dr. Sabina Faiz Rashid, RPC Coordinator and Assistant Professor at BRAC University, who initiated, organised and hosted the

workshop with her team members at BRAC University, Dr. Farah Mahjabeen, Nasima Selim, Rubaiyat Hossain, Mahrukh Mohiuddiun and Donald Bapi Das.

"Sexuality as a broader topic is not discussed," says Dr. Rashid. "And when it is, it is usually associated with negative terms such as HIV/AIDS, diseases, guilt; or couched in public health issues, such as the importance of practicing safe sex and abortion, but sexuality itself is a huge issue. It frames people's well being on so many levels and it is important not to ignore it. Of course one may argue that in a country where there are so many issues to tackle -- so much poverty, so many people dying -- is this really an issue that is relevant, and more importantly, is this a priority? However, the way I see it is that we are trying to make sexuality a mainstream



Presenters Nadia Afroza Zaman, Tahira Khan and Rubaiyat Hossain, along with session Chair Sumit Boudh, answer questions from the audience about their respective presentations.

issue, and provide these vulnerable groups with a platform. Through this workshop we, of course, intend to generate awareness, but I think it is also important to challenge and inspire people, to rethink and push boundaries, and also to allow people to link up and do further work in this area. There are all these voices wanting to talk about sexuality."

One such voice was Tanveer Reza Rouf, a Senior at BRAC University, studying Economics, who spoke about 'Middle Class Gay Identity in Dhaka City.' Rouf started his discussion by stressing that, contrary to popular belief, MSMs or 'men who have sex with men' are not the same thing as gay men. According to Rouf, the term MSM is more clinical and biological, incorporating hijras and sex workers, whereas being gay or homosexual is an identity. The term has been picked up by the development discourse and is frequently used by NGOs, especially in relation to STDs and HIV/AIDS, thus putting homosexual men in a position where there is only the stigma of diseases attached to their identity.



Many of the presentations and discussions afterwards encouraged the audience members to relay their own personal experiences.

Although men do not have a plethora of strong support groups in Bangladesh to choose from, they still have some respite. In his presentation Rouf described the happenings at Ramna Park, which is frequented by gay men in Dhaka, in order to find other gay men. Many of these men also have sex in the park because it is the only space that they have access to where they will find other gay men despite the threat of police making their rounds around 9.30 at night and beating people up. Another issue is that, although these men may find some sort of physical comfort, they are not able to get any emotional relief. They cannot talk about their feelings or problems with each other, which further alienates and isolates them. In response to this concern, online groups such as Boys Only Bangladesh (BOB) have popped up in order to provide gay men with Bangladesh a "safe haven" in which they can discuss their issues, be comfortable with their identities and also meet people, which is important because according to Rouf, most gay men in Bangladesh will either never come out of the closet and/or will participate in or be a victim to the ridiculing of homosexuality, which is extremely common in Bangladesh.

"What these groups are doing is creating more spaces where gay men can come out," says Rouf. "The problem is that most people do not even acknowledge homosexuality in our country. Those who do accept it do not want to talk about it. There is this constraint over sexuality -- people tend to pigeonhole it. As a whole, people never talk about sex as a pleasurable thing, instead people link it to a lifestyle. I would rather see people's prejudice, however, than have them remain silent and not acknowledge it at all. We need to break this silence and accept that there is a gay community in Bangladesh."

The silence that surrounds the issue of homosexuality is, in some ways, deafening and controversial at the same time. Some people believe that homosexuality is a choice, while others believe that it is biological and therefore, something that people are born with. Rouf says, "Being gay is a biological need, and no one can change it. It is a thing that you are born with, and not something that you can change. The choice part comes in when you decide if you want to accept it or not. You can choose whether or not you want to live your life like this or not."

Rouf also discussed his concerns for the lesbian population in Bangladesh because they face a double burden. "Not only are they a minority in terms of gender, but they are also a minority in terms of sexuality," says Rouf. "Gay men do not have enough support groups in Bangladesh, but gay women are at an even bigger disadvantage. At least gay men have certain places to go, especially with groups like BOB online, but lesbians have no place to go at all."

Sexuality does not only pertain to those who are labeled sexual minorities. According to Dr. Dina Siddiqi, a Research Associate at the Alice Paul Center for the Study of Women, Gender and Sexuality at the University of Pennsylvania, sexuality can be a mechanism of control and heterosexual identities are also subject to regulation

and policing by society.

Dr. Siddiqi, who presented two papers during the workshop: one on the 'Hetero-normative Framework and its Implications,' and the other on 'Women as the Battle Ground of Ideology: Women and Islam in Bangladesh,' notes that our dominant discourse recognises only heterosexual relationships within marriage as "natural" and normal. Everything outside of this is stigmatised as not-natural, "deviant" and immoral. "Any kind of sex, or sexual identity which is not about procreation, or not legitimised by marriage falls in to the category of deviant," says Dr. Siddiqi.

Dr. Siddiqi also talks about "methodological individualism," in which sexuality is mainly treated as a private issue, which concerns only the individual and his or her own beliefs, which in turn implies that all individuals are fully independent of society and societal relations. However, the truth is that social relations formulate and regulate an individual's identities and actions. For example, in Bangladesh, a woman is always under pressure to be sexually respectable. "Until we are married," says Dr. Siddiqi, "our actions are being circumscribed by the fear of possibly undermining our sexual reputations. And this whole notion of modesty and respectability cuts across classes."

Dr. Siddiqi draws on the term heteronormativity, derived from the words heterosexual and normativity. According to the heteronormative perspective, there are two distinct categories of human beings, male and female, each of which has a 'natural role in life,' and also that sex and marriage between two sexes is considered the norm. "The concept naturalises and valorises the patriarchal monogamous marriage, which is then projected as the fundamental core through which the family, community and nation are constituted," says Dr. Siddiqi.

She stresses that although most people, when they hear the word sexuality, consider it to be biologically driven, in reality, "sexualities are socially constructed. Certain sexual acts may seem universal and unchanging but categories of sexuality cannot be taken for granted, their meanings are embedded in historically and culturally specific contexts." She gives the example of homosexuality, which makes sense only in a modern framework because pre-capitalist societies did not acknowledge homosexuality as a proper category.

However, even in modern-day society, minority groups such as homosexuals and hijras are not recognised by societal and legal institutions as discussed by Dr. Faustina Perrera, Advocacy Director of Ain o Shalish Kendra, in her presentation on 'Legal Loopholes, Law and Sexuality.'" As Dr. Perrera surmised, since women themselves are not given legal rights, minority groups such as homosexuals and transvestites are even more unprotected by the law. She described a particular case regarding property rights. One of the siblings was a hermaphrodite and as a result, they were not sure how to fairly divide the land. After over a week of research Dr. Perrera and her colleagues found that under Islamic law, if the sex of a person was unclear, they should be treated as a woman.

Sexual abuse is also another important issue that is often swept under the carpet. A number of presenters spoke about their personal experiences, further encouraging the participants to accept that such an issue is indeed real and salient in our society. "I was sexually abused when I was four years old," says Afsan Chowdhury, Director of Advocacy and Human Rights at BRAC University, who presented a paper on titled 'Exploring Bengali Sexuality: Tentative Observations'. According to several of his researches, sexual abuse is very common in Bangladesh during one's childhood, though the fact is kept hidden due to the social stigma that may arise. Talking about his own childhood experience, Chowdhury says that he had no idea what was happening to him. In fact, he had even forgotten about the incident, until he started to work with people who were deeply scarred by incidents from their own lives. "At one point, it got so depressing that I began to remember the time when I had to go through abuse as a child. For no reason whatsoever, I would feel guilty, even though I was just a child and did not even know what was going on."

In most of the cases that Chowdhury has worked on, he has found girls to be sexually abused on a regular basis by older cousins, uncles or other male members in their extended families. This is usually kept hidden so as not to create any kind of chaos within the family. In fact, the girl's possible marriage prospects are given more importance than the fact that she might have been traumatised and scarred for life.

In the case of male children being sexually abused, the situation, in many villages, is not taken seriously. "It becomes a part of growing up," explains Chowdhury. "Something that every other boy goes through in a close-knit neighbourhood and not to be made an issue out of."

Chowdhury also discusses how "Bangalis, contrary to certain assumptions are very accommodating as far as sexual behaviour is concerned including conventional deviant behaviour. The public-private space distribution of sexuality is a very influential issue in this regard. The domains are separate and often contradictory but both are real." He says that a Bangali maintains a public and a private space as far as his/her sexual acts are concerned. "For instance, in certain zones of Africa sexuality is open," he adds, "whereas in Bangladesh while the social structure or the public space is not disturbed and sexual behaviour is kept in the private or a secret." In other words, according to Chowdhury, the family lies at the core of all the social action. "The family is considered private and that is why it has an interest in privacy as a dominant social and private expression including sexual practices."

One of the many stories of sexual abuse victims in the country were subtly captured in a six-minute documentary called *Ami (Me)* by Rajib Ashraf, a young, independent film-maker. In the documentary, a photographer walks around taking pictures on the street when he comes across a young child, photographs him and then brings him home. The child, who had probably wandered away from home is silently confused when the photographer shows him pornographic video images, in a way of teaching and showing the child of what they are about to perform. Watching this documentary, a few people attending the seminar voiced out their emotions, relating to the incident in the film. All of them were sexually abused as children. One of them, Joya Sikdar, General Secretary of Badhon, an association of transgender people, during her presentation, 'Representing Transgender Groups' spoke about how, when she was growing up, she was sexually abused, particularly while she was in school, "I used to go to a school which was co-educational," she said. "As I grew up and had to go to senior secondary school, the boys and girls were separated and I had to go to a boys' school. There I used to be taunted by both the boys and teachers alike and was also sexually abused at several instances."

An important and slightly different issue brought up was by Rubaiyat Hossain of BRAC University, who, in her paper 'Women-Nation - Izzat: Female Sexuality and Gendered Nationalism in Bangladesh' discussed women who were victims of war crimes such as rape, sexual abuse and torture. According to Hossain, these women carry the shame and embarrassment of being violated for generations. She mentions certain real-life cases in which women raped during wars are subjected to dishonour and as a result, are boycotted both socially and financially by the villagers and sometimes even their own families. The traditional idea of a woman representing the dignity of a family name is so strong within the social mind-frame that any deviance from the sexual norm, whether intentional or enforced, is seen as a disgrace rather than bringing about some sense of sympathy for these tortured and violated women.

In addition to women who were victimised as a result of war-crimes, there is another group of women who are victims of circumstances, such as poverty and trafficking. Rodela Selim, Research and Evaluation Division, BRAC University, Bangladesh presented a paper on 'Sex Worker's Rights,' after visiting a well-known brothel located in Madaripur. Her paper observed the sex workers' plight in that particular area. "Being a BRAC worker, I expected that I would obviously have ready access to the brothel," she says. However, Rodela had to go through several restrictions while working on her research at Madaripur. "Even though the women in the brothel were more than ready to welcome me inside and talk to me, the officials working there would only let me enter the brothel and visit with the women during certain times of the day. For instance, I was not allowed to go in at night sometimes and also during some of the 'peak hours' of their work."

Several organisations are currently working in the brothel in Madaripur and other brothels in the country to establish the rights of these sex workers. Speaking about her research at the brothel which she did for more than a year, Rodela says that many of these sex workers sometimes end up having kids. "If the child is a boy, then he is usually kept away from the brothel or sent away to the family in the respective villages," explains Rodela. "If the child turns out to be a girl, she grows up at the brothel and ends up working for it after a few years as well."

Madaripur, according to Rodela, is a city filled with clinics. Medical help should not have been a major challenge for

these sex workers. "However, since these sex workers are always in a hurry and need to get certain medical check ups done urgently, they are provided with a yellow slip by the doctor," says Rodela. "HAnybody entering a clinic with a yellow slip is automatically identified as a sex worker, and that's how they don't get the proper medical facilities."

Back-yard abortion is a very common activity in this brothel. "Because these workers get harassed at the hospital, they don't bother to go to a proper clinic or a hospital for abortions," says Rodela. "Usually quacks take care of abortions for these sex workers."

Be it sex workers, abused women and children, homosexuals, transvestites or just women in general, sexual minority groups face all sorts of discrimination on different levels. Whether it is through societal institutions or legal frameworks, the reality in Bangladesh is that its minority population is systematically repressed. It is a society where woman cannot freely deviate from the norms without being stigmatised, and homosexuals do not have strong enough support systems; where sex workers are susceptible to diseases and subjected to painful, unhygienic abortions and war crime victims are persecuted rather than comforted; transvestites are not only ignored but also treated as sub-humans and sexual abuse victims are scarred for life without being able to acknowledged that they were wronged.

There is no room for tolerance and humanity in a society so set in its ways. However, with workshops like the Gender and Sexuality workshop organised by the James P Grant School of Public Health at BRAC University, society is not only exposed to these problems and issues, but also forced to acknowledge these minorities, allowing them to speak out against years of ingrained discrimination, and giving them the space to find alternatives, to pave a smoother road for the future generations to come, and to provide each other the support that they are denied on a daily basis. Rather than most other workshops which discuss problems such as STDs, abortions, HIV/AIDS, this particular workshop went the extra distance in trying to mainstream the existence of these many groups, all trying to find their rightful place in the society that has for so long shunned them.