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### Breaking free of the binary: Some insights from the LGBTI movement in Nepal.

A large number of the members of different societies face social discrimination and inequalities due to their sexual orientation and gender identities. Recent positive legal and regulatory changes pertaining to sexual and gender minorities in [Nepal](#) have led some to tout Nepal as a 'Global LGBT rights beacon', 'gay travel destination' or even '[gay mecca of the east](#)'. Beyond the hype and interest laden discourses, the narratives of lived experiences of LGBTI community in Nepal accentuates persistent discrimination and persecution in their ordinary lives. I recently undertook a study to understand the social inequalities faced by sexual and gender minorities in Nepal and their struggles to initiate social change for equality. I present here some key insights of the study.

All social inequalities are sustained by some form of social classificatory schemes, which establishes differences between social categories through binary principles such as male/female or heteronormative/non-heteronormative. This generates the possibilities of inclusion and exclusion of different social groups from various arenas of social life. Hence, the act of classification itself is a political act and an act of symbolic violence. Social inequalities are reproduced through two possible ways. One, the dominated exhibit unquestioned acceptance towards the categories of perception of the dominant class (e.g. I am queer so I am a pervert or I am female so I am weak). Dominated are thus complicit in their own domination. Second, the dominant social groups always try to impose their own vision of the given social order (e.g., marriage is a heterosexual relationship and soccer is a male game).

The root to subvert inequality sustaining symbolic order is to problematize such classifications and/or raise consciousness about existing social classification schemes as arbitrary. We see gender order as dualistic and static (male/female) and inequalities in terms of only one form of domination (masculine) and subordination (feminine). This analysis can be extended beyond patriarchy (masculine domination) towards understanding heteronormativity and heteronormative domination. The LGBTI movement in Nepal is predominantly about establishing an alternate social category (*tesro-lingi*). It aims to establish that there are individuals who do not necessarily identify themselves as either 'male' or 'female' (sex) or 'masculine' or 'feminine' (gender roles) or 'heterosexual'/'homosexual' (sexuality). The role of the movement is to raise consciousness about the existence of such an alternate social category beyond the currently existing binary classification schemes.

One interesting revelation of the study has been the intersection of masculine and heteronormative domination. It seems that all sexual and gender minorities (in this context, *tesro-lingi* category) face an overall heteronormative domination, which is not experienced uniformly. Rather there are hierarchies of oppression faced by each of the categories within. The difference in inequalities faced by various categories of sexual and gender minorities is related to the extent of masculine domination in a society. Irrespective of self-identified sexual and gender labels, individuals who are assigned 'male' sex at birth continue enjoying privileges associated with being a 'male' although the privilege can be lower in comparison to those enjoyed by a heteronormative 'male'. For instance, MtF (Male to Female transgender) individuals are less educated and face severe discriminations in the form of denial of social services, physical harassment and verbal abuses. MSM (Men who have sex with men) on the other hand, do not have to disclose their sexual identity or have no embodied element to their identity. Hence, they are not

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subjected to any forms of discrimination in their ordinary lives as long as they 'fit in' to the current social practices.

Another important insight from the study is that there are very tight linkages between social categorization and culture. The legitimacy or 'naturalness' of a particular sexual or gender category and the corresponding perception of perversion and resulting discrimination is in large parts defined both historically and culturally. The repertoire of gendered practices available to individuals is always circumscribed by a particular cultural horizon. Cultural variations in lifestyles across contexts makes the boundaries of these categories fuzzy and dynamic; and to use the categories accepted in another context as taken for granted is to reify these labels and to engage in ethnocentric universalism. This study revealed that there are up to twenty-one colloquial sexual and gender identity labels that participants in the study identified with and the ordinary terms of usage (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, and Intersex) are largely imported discourse without cultural equivalents. Similarly, even seemingly unproblematic terms such as 'masculine' or 'human rights' are not as universal as they seem, as they are largely defined culturally. Understanding of masculinity and femininity is contextual and exists in a continuum. The choice need not always be confined to solely binary categories. If we add the self-constructed element of subjective identification to objective social categories, a classification scheme in one context is hardly always transferable to alternative contexts.

Putting it together, any form of gender or LGBTI activism could essentially be viewed as a struggle to problematize the fundamental social categorization schemes as regards to sexuality and gender. As mentioned, most classification schemes can be reduced to a set of binaries. This study revealed that there are similar categorical pairs, sustaining marginalization of '*tesro-lingi*' individuals in Nepal. Whereas gender binary is considered 'natural' and 'human', those not identifying themselves as gender binary are considered 'unnatural', 'perverse' or 'sub-human'. Similarly, in the civil sphere, whereas gender binaries are regarded as 'citizens' possessing associated citizenship rights such as marriage equality, those not belonging to the gender binary are considered as 'second-rate citizens' devoid of several consequential citizenship rights. Depending upon the social arena considered the orthodoxy of the accepted classificatory schemes also varies. For example, in the legal sphere, '*tesro-lingi*' may be sanctified as 'natural', which is not necessary so in the ordinary societal sphere. In the bureaucratic context, they miss rightful recognition as citizens. The purpose of the sexual and gender activism is to identify the nature of classificatory schemes across these various social fields and to engage in delegitimizing them or totally obliterating/transcending them through collective mobilization.

LGBTI movement in Nepal also clearly demonstrates that leveraging cultural resources to make apparent how society perpetuates sexual and gender discrimination is very effective. Nepalese activists have been successful in strategically using cultural resources such as beauty pageants, music, plays and traditional festivals as the medium of expression of political ideas. Nowhere is this idea more illustrative than the appropriation of '[Gai-jatra](#)' festival, a traditional Newari (ethnic group in Nepal) festival to commemorate the dead, as Nepal's own indigenous annual '[pride day](#)'. It is leveraged as a stage to deconstruct gender and sexual categories, make apparent the gender fluidity, explore the ambiguities of socially constructed categories, and the resulting oppression. The focus of such cultural performances is to enact, reinforce or renegotiate collective identity. Largely, such activities have had the largest impact in subverting the binary sexual and gender order although there is still a long way to go before achieving full equality.