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UNDERSTANDING HETERONORMATIVITY

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Abstract

Sexuality often refers to identity claims related to how one's relationships, sexual preferences and desires are perceived by one or imposed on one by others. Cultural shifts in the social sciences are moving in the direction of theorizing sexuality as socially constructed and doable, as opposed to an essentialist understanding of sexuality as an essential human quality. Human sexuality is the way people experience and express themselves sexually. This involves biological, sexual, physical, emotional, social feelings and behaviours. Sexual orientation refers to a person's emotional and sexual attraction to a particular sex (male or female). Sexual orientation is typically divided into four categories: *heterosexuality*, the attraction to individuals of the opposite sex; *homosexuality*, the attraction to individuals of one's own sex; *bisexuality*, the attraction to individuals of either sex; or *asexuality*, no attraction to either sex. Heterosexuals and homosexuals may also be referred to informally as "straight" and "gay/lesbian," respectively. Individuals are usually aware of their sexual orientation between middle childhood and early adolescence. They do not have to participate in sexual activity to be aware of these emotional, romantic, and physical attractions; people can be celibate and still recognize their sexual orientation. At the point of puberty some may be able to claim their sexual orientations while others may be unready or unwilling to make their homosexuality or bisexuality known since it goes against society's historical norms. Heteronormativity relates to a world view that promotes heterosexuality as the normal or preferred sexual orientation for people to have. It may include an assumption that everyone is heterosexual and may involve various kinds of discrimination against gays, lesbians, bisexuals, asexual, or transgender or non-binary individuals. Heteronormativity leads to serious consequences for those who are not heteronormative. Family rejection and discrimination faced by non-binary people is caused by cultural views that anything not straight or cisgender is abnormal or against societal norm. Social structures and the individuals who live within them create and reproduce inequality related to gender, race, class, religion, and ethnicity and so on. This paper is an attempt to understand and challenge heteronormativity as a social condition that reinforces norms related to gender and sexuality, upholds patriarchy and heterosexuality.

Keywords: *Sexual Minorities, Heteronormativity, Queer, Discrimination*

Introduction

Sexual minorities are commonly defined as groups whose sexual identity, orientation, or practices differ from the majority of the human population in a society. Sexual minorities comprise of lesbian, gay, bisexual, hijra and transgender individuals. Male-female divide in hetero-normative and highly patriarchal

societies has negatively impacted the lives of sexual minorities thus ignoring the fact that they are also human beings. The intent here is to highlight the need and ways to challenge the gender binaries and heteronormativity. Heteronormativity assumes that sexual and marital relations are most fitting between individuals of opposite sex. This concept is reflected in movies, serials and even animation movies. Gender roles are heavily emphasized in most Disney movies where the princess depends on a macho young prince to rescue her from evil forces and always ends in a happily ever after. Romance between a boy and a girl or hetero romantic relationship is highlighted in such movies. If it is true that such movies do not disrespect the queer community, it is equally true that queer community is totally excluded from representation in such movies. This lack of representation perpetuates heteronormativity and hinders the achievement of gender equality. Cinderella, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs and Rapunzel are cases in point. When children are exposed to such hereto romantic stories at such young age, it becomes tremendously difficult to break those ideals later in their lives.

Human sexuality means the way by which persons express themselves romantically and sexually. Such experiences and feelings may involve biological, sexual, physical, emotional, social behaviours. Sexual orientation refers to a person's emotional and sexual attraction towards a particular sex which can be a male or a female. Sexual orientation is typically divided into the four categories, namely, heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality and asexuality. These four kinds of sexuality are described as follows:

Heterosexuality- is the attraction to individuals of the opposite sex.

Homosexuality- is the attraction to individuals of one's own sex;

Bisexuality- is the attraction to individuals of either sex; and

Asexuality- no attraction to either sex.

The term heterosexual was coined by Karl Maria Kertbeny, an Austrian born Hungarian journalist and human rights campaigner, in 1869. Heterosexuals are referred to as straight. Homosexuals may be referred to informally as gay or lesbian. A gay is a homosexual man while lesbian is a homosexual woman. Individuals are usually aware of their sexual orientation between middle childhood and early adolescence. They do not have to participate in sexual activity to be aware of these romantic, and physical attractions; people can abstain from marriage and sexual relations and still recognize their sexual orientation. On attaining teenage, some may be able to disclose their sexual orientations while others may still be unwilling to make their homosexuality or bisexuality known since it goes against society's established cultural norms. Essentially, nearly all people are born with physical characteristics that are labelled male or female. In 1964, Robert Stoller coined the term gender identity, which refers to an individual's personal concept about their gender and how they feel inside. It is a deeply held internal sense of self and is typically self-identified. Gender identity differs from sexual identity and is not related to an individual's sexual orientation. As such, the gender category with which a person identifies may not match the sex they were assigned at birth.

Among Western values, human rights principles made gender equality the criterion for a just society, and respect for sexual minorities became one of the common goals. However, the full achievement of such goals in both developed and developing countries is still a long way off. However, in terms of individual rights and public policy, women's equality and the social situation of LGBT+ people (i.e., lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and other sexual minorities) are often subject to separate policies. And the very definition of gender equality was often cisgender-centric. (Hines, 2007; Mattysey, 2020). Binary gender means there exist two types of gender – male and female. Non binary gender refers to gender identity that is not masculine or feminine and non-binary identities can fall under the transgender umbrella since many non binary people identify with a gender that is different from their assigned sex. It can include terms like gay, lesbian, queer, hijra, transgender, androgyny etc. Across cultures, most people are heterosexual, and heterosexual activity is by far the most common type of sexual activity. Heteronormativity relates to a world view that promotes heterosexuality as the normal or preferred sexual orientation. It may include an

assumption that everyone is heterosexual and may involve various kinds of discrimination against individuals who identify themselves as gays, lesbians, bisexuals, asexual, or transgender. Heteronormativity leads to serious consequences for those who are not heteronormative. Family rejection and discrimination faced by non-binary people is caused by cultural views that anything not straight or cis-gender is abnormal or against societal norm. It can assign strict gender roles to males and females. Heteronormative belief can reinforce homophobia or feeling of hatred or fear or antipathy towards same sex people, and the belief that same-sex relationships are non-conforming. When someone insists on referring to another person according to their biological sex rather than their personal preferences, it implies reinforcing the heteronormative beliefs. Also, it becomes difficult for heteronormative parents to approve of their children coming out as LGBTQ or Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer or dating those individuals instead of entering into relationship with heterosexual individuals. The term LGBTQ is in use since the 1990s. It is used as an umbrella term for sexuality and gender identity. It may refer to anyone who is non-heterosexual or non-cisgender, instead of exclusively to people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. Discrimination, stigma and atrocities diminish self-esteem and sense of social responsibility. Sexual minorities tend to suffer from gender dysphoria which refers to the pain and distress that an individual might feel due to a mismatch between their gender identity and their sex assigned at birth. Many of them end up in marital or heterosexual relationships against their will because of family and societal pressure. These marriages end up in marital disharmony, divorce or continue with unhappy life. Various countries throughout history have criminalized transgender and non-binary gender identities. There is the pressing requirement to address this issue so as to enable the sexual minorities enjoy basic human rights and fundamental freedoms as guaranteed by the constitution of India.

Queer Theory

However, heterosexuality theory did not become central to feminist sociology in spite of significant insights (Ingraham, 1994). Instead, it was queer theory that assumed the theoretical role, focusing on the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1989) that maintains gender inequality (Seidman, 1995). The term Queer means odd or strange or unusual. Historian Teresa de Lauretis organized the first queer theory conference in 1990; gradually the term started to become legitimized in academia. In recent years 'queer' has come to be used as an umbrella term for a coalition of culturally marginal sexual self-identifications and at other times to describe a nascent theoretical model which has developed out of more traditional lesbian and gay studies. The rapid development and consolidation of lesbian and gay studies in universities in the 1990s is paralleled by an increasing deployment of the term 'queer'. Queer describes those gestures which dramatise incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire. Institutionally, queer has been associated most prominently with lesbian and gay subjects, but its analytic framework also includes such topics as cross-dressing, gender ambiguity and gender-corrective surgery. Gender is a social and cultural construct that starts in family. In our society, we have been conditioned to see humans as either male (masculine) or female (feminine), and heterosexual (Straight). As a result, we have been taught that sexual relationships are normal only when they exist between two people of the opposite sex. The ideas we have in our head about what constitutes male-ness, female-ness, and what constitutes normal are all socially constructed. Queer Theory actively challenges this conditioning by rejecting conventional thinking that heterosexual is the only normal sexuality and acknowledges the broad spectrum of sexuality, sexual orientation and gender identity. Queer theorists believe that gender identity is not fixed; rather it is fluid and changing.

Concept of Heteronormativity

Heteronormativity is created by maintaining the belief that men and women need to be attracted to each other, and that only two genders need to be in relationships with each other. Normativity explains the dominance of certain forms of heterosexuality in cultural and institutional life. Geographer Gil Valentine argues that public space becomes heterosexual when social and cultural norms that consist of repeated heterosexual acts, such as holding hands and kissing heterosexuals, are incorporated into public space. Such practices render homosexuality and all other non-heterosexual sexual identities 'other' and 'out of place' in public space. This regulation can take many forms, including discrimination and violence against people deemed beyond heteronormativity, including LGBT people. LGBT people may try to hide or minimize their sexual and/or gender identity for fear of violence, verbal abuse, and other forms of moral policing. Heteronormativity is the idea that binary gender identity and heterosexual orientation are the norm. Heteronormative ideology is persistent, pervasive and has negative impact. It is propagated through institutions, socialization and prevalent ideologies. Threat reactions to non-heteronormative behaviour reinforce heteronormative beliefs. The concept of heteronormativity should be rejected due to the following reasons: -

- Belonging to LGBTQ community is not a crime; yet such individuals are faced with discrimination and are often forced to explain their sexuality and also asked embarrassing or inappropriate questions while heterosexual individuals are not asked to explain their gender or sexuality.
- The very assumption that there exist only two kinds of gender -either male or female- is erroneous and this idea perpetuates the norm of heteronormativity. The fact is that everyone's gender can be unique and everyone's gender identity, gender orientation, and gender expression should be treated with dignity and respect.
- The assumption that all people are straight is inaccurate. It is true that majority of people identify themselves as straight but this does not imply that everyone will fall into the majority category.
- Gender fluidity or sexual fluidity refers to change over time in a person's gender expression or gender identity, or both. That change might be in expression, but not identity, or in identity, but not expression. Or both expression and identity might change together. The term sexual fluidity has been coined by feminist psychologist Lisa Diamond the year 2000, psychologist Lisa Diamond studied 80 non-heterosexual women over several years. She found that in this group, changes in sexual identity were common. In her 2008 book *Sexual Fluidity Understanding Women's Desire and Love*, which was awarded with the 2009 Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues Distinguished Book Award by the American Psychological Association, Diamond speaks of female sexuality about how people can be sexually fluid; in other words, at some point in life, an individual could feel completely straight, while at other times, the same individual might feel attracted to the same-sex and then again after some years that individual may identify himself or herself as straight. This means not everyone has an identity that remains the same throughout their lives.
- Heteronormativity leads to serious consequences for those individuals who are not heteronormative. Family rejection and discrimination is faced by non-binary people. It is caused by socio-cultural views that anything not straight or cis-gender is abnormal.

Conclusion

According to Cameron and Kulick (2003, 45), heterosexuality is a major factor in "maintaining the gender hierarchy that subordinates women to men." Section 377 of IPC states – "Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal, shall be punished with

imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine.” Section 377 of the British colonial penal code criminalized all sexual acts "against the order of nature". The law was used to prosecute people engaging in oral and anal sex along with homosexual activity. In 2018, after decades of grassroots activism, the application of section 377 of the Indian Penal Code to private consensual sex between men was ruled unconstitutional by India's Supreme Court. This historic judgement effectively decriminalized homosexual activity. In spite of this historic verdict, sexual minorities still encounter bullying, violence, workplace discrimination that affects their mental health. However, we must not forget that, all people, irrespective of their sexual orientation and gender identity, have the right to enjoy basic human rights and freedoms. The theory of gender equality is contained in the Indian Constitution in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles. The rights include freedom from all sorts of discrimination, right to equality before the law, right to life, liberty and security of the person, right to an adequate standard of living, right to education, right to health security, right to freely participate in public life and in cultural life, right to freedom of expression, right to freedom of association and peaceful assembly, freedom of thought, conscience and religion. These rights uphold equality, security and participation in public life of sexual minorities. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948 proclaims that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was considered as the common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations. Furthermore, it was stated that the recognition of the inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world. To address the issue of discrimination, societal mind-set has to change. Sexual minorities must be first and foremost considered as human beings; they must be allowed to have access to the constitutional rights and freedoms without any kind of gender-based discrimination.

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