Making Liveable Lives : Rethinking Social Exclusion

A Transnational Research Project
by
Sappho for Equality, India and University of Brighton, UK

Understanding Liveability/ies

A report of
Making Liveable Lives: Rethinking Social Exclusion

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We dedicate our work to all the participants who shared their lives with us that enriched our understandings of liveabilities.

We dedicate our work especially to one of them who had lived a very necessary life that will forever outweigh the unnecessary, accidental death she faced a month back. We will remember her as the youthful, energetic, lively person whose narrative has given us meaningful insights towards understanding liveabilities.

Acknowledgements

The Project at a Glance

'Making Liveable Lives: Rethinking Social Exclusion', a transnational research project, is looking at how the concept of 'Liveable Lives' plays out in experiences of everyday lives in different places, and how it might be powerful in activism. We think that the concept may have the potential to develop new ways of thinking and talking about the concerns of LGBTQ people, and might help to inform new initiatives and strategies beyond the equalities agenda. It is an activist-academic collaboration between Sappho for Equality, India and the University of Brighton, UK. The project was carried out from September 2014 to February 2016 in Kolkata and some of the districts of West Bengal, India and in Brighton and its surrounding areas in UK. Sappho for Equality (SFE) carried out this project in India with LBTQ identifying persons, while researchers from University of Brighton worked with persons identifying as LGBTQ.

We are presenting a report of the findings of Sappho for Equality only.

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Why this research

Background note

This research (India) looks at liveability of LBTQ (lesbian, bisexual women, FtoM transpersons and queer) persons. It asks two questions. What makes *life* bearable, worth living? And, what makes *certain lives* bearable, what standards make or ought to make life worth living for some 'abject' lives? Asking the question, what makes life liveable is asking what norms and conditions need to be fulfilled for life to become life or life that is worth living. What makes life liveable is understood in two senses: one that indicates the bare minimum condition of biological and physiological processes of breathing and living and two, the optimum conditions required by humans to maintain and reproduce life favorably. Talking of norms and conventions that can both facilitate and restrict lives, Judith Butler writes, "What is most important is to cease legislating for all lives what is livable only for some, and similarly, to refrain from proscribing for all lives what is unlivable for some" (2004, 8). Butler argues that liveability is intimately linked to stability of recognition through identity categories but she also writes that inflexibility of such naming categories impose constraints on life itself and make it unliveable. The criteria that are used to grant the status of human to one individual may deprive another individual that same status.

In other words, Butler's notion of livable/bearable life deals with figuring out ways to survive and persist, what she mentions as "to become possible" (ibid, 31). On the other hand, good life is what is available/granted only to people whose lives are already possible, recognizable and necessarily exclusive of those whose lives do not count (ibid, 205). For her, the question of a liveable life is crucial because to achieve a good life, one must first be recognized as having a life. This research (India) explores how LBTQ persons negotiate their lives in order to make them more liveable. It looks at the ways in which different geographical cultural spaces create and introduce liveabilities in the cracks and fissures of hegemonic gender-sexual practices and normative regimes.

This research (India) is part of a larger transnational research that posits these questions in respect to differential liveabilities in situations where legislative changes have been achieved (UK) and where it is still ongoing (India). The main research objective is to move beyond the analysis of exclusion/inclusion of LGBTQ communities in the UK and India and explore how, when and where lives become un/liveable for LGBTQ people. Academics and activists have increasingly stressed the fact that along with identifying

and documenting instances of exclusion it is also important to question selective inclusions, particularly those obtained through legislative reforms. The growing realization that legislative changes are inadequate without social transformation indicates the need to focus on "errors of commission" along with "errors of omission". The recent NALSA judgment prioritizing the rights of transgender persons over lesbian, gay and bisexual people and also certain trans identities (Hijra; MtoF) over others (FtoM) has once again shown that supposedly inclusive legislations can reiterate existing power relations creating new (stigmatized) others, and/or demand sameness/normalisations that undermine the differences that constitute vibrant societies (Duggan, 2002; Richardson, 2005; Richardson & Monro, 2012). Therefore, along with/moving beyond legislative securities, activists are calling for the need to create and consolidate individual and collective social systems that will enable and facilitate queer loves and life-worlds. The goal of this research is therefore to see how activist groups locally and across borders can create and deepen their demands for social justice, that while not abandoning juridical reforms will also go beyond them to claim the conditions for life that are worth living. In this regard, the research looks for what can make life more liveable beyond legal protections for those marginalised by their sexual and gender difference in India and the UK. The main beneficiaries of this research will be LGBTQ communities and those who work to improve the lives of marginalised people in India and the UK.

The above stated research project was conceived and conducted as a transnational one whereby India and the UK have been chosen due to their ongoing economic, social and cultural connections as well as legislative differences in LGBTQ equalities. The UK is seen as one of the 'most advanced' in LGBTQ legislative equalities, yet safety measures point to a lack of safety and abuse (Moran et al. 2004; Browne & Lim 2008) and hetero/homonormative progress trajectories are refuted by levels of mental health difficulties/suicidal distress that unevenly affect LGBTQ people (King et al. 2003; Johnson 2007). In India, Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) was read down in 2009 decriminalizing same-sex sexual acts, but reinstated in 2013. Violence continues against LGBTQ people. The primacy of the criminal paradigm in UK LGBTQ safety policy and the increasing involvement of the police in India, results in a reliance on the reporting of 'crime' that fails to recognize that liveable lives are not created through retribution or only the freedom from the fear of crime. "Instead of focusing on UK and India as static units of analysis between which LGBTQ lives are compared in terms of the dualisms of 'freedom' and 'unfreedom', this project is trying to understand and create linkages between various spheres of un/liveability with reference to LGBTQ persons, who are variously positioned across gender, sexuality, race, region, language and class, across specific sites in India and UK" (Browne, Banerjea, et al.). Progress in LGBTQ inclusions is typically seen as moving from the 'core' (UK/EU) to the 'periphery' (often former colonies). Disrupting Global North/Global South divides intervene into debates that hierarchize 'Western democracies' as spaces of inclusion, vilifying exotic 'others' as 'inherently homophobic' and synonymous

with 'backwardness' (Puar, 2007; Kulpa and Mizielinskia, 2011). The research is also transnational in that it aspires to build connections beyond the usual geographic borders and construct collective moments of working and researching together. This research situates itself in an arena where feminist participatory and collaborative research work between academics and activists transnationally has been rather limited. The highlight of such research is the process of learning for the research participants negotiating through various interstices of geographic, socio-cultural and language differences.

This research (India) explores what life means, what it requires and what it demands to make it worth living for lesbian, bisexual women, transgender (FtoM), and queer persons in a heteropatriarchal society. The effort is to move beyond binary thinking about social inclusion/exclusion, to address how liveable lives become possible. Liveable lives are lives that are more than just 'bearable' (Butler 2004). They transcend normative routes to happiness (Ahmed 2010). To date liveability has been addressed primarily in terms of availability of cultural infrastructure and economic opportunities (Florida 2004). This study aspires to understand how 'best to live' (Butler 2012), even as one is determined by existing geographies and politics of exclusion. What are the material and socio-cultural conditions of liveability? How do LBTQ persons interact with, navigate and transform everyday normative encounters to make their lives liveable? What is the role of the collective in this endeavor? These are some of the questions this research report raises and attempts to understand.

The research report aims not only to highlight the processes of violence and discrimination in the lives of LBTQ persons but also to envisage ways in which these conditions of social injustice may be transformed. To this end, our report will benefit community organizations, NGOs and policy makers who strive to bring positive changes in LBTQ lives. Equally important, this research (India) aims to sensitize the wider public and to facilitate their understanding of what makes life liveable for LBTQ people, so as to make a positive difference in everyday interactional situations.

The political legal context in India

2nd July 2009 was a momentous day in the Indian judiciary as well as for the LGBTQ movement. The historic Delhi High Court judgment reading down IPC Section 377 was marked by celebrations and jubilant 'coming outs', despite the fact that reports of oppressive behavior towards homosexual people continued to surface even after the decriminalization of homosexuality. It needs to be noted here that social stigma has been a recurrent theme in the lives of the LGBTQ community regardless of the "reading down" of the archaic Section 377. LGBTQ lives are irrevocably connected to incidents of violence and marginalization. The degree of violence varies from discrimination in family, educational institutions, workplaces to more overt acts of violence sometimes even culminating in lesbian/gay/trans suicides. News reports in the period following the decriminalization highlight the degree of aggression from the

mainstream faced by queer persons in India. There was hope that after the Delhi High Court verdict the lives of LGBTQ persons would be less discriminated although one realizes that even when laws change only a minuscule percentage of the population is affected by it. Different state agencies like the government, police, educational institutions, and cultural spaces have all individually and collectively disfavored queer persons by denying accessibility, marginalizing LGBTQ lives and perpetrating discrimination and violation of their rights. State apathy towards people of non-normative gender-sexuality finally came to the forefront when on 11.12.2013 the apex court of India invalidated a good verdict to re-criminalize homosexuality. The judgment of 11th December 2013 was criticized calling it a "step backward". Spanning across the day after the judgment, 12th December 2013 was a day for much retrospection where lawyers, activists, columnists, and persons from many other walks of life seem to try and reason the sudden shift in thought of the judiciary. One of the possible ways to understand LGBTQ presence in India is by not overlooking the political play of power. In 2009 when the Delhi High Court verdict was passed the Congress government was undecided about supporting the petitioner although later because of the impending loss in the Lok Sabha election Congress wanted to gain confidence with queer voters. By the time the repeal was heard in Supreme Court the government was highly confused about its stand - while the law minister was for the Delhi High Court verdict the health ministry opposed it - not only that, the Union Health Minister made some troubling statements about the LGBT community. 2014 was the year of a pivotal election that brought about a right-wing party to power - quashing all hopes of a parliamentary amendment of Section 377 though some of the political parties had tried to include LGBTQ issue in their manifesto. The December verdict was disheartening for many queer activists but the movement to repeal Section 377 was determined to fight back with its slogan, "No going back". After the questionable 11th December 2013 judgment Naz and others tried to move through a review petition, which was promptly dismissed, after which they filed a curative petition that was to be heard in 'open court' which is the last legal resort for the petitioners at this point. IPC 377 and the legalities related to it have come to a standstill and the LGBTQ movement is waiting for a response from the apex court.

One of the most perceivable shifts since 11th December 2013 has been the inclusion of transgender persons within the larger discourse of democracy. On 14 April 2014 the Supreme Court of India passed a verdict, more popularly known as the NALSA verdict that sought to recognize transgender people as socially backward and marginalized thereby requiring special protective measures and anti-discriminatory policies to ensure their well-being. The judgment also acknowledged the right of any person to self-identify as any gender of one's choice. However, the inclusion of transgender needs to be seen critically because it is only certain groups of persons who get to claim the benefits of this judgment, if there are any at all. The judgment also mentioned that the NALSA ruling would have no effect on the

recent re-criminalisation of IPC 377. This politics of recognition where apparently the Indian society seems to be ready to speak of gender re-orientation but is not comfortable to speak about sexual orientation has to be understood in the larger context of the hetero-patriarchal family being considered the cornerstone of nationhood and citizenship. While legalizing homosexuality (as embodied in Section 377) directly disrupts the procreative family apparatus, legalizing gender transition would help reset the balance of an oppositional binary gender norm that would give some, if not complete, stability to the conjugal family.

Why/how the understanding of liveability is useful for an organization like SFE.

In most parts of India, acknowledging the presence of persons outside of the gender-sexuality mainstream is still a taboo, which is why there are no laws protecting or even recognizing the presence of people from the LGBTQ communities. Following the recriminalization of LGBTQ people in India in 2013, activists are strategically working to fight the Supreme Court judgment at various levels. On February 2nd, 2016, the Supreme Court referred the curative petition to a five-judge bench, thus opening up the possibility of a legal hearing against decriminalization. We hope that this research report will also become an important tool for activists to advocate for the decriminalization of LGBTQ people.

Sappho as an organization was formed in 1999 and then Sappho for Equality was registered in 2003 as a lesbian, bisexual and trans (FtoM) rights based activist forum. Sappho for Equality is the only registered organization in Eastern India that works for the rights and social justice of lesbian, bisexual women and transmen (female to male transpersons). It works to create bridges between the queer and non-queer populations in our society and positions gender-sexuality within existing development discourses.

Sappho for Equality works throughout the year with a three pronged approach:

I) **Inbound or community empowerment**: it provides peer counseling and mental health counselling services to LGBTQ individuals and families; it works towards self-empowerment of community members through workshops, meetings, study circles and group discussions

ii) **Outbound or addressing general civil society and networking with other groups/organizations**: the activist forum interacts with student population and researchers; holds academic seminars and conferences, organizes annual international LGBT film and video festivals and fosters effective collaboration and dialogue with different social movements with the aim to usher in a discrimination-free society.

iii) **State-bound or advocacy/lobby with the State**: the organization works intensely with different state institutions like the police, doctors and lawyers to create awareness about the community and

advocate for their rights and services. Two of its active members are part of the State Transgender Development Board and thereby work in close contact with the state apparatus.

Sappho for Equality has been researching and documenting different aspects of queer lives to better understand structures of discrimination and exploitation that constitute and define norms of exclusion and inclusion from and into social-political-economic processes. Based on such research findings, Sappho for Equality has been pro-actively working towards creating conditions of socially transformative politics that would affect both individual and collective lives. These efforts at social transformation bear all the more significance in the light of the fact that Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code does not directly affect lesbian lives. The letter of the law addresses only carnal intercourse against the order of nature where penile penetration is a necessary condition to constitute the offence and for all practical purposes indicates sodomy. On the one hand, this judicial invisibility offers some level of protection to lesbian and bisexual women; on the other hand, lesbianism remains a blind spot in the heteropatriarchal state machinery, which refuses to acknowledge the fact that women *do* love women and cohabit with them. Given this context, the thrust of the organization's advocacy and activism has been geared towards breaking socio-cultural and emotional-intellectual barriers and building spaces for difference and celebration. While legal reform has been an important pillar of the LGBTQ struggle for equality and non-discrimination, Sappho for Equality has taken its struggle beyond the juridical and statist discourse to engage the larger society of thinking-feeling compatriots in its endeavor to bring social transformation. Given that the scope of law as an agent of emancipation is limited and given that queer lives are lived through multifarious forms of violation and violence, there is a need to envisage a queer feminist politics that situates itself in this space of heterogeneity and multiple possibilities.

Academics and activists have long pointed out the vital link between marginality, invisibility and silence. Queer lives being positioned at the margins have long been invisibilized through a politics of silence that has almost made their pain and suffering look non-existent, trivial at best. As a result "breaking the silence" has been one of the major political strategies. This "breaking the silence" involves the process of identification and articulation of marginalization and invisibilization, albeit in a language that can be communicated. While admitting that there are some silences, some sufferings that cannot be articulated in language, and can only be grasped at the perceptual level, it is nevertheless important to be able to find a language of resistance that can then become a possible path to address such hitherto unacknowledged pain and seek justice thereof. The thrust of the group's activism has from the onset been both envisaging the possibility of a liveable life for lesbian, bisexual and transgender women and advocating for its institutional support and sureties. As Butler puts it so aptly, "The question of life is a political one, although perhaps not exclusively political" (2004, 225). What makes lives liveable is a question that has

animated much of the organization's politics. As Butler argues, the crux of international gay lesbian politics is constantly geared towards remaking realities, reconstituting the human and "brokering of the question, what is and is not liveable?' (ibid, 22).

Working towards this agenda and using feminist qualitative research methodology, Sappho for Equality has documented instances of rights violation and violence faced by LBT persons. On the other hand, the interlinkages between research and advocacy are something that has emerged from the kind of work done by the organization in the last 16 years of its journey. Research has provided the much required groundwork to build our conversations, dialogues and engagements with state and non-state actors in order to create disruptive fault lines in the hegemonic structures. As an organization working for the rights of LBTQ persons, Sappho for Equality exclusively focused on understanding liveability for LBTQ persons in Kolkata and select districts in West Bengal.[1] Hence the project workshops and in-depth interviews were carried out with LBTQ persons. Given the different focuses, in the UK, the research team focused on LGBTQ persons. However, while doing the media analysis in India, the research team focused on looking at the larger juridico-political context for LGBTQ persons as a whole. The website surveys were done together for India and the UK and hence focused on LGBTQ persons in India and the UK. This research report is one more step toward this collective endeavour.

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[1] Given the different (though sometimes overlapping) histories of discrimination and violence of PAGFB and PAGMB persons, Sappho for Equality works specifically with LBTQ persons.

METHODOLOGY

Methodology and methods used

The research was conducted through transnational participatory action research. The transnational research group was a mix of academics and activists coming from a range of disciplinary and practice backgrounds. The medium of communication and collaboration was primarily the Internet. The research team in India regularly held face-to-face meetings as well. The research team from India including Debalina, an independent filmmaker, visited Brighton twice during the course of the research. The research team in India was directly responsible for gathering the material for this report (as has the team in Brighton for the UK part); nevertheless there have been regular Skype conversations between the teams on every aspect and at every level of the research. Some of these conversations focused on the limitations and possibilities of thinking and working transnationally. Working across geographic and cultural differences the teams came to share not just research objectives and methodologies, but also anxieties of net connectivity, linguistic translatability, notions of liveability as well as excitements of new insights, emotional connectedness and unsettling conversations. "Researching un/liveability in and across places, building strategic connections between academics and activists across geographical borders with an aim to facilitate LGBTQ struggles is crucial to our politics of transnational feminist LGBTQ methodologies" (Browne, Banerjea, et al.). Active participation and collaboration between activists and academics across two countries and cultures at every stage of the research sought to "contest the ways that some nations are seen as simplistically moving 'backwards' in terms of sexual and gender equalities based on ideals of LGBTQ human rights, and therefore need to learn from others who are moving 'forward'" (Browne, Banerjea, et al.).

For the research in India, the geographical area selected was Kolkata and its suburbs. Kolkata being the capital of West Bengal is a densely populated metropolitan area and the principal educational, commercial and cultural center of the whole of eastern India. Some of the participants were direct members of Sappho for Equality and some were contacted through friends and acquaintances. The team also traveled to Siliguri, a district town in North Bengal to conduct a project workshop with members of an organization located there.

The demographic outline of the participants in terms of their overall sexual orientation, gender identity, geographical location, profession and age are as follows:

Sexuality

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Lesbian	50%
Homosexual	3.75%
Bisexual	2.50%
Queer	25%
Heterosexual	3.75%
Other	25%

Sexuality
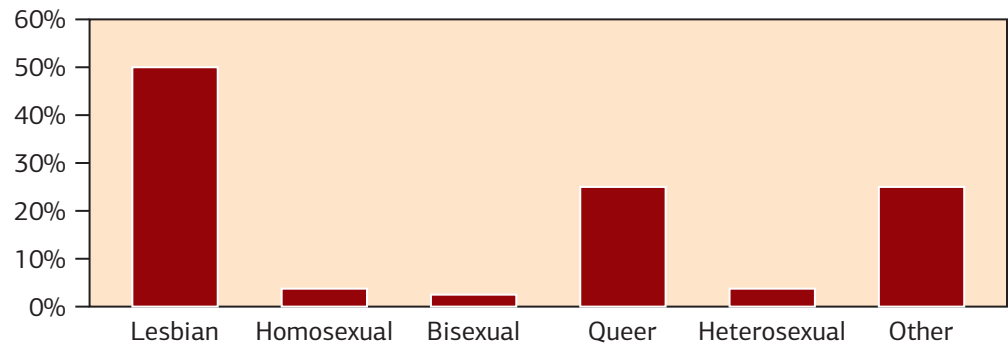
We have a majority of participants identifying as lesbian, and interestingly homosexual is also featuring as an identity when all the participants from Kolkata and around are PAGFBs (persons assigned gender female at birth). The term 'lesbian' here is emerging as more than a practice based identity, and therefore a woman desiring another woman calls herself 'homosexual' and not 'lesbian'. 'Heterosexual' is an identity used by 'transmen' who understand themselves as 'male' desiring a 'female' and therefore see themselves as heterosexual. The 'other' category consists of various expressions of non-conforming sexualities, including expressions like 'in-continuum'.

Gender

|	
Female	75%
Transman	5%
Androgynous	3.75%
Male	2.50%
Gender fluid	3.75%
Other	7.50%

Gender
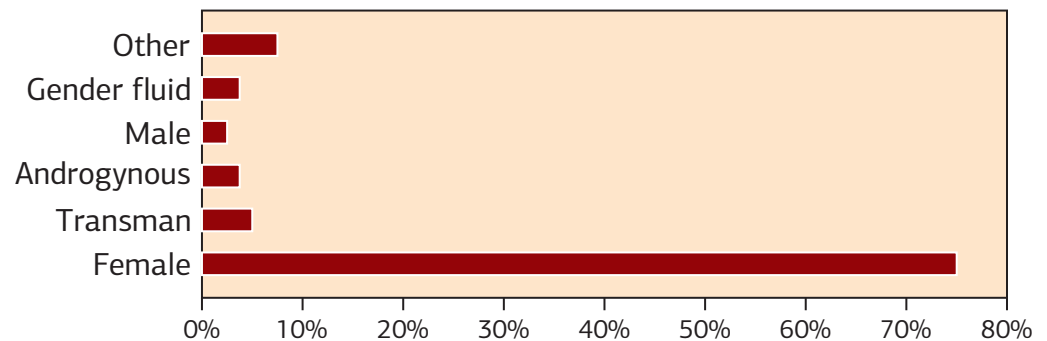
As explained before, in Kolkata and its surroundings, the research was done with only PAGFBs. Therefore 75% of the participants identified as female. But we also have transmen, gender fluid and PAGFBs identifying as 'man'. Here too, the 'other' category consists of various expressions that do not want to conform to any category.

Location

Metro	59%
Metro suburb	16%
Suburban town	16%
Rural	2.50%
Other	7.50%

Location

- Metro
- Metro suburb
- Suburban town
- Rural
- Other
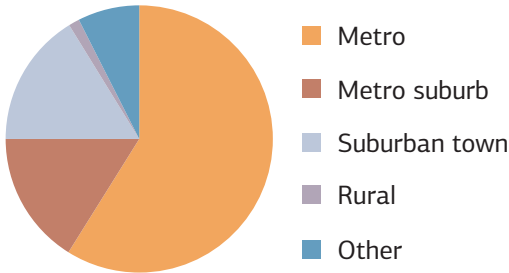
Geographical location is a very important component of this research as we needed to understand liveabilities in terms of areas, spaces, locations and places. Just as working with participants from India and UK are necessary, it is necessary to work with participants from the metropolis and the suburb, from villages and townships. Their responses to spaces and patterns of migration (if any), is important to note.

Profession

Student	30%
Social work/service	3.75%
Social Activist	7.50%
NGO worker	6.25%
Self employed/ small business	6.25%
Other	45%

Profession
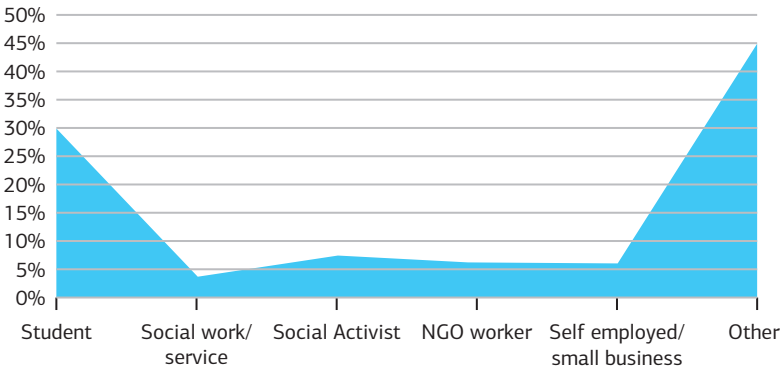
Age

18-24 years	20%
25-34 years	50%
35-44 years	11.25%
45-54 years	13.75%
55+ years	2.50%
Unknown	2.50%

Age

- 18-24 years
- 25-34 years
- 35-44 years
- 45-54 years
- 55+ years
- Unknown
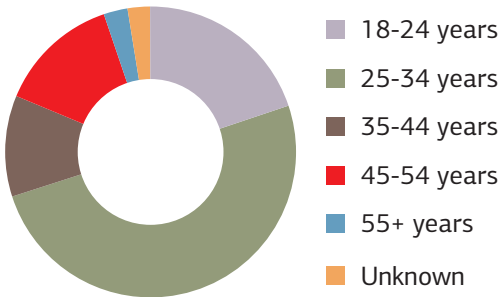
Profession and age are two other identity markers that the team has used to bring heterogeneity in the research. Profession indicates a socio-economic-cultural positioning and age points at a particular life positioning, which is important to place the participants in their varied contexts.

The different methodological tools used in the research are as follows:

Media report analysis

Media report analysis formed the background of the research in India. In order to understand legislative processes and how laws (or the absence of it) moulded queer lives in India, we tracked the news reports pertaining to LGBT issues focusing on the ones which have a socio-legal aspect. *Times of India, The Telegraph, Hindustan Times, Anandabazar Patrika, Ekdin, Eisamay, The Indian Express, The Hindu* are the newspapers that were closely examined and analysed but only on LGBT reporting. Themes were selected after going through the reports/articles and these were later categorised. A three-four lines synopsis for each of the reports/articles shortlisted in the themes was also prepared.

The three main judgments from the Delhi High Court 2009, Supreme Court 2013, and the NALSA verdict, 2014 were analysed. Some websites dedicated to IPC 377 were also studied in details. The team's Research Assistant looked at a website named, Orinam.net which is an exhaustive collection of articles, news reports, photographs, infographics, stories and links to other websites that can help anybody understand the state of Indian judiciary with regards to IPC 377. Orinam has resources open to all and an interesting list of atrocities in relation to 377 came up in their website. With the help of some recent news stories on judgments a list of the recent cases of 377 were prepared. From Orinam various other external links listed in the website were followed. A search was conducted on Google with keywords like "LGBT, Oppression, India, Legal etc." for which the first hit was always the LGBT Wikipedia page. The Wikipedia was then used to access the bibliography of the article and other related links. Some of the links were informative and had reports about the LGBT community. Along with the judgment analysis the reports were also analysed to see the socio-legal position of LGBT community.

In-depth interviews (IDIs)

Twenty-six participants were selected and their names and contacts were listed out. All of these participants were persons assigned gender female at birth (PAGFB) but self-identifying through various gender expressions and behaviors. The participants also expressed their sexual subjectivities across a wide spectrum of choices, preferences, orientations and behaviors.

A semi-structured questionnaire was followed for the interviews/conversations where each participant was asked a few broad open-ended questions and then given the opportunity to enter into a free-flowing

conversation. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and translated for further interpretation and analysis.

The research team began this process by listing possible participants for IDIs where two major objectives were: a) to get people from different geographical locations, urban, peri-urban and rural and b) to get people who are part of LBTQ groups/organizations/collectives as well as people who are not involved in any form of formal/informal groups or collectives. The team wanted to understand how far and how much the idea of liveabilities is connected to location-culture and what does space/place contribute to this understanding. From past experiences of working with LBTQ individuals, the team, comprised of Sappho for Equality members, knew that a certain kind of political understanding of life in general and living in particular is common in persons engaged in LBTQ organizing, whether formal or informal. Given India's socio-legal-cultural scenario, voices of politically motivated and active members of LBTQ persons are generally heard because people who are not part of LBTQ collectives do not generally come out to talk of themselves as it involves being identified. The team wanted to bring in such voices as well and communicated with such persons through common friends and acquaintances assuring them of confidentiality as far as possible. The research team members also participated in these interviews, where members interviewed each other.

The IDIs were taken at various places, at Sappho for Equality's resource centre, Chetana, which is a safe space visited by LBTQ members and those not LBTQ. In certain cases homes of participants or researchers, friendly neighbourhood coffee shops or open air spaces were also used as venues. Interviews were conducted keeping anonymity, confidentiality and comfort of the participant at the centre.

After every interview researchers offered to answer any question that participants may have regarding the project or the researcher herself, thereby trying to address the inherent 'interviewer-interviewee' hierarchy as far as possible. The interviews were kept free flowing as much as possible, more discussion-based than interrogative to allow the participant as well the interviewer talk and explore possibilities to define and/or understand the concept of liveability together.

After the process of collecting IDI's was completed, all participants were asked to choose pseudonyms. Some of the participants wanted their original names, some chose different names, while some asked the team to choose names for them.

Project workshops

The project workshops also followed similar rationale applicable for the IDI's. The research team involved members of two organizations/collectives in project workshops; one is Sappho for Equality, Kolkata and the other is *Subarnalata* (LBT arm of Northern Black Rose Society, a community based organization

working for gay, lesbian, trans and queer rights), Siliguri. Individual members of the LBTQ community, mostly from the suburban and rural areas around Kolkata were also involved to make the workshops heterogeneous and eclectic in nature.

The Siliguri workshop was conducted at Siliguri as the LGBT organization involved in the process provided space and other infrastructural support. The other four workshops were conducted at Kolkata as the participants from the districts were not feeling comfortable to take part in such an organizing near their homes. This also provided a chance for the research team to explore interactions between LBTQ individuals from urban, peri-urban and rural locations. Apart from Kolkata and Siliguri, we got participants from Howrah, North & South 24 Parganas and Hoogly Districts.

The research team has used a bouquet of creative tools for these workshops. On one hand there were focus group discussions, film screening & discussion, group work presentation, survey forms, which are more direct and language-based and on the other hand there were timeline/matrix, collage making & peer-reviewing, which are more evocative and feeling/expression-based. Since the concept of liveability by itself is complex and less discussed therefore, it needed more than one kind of methodological tool/device to engage with groups so heterogeneous in terms of socio-economic-cultural-locational background, with different learning/responding abilities.

Street theatre – 'I Script My Script'

The aim of the street theatre was to address the core reasons that mark spaces as uncomfortable/unsafe or safe/comfortable and how to create liveability spots within the existing spaces. The idea was to use street theatre to change perceptions of unsafe/uncomfortable places. Although it was well known that the impact of this process will be short lived, it is hoped that LGBTQ people will begin to see the possibilities of malleability of a space – the process of negotiating spaces, situations and life in order to be able to enhance one's own and others' liveability.

Audience interactions at the end of the performance as well as the process of occupying a public space for some time through street theatre, to talk of queer lives and their liveabilities indicated the ways in which difference is encountered between LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ people. The practice further created spaces that enabled processes of awareness, understanding and negotiating social-cultural barriers to augment liveability of queer lives.

The workshops were conducted at both Kolkata and Brighton, where LBTQ and LGBTQ identifying persons participated in the process. A short film documenting the process and the performances was also created as part of the findings of this research.

Website Surveys and Website/App

One of the methods used in the project was anonymous collection of data via a website survey online. The Liveable Lives website page was created with help of Vivify, a company that makes programming and products online including websites and other applications. The entire task of creating the website was done by the team members of Vivify along with inputs from the Liveable Lives team members. From the initial coding to the ultimate launch of the website saw a group of IT experts and social activists coming together to create a platform that was supposed to become a digital space for queer people from across India and UK.

The initial screening process included asking the age of the participant and the area of belonging, i.e. if the participants were over eighteen years of age, and if the participants resided either in the UK or in India. In case the participants answer in negative for either or both questions they cannot access the rest of the website. After preliminary conversations the team decided to keep five different sets of questions gradually increasing in complexity for people who took part. The website also flaunted a discussion-board where anyone can choose to leave a message or a picture or both to be discussed. Along with that the participants can also leave anonymous comments under each discussion thread if desired. There was also a section in the website where Nick McGlynn, Research Associate from University of Brighton, had filed and uploaded all the new events that were happening under the Liveable Lives banner.

The main objective of opening the website was to reimagine a digital space for people who live generally queer lives. It was also supposed to be a space for communication between LGBTQ community people across both India and the UK. The participants' identities, names or any other identity markers are not to be revealed during or after the completion of the project, keeping in mind the attempt to make this website an important space for conversations within LGBTQ persons of the two countries. As of December 2015 the website has:

- 141 unique users signed up
- 28 photo experiences
- 49 discussion topics

There are 5 surveys that have collected data over the period of the project, and the questions asked are: -

- What makes your life liveable? (55 respondents)
  i. As an LGBTQ person what makes your life unliveable?

ii. As an LGBTQ person what makes your life liveable?

- Place and time (26 respondents)

    i. Can you think of a place that makes you feel that as an LGBTQ person, your life is or could be liveable there?

    ii. If yes, would you mind telling us about this place? We would like to hear.

    iii. As an LGBTQ person, are there specific places where your life is not liveable?

    iv. If yes, would you mind telling us about this place or these places? We would like to hear.

    v. As an LGBTQ person, is what makes your life liveable at this point different from other times in your life?

    vi. Can you please explain? We would like to hear.

- People (12 respondents)

    i. Can you think of one or more person/people who make you feel that your life is liveable?

    ii. If yes, would you mind telling us about any of these people, and why they make your life liveable? We would like to hear.

    iii. Can you think of one or more person/people who make you feel that your life is not liveable?

    iv. If yes, would you mind sharing with us about any of these people, and why they make your life not liveable? We would like to hear.

    v. Does acceptance or lack of acceptance from (a) people who matter to you and (b) other people in society affect your experience and understanding of liveability?

    vi. Can you please explain why or why not? We would like to hear.

- Significant relationships (9 respondents)

    i. Do you need significant relationships, including those highlighted above, to make your life liveable?

    ii. Can you please explain your answer? We would like to hear.

    iii. Do you have one or more fulfilling significant relationship/s?

    iv. If you answered yes to the above question, can you please explain why you consider the relationship/s fulfilling? If you answered no to the above question, can you please explain what is an ideal significant relationship for you? We would like to hear.

    v. Do you have or need any specific resources/support to keep your significant relationship/s ongoing?

vi. Can you please explain your answer? We would like to hear.

- Futures (13 respondents)

i. We live in the present, but many a times we also think about our future. Do you think about your future?

ii. If you answered yes, can you please share with us your thoughts about your future? If you answered no, can you please explain why not? We would like to hear.

iii. Which of the following are important to make your future liveable? We have attempted to make a list. Please mark whichever is applicable:

Financial solvency, Societal acceptance, Legal rights/decriminalization, Living on your own terms, Freedom, Fulfilling romantic-erotic relationships, Visibility, Self-expression, Invisibility, Anonymity, Being 'normal', Self-acceptance, Age, Coming out, Education, Finding people who are like you, Food, Health, LGBT scene or community, Love, Marriage, Media support, Nature, Open environment, Friends, Children, Relationships, Partners, People who understand you, Religion, Safety, Work, Other.

Each of these surveys can be taken in English, Hindi or Bengali. As of December 2015, the Liveable Lives website has received 447 unique individual interactions, including sign-ups, discussion board posts, photo/experience posts and survey submissions.

The response from the discussion board of the website/App has generated some extremely interesting discussions around queer liveabilities; liveability as something to 'come back to', liveability as something 'ordinary', building alliances that enhances our liveabilities, the Northern Ireland Bill on anti-gay discrimination, the recent group-suicide of six young girls in Jamboni, a village in West Bengal, traveling queer and the issues around it, Transgender Development Board in West Bengal and how that enhances liveability of the community as a whole and for individuals, an earnest plea to Facebook and USA to stop pinkwashing queer lives in India, polyamory and liveability, Trans Day of Remembrance, and some strong poetry from participants.

Looking through the discussion board of Liveable Lives (https://liveablelives.org/main/discussion) website/app gives an idea of a wide range of liveabilities across cultures, time, space, and location. The exchanges between members of the website are critical of the community as well as attempts to create an intersectional idea about identities.

This research report does not include an analysis of the website material. The report is based on analysis of India-based media reports and in-depth interviews, and project workshops conducted here only. The

website is still open at the time of writing this report. Further, given the scale of the project, the intention is to have different forms of outcome and dissemination during the project period with different aspects of the material, of which this report produced by Sappho for Equality is a part.

Working with data

Once the data obtained from the project workshops and in-depth interviews was transcribed, translated and collated, the team prepared a set of codes to further help the work of analysis. Two levels of coding were decided in the initial stage.

The first level Codes:

1. Definitions of liveability (how are people defining it, living vs. surviving, etc.)
2. How/where/when/who/what makes life liveable (sorted into past, present, future)
3. How/where/when/who/what makes life unliveable (sorted into past, present, future) Note: personal and/or experiential
4. How might life be made liveable or more liveable? Note: collective and political, may include experiential
5. Code X (anything that is not included in the above 4 codes)

The second level analytic questions:

I. a. What does liveability mean? Difference, relation between living and surviving.
   b. Relationship between 'ordinariness' (mainstreaming, normalisation, normativity, being in place, unremarkable, invisible) and liveabilities?

II. a. How are lives made liveable or not liveable?
    b. How can lives be made more liveable?
    c. How are space and place important for liveability?
    d. How do multiple marginalisations and intersectionality relate to liveable lives?

III. a. What can foster good relations between LGBTQ and straight cis people?
     b. How can LGBTQ people feel more safe?
     c. What are perceptions of rights?
     d. How are initiatives to create rights experienced?
     e. How are rights initiatives used?

IV. Is liveability useful as a concept?

    a. For academics?

    b. For activists?

    c. For individuals?

V. What factors can be included in a measure of liveability?

As the research progressed we realized that it became difficult to talk of liveability as a measurable marker. What do we really understand by the term "liveability" and can there be anything "definitive" about it at all is a question that kept coming up to the research team at various stages of the research: during interviews and workshops, before going into the coding process and while trying to collate and analyse the data. During the initial coding process the research team used a range of meanings pertaining to liveabilities in order to categorise the data as effectively as possible. The discussions around liveability with participants from both IDIs and project workshops brought to light the unique particularity of this concept and the impossibility of fixing it as a universal experience. Though all participants in some way belong to the same community of LBTQ persons, their ideas of liveability are quite different from each other. Even when terms like 'wellness', 'liveliness', 'worthy life', 'surviving-living' are brought into the matrix of liveability, the research team was left with so many versions of life that are difficult to contain in single measurable structure. Therefore 'liveability' had to be altered into 'liveablities' to provide space to the particular experiences of unique lives that this project worked with. So we decided to move beyond the concept of measurability to understand liveability in its plurality.

Members of the research team also discussed how the project's name *Liveable Lives* hinted that comfort and peace are the crux of a "good life". Whereas in practice liveabilities cannot just incorporate all the happy things that have been a part of your life or all the good things you desire for your future. Moving ahead from this idea we grappled with how exactly to file the rich data into codes that are rather vast. While some respondents associated 'liveability' with staying well/happy/positive and "well-being" and a "cushioned" existence emerged as necessary to make one's life more liveable, it was becoming difficult to simply put all the "good"/ "positive" feeling data into the codes that directly asked the question, "what makes your life liveable" or "define liveability". As respondents shared during interviews and surveys, on the one hand, all "good" things or things that keep one "well" may not always be a part of "liveability"; on the other, all "unwell/bad" things does in some instances contribute to one's liveability.

As the research took off, the team became aware that the idea of liveability is mostly alien to the participants of India. The translation of this word is difficult and the interviewers had to use different

explanations and notions as well as change the translation over the course of the project. A number of symbolic words and phrases were used to contextualize the meaning of liveability: *jeeboner mato jeebo*n (life worth living), *benche thaka* (living), *bhalo thaka* (staying well), along with *tinke thaka* (surviving), *bhalo na thaka/kharap thaka* (staying unwell). Sometimes participants grappled with the meanings and contexts suggested by the interviewers adding to them their own interpretations and inputs. This brought to the research richness in terms of diverse and nuanced understanding of liveability.

Challenges and possibilities

The here and now of engaging with lives and liveabilities locally often prevents one from connecting transnationally. The physical meeting and interaction in person seemed to be an important component for some members of the team who felt in cognitive sync with the transnational work and the people involved there in a different time and space with a different set of liveabilities but felt constrained to connect emotionally. It appeared that sharing physical space is important to develop relationships between members of the research team and that is a challenge in transnational research work. As Sumita put it, "I have to see, feel, touch people in front of me". However, the common endeavour to research liveabilites brought the team closer intellectually working through physical distance.

The adoption of different methodologies for different geographical locations depending on feasibility was a challenge initially. The efforts given to adapt suitable methods of research transnationally instead of one methodology trying to colonize the other was encouraging and illustrated the fact that "parallel realities aren't really comparable, not just in terms of our research but also in terms of the research team and the operation of the research itself" (Browne, Banerjea, et al.). The transnational transactions across time and across space have proved to be a complex negotiation in terms of grappling with the translatability of methods and concepts introduced in the course of the research. For instance, people in India responded well to in-depth interviews but were a little wary of the online survey method on the website constructed for this purpose.

A different kind of challenge was in terms of time scales and funder's deadlines that often prevented each to reflect, share or celebrate the other's experiences of working transnationally.

In this study we have talked with and written about 'our own'. Irrespective of whether we explicitly claim a LBTQ identity or not, we are in varying degrees personally and politically involved with our participants, who are persons of similar 'sex' and 'gender' (with an awareness that these two are not watertight categories) as acquaintances, friends, lovers, co-warriors, partners and political allies. In positivist social scientific terms, we are therefore both 'subjects' and 'objects' of our own research. Such a stance is bound to create anxieties stemming from the need for distance and objectivity in positivist research. While a

discussion about the manifold potentials of researching the familiar and a 'community' that one is part of – both personally and politically - is beyond the scope of this report, yet we underscore one point of departure that is central to our study. Researching one's own allows us to create knowledge with our acquaintances, friends, lovers, co-warriors, partners and political allies. This has not been easy, requiring delicate negotiations with our own emotional selves and our participants, all the while guided by our task to maintain rigor in the study. We claim this uneasiness as part of our methodological tool, for we are not tied to a romantic conception of community, even when we study our own. The familiar is challenging and disruptive forcing us to look into our personal and collective/organizational comfort zones and ideas about what the liveable is and could be. Hence we hope that researching our own helps us to continue to craft our political visions and objectives more critically and strategically.

Visual data

Visual data was generated in the form of collages from all five project workshops. The participants were asked to create collages around their idea of a liveable life and everyone was asked to review each other's expressions and comment on those using emotion-coded coloured stickers.

The process was complex and intensely creative and the data thus generated is speaking in a very subtle tongue. The research team felt that there are chances of getting 'lost in translation/interpretation' with this particular set of highly layered, often very personal outcome. Therefore the team unanimously decided not to analyse this section, rather reproduce the collages as individuals created them and leave it for the readers of this report to interpret or just marvel at the complex creativity.

Some of the collages have used in this report to give an idea of how intricate and rich expressions of liveabilities can be.

Uniqueness of this research

Liveability is an uncommon topic of research for NGOs as typically NGO research focuses upon rights and entitlements and the absence of those for select groups of people. This is therefore an unique attempt and when coupled with queer lives, it becomes even more fascinating. The uniqueness of 'liveability' as a concept lies in its flexibility and particularistic approach, much like gender-sexuality and identities, expressions and practices related to it. At the same time gender-sexual identities, expressions and practices are tangible and can be theorized, and so the research team was asking a similar question – is liveability tangible, can it be theorized when applied to lives of 'queer people' living in two almost diametrically opposite socio-legal-cultural locations?

The uniqueness of this research is also about not doing a comparative study between two nations, which

would have been too obvious. Rather the project tried to see liveability in its varied forms, questioning the obviously liveable status of the UK queer with all legal rights in place and the criminal status of the Indian queer. It brought out a very complex, very nuanced understanding of liveability beyond the obvious demarcation of 'haves' and 'have nots'.

Ordinariness is a concept, which this research tried to connect with liveability, something that is usually not associated with queer lives. Queer, in this country is by definition not ordinary. The research tried to understand ordinary as experienced and expressed by LBTQ persons, their need to live ordinary lives, their strategies to blend into the ordinary, how ordinary enhances their liveability, or reduces it. The temporality of the concept of ordinary, the spatial/locational importance, what is ordinary today was so much extraordinary yesterday or what is ordinary at UK is so much extraordinary in India, like queer marriage, lesbian mothers and social security numbers.

This project explored liveable lives, not in terms of rights alone, not just how legal rights and social recognition would make life liveable as an LBTQ person and how violence and abuse and lack of rights make life unliveable. In fact, all the Indian respondents in this project talked about social acceptance and the lack of it and the need to have legal rights. But lives were made worthy, liveable, not just bearable, through a host of other things like partners, friends, financial independence, and most importantly to be able to live on one's own terms, which is often not associated with IPC 377 or other legal rights. To be able to explore liveability of a LBTQ person living in India in 2015 beyond decriminalization and violence is a unique approach.

The project began with no expectations; no idea of what liveability would look like at the end. It did not try in any way to arrive at a list of acceptable liveability markers, which in turn would prompt SFE to launch intervention programmes. It rather tried to bring out the conflicts in understandings; liveable lives is a conflicting idea, sometimes contradictory, because sometimes liveability rests with actually unliveable living conditions, in pain, discomfort, insecurity and abandonment by loved ones. Liveability also resides within oblivion, anonymity, secrecy, blending in as someone else. The project provided space for these conflicts and contradictions and tried to approach liveability from a pluralistic approach, which is also quite unique.

FROM LIVEABILITY TO LIVEABILITIES: THEMES AND ISSUES

From Liveability to Liveabilities: Themes and Issues

Our attempt in this chapter is to run the concept of liveability through the various themes that emerged during our conversations in the in-depth interviews and in the project workshops. We did not define liveability as a set of fixed factors and then placed it in terms that we understood to the participants. Rather, we attempted to open up the concept and then arrive at an understanding based on what participants shared with us. The process of isolating the themes was two-fold, one of which happened before the interviews and the project workshops and one after. Before we began the interviews and project workshops, we had a discussion amongst us, as to what kind of questions may elicit an understanding of liveability, when we are approaching the concept as an open-ended one. After all, not all participants would identify with the term liveability – even in its translated state – and then even if they did we may not have diverse and rich answers. So we collectively decided to ask questions around one's life and living, as liveability and survival is tied to life and living after all. Hence we asked questions about aspects of one's life and living, in addition to directly asking how they would understand liveability and survival. This yielded diverse conversations, emerging from a person's unique history and context. From these conversations we then identified the following themes that ran across the participants. As with any conversation conducted during a specific time and place, our conversations with our participants are also time and place specific, indicating what is significant (or not) about the following themes is particular and liable to change. So, we do not present thematic universals about liveability in the following pages, but 'partial truths' that help us open up the concept of liveability and understand what it means to live and survive as a LBTQ identified person in Kolkata and select suburban towns in West Bengal. The following themes help the particularities to appear in relation to the concept of liveability.

BODY/IDENTITY

Identity serves to give meaning and purpose to oneself and marks out difference from other identities. The ability to identify and understand the self on certain terms not only creates a recognizable inner identity but also brings forth the self to the outside world, in relation to other selves. Identities are not easy to claim and live on. The inability to be recognized for what one is, can cause depleted self-esteem, and sense of social unproductivity. In fact deliberate mis-recognition and non-recognition are political

ploys to reify the power held by the dominant over non-dominant modes of life. In this way certain life-forms are banished to the realm of the unacknowledged, pathological or the non-existent. Identities are formed around different axes – sex, color of skin, religion, sexuality, regional specificity, to mention just a few. Identities also produce a community bonding when individuals with similar specificities come together to mark and consolidate a certain identity. Identities can also become the premise of a political mobilization.

People perceive themselves not just in their gender-sexual identifications but also more holistically through their other social positionings. We found liveability quotient to vary according to where one is placed on the identity axis. As one participant from project workshop 5 said, "I would say social recognition is linked to my wellness as a queer identified woman, although my overall wellness is not linked necessarily to my social recognition". A participant from project workshop 1 had this to say about intersectionalities: "Though I am made up of many subjectivities, one of my identities that is my queer self intersects and affects my other identities". Again as another participant from the same workshop shared, her gender identity as a woman did not invite any ostracization but the fact that she is a lesbian undermines her wellbeing because society and family treats her with contempt. Another participant from project workshop 1 says, "Firstly I want to stay well with my identity as a human, and then I will love my identity as a lesbian".

The question of wanting an identity to understand and define oneself came up time and again in conversations. Respondents have variously described themselves, sometimes in relation to some inner core that was imagined to propel selves, sometimes in relation to some external agent, mostly an intimate other that seemed to mirror the self. Identities not only come up as a marker of one's sexuality, but also to signify the breaking of a norm. One respondent from project workshop 3 without elaborating any further shared that she saw a gap between the identity as human being and as a lesbian. Needless to mention each of these selves was lived as contingent and evolving. A participant in project workshop 3 described herself as an "ordinary person". In the course of the discussion she shared that she felt uncomfortable to identify as a woman and then went on to say that as a woman she felt attracted to other women. This fact raised the question of whether her discomfort to identify as woman was related to her sexual orientation.

The need for acceptance and recognition around one's identity may vary according to the people around. As Preet explains:

> Degrees of freedom you expect from your parents, friends, colleagues, acquaintances, elders, juniors...I try to find that, my acceptability...I transform according to that...wear a mask or be

myself... when I know people who are near and dear to me, and who would acknowledge my rights...people I can share my identity with...my humanity, lifestyle...the way I live...and there are people with whom I have to be very formal although I have no problem with that. I am not bothered by what they think of me. If they think I am straight, I don't really care. And there are people who judge me...who call me lesbian, wonder if I am male or female...I am no longer bothered by their actions.

Body and sexual identity

The body is an important pillar of one's identity. The question of puberty and adolescence is a significant marker in one's identification. Preet feels angry and blames his parents and curses his birth for the incompleteness he feels in a female body. He feels humiliated when people including his parents knowingly pointed out his identity as a woman. However, he also mentions that the incompleteness is mental. Preet knew from the beginning that he was different but just how different he had no idea till he came in touch with different identity terms. He felt conflicted when he searched different sources and found out he was a lesbian; however, he realized he loved women like a man unlike other lesbians. Finding an identity was important to him because his real life existence was physically stunting him. He abhorred his body, tried mutilating certain parts to prevent them from growing and barely existed: "I was being murdered again and again, but I could not die. I was an anomaly".

Preet came to know about terms like transgender and butch from his girlfriend and that changed his perspective. Before that he had faced internalized transphobia from his father who looked down upon the *hizra* community. The butch identity was at first offered to him as a way to understand himself but that still referred to a woman and Preet did not feel comfortable till he came to know about transgender. He negotiated with his girlfriend not to treat him as a woman, not to touch him as a woman and shared his insecurities with her to help their relationship. With her help he came to terms with the identity of transgender that did not necessarily signify the *hizra* and realized that his genitalia did not define him. For Preet, it is important to get rid of his physical limitations: "I know I am a man, I just need to get rid of my physical limitations". Though he is determined to go for gender transition he also critiques it somewhat when he reflects that there is a huge difference between being born with something and being 'artificially' implanted with its substitute.

Preet has to constantly negotiate and fight with his family members to hold on to his existential self and be respected for what he is. The obsession on their part with normalization is so strong that even though Preet had taken his mother to a doctor who had explained everything to her, she had forgotten all of it soon enough. Just a few days preceding the interview he was once again advised by his parents (who were advised in turn by well wishers) to visit a famous gynaecologist who could turn him into a girl.

Identification is also a process that often comes in retrospect, in looking back at the minutiae of everyday life that signals a different desire. As Sharmi recalled:

> When my father went to his office, I used to wear his punjabi and play pretend. When I was just a kid, I would play with my sisters, pretending to be the husband and sister would be the wife, and my brothers would be our children. We liked that, and every time I pretended to be someone else, I would always play the role of a guy, be it the conductor of a bus, or a grocer…so I was in class nine, I had a huge crush on a girl…her touch electrified me…we could have kissed through the days and felt that jolt through my body.

Identification is also tied to the question of recognition, including self-recognition. Not being able to recognize oneself as different and not being recognized by others as different and/or being misrecognized affects one's life, leads to a feeling of 'placelessness'. Also, 'misrecognition' by the other (when a PAGFB i.e. Person Assigned Gender Female at Birth, is recognized as a male) can be liberating. In the absence of readily available terms, recognition and identification has come in various forms.

Transitioning to one's preferred gender and sex is an important marker of liveability, despite the costs that it may entail. As a participant from project workshop 3 explains:

> If you mean a man residing within a female body is a transgender then before 9.11.15 I was that and I was very unwell mentally. After the surgery my mind and body are balanced and I am doing much better. That I can now identify as a male makes me very happy. I don't feel shy to stand in front of a mirror, I don't feel shy standing in front of other women and look for a life partner in them.

Dev explains how when he was little, when he did not know anything about sexual orientation, he used to play cricket and football with the neighborhood boys and be involved in fights. Later on when he was enrolled in an all-girls school by his parents, he did not like it, did not socialize with anybody, and only attended class and came back home. This continued for some time during which he came upon the character George in Enid Blyton's *Famous Five*, from which he learnt the term 'tomboy'; when his friends following that referred to him as a tomboy he liked that. This changed when he hit puberty - when he could neither identify with tomboy nor with the term lesbian. As he explains, "I was not a girl who dresses like a boy". Later on – during his class ten – when he went for tuitions, which included both girls and boys, he felt at ease with the group of boys: "Finally I am at a place with people of my sort. I started feeling good, I started feeling like I am interacting with the people whom I should have interacted with always."

Having gone through lots of trials and tribulations around being misrecognized as a girl, because he had to wear girls' clothes, live in girls' hostels during his growing up years, Dev is now finally comfortable in the identity of a cis-man. As he explains after he joined his current college:

> So the first day of college, nobody knows me here, and I am sitting away from everybody else. All I could recall was how people would mistake me for a boy and my parents would correct them, and that's what I was frightened of, you know, that people address me as a guy and my parents would turn up to correct them. But then a guy... asked me to sit with them, then I went and sat and started interacting, and everyone took me for a guy. And now in my college even my teachers, my friends, everybody... all know that I am a cis-man.

This misrecognition from the other has also been liberating for him. It however has not been easy to maintain, as Dev explains. When he topped in his first year, he was afraid that the certificate would address him in a certain gender that he would not be able to identify as, and so he told his parents why he did not want to accept the certificate. It was then that his father started researching on the Internet about persons like him and thus started the process of gender transition.

Often a certain perception of the body either by self or the other can become an impediment in the sexual act. As Appy shared, having to perform a certain body makes it difficult to enjoy sex. Partners who insist on a specific performance can prohibit the spontaneous expression of a person during sex. Sometimes the urge to please the partner is so strong that one forgets about her own pleasure and even forgets the absence of it.

Taking up a non-normative sexual identity

Respondents shared how they perceived their identity in respect to the person they were in love with or bond with. While at times it comes with an assuring confidence, the discovery that you are in love with a same-sex person can cause conflict and confusion/helplessness. "My LBTQ identity is the most valuable to me...this identity has been achieved and it keeps me well but sometimes it keeps me unwell too. But even if I am kept unhappy because of this identification—it still remains an important and priceless part of my life", shared a participant from project workshop 5.

The question of identification is not a straightforward one. Recognition of a sexual desire or being in a sexual practice may not automatically lead from or lead to identification of that. Those participants who talked about when they realized they were different, also said that at the time of this realization they did not either have the language or the realization of something called sexual orientation. As Sharmi said:

> I had no idea back then what orientation meant, I just felt a physical attraction for her. She was two/three years older than I was. We shared the same room in the hostel, she used to make my bed, care for me, but I was physically attracted to her. That was the first time. But I never categorized that under orientation.

Often lack of awareness leads to fear, apprehension and attempts to conceal self. Once individuals become aware of their identities and are confident about their selves they are able to come forward to make friends and express ourselves. When Appy's relationship with a straight woman did not work out and she did not know any other lesbian woman like herself, she felt confused and hopeless. She imagined that had she been attracted to a man life would have been much easier. One participant from project workshop 5 shared, "I'm living alone, in fear. I stand alone in a crowd. I think I'm asexual/demisexual but then I suddenly fall in love with people—maybe I'm panamourous. Because I haven't "slept" with anyone I may have to live my life by myself."

Anamika who identifies as queer when talking about her marriage at a very early age (15 plus), explains that she entered into that marriage because she was told not to by her mother without being explained why she should not marry at such an age. When she took the decision to marry, she just wanted to marry, and did not have any specific desire to have a household with her husband. Marriage was defiance, and to defy is to be queer, suggests Anamika.

Meghna describes herself as feminine not just in body but also in emotions – she describes herself as normatively feminine in that the emotions that are specific to women are not seen in men – softness and empowerment. Meghna makes a distinction here between men and women. "Say when I am emotionally vulnerable...when I love something, say a nice song, what I acutely feel at that time, it can only be felt by another woman...my male friends won't get that..."She did enjoy sex with men at one point of time; but once she met her girlfriend, she could not connect with her boyfriend any more physically. Ishika says she feels connected to men emotionally, but is attracted to women physically, emotionally and mentally: "So overall for the sake of completeness...I feel more attracted towards women so I think I identify as a lesbian". Buli whose upbringing is in a village with a liberal background had no idea that two women could be in a romantic relationship before she herself felt attracted to another woman. The realization caused much conflict in her.

Bibi talks of how difficult she finds it to belong to an identity. She wants to belong to some stable notion of identity like others who feel at peace with themselves having made some association with an identity. Yet she feels like questioning herself all the time and gets exhausted in the process. The fact that she cannot stop questioning herself feels like a curse that she cannot escape, however much she tries, and she can never ever go back to a certain liveability.

Identification as L or B or T is not important to all respondents. Further, an identity maybe limiting, as it may not only not explain one's sexual fluidity but also be stigmatizing, as in the case of a bisexual identity where often one is told that one is taking advantage of both worlds. The norms of recognition as a

bisexual in this case may not make one's life liveable. Further, not having a recognizable identity may make one's life more enriching and thus liveable. Anamika reflected on how she came to know only later about her orientation. Sex with her husband was once or twice a month as she explained. Later after being physically intimate with a woman she realized the reason behind why she used to be attracted to look at the legs or abdomen of her teacher. She rejects any labeling of herself as a bisexual, which people usually label her as, because she explains that sexuality is fluid for her and so she may change. So she prefers not to be identified as a bisexual person. Further, bisexuality itself becomes a stigmatizing identity – Anamika explains that in a group of 'pure lesbians' she has often been told that she is taking advantage of both worlds. Anamika also talks about how she began her life as a "normative heterosexual" and how now she is unable to label herself anymore. This journey she feels has enriched her. As she explains:

> I started my life as a "normative heterosexual" being, moving from that space right now I can't even label my sexuality anymore. So, this movement is very different, the way I've been enriched, it is very colourful, all the things I have undertaken. There are many things that I see differently now than I used to before, so these perceptions have changed because of the experiences I've gathered. The way I saw my life at 15-16 years is not what I see now.

Sumita's identity has undergone multiple transitions. From heterosexuality spanning bisexuality to lesbianism to asexuality, she has arrived at a phase where she thinks she does not need to be identified or as she says, "My desire is like a stream and that influences my practice". Subhra, on the other hand, identifies as queer: "I don't identify as lesbian or bisexual or whatever. But usually I call myself queer...but queer not as in a noun. I use the word queer as a kind of adjective or a verb. It's just that I resist identities, that way I am queer. That I am not like a queer person. Not as an adjective or not as a noun either."

For some exploring with one's sexuality becomes a conduit to come to terms with identity. As one participant from project workshop 4 observed, "I start exploring my sexual orientation, and knowing I belong to this orientation I feel excited and confident". Pakhi recognized herself as queer when she came in contact with a queer film maker and started working with her on making queer films for an activist organization. Before that she recollected liking girls in her childhood but did not feel sexually aroused. When she started working on the film, she wanted to know more and a friend provided her with information. That was when she realized she belonged to this sexual orientation.

For Sharmi feeling attracted towards women brought on a crisis of sorts, she started feeling incomplete as a woman, "From class eight...I just thought, I was lacking something, I could not impress a girl". However this incompleteness then gets translated into a positive attribution when she has this to say about herself wooing girls, "... I just thought I could have better impressed the girl than Amitabh did!"

Rahi categorically mentions that he identifies as a transgendered person and not as a transman. However he refers to himself as a man throughout. For Rahi, his family objected to his identification with man and his father supported him only when he was able to prove with the help of his psychiatrist that it was not a mental disease. His mother and brother and his friends took time to relent. Rahi is of the opinion that the majority of the country thinks it is some disease due to lack of awareness and education and so most are still fighting to get acknowledged or not fighting at all. "My first sexual encounter that helps me realise that I am attracted to women", says one of the participants from project workshop 1.

Identifying

The process of identification and self-recognition can happen in many ways – through literature, through contact with similar thinking and feeling people or through spaces that one comes to inhabit. For instance, a participant from project workshop 1 had this to share, "I come to NBR [Northern Black Rose] for the first time and I understand that I am a T.G.". Sharmi came to terms with the term lesbian when she came in touch with an organization. She almost poetically narrates her story about her attraction toward her classmate whom she later loses, as she was shifted to a different school. Not having terms to identify her different desires however did make her feel at times that she was 'abnormal', "I had called on the phone...I heard the term lesbian...before that, Sipra [her partner then] told me about it...we were lying together and she just told me that there's this lesbian in her locality...so I asked if I was one and she said no because we will marry".

To be able to live with a 'lesbian identity' is to be able to live with 'rights' as was noted by participants in the questionnaires that were handed out to them in the project workshops. A participant from project workshop 1 said, "I want to be accepted with my lesbian identity from the larger society, along with that I want my mother and father to also accept this relation, this will keep me happy." Another participant from project workshop 1 had this to say about the need for recognition: "To stay well firstly I need rights. The same way a man-woman relationship is not looked at in a bad way a woman-woman relationship also shouldn't be."

Moushumi recognized herself through literature: "I liked strong female protagonists in books, but I did not know I could have a relationship with another woman...I liked reading Ashutosh Mukhopadhyay's books because they had strong female characters". Moushumi talks of another identity for herself, that of a mountaineer. She reiterates that "the humbling beauty of the mountains" has contributed greatly to her existential self.

Violence is another common factor that contributes to one's identity: "I think I was in class 3 at that time and a man who was very close to us would use my hand to masturbate. I speak to him normally now but I

can never forget what he did. Because I am a girl this happened to me" shared a participant from project workshop 5. The heteronormative order that compels gender identification in terms of only two rigid binary opposites constrains lives and forebodes unliveability. Another participant from project workshop 5 said, "I'm not doing well. I'm a transgender person and the daily harassment and discrimination we face are multiple. There are limited facilities and resources for transpersons. Anyone who cannot fit into the neat boxes of 'ladies' and 'gentlemen' are marked as different for life."

Preet explains,

> So I am forcing to change myself and people are not open enough to accept that. Even if I go through SRS, grow beard and change my identity, take up a man's name...the society still would not accept me, people would point me out as a freak who wanted to be a man. I belong to a mostly uneducated neighbourhood so coming from that place I tried to change myself. I did not want to limit my identity there, I tried and now people communicate with me, not out of fear of the unknown, but with an understanding that this person is a bit different...an educated person with a big job, so they should watch themselves before they make a fool out of themselves while talking to me...

We reproduce below a verbatim account of a participant from project workshop 5 who identified himself as trans-heterosexual-cis-man. He gives a vivid description of how he went through self-recognition at different stages of life:

10-20 years:

- First time falling in love with a girl and getting physically intimate. Going from school to college and then finally beginning to earn
- I'm in my boy-hood

21-30 years

- Finding true love, having a great time romancing, and finally getting married
- College-sweetheart, got married at Dakshineshwar Mandir
- My own business
- I'm a man

31-40

- Leaving my business and joining a job
- Going to Sappho and understanding more about myself

- Becoming a member of Sappho, finding many friends, and staying mentally happy
- I am mentally a man, but according to my body I am F/M man

41-42

- I am happy till now, with my family and Sappho, without a wife.
- Even now both physically and psychologically I am 22 years of age
- I am a trans-heterosexual-cis-man—Till now I'm happy

Body and clothes

Clothes are an important marker of one's identity and well-being. Several participants (possibly transmen) in talking about their significant moments in the timelines, mentioned moments of unliveability because of being forced to wear clothes that they did not identify with, such as, *sari* or *salwar kameez*. As Dev explains, when he was growing up he liked to dress in boy's clothes, but when his mother forced him to wear *salwar kameez* around the time when he was in class six, he protested, so later on when his mother relented he felt better. However during different times in his school and college life he has been unable to wear what he wants and express his gender identity accordingly. This has severely affected his performance and mental health. He elaborates, "I got 94% in class X which dropped to 75% in class XII because I could not focus on my studies, I started skipping classes. I was a changed person, depressed."

Transition, SRS (sex reassignment surgery)/GRS (gender reassignment surgery)

Transitioning comes up as an important theme in relation to liveability, as well as familial and friends' support during the transition process. Dev, who came to know about the possibility of transitioning to his preferred sex and gender through the Internet when he was in college, was going through the process during the time of the interview. His father was on board with it as he had himself done some research through the Internet to understand his situation has been supportive; his mother on the other hand, did not like it, but later was convinced after he explained to her that he had been struggling with this all his life. He wants to go through the full transition; during the time of the interview he had already visited doctors, done information gathering by himself and with his father, and was undergoing HRT [Hormone Replacement Therapy]. He said that he was in a rush to get his top surgery done as he wanted his gender changed legally before he went ahead with enrolling in an institution for further studies as he did not want to end up having to enroll with his assigned gender as that will again create problems for him in his new institution. Both his parents and friends are currently supportive during this process. Going through the transition process he feels has definitely enhanced his liveability. As he explains when he was asked if his life is liveable now:

It's much better than what it was... it's definitely not unliveable; that I felt 3-4 years back. It's much better now. And I will feel it as total liveable after I have undergone the complete transition, after that life will be totally liveable, like being the person who I am... Why I already know that it will be liveable because since everyone in Kolkata started addressing me as a proper guy, life already became much better, so I already know how it feels. And this feeling, it will be more strengthened once my body is in synchronisation with the feeling... Liveability for me is being in the body which is in my mind, being recognised by that thing and then just living on the thing, as a normal person lives.

MENTAL UN/WELLNESS

Liveability is intimately tied to the state of one's emotional health. A majority of the interviews began with the question, "How are you right now?" Beginning the question with one's state of mind helped to open up participants to talk about their state of being, their lives in many respects. It also allowed the participants to talk about their past, present, and future. For instance, Meghna explained, "Like right now I feel mentally peaceful...right now as I am sitting here, talking to you [interviewer]...I have not even known you for long, you are not privy to my innermost thoughts, but in spite of that I can talk to you freely about my life...this is only possible when a person is mentally at peace...you see". Mental unwellness was seen tied to life circumstances that may have to do with being in two relationships at the same time, as in the situation of Meghna and Ishika; not being satisfied with one's job as in the situation of Ishika; losing a parent as in the situation of Ishika; or tied to the ability to wear what one wants and related recognition of one's gender identity.

Unwellness is related to the attempt to live outside of a recognized structure, and exhaustion relating to that struggle. In such cases often being part of a collective comes as a useful resource that helps alleviate the struggle. Factors such as social recognition, the presence of an understanding partner, the connection to collective, a movement, work situations, tangible objects and occupations, everyday harassment, the possibility of loneliness because of the challenges in finding a partner, all contribute to mental wellness and unwellness in participants. While some of this is directly related to ones queer life, yet it is that same queer life that also positively contributes to one's mental wellness. As a participant in project workshop 5 says:

> ...but when I see other queer members of our community I wonder aloud what makes their lives slightly better (because I can't think of one goddamn good thing, and no I don't think my queer relationships have the potential to make me "well")... I am living and surviving through my unwellness. But my queer relationships do have the potential to make me forget momentarily the pain of living a life that discourages my existence on a daily basis.

Several participants talked about their struggles with depression, visits to psychiatrists—some of which are connected to their gender-sexual orientation—as either contributing negatively or positively to their wellness. Leela spoke of her clinical depression that has remained in front of her as a wall and prevented her from enjoying a life worth living. Initially there were times when she tried to remove that wall as a way to reach a liveable life; she realized later that there is nothing beyond the wall, and that the clinically depressed person is who she is and her life can be worth living within the bounds of this wall.

Emotional states and non-conformity

Coming to terms with one's gender-sexual orientation often involves self-doubt and questioning that could take you or be taken by parents to seek expert opinion. This is truer for persons belonging to non-normative gender and sexuality. The constant pressure to fit into the dominant heterosexist order, the pervasive marginalization and questioning faced for being different and the non-supportive and sometimes violative behavior experienced affects one's wellness and mental peace. Sometimes this could lead to a situation where people might have to take professional help and live a life of further marginalization and violence. Experiences varied from being diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder, attempting suicide, having to drop out of studies and falling behind school friends – all these make life barely survivable.

The heterosexist imaginary creates an environment where diversity does not find place and is not well accepted when expressed. Ipshita felt she was doing something abnormal when she started enjoying sex with a woman. Rimpy felt there was some hormonal problem with her when she did not feel attracted to her boyfriend and could not respond to his kisses or sexual chat over phone. She even thought of consulting a doctor regarding her "sexual problems". A participant from project workshop 3 talks of her tryst with the psychiatrist when her father took her to one. The doctor turned out to be sensitive and gave her a patient hearing. She found him godsend but the treatment was discontinued because her father got suspicious about the intentions of the doctor and decided to take her to some other doctor. For Dev, the restriction on wearing a school uniform that he found more appropriate to his gender caused him a lot of "mental agony" and affected his performance. When his parents took him to mental health professionals, he held back his thoughts as he was not sure how his parents would react, so he just said that he preferred to wear boy's attire. When he joined an engineering college, he faced a situation of having to live in a girls' hostel, which in turn affected his performance and mental health again. As he says, "I just quit. I stopped eating; I was admitted in the hospital, so much happened." During these times he felt his life was not liveable. As he said, "I just wanted to commit suicide but I did not have the guts even though I didn't feel like living."

While remaining unwell due to certain events in life may not always have a causal relation to one's sexuality, yet it can be informed by it, as Ishika suggests:

> So now I am afraid because of my sexuality and the way I am, you know, my preferences…I feel I am too insecure …so if at the end I too get very, very sick [like her father], I am not sure whether there will be anybody with me at that point of time; because my mom will…may be she won't survive till then. I am afraid of what I might do, I am afraid for myself…

An individual's multiple subjectivities contribute differently to the coexistence of wellness and unwellness as explained by a participant of project workshop 5: "Separately as an LGBTQ person I don't have any problems. As a person I have various problems that I need to tackle. But even within problems I stay well."

Emotional states and relationships

Insecurity around a same-sex relationship arising out of significant life events, such as a parent's death, as in Ishika's situation:

> I mean there is more security, more assurance that someone would stay with you through thick and thin in a heterosexual relationship…somebody will be there for you during your really difficult times. But with me I am not sure. I don't know if I will have anybody in my life at that juncture, where I will be completely helpless and vulnerable and I am not sure, if I can see somebody there. I am in multiple relationships at this point of time. So what happens is, I am unable to get hold, or may be have that one person who will mean the world to me. I want to have that, but because of circumstances, because of the people I am with, are not very okay with the concept of stability that I believe in… so that's why…

Having to give up on significant relationships can also cause mental, emotional distress. Preet's breakup, which he still refers to as a "horrible accident", caused him to become an alcoholic and later on was taken to a psychiatrist for therapy. There however his gender-sexual identity was not emphasized either by his parents or by him. Sumita entered marriage determined to stay together with the person she loved but soon realized marriage entailed more than two people living together. This realization led to a mental breakdown and she needed professional help and medication. She felt the urge to live again but this was also the beginning of a new phase where she fell in love with a woman. Moushumi shared how she had to consult a psychiatrist when she decided to go through a divorce and could not tell people about it for a very long time.

The desire to be and remain an ordinary person, and the need to be accepted by family members could be tied to one's emotional health. As a participant from project workshop 3 said:

I am just an ordinary person. I couldn't specify my gender because I feel uncomfortable to call myself a woman, as a woman I am attracted to other women, I've had a lot of women in my life, and all of them have left me one by one, leaving me lonely. So I am very alone, life is complicated which is very hurtful. So many times I think nowadays that if I find a man then my family and society will accept me and will be very happy. But I cannot accept this either—why?

Emotional states and social-political states

The question of 'wellness' is tied to a "healthy ambience" as a participant from project workshop 2 explained. Such ambience can be created by support from family and friends and not be pressured into doing things that one does not want:

You know like, we need a healthy ambience, the society we live in...support from our families, friends, people we know...I am an educated person, the basic necessities of cloth, food, shelter are not enough for me...I need a support system where I would not be pressurized to do something I don't want to...I want that. I am an educated adult person with a job, I have a right to my individuality although I don't think I would get it any soon...but even then, some kind of help, a bit of mental support would go a long way to live a good life...

Wellness and unwellness may coexist at the same time and may or may not be linked directly to one's personal experience as a gender/sexual variant person, and could be tied to the overall political situation in one's country as a participant from project workshop 4 said:

To me the idea of keeping well is not very clear. What exactly is doing well—I don't think I can describe it, so I don't know how I am doing particularly right now. In my personal life I am not at all unwell due to my sexual orientation, and my staying well on a regular basis doesn't really depend on my gender-sexuality. But because I don't have personal space that keeps me unwell...The political and social climate we inhabit right now, and the pressure my friends and I face because of our gender-sexuality identity affects me. This socio-political surroundings don't keep me well. Because the state still hold 377, this keeps me unwell.

Emotional states and supportive networks

Many participants have shared how becoming part of a group with similar identity markers and collectives that are politically active have given them a sense of well-being and confidence to feel pride in their gender-sexual difference. Whether actively part of the collective or not, the assurance that "there are others like me" itself has been an important marker of mental wellness. The space of a collective where people have met, bonded and shared experiences has been an important constituent of well-being.

A participant from project workshop 2, on the other hand, highlights that the possibility of gaining full recognition of one's terms and being is needed in addition to a supportive environment. As she elaborates:

> ...of course you need support from other people, but honestly, you yourself are your best support. I am identifying myself spontaneously in front of the society, this does not happen in the real life. Surely, there is more exposure, people are highlighting the issue and coming forward...in my personal experience, I am in a community where I get a lot of exposure, I can express myself...it's very relevant, you know? But the full liberty to just be is not there, not when it comes down to the mainstream society.

FINANCIAL INDEPENDENCE/ ROLE OF A PROVIDER

Financial independence came up as an important issue tied to the need to live on one's own terms, to be independent in terms of taking care of one's own material needs, as well as being a provider, and being critically aware of one's surroundings. As Srabasti (who is economically sound) suggested, the only thing that she worries about is her economic stability and having money. As long as she has that, she need not worry about anything, she can negotiate through any hurdles in life that might be brought on by her non-normative life. For Rimpy, financial independence and establishing oneself in a career is seen as a first step towards dreaming of a life with your same-sex partner and coming out to everyone. One of the participants from project workshop 1 put it plainly: "Educationally, financially if I am independent and established then everyone who hated me at some point will learn to love me".

For Rahi, money can solve a lot of problems not only for him but also give him the resources by which he would be able to help others like him have a life. Financial independence is all about surviving and more. For someone like Srija who had to "micromanage" everything in her natal family, even her plan to marry and intimate relationships were influenced by money matters. She wanted to marry someone who lived outside Kolkata so that she had the independence to earn and spend her money on her natal family. Sharmi started working at a very young age in order to supplement her father's income as well as take a place in Kolkata to be able to stay with her girl-friend and support her as well. She also married her office boss to increase this financial security.   A participant from project workshop 2 shared that having to support her girlfriend monetarily and physically acted as negative pressure on her – something she connected with her survival – and yet wanted to do. On the other hand, Buli mentioned that though financial independence is important you also need the courage to go against your parents and family and that move is often necessitated irrespective of financial independence.

Related to financial independence is also the kind of work one does. Work satisfaction and/or dissatisfaction come up as an important factor in determining one's liveability. For instance, a participant

from project workshop 4 makes a difference between working and earning. Work is not surviving but earning is. For Anamika who began working full time since she was 22 (she was 42 during the time of the interview in 2015), full time work meant a way out of that marriage and a way out of the difficult times she faced early in her life. She also suggests that she never had a home and thought herself to be homeless; she was either staying in her parents' house or in her husband's house. Hence financial independence also meant the possibility of having a place of one's own. Having said that, Anamika also suggested that once she became financially independent – which was necessary to take care of herself – then the significance of only getting a salary recedes. In other words, once she became financially secure, she was able to make more choices about which assignment to take and which to leave; earning a salary for sustenance was now replaced by doing work that is more meaningful for her. Along these lines, having a certain flexibility is important to her – which she has – because she cherishes her ability to be able to go off to a place that she wants to go to for a couple of days if she so \desires.

INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

Intimate relations proved to be an important pillar in one's liveability. For LBTQ people being in a romantic sexual relationship validates and gives credence to one's non-normative gender-sexual subjecthood. Besides, romantic sexual relationships prove to be an important companionship in a life otherwise made difficult through non-acceptance, marginalization, discrimination and violation. In our conversations with participants, intimate relationships come up as relationship with lover, partner, and with husband. Respondents shared different and unique accounts of how they found, lived and came to terms with their romantic-erotic attachments with same-sex partners. Their expressions of love varied from kissing your heart throb on the lips – not knowing its significance – to giving hundred roses to your senior.

Finding yourself in love with a woman

Intimate relationships are a major crux of one's liveability and survival. Relationships can bring different dimensions to our sense of living and surviving. To have somebody to love, to be able to live with somebody is an expectation that many nurture. As Vaibhavi explained, "Yes...I think living means to live with the person I love, and someone who loves me back...I do not hope for something huge, just these little dreams." Along with that, there are also anxieties around that expectation, that is, if a person like that can be found at all, and if so, if there is a possibility of stability.

A participant from project workshop 1 explained:

> First of course staying with my partner like everyone else, is also my dream. But I don't know if that is a possibility... no one can guarantee that, someone is with me today and probably gone tomorrow, but I still want to live with her. And what So[another participant] said, at night I want to

> share my thoughts and in turn see her feelings and this sharing feels really good. To have a liveable life I want to think this is important as well...

Heterosexual love and romance always seems to triumph over homosexual[1] romance. When it comes to heterosexual relations there are multiple sources which can mediate and facilitate the enactment of a romantic erotic relationship and create congenial conditions for finding soul mates and partners etc. People in homosexual relationships operate from a point of major disadvantage in this area. Resources that will facilitate such romance in the form of friends, love songs, befitting poetry or even the self-confidence to propose to a love interest are hard to find. The absence of an identifiable structure in homosexual intimacy becomes a barrier to the actualization of love and intimacy. The pressure from peers to have heterosexual intimate relations bear down so much that people like Rimpy pretend to be lovers with friends and even with people they actually share a sibling relationship in order to appear mainstream. Being able to identify precisely the orientation of the person and not risking ridicule, humiliation or rejection is a major challenge. Yet, a certain amount of freedom is provided in our socio-cultural context where two women can still spend time together without attracting too much attention. This leeway is possible because as Rimpy explicates, "Conservative families are only concerned when two women want to spend their lives together, not when they are just having conversations". A different twist to this argument came from some respondents of project workshop 2 who readily agreed that two women could spend their lives together but were also concerned about social perceptions that women cannot understand other women...and can be jealous and competitive. As one participant (from the same project workshop) said, "Even if I can get past the unnatural tag, the society would never believe that two women can live together in harmony".

Intimacies are experienced in various ways. Vaibhavi talks of how she had been kissed on the cheek by her senior in school and had complained about it. But despite being suspended the senior girl did not lose her affection towards her. In class eleven she felt very close to a friend with whom she did not share any sexual intimacy despite knowing about homosexuality at that time. She painted her nude and even dreamt of living her life with her. The relationship lasted till the graduation days but gradually withered away when Vaibhavi fell in love with a guy and the friend decided to move away. With her present same-sex partner, she started off as an office colleague with whom she was very free, being physically intimate without any sexual intentions and gradually their friendship blossomed into love without their realizing. This helped her rcognize that she had lived a life of lie for 12 years with her then male partner and she felt more attracted to this life and love. Sharmi had a crush on a senior who did not acknowledge her feelings

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[1] We use the term homosexual here to claim it as a positive positionality in contrast to an oppositional identitarian term that is often used in contrast to the heterosexual by those wary of 'non-heterosexual' practices and/or those who medicalize the 'non-heterosexual'.

but later on sent her a picture of hers which is still treasured by Sharmi after all these years along with the friendship she still shares with that woman. Later too, when she felt physically attracted to another woman in her hostel she did not physically categorize it under any orientation.

Ipshita thought having sex with a woman was unnatural so when she was suspected by her father she denied it vehemently; for her it was not sinful, it was where she had found love and she was afraid of losing it if discovered. Ipshita's liveability seems to be defined around intimate love relationships. Her quest of a liveable life went through a series of 'unsuccessful' relationships, which often pushed her into mental unwellness and related visits to the therapist.

Rimpy felt attracted to her teacher in college and could only identify her desire as wanting to stay near her, get noticed, even touch her feet in respect and feel her "body's tremors". She tried experimenting and being comfortable with guys but when she hugged and became close to her female teacher she realized she was not attracted to men. Buli, on the other hand, started her journey of intimacy by experimenting sexually with a female friend at the age of 12. That single sexual act had no further consequences other than giving pleasure to both. She felt attracted to men but this liking for men was only restricted to talking over phone and writing letters. Any sexual advances or even physical intimacy gave rise to discomfort in case of men. During her graduation days she shared homoerotic moments with her roommate which led to them being hauled up by the hostel authorities. At the same time she felt very close and drawn towards her senior and later they went on to become partners.

For Srija, the company of women, spending time with them, without any necessity to explore the sexual, having little knowledge about how to make love to a woman in her earlier days, is intimacy. One participant in project workshop 5 had this to share about her experience of sexual intimacy in her earlier days, "When I had gone for a vacation it was the first time I had a physical relationship with another girl. That relationship lasted a while although she was never active again, but she kept enjoying. Before I didn't realize but once I joined Sappho I understood that she behaved like this because of internalized homophobia".

Living your intimacy

The search for stability is at the center of intimate relationships. Most participants provided detailed descriptions of the ups and downs of intimate relationships, and some of them are also virtual. Some suggested that their liveability revolved around intimate relationships; others said that while a relationship with a partner is significant, yet it does not define one's life. As Appy explained, "partner makes my life liveable…and I have searched for it every time I got involved, an understanding, compassionate partner who would stick through thick and thin…virtually or physically, that person will be there."

The vision of this life with an intimate other and what it means and entails is often drawn from one's family life. As a participant from project workshop 1 suggests: "It is how I see my father and mother, my uncles and aunts; at night when they return home they spend time with their families...I see it like this."

To share the everyday face to face is central to this understanding of life with an intimate other. As a participant from project workshop 1, explained:

> Like she said, after a hard day of work we want to be close to someone who we love, whom we can share our experiences with about all the things we did all day long. Talking over the phone is not always... we speak but that feeling of sitting with someone face to face is not possible through phone. This for me is enjoying a liveable life.

However, having an intimate relationship per se may not be the key to liveability. The quality of the relationship also matters and may make a difference between liveability and survival as a participant from project workshop 2, indicates:

> Like not to be able to disclose your identity and to cater to the needs of your partner...I have to sacrifice a lot; I have to adjust a lot, and may be the fact that I have to be able to support a woman, to provide her with security, be it monitory terms, be it physically; that's definitely a negative pressure on me, but still I want to have that.

When questioned what she would characterize this as, she says, "Survival." From her quote we may also note that the pressure of having to maintain a certain quality in a relationship may add on the already existing pressure of not being able to openly talk about one's sexuality.

Leela, who has had relationships with both men and women, self-identified as a queer person when she first entered into a relationship with a woman during her higher studies. Even though she never experienced internalized homophobia prior to this, the relationship was pivotal to her self-assertion as a queer person.

Akanksha spent a major part of her life, about 27-28 years, feeling "incomplete" in her relationships with men, but "felt at peace" once she embarked on a fulfilling relationship with her woman partner. Talking of her sexual relations Paramita talks of how she realized that she enjoyed the company of women and the pleasure she felt was not comparable with what she felt with men. However, at times she did not feel so strongly about falling in love with women and had partnerships only with men. Appy talked of different relations that can exist outside the sexual. Her attachment for her boy-friend who has been with her all these years through her various flings and relationships with women is valuable to her in all senses.

Pakhi's first relation happened with a roommate after she started work on a queer film. Pakhi's roommate

felt attracted to her but later insisted she was bisexual and blamed Pakhi for having infected her with a 'contagious disease'. Pakhi desperately tried to save the relationship but all in vain; today she feels alive and happy in the present relationship with another woman.

Sumita married the man of her love but after some time she discovered herself anew when she fell in love again, at age 37, this time with a woman, 15 years after her marriage and 11 years after her daughter was born. Not knowing how to deal with this new emotion, she tried to ignore it but could not wish away her intense desire for a woman. She tried to commit suicide and suffered a mental breakdown: "It was like I had completed a circle of not dying and therefore living again. I never looked back after that. I took a conscious resolution to live again, that moment was an epoch in my life when I felt I was born again. I cannot recognize the person that I was before that time, now."

Some like Srabasti feel apprehensive about 'full-fledged' relationships but at the same time also dreams of sharing life with someone. She appeared sceptic about finding that perfect considerate accepting partner and realizes that you cannot love someone always the way you want to. "It is how you look at your intimate relations – often open relations give you that protective mechanism to reduce hurt – you can love and live on your terms so that no one can hurt you, even if they leave you, the pain can be rationalized".

Anamika talks about how her short relationships with other women were not defining her living and her existence, even though they seemed to fulfill her need for some company. While sex has not been the defining crux around which she has had relationships, the need for company, to converse about many things, has been. She always felt the need to enjoy these intimacies on her terms and that often led to the relationships breaking. She however, does not regret it. Anamika married at fifteen and a half to a man with whom she had troubled sexual intimacy in terms of not wanting to be sexually involved with him or not feeling sexually alive with him. Her husband, she suggests, was probably aware of her relationships with women even though they had never explicitly talked about it. Anamika at this stage in her life, when her son is now grown (her son has always been the priority when he was growing up), is ready and open to have a relationship as she feels the need for a partner/companion with whom she "can sit with at the end of a day with coffee", with whom she can "laugh watching a bad film, have intellectual conversation after watching intellectual films…". When asked if she would want to stay with somebody – under the same roof – she said that if she resonates with that person, she surely would consider it. However, she is also clear about the fact that she wants to live life on her own terms, which will make her life liveable, and for that, she cannot be with a partner who will question her if she suddenly wants to take off and go visit a place that she desires to go to, or "stops" her from "doing the things" she wants to do.

Chhoto talks of her present 'friendship' of 8 years which shuns any talk of commitment or jealousy, is

defined by its subtleness and not through any norms of couplehood. Learning from her previous mistakes she has tried to keep this relationship alive and responsive to each other's need for personal freedom and self-determination.

Pakhi (8 months in this relation and living together for 2 months at the time of the interview in 2015) believes in building a family with a female partner to counter loneliness, share thoughts and understandings. Though it replicates a heteronormative relationship she believes dominance between two women cannot come in. The usual issues of ego in terms of education, physical appearance or earning do not come between two women, she feels. Even if homosexual marriage would be legalized she would not want to marry because "Two people can live together with mutual understanding and love without getting married." Though she likes kids she does not want the kids to face the discrimination and bigotry being brought up by two mothers.

Subhra talks of how having respect for each other, giving space for each other's individuality to grow makes life liveable. The uniqueness of such a relationship lies in the fact that two women understand each other better. Shared experiences by virtue of being of the same gender are, according to her, the highlight of such relations:

> Even something mundane like applying oil to each other's hair is a different experience...it starts from there and it probably... there is so much of commonness, so much of...this sharing...of your life, I don't think this happens between a man and a woman...not on that level...not even with a feminist man. Sharing of everyday mundane banal things...I think having the same gender is an important factor.

Heartbreaks, doubts and disappointments

While the presence of an intimate relationship contributes to one's liveability, break ups and 'betrayals' were also mentioned in the timelines as a marker of unliveability.

Preet fell in love with his headmistress and after leaving school he followed her to her workplace. However the love did not last long. Being 10 years older than him, she found a permanent teaching job and got married leaving Preet heartbroken. According to him, she had always resisted the suggestion of marriage for 4 years till their relationship lasted and then suddenly in a phone call she informed him that she was getting married. The break up caused Preet much agony and he could not continue with his education. This incident caused serious doubts about self and also egged him to find out more about his identity through the internet. His next girlfriend also helped him to further his search for an identity. She helped him with finding different terms to identify himself and inspired him to consider Sex Reassignment Surgery to feel more at peace with self-identification.

LOVE

DESIRE

DREAM

WANT TO GROW OLD WITH HER

Dreaming and Waiting

Want to go t...
I want to drink a...
I want to travel alon...

I love travelling alone in my own city. I ♥ Calcutta.

কলকাতা

"I want to travel with her blind."

Want to be alone and want to enjoy the black and white/dark moments of my life.

...re being with my family.

...Gathering with my ...ends (Sappho) gives me energy

DREAM

MY ONLY SPACE/my...

For Amrapali, remaining single gives her a feeling of settlement after having broken up with her friend cum boyfriend and having to leave her city of higher education. Her decision finds resonance in one of the participant's of project workshop 1, who thinks having a partner is great for sure but being alone isn't a problem either: "Since you can not forcefully keep someone with you". On the other hand, another participant from project workshop 1 rejects domesticity completely: "Well I don't want a domestic life; I want to be alone".

Polyamory is something women here have to often come to terms with especially in a space of a collective where friendships often turn romantic-erotic and partners get switched. Meghna talks of how trying to balance multiple relations – with man and woman and working out its dynamics in terms of physical and emotional desiring, transparency, loyalty, time, dedication etc can become stressful. Friends not attaching much importance to the dual love and assuming she is not serious about either, also hurts. Ishika talks of the difficulty of having multiple relations and how that does not give you any assurance that there will be someone for you at your old age, at times of your illness and indisposition. She thinks this is true for all sexual orientations and depends on the people involved in the relationship, their perspectives and ideologies. However, for homosexually oriented people it is still harder because of lack of recognition, safe space. As she says, "if you cannot recognize your relationship or your partner cannot recognize you, it makes us even more of a loner...it makes us...vulnerable, constricted". This necessitates stability even more. It becomes sticky when there is love, passion in a relationship but no stability because the demands are different, and in the other relationship there is stability but the love is lacking.

Ipshita sees love as a reason for becoming vulnerable and at the same time important to make your life meaningful. As Ipshita explained, her life was very difficult and she was emotionally unwell when she had made relationships the center of her life; now she is much better after she has stopped centering herself around relationships: "Love is not so much important that you will stake your life."

Moushumi entered into a same-sex relationship but never felt confident that two women could live together. Internalized homophobia prevented them from even holding hand while being intimate. "My first girlfriend who is dead from cancer, now I realize, had internalized homophobia... she never even held my hands when we were intimate..."

Subhra talks of the heterosexual imaginary, the social taboo and how that has inhibited many aspects of life from making your partner a nominee in your assets to not being able to express your desire for a woman:

> In class eleven I had a serious crush on one of my classmates and I realised that this was...and at that point of time I realised it was love, but I was not even able to talk about it to anybody. Whereas

at the same time I used to have crush on other guys, and we had a gala time discussing those you know, but I could only talk about her in my diary...I think because I was very scared of being rejected or being ridiculed by my friends, definitely by that person concerned; how it will affect me so that has definitely hindered me.

Rahi fell in love with a woman who later turned out to be tomboyish and since he identified as a man, he felt less romantic towards her and transformed the relationship into a friendship: "A tomboyish woman I might love, but I would never be in love with her". For him life without romantic love is incomplete: "Like Tenzing Norgay had said he could never conquer Mt. Everest alone. We all need a partner who would support and share our feelings."

The question of the possibility of having an intimate relationship in the case of somebody who is transitioning is complex. For instance Dev, who was going through the process during the time of the interview explained that he was not thinking about a relationship and a family as he was apprehensive of rejection; in other words he has heard of instances where a person like him has been rejected after he has revealed his journey to the girl.

MARRIAGE

Liveability takes on meaning in relation to the institution of marriage, a hegemonic frame that several participants negotiate. How do LBTQ persons navigate the materialities of a heterosexual marriage? How do they envisage the role of marriage in their own queer loves? Participants calibrate and reference their lives according to the institution, some clearly saying that they will be unable to marry a man, while others saying that they are open to the idea, as it's a secure option.

Marrying the "opposite sex"

The dominance of a heterosexual imaginary of romance and marriage is pervasive and people find themselves drawn to it for various reasons. Some want to try it out as a remedy for same-sex attraction. Women often are in a phase of denial about their love and attraction towards other women or attempt to treat it as a phase. But marriage also sometimes functions as a distraction from falling in love with women and relief from the constant urge to find a partner or an escape from crisis and struggle. As Appy said:

I used to think that if I got married, I would not feel anything for other women...I could not cope with the fact that I could not find a suitable woman...perhaps staying with a man would not be the best course, but at least it would have distracted me from the ongoing crisis [of not finding stable relationship with a woman]...It [wanting to marry] was the easy way out. I did not want to fight...I

was not fine, why I should care for others...why I should choose something that always hurt me...let me stay mediocre...

Marriage (heterosexual) has also featured as a survival strategy, a calculated risk where the gender of the person did not matter as long as there was this surety that in time of crisis (financial or otherwise) there will be someone to fall back on. Some repondents had entered into marriage either because they thought that marriage is important to living or marriage is something that is given and entered into without much thought. As Srija explained:

> I thought if I were to live, I must get married. I never thought I would live alone, if I did not get married, whom I would live with then? It made me worry and we lived in a small town, I have a younger sister...it was not tradition for the younger siblings to get wed first...so I felt I had to, you know? Even if it was to be the day before her marriage, I wanted to get married.

Srija ultimately did not get married, as she felt she would not be able to have a relationship with a man. According to her, this was the first decision that she took without much calculation; coming from a modest middle-class family where she always had to take up the economic reins from a very early age, her decision to marry and all her decisions in life has revolved around a concern for stability, most of which is economic.

Anamika married when she was fifteen and a half. While she does understand the implications of marrying at a young age, including a troubled relationship with her husband, and giving birth at 17 to a son, Anamika also feels that taking these "wrong decisions" in her life made her into what she is today, i.e. being able to be different and look at herself and the world around her more critically. She suggests that if she had not done what she did, then she would perhaps become like all her cousins who married and live a life of affluence and material comfort. Her life, she feels, has been enriched by these 'wrong decisions' she has made.

The lure of straight life with its conjugal bliss that is always interpreted as easy and smooth holds sway over many. "I just thought if I were straight, life could have been easier. My sisters were leading happy conjugal lives, why could I not be like them!" said Appy. Marriage as a tried and tested method with its given structure, promised advantages and apparent social security – the obvious fact that they are husband and wife has its advantages. To Appy that is survival "that does not hurt". And sometimes surviving is better than living. To Akanksha marriage seemed to be the solution to the dissatisfaction she faced in her multiple heterosexual relationships where she looked for and did not find stability. On the other hand, she was tired of taking responsibilities for her natal family and at age 25, she thought marriage as an external agency would bring stability, provide her with a "wall behind her back". All along

however, she felt marriage was like a prison and was terrified by the idea of getting married. The lack of mental support from the men she dated, and finding stability and understanding in her relationship with her woman partner finally changed her decision. Akanksha finds an interesting metaphor to explain marriage - marriage is like an inert gas (loses all reactivity) and bonding with her female partner is oxygen. "My point is inert gas alludes to a marital relationship...a couple marries, has children, lives happily ever after...an inert relationship." For Vaibhavi the possibility of marriage comes as a positive option. Being the only child of her parents, she does not want to be completely closed to that option. However, if the opportunity arises where she has the chance to live a life with her current girlfriend, she is open to that as well. As she explained:

> Yes...I cannot deny that completely since I am the only child of my parents...they want me settling down, a secure future for me...they have their dream...I perhaps shall talk to groom-hopefuls they choose, but I will have the final say regarding marriage... Yes...it's not that I don't want to spend the rest of my life with my girlfriend...if that's possible then it's absolutely okay...

A participant ofproject workshop 1, a married woman, who stays with her husband and not her in-laws talked about how it is important to live on one's own terms within marriage:

> I am the eldest in the house, I am talking about my parent's house, so I had to do many things that a boy has to do in the family. Socially, whatever roles are performed by men I perform it as well as performing the duties of a woman. You can say I perform both roles of mother and father. Now in my in-laws house, well I don't actually stay with them, I stay with my husband here...and the entire time that I spend with him I fight! The way I've been brought up all my hopes are not resting on him...I want to stay independently. I am earning, you are earning, and we don't have to have any say in that...you stay how you want to and you let me stay like I want to. I think this is having a liveable life for me. I want to live on my own terms.

Women often cannot decide and have second thoughts about marriage and want to take a call later in life with more thought and time. Navigating the pressures of marriage for young women is done through strategizing, such as rejecting prospective grooms for marriage and stalling time till one is able to move out of one's home either by getting a job and/or relocating to another place for educational pursuits. This meant they could buy time and make their own decisions regarding further education or how they want to live their lives. In almost all instances the latter meant living with their same-sex partners. The pressure to marry was commonly shared by many participants, either because the family expects it, or because it is thought as the only route to a secure and stable life. A participant from project workshop 3, explains: "I want a job now...I would tell them after completing my M.Sc...I am trying to maintain the peace before that...."

HALF FULL
OR . . .

WISH!!!

Solitude & solidarity

As Appy explains, "For now since higher studies would take a few more years, and for that to happen, I have to tackle the pressure of getting married from my family. So I want to get the teaching job, so I am free enough to make my own decision."

Subhra, on the other hand, stalled the pressure of marriage simply by telling them, "I don't want to right now", but not sharing that she did not believe in marriage. Often, being the only child, having to keep parental wishes in mind causes confusion about marriage. They are guided by their parent's wishes to see them married after a certain age as stated by Rimpy. For Buli the condition of marriage came from her father for agreeing to pay her course fees for Masters' degree. But she overturned her father's condition by agreeing to marry only if she got a job. On one occasion when her family almost blackmailed her (her father threatened to commit suicide) into appearing for bride screening, she turned the ritual of bride screening on its head when she questioned the groom and his sister instead. The pressure from her family to get married finally led her to one day snap back and let them know that she was in love with a woman and wanted to live her life with her.

Questioning marriage

Anamika married when she was fifteen and a half and at that time she had the idea up until her mid-20s that one needed nothing else in life if one has been able to get an understanding and compatible husband. As she explains, from mid 20s onwards, her views began to change. This can be traced to her difficult relationship with her husband, but also as Anamika says because of the diverse life experiences she has had. Today she advises other people to get into marriage only if they are aware of why they want to get into it; the need for sex and companionship, she says, can be also had outside of the institution.

Sharmi married her office boss for financial security and the freedom she got from him made her believe that this would be a good way to plan a future with her girlfriend. As she explained, she was more interested in the opportunities, than the consequences. But just on the verge of marrying she realized her mistake and wanted to break up the marriage. She confided to her future husband about her love for the girl but it did not work:

> "So I got married. I told him on his face that we could never be happy together. I was almost mad with my realization that I had committed some grave error...I saw her crying for the first time for me, she was heartbroken, but it was so very late...even then I told him to break up the marriage, there was still time for that...I told him about my lover, that she meant the world to me, that I could not compromise her for anyone's sake".

Sumita married early in life out of love, had a kid but then realized that she did not want this life. She fell in love with a woman at the age of 37 with a child of 11 years.

Moushumi married for various reasons: "It's a complicated question...I was 35 then, I just thought my fellow mountaineer, if I marry him, we could go together...I would have a partner". Being an avid mountaineer she thought she would be able to form a different kind of partnership with her fellow mountaineer that would extend to being able to go together on expeditions without giving rise to gossip since there were not many women always in a team. Being married would give her license and respectability. Once she became confident to be able to live life with her same-sex partner, the marriage and partnership fell apart. Her husband even threatened to sodomise her and she had to give up her dream of partnering him on mountaineering expeditions.

Marrying the "same sex"

Following the decriminalization in 2009 newspapers reported an increased incidence of same-sex couples 'marrying'. Though IPC 377 does not have anything to do with same-sex marriage the reading down of this section led to a flurry of couples taking their chances to celebrate their love with 'marriage'. It is interesting to note that there were gay and lesbian couples who had either gotten 'married', or were planning to. It is not that couples were not committing to one another before, but the media seemed to be reporting these incidents much more than before. The concept of marriage has always been a space for concern within the community, and the decriminalization gave a sense of assurance from the side of the state, which led to more public conversations around marriage. However, right after the 11th December 2013 judgment of Supreme Court, the tonality of reports changed because after the re-criminalization marriage itself is a non-issue for the community, or so the media thought. However, there are same-sex 'marriages' happening all around the country whether IPC 377 is amended or not.

People from the homosexual community desire conjugality and the imaginations are fed by the familiar images received from the heterosexual world – from parents, aunts and uncles. For Sandy it meant returning to your loved one after a hard day's work, sharing physical space and the everyday experiences. A participant from project workshop 1 dreams of a conjugal life but with less conviction. She dreams of staying with her partner, but is also skeptical of the fact that there is no guarantee of a long-term partnership.

Meghna sees marriage (homosexual) as signifying a life with the partner 24x7 and that puts her off marriage. Meghna explains:

> The structure it has, now it's good for my sister and brother-in-law, for my friends and their spouses, but spare me, please. I am not very comfortable with the idea that I would have to spend 24/7 with someone else. I am a short tempered person, I feel that too much sharing space would hamper that relationship...the littlest misunderstandings can blow up to some crises...I am afraid

that it would be hard for me to deal with that.

Marriage would also mean a monogamous relation and for her who is in love with two people at the same time that is an impossibility. For Preet finding a partner is contained in the imagination of a wife who would love him as much as his mother loves his father but he is also wary of the social conventions that make marriage an all or none institution. For Amrapali, marriage was never an option even when she was involved with a cis-man. She identifies the poor relationship between her parents as causing this disdain.

Marriage offers from cis-men always angered Pakhi because she felt she could not stay under the domination of a man. Though she stays with a woman in a live-in relationship it has never occurred to her that this could be equally dominating because living in a patriarchal society she sees only heterosexual relations as capable of becoming unequal.

OTHER INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

Our parents, siblings and friends form our inner circle and are our primary resource in many a times of crisis, happiness and sorrow. They propel us in significant ways; they draw a ring of protection and love around us; they also fail to understand us and often violate us in pernicious ways. Both support and non-support from family is core to participants who are young adults. While support has had a positive effect on one's wellness, non-support in terms of non-acceptance, physical violence, trying to cure, emotional blackmail has contributed to unwellness and often, greater resolve to live life on one's own terms.

Some relationships in our lives help us get a better understanding and coming to terms with life and its desires. Acceptance from our close ones comes up as a key factor in making one's life better. Acceptance means difficult negotiations with family, friends, colleagues and children. Acceptance however, may not mean the same thing for all and can be expressed in subtle ways. In other words, acceptance may not necessarily translate as 'coming out' in a linear form to one's family and friends, but may mean a recognition of one's life, which is different from others, and this may come through a simple but significant gesture of inviting the member of the family who is different for a family gathering and/or inviting her/his partner to the gathering, not necessarily as a partner, but as a close friend, a mother or sibling creating a safe space for the person either through overt recognition or through subtle acceptance of the person's same-sex desire.

Relationship with parents and siblings

Support from family and friends are a marker of liveablity for most participants. Yet the nature of this support varies from partial acceptance from one parent or the other, from a sibling, from a friend to full acceptance of one's sexuality. As a participant mentioned in project workshop 2: "I am a lesbian and I am

just surviving, balancing family pressure and societal pressure." Again another participant in the same project workshop mentioned:

> My parents are supportive and they always try to encourage me to li(ve)fe my life as I want. But sometimes it is not enough to be happy. Sometimes I feel alone and frustrated by this life and it makes me crazy. My friends are lovely they try to help me think positive. Recently my aunt came to know that I am queer and she thinks that I am psycho and she told my mother that I should be taken to a doctor. I don't like this kind of people who thinks this is abnormal. But overall my dad is best and he is always by my side.

Relationship with parents have varied depending on how much they have been supportive or not, about living one's life on her/his own terms, about transitioning to a preferred sex and gender identity etc. Mothers are usually the ones who are told by their daughters about their dreams and desires, their usual refrain being "as long as you are happy..." Srija shared a unique relationship with her mother based on trust, simplicity in life and solidarity. However, on discovering her love letters to women at the age of 14, she had put a restriction on Srija's desires, "My mother never lectured me about possibilities and impossibilities in our lives, normalities or abnormalities of our desire...but that one time she told me, it could not happen." But she came around at a later stage in life (10 years later); having learnt lessons from life, her mother realized that "... no matter the race, caste, religion, sex of the person I live with, if I was happy then that would make my mother happy and that's all that mattered." Parents are often supportive but fear social ostracization for their children. Pakhi's mother warns her not to out herself at the workplace for fear of losing jobs. Otherwise she seems to have no objection to her relationship with a woman and is supportive of her needs.

In Meghna's case her elder sister who was a mother figure to her became her support system knowing fully well her attraction towards girls and gave her the confidence that "nothing can be abnormal". The fact that her sister got married and left for her in-laws meant the end of a support and became a source of stress for her. Amrapali who lives with her younger sister talks of carrying on with life only because of her commitment to her younger sister as both their parents have passed away while they were still very young and became each other's support in those hard times of coping without much support networks. Her sister, on the other hand, is accepting and has no qualms about her relationship with a trans man and is her greatest support.

Dev's support from his parents – both financial and emotional – after he decided to undergo hormone replacement therapy has been crucial to his well-being. His father who had done a search on the internet was much more forthcoming than his mother at the beginning, but when Dev explained to them that he

had been struggling all his life to come to terms with his identity, they were convinced that he needed the transition.

Anamika's father died when she was very young. Although her mother has met her friends who are part of the LGBT community, she is probably unaware of her daughter's sexuality or may be under denial according to Anamika. Her relationship with her parents has been turbulent given she left the house after getting married at a young age. Yet when she gave birth to a son at 17, she and her son was welcomed into the house as her mother had a preference for a male child. Anamika suggests that after all because she was the only daughter of her parents (she has a male sibling) and because she gave birth to a son, her parents were also favorable to her despite her decision to marry at a very young age against her parents' wishes. However, things were always not smooth. Her son used to live in her parents' house as she did not want him to stay in her husband's house because of the "atmosphere." She had to send her son to a boarding school when her brother married as her mother feared familial discord. Anamika recollected some grievances around that, but then also mentioned that she has left those days behind her.

Not all parents are supportive or even understanding of their children's need to be happy on their own terms. Some use denial to deal with their children's sexuality and sometimes acceptance from parents may not mean overt recognition but an acknowledgment of the partner as a very close and significant friend. Even such subtle recognition is crucial to the well-being of a person belonging to the queer community. As Vaibhavi, whose father is well versed with the issue and treats her girlfriend as a family friend but shies away from accepting their relation as sexually intimate, explains, "They know we are very close...she has become family friend...so they think nothing of it...". Preet who identifies as a transman feels he has failed his parents by not being able to be either a good son or a good daughter. He could never talk to his parents about his conflict with the gender assigned at birth for fear of being thrown out.

Sometimes lack of information and understanding as well as societal and community pressure forces parents to be harsh on their children. Few respondents have shared about being abused physically and verbally by parents for daring to express their gender-sexual differences. Two participants from project workshop 3 talked of being abused physically by father. One was forced to dress traditionally in conventional feminine attire and even to wear make up for prospective grooms. He did not give in. He was denied pocket money on the ruse that he was a girl and therefore did not need money in school or college. His life was curbed as a result and he could not even mingle with friends. One respondent from project workshop 2 shared how witnessing parental conflict in childhood made her seek and bond with outsiders who would be more accepting and loving of her sexual choices.

Deciding to live your life, according to your wishes and dreams, for the sake of your sexual orientation can

break your other intimate and cherished bonds. You are often forced to make a choice (a choice you do not want to) between your romantic intimate relationship and your other intimate relationships. Buli found herself in such a painful situation when she was forced to leave home for the sake of holding on to her freedom and autonomy in matters pertaining to her life and love. However some bonds can never be severed and do withstand the test of time. As Buli cheerfully reiterates, "Nowadays my mother saves more food for her [girlfriend] than for me. Her mother trusts me more than her". A project workshop 1 participant who is presently living away from family spoke of his/her hope: "Standing on my own feet and returning back to my family." Chhoto who lives with her mother feels responsible towards her but fulfilling daily household chores and other responsibilities often keep her confined to the home and she feels suffocated sometimes. She however rejuvenates herself by taking travel breaks with her friends.

However, forging acceptance from family members impose a certain obligation. As one participant in a project workshop mentioned very succinctly, "In case of my partner leaving me I feel obliged not to hurt my family again by making another same-sex relationship. Because I feel my family has already walked an extra mile by having accepted my same-sex partner despite their reservation about homosexuality".

For most participants extended families were not significant in one's liveability, as it was typically troubled, or a meaningless struggle, or a struggle that participants were not interested in taking up. Dev whose relationship with his grandparents, aunts and uncles is troubled has this to say, "My aunties and uncles used to ask me why I was different. They used to judge me the way relatives do. I finally told my parents and they accepted,...then my parents themselves took the initiative to make my relatives be more sympathetic. It took a bit of time...actually my grandmothers ...first started accepting it. Then other relatives came".

Relationship with children

Anamika, whose age difference with her son is just 17 years, sees her son as a friend. This makes her experiences and her life more enriching. While she has not explicitly discussed her sexuality or her relationships with both women and men with her son, yet her son is aware of his mother's life and her participation in different LGBT community programs. While her relationships are not a topic of active discussion, yet they are a part of their everyday life as mother and son. Her emotional bonding with her son has provided a much needed resource for her not to feel hopeless and give up on life when she was going through a very difficult 12 years of her life after marriage. Being with her son during those difficult years, in which she also experienced abuse, helped to keep herself together emotionally and psychologically. On the other hand, Paramita talks of how she lost her daughter who decided to move out of home and refused to keep in touch with her following that. Being a single mother she remained busy

VIVA LIFE

forty

The only thing that's distant is boredom

Stay SMART

Here's how people who have everything live!

LOVE

The whole world in your hands

LIFE is PASSING TIME AS A ROBOT
PRE-Decided •
PRE-Programmed.

LOVE, CARE, AFFECTION, SHELTER

Shelter

Community

HEALTH BEGINS AT HOM

Home

MIGHT MAKE LIFE MORE LIVEABLE

with her work, travel and friends and could not make her the centre of her life. Severing of ties with her daughter killed something inside her. She continues with the chores of life but misses her every day.

Role of friends

Friendships occupy an important part of one's liveability as well. Friendships that last are nurtured with care and are based on mutual respect and acceptance of difference. As Shubhra explained:

> I am fortunate to have those friends who have been with me, or I have been with them throughout. The communication between us has withered and prospered again and again...we have been able to restart as if we have never been stopped in between. So that I think is very important. When we get back together, we have been able to connect and on those same terms or may be some better terms. So that's definitely important to be able to feel alive.

For Chhoto some bonds that have outlived support groups and remained as important links, sustain her: "My best friend is a 76 year old man. We discuss every single thing that's happening in my life". Some like Appy had fulfilling friendships in school and were even popular as "the couple" but once they separated after finishing school and started missing each other did she realize that there might have been something in that friendship. "Yes, we were extremely popular...but it was nothing serious or so I had thought...later when I started missing her, I knew what heartbreak was."

Anamika mentioned that friends have been an important part of her life. Incidentally she has bonded most with gay men rather than with women. However, these friendships have been sustained and nurtured by "walk[ing] towards" it together. She has had to "leave many things for both friendships as well as other smaller relationships..." When asked if she feels if she is living a life worth living, she says "Yes, I more or less live a life with friends". A project workshop 1 participant puts it rather plainly, "It will work for me without a girlfriend [laughing], I want friends".

Dev's close friends who had readily agreed to address him and recognize him as a boy/man had provided support in his struggle to be understood and recognized as a boy/man. They are supportive during his process of transition as well. However, since he currently lives away from his home town which is in another part of West Bengal, he is unsure if he wants to hang out with people in Kolkata till he completes his transition.

Often as Srabasti mentions when a lesbian makes friends with a woman she might feel compelled to reveal her orientation and explain that she is not interested in her romantically or sexually – all this to dispel misunderstanding. People from the non-queer community who are homophobic often feel threatened by such friendships.

BLENDING IN –ORDINARINESS

The question of blending in is a complex one and can come as a strategy to live well and not get involved in unnecessary trouble. Blending in signifies attempting to be part of the people, objects in one's surroundings such that they seem appropriate or go unnoticed. Members of the queer community yearn and fight for the right to be accepted into the 'mainstream', to have an ordinary life just like everyone else. However, their different life forms, choices, gender expressions often create impediments to such blending in. Respondents shared how sometimes they have strategically invisibilized their gender-sexual difference to pass as ordinary and not invite discrimination. Others have attempted to modify surrounding opinions through a careful and partial expression of their difference and been accepted as a midway negotiation. And yet others have spoken about how they have rejected the idea of passing as ordinary and asserted their differences with the result that sometimes they have been accepted on their terms and sometimes pushed further away.

Srabasti spoke of how difficult it is to blend in when one is marked out easily by their different attire, attitude and boldness about sexual orientation, even in an apparently homo-friendly space like the media world. As Srabasti indicated, since she lives in a neighborhood that is middle-class, she does not unnecessarily want to invite stares and trouble from people around her. In this sense, blending allows one to live life on one's own terms. However, if she feels the need to make her opinions known or a point made to persons she feels will hear, she will. So it matters to her that she would want certain persons – such as from her workplace or her family – to accept her on her own terms, and she would converse with them, but those that inhabit her neighborhood do not matter, and so she simply blends in there.

When asked about what would keep them well, what they would need to have a liveable life, a majority of participants talked about economic security, recognition from family and peers, a partner, some of which are not directly tied to their gender-sexuality. So for instance, most young adults pointed to the need for financial independence and economic security-something that is key to most young adult's life. One may argue that such needs point to the desire for an ordinary life, one that is realizable through economic security, partner, and acceptance from one's family and peers. Interestingly in most of the conversations, the need for decriminalization was not explicitly stated, but recognition from one's family and peers was.

Several participants noted that while they are doing fine as a human being, as a lesbian they were not, as a need to remain and be 'ordinary' was not met. A participant in project workshop 4 says:"I want a society where love and relationships will not have pre conceived notions. All relationships will be simple and achievable. And no relationship will be valued higher than others."

The desire for an 'ordinary life' is often hampered by pressures that one faces from family and the larger social environment. As one participant in project workshop 2 said:

> I am a lesbian, I can say that as a human being I am doing alright in this society although as a lesbian I am not. Social, relational, familial problems are faced by me. Along with my own family pressures I need to also handle my partner's family pressure. A normal, ordinary life is not something we live, so I am kind of surviving in a way.

The desire to balance existing pressures comes across in a participant's words in project workshop 2: "I am a lesbian, if I have to say, in totality I am a mix of good and bad things. A desire to stay well balancing societal and familial pressures."

Facilitating and inhibiting factors

ABILITY TO PASS: The inability to pass creates vulnerability in the minds of same-sex people especially in public spaces and at times of conflict like eve-teasing or public harassment. Either partner, normative looking or non-normative looking, when together attract curious glances. Scrutiny and not being inconspicuous mars self-confidence and dignity. Vaibhavi talks of her dignity being at stake by the fact that she is also marked in the company of a special friend who is marked by her attire and external appearance. This creates problems in blending in unlike the times when she is out with her other heterosexual friends. She further explains that the fact that the person is already marked and is in a sticky situation then makes it imperative that either she has physical strength to tackle adversity or the cool-headedness to avoid further escalation or still better not be a different looking partner – i.e. be a biological man. The possibility of being able to pass had it been a normative heterosexual couple and be more accepted and respected causes some women to wish for a male partner instead of a female one.

Preet always wondered why he could not study in a school where he could wear a tie like many girls from other schools who wore trousers and tie in winter even though they sported long hair. He even planned to join a certain institution which had more liberal dress codes but had to change his plans since the subjects did not match his interest.

Many participants talked about the ironical situation where on one hand, same sex relationships are often perceived as 'best friendship', and therefore can blend into the social fabric easily, and on the other hand, since the desire is not heterosexual it is not eligible for recognition, even teasing.

Pakhi gives an account of blending in in a different context when in class twelve two senior girls were outed as a couple and everybody condemned them, she too was part of that gang. Her own desires remained repressed then and she could not freely express herself; though she differed with the rest of the gang, she could not even be honest with her opinion.

The law could help or inhibit blending in different circumstances. For instance if two women are together in public and the police comes and tells them to move away that could immediately hamper blending in or

one's attempt to be ordinary. In other words if your life is constantly monitored and norms of living it are dictated to you either by state or non-state actors, it no longer remains ordinary.

LIVING AN 'ORDINARY LIFE': Respondents shared that having a "like-minded partner" who is "ordinary" makes life easy and conflict-free and facilitates blending in. An everyday that is filled with small things, with oneself, one's family and one's partner also pegs itself on blending in. As Ishika says when asked what a liveable life according to her is :

> I think...a chilled out life which doesn't need too many people, but very few important people, some real good connections with some really intense people, like friends who I call friends, my mother—happy, satisfied and calm... My job, where I have to figure out what I want...perhaps a cosy little family. I don't want to marry in a normative sense...live together in a simple, monogamous relationship...that's all I want to do.

Preet gives a different turn to blending in when he talks of how he transforms himself according to circumstances and the degree of acceptability he receives from people. So he either stays himself or wears a mask. People who are close, who acknowledge his rights, with whom he can share his identity, his humanity, his lifestyle helps him feel accepted. People with whom relations are more formal, who question his gender-sexual identity no longer succeed in perturbing him; once he did feel disturbed but he is better informed now and more mature and able to handle these curiosities and taunts.

Moushumi tried to blend into a heteronormative marriage which she had willingly chosen but realized soon that while everything else could be "managed" the sexual intercourse part was not something she could adjust or fake for long. It was making her life unliveable.

One of the participants from project workshop 4 talks of her experience at her workplace:

> It offends me and keeps me unwell, the fact that I cannot express myself completely, but at times I purposely hide it especially in office-spaces to stay well. Another thing about hiding is when I open up in front of others about my orientation or gender identity it builds a kind of expectation towards me which I may not like so I will continue to 'hide' that.

Chhoto talks of the process of blending in as a daily ritual:

> All these new things you see, like a shopping mall or even a woman wearing sari with a halter neck blouse...love marriage, living together...people become habituated to new things gradually and it's possible because they know about it. So I think if we can reach to them on that level, orientations would not matter...

Having explained things to her relatives, family and friends she has been able to create that ordinary life

Daily Life

Travel

MAD FOR PLAID

THAN TRUTH

for herself where what she wears at her father's funeral or whether she remains single is easily accepted.

ACCEPTANCE BY MEANINGFUL RELATIONS: Blending in for Buli became important from the point of view of being accepted along with her partner by her family. Though she could not achieve that with her father before his demise she could do that with her sisters and mother. Similarly, as Subhra explains blending in is sometimes necessary to maintain certain meaningful relationships:

> I do keep contact with my sister, her husband and my niece...especially because my ma is still alive...perhaps the relationship will not be there, when she dies, but as long as she is alive I have to keep that relationship, and it has no meaning for me, I find no joy in it because I have to constantly pretend that Pritha [partner] and I don't have a relationship or our relationship does not go beyond best of friends. So they see it as a close relationship, and I have to keep up that pretense because unless I do that, I know there is going to be so much conflict and so much of other kinds of tension that will again affect their relationship with ma, and I don't want that to happen, so I constantly have to keep pretending...

Being out of the ordinary can create non-acceptance among friends and families. For instance Preet fears the fact that even if he undergoes SRS, grows beard and changes identity he will not be fully accepted, and still be pointed out as a freak. Sharmi talks of her experience:

> Every other girl dated men and I did not feel the same. I realized I was attracted to more than one woman at the same time, loud or taciturn, fair or dark...women who are polar opposites and I could not decide whom I loved more. My friends used to tease me.

A participant from project workshop 4 had something similar to share: "Like if you don't date it's difficult to be a part of a group...people will ask, oh, you're not dating?!? If someone messages me and I don't reply then slowly people will start neglecting me and will not be able to stay in a group".

COMMUNITY/ COLLECTIVE

The presence of a collective has been crucial to 'understanding' of one's own orientation and the formation of a community around that understanding as well as contributing to one's emotional wellness. The role of a collective in participants' lives has been very central in (re)defining and confirming some of their wants, desires, and political belongings. Getting in touch with a community is seen as a way out of a life situation that traps you in doing things you don't want to. Srija's mother first talked to her about Sappho when she saw how Srija was not happy in planning for a marriage and yet loved and thrived in her woman friend's company. Srija on her part was hesitant to get in touch with the group because she did not want to offend her parents. This same person who had taken a calculated risk by planning to marry a man

who would be a support took the decision to relinquish that support once she came to realize that the collective would provide a different kind of sustenance to her. In this sense, a collective provides much needed support to an individual who otherwise may not seek it or be able to achieve it through the institutions of a heteronormative system. Therefore, a collective also offers the option of creating a system of support and bonding and providing courage to the individual to opt for it outside the given structures of the natal and marital unit.

The collective often inspires people to leave behind a life they are compelled to live and move on, on their own terms. For instance after coming to Sappho, Moushumi realized she wanted this life: "I came to Sappho and gradually felt this was the life I wanted." Moushumi who never believed, despite being involved with a same-sex partner, that two women could stay together and build a relationship found the confidence once she came in touch with a collective. She was finally able to divorce her husband and live with her partner. Rimpy explained:

> I did not have an easy childhood. Then an uncomfortable feeling that I had to be with a guy even though I did not want to. I would have to get married even though I did not want to. But now I know better, I can breathe properly now [after having joined the collective]. I don't have to get a regular job like my parents want me to. My father wanted me to be an engineer, I had even scored high in the Joint exams...but I said no, every Tom, Dick and Harry is an engineer nowadays.

A collective not only creates space for the formation of a community around a group of persons who are not in heterosexual practice, but also allows one to be involved in a movement. Sometimes being involved in a movement becomes central to one's liveability. As a participant of project workshop 4, explained:

> For me *benche thaka* [living] is collectivity, staying with a group is being connected. Even if one person is unhappy then it affects the group, and this connection is important to my living. Movement is a part of my living, like the women's movement I'm already associated with and simultaneously my Sappho friends and our movement here. Every single day, not a single moment of the day am I away from the movement, beginning with using public transport for going to office...and I've kept a point here – living is going against mainstream heteropatriarchal framework.

Concern for the other, to be able to be useful to the other, in the absence or limited presence of juridical/legal support, is part of liveability. Someone from project workshop 4 said:

> ...*benche thaka*, (living) is being able to support others...which is of course people from the community but also people in general in my case. For example, this is what I was saying, a few days ago Addy was trying to change his gender in his passport for which he has to speak to Paresh and

look through the internet. So when I was talking to Paresh the first time on Facebook chat I felt that my connecting with Paresh, talking to him in English trying to help Addy—and if I didn't join Sappho in 2009 then I wouldn't have been able to do any of this...and along with this the Internet and the English language are both tools...these made me feel that I was living in a particular way.

This does not mean that the collective is a unanimous homogeneous space; emotional and intellectual conflicts are part of this space. Further, the reasons for coming/not coming to the collective are manifold. Some come explicitly to find friends and a partner, and through that they become part of the queer movement. Again, when friendship or love does not work out for whatever reason, some might also exit the collective. The collective and its vicarious dynamics in the zone of emotions, support, love and friendships often take a toll on the individual's bonding with the group as happened in Srija's case.

The collective also becomes a space where one can live one's dream of activism and collective politics. Amrapali talks about her sense of belongingness to the collective and how she wants to fuse her academic activities with the activities of the collective. A collective is therefore a space that offers one a sense of not having to pass or pretend and to engage with one's political and personal self. As Subhra explains:

> ...and I feel alive when I come to this space, interact with my friends, spend a lot of moments, good moments with friends, with whom I don't have to conceal my orientation...to me, being alive is also being able to...participate in activism and movements...and for me movements is not just street corners, meetings or protest marches. For me movement is also in thoughts. So academics, activism within the academia, teaching, classroom activism...these are very important for me to feel alive.

Subhra talks of the activist space not just in gender-sexuality but also in mental health that she inhabits and where she feels absolutely comfortable to express her sexual choice.

Belonging to a community, discovering people who are "like you" boosts one's confidence and gives recognition to your identity. For Akanksha, trying to find people like her and her partner meant feeling complete where she could share feelings, experiences and anecdotes from the parallel life she was leading. This was something she could not share with her colleagues and other friends – the joy of having found love and friendship, someone who would understand and share the joy. "They made my life worth living...I realized that their presence satisfied my sensibilities...I finally had people to share my life with." The thrill of finding similar people led her and her partner to give an interview to a leading newspaper and follow it up with setting up a post box where people wrote to them and later on came to meet them and form a support group of LBT persons. One participant from project workshop 1 shared about his experience with a collective he belonged to:

> So I came here (NBR) and first I understood my own identity, what am I... and then I was told that now I have to explain to them [friends outside and family] what I am and that it isn't a disease. I explained to them and now my friends have understood and the teasing and harassment has reduced. Friends have accepted the situation.

However, while meeting "like minded" people from the community is exhilarating, it is also important to realize that people are diverse in their thoughts and that any collective that comes together on a common thread, for example in this case, gender-sexual orientation, must not presume homogeneity and sameness. Bibi sees the small queer collective where she is working and where friendship is highly valued as enhancing her liveability because she is not one to make friends very quickly. At the same time for her belongingness is fractured. Becoming part of a collective for her comes with some assumptions that you're supposed to do some work in certain ways or behave in certain ways. "I have a problem with this prescriptive attitude in a physical space". Despite her reservations about belonging, she finds the space of the collective extremely enticing especially for people who are different and are going through the process of understanding themselves. She also finds herself drawn towards collectives as a fantastical space.

Malobika speaks of how her life and all its struggles continue around the organization that she and others (including Akanksha) have built over the years. The challenges of keeping the organization alive and kicking keep her alive through all the pain. From attending to individual personal needs to organizing politically with limited resources and personnel is the challenge she talks about. The fact that there are successes and failures along the way added by the changing political scenario and its implications for funds – all these motivate her to go on. She finds strength in the fact that the younger generation needs support and guidance and a space where others from the community can feel supported and together.

Malobika has not been able to withdraw from the daily functioning of the organization and move on to other social issues as planned earlier. Constantly building expectation and catering to them is taking a toll on the limited resources. This had led to the idea that one needs to pause and reflect, the fact that she is unable to do other things like travel, read and write is something she rues: "But it has been physically painful for me to work on weekends after weekends; I get depressed when that happens...but somehow at the end of the day, it mostly works out".

SPACE

Liveability is critically tied to the space one inhabits and comes to feel comfortable in – it creates a sense of belonging in that person. Space can be perceived as the geographical location that one inhabits as well as the emotional, collective space that one comes to occupy at various junctures of life. The notion of both

physical and emotional space is important contributor to an individual's self-identity and security. Again, space can also come across as a source of insecurity, danger and rejection depending on the nature of bonding with the location.

Geographical spaces

Living in urban areas, especially if one belongs to an economically privileged class, has its advantages. In Srabasti's case having a space of one's own in the metropolis added to her liveability. For some who live outside Kolkata, the city affords a possibility of living on one's own terms. While this is not directly related to any essential nature of urban space as inherently accepting, yet moving to another place also means moving out of the gaze of the immediate family and strategize accordingly.

Project workshop 3 consisted of persons who were from small towns and semi-urban areas in West Bengal. For a few this meant that one had to also deal with certain adversities as one of the participants from project workshop 3 explains:

> Yes...when I was young, my family's financial condition was weak, my father was a farmer and he had suffered from some mental illness which further exacerbated our problems...I live in a remote area, not many educated people around...and it's almost a miracle that I have completed my Masters degree with that background. I knew I had to change things around no matter what. I had to overcome too many adversities, there had been days when I had nothing to eat and still go to school. The school paid for my education, all the fees and books. They helped me a lot. And when I was in class seven or eight, my father's mental problem degenerated and our condition became worse...I had to stay at my maternal uncle's home nearby and continue my studies.

In our conversations participants offered interesting interpretations of how they come to occupy different spaces. Some spaces in the same geographical area could facilitate or ruin one's happiness quotient and could even become dangerous and risky to life. Vaibhavi identifies the semi-urban spaces and some spaces in the city of Kolkata as carrying a gaze that discriminates you and makes life unliveable. The gaze in her office, which happens to be a child rights organization located in Central Kolkata, disturbs her. "People are known by the company they keep." This age-old adage takes a pernicious turn when a person's queerness is easily marked out based on the attire and appearance of her companion. As Vaibhavi explained, non/mis-recognition of her partner in certain parts of the city is something that bothers her. She says:

> If I go out with a special friend, we come under too much scrutiny...why must we face that? Why the difference? So my self-respect... My work-place... if I take my girlfriend with me...I don't know if it's her getup, or because it's my office premise or since it's Central Kolkata...she's been identified as

someone different... That clashes with their idea of normal... Perhaps her short hair which I too have...our interactions, people telling me they can't identify her as a man or a woman... But it's right in the middle of Kolkata...they read newspapers, they have a regular job, they watch news...they know it all and still ask those inane questions.

Some participants identified the suburbs as not very open to non-normativity. Ishika talks about the place where she lives, located on the outskirts of the metro, to be one such conservative location. Partners also often make that distinction too. Ishika's first love who was from her locality accused her of not understanding her compulsions when she could not withstand societal pressure and succumbed to the pressure of marriage. She felt Ishika belonged in spirit to the urban space and did not understand the compelling conservatism of the non-urban.

Rimpy, who comes from the northern part of the city, identifies South Calcutta as a liberal space where according to her a woman can stay out late without restrictions or stares. She specifically talks of a friend's place in that area where she once stood on the rooftop and felt free because as she says: "There was no one to disturb me, and a big field right in front of you, no parents there...you could be on your own...". She also mentioned she feels alive when she is working or with friends and is at the film institute, her place of training. It is evident from her narration that not just topologically, a safe and nurturing space is also imagined through the presence or absence of specific people who influence our feeling of wellness.

Amrapali talks of her recent experience of shifting to another city for educational purposes but the city did not have good memories for her from the time when she was previously living in that same city and had had a traumatic relationship with a guy. She felt the absence of a space like Sappho in the city where she traveled for higher studies and which she felt lacked in feelings being extremely invested in academic achievements. Sometimes a religious majority area in a particular city can cause anxiety about safety as mentioned by Amrapali who talks about her childhood and how since they lived in a Muslim area her mother did not feel safe with her and her little sister.

Chhoto talks of how she found acceptance in her neighbourhood through bonding with people over social gatherings and pujo spaces.

Leela left the city of Kolkata for higher studies but while teaching and doing PhD in the United States, she wanted to have a different relation with the city of Kolkata, a queer relation. So she contacted a group here, became a member and started working on queer issues. This contact with a community of queer activists made her feel alive. She left her academic advantages there and wanted to stay in this country for reasons relating to her life as an academic-activist as well as to give her intimate relation a chance.

The World with It's Splendour...

Love, Trust, Sharing? Bonding; Timelessness.

Dream Paradise.

Friendship Just Friendship
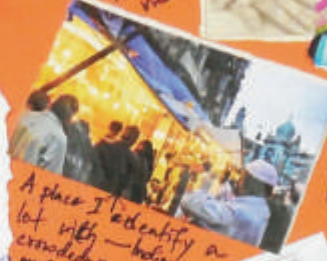
A place I identify a lot with —Indianness, crowded-ness, market-place, diversity.

Me Freedom Eroticism.

My Bookshelf, my Treasures
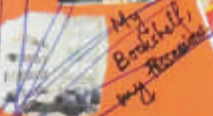
I want my words to be this colourful

Feeling Connected, Together — Express Solidarity

Reflection of Images...

A place I identify with — business urbanity flatness.

Sometimes in the park; in Recluse.

Food keeping me busy!!

Waiting to come out off Masks??

Though the picture is not explanatory what I want...

Fist Trying to Symbolise; Fight will go on

Solitary? Me & Myself.

Being Adventu

The characteristics and significance of a space change over time and through various interventions. As explained by Srabasti, "Like in Kolkata, M and A, thanks to them the scenario of homophobia has changed a bit...I mean like people have to think before saying something racist, people have started to think before saying something homophobic...like anti-Semitism...so it has become a better situation..."

Collective spaces

Collectives can become nurturing spaces as well as can represent spaces of confrontation and conflict. Spaces that come into your life as giving you an identity and meaning can also become bad memories leading you to shun that space in reality while still holding on to it in your heart. Many respondents shared that besides their home where they live together with their loved ones, Sappho is the only other space where they feel comfortable. For Srija, the space of the collective, Sappho, was welcoming because of the fact that there were so many women who were her equals, her friends with whom she did not have to play the role of a mediator – a role she has been playing with her other friends in their life crises and therefore missed being friends with. She could shift from playing elder sister to having an elder sister figure in her life. For Aparajita, joining a collective was on the advice of her psychiatrist and once she did join, slowly the world began to make sense to her little by little.

For Rimpy, the Sexuality Academy (a 5-day residential workshop on gender sexuality issues) organized by Sappho for Equality became a space where she could understand and identify her feelings and longings for her teacher about which she had no inkling before. She could come to terms with her orientation in the Academy and in the space of the support group of which she later became a member. The space also gave her the confidence to dream of a future when she can come out and introduce her partner to everyone. On the other hand, she shared how at home she simply scrapes through, survives, because her free will is not allowed there and she feels home is what it is only for her mother.

For Bibi, working in a place where everybody including her peers and seniors are as non-normative as her made her shift from looking at the job as a survival strategy (financially and otherwise) to making life more liveable. At the same time the fact that she shares a relationship with her immediate boss (one of the research team members is her biological mother) causes a collapse of boundaries, which make her life unliveable at times. The fact that people talk about her involvement in the project in terms of nepotism also hurts her.

For Moushumi, the collective space was like home away from home so even when she faced rejection from this space she stuck on. The mental space that she had co-build with the people there made her endure the brief phase of miscommunication and did not stop her from continuing till relationships improved.

Some respondents shared that besides being part of a larger collective and bonding with people there they also feel the need to spend time outside that collective with the same people; this fact raised the question whether there is some perception of the organizational space as structured with its norms that inhibit banter or 'purposeless' bonding. So a different time spent in a different space becomes important for some.

Educational and workspaces

Workplaces can take up that special significance as a tool to survive and feel alive. The same space can hold different significance for different people. For Subhra, working to earn money and being able to do something meaningful in that same job changes the significance of that space. Some spaces can become intolerant towards gender-sexual non-normativity despite being part of the social development sector, as in the case of Vaibhavi and Srabasti. While Vaibhavi shared how her colleagues remarked openly about her girl-friend, Srabasti who works in the media sector talked of the snide remarks passed by her co-workers.

Preet talked of how he was almost beaten up by guys with hockey sticks and swords in a small town where he was studying in a college because he was sitting inside a girls' common room and dressed in a guy's attire. He also shared about how he felt very alone there because he had no one like him to talk to.

A nearby university campus provides Chhoto and her friends the "oxygen in the lungs after being drowned in work the whole day". It has become part of life. The sense of anonymity and freedom attracts: "We know everything and everything knows us...there's this balance, you know? It makes us feel welcome, makes us feel at home". The fact that it is an educational institution and of a more liberal kind makes it all the more exciting to hang out there.

Pakhi would never have felt comfortable and come to terms with her own desires if she had not found the opportunity of working in a queer friendly team who was making a film on lesbian suicides. She would never have allowed herself to express her desires because of the homophobia around.

Subhra identifies some familial spaces including her partner's and friend circles and her workplace where she feels she is able to be herself without any constraints. Having a workplace that is intimately connected with issues of gender-sexuality helps, "I don't know how forthcoming I would have been if I had worked in a hospital...I never even disclosed to my friends from the medical college...I am not out to them".

The virtual space can also serve to give one a sense of solidarity and meaning when they seek and find partners and like-minded people to be able to assure oneself that there are others like me.

TIMES AND MOMENTS

In this section we talk about the urgencies of the present, the role of the past, the imagination of the future and significant moments in one's life. Most of the participants have talked about their lives as streams of time, punctuated with liveable or unliveable moments, phases where they had felt more alive or just managed to keep breathing or surviving. Therefore time came out as an important factor in deciding how liveable/unliveable one's life is or why. But the research team also felt that the time or moment when the discussions are happening, either individually or in groups, has affected the outcome as the responses often represent the mood of that very moment. Time or moments, this way, became even more complex an issue; perhaps in some other time/moment, experiences of liveabilities/unliveabilitis expressed by participants could have been different, thereby affecting the understandings of this time/moment, when the research is taking place.

There is always some appropriate time in life as expressed by some when you realize life has more in store for you. For Srija, "My whole life is a big calculation...I don't think I have ever lived for myself". For her every day was at one point of time a matter of survival with no time or space to think outside the box. Some moments (especially after failed relationships) come with the realization that the calculations in life need to be changed – the dream of a picture-perfect family with partner, kids and dog takes a back seat and you make adjustments; you tend to have zero expectation from future partners. You still dream but you don't get consumed by it.

In their timelines in the project workshop 1, participants drew the past, present and future around self-recognition of one's orientation, recognition by family and friends. Such recognition is explained through a romantic-sexual encounter with a girl (not a boy), seeing others who also felt like a boy, and being able to tell parents about oneself. Other than that, since a majority of the participants were young adults in this workshop in Siliguri, their idea of future was mostly tied to first securing their economic independence and living on their own terms. While having/finding a partner was part of their future plan, yet this was not key to most. Taking care of parents was also on the list.

The timelines explaining significant moments in specific spaces spoke about a variety of experiences, and the minutiae of bodily exploration, pleasure, sexual encounters, fantasies, pets, family violence, self-identification, friendships, and connections with a collective in spaces of home, work, and city streets.

Sumita has interestingly pointed out how her idea of liveability has changed over time. What she understood as a liveable life at one particular moment is not applicable at another moment. Liveability is time specific, she feels and therefore dynamic, which can change from moment to moment.

Relationship with the present

Some participants talked about how the present, the here and now is more important to them. As Meghna explained, "Now I live in present, future is a dream to me which can be beautiful or horrible...come what may, I can accept...whatever may come, I can take that. I don't mull over 'what-if's, that spoils the happy feeling... if I over think the past...it might depress me...time tells no lies, you see?" Anamika who has gone through a life time of struggle feels today her life is totally worth living; she finds her own life to be interesting. Bibi talks of the time she is presently facing having been part of the research for the last 8 months. The process of being with the research, introspecting within herself, the coming together of the self and the work has caused both, inspiration and therefore liveability as well as unliveabilty in her.

For some respondents the socio-political environment had important prominent effect on their present wellbeing. Akanksha talks of the present times and the escalating incidence of violence in her state which was relatively safer some years back. She feels no longer safe as a lesbian woman or for other transpersons either being alone or traveling, after dark in some spaces. When she started off with a very vulnerable core, unable to resist the hurt, but gradually achieved that power, even then she found life liveable. Subhra talks of how in the last twenty years, in the context of first the HIV/AIDS campaign, the LBT rights movement and then globalization things have changed in India for better or for worse. Talking of the Supreme Court verdict on recriminalizing Section 377 in 2013, she mentions how it created an exposure and public discourse more than in 2009 when the Delhi High Court had read down the law, "I would say there's a kind of social acceptance now...and it's not only social, even the police have supported us...more people now know that they are not alone". The overall awareness created through queer activism, books, movies (both positive and negative publicity) academic research in colleges, universities have contributed to a positive environment for most members of the queer community. She further explicates her experience in the classroom:

> At first I could not even introduce the terms lesbian, gay, homosexuality etc directly...but now the students themselves openly talk about it...this change has taken place... now in the MPhil courses there are students who are openly gay. Surely there were others before, but perhaps they were not open about it. People are much more open about their sexuality. These changes in the university space...there was a course called 'queer studies' in the English department...film festival in Kolkata, 'Swakanthey' at the book fair...these things have encouraged people to come out, to talk about themselves, to live their lives on their own terms.

Living and surviving is necessarily momentary, dependent on other people's happiness and sadness. As Meghna explained:
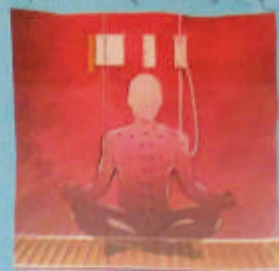
আমার কাছে...... মানে

WELCOME TO THE FABULOUS 40s.

৫ঃ এভারেস্ট অভিযান-

আন্দোলন

ভালবাসা

স্মৃতি-

আনন্দ-

ভালবাসা-
২৪ঃ ব্রীড়ানগর

Relax

Support and
Knowledge

> It's an everyday phenomenon. There are days when I am surviving, there are days when I am living...What makes a day liveable... when I am happy, everyone around me who I care about is happy. That day is a liveable day of my life. It is extremely important. If I am happy, others are not, it makes me feel very less...When my happiness collides with someone else's, it instantly makes me sad... I try to make things change, like...

Amrapali sees the present moment as completely unliveable because she is unsure of the future and at moments when something she is passionate about does not work out she feels stranded and disheartened. At the time of the interview she shared that she lives in some momentary life-situations but the general feeling is not to carry on. Rimpy links her present life with the need to feel better if and when her loved one feels confident to acknowledge her love and agree to be in a relationship with her.

Relationship with the past

Phases of Anamika's life has been difficult, especially the twelve years following her marriage during which time she says she did not have anybody to hold her hand, anybody to lean on if she wanted to cry, anybody to embrace if she experienced something nice. Yet Anamika suggests that her zest for life has never dampened. For about 12 years she has had a very difficult time, when her friends who probably knew only 10% of what was going on in her life, always asked her, how she managed to always laugh and smile. Even during such difficult times, she never lost her wish to live and to live a life worth living. During the difficult phases of her life she has felt that she has to live by surviving those moments, after which she will live life on her own terms. She finds "life is beautiful" and she never shies away from experiencing new things and seeing new places. She says, "For this [living life on her own terms], not many people liked me, but can't do anything, this is who I am, I am made like this".

Chhoto has also spent some very hard times in her 20s when she came out to her parents. The consequence was that among other things her mother went to each of her workplaces to reveal her orientation and cause her to lose the job. Sharing about his difficult times when he was coming to terms with his identity, Rahi shared how he was confined to a room for three months and he talked to himself to find the strength and courage to come out of that condition.

Relationship with/idea of the future

Dev who was transitioning during the time of the interview wants to become a biological man and then wants a good job and a future, like any biological man does. When asked his vision of what a normal life is he said:

> Like my dad goes to office, mingles with his friends, gets promoted ... my dad has always been my

role model, I have seen myself just like he goes to office and he is respected in his office, I also see myself going to the corporate world, coming back home and frankly, regarding family, I don't think about it because I do not know how... suppose I love a girl, that girl loves me. After that if I am in a relationship of course I will tell her, I don't know how she will react, and I totally hate rejection, so I do not know if I want to start a family or not... may be if someday I get someone who can accept me as who I am may be I will start, maybe I won't... I don't know about it yet.

Dev however had apprehensions about envisioning a relationship and/or family as he was not sure if, given his journey of transition, a girl would accept him.

Rimpy dreams of the time when she will be able to reach out to people through the medium of cinema and "create something that people had always wanted to watch and be satisfied after watching it. It should touch their hearts, I want people to love me, you know, to be a person people would like to talk to, share their feelings with". She believes the stigma attached to lesbianism will go away in the near future.

Some moments of crisis create a sense of insecurity about the future because they bring you face to face with your identity and vulnerabilities thereof. For Ishika, the recent demise of her father with whom she shares some characteristics brought her face to face with questions of who will be there in her times of ill health given her non-normative sexual preference:

I mean there is more security, more assurance that someone would stay with you through thick and thin in a heterosexual relationship...somebody will be there for you during your really difficult times. But with me I am not sure. I don't know if I will have anybody in my life at that juncture, where I will be completely helpless and vulnerable and I am not sure, if I can see somebody there.

Moments that mark liveability

Ishika talks of the time when she rides her bike alone as something that makes her happy. The time she spends on her bike is rejuvenating for her:

I think one thing that really makes me happy is my bike. I think it's not just a transport for me; it is my medium to connect with myself. When I drive, when I take that drive alone, I know for a fact that there are ten thousand thoughts on my head, but there is this one or two moments when I connect with myself and I don't think anything other than if I am well...I ask this question to myself every day and everyday...am I fine, am I gonna manage this well, and every time inside me I get this answer, yes, it's gonna be fine, you are not doing something really wrong, you are just trying to... I go into some kind of a self-justification mode, I try to reassure myself and that makes my life liveable. If I lose that confidence, I think I will completely lose it.

Chhoto finds the evening time most invigorating when she meets up with friends and chats up. "Not only people from my community, but also friends from the outside. We all meet up and gossip...it's refreshing after an exhaustive day". That is the time spent smoking, gossiping, teasing one another. This camaraderie crosses barriers of gender and sexual orientation and she feels free to express herself.

STRATEGIZING

Strategizing as a practice is seen both at individual and collective level. Deliberately planning a course of action to change the trajectory of a life-event or avert a crisis is a regular feature of lives living on the margins. For people belonging to the LBT (FtM) community, strategies become part of daily survival. Sometimes we make choices to strategize, not to offend sensibilities and to enhance our well-being. Respondents talked of both: how they negotiated their different life situations in their personal spaces as well as how collective strategizing becomes necessary to resist structural discrimination and marginalization.

People like Srabasti who are privileged in certain ways can use different strategies to fight homophobia. It can be as simple as just avoiding people who are homophobic and she can make that choice. Some who might come from more conservative socio-economic backgrounds might not have the freedom to make those choices. In other words, "not giving people the opportunity to judge my life" is an important strategy that Srabasti employs to make her life more liveable. Not smoking in a middleclass locality or not kissing a girl in public is part of that strategizing. For Srabasti, there is a clear division that she makes between what activities, or what spheres of her life she will share with whom. There is in her scheme of thoughts a prioritizing of people who are important, who matter. So discussing LGBT theory with a security guard might not be a strategy to increase liveability but discussing the same with mother, sister or other like-minded people where both parties will be enriched is important to her.

Strategizing comes across as moving to Kolkata, if one is living in small towns outside of Kolkata. However, this may not relate to the urban space as inherently more open, but to avoiding the questions and monitoring from one's family.

Marriage has emerged as a strategy to survive everyday insecurities in some respondents' lives. Strategizing about one's life involves negotiating one's family situation, in particular deciding about when to tell about one's sexual orientation, evade the pressures of marriage and first become economically independent. Rimpy strategizes about deferring her marriage by using the excuse of studying for another three years. But she also knows if they come to know about her orientation before that she will decide on the spot what to do in that situation. For now she wants to become financially independent before letting her family know. She explained: "Establish myself. Then I want to come out and

introduce my partner to everyone." A participant from project workshop 3, being the sole provider for her natal family, uses her role as a strategy to prevent her marriage: "And I have told them that I will only get married after my younger sister who is in college gets married". She wishes to live with her present girlfriend and hopes that her family agrees. But in case they do not relent, she plans to leave home and come to urban Kolkata, which she considers safer and people less inquisitive and interfering. Participants even shared how they give examples of other unhappy marriages among close relatives in order to stall their own marriages.

Strategizing is an important element in negotiating different life-situations and celebrating diverse needs of the self, to listen and respond to the "inner voice". For Viabhavi striking a balance between surviving and living entails being able to strategically spend time with her mainstream (heterosexual) friends circle as well as with her same-sex partner who appears non-normative in her external appearance. Akanksha identifies certain coping strategies to minimize the hurt she might feel from her close ones. She clearly identifies two layers to her self – a "core me" and an "external me". Even when the external surroundings like the social-political scenario affects her negatively she tries to keep the core self happy, and hurt-free. So she creates a shield around her, not to go into isolation but to stop that kind of hurt. Paramita talked of how she coped with the loss of her daughter by taking off to a tribal village for a month, simply walking around and reading books, trying to rediscover herself.

Not self-identifying as a lesbian comes across as an important strategy for liveability, especially in workplaces. Letting others know about one's sexuality may not necessarily be a preferred option for all participants. As a participant of project workshop 3 wrote: "I am a lesbian. As an ordinary 'girl' I am doing well. But as a lesbian I am not doing as well as I want to. The society and my family will look at me with contempt if I come out to them as a lesbian."

One participant from project workshop 5 says:

> But some instances also show that liveability may mean "hiding" our identities as and when we need to. I cannot speak up about my orientation—that I am a lesbian. It offends me and keeps me unwell the fact that I cannot express myself completely, but at times I purposely hide it especially in office-spaces to stay well. Once people come to know I am a lesbian then it may be a problem—so in a way we are doing well even when we are hiding our identities.

Subhra on her part maintains, "Some relationships are important to me...so to smoothly navigate between them, I have to subvert certain things that will actually facilitate my overall well-being, to maintain a sense of peace within myself, so I can live my relationship without anybody's interference".

She keeps up the front of being very good friends with her partner and can even go to the extent of introducing her at other times as her sister. "So I can do that whenever it's necessary. I don't have any qualms about that. There's no overt public display of affection that can single us out as lesbian couple...and we never appealed to the state that we need recognition as a couple or we want rights...we never fought on it. Property and such matters are not that important issue for us..." She admits that this subversive strategy has helped her liveability.

Other than hiding to pass as a strategy, one may also hide to avoid expectations, as a participant from project workshop 5, group discussion points out: "Another thing about hiding is when I open up in front of others about my orientation or gender identity it builds a kind of expectation towards me which I may not like so I will continue to 'hide' that".

Strategizing to dodge certain sticky situations and get your way can be creative as well. Buli shared about the time when she cooked up a story of having a boyfriend in the city to convince her room mates in her hostel to allow her girlfriend to stay with her in the hostel. Buli also talks of how she shifted to her aunt's place to avoid the "dramas" at home regarding her relationship with her partner. She introduced her partner as somebody else to prevent her family from knowing that she was going on a trip with her. For her getting a school job near her partner's home was a strategy to stay away from home and with her partner. She appeared for the exam for three years till she got a job nearer Kolkata and opted for it against her parents' wishes. Preet tried to pass as a boy in school as much as possible. So he left shirt buttons open to prove that he was a guy.

Negotiating with family members, extended families and close circles seem to be an important constituent of persistent strategizing for people belonging to non-normative gender-sexuality. Preet developed his own survival strategy. Coming from a mostly uneducated neighbourhood he did not want to limit himself to that culture and background. He educated himself, got a good job and turned the tide in his favour. People now talk to him with respect, not out of fear. To ease her relationship with her mother and extended family and to convey to them her different sexual orientation Chhoto took the help of a cousin brother who had a say in her family matters. He downloaded articles from the Internet, underlined the pertinent facts and showed them gradually succeeding in convincing them. Chhoto at this time used to carry her mark sheets with her for fear of them being destroyed by her parents. She was determined to leave home if the situation got worse and these certificates were her lifeline. One participant from project workshop 2 however, had a different take on using outside help to negotiate with family. She shared: "No third person can go and explain to families...today if I try to explain to my family about my situation only I can do it. How my family is, how they view things can be understood best by me".

Subhra shared how she maintained cordial relations with her family members other than her mother in order to not hurt her mother's feeling: "I never came out to my family directly…I never told them I am lesbian". She goes to the extent of pretending to be just friends with her partner of 7 years so that she is accepted and no frictions are created between her sister and her mother: "I have what I need…now if I confront my sister, I would have to distance myself from my mother, or my mother has to distance herself from either of her daughters or she would confront my partner instead…so in order to keep peace, we pretend to be very good friends, and we like to spend time together".

Pakhi has not come out at her workplace not because she fears being sacked, but because she does not want to face up to the derogatory remarks that might come her way once her colleagues come to know. She feels vulnerable when her partner who is an active member of the LBT rights movement introduces her to a new person who is even remotely connected to the media world (her work area). She shared one experience at her workplace where when she started working on a queer film, she was advised by her colleagues not to "turn into one of them". She feels concerned about the time if and when she is outed. She is even concerned that the interview might fall into wrong hands and she might be in trouble.

Political strategizing was an important part of Akanksha's life where she had to take a pseudo name before meeting other people like her since she and her partner both had government jobs and could not risk coming out in their true identities. Subhra believes in political activism but uses strategic negotiation to temper her politics:

> I just think that there's different time and space for that where I can make my presence felt. So if it is a street corner meeting where I have to shout about rights of lesbian women, I am there. But when it's just the two of us, in a sticky situation, I don't think I am going to shout out my activism and say I have the rights. So there I am going to take the easy way out. Unless one does that bit of strategic navigation it can render that moment and space unpleasurable, risky and dangerous. So discounting activism, these spaces within and outside your family…you have somewhat negotiated with them in order to make your life more liveable, pleasurable, hassle-free.

Chhoto provides a critique of a certain form of strategizing that takes place within specific activist circles. She talked of how people from the queer community shy away from taking a stand against other forms of discrimination and do not participate in other movements. She thinks the reason behind this is that either they want to hide themselves from public exposure or that they do not want to work outside the comfort zone of their known community. On the other hand, as she also mentioned, people outside the community take a progressive stance on homosexuality not supporting or knowing much about it, sometimes just to be politically correct.
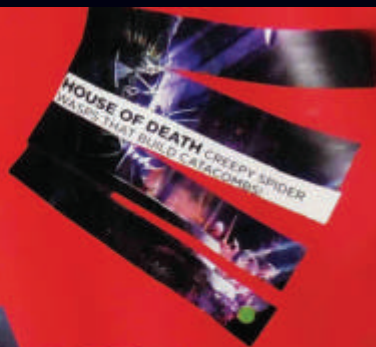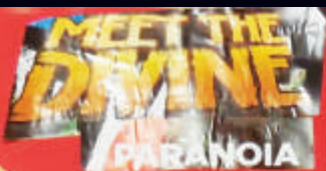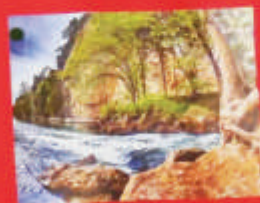
SUMMING UP

Conversations with our respondents revealed rich and diverse insights about how LBTQ persons face up to the challenges on account of their gender-sexual orientation. The lack of social and legal recognition creates a general milieu of intolerance, harassment and discrimination. Despite such challenging life-situations individuals show immense resilience and indomitable spirit to overcome adversities and creating chinks in the dominant order to survive and live. Sometimes circumstances and kinships tie them down and sometimes support systems emerge where none seem appropriate. Gender-sexual orientation comes to define and impact on all aspects of one's life, from education to intimacies, creating webs of barriers and boundaries that affect liveability. And yet, negotiating such life-situations, sometimes personally and sometimes collectively, speaks of the politicization of these marginal lives and how liveabilities are constantly created, performed/effected and reinforced. Our participants spoke of how lives are lived in the continuum of surviving and living, sometimes celebrating life and sometimes barely existing but living nevertheless.

LIVING, SURVIVING AND LIVEABILITY

Living and surviving hold different significance for different people. For people belonging to non-normative gender sexual orientations, these notions often take on difficult connotations because for some, life is an everyday struggle for survival. The notion of liveability understood in terms of living and surviving took interesting turns in each conversation marked out by rich nuances and unique creativity. During the course of the research, some tentative markers emerged to pan out liveability. However, none of these were definitive or universal. A pattern of liveability seems to be emerging though so far only the outlines are visible.

Our respondents were asked specifically what they understood by liveability and how they would describe their lives in terms of liveability. To further facilitate the process, the research team gave participants a couple of other concepts to consider – living and surviving - and the difference between the two. This was a question that indeed yielded interesting answers around not only what constitutes living and surviving but how the two are interconnected and may define one's being at the same time. Participants interpreted living and surviving in unique and creative ways and sometimes the same term came out with completely different meanings in different discussions. For instance, the terms "alive" and "living" at times signified the technical state of biological life and other times was meant to understand being in a state of wellness and happiness. Again, the term "surviving" was used to mean barely existing and at other times hinted at the struggle and pain one endures to make life worth living. Moreover, surviving and living did not always indicate a direct overlap with unliveability and liveability and often overturned the linearity that is commonly assumed.

To some, recognition and becoming part of the mainstream is meaningful. Mainstream here was understood as the majoritarian way of life where one is accepted and assimilated without having to give up one's difference; rather gender-sexual orientation while being recognized as different and non-normative becomes a non-issue and treated as an ordinary fact among many. To others invisibility grants liveability where one inhabits and becomes part of the mainstream without trying to assert difference; rather sometimes concealing difference and subverting dominant norms gives one the scope to live on. The inability to enjoy the right to live a full and free life based on the acceptance and recognition of one's gender-sexual orientation hindered liveability in some case. The absence of family understanding and support in important decisions on life was identified as hindering liveability in other cases. Seeking and

finding sustenance from various support systems was intricately tied to one's liveability. Frustration with the way one's social environment looks down upon non-normative people was identified as adding to unliveability. Being part of the community, increasing one's capacities and using them to help others from the community and outside was defined as liveability in some cases. Ability to communicate with people around, the state, society, family, etc., along with the ability to protest and resist also constituted liveability. For some, surviving meant not communicating effectively with surroundings. A participant from project workshop 4 talked of two forms of communication – one that is camouflaged and is based on a denial of gender-sexual orientation; the other that is influenced by gender-sexual orientation. She further explained, "Having a communication with myself, trying to know myself or being in connection with myself…if I cannot communicate then it is survival but if I can communicate then it makes my life liveable."

For some, surviving is giving up the sword, and withdrawing from the fight and therefore symbolised just by breathing. For some fighting can be both, surviving in order to live better some day, and living itself. "Like when we stand under the sun we get sunburn but it is that moment also when we recognise that there is a sun…", a participant from project workshop 5 commented. Some respondents from the same workshop opined that surviving was the process of trying to keep everyone else happy and becoming unhappy in the process. Respondents also talked of how one needs to move beyond personal problems and try to look at other people's problems as well. This, for them, indicates the will to collectively move towards transformation and defines life. For a participant from project workshop 4, dreaming is part of her survival because if she is fine she will have nothing to dream about.

In our conversations and group discussions living sometimes emerged as an ideal situation whereas surviving was seen as the everyday reality. At other times, surviving emerged as an alternative to living. Some saw both as co-dependent, two sides of the same coin – living is surviving, and through survival one also lives.

While in some instances participants made a difference between living and surviving, in other instances they did not, and questioned a binary opposition between living and surviving. Some respondents did not make any qualitative difference between living and surviving, either in their lives (practically) or in the course of the interviews (conceptually). Several participants destabilized the opposition between living and surviving and in a way 'released' surviving from its negative connotation. Survival in other words, does not depart from living, but is used in a generative sense to mark the emergence of what may come, rather than as something that deters the process of living. For some, it is understood as a continuum. For instance as Srabasti explains, "There's not much difference between the two… although I am not trying to be a pessimist. I am surviving well, I am not demeaning the phrase but if you consider surviving is kind of

living then…". Srabasti wanted to glorify surviving and teach the notion of living a little humility. Life is seen as a crisscrossing between living and surviving. As one participant from project workshop 4 reflects:

> Is surviving and living necessarily oppositional…living means sometimes good and surviving means sometimes negative? So we have some turmoil with these assumptions. And we started to ask ourselves what exactly we understand by these two phrases / words… and one thing we three realised is that we are confused. We think of it as a crisscrossing between living and surviving. But I don't know really how to differentiate this matter…that itself is unclear. Because every day we have to face challenges to survive and we are surviving because we're living or are we living therefore we are surviving? So facing these challenges…to both live and survive, we are unable to think of them as watertight compartments. I think liveability is about aspiration, a reminder to help me come out and overcome bad situations…that reminder is my will to live. But if I don't have a reminder and my life just continues as it is, just waking up, eating, sleeping, office, studies, then life becomes only about surviving. My drive, my reminder to stay alive is liveability for me.

Not identifying survival with negativity and living with positivity came up with several participants. One needs to survive in order to live, and the struggle that is involved in that process of survival translates to living, breathing with and through the odds. As Ipshita explained when asked what is a liveable life for her:

When you are backed into a corner…then you simply realize certain things…I will have to overcome this and there are people around me who are ready to help me out. They are pulling me, upwards. That is the sign, one sign…and a person is bound to fight back if they have even a tiny bit of will to live…it happened to me…

As Akanksha explained:

> I think somewhere down the line, surviving is proving to myself that I am alive… I am saying that I have felt alive all my life…I would say I am just surviving when in order to be alive, I have to…When I lose them all, when the ingredients that make up my life is lacking…I would say that's when I am surviving… As far as I understand…I am not comparing my present self with my past self…and it's all my sensibilities, intelligence and efficiency coming together to make me alive.

The condition of survival may also prepare for a meaningful struggle. As also highlighted by one participant from project workshop 5:

> Living equals to staying well…living also means having a life worth living, if I can achieve the life I have dreamed of then it is living. But at the same time living is also very porous – there is a movement between living and surviving. Now, surviving is when I cannot understand what is happening in my life, when I am unable to communicate, leaving me with only breathing…Now,

staying well/ unwell...living does not mean staying well – I can live but not be well, according to the mentioned definition of living... similarly surviving is not always equal to being unwell. If I am just surviving it may not be something bad because when we are struggling then the struggle itself is staying well even though it is a hard life. When I 'feel'...defeat...this feeling itself makes me well so defeat may even at times equate to being well, because defeat helps us to prepare for the next battle.

Vaibhavi paints a powerful imagery of ducking under water against a powerful downstream tide holding on to a bunch of water-plants, barely managing to keep steady, as survivng. Waiting patiently for the right moment to continue with her upstream journey is 'surviving', while the journey or the promise of the journey itself is 'living'.

The distinction between living and surviving not always being clear-cut, the very thought of it, abstracting it, can create exhaustion. Bibi finds it difficult to give examples of or make distinctions between living and surviving in her own life though she mentions that research participants knowingly/unknowingly have made this demarcation and have moved from surviving to living. She shares her inability to make these separations in reality and opines that especially when someone is living queer and complicated lives, reality does not give us a clear distinction between the two. She also identifies the desires inside her to get well when she is unwell as helping her understand that there is a difference between the two. She also challenges the idea that survival is bad and living is all good and so finds it all the more difficult to make the separation. She asks if being well can necessarily be equated with living. That it is possible to live while surviving or just survive as and when we live. She talks of how at the beginning the research team had to bring out the difference between the two in order to explain what liveability means. She thinks this distinction is just for the sake of the research; in real life, it is neither about just survival or about just living. She also asks if people who come to the interviews whether really bother about liveability and whether the project is at all practical in that sense.

Liveability, familiarity and comfort

There have been various enriching interpretations provided by respondents on what for them entailed living and surviving. For instance liveability comes from familiarity, a condition that does not challenge or put to stake your survival, your sexual choice, identity and practices. The familiarity of one's surroundings as also one's comfort and negotiation with sexual identity and choice and feeling "privileged" through all these creates a confidence that enhances liveability. Familiarity also gives rise to certitude: "Being comfortable with the knowledge for the last 20 years that I am a lesbian" is what makes life liveable for Srabasti who summarizes surviving thus, "I appreciate beauty, intelligence in a woman...beer, music, books, work...I am free to do what I like...I would have shrivelled up and died otherwise". And all this she gets from herself, her friends and everything around her.

LIVING, SURVIVING AND LIVEABILITY

The comfort of recognition and acceptance is important. As one participant from project workshop 4 said, "Living is living with my own gender-sexual identity with pride, that I belong to the alternative sexuality." Participants in some cases were asked what keeps them well to which respondents from project workshop 3 answered, "Being able to see myself as I want to in front of other women and in front of the mirror." Asked what things are needed to stay well, participants from the same workshop said, "If we get 'encouragement' instead of 'questions' when we're in public." Another participant commented "Getting to know myself, accepting that I am 'different', without this I couldn't stay well. Rebelling on a daily basis is tiring but then I feel that without fighting I can't stay well. This conflict has kept me alive somehow." Acceptance of one's gender-sexual identity by parents and the larger society gives happiness and it is seen as making life liveable. Right to have a woman-woman relationship akin to that enjoyed by man-woman relationship enhances everyday liveability. Vaibhavi defines living as being with the person of love and being loved back, having a secure place, work, travelling and financial stability. Rahi needs a strong support system (which he does not have presently) and a secure financial condition to feel alive. He also marks heartfelt acceptance "like a normal human being" as important, "Like if I have a crush on a girl, I would want my friends to tease me about it without any denigration, you see?" Rahi loves spending time with friends, paint, listen to music and dance and wants to stay near the sea beach or mountain top. This is something he dreams of and cannot live now since he does not have the means.

For some, the mere act of existing – being alive and not dead – comes with the sheer hope of being able to live a better life. For Preet, feeling alive is breathing, going through each day at a time and trying to find freedom. At times, living came across as basic as breathing, but yet not as only a biological realization but perhaps as being conscious of one's existence, as suggested by one participant from project workshop 5:

> to me personally living is as basic as breathing. At the Everest expedition when I turned around and saw the avalanche come towards us I knew inside I was going to die. As I was stuck behind a rock I felt just one thing—I am breathing therefore I am alive. The moment I feel that I am not being able to breathe I realise that I am not alive.

Liveability is also tied to the comfort of the routine and the ordinary. Being able to live like everybody else with similar rights, privileges and the same mundaneness of an ordinary life provides you with the comfort of being part of the 'mainstream'. Getting up every day to go to work and earn money is surviving and this form of surviving is necessary to live as one wishes to. For a participant from project workshop 4, surviving-living is also about buying an apartment, having a domestic life, daily marketing, and wearing clothes, like everyone else. Participants of Project Workshop 5 agreed that being able to afford and sustain our lives like arranging food, shelter and clothing is what makes life liveable. Surviving to them is attempting to live lives "well" through all the hardships, movements and revolutions. Besides, creating

friendships and bonds with people around as human beings also make lives liveable.

Liveability is often relative, calibrated according to the support structures one has in order to live a different life. In other words, as one participant from project workshop 1 puts it simply, "Having a life without any obstacles is a life worth living." In project workshop1, we had shown a short SFE produced fact-finding documentary on the double suicides of two women in a village in Nandigram, West Bengal, with the objective of generating a conversation around liveability and survival. A participant after seeing the documentary said the following:

> After watching this I feel somewhere that maybe the life that we are living is not so bad. We have support somewhere that our being with another girl is at least not being challenged. What happened to those girls (in the documentary), their meeting and interaction was forcefully stopped. From here I'm feeling I'm living a better life than them at least.

Sometimes struggles are part of life and self – reflexivity becomes important to take decisions and remove blocks but all this adds to an overall sense of being more alive than surviving. For Rahi, honestly expressing self, holding on to what one loves and enjoying life makes one feel alive. "Survival is fighting for your life and you feel alive after the fight is over. I am living that stage now." One participant from project workshop 3 said:

> I want to have fun...I want to cry when I want to...do what I feel like doing ...but this life ... I have never said this to anyone before...it's so painful to live at times...I cannot just give up and leave if I want to, once I felt death would be better.

The drive to end one's life may not necessarily be because of the absence of recognition, but may be as in this situation because of a break up of a relationship, even when acceptance from family is present. The same participant continues:

> I am somewhere in between living, surviving and not living...I was so committed to her...I think love is the trust, the notion of belonging to someone no matter whom you have been with...I trusted her even though I knew she might leave regardless...I still felt like dying again and again. My family validates my existence...they know I say what I mean...I have their trust...it helps me live...

For Sumita even a hard life can become a life worth living for. Living indicates a meaningful life, anything that adds new meaning to life. On the other hand, surviving is "carrying on with daily life in the hope that one day I will live the life I want to". As Sumita explains:

> Living is something meaningful, a meaningful life...it need not be all sunshine and puppies, but something, good or bad, that adds a new meaning to my life, then even if I lead a hard life, it would

be a life worth living for. And as for surviving, we cannot just divide life into good and bad, the world is not black and white...so surviving is the daily life I lead, a strategy to go on...I cannot live the way I want to at this moment, it's wishful to think everything will go my way whenever I want it to. But I live on hope, and that's how I survive. I ready myself, and I go right back up no matter how many times I have fallen down. So it's a positive thing for me.

Reaching a stage of not judging herself and not being judged gives a sense of liveability. Having gone through attempts to self-destruct, Sumita felt alive at the moment of negotiating with the self that survived. As she points out, "Living or surviving, why should either matter if I had no wish to live at all?" According to Subhra, forcing oneself to do things which are otherwise meaningless and a source of discomfort but necessary nevertheless, is to survive. Living is going with the flow, using available resources to make it meaningful. Subhra does not have a set of fixed criteria and finds meaningfulness to vary according to context. She finds meaningfulness in things that effectively appeal to her, intellectually appease and make her feel comfortable. Something that is in sync with her thoughts, ideology, and philosophy gives her happiness.

Sometimes being part of everyday life and going with the flow can be an important survival tactic that embodies liveability. Bibi talks of the time when she took up the job of Research Assistant in the current research project as a survival strategy because she was feeling "very useless" and wanted to come out of the "chilling out" phase that was proving to be too extended. As she mentioned, "Fact that I got this job was a combination of survival and the understanding that it is going to be a part of my liveability...making my life better, perhaps." However for Paramita, normative, run-of-the-mill life is not liveable. For her, a materialistic life is not worth remembering. Fighting itself is life. Having made a journey through different political ideologies like Marxism, ultra-left politics, feminism etc. has helped consolidate her alliances with queer feminist practice and given a perspective on life. Having friends, inhabiting different spaces, staying close to mother, though not on talking terms, friends, collectives are all factors in her liveability.

Talking about the meaning of life, Sumita says, "It depends on one's perspective. It's not an absolute term". At each juncture of life, the meaning has to be negotiated through different life circumstances. "Getting involved with X at 22 and getting involved with Y at 52 could have the same meaning but now I know a meaningful life would be where I firmly remain at the centre of my life. My partner's needs are definitely important, but nothing would control my life. It's important for me to live my life on my own terms." Being involved in a movement, being able to contribute to the changes in queer scene in Bengal, sharing intellectual space with colleagues, being able to undertake adventure trips despite frail physical health, having a support system in terms of daughter, partner and friends gives her the will to go on in life.
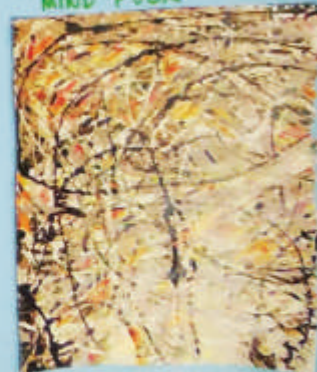
Liveability and emotional state

Liveability depends on one's emotional state. People do not necessarily identify their internal emotional state as interlinked with their external environment and thereby contributing to their liveability. On being asked how one is, people found it a difficult question to answer sometimes, while at other time, respondents gave a clear assessment of their state of mind. Pakhi, for instance replied, "okayish" and on further prodding explained it to mean "the way life goes on" with its ups and downs.

Balancing societal and familial pressure and preserving the self in between marks one's liveability. For a person who is educated with a job, and basic necessities being fulfilled, emotional support goes a long way to increase liveability. A support system and a safety network where one would not be pressurized to do things one does not want to is an important factor in emotional sustenance. When one is feeling happy one likes to spend time with oneself and feels complete doing mundane daily things on one's own. Living beings as well as various tangibles and intangibles go into determining what constitutes living and surviving. Pleasure, sex, photography, films, poetry, travel, good food, cooking, participation in protest are some of the tangibles and intangibles that participants brought forth in their discussions around liveability. As one participant from project workshop 4 explains, "Cinemas and books are there for survival, but for me it is also a part of my living. If there is a lot of frustration in my life, I can get rid of it by reading books... but just the opposite of this is in my case. Like she [another participant] said dreaming, for me if I don't dream how will I survive?" She further added, "Another important point for me is living is sexual relations.I think this is very important...uhh...this may sound bad but...sex is very important for me. I like doing sex, and ...without sex, how do I put it...I can't live."

Talking of how photography sustains her, another participant from the same project workshop explained, "When I take photographs all my senses are at work. I think it is a photograph that helps me explain the best what I see. In these moments I think I live spontaneously...I don't think about anyone, I do it for myself so I stay well."A third participant from the same project workshop added, "*Benche thaka* (living) for me is to write poetry for someone, to recite poetry, and to be able to say to the person that I'm writing for her. Just this much. I mean most of the time we are unable to say; it just remains unsaid as poetry, so being able to say this is living."

A good life to some is relative as well as impermanent. It can change anytime and is dependent on contingencies located both internally and externally, for example, one's mood and one's life circumstances. When asked how she was feeling at the time of the interview, Meghna described her state as "fine" because she has mental peace apart from few minor setbacks which she does not let bother her. Her state of happiness overshadows all negativity and she believes in living in the present. Not mulling over the past too much is a way for her to understand and practice liveability. However, some emotional

scars remain forever. In her case the misinterpretation by her school teachers of some poetry written to another girl with whom she did not have feelings other than sisterly made her want 'to kill her teachers', a feeling of hatred she still retains, even at the time of the interview.

Feeling optimistic in spite of all negatives makes one feel alive and living. As Mousumi shared:

> I mean 'I live' means how I enjoy my life. Of course there are bad elements and if I focus on the question whether I am enjoying my life or not then yes, I am. People who are with me, their situations affect me too but it's not that it's all bad. I am trying to enjoy my life the way I can...I introspect. I go over my actions at the end of the day and try to find and subtract the negative elements...I try to do things which I think will make me better.

Respondents have also talked of a state where one is constantly standing on the brink of a breakdown and then convincing oneself that you are stronger than this. Rahi for instance is his own inspiration and he often talks to himself to find strength. While this helps in moving on, often it does not result in doing anything productive or creative in order to feel alive. Relationships often become the backbone of one's negotiation through stressful times. As one participant from project workshop 5 said, "I am living and surviving through my unwellness. But my queer relationships do have the potential to make me forget momentarily the pain of a life that discourages my existence on a daily basis." Even during their individually unique difficult times, participants talked about how a certain stubbornness and obstinacy to live, to get out of those difficulties made life worth living. This stubbornness translated into the will to not only live, but live a life worth living, even during difficult phases of one's life. Ipshita locates liveability at that moment when you are cornered and you realise you have to overcome this state with help of people around you. The sign that a person has even a tiny bit of will and is ready to fight back is a sign of liveability. Surviving on the other hand, is bearing everything in silence, as her mother did, persevering against every obstacle life has thrown at her.

On the other hand, clinical depression and not being able to accept it adds to unliveability. Leela tries to analyse her feeling of being both stressed out and happy in terms of its link with feeling alive. Her life moves between feeling stressed, anxious and having a good time and she feels alive through all these at certain moments. For her, feeling alive carries a positive connotation – "full of energy and meaning". She explains,"If somebody asks me the question that ... do you feel alive? I will never say I am alive, I will say that I will feel alive in certain moments. Rest of the moments I don't." Being connected both emotionally and cognitively with the world around is what makes one feel alive according to her. But Leela feels she reacts only cognitively and not emotionally and so she is alive only in certain moments. Thus, at the moment of being affected by any positive or negative event around her and concerning her or her close ones, she is surviving, i.e., she is technically alive but not connected to the world. She might feel the

emotions but is not necessarily connected and can easily shut down as a defence mechanism. To be able to disconnect physically and psychologically is her way to survive. "To me my sense of being alive is the ability to feel certain emotions...being alive is being able to be in connection with my outside with this range of emotions." This dissociation affects her work, passion – her academics and in the process, her identity causing her pain. Leela also mentioned that she feels better connected with people than with herself because she gets results from her efforts which she does not when she engages with herself. Her relationship with a woman and coming to terms with her sexuality and working on issues related to gender-sexuality allowed her to feel alive and became one of those moments of living. She also feels alive with her interactions with students, her work at the interface of academics and activism but at the same time the feeling that she is not doing adequate work displeases her; she tries to be at peace by giving herself more time. Her decision to move countries, to take the stress of new adjustments, to work on issues that are important to her in this location and to try and forge a sustainable relationship with her current partner makes all this worth the risk. Talking of unliveablility she says, "it's very funny, I live in moments of liveability but there's nothing unliveable at this moment." Talking of enhancing liveability, she sounds apprehensive and locates it only in an uneventful life and the daily routine of running of life. "If I spend quality time with my partner, that also enhances my liveability...meeting an old friend this semester...sex..." Looking at the general concept of liveability through this project makes her hopeful and proud to be part of this endeavour.

Liveability and economic stability

Economic solvency ensures survival. Respondents shared that even if there is nothing else in life in terms of a meaningful relationship, intimate companionship or a support group, one can still live, travel and party and for that one needs to be monetarily stable. In other words, indulging the self helps boost one's confidence in the choices one has made in life regarding one's gender sexual identities. Such choices could alienate them from their loved ones and create adverse life conditions and /or lifetimes of struggle. To live on one's own terms is also connected to certain advantages that one is able to enjoy because of one's economic position in life. As Moushumi explained, "Now I live on my own, I earn, I drive all night, I am used to a certain degree of comfort...I shy away from people who are too homophobic for my taste. It's my choice."

Earning money becomes a survival strategy for some where the work or the space is not up to one's satisfaction or comfort. Then the fact that the money earned helps provide various perks makes life liveable. Sometimes belonging to a good/ upper socio-economic background, not having to worry about work or accommodation adds to liveability. Vulnerabilities and insecurities surrounding one's non-normative gender-sexual practices and identities are sometimes so stark, as in the case of Shrabasti, that earning a good amount becomes a comfort zone that can provide protection against material dearth and social rejection.

Liveability and relationships

Finding people who are like you, who do not consider you as abnormal or ridiculous, who will support you, adds to the liveability quotient. Those people could be friends, could be part of an organization, even a support group or even colleagues. Interpersonal communication and connectedness is an important peg in understanding liveability. Both romantic and non-romantic/erotic intimate relationships sustain lives as well as your sense of who/what you are? Interestingly, living alone is surviving for some and living for others. Relationships formed on basis of trust and mutual respect are important for liveability. On one hand, trust in love and romance, and on the other hand, family's trust in her/him validates her/his existence and this trust helps one to live on. Identities are often understood and lived in respect to the intimate partner. And sometimes with change in sexual partner's identity the person can feel confused about her own identity. Sometimes this confusion in identity can become detrimental to liveability. Finding compatibility in intimate relationships in terms of sharing same value system and reflecting your world view in different ways was shared as a way to feel alive. For Appy, the presence of a partner who understands and is compassionate would definitely make life liveable but the corollary is not true for her.

For Vaibhavi, living is when she is hanging out with her mainstream (heterosexual and cisgender) friends because in that circle, she does not have to fight for anything, is not identified separately and/or does not face discrimination. Hanging out with her girlfriend is more like surviving to her. The balance is between easier opportunities and levels of comfort. She explains that when she looks at a man and a woman holding hands or walking around without attracting undue attention, she feels bad about not being able to enjoy that same privilege with her girlfriend. As she said, "I feel...when I see that guy easily settling down with a woman or when a guy holding hands with a woman in public...why can't I do that with the person I love? What have I done wrong? It's not that I don't love xxx, but there are some things that are out of my control...I feel confused, uncomfortable...I try to keep myself busy with work..." However, she does not identify surviving with negativity and living with positivity.

Friendships based on identities are seen as fragile as in the case of one participant from project workshop 3. Perhaps relationships forged on identities get transformed the moment those identities are challenged or get transformed through various life situations. This participant was friends with a similar appearing, gender non-conforming person in school like him. At a point when she was married off, he could no longer trust her with his secrets having now identified her as belonging to the 'opposite camp' i.e., heterosexual and femme. One respondent from project workshop 3 shared that she did not willingly share her identity beyond her community to protect herself and her partner from being the butt of jokes.

For Buli, life is good because her identity and her partner have been accepted by their families and friends.

In her words, "Yes, I don't feel alone...I love my life, and I don't have to live a life which is a lie". Ishika identifies both love and stability in a relationship as absolutely necessary for making life liveable. She talks of being responsible in interpersonal relationships especially where there are two romantic intimate persons in life. She also identified good communication in relationships that matter, as important for a liveable life. The description of a liveable life for Ishika is:

> I think...a chilled out life which doesn't need too many people, but very few important people, some real good connections with some really intense people, like friends who I called friends, my mother—happy, satisfied and calm. My job, where I have to figure out what I want...perhaps a cosy little family. I don't want to marry in a normative sense...live together in a simple, monogamous relationship...that's all I want to do.

People are often scared to prioritise self even though they want to and see it as a way to their liveability. Sometimes being more concerned about what others expect of you rather than focusing on your own needs gives you an escape route, and can be helpful. Sometimes, the fear of losing loved ones if they do that can lead to becoming lonely. The death of a near and dear one causes you to look back on your life and see what you would want not to happen in your life and relationships. In Ishika's words, "If I only knew what I want...I think life would've been much more liveable. If I just knew what I want then I could live well...I know what people want from me, I don't know what I want from myself".

Not being able to communicate to parents the need to be happy on one's own terms and seeing it in conflict with parental happiness are detrimental to one's liveability. In this context, Preet talked of his struggle to balance between his responsibilities towards his parents' well being and their non-acceptance of his trans-identity. He felt conflicted in trying to negotiate between the two kinds of emotions. He makes a poignant statement when he said that along with his sex-reassignment surgery his parents also need a surgery of their thoughts, emotions to make his transition successful. He also felt hurt by his mother's description of his multiple breakups as prostitution.

For Chhoto, moving beyond one's community, reaching out and helping people, getting involved with various people from different backgrounds, irrespective of orientation is an important ingredient to increase liveability. She believes creating bonds with neighbours over other matters in life invisibilises one's orientation and creates a veil of acceptance. Even in those times when her family was not by her side she did not give up on life and wandered around clutching dearly to her academic certificates. At those times her thoughts were if in case she has to leave home and family she will have to survive and build her life again.

For Subhra, living certain relationships with family members because of being tied by blood and kinship

but not finding any meaning in them is surviving. Not being able to live on one's own terms in work or relationships is surviving. Spending time with friends where she does not have to pretend is being alive.

Paramita when asked how she felt shared, "I am functional I guess...I am happy, having fun as well as grieving". For her, the presence of her daughter is a big factor that adds to her liveability. Living a different life, and being open to her daughter about her non-conforming/different lifestyle, she was considered to be a bad mother but she tried to keep her daughter happy and that mattered to her most.

For Pakhi, her present relationship makes her feel alive which for her is feeling happy inside. "If it's a day off, watching rain on a rainy day...we have tea, cook together". Spending time together doing mundane household chores, planning travel when they save enough money or reading books to each other and sharing their work – all this makes her realise that her life would become unliveable in her partner's absence.

Friendships are an important part of our lives that can support and nurture us through various difficult phases of life as well as sustain us through the daily needs and crises. For members of the queer community especially, friends are an important support system because in most cases the natal family turns their face away and there is no marital family to fall back on. So friends become family and more. As Subhra explicates:

> Friendships are important to me, something that supports me unconditionally. I am fortunate to have those friends who have been with me, or I have been with them throughout. The communication between us has withered and prospered again and again...we have been able to restart as if we have never been stopped in between.

Marriage emerged as a way to ensure survival in many respondents' narratives. As Srija shared, "I thought if I were to live, I must get married." Again, respondents also talked of how it created impediments in liveability. For a participant from project workshop 1, who is married and living with her husband, liveable life is:

> I stay with my husband here...and the entire time that I spend with him I fight! The way I've been brought up all my hopes are not resting on him...I want to stay independently. I am earning, you are earning, and we don't have to have any say in that...you stay how you want to and you let me stay like I want to. I think this is having a liveable life for me. I want to live on my own terms.

One participant from workshop 4 provided a different notion of wellness by suggesting that society needs to be open, acceptable and flexible about all relationships, not just same-sex or opposite-sex relationships. Such a congenial environment where no relationships will be valued higher than the others contributes to her wellness.
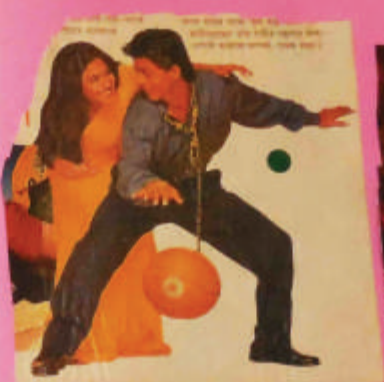
Liveability and spaces

Spaces can be nurturing and safe or hostile and restrictive. One's liveability is intimately tied to how spaces interact and impact individual lives. Some respondents talked of the city of Kolkata and its different regional locations with their specificities of cultural moorings and socio-economic character and how that impacted openness and tolerance towards gender-sexual non-normativity. In one sense, it seems that living in Kolkata, an urban area may afford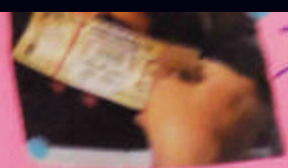 more opportunities to participants to live a meaningful life. Yet in the case of Dev, who is from a small town in West Bengal and is studying in Kolkata, it seems that the support of friends and parents in his home town is crucial to his well-being which he is not sure he will find in Kolkata. As he explains:

> When I go back to my hometown, I have a busy social life...but here I just go to college, after that I don't hang out. Unless I have gone through my whole transition, there is a kind of lack of space... So until I get my surgeries done I am not really sure whether to hang out with people who don't know my history.

Respondents related in different ways to their workplaces. Importantly, being comfortable and accepted at the workplace with your orientation, being able to share information about non-normative/alternate sexualities adds to the liveability quotient. For Pakhi, working on a team that made a queer film made her life more meaningful and liveable though the film dealt with people whose gender-sexual orientation had brought them to the brink of suicide repeatedly. Besides, doing meaningful work as part of your profession can be fulfilling. Meaningful work has been defined in this case as finding a harmony between the work you do and the ideology you believe in. Again, keeping the space constant liveability varies at different moments with the kind of work you are engaged in; keeping work constant variation in space can affect liveability. As one participant from project workshop 4 said, "Yes in a different office maybe the [same] work would be part of my liveability but because I dislike the workspace it remains a part of *tinke thaka* [surviving]". Being in charge of a project/assignment, getting an opportunity to get away from familiar surroundings, getting solitude, comfort and the time to be on your own and think—all these ensure liveability for Srija. Interestingly, having talked about feeling alive in a relationship and a job that is satisfying, Srija when asked whether she was surviving or living, said, "I am trying to survive." Some workplaces that apparently project openness and tolerance can turn out to be homophobic. The media world emerged as one such important example where even if they do not abuse you upfront, they turn you into a private joke because of your sexuality. The work culture of the corporate world with its accompanying sycophancy holds a different threat to liveability besides its lack if sensitivity towards non-normative gender-sexual expressions.

Educational institutions emerged as a space of discipline and punishment as far as gender and sexual non-conforming behaviour is concerned. Teachers in school often discipline children about appropriate sexual behaviour like kissing and expressing love for people of the same gender. This complete intolerance for what is a natural expression of love and experimental intimacy has in many cases precipitated self-realization, and in other cases resulted in self-doubt.

Often 'don't ask don't tell' serves well to increase liveability as in case of Ishika. During her college days being part of an all-women's college she felt safe as no one knew about her sexuality. She enjoyed the freedom of being openly flirtatious with women without raising any questions or reactions. However, when she was finally able to tell her friends they turned out to be supportive of her sexuality.

For Subhra, participating in movements in different spaces as well as practising her politics through teaching in the classroom makes her feel alive. She also mentioned the importance of continually engaging with these different intellectual and social spaces to build more acceptance and encourage rethinking of the familiar. She says:

> The kind of researches that are happening now, some kind of acceptance within the academia...a special kind of social space is being created...through movies and such...if it's not public acceptance then public focus which can lead to acceptance...it encourages people like us to be a little more open about ourselves.

For Malabika, happiness depended on the space she inhabits and the people around her. She mostly finds elements of liveability in her organization. The workplace on the other hand, affects her survival. Her job provides her with the means to afford a certain life; however, her passion lies with her NGO and she feels guilty and conflicted for being more focused on her organization than at her workplace which actually is her means of sustenance.

Not having a space or somebody to talk about your crises makes it difficult to cope. Sometimes a friends' collective fails to play that role if both your friends and your intimate others belong to the same space. People then identify themselves as just surviving from one day to another.

Liveability and time

Time plays an important role in marking out significant difference between surviving and living. For instance, the excitement of anything new, whether relationships or jobs, appears in all its novelty and possibilities thereby bringing charm and happiness, according to our respondents. With time the same job or relationship can become a sore point in life and impact on one's liveability. Liveability is also assessed through good and bad times spent. Meghna sees liveability and survival in terms of days, "There are days

when I am surviving, there are days when I am living". For her a day is made liveable when everyone she cares for around her is happy along with herself. She explains thus:

> Like...if I don't spend the Valentine's Day with my boyfriend, it makes him really unhappy, but if I spend the day with my girlfriend, it makes me immensely happy. So what I do is...it would be a kind of happiness with an empty feeling...so to achieve happiness properly what I do is, I am with my girlfriend for half. For the other half, I try to compromise my own happiness for a bit.

Rimpy makes a definite distinction between surviving and living. She describes her present life to be living. Her previous life comprising her childhood days and the time when she was in a reluctant relation with her boyfriend whom she feared having to marry was more like surviving. But when she was able to take a few decisions on her own like choosing a career of her preference, despite father's pressure to become an engineer, she started living in actuality; the fact that she is able to decide not to do a regular job in deference to her parents' wishes, and is pursuing a training that will let her fulfil her dream to reach people through her work, makes her feel alive.

Akanksha identifies the fulfilment of physical, organizational, familial and personal needs as constitutive of her sense of wellbeing. The political scenario especially in the context of right wing forces gathering strength at the national level and the rising violence in the state makes her feel "sick". She relates surviving to that phase when her father passed away and she struggled to support her family of mother and younger brother. In her words, "When I lose them all, when the ingredients that make up my life is lacking...I would say that's when I am surviving". Living for her is having a wall behind your back "so that nothing can surprise me from behind...but it is not the same as being cornered."Amrapali who is going through a bad phase in her academics when asked what liveability to her is replied that she was not even sure if she wanted to live on. For her everyday is a struggle to even survive. Paramita, on the other hand, does not believe in scraping through, she lives with the moments of unliveability. She thinks people should look into the undefined pain that remains after we get our rights.

Pain can also contribute to liveability. Some criteria that would otherwise qualify as liveability markers get overturned as in this case but that does undermine liveability. In some cases the giving up of these markers itself has enhanced liveability.The knowledge that one can fulfil one's dream of becoming a boy in real life comes with the hope that embodies liveability for some. One respondent from project workshop 3 has this to say:

> I used to dream that I would wake up and find that I had turned into a boy...and then I come to know that that can happen in real life, I thought I was born again...I don't have a fixed place to live, no guarantee of jobs, been disowned by my family...but still I am happy. I need a life partner, but I have time for that...I am happy now.

The future holds elements of liveability for some even if the past and the present appear less liveable. For Akanksha, the long years of organizational responsibilities have made her mentally tired and bored and being scientifically inclined she yearns for new discoveries, new ventures. To rid herself of saturation, she plans to do new kinds of research in the future that would be outside the usual purview of her organizational work. Malabika rues the fact that she cannot differentiate between her personal and professional life and that makes her feel less happy. She says:

> My life is not my own anymore. Like I don't have time to spend with my mother, spend as much time as I would wish with my partner...I have to allot that time for Sappho, I cannot spend enough time with them even if I want to, and that hurts very much. I must ask myself if my political entity is overwhelming my personal self...I applaud people who can compartmentalise these things...I had to plan a year ahead that I would take a vacation of twenty days, and I am happy that I did.

Bibi describes herself as conflict-ridden person and that makes her grow and the feeling of growing is what makes her life liveable. She rejects the given notion of liveability understood in terms of good and bad times spent. She opines that one is compelled to look for pockets of liveability exactly at the moment when one is in an unliveable environment. For Bibi, the rest of her life is going to be thus:

> It's either going to be largely unliveable with pockets of liveability or it's going to be largely liveable with pockets of unliveability. Society tells me that this structure of a good life, you know, is a good job, a good partner, being true to yourself, being true to your friends and family; so this is what I think is liveable life for me. I don't know what is a liveable life for me...the heavily unliveable parts of my life is the most liveable thing, otherwise my life is so redundant, you know. I wake up in the morning, I brush my teeth, I go take a shower, I do potty, I come to office, I eat something...what is this! This is so redundant. What is the meaning of this?

Drawing a parallel between her life and the research on liveability, she talks of how stumbling upon some realization in regard to an interview that reflects on her life, she feels shattered at that point in time, at the same time making it the most liveable moment as well.

Liveability and the State

The state and its institutions impact liveability in pernicious ways especially for people of the LBTQ community since so far their legal status is ambiguous at best and criminal at worst. Section 377 and the social political climate that we inhabit at this time is a major issue that recurred in some conversations. The law of the land that does not recognize homosexuality and obstructs people from legally living together with their partners is an important factor in hindering liveability. Section 377 of the IPC does not affect all personally in living life on one's own terms on an everyday basis, but may pose a problem at

times and is also politically problematic. As Anamika explained, "In my life this does not affect me so much. But in a political sense it bothers me." When asked if law is important – either in the form of positive rights, or as something that criminalizes – to her liveability, Anamika says:

> At a personal level this has not affected me directly but...if I want to walk hand in hand with a girl there may be a problem, now this is obviously an issue for me. Today if I want a partner, and I don't have my partner's gender now, that person may not be a man, or even be a woman, I don't care what gender the person is but if s/he looks like a woman and if my staying with this person is not accepted then it will affect me. Because at this moment I'm not staying with anyone it's not yet an issue in my life—but if I do then naturally my life will be affected. Directly it doesn't bother me but law is an issue in my life of course.

Akanksha in her turn explained:

> I am not worried about myself, because I don't know what danger I might be in, and if my orientation creates some problem, I don't think it would affect me much, but other people with the same orientation are afraid of being persecuted so that still affects me...I am almost fifty now, I probably won't have to face physical violence at my age. Not because I am physically strong, but perhaps my socio-economic status acts as a safeguard.

Malabika as an active member of the LGBT rights movement in India places importance in legal reform as contributing to bring changes in family attitudes and in the state and education approaches (including medicine) to the issue of gender and sexuality. Participants from different project workshops shared how after the 2009 Delhi High Court verdict, they found courage to start living with their same-sex partners.

While 377 may not affect one personally yet it may if one moves out of one's familiar place. As Chhoto explained:

> I interact with so many people...I might face problems from my field of work...perhaps not now, but nobody can guarantee the future. And yes, nobody impedes my personal lifestyle but if I have to relocate to some other city for work, I don't know if I might face problems over there if I want to live together with a woman...so I would definitely want it to go away. Not every place would be kind to me.

Law makes life more liveable for Rahi because it allows him to take care of family, friends and partner financially but he does not want the law to dictate all areas of life and feels there should be space for reconciliation. He does not let Section 377 affect him because he does not accept its existence. He dreams of helping others when he has enough money especially old people and kids who are homeless and

also wants to adopt a child. Thinking beyond legal sanction he wants to spread the awareness so that parents don't deny their children happiness and wants to utilise the time productively.

The law for a person like Dev, who is undergoing transition is important. As he explains while airing his concerns about his birth certificate showing that he is a PAGFB:

> because unlike America and Australia, even in European countries, your birth certificate gets legally changed, but not here. I don't know why but this creates a problem, because wherever I go, my birth certificate would make people realize and they would be prejudiced, like okay this person is a transman. I don't know why the law doesn't change this; this should be changed, totally.

The desire to live a life that is worth living is not always tied to the presence or absence of a law. It is tied to individual circumstances, the need for recognition, acceptance and presence or absence of support from family, community and collective and the general optimism that one harbours around living. It is tied to being able to live in an environment that is meaningful. As Moushumi explains who lives with her partner in her partner's apartment, "I have a flat but I don't live there because I can't see the sky, but my partner's flat, the ambience is beautiful…" Being able to be engrossed with nature, makes one's life liveable. One also realises that legal recognition is not enough. For Chhoto, living her dream of everyone being alive and happy together is what sustains her:

> There are so many people who remain unaware…people I know who live this insular lifestyle, who are confined within their own community and disapprove interactions with heterosexual people…there's this huge lack of faith and knowledge prevailing in our people and if that no longer remains unchecked…we would not have to conduct seminars, hold talks, give presentations…we would be able to reach each other irrespective or orientations and exist as human beings…I dream that.

For those wishing to change their names after having going through SRS, the response of state agencies is a crucial marker of unliveability. For a transman undergoing SRS the cooperation of legal authorities becomes a determining factor to complete the process of gender change in legal documents. As one participant from project workshop 3 explains:

> Oh yes…so my surgery was done, it was time to change my name…so I did an affidavit, put up advertisement on the newspaper and then went to the BDO office…but the officer thought… Yes…so I told him I wanted to change my name on the card, he was surprised that I was changing my name to Abhro from Arijita since it's a man's name, but not Suparna or Arpita…he exclaimed so loudly that people gathered around us…I presented him with the necessary documents, and he realized I was absolutely ready on that front and asked me to sit down. He told me that it's a

lengthy process, I would have to move heaven and earth and I said I was ready to do that. So he told me to meet him on the next month...too many 'next months' have come and gone...that was in November and now it's April...nothing got done. They got my address wrong on the voter ID card and harassing me for more than a year instead of rectifying the mistake. It's very normal to them...incompetence...they can't even change an address...name changing is beyond them.

Keeping self at the centre of life, living life on one's own term and being accepted by society and state are the constituents of a meaningful life. As Sumita explains, "I might have to sacrifice, but I will not be a victim. It's not about ego or pride but as a queer activist, these are my terms. I might stay with a woman, or spend my life alone, will my property to my partner or my organization...that would be my prerogative, not the state's." She places the onus on the state to be proactive and not just reactive.

Liveability and political activism

Self-dignity is important for Malabika and the fact that she has always prioritised self-respect over everything else makes her feel happy. She also prides herself over the fact that she has been able to grow over the years and has constantly undergone a change in perspective:

> I have changed myself with time; I always thought they (the younger generation) should not have to go through the same hardship we had to go through, I did not realize they would be able to decide for themselves. I did not know the language of rights, I learned.

For her one needs to take care of one's own needs in order to be part of the larger movement. She dreams of all political forces coming together all over the country and demand their rights from the state.

Liveability is tied to one's political being in the context of the political situation in the state and country. As Akanksha explained:

> Say my political sense says, my political being is unwell...I mean I am too connected to my country, but the current political scenario in my state, in the nation is making me unwell. For example violence is on the rise in my state West Bengal, and it is increasing day by day, and that makes me sick because I don't know if alone, I can do anything at all. If someone is in trouble, of course I will help them in any way I can. organizationally, it seems the system is inefficient and we have been somewhat bound, we are limited. And if you ask about my political need, everything that is happening during the regime of this right-winged government at the centre, it's not good. It's after effect has curbed my political needs.

Subhra felt that social and legal acceptance could make life more liveable. But only legal changes would not bring social changes. There must be some parity between the two – strategic negotiations and

confrontations – to make life liveable. For her, individual support systems and structural changes need to be joined at some level and disjoined too. The differentiation between survival and living would depend on that. To be able to fight for structural changes one needs to feel safe and happy and again this can also be brought about by structural changes. So there needs to be some propping up of lives and individuals—a support system that provides the confidence to come out and strive for structural changes. "So my liveability depends primarily...not primarily, initially on this system, support system. And only then I can take on the structure. I cannot think about bringing structural changes all alone without any anchor. It must be on an organizational level...". She also thinks it is more important to spread awareness and sensitisation among like-minded people and compatriots in a common struggle. It is rather useful to build a critical mass among them who will then spread the campaign and aid social transformation rather than hoping to reach every resistant individual and hoping to transform them. Often it becomes difficult to take this transformation to ones closest to you because there is also the question of your survival at stake here. But she believes in breaking the heteronormative imaginations in small ways, to be able to poke holes in the dominant heterosexual order and open up spaces that can then disrupt the hegemonic. To her, "It's as important as waiting for the law to change, the government to overturn its policies—acceptance in the family...inhabiting those small spaces...it gives us more air to breathe."

Reflections of liveability through theatre

The theatre workshop and performance, named 'I Script, My Script', happened throughout the month of June 2015 in Kolkata. Participants were from the LBTQ community and they scripted their own script. It was a series of four full day workshops culminating into two performances at the end of the fourth day, 28th June.

As part of the research project, 'I Script My Script' began with exploring how liveable are LGBTQ lives and what makes them more or less liveable. The discussions began on a few existing threads obtained from the in-depth interviews and project workshops conducted till June 2015.

The group brought out issues from their own lived experiences, which was then structured into five different scenes and a song.

Themes that emerged out of the process are:

1. Violence is the overarching theme, different sites of violence are represented.
2. What makes life liveable emerged as: a) resistance; b) community support; and c) support from other people.
3. What makes life unliveable emerged as: a) family violence, both overt and covert; b) lack of dignity; c)

society dictating terms of life; and d) psychiatric abuse.

4. What can make life more liveable emerged as: a) legal acceptance; b) organised resistance; c) neutralising adversaries, and transforming neutrals to allies as much as possible.

The programme worked in two ways – as a process and as a performance. The theatre performance was an advocacy tool, created keeping in mind constraints and specificities of street theatre format. It was a tool to communicate with the general audience, to make them aware of the issues of LGBTQ community, of the violence and discrimination they face, to open up a dialogue towards strengthening allies. Using mime, posters, music, interesting props and body acting, the performance was created to convey the strong yet simple message of rights, violation and support.

As a process, the workshops worked at a different level, which began by exploring the self to find out meanings of liveability. Participants spoke of the transformative quality of the workshops where their own stories of violence and violation were weaved and juxtaposed into a performance script owned by all. The process of self exploration, sharing, discussions, feedbacks and comments created not just a script but a unique form of bonding and empowerment culminated into the final scene where a strong voice of resistance was heard within the community involving other people who may not be part of the LGBTQ community.

Other than the final scene, the scene involving a transperson in a public pay and use toilet is also very significant in this case. One of the performers said in this context, "It touched me, the way we managed to show the split between someone's biological sex and gender identity by using both the moustache and the *bindi* on the same person. How the society wanted to put the person in a particular box though the person carried signs of both genders . . .   and finally how those two girls came and stood beside this person, it really touched me".

The performance and the process came together, a little unsuccessfully though, when the performers tried interacting with audience at the end of the theatrical performance. We expected a deeper level of interaction with the audience, more constructive involvement, which could have enhanced our liveability a little more. But though in both the venues we did enjoy a good number of encouraging audience, they were not forthcoming to discuss the issue or suggest concrete changes in the play or in lives of LGBTQ persons. We may need to wait for a while to make that happen.

Conclusion

Multiple factors serve to enhance or decrease liveability. Our liveability is on many accounts influenced by our desire and needs. That list of "basic needs and desires" is something that is different for different

people. While a number of external and internal factors impact on one's liveability, individuals often identify only some as contributing to one's well-ness and happiness. In most cases they are interpersonal connectedness and communication. Material benefits or economic solvency did not seem to emerge as a factor in determining one's liveability. A nurturing environment in terms of unconditional acceptance or invisibilized assimilation caters to liveability. Sometimes thriving within one's community, staying happy within the small world created knowingly serves obscure other conditions of unliveability.

Respondents identified a wide range of factors as contributing to unliveability such as violence from family in terms of non-acceptance and abuse, witness to domestic violence between parents, loss of a parent, forced penetrative sex with a man in a relationship, sexual abuse in growing up years, abandonment from friends after revealing one's sexual orientation, multiple break ups, not being able to talk about one's sexual orientation to persons who matter or in the workplace, Section 377 of IPC, transphobia, the larger saffronization and political situation of the country.

On the other hand, the list of factors enhancing liveability varied from gender-sexual awareness of larger society, never having to categorise oneself, hoping that femininity can be rediscovered along with masculinity, clarity about inter-personal relationship(s), working within the community and beyond, legal acceptance,sensitive and supportive friends, being able to stay alone without being lonely, academic and political success, travel, music, good food, having imaginary friends and being happy with them, living in close connection with animals and feeling that they will never leave you, SRS and other cosmetic surgeries, celebrating 50th birthday with natal family and community friends together, to try to live on one's own term are some of the entries in this list.

However, we also found that some of the same factors that contribute to unliveability in some cases contributed to liveability in some other individuals. We also arrived at the realization that legal change while important, did not come up as a top priority of one's unliveability. Rather social recognition was discussed as more important to ensure one's liveability. In other words, participants talked about how the absence of 377 can help to argue for acceptance in the workplace and in the family, yet some also indicated in reference to intimate relationships, that a legal change is not a guarantee against the permanence of a relationship. Could this be due to certain privileges of class, most of the respondents being from lower middle to upper middle class backgrounds? Or could this also be due to the association with a collective, that helps or equips many participants to be aware of and navigate the everyday obstacles that arise due to one's gender-sexual positionings?
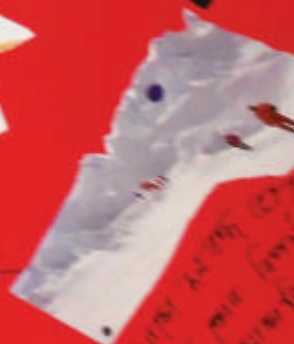
CONCLUSION

As is evident from our study, there appeared no consensus about what is liveability for LBTQ persons. Rather a cartography of desires, aspirations, choices, expectations, celebrations and struggles that are both individually and collectively experienced is what emerged. These narratives struggle against any attempt to define liveability in terms of definitive checklists, or something that is 'out there' that can be acquired through a series of 'right moves'. Moreover, liveability varies from one life narrative to another, one space to another or one time to another. What remains specific to LBTQ lives and their liveability, is the constant negotiations that these 'abject' lives have to make with the legal framework of criminality or the social framework of invisibility, marginalisation and discrimination. However, despite such barriers of legal non/mis-recognition and social ostracisation, lives exist and thrive due to certain protection nets provided by self-conviction, solidarity within communities and affinities across communities.

Queer ways of life, on one hand, poses tough challenges to persons living such lives and on the other, imposes difficult questions of the 'mainstream'. The resulting relationship that evolves is sometimes fraught with suspicion, rejection, contestation and conflict on both sides. In the midst of such an engagement liveability unfolds for the LBTQ person in tenacious forms. However, liveability in this context can by no means be understood in absolute terms of negativity and despair. As participants shared, surviving and living can be understood in such variations and nuances that one cannot draw any linear relation between wellness/happiness and liveability. This then is the important and unique 'finding' of this research. Moving from liveability to liveabilities, from trying to find a model of liveability to discovering a spectrum of liveabilities, this research has been a learning process at every step. Most importantly, this learning has greatly contributed to the research team's looking at liveability from a completely different perspective not just theoretically, but also personally and politically.

Project and our liveabilities

Niharika Banerjea:

I have worked as a researcher as well as a participant in this study. I have interviewed and been interviewed; I have co-facilitated project workshops and also participated in one. Within queer-feminist methodologies, such blurring of the researcher and the researched is not an uncommon practice. Yet the outcomes of such unruly methodological practices are never predetermined and always emerge within

the particularities of the encounters, which makes it always exciting and challenging. Liveability, in its English usage, is not a common term that is used in everyday transactions. Hence we began working with its loose translation, *jeeboner mato jeebon*, yielding multiple understandings of what it means to live a life worth living (a literal translation of *jeeboner mato jeebon*), and with it, what it means to survive (*tinke thaka*). As an interviewer and co-facilitator of the project workshops, I understood the variability of the term, thereby pointing to the complex ways in which concepts circulate and acquire meaning through and within everyday spaces. But as a participant, I was at times beside myself, trying to articulate what liveability and survival meant for me, at a time when I am undergoing momentous changes in my life. One of the most rewarding aspects of this collaborative work has come from the collective effort to think through and imagine what is liveability as an academic-activist enterprise. What is a liveable life for me? What is a liveable life for the other? What is its use for an activist forum working to write LBTQ lives and histories into heteropatriarchal institutions and dominant discourses? At one level, these are extraordinary matters, as the struggle to re-define the borders of who is considered a legitimate person is occurring within and with normative voices. On the other, these matters are strikingly ordinary, containing everyday navigations between one's self and the other, inflected by norms of the social. For me, the critical promise of this work lies in its possibility to challenge dominant modes of existence and normative violence, which resides not only in the other, but also in the self. A challenge that is not embedded in grandiosity, but in ordinary acts, desires, perils and dreams. For the past several months, I have conversed with lives – intimate, contingent, sequestered, daring, celebratory – to understand that liveability is made with others. Therefore, the need to communicate the everyday forms of life of those otherwise not considered legitimate, is ever more urgent.

Sumita B:

'Liveability' is not a word that I personally connect with. Or was not, when I joined this project. '*Jeeboner mato jeebon*' – I tried to translate the phrase 'Liveable Lives' in Bangla to be used in this project; it still did not ring any bell. I thought people will be talking about lofty things, using high sounding words, political ideologies and definitely about rights and rightslessness. Perhaps for me liveability meant a life that is worth living, a life perhaps not so ordinary or everyday or average or constricted or meaningless – a touch of grandiose may be!

I think this is what created the original reservations – I am not great, my life is not grand. Lives are usually not grand, they are lived more as an apology of what it should have been. What understanding of liveability are we expecting to gather from people living such lives?

I began with this question – is my life liveable? Got stuck at what is liveability! What *is* liveability? I asked

all the participants I happened to talk to and they said so much! From the first few discussions I managed to understand that all of them are talking about moments or phases of life where they feel alive and some other situations where they only carry on with the task of living.

So life can make you feel alive, that is living and when you feel living is a task, it is surviving. So I started using these terms while talking to the next set of participants. And they came up with practically every conceivable permutation and combination of life, throwing wellness, happiness, emptiness, comfort, safety and many such expressions in the mix for better measures.

'I am alive because I am not dead. As I listened to thundering avalanches coming down, mowing down everything on its way into a deathly snow-wash, I thought this is it' (experience from a high altitude mountaineering expedition)! She feels alive to be able to actually breathe, inhaling and exhaling life. And someone says – 'life had lost meaning after she left, I am not alive, barely inhaling and exhaling, this is no life' (talking about the loss of the childhood sweetheart who left her to marry a biological man).

I kept on thinking, am I alive because I am not dead or am I not dead because I have survived death? Survival is a term I thought comes as a lesser mortal to a greater godly living. And then she said – 'Survival is ducking beneath the rapid current flowing downstream. But I have to go upstream, so I am letting it pass; waiting for the right moment to emerge.'

I realised just as someday I arrived at the understanding that non-responding does not necessarily mean victimhood; today I have learnt that survival can be a tool to enhance my liveability.

Then there was the question of ordinary, or everyday, or normalcy – what is ordinary life? Is ordinary liveable? Is the attempt to make myself look ordinary my way of making life liveable? Do the 'ordinary' or 'everyday' or 'normal' change with space, place or time? Yes, to make my life more complicated, they do. And within these varied locations participants behaved like 'ill mannered children' asking for rights, resistance, comfort, safety, community space, friendship, acceptance and what not!

'I don't see any reason to antagonise people; if I lie low, my partner and I can pass as regular women' – she does not want to be bothered, she wants safety, security, perhaps comfort as much as she can. Her idea of liveability. Then again his idea of liveability is – 'what's the point of living, what is the meaning of my life if I am not recognised as who I am? How can I live as someone else?'

After working through this maze for the last eighteen months I still do not know what my idea of liveability is! What I and we, the research team have arrived at is liveability is not just one, it is not singular; it is plural. Individuals create their own lives and own ideas of living those lives. There can be a non-exhaustive ever-emerging list of liveability tenets but what makes each life liveable will still remain arbitrary.

Then what am I left with at the end of the day? I am somewhat able to connect with the term, it is not grand or is as grand as I want it to be, no more no less. It is my term of life, whether I live or survive, barely breathe or feel well and content – it is a cache of my emotions, expectation, dreams, realities rolled into a single expression of plurality. My liveability may differ from someone else's, and my liveability may also differ from my own, what made my life liveable in my twenties is not something I still find relevant. I am quite excited to read my life through liveability lens; it is a dynamic one that gives space to diversity.

As part of an activist organization I am happy to note that by trying to understand and explore liveabilities in connection to LBTQ lives we have actually opened a few more pathways. Parallel to rights-based activism and legal activism, the idea of looking at life beyond these frameworks are also necessary that can create another kind of space for activism where understanding the self is equally necessary. Our organization has always given ample emphasis to inbound programmes for community empowerment, this project is showing us newer ways of exploring meanings of empowerment and self-development, adding special notations to queer activism practiced by Sappho for Equality.

I am travelling, from my liveabilities to other liveabilities and exploring furthermore . . .

Rukmini Banerjee:

I want to remember the first time I heard the word 'feminist' and the word 'queer'... In reality I cannot recall the first time I actually heard these words; but I know that it did not come from a very exotic space...it was something uttered by someone primal to my life—a mother. As I grew up I also gathered ideas from various other strong, smart and dashing 'queer women' that feminism as a thought and queer living and politics has touched us in numerous ways, and cannot be purposively defined. These two words have evolved inside my mind and have created historic changes within LGBTQ movement in India—starting with identification with the word 'queer' beyond just a category of sexual-identification; towards a political association. In Liveable Lives I found my tiniest belief in queer-feminism take fruition...becoming a shady tree, one that is created from tenacious rebelling against hetero-compulsory ways of life.

No, I still don't know what having a life worth living means to me as a queer individual or even as a part of a queer collective, but I do think that there is no one way of living a "good" life. This project has also helped me to recognise the true potential of the Self (here written with capital S because I wish to re-centre selfhood), the same Self that we are so shy to acknowledge. The entire project planned (eventually) was like taking a trip into the land of the fantastical Self... which is why the different methods of collecting data became important, as our own engagements with ourselves changed. Liveable Lives for me was an initiation process, and like many other participants I watched myself almost in awe speaking about myself in vocabulary that I didn't know I had access to!

Natural, organic processes of reflecting on the Self, locating the power-core of identities, failing to achieve singularity of being, and ultimately realising the prospective of diverse conditions/ways of existing. But having a life worth living is difficult and this means as researchers we needed to figure out what is a "liveable" life, what make our lives liveable/unliveable or in fact just bearable—what is surviving versus what is living! We travel between surviving and living, the participants share their ideas/definitions of liveability taking it much ahead of the preliminary concept of having a life worth living towards more nuanced relational aspects of living queer. Perhaps there isn't anything like "liveability", and maybe the word in singular form cannot wholly express the multidimensional living/surviving we do on a daily basis. "Liveabilities" has become a more explanatory word and concept, giving agency to the people whose lives are in question, to choose and claim that there is no prescriptive "worthy" way of living. We condemn all rigidity in understanding the term "liveable" and any two people's desire of a "worthy life" cannot be the same. There is diversity in equality, and the same person can have several modes of living/surviving — extending further the complications around a fluid (almost effervescent) concept.

Liveability(ies)/survival/living/barely-alive are all porous and have seeped into lives of the researchers' (including myself) as well as the participants. The continual breaking and constructing of terminologies, concepts, beliefs are all leading up to reimagining the potential for navigating and strategizing (and in some ways 'queering') lives. 'Liveable' is not in any way specific to a particular community's existence.The concept is transformative and useful for individuals as well as collectives/communities. Last eighteen months have given me much deeper understanding of the radical potential of living queer, and researching queer, while being one myself.

Ranjita Biswas:

My association with the project has been intermittent. I had intended to be part of the research team but ended up travelling in and out of the research. I became more an outside-insider in the team during the period of interviews, workshops and transcribing, translating. My position as a semi-insider or an outside-insider gave me a fair advantage of position to observe how the notion of liveability became a buzzword not just among the interviewers and interviewees but also in its spilling over into the larger space of the organization. So people brainstormed, debated, explained and disagreed keeping their notion of liveabilities in focus. People discovered new significations and added new contexts to create and re-create liveability. Some of these resonated with the research team's understandings and findings around 'surviving' and 'living' and some simply took off in different directions, marking the journey with surprising conversations and fun-filled insights.

Along this journey I became a respondent as well which gave me an opportunity to look at liveability – my

living and surviving – more closely this time. As a respondent in the in-depth interview it encouraged me to grapple with the understanding of my life with its many moments, events and milestones and bouncing it off given notions of liveability. The opportunity to be part of the theatre workshop again opened up new avenues for exploring and performing liveabilities, this time not just among us but also in the public space with strangers and friends.

The latter part of the research saw me more involved, this time as a complete insider, trying to read, reread and engage with others' as well as my own accounts of liveability. This was the most enriching and humbling experience of defying definitions, overhauling concepts, celebrating diversities and reliving liveabilities. So here I was taking u-turns, making stop-overs and starting afresh at every narrative and in the process mirroring a choreography of living, breathing, surviving, existing and so on.

In the midst of all these we were shocked to hear about the death of one of our respondents and a longtime friend. And this, while I was reading her narrative and trying to absorb her life and its un/liveability. This sudden exit from life disturbed all of us as we were writing the different chapters of the report. It now became a retrospective exercise trying to understand one's liveability through the certain fact of her unliveability. It also made us realize that however much one may try to hold on to the certitude of liveability, life is after all most evident in its brevity and fleetingness.

Usefulness of this research to the organization

The LGBTQ movement in India is largely invested in a rights-based approach that focuses primarily on legal recognition. While social acceptance is also an important part of the struggle for social justice, clearly legal reform becomes the ground for fighting social discrimination and building support networks. Sappho for Equality on its part, has from the very beginning committed its resources (human, material and intellectual) into building up a campaign that will engage with the social sphere and create a spectrum of liveabilities that operates beyond the framework of legal recognition. Therefore, along with working within the framework of social transformation, Sappho for Equality believes that every 'queer' life is in itself a resource for understanding liveability. The idea of self, the process through which I (we?) come to embody my (our?) queerness is a movement in itself. The process of negotiation with the idea of 'myself', 'my subjecthood', impacts the idea of liveability. While the state, family and community do contribute towards my (our?) state of un/liveability it is also how I (we?) create webs of 'persistent lives', both, individually and collectively, in order to move towards a world that is free of discrimination and respectful of difference.

In this research, people have talked of those persistent lives, the queerness of those lives that question and re-signify what it is *to be* and be *well*. People have talked about how those lives are lived with and

beyond legal acceptance, how the struggle for legal acceptance has to necessarily spill over into the extra-legal domain in order to create liveabilities. It is the reiteration of this important fact that will help the organization continue its endeavours of building bridges, initiating conversations and forging solidarities with the 'mainstream'. It will also be important to continue to nurture these queer lives in all its potentialities and opportunities in order to open up new spaces and craft new avenues of liveabilities for so many different lives.

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These socio-demographic tables are meant to be indicative of the overall background of the participants.

Project & Theatre Workshops

Project Workshop 1	Sexuality	Gender	Locality	Occupation	Age
Participant 1	Butch/Lesbian	Female	District town	Student	18 years
Participant 2	Butch/Lesbian	Female	District town	Student	19 years
Participant 3	Not shared	Transman	District town	Student	19 years
Participant 4	Bisexual	Female	District town	Private sector	29 years
Participant 5	Lesbian	Female	District town	Non-govt. sector	19 years
Participant 6	Not shared	Transwoman	District town	Not shared	18 years
Participant 7	Lesbian	Female	District town	Student	18 years
Participant 8	Lesbian	Female	District town	Not shared	19 years
Participant 9	Lesbian	Female	District town	Student	17 years
Participant 10	Lesbian	Female	District town	Student	18 years

Project Workshop 2	Sexuality	Gender	Locality	Occupation	Age
Participant 1	Lesbian	Female	Metro suburb	Private sector	25 years
Participant 2	Lesbian	Female	Metro suburb	Self-employed	25 years
Participant 3	Lesbian	Female	Metro suburb	Student	20 years
Participant 4	Lesbian	Female	Metro	Student	27 years
Participant 5	Not shared	Transman	Metro suburb	Student	26 years

Project Workshop 3	Sexuality	Gender	Locality	Occupation	Age
Participant 1	Lesbian	Female	Metro suburb	Self-employed	27 years
Participant 2	Not shared	Transman	Suburban town	Self-employed	29 years
Participant 3	Lesbian	Female	Rural	Govt. sector	27 years
Participant 4	Lesbian	Female	Metro suburb	Student	24 years
Participant 5	Lesbian	Confused	Suburban town	Student	21 years

Project Workshop 4	Sexuality	Gender	Locality	Occupation	Age
Participant 1	Lesbian	Female	Metro suburb	Private sector	25 years
Participant 2	Lesbian	Androgynous	Metro	Non-govt. sector	26 years
Participant 3	Lesbian	Female	Metro	Private sector	22 years
Participant 4	Lesbian	Female	Metro	Private sector	26 years
Participant 5	Lesbian/Queer	Female	Metro	Non-govt. sector	26 years
Participant 6	Confused	Transman	Metro	Private sector	25 years
Participant 7	Lesbian	Female	Suburban town	Non-govt. sector	35 years
Participant 8	Homosexual	Androgynous	Metro	Student	20 years
Participant 9	Queer femme	Female	Metro	Non-govt. sector	26 years

Project Workshop 5	Sexuality	Gender	Locality	Occupation	Age
Participant 1	Queer	Female	Metro	Non-govt sector	26 years
Participant 2	Heterosexual	Male	Metro suburb	Self-employed	42 years
Participant 3	In-continuum	Female	Metro	Non-govt sector	52 years
Participant 4	Queer	Female	Metro	Govt. sector	44 years
Participant 5	Lesbian	Female	Metro	Govt. sector	46 years
Participant 6	Queer	Female	Metro	Student	33 years
Participant 7	Transperson	FTM	Metro	Student	33 years
Participant 8	Queer	Female	Metro	Student	34 years
Participant 9	Lesbian	Female	Metro suburb	Student	30 years
Participant 10	Queer	Female	Metro	Private sector	29 years
Participant 11	Lesbian	Female	Metro suburb	Govt. sector	34 years
Participant 12	Queer	Female	Metro	Govt. sector	52 years
Participant 13	Lesbian	Female	Metro	Govt. sector	50 years

Theatre Workshop	Sexuality	Gender	Locality	Occupation	Age
Participant 1	Queer	Female	Metro	Student	34 years
Participant 2	Queer	Female	Metro	Student	33 years
Participant 3	Lesbian	Female	Metro	Student	23 years
Participant 4	Lesbian	Female	Metro suburb	Govt. sector	34 years
Participant 5	Homosexual	Gender fluid	Metro	Student	20 years
Participant 6	Lesbian	Female	Metro	Govt. sector	46 years
Participant 7	Queer	Female	Metro	Non-govt. sector	44 years
Participant 8	Lesbian	Female	Metro	Private sector	22 years
Participant 9	Queer	Gender fluid	Metro	Non-govt. sector	56 year
Participant 10	Homosexual	Female	Metro	Private sector	26 years
Participant 11	Homosexual	Female	Metro suburb	Unemployed	25 years
Participant 12	Lesbian	Androgynous	Metro	Non-govt. sector	26 yearss

In-depth Interviews

Name	Sexuality	Gender	Locality	Occupation	Age
Anamika	Queer	Female	Metro	Non-govt. sector	42 years
Dev	Heterosexual	Male	Metro	Student	20 years
Sharmi	Lesbian	Female	Metro	Self-employed	48 years
Mousumi	Lesbian	Female	Metro suburb - metro	Govt. sector	46 years
Shrabasti	Lesbian/bisexual	Female	Suburb town - metro	Non-govt. sector	35 years
Srija	Lesbian	Female	Metro suburb - metro	Non-govt. sector	34 years
Appy	Lesbian	Female	Metro	Student	25 years
Meghna	Non-hetero practice	Female	Metro	Govt. sector	25 years
Vaibhavi	Desires both sexes	Female	Metro suburb	Non-govt. sector	31 years
Ishika	Lesbian	Female	Metro	Private sector	25 years
Ipshita	Lesbian	Female	Metro suburb - metro	Non-govt. sector	40 years
Rimpy	Same-sex desiring	Female	Metro suburb	Student	22 Years
Akanksha	Lesbian	Female	Metro suburb - metro	Govt. sector	50 years
Buli	Lesbian	Female	Rural to metro	Govt. sector	37 Years
Bibi	Queer	Female	Metro	Non-govt. sector	26 years
Preet	Same-sex practicing	FTM	Metro	Private sector	29 Yeras
Amrapali	Queer	Female	Metro	Student	33 Years
Chhoto	Lesbian	Female	Metro	Self-employed	37 Years
Aparajita	Non-hetero desire	Female	Metro	Student	35 years
Shubhra	Queer (adjective)	Non-normative female	Metro	Non-govt. sector	45 years
Pakhi	Lesbian	Female	Suburb town - metro	Govt. sector	27 years
Sumita	In-continuum	Non-normative female	Metro	Non-govt. sector	52 years
Leela	Queer	Female	Metro	Govt. sector	43 years
Paramita	Queer	Gender fluid	Metro	Non-govt. sector	56 years
Rahi	Same-sex practicing	FTM	Not shared	Self employed	29 years
Malobika	Queer	Female	Metro suburb - metro	Govt. sector	51 years

Note: Names, wherever used, have been either changed or kept as it is, depending on the participant's decision and consent. Care has been taken not to link any marker with a participant, unless explictly asked for.

Explanation for categories of location:
Metro: a city; Metro suburb: area adjacent to a city; District town: a mid-sized town in a district
Suburb town or Suburban town: Small town in a district; Rural: Village

Note: These are not official classifications but general perceptions of the participants of their own spatial locations. There are also indications of movement from one location to another, like, metro suburb - metro etc.

understanding liveability/ies