Final Report

Exploring sexuality of physically disabled people through photo-narratives in Bangladesh
by BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health, BRAC University

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On December 28, 2017, BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health, BRAC University launched the photo-book titled ‘Untold Desires.’ The book looks at narratives of physically disabled people between the ages of 20-40, and their perceptions around love, romance, intimacy and sexuality. Special guests Mashfiqur Zaman Satiar, Senior adviser, gender and SRHR of The Embassy of the Kingdom of Netherlands, and Sabrina Sultana, President of B-Scan were present at the event. Dr. Sabina Faiz Rashid, Dean, BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health, BRAC University, along with the special guests, launched the book at the event. 80 Spokespersons, practitioners and researchers from different organizations working on SRHR, disabilities, media and education, attended the launching ceremony.

The book brings forth ten narratives of individuals with disabilities such as cerebral palsy, post-polio syndrome, amputation, muscle weakness, clubfoot and spinal cord injury. The narratives explore how disabilities of the participants intersect and influence with their experiences and understandings around sexuality, desire and romance. The book for example looks at perceptions of Nayeem, a man with spinal cord injury, who negates understandings of masculinity and normative ideas around sexual performance, and navigates with a view that sex comprises of aspects of emotions and touch, and not simply sexual intercourse; or how Shukla, a woman with post-polio syndrome, sexually fantasizes

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about the man she has been speaking with over the phone, and never wants to get married; or Ayesha, with post-polio syndrome, who thinks that men in Bangladesh need to know more about sex and intimacy, and should be more sensitive and responsive towards their partners’ needs. The book addresses the misconception that disabled people do not have sexual desires, or do not think of sexual connection, by presenting ten diverse narratives that talk about sexual fantasy, sexual excitement, desire to connect and find partner, love affairs, successes and failures in romance. Interpreter Tanjila Tartushi was present at the event, who actively interpreted the speeches and the presentations for guests who had hearing impairment.

Special guest Subrina Sultana from B-Scan shared her personal story to reflect upon perceptions about disabled people in the Bangladeshi society. She said that disability is part of human diversity. She also spoke of how disabled women are silenced when it comes to expressing one’s sexual desire. She also touched upon the importance of creating awareness about sexuality among caregivers.

The program ended with views from the guests, among many of whom praised the initiative. Many also suggested that workshops around disability and sexuality be organized in their own organizations, while many came forth to also mention that they are going back with new ways of thinking that will help them to design more inclusive programs and interventions on disability and SRHR.

*Researcher Saad Khan introducing the project and the process.*
Dean Sabina Faiz Rashid, and Special guests Mushfiqua Zaman Satiar and Sabrina Sultana, launching the book.

The program ended on an engaged note where guests shared their thoughts on the project.
Conclusion: Reflections from the Researchers

This project was very special for many reasons. For one, it taught us (Farhana and me, Saad) new ways of doing research. As researchers, it was fulfilling and liberating to do research in an engaged manner, with all the participants in the project. Conducting the research was a process where we got personally involved with the lives of some of the participants. This also opens up ways of thinking of the position of the researcher—and readily critique notions around ‘being objective’ and distant from the research topic. As two able-bodied researchers, we tried our best to engage with narratives of disabled individuals in ways that made it possible for us to be self-reflexive of our own position and privileges in society.

Secondly, the medium with which we express the study findings—mainly the photo/narratives, are powerful ways to understand about the concepts we talk about—disability and sexuality, and want the society to know. The photo-book has emerged as a tool that can initiate discussions and thinking processes around gender, sex, sexuality, body and identity. Usually, there aren’t any mainstream publications till date that talk about disability and sexuality in this manner. Academic essays have been written on disability and sexuality, however in the framework of violence and abuse. This photo-book is unique firstly for its creative approach, and secondly because it shows glimpses of agency and voice that disabled individuals have, but are ignored by society.

One thing was clear from the dissemination event of the project—people want to talk about disability and sexuality, and now they have a medium to do so. These are complex concepts, and this book will aid to design dialogues in easy, and creative manner. We at James P Grant School of Public Health, BRAC University, will distribute the books to research, educational and development organizations that work on SRHR, disability and human rights. We will also collaborate with public and private universities to give the books to their libraries, especially in gender and social sciences units. We will also use the book in public health course, such on SRHR and qualitative methods, at the School, to take the discussion on disability and sexuality further.

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