



Indian Queer Community, Their Struggles in Workplaces and How They Cope With It

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Abstract: This qualitative research explores the pervasive workplace discrimination faced by Indian queer individuals and the coping mechanisms they employ within deeply heteronormative organizational contexts. Despite the 2018 decriminalization of homosexuality in India, persistent subtle and overt discrimination continues to marginalize LGBTQ employees, adversely impacting their mental health and professional engagement (Maji et al., 2023; Morin, 2024). Using semi-structured interviews with four participants from academia, corporate, and healthcare sectors, thematic analysis reveals key themes including the concealment of sexual and gender identities, employment of a gender-binary filter as a coping strategy, non-affirming workplace climates, and the resulting emotional and psychological burdens such as LGBTQ Battle Fatigue (Singh & Sharma, 2024; Morin, 2024; Maji et al., 2023). Participants showcased resilience through social support, positive self-affirmation, and strategic disclosure, illuminating adaptive pathways to sustain well-being amidst hostile environments (Riggle et al., 2011; Rodrigues & Kumar, 2022). The findings highlight a gap between progressive legal frameworks and entrenched organizational apathy, underscoring the urgent need for comprehensive, culturally competent inclusion policies, allyship training, and mental health services tailored to the Indian context.

Keywords: *Workplace Discrimination, Indian Queer Employees, Coping Strategies, Qualitative Research, Mental Health, LGBTQ, Gender-Binary Filter, Social Support*

1. Introduction

The global movement for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) rights has achieved significant milestones, yet discrimination against sexual and gender minorities persists, particularly within professional settings (Di Marco et al., 2021; Morin, 2024). In India, a landmark legal change occurred in 2018 when Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which had criminalized consensual homosexuality, was scrapped (Maji et al., 2023). However, achieving true social inclusiveness remains a challenge, as Indian society frequently remains broadly hetero-patriarchal, leading to continued struggles for queer individuals in the workplace (Maji et al., 2023). This research explores the specific forms of discrimination faced by Indian queer individuals in their workplaces and examines the coping mechanisms they employ to navigate these pervasive struggles.

1.1 Background of the Study

Despite legal decriminalization, prejudice and widespread discrimination against LGBTQ individuals persist in the social, educational, and organizational spheres of India (Maji et al., 2023). Workplace challenges faced by LGBTQ individuals often include systemic discrimination, microaggressions, and a lack of inclusive cultures, which can lead to chronic stress and exhaustion described as LGBTQ Battle Fatigue (Morin, 2024). Research focusing specifically on Indian workplaces indicates that even in the presence of non-discriminatory policies, adverse workplace experiences are rampant, often appearing in subtle or covert forms (Maji et al., 2023). To survive in these environments, employees frequently experience "disclosure dilemmas," involving whether, how, and when to reveal their sexual identity (Maji et al., 2023). Many employees adapt by employing a "gender-binary filter" to screen their actions and appearance to align with heteronormative expectations (Maji et al., 2023).

2. Theoretical Framework

Organizational Justice Theory (OJT)

This theory emphasizes the importance of fairness within organizational settings, particularly concerning the fairness of procedures, resource distribution, and interpersonal treatment (Miles, 2012; Harris et al., 2004). OJT posits that employees' perceptions of fairness significantly influence their attitudes, behaviors, and job satisfaction. When organizations fail to account for LGBTQ-specific barriers, systemic biases are perpetuated, leading to employee disengagement and reduced job satisfaction (Morin, 2024).

Queer Theory

This framework challenges traditional, normative concepts of gender and sexuality, arguing that gender and sexuality are fluid and socially constructed rather than fixed (Morin, 2024; Rumens et al., 2019). Through this lens, the pressure faced by Indian lesbian and gay employees to conform their behavior using a "gender-binary filter" can be understood as a direct consequence of the constant performance and policing of gender and sexuality (Maji et al., 2023). The concept of intersectionality further guides the understanding of how multiple forms of discrimination can overlap, complicating the experiences of individuals who embody multiple dimensions of diversity (Di Marco et al., 2021).

2.1 Statement of the Problem

While non-discriminatory policies may exist, many Indian organizations exhibit organizational apathy or reluctance to implement inclusive policies (Maji et al., 2023; Noronha et al., 2022). Lesbian and gay employees frequently encounter aversive workplace experiences in subtle forms such as microaggressions and social ostracism (DeSouza et al., 2017; Maji et al., 2023). The pervasive fear of bullying often dictates the disclosure decisions of LGBTQ persons, negatively impacting their mental and physical health (Noronha et al., 2022). A systematic inquiry is therefore needed to understand the specific methods of resilience and survival employed by Indian queer individuals in their professional lives.

2.2 Research Questions

1. What specific forms of workplace discrimination are encountered by Indian queer individuals?
2. What coping strategies, behaviors, and psychological mechanisms do Indian queer individuals employ to navigate these discriminatory workplace experiences?
3. What are the key psychological consequences associated with the exposure to workplace discrimination among Indian queer individuals?

3. Method

A qualitative research design was selected to investigate the complex, context-embedded experiences of Indian queer individuals dealing with workplace discrimination. Qualitative research is recognized for its ability to delve deeply into participants' personal realities, capturing the nuanced perspectives, emotional meanings, and social dynamics that quantitative methods

often miss (Lim et al., 2025). Semi-structured interviews were employed as they allow for both structured inquiry and flexible, in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences.

3.1 Sample

Participants included four individuals who self-identified under the queer umbrella and worked in academia, healthcare, or corporate settings for more than one year. They were between the ages of 20 to 40 years. The sample size of four was consistent with the standards of phenomenological research, which emphasizes depth and richness of data over generalizability (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Purposive sampling was utilized to select information-rich cases aligned with the research questions (Patton, 2015).

Inclusion criteria required participants to: (a) be 18 years or older; (b) self-identify as a sexual or gender minority; (c) be currently or recently employed (minimum one year) in academia, corporate, or healthcare sectors in India; and (d) self-report workplace struggles at least partially attributed to their gender identity or sexual orientation.

3.2 Measures

Prior to interviews, a pre-interview questionnaire was used to identify candidates whose workplace challenges were linked to their queer identity and to gather demographic and sector information. The guided interview schedule included open-ended questions addressing workplace difficulties, identity management, discrimination (formal and subtle), coping strategies (internal, external, reactive, and proactive), and perceived organizational support. Sample questions included: "Have you personally experienced any form of unfair treatment at work due to your LGBT identity?" and "Do you ever feel pressure to present yourself in ways that don't reflect your authentic identity at work?"

3.3 Procedure

Participants were recruited through established community networks, LGBTQ organizations, and professional contacts. Eligible participants were invited to participate in in-depth interviews conducted either in person or via secure video conferencing platforms. All interviews were audio recorded with participants' informed consent, then transcribed verbatim and anonymized to protect identity. The informed consent process included detailed explanations of the study's aims, procedures, potential risks and benefits, privacy protections, and the voluntary nature of participation, consistent with APA ethical guidelines (American Psychological Association, 2020). Thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), was employed

as the primary analytical method, involving familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. NVivo software supported systematic coding and organization.

4. Results

The analysis of participants' lived experiences in the workplace revealed four central themes: (1) Concealment of Identity in Workplace Contexts, (2) Non-Affirming Workplace Climates, (3) Emotional and Psychological Burden, and (4) Coping and Resilience.

Concealment of Identity in Workplace Contexts

A recurring theme among participants was the deliberate concealment of their authentic gender and sexual identities. This concealment was largely motivated by fears of discrimination, harassment, and potential loss of employment. One participant remarked, "I should act like a manly man only... if they get any doubt, my job will be at risk" (Participant 1), highlighting the necessity of performing masculinity to secure job stability. Participant 2 explained, "It was easier to pass as a straight woman than a bisexual... I am unable to share my experiences," illustrating pressure to adhere to gender norms. Participants further disclosed the adoption of "gender-binary filters" — psychological mechanisms to screen behaviors, speech, and appearance to conform with heteronormative standards. One participant stated, "I try to hide my feminine side... I feel uncomfortable when I have to prove my gender," exemplifying the emotional labor of identity regulation (Singh & Sharma, 2024). These concealment strategies, while protective, are psychologically taxing, often leading to emotional exhaustion and anxiety (Singh & Sharma, 2024).

Non-Affirming Workplace Climates

Participants recounted multiple forms of discrimination manifesting as both overt acts and subtle behaviors. One participant revealed, "They tease us... humiliate us... if they get any doubt, they may remove us" (Participant 1). Another shared that coworkers used "gay" as a slur and gossip about personal life was pervasive (Participant 2). Indirect discrimination was also prevalent; a participant noted, "People mock indirectly... they ask inappropriate questions about my sexuality" (Participant 4). The absence of institutional support exacerbated these challenges, with participants describing corporate LGBTQ+ initiatives as superficial: "Corporates celebrate pride only like a festival... nothing is done beyond the surface" (Participant 4). These accounts resonate with

research on Indian workplace cultures, where entrenched heteronormativity fosters exclusion and invisibility of queer identities (Maji et al., 2023; Singh & Sharma, 2024).

Emotional and Psychological Burden

Participants expressed that continuous identity concealment imposed a significant emotional and psychological toll. One participant reflected, "20% of my mind is always on how I move... how I speak... it affects my work" (Participant 1), indicating the cognitive load of sustained self-policing. Another shared, "It feels binding... like I cannot talk about my true desires" (Participant 2). Participants also described feelings of exclusion and diminished professional recognition: "They don't take me seriously because of my voice and identity" (Participant 2). The emotional strain was so profound that a participant reflected, "There are times I asked myself why I am like this... it really affects us emotionally" (Participant 4). These narratives align closely with Meyer's Minority Stress Model (2003), which frames chronic psychological stress in sexual minorities as arising from both external stigmatization and internalized pressures (Velez et al., 2013).

Coping and Resilience

Despite significant adversities, participants showed remarkable resilience through various coping mechanisms. Social support was a predominant source of strength: "I am lucky I have three friends who support me" (Participant 1), and "I first talk to my partner to feel better" (Participant 2). Internal strength and positive meaning-making were also vital: "It is a constant battle — but I keep going" (Participant 2), "I have accepted myself — that is enough" (Participant 4), and "I remind myself I have come this far... I have to be strong" (Participant 3). These coping strategies align with research demonstrating that social support networks and positive identity affirmation serve as protective buffers against adverse effects of minority stress (Riggle et al., 2011; Rodrigues & Kumar, 2022).

5. Discussion

The findings of this study confirm a significant and persistent dissonance between India's progressive legal landscape and the entrenched workplace heteronormativity that limits authentic expression and wellbeing for queer employees. Despite decriminalization of homosexuality in 2018, participants perceived concealment and identity regulation not as choices but as survival

necessities in workplaces characterized by systemic biases, microaggressions, and organizational apathy (Maji et al., 2023).

Non-affirming workplace climates, marked by microaggressions, gossip, and exclusionary practices, entrench structural barriers. Participants' skepticism towards corporate LGBTQ+ initiatives aligns with critiques of "rainbow capitalism" and tokenistic gestures that prioritize symbolic visibility over substantive inclusion (Ganguly & Maiti, 2021). The psychological ramifications of persistent stigma and identity concealment are effectively captured through Meyer's Minority Stress Model (2003), which identifies the additional, chronic stress burden faced by sexual minorities. Participant accounts of emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and self-policing amplify this theoretical perspective and reveal the urgent need for targeted organizational mental health supports.

Coping mechanisms such as social support, positive identity affirmation, and confrontation reflect resilient strategies that empower queer employees to navigate hostile environments. Rodrigues and Kumar (2022) document similar resilience among Indian lesbian and gay workers, emphasizing the dual role of interpersonal networks and intrapersonal strength in sustaining well-being. These findings underscore the imperative for systemic and policy-level interventions, including the development and enforcement of inclusive non-discrimination policies, comprehensive anti-harassment frameworks, and genuine diversity and inclusion initiatives (Di Marco et al., 2021).

The study's limitations include the small sample size ($n = 4$) and purposive sampling strategy, which limit generalizability. Participants were drawn from only three professional sectors, potentially overlooking variances in other industries. Self-reported data may be subject to social desirability and recall biases. The cross-sectional design limits understanding of how experiences evolve longitudinally. Additionally, intersectional factors including caste stratification, religious affiliations, and regional cultural variations were not deeply examined. Future research should adopt mixed-method or longitudinal designs, explore intersectionality more comprehensively, and evaluate the impact of organizational policies and mental health interventions tailored to Indian cultural contexts (Mara et al., 2021; Sakunpong et al., 2024).

6. Conclusion

This study conclusively demonstrates that Indian queer employees face a profound gap between the progressive legal landmark of the 2018 decriminalization of homosexuality and the persistent heteronormativity of organizational life. Discrimination manifests in both overt forms — such as teasing, use of slurs, and exclusion — and subtle forms, including microaggressions, gossip, and tokenistic inclusivity gestures. The use of the "gender-binary filter" as a culturally specific identity management tactic underscores the psychological labor required for workplace survival in South Asia and contributes a unique insight to global identity management literature (Maji et al., 2023).

The psychological consequences of sustained concealment and hostile climates — including LGBTQ Battle Fatigue, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and reduced job satisfaction — are consistent with the Minority Stress Model and empirical research on LGBTQ workplace experiences globally (Meyer, 2003; Morin, 2024). Despite these adversities, participants demonstrated resilience through social support networks and positive self-affirmation, highlighting adaptive pathways that organizations should seek to nurture and formalize.

This research makes a significant contribution by centering the voices of Indian queer employees and generating culturally specific insights that challenge the Western-centric bias in existing literature. The findings underscore the critical need for Indian organizations to move beyond legal compliance and performative inclusion toward substantive, sustained transformation. This includes implementing explicit non-discrimination policies, allyship training, and culturally competent mental health services that authentically address the lived realities of queer employees and foster workplaces conducive to their holistic flourishing.

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