A call to action: Addressing the mental health disparities of LGBTQIA+ Indians

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Abstract This article reports the challenges faced by the LGBTQIA+ community in India and how it affects their mental health. This is of significance as after the commencement of Section 377 people are starting to become more open about their sexual orientation. Every developing nation should make efforts towards augmenting the mental health of its citizens. LGBTQIA+ individuals in India often face discrimination, harassment, and violence due to their sexual orientation and gender identity. They are subjected to prejudice and are often denied equal opportunities in society, including access to mental health services. Discrimination can lead to higher rates of mental health problems, including anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation. Moreover, there is a lack of research and data on the mental health of LGBTQIA+ individuals in India, which makes it challenging to develop effective interventions and policies. This article can contribute towards bridging this gap by shedding light on the unique mental health needs and challenges faced by the LGBTQIA+ community in India. Our report can also promote awareness about LGBTQIA+ issues and help reduce the stigma associated with mental health problems. Increased discourse about mental health among LGBTQIA+ individuals, will lead to more clarity and help identify ways to address the issues and protect the rights of this vulnerable community.

Keywords: homosexuals, indian culture, psychological disorders, mental health

India is a collectivist country that focuses on cultural values that encourage collective decision-making, social cohesion, and a strong sense of community. These cultural values can sometimes be challenging to some groups. One such section of people is the LGBTQIA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and others) community (Verma, & Triandis, 2020).

The dark side of collectivism includes a lack of individualism, conformity pressure, and aversion to change, as well as limited autonomy, due to which the LGBTQIA+ community encounters a life-long struggle with self-identity, sexual orientation, stigma, prejudice, and discrimination (Awanis et al., 2017; Anand, & Vohra, 2022). Homosexuals' mental health difficulties vary throughout cultures. Individualistic and collectivist cultures have different attitudes towards homosexuality. Western nations prioritize individual rights and independence, which can lead to more acceptance of the LGBTQIA+ population (Werner, 1979). This also helps in providing social and legal support to them. However, in India, acceptance of homosexuality might still be viewed as a threat to traditional norms. Religious and cultural standards have been found to have a considerable impact on views towards homosexuality in some collectivist cultures. Religious teachings that oppose homosexuality exacerbate unfavourable attitudes in these countries. (Furnham & Saito, 2009)

Homosexuality was deemed a mental condition in the 1960s and early 1970s, but in 1973, the American Psychological Association withdrew it from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, and by 1992, World Health Organisation accepted homosexuality as normal. The overall population of India now is around 1.428 billion, of which around 2.5 million are LGBTQIA+ (Herek, 2010; Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2018).

The Delhi High Court issued its preliminary verdict in 2009, and the Supreme Court released its final verdict on Section 377 of the Constitution in 2018. In the Section 377 decision, after reviewing the Mental Health Act of 2017, Justice Chandrachud stated that discriminating against people based on their sexual orientation is unjust and underlined the responsibility of mental health experts in providing mental healthcare and support to this group.

It has been nearly fourteen years since the initial verdict, and no substantial research has yet been conducted in LGBTQIA+ mental health. This group has been reported to suffer from anxiety and depression. Furthermore, among LGBTQIA+, transgender people suffer 1.7 times more anxiety and depression, as well as 2.4 times more miscellaneous mental health concerns as that of the general populace (Misra, 2009).

Substance abuse, mood disorders, suicidal thoughts, minority stress, bullying, sexual assault, and other mental health concerns are also widespread among homosexuals. This community also faces problems related to health care services which directly or indirectly affect their mental health. It has been observed that 52.9% of the LGBTQIA+ community suffers from psychotic morbidity and have trouble receiving mental health care as medical practitioners lack the necessary training and are insensitive. (Soohinda et al., 2018).

Mental issues faced by the LGBTQIA+ community are due to myriad reasons, which range from lack of social support to sexual abuse. Low social support makes the individuals feel shunned by society, in turn leading to depression. Depression can furthermore complicate the problem as it is often a predictor of unsafe sexual practices and substance abuse. Low self-esteem and intimate partner violence are also prevalent as is the incidence of HIV positive cases within this community. (Meyer, 2003)

In recent years, there have been some positive developments in terms of improving LGBTQ mental health services in India. For example, the Indian Psychiatric Society has taken steps to educate mental health professionals about the needs of the LGBTQ community. There are now several organizations that provide mental health support specifically for queer individuals in India (Gonsiorek, 1982).

According to research, between 1990 and 2014, the proportion of Indians who believed homosexuality was not justifiable declined from 89% to 24%. (Wandrekar, & Nigudkar, 2020). While the United States of America and Western European countries have significantly fewer respondents who say homosexuality is not justified, Pakistan, Western Asian countries, and even China, Singapore, and South Korea have far greater anti-homosexuality sentiments than India.

According to a recent study conducted by The Times of India, Mumbai is the best city and Goa is the most welcoming state for LGBTQIA+ people. The Mumbai Queer Film Festival exemplifies the city's shared humanity. Companies such as Capgemini, Axis Bank, Nat West Group, Flipkart, and Tata Steel are emphasizing on recruiting, holding onto, and promoting an LGBTQIA+ talent pool. According to a survey conducted by the India Today Group in 2020, 73.3% of the respondents supported the decriminalization of homosexuality in India (Kumar, & Gupta, 2022).

Though The Supreme Court of India legalized homosexuality in 2018, overturning a colonial-era law that criminalized same-sex relationships, discrimination and stigma still exist towards the LGBTQ community in India. Same-sex marriage is not recognized in India, and adoption laws are not in favour of LGBTQ individuals or couples. Transgender individuals in India face significant discrimination and exclusion and are often unable to access education, employment, healthcare, and other basic services (Ghosh, 2022).

In nations such as India, researchers discuss the critical need for working modules to improve the mental health of homosexuals. Miller et al. (2021) discuss the relevance of mental health literacy among Indians in developing a favourable attitude towards LGBTQIA+ people. There are several organisations in India that strive to help the LGBTQIA+ community, including The Humsafar Trust, Indian Aces, Ya_All, Nazariya, and others. Through research and evaluations, capacity development, and advocacy, these organizations and their supporters address issues of gender-based violence, livelihoods, education, and health (physical and mental) from a queer perspective.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated their plight further, with many homosexuals struggling to access healthcare, employment, and social services. Overall, while there have been some positive developments in recent years, there is still a long way to go in terms of achieving true equality and inclusion for the LGBTQ community in India (Raveendran & Pannikot, 2023).

Ethical Considerations

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Conflict of Interest

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