

Structural violence and HIV prevention among Kothi-identified men who have sex with men (MSM) in Chennai, India

**Murali Shunmugam¹, Venkatesan Chakrapani¹, Peter
A Newman², Alan McLuckie²**

¹Indian Network for People living with HIV (INP+), Chennai, India

²University of Toronto, Canada

Introduction

- Stigma and discrimination against MSM may need to be explored as a product of structural societal forces, as opposed to traditional models that focus on stigma as an individual. level phenomenon
(Galtung, 1969; Parker & Aggleton, 2003).
- *Personal violence shows . . . Structural violence is silent . . . Structural violence may be seen as about as natural as the air around us* +- Galtung, 1969.
- Limited investigations have focused on stigma and discrimination faced by MSM and Hijras in India.
(Chakrapani et al., 2004 & 2007; PUCL-K 2001 & 2003; Human Rights Watch, 2002).

Study Purpose

- To explore the experiences and contexts of stigma, discrimination and violence among HIV-positive and high-risk Kothi-identified MSM in Chennai, India, and implications for HIV prevention.

Methodology

- Qualitative methodology
- In-depth interviews with:
 - 10 HIV-positive kothi-identified MSM
 - 8 Kothi-identified MSM of unknown HIV status
 - 3 key informants
- In collaboration with 3 community -based organizations (CBOs) in Chennai - *SWAM, Sahodaran and Allaigal*
- Sampling . Peer driven & Snowball sampling
- Narrative thematic analysis & Constant comparison method

Background Characteristics

In-depth interview participants (n=18)

- Mean age - 28 years (Range=19 to 52)
- All from lower socioeconomic status
(Most earned < 1 USD per day)
- Nine MSM engaged in sex work occasionally
- 4 MSM were heterosexually married

Key informants (n=3)

- Community activists or CBO leaders

Kothis

- *Kothis* gender expression is feminine and they are attracted to masculine male partners, whom they call *Panthis*.
- *Kothis* are generally receptive partners in sexual encounters with *panthis*, who are assumed by *kothis* to be predominantly heterosexual.
- Though Hijras (or transgender women) may also identify as *±Kothis* in our study we restricted our study population to only those MSM who identify as *±Kothis*

Findings

Kothi-identified MSM face Stigma/Discrimination from

1. Police
2. Ruffians (Rowdies)
3. Heterosexual friends
4. Family members
5. Health care providers

Forms of stigma and discrimination

- Direct & Indirect forms of oppression

1. Police

Direct forms:

- **Verbal and Physical Harassment**

“That policeman said to me, ‘Why are you standing here? I know who you are;’ and before I reacted he started to beat me with a lathi [police stick] on my back and legs.”

- **Sexual Assault and Rape**

“Policemen took me to police station and during the night one policeman asked me to come to the bathroom. He had sex with me in the back. I did not have condoms at that time.”

- **Blackmail and Extortion of money**

“He [the policeman] took away my driver’s license and said that if I want to have it back I need to give him 200 rupees. I had no other option and gave it.”

Indirect forms:

- Arrest on false allegations
- Refusing to offer protection to MSM from ruffians
- Harassment of MSM outreach workers

2. Ruffians

- Violence by ruffians

“They [ruffians] have sex with us. We cannot talk about condoms. They will beat us and show us a knife... They also take away our money. +

- Blackmail by ruffians

“That rowdy by some way got my home phone number and threatened me that he will tell my family members if I do not give him money periodically.”

3. Heterosexual friends

- Rejection by heterosexual friends
 - Could not reveal sexuality or HIV status. Fear that friends might leave if disclosed.

4. Kothi friends

- Fear of rejection by other Kothis if HIV-positive status revealed
- Reported Breach of confidentiality about HIV status and Discrimination on the basis of HIV status

5. Family Members

Direct forms:

- **Verbal abuse** (*Bringing shame to family*)
- **Physical abuse**

“My brothers had beaten me black and blue after they came to know about me. Later I had to run out of my family to settle in Chennai. ”

Indirect forms:

- Need to fulfil family expectation to get married
- Greater stigma associated with same-sex sexuality

“[M]y father told me that he could tolerate that I was HIV–positive but asked me not to tell others that I got it by having sex with men. ”

6. Health care providers

Direct forms:

- Derogatory labeling & Insulting remarks

“Are you a man? . . . You have a moustache and why do you want to have sex with other men? Try women. ”

- Breach of confidentiality & Outright refusal of services

Cont...

Indirect forms:

- Lack of sensitivity and knowledge in working with MSM
- Doctors and Counselors were reportedly negligent & embarrassed in asking about sexual history
- Lack of information on safer sex for HIV-positive MSM

Thus, Kothis were uncomfortable in reporting their anal symptoms that led to substandard care

Interlinking Factors

Example 1: Rowdies extort money and sexually abuse kothis because of

- Lack of police support to Kothis
- Criminalization of same-sex sexual behavior

Example 2: Police can extort money and sexually abuse kothis because of

- Criminalization of same-sex sexual behavior
- Media attention if police do not control homosexual activity in their beat
- Lower socioeconomic status

Structural level

Discriminatory practices

Indirect

Police

- False arrest
- Refusing to offer protection
- Harassment of community workers

Community members

- Social exclusion by peer groups & other Kothis

Family

- Blame for conflict & family stress
- Shame regarding sexual orientation

Healthcare

- Insensitive practice
- Inadequate training

Health care system

- Lack of services competent in working with MSM
- Inaccessibility to MSM

Direct

Police

- Verbal & physical harassment
- Sexual assault & violence

Community members

- Physical violence & blackmail by ruffians

Family

- Violence
- Forced out of house

Healthcare

- Refusal of service

Legal system

- Criminalization of "homosexual behavior"

Family

- Arranged marriage
- Taboos around sex and same-sex relations

Stigma

Vulnerability to HIV/AIDS

Community

- Stigma against homosexuality and HIV/AIDS
- Taboos against homosexuality

Recommendations

- Decriminalizing same. sex relations among consenting adults are central to resisting structural violence.
- Antidiscrimination education campaigns in the mass media targeting the general public to combat stigma/discrimination associated with MSM and HIV.
- Extensive education of police on rights of sexual minorities and wide-spread monitoring of police abuse.
- Programs for health care providers, both to counteract ignorance and end outright prejudice and discrimination.