APRIL 2013

understanding concerns and realities of
queer persons assigned gender female at birth across
a spectrum of lived gender identities

breaking the binary

A STUDY BY LABIA - A QUEER FEMINIST LBT COLLECTIVE

Through this research study, based on 50 life history narratives, we explore the circumstances and situations of queer PAGFB (persons assigned gender female at birth) who are made to, or expected to, fit into society's norms around gender and sexuality. We look at their experiences with natal families and in school; we chart their journey through intimate relationships and jobs; we attempt to understand what happens to them in public spaces, and how they are treated by various state agencies; we discover where they seek and find support, community, and a refuge from the violence and discrimination that mark far too many lives.

Listening to their varied articulations of their own gender has given us new insights into gender itself. It has helped us envision bits of a new gender system that challenges the existing hierarchical, discrete, binary scheme and urgently proposes its transformation into an equal, porous, multiple arrangement.

breaking the binary

understanding concerns and realities of queer persons assigned gender female at birth across a spectrum of lived gender identities

A STUDY BY LABIA – A QUEER FEMINIST LBT COLLECTIVE

APRIL 2013

PUBLISHED BY: LABIA - A QUEER FEMINIST LBT COLLECTIVE

CONTACT FOR COPIES: STREE.SANGAM@GMAIL.COM

WWW.LABIACOLLECTIVE.ORG

PRINTED BY: IMPRESSION GRAPHICS; 203, HARIPAD SOCIETY, MUMBAI 400099.

SUGGESTED CONTRIBUTION: Rs 100

This report may be distributed, shared or translated for non-commercial/educational purposes. The report may be used for deriving new works, in part or in whole. However, if you transform, or build upon this work, you may distribute the resulting work only under a licence identical to this one.
In all the instances listed above, the report and its authors must be given attribution at all times.
This work is licensed under the *Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License*.

research

CHAYANIKA SHAH
GEORGINA MADDOX
HASINA KHAN
KRANTI
MEENA GOPAL
MEENU PANDEY
RAJ
SABALA
SHALINI MAHAJAN
SHRUTI CHAKRAVARTY
SMRITI NEVATIA

analysis and writing

CHAYANIKA SHAH
RAJ
SHALINI MAHAJAN
SMRITI NEVATIA

design

VANI SUBRAMANIAN

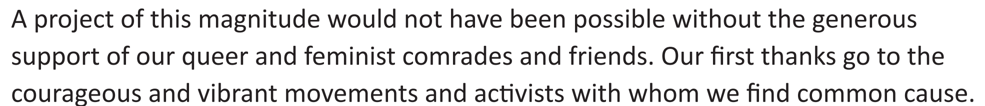
for deepu (1988–2012)

who sang, for us, *dhaage tod laao chandni se noor ke*, in the voice of one who searched for the thread of his own liminal narrative in each language available to him; who seized and rendered the ardour and luminosity so that the words he did not fully comprehend still hinted at every meaning that might lie below the melodic surface; who wanted only to express his self through notes that could have enriched the harmony of a world trained to perceive mere discord.

bol na halke halke, the song continues, and his young life speaks softly to us even now, in our memories and in these pages, but it also rages loudly as it demands to be heard, and not trivialised, dismissed, or forgotten, so that others who travel beyond the boundaries are not compelled to break their hearts or smash their bodies against the walls of narrow minds.

bahut shukriya

badi meherbani



A project of this magnitude would not have been possible without the generous support of our queer and feminist comrades and friends. Our first thanks go to the courageous and vibrant movements and activists with whom we find common cause.

We would specifically like to acknowledge the time and support given to us by the groups and individuals who connected us to our respondents, provided space for meetings when required, and shared their experiences with us. Sappho for Equality, LesBiT, Sangama, Sahayatrika, Sampoorna, WHAQ (We are Here and Queer), and friends in various cities, this study would not have been possible without you.

It is difficult to articulate our feelings towards our respondents, mixed as they are in jostling measures of gratitude, love, awe, solidarity, fierce protectiveness, despair and immense hope. We salute your courage and generosity in sharing your lives, experiences and ideas so openly with us, and trusting our politics and persons with them. Thank you!

Our deepest connect is with the larger research team of 11 persons and we want to thank them for all the warmth, the hugs, the discussions that threatened to tear us apart but strengthened us, the endless rounds of tea and coffee, and the constantly vigilant minds that did not let the least nuance escape nor hold anything so sacred that it could not be questioned.

This study was made feasible by an activist research grant by Kartini Asia/Trans Sign Network (jointly given by the Riek Stienstra Fund, Ford Foundation, Hivos and Mama Cash), while the report and its dissemination have been supported by the Global Fund for Women. We thank them all for their work towards creating spaces for such endeavours. We would also like to thank our NGO partner in the study, Awaaz-e-Niswaan, for generously extending technical support and for housing the study.

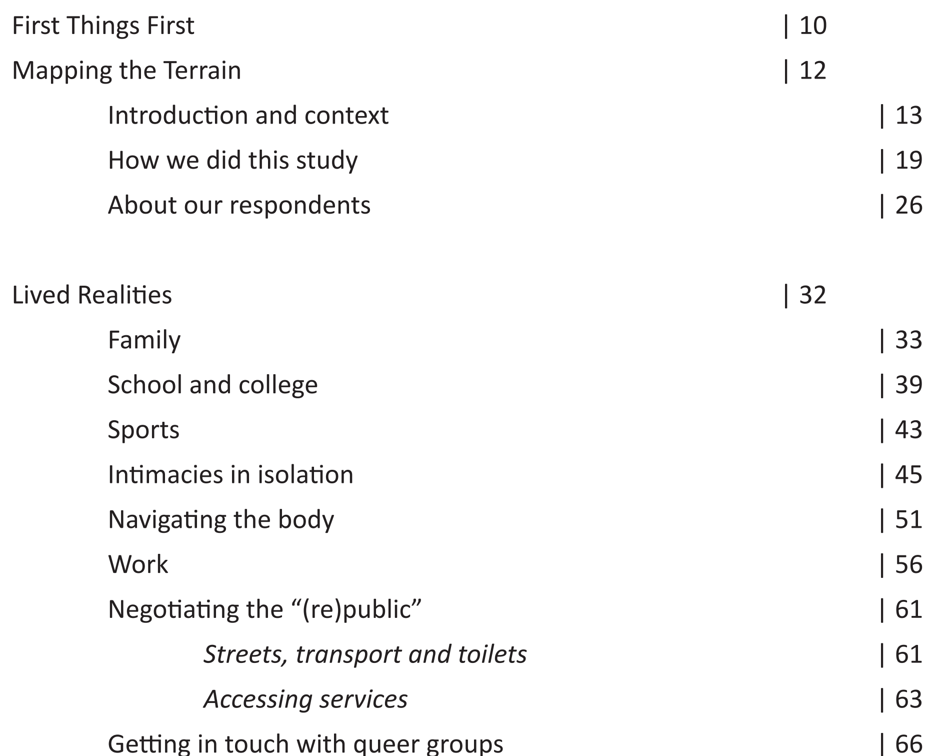
The research for the study was conducted between July 2009 and June 2010 with the help of the first grant by the team of 11 researchers, which also helped with the initial analysis. After that period, the analysis and writing was carried forward by us, the team of the four that has written this report as well as a couple of papers published elsewhere. Time and money have both been constraints in this largely voluntary effort, and we sincerely regret that we could not bring out the report earlier. We hope that it will serve to bring some very crucial concerns to the fore, and add to the vibrant conversations on gender in both community and activist spaces.

A tip of the nib to Vani, for bringing the text alive with her design from halfway across the world.

Finally we would like to send out a big cheer to all members of LABIA, and the work done by the group over the last seventeen years, for forging the politics and persistence that motivated this research.

Chayanika, Raj, Shalini, Smriti

contents | page



First Things First | 10

Mapping the Terrain | 12

- Introduction and context | 13
- How we did this study | 19
- About our respondents | 26

Lived Realities | 32

- Family | 33
- School and college | 39
- Sports | 43
- Intimacies in isolation | 45
- Navigating the body | 51
- Work | 56
- Negotiating the “(re)public” | 61
  - *Streets, transport and toilets* | 61
  - *Accessing services* | 63
- Getting in touch with queer groups | 66

Binary Gender is Just Another Imagined Norm | 69
Naming oneself | 71
The gendered body | 73
Persons with intersex variations | 77
How I look and who you see | 78
"But now I can wear anything" | 78
Being read for one's gender | 80
Gender in action, in closer interaction | 83
Being sons, being daughters | 83
Husbands, partners, lovers, wives | 85
Gender, a journey | 89

Queer Groups: An Evolving Understanding | 90
About the groups | 92
Engagement with gender | 93
Who can be a member | 95
Tricky issues that continue to be debated | 97

Towards a Vision of the Future | 100
Towards a Porosity of Gender Boundaries | 110

Appendices | 113

first things first

Do spend some time here, dear reader, or return whenever you feel the need to refresh your memory, so that the few necessary and important terms we've used that are not (yet) part of everyday language do not annoy or confuse you – this page is meant to bring us all on to the same page!

queer

We use the term queer in this report in a very specific sense, to refer to people who may or may not know or actively use the word for themselves but who define their own sexuality and/or gender identity as not heterosexual and/or not cisgender. It is in this sense that all 50 respondents – like all 11 researchers – are queer PAGFB. The term is also used as an adjective for those individuals, collectives, campaigns and movements that do self-identify as "queer", however they might define the term, while possibly also using other descriptors like LBT or LGBT or transgender.

pagfb

PAGFB (Person(s) Assigned Gender Female at Birth); PAGMB (Person(s) Assigned Gender Male at Birth): These terms, which we arrived at independently in the course of our discussions in the context of this study (and which we are happy to find echoed by gender activists and gaining currency in queer discourse worldwide), reflect our understanding that none of us is born with a readymade gender; gender is assigned to us at birth based on the traditional conflation of sex, in particular of the external genitalia, with gender. This assigned gender may or may not match a person's own sense of hir/their gender. All respondents in this study are PAGFB though not all of them belong to the "female gender" or consider themselves women, just as all PAGMB may not be of the "male gender", or call themselves men. Together the two terms include all persons, and every variation in gender and of body.

trans*

This term refers to all persons whose own sense of their gender does not match the gender assigned to them at birth. Spelt with an asterisk in this way, trans* is an umbrella term coined within gender studies in order to refer to all non-cisgender gender identities including transsexual, transvestite, genderqueer, genderfluid, genderless, agender, non-gendered, third gender, two-spirit, bigender, MTF (male-to-female), FTM (female-to-male), transman, transwoman, other, man-identified PAGFB, woman-identified PAGMB, and (m)any others.

cisgender

A cisgender person is someone whose own sense of her or his gender matches the gender assigned to her, or to him, at birth. Thus a cisman is a PAGMB who identifies as man, and a ciswoman is a PAGFB who identifies as woman. To be cisgender, then, is to enjoy cisgender privilege, which a trans* person lacks in a world based on the gender binary.

intersex variations

Human bodies have many variations and these could be at multiple levels. So it is in fact incorrect to talk of an absolute standard of "normal" for the "male" or the "female" body. We choose to say persons with intersex "variations", as against intersex "conditions", to emphasise variations in bodies without pathologising them. Intersex variations are congenital differences in reproductive parts and/or secondary sexual characteristics, and/or variations invisible to the eye such as chromosomal and/or hormonal differences.

pronouns

In our use of pronouns in this report, we have tried to be faithful to the gender identities that people espoused for themselves. So all those who identified as 'man' or 'woman' have been referred to by the appropriate gender pronouns: he*, him, his; she, her, hers*. For those respondents who did not identify as either 'man' or 'woman', we have used the category 'others', and chosen the pronouns *ze, hir, hirs*. Although everyone (with the exception of one respondent who was searching for a new way to speak of hirself) used either the male or female pronouns for themselves, we have used ze, hir, hirs to fill the gaps in a language which recognises only the gender binary. These (provisional) pronouns are also a useful way of indicating the gender location of the respondent in question, rather than having to clarify the point in every instance. In places where gender is not being specified, we have either used *ze, hir, hirs* or the generic plural *they, them, their, theirs*.

names

All names of persons have been changed in keeping with the principles of confidentiality. As far as possible all references to geographic location, and other identifiers, have also been generalised or edited out.

mapping the terrain

introduction and context

LABIA, then Stree Sangam, started in 1995 as a collective of and for lesbian and bisexual women with two clear agendas: the first was to support and network with other women loosely identifying under these terms and to create safe spaces for them to talk about themselves; and, secondly, to work towards change in larger society along with other groups and movements.[1] Both these agendas drove the work that we did. Our politics was continuously shaped by our experiences, and influenced by our changing membership over the years as more people joined in while some left. Simultaneously, our work and politics were also deeply impacted by the struggles and campaigns of other movements around us as well as the increasing conversations with other LGBTIKHQ... groups and individuals.

From the very beginning, gender and the imposition of gender norms were a large part of our discussions. Several of us identified either as "butch" or "women who look different" and spoke of constantly facing violence or oppression because of the way we looked, dressed, and how we were perceived by both men and women. Some of us found it easier to see ourselves as androgynous and some even spoke of "our masculinities", though this was a contested space. It was clear even then that often, for some of us, gender-segregated women-only spaces were not necessarily safe spaces. Some of us went to great lengths, in fact, to avoid travelling in, say, women's compartments on the local trains. From men, of course, we faced hostility everywhere.

Given that several of us were also strongly feminist, the political space of "being women" and of celebrating "difference" was precisely what gave us the strength and courage to fight our incessant gender battles, which were not confined to issues of sexuality. The women's movements in India, where most of us located ourselves, were themselves arenas where this question of difference was a primary one. The categories "woman" and "sisterhood" were not monolithic; discussions around differences of caste, class, work, location, and other such markers, took centre stage. Sexuality had been part of these often volatile discussions since the early 1990s. Issues around inclusion and exclusion were very much part of these debates, though questioning the entity "woman" itself did not happen till the 2000s.[2] Nonetheless, the feminist movements and the spaces they helped create were crucial to LABIA's politics as well as for the survival of a small group like ours.

1. See Appendix 1 for an account of LABIA's main work.

2. Shalini Mahajan, 2008, Seminar, "Questioning norms and bodies" retrieved from http://www.india-seminar.com/2008/583/583_shalini_mahajan.htm (as accessed on 06-04-13).

The 1990s were also a period of growth in lesbian and gay organising and activism. At one level there was the work on HIV/AIDS, which focused mainly on men who had sex with men (MSM) and, within that framework, started providing services and spaces for these men; many more groups formed around "gay" identity in the metropolitan areas, and a smaller number of nonetheless vocal groups for lesbian and bisexual women came up. This decade also saw the first coming together of women's and human rights groups on LGBT issues, in the conferences and workshops in Bombay and later with the formation of CALERI (Campaign for Lesbian Rights) in Delhi, fuelled by the release and subsequent "ban" of the film *Fire*. Another significant coming together of disparate groups was during the countrywide protests and campaigns around the arrest in July 2000 of HIV activists working with MSM in Lucknow.[3]

> At that particular moment in history, though, the focus on sexuality was much greater, while issues around gender were not being addressed as clearly. In fact, the first national meeting in 1997 to talk of "our" rights was called S*trategies to Advance Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Rights.*[4] *Work* around the concerns of "kothis" had been growing in the 1990s and so some understanding of gender-transgressive behaviour and identity was also being formulated, although this largely used the language of "sexual behaviours" and was mainly in the context of HIV/AIDS. By and large, "transgender" was a term still limited to hijras, the most visible marginalised gender, and a few transsexual persons.
>
> More intense discussions on gender and on gender transgression, the construction and de-construction of the binary of gender, and the marginalisation and violence people face because of this binary, entered the conversation within LGBT organising only in the 2000s. By January 2004 (when the World Social Forum rolled in), the *Rainbow Planet* events were clearly addressing issues of gender along with sexuality. Just prior to that, in October 2003, the first international film festival of its kind in Bombay, *Larzish*, had been tagged as a festival of sexual and gender pluralities. This is not to say that the shift in politics was either smooth or universal, but that for a lot of people and, more importantly, for groups, gender was becoming as crucial an issue as sexuality. Even so, transgender concerns (along with lesbian and bisexual concerns) often had to fight hard for inclusion, let alone equal space, within larger queer organising.

3. For this and a longer discussion on queer organising please see Narrain, A., Gupta, A. (Eds.). (2011) Law like love : Queer perspectives on law. Delhi: Yoda Press.

4. This meeting was organised by Forum Against Oppression of Women, Stree Sangam/LABIA, Human Rights Law Network and Counsel Club on 7th to 9th November, 1997. This meeting resulted in a book: Fernandez, B. (Ed.). (1999) Humjinsi : A resource book on lesbian, gay and bisexual rights in India. Bombay: India Centre for Human Rights and Law.

It was also in the early 2000s that many transgender-identified persons joined existing LBT organisations, while the organisations starting up in this period had transgender persons as members from the outset. Members of existing groups also started to find a different language to articulate their own gender concerns. Stree Sangam itself saw a transition, in 2002, from being a "lesbian and bisexual women's group" to becoming LABIA (Lesbians and Bisexuals in Action), a "queer and feminist collective of lesbian, transgender and bisexual women." Our language was still uncertain, but gender was now a central concern.

Around the same time we started reading and understanding more about people with intersex variations. This brought in another radical concept – that not just gender but sex, too, is constructed.

These shifts were accompanied by the increasing use of the word "queer", to refer to personal identities as well as to a political ideology. In the context of identity this reflected a sense that the terms lesbian, gay, bisexual, or even transgender, did not encompass the lived realities and complex trajectories of very many people; at the level of politics there was the growing maturity of a worldview that was invested in contesting the heteronormative constructs of all three – sex, gender and sexuality.

the need for the study

As a group that inhabited, and connected with, both the queer organising and the women's movements' spaces, we found growing conversations on both gender and sexuality in both spaces. The questions around gender were articulated from multiple locations, as more and more persons who questioned the gender binary in their own lives and work began to speak. Yet this did not mean that there was, or is now, any uniformity to these articulations, or to the identities being chosen.

For one thing, there is the social and cultural history of the hijras in India. The hijras have not all, or always, felt comfortable organising under the rubric of "transgender". The specificity of hijras and the cultural space they occupy needs a different articulation, as does the experience of those

persons assigned gender male at birth (PAGMB) who do not see themselves as either men or hijras. Yet because of the highlighting of these identities in the HIV/AIDS context, they have had some visibility, if not adequate space, in LGBTIKHQ... organising.

Such is not the case with persons assigned gender female at birth (PAGFB) who find it difficult to occupy the category "woman". There is neither any historical nor cultural space, howsoever marginal, for such persons, although there is, by now, some documentation of such lives.[5] The realities of queer PAGFB are, consequently, often overlooked in the larger queer organising when issues of transgender persons are raised.

> Simultaneously, in the women's movements, the hierarchy between the binary genders has been questioned and challenged, and gender has been examined along with its intersectionality with other marginalisations, but the existence of the binary itself has not been subjected to a similar critical scrutiny. Those transgressing norms of sexuality have gained a space and voice within the women's movements in the 2000s but gender transgressions have left many perplexed. The dialogues and debates have been around finding space within the agenda and politics centred on "women" for those who were assigned gender female at birth but identify as 'man' or in some other way, as well as for those who were assigned gender male at birth but identify as 'woman'. Yet many of those who identify as "trans*" are not comfortable being identified with "lesbian" spaces or with women's spaces. Their consequent marginalisation has meant that organising, coming together, and articulation of concerns have been relatively tricky. The few groups that work primarily with LBT persons, or have a trans* membership that is not just for PAGMB, have provided some space, but this is not enough.

We feel that there is need for more visibility for issues of queer PAGFB in the context of gender as well as sex and sexuality. It is imperative for both the women's movements and queer organising to take note of the lived experiences of this section of people, and to plan activism and interventions that recognise their realities. At the same time our entire discourse on gender, and on transgressions of the gender binary, must be informed by the lives and concerns of this hitherto invisibilised group.

> It is in these multiple contexts that we locate our study. A few studies that have looked at violence in the lives of lesbian and bisexual women, and one that included transpersons, have added considerably to our understanding of the violence queer

5. Sharma, M. (2006). Loving women: Being lesbian in unprivileged India. Yoda Press: New Delhi; Ghosh, S., Bandyopadhyay, B., S. (Eds.). (2010) Of horizons and beyond: Glimpses of lesbian, bisexual women and transpersons lives.Kolkata: Sappho for Equality.

PAGFB face.[6] This study, however, explores people's lives in their entirety with both gender and sexuality in focus. We have attempted to bring to our collective knowledge people's lived experiences and their own articulations. The study aims to fill the gaps in our understanding, our politics and our interventions.

We have sought to understand the lives and experiences of those who have been assigned the female gender at birth and identify as queer in some manner but whose life trajectories reflect a constant tension with normative sexuality and/or the binary definition of gender and sex as just "female" or "male". We have tried to understand the circumstances and situations of those who are made to, or expected to, fit into the "female gender" but who see themselves as different in terms of expression of their desire or their gender identity, perform different gender roles, possess or cultivate different gender attributes from those imposed by societal norms and conventions, and who may or may not have a dissonant relationship with their bodies. How have they mapped their lives through these several domains; how do they continue to negotiate private as well as public spaces; what have been the struggles and searches, the lacks and needs?

We began our data collection in August 2009, just after the Delhi High Court ruling in July 2009 reading down the infamous Section 377. The judgement has led to a sudden mainstreaming of issues of queer people. Pride marches have been taking place in very many cities, while many more groups working with LBT people have emerged. There are more vocal hijra and transgender voices. There is definitely more conversation on being queer and on transgressions around gender and sexuality. Within the women's movements, too, there is more openness towards understanding that the gendered oppression of women and trans* persons has much in common – the most recent example, at the time of this writing, being the women's groups' demand for a gender sensitive sexual assault law that recognises a gender neutral victim but only a "male" perpetrator.

As we bring this analysis and writing to a conclusion, we feel strongly that the voices reflected here, and the issues we have been able to highlight through this study, are valuable and necessary at this juncture. We believe these constitute a resource that will help enrich the discussions that have begun, at least in pockets, in both the queer groups and the women's movements.

6. Fernandez, B. & Gomathy, N. B. (2003). Voicing the invisible: Violence against lesbians in India. In K. Kannabiran, The violence of normal times: Essays on women's lived realities. London and New Delhi: Zed Books and Kali for Women; Ghosh, S., Bandyopadhyay, B., S. & Biswas, R., (2011) Vio-Map: Documenting and mapping violence and rights violation taking place in the lives of sexually marginalized women to chart out effective advocacy strategies. Kolkata: Sappho For Equality; Creating Resources for Empowerment in Action. (2012). Count me IN!: Research report on violence against disabled, lesbian, and sex-working women in Bangladesh, India, and Nepal. New Delhi.

about the report

For this study we interviewed 50 queer PAGFB across the country and had conversations with several LBT and trans* collectives. The aim of this report is to bring together what we have learned from the lives of our respondents and our conversations with them, as well as build on that understanding to add to our collective agenda for change. And this we have tried to do without losing the nuance and the intensity of personal articulations and lived experiences. A report of this size cannot do full justice to the amount or complexity of the data we collected, but we wish to share here at least as much as is needed to recognise areas of concern and to initiate informed discussions and campaigns.

The next chapter in this section of the report details the methodology and the process of research, and is followed by a chapter on the socio-economic profile of our respondents. The next section, *Lived Realities*, looks at some of our key findings about how our respondents charted their non-normative lives through the normative territories of family and school, public spaces and workplace, while negotiating zones of comfort with their intimate partners and their selves. It also looks at the role of queer support groups, and at the lacunae and needs with regard to health services and other State agencies like the law and the police.

The following section takes a closer look at gender. In *Binary Gender is Just Another Imagined Norm*, we look closely at how our respondents identify and live their genders while continuously being subjected to the norms and scrutiny of those around them. In *Queer Groups: An Evolving Understanding*, we focus on the emerging collective understanding of gender among members of the groups with whom we had focused discussions. In the last section, *Towards a Vision of the Future*, we identify some of the broad areas of concern, and include both long-term needs as well as specific, easy-to-implement short-term actions and demands.

how we did this study

This research was guided by feminist research methods and ethics. One of the crucial contributions of feminist research is towards challenging the notion of the "objectivity" of "neutral" researchers in the research process. The work of feminists like Sandra Harding and Donna Haraway[7] has today made it almost imperative for researchers to state their location and subjectivity, and not invisibilise these under the garb of objectivity. So, as much as we want to talk about the process through which we, the researchers, arrived at the way in which the data collection and analysis was finally done, we begin with speaking of who "we" are.

"we" the research team

The 11 members of the research team have many common connections, yet many diverse locations. We have all been part of FAOW[8], a voluntary feminist collective in the city of Mumbai, through which we have actively engaged with the autonomous women's movements in the country. Nine of us have also been involved, as members of LABIA, with queer organising in the city and the country. So we do have a shared political background within which we have located our research. Individually we all identify as queer, although each one of us may identify with the term in different ways.

Our gender locations are also mixed. We were all assigned gender female at birth and have shared the political location of "woman". None of us identifies as 'man', but we believe (and this research further confirms our understanding) that there are many other gender locations, and some of us choose from among those over 'man' or 'woman'. We also realise that those of us who do say we are 'women' are complicating that identification in different ways. While the team comes from varied religious backgrounds, most of us come from privileged positions of caste and class.

Professionally, we are a diverse group, and have worked with each other in smaller teams before, in the contexts of campaigning and activism through LABIA and FAOW. Yet a formal study of this nature, with such a large team, was a unique experiment that we embarked on consensually. We were all equivalent if not equal members in the research process. There was no core team, or any specialised task that only a few people did. This team of 11 researchers worked together till the coding and initial analysis of the transcripts was done.

---

7. Haraway, D. (1988) Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. Feminist Studies 14(3), 575-599. Also refer to Harding, S. (Ed.). (1987) Is there a feminist method? In Harding, S. Feminism and Methodology: Social Science Issues (pp. 1-13) Bloomington: Indiana University Press and Open University Press.

8. Forum Against Oppression of Women (FAOW), in existence since 1980, is the oldest non-funded, autonomous feminist collective active in Bombay. It has been involved in campaigns against sexual assault, domestic violence, communalism, and with many other issues such as reproductive technologies, sexuality, sex work, caste, and has been an active part of other struggles and movements.

Subsequently the detailed analysis, and the writing of this report and of papers based on the research, was taken up by a group of four members of the team. This was decided on the basis of the availability and inclination of the individuals. For over two years this team of four has been striving to make meaning of the large amount of data that was collected. At times, this project took a back seat as other matters – the need to earn money, our individual professional interests and other commitments – took precedence. However, we persevered with the collective process of thinking, analysing and writing.

> We are aware that this is a study of people like us, and thus it is also informed by our own individual experiences as well as by LABIA's intense and varied experience of working with others like us. We recognise the advantages that we had in carrying out this study. Our lives and work have informed us a great deal in figuring out how to ask the questions, and in deciphering which were the questions important enough to ask.

We knew, broadly, that we were going to be talking to queer persons assigned gender female at birth (PAGFB). These persons are very much a part of the social and political community that we inhabit, which made it easier to gain their trust and consent to be part of the study. At the same time, this put a huge responsibility on us as researchers: we had to tread the fine path between being subjective, as "insiders" to the community we were studying, yet maintaining the "objectivity" necessary to the process of research.

defining the study

Our initial idea was to look at the lived realities and concerns of "female-born persons" inhabiting a spectrum of identities loosely clustered under FTM. We identified the main concerns, which included aspects of people's lives from childhood to the present and also involved their complex interactions with very private spaces and relationships (familial, sexual and other such intimacies) as well as public spaces. We were interested in seeing how they negotiated and understood their gender, and also how they accessed spaces or groups that had others like them, and what they expected from such spaces as well as from society.

We realised that we needed to understand each and every one of these experiences in the light of the omnipresent binary system that envelops every part of our existence. This was impossible to do through restrictive questionnaires eliciting short answers when the binary system is so deeply embedded in language itself, our only means of communication, and when

there has been so little conversation or shared knowledge about the lived realities of people who were "transpersons across a spectrum of identities loosely clustered under FTM".

life history narratives

It was then that we decided to do qualitative interviews with about 50 respondents, using the guided life history narrative method. And so we evolved a detailed interview guide for this. We also planned to have focused group discussions with LBT groups (primarily working with lesbian and bisexual women and trans* persons) to get a sense of each group's collective understanding around these issues and also to learn about how they looked at their own present and future work on issues of gender.

Alongside, we started discussions about how to choose our respondents. The study aimed to understand the nature and degree of discomfort that PAGFB have with their birth-assigned gender and also the ways in which they negotiate around this. The question before us was: how are we to *know* who is discomfited, and in what way, by their assigned gender? We had three options before us. One was to contact persons whom we ourselves perceived as transgressing gender norms; the second was to ask people to self-identify. The third, a radically different option, was to assume that every person has something to tell us about their discomfort with and negotiations around their assigned gender, and so open up the study to include all PAGFB.

Since we were approaching known groups and networks for the study, the first or second option or both in conjunction with each other were easily possible. But we were dissatisfied with these choices. There was no certainty, but there was a sense, that many people who might not say they were trans* might still have many things to tell us about gender. What if some persons were not identifying as trans* because they were not yet used to the language? Wouldn't we then miss out on the realities of all such people? If we looked at people who already identified as trans* then would we not start getting very boxed-in answers?

The third option meant redefining our study in some ways, because here we were changing something fundamental. Up until now we had focused on hearing from and about only those who explicitly transgressed the binary system. We were now moving towards the premise that to understand what lay beyond the binary we needed to look beyond the transgressions.

We spent many hours trying to understand the implications of all these choices and trying to make the "right" decision. We read, we discussed, we talked about our lives and our lived experiences of our own gender and sexuality. We went back and forth on this over many meetings. Meanwhile a fairly detailed draft of our interview guide was ready. We decided to each try and say whether we considered ourselves as apt respondents for such an interview and whether our lives could contribute to such a study. We were surprised to discover that in our group, where everyone saw themselves as "woman" politically or otherwise, there were many who said that in principle they thought they could be part of such a study. This self-identification as suitable subject for the study was coming from persons who did not identify with the original category of "transpersons across a spectrum of identities loosely clustered under FTM".

We finally broadened our sample to include all those who were assigned gender female at birth, but narrowed our universe by choosing our respondents only from among queer PAGFB, who identified non-heteronormative in some way, and allied with queer spaces or organisations. In our understanding, all such PAGFB are already challenging societal gender norms, either in terms of their sexual or their gender identity, or both. The ways in which gender and sexuality are bound together under patriarchy means, in any case, that "same sex desire" becomes a violation of the gender norm too.

reaching out and selection of respondents

We sent out letters to queer LBT groups – Sappho in Kolkata, Sahayatrika in Thrissur, LesBiT and WHAQ in Bangalore, Parma in Vadodara, Sangini in Delhi, and to Sampoorna, a global network of trans* Indians.[9] We followed up with phone calls, and in person where feasible. We wanted the groups' help in reaching out to individuals who would participate in the study, and we also wanted to have group discussions with members from each organisation. Besides this, we contacted people we knew, especially in Delhi and Chennai, for help with other contacts through their social networks. In Bombay and Pune we relied on our connections as LABIA with other queer spaces and people. We also got in touch with some individuals from rural areas, whom we had met over the years and stayed in touch with, but who were not part of any of the groups.

We got very helpful, supportive and whole-hearted responses from most of these groups and individuals. And we must emphasise here that without their help we could have never reached out to such a diverse group of people from all over the country. We eventually managed to get a good sample of people fairly well distributed across the four geographical regions of the country.

There were some disappointments too. The call for participation in the study was put on the Sampoorna e-list but it did not elicit any response from there. We did, however, get to do a group interview with Sampoorna. Parma wrote back, and told us in person and on the phone, that they could not participate in this study as they were doing a similar study. From Sangini we did not hear back, as they did not respond to our emails and we were unable to talk to them over the phone, though we tried.

We tried to get as diverse a sample as was possible in each geographical location. We used purposive sampling to get variations across age, class, caste and religion. The number of people available for being interviewed was not very large in every place; wherever we had more than the required number of people who fit any given criterion, we kept the selection random by picking lots.

---

9. These first letters were sent in July 2009 and these were the only groups we knew of then that worked primarily with LBT persons. All data collection was done between August 2009 and June 2010.

the interviews

Each interview was conducted by two members of the research team together. We arranged for translators in situations where the interviewers and the respondent did not speak a common language (taking into account the comfort and consent of the respondent). On completion of the interviews, we sent back the transcripts to the respondents for approval, and shared each transcript with the rest of the research team only after the approval came.

Most persons were interviewed in the cities where they lived, but in four cases we made it possible for people to travel to another city and be interviewed there. In three other cases we conducted the interviews in mutually convenient locations to which the respondents had travelled for their own reasons. The spaces that we used for the interviews were our own houses, respondents' homes, organisational spaces, other people's homes – basically, spaces where everyone was comfortable and we were assured of privacy. No interview was conducted in any public space.

The interviews were conducted in the course of a single day, with small breaks, with the exception of five interviews. Seven were done with the help of translators. Many respondents added more information and some deleted a few details once we sent back transcripts for approval. The duration of the interviews ranged from four to nine hours, not counting breaks. Interviews followed the interview guide broadly, but took many different routes depending on the inclination of the interviewers and of the respondent.

In our focused group discussions with the queer organisations, on the other hand, we kept our questions fairly open-ended and group-specific, based on our knowledge of the group, or inspired by aspects of the interviews in which members of the group had been respondents. We sought to know more about the groups' evolving understanding of gender, the diverse strategies they used in dealing with issues of gender, and how these had been shaped by their interactions with queer PAGFB and interventions in the lives of those marginalised due to sexuality and/or gender.

analysis and writing

Our respondents shared details of their lives, revisiting difficult parts of their past and present struggles, and facing up to aspects they might prefer hidden. Often, the interviews turned into conversations, and we were able to probe beyond the obvious meaning of what was being said and understand some of the nuances. We are, of course, well aware that what can be obtained in a single interaction is finally just one layer of a complex life; any generalisations from these texts and narratives had to be carefully done, with due recognition of the subjectivities of all those involved.

After completing our interviews and transcripts, we shared with each other our impressions of the persons we had interviewed, and also our personal emotions and thoughts around the whole process. No one from amongst us has met all the 50 respondents. As we listened together to the accounts of their lives, both in their own words and as paraphrased by us, themes began to emerge, which helped us make the code sheets for analysis. Subsequently, four of the team took on the task of taking forward the analysis and actually writing this report.

Our preliminary findings were shared with other researchers at a conference organised by OUT, Pretoria, in September 2010. As a follow-up to this meeting, we prepared a brief report on the research for *Women-Loving-Women in Asia and Africa*, 2011. Four of our abstracts based on the study were accepted for presentations to be made at the Indian Association of Women's Studies National Conference *Resisting Marginalisations, Challenging Hegemonies: Re-visioning Gender Politics*, Wardha, 2011, while some key findings were presented at the CREA Conference *Count Me IN*! Kathmandu, 2011. We have also published a paper called *Bound by Norms and Out of Bounds: Experiences of PAGFB Within the Formal Education System* in *Contemporary Education Dialogue*, in their special issue on *Contemporary Issues in Gender and Education*, July 2012. Some of our findings were presented at *Negotiating Spaces: Interrogating Patriarchy with a Spotlight on Natal Family Violence*, organised by the Majlis Legal Centre, Mumbai in August 2012.

Currently we are working on a book based on this research, as it has yielded rich data on queer PAGFB lives in India, which may not have been recorded and aggregated on such a scale before. This book will seek to situate our findings in the wider contemporary body of work around gender and trans* concerns.

about our respondents

We conducted in-depth interviews with 50 queer persons assigned gender female at birth (PAGFB). Our endeavour was to talk to a wide-cross section of individuals across location, age group, caste, class and religion. These variations were critical, as we wanted to reach those living at the intersections of many marginalised identities.

location

Most of our respondents were living in urban areas when we met them, primarily in Bangalore, Bombay, Kolkata, Chennai, Delhi, Pune and Thrissur. We contacted them through queer groups and networks in these cities. The relatively large number of respondents from the South is due to the existence of vibrant and active queer groups and networks in Bangalore, Chennai and Kerala. Only two respondents were from rural areas, one from rural Maharashtra and one from rural Jharkhand.

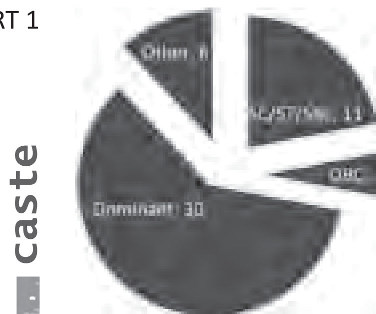
TABLE 1

ZONE	RESPONDENTS
East	9
North	10
South	18
West	13
TOTAL	50

Most of our respondents were from dominant castes. However, in each location, there was at least one SC/ST/SBC/OBC individual.

caste

CHART 1



class

We asked our respondents about the class background of their natal families while they were growing up. The categories were lower class, middle class and upper class. Answers were based on individual self-perception of class, which was influenced by relative exposure, geographical region and the rural or urban nature of the setting.

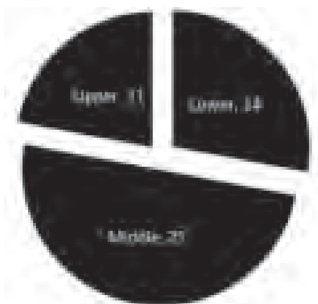
Though Jai and Murali both see their families as lower class, Jai used to go to school because there was no food to eat at home, whereas Murali was sent to a private school. This is the range that we glimpse in the lower class category.

There were similar variations in the other class categories. Santosh says his family is middle class despite his father being a daily wage earner, because his older brothers worked and brought home wages too, whereas Meghana considers hir urban family lower middle class despite hir father working in their family-run industry.

For our queer PAGFB respondents, an upper class background didn't necessarily mean having resources and privileges. 20-year-old Nidhi hails from a business family but, due to family dynamics, ze was unable to afford the education ze wanted and had to support hirself through earning small sums of money playing cricket. Bhargavi, also upper class, was deprived of education because of hir sexuality.

In Bombay and Delhi, most of our respondents came from the middle class and a few from the upper class. As we primarily used social networks to contact respondents in both these cities, this data suggests how class operates as an inhibiting factor in many of these spaces.[10]

CHART 2



10. In the interim, newer social spaces that have come up in both Bombay and Delhi are being accessed by queer PAGFB from a wider range of socio-economic backgrounds.

religious background

Recognising marginalisation due to religion, we made explicit attempts to talk to individuals from the non-dominant religions, but were unable to do so. We also found that the make-up of queer groups seemed to be largely reflective of the make-up of mainstream society. In Bombay we tried to reach out to potential respondents from varied religious backgrounds, and succeeded to some degree. It is important to note that many individuals we spoke to do not currently practice the religions into which they were born. Some had changed their faith, some chose to believe in God but not in any specific religion, and some were atheist.

TABLE 2

RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND	RESPONDENTS
Buddhist	1
Christian	3
Hindu	42
Jain	2
Muslim	1
Sarna	1
TOTAL	**50**

age profile

The youngest respondent in our study was 20 years old; the oldest was 65. We had intended an even distribution of respondents across the age brackets of 20-25, 26-30, 30-35 and over 35, but the sample seems to lean towards younger persons. This could be due to the largely young membership of groups like Sappho and LesBiT.

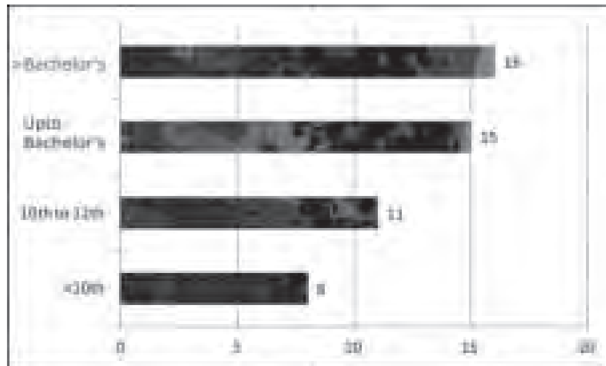
TABLE 3

AGE GROUP	RESPONDENTS
20-25	13
26-30	12
30-35	16
>35	9
TOTAL	**50**

education

The variation in level of education was more or less similar across all locations. As we discuss later, gender and sexuality played a significant role in many people's access to education.

CHART 3



current gender identification

Early on in our guided interviews, we asked respondents to state their current gender identification. To ensure that individuals would feel safe and free to respond to this question frankly, we did not furnish any options. Hence these were self-defined gender identities.

Answers were varied: we clubbed together all those who clearly said that they identified as man or male under 'man'; those that said they were woman or female under 'woman'; and put all others with variations on these under the category 'others'. Of our 50 respondents, 10 were 'man', 22 were 'woman' and 18 – in different ways – were 'others'. Even for 'woman', people often had individual descriptors.

Since how people name and live their genders and what meaning they make of it is one of the main areas of enquiry for this study, we have a much longer discussion on this in a later section.

CHART 4

marriage

We asked our respondents about their marital status. Of those married to cismen, one person was married, one was separated, three were divorced, and one had lost her husband. There were five persons who considered themselves married to women. One individual was married to a non-cisman and two saw themselves as having been married to women from whom they were now separated. Seven of our respondents were parents to either adopted or biological children.

migration

We found that 25 of our respondents had left their native place and migrated. Of the 11 who grew up in rural areas, only 2 had not migrated. This migration was largely propelled by tensions around gender and/or sexuality. All respondents who had migrated had moved from smaller towns or villages to metros or large cities, drawn by the relative anonymity of the latter or by the existence of support groups in those places. Some people had moved to bigger cities/towns to pursue their education. This latter category was made up of individuals who all identified as ‘woman’ or whose identities we have categorised as ‘others’, and came from middle class backgrounds. All the migrants spoke of the greater freedom the new place enabled, giving them a chance to express their gender and/or sexuality.

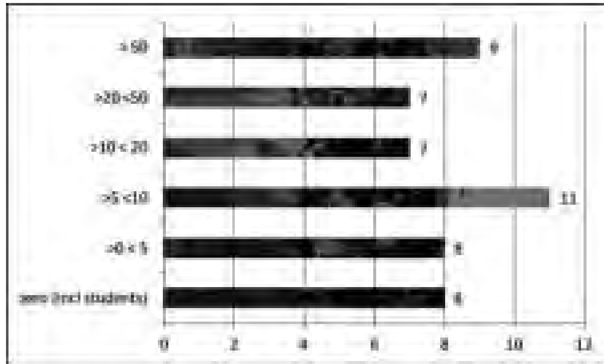
current income

Apart from class and caste disadvantages while growing up, our interviews showed how non-normative gender and sexuality become axes of further marginalisation. It was in this context that we looked at the current income of our respondents, to understand their class situation at the time of the interview.

As we see in chart 5, there were 27 people earning an income less than 10,000 rupees, which qualifies as a lower class income in the urban settings where most of them presently live.
Of these, 3 were students, while another 5 were neither employed nor living with or being supported by their natal families – which meant they were being supported by queer groups, friends, partners and personal support networks. This figure of almost half of our respondents falling in the lower class category is a stark indicator that they did not move up in life. In fact they seem to have moved downwards in terms of class.

Respondents living in the cities of Bombay and Delhi earned higher average incomes as compared to those in the rest of the country. This is due to two reasons: the cost of living is highest in these two metros; and the people we met here were largely from the middle and upper classes.

CHART 5 (Income in 000s)



lived realities

We embarked on this project with a fair notion that if we could gain our respondents' cooperation and trust so that they were forthcoming enough, our detailed questionnaires would surely elicit a wealth of comprehensive data for analysis. Yet even we were unprepared for the sheer scope and richness of the material we gleaned during this journey; we are still, at the time of this writing, continually amazed by the range of stories and memories, pain and pleasures, experiences and desires that tell us complex things about complex lives. What our respondents shared with us challenges every lazy preconception and resists every easy generalisation. We hope to do better justice to it all in the book based on the study. Here we look at some of our key findings about how our respondents charted their non-normative lives through the always fraught normative territories of family and school, public space and workplace, while negotiating zones of comfort with their intimate partners and their selves.

family

People have to do a test to drive a car but no one has done anything to prove that they are capable of having a child. You go to a mall and see all these families, mini catastrophes waiting to happen. Has any one of them ever asked themselves if they have any capabilities?[11]

One of the most critical aspects in the lives of most people is their relationships with their natal families. This was not an easy space for the majority of our respondents. It was with a good deal of dismay that we found narrative after narrative speaking of outright discrimination and extreme violence from parents and other family members.

abuse

neglect

Much of the abuse and neglect began very early, and often had nothing to do with non-normative gender expression or sexuality. Prem, who grew up in a very poor family, remembers the nature of violence ze faced as a child when ze asked for two rupees to go and see a cartoon film from school. "I came home in the lunch break and insisted that I wanted to go for the film and my mother got angry with me, she just picked up a knife and threw it at me and I got a big cut. Then she applied turmeric on it, consoled me, gave me two rupees and sent me for the film."

Whether it was violence linked to adult frustrations because of a tough life of poverty and hard labour, or overall situations of domestic violence that cut across class and other social differences, several respondents retained scars from their childhood. Meghana recalls, "Both mum and dad beat us. Dad was particularly violent when he beat us, for instance with a belt. Sometimes when he hit us, it felt as if I had lost my hearing in one ear or had broken some teeth. It never really happened but it felt like that."

11. The unattributed quotes at the beginning of each section of this chapter are from our interviews.

Many individuals were neglected or lonely as children. Priya says, “Over the years my brother had been violent towards me. I guess he was learning from my father. I became a loner and that’s how I still am.” Troubled by her violent brother as well as an unspoken attraction for another woman student in college, she tried to kill herself by taking sleeping pills. She says, “I slept for 36 hours and no one even noticed.” Taken together, all such experiences are indicators of the repression and trauma that routinely take place within the private and supposedly safe space of family.

A number of respondents faced sexual abuse within their families or inside their homes. 18 people said that they were sexually abused as children. Maushami has horrific memories of being sexually abused by her uncle, household help and many other people. “When I was a child I tried to kill myself a lot of times because of the sexual abuse. I had no security. . . . I was a depressed child. . . . It is a big house, with open courtyards. During vacations, I used to be alone at home. I was always tense. My mother used to laugh at me for locking all the doors and windows.”

Neha’s father stopped living with them when she was 10. She spoke of the abuse from him while he lived with them. “My father in the later years proved to be a complete sex addict. He’s acted funny with both my sister and me. Although my friends knew about it and were planning to inform my mother, due to my mother’s violent behaviour I made them promise not to tell her. And so I never informed her till much later, but from her response I don’t think she believed me really.”

Besides overt violence and covert neglect, there were the usual stories of blatant discrimination between boys and girls. After all, our respondents had all been assigned gender female at birth and brought up as “daughters”. Devi, who grew up in a working class family says, “My mother used to cook meat very well. Then she would give the pieces to my brothers and father, and add water to the masala and serve me and herself. She too would not eat, but would not give me any either.”

Extended families also exerted control, or attempted to do so, even when the parents were more open. Saumya says, “Earlier, one uncle and aunt came . . . and sat for three hours. I just do not answer them. They talk to my parents about why I do not want to get married. Parents do not encourage interference. And my parents’ support makes it easier for me.”

Some parents were supportive for other reasons. Falguni, an only child, says:

> *I played with guys, I climbed trees, I went here and there without telling my parents. I also played cricket, basketball, tennis and badminton. I wasn’t restricted. I enjoyed myself. . . . Dad’s behaviour towards me made me feel that he wanted me to be a boy. He took me out shopping and would buy me jeans and shirts. My mom used to protest . . . But he paid no heed. I feel he wanted me to grow up independent like a boy because he wanted me to be able to look after myself after they were no more.*

Usually, however, families took on the onus of creating perfect gender-stereotypical adults out of their children. Although many respondents said that they always did all the “boy” things and

played with boys when they were younger, adult tolerance levels dipped when their children reached puberty. Gender norms were now imposed and expected to be followed in a much more strict manner. For those not comfortable with their assigned gender, this was a particularly trying phase: on the one hand the changes in the body were difficult to accept; on the other, external restrictions grew.

Rahul recalls how deeply he felt the mismatch between himself and the world around him. “At home, from class 11, I started speaking about how I am. I spoke in the masculine gender for myself. Earlier they didn’t mind me speaking in this way, in a tomboy way, but later they started asking me why I talk like this. . . . A time comes when you are made to realise that you are a girl. That time came. I felt bizarre. I wondered how, why? . . . I used to keep very quiet then.”

Rahul waited eagerly to turn 18 because he knew he could then do as he wished. At the time of the interview he had begun taking hormones as a precursor to surgery, and although his parents and siblings still cannot comprehend him, they are resigned.

In a few cases, respondents who did not see themselves as ‘woman’ were allowed by families to live according to their gender even after puberty. For Sumit, who today identifies as ‘transgender’, it was as if hir dreams and hir family’s needs coincided:

> *If I look at my photos from childhood I see myself in boys’ clothes only. . . . Maybe it was because we were eight sisters and so my parents looked at me as their son. . . . It is not because my parents gave me boys’ clothes. I just felt like a boy from within. . . . All my sisters are married and away. I am at home and look after my mother, do everything that she needs outside and inside the house. So in a way it is good for everyone else also, to have someone doing this work.*

Yet Sumit’s story is not one of unconditional acceptance. Ze has never felt able to speak to hir family about hir sexuality. Nor do they ask, although they have never pressurised hir to get married.

For other respondents too, their gender non-conformance wasn’t necessarily a problem until their non-normative sexuality entered the picture. Confiding in their families was thus not an option for most people, though they were usually aware of their sexuality very early on, and had been in relationships with other PAGFB. When these relationships were discovered by families or revealed to them by their children’s teachers or friends, reprisals were swift and severe. There were stricter rules, greater surveillance and restricted mobility, if not complete house arrest.

In what must also be the story of so many people we never hear about, a respondent described a suicide pact with a partner, entered into because they could no longer stay with their families and realised they couldn’t survive on their own without shelter and jobs.

Suicide attempts, cutting or harming oneself in other ways, depression – these seem to be commonplace occurrences. As many as 13 of our respondents recounted stories of attempted suicide while still living with their natal families. Two others spoke of seriously considering it. While most of these attempts were made because of tensions around gender and sexuality, many times the reasons were general deprivation, neglect and abuse.

Given all of this, it is unsurprising that as many as a third of our respondents had completely hidden important parts of their lives from their families. This has not just meant living through relationships without ever talking about them but also going through severe emotional and other stresses alone, while families remain oblivious. Such silence and indifference are not just alienating but also violent.

Even when parents are likely to be supportive, the homophobia so embedded in society can be inhibiting. Aditi lost her father when she was just a toddler. She was brought up by her mother and aunt. The mother is very understanding, and has been there for Aditi throughout. Yet when her relationship of many years with the person she still refers to as “the love of her life” ended, Aditi attempted suicide thrice, but did not tell her mother about her relationship. “I gave a wrong reason, saying that I have tensions with my job. So my mother told me to give up the job. She can take care of me. My mother said that she would not live if anything happened to me. So now I have given up the idea of dying.”

control policing

It seems somewhat ironical that parents who cannot handle their children’s own assertions of their sexuality are almost always eager to get them married off. Not all our respondents were able to resist such forced marriages. Six were married to cismen at some point in their lives. Two of these marriages took place when the respondents were still very young. Another respondent actually used marriage as a way to escape her abusive and neglectful family, in a gamble that sadly meant exchanging parental violence for marital violence. The other three all tried hard to resist, but to no avail. Five respondents eventually got out of these marriages and lived lives of their own choosing, but only after all concerned went through tremendous pain, guilt and sorrow.

Rigid controls and policing, violence from parents and siblings because of non-normative gender or sexuality, forced separation from partners, increased marriage pressure on one or both young people in a relationship – these were all factors that led many to flee their homes, alone or with intimate partners.

Kamal and Murali, both from rural areas, eloped with their partners once their relationships were discovered. So did Jai, when his girlfriend’s mother spotted them together even though they had

been banned from meeting each other, and she was too frightened to go back home. Ranjana, who lived in an urban area, also ran away from home with her girlfriend, to another city where they knew of supportive queer people. Her family did not know about her sexuality but was pressurising her to get married. Sam, on the other hand, had to run away from home as he was being beaten and denied food for flirting with girls in his class and not dressing or behaving like a "good girl" should.

If relationships with family members have been bad all along, running away is the obvious solution. It is when relations have been good that the decision to leave becomes very difficult, because it means a complete break with family. In some instances, either very gradually or after a long period of time, there may be some reconciliation. Or cracks appear in the happy family portrait.

Neel has been in a long relationship with another PAGFB. She does not talk at length about the problems they went through, but mentions the police complaint filed years ago by her partner's parents, who are not yet reconciled to the relationship. Neel says her own family does not completely approve either. "I was the pet in the family, that is why all of the family is in sad mood now. I was always studious and good, now all that is changed." She says of her childhood, "Those times were golden times, now one feels terrible." Neel does visit her family with her partner but some members don't speak to them.

We did of course have respondents who were out to their immediate families, and who were affirmed in their gender identities or whose sexuality was never questioned or punished, but this was true for perhaps just 3 of the 50 people we met. It was more common for one or both parents to have come around eventually after being hostile at first. A few respondents had reconnected with natal families after achieving economic independence; there were even instances of respondents or their live-in partners having a parent who now lived with them.

> Sometimes, of course, it's possible to leave home for the sake of education or work, and live as one chooses in a different place without sharing much about one's life but without cutting off all ties. Yet others continue to stay on as they do not see any alternative, so they live with natal families while hiding parts of their lives, and gain an acceptance of sorts by becoming a source of support for the family financially and in other ways. Yet whether people chose to stay or had no choice but to leave, what comes through clearly is the isolation experienced by respondents who had nobody else, or perhaps only their partners, with whom to share their lives and dreams and struggles.

Although most of our respondents had difficult lives, there were often unexpected sources of support even in the midst of deprived childhoods and painful or abusive intimate relationships. Sometimes knowing about others in the family and neighbourhood who were similar to oneself made a difference. For Meghana, who grew up in a middle class family in a semi-urban setup, it was the knowledge of hir aunt's lesbian relationship and life that opened up new avenues and worlds for hir.

> Many respondents found solace in the animals that became part of their lives. Arun says, "When I was young I had seven dogs, love birds, a garden." These pets were hir companions in a childhood where ze faced a lot of violence from hir father. And Divakar admits that in the worst of times, when he could not really talk about what was happening to him, "Yes, there was a cow. I used to talk to her and be with her."
>
> Some people were helped, emotionally or financially, by members of the extended family or other adults in the vicinity. Alpana, Nidhi and Jai all speak of uncles who cared for them in various ways. Juhi's mother was distant and uncommunicative, but Juhi recalls with affection the various women neighbours who were around in the chawl where ze grew up. "Due to the communal living . . . I felt I had many mothers and never depended solely on my own mother."

For another respondent, who was studying music, many hours of the day were spent with the guru who became an unexpected ally. "Very gentle, very nice, very funny, very humorous. Never shouted at me, never screamed at me . . . We would talk about everything and by the time I was 16 or 17 he was my best friend." This guru, many decades older, was the one person in whom the respondent was able to confide about a girlfriend's suicide.

These findings underline for us how crucial it is to understand people's experiences with their natal families, both while they are growing up and as adults, to be able to make sense of their later lives. They also emphasise the need to understand the dynamics of birth families, with their inherent violence and hierarchies.

> Families emerge as extremely violent and non-supportive places that work to strengthen the hierarchical structures of society, rather than provide the nurture and support that they are supposed to.
>
> Considering the patriarchal nature of society, all PAGFB tend to face greater violence and discrimination within the family. And when non-normative gender and sexuality enter the equation, things become even worse.
>
> Natal families emerge in this study as one of the most important sites for intervention, so that they can become supportive and safe spaces that allow the young to make real choices, even if these do not conform to the norms of the world around, and in order to alter society's prescriptions around gender and sexuality.

family is
an important site
for intervention

school and college

I do not hold resentment towards individuals in my school but towards a whole system.

Education can be double-edged in many ways. It is supposed to be the great leveller, bringing all who have access to it on to the same playing field, but it often ends up alienating, othering, punishing those who resist regulation, and reinforcing marginalisations of caste, class, ability, gender. It's obviously of great importance for those who need to be able to achieve economic independence in order to live their lives the way they wish to, and all PAGFB come under that category, but as we look at our respondents' lives we find the ones who are the most in need of skills and qualifications that would stand them in good stead in later life are often the ones who fall through the cracks in the system.

And yet, as with every other aspect of this study, our respondents' experiences of formal education did not merely echo what we already knew or could guess. There were as many happy surprises as there were grim tales.

8 of our 50 respondents actually preferred school to home because school afforded an escape from, or a contrast to, the oppressive home atmosphere. Several respondents who came from families that were abusive, or from homes where they suffered discrimination or neglect, found much-needed affirmation from teachers and classmates. In some instances, teachers provided the affection and care that was missing at home: bathing and feeding one perpetually hungry and

unwashed child; taking another child, who was sad and withdrawn after his mother's death, to their homes to play with their children.

Jharna had a difficult home life which eroded her self-confidence and made her feel nervous and inferior, but she recalls how, after she wrote something in class, her teachers "picked me up and carried me to the staff room, saying, 'What you've written, such a small girl!' After that the whole thing changed for me, I got very special treatment in my schools – that gave me courage to live as I want."

Teachers and subjects sometimes played an enabling role in other ways. Kamal, disabled from an early age, might have missed out on education but for the fact that a teacher convinced his parents to send him to school. Roma had a tutor in college who had a huge impact on her and to an extent made up for her having been badly bullied by classmates in school. And for Kanika, sociology became hir "friend"; it was the discipline she had been searching for always.

While there were these positive experiences, there were also many unhappy memories of school. Sandy recalls hir school, "where everyone was classified based on the wealth of their fathers. . . . Whether it was class, religion, gender – we were all ridiculed and othered." Similarly, those from Dalit or OBC backgrounds found the discrimination hard to deal with, unless they came from a home atmosphere that derided caste distinctions. Thus Jamuna was largely unaffected by casteist remarks, whereas Vasu still carries a sense of shame around his "low caste" status. Vasu's story is one where we clearly see how other kinds of marginalisation intersect with transgressive gender – his family was Dalit and extremely poor, he himself hated dressing or being seen as the "girl" he was expected to be both at home and in school, and eventually, like so many other respondents, he dropped out.

> Despite all kinds of marginalisations, there is something to be said for individual agency and the thirst for learning. Mala grew up in a very poor, rural, tribal household. There was no question of any schooling and, when still very young, ze was married off. Yet a chance encounter with a group of nuns who ran a rural education centre helped Mala fight family disapproval and ridicule in order to acquire literacy, practicing the letters of the alphabet in the mud and on walls. When we met hir, ze was studying to give hir school finals.

Sandhya's mother was an agricultural labourer. Ze remembers, "Morning I would go to school from 7 to 12 and then run and reach wherever my mother was working. . . . She would take my brother and go and then I would reach and relieve her and then we would both come home after her work." Sandhya insisted on being sent to school, and on being allowed to go to college. When we met hir, ze was pursuing a postgraduate degree.

The table below shows the different levels of education of our respondents.

EDUCATION	WOMAN	OTHERS	MAN	TOTAL
Less than 10th std.	1	2	5	8
Upto 12th std.	2	7	2	11
Upto a Bachelor's degree	8	5	2	15
Beyond a Bachelor's degree	11	4	1	16
TOTAL	**22**	**18**	**10**	**50**

We see that as many as 16 of the 19 respondents who did not complete school at all, or did not go to college, do not identify as 'woman'. On the other hand, 19 of the 22 'woman'-identified respondents were graduates or postgraduates.

While the reasons for this high dropout rate among the more gender-transgressive respondents may lie outside of school – for instance, many ran away because of violence at home, or pressure to marry – we have to acknowledge that the schools concerned were unable to counter this trend. Indeed, in this respect, schools were no different from other mainstream actors.

For several respondents, school was a place that negated their very sense of self. All it took at times was the regulation school uniform. Sunny, who identifies as '50% male and 50% female', actually quit school because of being forced to wear skirts. And Alex remembers hir days at boarding school when ze was seven:

Outside of school, I wore pants, I dressed as a boy. . . . There was an English teacher who seemed to have left all her other work and decided to dedicate her time to making me wear skirts. . . . I would wear my skirt over my trousers, and when that teacher objected, I told her, 'You have told me to wear a skirt and you have not said don't wear pants, so I am wearing a skirt.' It was a horrible time when she made me wear skirts. It took up a lot of my mindspace.

One of the most recurrent causes of violence appears to have been non-normative sexuality. Sam was suspended from school for three months because a girl to whom he was attracted complained about him to the Principal. There are other accounts of being outed in disturbing ways. Nidhi used to wait eagerly to go to school every day, and was much loved by hir teachers and friends, till one day ze was caught utterly unaware:

In the 8th standard, we had our batch ceremony in the hall. They called me up on stage. I was expecting to be announced captain again. However, my headmistress insulted me in front of all by saying 'How can she be captain as she smooches girls.'

She openly told everyone. I was very hurt. I loved school more than I loved home. School was important to me. I just didn't know what to do.

Tuli chose not to study further when she failed her 10th standard exams, even though her middle class family was dismayed by her decision. Tuli does not offer explanations for why she did badly in that final year of school, but the narrative of her school years provides a substantial clue: it had nothing to do with school or teachers or subjects, and everything to do with her unarticulated attractions for other girls. Neither school nor home were able to provide an enabling space for her during this emotionally turbulent time.

Sexuality in itself is often enough to invite censure and to cause trauma; it does not necessarily have to be about same-sex desire. Neha, whose home environment was deeply troubled and who really enjoyed school until the 6th standard, says that it turned into a nightmare for her later. She was the only girl in her class who explored her sexuality, with her male classmates. She says, "As I walked down the corridor, people would say, 'There goes the slut.' The entire school came to know about this. It became really difficult for me to be in that school then."

As the table shows, college education was accessed by many more self-identified 'women', all of whom had completed school (except for one). In fact, two of those we have categorised as 'others' got education only as adults, while five of the 'men' did not manage to pass their school finals or even study that far. This leads us to speculate that while many queer 'woman'-identified PAGFB may be spurred towards higher education because of their strong need for independence, or in order to resist marriage pressures, persons who are more obviously gender transgressive (and who have an equally pressing need for independence) appear to lack the same opportunities or access. This has to be read with the fact that most of our respondents who identified as 'man' also came from more marginalised locations, and had been compelled to leave home while still very young.

Although education should have been a passport to economic independence and personal freedoms, gender and sexuality transgressions evidently became obstacles for many respondents. Often, in order to fit young people into larger societal norms, schools became yet another site of the violence inflicted on them. We need to reflect on strategies that will strengthen affirming spaces and create enabling environments for queer PAGFB in schools, encourage diversity, and help to question and dismantle deeply rooted patriarchal biases within the formal education system.

sports

I did not feel uncomfortable about my gender, maybe because there were other people like me.

It is noteworthy that several of our respondents got into sports, especially competitive sports, around the same time as puberty set in. This was, for most respondents, a time when rules around their behaviour started getting stricter – with greater monitoring of what they could wear or not wear, who they could play with, or how long they could stay out. For several, it was also a time of becoming aware of their attraction towards other PAGFB, while dealing with the changes happening within their bodies – all in all, a difficult time.

Sports offered a space of physical activity where people could establish a positive relationship with their bodies, and hone talents and abilities that otherwise find no space within the school curricula. Many respondents expressed their sense of the loss of this space once they stopped studying; very few were able to pursue their sporting interests outside of school and college.

In a sample of 50 persons, 6 achieving more than a moderate degree of success in sports does seem high. Significantly, 5 were from poor or middle class backgrounds, and from families that did nothing to support them in pursuing their sporting passions. This high degree of self-motivation can be understood in the light of certain experiences that respondents spoke of.

They described several affirmative experiences from the sports arena – a different kind of learning, support from coaches, the opportunity to travel and also greater mobility within their localities, much more space to do things which "girls" would usually not be allowed to do. Simran, who played sports through most of her schooldays, says, "Sports actually teaches you to block out and deal with various kinds of pressures. . . . I remember it helped me a lot."

Those who faced criticism in other quarters for their gender non-conformance often found in sports a safe space for gender expression, or at any rate a bargaining chip to negotiate such expression, especially if they did well in the sport. Thus Sumit managed to get permission to wear trousers to school because ze was winning competitions for hir team. "From class 9, girls had to wear a sari. One teacher tried to force me to wear a sari but I did not. I got some leeway and facility because I was a player. I was not good at studies but had got a lot of trophies for my school and so got away with some of these things."

At the same time, the gender segregation in sports helped many queer PAGFB access a safe space for sexual exploration and early relationships. Non-normative sexuality was even encouraged sometimes by coaches. Almost all respondents who played a sport reported that they met other "people like us" within the sports arena. This went a long way towards allaying feelings of

alienation and loneliness. As Aditi, a cricket player, says, “I met new people at the last event and I was very happy.”

However, while some gender rules are relatively relaxed within the sports arena, the space itself remains inherently gendered. There is also a differential treatment for boys and girls playing sports, or an attitude that certain sports are “boys’” sports. ‘Woman’-identified Roma wasn’t welcome to play football with the boys when she reached puberty, so she started playing table tennis. But she was compelled to drop out because “The coach was such a woman-hater, he used to believe that the games are only for boys and not for girls. He wanted me to go away and he succeeded. Because all the other boys, whenever they had a chance they would laugh at me. I gave up.”

These gender boundaries are explicit as well as implicit and mimic the boundaries set in other parts of life. It is not at all common to see women occupying playgrounds as part of a usual day. Many respondents were forced to stop playing because “women’s sports” are not encouraged at all. Besides, competitive sports pay very little, and the situation gets exacerbated for PAGFB. So, for several people, playing ended with school or in college.

At the time of the interviews two of our respondents were in sports-related professions and one planned to give up her current job and get into a sports-related business. They were finding their own ways of connecting their passions and their work lives. Many others, however, still lament the fact that they had to give up playing their favourite sport.

intimacies in isolation

Love is mental!

Our respondents spoke at length of their sexual intimacies with others. These relationships were crucial to their lived realities, their sense of self and their understanding of their own gender. Yet in most cases, before they managed to reach a support group and access safer spaces for conversations about their lives, the only other person they could speak to freely was a sexual partner (who may or may not have identified in a similar manner either in terms of sexuality or gender) or, more rarely, a friend or co-worker.

While the less familiar narratives of their sexual and romantic relationships abound in the same tropes that we encounter freely elsewhere – passion and pleasure, jealousy and heartbreak, highs and lows – there are significant variations on all these themes. An intimate relationship between two women, or a woman and an FTM, or an FTM and a gender queer person (to cite just a few possibilities), is also a love story that ends up breaking many of the rules, no matter how conventionally it may (seem to) begin.

Given all the homophobia and transphobia everywhere, it is astonishing that queer individuals are able to seek, let alone find, intimate partners. The classroom, the workplace, the house next door – all these were common backdrops to our respondents' early and later romances, dalliances as well as long-term bonds. Many of these relationships, however, were lived in secrecy and isolation, in constant fear of being found out, under the pressure of impending forced marriages, and with no other model besides the heteronormative.

As many as 10 of our respondents performed some kind of symbolic act or ceremony as a way of mutually affirming their relationship in the absence of any larger social or familial validation. For some it was simply a joyful act of love, for others a desperate bid to try and bind what was coming apart, for yet others an attempt to stave off forced marriage to cismen: always it was meant as a talisman that would protect the relationship in some way, keep the lovers from being separated,

beat the odds that were weighted against them. As one respondent narrated, “Have been married to the same woman several times by tying thali around neck in the temple. . . . some four or five times within a period of three months, and since the parents did not know, they thought that we were good friends going to the temple. . . . we would go to the temple and take off the thali and tie it again. *(laughter)* Love is mental!”

6 of the 10 who secretly married their partners were, in fact, no longer with those they had married. Some broke up after they came to support groups – apparently for the usual sorts of reasons: because of mutual differences, or partners getting involved with someone else. Jai recounts:

> *. . . one day, a week or so after we had come, I found out that (my partner) was having a relationship with (someone else). I confronted her and she said that it was her choice and she could do what she wanted and had not written and given to me that she would be with me for life. . . . (she) clearly said that she always had many relationships . . . and did not really love me but had used me to get out of the family.*

It’s worth reflecting on how, while the queer and feminist critiques of marriage and of monogamy that exist in some of the support groups might be liberating for some, they do create personal or relational crises for many who, until then, have never even met other people like themselves.

For some respondents, monogamy in their intimate relationships was non-negotiable; for others, it was an issue of mutual consent and an area of constant negotiation; for others still, these were shifting spaces. Some people had a political take, others an emotional and experiential stake. Ujwala’s considered view is, “. . . my understandings are changing and I am okay saying I am confused. For example if you are monogamous then I don’t have an issue with that. I will not buy into the argument that non-monogamy is important to be queer.”

Manjula, guided like several others by hir partner’s wishes, found hirself in a conundrum:

> *Initially (my partner) was very for monogamy and I was very non-monogamous. I changed a lot for him because he wanted monogamy. Suddenly one fine day I realised that he is non-monogamous and I had changed and I am not able to change back. . . . (Over the) last one and a half years it is almost killing me. . . . There is this continuous feeling of not belonging to anything – house, work, friends – even friends kept changing all the time.*

At the same time, a fairly large number of our respondents had practised or wished to practise non-monogamy while being in a primary relationship with one person. At least five of our respondents spoke of not wanting that one grand exclusive relationship. For them, non-monogamy had always been, or had become, the preferred option. Neha wants to have “lots of” relationships; asked if it is important to have love and intimacy to have sex, she says, “Not at all.” Alpana says, “I would describe myself as polyamorous. I don’t believe in a lifetime commitment.”

Whether relationships are monogamous or multiple, long-term or short-term, the question arises: how do two people, both assigned gender female at birth, apply notions of femininity and masculinity to their relationship?

What emerges clearly from our respondents' accounts is that a conventional feminist reading – of assigning less power to the "woman" and more to the "man" – may not make much sense when the gender equation is much more complex than that between a cisman and ciswoman. When we speak of people who challenge gender norms, their gender identities and masculinities and femininities require a much more nuanced reading than is available from most critical readings of how gendered power operates in a bi-gendered world.

> This study reveals again and again how gender non-conforming PAGFB who identify as 'man' are often vulnerable rather than powerful in their relationships with 'woman'-identified persons who have a less troubled sense of their own gender. Both the fact and the fear of being left for cismen are especially traumatic for PAGFB who do not identify as 'woman'.

Sunny has a clear analysis of just what was going on in hir first romance at the age of 14, with a girl in hir class. "Things ended badly with (her), she got married. Her father was a real dog, he kept a strict watch on her – no TV, no going out, he would pick and drop her from school. That is when I realised that (she) did not have any access to boys and that is why she was with me. I was her best male option." And when Sumit's partner of twelve long years left hir to marry a cisman, it echoed a pattern from Sumit's college days. "Many girls used to come closer to me then. I used to think that they are coming to me because they are attracted to me. Now I think I was wrong. They were not able to get closer to men and so they were coming to me. . . . The girls were coming to try out physical relationships, I just kept falling in love."

> Nowhere do gender and sexuality come together so completely as in the equation with an intimate partner. Depending on the extent to which such expression is encouraged or thwarted by a partner, these relationships can provide the deepest affirmation, or inflict the deepest hurt. Many gender non-conforming PAGFB are additionally traumatised when partners question or disrespect or fail to affirm their gender.

Santosh continues to encounter this kind of violence from his partner of six years. "My friends are FTM but when (my partner) refers to me as a girl in front of them, or even when we're alone, it's very difficult to hear and gives me a lot of tension. . . . Sometimes when (she) says these things to me, I think she wouldn't be saying this if I was a man. It's because I'm born this way that she's saying them to me."

Along with gender there are other markers of power and of vulnerability that influence interpersonal dynamics – such as age, location, caste, class, ability, mental health issues, support

or violence from family members, to name just a few. Difference in social status is definitely something that needs to be handled carefully to be able to get acceptance from families. Manjula speaks of how ze and hir partner also had to work through other differences, of age as well as of class. “I also had to negotiate with my parents not about his gender but about his being poor and uneducated. Once my mother said that he is not even an SSLC passed and you are a degree holder, how can this work?”

In Monu’s narrative, hir partner’s marginalised caste status was offset by the privilege of education, giving Monu grounds for countering family disapproval:

My mother too used to say earlier, ‘She is lower caste, why do you go to her house, why do you go to those people, the atmosphere there is not good.’ My brothers and sisters would also say, ‘That neighbourhood is chhota log, it is not nice.’ I would not tell (my partner) this. It would hurt her. I would argue with them that ‘Chhota-bada is not by caste but by education. . . . What does caste have to do with anything? My relationship is with a person. She is so modern, that is better than upper castes.’

negotiation

While not many respondents spoke of partners who were significantly younger or older than themselves, there were some intimate relationships in which there was a considerable age difference. As Jharna says, when you break one norm it becomes that much easier to break several others. Jharna was in a 20-year-old relationship with her teacher, who is 30 years older. Now, at 44, Jharna’s worries about her partner’s health are compounded by her anxiety about her own future.

non-monogamy

secrecy

Respondents also spoke of many kinds of violence within relationships, which might arise from conflicts around gendered behaviour and expectations, or from other problems like sexual jealousy and possessiveness. Falguni describes what happened in her first relationship. “She displayed a lot of possessiveness and it is my fault that I used to encourage it. . . . Last year, it turned violent, she slapped me but I did nothing back, and I took her back. And then it started getting worse. . . . She used to beat me up, I said stuff verbally. Her possessive behaviour just kept on increasing.”

gender equations

Besides physical, verbal, and emotional violence from partners, many spoke of self-inflicted violence in moments of extreme stress. When Prem’s partner decided to leave hir, ze slashed both hir arms with a blade. A similar episode outed Kavi to family, friends and doctors alike when she was 20 years old. Kavi and her girlfriend had been quarrelling. One evening Kavi saw her in a public space but ignored her:

The next morning, her mother came to me and said that she had taken sleeping pills. . . . She had written my name on her thigh, with a blade. . . . They made me sit on a chair, four or five doctors questioning me. I got very scared. They asked whether I had spent

the night with her. . . . In the prescription, they wrote 'homosexual love' and counselled me. Our families were told. They said this was the reason for (her) suicide attempt.

Many of the fault lines within relationships can be traced back to the lack of support outside. The sense that one's desires or behaviour are illegitimate or abnormal, and guilt over parents being saddened by one's life choices, all become pressure points.

Only a few of our respondents had been together long enough with present or previous partners to be able to reflect on aspects of a shared life, whether lived together under the same roof or not. Vimala and her partner had been together since she was in the 7th standard. She describes their decision-making process. "We do it on a monthly basis, so I think. That this month I shall decide, next month you do *(laughter)* . . . But prior to taking a decision we do sit and share it out. And in these discussions, all my family, even my most youngest sibling participates. Everything, even our loves, is discussed in our place. We keep a meeting for everyone to come and share and discuss."

we need to create more spaces where intimacies can be spoken of with ease

Other respondents traced how their sense of self, of what they were or were not comfortable with in a relationship, as well as the way they related to partners, had evolved over the course of a relationship or through a series of intimacies over time. Learning the importance of not being "joined at the hip" and having individual friends and spaces, letting your partner know that you do not care for "feminising" endearments, being able to talk things through, being able to process your own feelings and appreciate your partner's concerns, finding ways to affirm your partner's gender or helping them understand your needs, discovering how playful gender can be and how you can switch roles if that is what both people enjoy – these were some of the ways in which respondents created zones of mutual comfort, and happiness, with intimate partners.

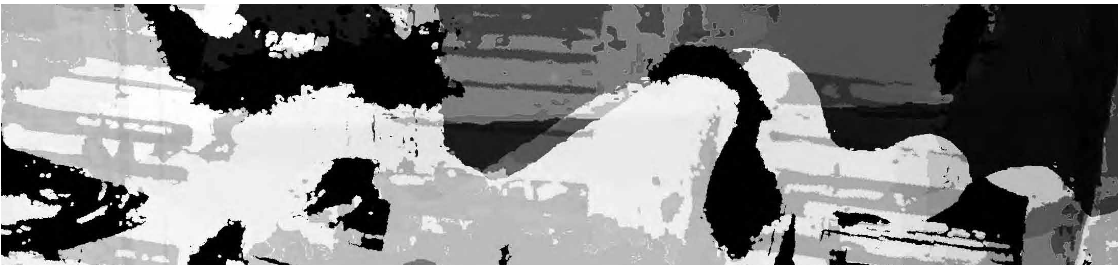
Many who had run away from home shared living spaces with other members of support groups, and developed closer ties with each other. Often, friends financially supported those who were jobless. It is hardly surprising, then, that several respondents were impelled to redefine – or inspired to re-imagine – the concept of "family" for themselves, going beyond the notion of family as given by birth or by marriage. Almost all our respondents had created new families in the course of their lives.

To the extent that redefining family also involves rearticulating intimacy, it's relevant to speak of Manjula's many imaginary lovers, Ujwala's assertion that "relationships can be inside one's head"

and ‘woman’-identified Alpana’s desire for a “poly family”. Ranjana, speaking of her partner, says, “We both are family. . . . This family structure is democratic, it’s a shared job, a real support to each other . . . We are supporting little-little families around us. Taking decisions together.” For some respondents, their envisaged families included a biological or adopted child. Geeta describes her home as “a very open house. . . . It was a space for queer people. It was a kind of space that you associate with family – secure, taking it for granted. In fact at one point I had to go sleep at another friend’s house as my own house was full of people.”

> One of the most crucial conclusions that we can draw fairly confidently from our respondents’ narratives is the fact that PAGFB who are more “masculine” in terms of their identity, expression, and roles in public do not automatically acquire gendered power in their intimate relationships. We need to take account of this in our activism, and also work towards creating more spaces where such relationships and intimacies can be spoken of with ease and comfort, and where conflicts and joys can be shared with community rather than remaining confined to the narrow, fragile space between two persons.

navigating the body



I feel that people are afraid to say what they want sexually, even with a partner, because that may reflect on their gender.

We spoke to our respondents at length about their relationships with their bodies. How they perceived their bodies, how would they like them to be perceived, what did they want to change in their bodies and why, what were their experiences of sex, and so on. Since the normative binary of gender also presupposes a certain kind of body for each sex and assigns gender accordingly, we wanted to hear what role the body played in their own understanding and living of their personal gender.

In this section we focus on the experiences of those people who accepted their body or gender assignment with some unease, as well as of those who did not see themselves fitting into either their body or assigned gender, or both. This does not mean that other respondents had nothing of interest to say, but we focus here on 'men' and 'others'. Ujwala sums it up well:

Just looking different is such a difficult thing that you have to live with. When you know that you are not going to pass. When you know that you are not going to be woman enough because you are not curvy enough or not pass as a man because you are not hairy enough. So it is a very difficult terrain when you are caught in between and have to answer questions on practically everything.

Breasts seem to be the chief marker that people look at, especially when other social markers of dress and hair length confuse them, or the person's gender transgression makes them uncomfortable. Even when the act of transgression has been recognised as such, staring at a particular body part is a familiar way of humiliating the transgressor. As 'woman'-identified Tuli, who usually dresses in pants and shirt and has short hair, says, "When I say I'm a girl, they look at my chest and not my face. It feels weird. I've been asked to take off my jacket and I said, 'Why? Want to see my breasts? Can I feel yours and check if they're real? I can't tell if you're a woman either.'"

"right" body look camouflage

To avoid such altercations and to be able to move about in their self-perceived gender hiding the breasts through tight clothing or layers of tight clothes concealed by loose shirts on top is common camouflage. Murali, who identifies as 'FTM', describes the process in detail. "To hide them I wear men's stretch banyan that flattens the breast, then cotton chemise which does not stretch and is stitched exactly to fit, then a T-shirt and then, over it, my shirt." Vasu, who identifies as 'man', narrates how "Earlier when at home, I tied it up tightly. Or wore a tight banian, of a child's size, and it would even cut my arms, making the skin red as it would be so tight. The arm would even blacken. Have tried everything but to no use."

Such pain and trauma are borne when rendering breasts invisible is essential for people's own relationship with their bodies, and how they want to see themselves. The physical pain is outweighed by the pain of seeing oneself unlayered, unbound, alien. Anand, who has been binding his breasts for many years, says he cannot eat when he's out because he feels choked. "As soon as I go home, I remove the binding, and therefore there are no mirrors in the house." And Jai says, "Inside I am a man, but the outside body is not like a man and so even if I see my breasts while taking a bath or something, then I do not like it. No, I never look at myself in the mirror naked."

How far anyone would go to achieve the "right" body look varies from person to person and on occasion for one person themselves over time. Some like Sumit say they are lucky to have small breasts which are not really noticeable, and so they do not need to go through surgery. Others like Rahul feel that top surgery [12] is essential for them to be able to gain self-confidence, and to be able to lead their lives. An important concern that propels many to consider changes in their bodies is the question of how sexual partners will perceive them. As Vasu, who wants "whatever men have", adds, "When partner comes, one should not be disregarded being considered a woman, for that one needs this. To be proudly showing off that I am a man. Because even if there is a small quarrel and she turns around and says, 'After all you are just a woman!' then I will not be alive, I will die!"

12. Top surgery is the commonly used term for bilateral mastectomy, which is the removal of breasts and/or reconstruction of the chest region. Similarly, bottom surgery refers to any or all of the following: complete hysterectomy (removal of uterus), genital reconstruction.

Menstruation, the other big marker of a "female body", did not get as many varied responses. Most people disliked it and yet not many wanted to get rid of it, because of the possible health risks. There were several explanations for this resigned acceptance. 'Man'-identified Sam, who wants to get his breasts removed, says, "Periods is inside matter. No one knows." Alex, now in hir late 30s, says, "I have never thought of stopping my period or removing my uterus. By the time I came to know about all these things it was too late. Now there are just four-five years left and I will just wait it out. I don't want to play around with my body. I am very conscious about my health issues." A few others hoped for hysterectomies after they started taking hormones.

> Surgeries are dreamt of by a few, but the expense of the procedures, the lengths of time involved and the possible negative impact of interventions in the body are major concerns. Surgery becomes especially prohibitive when people find themselves solely responsible for themselves, in the absence of any other material support. There is also the fear of not being able to continue to live where they do, once they begin the process of change. Others like Anand spell out a different type of anxiety. "If I like someone and she likes me – now she sees this guy she is attracted to, and then what do I tell her? That I'm a girl? Now at least it's easier, and it's easier for the person to believe."

Bhargavi has a nuanced articulation of what ze would like. "I feel I should have a body without breasts, but I want a vagina. Half part of my body is comfortable for me and half part is uncomfortable for society. Breast is visible and can identify me as a woman. If I have a vagina I have no problem, but for society it is a problem. If I had a penis it is a problem for me but for society it is not." Equally emphatically, Sandy, who speaks of hirself as 'other', says, "But I have no desire to change my vagina. It is also very important for me in terms of sexual pleasure and I have never desired to have a penis."

> And then there are those who recognise other pleasures as well. Mala says, "I really like my breasts. Right from the beginning. Even if someone asks for it, I will not give it!" Saumya has a more complex demand. "In the sexual space I get a lot of attention because of breasts so I would not want to get rid of them, but would like to fantasise -- if only I could remove them as per convenience! But would I like a flat chest in the sexual space? No. Or would I want to be with someone flat-chested? No."

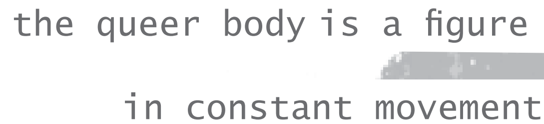
One of the most positive things that we hear in our respondents' narratives is this articulation of sexual pleasure. The body is seen by many as a site of pleasure, fun and exploration. There are constant negotiations with the normative, peno-vaginal definition of sex. Sometimes it inhibits people's expressions but often the impossibility of this kind of sex with the people they desired, for most of our respondents, led to multiple ways of re-visioning what sex meant, and especially of their expected roles in sexual encounters.

Several respondents spoke of finding pleasure in pleasing their partners. Anand and Sara define themselves as pleasers. Kavi says, “In terms of working towards pleasure, I work towards the pleasure of us both.” Vimala’s concern for her ‘man’-identified PAGFB partner is apparent when she admits, “I would have a lot of doubt and anxiety about how someone who does not undress can give the other pleasure and enjoy himself too. How does he get pleasure? . . . But he has said that when I enjoy, that is when he gets his pleasure. And he wouldn’t do this if he doesn’t get sexual satisfaction from this.” There is no notion of sacrificing one’s own pleasure; several voices express the idea of a mutuality in which one’s own pleasure is also underlined. As Jharna puts it, “I would say every sensual touch is important for me, and I work for it. And I take care that the person I’m with should also get maximum pleasure. When I’m in bed with someone, there is nothing that is bad. I plan for that, I take time out for that.”

Alpana says, “I’m very exploring in bed – it can’t be pre-decided, it just happens. Recently I have preference for bondage and other fetishes – am into it for the last few months and really enjoying it, but even there I have no preference in terms of dominant or submissive.” And Kanika shares hir approach to sex and to BDSM, “I have such fetishes, but I switch over there also, I would love to have sex in a cage or in a prison, I love bondage, I love handcuffs and ropes but it must be safe sex and consensual. And I love both, to dominate or being dominated, I love any bodily acts that are safe and mutual, I also love oral sex and I love experimenting with new things.”

We heard many positive statements on masturbation. Saran says, “I realise most people masturbate. And I have come to the conclusion that it is a very healthy outlet. Sometimes you are stuck with your work, nothing is happening, you’re frustrated, not liking the way your relationship is going. You don’t talk very well to your partner. When you masturbate and come back you ease out immediately.” Juhi mused on how “. . . in the context of two people, how you feel while in sexual activity and after, is coloured by many things. Whereas when you’re on your own, after an intense physically pleasurable experience, what are the thoughts you have about yourself, about your life are very, very, qualitatively different. It’s not only that masturbation is very nice and beautiful, but also very important.”

> Besides variations in who and what different people were attracted to, many respondents recognised how the experience of sex changed for them with different persons or from situation to situation. The openness with which all of this seems to be embraced not only challenges many aspects of the normative, it also indicates the multiplicity and, in that sense, the queering of desire. Maushami, who has been in relationships with women and with transpersons, says, “With women, you can be passive or active, or anything that you want to. . . . In other kinds of relationships, I want the other person to take initiative. I love to get pleasure first.”



Meghana speaks about certain moments of intimacy which make hir feel genderless. “It does not matter anymore what your gender is, what your age is, what your colour is, skin is, how your body is. You are meeting at another place or level. And I really appreciate feeling genderless and feeling that for once I am not defined or I don’t have to define.”

Some respondents who identified as bisexual had their own take. Simran says, “(With women) I have a natural tendency to move towards a mirror (image). . . . With men it is very different, though. There I need the absolute opposite. Men I want big-built. I want anti-chemistry really. So it is much different.” Geeta, on the other hand, finds the language of bisexuality itself limiting because “It reinstates the binary. Once at a conference I found an MTF really attractive. This attraction was because of the gender transgression. And then I figured the attraction was a broader thing, towards people who gender transgress and not necessary in one direction. Bisexuality is binary, so if I am attracted towards gender transgression, then who am I?” And Chandni narrates hir experience with a cisman thus, “After some time he would tell me, ‘You know, I’m not a lesbian, I have things you can put to use.’ And, I would say, ‘I don’t want that, I want your fingers.’ So I realised later that I liked queer sex. . . . And, not much role-playing – that’s okay, but not in a fixed way. It’s okay if the role is passing from one to the other, but not fixed.”

All these experiences and imaginings, desires and dilemmas, are part of a narrative in which the protagonist, throughout, is the queer self: a self that tends towards knowing how it wants to look at itself and appear to other selves; a self that seeks to discover and articulate its zones of sexual pleasure or physical discomfort; a self that keeps navigating both private and public realms in its effort to arrive at an idea, if not as yet a reality, of its embodied nature. This is not to say that the search is for a static image of the self or the other; even for those who speak of knowing exactly what they want, their experiences show how the queer body, in circumstances where all strictures and structures have been laid wide open already, is not a rigid statue but a figure in constant movement.

work

In the interviews my answers used to be right but I think they took my appearance negatively.

Our respondents were employed in a variety of occupations. There were researchers, teachers, daily-wage earners, artists, engineers, mediapersons as well as those in the police force, corporates and non-governmental organisations. At the time of the interviews, five respondents were unemployed while three others were still students. Many had started working at a fairly young age, either while pursuing their education or after dropping out of school. In some cases, people started work early to supplement the family income; others felt the need to be financially independent from their families. Yet others were compelled to work because they had had to run away from home.

Vasu comes from a poor, rural, Dalit family and would accompany his mother, a domestic worker. "I was never paid anything, when I went with my mother . . . during my school days." He started working for regular wages when he was 12 and says, "I used to get wages from here and there. I don't remember how much. Those people in those areas are stingy." He continued to work in the same household for three years, until he ran away from home because he was being beaten up by his brother due to his gender expression.

This intersection of multiple marginalisations such as gender, caste, class and location has meant that some people find themselves caught in a circle of deprivation. An interrupted education means greater vulnerability because it limits career opportunities. This gets compounded by further economic and social displacement when an individual is forced to run away from home due to violence from family or in school around their gender and sexuality. Those who leave home at a young age and come from these multiply marginalised backgrounds may not have the skill sets and the social resources to get jobs that help them survive. Then there is the issue of being in new cities and towns where even the language is often alien. This makes the circle even more complete, and difficult to break out of.

> Persons caught in such a circle of deprivation face systemic, structural violence which results in their slipping through any existing social safety nets. Many of our respondents who were caught in this vicious circle were struggling at a day-to-day level, even many years later, to find the means and work that would enable survival. This is reflected in our finding that almost half our respondents were earning less than 10,000 rupees, while living in metropolitan areas with a steep cost of living.

Divakar, who has an intersex variation, told us of his struggle to get a job despite being qualified. He started experiencing changes in his body, including facial hair and a deeper voice, while completing his course, and faced abuse from teachers and peers. He still managed to get his degree but didn't get a job despite there being vacancies. "There the application got rejected because I had attached the present photo so they said that the photo did not match with the (female name on the) certificate." The next time around he was unable even to file his application because he was publicly ridiculed in the office.

> Work spaces demand a certain dress code and gender expression. Not being able to dress, look or behave like a "woman" can mean tension, conflict, stress and violence. This also seems to have a critical effect on an individual's ability to get or keep a job. How does this dynamic operate in other occupations that are largely "male spaces" or termed as "a man's job"?

Santosh comes from a Dalit rural family and worked at many places before he and his partner found some support from a queer group. He recalls one of the jobs. "I worked for a month as an assistant in a full gents hotel. I got Rs 35 per day and three meals a day. Nobody guessed I was female – we all slept together. I'd wake up early and go to the bathroom, or go outside to the public bathroom. . . . the manager would have sex with several guys, call them one by one, and I was afraid: what if he comes to me?"

For Aditi, who works in the police force, the official uniform is pants and shirt, which she used to enjoy wearing; in fact she joined the police partly because it allowed her to dress that way. But her joy was short-lived. She says social events at work have most policewomen wearing saris and jewellery, whereas her preferred shirt and pants mean that she gets taunted and pressurised with questions about when she will get married. Aditi no longer enjoys her job; she plans to leave and start her own gym.

Sara, a television producer, says, "Direction is a hardcore line, it's like a masculine profession. When you shoot, there are 25-40 men, light boy, spot boy, and in between all that there's this one woman director. The woman can be of two types, either the typical girly type who flatters the DOP or the type who will take charge, be clear and say exactly what she wants. I have never had an issue and people do ask for my directions, like a light boy would ask me, 'Sir, sorry Madam, where do I place the light?'"

Harassment around gender or sexuality is certainly not limited to male-centric professions or workspaces – sometimes the work culture of the organisation is pervasively heteronormative and patriarchal. Chandni, who worked at a stock brokerage, says hir boss was a typical macho guy who thought that women couldn't do much work. Ze also spoke about the constant questions about why ze wasn't planning to get married.

Other respondents spoke out about explicit sexual harassment at work. Saumya recalls having to travel to another city on a business trip with her male boss. "He took me out for dinner and during drinks he started talking about adultery and I said, 'You are here, your wife too must be with another man.' and that fucked his head. He got sloshed, though he was trying to get me drunk. He left me alone and went straight to his room and slept off." She got a job elsewhere after this incident.

For others who tried to stay on in their jobs after being sexually harassed by persons in authority, the workplace slowly became untenable due to other kinds of harassment from bosses who had been rejected. Avenues for complaint, redress or support for incidents of targeting, taunting or harassment at work seem to be rare and often tough to access, not just for queer PAGFB, but for PAGFB in general. And when the person does not see hirself as a 'woman', it becomes more complicated.

Sunny told us of hir experience with one of hir bosses:

> *My boss . . . would talk badly of girls . . . I would ignore him and change the topic. I always treated him like a guy interacting with another guy, so when he asked me to go out for a burger I thought nothing of it. Then when he asked me if he could come up home after the burger I still thought nothing of it. He started to act weird and tried to kiss me, he made a reach for my chest but because I keep my ID card in my pocket, he got nothing but the ID card in his hand and I wriggled out of his grasp. . . . But after that he would give me the worst shifts and send me on all the difficult shoots just to get even.*

In the face of such hostile workspaces, jobs in the social sector were often an option. They were not always chosen places to work in, but an alternative when there was none other. Prem left hir forced marriage and ran away with hir PAGFB partner. As ze had studied up to the 12th standard, ze was able to find a job with a private company. However, ze ran into problems

when hir employer compelled hir to wear a sari to work. This forced hir to quit and stay at home, unemployed, until ze managed to get a job at an NGO working on LGBT issues. This freed hir not only to wear clothes of hir choice, but also to get a haircut of hir liking.

Yet NGOs are not always an ideal alternative. Devi, who comes from a background of poverty and very little education, joined an NGO working on women's issues and became an active part of many campaigns. When in the '90s ze took the lead in organising meetings in various bastis to discuss the varied concerns of single women, and some women spoke openly about lesbian relationships, Devi was castigated by others in the NGO and discouraged from attending meetings or speaking in public. Ze says, "When the oppression became too much to bear, I just quit. *(long pause)* The women's movement gave me new life. But a certain way of thinking caused me such deep hurt that it will stay with me forever."

> With their own internal limitations and structures, it is not always possible for such NGOs and groups to offer full support and help people realise their full potential. A bare survival is what can be managed, and this leads to a continuing dependence on the organisation. The NGO may be sensitive to sexuality and gender concerns, but the jobs they can provide rarely match up to the skills and qualifications of the individual or, in the case of those who lack skills, do not offer the opportunity for growth that could help people realise their dreams and aspirations.

On the other hand, for those respondents who made a conscious choice to work in organisations that worked on issues of gender and sexuality, these workspaces were often emotionally and personally affirmative. Maushami began working at an NGO that focused on sexuality at a time that she was going through an internal conflict about her own sexuality as well as self-destructive behaviours like cutting. The workplace turned out to be positive and supportive for her. "No one judged me, questioned me. When I was in a relationship with a transgender man, no one questioned me about how come, I had a boyfriend earlier, etc. They were so bloody supportive . . . have now worked here for three years. When I got to know so many people around me, I started feeling much better."

Jamuna spoke of her experience in an organisation that worked with hijras:

> *I was trying to bridge the class gap and well as the gender gap. But the gender gap I couldn't completely bridge because I could relate both to (a transman) and the Aravanis in completely different ways. . . . Aravanis were women but not the kind of woman I was . . . it became part of my worldview not to assume people's gender. Whether it led me to believe my own gender as static? I don't know, I can't remember. . . . But I also knew that I was an upper class, urban, progressive woman who did not wear saris like these lower class hijras and it also became clear to me how hard they worked to be a woman – something I always took for granted.*

Clearly it is the most marginalised who are most liable to be trapped within the circle of deprivation. Most of them are not able to survive in newer spaces because of the absence of privileges of class, caste, education and skills. However strong their desire to excel, realising their dreams is that much more difficult.

Some of our respondents were able to make their passions their means of livelihood – some in art, others in music, a few in sports or related professions, yet others with their work around gender and sexuality. Others managed to fight their circumstances and find their dream professions due to their determination.

Anand ran away from home at the age of 17, just after his 12th standard exams, because of marriage pressure. He found himself in the closest major metro where he knew no one. Thanks to his passion for academics and a few supportive persons, Anand managed to find stability, obtain a Master's degree and continue in a profession of his choice. He also re-connected with his family and became their chief support. Anand narrates one of the most heart-warming workspace stories – he went to office one day with a rakhi tied on his wrist:

> *(My senior colleague) asked why the rakhi. I just looked at him. He said, 'You're a girl, aren't you?' I don't know from where I got the courage, I said, 'Not really.' He said, 'What?' Then he closed the door and said, 'Ok now tell me.' I said, 'Do you know about transsexuals?' He said, 'Yes, are you one?' I said 'Yes I am.' He said, 'Cool, so then why do you let these guys call you (by your woman's name), what's your name?' I told him, 'Anand'. He said, 'That's how they should be addressing you.' I said, 'Do you think that's possible?' He said, 'Possible means what, you want it, right?' . . . So he calls all the people in that centre and says, 'Who is this?' They say (my old name). He says, 'Wrong, this is Anand and he's a he, and I want him to be addressed the correct way from now on.'*

In the numerous stories of rejection and violence from different people at work, of deception and forced hiding, of being thrown out of jobs because of being outed in different ways, this and a few such rare stories stand out with the promise that there are people like Anand's colleague who can work within their limited powers and act at an individual level to make lives easier.

Those who were able to find ways of being themselves in the workplace, or doing what they found most fulfilling, were able to rewrite their narratives in happy ways.

negotiating the "(re)public"

> *If only people can have conversations with one and other and accept that differences exist and every one lives in the same world as we do and not be so full of ourselves, calm down and realise that we are quite small…*

Apart from personal spaces, there is the realm of the public with which every individual interacts. We talked to our respondents about how they negotiate these spaces. The State is responsible for safe and secure access to public spaces for all its citizens. Hence we also explored the interface of our respondents with institutions of the State like the health system and the police.

streets, transport and toilets

Currently all public spaces are structured in ways that privilege a certain kind of masculinity. Thus access to public spaces is rather limited for most PAGFB, queer or not, especially while growing up, and their connection and comfort with them later varies, depending on factors like class, access and mobility.

As adults, many respondents felt most comfortable meeting their friends in homes and other private spaces, though some liked the relatively non-interfering atmosphere of places like coffee shops. Some persons do feel safe meeting in public because the strict gender segregation in our society allows for intimate friendships between people of the same gender. A couple that more or less fit in with gender norms and where both people pass as "women" are rendered invisible in public.

As Ranjana says, "Even with my partner in public space has been easy. It's not very evident. It's not as if people can make out that we are partners." Such interactions do not by themselves come under much scrutiny unless gender transgression visibilises them in unsafe ways.

Nidhi, who has short hair and prefers to wear shirts and pants, recounts, "They say dirty things – 'Ladke ka kami ho gaya kya, ki ladki saath saath hai?' or 'Come and sleep with me.' One afternoon we sat at the lake . . . suddenly we were surrounded by six to eight boys. They called my partner my maal. And they threatened her, saying, 'This Nidhi won't be with you all the time. We will find you and rape you.'" In this case, the gender-conforming partner was targeted in order to get at Nidhi. In other stories, the visibly transgressive person was directly targeted and taunted, abused or beaten.

In fact, in rural and semi-urban areas, the norms around dress and assigned roles are so rigid that it is extremely difficult for anyone to transgress them without severe repercussions. Kirti speaks of how he can never break some codes where he lives. "In the village we only wear saris. Ideally, I would like to wear pants and shirt. But I can't wear that in the village. . . . And I would have short hair if I had a choice. I would have smoked and drunk more freely." And Murali had to leave hir village because that was the only way ze could live as ze wanted, although hir gender expression was accepted by hir family. Murali goes back regularly with hir partner to visit them, but continues to live in the city.

Since in large urban centres the norms, especially around dress codes, are somewhat more relaxed for PAGFB than for PAGMB, the nearest big city becomes a desirable refuge for many PAGFB. For many of our respondents, their first act upon reaching a city was to get a haircut or start wearing pants and shirts. For some, other daring acts follow. As 'woman'-identified Saran says, ". . . we used to be on the street all day, starting 10 or 11 in the morning. . . . sometimes at the cigarette shop, sometimes at the back of a car, sometimes . . . sit under the tree."

However, even in urban centres, gender-segregated public spaces remain the most contested and difficult to negotiate, most notably public toilets, reserved seats in buses, train compartments, security checks in malls, airports or anywhere else. The stress and burden of passing in the expected gender has meant that some queer PAGFB people dress differently, others use their voice to signal the "correct" gender or travel with companions who can be their spokespersons. Sandy says, "I hate malls because you have to go through the body check at the entrance and that is always a tense moment. At the airport . . . I have a uniform and wear a tight T-shirt where the boob outline cannot be missed."

In women-only gender-segregated places such as train compartments and toilets, PAGFB who are gender transgressive have faced harassment, abuse and violence from women. Consequently, some individuals do not use public toilets at all. Prem has been scared of using women's public toilets ever since two PAGFB friends were beaten up while using one. Some respondents felt comfortable only when they were accompanied by someone who could pass as a "woman". Using men's toilets was

sometimes a viable option. Karthik says, "I always go to the gents' toilet. If there is only urinal, I will not go. I will control myself." For those who have the privilege of being able to access restaurants and other such spaces, there are often unisex toilets where no questions are asked and a degree of cleanliness is maintained. For others, it is a constant decision to be made.

Since public toilets can be problematic for individuals across a range of gender identities, we asked our respondents what in their opinion would be an ideal system. Safety concerns for "women", and considerations of hygiene, were paramount for those wondering whether common toilets would work. Some respondents believed that it would be best to include toilets for trans* persons along with toilets for "men" and "women". However, there were concerns of being outed or being singled out as a trans* person. A few respondents suggested having unisex toilets, with the proviso that they contain only private cubicles with doors.

The issue of public toilets is a tough one to tackle. As Juhi says, the issue, in some sense, is about something without categories but the solution is being sought in terms of categories. As ze points out, such categorisation serves only to emphasise gender, while possibly marginalising individuals who are already on the boundaries of gender.

accessing services

As we have seen, our respondents' lives are full of silences and violence. This has a severe impact on their physical and mental health. In such situations, one would expect that both health services and police would have a crucial role to play in their lives. However, people had very little to say about both these institutions, despite specific questions during the interviews. What emerged was mainly to do with either how these services were difficult to access, or how, in fact, they added to the overall trauma and abuse.

Many respondents shared their discomfort with visiting a gynaecologist. The assumed heterosexuality, and questions to do with marital status, are difficult to address, especially when one senses that the response could be homophobic. As Jamuna says, "They only ask if you are married and then they assume that you don't have sex. . . . It is not easy to walk into a hospital and say that I am having homo sex. And half the time I don't end up taking care of possible infections because I don't want to go through this hassle and possible homophobia."

It is extremely challenging for queer PAGFB even to access mental health services. Those with class privileges were able to see counsellors; in rare cases local health services might have counsellors. While a few respondents sought counselling at certain points in their lives, several were taken to counsellors by their parents. Some were lucky to find supportive counsellors, others encountered insensitivity and homophobia. When Kavi sought help while in college to deal with her depression, the counsellor instead tried to "treat" her sexuality, and added to her stress by telling her mother "that it was a phase and that I will leave it, get married and then everything will be okay." Jai had a similar experience – he went to a counsellor in his village when he first fell in love with a PAGFB, to try and understand what was happening to him, and the counsellor asked him to bring his partner along so that he could "cure" them both.

Further, trans* and intersex issues are not understood at all. There is meagre knowledge about medical interventions and their effects, and no accurate or readily available information. Add to this the routine pathologising of persons and their bodies and feelings, which further marginalises those who don't conform. One respondent with an intersex variation says wistfully, "Have not fallen ill at all so far. But do want to have a doctor who knows everything about me and can give me overall advice. Also worry about being taken to the hospital if I am suddenly ill, and taken, say, by the police when I am unconscious."

The police, in fact, constitute another crucial service, charged by the State to ensure equal access and just treatment to all. But when it comes to queer PAGFB, another layer gets added to the already existing discrimination and lack of access that "women" routinely encounter. None of the respondents who faced violence managed to get police help even when they tried. Vasu who identifies as 'man', tried using the provisions for "women", but to no avail. "Once when there was a fight in the house and I was beaten, I went to the police. I was bleeding badly and so I went and complained that my oldest brother beat me. I had gone and submitted a complaint to the Women's Cell. . . . He wasn't even made to come to the police station. I felt so worthless in front of all of them."

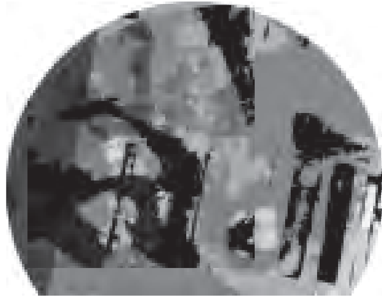
The police seem to take note only when natal families approach them to intervene, especially when queer PAGFB run away from their homes as a couple. One respondent was practically put under house arrest when her family discovered her relationship with a woman. She ended up running away with her partner and another woman. The three decided on a suicide pact. Despite later calling it off, the third woman killed herself, leading to the arrest of the other two. "Police used foul language and ridiculed me. They asked vulgar questions and showed their power by raising their voices and shouting at me. I have not experienced any sexual abuse

but my partner has. They were very intimidating and passed comments about FTM." Other respondents too were intimidated or harassed by the police, with one partner being accused of kidnapping the other.

The State has repeatedly failed in its duty to provide safety and security to all its citizens. Those on the margins who need many forms of support and protection have, in fact, been particularly targeted by the State and its institutions. Our respondents' lives indicate for us that their non-normative choices around gender and sexuality result in adding another axis of denial of what should be theirs by right.

An affirmative step like gender segregation, which is often seen as a solution for violence against "women" in public spaces, does not work in quite the same way for all queer PAGFB because it stems from a binary understanding of gender. It is imperative to remember that for those who do not strictly align with the codes and norms around their assigned gender, gender-segregated spaces of either kind can be sites of harassment and abuse. So we need a different understanding of gender, which makes public spaces differently gender-sensitive, allowing for gender specificity while retaining gender diversity, and ensuring accessibility and safety for all persons, no matter how they express their gender.

getting in touch with queer groups



Sense of community comes because the fights etc. are all short-lived. With this same group of people I also find that I can share . . . intense friendships. Where you do not always feel that it is always that you are taking. As time passes you turn back and become friends with the same people who have hurt you very badly.

While mutual friends and informal social networks helped us contact a few persons from relatively privileged backgrounds, we could never have met the more marginalised, or indeed known of their existence and struggles, but for the handful of support groups in the country. For the majority of our respondents, the first contact with such groups spelt the end of years of isolation, whether they had come as runaways from other places (like most members of LesBiT in Bangalore or Sahayatrika in Thrissur) or were local residents still living with natal families (like most members of Sappho in Kolkata).

So many come to these groups by such accidental or coincidental routes that their stories always, irresistibly, remind us of how many there must be who never get there. Some narratives can be shared today only because a few individuals found support groups through sheer serendipity: finding an article in an old newspaper lining a cupboard shelf at a time of utmost depression; meeting that one odd person from amongst acquaintances and family who opened out a new world for you; all followed by those anxious phone calls made to strangers who reassured you and made you feel at home.

There is one uncanny story of a runaway couple travelling up and down on a long-distance train for days on end, and being given a phone number by a member of a queer group who happened to be on the same train and guessed their situation, even though the couple in question denied it then. Another respondent, who identifies as ‘man’, spoke of wandering the streets of a city with no specific plan after being forced to run away from home. He says that when he saw someone

like himself he nervously started running in the opposite direction, but was followed by that person and brought to the space that has been a haven since. Other respondents came into contact with groups when they were sensationally outed by the media, and the group stepped in to offer counselling or legal aid, or help with relocation, providing timely relief in really difficult situations vis-à-vis the police and families. Some of these individuals stayed on as active members of the group.

> We need to recognise that we are talking about a mere handful of organisations and collectives. Some of them have a few paid part-time positions, others are entirely voluntary; some have their own offices or meeting spaces, others work out of members' homes and depend on NGO allies when a larger space is occasionally needed. At any given point of time, these groups (and here we are talking only of the ones through which we met most of our respondents – LABIA, LesBiT, Sappho, Sahayatrika) have a small and fluctuating band of active members, who are themselves queer PAGFB dealing with similar crises in their own lives, and whose own material and emotional resources are stretched thin and tight in the attempt to keep these spaces up and running.
>
> Support groups constantly have to find a balance between sustaining a space for the articulation of identities and trying to fulfil the varied needs of those who come to them. Yet it's important to be aware that the group space is not always and automatically safe and supportive. The needs, concerns or ideas of many people in the group may be overlooked because others speak up more, or have louder voices, or know English and are better-connected.

In the case of groups that are part of a larger umbrella organisation, there is the risk of the latter's policies overshadowing the needs and politics of the former. As one respondent says:

> *At first I did not realise that organisations could shut down because of funds. So I feel that NGOs may not be forever, but community groups have to be strong. . . . In (an NGO), I have seen the Board members get together on one side, and not keep the community's best interests in mind. So I feel that we need to do something for the community beyond the NGO.*

"Community" is the keyword here. These support groups, and queer friends made within these groups, were the closest many of our respondents came to rediscovering a sense of camaraderie and of belonging.

Kanika, who felt suicidal after hir breakup, says, "Even now that feeling is there, so I don't give myself time alone, and stay instead with friends (from the group). I talk to (an older member).

I just call her and tell her I want to cry, and she is there for me." Tuli is even more emphatic. "My parents, sister, niece – this is my blood family. I have to take care of them, I can never leave them for any reason or anyone. But if you ask me to say from my heart who is my family, other than parents, it's every member of (the queer group) – this is the family I can talk to, where I am at ease, which understands me. (The group) is a janmabhoomi of mine . . ."

As for Kirti, though he lives in a village and is only very rarely in touch with members of the groups he came in contact with years ago after a local newspaper sensationally outed him along with his partner, just the knowledge of these faraway friends is enough to keep him going. He says, "I used to feel I was the only lesbian. But now I know that there are more like me. And I also have friends in (two big cities). Without all these people I don't know what I would have done."

These assertions of what the groups have meant to individuals are vital, then, to the continued existence of the groups themselves, against often overwhelming odds. The real problem is that there are simply not enough queer or queer-friendly LBT support groups in the country, while the need is vast.

Although many more social spaces for queer persons are emerging today than there were even a decade ago, physical as well as virtual, such spaces tend to exclusive by their very nature and hence not accessible to all. In such a scenario, groups that are working primarily with LBT persons need to build alliances with each other, in order to share their resources as well as to gain greater voice, visibility and influence, both in queer organising and women's groups. Such groups, along with the many others working on issues of gender and sexuality, must take heed of the concerns of queer PAGFB and reflect on how to allocate resources for them and bring them into the ambit of their services.

"community"
is the keyword

binary gender is just another imagined norm

(life is entirely something else)

We did this study to talk about gender, and talk we did, and how. The stories and conversations began flowing with the very first question around current gender identification. From childhood experiences to the pangs of puberty; from a growing awareness of one's self and body to multiple meanderings in the realm of desire, love, sex and relationships; from the minutiae of hair length and turn of the collar to the complex arena of negotiating personal and public spaces; from finding words for oneself to creating spaces for an open exploration of consensual gender – our conversations traversed these paths of joy, pain, repression, violence, anger, silence, discovery, struggle, camaraderie, love, despair and hope with all our respondents.

In this chapter we look into some of the complex processes by which our respondents arrived at how they named themselves; the nuances of living their self-ascribed genders in a world that not just assigned them genders but also a gendered life; the pushes and pulls to which the various institutions around subjected them; and their negotiations, conflicts, and successes in being able to live within their own skins with varying degrees of comfort.

Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna's[13] work on the social construction of gender and the primacy of gender attribution in all social and cultural interaction as well as in the sciences; its connection to gender assignment, roles and identity; and the experiences of transsexual persons and persons with intersex variations have been extensively used by queer and transfeminists from Kate Bornstein to Dean Spade. The impact of gender assignment and attribution is echoed in our findings where respondent after respondent speaks of the struggles of naming themselves, of continuously being under scrutiny and being read for gender cues, and of fighting against gender norms in personal and public spaces.

13. Kessler, S., McKenna, W. (1978) Gender: An ethno-methodological approach. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

naming oneself

In the first part of our interview guide, we had a question on the current gender identity of our respondents. The term refers to people's own, individual negotiation with naming themselves while simultaneously negotiating the prescriptions and ascriptions of society. Their answers were very varied: we clubbed together all those who clearly said that they identified as man or male under 'man'; those that said they were woman or female under 'woman'; and put all others with variations on these under the category 'others'. The table lists the various answers.

MAN (10)

Man

Boy

Male

Male (but use FTM for others to understand)

WOMAN (22)

Woman

Bisexual woman

Woman with a difference

Female

Girl

OTHERS (18)

Confused

Shifting from female to male

Confused and variable

Gender queer

Androgynous female

FTM

Do not articulate

Society made me feel a woman
but I have denied and challenged it

Between transgender and lesbian

Fluid woman

Androgynous

50% male and 50% female

Transgender

Man but have come to terms with socially
being seen as a woman

Think as woman but am not sure

Woman from outside but not fully a woman

Other

Thus one of our very first findings underlined for us the vast gap between people's assigned gender and the names they choose to call themselves. The fact that 28 of the 50 respondents chose a gender identity different from the one assigned to them at birth is very significant. More

crucially, that 18 of these 50 chose names not within the binary indicates that the normative genders were, for them, inadequate as positions from which to speak.

Responses varied from single words or phrases to long narrative answers emphasising the difficult process of naming oneself when language itself is so normative. Monu says, “To talk about my current identification I will have to tell my story from the beginning. I would like to begin from the time when I was very young.” For yet others like Nidhi hir partner’s perception informs hir notion of hir gender. “My girlfriend thinks me male in terms of gender, I consider myself lesbian in terms of sexuality.” And Manjula describes hir gender identity as “Confusing – keeps shifting, sometimes female, sometimes male, sometimes just being a child is better. This gender has created all the confusion.” Arun says, “Intergender, gender queer. I am most comfortable with people calling me by my name.”

Some individuals had traversed long routes in arriving at their current gender identity, for some others it was something they knew very early in life, and some did not want to stay fixed in any static understanding of their own gender. How people named themselves also changed as people met other people and groups and learnt newer names.

Even when different people used the same terms to describe themselves, the meanings these had and the ways in which they actually lived these were considerably varied. ‘Man’ or ‘woman’, which are the available gender categories, often meant very different things. We also realised that some people tended to use different terms for themselves at different points in the interview because they were using terms not in common currency.

inadequacies of existing terms

This underscores the number of ways in which gender is constructed by individuals, sometimes rewriting societal norms, at other times just tweaking them a bit, and at others following them in a prescriptive sort of way.

the gendered body

The body has been seen as one of the primary markers of gender. Hence the popular assumption is that if people wish to alter their gender, they also want changes to the body. This was one of the reasons we found it crucial to explore our respondents' relationships with their bodies. We had questions about the degree of comfort they felt with their bodies, and whether they felt their body matched their gender.

All our respondents were assigned gender female at birth based on the external appearance of their bodies. Most persons who identified as 'woman' answered the question on whether their body matched their gender in the affirmative. Being cisgendered, though, did not necessarily mean complete comfort, either with the "female" body or with the social norms around gender, and did not directly point to any particular gender expression.

Jharna expressed her annoyance with the "female body". "Why do we have all these curves and things – if I had any control over it, I wouldn't want this kind of body (like I have) for myself. . . . If I could choose, I would want a mehnat-kash sharir." While Hemlata said, "My body matches with my gender. I have challenged the restrictions and the myths created around my body." Her assertion points towards the feminist journeys that so many have taken in their lives in order to reclaim and have a sense of pride in their bodies.

> Many of the respondents whom we have categorised as 'others' also spoke of their journeys towards building a relationship with their bodies. Arriving at such comfort was not always possible for all of them, but several factors helped. Some spoke of the complex interaction between their bodies and their gender over a period of time.

Juhi, who identifies as 'androgynous', says, "It actually took me a woman lover, with whom I bought myself (a bra) I liked, which made me comfortable, which made me happy . . . Somehow, after that there has not been discomfort about my body and bras that I like – that is comfortable, which I think is sexy. Overall, I would say that I have developed comfort about my body largely through my relationships."

Arun, who identifies as 'gender queer', finds the body yet another space from which to question social norms. "Yes I am comfortable with my body and I feel it matches my gender. Earlier I did not feel like that. I knew that my attraction is this, so the first thought that came was if I have to be with a woman, I have to become a man. But then I started thinking that then I am agreeing with society that I have to be either here or there. Whatever sex I am in I should have the freedom to choose how I should be. . . . I grew more comfortable."

Yet, for some, achieving a degree of comfort with the body is made very difficult because of the continuous scrutiny their bodies undergo every day. Sandhya, who has an intersex variation, feels that it is the social scripts of what a woman's body and appearance must be like that cause hir conflict, to the extent that ze does not feel comfortable identifying as 'woman', even though ze would like to:

> *Keep feeling that there is something lacking. . . . So in a sense I do not have a choice and so have to accept it but not because I like it. . . . My hands look very muscular and the veins are seen but do not want to show it so always wear full sleeves. Feel like I want to have a body like a woman's and also wear clothes like women do but cannot do it and so feel uncomfortable. Cannot live the way I want, have to always think of others. But I try to respect myself and to come to terms with what is there. . . . Do not think much about my body anymore.*

Many respondents, while speaking of an acquired ease with their bodies and genders, also shared their feelings of unease, irrespective of their gender identities. This does not necessarily mean they were all exploring medical possibilities for change, or even wanting such changes.

Kirti, who identifies as 'man', says he is comfortable with his body but adds, "I don't want my breasts. But I can't cut them and throw them away. I have disliked my breasts from the time they started growing. I also hated my periods. I have never taken any medication to stop them. . . . I wonder for how many more years they will be there."

This discomfort with breasts and with menstruation was echoed by several respondents, cutting across gender identities.

Alex, who identifies as 'between transgender and lesbian', says, "I almost forget that I am a woman. When the period comes it reminds me, hello you are a woman. This is an unnecessary job." Sara, who identifies as 'woman', says, "I get my periods regularly. I think any woman would be happy if she didn't get them. But they are there, so be it." Bhargavi, who speaks of hir gender as 'shifting from female to male', says, "I would like to undergo surgery to remove my breasts. I hear of this on the TV but I did not go for it because of its side effects. I am afraid of side effects. I have to earn and take care of myself and if my strength is gone then how can I work?"

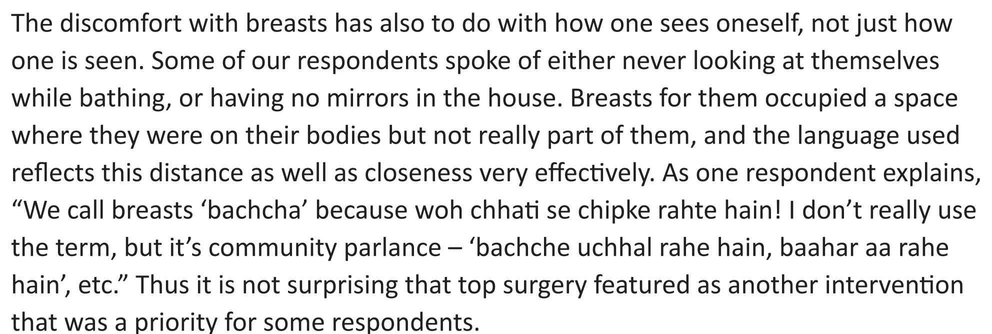
> All respondents who identified as 'man', and some of those whom we have categorised as 'others', had the most difficult and often painful relationships with their bodies. These people had such a heightened sense of their bodies not matching their gender that it permeated all aspects of their lives, becoming something they had to contend with almost all the time and in almost every space. Their bodies became sites of regret and yearning, with regard to what was present as well as what was missing.

The most visible marker of gender is facial hair. Many respondents wanted facial hair (along with more hair on the body) and several had even tried to help grow it either by shaving frequently or with the aid of medicines, but none of these attempts was successful. An intervention that was most clearly desired was for hormones that would enable facial and other hair.

'Man'-identified Kamal says, "I don't have hair. I want hair on my face. I have gone to a medical shop and asked for tablets for growth of beard and moustache. They called me mental and said what I need is counselling not medicine. I was willing to give any amount of money." Sumit, who identifies as 'transgender', says, "Would have liked but have absolutely no hair. I do not even have armpit hair. Some girls who feel like girls also have a fair amount of hair. A tenant's daughter has a nice growth on her chin but I do not have . . . Never used a razor or anything to increase hair because I knew that it will not do anything."

The other visible physical marker of gender is the bust line. Many respondents spoke of how, when people read their gender, they stare at the chest. While respondents across gender identities and expressions spoke of their desire to not have breasts or have smaller breasts, or their deep discomfort with them, most of those who identify as 'man' or 'FTM' had gone to great lengths to be able to be visible in their preferred gender.

Our respondents spoke of wearing tight sports bras and t-shirts with loose shirts on top, of wearing as many as four layers of clothes even in summers, of binding breasts using tightly wound crepe bandages under several layers of cloth to get a flat shape, of wearing jackets and large shirts with front pockets over other clothes, and other variations of this. Some had evolved their own methods of binding themselves while others had tried to bind their breasts after watching the film *Boys Don't Cry*. A couple of respondents spoke of binders that could be bought over the internet but which so far were not available in India. Invariably, such severe binding and layering is not easy and constricts not just the chest but also blood circulation, leading to severe bruising for some, skin rashes and pain for others, difficulty in breathing (or running), and in some cases also in eating.



The discomfort with breasts has also to do with how one sees oneself, not just how one is seen. Some of our respondents spoke of either never looking at themselves while bathing, or having no mirrors in the house. Breasts for them occupied a space where they were on their bodies but not really part of them, and the language used reflects this distance as well as closeness very effectively. As one respondent explains, "We call breasts 'bachcha' because woh chhati se chipke rahte hain! I don't really use the term, but it's community parlance – 'bachche uchhal rahe hain, baahar aa rahe hain', etc." Thus it is not surprising that top surgery featured as another intervention that was a priority for some respondents.

But these were not the only interventions that our respondents wanted. We discussed earlier the uncomfortable relationship with menstruation that most of them expressed. Speaking specifically of those who identify as 'man' or 'FTM', it is important to note that for many the beginning of menstruation came as a shock, almost a betrayal by their bodies, since many of them were used to thinking of themselves as boys. As Karthik says, "I do not want this, then why am I getting it? I have the same feeling of hurt and anger towards menstruation as I had when they asked me to wear the half-sari." Many of these respondents expressed a desire for removal of the uterus and stopping of periods.

And finally a few also spoke of wanting a penis. As Jai says, "Changes I want – remove breasts and uterus, have facial hair and body hair and have all the things that men have, including a penis." But several were aware that not only is reconstructive bottom surgery quite expensive but also that it might not be very reliable. Murali, who identifies as 'FTM', expresses hir compromise thus, "Complete SRS (Sex Reassignment Surgery) – have come to know it is very expensive. So will work on facial hair, removal of breasts and uterus."

For some respondents, then, changing their bodies was essential to feel consonance with their gender. At the same time they also spoke of fear of the loss of health or loss of the energy to work and earn a living that such surgeries might cause. While some had obtained information on these surgeries during counselling sessions with psychiatrists, others also spoke of information gained from other doctors they had visited at some point in their lives, or even from television or from friends. There seemed to be a general lack of credible and comprehensive information on available medical interventions and their potential effects on the body. As of now very few people can access these. For those who are able to do so, it can make a tremendous difference to their sense of self.

Only one of our respondents, Rahul, who identifies as 'boy', was undergoing hormonal treatment and preparing for surgery when we spoke to him. He expresses the difference it has made to him:

> *Earlier I used to feel that the words are mine but it's someone else's voice. I was self-conscious about speaking. Now I feel confident. It's my voice and my words. . . . Doctor had said there could be side effects. But nothing has shown up. I don't know if it's just suiting me, or whether I am too happy. . . . Work has to be done to look how you actually want. I have heard that transpersons still don't feel satisfied, even after taking hormones, they gain weight etc. That made my will power even stronger to not feel this way, to work towards what I really want. I dance, exercise, I walk wherever I can. You have to not look at side effects but benefits.*

A person's body is an integral part of their gender identity. At the same time, there is no one-to-one correspondence between a gender identity and a body type. Having said that, it is important to understand that medical interventions are crucial for the well-being of the persons desiring them, and should not be seen as optional procedures.

persons with intersex variations

Two of our respondents had intersex variations, which had a deep impact on their lives. Both were born in rural areas, to families that were not well off. While the parents, and in one case even the neighbours, were aware that there was something different about the children, no one spoke to them about it. Both were assigned gender female at birth and raised as girls. While one of them realised the difference and kept her body hidden, even from her mother, from a very early age, for the other the realisation that there was something different about her came only at puberty, when she did not menstruate like her sisters.

Sandhya reached out to a queer group because ze saw hirself as lesbian, and slowly grew comfortable enough to begin speaking of hir intersex variations as well. While ze is clear about hir sexuality, ze feels that it is difficult for others to understand. In hir daily interactions ze is still constantly afraid. “Since I have hidden myself from others, I feel that at any time it can come out in the open and people will know.”

Divakar reached a queer group while seeking to get his gender changed in his documents so that he could find employment. His body had blindsided him in his twenties, when secondary male characteristics like facial hair began to appear and his voice deepened. This caused immense trauma in his life, both within and from people around, but he finally went to a hospital to try to get a certificate saying his gender was male. There he was put under intense scrutiny and treated badly for days on end by doctors, staff and students, for whom he became a curiosity. Several organisations later, he was able to reach a supportive NGO working on issues of gender and sexuality. Today Divakar says he is comfortable with his body, and ‘male’ gender identity.

Our interviews, along with LABIA’s work on intersex issues, resonate with the work of intersex activists worldwide. We believe it is possible for people with intersex variations to have a comfortable relationship with their bodies. What causes problems is the imposition of norms and the constant inspection that bodies are subjected to. Intersex is not necessarily an identity that people take on, though some might refer to themselves as such. Intersex neither refers to any gender identity nor defines anyone’s sexuality.

Persons with intersex variations are assigned and brought up, like everyone else, in one gender or the other. As with everyone else, some may be comfortable with their assigned gender and others may not. Thus it is possible for a person with intersex variations to be a trans* person, but it is not necessarily so. Also, persons with intersex variations might seek medical intervention to change their bodies to be more like the gender they identify with, and this must be made available to them. The biggest need right now is for clear and non-pathologising information and conversation.

how i look and who you see

Naming oneself and establishing a relationship with one's body is also accompanied by presenting one's gender in a manner that feels "right" or comfortable. At the same time, it is also about presenting your gender in a manner, especially in public spaces, so that it is read in the way you want it to be read. Both the presentation and the reading of gender, in terms of appearance, behaviour and body stance, are influenced by the prevailing scripts and norms of society.

A majority of the people we spoke to, irrespective of their gender identification, recounted stories of their gender expression in which, more often than not, they challenged societal mores and norms. Achieving the desired gender expression is difficult, and the privileges of location and class may be crucial enablers for it to happen. The class you belong to automatically controls the spaces that you can access and the ways in which you are allowed to behave in them. PAGFB with greater societal privileges – of class, caste or religion – are often more easily able to wear clothes and sport appearances which may not be very "woman-like": in fact, some amount of breaking of norms may, within limits, be approved of and even encouraged.

"but now i can wear anything"

We had a set of questions on physical appearance, around clothes, hair and body, and the factors that enabled our respondents to exercise their choices around some of these. We asked our respondents about when and how they found the space to wear the clothes they wanted to wear, or the haircut they wanted to sport?

Most of the respondents were clear on how they wanted to present themselves; the battle was with the social and cultural norms around them. Many of them had to fight to be allowed to wear pants, or shorts and shirts, because such acts transgressed the gender boundaries. Respondents across gender identities had gone through such experiences. The struggle to

wear the preferred clothes was fought by many right from childhood, while some others were allowed to wear the clothes of their choice until they experienced puberty.

> It is not only persons identifying as other than 'woman' who faced opposition to their wearing clothes of their choice. Laxmi grew up in a semi-urban area, and was only allowed to wear clothes like skirts or saris. Eventually, both she and her partner ended up in a city, and this move to an urban area was an enabling factor. "I have the freedom to dress in jeans. First I had to wear what my mother bought but now I can wear anything."

Roma couldn't wear what she preferred either, but hers was a different situation. She is 'woman'-identified but was never comfortable in very feminine clothes. "As a kid I was wearing trousers, shorts and pants almost all the time and shirts and T-shirts. Back then I was thinner and my parents were the ones to buy these clothes for me. Until, in late adolescence, I became fat, and PCOS was diagnosed . . . Till a year ago I wasn't allowed to wear jeans because my mother and aunt felt I was too fat. They said that I look like a hippo and my bulges show."

Some people's freedom to express their gender identities lay in becoming economically independent. Take the story recounted by Saumya, who comes from a devout Jain family and grew up in a city. During her childhood she had access to her brother's clothes, and wore them instead of her frocks. This preference continued as she grew older. But in college she wore salwar-kameez – which she didn't like wearing, but was compelled to by her family. She started wearing the trousers and jeans she preferred only after leaving college and starting to work. It was the economic separation from her family that allowed her to stand up and claim her preference.

Kamal identifies as 'man', and his gender expression was enabled in an ironic fashion. Even as a child he wanted to wear pants and shirts like boys, while his parents wanted him to wear dresses and "behave like a girl". When his mother made him wear bangles, he would break them. Eventually he got his way only because boys' clothes were more convenient, given his disability. Even then, it was a constant battle.

> Quite a few of our respondents also had stories to tell around restrictions with regard to hair. As Santosh, who identifies as 'man', recalls, "When I lived at home I could only do as my family said. As far as dressing, or cutting my hair went, had to listen to family." He cut his hair to shoulder length soon after his 10th standard, when he got a job, and then to its present short length once he left home. In fact the very first thing many persons did after leaving home was to cut their hair short. Even in times of acute crisis, in the midst of running away, some individuals stopped to have their hair cut!

being read for one's gender

Every society has its scripts for the ways in which people of a certain assigned gender, age, body appearance etc. are allowed to express themselves. Also built into societal norms is the amount of transgression allowed, to whom, and in what situations. Gender attribution – or how one's gender is read by others – is hence very varied, and works differently for different people. As a result, a person's gender expression always needs to be seen in conjunction with how it is being read, especially in public places.

Expressing one's gender in such a way that the world is forced to attribute to one the gender one wants becomes part of one's daily public life. For those respondents in our study who identified as 'man', there was a certain enhanced notion of expressing maleness through dress and other external factors. Most were happy when strangers or others around them saw them as boys or men, or whenever they were able to pass with their "male" behaviour and appearance. Rahul, who identifies as 'boy', recalls, "There was this party – I was dancing away. These gay men started dancing with me. I told them I am not a gay man, I am an FTM transperson, but they wouldn't believe me! It makes me feel good!"

While people go to great lengths to be perceived as they want to be, vulnerability levels based on the fear of discovery remain high. Some respondents even recounted instances of sexual and physical abuse by police and others in public spaces when their gender identity was called into question. Sam, who identifies as 'man', recalls an incident in a bus:

> *I used to not sit in the ladies' seat. . . . Some young boys had got in and they were teasing me 'Ladka hai ya ladki hai? Neeche kya hai?' etc. and also saying bad words about my mother. I got very angry and screamed at them Then they realised on hearing me that I was a girl. So then they said that they would take off my clothes to check. But no one in the bus supported. The driver and the conductor also did not stop the bus. Then I jumped off the running bus when it slowed. . . . Since then I always sit in the ladies' seat.*

Many times, people do manage to pass. So the question they are then asked is not about why they are behaving like "men"; the situation is that of being seen as

a “man” and then being questioned about why you are not behaving like one. Karthik’s story shows this clearly.

Karthik has worked in construction all his life, starting with breaking stones in a quarry alongside his mother at the age of nine. “At work I am aware that all around they think I am a man. I try to make my voice deep and strong.” But people do notice that some of his habits are unusual. “All boys change clothes (at the site) before starting work, and bathe and change clothes after work. The women who are working say, ‘Why are you not changing your clothes, even when you are sweating you do not change your clothes? Are you a real man?’”

When the passing is so complete that the officially assigned gender itself gets changed, then the story becomes more complex. On the one hand, there is the satisfaction of getting a document with the ‘male’ gender mentioned on it because of the perception of the people issuing it to you; on the other, there is the constant fear of discovery.

Sunny, who has always worn pants and had short hair, says that all hir documents got made in the ‘male’ gender. “All the papers had been ticked male just by looking at my face. . . . PAN card male, passport male, voting ID. . . . There was a time when I was happy that they would tick male in my forms, but my mother has been so harassed and so much money was being spent on changing it again and again, that I have stopped feeling happy; now I just make sure they tick female.”

Situations do not always allow people to bluff or fight their way through. The constant questioning when they access spaces that are segregated along gender lines, as in airports or entrances to malls where gender-segregated checking of individuals happens, or public toilets and other spaces reserved for women, makes them quite frustrated with the constant humiliation and violence.

People traverse this terrain using various strategies for avoiding any awkward or humiliating experiences. Respondents spoke of how they dealt with the apparent mismatch between their voice and their perceived genders: some did not speak in public if they wanted to pass as male; others used their “feminine” voices to pass in women-only spaces like public loos; and yet others had to deal with the annoyance of being mistaken for a man when people thought they heard a “male” voice on the phone.

In extremely gender-segregated places, even those who are perceived as either man or woman have very many different kinds of negotiations to do. Things get a bit aggravated in women-only spaces like hostels where people live together because the separation of the genders is based, at one level, on the perceived similarity of certain bodies and on their differences with other bodies. Thus a body that is not in keeping with the norm may seem threatening and out of the ordinary even when the person’s gender does not seem transgressive.

Sandhya, who has an intersex variation, says that ze thinks hir gender is woman, but is not sure because of hir body and its difference. Ze speaks of the fear ze had that other people might notice these differences, when ze lived in a women's hostel. "When I was in the first year there were 40 of us sharing one single bathroom. So I would get up at 4 a.m. or so and finish my bath with cold water before anyone else got up and saw me. I would be scared, what if someone sees, notices my different body, then I will lose my seat in the college, and my education."

Hir fear is not unfounded. In fact, women-only spaces have also been fairly violent towards many people who are perceived to transgress gender boundaries. Several respondents shared stories of violence and experiences of fear while travelling in women's compartments or accessing women's toilets.

40-year-old Alex, who says that hir gender is 'between lesbian and transgender', talks about hir experience of using public toilets. "I never had any difficulty to use the men's loo. For the last four-five years because of the changes that have started coming in my body, I began to feel the need to go to the women's loos. But it's very difficult, I get stared at by everyone . . . I have had women screaming at me, 'This is a women's toilet!' and I have to yell back, 'Can't you see that I am not a guy?'"

It is such experiences, and the need to negotiate public spaces without constant discomfort, that makes some people alter their gender expression in a more permanent or semi-transparent sort of way, be it growing hair or wearing something that is ambivalent in its gender presentation.

From being able to make changes in one's hair and clothes as a basic expression of oneself to refining it and bringing nuance and play into it in various forms is the work of a lifetime, and is often done when one is in the company of others like oneself – a community that cares to read these nuances with you rather than against you. For the rest of the world, however, these are read as transgressions.

The point of caution here is that the gender binary is so powerful, there is danger of these transgressions themselves becoming norms. Speaking of the need to constantly challenge gender, Sandy, who identifies as 'other', complicates the project:

> *I would any day (prefer to) be 'other', representing another expression of gender. Once it becomes part of the schema, the danger is that it would become another norm. And this happens in our communities – 'If you are butch, why are you wearing these earrings?' 'How can you be femme, your hair is so short?' 'How can you be a queen if you do not wax your legs?' The beauty of challenging gender is that you can keep on challenging it.*

gender in action, in closer interaction

This complex interplay of how people express their own gender and how it is attributed to them by others gets more complicated when prescribed gender roles enter the fray. In a segregated, patriarchal, heteronormative society, roles are well-defined according to the gender binary, and strict adherence to them is the base on which this edifice is maintained. Yet in the last few decades gender roles have been challenged by various people in so many different ways that there is no singularly defined man's role or woman's role today. The narratives of our respondents add another extremely crucial layer to this changing understanding.

Families, friendships, relationships, workplaces – all these spaces of long-term personal interaction are arenas where gender roles operate. In this section we look at some stories about the roles that were thrust upon our respondents, or those they undertook willingly, or grew into, or just found themselves in at various points in their lives. Here we focus only on closer, more intimate interactions, as it is in these spaces that norms get challenged in more nuanced ways.

being sons, being daughters

Gender roles within the natal family were, expectedly, also shaped by class and other circumstances. Stories of having or not having to do housework, for instance, cut across the gender identities of our respondents. Several were forced to do certain domestic chores while growing up, often against their will; families that were middle class or upper class had the resources to employ people to do the same work. While some respondents were able to escape housework because they had older sisters to do it, being an only child or the eldest child often

meant having to take on specific responsibilities. This was as true in urban areas as in rural, especially in the early years of our respondents' lives.

Very often we came across narratives where the natal family, extended family, and sometimes even persons in the neighbourhood had been tolerant, if not downright supportive, of transgression of gender roles. In some cases the family acceptance of the gender identities of their "sons" extended to including them in rituals or customs ordinarily reserved for "men".

Kamal grew up in a middle class farming family. He and his partner had to elope since there was immense pressure on the partner to marry. Interestingly, when Kamal recently reconciled with his family, they had the couple married according to tradition, with Kamal performing the rituals prescribed for husbands, and his partner doing the rituals for wives.

> In a socio-cultural environment where the roles of sons and daughters are sharply defined, with sons being clearly preferred, gender-transgressive "daughters" may be treated like "sons", but only up to a point. Usually, the transgression of gender roles is more easily accepted by families when it is coupled with their dependence, economic or otherwise, on the transgressive individual. This does not necessarily translate into support for the life choices such a "son" might make.

Sumit, who identifies as 'transgender', grew up thinking of hirself as a boy. Hir father was very affirmative of Sumit's gender, gifting hir a cycle and, later, only "gifts for boys". Hir uncle and sisters are still largely accepting of hir gender identity. Sumit, who was the one looking after hir mother when we spoke, thought ze would probably inherit the family house. Even so, there are two fronts on which Sumit feels ze lacks support. One is hir desire for surgical change. "There is a lot of tension due to that but have done nothing. . . . What can I do. I like my family. If I have to do anything then I will have to leave the family and go. They say that you are like a boy only for us so you do not need to change." The other concerns hir sexuality. "I know that even if I have a girlfriend and she wants to live with me, they will not accept. The way I am, it is alright, but they will not accept her."

However, we found that while gender-transgressive "sons" might be accepted, to some degree, stricter norms tend to be imposed on those queer PAGFB who identify as 'women', or whose gender identity is negated by their families.

Kavi, who identifies as 'female', talks of how her family stopped her from following a bright future in cricket. "I had to stop (playing) in seven days as I was a girl and I needed to be protected – that's what my mother said. My brothers, who were six and ten years older than me, also felt that way. . . . I was unable to disagree with my family on this point. I met a player from the state cricket team and she said, 'It would be great if you join the team, but you won't.' I felt very bad, very very bad. I die to play cricket."

In some cases, just standing up for oneself can lead to repression and violence. Vimala recalls the consequences of rejecting the stranglehold of authority of the men in her household. Her family consulted a “holy man” about her rebellion:

> *He told them that from birth I have a bad force within me which is why I am against the family all the time. That is the reason why I am choosing my own path and not listening to them. . . . Their belief was that they are saving me, but as far as I was concerned they were destroying me. Not only that, this person coming to do the puja would put holy ash on me, rub it on my body, and through that touch my body. And I didn’t like anyone touching my body. So from 7th standard I was suffering this torture that my family was putting me through. So I withdrew inward, and was unable to express myself. I had no rights. . . . They would starve me for three days to get me ready to agree to the puja ritual.*

Even when natal families seem to accept their children’s gender identities, their acceptance tends to be limited to their own notions of the right kind of son or daughter, and does not extend to the person’s own understanding of their gender and sexuality.

husbands, partners, lovers, wives

As people grow up, newer intimacies enter their lives. While most of our respondents had not been in intimate sexual relationships long enough to have established patterns in their daily routines of living together, their narratives remind us how clearly defined societal roles and norms are, and how easy it is to slip into available stereotypes. Sometimes this is restricting, but sometimes it is these very gendered equations that are desired. A major learning for us in this study, however, has been that it is not very fruitful to see these equations as normative; queer lives and realities imbue them with dissonance, even when they might seem pat.

One of Anand's relationships was especially affirmative of his gender. He fondly recalls how "around the house, minor plumbing jobs would come to me and cooking was her thing, making the bed was her thing – I used to help of course. All these things were unsaid. Buying stuff from the market was my thing." He was happy to help around the house, except for cooking, as he had a strong aversion to this gendered task. Anand goes on to say he wants to be a "stereotypical male", yet imagines a partner who would be free to refuse him anything. So for him an open-minded, non-interfering, caring husband fits the mould of "stereotypical"!

While Anand may be redefining the stereotype in his feminist fashion, not all enjoy such an equal equation. Priya was living independently and earning very well when she started living with a girlfriend, and that was when she really encountered overt gender conflict. Although they had a cook and a maid, and Priya was working long hours, she was expected to play a wifely role:

> *My ex-girlfriend considers herself butch, I was the girl/wife in the relationship. As I didn't do much work around the house, she was sorely disappointed. . . . She would call my family names, monitor where and with whom I was going out, stopped me from talking to a male friend. She at various points was physically abusive, and it kept on increasing. She wasn't very different from my father. Once she threatened to rape me. That day I pushed her hard. It was extremely abusive emotionally.*

For Tuli, who identifies as 'woman', gender played out in an unexpected way in the space of her intimate relationships. She talks about how in each of these she was almost forced to enact the role of a husband or boyfriend. While she may have been a somewhat reluctant "husband", she also seems to have liked aspects of the role. "I started giving half my earnings to my girlfriend and half to my mother. Even after my girlfriend started working, I was the one who always had to pay, in shops or among friends. She'd give me the money before we went out."

Tuli also had a relationship with a transgender woman, who saw Tuli as her husband, while Tuli herself did not think of their attachment as a romantic/sexual relationship. But when the woman adopted a child, she asked Tuli to be the co-parent and Tuli officially adopted the boy. So she began to spend part of her time with this family of hers – a "wife", and a child for whom she is a "father figure".

> Normative scripts seem to be rewritten in our respondents' lives almost continuously. Ranjana talks of her living arrangement with her "masculine"-looking partner:

cisgendered privilege

We don't have a fixed idea of masculine, feminine, we really don't. It's other people's perception which sees her as masculine and me as feminine. But if you look at housework, she is a perfect woman. She keeps the house clean and tidy, cooking food . . . Because of the nature of (her freelance) work, it has worked out like this. . . . When I am at home I also cook. . . . Also she loves me so much that she doesn't let me work. So patriarchal it sounds na? So many men say na that my wife loves me so much that she doesn't let me work.

Vimala is married to her PAGFB partner who identifies as 'man'. She articulates her feminism, and her relationship with her partner, in a very nuanced manner. Her negotiations are not untroubled, and her affirmation of her partner's gender within the relationship is delicate:

> *. . . apart from considering himself a man, my partner used to be someone who abides by conventional societal man-woman relations . . . he believed in marriage and wanted to marry his partner, and see ourselves as husband and wife. . . . My politics has changed since then, and so I am now prepared to call him a partner not a husband. But that is my matter, and not of the person I am with. . . . He is still within that system. . . . But it is as though I am keeping things to myself, in a way cheating myself and telling the world that I married a man. . . . That is the struggle with which I am living and am trying to explain to you. . . . In other spaces I will not explain, I will just say that he is my husband and a male.*

Vimala does a very careful and aware negotiation of her cisgendered privilege:

> *There are many things he may not get, as he is biologically not a man, so this is a space for me to attain for him those things he desires. If he had another lover, who fulfilled all these aspects for him, then maybe I would have stayed away from this. But since I am the only one with whom he has a relationship, I have to compromise a bit. Although I don't see it as a compromise. I am only very happy to do it for him.*

This recognition of cisgendered privilege in intimacies is essential because even though a relationship appears to be like the "usual man-woman" one, the vulnerability that the gender transgressing partner feels changes the mutual gender dynamic considerably. Heteronormative power equations get turned around, turning ideas of masculinity and femininity on their head.

As we saw in the *Intimacies in Isolation* chapter, lack of gender affirmations and negation of gender identities leave a hugely negative impact on a person. Some 'man'-identified respondents, fearing rejections of this nature, chose not to enter into relationships at all.

Those who do manage to negotiate gender within their relationships find the canvas and scope of roles much more complex, and even playful, in the sexual space.

Monu, who identifies as 'man but have come to terms with being seen as a woman socially', says:

> *First I always wanted my body to be covered. Used to feel insecure about showing my breasts and vagina, feeling that the person opposite will know that I am a girl so used to wear genji all the time. Now my mind has changed. . . . (My partner) also knows and is careful. . . . One friend had asked me this question, 'Suppose her hand goes to your vagina. Then you will think that it is not a vagina, it is a penis. And if she thinks also of it as a penis, then what is the problem?' I also thought that when I am having relations I do not see these as vagina or breasts. . . . Then I went and asked (my partner), 'What do you think when you touch me there?' And she also said the same, that 'I do not think of it as vagina. I see it as penis.' Then I said, 'Then it is alright if sometimes you touch, but penetration I cannot have.' And she never does it too. . . . Now we are having open conversation. So now I wear genji also, and remove it also.*

Kirti, who identifies as 'man', speaks of the unique method that he and his partners employ:

> *(My partner) used to say that I am her husband. After six months, I made her my husband. That is how we used to divide it. Every six months we would take turns. We used to mark it on the calendar and take turns. When I was husband I would penetrate. I would make love to her like a husband would to his wife. When she was husband she would do it like that. . . . we always maintained this pattern. With (my other partner), for the last three years now, I am the husband. But we both penetrate. With her the term 'husband' does not have much meaning. . . . There is a lot of equality between us so what is the point of husband-wife?*

Kanika, who identifies as 'woman but fluid', describes how sexual play operates for hir. "When I feel feminine I love being penetrated. There were times when I was penetrated by my partner and we fantasised that she was having a penis and we both loved it, it was the same when I became her man, but sometimes we had sex fantasising both of us as girls (two girls making out) or as men (two guys making out). Because we both switch a lot."

so what
is the point of
husband-wife?

gender, a journey

Gender is a complex interplay of many factors where the extremely personal interacts in multiple ways with social and cultural ascriptions.

Some people keep fine-tuning their gender expression till they achieve what feels like consonance rather than dissonance with their gender identity; others may not have the enabling factors of class, or of other supportive circumstances, or affirmative relationships, and may feel the gap between self-image and reality more keenly. Some may be comfortable enough (or be allowed) to express their inner gender only in certain spaces and not in others. None of which is to suggest that gender identity itself is a static, given quality – the conversations with our 50 respondents show how it is both innate and constructed, and may be fairly fluid for one individual and relatively fixed for another.

Gender is often a process of discovery, even a work-in-progress, inflected and influenced by class and caste and education, negotiated through interactions with strangers and within intimate relationships, working its way around obstacles and redefining boundaries. It is both a point of departure and sometimes of arrival, which is why it makes sense to speak of it as a journey.

> *Throughout my younger life, I have been coaxing out what I call 'inherent' gender, looking in the mirror and making changes till one is happy finally with what one sees, one is seeing an image that is pleasing to oneself. The tension is between creating the image that the world demands and the image that one wants. In that sense I view myself as having had to reconstruct the original. I am not sure what the age was when I got entirely comfortable. . . . 20 is a good age as a reference point when the reconstructed image was complete, the process of removing the conditioning, the rules etc. and finding what one likes. And even when one finds what one likes, it is a journey to allow oneself to like what one sees in that image. You are pleased by it but you are oppressed by the idea of it being wrong. And to then make that transition towards celebrating, and for me that celebration begins when you are happy with what you see, glad that the world is seeing it.* (Sandy)

queer groups

an evolving understanding

We knew from our own experience in LABIA that every queer collective inevitably possesses a gender trajectory of its own. As the world around changes, groups and their members begin to form new ideas and find a new language for their selves and their work. And as new persons come in, the ways in which they identify and express themselves is bound to have its own impact on the group's thinking about gender and sexuality. Together the two processes inevitably pose challenges to the group's policies and politics, perhaps nudging it towards becoming more inclusive, or at any rate towards interrogating its own notions about gender, sexuality, identity, feminism.

Today LABIA is a group for lesbian and bisexual women and transpersons, but our awareness of trans* identities and discussions around trans* concerns has happened most intensely post 2000. The reasons for our shift were multiple, and have been discussed in the introduction to this report. To arrive at a more empathetic understanding of PAGFB who did not identify as 'woman', we had to unlearn the suspicion that they represented some subtle patriarchal subversion of our queer feminist spaces. Our internal debates and our wider readings and interactions led, eventually, to the current study.

We were aware that other groups were going through a similar churning. From the outset, then, dialogue with other groups was seen as a crucial aspect of the study. We wished to explore a series of questions: How does the queer collective serve to build a community of severally identified sexualities and genders? Does gender variance always add to the strength of the collective or does it sometimes create ruptures? What are the internal debates around gender? In what ways is the group affirmative of the individual's identity? What are the ways in which members name themselves, and what are the discussions around the new language and identities being created?

We had focused group discussions with LBT support groups based in Kolkata (Sappho), Bangalore (LesBiT) and Thrissur (Sahayatrika), as well as with Sampoorna, a global network for trans* Indians. These conversations were free-flowing, taking different turns as we went along depending on the experiences and primary concerns of each group. We spoke of the history of the group and also the nature of its membership. We look here at some of the broad themes and debates that emerged.

about the groups

Like LABIA, Sappho emerged in the ’90s and is very much located in the women’s movements and feminist politics. LesBiT, Sahayatrika and Sampoorna came up when the discussions on gender had already begun, and hence had somewhat different journeys.

sappho

Sappho began in 1999 as a group for lesbian and bisexual women and then extended its membership to include other identities. As a founder member explains, their understanding of “transgender” came about only after five or six years. During this time, the new people getting in touch were increasingly seeking to understand not only their own sexuality but also their gender. They were also trying to gauge whether Sappho would be the right support group for them. Sappho’s learning curve, then, grew largely out of the demand for information that came from callers on their helpline and from new members.

sahayatrika

Kerala-based Sahayatrika began in 2002 as a funded project to investigate the alarming number of lesbian suicides in the state that were being reported in the media. Eventually the activists involved decided to continue their work in the region. They began to operate a full-time helpline, and started the support group in 2005. A founder member says that transgender realities have always been a concern for them. “We started as a project enquiring into the suicides and in due course the issue of ‘trans’ came up, as the families and people whom we met kept mentioning that (in the cases involving couples) one of the girls/women was like a man. So gender has always been a problematic issue, as this was how the first references came about.”

lesbit

LesBiT started as a support group for lesbian and bisexual women, FTM persons, and other women who love women, within the Bangalore-based NGO Sangama, which works for the rights of all sexuality and gender minorities. It came up because Sangama’s main work was with hijras and MSM populations, and a need was felt for a separate space to address the specific needs of queer and questioning women and transpersons. In 2005 LesBiT carved out a separate identity, and today sees itself as a support group of and for “non-English-speaking working class lesbian and bisexual cisgendered women and female-to-male transgenders”. LesBiT and Sahayatrika have often done joint crisis intervention work.

sampoorna

Formed in 2000, Sampoorna is not focused exclusively on PAGFB like the other groups we met. It is also unique in that it is closed to cisgendered persons. Thus it does not work with lesbian and bisexual women, who form one of the big constituencies for the other groups. Founded by a transman during his own period of transitioning, it is

"a network for Indians who are trans* and who are in any part of the globe." Initially, members used to share experiences, and medical and legal information, till gradually a social space and a small community came into being. Their e-list continues to grow, while the actual meetings in Mumbai have moved from various coffee shops to the office of a supportive feminist NGO.

The outreach of these groups also varies. LesBiT is based in Bangalore but most of the members are migrants to the city, mainly from the four southern states, which is why they conduct all their meetings – as they did the discussion we had with them – in multiple languages. Sappho, on the other hand, is Kolkata-based and while it does have members living in other regions of the state, its regular members are more or less all from the city, living with or in contact with their natal families. Sahayatrika operates from the small town of Thrissur and has a membership scattered across Kerala, and Sampoorna is an online global network but also has physical meetings in Mumbai.

engagement with gender

Every group is struggling to find a language for the discourse about gender beyond the binary. As a member of Sampoorna says, "I do feel that the borders between butch lesbians and FTMs are so porous that it is just a historical possibility now to talk of trans-ness. We could not claim those spaces earlier because the discourses were not available. It is also very difficult to have a representative voice, and so we slip into our own individual voice."

Thus gender is really a matter for the individual in Sampoorna, which includes "women who say that 'I am a transsexual' and someone who says, 'I am a woman', someone who says, 'I do not understand this in-between, there is just a man or a woman', someone else will say, 'I am a transman'. So the thing is we are not theorising around gender, we are taking gender as it comes, as people identify themselves . . . We never even discuss with each other about the range in the group. Everyone is who they are."

Sahayatrika had something similar to share. Today the group has among its members many PAGFB who identify in gender-transgressive ways that may be quite dissimilar. As one person says, "People who have been with the group, and active since then, have been working class people with different gender identities. So there is no common position on gender. I also see no need for a common position. There are many gender identities. . . . Even in a couple, one may say I am a man, the other will say I am a lesbian."

As people come to groups, they sometimes start getting labelled in terms of trends within that group. LesBiT stands for "lesbian bisexual transgender" and yet, interestingly, the term current among its members is "FTM" rather than "transgender". FTM has been an enabling identity for many members, who speak of how liberating it felt, when they first arrived, to see others like themselves and to discover a term to describe their selves in a manner that seemed close to who they were, even though some people questioned these labels later. A LesBiT member says:

> *First I did not know about FTM identity etc. I always thought I was a male. I had cut my hair before coming . . . (Two other FTMs) were here before me. I felt they were like me. I did not know anything about sexuality. Later I got to know about gender and sexuality and I thought I may be FTM because I am female-born. I keep questioning identities. Sometimes I say I am male and when I talk to the media I say FTM. Sometimes I think I am a male and sometimes FTM.*

A Sappho member spoke of her own evolving understanding as she met more people who transgressed normative gender roles. "How people are living lives is completely different from what we kind of understand from the outside. I had to rethink a lot – so many nuances, such diversity in these lives, which from outside look like stereotypes." Other members of Sappho also told us that as discussions and engagements with newer members happened, several new concerns came to the fore, from medical interventions to whether your gender is more dependent on your body, your inner feelings or on the specificity of your partner's desire.

Each individual is obviously struggling to arrive at their own understanding of gender, and through discussions the group too may arrive at a shared position, however tentative. As a LesBiT member puts it:

> *I don't agree with body-based gender. . . . To fix me as female because of my breasts or vagina, I do not agree. Society has decided that a body with vagina getting periods is female and with penis is male. . . . We have to look at our minds, thoughts, feelings, where changes happen. Because of this there are various genders, new genders emerge. . . . I may be born female, then as you grow you are dressed as a girl, made to behave as a girl, grow your hair as a girl. You are pushed into a slot. Anything outside this is not accepted. All this is culture. . . . And you have to love a man only. In this way society has made two genders. Gender is what I feel inside. Yes, it is how I feel within me.*

So, on the one hand, gender is understood as what is felt inside. At the same time there is a clear acceptance and understanding that changes to the body are crucial for some people to realise their gender. This leads to new kinds of questions, as people try to grapple with these two apparently conflicting notions. As a Sappho member says:

> *When we say we want to change some part of our bodies, or don't like our body or a part of the body, does that come from within or from the external world which tells*

us there is something wrong with that part? Like, I today love my body completely, but earlier I used to not like it because it opened me to some kinds of abuse. So am I carrying something inside which is coming from outside? Having a penis means something which is told by other people, so I want a penis?

At the same time, the groups were all seriously engaging with the question of medical interventions. Sappho had invited a doctor for a session with the group to help them understand the issues involved, because there were so many members who wanted changes in their bodies. In Sampoorna, most conversations were around this – not only about the kind of options available and the effects these might have, but also about other trans* health needs. As a member says, ". . . there is also the issue of everyday problems (you face) when you have to expose any body part which might tell them that you have reassigned. Will they understand it? They do not have the vocabulary to understand it. So where do you begin (to talk about) health?"

In a way, then, the groups echoed the same concerns as the individual respondents in this study. There was recognition of the multiple ways in which people identified, and a rejection of the normative binary. From listening carefully to each other's lived experiences, the groups were all arriving at the understanding that gender is what one feels within, and the body is also crucial to this task of naming oneself. Thus, while there is an awareness that not identifying with the gender assigned at birth does not necessarily mean wanting changes in the body, there is also agreement that the body is an important gender location. Learning how to work with these nuances is what the groups are consciously attempting.

who can be a member

Bringing a new understanding about gender into the material reality of a group is not always easy. We see this fairly clearly in how groups decide who the group is for. Today, all of these groups, except Sampoorna, are for LBT persons. Those like Sahayatrika and Sappho that began as groups for lesbian and bisexual women, in a sense as exclusive spaces for women, have had to re-examine the issue.

One Sappho member sums up the early question that many queer collectives have asked of themselves in various ways. "If gender is a social construct but . . . s/he thinks s/he is a man or a woman, should s/he be part of Sappho? Are we going to give more importance to the biological gender of the person or the person's internal understanding of their gender? So if someone is a biological woman but considers the self as 'he', can he be part of Sappho?" Another member says that for her, today, "there is no watertight compartment between gender and sexuality, they are very intertwined, very perforated."

> Cutting through the whole business of a group's slow journey of comprehension and its internal debates, another Sappho member says passionately that when we claim to be a support group, we should not get limited by our own current understanding(s) of gender. Many people come from rural areas, she adds, and they may not be very educated; perhaps Sappho is the only support group they've come to know of. So "they are coming with the extreme hope that 'This is my place'. So then (we) should keep in mind that (we are) going to provide (them) with a safe space. . . . to be themselves and to know that their sexuality will not be revealed outside this room." There will be time enough, she insists, to let the newcomer grapple with questions like "What is gender? What is sexuality? What are the cross-cutting issues of gender and sexuality?" Sometimes persons may not care about these issues but are just looking for "a place to pour their hearts out" and so the group must be open to any PAGFB who wants to access it.

Sappho, then, functions as a community space for queer PAGFB; for those who wish to be more politically engaged or who do not wish to identify in any particular way – and for PAGMB – there is the broader platform, Sappho For Equality (SFE), where the more theoretical discussions can and do happen. All Sappho members are part of SFE, and many SFE members who are not officially Sappho members are still able to engage actively with Sappho. This dual structure allows Sappho to be highly inclusive as well as to develop links with other human rights movements. Our group discussion with Sappho included some individuals who were members of SFE alone.

Sampoorna's membership has also changed over time. A member says, "When we started, we started with FTMs. But you know how it works. Someone will . . . say, 'I want to be part of the group.' And then you include them." He explains that it was always meant to be a space for "anyone who does not fit into the gender normative. . . . The variation is across the board, each and every person's journey is very varied." Even though being open to all trans* persons is their mandate, "As far as the group is concerned we yet do not have a person who is saying that 'I am a male body but I do not want a gender marker' or that 'I am a female body but I do not want a gender marker'. The people we have are looking for a surgical transition, an endocrinological transition."

tricky issues that continue to be debated

Recognising these multiple identities causes some hiccups when demands are made from mainstream society and the State. Of late the State has made some efforts to list "other" as a gender option, besides man and woman, but this cannot be seen as an entirely positive step. A Sampoorna member explains, "For functional purposes, yes, but for political purposes, no. You don't want to be called 'other'. We have to have a framework which opens up the male-female thing, but I'm still thinking about it."

> Naming oneself is not a simple process, because it is not just about what one calls oneself but also about everything else that goes with the act. Group members from LesBiT reflected on their own practice of attributing identities. "When couples come here from the villages they come as 'normal' and we think they are two females. But when they come here they change clothing, hair etc. So then I decide that one may be FTM." Another member says, "When we see anyone with pant and shirt we ourselves say that he is FTM. We never ask them what is your gender, but we decide." Many people were still struggling with their own paradoxical behaviour. Everyone agreed that one's sense of one's own gender depends on what one feels, but most people still found themselves attributing gender identities to others rather than asking them about their gender.

A flip side of these assumptions was the concern around the "FTM style" of dressing that has evolved within LesBiT, which sometimes constitutes an unspoken peer pressure, a kind of sub-culture that imposes its own conformity. One member speaks of being unable to wear dupattas

and half-saris now, although ze would sometimes like to. “I stopped because I told everyone I am FTM, and even though I like to wear (feminine clothes) I (now) feel shy.” Ze adds, “But if I wear a sari it does not mean that I am not an FTM!”

> The questioning of every norm comes with its own, often unanticipated difficulties. Sappho for Equality has two PAGMB members who call themselves lesbian. This posed a considerable challenge to the group’s ideas of both sexuality and gender. Today they are accepted on the basis of how they self-identify, but this acceptance was preceded by – and continues to generate – a fair amount of discussion. One of the two wants surgery; the other says he does not want any bodily changes but “feels like a woman and desires women” – with whom he wants to have “lesbian sex like a woman”. He elaborates that non-peno-vaginal sex is what he means, and while we continue to debate whether there is such a thing as “lesbian sex” or simply different kinds of sexual acts which do not preclude penetrative sex between women, his presence and identity are accepted within the group.

At the time of the interview the two were still not part of Sappho, as the latter is seen primarily as a space for PAGFB. But the presence of the more inclusive SFE has helped resolve the issue to an extent; meanwhile, SFE is the only social space both PAGMB have in which they feel able to be themselves, and both speak of how deeply affirming the group has been for them.

Another major concern for these groups has been recognising, and working towards creating an awareness of, how gendered power operates in society and in all interactions. Though the groups and their members are continuously challenging the norms of gender and dealing with the difficulties of living their own gender in multiple ways, a member of Sahayatrika points out:

> *Patriarchy is all around. But people don’t recognise it within themselves. . . . As far as I am concerned, there is no uniform understanding on gender or feminism. I am a feminist, but here among all of us, the only common thread is our sexuality. In the future, I hope that we are able to integrate gender issues more in our work. Also, that we have a feminist understanding and, thirdly, that we are able to engage with other movements and campaigns.*

Another Sahayatrika member says that presently the group is not ". . . a feminist organisation but a democratic organisation." And a Sampoorna member reflects, "It is one thing to have the (group) space and another to claim a political space through it. It is very difficult. A large part of the group remains largely apolitical." Most groups do spend time building a common understanding, but often the task of survival and other needs are so overwhelming that this tends to be a slow process.

At an everyday level there is a definite awareness, and some discussion, of the power dynamics of gender. In the case of queer PAGFB who may have seemingly heterosexual relationships or inhabit apparently more privileged gender identities, there are questions about whether these are replicating heterosexist norms. There seems to be a growing sense that instead of talking about what sort of behaviour should be part of which gender identities, there should be more conversations around gendered power dynamics in the relationships that we create.

conclusion

The groups and collectives with which we had focused discussions all chart their journeys through the chaotic realms of gender and sexuality, searching for new vocabularies that can better encompass the lived realities of queer PAGFB and trans* persons. Being aware of the politics of gender power and of other privileges and marginalisations, consciously practising the principles of democracy, allowing complex new realities to inform their work – this seems to be the path that all these groups have taken.

Women's groups, other queer groups and human rights organisations and movements all need to take on board the new understanding around queer PAGFB and non-binary gender that is emerging from these collectives. Only then will we be able to we generate the necessary resources – political, social and material – that will allow all PAGFB to lead their own lives in a way that no longer marginalises them. This is part of our common struggles against heteronormative patriarchy.

towards a vision of the future

The preceding chapters of this report make it amply clear that the social structures we inhabit, based as they are on the norms of binary gender and heteronormative sexuality, are hostile towards all those who transgress these norms, just as they are unfavourable for other reasons (such as class, caste, religion, ability and age) towards many other communities and individuals. We have also seen some of the specific ways in which queer PAGFB are isolated, harassed and discriminated against in every sphere, both personal and public. It's hardly surprising, then, that every area of life and every institution needs to be looked at afresh when we speak up for the rights of those who are routinely marginalised and stigmatised within these spaces.

In this chapter we look at some of the broad areas of concern under various heads, and include both long-term needs as well as specific, easy-to-implement short-term actions and demands.

Till now, demands made by queer groups working with gender non-conforming persons have been largely confined to the issue of freedom from police harassment and from other kinds of violence in the public sphere. Our study shows that in order to address the specific concerns of PAGFB, we urgently need to find ways to deal with violence in private spaces like the family as well.

Our findings reveal that the natal family is, far too often, an extremely violent and non-supportive space, not just for most queer PAGFB but for PAGFB per se. Many of our respondents had faced neglect, or restrictions and abuse, well before their gender or sexuality entered the picture; non-normative identities and choices only made their lives that much more difficult. And yet when parents or siblings or extended family stood by them, they found it that much easier to take on society at large. Thus the natal family emerges as one of the most crucial sites for intervention.

§ It is imperative that queer groups foreground the issue of violence in private spaces like the family, and work with other agencies that can reach out to the family constituency.

§ Women's groups in particular need to address the issues of natal family violence with the same urgency as is now seen in cases of marital violence.

§ Violence and inordinate pressure are often used to force PAGFB to marry. A sustained campaign against compulsory and forced marriages would go a long way in easing some of the pressures that PAGFB face from families and communities.

§ Apart from addressing the violence and repressive controls within families, it is necessary to bring up all PAGFB from childhood in ways that encourage them to be economically independent, so that they are able to resist the varied pressures to conform to societal norms and enabled to make choices about their own lives.

school and college

Institutes of formal education, which are supposed to equip us with both life and livelihood skills, became yet another violent space for many of our respondents. From gendered codes that were strictly enforced to the policing of young people's sexuality, schools especially tended to reinforce rather than open up society's tight norms. Gender and sexuality transgressions became obstacles, leading several respondents to drop out.

We need to reflect on strategies that will strengthen affirming spaces and create enabling environments in schools for all PAGFB, while encouraging diversity and helping to question and dismantle deeply rooted patriarchal biases.

§ School is one of the sites where young people tend to explore their sexuality. The fact that more than half of our respondents were aware of their sexual desires and feelings at very early ages strengthens our view that sexuality education is imperative at this stage.

§ The homophobia and transphobia prevalent among teachers and administrators calls for their being sensitised to issues of sexuality and gender. Such active engagements over time should help make school an affirmative location for a young person's gender or sexuality rather than a place where they face constant monitoring, violent outings and stigma.

§ There also needs to be a de-emphasis on gender within the school structure, for example in uniforms, in choice of sports and courses, in toilets provided, etc. This does not mean that gender be negated; there is still need for gender-segregated schools as there are still many

parents who would deny education to a 'girl' child if co-educational institutions were the only possibility. The impetus should be, rather, on deregulating gender.

§ Textbooks too must be made consciously inclusive of different lived realities rather than reflective of a sanitised, homogenised, heteronormative account of culture, society and history. There is need for an analysis and reworking of gender and sexuality issues and family representations in school textbooks, much like the work being done to rectify gender biases and caste and communal prejudice in textbooks.

§ Queer PAGFB who have to leave home due to violence or repression often find themselves at a loss, as they have not been able to complete their studies. Schools and colleges need to play a supportive role in such instances, stepping in to ensure that education and/or vocational training is made available to these individuals.

sports

A significant arena for many of our respondents was that of sports. Young adolescents who were coming to terms with their gender and often uncomfortable with the changes that accompanied puberty found that sports allowed them to forge a different, more self-affirming relationship with their bodies.

Our interviews highlight the need for focused interventions in the area of sports, offering PAGFB a space that provides, to an extent, a happy alternative to other, more formal, often alienating spaces.

§ Sports need to be integrated into school programmes in an enabling manner.

§ To devalue the importance given to gender and to make the spaces safer for gender challengers, the choice of playing a certain game or participating in a certain activity must be left to the individual, regardless of gender.

§ The choice of attire should also be left to the individual.

§ Avenues for playing sports need to be made available and accessible for all PAGFB, both outside school or college premises as well as after they complete their formal education.

§ Since competitive sports are gender-segregated, persons with intersex variations must be able to participate in keeping with their lived gender, rather than on the basis of any bodily tests.

mental health

18 of our respondents had attempted suicide, some more than once, while several more had contemplated it. There were accounts of other forms of self-inflicted injury, of childhood depression and low self-esteem, of deep loneliness, of relationships lived in secret and heartbreaks suffered in silence. One respondent lived with long-term guilt because she thought her same sex relationship had caused her parents to die early; another felt intense shame while using public transport because he had to keep explaining he was a "girl". Some parents dragged their children to all manner of quacks as well as mostly ill-informed mental health professionals in an attempt to "cure" what was seen as problem behaviour.

Given the high degree of social and familial control, and the extent of alienation, violence and trauma that mark the lives of queer PAGFB, it is absolutely essential that mental health services and good counsellors be made widely available.

§ In the short term, data banks of queer-PAGFB-friendly mental health professionals need to be compiled in as many places as possible. Some groups have been doing this informally at the local level, but such pooling of information needs to be done much more effectively within queer communities.

§ In collaboration with queer groups, activists working in the health arena must develop and run sensitisation campaigns for counsellors, psychiatrists and other mental health practitioners, so that in the long term there are enough sensitive practitioners.

§ Mental health professionals must actively reach out to queer individuals, by creating queer-positive profiles – through their work, their literature, posters in clinics, workshops in schools.

§ Trained counsellors are needed not just for queer PAGFB but also for their parents and families, and not just for adults but also in educational institutes, since much of the conflict around issues of sexuality and gender starts emerging fairly early in people's lives.

§ The emphasis needs to shift from the archaic yet widespread bio-medical model of "treatment" that pathologises all persons and relationships that do not fit social norms to a more empathetic, non-judgmental counselling-based approach based on specific individual needs.

medical system

Encounters with the medical system – doctors, nurses, private clinics, hospital wards, other patients – were often less than positive for several respondents. Even those who identified as, or passed as, “women”, had to negotiate the slippery terrain of questions around marital status and of actual or potential homophobia; those who were more openly gender transgressive reported incomprehension, insensitivity and abuse. Rather than subject themselves to such discomfort, some preferred not to visit a doctor even for serious problems, let alone minor ailments, effectively compromising their health.

Although serious attention has been paid by medical and other organisations to the health needs of queer PAGMB and resources made available in the context of HIV/AIDS programmes, the medical system otherwise operates with very little awareness of the variety of choices that people make in their lives around gender and sexuality.

§ Medical education needs to be updated so that the learnings around sex, gender, sexuality and body available from people’s lived realities become an integral part of it. The overarching intervention would be to change the medical and mental health syllabi, so as to include issues of gender and sexuality in all their complexity.

§ Doctors and health care providers must be responsive to the specific needs of all queer PAGFB. Their sexual health and reproductive rights must be taken on board; non-normative sexuality, chosen gender identity and the trans body all need to be recognised and respected by the health system.

§ There is a great need for sensitive gynaecologists, endocrinologists and surgeons, along with mental health practitioners, so that persons desiring medical interventions can access them safely and securely. Information must be made easily available on what age one may start hormone therapy, surgical procedures, the possible mental and physical health complications at every stage and how best to deal with these. Voices from within the trans* community make it very clear that they want knowledge, not permission, and that they need counsellors and not psychiatrists.

§ Our interviews emphasise the need for information about concerns of persons with intersex variations. Medical professionals, in particular, must educate themselves on these issues. There should be no interventions done on infants to make their bodies fit any standard notions of “male” or “female”. Interventions, if any, should only be done with the person’s informed consent.

livelihood

Many of our respondents were caught in what we have called the “circle of deprivation”, which tended to perpetuate itself. Poverty, discrimination and violence due to non-normative gender and sexuality, having had to run away with partners or alone, not having been able to complete school or college, struggling to find and hold on to jobs and to survive in the new place, dealing with physical and mental health issues that were exacerbated by these difficult circumstances... a vicious cycle indeed.

In a context where jobs are scarce to begin with, the particular situation of queer PAGFB needs to be recognised and addressed by all concerned.

§ Queer groups must strive harder to make educational scholarships and skills training opportunities available for those who require such support, so that they are able to find stable, sustained and meaningful employment, or set up their own small enterprises.

§ Groups working with young and adolescent PAGFB must pay attention to helping them acquire the skills and qualifications they need in order to gain economic independence beyond subsistence-level gendered work.

§ Some big companies have begun to implement queer-friendly employment policies, an example that many others in the private and public sectors could follow.

public spaces

Rigidly enforced gender norms drove many of our respondents from rural or semi-urban areas to seek the nearest big town or city, where wearing trousers or having short hair was “allowed” and where public spaces afforded a useful anonymity. Yet gender-segregated spaces remained vexed even in the metropolis: public toilets, reserved seats on buses and trains, and security checks in malls or airports were often sites of harassment and abuse for those PAGFB who did not happen to pass as “women”.

While gender segregation has been a valid demand by women's groups because it is needed to make things easier, safer, even possible, for many PAGFB, it does often end up making things harder, more unsafe, even impossible, for many other PAGFB (and PAGMB).

§ The anxiety of constantly having to cope with other people's gender expectations, and of having to invent strategies for dealing with their remarks or threats, simply points to the need for greater gender sensitivity from us all.

§ In our public spaces, we need a recognition of the fact that patriarchy oppresses all genders, other than cisman, in similar as well as different ways. While there are no instant or universally applicable solutions to this conundrum, we must keep looking for small and big, specific and general, solutions.

§ At the very least, when people access spaces like malls or airports, where gender-segregated security checks are carried out, they should be allowed to choose which line to be part of, irrespective of their gender presentation.

support groups

We saw how years of isolation came to an end for many respondents only after they found queer support groups. The necessity of queer LBT support groups, funded or otherwise, is undeniable; the ones that exist are far from enough.

Although many more social spaces for queer persons are emerging today than there were less than a decade ago, such spaces, both physical and virtual, tend to be urban and largely upper class. Specific strategies are needed to make them more inclusive.

§ There is an urgent need to reach out to queer PAGFB, especially those in rural areas and small towns, and to those who do not have access to the internet or to English language media.

§ LGBT groups, women's groups, groups working on gender and sexuality, and human rights groups must all work with a greater awareness about queer PAGFB and their specific concerns. This would encourage the latter to feel safe about getting in touch. There is need for many more queer and women's groups to support queer PAGFB by being responsive to their short-term and long-term needs.

§ Drop-in centres for people not necessarily in crisis are also much needed. There is a lack of spaces for queer PAGFB to organise, meet community, make friends, find and provide mutual support. Such infrastructure is essential, and could be achieved by sharing space with other collectives and non-profits.

§ Groups working primarily with LBT persons also need to build strong alliances with each other, in order to share their experiences and resources as well as to gain greater voice, visibility and influence within the larger queer spaces as well as with women's groups.

the law and the state

It was evident that non-normative choices around gender and sexuality further marginalised many respondents who lacked the privileges of class and caste, or equal access to education and jobs. Thus when we speak the language of rights, we need to trace the lives of queer PAGFB along the intersection of these multiple axes of exclusion and then chalk out what is needed from the State, in terms of entitlements, support and protection.

The Delhi High Court's reading down of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code shows that the State has been forced to take a first step towards legal justice for queer individuals. Yet, as our respondents and the LBT activists to whom we spoke said, many more specific measures are needed. All of this must be done in consultation with queer and trans* activists in ways that guard against patriarchal, transphobic and homophobic approaches.

§ Anti-discrimination laws are needed to safeguard the basic citizenship rights of queer PAGFB (and all queer and trans* individuals) upheld by the 377 judgement.

§ The legalising of civil partnerships for PAGFB would allow them access to the same rights that heterosexual couples enjoy, such as property rights, the right to a joint bank account, the right to make medical decisions for your partner and the right to write a partner into a will.

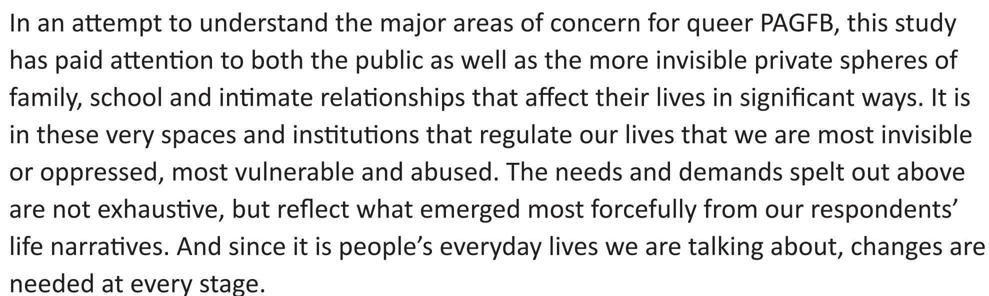
§ As already detailed earlier, State subjects ranging from the content of educational syllabi and textbooks to the regulations for public spaces like airports need to be made less heteronormative, more gender sensitive, and inclusive of different lived realities.

§ The State must be supportive in various ways when it comes to enabling each person to live in accordance with their gender. Framing clear conditions and criteria for an official change in

gender identity, and issuing identity papers to individuals in the gender of their choice, whether or not they have had bodily changes, is an urgent requirement. This legal paperwork needs to be done at various levels – from gazettes to ration cards and passports.

§ The official categories of gender must be expanded for greater diversity. The introduction of the category “other” in some states is a welcome but inadequate step.

§ State subsidies, as provided in some countries, must be made available for gender-related medical interventions.



In an attempt to understand the major areas of concern for queer PAGFB, this study has paid attention to both the public as well as the more invisible private spheres of family, school and intimate relationships that affect their lives in significant ways. It is in these very spaces and institutions that regulate our lives that we are most invisible or oppressed, most vulnerable and abused. The needs and demands spelt out above are not exhaustive, but reflect what emerged most forcefully from our respondents’ life narratives. And since it is people’s everyday lives we are talking about, changes are needed at every stage.

allies are crucial than ever

Given that such an overhaul of our heteronormative, patriarchal, binary-gendered world is indicated, allies become more crucial than ever. At the very least, putting support structures in place for queer PAGFB, whether they decide to stay with their families or on their own, is very vital and needs to be taken up by both queer and women’s groups, even as we widen the discourse both within and beyond the queer and feminist spaces. We need our allies in the women’s movements to stand firmly with us as we place our demands on behalf of queer PAGFB before the State; we need them to help support non-normative PAGFB in fighting the policing and violence they routinely encounter simply because they are trying to be themselves, and because they are breaking an increasingly dysfunctional binary.

towards a porosity of gender boundaries

Our study helps envision bits of the new gender system by challenging the existing hierarchical, discrete, binary scheme and urgently proposing its transformation into an equal, porous, multiple arrangement.

As we have seen, the very definitions of masculinity and femininity are highly nuanced in the articulations and lived realities of our respondents. Even when different people use the same terms to refer to themselves, the meanings of these terms may differ greatly. Boundaries between categories are also being pushed, pulled, squeezed, feeding off the energies of diverse genders. This means that there are already several movements from one gender category to another.

While the respondents spoke of these rich variations, their lives and narratives are also stunning records of the almost continuous violence many faced in their homes, schools, colleges, public spaces, workplaces, from their communities, friends and strangers, and at every transgression of the norms of gender and sexuality. This violently enforced gender norm must give way to a more egalitarian and voluntary system of gender. The flexibility that we see in individual lives needs to become part of our societal collective consciousness.

> Whether the world is more or less gendered, gender categories must be less rigid; strict gender prescriptions need to be relaxed. When the boundaries between categories themselves are blurred, the decrease in controls and rules will help them become porous. This will allow individuals greater choice of moving across, straddling, claiming and redefining varied gender identities.

This change will have to be wrought in both the short term and the long term within social structures and institutions, as well as other public and private spaces. In the short term, one practical step would be to modify the way gender-segregated spaces function. In the long term, of course, extensive awareness and sensitisation campaigns are needed.

Such a change would have a transformative impact on the whole social structure itself. Hetero-patriarchal structures bestow privilege on cisgender persons as well as establish pecking orders where gender is concerned. We need to work towards removing the hierarchies between genders. No marginalisation of genders can be tolerated if there is to be ease of movement between gender categories.

In this complex terrain of gendered bodies, there are a few things that stand out for us:

People are living their lives in multiple ways, and while it is tempting to see all genders as a fluid continuum, it is important to see the specificities of the gender locations in each case. So perhaps we are looking for gender plasticity rather than fluidity, where people occupy very definite identities and locations, even though in their own lifetimes they might shift shape or move from one place to another.

For some people their gender is a very fixed thing, for others it is a journey of discovery and change, so we must create room for more and more variance in living in place of the binary norm forced on us.

A person's body is an integral part of their identity. It is important to accept all bodies that vary from the restrictive binary norm as "normal". It is equally important that medical interventions be seen as crucial for the well-being of the persons desiring them, and not as optional procedures.

And finally, all of us perhaps need to change how we think, work and behave, and start asking each person how they identify, rather than read, assume, and attribute a gender to them.

Gender needs to be consensual!

porosity
constructed
journeys
interplay
creating
plasticity
consensual
redefining
inherent
transition
affirmation

appendices

appendix 1

LABIA – A QUEER FEMINIST LBT COLLECTIVE

Since our inception as Stree Sangam in 1995, our foremost concern has been to break the isolation and invisibility around queer lives and create safe spaces for LBT persons. We situate ourselves within the autonomous women's movements and queer rights organising; work with feminist and human rights groups against social injustice, violence, State repression, and fundamentalism; and ally with the struggles of various marginalised groups.

Our major work has been in the following areas:

§ Campaigning around issues specific to the queer communities as well as in the area of women's rights. We jointly organised the first national workshop on *Strategising for LGBT Rights in India*, in Bombay in 1997. We have also consistently organised sessions and workshops on marginalised genders and sexualities in various national conferences, including those of the autonomous women's movements (1997 and 2006), women's studies (2005, 2008) and other such platforms. In 2011 we coordinated *Hamari Zindagi, Hamari Choice,* a campaign built around issues of choice, consent and sexuality, in collaboration with several women's groups in the city.

§ Building solidarity with other queer groups, women's groups and social movements. We have been part of the national campaign against Section 377, and of organising marches and other actions in the city of Bombay. We have also been active in the campaign for better sexual assault laws for women and queer people in India.

§ Supporting lesbian and bisexual women and trans* persons through counselling in person and over the phone (for six years we have been running a phone line for LBT persons); intervening in crisis situations where people have faced oppression and violence from families; aiding queer persons to find shelter and livelihood; raising funds through feminist and queer community networks to help them pursue vocational training/academic studies. We have also organised three national-level retreats and meetings, especially aimed at those who do not have access to queer groups in their own cities/towns/villages.

§ Creating spaces for queer expression including a zine called *Scripts*, of which we have published 14 issues since 1997. This is a completely non-funded and collective endeavour. We have also organised reading/performance events for queer persons, and our film club *CineLabia* holds monthly film screenings of queer and feminist films.

We can be reached at stree.sangam@gmail.com

Our website: www.labiacollective.org

appendix 2

STATEMENT OF ACCOUNTS

A project of this nature and scope would not have been possible without some funding, even for a group like LABIA that otherwise functions as a non-funded collective. We received two grants, one for the initial research and the other for the writing and dissemination, for a total of INR 14,00,000.

The broad expenditure breakup is as given below (in INR).

Item	Amount
Expenses for data collection (travel, accommodation, logistics) x 6 cities	2,50,000
Honorarium for research team: 11 persons x 1 year	1,75,000
Honorarium for analysis and writing team: 4 persons x 3 years	5,00,000
Projected costs for design, printing and translation of report (Hindi)	1,00,000
Dissemination programme costs (travel, accommodation, logistics) x 6 cities	2,50,000
Equipment, reference materials, stationery, postage & overheads	1,00,000
Miscellaneous	25,000
Total	**14,00,000**

appendix 3

SELECT RESOURCES

- § Bettcher, T., Garry, A. (Eds.). (2009). Transgender Studies and Feminism: Theory, Politics, and Gendered Realities. (Special issue). Hypatia, 24(3).
- § Bornstein, K. (1995). Gender outlaw: On men, women, and the rest of us. (vintage books ed.) New York. Vintage Books.
- § Bornstein, K., Bergman, S., B. (Ed.). (2010). Gender outlaws: The next generation. Berkeley, California. Seal Press.
- § Broom, K., (Producer), & Rosskam, J. (Director). (2008). Against a trans-narrative [Documentary]. (Available from The Video Data Bank, www.vdb.org).
- § Creating Resources for Empowerment in Action. (2012). Count me IN!: Research report on violence against disabled, lesbian, and sex-working women in Bangladesh, India, and Nepal. New Delhi.
- § Feinberg, L.(1996). Transgender warriors: Making history from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman. Boston. Beacon Press.
- § Fernandes, B. (Ed.). (1999). Humjinsi : A resource book on lesbian, gay and bisexual rights in India. Bombay: India Centre for Human Rights and Law.
- § Ghosh, S., Bandyopadhyay, B., S. (Eds.). (2010). Of horizons and beyond: Glimpses of lesbian, bisexual women and transpersons lives. Kolkata: Sappho for Equality.
- § Ghosh, S., Bandyopadhyay, B., S. & Biswas, R., (2011). Vio-Map: Documenting and mapping violence and rights violation taking place in the lives of sexually marginalized women to chart out effective advocacy strategies. Kolkata: Sappho For Equality.
- § Hart, P. (Producer & Director). (2010). Orchids: My intersex adventure [Documentary]. (Available from Women Make Movies, www.wmm.com).
- § Human Rights Commission of the City & County of San Francisco. 2005. A human rights investigation into the medical "normalization" of intersex people.(http://www.sfhrc.org/modules/showdocument.aspx?documentid=1798).
- § Kessler, S., McKenna, W. (1978). Gender: An ethno-methodological approach. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- § Living Smile Vidya, (2007). I am Vidya. (V. Ramnarayan, Trans.). Chennai. Oxygen Books.
- § Narrain, A., Bhan, G. (Eds.). (2005). Because I have a voice: Queer politics in India. New Delhi. Yoda Press.
- § Narrain, A., Gupta, A. (Eds.). (2011). Law like love : Queer perspectives on law. Delhi: Yoda Press.
- § Reddy, G. (2006). With respect to sex: Negotiating hijra identity in south India. New Delhi. Yoda Press.
- § Research Centre On Violence Against Women, Tata Institute Of Social Sciences. (2003). The nature of violence faced by lesbian women in India. Mumbai. Fernandez, B. & Gomathy, N. B. (2003).
- § Revathi, A. (2010). The truth about me: A hijra life story. (V. Geetha, Trans.). New Delhi. Penguin Books.
- § Sharma, M. (2006). Loving women: Being lesbian in unprivileged India. Yoda Press: New Delhi.
- § Stryker, S., Whittle, S. (Eds.). (2006). The transgender studies reader. New York. Routledge.
- § Stryker, S. (2008). Transgender history. Berkeley, California. Seal Press.