OPEN ACCESS

Sexuality and Gender Studies Journal
ISSN 2783-7130

Experiences of Sexual and Gender Based Violence Among Queer Individuals in India

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Queer,
Sexual and Gender-based Violence ,
India,
Intersectionality,
Caste,
Religion,
Minority Stress,
LGBTQ+,
Mental Health

ABSTRACT

This study explores the multifaceted experiences of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) among queer individuals in India, both online and offline, through an intersectional and phenomenological lens. Drawing from in-depth interviews with three participants, it examines how caste, religion, gender identity, and socio-cultural structures influence the nature, frequency, and response to SGBV. Using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the research uncovers themes of digital and physical violence, institutional apathy, internalized stigma, and fractured support systems. The findings highlight the psychological toll of SGBV, the failure of formal legal and mental health structures, and the critical role of informal and community-based support. This study calls for systemic reform and inclusive interventions that recognize intersectionality as essential to justice and healing.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

In a country where gods change gender at will and mythology dances with queerness, the lived experiences of real queer people are a completely different picture. While there has been legal progress over the years especially after striking down Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code in Navtej Singh Johar v Union of India (2018), queer individuals are still fighting to exist peacefully—online, offline, and in between. (Pufahl et al., 2021) From rape threats at public places to anonymous comments on social media, queer individuals encounter in both online and offline spheres. (Powell & Henry, 2017)

This paper will focus on how SGBV is experienced by queer individuals in India and how they respond to it. While maintaining this focus, we also recognize that the marginalization of queer individuals is influenced by multiple intersectional factors such as caste, religion, gender identity and other social structures that come together to curate an individual's experience.

Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) refers to acts that inflict physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering, as well as threats of such acts, coercion, and other

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Cite this article as:
Damasus, I. (2026). Experiences of Sexual and Gender Based Violence Among Queer Individuals in India. *Sexuality and Gender Studies Journal, 4*(1): 34-56. https://doi.org/10.33422/sgsj.v4i1.1254

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deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life, that are directed at individuals because of their sexual or gender identity (Starr, 2019). SGBV encompasses violence targeted at an individual due to their gender or gender role expectations, including but not limited to, sexual violence, intimate partner violence, and discrimination against sexual and gender minorities. [UNHCR], 2003. SGBV experiences of queer individuals usually challenge dominant narratives of SGBV which is mostly studied in the context of cisgender women. (Starr, 2019) Existing research has evidence to how experiences of sexual violence among young queer individuals are disproportionately high as compared to their non-queer counterparts. (Atteberry-Ash et al., 2019)

Digital spaces are celebrated for giving the queer community a space to be visible. These spaces are a double edged sword that takes the role of both a refuge and a battle ground. (Dasgupta, 2016) Sexual and Gender minority youth have the chances of facing higher levels of cyberbullying, harassment and exploitation due to their marginal identity (Powell et al., 2018).

India's queer population is not homogenous in nature. Experiences of violence can differ depending on the individual's sexual orientation, gender identity and other social identities. Studies in various parts of the globe among queer adolescents have shown highest instances of sexual violence against lesbians followed by bisexual women and then gay/queer men. Research also supports the hypothesis that transgender individuals are at a higher chance of victimization as compared to their queer counterparts (Mitchell et al., 2013).

Queer Dalit and Adivasi individuals face discrimination and violence that are caste based. Many Dalit women are denied access to basic needs such as health care and education. They are also exposed to many forms of violence like temple prostitution and are raped frequently as a way to humiliate Dalit men (Grey, 2005). In case of such violations, Dalit individuals are unable to receive justice and find themselves in risky circumstances to defend their rights (Prema et al., 2021). This intensifies the effect of SGBV for queer Dalit individuals especially women in terms of both its frequency and institutional apathy that follows.

India is home to diverse culture and religion. Although India is a secular country, history of India since its independence shows an aggressive behaviour towards its minority religions.(Majid, 2015).

Authoritative bodies like the Gopal Singh Committee (1983), the Sachar Committee (2007), and the Ranganath Mishra Commission (2007) have shed light on the unfavourable conditions faced by religious minorities in terms of their educational, social, and economic status within the current context (Sofi, 2023). In addition to this religious minority groups in contemporary India continue to encounter numerous challenges, including issues related to their identity crisis, underrepresentation, and the insecurity surrounding their lives and property (Sofi, 2023). Queer individuals belonging to minority religions will hence have an entirely different story to tell about how their queer identity and religious identity would be perceived, experienced and responded to.

1.2 Theoretical Framework

This study uses interdisciplinary and critical theoretical frameworks. These perspectives together will help us lay a foundation and understand how identity, power and systemic neglect shape SGBV experiences of queer Indians.

Queer theory, drawn from the works of Judith Butler (1990) and Eve Sedgwick (1990) allows us to critically interrogate the heteronormative structures that enable violence. This is done by deconstructing the binary logics of gender and sexuality that underpins many acts of

SGBV. In the Indian context, heteronormativity is interlinked with patriarchal institutions, caste identities, and religious principles. Heteronormativity further works to marginalize and promote discrimination against people who do not conform to its ideals (Sengupta and Trijita, 2022).

The foundation of this research can be laid with the **Intersectionality Theory** by Crenshaw (1989). This theory was developed to broaden legal frameworks for individuals at the intersection of multiple oppression, such as racism and sexism (Ratti, 2019). India is an extensively diverse society with a wide range of intersecting discriminations affecting queer individuals. Class, caste and religious divisions form the foundation of the hierarchical nature of Indian society. This in turn leads to a vastly different perspective on gender, discrimination and power (Dey, 2019; Purkayastha et al., 2003). This theory allows the research to move outside a single-axis identity and recognize all the layers that shape the lived experiences of queer individuals.

The Minority Stress Theory developed by I. H. Meyer (2003) will serve as an important lens to explore the psychological impact faced by the queer community on repeated exposure to violence. This conceptual framework is for understanding how stigma, prejudice and discrimination can create a hostile environment that can cause mental health problems (Meyer, 2003). The model describes stress processes, including the experiences of prejudice events, expectations of rejections, hiding and concealing, internalized homophobia and coping processes (Meyer, 2003).

The final theoretical framework to support the study will be the **Ecological Systems Theory** by Bronfenbrenner (1979). This theory helps contextualize how the experiences of SGBV is within layered environmental systems starting with the microsystem that is family, friend groups etc. to the macro system that is cultural beliefs, media discourse, legal systems, etc. (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Literature Survey

An initial systematic database search incorporating all aspects of this study did not yield any results. Thus the survey has been organized into subtopics to sufficiently inform the project.

2.1.1 Experiences, Support Systems and Interventions

An exploration of the available literature shows a lack of Indian literature in this area. Hence in this survey we have included available Indian researches and global researches. These papers provide us insight on queerness, victimization and support systems and lays emphasis on an urgent need for acknowledgment of these problems and care frameworks.

In the context of United States, a study by Bedera et al. (2022), reveals queer college women usually find it difficult to disclose experiences of sexual violence to their family members.

They find family to be a very unreliable support system. Their findings indicate that disclosures to family frequently lead to negative reactions that further exaggerates the survivor's trauma. These negative reactions are also seen to be rooted in familial stigma surrounding queer sexualities.

D. Meyer (2021) did a study that highlights the challenges faced by queer male survivors. In their study, it was seen that participants often perceived that sexual violence against women are taken more seriously as compared to queer men. Internalized stereotypes sometimes cause male survivors to blame other fellow survivors for their situations. Salter et al. (2020)

conducted a study that showed Gay, Bisexual and Queer men recognize violence within their community but they tend to minimize the effect of the same.

A resource sheet by Fileborn (2012) shows queer communities often experience higher vulnerability to violence because of social exclusion and heteronormativity. The report stresses that there is a lack of proper research and services for queer survivors of sexual violence.

2.1.2 Intersectionality in Indian Context

Intersectionality gives us a lens for understanding how sexual violence is experienced differently by queer individuals across social strata defined by caste, class, gender, and sexuality. It exposes how traditional analysis of sexual violence can obscure the distinct experiences of marginalized groups, particularly Dalit women and queer individuals in India.

Nadamala et al. (2024) in their study talks about how Dalit women experience caste-based sexual violence which stays invisible in mainstream feminist movements. The research also talks about how caste is a historical axis of oppression that compounds gender based vulnerabilities. Similarly, Musahar (2021) talks about the connection between caste and sexual violence, showing how Dalit women are unfairly affected based on the data seen from National Family Health Survey.

A study done by Kang (2023) shows us a queer lens to the intersectional analysis. Their study lays emphasis on how queer Dalit individuals face a layered exclusion in the sphere of desire and intimacy. His work calls out the heteronormative assumptions that surround caste and love. Das (2024) conducted a study which echoes the same sentiments. Their examination of caste hegemony within queer movements, highlight how the dominance of upper-class erases the lived experiences of queer individuals from the marginalized castes.

2.1.3 Gaps in Literature

The author has identified several gaps in literature that can be addressed in their study. There are a lot of studies that focus on SGBV experiences but they talk about the experiences from the perspective of heterosexual cis-gendered women. There is a big absence of literature that lays focus on queer individuals in India. The literature that does exist about queer struggle tends to ignore aspects such as intersectionality and how that would influence an individual's experience. Existing studies on intersectionality in India also tends to eliminate queer Indian experiences. Hence, the author has decided to fill these gaps in this study and give a more informed perspective to queer SGBV.

2.2 Research Question

1. What are the different types of online and offline SGBV experiences by queer people in India?
2. How do their intersectional identities play a role in defining these experiences?
3. How do they respond to different kinds of violence – online and offline? Why do they respond that way?
4. What support systems do they reach out to?

2.3 Aspects of the Study

Experience of violence: The study investigates types, frequency and context of SGBV experienced by queer individuals in online and offline environments.

Risk perception: Risk perception is defined as the subjective judgment individuals or groups make about the characteristics, severity, and likelihood of a risk, shaped by psychological, social, cultural, and contextual factors. It encompasses cognitive evaluations (e.g., probability and impact assessments), emotional responses (e.g., fear or dread), and behavioral intentions, often diverging from objective risk metrics due to biases, heuristics, and trust in information sources. (Slovic, 1987)

Perpetrator profile: It is very important to identify the demographics, proximity to the victim and gender of the perpetrators. It is essential for both online and offline contexts. There have been studies that indicate the need to understand offender profiles in order to see what makes the queer community more vulnerable and why they are at a higher risk of victimization (Flores et al., 2022).

Intersectionality of victimization: This study explores how intersecting identities such as gender identity, sexual orientation, race, religion, and caste come together. It also examines how these identities impact SGBV experiences of the survivor. Researchers have established that individuals with multiple marginalized identities often face a higher risk of victimization. Pinch et al. (2024) conducted a qualitative study with queer individuals in Mumbai to explore intersecting stigmas and the research notes how important it is to acknowledge intersectional factors while taking into account an individual's experience.

Access to justice: This study examines the role of state actors in addressing sexual and gender based violence against queer individuals. In India, systemic discrimination within the judicial system hinders queer individuals from accessing justice. Goitiandia et al. (2024) in their study talks about how the Indian Supreme Court refuses to recognize same-sex marriage which is a reflection of deeper systemic discrimination.

Alternate support systems: The legal pathway is seen to have its limitations. (Devi, 2025) This study hence looks beyond the help the government can provide in supporting survivors.

Causal factors of violence: In order to address root causes of SGBV, we have explored psycho-social and cultural contributors to perpetuating SGBV. Elischberger et al. (2017) in their study talks about how religion-based disapproval and heteronormative gender beliefs drive negative attitudes toward transgender youth in India. This shows how important it is to study the systemic role of societal, religious and cultural norms in perpetuating violence against queer individuals.

3. Methods

3.1 Research Design

This research utilized a qualitative method as the chosen research methodology. Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was performed in order to explore the lived experiences of queer individuals who have faced Sexual and Gender based violence. IPA draws primarily from phenomenology. Macann (1993) explains phenomenology from the perspective of the four philosophers Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. IPA is particularly suited to exploring how individuals make sense of their lived experiences. It allows for a deep exploration of participants' meaning-making processes, attending not only to what was said but also to the underlying emotions, cultural contexts, and power dynamics that shape those narratives. This approach aligns with the study's broader goal of understanding marginalized voices and intersectional realities. The process of analysis was guided by Tindall (2009).

The participants try and make sense of their world while the researcher tries and makes sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world. (Smith & Osborn, 2021). This makes

IPA one of the most suitable methods of conducting this study as it will require the researcher to not passively receive their participant's story but actively interpret these accounts.

IPA is also idiographic in nature. It helps us focus intently on individual cases before we move to broader patterns. It involves small samples and rich individual perspectives within a context. This makes it ideal for research on vulnerable and stigmatized populations allowing space for a rich narrative with contextual sensitivity. (Callary et al., 2015)

3.2 Sample

3.2.1 Target population

Queer individuals (across sexual orientations and gender identities) in India who have experienced online and offline SGBV.

3.2.2 Inclusion Criteria

The participant must be an Indian citizen (naturalized or by birth) currently living in India for 5 years or more.

The participant must be aged 18 and above.

The participant must have experienced SGBV online and offline in the Indian context. The participant must be willing to talk about their experiences in an in-depth interview.

3.2.3 Sample Size and Saturation Rationale

The selected sample size for this study is 3. IPA lays an emphasis on data depth over data size. It entails intensive, detailed analysis of each participant's account. This makes small sample sizes not only acceptable but also optimal. (Smith & Osborn, 2021; Callary et al., 2015)

Unlike other methods, IPA aims for experiential richness across a small homogenous sample rather than theoretical saturation. (Callary et al., 2015). The decision to limit the sample to three participants is justified by the expected density and emotional intensity of the narratives. This sample size also allows the researcher to maintain idiographic focus by spending sufficient time with each case before moving to the nomothetic stage of cross analysis, ensuring adequate exploration of each theme.

3.2.4 Sampling Method

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants capable of offering rich first hand experiences. Recruitment was conducted by reaching out to Queer focused NGOs via email and posting digital flyers within private queer community circles on social media. A total of nine individuals were initially approached. Four expressed interest, and three were ultimately selected based on their fulfillment of the inclusion criteria and their readiness to engage in a long-form interview. No financial or material compensation was provided to participants to ensure that participation was purely voluntary and to avoid undue inducement in a vulnerable population.

3.2.5 Interview Guide Development

A semi Structured interview was organized into four primary phases:

1. Contextual Background: Neutral questions regarding identity and community belonging.
2. SGBV Experiences: Narrative-focused questions on specific online and

offline incidents.

3. Meaning-Making: Probes into how participants perceived these events and the intent of perpetrators.
4. Coping and Support: Questions regarding interactions with legal, clinical and informal systems.The guide structure moves from neutral to grand tour questions and subsequently questions about meaning making and coping strategies. The guide was pilot tested on a non-study participant to ensure neutrality. The pilot testing also allowed us to understand whether or not the questions were non-leading and trauma informed.

3.3 Procedure

The procedure followed for completing this study happened in the following phases:

1. Formulation of research questions and objectives- Based on literature review and research gap identified, four research questions were developed. To ease the process of interview and data analysis, focus areas were also developed.
2. Ethical approval- The first research proposal was presented to the Institute's Research ethics panel. Suggestions were made by the panel members which were incorporated into the study.
3. Participant recruitment and data collection- Participants were selected via purposive sampling method and data was collected using interview techniques. The author had reached out to queer NGOs via email to recruit participants. Each interview lasted over 50 minutes to one hour. The interview was conducted online and in English language using Microsoft teams. The participants were informed prior to the recording and transcription started and consent form was also signed in a document shared via email.
4. Data analysis and reflection- The collected data was analysed using IPA with the help of themes. Themes are primary expressions of the outcomes of data analysis from interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith et al., 2022). A reflexive journal was maintained.

3.3.1 Reflexivity

A reflexive journal was maintained throughout the research process. This was done by systematically documenting the researcher's personal biases and thoughts during and after each interview and phase of analysis.

3.3.2 Trustworthiness Strategies

Audit trail- A comprehensive record of each research stage was maintained. This includes, audio recordings, initial notes, step by step transformation into emergent themes and final derivation of themes.

Member checking- After initial analysis of each case, a summary of provincial themes and researcher's interpretation was shared with the respective participant. The interpretations were hence cross checked and it was confirmed whether or not the participant resonated with it.

Intercoder dialogue- There were constant discussions and cross checking with an assigned guide who is an expert at IPA. This allowed crucial dialogue and to challenge the researcher's assumptions and explore alternative interpretations.

3.4 Data analysis

Data analysis for the study was done using Interpretive Phenomenological analysis. The procedures followed were in accordance with the six steps given by Tindall (2009). The first step was reading and rereading. Here, the researcher read through the transcripts multiple times and relistened to the audio to ensure there was no error in transcription. The second stage was initial noting where initial impressions and interpretations were noted. The third stage was developing emergent themes. Here, initial themes were developed to capture all of the participant's experiences. The fourth stage is searching for connections. Here, the themes were linked together by common points and finally connected to the topic of queer SGBV. The fifth stage is moving to the next case. The previous stages were repeated across the next two participant interviews The final stage was searching for patterns across stages where the researcher looked for common, shared and contrasting patterns across all three cases.

Interviews were held online through MS Teams. Each interview was recorded and transcribed by the software. The transcribed data was reread and cross verified with the audio to avoid any errors during the transcription process. The data was well studied, multiple reading and initial impression nothing was done during this process.

Atlas ti was used for the initial coding process. The codes were then categorized into seven themes.

For IPA, the research question is necessarily about participants' experience (the phenomenological commitment). Consider themes, singly or in combination, as a way to tell the reader a story about experience. Essentially, the themes respond to the question "What's it like to live this experience?" or "What lies at the heart of this experience?" (Nigbur & Chatfield, 2025)

After the themes were developed a cross analysis was conducted where we looked for patterns across the three participants while ensuring that individual voices were not neglected. To ensure credibility and worthiness of the findings, the findings were corroborated or supported with prior established research.

Finally, to ensure that the author's positionality as a queer individual did not interfere with the data collection and interpretation process, a reflective journal was maintained.

3.3.3 Theme Construction and Theoretical Linkage

Themes were not merely descriptive but were iteratively linked to the study's theoretical framework. Theme 1 (Online Violence) was analysed through Queer Theory to identify how heteronormative digital architectures enable objectification. Theme 5 (Risk Perception) was mapped onto Minority Stress Theory, exploring how the expectation of rejection and hyper-vigilance function as a chronic stressor. Theme 6 (Support Systems) utilized the Ecological Systems Theory to identify failures in the macrosystems versus the resilience of the microsystem.

4. Findings

Brief participant information:

- Participant 1- Religion- Islam , Caste- Other Backward Classes, Gender- Cis-Male , Sexual orientation- Gay
- Participant 2- Religion- Hinduism , Caste- Other Backward Classes, Gender- Non-binary , Sexual orientation- Gay

- Participant 3- Religion- Catholic , Caste- Latin Catholic, Gender- Cis-female , Sexual orientation- Lesbian

Theme 1: Online sexual violence

This theme aims to explore the various experiences of SGBV faced by queer individuals within online spaces.

Digital architectures of Violence- Online spaces, encompassing dating apps (Grindr, Hinge and Bumble) and social media platforms (Instagram, Snapchat, Omegle) are portrayed as high-risk environments where harassment, surveillance and exploitation thrive. A primary driver of this violence is the role of anonymity. While anonymity and accessibility can be empowering in conservative contexts, these features simultaneously provide a shield for sexual aggression and verbal abuse. On Grindr, this manifests as "unsolicited images" and sexual objectification, while on random chat platforms like Omegle, anonymity enables real-time verbal abuse that functions as a digital re-enactment of street harassment.

Beyond anonymity, the architecture of these apps such as the lock of matching barriers unintentionally fosters a culture of entitlement and sexual intentions. Participant 2 noted that this environment normalizes harassment to the point of desensitization, stating *"You're indefinitely experiencing some form of harassment, but you don't know it…"* Furthermore, participants highlighted instances of identity deception on platforms like Hinge and Bumble, where men posed as women to infiltrate queer spaces. Participant 3 described these instances as follows*"I realized that this person is not a woman. This person is a man who is pretending to be a woman…."* The violation of digital trust is often compounded by a blurred concept of consent within the community itself. Participant 3 reflected on how, in their experience, even within a dating pool of women, there was a failure to fully respect boundaries and consent.

They observed, *"Consent was a very blurred concept... I don't know if this comes from a misogynistic standpoint."* This reveals that patriarchal norms can infiltrate even those communities historically defined by resistance to them. When participants attempted to resist these violences, they were often met with institutional failure. Several participants attempted to report harassment on platforms, but saw very little results. While Participant 3 routinely used reporting tools: *"So on online spaces, the major support that I seek is by reporting things... I immediately report things."* They also encountered total neglect when escalating to formal authorities: *"I called the Delhi Cybercrime three to four times and they just did not pick up."* This shows the failure of institutional support, leaving queer individuals to navigate the harm independently, often without resolution.

Intensity of online violence- Participants showed a strong rejection of the assumption that online violence is somehow less real or less harmful than physical violence. Across narratives, there was an emphasis on the emotional weight and psychological disruption associated with digital forms of SGBV. Participant 1 offered a nuanced comparison between types of online and offline harassment. They challenged the narrative that often places offline violence as inherently "worse" or more serious. Instead, they observed that demeaning, objectifying comments, whether shouted on the street or posted on social media—share the same intent: to reduce the individual to a sexualized or ridiculed object:

> *"One variation of offline harassment is more similar to one variation of online harassment … there's this passing harassment with no intent to actually engage in violent behaviour, but just to demean you…"*

This quote directly highlights how psychological violence thrives in digital comment sections just as it does on the street and both work to objectify and diminish queer individuals.

Participant 1 continued this thread by drawing attention to a false sense of safety in online spaces. While digital harassment may lack immediate physical threat, it carries profound psychological consequences:

> *"With online, you can always know that you're safe. It's more mental—the kind of violence you have to endure."*

This distinction introduces the concept of **"**mental violence**"** that brings to light the toll of being harassed, ridiculed, or threatened in online settings. The participant recognizes that while their body may be protected, their emotional safety is not.

Participant 2 further emphasized that the impact of violence is not defined by its medium (online or offline) but by its effect. They noted:

> *"The only thing is that whether it was online or offline, it was equally disturbing. It didn't really matter."*

This challenges hierarchical views of violence that dismiss online abuse as trivial or less serious. Their reflection was reinforced with a strong ethical stance:

> *"If there was someone who said they experienced online harassment and another person saying offline, I would definitely not give either of them the opportunity to say that mine was a little more serious."*

Theme 2: Offline sexual violence

This theme examines the experiences of SGBV that occur in physical spaces. It centres on how queer individuals in India encounter harassment, assault, boundary violations, and systemic neglect in homes, streets, public transport, institutions, and intimate relationships.

Discomfort at public spaces- Participant narratives reflect that offline spaces, from metros to Pride parades are often zones of threat. Pride, meant to be a celebration of identity and resistance, was described as a predatory space. Participant 1 shared:

> *"Offline spaces can be like even pride parades... there was, you know, this group of straight guys just trailing us." "Without your consent, they'll start recording you at the pride parade because it's a public event."*

These experiences show how Pride has been co-opted by non-queer individuals as a spectacle, where queer bodies are not celebrated but fetishized and recorded without consent..

Outside such events, daily life is filled with continuous discomfort, often forcing participants to modify their clothing or behavior. Participant 1 explained:

> *"So, I am dressed up in a nice slutty top or something, and then I get on the metro and have to drape a shirt over it. Otherwise you get stares."*

This is not merely discomfort, it's a strategy of risk reduction, where clothing becomes both a form of self-expression and a liability.

The metro system becomes a routine site of sexual violation. Participant 1 recounted:

> *"This guy was standing next to me in the metro and he was trying to touch me and he did touch me." "The touching thing has happened too many times…. I just recall it as one [incident]."*

This normalization of abuse, where repeated violations become indistinguishable, refers to trauma saturation. It shows how chronic exposure to public sexual harassment numbs emotional response, forcing individuals into survival mode. In another experience, Participant 1 described sexual violence inside a cab:

> *"I was studying... I look up a little and this guy has just started jacking off in the front seat."*

Even transportations like cabs are not safe for queer individuals. This leaves queer individuals with no safe transit options.

Outside of physical harm, participants also describe the emotional burden of protecting male egos to avoid escalation of the situation. As Participant 1 put it:

> *"My primary response tothese situations? I know it shouldn't be like that. It's to just [figure out] how not to offend the man. Because if you wound his ego, he will do anything."*

Participant 2 described an assault in a bathroom:

> *"This guy literally came in, pushed me, held my hands tightly and tried to kiss me… He said, 'You smiled at me in the bathroom.'"*

This account underscores the misinterpretation of basic politeness or bodily presence as an invitation, leading to non-consensual sexual advances. They also shared how their boyfriend was groped by a group of transgender individuals in public:

> *"He's been, like, held in the genitalia right in front of me... 'Oh, you're one of those gay couples.'"*

This shows how queer couples face not only verbal slurs but public sexual assault, even from members of their own community.

Sexual violence at public spaces- This code captures how queer individuals experience sexual violence across public, institutional, and religious domains, often at the hands of those who hold authority, trust, or perceived moral superiority. The narratives also expose the silencing of male and queer survivors, especially when the perpetrator is a woman.

Participants described religious spaces**,** madrasas and churches as unsafe environments, marked by grooming and sexual abuse. Participant 2 recounted:

> *"I still remember like when I was in first grade of my theology classes, madrasa as we call it. There, the ustad kind of like used to always put his hands through my pants and would just play with me while I was reading the Quran."*

This experience of childhood sexual abuse by a religious teacher illustrates the gross violation of bodily autonomy in religious settings, where perpetrators exploit positions of trust, faith, and obedience. Participant 3 mirrored this betrayal, describing a priest who, after hearing their confession of queerness, later assaulted them:

> *"The same priest that I am going to confession with gropes me... He fully fondled with my privates."*

They added:

> *"I am going and confessing queerness as a sin to a priest who is sexually harassing me… just because the church was telling me that it's wrong to be queer while the church in itself was doing something very wrong to me."*

This duality of moral condemnation and sexual predation reflects the deep hypocrisy and systemic abuse within religious institutions.

Participants also shared experiences where sexual violence were perpetuated by women. This is a frequently erased narrative of SGBV discourse. Participant 1 stated:

> *"Asked for a lighter from this girl and she just randomly came up to me and kissed me without my consent."*

Similarly, Participant 2 described:

> *"There were times where women have really, really thrust themselves upon me... trying to kiss me and shove my face between their cleavage."*

Yet, when these experiences were shared, they were minimized. As recounted by participant 2,

> *"They said... 'How can a woman harass you?' Which made absolutely no sense."*

These narratives disrupt the heteronormative assumption that sexual violence is exclusively male-on-female and reflect the social erasure of queer male victims, especially when women are involved.

The violence described also occurred in professional settings, like with patients in case of Participant 2, who is a mental health professional.

> *"My patient... started rubbing my shoulder... said, 'I think you are the closest thing to a girl... I would really like to have you for one night.'" (Participant 2)*

These encounters reflect how queer individuals are consistently sexualized and targeted, even in contexts where power dynamics should ensure safety and professionalism.

Participants also disclosed experiences of sexual abuse within the family. These incidents, beginning as early as childhood. Participant 2 disclosed:

> *"I wouldn't say this is like, you know, something I only experience as an adult. So as a child I was raped multiple times by my uncle."*

This revelation shows that sexual violence often begins in environments that should be defined by care and protection. For queer individuals, childhood abuse may also be combined with early awareness of gender or sexual nonconformity, which then becomes a target for punishment, control, or objectification by adults in power. The participant also reflected on how puberty and bodily changes were sexualized by the abuser:

> *"I hit puberty at 12 or 13... He kind of noticed that and told that to me. And that's when I realized... there is definitely an element of how my body looks and how I've presented myself for so long."*

The abuse, particularly as it intersects with puberty, reinforces how the queer body is scrutinized and ultimately violated in ways that are both physical and psychological.

Theme 3: Intersectionality

This theme explores intersectional identities that amplify the marginalization experienced by queer individuals in India. Several codes were identified pertaining to this theme. The codes explored are as follows:

Caste and religion: Participant 1 revealed how caste operates within supposedly progressive queer circles:

> *"This is my gripe with offline queer spaces. They are very, very elite and very caste blind and that is something I struggle with."*

This critique points to the upper-caste dominance and class elitism in queer spaces, where savarna norms often define acceptable language, behaviour, and aesthetics. This "caste

blindness" erases the lived realities of Dalit, Bahujan, and OBC queer individuals. Participant 1 also detailed the micro-aggressions that mark caste-based exclusion in social gatherings:

> *"You would see someone that can't speak proper English… standing in a corner… no one's talking to them." "If they talk to them, they talk in a very condescending way."*

These quotes show the language-based gatekeeping that isolates caste-marginalized queer people, even in spaces designed for community and solidarity.

While caste may not be cited as a primary cause of harassment, it surfaces multiple times in dating contexts. Participant 1 shared:

> *"On Grindr, sometimes people would randomly ask 'what's your surname though?'" "He'd be like, 'Oh, you're from like, OBC or something.' And then he would even use casteist slurs in conversation."*

This reflects how caste based discrimination happens even in digital spaces. The use of casteist slurs mid-conversation shows how sexual intimacy is weaponized with caste power, reducing individuals to social hierarchies even in moments that it should not.

Beyond caste, religion was also seen to be an intersectional point for participants. Participant 2, a gay Muslim, shared:

> *"I think religiously, even my identity plays a huge role because I'm a Muslim who's gay, which is very contradictory."*

For many queer individuals raised in conservative religious environments, identity formation involves deep internal conflict, and often sexual trauma within religious institutions. Participant 3, a Catholic, described their journey with moving clarity:

> *"Me being queer and Catholic is a huge oxymoron… I really would like to believe in a higher power." "There was a whole phase in my life where I was completely homophobic to myself and to others…".*

This reflection shows how internalized homophobia is often a product of religious guilt and identity repression, where attempts to suppress queerness are both spiritual and psychological.

Gender and sexual orientation: This code explores how gender presentation and sexual orientation intersect to shape experiences of violence in both online and offline spaces.

Participants articulated how being visibly queer or not conforming to binary gender norms subjects them to heightened scrutiny, misrecognition, and exclusion.

Participant 1 recounted how gender expression and queer visibility on the metro expose individuals to both gaze and threat:

> *"As a queer person, if you're dressed like this, you don't want to draw attention to yourself because people are already staring at you on the metro."*

The quote reflects how every day public navigation becomes a performance of caution. Queer individuals, particularly gender non-conforming people, experience constant hyper visibility. They are seen as anomalies and their presence as disruptions.

> *"Maybe if I were a biological woman, maybe I would feel more comfortable confronting the guy…"*

This comparison does not romanticize the safety of cis-women (as they also face immense violence), but highlights how gender deviance compounds the risk of being disbelieved, ridiculed, or blamed even by bystanders or authorities.

This fear extends into formal systems, as Participant 1 pointed out:

> *"Even the authorities... they're not going to question the guy who was very straight presenting and what not."*

This comment captures the institutionalization of gender normativity where straight-passing, cis-appearing men are presumed innocent, while visibly queer individuals are dismissed away. The intersection of queerness and non-binary gender expression thus invalidates queer people's access to protection and justice.

Participant 3 offered insight into how misogyny and gender norms shape even same-gender dynamics. Reflecting on their experiences in queer women dating spaces, they observed:

> *"All dating apps you're looking for intimacy… but in the queer dating pool... the concept of consent and boundaries [is] very very blurred." "I don't know if this comes from a misogynistic standpoint or something else."*

These comments surface the uncomfortable but important reality that queer spaces can replicate heteronormative patriarchal power dynamics, especially around consent. Even without men being present, the internalization of gendered behaviours continues to shape interactions.

Theme 4: Perpetrator profile

Close family: As disclosed earlier, Participant 2 had experienced sexual violence in the form of rape, at the hands of their uncle.

> *"I wouldn't say this is like, you know, something I only experienced as an adult. As a child, I was raped multiple times by my uncle."*

The uncle, as a known and familiar figure, had repeated access and unchecked authority, which enabled abuse for a long time.

Religious leaders: As disclosed earlier, both participant 2 and 3 had undergone sexual violence at the hands of their respective religious leaders. Participant 2, who identifies as Muslim, disclosed childhood sexual abuse at the hands of a religious instructor (ustad) in a madrasa:

> *"I still remember like when I was in first grade of my theology classes... the ustad kind of like used to always put his hands through my pants and would just play with me while I was reading the Quran."*

Similarly, Participant 3, a queer Catholic, revealed being sexually assaulted by a priest during confession:

> *"I am going and confessing queerness as a sin to a priest who is sexually harassing me." "The same priest... groped me… He fully fondled my privates."*

Public transport users: This code centres on unfamiliar men in public transportation spaces. As frequent perpetrators of sexual harassment and violence against queer individuals.

Participant 1 described repeated incidents of being recorded and followed on the metro:

> *"Inside the metro, this has happened plenty of times. Like somebody will start recording you. Somebody will follow you."*

These actions create an atmosphere of constant threat.

In an incident, Participant 1 described being sexually assaulted by a metro security guard or police officer:

> *"The police officer there or the guard at the metro, he just grabbed my dick, like, unprompted… I was like, did something happen?"*

When the very individuals tasked with ensuring public safety become perpetrators, queer individuals are left with nowhere to turn.

Intimate partner violence: The narratives of participants challenge the assumption that queer spaces are inherently safe and demonstrate how coercion, consent violation, and emotional manipulation also exist within queer romantic dynamics. Participant 3 introduced this theme by naming the silence:

> *"Intimate partner violence is something that is very underspoken about when it comes to queer relationships, because I think the major focus is on the most basic things like rights…"*

This quote reflects how mainstream queer activism often neglects internal community harms. The participant's observation points to a gap: when violence occurs within the community, survivors may feel confused, isolated, or unable to seek support, especially if the relationship is perceived as non-threatening by others.

Participant 3 went on to describe coercive sexual experiences within relationships:

> *When it's time to get physical and you tell the person that this is making me uncomfortable… they don't really think it's necessary to listen to you." "That has happened multiple times with me."*

These quotes expose how consent is ignored. What's especially critical here is that the survivor communicated discomfort clearly *"don't do this"* and *"that's not okay"* but the partner proceeded regardless. This speaks to a form of intimate partner violence often invisible to outsiders.

Theme 5: Risk perception

Self-perception of risks: This code reveals how queer individuals internalize and navigate perceived risks in both offline and online spaces. Rather than viewing risk solely as external or institutional, participants show a deep internalization of threat, leading to a hyper-awareness of how their identity can provoke violence even in "non-violent" contexts.

> *"One variation of offline harassment is more similar to one variation of online harassment... just to demean you and make you feel little..." (Participant 1)*

This quote articulates the continuity of harm across digital and physical spheres. The participant equates seemingly "minor" online objectification with street-level harassment, suggesting that microaggressions, even when not overtly violent, are felt and perceived as threats. This reflects a trauma-informed perception of violence, where even non-contact harassment is mentally coded as unsafe.

At another instance, participant 1 had revealed *"You always have to... share your live location... just like a mental thing..."*This quote reveals a cognitive adaptation to persistent threat. Even when the utility of the measure (like location sharing) may be limited in real-time rescue, the action becomes a psychological buffer. It highlights how perceived risk doesn't rely on actual proximity to danger, but the persistent fear of it. This is especially relevant in an Indian context where support systems (both legal and social) may not respond on time.

Theme 6: Support systems

Legal system: Participant 1 had recounted an incident where the law enforcement officers took the role of perpetrators. *"They would just keep her there past lewd comments... the policeman put his hands inside her pants."* These accounts underscore the perverse irony of SGBV perpetrated by law enforcers. This shows that queer survivors face a double bind: seeking help may expose them to additional violence, particularly sexual assault, by those entrusted with their protection.

Participant 1 also talks about legal taboos and prior criminalization of same sex acts. *"Before they decriminalized gay sex... you couldn't even go to the police."* This reflects the legacy of Section 377, which criminalized same-sex relations in India until 2018. Even after its repeal, the residual stigma remains embedded in legally, discouraging queer individuals from approaching legal institutions.

Participants 2 and 3 both show fear of traumatization or futility. This is expressed in the following quotes- *"Scared to kind of approach it legally... a couple of friends... didn't go well." "Justice delayed and justice denied."*- Participant 1 *"Court case took almost 1.5 years... she had to accept an apology.* Participant 2. These accounts reveal disillusionment with the legal process, with concerns about time, emotional toll, and lack of closure. Survivors internalize the futility of legal justice, especially when outcomes feel like coerced compromises rather than validation or reparation.

Participant 3 also expressed concerns about the legal gray area by saying *"Is this harassment or not?... no police."* This shows the ambiguity queer individuals face in categorizing their experiences, which often fall outside heteronormative legal definitions of violence. The lack of queer-inclusive legal frameworks leave survivors unsure if they even qualify for justice.

Talking about the absence of laws required to protect queer individuals, participant 3 says, *"No laws to protect me... very susceptible to being harassed by police officers..."* This shows a critical structural gap. Queer individuals fall outside existing legal categories, especially in cases of intimate partner violence or same-sex abuse.

Alternate support systems: This code provides vital insight into how queer individuals in India navigate outside the formal legal framework when coping with SGBV. Participants 2 and 3 talk about the reliance of emotionally supportive circles like friends and family. *"I have a family and I have my friends... strongly in place..."*- Participant 1 *"Talking to them was pretty helpful."*- Participant 2. These quotes reflect the emotional safety net offered by family, friends, and intimate partners. For some queer individuals, these relationships become the primary source of healing and validation**.** The chosen families and emotionally available peers function as lifelines in the aftermath of violence, especially when institutional systems fail.

Participant 3 talks about how the current set up of mental health services in the country is not an adequate support system. "*My therapist was just like... I'm being too anxious about being queer."* We see how therapeutic spaces can be invalidating, especially when therapists lack queer-affirmative training. Minimizing the emotional distress associated with queerness and coming out reflects clinical erasure of identity-based trauma**.** In the Indian context, where mental health care is still developing, this quote reveals that even "helping" professions can reinforce alienation.

Participant 3 also shed some light on NGOs as support systems. They recounted "*It would require a lot of energy... I was not ready to put it out."* This quote captures a form of resource fatigue or trauma inertia. The emotional and logistical burden of seeking help from NGOs feels too heavy to carry. It's not simply about access but about mental capacity in moments of

crisis. This speaks volumes about how even well-meaning support structures can be inaccessible if not designed with emotional readiness and simplicity in mind.

Participant 3 also talks about how they faced total isolation in times of crisis. They recounted *"There was no support system... just me and my problem."* This statement highlights emotional and social isolation, driven by fear. Even when informal systems exist, queer individuals may find them emotionally inaccessible due to internalized fear or societal taboo.

Theme 7: Mental health impact

Psychological impact of SGBV: This code uncovers psychological impact left by SGBV. This is not limited to fear or sadness, but chronic disconnection, distorted processing, and attempts to emotionally regulate trauma using humour, avoidance, or rationalization.

Participant 1 says, *"Online... you're safe. It's more mental... in physical spaces, there's immediate danger..."* This quote introduces an important connection between emotional and physical threat**.** While digital spaces provide relative physical safety, they inflict psychological violence. This includes objectification, dehumanization, or threats that are equally damaging. The statement suggests that even non-contact violence can have mental health implications.

Participant 2 talks about how they used humour as a defence mechanism while coping with SGBV. They said, *"I like to use humour... let's not make it seem like a bad thing..."* This shows how humour is used as a defence mechanism to defuse emotional intensity not because the trauma is trivial, but because processing it directly may feel too overwhelming. This also hints at the social difficulty of claiming victimhood as a queer person in India. Humour becomes a way to make stories palatable to others.

Participant 3 talks about dissociation and cognitive disruption. They recounted, *"It was very dissociating... lost track of day... couldn't focus..."* This is a description of post-traumatic dissociation, where the mind disconnects from time, tasks, and even the self as a survival mechanism. This is not mere sadness or anxiety, it is a breakdown in cognitive functioning, often seen in survivors of intense or prolonged trauma. (Kolk & Fisler, 1995)

5. Discussion

5.1 Implications

Enhanced practice recommendations- 1. Platform-Level Safety: Dating apps should implement identity-aware moderation that detects not just global slurs, but region-specific queerphobic and casteist words relevant to Indian context. 2. Police training: State police academies should integrate mandatory modules on the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, focusing on the prohibition of physical and sexual abuse by law enforcement officers. 3. Mental Health Curriculum: The Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI) and National Medical Commission should mandate Queer- Affirmative moules in thier curriculum to prevent the clinical erasure and identity-base invalidation reported by participants.

Social implications-The results of this study showed us how dating apps such as Grindr, Bumble and Hinge and even social media platforms such as Snapchat and Omegle facilitate SGBV. This facilitation is via anonymity, poor moderation and blurred consent dynamics. These findings are at par with Roy (2023) which talks about how gay dating platforms in India reproduce victimization because of its architecture and social stigma. They also talk about how these risks can be mitigated by embedding queer-sensitive safety mechanisms.

Dasgupta (2017) also stresses that safety mechanisms should be in line with the realities of queer individuals.

The participant narratives exposed deep mistrust in legal authorities and institutions. This aligns with the findings of Kaur et al. (2022). The findings talk about how cyber harassment laws in India do not address vulnerabilities of the queer community especially when crimes go unreported. This calls for urgent reforms where legal structures where queer needs are included. These structures would also benefit from queer and gender sensitivity training and established queer support cells within police stations.

Indian queer spaces are usually classist and Savarna- dominated. This creates an exclusive space even within activist circles (Dasgupta, 2016). The finding of this paper amplifies this problem and suggests that anti-caste and interfaith inclusivity should be the core organizing principle rather than a surface level concern.

Narratives recounted by the participants disrupt the hierarchy of violence perpetuated. There were instances where SGBV was perpetuated by heterosexual women towards queer men and homosexual women towards other homosexual women. This disrupts the commonly seen hierarchy of violence where men are the perpetrators and women are the survivors.

The study reveals how informal support becomes crucial to queer SGBV survivors. These support systems include friends, family and NGOs that offer support. The study also shows how these systems also have their limitations such as difficulty to access and fear of stigma. A study by Kaur et al. (2022) also shows how lack of institutional accountability forces queer individuals to seek help from community and NGOs. These support systems are often overstretched and inaccessible due to systemic erasure and trauma burden. (Kaur et al., 2022)

Clinical implications- The participants had spoken about long-term psychological impact and emotional disconnect that occurred from SGBV experiences. They also spoke about invalidation by mental health professionals. These distresses mirror findings by Dasgupta (2017b), who noted that queer individuals usually avoid formal mental health systems because of heteronormative bias and lack of intersectionality. This implies the need for more queer affirmative training for mental health professionals along with accessible mental health care.

Educational implications- The findings show how queer individuals are susceptible to various types of digital sexual harassment. Educational institutions should hence incorporate modules on digital safety, consent and boundary settings and this should be queer inclusive. (Glazzard & Stones, 2022). Counselling services provided in schools and colleges must be queer informed. Given the unique forms of online SGBV faced by queer individuals, it is essential that counselling services are queer affirmed. School staff and educators also need to be made aware of how the queer identity of an individual can be the cause of violence faced. This awareness can be brought about by queer affirmed sensitivity training. Szalacha (2004) also talks about how it is important to educate teachers on queer issues as it will help in both prevention and countering of problems. However, intersectionality in the Indian context should always be kept in mind while considering these recommendations.

5.2 Limitations of the Study

1. Transferability and Demographic limits: While the IPA approach provided rich narrative depths, the findings are characterized by specific transferability limits. The sample was exclusively urban, English-speaking and digitally connected, which likely elides the experiences of rural or non-English speaking queer individuals who may face different forms of structural violence.

2. Small sample size and Gender Diversity: With a sample of N = 3, the study does not claim to represent the entire spectrum of queer identity. Specifically, while the inclusion of a non-binary participant offered vital insights into gender-variant experiences, the small sample size cannot capture the diverse intersections of transgender and non-binary (TGNC) communities in India. Future research should utilize larger cohorts to explore how specific TGNC identities navigate SGBV differently than cis-appearing queer individuals.
3. Participant biases and mental filtering- The sample was collected through interviews where participant bias may influence how they narrated their incidents. Going back to distressing events may cause the participants to use mental filtering which is a cognitive distortion where an individual focuses on the negative aspects of a situation while downplaying positive elements.

5.3 Ethical Considerations

Informed consent and confidentiality- All the participants were thoroughly explained the purpose and procedures of the study. They were also given a right to withdraw at any point without penalty. Signed consent was also obtained. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the study. While addressing the participants, Participant 1, Participant 2 and Participant 3 were used.

Data storage and protection- All research data was handled with proper security protocol. The data was accessible only to the researcher and their supervisor. Transcription was done manually. Atlas ti was used for coding processes. All data will be deleted after publication.

Risk management and trauma informed protocol- A comprehensive trauma informed protocol was followed throughout the process. The researcher is trained in providing psychological first aid in case it is necessary. The participants were also given resources that they can reach out to in times of distress.

5.4 Conclusion

The study's findings challenge the structural, psychological, and legal frameworks that render queer individuals in India vulnerable to SGBV across online and offline settings. It is also seen how violence is not merely a function of queerness but is shaped by intersecting identities such as caste, religion, gender presentation and social class. This compounds marginalization and restricts access to justice and support. By integrating these lived experiences with current literature, it is evident that systemic reforms in digital governance, legal frameworks, mental health care, and intra-community politics are urgently required.

This study is a call to action- to listen, act and rebuild the systems that continue to dehumanize marginalized individuals. In every story shared, there is resistance and survival. In that lies the power to see a future that holds space for inclusive queer liberation.

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