

Unveiling Invisibility: Using Queer Theory to Understand Case Study Analysis and Literature Review of Lesbian and Bisexual Student Experiences

Sheethal MJ¹, DR. R Kavitha²

¹Research Scholar, Dept. of Social work, PSG CAS Coimbatore,

²Research supervisor & Assistant Professor, Dept. of Social Work, PSG CAS Coimbatore

ABSTRACT

The author explores Queer theory into lesbian and bisexual college students' multiple identity perceptions, applying queer theory to provide a different analytical perspective on three participant's developmental narrative, particularly regarding her experiences with sexuality, religion, gender, and social class. To explore, through case studies and review of literature, the specific challenges and successes of implementing inclusive education for lesbian and bisexual students of Kerala. This research employs a qualitative re-analysis approach, drawing upon Queer theory. This study will employ a mixed-method design, employing Sequential Exploratory research Design. The first stage will be synthesizing existing literature on inclusive education for lesbian and bisexual students, followed by three qualitative case studies exploring in-depth experiences within specific educational settings. The Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS-21), a standardized instrument, will be used to evaluate and monitor participants' existing symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress. The review of literature reveal a pattern of both direct and indirect discrimination experienced by lesbian and bisexual students, alongside a lack of consistently implemented inclusive policies. The case studies reveal various challenges faced by bisexual and lesbian women such as violence, lack of social support and discrimination in educational settings by peers and faculties. The study also highlights the importance of social workers as student counsellors in higher educational institutions.

Keywords: – Lesbian, Bisexual, Sexual minority, Inclusive education, Inclusive practices, social equity, social work perspectives.

INTRODUCTION

NAVIGATING MULTIPLE IDENTITIES: WOMANHOOD AND LESBIANISM IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

Implicitly, women experience significant marginalization in the majority of the settings in which they live. These encompass both the public and private domains, employment, social interactions, education, family life, health, leisure, and free time. The male centric and patriarchal systems that drive society shape this marginality. These same systems also establish heterosexuality as the standard from which definitions as well as the distinction between males and women is derived. This division serves as the

foundation for attributing duties and behaviors as appropriate or expected. Apart from stigmatizing particular patterns as “abnormal”, such a society penalizes and punishes everything that escapes its control. This produces the two key factors that offer light on the marginalization and social exclusion of lesbian women, since they are an effect of these two characteristics: being women and being lesbian. Due to these two factors, these lesbian and bisexual women are subjected to double prejudice in almost every aspect of life. When it comes to mitigating the risks involved, there is a significant and confirmed risk of social isolation. Within the context of India's deeply patriarchal and religiously conservative society, women who deviate from heteronormative expectations, specifically those identifying as lesbian or bisexual, face systemic oppression stemming from both gender-based and sexuality-based discrimination.

UNDERSTANDING QUEER THEORY

Early in the 1990s, the official discipline of queer theory developed from women's studies and LGBT studies. It evolved from a study of the perceived shortcomings of the conventional identity politics of self-identification and recognition. According to Anna Marie Jagose, “queer” is a catch-all phrase for a group of culturally excluded. As a result, queer becomes more of a critique of identification than an identity. Cultural materialism, psychoanalysis, structuralism, feminism and Marxism are some of the discourses this theory draws on (Ishwerwood, 2023). It is a collection of concepts founded on the notion that our identities are not a set in concrete and do not define who we are. It implies that discussing women or any other group in general, is pointless since identities are made up of many different components. And that is incorrect to believe that people can be viewed as a group based on just one characteristic. In fact, it suggests that we consciously question every idea in unpredictable ways. One of the primary concepts of queer theory is the notion of identity as free floating, as an expression rather than anything linked to the ‘essence’. Thus our identities are ‘performances’, rather than genuine ‘inner core self’.

Queer theory, in contrast to lesbian and gay theory, considers sexual differences independently of gender and radicalizes the status of gender in conventional discourse by placing individuals within restrictive sexual orientations, thus undermining the normalizing tendencies of the sexual order. Mismatches between sex, gender, and desire are the main emphasis of queer culture. It identifies and takes advantage of the contradictions in the three words that define heterosexuality. It examines how gender and sexuality are contested and casts doubt on assertions of a fixed identity based on these factors. It contends that rather than being everlasting or fundamentally natural types, identities are more self-consciously historicized and viewed as being the creations of certain lineages. While the term “queer” itself is not new, the way that the “queer” is being addressed in academia and politics is undoubtedly new. Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Lauren Berlant are the main proponents of this idea; they were all greatly impacted by Michel Foucault's writings. Queer theory critiques heteronormativity, the assumption that heterosexuality is the natural or superior sexual orientation. It also challenges other forms of social norms and power structures. It also Queer theory rejects rigid categories like “male/female,” “heterosexual/homosexual,” and “man/woman.” It argues that these binaries are socially constructed and limit our understanding of identity.

LGBTQ+ IN EDUCATION

The global recognition of health issues and disparities affecting LGBTQI+ individuals has coincided with

th significant advancements in LGBTQI+ rights movements. As awareness grows regarding the unique health challenges faced by this community, there is a corresponding shift in legal and policy frameworks. This evolution reflects a broader societal commitment to not only uphold LGBTQI+ rights but also to tackle the specific inequities and discrimination that persist.(Belmonte 2021).Key developments in this area include legislative reforms aimed at enhancing healthcare access for LGBTQI+ individuals, alongside initiatives designed to combat stigma and discrimination in different settings.

People who identify as LGBTQ+ lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and nonbinary, and queer—face more stresses than cisgender heterosexuals because of stigma, persecution, and marginalization. These high stress levels affect not just one's profession but also one's health and well-being. According to limited studies, LGBTQ+ academic members in higher education may face harassment, discrimination, and bullying at work. Research on marginalized communities is also thought to be less useful and impartial than research on majority populations, according to certain studies. There are less studies especially in Indian context about LGBTQ+ population. Academicians or researchers working on LGBTQ+ themes often face challenges and discrimination. Veldhuis (2022) found that biases against LGBTQ+ research can lead to misconceptions about its validity, often dismissing it as "me-search" while simultaneously valuing similar work from majority-group researchers. Furthermore, the lack of supportive networks and mentors within academia can amplify feelings of isolation and anxiety among LGBTQ+ researchers, affecting their professional development and sense of belonging. This dismissal often stems from a fundamental misunderstanding of the researchers' lived experiences as valuable data points, rather than a conflict of interest. Consequently, this bias can hinder the dissemination of critical research that directly addresses the needs and challenges faced by LGBTQ+ communities. The subsequent marginalization within academic spaces can also lead to a reluctance among LGBTQ+ scholars to pursue advanced degrees or leadership positions, further perpetuating the cycle of underrepresentation.

Indian lesbian and bisexual women navigating academic institutions face a multifaceted array of challenges rooted in societal stigma and the intersection of their sexual orientation and gender. Forced invisibility due to cultural norms and a lack of institutional awareness leads to pervasive feelings of isolation. Discriminating experiences, including verbal harassment and microaggressions, are compounded by the fear of being "outed," which often silences reports of such incidents. The absence of formal LGBTQ+ support systems and inclusive policies further exacerbates their vulnerability, contributing to heightened mental health challenges like anxiety and depression. Family pressures to conform to heteronormative expectations add significant emotional distress, with the fear of rejection creating a constant burden. Moreover, intersectionality deepens these struggles, as lesbian women from marginalized communities face compounded discrimination based on caste, class, or religion. The lack of an inclusive curriculum and limited research on their lived experiences reinforces their exclusion.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Some Global Perspectives on LGBTQ+ Student Experiences:

- Longerbeam (2007) examines the college experience of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) students, exploring their appreciation for diversity, intellectual growth, and residence hall climate, and highlights the need for further research on this population. The study found that LGB students often remain closeted due to the hostile climate they experience on college

campuses, and that the campus climate for LGB students affects their process of identity development.

- The study by Li et al. (2023) investigates the mental health challenges faced by lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) college students in China, focusing on the interplay of minority stressors, social support, and mental health outcomes. The existing literature highlights a significant gap in understanding LGB individuals' mental health in non-Western contexts, particularly in China, where societal stigma regarding non-heterosexual identities persists. The findings reveal alarming rates of mental health issues among LGB students, with 48.1% experiencing depression, 57.1% anxiety, and 37.5% stress. The study identifies a significant association between experiences of school bullying and internalized homophobia, which in turn correlated with negative mental health outcomes
- The study 'Stigma Resistance Among Sexual Minorities' (2022) by Chiu Hung Yip and Kevin Ka Shing Chan investigates the individual differences in stigma resistance among LGB individuals, focusing on the psychosocial factors that can enhance their ability to counteract stigma. The authors posit that positive in-group perceptions, particularly group value and identification, play a crucial role in fostering stigma resistance, which subsequently influences self-stigma, self-empowerment, and overall life satisfaction. Utilizing a sample of 401 LGB individuals from Hong Kong, the researchers employed structural equation modeling to assess the relationships among various psychological constructs. Their findings revealed that both group value and group identification significantly correlated with higher levels of stigma resistance, which in turn was associated with lower self-stigma and increased self-empowerment. This chain reaction ultimately contributed to greater life satisfaction among participants. These results highlight the importance of fostering positive in-group perceptions to combat public stigma and improve mental health outcomes. The researchers emphasize the need for tailored approaches that consider the specific sociocultural factors affecting LGB individuals in this region. By understanding the dynamics of stigma and resistance, practitioners can better support LGB individuals in navigating their identities and experiences in a challenging environment.
- The study conducted by Whitfield et al. (2021) investigates the prevalence and nature of intimate partner violence (IPV) among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) college students, highlighting the increased risks faced by this demographic compared to heterosexual and cisgender peers. IPV encompasses a range of abusive behaviors—emotional, physical, and sexual—within intimate relationships. The research utilizes data from the National College Health Assessment-II, spanning from 2011 to 2013, involving nearly 89,000 students, to analyze how factors like sexual orientation and gender identity intersect and impact experiences of IPV. The findings reveal alarming statistics: LGBT college students report significantly higher rates of IPV, with emotional violence rates ranging from 9.23% overall, but rising to 18.41% for transgender students. Bisexual individuals also experience elevated rates, particularly in emotional (16.86%) and sexual IPV (4.43%). The study employs multilevel logistic regression analysis, indicating that bisexual and transgender students have the highest adjusted odds ratios for experiencing various forms of IPV. The implications of these findings are significant, suggesting that interventions aimed at enhancing positive perceptions within the LGB community could be beneficial. By promoting group value and identification, LGB individuals may develop resilience against stigma and improve their psychological well-being.

- A 2022 study by Caitlin M. Kay at Walden University explored the challenges LGBTQIA students face in higher education across academic, residential, and social domains. Through interviews with eleven undergraduates, the research identified key obstacles, including the impacts of intersectionality, difficulties with LGBTQIA centers and clubs, experiences of nonacceptance, and feelings of institutional disconnect. These challenges, often intensified by intersecting identities like race and gender, can negatively affect well-being and academic performance. The study emphasizes the need for systemic changes and recommends professional development to foster more inclusive and supportive environments for LGBTQIA students in higher education. Ultimately, addressing these issues is crucial for promoting social change and improving the educational journey for this community.

Review of Indian-Specific Research;

- The article "Perceived Social Support and Internalized Homophobia among Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Individuals" (Anil, 2022) explores the complex relationship between perceived social support and internalized homophobia within the LGBTQIA+ community in India. Despite legal advancements, such as the decriminalization of homosexuality under IPC Section 377, members of this community continue to face significant societal discrimination and stigma. The methodology employed in the research involved a correlational design with a sample of 109 participants, utilizing mixed-snowball sampling to collect data. The research found that non-heterosexual women exhibited higher levels of internalized homophobia compared to their male counterparts, indicating gender disparities in the experience of homophobia within the community. The findings of the study underscore the importance of social support in mitigating internalized homophobia. A lack of perceived social support can create a negative feedback loop, exacerbating feelings of self-loathing and reinforcing internalized homophobic attitudes. The heightened levels of internalized homophobia among women can be attributed to the intersection of gender-based violence and societal expectations, further complicating their ability to seek support and affirm their identities. These insights highlight the necessity for targeted mental health interventions that promote social support and address the unique challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ individuals.
- The article "Sexual Minorities Students in Educational Institutions: Identity and Other Challenges Faced by LGBTQ Individuals" (Kumar, 2023) explores the unique challenges that LGBTQ students encounter within educational settings, particularly in India. It highlights how societal constructs around gender and sexuality can lead to marginalization and discrimination against these students. The authors emphasize the need for a more inclusive environment in schools, colleges, and universities to ensure the physical and emotional safety of LGBTQ individuals, who frequently face bullying, harassment, and mental health issues due to their identities. The article presents substantial evidence regarding the prevalence of bullying and harassment faced by LGBTQ students in educational institutions. Studies indicate that these students are significantly more likely to experience derogatory remarks and violence compared to their heterosexual peers. For instance, reports reveal that 95% of LGBTQ students have heard homophobic slurs at school, and a significant percentage have contemplated or attempted suicide due to the harassment they face. Moreover, the mental health impact of such experiences is profound, with LGBTQ youth showing higher rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Objectives

- To explore existing literature related to Lesbian and bisexual women and their challenges in educational institutions.
- To understand the challenges faced by lesbian and bisexual women in Educational institutions through case studies.
- To apply the DAS scale to provide a complementary perspective on the levels of depression, anxiety, and stress experienced by participants within the case studies.
- To identify common themes and patterns across the literature review and case studies.

Research Paradigm and Approach

Novelty of this research: While Kerala boasts a progressive social and political landscape alongside high literacy, research specifically examining the challenges faced by queer women within its academic settings remains limited. This study addresses a notable gap in understanding the unique experiences of this demographic within the state's higher education system.

Mixed methodology paradigm focussing on qualitative data: This study adopts a qualitative paradigm, focusing on in-depth understanding, interpretation, and meaning-making rather than numerical measurement and statistical analysis.

This study will employ a mixed-methods approach, employing Sequential Exploratory Design. An exploratory sequential mixed methods design, researchers first collect and analyze qualitative data to explore a phenomenon, then use the findings to inform and design a subsequent quantitative phase for validation, generalization, or further exploration. Here, in this study Initially existing literature will be synthesized on inclusive education for lesbian and bisexual students, followed by three qualitative case studies exploring in-depth experiences within specific educational settings. The DASS-21, a standardized instrument, will be employed to evaluate and monitor participants' symptomatology related to depression, anxiety, and stress levels.

Case Study Approach: The core of the research will be conducted through three case studies, allowing for a detailed exploration of the phenomena within their real-life contexts.

Descriptive and Interpretive Approach: The research aims to describe the experiences and perspectives related to the research topic and interpret the findings within the context of existing literature and the DAS scale results.

Sampling Design: The study adopted snow ball sampling.

Case Examinations

- **Case example 1- The Intersecting Marginalization of Maya: A Case Study of a Lesbian Scheduled Caste Student in Kerala**

Background- Maya,(name changed), a 21-year-old lesbian and scheduled caste undergraduate student from Trivandrum, Kerala, embodies a complex intersection of marginalized identities. Hailing from a deeply orthodox household, she is the first in her family to pursue a college education. Her parents intend for her to marry upon graduation.

Currently status- Maya is a final-year B.Com student at a reputable college. She considers herself an above-average student. She has confided her sexual orientation to two close friends, both of whom are supportive, but she lacks the courage to come out publicly, especially to her parents. She is currently single.

Challenges- During her second semester, she confided in a classmate who later mocked her sexuality in front of other students during an argument. Though she dismissed the incident, she feels that some teachers observe her with suspicion. She remains extremely vigilant about concealing her sexuality, fearing discrimination. In her third semester, she dated a male batchmate to deflect suspicion, but the relationship ended after five to six months because his mother disapproved of him dating a woman from a "lower caste." Maya also reports experiencing subtle caste-based microaggressions, such as jokes and casual conversations that perpetuate caste stereotypes.

Regarding her mental health, Maya completed the DAS-21 scale, revealing mild depression and moderate stress, while her anxiety levels were normal.

Maya states, *"My mother and father do not even understand the concept of sexuality or homosexuality. I am very keen on pursuing a master's degree. Although my parents value education, I come from a community where girls are typically married by my age. My parents have done many sacrifices to educate me and my brother. All my cousins are married. I fear eventually, I will have to live a life of lies. While I see queer content in movies and web series, I see no representation of queer women in real life. I often feel lonely and scared. In my opinion, every college should have a mandatory queer support cell. There should be yearly workshops and awareness programs for faculty and students on sexuality and gender."*

Maya's narrative reveals a confluence of challenges stemming from her lesbian identity, caste location, and gender.

- **Case example 2-Navigating Bisexuality: Revathi's Journey of Isolation and Resilience**

Revathi, a 23-year-old bisexual postgraduate social work student (first year) from Alapuzha, faces significant challenges.

Background: Hailing from an upper-class Christian family as an only child, Revathi's bisexuality is known to close friends, though often dismissed. She had a three-year heterosexual relationship, but during her first year of postgraduate study, she developed attractions to women. This led to a breakup and a subsequent abusive same-sex relationship involving mental and physical harassment, which she ended. She is currently single.

Challenges: Revathi struggles with internalized biphobia and a lack of supportive resources. She feels unseen and unheard, noting the absence of safe spaces for bisexual women, even within her seemingly progressive college environment. She advocates for college-based queer support cells and statewide helplines.

Revathi says *"I confided in my best friend of seven years about my bisexuality, and her immediate response was that I was just confused. When I shared my sexuality with a close classmate, she told me I could still date men and that it would be better to marry one. During our conversations about sexuality, I've noticed that many of them perceive bisexual people as sexually promiscuous, believing we're more likely to cheat. This makes me want to hide my sexuality even more. I wish I was straight like everyone else at class"*.

Mental Health: Revathi's DAS-21 scores indicate moderate depression and anxiety, along with mild stress. She also reports sleep disturbances and constant nightmares.

Revathi's case highlights the critical need for inclusive support systems for bisexual individuals, particularly within educational and social contexts. The pervasive misconceptions and lack of understanding surrounding bisexuality contribute significantly to mental health challenges and feelings of isolation, underscoring the urgency for targeted interventions and awareness campaigns.

• Case example 3- Outed and Isolated: Rima's Struggle with Lesbian Identity

Rima (22), a lesbian undergraduate student from Ernakulam, faces profound challenges due to her sexuality.

Background: Pursuing her third year of college, Rima comes from an orthodox middle-class Nair family. Her educated parents view homosexuality as a perversion, and she remains closeted to them. Her parents hate seeing homosexual content in TV shows or movies.

Current status- A significant relationship with a female batchmate ended abruptly when the partner cheated with a male student and denied their relationship, resulting in Rima's involuntary outing. She sees herself as a average student in academics. She feels hopeless.

Challenges: Rima attempted suicide following the breakup and public exposure. While rescued, she lied to her parents, attributing her distress to academic pressure. Though supported by close friends, she experiences mockery and ostracism from some peers, including homophobic slurs from a male classmate. She contemplated dropping out but was persuaded to continue. Rima feels isolated and ashamed, longing for queer representation and support groups on campus.

Rima says “ *I live in constant fear of my parents knowing my sexuality through my peers some day. They would prefer a dead daughter than having a homosexual daughter. I have no hopes of finding a partner, my parents might start seeing alliances for me as soon as my graduation is done. I feel hopeless and unheard in life*”.

Mental Health: Rima's DAS-21 scores indicate moderate depression and anxiety, and severe stress.

Rima's experience underscores the devastating impact of forced outing and homophobia on a young lesbian woman's mental health and sense of belonging.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Table 1- Connecting Literature to Case Studies

Literature Review (Global & Indian)	Cases: Maya (Lesbian, Scheduled Caste)	Revathi (bisexual)	Rima(Lesbian)
Longerbeam (2007): Hostile Climate & Identity Development - LGB students often remain closeted due to hostile campus climate. Campus climate affects identity development.	Maya conceals her sexuality, fearing discrimination. Experiences mocking of her sexuality.	Revathi feels unseen and unheard, even in a seemingly progressive environment. Experiences dismissal of her bisexuality.	Rima is involuntarily outed, experiences mockery and ostracism.
Li et al. (2023): Mental Health in China - 48.1% of LGB students experience depression, 57.1% experience anxiety, 37.5% experience stress. School bullying and internalized	Mild depression, moderate stress.	Moderate depression and anxiety, mild stress.	Moderate depression and anxiety, severe stress.

homophobia correlate with negative mental health.			
Yip, C. C. H., & Chan, K. K. S. (2021). Stigma resistance among sexual minorities.- Structural equation modelling showed that group value and group identification were positively associated with stigma resistance, which was, in turn, linked to lower self-stigma and higher self-empowerment, and thereby greater life satisfaction	Lack of safe community, fear of coming out. High (Internalized stigma from mockery, microaggressions)	Misunderstood, dismissed, lack of bisexual support). Internalized biphobia, lack of resources. reduced self-empowerment	Forced outing, isolation, no belonging, Extreme homophobia, lack of safe spaces, Lack of in-group support, coupled with severe homophobia.
Kay: Challenges Faced by LGBTQIA Students - Challenges in academic, residential, and social experiences; intersectionality; lack of support; institutional disconnect.	Experiences intersectional discrimination (lesbian, scheduled caste). Feels teachers observe her with suspicion. Faces jokes with caste mockery.	Struggles with internalized biphobia, lack of supportive resources, and absence of safe spaces.	Experiences forced outing, mockery, ostracism, and lack of queer representation.
Whitfield et al.: IPV in LGBT Students - LGBT students report higher IPV rates. Bisexual individuals have elevated rates of emotional (16.86%) and sexual (4.43%) IPV.	N/A (No IPV reported)	Revathi experiences an abusive same-sex relationship with mental and physical harassment.	N/A (Relationship ended due to partner cheating)
Anil, A., & Raveendran, R. (2022). Perceived social support Non-heterosexual women exhibit higher internalized homophobia. Lack of	Fears living a life of lies. Feels lonely and scared.	Wishes she was straight. Feels sexually promiscuous due to peer's perception.	Feels hopeless and unheard. Lives in constant fear of parents knowing her sexuality.

social support exacerbates feelings of self-loathing. 95% of LGBTQ students have heard homophobic slurs at school.			
Kumar, A., Gill, R., & Verma, N. (2023). Sexual minorities students in educational institutions LGBTQ students face bullying, harassment, and mental health issues. High rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts.	Experiences mocking of her sexuality, caste-based microaggressions	Experiences peer's misconceptions and lack of understanding.	Experiences homophobic slurs, attempted suicide

Queer Theory in Practice: Analyzing LGBTQ+ Experiences with the above case studies

Maya's experience vividly illustrates the intersection of multiple marginalized identities (lesbian, scheduled caste, and female). Queer theory emphasizes how these intersections create unique and complex forms of oppression, challenging the idea of a singular, universal LGBTQ+ experience. The pressure Maya feels to conform to heterosexual norms (marriage) and her fear of being "outed" highlight the pervasive power of heteronormativity and cissexism in her community. Queer theory critiques these norms and explores how they marginalize individuals who deviate from them. Queer theory helps us understand that Maya's struggles are not solely about her sexuality but also about the complex web of social hierarchies that shape her life. The theory challenges the notion of a universal, monolithic "queer" identity, acknowledging that experiences of queerness are shaped by caste, class, religion, and other social factor, and that, how gender and sexual identities are shaped by caste systems and norms, highlighting the complexity of Dalit and queer identities.

Revathi's experience of being dismissed and misunderstood, even within the LGBTQ+ community, reflects the biphobia and bisexual erasure that queer theory critiques. Her exploration of her bisexuality challenges the idea of fixed sexual identities. Queer theory embraces the fluidity and instability of sexuality, rejecting essentialist notions of identity. Queer theory provides a framework for understanding Revathi's experience of being "unseen" and "unheard," highlighting the need for greater inclusivity and recognition of bisexual identities.

Rima's forced outing and the subsequent ostracism and homophobic slurs she experiences illustrate the violence that can be inflicted on individuals who deviate from heteronormative expectations. Queer theory examines the ways in which power and violence are used to enforce social norms. It highlights that the pressure to hide is not just about individual choices; it's about the systemic violence of heteronormativity. By understanding this, we can work towards creating societies where LGBTQ+ individuals can live authentically and without fear. Rima's need to "pass" as heterosexual to protect herself from her parents reflects the performative nature of gender and sexuality. Queer theory highlights

how individuals are constantly performing identities to navigate social contexts. It fundamentally challenges heteronormativity, the assumption that heterosexuality is the "natural" or "normal" sexual orientation. This norm is not neutral; it's a system of power that privileges heterosexual relationships and marginalizes those who deviate. Homophobia, as a product of heteronormativity, is not simply a matter of individual prejudice. It's a systemic force that creates environments of fear, discrimination, and violence. We can connect this theory to the student experiences to understand as of how this violence operates not only through overt acts but also through subtle forms of exclusion, erasure, and pressure to conform.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals a consistent pattern of mental health challenges and social marginalization among lesbian and bisexual women in educational institutions in Kerala, India. The case studies of Maya, Revathi, and Rima demonstrate the compounding effects of intersecting identities (caste, class, religion) and societal stigma on LGBTQ+ students. Notably, all participants reported experiences of discrimination, either overt or covert, leading to significant emotional distress, reflected in moderate to severe levels of depression, anxiety, and stress as measured by the DAS-21 scale. The fear of being "outed" and the lack of visible queer representation contributed to feelings of isolation and hopelessness, particularly in Rima's case, which resulted in a suicide attempt. The reported experiences of bullying, microaggressions, and the lack of institutional support highlight the urgent need for comprehensive interventions, including mandatory queer support cells and awareness programs, as advocated by the participants. Furthermore, the higher levels of internalized homophobia reported by non-heterosexual women in the Indian context, as noted in the literature, are mirrored in the case studies, emphasizing the need for targeted mental health interventions that address the unique challenges faced by this demographic. Finally, the findings underscore the necessity for educational institutions to create safe and inclusive environments that acknowledge and support the diverse identities of their students, moving beyond legal recognition to achieve true social acceptance. The literature review, encompassing studies on minority stress, intersectional discrimination, and the campus climate for LGBTQ+ students, provided a vital framework for understanding the experiences of Maya, Revathi, and Rima. Longerbeam's (2007) findings on the hostile climate and its impact on identity development were mirrored in the case studies, where all three women navigated environments marked by prejudice and lack of support. Li et al.'s (2023) alarming mental health statistics among LGB students in China resonated with the DAS-21 scores observed in the Kerala-based cases, indicating a global trend of psychological distress. Whitfield et al.'s (2011-2013) research on IPV highlighted the vulnerability of bisexual individuals, directly connecting to Revathi's experience with an abusive relationship. Moreover, the intersectional challenges identified by Kay and the heightened internalized homophobia discussed in the Indian context were vividly illustrated in Maya's experience as a lesbian scheduled caste student and Rima's forced outing and severe stress. Ultimately, the literature served as a lens through which the individual narratives of Maya, Revathi, and Rima could be contextualized, revealing broader patterns of marginalization and the urgent need for systemic change.

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