

Sodomy Laws

Home
USA Laws
World Laws
News
Editorials
History
Legal Cases
Effects
Research
Strategies
Advocates

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The Shadow Citizens

There are gays in every society, including Bengali society, and there is no sense in suppressing and stifling homosexuality.

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By Afsan Chowdhury

They will forgive me if I commit a murder but not if they find out that I have a boy friend.” Mohsin is 28 years old, a Bangladeshi, and a gay. He was speculating on the possible reaction of his upper middle class family members if they were to discover his sexual preference. Having graduated two years ago, Mohsin has landed a decent job in a development outfit and knows his mother will push for his marriage as soon as his youngest sister ties the knot. He is terrified of that moment. He plans not to tell his family, and not to marry either.

Is he overreacting? There has been a number of cases where the family has accepted the same sex proclivity of their sons, and even daughters. While family dinners with same sex partners are still not in, children are not always thrown out if they are revealed to be homosexuals.

Gay Bangla

But there certainly are difficulties when homosexuals first declare their preference, known as “coming out” in gay parlance. Most families respond with dismay and a kind of corporate shame. Many feel that they have gone wrong somewhere in the child’s upbringing.

Since some gay activists in Bangladesh are very highly educated, once in a while, foreign education is cited as a reason for being gay. In fact, Bangladeshis are very active on the global gay scene. But those still in the closet oscillate between confusion, guilt and fear. “Why do they hate us?” asks a gay man in Dhaka. “Except for preferring people of the same sex as partners we have done nothing wrong.”

Being gay in Bangladesh isn’t easy because society responds differently to sexuality in public and in private. To put it bluntly, society is hypocritical, for it says one thing and does another. People involved with gay issues say that between 5 to 10 percent of the population is homosexual. That would mean at least 6 to 12 million Bangladeshis, more than the total population of many countries, prefer the same sex.

Even if that estimate is considered to be on the higher side and is reduced by half, the number left would still be significant. But almost no discussion can take place on the subject, even with the threat of HIV/AIDS looming over Bangladeshis and gays being identified as one of the most vulnerable groups.

Cultural Behaviour

One of the reasons that homosexuality is treated so gingerly is that the country’s Criminal Code decrees sodomy (homosexuality or advocacy of the same) a crime which is punishable with a jail sentence. Any discussion, not to speak of debate, is hence ruled out and homosexuality is driven into the shadow world.

Demonstration of homosexual tendencies for short periods is quite common in Bangladeshi society. Those practising it are not ostracised, although if caught, are ridiculed. Like in other societies, gay relationships flourish in dormitories, barracks, labour colonies and hostels, and authorities are hard pressed to keep them a secret.

In the Dhaka University dorms, cases of young boys being kept as “regulars” are well known. Male prostitutes are available in most towns. And in rural areas, homosexuality is generally considered something that young people do for fun and some elders may do in secret. Male homosexuality is tolerated despite religious sanction. Yet divorce citing gay behaviour by any partner is not known.

It is a different story for lesbians, however. Although it is no secret that dormitories record incidences of lesbianism and studies have corroborated the fact, it is kept a secret fearing loss of marriage prospects. And marriage, after all, is society’s idea of a woman’s ultimate nirvana. Literature has recorded a high incidence of shakhi culture, where proximate friendship develops between two women in which emotions are at least romantic and may lapse into “touching”, though both parties may deny any sexual overtones in such relationships. Psychologists say many shakhis may be substitutes for boyfriends.

Society frowns upon single women, and the social pressure to marry—doesn’t matter who to—is intense. Most succumb to it, despite their sexual preferences, and end up miserably knotted.

Heterosexual girls suffer in marriages with male gays too. “I can’t run away from my responsibilities. I have a family. So I stay although we are like strangers at home,” says Sultana, a 30-plus housewife married to a gay. Many gays, forced into marriage, often resort to clandestine and then increasingly open gay relationships, leaving women with a dead marriage to have and to hold. Children, economic dependence and “shame” prevents any divorce actions.

There are some instances of lesbians entering permanent relationships, but most lesbians are married and whatever sexual liaisons they may enter into are purely by chance. “I have had sex with a woman only once in my life,” says Zaheda, who works for a travel agency and lives with her disabled sister. The tolerance level for lesbians is very low in Bengali society. It is low for women in general. One either worships them (mother models) or abuses them (partners).

West Bengal (India)

The situation is somewhat different in Bengali society across the border in India. At the elite level, there is considerable acceptance of homosexuality and of gay groups.

Homosexuals keep in touch with each other through magazines like Provortak (published from Calcutta) or through gay organisations. Some activists in Calcutta are directly involved in running sexual health projects jointly with official agencies.

Although India also has the same laws relating to sodomy, gays are not prosecuted. A petition for scrapping the sodomy laws is awaiting action at the Supreme Court in New Delhi. A number of organisations like the Humsafar Foundation have been working for wider acceptance of gays in Indian society with some degree of success. In West Bengal, there have been occasional instances of harassment, but gays can operate with relative openness. Gay prostitution is high, operating out of parks and other public places.

Some Calcutta lesbians, many of them married, have set up private clubs which are basically places to get together. But the stigma of female homosexuality remains strong in West Bengal as well, even though the pages of Provortak are full of pieces by lesbians discussing their problems.

In Bangladesh, it looks as if the sodomy laws will remain in the books for some time to come, not a little because of religious opposition. Whatever society may do in private, publicly they want respectable laws. In India, social attitudes are more liberal and relaxed, which allows gays to “come out” and access health and other services more easily.

Meanwhile, the least that the authorities could do is wake up to the reality of gay behaviour and recognise that health and social issues are becoming more and more pressing where homosexuals are concerned. Homosexuality does not disappear by ignoring it. Some Middle Eastern societies have adopted a pragmatic approach by maintaining that because homosexuality is a crime committed against God, the matter should be dealt by Him on Judgement Day. Perhaps this interpretation should be used to provide Bengali gays with some

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respite as well, if not in society at large, at least in law?

[\[Home\]](#) [\[Bangladesh\]](#) [\[World\]](#)