SOCIETY, SELF IMAGE AND RISK: A STUDY OF MSM COMMUNITY IN MUMBAI

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Based on the empirical work done among men having sex with men (MSM) in Mumbai this theoretical paper focuses on risk taking behaviour among the sexual minorities. It shows how the social structure dominated by heterosexual discourse leads to various health risks among the MSM. In day-to-day interaction MSM adopt dual images in public and private life. Due to these dual images and conflicts between them, they face negative emotions such as guilt and anger. Some of them reported that divulging identity means killing the honor of their family. It has been found that in few cases family members got shocked and had serious health problems like a heart attack by knowing sexual orientation of their child. Heterosexual norms create a conflict between sexual and social identities and whether a person comes out or not in both the cases it leads to tremendous psychological stress on the mind of the person. If he comes out he faces discrimination, stigma and prejudices. If he does not come out he suffers from the feeling of being a liar, a criminal. What a person does eventually depends on family environment, experiences and social circumstances. Many members of the MSM community are forced to marry to maintain family honor and this not only victimizes the person but this also ruins the life of his wife and many people are adversely affected. In the context of conflict between sexual and social identity and abnormal self image the members of sexual minorities develop subsequently, they tend to lose agency and are found engaging in risk behavior affecting their health as well health of many others who come in their contact – wife, partners, etc.

In this paper the authors argue that repeal of Anti-sodomy Law (Article 377) could create an atmosphere in which voluntary organizations could help in promoting psychological and physical health among the MSM. Through this the rate of transfer of HIV from high risk groups (HRG) to general population can also be slowed down.

The paper covers a number of issues relevant for exploring the relationship between social structure and health: social, cultural, and religious beliefs; diverse identities among MSM such as kothis, panthis, bixexuals and hijras; the process of coming out; representations of HIV/AIDS and condom use; the concept of masculinity; procreation; active coping and avoidant coping; treatment seeking; transgenderism; importance of MSM network and voluntary action.