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SILENT STRUGGLES IN RURAL COMMUNITIES OF KALINGA: THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF CLOSETED LGBTQAI+ PROFESSIONALS AMIDST DOMINANT GENDER NORMS

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ABSTRACT: Closeted LGBTQAI+ professionals in rural areas face unique challenges due to deeply ingrained cultural conservatism, rigid gender norms, and systemic discrimination. However, research on their lived experiences remains limited, particularly in non-Western contexts. This study employs a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the struggles, identity negotiation, and coping mechanisms of 10 closeted LGBTQAI+ professionals in Kalinga, Philippines. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and analyzed using thematic phenomenological analysis to uncover key themes. Findings reveal that traditional gender norms and societal expectations compel individuals to suppress their identities, resulting in social isolation, psychological dis- tress, and constrained self-expression. Participants adopt coping mechanisms such as strategic identity concealment, close interpersonal support networks, and engagement in online communities, though these remain insufficient in addressing the systemic challenges they face. The study highlights the urgent need for community-based awareness programs, LGBTQAI+-affirming mental health ser- vices, and stronger anti-discrimination policies to foster inclusivity. Thus, expanding the discourse on LGBTQAI+ struggles in rural, non-Western societies, this research provides critical insights for policymakers, educators, and advocacy groups working toward structural reforms and social equity.

Keywords: LGBTQAI+, closeted professionals, rural communities, identity concealment, mental health

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INTRODUCTION:

This qualitative study is designed to delve into the lived experiences and challenges encountered by closeted LGBTQAI+ professionals within the sub-tribes of Kalinga Province, Philippines. While there exists a wealth of research on LGBTQAI+ issues on a global scale, there is a noticeable dearth of studies that specifically focus on rural communities, particularly in third-world nations such as the Philippines (Garcia, 2013; Tiojanco, 2024). Despite the Philippines' reputation for LGBTQAI+ friendliness, especially in urban areas, it still grapples with deeply ingrained traditional gender norms and expectations, which are particularly pronounced in rural regions (Emmanuel & Siddayao, 2021, UNDP & USAID, 2014). This study is a sincere effort to bridge this research gap and contribute to a deeper understanding of LGBTQAI+ lived experiences in the unique context of predominantly masculine and feminine rural communities in the Philippines.

To embark on this exploration, it is essential to consider the historical and cultural background of the Philippines, particularly in rural areas like Kalinga Province. The country has a complex history of colonization, with Spanish and American influences shaping social norms and values (Neferti & Guan, 2010). These historical factors have contributed to a complex of gender expectations in which LGBTQAI+ individuals find themselves embedded. In rural areas, these traditional norms may be even more deeply entrenched, making it challenging for LGBTQAI+ individuals to express their identities openly (Bazargan et al., 2021; Fernandez, 2023; Chadambuka & Warria, 2019).

The existing literature on LGBTQAI+ acceptance within Kalinga culture is limited, highlighting a crucial gap in understanding the lived experiences of closeted LGBTQAI+ professionals in the region. One of the key factors contributing to this complexity is the presence of distinct sub-tribes within Kalinga Province, each with its own cultural practices and norms. These sub-tribes may exhibit varying levels of acceptance or rejection of 4LGBTQAI+ identities, influencing the lived experiences of LGBTQAI+ individuals in different ways (Camp et al., 2020; Katz-Wise et al., 2016).

Furthermore, research suggests that LGBTQAI+ acceptance can differ significantly even within the same geographical region. Cultural traditions, social structures, and generational perspectives all play a role in shaping attitudes toward LGBTQAI+ individuals (Tomas, 2024; la Roi & Mandemakers, 2018; Stroud, 2023). Additionally, broader societal attitudes often interact with localized cultural beliefs, further influencing the lived experiences of closeted professionals (Chen & Zhou, 2021; Sadika et al., 2020).

Given these complexities, a deeper exploration of LGBTQAI+ lived experiences within Kalinga's diverse sub-tribes is necessary. Understanding how cultural context shapes acceptance and identity expression can provide valuable insights into the intersection of tradition, identity, and social inclusion in the region. One cannot discuss the lived experiences of closeted LGBTQAI+ individuals without considering the intersectionality of their identities (Beagan et al., 2022; Moorhead & Jimenez, 2020). Factors such as age, socio-economic status, and education level can profoundly impact how individuals navigate their identities within these rural communities (Woods, 2023; Beagan et al., 2022; Henriquez & Ahmad, 2021). These intersecting identities can create unique challenges and opportunities for closeted LGBTQAI+ professionals in Kalinga Province.

Due to the gap in existing research on this topic, this study aims to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on inclusivity by exploring the lived experiences of closeted LGBTQAI+ professionals in Ka- linga Province. By focusing on this marginalized group, the study seeks to highlight the need for more inclusive policies and cultural understanding within local communities. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with individuals from different sub-tribes will serve as the primary data collection methods, allowing for an in-depth examination of their personal experiences, challenges, and coping strategies (Amistad, 2022; Cámara-Liebana et al., 2023). These narratives will provide crucial insights into the realities faced by LGBTQAI+ individuals, helping to inform both academic discourse and practical interventions (Silverio et al., 2022; Cook, 2020).

Ethical considerations are central to this research, especially when working with marginalized populations. This study upholds the principles of informed consent, confidentiality, and participant anonymity to ensure the safety and well-being of all participants (Henrickson et al., 2020; Ahsan, 2024).

Studying the lived experiences of closeted LGBTQAI+ professionals in Kalinga is essential for fostering a more inclusive society. By bringing attention to their struggles and aspirations, this research can serve as a foundation for advocacy, policy development, and educational initiatives aimed at promoting acceptance and equal opportunities. Enhancing inclusivity not only benefits LGBTQAI+ individuals but also strengthens social cohesion and diversity, ultimately leading to a more just and equitable community.

OBJECTIVE

This study investigates the lived experiences of closeted LGBTQAI+ professionals in rural Kalinga, focusing on several key aspects:
1. To understand the lived experiences and struggles of closeted LGBTQAI+ professionals in rural communities of Kalinga Province.
2. To explore the impact of traditional gender norms and cultural expectations on the mental health and well-being of closeted LGBTQAI+ individuals.
3. To identify coping mechanisms and support systems used by closeted LGBTQAI+ professionals in navigating their daily lives.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design
This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of closeted LGBTQAI+ professionals in Kalinga Province, Philippines. Phenomenology was selected for its capacity to capture the rich, nuanced realities of individuals from marginalized communities, particularly how they perceive, interpret, and navigate their experiences. This approach provided an in-depth exploration of identity concealment, cultural pressures, professional challenges, and coping mechanisms, allowing participants to articulate their realities in their own terms (Vestlie, 2021; Henriquez & Ahmad, 2021).

Participants and Sampling Procedure
The study used purposive sampling to select 10 closeted LGBTQAI+ professionals from rural Kalinga who met criteria including self-identification as LGBTQAI+, active professional engagement, and cultural roots in the region. Including married participants provided insight into navigating heteronormative and familial pressures. The sample size was determined by data saturation, ensuring comprehensive coverage of thematic insights. This targeted approach enabled an in-depth exploration of the complex identity negotiations, cultural constraints, and professional experiences faced by closeted LGBTQAI+ individuals in a conservative rural context, capturing diverse yet shared perspectives within this marginalized population.

Data Collection

Data were collected via semi-structured in-depth interviews, enabling participants to openly share personal experiences, challenges, and coping strategies in a flexible, participant-led format. This method supported a nuanced exploration of themes while addressing core research objectives. To enhance validity and reliability, the interview guide was assessed for qualitative content validity, ensuring clarity, cultural sensitivity, and effectiveness in eliciting meaningful responses. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent to ensure accurate data capture, transcription, and comprehensive analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic phenomenological analysis to identify recurring themes within participants' narratives, enabling a systematic exploration of how traditional gender norms and cultural expectations impact identity, mental health, and coping among LGBTQAI+ professionals in Kalinga (Leung, 2021; Rosati et al., 2020; Naeem et al., 2023). Multiple coding cycles were conducted to ensure themes emerged organically from the data rather than researcher bias. This rigorous, reflective process captured both collective challenges and individual coping mechanisms, providing a nuanced understanding of the participants' lived experiences within their cultural context.

Ethical Considerations

The study prioritized ethical safeguards to protect the vulnerable LGBTQAI+ participants, ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, and emotional well-being. Identifying information was anonymized, with pseudonyms used to prevent exposure. Mental health resources were provided to address potential distress. Researcher reflexivity was maintained to enhance credibility, with team members including LGBTQAI+ individuals and gender rights advocates offering cultural sensitivity. To minimize bias, peer debriefing, member checking, and methodological triangulation were employed. The diverse research team, comprising experts from the Gender and Development Technical Working Group and LGBTQAI+ advocacy, ensured a rigorous, balanced analysis while fostering a safe environment for participants.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

The Lived Experiences and Struggles of Closeted LGBTQAI+ Professionals in Rural Communities of Kalinga Province

The experiences of closeted LGBTQAI+ professionals in Kalinga Province highlight the difficulties of navigating a conservative social landscape. Cultural norms, workplace constraints, social isolation, and the emotional burden of secrecy shape their struggles.

Identity Concealment and Cultural Expectations

Kalinga Province, like many rural communities in the Philippines, upholds strong indigenous traditions and religious values that reinforce heteronormativity. Social structures prioritize family honor and conformity, discouraging deviations from traditional gender roles. As a result, LGBTQAI+ professionals often feel compelled to hide their identities to avoid discrimination and social repercussions, leading to significant emotional and psychological strain (Mane, 2021).

Participants 8 and 9, respectively, expressed how societal expectations dictate their behavior:

"Even at work, I have to be careful about how I speak and act because I don't want people to suspect."

"I only feel free to be myself when I'm outside the province, where people don't know me and are more open-minded."

LGBTQAI+ individuals often engage in passing—modifying behavior to conform to heteronormative norms—which entails identity suppression with significant psychological costs. Continuous concealment is strongly linked to adverse mental health outcomes, including chronic stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion (Brennan, 2019; Bouma-Sims et al., 2024). Fear of discrimination fosters self-doubt and lowers self-esteem, limiting personal and professional advancement as individuals avoid visibility in leadership or social roles (Hailey et al., 2020; Dotan, 2024; Leung, 2021; Roughley, 2014). Research in conservative and rural contexts confirms that identity suppression exacerbates psychological distress, with cultural and religious factors in Kalinga intensifying barriers to support and authentic self-expression (Hemphill, 2020; Levitt et al., 2020; Reynish et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2023; Garcia et al., 2019).

Social Isolation as a Means of Self-Preservation

In rural communities, privacy is difficult to maintain due to tight-knit social structures, making it challenging for LGBTQAI+ professionals in Kalinga Province to live authentically. Fear of exposure forces

many to adopt self-imposed isolation as a defense mechanism against discrimination. Unlike urban settings, where anonymity offers some level of protection, rural areas present fewer opportunities to remain unseen, further intensifying the pressure to conceal one's identity.

Many participants shared their experiences of isolation:

Participant 3: *"I've learned to keep to myself because I know the people here won't understand."*

Participant 7: *"I would like to be part of the community, but I'm always afraid of being outed and rejected."*

Isolation among LGBTQAI+ individuals may reduce direct discrimination but simultaneously heightens loneliness and emotional distress. Lack of meaningful social interaction fosters exclusion, depression, and internalized stigma, undermining mental health and identity development (Garcia et al., 2019). Prolonged withdrawal is linked to increased depression, social anxiety, and suicidal ideation, particularly in rural areas with limited mental health resources. Establishing inclusive networks and safe spaces is crucial to improve emotional well-being and belonging (Bouma-Sims et al., 2024; Mane, 2021; Research confirms poorer mental health outcomes in isolated communities, driven by stigma and lack of support (Roughley, 2014; Hailey et al., 2020). These findings highlight the need for inclusive policies and community initiatives to promote acceptance and integration.

Workplace Constraints and Professional Barriers

Workplaces in Kalinga Province remain deeply conservative and often reinforce traditional gender norms. Unlike corporate environments in major cities that have begun adopting diversity policies, rural workplaces provide little to no protection for LGBTQAI+ employees. This lack of inclusivity forces many professionals to suppress their identities at work, limiting their ability to fully engage with colleagues and career opportunities. The fear of being ostracized or discriminated against often discourages LGBTQAI+ individuals from asserting themselves in professional settings (Mara et al., 2020).

Participants described how workplace discrimination influences their behavior:

Participant 2: *"I have to be careful about how I interact with colleagues because I don't want them to suspect anything."*

Participant 5: *"Workplace gossip can be ruthless. I've seen how people talk about others, and I don't want to be the subject of those conversations."*

LGBTQAI+ professionals often experience workplace anxiety that reduces job satisfaction and leads to self- censorship, limiting career growth, networking, and professional confidence. Many opt for lower-profile roles to avoid scrutiny (Reynish et al., 2023). The lack of anti-discrimination policies discourages pursuit of leadership, contributing to income disparities and stagnation. Conformity pressures harm individual well-being and workplace productivity, while inclusive environments enhance innovation and collaboration (Levitt et al., 2020; Reynish et al., 2023). Research in rural settings highlights discrimination's economic impact, with insufficient institutional support forcing invisibility and limiting mentorship and advancement opportunities (Mara et al., 2020). Persistent workplace discrimination reflects broader societal biases, under- scoring the need for policy reform and awareness initiatives to foster equitable professional spaces (Rough- ley, 2014; Hailey et al., 2020).

The Emotional Toll of Living in Secrecy

Constantly concealing one's identity creates a persistent emotional burden for LGBTQAI+ professionals, leading to severe psychological distress. The pressure to conform to societal expectations fosters anxiety, self-doubt, and emotional exhaustion, making it difficult for individuals to fully express themselves. Many participants described their struggles, emphasizing how secrecy affects their well-being, specifically participants 3 and 8, respectively:

"It's exhausting to always pretend. Sometimes, I just want to leave and start over somewhere else."

"I wish I could be honest with my family, but I know they wouldn't accept me."

Living in secrecy imposes significant mental strain, as individuals are caught between their authentic identities and external expectations, resulting in chronic stress, self-censorship, and hindered personal and professional development (Mane, 2021). Prolonged identity suppression contributes to exhaustion, internal conflict, and

increased isolation. Research links these experiences to depression, self-hatred, and suicidal ideation, with lack of familial and societal acceptance reducing life satisfaction and psychological resilience. Without supportive environments, LGBTQAI+ individuals face barriers to authentic self-expression. Addressing these challenges requires targeted mental health interventions and inclusive community initiatives to foster acceptance and well-being (Bouma-Sims et al., 2024). Studies highlight that those in conservative contexts experience heightened stress and emotional distress, underscoring the urgent need for accessible mental health services and support programs (Hemphill, 2020; Levitt et al., 2020).

The Impact of Traditional Gender Norms and Cultural Expectations on Mental Health and Well-Being

The intersection of gender norms, cultural expectations, and mental health is a significant aspect of the lived experiences of LGBTQAI+ individuals in Kalinga Province. The data reveals that the pressure to conform to traditional gender roles, the fear of judgment, and the societal expectation of marriage and family life contribute to chronic stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion.

The Psychological Burden of Conforming to Gender Norms

Traditional Kalinga society, like many other indigenous and rural Filipino communities, upholds deeply entrenched gender norms. Masculinity and femininity are strictly defined, and any deviation is often met with social disapproval. For LGBTQAI+ individuals, failing to conform to these prescribed roles results in immense pressure to modify their behavior and presentation to align with societal expectations. This constant struggle forces individuals to suppress their true selves to avoid judgment, exclusion, and discrimination.

Many participants shared the emotional and psychological toll of forced conformity, describing the exhaustion of continuously adapting their identities to meet societal norms.

One participant (9) expressed:

"The constant need to act a certain way to fit in is exhausting. I sometimes feel like I'm living a double life."

Another (participant 4) highlighted the anxiety of maintaining secrecy:

"I feel like I'm always walking on eggshells, constantly worried someone will find out who I really am."

The burden of identity suppression compels LGBTQAI+ individuals to navigate daily interactions with heightened caution due to fear of rejection, generating chronic stress and emotional distress. Prolonged forced conformity leads to emotional exhaustion, identity fragmentation, and increased risk of depression and anxiety (Dorn et al., 2023; Lintner, 2020; Singh et al., 2022). Constant self-monitoring undermines self-esteem and well-being, impairing social relationships and career prospects while fostering isolation and self-doubt. Minority stress theory research demonstrates that identity concealment significantly elevates psycho-logical distress (Timmins et al., 2019). Studies in rural Southeast Asia further reveal that rigid gender norms exacerbate mental health challenges among LGBTQAI+ populations, underscoring the necessity for inclusive policies and mental health support (Tan & Saw, 2022).

Visibility, Scrutiny, and Fear of Judgment

In rural communities, where diversity is less accepted compared to urban centers, individuals who do not conform to traditional gender roles often face heightened scrutiny. Gender nonconforming individuals, in particular, become targets of curiosity, gossip, and discrimination due to their visibility. This societal pressure creates an environment where LGBTQAI+ individuals feel constantly watched, reinforcing feelings of vulnerability and stress.

One participant (4) described the discomfort of standing out in public:

"As a woman who dresses more masculine, I get questions and stares, and it makes me anxious."

This heightened awareness of being observed forces individuals to become hyper-vigilant about their appearance and behavior. The fear of being judged or ridiculed leads many to alter how they present themselves, further exacerbating feelings of anxiety and self-consciousness.

The constant fear of judgment affects self-confidence and social interactions, often pushing LGBTQAI+ individuals to avoid public spaces or withdraw from community activities. Many modify their natural behaviors to minimize scrutiny, limiting their ability to fully engage with their communities. This contributes to social isolation and restricts opportunities for personal and professional growth (Bowling et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2022).

Research on gender nonconforming individuals in rural settings confirms that increased visibility frequently results in discrimination and exclusion ((Kaplan et al., 2019)). Similarly, studies conducted in the Philippines indicate that LGBTQAI+ individuals in conservative communities experience heightened anxiety due to the constant risk of being singled out and marginalized ((Wong et al., 2024; Aquino et al., 2023; Alibudbud, 2023)). The persistent pressure to conform or remain unnoticed reinforces the need for inclusive policies and awareness programs to foster a more accepting environment.

Cultural Expectations of Marriage and Family Life

Marriage and family are deeply embedded in Filipino culture, serving as fundamental social pillars that dictate individual life trajectories. In rural communities like Kalinga, these expectations are even more rigid, reinforcing heteronormativity as the default life path. From a young age, individuals are conditioned to believe that marriage and parenthood are inevitable milestones, with little room for deviation. For LGBTQAI+ individuals, this creates an immense psychological burden, as they are constantly reminded that their lives are expected to conform to traditional norms. The pressure from family and community to marry and raise children leaves them feeling trapped, torn between the need for acceptance and the desire to live authentically.

Participant 1 expressed deep frustration with these expectations:

"There's this expectation to marry and start a family, and I feel pressured to follow this path, even though it's not what I want."

Participant 10 echoed the internal struggle of choosing between family approval and self-acceptance:

"No matter how much I achieve, my family still thinks my life is incomplete because I'm not married. It's like nothing I do matters unless I follow the path they want for me."

LGBTQAI+ individuals often experience profound emotional turmoil due to societal expectations that force them to conceal their true identities. Fear of disownment, ridicule, or bringing shame leads many to conform, while others endure guilt over potential familial estrangement. Some enter heterosexual marriages to avoid stigma, resulting in emotional detachment and loss of authentic selfhood. Others may choose self-exile to escape judgment, facing loneliness and disconnection (Domingo & Escobido, 2024; The Trevor Project, 2024). Research in the Philippines links rigid marital expectations to significant psychological distress, including alienation and emotional exhaustion (Pachankis et al., 2015). These findings emphasize the need for inclusive dialogues, mental health support, and community initiatives that allow LGBTQAI+ individuals to pursue authentic lives without sacrificing family acceptance.

The Emotional Toll of Self-Monitoring

Closeted LGBTQAI+ individuals in conservative communities, self-monitoring becomes a necessary sur- vival mechanism. The constant regulation of speech, behavior, and appearance is a way to avoid suspicion and protect themselves from discrimination, exclusion, or even violence. However, this relentless need to blend in comes at a significant emotional cost, leading to exhaustion, anxiety, and a diminished sense of self. Participants described the overwhelming mental strain of being perpetually cautious:

Participant 7: *"I always have to think before I speak or act. It's tiring to always filter myself just to avoid suspicion."*

Participant 9: *"It's like wearing a mask every single day. Even with family, I can't fully relax because I don't know how they'd react if they found out."*

Persistent self-policing compels suppression of authentic identity, creating chronic anxiety and emotional distress. Fear of exposure leads to extreme self-censorship, causing frustration, isolation, and internal conflict. Long-term effects include identity suppression, reduced self-confidence, and emotional fatigue, hindering authentic relationships and limiting social and professional engagement (Moagi et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2022). Psychological research links prolonged self-monitoring to increased stress, burnout, and deteriorating mental health, including anxiety and depression (Shaikh et al., 2024). These findings emphasize the critical need for safe spaces and inclusive policies that enable LGBTQAI+ individuals to express themselves authentically without compromising mental well-being.

Identity Suppression and Mental Health Struggles

Identity suppression, or the deliberate concealment of one's sexual orientation or gender identity to conform to societal norms, creates a profound psychological burden. For many LGBTQAI+ individuals,

especially in conservative communities, this suppression becomes a daily survival strategy, but over time, it erodes their mental and emotional well-being. The inability to openly express one's identity fosters internalized homophobia, self-doubt, and a deep sense of alienation.

Three participants described the emotional toll of long-term identity suppression:

Participants 3: *"It's mentally draining to keep hiding who I am. Some days, I just want to disappear and start fresh somewhere else."*

Participants 6: *"I've gotten so used to pretending that I sometimes feel like I've lost myself in the process."*

Participants 10: *"I laugh and go along with the jokes, but inside, I feel like I'm erasing myself bit by bit just to fit in."*

Prolonged concealment of identity results in silent suffering, as the pressure to conform forces compartmentalization of the true self, causing emotional exhaustion and detachment from identity. This sustained effort leads to diminished self-worth and social alienation. Identity suppression is strongly associated with mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety, and burnout. Chronic stress, low self-esteem, and reduced personal fulfillment are common outcomes of fear of exposure, hindering self-acceptance and meaningful social connections (Brennan, 2019). Research consistently shows that inability to express authentic identity increases the risk of psychological distress, underscoring the urgent need for inclusive environments and mental health support to break the cycle of invisibility and emotional suffering.

Coping Mechanisms and Support Systems Used by Closeted LGBTQAI+ Professionals in Navigating Their Daily Lives

LGBTQAI+ professionals in Kalinga navigate a complex and often hostile environment that necessitates various coping mechanisms and informal support systems. The findings reveal that many rely on close friend- ships, online communities, personal hobbies, and other strategies to manage emotional distress. However, these individual coping mechanisms highlight the broader need for structural support and policy reforms to address systemic discrimination.

Relying on Close Friendships for Emotional Support

In the absence of institutional support, LGBTQAI+ individuals often turn to their closest friendships for solace and emotional security. In rural communities like Kalinga, where LGBTQAI+ organizations and safe spaces are scarce, personal relationships become the most accessible and reliable form of support. These friendships serve as lifelines, offering understanding, validation, and a rare space where individuals can express themselves without fear of judgment.

Many participants emphasized the significance of having a trusted group of friends to provide emotional stability and a sense of belonging. Participant 2 shared:

"I have a small group of friends who know about me, and they're my support system. They keep me grounded."

While participant 1 echoed this sentiment, highlighting the deep impact of even a single supportive relation- ship:

"Having even one person I can talk to makes all the difference."

These friendships serve as vital safe spaces where LGBTQAI+ professionals can temporarily alleviate the psychological burden of identity concealment and express their authentic selves. The emotional support within these close-knit networks is essential for sustaining mental well-being by mitigating stress associated with societal conformity. However, while such peer support reduces isolation and enhances psychological resilience, it cannot fully offset pervasive societal pressures or replace the need for formal institutional protections and advocacy. Reliance on informal networks underscores gaps in workplace and community acceptance, limiting opportunities for broader social recognition and rights (Hailey et al., 2020; Hemphill, 2020). Research confirms that strong peer connections improve mental health outcomes but must be complemented by systemic efforts to achieve lasting inclusivity.

Seeking Comfort in Online Communities

With limited acceptance in their immediate surroundings, many LGBTQAI+ professionals seek refuge in digital spaces, where they can connect with like-minded individuals without fear of judgment. In rural com- munities, where LGBTQAI+ organizations and safe spaces are scarce, online platforms become a crucial source of support. These virtual communities provide a sense of belonging and validation that is often unavailable offline, offering individuals an opportunity to express themselves more freely.

Participants 4 and 3 described the significance of online support in their lives, respectively:

"I can connect with people online who understand what I'm going through. It's like having a second family."

"Whenever things get tough, I turn to social media or LGBTQAI+ forums. It's comforting to know I'm not alone, even if I don't have many people here."

Digital platforms function as virtual safe spaces where LGBTQAI+ individuals can openly discuss experiences and receive emotional support without immediate fear of discrimination or exposure. These online communities offer empowerment and aid in navigating identity suppression in physical environments. However, reliance on digital spaces may exacerbate feelings of isolation from local communities, rendering online interactions temporary rather than sustainable support (Qidwai, 2022). Research indicates that online networks are critical for identity formation and emotional support, especially in conservative contexts with limited offline resources (Wandrekar & Nigudkar, 2021). Although online engagement can improve mental health, further study is needed on its long-term impact. Such platforms should complement, not replace, efforts to create inclusive physical environments (Town et al., 2021; Wandrekar & Nigudkar, 2021).

Using Hobbies as a Coping Strategy

Engaging in hobbies provides LGBTQAI+ professionals with a vital means of managing stress and expressing themselves in non-verbal ways. In communities where identity suppression is necessary for social acceptance, creative and recreational activities offer an escape from daily pressures. Whether through art, music, sports, or writing, these hobbies create moments of freedom and self-expression that are often unavailable in public spaces.

Participants shared how their personal interests help them cope with the challenges of identity concealment:

Participants 8: *"I try to focus on things I enjoy, like painting, which helps me escape the stress of hiding."*

Participants 5: *"When I'm playing music, I feel free. It's one of the few moments where I can truly be my- self."*

The findings demonstrate that engagement in personal hobbies functions as a psychologically protective mechanism for LGBTQAI+ individuals, providing emotional regulation, a sense of agency, and fulfillment in contexts where identity expression is constrained. Participation in creative or physical activities reduces stress and supports mood stabilization, aligning with broader evidence showing reductions in anxiety, de- pression, and improved overall well-being across populations.

Nevertheless, the research highlights that while these leisure practices offer temporary refuge, they cannot resolve the underlying societal and structural barriers that enforce invisibility and concealment. Sustainable well-being requires systemic interventions—such as advocacy, inclusive environments, and policy changes—to reduce reliance on private coping and enable authentic, stigma-free identity expression (Nematy et al., 2022).

The Limitations of Individual Coping Strategies

While LGBTQAI+ professionals in Kalinga employ various coping mechanisms to navigate daily challenges, these strategies do not eliminate the deeper systemic issues of discrimination, exclusion, and identity suppression. Despite finding temporary relief through self-care and support networks, many still experience the emotional toll of living in a society that does not fully accept them.

Participants 1 and 9, respectively, expressed their frustration with the limitations of personal coping mechanisms:

"I wish I didn't have to hide who I am just to be accepted. It's exhausting to keep pretending."

"Even though I have ways to manage stress, it doesn't change the fact that I can't be my true self here."

Individual coping strategies, though beneficial, are insufficient to address the systemic discrimination faced by LGBTQAI+ individuals. The constant need to conceal one's identity contributes to psychological distress, social isolation, and constrained self-expression. Without structural change, these individuals remain burdened by the pressures of conforming to heteronormative norms. While personal resilience is important, it must be reinforced by systemic reforms that promote inclusivity and challenge institutionalized discrimination. Sustainable change requires inclusive policies, public education campaigns, and workplace protections to foster broader societal acceptance. These structural interventions are essential to ensure that LGBTQAI+ individuals are not merely coping but are empowered to live openly, with dignity and equal access to opportunities (Sharma, 2021).

The Need for Structural Support and Policy Changes

Beyond individual strategies, the absence of institutional protections leaves LGBTQAI+ professionals vulnerable to discrimination, particularly in the workplace and public spaces. Without clear policies ensuring their rights and safety, many are forced to navigate uncertain and often hostile environments where acceptance depends entirely on the attitudes of those around them.

Participant 3 emphasized the need for systemic reform:

"We need actual protections in place. Right now, everything depends on whether the people around you are accepting or not."

Participant 4 voiced concern over the lack of workplace policies:

"There are no clear rules protecting LGBTQAI+ employees. That makes it hard to feel safe at work."

These insights reveal a critical gap—while personal support systems provide some relief, they cannot replace the need for legal protections, workplace inclusion policies, and broader public education. The absence of anti-discrimination laws and inclusive work environments leaves LGBTQAI+ individuals in precarious positions, forcing them to choose between career advancement and authenticity.

Advocacy efforts should prioritize the development of anti-discrimination policies, the establishment of LGBTQAI+ resource groups, and the promotion of awareness campaigns that foster inclusivity. Without these changes, LGBTQAI+ professionals in Kalinga will continue to live in secrecy, unable to fully participate in society without fear of repercussions (Mara et al., 2020).

Fostering LGBTQAI+ rights requires more than just individual resilience—it demands collective action from employers, policymakers, and society at large. Workplace protections, labor rights initiatives, and inclusive policies play a crucial role in ensuring that LGBTQAI+ individuals can live and work without fear of dis- crimination (Mara et al., 2020).

CONCLUSION

This study examines the psychosocial challenges faced by closeted LGBTQAI+ professionals in rural Kalinga, where adherence to traditional gender norms and cultural expectations contributes to identity suppression, emotional distress, and increased risk of mental health issues, including anxiety and depression. Although participants employ coping mechanisms such as maintaining close interpersonal relationships, engaging in online communities, and practicing self-care, these strategies remain inadequate in addressing systemic marginalization. The findings highlight the critical need for structural interventions, including inclusive education, accessible mental health services, and the establishment of safe spaces. Sustainable inclusion requires confronting normative frameworks and promoting environments that support authentic identity ex- pression.

Promoting LGBTQAI+ inclusion in rural Kalinga necessitates an integrated approach involving education, mental health services, policy reform, and community engagement. Evidence-based interventions— such as comprehensive awareness programs, affirming mental health care, legal protections, and the creation of safe spaces—are essential to reduce stigma, enhance psychosocial well-being, and support authentic identity ex- pression.

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