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### Dynamics of Lesbian Invisibility in India: A Review within Global Context

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#### A B S T R A C T

Invisibility is often interpreted as an ‘end result’ and is rarely recognized as a potential cause for mental health issues. In reality, invisibility is a complex process that percolates a person’s identity to further suppress their identity. In case of lesbians, internalized homophobia further pushes them into invisibility. It causes a tandem relation between identity recognition and identity acceptance when it comes to minorities in general, and specifically among lesbians. Compared to the developed and westernized Global North, legality surrounding LGBTQI people in India is unacceptable. In most westernized countries of the Global North, a person's identity is considered normal if it is not psychologically distressing. For a Lesbian, those parts of world must certainly be better place to live. Reviews of literature on various causes that lead to invisibility indicate that lesbians in India live in extreme situations, surrounded by uncertainties. Most lesbians are forcibly married to heterosexual men, who enforce heteronormativity on them, while social problems like discrimination in obtaining education, job and housing co-exist. Specifically, marital rape in the form of obligatory heteronormative sex causes a special kind of trauma to lesbians in India. A majority of lesbians do not understand the existence of their lesbian identity, as their counterparts in the Global North might do, furthering their invisibility. Lesbians in India are subjected to psychological, emotional, sexual, physical, and verbal abuse. In such circumstances, lesbians have an option between silencing their natural identity and becoming vulnerable to various kinds of violence by coming out. In the Indian context, providing and encouraging safe spaces for lesbians, increasing awareness among lesbians about their orientation, and enhancing mental health support to those who need it are crucial. Encouraging lesbians to recognize and accept their orientation, regardless of whether they choose to come out in a homophobic society, will help them to reduce their own invisibility and develop coping skills and better adjustment.

## **History of homosexuality**

Homosexuality has been approved of, penalized, chastised, and quietly tolerated in various times and cultures. While it is common knowledge that homosexuality was widely tolerated and even approved of in ancient Greece and Rome, Abrahamic and Dharmic religions and societies have mostly perceived it to be sinful, and thus, criminalized it or marginalized its expression. However, there have been isolated instances of tolerance in various societies and cultures. (Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2017).

In "Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History", Saleem Kidwai and Ruth Vanitha (2000) documented homoerotic relationships and love as expressed in a large number of texts written during the last 2000 years in the Indian sub-continent. This goes against the popular belief that homosexuality is a colonial import, and alien to the sub-continent.

## **Situation of lesbians in India**

The American Psychological Association defines sexual orientation as *"an often enduring pattern of emotional, romantic and/or sexual attractions of men to women or women to men (heterosexual), of women to women or men to men (homosexual), or by men or women to both sexes (bisexual). It also refers to an individual's sense of personal and social identity based on those attractions, related behaviors and membership in a community of others who share those attractions and behaviors. Some people who have same-sex attractions or relationships may identify as "queer," or, for a range of personal, social or political reasons, may choose not to self-identify with these or any labels."* (American Psychological Association - APA, 2017).

While homosexuality has been recorded in the Indian subcontinent since ancient times, it currently criminalizes, marginalizes and perpetuates negative public perception to homosexuality. Section 377 continues to criminalize male homosexual relationships in a crudely dismissive manner, which often indirectly makes the legal situation of lesbians questionable too. When compared to urban areas such as Bombay or New Delhi (Shah, 2003), women are more vulnerable to quasi-feudal and patriarchal repression in rural areas. In such patriarchal situations, a woman's social standing is assessed by her relationship with male members of her family, such as being the mother, sister, wife, or daughter of somebody (Thadani, 1996). In such a scenario, coupled with religious oppression (Vanitha, 2002), lesbians are pushed further into invisibility. Fernandez and Gomathy (2003) found that lesbians in India experience various forms of physical, sexual, and emotional violence. If their sexuality is found out, they face excommunication from family members, abandonment, shame, guilt, isolation, etc. To mitigate both real and imagined violence, lesbians in India suppress their sexual identity and perpetuate their own invisibility to an extent.

A majority of lesbians do not understand the existence of their lesbian identity, as their counterparts elsewhere might do, furthering their invisibility. When lesbians do come out, they are subjected to psychological, emotional, sexual, physical, and verbal abuse and violence at home, work, school, inter-personal relationships, etc. In such circumstances, lesbians have an option between silencing their natural identity and becoming vulnerable to various kinds of violence by coming out. They may also face social problems like discrimination in obtaining education, job and housing. Most

lesbians are forcibly married to heterosexual men, who enforce heteronormativity on them. Specifically, marital rape in the form of obligatory heteronormative sex causes a special kind of trauma to lesbians in India.

### **Understanding invisibility**

Social invisibility is the subjective experience of being unseen by others in a social environment. A sense of disconnectedness from the surrounding world is often experienced by invisible people (Scotland-Stewart, 2007). Social invisibility pertains to people who are marginalized and systematically overlooked by the larger public, causing them to feel alienated and excluded. (Brooks and Gelderen, 2008). Invisibility's consequences are often damaging and disadvantageous to the vulnerable population.

Invisibility in India is perpetuated by various kinds of oppressional forces including class, education, caste, geographical location, culture, sexual and gender orientations, economic situation, etc., highlighting the importance of viewing invisibility in India from an intersectional perspective.

When compared with other societies in the world, in India, caste plays an important role alongside class. Invisibility is often interpreted as an end result of marginalization and social exclusion, but minority identity could also result in invisibility. Invisibility is experienced by the politically disadvantaged, socially underprivileged communities, social classes, castes, and also among groups of individuals who possess a minority identity. A number of studies in sociology have sought to understand social invisibility and describe the psychological impact that it might have on the affected individuals. At this point, understanding LGBTQIs from the

perspective of minority identities and social invisibility is very important to understand the difficulties faced by Indian lesbians. Only a deep understanding of their invisibility may help in mainstreaming efforts. However, there is a dearth of studies and research when it comes to Indian lesbian individuals and this self-perpetuating invisibility is rarely recognized as a potential cause for mental health issues.

### **Invisibility in the case of sexual minorities**

People whose sexual orientation, practices, or gender identity may differ from that of cisgender heterosexuals are known as sexual minorities. Sexual minorities usually consist of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgendered people, queer-identified people, and intersex individuals (PUCL-People's Union for Civil Liberties, 2001). Predominance of heterosexual relationships between cisgender males and females in heteronormative societies has resulted in varying degrees of non-acceptance of sexual minorities and gross violations of their human rights. Though they are minorities, it does not mean they are fewer in number, but that they score rather low in social power, and are grossly under-represented, rendering them invisible to dominant heteronormative groups.

While feminist and queer theories explain the invisibility of homosexuality and queer identities in Europe and North America, people of color are not adequately represented in those theories, though that is rapidly changing. Yet, these theories do not provide voice to Indian sexual minorities, and they are thus invisible in literature. Invisibility of different groups varies widely across cultures and societies, and is thus not an India-specific problem. Invisibility of lesbians has been studied in a few countries from different points of view.

Within the context of Nova Scotia women's movement of the 1980s, Darl's (2002) thesis examines the relationship between lesbian and heterosexual women, the processes of lesbian invisibility, and the paradox of lesbian visibility and invisibility. The study evaluates the disappearance of lesbian sensibility in current feminist and women's studies, which could be understood as a form of invisibility. Similarly, Lambie's (2002) article describes lesbian invisibility within the legal framework in Anglo-American courts. Hornick (2002) describes a Canadian case in which the police raided a women's bathhouse, pointing towards the othering of lesbianism, and pushing it further away from mainstream sight. The same paper argues that limited knowledge and limited thinking not only regulates the borders of visibility, but also plays an important role in shaping the identity of those who are rendered invisible.

It is important to note that in a country like India, various factors add to layers of marginalization and oppression when it comes to sexual minorities, and lesbians in particular, creating an intersectionality of oppression. Lesbian invisibility in India can thus be tied to intersectionality, and studying it from an intersectional perspective may help to address levels of invisibility that exist today in both urban and rural societies of the Indian sub-continent.

### **Invisibility's disastrous effects on physical and mental health**

In India, the invisibility of sexual minorities is manifested in a number of ways, including their access to medical and psychological care. Math SB and Seshadri (2013) noted that transgendered people do not have separate wards or beds reserved for them, and sometimes, they are denied entry into hospitals as well. Pathologizing

homosexuality makes it difficult for gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals to discuss health issues honestly with their medical providers in India. Levels of discomfort was also found to be directly related to the level of education, how well an individual was accepted by friends and family, legal situation, access and awareness about non-heteronormative lifestyles, support systems, etc. A higher level of these supportive factors revealed reduced perceived discomfort (Maroky *et al.*, 2014).

Challenges posed by invisibility include being vulnerable to various types of violence, poor physical health, elevated rates of suicide attempts (King *et al.*, 2008), mental health issues such as Major Depressive Disorder, Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Substance Use or Dependence, etc., among lesbian and gay youth (Greene, 1994).

Though in one study lesbians reported a similar level of mental health when compared with heterosexual women (DeAngelis, 2002), they do not find culturally competent care and existing methodologies do not adequately address their concerns (Cochran, 2001).

Though there are no readily available studies in India to discuss the psychological well being of lesbians in the sub-continent, one could draw conclusions based on studies conducted elsewhere, which reveal that mental health and psychological wellbeing depend on social acceptance and visibility (King McKeown, 2003). All the studies that have focused on sexual minorities in India (LGBTQI) reveal invisibility, marginalization and deprivation, resulting in a socially disadvantaged condition, which is directly responsible for poor psychological well being (Shubrajit, 2014; Srivastava and Singh, 2015).

McNair and Hegarty (2010) did an extensive review regarding primary care of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals, and identified the importance of inclusive clinical environments, sensitivity training and establishing standards for clinician-patient communication. Unfortunately, such a situation in India cannot be imagined at the moment.

### **What psychologists can do to tackle lesbian invisibility**

In the Indian context, providing and encouraging safe spaces for lesbians, increasing awareness among lesbians about their orientation, and enhancing mental health support to those who need it, are all very crucial. Encouraging lesbians to recognize and accept their orientation, regardless of whether they choose to come out in a homophobic society, will help them to reduce their own invisibility and develop coping skills and better adjustment. It is also important to consider a feminist perspective in general to understand the power struggles experienced by lesbians in India.

Feminist therapy could be actively pursued as an alternative therapy along with other techniques, as it gives an active role to the therapist when compared with psychodynamic and behavior therapies. There is a need for considering eclectic and family therapies to help them find better acceptance.

It is also important for therapists to be informed about Indian social situations to develop empathy, better research focus, and interventions within the Indian context. One may also need to consider if coming out is safe at all, and most of the times, the therapist's office may be the only safe space for a lesbian to discuss her inner struggles and feelings.

Researchers in India face many challenges and constraints while studying issues concerning lesbians. There are very few non-governmental organizations that work with lesbians in India, and those that do may not provide adequate access to researchers. There is also a general lack of initiatives targeted at lesbians, and there are difficulties in identifying lesbian individuals in India for the purpose of research due to stigma and invisibility.

In the context of lesbian identities, there is a need to understand invisibility as a complex process. Lesbian identity could be understood as a sexual identity that is not accepted by the mainstream Indian society, leading to a minority position. The perception of the minority identity as "unacceptable" leads to suppression of one's own identity. This oppressive situation interacts with other oppressive forces and intersectionalities, resulting in a cyclical negotiation of one's own sexual orientation, further suppressing the lesbian identity. In the process, lesbians' internalised homophobia further pushes them into invisibility. This results in an influential relationship between identity recognition and identity acceptance, when it comes to minorities in general, and lesbians in particular.

Lesbians in India are invisible due to various forms of violence, abuse, and discrimination perpetrated against them. Most lesbians internalize homophobia that exists in their society, and continue to perpetuate and participate in invisibility. As evidenced in various studies, invisibility causes physical and mental health issues, and the same invisibility makes it difficult for the invisible to seek quality medical and mental health care. Lesbians in India do not have access to either trained mental health professionals who are sympathetic to their difficulties nor

are there adequate resources to help those who wish to come out safely.

Thus, there is a need to develop safe spaces for lesbians. Such safe spaces may also include the psychologist's office, and often, the therapist's office is the only safe space that an Indian lesbian can rely on to express her thoughts and feelings. An eclectic, feminist, and family therapy-oriented approaches may help psychologists to provide better mental health care to lesbians in India. There is a need for psychologists to recognize lesbian invisibility in India, and be sensitive towards their difficulties and encourage them to accept themselves, and validate their choice to come out or not.

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