

## SEXUALITY AS A TABOO: SOCIAL DISCRIMINATION AGAINST LGT IDENTITIES AND SEX WORKERS IN URBAN SRI LANKA

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### 1. Introduction

Sexuality is treated as merely a biological factor where social meaning attributes to sexuality by society often forgotten and neglected. In fact terms such as sex, gender, gender identity and sexual orientation are parts of the complete picture of human sexuality which brings the notion of social meanings of human sexuality. Simple definition of the term sex based on biological categorization where a human is given an identity as a male, female or other based on biological organs by their birth onwards. The term gender refers to a social identity where on the basis of sex categorization the society itself provides different accounts for man and woman where often terms such as masculinity and femininity used to describe gender identities of a man and a woman. The fact is there might be humans who do not claim their sex identity as similar as their gender identity, but the opposite sex's gender identity. That is the fact it is argued as that gender is a social construction where different individuals may claim their gender identity their preferences and feelings accordingly. Sexual orientation stands as both sexual and psychological attraction of an individual towards another in which different categorizations such as heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality, asexuality and queer sexuality come to forefront.

Homosexuality is a sexual, physical as well as psychological attraction towards a same sex partner where such female to female attractions termed as lesbians and male to male as gays. Diamond (2002) outlines that today, the term transgender includes intersexual, transsexual, drag queen, cross-dresser and transvestite. Intersexual is a term used to refer to individuals who have both male and female organs. Transsexuals can be defined as being biologically born to one sex though they feel that they belong to the opposite gender, and suffer from an identity crisis. Therefore, male-to-female transgender is identified as 'M to F', 'Transgender Females', or 'Transwomen'. Female-to-male transgender people are identified as 'F to M', 'Transgender Males', or 'Transmen'. Drag queens usually dress like the opposite sex but only for performances. Apart from them, cross-dressers, dress like opposite sex with some purpose such as issues impacting their own gender identity but not for performances. However, Transvestites cross dress for some erotic pleasure such as in sexual acts. Even though there are few differences between them,

contemporary transgender discourse broadly includes all these sub-categories as transgender.

Given this background our intention is to argue that human sexuality also inter related with these said concepts where society plays a major role while shaping human sexuality which is the fact we tend to argue it as more than a biological factor. The point is even when it comes to human sexuality; a society like Sri Lanka which is grounded by cultural values and norms has its own rules, regulations and values which is the factor that heterosexuality becomes only acceptable human sexuality within the context. Since heterosexuality is accepted as only conventional human sexuality within the context other sexual minorities in a margin which clearly discriminate and stigmatize such sexual minorities of lesbian, gay and transgender as not accepted human sexualities not only in the social level but also in legal frame work. The point is since sexual minorities are not acceptable human sexuality within the context they face social discrimination in various ways.

Ironically, though heterosexuality treated as only acceptable sexual behaviour, there are social constructions of heterosexuality relationships as well. Arguing the line it is agreeable that heterosexuality also accepted only it comes under legal marriage between a man and a woman where all forms of extra marital relationships are considered as a deviant sexual behaviour. Similarly when it comes to sex workers it is not only criminalized under the law but also it is labeled under unaccepted sexual behaviour in larger society. Then sex workers also in a margin as a deviant group where they also face social discrimination against them.

In here the sex industry can be identified as is a person who engages in sexual services to earn money, and the term of 'prostitute' is not only a female term (Coorey, 2009:18). But the common usage of female sex workers is a gender based construction. Though female sex workers provide their sexual service to heterosexual clients, the restriction is created through basically legal and cultural construction in Sri Lankan concept. Though it is conducted among heterosexual partners, through the establishment of legal marriages and legally accepted sexual relationships within legal families, the sex industry becomes a crime in Sri Lanka. As Glidden's states "human sexual behaviour is meaningful- that is, human use and express their sexuality in a variety of ways. For humans sexual activity is much more than

biological. It is symbolic, reflecting who we are and the emotions we are experiencing” (Giddens 2009: 579). Therefore in this paper our attempt is to outline the social discrimination faced by LGT and sex workers due to the social notion emerged as deviant and unacceptable sexualities where we would like to raise the question of are not we ready to understand that human sexuality has various forms in which hetero sexuality is just one where psychological and symbolic reflections on human sexuality also often not clearly understood in our societies.

## 2. RESEARCH PROBLEM, OBJECTIVES AND QUESTIONS

### 2.1 Research problem

As outlined in the introduction it is evident that lesbian, gay, transgender and sex workers do not enjoy their rights as citizens in the country just being sexual minorities in the context. In this legal, political and social context, research problem articulated to examine ‘what is social discrimination faced by LGT and sex workers being a sexual minority in Sri Lankan context?’

### 2.2 Research Objectives

**Main research objective:** To identify social discrimination faced by LGT and sex workers in the context.

#### Sub objectives:

- To investigate role and impact of family and close social networks towards the social discrimination they face.
- To examine the role and impact of legal sector towards the sexual minorities.
- To identify coping mechanisms they use as sexual minorities.

### 2.3. Research questions:

- What forms of labelling experienced by LGT and sex workers in Sri Lankan context?
- What are the reactions they receive from their family and close social networks in terms of their gender identity, sexual orientation and sexual behaviour?
  - What is the impact from family and close social networks towards them?
  - How they perceive larger society social responses and its impact?

- How they cope up with main stream society as sexual minorities in the context?

It is important to note that in this research paper the authors specifically focused only on the social discrimination they faced and reactions from family, social networks and larger society towards them only.

## 3. Methodology

Since the sampling groups were quite hidden and not promptly visible in main stream society, using purposive sampling method 40 case studies with Lesbians, gays, transgender and sex workers where 10 per each conducted during the time period of 2010 – 2014. LGT samples were found through two NGOs in city Colombo and Sex workers sample was found through an urban setting in City Colombo where Sex Trade seems to be operating more rapidly in an organized manner where one would come across street prostitution as well as organized brothels. Since this is a qualitative research thematic analysis used as the qualitative analysis method. The themes derived from data and information were, negative reactions of family and ambiguous relationships with their families, social stigma and discrimination from social networks including job, the discriminatory positions by larger society.

## 4. Conceptual framework

To develop the research as conceptual backdrop terms gender, gender identity and sexual orientation are used. Deviance also used to clarify the notion of unacceptability of sex workers.

### 4.1 The Notion of ‘Biological Man’ – ‘Biological Women’ and Defining the Term ‘Sex’

The term ‘sex’ refers to male and female defined by their biological organs and the term ‘gender’ refers to the social or cultural contexts where two role models of male and female are differentiated depending on their sex (Diamond 2002; Glover and Kaplan 2009; Wharton 2012; Whittle 2002). Diamond (2002: 3) states that “gender is to sex as feminine is to female and masculine is to male”. It is clear that the binary opposites of sex as male and female as well as the binary social construction of masculine and feminine causes the emergence of the discourse on sexuality. Mostly homosexuals and sex workers do not have any issue related with their sex and gender categorizations but when it comes to transgender identities, the problem is they do not fit in to either sides of binary as they are in a male body with a

feminine feeling or female body with a masculine feeling, where their gender identity and sexual orientation within this discourse is absent. With such effects one form of heterosexuality became the only acceptable sexual behavior in most social contexts where we can identify either absent or invisibility of alternative sexualities.

#### 4.2 Defining 'Gender' and 'Gender Identity'

By using the term 'gender,' we refer to personal characteristics and social roles that society usually attributes to one biological sex as a male to a masculine man or the other biological sex as a female to a feminine woman. The terms 'masculine', and 'feminine' are usually used to describe the gender identity while 'male' and 'female' are used to describe the biological sex of a person. Gender identity refers to how one thinks about one's own self in terms of gender. However, gender is socially constructed even though it is not a stable identity. The fact is, again while homosexuals and sex workers do claim their gender identity on the same line of sex categorization when it comes to transgender it can be defined as the third gender which does not categorize as male or female but is defined as a third sex. This idea of third sex creates a blurred area between the sex dichotomy of male and female and the dichotomy of masculinity and femininity.

#### 4.3 Defining 'Sexual Orientation'

Furthermore, the term sexual orientation refers to "the sex of the erotic, love and affectionate partner a person prefers. Does the individual seek a mate who is male or female; does the desired person live as a woman or man? Most often, to describe orientation, the terms heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual are used" (Diamond 2002:3). In simple terms, sexual orientation is how we think of ourselves, in terms of being significantly attracted to members of the opposite sex or same sex or the other sex (including third sex). Here homosexuality in a one form of sexual orientation as similar to heterosexuality which is often neglected by main stream society. Further, a question arises as to how transgender individuals define their sex, gender identity and sexual orientation, as they do not easily fit into these categories. On one hand, there could be a clash between their gender identity and sexual orientation while on the other hand they may base the definition of their sexual orientation either on their sex or on their gender. Importantly, transgender individuals can be heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual in their sexual orientation. Some lesbians, gays and bisexuals are transgender but most are not. As the Institute of the

Medicine of the National Academics report (2011) explains, there are health differences between transgender and non-transgender people as well as between transgender females and transgender males. Ironically sex workers are the group fit into the categorization of accepted sexual orientation of heterosexuality, again being reflected as a deviant group they are in a margin and face social discrimination too.

#### 4.4 Deviance and Deviant Behaviour

The term of 'deviance' is mostly associated with the term of 'crime'. Moreover Deviant behaviour attaches with exact social norms and values in a certain social context. Norms are important to existence. Therefore essentially deviance is based on consecration to and destruction of norms. A reactivist or relativist definition of deviance holds that they are no universal or unchanging entities that define deviance for all times and in all places (Clinard and Meier 2011:06). Rather 'social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infection creates deviance'(Becker 1973:09). Deviance is in the eye of the beholder, not in any particular action on the part of the person who may be labeled as a deviance. A normative definition describes deviance as a violation of a norm. A norm is a standard about "what human beings should or should not think, say, or do under given circumstances'(Blake and Davis 1964:456). In Sri Lankan Context, both LGT and sex workers identify as deviant groups based on their sexual orientation and sexual behaviour. Social, cultural, religious, economic and legal factors influence to define these groups as deviant groups. They became deviant due to the common notion of the Sri Lankan Context. LGT is a group which deviates from the accepted sexual orientation in Sri Lanka. Similarly sex workers deviate, because society is given the acceptance to the sexual relationships within legally accepted marriages. According to the view point of LGT and sex workers, they do not define them as deviant groups. Therefore they do not try specifying themselves as a special category in the society.

#### 5. Limitations of the study

Since the study was based only on homosexual and transgender the results could not be generalized to all sexual minorities such as LGBTQ which means bi sexual and queer as well. Further sex work sample only based on female sex workers where findings could not be generalized to both male and female sex workers in the country. Moreover since study had based only on the sample of 40 which was quite

small number the research findings could not be generalized to all LGT and sex workers.

## 6. Key Findings and Analysis

### 6.1 Social discrimination against homosexuals

As we stated earlier, Steinem (2008) writes there are various forms of sexual orientation in which homosexuality becomes just one. Throughout the research project the clear cut outcome was that hiding their sexual orientation as gay or lesbians from their families, relatives, friends and other social networks due to the fear of negative and harmful reactions. When the majority of the families reveal their daughter, son or sibling as a homosexual person, the common responses were putting out from homes, blaming, taking to a councilor (a friend or a relative not a professional one), hitting, which could be claimed as both physical and psychological violence. Bersani( 1995) writes a homosexual couples in Europe lived in near two apartments hiding their sexual orientation, due to the fear of social excision they would face in the society during 60s which is one type of evident of social exclusion. Quite similarly the said reactions by their families and relatives reveal that how social exclusion towards such sexual minorities exist in the society. Further most of them do not reveal their sexual orientation due to the fear of social stigma they may face in the larger society. Those who reveal make sure that it is known by only close friends and tolerated family relatives mostly their biological families. However abusive words such as Appe, SLS are often used to discriminate them as most of them said they heard such words when they reveal it to society.

### 6.2 Social exclusion faced by transgender identities

Comparing to homosexuals transgender are the group who face more social discrimination as they could not hide their gender identity.

It is important to note that all ten transgender dropped out from their home at one time period of their lives when they came out directly saying that they were transgender. Mostly the family claims that they bring dishonour to the family as it is not socially acceptable behaviour. The common social perception about transgender community are that they are crazy, ridicule and violent which does not depict reality. After all ten came out as transgender to their families, all faced the issue that they have mental illness. All ten dropped out from home at one time period of their lives

when they came out directly saying that they are transgender. However, today some are living with their siblings, and some have some kind of connections with their homes but some are staying alone as they do not have any kind of contact with their homes. This clear discrimination still exists within their homes and from relatives. Furthermore, there is an ambivalent relationship between them and their families.

This discrimination and stigmatization is not only in legal sector but also prevails in the media where they represent a vulgar and derogatory discourse about transgender. The violence is the other part of total picture which shows the entire negative social perceptions of the transgender community. Here language also plays a major role.

### 6.3 Social exclusion faced by sex workers

Sex work as a profession is not legally accepted in the Sri Lankan context. The main factor is that sex workers are discriminated in all social institutions such as legal, religious, social and cultural. The only acceptable hetero sexual relationship is limited to legal marriage between a man and a woman in the Sri Lankan context where sex workers are discriminated both socially and culturally giving the reason as deviant behaviour. The fact is sex workers not only discriminated from larger society but also from their social and family networks being an actor of deviant behaviour. Therefore it is agreeable though hetero sexuality is only acceptable sexual behaviour within the context there are certain social values and norms which made even sex work as not acceptable sexual behaviour of human sexuality. There are no any legal, social acceptances towards this group of women where they face powerlessness in the society. The crucial factor is because of these kinds of powerlessness, clients, brokers, legal parties and larger society missed use them sexually, physically and economically. Unacceptable sexual behaviours which could not fulfil within their legally accepted marriages with their wives such as sadism are done by clients against sex workers which often end up in a face of violence against them. Here the point we want to raise is that though they face different faces of discrimination in the society still they are used as stress releasing component and missed used by the some groups of people and individuals for their own sake. Certain abusive terms used by larger society as a way of labializing, stigmatizing sex workers which portraits that sex workers are involved in a sexual behaviour which is not accepted by the society which means diversity of human sexuality is not clearly understood still in the context.

## 7. Conclusion

The common notion developed by Sri Lankan society regarding human sexuality stands as hetero sexuality as only acceptable sexuality where all other forms of sexual minorities in a social discrimination. Ironically even within hetero sexuality there are certain cultural values and norms interfered in which sex workers also in a social discriminatory position as a deviant sexual group. The point we attempt to raise in this paper is we not attempting on understanding the fact that "sexuality is far too complicated to be wholly attributable to biological traits. It must be understood in terms of the social meaning which humans ascribe to it" (Giddens 2009:579), where ascribing social meanings also have their own limitations and biasness which made certain minority sexualities in a social discrimination.

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