SAFETY, AGENCY AND SURVEILLANCE

An Exploration of Sexual Expression and Digital Spaces in Bangladesh

APC
ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS

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An Exploration of Sexual Expression and Digital Spaces in Bangladesh

Author
Parsa Sanjana Sajid

Project assistance
Ahana Raihan

Copy editing
Maya Bhardwaj

Design and layout
Suvashis Kundu

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Parsa Sanjana Sajid
Dhaka, Bangladesh

APC

AMPLIFYCHANGE

SUMMARY

SUMMARY

The idea of "protection" dominates public discourse on sexual expression and gender equity in Bangladesh which also extends to how online spaces are understood and regulated. There is always somebody to save, to protect, to be cocooned off from the dangers out there, but such safety measures, whether legal or policy instruments or more amorphous cultural and public discussions, are often paternalistic and disciplinarian. It is also not incidental that despite or perhaps because of these currents, violence against and isolation of people such as sex workers, trans and other gender and sexual minorities, women without (or even with) the privileges of religion, class, or ethnicity continues apace.

Often so-called protective measures and surrounding discourse comes down heavily on the side of punitive measures, and restrictions on dissent and transgression which includes sexual expression. That is because those with power (e.g. state institutions) wield enormous authority to dictate the terms which can be self-serving leaving those who need support more vulnerable and without any recourse. This also relates to who has and can have a stake in a space, public or private, digital or physical, the boundaries of which are supple and constantly shifting. On the other hand, it is also important to explore the limits of "freedom of expression" or "rights" in these circumstances because they are inadequate tools for a truly emancipatory politics. Consider, for example, when freedom of expression becomes an excuse to engage in racism, misogyny, trans- and homophobia, xenophobia and other kinds of bigotry. Against this twin and limiting horizons of possibility – overly paternalistic measures or freedom as continuation of an untenable status quo – this paper is interested in cleaving its way towards an alternative, however introductory and imperfect that may be. Surveillance, systemic and built-in inequities and biases notwithstanding, online spaces also afford escape, community building, connection, livelihood to many. This recognition of the internet as offering a spectrum of opportunities is not to hedge on its potential, but to explore and understand what this shifting space offers its users and how might we transfigure its boundaries, terms and terrain.

This exploratory study presents a snapshot of the digital economy, how online spaces are navigated and how that correlates with our understanding of sexual expression and autonomy. Using a qualitative method, we provide this analysis mainly through two avenues: One, is through extensive desk research, and two, discussion and interviews with selected and overlapping groups who are heavy internet users; they are – youth, university students, members from the LGBTQI community and sex workers. The latter is meant to relay an on-the-ground perspective of people whose lives are intertwined with the digital space. All names when used here have been changed for privacy; several other types of information have been omitted in consideration of the participants' safety and livelihood.

This study was completed in 2019.

INTRODUCTION

01. INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of the student protests for road safety in 2018, amidst a spate of arbitrary arrests, quite a few of which were the result of social media posts, Bangladeshis took to scrubbing their social media profiles and chat histories en masse.[i] The risks of online presence can be considerable when the threat of arrest or sometimes even death looms large. But while users may trim their activities online in response to such a climate, internet use itself remains high. Bangladesh ranks fifth in internet use in Asia[ii] with over 90 million internet users.[iii] Nearly 50 percent of Bangladesh's 160 million people are online in a country where around 47 percent of the population is under 25 years. In a global cities survey, Dhaka – the Bangladeshi capital – was ranked second in active Facebook users.[iv] Fueling this trend is affordable smartphones and cheap data plans – mobile internet users make up the bulk of internet users with over 80 million subscribers.[v] However, a deeper look at the data shows that this access is not uniform across age, class and gender lines, and particularly women often have reduced access or use methods like creating proxy male profiles in order to subvert patriarchal norms and obtain internet access.

Despite this wide usage, the internet can also be a source of anxiety, violence and harassment that exacerbates inequities and favors heteronormative, patriarchal, capitalist, racist and state-centric ideas. It can also, however, serve as a space for community, refuge and resistance. The student protests of 2018 and also two other short-lived student protests in the past five years illustrated how online tools were both instrumental in organizing movements but also created pitfalls as protesters attracted the attention of a surveillance state. This dual nature is also true with regards to sexual expression online in Bangladesh: Many observers feel the internet is another tool for harassment and surveillance, but it is also more than that, an information-gathering space, a support network, way to connect with friends and a vehicle to livelihood.

This exploratory study is part of a larger project to imagine online spaces as spaces for care, community and pleasure. We explore how people navigate online spaces and platforms, how they are circumscribed in expressing desire, how they circumvent the limitations of that space, and how they live and want to live on the internet, particularly how specific communities in Bangladesh who use the internet heavily – sex workers, members from the LGBTQI community, students and youth – are creating those online bastions of support for themselves and how to facilitate their efforts. Among several other upcoming interventions including a survey, the study lays the groundwork for understanding key issues pertaining to online sexual expression in Bangladesh, supporting grassroots networks and mobilizing resources for policy and advocacy campaigns and further research.

METHODOLOGY

02. METHODOLOGY

This study uses exploratory research to present a snapshot of digital communities and communications, how online spaces are navigated and how that correlates with our understanding of sexual expression and autonomy. The paper attempts to discuss and offer insights into the following questions:

- What are the contours of sexual expression online and how does that relate to our understanding of protection and rights? What kind of potential and restrictions do online spaces afford?
- Beyond a top-down understanding of protection and safety, what kind of measures are available (or unavailable) to people for their own protection and safety?
- Is sex always beyond the pale for public discussions? And what are the consequences of that?
- Where do we go from an individualized understanding of rights to imagining collective emancipation?
- How can the internet be instrumental (if at all) to that process of organizing for collective emancipation?

Using a qualitative method, we answer these questions and provide analysis through extensive secondary research, and through discussion and interviews with selected groups who are heavy internet users. These groups include youth, university students, LGBTQI individuals and sex workers, and they may overlap with each other. This primary research relays an on-the-ground perspective of people whose lives are intertwined with the digital space. All names when used here have been changed for privacy, and several other types of information have been omitted in consideration of the participants' safety and livelihood.

Secondary research and literature review: This study contains a scan of social-political and legal frameworks of sexual expression and the digital economy in Bangladesh along with a reflection on the conceptual scaffolding informing that landscape particularly the instrumentalization of protection to curtail rights and the limitations of a strictly rights-based approach in imagining a politics of liberty and emancipation.

> 98 percent of Bangladesh's population is Bengali and 1.1 percent are indigenous ethnic groups, according to the 2011 census. However, there are criticisms that the 2011 census underestimates the indigenous population. The government of Bangladesh recognizes 27 indigenous groups, but the unofficial count is as many as 75.
>
> The majority of its population is Muslim, around 89 percent and 10 percent Hindu. The remaining 0.9 percent includes Buddhists, Christians and animists.
>
> Just over 40 percent of the population between 24-54 years of age and almost 20 percent are between 15-24.

Discussions and interviews: Participation in focus groups and in-depth interviews was voluntary and based on consent. Prior to participation, a brief description of the project and expected format and discussion questions were distributed. The questions were for guidance and the discussions were unstructured (see annex II for distributed guidelines). Unstructured interviews allowed us the flexibility to integrate and prioritize participants' flow of conversations. These discussions were guided by a set of core inquiries that focused on the research questions outlined above. Snowball sampling method was used to recruit interested participants for these sessions and each session was introduced with discussions on informed consent and privacy.

These sessions were in a mix of Bangla and English and participants could communicate in the language(s) that they most felt comfortable in. At the completion of each session, participants were requested to fill out a short survey, but this step was voluntary and they could opt out (see annex III for survey questions). A total of 29 individuals participated in these sessions and 24 of them took the survey. The majority of participants were between the ages of 18 – 40 and were enrolled at or had a bachelor's degree, with the exception of sex workers whose educational attainment was lower or without any formal schooling. Although the interviews took place in Dhaka and vicinity, most reported their hometowns as outside of Dhaka. In terms of gender and sexual orientation, from those who took the survey, 13 identified as cis women, two as non-binary, two as trans; four reported bisexual and two listed "other" as sexual orientation. Three individuals who did not take the survey but participated in focus groups identified as gay. Two of the participants identified as disabled and two "preferred not to say."

Focus groups: Focus group participants were drawn from overlapping categories of youth, university students, LGBTQI individuals and sex workers. All participants were required to be 18 years old or above. There were five focus group sessions. To recruit participants, we reached out to student and queer groups, study circles and sex worker advocacy organizations, and we are thankful for their cooperation.

In-depth interviews: There were eight in-depth interviews also drawn from the above groups, three of which were with sex workers and two with queer and/or trans identified individuals who had previously participated in a focus group session. One interview participant identified as bisexual and had not participated in a focus group. Two in-depth interview participants were from the indigenous communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts who did not participate in a focus group.

Notes on limitation: An undertaking of this nature must be weighed against the limitations of time constraints and fixed resources. The insights gleaned from the interviews can be instructive, but they are also particular experiences of people in specific circumstances. Each of the participants were self-selected within the snowball method as is typical of any research of this design. As testimonies they offer a multi-dimensional glimpse into sexual expression and online spaces in Bangladesh but at the same time should not be over-generalized. Despite a representative geographic sampling, we should stress that the sessions took place in Dhaka and the vicinity and because administrative, educational, economic and political opportunities tend to be Dhaka-centric in Bangladesh, this generates a divide of opportunity and access. Finally, despite attempts to make these sessions as inclusive as possible, we were still faced with all Bengali participants yet wanted to avoid inclusion as tokenization. To address that, contact through indigenous student networks resulted in two in-depth interview sessions with students from the Chittagong Hill Tracts. This, we feel, is not enough.

[**Addendum:** The paper reflects interviews and research conducted in 2019. By the time it is published, the COVID-19 pandemic has ushered in or deepened many of the inequities discussed here, as well as affecting our social, political, economic relations and survival strategies in the digital sphere. Without a question, the pandemic and its scale require thoughtful inquiry, ambitious organizing strategies and amends to long-held principles. But it is still a developing situation and as much as there is the need to reinforce our collective efforts in building spaces of care and support, we must also be careful about rushing in to produce materials just for the sake of it. There will have to be separate interventions, strategies and working methods to understand the effects of COVID-19 on these communities and on online behavior. It is our hope this paper can still be a foundational guide to understanding access, expression and conduct in online spaces in Bangladesh.]

BACKGROUND

3. BACKGROUND

3a. Panic and paternalism

In April 2019, a teacher at a Dhaka school was suspended after media reporting that he had included the name of two (former) porn stars, as possible answers to multiple choice questions in an exam for ninth grade students.[vi] The questions themselves were innocuous enough, concerning authorship of particular texts, and these names were among the wrong answers. As soon as the news went public, the focus turned to disciplinary actions against those involved for this mishap, followed by other remedial actions to avoid such blunders in the future. This particular incident occurred on the heels of the Bangladeshi government's February 2019 anti-porn crackdown when it blocked or barred almost 20,000 websites and apps as part of that crusade.[vii] Although most likely a mistake by the teacher, the school incident reveals critical narratives in the landscape surrounding sex, porn and digital as well as offline spaces in Bangladesh, particularly with respect to sexual expression and pleasure, consent and privacy.

That ninth-graders or other children should not be exposed to harmful including pornographic or violent materials is undisputed; adults should also not suffer the psychological, emotional and physical toll of harmful and violent content.[viii] But there is danger in reflexively linking porn to harm, with an acknowledgement that children should be shielded from all pornographic content. It is also undeniable that proliferation of and access to digital spaces expand the circulation and reproduction of these materials at a scale and pace unseen before, combined with the fact that popular digital platforms are privately owned behemoths, foregrounding the need for a fine-tuned regulatory approach. At the same time, when both sexuality and laws are manifestations of power, then a cavalcade of laws or regulations, no matter how fine-tuned, risk being instrumentalized for manipulation and political advantage by the state and others. A narrow conception and application of laws alone cannot solve this.

Conflating anything sexual and pornographic automatically with harm and violence, especially when pornography itself is an ample and varied genre, reduces the scope for meaningful understanding of and conversations around sexual expression and pleasure, and detracts from a much-needed distinction between harmful content and less injurious material. That distinction can at times be more blurred than clear cut, but what is important is an opening for more discursive spaces so that any and all conversations around sexuality, or any hint of association with sex as with the multiple choice questions, do not devolve into a moral panic about sex and porn and a resulting stranglehold on and surveillance of sexual expressions and behaviors, especially non-normative ones. This conflation of sex with harm also severely constricts any avenue to discuss and address sexual expression in conjunction with pleasure, consent and privacy, and the complicated topology in which each of these issues reside. For instance, consent may be a minimum requirement for any sexual encounter, but conceptually it is not a "check in the box" yardstick. Nor can there be a discussion on consent without examining pervasive power structures where mere consent can be forcibly or subtly dictated due to power imbalances. Similarly, it is simplifying to frame privacy and autonomy without a concurrent discussion of collective formations and fusion of public and social spaces with private ones. If any reference to sex follows with calls to purge, we are unable to have these discussions. Not to mention, as this school question saga illustrates, an implicit

framing of porn stars as immoral/loose women who would sully innocent minds reproduces that trite and troubling trope of good (Madonna) and bad (whore) women.

With the blanket ban of porn sites earlier in the year, most media reports referenced vague "internet safety solution" programs that were used to block these sites without further details.[ix] The then telecom and internet and communication technology (ICT) minister was also quoted as saying that "the move will continue from the government side,"[x] again devoid of any more details. This is not the first time the government of Bangladesh stepped into this regulatory terrain; in 2016 it also made attempts, though less successful, to block porn sites. Importantly, both times, the government initiative was in response to court orders to ban such materials: In November 2018, the High Court issued a directive to "block all pornography websites in the country for six months" and in 2015 the same court also asked the government "to stop pornography and obscene pictures from being uploaded and shared through mobile phones and social media, including Facebook and Twitter."[xi] This leaves the government with the convenient explanation that it is simply following court orders, while many legal scholars and experts have repeatedly expressed concerns[xii] about the independence and impartiality of the judiciary from the executive branch, raising questions about the cause and intent of these events.

Prior to these drives, in 2012 the government approved a stringent anti-pornography law, the Pornography Control Act, which prohibited the production, sale or distribution of any pornographic materials.[xiii] Characteristically, the law's definition of pornography is vague enough to include any kind of nudity (video or images containing nude or half nude content) and any material likely to increase sexual desire or sensation. At the time, those supporting the law claimed it would help with cracking down on revenge porn and non-consensual distribution of sex tapes and images. This problem is indeed persistent in the country, as are threats, blackmail and extortion around such videos and images, as well as online and mobile stalking and harassment. In more egregious examples, there have been instances where women were raped or assaulted on video, and recordings were later distributed or threatened to be. In one such incident from 2017, three men were arrested for distributing sexual images and videos of a college-aged woman. According to media reports, one of the accused lured the woman into a relationship, videotaped their intimate encounters and then threatened to release them online unless she paid a ransom. She paid, but they allegedly released the materials anyway.[xiv] One of the express goals of the 2012 Pornography Act was to stem these kinds of incidents and generally address revenge porn; section 8(ii) of the act, for example, "penalizes harming a person's social status, blackmailing

or inflicting emotional abuse on a person by means of pornography."[xv] But the same act stands as an example of overreach when section 8(i) "penalizes manufacturing pornography or agreeing to supply participants for the purpose of producing pornography, or forcing any person to participate in such production."[xvi] In failing to distinguish between force and simply participating in the manufacturing of pornographic material where pornography itself is ill-defined, the act perpetuates conservative paranoia about sex and sexual expressions and leaves wide open the possibility of its misuse as a tool of intimidation and criminalization of anything related to pornography. Even more telling is the codification of any nudity or materials causing sexual desire as potentially criminal, thus demarcating nudity as outside of acceptable content and conduct. The intent and spirit of such laws are to add another mechanism for sexual regulation and repression without any remarkable change to harm, violence, abuse or harassment of women, queer people, minors and others.

These developments, generated from the need to address endemic violence, threats and discrimination coupled with a moral investment in regulating sexuality in general, are writ large in other policies, laws and public discourse on sexual expression and behavior. Take for example two pieces of legislation from 2002 that control acid throwing-related crimes. Faced with an upsurge of acid throwing in the 1990s, mostly against women and often as revenge attacks for rejection of sexual or marital offers and advances, the government of Bangladesh passed two laws, one to control the import, transport and manufacture of acids and other corrosive materials and another to punish acid related crimes. This would suggest a state interest in controlling gendered violence. On the other hand, Bangladesh still retains vestiges of the British colonial era penal code (1860) which per its Section 375 does not penalize marital rape unless a spouse is under 13, and per Section 377 punishes anal or oral sex regardless of gender or sexual orientation. Specifically, regarding statutory and marital rape, due to pressure from women's right advocates, a 2003 amendment to the Prevention of Oppression Against Women and Children Act 2000 raised the age of consent to 16, below which any sexual intercourse regardless of consent would constitute statutory rape. But Section 19 of the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 2017 allows courts to approve age waivers in special circumstances, without any further explanation what those circumstances should be:

> **"Notwithstanding anything contained in any other provision of this Act, if a marriage is solemnized in such manner and under such special circumstances as may be prescribed by rules in the best interests of the minor, at the directions of the court and with consent of the parents or the guardian of the minor, as the case may be, it shall not be deemed to be an offence under this Act."**[xvii]

This demonstrates the push to reform the complicated mosaic of colonial era legal relics but only within patriarchal and neoliberal modes, and shows the tension between entrenched moral codes and ways to transgress them. As activists and observers have argued, the age waiver practically allows statutory rape and removes any lower age bar under this special circumstance. Particularly alarming is the fact that a potential rape survivor may be forced to marry their rapist in the name of reputation and that marriage could be judged as a "special circumstance." Yet when open sexual relations and intimacy outside of marriage are stigmatized, there are instances where 16- or 17-year-olds find marriage an alluring option for a legitimized way to have sex. In other cases, given grim security situations in towns and villages across the country including threat of physical and sexual assault against young women, parents of girls frame marriage as a way to avert those threats, as misguided as that may be. Also, as anthropologist Dina M. Siddiqi notes, regardless of age, in the absence of vocabulary for consensual sexual relationships outside marriage, coercion and discipline of

women's desires become the more acceptable reference through which to mediate perceived transgressions including young people's complicated sexual desires.[xviii] Colonial era abduction laws are often deployed to adjudicate elopements that defy familial and patriarchal authority: "Given that the plaintiffs are usually men and the "victims" their daughters ostensibly subjected to abduction and deception, for whom is this kind of access to justice ultimately tailored?"[xix] As Siddiqi keenly observes, relying primarily on legal reforms produces ambivalent outcomes, often re-inscribing dominant gender relations, and "bad" cultural practices cannot simply be substituted with "good" laws, as the latter is embedded within the former.

This push and pull extends to other policy and legislative interventions. In a landmark decision in 2000, the High Court of Bangladesh made prostitution legal provided brothels or red-light districts had requisite licenses. But as in other countries, legalization, which is markedly different from the more sex-worker friendly option of decriminalization, has not resulted in a more sex work- and worker-friendly climate. Raids at brothels, arbitrary detention and extortion and harassment of sex workers are common. The Bangladesh chapter of Sex Worker's Network reports that often "sex workers are charged with drug peddling and human trafficking," cases that can be unbailable, or they have to bribe the police to avoid these charges.[xx] Public solicitation still remains a crime, the administration can still take measures to prevent prostitution and brothel licensing is fraught with intimidation. And eviction remains an ever-looming threat: In 2014, for example, approximately 1,000 sex workers "were evicted from a 200-year brothel in Tangail."[xxi] In ensuing court battles, a few of the establishments there reestablished themselves, but eviction threats persist.

In another example, through a gazette notification in 2013, the government recognized hijra as a category and identity and the Election Commission updated the Voter List Regulations to add "hijra," a local colloquial term, as a gender identity. Some activists have mixed feelings about these formalized classifications, which evoke a ranking and order of acceptable genders. These culturally specific terms are also highly fluid and supple, which formal categorizations do not fully capture. And even with these protections, "violence against hijras, especially hijra sex workers, is often brutal, and occurs in public spaces, police stations, prisons, and their homes."[xxii] And systematic discrimination and exploitation against the community in every sphere from health to housing to employment continues apace.

In disciplining and punishing non-normative sexuality, perhaps the most widely known incident recently was the 2016 murder of LGBTQ activist and founder of an LGBTQ magazine, Xulhaz Mannan, at his home. He was hacked to death along with another activist in a brazen attack by members allegedly belonging to an Islamist outfit sympathetic to Al-Qaida. But these brutal examples of violence are the tip of the iceberg. In 2017, the law enforcement agency Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) raided and detained 28 individuals for suspected homosexuality in the outskirts of Dhaka. News reports about the detention uncritically transmitted official statements. In one a RAB officer was quoted as saying, "homosexuals from 20 districts gathered there. They usually get together once every two months"[xxiii] as if that itself was an indication of something nefarious. Official sources claimed the detainees kept in touch through social media and that locals complained about a "homosexual party." The detainees, mostly students and all under 30, were also charged in a narcotics case, following alleged trend of law enforcement agencies in Bangladesh using framed and trumped up drug charges against the already targeted.

3b. Limits of legality and fluidity of gender and sexual mores

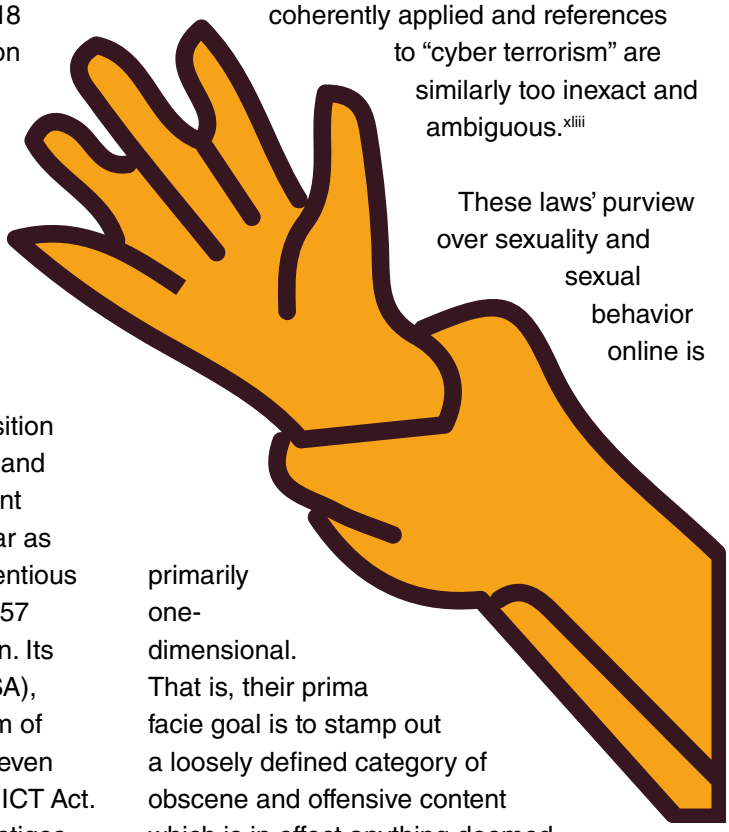
There is a gender disparity in internet access and use. For example, countrywide among Facebook users, a staggering 72 percent are men and 28 percent are women revealing a stark gender divide.[xxiv] And "many of these users are aged between 18-24" likely to be enrolled at undergraduate programs or working at "blue collar jobs."[xxv] A survey on mobile ownership revealed that among the 15-65 age cohort, there was a 34 percent gender differential with male mobile ownership at 87 percent and female ownership at 58 percent; unsurprisingly these gaps get more pronounced with socioeconomic backgrounds and rural women reportedly had the lowest internet use.[xxvi] And when they do go online, threats and harassments shape that experience. According to a report by Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST), 73 percent of female internet users have reported being subjected to cybercrimes. Of the complaints received by the ICT division's help desk, 70 percent of complainants were women.[xxvii] In a regional study that included Bangladesh, women internet users were 43 percent more likely to get harassed online than their male counterparts.[xxviii] Although this study also revealed that 13 percent of the male respondents, aged 15-65, reported online harassment versus 10 percent of female users,[xxix] women in general are less likely to report or talk about such harassments and cybercrimes for fear of "social consequences, in particular attacks on their character." [xxx]

Many of these studies however employ heteronormative assumptions and fail to illuminate patterns of violence against queer, trans and gender non-conforming or non-binary people. Amidst these developments, civil society members in Bangladesh have called for stricter regulations. For example, an editorial at a national daily urged "zero tolerance for revenge porn."[xxxi] Advocacy organizations, legal aid services, including prominent women's rights organizations point to this alarming trend to press for longer term solution to this pattern of "cyber violence against women."[xxxii] Although several laws including the anti-pornography law purports to address cyber violence and online harassment, activists argue that they are saddled with loopholes, weak institutional support, lax implementation and confusion about these laws. These laws can also be instruments for curtailing and surveilling online expression, especially when some of these laws do not specifically mention "cyber violence against women." But many simply envision that "longer term" as yet another piece of legislation when overall trend of violence against women do not seem to subside. Particularly that "the government should not employ vulnerabilities of women to online violence for claiming more restriction on freedom of experience [sic], rather what [sic] needed is new and specialized law to deliver justice against online abusers of women."[xxxiii]

Beyond online regulation of sexuality, two other major laws have regulated broader online behavior for the past 15 years in Bangladesh: The newly enacted Digital Security Act (DSA) 2018 and the earlier Information and Communication Technology Act (ICT) of 2006. Section 57 of the ICT Act became synonymous in Bangladesh with crackdown, arbitrary arrests and detentions. A 2018 Human Rights Watch (HRW) report documented how a rubber plantation worker was arrested because he liked and shared a Facebook post critical of the Prime Minister.[xxxiv] Initially denied bail and detained, the worker was eventually released but the use of the law in creating an atmosphere of fear and harassment was solidified. Enacted to regulate digital communication, this specific section allowed prosecution of digital publication of anything fake, defamatory or obscene, which contributed or could contribute to the deterioration of law and order, "prejudiced the image of the state or a person" or qualified as materials that tended to "deprave and corrupt" or hurt religious beliefs.[xxxv] As if these expansive and vague terms were not already grounds for misuse, the next governmental administration amended the ICT Act in 2013 to eliminate

arrest warrants and "official permission to prosecute," restricted bail and increased prison terms upon conviction.[xxxvi] The government also created specialized Cyber Tribunals to prosecute ICT cases. According to the HRW, complaints, arrests, and prosecutions increased exponentially, and the report cites court officials as reflecting, "often […] the intent is to intimidate, with relatively few convictions." [xxxvii] Despite replacing section 57, those charged under the ICT Act may still be prosecuted. In one case, an actress was arrested under the act in 2018 for spreading rumors and false information on social media during the student protests for road safety in Dhaka. After several days in detention she was released on bail, but in May 2019 law enforcement agencies decided to continue with prosecution and press charges against her,[xxxviii] showing the continued damaging nature of this bill.

Facing sustained and vociferous opposition to the ICT Act from concerned members and civil society organizations, the government moved to review and revise it, going so far as to signal a willingness to repeal the contentious section 57 of the act. Eventually, section 57 was scrapped in favor of a new legislation. Its replacement, the Digital Security Act (DSA), was enacted in late 2018 and to the alarm of everybody, the new law reproduced and even made worse the stifling provisions of the ICT Act. The new act goes so far as to include vestiges of the British colonial era Official Secrets Act and expands vague offenses of the ICT Act to criminalize causing damage to the state, hurting religious sentiments and using digital media to intimidate or defame.[xxxix] Section 43 of the DSA gives sweeping powers to the police where "if a police official believes that an offence under the law has been or is being committed at a certain place, or there is a possibility of committing crimes or destroying evidence, the official can search the place or any person there."[xl] The law also includes a proposed Digital Security Agency with the authority to instruct the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) to block any material harmful to digital security.[xli] Warrantless searches and arrests, lack of judicial review of the proposed agency's decisions, suspicion of crime to instigate arrest and prosecution and expansion of non-bailable offenses are among the law's many troubling provisions[xlii] that run counter to constitutional protections and rights such as freedom of expression and media and the right to information. As Amnesty International highlighted in its analysis of the act, terms such as "annoying, insulting, or humiliating" and "invasive and intimidating" are too broad to be coherently applied and references to "cyber terrorism" are similarly too inexact and ambiguous.[xliii]



These laws' purview over sexuality and sexual behavior online is primarily one-dimensional. That is, their prima facie goal is to stamp out a loosely defined category of obscene and offensive content which is in effect anything deemed pornographic, harmful or vulgar, without much specification of what they are and without any deliberation on agency, consent or rights. Undergirded by an assumption that any expression of sexuality must be contained or destroyed, these laws, though they do not address sexuality directly, nonetheless permit a public and social domain where any sexual expression is by default suspicious and cause for moral panic. What emerges as a result, in parallel to its vague use of cyber terrorism, is another imprecise term for policy intervention – cyber violence. When the problem of online harassment and violence is pervasive, it is reasonable to expect policies and laws will be crafted to address this specifically. Usually,

expressions, exchanges and behaviors that do not constitute as harassment or violence are not under the purview of these legal or policy prescriptions. Yet against a backdrop of a surveillance state and its coercive institutional apparatuses, and a persistent anxiety about sexual expression in general, vague and sweeping legal and policy prescriptions reproduce and entrench moralistic and punitive tendencies while disallowing a more careful understanding of and conversation about online sexual expression and practices. Legislating away deep-seated problems may only expand carceral and punitive measures and give disproportionate power to the state (for reference, see annex I for a timeline of relevant laws).

Is just another law a solution, or change will mean reshaping normative expectations of sexual practices and expressions? What will it take to decrease violence and harassment and most importantly to publicly and socially recognize and prioritize respect, consent and pleasure? As laws are fundamentally conceptualized as neutral, they cannot distinguish between structural injustices and are often used to perpetuate those same injustices.

Once again, while the issue of online threats, harassments, and violence against women and the queer community is chronic and in need of serious attention, we should also consider whether handing over more arbitrary and sweeping powers to the state will bring about any meaningful change other than strengthening the coercive powers of state institutions. One could argue that serious flaws in some of the existing laws or loopholes in implementation merit newer, better laws, and that is partially true, but what is also undeniable is that laws have failed to address these problems. We must fundamentally revise our understanding of status of laws, and their role as instruments of power and understand how the rhetoric of "zero tolerance" and "specialized laws" facilitate and normalize the carceral state to the exclusion of alternatives. These laws, framing social media primarily as a site of criminal excess, disregard social media centered support groups that cater specifically to and support women and queer communities.[xliv] There are a variety of ways people use the internet and social platforms to develop mutual intimacies and communities, including erotic and sexual ones. Also, centering the prevailing notion of good, straight, heteronormative "women" who are in need of protecting, shuts out others, including those who identify as queer or third gender and those who do not inhabit the limiting role of "good" women like sex workers, who might also need safeguards or those who desire safe online spaces for sexual expression and sociality without constant policing and criminalizing of such behavior.

These troubling patterns extends to coercive policies in the name of reform measures with

the creation of rehabilitation centers for sex workers and homeless children. People in these situations also find ways to transgress imposed boudaries and restrictions. As Shuchi Karim illustrates, women who spent time at rehabilitation centers, meant to "reform" sex workers and street children, formed bonds and staked a claim to a lesbian identity. These restricted homosocial environments did not necessarily cause exclusive homoerotic bonds, as many of those women had heterosexual encounters before and after their time there, but given the "long period of traumatic time spent together in the centers, where they were deprived of resources, compassion, and support – the women only had each other for comfort and the bonding established there had more to offer than mere sex. Many women were initiated into the actual act of homoerotic sex in the centers, but it was female camaraderie and love that lasted beyond the walls and time of the semi-prisons."[xlv] What transpires is a more fluid, looser sexuality beyond straight/non-straight classifications. Vocabularies of self-identification may fall outside of that: "Identities are not only expressed through labels but more through day-to-day expressions of living arrangements, lifestyle, dress codes, associations, and images that are crucially more social than individual."[xlvi] An undeniable class and gender dimension runs through these configurations of identity, as also noted by Karim, where from her research these mainly rural and working-class sex workers both adapted and eschewed identities and strategies that differed from those deployed by middle class women's networks and "male sexually diverse groups." For example, in contrast to visibility as a strategy for demanding sexual rights by middle class groups, these sex workers, despite self-identification as lesbians would not disclose so publicly, though they preferred to organize within a mainstream platform and saw visibility as counterproductive and even dangerous. (It is important to note here that after the murder of Mannan in 2016, queer platforms and networks regardless of gender were forced to go underground and rethink visibility as strategy.)

While we cannot generalize from a select group of networks, it is undeniable that with sexual politics there is a vast and varied landscape across class, gender, and intra-class and gender divergences intersecting with other factors such as ethnic and religious markers where "sexuality can be expressed differently yet simultaneously as labor choice, desire and identity."

When middle class conceptions of taste, culture and politics dominate much of the public discourse and policy in Bangladesh, like elsewhere in South Asia, and this extends to sexual politics as well, these counternarratives offer an alternative entry point in thinking about sexual expression, identity and politics.

There is, however, an opportunity to reevaluate what "middle class" stands for, as not only a socio-economic status, but also a marker of taste and aesthetics, and although there is consolidation of a middle class sensibility through performances of respectability, the conception of respectability itself changes over time and generations. In her study of "new womanhood among affluent middle-class women in Bangladesh," Nazia Hussein showcased performances of "respectable femininity, through giving both family and profession equal importance"[xlvii] by propertied, urban, educated women. Among this group there are also cleavages around visible performances of the religious versus the secular intersecting with questions of agency and modernity, played out on an overtly heteronormative terrain. While queerness may exist covertly in these spaces, the vocabulary and practice of such queerness often follow global movements which are inaccessible or unappealing to those outside of the middle class (or even some within it). Overall, overrepresentation of the middle class and its internal schisms must impact our analysis of the spectrum of gender and sexual expressions and agency outside middle class imaginations.

3c. Surveillance and the social life

As part of its election manifesto Vision 2021,[xlviii] the present government adopted a far-reaching digitization policy in 2009 under an umbrella program called "Digital Bangladesh,"[xlix] coordinated through an Access to Information (a2i)[l] project housed at the Prime Minister's Office (PMO). This has entailed both spreading digital access, and bringing, offering and digitizing different public services available to people. Developments range from encouraging private sector investments (e.g. workforce and software development, land reclamations for IT parks) to government service and information availability (e.g. local government information centers, services such as land deed and registration digitization and digital land records, text announcements from the government, a dictionary service for the visually impaired), to bringing a wide variety of sectors from health to education to disaster management to law enforcement under this digitized information and service delivery umbrella.[li] In 2018, for example, the a2i project launched several online services and platforms, including one through the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs under a "Multi-Sectoral Program on Violence Against Women" which would allow app users to send urgent messages to law enforcement, three selected friends and family members and to a nationwide helpline[lii] in case of emergencies. Similar apps in other countries have attracted structural and practical critiques. In India, grassroots organizers and community advocates pointed to several problems with public safety apps directed at women, including the high incidence of sexual harassment in public spaces despite a high app download rate among women mobile users; difficulties in real time reporting including network problems and low battery life of cheap phones; police insensitivity and more importantly distrust of police; and exposure risks from data and location sharing.[liii] Also in India, though the government has now made panic buttons mandatory for mobile phones sold from 2017 onwards, this could actually make phones more expensive.[liv] Deeper concerns about technological fixes for systemic social problems of violence, harassment and discrimination abound, and features like location data can perpetuate community, cultural, ethnic, racial profiling and other stereotypes. All these concerns are applicable to Bangladesh. Aptly, the cyberfeminist collective SubRosa reminds us in *Interpreting the Internet: Feminist and Queer Counterpublics in Latin America*, that "it is foolish to believe that major social, economic, and political issues can be addressed by throwing technology at them."[lv]

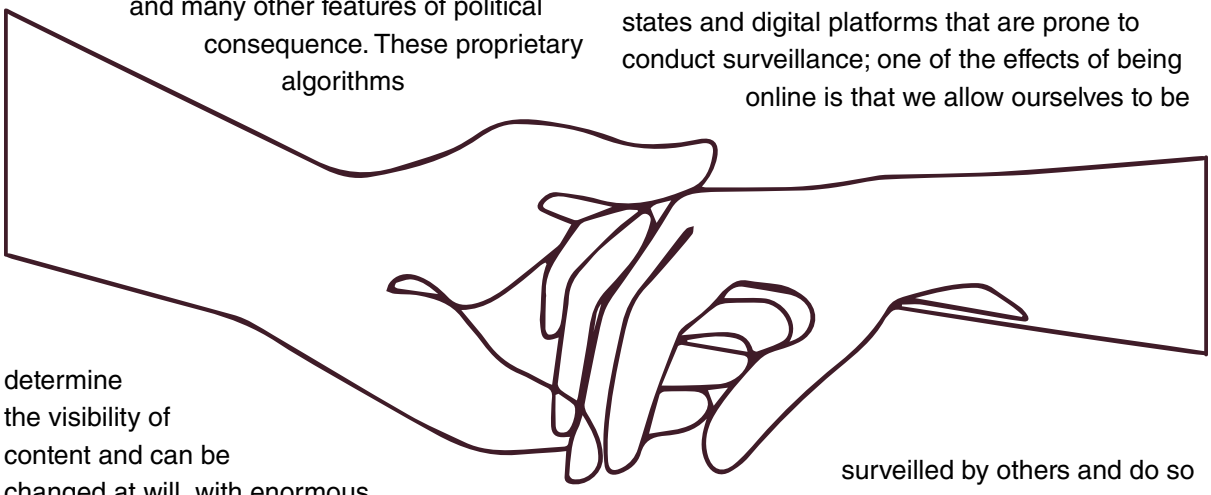
Add to that are the myriad of ways the government has intensified social media monitoring, news of some of which are in the public domain, others covert, but all suffering from an absence of meaningful transparency and accountability. On the heels of two youth-led mass movements in 2018, the administration green-lit a social media monitoring project in November under the auspices of RAB, a force many human rights organizations allege to have been involved in rights violations including extrajudicial killings.[lvi] According to news reports, this program will "identify and bring to book those who spread anti-state propaganda, rumors and false information to confuse and instigate people into violence."[lvii] The Bangladeshi government has also been accused of purchasing spyware from an Israeli security firm to eavesdrop on dissidents and activists, including queer people, in an investigative report published by Haaretz in October 2019.[lviii] Internet and mobile restrictions and slowdowns and targeted blocking of sites like Facebook or Youtube have also become common practice in the name of public safety and order. We cannot ignore the risks of social media fueled violence, as what happened in Myanmar with regard to the Rohingya population,[lix] but an unaccountable and repressive regime with unfettered powers to block or slow the internet simply maintains the status quo and quells dissident voices and movements. Perhaps the clearer lesson here is that these are ultimately political decisions, and unaccountable control over these platforms and flow of information

serve the interests of those in control.

The confluence of expanding digital access and use on the one hand, and increasing surveillance and crackdown on digital spaces on the other, clarifies a fundamental issue: The terms of engagements and expectations of online behavior and exchanges revolve around normative expectations, in this case, statist, patriarchal, heteronormative, capitalist among others, and any breach of these expectations is accepted only if it can be absorbed, coopted or otherwise disciplined. In other words: Be online but behave according those tenets of power. Given the dangers of outing and doxing, and the amount of harassment of and online threats against women, queer people, minorities and others, the desire for decorum is reasonable, but that reasonable demand is often instrumentalized to consolidate power and normative standards. This kind of social and public engineering is not only how political communities like states operate, but is also the default setting of privately-owned digital platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Writing about such engineering, sociologist Zeynep Tufekci wrote: "These platforms operate via algorithms the specifics of which are mostly opaque to people outside the small cadre of technical professionals within the company with regards to content visibility, data sharing and many other features of political consequence. These proprietary algorithms determine the visibility of content and can be changed at will, with enormous consequences for political speech."[lx] Given the nature of these platforms and their gathering of "Big Data," their interest is in protecting the social order and not subverting it. One of the many ways that this is accomplished is through creating a facade of democratic tendencies and redirecting them to the service of the status quo. In each of these scenarios, the ultimate goal is to thwart counter-reconfigurations or counterpublics: "Counterpublics are the places, spaces or means through which those pushed to societies' margins develop their identities, construct communities, and formulate strategies for transforming wider politics." It is worth reiterating the internet is not a "guarantee of transformation,"[lxii] and social media can be as disciplinary:

> **"So the social order is protected not by preventing "self-expression" and identity formation but encouraging it as a way of forcing people to limit and discipline themselves - to take responsibility for building and cleaning their own cage. Thus, the dissemination of social-media platforms becomes a flexible tool for social control. The more that individuals express through these codified, networked, formatted means to construct a "personal brand" identity, the more they self-assimilate, adopting the incentive structures of capitalist social order as their own."**[lxiii]

At a more micro level, these structural patterns intersect with cultural and social norms to order and reorder modes of social control. It is not only states and digital platforms that are prone to conduct surveillance; one of the effects of being online is that we allow ourselves to be surveilled by others and do so willingly. Here, notions of agency and autonomy get blurred, when sociality, desire, and participation in community require that we willingly transact information on these platforms.



Again:

> **"Surveillance is not merely a matter of unwanted scrutiny that imposes repressive social control. Its mechanisms are inseparable from desired forms of social attention, serving as a guarantor of legibility, visibility, relevance. Given how social media undergird everyday life, surveillance has become the contemporary form of social participation. It conveys that we belong; it can be experienced as a systemic form of care."**[lxiv]

It is almost a truism now that earlier distinctions between online and in-real-life no longer holds, because the overlap is too fused to conceive of them as separate spaces. And if the "internet is where people are,"[lxv] producing conditions where being online is "necessary"[lxvi] or desirable, then the task at hand is to understand these compound elements of surveillance, sociality, desire and necessity which makes up the digital space that itself is coextensive with the physical space. As online and offline spaces and expressions feed each other, much of online problems of harassments and threats are symptomatic of offline systemic and societal issues, but at the same time they are reiterated and re-inscribed in specific ways online. With the detention of gay men in 2017, for instance, we witnessed how these convergences work when officials testified to tracking local area complaints (offline) and social media connections (online), melding both spaces of surveillance. But if threats, intimidation, harassment and violence are manifest across these spaces, these same spaces also work as connective tissues, with community centers (offline) as a gathering places and social media groups (online) as another kind of gathering, networking and community building space. In order to catalyze a digital space that safeguards sexual expressions but is cognizant of symptomatic violence and harassment, recognizing this push and pull is essential. Since neither technology nor society is static, instead of just mirroring each other, they reshape each other, forming what Elisabeth Jay Friedman calls "constitutive entanglements, not just mere reflections, they are intimately related parts of a whole" formed through relations "among human and nonhuman elements."

Reducing these multifarious currents to a single frame of analysis is thus inadequate. What is at stake are considerations that, a) blanket moral panic about sex and sexual expression detracts from understanding of consent, respect, and agency; b) sweeping and vague bans founded on seeing all things sexual as suspicious and thus subject to punitive restrictions only strengthen repressive institutions; c) emphasis on freedom of expression, especially in the post #MeToo era, ignores the insidious way power devalues and subverts consent and forgets that freedom cannot extend to freedom to abuse; d) powerful institutions can use the cover of harm and abuse to self-serving and repressive ends; and e) when rights, agency, autonomy are threatened, how to contend with conceptual limitations of these ideas? Particularly when rights and agency of the universal liberal subject are always encoded with particular subject positions of whiteness and are thus insufficient for a politics of liberation. In examining internet access in Bangladesh, we must evade the same trap.

TRANSMISSIONS

4. TRANSMISSIONS

The following sections collate the information gathered from our focus groups and in-depth interviews. As mentioned in the description of limitation of the research, they are not meant to be exhaustive regarding online communications and sexual expression, but are considered insights from a segment of people whose lives are enmeshed with the internet and who defy and navigate the social, legal, everyday limitations of gender and sexual boundaries. Sexual mores and gender identities are not as clear cut as normative expectations dictate, but those expectations do determine what is and can be available to young people, students, sex workers and those who identify as queer or non-binary. This exploratory document presents their views as a cornerstone for understanding the terrain of gender and sexual expression in Bangladesh.

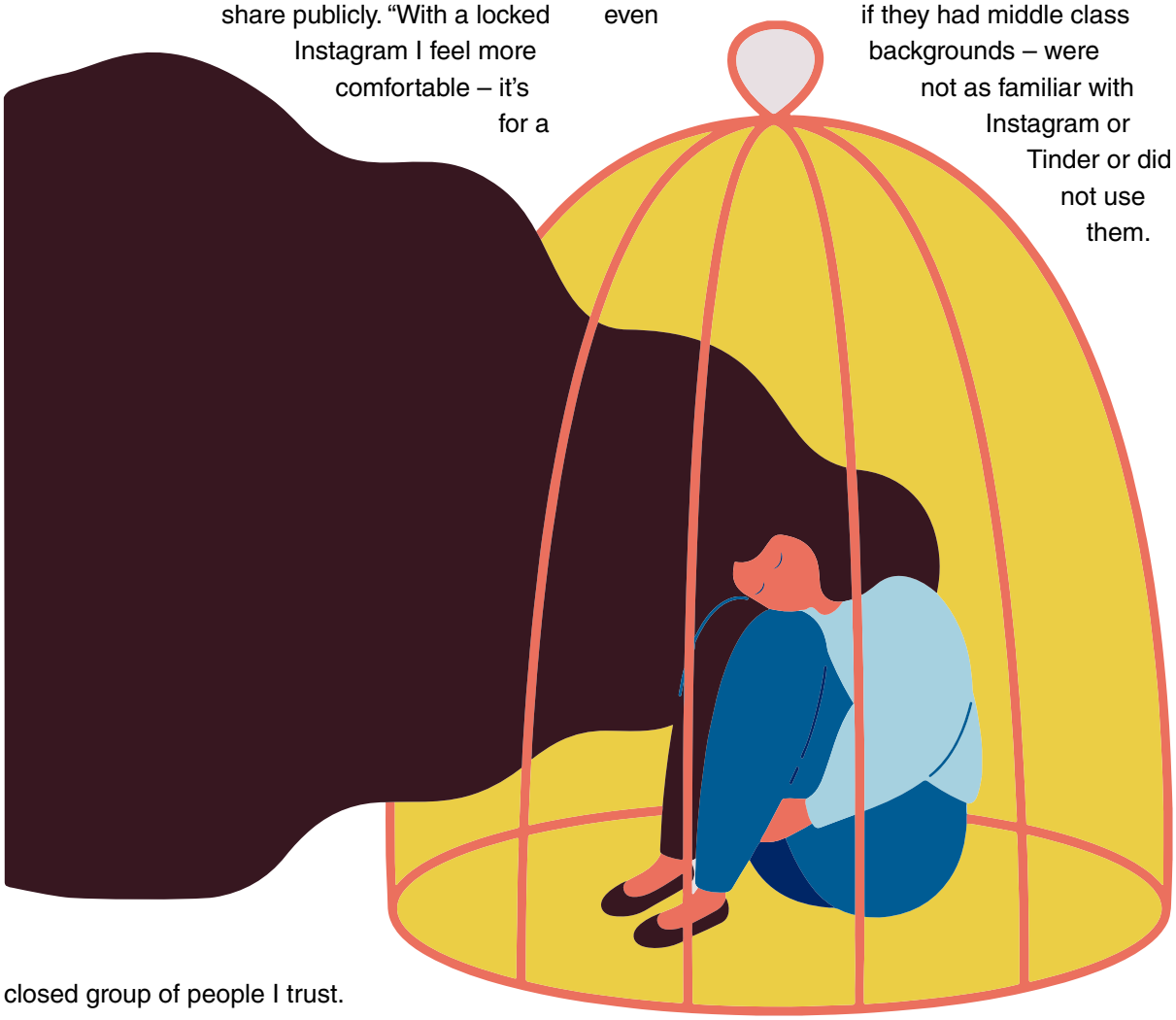
4a. It's complicated: Reimagining online spaces along a spectrum of public-social to private-collective

In Bangladesh, Facebook is the most prominent social media and networking platform. Most Facebook users use it to keep in touch with people, news, announcements and events; it is a primary way for them to communicate. Other social media platforms like Twitter have failed to achieve similar traction, leaving Facebook with a massive following. Facebook has also grown to be an e-commerce platform in Bangladesh, especially for small or medium sized enterprises and one-to-two person operations. Since credit card or online financial transactions, especially international ones, are severely restricted in Bangladesh, which curtails the domain-hosting and webpage management that require such payments, most businesses forego a website to create Facebook pages as their primary public-facing presence.

This use of Facebook is a transformation of the social – as reiterated by multiple participants in focus groups and in-depth interviews, it is where a public persona or brand is presented. In that public and social facing presentation, the main consideration is a limited presence. Many participants expressed sentiments along the lines of: "I don't engage or minimally engage on Facebook, just use it to post articles and announcements," or "I use Facebook for networking and professional reasons." But for most respondents a transformation was palpable in that they remember using Facebook in relatively more unfiltered, unfettered ways, when they would post, chat or connect on it more unguardedly. Now intimacy has moved elsewhere. When asked about changes to their posting and engagement patterns, participants reported a mix of reasons, including what Facebook had become or looked like compared to their earlier experiences on it, the growing examples of Facebook's misdeeds, anxiety about being tracked and observed and personal experiences of harassments and/or stories they had heard or had seen happen to friends or family: "It's more headache than comfort; I just maintain an account to keep a presence there." Yet it is also a necessity in that without Facebook there was a feeling of being left out, if not in a personal sense, but from professional opportunities. Take, for example, the now standard practice of employers requesting social media information in job applications, which induces self-censorship. But being on social media was also how people would hear about jobs and opportunities. Almost every student interviewed reported using Facebook for their class-related work and found

it the easiest way to do so. The scope of those interactions was more professional and less intimate.

But what of intimacy then? Curiously for more private interactions, respondents used platforms also owned by Facebook, like Instagram, WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger. A private Instagram, several respondents reported, had a more intimate feel, allowing them to post images, thoughts and videos that they would not normally share publicly. "With a locked Instagram I feel more comfortable – it's for a closed group of people I trust. When I share a photo or post more intimate material, there are likes and comments but no worry of harassment, stalking or lewd comments," said a cis woman participant who also identified as bisexual. "I have more control on Instagram and it feels how Facebook was when I was first on it," mentioned another straight female participant. "Don't really use Facebook, other than to know what's happening in class, for class work," echoed several student participants, men and women and when asked what they used for more personal interactions they replied, "Messenger." Like Messenger, messaging apps such as WhatsApp, dating apps like Tinder afforded a space for sharing, communicating and sometimes meeting new people but in a more controlled way. But the platforms of choice showed some variance across class, where Instagram and Tinder were to a degree more popular with respondents who had more of an urban, middle class upbringing, while those with more non-urban ties – even if they had middle class backgrounds – were not as familiar with Instagram or Tinder or did not use them.



Messenger and WhatsApp use was common across all groups in varying degrees. The sex workers interviewed, who were all cis women from working class backgrounds, used Messenger, WhatsApp, and even Facebook more heavily than the others interviewed, as well as another messaging service called Imo. Pervading these platform preferences was something resembling a network effect – "I use

them because my friends use them" – with online formations somewhat, if not fully, determined by social ties.

There was a desire to share, to be part of a community, to let a slice of the self out there that was perhaps easier to control on these other platforms. These calculations were obviously more pronounced for women, femmes, and non-heterosexual men who had to walk a tightrope or risk exposure, even on private accounts, messaging and dating apps, which is why control figured so prominently in these conversations. Interestingly, a desire for control, boundaries or even privacy, did not amount to the sort of individualized, me against the world subjectivity, but showed a wish and practice to exist in concert with others and to inhabit a space built on trust. Private thus did not mean solitary – it still allowed a collective experience. Sami, a queer-identified participant, shared feelings of contentment from expressing erotic desire and posting semi-erotic images in a close friends-only account, which may not bring any real change but "still felt good." Privacy of course has always been unevenly applied and distributed. Notions of privacy are already frayed with assaults not only from the more recent state surveillance apparatus, but also from the colonial legacy on which the former is built. An architecture of state and institutional intrusion into private lives is built in whether we consider, for example, the colonial era criminalization of homosexuality or contemporary biometric datafication. At the same time, radical scholarship has long questioned the public versus private division and the conceptualization of an individual subject in the liberal sense, positing instead an overlapping subjectivity and a more collectivized approach to political emancipation. The latter can be a useful frame to understand community building efforts as gathered from the interviews. As one queer participant noted about their sexual awakening, "Even if I could access information online, learn, read from available materials, I couldn't really internalize or absorb that without a space to discuss them," adding how communities they found online and then met physically were important to their evolving sense of identity. A desire for private, yet collective, online spaces only affirms that framework.

4b. Disciplining sexuality, performing sexuality

Many participants in the discussion sessions voiced a concern that while there is a wide scope of sexual expression for straight men, with expansive freedom and broad excuses to justify their worst behaviors, for others it is a tightrope of restrictions, policing and hiding, illuminating their experiences with sexual expression off- or online. An expectation of chaste, heteronormative performance followed everyone, but its limits were incredibly pliable for straight men. Tushar, a public university student, recalled how in college fellow classmates constantly bullied a student for purported homosexuality ("he acted like a woman"). Tushar admitted that he only objected when that student was severely beaten and made to promise he would straighten/man up. He was not happy with those choices and admitted to another failing in his presence in a group chat of his pre-university classmates whose sole purpose was to share revenge porn. Tushar added that "I asked them to stop," but they did not listen, and he added that he no longer considers them close or belongs to the group but to the best of his knowledge the group chat still exists. Still, participating in a fraternity of revenge porn sharing is normal/ized whereas "acting ladylike" is not.

And while Tushar, as a straight man, did not receive backlash for his silence in the face of sexual misdeeds, another participant Lubna experienced extensive harm from online dating spaces as a woman. In the case of Lubna, an online Tinder encounter that developed into relationship with a man metamorphosed into a harrowing example of excesses, entitlement and violence. As the relationship wore on, this man reacted to Lubna with emotional abuse, physical threats, online stalking and harassment, threats of blackmails and actual threats to her family and social circle, which led her to shut down accounts and seriously restrict her online footprint. She experienced extensive fear, anxiety and emotional distress as a young, queer woman

living away from her family in Dhaka. She now mostly used emails and limits her social media engagements, using strict privacy settings and reducing her interactions to trusted or tested contacts; she has also curbed her sexual interactions online which she reports were never easy to begin with.

Others also echoed this method of restrictions for safety, with individual variations on a case-by-case, but generally it meant contacts made online, including Tinder, had to be within two degrees of separation – "somebody in the network would know somebody who would know this person" or share at least one common network with friends, extended family or professional relationships. This method worked for queer-identified Tuli, who had a more extensive social media presence but was still mindful of posting nothing personal on her public profile. Tuli restricted who she friended or followed and uniquely reports no unpleasant experiences on the internet, including on Tinder. She realized her experience was unique but also credited a supportive family because she did not fear her family or felt the need to hide intimate exchanges and relationships: "My parents are openly affectionate to each other. When we were kids and my parents were young parents, they regularly made our home available to single friends who had to hide their romantic entanglements from their parents. I can openly talk to them about sex and romance and the things I don't want to talk about or share, they understand. They don't need to know everything, but they respect that." In these examples, while there may not be absolute freedom of expression, participants' tips and tricks for being safe online reveal learned self-censorship and self-preservation in a climate hostile to sexual transgressions; staying safe meant not saying or doing the wrong things in a game with shifting goalposts.

For most participants, family members were less understanding or open, which provoked anxiety or surveillance. Participants feared family intrusion and surveillance of their social media activities, preferred to keep family off of contact lists or gave them limited access to online profiles. Saba, a public university student, said her mother was upset with a post of hers where exposed skin on her back was visible, and instructed her to remove it. Saba noted her mother's concern about "my reputation back home, about people in our hometown where my parents live, relatives and area people, they would think I have become too liberal. And my parents are middle class, educated by mufassil (small town) standards and I don't think the post was sexual at all." At the time she was still fighting with her mother. A queer respondent summed up their online experience thus: "Sometimes I do want to present my sexuality online, to feel good, to get some likes when I am feeling good or attractive about myself, but the main question I ask is, is it safe and I know it's not." But this participant found small measures, like restricted accounts and a small friend group, to navigate those safety and security concerns.

The tension between sexual expression, desire, social, institutional discrimination and violence, and everyday injunctions are even more glaring for those who identify as trans. Even a "best" case scenario meant being subjected to lurid and dehumanizing fascination or "jokes," and imperiled medical or mental health support. The two trans persons interviewed managed being out within a close circle and not out beyond that but questioned a linear trajectory of coming out. One of them expressed discomfort about seeking recognition within a strictly liberal model of indivisual rights: "I realize it's inadequate, but what option do we have, do we not do anything then?" There was no easy answer when a strictly legal, rights-based approach and recognition still felt inadequate. A rights-based discourse is conceptually flawed because of its universalizing motive founded on idealization of whiteness, particularly white men. Equality is guaranteed to those who pass, who embody or are proximate to that ideal white subject, to others not, and the formation of modern states is based on extension of such idealizations of model citizens. Constitutionally all citizens of Bangladesh are guaranteed equal rights but clawing away at rights is also the flipside of that arrangement. This ideology limits entry into that model imaginary and expands criminality and inadmissibility

around citizenship and equality, using patriarchal, heteronormative ideals to bar queer participation in the polity. This model citizen ideal permeates the very basis of social recognition and dooms rights, as its political equivalent, to be granted with difficulty and lost at every turn. Hijras, for example, have been granted formal recognition by the state, but social acceptance is far from reality, and even this limited recognition does not produce material, legal and other gains in everyday life.

Despite her ordeal, Lubna insisted she did not see herself as a victim. She and several others rejected the idea of victimhood, which they thought stripped them off agency, will and especially sexual agency and desire. If Lubna were to seek redress via institutional channels, her rights would be dependent on her being a desexualized, respectable victim. In Bangladesh, like other South Asian countries, middle class respectability and its public performance draw on outmoded notions of virtue, most obviously manifesting through institutional sanctions, laws, regulations and even advocacy and rights discourses.

As these examples show, within the limits of sexual politics straight men have the greater latitude, however, as Siddiqi notes, "a heterosexual/homosexual binary understanding of sexuality cannot be mapped unproblematically onto ground realities. Who is 'straight' and who is not is by no means self-evident."[lxviii] But standards, expectations, performances of that respectability persist. These standards are also variable across the gender spectrum, with men accorded more freedom and flexibility and women and non-binary persons' sexuality and desire that much more disciplined:

> **"Across class and educational lines, regardless of sexual and gender preferences, men possess greater mobility and freedom while women negotiate a more limited set of alternatives. Men have greater 'freedom' to act on their sexual and gender preferences-as long as social and familial obligations are met through marriage, and all acts are hidden from public view. Thus it is possible for men to lead dual lives. A married man may be able to go 'cruising' at night or be in a long-term relationship with another man without encountering too much scrutiny. For some men, marriage to a woman offers a way to 'pass' as straight in society; for others, it may be desirable for other reasons. Male-male sexual relationships are tolerated under the surface but harshly punished once discovered."**[lxix]

While men have greater freedom generally, there is also an undeniable class dimension to sexual expression in that what is derogatorily considered "low(er) class" behavior is both more easily licensed and also more disciplined. The solution is to reform and modernize "low(er) class" practices to follow the idealized, nuclear, patriarchal, heteronormative, monogamous family arrangements. In this model citizen imaginary, no other possibilities are allowed, and their transgression is costly especially for those with lesser power in that arrangement. Breaking the norms of heterosexual marriage has repercussions that are borne unequally among men and women and are further intensified by class stratifications. Queer unions lack formalized contracts and employ arrangements outside the zone of formality. A trans man or woman, gay, lesbian or bisexual person may be open about their identity to a small, trusted circle but may choose not to disclose that more publicly for fear of social, financial or life-threatening repercussions. Despite formal recognition and social cognizance, hijra communities continue to face discrimination and violence and remain marginalized, particularly because hijra continues to be a largely working-class identification. Hijra identity is also often excluded from globally legible terms such as queer, trans etc. or cultural and social specificities are subsumed under globally accessible trans identities. But whose accessibility, understanding or terminology is prioritized in that process? Lost in translation, the flag does not look so rainbow or multicolored after all. A flattened global narrative cannot resolve these issues without local and grounded perspectives.

4c. Formation of queer safe spaces and sanctuaries

Yameen, a participant about to enroll in an undergraduate program, recounts his process of exploring queerness, noting the hostility and discomfort he had experienced in his immediate surroundings, at school, from family members and with his classmates who he at the time thought were friends. He was young and had not thought about his own sexuality deeply, but experienced others insulting him as effeminate, leaving him angry and confused. His friend Zafar, who is also a discussion participant mentioned getting probing questions about his sexuality, jokes and throwaway comments at his place of work. Both speak of finding local queer groups and persons online to be a source of comfort. However, they found it particularly important that these online meetups translate into meeting people and being part of groups in the physical world. The journey as he sees it has been interesting, evolving, therapeutic, full of pitfalls, reports Yameen. His first foray into online communities took him among ostensibly more liberal and gay friendly corners but they were also "Islamophobic and orientalist," which at the time, he could not parse out. But these groups, like his earlier school friends were left behind, none of whom he considers friends anymore. Instead, there are new friends, new communities, new networks of support.

Can queer sanctuaries online then truly be achieved? Forming queer sanctuaries on- or offline can be fraught and hazardous, where a wrong post, move or encounter can be disastrous. In Bangladesh, after the murder of Mannan, LGBTQI groups were forced to go underground and reconsider their online organizing strategy to prioritize community safety, when even before that available safe spaces were limited. Threats of violence or outing had always existed, but these only deepened after that incident, which meant a decimation of already limited LGBTQI organizing in the country. However, without minimizing these dangers and realities, this framing and categorization of a group as a monolith and their histories as "emerging" requires some reflection.

When a section of Islamists and state institutions exhibit hostility towards LGBTQI communities and attack and demean them or when there is a general climate of antagonism and bigotry, with regular accusations of LGBTQI people as "foreign" or "alien" or "aberrations," the historical context must be foregrounded, particularly, Section 377 of the British Indian Penal Code which criminalized homosexuality in the Indian subcontinent from 1860 onwards, marking same-sex desire as criminalized in society. That legal classification, and the philosophy on which it rests, also encoded the cultural and social milieu giving birth to dubious dichotomies of natural versus unnatural, normal versus abnormal, foreign versus tradition. It is Section 377, which Bangladesh still retains, that states: "Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal, shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine." As Jessica Hinchy argues about the Indian context,

> **"Rather than simply 'inheriting' colonial laws, the post-Independence Indian state has been shaped by Indian middle-class gender and sexual morality, which was constructed in the context of colonial rule, but was not simply a mimicry of colonial norms. In the late-19th-century colonial India, the term 'middle class' was increasingly used by educated men from high caste and Ashraf scribal communities, who were increasingly politically and socially dominant, to distinguish themselves from the old elite of Indian rulers and nobility. Middle-class notions of respectability combined Victorian morality, ambiguous notions of women's uplift and redefined notions of 'tradition.' 'Middle-class' Indian men also backed extremely harsh policing measures against the Hijra community."[lxx]**

Given geographic, cultural and historical congruities, this is largely applicable to Bangladesh as well. As exhibited in this colonial legacy of criminalization, gender and sexually variable communities in Bangladesh or South Asia cannot be “new” or “emerging.”

As already noted in the previous section, nor are these communities and identities only legible through the globally uniform classification of LGBTQI which itself operates as an imposing monoculture. The latter may be the most useful and accessible vocabulary and may provide a source of sustenance and emancipation for some (or many) – particularly a more urban, educated, middle class sensibility – but there are myriad other identifications and terms of reference which are not as easily understood or explained through an LGBTQI framing. For example, this framing does not fit the various forms of homoeroticism integral to the social and cultural lexicon here. Consider also, the current formal recognition of hijras under the gender rubric “third gender” with an even clunkier literal translation into Bangla as তৃতীয় লিঙ্গ (tritiyo linga), which reveals the limitation of borrowing and updating such classifications at the cost of vernacular practices and identities. Implicit here is still a gender binary and a classification and hierarchy along the lines of first to third, which itself can limit variable queer imaginaries.

In conjunction, and without minimizing the violence, the existence of these multiplicities means that the existence of sanctuaries and other mutually aiding welfare practices are also not “new.” In the hijra community, care and patronage networks coalesce around a matriarchal head, often called a “mother.” Specific experiences like Yameen’s may be new, but community and care are not, though they may be changing. One may find new friends, or find new ways of finding friends, but friendships are not new. These systems of support and care may form despite or because of violence and ostracization and may be shifting grounds constantly. They may be shaped by situations of class, politics, ethnicity or gender, may not be ideal and are failed by the system, but visible and invisible (to the dominant culture) practices of care and support formed through these crosscurrents have always been in existence. On the other hand, if finding communities online are plagued by concerns of privacy leaks, doxing, security breaches, physical spaces are also as much or more risk prone. There can be raids,

attacks, in addition to more banal limitations like resource constraints, exhaustion from daily life disincentivize inhabitants from organizing and meeting, where online spaces offer an alternative.

Communities forged through erotic desires and erotics of desire are not outside the deleterious effects of power and access. The matriarchal constellations in hijra communities often coincide with a guru-shishya (master-disciple) dynamic. Multiple sex workers in discussions said they turned to or relied on their shardarni (madam) who, aside from their peers, knew about their profession when their families did not. When asked about their future plans, each replied they wanted to become a madam themselves or viewed that as the only option available to them. Being at the margins does not mean there are not similar as well as different hierarchies and stratifications at play; in fact, the need for protection may sometime compound those stratifications. Other factors also contribute to power and access differentials including diminished opportunities for some within an already embattled community. Several interviewees, including trans men, femme, non-binary and cis women, expressed frustration about the influence and visibility of cis gay men in the community and the subsequent shrinking of space for other identities, due to a push for a NGOized version of gender, sexuality and activism. Over the last three decades, most social justice issues in Bangladesh have been framed and processed through overly-legalistic, technocratic models, an experience similar to other countries in the region and the world that have been subjected to a "development" model of progress. Writing about this phenomenon about the Indian feminist space Srila Roy notes:

> **"For the Indian feminists, this problem is articulated as one of donor dependence, that is NGOs are increasingly dependent on external donors who may not necessarily be pro-woman or even pro-people, and in whose hands any original radical agenda is likely to be domesticated if not depoliticized. While the structural dependency of NGOs in the South on international donor organizations (the World Bank and the IMF) has been noted, less has been said of their dependence of the state that not only spearheads the socio-economic transitions that feminists find damaging such as neoliberal economic policies but also limits the possibility of outright critique and opposition."**[lxxi]

Discussing what Lamia Karim characterizes the "NGO paradigm" in Bangladesh, Elora Halim Chowdhury argues that "these linkages shape the kinds of conversations that can emerge in public and inhibit rigorous critiques of western and elite development and ideology."[lxxii] But these relationships and their resulting effects are hardly static as Karim has further shown how NGOs in Bangladesh are increasingly forced to play even more of a docile and cautious role vis a vis the state.[lxxiii] In exploring alternate movement building strategies, an understanding of how organizing and activist spaces are structurally limited can lead to those alternatives. Amid these limitations, mutually supportive or mutual aid networks form through social networks, word-of-mouth, in response to specific circumstances and as coping mechanisms, simply because being there for each other is how these communities survive or sustain each other.

Despite this, participants acutely felt the need for more support systems and expressed dissatisfaction and anger at what was or was not available. This was especially felt among LGBTQI participants, and other students and youth, who complained about the lack or weaknesses of systems of expert support for their emotional and physical wellbeing, the need for legal aid and the ignorance and hostility of law enforcement agencies that detracted them from turning to these places in times of need. Options were further limited by questions of affordability and accessibility. Instead, participants described that they relied on each other, friends and in some cases family. For Lubna, through her ordeal of harassment over almost two years that her family was dragged into, she solidified a more robust relationship with her father in a process that took time, effort and had setbacks. But not everybody can count on a similar experience.

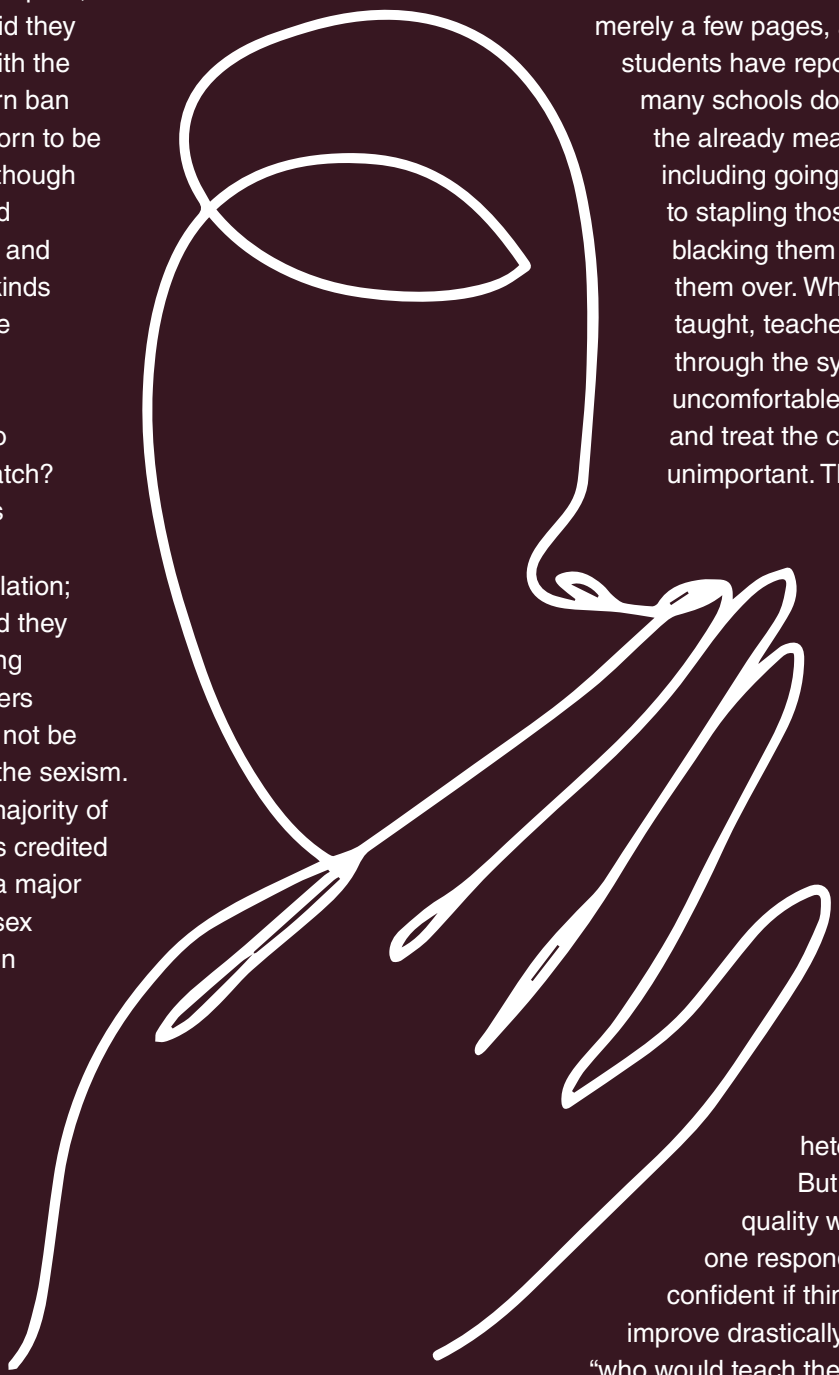
As few other participants noted, many lacked friends or family to seek support from, and did not know where to look for the supportive networks that others like Yameen had found. Friends who acted as caregivers and support networks also described feeling drained. Participants shared examples of counselling experts who berated patients and pushed heteronormative ideas of family, and law enforcement members who immediately linked sexual expression with illicit behavior or criminality or enforced patriarchal norms in their interactions with women and non-binary people. "We rely on our friend lists" or "I've a selected group of friends" echoed many of the respondents from sex workers to queer participants, emphasizing the necessity of trusted and personal informal networks in the absence of many formal ones. In thinking about support networks, however, it is important to not idealize one over the other or to supplant one with the other: An impersonal, supposedly professional network is not necessarily always better than the informal ones, and bias around formalization and who and what counts as expertise, an expert and systems built around that also need further examination. Making support systems more multifarious, more resourceful, easier to access, with less policing and shifting attitudes towards sexual expression in order to prioritize care and consent should be the task at hand.

In imagining queer sanctuaries, a reevaluation of here and now must accompany visions of the future. If there are sanctuaries, what does that say about a structure that necessitates refuge? Shall their obsolescence be a desirable outcome then? And if refuge is a necessary condition for anyone, what kind of refuge shall that be? Would that result from mainstreaming of gender in development parlance, a cooptation within existing systems or because we have managed to replace that order with multiple queer ones? In politics, there is a tendency to denigrate what is fanciful as unrealistic, but upending the stakes of the rational – an audacious unrealism – may just be what is needed here. A treatise for the future can include an "insistence on the transformative force of eros as an experimental practice aimed at making another everyday life." including "queer virtuosity [that] might appear irrational from the point view of straight time."[lxxiv] Also of relevance here is the feminist activist Houria Bouteldja's apt reminder: "I don't necessarily consider progress to be progressive but sometimes, even often, it is regressive."[lxxv] Even considering the truly newer opportunities such as finding online spaces, an unexamined forward motion blind to a multitude of other constellations is to fall trap to that notion of progress as inherently good. For example, formation of non-nuclear, matriarchal hijra families form in reaction to social marginalization, but they are also a challenge to patriarchal nuclear families, especially when we consider nuclear families were not the norm in much of South Asia until recently. To cast any vernacular, indigenous practices as backward or ignore that much of what counts as tradition has a specific political, historical (e.g. colonial, nationalist) and exclusionary dimension is to fall trap to that notion of progress as inherently good; nor can there be a sclerotic understanding of tradition (e.g. family values) used as an excuse and justification for discrimination and violence.

4d. There is no talk about sex, but there is talk about sex

"No roads, no electricity, no mobile signal," is how Shailen described his village in one of the most remote parts of Bangladesh in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, an experience echoed by another interviewee also from the region. Both of them went to boarding schools but did not start using the internet heavily until they arrived in Dhaka. But in the absence of any comprehensive sex education in Bangladesh and a general climate which can be best encapsulated with *there is no talk about sex, but there is talk about sex,* most regardless of geographic location resort to a kind of DIY method, feeling their way through it. An overwhelming number of those interviewed credited porn in facilitating their sexual awakening and education, in addition to talking to friends. Shailen however did not feel comfortable talking

about “personal” interests with friends, so his source of education was for the most part from watching porn. Several sex workers mentioned mobile recharge, photocopying and compose shops where they could download music and video, including porn. Asked specifically about porn, respondents said they did not agree with the government porn ban as they found porn to be instructional, although they also shared their discomfort and distaste at the kinds of porn available terming most of the content as misogynistic. So why did they watch? Most responses ranged from technique to titillation; a few mentioned they stopped watching and several others felt confident to not be conditioned by the sexism. Porn or not, a majority of the respondents credited the internet as a major source of their sex education. “Often civil society is not in step with society,” said a participant, clarifying how overwhelmingly any effort to deal with questions of sexuality meant avoidance and covert exploration, as criminalization was rife. The participant wondered whether this kind of approach of trying to wish sex away has in fact done more harm than good.



On paper there is a government mandated sex education curriculum in Bangladesh but in practice the state of instruction and quality of the curriculum are both low. It is merely a few pages, and many students have reported that many schools do not teach the already meager syllabus, including going so far as to stapling those pages, blacking them out or skipping them over. When they are taught, teachers speed through the syllabus, are uncomfortable and flippant and treat the curriculum as unimportant. The curriculum itself is reductively biological and overly heteronormative. But even if the quality were to improve, one respondent was not confident if things would improve drastically, because, “who would teach the syllabus? The teacher quality is still so abysmal and sometimes parents are resistant and complained to schools about exposing their children to sex.” Many quipped their parents and families also needed sex education to be comfortable about talking about sex: “I am more

concerned about my parents and others of that mindset who are outside of this bubble and find all of this unthinkable, would we ever reach them? And how would we do that?"

Some discussants felt that that obstacle could perhaps be surmounted with small steps, like quality sex education, but one respondent disagreed saying, if "basic" sex education meant it was still within the heteronormative framework, she did not think that would be much of an improvement. She stressed that sex education without including queerness or non-binary gender expressions into it would be pointless. Another participant noted, "policy change isn't easy when সংস্কার is there" (সংস্কার, transliterated to shangshkar, can be loosely translated here to mean custom; curiously shangshkar also means reform). Yet customs are not ahistorical or fixed – understanding these historical, political, social trajectories is also crucial to changing them.

Prevailing social taboos and ostensible public bans on sexuality have not stopped anyone from engaging in or looking for sex, but have instead produced an environment where a patriarchal, heteronormative status quo is firmly maintained. For many of the respondents, the internet offered an avenue for sexual exploration – but still an imperfect avenue since it was also the source of a lot of harassment they encountered and cause for stress. While online spaces did offer connection, escape and education, the internet could not magically transform into a compassionate space without open conversations on sexuality and sexual expression writ large.

4e. Allied interventions

Who speaks for whom is a pertinent question for any political project and movement. Although the weaknesses of uninformed solidarity and encroaching allies are now well established, interviews and discussions with participants revealed some prevailing concerns. Uninterrogated prerogatives, particular incentives of social media posturing and self-aggrandizement and predatory quests of "truth" and "knowledge" propelled by depoliticized empowerment mantras often create more obstacles for meaningful social change than facilitating them. This was however felt differently among sex workers and LGBTQI participants which necessitates some exploration.

By and large, sex workers interviewed welcomed allies but voiced disappointment that help and advocacy from these allies failed to change the conversation around sex work in Bangladesh. Listing several documentary and health projects they had been part of, sex worker interviewees said they were happy to work with experts which they thought gave them recognition, because partnerships could be currency. If a sex worker was charged, having a legal advocacy group or expert in their corner helped, adding that in most cases however it would be their peers, other sex workers trained to be liaisons, who were the first line of defense to try to release detained sex workers without an arrest. Similarly helpful and also resulting from NGO partnerships were clinics staffed by health aides (certified but without a medical degree) where they could get health services, while at traditional medical facilities sex workers could not discuss their sexual history openly. Having the support of these networks were buffers, but they also highlighted that sex workers had been fighting for their own cause and there needed to be wider support. Due to fear of online attacks, representatives of the sex worker organization described that they maintained a lighter online presence – they did not have a website, Facebook page had cursory information, contact information not prominently displayed – and vetted local partners very carefully as a protective measure to not attract too much attention in Bangladesh.

Movements rely on support and solidarity, that is a given, but the distinction with LGBTQI participants was that there was more ambivalence about allies and the nature of solidarity, tensions that were especially noteworthy given the differences in class and educational backgrounds of the interviewees between the two groups. The more urban middle-

class LGBTQI participants and their exposure to prevailing discourses on limits of solidarity perhaps played a part in that ambivalence. Several discussants particularly mentioned online activism and posturing in this context, where for example, posts and shares jeopardized safety of individuals by leaving a public trail for locating queer networks or when LGBTQI people and organizations were not consulted for work done in their name. In another specific example, a self-professed supporter of LGBTQI rights based outside the country posted social media announcements for a call for an online event to showcase queer achievements in Bangladesh. Activists questioned the merit of an intervention called without local input that could put them at risk. Local networks and activists were involved in building and rethinking safe spaces and networks without the burden of visibility or with visibility on their own terms and time and participants often found these cavalier interventions to be unhelpful. Expressing dissatisfaction about such activism removed from local concerns and efforts, they wondered who that kind of online performance really helped!

A parallel here is when, during the protests last year, student protesters cautioned journalists about being responsible with spreading images online that risked implicating activists, though the student protestors did still rely on tactical social and traditional media use. Prioritizing well-being and safety, listening to the concerns of individuals on the ground and being preceptive to ethical judgements are all necessary pre-conditions here – especially when powerful institutions and governments invoke well-being and safety contrarily to restrict dissent and protests, including through internet shutdowns and content filtering. Public safety, conflated with protection of state interests, was the Bangladesh government's stated reason when it announced a Facebook monitoring scheme that, according to media reports, allows them to "monitor, block or filter online contents, including those on social media."[lxxvi] Although reliable data on internet shutdowns and slowdowns is not easily available, it is a common experience in Bangladesh: According to Access Now, there were five incidents of government ordered internet shutdowns in 2018 and these shutdowns usually affect almost 80 percent of the country.[lxxvii] Bangladesh was also one of eight countries affected by "bandwidth throttling" and one of 13 where at least one social media platform was blocked in 2018.[lxxviii] But public safety is not only a matter of semantics and a blanket usage should not blind us to the fact that it is used to preserve the status quo of the powerful, and not when communities and individuals face violence and threats from the powerful. Notions of solidarity, whether off- or online, are co-constitutive and must account for power and positionality and be aware of the risks and potential for abuse, particularly when speaking for others masquerades as support thus infringing on rather than helping movement building. Any kind of solidarity, any offer of alliances and any measure of aid must thus contend with whether they are community directed, must account for intra-group hierarchies and must grapple with possibilities of co-option, especially when powerful institutions likes the state use the same cover of safety to do the opposite.

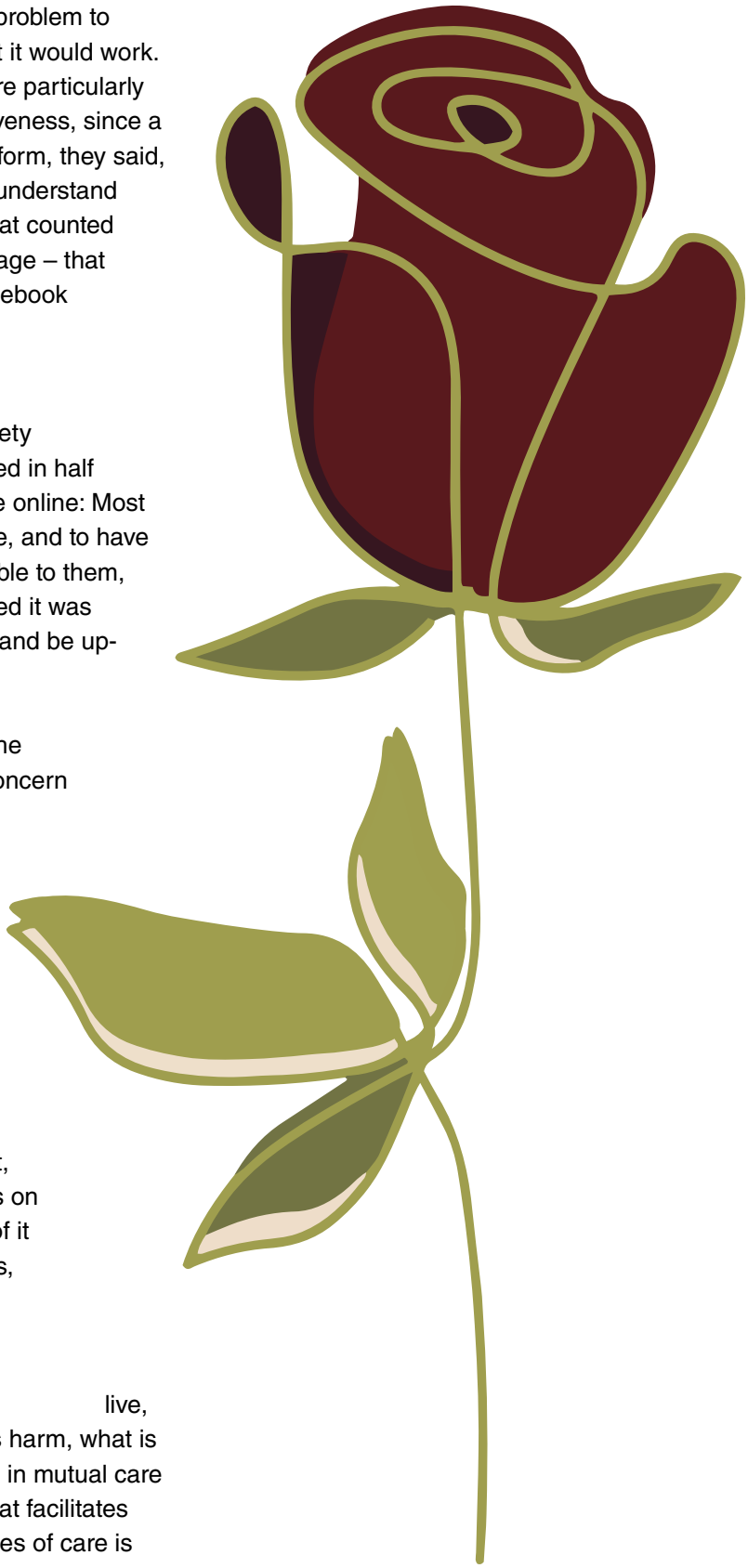
4f. Boundary setting

Arose for a picture and a man's name, her brother's, for an identity, is how Saima, a sex worker, manages her Facebook account for clients and impromptu exchanges with strangers. For family she has a separate Facebook, IDed to separate phone numbers. She also uses separate phones for clients and family. Most cellphone users in Bangladesh have multiple SIMs and most Facebook users here use their phone numbers to log in. Saima however did not view her "fake" profile as catfishing because this was just one of many protective measures she and fellow sex workers followed online; besides, she said her clients knew who she was and that using a fake profile or a pseudonym did not mean she was misleading the clients. In fact, it was necessary because she and her colleagues did not want to be harassed or stalked online and wanted to protect both their and

client confidentiality. She and other sex workers I spoke to felt that being a woman online meant people took liberty with lewd comments, but more importantly they did not want to be traced and connected to their profession publicly and photographs risked that. Each of the sex workers interviewed were also meticulous about deleting chat and call histories regularly and ensuring mobile phones were turned off during physical client sessions. With calls, several said they spoke to clients normally during introductory sessions, but they camouflaged their faces during video calls whether they were sexual or not. Other participants spoke of using encrypted services, timed autodeletes, and generally "not using Facebook" to guard against unwanted encroachments and safety risks. A major concern for almost all participants, including sex workers, LGBTQI identified persons, students and youth, was screenshots: They feared, and felt helpless to combat compromising text and/or images screenshotted and then distributed without their consent. They were concerned there were no technological fixes – what use is a notification if the deed is already done, noted one public university student – so they relied on age-old methods like trust, judgement and screening people when interacting with them. They otherwise used blocking, unfollowing, unfriending offending parties, using available "tech fixes," and where possible employed personal interventions like talking to harassers, requesting friends to speak to them or using threat of legal or other disciplinary actions. Bangladesh has a revenge porn law, but few interviewees knew about it. Even if they were aware, most were unwilling to step into that kind of legal quagmire which they viewed as more trouble. Most of them perceived legal recourse as more emotionally, physically and financially draining than worth it, particularly given a hostile judicial and administrative system, especially when that risked unwanted exposure for sex workers and LGBTQI individuals, although other women cited risks of reputation and reprisal as well. In any case, screenshot concerns were not always sexual: Any incriminating texts, visuals or memes could get them in trouble with the authorities. An indigenous participant pointed out how they had to be vigilant against Bengali settlers creating hoax Facebook accounts with "Chakma names" or other indigenous identities to post inflammatory materials on social media contributing to ethnic tension and violence.

Most participants harbored no illusions about safety on the internet; it was after all a place they had to be and had to learn how to balance and navigate. Some even found it useful, but it was rife with dangers at every corner. "All of us have some kind of digital footprint," voiced several participants – it was a matter of learning to manage that. Tarana, a student participant, found it so cumbersome and injurious to her mental health, even when just scrolling through other people's comments especially around "festivals or special occasions" – though she added everything was an occasion on the internet, including games and elections – that she had to disengage. As Jacqueline Rose observes about the internet "whose secular omniscience colonizes every pore of your being. As Karl Kraus famously pronounced of psychoanalysis, the remedy or drug might best be understood as the disease it purports to cure,"[lxxix] Tarana needed to step away. At the time of the interview, Polly, a sex worker, was trying to figure out how to report or shut down a fake Facebook profile someone made to damage her reputation; though she had suspects, she was not certain about who it was

and did not know how to report the problem. Several other participants had experienced fake profiles or knew someone else who did, but even if they knew how to report a problem to Facebook, they were not confident it would work. With online harassments, they were particularly resigned about Facebook's effectiveness, since a lot of it was in Bangla and the platform, they said, simply was not adept or willing to understand and regulate the finer points of what counted as threats and insults in the language – that would require a cultural acuity Facebook was not willing to invest in and participants were not sure they trusted Facebook with it to begin with. When asked about digital safety measures, participants were divided in half about their grasp of how to be safe online: Most wanted opportunities to learn more, and to have easily accessible resources available to them, but a few very justifiably commented it was exhausting to be always on guard and be up-to-date on a surfeit of information.



Perhaps the best illustration of the ambiguity of being online was a concern expressed by almost all interviewees who when talking about security risks said they were not only concerned about themselves but also about their contact lists on various platforms, a concern especially magnified for sex workers and LGBTQI groups, but given crackdowns on any kind of dissent, felt by all. The ease of connections on the internet, the entwined nature of it all and its possibilities and hazards, are also its greatest weapon. If disturbing internet trends are inevitably growing, yet being online is essential to how we live, then understanding what mitigates harm, what is pleasurable and helpful, what aids in mutual care and support in that space, and what facilitates building and rebuilding these spaces of care is what should be our charge going forward.

CONCLUSION

CONCLUSION

An abiding discomfort pervades public and private narratives about sexuality and sexual agency, the most common fallout is to largely scrub discussions on them from our surroundings. Puerile misgivings about sex paradoxically create both a vacuum – barring any discussion on sex – and a space for the existing state of things – patriarchal, heteronormative, capitalist – to persist. But any limits or boundaries placed on variable gender expression and sexuality are also susceptible to breaches; this paper outlines where and how those fractures and fissures are happening. To reiterate once again, *there is no talk about sex, but there is talk about sex.* It is those subversions, those sparkles of creative and organizing energy are where our attention should turn to. This paper is an exploratory effort and there are opportunities for further investigation into the issues raised here including deeper analysis of online communities, their spillover into physical spaces, network effects on social and private lives due to digital activities. This then is an initial foray into further research and programmatic work around those digital formations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

06. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are from the perspective of grassroots interventions. Even changes to policy and legal frameworks require fundamental re-examination of issues of gender, sexuality, morality, rights, protection, consent, privacy and safety without which meaningful changes are not possible. Take for example the revocation of section 377 of the 1860 penal code and decriminalization of homosexuality along with decriminalization of sex work. There is no disagreement among LGBTQI activists about revocation of 377 but there are ongoing discussions about timing and whether open advocacy could jeopardize lives – most felt now was not the time and that their energies were better served devoting to intra- and inter-community alliances and other urgent strategies such as building support networks, creating and finding resources to help LGBTQI people at risk. And although sex work is legalized in Bangladesh, an intricate web of still too many legal obstacles and social ostracization entrap sex workers in a cycle of abuse and violence. But simply removing legal bans will not be enough, as we see in the failure of formal recognition of hijras to stem systematic violence and marginalization. Whether sex workers, LGBTQI individuals, women or students interviewed for this paper, changing or transforming the online space meant also transforming underlying assumptions about legality, morality, sexuality, agency and consent in order to build towards spaces and systems of care.

Divided into three sections, the following recommendations are designed to feed into each other, and are steps that can be implemented in the short to medium term.

Organized spaces:

1. Organize targeted, on-the-ground listening sessions and teach-ins at safe spaces, eschewing a hierarchical model to discuss gender, sexuality, desire, consent and safety where conversations can delve into particulars of sexual expression.

2. Identify and facilitate smaller but existing community building efforts on gender and sexual expression that are outside of the well-funded network of NGOs.

Teaching tools:

3. Develop a diverse repository and curriculum for selected themes from above for students, educators, activists and others. The materials should integrate feminist and queer principles, be linguistically diverse, promote class and cultural awareness.

4. Develop easily accessible tools on sexual expression and online behavior for educational institutions, advocacy organizations, grassroots groups. Similar to above, these tools should also be diverse.

5. Produce community-driven guidelines, checklists and standards for the media, policymakers and other legal and administrative professionals.

Advocacy:

6. Prepare grassroots led legislative analysis, legal briefs, media advisories on digital safety and sexual expression.

ANNEX I

A Timeline of Relevant Laws

1813
Regulation of Sati bill in 1813.

1813
Sati Abolishment Act was finally passed in 1829.

1813
Hindu Widows Remarriage Act of 1856 - The act was passed to assure a life for the child-widows after the death of their husbands rather than having them still remain with their in-laws where they would be subjected to potential abuse, especially the widows without children.

1860
Soliciting to sell sex is illegal under Section 290 of the Penal Code (1860) and various local laws. Buying sex is not illegal.

1860
The punishment of crime regulated by the Penal Code of 1860 clearly in its sections from 312 to 316, mentions punishment of causing miscarriage, causing miscarriage without women's consent and death caused by the act done with intention to cause miscarriage. Also, the sections make no exception, even for women from being criminally liable for performing miscarriages on themselves. According to the code, abortion is only allowed, in case the pregnant women's lives are at stake.

1860
Act XLV of Penal Code (1860), Section 317: "Whoever voluntary has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with man, woman, or animal, shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to 10 years, and shall also be liable to fine".

1860
Penal Code, 1860 (Act XLV), Section 375: definition of rape does not criminalise marital rape unless the spouse is under 13, as that is the age of consent for married adolescents.

1860
Section 377 of the Penal Code 1860 forbids anal or oral sex, regardless of the gender and sexual orientation of the participants.

1869
Both Christian spouses are entitled to dissolve their marriage through Court under the provision dealt in the Divorce Act, 1869. According to the Divorce Act, either spouse may sue for restitution of conjugal rights.

1872
1872 Special Marriage Act- There were many cases documented of British men being intrigued by local women but until the law was passed there was no legitimate manner in which the marriage of a local woman and British man would have been recognized. It also provides for civil marriages in Bangladesh.

1872
1872 Christian Marriage Act regulates the legal marriage of Christians in the region.

1813

Section 155(4) of the Evidence Act 1872 allows for evidence related to a rape victim's character and past sexual history to be admissible in Court in rape trials.

1872

1872 Christian Marriage Act regulates the legal marriage of Christians in the region.

1874

In 1874 the Married Woman's Right to Property Act - Recognized as earning citizens, women should be able to claim that their earnings were their property.

1890

The Guardian and Wards Act, 1890 - The court or appointed authority has the ability to decide the guardian of a child by appointing one or removing another guardian.

1891

Age of Consent Act of 1891 considered sexual intercourse with a girl below twelve years of age as statutory rape.

1924

The Cantonments Act, 1924 (Act No. II) - Whoever in a cantonment loiters for the purpose of prostitution or importunes any person to the commission of sexual immorality, shall be punishable with imprisonment or fine, or both.

1925

The Succession Act 1925 - By marriage a woman acquires the domicile of her husband, if she had not the same domicile before. It also states the division of a female intestate's property among her widower and children.

1928

The Hindu Inheritance (Removal of Disabilities) Act 1928 - The Act specifies that persons who are diseased, deformed or physically or mentally handicapped cannot be disqualified from their right to own or share joint-family property unless the law specifies otherwise. This Act essentially abolishes the ancient Hindu legal practice that those who are handicapped are ineligible to inherit property from their family.

1929

The Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929 have fixed the eligibility age to contract marriage as 21 years for men and 18 years for women.

1933

Keeping a brothel or allowing premises to be used as a brothel, living on the earnings of prostitution and procuring a female for the purpose of prostitution are criminalized by the Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act, 1933.

1937

Hindu Women's Rights to Property Act 1937 - a Hindu widow has the right to claim partition in their husband's property and get limited interest, with conditions and limitations, which entitles them to hold the property during her lifetime but not sell or transfer (known as Hindu woman's estate).

1937

The inheritance of property for Muslim women in Bangladesh is governed by the Muslim Personal Law (Sharia) Application Act of 1937, which is itself based on Hanafi law, one of the four legal schools recognized by the Sunnis, who account for the large majority of Muslims in Bangladesh.

1939

Maternity Benefit Act, 1939 (Bengal Act No. 4 of 1939) - "Prohibits employment of a woman worker 6 weeks before delivery and 6 weeks after. If a woman has been employed for nine months before the day of delivery, she shall be entitled to maternity benefit. Prohibits dismissal of a woman worker during maternity leave."

1939

Dissolution of Muslim Marriages Act of 1939 prevents Muslim women from converting to other religions to gain grounds for divorce, which is otherwise denied to them.

1946

There is no scope for a Hindu married woman to divorce or marry another person, due to Section 2 of The Hindu Married Women's Separation And Maintenance Act, 1946.

1948

Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 1948; Bangladesh was then East Pakistan.

1951

Bangladesh is a signatory of the Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others (1951).

1961

Muslim Family Laws Ordinance of 1961 - aims to restrict polygamy by imposing procedural conditions. The law requires a husband to treat all his wives equitably and to seek the permission of a local arbitration council to take multiple wives, indicating to the council whether the previous wife or wives consented to the subsequent marriage. It also lays down the procedure for execution of divorce which is mutatis mutandis applicable for all forms of dissolution of marriage.

1972

The 1972 Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh:
In Part 2: Fundamental Principles of State Policy, participation of women in all spheres of national life, is included under 'Equality of Opportunity.'
Part 3: Fundamental Rights include right to property, equality before law and 'Freedom of thought and conscience, and of speech'. Article 28 states that the state cannot discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of sex. No one can be subjected to any liability, restriction or condition with regard to access to any public place. Article 28(2): "Women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of the State and of public life." And Article 29 details 'equality of opportunity in public employment'. Also, rights of minority groups have been protected by Article 41, which reiterates that religions may be practiced in peace and harmony (subject to law, public order and morality).

1974

A divorce is required to be registered under Section 6 of The Muslim Marriage and Dissolution of Marriage (Registration) Act, 1974.

1976

The Dhaka Metropolitan Police Ordinance Act, 1976 (Ordinance No. III of 1976)
Section 74: Any person who in any street or public place or within sight of, and in such manner as to be seen or heard from, any street or public place, whether from within any house or building or not (a) by words, gestures, or indecent personal exposure attracts or endeavors to attract attention for the purposes of prostitution ; or (b) solicits or molests any person for the purposes of prostitution.
Section 76 penalizes any person who 'willfully and indecently exposes his person in any street or public place within sight of, and in such manner as may be seen by, any woman, whether from within any house or building or not, or willfully presses or obstructs any woman in a street or public place or insults or annoys any woman by using indecent language or making indecent sounds, gestures, or remarks in any street or public place.

1976

The Bangladesh National Population Policy tried, and failed, to legalize abortion, in 1976.

1979

As part of the family planning program in Bangladesh since 1979, menstrual regulation has been allowing access to early abortion without medical assistance or legal approval.

1983

Cruelty to Women (Deterrent Punishment) Act of 1983: Also known as the Deterrent Punishment Act, it reiterated certain offences that were first defined in the Penal Code of 1960, and strengthened the penalties for infraction. The act made the rape, sexual exploitation for gain, abduction, kidnapping or attempt to cause the death of a woman, offences subject to life imprisonment or death.

1984

Bangladesh Women's Rehabilitation and Welfare Foundation (Repeal) Ordinance, 1984

1988

The Cruelty against Women (Deterrent Punishment) (Amendment) Act, 1988

1991

The National Women's Organization Act, 1991 - The government establishes a statutory organization, that "shall have perpetual succession and a common seal and shall have power, subject to this Ordinance and rules, to acquire, to own or to transfer property, whether movable or immovable, and cases may be filed by or against it." They seek to support women in all fields of the national life, among other functions.

1986

The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1980: Dowry Prohibition (Amendment) Ordinance, 1982; and Dowry Prohibition (Amendment) Ordinance, 1986.

1984

Bangladesh acceded to CEDAW [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women] in 1984 with reservations. In 1997, the Government had partially lifted reservations from Article 13 (a) and 16(f). However, they have not ratified CEDAW in full and has retained reservations to Article 2 [principle of non-discrimination and elimination of discrimination against women] and Article 16 (1)(c) [elimination of discrimination against women in all matters relating to marriage and family relations, in particular the same rights and responsibilities during marriage and its dissolution].

1985

Family Courts Ordinance 1985 provides a forum for all communities to seek legal redress in the wake of disputes relating to dissolution of marriage, dower, maintenance, restitution of conjugal rights and guardianship of children. A system of family courts at the upazila (county) level is set up, providing for the legal redress of cases involving marriage, divorce, dowry and the maintenance, custody and guardianship of children.

1990

Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) 1990: Article 13 - "The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice." Bangladesh has reservations regarding Article 14(1) - the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion and Article 21 - the adoption of a child. Article 29 states that "States Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to "(d)The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin"

1992

1992 Anti-Terrorism Ordinance, which provides stiff penalties for the abduction or harassment of women, among other offences.

1993

Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) is a signatory to the "Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1993)"

1995

The Oppression of Women and Children (Special Enactment) Act, 1995 - outlines penalty for rape, attempts to cause death or causing hurt in or committing rape, for trafficking etc. in women, for abducting any woman for using her in unlawful or immoral etc. activities, for causing death, etc. for dowry, and for trafficking in children.

1997

Under the Local Government Act, 1997, one-third of the local Government seats of members/councilors were reserved for women to be elected by direct vote of people.

1998

National Action Plan for Women's Advancement was adopted in 1998 projecting the strategy of mainstreaming gender in all Governmental policies by the sectoral Ministries.

2000

2000, the High Court Division declared prostitution legal as long as the brothel or red light areas are properly licensed in a judgment.

2000

Bangladesh ratified, with reservations, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), in 2000. The rights protected under ICCPR include Article 22 – Right to freedom of association with others, Article 23 – Right to marry, Article 26 – Equality before the law, Article 27 - Minority Protection, etc.

2000

Bangladesh ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography in 2000.

2000

The age of consent was 14 years in the Prevention of Oppression Against Women and Children Act or Nari O Shishu Nirjatan Daman Ain 2000. The 2003 amendment mentions that sexual intercourse with a girl below 16 years of age, with or without her consent, will be considered as statutory rape. Section 9(a) penalizes causing or abetting suicide of a woman. Section 10 penalizes 'sexual oppression' including any indecent gesture, while Section 14 penalizes the publication in the media of the identity of a victim of any offence under the Act.

2001

Section 69 of the Bangladesh Telecommunication Control Act, 2001 penalizes the sending of any obscene or indecent message. Section 70 covers causing annoyance or inconvenience to someone through telephone calls.

2002

Acid Crime Control Act 2002 - control the import, production, transportation, sale and use of acid, prevent misuse of acid as corrosive inflammatory substance and provide treatment to victims of acid violence, rehabilitate them and provide legal assistance. And the Acid Offence Prevention Act 2002 was enacted to control acid crimes.

2006

Section 57 of the Information Communication Technology Act 2006 penalizes publishing or transmitting any fake, obscene or defamatory information in electronic form. [Section 57 replaced with the Digital Security Act 2018.]

2006

Section 87 under the 'Special Provisions Regarding Health, Health Rules and Safety' of the Bangladesh Labor Act 2006 equals women with teenagers and prevents employment of women in certain activities related to handling of dangerous machineries. The revised Bangladesh Labor Act, 2006 provides for equal pay for equal work, maternity leave, etc.

2006

In 2006, the Ministry of Water Resources has adopted a Gender Equity Strategy and Gender Action Plan from 2006-2011 that included the issue of ensuring water availability for rural women and women participation in water resources management.

2006

Under the supervision of Ministry of Labor and Employment, the UNFPA financed the project named "Promoting Gender Equality and Preventing Violence against Women at Workplace", implemented by ILO.

2008

The Representation of People's Order 2008 provided for two elected Vice-Chairman, one of which must be a woman. And further recommends that political parties nominate 33% women to contest directly in parliamentary elections.

2008

Caretaker Government established National Women's Development Policy (2008) with the aim of amending existing laws and enacting new laws on the basis of gender equality.

2008

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and its Optional Protocol came into 2008. Some of the guiding principles that underlie the convention are 'full and effective participation and inclusion in society', 'respect for difference and acceptance of persons with disabilities as part of human diversity and humanity, equality of opportunity, accessibility' and 'equality between men and women'. Article 8 stresses the aim to combat stereotypes, prejudices and harmful practices relating to persons with disabilities, including those based on sex and age, in all areas of life. And Article 27 aims to "protect the rights of persons with disabilities, on an equal basis with others, to just and favorable conditions of work, including equal opportunities and equal remuneration for work of equal value, safe and healthy working conditions, including protection from harassment, and the redress of grievances" The Optional Protocol is based on the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (2000).

2009

Amending Section 5 of the Citizenship Law of 1951, Bangladesh Parliament enacted Citizenship Amendment Act, 2009 giving Bangladeshi woman the right to transmit her citizenship to her children.

2009

Right to Information Act 2009 makes provisions for ensuring free flow of information and people's right to information transparency and accountability.

2009

The Election Commission (EC) added 'Hijra' as 'gender identity' by amending the Voter List Act 2009 and the Voter List Regulations 2012.

2009

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2010

Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act 2010 - it specifies and differentiates between "physical abuse, psychological abuse, sexual abuse or economic abuse," and details the procedure for domestic violence crimes.

2012

Pornography Control Act, 2012 - Section 8(i) penalizes manufacturing pornography, agreeing to supply participants for the purpose of producing pornography or forcing them to participate in production. Section 8(ii) penalizes harming a person's social status, blackmailing or inflicting emotional abuse on a person by means of pornography. [e.g. revenge pornography].

2012

Registration of marriages solemnized under Hindu law was not possible up until the passing of the Hindu Marriage Registration Act, 2012. Amended in 2013, registration is discretionary, i.e. marriage will be considered valid even if it is not registered.

2012

In the National Labor Policy, 2012, provisions have been made to address wage discrimination along with assurance of equal wages and rights for women workers.

2013

In order to update the Bangladesh Labor Act, 2006 the Bangladesh Labor (Amendment) Act, 2013 has been enacted. Provisions for ensuring maternity welfare facilities for female workers and maintaining proper working environment were made.

2013

The government of Bangladesh acknowledging the Hijra as third gender in 11th November 2013, through a gazette.

2013

Cybercrime is tried before the Cyber Crimes Tribunal, established under Section 68 of the ICT (Amendment) Act 2013.

2013

Children Act 2013 - Clause No. 3.6.6 prohibits showing pictures of women and children who are victims of rape and adultery. And Clause 5.1.3 prohibits circulation of information which is confidential or defamatory to any person.

2014

National Broadcast Policy 2014 - Section 81 strictly prohibits publication of any news report, photo or information that is contrary to the best interests of children in conflict with law or in contact with law in any kind of media, print, electronic or the internet.

2015

Ministry of Labor and Employment enacted the "Domestic Worker's Protection & Welfare Policy 2015" by following the ILO convention on domestic workers in order to ensure their welfare and rights.

2017

The Cabinet approved draft of "National Online Mass Media Policy 2017" that suggested the National Broadcast Commission to facilitate operations of online mass media.

2017

Repealing the 1929 Act of the same title, Child Marriage Restraint Act 2017 was passed by Parliament with a special provision that allows child marriage, as in, before the minors reach the statutory age limit in some exceptional cases. In Section 19, a child marriage would not be considered an offense if it was “in the best interests of the minor.”

2018

Digital Security Act 2018 - Section 22: Digital or Electronic Forgery (1) If any person commits forgery by means of any digital or electronic medium then that is an offense. Section 25: Publishing, sending of offensive, false or fear inducing data-information, etc. (1) If any person on any website or through any digital medium, intentionally or knowingly, sends, publishes or propagates offensive or fear inducing information with the intention to annoy, insult, humiliate someone.

2018

Under the proposed Broadcast Act 2018, if anyone broadcasts false or confusing information in a discussion program or anything against the spirit and principles of the Liberation War or against the state, they will be penalized. According to the draft, a commission will be formed with the power to issue licenses to broadcasting media outlets and news portals and outline a set of standards for them.

The timeline was prepared by
Ahana Raihan.

ANNEX II

EROTICS SOUTH ASIA: BANGLADESH FOCUS GROUP DETAILS

Background
"Expanding EROTICS network in South Asia, Bangladesh" is a two-year project as part of Association for Progressive Communications (APC)'s regional program to build stronger alliances around digital rights and sexual expression. This particular project in Bangladesh will involve two phases, the first of which ends in July 2019 (with the possibility of extension until mid-August 2019). For this portion of the project, the outcome is a background report on sexual expression and digital rights in Bangladesh. As part of this background and exploratory research, the research team is organizing a series of focus group discussions (FGDs) with select and targeted groups.

FGD outline
We plan to hold 5-6 sessions each with 6 to 8 participants for each session. We anticipate the sessions to last for approximately 4.5 hours with the following breakdown: 2 hours of open discussions, 30 minutes break, and 2 hours of semi-structured discussions. The venue details will be shared with confirmed participants ahead of each session. Refreshments will be provided.

Desired goals
Broadly speaking, for each session we hope to get an understanding of the following: Participant perspectives on sexual rights and expression as the participants understand them; the contours of sexual expression off and online as they view it, experience it, think about it; what works, what doesn't; how they navigate these spaces (in interpersonal as well as structural terms); what is exciting about online (with spillover to offline and vice versa) spaces and what's dangerous, challenging; what does an ideal or improved space looks like and steps to achieve that.

Informed consent, privacy, safety, safe space, and stakes of participation
Privacy and safety of the participants are priorities for the research team. We also want participation on the basis of informed consent and understand that it is a dynamic process. No verifiable information will be gathered or disclosed. We also do not view participants as merely subjects, but a community we are entering into a partnership with and part of subsequent network building efforts. And our overall goal of this project is that its outcomes reflect the desires of this community of participants as we think about a more equitable Internet.

Leading questions
These questions are for guiding the conversation only and may change given the specific flow of a particular FGD. We will also collect general, individually univariable demographic information such as age, gender, sexual orientation, education, ethnicity, religion but participants may opt out from providing any or all of these information.

- How much time do you spend online on average / day? What's your primary mode of Internet access, mobile or wifi or other?

- What do you mostly use the Internet for? List top 3 reasons, such as, work, news, entertainment, chat with friends and family (in groups or individual). Also list top 3 most visited sites and/or platforms.
- Please tell us about your online and offline linkages. For example (but not limited to), the extent to which you use online methods to maintain IRL relationships, work, etc. To the degree that you have made online communities that turned into IRL communities, relationships. Or how you perhaps maintain online communities in addition to or separate from these overlaps or linkages.
- Do you take any precautions to guard your privacy online? Are you concerned about any particular platform, policy, or law? Do you feel resigned to the status quo or do you feel motivated to take individual and/or collective actions to address what you think needs fixing re. online privacy? If it's the latter, what are they? How does that relate to your experience, idea, and desire for an online space to build communities, to network?
- Do you use online sites/platforms to connect with strangers? Or only communicate with those you know? What's your experience in both cases? Do people you do not know reach out online? Usually how do you respond?
- How cautious/uncomfortable or not cautious/comfortable are you about conducting personal affairs online?
- How cautious/uncomfortable or not cautious/comfortable are you about sharing personal details online?
- Do you conduct intimacy online? Thinking about the digital space in general, to what extent (structurally and in your own experience) does it thwart or foster your desires?
- Do you find online spaces to be safe for you to express desire? How? Why or why not? Do you feel there is anything that you should do differently? Or perhaps wish a different kind of online space?
- What is the one (or two) specific thing/policy/terms of engagement you would propose for a better digital space that allows for consensual, respectful, and intimate exchanges?

ANNEX III

Erotics FGD Survey Form

"Expanding EROTICS network in South Asia, Bangladesh" is a two-year project as part of Association for Progressive Communications (APC)'s regional program to build stronger alliances around digital rights and sexual expression. This particular project in Bangladesh will involve two phases, the first of which ends in July 2019 (with the possibility of extension until mid-August 2019). For this portion of the project, the outcome is a background report on sexual expression and digital rights in Bangladesh. As part of this background and exploratory research, the research team is organizing a series of focus group discussions (FGDs) with select and targeted groups. Thank you for your time!

1. Age

Mark only one oval.

- ▭ 18 - 25
- ▭ 25 - 35
- ▭ 35 - 40
- ▭ Above 40
- ▭ Prefer not to say

2. Hometown (e.g., Jessore)

3. Gender

Mark only one oval.

- ▭ Female
- ▭ Male
- ▭ Transgender
- ▭ Third gender
- ▭ Non-binary
- ▭ Other
- ▭ Prefer not to say

4. Sexual orientation

Mark only one oval.

- ▭ Gay
- ▭ Lesbian
- ▭ Bi-sexual
- ▭ Heterosexual
- ▭ Other
- ▭ Prefer not to say

5. Educational qualification (if you are currently enrolled, mention you are a student and provide information for which degree, for example, "enrolled at a BA program")

6. Ethnicity

Mark only one oval.

- ⬭ Bengali
- ⬭ Adivasi
- ⬭ Other non-Bengali Other
- ⬭ Prefer not to say

7. Religion or belief

Mark only one oval.

- ⬭ Islam
- ⬭ Hinduism
- ⬭ Buddhism
- ⬭ Christianity
- ⬭ None Other
- ⬭ Prefer not to say

8. Disability status

Mark only one oval.

- ⬭ Not disabled
- ⬭ Disabled
- ⬭ Prefer not to say

9. If you'd like to be updated on the progress of this project or be part of this network please provide your email below:

_____

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About the Association for Progressive Communications (APC)

APC is an international network of civil society organisations founded in 1990 dedicated to empowering and supporting people working for peace, human rights, development and protection of the environment, through the strategic use of information and communication technologies (ICTs). We work to build a world in which all people have easy, equal and affordable access to the creative potential of ICTs to improve their lives and create more democratic and egalitarian societies.

To learn more, please visit: https://www.apc.org/

About Exploratory Research on Sexuality and the Internet (EROTICS)

EROTICS is a network of activists and researchers working on the intersections of sexuality and the internet. It is an APC project. Funded by AmplifyChange, APC expanded the project under the banner "Building EROTICS Networks in South Asia" spanning Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka. In Bangladesh, the project primarily focuses on sexual expression and rights in digital spaces.

To learn more, please visit: https://erotics.apc.org/

About AmplifyChange

AmplifyChange is a multi-donor challenge fund to support civil society advocacy for sexual and reproductive health and rights, and aims to empower young people, men and women to realise those rights.

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SAFETY, AGENCY AND SURVEILLANCE

An Exploration of Sexual Expression and Digital Spaces in Bangladesh