LIVING SEXUALITIES:
Negotiating Heteronormativity in Middle Class Bangladesh

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RUIMTE VOOR SEKSUALITEIT:
Hoe de middenklasse in Bangladesh omgaat met heteronormativiteit

Thesis

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Dedicated to Ammu, Abbu and Shayma

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Acronyms

ASK	Ain O Shalish Kendra, Bangladesh
BoB	Boys of Bangladesh
BRAC	formerly known as Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
GDI	Gender Development Index
HIV/AIDS	Human immunodeficiency virus infection / Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome
ICPD	International Conference on Population and Development
IGLHRC	International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission
LGBTQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer
MDG	Millennium Development Goal
MSM	Men having Sex with Men
NGO	Non-Government Organization
SRHR	Sexuality and Reproductive Health and Rights
SPH	School of Public Health, BRAC University
STD	Sexually Transmitted Disease
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme

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PhD can feel like a long and lonely journey, where me and my thesis accompanied each other for years, going through our own saga of ups-and-downs. But, it has also been a journey of friendship, joy, happiness, support and compassion – received from countless people. It helped me learn to rediscover myself, appreciate the unconditional love and support of my family and friends which otherwise I tend to take for granted. I owe this thesis to family, friends, mentors, teachers and a cat.

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Abstract

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

Taking sexuality, gender, class and space as central concepts the lived experiences of sexualities of three non-normative groups are analysed: gay men, women in/interested in same sex relations, and single heterosexual women. Space – as a 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 a 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, straightforward 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 are 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.

*Ruimte voor seksualiteit: Hoe de middenklasse in
Bangladesh omgaat met heteronormativiteit*

Samenvatting

Dit proefschrift beschrijft een onderzoek naar erotische verlangens, praktijken en identiteiten binnen de heteronormatieve en op de huwelijksnorm gerichte socio-seksuele structuren van de stedelijke middenklasse in hedendaags Bangladesh. Voor het onderzoek is twee jaar veldwerk gedaan waarin data zijn verzameld op basis van 35 levensgeschiedenissen en -verhalen, diepte-interviews, casestudy's, wetenschappelijke en algemene literatuur en participerende observatie.

Het onderzoek hanteert seksualiteit, gender, sociale klasse en ruimte als centrale begrippen en analyseert de wijze waarop seksualiteit in de praktijk gebracht wordt door drie niet-normatieve groepen: homoseksuele mannen, vrouwen met (interesse voor) lesbische relaties en alleenstaande heteroseksuele vrouwen. Ruimte – als fysieke, sociale en symbolische categorie – is verweven met het idee van seksualiteit, en dit laat zien dat er binnen heteropatriarchale sociale structuren van gezin en huishouden en binnen de openbare en virtuele werelden ook nog ruimte is voor ambiguïteit, meervoudige identiteiten en niet-heteronormatieve uitdrukkingen van gender en seksualiteit.

Vrouwen uit de middenklasse zijn steeds vaker hoger opgeleid, hebben vaker banen die financiële zekerheid bieden en zij verhuizen vaker van het ouderlijk huis naar andere steden, landen en continenten. Deze ontwikkelingen hebben een enorme impact op hoe zij seks onder woorden brengen, seks hebben en hun seksualiteit tot uitdrukking brengen. Vrouwelijke seksualiteit bestaat niet slechts uit verhalen van slachtofferschap, discriminatie en onderdrukking, maar in werkelijkheid ook uit verhalen van aspiraties, strategieën en empowerment. Dit betekent dat er verschillende, ambigue, paradoxale 'seksuele ruimtes' bestaan binnen het middenklassegezin, socio-symbolische werelden waarbinnen diverse seksuele verlangens, identiteiten en praktijken een plaats kunnen hebben.

De grenzen tussen het publieke en het privédomein zijn poreus en worden voortdurend uitgedaagd, verkend en (opnieuw) getrokken ten behoeve van niet-normatieve verlangens, identiteiten en praktijken. Ook vormen de vele facetten van de vrouwelijke seksualiteit vaak een uitdaging voor de gebruikelijke opvatting dat seksuele identiteiten en praktijen vastliggen. Niet-heteronormatieve vrouwen bedenken talloze manieren om met hun meervoudige en diverse seksuele verlangens, identiteiten en praktijken om te kunnen gaan. Het is echter evident dat de factoren gender, leeftijd en klasse van invloed zijn op de mogelijkheden voor het gelijktijdig bestaan van meervoudige seksualiteiten en de gevolgen ervan. Genderprivileges geven mannen meer ruimte dan vrouwen; leeftijdsprivileges geven oudere vrouwen meer macht dan jongere vrouwen; zekerheid op het gebied van werk en inkomen schept meer ruimte voor niet-heteronormatieve seksualiteit dan economische afhankelijkheid. Hoewel de context van homosocialiteit niet-heteronormatieve mannen en vrouwen enige ruimte biedt voor relaties met seksegenoten, lijkt het er ten slotte op dat jonge alleenstaande heteroseksuele vrouwen de meeste beperkingen ervaren, ongeacht economische onafhankelijkheid.

Verder blijkt uit het onderzoek dat er op het gebied van de seksuele identiteit geen simpel en eenduidig onderscheid gemaakt kan worden tussen 'homo' en 'hetero', maar dat onderling samenhangende factoren een rol spelen. Leeftijd, klasse, gender en economische positie beïnvloeden de ruimte om levenskeuzes te maken en met de eigen identiteit om te gaan. Bovendien hangt de wijze waarop mensen omgaan met hun seksuele identiteit samen met hun deelname aan en positie binnen grotere (en vaak overlappende) terreinen van het openbare leven zoals activisme, sociale bewegingen en ontwikkelingsinterventies. Zowel individueel als in (door henzelf) georganiseerd verband worstelen mannen en vrouwen met het benoemen van hun verlangens en ze hebben veel verschillende redenen om juist wel of niet te willen dat ze in specifieke categorieën ingedeeld worden en labels opgeplakt krijgen. In dit opzicht bestaat er een wisselwerking tussen transnationale, institutionele, groeps- en individuele praktijken.

1 Introduction: Concepts Framing the Research

'Living Sexualities' is a study of erotic desires, practices and identities, lived within the hetero- and marriage- normative social structures of the urban middle class in contemporary Bangladesh. The intersectionality of gender, sexuality and class is used to examine how gender power relations are played out in practices, aspirations and identities of women and men who are non-normative in their sexual life choices.

Bangladesh, a South Asian country, is a relatively new nation-state in a transition period of changes with globalization, modernization, and neo-liberal economic policies. This not only translates into creating a wider gap between poor and rich but also into a booming of the middle class. Gender roles are changing with more women entering public arenas through education, employment and politics, affecting the perceived notion of tradition and modernity. How these changes impact on notions and norms of lived sexuality, its practices and negotiations with heteronormativity is the main question of this research.

In this chapter, I will discuss the key concepts that help me frame the research and the theories that guide and inspire me to undertake the analysis of my data.

Sexuality and Heteronormativity

In this research, sexuality 'encompasses eroticism, sexual behaviour, social and gender roles and identities, relationships, and the personal, social and cultural meanings that each of these might have' (Khanna et al. 2002). Furthermore, in understanding sexuality, I perceive it as lived experience – lived in specific groups, spaces, times and cultures.

In other words, I understand sexuality as a cultural construction and reproduction. Sexuality is a manifestation of norms, beliefs, values and behaviours. Cultural elements construct its discourses and regulations in specific socio-historical contexts. Sexuality has a history, a 'normalization' process through discourses which establish 'normativity'; any 'deviation' from the norm is regulated, disciplined and punished (Foucault 1984; Weeks 1986; Goettsch 1989). Even though modernity has constructed sexuality as a strict system of gendered binaries with compulsory heterosexuality as its dominant norm of sexual practice, research around the world shows that diversity, rather than uniformity, is the norm. Lancaster and Leonardo (1997) note that in this shifting world of cultural meanings and social practices, nothing can be understood as 'given' or natural. It implies that human beings are individuated at the level of their sexuality, that they differ from one another in this aspect of life, and indeed belong to different types or kinds of persons by virtue of their sexuality (Halperin 1989).

Critical sexuality discourses emerged in the second half of the 20th century, particularly at the time of the rise of the women's and gay liberation movements and social constructivism. Feminist work has emphasized sexuality as an important point for discussion or study that gradually came out of the private sphere to public and political discourses (Richardson 2000). Feminist theorization took sexuality as socially constructed, offering new insights into the intricate forms of power and dominations that shape peoples' sexualities and sexual lives (Weeks 1986; Caplan 1981). In South Asia, John and Nair (1998) and Menon (2007) sum up the feminist approach to sexuality as a challenge to biological 'genitality', as 'a way of addressing sexual relations, their spheres of legitimacy and illegitimacy, through the institutions and practices, as well as the discourses and forms of representation, that have long been producing, framing, distributing and controlling the subject of "sex" (John and Nair 1998:1).

This study takes social constructivism as a broader theoretical framework. For this research, sexuality is part of both individual and collective lived experiences. It refers to:

> … aspects of personal and social life which have erotic significance, not only 'individual erotic desires, practices and identities' but also the discourses and social arrangements which construct erotic possibilities at any one time. (Andermahr et al. 1997:245)

Sexuality relates the personal with social and political aspects of life, especially within discourses that create social arrangements. I understand sexuality as time and space specific, as bound to the social-symbolic context within which it is lived, and look at middle class, urban Bangladesh of today as the most immediate context.

Feminists have had a long run at critiquing the sex-gender system and sexuality as a realm used for establishing patriarchy, and its unequal-oppressive gender relations system. In order to deconstruct patriarchal norms and practices, and to define/theorize sexuality, female sexualities and femininity, two very significant and influential concepts and theoretical approaches came out of the second wave feminist scholarship and movement: *Heteronormativity* and *Queer theory.* Heteronormativity, from feminist perspectives, is:

> …the view that institutionalized heterosexuality constitutes the standard for legitimate and expected social and sexual relations. Heteronormativity insures that the organization of heterosexuality in everything from gender to weddings to marital status is held up both as a model and as 'normal'. Thinking straight means employing ways of thinking that assume the centrality and universality of heteronormativity. (Ingraham, 2006:315)

Feminists like Rich (1980), Wittig (1976), Rubin (1975), Grosz (1995), Butler (1990) etc. have all critiqued a sex/gender system of social arrangements that are seen as sites of hetero-patriarchy which oppress its members through heteronormativity. Marriage normativity and compulsory heterosexuality are at the core of heteronormative structures, and are seen by these feminists as a powerful force of women's oppression.

Teresa de Lauretis (1994) and Judith Butler (1990), through 'queer theory', deconstructed the fixed gender binary of masculine/feminine. Butler's (1990, 1993) theorization of gender and sexuality as 'performativity' emphasises gender as fluid and variable depending on an individual's location in time and society. Following Butler, I also wish to analyse non-normativity in sexual identity performances as fluid and varied. I wish to see whether sexual fluidity and variant performances can destabilize the binary of gender performances and compulsory heterosexuality; to know whether, irrespective of the subversive sexualities of individuals, the normative gender-binary remains unshakable. In other words, the relationship between sexuality and gender through their performances is

key to my understanding of what power relations they have in different times and locations, in a specific classed context.

Although the concept of heteronormativity is coined mainly in the West and by Western feminists, it has been a useful and popular concept among feminists in non-Western cultures, especially in South Asia. Heteronormativity is a dominant paradigm in South Asian post-colonial nations and through the process of colonial modernity. Socio-sexual norms were framed under strict gender binaries, compulsory heterosexuality and marriage normativity. These are relatively new norms in the region, part of national modernity projects, inscribed into the nation states' legal frameworks, and gradually established as universal, ultimately negating the sub continent's own pre-modern history of sexual diversity (John and Nair 199; Menon 1998, 2003, 2007; Bose, B. 2002).

Feminist interest in sexuality within South Asia might be recent, but it has been an intriguing engagement as it corresponded with women's movements and sexuality rights movements across the region. Most academic and research work on sexuality from South Asia has come from India. Tying its investigation of sexuality to gender, post-colonialism and modernity, this literature provides great points of inspiration for my own research. South Asian feminists challenge the Western hegemonic discourses of sexuality, and put emphasis on engaging with the region specific socio-historical evolution of concepts, variant desires, practices and identities. Stories of pre-modern sexualities (Vanita 2002, 2005; Bose, B. 2002), and the impact of colonialism on present dominant frameworks of heteronormativity in South Asian countries (John and Nair 1998; Menon 2002, 2007; Bose and Bhattacharya 2007) indicate the problematic of accepting gender, sexuality, queer etc. from a generic perspective that has been developed in the West from Western specific socio-cultural history.

At the same time, I am cautious in romanticizing a pre-modern, pre-colonial 'golden age' of South Asia history as set against colonial modernity. The necessity of re-conceptualizing sexuality and gender from South Asia's own perspective is obvious. But how can that happen? How can someone like me, for example, undertake a study on exploring sexuality in Bangladesh without depending heavily on Western theories that have undoubtedly been hegemonic in my own process of academic learning about the subject itself? Menon (2007: xvi) addresses that dilemma:

It is impossible to engage with what is called "sexuality" in contemporary India without recognizing its passage through the complexity of the practices that were homogenised under the sign of Modernity. It is equally important to insist that this kind of scholarship is not an "indigenist" critique of "the West" – that is, what is at issue is not discourses of Place, but of Time. We must therefore, revisit an older terrain of debates before we move on.

John and Nair (1998:6), in the first comprehensive book on sexuality in India, also addressed questions and anxieties when Western literature and theories are used: 'why bring up western theories at all?' They responded that 'the West' is not only a particular geographical place, but also a relation of complex domination, or even hegemony, because 'we are effectively located in the West' (ibid). What is to be challenged is the notion that West-inclined feminist scholarship is unable to deal with locality. One must, therefore, be able to understand locality as a site of specific, time-space bound power relations. Both John and Nair (1998) and Menon (1998, 2007) accept that though at an unconscious level South Asian feminists draw upon Western theories, they still engage in a process of theorization of sexuality and sexual 'economies' through their own understanding of its realities in its experiences of uneven modernity, set in its own socio-historical backdrop. For my own theorization process, this means that I am inspired by existing Western theories, but that I also engage with 'multiple levels of analysis and the forging of articulation between the global and local' (John and Nair 1998:7).

Bose and Bhattacharya (2007) address the tension between Western 'queer' theoretical premises and a uniquely local theorization of non-heterosexual practices and identities, especially in today's globalized economic, cultural and political context. Sexuality and its identity categories have always been a key way of controlling individuals as well as populations. Clearly, construction of homosexuality is not new in the Indian sub-continent. Vanita (2002, 2007) traces it back more than two millennia, and criticizes Foucault and Western scholars who assume that social-textual constructions of (homo) sexuality and various identity categories began in 19th century Euro-America. Boyce (2008) and Khanna (2009) refer to these hegemonic discourses and identity-power-politics through labelling in the context of India and question whether or not these dominant discourses and identity-politics are actually yet another way of creating/labelling the 'other'. Khanna et al. (2002) show how in the post-

colonial Indian context, Foucault, for example, is not as useful as he is in the West, as Foucault fails to interrogate the colonial construction of European modernity which is seen as a unilinear, progressive replacement of the old with the new. The tendency to view traditional sexual norms as being overtaken by the irrevocable forward march of the modern dominates many studies of sexuality in South Asia. They argue that an Indian (or a post-colonial) way of studying sexuality is to have a double articulation whereby each – the past and the present – is coloured and re-constituted by the other (ibid).

Coming back to the use of a heteronormative framework for studying sexuality in South Asia, Menon (2007:3) focuses on 'counter-hegemony', or the politics of counter-heteronormativity that refers to 'a range of political assertions that implicitly challenge heteronormativity and the institution of monogamous patriarchal marriage'. Heteronormativity, however, is a problematic term in itself, because of the porosity and instability of the boundaries of institutions and binaries that constitute it. Yet, Menon argues, it still remains a significant concept in understanding the continuous processes of producing particular forms of family, gendered identities and establishing desires as natural and historically eternal (ibid).

Understanding heteronormativity beyond the scope of homosexuality or the same-sex relations is central to this research. One can be heterosexual and non-heteronormative by defying the compulsory participation in marriage and procreative norms. The crux of heteronormativity is not only the sexual preference of an individual or how one 'fits' into the hegemonic heterosexual categories, but understanding whether or not a person conforms to social formations that emphasize on or are built on acceptance of the institutions such as the heterosexual patriarchal monogamous family unit, family and marriage (Siddiqui 2007). In this light, it is not only people who have same-sex preferences, but also those who either remain single, sexually active outside marriage, or have children outside marriage – in other words people who embrace sexuality outside the heteronormative boundaries of the given society – who are the focus of this research, with women and their sexualities being the central locus.

What then is sexuality? Or what is to be studied under sexuality? In a review of selected work on sexuality in India over a decade (1990-2000), Khanna et al. (2002) show how wide ranging sexuality study has been in that country: from specific concepts like negotiation, coercion, masturba-

tion; to encompassing knowledge about sexual bodily functions, HIV/AIDS, STDs; to opinions and perceptions about relationships, sexual behaviours and pleasure, pain, harassment etc. Sexuality, therefore, covers the total sexual make up of an individual including physical aspects, attitudes, values, experiences and preferences, as well as the social contexts within which individual sexualities are formed and lived. In carrying out a sexuality study one therefore engages with individual and social lives at multiple levels. Sexuality needs to be investigated beyond the framework of control, which is a dominating framework in this field of study, especially in post-colonial contexts. Rather one must move towards sexual pleasure and desire: 'appreciation of uncontainable fluidity of sexuality of desire, and of the complexity of representational practices' (Menon 2007: xxviii). Sexuality should be concerned with the materiality or economies of the sites wherein discussions on sex and sexuality are laid out (John and Nair 1998:7). And sexuality needs to take into account subjectivity and agency too. Subjective realities of the sexual body is vital for any feminist engagement with sexual politics. What is seen as assertive, agential, and autonomous is often a reassertion of dominant values. There is a constant and on-going struggle and conflict between power, subjectivity and agency.

Why Study (Middle) Class

> Class has been under investigated in sexuality studies just as sexuality has been frequently absent and often implicit in class analysis, where heterosexuality is embedded yet frequently unnamed across classed terrain. (Taylor 2011:14)

Class is crucial to my feminist explorations of gender and sexualities. In studying intersections between class, gender and sexuality, feminists have made use of two philosophers/theorists who did not address the question of women directly: Bourdieu and Foucault. Nevertheless, their studies of class, culture and power were deemed important for feminist theories on social agency (social versus performative agency, by Butler 1990, 1993), gender dynamics in cultural authorization and production (Moi 2002) and the study of sexuality in particular. Class is also of relevance in studying non-heteronormative sexualities, especially within queer studies. Seidman (2011), Heaphy (2011), Binnie (2011), and Jackson (2011) all put emphasis on looking into the intersection of class, gender and sexu-

ality, and probe into the contextual-cultural specific differences that make studies of sexualities – heterosexual, non-heteronormative, and queer – so much more complex and intriguing. Jackson (2011:12) argues:

> A thorough exploration of class and sexuality requires further investigation on the consequences of social advantage for sexual life. Most obviously this means turning the spotlight onto heterosexuality and on its intersections between class privilege and heterosexual privilege. … it is necessary to consider not only the intersections between class and heterosexuality but also between both and gender, since heterosexuality is founded on gender differentiation and inequality.

Jackson (2011:13) adds two research aspects of class and sexuality: the first aspect looks into queer lives from heterosexual assumptions, practices and prejudices; while the second aspect looks into how heterosexuality is classed, and how the hetero-homosexual binary intersects with class in regulating intimate life. In turn one can see 'material and cultural dimensions of class and the ways in which both can impinge upon identity, subjectivity and everyday life'. These two aspects are integral parts of my own research in its close examination of heterosexual assumptions in Bangladeshi society and its intersection with gender and class in controlling sexuality.

Heterosexuality has historically been institutionalized and established as the only 'respectable' form of sexuality for middle class women via a normalization process. Respectability, as a discourse of normativity, is one way in which sexual practice is evaluated, distinctions drawn, legitimated and maintained between groups. The cult of domesticity was central to the self-defining of the middle classes (in Europe) and importance was put on moral categories that placed women at the centre of the discursive construction because it was women who were predominantly observed within this middle-class family. Class was and remains central to women's subjectivities because class informs the production of subjectivity. Class is a discursive, historically specific construction and it prescribes forms of femininity and masculinity for its respective members. Femininity is seen as the property of middle-class women who could prove respectability through their appearance and conduct (Skeggs 1997). The relation between sexuality and class is historically linked to the concept of modernity, or in other words, sexuality as a modern concept has class implications. Sexuality is understood as a modern con-

struct with a historical origin and line of development. As Horrocks (1997) explains, in modern Western culture, sexuality is understood as an independent entity, and as vitally important to the identity of the individual. Ideas like social constructionism have argued that sexuality – as a discourse and separate social category – is a historical construct which came into being at a certain time in certain cultures and that in many previous times and cultures it did not exist. These Western historical traits of class, modernity and sexuality (especially of the middle class) have commonalities with the colonial history in South Asia. Different post-colonial nation states have developed their own versions of heteronormativity that are embedded in their respective dynamics of modernity, culture and class (Liddle and Joshi 1986; Chatterjee 1989; 1993; Ganguli-Scrase and Scrase 2009; Bagchi & Sengupta 1997; Puri 1999; Menon 2007; Baviskar & Ray 2011).

The middle class is increasingly becoming a focus of studies in South Asia in the context of globalization and liberalization. Relatively smaller in size, and in between a vast poor population and a tiny but powerful rich (elite) class, the middle class in South Asia has seen a remarkable evolution since its emergence in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Initially setting itself apart as a 'progressive', 'reformist' educated group (especially in Bengal, which was an integral part of the nationalist movement); the sub-continent's middle class generically created a 'hegemonic' identity that continues to claim the representation of the common people (Varma 1998; Baviskar and Ray 2011). But post 1947 (i.e. decolonization) and especially in the past few decades with the liberalization of economies and the rapid globalization of the region, the characteristics of the middle class have changed into a consumerist class, fragmented in its identities, values and dynamics. The middle class in the region has been expanding through the benefits gained from the neoliberal economy. Liberalization has affected the economic aspects of peoples' lives as well as their lifestyles in terms of consumption, choices, and mobility. In India, this change has been extensively documented, investigated and explored by researchers. Even though Bangladesh's economy and cultural aspects are understandably different from that of India, the Indian experience remains relevant.

Image 1
Bengal: Bangladesh and West Bengal (India)[1]

The Bengali Middle Class

Bengal developed its own brand of middle class, '*bhadrolok*' (gentlefolk, well-mannered person), in the late 19th to early 20th centuries through (Western English) education and the rise in economic fortune via employment and business under colonial rule. It also carried out its own modernization process, the Bengali Renaissance and spearheaded the anti-colonial movement. All these processes had a women's agenda which initially made 'liberal, rationalist and egalitarian' attempts to 'modernize the condition of women' in mid-19th century Bengal, soon followed by a period of 'retrogression' of nationalism where the 'new woman was subjected to a new patriarchy' (Chatterjee 1993:116-7). In the formation and rise of this 'new patriarchy' and women's position in it in 19th century middle class Bengal, Sarkar and Sarkar. (2008) argue that there was a core difference between the English middle class and that of Bengal. The Bengali middle class was much more rooted in the land and was far from being capitalistic. The introduction of a capitalist regime by the colonial rulers produced a modern but dependent bourgeoisie and this class recast its women and its gender practices in a new form of patriarchy provided a rationale for a reformist agenda but never actually

seriously questioned the system. The concept of *'bhadrolok'*[2] indicates that members of the middle class have always distinguished themselves by their self-perceived refined behaviour and cultivated taste, or cultural identity that does not necessarily equate to wealth or power. The middle class here, therefore, symbolizes a relatively well-off, educated, cultured status group. The socio-historical formation of the middle class in colonial Bangladesh[3] shows how the petty-bourgeoisie during the colonial times emerged as a political agent and became the moral leader of the other subordinate classes (even though they were initially the subject of colonial hegemony). The Bangladeshi middle class emerged from small-time traders, salaried government employees and private entrepreneurs, professionals (like doctors, engineers, teachers etc.) and the intelligentsia who mainly came from urban areas. So, the middle class was dependent on education and skills, and came from predecessors who had economic relations with rural areas (Sabur 2010; Ahmed and Chowdhury 2000). It captured the centre stage of politics, dominated political ideology and operations in post liberation Bangladesh. This paved the path for class transformations, in its life style and gender relations, in the late 20th century.

The problems of using a generic 'middle class' term to define this ever-evolving, changing, morphing population in South Asia are multiple. Chatterjee (1989, 1993), Bagchi and Sengupta (1997), Ganguli-Scrase (2009), Baviskar and Ray (2011) show a broad definition of middle class, and how difficult it is to pin it down, how it cannot be defined just in terms of income as a result of the influence of values, cultural affinities, lifestyles and educational attainments. These works in the context of India, and Liechty's (2003) work in the context of the urban middle class in Nepal, clearly illustrate how the South Asian middle class in its post-colonial reality is not only defining by the list of consumer goods that it possesses, but also by its conformation to some general patterns of modernity (like urbanization, social mobility, higher education, stable economic income, culture etc.). All of this impacts on gender relations and power dynamics within households, and, more relevant for this research, on the practices and discourses related to sexuality and identity.

While there is certainly no fixed definition or income level that 'boxes' the middle class, studies from South Asia give useful cues to my research in Bangladesh. What does middle class mean, what are its consti-

tutive elements, its relation to modernity and globalization, and its relation to gender, sexuality and women?

The (Urban) Middle Class in Bangladesh

Middle class is not explicitly categorized in economic statistics in Bangladesh, and it is mainly understood as a self-identified class-identity that one usually carries as part of family legacy. The spectrum of income capacity within the middle class is wide, and one can position him/herself at different income points at different stages of life. Bangladesh defines an estimated 10 per cent of its population as middle class or in middle-income bracket (Mohiuddin 2009)[4] and any household within the income bracket of 10,000- 40,000 TK per month (Euro 97.09 – 388.37[5]) can be termed as middle class (Khan, S. 2010). I am mentioning an 'income bracket' here to give a general idea of the economic aspect or element of the class, but would not use it strictly to define middle class in this study. In this research, middle class is not identified through an economic income range because the concept of household, its membership and entitlement in social terms do not have a relationship with this income bracket. For example, in my house, which is my parent's household, I am seen as a dependent even though I physically move in and out of their home at regular intervals for educational purposes. My income is never included in the household's income as I am an unmarried woman living with her parents as their dependent. Also, our income has varied across time, depending on the nature of the jobs we each held at different points in time. For example, if I am employed within the government salary scale, I quickly move down to the lower rung of middle class income, whereas employment in the private sector pushes me towards upper class. Irrespective of our individual or cumulative income within the household (which has increased over the years) and our relocation to better housing and area, we are socially identified as middle class and our behaviour, conduct and social performance are judged by the standard middle-class framework of decent, respectful, polite, civil, moral behaviour. Our dress codes, friends, associations, relations, politics, religiosity etc. are markers of a socially understood image and concept of the middle class.

The difference between an economic middle class and a socially identified one is evident from a respondent's (a single, gay man, age 35, living with parents) remark:

I was middle class in terms of values till I left home for university at the age of 19. My parents' middle class values, irrespective of their slightly higher income, dominated my life view. But now, though I live with my parents, and my own independent income is actually within a middle class bracket- I have freed myself from middle class identity as I don't endorse those values anymore.

Respondents in this research (other than commercial sex workers) did not hesitate to identify themselves as middle class as they automatically understood or translated the term in social meanings. Engagement with some white collar profession (and business), educational qualification for engagement with these professions; self-identified middle class values that are acquired through social and cultural capitals – are crucial elements of class identification. Khan (2010) describes the wide ranging Bangladeshi middle class as a socio-economic class that not only constitutes government employees or private sector employees or teachers, but also small shopkeepers, budding entrepreneurs or the landed farmers. Amongst the participants of my research, except for one woman, everyone else was employed. Their professions range from teachers, engineers, development workers, sports-person, consultants, computer programmer, architect etc. This means everyone and anyone from rural or urban background, trying to get a decent education and working hard to start a family, is a member of a middle class family. This marks three aspects of the middle class in Bangladesh: education, income and family.

Middle class, as referred to the participants in this research, therefore fulfils these economic brackets of class definition, but also includes 'self-definition' that is closely tied to a cultural understanding of the class in terms of values and norms, professional identities and respective locations. This self-definition often includes markers that indicate differences with two other, opposite, classes, i.e. the elite and the poor.

All these issues of definition make it difficult to define the class which commercial sex-workers in this study belong to. On the one hand, they can be fitted into the middle class income bracket of minimum 10,000 Taka per month for a household. However, they do not identify themselves as middle class. They have established clear differences in meanings of class, when dominant values and social recognition are concerned. Their commercial sex-work places them outside of the moral values of the middle-class monogamous, marital, procreative sexuality. Nevertheless, as this research will show, commercial sex-workers' own rejection of sex between women as abhorrent brings them very much

into the folds of middle-class sexual morality. Further, while most the sex workers originate from a rural backgrounds had agrarian families households, or from poor working class families in urban areas, this origin in itself is not the most important class distinction. Some of my other informants are also the first urban generation, coming from rural backgrounds. So, while the income, origins and moral values as a difference between sex-workers and other informants do not create clear-cut distinction between them in terms of class, the housing may just do it. Sex-workers predominantly and deliberately live in identifiable poorer, lower middle class areas in Dhaka, even when their income would allow them to move to 'better' middle-class areas.

This ambiguous class position of sex-workers gives me a significantly relevant point of comparative study. Inclusion of this group of respondents into the study of the middle-class not only contributes to a better understanding of the relationship between class, power and heteronormative structures of the mainstream, but it also provides an opportunity to compare the 'lived' experiences of sexualities of specific groups of population within the broad context of economic independence, moral values and personal desires.

This is related to the fact that the middle class is positioned as a dominant class, especially in the context of liberalization. It benefits from the neo-liberal economy, thus not only changing the economic aspects of its peoples' lives, but also their lifestyles in terms of consumption, choices, mobility etc. Along with these, there are the changing influences of religion (including fundamentalism). Further, the middle class is linked to changes in gender relations and representations and power dynamics, especially within households. Finally, and more relevantly for this research, the changes in the middle class need to be related to the changes in sexuality and identity discourses – thus linking class, sexuality and gender to the broader on-going debates on culture and modernity in South Asia.

Space: Between and Beyond the Private-Public Binary

Though often interchangeably used, there are differences between 'place' and 'space' as used in this research. 'Place' denotes specific areas and is inclusive of all the physical objects attached to it and with definite physical boundaries; whereas 'space' is a more ambiguous concept in its socio-

linguistic boundaries, a notion of a place where abstract and intangible processes take place. But, 'space' as a term can encompass the physical and symbolical meanings at the same time. That is why the concept of 'space' is important for this research. Space is vital to my analysis of perceptions, entitlements and denial of erotic desires and practices. Spaces we inhabit are personalized by meanings that its inhabitants, as subjects, give to them. Spaces are sexualized, eroticized or desexualized by their actors in relation to their internal power negotiations and in accordance with the dominant socio-cultural framework. Spaces are also highly gendered. The ambiguity, unpredictability and conflicts within spaces that individuals inhabit are sites of social control, disciplines and surveillances, and at the same time, sites of possibilities, alternative life choices and struggles for self-fulfilment. The differences between and the intertwined characteristics of place and space are best explained by Foucault's 'Heterotopias' (Foucault 1967) where he explains how spaces exist within a multiplicity of places, how they are heterogeneous and how this existence is in relation to other spaces, and within the social structure of power. This 'ecology of surrounding' (Kelly and Munoz-Laboy 2005:359) can either enhance or inhibit its subject's sexual experiences. At the same time, sexual subjects, through agential practices, can create and thus impose new meanings upon these very spaces.

As Jimenez (2003:138) puts it, 'Space is a dimension and form of agency – a capacity' that is related to social mobility, and this capacity or agency has the power to bring out new values, new ways of expressions, and new meanings. As a result, structures change through new dimensions of meanings. Hubbard (2001) correctly points out that spaces do not just exist, but affect (and are affected by) things that are always *becoming*. Or, to put it another way, space is not just a passive backdrop to human behaviour and social action, but is constantly produced and remade within complex relations of culture, power and difference. And that is why one needs to have a more critical, constructionist notion of space, because it is often through the transgression of 'sexual dissidents' (into public spaces for example) that the naturalization processes of heterosexual norms are challenged, changed and transformed, and new sexual identities are created. Since spaces are gendered, sexualities, whether normative or otherwise, are expressed or lived within these spaces differently by men and women at different stages of their lives. During my research it became obvious that 'space' has a special significance in how

(non-normative) individuals experienced their sexualities. Space was often the determinant factor of how one learnt, experienced, perceived and practiced his/her sexual lives in the urban middle class context. Whether it is the underground yet vibrant, sexually active gay life or the invisible/closeted lesbian/bi sexual women's strategic sexual living style, or a single heterosexual woman who struggles to find a balance between a respectable social life and her personal desires – it is, in the end, greatly a matter of how one is placed and positioned in a particular social and physical location and space – at different stages of life – which determines the (im)possibilities of sexual identity, sexual life and the practices of one's own choice.

In order to understand these processes, Hubbard (2001:51-2) suggests that 'a more fluid and topographical complex interpretation of public and private space is necessary to understand the changing geographies of sexuality'. Foucault (1967) brought out the dichotomies of spaces, and challenged the socially given opposition to spatial concepts like public and private, family and social space or space for leisure and work etc. The opposition between these spaces and their separations are perceived as 'given', and our lives are governed by these oppositions, which have their respective rules, norms and modes of control. But even within divisions, there are always in-between spaces (both physical and mental) that create opportunities of existence of non-hegemonic otherness, existence of duality and contradistinctions.

In this research, the notion of 'space' is related to notions of *public and private* that are crucial to a feminist understanding of gender and sexuality. Pateman (1988) sees the dichotomy of the public/private as central to the feminist movement, struggles and history. The divisions and dichotomy of Public (state, political, social, workplace, landed class, politics founded on family/kin) versus Private (civil society, personal, individual, household, bourgeois, separation of spheres) are challenged by feminists (Pateman 1988; MacKinnon 1991; Weintraub and Kumar 1997; Andermahr et al. 1997) while simultaneously the effects of such categorization on individual lives is acknowledged. In other words, challenging distinctions of space is also about challenging the social arrangements that are interpreted as 'public/private' in a given context itself (Gavison et al. 2011). Feminist arguments regarding the distinction between the private and the public frames the boundaries within which women constantly negotiate their lives. At the same time, the public/private is seen as deep-

ly unstable, permeable, inexact, and ambiguous. I would argue that firstly, the private or the domestic space cannot be ignored when investigating gender and sexualities; secondly, as much as the public/private distinction is deeply gendered, the boundaries of these spaces need to be problematized, understood as blurry, permeable and be re-defined.

Family home or household is generally seen as the locus of individual life and its respective socio-cultural framework. Especially in the context of a South Asian country like Bangladesh, household is the central space within which gender and sexuality roles and relations are performed. This 'private' space as a site of sexual construction is becoming more and more significant in many sexuality studies in South Asia. Khanna et al. (2002) see this as an outcome of pioneering work on gender and households within the region by researchers like Naila Kabeer (1999) who provided models of gender power relation analysis based on negotiations and interactional approaches. Helping to focus on the bargaining power of members of a household, ways in which an individual's contributions are valued, entitlements negotiated etc. can be applied beyond the economy of the household to uncover a more nuanced gender perspective on men's and women's interactions and their negotiations around sexual relationships, identities and life choices.

Through sociocultural interactions, 'space' is imbued with meanings, as locations come to be experienced with specific sentiments and memories. These meanings emerge from the practices of everyday life, in which sexuality plays an important role. Thus context-specific practices ultimately shape and reshape the world in which individuals live. Individual agents act collectively to produce and reproduce local social worlds nested within broader socio-cultural systems. Sexual subjects act within a realm of embodied structures, creating sexual culture through practice. Spaces are sexualized as an active, and, often, contentious process of meaning making. There is no sexual neutrality of space. Instead, a critical reading of space, its identities and meaning-(re)making process is needed. For example, my heteronormative notions and prejudices were challenged during this research. In a brothel in Faridpur I assumed that the views, beliefs and ambiance within the brothel sub-culture would be far from heteronormative given the sexualized characteristic of the place. It was an eye-opener when female sex workers expressed their non-approval (to the extent of disgust) at the possibility of same-sex *sexual*

relations between women. At the same time, they accepted and had high regard for same-sex *love* relations between women.

It is not only those who fashion identity *within* a space that are relevant to processes of meaning-making: those people who move across spaces may also be key contributors to the sexual characterization of places (Puar et al. 2003). And this can happen within a city, country or across borders, within the diaspora. A good example of creating 'identity' within a space and for people who 'move across' such spaces would be Payal (20), a bi-sexual woman in Dhaka. I was introduced to Payal by an openly gay man, who briefed me about her as a *'young, lower middle class girl, living with another girl and working as a sex worker for living'*. He met her frequently at a public park and they became friends. When I met Payal, I realised that though she was financially struggling to live an independent life, she was not a sex worker. She frequents public parks every day to meet with friends and people in general. She admits to being a *'public space addict'* and her obsession with being in public places actually resulted in her running away from home and living a rather socio-economically vulnerable life. It was her regular presence within the premise of the public park (which is commonly viewed as a rendezvous location for commercial sex workers, both male and female) and her socio-economic vulnerability that made my gay contact assume she was a commercial sex-worker.

Spaces are not mere examples of dichotomous divisions of public and private. They are part of a much richer continuum, in which 'variations in gender identity and performance can change the subjective nature of gendered spaces' (Doan 2010:638). For example, variations in the way gays and lesbians categorize their own genders are a better predictor of how they navigate through space than their sex, recognizing that gender is fluid and performative (Butler 1990). Taking a poststructuralist and queer approach to the concept of space goes beyond the reliance on spatial metaphors of inside/outside and sees spaces as multiple, fragmented and contested in character (Eves 2004). This is why I study the spatiality of gender, class and sexuality, their constructions and performativity.

Sexuality and Development

Sexuality has become part of different development approaches and debates over the past decades (Harcourt 2009). While development discourse has a history of taking sexuality along the line of reproductive and

sexual health or within rights-based approaches, feminists/activists, especially those engaged with sexual politics in the global South (Harcourt 2009; Correa et al. 2008; Cornwall and Jolly 2006; Petchesky 2005; Menon 2007; Khanna, A. 2007), have criticized these existing discourses and approaches to development. They have been raising alternative lines of thinking that take into account 'erotic justice', concepts of pleasure, a move away from identity-based politics to a broader sex politics that incorporates both rights and advocacy and sees sexuality as a cross-cutting topic for women, gender and sexuality.

Discourses on sexuality have long been dominated by medical science, which is held in high esteem as something modern and beneficial (in terms of knowledge and practices) brought to people of different cultures (Harcourt 2009) as part of development. The impact of medical science, in knowledge and interventions is an extremely important aspect of sexuality study within development discourses as it has direct and long term impacts on 'target' populations: especially on women's bodies and lives. Bangladesh, since its inception, has been part of global development projects for various population-control interventions. Most development interventions target women, often ignoring their own needs and lived realities. Women's sexuality is usually seen within reproductive health and as 'problems' like infertility, miscarriages and white discharge (Rashid 2012). Traditionally, women's sexual (and reproductive) health related issues have not been brought into public, and have more often than not been treated through alternative medicines, herbal treatments and talismanic practices. Religious books such as sex manuals have covered a wide range of topics like conjugal life, normative sex, erotica, normative gender roles within sexual interactions, homosexuality, deviances, fertility etc. They are publications commonly available in Bangladesh that provide basic (and often incorrect) information on the body, sexuality and health. Books like 'Medical Sex Guide' on talismanic treatments, magic, casting spells, and prescribing amulets are also available, targeting populations that otherwise do not have much access to sex education or help regarding sexuality, be it a simple query, problem, or illness.

Sexual politics is, clearly, body politics. Thus, medical discourses that influence policies, especially those related to Sexuality and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) and population, need to be part of an inclusive sexuality study. But, after much deliberation, I realized that taking

on the medical discourse in my current research is beyond its immediate scope. I hope to address this aspect of the embodiment of sexuality in future endeavours.

The questions regarding development and sexuality for this research therefore are related to the production of discourse that contributes to establishing heteronormativity, rather than creating arguments for sexual diversity. I suggest that development increasingly positions itself within the framework of victimhood and abuse-based gender and sexuality and less with sexuality as a positive, pleasurable and empowering issue central to human rights. I also question whether, by investing in sexual identity-centred rights-based approaches to sexuality, development re-creates sexual 'others'.

I look into sexual aspects of the lives of people who are the focus of development interventions in Bangladesh, as well as those who engage with development as a domain of interventions. Starting with the inside world of the individual, I explore the avenues through which the individuals relate with the state and non-state agencies like those in development and activism. Engaging with sexuality and development at a time when international events like Cairo+20 and MDG (Millennium Development Goal)+15, Rio+20 will be taking place, will hopefully bring back some attention to sexuality, and reproductive health and rights issues.

Research Objectives

'Living sexualities' is a study to understand heteronormativity. In doing so, I intend to explore ways in which concepts, identities and practices of sexualities are 'lived' through daily lives in urban middle class Bangladesh. I take the perspective of non-normative gender and sexuality practices that are lived beyond and outside the dominant heteronormative matrix in Bangladesh. Lived experiences of sexual desires and practices are spread across spaces that individuals inhabit. Therefore, space is central to this exploration of sexualities and its various politics. I take into account the most important component of heteronormativity i.e. marriage normativity, as my centre of investigation and family household as the main site where different practices of sexualities take place. This research goes beyond investigating marriage normativity, and inquiries into processes of sexual politics in both public and private spaces. In doing so, it hopes to uncover the possibility and existence of multiple sexuali-

ties within the spaces of middle class social arrangements at different stages of lives and discover how these challenge the dominant heteronormative socio-sexual structure.

Research Questions:

The research aims to engage with these queries:

1. What is the basic structure of heteronormativity in the Bengali middle class in Bangladesh?
2. How do non-normative men and women negotiate, challenge and/or make use of compulsory heterosexuality and marriage normativity, the two pillars of heteronormativity?
3. How are gender and sexuality-based identity politics played in the current sexuality movement in Bangladesh?

Structure of the Remaining Chapters

Chapter 2: Research Methodology describes the process of the actual research through choices of approach, methods, locations and participants. It also gives a narrative of the field experience as an ethnographic styled description, depicting obstacles, limitations and power relations between researcher and research subjects in a reflexive manner. *Chapter 3: Contextual Background: Gender and Sexuality in Middle Class Bangladesh* is a socio-historical-cultural discussion on the origin and evolution of the middle class in Bangladesh. It also situates gender and sexuality within this backdrop and brings forth existing discourses relevant to this study. *Chapter 4: Making of the Sexual Private: Ambiguities of Family and Household* looks into the family/household of the urban middle class for its understanding of heteronormativity. How sexuality is constructed and how it operates within the different spaces of household, based on marriage privileges is the focus of this chapter. The chapter also probes into ambiguities of family relations and household spaces that offer scope for its members to create some 'private spaces' of sexual agency. *Chapter 5: 'Living Sexualities' through Marriage Normativity: Women's Journey through Different Phases of Life* takes on the central element of the middle class heteronormativity, i.e. marriage normativity. From the perspectives of non-normative men and women, the chapter analyses strategies and tactics that are taken up to deal with marriage normativity at different stages of life. *Chapter 6: Non-Normative Households: Scopes of Agency* explores alterna-

tive households where non-normativity is negotiated and which have seen some success in creating spaces for certain sexual agencies, especially through the use of the dominating norms themselves. *Chapter 7: Sexuality in Public Spaces: Virtual Reality for Love and Sex* takes the thesis beyond the boundaries of 'private spaces' into the 'public'. Mainly focusing on the 'virtual world', a grey area between the private and public, it explores the ways in which non-heterosexual communities are making use of accessible and affordable technology to create communities, networks and allies looking for both sex and love. *Chapter 8: Sexual Politics of Identity and Heteronormative Hierarchy in Development and Activism* opens up with a discussion of the problematic nature of sexual-identity politics, and what it means for non-heterosexual men and women to engage with such politics. Analysing activities and debates within three same sex support groups in Dhaka, the objective of the chapter is to understand the dynamics of gender, class and generation in these groups, and how 'identity' politics are played out in the field of sexuality and development along with an activism that usually has a rights-based approach. In the *Conclusion*, I try to bring out my main findings and what implications or contributions these can have on sexuality discourses at both the global and regional level, as well as in the field of development and policy.

Notes

[1] http://southasiarev.wordpress.com/2008/11/17/india-uprizing-in-west-bengal

[2] In undivided Bengal, the close proximity of Kolkata and Dhaka as a hub of culture, politics and education indicates that there were/are commonalities, even though each places were influenced by its respective dominant religions (Hindu and Muslim) and by subsequent culture.

[3] Which was then part of the larger undivided, yet Muslim majority part of Bengal.

[4] An Asian Development Bank (ADB) report in 2010 indicated a minimum $2 (to maximum $20 per day, per person) expenditure as an indicator of economic middle class in Developing Asia, including Bangladesh.

Khan, Shahiduzzaman, 2010: 'the spending pattern of a typical middle class family could look something like this with an average income of about 30 thousand taka. House rent 1000 (including utility bills), groceries 4000, children's education 6000, transportation 5000, health 2000, other costs 3000'.

In 2006, there were an estimated 5-13 million people under the middle class income bracket with $70 bn consumer market according to the Bangladesh

Weekly Market Review, May 13, 2006 < http://www.aims-bangladesh.com/2006 /369WeeklyMay13-2006.pdf>. By 2010 this percentage had grown to 9-10 per cent, taking it to an approximate population of 30 million – though it is argued that the increase is only in terms of numbers and in reality the percentage is shrinking and is in decline.

[5] Currency converted on 24 June, 2012.

2 Research Methodology

Sexuality is a difficult subject to study because it is as much a concept as it is a practice. Both are outcomes of processes that are mediated through socio-cultural factors and physical capacity (or disability). Sexuality is also a politics and a system that includes inherent power relations between different actors. It is challenging to inquire about sexuality because of its personal and intimate characteristics – aspects that are prescribed by society to be kept as inaudible and invisible as possible. To venture into sexuality one needs to negotiate not only with an individual's sense of privacy, but be very cautious of the sensitivity that the topic brings to the table along with myths, taboos and morality. So, what is the best possible way of going about research like this? Being a feminist, and coming from a mixed background of Humanities and Social Sciences, I firmly believe in the power of narratives, subjectivity and reflexivity – both on the part of the researcher and the participants. As a researcher, I am as much a part of the research process as anyone termed 'respondent' or 'informant' in the thesis.

This chapter is divided into two main sections. *Section 1: Methods* introduces the reader to the methods, categories, data processing etc. that are necessary for academic research. *Section 2: Notes from the (Urban) Field* is an ethnographic styled description of the field and processes of networking, knowing and interacting with participants. It is also about my own standpoint, position and participation within the research as an ongoing process.

My research is qualitative and feminist in approach. In this section I will first discuss the rationale and use of the different methods; and then I will bring out the challenges, limitations and reflections from the field

experience that inevitably contribute to the understanding of the empirical chapters that are to follow.

Image 2
Women making a traditional quilt: Nakshi Kantha[1]

Nakshi Kantha, (*Nakshi* means design, *kantha* means quilt) is a traditional embroidered quilt, indigenous to Bangladesh and parts of West Bengal (Banglapedia 2012). Traditionally it was made out of old pieces of garments like sarees. *Kantha* making is a feminine form of art, done by women in their leisure time, taking months or even years to finish just one quilt. It is as individual an effort as it is collective. A *Kantha* can be stitched by many neighbouring women, each contributing at their own pace and in their own style. Traditionally *Kanthas* do not have a fixed or premeditated design, rather they are an expression of a woman's thoughts, dreams, aspirations – influenced by her surroundings and life

experiences. The design can range from texts, to nature, to abstract mo-
tifs. Once complete, a *Kantha* is an amalgamation of expressions through
design that tell a larger story of a community, society and women's' life
perspectives. To appreciate *Kantha* art in its totality, one needs to pay at-
tention to each motif and individual design that represents an individual
view of life. It is art, done through a method of bringing out the collec-
tive through individual stories and vice versa.

My approach to this research has been inspired by the art of *Nakshi
Kantha,* as a feminine and feminist approach of reflexivity, a particular
stand point yet part of a larger picture. To understand lived experiences
of gender, sexuality and class, I had to look carefully at individual lives
and understand their own designs.

My research relied on a combination of qualitative methods that
helped me to gather useful, in-depth narratives on sexuality. The im-
portance and relevance of qualitative methods for social science research
is now widely known, valued and understood as valid because of its wide
range of data sources, variety of methods applied to investigate detailed
and in-depth knowledge and make meanings of social life (Silverman
1997; Yates 1998; Denzin and Lincoln 2003; Grik 2004; Seale 2004;
Richard 2005; Somekh and Lewin 2005 etc.). I used ethnography, narra-
tives (collected in the form of life-stories and unstructured interviews),
focus group discussions, participatory observation, document analysis,
and archival research. A feminist approach to the conceptual framework
paves a path for a feminist methodology as well. A feminist approach to
research is more than a matter of method as it raises philosophical issues
of ontology and epistemology; and it is guided by feminist theory, is crit-
ical, political and is aimed at creating social change (Neilson 1990; Hesse-
Biber et al. 1999; Burns and Walker 2005; Wickramasinghe 2010). Femi-
nist empiricism is also embedded within a feminist standpoint that is
subjective in character (Harding 2004). All of these characteristics guide
my research and the methods I use in this study as well as how I analyse
data derived from these methods.

Standpoint of the researcher: why do I study what I study and why
is it so important to me? Can it be self-discovery, or just curiosity? Can
anyone study gender-related issues without being reflexive? Is it possible
at all to remove ourselves from the subject of our study or investigation
and be objective at all? For me, the answer is NO! Each research subject
holds up a mirror before me to see where I am positioned in my own

social framework, giving a commentary on culture. The question that I pose for myself is this: is it sexuality that I want to study; or is it social-cultural change within a particular class-gender-culture that I want to understand by taking sexuality as an indicator? Both are interlinked and both are entry points to the query.

There has been a shift in recent times in this question of the researcher-subject relation, and between subjectivity-objectivity, and it is now acknowledged that distance between the two is not necessary, and that there exists an inter-subjective realm in which both reside: in contemporary life history research the researcher is visible, and a reflexive stance is expected. And finally, it is now argued that knowing 'who' the researcher is, and his/her position/location in that research and the vantage point from which the researcher operates provides important and useful information for the reader (Cole and Knowles 2001). Cole and Knowles (2001) empathize the principle or guidelines of life history research: the relation between the researcher and informant (based on ethics, sensitivity, respect and trust); mutuality where both researcher and informant are clear about the process and outcome of the research – including discussions of confidentiality and risks; developing empathy through reflexivity etc. My position as a woman, a feminist and a single straight middle class Bengali woman from Bangladesh makes me both an 'insider' as well as an 'outsider'. My non-normative life as a 30+ old single woman defying marriage normativity and almost mandatory motherhood makes me challenge hetero-patriarchy, and thus builds my 'credibility' as an 'insider' in my own class, gender and, especially, in non-heterosexual communities.

Section 1: Methods

Ethnography

Ethnography, one of the most common methods for a qualitative researcher to document 'cultures', and the link between 'cultures'(Clifford and Marcus 1986; Atkinson et al. 2001), is a default method choice for this research since my objective was to understand a particular class, gender and location. Almost the entire first phase of fieldwork was taken up with making what can be termed an ethnographic-styled '*mapping*' of the middle class gay and lesbian informants' social interaction sites in Dhaka city (shown in the following section); and to understand the most influencing element in the 'living' aspect of sexuality for informants, i.e.

space. With a more open-ended ethnographic approach which is reflex-ive in character and included knowing, networking, observing, and un-derstanding/making meaning of places, people and their lives within a social context. (Shehada 2005), I travelled around Dhaka city and three other major metropolitan cities in Bangladesh (Sylhet, Bogra and Khul-na) to get a grasp of how varied sexualities are lived/experienced by in-dividuals within the wide spectrum of the middle class. I paid attention to how different groups made networks within the city, within its com-munities which facilitated (or constrained) an actor's action to live out his/her desires. This ethnography-styled mapping process has contribut-ed at two levels: firstly, in constructing the hetero-patriarchal socio-cultural background of the study and its informants; secondly, in analys-ing the power relations between different gendered actors, and especially between sexual-identity based communities. All the groups (described below) have their own social networking and meeting places – some rela-tively open and some clandestine – and study of these meeting places, their organization and dynamics, their members, and ambiances was of significance as these are gateways to insights into class, gender, power and sexualities .

I kept notes during the field work, of interviews, social events, inter-actions and observations as well as my online interactions with partici-pants at different times; as the life stories and interviews were not re-stricted to face-to-face conversations, but were also gathered when we all were located in different continents but connected through the internet (via email or social networks), and thoughts were shared on a regular ba-sis as a few of the interviewees felt that there were issues that they want-ed to write to me about rather than telling me face to face.

Narratives/Life History

The core method of this research is its narratives collected through the life-histories of individuals. I was clear from the beginning that this re-search is mainly about individuals and their living experiences of sexuali-ty, and that I, as a researcher, would attempt to make meaning of women and sexuality in middle class Bangladesh, especially in urban locations. This would be done through a systematic, in-depth interpretation of nar-rations, as a narrative has a valuable place within social science as it 'gives us something that the cultural framework within which individuals make sense of their lives, then the close analysis of narratives produced by a

relatively small sample of individuals may produce evidence that is considered to provide an understanding of the intersubjective meanings shared by the whole of a community' (Elliott 2005:28). Therefore, it is far from any positivist or hypothesis-testing method of research, and people are not going to be represented or reduced to numbers. The method is subjective, and has positional-subjective interpretations, but is aware of the fact that research like this which is subjective in nature and depends on interpretative analysis, has more strength in exploring, investigating and examining topics that are extremely personal, sensitive or even tabooed and can only be understood from lived experiences as narrated by the subjects themselves. It is also a reflexive process which demands knowing and analysing at the same time. The method for knowing lived experience as 'life history' is extracted in the form of a conversation, in as much detail as possible, and in the process captures the flavour and minute nuances of words and gestures that add to a better meaning-making of text.

Why life history? Individuals are often considered to be the 'window' into their broader social and societal condition. Therefore, gaining insight into or through this window is always an advantage for a researcher, especially when investigating or examining certain phenomena, like sexuality, that tend to remain locked within the four walls. Therefore, one needs a method, a tool that carefully balances between inquiry and intrusion by giving the informant as much control and freedom as possible. Life history is one such method. It is based on an assumption that there is a relationship between the general and the particular and therefore, one can understand the 'general' through knowing and analysing the 'particular'. In one sentence life history is a story or a narrative account of an individual's life or segment of it (either in oral or written form) told by that individual. 'Life history is a process of inquiry about gaining insights into the broader human condition by coming to know and understand the experiences of other humans' (Cole and Knowles 2001:11) – and this could be an attempt to understand a particular situation, condition, institution etc. in a particular given context. Lastly, life stories and narratives are better sources of information when collected repeatedly (Elliot 2005), and except for two informants, the narratives for this research were collected over a period of at least one year through multiple meetings making the narratives more detailed, clearer and more consistent – thus establishing their 'internal validity'.

The choice of informants is often subjective and at times incidental (being at the right place at the right time with the right people), and the subjective aspect of informant choice and narrative selection can be questioned, though it is acknowledged that giving time to developing a broader network and connection can help one to deal with such questions and be able to develop a range of informants that create a spectrum of life experiences. This I believe happened in my research and forms the basis for the validity of the data itself.

Since heteronormativity is not only experienced by one gender, a comparative study of men and women would definitely benefit the scope and depth of the research. In other words, women's sexuality cannot be studied in isolation in the context of Bangladesh, or anywhere else for that matter, because in societies like Bangladesh, norms are highly gendered and sexuality is situated within gendered relations and its parameters. My class choice is urban middle class (the reason for which will be explained in the next sections), and I chose to concentrate primarily on gay men, lesbian/bi-sexual women, and single women over the age of 30 because, even though each group has its respective socio-sexual realities, there is a commonality that threads them together, i.e. being outside 'heteronormative' Bengali society. The inclusion of 'sex workers' identifying themselves as 'lesbians' happened later during the field work, during the second phase, as I met them by chance. The inclusion of sex workers and their non-normative sexuality added an extremely valuable edge to this research because of their class position (in the lower rung of the middle class), their position as sex workers that is in sharp opposition to mainstream sexual morality and finally their sexual preference and assertion of sexuality as a challenge to heteronormativity. Also, how they organize themselves as a group, how they worked within the hierarchical structure of sexual politics in Dhaka, and their negotiation with sexual identity provides a stark comparison with the other non-normative/non-heterosexual middle class women in particular.

Group 1: Non-heterosexual women

15 non-heterosexual (in/interested in same sex relations) women (age range 18-60 years) participated in this research. Their life stories/narratives were collected over a period of two years. The group can be divided into two sub-groups based on their socio-economic and professional position: this is crucial in exploring the dynamics of power,

class and gender in experiences of sexualities and identity politics. The first sub group comprised of middle-upper middle class educated (from 12 years education to Masters level) women; and the second group comprised of lower middle class sex workers (from illiterate to less than 10 years of schooling).

Group 2: Single heterosexual women

10 single heterosexual women (age range 25- 55) in various states of singlehood (divorce, never married, separated etc.). Most women in this group live in close proximity of their parental families (either living in the parental/family household or in independent households within the same localities as the parental household).

Group 3: Gay/bisexual men

To understand the gendered aspect and the difference in lived experiences of sexuality, men needed to be included, especially those with non-heterosexual identities and same-sex preferences who experience life through restrictive-prescribed gender roles, gender subordination and challenges. I collected life stories from 10 gay men (age range 20-53) to make a comparison of sexuality, choice and strategies with those of women in the non-heterosexual category.

Interviews

Individuals who are key informants on sexuality rights-related activities and programmes (especially feminists), women sex workers (from brothels in peri-urban locations in Faridpur District) and women (non-normative) who did not want to be part of the life-story method but wanted to 'talk' about sexuality issues were interviewed in an unstructured manner (though nevertheless remaining within the thematic and conceptual framework of the research). Many of these interviews took place during meetings and events which I attended in different capacities (researcher, invitee, and consultant) and during *participatory observations* of social gatherings, conferences and seminars. Many of the interviews and observations happened spontaneously, when opportunities presented themselves to me to interview individuals who were key to understanding broader issues of heteronormativity, gender, sexual rights, violence etc. In total I make use of five such interviews (two feminists and two

activists (one male and one transgender), and one heterosexual female brothel sex worker) for this research.

(Focus) Group Discussions

Even though focused group discussions were not part of my planned method, group discussions focused on gender, women and sexuality happened in different locations, amidst different researched groups and in the end not only provided invaluable insight into the groups'/communities' collective perspective on these issues, but also opened up opportunities to make contacts with potential interviewees. Group discussions are in reality the joining of participant observation and interviews which use 'multi-vocality' and provide a collective testimony and group resistance narratives. For me, this was also a useful method to do pilot studies and/or gather experiential data that paved the ground for fully-fledged interviews and discussions. In total I draw information/data from four group discussions: one with women in/interested in same sex relations; one with lesbian sex workers; one with single straight women; and finally with women in a brothel. The rich collective data originating from these diverse groups broadens the horizon of this research's exploration of gender and sexual norms and helps me to analyse sexual normativity and its operatives.

Study of Organizations/Groups

The case studies were composed of three sexual identity-based organizations and/or support groups: BoB (Boys of Bangladesh), *Shawprova* (Women's *Shomo-Premi* or same-sex support group), and *'Shomoy'* (support group of Dhaka-based sex worker women in lesbian relations). Since the groups are non-registered and more or less informal in their organizational style and visibility in the mainstream, case studies were conducted based on documents made available to me by the group convener, President or founder members, on observations and interactions made with group heads, members and ex-members over a period of almost three years. It should be mentioned that my list of interviewees includes decision-making personnel from these three groups, their present members as well as ex-members. Information generated from these individuals was extremely rich in understanding relations and dynamics between individuals' and groups' understanding and approaches to sexuality and its politics in Bangladesh.

Documents

Documents as research materials and tools have effects and have to be studied in their social settings. They can throw light on how 'identities' for example, are structured or on how organizations perform and how the content of documents actually 'refers' to concepts, norms and beliefs (Prior 2003). My document-based data included newspaper/organization documents, writings and notes by informants, artefacts, photographs, and books. The documents were both printed documents as well as materials available in the internet, especially in blogs and notes on social networking sites (both in English and Bangla) that focus on gender and sexuality issues in different capacities. Besides these, I also conducted archival research on women and sexuality issues on two sites: '*Prothom Alo'* (2000-), the most widely circulated Bangla newspaper in Bangladesh, with special focus on their weekly women's supplementary page '*Nari-Moncho'* (2000-2009); and the archive of '*Naripokkho'*, a leading feminist organization, and the only one to take up the issue of women's body and sexuality. Finally, books on sexuality were collected from different parts of Dhaka, as well as outside Dhaka, and ranged from women writers, feminists, and Bengali-Islamic writers/publishers. All books are written in Bengali and published in Bangladesh. Throughout the field work period, a variety of materials/tokens which can be termed as 'artefacts' were collected too. I extensively photographed events and locations, and even though I have the permission to use most of these photographs, I choose not to because of the social repercussions they might have on my participants. Textual analysis of documents of various kinds, though in the end used in a rather limited way, formed a significant part in understanding the socio-cultural context of women, gender and sexuality in general and also gave greater insight into how organizations/support groups view the issue of sexuality, sexual rights and gender in particular. Personal notes from informants, such as old lectures, poems, travelogues, incomplete research etc., were valuable cues to their (often changing and their growing) perspectives.

Section 2: Notes from the (Urban) Field[2]

Way before I undertook this research formally as part of my PhD, I believe I was pushed towards it by situations of my own life. The ethnography section cannot but start with my own socio-cultural-sexual posi-

tioning within the urban Dhaka scenario, not only because it explains
and throws light on my eventual 'snowballing' process, but also because
it helps to get insight into how one operates, socializes and lives one's
social-sexual existence in this particular context. Even though I was not
born in Dhaka, I grew up in its urban middle class environment from the
age of five. As an adult, I moved in and out of the country for education
purposes, but a turning point came when I returned (yet again) to the
city when I turned 30. I consider returning to Dhaka at this point as a
landmark period in my life because in the following five years I had to
confront the pressure of my gender role and forms of normativity. My
own social surrounding suddenly altered with the appearance of many
other non-normative individuals from a similar age group, and with the
arrival of a band of non-heterosexual friends who would make me think
critically about the way we all live heteronormativity.

> *Dhaka, for a 30+ single 'independent' (minded) woman can be stifling, with few friends
> to mingle, and fewer places to socialize. I was lonely in my personal life and was slowly
> slipping into depression when I met AD in my gym. He was in his early 30s, very so-
> phisticated, suave, well-articulated and strangely straightforward, unlike most Dhaka
> men. My friendship with AD and through his with other friends, mainly men from my
> age group opened a new dimension of Dhaka social life and understanding of the 'com-
> munity', as it is referred to there – my network of gay friends as such began.[3]*

I would term it as the beginning of a 'snowballing' process which
would form the backbone to my PhD research in a few years to come.
The 'snowball' of my circle of non-heterosexual friends would soon turn
into an 'avalanche' of queer social life in Dhaka My 'gay-dar' (gay radar)
was on auto-mode and I am now fondly called a 'gay-magnetic field' as I
have a very wide non-heterosexual group of friends all over Bangladesh
and around the world. My friendships within the non-normative 'com-
munity'[4] soon included women who were struggling with marriage
norms (either within an existing marriage, or under pressure to get mar-
ried), and their aspirations to be truly 'independent' in terms of decision-
making power over their own lives. All of us were young, highly educat-
ed, on our way to what can be termed 'successes' by middle class percep-
tions of job and income, and we were responsible and loyal to our fami-
lies. Yet there were a definitely increasing number of us who struggled to
'fit in' without compromising our own personal lives, or at least how
each one of us wanted to live our lives. It was a direct question of 'sexu-
ality' – sexual preference for many, while for others it was the question

of not being willing to be bound to a sexually within a 'legally legitimate' contract. For five years, I observed this growing circle of people around me, with myself as part of it, and when I decided to start a PhD I was certain about the topic and the people that I was ready to engage with for the next few years. In a way, I, entered this research knowing more about my field than about the theories. In 2009, when I finally 'started' the formal field work, I already had the trust of a wide circle of non-normative communities, affiliations, and friendships, as well as that of contacts/networks made over a decade and half of long work with NGOs, universities and women's organizations.

It is always difficult to pinpoint the exact time-frame or duration of research, especially when the qualitative field work literally starts from the day of conception and remains an on-going process till the thesis is actually published. Even though one can never be 'out of the field', yet there is still a certain time-frame for field work that one plans and executes. I planned my field work in two phases during which I was physically present in Bangladesh. The first phase was from April 2009 – March 2010; the second phase was from December 2010- February 2011. The location of the field was primarily Dhaka city, but I also collected interviews, life histories and conducted various group discussions from other major metropolitan cities like Sylhet, Bogra and Khulna.

Before starting field notes, I will give a brief note on Dhaka, which is my primary field because it sets the context against which both I and the participants in the research operate.

The (Urban) Field

It was evident to me that even though I had the advantage of a string of reliable key informants, I still needed to start contacting and reaching out to them, both men and women, before arriving in Bangladesh. I approached three different personal contacts: a gay male friend living in Dhaka, a 'lesbian' acquaintance (through another gay friend) who had just left Bangladesh; and a small group of ex-university students with whom I had studied and who had shown interest in my research and often described themselves as non-normative (for example 'experimental about sexuality', or 'vanilla lesbian', 'queer minded' etc.). All three links resulted in interesting and fruitful outcomes. I could establish some more contacts and future meetings with potential and willing participants as soon as I was in Dhaka. My first contact, an old friend, a gay man in

his 30s was planning his birthday party, and agreed to invite people from the gay community who were diverse in their location, social backgrounds (but within the middle class range), and who could be potential informants. I looked forward to meeting them all, but was especially keen on meeting with some who were known to be more open about their sexual identities and had some involvement in sexual rights activism. The party was vibrant, as expected, and I was the only woman present. When I expressed my surprise: 'Am I the only woman at this party?' two men responded immediately, 'Correction, you are the only *biological* woman at this party!' This marked an entry point for the research because I could now easily tap into how gender, sexuality and identities were being performed at different social levels by individuals. This social event introduced me and my research interest to the social circle, and the word soon spread that I was looking for willing participants for my research. Some called me back or we got connected through social networking sites, resulting in more meetings and discussions and my access into the 'inner' world of gay culture in Dhaka for the following years.

My attempts at making 'lesbian' contacts involved a more elaborate journey and a lengthier process. First I contacted my only known 'lesbian' acquaintance through a non-Bangladeshi gay friend (all three of us met in Dhaka in 2006). A forwarding system of referential emails travelled the Netherlands-New York-California-Dhaka route to get me connected with a key informant in Bangladesh. I was promised 'necessary help' when I reached Dhaka. After some months of email exchanges (within Dhaka) and discussions, clarifications on my agenda, objectives and intentions, and after some time-management issues I finally met with Flora, a 51 year old non-heterosexual woman, who would be very important for this research. Through Flora I would meet a few other non-heterosexual women, and get to know about their support group and gain insight into women's sexuality issues within the field of development and activism.

One of my more important new contacts was a semi-open gay man, Islam, in his early 30s. Islam was into creative work – an extremely flamboyant man in his choice of dress and expression of self, which is very unlikely and also courageous for a Bangladeshi man. He was already involved in other forums that had started dealing with sexuality, diversity and rights. We met regularly, and found a lot of commonality in our so-

cio-educational context, and our non-English medium educational background provided an interesting bonding and affectionate relationship between us. It was he who arranged my first meeting with a 'lesbian' contact, Nahar (mid 40s). Soon, I had enough non-heterosexual men and women willing to share their life-histories with me, and in the following two years I would learn about their lives, beyond specific methodical research sessions.

Being myself the key informant of the third group of people I was interested in studying, i.e. single 'straight' women (beyond the normative age of marriage), I snowballed through two contacts. The first one I have already mentioned: a group of young women (ex-university students). I chose these contacts as they sported fewer inhibitions in discussing sex, sexuality and identity and were concerned with individuality, independence and empowerment as modern young Bangladeshi women. Via word of mouth the message spread that I was in town researching sexuality and I very soon had my first informant from this group. Unfortunately the contact took place in the same week that she was being married off and leaving Bangladesh. I eventually managed to find a couple of other young single women be part of the study.

The *significant role that Facebook* played as an effective networking tool in this research must be mentioned here. Facebook, as a social networking site, played a substantial role in establishing rapport, camaraderie and a sense of familiarity with people in general, and with the non-heterosexual community in Bangladesh especially. Even before I reached Dhaka, many knew about me and my research interest and thus, because of the 'access' to 'common friends' who had photographs, status, links and notes about me, an image of me as a liberal, open, non-normative woman was established. So when I met many people from the 'community' in Dhaka for the first time, they already had a sense of familiarity and acceptance of me within the group. Interestingly, this happened with men much earlier than it happened with the women informants, who were much more cautious in their socio-sexual interaction and exposures.

Space, as has already been mentioned in Chapter 1, is a central concept of my thesis. Space has also been very crucial in my field work. Where I was, where I met with whom, when and how; how my location was perceived by others etc. played a decisive role at times regarding what was or was not possible. Most of the male informants chose to meet me (for

research related sessions, when I would formally collect their life-histories) at one of the two cafes/restaurants in Banani. These are the places we had been frequenting in recent years. There is a sense of familiarity, acceptance and security attached to these places because they are owned and run by people we knew well. There were days when I occupied a particular corner of the café from afternoon to late night, interviewing people one after the other: talking, listening, recording, noting down in between sessions. There were days when I actually had breakfast, lunch and dinner at the same café just because all informants chose that same venue on the same day! The waiters somehow understood the process, and as any academic endeavour would naturally command respect from a Bangladeshi environment, I was not an exception. The service people would keep the background music low so that it did not disturb me and my research procedures.

I usually met with gay men and single straight women in these venues in Gulshan-Banani, while my meetings with most non-heterosexual women took place in other parts of Dhaka, in Mirpur-Pallavi-Dhanmondi areas (outside the Tri-State). I met some at their home, where they had more control of the situation. I met some at their work places, where women had personal office spaces and therefore felt a sense of authority. Or some met in public parks, where, being part of a larger anonymous crowd, perhaps gave a sense of security, comfort and a chance to exit (if needed). My accidental meetings with non-heterosexual women would take place in cities and towns outside Dhaka while I travelled across the country through other networks, doing different short term research consultancy work. These 'sudden' meetings at conferences, during tea breaks, at residential hostels, airports and courtyards brought the most enriching experiences for me in this research. They formed unexpected, yet connecting encounters where women took rather impulsive decisions to 'open up' to me, a stranger and a woman, to narrate or 'confess' life stories of desires that were otherwise kept locked inside their hearts. It didn't puzzle me as much as it pleasantly surprised me. Wherever I went I made sure, as a research strategy, to let it be known that I wanted to know about desires, practices and sexualities. The fact that I mostly entered these social sites and events as an academic, a researcher, a woman who could speak about sex and sexuality without much hesitation immediately made me accessible to those who probably had been looking for an eager, patient, accepting ear to express themselves. My

position was a powerful one, both socially (as a Dhaka-based educated woman, associating with senior activists) and academically (being a woman with high academic qualification, being educated abroad etc.).

Power Relations between Researcher and 'Subject'

My contacts and interactions with non-heterosexual women were always a long process of 'examination' in which I was the subject. The much discussed and assumed power relations between researchers and researched, in which the researcher benefits from a more powerful position, was proven wrong many times during my field work. For example, when I met Nahar, even though the interaction was warm, it was nevertheless mainly me answering her queries about my research, my agenda, process and my own sexual orientation, attitudes etc. With men the power equation was less tensed, as most gay men saw me first as a friend, or at least a trusted friend of another member of their community. There were exceptions, of course, especially with those who felt their reputation as respected 'straight' men could be at risk if they were seen with me as by then I had gained a reputation in Dhaka of being 'gay friendly'.

A different power dynamic existed between me and sex workers; and it further differed based on where the sex workers were located. During my interaction with brothel-based sex workers in Faridpur (which was part of other research on disability, but which included a very vibrant and productive discussion on sexuality), I was immediately placed in a less powerful position. The women were confident, very much in control of the discussion, at least in the first half of the morning, and took long to 'test' my limits or boundaries of sexuality discourses. I felt they wanted to see how much sex-based talk, information and their culture I could take, and how open I was regarding the sexual practices and ethics of the brothel sub culture. My urban appearance (however much down played), my middle class position and my association with the NGO workers who operated there meant nothing much. It was a gender and class anxiety that took time to defuse with cautious tip toeing for a while. But by the end of morning, there was a breakthrough when I attracted some children and could demonstrate a womanly-motherly side of me. If womanhood was a problematic area of negotiation, if sexuality was even a non-issue of discussion, it was a demonstration of eager motherhood that broke the ice. On the other hand, with sex worker 'lesbians' whom I met in Dhaka through same sex organizations and activists in the sexuali-

ty rights movement, I had the advantage of my socio-economic position, and the sex workers initially felt 'obligated' to help me in the research because other senior activists had requested them to do so. When I met this group during a social event (an anniversary celebration of a gay support group), women from this group avoided me very carefully without appearing to be rude. The whole evening I tried to make eye contact, whilst at the same time trying not to be imposing. The sex worker lesbian women felt comfortable with the '*hijra*' or transgender group (maybe because of socio-economic or professional commonality). It was when they saw me being comfortable and social with the transgender members, that I felt their sense of curiosity grow towards me. Later we were introduced to each other formally by gay activists, and future contacts were made. A warm, mutually respecting relationship grew very fast, and I often met them as a group and some members individually, either in an office or at my house. Despite this 'friendship', I feel that an unequal power relation exist between us, which is probably so embedded in class difference that one could never erase it completely.

One thing that came as a surprise was a realization of my own 'othernesses' to my non-heterosexual informants. With them, I was not the 'dominant'; I was the outsider other, who was invited 'in', with a careful testing process and with a very slow but strong sense of bonding. My close proximity to the gay-lesbian groups gave me a reputation in 'straight' social circles, something that pinches of ridicule, amusement and intrigue. I became a representative of the 'queer' world to my straight friends (I am asked, on a daily basis, about the sexuality and non-heterosexual orientations of people by many straight homophobic friends and acquaintances), which in turn makes me more non-normative to them. The suspicion that I am actually unaware of my 'queerness' is expressed by many heterosexuals. On the other hand, the 'queer' friends insist on joking about me as a 'gay man in a woman's body'. By the end of my field work, I have learnt to take all the remarks in my stride, and have come to the conclusion that indeed, a non-normative mind-set is essential for a study on sexuality and sexual diversity in the sexually suppressed culture of Bangladesh.

Lastly, on a lighter note, however frivolous it might sound I believe my tattoos, sported on legs and arms actually helped me in establishing an image of a non-normative Bangladeshi woman. I was not aware of this in the beginning of my field work, but soon I realised that my tat-

toos always helped to break the ice, in any given context: in urban, rural, peri-urban areas or brothels it is a good conversation topic. Whether I wanted it to or not, appearance remained an important element and the image of a traditionally dressed (often in *sarees*) woman with tattoos (which is very uncommon in Bangladesh) portrayed a picture of me as an intriguing woman. And in sexuality study, enticing, intriguing, and inviting minds through any method is useful.

Ethics and Confidentiality

The moral concerns of qualitative research in the field are mainly centred on how the researcher stages the self, and the different roles and performances one assumes in different situations. It also concerns issues of confidentiality, manipulation and exploitation of subjects etc. (Laine 2000) – all of which are even more relevant when researching a topic like sexuality. Because of the sensitive nature of the topic and the 'secretive' nature of the sexual identity of most of my informants, ethics and confidentiality were of top priority in my research. Life stories were recorded either by audio recording or note-taking. Interestingly all men agreed to be recorded, while most women in/interested in same-sex relations were reluctant to being recorded (except for one). Most of the transcribing was done by myself and only four being carried out by my research assistant (because she helped in collecting those life stories). The understood but unwritten confidentiality terms and conditions included that pseudonyms would be used and the narratives would be used for this research only.

An Informed Consent form was given or offered to all participants but none but two wanted to sign it and/or did not care about documents as such (the reason given was that participating in this research itself signals a consent and trust between the researcher and researched and a piece of paper does not necessarily offer further trust or reliability). The freedom to withdraw from the research at any point was used by one female informant, who came to this decision after getting married (and under pressure from her husband, as informed by her). In fact, this withdrawal became more meaningful and significant to understanding heteronormativity in Bengali middle class society than her life and sexuality narrative itself did.

Data Analysis and Validity

Once data was collected it was transcribed (the recorded interviews), systematically and thematically organized and interpreted and analysed. Collection and analysis took place simultaneously and the time lapse of several months between phases of field work actually gave me the opportunity to: a) process the collected data, transcribe and make a primary analysis; b) find 'gaps' in information and go back to informants (some of them) regarding further question; c) come full circle in the research and add that extra insight into the complexity of sexual rights and lives of non-normative individuals as, after a 6-8 month gap between phases, returning to the field presented me with new developments in both informants' private lives, changes to (and end of) support groups and their organizational agenda.

Narratives collected through life history helped me to analyse how things are related, interacted, interplayed, and what the complexities of relations, spaces and interactions are. By investigating all these processes in an individual's personal life, I could comprehend and analyse the broader and collective context of sexuality. This insight and comprehension then led me to theorize, which brought my research methodology more in line with 'grounded theory'. The aim of the data analysis for this research is two-fold: first, to present data in such a way that it can speak for itself, if one wishes to address it that way. At the same time, the careful selection, synthesis and description of the data in an as 'transparently subjective' way as possible makes it possible to bring my own interpretation and analysis of the findings. Second, the aim is also to connect field data/knowledge to theories and concepts that I have used in this research. Though I am aware that 'generalization' is difficult when one deals with qualitative data based on a limited number of interviews and related materials, nevertheless I also believe that themes and patterns that have organically evolved from the data are significant enough to gain a 'holistic' overview of the subject.

Obstacles to Researching Sexuality

Language is the basis of discourse, in academia and everyday life. Words remain the most powerful element in this research of narratives. How much and in what ways languages can determine and influence the process of research and the production of thesis is beyond my initial assumptions. The back and forth journey between the academic world of

writing and the real life of the field has been linguistically challenging. The thesis is conceptualised, planned, proposed and written in English. Sex and sexualities, are tabooed subjects in Bangladesh and in Bengali societies 'talking sexualities' is never a 'straightforward' thing. Talking about sexualities in the language of middle class Bangladesh is a problem of vocabulary. To even give the title of my thesis and explain it to people at home in Bangla was a complicated process. The academic concepts in English needed to be broken into mini-concepts, and then elaborately explained in available Bangla words – without sounding abstract and vague – was a process that I had to master. I am not embarrassed to admit that it was initially difficult for me to explain 'sex and sexuality' in Bangla to people because of my own grooming within middle class norms which consider sex and sexuality-related words to be vulgar. Therefore, before going to the field I practised talking about sex-sexuality in Bangla with myself, and self-taught myself not to hesitate, fumble or look embarrassed while speaking about the issues in my mother tongue. I felt that any hesitation on my part could bring out confusion, more hesitation and reluctance in a respondent's mind about the validity of the research itself. Sexuality being such a problematic theme in most respondents' lives, it was a privilege that anyone agreed to share their life-stories with me, so anything that suggested that sexuality was a taboo, was distasteful or shameful might have alienated a respondent from participating comfortably.

Most of the terms that are by now effortlessly used in English within gender and sexuality studies have no direct (or even indirect) translations in Bangla. It has only been in recent decades that we have a Bangla translation of gender. So, 'heteronormativity', 'queer', 'butch/dyke/femme', 'LGBTQI' etc. are non-existent in my language. Of course, within the development and academic world of Bangladesh, these terms are known, and used in documents (which are mostly produced in English), but amongst activists, some of whom are part of my research, terms like queer and LGBT(Q/I are added at times) are used interchangeably in a loose manner to indicate 'gay-lesbian-transgender' together. At the same time, English is increasingly becoming part of everyday middle class language and vocabulary, and has become an influential part of the socializing process, especially amongst the youth. This means that expressions of sex and sexuality in English are becoming common in urban areas. Use of common sex-related words in English actually saves the 'well-

mannered and cultured' Bengali middle class from using 'Bangla sex words' which are deemed to be slang and crass. So, when I use these terms here in the thesis as expressed through narratives, they have to be read within the 'fuzzy' socio-linguistics of sexuality languages. However, I use LGBTQ in this thesis as an inclusive acronym for sexualities. LGBT is used when it is mentioned as such by respondents. I also use the term 'queer' as an umbrella term to include all sexual minorities, and anything that rejects the normalizing opposition between homosexuality and heterosexuality.[5]

The obstacles to researching sexuality, especially women's sexuality, in Bangladesh are numerous. The initial embarrassment about what another person feels when I explain my study; the stigma of researching something as 'obscene a word like SEX' remains an inseparable part of one's personal reputation, and affects the social position of myself and my family. Everyone is suspicious of your motives: '*Are you doing it because it is a popular topic in the West?' 'Is your focus on Muslim identity, are you planning to portray us in the wrong way?' 'Do you want to prove that we are NOT a moral society that respects religion and tradition by showing we have gays and lesbians?*' All these questions and confrontations did shake me up at times. In the initial few weeks I saw myself stammering, looking for the best possible diplomatic answers, and the least socially offensive words to answer all these questions (depending on who was asking in the first place). With time, I learnt that sticking to what I believed in, and narrating/explaining the research objectives in the exact words of my research design actually helped more than I had expected. The number of informants increased through academic styled discourses (or maybe Bengalis simply have this inherent respect for education and a reverence for academia), and things eventually became smooth.

Limitations

Is there any one particular method of studying sexuality, especially in a context like Bangladesh, where sexuality itself is a highly tabooed subject? Is there any difference in method and execution of research on a topic like sexuality between an individual researcher (with limited resources) and researchers from established organizations? All these have been crucial questions in adopting, adjusting and strengthening my research methods for this thesis; and these also indicate certain limitations

to the research itself. The study's limitations stem from the nature of the research topic and its context.

Firstly, the limited number of interviews may not be sufficient to make an overtly generalized statement about the relation between gender, class and sexualities within the urban middle class in Bangladesh. Women especially are not homogenous and sexuality is a subjective and diverse matter in the extreme.

Secondly, the problems and limitations of interviewing non-heterosexual women in Bangladesh were completely dependent on an individual's volunteering spirit: the group itself is diverse in age, education etc. due to a rather limited number of informants and their urban location in fast-changing, fast moving diverse capital city like Dhaka. Not being an 'insider' within this closeted, close and vulnerable community has its own limitations. Making use of members and their help in accessing online groups, for example, shows the level of networking that needs to be done for research like this.[6]

Thirdly, being an independent researcher with limited resources and a specific time-line in which to complete the research, limited the extent of travel and the number of people/networks that I could manage. There are certain inherent limitations to every method, and snowballing and life-histories are no exception. Snowballing as a term is problematic for me (a researcher from a tropical country who does not understand the exact working of a 'snowball' to start with). Figuratively speaking, the 'snow ball' method was always at risk of 'melting too fast' in the heat of Bangladesh where the sexuality and sexual-identity of individuals can evaporate within minutes of public appearance. Snowballing can roll in different directions and can gather individuals in the process who might not really be the 'target' subject or individuals. I would rather think that the snowballing method that I used was actually a version of 'Six Degrees of Separation[7]' that refers to a belief that each one of us are separated by six steps or are linked to each other through a few acquaintances in this shrinking world – and this is especially true within Dhaka's middle class social groups and even smaller non-heterosexual social networks.

Finally, an ethical dilemma faced by me was twofold: firstly, regarding a researcher's right to ask about such intimate subjects of life; and secondly, regarding the understanding of the seriousness of asking such questions. At the beginning of my field work, I carried out two pilot in-

terview sessions only to realize how intrusive and personal the process can be. I came to the conclusion that as a researcher, I must go through the same process of narrating sexuality myself to build as much sensitivity and compassion as possible. As part of this exercise, I made use of a one month fellowship at the Institute of Development Studies, (IDS) at the University of Sussex, UK in the summer of 2009, to write an auto-ethnography of my sexuality, in a life history format. I cannot claim that such an exercise solves all the problems or limitations of such an otherwise personal and intrusive form of research work, but I could re-enter my field work with a better sense of the depth of the process and more sensitivity and compassion.

Notes

[1] For more information on *Nakshi Kantha*, refer to Banglapedia, http://www.banglapedia.org/httpdocs/HT/N_0026.HTM

[2] Part of the ethnography is based on my auto-ethnography, written in 2009 as part of a Fellowship at the Institute of Development Studies, IDS, at the University of Sussex, UK: Karim, 2009, 'Auto-ethnography', (Unpublished).

[3] Ibid.

[4] 'Community' refers to the LGBT, especially used by the gay community, and therefore the term will be used in this chapter to refer to non-heterosexual social circles in Dhaka.

[5] Refer to Sonya Andermahr, Terry Lovell, Carol Wolkowitz edited, 1997, A glossary of feminist theory , (Arnold, London) especially regarding how it is used in opposition to the commonly used term 'straight' for heterosexuality, against which, in Bangla 'baNka' or bent/crooked/twisted is used.

[6] See Bhattacharjya and Ganesh 2011, in Kee edited, 2011, EROTICS: Sex, Rights and the Internet, An Exploratory Research Study, Association for Progressive Communications for the methodological limitations of similar research in the Indian context.

[7] Refer to: Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Six_degrees_of_separation (retrieved on 07 Oct. 11) BBC News, Study revives six degrees theory, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7539329.stm (retrieved on 07 Oct. 11)

3 Contextual Background: Gender and Sexuality in Middle Class Bangladesh

In this chapter I will contextualise my central concepts of gender, class and sexuality in Bangladesh. Firstly, I will give an overview of Bangladesh and trace the socio-historical evolution of its middle class. Then I will look into how gender and sexuality are constructed within its dominant Bengali culture, language and discourses. Work on Bangladeshi women and gender is extensive, especially on women's empowerment, but studies on gender and sexuality are rather limited. Within the South Asian sub-continent and in the past couple of decades there has been an increasing interest and engagement with sexuality at the academic and feminist level, and India has produced a substantive bulk of work. For the purpose of this chapter and to bring out the unique socio-political characteristics which separate Bangladesh from other countries within the continent (like India and Pakistan with which it shares history directly), I have tried to focus on literature that is related to Bangladeshi class, gender and sexuality issues. This includes Bangladeshi and non-Bangladeshi authors though relevant literature from the sub-continent has also been used.

Section 1: Bangladesh

Bangladesh is a South Asian developing country with a population of about 140 million, making it one of the most densely populated countries in the world. The majority (about 88 per cent) of the people are Muslim, and over 98 per cent speak Bangla (Statistical Pocket Book of Bangladesh 2007). Bangladesh has historically been part of the Indian sub-continent and was under British rule until partition in 1947, when it became part of Pakistan, known as East Pakistan. Bangladesh gained independence from Pakistan in 1971 after a nine month liberation war.

Image 3
Bangladesh in South Asia[1]

Bangladesh initially opted for a secular nationalist ideology that was embodied in its Constitution. However, the principle of secularism was subsequently replaced by an increasing political commitment to the Islamic way of life through a series of constitutional amendments and governmental proclamations between 1977 and 1988.

Bangla is the state language and Article 6 Part 1 of the Constitution (1971) declared that the citizens of Bangladesh were to be known as Bengali *(*Samad 1998). Such Constitutional identity, however, fails to acknowledge the ethnic diversity that exists in the country and assumes a homogenous character of the nation. I recognize the existing identity-politics of 'Bengali versus 'Bangladeshi' (the first one taking culture as a marker and the latter one nationalist identity as its base) and therefore the limitations and almost exclusiveness of the generic term 'Bengali'. In 2010 there were initiatives to take the Constitution back to its secular position, but Islam remains the state religion in the newly revised Consti-

tution. As I politically position myself against such exclusive narrow nationalist identity terminology, I will use the term 'Bangladeshi' here because all the interviewees are Bangladeshi nationals, and also because nationality was not the focus of my research. Even though it might be intriguing to see whether one's own construction of nationalist identity influences and/or shapes that of gender and sexuality, it would constitute an entirely different research study. For this particular thesis, 'Bangladeshi' refers to the national identity of the respondents and 'Bengali' refers to the dominant culture of the country to which all respondents appeared to subscribe.[2]

Image 4
Map of Bangladesh (with Administrative Districts)[3]

Bangladesh, like other South Asian countries, has a patriarchal society that dominates within both the private and public spheres of life to different degrees. From the household to the political realm (from local government to parliament) male domination is the dominant paradigm and includes controlling and/or influencing women's labour, their sexuality, choice of marriage partner, access to labour and other markets and income/assets. Women's accesses to social, economic, political and legal institutions are mostly mediated by men. Culturally, women are expected to be dependent on men throughout their lives (Baden et al. 1994). Proverbs regarding women's dependence on her father, husband and son throughout her life are rampant in Bangla. Yet to say it is a country that has a fixed, strict or boxed frame of patriarchy would be far from the truth. The record on women's empowerment within education, the economy and politics is rather impressive and progressive. Bangladesh has had women Prime Ministers since the 1990s and women currently head both major political parties.

Despite women's political leadership, gender equity is still a problematic issue. According to the UNDP Gender Development Index (GDI) of 2004, Bangladesh ranked 110 among 144 countries (which was an improvement of 13 places since 1999). Even though the gender gap is slowly narrowing and there has been improvement in the life expectancy of women, the country continues to have low levels of female representation in government, in decision-making positions and in ownership of assets. Bangladesh's performance with regard to Millennium Development Goal 4, i.e. gender equity and women's empowerment, remains mixed (UNDP 2004). Women have entered the labour market in millions, making their entry into public spaces more visible almost everywhere. Since the mid-1980s the size of the total labour force increased 1.6 times, averaging a growth rate of 3.6 per cent per annum. During this period the female labour force increased from 2.54 million to 10.02 million, implying an average growth rate of 16.7 per cent per annum, more than four times faster than the total labour force and more than six times faster than the male labour force (Mahmud 2003). The comparative position of women in the labour market in Bangladesh compared to that of men increased steadily during the period 1984-2000, whereas the percentage of males in the labour force declined. Perhaps the most remarkable characteristic of this increase is that entry into the labour market peaks for women in the 25-29 year age group (Rahman and Otobe 2005).

All these statistics have caused what is now termed the 'feminization of the workforce' (Sultan 2010). Studies on women's paid work by Siddiqui (2000), Kabeer (2001), Mahmud (2003), Kabeer and Mahmud (2004) etc. clearly show that women in Bangladesh were/are not pushed into the labour market because of worsening economic conditions only, but also because they were/are responding to new economic opportunities, and expressing their own demand for paid work (Sultan 2010). Women's participation in politics, especially at the local governance level, has also increased in recent years. This is mainly because of various reservation or quota policies, but women at the local level have proven to be efficient, less corrupt and more active (Mohsin 2010). Thus the traditional gendered separation of the public and private is very much challenged in Bangladesh. Increasing the percentage of women in higher education also contributes to women's visibility and presence in the public sphere (White 1992; Mahmud 2010).

While women are not excluded from public spaces, the negotiations of these spaces, nevertheless, involve dealing with, and often remaining within, dominant cultural norms of femininity, sexuality, and class. If women transgress any of those norms for reasons other than economic, and engage in questioning the character, morality and dominance of patriarchal values or men, they face hostile and sometimes violent consequences (Baden et al. 1994; Haq 2008; Mohsin 2010; Azim, F. 2010). Notably, Bangladesh has a poor record regarding violence against women. UNDP (2004) resources show that one woman is subjected to some form of violence every hour in Bangladesh. Nonetheless, the existing view that patriarchal social structures force women into 'passive acceptance' of violence can be contested given the legal changes that the women's movement has brought in Bangladesh. Since the early 1980s, the women's movement in Bangladesh has successfully campaigned against acid violence, in support of sex workers' rights and against the state control of women's body etc. The women's movement at the national and grass-root level on issues like domestic violence can be credited with moving the issue from a 'private matter' to a public concern.

Thus domestic violence has been successfully re-defined in Bangladesh, ultimately resulting in increased public awareness that eventually has led to support for changes in criminal laws. Bangladesh now has various Acts and legal frameworks that are very progressive in character (though one can question the correct application of these). The Constitu-

tion guarantees equality to women in the public sphere, but it controls private lives with Personal Laws that are religion-specific, and, as Mohsin (2010:15) correctly points out, 'it is the private sphere which regulates the lives of the majority of women'. Restrictions on marriage, sexuality, child custody etc., through discriminating Personal Laws, can and do restrict women's capacity for income, resource accrual and empowerment.

Also, there is a rise in the 'culture of violence', especially with a high increase in *fatwas* (religious decrees) in rural areas (though *fatwa* was illegal until May 2011). *Fatwas* are commonly practiced in rural areas and usually used against women. Women's groups over the last two decades have been recording an increase in stoning of women for accusations of adultery – a type of violence against women that is completely new in the history of Bangladesh. Amnesty International reported in 2001 that 'Dozens of *fatwas* are issued each year by the rural clergy at village gatherings after receipt of complaints against women who assert themselves in village family life' (Amnesty International 2001). The change in state politics has become 'highly masculine' and there has been a rise in Islamic fundamentalism 'manifested in the increasing and frequent *fatwa* instigated violence leading to torture, humiliation and ostracism of women across villages in Bangladesh' (Mahmud, 2010: 196). Clearly, the position of women, in both the public and private spheres, whether they are part of practicing Islamic communities or not, depends on the complex interplay between the dominant religion, Islam, and politics in Bangladesh.

Section 2: Middle Class and Gender in Bangladesh

The origin and rise of the middle class in the Indian Sub-continent, especially in the Bengal region started in late 19th and early 20th centuries. In Bengal the appearance of the '*bhadrolok'* or gentlefolk constructed itself as modern, progressive yet traditional class of people. The middle class grew in various paid jobs, mostly in offices and through achieving a modern English mainstream system of education. It took part in reforms like women's education and reforms in family laws (e.g. widow marriage). With time, the identity of middle class within Bengali culture became that of a respectable, educated, cultured, progressive yet traditional, comfortable in income but not extravagant in expenditure, population group. Research from India and Nepal clearly points out that the Indian subcontinent's middle class, in its post-colonial reality is different from its

original version. This new middle class is an emerging powerful consumer category, and its own negotiation with modernity in today's global world is inevitably different from its colonized predecessors. But it is not only defined by the list of consumer goods that it possesses, but also by its conformation to some general pattern of modernity like education, urbanization, formal employment, political awareness and participation etc. The evolution of the middle class has responded to many external influences, but it is the inner landscape of its 'thinking' which is tied to its colonial past and its modernized present – and that is of concern. With globalization, neo-liberalism and the presence of a powerfully invasive media, growth of a new middle class differs itself from its 'older' version on grounds of consumerism (the old middle class took pride in austerity), its image of itself as keepers of traditional culture, values and sexual morality (Varma 1998).

Sexual Normativity in Middle Class Households

'*Shongshar*' is a word that has immense presence in the daily discourse of the Bengali middle class of Bangladesh. *'Shongshar'* literally means household, but it is a concept attached to home-based conjugal or married life. In the middle class consciousness, 'household' or '*shongshar'* is never separated from *'ghor'* or a home that is built through marriage between a man and a woman. Any other possibility is beyond the moral scope. The basis of this '*shongshar'* is gender difference, and this difference is articulated through phrases like '*shongshar chalano'* (to run a household, for men) and *'shongshar kora'* (to perform a household, for women).

History shows that in the 19th century these concepts of '*shongshar chalano versus kora'* were not so gendered, as men also 'did or performed' in *shongshar*. In the changing landscape of the urban middle class family structure, '*shongshar'* eventually became the 'identity' of female existence (Ahmed and Chowdhury 2000). These transformations are to be understood through the discourses of progress, modernity and liberalism, which were/are part of 'western'/colonial projects. The middle class Muslim, one man-one woman marriage and family structure is an outcome of the western cultural hegemony which has reconstructed and re-established discrimination and power relations (Ahmed 1952, 1953; Akhtar and Bhoumik 1998; Ahmed and Chowdhury 2000). The family household marks the crux of both class and gender relations. It is the basic unit to which people belong, and through which they enter into

society. In this it is essentially contradictory: '…it gives people a common identity and common interests, but also divides them into specific roles and places in the hierarchy' (White 1992:120). The family household of the middle class is the site of the gendered division of space, and entitlements as sexual beings.

The notion of newness as part of the modernization discourse of the 20th century nationalist movement in the sub-continent dominated women's question of citizenship, especially in the realms of political participation and education. These participations were also debated in order to figure out what position women would have in the envisioned nation and their status as citizens as the 'modernizing mission for women had to contend and negotiate with traditional roles' (Azim, F. 2010:2610). Women negotiated a complex position within the nationalist discourses in the post-colonial nation state as they struggled to find a place for themselves while balancing the traditional with modern: to position women simultaneously as custodians of traditional culture and also as the bearers of modernity – the tension brewed within the public and private. Azim, F. (2010), in tracing this evolving history of women, shows how the mid-20th century image of a 'new woman' as a *modest, educated and upright woman* continued to play a significant role in the independence movement of Bangladesh. In the struggle between aspirant Bangladesh and Pakistan, the images of the Islamic versus the Bengali woman were pitted against each other. Feminist historians and researchers like Amin (1996), Akhtar and Bhowmik (1998), Begum and Haq (2001) reveal that Bengali Muslim women's evolution has been complex and it is therefore impossible to contain this evolutionary process within a singular, generic, linear image and 'within the binaries of the public and private sphere' (Azim, F. 2010).

In the context of Bangladesh, it is important to understand the evolution of the concept of the Bengali Muslim women as *'bhadromohila'* (gentle women) as a precedent to today's Bangladeshi understanding of womanhood. Amin (1996), Akhtar and Bhowmik (1998), Begum and Haq (2001), Nahar (2005), and Sarkar (2008) trace the formation, transformation and position of Muslim middle class *women (bhadramahila)* in colonial Bengal, and especially within the nationalist agenda. These works are based on a literary genre produced by Muslim women in the late 19th to early 20th centuries in Bengal, and document the process of production of *bhadramahila* subjectivity that was class specific. The origin

of the Bengali Muslim middle class was in and around the end of 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century, through the transformation and change in the structure and formations of family, marriage and gender relations. The much practiced polygyny of the 19th century was reorganized into one man-one woman monogamous matrimonial alliances, and in the 20th century this new arrangement had established itself as the symbol of morality, equality and progressiveness. 'This one man-one woman marriage is only a 40-50 year old practice or arrangement for the middle class, but it has established itself as common sense by now' (Ahmed and Chowdhury 2000:153). This 'practice of common sense', according to them, is actually an integral part of middle class identities (ibid).

The practice of morality and values defines the class itself. The sexual practices of men in 19th century were not only polygamous and polygenic but they also included serial monogamy, marriage and sexual relations with maid-servants and services availed at brothels. A woman's sexual and marriage practices were much more limited compared to her male counterparts. Serial monogamy through marriages was practiced, but women were expected to be with one husband. The socio-political history of the early 20th century saw a demand for a 'respectable Muslim middle class leadership' (ibid), in opposition to the presumably immoral elite Muslim feudal leadership. The basis of this new leadership was: a) education; b) restructuring and reimaging of the household; and c) a new marriage system and sexual code of conduct. By 1950, sexual practices and sexual attitudes were attached to marriage, which was prescribed as the only space for sexuality. This new control of and attitude towards sexuality became the defining characteristics of the middle class consciousness (ibid).

The post-independence Bangladesh middle class women's position and image is not a well-documented and researched topic. Popular culture, reflected in magazines of that time (in the 70s and early 80s), are good examples of how this image of a newly emerging middle class was being produced. Middle class women's roles and functions as prescribed in the media reflected emerging values on women's roles in the home and at work, and how the domestic and economic sites were to be negotiated. The middle class woman, therefore, remained 'with a settled home, but who now has to foray into the outer world to take her place there… the broad outlines of the female figure of this period can be seen

as secular yet traditional, educated and docile, participating in rather challenging nationalist aspirations and desires.' (Azim, F. 2010:265).

Women have always been an active part of 'class formation'. Kaplan (1985) reminds us that a class analysis strictly and primarily based on production will inevitably exclude most women as only a small group of women take part in paid jobs. Though this scenario has changed vastly since the mid-80s, it is still true that to understand women within a class, and certainly a class as complex and under-studied as the middle class, one needs to explore beyond economy, and rather look at 'sites' where class values are practiced, where politics of exclusion and inclusion are played out on a daily basis (Baviskar and Ray 2011). One such site is the household. An important aspect of the Bengali 'middle class' is its 'Bengaliness', or being 'Bengali' in Bangladesh. This Bengali identity is conceptualized and put into practice in a continuous negotiation between class, tradition, religion and modernity and therefore needs to be interrogated and understood in that context. Part of this understanding comes through reflecting on an individual's own perceptions and narratives of gender and sexuality, as well as how gender and sexuality fit into this cultural-national and class identity.[4] The gendered spaces of middle class lives are woven through identity as a (Muslim/Hindu/Buddhist) Bengali, and thus cultural image, morality and values manifest themselves primarily within the household. As Blanchet (1996), Muna (2001), Ahmed and Chowdhury (2000) show, the Bengali middle class in Bangladesh tends to contain its norms and members within the protective realm of the household and it is in this space that gender and sexuality norms, desires and practices are given primary meanings.

Although there has been a wide range of research on the changing lives of the rural, poor and lower middle income class of women – empowerment-related issues of mobility, decision-making power, household power dynamics etc.[5] – there has been very little work on urban and middle class women's lives in Bangladesh. Even studies of urban women have been mainly limited to the poor working class. Kibria's study (1995) illustrated the impact of post-independence urbanization and the rise of the non-agrarian economy and salaried middle class on gender, family structure and women's roles in both rural and urban Bangladesh. She found that women's increasing participation in the formal economy (like in the garment industry) has different impacts on women's position in poor and lower-middle classes. Even though employment increased

women's self-esteem and women's worth within the household, Kibria cautioned that this 'empowerment' is not overtly optimistic as the consequences are re-instating age-old patriarchal family structures where men control and dominate women: 'the most significant and powerful challenge to patriarchal family relations stems not from women's involvement in the industry sector but from the ongoing macro structural shifts that have questioned the core dynamics of traditional family relations' (1995:307). In their multiple research, Kabeer (1999) and Dannecker and Sieveking (2009) have shown how participation in the labour market (paid work) has transformed family relations as well as women's relations in the public sphere. Forces of economic globalization have been instrumental in opening not only public spaces for women, but have impacted the private spaces of households, where women are challenging the cultural stereotypes of women as solely stay home care-givers for the family. Women's self-identity, as a result, has been increasingly positive (Sultan 2010).

For poor, landless men and women, urban migration and employment of women in growing numbers (and often with more earning capacity than that of the men) challenges the traditional family system by making women go beyond the boundaries of gender roles. New forms of families evolve in the process. For the middle class however, urbanization and the advent of new nuclear family systems has actually been a space where traditional family structures and power dynamics have been re-invented and re-structured in a way that distances them from the middle class people and practices of lower socio-economic strata (Kibria 1995). But similar studies on middle class women who are also increasingly taking part in higher education, have professional jobs and live urbanized lives remain limited. As Baviskar and Ray (2011) point out, the new middle class is being produced in key sites of the economy, in educational institutions and at home. The new image of middle class women (that holds a balance between a new progressive femininity of being economically productive and yet retains traditional gender roles) is being created and reinvented continuously. These new images, dual identities and transformations, of which gender roles and sexuality are integral aspects, need to be investigated.

In the Bangladeshi middle class, sexuality is perceived and practiced within a tension of the traditional perception of guilt and shame, and the urban-modernized-global Western cultural influences of desires:

> Instilling attitudes of extreme modesty and feeling of shame (lojja) are part of girls' education in all classes of society. … shame is not only a desirable quality, it is an essential attribute of virtuous women which must be instilled in girls before puberty (Blanchet 1996:57).

The code of conduct for female sexuality is based on shame and modesty and, in the urban middle class social contexts, threats of violence (inside and outside home) and family reputation and honour team up to impose certain restrictions on female sexuality while retaining the image of a 'liberal, modern, progressive' Bengali identity. Varma (1998:162) articulates this tension in the context of the Indian middle class:

> One very fascinating and revealing aspect of the middle class in India is its attitude to sex. … the complexes the average middle-class person has about sex and its role in society are results of all these factors: a past, which is remembered or invoked to justify sexual licence; a more recent heritage which considers the sexual urge wrong and associates it with guilt; and a present which is invaded, as it were, by the expression of sex vulgarity or, as depicted in western soap operas, fantasy.

This observation holds true in the context of the middle class in Bangladesh and a metropolis like Dhaka in particular. The ever-increasing presence and interaction of both genders in public spaces like work, education and recreation in the urban areas give way to relatively flexible social norms of gender, curiosity and opportunities regarding sex and expressions and new meanings of sexualities which may challenge, if not always overtly, the middle class notion of propriety.

In a city like Dhaka, the *samaj* is different. The word and concept of *samaj* in Bangladeshi culture has shifted meanings, both contextually and historically. Since colonial days, the state carries many 'foreign' traditions and enacts laws based on notions and values that Bengali *samaj* at large do not endorse. For most Bangladeshis, as Blanchet (1996) points out, being a member of a *samaj* is far more important than being citizens of a nation state. The *samaj* upholds a moral order that is far more compelling for its members; and membership of a *samaj* can be more enduring than membership of a state. The *samaj* is associated with proper living as a Bengali, as Muslims, as Hindus, as a civilized people dependent on social location, rural/urban dwelling, wealth and education. As a physical entity of place it is difficult to delineate, but as a symbol of proper living, it is

distinctly 'Bangladeshi', and opposed to foreign or 'Western' ways, and therefore it remains a powerful reference. The failure to keep social norms is associated with the weakness of male authority that has given too much liberty to women, and as a result, lost control over its subordinate members. Protecting the 'inside' of the home (*ghor*) from the 'outside' world is a core value of Bengali culture and society. In the porous social arrangements of modern urban life, women and female children appear to be in need of protection (and seclusion) from the urban jungle and are not allowed to circulate freely. Homo-sociability is practiced in friendships and middle class children are expected to remain innocent and under parental control for as long as possible.

Blanchet's (1996) work sheds important light on understanding the complexities of the middle class, gender and their self-perceptions in contemporary times. The Dhaka middle class covers a wide spectrum of positions, even though it is essentially urban in its outlook, and the highly marked division of gender roles is not challenged much by either men or women. Women, especially middle class mothers, see themselves as carrying the true spirit of the dominant Bengali (or Bengali Muslim) proper way of life in *samaj*. This is manifested in the way they bring up their children: 'We don't do as the elite or as the lower class do. We don't bring up our children like them' (Blanchet 1996:31). Women regard themselves as occupying the centre of society, safeguarding honour and prestige and setting up (dominant) Bangladeshi Bengali[6] norms with a remarkable sense of self-righteousness and moral superiority.

Dhaka, the Context

Dhaka is the capital of the country. Like most other developing countries in the region, the capital is THE centre of all activities: education, development, culture, politics, movement, activism etc. The population is estimated to be 12,797,394 (2008)[7], and the city is divided into city districts and sub districts[8]. Much of the socio-economic fabric of the city is based on different areas that largely correspond to certain classes (both economic and social). Like many other cities, especially mega-cities, Dhaka is socially divided into rich, middle class and mass areas even though each of these geographical 'sections' include all three groups. Old Dhaka, which was once the hub of all businesses, old money and a certain kind of 'olden' day's food and culture, has been on the decline for some time. Even though people romanticize the food and even the traffic condi-

tions of the old town, the use of the term 'old town' connotes a lack of modernization, a glitzy dressing style, the use of the '*Dhakaiya*' dialect (infused with Urdu) and is often used as an image of ridicule. Historically, it was during the post-1947 partition of the Indian sub-continent as an outcome of decolonization that a 'New Dhaka' developed towards the highland of the north, north-east and west. Development of the new Dhaka saw escalation in the 50s and the 60s, and

> … in the north brought about a fundamental change in the character of the city. The old Mughal city remained most of it as before with narrow and winding streets and crowded dwellings, shopping centres and bazaars and in sharp contrast to the spacious and planned new extensions in the north. This contrast made Mughal Dhaka the 'old Dhaka' and the northern extension the 'new Dhaka. (Banglapedia 2010)[9]

Dhanmondi, and its adjacent area, (especially the Dhaka University, Museums, Art College, Baily road and theatres etc.) are located in the centre of the city. This is perceived to be the location for those who have money, education and culture. It is also the centre of political activities and development agencies. It is still the centre of Dhaka cultural life, especially for aspiring artists, activists and students. This is not an inexpensive area for a vibrant social life, but since it has public universities and colleges the area offers a range of life styles for many. Even though Dhanmondi has numerous cafes, eateries, lakes and art centres, it is nevertheless losing some of its character as high rise buildings and shopping malls are constructed. Dhaka, post-independence, grew towards Gulshan, Banani and the latest addition would be Baridhara – all developed and perceived as the 'new town' or the *'tri-state',* a 'hub' of nouveau riche, and centre of the corporate world, NGOs, embassies, clubs, cafes, private universities, shopping malls and restaurants. In recent times Dhaka has tried to add the missing element of 'culture' that it was said to be lacking amidst all the money and glamour. Socializing in this area is expensive. It is also a location for expatriates, foreigners and elite Bengalis. The English language is a marker of modernity, social status and a determinant of one's entry to a certain social class and access to it. I will come back to the subject of language soon.

The rise and growth of the educated middle class (which has its own multiple layered sub groups), with an ever-increasing purchasing power

and a globalized image of life style, has started to define and dominate the socio-cultural fabric of the city.

> A substantial number of the inhabitants are very rich. It is also the home of the rizing 'Bangladeshi' middle class. However, Dhaka has been caught up in a sudden spree of development and growth, without proper planning and no real control over the haphazard growth. The never ending migration of people from the countryside and district towns often without any jobs is creating tremendous pressure upon the city with its meagre housing and other facilities. (ibid)

Image 5, the map of Dhaka, colour coded by me, might help to get a visual understanding of the city in terms of the location of each area, distances and how the city itself is conceptually divided by its residents. The descriptions given in the text boxes are only in reference to this sexuality study and the urban middle class inhabitants who are the focal subjects and therefore only highlight that particular dimension of the area.[10]

Notably, because of the dire traffic situation, Dhaka city life is organized according to suitable times and zones for certain activities. Often you will hear people saying that it is 'difficult and time consuming' to 'go to your part of the city' (old town vs. new town; or Dhanmondi-Mohammadpur Vs Gulshan-Banani) – so much so that social interaction between these parts have to be pre-planned, well organized (for example meeting late at night when traffic conditions are better, or in the week-end at 'odd' hours), and jokes and taunts are made based on who lives where, and what that says about one's social life.

While looking at urban Dhaka and middle class life within it, it is notable that education is an area that demands special attention. Education is directly linked to one's perception, construction and expression of sexuality. It also plays a significant role in whether or not an individual can enter and/or participate in certain socio-sexual groups and their respective activities.

Image 5
Dhaka City Map
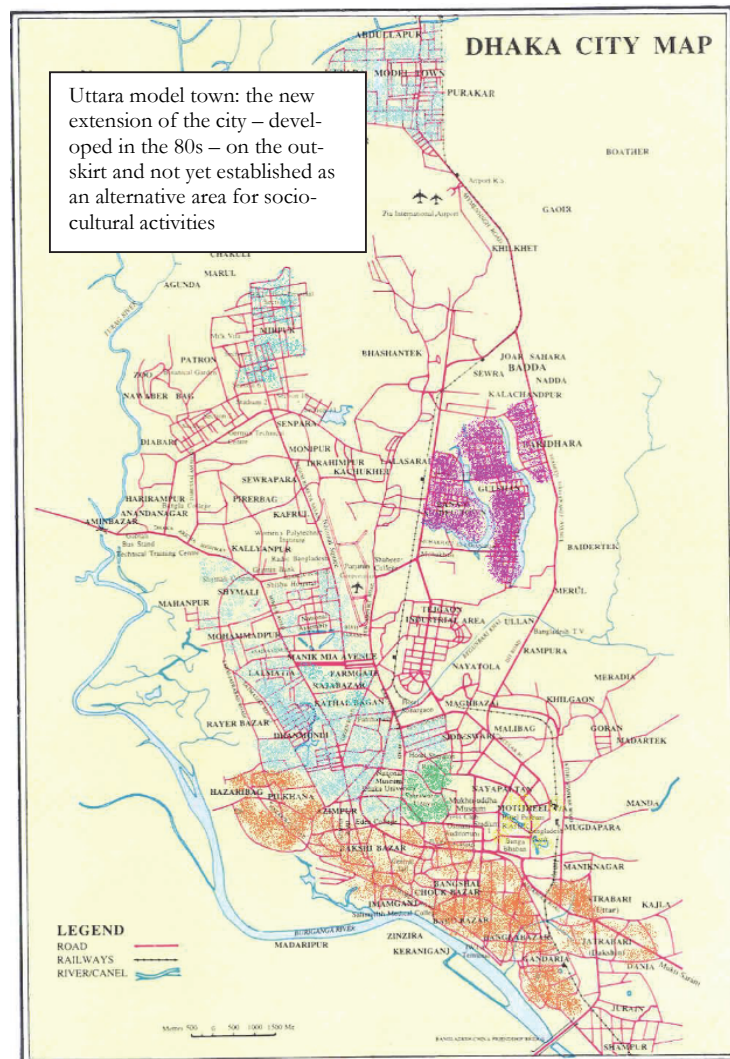
Pink: Gulshan- Banani-Baridhara

Green: Public spaces: parks (used for cruizing, meeting friends, partners and like-minded people, especially by university students, artists, political activists, sex workers and LGBT community.

Blue: Dhanmondi and adjacent areas

Brown: Old Dhaka/Old Town

Bangladesh has three parallel educational systems that actually conveniently make clear-cut class divisions. At the bottom of the education hierarchy are religious schools or the *Madrasa System*, which is mainly meant for the poor who cannot afford even the 'free' universal primary school system. It is quite uncommon to see children from the middle class and above studying in the *Madrasa System*, unless the family is extremely religious. The future of *Madrasa* educated youth (even though they can merge with the mainstream at the higher education level) is mainly religious careers, and thus those educated in this system mostly stay separated from the otherwise less orthodox-more secular (yet still Muslim) mainstream system of education in Bangladesh.

The *Bengali Medium School System* is the mainstream educational system, and this is where the national curriculum is utilized. The middle class is the main patron of this system because it is affordable (even though a hierarchy of schools operate here too, from government run to private ones) and it reflects the culture and ideology that is closer to the dominant Bengali culture and identity (compared to the *Madrasa System*). The medium of instruction is Bengali although in recent years an English medium version has been made available in urban schools. The curriculum includes compulsory religious education, and English. This mainstream system of education has always been successful in producing 'respectable' civil servants, doctors, engineers, teachers, and intelligentsia.

The *English Medium School System* is comprised of a very small number of schools with provisions of graduating school final examinations though there are also English medium pre-schools mushrooming in cities across the country. They are expensive, located in the prime areas of Dhaka (and some in other major metropolises) and mainly attended by the upper-upper-middle and elite class. The medium of instruction is English, usually the Cambridge system, and the curriculum is more foreign than Bangladeshi. Admission is given based on parents' socio-economic class and the ability to pay.[11]

The reason I am narrating the educational system is that the mainstream Bengali medium school, that actually produces and reproduces the middle class, promotes and reinforces certain values that form the sexual norms and behaviours of its boys and girls. The curriculum teaches 'gendered roles' that are normative in Bengali society – how to be a 'good' girl and responsible boy. Most schools in the mainstream Bengali

medium system are sex-segregated. Middle class children are groomed to 'behave' within the class, and to uphold the Bengali culture and values.

English medium trained children are viewed by the middle class as 'fast': a popular term to mean 'Westernized' or too fast to stay within the pace of the Bengali social life style. They are considered to be alienated from Bengali culture because the system is co-educational and laced with money which, in traditional middle class Bangladeshi perception, equals decadence, corruption and a loose/immoral character. In socio-economic terms, this parallel education system creates unfair competition amongst students, especially in employment and life opportunities, as English speaking graduates with class privilege have more opportunities on the job market than those from the Bengali medium system. The social circles in which Bengalis operate, and which are dependent on the educational medium, remain quite separate within society, even well beyond primary education.

Another significance of the impact of the educational system on this research is how one 'conceptualizes' and 'articulates' sexuality, desire and identity. Having the vocabulary of sex and sexuality (as it will be indicated in interviews), which are available more easily in English, actually enables many non-heterosexual men and women to process their experiences and identities in a much easier and faster way than those who do not have the tool of the English language. English plays a very important role in the sexual socializing process, as well as in one's capacity to enter the realm of sexuality discourse in Dhaka.

Section 3: Sexual Politics of the State

The state exercises control of sexuality through different means via laws and administrative arrangements, to set limits on people and spaces through the criminalization and stigmatization of sexuality. The state has the capacity to regulate sexuality within the marital contract and thereby repress homosexuality and not recognize transgender or third gender etc. (Connell 1990; Foucault 1977). Political situations, state politics and the ideologies that stay in power have influenced issues of sexuality in Bangladesh through public discourse. For example, after independence, the main discourse on women's sexuality was based on war time rape, violence and the question of 'honour'. Nationalist discourses saw women as 'victims' and their bodies as grounds and opportunities for nationalist

claims.[12] Changes to the Constitution since 1975, including moving from a secular document to a more Islamic legal codification, and frequent political power struggles between democratic and military rules, have had a profound impact on women's legal rights issues. The state ideology with military and Islamic influences has increasingly been 'highly masculine' (Mohsin, 2010:15). As mentioned earlier, there are a plurality of legal codes involved with controlling women, such as the Personal Law, which is a religion-specific law aimed at regulating women in the 'private sphere' of the family-household. Though Bangladesh is a signatory of CEDAW (The Convention on all forms of Discrimination Against Women), its reservation to Article 2[13] makes it difficult to bring gender equality for women, especially in the realm of inheritance rights.[14]

As far as sexual rights and diversity are concerned, there is much restriction at the state level. For example, in April 2011 public space and parks in front of the Parliament House in Dhaka were decorated with notices from the Metropolitan Police barring men and women from sitting together. The notice read: 'Men and Women Sitting Together on Lake Road is Prohibited – by order, Dhaka Metropolitan Police'. Progressive newspapers like The Daily Star reacted to it by writing the following:

Image 6
'An outrageous notice' (The Daily Star, April 27, 2011)

ANTI-COUPLE CAMPAIGN

When there is hardly any open space left for couples and families to spend afternoons in the crowded capital, the Dhaka Metropolitan Police prohibits male and female to sit together by the Crescent Lake, north of Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban. Inset, It even hung a signboard to warn people. The DMP failed to provide any reason for putting up such a signboard but did say that it would be taken down. Photo: Sk Enamul Haq/Anisur Rahman (The Daily Star, April 27, 2011)[15]

Feminist and early gay liberation movements in western countries have viewed the state as a 'male', patriarchal power structure and as an oppressor that criminalized non-normative sexualities. More importantly, the state's patriarchal power is situated and embedded in its procedure, its way of functioning, which locates sexual politics 'in the realm of social action, where it belongs, avoiding the speculative reductionism that would explain state action as an emanation of the inner nature of males' (Connell 1990:517). It is of paramount importance, according to Connell, that we question the state apparatus – its dynamics and character – and analyse these through the lens of gender.

The news clip with a photo of the prohibition from the Metropolitan Police notice banning men and women from sitting together in one of the most popular public spaces in Dhaka is a prime example of how gender, sexuality and the state interact with each other within hetero-patriarchy. The fact that the police felt a 'need' to officially 'prohibit' men and women from sitting together in a public park is indicative or suggestive of a few oppositional but complimentary aspects of heteronormativity. Firstly, such a prohibition stems from a strict (and limited) heterosexual understanding of sex and sexuality which are seen as immoral if not sanctioned by state law in observance of 'anti-obscenity'[16] laws or in relation to social normative of 'decency and morality'.[17] There are contradictions in state's policy regarding prostitution or sex work (which is illegal yet licensed through the government).[18] Secondly, the cautionary assumption that men and women's social interaction of 'sitting together' is indicative of probable 'intimacy' resulting in indecency informs us of the 'sexualised' characteristics of public spaces within Dhaka city. Thirdly, it reinforces acceptance of 'homosociality' as a normative interaction between the state's citizens, and either turns a blind eye to homosexuality or actually creates a space for 'male-interaction' through homosociality as part of a general overarching framework of

male sexual freedom, masculinity and gender discrimination. In Bangladesh, demonstration of some sort of physical intimacy between same sexes is not uncommon. Sitting close to each other, holding hands, putting hands or heads on each other's shoulders in public between same sex individuals does not carry any sexual connotation. But same sex affection and 'friendship' between men are more explicit than that between two women. It is very common to see men embracing each other, holding hands and/or caressing legs, back or putting hands inside each other's shirt to caress the chests; whereas women in public refrain from such intimacies. Finally, even though this notice is actually illegal, it exudes the power of control, surveillance and discipline through its association with the state's invincible power over citizens, especially in public spaces.

State criminalization of homosexuality is at place through Section 377A under the Criminal Penal Code. It is stated that:

> Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman, or animal, shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall be liable to fine. (Deb 2009)

In Bangladesh, male and female homosexuality is generally ignored and not named. There is an uncomfortable cover-up, a denial. It should be noted that this was not always so. In the first part of the 20th century there were many parts of the country with a much more casual approach to sexual encounters between men, and especially relationships between adult males and young boys. The practice involving adult men and young adolescent boys continues exist in practice , though only in pockets of society as this practice has become increasingly shameful and hidden (Blanchet 1996). Nonetheless, the practice of adult men, especially migrant workers, having relationships with other males, socially transgender she/males, is still common (Hussain 2009). Such practices might be frowned upon by middle class morality, but within the working class population, for example in mining sites in Sylhet, as Hussain (2013) shows, sexual relationships between men are not seen as anything out of the ordinary, nor as exclusively stemming from female absence. Rather, Hussain's research reveals how the female body and its sexuality are feared as a 'ticking time bomb' that can result in unwanted pregnancies. As well, relationships with transgender men or *hijra* by married migrant

men who are separated from their wives and family for employment reasons are often seen as a practical solution by management. In other words, homosexuality in Bangladesh is a much more complex issue that involves a complicated inter-play between class and gender rather than a simplistic reading of morality. The concept of a 'moral society" within the middle class specifically, therefore, is why Law 377 (anti sodomy law) is not an issue as there is a social understanding or a level of tolerance and sometimes denial that non-normative sexualities are allowed to exist as long as they do not come to the surface (Blanchet 1996; Rouf 2008; Hussain 2009). An individual who lives by the norms of social morality in public remains a respectable member of his/her respective social class and/or group.

Issues of sexual diversity and rights have been very slow in making public news. The 1980s saw a few reports of 'queer activities' (refer to Appendix 3: Queer history Bangladesh) including demonstrations and slogans on the autonomy of women's bodies and bodily rights and protests against religious influences on laws that impact women's bodily integrity (for example, Naripokkho's movement for women's control over body in the mid-80s). The presence of such 'radical' (in the context of Bangladesh) activism could correspond to a then strong women's movement and the growing anti-dictator movement of that decade. But a greater flurry of queer activities seemed to take place and rise in relation to the number of new and flourishing NGOs and development sector organizations in health and sexual rights issues (including HIV/Aids etc.) in the first decade of the new millennium. Politically this decade saw unrest and instability during a period of a military-backed government in 2007. This military-backed government was strict on morality and therefore during this time gay groups went 'off the grid' (offline) and ceased all activities. The convener of one such group recalls: '*It's not that there was any looming threat, but we had to consider the overall political situation. Even the straight parties were halted. But in 2008 when the political situation settled down a bit, we planned to revive its regular activities and started organizing get-togethers.*' Emergency rule by the military-backed government's administration and the significant law enforcement apparatus was seen as extremely powerful and arrests without warrants were frequent. With a sodomy law in existence and a moralistic military caretaker government in action, queer communities feared the state for good reason. The state still has not changed its approach to sexuality rights, and thus queer communities

continue to remain outside the acceptable parameters of discussion at large – the reasons for which can also be attributed to the influence of religion (mainly the Islamic framework) that frames and guides the constitution. Also, by not engaging with sexuality rights and especially by not enforcing anti-sodomy law 377, the government stays clear of human rights violation accusations and can continue with its 'moderate Muslim nation' image at the international level.

The state's position on sexuality in general and LGBTQ rights in particular is of the utmost relevance in understanding sexuality in Bangladesh. On June 17th 2011, Bangladesh was amongst nineteen other countries that voted against the resolution declared by the Human Rights Council of the UN Human Rights Body regarding 'no discrimination or violence against people based on their sexual orientation'.[19] Bangladesh, through its Councillor, protested by stating that:

> Bangladesh is disturbed by the focus on personal sexual interests while discrimination based on race, ethnicity, religion and other issues remained ignored… [20]

It was also interesting to notice how news on 'sexuality rights' was reported in the English edition of online newspapers like www.bdnews24.com (Bangladesh Decries Equal Gay Rights) and in their Bangla edition (*Jouno Porichoyer karone Boishommo noe: Jatishongho*)[21] 'No discrimination based on sexual identity: UN'. The news failed to indicate anything regarding the Bangladesh position, unlike the English report. This is a significant indication of how public spaces of discourse in Bangla cannot yet accommodate sexuality issues within a rights framework, while it is possible to discuss normative sexuality issues within violence (abuse, rape, harassment) and/or sexual morality etc. within heteronormativity. Another leading Bangla newspaper '*Prothom Alo*' covered the story a few days later. It mentioned 'lesbians' to imply '*shomokami*' or homosexuals and asked the local transgender groups to comment on the issue, ignoring any other sexual-identity based groups, especially gay men.[22]

Section 4: Sexuality and Religion

Doing research on sexuality, in any context, inevitably assumes that the role of religion/s would be major, if not one of the most influential factors. In the Indian sub-continent, religion has played a decisive role in

politics and history, and remains a central part of its peoples' lives. Sexu-
ality in Bangladesh, with a majority Muslim population, a Constitution
marked by recent Islamic influences and in recent years a rise in Islamic
fundamentalism, is significantly influenced by religion. Islam plays an
incredibly powerful role in people's perceptions and practices of sexuali-
ty and sexual identity. The state considers homosexuality a punishable
crime, and Bangladesh has witnessed phases of fundamentalist rise in
right wing politics in the past few decades. However, homosexuality has
not been a topic of public discussion, protest or agitation by political
parties, especially by religion-based groups.

When I started this research I assumed that religion would be central
to the discussion given my understanding that Bangladeshis, in general,
are a largely religious people. The taboo attached to sexuality is a contri-
bution from both colonial history and religion. While doing my field-
work I was surprised to observe that the topic of religion, though fea-
tured regularly, did not make up an important part in the life histories of
the men or women I talked to. While almost everyone had had phases of
religiosity in their life and adhered to some form of faith or spirituality,
no one was in major conflict with religion as a result of their sexuality,
sexual orientation or sexual identity. Although religion is central to most
women's lives, nonetheless, there are ways in which individual woman
negotiate with those respective religious norms and rules that are in con-
flict with their sexual desires and identities. Mukta had already resolved
this tension for herself:

> *I never turned out to be that religious. Mullah's children don't need to be mullahs and I*
> *don't think I had to be like my father – I am a human being and I have my limita-*
> *tions, and I do commit occasional sins. But I do say my prayers – for the rest, I am fine*
> *with myself!… I might look like an old-fashioned, backdated woman from outside, but*
> *I know how 'fast'[23] I am from inside. I have a very different sense of 'sin' in me; I don't*
> *consider myself as a sinner – maybe mad – but not a sinner.*

Religion is seen as a personal matter that needs to be approached and
resolved in a personal spiritual way. Religion is also used as a 'protection'
against outside scrutiny that one otherwise is subjected to in Bangladeshi
culture. Rima (27), who finds the idea of marriage a problematic concept
for herself, uses her practice of religion as a shield from social pressure.
Rima struggles to deal with a series of sexual abuses she experienced
from an early age at the hands of family members. Through religion,

reading religious texts, performing prayers and dialogue with God, she tries to deal with these traumas, and *come back to normal life*. Rima prays to God for forgiveness and for grace so that she is never put through any such situation of sexual trauma again. Bodily purity and cleanliness, which are central to Islamic prayers, trouble Rima. She feels no matter how much she showers and soaps herself she is never 'clean enough' to be in front of God while offering prayers because of the sexual abuse and its association with 'dirty'. These internal struggles stop her from getting married despite the fact that she is keen on marriage as it is pre-scribed as a 'must' in Islam. Because of the nature of her experience, she cannot reveal the reason she does not marry to others who find it difficult to understand why Rima, a young, beautiful, dutiful, homely, religious girl is not getting married. She noted that it is her devotion to religion, and the performance of religiosity that mostly saves her family, friends and relatives from being criticised for her staying single beyond a socially accepted age limit. The label of being a '*namazi*' (one who performs prayers regularly) is like having a reputation for being a 'good student' – both are highly valued and appreciated in Bengali middle class. Once one acquires a label, one needs to maintain these images. Being known as a religious girl saves Rima from the pressure of getting married because family, friends and relatives know she would not do anything bad that would create 'trouble'. According to Rima, even when everyone worries about her not getting married (on time) they are still relieved to know that her religiosity will stop her from behaving 'immorally' unlike other single women. Yet interestingly, Rima's sexuality, in which she practices same-sex sexual acts, is not in conflict with her religious beliefs. While she admits that she suffers from a sense of 'sin' because of the forced (heterosexual) sexual acts (or abuses) she underwent, she does not feel the same way regarding her sexual relationships with women, though she understands that society considers such sexual behaviour as *bad*.

> *Being a religious, God fearing, holy book-norms abiding person I do suffer from a sense of sin because of my sexual acts with women – but when I am with her (which is once or twice a year when they visit me during vacations) – I live in this trance and I forget everything about life, right-wrong, my past – there is not anything else but the body that stays in my mind. ….but when my cousins leave, the feelings of shame, guilt and discomfort bug me constantly…so my life goes on swinging in between prayers, asking for forgiveness and my erotic desire for my female cousins' bodies and intimacy with them..*

Bani, born in a Buddhist family feels that because of her religion she does not have strict socio-sexual norms like those associated with other dominant religions. She escaped many disciplinary aspects of familial life regarding gender norms as her religion grants less restrictive mobility, dress codes and grants more hetero-social activities. Flora follows Islam and is still in the process of learning where and how her sexuality fits into the religion, while Nahar, who grew up as a practicing religious Muslim, has learnt to critique religion in general. Even though she herself did not struggle with any dilemmas and/or conflicts with her own religious practices, she has witnessed other women in/interested in same sex relations fighting religious moral dilemmas regarding sexuality which views homosexuality as sinful and abnormal:

> *They (female lovers) all told me in the end that 'I find our relationship abnormal, unnatural, tasteless, I feel repulsive seeing you, I don't know why I got involved in this relationship and/or you, and it is sinful, I feel like I have sinned'- and none of these women were religious, or at least practicing religious people, but in the end they always referred to religion to prove that it was all wrong and that it was a sin.*

Religion is central to Bangladeshi peoples' lives, but the Bengali middle class has always prided itself as being 'liberal' and more affiliated with a practicing spiritual people rather than with fundamentalism. Religion is part of a middle class Bangladeshi's identity, but it is not at the core of its identity politics. As such, cultural characteristics and elements often take priority over text book religious prescriptions. Other researches of non-heterosexual groups (Hasna Hena 2011) also do not find an overtly influential or non-negotiable religiosity in the lives of Bangladeshi men and women. It might be that because of the distinctive Bangladeshi middle class cultural make-up, most respondents in this study did not find their respective religious affiliation to be disruptive to their sexuality, sexual desires and acts. This is not to say that most respondents did not have their fair share of internal dialogues and conflicts related to religion. Indeed, the role of religion in respondents' lives is complex and contradictory at times. The protection of religion from social norms (like marriage) indicates the complex relation women have with their religion, gender, and body regarding sexuality.

Section 5: Discourses of Sexuality in Bangladesh

Bangla Language and Sexuality

Language and sexuality, or rather languages (as there is always more than one language in use and operation in everyday life) and sexualities are embedded in class and gender which not only intersect and influence experiences and expressions, but also dominate conceptualizations and possibilities of sexual desires that transcend normative boundaries of society and find expressions in languages (Kulik and Cameron 2003; Tsang and Ho 2007). Heteronormativity is constructed and in operation within language, in both official and colloquial forms, which in turn makes it possible to uphold and encourage the dominance of male heterosexuality and its manifestations (often in violent forms) and to suppress female sexualities as well as non-heteronormative desires (Penelope and Wolfe 1979; King 2008). In other words, what a language, like a mother tongue, offers in words and meanings towards the construction of gender roles, sexual moralities, norms and values attached to the bodies and its functions and desires, will greatly shape how one learns to understand one's own immediate world and relations. Between a lack of sexual vocabulary, archaic-obsolete sexual words, religious overtones, and sets of ever-evolving colloquial expressions that are produced through gender power relations, society's tolerance of violence against women and the sexual objectification of female body, it is not surprizing that relations between the Bangla language and sexuality is anything but 'straight'. It linguistically equips men and women differently, which as a result differently impacts their 'ability' to narrate their sexualities.

Taboos related to sex and sexualities in Bengali society are reflected in the Bangla language – both formal and informal everyday colloquial versions. The gendered nature of erotic words and sexual expression within the Bangla[24] language illustrates a male dominated concept of sexuality, heteronormative structures of social thinking as well as strong homophobia (lists of words in appendix 1). Within the educated middle class, English is increasingly becoming a common language and a tool. Therefore, English has a class element that plays a significant role in the discourses of sexualities in Bangladesh. Common contemporary phrases to express sexuality acknowledge male sexualities, tolerate 'deviances' (diversity is linguistically described as deviances) within male sexuality; and ridicule and marginalize transgendered existence. Women's sexuality is

mostly absent from those expressions (list in Appendix 2). When present, it is in relation and/or response to male desire and sexuality and seen as ideally monogamous, passive, suspicious and sometimes treated in a rather degraded or violent manner. Furthermore, mainstream language is also blind to women's alternative sexualities. The patriarchal social system is reflected in the Bangla language and is a good example of how language can be used as gender oppression, marginalization and abuse. Sikder comments; 'Probably Bangla (along with a few Indian languages) is the only language in this world which coined one the most humiliating word for women, 'Sati', originated from story of Hindu Goddess Sita's fire-testing episode to prove her chastity to her husband and the state/kingdom' (2010:6). The word '*sati*' indicates how society perceives female sexuality: virginal, monogamous, chaste and subject to be proven. '*Sati*' is exclusively a female word and has no male version. The language has a series of words and phrases that reflect society's patriarchal and gender biased attitude towards women's sexualities:

> Bangla language in its application and addresses has failed to show respect to women, rather it disrespects women in a various ways. We have many words in Bangla, which have been mis-used and abused against women for a very long time. Opening up a Bengali dictionary will show you the difference in meanings and representation of gender for the same word. We have failed to establish the basic sense of sensibility of humane respect for women in our society and it reflects on our use of language too (Hossain, in Sikder 2010).

Even though the language has spaces for subversion, creativity and adaptation (example, *Lace-Fita,* see in Appendix 2), the public use of language does not offer a linguistic reference point for its users to express sexuality without engaging in homophobia, gender bias or discrimination. This not only helps in reinforcing the inherent patriarchal gender inequality and heteronormativity through generations of users, but also poses challenges for people pushed into the sexual margins to express, negotiate and resist oppression. This also means that different, subversive language is often a language of a small sexual minority, and often spoken either in private, or in safe (semi-)public and virtual spaces such as specific (non-governmental, or private) groups and organizations.

Thus, language becomes a part of the discipline process through victimization, punishment and control of practices and ideas that appear

outside the 'mainstream'. Language is a powerful tool which can also be used to create agency and power for individuals, communities and class. However, one could argue that in the context of the urban middle class, it is languages, both native and foreign, that mark class privilege, gender advantages, denial of female sexual agency and an outright rejection of non-heteronormativity. Sukumar Hossain (in Sikdar, 2010:6) makes a significant point regarding the gendered use of Bangla language: 'Women's vocabulary stock is very different from that of men. Women use fewer words than men', and Sikdar (2010:6) illustrates that point: '…in a class divided society like ours, if men imprison women within the household to ensure services for him/them, it becomes natural (that women will have limited vocabulary). Men have very little interest in expanding women's work space, and within the limited spaces of life, women's linguistic space gets limited too.'

Sexuality Discourses in Literature and Research

Sexuality discourses in Bangla and in Bangladesh are not yet overly influenced or dominated by political, medical, or social science languages, as is the case in many other post-colonial contexts such as India. So, next to the mainstream homophobic and sexist language, is there another way to speak of non-normative sexualities? Is there an alternative, subversive side of erotic Bangla under the surface of everyday communication, especially within the educated urban middle class? Is there any queer language in the public life of Bangladesh? The '*hijra*[25] community can claim some degree of 'queer language', perhaps because their presence as a community and a sub-culture within South Asian societies has a long history. But the *hijra* community should not be compared with the gay/lesbian/bisexual communities of today.

South Asia's history and culture have long been closely related to religion. Sexuality and its variety of representations can be seen through religious rituals, norms and practices. Examples of these can be found in literature, art and music. Temple arts, Sufi songs and oral literatures across the region are rich with expressions of desires, of both men and women. Therefore, it is not surprizing that women have found their voices of sexual expression through a variety of media at different times. The reason for the public silence of women's voices and for them being audible mainly in literature is probably because women came into the public life much later than men did. With education being offered as part

of reformist agenda literature became one of the very few spaces that allowed them to express their views. Also, the women's movement and its pioneer activists were (and still are) mainly urban, educated, middle class and often from the academic and literary world. Sexuality and women's sexuality in particular, as a subject of discussion mostly appeared in literature and in the realm of fine arts. Women writers and activists, from the time of Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932) and her contemporaries to 'controversial' writers including Taslima Nasreen (1962-) have engaged in writing about women's sexuality and its relation to different aspects of society. Therefore, any discussion on women's sexuality in Bangladesh has to start from its tradition of literature and popular art. It should be mentioned here that expressions of sexual desires, both normative and non-normative, are common and rampant in folk music, folk art and also in contemporary music (including videos) that target working class and rural audiences. Even though beyond the scope of this research, it is worth noting that the entertainment genre (music, films etc.) are also indicators of class and sexuality. Genres that are produced for the 'public' are seen as a degraded form of culture that must be avoided by the middle class *bhadrolok* audience. An issue for the Bangladeshi film industry today is how to make the middle class audience return to the theatre '*bhadrolok dorshok der hall-mukhi kore tola'*, as it is generally affirmed that anything that has overt sexual connotations is not for the respectable middle class.

Discourses on sexuality have also slowly been created through development and academic research works. Sexuality studies in Bangladesh, especially women's sexuality, are a recent phenomenon, but an area that is gaining importance slowly and steadily. There are still obvious silences and discomforts to formally spelling out sexuality even as a part of a gender studies programme. For example, even in the first ever 'Gender Encyclopaedia' (Hossain 2006) one cannot find an entry on 'sexuality'. However, there are attempts to break these taboos and their resulting silence. Much of the silence can be understood as an outcome of social-cultural-political and religious restrictions, but nevertheless, it is my personal observation and understanding that women's issues, pursued by both the development sector and women's/feminist organizations have mostly followed the mainstream and avoided probing into the lives of women themselves when it comes to sexuality. A lack of research on sexuality within the urban middle class in the sub-continent, even in In-

dia can be noticed. The invisibility of non-normative sexualities of the said class is considered unimportant and even kept outside the realm of human rights. Sexuality rights as part of human rights have class implications too. Violation of human rights, including sexuality rights, has different consequences for members of different genders and classes.

In Bangladesh, silence on the topic of sexuality, especially on non-normative and female sexuality, is acute. A few recent studies, mostly undertaken by women scholars and activists such as Rashid (2006), Haq (2004), Azim, F (2007), Siddiqi (2007) have shown that in Bangladesh, both in academia as well as in policy discussions, sexuality is seen as a problem within the framework of violence and/or disease, but not as pleasure, desire or as a positive aspect of human lives. Much of the research in this sector focuses on public health and HIV/AIDS issues. There have been studies on adolescent sexuality and male sexualities, especially in the context of rural Bangladesh (Alam 2001; Nahar 2010). Studies by Azim, S. (2001) and Khan et al. (2002) inquiring into women's perception of their sex drive, desires and expressions of such desires concluded that a majority of women believed and practiced suppression of sexual desires in conjugal life.

Much of the work on women and sexuality is on sex-workers. For example, my own study 'Exploring the Household Composition of Female Sex-workers in Brothels: Daulatdia' also shows how power and control over the immediate environment can come to women with the use of their bodies and sexuality (Karim 2004). I showed that sex-workers' control over their bodies can be understood through their choice of partners and pregnancy. While in mainstream society the issue of women's sexual pleasure remains a taboo and women remain un-vocalised, sex-workers present a different scenario where in many cases they can and do ensure that their bodily demands are satisfied. In terms of bodily care, sex-workers, especially in brothels, ensure sufficient food intake, enough rest, and take special care of their body (mostly because of the demand of their job).

The necessity and importance of a better understanding of how women experience their bodies and sexuality/sexual relationships without prejudice or pre-judging their situation is emphasised by Huq (2004). In her essay 'Sex Workers' Struggles in Bangladesh: Learning for the Women's Movement' she reveals the effects of social norms governing sexuality in women's lives and the dissonance between lived experience

and society's expectations. She argues that restrictions on women's mobility related to women's sense of honour, chastity etc. has an impact on women's physical well-being, self-worth, personal freedom and happiness. Based on women's life-stories, Haq (2004) emphasizes the importance of finding new ways of communicating about sex that reframes the boundaries of what is possible and acceptable (2004). Rashid's (2006) work on sexual and reproductive health in a Dhaka slum shows that young married women's sexual relations with their spouses are fraught with contradictions: at one level these women are choosing 'love' marriages over traditional arranged marriages and are enjoying greater mobility and freedom in the choice of their partners. At the same time, in the absence of economic independence and social autonomy, many of them tolerate unsafe and painful sex as a survival strategy. But there are also some who use their sexuality as a resource to attract their husbands and to secure material support and in many cases exercise sexual power for individual benefits. What needs to be noticed here is that within development studies, sexuality is related to issues like HIV/AIDS, reproductive health and/or part of a very general 'gender' spectrum of work. There is work on transsexuals and sex workers, especially from rights-based approaches, thus making them somewhat more visible rights-based development discourses within Bangladesh. On the other hand, there has been almost no work on women's diverse sexual orientations and practices except for a few individual studies (two such studies were carried out by two respondents in this study). Students' monographs at the university level (a handful of thesis) indirectly address women's sexual diversity through the lens of violence from perspective of anthropology. In terms of published works, there is mention of non-normative desires in Khan et al. (2002) and Rashid (2011).

Bangladesh is situated in globalized world. Adams and Pigg (2005) emphasize the importance of the relationship between globalization and localized contextualization and an understanding of sexuality. Regarding sexuality, the authors (2005:11) state: 'Intimacy itself comes into question when globalization is brought into studies of sexuality because… globalization 'queries our common sense referent of the proximate and the intimate, the subject and her space and time of being, and thus her forms and practices of desire'. The question, therefore is, how are forms of sexual subjectivity, identities and desires produced and manifested within these contexts? This seems to me the perfect time and opportunity for

research that aspires to address these questions and bring sexuality into the mainstream and make it relevant in Bangladesh.

Notes

[1]   http://www.southasianconcern.org/south_asians/detail/what_does_south_asian_diaspora_mean/

[2] All are self-proclaimed 'Bengalis' in terms of ethnicity and I have no other ethnicity represented amongst my respondents.

   In the revised (15th Amendment) Constitution of Bangladesh 2011, the term 'indigenous' has been rejected and denied, thus terming all citizens of Bangladesh as 'Bengali'. Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission, July, 2011, http://www.chtcommission.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/CHT Commission_LetterToPM_Constitution.pdf

   Article 6(2) of the Constitution now says: "The people of Bangladesh shall be known as Bangalees as a nation and the citizens of Bangladesh shall be known as Bangladeshis"; and

   Article '23A' now says: 'The culture of tribes, small ethnic groups, ethnic sects and communities – The state shall take steps to protect and develop the unique local culture and tradition of the tribes [upajati], minor races [khudro jatishaotta], ethnic sects and communities [nrigoshthi o shomprodai].'

   Also refer to: The Daily Star, June 30, 2011 http://www.thedailystar.net/newDesign/latest_news.php?nid=30610

[3] http://onlinenewshome.blogspot.com/2012/01/full-map-of-bangladesh.html

[4] For more information on this, refer to: Muna 2005; Nahar 2005; Begum and Haq 2001; Amin 2001.

[5] For example, within development studies, research on the lives of garment workers, women and micro credit programmes, women in agriculture or export processing zones etc. are extensive, but there has been very little work on urban and middle class women's lives in Bangladesh.

[6] Blanchet's work is predominantly on the Bengali population in Bangladesh and does not address other ethnic groups.

[7] Statistical Pocket Book of Bangladesh, 2008, http://www.bbs.gov.bd/dataindex/pby/pk_book_08.pdf

[8] Dhaka As The Capital Of Bangladesh (since 1971)
After the independence of Bangladesh on December 16, 1971, the city's population rose suddenly to about 1,500,000 and in 1974 it was about 16,100,000 (Census of Bangladesh 1974). Urbanization achieved tremendous growth to deal with the needs of the newly independent country's capital. Through land reclamation the city began to expand in all directions including over the low-

lying areas on the eastern side, such as in Jurain, Goran, Badda, Khilgaon, Rampura, and in the western side, areas like Kamrangirchar, Shyamoli, Western Mohammadpur, Kallyanpur (Chowdhury 1991).

In 1995, The New Master Plan for Dhaka was prepared for the further development of Dhaka City. As very rapid urban growth, along with the fast increase in population and structural development, started to take place in the city, this new structure plan was a must. The population had leapt to 3 million within one decade of the country's independence and the city covered an area of about 70 sq. km. in 1980.

The swamps and wetlands of the city started to disappear fast. New areas of residential, administrative, business, and commercial importance began to develop. At the same time, numerous slums and unplanned low-income residential areas or squats also grew up in different areas of the city. Keeping pace with the magnitude of this urban growth, the new urbanized areas were encroaching the low-lying areas in the city and even some of the adjacent distant areas.

Dhaka City Corporation, http://www.dhakacity.org

Dhaka Statistical Metropolitan area, http://www.citypopulation.de/Bangladesh -Dhaka.html

[9] Banglapedia: Dhaka, http://www.banglapedia.org/httpdocs/HT/D_0145. HTM, accessed on 29 March 2010

[10] My own social mobility through the different levels of the middle class is also defined by location: I grew up in Baily Road/Eskaton, in the centre and cultural/theater area of the city in the 80s. I lived in the newly planned Government housings that were meant for the new nuclear families with two children and went to Bengali medium school. Socially I was a typical urban, civil service background, Bengali speaking, middle class girl.

In the 90s I moved with my parents and sister to Dhanmondi side (as my parents' income increased) and we left government housing for our own flat. We became part of the Dhaka University area and its related culture since both my sister and I were admitted to Dhaka University. In the early 2000, we relocated, for the last time, to Banani, and our offices were also located in the Gulshan-Banani area: in this way social mobility through education, job and location had put me into the more affluent, English speaking and more 'global' social surroundings/network of the city.

Therefore, when I got into my field work, I was fortunate enough to have lived in all the three major centers of Dhaka city and thus access to and communication with different and a varied range of informants was not difficult.

[11] For information on the education system of Bangladesh, pleases refer to: http://www.banbeis.gov.bd/es_bd.htm

[12] Refer to: Ibrahim 1994; Drishtipat Women of 1971, www.dristipat.org; Mookherjee 2003; Brownmiller 1975; Bose2005; Karim2011.

[13] Obliging the state to take measures to do away with all kinds of discrimination against women including legal, customary and traditional sources.

[14] Also refer to CEDAW Report On Bangladesh, 2011 by the United Nations http://www.bayefsky.com/pdf/bangladesh_t4_cedaw_48.pdf

[15] http://www.thedailystar.net/newDesign/photo_gallery.php?pid=183381

[16] like the anti-obscenity law in films 2006; Film Censor Act 1977.

[17] Refer to Banglapedia, 'Freedom of thought and conscience is guaranteed in Article 39 of the Constitution. Subject to any reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interests of the security of the State, friendly relations with foreign states, public order, decency or morality, or in relation to contempt of court, defamation or incitement to an offence the right of every citizen to freedom of speech and expression, and freedom of the press are guaranteed.' http://www.banglapedia.org/httpdocs/HT/F_0190.HTM;

[18] Though female prostitution is 'legal' in Bangladesh, the state, through the Constitution, promises to prevent 'gambling and prostitution' (Section 364, 366, 373). The state's position on prostitution or sex work remains contradictory. Male prostitution and homosexuality are 'illegal' through section 377, anti-sodomy law.

[19] bdnews24.comBangladesh Decries Equal Gay Rights, 18 June 2011, http://www.bdnews24.com/details.php?cid=2&id=198740&hb=2

[20] Ibid. The Councillor further explained that 'There's no legal foundation for this draft resolution in human rights instruments. Bangladesh believes that rights included in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights have been coded into international instruments. By introducing notions not articulated in human rights instruments, these very instruments and the human rights framework are undermined,'

[21] http://www.bdnews24.com/bangla/details.php?cid=2&id=162158&hb=5

[22] http://www.prothom-alo.com/detail/date/2011-06-19/news/163577

[23] In Bangladesh, 'fast' is a commonly used English term to describe an individual (especially women) who are perceived as non-traditional, non-conservative, 'modern', 'western' in lifestyle, and often to indicate a loose sexual moral character.

[24] Bangla is the state language of Bangladesh, and is the world's 6th most widely spoken language. An Indo-Aryan language, due to influence in the Mughol/Muslim era and colonization, Bangla has been greatly influenced by Sanskrit, as well as foreign languages like Arabic, Persian, Turkish, English, Portuguese, French and Dutch. It was not before the 18th century, under British

influence, in particular by Christian missionaries, that literature in modern Bengali started, before which Sanskrit was the major vehicle of prosaic literature.

[25] Transgender or eunuchs/third gender.

Making of the Sexual Private: Ambiguities of Family and Household

This chapter engages in an exploration and understanding of *private space and class* in relation to gender and sexuality. I would argue that, in a strictly heteronormative socio-cultural structure of middle class Bangladeshi households, the concept of privacy and private space is highly gendered. These gendered private spaces produce and discipline, control and monitor women's sexualities and also turn a blind eye to women's sexual desires, needs and expressions outside institutionalized heteronormativity. I also argue that family-households are 'private' spaces beyond the 'physical' aspect of their realities. They are socio-symbolic sites of multiple and conflicting sexualities that are produced through the dynamics of age, gender and class and are outcomes of constant power struggles and negotiations between various actors. Stepping 'inside' this private space of home or the family-household, one can see how heteronormativity is established, instilled and enforced on its members through the concepts of privacy, homosociality and heterosexualization, and, above all else, marriage normativity.

Section 1: the Urban Family-Households

According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (2005) a household is:

> … the smallest unit of social institution. Almost all the socio-economic activities are being performed around this unit. It can be defined as a dwelling unit where one or more person live and eat together under a common cooking arrangement. Matrimonial or blood or both relations, exist among most of the persons who reside in the dwelling.

A family member is defined as:

A family member is a person who depends on the family. A family member can be a head of household, spouse, unmarried sons and daughters, married sons who are direct dependents, parents, unmarried sisters, divorced or separated daughters, or sisters. Servants, labourers and lodgers who have no other usual place of residence but live and eat together within the household with or without payments are not considered as family members. (ibid.)

Image 7
High rise apartment housing in Dhaka[1]

South Asian researchers (Sharma 1986; Kibria 1995; Bagchi et al. 1997; Bagchi 1995; Liechty 2009) have repeatedly shown that in this continent, family and households are not to be understood as mere economic units, but rather as a matter of extended kinship and co-dependency beyond the realm of economics. I use the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics' (2005) definition of family and household because it broadly out-

lines the state's official understanding of the concepts, which, in turn, are reproduced and reflected in policies, national curriculum etc. of the country. The definition of a family member clearly draws on blood and class lines, emphasizing the socio-symbolic meaning of household spaces and going beyond the mere sharing of physical spaces. These definitions are therefore my entry ground for understanding sexuality as lived experiences by members of families within their urban households' shared/cohabited spaces.

Image 8
Everyday Dhaka traffic[2]

Rows and rows of vehicles stretch as far as eyes can see, on the Mohakhali flyover and the road beneath in the capital. The photo was shot around 12:30pm yesterday.

PHOTO:
AMRAN HOSSAI

Housing, Space and Privacy

Sharma (1986:40) wondered whether there is any such thing as the urban household, and concludes that in a crude and obvious sense there must be one: 'any household located within the limits of a city is urban – even if its members are engaged in agriculture, they are presumably exposed to urban values and institutions'. We must remember that in Bangladesh the transformation of agro-based households into an educated middle class

has a colonial history, and whatever might be the location of the family (urban, peri-urban or rural), the transformation into 'education-focused, refusal and distance from rural origin, salary-based economic existence and nuclear family structured middle class happened only a generation ago' (Gulrukh and Chowdhury 2000). Differences between the urban household and its rural counterpart, if any exist, are a matter of comparative study, which this research is not about. What is relevant, however, is whether there are any differences between the way metropolis and small town urban households experience gender and sexuality. The differences in middle class upbringing in Dhaka, or any big city, and small town or 'Mafashawl' in Bangladesh, eventually converge in a commonality of broader understanding of aspirations, psychology, success and values defined by the middle class (ibid). The realities of middle class upbringings are nevertheless different in these locations.

Dhaka is a mega-city with a rising population and one of the highest population densities (6,771 persons/sq.km in 2005) in the world. Islam (1999) and Kamruzzaman (2008), show that the lower middle and middle income groups cover 65 per cent of Dhaka's residential lands and they are mostly out of the permanent housing market because of the high increase in land / property costs. An average total floor space for an urban household is only about 30 sq.m while per capita floor space in 1991 averaged 5.1 sq.m. The average household size is 4.8 people per residence. Lower-middle and middle income groups share living space and services in smaller rented houses, and in recent times, there has been a huge shift to small apartments that cater to the needs and income of these groups. High-end houses and apartments, mostly Western styled, are available though very expensive. Yet independent (single family) houses are disappearing fast as a result of an increase in apartment living. Urban lives in these conditions are relatively new in Bangladesh, and these new arrangements in living spaces and styles influence gender arrangements within family households.

Gulrukh (2000) studied the urban middle class household structure in popular drama in Bangladesh and she shows how 'spaces' within these households are divided into public and private along the line of masculine and feminine, and how genders are expected to perform accordingly. For example, kitchen versus roof top mark feminine and non-feminine spaces: a male presence in the kitchen is effeminate, while the long presence of women on the open rooftop is inappropriate. Women's loud,

vocally audible presence on a university campus is seen as non-feminine, and her code of conduct is determined by her marital status. In this culturally determined and imposed gendered division of private and public spaces, it is inevitable that sexuality is also influenced and adheres to similar rigidly defined roles. It is, therefore important to know the housing conditions, and what physical and symbolic spaces are generally available within the middle class households in cities like Dhaka in order to better understand how gender and sexuality are engaged in by individuals.

'Ghor' and *'bahir'* refer to home and outside and is how private and public is described in the Bangla language. Home is the centre of the family, and family is a socio-religious obligation, a responsibility that everyone must take on. Home is where 'purity', 'innocence', 'morality' and 'values' of the family are practiced and preserved, especially in the middle class. *'Ghor'* is a place where safety and protection are located, and to be outside *'ghor'* is like stepping into the unknown, where chaos, danger and risk lurk, especially for women. Chatterjee (1989:626-27) reveals how a new modern Indian womanhood was constructed as part of the nationalist agenda against the British colonial rule:

> The new norm for organizing family life and determining the right conduct for women in the conditions of the modern world was done through reconstructing the 'classical' tradition and by putting women at the centre of family life that would uphold spirituality against materialism, and by making women custodians of protecting and nurturing spirituality.

Tagore's 1916 novel *Ghore-Baire*[3] or The Home and The World, is a prime example of these perceptions of the Bengali households as 'home' and anything beyond it as the 'world', and how Western modernization versus traditional *Bengalines*/nationalism clash which in turn challenges the positions of women within the boundaries of these spaces. Of course, one must remember that these discourses were class specific and addressed the educated middle and elite class of Bengal, whereas the lives and conditions of the rural poor and what is termed as the 'subaltern' women were excluded. Women in poverty have always worked and in rural agrarian contexts women were always outside the *'ghor'* when necessary. But as White (1992) has noted, women in rural Bangladesh often find the compulsion to work outside the family household (either in fields or at other households) a marker of poverty and whenever there is an improvement in the financial situation many prefer to withdraw

from economic activities that take them 'outside'. Studying sex-based activities of women in rural Bangladesh, Paul, K. (1992:4-5) clearly showed that the spatiality of female activities are '*bari*' or family home centred and,

> Although the neighbourhood boundary generally determines the extent of female space in rural Bangladesh, the area may vary in size according to a woman's economic status, age, and women from different economic classes are subject to varied types and degrees of patriarchal control. The poorer the family, the more egalitarian the relationships and responsibilities between the sexes…Women of landless and land-poor families thus often work outside their neighbourhoods. The female space of women of poor-to-very-poor families may include their own and adjacent neighbourhoods.

My own experiences in the field and at the village level since the early 1990s indicate that even though there has been remarkable change in women's attitude towards what constitutes the 'outside', it is still laced with a class connotation and in many cases it is seen as a negative commentary on the male provider's capacity to support the family. In 1993, while working as a research assistant, I was told by village women in Chittagong, Bangladesh that it was my misfortune that I had to go to the public market to buy necessary items (like a saree) because I did not have a provider husband: most women in the village took pride in the fact that they did not need to even go to the local market unless it was absolutely necessary. In the two villages we worked in for over four months I observed only a few women working in the fields, or going to the hills to collect wood etc. because they were either widowed or divorced and without any parental support. Besides these women, other women who engaged in outside work preferred to work as domestic help or post-harvest aids within the household of more affluent families and under female supervision. There was a change in this scenario in 2010 when one could observe women shopkeepers, business women and NGO workers on bicycles in rural and peri urban areas. But the social ideal that women should be able to stay at home and be provided for is still dominant. Maggie, a lady in her sixties, working as an office assistant and cleaner in a school in Dhaka, expressed the desire to stay inside the home: '*sister, if only I could taste the pleasure of staying at home and eat without earning that grain of rice – I would have known what it means to be a woman*!' What I am trying to argue here is that women's presence outside the pa-

rameters of the inside world has always been contested and negotiated irrespective of their class position.

For a woman to be outside the home, '*ghor-er baire paa rakha*' (to step outside the doorstep of the home) with liberty and agency is seen as a new phenomenon, something resulting from the new modern urban life-styles that have brought increased opportunities for education and work. In Bangladesh, a girl staying outside of the home (*ghor er baire thaka*, or *ghur e berano* i.e. to roam around) is exposed to a very different set of moral judgments than when similar acts are done by boys and men. For men, '*bahir*', or the outside, is considered a natural space. In fact, when an adult man stays home for too long without a valid reason, such as ill-ness, it can have grave implications on perceptions of his 'manhood' and the question would arise, '*purush lok ghore boshe thake?*' (being a man he stays inside the home?). This is culturally quite unacceptable, as evident in Bangla proverbs. Bangla proverbs are explicitly gendered[4] and women in them are positioned within the private sphere of the households – deemed as her 'rightful place' within which she is responsible for the smooth running of the family. She is expected to be docile, submissive, caring, sacrificing etc., and have a restricted gender role that cannot be jeopardised at any cost. '*Oshurjosporsha*' (the woman untouched by the sun) is an archaic term but the resonance of which is still desired, or at least the qualities of a good woman are desired. In contrast, '*orokkhita*' (the unprotected woman) shows a tension between the social sanction of space and sexuality, requiring the strict disciplining, monitoring and chaperoning of women's sexual morality in society.

Two crucial concepts of family life in Bangladesh are thus: homoso-ciality and marriage normativity. Each implies different meanings and practices for men and women, and of course different sexualities. Ho-mosociality and marriage normativity are part of growing up and part of the gender training that takes place within the spaces of family house-holds through different phases of the life cycle.

The social meanings of being a girl versus a boy, and their close tie with 'perceived sexuality' versus 'lived experiences of sexualities' deter-mines spaces that are either 'given' or 'occupied' by the members within family-households. The lack of, or the limited, space available to middle class families means that all members do not usually have personal rooms or spaces. In Bangladeshi culture there is not much attention paid to the concept of 'privacy' or 'personal space' anyway. Parents are suspi-

cious of their growing children's 'personal times' spent in 'personal spaces'. Locking rooms is seen as 'secretive' and therefore a strict monitoring system is mostly in operation as children approach puberty. Elder sons are usually given preferences for having separate rooms, while mothers, grandmothers and sisters share living and sleeping spaces.

Shehreen (32), a single heterosexual woman explains the scenario as follows:

> *In Bangladeshi middle class society, the concept of space itself is a complex and relatively new one. Space is always scarce in a middle class home – there are the parents, the grandparents, the children, the unmarried adults, the servants and the visiting relatives. … The notion that people want to have space for themselves is almost unheard of. There is always a multiplicity of people at any given time, in every room of the house. The concept of private rooms was only valid when there was a marital relationship…. Even then, this room was only private in the evening hours, when the couple was resting or asleep. In this case, privacy was guarded and respected. If you are a single person in a household, this right to have people respecting your private space is not typically available. An unmarried son or a daughter will usually have to share their room with siblings, and is expected to allow access to it by parents and other family members at any time. … The family unit, especially the elders within this unit, does not recognize that a person may have a need for privacy – whether it be physical or mental. This is not seen as intrusive or wrong, simply the norm.*

Kamrun (33), another single heterosexual woman addresses the issue of privacy and gendered privilege within homes thus:

> *The definition of personal space is a very relative one. I find that those who are exposed to Western culture even in the slightest form are the ones that have an issue with personal space and privacy being invaded. But I had found in many of my University friends who had come from the villages that there was no concept of intrusion. Mothers and fathers are supposed to know everything because it is their right. My mother believed in the same thing and often went through our things.*

Shehreen further explains this 'right' of parents or family members to intrude or occupy the spaces of unmarried children in the house:

> *A single person's thoughts and actions are always open to review and analysis by other members of the family. The physical space they inhabit, the room, is always available for entry. One cannot lock the door or be alone with the door closed without raising suspicion. … If a single person insists on this space, they are viewed as having 'foreign' or 'new' ideas, and this is regarded negatively. The idea is that everything you might want*

*to do, you can do with your mother/father/older sister/brother/etc. present. The only
exceptions may be to talk about 'women's matters' with older female relatives.*

Clearly, privacy as a concept does not resonate in Bangladeshi culture
and is not a part of everyday household vocabulary: so much so that in
fact, that there is no direct translation of the word 'privacy' in Bangla.
The closest we can conceptually come to 'privacy' is confidentiality, se-
cret, intimate or own etc. (*ekanto, nijoshho* etc.). Privacy, as Kamrun and
Shehreen point out, is a rather urban, modern concept and there is a
generational difference in its understanding. When it is understood, it is
invariably a matter of gender privilege and more significantly, a marital
privilege. More importantly, privacy or private spaces for members of
the family, carry socio-symbolic meanings, showing that the significance
and problematic construction of 'space' as a concept in Bengali society is
embedded in deeply gendered 'age-marriage based sexuality' privilege. It
is therefore only through marriage that one can claim a 'private space' or
entitlement of privacy. Marriage, irrespective of one's age, grants auto-
matic adulthood, sexuality and a better position to receive entitlements
like respect and privacy. Though one must add here that 'private time' or
privacy for a married couple traditionally is sanctioned only at night after
all the household chores and collective family activities are complete.
Even for a married couple who live with extended families, closing the
door during day is seen as impolite and improper.

Boys and men have somewhat better options for privacy in life as
they have more mobility, freedom and a more relaxed 'curfew time' at
home. The liberty of movement, recreation and interaction with peer
groups outside the home actually allows them to explore life, selfhood,
and, consequently, bodies and sexualities. Boys are allowed to spend
nights at friends' houses and can bring male friends to their family home,
whereas girls, in most middle class households, cannot even imagine
spending nights out at friends' without a chaperone.

*There is a pragmatic view that young men have 'needs'. These needs are never specified,
but are vaguely understood to be the need to release aggression, etc. So, if space, which is
at a premium, does become available, it is given to the male single person in the house-
hold. Female singles are seen as a burden, or more benignly, in a transitional phase of
their life until they reach the final destination of marriage and motherhood. Even an
earning single woman will not be given the same right to private space as her brother
might be. However, typically neither men nor women will be allowed to express any sex-*

ual identity, let along engage in sexual behaviour prior to marriage within the family home. If this is done, it is usually in the parent's absence and with the risky complicity of the household staff. (Shehreen)

What Shehreen points out is the discriminating gendered view of space in middle class households, which has a direct implication on sexuality: who is allowed what space for being sexual, to what extent and for how long? In other words, who has the privilege of making a 'sexual private space' within middle class households? This observation is reinforced by male narrators who admit that their gender is a privilege in not only having better access and control over private spaces at home, but also regarding being recognized as sexual beings. Akram (33), a single gay man from Dhaka explains why and how a man or a son can carve out his privacy, private space and territory based on gender privilege within the private spaces of home:

Being an asshole son helps creating personal space. You have to negotiate your privacy at every step here – not just at home but also in social spaces and work. At home, I'd say fortunately I've established my parameters. … don't get me wrong, I love my parents but I also like my personal space and who I am. I'm not out in the open to everyone I know, including my parents, as I haven't announced my sexual orientation to them. But I've brought over guys I was going out with to our home. … my parents respect my privacy, at least to the extant I want. I have my own of set of keys. I give my mom a certain amount of money, which I would've spent if I were living on my own. I come home when and if I want to, at whatever time, it hasn't been an issue.

He further explains how this gender privilege started working from a much earlier age when he started the process of '*marking [his] territory*'. He also brings back an important issue here: the privileges and obligations of staying within family-households and its relation to marriage normativity. Even economically independent single male informants cannot find a socially acceptable reason to live outside the family household when not married, unless they are located in a different city for an academic or professional reason.

*There are several reasons behind me not moving out yet. Sure, my parents wouldn't like the idea, as in our society a bachelor/ bachelorette living on his/her own despite parents having a specious[5] home is considered ridiculous.' (*Akram)

Marking two crucial central concepts of family lives here are: *homociality* and *marriage normativity*, each having different meanings and practices

for men and women, and of course for different sexualities. Homosociality and marriage-normativity are part of growing up and a part of gender training that takes place within the spaces of family households through different phases of the life cycles. Because 'homosociality' is a norm that provides more advantages and spaces for (single) men than (single) women to practice their respective sexual desires/orientations, men find it more beneficial to stay within the traditional family-household. Bird (1996) argues that homosociality, as a 'delineation of relations among masculinities, is important because it facilitates a better understanding of how the structural order of gender is maintained.' (1996:120). Homosociality is centred around a hegemonic 'masculinity' and 'the maintenance of practices that institutionalize men's dominance over women and is constructed in relation to women and to subordinate masculinities' shaping the overall framework of gender relations'(Connell 1987, as quoted in Bird, 1996:120). It also refers to a generic understanding of the relations as non-sexual while 'it promotes clear distinctions between women and men through segregation in social institutions; and also promotes clear distinctions between hegemonic masculinities and non-hegemonic masculinities by the segregation of social groups' (Bird, 1996:121).

Homosociality among heterosocial and homosocial groups are different. Saad (in his late 20s) is a single gay man who lives with his parents. He describes the ways sexualities can be practiced within the private space of parental homes because of the gender privileges of homosociality:

> *There is a plus side to being gay and a Bangladeshi. You can have as many male friends as you wish and they can come over as much as they like. Holding hands or resting your head on another guy's shoulder is considered normal. You're just best buds, what we in Bangla call, 'shokha', a socially and culturally accepted thing.… He's just a friend from school, from football practice, from art class. As long as you had a legitimate excuse, your parents didn't care what you two were up to behind closed doors. … This only works if you are a guy. Lucky for me, being a middle class boy from a Muslim household, I only get a slap on my wrist or in the worst case, get married off by force to 'cure me'.*

To summarize, space is a concern for sexual practices because in the first place Bangladeshi women are not expected to stay outside in public for too long. Almost all families will have gender-specific timelines for its members to return home. Secondly, there are not enough public spaces

that people can go to for meeting others, like prospective dates, lovers or even friends. Thirdly, for non-normative sexualities it is even more problematic and at times dangerous to meet in public places. Lastly, in Bengali culture, unmarried/single men and women are expected to live with their parents and share common spaces, and it is culturally accepted and understood that unmarried children's lives, especially daughters', need to be monitored by their families. It does not matter how much one earns or how independent thinking a person might be – to live separately from the family as a single man or woman within the same city is seen as unnatural, anti-social and a potential threat to the morality of society. Echoes of such norms and rules are found in abundance in the narratives of informants, in socio-religious books and in the media as well.

The gender and age of informants sheds light on how, at different stages in life, men and women negotiate for personal spaces and how, depending on their gender and age, they may be socially granted some kind of space in which they can practice sexuality. The narratives indicate that even though men tend to enjoy much greater freedom for experimenting with and expressing different aspects of their sexualities, they also face more social-familial responsibilities to perform their gender roles as sons and to beget children. Marriage normativity and the social pressure for a man to take over the role and responsibilities of breadwinner and household head force most gay men to marry reproduce and live either a double life or repress their sexual preferences. Akram points out the pressure of the social heterosexualization process that men experience as they gets older:

Being single is not easy in Dhaka, but you already know that. It's nowhere near the bullshit and harassment women face, but when you're a man with a degree and a job everyone expects you to get married. The pressure mounts as your get older. Hell…doesn't matter if you even have a job…You come from a respectable family, people are ready to get you married…Most gay men here succumb to social, particularly parents', pressure. The excuses are: 'But what will my parents say?' or 'I cannot betray my parents' etc. Then they get married, produce a child (which is kind of like a release form for them), continue to chase 17 year old boys and ruin a life of a woman who had nothing to do with this.

For women, on the other hand, the greater part of their lives, childhood through most aspects of adulthood, is spent within restricted, monitored and relatively confined personal as well as public spaces. Mar-

riage and motherhood are prescribed social norms and very few (though increasing in number) can evade these expectations. But, it seems, once women can evade marriage and passes the socially perceived 'age of reproduction'; they are more or less left alone to deal with their lives, as long as it does not become too publicly disturbing. Most single women (heterosexual and non-heterosexual) in this study, who are 40 or older, indicated that by the time they reached this non-marriageable/non-reproductive age, they also reached a stage in life in which they were more economically stable. This allows them to afford their own spaces (houses or flats), in which they are finally able to live more 'free and independent' lives. It is therefore not a surprise that some of the women in this age group are activists within the LGBTQ community and are semi-outed in their sexual identities. This is an area that will be discussed further in the following chapter.

Section 2: Private Spaces of Home as a Site of Female Sexual Construction

How, in general, is female sexuality perceived? In a printed campaign for vaccinations of adolescent girls to prevent cervical cancer, heteronormativity is in full action. As much as one can give the excuse of 'poor' translation, a very patriarchal gendered social attitude towards women's bodies and their sexualities is represented and articulated in the Bangla language.

In the English version the question (at the bottom left of the page shown in the image below) is '*will sexually active women benefit from the vaccine*', and the answer also uses the phrase '*women who are sexually active*'. In the Bangla translation, the same question (in red, opposite the English version) uses 'sexually active women', but in the answer, '*sex worker*' is used as a term for indicating 'sexually active women': '*women should get vaccinated before becoming a sex worker*'). It was a nationwide, celebrity-endorsed advocacy campaign on cervical cancer, which had to address women's active sexuality, especially that of adolescents. This campaign illustrates how uncomfortable Bangladesh is with the idea that young women, outside of sex workers, are sexual. This makes it difficult for the campaign to disassociate women's sexualities from marriage, morality and cultural ideals of sexual purity. Thus the only women who could be socially identified as sexually active outside marriage are sex workers.

This division of women based on sexual activity and subsequent sexual morality clearly indicates a strong gender bias against women's sexual agency, and a less-than-subtle message that a sexually active woman can be named as a 'sex worker'.

Image 9
A page from cervical cancer prevention campaign in Dhaka, with focus on the translation of the question: Will sexually active women benefit from the vaccine?

When female sexual agency is synonymous with sex work, and campaigns directed at middle class educated families endorse, carry and convey these gendered sexual moralities, it is worth interrogating how girls come to learn about body, sexuality and gender relations within households. How does a middle class girl grow up? What space, mobility and freedom of action is accessible to a girl in middle class Bangladesh? A very common sight in urban and peri-urban areas of Bangladesh, during the late afternoon and evening, is of women, ranging from pubescent to elderly, leaning over balconies or looking through grilled verandas watching the world pass by. It is uncommon to see girls after the age of puberty go out and play in the open and the maximum level of physical activity available to post-adolescent girls is going for walks in groups or pairs

within an area that is socially sanctioned or chaperoned. Blanchet (1996), White (1992) and Karim's (2007) work on women and households at different locations in Bangladesh show that girls' mobility is not only restricted, monitored and chaperoned, but that they also enjoy less homosocial activities compared to boys of a similar age and background. Girls play very little in the way of sports, remain less physically present in outdoor activities and are consistently groomed into a femininity that is believed to be in sharp contrast to masculinity (characterized as restless, outgoing, active or unruly). This is truer for urbanized locations like Dhaka, where open space is scarce and the threat of violence against women is real (Blanchet 1996; Muna 2005; Karim 2007).

Parveen (51), a non-heterosexual woman, (a sports teacher by profession) observes some generational changes regarding women and outdoor sports. During her adolescence in the 70s, urban (especially Dhaka-based) girls in girls' school and college teams were active in sports. It was something like a marker of being educated, middle class and progressive. But now, urban Dhaka girls only take part in sports as long as they are in schools or school teams with limited participation beyond school level competitions.. Therefore, in the national women's teams, there are hardly any Dhaka-based female players. Rather, it is the small town, lower middle class, struggling girls who take up sports. Often, this is not because they take an interest in sports in particular but rather as an 'escape' from the hardship of life, financial problems, and often to escape the inevitability of early marriage.

Lady Bug (26) is a single heterosexual woman who grew up in a rather modern, urban, upper middle class family. Even though she had the privilege of attending an expensive English medium school, of living in Western countries for several years, and flourished as a bright, intelligent writer/activist, she still struggled against the dominant/expected image of a 'good, normal, moral, feminine girl' in the family household:

I played with male cousins, and loved playing outside with them most of the time. My other female cousin (aunt's daughter) was more feminine, and into girlie games like doll's house etc. One time I was playing outside with my other cousins when my cousin wanted me to play with her inside, which I refused. When she complained about me to her mum, my Khala (aunt) came and scolded me. I asked why my cousin couldn't come out and play with us. In reply she told me, 'Because my daughter is a normal girl, unlike you, who is a hijra (transgendered)'. I was 7 years old and had no idea what the word 'hijra'

meant… I asked my mum, and she answered it is something in between male and female… Almost for a year, I had this fear of waking up to a growing penis.

The use of the term or sexual identity of a *'hijra'* here is significant, because it not only indicated the possibility of a sexual 'abnormality' in a girl who was not conforming to the norms of femininity, but it also functioned as a mechanism of intimidation and fear to discipline the respondent. Home-bound femininity and feminine sexual desirability in the avatar of homely, weak, dependent individual is shaped by two processes. Firstly, by sexualizing the female body from a very early age through different discourses and by different actors like the mother, aunts, female domestic help, religious teachers etc. Secondly, by providing reference points of successfully married, beautiful feminine girls like cousins, neighbours' daughters etc. epitomizing beauty, desirable passive sexual-femininity and dependency on the patriarchal structure.

My aunts would proudly say, 'My daughter is very weak, she can't play for too long' i.e. feminine, frail and delicate. My cousin became obsessed with marriage at a much earlier age and would not understand why I was not thinking like that. Everyone else was telling me that 'She is such a nice feminine, soft girl – unlike you, who is tomboyish and dark….She will be married off to a nice house, not you!' I had no market value….I have always been a rebellious, argumentative outspoken girl. And when I would argue with my mother, my aunt would warn me, 'If you argue so loud and if the neighbours get to hear your voice, they will think you are a girl from the market, 'bazaar-er meye.[6]

This particular excerpt illustrates that gender-specific traits for women such as femininity, frailty and delicateness, are not only desirable but also sexualized, and directly associated with marriage. Paradoxically, most narratives also show that efforts are always made to keep young girls as non-sexual or asexual for as long as possible by monitoring their lives, and the spaces they can access or operate within: by restricting knowledge of sex/sexualities and minimizing interaction with the opposite sex. Secondly, the 'Madonna' versus 'whore' parameter is at work, ready to be ingrained in young minds. Class is also very much in action here with a reference to the market. Thirdly, even though children and young (boys and) girls are under constant pressure by adult actors to be sexually pure and innocent, their discourses of discipline are often hyper sexualized.

Whatever physical space is available to a girl to manoeuvre within, it gets literally limited in the urban setting. Shurma, 25, describes her child-

hood and growing up as an urban middle class girl in comparison to her cousin from a smaller town:

> *Because of living an urban middle class lifestyle, I had this 'farm chicken' (broiler chicken) syndrome or characteristics with me, which was absent in my cousin who grew up in a small district town. She would walk with a thump, run, would talk a lot and loud , play, beat us up…In other words, she did not have our typical urban middle class growing up traits: like singing, some sort of hobby like painting a bit or learning dance for a while.'*

The difference between the two cousins growing up within similar familial norms values and structures but in different locations, is a prime example of how spatial norms and disciplines are structured. Shurma (single-heterosexual), her friend Rima and cousin Tamanna (both bisexual women) are of a similar background, are in the same age group, and are close friends. All three took part in this research. Tamanna grew up in a small-town household where there was always a 'flow' of people – friends, family and strangers. As her father was a practicing doctor, there were always patients, friends and neighbourhood people who dropped by or stayed for a long time, and many walked in and out of their bedrooms. This is not an uncommon practice in typical Bangladeshi culture, especially in rural and smaller towns, for guests, neighbours and friends to walk into people homes, including the bedrooms. Her father liked such a social environment in the house. Because of this 'bazaar'/market-like environment at home, Tamanna says she faced a number of sexual abuses during her childhood. When her family found out that a close friend and a frequent visitor of her father – an elderly uncle – had been sexually abusing her for some time in the adjacent room of the medical chamber of their house:

> *My mother started scolding me, what happened, why did it happen…a lot of mess…I was physically beaten by my mother…Even today I cannot understand why she had to beat me up and why she cried uncontrollably at the same time…But I don't feel bad for my mother, and I have not forgiven her … If she had not treated me like that, my life would have been much different.*

Since that incident, Tamanna's mother made an effort to keep an eye on her and make sure that Tamanna was not left alone. In order to *'provide a better and safer space'* for Tamanna, her parents decided to send her to one of her mother's sister's house in a different city. It was an 'all female household' as her aunt's husband was posted somewhere else, and it was

assumed that the socially-professionally 'achiever aunt' would be a good guardian for her.

The connection of physical space and sexuality seems to be very close in this narrative. Tamanna shows how individual identity in general and sexual identity in particular, is gradually formed based on different experiences and interactions with people in different spaces, places and locations. Places, spaces and an individual's experience in those locations shape the way h/she perceives him/herself sexually and interprets and rationalizes his/her position in it, based on the norms and rules of those locations. Tamanna mentioned the significance of 'housing' many times during interviews. She discussed the sexual abuse and how it was viewed by relatives as making her a 'sexed up girl' who had 'sex coming to her body at an early age'; having sexual experiences with her female cousins, being involved with 'the wrong men', subsequently getting pregnant and having an abortion etc. All of those experiences were greatly influenced and often decided by the choices (or rather lack of choices) in her housing and expectation of privacy during different stages of her life.

Interestingly, when Tamanna had to be brought back to her parents' home for a brief period of time (because of another sexual abuse incident taking place at her aunt's house), this time a separate partitioned room was made for her. It was an adjacent room with an attached bathroom, with grilled windows and door, so that even her father could not enter her space at will. *'…My separate room, it was very claustrophobic, stuffy, with hardly any air circulation, I would get boiled in heat…It was like a box…The double doors with grills prohibited anyone from even peeping into my room….But, it was my own room, my own bathroom, my own space…like all other normal people'.*

Tamanna has continued to struggle with acceptance within the family because of her tormented past, and she has moved in and out of different homes of relatives and from hostels at the university etc. to be able to create a space of her own. Tamanna's sexual involvement with her female cousins (taking place during annual get-togethers like weddings and other events) did not remain a secret and her reputation as a hyper-sexualized trouble-maker went beyond her immediate family household. As an adult, an otherwise successful student and a professional in the making, Tamanna struggles with an identity that is closely tied to her experiences of sexualities, both in terms of pleasure and pain. She tries to make a connection between her present life and her experiences of both sexual abuse (by men) and pleasure (with female cousins), based on the

homes and living spaces that she has inhabited. The dynamics of the spaces, the people who inhabited those spaces, and her lack of agency as a young girl as well as a lack of control or power over who could invade her private space, or privacy contributed to her understanding of sex, gender and sexuality. She feels that in order to ensure the sexual safety of a woman, to make a sexual woman 'asexual' (which is the desired state of sexuality for women in our society) the space she inhabits has to be made 'asexual' as well. To her, 'asexuality' is seen as equal to 'sexually safe' for a woman. The sexual possibilities of the housing spaces influence the sexual construction of the woman and the subsequent relations that she would have in life. Tamanna repeatedly mentioned housing and its space dynamics, especially the failure of creating a protected private space, in her interviews.

When Shurma compared Tammana's story to her own, she narrates how family spaces were usually monitored and protected for the upbringing of young girls in middle class houses:

> *In contrast to Tammana's growing up style, I was brought up as a young girl under the watchful eyes of my elder sister, who, because of her experience of sexual abuse, made sure that I was put away from it for as long as and as much as possible. She put a hanging bell on my door when I got my own room, as part of a strategic decoration, which also worked as a warning for her to know if someone entered into my room. … From a very early age my mother and sister were very careful about me. No one but my parents and siblings could touch me or take me onto their laps, and they kept an eye on me all the time. I had this protection-dependency on them for a very long time, till I became an adult. I was abused sexually by people outside home, at a much later adolescent stage…. But I remember female relatives, like aunts and cousins would comment on Tamanna being too 'grown up' or 'sexual' at a rather early age: 'sex bomb'; 'she has got sex in her body', or 'she is so young, but she has already understood sex'; and the reason was always that 'her mother has made her into this by keeping her outside home' (referring to Tamanna's stay in a relative's house, or in hostel in Dhaka).*

What makes Tamanna's story relevant to the mainstream middle class understanding of sex, gender and sexuality is the definition of her by others as 'sexual' and personified as a hyper-sexual girl, who is uncontrollable, problematic and non-normative as opposed to other 'good, respectable' middle class girls who are required to be non-sexual or asexual until marriage. Her mother refused her pleas to take her back to their own home for a long time because she feared that *'…you would get pregnant while I am away at work, what will I do then?'* Because it was a well-known

fact that she was abused by relatives/family friends, she was seen as a girl who had already 'known' the sexual side of life and therefore could not be treated or considered to be an 'innocent child' anymore. On top of this, her physical growth as an adolescent was a problem for others as she could not manage to cover herself 'properly', and was seen as a potential sexual 'temptress', a fearsome existence within the family. Shurma recollects that amongst all her cousins, Tamanna was identified as 'the bad one' and there was already fear within the family regarding Tamanna's sexuality. No one wanted to keep her within their household and no one wanted to take responsibility for her even when she needed help later in life. Tamanna's only weapon for social-familial acceptability or respectability was through academic success and religious practice. Education and religion, as a strategic device for women, will be discussed in the following chapter as part of resistance.

The gender discrimination between daughters and sons regarding space, privacy and freedom of choice is stark. Socializing, sports or family time becomes sex segregated, mostly with cousins and outsiders, in a subtle way as soon as children reach puberty. Mukta (36) recollects such an episode: `*I was "friends" with a male cousin, when we were young, around the time of standard five, when we were still allowed to play together. There was nothing sexual, but I felt good when he was around me, and I felt physically and emotionally good when I spent time with him … there was a hint of romance in it. But once we reached pre-teen, boys and girls were separated from socializing, and he was "lost" from my life.'*

Girls who try to transgress these gendered spaces in their childhood would all note that with time, especially with puberty or menstruation, they were all compelled to be home-bound, and trained, disciplined and restricted within the gender and sexuality norms of society, if not of the home itself. Nahar (45, non-heterosexual woman) describes such imposed changes in her life as part of growing up in an educated, middle class family:

> *What was significant about my childhood is that I was tomboyish….I did not play the sports that girls played, did not dress like a girl and behave like one. My family considered me as 'a boy born as a girl'…Everyone said that 'Doctor has got a son, not a daughter'.*

In the gender privileged social structure, it is not surprizing that Nahar realized who had more power and freedom of choice to allow her the outside, non-feminine life that she liked: her father and brother;

> *It was my fathers who let me and often encouraged me to dress the way I liked … even though people would comment on the gender confusion because of my dress and behaviour… Father allowed me to be myself for a very long time. …. I saw my sisters as homebound and playing indoor games, mainly with dolls, and they would never accompany me with outdoor games…. Everyone else was male in the outdoor life with my brother, and when my brother would refuse to take me, my father would say: 'What is the problem, she is dressed like a boy!' I would bribe my brother to take me with him… In my all girls' school, I hated my school dress. But I had to compromise, adjust to the new way of living as a girl. The first shock came during adolescence – menstruation. Finding that as a girl, my body is a binding, a limitation for my life…. I was still not bothered about the changes in my body. I accepted it as part of growing up bodily…all I was interested in was to go out and live my life to the fullest…Body and gender identity as a girl was least of my concerns.*

Being 'different', or better, being perceived as 'different' from the socially prescribed gender norms, is something that girls struggle with, particularly in forming a gender and sexual identity for themselves from a very early age. What stands out from the narratives as a pressing issue of sexuality placed within households is the middle class idea of an 'innocent, asexual' youth that seems to be simultaneously idealized as a concept or belief but that is also problematic as an ever-present threat to the otherwise moral-stable gender-age hierarchy of the family-household unit.

Spaces of Conflicts: 'Asexual Youth' versus 'Sexual Adults' – Abuses, Agencies and Practices

Shurma*,* an anthropologist, explains the issue of sexuality, gender and space:

> *In the story of women's sexualities, space is crucial. If a woman is required to be asexual or non-sexual within the given space, then that space also requires being asexual or clear or safe of sexual dynamics… And often the narratives are built on the failure of creating a safe, independent, private space by the women in different phases of their lives.*

In other words, if the space is buzzing with sex, repressed or overt, and if a space has all other actors in a powerful position to act sexually with the otherwise expected-to be-asexual-girl (be it a child or an adolescent),

then the space itself starts constituting and influencing a variety of sexual relationships, identities and assertions within its territory.

Unlike in Western societies, Blanchet (1996) comments that in 'Bengali' culture, children are not entitled to any legal rights and are not allowed any spaces for creating a children's subculture. With some gender and class differences, there is a widespread belief in 'Bengali' society that children should be kept under the tight control of the guardians to mould their still pliable characters. In different ways, boys and girls are seen as vulnerable and in danger of getting 'spoiled' (i.e. *'noshto hoye jawa'*) (Blanchet 1996:8-9). This epithet of 'spoiled' (*noshto*) is a central reference point to the sexuality of boys and girls during their childhood and adolescence. The term carries a range of meanings depending on the gender of its carrier: 'When applied to girls, it mostly refers to their having been sexually used and defiled (*noshto meye*). … The term is not synonymous with the loss of virginity but with the loss of honour' (ibid: 65). The primary cause of a child being spoiled is seen as a consequence of weak parental control and discipline. But how a spoiled child is treated by the family also differs according to the gender of the subject and the class of the family. Blanchet observed that 'Middle class parents may be highly concerned about a delinquent son but refrain from calling him "spoiled" in front of outsiders because of the negative social consequences' (ibid: 67).

Social restrictions and imposed sexual morality do not necessarily stop young members of the family from being sexual. Life-histories from the participants of this study prove this point over and again, irrespective of sexual orientation. The difference between an individual's socio-religious perceptions of sexual morality and actual practices are not straightforward and are extremely complex. Muna's (2005) work on the sexual conduct of unmarried young people shows similar results. The differences or asymmetries are often termed as 'double-standards'. Muna (2005) also uses this term to describe male sexuality practices, but rather one need to identify the social relations and normative constrains within which young people inhabit, and which, in turn influence their sexual expressions. West (1999:526) argues that 'constraints surrounding youth sexuality are not to be understood in solely normative of ideological terms' and that conditions under which young people construct their identities need to be examined as well. Young people's understanding of sexuality is not only formed from unmediated constructs of masculinity

or femininity in relation to their particular social class and backgrounds, but also by the social arrangements of gender. The power relations between generations, dependency dynamics within households related to economics, as well as social acceptability and respectability and the cultural sanction of parents' 'ownership' over children and their well-being, form core elements in young peoples' assertion of gender roles and sexual assertion.

Khaleda (33) brings up the concept of parental 'ownership' of children irrespective of age in Bengali society:

> *They think by giving birth they own me and I am eternally indebted to them for whatever decision I want to take. … I have to be very selective in my choice of words and subjects. I know I am always under scrutiny and I don't want to be their subject for gossip. For this reason, I know I am not doing anything unethical or wrong „still, in fear of being judged, I all the time pretend to be someone who I am not. I dislike it so much.'*

The lack of trust on parents' part of children's free will, self-control and sexuality characterize middle class family relations at home. Middle class parents feel a sense of urgency in child rearing. There is only a limited time span for them to instil in their children proper moral values and knowledge, and make them understand and accept the obligations of their social rank. It is believed that norms of behaviour should be internalized while parents still exert control over their children. Once sons go to university, parents will have little hold over them and it will be too late. This is also true of daughters, though to a lesser degree (Blanchet 1996:161-2).

Though 'trust' is more of an acute issue regarding daughters' sexuality, my observations and understanding from narratives indicate that parents usually see their son's active sexuality as a 'naturally' given trait. Therefore, once they have more social mobility in adulthood, 'mistrust' is framed as the 'masculine, natural sexual' aspects of manhood. In the case of daughters, mistrust is more in relation to their 'falling victim to the male predatory nature', to their natural sexual curiosity, and to the fact that there are more opportunities of exploring sexuality in mixed gender environments. But there is definitely a degree of differences in control between male and female.

The control only loosens when children start going to college and universities. Girls still have less freedom and access to mixed environments as most homes have a 'curfew' time for daughters. Many girls go

to all girls institutions and /or live in all girls' hostels. All girls' hostels in Dhaka University (and other public universities) have what is called 'sunset' law, meaning that girls need to be back in the hostels by sunset. Men in this research also admit that breaking away from middle class parental values is possible when they go to university, especially while being away from home.

Regulations, control and restrictions on mobility do not necessarily provide 'safe' home spaces. Child sexual abuse at home is not uncommon in Bangladesh. According to a World Health Organization study, 68 per cent of girls and 33 per cent of boys under the age of 18 experienced forced sexual intercourse or other forms of physical and sexual violence in 2002. Parents keep close watch on both sons and daughters to prevent relationships with the opposite sex. As a consequence, adolescent romances are most likely to develop between cousins (accommodating all diverse sexual practices), with tutors or family friends. And this is where a crucial part of sexuality is developed in youth: through both exploration and 'abuse'. The majority of respondents (both boys and girls) recollected childhood sexual encounters within family relations ranging from rape and child sexual abuse to the grey area of children's experimentation with sexuality. I am using the term 'grey' because the recollection and subsequent interpretations of these encounters took place during the course of this research and by adult respondents who admitted to having a different understanding of sexuality at this point in their lives. What they might have felt as children during the course of various sexual acts (voluntarily or coerced) is difficult to know now, hence the interpretations are intriguingly mixed and often full of contradictions. Most male informants remembered being sexual with cousins, uncles or tutors at an early age, which they admitted 'can be termed sexual abuse' based on the legal age of consent. But, they also mention their problems with articulating these experiences strictly as 'abuses' because they assert they exercised a certain degree of agency in their curiosity, interest and pleasure during the encounters. The lack of explicit coercion and/or violence during these early experiences meant that some of the informants ignored the 'power relations' that existed and focused on the sexual acts as their own male 'sexual agency' in action. Men only described encounters as abusive in cases when they did not like the 'perpetrator' or when there was an element of fear involved with the act.

In the South Asian context, sexuality norms that govern adolescent boys and girls are often diametrically opposite. These social arrangements enable men to explore their sexuality at different ages while restricting female sexuality and its expressions (Abraham 2002; Muna 2005). Masturbation, though not encouraged, is acknowledged as part of male sexual growth and is termed '*shwopno-dosh*' (nocturnal emissions). A direct translation would be 'faulty dream' or wet dream. A cure for such problems or '*dosh*' can be found in abundance in newspapers, streets and leaflets everywhere. Wet dreams are considered to be bodily malfunctions and/or satanic influences on young minds and bodies, and as a cause of weakness in the male body. Studies on adolescents and youth (Nahar, Q. et al. 1999; Ahmed. M. et al. 2006) show that only one third of the respondents had prior information on menstruation or nocturnal emissions. Studies on male sexuality and vulnerability to HIV/AIDS show that young men engage in homosexual activities like exploratory play, mutual masturbation, penetrative anal sex etc. (Gibney et al. 1999).

Masturbation or '*hasthomoythun*' ('hand massage' or 'hand shake') is mostly discussed as a practice among boys and men. It is rarely a mentionable topic of discussion for girls, and is often considered as 'unthinkable' or unheard of. While men easily described masturbation and body exploration as teenage sexual growth, not a single woman brought up this issue during discussions. While girls/women rarely admit engaging in masturbation, they do admit to knowing about such possibilities and hearsay stories of female masturbation practices (Nahar. P. 2010; Alam 2001).

Women narrated incidents of heterosexual encounters in childhood with close relatives and family friends as 'rape', sexual abuse, as being coercive and violent. The majority of women informants have had some experiences of sexual abuse/molestation (and in some cases, rape) at home. These experiences shaped their views of the female body as problematic, powerless and as a 'sexual object' during their formative years. Some explain their same-sex relations with women as a 'refuge' from a confined spatial gendered existence, or finding 'solace' (*shanti pawa*) or being simply experimental. But such differentiation made between heterosexual and homosexual childhood 'abuse' incidents are more problematic than the narratives seem to present. Men grew up learning that the male body is a site that cannot easily be sexually violated and it is men who have the bodily (and symbolic) power over the female body to

abuse. Perceptions of a vulnerable male body as prey to male sexual de-
sire is a difficult concept, and, therefore, I felt that my male respondents
struggled to term their childhood incidents as abuse or rape. Women re-
spondents' use of the term 'abuse' for heterosexual encounters arises
from the social understanding of the bodily purity of women that is seen
as being violated only through either penetrative sexual acts, and/or
through encounters that are not romantically framed.

The question of age is not as big an issue in all respondents' minds as
much as consent, romance and love are. Female respondents recall their
relentless efforts to regain 'purity' of the body and self-respect after het-
erosexual incidents of abuse by turning to religion, God and prayers.
Taking up religious discourses to shelter oneself, or withdrawing from
social life to protect oneself from social scrutiny, or to even become ex-
cessively studious, are ways in which women attempted to renegotiate
themselves into a space of respectability and acceptance. Homosociality,
as a social norm, offered a space for them to go through this process of
internal negotiation. Perceiving same-sex relations as a refuge or solace
is, in my understanding, an adult interpretation of restoring the body, its
dignity and worth by placing these incidents in direct opposition to the
violated body. This is more like a process of regaining agency and con-
trol over self and body and against vulnerability and victimhood, than a
simple equation between heterosexual and homosexual pleasure and
pain.

Sexual abuse and its impact on individuals is a very important and se-
rious issue, and unfortunately beyond the scope of this particular study.
From the life-histories and narratives in this research, it can be said that
multiple, different and conflicting sexualities are lived, practiced, negated
and controlled within the physical and social space of a family and
household in relation to gender and age. Different experiences of sexual-
ities that take place within these spaces leave a mark on individuals and
the way people learn who they are sexually. The youth is not constituted
as a homogenous category; and their sexual experiences and vulnerabili-
ties, as well as control over their sexuality, differ among groups depend-
ing on their socio-economic locations. In the context of India (and in
South Asia in general), very little is known regarding the cultural con-
struction of youth; 'how youth sexuality is culturally constructed and
what structural arrangements enhance or inhibit sexual experiences as
well as access to information among young people' (Abraham 2002:337).

The point I am trying to make here is not to essentialize sexuality, but to show how complex, problematic and conflicted sexuality is within the private spaces of Bengali middle class households. The perceptions of youth 'innocence' and imposed notions of 'asexuality' are problematic when put together with notions of practices of adult, gendered and heterosexual sexualities. The middle class tendency is to 'prolong' youth or childhood – believing it to be 'innocent' sexually – lies at the core of the household construction of young peoples' sexuality and ideals of masculinity and femininity. Child 'asexuality' versus 'sexualization' of household spaces and its actors brings out the paradoxical nature of a 'safe home' or household which is a site of unequal power, exploitation, and social control, and is highly sexualised, both physically and symbolically. Therefore, the lack of safety for children's sexuality is not only due to the lack of physical space, but also due to the opportunity for exploitation to the fact that the concept of 'safety' is obscured within family-household space. Abraham (2002:339) shows that in the urban metropolis of India, the limited space available in urban housing has forced some degree of relaxation within traditional restrictive social norms and sexual segregations, purity/pollution practices. While 'public' spaces are viewed as dangerous, thus access to them are made limited and monitored (for girls at least), incidences of sexual activity (both abuse and consensual) challenges these notions of 'asexual' pure/safe homes.

Finally, marriage remains the most important socially acceptable and valid passage to adulthood, especially for girls, irrespective of age. As expressed by Shehreen (33) and Tahera (50), when a younger female cousin or friend is married, she automatically gains rank over an older sibling in the family hierarchy, with the unsaid acknowledgement that being in a sexual-married relation has attributed her with knowledge, wisdom and seniority as a person.

> *The notion is that marriage turns people into 'adults', and more importantly, sexual beings. This is when the need for privacy arises and should be respected. When a person is married, he/she is seen as able to demand privacy for sexual acts and private interactions with their partner. They are now seen as capable of engaging in such relationships and more importantly, allowed to engage in them. … A single person is not accorded the same rights.* (Shehreen)

This means that a woman who does not take part in the marriage institution, no matter her age or level of economic independence, is denied

'adulthood' within the family because she has not learnt the 'responsibilities of '*shongshar*[7]' (household/domesticity). This makes her into a child-like entity for which the family should still take major decisions and have control over. Unmarried women's sexuality is seen as anything between hyper-sexualised to asexual. Bengali proverbs like *je ranna kore, she chul-o bandhe* (one who can cook, can tie her hair too – meaning a woman needs to multi-task) – basically means that to be a good Bengali woman one has to be a bashful housewife who can multi-task. A woman is either considered a *ghor-er lokkhi* (goddess of wealth, good omen/blessing at home) or a g*hor-er khunti* (pillar of the house) which is usually applicable to unmarried daughters, whose failure to secure a timely marriage is perceived to be turning her into a supporting pillar of the father's home. Marriage normativity is dominant and almost non-negotiable without bringing scorn, contempt and suspicion on the character of the woman in question. The popular proverbs not only reveal the cultural ways of perceiving and implementing gender discrimination, but also show how women are generally viewed within the private spaces of home, and how they are expected to operate within its patriarchal frameworks. It is, therefore, not surprizing that because of the lack independence, mobility and decision-making power, a large portion of women's perception of their own body, sexuality and appropriateness of their expressions are formed in the private spaces of home and extended families.

Conclusion

As Griffin (2009:4-5) argues, 'conceiving heterosexuality as some sort of "default sexual identity" creates a sense of cultural invisibility; thus, it is important that we start interrogating areas of sexuality that are considered "normative as much as we investigate the areas that are defined as non-normative'. What these narratives tell us is that different sexualities are played out in a variety of ways within the family-household physical, social and symbolic spaces. The family-household is at the same time a private space, culturally 'shielded' from the outside world, and still open to scrutiny. It is a social place, with influences of kin or relations. In that way, sexuality has to be performed at different levels for different audiences. The subjective self's own desires cannot be practiced without many negotiations and strategizing, depending on the actor's gender, class and age.

Notes

1 http://www.skyscrapercity.com/showthread.php?t=241806&page=6

2 Facebook

3 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Home_and_the_World

4 For example, '*lojja narir bhushon*' (bashfulness is the garment of a woman); *shongsar shukher hoe romonir gun-e, jodi ba gunban poti thake shone* (a home is an abode of happiness by the virtue of a woman, only if she has a good/qualified husband with her).

5 Specious – indicating the availability of personal rooms within the household.

6 Woman from the market place, a whore.

7 Shongshar or the Hindi/Sankskrit original word Sanser, also means the world, universe, the earth etc. Its use in an individual's life indicates domesticity and its realm that is tied with relationships, marriage and households.

5	'Living Sexualities' through Marriage Normativity: Non-normative Journeys through Different Phases of Life

This chapter takes forward my discussion on *private spaces and sexuality*, focusing on the lived experiences of non-heterosexual sexualities within family households, thus addressing the larger query of the thesis- heteronormativity. Rosenfeld (2009:634) rephrases this very query as: 'rather than ask how heteronormativity works in everyday lives, we might better ask how actors work heteronormativity into their everyday lives, and work to sustain its core precepts as features of their impression management , on the one hand, and of the social moral order, on the other'. Addressing the above question*,* the chapter is about 'how' the two core pillars of heteronormativity in Bangladeshi society: marriage normativity and homosociality, are used strategically through negotiations and agential compromises in order to create spaces to accommodate non-normative desires. In Section One, I explore ways in which individual awareness of sexuality takes place in a dominant homosocial culture and family environments, and in what ways marriage normativity is used for heterosexualization-normalization processes by both men and women. Also, I try to understand how marriage, as a norm, has come to play a decisive role in the lives of women from different generations and contexts. Respondents' age range from mid-twenties to early sixties and therefore, generational differences play significant role in the analysis. Section Two will look at the ways in which agency is applied in negotiating sexual subjectivity within the creation of non-normative family households. Section Three focuses on female sex worker lesbian's households and how they make use of their class, profession and sexual sub culture to establish alternative households.

Sexual Subjectivity versus Marriage Normativity

Women document their journey of discovering sexualities, and especially that of female homoerotic attraction, as an encounter with the self, and awareness of certain desires that are different from the dominant model of compulsory heterosexuality or marriage normativity. The socially pre-scribed *automatic* relation between sex, love and marriage is actively challenged by all of the respondents in this research in one way or another. Encountering the self, one's own sexual subjectivity that may stands in contradiction or opposition to the dominant model of desires and social class specific gender norms, creates dilemmas and conflicts in women's minds as they try to make sense out of their feelings, erotic desires and sexualities. Sexual expressions outside the box of heteronormativity is demonized and/or stigmatized. The struggle for acceptance as respecta-ble yet free sexual beings is slightly different between single heterosexual women and single non-heterosexual women. For non-heterosexual women as Sala and Benitiz (2009:828-29) explain '*the difficulties they faced when first considered the possibility of being homosexual, an idea that is even difficult to formulate owing to a lack of vocabulary. …here we see the effects of heterosexism in silencing non-normative identities, emotions and desires. There are no words to talk about it- and if we do not talk about it, it does not exist.*' But these difficulties are not the same for women even sharing the same class position or gen-eration.

Flora and Parveen are women over the age of 55. They grew up in smaller towns and in a different generation when marriage was not only a norm but a compulsion. Brought up in a rather conservative family in the southern part of Bangladesh, which was/is rather conservative and religious in character and surrounding (in the 1960s girls could rarely continue schooling after puberty in Flora's village), Flora proved to be a rebel. As per tradition of the house, Flora was sent to school once a year to get registration formalities and exams done, while the rest of the year she stayed home and studied. Even though Flora had restrictions regard-ing attending school on a regular basis, she recalls living a relatively free and 'tom-boyish' childhood supported by her father who liked dressing her in male attire. Puberty brought with it the inevitable rule of getting daughters married off. At the age of fourteen she was married to a man ten years older than her. After the wedding she moved in with her hus-band to another small town and continued with school. It was here that Flora had a love relation with another girl. A classmate '*knocked*'[1] and she

responded. Though there was nothing explicitly sexual between the two, it was still a very close, affectionate relationship that involved exchanging secret love letters, sharing snacks at break time, holding hands and simply enjoying each other's company. Her friend once kissed her. Flora 'liked it a lot, though there wasn't much beyond that!' as kissing was not part of her marital erotic activities.

At the age of 17, Flora left her husband (he opposed her higher education) without much hesitation, as she planned to continue attending college. She returned to her parents' home amidst scandals and much social humiliation. After many attempts for freedom (including running away from home), she was sent to Dhaka to her sister's, to continue with her studies. It was in Dhaka that Flora would eventually get an MA degree, mostly staying at girls' hostels. During her undergraduate days, she fell in love with a female friend and shared a committed relationship-they planned to live together after completing graduation. But Flora's girlfriend ended up marrying a man and leaving her feeling extremely betrayed: *'I carried the burden of that box full of utensils that I gathered along with her'*, for the next five years. She gave marriage another chance, after establishing herself financially and in a career. She was in her early thirties and was not very *'firm on sexual preference'*- Flora started thinking of marriage, mainly because, that was a family expectation and also because here same-sex desire did not deter her from marriage, which she still comprehended in terms of a strong heterosexual framework. She rationalised her decision by believing she was fundamentally attracted to a good personality and not to a specific gender. But her second marriage did not work out either – the couple found themselves to be incompatible. At that time, Flora came to Europe with a scholarship, and eventually they parted ways. During her stay in Europe, she became connected with people who were open about sexuality and introduced her to the global sexual rights movements and discourses of sexuality. She made friends with other women and they went together to seminar/conferences on sexuality, which helped her learn more about herself and sexuality in general. She eventually had a sexual relation with a female friend, *'a first proper sexual relation with any woman.'*

> *I never thought my interest in women as something exceptional, abnormal or extra ordinary. I have seen, understood this as a spontaneous and natural and right because it felt right to me. What other people were/are doing, who they are having sex with is never my concern. But I do what I think is right! All my life I felt that I was the only woman*

here, in this country, who was like this…I would look for others, but could not find….but again, I used to think, there must be other women like me, because I have had women who were attracted to me, I had girlfriends who loved me as well…where are these people, who are these women….where do I find them? How does one find them?

Flora retired after a long successful career. She now lives independently in her own apartment, allowing her the personal space and liberty to pursue the life style of her choice. She is close to her family. Part of her income and private space in her home is dedicated to supporting other women with same-sex desires.

Parveen, a contemporary of Flora, grew up in a rather liberal middle class family environment of the sixties and early seventies. She went to university and pursued sports from an early age. There was never any objection or resistance from her own family regarding her interest and participation in active sports. From a very early stage in life Parveen was attracted to girls. It was in her high school days that she fell in love with her friend, R, who, according to her, was a wonderful, beautiful feminine girl. They were always more than friends, but never fully sexual. The girls would stay close to each other, secretly holding each other close and putting their arms around each other's waistlines. The relation ended because of Parveen's over possessiveness of her lover and R's simultaneous interest in men and women. Her relation with R was also known to a group of colleagues. However, this close female 'friendship' was never questioned by them. R was accepted as a friend and when the pair sat separately/privately- people would just smile at them and leave them alone. This acceptance of this relationship by Parveen's professional colleagues and surroundings was remarkable. At university, Parveen continued having other girlfriends. Like many other Bangladeshi women in same-sex relationships, she also did not actually 'have sex' with any of her girlfriends during these relationships. For her, she can only have sex with a 'loved one'. Monogamous romantic love remains the basis of middle class sexual morality in Bangladesh, irrespective of sexual orientation.

Parveen was married off to a suitable man with a stable job and respectable family background. He was not someone she liked or chose, but someone with whom she was required to give consent to because of family obligations and expectations. Parveen says that even though the marriage lasted for nine years she was never happy or felt connected to her husband. But once she gave herself to marriage, there was a full

commitment on her part. The marriage suffered from its early stage, and all her efforts proved to be futile with time. They had a daughter at the later stage of their marriage in order to 'save' it. When asked whether the failure of the marriage had anything to do with her own sexual orientation, she said that sex was always a problem.. When her daughter was a few years old, Parveen received a fellowship for a year abroad. By that time she and her husband had already decided to separate and eventually divorce. Parveen now heads her own household, taking care of her daughter and mother. Her sexual-romantic life is well integrated within her household, something we will discuss in detail in the following section.

I think these women's journeys of sexualities mark very important points for our understanding of Bangladeshi heteronormativity, especially that of marriage. Homosociality, though a norm and a common cultural practice, does not necessarily offer shelter from compulsory marriage norms or submission to compulsory heterosexuality. Flora and Parveen mostly studied in all girls' educational institutions (like majority of Bangladeshi girls), living in girls' residential housings, but their relationships did not result or benefit from homosociality as such. The meaning of marriage, for these two women, seems to be something removed from sexuality, and not as disruptive or suppressive as one would expect it to be. Flora and Parveen have always preferred women and yearned to find an alternative set-up of household with the women they love, but never in terms of marriage. Marital arrangements prove to be oppressive and restrictive because of personality clashes and restrictions on personal aspirations and passions whether education or sports, rather than a suppression of sexuality itself. Marriage, therefore, is a necessary social arrangement that needed to be performed at different ages for different reasons, whereas individual sexual subjectivity seems to be able to develop separately.

The quest for *others* like the self, to look for a reference point of normalcy or community, is common, and this quest is filled with dilemmas that derive from social construction and learning of what ought to be *normal* desire, i.e. heterosexual. Women get conflicted between whether sexual orientation is essentialist in nature or it is a later-life construction stemming out of other experiences, especially from sexual violence or other negative experiences. It is not uncommon in women with same-sex desire to believe that sexual orientation can be compromised, and re-

oriented, negotiated and if given opportunities, they can be heterosexual-ised. Much of the dilemma and conflict comes from the fact that being in a very restrictive heterosexual and male dominated culture and especially because of overarching presence of religion, there is no point of reference in discourses or in practices that women can refer to as a possibility for having a non-heterosexual identity as such. Because of strict marriage-normativity, women, whatever might be their sexual desires and orientations, tend to give in to marriage and give heterosexuality a chance. Flora and Parveen both narrate difficulties in comprehending and defining their desires for the same sex in an acceptable way to themselves first, and then to their families. These are examples of women discovering their sexual desires and subsequently facing dilemmas and internal conflicts regarding sexuality while going through the heterosexualization process from society.

With changes in women's conditions, especially in education and employment opportunities since the 80s and more so in the 90s, women from a younger generation, presumably, have a better chance of resisting marriage as a norm. There might be a slight delay in the age of marriage for girls' amongst urban middle class families, but the expectation for women to marry and the gender roles associated with marriage and femininity has not changed much. Women's empowerment, as translated through education, employment, mobility and decision-making power, is not the same even within the same age group. For example, both Mukta (32) and Bani (35) are middle class non-heterosexual women in their 30s, but they are different in terms of level of education, profession, religion, marital status, language efficiency and location. These differences play very influential roles in their ability to assert their sexual desires and identities. Mukta is a single (divorced) woman from a small conservative district of Bangladesh. She is a college dropout and lives with her religious conservative family. She has been in love with her friend's elder sister- a married woman (who will be referred to as B) – for over twelve years now. She is literally described as the 'shadow' of B, who tells everyone that Mukta is like her younger sister and that she is a little '*Pagol* or crazy'. Mukta is very well accepted and integrated within B's family, which includes a husband and two grown up children. They all see it as a 'deep friendship' between two women. Mukta's family, though, finds the relationship as obsessive, abnormal and disturbing. I think they would have been more accepting of this homosocial relation if Mukta was also mar-

ried with children and thus conforming to socially expected gender roles, similar to how B has established her position within family and society. The difference in marital status between the two *unequal friends* is what troubles everyone. Mukta's family had forced her into a marriage, which ended bitterly within a month and half's time, as she couldn't 'bear to live with an ordinary man or to live anywhere without seeing B every day. Being from an orthodox religious family and brought up in a religious atmosphere, Mukta mainly had female friends and companions while growing up, and her socialization was restricted to close family and friends. She has been exposed to heterosexual pornography (shared with other girlfriends who were getting married at an early age and thus becoming legitimate sexual beings). Mukta recognises herself as an extremely sexual being, but it is primarily her love for B that Mukta finds irresistible. Mukta admits being sexually attracted to B with her *'shorir jwole jae'* (body burns in desire)'. Her desire is not reciprocated, but she doesn't give up. Mukta says that she goes for quick walks, or engage with rigorous household chores or take a cold bath when her body gets 'too sexy' to control. But the sexual relation between the two women is not as simple as it appears to be. Mukta doesn`t know how two women can actually have a sexual relation, but she feels that the desire in her body for B can find a way:

> *I am a very sexy woman, I have a lot of sexual desire, and I know it about me. I want to have sex and I want to satisfy my sexual needs…but I love this `wrong` person- a woman and I don't know how two women can have sex with each other. I know that I want B and I want to have sex with her. I sometimes joke with B that, if I were a man, I would have raped her!*

There is a strange sexual relation between the two as B's husband is often out of town for business tours and then Mukta is welcome to sleep-over at B's house to accompany her (a common practice in Bengali homosocial culture, especially amongst women). Mukta tells me that they share a common bed, with a big side pillow separating the two as B feels Mukta's sexual intentions are too strong. Mukta's sexual craving for B is somewhat satiated by B allowing her to 'smell the fragrant hair' every night. B considers anything more physical between the two women as *sinful* and *unnatural.*

Mukta's understanding of her sexuality is framed by contradictions. Since B terms Mukta's desires as 'unnatural', Mukta also suffers from

doubts, making her wonder, *'I know I am not a sinner, but am I abnormal?'* She sees herself as 'unnatural', and since her formal Bengali language skills are limited and she has very limited knowledge of English, she does not know where to look for information on her 'type' of desire, or how to articulate it. Mukta tries to 'heterosexualize' herself by talking to men over the phone or having clandestine meetings ('bike rides'), but she feels that most men want only a sexual relation with her because she is a divorced woman. Mukta admits that the motive behind such heterosexualization process is also to make B jealous. B interestingly keeps a tight check on Mukta's phone calls and whereabouts. B separately told me that she is vigilant with Mukta because she does not want men to take advantage of her 'craziness' and that Mukta should only socialise with the man that who promises marriage. Mukta on the other hand has no intention of re-marrying but hopes that one day B's husband will die and her children will leave – making B a lonely woman, solely dependent on her for love, care and companionship. Mukta understands the futility of her desire for a woman in terms of having no future of marriage, children or social acceptance. Even though she cannot term or articulate her sexual orientation or identity, she is nevertheless, aware of the fact that this same-sex desire is making her a social outcast, a woman who is condemned and often pitied for crossing thirty as a single childless individual:

> *I sometimes, contemplate on committing suicide- but what is the use of such death…am I a loser…when people ask me, 'what is your relation with B?'; I answer, 'I love her', and everyone laughs at me! I have never met or even heard of any other woman, who loves another woman, who feels for a woman like I do for B!*

What stands out from Mukta's story is not actually her, but the woman she loves. B, who (according to my understanding, observation and discussions with both) appears to be invested in this long term relationship for more than the reasons of *friendship* despite the parameters she has put into place. She strikes a very fine balance between her role as wife, mother and close friend to Mukta in an overlapping fashion that does not interrupt her social-familial positions. For B, her second marriage to a well-established businessman is more than a norm, it has been her way of re-establishing herself back in society and recovering a loss of respectability when at an early age she eloped with her lover, got married-had children-and divorced and returned to parents' house. B under-

standably has more at stake in her life than Mukta. Unlike Mukta, B is an older, educated, ambitious entrepreneur and social-political activist. She pragmatically handles her relation with Mukta so not to disturb the social security, respect and benefit that heteronormativity ensures her through marriage, family and motherhood. Mukta, on the other hand is more emotionally vulnerable as she perceives herself (in tune with perceptions of her immediate social surroundings) losing out on marriage, mother-hood, and her own family life, making her appear an emotionally unbal-anced, lonely and dependent woman.

Bani on the other hand, is a highly educated woman, originally from one of the major metropolises in Bangladesh, currently living[2] in Dhaka (away from her parental home). Bani has a respectable job in the field of academia, which gives her the financial freedom to create her own com-fort and safety zone. Within her own space she practices the life style of her choice while not disturbing the normative surface of society. To make a pocket of life where one can bend rules through manipulations of norms is possible because of Bani's strong educational qualifications and her aspiration of doing further higher studies. Bani's language skills (both in Bangla and in English) and ability to articulate her desires help her to deconstruct, analyse and make individual interpretations of (het-ero) norms and use them for her own advantage. Her intellectual ability helps her negotiate efficiently within her immediate surroundings. Be-cause of her social mobility and networks, Bani is more able to find oth-er women with similar sexual orientations, allowing her to have an active social-sexual life. Unlike Mukta, she is not traumatised, confused or iso-lated in her desires, orientation or identity as woman-loving-women. On her sexual orientation, same-sex attraction and how she asserts it within the heteronormative societal frameworks, Bani narrates:

> *The first time I was attracted to any woman, was my English teacher at school, I would dream of her frequently, and when she left the school, I was in pain. But I never found my attraction to women as something strange or weird. `Love` was, and has always been a concept of inspiration. For a brief period in life, during high school days, I did worry about not getting love offers from boys, but when I started getting attention from boys, it was very clear to me that my attraction to boys was limited to flirting, and temporary- it was only women, for who I had `heart-felt `love. I do not feel that I struggled hard to feel like a straight person. My passion was consistently always for women. I fell in love with-out it being returned for quite a good number of times. I used to be quite occupied with all its pain and pleasure of such love!*

Bani has had long-term relationships and lived together with her partners in Dhaka. The contrasting stories offered by Mukta and Bani mark the differences that education, income and location have on women's ability to assert life choices including sexuality. Since Bani and Mukta are still within the age of marriage and the possibility of motherhood, negotiation with their family regarding 'singlehood' is not easy. Unlike non-heterosexual women of marriageable ages, single heterosexual women, perhaps, face much more socially problematic contexts for expressing their sexuality, mainly because they tend to defy two social norms: marriage normativity and homosociality. The struggle here is not a sexually diverse identity, but rather a desire to express oneself as a sexual being for which homosociality has no use. The risk for single heterosexual women is, therefore, a damaged image of the socially revered bodily purity, character and reputation that can be irreparably tarnished.

Lady Bug (25) recalls her confusion regarding understanding the relation between sex, love and marriage. In her school boys and girls started having sex around the age of 15/16 and sex was tied to romantic notions of love but not necessarily translated into the notion of marriage. Lady Bug grew up in urban Dhaka in the Mid 90s. The difference between most other women respondents who grew up in the 70s or 80s middle class atmosphere was the end of the otherwise expected 'automatic' relation between sex and marriage as a result of a new generation of young people whose lives were directly influenced by globalised culture codes. Lady Bug was not 'concerned' about marriage but she wanted to have a boyfriend and a sexual relationship that would be expressed outside compulsory legal boundaries. The notion of romance was stronger than that of marriage and Lady Bug laughingly admits that '*..in reality I had to imagine someone else while having sex for the first time*'. As she grew older and spent few years abroad, her sense of an independent self, thoughts and confidence grew to a level where she found herself at odds with the norms of Bangladesh when she returned. Lady Bug is an activist, writer and economically capable of taking care of herself, but when in Dhaka, she is socially bound to live with her parents, which puts certain boundaries on her mobility and social-sexual life. '*When in Bangladesh, I have to forget that sexual pleasure is an entitlement*'.

Cultural norms dictate that daughters remain under parental supervision and control and a member of the parental household until they marry and start their own '*shongshar*'. With an increasing number of women

opting for higher education, professional careers and an inclination towards choosing their own life partners, there is a new singles women phenomenon in urban places like Dhaka. However, setting one's own place or 'single woman's *shongshar*' continues to be highly challenging socially, if not impossible. 'Consider the social and economic consequences for those who do not participate in these arrangements (of heteronormative organizations, institutions and order)… 'all people are required to situate themselves in relation to marriage or heterosexuality, including those regardless or sexual (or asexual) affiliation do not consider themselves 'single', heterosexual or who do not participate in normative heterosexuality and its structure' (Ingraham 2002:76)

Kamrun (33) illustrates her frustration with a dead-end negotiation for a personal space as a single woman, which she sees as deeply tied to compulsory marriage norms:

I did indeed want to have a place of my own and I discovered two odd things: a) people consider you to have loose morals if you want to live on your own; b) no one wants to rent out to a single woman. Even in university (where I teach), I can't apply for a flat unless I have a hubby.

Hamida (35) a single mother with a child had to move back into her parents' house after her divorce.

When I got divorced from my husband there was no question about where I was going to live – back at my parents' very small house. My son was three years old when I got divorced and I needed to work full-time to earn for myself, for my son and for my stay-at-home mother. But that meant that I would be sacrificing my privacy completely. My son is five-and-a-half now and things haven't changed. There was the physical loss of privacy. My son and I share a cupboard, which means no keeping of anything 'illicit' things like condoms or alcohol or even a photo of my boyfriend. And there was the loss of space to be myself. My mother on a regular basis asks me what I'm going to do with my life that I needed to be with someone and late nights on weekends were unacceptable. What would the neighbours think I was up to? There was only one thing a divorced woman could possibly be doing at midnight on a Friday night! So even at the age 32, I have to lie and pretend to have a somewhat normal social life.

Being a single woman is very difficult, but being divorced and a single mother is even more difficult. People are always looking for the husband or a boyfriend. It is just impossible for many people to comprehend how and why a woman would want to not be with someone. People are very invasive and very unashamed about not giving people personal space. For me, on the one hand there is a very demanding job, a very demanding son and

at the end of the day the disappointment of my parents at living a life that they don't understand or appreciate. Taking breaks and getting away from Dhaka, whether it's for work or pleasure, is very refreshing.

Ishika (32) faces the dilemma between having a personal life and obligations to maintain a socially acceptable image of the self. Anything that does not conform to the norm is seen as either deviance or an alternative. Ishika very eloquently outlines the challenges of marriage normativity and homosociality for single heterosexual women:

As an almost 32 years-old single woman living in Dhaka, leading my "alternative" lifestyle is not easy. I feel that right off the bat many factors are stacked up against me. Three factors in particular skew everyone's perceptions of me even before I open my mouth: my gender, my age and my marital status. This lethal combination elicits a gamut of expressions and responses but rarely are they positive. They range from mild surprise to outright shock tinged with suspicion to general confusion about how to think of me from that moment on. As a result, socializing of any sort, whether with men or women, draw attention. The reactions towards a single woman socializing with any man are the usual, suspicious, scandalous and in some situations disgust. With women too I attract attention mostly because I just happen to know quite a few single 30-plus years-old women. When we spend time together, our single, 'aged' status seems to be magnified into a giant force of 'being fringe', and 'out there' leading to many to shake their heads at our lack of shame for being who we are.

These prejudices against my alternative lifestyle ironically prohibit my chances of being able to lead a 'normal' lifestyle. In order to lead a normal life I would need to be married to a man and have children. Yet my status prevents me from socializing with men freely. And here socially can mean anything from having sex to having a cup of coffee. If I am prevented from interacting with men and being allowed to know them, I don't know how I can leave my alternative lifestyle and begin to 'normalize'. I have never been someone who socializes online so I cannot comment on that aspect of socialization. But since I am not social virtually and given the problems of socializing in public that I outlined above, I do feel that there isn't much space for me as a single woman to socialize anywhere. For now I keep myself focused on friends and my family and job but the socializing aspect of my life is largely empty. Part of that is definitely my fault as I am quite an introvert. But those labels of being single and a woman are put on me whether I ever speak or not. So I believe that, at least for me, I don't think there is a space to socialize in public, at least not without drawing unwanted attention.

How then does one survive in such confinements of normativity? Shehreen explains:

Single men and women therefore have to carve out private spaces outside the home. This could mean in time spent at college or university, the workplace and even on the internet. However, the threat of being seen by relatives or family friends while engaging in behavior that would not be approved of is ever-present. In recent years, more and single people of both genders go abroad, ostensibly for studies, but often to assert independence and engage in a more private lifestyle than is available at home.

Seven out of my ten single heterosexual (and one homosexual woman) respondents have left the country to pursue long-term higher educational studies. Is this only dedication to knowledge? I assume not, rather these are socially granted respectable escapes that allows these women 'breathing spaces', opportunities to explore the self and the experience of independence, even for a short while. Most women know that they will eventually have to return to their parental homes if they decide to remain single, but keeping escapes like this as an in between breather is just another pragmatic strategy used to experience the self. *Getting away or escapes* are therefore crucial to these women's lives in terms of realizing their sexual selves. It does not mean that sex does not happen in women's lives, rather it means that women have to resort to strategies of finding time, opportunities and discreet spaces that can be used for erotic-romantic endeavours. But as women grow older, *sneaking out* or being on the lookout for such opportunities does not appeal to their sense of self-worth as often women feel like teenagers or juveniles who have very little control over their lives and desires. Women do not voice their frustration over restrictive sexual expression because sex is unimportant, but rather prioritize their struggle to be accepted as a respectable member of society where one has basic rights and entitlements without having the fear of being judged, condemned or punished. Modern middle class educated, economically independent, easily mobile women try to assert what they grow to believe as their right. And yet they struggle to bend norms as much as possible in order to accommodate desire, responsibilities, honour and family all in one within the layered space of the household.

In what ways then, do non-normative women (and men) use agency to work around social norms like marriage and individual erotic desires within the space of household?

Notes

[1] The English word 'knock' is used often by women to indicate them being approached by other women. Here 'knock' connotes 'knocking on a window or door', to allow one in.

[2] Currently refers to 2009-10 when she was interviewed, now Bani is studying abroad.

6 Non-Normative Households: Scopes of Agency

Households, though often considered as a site of gender discrimination and sexual oppression, can be a space that offers scopes for choices and agency through strategic negotiations. It accommodates ambiguity through which conflicting identities and various performances can find pockets for sexual diversity. 'Queer' versus 'straight' is not a simple or straight-forward equation in Bangladeshi middle class families when norms like homosociality or oppressive family-households provide opportunities for agency and experimentation. In this section I will draw comparisons between non-normative men and women in order to see if there are gendered differences in the ways individuals make use of norms and exercise agency within the households to his/her advantage.

Section 1: Agency through Gender and Generational Privileges

In this section I will discuss different ways in which gender and age are used by non-normative men and women to negotiate with norms in personal lives.

Non-Heterosexual Women's Negotiation with Norms

As women grow older and surpass the socially perceived 'reproductive age', there is a gradual sense of freedom and independence that can be achieved. In earlier times, the single (unmarried or widowed) aunt in the house would dedicate her life, labour and time to the service of the family, thus earning her a valuable space within the household (examples of such character portrayal is in abundance in Bengali literature). Today, women with considerable income and ability to be self-sufficient earn a special place within families in terms of decision making power, express-

ing opinions and living life with relative independence. Flora, Parveen, Nahar are examples of such non-heterosexual women. They are all over the age of fifty, have diverse sexual orientations and have been able to successfully combine age, class and income in order to negotiate life more powerfully than their younger counterparts.

Shawyambar[1]

Suddenly I meet with Shajuli,
We used to be neighbours – living next door to each other,
Classmate–friends, for many years –
We were closer than friends would be – a closeness that
took us to the world of dreams.
Under the dark shadows of trees behind the pond,
We would sit together – a little closer than usual.
Morning would become noon, and noon would fall into sunset-
But words of love never ended.
Hand in hand, we promised – we won't marry,
Get an MA degree, find a job and live together, happily ever after!
…
As per the norms of society, we were separated –
With hearts full of sadness.
Father–brothers decided on my future – marrying me off before I could even finish school;
Married to an engineer – they were proud.
Such a son-in-law, it was indeed a matter of luck!
My heart doesn't settle
In this imposed life, but I carry on through years-
In search of security.
….
Suddenly I meet with Shajuli,
At the crossroad of New Market.
Shajuli embraces me…and embraces me for long;
As long as reality allows;
And then she talks non-stop.
Shajuli hasn't married,
After an MA she did find a job,
But subordination didn't suit freedom-loving Shajuli.
Resigning from it, she started her own business of a fast-food cafe,

And a nursery in the backyard.
Shajuli tells me,
'very profitable business, but a lot of hard work-
I have to look after everything myself'!
I keep on staring at Shajuli,
I stare at her strong stature,
At the confidence and satisfaction glowing on her.
The dependent parasitical existence of me keeps on staring at Shajuli.
Finally I whisper,
'I want to live Shajuli –
Just for once, my dear,
Hold these hands'.

(Written by informant Flora, under the pseudonym of Mrittika, published 1998, First edition of *Shawprova,* December 1998)

The poem, besides its theme of same-sex desire in the form of romantic love, brings out several important elements in women's capacity for negotiating heteronormativity: education, income and age. These elements are not exclusively applicable to women with same sex desires, but also apply to single heterosexual women, though the combination of elements and dynamics of negotiation may differ between the two groups. If heterosexual marriage normativity is a common barrier in both group's assertion to live a life of choice, homosociality, on the other hand, offers a strategic avenue only for homosexual women, and not to the other. If we understand the significance of marriage normativity for women is mainly to provide economic security, social respectability in terms of having a legally sanctioned male guardian, and to control and contain female sexuality within a monogamous heterosexual relation- then it clearly has a different meaning and implication for women who can provide for themselves and don't need to enter a matrimonial contract for financial security or social protection. They then are challenging the main purposes of marriage as an institution. In this way, women resisting or refusing to enter marriage, something that is otherwise seen as a (religious) 'duty' or a site for fulfilling 'femininity' through conjugal partnership and motherhood is an (in) voluntarily reframing of the dominant concept of gender, femininity and female sexuality, by separating sex and marriage and by refusing the notion of compulsory motherhood.

In other words, there is a slow, subtle and inevitable change in what is understood as 'sexuality' within the middle class context in contemporary Bangladesh. If the middle class continues to view values, morality and respectability as their primary markers of class identity, which is set in the image of an ideal heterosexual family unit with prescribed gendered roles for its member, then the educated, mobile and economically powerful 'new women' pose as a considerable threat. But is education and earning capacity strong enough to enable middle class women to assert their independence including sexual freedom? Are these the new bargaining chips available to women to use to negotiate some degrees of independence? Do these play equally powerful roles in the lives of homosexual and heterosexual women of all ages and locations? And what meanings does intersectionality of age, education and income bring to the understanding of the middle class itself? In other words, in what ways and how far can female sexual subjectivity exercise agency within its class?

Parveen is economically independent. She runs her own household that goes beyond her immediate family and includes financial support and mentoring to young non-heterosexual women who are in need of help. Parveen came 'out' to her mother and daughter and an after initial stage of difficulties, she has gradually been able to establish an 'arrangement' of family-household suitable to her socio-sexual life which from the outside might look like any other female headed unit, but internally restructured to accommodate her 'couple' relationship with a female lover. Her female partner is an integral part of her household, while also maintaining her own two separate p family-households (one in Dhaka, which she shares with her husband and in laws, and the other one abroad where her children live). Parveen told me that after a year of 'coming out' to her mother and daughter (which she refers to as 'family') everything seems to have fallen into a peaceful place; everyone is at ease with each other and there exists a level of acceptance, respect and love.

What seems to have worked in Parveen's favour is her socio-economic position within the larger society in combination with her evolving role as a responsible, capable head of a family who maintains the requisite performances of femininity. This performativity of gender, (true for most of the non-heterosexual women respondents) is not through traditional representations of 'femininity' in terms of dress and accessories (Saree, or long hair etc.), because most have androgynous

look (with short hair, a cross-over dressing style with pants and tunics with scarves) – but through their playing of feminine roles. Parveen heads the household, holds a senior official position, and thus occupies a highly respected role of 'mother figure'. Sexuality, which is an integral and definite aspect of gender identity, is played down or rather played in accordance with social expectations. Since she is divorced and not seen intimately or romantically with men, her sexuality is probably assumed to be non-existent. As socially expected from un-married women, she is probably considered to be celibate. It is because of cultural notions of femininity and (the non-appearance of) sexuality within the heteronormative system that even after almost thirty years of 'friendship' with her female partner/s, Parveen's mother and daughter apparently did not raise any questions over her sexuality. Of course, I raise doubt and debate about this 'non-suspicion', given the fact that Parveen has established such a strong power position in her family hierarchy that challenging her decisions or life style would not be as easy as it was even a decade or two ago. In fact, life histories of women indicate how much control families (as the operative site of societal norms) have over women when they are relatively young. Interestingly, the same controlling families can be turned into allies with time, once adult women gain certain social capitals similar to men (and more). Flora attributes her successful experience of establishing a live-in relation with women and the possibility of setting up a 'respectable-functional' household with a same-sex partner in Dhaka, to her economic independence, a successful career, and to her 'personality'. Her family and building neighbours accepted her same-sex live-in relation probably because there is a sign posted on her door that says, 'Female same-sex partnership'. Of course, the sign is open to interpretation. Most people might just read it as female friendship/sisterhood/feminist bonding etc., but assuming people's perceptions so simplistically would be an error. That is, just because questions or objections are not raised regarding Flora's non-normative life choice does not mean that people are unaware or naïve. Rather, it is also possible that this is an indication of tolerance crossing the boundary of acceptability.

'Non-interference' may also be a silent form of support or in the least, acceptance of non-normative non-heterosexual lifestyles – so long as they do not interfere with the lives of others. For example, a landlady told me a story of a lesbian couple tenant she once had, and how the

couple could live a rather peaceful life in spite of occasional objections from another tenant (who perceived the co-habitation of two women as sinful and anti-social). Because the landlady supported the women's right to live their personal lives of their choosing, objections were mitigated if not almost entirely prevented. Conversely, I learned about another story where the couple experienced a tragic ending when one of them died of some ailment, and the other later committed suicide. Neither of the women had any family come forward to claim their bodies or give them a burial. The extreme isolation and exclusion these women experienced from their immediate family no doubt impacted their experience together and the supports available to the surviving woman.

Women in or interested in same-sex relations move through their sexual lives, or rather desires (as often the practice of desired sexual act either doesn't take place ever, or for years, or needs to be suppressed for giving other gender roles a priority in life), in different ways than men do in similar situations. This is not to suggest a popular essentialist 'natural' difference between the genders, but rather, recognizes the social construction and expectations of roles and their performances within the heteronormative structures of sex, sexualities and genders. It often took women of this study years to recognize and come to terms with their sexual desires, and after years of negotiations with the self and loved ones some of them could find ways of dealing of plural manifestations of sexualities. These pluralities are often hidden and/or suppressed under the compulsory heterosexual roles, and caught between social roles and women's personal sexual desires. These roles are of extreme importance to many. Being a mother, a dutiful daughter and sister; and keeping an eye on the family honour, reputation and respectability. Thus women's conduct, and social perception thereof, are priorities for women. Women and men have plural lives with multiple identities. But whereas men find it relatively easier to negotiate their way through duty and desires- women, on the other hand, have a life-long struggle coming to terms with asserting erotic desires, let alone living them. It took informants like Flora, Parveen and Nahar almost forty years to be able to live a life with 'balance' between the gender roles and duties. Economic independence and new-found respectability within the family structure helped them to carve out personal space and a living arrangement and household they can they can call their own. Within these private spaces, they have been

able to live and maintain the same-sex relations they have desired all their lives.

Men Negotiating Normativity: Gender Privileges of Masculinity

Non-heterosexual men's negotiation with marriage normativity is bargained differently, no doubt as a result of their advantaged position as 'son'. Within the family household, the status of 'son' is granted a considerable amount of power. If women are expected to marry as a guarantee for social security, men face marriage compulsion to continue the family lineage. Women face the pressure to marry at an early age (as women have a 'shelf-life' in marriage market while men are eligible till the very end)[2]; in contrast, men are put under pressure of gender role performativity (of son, father, head of household, provider etc.) as they grow older. Men's sexual identities remain socially licensed and are performed at various levels as long as the normative family structure remains intact. Mohammad (35), married with a child, is a good example of how conflicting sexualities can co-exist rather smoothly making usual categorization of sexual identities problematic and ambiguous. When asked if he had a sexual identity or not, Mohammad answered: '*I will call myself gay…but I have always wanted to be married, to have this big grand wedding, children, and my own 'shongshar'*'.

By 'marriage' Mohammad meant heterosexual marriage, but at the same time he would not identify himself as bi-sexual. His initial struggle with his non-normative sexuality was mainly religious as he comes from a rather conservative practicing Muslim family. He is still a practicing Muslim, but he has come to terms with that internal struggle. He is attracted to men primarily, though he says: '*I think I am just too sexual…I just like having sex!*' Mohammad identifies two interpretations of sexualities for himself: the first one is erotic desire oriented, with 'sex' or dominant sexual orientation at the centre of 'sexuality'. This is 'living sexuality' mainly for erotic desires, which might now have the notion of romance tied to it. The second interpretation is gender role centred, modelled after heterosexual dynamics, where sex is connected to and set within the marriage, lineage and household. He keeps the two interpretations separate in their manifestations and practices in terms of time and space.

As a single man, Mohammad was free to use homosociality within the family household site, where (his sexual behaviour/activities) it was neither questioned nor disturbed. Homosociality, a norm in his house and

much appreciated by a young gay Mohammad, gave him ample opportunities to explore men sexually, especially with cousins with whom he even now has occasional sexual relations (in secrecy). Gender-bender behaviour for young children is not uncommon in Bangladesh where children are allowed or even encouraged to cross-dress. Bengali culture does not have color-coding of blue-pink for gender (only a very recent phenomenon amongst urban people who have learnt gender colour coding from the media). Mohammad was also allowed to dress-up as a girl until early puberty. His 'effeminate' ways of behaviour or body language were lightly teased, but never to the point of causing trauma. He himself 'corrected' his gestures and gradually 'masculinised' himself to the extent that he later worked as a model in electronic and print media. His soft yet manly look is admired by family and friends and established him as a 'desirable man'. Being a son, he enjoys immense liberty in his mobility and life-style, as long as he is regular in his attention to family duties, including marriage and procreation.

Once married, Mohammad separated the sites of his two sexualities, giving the second interpretation a priority, thus performing heterosexual acts at home and non-heterosexual acts outside of the home. Mohammad feels that he can balance his life and its responsibilities along with his own sexual orientations in a rather pleasant way. His love for his wife and child is genuine and his dream of a '*shongshar*' is fulfilled even though he had to give up his other dream of being with his long-term male lover for a heterosexual marriage. Mohammad 'came out' to his family (except for his father) expressing his desire to marry his male lover. It was his male lover who ultimately refused to marry him realizing the complexity of the given situation and Mohammad's family's disappointment over his sexuality. Interestingly, Mohammad's allies at home are mainly female, and he, like other gay men from this research; find the clash between father-son almost impossible to resolve when it comes to sexuality. Mothers, across both genders, remain the most tolerant, accepting and protective of their children's non-normativities, whereas fathers pose a long-standing opposition to anything that challenges normative values and practices. Therefore, in the end, Mohammad finds 'heterosexualization' of his family life to be a beneficiary performance and a legitimate choice, which helps him have regular clandestine homosexual affairs. It is not the most perfect or desirable situation, but it is also not seen as major problem or a source of sadness for Mohammad. His wife came to

know about his sexual orientation soon after their marriage, but Mohammad tells me that the marriage works well enough for both of them for variety of reasons. So they choose to ignore his diverse sexuality in their household conversations.[3]

Mohammad's narrative indicates two pertinent issues: a) heterosexuality is not just about being straight in sexual practice terms; and b) the household holds a very powerful gender hierarchy where masculinity is given time and space to be 'reconstructed' for social performance, with the hope that the process of this 'reconstruction' will 'successfully' lead to sexually performative 'heterosexuality' within marriage and procreation. In other words, households do offer space for 'queer minds' especially those of men, as long as prescribed form of 'straightness' continue to be performed.

Different from Mohammad are the gay couples who live together in partially independent units that only merge with the broader family/parental households at convenience. Martin (43) and Kabi (25) are one such couple. Martin is a very successful professional and a businessman who lives with his mother in their house. His partner Kabi has been living with him (and his mother) for more than two years. Kabi is from a different town and came to Dhaka for higher education and is now employed. To his family, living with another man of a particular age is not problematic because it is a common practice for men to find lodging with senior friends in new cities. In fact, this arrangement is welcomed because then he is seen to be in a 'family' environment, thus assuming some degree of protective supervision.

As for Martin, who defines his sexuality as 'bi-sexual but mostly gay', he once 'surrendered' to heteronormativity by getting married to a girl of his parents' choice. The marriage did not work out for various reasons and they eventually ended up in a divorce. Martin's choice of bringing a male lover to his house and making him part of the household (which is otherwise rather traditional and religious in character) has been possible for a number of reasons. Firstly, his age and social status has reached to a point where he can afford to ignore most of the norms. Because of his mother's presence in the house he is not questioned by outsiders directly about his relationship with Kabi. Even though most people understand the sexual dimension of the relationship, they prefer to overlook it in order to maintain social decorum regarding male sexuality and the social sanctioning of male sexual liberty. Secondly, the social acceptance of

homosociality among men and the tradition of patron-ing younger men give him ample scope within the private spaces of his household to bring desire and practice together; and to negotiate with social acceptability and tolerance towards homosexuality. Thirdly, his heterosexual marriage is life-long proof of his 'heterosexualized masculinity'. In fact, he is considered one of the most 'eligible' bachelors in town because the greater society still considers him a heterosexual man. Finally, the size and arrangement of his home/household leaves enough space for him to have a private life with Kabi or other male friends. The relatively independent unit of respective households of mother and son with designated domestic helps had an 'unstated' tolerance in the initial stage. But with time the two units merged into one as Martin's mother bonded with his lover and an 'unstated' acceptance took place regarding this new arrangement of family.

The interplay of gender, age and relation in this arrangement is crucial. Martin's mother's ailing health and widowhood has left her vulnerable physically and emotionally. Martin is an only child and a son and therefore there is a certain level of co-dependence between the two as well as social expectation. In this case, feminine vulnerability related to a widowed 'mother-on-her-own' creates a practical and emotional supported by dominant notions of responsible masculinity. And this relational normativity and understanding of familial duties privileges Martin in bending sexual norms, creating spaces and negotiating a life-choice.

The second male couple Huda (28) and Ashfaq (50) are a step ahead in non-heterosexual performativity as both are relatively 'open' about their gay sexual identities. Ashfaq has been openly gay for a very long time, whereas Huda recently 'came out' to his parents. They have their own home and live a very socially open gay life. The couple lived in Ashfaq's parental home, with Ashfaq's father – but always kept a separate apartment for their 'private' social space. They have moved in there permanently, as Ashfaq's sibling has taken the responsibility of his parental home. Both men move effortlessly between the two households. This couple is an exceptional case in the context of Bangladesh because neither of the men has performed heterosexual duties of marriage or procreation. But, their male gender as well as economic independence has given them the freedom to navigate social norms that are in contrast to their desires and lifestyle. Huda's parental family lives in a different district and his conjugal life never overlaps with parental-family household

space, which allows the family to keep up a stable heteronormative image to the society.

This household is a prime example of how non-normative sexualities can exist without conflict and within the space of the family-household, slowly erasing the heterosexualization process. It also challenges a common perception of family and households as sites of pure oppression and opposition for non-normativity. Moreover, those are a certain ironical usefulness in the very social perceptions of households as private spaces that serve non-normativity. For example, in Martin's case it shields him from public scrutiny, condemnation and judgment as long as the primary base of hetero-gender is kept intact through the necessary performances. What becomes evident from these experiences is that masculinity, homosexual experiences and the dynamics of gender within the family-household unit are often about the relationship between homosexuality and hegemonic heterosexual masculinities. Homosexuality and hegemonic heterosexual masculinities may be negotiated through a single relational dynamic – often only symbolic – between homosexual and heterosexual men, and the 'relational character of gender' (Connell 1992). Connell (1992) also makes an observation that confirms my argument; homosexual men's life-styles and identity are in relation to heteronormativity and gender orders within the middle class society in Bangladesh. 'Gay men may be generally oppressed but they are not definitely excluded from masculinity. Rather they face structurally-induced conflicts about masculinity – conflicts between their sexuality and their social presence as men, about meaning of their choice of sexual object, and in their construction of relationships with women and heterosexual men' (1992:737). She (ibid) observed the social process of 'reconstruction of masculinities' which is not a 'socialization into a stigmatised identity' but rather 'an agentic, multi-level collective process'. The life stories of men from my research showed such agentic processes linked to various physical, social and symbolic spaces in their lives.

What is different between Connells' conclusion of masculinity, homosexual experiences and gender dynamics of Western societies and that of Bangladesh (and South Asia) is the specific socio-cultural context that provides a broader margin, or larger threshold for flexibility regarding sexual identities and their gendered practices. Connell suggests that at 'the historical exclusion of homosexual object-choice from heterosexual masculinity of both homosexual and heterosexual men' is a reason for

possible tension within masculinity and gender order (1992:748). This is also applicable to South Asia and Bangladesh. The difference is that Bangladesh can still be seen as being in the process of post-colonial modernization, with strong traditional cultural practices of acceptance in relation to sexual ambiguities and a tendency to 'ignore' or keep a blind eye to some non-normative sexualities, especially of men. Bengali culture has a history of '*sakhi' or 'shakha'* (friend) that socially legitimizes homosociality. Spiritual singers or 'Bauls'[4] – village mystics living in small commune settings with free gender mixing and who dress with elaborate feminine accessories including earrings, necklaces, long hair etc. – are respected. And the traditional male everyday attire of *lungi*, a male skirt, is itself close to a women's sari. Furthermore, the traditional culture does not have gender colour coding (e.g. *pink* and *blue*). Male homosexuality is legally prohibited, but it is not excluded from the subtext of social life. As one Bangladeshi gay activist wrote on Facebook, 'We live in a closet, but it is a very spacious one'!

Defying Marriage: Single Heterosexual Women's Struggle

Conversely, for middle class heterosexual women to defy the marriage norm and carve out a space of social respect, acceptance and happiness is a long process of negotiation and navigation. Yasmin (50) is a never married single woman. Defying marriage normativity has been a somewhat difficult social process but because she has progressive parents, she was able to shield herself from social-familial pressure. During her college years (in the 70s), marriage normativity was a social force to be reckoned with:

> *Girls were getting married left, right and centre…they were getting married within the span of one evening…especially to men who lived abroad and/or had green cards. I always marvelled at the fact that how women could actually marry or sleep with a stranger, 'you won't understand, the moment you agree to marriage, you are connected to that man-. Sexually connected'…there was a sense of pride and bravado that one was getting married (and having sex) before the other friends… My family did try to fix me with some men, unsuccessfully…the pressure wasn't really there, but there was expectation. My mother was pressurized by her family to get her daughters married off, she felt the need to confirm…but she didn't know how to do it well!*

Yasmin's achievement at both the academic and professional level has helped her gain not only respect from family and friends, but also guar-

anteed her a comfortable income. Moving out of the family home, to set up an independent household of her own was possible at the age of forty. However, she still needed the support and approval from her parents, especially from her father. She adopted babies, rented a flat and started from the scratch. Yasmin recalls how difficult it was for her to convince landlords to rent a flat out to a single woman. Her father accompanied her and helped her look for suitable accommodation. When she finally found a worn out place she could rent, she felt ecstatic even though the walls were dirty and cockroaches filled the rooms. Most single women interviewed for this research are in different stages of singlehood (never married/divorced) and have spent at least a few years living abroad (studying and/or working) independently. But they find themselves caught in between the role of dutiful daughter and modern independent women who craves personal freedom. It is crucial to protect 'character' and 'reputation'. Within the heterosexual hierarchy, women/girls are often seen as on the verge of slipping into the wrong side of morality. Unless parents are affluent enough to provide a semi-detached living space (for example, a smaller unit on the rooftop/terrace, or an adjacent flat with a common entrance), a single woman cannot usually negotiate much in the way of private space for herself where she can be an autonomous person and sexually active. Unlike women who are interested in women, who can make use of homosociality, straight women face significant challenges practicing heterosexuality within the family-household, be it parental or their own. Celibacy, if not total 'asexuality' is expected of unmarried woman.

The complex interplay of gender, sexuality and class and embodied experiences of intersectionality is best represented by the extra ordinary case study of Mamata. If body is understood as the central site of sexuality then Mamata's condition as an educated, empowered woman with a disability shows us the contradictions, paradoxes and interplay between the possibilities and restrictions of sexual subjectivity. Mamata not only runs her own organization, but also owns a spacious independent house where a large part of her parental family lives. She is the head of the household and exercises absolute authority. Mamata has been paralyzed from chest down since adolescence. Encouraged and supported by her brothers, she finished school and soon thereafter started a long and prolific career as an activist. It was in the organization she worked for that she first met Kamal (another activist/co-worker with disability), who be-

came a friend and an integral part of her life. When the organization de-
cided to stop providing free accommodation for its workers, Kamal was
in a difficult situation as he could not afford to both rent a place and hire
a caregiver- without which he could not manage daily life. Mamata de-
cided to share a one-bedroom accommodation with Kamal and be his
care giver. Mamata needs a wheel chair as she is paralysed below the
waistline, and Kamal is mostly stationed in a bed as he is paralysed from
just below the neck (though he has limited movement in his hands).
Mamata described it as a *'strictly divided spatial arrangement'* because the
bedroom or the private part of the flat belonged to her, the woman of
the house, while Kamal had the more public space of the 'outer-living
area' where people could come and meet them for work or social pur-
poses. Mamata mentions how Kamal humorously depicted his position
in her life and in their home as a *'flower vase decorating the drawing room'.* The
arrangement suited them well and it remained a functional set up for
many years until they jointly bought land and together had a house built.
Mamata's family later moved in with them. When I asked what made her
family agree to this arrangement of co-habitation, an almost impossible
socially critiqued choice made by a single woman, Mamata answered: *'If
either of us were even an inch more 'able-bodied' this wouldn't have been possible'.*

This statement is profound to me because it gives me a deeper under-
standing of the relation between sexuality, gender and performativity
within the framework of subjectivity and agency. Firstly, the question of
class here is interesting because it places masculinity under femininity
based on economic power. Kamal's economic dependence (even within
this partnership) and dependence on Mamata gave her a position of
power in decision making regarding space division and boundaries within
their common space. Her own upward economic mobility from her pa-
rental middle class position to property ownership places her very com-
fortably on top of the gender hierarchy even within her own family. She
has therefore managed to control social-familial dynamics of gender
within these spaces, well beyond what a woman with a disability in Bang-
ladeshi can commonly master. Secondly, there is a carefully articulated
reluctance on her part to indicate anything sexual about her body or her
relationship with Kamal beyond 'platonic' friendship, which is probably
a wise way of protecting herself and honouring him. If she is socially
perceived as 'asexual' or unable to be sexually performative, she is able to
use normativity to create a space of her own where she is in control of

her life, including her choice of partner. A discussion on the sexuality of people with disabilities, especially women, has been non-existent in the context of Bangladesh (Karim, 2009; Chowdhury and Karim 2010). Most sexuality studies or discussions within the disability movement are from the perspective of sexual violence where women are invariably seen as victims. Considering women with disabilities as active and willing sexual beings is seen as impossible or irrelevant in discourses of disability rights. Finally, taking it beyond the disability framework, and drawing applicable meaning to our discussion on gender, sexuality and class, Mamata's case informs us how sexuality is narrowly translated as bodily acts of sex. This undermines the subject's own capacity to give meaning to his/her own sexuality beyond socially proscribed meaning and definition. A sexual body is commonly seen as an actively performative sexual agent. The agency of the sexual body is therefore confined to its 'ability' to perform in heterosexual and penetrative ways, without acknowledging any alternative ways of erotic expression, let alone acknowledging bodies with 'disabilities' as sexual subjects.

From bodies that are seen as incapable of sexual subjectivity and agency, I would like to move on to bodies that are perceived as hyper sexualised, immoral and deviant. The lives of sex workers, who live their sexualities in two parallel social worlds, present another example of non-normative sexuality and gender negotiation within two intersecting spheres of space. The first space of lived sexuality largely belongs to mainstream society where sex workers come to conduct their business and engage with clients. While this work is occurring in the mainstream, it is the value of the dominant heteronormative society that sees sexuality as taboo and condemns sex work as a profession. The second space is the sub-culture of sex workers, either in brothels or within a tight inner community of networks, where sexual and family norms or practices are reframed and altered to suit the life style of its members. In the following section I will engage the current discussion of sexual subjectivity and agency within private spaces of family households of my sex worker respondents who identify as 'lesbians'.

Section 2: Non-Normative Lives of Female Sex Worker 'Lesbians'

Before going to the narratives of sex worker lesbians I will explain my findings on attitudes towards homosexuality in the sex worker culture. Homosexuality is tolerated and accepted in a very different way within the sub-culture of sex workers. Male homosexuality is seen as a non-issue while female homosexuality is perceived as condemnable. A good example of 'accommodation' of male homosexuality can be drawn from my informal conversation with peri-urban brothel sex workers. When asked about male homosexual practices within the brothel community[5] it was acknowledged immediately and discussed as a matter of fact, with no ridicule, shock or concern. Multiplicity of male sexuality was recognized, and this multiplicity did not form any part in essentializing men's social identities. Rather, the talk was about a 'tendency' or 'practice' (*'obbhyash'*). Homosexuality was expressed linguistically as the sexual act itself: *'Gua mara'* ('butt fucking' or anal sex). It was also mentioned, though only in reference to men with some power and resources, that they may exploit/help younger men with work in exchange for sexual favours -- implying that active male homosexuality is associated with a man who is not 'top' in the sexual act itself, but who is socially on top in terms of power relations. On the contrary, when female homosexuality was mentioned, it not only raised eye brows, but generated ridicule, contempt and questions of religious morality, as well as perversion on my part even asking such a question. When I inquired further, it became clear that female homosexuality is recognized but not tolerated. A few admitted having intimate partnership of 'love' with fellow female sex workers, which involved '*ador*' (caress), sharing everything from food to clothing, feeding each other with hands or '*mukhe tule khawano'* (a sign of extreme care and motherly affection in Bengali culture), dependency, and finally broken hearts when one left the brothel or moved on. And still, I was categorically told that such relationship could not be sexual, because that would be dirty and perverted.

'*Amader shomporko ekdom shame-streer moton chhilo'* (our relation was like that of husband and wife), says one middle-aged sex worker. When I asked what that meant, because a husband-wife relation implies a sexual relation, she protested by saying: '*Shamee-stree mane bhalobashar shomporko, ekjon arekjoner jonno onel bhalobasha-momota…shower jonno to khodder ba purush manush ache!'* (husband-wife, meaning a relation of love and affection. For

sex one can always have a client or a man!). Thus, while both male and female homosociality is a norm, the sexualization of this norm is gendered here. Femininity is established through affection, care and compassion within the shared resource-household system of the brothel. In this context, sexuality is generically synonymous with heterosexuality and penetrative sex – and thus female homosocial relationships are defined as expressions of emotions, non-sexual yet physically affectionate.

Female sex worker 'lesbians' have different life stories of sexualities, assertion of desires and identity formation processes. Though most would acknowledge that since their childhood or adolescent days they felt a strong bond toward female friends and/or desire to be more like the 'boys' by taking part in farming, outdoor games and dressing in male clothing- but none of these seemed alarmingly different in a way that screamed out 'female homoerotic desires'. A few were either married at an early age or came to Dhaka and became commercial sex workers for socio-economic reasons. A couple informants originated from lower middle class families within Dhaka itself. Shaheen and Chameli are 'senior' (forty is considered old for this profession) in this group and would term themselves as 'ex-sex workers' and current 'activists', though they admit that when necessary they fall back on their profession. Both women have long-term live-in partners. While Shaheen gave up her child for adoption, Chameli's family is made up of adopted children. Ruma and Begum is a couple in their twenties.

Tania is in her early thirties and also living with her long term partner. All these women are part of a support group '*Shomoy'* (to be discussed in detail in Chapter 8) that forms a close knit community of women. The bond between these women not only originates from their profession and sexual orientations, but also from the fact that each one of them spent at least a few years in State sponsored/administered 'Vagabond' or 'Correction centres' (now known as 'Rehabilitation Centres) where street children and sex workers are sent and kept until they are 'reformed'! In the all-women units, friendships are formed and partnerships are made. But it is an error to think that this 'homosocial' environment is the sole reason for forming homoerotic relations. When asked if homosociality was the reason behind their 'lesbian' identity, everyone answered in the negative (and noted that they had access to men within the premises) and many had heterosexual encounters before and after their prison time. It is recognized by informants that years of spending time together in a

correction centre, which is entirely deprived of resources, compassion and support – the women only had each other for comfort and the bonding established there had more to offer than mere sex. Many women were initiated into the actual act of homoerotic sex there, but it was female camaraderie and love that lasted beyond the time and space of the semi-prison. Even though same-sex relations were commonplace in the confinement of the correction centres, it still had to be kept form the authorities who were known to handle such 'deviant acts' and 'abnormalities' with strict discipline. Almost everyone narrated episodes of 'punishment' after getting 'caught' or being exposed by others: usually being tied up across balcony grills, or hung from a branch and flogged until 'guilt' was admitted and confessions were made. The abuse, trauma and humiliation of being imprisoned as a 'vagabond' or sex worker and then punished for their sexual choice was no doubt a painful process which shaped these women's resolution to stick to what was felt 'right'. When freed, they all set up homes with respective female partners and continued life as heterosexual sex workers.

Motherhood is coveted by most of these women, and so they either already have biological and/or adopted children or plan to have children someday. Households with children do not see the absence of father in an all-women set up as problematic, but at the same time, the sexual aspect of the relationship between mothers is kept away from children, and is described as an 'aspect' of conjugal life that children do not need to know'. This is very similar to mainstream heterosexual family situations in the Bengali context where parent's sexual relationships are never seen, talked about or acknowledged.

'Bon' or sister – is a generic term used within the sex worker community to indicate love and a sexual relationship between two women. The term *'bon'* itself encapsulates a strategic move to negotiate heteronormative structures within Bangladeshi society. At one level, sisterhood (*'bon'*) is revered and the term can be applied to a wide range of social meanings. For example, 'bon' can refer to blood sisters, cousins, friends, co-wives etc. but in this context a very strict 'non-sexual' meaning is understood, thereby removing any connotation of incest. At another level, because most women who do sex work come from rural areas and work in the city, use of the term 'bon' may help them establish a level of respectability when they are home. Most create a married-woman image when they are visiting family homes in villages, legitimizing any children they

may have as a result of their work. Having another woman accompany them on their visits home may also be an added benefit. To have colleagues or sister-like-friends is not only socially acceptable, but also beneficial. Sex worker lesbians prefer to live in a social cluster with other women from their profession as it provides an understanding of life styles and protects them from threats from mainstream society. Sisterhood is essential for networking and survival, especially in the case of police harassment, arrest or violence. Finally, most women desire motherhood, biological or adoptive, and raising children with another 'Sister' or within a sisterhood provides these women with a relatively secure and caring household for their children.

Because of their triple marginalized status in society (women, sex workers, and lesbians) – these women appear to be extremely resolute and strategic in how they pursue life, livelihood and their personal desires. Within the private lives of sex worker lesbians, the heterosexual model of 'husband and wife' (a model that is followed and/or adapted by other same sex couples too, both men and women) is followed. There was not any cross-dressing or dressing like the 'male-husband' in any of my sex worker 'lesbian' couples, and the reason for that was very clear- to be a commercial sex worker in a heterosexual world, one needed to maintain a desirable feminine appearance. Also, none of the women mentioned any acute or inherent aspiration to look like a man, but rather the desire to be able to live in the world like a 'man'. This is indicative of the power the masculine gender has in a hetero-patriarchal structure. The concept of a 'queer' or 'lesbian' family does not even feature in the socio-sexual discourse in Bangladesh. It is therefore difficult for me to address this new yet existing form of family within the sex worker lesbian group. Other non-heterosexual women of this research also have families with children (as discussed earlier), but they can be termed as *single mothers* without actually having to share and run a common household space with another female partner as such.

The issue of respectability that is attached to middle class culture remains central to the decisions women make regarding their sexualities, its expressions and assertions. Brothel based sex workers, irrespective of their sexual orientation or identities make a rational separate connection between sex as a bodily act and economic performance, and sexuality as an expression of desire and emotions. Because there is a limited number of class based sexual taboos or moralities attached to meanings of sex

and sexuality, gender roles can be performed in a range of alternative ways (women dominating all kinds of sexual and non-sexual economic activities). Urban sex worker lesbians, because of their need to move in and out of their own circles and mainstream society (and the lack of a definite physical boundary like in brothel) learnt to associate sexuality and gender in a more middle class way. Performances of femininity and marriage normativity are integral part of their socio-sexual identity. Desire of the agential body is associated with monogamous love relationships, whereas performance of the erotic body for economic purposes is separated from the personal life. Homo-erotic desire is framed within the context of middle class heterosexual marital relations (of provider husband-care giver housewife). The agency lies in their ways of internalizing same-sex desires as a natural part of life, unlike in brothels where it is seen a problematic. Resistance occurs in the creative avenues they use to navigate through the multiple layers of life and the plural worlds that they inhabit. The women are constantly strategizing performances, images and routines in such a concerted way that it enables them to have separate pockets of life, each pocket with different but functional relations with families, friends and lovers. Sex worker lesbian women live on the periphery of the respectable middle class, and inhabit a smaller circle of community space that has its own sub-culture of sex, gender and sexualities and norms of acceptability that often differ from the mainstream middle class. And it is this inner space of the community that allows women to have same-sex relations, household partnerships and co-parenting arrangements for children. Same sex marriage, co-habitation and the right to have children are still components of a Western Queer movement agenda that cannot be translated into a Bangladeshi social-legal context, yet. Nonetheless, these narratives illustrate that the concept of 'family' must be re-examined with an understanding that sexuality in totality as a concept is a part of its discourse rather than just understanding as a mere physical 'sex act' (Malone and Cleary 2002).

Camaraderie, Networks and Support Groups: Ways of Survival

Creating a social network and securing a safe private environment is crucial to any marginalised or non-heteronormative group, especially women. The small but crucial breathing spaces give women opportunities to find friendship, bonding and camaraderie – but also provide all-important grounds for organizing themselves, debating the politics of sexual

rights and identities, and extend support to fellow members of the community. Women create homes, support groups or simple inner circles of friends to come together as a community- sometimes these communities have intergenerational characteristics, sometimes they are based on professional commonality or commonality of education, marital status or simple family affiliation. These meetings can take place at someone's home (for example, at Flora's or at Parveen's), or at an after-hour office venue that is secured and has privacy. Sometimes, the spaces are used for building networks and not necessarily for erotic interaction. At times, spaces are also used for pure sex. Rima, living with her parents, has created a personal erotic space for herself within which she engages in sexual activities with her two female cousins.

> *When I meet my cousin sisters during annual holidays, I find myself in a sexual trans…during that period, I have nothing else but body and its pleasure in my mind…I need to do it with them over and over again…I feel like I have to have enough of this sex so that I won't need it for the rest of the year…so that I don't even think of this sex for the rest of the year…*

Rima's use of this erotic space to satisfy her sexually with other women is strictly private in nature while Flora's purpose of opening her own home or private space to other women-loving-women is more social and activism oriented. Flora controls access and membership to this space with extreme caution and vigilance in order to maintain security and privacy for members. Sex worker lesbian women, even though they have private spaces within the respective homes they share with their female partners, still choose to meet as a group in a neutral safe space. They feel the purpose of the space is to bring a more serious note to their networking, which has an agenda beyond erotic interests. On the other hand, single heterosexual women find it difficult to demand or even create an independent private space that has erotic potential.

Seidman (2011:38) points out something that is central to my query of sexuality and class:

> What needs to be investigated or studied with empirical evidences is the 'role of class and its intersection with sexuality or gender in shaping varied aspects of queer life… [the] issue is not whether lesbian, gay and queer life is class structured or whether class is a dimension of inequality within queer life, but whether it's a central axis of difference and hierarchy. In other words, are queer lives and cultures class based?

The (unintentional) comparison between non-heterosexual women, who live their lives in a different economic position within the vast-varied spectrum of the Bengali middle class, is a fertile ground for addressing questions of class, sexuality and differences. Female sex workers in same sex relationships are grounded in the same hetero-patriarchal social context, but their take on gender hierarchies and heteronormativity has different interpretations and performativity because of their marginalised position as sex workers. Their status is at the bottom of any hetero-patriarchal hierarchy, but their household arrangements and relationships, and how these are maintained within the broader familial and social contexts, can be termed a *queer habitus*. They form a very close-knit community (of sex-workers and 'lesbians'/sisters), and it is the reality of an *extended family* that helps them to maintain multiple social-sexual identities. The support derived from these networks helps them cope with demanding roles, which include: keeping the appearance of a 'respectable' working woman when visiting the village family home,[6] acting as a responsible mother, being involved in a sex workers' network (providing safety in instances ranging from client violence to police cases), and maintaining an intimate relationship with another woman within their home. Living with another woman is compliant with homosociality, but it is the immediate community of sex-workers who prefer to live in clusters, that provide a sense of space and freedom. This is in contrast to the mainstream 'respectable' middle class existence that requires supervision and surveillance of women living outside matrimonial arrangements. If family support is crucial to many educated middle class non-heterosexual women, for lesbian sex workers it is their immediate community that forms a *family* and whose support provides a safety net that allows them to maintain a same-sex family-household.

Conclusion

Lived realities of non-normative men and women of this research confirm how heteronormativity creates both constraints and possibilities for individuals to become sexual beings of their own choice. Dominant notions of femininity and masculinity and female and male sexualities, acceptance of homosociality, age and able-bodiness, intersect with the economic advantages, or the lack thereof, within the physical, social and symbolic spaces of a family-household. Those intersections both allow and restrict women and men in the creation of space of their own, and

especially a space for being sexual. The private aspect of that space – often critiqued in feminist scholarship as the prime site of violence and discrimination of women – can actually function as a protective cover for non-normative sexual arrangements. Those protective mechanisms have limits – as the case of single heterosexual women can show. Jackson (2011:13) suggests that analysis of heterosexuality must address 'two interrelated aspects of its social ordering: first the ways in which institutionalized, normative heterosexuality and its associated practices serve to marginalize those who live outside its boundaries; second the social ordering of relationships *within* heterosexuality'. The first aspect looks into non-normative lives from the 'heterosexual' assumptions, practices and prejudices; while second aspect looks into how heterosexuality is classed, and how the hetero-homosexual binary intersects with class in regulating intimate life. These two aspects are integral parts of this research in its close examination of heterosexual assumptions of Bangladeshi society and its intersection with gender and class. Narratives from non-normative lives depicted in this chapter show exactly how individuals integrate heterosexuality and heteronormativity to push the boundaries of norms in order to create spaces for multiple expressions of erotic desires. There is no linear way of negotiation even within the same economic class; it is mostly individual journeys towards life through various gender and sexuality performances ranging from performative heterosexualization to de-sexualization of the self.

Notes

[1] *Shwayambar*: (power to choose one's own life-partner).

[2] Proverbs like '*kuri tei buri'* (20 turns a girl into an old hag) versus 'p*urush manush holo shonar chamoch, baka holeo damee'* (men are like gold spoons, a dent or a flaw doesn't make it any less precious).

[3] Even though I know his wife, I didn't interview her for the obvious reason of 'outing' Mohammad formally, and therefore, I engage with Mohammad's narrative only.

[4] *Baul*: refer to http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baul
Also see Openshaw 1997. South Asia Research 1997 17: 20 http://sar.sagepub.com/content/17/1/20.full.pdf+html
Openshaw '1998, killing' the guru: Anti-hierarchical tendencies of 'Bâuls' of Bengal, Indian Sociology, May 1998; vol. 32, 1: pp. 1-19.http://cis.sagepub.com/content/32/1/1.full.pdf+html

[5] For more information on Bangladesh brothel structures and spatiality, refer to Blanchet (1996), Tahmina and Moral (2004), Haq (2006), Karim (2004).

[6] All sex workers (in this research) are migrant women, who maintain one household in Dhaka, and support parental-family back in the villages. The shaping of one's public image has to be done at two levels: covering up professional identity and sexual identity. Professional identity is also part of personal identity as a woman, who needs to carefully establish an image of a respectable working woman staying away from home-village/family, but whose economic contribution is crucial for others too.

7 | Sexuality in Public Spaces: Virtual Reality for Love and Sex

This chapter is about lives in separate yet occasionally merging spaces of the private and public worlds of sexuality. The porosity of public and private spaces in the physical, virtual and symbolic world is addressed. The sexual spatiality of public spaces, especially the relatively new arena of the virtual world, shows the contradictions of conformity and resistance to heteronormativity present in contemporary lives.

To step outside the private realm of the family-household to a public arena of social life in the context of Bangladesh, can include a wide range of spaces, especially in the cities. Public space can be understood to be a social space or 'spaces where individuals can see and be seen by others as they engage in public affairs' (Mensch 2007:31). Such spaces have multiple meanings and are often linked with concepts of freedom, power, citizenship, administration, democracy etc. (Mensch 2007; Goodsell 2003) – all of which are relevant to the study of sexuality and sexuality rights in urban locations in particular because these discourses are largely located, produced and reproduced there.

Section 1: *'Sexing the Public'*[1] in Dhaka

Dhaka, as a city and urban location, is *sexualized* in a variety of ways, providing many spaces and opportunities for its inhabitants of various sexual orientations and preferences of practices. The question is, what sexualities are exercised outside, in the open, presumably with caution and under many disciplinary and monitoring systems? In one word, Dhaka, like any other metropolitan cities, has a varied sexual-erotic landscape. The erotic mapping of cities or urban spaces in order to study sexuality has become an area of study, especially within human ge-ography, in recent years (Oswin 2008; Kellyand Munoz-Laboy 2005; and

Cook 2003). Most investigations are on 'queering the city' or how queer spaces exist and operate within the space of an urban locality. Recently, similar work has been done in India where sexuality has been studied in the context of public premises of metropolitan cities like Mumbai, Delhi etc. (see, for example, Srivastava 2007). Kelly and Munoz-Laboy (2005) point out that exploration of the relation between space, place and sexuality usually and largely focuses on gay and lesbian spaces, especially in the study of Western contexts, and much of it on 'gay ghettos' and commercial gay and lesbian spaces or discussions on sexual communities utilizing space to situate what are otherwise termed as 'imagined communities'. Yet there are also always many places in any location, especially in urban cosmopolitan cities, where men (and women) meet each other to have sex. In almost any neighbourhood in an urban setting there are spaces designed for non-sexual activities that have been attributed for sexual purposes at certain moments during the day or evening hours. Such erotic and homoerotic places include public toilets/bathrooms, bushes near bridges, movie theatres, parks and many other semi-public spaces. Bangladesh, with a good number of red-light districts that are mainly for heterosexual commercial sex work, does not have 'gay ghettos' or well-established or designated areas termed as such. Rather, there are pockets within public spaces, not meant for sexual activities, yet which are attributed to sexual activities for both hetero and homosexual (in general 'erotic') activities. In the context of Dhaka, making use of public space to practice personal sexual desire implies a combination of a lack of personal/private spaces, and the need for people feel to step into the public sphere for sex which cannot be contained within the heteronormative framework of the immediate family-household, society and its culture.

Public spaces in Dhaka can be overwhelmingly sexualized with the presence of billboards and other forms of advertisements for medical facilities that address sex-related problems or explicitly erotic films. From street walls to inside public transports – sex is present both as an erotic attraction as well as a 'problem'. Street vendors (pavement shops) sell erotic books, magazines and videos. Urban public spaces like parks, shrines, transport hubs (stations, ports etc.)[2] are known for their erotic possibilities and as the main working area for commercial sex workers (both male and female)[3]. Parks are also places where people meet with each other for romantic rendezvous. Sexual acts for both commercial

and romantic purposes take place in parks (behind shrubs and by the lake side).

Sex in public spaces is dominated by heterosexual desires and practices, but there are certainly pockets for non-heteronormative sexualities in the public arena too. Evidence of Dhaka city as a 'sexual site' is ample from informants' descriptions in this research. Johny (40), Martin (45), and Saad (30) all admit to using all available public spaces like parks, road sides, toilets etc. for homosexual sex. Johny jokingly mentioned how there aren't many sites left in the city that he has not made use of for sexual hook ups, and not always necessarily after dark. Hussain (32) exclaimed, '*It is much easier to get gay sex in Dhaka than a glass of clean water*'! Saad (30), mentioned the benefit of homosociality in public places for gay men, but reflected on the fragility of the social boundary between friendship and immoral acts:

> *I guess, in Bangladesh, it is easy for two gay guys to hold hands and be what the west would consider 'romantic' in public places. Same applies to girls. This physical contact is limited to touch; I don't think people will take kindly to two people of the same gender making out. The funny thing is, if a guy and a girl, who don't give off married vibes do the same, they will usually get a few stares. Dating is still not something permissible in the public realm. Public places for gay 'dating' are the same as they are everywhere in the world, shopping malls, parks, movie theatres. As for the question of going beyond that, getting intimate, that might pose some problems.*

Going to public spaces like parks, art centres etc. for socio-cultural events are part of urban women's life in Dhaka. Going on dates in restaurants, gardens, or taking rickshaw rides, for example, are common but women then also run the risk of being 'seen' or found out by family or relatives, thus making most girls sceptical of these spaces. Women are commonly seen engaging in amorous acts in parks and lake sides, though the fear of being harassed by police or hooligans remains real. Interestingly, none of my women respondents mentioned using public spaces for erotic purposes, besides sex worker lesbians, for whom these places are work places separated from their personal love lives.

Sexual culture is expressed via practices. An examination of the spatiality of sexuality can provide key insights into how sexual subjects produce sexual cultures and how broader social forces influence this ever changing cultural production. Within geography, the earliest studies on sexuality and space focused on defining and mapping gay landscapes and

communities, working to make gay bodies and zones visible and high-lighting forms of resistance, which mainly examined urban spaces (pri-marily located in North America and predominantly inhabited by white, middle class or upper middle class gay men) (Puar Kaur et al. 2003). In recent times, the focus has been expanded to explore the power relations and discursive and material processes and structures that underlay the simultaneous production of space and sexualities, and which have suc-ceeded in drawing attention to the implication of 'heterosexing' everyday spaces (ibid).

Yet lived experiences of sexuality extend beyond the culturally con-structed frameworks of representations and meanings associated with sexual identity. This is a critical point for this research on urban spaces and sexualities in Bangladesh because in a place like Dhaka there is no 'gay ghetto' or commercial or residential area/place (besides red-light areas and public parks for cruising) that is synonymous with gay-lesbian sexual identity, or any specific sexual identities for that matter. There-fore, in the context of urban Bangladesh/Dhaka, much of the focus of the research is on the lived experiences of sexually marginalized people (gay, lesbian, single, straight etc.) who not only struggle to negotiate a socially-acceptable sexuality-identity, but are also continuously creating spaces that can accommodate their socially-expected gender-roles as well as allowing them to assert their respective choice of sexual orientation and erotic desire. Sexual behaviour is contingent upon the context of sex. If the spatial context of sex changes, the configuration of erotic and sexual interactions also changes, which demonstrates that place and con-texts should not be considered static, but rather fluid through space and time (Kelly & Munoz-Laboy 2005).

Since 2009 was my year of field work, I would like to give a descrip-tion of sexuality in public life in Dhaka through my observation made that year. Also 2009 saw an impressive raise in number of social-cultural activities addressing sexualities which is of my research's interest and provide me with initial insight in ways in which different stakeholders on LGBTQ groups have started to organize and express themselves in the public eye.

2009: 'Sexuality is happening'

In Dhaka, sex is everywhere; walls are plastered with advertisements for medicines, treatments and medical houses that treat sexual problems ex-

clusively. Every locality has at least one centre (mostly herbal) that claims to specialize in sexual complications (mostly male problems) and promises to improve virility and pleasure. Leaflets are distributed at traffic signals, in public transport and at prime points in the city. Women wearing the burqa are engaged to hand out these leaflets to passers-by. Sex is in mainstream film and poetry and now also in blogs and notes in the virtual world. Yet, it is not talked about in daily life and not addressed as an integral part of marriage, or even life in general. Heterosexuality is the norm, but nonetheless seems to be more suppressed in a gendered way than 'deviant' forms of sexuality as deviance can be ignored, denied or even punished, whereas the expression of heterosexual sexual desires and pleasure outside marriage within heteronormativity is more problematic.

2009 was a year full of socio-cultural, development encouraged/ funded events and activities that paid attention to and promoted sexuality rights, identity and activism of all groups in different forums. Though heteronormativity was barely challenged, sexual minorities, especially transgender groups, were successful in making their presence felt in public and in carving out a kind of acceptability (even though it was still spiked with a touch of ridicule and/or fear). 2009 began with a small workshop on homophobia[4], attended by sexually variant people across the city. Even though attendance was reportedly limited, the event was seen as a success by its organizers.

It is the other groups – gay, lesbian and bisexuals – that seem to pose a threat and a problem to society. Acknowledging their existence is itself a disruption to the norms in Bangladesh. Stakeholder representation of the sexually variant community at social events in 2009, and in the media, is good proof of the invisibility and further marginalization of certain groups[5]. For example, the character of *hijras* became part of a television drama, and proved to be popular. It was interesting to observe that even though there were hints of ridicule and often the purpose of the *hijra* character was to provide comic relief, the portrayal of such characters gradually became much more real and human in their depiction. In the context of pop culture, especially within the visual mediums of television and the film industry, the issue of sexuality, desire and challenges to ideas like chastity, monogamy, and marriage as an institution etc. are on the rise. Likewise, modern drama/film makers take on these subjects and often boldly depict them. A landmark film (mainly catering to urban or at least peri-urban young audience), 'Third Person Singular Number'

(2009), dealt with the difficulties of a single woman in a city like Dhaka, where every man is a predator and every gaze is that of judgment.

The film deserves more detailed scrutiny by cultural studies researchers as it deals with female sexuality and desire almost exclusively. To make a quick point, while 'Third Person Singular Number' shows a young couple living together, a young single woman sharing a house with a male friend for economic and social reasons etc., female sexuality is represented as 'monogamous morality', if not chastity itself. Even in the face of adversity, the woman maintains her chastity, and even in the face of sexual temptation and desire, she suppresses her own sexuality because promiscuity is not something she grew up seeing as normal and acceptable. In 'Bachelor'(another popular film made by the same director) on the other hand, male sexuality and desire and its associated 'lack' of control in terms of temptation, cheating and polygamy is depicted in a playful manner to the extent that it is normalized and celebrated. Surprizingly, it was 'Third Person Singular Number' that faced opposition and protests from many corners and was accused of promoting living-together, polygamy and sexual immorality (because there is a condom-buying scene) etc., whereas there was no public reaction to 'Bachelor'.

A 'Hijra Fashion Show', entitled 'Agony and Ecstasy' (August 18, 2009) was organized by *Badhon Hijra Shongho* (a Bangladeshi organization for *hijras*) and funded by donors, took place at the National Museum Auditorium. The aim of the initiative was: '…to sensitize the larger community on transgender issues… and also aimed to create awareness about the risks of HIV/AIDS and drug-use'[6]. It drew a respectable audience comprised of social activists, development partners, the LGBTQ community and a huge number of expatriates and foreigners. The mood was festive and even though the gay and lesbian presence was formidable, it remained a 'transgendered othernesses' oriented event. For example, patrons commented, '*We wanted to give them a sense of empowerment, so that they can feel they too can contribute in the society.*'

There were more events to follow including 'International Sexual diversity' and 'Rainbow Week' at the German cultural centre and more *hijra* cultural and dance competitions etc.[7] From the events and the photographs displayed on the LGBT Bangladesh website, it is evident that sexuality rights and related activism is dominated by transgender and gay groups. Even though in many of these events one could see the familiar 'known' faces of lesbian-bi-sexual women, somehow women's sexuality,

rights and activism is not discussed or asserted openly nor do such women receive public support or sympathy. Also of note here, most of the events were attended by a large number of foreigners and expatriates who are well-conversed in sexuality discourse, and often dominate the discussion. This illustrates the fact that sexuality is an issue that is not part of the mainstream discourse; rather it is contained within specific groups of people, and mainly dominated by men and male sexual diversity.

In December, Boys of Bangladesh (BoB) held its annual get-together/party. It was a gathering of gay men from across the city, and across different classes and age groups, showing how hierarchical the queer/gay world actually is. Oswin (2008:2) rightly points out that: 'Queer spaces need to be critically questioned too as these are never beyond normativity' and that '…multiple exclusions operate in queer spaces'. Member interaction at the BoB party was strictly divided by class and age with the more successful mid 30s gay men trying to avoid 'being hunted' by younger struggling men, who, according to Johnny (40), are always scanning for potential 'catches' who can assist them in social climbing and are therefore not interested in real friendship or 'having a good time'. Two women, an expatriate lesbian woman and I, attended the party. The event saw its fair share of sexual acts, fights and simple merry-making. What was, in a way, striking, was the explicit sexual nature of the party which was different from the 'physical intimacy' of holding hands, touching bodies etc. that is allowed by homosociality in Bangladeshi culture. Though the venue was under tight security and the guest list was controlled (tickets were sold through invitation only, and were highly priced), there were nevertheless men working for the catering service, security and administrative staff at the venue who could not all have been pro-gay rights or gay themselves. I observed their reactions with curiosity (some looked amused, some indifferent and there were constant whispers). I later talked to one of the organizers regarding the sexual explicitness of the private party in a relatively public venue and the issue of police raids and harassments from authority if things got out of hand or leaked. I was told that the fact that the venue was hired at a high price, and the owner had full knowledge of the sexual orientation of the event itself made it secure:

> *Of course the restaurant authority or the police was not told that it was a gay party. It always used to be a party of common male friends maybe celebrating birthday or any oth-*

er occasion. The restaurant authority was less worried about the participants but more about their business. They never bothered with guys dancing very intimately or kissing on the sly. It was either their ignorance about homosexuality or the social veil we have (male – male intimacy is very normal in Bangladesh) or they took it as fun that people at a certain age have or maybe it was their serious business attitude. But whatever it was, it served our purpose well. Some restaurant authority even appreciated us for having a clean party (since there were no girls or alcohol)! (Himadri, 25)

The thin line between homosociality and the homosexual act is pushed, made blurry or obliterated. As Miller (2006:460) points out, these events reveal how gay spaces can be seen as a '…place/event in which subjects move from paramount reality of everyday life in heterosexual society and enter the non-paramount reality of the enclave, thereby experiencing different modes of spontaneity.'

Another women and sexuality-related event to take place during my field work was on 8th March, 2010, on International Women's Day, in different venues at Gulshan. There was a performance of the *Vagina Monologues*, termed mysteriously as 'V-Day', which was organized and attended by the upper class and elites of Dhaka. The tickets were BDT 500 (approximately Euro 5) and the show was in English. Even though it was one of the very first of its kind to be organized in Dhaka, the show's linguistic exclusivity and class restriction made it inaccessible to many potential 'mainstream' audience members.

Within the city there are pockets of spaces created for what can be termed as 'experimenting with alternatives' in life style, art, culture, philosophy. Sexuality is an integral part of their discourses and practices. Women respondents who have been part of such spaces and communities reveal how 'sexual freedom' is a popular theme where alternative, non-heterosexual practices are encouraged while male-dominance over female bodies and members remain intact. Even though the expressions of the self and sexuality are celebrated here, female sexuality is controlled within this 'freedom'. Modes of such control include malice, rumours, character assassination etc. Sujata (25) says, *'This is a good place, I can talk freely, can express myself, but people are a problem…they love poking into other's life and pass authoritative comments.'* When she got pregnant, one male member of a group told her, *'…try to be a human, not a woman – the problem with women is that they can't easily digest alcohol or sex…should be careful, use a condom so that you don't get pregnant…otherwise, we will have questions like where did you get rid of it.'*

However radical or alternative spaces like these might seem from all these activities, in the end they are only spaces that are used by dominant middle class men to experiment with alternative thoughts and actions, while maintaining their regular mainstream middle class lives, its practices, and comforts. These are places that attempt to be 'outside' the mainstream but end up leaning towards the dominant. Women's sexuality, which is celebrated here, does not remain a woman's issue. In the end, women's bodies and sexuality do not seem to be able to move beyond the pressure of 'chastity, modesty and reputation'. A woman's sexuality is always attached to dominant social value judgments.

The agency exercised by women, to some extent, can help to create pockets of non-normative sexuality. Sujata (25) and Payal (21) say that as women they can express sexual desires when they want to, but they can also say 'no' to unwanted sexual advances. They both claim to come to these places in the hope of self-discovery. Such places offer a 'relief', and as Sujata expressed, *'…the fact that I can 'eat and digest'[8] anyone, that I have the power to snatch someone and eat him/her at my will…I have learnt it here…before that I did nothing but useless.[9]*

Since the focus of this research is on the lived experiences of sexuality through non-heteronormative people, it is of interest to see how they create spaces outside their homes that can accommodate non-normative choices in sexual orientation and erotic desires.

Section 2: Virtual 'Reality' – Non-heteronormative Groups in Cyber World

Studying sexuality and erotica in the context of the internet in India, Bhattacharjya and Ganesh (2011) show how virtual spaces now force us to revise our perspective of what constitutes 'public' spaces, and the ways normativity and power relations between class, gender and sexualities are being traversed by its users. Virtual space has also become a transitory space that is increasingly powerful in terms of influencing popular transformative public opinion and politics. Virtual space and the internet are indeed an intersection between private and public, ever expanding and complex in their multiplicity of meanings and directions. In this chapter I will primarily engage with the virtual world, specifically exploring the non-heterosexual presence and participation in virtual public spaces:

> The social space is mainly epistemological and based on interpretations, derived from the visible interactions and our imaginations about others. The social space is the complex of computer mediated human culture, defined primarily by those participating and by no account a fixed or limited space. The social space is certainly the attractive part of the deal and thus central to the explanation for the popularity of online communities. (Gotdev 2002:411)

Personal computers and access to the internet are relatively new addition to middle class life in Bangladesh. Almost every middle class household in cities like Dhaka will now have a computer. As mentioned before, virtual space is something that has caught the fancy of Bangladeshi youth especially. The number of mobile phone active service subscribers in Bangladesh reached 54.590 million at the end of March 2010.[10] There is a rapid increase in internet use, especially in recent times when mobile service providers are adding cheap internet access to phones. Cyber cafes started mushrooming in early 2000 and offered not only cheap services, but often cabins that allowed clients to browse sites that they would not have been able to surf at home or in public. Curtained cubicles may also be provided for more private internet use. Social networks, blogs and email groups are frequently used not only for connecting with similar-minded/oriented people, but also as places where people can express themselves, debate and even fight out ideologies within the anonymity and safety provided by that context.

The capacity of the internet to change and challenge existing structures, norms and practices because of its unique characteristics provides a critical space for the proliferation of multiple discourses on sexuality. It also has the power to challenge sexual hierarchies, existing standards of sexual legitimacy, discrimination and rights (Bhattacharjya and Ganesh 2011). Gotdev (2002:406) explains why online communities exist and what makes them different from 'real' communities:

> Communities exist within a kind of reason – the reason of destiny…, the reason of proximity, and/or the reason of shared interest. …the communities on the internet are communities of shared interests, which sometimes evolves into something more, for example, ideas of mediated proximity and the aforementioned belonging. Still, the online communities may be very different regarding interface, time structure, and scope.

How separated are the two worlds – the virtual and the 'real' – if at all? And how much do the 'real' and 'virtual' as well as 'private' and 'public'

actually overlap with each other in the world of sexuality and gender? Gotdev (2002:412) explains:

> The social space is the attractive world of culture and connections, community and belonging, whereas the metaphorical space makes us recognise the online through analogies from offline space. The online communities do indeed present themselves differently from one another, but the social functions seem to be very much alike.

Over the past few years, as I interacted and socialized closely with gay men, both friends and acquaintances, it was clear that even within the class-specified social circles of gay Dhaka, the internet played a very important role. There are two aspects to this: firstly, because it is class and education (and often location) specific, gay members of a particular social group can interact, meet and mostly have sex with each other by hooking up through internet and mobile phones. Numbers of favourites are circulated and meetings are arranged accordingly. Online social networking groups like BoB are very popular and their membership is increasing by the day. Many gay men I have known, talked with and interviewed have admitted that 'blind dates' from websites are a primary source of meeting other gay men. Once a meeting or date is agreed to through the internet or by phone, men prefer to meet in very open public places (mostly in the parks, and lake sides in Dhanmondi). If there is mutual attraction and trust between the two after meeting in public then the pair may advance to meeting at one or the other's home or other private space. Secondly, the reason for meeting in a public place is for reasons of security and safety, and the easy opportunity to avoid or end the intimate date – in other words, intimacy can be avoided when the meeting is in a public space. And it allows both men to get out of what has been termed 'the fish bowl of incestuous sex life of Dhaka'. Cruising in parks for sex is looked down upon. *Respectable* men from the middle class now prefer to look for sexual partners through websites.

Himadri, from BoB, explains the situation of sexuality, different groups and the virtual world in the context of Bangladesh:

> *In the beginning of 2000 Bangladeshi self-identified affluent gays started using Internet as their primary hub to look for partners, friends, communities and likeminded organizations from all over the world. As internet became cheap and available over the years it started to be used by everyone, including people with limited English knowledge and wealth. Hence the numbers of gay users has significantly increased in the last five years.*

In 2009, the year of my field work, there were at least three Yahoo-based online groups, one blog, one website and few chat rooms, run by Bangladeshis catering to gays in Dhaka. In addition to these, worldwide online gay dating sites have also become tremendously popular among the gay crowd. The profile counts on these websites are quite substantial; Saad reinforces this view:

> *With internet so readily available at home or at cafes, people are having a much easier time looking for possible partners and be discreet at the same time. Although the old ways of cruizing in the parks and designated 'gay spots' still exist and thrive for a certain demographic, most of the more 'educated' people who know how to use the internet prefer going online to gay sites over dark alleys and shady parks.*

In the *Gay forum* Bangladeshi gay men post their profiles, messages, and hook up with others. What is interesting to observe is what people are looking for. The specific requirements for networking indicate the social scene in which the gay sexual life in Bangladesh, especially Dhaka, is situated. The Gay Forum site had two separate pages, one for Dhaka and the other for Chittagong.[11] Besides expressing a desire for sex, a good number of men are looking for 'foreigners/ex pats who live in Bangladesh', 'aged men' ('searching for aged partner with place') or men who have their 'own place' ('parents will be away', 'have the house for a week – interested in having wild sex/parties, fetishes', 'I have a place', 'living alone' etc.).

The demand for 'aged' men was a reoccurring issue of discussion during my interaction with gay respondents and their social circles. Age here is very closely tied with the common perception of financial stability, an income surplus (that one can afford to splurge on younger lovers), and the perception that older men will take a fancy to young bodies. The lookout for 'sugar daddies' by aspiring and ambitious young men is thus a characteristic of the gay scene in Bangladesh. Older, successful, independent gay men, on the other hand, are often sceptical of socializing beyond their circles because of their fear of being exploited. In recent years the expatriate community in Dhaka has been visible and major gay social events are organized or patronized by foreigners because they have more resources.

Be it foreigners or 'aged men'- the dominant theme of relationships within the sites appears to be mutual benefit with a more financial interest for younger men. Space, as has been repeatedly mentioned in earlier

chapters, is scarce in urban Dhaka and to find a space for fulfilling erotic desires is difficult, especially for youth who mostly live with their families and either cannot afford to have separate housing or are not allowed to live independently because of their age. Many professional men, who are at a later stage in life, live independently and away from their family homes for professional reasons, or can maintain separate apartments for private use. Within the gay community, demands for such dates are reasonably high. Notices for renting out places for gay sex[12] or 'Gay flat-partner needed' are often posted on internet: there was even a notice for a 'Research Assistant needed: age 17-27, if gay, then we can have fun too', which is outrageously unprofessional and unethical, yet reinforces the fact that money and sex have always been used for exploitation, especially in situations where unemployment among the youth is prevalent.

Finally, there are direct messages on sponsorship: 'need travelling mate and a sponsor who will pay for the airfare and other travelling costs in Dhaka, in exchange for sex'. Such postings are a direct commentary on how strongly the economy is related to sex, how sexuality is used for economic gain, social mobility and finally how 'sex' is 'worked', not necessarily through cash, but in terms of other material advantages.

The reason for illustrating some of these messages is to show that in a densely populated country with family structures that do not allow and/or where individuals cannot afford privacy, and where economic independence for men is difficult to come by or at least comes much later, sexual relations are often tied to other practical socio-economic factors/elements.

In their study, Hiller and Harrison (2007:87-8) explored the potential of the internet as a:

> …safe space to practise aspects of sexual difference… (and) how this medium might create a place for same-sex attracted young people to practise aspects of their sexuality, in the same way that life on and off the screen allows other young people to practise heterosexuality.

Gay online communities in Bangladesh appear to have established and popularized themselves in allowing their members to express and practice their sexualities. The popularity of these websites was more at the beginning of the emergence of the internet in Bangladesh. Virtual forums are public platforms where men can express their sexual desires and sexualities within the comfort of relative anonymity, though at the

same time real-life considerations influence and impact their desires. As in any other country, the internet provides a space for sexual practices in the virtual and lived realities of non-heterosexual people. Sex in Bangladesh is a taboo, any form of youth sexuality is socially frowned upon, and non-normative sexualities do not have much in the way of reference points for young people to understand and explore their erotic desires in real life. The privately accessible virtual world provides ample opportunities for those who are eager to talk, share and exchange thoughts regarding sexualities, and can thus learn ways of translating their desires into practices. Virtual reality, therefore, substitutes the everyday physical world that otherwise does not give its members easy access to information on and/or practices of sexualities.

The history of gay groups like BoB is a great example of how gradual efforts are made to create 'spaces' for gay men in Bangladesh, both in the virtual as well as in the 'real' public life of Bangladesh.

As recently as 1999, internet in Bangladesh was an expensive affair and only the privileged upper class of society had access to the virtual world. But soon Internet Relay Chat (IRC) fast became a popular chatting platform where a room for Bangladeshis was created and soon it became a major hub for Bangladeshis worldwide to mingle and giggle. No wonder such a platform also helped the queer Bangladeshis to find each other under witty and effective pseudonyms like mnm, m2m, b4m, boysonly etc. (Convener, BoB).

Owing to the massive popularity of IRC and the rapid expansion of the internet, one local entrepreneur opened up Bangladeshi chat rooms, with the first one to take on being BD Chat (www.bdchat.com). There was no online gay community until 1999 when '*GayBangladesh*', the first e-group for queer Bangladeshis, went online. The group attracted a number of members (1000+) and was quite active. There was another active group before BoB. Its name was *Teen_Gay_Bangladesh*. In October 2002 BoB started to include all gay men in Bangladesh.

Keeping in mind that gender differences are at work when it comes to spaces, it is imperative that we pay attention not only to these spaces separately, but also look at how they over-lap and at the areas that constitute in-between, like the virtual worlds. How technology is being accessed and used based on gender, age and class is also a matter of great significance for this chapter. MacDowell (1999) notes that because of the strong associations between women and the home, feminist investigations of public spaces have often focused on the problems and dangers

that women experience 'outside' compared with an assumption that men may take for granted their freedom in and dominance of these spaces. Mac Dowell (1999:149) shows how, paradoxically, 'the public spaces of the city have been significant locations in women's escape from male dominance and from the bourgeois norms of modern society'.

A direct comparison and contrast between the male and female non-heteronormative communities can be made easily based on each groups' 'presence' or rather on their relative 'invisibility' in both real life public spaces as well as the virtual world. While it is evident that the gay community (as well as the transgender community), is able to increasingly carve out spaces (however limited they might be) as a result of gender advantages which also allows many to 'come out' openly with a sexual identity, this has not been the case with women. The social life of lesbian/bisexual women, even in Dhaka, remains strictly closeted and discreet.

Unlike the gay community, the lesbian community began utilizing the virtual world only recently. When I started looking for online gay groups and women's same sex/lesbian groups based in Bangladesh, it was soon obvious that women moved like apparitions, if not in an entirely 'invisible' manner, in the virtual world, unlike their gay male counterparts. Himadri, who is active in online communication with lesbian/bisexual women's group and forums, gives his observation regarding lesbian women's 'inactivity and invisibility' in the virtual world:

> *Quite contrary to the gay community flourishing in internet, the lesbian community is still very much underground and has almost no presence in the virtual world. There seems to be no active and organized online forum or sites of the lesbian community. They are not even seen in any of the worldwide dating services. The few Yahoo groups established to reach out to lesbian persons have only a handful of members, of which many are gays or straight allies.*

There are several reasons that probably contribute to the lack of 'presence' (if one might term it such), of lesbian women online. My observations and understanding of this group's late arrival primarily lies in the fact that the 'leaders' or pioneers of the lesbian/bi sexual women's groups and social networks are much older and belong to a generation which did not necessarily see the potential of the internet as a possible space of networking, organization and socializing. The online groups are organized and administered by women from an older generation, not as technologically savvy or resourceful as the initiators of the online gay community. Gay community online organizers were not necessarily

young, but they had had more exposure to the internet and to technology. Thus, it took young women to bridge the generational gap regarding technology, and connect with other online women's group.

Even when women did access the virtual world through their own online communities, they could not leave much of an impact or be useful so that a buzzing social site could be created. Online groups remained inactive for months or interactions were not as frequent as they could have been. One reason for such a difference is, of course, related to the main purpose for people to use such sites: for the gay community, most sites were used to access/coordinate sexual encounters; this is not the case for women's same-sex sites, or at least this was not observed in their public forum pages (or expressed to me by respondents of this study). One might wonder why. From the narratives and discussions with female informants, it seems that women are not comfortable talking very openly about sex, especially in public spaces, unlike men who I observed to be at ease with 'sex-talk' (in cafes, dinners, parks, social networking websites). Women tend to portray their image of 'femininity' as per social norms and expectations, i.e. through expressions of love relationships and companionship. Building groups for camaraderie seemed to be a priority, suggesting that. It is perhaps women's social conditioning and gender roles which do not allow them, or at least makes them hesitant, about expressing sexual desires in an explicit way. Of course women expressed their bodily desires and yearning for sexual pleasure when I met with them on a one-to-one basis, but there was hardly any incident where women talked explicitly about sex in a social arrangement.

For example, in the *Sakhiyani* Yahoo group**,** (which is mainly an Indian network group but has a platform for Bangladeshi women who are looking for same-sex friendship, love and relationships) describes itself in the following way:

> *'Sakhiyani' is for women who are interested in women for friendship and MORE. This group is for women (somehow linked to Bangladesh) who identify themselves as lesbian/bisexual/ queer/not-wanting-to-identify-according-to-sexuality – as well as lesbian-friendly people to make their mark online (and offline). Welcome to the sacred arena of sakhiyani!*[13]

Lesbian Bangladesh, another Yahoo group, describes itself as follows:

> *'Let emotions flow with the touch of love'*

> *Lesbian-Bangladesh: it is one of the oldest yahoo groups for Bangladeshi lesbian and bi-sexual women.*

And it continues:

> *You are Always Welcome to Our Family.*
> *'United We Stand, Divided We Fall'*

Thadani (2006) explains the meaning of '*sakhiyani'* which encompasses the idea of female-to-female eroticism and sexuality. The word *'sakhiyani'* is Hindi and the corresponding Bangla word is '*sakhi*' meaning girl-friend or a close female friend. It subtly indicates that this is for women, and women's friendship with each other. The history of '*sakhi*' culture in the sub-continent, especially in Bengal, is very old. The concept of *'sakhi'* is almost like a soul mate, a friend who is meant to last a life time. Even though culturally *'sakhi'* can have a subtle sexual connotation, the main implication is being able to share secrets of the heart and inner-most thoughts. Use of terms like '*sakhi'* or '*sakhiyani'* and concepts of 'family' are therefore significant, showing that women's social conditioning to associate femininity and feminine sexualities within the realm of family and friendship separates them from the way men tends to express their sexualities.

Women present themselves online as more feminine, aesthetic and social; where they are looking for food for thought, soul searching opportunities, friendship, companionship, and opportunities to connect with the wider world. There is very little about sex, desire, passion or sexuality that is explicitly posted or discussed online. It could be because lesbian women in Bangladesh maintain a very tight circle and fear being exposed. The notes, links, messages etc. that can be found on the public walls of online sites are accessible to the general public (if they wish to visit such sites) and therefore do not tend to be of a private or personal nature. Rather there are postings of articles, links and announcements of workshops and conferences. There were no profile pictures (not even fake ones or those of popular actors or singers which are commonly used in otherwise regular social networking sites by many). Messages are often about relationships, trust, dependence and the purity of love – expressed through short stories or jokes; or a simple message titled 'love', or wishes for 'Valentine's day'. Sexual connotations are completely absent. Instead, the sites announce get-togethers and plans for meeting up with people from the network to have tea and coffee discussion sessions.

The sites had a few gay men writing and participating, expressing their support and encouragements. Interestingly, there is no female presence on the gay men's forums or sites. Although there was a posting for the BoB's annual party on the *Sakhiyani* website, there was no response from any of the members (or at least not on the wall). I personally attended that party and I did not find any Bangladeshi woman (not even the familiar faces from the lesbian/bi-sexual community) present. In contrast, gay men sometimes participate in lesbian websites, sharing information on events etc. The male presence on women's websites does not necessarily speak of male encroachment in female spaces, but it definitely indicates how a few gay men, at least at that point of time, are trying to build a bigger, broader community based on sexual-identity and to include women's groups and their memberships in it.

Comparing the number of messages and member profiles on gay online sites and lesbian online sites (in 2009), it is clear that women are much more secretive and closeted (online) than gay men in Bangladesh. It seems that even in the virtual world women guard their private space more rigorously than gay men. This could be because they are less technologically oriented or savvy than men, but it could also be a result of other factors. By 2009 the internet was becoming more accessible and cheaper, and women, specifically younger women, had the option of building their own individual networks of friends from the 'community' through social networks thus minimizing the necessity of being attached to larger lesbian/bi-sexual online forums.

It is only in recent years that in countries like India sexuality rights as a concept has gained currency within the discourses on internet rights, and researchers are framing an understanding of how the internet becomes part of those dynamics (Bhattacharjya and Ganesh 2011). There is also an increasing interest to find out how discourses are being shaped in this domain and whether and how they can be regulated. It is undeniable that sexuality as a right is being expressed by many, especially by women and marginalized sections of society, through different social networks. The internet is gradually playing a key role, enabling people to transform unequal gender relations and discriminatory norms and practices (ibid). Even though, in the context of Bangladesh, men seem to have gained more momentum to organize their sexual identities within the context of the internet, women seem to be in the process of using the virtual world

to push the existing boundaries of cultural and social barriers that are otherwise imposed on them.

Conclusion

'Sexing the Public', as Bell (2001) terms it, is about looking into a variety of urban public spaces where erotic practices take place. But it is not only about the spots, the corners and centres where sexual desires are acted out that interest me. Rather, it is the blurry boundaries between the concepts of 'public' and 'private', and the ways in which privacy within public spaces simultaneously coexist that is critical. Thus, the public and private, operating in the same space at the same time, become the central point of investigation. Just as within 'real life' public spaces, pockets of private can be/are created to express and practice variant sexualities within the virtual world. This world can be both public and private and depending on its use has the potential to offer spaces for non-normative assertion of sexualities. For heterosexuals and sexual dissidents, the protective nature of the circles where 'outsider-invisible and insider-visible' (Bell, 2001:91), the ordering of spaces is part of the urban sexual culture in general, and non-normative sexual culture in particular. It is all the more applicable to women's non-normative sexualities in Dhaka. Binnie (2001:107) writes in the 'Erotic Possibilities of the City' that:

> Sexual dissidents are acutely aware of space in our everyday lives because we constantly have to recreate it from nothing. Heterosexual space and heterosexual desire are all-pervasive – just here. Heterosexual identity is ubiquitous and thereby placeless. In this sense, queer space is intimately dependent on a sense for place for its realization.

I agree that there is a constant challenge and effort on the part of sexual dissidents to create spaces for realizing, and not only having, sexual fantasies and desires within the ever-pervasive heterosexual spaces. In the context of Bangladesh there is an overall cultural fabric of repressing sexuality in general and enforcing heterosexuality as the norm. The 'publicly' lived 'private' lives of non-heteronormative people with alternative sexual desires, as discussed in this chapter, indicated the 'porosity' as well as the 'instability' of an otherwise strict heteronormative social framework that dominates both private and public spaces of the middle class in particular. Within a given urban space in the city of Dhaka, the gradual carving out of pockets of spaces by people on the socio-sexual margin is

carried out mostly by men and members of the transgender community. The dominant presence of male non-normative sexuality within public spaces and discourses is significant for understanding the position of women within sexual-identity based communities, their hierarchies and spaces.

The following chapter addresses aspects of sexuality, gender and sexual politics within the spaces of 'sexuality and development' and the 'sexuality rights movement' in Bangladesh.

Notes

[1] Title taken from Bell 2001.

[2] For information on street life and sexual activities in public spaces such as parks, shrines and transport hubs refer to ASEAB & TSB, 2000, Missing Citizens: Life on the Streets of Dhaka http://www.aseab.org/missing_citizens.pdf

[3] Reports on male prostitution and cruizing in Ramna Park, Dhaka, Bangladesh: Gay Bangladesh News and Reports: 1996-2009, GlobalGayz
http://archive.globalgayz.com/asia/bangladesh/gay-bangladesh-news-and-reports/#article2

[4] Organized and supported by BRAC.

[5] For more information on LGBTI in Bangladesh, please refer to http://lgbtbangladesh.wordpress.com/

[6] For a report on the event, refer to http://lgbtbangladesh.wordpress.com/2009/08/26/hijras-take-to-dhaka-catwalk-in-unique-awareness-campaign/

[7] For reports and photographs one can refer to LGBT Bangladesh (http://lgbtbangladesh.wordpress.com/).

[8] '*Ami kheye hojom korte pari'* translated loosely as 'can eat and digest', meaning one's capacity to handle or tackle people or situations with ease. It is a statement of power to demonstrate one's ability to resist, endure and process difficulties or challenges. It suggests a combination of strategy and power. In this narrative, the respondent is indicating that her gender as a woman is not a weak one, and that she is tough enough to stand her ground in any situation or context.

[9] It is in this space that Sujata can practise her bisexuality, being able to have a romantic relation with her (then) female lover, with whom she took a series of intimate photographs (of kissing, embracing and loving), and uploaded them on a social networking site for everyone's view.

[10] Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission, http://www. btrc.gov.bd/newsandevents/mobile_phone_subscribers/mobile_phone_subscribers_march_2010.php 21 April 2010.

[11] The second largest city in Bangladesh is a port city which has had a long reputation for gay sexual practices.

[12] '*Gay sex korar jonno shulobh mullay upojukto place vara dibo*,' meaning will rent out place for gay sex at a good price.

[13] http://groups.yahoo.com/group/sakhiyani/, 21 April, 2010.

8 Sexual Politics of Identity and Heteronormative Hierarchy of Development and Activism

The emerging discourse of sexuality is relatively new in the field of development, even within the sexuality rights movement. Both fields overlap each other as development agencies and donors support and fund sexuality rights-related initiatives and activities. Development and sexuality rights movements in Bangladesh are dominated by heteronormative attitudes and gendered class privilege. In the context of Bangladesh, the subject of sexual identity, its struggle and politics of labelling, is closely related to an individual's gender and class position. One therefore needs to address the politics of 'sexual identity' within the framework of development and sexuality, and how these concepts and politics are played out within sexuality-rights groups and networks. Do or can male and female homosexual groups access or claim the same place, position and prominence in these discourses and initiatives? Is there a gender hierarchy at play? Or is it class that eventually dominates the fields of sexuality?

In this chapter I focus on non-heterosexual women's groups and their position in the fields of sexuality rights, by exploring the politics of female sexual identity and how it impacts women's same sex support group membership in relation to different economic classes. In doing so, I also make a comparison between male and female same-sex support groups in order to understand if there are any differences in the ways in which these groups conceptualize sexual identity and operate through gender-sexual politics. I then look into the ways in which these groups and women's sexuality issues are positioned within the sexuality, development and rights movement.

Section 1: Sexual identities – from Personal to the Political

Identity is a fluid term, and the narratives of the non-heterosexual respondents in this study indicate that sexual identity is anything but *straight*. One can make strategic decisions to move in and out of different sexual identities (Holliday 1999; Eves 2004). My discussion on sexual identity therefore needs to start with a certain clarification on terms that are used in this chapter. I will use the term 'gay' for male homosexual individuals and groups because in my field research all male participants identified themselves as 'gay', and the group discussed here, BoB, identifies itself as a 'gay' group. Though the term MSM (Men having Sex with Men) is more commonly used in the fields of development and sexual-health, it is more indicative of sexual acts rather than identities. The term MSM is commonly endorsed by transgender groups while many gay men refuse MSM as an identity.

The differences between a 'gay' and an 'MSM' identity, according to an activist in Bangladesh, are that MSMs have sex just for erotic 'fun' to have a 'physical release' without bearing any emotional and/or identity implications, whereas 'gay' indicates a relationship component that is beyond physical need or pleasure. The second difference is that of class, i.e. within the development framework, MSMs generally are from a lower income group or the working class while 'gay' men tend to come from a middle and upper class background and are part of a wider, global gay identity with all its trappings (Hussain 2009).

A 'gay' identity label is therefore, from this perspective, something that only the educated, affluent class can afford to have or even understand, while for the working class sexual activity is apparently primarily for sexual gratification purposes alone. The difference between notions of 'sex' and 'sexuality', which clearly have a class bias, and interventions from activists at times even unintentionally fall into this already existing class biased approaches of development. It is therefore not surprising that efforts are focused largely on providing health care services rather than on other life oriented issues.

The class issue is acute in these discourses and articulations of interventional development programmes which target 'sexual minorities' and understand 'minorities' in terms of their sexual practices in a linear way. For example, MSM groups who are more inclined toward poverty, social exclusion and limited life choices, making them vulnerable to STIs and

HIV/AIDS. It excludes the young, middle class urban gay men (who are technically MSM too) who find the 'MSM' labelling to be insulting. To be gay is therefore, '…far more complicated and less palatable for the orthodoxy' (Hussain 2009). In other words, gay men are excluded from the MSM-dominant sexuality development politics mainly because of their class position. This refusal to be termed MSM challenges the heteronormative system that is tolerant enough to accommodate need-based male physical-sexual behaviour, but will not accept an identity that claims more space within the social institutions that constitute the very base of society.

'Lesbian' is a term that is more problematic. One group of women I studied rejected the term and never identified themselves as 'lesbians'. Others did not even know the term existed until an explanation of the term was provided to them in Bangla. On the other hand, the group of urban female sex workers identified themselves as 'women-loving-women' in Bangla but did not have a problem with the English term 'lesbian'. They reasoned that people understood it more readily than the Bangla terms. I will adopt Bacchetta's (2007) method of terming women's sexual identity as *lesbians and 'lesbians'* ('lesbian' for women who love women but do not use the term; and lesbians for those who do use it).

'Bisexuality' as a label of sexual identity has not been used by any of the groups. The term seems to be understood as an *obvious* state of being for many, as well as a strategy for survival. The *non-existence* of bisexuality, or rather the unsaid but understood acceptance of the necessary potential for bisexuality, of many interviewees is critical in my understanding of sexuality, both theoretically and politically. Mohammad (35), married and gay, did not have to think much before identifying himself as 'gay' to describe his sexuality. He explains his sexual activity within his marriage as his social-familial obligation that also helps him fulfil his lifelong desire for marriage, family and children.

The absence of bisexuality in the networks and discussions also shows that it does not form part of the discourse of sexuality and diversity. Female sex workers who are in same sex relations do not have the language to even address this issue. Rather, it is a non-issue and consequently does not need any specific terming. This raises an important question: is bisexuality, as a non-issue, a conformation to the concept of 'queer' which is about being non-normative, and defying norms beyond categories and labels? Or is it evidence of a deep-rooted compulsory het-

erosexuality that lies at the heart of Bengali society, a default option available to all, which cannot be equated with non-heterosexuality? In my view, it is the latter, i.e., heterosexuality has manifested itself with such compulsion and 'obviousness' that it is not a choice, but taken for granted as a necessity of sexual practice. Non-heterosexuality, on the other hand, is a choice of practice, if not erotic desire. But in practice it is not necessarily at odds with heterosexuality. The critical point here is desire versus practice, and default options versus personal choices.

'Queer' is a term that is never used in a clear/definite way in any discussions in Bangladesh. Rather, it is interchangeably used by activists, though rarely, with the term 'LGBT', or any other specific sexual-based identity. It does not have any Bangla translation, and therefore does not feature in discussions and conversations other than in academic or concept papers. 'Coming out', 'closeted' and 'outed' are terms that also seem to have limited relevance in people's narratives of their lives and sexualities, largely because these terms cannot be translated. *'Ami kauke boli nai (*I have not told anyone); or '*keu jane na'* (no one knows) are how people describe their 'closeted' status. Despite this, I will use the term queer for the sake of convenience and also because, unlike women respondents, none of whom ever used this, quite a few men (mainly educated, middle class and activist) did use it. Coming back to the main discussion, I would like to bring attention to the process of identity construction. Identity, and labelling oneself with a particular identity, is done at two levels: firstly, at the personal level, and secondly, at a collective level which takes the 'personal' to the level of the 'political'. I will discuss identity (and its politics) at the collective level first, mainly because in LGBTQ activism or sexuality rights movement 'identity' of the collective in terms of groups plays a crucial role. This is where groups differentiate from each other based on their respective sexual politics. For example, the '*Shomo Premi'* women – who are also the most visible in the LGBTQ community, had a debate over the labelling of 'lesbians', weighing the term's political correctness as well as its political usefulness in the broader sexuality rights movement/framework. They prefer to describe themselves as '*shomo-premi'*, emphasizing 'love'. In interviews, very few used 'lesbian' to describe their sexual identities and refused to 'label' themselves as such. In a workshop on Sexual Diversity and Coalition Building in 2009, a discussion around lesbian identity, its invisibility and survival mechanisms included declarations that 'Lesbians in Bangladesh prefer

the term *Nari-shomopremi*[1] '…relation between two females is spiritual, mental, and social. Sex is not central, but part of the larger construction of a relationship' (Rajeeb, 2010). Group members also indicated that image is an important element to social life in Bangladesh. Thus, one should use terms of identity that have less sexual connotation. While they reject the English term 'lesbian' in the context of Bangladesh, they recognize its relevance in international forums.

From our discussion, it was clear that non-heterosexual women's concept of gender and of their own femininity is moulded after the traditional role of women within Bengali society – a cultural setting where women's overt projection of sexuality or emphasis on 'sexual desire' is not welcome. Rather, for women expressions such as love, affection, loyalty, patience, and sacrifice, dominate their notions of female sexualities and how these can be expressed. Recognition that women are sexual – and in this case sexual in a way that is deemed 'deviant' – undermines the mainstream notion of 'respectable female sexuality', which is understood as transcending the sexual to an almost spiritual level. Therefore, 'S*homo Premi'* women want to distinguish themselves from the 'overtly sexual' *'shomo-kaami'* (*shomo* = same, *kami* = desiring/lustful/sexual lovers) gay culture. They avoid the label '*shomo-kaami',* which is a more generic public term for homosexuality, precisely because they do not want their sexual lives to be seen as the main marker of their identity. They approach sexual identity in a more holistic fashion, as a life option within the dominant mainstream framework of femininity; and within the Bengali cultural context that constructs women as caring, loving, soft, homebound home-makers. But what they add to this existing normative framework is agency, which is not part of mainstream Bengali female sexuality. Thus, '*Shomo-Premi'* women strive to achieve the freedom to choose a partner and live with respect and dignity without facing sanctions.

Sex worker 'lesbians' usually use Bangla terms such a '*nari-prem'* ('love for women') or '*bon*' (sister) though they have recently learned the term 'lesbian' through various intervention programmes around HIV/AIDS designed for sex workers. Their decision to be affiliated with sexual rights activities and to join a broader platform made them cautiously choose the English label of 'lesbian' because it has a more universal currency. I also feel that women sex worker do not feel the necessity to be viewed in the 'respectable middle class Bengali woman' image, or they

simply accept that society will not view them this way in any case. Their approach and lived experiences of sexuality through their profession, in a way, allows them to deal with sexuality and identity in a more straight-forward way. Being a sex worker, part of their social identity is related to professional identity, which is sexual in nature.

What makes sex workers' sexual identity a more complex and intriguing issue is that it shows that sexual identities can be as plural or diverse as an individual's sexual practices. Being commercial sex workers, these women not only assume heterosexual identities, they also practice it. While sex (the act) is central to the heterosexual identity, 'lesbian' is an identity that is used for a broader purpose of which sex (the act) is only a small part. 'Social identities, individual selves' as Holliday (1999) puts it, is central to the problematic of sexual identity-labelling for non-heterosexual women in this study. Identities are not only expressed through labels, but more through day-to-day expressions of living arrangements, life style, dress codes, associations, and images that are more social than individual. As individuals get more comfortable and confident with their sexualities, many find a middle ground of self-expression that allows them some continuity or fluidity of movement between different spaces, and their separate identity performances get reduced.

What is/are the links between the 'comfort of the outside of the body with the naturalness of the inside (self)' (Holliday 1999:483) and can these be prioritized over the social in the case of Bangladeshi middle class women? Unlike the popular image of Western queer/lesbian subcultures, in Bangladesh there is not a social 'obviousness' of queer identity (except for the transgender community), and the specificity of 'dyke, femme' etc. are not translated in either language or social meaning. Identity, its representations and meanings, are still very much within the binary of masculine-feminine, and mostly kept in this 'simplified' linear status. Within non-heterosexual communities, especially gay men, identities, roles, and expressions are much more varied and labelled. '*Shomo-Premi*' women will talk about how younger women of the community often love dressing up like 'men' (*chheler moton poshak-chola fera*/boy or men-like attire and movements) or couples coming as *'jamai-bou'* (husband-wife), but such cross-dressing is not done with the specific intention of claiming a particular 'label' of individual sexual identity.

The complexity of one's relation to sexual identity gives way to a debate about why and when one needs an identity, if at all. Sexual identity

and its variety of labels of queerness (LGBTQ) is a Western concept that somehow tries to put people into categories based on their sexual practices. However, for some, sexual identities are not at all tied with their sexual practices but to the erotic and/or romantic desires they have but which they might not have put into practice, ever! Mukta is a prime example of such a situation. Her brief but active (as narrated by her to me) heterosexual marriage does not identify her as a heterosexual. She describes her sexual 'identity' as someone who is attracted to other women, for whom she has deep sexual desires, but desires that are never expressed in sexual acts. To top it all, she does not even have the language (neither in Bangla nor English) to use terms for sexual identification.

I asked every participant, at some point, how would they 'identify' themselves sexually – a question that represented my own embeddedness in Western sexuality discourse. Three individuals (two women, and one male) 'did not understand my query' because 'identity' as a concept has not been part of their understanding of sexuality nor of the language of sexuality. As much as I recognize its relevance to the politics of sexuality rights, differences and diversities represented through label-based identities is an example of Western hegemonic sexuality discourse and is disputed by non-Western researches. Moreover, my own research provides evidence that these identities cannot do justice to the complex sexual lives that people live in reality, particularly in societies such as Bangladesh that require terms with more nuances (rather than labels) to accommodate variant gender and sexual practices with respect and acceptances for all. The diverse range of erotic desires and fluid sexual practices of these societies do not fit neatly into the dominant and conventional oppositional imagination of *homo-heterosexualities*.

Many non-heterosexual women give in to marriage, or let their female partners get married. That happens to be the most pragmatic strategic option, allowing them to remain friends and be in touch with each other, since marriage automatically translates (in the social heteronormative mindscape) into a heterosexually functional monogamous relation. In an informal discussion with a few *shomo-premi* women (who were not formally part of the research but were friends with some of my informants), they mentioned how sad they felt because of their lovers' marriage to men. They nevertheless found consolation in the fact that *'there is more to a relationship than living together, being physically close….it is love, which is beyond all these, and forever…we call each other, talk to each other…I was happy when she*

had a child … the fact that we can still be in each other's lives is enough!' Non-heterosexual women put a lot of emphasis on love and tend to keep the sexual aspect at a distance, making the matter of sexual orientation or choice broader and holistically life-oriented. Thus, in many ways, they want to fit into the social-cultural image of women and femininity in a loving, committed and compassionate relationship rather than as overtly sexual beings. Though they recognize the invisibility and silence of non-heterosexual women in society at large, and within the sexual 'minority' community in particular, they are not especially looking for immediate visibility or a voice. Women, therefore, can refuse to label their sexual identity because it is either an alien term, or something that denies the fluidity that one might or must perform at different phases of life.

Within the sex worker lesbian group everyone is referred to as a 'sister' (*'bon'*) or *'woman' ('nari'*) and nothing beyond that. But within gay male social groups, individual sexual identity is expressed in private and sometimes in public as well. The much-debated theoretical argument within queer studies regarding 'imitation' (butch/femme) of heterosexual practices and identities is yet to find ground in Bengali sexuality discourse, but it can still find ground in terms of locating performance and enactment of sexual identities. Production of queer or lesbian discourse in such social and spatial sites gives us the opportunity to explore how they have a destabilizing effect on heterosexual hegemony (Eves 2004). In gay gatherings/parties, I have seen men cross-dressing, performing drag, gay men in extremely feminine self-expression (almost gender transgression) while being completely at ease in a variety of social events like weddings, business environment and academia. Conversely, women in the same situation who manifest signs of non-femininity cause major gossip among colleagues and students. In other words, the construction of genders, subject positions and embodied identities of sexualities are not easily translated in Bengali socio-cultural space. In addition, non-heterosexual women have to continuously move within the shifting expressions of identities. As Holliday (1999:489) argues; '…comfort of identity…' for lesbians is far from an '..individual or individualized state within queer culture. Rather it is always social, though it may sometimes be produced through the rhetoric of individualism'. Within non-heterosexual women's groups, the social is more valued than individual comfort of identity because that might draw unwanted attention, displacement and disruption of the community.

Therefore, sexual identities also have generational differences in their understanding and manifestation. The 'non-heterosexual women without any label' were also comprised of younger women who felt they were in a sexual transition and therefore could not conform to one single sexual identity:

I would like to know if I am lesbian or not – so that I could get out of my dual life – this sense of guilt and shame. But whatever might be the interpretation or identity or even the opinion of the society regarding my sex life- I know this is what gives me joy. (Rima, 25)

Others do not really care about sexual identity as such:

Nowadays, they have so many names for this…. homosexual, girl-on-girl, etc…but I cannot think of myself in those terms, or categorize myself by those names… (Tamanna 29)

Identities, especially sexual identities, can be tricky for individuals who inhabit a social structure that either stigmatizes or demonizes anyone who appears to be deviant, and is seen as a failure or not adept at living within heteronormative societal boundaries. This is a reason why many women refuse to take a 'label' themselves. Nahar says; *'I am not particularly too keen on being introduced as a lesbian woman. I mean, I am proud of my sexual orientation and identity, but why should it be THE identity, or point of introduction! Do straight people get introduced as "heterosexual" individuals!`*

What comes out of women's narratives on sexual identity is that there are no Bangla words or terms to refer to women's non-normative sexualities (like the English words lesbian, dyke, butch, femme etc.) that can be used by women to construct or even define their desires, styles and choices of identities. But it is not the lack of vocabulary that is the main problem, but unwillingness on many women's part to be labelled based on their sexualities. Sexual identity for women is not a `straight-forward` process. Women go through a much more strict process of heterosexualization than men do. Because of how gender and femininity are constructed in Bangladeshi society, women are trained to think of themselves not as overtly sexual entities. In a heteronormative society, where marriage is the norm and motherhood is seen as the 'achievement of womanhood', women with non-heterosexual or even non-heteronormative identities find it difficult to identify with one particular label of sexual identity.

Image 10
Picture of an Opinion wall in the Coalition Office, Dhaka (2010)

Connecting women's conflicts, negotiations and personal politics of sexual identity with that of organizational politics is extremely significant to understanding how support groups organize, conduct, operate and thus position themselves in the broader field of sexual rights 'movements' and/or initiatives.

Image 11
Message from women's Same Sex group (Sex Worker Lesbian Group Shomoy,
in Bangla): It is TIME to speak with an open heart.
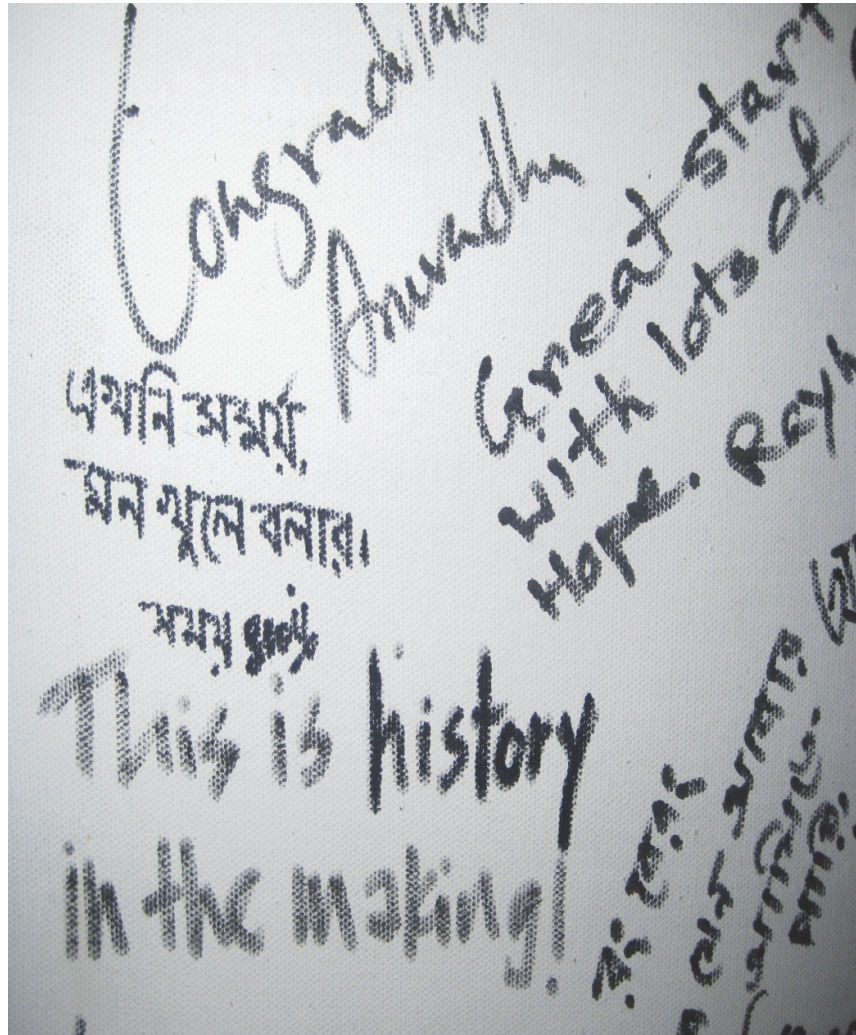
Visibility, Representation and Credibility: Gender, Class and Age Dynamics in Sexual-identity Based Groups

Shawprova was an initiative taken on by Flora in 2008. Flora is well conversant in sexuality discourse and has been part of international sexuality movements. She is, perhaps, the only 'public face' currently able to represent Bangladeshi women in/interested in same-sex relations, both nationally and internationally. The purpose or goal of the group was to bring women with same-sex desires, and sexual identities together, provide them a safe place for getting together, discussing their lives, struggles, issues etc., and provide a network of friends. Another of Flora's aims in setting up *Shawprova* was to introduce these women with information regarding sexual identities, different schools of thoughts, movements and how globally these issues are discussed and dealt with etc. In this way, awareness building about sexual rights was one of the prime objectives of the initiative.

The group always had a small membership but Flora's concern was never to expand the group for the sake of it, and membership was only given after serious scrutiny and a series of reference checks. Parveen (Flora's close friend) played a vital role in bringing in suitable members. Through her professional links she was able to meet young women interested in discussing sexuality issues. The group schedules monthly meetings at Flora's house, a group email is circulated and phone calls are made for confirmation. The monthly meetings operate more as a breathing space for the women, where they talk about life in general and things that are important to them as well as possible organizational agenda items. There is also a helpline, which is staffed by their friends, but only a few calls come.

When I did the first phase of my field work in 2009 the only members of this group I met up with were Flora and Parveen. This was because attendance at the meetings was restricted to members. By that time, the group was already well known within the LGBTQ community and within the development sector as well. *Shawprova* has always been represented by both Flora and Parveen at different forums and meetings. Within the group, membership was fluctuating and plummeting because of internal conflicts and disagreements – often between the founder and its members.

It must be mentioned that the group is divided more by age and less by class. The heads, Flora and Parveen, are senior in age and have the advantage of socio-economic stability in comparison to most members who are struggling young women in various challenging professions. As most young members came through Parveen, their affiliation and attachment was understandably with her. Other members of the group were middle aged, 35+ and educated, professional women who have equally strong opinions and views regarding issues that involve the group, much like the founder. By the time I came to know about the group, some of them had already left as a result of conflicts and disagreements. I did, however, manage to interview one such former member.

By 2009, *Shawprova* was facing conflict and was crumbling from within, but even then they continued to represent women's sexuality groups, mainly through Flora. One reason for this continuous representation was that there were no other known women's group that came forward to take part in forums etc.; and since Flora was educated, well conversant in sexuality rights language and in English with a strong international network it was evident that she would be called on for participation. Also, it must be acknowledged that Flora is a pioneer in this field; she has a strong conviction, commitment and motivation for what she does. Perhaps what lead to the failure of the group was the gap between generations and socio-economic status as well as the choice of methods for addressing issues and engaging with the subject.

In 2009 and early 2010, one of the burning issues of discussion and dispute in the group was whether to make the helpline publicly available by an advertisement in the newspapers. Many members did not support this action as it could put their lives at risk. Another issue was whether to register the group as an official organization which would mean it would have to have a certain number of members, would have to specify the group's objectives, and it would have to be renamed along the lines of a women's empowerment and rights group (under which sexuality could be covered – registering it as a pure sexuality group for women would make it impossible for it to exist). In April 2010, Flora mailed me to share the news that the group decided against registration as many felt that they were not ready for such a step yet. Even though the group, represented by Flora, was involved in at least three initiatives related to research and networking on sexuality groups (in 2009), by the time I revis-

ited the field in December 2010, all the links and networks had been dissolved as a result of conflicts of interest and ideological differences.

Flora is a staunch critic of the LGBTQ movement and sexuality and development initiatives for a variety of reasons. When I asked her (in 2010) about her thoughts on women's sexuality groups' position and space within the sexuality movement and the sexuality and development sector, she explained to me that in the LGBTQ movement, at present, the transgender community and a slim section of the gay community were making their presence felt. These two communities were a part of the 'sexuality and development' discourse in order to access a portion of the funding available. So, I asked where the 'lesbian' community stood in this. Can it be part mainstream NGO-based development partnerships, giants like BRAC, or must it try to do things its own way? Flora thinks there are two sides to this. In the first place, it is undeniable that NGO giants like BRAC can make anything or any event happen as generally people will not object to their initiatives, and important people will attend their events and can make sexuality a public issue. Yet although it has 'experts' on sexuality, it still addresses the issue within a disease/HIV etc. framework and not the root concerns of the community. Secondly, what is important for the LGBTQ community, especially the lesbian community, is the need to invest more time and effort organizing themselves in order to strengthen their message and prioritize their concerns before getting into public forums, or for any kind of public activism. Flora gives an example of how often the community wants to address issues that are relevant but not of immediate importance. When anti-Sodomy law was repealed in India, there was a similar demand (within the group) in Bangladesh. But Flora questioned how many people actually knew about 377 (same anti-Sodomy law) in Bangladesh and what, if any, its real impact is on the lives of non-heteronormative communities. She asserted that it has only been used once in the history of Bangladesh, and therefore it is as good as dead already! And only when you start stirring this issue does it becomes a danger. And even if it was repealed, what benefit would there be to the community?

Shawprova tried to collaborate with other groups' joint programmes and coalitions in order to make their existence felt. However, Flora felt that even though the 'leaders' of these initiatives were well-intentioned, young, enthusiastic people, they lacked foresight and experience. The different stakeholder partners could not come up with a structured long-

term agenda which would take the movement forward. She also felt that this new space that has been opened for sexuality rights ad discourse, is offering funds and possibility for many to make a career out of it. She blamed donors as well, arguing that their interest was superficial and that they only wanted to disburse money so they could report that in a country like Bangladesh, where there was no previous discussion on sexuality, *'…we initiated this and that and therefore it was a success'.*

On my return to the field in late 2010 and early 2011 I met with three members of *Shawprova*: Flora, Parveen and Bani. I discussed separately with each of them the group's current situation, its membership crisis and the reasons behind the crisis. Parveen had, by 2011, left the group over some disagreement with the founder, Flora. Since she happened to be a vital source of membership identification for *Shawprova*, her lack of participation impacted the group's membership significantly. Parveen says there are a few reasons for this 'fall out'. Firstly, the group tended to spend all its time in meetings just engaging in 'talking'. Theoretical talks about sexualities, rights, approaches etc. are all good, but these talks, in Parveen's opinion, do not have immediate relevance to the struggle of every day women's lives, especially her younger friends' lives, which are centred around the struggle for living, space, respect, and acceptance from their families and immediate surroundings. Most of Parveen's younger friends come from smaller towns and villages, taking up certain unconventional professions as a route of escape from both financial crisis and heteronormativity, especially the marriage norm and compulsory heterosexuality. These new professional and relocation choices not only allow the girls to support themselves and their families, it also gives them the opportunities to live with their partners. Parveen says that one of the ways to ask for or bring about acceptance from parents, especially mothers, for the daughter's same-sex relationships, is by showing how capable the daughter is as a child in terms of financial and social support, and show that she is not a burden to the parents but has a strong social network which is in turn their 'safety network' too. For example, when a daughter is away from home, Parveen and her group tries to maintain regular communication with her parents, especially her mother – they make sure that she is taken to the doctor or provided with help when needed or arrange for a fund that will allow the mother-daughter to go on a short holiday. These initiatives are taken by the larger support groups of friends in order to bond and further develop a better relation-

ship and thus ensure the gradual acceptance of sexuality. This is what Parveen calls '*social relevance which must be the central and integral part of the group*'s *agenda*'.

Social security and acceptance from families is a critical first step before politicizing the issue to a level that only deals with the theoretical aspects of sexuality issues, especially for women, and for her group of women in particular. She told me about two of her female friends who just got married and are now settled in Europe. Their 'love' story was an example of a success. The couple was introduced by Parveen (and other friends) and the wedding occurred according to all the local customs and necessary celebrations. This wedding represents a landmark occasion as it included the women's families and their consent/blessings for the same-sex marriage. Parveen saw this as an achievement for the members of the group. Parveen and her partner plan to start their own organization/group where life as it is lived and its attached needs are given priority over 'jargon'. She wants to focus on lives at the local level rather than on what and how it is comprehended at the academic/international level. She is open to have *Shawprova* included as part of the new groups activities, but does not want *Shawprova* to exist under its umbrella/auspices.

Bani, still a member of *Shawprova*, told me that the reason for its failure to organize a sustainable group was its 'rigidity', lack of social relevance and absence from fun social events etc. Unlike the male gay groups/community, which was gathering and organizing itself for entertainment and 'hooking up', *Shawprova* had no such initiatives. Also the group's lack of online activity and access limited their membership greatly, making it entirely dependent on individual references. Bani herself admits that even though she is a regular member of the group, she does not feel motivated enough to be active and do more than her assigned tasks.

Flora, the founder of the group, discussed the group's working or non-working status and reasons behind it. Since she is undeniably the 'face' of women's homosexuality in Bangladesh, and represents the issue internationally as well, her over-presence is bound to bring about a certain tension within the community. She understands that because of her position in the group, there is not anyone who wants to take on the leadership role, even though she has always been open to young leadership. She admits that the group did not manage to arrange any social events as such where girls could meet new friends and enhance their social-

personal-sexual lives. She recognizes that her own ideological stance is often in conflict with mainstream thoughts and thus limits her from participating in broader forums, which in turn affects the expansion of the group. Whatever the limitations might be, Flora is keen on keeping the group alive and continues to circulate regular meeting invitations. She plans to use her personal funds to support workshops in women's colleges outside Dhaka at an institute built and run by her friend.

The fact that not everyone believes in the popular 'the personal is political' motto of activism in a universal way is crucial in my own understanding of sexualities and its politics in the context of Bangladesh. Protecting the personal is often considered more strategic than going public and political and these difficult choices are more real for members of the middle class. In Bangladesh, going public and political for many means risk, vulnerability and disruption to a quiet, closeted but safe life of personal choices. Going political and public for women also means confrontations with male dominated forums and inherent patriarchal structures because sexual equality does not necessarily bring gender equality. Finally, any kind of political agenda within an organizational structure brings a hierarchy that can eventually give way to power relations. For many members of these groups, such power relations, and politics, are something they want to avoid.

If women's sexuality group initiatives started with a much more activism-based approach and failed because of the absence of social relevance, men's sexuality groups went in the opposite direction. BoB started as an online group, also an individual initiative, at a time when the internet was just becoming popular and therefore still relatively uncommon at the household level. The group started with the simple aim of getting together on a regular basis and offering a social-network service for men who were in/interested in same-sex relations. With time the group had a huge response from Bangladeshi men, especially from Dhaka. Gay men used the online social platform to make friends within the community and to look for potential 'hook-ups'. BoB's popularity was immense as a result of the meetings, parties and social events organized by the group. In the beginning the group could be homogenized within a particular class of men (mainly middle-upper middle class, educated, professionals and English speaking). But with time and because of the changes over the past decade in the urban social scenario – more class mobility, rapid improvement in telecommunication and internet access

for people of all sections and classes – BoB became increasingly less relevant as a mechanism for community events (other than the annual parties).

Two things happened over the past few years which changed BoB's function. Firstly, changes in class became an issue in the operation of BoB as a group. With time more non-English speaking, middle class to lower-middle income men were coming to BoB events, and especially older members felt that the events were used by many young men as a social ladder (in order to capitalize on benefit from those with financial or other assets). This became a dominant issue so much so that in recent times BoB parties are not attended by older and more affluent/established original/old members of the group. Secondly, there were generational changes as the young men who started BoB are now in their mid-thirties or early 40s, mature, and professionally and/or personally settled (in heterosexual marriage or even in discreet same-sex cohabitation). For many of these men BoB has become irrelevant, and in fact, may even pose a 'risk' to an otherwise settled and 'balanced' life.

Not having the original members and patrons of BoB affected its operation. Thus the activism and the political agenda of the younger leadership of recent years has resulted in a shift in the interests from organizing social events to right-based activism, including joining in the bandwagon of sexuality and development issues, especially those funded and spearheaded by national NGOs and international donors. At that time BoB also started sending letters to the daily newspaper addressing gay issues in order to bring these to light. The response was mixed, with some great support and some extreme criticism. Safe sex campaigns were also initiated and members were encouraged to go for voluntary HIV testing at *Jagori*, a sister concern of International Centre for Diarrheal Disease Research, Bangladesh (ICDDR,B). As a result, in 2006 BoB had a meeting with the then country representative of different UN organizational heads and head of the virology department of ICDDR,B. In the same year BoB also had a meeting with *Ain O Salish Kendro*[2] (ASK) and facilitated a survey on sexual diversity that was carried out by ASK. Unfortunately none of these meetings produced any project participation or initiatives since they were not followed up, mostly because of a lack of effort from BoB.

This sudden involvement of BoB in social activism caused discomfort for many. Also, the then convener's own initiative to bring private fund-

ing to support workshops and play a core role in building a coalition was not supported by some members. There was such concern about the convenor's level of 'domination', his 'authoritarian attitude' and use of 'power games' along with suspicions over money and funding that it resulted in creating rift amongst the members. All this resulted in the group considering stopping all its activities for some time, and for the (then) convener to step down from the post.

Interestingly, the difference between the gay and lesbian communities in Dhaka is that, in terms of activism, the gay community represents a younger, more educated urban group of people who want to make their issues more public and start a political movement. They are more 'out' than the lesbian community. In the women's group, on the other hand, it is the senior members who are the public faces, and the younger ones are not only closeted but also reluctant and less confident in making this a movement for their right to live a life full of choices. Class and age seem to dominate the dynamics of these two groups in quite opposite ways, yet they have similar outcomes related to identity conflicts, ideological differences and the tension regarding leadership and representation. In this context, it is interesting to examine a third group which works these intersections of class and gender to its benefit and helps to bring about new thoughts regarding sexuality, space and organization.

Shomoy is a non-registered group of commercial sex workers who identify themselves as 'lesbians' in their personal lives. I met with the group in BoB's office in January 2011, during a social event. We were introduced to each other by BoB's convener and a meeting date was set for discussion. Although sex workers were not part of my original research design, their position as a 'lesbian' group and the only other women's group in the sexuality scenario next to *Shawprova*, made this group crucial for this study. It was intriguingly insightful to know how women sex workers could organize and claim space within an otherwise educated, middle class and male dominated LGBTQ landscape in Dhaka.

The group was initiated and formed by an ex-sex worker, Kohinoor (28), who felt the need to organize fellow sex workers (within Dhaka) in same-sex relationships and to look into their (and their children's) welfare. Kohinoor started the initiative only about a year ago but managed to get an initial membership of 25 women. The membership has been increasing ever since, and Kohinoor is working relentlessly to gather resources, information and space through networking with other sexual-

identity based groups. She was introduced to the Coalition through a transgender group and after some meetings, her group was given membership, which in turn allowed her to access a small fund to hold monthly meetings using the Coalition's office space. The group is administratively well-organized in terms of maintaining meeting minutes, documenting proceedings and transparency of accounts and accountability. Members are required to pay a monthly membership fee, which is mainly used for the emergency needs of the members (like releasing a sex worker from police custody, or bailing a member from the court etc.). Most members are also part of the Sex Workers' Welfare Organization.

Their experience of organization provided them with administrative and organizational skills, and this is a major difference between *Shomoy* and the other two groups discussed in this section. It should also be mentioned here that the initiative to set up *Shomoy* as a separate group based on sexual-identity, created anger and hostility within the umbrella Sex Workers' Welfare Organization, which resulted in threats, violence and punishment (in the form of monitory compensation) for Kohinoor. One of the main objections of the Sex Worker's Organization was that identifying and organizing as a 'lesbian' group will label the entire sex workers' community as deviants and lesbians, which will be harmful to the image of the association. This indicates that sex workers find it easier to work and strategically benefit from the heteronormative structure of the society, even though they are positioned at the bottom rung of the hierarchy.

Despite the conflicts, threats and violence inflicted on Kohinoor, she has been determined to carve out a space for her group with the help from groups in the Coalition. Unlike *Shawprova, Shomoy* is closer to the other groups and their leaders, especially the transgender groups mainly because of their class affiliation and a commonality in their marginalized social position. *Shomoy* was looking for allies that would benefit them, and did not want to challenge anyone or any group ideologically. *Shomoy* refrained from participating in all discussions because of their newcomer position and lack of efficiency over the 'language of sexuality' and 'jargons of sexual discourses'. They rather preferred to focus on the organizational stability of the group itself. Though the group uses the term 'lesbian' as their sexual identity, all documentation and communication is actually done in Bangla so they use the term '*nari-premi*' (women-loving-women). Interestingly, they mentioned in our discussions that they can

do without getting into the politics of identity, labelling and framing etc., because they are not educated or informed enough regarding these politics. They have identified welfare as their topmost priority and this strategy and attitude actually benefits the group. The most common complaint that was voiced by other members of the other groups regarding 'lesbians' were: *'(They) argue too much, they whine and they put too much emphasis on "terminology" and contest 'this rights movement' which, according to them is not to be done for donors, or for making a career'* (Martin, 45).

Unlike the other two groups, *Shomoy* does not seem to struggle internally with class and age tensions. Because all its members come from similar professional backgrounds, realities and living arrangements, they are united in protecting themselves from the outside (both mainstream oppression and marginalization, as well as hostility and marginalization within the sex workers community). The extent of their common ground strengthens the group and helps them to stay together. Also group members are all between 20-40 years old, and, as a practice in the sex workers' community, age is respected and hierarchy is maintained based on age and seniority within the profession. Also, because socially the group is considered lower middle class or even working class (despite the fact that many of them have a high income – a fact they prefer to hide for safety and security), within the sexual identity-based organizations and LGBTQ movement they are not seen as a threat, and can be kept under control unlike the other women's group (whose class and network privilege is seen as problematic). Weiringa and Blackwood (2007:9) note that conflicts, especially those based on class, are features of women's groups: 'As Asian feminists struggle to attain greater rights, the tensions and differences within and across same sex communities and networks are becoming visible as well, particularly in terms of class.'

Comparing the two women's groups discussed above, it is important that we look into how their individual identity and identity-based political positionality actually plays out in the sexuality field of development and the sexuality rights movement itself. 'Does a lesbian identity necessarily offer a natural and secure platform for lesbian politics? Is the name "lesbian" a self-explanatory one, a homogenous embodiment of marginalization and therefore a bearer of a radical transformation?' asks Biswas (2009:276).

Looking back at the history of lesbian politics in India, and from the reflections of activists, Biswas (2009) shows how a slow shift has taken

place in the 'collective identity' of lesbians over the decades. While there were undercurrents of tensions and conflicts over determining or evolving a 'true' collective lesbian identity, and the dilemma over who can be included and not, the journey maps lesbian politics '…moving from understandings of secure, self-evident lesbian identities to include more and more fractured, blurred, and indefinite sexual identities. And as they embarked on a self-reflexive rethinking of their assumptions, as a community, and to remind themselves that struggles to change mind-sets are not just for the world at large but also about their very own set, what appeared on the surface as politically baffling carried the promise of a larger sisterhood. Sharing space inevitably spawns a dismembering of one's self, and an effort to think an (im)possible politics of collective solidarity amidst a remembered solitude of selves' (ibid, 2009:277). Bacchetta, in her reflection on 1980s lesbian history in Delhi, says that India dealt with this identity and positionality that was crucial for the lesbian women's agency, organization, and activities in the 80s. In fact, in the 1980s there was little agreement among lesbians, and among 'lesbians', and between them about terms of identity, and in some work a multiplicity of terms surfaced precisely to dismantle fixity. (2007:112). Just like in Delhi in the 80s, in Bangladesh, especially in Dhaka, we find women informally grouping and organizing themselves based on their sexual-identity or orientations. And as in Delhi, in these informal organizations, autonomous discussions were arranged in smaller private spaces like middle class homes. And just like the present debates that are central to the women's groups, such as *Shawprova'*s conflict or crisis etc., 1980s Delhi lesbian and 'lesbian' groups' faced similar debates and conflicts, which resulted in '…splits over strategies (remain a discussion group? Engage in projects? Mobilise a rights campaign? Visibility or not?)' (ibid, 2007:115-116). In this sense, what the women's sexual identity-based groups as well as men's groups are going through is not uncommon if one looks at the history of LGBTQ communities around the world.

Section 2: Players and Power Dynamics in the Field of Sexuality in Bangladesh

There is a growing tension in (homo)sexual politics amongst the groups that are organized based on their non-normative sexual identities as well as between dominant heterosexual mainstream researchers/organizers and networks. The tension between transgender, gay and lesbian groups

stems from the sexual rights-based approach that centres around identity politics, which is brought about by a new wave of interest in sexuality studies/development work by donors in Bangladesh. There is also a tension regarding who gets to use this newly formed platform within the funding-backed development sector. Since most of these groups are self-organized, often non-registered (except for a few transgender groups for disadvantaged and discriminated members of the communities), the struggle is often over group 'boundaries', memberships and what space they can claim within this newly articulated sexuality discourse of development. As Humphreys (2011:223-4) indicates in his study titled 'To Queer or not to Queer a Lesbian and Gay groups? Sexual and gendered politics at the turn of the century', an empirical study in the UK that such struggles are far from unique to gay and lesbian groups, and '…they may be endemic to identity politics as such'. Unlike the UK situation, which deals with the struggle between the gay and lesbian groups' position versus that of 'queerdom' (thus bringing the transgender and bisexual people in the equation), in the context of present Bangladesh sexuality rights activism labelling and membership exclusivity is still mainly on a broad, generalized and often linear simplistic level. Unlike most Western countries, in Bangladesh it is uniquely the transgender community that spearheads the sexuality discourse, organizational work and holds the top position within the hierarchy of sexual minorities. Therefore, the struggle for space, and the tension revolving around power within the margin of sexual politics is about negotiation for existence, visibility, and presence so that groups can be formed, operate and kick start their networking activities with members who are mostly closeted or highly invisible. Therefore, unlike the Humphreys' UK union case, for example, in which the anti-queer lobby feared that '…the prospect of queering the group is viewed as tantamount to the extinction of the group' (ibid), in Bangladesh, it is more on the line of the pro-queer lobby which endorses the view that inclusion of transgender and bisexuals helps the community or the group to liberate itself from '…its own myopic strictures' and helps in '…tackling wider questions of sexual and gender oppression' (ibid). But what needs to be explored and investigated in this chapter, to some extent, is whether such views actually can or do operate within the community when it comes to formal grouping and organizational networking, or do they actually reinforce mainstream society's dominant system of gendered discrimination and oppression.

The other side of this struggle of identity and 'boundaries' of identity-based groups is the infiltration and dominance that more powerful (in terms of resources, class, education and networks), mostly heterosexual, development actors/researchers have who enter the 'field' as experts, and with an often unintentional but in-built 'self-other' framework of mind and attitude. The starting point of their work is from a dominant-heteronormative stance of social position against which the sexual minorities are placed – which results in an unfair and imbalanced power dynamic within the field itself. This tension is quite similar to the work Humphreys (2011) conducted where he showed the connection between local sites of sexual and gendered struggles and global cartographies of sexual and gendered oppressions and in Bangladesh it is the tension between the local understanding and often cultural-linguistic limitations of concepts, labelling and framing of identities against the already established and well-used Western-English hegemonic terminology, frameworks and jargons of sexuality and rights.

In Bangladesh, all development and social movements are centred in the capital city, Dhaka, and this is no exception in the case of sexuality. Here there is nothing concrete that can be termed as a 'sexuality rights movement', though sexuality has become an issue within the human rights discourse and slowly but surely sexuality as a rights issue has entered the scenario. Much of the sexuality rights-related discourse in the country is actually part of the development discourse, as the Bangladeshi development scenario is dominated by a variety of NGOs who are also part of the social movement in general as well. The sexual identity-based groups, which are supposedly the main actors, stakeholders, and target groups and/or beneficiaries of the interventions and activities funded, assisted, and sponsored by various donors and NGOs are the ones that are still predominantly and informally organized, except for the transgender groups. As mentioned before, 'queer' as a concept is used very loosely and does not interfere or challenge exclusive sexual-identity-based groups. Even though each group is exclusively for its members who share similar sexual orientations, bisexuality is understood as a regular and accepted practice by all groups and seen as an essential survival strategy for people with non-heteronormative sexualities.

Also, a group's status as 'registered' or 'non-registered' can influence how it can and does operate within the hierarchy of stakeholders. As a registered group the organization can take funds and have extended ac-

tivities while non-registered groups are often dependent on their affiliation with registered group, and/or the financial support of members/sponsors. Funds can either be disbursed through the registered groups or an individual member of a non-registered group. Such informal systems of fund management often paves the way to disputes, conflicts and more uneven power relations amongst its members.

As can be seen from the three support group case studies, and from field experiences and participants' narratives, I conclude that at this preliminary stage of a LGBTQ movement in Bangladesh, which is strictly Dhaka centred at this moment, sexual-identity based groups are still struggling to organize themselves. This conclusion does not include the transgender groups which are already socially clustered and hence in a somewhat better position to be organize themselves. Age, education, class, and networking ability are the main elements that come to play in the organizational aspect of the groups.

These gendered privileges also spill over from members' private lives to the group dynamics. The difference between the gay and lesbian community in Dhaka in terms of activism, is that in the gay community it is the younger, educated urban men who want to make their issues more public and start a more Western-modelled rights movement. They are the ones who are more 'outed' than the other gender and age groups. Conversely, in women's same-sex groups, it is senior members who are the public face of their community. Younger women are not only closeted but also reluctant and less confident to actively take part in a movement on sexual rights. What is the reason for younger women's reluctance to participate? I, in discussion with Flora, feel that in Bangladeshi middle class society people do not really care what women of a particular age (i.e. past the marital-reproductive age) do. This position is more powered by a middle class woman's education, professional and economic success or confidence. Therefore, women over 50 are the ones who can afford to lead these groups. Younger women on the other hand, are more occupied with the on-going struggles of their personal lives. According to Parveen they are '… *more than happy or satisfied of they could find a safe corner to live with their girlfriends and live an undisturbed life…they want nothing more than this*'. Younger women lack in confidence even if they have the education and/or the money, and often concepts of rights and movements as such are unclear to them.

Bani explain why she, for example, is not into activism or in LGBT movement:

I am not very sanguine about the future of LGBT activism because of the lack of democratic norms in the fabric of this country. Still, religion is a huge political factor here and our politicians are not earnest and honest enough to face it. But, one of the most positive facts is that studies are underway from the rights perspective. The earlier engagement of sexuality issues tied with the HIV-AIDS matrix opened up a way for talking about sexuality. But it cannot be confined to it for its own liberation. All the LGBT groups, apart from the transgender community, are acting as the safe spaces for meeting primarily. In terms of serious activism, these groups are yet to take the stake, but the lack that I feel is a vibrant political dialogue, and the interconnections that it will make with the political ideology without which it cannot sustain a strong footing. And we also must be aware of the class issue, and that gay and lesbian groups in Bangladesh are suffering from elitism sometimes due to their class bias and also due to the lack of political vision. In fact, we are in a nascent stage, the stage where we are documenting who these people are, how they lead their life. The real activism needs to form within this group. I also don't expect more from these groups as I know the risk involved with it. Nowadays, I am quite confounded to share my thoughts in a public forum, so those who are striving should be given the credit which they deserve. But the movement would be much strengthened if the horizons were widened, if they remain cautious about the pitfalls of identity politics.

The 'pitfalls of identity politics' as Bani points out, are indicative to the central reasons of sexuality groups' initial existence, their organizational basis and also eventual break-down.

Sexuality and/in Development

The question remains whether in Bangladesh there can be any 'movement' as such which would gather enough momentum to challenge the heteronormative socio-legal framework and dominant Bengali culture in order to pursue equal rights and acceptance for people with non-heterosexual identities and life choices? Rashid et al. (2011) assesses the situation as such:

Given the present political climate, and the nature of the subject matter and lack of an enabling environment in Bangladesh, it is very difficult to predict the level of impact our research/advocacy will have on any larger change in government policy in the immediate term. Very few governments will push forward policy changes which may be viewed unfavoura-

bly in the wider society. However, we found that it is possible to create a public space and dialogue on sexuality and rights in a conservative and challenging environment like Bangladesh by bringing together a diverse group of stakeholders – LGBT groups, researches, academics, NGO professionals, health providers, journalists and policymakers – to successfully challenge representations of sexuality in the public arena. (ibid)

The influence of religion, especially Islam, is very strong on politics and the legal framework and any challenge to change what is seen as the essential 'base' and 'structure' of the hetero-patriarchal society of Bangladesh, would be extremely difficult. Such danger is voiced by Weiringa and Blackwood (2007) in their reflection on the Asian context:

In most Asian countries women and transgender women who desire women must navigate the advantages and dangers of 'coming out' against the public silence about sexuality, the anti-women discourses of rising fundamentalist movements (themselves inspired by global phenomena), and opportunistic politicians, who for reasons of building political alliances, proclaim all forms of same-sex relations decadent and 'western.'

These very tensions of culture, gender and class characterize development and sexuality in Bangladesh and the slowly emerging LGBTQ movement. Women's same-sex groups, which are far and few between, are yet to find firm ground under their feet and make strong, trusted allies to take their agenda forward.

Us versus them- 'we need to be with them/ raise a voice for their rights'

Inherent heteronormativity is a process that can produce an 'us versus them' situation even when one is careful, well-intentioned and otherwise sensitized in sexuality rights issues. And this 'us versus them' is a rather common phenomenon in development discourses on sexuality. Informants and activists from the non-normative community mentioned that if sexual rights activists, researchers and development workers are non-community members , then there is a risk of a dominating 'heterosexual vision of sexuality' (Himadri). Besides this, there is still a dominating trend of addressing sexuality from a medical, HIV/AIDS and reproductive health and rights perspective, rather than engaging with it from a life-centred, integrated humane perspective. As much of the funding is for HIV/AIDS/reproductive health-related work, target groups are seen as 'risk groups' or people who are potential risks. For these reasons,

most work is male sex and men oriented, thus looking at taking MSM (Men having Sex with Men) and leaving women's sexual health and rights issues addressed. Himadri, who is involved in many of these sexuality related studies and activities, commented that he has only once an(other) heterosexual activist (a feminist) give a speech during the 'Rainbow Week' (in 2010), without mentioning 'us and them', thus othering the LGBTQ community. Whether it was a carefully crafted speech or not, but it still indicated a sensitivity which was appreciated by members of the community. He discussed how, even with the 'best of intentions', heterosexual activists, researchers and development workers find it difficult to forgo their patronizing attitude towards LGBTQ community – an attitude which can be very humiliating and disturbing.

Members of women's organizations like *Naripokkho*,[3] which is a feminist organization and was one of the very first ones (perhaps the only one) to take up issues regarding women's rights over their body, control and sex-workers' rights, admit that even though 'sexuality and sexual rights issues' were part of their central agenda when they started the organization, they never actually managed to seriously take up an exclusively 'sexuality' theme as part of their activities. Even though it was in this organization that Flora found a forum to discuss women's sexualities and women's same-sex love in the 90s, these themes did not proceed on the group's agenda beyond that. In their organization's assessment workshop held in 2009, the founding members discussed this as a 'limitation' and frankly admitted that like many other women's organizations, here also 'sexuality' remains a 'taboo': *'We have wanted to talk about it and work on it for some time now but don't know exactly, how…we have hidden ourselves behind the comfortable issues and failed to address sexuality on its own terms'.*[4] From my own interaction and discussion with its members regarding women's sexuality issues, especially women's non-normative sexuality issues/identity etc., held during many meetings and tours as part of their women's conferences held in late 2009 and early 2010, I realized that there is a strong 'homophobia' and heteronormative judgement over members who are 'known' to be 'lesbians'. While I respect individual's personal opinion regarding this, what was striking was that one important member was not included in the tours mainly because no one wanted to share a room with her as she was a 'lesbian' and allegedly had 'attacked a woman' previously. The strong bias, prejudice and fear of the 'unknown, unpredictable sexual aggression of lesbian women' who 'act like men' was surpris-

ingly strong even when most members were actually quite tolerant and open minded about the concept that some women are non-heterosexual. Therefore, the organization has, in its members' mental landscape, a tolerance and acceptance of non-heteronormative sexual identities as a concept and is much more comfortable with gay and transgender people (who are part of their many activities and programmes), yet in reality expresses a non-acceptance, fear and rejection of non-heterosexual women.

One of the major organizations that entered the sexuality and development field in 2008 is BRAC, which has its own Centre for Gender Sexuality and HIV/AIDS: a UNAIDS Collaborating Centre, which 'is designated for research, policy, advocacy and training activities utilizing the state-of-the-art methods and technologies of teaching/learning and providing unique opportunities in hands-on field experience in dealing with gender, sexuality, and HIV/AIDS in Bangladesh and other developing countries.' (SPH, 2011). Sexuality is one of their major themes, under which BRAC has been conducting research. BRAC is relevant for this study and for this particular chapter because some major of my key informants/interviewees have also been partners in BRAC initiatives and studies. BRAC's sexuality centre was also represented in the Coalition (formed in 2009). In many ways, BRAC has networked within the community and mainly worked with transgender and gay men and a few women in same-sex relations. In their preliminary research finding seminar in 2009, most of the attention was paid to transgender identity, sexuality rights, with some representation from gay men (and BoB was one key group to be represented), and a very brief overview of women who are in same-sex relations, in which *Shawprova* was mentioned. The researchers acknowledged the limitation of the study regarding women's non-normative sexualities as they found it difficult to get interviews and information beyond the familiar faces within the community.

In a paper titled 'Creating a public space and dialogue on sexuality and rights: a case study from Bangladesh' (Rashid et al. 2011), the authors conclude that the success of BRAC's programme was that 'It was found to be possible to create a public space and dialogue on sexuality and rights in a conservative and challenging environment like Bangladesh by bringing together a diverse group of stakeholders to successfully challenge representations of sexuality in the public arena' (ibid). Much in tune with the broad theme of this research, BRAC also addresses 'space' as a dominant theme, though mostly dealing with public spaces, through

which they try to induce LGBTQ communities to interact with the mainstream communities:

> However, there was a clear understanding that the important space to be influenced was the conceptual space. Given a combination of the resources we had available and our positioning as an academic institution, the principal focus of the work was to use research and informed debate to challenge representations of sexuality and rights in the public domain. As the work progressed through activities to build partnerships and alliances, other spaces have become engaged. The increasingly visible participation of LGBT groups and strengthening of advocacy in this arena has begun to open up claimed or popular spaces where such groups feel able to contribute their own voices. For example, in some of our training workshops in 2009, LGBT groups were invited as participants and encouraged to share experiences and challenge existing in hetero-normative frameworks with a diverse group of participants. This also allowed for LGBT members to reach out to each other and start the dialogue with one another. It is hoped that other policy spaces can be opened up through this unfolding process, for instance in relation to law and discriminatory practices (Rashid et al. 2011).

Also, as one of the major emerging 'players' within the sexuality and development field, BRAC was able to enter as a 'contributor' to the emerging LGBT movement as well: 'The LGBT communities are setting up a Coalition and have approached the School to provide venue support for their trainings and access to resource materials for training of their members. Given the level of trust and close relationship with many members of the Coalition, staff members were invited to the first ever historic inauguration of a registered office for the Coalition of LGBT in Bangladesh in August 2009. Donors have recently provided support to fund the establishment of an office for the Coalition of LGBT in Dhaka.' (ibid.)

The 'problem' (if it can be termed as such) with bigger organizations like BRAC is that their objective is to bring 'sexuality issues' and 'its non-conforming participants', who are termed also as 'sexual minorities' (which is opposed by many members of the community) to this 'space' of public discourse and discussions. This means that they are more or less bound to work with 'representatives' of different stakeholders, groups and sexual identities and are more engaged with concepts rather than lives as lived by individuals across class and location. The danger of

'representation' is noted by Bacchetta (2007) especially at the transnational level, but is applicable here as well:

> In this transnational organising, national-normativity remains the dominant frame. … queer activists … are understood as national subjects – as parliamentary representatives… They are often made to speak for or are interpreted as speaking for the entire queer population of their nation. This poses several problems. First, nations are not homogenous and the conditions of variously positioned queers (by class, racialization, caste, gender, or sexualities themselves) can also vary considerably. When national subjects who speak in transnational forums are made to represent all of queerdom in their nation (or diaspora), the possible range of international queer subjectivities gets effaced. The effacement may occur for a number of reasons. For example, transnational queer activism has come to require some competence in the English language, which is often a privilege of elites. Furthermore, interqueer connectivity within nations themselves cannot be assumed; the national speakers in question may be oblivious to the range of queer subjectivities in their own national contexts. Finally, in patriarchal/fraternarchal/filiarchal national contexts, lesbians and 'lesbian' voices may be silenced, to the point that they become doubly silenced at the transnational scale. (2007: 107-108)

The three points made here about representations and the problematic of 'tokenism' is very much a reality in the context of Bangladesh as well. The interconnectedness of the members of each sexual-identity based groups across class and location remains a question (this does not hold true for transgender groups as their network of organizations is rather large and country wide). Likewise, because of the emphasis on 'representations' of different groups and communities, 'subjectivities' get effaced as more generic representation of a sexual identity as lived experiences are presented in larger forums. And finally, women's already faint voices become gradually lost in the cacophony of multiple and contesting voices.

Sexuality within development is new in Bangladesh, and has emerged at a time when the sexuality-rights movement is still in its conceptual stage and when different sexually variant groups are positioned in a gender and class hierarchy. As Lind (2009, 2009:37-8) points out, rather than simply 'add queer and stir', development scholars and practitioners should 'rethink the social organization of sex/gender systems', and 'assess how heteronormativity is central to the frameworks they use'; and

more precisely 'research could be conducted to analyse how development practitioners themselves think about gender and sexuality, and how this translates (or not) into development policies in the global south'.

There is a need to address heteronormativity and not look exclusively into non-normative non-heterosexuality, but to dig deep into heterosexuality itself. The close association of development (and NGOs) with sexuality rights (and its various stakeholders) has its pros and cons. Nayar (2007) questions the 'usefulness' or application of 'First World' model/s of successful gay subcultures and movements (citing Weeks, 1997) on countries like India. Nayar (2007) and Merchant (2009: 120)) talk about the problematic of 'homogenization' of gay life/gay continuum because it 'forges a solidarity among world's gay community, situating all gays within the category of oppressed and silenced, the contexts in which gay life is lived varies from culture to culture'; and how a backlash can be/is the 'impact of Western gay lifestyle/attitudes' and should be 'crucial to an understanding of the subcultural influences on sexuality and attitudes towards it'. This fear is very real in the case of Bangladesh, a fear that is expressed by many 'closeted' gay and lesbians, as well as being evident in the public reaction to any news in local newspapers on gay rights in the West. Besides, the power hierarchy existing within the movement and NGO-styled support-groups/organizations is real and can be (and has proved to be) fatal for such groups even at the primary stage of their existence. While a hierarchical organizational structure can be seen as efficient and practical, it also regulates the discourse of sexuality, and gives certain people with 'expertise' (often over English language) more power, at the expense of those who do not 'make sense' or who provide a challenge to the dominant framing' (Khanna, A. 2009:180-181). The dominance of 'expert' members who are more globally conversant and well-connected is a reality of many of these groups. In the context of the Indian Queer movement and development and sexuality, Khanna, A. (2009:176) critiques this relatively privileged group of members who are 'often professional' (lawyers, journalists, development professionals) and carry 21st century ideologies to try to 'get our fellow "subjects" to accept our ways of understanding… We are also demanding that "civil society" frame "its" treatment of desire in terms of sexuality, by marking "it" as "homophobic", by setting the terms within which the politics of sex shall be spoken about. This creates a situation where the question of a framework of difference based on the idea of sexuality as personhood comes

to be depoliticized. …Movement comes to capture the aspirations of the non-heteronormative, as though there is unanimity about what it means to be non-heteronormative, about the ontology of personhood'.

Trying to push the discussion beyond the HIV/AIDS and/or reproductive health framework to a more 'rights based approach' might be well-intentioned, but it can invoke a backlash and a power struggle within the communities as well as causing competition between them for funding without setting agendas, work plans or strategies that are based on common understanding and consensus. As Khanna, A. articulates, the basic problem with the sexuality discourse in development and the sexuality rights movement is that:

> 'Sexuality' has become one of those many circulating words that everyone uses but no one clarifies…. Sexuality has emerged as a concept that enables people to relate their desires and sexual behaviours to their 'selves' – it has emerged as a central constituent in the ontology of the postcolonial subject. (ibid. 166-7)

At this moment, the approach is very much Western, LGBTQ-movement modelled and in line with a human rights/sexual rights framework. This framework needs to be re-examined as an approach due to the recent stand taken by the Bangladeshi government regarding UN resolution on non-discrimination based on sexual identity, where Bangladesh voted against and made a statement against such 'rights-framework'. This makes one think how far 'rights' can actually be pushed in a country like Bangladesh. Lind (2009) proposes that development can challenge heteronormativity by introducing a combination of a justice and rights-based framework. It is important and urgent to place LGBTQ and other non-normative lives at the:

> ….centre of rights based development frameworks – as establishing a normative set of rights is important – yet, also, that we shift the dialogue from a liberal discourse of rights, which frames identity primarily in binary terms, to a discourse critical of liberalism, which frames processes of identification as multi-faceted and constructed through forms of agency as well as through the various external interventions that frame who we are as the subjects of development (Lind 2009:40).

Therefore, a 'multi-faceted' sexuality rights and gender justice approach can 'de-conflate sexuality and gender in conventional narratives of rights'

– which activists in organizations like IGLHRC (International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission) argue is a better approach as 'persistent conflation of sexual orientation and gender expression in legal, human rights, feminist, LGBT activists and other accounts of gender and sexually variant individuals has only exacerbated the problems of securing LGBT rights around the world'. Placing advocacy work in traditional models of identity politics and/or minority rights or even within civil rights framework can prove to be rather problematic only because not everyone necessarily identifies themselves in relation to gender binaries, and variant identities can often be misunderstood or misrepresented in the otherwise normative legal and/or political frameworks (ibid.). And each national context needs to pay as much attention to the local meanings and implications of sexuality as much as it needs to be aware of global movements. To do so, local partners from other movements and actors of society need to be included in the meaning-making process of 'heteronormativity' of which sexuality is an integral part. Khanna (2009:167) argues, and I completely agree with him, that it is important to reconstitute a framework of sexuality that is recognized by law as a policy of the state, as a 'redistribution of resources, power, suffering, pleasure and control over discourse in "civil society", places the different understandings of desire and personhood in relationship of power of dynamism, of negotiation'. To try and reframe the emergence of 'sexuality' is thus necessary to reframe our imagination of power, of our colonial histories and our postcolonial, imperialist presents'. And outside the non-heterosexual paradigm of discussion, one must question whether sexuality discourse itself needs to be interrogated, and redefined in order to avoid restricting itself within the binary of hetero-homo. It would do better to examine heterosexuality itself in order to unpack heteronormativity in Bangladesh through which a broader collaboration with other movements, such as the women's movement (which sees sexuality issues as either risqué and/or a separate gay-lesbian issue) can be possible, thus making sexuality a much richer and more engaging discourse.

As Wieringa and Blackwood (2007) in their reviews of Asian women's same-sex sexuality and sexual rights movement indicate, understanding women's same-sex communities and networks in their unique Asian cultural context is important and their own sexual rights movements are not always the product of or directly relevant to the dominant global/Western queer culture; therefore, understanding women's sexual iden-

tity-based networks in Bangladesh has to be understood not only from as a collective but also from individual women's subjective life experiences which each brings to the collective:

> Rather than being the offspring of a global queer culture, we see women's same-sex communities and networks in the urban middle classes accessing global discourses of human, women's and gay/lesbian rights, yet reconstituting these discourses in ways that are more meaningful and appropriate to them in their quest for socio-sexual citizenship. (ibid, 9)

When I started my field work in 2009, it appeared to be the most exciting year for the sexually-variant communities and for the sexuality-rights discourse as different actors and stakeholders came together- making sexuality issues 'visible' even within a small space of urban locations in Dhaka. Momentum was created, funding for research, activities, workshops, support group formation was made available, and common platforms for the 'community' were initiated. At the time of writing this chapter in mid-2011, most of the support and sexual-identity based groups (except for transgender ones) are either closing down their activities, or have become inactive because of a lack of consensus, and internal conflicts etc. Transgender groups' continuous progress with activities and partnership with funding agencies/development partners can be located in their positional importance as 'risk groups' for HIV/AIDS intervention and their identity as MSM (Men having Sex with Men) groups that includes them in most medical/health-based sexuality discourses. Coalition and Forum – two initiatives to bring together both organizations and individuals in a model of 'civil society', came to an end within one year of their respective formation. In both these umbrella platforms, non-heterosexual women were represented by the same group/person and other participants (both gay male and heterosexual women, and feminists) viewed such representation as a monopoly and limiting to the group.

Leadership appears to be a contested issue within the sexual-identity based movement as well as within non-heterosexual women's groups. The main reasons for the disintegration of these groups were generational differences in the understanding of 'movement' and activism; conflicts regarding agenda and funding; debates over how much sexuality rights need to be 'politicized' and how; and finally, a failure to approach sexuality as a 'lived experience' rather than as an isolated 'identity-based' dis-

course and how sexuality impacts different people and different genders in the wide range of class and location.

Notes

[1] A workshop entitled 'Sexual Diversity and Coalition Building' among the Bangladeshi LGBT community was held February 6-7, 2009 in Cox's Bazaar, Bangladesh with financial support from the Norwegian LGBT Association (LLH Norway) . The topic of 'Gay Women: Issues and Concerns – Perspectives from Bangladesh OR Bangladesh in Perspective? Perspective of Bangladesh' (where this Shomo-premi group represented the only 'gay women's' group) was addressed.

[2] Ain o Shalish Kendra, www.askbd.org

Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) is a national legal aid and human rights organization, established in 1986. Initially focused on providing free legal services to the disenfranchised in Dhaka City, its aims and activities have developed over twenty years to encompass investigation, advocacy, media campaigning, documentation, training and action research in addition to its core activities of legal services (including legal aid, mediation and public interest litigation).

[3] PSPD, http://blog.peoplepower21.org/English/5763

Naripokkho is a membership-based women`s activist organization founded in 1983, working for the advancement of women`s rights and entitlements and building resistance against violence, discrimination and injustice. Naripokkho`s activities include advocacy campaigns, research, discussions, cultural events, and lobbying on issues of gender justice.

[4] Azim, Firdous during a workshop at Naripokkho, 2009.

9   Conclusion

When I started this research, my initial queries were relatively simple as I intended to shed light on realities rather than to find specific answers. At the beginning of this reflexive research, I honestly did not have a research 'puzzle'. What I had, as a feminist researcher, was an urge and an inquisitiveness to simply decipher a rather personal puzzle: why did I, as a Bangladeshi middle class, educated, financially independent, socially mobile, never-married single heterosexual woman, despite having ticked all the boxes of 'empowerment', still struggle to socially 'fit in'? And it was not only about me. In the past decade and a half, I have observed an increasing number of young men and women of similar background and from a similar age group who often *whispered* their troubles in adjusting to our middle class norms of gender and sexualities.

There were two pieces to the puzzle. Firstly, who constituted this '*we*' of which I was socially part. Since there was a common understanding of the constituency's class identity, i.e. the wide spectrum of Bangladeshi middle class (however fluid and porous its internal borders might be), then the query leads to knowing whether there has been any change in our middle class existence that has made a profound difference in the ways we are experiencing our lived realities. Has there been a generational shift in Bangladeshi middle class aspirations, values, and life choices that are different from the generic class characteristics formed a century ago? Has there been a change in the generational grasp of an on-going modernization process modelled after the images of a globalized world? Do we now understand our entitlement to individual sexual choices and claims of personal spaces in a more assertive way than people living in similar middle class societal frameworks even a few decades back did? The second piece of the puzzle regards what is the *it* that we struggle to fit in to? Is it the 'one size fits all' heteronormative box that endorses

compulsory heterosexuality, marriage normativity, and hetero-gender binaries? Or is it actually a more pragmatic struggle of finding spaces within this structure without trying to de-construct it completely?

I could have studied these dilemmas and questions from other angles, but for me sexuality became the focal lens because it is the most monitored, tabooed and apparently suppressed aspect of our middle class lives where proper gender and sexual performance are crucial to enjoying class membership benefits. The idea, then, is not only to understand the heteronormative 'box' or framework, but to understand the ways in which its defiant non-normative members operate in resistant, negotiated yet creative ways to find spaces for themselves. How differently men and women carry out these negotiations and resistances are a major concern of the study, and how these practices alter the dominant structure is a matter of research interest.

Findings and Contribution

Sexuality and Heteronormativity: (Re)defining the Concepts

My attempt to understand sexualities was less occupied with issues of the 'whys' of sexual orientations, and more interested in the 'hows' of living it. 'Living sexualities', as a study of middle class heteronormativity, looked into aspects of sexualities both at an individual level in terms of erotic desire, practices and identities, as well as at the collective level looking at how social lives construct erotic possibilities. Sexuality has its own internal world of overlapping and reciprocal fields of construction and being constructed, where both individuals and the collective are in a continuous process of (re)shaping, (re)defining and (de)constructing each other. Sexuality, in this sense, not only has a specific history, but is itself a significant factor that contributes to 'history in the making'.

As discussed in Chapter 1, there are problems with accepting notion and/or concepts of gender, sexuality, queer etc., as they were developed mostly in the West from its own specific socio-cultural- history. The necessity of re-conceptualizing sexuality and gender from South Asia's own perspective is obvious. Undoubtedly, much of our (South Asian) understanding of sexualities is embedded in the West, which, correctly put by John and Nair (1998), is more than a geographical location. We in our post-colonialism have a more complex relation with sexuality because in

many ways we are located in the West. And in today's reality, to make a strict difference between the West and non-Western locality is a rather difficult task. To critique any theories simply because they originated in a different (dominant) locale, especially if they are from the West, is not what I want to engage with. Hegemony can and does range from Western locations to immediate regional power dominance, and one needs to be careful of both. Feminist theories on gender, sexuality, and class as the basic core thoughts of my research are useful, irrespective of their geographical origin. Butler's concept of performativity, Rich and Rubin's arguments on compulsory heterosexuality and heteronormativity are still extremely useful to launch my own queries on these issues, placed carefully within our new and changing local realities. Foucault, even with his limitations on gender and his lack of reference/understanding of colonial realities (as often correctly critiqued by South Asian feminists), still provides me with valuable cues to understanding historical construction processes of sexuality, the mechanisms of discipline and punishment, of power and control, and the politics of discourses. The challenge that remains is to bring 'local colour' to the otherwise 'hegemonic' Western theories through 'multiple levels of analysis and the forging of articulation between the global and local' (John and Nair 1998:7). The postcolonial way of reworking, as suggested by Khanna et al. (2002), is to study sexuality as a subject with a double articulation whereby each – the past and the present – is coloured and re-constituted by the other. And that is, therefore, a more useful endeavour for me.

Heteronormativity, an institutionalized system of making a 'model' of gender and sexuality understood from Western queer theories, centres on compulsory heterosexuality, seen as a tool for gendered oppression. My study shows that heteronormativity goes beyond linear power equations of gender. It is marriage normativity, more than compulsory heterosexuality that is at the core of heteronormativity for the Bangladeshi middle class. A person can remain ambiguous and fluid in his/her sexuality in terms of practices and thus be able to evade the traps of compulsory heterosexuality at different points in life. It is much harder to avoid the marriage norm which demands more conformation to gendered performances than to gendered sexual expressions of desires. Heteronormativity is oppressive to both men and women, especially for those who have non-normative inclinations towards either gender or sexualities.

Securing heterosexuality through various policing systems is not done just to ensure that heterosexuality is maintained as the only 'natural' expression of sexual desire, because historically most South Asian cultures have acknowledged non-heterosexual desires and always made space for such practices. It is imposed to ensure a social system of reproduction, familial and territorial control of hetero-patriarchy. Within the middle class social structure, it is the much coveted 'moral value system' (a hybrid product of tradition and modernity), which is the mechanism of control over its members. Through sustaining a traditional yet modern, liberal yet moral character, the middle class attempts to hold on to its position of social significance, relevance and identity. This means, for its members, that procreation and the nurturing of an (apparently) monogamous, heterosexual (performative) family unit is the priority of marriage. Marriage ensures these operational aspects of such control, and guarantees its members gendered entitlements and rights to space, resources and power within the family and immediate society.

The dominant heteronormative framework of the Bangladeshi middle class has its historical origin deeply embedded in colonial history. Its negotiation with 'modernity' and the modernization process sets the basis of socio-sexual morality for its members. At the heart of the system lies the family-household that has marriage normativity, homosociality, and gendered privileged visions of masculinity over femininity as core elements. It discourages sex outside marriage in general, but particularly suppresses female sexual expressions beyond marital norms. Marriage normativity and homosociality have different possibilities and consequences for men and women at different ages. Women who resist these roles, especially marriage-normativity (with or without same-sex desires), are seen as a social anomaly. Women non-conforming to marriage are deprived of the entitlement to sex, and therefore must perform some degree of asexuality. Even though heterosexuality is compulsory and procreation is central to marital sexual relations, it still privileges the male gender in sexual expressions outside heterosexuality: women's non-heterosexual expressions are ignored to the point of denial (keeping the concept of penetrative sex as the only form of sex). Non-normative life choices are frowned upon, but socio-familial acceptance can be acquired by achieving middle class markers of respectability such as economic and symbolic success.

Homosexuality is punishable by law in Bangladesh, deemed 'sinful' by all dominant religions, and is socially unacceptable. But homosociality can provide a protective shield to both men and women's same-sex relations. Men's same-sex desires and relations enjoy tolerance (if not full acceptance) as long as the men conform to their heteronormative performative roles and responsibilities of marriage, children and family. Under heteronormativity, it is 'deviances' from heterosexuality that are most feared and, therefore, strictly monitored. Non-heterosexuality is tolerated to a great extent because there is already an existent system of suppression and marginalization in place to tackle it if it gets out of control. This has special implications for single heterosexual women who can neither make use of homosocial nor marriage norms in order to assert their sexual agency in a socially negotiable manner.

Challenging, Resisting and De-constructing Heteronormativity

Norms can be lived through everyday practices, and they may become embodied, but they are also challenged and subverted. As a result, new subject positions are created. My study shows that there are strategic elements to everyday practices as individuals negotiate the discursive structures of gender and sexuality. Such challenges and transformations might not always be carried out at a conscious and intentional level, but there is always some creative appropriation and re-signification of gender and sexuality that is otherwise constrained by norms, sanctions and hegemonic heteronormative ways.

The study indicates the possibility and realities of multiple sexualities that exist within middle class hetero-patriarchal social spaces. There is always scope for ambiguity, plural identities and varied performances of gender and sexualities. These multiplicities, ambiguities and agential choices of parallel sexual selves across class, gender and age are significant to the broader study of sexuality because they problematize and challenge the dominant prescribed heteronormative forms of family, marriage, and sexual identities.

Hubbard (2001:51-2) suggests that 'a more fluid and topographical complex interpretation of public and private space is necessary to understand the changing geographies of sexuality'. Foucault (1967) brought out the dichotomies of spaces, and challenged the socially given opposition to spatial concepts like public and private, family and social space

etc. The opposition between these spaces and their separations are perceived as 'given', and our lives are believed to be governed by these oppositions, which have their respective rules, norms and modes of control. But even within divisions, there are always in-between spaces (both physical and mental) that create opportunities for the existence of non-hegemonic otherness, the existence of duality and contradistinctions. And this is exactly where the notion of 'space' in this research is engaged. Findings from this study show how the public and private are deeply unstable, permeable, inexact, and ambiguous. I argue firstly, that the private or the domestic space cannot be ignored when investigating gender and sexualities; secondly, that as much as the public/private distinction is deeply gendered, the boundaries of these spaces need to be problematized, understood as blurry, permeable and be re-defined.

Common perceptions that the family-household is a site of gender discrimination, domination and oppression is challenged by the non-normative life narratives of respondents as they show that concepts of sexuality and gender cannot be applied generically across class and locations. There exist multiple and paradoxical 'sexual spaces' within middle class family-households. These are socio-symbolic 'inner' worlds within which diverse sexual desires, identities and practices can be/are accommodated. Just as a space can be 'sexualized' by its inhabitants, a space can be 'asexualized' by its members. For example, many informants, especially gay, lesbian and single-straight women mentioned how life outside the country (at times even outside their own cities) opens up possibilities of an active sexual life, where an individual can feel free from immediate social expectations, norms and vigilance allowing them to explore and assert his/her sexualities. But returning to the homeland, or home 'district', is often like entering 'the de-sexed zones', especially for women. Non-normative sexualities are often tantamount to spatial displacement, and one cannot overlook the importance of spatial mobility for non-normative sexual agents that can span from the sub-national level between neighbourhoods, towns, and cities, to the international scale between countries.

People experience being sexual differently as they move between spaces. Respondents in this study clearly show how spatial mobility is not just a one-time move away from one site of sexual oppression to another – it is more than that that. Puar et al. (2003) describe the spatial mobility of sexualities, it is a shuttling between different spaces and as an

on-going activity that occurs not only across physical space but also within the sexual subject.

However, the dynamics of gender, generational positioning and class produce different possibilities for the existence and consequences of multiple sexualities. Non-normative sexualities can exist without explicit conflicts within the space of a household that is normatively heterosexual. Carefully maintained heteronormative gender hierarchies and family relations make negotiations possible. Family can become an alliance, especially for middle class non-heterosexual women. The private spaces of a household often critiqued as sites of only violence towards and discrimination against women can actually function as a protective shield for non-normative sexual arrangements. Men become more constrained by hetero-patriarchal norms of gender and sexuality with age, while women increasingly earn relative freedom from their gender and sexual/reproductive roles, resulting in greater liberty. Women's increasing sense of empowerment has a profound impact on their articulation, practices and expressions of sexualities. The historically crafted division between the private (household) and the public that has drawn the social demarcation of spaces between the genders for the Bengali middle class *bhodrolok* since the late 18th century today is being increasingly challenged and breached in urban locations. New arrangements of family and social life are challenging the common belief that everyone participates equally in the process of submission to hetero-patriarchy. It might take women longer than their male counterparts to achieve sexual empowerment, but it has definitely started to take place as women strategically and innovatively create spaces that are simultaneously private yet also push into the boundaries of the social.

Sexualities, and women's sexualities in particular, as lived realities, are not merely stories of victimhood, discrimination, and oppression – they are in reality also narratives of aspirations, strategies and empowerment. The porosity of the borders between the public and the private (as well as the virtual) are constantly challenged, negotiated and (re)created for non-normative desires, identities and practices by individuals of all genders, though women still find it relatively difficult to tread on public spaces regarding their sexualities.

Identities beyond Fixities: Choices and Agency in Practice

Sexuality is understood here beyond the usual dominant frame of control, both in terms of construction through history and 'lived' realities of gender and class. It largely engages with desires, pleasures and agency. Aspects of desires, pleasures and agency (in terms of turning desires into practices and identities) are linked with the materiality or economies of the spaces or sites where individual lives are situated. The 'lived' experience of sexualities by the non-normative men and women in this study is not merely a study of heteronormativity, but is more of a revelation of 'counter-heteronormativity', of 'counter hegemony' (as termed by Menon 2007) which opposes heteronormativity and challenges the 'model' institution of the monogamous hetero-patriarchal marriage. It shows that through discipline and punitive actions, compulsory (monogamous) heterosexuality can be made to stay put for a while, but in reality variant sexual and erotic desires are performed and practiced. The (reluctant) acknowledgement and increasing (informal) accommodation of non-heteronormative practices within the institution of family in particular, and society in general, are forms of resistance in themselves. The embodied experiences of sexual subjectivity and agency are key ways of understanding the sexual politics of the middle class.

Sexualities are lived in fluidity and often challenge the otherwise commonly understood 'fixity' of sexual identities and their practices. Non-heteronormative men and women's narratives indicate how neither norms nor gender-hierarchies are static, and in what ways age, gender and class can be challenged, transcended or even traded off for some degree of sexual choice and agency. *Choice and agency* are 'relational' in the context of Bangladesh. They are not understood as 'individual' autonomy, but rather in 'relational' terms thus challenging these concepts as absolute forms of freedom, liberty and automation. There is a common tendency to place *victimization* in opposition to *agency* in a dichotomous way, where one is believed to be present only in the absence of the other. Such an equation of power in the concept of agency as individual autonomy, action, control, mobility etc. is rather narrow and simplistic as it fails to take into account the struggles, resistances and strategic negotiations that men and women make in their everyday on-going relations. In post-structuralist analysis, subject positioning within a particular discourse (here that of gender and sexuality in heteronormative discourse) is significant in agency. Choices are made from 'a line of action' that is

available, not as a default choice but 'because one has been subjectively constituted through one's placement within that discourse to want that line of action' (Davies 1991:42). In this way, agency might appear to be illusionary though it also has the possibility of regaining another type of formation when the subject can move within and between discourses enabling him/her to see through the very process of subjugation, suppression or oppression. As a result, the same terms of a discourse of subjugation, oppression and restriction can be used to modify, refuse or counteract. The respondents in this research exercise choice and sexual agency in their everyday lives through their active presence as part of family constitutions, where they are able to gradually create their own multiple meanings of erotic desires and interpretations of sexual normalcy, though often limited within the boundaries of commitments towards the collective (family, for example) that they set for themselves. The possibilities of one's ability to go beyond the given meanings of the dominant and prescribed discourses by creating something new and personalized (in combination with existing discourses) are very real. These shifts do not always happen suddenly, abruptly or very visibly, but they do begin to occur in small pockets of spaces of lives through developments of new ways of living. These occurrences result in the eventual invention of new terms that have the potential of altering power relations within a society and its culture.

Choices and agency are then negotiated beyond the apparent 'fixities' of sexual identities and their materialistic manifestations in lives. Identities are expressed beyond 'labels'. Subtlety in defining oneself beyond the gender binary and/or sexual fixities is achieved through the day-to-day expressions of living arrangements, life styles, dress codes, associations and images that are more social in character than individual. Identities and their representations and meanings are still maintained within the gender binaries of masculine-feminine, and are mostly performed in a simplified linear state, though within the non-heterosexual communities expressions are much more explicit and defiant. These expressions and flexible playing with identities are inherently subversive in their character, challenging the hegemonic concept of identity that tries to directly link desires with practices. But the research shows clearly that sexual identities are not exclusive in their manifestation in either personal or social life. Sexuality, in fact, is not central to any identity formation in the context of Bangladeshi society. Within its middle class specifically, overt

sexual expressions or focus on the sexual aspect of life are seen as a sign of low or total lack of culture and sophistication. Sexual identities are therefore not an explicit aspect of an individual's place within society. And when formulated, sexual identity is commonly linked to erotic desires and not necessarily to its expressive practices.

Sexual Politics: Relevance and Gaps in Development Discourses

Within development discourse, sexuality is tied closely to a reproductive health and rights framework, and has not yet been directly addressed. Women's sexualities, especially those of non-normative women, are placed not only within the 'hierarchy' of social values, but also within the 'hierarchy' of political agendas of development and activism. Even though in a limited number of forums of non-heterosexual women are given a 'token voice', taboo and homophobia are prevalent in social movements and development fields. Fear and anxiety about bringing personal formulations of sexual identity as a pre-condition of claiming 'rights' to public spaces is real. The *personal* does not or cannot always transition into *political*. The pressure of 'bringing sexual rights' in non-Western countries creates dangerous gaps between the local-national realities and international agreements of norms and rights. For example, the UK and US governments' announcement in 2011 supporting the global propagation of LGBT rights as human rights suggested that the future disbursement of aid might be made conditional on how LGBT-friendly recipient countries are, as perceived by the donor nations, of course. This imposition of 'gay conditionality' on aid has been widely critiqued by sexuality rights activists from the global south who opposed the imposition of 'a US/European model of sexual progress on "developing countries", which may justify covert geopolitical agendas and fail to actually benefit marginalised groups' (Dutta 2012:1). The problem is beyond the apparent imposition of aid conditionality, but lies at the core difference with the Western hegemonic concepts of reducible clear-cut categories of identities for gender and sexuality that are forced to be used in contexts still in the process of finding their own sexual realities, identities and practices based on their respective socio-historical backgrounds. These new findings in this current research might or might not fit into these dominant frameworks of identities.

The pressure and race to secure development funds, where sexuality is a relatively new area, is obvious. As a result, individuals from socio-

economically marginalized non-normative groups are the first ones to rush into the process of being put into catalogues, of being labelled, and identified as one of the legitimate claimants of the LGBTQ letters in order to benefit from available funding. It is not surprizing then that transgender groups are the first target beneficiaries in sexuality and development, followed by the MSM category of poorer men. Middle class, non-heterosexual men and, especially, women find it extremely difficult to join these platforms and participate in 'rights-approach' movements spearheaded by development agencies as the process makes them socially more vulnerable and puts them at risk. It was not surprizing, therefore, to see sex worker lesbians being more assertive and strategic than other groups of respondents in their claim for a place in the fund-centred rights-based initiatives of development and activism. To be public about sexuality and to endorse an identity (with or without engaging consciously with its politics) of 'lesbian' was a very pragmatic choice, enabling the sex worker lesbians to improve their capacity to organize and support themselves.

There are major gaps in the knowledge base about sexuality in Bangladesh and the socio-sexual conditions of people of different genders and sexualities. There is almost no in-depth knowledge base about women's sexualities, its diversities and social practices. The gaps in development and sexuality activism are illustrated by the lack of a coherent, inclusive approach to sexuality, as an embodied concept, as part of the bodily integrity discourse. Spaces for alternative discourses that often stem from different sites of resistance created by the individuals through life's strategic lessons are absent in documented forms. As Sharma, J. (2009) puts it, and what my findings agree with, reflecting on lived realities is a crucial entry point to sexuality politics, especially in the case of women. Lived realities show us the processes of challenging norms, of negotiating norms which are processes of not only strategic living but also of the widening possibilities of fighting stigmas and discriminations. Moreover, the identity-based rights approach to sexuality runs the risk of imposing 'stereotypes' which then leads to discriminatory policies that at the end can be contrary to human rights (Harcourt 2009). Sexuality cannot be viewed as a 'problem' area in need of intervention by the development industry. It is also not an area filled only with victimization and oppression which needs to be resolved through funding and project-based solutions (Cornwall and Jolly 2009; Khanna 2009). There is an ur-

gent need to move beyond the funding-centred project-based short term interventions to a more inclusive networking amongst all the stakeholders. And there is also a need to influence and bring feminist and women's organizations on board, if women's sexualities are to be addressed.

Sexuality as a discourse is simulteniously independent and inclusive of Sexuality and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR). The current global debates and discussions on sexuality and SRHR since the onset of Cairo+20, and the Millenium Development Goals (MDG)+15 must be brought to a local level of scrutiny. Even with all the positive changes and advancement in SRHR since the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo in 1994, in many regions and individual counrties major gaps, limitations, and often blind spots remain when it comes to women's sexual heath and rights issues. State governent-level policies, programmes and discourses on women's sexual health and rights that are framed in exclusive and limited ways – ignoring or not recognizing sexuality and its diversity, especially that of adolescent and young women, is a real concern.

Within South Asia, for example, India and Nepal have made some progress in making SRHR and sexual diversity a relatively visible, legal and a legitimate issue; whereas in Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, sexuality has hardly been able to move beyond the HIV/AIDS prevention, family planning/fertility control discourse. The rise of religious fundamentalists and their increasing influence on state governance and its policies has directly impacted on lives and made the already conservative approach towards sexuality and SRHR by the states even more limited.

If states do not move beyond their rather conservative understanding of what real life sexual practices within class-gender dynamics are, then they will fail in their aim of reducing disparity, and fail to protect individuals who do not feature as legitimate actors and stakeholders in development. It is time that our understanding of 'marginalization' is stretched further to recognize sexual diversity and the lived realities of practices. One must remember that what theoretically appears to be 'marginal' and/or labeled as 'minority' in reality is translated into absolute numbers of millions of people (in most developing countries, like in Bangladesh, even a fraction of the total population is already huge). Therefore, leaving out minorities or marginalized people/women

implies leaving out a large number of potential benificiaries from development programmes and initiatives.

As countries from the region around Bangladesh (like India and Nepal) gradually open up to changes regarding sexuality, and accepting it as part of citizenship rights, it remains to be seen how long Bangladesh can use the pretext of culture and religion to 'insulate' itself from these evident changes. Even in other Muslim countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia, there is an opening up of the discussion of sexuality and diversity and their possible dialogue with religions. With the increasing access to knowledge and information, and by becoming part of a globalized world, for how long can Bangladesh afford to ignore sexuality as a legitimate part of its cultural and development discourses?

New Realities, New Knowledge: What Lies Ahead?

While my research has its limitations, and is primarily exploratory in character, I have tried to make an honest and passionate attempt to do something I consider it to be extremely topical, relevant and immense in potential. I hope to make some contribution to the field of sexuality study in general and in the context of Bangladesh in particular. Sexuality study is very new in Bangladesh and studies on heteronormativity and how it operates in the lives of non-normative men and women are almost non-existent. This research has, therefore, delved into almost unchartered territory. In Bangladesh, I hope this research serves to stimulate debates regarding sexuality. Firstly, with this research I have tried to create a more open and academic discourse on sexuality in Bangladesh. The gaps and absences of sexuality discourse, especially within women's /feminist movements, in the development and sociological research fields need to be filled, and this study is a step towards that. Through this study, I will hopefully illustrate the importance of seeing sexuality as a cross-cutting and essential part of gender research, and show the significance of carrying out long-term life-experience based research in this field as lives of women are fast changing in this journey to modernization of Bangladesh. Secondly, this research will hopefully initiate a critical examination of the dominant Bengali patriarchal-heteronormative structure of gender and sexuality that needs to be understood within its class existence and thus will help to challenge the dominant-common acceptance of heteronormativity as universal and/or as an integral part of Bengali culture. Thirdly, it critiques the existing and contemporary dis-

courses of sexuality within the state and within development and sexual-rights movements in Bangladesh.

Foucault (1984) asked whether there is a relation between the new knowledge of sexuality and sexual liberation. This is a particular point of interest for me and my research because it takes place at a time when there is a buzz around sexuality. Cultural expressions of sexuality through literature, film, music, media, blogs, as well as academic research interest, are on the rise. There is also a collective effort from development agencies and sexual rights-related activism in Bangladesh to engage with sexuality. Bangladeshi multi-level, multi-actor attempts to discover sexuality for ourselves, and to create new knowledge in the process, might have their initial grounding in Western (and the English language) theories and discourses, but we are beginning to find our own voices. Therefore, it is important to know whether this 'new' knowledge of sexuality can pave a path towards a more inclusive sexual discourse in Bangladesh. It will also be exciting to see whether this new knowledge succeeds in recognizing the otherwise fluid but socially suppressed sexualities of its members across class and gender.

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Appendices

Word/phrase in English	*Bangla*	Translation with Notes
Sex	*jouno kaj, jouno milon, sohobash, kharap kaj,sharirik melon, chuda chudi, aakum-ku kaam* *Dhurpit* (*hijra* language) *Lagano*	The highlighted words mean 'to engage with bad act'; to do things that are 'not-socially sanctioned'. Sex is considered a 'bad' activity. 'to fix' or to 'fit it in'
Penis	*purush linggo, Nunu, Dhon, bara, laaura, shona, Becha, Goponanggo* *Legam* (hijra/transgender vocabulary)	These words actually mean something precious: treasure, big, and gold
Vagina	*Jounanggo, joni, moina, bhoda, mang, heada, gudh*	*Moina*: a bird *Bhoda*: dumb/stupid/blunt
Anus	*Pacha, putki, hoga, batli(hijra), nitombo,*	back side
Anal sex	*pacha mara mari kora, putki mara, batlite nea, hoga mara, back side e kora, gua mara*	All the phrases have '*mara*', meaning to 'hit' or penetrate suffixed with a word that describes the 'anus'. The connotation is always active, and aggressive
Oral sex	(fellatio) *shona chusha, dhon chusha, bara chusha, muk dea kora, mukhe penis newa, chumu dewa* (cunnilingus): *chaata*	For fellatio, the verb is to 'suck'; Cunnilingus: to lick (not a common word or expression or even a concept)

Word/phrase in English	*Bangla*	Translation with Notes
Homosexuality (men)	*shomokamita*	= lust for same sex
	kharap kaj, baje kaj,	Bad/immoral/act
	pola-pola	Men-to-men
	chuda chudi, putki mara mari kora	To 'fuck', 'to thrust'
	MSM (NGO word), gay, *purushe-purushe jouno kaj kora*	NGO/development discourse, that try to be more 'socially and politically correct'
	zeena kora, haram kaj, hijrader kaj	To commit *'zeena'* (Islamic word for illicit sex); to do something '*haram*'; an act done by 'hijra' or transgender' (unnatural)
Homosexuality (women)	*Shomokami nari*	Lust for same sex (women)
	Shomo-premi	'love' for the same
	Dui narite prem,	Love between two women;
	meye meye jouno / meye meye k kore	Sex between two women/ women doing women
	Lace-fita	A recent phrase for lesbians, 'Lace-ribbon'. The word phonetically matches with 'lesbian' as in Bangla 'lace' is pronounced as 'les'…and the concept of '*lace-fita'* is probably rooted in the traditional feminine dressing up/ or aesthetics for self-care. (vendors sell *lace-fita* and everything feminine from door to door, in neighbourhoods at odd hours like afternoon when women usually are at home and have chance of spending time with each other-grooming, beauty care etc.
Sex worker	*magi, beshsha, khanki*	Loose women in a range of degrading words;

Word/phrase in English	*Bangla*	Translation with Notes
	jouno kormi, deho posharini, shorir bekreta *rater pori*	Sex-worker; woman who sells body; Night angels
	Baje meye, mondo meye, hotel er meye, raster meye,potita,mokhi rani, taka dea jader shate sex kora jai (these all for female sex workers). (men) hooker, escort, money boy etc.	Bad women; women of the hotels; women on road; fallen woman; who you can fuck for money; (all the words are for women, and no one I spoke to had any Bangla word/s for male-sex workers).

Appendix 2
Commonly used conversational words and phrases/expressions
of sex and sexuality in Bangla (urban Dhaka)

Words/phrases in *Bangla*	Translated in English	Notes
Maal	Literally means 'an object' that can be traded; useful, substantial; fit to consume. An adjective.	A word very commonly used in colloquial Bangla but never in presence of family, or at home where decorum of language in middle class is strictly maintained.
Heavy Maal	Mainly used to describe women, a good, tasty 'maal'.	
Maal khasha	Stress on 'heavy' meaning extra, super added value *Khasha*: good quality	
Josh	Mainly meaning 'enthusiasm', something that fills one up with energy. But when used sexually, it means something good, something enticing.	Can be non-sexually used as well
Heavy josh	'Josh maal'	

Words/phrases in **Bangla**	Translated in English	Notes
Jhakkas	Extremely enticing, shakes one up.	Very recently made an entry in urban Bangla
Moshla	Masala/spice= tasty, or potential of being tasty	e.g. '*heavy moshla*'
Makkhon	Butter= smooth, tasty, rich, leaves an after taste	Used in sexual way for women's body – so good to eat that the taste lingers on your mouth
Justi	Difficult to have a translation: used for women, someone who is good for sex; fit and hot, desirable etc	First time I heard this word was on television, where a man wants a '*justi*' girl for marriage.
Laal pola	Red man= effeminate boy (blushing, soft, fair)	Attractive man, a potential homosexual; also used as '*laal mula*' (red raddish) which means pretty to look at but good for nothing.
Kaaa…j-kaaa…m	Original words: *kaj-kam* (to work) But when spoken with a stretched way, it connotes to sex, as lustful activity	Separating work (*kaj*) from everyday work, and making it sexual work; and *'kaam'* indicating lustfulness
Ami daraye gelam kintu	I am 'standing up' now= erection	Wanting to have sex
Fataiya laaga re *Fataiya fel mama*	*Fataiya*= to rip off Here it means 'fucking' in a fast, forceful way so that it has the potential to 'rip apart'/open; 'rip it apart' uncle (mama)	The expression has a violent streak to it, along with a sense of over excitement, over-sexed call for action; to have sex repeatedly and with lots of energy. Using the word 'mama', which is a common word of endearment among men- the expression has a dialogical quality between men, who share a sense of aggressive sexual attitude. Mainly an 'action call' for masculinity. (Such expressions might have

Words/phrases in *Bangla*	Translated in English	Notes
		their root in the gang-bang of pornography and rape-fetish described in the sex booklets, where men over-power women and women remain passive, receptive and sub-missive- unable to resist any aggression).
'faiytta jaitese re'	Use of 'fatano', or ripping open/apart used for women body. Here it is a comment on a woman's body that seem voluptuous (big breasts/hips/good waist line etc) that are seen as indicators of her sexual desirability for the men; but also an indicator of her potential 'sexiness' or her willingness/eagerness to be sexually perpetrated.	Here 'faiytta' also means 'over spilling' of sexiness in a woman's body (which correlated to the popular believe that 'good girls' are not sexual and cannot be seen as sex-objects.
'faiytta jaite chae re magi'	The use of word 'magi' in this phrase only emphasizes the woman's potentially loose character, which (strangely) is linked with her voluptuousness, meaning only an over-sexed woman can have such a sexy body.	In a particular discussion, these phrases are used to refer to women who have the reputation (or speculated to be) polygamous, to sleep around with more than one man.
Ummm	Tasty	Slurping and sounds of taste, usually used on streets for teasing women.
Pachha mara kha	A woman's backside, ass described as desirable; *pachha*= hips/ass/backside etc	Indicates the 'satisfaction' that a man will get from woman's body, and especial body parts…the presence of the word 'mara' (to hit, to penetrate, to thrust upon) adds aggression to the phrase.
Dhwaj	Lack of virility (*dhawj-bhanga*)	A common word and concept used to express masculinity, virility and when lacking, it is problematic. Also

Words/phrases in *Bangla*	Translated in English	Notes
		can indicate the 'infrequent' sex a man might be having – not having an active sexual life.
Pachha mota	Fat ass= a man who is not good at sex or any other work.	A man's failure or usefulness is measured and expressed through his virility, in general.
Loose	Loose= a woman's body not being tight enough, to have sagging breasts, vagina etc…it is used to express a woman's loss of sexual youthfulness, and tightness – being undesirable for a good 'fuck'	e.g. comment on women who are 'loose': *'loose re, gari jabe re'*= vagina is probably so loose that even a vehicle can go through it.
Rog dhila	Erectile problem	
Aga mot agora chikon	Top of the penis being broad, but the base is thin, weak	Meaning problem with the penis and potential impotency
Maal nai	'*maal*' here is used for men, *Nai*= not having = not having enough material of masculinity (sperm)	e.g. when a man doesn't want to have sex with willing women, it is a tease, 'why don't you want to have sex? *Maal nai*?
Bhoda chulkano	'*bhoda*' = vagina *Chulkano*= itch	A woman who is horny, who is having an itch in her vagina for sex.
Magee-baji	To womanize	*Magi*= loose women To sleep around with women (here women, in general, have been termed as magi or loose women)
Magee-baji baad de maa	'Leave your smart-feminine intelligence'-Reverse use for women: used as an aggression against a woman who is outwitting a man in a discussion; a woman who can answer back etc.	Interestingly, the linguistic roots of the word '*magee*' are '*maa*' (mother), and '*gee*' meaning words= what mother (woman) says. So, here, the original words are back in a twisted way.

Words/phrases in *Bangla*	Translated in English	Notes
Dui number	Number 2= who lacks purity; and who will not be nice to sleep with	
Kichhu korar nai, shame bidehs-e	Has nothing to do, husband is out of town	Since the husband (the legal sexual partner and custodian) is not in town, she is free for all.
BHMH	*Boro Hol-e Maal Hobe*= when she grows up, (she) will be a *Maal*	
Head light bhalo	Have good head-light= have good boobs	
Babu-der khabar dekhe rakh	Have a look at the 'food' items of elites= commenting on rich women/girls	A clear class-based comment
Pichlae na	Not slippery /wet enough	A woman past her 'sexual' age.
Choda khaise re	Has been fucked well recently	A tired looking woman is assumed to be so 'fucked' that she is unable to walk probably.

Appendix 3
A chronology of Bangladesh LGBT history (2009)

Its chronological history was documented by Rajeeb of BoB (Boys of Bangladesh) and was provided to me for this research in 2009.

1951: "Smritir Pot" by Jashimuddin. The character Ananda is perceived homosexual.

1977: 1) At Rajshahi University a male converted to female & married another guy. Published in the magazine 'Bichitra'.
2) 'Daily Ittefaq' reported an arrest for raping attempt on male servant.

1983: A report on magazine 'Chitrobangla' about male prostitute in posh areas.

1985: ILTS conference in Geneva was attended by Hasna Hena, first Bangladeshi 'outed' lesbian.

1986: 'Trikone' formed in USA and Tinku Ali, a gay Bangladeshi was one of the founders.

1987: Magazine 'Chitrali' reported on Ashok Ghosh & Azizul Rahman living together & adopting a daughter together.

1988: At Naripokhkho-Mukto forum, Hasna Hena read a write up 'Narir Proti Narir Priti'. (Women's Love and attraction to women).

1991: 'Daily Ittefaq' & 'Dhaka Courier' reported on a Bangladeshi youth Tinku Ali marrying an American guy, Scott Anderson.

1996:

1) 'BSWS' gets registration.
2) 'Bidroho Koro Nari' by Hasnahena.
3) A Bangladeshi gay man, Tinku Ali became the chairperson of IGLHRC.

1998:

1) Sumon Lahiri writes 'Shomoprem'.
2) Poem written and published by Hasna titled 'Narir Proti Prem'.

1999: 1) 'Daily Ajker Kagoj' reports 14 people of HIV/AIDS active group got arrested.

2) 'Daily Inqilab' reports on same sex practice in a madrasa in Matuail.

3) 'Ittefaq' reports on male sexual harassment.

2000: Sustho Jibon founded by BSWS.

2001: 1. Naripokhokho publishes 'Trtitio Prokriti'.

2. 'Meghla Akash' (film on HIV/AIDS) is released.

2002:

- BoB started.
- Story about two girls living together in a village. Hasna Hena and Shumon went to see them.
- 'Jai jai Din' publishes a gay letter by Hasan, a BoB member.

2003:

- 'Iraq-er Diary' by Hasna.

- 'Meghla Akash' awarded in Germany.
- 'They Swing Between Both Sexes' by Adnan Hossain.
- Shikhondi Katha, a stage drama about Hijras is performed.
- 'Badhon Hijra Shangha' gets registration.

2004:

- Let There be Light formed in July.
- 'BSWS' awarded as an MSM role model for NGOs.

2005:

- A magazine publishes a scandal of Bangladeshi hero.
- J.M Akash shows his photography on Hijra.
- Shustha Jibon registers.
- Let There be Light registers.

2006:

- 'Daily Star' publishes homosexuality approving letters from BoB.
- Daily Prothom Alo reports on a Madrasa boy rape

2007:

- 'Shawprova' (women's same sex support group)starts.
- RTV talk show attended by Katha (transgender activist).
- JPGSPH of BRAC University holds the first ever public workshop on gender and sexuality.
- 'Shawprova' becomes ILGA member.
- Hasna is selected as ILGA Asia board member.

2008:

- Queer Bangla starts.
- National MSM Task force formed by BSWS.
- District Level lawyer group formed by BSWS.
- A Bangladeshi gay from BoB attends workshop in Nepal.
- Journalist Forum formed by BSWS.
- Bandhon Hijra Shangha receives DSL YES award.
- Ekushey TV broadcasts program on Hijra.
- Boisakhi TV interviews Katha (transgender).
- 'Prantikee' a book by Mozammel Haque Niyogi talks about kothi, msm and Hijras.

2009: Bangladesh civil society report on LGBT to UNHRC by Adnan Hossain for UPR..

- Workshop on 'Sexual Diversity, Partnership Building and Networking'.

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