

UNREPORTED PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL VIOLENCE FACED BY GAY MEN IN PUNE

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34293/shanlax.9789361634130.ch017>

Introduction

Seven years after the Supreme Court's landmark judgment in the *Navtej Johar versus Union of India judgement*¹ (2018), which decriminalized consensual homosexual relationships, incidents of unreported violence faced by gay men in Pune continue to remain largely undocumented and underrepresented in academic literature. Gay men, face multifaceted violence, from their intimate partners and other gay men in their broader queer social networks. Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), while well documented in heterosexual relationships, remains under reported and under studies in Indian academic circles. IPV among gay men can be physical (both sexual and non-sexual), psychological and emotional. Psychological violence manifests in the form of bullying, gaslighting and other manipulative behavior. Lack of scholarly engagement in the field of IPV in gay men - particularly in urban centers like Pune- has led to gaps in knowledge about the phenomenon. The gap in knowledge has led to lack of targeted intervention for the victims.

Laws such as The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005(PWDVA), Sections 35-38 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Samhita (BNS) 2025 (which has replaced the Section 498(a) of Indian Penal Code, 1860) provide protection for women victims of IPV in heterosexual relations. For gay men who are victims of IPV the lack of legal recourse compounds the problem.

Traditional gender stereotypes often prevent men -both gay and heterosexual- to seek legal recourse in case of sexual violence.² Marginalized nature of gay men acts as an additional impediment for them to address IPV and other violence individually and as a community.

Pune and the Queer Community of Pune

The urban cosmopolitan nature of Pune has a visible expression queer community. The city has two Pride Marches and a significant number of Community Based Organizations (CBO)s who carry out interventions for the health and well-being of the queer community. CBOs like YUTAK Charitable Trust and MIST LGBTQ Foundation are active within the community in terms of health interventions and also in the cultural spheres³. Treks, social gatherings, including parties are frequently held for community members which allows for socialization of Gay men. App based dating is popular within the community.

Health interventions include distribution of condoms, HIV/STI testing, consultation with specialist doctors. Both YUTAK and MIST have dedicated services for mental health with counselling services being offered. MUKTA Helpline also offers psychological counselling but the service is offered to the general community and not only for the queer community⁴.

Pune's queer community has been active in legal interventions, Bidumadhav Khire, the founder of Bindu Queer Rights Foundation (BQRF) was one of the early activists who had started working for LGBTAQ causes in the city⁵. YUTAK has helped transgenders to apply for transgender identity cards. The Government run Sassoon Hospital has a transgender ward a mark of successful activism on part of the queer community⁶.

Violence Faced by Gay Men

This paper discusses unreported violence among gay man in Pune at various levels. Case studies using unstructured interviews were used with victims to understand the extent and social context of violence. Academic literature is silent in terms of statistics of cases where the victim has sought and received legal remedies. Crime Report 2019, published by the Pune Police Commissionerate has listed crime against women but there is not no separate mention of crime faced by gay men. Crimes if such, CBOs said were dealt under normal crime statistics which makes it difficult to get statistical trends separately.

Gender stereotype- that men can't get sexually violated or can get abused has acted as a major impediment for men to see justice⁷. CBO workers confirmed that victims are extremely reluctant to approach the police to seek justice and instead ask for the CBOs to help them settle the manner without involving the law enforcers. Very few gay men are 'open' about their sexuality and try to avoid exposure to their family and community as much as possible. The 'dual identity' that many gay men take is an important reason for them to avoid exposure. CBOs said this makes many gay men easy target for crimes like blackmail. In queer theory dual identity denotes the difference between public and private identity that gay men keep⁷. In the public sphere which includes the immediate family, most are either silent about their sexual identity or assure heteronormative roles as dictated by society. It is only in private sphere which includes in social setting with other queer members or with other queer men they express their sexuality. This tension between the public and private personality makes many queer men easy target for unscrupulous elements.

Broadly unreported violence among gay men can be studied under two major head. The first one would be violence- mental, physical, emotional and psychological. The second head would involve sexual violence in addition to the above. Gay men face violence from their intimate partners as well as other queer men in their social setting. Violence in both cases can range assault to psychological manipulation in terms of coercion, gas-lighting, body shaming are some of the reported psychological manipulations reported from the community.

Methodology Employed

Given the sensitive nature of the subject under study, qualitative research method was used. Case studies with four individuals in the unstructured interview format was used to collect experience data in the exploratory research design manner. Profile descriptions on dating apps were analyzed. to understand preferences of men was also done. Interviews with CBOs in the unstructured format were conducted to collect secondary data about violence was done. All five individuals were residents of Pune and were above 18 years of age. Their identity was kept hidden to protect their privacy. Selective sampling was used from the cases referred by the CBOs for the research.

Secondary data in terms of cases handled by CBOs was collected from the offices of the CBOs. Newspaper articles in terms of reported cases of violence were studied for the research

Five cases were used for the study, but the depth of the interviews was enough to justify their inclusion. The saturation was achieved by the interviews, especially in terms of context and quality of answers provided by them. Of these the last case involved violence experienced in a public space while the other four were of violence in private sphere.

Case I

A 24-year-old man working in an MNC had approached YUTAK's office for their intervention for a case of blackmail. The man had met another gay man on a dating app from Pune. After the first two meetings, he had decided against going forward in a romantic relation with the other person. His partner was against this and had resorted to emotional techniques to pressurize the other person to continue with the relation. The spurred partner had in time had connected with friends and family of the former partner on various social media platforms and started threatening him of exposing his identity as a gay man.

As a person who is yet to make his sexual identity public, this proposition had alarmed him of exposure. He had approached YUTAK for help, but the case was made complex as his former intimate partner had made no claims to money or other material benefits from him. During an meeting mediated by YUTAK, the only demand the other partner made was for continuation of the relationship, which was not amenable to the other partner. The second partner had approached close family members of the former partner and talked about their relationship thus "outing" him technically. (Outing is defined as the involuntary exposure of sexual identity in terms of queer individuals. Coming out is the voluntary declaration of sexuality by them to the general society or immediate family. While the former can cause significant stress, the latter is often seen as a step towards acceptability and comfort.) This had pushed the former to despair as he was yet to declare his sexuality to his family members. When YUTAK had approached the police, the latter had expressed their helplessness as technically no legal provisions were violated.

Case 2

A 22-year-old gay man from Pune was approached by a man on a popular gay dating app to start a sexual relationship. When the person reached the designated place for the meet up, he was accosted by three men who claimed they were police men and had come to apprehend him for “illegal moral activities”. He was forcefully made to part with his available cash, mobile phone, in order to buy their silence. This continued with the group continuing make their demands for money from the young man to buy their silence. Faced with increasing financial distress the person approached a CBO who had helped him to file a police complain. The police had filed a First Information Report (FIR) and subsequently arrested the men.

In this case, the young man had contemplated to die by suicide before approaching the CBO. The CBO had spoken to the group of men trying to put a stop to the blackmail but had was not successful. The young man was threatened with physical violence and exposure in case he went ahead with his decision to seek legal recourse. Intervention by the CBO had enabled the police to apprehend the other person. Subsequent investigations have revealed the group was connected with other similar crimes in the past. Their victims had refused to come forward to seek legal recourse given fear of exposure attached to the process.

Case 3

A 30-year-old gay man had approached MIST to seek mental health counselling. A successful business professional, he had failed to sustain any long-term relationship despite him trying for the same. While speaking to the counsellor, he admitted of being sidelined based on physical attributes. He was routinely turned down for failing to adhere to the set standards demanded of other men. This constant rejection on the dating apps had led him to question his self-worth. When he approached the counsellor, he was diagnosed with borderline depression which had stemmed from constant rejection on dating apps. His experience had left him psychologically disturbed which manifested itself in terms of behavioral patterns like irritability, questioning his worth in the dating circles.

Case 4

During his talk with this researcher, a 28-year-old gay man from Pune confirmed that he has faced continuous rejection because of his overtly feminine behavior. Even in the queer circles, he had faced discrimination because others found his behavior too “loud” for comfort. The gay man in question identifies as a cis gendered (same gender identity as sexual identity) but his behavior is deemed to be ‘feminine’ by other gay men.

On dating apps, he said heteronormative behavior was stressed upon, expressions like “No girlish” “straight acting” were used frequently. The person who has otherwise had a successful professional career as an interior designer, said these comments harmed his self-confidence and added to his social exclusion.

Case 5

Five years back a 24-year-old gay man had faced violence from some neighbours who had taken exception to the way he dressed. The man who identifies as gender fluid was wearing androgynous clothes which had roused ire. The person in question was physically assaulted and when the police was called he was blamed for being 'loud'. The person admitted that it was just him and his friend against a whole group of irate people who blamed them for no fault of their own. At the end the police refused to make any complaint against both parties and instead got the crowd to write a letter of apology to the person to end the matter.

Discussion

Four of the five cases who were interviewed pointed to structural violence faced by gay men in Pune. Structural violence refers to the harm that social institutions or structures can inflict on people by preventing them from meeting their own needs⁸. In both Case 3 and 4 the violence stemmed from set notions about behavior and body standards within the community. 'Fat shaming' 'femme shaming' are seen as normal within the community as they violate the set standards. Being ingrained within the structure of the community's common psyche these cause considerable damage to the psychology of the individual.

Patriarchy and patriarchal mindset dictate a large portion of behavior and expresses itself in interpersonal behavior. CBOs confirmed that in Pune 'straight acting' gay men consider themselves as superior to their brethren who in their definition were "girlish". Heterosexism⁸ or the phenomenon of grading heterosexual behavior pattern as superior is practiced in the gay community. Rosenwasser's definition of internalized oppression refers to the process in which marginalized communities internalize negative images about them by the majority community. Thus, in Pune this is reflected in the way the heteronormative behavior is standardized and those who fail to adhere to the same face discrimination. Deeper research is necessary to understand the extent of this belief in the gay community of Pune and the reason for the same.

Alienation of gay men within the community in Pune has not been well represented in academic literature. But the cases investigated show the feeling of alienation is real and stems from discrimination and violence faced by the gay men. This alienation makes gay men feel disconnected from the greater community. During the course of interviews, the subjects admitted that constant rejection because of their behavior has taken a toll on their mental health.

Heteronormative behavior was preferred and those who failed to adhere to the same faced exclusion. In intimate relationships, manipulative action by one partner against the other was reported. The partner, who is seen as the "woman" in the relationship was expected to be subservient and adhere to societal norms of a woman. CBOs had documented abusive relationships among intimate partners which stemmed from patriarchal notions about behavior and expression.

CBOs especially YUTAK flagged the growing cases of blackmail faced by gay men in Pune¹¹.

The modus operandi is similar in multiple case and YUTAK's data showed multiple cases from various geographies of the city. Dating apps are widely used to lure gay men in meeting either at secluded locations especially near Highways. Once the person arrives there, he is met with multiple people who threaten to 'out' him in case he does not pay. Another modus operandi was the threat to make public videos or pictures of intimate moments between partners often taken with the consent. The fear of exposure is used to extort money at multiple occasions. YUTAK's referred to the case of suicide of a 21-year-old student in March due to the constant threat of blackmail from men he met on a dating app. YUTAK said there were groups active who operated through the app. YUTAK had followed up with the police in order to register FIR in the case which had led to the arrest of the accused.

The problem in seeking legal recourse is in two layers. The first layer involves the lack of legal recourse in terms of laws, rules regulations which can address the problem of IPV and other violence among gay men. In case of heterosexual relationships, PWDVA and relevant sections in the BNS have addressed concerns for women. Academic work in regard to legal protection for women has shown how the law has made enough provisions for protection of women from violence both in the private and public sphere. Faced with this legal conundrum IPV and other violence faced by gay men remains a grey area.

The second layer of problem is the reluctance of gay men to seek legal recourse when faced with blackmail or violence. Gay men fear exposure of their identity to the greater community which makes them reluctant to approach police to report violence. This stems for the Public and Private lives which gay men lead- most of them are comfortable leading a heteronormative life in public and prefer not to openly identify themselves as gay. Heterosexism and over all non-acceptance of gay identity in the larger society was identified for this reluctance. This reluctance plays out in many forms and for many gay men, silence in face of violence in intimate relationships or being forced into blackmail. Paucity of academic record as well as statistics points to the same conclusion. The cases which come to CBO often insist that their names are not mentioned when it comes to police or legal recourse.

Of the five cases studied, the last one i.e. Case 5 refers to a different kind of violence faced by gay men. This incident shows that gay men can who are not heteronormative can face violence without any visible provocation. But the legal recourse to the violence remains under addressed. In the case studied the police had pushed for reconciliation.

Conclusion

Gay men in Pune, face violence both from the queer community as well as the greater society. Violence can be structural and stem from internalized homophobia in gay men or the patriarchy which manages to internalize oppression among them. The process of addressing this has started in forums but visible efforts are few and far between.

Body shaming, manipulation, bullying are some of the forms of psychological harassment faced by gay men in IPV and form the greater queer community.

Gay men face exclusion from the queer spaces if they fail to adhere to norms of the community which are arbitrarily defined. Instead of a common queer identity, the community has standards which act as gatekeeping for those who fail to adhere to the same.

Another level of violence gay men face is from elements who try and exploit the dual lives gay men lead. This level of violence involves material threat. The problem is made complex as clear legal recourses are lacking to address the problem. Gay men think twice before approaching any authority even if they are victims of violence. Other than their desire to keep their private identity private, it also stems from the fact the legal framework has failed to account for problems of gay men. In Pune cases of violence like blackmail fail to reach conclusion as gay men do not approach the police. Even if cases reach police reconciliation is stressed by the law enforcers.

The institutional framework to address cases of extortion, blackmail is weak. Gay men who reach police station find it difficult to communicate as the police is seen as non-cooperative or insensitive while dealing with them. CBOs said they had encountered institutional biases while dealing with the police. This despite the higher-ranking officials assured them of cooperation.

CBOs in 2025 have filed FIRs in cases of extortion in four police stations. The progress of the cases is to be ascertained.

Acknowledgement and Disclosures

This paper was solely possible because of the guidance of my professor Vishnu Vairagad. My thanks are due to him for his constant encouragement and feedback.

My thanks are due to Anil Ukarande, founder director of YUTAK Trust who helped in my course of research. Ukarande also agreed to be interviewed which provide me with valuable insight for the paper. Shyam Konoor, founder director of MIST LGBTQ Foundation also helped in my case studies. My thanks are due to the members of the community who agreed to be interviewed.

The individuals who were interviewed were collected through snowballing method. The researcher had requested for multiple contacts from which random sampling was done to ensure biasness is not there. The sample size of five is acknowledged to be small, but the quantitative nature of the investigations has ensured depth and width is recorded in their interviews.

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