

Being Young and LGBTI in Bhutan

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Between 2013 and 2014, I realised that I no longer had any romantic and sexual attraction to the opposite gender. I felt out of place and did not know what to do. With heteronormativity as the standing norm around me, I felt isolated, segregated, and even jealous, because I knew that my life was not going to be the same as my peers.

The only word I saw and knew was “gay” and that, too, because I came across an article in a Bhutanese newspaper. I immediately went online and searched “Gay in Bhutan”. The first search result I saw was “Being gay is illegal and punishable by up to one-year prison term”. This sentence has more or less haunted me for a long time.

Before the Penal Code (Amendment) Act of Bhutan 2021, consensual adult same-sex activity was classified as an offence of petty misdemeanour under the 2004 Penal Code of Bhutan. Although there was no active persecution of LGBTI people under this law, the community has never been able to live an open and authentic life without the fear of stigma and discrimination.

The 2021 Amendment has opened a door of opportunity for the community to at least start living their lives on their own terms but to say that the overall situation of the LGBTI community has improved is an overrated remark.

Being a Child

Heteronormativity is deeply rooted in our culture and value system. Boys wear blue, girls wear pink. Boys play football and girls the playhouse. Boys date girls and marriage is between two different genders. These are some of the perceived norms around us. These norms have not changed over time and are still taught to children.

For those of us who grow around these norms, our way of analysing and understanding becomes narrow and accepting diversity can be challenging

later in life. For the few of us who grow up differently, we are often forced into corrective behaviour which is believed to be the correct way of life around us.

As children who are discovering their place in society, they are already dealing with the pressure to keep up with their peers and with the expectations of their families. Being born with diverse sexuality and gender identity can be additional hurdles for the children to overcome if they are not living in an enabling environment.

Children are often exposed to ridicule for behaving differently from their expected gender norms and this can traumatise children at the beginning of their lives. Often, society can also put pressure on the family to reinforce expected normal behaviour in their children.

Education

A major portion of our young lives is spent educating ourselves. Academic excellence is the major focus of our education system. We are taught to score marks in examinations or get left behind. Sexuality is never a discussion we had in any class. Education now has slowly started to integrate comprehensive sexuality education into the curricula but its implementation and dissemination in the actual classroom are yet to be tested. Developing policies around the issues of integrating sexuality education is the first step to move forward but often our realities are that these are just on paper.

Children and young people miss out on crucial life skills and information which can positively influence their lives. The misconception that sexuality education is teaching children about sex and influencing them, is rooted in the fact that sexuality education is over-generalised, not understood, and not taken seriously.

I studied in a school where I was afraid to go to the washroom because I saw my male friend (who is effeminate) bullied in the washroom and get locked in. The teachers were of no help. Instead, they told us to act in a way that did not attract any unnecessary attention.

When I think back, I often wonder whether the situation would have been different if we were taught to accept each other regardless of our differences, and if our teachers understood us, we would not have to worry about getting harassed in the washroom. Instead, we could have focused on improving ourselves one day at a time.

Times have changed but, for a few of us who are still in the education system, our ordeal has remained the same. Anti-harassment and anti-bullying policies are unheard of and often lack implementation in most of the education setting. A carefree attitude is very detrimental to a LGBTI individual's wellbeing.

Most education institutions in Bhutan offer limited or no support to LGBTI youth who are struggling with their sexuality, mental health, bullying, harassment and abuse. This increases their feelings of isolation and drives them into believing that they have to deal with their own issues. Any attempt to support and help in the later stages of life becomes a challenge and they continue to live with it. Often, they resort to negative coping mechanisms, such as smoking, alcohol, and substance abuse.

Mental Health

Mental health has always been a neglected subject in Bhutan. Young people within the LGBTI community are more likely to experience challenges with their mental health, compared with other young people in the general population. This is largely due to the stigma and discrimination they may face at schools, at home, and in their immediate community.

Global statistics suggest that gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth consider suicide at nearly three times the rate of heterosexual youth.¹ There is often no recognition of LGBTI issues in any national statistics, and targeted interventions for young LGBTI people are not available.

Resource constraints are always a reality but it is also true that young LGBTI people continue to suffer in the corner without accessible and targeted mental health interventions and support. Anxiety and depression have been identified as the most common mental health issues faced by the general population in Bhutan.

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/65/ss/pdfs/ss6509.pdf>

Transgender youth are far more likely to experience nearly four times the risk of depression² and LGBTI teens experience significantly more symptoms of depression than their non-LGBTI peers.³

Rejection, isolation, bullying, and other safety issues can all contribute to increasing the difficulty for LGBTI youth to feel safe and supported. These issues continue to remain hidden or not reported. Young LGBTI people will often refuse to seek mental health support, for fear of stigma and discrimination.

Employment

Labour laws in Bhutan do not explicitly protect LGBTI people from discrimination and unlawful termination because of their sexuality, gender identity, and gender expression. Some young LGBTI people even have to leave employment because of negative workplace experiences, including stigmatisation and harassment.

Employment for young transgender women is often limited to the entertainment sectors, with low wages, job insecurity, and lack opportunities for development and progression. This is further fuelled by the fact that they often lack the education qualification to move forward in life. Young gay men and lesbians will choose to stay in the closet or not be open about their sexuality for fear of stigma and discrimination.

Substance Use

With an increased burden on education, mental health, and employment, young LGBTI individuals will often engage in substance abuse as a means of coping with the surrounding problems. This affects their ability to re-enter education and employment and affects both their mental and physical wellbeing. With constraints in resources and the shortage of rehabilitation services in the country, young LGBTI are left behind and reintegration into the community after rehabilitation is often a challenge.

² Reisner, Sari L., Ralph Veters, M. Leclerc, Shayne Zaslow, Sarah Wolfrum, Daniel Shumer, and Matthew J. Mimiaga. "Mental health of transgender youth in care at an adolescent urban community health center: a matched retrospective cohort study." *Journal of Adolescent Health* 56, no. 3 (2015): 274-279.

³ Marshal, Michael P., Laura J. Dietz, Mark S. Friedman, Ron Stall, Helen A. Smith, James McGinley, Brian C. Thoma, Pamela J. Murray, Anthony R. D'Augelli, and David A. Brent. "Suicidality and depression disparities between sexual minority and heterosexual youth: A meta-analytic review." *Journal of adolescent health* 49, no. 2 (2011): 115-123.

Reintegration

Re-entering the education setting or workplace can be a significant obstacle for young LGBTI people who are trying to get back on their own. Fear of re-stigmatisation and discrimination deters them and the lack of understanding and support in workplaces and the education setting can exacerbate the overall situation.

There is always a lack of practical support and knowledge about re-entering education or the workspace.

What Needs to be Done?

- Generally, awareness among families of LGBTI youth must be raised to encourage the acceptance of their LGBTI children. Efforts to reduce abuse and increase acceptance within their LGBTI family members must be stepped up.
- Investment in an LGBTI-friendly educational environment must be considered. Support for LGBTI students and staff must ensure that attitudes towards homophobia, transphobia, bullying and harassment are challenged in all areas of the schools including policies, procedures, and curricula.
- Develop and support efforts to end stigmatisation and abuse against LGBTI young people.
- Availability and accessibility to social services which target and tailor to the specific needs of the LGBTI young people must be identified and scaled.
- LGBTI persons have different needs and this must be acknowledged.
- Formal gender recognition for self-identified transgender individuals should be recognised in all citizen documents.
- The Ministry of Education should adopt anti-bullying and inclusive policies in schools and provide comprehensive sexuality education for all students and teachers.
- The Ministry of Health must strengthen and support counselling services in all schools and health facilities.
- The government and Constitutional bodies must make committed efforts to ensure and improve gender equality by including gender and sexuality equality indicators into all programming plans.
- The LGBTI community must speak up and advocate for themselves.

The community should strengthen and support their social support network, build connections, help each other, and accept help from others.

- The LGBTI community should make conscious and active efforts to build our capacity to better our lives and to become a more effective advocate for ourselves and the community.

Despite all these alarming issues, there are always opportunities to intervene and establish equality and protection for LGBTI youths who are deprived of opportunities to excel in life. It is not just the issue of the LGBTI community; families, communities, and everyone who works in the government and public sector need to strategise effective methods to help young LGBTI people in the country.

Integrating young LGBTI issues with the national and international movement must be done to address our issues holistically. National policies and activities should provide a space for dialogue and should integrate LGBTI issues to address the social discrepancies in our country. Resources can be drawn from both inside and outside the country.