



**Performances of identities in hetero-patriarchy:  
LGBTQ youth in navigating the dominant sexuality discourse in  
Bhutan.**

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***Disclaimer:***

This document represents part of the author's study programme while at the International Institute of Social Studies. The views stated therein are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Institute.

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## List of Acronyms

AIDS	Acquired immune deficiency syndrome.
BBS	Bhutan Broadcasting Service (national broadcast).
CSHP	Comprehensive School Health Programme.
CSO	Civil Society Organisation.
GNH	Gross National Happiness.
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus.
LBGTQ	Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay, Transgender, Queer.
Lhak-sam	Network for People living with HIV and AIDS in Bhutan.
M.A.	Master of Arts in Development Studies.
MoH	Ministry of Health, Bhutan.
MoE	Ministry of Education, Bhutan.
MSM	Men having sex with men.
NACP	National AIDS Control Programme.
NGO	Non-Government Organization.
NKRAs	National Key Result Areas.
NSB	National Statistics Bureau.
NYP	National Youth Policy.
RB	Rainbow Bhutan- <i>Celebrating Diversity</i> (network of LBGTQ people).
RENEW	Respect, Educate, Nurture and Empower Women.
RP	Research Paper.
SRH	Sexual Reproductive Health.
STI	Sexually Transmitted Infections.
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme.

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## **Abstract**

This paper looks into the use of agency of young LGBTQ (Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay, Transgenders and Queer) people in a heterosexual Bhutanese society, by delving into their everyday coping and negotiating experiences. To gauge the navigational experiences of LGBTQ youth, in-depth qualitative interviewing and participant observation methods were applied among nine LGBTQ youth participants. I have used critical youth studies as a core conceptual framework to analyze how LGBTQ youth make sense of silences in Bhutan's tolerant society, while creating individualized experiences in the transitional period of youthhood.

The study reveals that LGBTQ youth exhibit in copious ways, how they assert and act on their sexuality through coping, resisting and evading discrimination. However, the extent to which agency is used to assert for spaces of participation and representation is restricted by structural norms of hetero-patriarchy. In addition, the ambiguity of youthhood is plagued by adult's notions of assumption of young people. Importantly, this study has discovered that given their constrained situatedness and limited autonomy, LGBTQ youth tend to reinforce the very binary genders and sexual hierarchies they seek to resist and deconstruct. In this paper, I argue that this has come about as a result of youth's strategy to stay relevant in a patriarchal environment that gives prominence to heteronormativity. In the concluding chapter, I reflect on the need for more recognition and inclusivity of LGBTQ people in general, by drawing on implications to larger policy planning as creating social inequalities.

## **Relevance to Development Studies**

Inclusion of people of diverse sexuality by allowing spaces for use of agency to participate and represent themselves is crucially important, towards young people's achievement in attainments of education, employment, emotional, health and overall wellbeing. Learning by way of educating ourselves on minority status and the issues unique to them has the ability to inform us of the values our society holds. It brings about a necessity to initiate changes to transform it into an equal society. Essentially, this study contributes towards the wholesome empowerment of young people. This research will add to the growing scholarship of narratives justifying for equal status for LGBTQ people, by pondering on the debilitating and intersecting hindrances brought about by structural norms. Particularly, in the case of Bhutan, where information is scarce, this study will be crucial towards seeking social justice for LGBTQ persons by opening up spaces for dialogues, positive manifestations and opportunities to introspect on existing assumptions.

## **Keywords**

Agency, Bhutan, Gender Performativity, Heteronormativity, LGBTQ, Patriarchy, Sexuality, Youth studies.

“Traditionally, the body for youth has been one of the principal terrains for multiple forms of resistance and as a register of risk, pleasure and sex. It has been through the body that youth displayed their identities through oppositional subcultural styles, transgressive sexuality and disruptive desires. The multiple representations and displays of the body in this context were generally central to developing a sense of agency, self-definition, and well-placed refusals”.

(Giroux 1996:193)



# Chapter 1 Grounding a young LGBTQ person in a heterosexual Bhutanese society.

## 1.1. Homosexuality becomes an ‘issue’.

Bhutan has historically been known to be an open and accepting society when it comes to sex and sexuality of young people. As per the National Youth Policy (NYP), premarital sex is not considered a taboo, and there is a prevalence of early sexual onset among young boys and girls, especially in rural places (2011:18). Having never been colonized, the country had largely remained secluded from rest of the world until it began development work in the 1960s (Bendick 2010). As the country began assimilating into the global community, notions of childhood began to be reconceptualized to conform within international “philosophies of ‘universal’ child and childhood” (Cheney 2007:43), resulting into asexual and heterosexual children narratives. Recognition of children’s need for sexuality education was felt as HIV/AIDS, STIs, and teenage pregnancies among young population increased alarmingly in the country. This resulted in sexual reproductive health (SRH) education being prioritized in schools, however the 49 modules<sup>1</sup> in the guidebook<sup>2</sup> used to teach sexuality education in schools has failed to meet the needs of children of diverse sexualities. Besides propagating heterosexuality in schools, Bhutan’s sodomy laws and civil/legal exclusion has bought about an environment of social injustice for LGBTQ people.

The little historical data on same-sex relationships that exists of Bhutan is limited to anecdotes of sex between men in male dominated establishments like army barracks, prisons, and monasteries (UNDP 2013:7). The first verifiable references to same-sex relationship was revealed through ‘HIV/AIDS Behaviour among the general population in Bhutan’ survey in 2006. The survey acknowledged that homosexuality among males did exist, though in small numbers only. Shame and stigma were cited as causes for low reporting and people choosing not to come out.

The state religion of Bhutan, Buddhism, has been known to have tolerant attitudes towards homosexuality. In a YouTube video of a sermon given by revered Bhutanese teacher H.H. *Dzongsar* Jamyang Khyentse *Rinpoché*<sup>4</sup>, he talks about homosexuality from Buddhism perspective. H.H. says “sexual orientation ...has nothing to do with understanding or not understanding the truth. You can be gay, or lesbian, or heterosexual, no one can say who will attain enlightenment first” (Yogi 2015: no page). Even though Bhutan’s article 213 of the Penal Code of Bhutan on unnatural sex carries an imprisonment of one month to a year, no LGBTQ person has been prosecuted till date. Thus, to an extent, Buddhism has helped Bhutanese develop a level of tolerance towards LGBTQ people. However, this tolerance has not been able to translate itself into accepting and concrete actions towards inclusion of LGBTQ people’s sexuality. There still exists a prominence of stigma and shame attached in being an LGBTQ person in Bhutan.

In the last two decade or so, with the rampant use of internet and global exposure, there has been a number of instances whereby Bhutanese LGBTQ persons has mobilized individually and collectively to assert for more inclusivity and recognition. This is reflected in their

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<sup>1</sup> SRH topics such as puberty, HIV/AIDS, teenage pregnancy, safe sex.

<sup>2</sup> Guidebook for Teachers on Adolescent Health.

<sup>3</sup> His Holiness.

<sup>4</sup> Precious one.

increasing public engagements either through online and offline spaces such as on Facebook, media events and public campaigns<sup>5</sup> whereby LGBTQ individuals have asserted their presence and need for inclusion.

Despite the gains, narratives of homosexuality in Bhutan is shrouded in feelings of fear and doubt; this has led to non-conforming people internalizing self-stigma and shame (Singh et al. 2015:2). It is estimated that about two-thirds of bisexual men in Bhutan are living parallel lives, secretly having relations with men and publicly with women to ward off pressures of heterosexual expectations (ibid:4). Martino points “avoidance of being subjected to the gaze of straight society...motivates gay man’s compulsion to assimilate and become invisible” (2006: 42). In a study done by UNDP and MoH in 2015 among six MSM and nine transgender people in Bhutan, it shows that the socio-economic status of transgender people were low across all respondents. Particularly, transgender persons were less educated; hence majority being unemployed during the time of interview and had no steady income (ibid:23). A news article by ‘Kuenselonline’ in 2015 on a symposium on mental health organized by MoH, reported that LGBTQ participants admitted having attempted and had suicidal ideations, had mental health issues like depression, and frequently resorted to use of alcohol and drugs.

With the increase of STIs/AIDS in the country, health advocacies have focused on developing programs and services for sexual minorities, i.e. transgender people and MSM, often labelling them as ‘at-risk populations’<sup>6</sup>. In doing so, health advocacies have adopted a reductionist stance of categorizing people as ‘issues’ thereby negating their lived experiences. “This behaviour-oriented term has effectively masked the sexual identity of men who engage in same-sex behaviour, potentially impairing long-term goals of self-actualization and social justice” (Khan et al. 2006:766). Concurrently, these ‘at-risk’ narratives which are centered around male sexuality brings about an atmosphere, where female sexuality does not receive due acknowledgement beyond child rearing and reproduction.

## **1.2. LGBTQ youth seeking individuality in the tussle between tradition and modernity.**

As per Bhutan’s NYP 2011, youth is any person within the ages 13-24. With almost 56% of the population below the age 25, young people are seen as drivers for spurring economic development, bringing in social change, innovation and technological advancements (ibid). As a result, since 1960s, the Bhutanese government began a process of institutionalizing modern education, as children’s education is viewed as one of the top priorities of reaching the nation’s goal.

Alongside, rapid changes in the social lives of young people was also brought about with the initiation of television and internet in 1999 and mobile telephone in 2003. Young people in Bhutan began fast adapting themselves to new developments that had already taken place around the world. Simultaneously, there has also been an increase in the avenues for young people to gather in places like clubs, karaoke, *drayangs*<sup>7</sup> where indulging in sexual practices and substance abuse are common. With this, traditional notions of union and socializing are

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<sup>5</sup> Two female transgenders appeared on BBS in 2013; a journalist interviewed a gay man in a YouTube video posted on 14 June, 2013; seeds of the informal LGBTQ network ‘Rainbow Bhutan-Celebrating Diversity’ sown in 2015 by registering members; annual observance of International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia since 2016; Bhutan’s first openly gay couple appeared on BBS (national broadcast) in 2018, among others.

<sup>6</sup> Cited in Bhutan’s 2012 country snapshots of HIV and men who have sex with men.

<sup>7</sup> Night entertainment centers.

fast being replaced by new and liberal ‘online’, ‘no strings attached’ and ‘casual dating’ scenes. Forgoing traditional customs, young people are now embracing “western ideals of love and marriage...even with same-sex marriage and unions showing their presence” (NSB 2015: 8). Discourses of young people due to its “metaphorical connection to national growth... becomes a crucial aspect of the construction of child citizen” often ignores that childhood and growing up is a culturally subjective idea (Cheney 2007:43). Young people in Bhutan view sex and sexuality as their inherent natural rights (NSB 2015:127) which has led to much consternation among the older generation. Expressing their sexual right and freedom causes much tensions and contradictions for parents, teachers and others having to “reconcile to revere culture and tradition and accept the growing trend of preference for human rights” (ibid:8). Traditions and cultures are perceived to be under attack by contradictory notions of gender and sexuality which is seen as immoral sexual attitudes and practices; a forced import from western developed countries. Bhutan stands firmly on its ground of preserving its culture; it being one of the four pillars of the country’s development philosophy, Gross National Happiness (GNH). However, contradictions and tensions exists as there are clashes between young people trying to make sense of tradition, while equally wanting to stay relevant in modern times. This is evident as more young Bhutanese demand for their sexual rights to be heard by exercising their civil voice and defying control put on them over sexuality, love, and relationships (ibid:8).

Being labelled as symbols of hope, lucrative markets and threats to the society, youth “becomes objects of ambivalence caught between contradictory discourses and spaces of transition” (Giroux 1996:190). Applying an intersectional lens, LGBTQ youth faces unique challenges of being sexually diverse youth in an adult heterosexual world.

The study will therefore demonstrate how LGBTQ youth use agency within a heterosexual context while also making sense of being young in Bhutan.

### 1.3. Asking relevant questions to unpack young experiences.

This study contributes to Bhutan’s scarce knowledge on LGBTQ youth’s experiences within an environment that does not overtly perpetrate violence, but one that still upholds dominant heterosexual social, political and cultural norms. The study depicts the ways in which young LGBTQ people use daily agency to make themselves socially relevant. Highlighting their stories on being ‘different’ in Bhutan and how it impacts the way they navigate their lives; we will see how individual agency is translated into larger and collective forms of recognition and solidarity among themselves. In doing so, the study showcases that their agency is invariably embedded and confined within structural discourses.

My main research question is,

***How do LGBTQ youth use agency to navigate experiences of heteronormative Bhutanese society?***

**In this study, I discovered that despite the prominence of heterosexual norms in Bhutan that exclude sexual minorities that render their sexuality invisible, LGBTQ youth use their situated agency daily to assert their sexuality. In doing so, however, they tend to reinforce the very heteronormativity they seek to challenge, as socio-cultural structures of hetero-patriarchy renders a person unintelligent.**

Using the following sub-questions, I endeavor to unpack the above-mentioned research claim.

1. How are the LGBTQ youth in Bhutan affected by the dominant norms and values that legitimizes heterosexuality?
2. What coping mechanisms do LGBTQ youth use to realize their sexual autonomy and how is it being negotiated in their daily lives?
3. How do LGBTQ youth build solidarity and safe places amongst themselves?
4. What does the situatedness of LGBTQ youth mean for their agency?

## 1.4. Relevancy of the study.

My association with Bhutanese LGBTQ persons dates back to 2016 when as a programme staff in my current Organization, RENEW (Respect, Educate, Nurture and Empower Women), we had organized a 'Life skills and comprehensive sexuality education' workshop for 17 individuals. Since then, it has been my constant endeavor to learn more about LGBTQ from individual experiences of lived realities. This research topic is a deliberate and conscious move on my part to contribute towards the recognition and inclusivity of LGBTQ in Bhutan, by flagging off discriminatory practices and prejudices. Through this research, I also want to reflect on the work I do, as bringing in biased heterosexual regimes of human rights and equality rhetoric.

This study comes at an opportune time to bolster the efforts of LGBTQ rights in Bhutan. The year 2019 has been particularly historic for LGBTQ people in Bhutan as during the National Assembly session on June 2019, the Minister for Finance *Lyonpo* Namgay Tshering proposed for scrapping the existing sodomy laws of section 213 and 214. The bill has now been forwarded to the National Council for review before it is presented to the Fifth King of Bhutan for endorsement. In a quote shared in the newspaper 'The Bhutanese' on 1<sup>st</sup> June 2019, the minister said "My primary reason is that this section is there since 2004 but it has become so redundant and has never been enforced. It is also an eyesore for international human rights bodies" (Lamsang 2019:no page). Though this move was positively received by LGBTQ people in Bhutan, the quote from the minister showcases the priority for Bhutan to gain global appreciation over individual subjectivities.

Simultaneously, Rainbow Bhutan (RB) is growing steadily with efforts underway to establish itself into a registered civil society organization (CSO). They were previously working under the umbrella of Lhak-sam, a CSO for people living with HIV/AIDS due to overlapping programs and mandates. By registering itself as a legal entity, RB core members envisions they will have legitimacy and leverage to lobby with partners for livelihood opportunities, services<sup>8</sup>, programmes<sup>9</sup> while also escaping the double stigma of being associated with an HIV/AIDS based organization.

## 1.5. Laying down the research canvas.

This paper has been organized within six chapters. The first chapter gave an overall view of the research, the problem it seeks to address; contextual background of the problem and country; and a brief overview of the unique challenges faced by Bhutanese LGBTQ youth. Methodology and the process of data collection methods used to generate knowledge for the papers has been elaborated in Chapter two. Chapter three provides the conceptual framework used to give a critical lens in understanding the agency of young LGBTQ in their lived realities. In chapter four, the analysis of the research findings will be presented in the format

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<sup>8</sup> Specialized health professionals for medical consultations and counseling, hormones.

<sup>9</sup> Skill building and awareness programmes

of stories, thematically done to highlight key discussions. Chapter five will also present experiences while explaining how young people use agency within boundaries of restrictive socio-cultural contexts. In the concluding chapter, I take the readers back to the central claim of the study to discuss implications on future policy planning and individual subjectivities. In the next chapter, I elaborate further on the field work methods and the writing process.

## **Chapter 2 Process of generating knowledge.**

### **2.1. Initiating data collection by strategic choices.**

This is an experiential study combining in-depth qualitative interviewing and ethnographic participant observation, to narrate experiences and use of agency of LGBTQ youth within a dominant heterosexual norm.

In-depth qualitative interviewing as a method is apt for this study, as it helps to draw out nuances and meanings attached/derived from everyday mundane experiences of getting by. The choice of in-depth interviewing to source data, is important as it allows the researcher to bring to forefront the subjectivities that confirm, subtle layers of social injustice and discrimination. Secondly, ethnographic participant observation has been useful to gauge the lived experiences of agency and participation within larger contexts of socialization and building relationships (Cerwonka and Malkki 2008).

This chapter is split into two segments. The first segment offers an understanding of the researcher's dilemmas regarding positionality and challenges encountered during the research. The second segment talks about the rationale behind the fieldwork methods used and how data was analyzed.

### **2.2. Reflecting on dilemmas in doing research with young people.**

In this segment, I bring to light the subjectivities and positionalities, I unwittingly brought to the research which may have had an influence in the research outcomes. Though, I strongly believe my subjectivity is knowledge in itself, yet, I was mindful not to let it stifle the voices of the youth.

#### **2.2.1. Bringing along my subjectivity and positionality.**

The baggage of being part of a known organization played out vividly to my disadvantage during the initial interview stages. Having to work with participants who already possess familiarity of my professional affiliations, attributed towards our relationship being embroiled in power dynamics. In addition, having previously worked with four founding/senior members of RB was a disadvantage as I noticed social hierarchies existed within this marginalized group.

Recognizing how inherent power dynamics can distort ethics and negatively impact the research outcomes, I invested a major chunk of my initial fieldwork in doing reflexivity. I practiced reflexivity through introspection of each and every research move I made. By making myself accessible and relatable, I was able to gain trust. I would share my research insecurities and ignorance of LGBTQ prior to joining RENEW. I practiced 'judicious use of self-disclosure' (Harrison et al. 2001:323) whereby I would tell participants of my personal motivations and interests behind engaging with LGBTQ individuals.

#### **2.2.2. Working around dilemmas and challenges.**

Considering my participants are young (between the ages 19 to 24) and only five out of the nine are high school educated, maintaining a researcher-respondent status that resonates equality rather than 'studying down' was challenging. Understanding the dilemmas of power

and authority in doing research with young people, I paid attention to “acknowledge and account for the structural and institutional relations that legitimizes authority” (Best 2007:12). Reflexivity allowed me to think subjectively; it gave me room to think about my underlying assumptions, the purpose behind the research, and/or if any unintentional ideologies I may convey through the research (Shefer 2016:9).

In addition to my hierarchal researcher identity, I also carried the baggage of being affiliated to an institution/organization. I had one primary and two secondary participants who requested me to use my organizational influence to provide them personal assistance. Even though I practiced not going ‘native’ to maintain neutrality, it was challenging for me as Thimphu (capital) is a small place. To avoid conflict, I would constantly remind them of the research ethics I had to adhere to.

Bhutan is a small society; and even more close-knit and personal is the Bhutan LGBTQ community. In three of the eight participant observations, I experienced this personal proximity starkly. Participants seemed to know ‘everything’ about each other as there was much exchange of personal information in casual light. I experienced dilemmas of having to maintain confidentiality and anonymity while using covert information shared about a certain person(s) or incident(s). This posed for me an interpretation risk given my new knowledge about the person(s) of interest. For confidentiality, I have decided to restrict my interpretations to only that information shared directly and collapse others for a generalized analysis.

In terms of research participants, my endeavor was to have a fair representation of individuals ranging across different ethnicities, class, and sexual orientations. However, due to lack of access, I realized I was working with a group representing the middle-income category and belonging mainly to the two dominant ‘*Ngalop*’ and ‘*Sharchop*’ ethnicities. Using known gatekeeper to source my participants also restricted the scope of diversity.

## 2.3. Application of methods in fieldwork.

In this segment, I discuss about the process and implementation of methods in fieldwork in-depth. All in all, I was in fieldwork in Thimphu for forty days from July to August 2019.

### *Ethical clearance*

Prior my fieldwork, I cleared a mandatory process of getting an ethical clearance from the Research Ethics Board of Health under MoH.

### *Sourcing participants*

I initially planned to source my participants neutrally through anonymous Facebook LGBTQ pages, but faced a deadlock. Given the lack of dedicated public spaces used as hangout places by LGBTQ youth, my choices were far and in between. Running out of options, I got in touch with my personal contacts in RB and youth group coordinators in Bhutan. Through them, I was introduced to the first five participants. Existing participants assisted me with referrals to other five participants who met the criteria (age and orientation) using chain sampling. All participants self-identified their orientation.

### *Participant profile*

A total of nine participants were eventually finalized for the study out of the initial ten<sup>10</sup>. The orientation composition of the participants are; Transmen-4, Transwoman-1, Female bisexual-1, Gay-2, Queer-1. Age range for the participants are between 19-24. Two of the

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<sup>10</sup> The tenth participant dropped due to his busy schedule.

participants are full time students while others are either employed full time or in between jobs. Regarding educational status of participants, five among the nine have completed high school, two are currently in high school and two chose not to complete high school. One participant is based in a different district but would come to Thimphu often for his football matches. Two participants are employed in a nine to five work setting; three work flexi timings in private businesses, while two are in-between jobs. Except for two participants, seven are open (to their family) about their sexual orientation. Two participants in the research have been a couple for the last three years. Eight out of the nine participants admitted having been or had been in same-sex relationships.

### ***Deriving knowledge from key informant***

During the orientation session, I explained to the participants about the research objectives, what is expected of them, letter of consent besides also answering their queries. I also gave the participants an option to choose personal pseudonyms and pronouns for themselves. All places for interview were chosen by the participants themselves.

All nine participants gave permission to audio record the interview, but two participants asked for the audio material not to be shared further. With each participant, I spent a minimum of 45 minutes and maximum of 2 hours per session. I used semi-structured and open-ended questions which were based off broad categories of discussions, leaving room to pursue other topics of interests.

A total of eight participant observations were undertaken in their places of comfort, such as in workplaces, a participant's home and hangout places to comprehend deeper levels of meanings and attachments to people and places in 'natural settings' (Cerwonka and Malkki 2008; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007).

In addition to collecting narratives from participants, I also interviewed and engaged with three secondary stakeholders, six core members of RB and five LGBTQ individuals.

## **2.4. Bringing the data together.**

Except for interviews with secondary informants and participant observations, all interview sessions were recorded. As soon as I would be done with an interview, I would transcribe it manually in a word document. Participant observation were transcribed within broad themes. Six participants preferred to do the interviews in national language *Dzongkha*, so I did a verbatim transcription of their interviews. With each transcription, I included a short description of my observations regarding their body language, tone of voice, gestures and appearances to give me more data to work with. Upon transcribing the narratives, I ball parked quotes and information under specific themes. These were drawn broadly to answer the research objective and questions. Engagement with relevant literature and secondary data was a continuous process throughout the research.

## **2.5. Wrapping the chapter with ethical considerations.**

To understand the experiential hegemonic prevalence of heterosexual norms of young LGBTQ in Thimphu, this chapter took us through step by step on how data was collected, and the relevancy and credibility of each methods used. Throughout the field work and beyond, challenges and dilemmas encountered has been listed in the chapter along with how they were resolved, so as not to jeopardize the authenticity of the research. In this study, getting participants' honest views and interpolating them judiciously has been a priority. As a researcher, I maintained highest level of ethical standards at all times keeping in mind not



to overpower my subjectivity and positionality over the participants' perspectives. Overall, I do believe I have incorporated valid ethical considerations of both RBEH and ISS research ethics throughout the process to uphold my research credibility.

In subsequent chapters, experiences of participants along with discussions on key findings using relevant concepts will be shared.

## **Chapter 3 Conceptualizing everyday navigation of LBGTQ youth.**

### **3.1. Introducing the conceptual framework.**

As this study focuses on revealing the often-untold experiences of LBGTQ youth in Bhutan, this chapter presents an overview of the analytical lens used to unpack agency in doing so. I take critical youth studies as my point of departure for the overall conceptualization as it provides an edge in understanding young peoples' subjectivities. It helps ground the study with the nuances of dilemmas endured by youth, while also jostling the intermediary stage between childhood and adulthood.

In conjunction, I also bring into picture agency to uncover how young people navigate contesting dilemmas, brought about by cultures of silences to stay relevant in a heterosexual society. I then bring counterproductive discourses created by performing of sexual scripts, resiliency and stigma internalization as contributing towards an environment of non-recognition. Finally, I talk about performativity of LBGTQ youth as reinforcing heteronormativity to make sense in a patriarchal prominence.

### **3.2. Young as social agents and co-producers of culture.**

The concept of youth has historically been used to refer to persons transitioning into adulthood, by way of achieving certain social independency markers like employment and heterosexual marriage (Wood 2017:1179). It is a "unique developmental stage in human life cycle and sexuality is commonly seen as a pivotal issue in negotiating the change from childhood to adulthood" (Sharpe 2003: 210). Young people's sexuality has been widely contested, shrouded in fears of losing their vulnerability and innocence. However, young people's sexual experiences is not isolated, nor can their subjective sexuality be considered homogeneous. Encompassing sex, sexuality includes "sexual identity, love, empathy, kinship and comfort" which are entrenched within larger social discourses and practices (Watkins 2008: 116).

In recent decades, this linear trajectory of childhood to adulthood as a notion has received considerable criticism for "failing to recognise the fluidity and complexity of young people's lives" (Wood 2017:1179). Critical youth studies has problematized the framing of young people around representations of 'troubled', 'at risk', 'delinquent' as biased adult assumptions (Best 2007:17).

The lives of youth are changing rapidly resulting in creation of identities which brings along tensions of recognition, participation and inclusion. Within an adult-centric framework of governance and functioning, youth tend to develop their alternative patterns of practices, engagement and making sense of realities. Constant movement of ideas and people facilitated by globalization has resulted in young people picking choices and developing avenues of new cultures and identities (Valentine 2003:40). Youth are no more "subjects in the making anymore rather subjects in their own rights" as they are able to negotiate complex situations contributing towards the production of a social world (Best 2007:11). The extent of which youth can exercise their agency is dependent on the restrictive social, economic, political, and historical boundaries established by societies (Valentine 2003:39).

### **3.3. Cultures of silences around homosexuality.**

The power of silences is a dominant force brought about by environments of non-recognition and unacceptability of homosexuality through discourses of ‘others’ (Atkinson 2002:126). It is taught through the “absence of representation in discussion, study, inquiry or subject matter; through the policing and perpetuation of heterosexual norms and assumptions; and through the blind eye we turn, collectively, to heterosexist and homophobic practices” (ibid: 125). These discourses are linked to inequalities of power, gender, and status thus people’s reaction towards LGBTQ are translated into hostilities, violence and malevolent stereotypes (Herek et al. 2009:33). As much as norms of heteronormativity excludes and pushes minorities to the fringes; cultures of silences are also subtly created and get adapted to by minorities, through use of agency in their performativity, stigma internalization, coping and resiliency mechanisms.

#### ***Discourses as knowledge.***

Foucault sees homosexuality as a discursively and relationally constructed system rather than belonging exclusively to an individual (1981). For him, it goes on to produce and define truths based on the legitimacy and authority positioned as an expert knowledge (cited in Rahman and Jackson 2010:123). Knowledge on sexuality becomes power that necessitates defining and regulation of normative and deviant norms (ibid). In discourses regarding young people’s capabilities, assumptions and adult prejudices take precedence that are linked to “larger debates of power, ideologies and politics” (Giroux 1996:197).

#### ***Sexual scripts to make sense.***

Scripts are beyond a set of rules and regulations for people to abide by in a particular context. Rather scripts helps in understanding the conduct of behaviors in a social context; the conduct is a product of the socio-historical process that it becomes (Gagnon and Simon 1974: 53). By constantly making and modifying meanings, scripts helps a person in “learning the meaning of internal stages, organizing...decoding...setting limits...and linking meaning from non-sexual aspects to sexual experiences” (ibid:19).

#### ***Internalizing sexual stigma.***

Sexual stigma is an attitude referring to negative and devalued status of homosexuals arising during socialization in a heterosexual environment. It stems from a shared perception and knowledge of societies. Sexual self-stigma like the prejudice held among heterosexual is confirmation of a type of cultural ideology that devalues sexual minorities creating institutional obstructions for participation and representation (Herek 2008). Hence, internalizing stigma entails “adapting one’s self-concept to be congruent with the stigmatizing responses of society” (Herek et al. 2009: 33).

#### ***Conditions for Resilience***

Resilience is the ability of young people to cope and bounce back through stressful situations and conflicting experiences. There is an assumption that young people have the material resource, options and the social politics needed for successful coping (Ungar 2007:87). Young people’s coping and depiction of resiliency becomes an “outcome of negotiations between individuals and their environment to maintain a self-definition of healthy” (Ungar 2002a, 2004 cited in ibid:87).

### 3.4. Young peoples' restrained agency in asserting.

Young people's agency to make decision, informed choices and the ability to act upon them freely, depends on the multilayered relational factors that limits as well as facilitates young people's sexuality (Bell 2012:282). Agency is constantly being used and actively constructed as one goes about navigating daily lives. In regard to competing situations, agency is an important factor for contextualizing experiences to see how decisions are made in consonant with one's intention. Agency allows for LGBTQ's individual subjectivities and collective action towards a life of either conforming, resisting or developing alternative responses to heteronormativity. It helps to understand the everyday mundane lives of interaction and engagement with the society (Rahman and Jackson: 2010:155).

Therefore, an environment that provides spaces for young LGBTQ individuals to explore agency around their own sexuality tend to have affirmative emotional, sexual and health outcomes.

### 3.5. Heteronormativity that thrives on patriarchal performativity.

#### *Heteronormativity*

Heteronormative privileges are interwoven and assimilated into the social fabric forming social structures and norms around which everyday lives exist. It assumes everyone as heterosexual thus normalizing heterosexuality and hegemonic gender performances that gives prominence to masculine and feminine binaries (Kjaran and Kristinsdottir 2015:979). To become legitimate individuals, the performances of gender and sexuality must be in line with the dominant notions of heteronormativity (ibid:980). Circumventing sexual expressions, heterosexuality becomes "key sites of intersection between gender and sexuality, but also one that reveals the interconnections between sexual and non-sexual aspects of social life" (Jackson 2006:107).

Non-conforming to established relational norms of family and social institutions means expulsion as sexual deviations, hence LGBTQ people comes to be depicted as the abject 'other'. These heteronormative norms is solidified as 'regulated ideals' through discourses on sexuality (Foucault 1978:24).

In hegemonic heterosexual systems, the complex situations of butch- femme<sup>11</sup> becomes unintelligible and beyond control thus losing its authority (Nguyen 2008:679). To reiterate its authority, heteronormativity has to be secured through repetitions (Butler 1997). Transgressing bodies that exhibits male femme and female butch while reinforcing the need for heteronormativity structures also threatens to expose "the failure of heterosexual regimes ever fully to legislate or contain their own ideals" (Butler 1997: 22).

#### *Gender performativity*

Butler proposes that gender is "not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pre-given sex (a juridical conception); gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established" (1999: 11). Rather than being biologically determined, gender comes into existence through the enactment of its daily performance which is reinforced through social norms (Butler 1990). Performativity is not just about a singular performance, rather it "is a reiteration of norms that precede,

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<sup>11</sup> Femme- Feminine acting/dressing, Butch-Masculine acting/dressing (urban dictionary).

constrain and exceed the performer” (Butler 1993b:243). The limitation with Butler’s viewpoint is that she fails to provide an insight on how everyday agentic actions also produces gender (Rahman and Jackson: 2010:173). Agency will be used to unpack gender performativity proposed by Butler .

The hierarchical system of heterosexual privileges masculinity and thrives on the devaluation of femininity and homosexuality (Schilt and Westbrook 2009:443). Holding on to the institution of gender binaries reflect power that is derived from a patriarchal system of compulsory heterosexuality<sup>12</sup>, sustained and reproduced through performativity (Butler 1990). Transgressing bodies such as female transgenders dichotomizes the gender-sexuality paradigm by reinforcing heteronormativity for masculine privileges while at the same time also challenging the status quo of womens’ objectification (Nguyen 2008: 681).

In this study, I shed light on how LGBTQ youth use agency to perform their genders not as a consequence of organic realism but rather as a social need to uphold prominence of binaries to stay socially relevant (Kessler and McKenna 1978).

### ***Patriarchy***

When women started acting on their sexuality by way of adopting relationships beyond heterosexuality, what was apparent was that their ability to challenge the power of control was not significant enough. Women’s autonomy threatens state, religion and family; therefore, regulation is necessary through institutions (Rich 1980:11). Rich says compulsory heterosexuality becomes imposed on women due to patriarchal norms of gender. The concept of patriarchy is core to the social systems that thrives on hierarchies of legitimized power in male superiority (Rahman and Jackson 2010:64).

The inequalities of genders is a creation of hegemonic patriarchal masculinity which legitimizes “heterosexuality...understood as regimes of power/discourse” (Butler 2006: xxix). Critiqued by feminists from 1970 onwards, patriarchy allows the perpetuation of male superiority brought about by a social system that favors males socially, economically and politically (Rahman and Jackson 2010:63). Thus, for Butler, going back to the heteronormative definitions of gender and sexuality is core in a patriarchal heterosexist system (Butler 1990).

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<sup>12</sup> Propounded by A. Rich in 1980 to refer to the mechanisms of masculinity/femininity causing gender inequality.

## Chapter 4 Personal stories of everyday struggles and experiences.

By telling stories of experiences of young LGBTQ people in this chapter, this research aims to ground attention to the realities of navigation and interpretation of meanings attached to everyday practices. It decodes young lives by taking us through the “situated strategies of survival they engage in, their own identity claims, their acts of storytelling, the social networks within which they navigate and the ways in which they interact with wider frameworks” (McQuaid 2014:571). An analysis of the experiences will also be presented alongside.

### 4.1. Schools as sites for heterosexual ideological propagation.

#### 4.1.1. Playgrounds for early discrimination.

Schools are often considered neutral grounds for sex and sexuality; however, it becomes one of the first places for LGBTQ children to experience harassment and discrimination (Renold 2005; DePalma and Atkinson 2006a). In this study, participants expressed schools were one of the first places where they learnt of their lower status due to their sexual orientation, making them objects of ridicule. Experiences have been severe, particularly for the transwoman and effeminate gay people interviewed in the study. Enduring severe victimization, two participants were pushed to attempt suicide. In narrating his school experiences, a twenty-one-year-old gay participant, Ngodup said,

“I was constantly bullied in school, I used to have boys who would call me names like ‘*Chbaka*<sup>13</sup>’, sissy....in the toilet the boys would ask to see what I had under my school dress. One time, a classmate boy touched me all the way...I just screamed... as a result of the bullying and harassment I attempted to kill myself three times while still in high school”.

Sharing similar experiences, twenty-three-year-old transwoman participant Padma said,

“In school, I had a bad time with my school friends. They used to tease me and call me names like ‘*Chakka*’. They used to harass me and dominate me for being feminine...Sometimes when I used to sleep, they used to harass me sexually...Even the teachers used to laugh at me. I really felt bad and I tried to behave like a boy by copying their behaviours. But I couldn’t change myself and I went back to being feminine...Boys were mean; they would put lot of garbage on my bed...I used to fight with the boys...I have also tried to do suicide”.

As we can see, schools often become heteronormative conduits for tacitly and actively making transgressive LGBTQ children stand out as deviants (Epstein et. al 2003 cited in DePalma and Atkinson 2006:342). Moreover, what is apparent from these two accounts is that schools become playgrounds for enacting hegemonic masculinity. The necessity to adhere to self-constructions of masculinity through punishing and disciplining underpins discourses of misogyny and homophobia (Atkinson 2002: 122).

Ngodup went on to express his disbelief that children as young as in primary schools knew about derogatory terms like ‘*Chakka*’ and ‘Tomboys’ and would use it to devalue people like him. A study done by DePalma and Atkinson in 2010 explains that school children learn about “homophobia and transphobia at a very early age, that ‘gay’ can mean anything that is ugly or doesn’t work properly” (page 1670). Thus, we can see that children unknowingly

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<sup>13</sup> Derogatory and offensive term to address effeminate males. It has its origins from India.

becomes carriers of adults' notions of homonegativity without realizing the consequences of it. In other studies, done by scholars (Kenway and Fitzclarence 1997; Mac and Ghail 1994, 1999) who analyzed schools, have located it to be hotbeds, where notions of masculinities, femininities, sexualities and hegemonic heterosexual masculinities have become prominent with LGBTQ harassment (cited in Renold 2002:416). To conclude, schools cannot be considered static nor neutral entities as they are institutions created from intersecting practices of societies that extends, boundaries of space and time.

#### **4.1.2. Not a topic of discussion in school pedagogies.**

Institutional discourses in schools often deny children sexual awareness that embodies subjectivities of how children live their sexual autonomy and contradictions (Driver 2007:307). The need for sexuality education in Bhutan resulted in the two ministries of health and education collaborating through the Comprehensive School Health Programme (CSHP) to develop a 'Guidebook for Teachers on Adolescent Health' in 2000. The guidebook with its undertone of an abstinent heterosexual rhetoric fails to recognize the agency of diverse sexualities, in making informed choices regarding their body, health and emotional wellbeing.

All nine participants agreed in the inadequacy of sexuality education in schools in meeting their needs. They felt the curriculum only taught them the biological aspects of the body and how to keep oneself safe from HIV/STIs and pregnancy.

Twenty-year-old gay participant Jampa shared his thoughts, he said,

“What is taught in schools is not enough, its only biology. For children like us (LGBTQ), schools does not teach us about our changing bodies and our identities. We cannot expect much from teachers also, most of them are not aware or don't know how to deal with us. Most of us have to rely on the internet or if we are lucky to have supportive family members who are aware and willing to help us”.

The views of the participants is corroborated by the study done by NSB in 2015 among 250 young people to gauge their understanding on sexuality. It was revealed that young Bhutanese viewed abstinence (until ready) based sex education were not effective, as early and unsafe sex were quite rampant in rural places (2015:93). Being active sexual agents, young people need evidence-based information and support to construct and negotiate their sexual wellbeing (de Haas et al. 2017: 2). Additionally, based on the five circles of sexuality model proposed by Dr. Dennis Dailey in 1981, sexuality education becomes wholesome only if all components of 'Sensuality, Intimacy, Power and Sexualization, Sexual Reproductive Health and Sexual Identity' is included.

When twenty-one-year-old queer participant Ngawang (prefers a gender-neutral term) was asked why young people and sexuality have become two opposing topics of discussion. S/he said,

“In schools, sex education is about anatomy... Not more than that. Teachers are shy to speak about condom and its usage. There is still an abstinence-based sex education in schools. Even educated people hesitate and ask not to speak about it. 'Don't speak in front of the kids. We might encourage them'. But considering how sexually active young people in Bhutan are, it defeats the purpose”.

By choosing to deliberately leave out discussions and recognition of young peoples' sexuality and topics of LGBTQ in schools, there is an implicit assumption that children are able to choose their sexual orientation (Gegenfurtner and Gebhardt 2017:216). This fear that children will choose to become sexually active and adopt risqué practices like same-sex

relationships leads to creation of ‘appropriate’<sup>14</sup> performances of sexualities and gendered bodies in school environments through invisibility in textbooks, course subjects, discussions, teaching pedagogies and practices (Kjaran and Kristinsdottir 2015:978). As described, constructions of heteronormative narratives makes homosexuality come to be associated with sexual desires and perversions while heterosexuality is not (Foucault 1979).

## 4.2. Discriminatory practices in job markets.

Beyond schools and in the job market, there is pressure to conform to heterosexual ideologies put in place by workplaces through requirement of appropriate appearances, dress code and behaviours. Youth who find it uncomfortable to fit into dominant gender norms often let opportunities slide or most of the time, are not provided a chance to be included. For example, after completing class ten, an effeminate Ngawang, went looking for a job like others. S/he was rejected flatly based on the visible effeminate expressions and gay identify s/he projected. S/he says “I came to know that my CV was thrown in the dustbin. I then made up my mind that normal office work was not cut out for me. I have been working in private businesses since then”.

On the other hand, a twenty-four-year-old transman participant, Kunchen shares how scenarios turned out differently for him as his employer manipulated his masculine identity. He said “I was working for a private company, and being a transman person, the owner would prefer to recruit us than girls. They would pay us less and make us lift heavy things”. As shown in a study done by Schilt and Westbrook in 2009 on transgenders, in non-sexualized work relationships, people generally tend to accept the transition smoothly. However, the problem arises in sexualized relationships where both gender and heterosexuality is required, hence the “heterosexual women's perception of a mismatch between ...biological sex and gender identity comes to the forefront” (ibid:450).

Quitting his job, Kunchen now plays part-time football which provides an avenue for part-time allowance and free time to look for employment elsewhere. His aspiration is to get a job in his line of interest, football or drive a wholesale van if that fails. He says,

“getting a job as a football coach is difficult, they don’t want to recruit us (transmen people), they prefer ‘normal’ girls over us. They tell us to grow our hair and be like girls. They consider us as troublemakers as we move in packs and behave like boys. But the sad thing is they don’t even consider us as boys”.

Kunchen’s case makes clear that possession of the ‘correct’ body is central for a person’s validation. Alternatively, Padma, who works in a club wishes nothing more than to have a ‘normal’<sup>15</sup> office job. She says she will be able to gain society’s approval and acceptance by having a job like other girls. Each time she meets potential employers, she is disheartened when they tell her that she cannot be hired as she does not possess a woman’s body. Though Padma has always identified as a female, she is led to believe that to transition into a ‘proper’ female, possession of a body with correct biological genitalia or through surgical correction is necessary. Whenever she looks at her masculine hand, she is ashamed of it, thus she harbors a dream to transition into a woman by taking hormones, no matter the costs.

As evident from Kunchen and Padma’s stories, they reveal a state of normalization brought about by heteronormative projections; either through bodies or by doing correctly, one of the two binary genders. This validates the theorization of heteronormativity which is done

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<sup>14</sup> Male=masculine, Female=femininity

<sup>15</sup> 9 am-5 pm desk job.



in a manner convenient to uphold assumptions of binary genders, one that is consonant with biological sex and is heterosexually attracted (Schilt and Westbrook 2009: 441).

### 4.3. “The elephant in the room”

Sex and sexuality is not a topic of Bhutanese dinner discussion; consequently, families avoid discussions around it. Although being a tolerant society, Bhutanese struggle to accept LGBTQ people due to prominence of heterosexual narratives. Young LGBTQ who have come open about their sexual orientation to their friends and family are often cautioned to remain as discreet as possible. Bhutan being a close-knit society, where the privilege of anonymity is absent, there is a fear of negative attention on the family. Excluding the female bisexual participant, all eight participants mentioned that their families did have an idea about their identities from childhood. This was attached to visible traits in everyday choices of clothes, toys and friendships. However, inherent cultures of silences surrounding sexuality prohibits parents and family members in discussing sexuality, openly.

In the case of Jampa who still considers himself a closet gay, his sexuality is like the ‘elephant in the room’. He says,

“For us we really don’t have a clear line between being open and in closet. My close friends know about me. But I have never told my parents I am gay, nor have I publicly disclosed my status. But I think my parents know about me. Sometimes I go home wearing lipstick and I am also bit feminine... I also work in a place where there are other LGBTQ people...yet they don’t say anything. I feel they will tolerate my behavior till maybe I take it to another level like when I find a same-sex partner”.

This uneasiness and silences created around sexuality, more so on homosexuality makes matters worse by having it associated with misunderstandings and ‘illicit’ rhetoric (Atkinson 2002: 124).

Likewise, with the intention to avoid society’s rejection, Tashi, a twenty-one-year-old transman person said family members would often persuade children to stay quiet and not attract attention. He said,

“Some of our transmen friends had appeared on national broadcast BBS...the next day, the parents of our friends’ who hadn’t appeared on the TV show, advised their children not to hang out with them. They were of the opinion that everyone will start talking about their children too”.

This suggests that, maintaining a culture of silence is crucial for parents and family members as they fear that their family will be ostracized and ridiculed if their child is labeled ‘different’. Belonging to the same society which has learnt and applied the tenets of prejudice on others, they have internalized stigma and portending homonegative reaction from society on themselves, chooses avoidance (Herek 2009: 33). By doing so, overtly and covertly, an illusion is built to erase the presence of sexual minorities by not acknowledging them as it carries negative backlash of hostilities and discriminatory treatment. Presumption of ‘heterosexual assumption’ makes lives easier while visibility of sexual minorities becomes a problem due to its perceived abnormality in the society (ibid).

Ngodup, as an advocate on LGBTQ rights appears on TV and public forums regularly. Despite being an open gay person for almost four years, he senses a cloud of awkwardness, not only from his parents but also within himself when making references to his gay life. He attributes this behavior to the way Bhutanese have been raised not to talk about sexuality with elders.

Among the general public, sex and sexuality is often spoken in a casual manner which erodes the negative impact it can have on a person's life. For instance, Ngawang said,

“most Bhutanese don't speak directly or have open conversation about sex and sexuality in a matured manner. But they make a lot of jokes, innuendos and indirect conversations among themselves. We do have quite an open and casual approach regarding sex, that is why extra-marital affairs and divorces are so high in Bhutan ”.

Even so, public reactions to LBGTQ in Bhutan seems mixed. During an observation done in a participants' workplace, female customers exhibited a sense of awkwardness through their hypersensitive behaviors. Taking them for their projected gender, female customers would often be confused on how to correctly address and behave around them at first. But among regular customers, there was sense of comfort that the participants' projected gender was accepted as seen through their inclusion in 'gender rituals'<sup>16</sup> (Goffman 1977 cited in Schilt and Westbrook 2009:447).

## 4.4. Transitioning identities.

### 4.4.1 Creating and choosing identities.

LBGTQ people creates multiple and varied notions of self-identity by negotiating “one's own regulation of self and how one is regulated by those one associates with... reliant on the recognition and confirmation of their identity by others” (McLean 2014:6). Majority of the participants said they were confused but partially aware of their identities since childhood. Tashi remembers not wanting to wear dresses early while Jampa was fascinated by makeup and dolls.

Excluding the female bisexual participant Yangchen, all said it was a gradual but early process of discovering their identities. Admittedly, all said it was during their teenage years when they started developing romantic attraction toward same-sex peers that they felt a heightened sense of confusion. 21-year-old transman participant, Lhundup said “for me, I think I always knew I was different; I have always been attracted to girls and have liked doing boy stuff. It's so natural”.

Individual and social identities are developed and remade constantly by applying Butler's identity performativity. In the case of Bhutan where information and help in the form of guidance from adults and peers are scarce, identities get shaped by learning online or looking for people like themselves. For instance, upon investigation the study found that transmen individuals, having come open were likely to be organized internally than others. They are usually known to hang in groups, choosing to stick together and move in packs. This behavior while protecting them from direct harm would often expose them to negative group judgments.

Transmen persons in Bhutan are often publicly referred to as 'Tomboy'<sup>17</sup>; but these terms can mean two separate phenomena. Considering oneself as Tomboy can mean a cross dresser and a person who is cross dressing in addition to being attracted to other girls. Within themselves, transmen people identified with the local term 'Tomboy' though they also said it was used as slur by others. 'Transman' as a label is of recent origin stemming from donor programs; mostly serving external purposes. In groups, differentiating between a transman and

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<sup>16</sup> Casual/stereotyped conversations on makeup, clothes, husbands, children.

<sup>17</sup> Derogatory term for female who exhibit male characteristics.

crossdresser is often difficult. Lack of clarity has added to the confusion among the general public who often say that transmen/tomboys are faking their identities for undue advantage<sup>18</sup>.

Regarding sexual orientations, there is a general belief that it is fixed and rigid. For instance, Tashi recalls having seen girls make the switch between genders through their outer appearances. He attributes that this could probably be due to peer pressure or them being in a state of confusion. He mentions being 'real' transman person meant being 'born this way' and someone who would stay that way. This outlook was shared by other transmen youth in the study too. Developmental psychologist Dr. Lisa Diamond has questioned the innateness of sexual orientation in the 'born this way' narratives. She says that this may cause harm and bring more social unjust to the LBGTQ movement as it fails to recognize the fluidity in sexuality (TedxTalks 2018: no page). In addition, four sexuality researches (Chung and Katayama, 1996; Diamond, 2008; Epstein et al., 2012; Rosario et al., 2011) have shown that sexual orientation falls on a continuum, hence it is fluid and can change over lifetime (cited in Better and Simula 2015:666). As LBGTQ people challenge the institution of heteronormative gender and sexuality, they also go back to seeking refuge in the norms of tolerance set up by heteronormativity.

#### **4.4.2. Acquiring knowledge by assimilating into popular culture.**

In contexts where information on sexuality is lacking in form of guidance from elders, internet and digital platforms become great ways to engage in a self-learning process; from changing appearances, developing identities to managing relationships. For young people, learning by consuming popular culture is crucial towards developing identities (Valentine 2003). This study detected that resorting to internet to clarify confusion is common practice among LBGTQ people in Bhutan. For instance, Ngodup, being bullied and confused about his effeminate self, turned to internet for the much-needed knowledge, he said,

“Once a classmate had called me a gay, so while using internet for a school project, I happened to google about gay as I was curious...I browsed about what gay is, what being gay meant...I concluded that I am gay. Since then, I have been going online to learn about LBGTQ and how things are done”.

Researchers Craig and McInroy's 2014 study corroborates that information technology and internet platforms such as social media and smart phones have increased social support, assisted in learning and developing identities and wellbeing for LBGTQ people. For example, Padma who is an active Facebook user, regularly uses it to build online networks and post updates about her life. For her, Facebook has been extremely useful. She says,

“I am in touch with few trans people living abroad...I had been using hormones from India but the progress is slow...I wanted to try a hormone that will give me quick results...so I asked friends online...got to know that there is a Thai hormone which is effective and gives quick results but it's expensive.... I need to earn extra money from my tips at the club to afford it”.

Opinions and lifestyles of experienced transgenders gives Padma's trans life a validation and purpose in life.

Equally, for the participants who use social media regularly, making online relationships was seen comparable as having real life experiences. Participants said, it brought them a sense of freedom as they could choose how they wanted to project themselves through the pictures and videos they uploaded. Besides friendships, one of the motives for chatting online was to meet a potential partner, given the lack of dedicated physical spaces for LBGTQ people

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<sup>18</sup> To justify poor behavior like staying out late with friends, drinking, smoking.

to interact. Chatting mostly occurred via fake accounts as the youth understood that they could easily become targets of abuse or ridicule by ill-intentioned people. This was resonated by Ngodup who said,

“There are many LGBT Facebook pages and fake accounts in Bhutan. I have met new people from there. I have joined global groups as they are less vulgar and more supportive. When we join a particular group, and if people are interested in us, they will message us and then we start chatting. But you never know who is on the other end, and what intentions they may have, people just want to experiment with us, they think it is a thrill. But still many LGBTQ people just take the risk as they want companionship badly”.

Besides online platforms, LGBTQ films and documentaries are also popular sources of learning cultures. Sociological and geographical research have shown that young people are active agents attaching meanings to behaviors learnt off these virtual platforms; these become markers of inclusion/exclusion based on style, class, and social relations (Valentine 2003:45). Bunny, a nineteen-year-old transman participant explains further, he says,

“My friends and I watch popular Thai and Pilipino gay movies and documentaries. Some copy their habits like stomach and breast binding. I have not heard of anyone do crotch stuffing, but I am fine with my body for now. But yes, in future I would like do surgery...Overweight transmen people are more conscious when they run as they don't want to show people that they have breasts...if you look at us, we mostly have similar hairstyles and dressing style”.

Joining the global trend, Bhutan hosted its first drag fashion show on 7<sup>th</sup> June 2019. Ngawang who was part of the event said, it's quite impossible for Bhutanese to stay isolated. Further s/he added,

“What the gays in Bhutan are doing is they look at what other gays do in western countries like James Charles Dickinson and Jefferre Star (popular gay Youtube celebrities and makeup artists). They are intrigued by their fan following and their million dollars make-up empires. Copying them will cause more harm as our context is different”.

Here we see, internet and digital platforms becomes performative spaces whereby LGBTQ people adopt random patterns from media representations reinforcing gay stereotypes, but also at the same time “perpetuating the idea that there is no other way to be...many young transpeople may not understand that there are options beyond surgery and hormones” (Siebler 2010: 328). Films and television displays depictions of “transqueers simply being born in the ‘wrong body’ and therefore must have this corrected with hormones and surgeries”(ibid:342). Whilst, young people may not have the resources to procure hormones and make surgical transitions just yet, nevertheless they assert the need to conform to stereotypical prescriptions of masculinity/femininity through their hyper performativity. Transmen people are likely to be more outgoing, frequenting bars, making tattoos, staying out late and indulging in male dominated sports<sup>19</sup>. While transwomen persons indulged in makeup, bright clothes and feminine profession<sup>20</sup>.

Adding on to the influx of information, is a growing interest of development partners and donor agencies on LGBTQ and HIV issues in the country. Ngodup lamented that for most donor driven projects, numbers speaks volumes, hence there is an urgency to register new members rather than strengthening community of existing members. Young participants felt they were being provided with information and put into labels; most of which they have not understood properly. Rights-based narratives of developmental projects often bring along constraints for young people by laying appropriate ways to be and behave (Cheney 2007:67).

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<sup>19</sup> Fieldnotes, participant observation

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

Since the movement of LGBTQ rights has had a slow start in Bhutan compared to other countries, there is a rush to catch up with the global community with less retrospection.

Having said this, internalization of popular culture is not without agency. Individuals don't merely adopt and perform scripts without understanding the possible benefit/harm it may bring to self or to the group collectively. What is depicted in movies and popular culture elsewhere is experimented in Bhutan which has led to the rapid realization of gains. Today, gay movement in Bhutan is vibrant with internet and media having contributed significantly towards providing a platform for power of queer knowledge.

## **4.5. Internal issues around acceptance.**

### **4.5.1. Stigma consciousness.**

Young LGBTQ learn the tenets of sexual stigma and negativity; these are internalized either inwardly or outwardly, which is reflected in their choices of profession and socialization. In Bhutan, there has been no recorded incidences of homophobia in the form of deliberate hate crimes or violence, but subtle forms of stigma, discrimination and homonegativity do exist (UNDP 2017:8). These subtle discriminations often remain hidden as they are embedded within exclusionary practices of norms, structures and institutions.

A young LGBTQ person with limited social networks, often do not realize discrimination has taken place. Talking to Tashi, he firmly believed he faced no discrimination as a result of his sexuality. Besides minor backlash for keeping short hair in schools, which is ironic as traditionally Bhutanese women are known to keep short hair, he said, "I haven't faced any discrimination as such...since we look so much like young boys with our short hair and dress up, no one notices us. Only when we speak people realize we are girls...but they find it funny". Upon further probing, he admitted he has been at the receiving end of discrimination at times. He said "Yes, in school, often my Tom friends and I are targeted, and our actions monitored. Teachers in schools label us as troublemakers, watching that we don't have close relations with girls".

Majority of the participants internalized stigma when they felt they did not have the right support system to fall back to. Study done by Palleja` et al. in 2018 confirms that stigma consciousness<sup>21</sup> is generally high among LGBTQ persons leading to "increase in the perception of subtle discrimination...which means that the more they feel they are stereotyped, the higher the perception of subtle prejudice against them" (ibid: 1127). For a young person, to have internalized stigma that it has become invisible speaks volumes about how they, have used agency to change negative narratives into workable solutions.

### **4.5.2. Feelings of guilt and having let down**

Carrying the burden of not being economically independent and having to rely on family members brings about a sense of not being matured enough to form cognitive life decisions. LGBTQ youth felt a shared responsibility of having disappointed their family members by being 'different'. As a result, accepting and acting on their sexuality publicly was not rightly justified for them. Instead, the need to attain a semblance of maturity in terms of having stable careers, steady sources of income and social security was prioritized. When female bisexual participant, Yangchen was asked about her future plans, she said,

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<sup>21</sup> Coined by Pinel in 1999 to refer to the stereotypical treatment a group/individual.

“I feel I should work hard and get a good job and be financially stable. And maybe by the time I am in my 30s, have a stable income, I will speak to my parents. I feel my parents will be more agreeable to listen to me and sort of accept me then. Right now, I don’t think they will accept us”.

This statement depicts constrained agency of young people derived from a sense of duty towards family, while also reiterating social constructions of young people as not being capable of making life decisions. Exhibiting a sense of gratitude and willingness to fulfill filial duties by other means, Yangchen went on to say,

“We have to understand the generation our parents belonged to, they don’t know about LGBTQ, they have not seen it before in their lifetime, it’s new for them. So, we cannot blame them for not being understanding towards us, it will take time. With more awareness, things will change”.

Every young person carries with them the perils of vulnerability and marginalization being placed at a junction of childhood and adult (Allatt 1997:90). Nevertheless, young people are able to demonstrate their maturity in managing their lives as they understand that sense of being mature comes not from ‘age’, but from their performances of acting in a responsible manner (Solberg 1990; Valentine 1997 cited in Valentine 2003:38). This is reflected in the ongoing debate within themselves to attain life achievements inscribed by society while still battling their sexuality dilemmas. It becomes a constant struggle, to learn ways around which one can articulate their individuality while conforming to peer and adult pressure of norms (Valentine 2003).

#### **4.5.3. Justifying self-conduct for stigma.**

Transgender people being prominently visible from their appearances regulate ‘stigma consciousness’ in varied ways to avoid facing stigma enactments (Herek 2009:33). Bhutanese transwomen people are known to have lower literacy levels making them economically vulnerable (UNDP 2017: 32). This leads them to seek employment in places like *drayangs*, bars, clubs and karaoke, which are predominantly seen in poor light. “*Drayangs* are seen as modern phenomena that are not part of Bhutanese culture thus portrayed as bad developments... breeding grounds for alcohol and drugs consumption and network for sex” (Lhamo 2013:5).

Responding to the question on how society views the LGBTQ in general, Bunny said,

“Most transwomen people are working in bars, clubs and *drayangs*. They are less educated and most of them have been neglected by their family. They are known for being associated with dancing, drinking, partying and being loud. They have a bad image in Bhutan and people talk about them like they represent all of us”.

From the interview with the four transmen persons, the study learned that they generally prefer working in places that allow them to dress in male or neutral attires (fieldnotes). This is why majority of the transmen youth are into sports, playing in football and cricket clubs (ibid). Inclined towards masculine social traits, they are known to indulge in stereotypes; abusing alcohol and psychotropic drugs and staying out late (ibid). Kunchen says he started doing drugs and alcohol at an early age not due to his orientation, but due to a culmination of peer pressure, relationship issues and the environment he grew up in. But since he began hanging out with other transmen friends in bars and clubs, it has made access to alcohol easier. He understands why people view him and his friends poorly, he said,

“When they look at us, they see our short hair, tattoos, the way we dress and how we hang out in groups and drink, they think we cannot be trusted... I started taking drugs quite young and drinking alcohol after that.... I know other transmen brothers who have been/are alcoholics and have been to rehabilitation centers...when people see us going to rehabilitation

centers, they think we are no good. For us to get a good job, we have to be like girls, well behaved and act like them...I have tattoos on my body, so I will not get an office job, I know, I have to cover them... We are not so educated; I didn't finish high school...most of us are into sports which does not bring stable income”.

In hindsight, the larger population of Bhutan who do not have much knowledge about LBGTQ, derive their negative attitudes and prejudice primarily based on the way individuals conduct themselves or collectively in public and their choices of livelihood. Their shared knowledge depicts the attributes and norms considered appropriate for the society. The public and LBGTQ people collectively do not realize negative attitudes stems from a culture and structure that nurtures and reinforces negative attitudes (Herek 2007: Herek 2008). This was resonated by Ngawang, who said,

“How you project yourself is important. If you treat the other person with respect you will get respect. At first even I faced a lot of discrimination for being feminine and people stared when I wore makeup...but overtime as people came to know me, the work I do, they have begun to treat me differently. Now I am working full time...people treat and speak to me in respect...so no matter what you do or where you work, it's how you conduct yourself”.

Due to its invariable link to social power relations, minorities continue to have lesser spaces and access to resources, hold subjugated positions and have lower agency to determine life outcomes other than accepting blame (Link and Phelan 2001 cited in Herek 2008:441).

On the other hand, sexual categories whose identities and expression are somewhat in congruent to the sex/gender assigned at birth, their internalization of stigma leads them to concealment (Herek 2009). Due to the fact that concealment is possible, these categories of people are in a slightly better position to have access to gaining social capital through better jobs and less public discrimination. At the same time, their concealment often results in worse forms of internal mental health and physical stress. Having to manage conflicting notions of visibility/concealment becomes a necessity as LBGTQ people are aware of the negative consequences they would have to endure (Palleja` et al 2018:1118).

## **4.6. Concluding with recommendations for early intervention.**

Aforementioned personal accounts show LBGTQ youth are caught in-between the rapid global advancements taking place in gay rights and the changing social lives in Bhutan. In this conundrum, situating themselves becomes constrained and challenging due to lack of social capital and enabling environments.

An enabling environment can be brought about by recognizing LBGTQ discrimination is a learnt process, passing through everyday adult practices that becomes norms, then transferring the knowledge to children who carry it forward. Severing this circular link early on can help reduce homonegative narratives for generations down the line. Awareness and open discussion about sexuality in schools through unbiased sexuality education programmes, adult-children mentoring, more gay visibility can equip children and young people with the aptitudes, knowledge and principles to make responsible choices.

In contexts where domination of heterosexuality leads to absence of diversity in scripts for LBGTQ people, internet and media becomes useful source of knowing queer life. Internet provides individuals a sense of ‘cyber-shelter’ that supplements social capital to reach out on online spaces without fear and stigma (McLean 2014:8). At the same time, stigma surrounding gayness prompts clandestine operations, which can be potentially risky, as transgenders in Bhutan have begun to experiment with hormones bought online, based off random suggestions from friends without clinical supervision. While, learning from popular culture does reflect autonomy and agency, yet homogeneity of gay behaviors can backfire for young

LGBTQ people as consumptions of popular representations reinforces stereotypes, defeating the purpose of diversity (Sibler 2010:324).

Bhutan needs to provide queer narratives to children to allow for homegrown and traditionally appropriate ways of doing. Systems should be able to accommodate the learning about sex and sexuality (both online and offline), to enable young children to think critically and accept the fluidity in sexuality. By doing so, we will be able to see transgenders as individuals exposing the underlying heterosexuality and patriarchy that thrives on having “male/masculine and female/feminine hierarchies” (Siebler 2010:342). I explain this point further in the next chapter.

Despite the situatedness of LGBTQ youth; they can no longer be considered mere spectators in an adult world that prescribes sexual scripts for young people. They exhibit substantial agency to convert everyday dilemmas and struggles into workable coping strategies. Their pursuits of being agentic and active creators will be highlighted in the next chapter. In it, I will also go on to substantiate that their agency is not isolated, rather it is shaped by broader and underlying socio-cultural norms.



## Chapter 5 Using Agency in a socio-cultural context.

### 5.1. Setting stage for young as creators and negotiators.

In this chapter, the study amplifies the voices of young LGBTQ in Bhutan in how they use their agency to navigate through their daily lives. We shall see how young LGBTQ work around restrictions to mitigate and subvert the discrimination they face. The mini stories in this chapter considers the agency of young people in navigating complex and rapidly changing lives, while having to deal with intersecting predicaments of being an LGBTQ person. The chapter divulges into the spaces and scenarios in which young people become agentic despite restrained situatedness arising from lack of support. Alongside, we will also look at what their agency means for the youth themselves and what it reflects of underlying societal discourses.

### 5.2. Negotiating and Coping through adversities.

Young people who inhabit marginalized social locations, engage in discrete processes that allow them to positively adapt to adverse life circumstances (Khanlou and Wray 2014 cited in Schmitz and Tyler 2018:712). For instance, Tashi is well aware that he needs to avoid negative attention, hence he chooses to blend in, he says, “I know when I dress in boy’s clothes, I can pass off as a normal boy with my short hair and the way I walk. That way people will not stare at me. It looks weird sometimes when I have to wear *kira*<sup>22</sup>, so I avoid wearing it”.

When heterosexuality is ingrained in our norms in the ways we think and do our daily routines, a person who is ‘different’ tends to believe that he/she is not ‘normal’. A sense of self-doubt and self-loathing leading to avert and negotiate circumstances becomes crucial. This was experienced in the case of Ngodup who underwent self-doubt and to subvert pressures for his effeminate behavior, he succumbed. He says,

“I had no choice but make a girlfriend in school, my female friends encouraged it, saying I would change, and I strongly wanted to believe them. I feel sad for the girl but what was I supposed to do, I was facing so much bully in school that I wanted to be normal. But things didn’t change, I never grew any feelings for her. I went back to how I was before”.

Learning early on to fit into certain gender ideologies and roles, LGBTQ children are not only denied “the variability and fluidity of gendered attributes and conduct, but it also fails to allow for agency and reflexivity in the ways in which gender is lived and continually negotiated” (Rahman and Jackson 2010: 159). Negotiating within limited choices becomes a continuous battle which is further intensified due to internalization of stigma by sexual minorities themselves.

When Padma was asked why she continues to work in a club despite being high school educated, she says,

“I have tried looking for jobs elsewhere, but people are apprehensive about hiring me. People think we cannot be trusted. In a way, I prefer to work in these places as they are mostly night jobs, and our masculine body is not so visible at night. When we talk, our thick voice cannot be heard in the loud music. It gives us a sense of invisibility, and we can blend well and not stand out. Many transwomen people prefer to work in these types of places, and many do, it

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<sup>22</sup> National dress for female.

becomes easier for young people like us to follow the footsteps of elders...Customers are attracted when they see new faces, they give us more tips”.

For her, she has used agency to adopt a cloak of invisibility proving that “stigmatized people are not passive receivers of prejudice and discrimination, but instead active preceptors who interpret and respond to stigmatization in diverse ways” (Dovidio et al. 2000 cited in Palleja` 2018: 1118).

For the people who choose and are able to conceal their sexuality, passing off as heterosexuals often do it as a preemptive measure to escape the negative attitude of the society on LBGTQ collectively (Herek 1996). For instance, bisexuals and gay people have been known to lead dual lives in Bhutan. In the case of Yangchen; she says that since society does not view closeness among girls negatively, she avoids any kind of negative attention on her same-sex relationship. She said,

“Even though my partner is a tomboy, our families do not think anything about it even if we hang out together daily or sleep over at each other’s places. But of course, they don’t know we are dating, so in front of them we pretend to be friends, doing what normal things that friends do. At work I tell everyone we are either friends or sisters”.

Five of the eight participants felt that working in an office setting, which requires them to conform will restrict their freedom. In turn, they make intentional choices to create spaces for themselves whereby they are at ease with their sexuality. When Lhundup was asked about his career plans, he said,

“I knew even before I finished my high school that I wouldn’t work in a 9-5 office job. I had to choose a profession that allows me to be comfortable in my clothes. I don’t want anyone to tell me anything about my clothes and appearances. Now I am training to be a chef, I will wear pants to work and no one will see me as I will be away from public eye”.

In Lhundup’s case, he depicts an everyday coping strategy to not stand out, as he understands the situatedness of young LBGTQ’s position in connection to social relations (Ungar 2012).

In a participant observation scenario, where I went for a night out with three LBGTQ participants in a club, I could sense all eyes were on us the moment we stepped in the room. I felt we were continuously being stared now and then even as we tried to blend it. The same momentary pause and stares continued in other places we visited during the night as well. All this time, the participants themselves were nonchalant. Ngodup said, “before we used to get disturbed and angry when people stared at us, but now, we are fine. We just ignore them. I realized that people don’t notice us when they receive no reaction from us. As long as they don’t pass derogatory comments upfront, its ok”.

When it comes to doing gender, the adoption of masculinity for transmen people does not come as easily as it does for men (Nguyen 2008: 674). They are wary of the potential threat lurking when heterosexual cisgendered men want to engage in harassing or disciplining them. Kunchen narrated an incident when crossing genders became a tricky situation, he said,

“Once there was a case of a transman friend who was raped by her(sic) group of male friends when all of them were drunk. She (sic) didn’t even know what had happened the next day. Similar things can happen to us. We frequently talk about this incident among ourselves and use it as a reminder to be careful. I hang out with my usual friends (mostly cis girls and transmen persons). Though we are like boys from outside, inside we have female bodies, we have to make sure that we don’t go all out and be like them”.

This account tells us that, performances of transmen people is often done “defensively, encompassing both the defensiveness that women within a sexually violent patriarchal society may feel, as well as the defensiveness of being lesbian within a violently heteronormative society” (ibid. 674). This incident proves that despite transmen people doing a satisfactory

job as passing off as boys with their adopted masculine traits, they “do not necessarily adopt masculine behaviours and attitudes in all social contexts” (Walker et al. 2012:9192). Being at a threshold challenging gender and heterosexuality norms, it will be worthwhile, to study further, sexual minorities’ coping behaviors, to gain crucial insights into the consequences of the existing norms on their lives.

### **5.3. Being young and resilient.**

#### **5.3.1. Relying on social support.**

A study done by Poteat et.al in 2016 has shown that children and youth who receive social support and opportunities to socialize are in a better position, to exercise agency and have greater chance towards building resiliency (page 3). Absence of understanding from family members, teachers and social network can hinder construction of safe and conducive environments.

Five participants have named females in the form of mothers, sisters, friends and teachers as having helped them get through the pressures of bullying and stress. Besides having a close network of transmen friends, Tashi is close to his mother, he says,

“Whenever my father is not happy with the way I dress, walk and behave, he scolds me to change my behaviors. He avoids talking about ‘it’ directly with me. He tells my mother to tell me to change and not be the way I am. But my mother supports me by telling him that I have been this way forever, just accept him. Even if I have any problems in schools or with my friends, I go to my mother and share with her...she understands me the most”.

Like Tashi, Bunny has a close network of transmen friends who support each other in times of need. He said, “I share a close bond with my transmen friends...even if it’s not possible for us to meet regularly, we keep in touch with each other on Facebook. If anyone has a problem, whoever is the nearest will arrive to help. That is our friendship rule”.

LGBTQ youth in Bhutan struggle with not having proper institutionalized facilities such as mental health facilities, sexuality counseling and agencies dedicated for their specific discrete needs. Only one participant mentioned having been to a psychiatrist and having used counseling assistance provided in schools. Others were either not aware or hesitant to avail assistance. Having no dedicated or central support mechanism besides the informal RB network, LGBTQ youth adapt behaviours to reduce their dependence on institutional support. To reiterate this point, Kunchen said,

“I have no link up with any institutions or government agencies and I have never needed any assistance regarding my sexuality. There is nothing for us in the policies, things happen at a personal level here. So whatever change they make, it doesn’t affect me. My life goes on...moreover how can we talk openly about things related to our sexuality, people will not understand, as it is, they think that we are going through a phase and will change once we get married to boys”.

Being a sexual minority, in addition to being young shapes the attitudes of how people and systems interact differently as resiliency also depends on the relative power (Ungar 2007:87). Often, young people are not taken seriously, or their behaviours are laden with risk narratives. It becomes particularly challenging for young LGBTQ to assert their individuality within norms embodied in notions of adult centric views of heterosexuality and perceptions of young people (Valentine 2003:42).

### **5.3.2. Making Safe places.**

In Thimphu, there is no physical hangout places marked privately for LGBTQ persons nor are there any places that overtly disallows entrance or one that poses potential risk. Places of frequent are mostly mixed and non-gendered. Considering, there is no perceived threat of physical violence, 'safe spaces' are used to describe places where one would feel most comfortable and happy. Each participant had their pick of places or groups; being around people of their 'own kind' gave them a sense of security and confidence.

At a popular bar in Thimphu, majority of the patrons are transmen people who regularly come to relax and share drinks, this is where Kunchen and Tashi also frequently spend their leisure time. Being one of the youngest, Kunchen is regularly sponsored drinks by his transmen friends. When asked what makes him come to the bar frequently, he said,

“because most of our transmen friends come to this bar, we drink, sing karaoke, and watch people dancing. Most of them are working in different places, so its during weekends we all get to meet. I was introduced to this bar by an elder transman brother. The owner and customers are friendly here, I even have a credit tab here when I am broke”.

Besides physical spaces, in a research done by Craig and McInroy in 2014, they show that when LGBTQ individuals face disproportionate risks in public spaces, they often resort to living parallel lives online. Though LGBTQ youth in Bhutan do not face overt public risks; online spaces like Facebook, WeChat, WhatsApp are gaining popularity for building alliances for hook ups and friendships. These online engagements offers LGBTQ youth an access to a sense of wellbeing in the form of social support and relationships to hone their gay identities (McInroy 2018:507). While internet can provide a sense of assurance through anonymity which can be liberating to an extent, yet it is not risk and deception free.

Safe places for young people seems temporal and transitory. For the lack of institutionalized safe spaces, LGBTQ youth take it upon their discretion to make and remake boundaries of safety. Additionally, internet becomes performatives spaces for LGBTQ youth to present and sharpen identities.

### **5.3.3. Building individual and collective solidarity.**

Having a strong network of friendship provides the ability to provide a buffer from the homonegativity that drives one towards social isolation. Three participants work in a common place while two transmen youth are childhood friends. The sense of mutuality and equality in their friendships draws them closer as opposed to having to do negotiation of intersectionality in mixed friendships. All four transmen participants said they have a close network of transmen friends with whom they would hang out and make plans regularly. Mixed friendships is limited to females; having male cis-gender friendships is minimal across the participants. Patters of socialization within similar sexual orientation identities is validated by other four research (Galupo 2007a; Nardi 1992, 1999; O'Boyle and Thomas 1996 cited in Galupo 2009: 812).

Initiation of RB has brought about a sense of solidarity as it seeks to bring people of diverse sexualities together. They regularly conduct community forum meetings and keeps members connected through social media platforms. To overcome shortage of funds, few RB members voluntarily contribute to a kitty fund set up for use during emergencies (interview with RB core members).

However, the translation of solidarity into larger collective and concrete action among young LGBTQ remains poor due to inherent agency constraints. Participants felt that they lacked confidence and social capital to voice their opinion due to situated limitations of education, financial dependency and lack of ability to articulate. Apprehensive about joining RB actively,

Lhundup says, “I think I don’t want to be a part of the RB community; I have never attended their meetings... I like my life right now. I will soon look for a job and I don’t want any negative attention being associated with any groups”.

Skeptical about the quick progression of LGBTQ movement in Bhutan, Ngawang said,

“I think forming an organization right now is too soon for us...I feel that we are not equipped ourselves; we don’t possess the right skills and knowledge yet to establish an organization. There is need to strengthen the core first, members are all scattered, disinterested and unmotivated”.

Another factor that seems to be having a negative impact on the collective solidarity is the differing social status among LGBTQ individuals themselves. Gay individuals possessing better social capital receive less backlash, therefore they choose to stay away. Social positioning is derived from stable and respectable livelihoods, status, appropriate appearances, mannerism and social support. Pema, RB core working group member said,

“There are many gays in Bhutan who are well educated and doing well in life who can help us with our cause. What they say and do will have more weightage than ours, as they have social capital and better position in the society. But they don’t want to join our network because of how poorly LGBTQ (referring to transgender community) are perceived in Bhutan”.

The importance of having social capital was also reiterated by Jampa, who said, “I feel that as you grow older, get a job and make a better living and network for yourself, you will be in a better position not to let your sexuality determine how the society treats you”.

However, due to inadequacy of this study to uncover experiences of coping and struggles of participants from upper socio-economic status, this impasse remains. Therefore, there is need for studies to look into the correlation and consequences between social status and deviant behaviours.

## **5.4. Dealing with the dilemmas of gender/sexuality duality.**

The trans community has the potential to break the regulatory system of binary genders by severing the connection with bodies. A transman person’s presence “demonstrates that the connection between masculinity and male biology is not natural or inevitable and that men’s power—flaunted through a dominant and virile masculinity—is, therefore, an artifice” (Ngunyen 2008:679).

As per Butler, in patriarchy and heterosexual systems, gender is essentialized and sexuality becomes the key repressing tool for women. The tenets are laid out in everyday norms to ensure the reinforcement of the normalization. Given a young persons’ restrictive situatedness, lack of agency and support, young trans people often find themselves “partaking in patriarchal structures and ideologies” (ibid. 680) to make themselves socially relevant and have the best of what little is being offered.

These opposing opinions are further elaborated in the subsequent sub-topics.

### **5.4.1. Transqueer complicating and reinforcing binary genders.**

As it is with other categories of genders who switch their performativity, transmen people have to constantly work around the dichotomies of prescriptions of masculinity and femininity within their private/sexualized and public/non-sexualized lives (Schilt 2009:446). When asked if he would ever like to pursue for a gender change in his citizenship card, Kunchen expressed his dilemmas by saying,

“Everything is segregated based on sex. We don’t have other categories. Of course, I would like nothing more than be recognized as a male, but I am an athlete playing in a female football team. What if they tell me that I have to join the male team, I will not be able to survive there. So, we are apprehensive about what to do...so we choose not to make noise”.

Exhibiting masculine traits, he says his self-identity as a transman person does in certain situations give him a slight advantage over girls, for instance when playing sports (fieldnotes). Transmen’s adoption of female masculinity while giving them certain advantages also riskily positions them as opportunist (Nguyen 2008: 677). However, Kunchen cannot comprehend how else he would play his favorite sport if the level playing field is not as same in an all-girls team. Similar dilemmas was also expressed by a transman person, who is currently serving term in a female prison (phone interview on 25<sup>th</sup> July 2019). He said “if I approach the government for a gender change in my citizenship identity card...afterwards what if they put me in a male prison as I would be recognized as a male... It’s a tricky situation and people are not clear about how to deal with people like us complicating systems”. Not having supportive mechanisms that recognizes diversity, sexual minorities will continue to face conflicting predicaments having to jostle between binary gender expectations. Doing heterosocial gendering not only reinforces gender binaries, but it also puts the individual doing so, in a continued state of limbo. What they are perceived publicly and what realities are, will be a constant struggle.

The pursuit of desired femininity and masculinity among transqueer people is exhibited by the need to achieve certain type of bodies, appearances and hyper-performativity (Nguyen 2008:672). This was reiterated by Padma who said,

“Transwomen persons have a bad image in Bhutan as we wear bright, flimsy clothes and loud make up. It’s like we are trying to be like women/girl, but we tend to overdo it and attract unwanted attention... Yes, I want to look as much as possible as a girl, so keeping long hair and wearing makeup and dressing up gives me momentary happiness but then I see my masculine hands I become sad”.

Here we can see, constructions of ‘idealized’ femininity is ensnared with narratives to feed the hegemonic masculinity, through wanting to have the much-desired bodies and appearances.

To assert ones’ identity requires one to exhibit behaviors through reiterative performativity that ascribes and reinforces dominant gender (Butler 2003: Raymond 1994). Bodies are linked to established genders, therefore there is a need to conform through changing bodies, appearances and behaviors. Whether it is the need to take hormones to change bodies, or to enact discursive practices and behaviours, transgenders invariably reinforce binary genders of masculinity and femininity. Butler in her book ‘Gender Trouble’ discusses how transgenders and butch lesbians themselves struggle with performing butchness as it seems to be the only way of reaching “a desired status of man” (2006: xi).

When Lhundup was asked how he feels about his partner, he said “I have this inner feeling of always wanting to protect my girlfriend and providing for her. She is small and weak. That’s why I pick my girlfriend from work every evening and drop her home since it becomes dark”.

Seeing gender through the lens of Butler, transqueer people who have adopted masculine traits defy the notion of feminine/female bodies paradigm (1999:11). By complicating it, they have recreated a new gendered category of butch/femme bodies, that threatens the institution of masculinity linked with men’s bodies (Nguyen 2008:672). Not just masculinity, but transqueer bodies make a dent in the regulatory gender system that favors patriarchal status quo which depend on repetitive hegemonic heteronormative performances (Butler 1997). While at the same time, Lhundup’s statement also reinforces historical traits of masculinity

as provider and protector hence perpetuating the subordination of women's oppression (Nguyen 2008:670). Transmen people "are seen as colluding with the patriarchy through treating women as men do, such as by objectifying women, by wanting to be the physically stronger or dominant partner" (Jeffreys 1989: 169 cited in *ibid*:668).

The requirement to make these strategic choices in their bodies and behaviors have purposes and meaning far beyond what they have been intended for. Lack of adequate structures to support sexual diversity, makes reinforcement of binaries a survival and as well as spaces to claim identities.

#### **5.4.2. Politics of patriarchal hierarchies.**

By claiming to belong to a minority status, it does not mean that this identity is representative of all minority's experiences. Even within this group of LGBTQ minorities, there exists patriarchal hierarchies of privileges, corroborating with Rich's notions of patriarchal heteronormativity that accords lesser value to women's sexuality (Rich 1980 cited in Marchia and Sommer 2017:270).

Transmen participants said in close peer relationship, their being masculine would make them popular among the girls. Whereas for the transwoman and the three effeminate participants, abandoning masculinity meant committing a crime thus exposing them to discrimination. However, having a male body and participating in male gender orders in a patriarchal setting allows for patriarchal dividends that brings along visibility, stronger voice and access to resources (Rich 1980), these being derived from social capital, education, employment among others.

Gender inequalities have historically and culturally rendered female sexuality as subalterns. It is difficult not to let the hindrances of institutional and structural permeation of gender inequalities affect how behaviors and actions come to be shaped. The young transmen and female bisexual participants studied in the group display an embodiment to the larger structures of women's status in the country. They were seen to perform their sexualities within tightknit groups refraining from public engagements. Just as dominant groups are structurally legitimized, individuals of less stigmatized identities face more discrimination and non-recognition within (Pannu 2017:no page). Due to this mindset, there is visibly a poor representation of females in the LGBTQ rights movement. When Bunny was asked, why he didn't want to do more public action with the other LGBTQ members, he said,

"I feel that even if I say or do something, it will not matter much to them. We are young, don't have any standing on our own. So, who will believe us. Other people are more educated, vocal, bigger and have more social network. Sometimes, I go to meetings, but I don't say much. I rather not associate myself with the community".

Speaking about the distribution of power and leadership within the LGBTQ movement in Bhutan, Ngawang said

"The collective action of LGBTQ is mostly run by men- the gays and bisexuals...it's probably also because they face severe discrimination. But also, because they are more educated, they are more vocal and are able to express better. In comparison to others, they have more social capital and financial capabilities. Look at the transgenders, most transmen persons are dropouts and transwomen people are working in clubs...lesbian people are non-existent... they don't have the skills nor resources to be articulate".

The history of LGBTQ movement is testament of movements that had been spearheaded by gays, majority white gays (*ibid*), making them hold prominent positions within the struggle. This is true in the case of Bhutan too. There are gays (both effeminate and masculine) and transwomen people holding prominent positions in the LGBTQ cause (fieldnotes). Due to

the severity of negative backlash they face, spaces of activism is dominated by individuals who embody male body revealing discursive patriarchal practices.

Though, this study was done in a small scale, yet it demonstrates social dynamics of power and struggle that brings about gender inequalities, stemming from patriarchy and its historical negligence of female sexuality. Sexuality among minority same-sex female relationships need to be studied further as it can highlight deep seethed inequalities and violence.

## **5.6. Concluding by highlighting the situatedness of youth.**

This segment brings to light key findings from the research that encapsulates the machineries of agency of young LGBTQ in Bhutan. To say they succumb relentlessly to larger social powers without any retrospection on their part would be a misnomer. Young people demonstrate use of agency in myriad ways, becoming social agents and making transformation whenever opportunities arises. But structural forces embedded within the everyday knowhow of people constrains their use of agency.

The study illustrates, that while agency of young LGBTQ people is a crucial factor in how they experience their youthhood within competing notions, social structures such as gender, class, sexuality, ethnicities has to be acknowledged as well (Prout and James 1990). To act on their sexuality means to be in a state of comfort and wellbeing. Despite the obstacles they encounter, youth are willing to negotiate and create new spaces, online and offline. In a plethora of youth centric programs that treats young people as homogenous, there is need to look into the complexities of social structures and how it is being internalized by certain groups of young people.

In times of tensions when agency is constrained, LGBTQ people realize they need to weigh the impact of their decision and actions. It becomes a constant battle, to negotiate their agencies in determining the identities they project. Nevertheless, they make conscious choices to avoid confrontation and bring negative attention on themselves.

In the next concluding chapter, I will bring forward key implications of the study findings for LGBTQ youth and the country.



## Chapter 6 Concluding Thoughts: Implications of exclusion.

In this study I set out to demonstrate through the experiences of young LGBTQ, on how they use their situated agency to assert their sexuality in a Bhutanese heterosexual environment. In being agentic, LGBTQ youth are at times limited and unable to dissociate themselves from embedded structures of patriarchy hence they reinforce the very heteronormativity they seek to challenge. The study sample is small with inherent multiplicities; therefore, it does not proclaim to represent all LGBTQ youth in Bhutan. Yet still, the stories of LGBTQ youth presented in these chapters display a compelling insight into the everyday struggles of negotiating and coping, that can serve as insights for future interventions.

What does the findings of the study mean for the purposes of future policy and subjectivities of LGBTQ individuals? To answer this, I list below key implications, that delayed translation of people's tolerance into concrete actionable steps, to accept people of diverse sexuality may have on future policy decisions and lives of LGBTQ youth.

Acknowledgement of the existence of LGBTQ people by way of inclusion in mainstream policy planning brings about an implicit understanding that sexuality is not a rigid category that heterosexuality propagates. Rather the crux of its variability depends on its fluidity and context which should be seen in a spectrum changing over time. It expands our view of looking at sexuality as an important aspect of social life that encompasses identities, practices, desires and how we build relationships (Jackson 2006:106). This notion has the potential to assist towards avoiding framing of homogenous policies that unconsciously reinforce social inequalities.

Embracing diversity in sexuality allows for disruptions of institutions and structures that uphold heteropatriarchal power that justify male dominance over female. This study has revealed that female sexuality has been placed on the lowest ranks, allowing for perpetuation of women and young girl's continued subjugation, through the authoritative sexual and gender roles of maleness. Transqueer recognition can dispel the link between bodies and genders, queering both masculinity and femininity. To reach Bhutan's goal<sup>23</sup> of tackling unequal male-female power relations and to bring about women and girl's empowerment, it is important to dispel the traditionally occupied male power that subjugates women and sexual minorities.

This study sheds light on the need to maintain notions of binary genders as a personal motive to stay socially relevant. Prominence of hegemonic heteronormativity will continue to bring about additional inequalities and divides in societies thereby rendering sexual minorities as unintelligible and deviants. By accepting people of diverse sexualities in mainstream policies, there is hope that the rigid regulatory gender regimes can be rendered inefficient thereby losing its authority. If not, heterosexuality will continue to brand homosexuality and homosexuals as perverted and colluding with patriarchal powers to dominate and objectify women and girls.

Assertion for sexuality rights is allowing room for homosexuality and sexual diversity to become part of everyday cultures. Hence, for a small country that prioritizes human capital<sup>24</sup> the need is to evolve with the changing times while maintaining cultural sensitivity and uniqueness. Having agency to act freely without discrimination on individual sexuality can

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<sup>23</sup> Bhutan's National Key Result Area goal 10: 'Gender Equality Promoted and Women and Girls Empowered'.

<sup>24</sup> Bhutan Vision 2020.

promote and bring about psychological, financial and overall wellbeing of Bhutanese sexual minorities. This can contribute towards achieving psychological wellbeing of Bhutanese, it being one of the nine domains of GNH.

This study lets us know that LGBTQ youth in Bhutan face a multitude of challenges making sense of the rapid developments taking place whilst having to deal with the internal crisis brought about by their sexuality. Constrained agency limits their autonomy enactments and possibilities to partake their citizenship rights in areas of education, livelihood and social relationship. Absence of acceptance and recognition in mainstream policy, leads to unfavourable practices, behaviours and identities that mirror stereotypes and risky patterns with less retrospection. Young transgenders may resort to think that the only way to live a transgendered life is through making bodily changes using hormones and surgery. Similarly, Bhutanese gay youth are resorting to aping representations blindly off what they see and learn from popular films and internet. The adoption of stereotypical and homogenized representations off internet and media erases all notions that a person can be comfortable and empowered in their bodies and way of doing, as it is.

Finally, I collapse the motive of the paper by reiterating that study has thrown light on the lives of young people who are deliberately cast outside of the gender system by creation of hegemonic sexualities and genders. As we come to see young LGBTQ people as they are, we will be able to introspect on our notions and assumptions of hetero-patriarchal sexuality and gender norms.

**Total word count: 16930.**

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- Appendix III. List of participant observation details.
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- Appendix V. Sample of Consent form.
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## Appendix I- Participant profile

Sl no	Pseudonyms	Self-identified pronoun	Self-identified sexual orientation	Age	Profile	Interview dates
1	Kunchen	He	Transman	24	He is a shy and a soft spoken. Football is his passion. He plans to go back to his hometown and start doing business if he does not get his desired job.	15 <sup>th</sup> July 22 <sup>nd</sup> July 14 <sup>th</sup> August
2	Yangchen	She	Bisexual	21	She loves writing and helps her family financially. She is ambitious, focused and knows what she wants to do with her life. She plans to study further after working for a while. She lives with her family in Thimphu.	22 <sup>nd</sup> July
3	Bunny	He	Transman	19	He loves to be in the company of his friends, just hanging out and making videos. He has been in a dedicated long-distance relationship for 5 years. He lives with his family in Thimphu.	15 <sup>th</sup> July 20 <sup>th</sup> July
4	Padma	She	Transwoman	23	She loves reading and hopes to find a full-time office job one day. She is an independent person living all by herself in Thimphu. She regularly sends home money to help her parents and siblings.	12 <sup>th</sup> July 1 <sup>st</sup> August
5	Jampa	He	Gay	20	He is a sweet and caring person. He is an introvert and usually stays by himself. He wants to make a successful career in the beautician industry. He lives with his family in Thimphu.	16 <sup>th</sup> July 20 <sup>th</sup> July 23 <sup>rd</sup> July 6 <sup>th</sup> August
6	Lhundup	He	Transman	21	He loves to cook and help people. He wants to find a stable job soon so he can start living independently.	22 <sup>nd</sup> July
7	Ngawang	S/he	Queer	21	H/She is a chatty, friendly and vivacious person. H/She helps young LBGTQ struggling by advising and guiding them. H/She wants to start her/his own line of beauty products.	15 <sup>th</sup> July 22 <sup>nd</sup> July 12 <sup>th</sup> August
8	Tashi	He	Transman	21	He is an extremely loyal and dependable friend. He guides his friends by advising them to study and avoid negative company. He is close to his mother.	16 <sup>th</sup> July 22 <sup>nd</sup> July
9	Ngodup	He	Gay	21	He is a very talkative, friendly and confident person. He loves reading and hopes to continue his studies one day. He lives in Thimphu with his partner.	12 <sup>th</sup> July 24 <sup>th</sup> July 24 <sup>th</sup> July 13 <sup>th</sup> August

## Appendix II- List of secondary participants

Sl No	Name/Pseudonym	Profile	Interview date
1	Anuka Sampang	Asst. Manager, Dept of Youth and Sports, Ministry of Education	6 <sup>th</sup> August 2019
2	Kinley Lemo	Chief Nurse, Jigme Dorji Wangchuk National Referral Hospital	5 <sup>th</sup> August 2019
3	Prakash	Senior Counselor, Ministry of Education/RENEW	6 <sup>th</sup> August 2019
4	Sonam	Adult Lesbian Core group member in RB Works in Lhak-sam	Chat on Facebook messenger: 6 <sup>th</sup> August 2019 7 <sup>th</sup> August 2019 8 <sup>th</sup> August 2019 9 <sup>th</sup> August 2019
5	Pema Dorji	Adult Gay Core group member or RB Works in Health Information Service Center, Ministry of Health	5 <sup>th</sup> August 2019
6	Tenzing Gyeltshen	Adult Gay Core group member in RB Works at the RB secretariat	13 <sup>th</sup> August 2019
7	Ugyen	Transwoman Core group member in RB Works in Lhak-sam	Participant Observation- 20 <sup>th</sup> July 2019
8	Sonam	Adult Transman	Participant Observation 16 <sup>th</sup> July 2019 21 <sup>st</sup> July 2019
9	Chimi	Adult Transman	Three conversations over phone from July-August 2019
10	Pem	Adult Bisexual	Interview on 13 July 2019
11	Dolly	Queer Youth	Participant Observation 20 <sup>th</sup> July 2019
12	Passang Dorji	Adult Gay	Chat on Facebook on 14 and 16 <sup>th</sup> September 2019
13	Dechen Selden	Adult Transwomen	Participant Observation 20 <sup>th</sup> July 2019
14	Tashi Tsheten	Adult Gay Director, RB Jigme Dorji Wangchuk National Referral Hospital	Chat on Facebook 7 <sup>th</sup> June 2019 17 <sup>th</sup> June 2019 3 <sup>rd</sup> July 2019

### **Appendix III- Participant observation session:**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Place</b>
15 <sup>th</sup> July 2019	Workplace of Ngawang in Thimphu
15 <sup>th</sup> July 2019	Lunch at JoJos building in Thimphu
16 <sup>th</sup> July 2019	Participant Kunchen's residence in Thimphu
20 <sup>th</sup> July 2019	Thimphu Club and Ace Club in Thimphu
22 <sup>nd</sup> July 2019	Drop in Center, Youth Development Fund in Thimphu
24 <sup>th</sup> July 2019	Workplace of Ngodup in Thimphu
27 <sup>th</sup> July 2019	Rumours Pub in Thimphu
3 <sup>rd</sup> August 2019	Semi-finals of female football match, Changlingmethang Ground in Thimphu
6 <sup>th</sup> August 2019	Workplace of Jampa in Thimphu

## Appendix IV -Exemption letter from Research Ethics Board of Health, MoH



### EXEMPTION LETTER

Protocol No: PO/2019 /0038

Protocol Title: LGBT youth navigating the dominant sexuality discourse in Bhutan

Version Number: "NA.6 June 2019"

Principal Investigator: Ms. Yangchi Pema

Institute: RENEW, Motithang, Thimphu

Co-Investigators: NA

This is to state that Research Ethics Board of Health (REBH) has determined that the above protocol fulfil the criteria for exemption from ethics review specified in SOP/007/03 of REBH.

Therefore, the need for REBH approval is exempted for the proposed protocol. However, the investigator(s) shall be responsible to seek all other clearances/approvals required by law/policy including permission from the study sites before conducting the study.

(Dr. Lhamu Langpo)  
Vice Chairperson

For further information please contact: [msgurung.@health.gov.bt](mailto:msgurung.@health.gov.bt); REBH Secretary

## Appendix V- Informed Consent form

### INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Note: Provided only in English, will be orally translated in Dzongkha if required.

Working Research Title	LGBT youth navigating the dominant sexuality discourse in Bhutan.
Name of the principal investigator	(Ms.) Yangchi Pema
Affiliated University	Institute of Social Science, Erasmus Rotterdam University, Hague, Netherlands
Purpose of Study	This research is being conducted by (Ms.) Yangchi Pema. I am inviting you to participate in this research project that is to analyse the agency of LGBTQ youth in Bhutan in navigating their sexuality in the context of a dominant discourse that upholds heterosexual norms. The data will be used for the fulfilment of Master's in Development Studies degree.
Procedures	The interview will be conducted in multiple series not exceeding two hours per session. You are willing to allow participant observation to occur to facilitate additional research learning. You must be at least 18 years old and below 25 years of age.
Potential and anticipated Risks and Discomforts	There are no obvious physical, legal or economic risks associated with participating in this study. Your participation is voluntary, and you are free to discontinue your participation at any time. You may express your desire not to engage in the interview at any point. You may also choose to have certain data deleted at any point. If yes, please clearly state.
Potential benefits	Participation in this study does not guarantee any beneficial results to you. The broader goal of this research is to highlight the issues faced by young LGBTQ people in Bhutan. The research may or may not be used to influence policy and programming.
Sharing the results	Copy of the final research will be shared with the participants after the final grading.
Confidentiality	Pseudonyms for participants and/or any identifiable locations will be used to prevent traceability to participants. Permission to do voice recording and take/use pictures will always be sought. The audio recordings, forms, and other documents created or collected as part of this study will be stored in a secure location or on the researcher's password-protected computers and will be destroyed within ten years of the initiation of the study. Data will be anonymized as much as possible.
Statement of Consent	Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age; you have read this consent form or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree that you will participate in this research study. You will receive a copy of this signed consent form.  This research project has been reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Board of Health (REBH) of Bhutan and the Erasmus Rotterdam Ethics Review Committee. For research problems or any other question regarding the research project, contact the Data Protection Officer of Erasmus University, Marlon Domingus, MA (fg@eur.nl), or the REBH.  If you agree to participate, please sign your name below.
Audio recording (if applicable)	I consent to have my interview audio recorded <input type="checkbox"/> yes <input type="checkbox"/> no
Secondary use	I consent to have the anonymised data be used for secondary analysis

(if applicable)	<input type="checkbox"/> yes <input type="checkbox"/> no	
PARTICIPANT NAME		NAME PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR  (Ms.) Yangchi Pema
SIGNATURE		SIGNATURE
DATE		DATE

## Appendix VI-Guiding interview questions.

### Introduction:

My name is Yangchi Pema and I am currently doing my Master's in development studies in Hague, Netherlands. The purpose of me interviewing you is to study the experiences of young LGBTQ individuals in Bhutan as they navigate through a dominant heterosexual norm (*explain more*).

- Ask for the participant's introduction and background.
- Briefing on the overall research:
- Explain more on the objective and background of the research
- How long will the interview take?
- How and where will the interview be done?
- What my role as a researcher entails?
- The confidential aspects.
- My conflicting interest.
- What other cooperation and additional assistance I seek as a researcher?
- How will the data generated be used?

Ask for the participant to give me feedback, comments or recommend changes to the research or directly to me as a researcher/individual.

*Overall Research Question:* How do LGBTQ youth use agency to navigate experiences of heteronormative Bhutanese society ?

*Sub-questions-* Themes and broad guiding questions (*rephrase and make it understandable*)

How are the LGBTQ youth in Bhutan affected by the dominant norms and values that legitimizes heterosexuality?

- Tell me about your experiences (after explaining the context).
- What are some of the challenges you face on a daily life due to your identity?
- What are your thoughts about the way education, law and health advocacy portrays you?
- Do you feel included in the above discussions? Either ways, how so?
- Share your experiences from school, work and other spaces of daily lives.
- What understanding do you make of how society treats you? How you internalize it into your everyday lives?

Which institutions are targeting LGBT youth and how? (institutions can be formal/informal and visible/invisible)

- What are the different institutions and networks do you engage with? How regularly?
- What role do they play in your life? How important are their presence in your life?
- Do you find that they empower/disempower you? Either ways, how so?
- What are the missing elements that you feel that these institutions have overlooked?

What coping mechanisms do LGBTQ youth use to realize their sexual autonomy and how is it being negotiated in their daily lives?

- What are some of the strategies you use to go about your life- work related, personal, social.?
- To what extent and how does external influence matter in the choices you make?
- Do you willingly go about your daily duties/habits, or you feel obliged to do it?

How do LGBTQ youth build solidarity and safe places amongst themselves?

- How important is it for you to reach out and have a wider supportive network?



- What importance does certain people, family or friends play in building solidarity?
- How do you build relations (not just sexual, but emotional)?
- In peer groups, what are the common threads of discussions and topics.
- How do you organize yourself to join or become part of a collective social action?
- What are your views on the collective action of LGBT in Bhutan?
- In terms of disagreements among yourselves, how is it resolved?

Which spaces do they consider as 'safe' for their relationships? (spaces can be visible/invisible)

- Which are the places you visit frequently? How often? Alone or in group, explain why?
- Why do you visit these spaces?
- Why do you assign certain spaces as safe (after explaining what safe means)?
- What significance does these spaces play in your life? How and what impact does it have in your lives?
- How private or public are these spaces? And why is that way?