

Lived experiences

of poor transgender women in Myanmar



The lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and gender diverse, intersex (LGBT+) community in Myanmar faces many challenges of discrimination and exclusion. Gathered in the beauty salon of one of their members, the Sunflower transwomen self-help group talk about their life experiences.

In current Myanmar law,

same-sex relations are illegal. Section 377 of the Penal Code prohibits 'carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal'. Although the law is rarely enforced, it has been reported that it is used to intimidate gay people. It also influences perceptions and norms in society, negatively impacting LGBT+ people's lives, for instance in accessing basic services.

The so-called 'darkness law', section 35c of the Police Act, allows authorities to arrest 'any person found between sunset and sunrise having his face covered or otherwise disguised, who is unable to give a satisfactory account of himself'. It has been reported that this rule is used to target specific population groups.

"We are now like girls,

we marry our boyfriends and we all live together. And our mother understands now. At first, she didn't want us to be like this. She worried. She used to beat us, but we would hide our women's clothes in the bushes, sneak out and change outside. We know ourselves, me and my younger brother. Now, people know us as sisters and our mother knows that we are happy with who we are, and she accepts it," says Zukha, remembering her youth. We are in the outskirts of Mandalay, listening to a group of transwomen sharing their life experiences.

It's hard to find work

As a transwoman it very difficult to find work for several reasons. For one, it requires a recommendation letter from the police. "But we are not comfortable to go to there. When we

are asked questions about what we do, who we are, we are not comfortable to answer." In Myanmar many LGBT+ people face harassment or even violence and current laws do not protect them, or are misused.

Employers don't want to hire LGBT+, because their level of education is too low. Poverty is one reason for this low education. Shwe Hmone explains "First, I did go to school, even though my parents couldn't give me pocket money. After I passed 8th standard, I wanted to become an actor, but my parents are poor and I wanted to support them. I am the eldest child, so I had to quit school. I did many odd jobs, I made snacks and sold water melon." Another major cause of drop-out is discrimination at school. "Some boys at school just beat up LGBT for no reason. And then, when they go and tell the teacher, she will say things

like: It's because you are acting like a girl. No wonder they beat you up".

Ending up in a vicious circle

Low education and thus not being able to make a living often adds to the discrimination against LGBT+ people within the family. Parents may already be afraid of embarrassment in the community, for instance due to fear of HIV, and their child not having a job worsens this. The group explains how this leads to a negative vicious circle: "When we don't have jobs, families are not happy. Parents put a lot of pressure. So, people run away from home and this will ruin them. Maybe they offer sex for money to survive. And sometimes they meet cruel men or could even get killed. And sometimes, transgender girls become morally corrupted and steal from the man they are with. Really, the future is either jail or death."

Zukha remembers the story of a former group member "with two distinctions in her matriculation exam. She was our treasurer. But her family tied her up and they beat her, because she wanted to live as a woman. She ran away from home and she lost touch with us. Later we heard that she started taking drugs and she stole money and was sentenced to two years. She met the wrong people and she is in prison now."

Doubled discrimination

"We are poor transwomen", says Myat Noe. "There is a difference between transgender people who are rich and poor. I am poor, just selling flowers on the street. They say that I steal things, but I never did. I had to run away from home. There were times when I had to sleep on the streets and figure out what to do. I was threatened and beaten up, just because I am an 'achaut' (a very derogative word for transwoman). Rich transwomen look down on us. Later, I won a dancing contest and they were surprised. They started to treat me differently. I'm happy about that."

Zukha adds that for poor transgender people it can be more difficult to find support. For instance, when a poor transwoman is picked up by the police, it is sometimes just assumed that "she must have been stealing" and it was right for her to be arrested. Zukha – being poor herself – remembers occasions where transwomen called her for support. "Even if I can't help them myself, I will still go and ask what happened and try to connect

them to others who can." This situation where being poor adds to the difficulties that LGBT+ people are already facing was a returning topic.

Inner strength and solidarity

The group reminisce about a drop-in center (DIC) for LGBT+ people that used to exist and was shut down due to lack of funding. They regret this because it was so important to have a place where "we could go for information or counselling or just a place to rest a bit before going to HIV testing." Zukha, who was involved in the center, further explains that they would help in police cases. "One time, 10 were people arrested based on the staying-in-the-dark law. I am not a paralegal, but I helped them get out." Many LGBT+ people are afraid, but the center provides space to hear stories from others or receive training to learn that they do nothing wrong. Knowing that being themselves is not committing any sin or crime helps them to feel more confident, build their inner strength. This and the education materials provided by the center, helps them to raise awareness with parents and other family members.

Building skills and awareness

The DIC is also a space for sharing skills that will help people to make a living. Shwe Hmone recalls some "senior transgender women who are like mothers. They taught make up skills and were asked to do some trainings. They didn't need to be paid. When the trainees started earning income, they would give some honorarium". She also recalls how this helped her situation at home: "Previously my father beat me a lot, but later no more. I told them about what I learnt at the DIC. Of course no parent would want their child to be like this, but since I am able to earn money with the make-up skills I learnt at the center, they leave me alone."

Dreams for the future

When asked about their dreams all say they want to create a better situation for the next generation. It is Zukha's dream to start an NGO and help LGBT+ people to build their skills and claim their rights. "When I was young, I went out at night and without doing anything wrong, I was arrested. It was scary and I was very afraid. Nowadays, I feel more confident. I know that I am not doing anything wrong. I don't want the young LGBT+ to have to face this like me."



Christian Aid Myanmar's work

Christian Aid aims to support the most marginalised in society, strengthening their voice and agency to enable them to address the issues that cause or maintain their exclusion. In Myanmar, Christian Aid partners with two major network organisations promoting equal rights and empowerment for people who are excluded based on their gender identities or sexual orientation (LGBT+). Supporting people to unite their voices and speak out to challenge the unequal power relations that exclude them, we address the structural causes of poverty.

Christian Aid Myanmar has been a member of GEN (Gender Equality Network) since 2013. GEN is a network of over 150 organisations who focus on gender equality. Currently we are supporting GEN to build awareness and mobilize local CSOs on LGBT+ issues and advocate for an amendment of section 377 of the Penal Code to protect LGBT+ people's rights.

The support for Mandalay-based Civil Authorize Negotiate Organisation (C.A.N.) focuses on strengthening 15 LGBT+ organisations across the country and developing strategies and plans to advocate for an Anti-Discrimination Law, prohibiting any forms of discrimination against LGBT+ communities. The project also supports public awareness raising, such as events celebrating the International Day against Homophobia, Bi-phobia and Transphobia (IDAHOBIT).