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# RESILIENCE OF LGBTQIA STUDENTS ON DELHI CAMPUSES

ANJALI KRISHAN, APURVA RASTOGI, AND SUNEETA SINGH

*In this paper, we document how LGBTQIA students on college campuses in Delhi, India, are handling discrimination in the aftermath of the Supreme Court of India's ruling on December 11, 2013, that recriminalized homosexuality in India. Applying a resilience research approach, our study revealed that LGBTQIA students are mired in a context of adversity and discrimination that leaves them struggling to achieve their desired outcome: acceptance of their LGBTQIA identity. Students employ both protective and promotive resilience strategies to reach the desired outcome, but these efforts come with a high cost that is borne by both individual students and the LGBTQIA community. Resilience strategies, therefore, have not necessarily improved the adverse environment in Delhi's extremely homophobic higher education establishments. In this paper, we identify which strategies are most likely to lead to positive, long-lasting change.*

## INTRODUCTION

Resilience is commonly defined as “the ability of the individual or group to face adversity positively, even when their environment is unfavorable” (Labronici 2012, 626). The concept has been refined over the years, and has shifted from an individual approach to an ecological one. An ecological approach, which views “the social and physical environment as the locus of resources for personal growth” (Ungar 2012, 13, 15), focuses specifically on how individuals and groups use protective and promotive processes to transform an adverse context to achieve their desired outcome. Resilience thus embodies the individual's capacity

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to navigate their way to the resources that support well-being, and to negotiate the opportunity to experience these resources fully (Ungar 2012, 17). Families, communities, and governments are expected to play a role in providing resources in ways that are both culturally appropriate and responsive to the preferences of those who need them (Ungar 2013, 255). In this paper, we analyze the state of adversity facing lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans\*, queer, intersex, and asexual/ally (LGBTQIA) individuals within the discriminatory higher education environment of Delhi, India.<sup>1</sup> We specifically examine how LGBTQIA students are managing their identities in this environment since the 2013 ruling by the Supreme Court of India that recriminalized homosexuality.

While LGBTQIA college students in Delhi have historically faced homophobia on campus, their situation has deteriorated dramatically in the wake of the Supreme Court ruling on December 11, 2013. The judgment reinstated Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (1860), which effectively criminalizes homosexuality by banning “unnatural sex,” traditionally interpreted by the legal establishment as referring to sodomy. This law has far-reaching consequences for the LGBTQIA community:

The criminalisation of homosexuality condemns in perpetuity a sizable section of society and forces them to live their lives in the shadow of harassment, exploitation, humiliation, cruel and degrading treatment at the hands of the law enforcement machinery. (NAZ Foundation v. Government of NCT of Delhi 2009)

In 2009, the Delhi High Court struck down Section 377 as unconstitutional. It was widely expected that the 2013 judgment would extend this decriminalization to the rest of the nation, but the opposite occurred. In reaction to the later judgment, former High Court Judge Leela Seth (2014) commented:

The interpretation of law is untempered by any sympathy for the suffering of others.

The voluminous accounts of rape, torture, extortion and harassment suffered by gay and transgender people as a result of this law do not appear to have moved the court. Nor does

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<sup>1</sup> We use the initialism LGBTQIA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans\*, queer, intersex and asexual), as it was the term most widely used by respondents when asked to describe themselves or their community. Similarly, we use the term “trans\*” because our respondents considered it the most appropriate and politically correct term. The term was used as an umbrella term to describe multiple trans-identities that extend beyond transgender or transsexual.

the court appear concerned about the parents of such people, who stated before the court that the law induced in their children deep fear, profound self-doubt and the inability to peacefully enjoy family life . . . The judgment fails to appreciate the stigma that is attached to persons and families because of this criminalization.<sup>2</sup>

The Indian LGBTQIA community moved overnight from an era of cautious optimism into one in which homophobia is legally sanctioned, and thus was propelled into a renewed state of emergency. LGBTQIA community members are more vulnerable than ever before to discrimination and exclusion in all areas of life, including education.

In the education in emergencies field, “emergency” refers to “situations in which man-made or natural disasters destroy, within a short period of time, the usual conditions of life, care and education facilities for children and therefore disrupt, deny, hinder progress or delay the realization of the right to education” (Committee on the Rights of the Child 2008, 1). In this paper, we examine the case of LGBTQIA students on Delhi campuses who find themselves in a situation of emergency as the minority group they belong to is being legally and socially persecuted.

No robust studies exist that indicate the number of LGBTQIA students in Delhi whose education has been disrupted or denied due to their sexual or gender identity. However, a recent report found that, of the 132,435 students admitted in 2015 to Delhi University, the city’s largest campus, not one identified as transgender on their application form (Saxena 2016). There also is no data on the experience and resilience of LGBTQIA students after the recriminalization of homosexuality. Our study addressed this gap, and found that the risks attached to identifying as LGBTQIA, participating in same-sex relationships, or taking part in LGBTQIA community activities have multiplied since the 2013 judgment, which is affecting these students in the most personal and intimate spheres of their lives.

We begin this paper by examining the literature and the research on the resilience of LGBTQIA students in India. We draw from our findings to describe the context of adversity these students inhabit and the risks they face. We then explore resilience strategies the students employ in an effort to achieve acceptance. We

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in the *Times of India*, January 26, 2014. See <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/sunday-times/deep-focus/A-mother-and-a-judge-speaks-out-on-section-377/articleshow/29383723.cms>.

demonstrate that the Delhi higher education establishment does not nurture or accept LGBTQIA students, and thus fails to provide them with an empowering and safe environment. As a result, LGBTQIA students must employ multiple resilience strategies to carve out a space in which they belong and find acceptance. These strategies come with high costs, to both LGBTQIA individuals and their community, that severely limit these students' ability to make positive changes in the context of adversity they face on campus.

### **THE RESILIENCE FRAMEWORK**

The concept of resilience, which emerged in the field of ecology during the 1970s, has gained traction in a variety of subfields that range from disaster relief, to gender relations, to homeland security (Holling 1996). The resilience framework described in this paper originated in psychology and has been adapted to education in international development. This framework is helpful in understanding the questions we raise here because it considers the respondents' specific sociocultural context, as well as issues of social justice and transformative change (Mertens 2009; Ungar 2005).

Resilience research consists of several building blocks: It describes the context of adversity and identifies the negative stressors, risks, and assets (Reyes 2013). It documents how respondents use resilience strategies to navigate and negotiate a context of adversity to reach their desired outcomes. These strategies may protect respondents from risks or promote their ability to leverage assets, such as safe spaces, friendships, and economic independence, to reach their desired outcomes (Reyes 2013). Definitions of these building blocks are context specific and may change over time, as resilience processes are constantly shifting in response to changes in a context of adversity. The respondents in this study had dual roles—as both individuals and as members of the LGBTQIA community on Delhi's college campuses. We thus analyze their resilience on two levels, individual and community, and discuss how it operates in the setting of Delhi's higher education institutions.

This approach expands on individual resilience by examining how formal and informal social networks facilitate resilience among the larger LGBTQIA community (Ungar 2011, 2012, 2013). To understand resilient individuals, previous research has examined their personal traits, such as motivation, positive outlook, and ego (Luther, Cicchetti, and Becker 2000). However, critics observe that such an approach risks “blaming [individuals] for not flourishing when there

are few opportunities” (Ungar 2013, 256) within their adverse environment. Scholars increasingly view resilience as ecological, and maintain that personal resilience is triggered and sustained by macro-level ecological forces, such as family, friends, community, and institutions (DuMont, Widom, and Czaja 2007; Masten and Garmezy 1985; Masten et al. 1988). Thus, the impetus for an individual to adapt to a context of adversity is shifted to the forces that define that context. The ecological approach focuses, therefore, not on individual adaptation but on how resilience strategies can be harnessed to transform a given context. This approach also lends itself to social justice aims, such as advocating for LGBT rights and upholding them in the higher education system.

### **RESILIENCE AND LGBTQIA**

The literature on LGBTQIA college students in India is limited, and research on their resilience strategies is practically nonexistent. However, studies in other countries shed light on how LGBTQIA students negotiate contexts of adversity.

Common risks LGBTQIA students encounter in such contexts include being stigmatized due to sexual orientation; being alienated from peers, society, and family; suffering verbal or physical harassment; and experiencing discrimination at academic institutions (Craig et al. 2015; Fairtlough et al. 2013; Kosciw et al. 2009; Pizmony-Levy et al. 2008; Rankin 2005). These risks are linked to mental health problems, such as depression, substance abuse, or increased risk of suicide (Shilo, Antebi, and Mor 2015), and are particularly great for LGBTQIA college students as they struggle through the difficult developmental period of emerging adulthood. In their review of the literature on LGBTQIA youth, Shilo, Antebi, and Mor (2015) find that “the deleterious effects of coming out and of experiences of anti-LGBQ victimization are risk factors even more relevant to LGBQ youth than to adults and . . . LGBQ youth are at a higher risk and possess fewer resilience factors compared to adults” (217).

And yet, coming out or revealing one’s LGBTQIA identity can also reduce internal risks, such as anxiety, depression, internalized homophobia, and suicidal tendencies, and is associated with positive outcomes such as higher self-esteem (Kosciw et al. 2009; Kwon 2013, 372; Shilo et al. 2015). In some contexts, therefore, coming out is a resilience strategy, although its effectiveness is context dependent.

Another pivotal resilience strategy is having a social support system; while some individuals may already have this asset in their context of adversity, there also are strategies to create it. A strong system consisting of both family and peers can lower an individual's reactivity to prejudice (Kwon 2013, 372), and "support systems, especially at the community level, [can] promote well-being and [act] as a buffer against mental distress in both LGBTQ youth and adults" (Shilo et al. 2015, 223). Supportive family members are particularly important for LGBTQIA youth; they often are economically and socially dependent on their families, so coming out to a homophobic family can cause extreme distress. Shilo, Antebi, and Mor (2015) find that many older individuals who are LGBTQIA resolve this problem by "shifting the focus from familial to other sources of support" (225). These "families of choice" can provide "long-term support, intimacy, and a safe space in which to discuss and share one's emotional, social, and sexual experiences" and improve an individual's "connectedness to the broader LGBTQ community" (225).<sup>3</sup>

Craig et al. (2015) have identified other resilience strategies, which include leveraging both social and traditional media to create families of choice, finding safe spaces and allies, and accessing positive and empowering storylines and characters that provide an escape into a less homophobic environment. For LGBTQIA youth, mainstream and social media can positively influence identity formation, foster self-esteem, and facilitate greater engagement within the LGBTQ community (257). Processing emotions through expressive writing is linked to increased emotional openness, which in turn can improve an individual's resilience (Kwon 2013). Hope and optimism are also linked to improved resilience, yet it is not clear if these characteristics are triggered by external stimuli, such as supportive families and friends (Kwon 2013). Substance abuse is also a way of coping as it provides an escape, but it obviously has negative consequences and cannot be considered a form of resilience (Craig et al. 2015).

Several sources suggest that homophobia at the institutional level is rarely addressed directly or thoroughly in the school or college environment, where a culture of silence often isolates those who are LGBTQIA (Pizmony-Levy et al. 2008; Rankin 2005; UNESCO 2012). Authority figures such as teachers and staff are sometimes not just silent witnesses but those who actively harass and blackmail LGBT students and deprive them of their educational opportunities (UNESCO 2012). Even where institutions have implemented initiatives to address the needs of LGBTQIA students, such as creating resource centers, safe spaces,

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<sup>3</sup> "Families of choice," as opposed to "families of origin," refers to an alternative family structure that consists of relationships chosen by the individual, rather than the ties the individual was born with.

and recognizing LGBT groups, the efforts often do not dramatically improve acceptance of LGBTQIA individuals (Rankin 2005). Rankin (2005) finds that, despite such initiatives, LGBT individuals continue to be harassed, isolated, and fear for their safety, which leads her to conclude that “a shift of basic assumptions, premises, and beliefs must take place in all areas of the institution” (41) if the needs of LGBT students are to be adequately met.

### **LGBTQIA STUDENTS IN INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION**

According to survey data, Indian society is highly homophobic. The 2006 World Value Survey shows that 64 percent of Indians believe homosexuality is “never justified,” and 41 percent say they “would not want a homosexual neighbor.” A popular TV news channel, IBNLive, conducted a “state of the nation” survey in 16 Indian cities in 2009; 70 percent of respondents said that homosexuality should be illegal, and 83 percent said being gay or lesbian is “against Indian culture.”<sup>4</sup>

Scholarly research shows that college students who choose to “express their sexual orientation in their public posture or behavior” face intense homophobia (Singh et al. 2013, 18). A study of “men who have sex with men” (MSM), a term widely used in India to describe men who may not identify as gay but do have sexual encounters with other men, shows that male students whose appearance is “feminized” are harassed by both students and teachers (Khan, Bondyopadhyay, and Mulji 2005, 19). The study finds that higher education students are especially vulnerable, as they “experience more harassment than those in [lower levels of] school” (19). Research also shows that discrimination against male-to-female trans\* individuals is prevalent, and that groups termed “hijras” are actively excluded from higher education (Singh et al. 2013; Singh et al. 2012).<sup>5</sup> These various studies focus mostly on individuals who are MSM and male-to-female trans\*; the experiences of lesbians, female bisexuals, and other trans\* individuals are largely absent from the scholarly literature.

The intense discrimination LGBTQIA students face in higher education is an integral factor in their overall economic and social marginalization. A World

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4 See <http://ibnlive.in.com/news/sotn--homosexuality-still-a-taboo-in-india/98909-19.html> for survey findings.

5 “Hijra” is a term used to describe a South Asian community with deep historical roots. The community consists of members who were born either male or intersex but identify as female, or as a third gender that is neither male nor female. The documentary *Bioscope: Non Binary Conversations on Gender and Education* (produced by Nirantar, Centre of Gender and Education, 2014) poignantly captures the type of sexual, physical, and mental abuse that trans\* individuals can be subjected to in the Indian education system.

Bank report on Indian sexual minorities states that “the educational system is often the point at which many community members face their greatest initial challenge . . . The consequent high dropout [rate] from the school systems leads to poor educational outcomes and perpetuates poor social acceptance and achievement within mainstream society” (Singh et al. 2012, 12). The literature suggests that many LGBTQIA students are systematically excluded from higher education due to discrimination (Khan et al. 2005; Singh et al. 2013; Singh et al. 2012), which also inhibits and hinders the few who are able to access the college setting. Therefore, achieving the desired outcome of acceptance by both individuals and society is of the utmost importance for the LGBTQIA community.

## RESEARCH METHODS

The research we present is part of a larger study undertaken for the Education Research Approach program, which was conducted by the World Bank in early 2014. The respondents are LGBTQIA students or graduates who studied on campuses in Delhi (see Table 1 for details).

*Table 1: Demographic Mix of Survey Respondents*

Gender and Sexual Identity	Number	Percentage
Gay	36	68
Bisexual	7	13
Lesbian	5	9
Queer	4	8
Trans*	1	2
No Label	1	2
Intersex	-	-
Asexual	-	-
Sex at Birth		
Male	45	85
Female	7	13
Intersex	1	2
No Answer	1	2
Number of Years at College		
1 year or less	6	11
2 years	2	4
3 years	19	35
More than 3 years	27	50

The study was conducted in three phases. The first phase was a four-hour focus group discussion with four LGBTQIA activists. The focus group findings were used to create a web survey for LGBTQIA students, which they responded to over a three-week period; this was the second phase of data collection. The survey was advertised on the Facebook pages of LGBTQIA campus clubs, and links to it were tweeted by LGBTQIA student activists. There were 54 respondents, but it is unclear how many different campuses the survey reached or how many eligible respondents saw the social media posts. It should be noted that LGBTQIA students who are closeted do not necessarily follow the designated Facebook and Twitter pages, as they are hesitant to be seen “liking” a LGBTQIA organization. Furthermore, not all who viewed these posts were eligible for the survey, which was open only to those who identify as LGBTQIA and were currently attending a Delhi higher education establishment or had attended one in the past five years. To protect respondents’ anonymity, the survey did not include questions about university affiliations. In the third and final phase of data collection, researchers read the web survey findings to four respondents to learn their reactions to them, and to gain more detailed personal information about their individual journeys through higher education.<sup>6</sup> Respondents for these interviews were chosen using convenience sampling to capture a range of identities (gay, lesbian, trans\*, and straight ally) and experiences (professor, former student, current student/activist).

It is important to note that the LGBTQIA community is highly marginalized, that individuals tend to be frightened and thus are unwilling to trust outsiders, especially in the wake of the 2013 Supreme Court ruling. Given this hesitation to participate in data collection that requires coming together in a semi-public setting, such as a focus group or interview, we altered our original methodology. The initial focus group was intended to be a large workshop for approximately 50 people. However, while we were recruiting participants, the feedback suggested that many were uncomfortable with the face-to-face, public nature of such a workshop. Furthermore, focus group respondents shared that, in the aftermath of the 2013 ruling, they were scared to participate in queer events. Thus we chose to conduct the web survey so respondents could remain anonymous and feel safe while participating. We spent considerable time building relationships with the LGBTQIA students who acted as gatekeepers between us and the respondents, and thereby were able to reach a final sample size of 62 across the three phases of data collection—a number that exceeded our expectations. However, these tactics also skewed our respondent mix: most respondents were gay men and tended to be in their third year of college education or above.

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<sup>6</sup> The four respondents were one gay former student of a Delhi University, who now works in that university as a professor, one lesbian student, one trans\* student, and one straight ally who is also a student.

Given that the LGBTQIA student clubs that advertised the survey were affiliated with the top educational institutions in Delhi, we assume that most respondents were enrolled in these institutions. The fact that they accessed the web survey via the Internet also suggests a certain level of social privilege and wealth. This information indicates that the study likely missed a more vulnerable population of LGBTQIA students: that of female-born sexual minorities, trans\* people, students attending less prestigious colleges, and students who are in their first or second year of college or are still coming to terms with their sexuality.

The findings from this survey are not generalizable, as respondents were not randomly selected. Nevertheless, they do offer insight into the context of adversity for a group of relatively empowered LGBTQIA students. It is highly probable that the stigma and discrimination they experience are even worse for the average LGBTQIA student on Delhi campuses. However, their use of resilience strategies provides valuable insight into how students can negotiate the campus environment at a time of emergency—in this case, the recriminalization of homosexuality.

## FINDINGS

### THE CONTEXT OF ADVERSITY

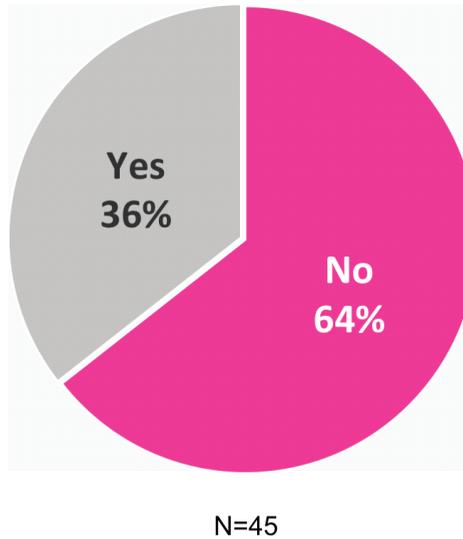
#### DISCRIMINATION BY CLASSMATES

Our survey revealed that almost two-thirds of our respondents do not feel safe expressing their LGBTQIA identity on campus (Figure 1). They fear that coming out will lead to betrayal, loss of friendships, and isolation. Many also fear being ostracized by their classmates, which results in a negative campus environment. Respondents revealed that coming out is especially problematic for those living in hostels, as roommates could ask them to leave. One described how, upon sharing his sexual identity with one person in his first year of college, that person revealed it to “practically everyone we knew,” and he was “ridiculed [and] to a large extent ostracized by [his] peer group” (KII\_g, April 17, 2014).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) are coded by date they were conducted and LGBTQIA identity of respondent: g indicates gay, l lesbian, t trans\*, and a ally.

Figure 1: Can you safely express your LGBTQIA identity on campus?



Respondents reported facing physical and sexual harassment from their classmates; 60 percent experienced verbal abuse (see Figure 2), ranging from jokes on the virility and masculinity of gay men to outright bullying. Harassment sometimes became violent and/or led to sexual assault. A trans\* respondent recounted the following:

This one time during first semester, a guy tried to touch my chest. I bind [my bosom] and he was like, “What is that?” And he was pointing towards my chest. He was moving slowly closer and closer and then I just grabbed his finger and twisted it. I cursed him, and gave him the finger—that sort of thing. It was all very dramatic. Also traumatic. (KII\_t, April 24, 2014)

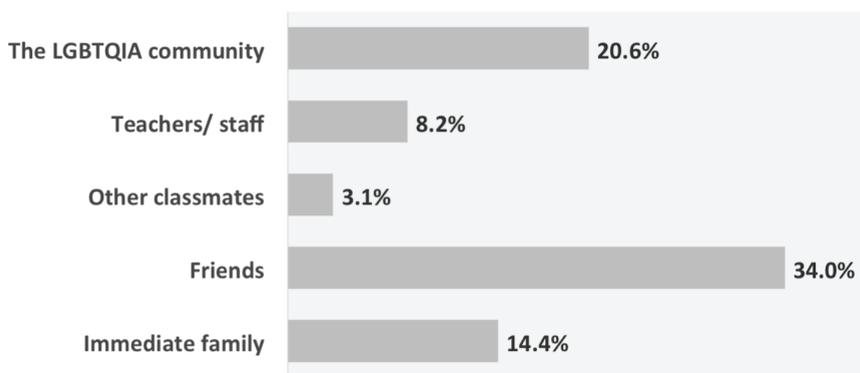
One focus group discussant said that being vulnerable to such overt discrimination “comes down to appearance.” On the other hand, LGBTQIA students who appear straight have to grapple with the fear of being outed in an extremely homophobic society. Trans\* students and people who don’t fit gender norms are particularly vulnerable to explicit acts of violence and sexual assault, as described above.

Even when classmates are supportive, respondents worry that they are being caricatured as the gay friend. As a gay respondent observed, “It has now become ‘fashionable’ to be accepting of queer people” (KII\_g, April 17, 2014). Another respondent—a lesbian—complained that

you come out [and] there are certain women who try to hit on you while they are drunk. It’s like an opportunity or a feather in their cap . . . So that’s why I don’t indulge in this [partying]. (KII\_l, April 23, 2014)

Respondents thus even have to be cautious of those who appear to be allies.

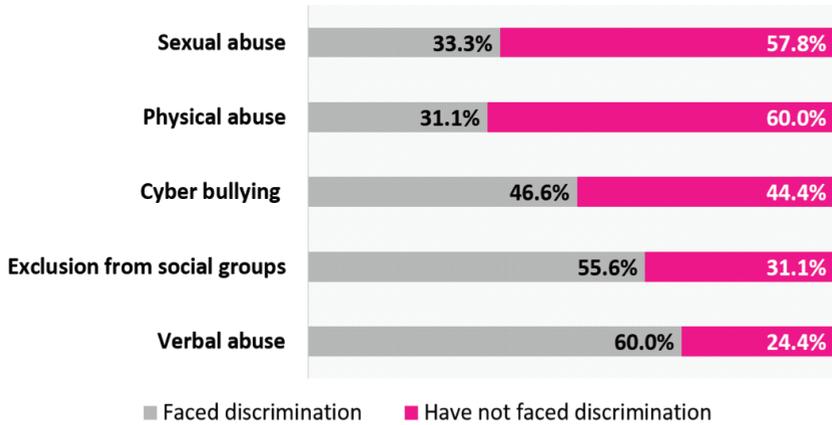
*Figure 3: Whom would you talk to about an instance of discrimination?*



N=54

## DISCRIMINATION AND THE CAMPUS

Figure 2: What type of discrimination have you faced because of your LGBTQIA identity?



N=54

While the most immediate source of adversity and discrimination in the educational environment is classmates, LGBTQIA students also have to contend with an emotionally and socially distant faculty. Only 8 percent of survey respondents said that they would approach a faculty member about experiencing discrimination (see Figure 3). One respondent, a professor who is gay, explains that, “at that age, if you’re queer you really don’t want to talk to an adult” (KII\_g, April 17, 2014). He continued, saying he feels pressure to “always maintain a professional distance so that they see me as an authority figure,” which prevents him from approaching students about their gender or sexual identity.

However, this kind of distance can create a negative education environment for students. For instance, a trans\* respondent who suffers from dysphoria when referred to as “she,” spoke about his struggle to approach faculty:

Often times there has been a teacher whom I would not feel comfortable asking, “Please don’t use these pronouns for me” . . . I won’t go and talk to all my teachers. (KII\_t, April 24, 2014)

Figure 5: Is your course supportive of your LGBTQIA identity?

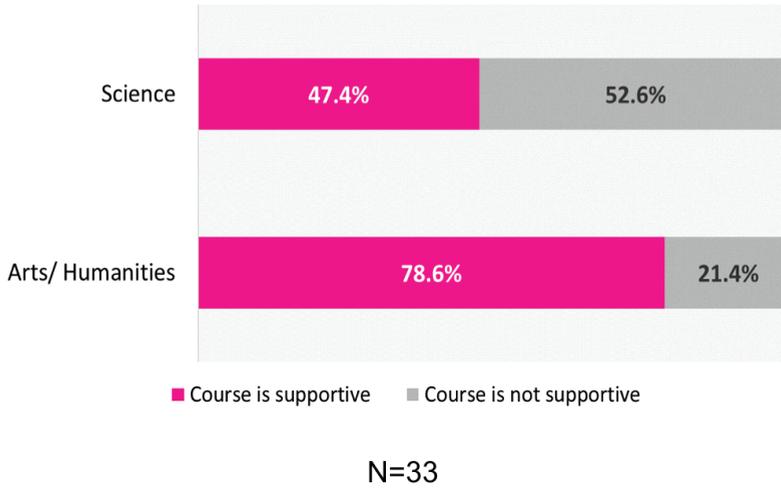
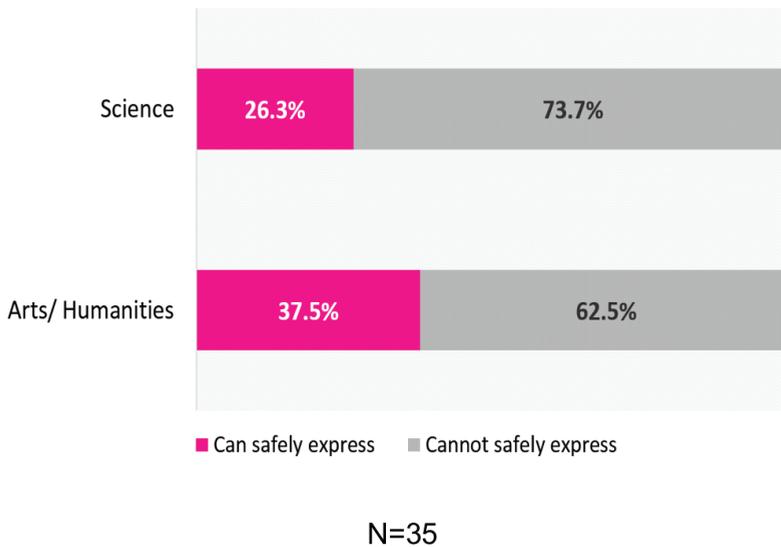
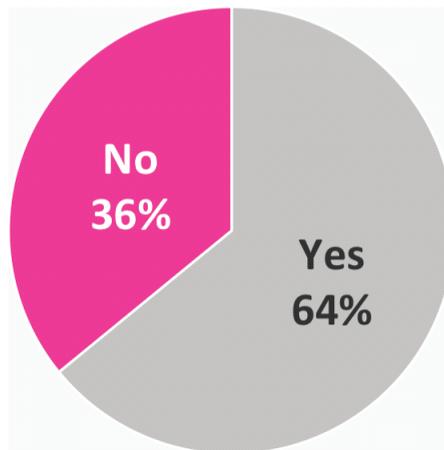


Figure 4: Can you safely express your LGBTQIA identity on campus?



This study suggests that the experience of adversity is linked to an LGBTQIA student's course of study; people in the humanities were found to be more receptive than those in the sciences. A respondent noted that, on her campus, "conservatism in general, unfortunately, so far [has] found a certain consonance with the pure science schools." She added that students in these fields face greater difficulty in joining LGBTQIA rights movements, as they "do not want to be alienated [from their] academic department" (KII\_a, May 7, 2014). One respondent revealed that she prefers to socialize only with those studying the humanities and arts, as she anticipates that students from other courses will be less accepting of her (KII\_l, April 23, 2014). The survey reveals that those in the humanities or arts not only feel that their courses offer an environment that is more supportive of their LGBTQIA identity than courses in the sciences, but also that they feel safer expressing their LGBTQIA identity in their field of study (see Figures 4 and 5).

Figure 6: Has life become harder after the December 11, 2013 judgment?



N=39

It is unclear why acceptance of LGBTQIA students is more common in the humanities. One possible explanation is that several humanities subjects, such as literature, philosophy, women's studies, and the fine arts, directly refer to gender, and in some cases LGBTQIA issues. Furthermore, science courses have historically been highly competitive in India, and any perceived weakness, such as identifying as LGBTQIA, might be exploited by peers. However, this does not mean that survey respondents specifically chose arts and humanities courses. In fact, although our sample is not statistically representative, the majority of our survey respondents are in science streams.

#### THE HIGHER EDUCATION ESTABLISHMENT AFTER DECEMBER 11, 2013

More than 60 percent of respondents say life has become harder since the 2013 judgment. One survey respondent wrote, "It's terrifying! I am very frightened. Do something please, quickly!"<sup>8</sup> Another now advises students "to stop randomly coming out to people. If you are not sure how your parents will handle it, do not tell them right now, especially with the judgment having gone the other way" (KII\_g, April 17, 2014). Gay men who came out after the 2009 judgment are particularly scared, as one woman explained: "After it was criminalized again, the people who had come out were a little hesitant to go back to work because they would perhaps face discrimination" (KII\_l, April 23, 2014).

While not all respondents fear being arrested under Section 377, most are conscious that their life as LGBTQIA students will now become more difficult (see Figure 6):

The reality of the situation is this, before the High Court judgment, you had to pay 1000 rupees as a bribe to the police to not be arrested because of 377, it became 200 rupees after the High Court judgment and now, it has gone up to being 2000 [rupees]... You will find more harassment, you will find more bullying, but that's all. Because the whole thing is very difficult to prosecute under the law and what the police is usually looking for is a [bribe], it's just the size [of the bribe] has increased. (KII\_g, April 17, 2014)

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8 Translated from the Hindi.

Before the Delhi High Court judgment was passed, the police would often ask for a bribe in exchange for not arresting (mostly closeted) LGBTQIA persons under Section 377. Once the High Court ruled in 2009 and Section 377 was no longer valid, police nevertheless still demanded bribes in exchange for not harassing LGBTQIA individuals or revealing their identities to family members. Now that the Supreme Court judgment has reinstated Section 377, the police are on stronger ground and are demanding higher bribes in exchange for not arresting LGBTQIA individuals. This development disproportionately impacts the economically marginalized or students who have limited access to funds. LGBTQIA students are also more vulnerable after the 2013 judgement to other forms of abuse: "People [have] said that police had harassed them and let them go in return for sexual favors because they could not pay the price" (KII\_g, April 17, 2014).

Several colleges have asked faculty and staff to sign anti-discrimination statements, which pledge that they will work to create an environment free of discrimination on the basis of sex or gender. Focus group discussants were bewildered by this development, as they found it difficult to believe that faculty and staff would understand the full implications of such a pledge or take it seriously. They were also stumped as to how such a pledge could be implemented or enforced.

However, others have been empowered by the groundswell of support for the LGBTQIA community that arose after the verdict. One respondent said that the judgment "jolted everybody into action . . . Post the verdict, people have actually made it a point to come out and actually say, 'This is not done'" (a, May 7, 2014). Another wrote that they found the judgment personally empowering: "It, in fact, became a little easier . . . Since the cat was out of bag, nobody can deny its existence anymore. If they are saying it's illegal, it means it exists. When so many like me are on the street, nobody can say I am not real." Thus, the response to the 2013 judgment appears to depend on a student's position: those who are gay, who have come out, whose parents disapprove, and who have limited financial means are particularly vulnerable.

#### DISCRIMINATION AND THE INDIVIDUAL

While discrimination and the potential consequences of coming out are external risks, students also face internal risks such as alienation and internalized stigma, which may cause depression and affect academic performance. The pressure of hiding their sexual orientation can also interfere with students' personal social

networks. Several respondents reported that they had to withdraw from campus social life to be safe and avoid discrimination. All the LGBTQIA interviewees in this study believed they had underperformed academically due to feeling alienated or internalizing stigma, as one explained:

My grades significantly declined once I started having same sex attractions. It was not just the fact that I was having attractions, but the fact that it was so taboo and nobody had talked about it. (KII\_g, April 17, 2014)

Another respondent added how, after scoring “96 percent in Xth class . . . [he] failed math in XIIth class,” partially due to the stress of hiding his identity (KII\_t, April 24, 2014).<sup>9</sup> This prevented him from attending a top college and affected his self-confidence. Clearly, the fear of coming out may significantly impact a respondent’s self-esteem—and their future.

These risks emanate from a higher education setting where discrimination against LGBTQIA students is unchecked. The severity and systematic nature of this discrimination is undeniable, although individual experiences vary greatly.

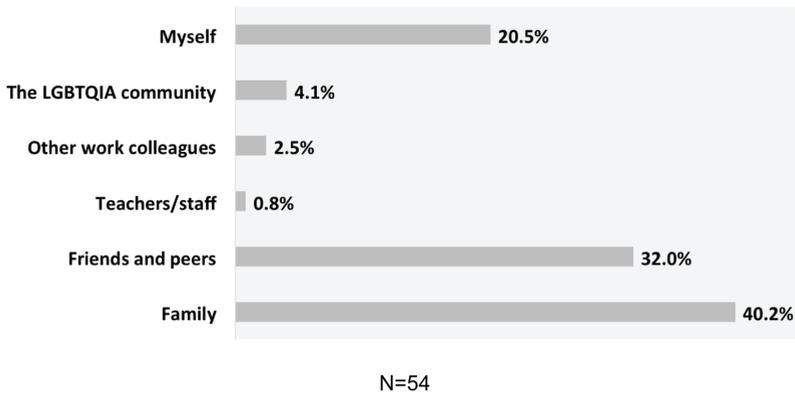
### **ACCEPTANCE AS A DESIRED OUTCOME**

Individual LGBTQIA students’ desired outcomes vary, but acceptance is a central pillar that links them all. Acceptance is necessary not only for its merit as an empowering state of being that promotes resilience, but also because it is crucial for those seeking protection from the risks within the context of adversity.

Many LGBTQIA individuals move from self-acceptance to acceptance from family and friends, then to general acceptance in the classroom and beyond. Our survey finds that those the respondents most want acceptance from are themselves, their peers, and their families (see Figure 7). Many respondents (44 percent) found it difficult to come to terms with their identity.

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<sup>9</sup> Classes X and XII are watershed years for Indian students. They mark when school board exams are held and subjects of study are chosen. These years are often trying, for students and parents alike.

*Figure 7: Whom do you want acceptance from?*

Navigating the context of discrimination, internalized stigma, and increasing alienation while negotiating an outward social identity is difficult for these students, and the pressure to conform can hinder the process of self-acceptance, as a lesbian respondent explains:

When I finally accepted [being a lesbian] I was in the first or second year of college. I think before that time there was always the pressure of being “normal” and not deviating, because . . . if you are lesbian, people will ostracize you . . . So I suppose in the mix of all that, I didn’t quite accept it. (KII\_1, April 23, 2014)

#### ACCEPTANCE BY FAMILY AND FRIENDS

While respondents worry that coming out may dramatically and negatively affect their relationships with friends and family, they in fact prioritize acceptance from these groups. Acceptance from both groups is riddled with strife: friends may betray the student or pressure them to be “normal,” and families may react badly and even abuse or disown their child. However, the pressure to share their identity is often immense. Therefore LGBTQIA students may be strategic when coming out. For example, one respondent described how he chose to come out to “a friend, not somebody who I considered close, [as] he was leaving India” (KII\_g, 17 April 2014).

Our study finds that, among those in our sample, acceptance by family and friends tends to be a long process, as a respondent who counsels LGBTQIA students said:

Here's what I tell people who plan to come out. "You must keep on talking. Your parents must see that nothing else has changed about you except this. You are still the same person who you are except in this one way." And for the parents to realize that, it's going to take time. You need to have patience. (KII\_g, April 17, 2014)

The process of gaining acceptance from family can be devastating:

At that time it seemed that it had gone pretty well, excellently, unbelievably so . . . It was only one and a half years later that I realized that my dad had only gone along with it just for the heck of it . . . I was very upset. I asked him, if this is what you thought, why did you say all of those things? (KII\_t, April 24, 2014)

Respondents' struggle for acceptance as LGBTQIA often is conflated with their struggle to be accepted as adults in the family. An interviewee shared how his mother responded to his coming out:

My mother's first reaction was that, as she had not raised me with traditional values, I had become gay. So for one year there was *arti* [a Hindu prayer ritual] every morning, every evening, there was no non-vegetarian food on Tuesdays, Thursdays in an effort to inculcate more Hindu values in me. (KII\_g, April 17, 2014)

In this example, the mother's inability to see her son as an adult and her idea that she could raise him with what she believed to be the right values was at the root of her failure to accept his sexuality. The respondent goes on to share that it "took a year and the fact that I got acceptance into a master's-PhD program in the U.S. with full funding" (KII\_g, April 17, 2014) for his parents to accept his sexuality and his identity as an adult. In general, respondents struggle with their families on issues that range from curfews to course choices. These challenges may be typical of other students their age, but it is impossible to separate them from issues surrounding being LGBTQIA.

ACCEPTANCE ON CAMPUS AND BY SOCIETY

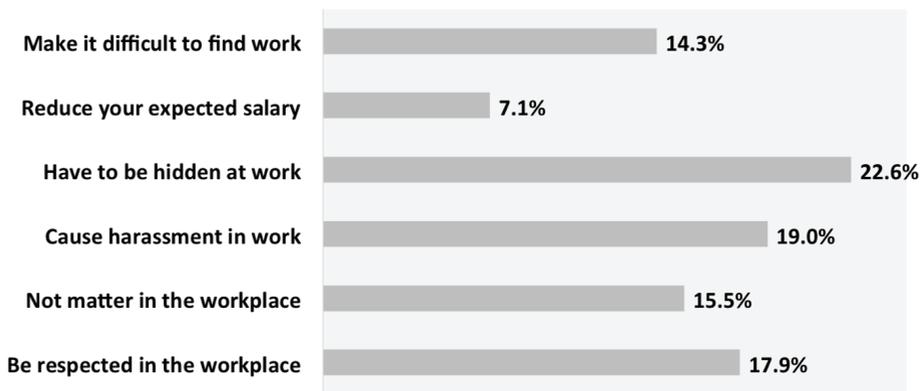
Many respondents were not concerned with acceptance outside their immediate circle of self, peers, and family. However, it is likely that acceptance, whether in the classroom or beyond, dramatically impacts these students’ daily lives and future priorities.

Most respondents were more worried about finding acceptance beyond college, when they enter the workplace. The trans\* interviewee shared the following:

The issues that I faced in college . . . more of those will pop up in the workplace. But the more daunting thing about the workplace is that I would need to be professional at all times. I cannot just tell people, don’t talk to me if you can’t talk to me properly. I need to deal with all of that. (KII\_t, April 24, 2014)

Almost a quarter of survey respondents believe they will have to hide their gender and sexual identity at work, and approximately 20 percent believe their identity will lead to workplace harassment (see Figure 8).

Figure 8: Do you think your LGBTQIA identity will . . .



N=54

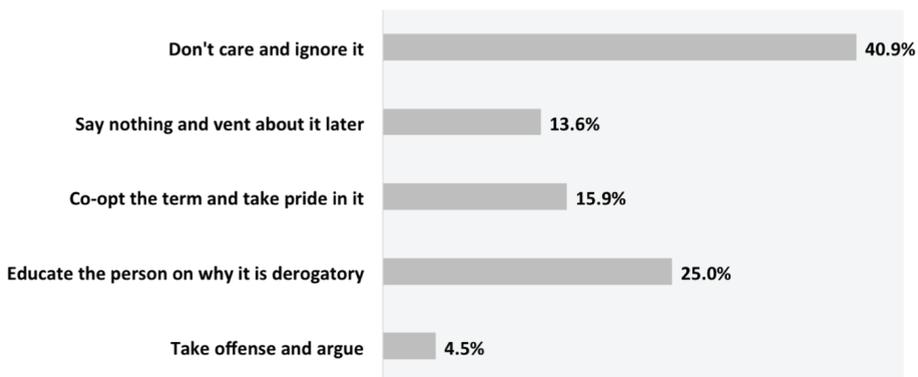
## THE COSTS OF ACCEPTANCE

Seeking acceptance of all forms has corresponding costs. Respondents who struggle with individual acceptance are likely to have low self-esteem, feel there is something wrong with them, and suffer from depression, which can have a dramatic impact on their academics, relationships, and future priorities. Similarly, LGBTQIA students suffer overwhelming anxiety that seeking acceptance from their peers and family members may mean losing a supportive relationship. Seeking acceptance in the classroom and beyond is also risky, because it requires exposing oneself to the discrimination experienced by those who are openly out. Of course, there are also immense benefits to seeking acceptance, including being able to accept one's own identity, finding support from peers and family, and living in an environment where one's sexual or gender identity is accepted. Furthermore, the emotional and mental pressure of keeping silent, of hiding and trying to pass as straight can become overwhelming, and some respondents said in fact that seeking acceptance was not always a choice, that they felt forced to share their identity due to this pressure.

## RESILIENCE STRATEGIES IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT

Being resilient is crucial to navigating and negotiating through the context of adversity to gain the desired outcome of acceptance. The same respondent can use multiple resilience strategies, depending on the situation. We are interested in two aspects of resilience—protection and promotion.

*Figure 9: How do you deal with derogatory comments? Choose only one option*



N=44

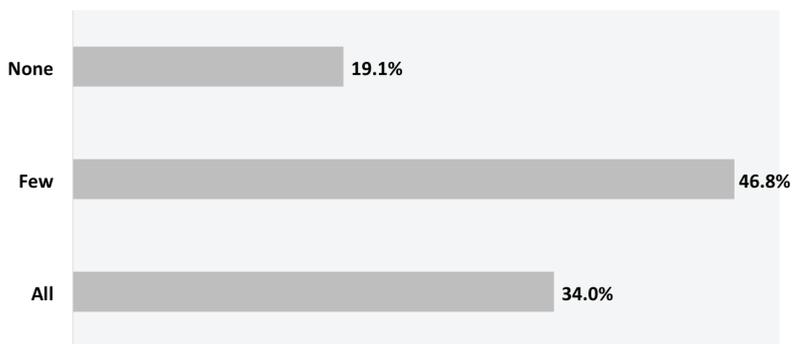
## THE STRATEGY OF NOT CARING

Perhaps the most common situational resilience strategy among our sample is one of not caring. Almost 41 percent of respondents say they do not care and ignore derogatory comments (see Figure 9). This is a protective strategy, as it involves disassociating and thus not directly seeking acceptance as an LGBTQIA individual. Respondents may initially use this strategy when coming to terms with their sexual orientation. One interviewee shared that when he realized he was gay it was “more of a resignation than acceptance at first” (KII\_g, April 17, 2014). This strategy can also be used in response to upsetting situations, such as when one respondent found that his father did not approve of his gender identity. He said, “By that time I had already become self-certain on some level . . . so it was more like I don’t care what you say, I don’t care. I was upset but not demotivated” (KII\_t, April 24, 2014). In this case, caring about his father’s view would have impeded the respondent’s personal journey and have demotivated him. Thus, not caring is a strategic choice, as it allows the respondent to balance his individual journey without being confrontational in a potentially explosive situation.

In our sample, students in science courses were more likely to adopt a strategy of resignation. An interviewee explains that, for these respondents, resignation represents individual progress:

See, people in the sciences especially here in this country are so involved in their work, because it is tough . . . you are doing everything yourself and there is so much competition . . . So most of them tend to put all of these issues [of sexuality] in the back burner and deal with them later. (KII\_g, April 17, 2014)

Figure 10: Who have you come out to?



N=47

### THE STRATEGY OF HIDING

Another strategy is to hide one's gender and sexual orientation. Perhaps the most common use of this strategy among those in our sample is when they are with their families. All respondents hid their orientation from their family at some point, and almost 65 percent were not out or only out to a few of the people from whom they desired acceptance (Figure 10). Focus group discussants said that hiding their identity from their parents is part of a broader strategy: they wait to be economically independent before coming out so they have a backup plan if their parents do not accept them and stop supporting them financially.

Of course, hiding one's sexual orientation or gender identity may not be an option for those who do not conform to gender norms. Nevertheless, it appears that those respondents adapt the strategy of hiding to one of avoidance:

It's not very good, but I keep at a distance . . . Usually the kind of question I get is, "Are you a boy or a girl?" which is none of your business . . . More often they would ask, "Can I ask you a question?" And I knew what the question was going to be and I would say, "No," and then I would go away. That is the way I deal with it. (KII\_t, April 24, 2014)

Using the protective strategy of hiding their identity and avoiding particular situations enables these respondents to navigate risks. They choose this strategy not to seek acceptance as LGBTQIA individuals but to conform to their families' and peers' heteronormative expectations.

### THE STRATEGY OF USING SOCIAL AND MATERIAL ASSETS

The resilience strategies discussed above help respondents cope with a context of adversity but do not lead to acceptance, the desired outcome. Study respondents, like those discussed by Craig et al. (2015), use assets such as social media to find a safe space where they can escape a context of adversity. This asset is particularly useful for those who are still coming to terms with their sexuality, as one respondent shared:

I used to read a few people's blogs . . . I was away from home and I wanted to write random things about my life, so it started off like that and then it delved into more of the issues that I was dealing with, it became more serious after that . . . It was

an outlet. Sometimes [readers] would have advice for me; sometimes they would have got some encouragement. (KII\_t, April 24, 2014)

This respondent's use of social media enabled him to find a safe space where he could reach out to new allies and practice expressive writing, which also has been shown to lead to greater emotional openness and resilience (Kwon 2013). Assets like social media not only provide a coping mechanism but can also transform an adverse situation. For example, a respondent who came out to his family said that he followed up by "printing out articles and links and sending them to my parents," thus using this asset to open a window of communication (KII\_g, 17 April 2014). A focus group discussant used a similar strategy; before coming out to his mother, he placed LGBTQIA pamphlets around the house to introduce her to the idea. Such strategies help the LGBTQIA individual to negotiate acceptance from their family and in social media spaces.

#### THE STRATEGY OF BEING A MENTOR

Resilience strategies also take shape in the different roles LGBTQIA students adopt within a context of adversity. One of the most common roles respondents reported taking on was that of a mentor to other LGBTQIA individuals. One new mentor explained how he responded when asked about the "It gets better" campaign:

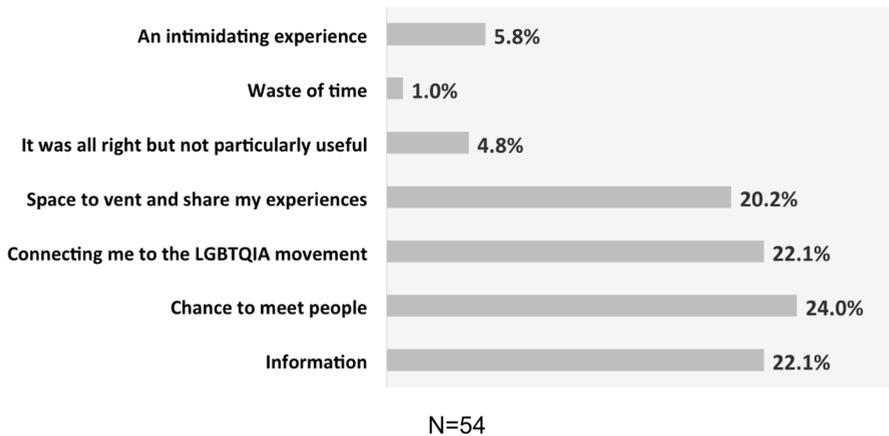
I said, "It doesn't get better. It gets different." . . . So, they had not heard that answer before and then things changed; then they realized they could actually talk to me because . . . I was treating them as equals, just with a little bit more experience, and they insisted that I come back. (KII\_g, April 17, 2014)

This respondent went on to be an active member of the LGBTQIA community and to counsel and mentor LGBTQIA students through their coming out process. Other respondents reported that they benefit from being mentors. One described sharing "interesting articles" on LGBTQIA via Facebook: "It's good to know that there are people who . . . want to be informed about it, rather than thinking that, 'Oh, it's just an LGBT thing'" (KII\_l, April 23, 2014). By sharing articles, she educates others and wins potential allies, and also feels connected to her friends. This counteracts the alienation she might otherwise feel. This strategy is also promotive at the individual level, as it enables respondents to enter spaces where they are accepted.

## RESILIENCE STRATEGIES AND THE LGBTQIA CAMPUS COMMUNITY

The empowered activist embodies a resilience strategy in which respondents come together in collective protests to promote LGBTQIA rights. Examples of this form of resilience include protesting the criminalization of homosexuality through pride marches and campus sit-ins, as well as forming and expanding student organizations.

*Figure 11: What do you think of LGBTQIA meetings?*



Clearly, some resilience strategies, such as acting as a mentor or becoming an activist, feed directly into the formation of an LGBTQIA community on campus. On campuses in Delhi, however, this community is still emerging. While some individual campuses have their own queer groups, Queer Campus is an organization that spans a number of campuses. Unfortunately, most campus queer groups are concentrated at the most prestigious Delhi colleges, so that many students do not have access to them. Moreover, according to the survey, meetings and other resources are not viewed as major sources of support for LGBTQIA students, which comes instead from family and/or friends.

Nevertheless, more than 70 percent of respondents had attended LGBTQIA meetings and found them useful. They attended these meetings for a host of reasons, including gaining information, meeting and connecting with people, and finding a safe space to vent their feelings (Figure 11). Although some respondents

admitted to finding meetings intimidating at first, LGBTQIA groups have immense potential to have a positive impact on the overall context of adversity on the Delhi campus.

This is especially true in the aftermath of the Section 377 ruling, as public meetings and exhibitions of LGBTQIA experiences have helped to familiarize straight students with queer issues and gained allies for the LGBTQIA community. A major concern for LGBTQIA student organizations is creating a safe space within the context of adversity, especially for vulnerable young LGBTQIA students, where they can be accepted and empowered.

Respondents from student-run LGBTQIA organizations described the uphill battle they face, especially since the 2013 judgment. First reaching LGBTQIA students and then providing them with a safe space is needed more than ever, but it has become more difficult to do. Groups struggle with balancing membership growth, keeping meetings accessible, and finding places to meet. Some LGBTQIA groups keep their meetings small to make it easier for those who have recently come out or are still exploring their sexual orientation to participate without being intimidated, but this also limits their reach. These organizations frequently use social media to reach out to students and offer online platforms, but those who do not have access to social media tend to be left out. Some campus groups also partner with other LGBTQIA groups in Delhi that provide access to resources such as books and brochures that address LGBTQIA issues.

Despite the best efforts, the LGBTQIA community can be daunting for many individuals because of internal discrimination. The LGBTQIA community appears to be highly exclusionary toward people who do not come from an urban and/or privileged background: 61 percent of survey respondents reported that they had experienced this kind of discrimination, and an overwhelming 85 percent said they believe there are cracks within the LGBTQIA community:

The whole idiom of “the party” is something that has put off a lot of gay men<sup>10</sup> . . . Boys who have come from small towns of North India who are completely uncomfortable with the idea to *start with and have* a lot of issues struggling with their own sexuality but also have this social diffidence about how do I deal with myself in these situations? Do I need to carry a gift?

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10 Traditionally, “parties” in India refers to occasions where extended family members get together and are associated with particular social norms in terms of behavior, gift-giving, and dress. These norms do not hold for Delhi LGBTQIA parties, which are more “Westernized.” These parties primarily provide an opportunity for LGBTQIA people to meet and socialize in a safe space.

What kind of shoes do I wear? Am I dressed appropriately? So they say “*ki mai jaunga nahi*” [“I won’t go”].<sup>11</sup> (KII\_a, May 7, 2014)

While LGBTQIA groups can change the context of adversity for LGBTQIA students in positive ways, multiple obstacles remain in terms of students’ gaining acceptance and their ability to access support. Those who are from marginalized backgrounds or are less privileged are not only the most vulnerable, they also are likely to have the most difficulty receiving support from LGBTQIA groups.

#### THE COSTS OF RESILIENCE STRATEGIES

While resilience strategies can be empowering, it would be naïve to discuss them without talking about the associated costs. For instance, hiding one’s identity from family or friends can be mentally stressful, alienating, and can impact one’s grades. Many respondents, for example, have two identities and two different social media profiles. By having to hide their LGBTQIA status, they are forced to betray both their own identity and their friendships. Moreover, it is difficult for the LGBTQIA community to reach students who are hiding. Therefore, the risk of being alienated and internalizing stigma is significant, yet many have no choice but to use these protective strategies. Resignation is a similarly passive way respondents deal with difficult situations, but it precludes their ability to change them, as they are effectively silenced.

Those who directly engage with discrimination, either by trying to educate those doing the discriminating or by mentoring other LGBTQIA students, also face problems. As mentioned above, such tactics require courage and can be emotionally draining. The respondent who acted as a mentor to students admitted that this role takes a toll on his personal life:

It is extremely difficult for me to find a person who is romantically interested in me because I have young people around me. The older people who are my age constantly keep asking, “Why are you hanging out with young queer people?” (KII\_g, April 17, 2014)

Those who choose to become activists may be similarly frustrated by the politics within the LGBTQIA community and find it difficult to sustain their involvement

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<sup>11</sup> Translated from the Hindi.

over a long period. The LGBTQIA community, which should encourage and promote resilience for many students, clearly has a fairly complex impact.

It is important to note that respondents' campus experiences change as they advance through college. Interviews and focus group discussions revealed that respondents found the first year of college life and a new social milieu particularly difficult. Finding a social group was a priority at that stage, and many felt compelled to use protective strategies such as hiding and resigning themselves to discrimination to shield themselves from harassment by their peers. However, the pressure to hide and conform seems to abate by the second or third year, and respondents said they later gained confidence, which enabled them to use promotive resilience strategies and actively seek individual acceptance. Having a group of supportive friends, which provides a sense of belonging, is crucial to the process of moving from being a wary first-year student to a confident third-year student.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE RESILIENCE APPROACH**

Our research provides a micro-level view of the complex issues LGBTQIA students face on Delhi's college campuses. We acknowledge that this study is small and exploratory and has only begun to uncover these issues, and thus that our findings should be viewed with caution. Nevertheless, this study does provide a valuable first look at the resilience strategies LGBTQIA students employ as they navigate their personal and community lives in a context of adversity.

We found most respondents keenly aware of the discrimination and abuse they risk facing on campus, and of the need to protect themselves from it. Many do not feel safe expressing their LGBTQIA identity on campus, thus negotiating an accepting educational environment remains a challenge. Respondents had both experienced and feared discrimination; as a result, they often internalized stigma, and many felt alienated. To protect themselves from these risks, they leveraged several resilience strategies. The most successful appeared to be one that allowed them to achieve their desired outcome of acceptance temporarily while furthering the visibility of the LGBTQIA community on campus. Using this strategy enables individual and community resilience to reinforce each other. Other resilience strategies, such as hiding one's LGBTQIA identity, are protective at the individual level but do not seem to have a positive effect on community resilience.

This study suggests that respondents' hopes and fears will likely be transformed as they go through college. At the beginning of their college lives, they are primarily concerned with having a social group and are fearful that their LGBTQIA identity will prevent them from integrating with their peer group. At this point, they rely primarily on the protective strategy of hiding and try to overlook the discrimination they experience. However, our respondents said that, as they advance through college, their desire to come out and gain acceptance as LGBTQIA from friends and family increases, which prompts them to rely on the riskier promotive resilience strategies.

With the pervasive homophobia in Indian society that is reinforced by government mechanisms, such as the recriminalization of homosexuality, LGBTQIA students struggle to find and access formalized sources of support, assets, and resources in the higher education establishment. They are pretty much on their own as individuals and community members as they navigate and negotiate the context of adversity. Protective strategies are often the most feasible and practical options they can practice at an individual level. These choices do not challenge or change the context of adversity, but they do buy respondents time to accumulate important assets, such as safe spaces, friendships, and economic independence, which can buffer them against the risks they face in the context of adversity. Unfortunately, relying on such strategies also has psychological and social costs, as noted above.

Using promotive resilience strategies involves LGBTQIA students reaching out to others, either as empowered activists or by mentoring other LGBTQIA students who are just embarking on their college career. Born out of the general sense of unease and frustration they experience on campus, the activism these respondents engage in suggests that LGBTQIA students are unhappy with their campus environment and are actively trying to change it. Such strategies feed directly into the mobilization of the LGBTQIA campus community by heightening its visibility and building ties, and increasing their potential to bring about transformative change in the context of adversity.

It is clear that changing the context of adversity requires achieving two primary goals: (1) the LGBTQIA campus community needs to be strengthened, and (2) LGBTQIA issues must gain mainstream legitimacy. While the reinstatement of Section 377 is an overwhelmingly negative development, our findings suggest that the promotive resilience strategies LGBTQIA students use on Delhi college campuses may help them accomplish these two goals, which will change the context of adversity for the better. Indeed, the results of this study have

important implications for other institutions in India, and for other contexts that foster inclusive education and aim to make their campuses more welcoming of LGBTQIA individuals.

## CONCLUSION

We have documented the stories of young LGBTQIA individuals who are doing their best to grow into adulthood in the context of adversity they and their community encounter on college campuses in Delhi, India. We have argued that, in terms of the existential threat to the well-being of LGBTQIA individuals, the persecution and fear they face in this context represent an emergency as real as armed conflict or a natural disaster. We have tried to capture not only the discrimination our respondents face, but also their resilience in navigating and negotiating this context of adversity, including their conscious efforts to transform it. While this study is small, our findings point to avenues that may be explored by both LGBTQIA students and their campus communities. These findings also suggest that, to achieve transformative change in this situation, promotive resilience strategies that involve the community are reasonably effective. It would be interesting to see if this holds true in other education in emergency contexts, or if there are other individual resilience processes that can challenge and change the context of adversity. By distinguishing between the types of resilience and how they impact the context of adversity, practitioners may be better equipped to inform the social justice aims of advocating for and upholding LGBTQIA rights. Understanding both protective and promotive resilience, as rooted in individual responses and a community context, provides a greater understanding of ways resilience can be cultivated.

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