

**Religious Leaders' Perspectives Towards LGBTIQ in Nepal**DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/skmj.v2i2.62507>**Laxman Subedi<sup>1</sup>****Abstract**

*Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans gender, Intersex, Queer plus is an emerging social issue in Nepal. Still Nepalese society has hardly accepted the issue yet. There might be various reasons; this concept has not earned priority in current social structure. Social structures are guided by the religious belief and practice. Religious leaders' hold the governing positions to construct the perception of society. For the reason, it aims to explore the perception of religious leaders towards LGBTIQ. The religious leaders from Hindus (Sanatana Dharma), Buddhist, Islam and Christian around Kathmandu valley were selected as the respondents of the research. Qualitative data were collected through in-depth interview. In their own worshipping places through field visit. Respondents felt uneasy on the topic though they preferred to explain the good features of the religion rather than the issue. Hindus claimed that they respect third gender as the grace of the god, though they believe that it is against the rule and nature constructed by the god. Similarly, the devotees of Buddhism take oath to follow the 'Eight-Fold-Path' as their guideline which consist the five precepts. The Christians consider sexuality to be a divine gift, though it ignores the sexual orientation of LGBTIQ and there are significant disagreements among the Christian community in Nepal. Islamic faith is controlled by holy Quran, which does not give permission for unnatural sex. Though, in the holy text, the story of Luth is mentioned to aware the devotees from the sinful act performed by LGBTIQ. Though, the religious leader accepted the biological features of the LGBTIQ but they denied the sexual activities they perform or express. They perceive it as a sinful act of previous life. Moreover, they believe that the lesbian, gay issues were mostly influenced by western culture and the advancement of the modern technologies. Thus, the religion guided structure of Nepal left behind to address the LGBTIQ to struggle for decades to achieve the rights in the country.*

Key Words: LGBTIQ, perception, religious leaders, holy texts, SOGIESC.

**Introduction**

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans gender, Intersex, Queer plus (LGBTIQ+) is an emerging social issue in Nepal. It denotes the diverse nature and orientation of the people in society. Any individual who belongs to this group, can identify themselves at the time of late teenage

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which distinguish them with others groups of people. Until now, they have to expose themselves either in male or female category forcefully because of various restrictions of family and society. In such conditions they dare to introduce themselves openly as the group of third gender, or the members of LGBTIQ. First, they need to be addressed by the law of the state.

In Nepal, the legal provisions of the state have not addressed explicitly the issues of sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) yet. Both LGBTIQ and SOGIESC are the embedded conceptual perspectives of third gender. Perhaps it has got less priority in the current issue of social structure. Social structures are guided by the religious belief and practice. Religious leaders' hold the governing positions to address and construct the perception. In such context, how do the religious leaders perceive the issue of SOGIESC in Nepal is the query of the research. Thus, four major religions according to the demographic composition of Nepal; Hindus, Buddhists, Muslim, and Christian and their leaders are selected as the participants for the research.

Although, it has been acknowledged that many lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons remain invisible and marginalized. Multiple forms of prejudice may have experienced by these people, including discrimination from within their own groups. They may have the greatest needs, in terms of support and services. Contrastingly, they might also be able to contribute crucial information to the creation of effective policies and initiatives. Department of Health for England and Wales recently published briefings for health and social care staff on LGBTIQ issues, recognizing that "religion has a central, positive function, it can also play a role in supporting homophobia" (Department of Health, 2007:6). Because of how religious leaders and sacred books perceive them, they may be put in danger or silenced. In another hand, the lesbian and gay diversity frameworks have showed the growing impact of a transition away from standalone equality problems. Even at the highest ministerial level, there have been conflicts of interest surrounding religious belief and sexuality

The issue of diverse SOGIESC is just an iceberg of perceptions of religious, and community leaders. Such institutionalized homophobia, maintained by the personal and political prejudice, ignorance or cowardice of some officials, can have direct consequences for frontline social care service provision and the development of innovative practice with marginalized groups. For example, a study examining sexuality in some developed and developing countries revealed that homophobia was a major factor affecting sexualities initiatives in local authorities, and in some instances, this was so marked that 'people did not even want to use the words lesbian or gay' (Monro, 2006).

Given the problems with recognizing diversity and potential conflicts regarding religion and sexuality at the local authority level of service planning and commissioning, it's unclear how their perceptions of SOGIESC matter and effect. With all of these factors in mind, social care professionals continue to face the problem of providing competent services in a varied society where religion and belief have become increasingly powerful, and sexual orientation as a diversity issue is still less understood. As this study suggests, differing religious leaders' opinions on LGBTIQ persons have led to inherent problems in confronting this challenge.

This can have an impact on LGBTIQ engagement in the planning and delivery of services, as well as jeopardize the quality of social work practice. Some social care workers may be unfitting to practice because they belong to religious groups that promote the oppression of sexual minorities and are unwilling or unable to challenge their own prejudices, which may promote anti-discriminatory practices. This practice approach also applies to religious leader. In the end, it's all about how people see things.

In Nepal, the term LGBTI, rather than just LGBT, is being used to refer to intersex people where as in the constitution of Nepal, the term "gender and sexual minorities" have been used. The phrases "queer" and 'Marginalized Orientations, Gender Identities, and Intersex' are also used among young Nepalese. POMSOGIESC, which stands for "people of marginalized sexual orientation, gender identity, and sex characteristics," is coined by some activists to embrace a broader spectrum of identities beyond the LGBT language. Nepal has some of the most progressive country in LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) rights in Asia in the sense that, LGBT rights are recognized as essential rights in Nepal's legal code.

Although, LGBTIQ individuals are treated as abnormal, unnatural, and sub-human in some communities in Nepal. The socio-cultural structure is guided by religious and spiritual norms and values as practiced in society. In such situation, perhaps, the legal code only may not create the environment for the individuals belong to SOGIESC. Religious and spiritual consent is very much important for the persons belong to SOGIESC. To unfold the perception of religious leaders towards SOGIESC, the researcher has selected eight religious-leaders from major four religions (two religious-leaders from each religion) are selected around Kathmandu valley.

To find out the information from religious leaders, the researcher has formulated an objective of the research, 'to explore the perception of religious leaders towards diverse SOGIESC'. According to the objective a research question has been constructed 'what perception do the religious leaders have towards diverse SOGIESC'. Interview was

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conducted during the time of field visit. Qualitative data are collected through the process, and the data and information are analyzed in thematic process.

In the context of Nepal, various religions are followed throughout the country. Hindus (Sanatan Dharma), Buddha Dharma, Muslim, Christian, Kirata, and so on. Hindus have majority followers and Buddhist have second position in demographic composition in Nepal. Hindu, Buddhist, and Islam have long history in Nepal whereas Christian are in emerging position in Nepal. In such situation, how do the religious leaders and religious texts perceive the SOGIESC within their religious system? Do the religious texts address them and their problems? Do they provide them equal status within their community? And so, on relevant questions were asked during the field visit with the participants. First, the researcher attempted to find out whether the religious texts mention or explain about the issue of SOGIESC or not. For the purpose some religious texts of different religions are observe slightly as per available during the time of research.

LGBTIQ+ is a socially constructed phenomenon identified in combination with physical, psychological, social, religious, and so on aspects of society. How do the religious texts evaluate them in their religious sectors and how do the religious leaders perceive them in their own religious setting? And so, on initial queries hit the mind of the researcher. For the purpose, four major religions and their religious leaders from Kathmandu and its neighboring areas were selected and in-depth interview were conducted during the field visit. The information are analyzed through thematic analysis and presented with their opinions. During the field visit, principles of confidentiality, non-judgmental attitude, are followed to preserve their reservation.

### **Perceptions of Religious Leaders**

The participants were selected through availability of the time and space. Two religious' leaders from Hinduism are selected around the *Pashupatinath* temple. Islamic leaders are from Nepali *Jame Masjid* of Ratnapark and two Buddhist religious leaders; including female called Aani (nun) from Patan area and two different leaders from protestant and catholic are selected from different churches around Kathmandu valley from the side of Christian. While collecting data, the researchers visited the participant twice and more to make friendly relationship. After making appointment the researchers visited them, when the participants prepare the readings and share the experiences related to SOGIESC.

### Perception of Hindu Leaders

Two Hindu leaders, called Sanyasi are selected from Pashupatinath area. First, they ignore to discuss the matter of SOGIESC, after making special request; they viewed their perceptions on the basis of religious characters. Before entering the issues, they explain about the salient points on Hinduism. Hindu Dharma (prefer to call the Dharma rather than religion) is considered as the oldest religion of the world. The ancient philosophers like, *Balmiki*, *Veda Byas*, *Jaimini*, *Parasar*, and so on systematized the cultural and spiritual values in social life of the people. They mentioned the fundamental duties of human beings in *Vedas*, *Purans*, *Upanisad*, *Geeta*, and so on holy texts to regularize the life of human beings in society. They launched the '*Sadaachaar Paddhati*'; code of discipline to systematize the life of the followers.

One of the participants argues that some similar evidences are found in Purans. He mentioned a sacred incarnation of lord Shiva as *Ardhanaariswor* (a god who hold the physical character both male and female) in holy text Shiva Puran and worship with full respect by Hindu followers. Hindu texts describe some evidences similar with SOGIESC like, any individual who possess both physical features are evaluated with full respect as the term *Kinnar* and donate them with money for the sake of good blessing.

Next participant explained a story of mythical king Yayaati mentioned in *Bhagawata Purana*; he transferred his old age into young age for the sake of sexual satisfaction. Another story is found in *Mahabharata* that a mythical lady character, *Amba* who changed herself into a male character, named *Sikhandi* to take revenge with *Bhisma* who rejected her to marry. Beside them, there are many characters found in the holy texts in *Puranas*, *Mahabharat*, *Ramayana* and so on. These holy texts of Hinduism describe the story similar with SOGIESC but they could not give permission to adapt these characters in normal life because such features are born due to their sin or curse of previous life.

He further explains that in *Bhagavata Purana*, there is evidence described in chapter (*Skanda*) eight that there is *Elopakhyana* in which a prince of a state changes his physical character into women while entering into a magic forest. According to the *Purana*, *Lord Shiva* discover the forest where the person who enters into the forest his or her sex automatically changed into opposite sex. This story illustrated that there was a practice of sex character change and the needs of changing sex character. Another *Purana*, *Devi Bhagavata* mentioned a story in which a princess, changed herself into a male. Moreover, practiced her new life to adjust in common society. Her character also accepted, but it was fluid and changing according to time and nature. The natural environment affects the sexual

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interest of princess. She changed her sexual interest being male in particular environment and being female in separate environment. It means, she had bisexual relationship according to the natural environment.

According to the leaders of Hindus, sex is a sacred work for the production and continuity of their generations. For the purpose only married couples have rights to have sexual relationship in particular days at mid-night. Remaining times, even the married couples are not allowed to have sexual relationship. It shows that Hinduism strictly control and regulated the sexual relations within their followers. They claimed that there is not any discrimination in religious places on the basis of SOGIESC features because it is the perception of the people which hid inside them. Though, it does not give permission to violate the norms of the religion in society.

### Perception of Buddhists Leaders

In Buddhism, religious leaders believe that, advocating for the rights of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender individuals are connected with the concept of human rights. Beside them, they are playing the role of activists representing a wide range of identities and causes of SOGIESC. Although there was no consensus within Buddhism on sexual orientation and gender identity, the third precept is frequently mentioned when discussing gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer problems. A leader from Buddhist Temple said,

All are equal in Buddhism, there is no any restriction being monk or coming to *Bihar* or *Gumba*. If people are good from inside and have good soul, they can visit our *Bihar*. No one is discriminate based on gender or sexual orientation they belong. To obtain or to reach *Nirvana* we should not involve in any kind of sexual activities or misconduct". A monk participant described that '*The Eight-Fold Path* is the fundamental philosophical notion of Buddhism. They do not allow practicing the notion of SOGIESC but *Tripitaka*, holy text of Buddhism respect all equally. It never divides the people of society by birth. (Interview: 2023)

While, the *Five Precepts* are a subset of the *Eight-Fold Path* that serve as guidelines for living and the basis of Buddhist morality. They include a person's willingness to be 'aware of the suffering caused by violence, theft, sexual misconduct, harmful speech, alcohol and drugs.' Among the five precepts the guidelines number three aware of the suffering caused by sexual misconduct. SOGIESC narrated as because of whom they love, how they appear, or who they are, people all across the world are being subjected to violence and inequity, as well as torture and even execution.

Similarly, another participant stated that,

The *Pali Canon*, which contains the Buddha's original teachings, contains no reference or advice for laypeople about sexual orientation or same-sex activities. Buddhist monks and nuns are prohibited from having sexual contact with men, women, and other genders, such as *Padankar*, according to the *Vinyana*, a Buddhist scripture for monks. (Interview, 2023)

Finding shows that even in Zen Buddhism, there is no distinction between same-sex and opposite-sex partnerships. There is no expectation of harming, exploiting, or manipulating people, as this would be a clear breach of the third commandment. Zen Buddhists, for example, regard hedonism, ascetic masochism, and prostitution to be transgressions of the "Middle Way" as a sin.

These scriptural references do not specifically target LGBTQI people because everyone in the monastic order is required to abstain from all forms of sexual relations. This seems especially common in *Theravada* Buddhism, where monastic tradition is highly valued. Overall while categorizing Buddhism's position on same-sex marriage is difficult due to the vast range of perspectives within the faith. Because enlightenment is Buddhism's core theme, one's path through the religion, as well as one's viewpoints, is wholly individualized. As a result, most Buddhist literature emphasizes that support or opposition to same-sex marriage rights is a personal rather than a theological statement.

### **Perception of Christian Leaders**

Christians believe on the notion of, "all humans are made in the image of God", is the beginning point for a Christian interpretation of human sexuality. While, many Christians fail to see that Christians and sexual minorities are overlapping groups (the majority of LGBTQI people identify as Christians). Instead, they see LGBTQI persons as a zero-sum relationship, believing that social advancements for sexual and gender minorities are damaging and dangerous to Christians.

A participant from Catholic sect said, "Homosexual acts are intrinsically sinful and opposed to the natural law. We took homosexual tendencies as objectively disorder" (Interview, 2023). However, this statement is frequently crossed, and many religious leaders are led to believe that simply being or having different sexual orientation is a sin. Likewise, another religious leader from Protestant Pastor addressed that, "While the gay person's particular inclination is not a sin, it is a more or less powerful tendency organized toward an intrinsic moral evil; consequently, the inclination itself must be viewed as an objective

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disorder” (Interview, 2023). His feeling relates that it is not a sinful act but it needs to be controlled.

Furthermore, one of the participants from Protestant sect explain,

In our religion, there are legitimate concerns about human sexuality, but those concerns cannot overshadow our care for people, the love we have for them, their families, and their eternal destiny. God created people intentionally and chooses their gender before birth, and that God established marriage to be between a man and a woman. (Interview, 2023)

. Similarly, the participant from catholic sect mentioned that,

The flesh, with its emotions and desires, has been crucified by those who belong to Christ Jesus. Let us keep in sync with the Spirit since we live by the Spirit. To join us, there won't be any problem in biological aspects as we concern about spirit rather than what gender he or she carries. (Interview, 2023)

In Roman Catholic Church's code, homosexual acts are inherently disordered and the findings of the study shows that fewer members of the LGBTIQ community are attempting to reconcile their sexuality with their religious faith. This terminology has been defined as the, “sexual identity leading with compassion”. Many priests, nuns, and other religious leaders are also working to heal the divide between LGBTIQ and their families, as well as their socio-psychological challenges facing by them. They have a hope on members of a congregation, gay and straight; can play a crucial role in educating the rest of the congregation and pushing for LGBTIQ acceptance.

Religious leaders from Christianity believe sexual sins were fueled by something other than reason, something that has a tendency of drowning out rational objections, at least in the heat of the moment. However, this line is frequently crossed, that simply being or having different sexual orientation is a sin or influenced from western culture and policy. Christians are justified to wonder if such inquiries reflect a true sense of liberty. After all, no one is ever truly free from the influence of others. God is the ultimate authority for Christians, both for themselves and for everyone else beyond their sexual orientation or gender identity.



### Perception of Muslim Leaders

Islam believes on the faith that there is no any shape of the god. Muhammad is a messenger of the god whatever he received from the god dictated in the text called *Quran*. It is the fact that cultural norms and traditional readings of sacred texts *Quran* often uphold a heteronormative binary of gender identification and sexual orientation that don't allow for the range of identities present in Muslim society.

A participant argues that the religious leader will give justice for SOGIESC issues. As they believe that, God created everything in pair forms, the basis of an Islamic doctrine that everyone is either male or female-there can be no halfway house. The question this raised is what to do about children born with ambiguous genitalia since, according to the doctrine; they could not be sex-neutral. For that answer, participants mentioned that Muslim societies have often acknowledged this tolerating it to some extent even if they disapproved. While a participant believes that, the prophet Muhammad never specified a punishment for homosexuality; it wasn't until some years after his death that Muslims began discussing what a suitable punishment might be. So, the Muslim leader condemnations of homosexuality were mainly based on the story about God's punishment of *Sodom* and *Gomorrah*, which is recounted in the *Quran* as well as the Old Testament just like an Adam in Bible. Overall, most Islamic religious leader explained that homosexual acts are a major sin and punishable by death. To prevent such punishment there is the mandatory of *Hijab* for Muslim women and have to follow *Sharia* law to all Muslim people.

A religious leader from Islam explained that, society was turning into devastating due to such immoral act SOGIESC. So, the LGBTQI are taken as the children of Luth. If somebody goes beyond the system of sexuality or the social values then are rejected through the religious tribe's system. Following the participant's perceptions-it has been noted that all the countries where the death penalty for sodomy still applies justify it based on Islamic law, which is less implemented in Nepal. In accordance with the classical understanding of the Sharia law, any extra-marital sexual relations are illegal, with corresponding criminal law sanctions. It is therefore not surprising that homosexuality is forbidden, while at the same time considered to be a moral, physical, and psychological disorder. While Islam law does not have policy for the abortion. If ones go against it then there will be the penalty of death within the communities so that another person doesn't attempt to do that again.

There is a tale in *Quran*, which relates that the attempted sodomy (particularly anal intercourse) between men constituted the "abomination" alluded to in the *Quranic* texts. The people of Lut's transgressions became legendary, and the *Arabic* words for anal intercourse

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between men, such as "*Liwat*," and for a person who does such actions, "*Luti*," both come from the name *Lut*, despite the fact that *Lut* was not the one who demanded sex. Some modern Muslim gay and lesbian activists disagree that this rape incident is linked to homosexual partnerships. In the *Quran*, there is no explicit prohibition of sex between women. Some exegetes believe it is "*Zina*" (the criminal crime of sex outside of marriage), while others argue that it is a sin but not a religious offense.

Similarly, one of the participants from *Jame Masjid* explained on the issue of trans sexuality that the *Quran* does not explicitly mention any transgenderism. In the *Hadith*, there are convictions of effeminate men (perhaps eunuchs) and women who imitate men. Mohammed said to have exiled effeminate males but did not execute them because they were also believers. In Islam, there is a disagreement over whether transgender people imitate the other sex (which is forbidden) or if they are in the wrong body. In 1987, *Ayatollah Khomeini* issued a *Fatwa* allowing for sex surgeries. Despite this, Muslim transgender people in most Muslim nations (including Iran, where surgeries are available) face persecution.

When looking at the issue of gay or lesbian marriage, they could construct an arrangement for inheritance and shared property that mimicked marriage, but it would not be marriage. Automatically, it will not be acceptable in *Sharia* law. Nevertheless, frequently Islam is portrayed as "the source of unbridgeable difference," and the one that continues to prescribe the most serious penalties. As many of the Muslim women have been burned, killed and excluded from the family unit, society and community.

For the Muslim religious leader, if there is, someone above them to rule is *Hakim* (*Quran*). Government representatives and officials emanating from Muslim-majority and Islamic openly refer to the Islamic religion as a justification for human rights abuses against queer individuals, treating them publicly as inferior to human beings or simply declaring that homosexuality is a sin worse than murder. Furthermore, religious who advocate the incompatibility between Islam and homosexuality is against nature. As a result, LGBTIQ individual's right has been massively abused.

Thus, the religious leaders point out that Muslims' attitudes toward sexual diversity have shifted dramatically in the last century, despite the fact that Islam has long been more tolerant than Christianity. Furthermore, colonialism and opposition to Western exploitation have generated a broad aversion to many things that Muslims regard as Western (and corrupt). The use of homosexuality as an argument to demonstrate how rotten the West is follows. Although there are no statistics on how many LGBTIQ+ Muslims are out because

the subject is still taboo. Stone wall study reveals that 32% of lesbian, gay, and bisexual Muslims are secretive about their sexual orientation. One out of every four Trans people of faith is also secretive about who they are in their faith group. Living their truth can lead to ostracism, danger, and even violence for many queer Muslims.

The research demonstrates that several passages of the *Quran* acknowledge homosexuality and celebrate sexual diversity, and that it is therefore inaccurate to suggest there is a prohibition of homosexuality in Islam and to advocate criminalization or adoption of discriminatory practices targeting sexual minorities. Furthermore, it is argued that religious views and societal practices that suppress LGBTQI are not only incompatible with human rights law, but also contradict the fundamental principles of *Sharia*. To sum up the *Sharia* in contemporary Muslim societies requires absolute recognition and celebration of diverse gender identities. It is the fact that cultural norms and traditional readings of sacred texts *Quran* often uphold a heteronormative binary of gender identification and sexual orientation that don't allow for the range of identities present in modern society. Nevertheless, most of the religious leader agreed on, 'it is up to the family unit and society then the state law should approve of homosexuality'.

## **Conclusion**

Religious leaders are often the most respected figures in their communities. Because of the religious power vested within them, Buddhist monks and nuns, imams, pastors, priests, pujaris, and leaders of other religious organizations play a powerful role in shaping attitudes, opinions and behaviors. Religious leaders also have the authority to promote and support public policy that safeguards the culture, norms, social inclusion, justice, and equality for SOGIESC communities. Finding shows that there was a tension between theology and practice. Many religious leaders feel that they need to protect the values of faith. Based on this thought, they feel that talking about sexuality is the same as condoning it, and that those who practice sinful behavior are not true believers. Therefore, religious leaders are often not addressing sexuality, gender and related issues. Yet when they do address, it is often done in a very stigmatizing in moralist way.

At the same time, research finding shows that sexuality is often not an issue openly discussed by religious leaders and influenced by limited knowledge and insight they often promote stigma and discrimination. Most of them believes that they are sinful and diseased. In many cases of Muslim and Christianity, they thought it establishes a culture of impunity for perpetrators of violence in the society. Besides that, in Hinduism gay and lesbians' sexual relationship is not allowed. While in Buddhism, there is no specific discrimination

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between any caste, sex, gender, or religion. However, to obtain the pathway of enlighten they have to follow strictly eight-fold-path of Buddhism.

The overall research study shows that the issues of SOGIESC are taken as part of a syndrome in which individuals' rights are subjugated in the perceived interests of the community and-often maintain in their specific religious text ethos. Most of the religious leader accepted the biological features of the LGBTQI but they denied the sexual activities they perform or express. Mostly they take it as an improper or sin and the wrong deeds of previous life. Moreover, religious leaders also believe that the lesbian, gay issues were mostly influenced by western culture and the advancement of the modern technologies, where they were adapting the core value of Human rights for themselves.

Similarly, the men and women who belong to SOGIESC do not easily recognize and accepted in society. However, most of them hide their physical characteristic because of fear of being exposed and the fear of rejection and being boycotted from community. That's the fact they hide their originality and identity for survival. For many of them, the attitudes of family and norms of society are a much bigger problem than the fear of being persecuted. Therefore, throughout cultures and traditions, religion has played a considerable role in the repression of SOGIESC issues. Unsurprisingly, many religious leaders find SOGIESC issues unacceptable. For the reason, in depth interview and more research about SOGIESC is needed to explore the detail perception of religious leaders in Nepal. Research shows that divine revulsion features prominently amidst a range of justification for rampant discrimination and violation of the fundamental human right of LGBTQI communities still exist in Nepal.

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