

Behavior and experience of male homosexuals in Bangladesh

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Summary

Homosexuality is defined as “the occurrence or existence of sexual attraction, interest and genitally intimate activity between an individual and other members of the same gender.” The objective of the study was to explore the behavior and experience of male homosexuals in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Due to hidden nature of this population, data were collected through a non-government organization working with them. This was a cross sectional study done during the period from March, 2009 to June, 2009. For this purpose, 102 male homosexuals were enrolled in the study by purposive sampling method and interviewed using a custom-built questionnaire. The results showed that all of the participants were biologically male with age ranged from 14-48 years and average age of first homosexual exposure for the participants was 11.75 years with a range from 4 to 27 years. The majority (56.9%) of the male homosexuals reported experiencing heterosexual intercourse. A high rate of sexual victimization history in childhood (64.7%) as well as in adulthood (49%) was reported. A sizable portion of the participants reported different discriminatory experiences including stigma and discrimination (48%), humiliation in public (49%), being cheated by male partner (60.8%), and exclusion from family (21.6%) because of their homosexual identity. Widespread childhood sexual abuse and discrimination clearly call for protective measures to be taken for safeguarding this vulnerable population.

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Introduction

Sexual behavior is a normal part of our biological and psycho-social entity but it has always been a matter of secrecy and taboo in almost all cultures and all parts of the world. Where the normal sexuality is tabooed, it is easily understandable how people may react to variation in sexual interest and behavior such as homosexuality. Francoeur and Perper¹ defined homosexuality as “the occurrence or existence of sexual attraction, interest and genitally intimate activity between an individual and other members of the same gender.” Despite the long history of the existence of same-sex behavior among humankind, homosexuality has generally been construed as a deviation.^{2,3} Peoples’ view about homosexuality and the homosexuals are highly prejudiced and concentrated with negative connotations such as, dirty, bad, immoral, criminal, carriers of disease especially Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) infection and mad.^{4,5} Even the worldwide acceptable Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of

Mental Disorders (DSM) used to classify homosexuality as a mental disorder till 1973.

Stigma and discrimination are common phenomena in the life of male homosexuals. They often isolate themselves from the mainstream society to avoid stigma and rejection.⁶ Research literature consistently reported that individuals from sexual minority population encounter more psychological, physical, and sexual victimization than heterosexual individuals.^{7,8} Wong et al.⁹ classified the types of violence faced by the male homosexuals and transgender in Bangladesh into four categories physical, sexual, verbal, and others (like stigma, discrimination, harassment and humiliation). They found all these to be a common experience among their study participants. Stress generated from stigma and discrimination has been linked with the development of psychological morbidity among sexual minority population.^{10, 11}

Although some recent works have been done in connection to mental health and social aspect of male homosexuals,¹²⁻¹⁴

published data on male homosexuals in Bangladesh are limited and are mostly focused around HIV infection and sexually transmitted diseases. This lack of data has made it difficult to design and implement services for this sexual minority population. The present study was aimed at broadening understanding on this hard to reach population by exploring sexual behavior and relevant history as well as discrimination and victimization experience of them.

Materials and methods

This was a cross sectional study done during the period from March, 2009 to June, 2009. For this purpose, 102 male homosexuals were enrolled in the study by purposive sampling method. Due to hidden nature of this population, data were collected through two Dhaka based field offices of a non-government organization working with male homosexuals including male sex workers. Interviews with 102 male homosexuals revealed several aspects of their life. Participants were interviewed individually by two of the authors. A custom built survey questionnaire with open and close ended questions was used to explore several psycho-social aspects including socio-economic features, sexual behavior, sexual history and discriminatory experiences. The questionnaire was prepared by the research team members after extensive brainstorming on the topic. Due to sensitive nature of the data, verbal informed consent was taken instead of written consent.¹⁵This study conformed to the ethical principles including autonomy, benevolence, non male faience and justice as delineated by ethics guidelines for medical research. Descriptive and co relational analyses of the data were carried out by Predictive Analytics Software (PASW) 18.

Results

The results showed that all of the participants were biologically male with age ranged from 14 to 48 years with mean age of 24.5 years. The average age of first homosexual exposure for the participants was 11.75 years with a range from 4 to 27 years. Among them 32.4% had multiple sources of income and 52.9% attained class V to SSC level of education (Table 1). In the current study, family history of homosexuality was present in 14.7% of respondents. The majority (56.9%) of the male homosexuals reported experiencing heterosexual intercourse and a half (24.5%) of them were engaged in heterosexual marriage. A high rate of sexual victimization history in childhood (64.7%) as well as in adulthood (49%) was reported. Many (33.3%) of them also mentioned about the experience of having sex with under aged minors (age < 14yrs) at their adult age (Table 2).

Table 1: Socio-economic characteristics of the participants (n=102)

| Socio-economic features | Number | Percentage |
|-------------------------------|--------|------------|
| Occupation | | |
| Not having a regular income | 9 | 8.8 |
| Gainfully employed | 26 | 25.5 |
| Sex work | 21 | 20.6 |
| Multiple sources | 33 | 32.4 |
| Not reported | 13 | 12.7 |
| Educational attainment | | |
| Illiterate | 6 | 5.9 |
| Class I-V | 23 | 22.5 |
| Class V-SSC | 54 | 52.9 |
| Class XI-HSC | 8 | 7.8 |
| Above HSC | 11 | 10.8 |

Table 2: Sexual behavior and related history among male homosexuals (n=102)

| Sexual behavior and experience | Number | Percentage |
|-------------------------------------------------|--------|------------|
| Family history of homosexuality | 15 | 14.7 |
| Heterosexual intercourse | 58 | 56.9 |
| Married to female partner | 25 | 24.5 |
| Fixed male partner | 62 | 60.8 |
| Victim of coercive sex in childhood | 66 | 64.7 |
| Victim of coercive sex in adulthood | 50 | 49.0 |
| Intercourse with under aged minor (age < 14yrs) | 34 | 33.3 |

Coercive sexual experience in adulthood was significantly correlated with sexual activity with minor while controlling the effect of coercive sexual exposure in childhood. However, significant correlation was not found between coercive sexual exposures in childhood and sexual activity with the minors (Table 3).

In most of the indicators of discrimination and victimization, the majority (52-80%) of the male homosexuals reported of never having these experiences (see Table 4). A great portion of the participants reported different discriminatory experiences including stigma and discrimination (48%), humiliation in public (49%), being cheated by male partner (60.8%), and exclusion from family (21.6%) because of their homosexual identity. However, sizable proportion of them reported regularly experiencing discrimination (19.6%) and humiliation in public (20.6%) (Table 4).

Table 3: Partial correlation between coercive sexual exposures and sexual activity with the minors(n=100)

| Variables of interest | Control variable | Partial r | P |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------|-------|
| Number of coercive sex in childhood and number of coercive sex in adulthood | Number of sexual activity with minor | 0.250** | 0.012 |
| Number of coercive sex in adulthood and number of sexual activity with minor | Number of coercive sex in childhood | 0.279** | 0.005 |
| Number of sexual activity with minor and number of coercive sex in childhood | Number of coercive sex in adulthood | 0.023 | 0.824 |

Table 4: Discrimination and victimization experience among male homosexuals (n=102)

| Experiences | Regularly | Occasionally | Rarely | Never | No- response |
|---------------------------------------|-----------|--------------|-----------|-----------|--------------|
| Deprived from accessing rights | 10(9.8%) | 9(8.8%) | 6(5.9%) | 75(73.5%) | 2(2%) |
| Experienced stigma and discrimination | 20(19.6%) | 14(13.7%) | 15(14.7%) | 53(52%) | 0(0%) |
| Humiliated in public place | 21(20.6%) | 17(16.7%) | 12(11.8%) | 52(51%) | 0(0%) |
| Being threatened | 10(9.8%) | 22(21.6%) | 8(7.8%) | 61(59.8%) | 1(1%) |
| Physically tortured | 4(3.9%) | 12(11.8%) | 13(12.7%) | 72(70.6%) | 1(1%) |
| Being cheated by male sexual partner | 14(13.7%) | 22(21.6%) | 22(21.6%) | 40(39.2%) | 4(3.9%) |
| Excluded from family activities | 7(6.9%) | 11(10.8%) | 3(2.9%) | 80(78.4%) | 1(1%) |

Discussion

An in-depth understanding of the male homosexuals was felt needed before designing and implementing intervention targeting towards this population. Male homosexuals were considered a sexual minority population hidden in the plain eyesight. This paper aimed to shed some light on this population to orient researchers and policymakers on their unique nature and life experiences. One of the most common questions regarding homosexuality that intrigued researchers and common people alike was - why people became homosexual. Nature-nurture debate regarding gender identity was still on. Findings of the present study indicated family history of homosexuality among 14.7% of the participants. Bailey et al.¹⁶ reported 7.3% to 9.7% concordance rate of homosexuality among siblings while others reported higher rate (up to 13%) when 'family' was extended to maternal cousins.¹⁷ Although many researchers used that rate to support the genetic theory of homosexuality, many others argued for social learning theory. In the present study, the participants' reported age of first homosexual exposure started from 4 years with a mean age of first exposure at 11.75 years. Thus, study findings suggested that the role of exposure from early childhood in determining homosexuality could not be rule out.

The majority (60.8%) of the male homosexuals had fixed homosexual partner. As homosexuality was socially unacceptable, many male homosexuals were forced to or chose to get married into heterosexual relation to appear

normal.¹⁸ They also engaged in sexual activities with females out of curiosity or as a way of preparing for heterosexual marriage. More than half (56.9%) of the participants reported experience of heterosexual intercourse which was consistent with findings from other studies conducted in Bangladesh.¹⁹ One-fourth of the participants in this study were married to female partners. Heterosexual marriage of the homosexual males in Bangladeshi context had also been reported in qualitative study findings by Khan²⁰ Heterosexual activities of homosexual males had implications regarding sexual transmission of diseases related to unprotected polygamous relation.

Sexual abuse or coercive sex in childhood was very common (64.7%) among male homosexuals, many of them (49%) also reported sexual abuse in adulthood as well. The cycle of child sexual abuse was a well-known phenomenon, the victim of child sexual abuse often became perpetrator themselves.²¹ In the present study, 33.3% of the homosexuals reported having sex with minors below age 14 years at their adult age, which clearly qualified for sexual abuse. Further analysis using partial correlation method revealed significant correlation of numbers of coercive sexual exposure in adulthood with number of coercive sexual exposure in childhood and with numbers of sexual activity with minors. However, no significant relation was indicated between coercive sexual exposure in childhood and sexual activity with minors. Correlation between sexual abuse in childhood and adulthood was suggestive of continuation of vulnerability and powerlessness of the male

homosexuals from childhood to adulthood. Correlation between being a victim and being a perpetrator at the adult age supported the idea that child sexual offenders were often emotionally vulnerable and were engaged in sexual activity with children to reassure themselves as of potency, power and control.²²

Contrary to the widespread view regarding discrimination towards homosexuals, the majority of the participants in the present study reported no discriminatory experience on most of the indicators of discrimination. However, the number of homosexuals reporting discriminatory experience constituted a sizeable portion of total participants. One-third of the participants reported occasional to regular experience of stigma and discrimination. Half of the participants reported experience of humiliation in public places; among them, an alarmingly high portion (20.6%) reported this to be a regular phenomenon. Being threatened and being cheated by male partner had also been reported by a large portion of the male homosexuals. Many of them also reported the experience of physical torture and exclusion from family activities. Although discriminatory experience reported in this study was not as pervasive as reported by Wong et al.,⁹ the findings clearly presented a dire picture of the human right situation and unequal treatment for the male homosexuals in our society. Alam¹⁴ reported that 14% of the male homosexuals in Dhaka did not even know if they were stigmatized or not. This raised the possibility of an even worse actual picture of stigma and discrimination among male homosexuals than reported by the participants in the present study.

Conclusion

This study presented descriptive data on behavior and experiences of male homosexuals. It is believed that the findings will help researcher and policy maker to understand this hard to reach population. The presence of childhood sexual offense around male homosexuality is a major concern to work on. Additionally, strategies need to be devised to curb the high incidents of discrimination among the male homosexuals.

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