

# *Stories of Struggles*



**A collection of testimonies of  
YOUNG LGBTQ+ people growing up  
without Comprehensive Sexuality Education**





**“Being called names was an everyday occurrence but there was no one that I could talk to about the bullying”**

**-Tebeio, Kiribati**

Tebeio, a Masters student at the University of New South Wales in Food Science and Technology is a young gay man from Kiribati. He has been a representative from Kiribati to the Pacific Sexual and Gender Diversity Network (PSDGN), a representative to ILGA and is also a Co-Founder of BIMBA. BIMBA is an acronym for Boutokaan (Support); Inaomataia (Human Rights); & Mauriia (Health and Safety). Coming from a conservative country with a colonial past with the British, Tebeio explains that Kiribati is still a conservative country with conventional attitudes towards LGBT people.

Tebeio recalls an adolescence which was not very pleasant for him as he was growing up different in the eyes of others.

**“Primary school was difficult. I was bullied and sometimes I experienced physical harassments too”**

He was mainly bullied because he was different and the bullies could not understand or interpret Tebeio's difference. His nature which was not typically considered male or masculine was a problem to others. Reminiscing on his experience as a young boy who was different, Tebeio now reflects that the bullying is not necessarily because his bullies wanted to bully him, but also because they were simply unaware of how else to handle such a situation.

**“Being called names was an everyday occurrence but there was no one that I could talk to about the bullying”**

Realizing the difference within him which others perceived as a reason to bully, Tebeio recalls how he was praying to make himself normal. One of his main challenges was to find information or to find someone sympathetic to whom he could talk .



**“I had no access to any information about sexuality, gender identity or about the physical changes taking place in me. Others seemed to be fine with no information but I was definitely not”**

As many other young people, Tebeio had no information on these changes from the primary school. A few sessions on safe sex has been held when he was in high school but they have been disseminating information on a heterosexual base which did not help Tebeio that much.

Tebeio now realizes the indispensability of comprehensive sexuality education to young people as they grow up irrespective of their sexual orientation or gender identity. He recognizes the harmony comprehensive sexuality education can bring to peer settings where bullying could be effectively addressed.

***“Design and implement high quality sustainable CSE programmes that encompass information and education about sexual and reproductive health, positive aspects of sexuality, gender, rights and empowerment principles.”***

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**“But with that came enormous fear.  
What next?  
What's going to happen to me?”**

**-Rukshana, Nepal**

18-year-old Rukshana is a young transgender woman from Yala, Kathmandu valley, Nepal. She is currently working with Blue Diamond Society, one of the oldest and successful organizations in South Asia working for LGBT community in Nepal. Rukshana also runs a radio program in Nepal and is also actively involved in indigenous and ethnic issues in Nepal.

As many other transgender women, Rukshana faced numerous challenges growing up. She reflects on the hardships and challenges she had to face as a student at the school.

**“School life was miserable. I was bullied, harassed and called names. I knew I was different but I didn't know what it was”**

She knew she was different from a very young age. She noticed the changes in her emotions as she was physically growing up and she knew that her emotions were different to those of her school mates. The difference that her school mates noticed in her lead them to bully and harass her.

In retrospect, Rukshana now thinks that her school mates were not inherently bullies but complete lack of understanding and information made them bully her.

**“Born in a male body, having all feminine aspects and attributes, the people surrounding and observing me started to bully me”.**

Rukshana had no support from school authorities. Even though the school was in Kathmandu, the principle had very conservative ideas. Each time she complained about the bullying, she, who was the victim, became the perpetrator and was severely warned against misbehaving. She was also threatened to be expelled from the school as her behavior was claimed to bring shame.



**“I tried my best to avoid being bullied. I went to school late so that no students will be outside to bully me”**

**“There was no way that I was able to get any information from school about what was going on with me. No lessons in the school tackled these issues”**

Her first glimpse to transgender identify came through a newspaper. The **“son”** of a famous actor had gone through a gender reassignment surgery and the news was all over papers. With such news, Rukshana started looking for information online, started spending more time at internet cafes and gradually she confirmed to herself that she is **“transgender”**

**“The revelation didn't bring any special joy to me. I already knew I was different and the information confirmed it. But with that came enormous fear. What next? What's going to happen to me?”**

Rukshana didn't know back then what her transgender life would entail in the future. There was no one that she could talk to or someone that could give her any information. Looking back at her struggle she reflects that had she had such information, her school life would have been much better with higher scores at exams. She also thinks that she could have had more long lasting friendships with her schoolmates had they had such information.

Rukshana urges that teachers and principals to be sensitized and trained on comprehensive sexuality education and especially in providing such education to students in a sensitive and non-judgmental manner. She also emphasizes the importance of imparting such training to teachers and principals on a regular basis to create an ongoing discussion on these issues in order to make them non-controversial.

***“Ensure high quality CSE, that considers the full spectrum of young people's sexual and reproductive lives, is delivered within schools and the national curriculum as well as across non-formal settings.”***

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**“My friends bullied him because he acted feminine and called him girlish or half-lady. They simply didn't know what else to do but to bully and tease”**

**-Mir Abu, Bangladesh**



At 28 years, Mir Abu Reyad, is currently working as the senior youth link associate in HIMSTER, a project jointly implemented by UNICEF and Bandhu Social Welfare Society in Bangladesh which aims to create an enabling environment for young adolescents. Mir engages with young adolescents who are gay and transgender aged 14 – 24 in Dhaka and collaborates with other divisions organizing interactive events, awareness sessions, HIV & STD testing sessions and as required providing condoms and lubricants.

Mir has also been working with **"Right Here Right Now"** Bangladesh Platform as a youth focal point from Bandhu Social Welfare Society. The Right Here Right Now (RHRN) intervention in Bangladesh (RHRN-BD) is being implemented by a platform consisting of 11 organizations with unique expertise in the respective areas of SRHR and SOGI issues. The RHRN-BD platform aims to work for young people's sexual and reproductive health and rights irrespective of their sexual orientation and gender identity and focuses on creating stigma, discrimination and violence free access to comprehensive youth-friendly services; access to comprehensive information and space for young people's voices. The Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW) in Malaysia is the regional partner and Rutgers in The Netherlands supports the platform as development partner.

Growing up in a city outside the capital, Mir, moved to Dhaka when he was 16 for his higher education. He recalls how isolated he felt in his home town knowing that he is different but with no way to find out others who may be like him. Mir is one of those lucky ones who did not face significant bullying, discrimination or physical harassment at school. The only time he faced some teasing was when he wanted a school mate of him to become his **“friend”**. He didn't know what he exactly wanted but he knew that he is attracted to his school mate.



**“I had the same dilemma that almost all young LGBTQ people have. I was questioning whether I am the only person in the world who feels this way. I had no idea how to find anything about myself or who I was, even there was no one I could share my feelings with.”**

Mir remembers how one of his school mates was constantly bullied by his other friends because he was **“different”**.

**“My friends bullied him because he acted feminine and called him girlish or half-lady. They simply didn't know what else to do but to bully and tease”**.

However, Mir recalls that this boy enjoyed the bullying and all the attention that bullying brought to him. In hind sight Mir now realizes that it must have been his way of coping with bullying. Being an adolescent, his school mate did not know about his identity and nor did the other students knew about how to understand and act to such differences.

As an adolescent, Mir had no access to information about the changes that he is experiencing as he reaches his secondary sexual characteristics. He had no information about the difference that he sees in him and in his attraction to other boys. As in most other South Asian countries , the lesson about sexual health was limited to HIV and the teachers asked them to read it at home. Mir's understanding of himself took a huge a leap when he moved to Dhaka. He found Boys of Bangladesh (BOB) one of the two organizations working with LGBTQ community in the country.

Through BoB he gathered information about gender and sexuality which cleared his doubts about himself and gave him courage and strength to accept himself. Later on he became a core volunteer and a management board member of BOB and started working on some promising projects to sensitize the society. “Project Dhee” is a massive Bangladeshi project that aims to advance the LGBT movement in Bangladesh. BoB produced a comic book to educate people with some basic terms and terminologies as part of sensitizing the society.

Reminiscing about growing up without proper information about gender, sexuality and sexual and reproductive health, Mir now reflects that many unfortunate incidents such as his attempt to suicide could have been avoided if he had access to information through school or any other means that was easily available to him as an adolescent. He believes that comprehensive sexuality education should be provided through schools and teachers need to be trained to provide students with this knowledge with a non-judgmental attitude.

As a fellow of the **“Young Connectors of the Future”** fellowship program implemented by the Swedish Institute, one of Mir's goals is to advocate for legal changes in Bangladesh to amend/reform article 377 of the penal code. He believes that change/reformation should happen within and change makers need to be where the change needs to take place.

***“Listen to the voices of adolescent and young LGBTQ+ people to ensure that information and education on CSE is responsive to their specific needs.”***

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**“people asked me questions about my sexual preferences and I didn't know any of it”**

**-Gajendra, India**



23 year old Gajendra Singh is a proud and out young gay man from Jhansi India. He currently works for Oyo Rooms , a company in the travel industry and also models whenever he gets an opportunity. Growing up in a small city of India, his coming out to family has been smooth to the very surprise of him.

**“I was scared because I did not know how my family would react and I was scared that they would disown me”**

However, Gajendra thinks that his parents already knew about him and living in a very conservative Indian society, he is quite surprised that his parents were able to accept him for who he is.

Gajendra does not recall his high school life as one with pleasant memories. He has experienced teasing, bullying and physical harassment because of his sexual orientation which he was not aware of back then.

**“They made fun out of me and called me names. They called me gay, Fag , girly at school”**

With no access to information from school about sexuality, gender and sexual and reproductive health, Gajendra recalls how confused he was growing up as a young gay boy. He also reflects that the school mates who bullied him were equally unaware about these issues and that must have prompted them to behave violently. His teachers, as in many parts of South Asia, have been avoiding sexual health lessons. As the subject was considered embarrassing no students asked any questions as well.

**“When someone is confused about him or herself, the rest use that confusion for their advantage. The outcome could be bullying, physical harassment or sexual abuse”**



One of the turning points in Gajendra's life was his attempt to commit suicide when he was at high school. Resulting from a breakup he had as a young man, this attempted suicide led him to come out to his family. Gajendra reflects that with no information about relationships sexual or romantic or about interpersonal connections and power relations he was a confused young gay man trying to find a place for himself in the world.

Gajendra, fortunately had the privilege of accessing internet at home which encouraged him to seek information that he was not getting from any other sources, especially from school. However, he found it quite confusing when he was accessing dating sites for gay men and questions were thrown at him for which he didn't know answers back then.

**“people asked me questions about my sexual preferences and I didn't know any of it”**

Gajendra explains that not having information on sexuality, sex, sexual relations and safe sex behavior can easily lead young people to take risks in the guise of sexual adventure taking and could lead to sexual abuse, violence and in most cases rape.

He also reflects that such information can empower young people to be more responsible and also responsibly engage in relationships that are sexual or otherwise.

He also insists the importance of supportive characters, like one of his school teachers who supported him in facing the bullying at school and his parents. He mentions that these supportive characters can make young people especially from LGBTQ communities strong, enabling them to pursue their dreams.

Acknowledging the important role of comprehensive sexuality education in the lives of young people, Gajendra emphasizes that it should be made compulsory in all schools because the empowerment such information can bring to young people is unmeasurable. He, as a young man, rejects the traditional accusation against comprehensive sexuality education to encourage casual sex among young people but claims that such information will make young people more responsible. He insists that young people whether straight or LGBTQ should not be made to feel isolated or harassed because they are different and the responsible parties should take all necessary steps to avoid this kind of situations at school settings. He suggests establishing specialized committees at schools to protect LGBTQ students from harassments and violence as a first step to protecting the right of young people for an enabling childhood.

***“Ensure that CSE is delivered within safe and non-judgmental environments, and involves participatory teaching methods that meet young people's learning needs.”***

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**“Because I could not fit in the pink and blue boxes of the society”**

**-Rovin, India**



A 17 year old guy runs away from his house to find his real self, the authentic self but that lil soul didn't know then that this life completes its circle, at last you end up where you started from.

**“I was always a topic to crack jokes on at school and also among family, my childhood is nothing but a bad memory”.**

In spite of facing so many atrocities, harassment, assaults, bullying he didn't quit. The fight actually started the day he ran away and possibly will go on till the day he takes his last breath. From working at a placement firm to working with the Fortune 500 best companies, he worked everywhere to earn his bread and butter ignoring the harassment that he goes through at the workplaces regularly.

**“Earning livelihood, finding accommodation, or walking down the streets being “authentic” , is not cakewalk in India. You have to go through this trauma and pain every single day, until you follow the gender norms of the society or kill yourself”**

After leaving all the four organizations within a span of 4 years, he was sure about the fact that neither did he want to beg on the streets nor did he want to get into sex work. Before fighting with the world one has to fight with one's self and know what one wants for one's self.

**“Take care of the small things and big things will automatically fall in place”**



Rovin Sharma now uses the singular **“they”** pronouns and identify as **“Genderqueer”**, based out of Delhi and working for the visibility of gender non-conforming and non-binary folks, who are an important part of **“Trans”** community but are often neglected.

“Anybody who doesn't fit in the binary of Male or Female is a **“Transgender”** and it's a modern umbrella term which doesn't just mean hijras “, says Rovin.

Rovin now is an ambassador to the LaLit Hospitality Group for Transgender Folks and working very closely in sensitizing the organization towards LGBTIQ people forming an Inclusive space that celebrates Diversity. The group has introduced all-inclusive toilets, gender neutral pronouns, gender neutral honorific titles and an ungendered manner of conversation. Rovin also stresses on the need of **“comprehensive sexuality education”** not only at colleges and schools but at workplaces too.

Rovin also performs drag as **“Roveena Tampon”** and is among the first few Drag Queens in India. Kitty Su is the first Night Club to introduce Drag Culture in India and behind all this is the queen of queens **“Keshav Suri”** – Executive Director of The La Lit Hospitality Group.

**“Making drag mainstream in a country like India, where something like this is always looked down upon is a Revolution”**

India has acknowledged “third gender” but still doesn't know what that means. UT has a Transgender Welfare Board that is focusing on the university level education which is fabulous.

**“But dear board what are you doing about the trans children who are thrown out of their houses even before they finish their high school?”**

We have a long way to go as a world but people like Rovin has a great vision for not just the country but the world.

***“Provide information and education on CSE to adolescent and young LGBTQ+ people through flexible and creative approaches that are carefully planned and monitored, and targeted to reach them.”***

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**“I am so glad that I am one of those people who have survived. A lot of us can't do that and that is how we lose our people”**

**-Sumair, Pakistan**



**“I was a very depressed child when I was growing up. I was different and it was obvious”**

says Sumair, a young transman from Pakistan.

Sumair is from Karachi and growing up in a religiously conservative country, Sumair still faces numerous challenges as he is openly advocating for the rights of transgender people in Pakistan. Sumair currently works with the Transgender Blue Veins which advocates for the rights of transgender people, including addressing violence faced by transgender people and providing shelter for those who have faced violence.

Sumair, remembers how his family prevented him from going outside, playing with boys and forced him to be more **“feminine”** when he was about 12 years old. This is when Sumair started becoming depressed and developing suicidal tendencies.

**“Until then I was like a boy and suddenly I was forced to be more like a girl and this made me quite depressed”**

Sumair was no exception to the plight of many other adolescents in South Asia who are LGBTQ. He had no access to information or education that could have given him some clarity about himself and changes that he is experiencing as he was growing up.

**“I was bullied at school because I was too masculine. I was teased because I played football and they were saying that a “girl” cannot play football. Any way I was good at it”.**



Sumair now reflects that the bullying he faced from fellow students was not necessarily because they wanted to bully him, but simply because they themselves did not know how else to react. The school had no intention of providing such information and topics such as gender, sexuality, sexual and reproductive health were taboo topics that no one discussed.

Despite the hardships faced by Sumair as an adolescent, he was lucky enough to have access to internet and language skills in English to read and understand. At 14 Sumair started searching for information online and found gender dysphoria which turned his world upside down.

**“I had this information with me and I went to see a psychiatrist. He suggested that I should undergo electric shock therapy to cure myself”**

Sumair, reproaches that's it is not only the conservative people in Pakistan who have no knowledge and sensitivity towards LGBT people, but even the medical professionals lack the professional knowledge and understanding.

Looking back at growing up in a religious conservative and culturally constrained country, Sumair cannot but emphasize more the importance of comprehensive sexuality education for all. He explains that lack of comprehensive sexuality education at school not only leads young LGBTQ people to take rash decisions such as attempting suicide but also push others to discriminate and harass them.

**“If this information was available to me when I was growing up, I could have not been that depressed child, I would have never attempted suicide. I am so glad that I am one of those people who have survived. A lot of us can't do that and that's how we lose our people”**

Sumair believes that more spaces should be established to continue the discussion on comprehensive sexuality education including offline and online platforms. He also believes that Pakistan should accelerate efforts to integrate comprehensive sexuality education to school curriculum despite religious and cultural pressure to do otherwise.

He calls upon all young people out there in the world to be themselves and to embrace the very insults that are thrown at them. He also urges them to stop trying to fix their identities but to let loose and explore the world.”

**“We are young people and we are allowed to be confused. Use that opportunity and explore”**

**“Strengthen partnerships with youth-led groups, supporting the direct participation and leadership of young people, particularly from marginalized groups, in CSE programme development and delivery, research and advocacy.”**

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**“We leave you out always because you are not a boy”**

**-Tung, Vietnam**



Tung is a 26-year-old young gay man from Vietnam who is currently working with Light House Social Enterprise, an organization working with LGBT community on sexual and reproductive health issues. Light House also has special initiatives targeting young gay men and young transgender people in relation to HIV prevention, treatment and care.

Tung, currently lives in Hanoi and is originally from a small village in central Vietnam. Recalling his growing up as a young person in the heart of the country, Tung talks of the hardships he had to face because people thought he was different.

**“Growing up I knew I was different, and I thought that there is something wrong with me because that is what everyone thought of me”**

Tung faced a lot of discrimination in his village because he was perceived to be different mainly because he was not behaving as a typical boy in the eyes of his neighbors. The school was not much different to his experience in the village. His school mates bullied him, harassed him and called him names. He was always left out of their games and once Tung asked his best friend why he is always left out and the answer shocked Tung but at the same time motivated him to find his own ways to tackle it.

**“we leave you out always because you are not a boy”**

Tung's coping mechanism was to get deeply engaged in his studies with an ambition to leave his small village and migrate to a larger city where he does not have to face any discrimination”



**“All this bullying and harassing made me study harder because I wanted to get out of my small village”**

Tung recalls that any information on gender and sexuality was impossible to come by in his school. His teachers did not talk about such issues because they themselves didn't know. He was isolated and as many other young LGBTQ people, he thought that he is the only one in the world. He could not talk to any teachers or friends about his feelings because that would have surely brought more bullying. Being gay or simply not adhering to typical gender roles was strongly discouraged at school and therefore gave legitimacy to all the bullying and harassment that he had to endure as a young person.

Reminiscing the hardships, he had to go through, Tung emphasizes the importance of comprehensive sexuality education at the school level.

**“Such information could have made me more confident. If those who bullied me had such information they would not have done so and the school environment would have been much safer for all students”**

Tung also insist on the importance of creating protection mechanisms at the schools through the introduction of comprehensive sexuality education in order to protect students who identify with minority sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions. He suggests that acceptance of diversity should be promoted within schools through regular sensitizing of teachers, principals and students to create safe enabling education spaces for students.

**“Ensure strong links between educational facilities and health providers, as well as between ministries of education and health within governments, in order that young people can access the information and education as well as the sexual and reproductive health services that they need.”**

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**“Ensure strong links between educational facilities and health providers, as well as between ministries of education and health within governments, in order that young people can access the information and education as well as the sexual and reproductive health services that they need.”**

**“Work with communities and parents to build support for CSE as well as a culture that supports choice and respect for young people and their sexual and reproductive health and rights.”**

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