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Stories of INTERSEX people from NEPAL

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This report was technically and editorally reviewed by Mx. Jensen Byrne . It is based upon personal stories submitted in writing by intersex persons themselves. during the 1st Intersex National Meeting in Nepal, held on the 8-9 February 2016 in Kathmandu. All contributors have given their express permission to be included in this collection and are aware that these stories are intended to be distributed widely and made freely available.

The stories, originally written in Nepali were checked and translated to English by Mr. Esan Regmi and Mr. Parsu Ram Rai. All English translations were proofread and edited by Mx. Jensen Byrne.

The views, opinions and experiences shared by the intersex persons in this collection are their own. We thank them for their honesty, vulnerability and trust in sharing their stories with us.

Thanks are also extended to the Being LGBTI in Asia programme under the United Nations Development Programme and the Multi-Country South Asia Global Fund HIV Programme. Their support in convening the national meeting was essential in the development of a national intersex movement in Nepal and the compilation of these stories.

Thanks are also extended to Mr. Parsu Ram Rai for his tireless assistance and translation services during the meeting and in compiling these stories.

Design: Jensen Byrne

FOREWORD

My name is Esan Regmi, I am an intersex man from Nepal and an LGBTI activist. I advocate strongly and with limited resources for the human rights of intersex people in my home country. This year, during my work, I had the amazing chance to meet many Nepali intersex people.

There are so many more intersex people than you would believe and I have met many during the course of my work as I try to build a network for us in Nepal. In February after my visit to ILGA Asia and in coordination with Mr. Parsu Ram Rai, my organization, the Blue Diamond Society, organized the ‘1st Intersex National Meeting in Nepal’. This meeting lasted two days and was supported by the United Nations Development Programme and the Multi-Country South Asia Global Fund HIV Programme.

This meeting brought 13 intersex people together for the first time. We were all of different ages, genders, sexual orientations and intersex variations, but we were united in our experience of being intersex. We shared experiences of confusion, isolation, human rights violations, shame and silence. This meeting gave us the chance to share our stories and to know that we were not alone. It gave us the opportunity to begin building a community where we felt supported and inspired us in our drive to reach out and strengthen the intersex network in Nepal.

During this meeting I asked the participants to share with me their stories. I have gathered them here in this small publication as a beginning. A beginning of a national movement and also a national voice. We are intersex. We exist, we are here, and these are our stories. Do not neglect us in your work, please include intersex people and issues in your human rights work.

INTRODUCTION

What is intersex?

Intersex people are born with sex characteristics (including genitals, gonads and chromosome patterns) that do not fit typical binary notions of male or female bodies. Intersex is an umbrella term used to describe a wide range of natural bodily variations rather than a single intersex variation. In some cases, intersex traits are visible prenatally or at birth while in others, they are not apparent until puberty. Some chromosomal intersex variations may not be physically apparent at all or may be discovered when trying to conceive, or through random chance.

How does having an intersex variation relate to sexual orientation and gender identity?

Intersex people have the same variety of sexual orientations and gender identities as people who do not have an intersex variation.

Being intersex relates to biological sex characteristics, and is distinct from a person's sexual orientation or gender identity. An intersex person may be straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual or asexual, and may identify as female, male, both or neither.

How common are intersex variations?

It is estimated that between 0.05% and 1.7% of the population is born with intersex traits – the upper estimate is similar to the number of red haired people in the world.

What are some of the key challenges faced by intersex people in Nepal?

-Intersex genital mutilation as a growing practice and lack of information and access to reproductive health information or care

-Lack of access to necessary health care for those experiencing health difficulties as a result of their intersex variation

-Discrimination from families and communities, including street harassment, bullying and isolation in schools

-Access to employment- while Nepal has special reservations in employment for women, third gender and other populations, there are no specific schemes for intersex people

-A lack of intersex focused research and activities within the LGBTI movement

-Intersex people cannot amend the name or gender marker on birth certificates and have difficulties changing documents including citizenship and educational certificates and transcripts if wanted

-Marriage and inheritance rights

Sheetal Humagai

My name is Sheetal Humagai , I was born on the 27 July 1991 AD at VDC Sanopokhara, Kavrepalanchowk district of Kisantara in Nepal .When I was born, I was given a feminine name and raised as a daughter. However, when I reached puberty I began to develop like a boy. I was 14 years old when I realized I was different from others and I began to examine that difference. It was then that I realized that my difference lay in the fact that I had been born with male and female genitalia.

My family had raised me as a girl due to the fact that I urinated from the female part of my genitals and they feared society's reaction to my intersex variation. However, my gender identity is male. Throughout my childhood and adolescence they kept suppressing my identity out of fear that their social status would be downgraded if the community knew that they had a child like me, they also feared that I would be mocked.

Though I was raised as a girl I often felt uncomfortable and stressed that I had to put on girl clothes. I was teased and humiliated often by my friends on the street and at home because my body was different to others.

My father passed away before 2004 and I then had difficulty with my livelihood and continuing my studies.

In 2008, an organization called 'Rest Nepal' came to our school and had a short conversation with my teacher Kesab Bahadur Raimaji. Looking at socioeconomic status, they guaranteed me a scholarship so that I could continue my studies. At this point I felt that I could not disclose that I was intersex.

But later, with courage, I told them and despite my fear they continued their support for my education. With this support I managed to complete Higher Education and I was given the opportunity to teach in a school as a support teacher.

“Throughout my childhood and adolescence they kept suppressing my identity out of fear that their social status would be downgraded if the community knew that they had a child like me”

I was at one point introduced to Mr. Bruce Moore, who employed me in the Hotel Dwarika in Dhulikhel; at the same time the staff of ‘Rest Nepal’ took me to ‘Blue Diamond Society’ a Nepal LGBTI organization and here I got to meet and make friends with other intersex people.

I was incredibly happy to become part of this community but when I learned about intersex issues and how they have not been highlighted, I felt sad.

In the last six months, I have voluntarily undergone surgery in hospital to make my genitals more masculine. However, the initial surgery was not successful and I will need another in three months. I am happy now and have come out from the closet. I have started speaking about my experience of being intersex and I would like to thank ‘Rest Nepal’ for their initiative and help.



China Chaudhary

My name China Chaudhary. I was born in the year of 1984 AD. I was born and was raised as a daughter. My body appeared wholly female. However, when I was 12 years old, my physical growth was not like other girls and due to this difference, I was forced to leave home and my parents were not at all happy.

I began to work in the homes of other people to make a living. After some time working there I broke my leg. As a result I was fired instead of being provided with treatment and had nobody to look after me. I returned home at this point, but I did not receive any care, support or treatment from my family who did not seem bothered with me. With the little money I had earned from my job I got treatment, but I was so sad at this point and experiencing a lot of problems. On the one hand I was temporarily disabled by my injury and in the other I had no one who cared for me or who could provide me with food. So I lived by borrowing food from others. When I eventually healed, I again started working and to lead my life.

However, while I dressed and lived like a woman I did not develop breasts and most people called me different disparaging names such as *Hijada*, *Chbaka* and so on. I also had to face a lot of such humiliation in the workplace as well. Through work I had collected enough money to go for a health checkup. It was at this point that the doctor told me that I did not have a uterus.

I was incredibly upset by this but I had nobody close to confide and share my feelings with. Nearly everybody I knew discriminated against me in some way. I felt incredibly alone and isolated.

“Through work I had collected enough money to go for a health checkup. It was at this point that the doctor told me that I did not have a uterus.”

Slowly I have started to understand myself, and while I was experiencing difficulties in my life, I came to know about the Blue Diamond Society (BDS). I went to their centre where I was given the opportunity to work there. This was an incredible relief as I have made many friends there and they are quite supportive. I still work with BDS and we work together as a family.

Nabin Chaudhary

My name is Nabin Chaudhary and I was born in 1991 AD in the Bardiya District of Nepal. When I was born I had ambiguous genitals, but my family gave me a feminine name and raised me as a daughter.

“I began to wonder why I looked different and why they were looking at me and questioning me”

When I was in the 5th Grade, despite my feminine name, my body started to develop like a boy's and my school friends began to tease me. Other people also began to perceive me as either male or female at different times. I began to wonder why I looked different and why they were looking at me and questioning me. Added to this, we have five intersex people in my immediate and extended family and this resulted in more teasing and humiliation. This led to a lot of stress and my studies began to suffer.

Later, when I reached the 7th Grade, I changed my name from a girl's name to that of a boy. But I started to be doubly discriminated against as I looked male yet had breasts as well. I was stressed and completely dropped out and went to headquarters for my School Leaving Certificate preparation.

When I was in headquarters, one of my friends who was from the LGBTI community took me to the Gulariya office of BDS where I was introduced to different LGBTI community people and they provided me with a book on LGBTI issues. I read the book and came to know about being intersex as well as my sexuality and orientation.

I could not continue with my studies and after learning and coming to a great understanding about myself I started sharing information about being intersex with many people as they found it very difficult to understand. Later I was invited to work at the office as community mobilizer.



Kamala Guragain

My name is Kamala Guragain. I was born in Jhapa District, Nepal. When I was born, I had ambiguous genitals, but my family brought me up as a daughter. When I was 5 years old, I remember people in my community questioning whether I was a son or daughter, my Dad would tell them that I was his daughter. When I went to school to study, my classmates used to tell me that I was a boy and must sit and stay with the boys. I ignored their words and I stayed sitting with the girls in school.

“They saw me as a bad omen and often used to say to me and others that I must be expelled and sent to a faraway land”

I reached puberty when I was in class five. At this point there were drastic changes in my appearance as I started growing facial hair and developed a beard and moustache. This was really difficulty as my friends started teasing me, calling me different names and using bad language, calling me things like *Hijara (a transgender culture in India)*. They saw me as a bad omen and often used to say to me and others that I must be expelled and sent to a faraway land.

Because of the fear and humiliation, I used to cover myself with a blanket in class and eventually I was forced to leave school completely. This resulted in me making a bad impression on my family too as I was looked at so differently by the society . I felt sad and used to feel very alone. Often times, I used to curse myself for being born this way.

Later I learned about BDS and went to their central office in Kathmandu. Here I got the opportunity to learn about myself, being intersex, about my sexual orientation and I was also given the opportunity to work there. Later, I moved back to my own village from Kathmandu and at present I am working at the BDS branch in Damak as a community mobilizer.



Archana Pokharel

I was born in 1984 AD in Udaypur District of Tavasrima, Nepal. When I was born, my body had sex characteristics that they could not distinguish as male or female. My parents had a daughter already and due to our patriarchal society there was a desire to have a son. As a result my family used to call me as 'son' but my name is Archana (a feminine name). At this time my father was a teacher in the local school so I had no difficulties in attending school, and at the same time, I did not feel that I was different. However, later when we migrated to Sunari, I had grown a little, I was about 13 years old and I was not developing physically like other girls my age. At this point my mother, father and other relatives began to worry about me.

As days continued to pass, things became more difficult for me, though my name was feminine I was called 'son', but when I went to school I wore a skirt and shirt. When I was in Class 11 I came first in my class and got a scholarship. But from this point the situation began to worsen as I had to wear feminine dress which did not suit me as I looked female but my body had not developed, but the uniform was compulsory in the college. My uncle was a professor in the college and one day he approached the administration on my behalf and from that way onwards I was able to wear the male uniform and began to come to school.

But on campus, my classmates refused to stay with me as they were not sure about my gender.

I used to think about myself a lot and got extremely stressed. My family used to worry about me too and I used to cry often. For this reason, I could not study well. Then my mother's uncle, a doctor from India came to visit. I told him about my physical features and it was him who told me about being intersex. I started crying then, to finally know about it. My mother comforted it.

Gradually I returned to and continued my studies and then I went to Biratnagar to pursue my Undergraduate degree. Here there was freedom for me to choose the uniform and so I had no difficulties. I took a keen interest in my studies and did well. For my Master's degree, I came to Kathmandu where I stayed at the college accommodation and faced discrimination from my peers. My parents supported me until my Master's level but afterwards my father passed away from a heart attack. At this point all the familial responsibilities fell on me and even before the 13 Day Hindu period of mourning was complete my sister had already married. It was difficult to manage these new responsibilities and I started looking for a job but found it very difficult to find one. Eventually I got a job in a Cooperative.

Before being introduced to BDS and meeting other intersex people, I used to think that I was alone but now I have made a network of intersex friends who I can work together with. I think we should have our own separate intersex organization and work together accordingly.

Amar Chaudhary

My name is Amar, I was born on the 1 July 1996 AD in a place called Tara Tal of Bardiya in Nepal. I was also born intersex and my genitals are 'ambiguous'. Nobody knew about my intersex variation initially, but once I was brought home my family discovered that my genitals were mostly male but also partially female. Despite this I was raised as a boy.



I don't know if it is an omen, my destiny or Karma but my female part doesn't function properly. I have a constant stream of urine that never stops. My parents initially thought it might fix itself, but this never happened.

Due to my family's socioeconomic condition we could not afford treatment. Our financial situation was so difficult I did not enroll in school until I was 8 years old.

This was a milestone for me but it was also incredibly difficult. I was teased constantly and humiliated due to the constant strong smell of urine.

Over time my problem got worse and when I was 9 I was taken to Kholpur Hospital in Nepalgunj for treatment. I was admitted for 2 months and prescribed medicine but this didn't help. Later the doctor told my family that my bladder was not properly formed and recommended me for surgery. But my family could not afford treatment and my father took me back home.

I returned to school, but my problem remains. I need to change clothes several times throughout the day and the smell is always there. I also suffered cuts and pain from special clothes that chafe and are designed to help with the foul smell. Due to lack of treatment I cannot participate in sport and as my health worsens I find it difficult to walk, stand or sit and I do not sleep well. I would love to play sport like other students but I cannot due to my physical condition. I am isolated completely in class. My classmates show reluctance to sit with me in class or to be around me.

I am a 17 year old intersex male. Before I didn't know 'what' I was, but I have met more people like me, including Arjun with a similar condition. This has made me happier but still I hold a great sadness inside me.

My story from Parvati to Esan

I was born in 1988, in the remote mountainous district of Bajura in the far Western Development Region of Nepal. At birth, I was brought up as female by my family but later at the age of 13 years, my physical development was different compared to other girls. This was extremely shocking to me and my family because I lived in a conservative society and they started looking at me very differently. My community told my family to take me to treatment centers and counselling as well.

My family thought I could be cured and I was taken to India for treatment, but upon reaching there the doctor said that the treatment would not be possible. Instead he advised that the *Hijra* community in India would take me as part of their rights. (There is a believe within the *hijra* community that intersex people belong within the *hijra* community and should be rightfully given to them to be raised). My parents feared this story and were afraid that I would be abducted and so bought me back to Nepal. At this point my body was slowly developing as male, while all my documents said that I was female. As a result I could not go out and had to stay at home alone.

I was forced to conform and act like a girl because of my documents and having a girl's name. Despite wanting to have my freedom and to be proud of being intersex I was suppressed and forced to hide inside and could not share who I was with others.

Whenever I did go out, people used to look at me and ask if “I am a man or woman” which used to stress me out badly and hindered my work and my life. This stress affected my studies too as I often broke down and felt weak. However, my family always encouraged me . This encouragement led me to continue my studies. But when I appeared to take my final examination I was told that I was a fake student as my appearance did not conform with the name and gender marker on my ID card. As I result I had to overcome a great deal of stigma, discrimination, discouragement and accusation while undertaking my exam. Despite these challenges and problems I did not give up on my studies and turned my thoughts in a positive direction. After some time I completed my education and began looking for employment opportunities, but to my dismay I was continuously rejected because my certificates which say ‘Parvati’ a feminine name and my physical appearance, of the man ‘Esan’ do not match.

From experiencing these difficulties and humiliation I made up my mind to address these issues and make other people aware of them. Hence in 2011, I came to learn about BDS and began to work there as a volunteer. I also began to research some facts on intersex. Gradually I began reaching out and talking to intersex community members on a weekly basis which has resulted in national and international connections. I have since been selected to represent the intersex community members at national level.

Arjun Chirima



I am Arjun Chirimar born in 2001 in Bardiya, Gulariya, Nepal. I am 15 years old. Soon after I was born my family came to realise that my genitals were neither male nor female, but a mix somewhere in between, still I was raised as a son. Since birth I have suffered from a continuous flow of urine from my genitals. My family, initially sought medical treatment for

me in the teaching hospital in Kathmandu. The doctor recommended that I undergo surgery, but for this my parents would need to pay almost 3 lakhs Nepali Rupees (about 3000 US\$) which they were unable to afford. As a result my family returned home with me without treatment.

Later with support from one of the LGBTI community members, I was brought to the central office of Blue Diamond Society in Kathmandu where my Dad shared all the information about me and came to know about intersex issues. It was at this time that I learned I was 'Intersex'. As Blue Diamond Society did not have the resources to help me access the medical treatment I need I was taken back to my village and was enrolled in school.

However, due to my urinary incontinence and the continuous foul smell of urine, I was teased and most of my classmates disowned me and humiliated me many times. Due to such a hostile and uneasy environment, I was forced to leave school. Even within my wider community I feel rejected as they are not at all happy with the way I was born. My family too receive criticism and are isolated and looked upon differently in my community.

My former classmates and other children continue to tease and humiliate me due to my problem. My family also continue to receive negative comments and treatment but due to our financial situation we do not have the option to leave our village.

Because they fear being stigmatized and discriminated against within my community, my family are hesitant to speak out on my behalf, particularly about my problems.

Bimala

My name is Bimala, and I was born in the district of Panchthar, Mamuma VDC in Ward number 5. I was raised as a daughter but my genitals were different. I was enrolled in school but I always got sick and because of this my studies couldn't continue.

Later though I was 15 years old, my physical growth was not the same as other girls and I had no menstruation. People used to give me bad names like *chhakeka* and *hijra* and thought I was infertile. My group of friends eventually got married but I had never felt strongly about marriage and the thought of marrying never came into my mind. Because of this I was humiliated and looked upon differently. Though it was stressful, I never fought with them and I never really spent time with the group. I used to think that it was only me that was different in this world and I used to feel that I was all alone.

I used to listen to the radio, and once while listening I heard a programme on LGBTI issues. I began listening to the programme more often and it was this way I learned about my physical changes, being intersex and other LGBTI issues.

I was interested to know more and as a result I travelled to the BDS office in Damak with the support of one of my friends. It was here that I met Chanchala, the district coordinator of BDS branch and shared my story.

Hearing my information, I was given an opportunity to work in the office. At present I am working in the Damak office and I am a bit happier but I still feel a lot of uncertainty about my future.

Notes

We would like to thank UNDP and the Being LGBTI in Asia programme for all of their help and continued support.



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Resilient nations.*



