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Intimate Economics: Power, Gender, Sexuality, and Heteropatriarchy, in Delhi, India, 2011–2015

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Abstract

Taboos differentially reinforce socially constructed gender and sexual hierarchies that affect the experiences of all people—women, men, queer, heterosexual, and transgender people. In Delhi, India, institutions of heteropatriarchy, buttressed by colonial history, reproduce and naturalize limits to the agency and economic autonomy of women and queer people. These intimate economics influence and are influenced by people making decisions regarding relationships and have broad repercussions in society. How do individuals and groups simultaneously question, remake, and enlarge gendered categories and experiences? Interviews with middle-class people are discussed in the context of scholarship that considers the social, political, and historical contexts of the region. Interview responses are triangulated with ethnographic participation in Delhi-based events that examine and confront aspects of heteropatriarchal regulation of people regarding categories of gender and sexual expression. Themes emerge regarding how people create and access knowledge, economic autonomy, relationships, and family formation. The conclusion discusses ways in which the erosion of taboos reveals changing roles and identities and how these changes affect the hierarchal gender binary, producing social tensions and paradoxes.

Keywords: heteropatriarchy; gender and power; gender equality; gender identity; sexual diversity; sexuality; queer visibility; LGBTQ+; taboo

1. Introduction

Social and political upheavals regarding gender power and sexuality in Delhi, India, during the decade of the 2010s provide telling narratives in jurisprudence, media coverage, and local scholarship. In October 2014, Indian newspapers and world news reported on a story about the arrest of a man charged by his wife under Section 377 in the Indian Penal Code (IPC), a colonial-era anti-sodomy law [1]. The couple had been married for several months but had never been physically intimate. After being informed by neighbors that the husband was having a male guest over in her absence while she was working at a professional job, the wife installed cameras in their home that captured footage of her husband having sexual encounters with a man. Perhaps hoping to end the marriage and preserve her reputation, the wife presented the recorded evidence to the police. According to IPC law at the time, the husband faced ten years to life in prison. In the first breaking stories in the newspapers, the distressed wife was quoted lamenting that her life had been ruined and described her husband's ritual of applying make-up and lip gloss every day. Initial print coverage revealed detailed information, enabling the possibility of identification and social repercussions for the couple, followed by calls for retractions by journalists and activists. The story disappeared after 2016.

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This news story provides a domestic vignette that exposes important features of heteropatriarchy, gendered power, and intimate economic processes in relationships. How did the combination of gendered social practices and relations, what Connell refers to as the gender order [2–6], culminate in the unfortunate domestic union and subsequent parting of two people who knew so little about each other? Norms about maintaining silence on matters of sexuality, gender, and relationship alternatives foreclose the communication that might have prevented this scenario. Furthermore, anti-sodomy laws such as Section 377, which concern otherwise consensual sex, reflect a history of social control that implicitly regulates all forms of relationships, sexuality, and gender relations. What might we learn from the histories and power hierarchies behind these norms and laws and how people experience and engage with them? The story behind this arrest provides an entry point into the complex and changing relations of gender and sexuality in contemporary middle-class, urban India.

Heteropatriarchy is a social construct of power that rationalizes the subjugation of women and queer people (people with alternative sexual orientation and gender identities, sometimes known as SOGI). Claims of "natural order" or "god-given" authority establish the norms that confer the privileges of cis, heterosexual men at the top of the hierarchy [7]. This research draws from interviews with middle-class Delhi, in which women, men, heterosexuals, and queer people discuss how and where they obtain information on gender and sexuality norms, and situates them in the social, political, and economic histories of the region. Interview data is then triangulated with ethnographic participation in Delhi-based events that confront aspects of heteropatriarchal regulation of gender and sexuality. Interview respondents consistently noted marked taboos around discussing sexuality and questioning sexuality and gender norms, even as public discussions of sexuality and gender increased. This scholarship examines how taboos reinforce socially constructed, institutionalized norms that broadly affect people's attitudes and experiences and how institutions of heteropatriarchy reproduce and naturalize both homophobia and the limited autonomy of women. It also examines how people are examining, resisting, and reimagining existing gender and sexuality norms.

Publicly contested norms and changing laws regarding gender and sexuality are of interest in India and on a global level. In these specifically located movements, lives, and conversations, we can identify the effect of patriarchal, colonial, and neoliberal constructions of what is considered normal [4,8–10]. The collusion and pressures of local patriarchies, colonialism, nationalism, and liberalizing markets contributed to foreclosures and regulations of intimacy, family, and kinship forms [11–15].

At the heart of this investigation are the intersecting, compounding, and conflicting interests of women, men, transgender, heterosexual, and queer people regarding autonomy, power, recognition, and rights. Are there ways for disparate individuals and groups to work together for the emancipatory goals of dignity and equality? If yes, how? The aim of this paper is to consider present-day implications of historical and legally enforced gender and sexuality norms concerning taboos and agency. Beginning with current events, it examines how recent applications of the Indian Penal Code bring questions regarding sexuality and gender to the fore. Referencing feminist and queer theory, as well as social and historical contexts, the paper focuses on themes that emerge from the data collected over five years of interviews in Delhi. This paper closes by conceptualizing the implications of these intersections and tensions for women, men, and queer people as they attempt to move toward social equality. The binary construction of gender among the middle class emerges as a defining or primal hierarchy that intersects with other social hierarchies, particularly with economic autonomy in the context of intimate relationships.

1.1. Social Context Through Pertinent Judicial and Legislative Background, 2009–2015

This research was conducted during a time of significant transformation in the laws, practices, and politics of gender and sexuality in India. Several notable and highly publicized judicial proceedings provide insight into these central fault lines and fissures. They are presented here in chronological order.

The NAZ judgment, of July 2009, by the Delhi High Court declared Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) unconstitutional. Section 377 was a 1860 British colonial-era anti-sodomy law that regulated sexual practices between otherwise consenting people having "carnal intercourse against the order of nature". Though not explicitly naming homosexuality, and even though several of the acts referred to are practiced by some heterosexual persons, Section 377 IPC has been broadly interpreted to implicate men who have sex with men (MSM) and has provided leverage to harass, extort, and threaten MSM and transgender people [12,16,17]. The queer and feminist activists who formed coalitions to defeat 377 celebrated this landmark decision even while keenly aware that NAZ did not confer acceptance of alternative sexualities and families but merely decriminalized several specific consensual sexual behaviors.

The Koushal judgment in December 2013 overturned the NAZ decision by the Delhi High Court, reading down Section 377, and essentially reinstated the colonial sodomy law in an unexpected reversal [18]. Protests and vigils arose across the nation and drew pledges of support from civil society around the globe. This immediately resulted in widely publicized citywide and nationwide gatherings of the interested public, activists, scholars, and advocates to strategize, organize, and push back against what was largely seen as a betrayal of the human rights of Indian citizens.

The Justice Verma Commission report was formed immediately after a December 2012 widely publicized violent gang rape [19]. People were shocked and angered by this ultimately fatal rape of a young woman student who was traveling home on a bus in the evening after seeing a film with a male friend. Protests rose across the nation against police inaction and rapist impunity, slow-moving courts, and a culture of disrespect toward women. In a move of unprecedented promptness, the Verma Commission made recommendations for additional changes to the IPC rape and sexual assault/sexual harassment laws and related social policy. It was the most recent iteration of engagement with sections 375 and 376 IPC, about rape, as activists from many longstanding feminist movements have produced scholarship and modeled resistance to patriarchal structures and violence against women since before Independence [20–22]. Sites of resistance range from spontaneous uprisings to informal collectives, such as Saheli in New Delhi, to NGOs concerned with gender, education, and intimate violence.

The resulting 2013 Verma Commission report called for an end to the culture of "honour", purity, and shame, to discontinue exceptions for marital rape, to immediately institute comprehensive sexuality education for young people, and other measures [23]. To this date, only a few of the recommendations have been implemented, and the reforms that have been taken up notably leave out the recognition of marital rape as a crime [24]. This omission has been decried by activists, scholars, and advocates alike. A telling passage from the Criminal Law Amendment Act 2013 illustrates some of the thinking behind the opposition to recognizing marital rape as a punishable crime [24]:

> "It was, therefore, felt that if marital rape is brought under the law, the entire family system will be under great stress, and the committee may perhaps be doing more injustice." [24] (p. 47)

The NALSA judgment of April 2014 recognized the third-gender status and human rights of transgender persons in a largely unexpected and historic decision by the Supreme Court. NALSA (The National Legal Services Authority, India [25]) was written not even

five months after the Koushal judgment that reinstated Section 377. NALSA essentially acknowledged the existence of non-binary conforming gender identities and proposed measures to begin addressing the widespread societal discrimination they face [26]. NALSA creates an unprecedented legal identity for a third and possibly more gender categories, many of which are not [yet] intelligible in American or European civil or legal society [26,27]. This is distinct from Western binary constructions of transgender in which people transition from one gender to the other, as in female to male (FTM) or male to female (MTF).

NAZ, Koushal, NALSA, and the Verma Commission report left people in 2015 with several sets of contradictions that move beyond abstract considerations and profoundly affect people's lives. Examining these judgments and their precipitating events reveals an interplay of shared concerns regarding people's claims to well-being, equal opportunity, autonomy, human rights, and bodily dignity. These judgments and cases relate to gender constructions and sexualities that underscore tensions between what is considered unacceptable versus normative or natural and what is considered consensual versus coercive. The first significant contradiction or paradox of taboo lies in the most widespread effects of these court actions: they provoke detailed, explicit, public discussions about gender and sexuality. These uncomfortable dialogues are not necessarily conducive to tolerance or problem-solving and can heighten conflict or denial in a social atmosphere of rigid taboos; however, they can also raise the visibility of emancipatory discussions. Other emergent contradictions will be discussed later.

1.2. Conceptual Frameworks: Gender Order, Heteropatriarchy, and Using the Lens of Taboo

Part of the goal of this scholarship is to better understand movements toward human dignity, self-determination, and equality to the extent that they are asserted and understood in specific, localized social contexts and globally. Using grounded theory to approach an analysis of how respondents articulate and interact with gendered experiences led to the consideration of multiple theories about gender and sexuality. Several offered explanatory frameworks for a greater understanding of the intersections, conflicts, and changes taking place in Delhi at that time. Most contain omissions and drawbacks, even while contributing to understanding the processes of gender and power. The most comprehensive and comprehensible theories were advanced in work by Connell in her relational, layered gender theory [2–6] and the post-colonial feminism of Chandra Talpade Mohanty [28]. Both Mohanty and Connell draw from and improve upon Foucault's explanations of how power and sexuality are constructed through discourse and knowledge affecting individuals and institutions [29] and similarly build upon the scholarship of Judith Butler's "heterosexual matrix" for understandings of heteropatriarchy [10,11,30,31]. Along with other feminist and queer theory researchers, these theorists best help frame the gendered understandings that emerged from the interviews, events, and judicial proceedings. Connell, Mohanty, and others contextualize the contributions of Butler and Foucault into a complex yet intelligible, historically grounded theory for the present with implications for local and global collaborations and action.

The gender theorization offered by RW Connell outlines a holistic perspective that describes gender orders as complex and changing norms and relations, focusing on lived material conditions, as articulated in discourses, that weave throughout and partially constitute power relations between individuals and institutions in each society at a given time [2–6]. Connell includes colonial and global social and economic processes imposed upon and hybridized with local communities and local elite gender orders. She draws attention to the changing nature of gender orders and the focal possibilities of change within specific social institutions, such as families, governments, and organizations [2]. Connell and Mohanty use accessible language purposely, which can then translate into impetus

for activism, policy, and health applications [2,28], among other things. Further, they incorporate contributions of feminism, Foucauldian discursive power, Butlerian gender performativity, queer visibility, and colonial and post-colonial processes.

Mohanty also proposes a post-colonial transnational feminism with an urge toward emancipatory knowledge and praxis or action [28]. She asserts that "the interwoven processes of sexism, racism, misogyny, and heterosexism are an integral part of our social fabric, wherever in the world we happen to be" [28] (p. 3). Updating Foucault, Mohanty writes of developing social genealogies to understand the conditions, knowledges, and attitudes that can provide solidarity across contexts and identities for a non-colonized dialogue [28].

This paper centers on the contributions of gender theorists from India, and many of the scholars cited herein were working in Delhi and Mumbai at the time of this research.

To begin, social construction of gendered processes, relations, and identities is widely acknowledged as a challenge to essentialized, binary constructions of gender often based on our understanding (also constructed) of biological male, female, and other bodies, as suggested by Butler [11,30] and others. However, the two categories of man and woman remain primal and primary in many people's everyday lives, and parallel normative processes and performances carve deep pathways through our social worlds. Despite and in addition to the liberatory destabilizing of gender binaries in many feminist and queer theories, and expansions of gender from subaltern contexts, the simplistic seeming binary of man/woman cannot be entirely abandoned for several reasons. First, the social dialogues of gender are more accessible when they include intelligible fields for entrance into theory and praxis; otherwise, emancipatory projects are left fractured into hyper-specialized communities speaking disparate tongues and are more easily divided and conquered by hardened, fundamentalist, and essentialist actors, ideologies, and structures. Secondly, including the primal binary in future gender multiplicities prevents the erasure of pervasive, diverse, historical and global inequalities experienced between men and women, along with the efforts to organize toward emancipatory transformations. The third reason is to mobilize significant areas of intersection for resilience and emancipatory potential beyond the primal gender binary wherever these can be articulated and strengthened. Even as essentialism is deconstructed, the gender binary remains a large entry portal and speaks to many people's experiences, conceptions, and language. Additions, complications, and elaborations add breadth, depth, and power to gender analysis. The problem is a classic "yes/and" of inclusion, interpretation, and improvisation.

Intertwined with structures of Connell's gender orders and hierarchies, heteronormativity provides a lens to envision and question the persistence and ubiquity of certain relationships and family forms above others [8,31]. Connell's gender orders, combined with Lee and Pratto's ideas of gendered power [32], question categories such as woman and man, along with the power hierarchies ascribed to such identities. Gender order, heteropatriarchy, and gendered power build a rich societal and relational framework for this analysis. Analyses of heteronormativity, heteropatriarchy, and their associated hegemonic politics are performed by many South Asian and other scholars, such as Menon, Narrain and Bhan, Sharma, and Vanita [12,14,15,21,33–35]. Narrain asserts that heteronormativity can be defined as "the primacy of heterosexuality that has been coded into societal institutions in a way that heterosexuality appears natural" [35]. The concept exposes the ideology that all other sexual ways are unnatural, and this dichotomy provides justification for the colonial anti-sodomy law. Wieringa describes heteronormativity alternatively as "regulating the moral codification of sexuality. The heterosexual family is a central site for the production of sexuality, of its pleasures, but also for the policing of counter-normative desires, deemed

dangerous to the stability of the patriarchal order" [8] (p. 9). Menon elaborates on this order, linking it to property, family, and citizenship:

> "...the only form in which it is allowed to exist in most parts of the world—the heterosexual patriarchal family—is the key to maintaining social stability, property relations, nation, and community. Caste, race, and community identity are produced through birth. But so too in most cases, is the quintessential modern identity of citizenship. The purity of these identities, of these social formations, and the existing regime of property relations is thus dependent on a particular form of the family". [14]

Queer theorizations added new dimensions to gender(s) and sexualities and stand in mimetic relation to feminist gender theories. The discursive formations developed by Foucault explain the process whereby power operates through language, constituting and being constituted by individuals and institutions. Combined with Butler's work, Foucault's philosophical examination of the genealogy of science, institutions, power, and what is normal or deviant contributes a significant foundation of queer and sexuality studies [29]. Unfortunately, Foucault's work is notable for the absence of women as subjects or subject matter and for its limited theorization of the implications of power [36].

Several concepts arising in queer theory provide further useful engagements for this research, even as it is important to note that these arose primarily in the contexts of theory from the Western metropole and, therefore, will often map differently in other contexts. They are queer visibility and gender performativity.

In an example of the complexities added by context, we can examine the uses and risks of queer visibility. While activists and theorists rightly assert that increased visibility of queer lives and identities facilitates movement building and rights claims, increased visibility can also increase fears of violence and the risk of violence, rejection, or repression, as we shall see emerge in the data. In research from Mumbai, Horton writes of people's ambivalence about coming out in atmospheres of conflictual spaces and familial relationships [37]. With the evocative title, "You cannot oppress those who do not exist", Brock and Edenborg discuss the contradictions of queer visibility and strategies of visible and invisible repression in Chechnya [38]. Edenborg writes of the complications of queer visibility internationally and how it can be instrumentalized for different purposes [39]. Lind discusses how queer visibility politics are sometimes mobilized for hegemony and superiority between states [40]. Themes of the possibilities and dangers posed by visibility weave through the emergent themes in this paper and articulate with taboo.

According to Bernstein, queer and other identity politics are inherently complex and sometimes contradictory. On the one hand, they can mobilize constituencies and social movements, but they can sometimes operate as essentialist and exclusionary [41]. Butler writes: "The mobilization of identity categories for the purposes of politicization always remain threatened by the prospect of identity becoming an instrument of the power one opposes. That is no reason not to use, and be used, by identity. There is no political position purified of power, and perhaps that impurity is what produces agency as the potential interruption and reversal of regulatory regimes" ([30], preface).

Gender performativity, in Judith Buthler's compelling elaboration, articulates with queer visibility and politics. For Butler, the moving targets of gender and sexuality become visible through processes and enactments, perpetual though not always conscious [30]. She writes, "the anticipation conjures its object. [so it is] an expectation that ends up producing the very phenomenon that it anticipates... performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration" ([30], preface).

South Asian and global feminist and queer scholarship adds power, depth, and specificity, drawing generously from divergent histories and geographies, often unearthing buried or ignored lineages, as well as diverse gender and sexuality ways [17]. Jolly, Sharma and others examine assumptions of heteronormativity and heteropatriarchy in development work [31].

During this research, the concept of taboo emerged prominently from the grounded theory process, both as a term respondents used and as a useful lens and unifying theme for understanding the barriers and environments in which people obtain information and communicate about gender and sexuality. Concepts of taboo engage with Foucauldian and Butlerian discursive processes in the way that power from above can impose and produce order, structure, and surveillance, while at the same time, individuals, groups, and collectives exercise power to produce conversations that change and remake knowledge—in this case, regarding gender and sexuality. Concepts of taboo provide focal points indicating areas of tension around the power status quo and its contestations. An early discussion of the social power of taboo is articulated by the anthropologist Mary Douglas:

> "...taboo is a spontaneous device for protecting the distinctive categories of the universe. It protects the local consensus on how the world is organized. It shores up wavering certainty. It reduces intellectual and social disorder. Ambiguous things can seem very threatening. Taboo confronts the ambiguous." [42] (p. xi)

As taboos obscuring issues around sexuality and gender become contested in public, paradoxes and contradictions of social categories and behaviors are revealed. Pearse and Connell note that tensions and contradictions emerge as gender regimes (in institutions) and gender orders (in societies) go through contradictory or paradoxical changes, which they call crisis tendencies [43]. These moments are instructive for agency and social action. Several emergent paradoxes regarding taboos on the discussion of sexuality and gender alternatives are discussed later in this paper.

1.3. Historical Erasures: Antiquity, Colonialism, Nationalism, and the Economy

In keeping with Connell's historical and material grounding of changing gender order and alternative sexuality forms, and Mohanty's call to learn each other's genealogies, close examination reveals a wide diversity of practices and relations in India. Much of this diversity has been erased during times of significant social and cultural changes over the centuries. The landscapes of kinship, gender, and sexuality in India before colonialization and nation formation were diverse from region to region, resulting from customs, settlements, migrations, and incursions of different groups over thousands of years. While Vanita cautions not to assume a golden age of progressive pre-colonial gender relations [44], sociologists and demographers have documented a diverse range of forms of family and kinship arrangements, some persisting even to the present day [45,46]. Scholars have worked together with documentarians to capture long-lost same-sex lovers in art and architecture—see the Film "No Easy Walk to Freedom" [47]. Aside from variations over time, regional gender variations in lineage, household formation, and property ownership have persisted and spread to other areas. Of note are the well-documented trends toward patrilineal families in northern regions [45] versus different types of matrilineal arrangements in the south and northeast areas [21,45] and cross-cousin marriages in the south [45]. In addition, alternative living arrangements in families sometimes involve people of differing gender constructions, such as Devadasis [46] and Hijras [48].

Contact with foreign peoples, invasions, trading relationships, and colonization ushered in rapid changes and cultural ruptures on the Indian subcontinent. Connell, Lugones, and Mies map out scholarship regarding the coloniality of gender, examining the ways that colonial frameworks of power and gender threw existing gender relations into disarray and

subsequently unmade and remade the gender relations they encountered through violence, legislation, and collusion [2,49,50].

To better understand the political and economic gender perspectives imposed by colonization, it is necessary to consider forces that were operating before the growth of the Indo-European trading routes and the eras that followed. Scholarship that examines significant changes in the gender order of European societies before the colonial period provides insight into the origins of some of the erasures, taboos, and criminalization that subsequently affected Indian societies. Federici, Ehrenreich, English, and Mies [50–52] assert that sweeping changes in property ownership, production, sexual division of labor, and the rising institutionalization of medicine, law, education, and religion in Europe were centrally implicated in the centuries of systemic, violent persecution of women [50–53]. In European witch trials and executions, as many as 500,000 or more people were killed within their communities over roughly 300 years, with no recourse to appeal [53]. Simultaneously, as people were displaced from land to labor in extractive industries and factories, people migrated, and extended communities and families were fractured. Women and men were increasingly tied into small domestic units in which women performed most of the care work that enabled laborers and reproduced the system. This violent appropriation and sequestration of women's reproductive and care work into patriarchal family forms facilitated the emerging systems of production and wealth accumulation in what soon became aggressive economic empires. Gender norms regarding women moved into positions beyond question as part of socially constructed "god-given" or "natural" orders that privileged the growth of the capital-oriented market system.

Subsequently, the colonizers' concerns with gender and sexuality in India included enforcing the hierarchal, binary gender norms, as well as maintaining boundaries of race, class, nationality, and the orderly accumulation and dispersal of property [14,21,54,55]. Hegemonic masculinities of the elite defined the secondary masculinities of colonial subjects and their complimentary respectable femininities, reinforcing notions of heteropatriarchy so that these categories became solidified and naturalized in modern subjects. Historians of the region have unearthed legacies of alternative accountings of lineage and women's agency before and during the colonial period, which have complicated and enriched the narratives [56–60]. Indeed, the fact that they have had to be unearthed emphasizes their erasure.

Alternative kinship arrangements have been prohibited by a combination of colonial and national legal foreclosures and altered by the subsequent dwindling of economic channels by outlawing unrecognized livelihoods and patterns of inheritance. For example, Ramberg [46,60] documents how Devadasis, daughters dedicated to a goddess, can function economically as sons, interacting across castes and enhancing the status and wealth of their natal families. This contrasts with undedicated daughters, who, through marriages with men, transfer wealth and value to their husbands' families. With colonization, modernity, and globalization, decades of reforms have reduced the nuanced roles and reciprocities that have long benefitted local families in symbolic and material ways. These women, who have served in the past as conduits for beneficial flows of energy and economy, are now often misread out of context as trafficked women or prostitutes. The state has not only criminalized the further dedication of daughters but also financially rewarded men who marry and confer so-called "legitimacy" to women who were once dedicated. In another case of gender variation and colonial intervention, traditional hijra households are not legally recognized, and, therefore, hijras themselves cannot legally inherit property [48]. These practices are examples of how laws regarding property prevent people from being able to reproduce social arrangements that have been traditional and sustainable in their specific lives and contexts. Many of the forms of gender, kinship, and sexuality that were

non-normative and unintelligible within the economic processes erected primarily between and among elite men were forced underground, forbidden, and finally rendered nearly invisible and forgotten.

Colonial instigations of changes in gender structures later segued into projects of independence from British rule and the formation of the Indian Nation. The so-called "civilizing mission" of the colonizers colluded with elite Brahmanical forms of patriarchy that regulated women's sexuality and kept castes separate and inheritance legible along patrilineal patriarchal forms. As centralized forms of trade and market rolled out, separate spheres of public and private further pushed elite and highly educated women into the home, and they became the feminine models for the new nation's "forward" movement [58].

In the decades after independence, feminist scholars in South Asia examined the material conditions and constraints of women's participation in economic and civic life, documenting the often-unacknowledged work that women, particularly poor women, undertook in their everyday lives. Menon, Jain and Banerjee and Nair and John draw links between economic practices, gendered divisions of labor, and family forms throughout history [13,14,21,61]. Inheritance, marriage, and family legislative acts, while striving for and failing to achieve uniformity, have created ruptures and fed contention, exacerbating what may have been minor or tolerable differences between religious or communal groups. This further forecloses local variations in family and inheritance patterns so that some are preserved and codified, while others are marginalized or lost.

More recently, in processes that echo those of colonialism, amidst international pressures and alliances, another critical period began with the 1991 liberalization of India, when the economy and the media opened to Western market engagements and cultural products. Despite being hailed by some as an unquestioned boon to a growing middle class, a boost for the empowerment of women, and a triumph of liberal values, scholars have noted that market liberalization has also created or re-enforced hierarchal gender norms by promoting consumerism and increasing insecurity and inequality [62–66]. Economic liberalization has both broadened and burdened the middle class, and it is often experienced vastly differently by women and men as women move into marginal work. According to Phadke, semi-public spaces such as shopping malls seem to offer protection (for a price) as they draw in women as consumers [63,66]. Meanwhile, queer and transgender people continue to be marginalized in the world of heteropatriarchal gender norms and criminalized sexuality.

1.4. Development and Human Rights: Diversity Lost in Translation

Moving from erasures related to colonial, national, and market forces, the transnational development language of subjects with human rights alternately recognizes and then fails to include the diverse experiences of gender, kinship, and sexuality. Jolly, Khanna, Lind, and Sharma write about heteronormativity in and provide relevant critiques from within development scholarship [31,40,67,68]. They point out that other forms of family and relationships have often been unintelligible to practitioners outside of the local contexts, continuing the erasures of colonialism. Frameworks such as human rights often, unfortunately, overlook or supplant local variations and understandings of sexuality and gender. In this way, development work around sexuality has often been blind to gendered practices on the ground, except for how they relate to projects of public health or population [69]. This is not to dismiss the vital importance of human rights frameworks in aiding women's or queer people's efforts. However, the framing of development work relating to gender can reify socially constructed, essential male/female binaries, foreclosing possibilities for the individuals and groups they seek to serve. For example, when Jolly asks "Why is development work so straight?", she points out that a female-headed household (FHH) is a category used only to signify the absence of an adult male as a head of household,

and that these households are often considered at risk and seen as vulnerable according to development indices [31]. The possibility that FHHs could be matrilineal, extended, lesbian, or otherwise purposefully headed by a woman, and thriving, with or without adult men present, is not even considered.

Sharma explores how the conventions of heteronormativity are sometimes strategically deployed and that the negotiation of norms is a process, not a binary overturning of norms [15]. She further interrogates the primacy of romantic love over the bonds of friendship, a significant but often invisible basis of survival and kinship that is often overlooked even in queer theory. Development practitioners sometimes not only emphasize marriage and biological kinship, but when they privilege "romantic love" and sexual partners, they render invisible many significant social support unions and networks. Sharma opens an important dialogue about the role of friendship as a source of possible new kin networks.

Boyce notes that the concept of human rights does not always translate across borders without compromise and points out that much of rights language relies upon the assumption of a linear, Western progress logic [70]. He further explores how the language of privacy can imply an individual disconnected from a social context, an ultimate impossibility, but frequently invoked in the development context.

Even after the United Nations declared a decade for the rights of women (1976–1985), several of the rights relating directly to women in homes and households remained beyond discussion. It is notable that during the drafting of the 1994 Population and Development Conference's Programme of Action in Cairo and the women's platform in Beijing, the language of "diverse family forms" provoked strong opposition from fundamentalist groups, including the Vatican and a mixture of representatives from Christianity and Islam [71]. Following this for over a decade, it is no wonder that the human rights declaration regarding sexual orientation and gender identity that was drafted in 2007, called the Yogyakarta Principles, is still not widely accepted [72].

Regarding the contemporary Indian context, development scholars have noted that even the most recent Western sexuality categories fail to map the range and diversity of affectional and sexual practices and relationships. They especially critique the politics of Western LGBTQ+ sexual identities as they reflect liberal notions of the individual subject outside of history and community [17,73]. Many, addressing this lack of fit, advocate for the use of the term queer as a more inclusive word that can also indicate resistance and agency and serve as an umbrella inclusive of hijras and a range of other local (and perhaps unnamed) sexual and gender ways [12,17,34]. Others stress that practices are not identities but rather sometimes reflect longstanding variations or fluidity. They question the notion of sexuality that can be a state possessed by an individual, preferring the terms "play", "sexual ways", or "sexualness" [17,30,34,74].

2. Methods

The methods for this research centered on qualitative data gathered during this period of public engagement with high-profile judicial changes regarding gender and sexuality. Initial data were obtained in semi-structured interviews, a focus group discussion, and targeted ethnographic participant observation in public events involving people among the middle class in Delhi. This grounded theory approach enabled an iterative process to develop themes and a theory from the data [75].

Interview and focus group respondents included a total of 46 respondents. Participants were aged 18–53, with a mean age of 30.6 years. Most were in their late 20 s and early 30 s. The respondents included 31 women, 11 men and 4 transgender-identified people. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (queer) people made up 17 out of the 46 respondents. Thirty-three of the interviews were conducted in 2011, and the remainder in 2013–2014. The focus

group was conducted in 2011 and comprised five gay-identified men between their mid 20s and early 30s.

The decision to focus on middle-class people as interviewees and informants was influenced by several factors. The first of which was a desire to study sideways instead of "down" [76], to cultivate collaborative problem definition and research. As a cultural outsider, I sought to facilitate trust and establish relationships for social and health-sector applications. Horizontal fieldwork affords unique opportunities for relationship building, as well as for a more complete picture for theory building [77]. It also echoes the intention of responsibly and consciously examining hierarchy and power structures in social relationships. In addition, the middle class is thought to be "undermapped" [66], that is, not often considered in social research. People in the middle class can represent a best-case scenario regarding autonomy and access to knowledge, information and services. They can be opinion leaders and sources for the diffusion of social information, and they may have increased agency in some areas to advocate for themselves and for broader social changes. On the other hand, Uberoi and Menon write that they may also experience intense social pressure from families and communities, sometimes partly due to property and economic investments, and that these pressures are often even more increased in the highest socioeconomic groups [21,45]. Finally, queer movements and many feminist movements develop mostly in the context of the middle class [73]. Interviewees were selected by using three inclusion criteria I developed for "middle class": English fluency, any education past twelfth standard (high school), and use of public transportation (metro, bus, or auto-rickshaw) at least once a week. The use of the public transportation criteria tended to exclude people in the highest wealth bracket. These markers were straightforward to ascertain, less sensitive to discussion than income and wealth, and supplied both lower and upper boundaries to the sample, which were nonetheless flexible.

LGBT/queer people were actively included because they are often underrepresented in social science research, perpetuating the injustice of making them invisible in the social world. Conversely, studying only queer communities can render them hyper visible and place them outside of, or aside from, the larger social community. It was strategic to include all these categories because I sought to note areas of converging and diverging power among women, men, heterosexual people, and queer people. Inclusion was also realistic, given the fluidity of expressions, identities and behaviors. Among the 17 of the 46 respondents under the umbrella term of "queer", some identified with the following terms: queer, lesbian, bisexual, gay, hijra, trans and "gender-wobbly". Heterosexual people tended to identify themselves as straight or hetero if they used any terms at all.

The recruiting of interview and focus group respondents was achieved by stratified purposive sampling, as described by Patton, using a mix of purposive, emergent, and snowball sampling methods [78]. Most respondents were contacted through casual conversations in coffee shops, universities and other public places. Respondents were recruited in different networks and neighborhoods to get a sampling of respondents who did not know each other. Because people who are associated with non-normative genders or sexualities are socially vulnerable and can be difficult to locate, snowball methods were employed to meet and include them. After many months, a chance encounter on a metro line led to a friendship with a person willing to discuss queer lives in India from an insider's perspective. That woman subsequently facilitated introductions to a wide community with ties to many subgroups and gatherings. When large social events enlarged the base of queer-identified potential respondents, people were recruited who were not in the same networks through emergent sampling.

Interview questions were constructed, tested, and followed an interview guide, including open-ended and follow-up questions. Respondents were asked how (what, where and

when) they had learned about a series of related topics, including both formal (in school or other curricula) and informal sources of information, as well as through any form of media or interactions. Broad questions later progressed to more directed prompts, with open-ended questions at the end. How and where did you first learn anything about sex or sexuality? What did you hear or learn? What was the source? Who was involved? What about later times when you learned related things? Is there anything else you want to add? For this paper, these prompts were added: How did you learn about what women and girls, or boys and men, are supposed to do in your family and community? How did you learn about what is normal or expected? What did you learn or hear about people who did not fit into the expected male and female appearance or behavior? How about heterosexuality and homosexuality? How about straight relationships, gay or queer relationships?

The interview questions purposely inquired about how people learned about these topics for two main reasons. First, to provide a respectful and professional frame for the interview. Second, this approach situated respondents as social thinkers and actors and contributed to a more horizontal process. The purpose was not to delve into personal experiences, but rather to listen to what people had learned and what they thought about the prompt topics in the context of their social world and interactions. This also enabled people to calibrate their engagement in the process.

There were limitations to the questions. Experiences of people with diverse identities of caste or religion were not explored because the questions tested badly in the development of the interviews. People didn't answer, dismissed the questions, or were offended. Many said they didn't want to talk about caste or religion; some said it was too complex. Researcher outsider status most likely played a role. Secondly, Though the intention was to include middle class transgender people and gender minorities, only four were located to interview. It was difficult to find respondents who fit into the three parameters to establish a middle-class status- possibly illustrative of the economic marginality many experience in their lives. Thirdly, neither the sample nor the scholarship were broad enough to investigate deeper heterogeneity among the middle class.

The interviews were initially recorded and later transcribed. The transcribed interviews were initially read through, and themes were noted with open line-by-line coding, followed by focused coding. Data were subsequently analyzed in an iterative, abductive process to engage with the data and look for prominent, recurring themes. Analysis was done by thematic coding, using memos and coding, as described by Charmaz in the framework of grounded theory [75]. The prominent themes that emerged from interviews also informed the direction of subsequent targeted participant observation. For a good example of a cross-cultural study using qualitative methods to examine women's perceptions of masculinity norms, see Aksu et al. [79].

Internal Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained, and each participant was given comprehensive IRB-approved information about the study before they participated. At the end of interviews and focus groups, all participants were given a sheet of resources, including links to comprehensive sexual health information sites, with an emphasis on Indian and Delhi-based NGOs, most notably TARSHI (Talking About Reproductive and Sexual Health Issues), one of many NGOs founded by women.

Throughout the research, due to the heightened awareness and activity in social movements, civil society, and media about issues of gender and sexuality, there were many events and gatherings to attend and observe. These related to local experiences with gender and sexuality and were especially abundant before and after calendar events such as International Women's Day, queer pride marches, and significant judicial proceedings and their anniversaries.

Participant observation was implemented in two ways for this paper. First, I attended safe-sex seminars for local university student groups, film screenings, exhibits, and panels, and I participated in consultations and conferences by various groups, collectives, universities, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as well as celebrations, demonstrations, and Pride marches. These events were organized by a variety of people acting as individuals who were often members of social groups, collectives, and NGOs and/or working in professional capacities. Their efforts provided contexts in which to begin to establish community relationships with local stakeholders, enabled me to engage in a more dialogic research process, and helped me develop situation-appropriate interview questions.

Secondly, in response to data collected from the interviews and exploratory participant observation, I deployed targeted participant observation at several events, which follow below. As I analyzed interview respondent data and began to recognize emerging themes, I highlighted these events among the many I was able to attend. All were publicly accessible and were publicized in print, online, through social media, and by word of mouth. One was a craft-making workshop at a safe gathering space for transgender people and their allies. The second was a conference relating to the right of young adults to choose their partners in marriage unions regardless of class, caste and religion. The third event was a public celebration of the work of a well-respected feminist economist, and the last was a pair of two queer speaker panels, with attendance in the hundreds, a month apart. One led up to a queer pride march, and the other was held in reaction to the reinstatement of the anti-sodomy law section 377. The events are presented in chronological order. Participant observation at each event was recorded by taking off-phase field notes and was coded for emergent themes. These were then compared to themes that had emerged from respondent interview data.

Targeted Participant observation in ethnographic events:

1: Craft-making workshop at the Meeting Center (not the real name). This refuge was separate from the larger, parent NGO housed in the Lajpat Nagar neighborhood and served mostly as a place in which hijras, other transgender people, and their friends could socialize safely away from violence and harassment. The initial focus of the Parent NGO and the Meeting Center was serving the mission of decreasing the risk and spread of HIV/AIDS and transgender people, particularly hijras, and their friends and partners came to be tested, educated, and empowered to use safer sexual practices and condoms. The mission expanded to enable them to build community, learn how to protect themselves and others from violence and harassment, and develop skills and livelihoods. The space became known for knowledge sharing, such as safe sex workshops, and, as a health care provider, I was asked to co-facilitate one event. The larger organization attracted positive attention and funding for its work, including a donation and visit from Lady Gaga (an internationally famous rock musician known for her advocacy of feminist and queer causes) when she performed in Delhi. It also hosted a group of Canadian documentary filmmakers who were exploring the impacts of colonial sodomy laws on LGBTQ+ rights globally. One of the repeated calls for community input was to help create and transfer knowledge about how to build cottage industries that could develop the skills and labor of the members and provide alternative, safe, and more reliable livelihoods than the intermittent performing, blessing, begging, or sex work that usually provided the mainstay of income for hijras. Through research and acquaintance contacts, I was invited to lead a craft workshop for a line of shadow puppets as desirable keepsakes or artwork. These were standardized shapes that allowed for flexible creativity using hand-painted designs and handmade local papers and fabrics, so that each one was unique. In addition, the packaging could convey information and insight into the history and creativity of hijra and queer lives in contemporary Delhi, and their display in public places could serve as symbols of support for these communities.

The workshop was attended by seven people who set to work with scissors, paper, paint, and thread, and we created 10 puppets. I left the design templates with managers at the center. [See Appendix A for example puppet designs]. Follow-up note: Unfortunately, the center was suddenly closed a few months afterward due to a lack of funding support and has not reopened.

2: The Right to Choice in Marriage Union Seminar (RTC seminar). This took place in the Indian Social Institute on Lodhi Road. Approximately 52 people attended this all-day event on Saturday with tea breaks and a lunch of pakoras, samosas, and dal. Approximately half of the conversation and presentations took place in Hindi and half in English, with translations back and forth. Men and women identified themselves as elected officials, local community elders, married couples who crossed convention, lawyers, police, NGO and feminist collective members, journalists, and activists. All were from within or nearby Delhi, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh. The presentations and panels discussed cases in which people were prevented from forming marriage unions due to proscriptions of caste, family lineages, or as members of different religions. The authority, influence, and actions of Khap Panchayats, unelected bodies of mostly male elders, were discussed at length. Several recently publicized cases of "honour" killings by family or community members were discussed along with nationwide statistics collected by police about "honour"-related violence. Moral policing and variations in regional patterns of kin and family were discussed at length. Two members of the Saheli women's collective performed dramatic readings of several narratives representing situations in which women and men exercised their rights to choose a partner (as well as their right to *not* marry or choose a partner). Discussions were conducted around the implications of restricted or constrained family types. Strategies were raised within the meeting on how to broaden and build coalitions to support changes in attitudes and practices in local communities.

3: Devaki Jain's 80th Birthday Celebration. Jain is a prominent economist, feminist, researcher, lobbyist, and writer who was a founding member of the Development Alternatives for Women for a New Era (DAWN) and the Founder–Director of the Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST). The event was hosted by people who had worked with Jain over the years, and approximately 120 people came to honor her life and work in the Indian International Center, where an extensive buffet offered North Indian favorites, including saag paneer, rotis, dahl, curries, and chai. Most of the evening was devoted to the substance of Jain's work and her research revelations, especially her time studies documenting the fact that most women work regardless of whether they get paid, especially poor women. Discussions continued about her fieldwork and the formation of DAWN and the ISST. What many found surprising and provocative were discussions and disclosures about her personal life and agency, particularly regarding her family life and marriage. In a series of lively narratives from several of the panelists, the audience learned how Jain had refused a wedding in her teens and much later managed to propose to, marry, and have a lifelong and egalitarian relationship with a man she loved and admired. These and other engaging personal stories stood out against strong opposition to such agency from women in society, all the more so considering some were from sixty years ago.

4: Two Queer Discussion Panels. One panel took place before Queer Pride (in November 2013), and the other after the reinstatement of Section 377 of the IPC (in December 2013). Packed to overflowing, these gatherings took place in large public places associated with international libraries and foundations, organized by Indian scholars and activists from Delhi and other Indian cities. One month apart, they reflected very different political, social, and emotional climates, the tone changing in four weeks from forward-looking and celebratory to a tone of mourning, anger, frustration, and resigned determination after the Koushal judgment. For the second panel, journalists who were not from the queer or allied

communities were asked not to come, so that people could speak safely and without fear of social exposure and harassment. The panelists represented a broad range from the queer community and its allies, friends, and accomplices: human rights lawyers, artists, writers and lecturers, social researchers, activists, activist professors form JNU and Delhi Universities, a writer/historian, professor formerly at Columbia University, a transgender person working with an education NGO, and a woman co-founder of a sexuality education NGO.

Researcher positionality affects qualitative research. My work as a social science doctoral student from the United States was augmented by a career of several decades working in health care as a midwife and nurse practitioner. I worked in clinics providing sexual and reproductive health care, including education, screening, diagnosis, and treatment for disorders and infections, as well as contraception and preventive care, primarily with low-income, healthy adults in upstate New York. In Delhi, I was older than most, but not all, respondents and had been a long advocate of age-appropriate sexuality education, bodily dignity, equality, and human rights. In my home city, I am an active participant in communities strongly inclusive of queer and straight people that include a diverse mix of racial groups, immigrants, and income levels. I believe that my age, background, and attitude of non-judgment encouraged people to feel comfortable.

Relatedly, the desire to study horizontally and generate trust was augmented by factors that emerged unforeseen during the fieldwork process. While I could be considered an expert on sexual and reproductive health care, I was an intermediate beginner in my understanding of the complex social contexts of my respondents. They were patient, generous, and immensely helpful in my efforts to live in and adapt to life in Delhi, from issues with transportation, food, and housing, to bouts with minor illness. Even after several years of studying the social history of South Asia, Delhi, and the Hindi language, at the beginning of fieldwork, I was hardly fluent in the social context. Fortunately, the middle-class acquaintances and respondents were fluent in both English and their social worlds. Relying on the patience and assistance of so many was humbling, and I believe it contributed to a diminution of power inequality in the research. Interactions outside of interviews often became more of a collegial information exchange, in which I was able to offer information about specific sexual and reproductive health and healthcare in an ethical and confidential manner, and my contacts helped me navigate, survive, and understand their city. On another note, many colleagues and respondents engaged vigorously and critically with my research and ideas, often challenging and holding me to account for assumptions and omissions. Their welcome feedback continues to shape my understanding.

3. Results

Themes That Emerged from the Qualitative Data

Data from the interviews and focus groups yielded individualized reflections and themes that appeared to reach saturation among respondents.

Women expressed feelings of being enclosed, forbidden, or held back from both knowledge and mobility.

> *I was in a convent school and never had boys around me. I think women should step out of the boundaries and talk about it-sex. You know, rather than enclosing a girl within those areas where she should only know certain things and not more than that. I think there is a need of talking about sex because now it's still a hidden thing.* (Female, 42, heterosexual)

> *As I grew a little older like around 12 or 13 that's when you know my family started telling me what to do, what not to do, when to go out, and when not to go out and they would tell me it's not safe for girls to do this and that.* (Female, 28, heterosexual)

> *The girls who did have boyfriends or were indulging in sexual activity never ever-ever talked about it. It was never openly discussed. Even best friends would not tell best friends that they had slept with someone.* (Female, 25, heterosexual)

> *Awareness is the first step to everything, you have to have the awareness, the questions. If you have questions, you just need the confidence that these questions will be answered. Otherwise, when I was young, we would stop asking questions, because knowing that no, the answers doesn't exist or they are in a secret place or something, its forbidden, or not to be asked.* (Female, 35, bisexual)

> *Since childhood we have been hearing this: you are a girl, you shouldn't do this, you are a girl, you shouldn't do that. We can't even talk loud. There will be like granny telling okay girls keep silence. So, why just girls? So that kind of discrimination we would feel all the time. But, since I have grown old and have moved to a metro, my parents don't have much of control over me, they don't know where I am all the time.* (Female, 27, heterosexual)

Despite taboos, some women exercised agency to become resources for others.

> *In high school and then college, I was always the one my girlfriends would come to for information about sex. First it was because I read my parents medical books, then like I just looked up and found out more and more. It was pretty hush hush, but I didn't mind talking about it. Eventually, I started volunteering with an NGO in Delhi that had a lot of good information you could count on.* (Female, 28, heterosexual)

This is notable because there were many collective organizations and NGOs in Delhi founded by women with feminist and queer emancipatory missions that focused on gender, sexuality, policy, and economic or academic success. I was able to observe and participate in the meetings and activities of 17 different groups.

Men and queer people experienced more autonomy, freedom, and access to information than women. Both straight men and queer people remarked on the enforced silence and decreased mobility of women, with many concerned about how this was unfair.

> *This is a closed patriarchal society, and they don't do things openly here. Families don't talk about sex—it's a very taboo topic. I think it's very difficult to grow up as a girl in India. Different regions have regressive, rigid gender separations.* (Male, 32, heterosexual)

> *I grew up with my grandmother and relatives in an extended family. I assumed gender roles from what my mom and dad did, and from TV shows. The man is the dominant one. My parents treated me and my sister very differently. I got to do a lot more, go out, have a lot of freedom. They also kept me apart from my sister and her friends. In the last few years, I started thinking about how unfair it is—that the girls can't do very much.* (Male, 24, bisexual)

> *Guys start talking as soon as age 11, it's "cool" to talk about such things. Boys can talk about sex, girls can't.* (Male, 23, gay)

> *If a boy has sex, he's a player, if a girl has sex, she's a slut. In school, boys would talk about girls in a very lurid fashion, objectifying them.* (Male, 28, heterosexual)

> *I've seen female friends who didn't know anything about sex even in college, and then they experienced things without knowing anything about them. Since I came out to a friend, she talked to me and asked me about things, otherwise she wouldn't have known anything—even right before her marriage.* (Male, 31, gay)

> *You think of heterosexual as the normative, so you would watch straight porn, but you would not care about the woman in the video. It came in very later in my mind that girls also get pleasure.* (Male, 24, bisexual)

Some queer men expressed feeling protected by taboos around discussion, which provides anonymity. They had misgivings about increased activism and queer visibility, citing danger of exposure, prosecution, shame or violence.

> *I was already comfortable in my sexuality before I learnt there was any shame associated with it.* (Male, 26, gay)

> *[About being queer] There was no shame about it, because there were no conversations about it. Now the conversations are in its initial stage and hence the shame, also because of the stigma and stereotypes that the media creates.* (Male, 31, gay)

> *For a lot of boys, the first sexual experience is with cousins [also boys]. To anyone else, they would not even acknowledge that it happened.* (Male, 27, gay)

After the initial interviews with women, this finding among queer men was at first unanticipated. In the interviews and focus group, it was a marked addition to the politics of queer visibility to hear men speak of this taboo, the lack of discussion about sexuality, in terms of the freedom and safety it afforded them. There was even a sense of exhilaration in a life that could be hidden, yet out in the open. The contrast was striking; how in one life, taboo causes erasure or foreclosure, and in another, it provides tacit permission and freedom from constraint.

Queer people are expected to know about sex and sexuality and are often called upon as resources by others.

> *We learned about condoms in school in 12th standard in the standard curriculum, but it was really quick and sort of a joke. Plus, it was just about HIV prevention, they tried not to even say the word sex. Of course, before that everyone shared porn. The boys, I mean. But then I went to this little workshop organized by someone at uni [university]. They got a person from some organization to come in with condoms and lube and stuff and we learned how to check the date and we took one out of the package and got to see what it was like. Everybody was laughing and talking and you could ask anything. Mostly it was other gay guys, but there were a few girls too. Later, some of us told our friends about it.* (Male, 22, gay)

> *A gay friend gave me advice about buying condoms, for some reason he just knew more about things, maybe from reading. Also, I came to know a lot more when section 377 was in the news because of the Delhi High court, it seemed like people could start talking about things, like it was more okay to talk about. Before then guys always talked about sex anyway, but we didn't know much, it seemed to me there was just more information about sex and sexuality in general after that.* (Male, 28, heterosexual)

While it appears that men have more freedom and opportunity to discuss sex and sexuality, it is worth noting some pervasive problems with the quality of information they are most likely to share. The types and sources of information that were most often referred to by men tended to come from personal stories, erotic popular media, and pornography, which are more instructive of specific techniques and desires rather than inclusive of emotional, bonding, health, and safety issues. The latter two were often more familiar to queer men. This probably was a result of concerns about "safe sex": pathologizing of desires and conflating queer lives with HIV. This position unintentionally places heterosexual people at risk as they are less likely to have access to safe sex information and practices or to regard them as applicable to their lives [58,67]. Perhaps because of this discrepancy, queer people were often in the position of informal peer educators to their straight friends.

Women, transgender people, and visibly queer people are often targets of violence meted out by heterosexual men and feel vulnerable.

Norms of hegemonic masculinity are inculcated into and enforced on boys and men inside and outside of the family, while queer or transgender people are either invisible or highly marginalized and often in danger.

> *People who have the privacy of their bedrooms will continue to have sex without repercussions- but the people who this judgment [Koushal] really affects—anybody who doesn't fit into hetero idea of gender with two clear boxes, male and female—people who stand out visually—are at a greater risk for violence. Just walking down the street! Most people don't understand anybody who is not in that gender box: male-penetration, female-penetrated. How can you criminalize something when you don't understand the very body that it concerns? Trans is not as narrow as people make it out to be. . . I identify my gender as "wobbly." My mom and my sister, they accept me like crazy. My father is supportive and loves me. At the end of the day, their only concern is that I am safe. . .* (MTF, 23, transgender)

> *Pretty early on, our feminine side is more visible, so you do things a certain feminine way which gets you the backlash from adults. Luckily, my parents didn't do that, but it happened in school, they would say, "Why are you talking like a eunuch?"* (Male, 23, gay)

> *I had an effeminate classmate, for 10 years, no one ever talked to him. He was called a "half man".* (Male, 31, gay)

> *There's these female-dressing men—called hijras. They tease boys on the trains and if you don't give them money they'll lift up their skirts at you and say stuff—it's really embarrassing, and our families say to always keep away from them. But also they've always been there in our society going way back. I don't know when it started. A lot of people hate them. You can't really ask questions about them or show an interest too much, people don't like to talk about them except to make jokes or tease other guys.* (Male, 28, heterosexual)

> *I used to be scared and think the eunuchs were disgusting, but then I learned more and met some at a project I was working on and now I realize they are like anybody else who faces a lot of difficulties.* (Female, 26, heterosexual)

> *[Health care provider speaking about a female to male transgender person and a female in a long-term relationship] Once two girls came to my clinic, they said they had got married and they want a child. The one was dressed up like a male and the other one was a female and the female wanted to carry a baby and asked how it is possible. I told them you can have some sperm from a sperm bank then you can have your own baby. But, in our India it's not very open and that couple—the girl who was playing the male role, she didn't even tell her neighbors that she is female, because they might kill her. He will always dress up like a boy and he won't let anybody know that he is a girl.* (Female, 42, heterosexual)

The enforced norms and the implied or possible violence to those who do not uphold them reinforce exaggerated gender performances, particularly of hegemonic masculinity. The lack of acceptance and the reactions of disdain, disgust, and anger toward non-masculine men, queer men, transgender people, and women exact a heavy toll of harassment and violence. In addition to physical violence, the violence of non-acceptance has profound effects when queer men, transgender people, and women are denied access to employment, education, housing, and other means that would enable them to live autonomous lives. This is part of the pervasive violence Butler refers to in *Gender*

Trouble [30]. Same-sex partnerships and hijra lineages and households are rarely recognized and cannot legally inherit or pass on property or wealth. Providing care for their sick or elderly members becomes difficult, if not impossible. This poverty and vulnerability reproduce precarity and marginal status, and it is paralleled by the economic situation of single women, except for those who have independent wealth.

The institution of traditional marriage contributes to inequality and violence, a cause of anxiety among women.

Though heterosexual marriage is a largely compulsory and almost universal social institution, women draw conflicting connections between intimacy and family versus economic power, autonomy, and well-being.

> *There was this lady who used to come home to help mom with some stuff and I remember her telling me once about her daughter and she spoke of her daughter's plight as having to have sex with her husband as a chore, like that's another chore that she has to take care of along with the housework and the kids.* (Female, 26, heterosexual)

> *I have seen that in this society, that man can have an extramarital affair and woman cannot. A man can shout and woman can't, and a man is bread earner of the family and the woman is the piece of furniture in the house. Only the boys are supposed to be rowdy. You can't be a rowdy person because you're a female. So a boy can cuss and a woman cannot. I have seen all of that everyday. I see it every second in our office, in the Dhaba where we eat, everywhere the rules are always defined.* (Female, 33, heterosexual)

> *The thing is that I totally believe in equality, but sometimes there is a kind of slavery because the man is not letting you be independent. If I want to come to meet my parents I want to have at least some amount of money where, I don't have to ask my boyfriend, it's my independence. I think I want to earn a little bit even if it means working hard, so that if I want to walk out of this thing, I have this choice. This is an Indian thing I guess, because in India the men work and the women stay at home.* (Female, 27, heterosexual)

> *I think women have become more career-oriented now and finding a job is pretty natural, most women are working now, most girls want to be working so I see that as a big progress in the last 20 years. Even while I was in school or college the number one plan of action was to find the right guy and to get married and have children and settle down but now you see girls have become more independent.* (Female, 24, heterosexual)

The respondents sometimes spoke with fear of narrowing autonomy and self-determination upon becoming wives and often discussed needing economic and family resources to rely on. Though marital rape was not directly referenced in the interviews, the reference to slavery and the chore of sex implies the norms that married women might commonly endure a lack of control and consent and that this is to be expected.

The targeted participant observation event data contrasted somewhat with the interviews and focus group in that they presented venues where gender and sexuality norms and their social histories came under the processes of larger group scrutiny and questioning. These events grew out of peer-to-peer interactions and organizing, beginning primarily in non-public conversations, friendships, and collegial relationships. These forums provided spaces for questions, alternatives, and new (or expanded) norms to be imagined and discussed publicly and privately. Activists, advocates, and scholars engaged with middle-class publics through events, vigils, and protests, as well as through multiple forms of media, social media, and journalism.

The resourcefulness and resilience of individuals increased when they came together. Throughout the several years of this research, I was impressed by the number, energy, and networks of formal and informal collectives and NGOs dedicated to increasing information and knowledge, access to resources, and education about health, safety, and sexuality, as

well as economic and legal issues of concern to addressing women's and queer inequalities. Individuals in these groups, such as Saheli, TARSHI (Talking About Reproductive and Sexual Health Issues), the Kinky Collective, the Pleasure Project, Hidden Pockets, Zubaan Books, and others worked alongside and with each other to provide education, create knowledge and publications, and organize public events, actions, workshops, and film screenings. Out of many events and gatherings over five years, I chose several for this paper, took off-phase notes, and coded to triangulate themes that emerged from the interviews and focus group.

Many of the social structures and resources were created by feminist women and allies. They largely subsequently functioned as models and peer networks for organizations focused on queer advocacy, which emerged later. Indeed, advocates and strategies often socialized, interacted, and overlapped between the activities, advocacy, and events for women and queer people. Thus, from a seeming vacuum of formal social support for conversations about comprehensive sexuality information and gender advocacy, the taboos on speech and action appeared to contribute to an organizing impetus. Intersecting identities and oppressions transformed into intersections in resilience and advocacy.

In the targeted participant observation events analyzed here, many of the themes around gendered taboos, power hierarchies of access to knowledge, feelings of enclosure, and imminent violence that emerged from the interviews were echoed. However, other themes countered those narratives. I chose to focus on two contrasting themes that seemed to dominate these discourses: concerns about violence and safety, and emancipatory possibilities. The first concerns survival, and the second concerns self-determination, resilience, pleasure, friendship, and egalitarian relationships and family forms.

3.1. Concerns About Violence

At the targeted participant observation queer panels, many queer activists made repeated efforts to include concerns about the increased oppression and vulnerability of women in relation to men. In contrast to women's experiences of taboo as oppressive, in general, people expressed that men have more leeway among themselves to talk and act upon matters of sex and sexuality.

This also brought up issues of visibility of women and queer people in varying and different ways. Middle-class women, especially young women, are repeatedly cautioned and warned about being visible in open spaces. A common type of harassment known as "eve-teasing" consists of men following and harassing a girl or woman, sometimes to the point of criminal stalking and assault. Beyond visibility, women are subject to constant surveillance, and in response, they notably make themselves less visible in public spaces, unless the spaces are enclosed or protected, such as markets, shopping malls, university campuses, and (mostly indoor) workplaces. Most of the time, if young women are out, they are in rapid, head-down transit between enclosed spaces, are rarely seen at leisure outside, and almost never alone. This was an example where my outsider status was of benefit. Because I was visibly foreign and older, men (almost) never interfered with my lone comings and goings. I was just enough of an outsider to not care about or respond to admonitions and norms about where women should and should not be. In "Why loiter?", Phadke and Khan examine these inhibiting gendered expectations of women in public spaces and explore the life-expanding processes of purposely transgressing these norms. However, barely concealed underneath the norms was the constant possibility of violence.

Another aspect of visibility/invisibility could be translated or paralleled in an auditory sense: that of speech, hearing and being heard, learning and knowing. As women are expected to be enclosed, or at most engaged in furtive errands, they are also expected to be quiet. This went double for discussions or questions about sex and sexuality. Even in

one-to-one interviews in private spaces, women often spoke in lowered voices and short phrases, often readily claiming a lack of knowledge and experience. This reticence changed as the interviews progressed and a sense of trust began to develop.

This relates to the targeted participant observation events because the difference in the demeanor of the participants in these spaces was striking. The events were comparatively safe spaces where women could come with the intention of being themselves, being seen, being heard, asking questions, and sharing knowledge. They were performing safety and visibility for and with each other. They created safe spaces for discussion and transformation of the very norms that enclosed them, often saying so with relief and urgency. They built relationships with others, and the transformative difference was visible and audible. There was volume, laughter, argument, and altogether different body language. The few men who were present were in full support as allies. People came to see and become visible to each other in advocacy, friendship, and community.

Many of the same tensions and transformations about visibility/audibility carried into events for the queer community. At the queer panels, advocates and activists remarked on the safety of finding and being in a community, and they also spoke of fears of violence and harassment in the public sphere. They spoke of the increased vulnerability of transgender people after the Koushal decision. The craft-making workshops at the Meeting Center were an effort to counter social and economic exclusion with a means of becoming economically self-sufficient outside of begging and sex work.

Feelings of community solidarity made people generous with compassion toward others. For example, queer people of different identities often referenced solidarity with the struggles of women, other queer identity groups, and Muslims, as well as across caste, economic strata, and other intersecting identities. Female-to-male transgender (FTM) people were so anomalous and unspoken of that it was striking to hear the hijra activists saying, "Let us not forget our brothers among us, they are part of this struggle too." Unlike hijras and kothis, even more than being invisible, FTM people are so largely unheard of that it was difficult to find a term for them.

On the other hand, queer men, especially those who were not visibly queer, often expressed a sense of freedom in the lack of societal norms on discussion about sexuality. This even manifested in discussions during the queer panels relating to the recent judicial decisions around 377, with some people asking, "Why are we going public with this? Things were fine as they were, now they might get worse." This underscores that while people may benefit from the community-building and advocacy efforts, many fear the risks of violence inherent with increased visibility.

For discursive processes regarding public renderings of gendered violence directed towards women and contrasting efforts by feminists to build communities for promoting pleasure and consent, see Edmunds and Gupta [80].

3.2. Emancipatory Possibilities

In the targeted participant observation events, gendered expectations and norms such as the institution of heteropatriarchal marriage are questioned as the traditional and primary repository for women's life and labor after adolescence. Women spend a lot of time thinking and worrying about how they will prepare and fit themselves into such marriages, as well as how they may resist or transform them. Men did not evidence the same consternation. At Devaki Jain's 80th birthday celebration with over 100 people, the atmosphere was collegial and joyous, yet the discussions were cogent and directed toward activism. It was a celebration of her work and life. Jain spoke of her own and other women's work within and outside of home and marriage, and some of her feelings growing up: "I wanted to be a man—if I was a boy, I wouldn't be cloistered, I wanted to be a neurosurgeon.

women's colleges didn't have science, but they did have math and economics. So, I became an economist and feminist by accident."

The Right to Choice seminar was primarily about the ability of women and men to choose their partners, presumably based on knowledge and mobility, which would enable their choices. The seminar dealt primarily with women and men having more control, not only to increase acceptance and success of those unions but to eliminate the opposition and violence perpetrated by external actors seeking mainly to control women, sexuality, and property. A women's collective staged a political play.

At the queer panels, several people raised the issue of the double injustice of women who know nothing of their husband's orientation being pressured into marriage with men who were gay. Both parties suffered, and the women were more likely to be relatively economically dependent or disadvantaged. These scenarios were said to be somewhat common and brought to mind the couple in the news story at the start of this paper.

The queer panels were especially revealing when people's conversations turned to forming families and growing older. Over tea during a break, a group of seven close friends of mixed genders divulged a long-term dream to move to an area one by one to get jobs, buy adjoining land and build homes, and then possibly adopt and raise a few children. One laughed, noting their shared intention to have a few children (and lampooning an old development line): "Well you know, small families are better!" Some at the panels wondered how and when gay marriage might become legal so partners could finally live together and seek the social protections afforded to straight couples. Another woman spoke up: "Can we talk about friends please and not just always about monogamous couples? What is it with romantic love? Isn't there anything else?" In response, another woman added that she and four others are planning to buy property and grow old together.

Similar conversations took place among groups of heterosexual and queer women, at several of the events, as they noted all the work they were doing within as well as outside of their homes and how the labor and care might be more equitably and amiably shared among other women.

A conversation at the Meeting Center was about how hijras often long for male partners who can be their husbands and support them in their lives outside of sex work, where they can tend to their homes and give care to their families. This recalled a poignant anti-mirror of the heteropatriarchal marriage, which is compulsory for most and out of reach for others.

Many people expressed the positive feelings of being in spaces where visibility was safe, such as gatherings and even queer pride marches, and still others were also able to express that they did not feel safe being visibly queer (or female!) in public.

4. Discussion: Intimate Economics, Power and the "Chastity of Knowledge"

Early in this research, one highly educated young married woman warned me emphatically not to undertake these interviews, referring to a "chastity of knowledge", whereby young, unmarried women were not supposed to know or talk about sex or sexuality. The phrase stood out. Women are aware that they are expected to be, and are more valued when they are, ignorant and unsullied by knowledge of things sexual.

Taboo, and the erosions of taboo, reveal the effects as gender order changes. In contrast to women's desirable innocence, men are expected to pursue information and action, yet also to be discreet about their desires, whatever they may be, and queer people are often sexualized and therefore expected to know more about sex. This gendered division of taboo supports the gendered power status quo. If women are shamed into not knowing the possibilities of sexuality, they are ill-equipped to exercise agency, to question or explore.

Their subsequent decreased agency ushers them into traditional roles and enables the appropriation of their lives, time, and labor into the marital state.

Despite and sometimes augmented by transnational rights and development languages, globalization has fueled backlashes against queer and women's equality. Various groups play significant roles in re-enforcing gender binaries and heteronormativity under the guise of tradition [81]. This is marked in the fundamentalist religious gender ideologies increasingly visible in public discourse in both India and the United States in 2025. Combined with longstanding structural inequalities, this backlash makes heterosexual marriage potentially quite costly for women (sometimes literally, as with increasing dowry payments). Women who have more personal, social, or economic resources are more likely to postpone or opt out of matrimony. Scholarship about the flight from marriage for women in Southeast and East Asia prefigures that we may see more of this happening in urban centers of India [82]. A 2015 article by Kashyap et al. highlights beginning trends toward postponing or altogether avoiding marriage among women in South Asia [83].

Hierarchal binary gender norms are often reproduced in economic participation and autonomy and are renegotiated in family and peer interactions. In the interviews and targeted participant observations, women were much more likely to discuss concerns about economic power and mobility regarding gender norms and gendered division of labor because they experience these as the means by which they will either access, or be prevented from, a broader range of opportunities and expression. Women respondents uniformly expressed anxieties and concerns with gender expectations and ever-present warnings or threats of violence that limit their movements, education, and social participation. Some women link these threats and the lack of access to economic autonomy to the social expectations that they must inhabit underpaid, economically dependent, gendered caregiving roles upon marriage or maturity. A similar economic marginality and social vulnerability is echoed and magnified in the observations of transgender people's economic realities. As mentioned previously, they are largely closed out of livelihood choices due to discrimination based on their often-visible gender difference.

Paradoxes of Taboo: Connell's Crisis Points and Contradictions

Taboo interacts with gender and sexuality to coalesce into several themes. Maintaining rigid mutually exclusive categories of male and female relies upon the fiction of an articulable natural order and upholding taboos around discussion, challenges, or alternatives. Those invested in the power status quo mete out violence and impose silence to discourage change, while others question, organize and strategize. Paradoxes emerge as taboos are exposed in processes that are political, iterative, and reflexive.

Paradox 1

While Taboo upholds the heteropatriarchal power status quo, it can provide a cover for those with privilege, yet it also provokes resistance, enables community building, and provides an impetus for organizing.

Gender and sexuality issues hitherto unheard are now being discussed due to judicial decisions, public health campaigns, popular media, activists, and the public at large. These processes articulate with understandings of queer visibility. Women, queers, transgender people, and their allies are using these opportunities to open more public space about their concerns and inequalities. However, this new scrutiny also provides sometimes unwelcome public insight into previously surreptitious sexual behaviors, including those of gay men. Where it had provided a protected silence around some forms of gender privilege and a cover behind which people could meet others, taboo also provides a cover behind which to organize and spurs people to share information and build community. As awareness

and outreach increase, the cover of taboo withers, and with it, so does some of the safety it has provided.

Paradox 2

Does consent matter? Can it exist? Examining the disjuncture between heterosexual marital rape exceptions and consensual queer "unnatural acts".

Consent requires speech. Choice and agency regarding sex, sexuality, and/or marriage require communication. People must be able to speak about subjects relating to sexuality to negotiate this terrain. The recent judgments discussed at the beginning of this paper provide opportunities to question whether coercion or consent can be considered normal or natural and which bodies or institutions have the power to make such determinations.

The gender order in Delhi presents paradoxical binds for transgender persons, women, and men in the law, in social norms, and in their everyday lives. Regarding section 377 IPC, Koushal, NALSA, and NAZ introduce the tension between universal human rights and which sexualities or sexual acts are considered legitimate or criminal. By upholding the exception of rape within marriage in sections 375 and 376 IPC, the anti-rape laws all but nullify the need for a woman's consent [79]. While this is indeed a problem for women, little attention is given to the bind confronting heterosexual men who learn from such a system that consent is not needed, or that "good" women will not/cannot give consent. How is a kind and ethical man to ask or proceed? And how can a desiring woman say yes?

In contrast, the language condemning "acts against the order of nature" in section 377 calls for the criminalization of any people who engage in non-reproductive sexual acts, even when they are consensual. Though the case is often made that 377 targets primarily queer/SOGI people and is largely only symbolic for most heterosexual people, the Koushal judgment significantly sends clear signals about what sorts of sexuality will and will not be legally tolerated. These issues have profound impacts on the social and emotional lives and aspirations of all people, privileging heterosexual relationships even if they are abusive, and restricting the knowledge and imagination regarding possible other forms of sexualities, affective bonds, and family forms. Consent aside, if same-sex love is unnatural, is marital rape natural?

Paradox 3

Transgender people now have rights, but queers are still criminals, and women are still subordinate. And, how does the concept of transgender simultaneously reinforce and destabilize the hierarchal gender binary?

In the India of post-NAZ, Koushal, and NALSA, unanswered questions arose: How would Indian society move forward from this moment? Will the rigid male/female hierarchy in social norms and the resulting social disparities be somewhat ameliorated? Or will the legal institutionalization of a third gender disarticulate from the other two genders, leaving the hierarchy intact? Will newly won rights introduce measures of economic reparations for transgender persons while women struggle as ever with relative poverty and economic dependence? How will the social and economic gains of transgender people impact their desires for sexuality and family? What will change for lesbian, bisexual, and gay Indians whose desires are still deemed criminal? Can transgender people have sex? And if so, with whom?

On the one hand, enforcing the marginality of transgender people reinforces the centrality of the hierarchal male/female binary. When transgender people are legally invisible, unrecognized, and outcast, they are unprotected and vulnerable to harassment and violence. Furthermore, they are seen as a threat to order, and their vulnerability is held out as a warning to women and men who do not conform to gender norms. Paradoxically, when transgender people gain the status of a legally recognized third sex, it may unintentionally

reify the hierarchal binary by providing another fixed category, which is distinct from the male/female pairing. The social discomfort and ambiguity of blurred gender boundaries can then be relieved by either viewing transgender people as moving from one primary gender to the other or by seeing them as altogether separate.

Paradox 4

Illusions of progress or backward motion? South Asian diversities versus Western and colonial homogenies.

Communities in which women have exercised expanded power and agency, as well as those that have accepted and celebrated the queer people in their midst, are far from being Western imports to India. On the contrary, colonialism and Western markets have sometimes deepened gender inequalities. Activists express concern and skepticism about aligning themselves with global LGBTQ+ movements as scholars reveal the extent of colonial and elite control over men and women, sexuality and gender, and the ways that various social kinship and sexuality histories have been erased. Viewed in a longer and larger context, Western development projects to empower women or advance gender and queer equality are seen by some as matters of a sort of amnesia [84]. Along similar lines, Spivak famously critiqued the global north for its mission of "saving brown women from brown men" [85]. However, the history of pre-colonizing Europe suggests deeply inconsistent and violent intentions toward women. The historical colonial strategy was to enforce European binaries onto all people. Any imperial efforts to save women or queer people from subjugation would be strategic later developments.

The colonial imposition of gender and sexuality binaries is starkly evident in the enactment of Section 377. However, in the case of gender, rather than attribute rational plans to colonial actors, we now have more insight into one of the most significant European erasures contributing to global misogyny: the self-inflicted European trauma in which many generations of women were tortured and killed during "witch" persecutions by elites in their own communities. The subsequent social erasures the colonizers propagated may have been less a result of planning and power and more of inherited blindness and terror. By the time they were setting up trade and imposing rules, traders and colonizers could not *see* women with power and property, and could not *see* queer kinship.

Paradox 5

Heteropatriarchal Marriage: Idealized as love but held together by a fist.

As Menon, Butler, and others attest, an impressive amount of social effort, including many forms of violence, imposed tradition, sanction, and legislation, goes into making heterosexual marriage compulsory and almost universal in India and societies around the world [21]. Heteropatriarchy represents the naturalized social structure and the ideology that preserves the vessel of the family in one form. Re/invented religious traditions [81] propagate the fear that if the family changes its constitution, nothing will hold society, or human beings, from chaos. Religious, cultural, and economic fundamentalists of every persuasion assert that without the binary gender hierarchy, people and families will lose their intelligible order and ability to function. Codified ideologies privilege some forms and make others precarious or invisible. As people transgress the taboos that protect these structures and begin to discuss and negotiate gender, sexualities, and families, other possibilities emerge and become more audible and visible, including alternate kinship and decisions to postpone or opt out of marriage.

5. Conclusions

Beyond theoretical considerations, these tectonic shifts in gender order, taboo and tolerance have life-changing consequences for people. This is where Connell's relational

gender order articulates with the lens provided by taboo and the politics of queer visibility. Inherently, the concepts of consent and choice regarding sex, sexuality, and/or marriage require communication. Consent can only be negotiated if the subjects relating to sexuality can speak and be spoken about. Increased public discussion of gender and sexuality, participation of women in education and workplaces, discussions of human rights, and reclaimed knowledge of pre-colonial and alternative sexualities and kinship systems serve to slightly flatten the power gradients that enforce heteropatriarchal norms. However, there is a catch: When discussion comes out in the open, a backlash of opposition and violence may occur. Furthermore, the infusion of (re)invented religious fundamentalisms into national politics adds fuel to this trend. This iterative process is an uneven, staggered process.

Hetero-normative patriarchy reproduces and naturalizes homophobia and the limited autonomy of women by creating and reinforcing economic, power, and wealth disparities that produce dependence and marginality. Yet Delhi abounds with ample evidence of resilience, resistance and creative transformation. People live and participate in a complex community that examines, resists, and reimagines existing gender and sexuality norms in art, media, journalism, academic spaces, civil society, and, most importantly, peer networks and relationships. While celebrated by many, these movements and changes feel threatening to others. Disruptions to the power status quo cause tension and, unfortunately, attract backlash, often in the guise of upholding and imposing tradition. This backlash is often ironically directed against the social construction of the so-called "permissive" West, which in other eras codified some of the most vehement forms of repression. With the upsurge of global, patriarchal fundamentalisms, the violence of these assertions for traditional gender and sexuality is real and dangerous, regardless of when and by whom these often-invoked traditions were invented [81]. The ways in which these fundamentalist reinventions are mobilized and resisted call for further research.

Let us reconsider the unfortunate married couple from the news story at the beginning of this text. They complied with the wishes of their families and the expectations of their communities when they entered a legally sanctioned marriage. Social norms strongly prohibited them from communicating about sexuality and prevented them from being able to truly give informed consent to the formation of their union. Perhaps they were unable to envision other relationship possibilities, much less to imagine the unhappy outcome of their short time together. The young man was unable or unwilling to be sexual with his wife, but neither could he legally engage in consensual sexual acts with a male partner. Still, it would have been legal for him to sexually coerce his wife had he been so inclined. The young woman was expected to not express a desire for a specific sexual companion or relationship, and she was no doubt aware that she would be perceived as more valuable as a bride if she remained innocent of sexual knowledge. When confronted with the actions of her husband and the shame of a failed marriage, she charged her husband with violation of the colonial anti-sodomy law, possibly to protect her reputation and chances in the future. Perhaps she broke the silence because she had the buffer of her career and resources, and perhaps partly because issues of gender and sexuality are currently being discussed more widely. Before this story came out, most of the elements would often pass unremarked; a silent wife, a husband who had sex with men, a marriage neither party wanted. Norms are common, but that does not make them just.

What happens when some aspects of gender and sexuality become more open and others are still foreclosed? In urban, middle-class India, the voices of women and men, transgender and queer people, illuminate, contradict, and amplify each other's struggles and claims. Local contests converge with larger global conversations as Indian advocates and scholars build momentum toward justice and equality in issues of gender and sexuality. In 2015, the United States Supreme Court granted same-sex couples the same largely

economic rights and benefits as heterosexual couples [86]. This decision evoked similar narratives, with patriarchal social institutions clinging to authority by invoking traditions and unquestioned natural and god-given orders. Meanwhile, almost a quarter of American women, like their Indian counterparts, will at some point endure physically or sexually abusive intimate partnerships [87]. In 2015, transgender people in the United States remained legally invisible (unlike in India after NALSA) while at the same time being vulnerable to violence and murder in disproportionate numbers [88]. As some lesbians and gays enter families that appear "normal", the rights of transgender people remain far from coherence in US jurisprudence. Amid change and stagnation, people in both nations negotiate terrains that are unordered and disheveled, lovers and legal systems at odds, social institutions ajar.

What are the implications? Gender orders intersect with every aspect of society, including economic systems, employment norms, and class expectations, adding weight and history to power hierarchies. Beyond theory and recognizing the social construction and reproduction of essentialized categories of gender, people variably embody, animate, inhabit, and contest such categories. Regardless of identity, people experience material consequences such as economic stability and instability, employment or joblessness, union formation and dissolution, pregnancy (intended and not) and childlessness, and safety or violence. How can these disparate groups, such as women, queer people, and men, work together for emancipatory goals of dignity and equality? Singly and in groups, they employ agency, power, resistance, and resilience in these ways: by becoming visible to each other and acknowledging the differing ways that norms curtail agency, by demanding, creating, and securing each other's safety from violence, and by building varieties of relationships that support sharing time, care, and economic resources. As people name and perform these processes, they transform their own and others' lives and situations. With all the histories and intersections that they embody, people exercise and are exercised upon by power. If there are actions and performances that can summon people to assemble in solidarity, those most effective will work to disarm violence and support the self-determination and emancipation of others. There is and will be backlash. The process is iterative and on-going, and that is the point. In the face of backlash, to be pitted against each other is useless and worse.

By 2015 (and still in 2025), in both New Delhi and New York, the social norms that enforce the narrow ranges of legitimate gender and relationships warp unevenly. Despite histories of foreclosures, current legal threats, economic marginality, and violent backlash, the hegemonic narrative of the heteropatriarchal family grows thin. The work continues to move into and through the intimate economics that outline changes of gendered power, caregiving, social acceptance, and access to livelihoods. These are new and ancient issues. When we listen to and beyond taboo, we hear the voices and aspirations of women and men, single, partnered, queer, and transgender people who have been here all along. The question of whether their voices are smothered and overpowered, or raised in celebration and acceptance, concerns and affects us all.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

IPC	Indian Penal Code
377	Section 377 of the IPC—a colonial era anti-sodomy law
SOGIs	sexual orientation and gender identities
NALSA	The National Legal Services Authority, India
FTM	female to male transgender identity
MTF	male to female transgender identity
FHH	female-headed household
IRB	Institutional Review Board
JNU	Jawaharlal Nehru University
NGO	non-governmental organization
HIV/AIDS	human immunodeficiency virus and the related syndrome
LGBTQ+	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer
DAWN	Development Alternatives for Women for a New Era
ISST	Institute of Social Studies Trust
RTC	The Right to Choice in Marriage
TARSHI	Talking About Reproductive and Sexual Health Issues

Appendix A



Puppet templates for the Meeting Center, Emme Edmunds, 2011.



Puppet templates for the Meeting Center, Emme Edmunds, 2011.

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