Exploring the lived realities of lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) youth in Bangladesh

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INTRODUCTION

According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2006), sexuality is '…a central aspect of being human and encompasses sex, gender identities, and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy, and reproduction'. Due to its fluid nature, sexuality can be manifested and expressed in many forms, including heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality and asexuality (Little and McGivern, 2014). In Bangladesh, conservative cultural and religious norms mean that homosexuality is widely seen as unacceptable. There is a lack of education about sex and sexuality, and same-sex relations are criminalised under the Penal Code. Many people in Bangladesh hold conservative religious beliefs that are shaped by a heteronormative lens. This can make it challenging for individuals to openly discuss their sexual identity and those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual and other sexually or gender diverse (LGBTQIA+) can face significant stigma and discrimination.

Sexuality is an important aspect of adolescents' and young people's development (American Psychological Association, 2021). Therefore, it is paramount that adolescents have accurate and age-appropriate information about sexuality and sexual practices so that they can make informed

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decisions about their sexual behaviour. Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) provides accurate and age-appropriate information about sexuality, sexual and reproductive health, and relationships (UNFPA, 2018), and is a recognised strategy for improving adolescents' sexual and reproductive health outcomes (Kirby, 2019). Research has shown that CSE programmes can help young people develop the skills and knowledge necessary to make informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive health, communicate effectively with partners and health providers and advocate for their own rights and needs (UNFPA, 2018). According to the APA (American Psychological Association, 2008), sexuality education is particularly important for LGBTQIA+ adolescents as they often face discrimination, stigma and a lack of understanding and acceptance from their families and communities. By providing accurate information and promoting positive attitudes toward LGBTQIA+ individuals, sexuality education can reduce discrimination and stigma and create a more inclusive and supportive environment for all young people (Kann et al., 2016).

Young people in Bangladesh face numerous sexual and reproductive health challenges, yet schools provide only limited CSE programming. There have been recent efforts to introduce CSE. According to a rapid assessment conducted by United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Bangladesh (2020), the government included a chapter on reproductive health in the secondary school curriculum, which covers topics such as puberty, menstruation and contraception. Some international and non-governmental organisations have also implemented CSE programmes in schools and communities. However, none of these programmes talk about diverse gender identities and sexual diversity. This case study examines the social, cultural and religious barriers that young self-identified lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) individuals in Bangladesh face. These obstacles hinder their ability to fully participate in various aspects of their personal, social and family lives as well as engage as rightful citizens of the state. It also explores how the lack of sex education affects young people's ability to express themselves and assert their agency. Finally, we explore the strategies and coping mechanisms that young people use to navigate these challenges and express their voice and agency.

BACKGROUND

Bangladesh remains 1 of 67 countries with a law that criminalise same-sex activities, with a maximum penalty of life imprisonment (Human Dignity Trust, 2022). The Government of Bangladesh does not engage in constructive public debates concerning the LGBTQIA+ community (The Global Human Rights Defense, 2015) and has twice rejected recommendations to repeal the

colonial-era law during its Universal Periodic Review at the United Nations Human Rights Council (Human Rights Watch, 2017). Conservative social norms and intolerant and extremist religious views drive the mindset of the majority of Bangladeshi citizens, and it is challenging for LGBTQIA+ individuals to claim their human rights. It is evident that in Bangladesh, societal, cultural and political structures systematically disadvantage and discriminate against individuals who identify as LGBTQIA+. This kind of structural marginalisation of LGBTQIA+ individuals pose significant obstacles, especially among young people, to their capacity to express their identities while growing up. These barriers can prevent individuals from fully expressing their identities and exercising their agency, making it difficult for them to participate fully in society.

In February 2015, the online activist, writer and blogger Avijit Roy, known for creating an internet blogging platform for Bangladeshi freethinkers, atheists and humanists (author of Bangladesh's first scientific book (2010) on homosexual identity) was murdered by religious fundamentalists (BBC News, 2015). In April 2016, Xulhaz Mannan, the founder and editor of Bangladesh's only LGBTQIA+ magazine, and Mahbub Rabbi Tonoy, an LGBTIQ+ rights activist, were hacked to death by Islamist militants in Dhaka (The Daily Star, 2016). Following these events, targeted harassment and violence against the LGBTQIA+ community increased, leading to sharply reduced efforts around the visibility of LGBTQIA+ activities in the country. Due to the immense lack of discourse on homosexuality and a staunch heteronormative culture around marriage and sexuality, diverse sexual identities lack legitimacy in the national cultural space of Bangladesh. Since it is a Muslim-dominated country, non-normative gender and sexual behaviours are considered immoral and sinful, and 'there continues to be a culture of collective denial of the existence of same-sex sexualities in the country' (Rashid et al., 2011).

According to the UNFPA, adolescents (aged 10–19) comprise 21% of the population in Bangladesh. In the country's National Strategy for Adolescent Health 2017–2030, there is no mention of LGBTQIA+ individuals, either in the suggested measures or implementation strategies, and particularly in the section on vulnerable adolescents and adolescents in challenging circumstances. The strategy lacks tailored, age-appropriate sexual and reproductive health programmes for younger adolescents (aged 10–14). Given that this is the age when adolescent girls and boys begin to define their gender and sexual norms, values and attitudes – and that many individuals first become sexually active during early adolescence – it is crucial to address sexual and reproductive health through policies and programmes that target this age group.

METHODS AND SAMPLE

This chapter draws insights from a six-month qualitative study entitled 'Sexual Diversity in Bangladesh, Narratives of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Youth', conducted by BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health, BRAC University in 2017. The study, funded by Share-net International, explored hidden narratives of LGB individuals (aged 18–30) from Bangladesh. After the Islamist militants killed Bangladesh's most prominent gay activists in 2016, all the ongoing activities by the community and ally organisation were completely shut down. The situation forced all the organisations in Bangladesh that advocate for LGBTQIA+ rights to take a low profile in the following years. Though the safety concerns are still there, there have been cautious and strategic efforts to mobilise the community slowly in recent years. In light of this, the chapter is now being published after five years of collecting data.

The study examined how LGB individuals transition from adolescence to adulthood in a context where their identities are criminalised and considered taboo. The study also aimed to explore the experiences of the LGB community regarding social exclusion, the degree of acceptance of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities and strategies and coping mechanisms people use to navigate their situations. Secondary research was conducted at the beginning of the project to map out the existing evidence on this topic.

Researchers conducted ten in-depth interviews (with six males and four females) and one focus group discussion with LGB individuals living in Dhaka. The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. They were all transcribed into Bengali and then translated into English. The data was coded manually to develop the thematic codes for analysis. Researchers explained the purpose of the study to all participants, emphasising their anonymity, and described how the data would be used. All participants gave informed consent.

It is important to understand the challenges and barriers young LGBTQIA+ people face in terms of voice and agency while they grow up, as it has a long-term impact on their future and shapes how they would function as an adult. Given the context of Bangladesh, identifying young people with diverse gender and sexual identities is challenging because of various social, cultural and legal factors associated with it. Therefore, it is highly unusual to find an adolescent (10–19) from the LGBTQIA+ community who is willing to talk about their sexuality. For this chapter, we have therefore used data from a slightly older demographic (18–30) who talked about their experiences during adolescence. Respondents identified as LGB according to their sexual orientation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Barriers to exercising voice and agency

Respondents reported that as they began to explore their sexuality during puberty, they encountered significant obstacles in accessing information and support. One key factor was a general lack of knowledge about sexuality. In Bangladesh, sex education is not commonly taught in schools, and many parents may feel uncomfortable discussing sexuality issues with their children. Moreover, a lack of awareness and social stigma surrounding LGBTQIA+ issues in Bangladeshi society further impedes access to information about sexuality beyond heteronormativity. Traditional gender roles and social expectations reinforce a binary perspective of gender and sexuality, which makes it difficult for non-heterosexual individuals to feel seen and understood. Some participants recounted experiencing adverse reactions when trying to discuss their sexual desires or romantic attraction with their families. These reactions ranged from family members remaining in denial about the person's sexual orientation, to labelling it as a mental health issue. One female respondent explained that her family took her to see a doctor when she said she was attracted to other girls:

> When I was a teenager, I told my parents about how I felt [feeling attracted to women]. Then I was taken to a psychiatrist. He asked me when I realised I was drawn to other girls, whether I did anything with any girl, etc. I explained everything to him. After that, he gave me some medicines, mostly relaxing and sleeping pills. Maybe he thought I wouldn't be thinking about the girls if I always slept.
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> (Neetu, lesbian woman, 20)

The resources available for sexual and reproductive health and rights education, sexual health services, relationship advice and media representation in Bangladesh do not explicitly address the needs and experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals. As a result, LGB young people mentioned often feeling confused or ashamed about their desires and unable to access the support and resources they needed to better understand themselves. Many participants reported feeling alienated during adolescence due to the lack of representation of same-sex relationships in the media, including TV shows, movies and stories. Some even believed that they had mental health issues because of their attraction to people of the same sex.

> I started liking a female classmate when I was in school. Growing up, I realized I had never seen two girls having a relationship in any storybook, movie, or anywhere. That's why anxiety started to work in me

naturally since I had not seen this kind of relationship. Maybe it was not normal. Maybe I am mad or have biological and hormonal problems…

(Shumi, lesbian woman, 22)

Another gay individual shared how he expressed his love to a long-time friend on the street, much as heterosexual couples do in movies or dramas. However, he was fearful that anyone else on the road would hear him say romantic things to another man, as this could result in negative consequences.

I asked my friend to come to Shahbag (a major neighbourhood near Dhaka University) where we hang out most. I bought roses. When he came, I gave him the flowers, told him I love you, and then ran away. I could not believe I had done that. I was so scared, thinking 'what if anyone else heard me?'…

(Shamim, gay man, 23)

Stereotypes and media representation often shape societal attitudes and perceptions towards the LGBTQIA+ community. All respondents noted that the media portrays stereotypical and limiting depictions of LGBTQIA+ individuals, such as effeminate men being gay, or aggressive women, or those who do not conform to conventional beauty standards being lesbians. This narrow portrayal reinforces harmful stereotypes and can shape and reinforce people's perceptions of LGBTQIA+ individuals.

When I was in school, a female friend had a crush on me, and when I told her that I am gay, she was shocked. She asked how that could be possible. 'You don't seem like a person who'd be gay, and you don't even walk like "that" [in a feminine way]'. I told her, how could she know about my orientation from my behaviour? Do you carry a signboard saying, 'I am straight'? Being homosexual has nothing to do with masculine or feminine behaviour.

(Topu, gay man, 18)

In movies and dramas, such depictions are often presented for comic relief. Moreover, media representations of LGBTQIA+ individuals as choosing their identity or it being 'just a phase' or 'abnormal' can reinforce negative stereotypes and stigmatise those who identify as LGB, causing them to fear backlash or discrimination. Some respondents expressed frustration that their identity as an LGB person is not a matter of choice, and it is unfair for them to experience discrimination for something they were born with.

How is it possible to change? I would have changed myself if I could because being a gay person is not an ideal thing in this society and comes

with a lot of negative consequences. I am who I am. I can't change myself, and I also can't apologise for who I am.

(Rana, gay man, 18)

Popular media in Bangladesh also often perpetuates the myth that LGBTQIA+ individuals cannot form meaningful relationships, further fuelling prejudice against the community. Respondents noted that homosexuality is often oversexualised in the media, while the romantic, loving, committed and respectful aspects of same-sex relationships are overlooked. Respondents noted that same-sex relationships are just as valid and multifaceted as heterosexual relationships, and that it is important to acknowledge and respect this diversity in media representation.

If it was only for sex, then why all these movements? We want to express our identity too. To say that he is my husband. When that does not happen, that is when we fight for our rights.

(Rana, gay man, 18)

Respondents also highlighted how religious beliefs shape people's attitudes towards homosexuality. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, Muslims comprise 91.4% of the population (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2022) making Bangladesh a Muslim majority country, and Islam considers homosexuality to be a violation of the natural order of creation. Respondents noted that religious extremists often view non-heterosexual behaviour as immoral or sinful, which can lead to violent attitudes and behaviours. Alongside laws criminalising homosexuality, this creates a hostile environment for LGBTQ+ individuals, preventing them from exercising their rights as citizens, expressing themselves or advocating for their rights without fear of violence. All respondents mentioned being under immense fear and threat, especially after the killing of two gay rights activists in 2016.

I can be under attack at any time. I still have nightmares about someone attacking me.

(Shumi, lesbian woman, 22)

I always thought about what is the worst that could happen. Beat me up? I was bullied before as well. But I couldn't imagine it would get much worse than the bullying and that people can be so violent. I thought this kind of killing happened in Syria or Iraq only. Bangladesh is a secular country. And it is terrifying when people are murdered like this in a secular country. I was terrified when Xulhaz Mannan was killed.

(Topu, gay man, 18)

Respondents who identify as both religious and homosexual often struggle to reconcile these conflicting aspects of their identity. This can lead to feelings of guilt, shame, regret and confusion, as one respondent shared:

> When I was in school, our accounting teacher was very religious. He brought a religious book to the class and talked about it… One day he gave me a book called 'kabira gunah' (Major Sin), which mentioned homosexuality. It said homosexuality is 'Haram' [forbidden by Islamic law] and homosexual people will never go to heaven. During my adolescence, I used to say my prayers (Namaz). But I always had concerns. I used to think, I did not choose to be a homosexual… My other male friends like girls, but I never felt attracted to them… Why is this happening? I did not choose to be this way, why will I suffer then?
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> (Topu, gay man, 18)

Another respondent mentioned that when he was young and learned that his sexual orientation is prohibited according to his religion (Islam), he prayed to God to heal him and change his sexual orientation to heterosexual.

> I went to tabligh [to make Islam's message known to people is called tabligh]. I did much soul-searching when I was in class 7 or 8. I used to pray five times a day. I used to cry and beg Allah so that he could fix me.
>
> (Mizan, gay man, 28)

Respondents mentioned that ensuring LGBTQIA+ rights in Bangladesh will be a long-term process due to multiple factors, including cultural and religious beliefs, political and legal barriers and societal attitudes toward the LGBTQIA+ community. And for women who identifies as lesbians, the journey can be more difficult due to the double burden of discrimination, as women and as members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Lesbian women also reported encountering challenges while seeking sexual and reproductive health services due to discrimination or stigmatisation from healthcare providers. A female respondent said:

> As a woman in this country, we have to struggle a lot. So being a lesbian, it's another added challenge….We are trying to make a space for ourselves as lesbians. But it is a long-term process. I don't know if I will live to see that day.
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> (Moni, lesbian woman, 21)

Negotiating voice and agency

Agency refers to the ability of individuals or groups to act and make choices for themselves, while voice refers to the ability to express oneself and be

heard. The exercise of agency and voice is deeply relational because it occurs within social contexts that are shaped by power dynamics, social norms and cultural values. Findings indicate that negotiating voice and agency for LGBTQIA+ people in Bangladesh involves the process of actively asserting their rights and making decisions that affect their life while navigating the various barriers and challenges that exist within their cultural and societal context. It can include both active participation in advocating for rights and being open about their sexual orientation, as well as the strategies they use to protect themselves from discrimination and violence.

Negotiating voice and agency is particularly challenging for LGB youth in Bangladesh, given the legal and other barriers to their expressing voice and agency. Respondents mentioned that the visibility of homosexual people is crucial in combating homophobia. For example, when homosexual people and their stories are visible in the mainstream media, in their communities or in their personal lives, it can help challenge the idea that being attracted to someone of the same gender is immoral, unnatural or abnormal. It can reframe perceptions in a positive way, promoting understanding and acceptance of diverse sexual orientations such that everyone deserves to love and be loved in their own way.

> The more visible I am, the more people will get to know me, and they will not find any difference between them and me. The more I share my life experience, the more they will be able to relate to me. The fact that I am lesbian won't make any difference, then.
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> (Munia, lesbian woman, 19)

However, some respondents mentioned that increasing visibility of LGBTQIA+ people in Bangladesh could risk backlash from conservative groups, as it had in the past (referring to the 2016 murder of two LGBTQIA+ activists). Efforts to promote acceptance and inclusion are vital but need to be strategic to address widespread homophobia in the country.

Many respondents mentioned that finding support from peers who share a similar experience can provide LGB young people with a safe and accepting space in which to express and explore themselves. Also, advocating for their mental and emotional well-being is important, including negotiating with family members who may not accept their identities. However, some reported that they kept their sexual orientation or gender identity a secret from their family, or even pretended to be heterosexual or cisgender, to protect themselves from negative consequences. One young woman mentioned that when her family took her to a psychiatrist, she decided to give them a desirable response to avoid any further backlash and go forward with her life.

> I was almost dysfunctional [after the treatment, which mainly included sleeping pills], and since I did not want to feel like that, I told my parents that I didn't feel anything for girls anymore and then stopped taking the pills. Then I never talked about it with my family anymore… I still live with my family. I do a decent job now. My family doesn't know anything about my dating life or the fact that I am seeing girls. It is better this way.
>
> (Neetu, lesbian woman, 20)

A few respondents reported that hiding their identity has enabled them to navigate a hostile environment and avoid negative experiences. One young man said it is better to hide one's sexual orientation from family members as coming out as LGB can lead to rejection, separation or even violence.

> People [in the respondent's family] probably don't want to see my face [as a homosexual person], and if they know, my close ones might not stay close to me anymore. So, what's wrong if I stay close to them by hiding this face? It's better to hide my identity and remain close to them rather than be open about it and part ways.
>
> (Tanim, gay man, 23)

Respondents acknowledged that not everyone could accept them or fully understand their identity. Still, they emphasised the importance of empathy, understanding and a willingness to find common ground to create a more inclusive society. One male respondent urged coexistence and mutual respect between individuals with differing beliefs and values, even if complete agreement were impossible.

> I am not saying that you must accept me. But you can be kind to me. Be sensitive. There might be many things that you can't get. You can't take the fact that I am gay or someone is bisexual. But at least be respectful… It's okay if you can't accept me, but I want us to co-exist – nothing else.
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> (Jeebon, Gay man, 19)

CONCLUSIONS

The experience of exercising agency is not uniform for all LGB individuals across different contexts. In a society where homosexuality is criminalised, practicing rights is not always about being vocal and visible. The findings demonstrate that the definition of voice and agency for LGB people is context-specific and relational because they vary depending on the cultural, legal and social context in which LGB youth in Bangladesh live. In a society like Bangladesh, where homosexuality is still considered immoral and taboo, expressing one's sexual orientation openly can lead to social rejection,

violence and other negative consequences. As a result, LGB individuals had to negotiate their voice and agency in ways that balance their safety and well-being with their desire for visibility and acceptance. Based on the evidence, it appears that while LGB youth may have limited agency and voice in Bangladesh, some of them are still able to navigate power dynamics to some degree to communicate their needs and desires. Their relationships with others, including family members, colleagues and political allies, shape the exercise of agency and voice, either enabling or hindering it. Therefore, it is important to understand the relational nature of the concepts of voice and agency.

The findings indicate that in a context like Bangladesh, where there are legal and social barriers for expressing any sexual orientation and gender diversity beyond heteronormativity, it is very challenging for young LGBTQIA+ people to negotiate their voice and agency. They navigate through these barriers and complex relationships with family, friends and society to exercise their voice and agency by adopting different strategies, such as hiding their sexual orientation to avoid negative consequences like rejection and/or violence. In addition to that, they also seek support from those people who share a similar experience or ally individuals/organisations to advocate for their rights. Evidence also suggests that to combat homophobia and promote acceptance of diverse sexual and gender identities, the visibility of LGBTQIA+ people is important. Therefore, finding ways to make their stories visible and voices heard in mainstream media, including social media or other relevant advocacy groups/platforms, is essential. However, the efforts need to be strategic and mindful as there are risks associated with being visible which may involve backlash or violence from extremist groups. For women and lesbians, the journey can be more difficult due to the double burden they face of homophobia and patriarchy.

Respondents from the study emphasised the importance of empathy, understanding and a willingness to find common ground to create a more inclusive society. Findings from the study acknowledge that ensuring rights for LGBTQIA+ people in Bangladesh will be a long-term process. Therefore, it is crucial that efforts to promote awareness, advocacy and support for LGBTQIA+ individuals continue to be strengthened and expanded. This includes promoting LGBTQIA+-friendly policies and practices, increasing social connectedness and reducing social isolation among LGBTQIA+ individuals, particularly adolescents, and providing resources and support to help young people navigate the challenges they may face. It is also important to involve parents, teachers, religious leaders and gatekeepers of the community in these efforts in order to build understanding and acceptance of LGBTQIA+ individuals.

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