Final Report

Documentary on sexual diversity in Bangladesh: LGB Narratives by BRAC James P Grant
School of Public Health, BRAC University

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The documentary project titled *Documentary on sexual diversity in Bangladesh: LGB Narratives* initiated in September, and ended in December 2017. The project was divided in three main phases. In the first phase, we the researchers at the School conducted a brainstorming meeting with LGB community members in Dhaka, the capital city in Bangladesh. 15 community members joined the meeting, including two from outside Dhaka. We brainstormed about the potential content in the documentary movie, and also map out individuals whom we could interview for the documentary. The discussion was also based on the findings of the WOTRO funded project *Breaking the Shame*, where we found out about the different kinds of misconceptions that adolescents and teachers in Bangladesh have about sexually diverse people, which we also wanted to be reflected in the movie. The director of the documentary, Tousif Farhad, Freelance filmmaker, was also present at the meeting to outline what the movie could look like. He was selected based on the personal relationship he has with us, the researchers, and also his previous experience of working in LGBT projects. Several people in the meeting volunteered to be interviewed for the movie. Several others who can be interviewed were also referred to. A total of 9 LGB individuals were documented—3 lesbian women, 4 gay men and 2 bisexual men.

In the second phase, we shot the movie. The researchers, along with Tousif, went and interviewed the participants. The interviews were depicted in an anonymous manner, showing only dark outlines/silhouettes of the participants, or shot from angles that ensured that the participants are not identifiable. Voices of some of the participants were distorted whose voices are very distinct and recognizable. The interviews are in Bangla, for which the movie has English subtitles for a range of audience. The participants talk about their experiences of growing up in Dhaka, exploring sexual identity, of falling in love, of heartbreaks. All the 9 narratives are diverse in nature; each one sharing unique stories of coming to terms with their identity. They also talked about the myths and misconceptions that society has regarding sexual diversity, that they themselves also had to personally experience, such as: homosexuality/bisexuality is a biological and mental disorder; you can understand one’s sexual orientation by looking at how one behaves; homosexual/bisexual people are sex-crazed individuals, etc. One of the lesbians shares how she was taken to a psychologist when she was young, when she came out to her mother. The psychologist gave her sleeping pills. A gay man shares his story of how he used to pray five times a day, asking God to fix himself and turn him straight. Through the personal narratives, the audience gets to know about sexual diversity, and that LGB people exist, and have rights to be, practice their right to live, choose partner and engage romantically, emotionally and sexually.

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Movie Clips

Feeling this way:
Narratives of sexual diversity in Bangladesh
Produced by Dutch Government

I also can’t apologize for who I am.

but I was never attracted to any girl back then.
It is a rule set by God.

Several myths, misconceptions and prejudices work on different levels about homosexuality.

I was already branded as ‘deviant’.
The documentary is 15 minutes long. A pre-screening was done with the participants in the documentary, to take their final consent about how they are portrayed in the movie. We had the dissemination event on December 30 at the BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health, BRAC University, where 25 guests from different professional backgrounds (LGBT community members and activists, development practitioners, embassy officials, research and communication and advocacy officers) joined. We chose the venue for its safety, and didn’t want to do the event at a public place. It was also an invite-only event. As special guest, we had Dr Shuchi Karim from Radboud University, Netherlands join us.

We screened the documentary at the event, followed by a discussion about how and where we can use the documentary. Several advice and suggestions came up from the audience. Guests suggested that this be used in schools, with adolescents and youths, but ensuring that the crowd is safe, and can be controlled. For which, the screening should be done with individuals who are somewhat oriented with the subject, and are also safe. It needs to be also ensured that the adolescents are given counseling referral after screening if needed, in case the movie creates a space for closeted teenagers to come out, to talk to someone. Several also suggested that dialogue sessions with undergraduate students at private and public universities take place, in departments such as gender studies, liberal arts and social sciences, where chances of backlash are minimal. Several also suggested that screenings be done in cultural centers in Dhaka that are safe locations. The events however need to be private. Guests also suggested that movie can be shown in certain organizations for employers, to create more awareness. Suggestions of collaboration with local and international LGBT organization can also be done to show the movie to LGBT and non-LGBT individuals.

The movie doesn’t mention names of JPG School Share-Net International, the researchers and the director for the purpose of safety, in case there are public screenings of the movie. We are also not putting the movie up on social media right away, as the distribution may get out of hand, and might get difficult to take it off the net.

It was challenging to make this documentary, in the sense that we had to ensure that the narratives do not lose the humane touch, and also make a visually pleasing and engaging movie. However, the 15 minutes long movie can now be used in various discussions and dialogues in educational, development and activist spaces to talk about sexuality in Bangladesh. We would like to acknowledge and thank the participants who bravely shared their narratives in the movie.