



Abstract

LIVING SEXUALITIES: Negotiating Heteronormativity in Middle Class Bangladesh

'Living Sexualities' is a study of erotic desires, practices and identities, lived within the heteronormative and marriage-normative socio-sexual structures of urban middle class in contemporary Bangladesh. The study is based on two years fieldwork during which data were generated through 35 life histories and narratives, in depth interviews, case studies, academic and popular literature and participant observations.

Taking sexuality, gender, class and space as central concepts, – the lived experiences of sexualities of three non-normative groups are analyzed: gay men, women in/interested in same sex relations, and single heterosexual women. Space – as physical, social and symbolic category – weaves through the understanding of sexuality, showing that within hetero-patriarchal social structures of family and household, and the public and virtual worlds, there still exist spaces for ambiguity, plural identities and non-heteronormative performances of gender and sexualities.

Middle class women's increasing participation in higher education, more financially secure jobs, and moving out of family homes to different cities, countries and continents are having a profound impact on their articulation and practices of sex and their expressions of sexualities. Women's sexualities are not merely stories of victimhood, discrimination, and oppression; they are, in reality, also narratives of aspirations, strategies and empowerment. Hence, there exist multiple, ambiguous, paradoxical 'sexual spaces' within the middle class family-household, socio-symbolic worlds within which diverse sexual desires, identities and practices can be accommodated.

The porosity of borders between the public and private is constantly challenged, negotiated and (re)created for non-normative desires, identities and practices. Likewise, women's sexualities are lived in the fluidity that often challenges the otherwise commonly understood 'fixity' of sexual identities and its practices. Non-heteronormative women find a myriad ways in which they can strategize to live with their multiple and diverse sexual desires, identities and practices. However, it is evident that the dynamics of gender, age, and class produce different possibilities for simultaneous existences as well as consequences of multiple sexualities. Gender privileges create more spaces for men than for women; age privileges afford older women more power than younger women; income and job security allow more space for non-heteronormative sexualities than being economically dependent. Finally, while the context of homosociality creates some space for same-sex relations for non-heteronormative women and men, being single and young heterosexual woman seems to be the most restricted mode of living, regardless of economic independence.

The research further finds that there is no simple, straight forward mapping of 'queer' versus 'straight' sexual identities, but rather that interconnected factors are at play. Age, class, gender and economy create spaces for negotiating life-choices and identities. Furthermore, personal politics of sexual identities is linked to the individual's participation in and position within larger (and often over-lapping) public fields of activism, social movements and development intervention. Women and men, both individually and (self-)organized, struggle with naming their desires, resisting, negotiating and adhering to specific categories and labels for many different reasons. In this respect, transnational, institutional, group and individual practices inform each other.