

“All we want to do is fit in. To be accepted. To be part of the group”: Discussing LGBTQ rights in Bangladesh

*Following the LSE-UC Berkeley Bangladesh Summit, a representative from a queer collective in Bangladesh spoke to **Rebecca Bowers** on the current status of LGBTQ rights in the country.*

RB: Can you share with us the journey that led you to becoming a gay rights activist?

I grew up in the port city of Chittagong, Bangladesh but since my graduation I have lived in Dhaka. I came to know about [Boys of Bangladesh](#) (BoB), a queer collective in the country, during my university days but at that time I was not confident enough to come out. Later in 2007 I realised that being gay, I am more comfortable with like-minded people, so I became a member of Boys of Bangladesh and started meeting more people and attending a few events. The people there seemed decent and it inspired me to work voluntarily for the group where I have been a moderator since 2009.

Can you tell us how the organisation has evolved since its creation in 2002?

Boys of Bangladesh, popularly abbreviated as BoB, started out as a gay-only network. Today the network consists of the wider LGBTQ community although it remains a constant challenge working in the present political climate.

BoB envisages a society where every individual regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity can enjoy life to its full potential with dignity and rights.

To adhere to our value of inclusiveness and since BoB is now widely known as an LGBTQ rights organisation, we felt the need to change the name to reflect this and it shall soon be called Oboyob which means shape, or outline.

Boys of Bangladesh is the oldest running and largest network of self-identified LGBTQ people living in the country and abroad. Based in Dhaka, this non-registered, non-funded and non-formal group is run by a pool of volunteers. Formerly known as Boys Only Bangladesh, BoB has been operating since 2002. Its Facebook page acts as the main networking medium in addition to a website and a Yahoo Group. The organisation does not have any office space or paid staff.

In October 2002, Joy, the founder of BoB, went to meet the moderators of the group Teen Gay Bangladesh (Prakash and Abrar) and decided that he also wanted to start a group helping gay people. Since TGB was exclusively for teen gays, Joy decided to open BoB (Boys Only Bangladesh) on 2nd November 2002.

The moderators of BoB initially wanted gay men in Bangladesh to be able to meet in person and build a supportive community. It arranged the first ever offline get-together on December 7th, 2002 with three men brave enough to meet other gay men in broad daylight and in public. BoB was the first group to organise face-to-face meetings. From then on, it worked with TGB until Yahoo! deleted both of these group accounts without any warning on 25th December 2002.

The moderators of TGB opened a new group with a new name called Bangladeshi Gay Boys (BGB) whilst BoB slightly altered its name, becoming Boys Only Bangladesh, and reopening on January 4th, 2003. Since BGB was searchable under Yahoo groups, it attracted more people, becoming very active online whilst BoB remained discreet, continuing its highly guarded get-togethers.

BGB was deleted again by Yahoo and this time, failed to re-emerge although not for the lack of efforts from its moderators. At the same time, BoB grew steadily, slowly and silently. Initially, the membership was restricted, and people could join only by invitation. Because of security concerns, moderators invited people they knew from chat rooms, matchmaking websites and through other people. The monthly gatherings continued for the next few years bringing in new faces. Apart from these events, the online forum worked as the soul of BoB, where members found great solace in sharing their emotions and untold stories.

What are your current activities?

Today, BoB is a full member of Human Rights Forum of Bangladesh, Human Rights Alliance of Bangladesh, International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA), Right Here Right Now network and others.

We primarily base our work on three pillars – Community Mobilization, Advocacy and Policy and Networking

BoB regularly organises community events such as get-togethers, picnics, film screenings, trainings, workshops, and various innovative programs to help LGBT individuals come together, find peer support and to be more visible as well as assertive of their human rights. It also runs a telephone line for support. All the community events are self-sustaining – participants collectively bear the cost of the events, which also gives them a sense of ownership and belonging.

Decriminalisation of same-sex relationships has been the primary goal of BoB. It actively engages with various policy makers and stakeholders nationally and internationally. BoB has produced research papers, educational materials, conducted surveys, and fed into numerous consultations on the LGBT rights.

BoB believes in the intersectionality of social movements and has been working closely with leading human rights organizations, women's rights movements, indigenous groups and other minorities. Since we are non-

registered and non-funded, we conduct most of activities in partnership with other organisations, enabling us to reach a wider audience and build relationships. BoB regularly organises sensitisation workshops for various organisations and takes part in meetings, seminars and conferences both nationally and internationally.



A rainbow flag flying in the wind. Photo credit: Ludovic Bertron, [Wikimedia Commons](#), CC BY 2.0.

Given the daily levels of intolerance and harassment faced by the LGBTQ population, what are the challenges BoB face in raising awareness and visibility whilst having to deal with the very real threat to your own and your members' safety?

It is nearly impossible to gauge the impediments right now since the issue isn't out there in the open. But the main challenges we are facing right now are a lack of education in the wider population as well as the community around sexuality and rights, class division, patriarchal social values and the legal system.

Emotional wellbeing and social support is another area where we believe there is a lot more to do. Many community members suffer from low self-esteem and depression. There is no proper research so far. We tried to establish a support line initially but due to security reasons in 2016, we had to shut down.

The lack of safe space for discussion on sensitive issues for free thinkers is getting very limited which is alarming. It's not only a challenge to find a physical space. If we want to publish a book, publishers are not eager to work on it. The same is true for the media and online journalism.

Self-censorship is the biggest challenge now in my view and is something we must adopt in everyday life. We previously announced our programs on social media. However, now we cannot recruit any volunteers or meet anyone who seeks help because of safety concerns. It's a challenging situation when you know that you have the capacity to help but your hands are bound by the need for protection and security. This is particularly suffocating as safe spaces for open discussion are becoming extinct, not only in a physical manner but virtually as well. Now it is difficult to find a publisher who can publish such topics. Similarly, putting such topics online in a blog is threatening too – especially when you are located inside the country.

The amendments to the ICT Act have further restricted the space for online expression and organisation. What would you say the impact has been on gay activism in Bangladesh and what countermeasures are available?

Section 57 of the Information and Communication Technology Act 2006, directly undermines freedom of expression. The section imposes a penalty

of a minimum seven years and maximum 14 years of imprisonment with a maximum fine of Tk 1 crore for those found in violation of it. [An accepted translation of Section 57\(1\) of ICT Act 2006 has been given below:](#)

“If any person deliberately publishes or transmits or causes to be published or transmitted in the website or in any other electronic form any material which is false and obscene and if anyone sees, hears or reads it having regard to all relevant circumstances, its effect is such as to influence the reader to become dishonest or corrupt, or causes to deteriorate or creates possibility to deteriorate law and order, prejudice the image of the state or person or causes to hurt or may hurt religious belief or instigate against any person or organisation, then this activity will be regarded as an offence”

Therefore, a person updating a status on social media, writing a blog or running a news portal is under the ambit of the section. Section 57 allows a third party to file a case against a person in violation of it. Anyone may file a case against our Facebook page or blog if they feel like the content has even a remote possibility of hurting someone else's image or upsetting religious sentiments.

Although its authors may have intended for this part of the law to be used sparingly, it is now routinely used to suppress freedom of speech and harass writers, activists, and journalists, often for their comments on social media.

Whilst there is talk of removing the section from the ICT Act, the draft Digital Security Act contains a very similar provision. Experts have pointed out repeatedly how removing Section 57 would be useless, if the same threats to press freedom are reintroduced through another law which too disproportionately penalizes similar “offences.”

The community is now stuck between a rock and a hard place. While international instruments like the ICCPR or the ECHR emphasize the freedom of expression, the queer community in Bangladesh still struggles to identify the line between independence and the possibility of committing an offence.

What would your message be to gay, trans, queer and intersex readers facing discrimination in Bangladesh and beyond?

For more than a decade I've dedicated my life to LGBT advocacy work. However, it wasn't until three years ago when my six-year-old nephew asked me whether I had a girlfriend that I realized the pervasiveness of homophobia. His question and my family's response, including my own, helped me see the deeper and nuanced layers of homophobia.

We live in a heteronormative world and beneath heteronormativity is buried homophobia. Times are changing and the deeper we go in our individual lives the more we can make even bigger strides toward a world of equality.

We feel down. We feel isolated. We feel alone. We feel separated from those closest to us. And all we want to do is fit in. To be accepted. To be part of the group.

We have internalised negative messages and poor behaviour directed towards us – from our parents, grandparents, siblings, school mates, teachers, colleagues, strangers. And now we feel shame, rejection, fear, guilt. We are unable to accept ourselves.

So my message is be true to yourself and follow your heart. Give people the space and time to process who they thought you would be and accept who you are now.

Speak to others. Find ways to support each other if you can. And seek support. There are collectives like us working around. There are many people out there, walking past you day after day, that would love to help you. Many don't know how to help you. Get clear in your mind what would really help you and then ask for what you want. Believe you can improve your life – and you will.

This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the South Asia @ LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

About the Authors

The author is a representative from a queer collective in Bangladesh.

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