

Social Stratification and Gender Spectrum

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper explored through the dimensions of what social stratification is, what gender spectrum is, the social stratification of LGBTQ community, the status of LGBTQ community in India, the problems faced by LGBTQ community in India and suggestions for social inclusion of the community.

Design/methodology: The present study employed descriptive research to identify characteristics, frequencies, trends and categories related to the gender spectrum. It studies the unique intersectionality of aspects like socioeconomic classes, ethnicities, nationalities, backgrounds and religions combined with the numerous overlapping aspects of an individual's identity.

Findings: The main findings highlight that regardless of the constitutional readings, no unambiguous law has been ratified to ban the discrimination based on sexual orientation. Members of LGBTQ+ community are more likely to experience intolerance, discrimination, harassment and threat of violence due to their sexual orientation, than those that identify themselves as heterosexual. The exclusion and discrimination have major impacts on the lives of LGBTQ people.

Keywords: Social stratification, gender, gender spectrum, gender identities, sexual orientation, LGBTQ+.

1. Introduction

Gender is a spectrum, not a binary. Yes, you heard it right, the gender spectrum is an understanding that gender is not binary, but rather a spectrum of biological, mental and emotional traits that exist along a continuum.

All human beings live within pre-existing relations of unequal power, status and economic resources. These unequal relations surround and constrain us, they provide us with the context of our interactions which in turn affects the choices we make in our life, thus, opening some channels of opportunity and closing off other channels. This is a condition of social life but stratification is concerned with how some have more freedom and choice than others. Thus, social stratification is concerned with the patterning of inequality and its enduring consequences on the lives of those who experience it. As said by Otis Duncan, the difference between inequality and stratification is that "social stratification refers to the persistence of positions in a hierarchy of inequality, either over the life time of a birth cohort of individuals or, more particularly, between generations" (1968).

Sociologists are of the view that there are a variety of factors, including social class, race, gender, sexuality, nationality and religion that influence stratification in society. Gender stratification as defined by Calhoun et.al. focuses on the unequal access females have to socially valued resources, power, prestige and personal freedom as compared to men based on differing positions within the socio-cultural hierarchy. When using the terms sex and gender, it is important to note that sex describes biological

traits, whereas, gender is a broader term that reflects how a person lives within society. Concept of gender goes beyond the biological differences between men, women and gender diverse people and refers to socially constructed differences between them in terms of attributes, roles and relationship. Thus, we can say, gender identity is not confined to a binary i.e. girl/woman and boy/man and nor is it static rather it exists along a continuum and can change over time. One's gender identity could be woman, man, transgender, nonbinary, etc. The sociologists thus tend to take an intersectional approach to analyse gender stratification. According to this approach, the systems of oppression intersect to shape people's lives and to sort them into hierarchies. They view sexism and heterosexism as a significant factor that plays troubling roles in social stratification.

2. Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation

An important aspect of understanding the spectrum of identities related to gender and sexuality framework is developing a foundational understanding of gender, sex and sexuality. The definition of gender is given by Canadian Institute of Health Research and it goes as "Gender refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, expressions and identities of girls, women, boys, men and gender diverse people and it influences how people perceive themselves and each other, how they act and interact and the distribution of power and resources in society. Gender identity is not confined to a binary i.e. girl/woman and boy/man and nor is it static rather it exists along a continuum and can change over time. There is considerable diversity in how individuals and groups understand, experience and express gender through the roles they take on, the expectations placed on them, relations with others and the complex ways that gender is institutionalized in society."

The term gender identity refers to the personal sense of an individual's own gender. Gender identity is one's own internal sense of self and their gender, whether that is man, woman, neither or both. It is related with our gender expression i.e. the way we present our gender to the world through clothing, dress, physical attributes, mannerisms, behavior, etc. but at the same time it does not have to be correlated.

Now, let's understand what sex is. Sex is a label that a person is given at birth based on medical factors, including their hormones, chromosomes and genitals. When a person is assigned a sex at birth and they are comfortable and continue to identify that way, they are someone who identifies as **cisgender**. When a person is assigned a sex at birth and they are not comfortable with it and no longer socially or physically identify themselves that way, they may be someone who identifies within the **transgender community**. Sexuality, whereas, refers to a person's sexual feelings, thoughts, desires and attractions. It is a personal identifier that best describes whom a person may be attracted to sexually, emotionally, intellectually or romantically. It includes sexual orientation, which is a person's romantic or sexual attraction toward another person that includes both sexual behaviors and personal identity. Sexual orientation encompasses both heterosexuality i.e. attraction to someone of the opposite sex and homosexuality i.e. attraction to someone of the same sex. These categories are not always clear-cut as people often fall on a continuum between heterosexuality and homosexuality and many people have attractions to both or multiple sexes. Some common terms that are associated with sexuality are lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, queer and many different identities as well. These distinct terms are crucial for a deeper acknowledgement of LGBTQ and sexual identities. LGBTQIA+ is an abbreviation for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual, and more. The plus is used to signify all of the gender identities and sexual orientations that letters and words cannot yet fully describe.

3. Gender Stratification and Gender Spectrum

Gender stratification refers to the unequal distribution of wealth, power and privilege between men, women and gender diverse people. This inequality between different genders can be analysed based on prestige, life-style, privileges, opportunities, association with social groups, income, education, occupation and power (Acker,1973). The discrimination against any group or individual can occur at individual level as well as at structural level. Discrimination in society can emerge between individuals when a person refuses to hire someone for a job based on the person's race, gender or sexuality, or it can be structural, as when laws codify discriminatory treatment toward some members of society. Individuals may engage in discrimination against or hold prejudicial attitudes toward other members of society but structural discrimination ensures that some populations are not eligible or do not receive the same rights, privileges and/or protections as dominant groups. Sexual orientation is a significant source of social inequality, just as race/ethnicity, gender and social class are sources of social inequality. Gender spectrum, in the study of human sexuality, is the thesis that gender is not **binary** or limited to the specific genders man and woman but continuous, forming a spectrum of differing degrees and combinations of the mental, emotional, behavioural and biological traits commonly possessed by or attributed to members of the male or female sex.

4. LGBTQ Community

LGBTQ+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (or sometimes questioning) and others. The plus in this acronym represents other sexual identities including pansexual, asexual and many others. As society's understanding, recognition and inclusion of diverse sexual identities and gender expressions has

grown, so has its acronym. The first four letters of the acronym have been in use since the 1990s, but in recent years there has been an increased awareness of the need to be inclusive of other sexual identities to offer better representation. Let us understand what each letter in the acronym LGBTQ+ mean:

- **L stands for Lesbian.** A lesbian is a woman/woman-aligned person who is attracted to only people of the same gender.
- **G stands for Gay.** Gay is usually a term used to refer to men/men-aligned individuals who are only attracted to people of the same gender. However, the term gay is used for casually representing the whole LGBTQ community based on their similar gender attraction.
- **B stands for Bisexual.** Bisexual indicates an attraction to all genders.
- **T stands for Transgender.** The term transgender indicates that a person's gender identity is different from the gender associated with the sex they were assigned at birth.
- **Q stands for Queer or Questioning.** Queer may be used by people as a specific identity but it is often considered as an umbrella term for anyone who is non-cisgender or heterosexual. Questioning refers to people who may be unsure of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.
- **+ (Plus):** The plus is used to signify all the gender identities and sexual orientations that are not specifically covered by the other five initials. For example, pansexual, asexual, etc. can be included in this +(plus).

5. Rights and status of LGBTQ in India

“Why is that, as a culture, we are more comfortable seeing two men holding guns than holding hands?” - Ernest J. Gaines

This very much sums up the status of LGBTQ+ community in India. LGBTQ+ basically stands for lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, transgender and queer. If we go through our history, we can find more than twenty types of gender such as Transmen, Transwomen, androgynous, pan-gender and trig ender in the era of pre-modern history. In ancient India, Trans people were accepted and referred to the terminology like Tiritiya Prakriti. We can say that homosexuality is old as Vedas. Since ancient times, we all have seen slow but steady achievement in LGBTQ rights in India.

The first-ever protest for gay rights was conducted in 1992 where “AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan” filed a public interest litigation in Delhi High Court questioned the validity of section 377 of Indian penal code. In the year 1997, two separate helplines were introduced for LGBTQ community in India; “sangini” for lesbians, bisexuals, transgender women and “humraz” for queer men. In year 1999, the first-ever Gay Pride Parade was marched in Calcutta. The Supreme Court of India in 2014 ruled that transgender people should be treated as the third category of gender. In 2017, the Supreme court gave the country’s LGBTQ community the freedom to safely express their sexual orientation but homosexual acts remained criminalized. Finally, in September 2018, the Supreme Court struck down the part of section 377 which criminalized consensual homosexual activities.

5.1 Recognized Rights by Supreme Court for LGBT Community

The supreme court of India in 2018 struck down Section 377, a colonial-era law that forbids same-sex or homosexual relations, sparking hopes of equality for the country’s LGBTQ community. In this judgment of Supreme Court, the emphasis was on the fundamental right of homosexual persons to live with dignity without the stigma attached to their sexual orientation with equal enjoyment of rights under India’s constitution and equal protection under the law. The decision of Supreme Court on decriminalization of Section 377 was based on primary grounds under the Constitution i.e on

1. Right to equality under Article 14,
2. Right against discrimination under Article 15,
3. Right to freedom of speech and expression under Article 19 and
4. Right to privacy under Article 21.

The decriminalization of Section 377 by providing equal fundamental rights to LGBT community as that of other citizen was the first step towards recognizing the rights of the LGBT community in India.

Another legal act, Transgender Person (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019 prohibits prejudicial discrimination against transgender people in educational institution and services, employment, healthcare facilities, etc. this act gives the transgender community a right to the “use of any goods, lodgings, amenity, facility, profit, freedom or opportunity dedicated to the use of the general public or normally accessible to the public.”

Regardless of these constitutional readings, no unambiguous law has been ratified to ban the discrimination based on sexual orientation.

5.2 Problems faced by community

Members of LGBTQ+ community are more likely to experience intolerance, discrimination, harassment and threat of violence due to their sexual orientation, than those that identify themselves as heterosexual. The reason of this discrimination is homophobia i.e. the fear or hatred of homosexuality. The factors that may reinforce homophobia on a larger scale are moral, religious and political beliefs of a dominant group. Some of the problems faced by the community in mainstream society are as discussed below:

1. Social exclusion and Marginalization

Marginalization is one of the major problems faced by homosexuals in a country like India. People who

are marginalized have very little control over their lives and the resources available to them, they are stigmatized and are often receive negative public attitudes. The impacts of marginalization, in terms of social exclusion, are similar based either on social attitudes or social circumstances. LGBTQ individuals may experience multiple forms of marginalization such as racism, sexism, poverty or other factors. The stigma attached to sexual orientation and gender identity or expression that fall outside the expected heterosexual, non-transgender norm pushes many LGBT people to the margins of society.

2. Family rejection and Conflict

The LGBTQ people usually face rejection from the family and rejection from the society. If a person falls outside the expected heterosexual, non-transgender section in society, he or she is always rejected by society. After coming out to their parents about their sexual orientation, their family members are not supportive to their child. Many hide their sexuality so that they won't hurt the feeling of their parents and other family members who believe that being gay is wrong or sinful. As a result of it, the members of LGBTQ community less likely want to have a family or to be parents themselves. It also affects their ability to plan for the future, including their ability to have career or vocational plans.

3. Harassment

It can hardly be seen that a person who is homosexual, has not been harassed or tortured in school, college or workplace by their friends and colleagues. The harassment is not limited to the schools, college or workplace only; people from the LGBT community face casual homophobic comments on everyday basis, prejudice/embarrassed response from professionals, no protection against discrimination at work, verbal harassment, fear of physical violence and discrimination.

4. Mental health

LGBTQ people face considerable levels of stigmatization, discrimination and harassment in their daily lives. A significant number of LGBTQ people have to cope up with stigmatization, discrimination and harassment without support. Many also face additional stress from experiences such as high levels of homophobic bullying in society and attacks both physical and verbal. All this has a negative impact on their mental health, which leads to significant levels of psychological distress, self-harm and suicidality.

5. Poor Socio-Economic Condition and Discrimination at Workplace:

Discrimination of LGBTQ persons in the workplace is a significant factor in the differences in socioeconomic status for LGBTQ persons. They suffer from socioeconomic inequalities in large part due to discrimination in the workplace. This discrimination directly causes job instability and high turnover, resulting in greater unemployment and poverty rates for LGBTQ people.

There are many other problems faced by the LGBTQ community such as rejection by loved ones or social groups, bullying at school, harassment by neighbours, danger of violence in public places, casual homophobic comments, prejudice from professionals, no protection against discrimination at work and verbal harassment.

5.3 Recommendations for Social Inclusion

The exclusion and discrimination have major impacts on the lives of LGBTQ people. It has resulted in school dropouts, running away from families, unable to find regular jobs, they are ignored in the community and are isolated. There is no short cut solution that can address the problems facing many LGBTQ people, thus there are some recommendations that can be considered for the social inclusion of LGBTQ community. The recommendations are as follows:

1. The LGBT community should be given familial support.

2. Institutional changes can make the world a better place for members of the community. One way of doing that is by sensitising the teaching community, who potentially can become early life mentors to children who identify with the LGBTQIA+ community
3. It is important to make educational systems inclusive of the LGBTQIA+ community,
4. holistic skilling programs should be created for them that can help them pursue their career aspirations.
5. As members of society, we should support LGBT racial and economic justice work.
6. We should change societal attitude. Media can play a responsible role in this by reporting on LGBT issues and promoting a culture of tolerance and freedom for minorities.
7. Local authorities, policy makers, schools and family need more education on accepting gender-variant children and in treating people of different sexuality and gender identity equally.

Conclusion

We can conclude by saying that gender is not binary or limited to the specific genders; man and woman, but it is continuous, forming a spectrum of differing degrees and combinations of the mental, emotional, behavioural and biological traits commonly possessed by or attributed to members of the male or female sex. The LGBTQ community represents a wide variety of sexual identities and gender expressions based on orientation. The members of this group come from a wide variety of socioeconomic classes, ethnicities, nationalities, backgrounds and religions.

My concluding thoughts on the social stratification of gender rest on the premise that the unique intersectionality of above-mentioned aspects, combined with the numerous overlapping aspects of an individual's identity contributes to a wide variety of thoughts, perspectives, experiences and understanding. In contemporary world, belonging to the LGBTQ community can certainly be a source of strength in many countries but it also leads to a wide variety of challenges. Many LGBTQ individuals have issues recognizing how their sexual orientation and gender identity contributes to their lives moving forward.

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