Conversations with transgenders of Pakistan

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Pakistani media has been highlighting the plight of transgenders in the country and a number of newspaper reports have appeared recently about widespread discrimination, hostility, and verbal and physical violence towards them. In the recent past transgenders have faced brutal attacks and, denied timely medical intervention, have lost their lives. This attitude towards transgenders rests on a binary understanding equating biological sex to gender and a rigid categorization of female and male, women and men. Any variation from this rigid schema is perceived as a wilful aberration, individuals who choose to live in “unnatural” ways. Pakistani society, including many healthcare professionals, seem unaware of emerging studies which reveal that some individuals can experience gender dysphoria (sometimes beginning in childhood), a condition in which their emotional and psychological identity as male or female is opposite to their biological sex.

The last contact module of CBEC’s academic year in December focuses on Gender and Ethics and in previous years it has included an introduction to the complexities of understanding transgenders. This year however, it was decided to expand the module to explore human construction of gender and how this determines an individual’s place in society and her or his access to the public sphere. Connected to this, for the first time, a number of sessions were devoted to help students develop a deeper understanding of transgender as a concept, and its historical, religious, and legal underpinnings. In order to move beyond abstract discussions to lived realities, CBEC invited transgender individuals to meet with the students in flesh, to talk about their lives, to narrate their difficulties and aspirations in their own voices.

The first conversation was a moving encounter with a male transgender who when asked to introduce himself stated poignantly, “You can decide 'who' I am after my conversation with you.” Describing a life coloured by rejection and loneliness, he remarked, “No one ever accepted me…I never accepted myself.” Born biologically female, he identified himself as a boy from childhood, a practice that his family initially accepted, perhaps finding it amusing in a very young child. He recalled his shock and feelings of revulsion when his parents asked him to wear a dupatta (scarf worn by females) when he turned thirteen. He told them that girls and not boys wore dupattas and continued to wear male attire despite his family’s increasing antagonism towards what they now perceived as deviant behaviour. He narrated how devastated he felt when he began to menstruate, and that he made four attempts to kill himself over the subsequent years. “Girls always seemed to like me. They felt safe with me. I would accompany them when they went to the bazaar to protect them,” he said with a smile. He recounted his heartbreak at witnessing the marriage of a woman he particularly liked. She was divorced a few years later and he is now taking care of her, planning to find a suitable husband for her. Asked by one of the students why he did not tell her

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about his feelings for her, he replied sadly, “I have nothing to offer her.”

This session was followed by a conversation with two members of the Khawaja Sira community in Karachi. The term Khawaja Sira has long roots that can be traced to ancient Jewish, Muslim, Persian and other Middle Eastern civilizations, and referred initially to castrated men who were administrators put in charge of female dwellings. In recent times however the term Khawaja Sira within South Asian countries denotes female transgenders who subsist as dancers during celebrations of birth of children, weddings, etc. and are now increasingly turning to begging or walking the streets as sex workers. Social pariahs, they have been deprived of the most basic legal rights including a national identity card, the ownership of which is a prerequisite to exercising citizenship rights such as voting and inheritance. In 2012, Pakistan’s Supreme Court ruled that members of the Khawaja Sira community are citizens of the country with equal rights to others, and that they be issued national identity cards acknowledging a “third gender” as a legal entity. In practice, however, this ruling is yet to be implemented.

The Khawaja Sira, Ms. Bindiya Rana, who interacted with students is a prominent public figure, a well known transgender activist working for the rights of her community. She is also the first from her community to participate in a local election in Karachi (which she lost). In her talk, delivered with flair and caustic humour, Ms. Rana highlighted the social ostracism transgenders continue to face in every facet of their lives including when they approach physicians and hospitals for medical care. She recounted the humiliation they faced when they applied for national identity cards and were asked to undergo medical tests to establish their sex, something no other citizen is required to undertake. In response, the Khawaja Sira community protested on the streets and although this condition was subsequently removed, the uphill battle for legal identity and rights for transgenders continues. In Ms. Rana’s words, in the preoccupation with male and female we forget insaniyat (humanity). She remarked, “We are humans like you.” The second Khawaja Sira guest was a young student currently studying for a law degree. She recounted how she left her native town Lahore because of the harassment she faced in college and that she is now studying in Karachi where she is accepted by her teachers.

For CBEC students and faculty, meeting the transgender guests was revelatory bringing home an increased awareness of the difficulties faced by individuals who fall outside the circle of what society considers normal. The impact of sitting across the table from transgender individuals and listening to their stories in their own voices was a moving experience. A topic that may seem distant and esoteric became tangible and real when examined through personal narratives of pain and deprivation.