Chapter 1

Diversity or Dilemma: The Cry for Social Freedom of MSM People Living in Dhaka City

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ABSTRACT

Sexuality, masculinities and gender roles are interconnected in many aspects. The construction of gender among men and women is influenced by sexuality. Bangladesh is predominantly influenced by Muslim socio-cultural values as more than 85% people follow Islam as their religion. Islam does not allow the space for homosexuality. Hence, MSM (Men who have Sex with Men) people are perceived, viewed and identified as deviant, outcast and sinners. They are deprived of basic human rights, access to proper education, health care services and so on. MSM people are often forced to marry a woman as it is believed that it will ‘cure’ their ‘problem’ and mainstream them into society. Hence, they are forced to compromise not only as a citizen but also an individual. Such oppression is pushing MSM people in Dhaka not only to the edges but also making them silent and almost invisible from the society.
INTRODUCTION

Sexuality is among one of the basic human instincts (Maslow, 1943). Culture, geographical location, religion, norms and social system—all have significance in shaping the sexuality of men and women. Sexuality comprises sexual acts, practices, beliefs, myths, ideologies, rituals, expectations and restrictions. Human sexuality has been the most talked about also the most secluded/tabooed topic in the history of mankind (Foucault, 1998 [1976]). On the other hand, our social expectation and norms determines or tries to determine human sexual behavior. The practice of human sexuality is often made synonymous with heterosexuality. Though, homosexuality and bi-sexuality is also a common practice for many individuals. Human sexual orientation and sexual behavior depends mainly upon his/her gender construction. The gender roles and responsibilities vested upon them often pave their sexual orientation and identity. Those men who are involved in homo and bisexual practices can be called as MSM (Men who have Sex with Men) people. Some of these MSM people are adopting sex work as a profession. They are called MSW (Male Sex Workers). The sexual preference and practices of MSM and MSW people are the reasons for the oppression and social negligence they face in their day to day lives.

Homosexuality is not welcomed or entertained in Bangladeshi culture. Maximum number of the population (88%) in Bangladesh is Muslim (Robinson, 2011). The socio-cultural composition of Bangladesh is highly influenced by Islamic values. The practice of homosexuality is against such cultural beliefs and is strongly stigmatized. Islam does not allow the room for homosexuality and/or bisexuality. In fact, it is considered as sin (Religion Facts, 2011). Homosexuality is considered as a sinful act not only in Islam but also according to almost all the known religions across the globe. Only heterosexual practice within the wedlock is considered as regular and normal human sexual behavior in most of the religions1. Still, homosexuality and bisexuality is being practiced by both men and women throughout the world. Men who are involved in homosexual practices are called MSM (Men having Sex with Men) people. There are a growing number of men who are engaged in homosexual and bisexual practices. Some of them have taken it is as a profession. Both the professional people and their clients are men and their sexual practice plays a significant role in the construction of masculinity among them. Hence, MSM people are often faced with a dilemma whether to follow their natural instinct or their socio-cultural identity. The main objective of this chapter is to trace out the living realities of MSM people of Dhaka city and how their sexual identity is causing their social exclusion.

BACKGROUND

Living in a dominant Muslim country with a very conservative attitude towards social digresses, life and identity of a member of LGBT (Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgender) community is constantly under threat. More often than not they are humiliated socially, psychologically and physically. Often MSM people are mistaken to be Transgender or ‘Hijra’ people but the fact is