

Attitudes & Level of Acceptance towards LGBTQI Community: A Case Study in Sherubtse College

A Research by Team Sherubtse

Acronyms and Meaning

- **LGBTIQ:** an acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer
- **Lesbian:** a woman who is attracted to women emotionally, sexually, physically.
- **Gay:** a man is attracted to men emotionally, sexually, physically.

- **Transgender:** an individual who has a gender identity or gender expression that differs from their assigned sex. Say, a man is anatomically born as male but is more comfortable with opposite sex (female) and chooses to go under hormonal treatment to change sex.
- **Intersex:** a medical condition whereby an individual has male and female sex characteristics; a state of having the physical features of both sexes; intersexuality.
- **Queer:** an individual who is unsure of and/or exploring their gender identity and/or sexual orientation
- **Homosexual** - a person whose sexual/romantic/emotional feelings are towards those of their own sex.

- **Youth:** 15-24 age cohorts as youth (National Statistics Bureau, 2017)

Introduction

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Ever since Bhutan opened its door to the outside world, the country has experienced new emergence of socio-economic which has impacted the lives and behaviour of the people. Like many other new emergences, LGBTIQ is a new concept and it came into light just few decades ago; few gay, tansmen/transwomen just started coming into lime light. LGBTIQ community in Bhutan face minimal issues however, some invisible discriminations and violence (physically and emotionally) still exist (Hallman, 2018). Although LGBTIQ members existed in every corner of the society and at other times unseen and silence, their issues are neither talked about nor taken seriously. Stereotype cycle, gender discrimination, violence, prejudice and oppression still exist in the society.

However, unlike other countries, LGBTIQ members face minimal violence or persecution or zero penalised, and majority do not know they even exist with the idea of being gay, lesbian, transgender and intersex or pretty much unheard of. It was just

recently that few LGBTIQ members in Bhutan have started to publicly come out and has formed their small community (rainbow colour) representing them under Lhaksam. Dema & Samal (2016) reported that according to informal records as of today, there are 92 registered LGBTIQ members; 47 gays, 1 lesbian, 12 bisexual (men), 2 bisexual (women), 14 transmen and 16 transwomen in Bhutan among which, 20 have publicly open about their gender identity and 15 have open to some as of 2016. By 2019, the number has increased to 136.

Predominantly the official religion of Bhutan is Vajrayana Buddhism; teaches values such as compassion, sympathy, empathy, acceptance and tolerance while the laws of the country is highly unfavorable. Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche in of the talks stated that sexual orientation has nothing to do with the understanding or not understanding the truth. He furthermore, added with a smirk that no one knows which one would get enlightened first, probably any LGBTIQ member first (Whitaker, 2015). Until 2019, Bhutan's official state of law criminalizes homosexuality from three months to less than a year (Article 213 &

214); however, by June 2019, Bhutan is on its way towards eliminating these articles.

Even in educational institutions (in particular Sherubtse College) the level of acceptance is low specifically those students those who pursue Arts and Humanities department and those who are from technical background. Students those who pursue developmental studies, population studies and sociology are found to be more knowledgeable about LGBTIQ, their rights, LGBTIQ community (Rainbow Bhutan). Furthermore, the results show that those having more information on LGBTIQ does not necessarily mean they have acceptance in theoretical, the respondents do have acceptance; it has shown differences in the informants responses. On the positive note, youth from Social Science background possess positive attitude and high level of acceptance on third sex.

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Objectives of the study

The objectives taken up for the study are specified below:

- To learn the attitudes and perceptions of young people in Sherubtse College on LGBTIQ community.
- To find the level of acceptance among youth in sherubtse college towards LGBTIQ community and their rights.
- To understand and analyze the perceptions of these youth on LGBTIQ community as a part of the society.

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Problem statement

As mentioned earlier, LGBTIQ community in Bhutan face minimal issues; zero penalized or persecuted however, some invisible discriminations and violence (physically and emotionally) still exist. Many LGBTIQ members face fear of being an outcast and ill treatment for being different. Legal discrimination against these LGBTIQ communities takes many forms, even the penal code under which Article 213 and 214 states that homosexuality is

considered illegal and shall be guilty of the offence of unnatural sex, if the defendant engages in sodomy or any sexual conduct that is against the order of nature and are punishable by a prison sentence of between one month to less than a year.

Majority is still ignorant towards these sexual minorities; talking about sex within groups or in circle of friends always existed however, sex education in particular that need to be talked about is a taboo in Bhutan. On the contrary, most people have no clue and if aware, have a little or false knowledge on this sexual minority. The youth of today's urban cities are becoming much aware about LGBTIQ members. Even after knowing, some find it hard to accept the LGBTIQ community as a part of the society and forgets that every individual has the right to live the lives they wish in the society. People including many youth, have narrow mind when it comes to accepting third sex community and holds false pre-conceptions towards them.

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Research Design and Methodology

Research Questionnaires

1. *Respondent's age (In years)*
 - *Below 17*
 - *18-24*
 - *24+*
2. *Sex of the Respondent*
 - *Male*
 - *Female*
 - *Others*
3. *Have you heard about LGBTIQ?*
 - *Yes*
 - *No*
4. *Is homosexuality legal or illegal in Bhutan?*
 - *Yes*
 - *No*
5. *Are you aware of the LGBT community in Bhutan?*
 - *Yes*
 - *No*
6. *From where did you hear about LGBTIQ?*
 - *Friends & Family*
 - *Lecturers, Schools, College*
 - *Books & Magazines*
 - *TV & Social Media*
7. *When you see a person with different gender identity, what is your reaction?*
8. *How do you feel reacting with them?*
9. *If your family member or a friend belongs to LGBTIQ Community, how would you feel?*

10. What is your view on recent/current Law towards decriminalizing Homosexuality?

Area of the study

The study has taken Sherubtse College as the area of the research as it was easier and more convenient to get the approval, selection of the respondents was not an issue.

Research Design

The research design chosen for this particular study is qualitative. Since the particular study is concerned about the perceptions and attitudes towards LGBTIQ community & their rights, therefore, the chosen design fits the best. For this, this study has used SPSS software and excel to generate and analyze the findings.

Tools of Data Collection

The collection of data from the field is the most significant aspect of the research; while conducting the particular research the researcher have used likert scales, qualitative questionnaires, semi-structured questionnaires and observations. Various kinds of rating scales have been developed to measure attitudes directly (i.e. the person knows their attitude is being studied).

| Respondents | Quantity | |
|--------------------------|------------|--------|
| | Male | Female |
| Age (18-24 years) | | |
| social science | 30 | 30 |
| Arts and humanities | 30 | 30 |
| Life science and EVS | 30 | 30 |
| Physical science | 30 | 30 |
| Cyber forum and math | 30 | 30 |
| Total | 150 | |

Literature Review

In the land of Gross National Happiness (GNH), LGBT people are still largely invisible and criminalized but constitutional change is leading to legal harmonization and eventually greater LGBT equality in Bhutan. According to Hallman, 2018, Bhutan’s new constitutions launched by first democratically elected government guaranteed many fundamental human rights, under such rights Trans men and women can now gain official identification aligned with their gender identity as one LGBT forum fellow from Bhutan was able to gain in 2018

Although Bhutanese society has been quite accepting of Transgender, many are quick to label homosexuality as unnatural and are suspicious and judgmental about homosexuality (Zam, 2013). In a survey conducted by one of the exchange student Ben Gagnon in Royal Thimphu College (RTC) from Wheaton who is gay found out that 60 percent of the respondents believe homosexuality is immoral, but more than 50 percent also say homosexuality should be accepted and protected from discrimination and harm.

In the article ‘Gay in Nirvana’ written by Ryan (2015), Karma Dupchen, one of the most public LGBT figures in the country told that he have never faced any kind of harassment but growing up gay in Bhutan was very alienating experience for him. Bhutan still have colonial-era anti-sodomy law that punishes sexual conduct that is against the order of nature, however no one have ever been prosecuted. Dechen Wangmo, a public health consultant who helped launched Lhak-Sam stated that for those still unaware of LGBTI identities, blame it on western culture which is particularly problematic in Bhutan which proudly resists western culture influences

which deems to be harmful to Gross National Happiness (GNH).

In the article ‘To be or not to be in Bhutan’ written by Leupold (2016), said that gay in Bhutan are largely quiet and closeted and there is no gay right movement due to the nature of Bhutanese culture which regards sex as private matter that is not openly discussed. Homosexuality was something people were unfamiliar with so it would set them apart from what was common and expected in this traditional society so coming out as homosexuality would be embarrassing and they feared being not accepted. Majority of Bhutanese are heterosexual and have virtually no knowledge of sexual variations because the subject of homosexuality is not on the common tongue and there is no return or broadcast information about it in home or schools (Ammon, n.d).

The Dalai Lama ()“If the two people have taken no vows (of chastity) and neither is harmed why should it not be acceptable?” In fact, Dalai Lama suppo gay marriage. “If two people really feel that way and both sides fully agree then (it’s) okay,” he said on Ora.tv’s Larry King show. He added, “I think that’s an individual’s business.” He

was against bullying of any of the LGBTIQ members. (Stressing on violation of human rights).

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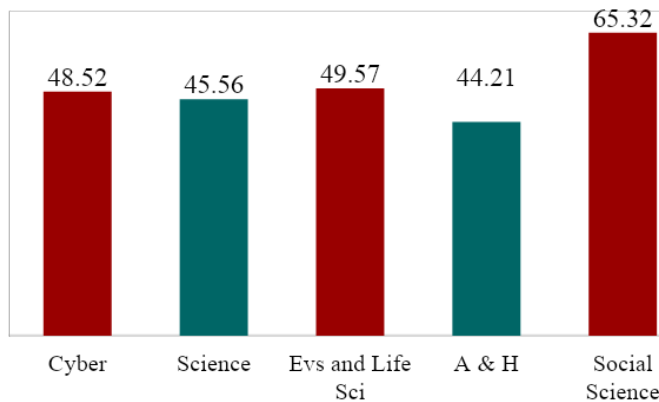
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community. The graph shows that social science department has more information on LGBTIQ (65.32%) comparison to other four departments followed by Environmental and Life Science Department (49.57%) and the department having least information of LGBTIQ is Arts and Humanities (44.21%).

Results and Discussions

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Findings – Information & Awareness on LGBTIQ



The figure above shows the percentage of students among the departments having information or knowledge on LGBTIQ

Sources from where people have heard about LGBTIQ

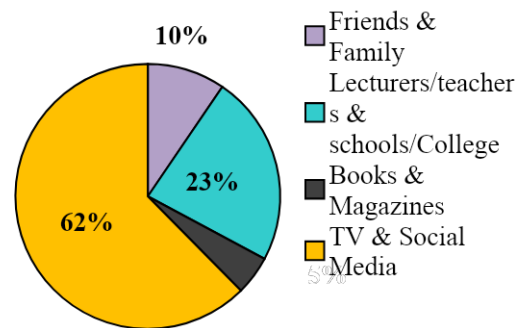


Fig.2 Sources from where people have heard about LGBTIQ

Major sources that students in Sherubtse College student get information about LGBTIQ is from TV and Social Media (62%) and from educational institutions (23%). On an average 85% of sources about LGBTIQ comes from these sources.

Findings – Level of Acceptance

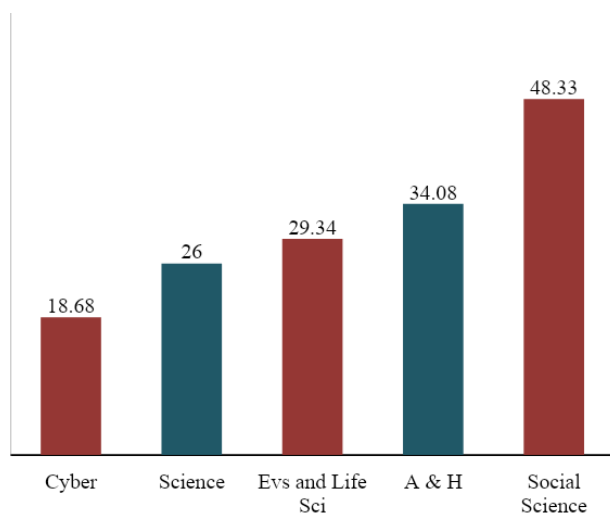


Fig 3. *Departments showing level of acceptance towards third sex community*

Graph (Fig.2) shows the level of acceptance LGBTIQ; the department having highest level of acceptance is social science with 48.33%. However, the result shows some extent of differences; person having more information towards LGBTIQ does not necessarily mean they have the same level of acceptance. Even though Cyber and Math have more knowledge on LGBTIQ, when it comes to the level of acceptance there is gap/lapses and is the least amongst five departments with just 18.68%. On the contrary, though Arts and Humanities proved to be less knowledgeable, the level of acceptance tops the list after social science department. This clearly shows, having more knowledge does not necessarily

mean, people have that level of acceptance. Most students believed that the reason behind people finding it hard to accept LGBTIQ is the social restriction (52.7%) which includes culture, tradition, moral values and the role played by male and female in the society. Dorji (2019) one of the social science lecturer stated that one of the reasons why social science department having more information and high level of acceptance could be the nature of modules/subjects that social science study; more debates, researches and seminars on social issues may contribute in positive change in the students' mindsets unlike, cyber, science department that purely deals with particular technical subjects. Similarly, Beda (2019), a lecturer from Arts and Humanities Department mandated that though A&H Department's modules are based on language and literature and students do not get to study more about social issues, the reasons why the department have more level of acceptance after social science could be the values of compassion, kindness and empathy that they learn in these modules.

Respondents' view before Anti-Decriminalizing LGBTIQ

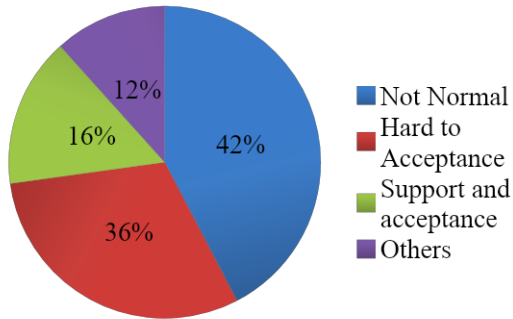


Fig.4. Respondents' view before Anti-Decriminalizing LGBTIQ

The graph (Fig.4) shows the respondents' opinion before the Parliament passed the bill on decriminalizing homosexuality or eliminating penal code (Article 213 & 214) and it was found out that Majority (42%) feel LGBTIQ members are not normal meaning different from rest (normal being primarily can be either male or female) followed hard to accept (36%). The rate is least (16%) who supports and accepts LGBTIQ and remaining 12% feels strange, pitied and admiration.

Current views on Bhutan's way towards eliminating LGBTIQ Laws

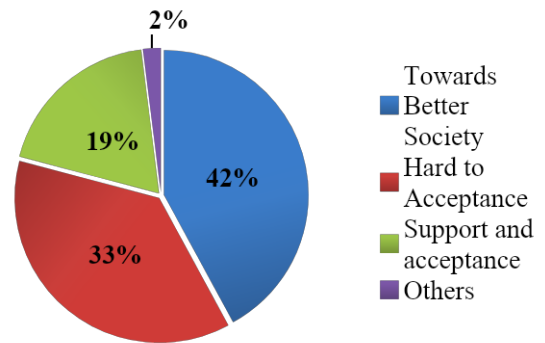


Fig.5. Current views on Bhutan's way towards eliminating LGBTIQ Laws

The above diagram (Fig.5) shows the opinion the respondents after passing the bill on decriminalizing homosexuality one June 7th, 2019 by parliament. There is a shift in perspectives of the respondents in fact, positive change in respondents' perspective on LGBTIQ. Acceptance towards LGBTIQ community has increased from 16% to 19%. On the positive note, majority (42%) legalizing homosexuality in the country is likely to be the stepping stone towards a better society; a fair, just and an equitable society. However, there is still some portion (33%) that struggles to accept LGBTIQ.

Recommendations

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As mentioned earlier, an average 85% of sources about LGBTIQ come from TV & Social Media and educational institutions, it is recommended to have more debates, panel discussions, campaigns, seminars in educational institutions and awareness through social Medias (educating through social media). Although Bhutan is on its way to make a positive change by eliminating article 213 and 214, it is important to relax the laws though no LGBTIQ members in Bhutan have ever been persecuted for sodomy and some member of parliament have expressed openness to overturning it. The rights of the sexual minorities includes right to life, liberty, and security; right to be free from torture or cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment; right to privacy; right to freedom of thought, conscience, opinion, and expression; right to equal protection of the law; right to work and equal pay; right to physical and mental health; right to education; and right to asylum.

Since Sherubtse has film society, films, documentaries can be used to change hearts and minds. It is clear that media advocacy has been a scalable and effective tool to reach mass audiences and growing acceptance of the LGBTIQ.

Making awareness/campaigns on constitutional rights will not only combats the discrimination of LGBTIQ but also encourages people to express their orientation or gender without any fear or pinch of hesitation.

Conclusion

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The perceptions of people differ from how they see the LGBTIQ members. Therefore, there are still negative attitudes remained such as pity, tolerance, and repulsion but majority are of them are positive attitudes. Thus, their views shape their attitudes towards LGBT people. The findings show that though social science students had mostly positive attitudes, these young people lack adequate knowledge and acceptance of the third sex community. Therefore, there should be more talks, discussions and awareness to effectively treat LGBTIQ members in the society. Furthermore, it is important to broaden minds and accept not just in theoretical, but also in practical lives. On the positive note, there are some youth who possess positive attitude and high level of acceptance on third sex more, important, admiring the fact that to the least, they are living the lives they wish.

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