

Barriers to education for the Queer (LGBTQ+) individuals in Nepal: A thematic analysis of lived experiences

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Abstract

This study explores the multifaceted challenges faced by queer individuals in Nepal's educational system through four key themes: societal stigma and discrimination, lack of inclusive policies, family and cultural pressures, and economic marginalization. Despite legal advancements in recognizing queer identities, students continue to face pervasive bullying, exclusion, and emotional harm in schools, often exacerbated by untrained or indifferent educators. Institutional gaps, including the absence of gender-neutral facilities and LGBTQ+-inclusive policies, further hinder safe learning environments. Beyond the classroom, deeply rooted cultural norms and family disapproval place immense emotional and psychological burdens on queer youth, frequently resulting in school dropout. Economic challenges compound these issues, particularly for those from marginalized caste, ethnic, or rural backgrounds, limiting access to educational resources and opportunities. The findings underscore the urgent need for systemic reforms ranging from inclusive policies and teacher training to community sensitization and targeted financial support to create equitable educational experiences for queer students in Nepal.

Keywords: Queer students, Educational discrimination, LGBTQ, Inclusion, Socioeconomic marginalization.

1. Introduction

According to the right to education, human rights are inherent to all individuals regardless of sex or any other status (Right to Education). These rights are inalienable, and they cannot be granted or taken away. As outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), Article 1 states: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood." Specifically, Article 26 of the UDHR proclaims that education shall be directed toward the full development of the human personality and the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Education is a fundamental human right and the foundation for personal growth, economic opportunity, and social equality (Gingrich & Giudici, 2022; Boisvert, 2022). The queer community in Nepal has made significant strides in recent years, particularly in the realm of legal recognition and advocacy (Thapaliya & Kantha, 2024). Nepal is often celebrated as a global leader in LGBTQ+ rights, being one of the first countries in Asia to decriminalize homosexuality and recognize a third gender category in its constitution. Landmark rulings by the Supreme Court of Nepal have paved the way for greater inclusion, such as the 2007 decision mandating the recognition of gender and sexual minorities and issuing citizenship documents reflecting a third gender (Bochenek & Knight, 2012; Subedi & Jha, 2023). However, for the queer community in Nepal, access to education remains a significant challenge, shaped by deep-rooted societal stigma, institutional shortcomings, and pervasive discrimination (Acharya, 2024). Despite Nepal's progressive stance on LGBTQ+ rights, including constitutional recognition of gender diversity, systemic barriers often prevent queer individuals from fully participating in educational systems. These barriers, ranging from harassment in classrooms to the lack of inclusive curricula, have profound implications for their academic attainment and broader life opportunities, perpetuating cycles of marginalization and inequality (Ojha, 2024).

Education, as a fundamental human right, is pivotal in empowering individuals and fostering social change. It is not only a pathway to personal and professional development but also a means of challenging stereotypes and dismantling systemic inequalities. However, for queer individuals in Nepal, access to education is often hindered by a multitude of barriers, ranging from overt discrimination to subtle forms of exclusion. These challenges not only limit their educational opportunities but also perpetuate cycles of marginalization and disempowerment (Campbell et al., 2024).

Globally, research highlights the negative impact of discriminatory environments on the educational outcomes of LGBTQ+ individuals, including higher dropout rates, lower self-esteem, and limited career prospects (Glazzard et al., 2020; Raja et al., 2023; Leung et al., 2022). In Nepal, the situation is exacerbated by cultural and religious norms that often reject non-heteronormative identities, leaving queer students vulnerable to isolation and the academic potential of queer students but also reinforcing societal biases against them. Mental health challenges. Educational institutions, which should ideally serve as spaces of growth and acceptance, frequently fail to address these issues, lacking policies or support mechanisms to ensure an inclusive environment (Russell et al., 2021). This gap in institutional support not only undermines.

This study aims to explore the lived experiences of queer individuals in Nepal's educational institutions, focusing on the barriers they face in accessing and thriving in these spaces. Through a thematic analysis of narratives, the research seeks to highlight the intersection of societal, institutional, and personal factors contributing to these challenges. By understanding these experiences, this research aspires to inform policymakers, educators, and advocacy groups, paving the way for more inclusive and equitable educational systems in Nepal. It also seeks to inform the development of inclusive education policies and practices that address the unique needs of queer students. Addressing these barriers is not merely a step toward equality but a crucial investment in the nation's social and economic development. Ultimately, this research advocates for a more equitable and inclusive educational environment that empowers queer individuals to thrive and challenges the systemic inequalities that perpetuate their marginalization.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Socio-Cultural Context of Queer Education in Nepal

Nepal's journey toward LGBTQ+ rights presents a complex paradox. While the 2015 Constitution recognized gender minorities and some legal protections exist, societal acceptance lags significantly (Pant et al., 2011). This disparity between legal progress and social reality creates a challenging environment for queer individuals, particularly in accessing education. Traditional patriarchal values and cultural norms often stigmatize and marginalize queer identities, making it difficult for individuals to openly assert their rights and needs. This marginalization is often reinforced within families, a crucial social unit in Nepal, where fear of social repercussions can lead to disapproval and pressure to conform, sometimes forcing queer youth to abandon their education to escape conflict. This dynamic highlights the tension between individual identity and familial expectations, a key aspect of social exclusion theory. Queer individuals may be denied access to family support, resources, and even shelter, further limiting their educational opportunities (Katz-Wise et al., 2016). This exclusion can extend beyond the family unit to wider community networks, where social stigma and discrimination can limit access to educational institutions, scholarships, and other forms of support. The intersection of cultural norms and family dynamics creates a particularly challenging environment for queer youth seeking education, demonstrating a clear need for greater understanding and acceptance within families and communities.

2.2 The Legal and Policy Landscape: Gaps and Opportunities

The gap between progressive legal rulings and their implementation is a significant barrier to inclusive education for queer individuals in Nepal. While legal advancements, such as the recognition of a third gender, are commendable, they often lack practical application within educational institutions. The absence of gender-neutral restrooms, for instance, forces queer students into uncomfortable and potentially unsafe situations, highlighting the

disconnect between policy and lived experience (Francis et al., 2022). This lack of basic infrastructure reflects a systemic problem: the absence of specific policies addressing LGBTQ+ issues in education. Schools often lack clear guidelines on how to support queer students, prevent discrimination, or address bullying. This policy vacuum leaves queer students vulnerable and contributes to an environment where their needs are overlooked. This absence of institutional support further exacerbates the social exclusion faced by queer students, limiting their access to a safe and affirming learning environment. However, this policy gap also creates an opportunity for advocacy. NGOs and advocacy groups play a crucial role in pushing for inclusive policies, advocating for systemic changes, and filling the gaps left by institutional inaction (Cader & Khanna, 2024). They work to raise awareness, provide resources, and pressure educational institutions to create truly inclusive learning environments. Examining similar challenges and policy responses in other South Asian countries, such as India, where targeted interventions like teacher training programs on gender sensitivity have been implemented, can provide valuable lessons for Nepal. Analyzing the effectiveness and limitations of these interventions can inform the development of context-appropriate policies for Nepal.

2.3 Lived Experiences of Queer Students: Navigating a Hostile Environment

Global research demonstrates that LGBTQ+ students are disproportionately affected by bullying, exclusion, and harassment in schools. In Nepal, these issues are exacerbated by the lack of inclusive policies and awareness among educators. Queer students often experience isolation due to non-heteronormative gender expressions, which leads to higher dropout rates and mental health challenges. The lack of representation in curricula further perpetuates ignorance and reinforces societal biases, denying queer students validation of their identities within academic spaces (Priddle et al., 2023; Snapp et al., 2015). This invisibility contributes to a sense of alienation and can negatively impact academic performance and overall well-being.

Furthermore, the intersection of queer identity with other marginalized identities, such as caste, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, can compound these challenges (Potter et al., 2020; Hagai et al., 2020). Queer individuals from lower castes or ethnic minorities, for instance, face compounded discrimination, experiencing both economic hardship and social marginalization. Understanding these intersectional experiences is crucial for developing targeted interventions that address the unique needs of different groups within the queer community. This research aims to explore these nuanced experiences through in-depth interviews, giving voice to the lived realities of queer students in Nepal and providing valuable insights into the specific challenges they face.

The four themes highlighted in the analysis of barriers to education for the queer community in Nepal: societal stigma and discrimination, lack of inclusive policies, family and cultural pressures, and economic barriers and marginalization are deeply rooted in both the socio-cultural context and the legal and policy landscape of Nepal, as evidenced by the literature review.

Societal Stigma and Discrimination:

This theme is justified by the significant disparity between legal progress and social reality in Nepal. Despite legal advancements like the recognition of a third gender, societal acceptance lags significantly. Traditional patriarchal values and cultural norms often stigmatize and marginalize queer identities (Salam-Salmaoui & Salam, 2024), leading to frequent bullying, name-calling, and social exclusion in educational settings (Earnshaw et al., 2020). This is consistent with global research showing that LGBTQ+ students are disproportionately affected by discriminatory environments, resulting in higher dropout rates and mental health challenges.

Lack of Inclusive Policies:

The gap between progressive legal rulings and their implementation is a significant barrier to inclusive education. The absence of gender-neutral restrooms and the lack of specific policies addressing LGBTQ+ issues in education highlight the systemic neglect within educational institutions. This policy vacuum leaves queer students vulnerable and underscores the necessity for advocacy to push for inclusive policies and systemic changes (Sousa & Gato, 2024).

Family and Cultural Pressures:

Family disapproval and cultural norms significantly impact the educational experiences of queer individuals. In Nepal, where family is a cornerstone of society, fear of social stigma often leads families to disapprove of their child's sexual orientation or gender identity (Chan et al., 2025). This can result in emotional manipulation, rejection, or even forcing queer youth to abandon their education, illustrating the tension between individual identity and familial expectations.

Economic Barriers and Marginalization:

Queer individuals in Nepal, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds, face disproportionate financial challenges. Poverty limits access to educational resources, and economic dependence on unsupportive families further restricts opportunities (Subedi & Jha, 2023; Waters et al., 2022). The scarcity of targeted scholarships and the compounded discrimination faced by queer individuals from lower castes or ethnic minorities exacerbate these economic barriers, creating a cycle of disadvantage that impacts their educational attainment.

2.4 Intersectionality and Queer Theory: A Framework for Understanding

This research utilizes intersectionality and queer theory as key analytical frameworks. Intersectionality, as developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, highlights how overlapping identities, such as gender, sexuality, caste, class, and ethnicity, interact with systems of oppression to shape the lived experiences of queer individuals (Crenshaw, 1991; Cho et al., 2013; Leung, 2022). It emphasizes the importance of understanding individuals holistically, shaped by the interaction of their various social identities and the power structures that influence them. By centering intersectionality, this research seeks to uncover the nuanced and layered barriers that queer individuals encounter in educational settings, particularly those who belong to multiple marginalized groups. The queer theory challenges the binary categories of gender and sexuality and questions the social norms and power structures that maintain these categories (Mizzi & Stebbins, 2010; Marcus, 2005). It emphasizes the fluidity and diversity of sexual and gender identities and experiences and critiques how "normal" and "deviant" are constructed and used to marginalize those who do not conform. This research will use queer theory to analyze how dominant norms about gender and sexuality shape educational experiences in Nepal and how these norms contribute to the exclusion and marginalization of queer students. By applying these theoretical frameworks, this research aims to provide a deeper understanding of the complex factors that contribute to educational disparities faced by the queer community in Nepal and to inform the development of more inclusive and equitable educational policies and practices.

3. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the barriers to education faced by the queer community in Nepal. Guided by an interpretive approach, the research seeks to understand the subjective meanings and lived experiences of queer individuals in educational settings. Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), involves identifying and analyzing recurring themes within the data. Purposive sampling is used to recruit 15 queer individuals from diverse backgrounds, including urban and rural areas, various gender identities, and different educational experiences. Participants are recruited through LGBTQ+ organizations, social media platforms, and snowball sampling. Data is collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted in Nepali or English, depending on participants' preferences. Interviews are audio-recorded with consent and later transcribed for analysis. An interview protocol with open-ended questions guides the discussions, focusing on participants' experiences of barriers to education and their strategies for navigating these challenges. Thematic analysis is conducted using Braun and Clarke's six-step framework. Data is coded and organized into themes that reflect the key barriers and experiences identified by participants.

This thematic analysis approach allows researchers to capture the depth and complexity of participants' experiences while maintaining a structured analytical process. In the study on barriers to education for the queer community in Nepal, thematic analysis helps uncover recurring challenges and coping strategies, providing a nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of queer individuals in educational settings.

Fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with queer individuals from diverse backgrounds, including urban and rural areas, various gender identities, and different educational experiences. The interviews were designed to explore the barriers they face in educational settings and their strategies to navigate these challenges. To ensure participants could express themselves freely, interviews were conducted in either Nepali or English, based on their preference. The collected data were then transcribed and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework, allowing for a deeper understanding of the participants' recurring themes and lived experiences.

Table 1
Distribution of Participants

Identities	Number
Gay men	3
Lesbian women	3
Bisexual individuals	2(1 male, 1 female)
Transgender individuals	3(2 trans men and 1 trans women)
Non-binary /genderqueer individuals	2
Intersex individuals	1
Other queer identities	1

The study adheres to strict ethical guidelines, including obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, and providing participants with support resources. It is also conducted with cultural sensitivity and respect for participants' identities and experiences.

4. Results and Analysis

This study utilized a theory-driven thematic analysis, drawing on the framework proposed by Boyatzis (1998) and further developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis centered on four core themes: Societal stigma and discrimination, lack of inclusive policies, family and cultural pressures, economic barriers, and marginalization that were established before data examination. These guiding themes were initially applied to the data, followed by a structured process of coding and classification. As the analysis progressed, the original themes were revisited and refined, allowing for the discovery of new insights and the incorporation of additional sub-themes. This iterative approach enabled a thorough interpretation of the data, grounded in the predefined thematic structure (see Figure 1)

Figure 1
Themes and Subthemes from Thematic Analysis



Theme 1: Societal stigma and discrimination

Queer individuals in Nepal often face pervasive societal stigma and discrimination within educational settings, manifesting as frequent bullying, name-calling, and social exclusion from peers. These experiences can lead to significant mental health challenges, such as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem, as queer students navigate hostile environments. The attitudes and actions of educators and school administrators play a critical role in shaping these experiences (Goldstein-Schultz, 2022); while some teachers create safe spaces and offer support, others neglect or even complicitly enable bullying and discrimination due to a lack of awareness or training on LGBTQ+ issues. This inconsistency in institutional response further exacerbates the marginalization of queer students, highlighting the urgent need for systemic changes to foster inclusive and supportive educational environments.

Theme 2: Lack of Inclusive Policies

The lack of Inclusive Policies highlights the significant gap between progressive legal frameworks and the lived realities of queer individuals within Nepal's education system. While Nepal has made strides in recognizing the third gender and other legal advancements, these progressive rulings often lack effective implementation within educational institutions. A glaring example is the absence of gender-neutral restrooms, forcing queer students into the discomfort and potential harassment of using binary facilities that do not align with their gender identity. This lack of basic infrastructure reflects a broader systemic issue: the absence of specific policies addressing LGBTQ+ issues in education. Schools often lack guidelines on how to support queer students, prevent discrimination, or address bullying (Stańczykiewicz&Senczyszyn, 2024). This policy vacuum leaves queer students vulnerable and contributes to an environment where their needs are overlooked. Consequently, NGOs and advocacy groups play a crucial role in pushing for inclusive policies, advocating for systemic changes, and filling the gaps left by institutional inaction. They work to raise awareness, provide resources, and pressure educational institutions to create truly inclusive learning environments for all students, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.

Theme 3: Family and Cultural Pressures

Family and Cultural Pressures reveal the significant impact of family disapproval and cultural norms on the educational experiences of queer individuals in Nepal. For many, family, a cornerstone of Nepali society, becomes a source of immense pressure when a family member identifies as queer. Fear of social stigma and a desire to uphold traditional values often lead families to disapprove of their child's sexual orientation or gender identity. This disapproval can manifest in various ways, from emotional manipulation and attempts to change the individual's identity to outright

rejection and disownment. In some cases, the pressure becomes so intense that queer individuals are forced to drop out of school to avoid constant conflict and maintain a semblance of peace within the family. This difficult choice highlights the tension between individual identity and familial expectations, often leaving queer individuals with limited educational opportunities and long-term consequences for their personal and professional lives. The intersection of cultural norms and family dynamics creates a challenging environment for queer youth seeking education, demonstrating the need for greater understanding and acceptance within families and communities.

Theme 4: Economic Barriers and Marginalization

Economic Barriers and Marginalization underscore the disproportionate financial challenges faced by queer individuals in Nepal, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds. Poverty significantly limits access to educational resources, often forcing queer students to drop out of school early to contribute to family income. Economic dependence on families who may be unsupportive of their queer identity further restricts educational opportunities, as financial support can be withdrawn or made conditional upon conforming to societal expectations. The scarcity of scholarships or financial aid specifically targeted at queer students exacerbates these challenges. Moreover, queer individuals from lower castes or ethnic minorities experience compounded discrimination, facing both economic hardship and social marginalization. Rural queer students often encounter greater isolation and fewer resources compared to their urban peers, limiting their access to quality education. Finally, gender-nonconforming individuals face additional barriers due to rigid gender norms, which can restrict their employment opportunities and further contribute to economic vulnerability, creating a cycle of disadvantage that impacts their educational attainment.

5. Discussions

The findings of this study reveal that Nepal's queer community faces systemic barriers to education rooted in societal stigma and institutional neglect. Despite progressive legal frameworks, such as constitutional recognition of gender diversity, queer students endure bullying, exclusion, and a lack of safe infrastructure in schools. This contradiction mirrors critiques in queer theory, which challenge the rigidity of heteronormative systems (Mizzi & Stebbins, 2010). For instance, the absence of gender-neutral restrooms and inclusive curricula perpetuates invisibility, forcing students to navigate environments that invalidate their identities. Participants' accounts of educators' complicity in discrimination, whether through silence or active marginalization, highlight systemic failures to align policy with practice. These issues are compounded by societal norms that prioritize conformity, reflecting a broader cultural resistance to challenging patriarchal and heteronormative structures. Without enforceable anti-discrimination policies and teacher training programs, Nepal's legal advancements risk remaining symbolic rather than transformative.

The intersection of cultural pressures and economic marginalization further entrenches educational disparities. Familial rejection, driven by fear of social stigma, forces many queer youth to abandon education to avoid conflict, a phenomenon amplified in Nepal's collectivist society. This aligns with intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1991), as caste, ethnicity, and the rural-urban divide compound exclusion. Rural participants, for example, reported heightened isolation and limited access to resources compared to urban peers, while lower-caste queer individuals faced layered discrimination. Economic dependence on unsupportive families exacerbates these challenges, as financial instability often truncates educational journeys. These findings underscore the inadequacy of universal solutions; tailored interventions, such as scholarships for rural queer students or vocational programs addressing caste-based barriers, are critical. The role of NGOs in bridging institutional gaps also emerged as vital, emphasizing the need for collaborative efforts to challenge systemic inequities.

Finally, the study underscores the urgent need for holistic reforms that integrate legal, institutional, and community-level changes. While Nepal's legal recognition of gender diversity is laudable, its educational system remains ill-equipped to protect queer students. Participants' calls for gender-neutral facilities, inclusive curricula, and teacher training resonate with global best practices but require localized adaptation. For example, integrating LGBTQ+

histories into textbooks could foster acceptance, while partnerships with advocacy groups might amplify queer voices in policy design. Addressing economic barriers through targeted financial aid and employment programs could also disrupt cycles of marginalization. These steps, grounded in intersectionality and queer theory, would not only align education with constitutional promises of equality but also empower queer individuals as agents of social change. By centering their lived experiences, Nepal can transform its educational institutions into spaces of belonging and opportunity.

6. Conclusions and Implications

This study underscores the urgent need to bridge the gap between Nepal's progressive legal frameworks and the lived realities of its queer community in educational spaces. Despite constitutional recognition of gender diversity and landmark court rulings, systemic barriers rooted in societal stigma, institutional neglect, and economic marginalization persistently undermine queer students' access to education. The intersection of cultural pressures, familial rejection, and caste- or region-based discrimination exacerbates these challenges, revealing the limitations of one-size-fits-all solutions. To realize the promise of equality enshrined in Nepal's constitution, educational institutions must adopt inclusive policies, such as gender-neutral infrastructure and anti-discrimination protocols, while addressing economic disparities through targeted scholarships and vocational programs.

Transformative change requires collaborative efforts among policymakers, educators, NGOs, and communities. Integrating LGBTQ+ perspectives into curricula, mandating teacher training on gender sensitivity, and amplifying queer voices in policy design are critical steps toward fostering inclusive environments. By centering intersectionality and queer theory, Nepal can dismantle heteronormative structures and empower queer individuals as agents of social progress. Ultimately, aligning legal advancements with grassroots advocacy and institutional reforms will not only uphold the rights of queer students but also strengthen Nepal's commitment to equitable and inclusive development for all.

The findings of this study carry significant implications for policymakers, educators, and advocacy groups in Nepal. Persistent societal stigma, institutional neglect, and economic marginalization threaten not only the mental health and academic success of queer students but also Nepal's broader social and economic development. Without enforceable anti-discrimination policies, gender-neutral infrastructure, and inclusive curricula, educational institutions risk perpetuating cycles of exclusion, limiting the potential of queer youth to contribute meaningfully to society. The intersection of caste, ethnicity, and rural-urban disparities further necessitates tailored interventions, such as scholarships and vocational programs, to address layered inequities. Collaboration between government bodies, NGOs, and communities is critical to translating legal progress into tangible change, ensuring that educational reforms prioritize intersectional approaches and amplify queer voices. Failure to act risks undermining Nepal's constitutional commitment to equality, while proactive measures could transform schools into spaces of empowerment, fostering inclusive growth and aligning education with the nation's progressive ideals.

7. Limitations

The study acknowledges limitations such as self-reporting bias, challenges in recruiting participants from rural areas, and the limited generalizability of qualitative findings. The study's reliance on qualitative data drawn from a relatively small number of interviews may limit the broader applicability of its findings. To address these limitations, future studies should adopt a mixed-methods approach that incorporates quantitative data and a more diverse range of participants. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into the barriers to education faced by the queer community in Nepal.

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