“Kenya’s Neo Musangi changes between dress codes and genders, transforming the public space into a symbolic closet”
-Zethu Matebeni

Synthesis of Discussions at the 2nd MenEngage Global Symposium 2014

Session: Beyond the Gender Binary

Working with Genders and Sexualities
The session ‘Beyond the Gender Binary’ held during the 2nd MenEngage Global Symposium 2014 — Men and Boys for Gender Justice, organised in New Delhi from November 10-13, examined new areas for investigation and understanding beyond the male-female dichotomy and seeing how gender work and conceptualisation of gender outside the binary can interrogate masculinity and feminism. As moderator Akshay Khanna of the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, UK, said, “There are far more than two genders. And yet, the development discourse insists and continues to imagine the entire world as being either male or female.” This session aimed to go beyond this imagination.

**Gender Is A Chosen Identity, Needs To Be Consensual**

Chayanika Shah, queer feminist activist from Mumbai, India, traced the shift in people’s understanding of the social construction of a gender ideology that includes many genders within the masculine and feminine today. “Forty years ago we got the language of gender when feminism separated sex and gender, assigning a biological meaning to sex and a social meaning to gender. It was said men and women are not born, they are made. This big shift in people’s understanding of gender as a social construction was read into every institution of society. Today, looking at what has transpired in the intervening years, somewhere we’re understanding both sex and gender very differently again. As we went along, it was clearer that all men and all women are not the same. That when we say masculine or feminine then we’re talking of many genders actually within it.

“And I am not talking of individually taken gender, I’m talking of how gender gets manifested in my location when I am somebody who’s not only a woman, but who’s also an upper caste, upper class woman etc. That somebody is Dalit and a woman is not two distinct things. I can never say whether this violence is happening on me because I am a woman, or it’s happening on me because I am a Dalit woman. And I think this is one of our biggest shifts in understanding gender.

“The other big shift has come from trans (gender) narratives. The clubbing together of LGBTs (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) is unfortunate because there is a collapsing of sexuality and gender. There is a distinction between a sexual orientation and a gender identity or gender expression. Gender is fluid and people may shift from one gender to the other as a very thought-out choice.”

Finally, the constant reading of gender poses a problem, she said. “We see expression and decide what gender. What our study (See Box ‘Negotiations with Gender’) keeps telling us is that gender has to be asked. It’s like any other identity, it’s a chosen identity. And in that sense, it needs to be consensual. This has many implications for feminism, masculinity studies and feminist interventions.”

**Negotiation with Gender, Finds Study**

A 2013 study ‘Breaking the Binary’ by Mumbai-based feminist queer collective LABIA (Lesbians and Bisexuals in Action) interviewed 50 persons assigned female gender at birth who had in some way broken gender norms, to find out how these people understood gender. The answer to the first question itself was surprising: What is your current gender identity? 22 participants identified as women, 10 identified as men, and 18 said they didn’t want to identify as either man or woman. Their narratives brought out clearly that there is a negotiation with gender going on. “Therefore, it is time to transform our understanding of gender, that even though we say the world has only two genders, people live in multiple ways and we need to recognize that now,” said Shah.

**Dismantle Gender on The Streets**

Zethu Matebeni, senior researcher, Institute for Humanities in Africa (HUMA), University of Cape Town, South Africa, said from the vantage point...
of her own identity as a black, queer, female person in South Africa, a lot of the preoccupation is with race and violence which is a constant reality in her location. Matebeni, who said she became a girl at six and transitioned into a man at 15, and now takes the position of “anything that I want to be”, said “Zoliswa (See ‘Zoliswa’s Story’) reminded me of how we should put our bodies out there, to speak truth to power and to the invented cultural norms and discourses that have made us what we’re not.”

Forced to be Hijra

Reshma Prasad, LGBT rights activist and Secretary, Dostana Safar, Patna, India, spoke of the marginalisation of the Hijra community. Those who don’t fit into the gender assigned to them at birth, and are from a class background where they cannot transition to being a different gender, are forced in some sense to become something that fits into the Hijra. Highlighting the transgender community’s problems, she said, “People associate me with only one thing -- that I am a Hijra -- ignoring that I am an activist working for the community. They think I only beg and there is always a negative sentiment associated with us.” She said in India the transgenders’ identity is characterised as their professional identity. “My profession should be my identity. My profession should not be linked only to my being a Hijra...where am I wrong, where is my community wrong?”

Agreeing, Khanna clarified, “Gender articulates in a political economy – the work that you do - in a very particular way. At a social level, Hijras are believed to be associated with select professions. There is a disjuncture if they work in other fields. That’s why it’s important to establish a transgender identity separate from the Hijra identity and to acknowledge their different professional roles.”

“Many people of the inter-sex community stay hidden all their lives, becoming victims to mental illnesses,” Prasad said. “Those who are poor adopt the Hijra identity to make money. But people like me want to look beyond that. I am a transgender, not necessarily a Hijra. My friends have respectable jobs. Some are teachers but they cannot be open about their real identity.”

Calling for an end to discrimination, Prasad said there has to be a development agenda for the transgender community that gives them the confidence to step out and establish their identities in any way they choose. “Whatever identity my community has, it should not be related to just that we’re Hijras. We also need sexual rights, human rights and health rights.” Referring to the landmark Supreme Court of India ruling in April 2014 that recognised transgender as a legal category, Prasad called for affirmative action programmes to accommodate that.

“After the ruling there have been no further steps by the government to stop discrimination or have development agendas, plans or policies for the community,” she said. “But is it possible to have state-wise policies in India? Even in those places where there is no community leadership?” Prasad wondered.

Only 7 Countries Recognise Third Gender

Of the 193 countries all over the world that are member-states of the United Nations, a mere four nations in Asia, one in Europe and two in the Australian continent recognise the existence of the third gender in official documents, including passports:

- Nepal
- India
- Pakistan
- Bangladesh
- Germany
- New Zealand
- Australia
Some categories of people with gender identities or sexual orientations within or beyond the commonly known male, female and LGBT identities:

- **Trans man** is a transgender person assigned female at birth but whose gender identity is of a man. Many trans men choose to undergo surgical or hormonal transition, or both, to alter their appearance in a way that aligns with their gender identity more appropriately.

- **Trans woman** is a transgender person assigned male at birth but whose gender identity is of a woman.

- **Transsexual** people experience a gender identity that is inconsistent with or not culturally associated with their assigned sex, and desire to permanently transition to the gender with which they identify, usually seeking medical assistance to align their body with their identified gender.

- **Queer** is an umbrella term for sexual and gender minorities that are not heterosexual or cisgender. Queer may be used by those who reject traditional gender identities and seek a broader, less conformist and deliberately ambiguous alternative to LGBT.

- **Intersex** people have a variation in sex characteristics including chromosomes, gondas or genitals that are not distinctly identified as male or female. Some intersex children with ambiguous outer genitalia are surgically or hormonally altered to create more socially acceptable sex characteristics. Like all individuals, intersex people have various gender identities.

- **Questioning** of one’s gender, sexual identity, sexual orientation, or all three takes place with people who may be still exploring, and concerned about applying a social label to themselves. The letter ‘Q’ is sometimes added to the end of LGBT and can refer to either queer or questioning.

- **Pansexual or Omnisexual** people have a sexual attraction or emotional attraction toward people of any sex or gender identity.

This synthesis paper is also available in other languages.

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