

A REPORT on
SEXUAL AND GENDER MINORITY STUDENT FORUM, NEPAL (SGMSFN)

Namaste, dear Friends,

Upon my arrival in Kathmandu March 4, after registering at the Holy Himalaya Hotel in Thamel, Roshan Mahato took me to one of the Kathmandu campuses of Tribhuvan University to witness a remarkable event. Five LGBTI Student Forum (SGMSFN) members explained the natural/scientific realities of their gender and sexuality. Their direct and poignant personal testimony of how their lives had been and the "new life" they had been given through the Blue Diamond Society (BDS), the network organizations of the Federation of Sexual and Gender Minorities, Nepal (FSGMN), and their own empowerment moved the 200 sociology master's students and faculty in attendance.

The president of the campus student association introduced the speakers enthusiastically. Since I do not understand Nepali, my focus was to watch the faces of those in the audience. Openness, interest, compassion and response to humor were evident. In my meeting with faculty before the session, they acknowledged their own ignorance of and interest in learning of sexual and gender minority realities. In the question and discussion period, students also indicated how much they had learned and how they hoped to participate in continuing efforts to eliminate the stigma and discrimination against LGBTI that has been so intolerant as to be life destroying. One young man stood up and confessed how, as an undergraduate classmate and friend of Roshan Mahato, he had distanced himself from Roshan when Roshan came out, fearing that others would think the friendship meant that he was gay. The speaker said such distancing would no longer be the case for him. Applause greeted his remarks and his encouraging smile to Roshan.

Thus, my return to Nepal began with such a testimony to the progress already achieved by the Student Forum - beyond expectations of the courageous group of ten who met in confidentiality to organize two years before. Their outreach since then has developed a core of about 50 LGBTI members and 25 heterosexual allies. Numerous activities have brought positive response. They speak in a variety of settings and have made representations to the Ministry of Education for better curricula as well as scholarships for LGBTI students. Jyoti, a transwoman has received a scholarship directly from one college for her master's work in gender studies. Through Student Forum outreach, a number of university faculty now offer credit for internships by their students with offices and programs of the BDS and the Federation. I joined one group of seven interns, going to assist one of the small drop-in centers in a poor area of Kathmandu. This would have been unthinkable as recently as my visit the year before.

Life is not easier in Nepal than when I visited last year. Changes in coalition in the parliament, a "constituent assembly" that is behind schedule to formulate a new constitution, hinder direction to address national problems from the top.

Shortages of electricity and water are more severe. (14 hours a day without electricity when I was there.) Businesses crippled. Unemployment more severe. Food prices higher. Through this the Student Forum remains volunteer, vital and accomplishing much on its ambitious agenda, although understandably constrained by the practical realities imposed. The progress I have witnessed in other contacts with BDS and Federation groups in other cities is an indication of how civil society at the grassroots can make a difference. It does not mean that discrimination and stigma are over, nor that those doing so much no longer need help. Indeed, the Student Forum as well as BDS and the Federation are acutely aware of how many still need to be reached.

The individuals involved each has an impressive story, often heartbreaking when hearing of the past, but such a message of inspiration when looking at the smiles and hearing the voices of the present. Your assistance has been fuel to their motor.

Below some of the faces of the dear people who thank you!!! Our thanks, too, to George Carter, director of the Foundation for Integrative AIDS Research (FIAR), one of the earliest international supporters of the Blue Diamond Society, and such a help to the Student Forum.

Be proud of what you have enable to flourish!

As ever,
Gus

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Sexual and Gender Minority Student Forum Nepal (SGMSFN)

To gain an education, Nepalis confront many socio-economic obstacles. In addition, sexual and gender minority individuals face stigma and discrimination from students, faculty and staffs. Many young people are denied adequate pre-university education because of such discrimination. University student politics are as volatile as the national political parties. Two brave LGBTI candidates in 2008 student elections determined that, as with the Blue Diamond Society on the national scene, an organizational effort was required to bring awareness, understanding, social consciousness and human rights to enable full university opportunity and expression for sexual and gender minorities.

In March 2009, a courageous core of LGBTI students and allies, met in confidentiality to commit to lead change. On January 25, 2010, the SGMSFN (SGM Student Forum) was officially registered in Kathmandu. Its aims are to empower LGBTI students, working with them as well as student and faculty allies to guarantee rights and acceptance within the community and nation. Not only our own liberation, these are contributions to education, democratic fulfillment and social development in Nepal.

As with the experience of BDS, the SGM Student Forum initial steps resulted in progressive accomplishment - all through volunteer efforts. In the eighteen months from the first gathering, the Student Forum has presented educational programs and stakeholder meetings at various campuses (including an assembly of 1,500 students of Tribhuvan University's main Kirtipur campus); counseled current LGBTI students and assisted others in university registration; met with Ministry of Education officials in various efforts, including to enhance curricula and promote scholarship opportunities; organized English tutorials; assisted students to formulate theses on sexual and gender minority topics; conducted educational classes at secondary schools; made presentations at youth conferences; and provided volunteers to assist in various cultural and democracy campaign programs. The SGM Student Forum does not align with any political party.

Guided by an executive board, the SGM Student Forum leadership plans a "One Year Journey 2011" to expand its capacities, outreach, and effectiveness. The SGM Student Forum is grateful for consultation, space and in-kind assistance from BDS. While it will remain a volunteer student organization, the SGM Student Forum will seek financial support for program requirements. Progress evident on the ten campuses thus far involved, the moral support and volunteer service of non-LGBTI students and faculty, and expanding interest by the media hearten us that we can contribute even more widely. 2011 being Nepal Tourism Year, we welcome international students and educators to make contact for an interchange of experience and knowledge.

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SEXUAL AND GENDER MINORITY STUDENT FORUM, NEPAL (SGMSFN) One Year Journey 2011

Introduction

Our nation is at a historical juncture—presently Nepal is a secular republic drafting a new constitution. This moment has opened up new opportunities for marginalized groups, particularly on issues of human rights. This is especially important regarding issues that the LGBTI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Inter-sex) community faces, especially because this community has been discriminated against in the past. As such, the 'One Year Journey 2011' project is an effort on the part of students to contribute towards discussing key issues pertaining to LGBTI community and higher education.

The project is a joint effort by various members of Sexual and Gender Minorities Student Forum, Nepal (SGMSFN) to make LGBTI issues more visible and respectable in colleges and universities in Kathmandu, Nepal. This is the first time a project of this kind has been organized to systematically address the needs and concerns of LGBTI community in higher education settings. The project also focuses on the need to work with various communities to promote awareness of LGBTI issues.

Purpose

The main purpose of the project is to raise awareness of LGBTI issues, through pro-active planning and programming, in the educational sector and to address issues previously neglected by higher educational institutions. We aim to revise the curriculum of different educational levels and to work with the Education Ministry to implement appropriate changes in order to make education LGBTI and gender friendly. Simultaneously, we will also focus on promoting awareness of discriminatory experiences LGBTI students face in classrooms in order to make educational climate more inclusive for them. Similarly, we want to raise the issue of the necessity of scholarship opportunities for LGBTI students, as a majority of us come from disenfranchised backgrounds, or are neglected by our parents and families. Finally, we hope to strengthen the unity of LGBTI students and to create a robust support system for young students burdened with having to cope with an often times prejudiced society.

Activities

- Monthly Board Meeting: We will be meeting once a month during the project to examine programs and events. The project committee will consist of nine members. The committee will include members from different sectors of the LGBTI community.
- LGBTI Movie of the Month: We will showcase movies pertaining to LGBTI issues at appropriate/available venues. We intend this event to be entertaining and fun. It will not only facilitate interaction within members our community but will also expose them to LGBTI movements and milestones from around the world.
- Language Training: We will provide free Nepali and English language training to our community members. This event will occur primarily on a need-basis, in coordination with Federation of Sexual and Gender Minorities, Nepal (FSMGN).
- Safe Zone Training: This program will be equivalent the Safe Zone Training program used in American campuses to increase awareness about LGBTI issues. We intend to approach various campuses to run this event among their staff and administration in order to encourage inclusivity and increase sensitivity towards LGBTI students in the classroom and outside. We aim to run this workshop once each month.
- Monthly meetings with Stakeholders: Student Unions, the Education Ministry and the educational administrative sector are all accountable to LGBTI students. We intend to have our voices heard and our issues raised among these sectors to ensure an end to discriminatory practices.
- LGBTI Essay Competition: The aim of this program is to promote intellectual and academic self-awareness among young LGBTI students about LGBTI challenges, culture and history. We will hold it biannually and will announce prizes to attract participation.

- Internship Program: This program will aim to provide hands-on experience to LGBTI students who are interested in the social work and/or NGO sectors. They will volunteer with our organization and FSGMN, and will garner important leadership and organizing skills.
- Thesis Writing Program: As an organization run by students, we are committed to the facilitation of production of literature and academic articles pertaining to LGBTI issues in Nepal. This program will be announced to all university level students and we will act as liaisons in making appropriate articles and data from FSGMN and Blue Diamond Society (BDS) available to students.
- Collecting LGBTI articles: Since the voices and stories of our community are seldom heard or published, we intend to start of campaign of collecting articles pertaining to LGBTI experiences. Depending on submission, we intend to publish these stories and articles in the form of newsletters that we will then distribute.
- Year- Long LGBTI Book Collection Campaign: There is a serious dearth of books about LGBTI issues at our libraries in Kathmandu. We intend to correct this by starting a campaign to collect and lend books to one major library that is willing to allocate an LGBTI section. We will appeal to different sister organizations and individuals in Nepal and abroad for donations in the form of books or payments to the campaign fund.

Outcome or Intended Impact

This project is a multi-pronged effort to create awareness about LGBTI issues in the educational setting in Kathmandu. Too often LGBTI youth feel isolated in educational settings due to lack of support system. As such we intend this project to build that much lacking support system, and to bring us together as a community where we can share our ideas and experiences.

Broadly, this project will also bring much neglected LGBTI issues to the fore, and will not only create more awareness about the challenges we face as students, but also force educational institutions to implement new strategies in order to truly accommodate our needs and integrity as people.

Submitted By,

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Bhakti: SGMSFN LGBTI members' presentation to Sociology Department faculty and master's degree candidates, Kathmandu, March 4, 2011



Bhakti ("trans-man"and Roshan, gay man, Kathmandu, March 7, 2011



"Our Equal Access" office, Bhaktapur, March 11, 2011. Jyoti (trans-woman, Gus and Manav . Jyoti and Manav are members of the Student Forum Executive Committee.



LBT Women's Issues, Kathmandu, March 31, 2011: Parsu and Durga (lesbian). Durga is a member of the Executive Committee and is Bhakti's partner.



LBT Women's Issues, Kathmandu, March 31, 2011: Bhumika. Bhumika (transwoman), BDS human rights leader, is a member of the Student Forum Executive Committee.



SGMSFN, 2nd anniversary dinner with Executive Committee, April 3, 2011, Kathmandu