

PROBLEM:

In Bangladesh there is an environment of conservatism and a culture of collective denial of the existence of same sex sexualities which stifles any public debate in the country. A lack of protection of sexual rights of homosexuals and transgendered people results in harassment, silence, shame and fear around any discussions regarding sexuality. This pushes many issues underground.

ACTION:

Since 2007 the School has been working to create a climate for open discussions on sexuality and rights at a larger scale and to put in place mechanisms for monitoring influence on policy and practice.

- **Networking.** Local workshop with affected community to try and understand levels of interest in engaging and the situation. Communication through informal networks led to a huge response, realization that many groups were interested in pushing forward the platform. Brainstorming session held with mental health professionals, researchers, academics, activists, queer groups, students, journalists, ad agencies, clinical psychologist (practitioners), and health educators, health activists, lawyers researchers, academics from outside of Dhaka; clinical psycho-therapists, NGO professionals. Worked with sexual minority groups to build capacity and make spaces to argue and build their own agenda to fight. A database of core network. School invited to a workshop (Sexual Diversity and Coalition Building) organized by a gay rights activists group. This was an unpublicized meeting with important representatives from the LGBT communities aiming to build a network.
- **Creating public visibility.** Targeted at three core groups - academics from outside Dhaka; journalists and sexual minority groups. International conference in 2007. Encourage more writings by journalists on sexuality (award system/training session). CD resource pack - a compilation of all the presentations from the International conference in 2007. CD was distributed to more than 150 participants all over Bangladesh and internationally
- **Legitimacy.** University hosting provided legitimacy. International conference situated action as part of larger research and advocacy efforts. Research was conducted on sexuality and rights in 2008 to understand local constructions of sexuality and rights to inform workshops and advocacy efforts. Developed education/training modules. Research rooted in how the affected communities experienced the environment, research agendas built as a result of perceived need. Pre and post evaluation questionnaires monitored and tracked changes, progress (individual, work and community). Gay and lesbian rights groups - very reserved and cautious in terms of allowing access to people outside of their communities have trust in the School.

RESULTS?

While this is an ongoing process they have managed to create an initial platform which they hope will lead to the foundations for institutional building of various groups in the larger society. The mandate to push forward the agenda on sexuality and rights has also created opportunities for future collaboration and networks, which in the long run may give way to specific policy changes in the country. They have received emails and phone calls from activists and researchers from within and outside of Dhaka asking for materials and resources. Academics outside of Dhaka specifically requested for more training to develop their own modules on sexuality. Clinical psychologists and doctors expressed interest in receiving training to be sensitized to sexual minorities; requests from journalists. Significant interest generated among the students in terms of wanting to know more about sexual diversity and rights. A more striking indicator of success in breaking some of the silence was the presence of two members of the 'lesbian' community at the Gender workshop in May 2009.

MAIN LEARNING:

Bringing together people from diverse backgrounds, including those who are usually invisible or silenced, to come together, speak freely, and critically reflect on sexuality and rights issues has been key to the research.

The process used - particularly creating a space for frank and honest discussions amongst respondents helped the School to gain credibility and trust among the sexual minority groups.

Utilising some members from the queer community help researchers to gain access to 'underground' members of the communities who were more reluctant to participate directly.

'I've allowed everyone to take ownership, I think it hasn't been, 'this is the JHP School of Public Health', but everyone can take it forward in other ways...I think that's important' Sabina Faiz Rashid, researcher

'Now we are sitting together with all of you and talking about these issues...thanks to James P Grant School...who else has done this?' member of transgender community