

# LIVING SEXUALITIES AND NOT TALKING 'STRAIGHT': UNDERSTANDING NON-HETEROSEXUAL WOMEN'S SEXUALITY IN URBAN MIDDLE CLASS BANGLADESH

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**Abstract:** The paper aims to explore and understand how individual non-heterosexual women live, challenge or 'counter' heteronormativity, especially in terms of 'sexual identity formation', in urban middle class Bangladesh through their personal narratives. It inquires how women, of this particular class, in their lives define, assert and practice their own sexuality and sexual identity- which includes constant process of negotiation, bargain, manipulation, conciliation, and strategies.

**Keywords:** sexuality, heteronormativity, gender, identity

## I. INTRODUCTION

Being a Muslim dominated population with a mixed culture of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam- Bangladesh is at a crucial yet intriguing point in history where it struggles to be part of a globalized world and still maintain a rather conservative social-culture. Sex is a taboo topic and sexuality is strictly understood within 'heteronormative' framework, within which though 'deviance' for men is tolerated and often ignored but the same for women is almost denied.

The paper, is derived from my own PhD field research work (on Women and Sexuality in urban middle class Bangladesh), aims to explore and understand how individual non-heterosexual women live, challenge or 'counter' heteronormativity in urban middle class Bangladesh through women's personal narratives. It aims to inquire how women, of this particular class, in their lives define, assert and

practice their own sexuality and sexual identity- which includes constant process of negotiation, bargain, manipulation, conciliation, and strategies. Using the concept of heteronormativity, the paper, because of its limitation of scope, narrows down to non-heterosexual women's own narratives of 'identity' formation within their middle class existence in Bangladesh, and thus, hope to open space for understanding of how heteronormativity works and operates in the sexual lives and identities of women.

The paper is outlined as such:

Section 1: Contextual Background: Bangladesh;  
Section 2: Concepts presents the paper's understanding of sexuality and heteronormativity, as well as research questions and methodology;  
Section 3: Living Sexualities and not talking so 'straight', identity formation of non-heterosexual women;  
Section 4: The 'Invisible' women, in which I talk about the invisibility and social exclusion of non-heterosexual women in mainstream social lives as well as from the LGBT movement/community.  
Section 5: conclusion.

### *Contextual Background Bangladesh*

**Bangladesh** is a South Asian developing country, and is one of the largest Muslim countries of the world, which means Bangladesh has Islam as its official State Religion, is dominated by Muslim (especially the Sunni Muslim) and Islamic norms and practices. This influence has major implications on state policy, culture and the lives of religious minorities. Bangladesh has a population of about 140

million, making it one of the most densely populated countries of the world. The majority (about 88%) of the people is Muslim, and over 98% of the people speak in Bangla (Statistical Pocket Book of Bangladesh, 2007). Bangladesh is a highly patriarchal society in which men are at top of gender power, and have control over women's labour, sexuality, income, and assets- both through public and private sphere domination system. Women are taught and often made to depend on men throughout their lives (fathers, husbands and sons); and a woman without any male 'guardian' or protection is seen as vulnerable. Marriage is a norm, and compulsory heterosexuality is the normative form of accepted sexuality. Because of conservation social culture and dominance of religion, any deviance from norm has social or legal consequences, especially if deviance is of sexual nature. constitutionally (Article 377 homosexuality is a punishable crime, and there is no provision of marriage or civil union for same-sex relation or any gender identity other than male and female. Modesty and chastity are of paramount importance for women, and the concept of protecting 'family honour' or 'izzat' sees into the control of female sexuality. In Bangladesh female sexuality is often controlled through denial of access to information on sex, sexuality and reproductive function. (Khan et al 2002; Rashid 2007). In spite being a Muslim dominated and culturally conservative society, Bangladesh sees a much more relaxed gender relations and sharing of spaces compared to many other Islamic countries, and the strict notion of 'public and private' can be, and often is, a blurry one, where women move in and out of male domains.<sup>1</sup> The UNDP Gender Development Index (GDI) for 2004 ranked Bangladesh 110 among 144 countries, an increase of 13 positions since 1999.<sup>2</sup> Women's participation in public work places have increased in the recent years and steady increase in women's participation in education, labour market and politics has contributed to an improved gender situation in Bangladesh, but at the same time, this increase in 'path-crossing' of public and private and independence has made the issue of sexuality, identity and its assertion a more problematic and challenged one.

## II : THE CONCEPTS

I understand sexuality from a feminist perspective:

<sup>1</sup> Baden et al, 1994, Background report on Gender issues in Bangladesh, BRIDGE-IDS, Report no 26, <http://www.bridge.ids.ac.uk/reports/re26c.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> UN-BD-Org, <http://www.un-bd.org/bgd/index.html>

*Sexuality 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, Lovell and Wolkowitz (1997) quoting Jackson and Scott, (1996) as: 1997:245)*

It therefore, recognizes the fact that what is defined as erotic varies from context to context, and therefore, what is encompassed by the term is far from fixed. But I do take this definition of sexuality as an entry point for this research because a) it lists what is broadly included in sexuality: erotic desires, practices and identities- thus scoping it from an intimate personal point to a broader issue of identity; b) it relates the personal with social, especially within discourses that create social arrangements, and religion is a dominant discourse in most societies that constructs 'erotic possibilities', especially in this case for women; c) it specifies that all these are time and context specific, therefore, allowing me to justify my study of a specific class context and time line.

My study is situated in a small but growing body of literature on women's sexuality in Bangladesh. Sexuality studies in Bangladesh, especially women's sexuality studies, are a recent phenomenon, but something that is gaining importance slowly and steadily. On a broad level, I am interested in sexuality as a topic and women's sexuality in particular. Different approaches to sexuality only prove that sexuality does not have one or ready-made theoretical framework, which could be prescribed for a research like this. But, because this is a study about relations between sexuality and class and gender- specifically women's sexuality - a broader analytical framework used here would be a social constructionist one, taking gender as an analytical tool. The understanding is that sexuality is socially constructed as well as subjective; and that its meanings are expressed in language (discourses) as well as actions (practices).

What lies at the core of this research are the concepts of: heteronormativity, Sexuality and Gender.

### ***Heteronormativity: why is it central to the research?***

*'...the question is not whether (hetero) sexuality is natural. All aspects of our social world – natural or otherwise – are given meaning. The real issue is, how we give meaning to heterosexuality and what interests are served by these meanings... Without a systematic analysis of this institution (i.e. heterosexuality) – various questions go unanswered...the broader question at hand, 'who decides what counts as appropriate and necessary*

*and under what conditions is their authority legitimate? It is cultural meaning systems that determine (with our agreement, of course) what counts as natural or unnatural. And it is cultural meaning systems that regulate what should be the 'proper' treatment or response to anything 'inappropriate' or 'unnatural.* (Ingraham, 2002:73-74)

This research aims to engage itself with a range of individual assertion that women make to challenge or 'counter' heteronormativity in Bangladesh, especially in the cases of non-heterosexual women. In that process, it also aims to understand and question the dominant, its construction in terms of influential elements/phenomenon like history, politics, class, religion etc. As indicated by many researches<sup>3</sup>, it is of paramount importance to trace the history or mapping of a term, for example, here heteronormativity, in the specific context of the study (here Bangladesh). As Bangladesh is a relatively new nation, was part of the Indian sub-continent, therefore, part of the British colony, this mapping of process through history can be understood by researches done in the continent, especially in India (which is ample and rich). The route usually would take one through the processes over the 19<sup>th</sup> century where two opposed tendencies or forces- British colonial interventions and emergence of new nations- came together to create

<sup>3</sup> As Menon (2007) documents that in India the term 'counter-heteronormative' in the realm of activism and movement emerged in the 1990s when it referred "to a range of political assertion that implicitly or explicitly challenge heteronormativity and institution of monogamous patriarchal marriage" (2007:3). Nothing so public or political of that extent took place in Bangladesh, except for occasional publication of books by certain authors who challenged 'heteronormativity' and faced the consequence of either ban, exile or death threats, which were more often than not state approved. But as Menon (2007) points out that there is a difference between 'everyday practices and the narrativising of these practices in a particular mode', (for example that of modern history writing), because 'people in their everyday practices have lived for centuries as individuals and in communities, overtly or covertly violating dominant norms'- though the deviance have had made occasional appearances in the public space (Ibid, 4). Though Menon's paper concentrates mainly on the political and social movements in India, especially in the feminist movement to 'counter-heteronormativity' but it provides useful ground for understanding 'heteronormativity' and the process of hegemonising of the concept through history in the sub-continent, with focus on modernity.

the same effect of erasing homoeroticism and naturalizing heterosexuality (Menon, 2007:8). Specific studies on Bengal (which includes both present Bangladesh and Indian state of Bengal) reveal how modernity, with its influence of education, created a dominant 'Bhadrolok' (gentlemen) ways of things for both masculinity and femininity, and thus reinforcing the good housewife-ideal marriage kind of heteronormativity as norm.

Heteronormativity is significant to study sexuality because it produces particular forms of family, gendered identities, and makes only certain desires as natural, acceptable and as something that have existed through eternity- and much of these are institutionalized and continued through mechanism of state and its laws. But a careful study of the term in its conceptual and historic mapping only reveals the porosity and instability of the binaries and boundaries that constitute heteronormativity- the task is to question or interrogate these through the lived experiences of individuals.

I adopt the lens of heteronormativity, in its broader, all inclusive meaning- it would allow me to understand class, gender, power, identity, subordination as well as agency- and religion would inevitably be part of these revelations. It would also allow me to investigate what constructs the dominant norms, image and representation of sexuality for women in contemporary Bangladesh, and individual's life stories and narrations will help me to understand both the dominant as well as the alternatives that are lived by people, at least in their private realms of life.

Heteronormativity, as it is an analytical framework for this research, is not only understood as 'compulsory heterosexuality', as it would then only mean to be challenged by homosexuality. But heteronormativity can and should also be understood beyond this scope of homosexuality or same-sex relations, as one can be heterosexual and not be heteronormative- because the crux of the matter is not only what is the sexual preference of an individual or how one is 'fit' into a the hegemonic heterosexual categories, but to understand whether a person conform to a/some social formation that emphasizes on or built on a heterosexual patriarchal monogamous family unit, mostly within the framework of marriage. In this light, it is not only people who have same-sex preferences, but also those who are either remain single, and sexually active outside marriage, or have children outside marriage- in other words who embrace sexuality, motherhood etc outside the heteronormative social norms and boundaries of this given society and thus transgress heteronormative ideology which is expected to be the 'foundation' of the social identities of its members, especially of women. But it also remains aware of the fact that

there are power dynamics that are based on gender roles (often replaying the dominant norms) and gender subordination in all relationships, be it same sex or heterosexual- as gendered roles and consequent subordination are based on differences between individual access and control of resources, which again, in turn is related to the class issue in one way or the others. Therefore, a link between gender subordination and heteronormativity is to be explored in individual's lived experiences of sexuality.

The focus of this study is urban middle class, which I consider as a significant class for a variety of reasons. It is important because it is a class that is becoming focus of studies in South Asia in the context of globalization and liberalization as it has expanded as a class which benefits from the neo-liberal economy. Furthermore, liberalization has affected the economic aspects of its peoples' lives, but also lifestyles in terms of consumption, choices, mobility etc. Along with these, there are the changing influences of religion (including fundamentalism) and the ways gender relations and representations, power dynamics especially within households, and more relevantly for this research, the changes in sexuality and identity discourses – thus linking it to the broader ongoing debates on culture and modernity in South Asia. I am aware of the fact that 'middle class' as a generic term is problematic as there is certainly no fixed definition or income level that 'boxes' this category.

**This particular paper has a specific set of research questions:**

- How do non-heterosexual women form their sexual identities in urban middle class Bangladesh?
- How do women in same-sex relationships negotiate, challenge, resist, reinforce and/or make use of heteronormative ways of middle class life-style?

As a part of PhD research work, non-heterosexual women formed one of the three groups of people that I collected life-stories of, in the time span of over 10 months in Bangladesh; and in total there are 10 narratives of non-heterosexual women that will be used for this paper. all names are pseudonyms.

### III SEXUALITIES AND NOT TALKING SO 'STRAIGHT'

**Describing non-heterosexual desires: 'Discover, Dilemma and Denials' of same-sex attraction**

Women document in their narratives their journey of discovering their sexualities, their attraction for same sex- which often is encountered with a self-awareness

of their desires but also their difference from others, especially against their own cultural dominant model of compulsory heterosexuality. Such encounters makes way to dilemmas and conflicts in women's minds as they try to make sense of their own feelings, erotic desires and sexuality against the social construction of demonizing or at least stigmatising anything other than heterosexual identity. Sala and Benitez (2009) in their study of lesbian women's narratives of sexual identities in Spanish culture, explains how '... participants explain very clearly 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 nonnormative identities, emotions and desires. There are no words to talk about it- and if we do not talk about it, it does not exist.' (2009: 828-829)

Life story of Flora, for example, is a good example of how women through different phases of life come to discover her own sexual desires; face dilemmas and conflict and go through heterosexualization process, and finally, through exposure alternative identities and possibilities of non-normative life styles as well as with language tools and access to information – how a woman can come in terms with her sexual identity.

**Flora**

Is a 58 year old Self identified 'lesbian' (she prefers to be called 'Shomo-premi, i.e. one who LOVES person of same sex). An outed lesbian Flora is an activist and the founder of support group for women in same-sex relations. Flora is deeply religious and follows Islam; has been successful in her professional career in development sector. Though she hailed from a small town in Bangladesh, and still has her roots there, but she lives in Dhaka, and can be termed as a Dhaka urban middle class woman. She lives an independent life, and has her own living space, a flat. Brought up in a rather conservative family and surrounding (where girls did not continue schooling after puberty), she made an exception. Her father dressed her as a little boy (in traditional male dress of 'lungi' and shirt) till she was 8/9 years old and when she was handed feminine dresses, she was upset and 'wanted to turn into a boy'! Flora had reached puberty a little early, around the age of 11-12, having menstruation at that age made her feel disgusted about her body and she wished to turn into a boy as soon as possible (though she mentions that never ever in her life she has been uncomfortable with her body or gender ). She also says that sexual awareness and that of the body came rather late in life for her. So, when the marriage proposal came, and she agreed to

marry was not because she had much idea about marriage, conjugal life etc, but she was just excited to know that she would or could reach her goal, i.e. passing School final exam.

At the age of 14 and half, Flora got married to a man, 10 years older, very different from her and who was not that educated. After wedding she moved in with her husband in Sylhet, another small town and got into a girls' school - *'everything looked wonderful- I loved everything about life, the world- girls of my age, books, trees, class, sky, tiffin period - everything! The world changed for me! But it was a different, the real world for me- poles apart from the household that I shared with my husband. I hated going back home, to have to have sex with him- painful, stiff, uncomfortable and life a torture. I loved staying in school!'*

It is in school, that Flora had a love relation with a girl. A classmate of her's 'knocked' at her, and she responded. Though there was nothing sexual between the two, it was a very close, affectionate relation between the two- exchanging secret love letters, sharing snacks in break time; holding hands and simply enjoying each other's presence. It was only once that her 'friend' kissed her, which she did not dislike much, in fact liked it a lot, though there wasn't much beyond that! (her husband had never kissed her). This relation continued for a year, but after a year her husband had to shift base to another district, and the two friends separated. Letters continued for a while, but after the school final exam, there was no reply from the other girl, probably because she was also married off by that time.

At the age of 17, Flora left her husband without much hesitation as she planned to continue with her college, which the husband was not very keen on; and she returned to her parents' home amidst scandals and much social humiliation. After many attempts of freedom (including running away from home), she was sent to Dhaka, to her sister, to continue with her education. It was in Dhaka that flora would complete her education, till MA degree, and mostly staying at girls' hostels. It is during her undergraduate days, she fell in love with a friend of her and they shared a 'committed' relationship- so much so that they planned to live together after their graduation, and she started collection household stuff together for their future. Flora's girlfriend proved to be a bi-sexual and she started having a relation with another man, whom she married and left the country with. HH felt extremely betrayed and 'carried the burden of that box full of utensils etc that she gathered along with her ex-girlfriend', and she carried that burden for around 5 years.

She gave marriage another chance, after establishing herself financially and in a career. She was in her early 30s, and she was not very 'firm on her sexual preference', as she started thinking of marriage, mainly because, there was family expectations from her to get married and get settled and also because she was not against men as such. She felt that she was actually attracted to a good personality, not because someone was a woman or a man. She married a colleague of her's, but this marriage also did not work for her, as she found that they lived in two opposite poles. At this time, flora got a scholarship in Europe, and her husband decided to go to the USA and abandon her. This divorce made her parents very sad. During her stay in Europe, Flora came in touch with people who were open about sexuality and introduced her to the global sexual rights movements- the discourses of sexuality, it is also at this time, she made friends with another fellow student who took her to seminar/conferences on sexuality and helped her to learn more about these issues. She also had a sexual relation with this friend, *a first time 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 doing 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 has had relations, and lived together with her former partner, in her own apartment. She feels that that her personality, her professional career, and education added to the 'respectability' and 'acceptability' or at least being 'left alone' by others, and allowed her to live life, at this point on her own terms. Her front door sports a 'women in same-sex relation' sticker and it is, in fact, a statement that she makes without the help of words. Flora makes an interesting and important point: the personal relationship with families, especially with parents and siblings. It is because she has had a very solid relation with her family, and the fact that her family members values her, as a person, and loves her unconditionally, it becomes easier for them to accept what she likes or who she likes. Of course they could be hurt, if there was bad press regarding her personal life, but it would not be because of what others might say, but because of their realization that it might have

hurt her. Family support, acceptance and love- are central to live a happy life with choices made by women.

The dilemma also derives from social construction and learning of what ought to be `normal` desire, i.e. heterosexual, but also what women get conflicted between whether the sexual orientation is essentialist in nature or it is a later-life construction stemming out of other experiences, especially because of sexual violence or other negative experiences. It is not uncommon in women with same-sex desire or attraction to believe that sexual orientations can be compromised, and re-oriented, negotiated and if, made enough effort and given opportunities, they can heterosexualised. 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.

Narrative stories of Parveen and Mukta, from different age group captures the heterosexualization process and the `denials` of one`s assertion of sexual identity along with denial of sexual-self to such an extent that it almost violates human-sexual rights. Especially with the case of Mukta, the lack of language or the tools of self-expression as well as lack of role-model, a reference point for non-normative life identity is a prime example of why non-heterosexual women remain invisible and closeted in Bangladesh.

**Parveen:**

Aged 51, a semi-outed lesbian, and part of lesbian women's support group. She was a national level sports person/player, now works for and a successful coach for girls' teams and she is the first and the only female coach for professional male teams. She has a daughter from her marriage, which ended up in divorce. She has always had attraction for women, and has recently revived her love affair from high school days- her lover is a cancer survivor, a married woman with children.

She stands out in a Bengali crowd because of her salt-pepper short hair, stout and fit body and confident stature, which generally would be termed as `masculine` by many. She holds a senior government post in sports and is an extremely dedicated to her job and recruits players from around

the country and train them for sports that are always termed as `boy's game`.

Parveen was born in Bhola, a district in Southern coastal district of Bangladesh. She was the eldest child of her parents and spent her early childhood in that small district at her maternal grand-parents` home. She recalls a very active, full of sports, free childhood at her grandparents` house, where her uncles would make football teams in post-harvest paddy fields and take her along with them. Her grandfather used to buy her Lungi- and white hawai shirt for her, which was a typical dress for solvent men in rural Bangladesh.

In Dhaka, she went to girls' school and college, and would be into sports from very early days. She took part in national level competitions, came for practices to sports complex itself as a young player. She later studied in Dhaka University, completed her undergraduate studies and MA in Bengali literature and Language. Later in life, she worked as a Bengali teacher in a leading Girls' college, which she did not continue with for too long as she chose sports career over that. There was never any objection or resistance from her own family regarding her interest and participation in active sports or even taking up a career in this field.

Parveen was married off to a man who she did not really like or choose. Since the pressure of marriage was building up on her for obvious social reasons, she finally gave her consent for marriage. Her parents chose the husband, based on very typical Bengali criteria: good looking, stable job with government, very good family (and extended family as well). Parveen says, even though the marriage lasted for 9 years, but she was never happy or felt connected to her husband. But once she gave into marriage, she was committed to it as she wanted to make it work. The marriage suffered from its early stage, and all efforts proved to be futile with time. They had a child, a daughter at the later stage of their marriage, but even child could no save the marriage.

When asked whether the failure of the marriage had anything to do with her own sexual orientation or not, she said that sex was always a problem, and sacrificing sports and/or job (she gave up sports for few years on her own once she got married) could not bridge the gap, especially the physical one. She was not a dyke or anything; she had long hair, wore sarees and looked every bit the Bengali wife/woman that one is expected to be. When her daughter was a few years old, she got a fellowship for a year in another country, which she took up for few reasons: a) by that time she and her husband had decided to separate and eventually divorce; b) her daughter and she was staying with her parents, and she knew her daughter would be well taken care of by her own mother.

During her stay outside Bangladesh, she developed a sexual relation with another man, which ended when

she returned home. The obvious question to her, at this point is, what or how does she describe her sexual identity. Parveen identifies herself as a woman who love women (shomo-premi). She tells me that from a very early stage in life, she was attracted to girls. But same-sex attractions were always kept under the radar. It was in her high school days that she fell in love with her friend, who, according to her, was his wonderful, beautiful girl, who could dance and sing. They were always more than friends, but never fully sexually- but would stay close to each other, would hold each other closer, put arms around her waistline when no one was noticing. They understood the fact that they were attracted to each other, and that they were in love and with time.

Parveen's relation with her girlfriend ended gradually when she went to university, where she had other girlfriends. Like many other Bangladeshi women in same-sex relationships, Parveen also did not actually have sex with any of her girlfriends during these relationships. For her, she can only have sex when she loves a person. Random, casual sex is not her thing. And she mentioned at this point in the conversation that, *she would eventually have sex with the woman she loved and prove her conviction, value and integrity right!*

Parveen narrates that moment when she would meet her girlfriend (married with children) after decades, now a cancer patient: *'I went to her house and in the dining space everyone else was sitting, and there was she, sitting on a chair, turning her back to me- I could recognize her immediately, even after all these years and changes in appearance. She had put on weight and looked different, frail and ill- but when I saw her, I could not resist, a feeling that I had been avoiding to confront for a very long time. Since that day, that moment, for the next few months, I hardly spent any moment without seeing each other. I was accepted by the husband; mainly because she was so ill and they understood that I was important to her (this welcome and acceptance would be less with time, as she recovered from her ailment). She became better, and I was always with her, there was this get together at a farm-house outside Dhaka, a get together with friends, and it was there, for the first time they had sex, after all these years, but with someone she loved!*

Interestingly, even though they have continued with their relationship, Parveen declined her girlfriend's offer of leaving husband and children for a life together with each other. Parveen explained why: she feels that she is more calculative than impulsive girlfriend, and in no way she is willing to mess up

with their lives! According to her, *'if I get involved with her, I would not be able to return ever from that or from her!*

**Mukta:**

Aged 32, single (divorced), is from Sylhet, one of the most conservative districts of Bangladesh. She is a middle class woman, college drop out and lives with her family, which is very religious (her father was a maulana, i.e. preacher). She has been in love with her friend's elder sister- a married woman with two grown up children- for over 12 years now. She is literally the 'shadow' of that lady, who tells everyone that Mukta is like her younger sister and that she is a little crazy. Mukta is very well accepted and integrated by that lady's family as well as husband. They all see it as 'deep friendship'. Mukta's family thinks otherwise, and they forced her into a marriage, which ended bitterly in a month and half's time. Mukta is sexually attracted to her lady, but that desire is not reciprocated, but she doesn't give up. She sees herself as 'unnatural', and since her formal Bengali language skill is limited and has no knowledge of English, she doesn't know where to look for information on her type of desire, or how to articulate it. She hopes that one day the husband will die and children will grow up and leave their mum, and then she can claim her beloved.

Mukta wanted to be part of the research, in order to 'talk' out her 'secrets, thoughts and confessions', to talk about her 'story' and to find out whether she was 'satanic' unnatural' because of her desire for a woman. Being from an orthodox religious family, and brought up in a religious atmosphere, Mukta mainly had female friends and companions, and her socialisation was restricted to close family and friends. Religion, Islam, that condemns homosexuality, is an area of contention for her, which she struggles to deal with, especially because of her father's reputation as a religious man, a preacher:

*'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 limitations, 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' I am from inside. I have a very different sense of 'sin' in me, i don't consider myself as a sinner- may be mad- but not a sinner!*

Regarding love, romance and erotica, Mukta narrates childhood-crush on a male cousin:

*'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 they reached pre-teen, boys and girls were separated from socialising, and he was 'lost' from her life.'*

But it is her love for B, a married woman with 2 grown up children that Mukta finds irresistible and trapped in. She has been in love with B for the last 12 years, and even a forced marriage could not stop her from being attached to B. She left her husband after 2 months of the wedding, mainly because the marriage meant re-location, which meant staying away from B. Mukta describes why she loves B:

*'I love her face, it is so beautiful, no one can be as beautiful as B'I love the way she smells, i need to smell her before I go home every night-no one can be like B'!* everyone, including her mother, thinks that Mukta's obsession with B is unnatural, and is a form of madness (*'what do you see in that old woman's face', 'can she give you children'*- are questions that her family often ask her). She had been given many 'blessed amulets' and 'prayers' to come back to 'normal' life and to be free from B, but, of course, nothing worked. Forced marriage, and obligatory sex with husband did not go too well with Mukta and she hated sleeping with her husband. Added to this were the rural re-location and the ruralness of her husband in terms of dressing and family behaviour, which was a difficult thing to adjust to for urban Mukta.

Mukta says that she has never had any sexual relation with B, as B doesn't approve of unnatural sex or sexual desires, which can also be termed as sinful. Mukta doesn't know, how two women can have a sexual relation, but she feels that the desire in her body for B, can find a way to it! *'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!' often Mukta sleeps in the same bed with B, especially when B's husband is away for business, but B keeps a pillow between the two, so that bodies don't touch: 'I think, B does this because she knows how there can be sex between two women, and she thinks, I don't know about such possibilities'!*

Mukta is like a 'shadow' to B, on an everyday basis, and supports all her activities and to others, she appears to be a 'side kick' to B, but Mukta sees herself like a 'husband' to B, who takes care of her, protect her, and she says, *'I sometimes wonder, if I*

*were as rich as B's husband, would B then consider leaving him and come and stay with me, and she would not need to have a husband...I could be her provider husband...' and she hopes for the day '...when B's husband would die and her children would grow up and leave home, then B would have no one but Mukta to rely on and they would live together as two old women'!* Mukta understands the futility of her desire for a woman, though she had no words available to her to describe her sexual orientation or identity, nevertheless, she is 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 30 and not being married and without children.

*'I sometimes, contemplate on committing suicide-but what is the use of such death...am i a loser...what have i got from this relation...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 difference age, education, and urbanization can make in terms of asserting sexual desires and identities, at least to some extent can be understood from the following two women's narrative. Bani in her early 30s, and living outside her own town, settled in Dhaka, in respectable job and with financial freedom have found her won comfort and safety zone, within which she can practice a life style of her choice and not disturb the surface. It is also possible because of her educational background, her knowledge of English (which helps in using concepts and words that are not in use or commonly used in Bangla); and also because of her ability to find other women with similar sexual orientation, who works as a reference point, a model of possible life style beyond heteronormativity. On the other hand, Payel, a young girl in her early 20s, with little education, but access to spaces and social groups that are more open with sexuality and sexual discourses- help her to experiment with sexuality, and remain open to all possibilities without being too restricted by dominant social norms. Though Payel, still wants to conform to heterosexual dream of 'happily married ever-after' course of life, she is not bound by the dream as such.

#### **Bani:**

A Lecturer in a private university, in her mid 30s, was also part of the lesbian support group, but ultimately came out of that because of difference of opinions. 4 years back, she started the first ever research on women's sexuality, especially on women who desires women, but for some reason she never



completed it, and even though she is from the community, she told me (4 years back) that she could manage only 3 interviews for her research. Born in a Buddhist family, she never had an orthodox upbringing; *I was never traditional believer in religion. And so, it never created any dilemma, conflict or anything. And after my initiation into the leftist politics after college days, gave me the critical tool to analyze religion.*''

On her sexual orientation and 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 the women and I fell in one-sided love for quite a good number of times with which I used to be quite occupied with all its pain and pleasure!! My fascination for boys did not use to linger for long, but sometimes I would really like to have the attention of those I really admired.*''

Since BANI is not from Dhaka, but has been living in the city, initially for higher education and now for job purpose, she lives outside the usual 'family' supervision and close proximity that is almost mandatory for single women. She has had live-in relationship with other women in Dhaka, an arrangement that made use of homo-sociability that can camouflage homo-sexuality. She gives credit to her higher education and choice of a 'respectable' career in teaching, that has made relatives and family more cautious of interfering with her personal lives:

*'I spent a whole four years with my former partner, but we were three together. The other friend was the closest friend of my partner and we all three became friends. Even, after the marriage of that partner, I still am staying with that friend in the same flat. We three used to share everything, all expenses. ... Regarding the social surroundings, we did not face questions as nobody knew about our relationship except with whom we confided in. ... the fact that I am 'shomo-premi', woman-loving-woman, is not disclosed to too many people, and that is why, I do not face much discrimination and hardship in social*

*life. But I know for fact, that if my sexual orientation becomes public, especially in my work place, it will definitely have a negative impact on my career. I guess, i will have to resign from my job to save respectability. I do not see or wish to be visible to the society as a lesbian, because the consequences are dire and the pressure would be too much to handle. During university days, when I used to live in hostel, my relationship with my girlfriend (who also was a resident in that hostel) somehow came out to some other girls and to save ourselves from disgrace and expulsion from the residence (which had happened to other girls before), we both had to deny our relationship. This constant denials and lying to others is a source of pain and anger in life.'*

*Payel:*

Aged 20, completed high school and a drop out from college. She left home last year, and started living on her own, sharing a room with another girl. Payel told me that she likes being sexual, she enjoys kissing and fondling, but she is yet to have sex with a man, as she is waiting for her 'prince charming'. It is, according to her, wise to wait for another few years for that prince charming, otherwise, losing virginity to anyone and then immediately after that meeting the man of her life would be disastrous! But after a few years, she would just 'jump' into the field of sex, and go for it! But she also admits that she has had sex with women and that she enjoys it and love could happen with anyone- man or a woman. She narrates her sexuality: *'I like both men and women- for me the person is important, i can be attracted to both. Honestly speaking, I have had sex with a girlfriend. I was very fond of her- she was my best friend, and we loved being sexual with each other- like, touching breasts, kissing, removing pants, underwear...you know, all of it- like having sex- and I like it very much!...even though i have slept with women, and I have done many other sexual acts, but I have not had sex with a man yet, but i really want to have sex with a man- I have the urge, and there are many offers and temptations- almost on a daily basis, but somehow I have not done it yet. I guess, I hope to meet 'the man, the One', the love of my life- who i can get married to, who would be handsome and loving, and will have eyes only for me...I will wait for this man, for the next 2 or 3 years, then, I will sleep with everyone! By the way, I don't mind if this 'love of my life' is a woman- it is the person that matters- a person who can take care of me, keep me well, love me and will not stop me from roaming around parks, and roads and my favorite hang-outs...there will be no compromise on that! I don't think, i can find such love!*

#### IV THE 'INVISIBLE' WOMEN AND THEIR INVISIBLE 'IDENTITIES'

Identities, especially sexual identities can be tricky, for individuals who inhabit in social structures that either stigmatize or demonize anyone who appears to be deviant, and is seen as a failure or in adept to live within heteronormative societal boundaries. This is a reason why many women refuse to take a 'label' themselves. *Nahar*, a 45 year old Lawyer, a semi-outed lesbian woman (within friends and close circles) says, *'I am not particularly too keen on being introduced as a lesbian woman. I mean, i have 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' individual!'* most women i talked to, expressed a desire to live a more open life, to have the socio-political and legal right to live a life of personal choice, but they also understand that it is a wish that is far from being fulfilled in near future. Homophobia is strong, and women's same-sex relationships don't feature in public discourse, not even as much as male homosexuality and transgender sexuality. *Flora* says that keeping oneself under the radar is the best strategy for the moment and it is the only way to try to live a life according to one's choice, as much as possible: *'In Bangladesh, you can be yourself, as long as you don't stir the system- they will let you be.'* Her attempt to have her support group for women-loving-women registered and more formalised is always faced with resistance from its own members. The lack of younger women interested in activism for sexual rights for non-heterosexual women, is something that concerns senior members like *Parveen* and *Flora*. Interestingly, the difference between the gay and lesbian community in Dhaka, Bangladesh is that, in terms of activism, in gay community it is the younger, educated urban men who want to make their issues more public and want to start a movement. They are the one who are more outed than the others. On the contrary, in the lesbian group, it is the senior members who are the public face of the groups, and the younger ones are not only closeted but also reluctant and less confident in make this a movement for their right to live a life full of choices. What is the reason? *Flora* in discussion with me agrees that because in our society, women of a particular matured age (when she has passed by the marital-reproductive age, of any social obligatory roles), people really don't care much about what they do. This position is more powered by a woman's education, professional and economic success or confidence. Therefore, women past 50 are the ones who lead this group. On the contrary, the younger ones are more occupied with 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 ones lack in confidence even if they have the education and/or the money: the whole understanding of 'rights' is not clear or strong to them.

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

*I am not much sanguine enough of 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 fact that researches are underway from the rights perspective. The earlier engagement of sexuality issues tied with HIV-AIDS matrix opened some way for talking about sexuality. But it cannot be confined to it for its own liberation. All the LGBT groups, apart from 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, the interconnections that it will make with the political ideology without which it cannot sustain a strong footing. And we also must be aware the class issue, that Gay and lesbian groups in Bangladesh is suffering from elitism sometimes due to its class bias and also due to the lack of the 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 m quite confounded to share it in public forum, so those who are striving, they should be given the credit which they deserve but it would be much more strengthened if the horizons get much more widened, if they remain cautious about the pitfalls of identity politics.*

Whether or not women are willing or feel ready to talk about sexuality and take on sexual rights movement within the upcoming LGBT movement in Bangladesh, one thing is for sure, that each have and are in the process of deconstructing heteronormativity at a personal level. Some do it through a dressing style:

*I had a makeover when I got admitted in the university. That means short hair, Punjabi and pant but with stole. Before that my dresses were like normal women's clothes. I did not feel that much uncomfortable, but obviously I used to fall prey to 'gaze' which was sometimes friendly or sometimes unfriendly. Still I wear the so-called male dress, but still my dresses have that flare of unisex type of flavour, I have not yet started dressing as hardcore male dress, i.e. shirt, pants. That means, still I look*

*feminine in my attire, according to my onlookers and also I also like to keep feminine flavour because of the social setting. ... I think if I go outside of the South-Asian boundaries, I might like to wear masculine dressing and I would never mind to keep feminine look. (Bani)*

Some do it through defying marriage normativity through higher education:

*There was pressure for getting married, till a point, but now there isn't any...i guess, my family has started to accept the fact that I might not be interested in marriage, but rather am into studies, or they might think that I have plans for higher education, like PhD, and they will be actually very happy if I pursue that dream which will be a compensation, or a way to sooth the pain of me not being married, to them!*

Some do it through activism and writing like Flora, who, actually was the first person, to talk about 'women-loving-women' at a women's organization back in the 90s and often she expresses her thought in her poems and articles that are published in different magazines and books.

Whatever might be the mode, it is undeniable that each women resist heteronormativity within their given situation and everyday resistance cannot be ignored because resistance is never simple or easy, especially when one has to operate in a religious and patriarchal society like ours. There is a need to develop a discourse of sexuality in Bangladesh, in Bengali, which would make the concepts of sexualities, sexual identities accessible to everyone, vocabulary that does not have prejudice or violent or degrading or demeaning connotations. Access to information and opportunities to meet people from communities, with similar orientations and interests can help deconstruct the social stigmas and marginalization. All these are only possibilities only when women, in general, and non-heterosexual women in particular can gain in more social mobility, education and financial independence to assert their personal choices of life-style and sexual identities. It is evident from this small group of women's narratives that, since women find themselves in a discriminating and vulnerable position in the social gender hierarchy, it is much more difficult for homosexual women than homosexual men, to make space for themselves, both at public and private realms of life.

## V. CONCLUSION

Identity is a fluid term, and the narratives of the non-heterosexual women in this study indicate that sexual identity can be anything but 'straight', but in real life,

one can or makes strategic choices to move in and out of different sexual choices. Sexual identity, for women, is not a 'straight-forward' process. Women go through much more rigid and strict process of heterosexualization than men do. Because of how gender, and femininity is constructed in Bangladeshi society, women are trained to think themselves not as overtly sexual entities, and to contain their sexuality within marriage and heterosexuality. Sex is taboo, sex is feared, and women's sexuality is seen as troublesome: 'women are gateway to hell' etc, therefore, suppression of women's sexuality is embedded within the system. In a heteronormative society, where marriage is a norm and motherhood is seen as 'completion of womanhood'- women with non-heterosexual or even non-heteronormative identity find it much more difficult to 'come out' with one particular brand or label of sexual identity, unless she has crossed a certain age (beyond marriage and reproductive possibilities), have gained certain level of education, financial independence and often some kind of sense of 'community' for support and reference point- it is not only difficult but at times, almost impossible to even articulate sexual desires, sexual identities and coming in terms with the self. The plurality or multiplicity of identities that women are required to operate within, it is crucial that sexuality studies addresses women's lived experiences of sexuality in order to gain an overall understanding of sexuality and sexual rights in the context of Bangladesh.

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