Challenging conformity: Experiences and impact of gender policing on the queer community in Kerala

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Contents

List of Tables

List of Appendices

Abstract

The study focuses on the experiences of gender policing on queer women in Kerala, India. This study is important as it challenges the rigid gender binary system following the gender norms. It is relevant as it promotes and advocates for an inclusive society. The main research question seeks to answer how the gender expression of queer women play a role in their gender policing experiences. This study is conducted through a qualitative interviewing approach which took place in Kerala. The findings revealed that gender expression of a queer women is non-conforming to the gender binary system and hence as a regulatory mechanism, gender policing is undertaken.

Relevance to Development Studies

Reviewing literature on the impact of gender policing on the queer community, the relevance of the identity as a queer woman in Kerala was noticed. In a world filled with oppression, discrimination, and homophobia, this study attempts to capture this reality to shed light on the life of the people outside the gender binary system. This research focuses on the cisgendered heteronormative hegemony that suppresses the identities that are non-conforming to the gender binary. The critical focus of the study highlights the life experiences of the diverse gender and sexual identities.

Keywords

Queer Women; Queer Feminist Perspective; Heteropatriarchy; Gender performativity; Gender Policing; Gender Expression; Gender Identity.

CHAPTER 1
Setting the stage for Inquiry: An Introduction

1.1 Introduction

"'Can't you live like a woman?' or 'are you planning to marry a woman?' Whenever I wear clothes those are "masculine", my family or relatives asks me this question. This brings the heteronormativity that states that only a man is supposed to marry a woman. All these "little things" they state, screws up with your mind. We start to question what is right? What is wrong? What are we supposed to do? And what are we not supposed to do? Everything becomes blurry for us, leaving us in that loop for a long time. The only way is to get strong and break out of that loop, ignoring all those manipulations and start believing that you are own your own and live as you like" (Ayisha, September 2023).

In certain societies around the world, there are assigned roles and expectations for each individual based on their gender identity. The gender identity and expression of an individual is often subjected to follow what we refer to as "gender norms". These gender norms shape the way in which these individuals live. The above narrative is the Ayisha's experience of being subject to gender norms. But now think about how it will turn out to be, when these norms are not just established but enforced in an Indian state as unique as Kerala? Kerala, with its impressive human development and remarkable growth rate, tells the peculiar story revolving around the complex dynamics of gender norms and the existence of a heteropatriarchal society that replaced a historical matrilineal system (Kartha, 2020). Gender norms, in this study, are understood as the expectations and roles assigned to each individual's perceived gender and they are produced and reproduced through repeated acts or performances (Butler, n.d.). A heteropatriarchal society establishes heteronormativity[1] and hegemonic masculinity[2] by reinforcing the gender binary system, which rejects the existence of any other gender than man and woman. This gender binary system assigns traits of femininity and masculinity, imposed through gender policing. Gender policing is one of the important concepts used in this study. Gender policing throughout this paper implies the negative consequences in the form of implicit or explicit feedback received when one is accomplishing gender inappropriately and non-conforming according to the contextual norms, expressions, and ideals (Lauren, 2013).

These concepts of gender norms followed by the practicing of gender policing in a dynamic heteropatriarchal society, brings us to one of the most challenged groups in this complex environment, that is, queer women in Kerala. (Debnath, 2017). Queer is seen as a new approach to sexuality that includes gays, lesbians, transgender, transsexual and so on. Queer women in Kerala demonstrates a new layer of complex societal expectations, as their sexuality and gender intersect adding on to the usual gender policing of "how a woman should act/live". The expression of their gender identity can bring a specific tension around them which sometimes pave way to resistance or resilience.

This study focuses on these experiences of gender policing faced by queer women in Kerala as they express their gender identity. This research paper delves into the various nature of this research problem to provide a comprehensive understanding of how the gender expression of queer women in Kerala shaped the experiences of gender policing they encountered, how they challenged these experiences and what strategies were employed to overcome this. This paper aims to provide both a perception of empowerment and a scene of vulnerability in a heteropatriarchal society.

1.2 Nature of the Research Problem

As Butler put it, "the assault on gender is also the assault on democracy" (Butler, 2023). As a democratic country, Indian constitutional law goes in the wrong direction by leaving queer sexualities untouched (Narrain, 2007). Indian society does not fulfill the "perfection" of (ensuring rights) freedom to create a world that is not governed by the constructive framework of heterosexiam and patriarchy (Narrain, 2013). This study lies on the centre of these issues and links together the complicated relation between gender, sexuality, and societal norms. The research problem is specifically linked to the context of Kerala, known as the "God's Own Country" famous for its scenery, cultural diversity, and high literacy rate. The experiences of gender policing on queer women in Kerala and the role of gender expression is the focus point of this study. This research problem finds its roots in the contextual factors, such as the transition to patriarchy and establishment of heteronormativity leading to heteropatriarchy, that serve as critical factors that influence the challenges, resilience, opportunities, or ambitions put in front of these women.

Having a social justice perspective to the research problem brings in the inextricably linked concepts of equality and inclusivity. In a society that privileges heterosexuality and follow rigid gender norms, it seems like these concepts are invisible. In a heteronormative society that is rules by the gender norms, the gender binary system prevents acceptance of any other identities outside the binary, which results in discrimination and inequality. As Butler puts it, "what it is to be a woman, or indeed what it is to be a man or any other gender, is an open-ended question" (Butler, 2023). An individual's gender expression should not be oppressed by the societal norms. However, these oppressions go beyond one's mere observation; what we need is change. Change in the way we perceive gender and sexuality. Change through challenging the prevailing norms, heterosexuality, patriarchy and promoting equal rights and inclusivity.

This takes us to the relation with the dynamics of gender and sexuality. To analyse the research problem, the gender is understood as socially constructed and is one's innermost concept of themselves as a man, woman, transgender or even non-binary, whereas sexuality includes a plethora of orientations and refers to who one is attracted to (American Psychological Association, 2019). These dynamics are important, as in Kerala context, the sex assigned at birth and the gender we were taught to be, sometimes determines how you live your life. That is, when we look at the politics of sexuality from the Kerala-Indian context, we see that cultures refuses to accept diverse sexualities with kindness, instead they accept them and divide them into good and bad sexualities creating a hierarchy of sex (Narrain, 2006). These refusal, challenges and dynamics creates the experiences of resilience and resistance, is explored in this paper through the understanding of interwoven intricacy of gender and sexuality.

1.3 A Basic Map Towards the Study

Research Problem: There is an assumption that as Kerala is known for its literacy rates, the society is also as progressive as these rates. However, when we delve into the reality of people who do not conform to the gender binary system, it reveals the truth about various forms of consequences for their gender expression.

> *"As lawyers we have had to deal with a number of cases of adult lesbians who run away with their lovers and are pursued by their families who track them down and ensure that the local police station files a case of kidnapping against the older woman, thereby forcibly separating them and ensuring that they go back to their parental homes" (Narrain, 2007).*

This is just one example of separating same-sex couples all-around India. The research problem in this study focuses on the experiences of gender policing on queer women in Kerala and the role of gender expression in it. This problem allows to have an immense exploration of the struggles,

challenges, and celebration of the marginalized and discriminated queer women and sheds light on the need to foster inclusivity and social justice.

Problem Justification: The existence of gender policing because of non-conforming gender expression explains that the problem highlights the social inequalities and injustices. Kerala, with its high literacy rate and progressive status, fails to come out of the conservative perspective. Kerala continuous to foster heteronormative values and gender norms/expectations. By addressing this problem, it acknowledges the complex interplay of gender and sexuality and sheds light on how diverse humans are. The reality is that those people in power decides which biological difference between people will put them in particular categories. In such circumstances, those who do not fit into these categories are shamed into secrecy, made to disappear, or even dealt by physical interventions (Jolly, 2000). These reality calls for an urgent need to empower these individuals, who are impacted by gender policing due to their gender identity and expression, and to challenge the oppressive norms and toxic heterosexual frameworks.

Research Objectives: This study aims to understand the experiences of gender policing and its impact on queer women in Kerala. I will be analysing how their identity as a woman and other intersecting identities of queer women shapes their experiences of gender policing. These intersecting identities are not limited to their gender or sexual orientation, it includes caste, religion and socioeconomic status. This study analyses the impact of these experiences, both including the positive and negative impacts. Thus, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how gender norms and expectations operates around the gender minority and how these have a long-term impact in their lives. Given this context the research question and sub-questions are:

Research Question: How does the gender expression of queer women in Kerala shape the experiences of gender policing faced by them?

Sub-Questions:

- How do queer women in Kerala challenge gender policing?
- To what extent do queer women in Kerala experience gender policing and what are the difference forms of gender policing experienced?
- How do the rigid gender norms enforcement in a heteropatriarchy impact the lives of queer women in Kerala?
- What are the ways in which queer women in Kerala fought back or resist the gender policing?
- What support system or coping up mechanism do queer women in Kerala use to face these challenges put forward by the heteropatriarchal community?

Limitations & Recommendations: I acknowledge that the focus of my study is on a very diverse group of queer women in Kerala. The experiences narrated by each woman during the field work derived based on their other identities such as different religious background, family status and so on. Even though, the research took place smoothly, one of the notable limitations was that due to the frequency of gender policing experiences which began from the childhood, it was considered 'normal' by some of the participants. The intensity of the issue was ignored. This created a hurdle to get relevant answers from some of the participants. Even though, the study covers whole of Kerala and women from different cities, the sample size is small. A recommendation for the future study is that a higher sample size might lead towards unexplored themes.

1.4 Academic and Social relevance

The social relevance of this research problem can be seen in its position to challenge the current state of affairs aiming to promote a more inclusive just society breaking the gender binary system. By shedding light on the unspoken incidents of gender policing, this paper delves into the experiences inside the four walls of households. The other side of the study provides a platform for the marginalised sexualities to speak out and advocate for their rights. Being told to "behave like a woman/girl" or "someday you have to marry a man, so behave accordingly" from a young age, I was personally not open to the idea of other sexualities than heterosexuality till my high school. This study made me meet similar people with similar experiences from their societies and families. These kinds of discussions empower the marginalized community and encourages them to come forward with their issues and demand for the justice. Addressing this research problem opens up the possibility of "having the power and the freedom to make more livable lives for ourselves, where bodies can be more free to breathe, to move, to love without discrimination and without fear of violence" (Butler, 2023). As Butler (2023) puts it,

> *"When we live in a democracy, we assume that we are living according to certain principles of equality, freedom & justice. We are constantly learning what freedom is and what the equality is and what justice can be? And those challenges write the anti-slavery movement, the suffrage movement, the movement for LGBTQIA+ rights. Each of those struggles involve challenging peoples existing ideas, of who's equal, who has the right to be fray and how do we define justice. We are all the time struggling to achieve that goal. We need to reoccupy these notions and show that concerns with social justice and gender equality, gender freedom are an integral part of any democratic struggle, especially if we want to rethink who the people and what it means for them to live in freedom without fear."*

the social relevance of the research problem lies in showing the concerns of gender equality and social justice to achieve the gender freedom everyone deserves in a democratic society. The academic relevance of the study is contributed towards gender and sexuality studies by focusing on the gender policing experiences of queer women. The role of caste, economic status, and religion in influencing these experiences is discussed in the paper to provide an understanding of intersectional factors and its effects on the same. This study academically provides an insight into policies and advocacies in the realm of gender and sexuality to ensure social justice. While the existing literature provides valuable insights into the experiences of gender policing within and towards LGBTQ+ community, this research contributes specifically to the context of queer women in Kerala. By emphasising on 'challenging conformity', this paper adds onto the stories of struggle and the exploration of resistance mechanisms by the queer women in Kerala. Furthermore, the findings present a more cultural context of gender expression intersecting with its impact as gender policing experiences.

1.5 Author's Positionality

As a queer woman who lived a big chunk of her life in the culturally diverse state of Kerala, this research paper is about the experiences of each queer woman in Kerala deeply connected to my own personal identity and life experiences. Throughout this study, I did not just feel like a spectator, but each experience by the women I interviewed, enabled me to reflect on my own experiences. Each of us were from different in their own ways, but sharing each experiences made me realise that we all want justice, but it should not just be to the group we belong to, instead for any group that suffers in a similar way (Butler, 2023).

My identity as a queer woman, based on the rich cultural heritage of Kerala and my sexuality, positions this problem at the centre of my heart. As mentioned in the previous section, a qualitative approach through personal interviewing was followed for this study. One of the advantages of being a part of queer community in Kerala for this study was that I was able to get

some of my close friends to be a participant. This enabled me to have a comfortable conversation with them which allowed me to access authentic narratives and experiences. This closeness to the participants also helped in getting new information about sensitive issues such as gender violence and abuse. Snowballing procedure[3] was followed to recruit more participants. This was much easier as contacts were passed on by my friends.

I commit to this research with complete transparency, ethical review, and proper reflexivity. I understand that my positionality will influence the very questions I ask and how I analyse the data. For example, my own experiences as a queer woman from Kerala, allowed me to interpret the data from the participant's point of view. The support I received from my friends' circle made me want to know about more of such stories of support and understanding. However, I embrace both my positions as a researcher and a member of the community I am studying about. These positions will contribute to the strength and authenticity of the narratives and stories shared by the queer women and aims to amplify these experiences and their voices.

1.6 Methodology & Justification

As the research problem is exploratory in nature, it is essential to take a qualitative approach for this study. To understand how gender expression in a heteropatriarchy result in oppression and gender policing, it is necessary to capture the reality. Hence this subjective and dynamic problem is revealed through personal narratives, stories from personal interviews with the queer women in Kerala. As the question of gender expression and its role in experiencing gender policing was raised during this study, the themes raised, showed a necessity to delve deeply into the understanding of gender identity and expression. Therefore, this study intends to question the understanding of these two concepts as gender expressions are constituted through gender identity. Gender identity is internal and not obvious to the world, whereas gender expression is the external appearance through which one presents themselves (American Psychological Association, 2019). By providing a comparative understanding of the key concepts and terms, moving to an in-depth analysis of the experience of gender policing influenced by the gender expression of queer women in Kerala, this study will provide a better understanding, empowerment, and advocate for those who were marginalized based on their gender and sexuality and promote the idea of an inclusive society.

The sensitivity of the topic necessitates the need to build a rapport and provide a comfortable atmosphere for the targeted audience to get data from them. This need for an in-depth understanding on the research problem that embrace the perspectives of the study population and the context in which they live in, asks for a qualitative approach. As this study requires the understanding and explaining people's beliefs and behaviour; and identify the social or cultural norms of a specific society, qualitative approach is the most suitable one (Bailey, Hennink and Hutter, 2020). Hence this study followed qualitative research to gain a contextualized understanding of this research problem. To construct the theoretical framework for this research, a diverse array of scholarly works is selected. Some of the notable works used for this study is the Gender Performativity (Butler, 2009), Queer feminism (Cuklanz and Erol, 2020) and I also use literature of scholars from Indian and specifically Kerala context. This includes the noted works such as Sexuality: A Realm of Politics Sexuality, Gender and Rights: Exploring Theory and Practice in (Narrain, 2006), Same-sex love in India: a literary history (Vanita and Kidwai, 2008), Shifting spaces, frozen frames: Trajectories of queer politics in contemporary India (Mokkil, 2009) and so on.

A qualitative interview helps in examining the living experiences of the subjects and helps in creating an opportunity to listen to their stories and bringing out the realities that has been kept inside by many participants. I selected queer women from Kerala, as participants for this study, purposively due to my lived experience as a queer bisexual woman from Kerala.Ten in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Keralite queer women. Semi-structured interview was selected due to the nature of the topic. As a researcher, it brought-in a chance to discuss and explore relevant

topics discovered during the literature review; whereas for the participants, it enabled them to have more space to introduce other experiences, which led to new themes for the study. The interviews were conducted between July and September 2023. Majority of the interviews were conducted in-person, while two of them were conducted through online platform such as Zoom and WhatsApp Video Call.

Sampling Method: Participants were selected through three methods such as direct approach through social media and personal contacts, approach through NGOs working for queer advocacy and the snowballing process. Since I have been part of queer community in Kerala before I left India for my studies in the Netherlands, it helped me to reach out to some of my friends directly for the interview. Even though, not all of them were interested in being a subject for research purpose, I was able to find one or two persons who were willing to participate. Secondly, I approached two of the NGOs through one of my friend, who is a transman and has more contacts with the queer community. These organisations provided me with contacts of queer women in Kerala. The last method used, snowballing process, is considered as "one of the most effective means of reaching a socially marginalized group" (Doan and Higgins 2010: 9). This method helped in gaining three more participants for my study.

Participant Profile: All seven participants recognize themselves as queer women of different sexual orientations. All of them are or were in a same-sex relationship. Participants age varied from 22 to 42 years. All of them had different family backgrounds, educational qualification and occupations. All ten participants are natives from Kerala. Some of them are open about their gender identity whereas some of them are still closeted to their family, friends and society.

Table 1: Participant Profile

No.	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Sexual Orientation	Religion	Mode of Interview	City of Residence
1	Archana	25	Transwoman	Pansexual	Hindu	In-person	Ernakulam
2	Arathi	28	Transwoman	Pansexual	Hindu	In-person	Kottayam
3	Ayisha	25	Female	Demisexual	Muslim	Online call	Thrissur
4	Nimisha	40	Female	Bisexual	Atheist	In-person	Calicut
5	Sreelakshmi	27	Female	Lesbian	Hindu	In-person	Ernakulam
6	Amy	22	Female	Lesbian	Christian	In-person	Ernakulam
7	Shifa	25	Female	Demisexual	Muslim	Online call	Ernakulam

Data Collection: The data was collected through semi-structured interviews. A interview guide, with the topics to be discussed, was made and shared with the participants to make them comfortable about the interview, as most of them were nervous about it. Before the interview, a consent form was signed by both the parties to ensure integrity of the research. All interviews were audio recorded with the consent of the participants. Participants were given the option to use pseudonyms in order to de-identify them. Each interview took over 60 minutes to 3 hours. All the interviews were conducted in Malayalam as it is the mother tongue of the participants and myself. The longer the time took for an interview, the more the participant had to contribute to the topics discussed.

1.7 Research Outline

The research paper is structured as follows. Chapter 1 introduced the research problem and objective along with the author's positionality. It also provided the academic and social relevance and the justification of the study. General methodology and its justification are included in Chapter 1. Chapter 2 covers the literature review and its connection to the research question. This chapter explains the historical background of Kerala and Indian context to have a comparative analysis. Chapter 3 provides the conceptual framework used for the study. This chapter ends with the description of data and thematic analysis procedures. Chapter 4 is divided into subsections according to the themes of the findings. This chapter provides the findings to answer the research question. Chapter 5 is the final part that provides a summary and conclusion of the whole study.

CHAPTER 2

Unravelling the Historical Thread

This chapter sheds light on the literatures that shows the historical journey of struggle, resilience, and celebrations of the queer community in India, and specifically Kerala. Any study conducted related to such a dynamic and complex topic requires a deep understanding of the existing body of knowledge. The relevance of the research question is explained in relation to the literature review provided. This chapter examines the historical background of queerness in India and Kerala and engages with the key concepts such as heteropatriarchy, gender norms, gender hegemony and so on. Some movies from the Malayalam[4] movie industry and literatures from Indian vernacular languages with queer representation are also reviewed and included in this section as media and literature representation plays an important role in the Kerala society.

2.1 Queer Experience in India: A Historical Perspective

The history of queer people in India reveals the spectrum of sexualities. Queer population in India is estimated to be between 3% to 10% of the entire population. However, many individuals are not comfortable with identifying openly as queer. This is due to the concerns about societal acceptance and gender norms. When turned back to the history, pre-colonial India witnessed a profusion of sexual and gender identities. Ancient Indian religious texts included homosexual characters and took a neutral stand on homosexuality. The most famous one among them is the Kamasutra. Kama (desire/lust) is considered as the essential aims of human life, within Hinduism. In Kamasutra, the mention of transgender people can be seen in the ninth chapter as Vatsyayana explains what Auparishtaka[5] is. However, they are mentioned as 'eunuchs' in the text, which is considered as a derogatory term now. Such that, lesbians were referred as 'swarinis', translated as 'a loose or unchaste woman' and gay men were referred as 'klibas' which means a man with the inability to have intercourse (Vatsyayana, n.d). Even though the original date of publishing Kamasutra is unknown, it is believed to be wrote in the 2nd century. Moving ahead, Khajuraho temple built in the 12th Century known for its erotic sculpting includes sculptures referring to homosexuality. The reference of same-sex love in Hindu culture is undeniable such as the story of Varuna and Mitra in the Rig Veda[6] and the story of King Bhagirathi being born out of sexual intercourse between two women.

The Islamic culture talks about the Mughal emperor Babur, who has the records of having oppressed the Indian natives under the Islamic patriarchy. The personal memoirs of Babur, the Baburnama, included couplets describing his love for a boy named Baburi. He wrote, describing falling in love with Baburi as;

"Nor power to go was mine, nor power to stay; I was just what you made me, o thief of my heart" (Baburnama, Vol. 1, pg 121).

It is also evident in the writings that boys were castrated and turned into eunuchs for the nobles' sexual pleasures. Ruth Vanita and Salim Kidwai talks about the homoerotic Urdu poetry from the 17th Century. **In the pre-modern Urdu ghazals, manifests queerness by not fixing a gender identity for the beloved. There are Urdu ghazals sung by male voices for their male beloved (Vanita & Kidwai, 2008).** The father of Urdu Ghazal, Mir Taqi Mir, writes in love of Brahmin boys;

"Kiya uss Aatishbaaz ke launde ka itna shauq MirBeh chali hai dekh kar usko tumhari raal kuchh (The fireworker's son has fired my heart so I can do nothing, but sit and salivate)" (Chakraborty, et. al, 2023).

The 15th to 20th century witnessed the invasion of colonial powers in India. After the Portuguese and Dutch ruled, British colonizers got control over the nation. In 1861, in the name of reformation, British empire added Section 377 in the India Penal Code (IPC), forbidding homosexuality, which I quote:

"Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal, shall be punished with [imprisonment for life], or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine." (Gupta, 2016).

This had a dehumanizing effect on a certain sexuality as this creates a general societal inference on homosexuality since law books says it is illegal (Han et al., 2018). For example, the imposition of IPC Section 377, brought in discrimination and abuse towards homosexual people. This was enforced through rigid gender norms. The effects of Section 377 established homosexuality as nonnormative, till this day, which on the other hand supports heteronormativity. In the book "The World of Homosexuals", Devi narrates one of her interviews with a gay Indian, where he was in a four yearlong relationship with another man, but he is now forced to marry a woman under family pressure (Kalra, 2016). This is an example of heteronormativity, where the society considered only heterosexual relationships are 'natural'. By stating that women can only marry men or the vice versa, a gender norm is created, ruling how a gender must live. Heteronormativity and gender norms are important concepts which will be detailed out in the coming sections. However, in the late 18th and early 19th century, witnessed more gender norms enforced on the heterosexual couple outside marriage. It was easier to be with a same-sex person in that matter (Vanita & Kidwai, 2008). Modern India from the late 19th and 20th century encountered the rise of homophobic voices. This period shaped the Indian society according to the colonial values and social morals. These values and morals held up homosexuality as 'unnatural'. This period witnessed suicides and suffering of same-sex couples in many parts of India. Hence, the nineteenth century evolution of homosexuality in India is studied by the queer theorists as the period of significant transformation in Indian cultural understandings of homosexuality. A minor practice of pre-colonial homophobia led way to the spread of mainstream disapproval of homophobia (Lauren Ruhnke, 2018).

The 20th century traces back the beginning of growing awareness on gender and sexuality and recognition on the queer community in India. Queer rights movements started taking place in the late 20th century. The biggest milestone for India is the public interest litigation (PIL) filed by the Naz Foundation challenging the IPC Section 377, which was followed by events of decriminalizing consensual same-sex activities in 2009 by Delhi Court and later its reversal by Supreme Court in 2013. However, in 2018, the Supreme Court of India ruled out IPC Section 377 from the Indian constitution decriminalizing homosexuality. This landmark verdict was celebrated all over India and the rainbow flags finally came out of closet. However, the definition of homosexuality in the society still didn't accept it as natural. Even after 5 years of decriminalizing IPC Section 377, unacceptance of certain gender identity and expression by the family and society continues.

Even now, many families raise girls by reminding them that they will be married off to some other house in the future and so they must behave in a certain way and be modest from their childhood itself. Whereas boys are not masculine enough if they express their emotions. These kinds of gender norms were always imposed on us in an Indian society. Each gender is assigned with rules on how they must act or live. The story of Hridaan and Siddhartha from West Bengal, getting beaten up and abused by their family and society due their gender fluidity is an example for this (Bhattacharjee, 2022). This incident took place in 2022, which makes it shocking to believe that Indian society is still narrow-minded in many ways. "The Country Policy and Information Note India: Sexual orientation and gender identity and/or expression" shows the anti-LGBTQ+ societal attitudes by quoting "Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer people in India are often confronted with stigma, discrimination, and restrictions in access to health services

due to discriminatory laws and negative social attitudes. For many LGBTIQ, the lack of family or community support increases their vulnerability to violence, unemployment, poverty, and homelessness"(Country Policyand Information Note India: Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and/or Expression, 2023). In the section societal attitudes, a medical student who is openly gay expresses his concern that the ideology of marring a woman and having children is still deeply rooted in a vast city like Patna. This is a fact in many of the cities in India. Attempted rape against lesbian women were reported in rural areas. Lesbian or bisexual women lack safe spaces and often need to hide their sexuality in rural areas. In 2021, two trans siblings were attacked on a night out by two men in Kerala (Supreme Court, 2014). A form of gender policing is performed every now and then in India. When same-sex relationships are made public, the ability of the family to reproduce itself is threatened and the surface of the family as a kind institution brings violence to rule (Narrain, 2007).

2.2 Vernacular language and Queer Representation

One of the major transitions is seen in the vernacular languages. Certain terms used in respect of queer people are being used as derogatory terms now. The presence of queer community is clearly outlined in the book "The Queer and The Vernacular Languages in India" which analyses the queer expression in regional experience that are available in the Indian vernacular languages. This book is an insight into the way a language community depicts queerness and tries to address the issue of lack of queer representation in certain language communities (Chakraborty, et. al, 2023). The ancient Indian vernacular cultures represent Queer expressions (Vanita and Kidwai, 2008). The diversity of this can be explained by the Meitei culture of Manipur and the traditional theatrical practice of Shumang Lila. While the first one is that people prefer to talk about things related to sex in a puritanist way without directly referring to it and the latter is queerly performed by men in female roles which is enjoyed by the audience (Kaustav Chakraborty & Shekhar Chakraborty, n.d.). Bindumadhav Khire's queer Marathi novel Partner, Kishor Kumar's gay autobiography Randu Purushanmar Chumbikkumbol (When Two Men Kiss), Vijayaraja Mallika and Jayan K. Cherian's queer poems, all written in Malayalam, are various examples of queer language literature coming out of the closet (Chakraborty et. al, 2023)

2.3 Queer History of Kerala; An Analysis of Media Representations

While India was majorly a patriarchal nation, Kerala had matrilineal societies. A matrilineal society provided privileges and rights to women, even the kinship is traced through maternal lines. However, the colonial rule left with its roots in patriarchy. In short, the British rule introduced the joint family (tharavadu) system, which challenged the matrilineal kinship system. Later the joint incomes were changed to individual salaries collapsing the tharavadu system. This was followed by the cultural imperialism left by the British, by bringing back the patrilineal system which encouraged the provinces which followed patriarchy to spread it. The effects of this still prevails in Kerala.

When investigated closely we can see that the exploration of sexuality has been taken as a political emergency and the developments and incidents followed by that is also visible in Kerala. The two legal reforms related to the decriminalisation of homosexuality is one of the developments as it opened a new door for discussions on sexuality. However, the heteronormative assumption of the society brought escalating patriarchal violence against women. Colonial education and nationalist emotions motivated gender and sexuality movements to take place in Kerala in the early mid of 20th century (Tharayil, 2014). The issue was that the national modernity in India disciplined sexualities and followed heteropatriarchal morality (Arunima 2003; Chatterjee 1993; Menon 2008).

During the 1950s and early 1960s, the evidence obtained through oral histories and artists records shows existence of heterosexual and monogamous marriages that followed normative

patriarchal nuclear families. This can be traced in the cultural literary production of this period. "Naalukettu" is an example for this, which depicts degeneration of matrilineal system of joint families into nuclear families with certain consequences in the social and traditional values (Nair, 1958). 1960s witnessed a successful implementation of a state-sponsored family planning programme, which paved way to the production of various public documents even in the form of films. These films included the talks about sexuality in a metaphorical and muted manner. These films acted as a campaign that helped to sell the brand of condoms by the Government of India as part of the family planning programme. Malayalam movies like Ollathu Mathi (What you have is enough) gives insights over the importance of birth control and family planning (Sethumadhavan, 1967). Movies representing queer identities started being produced in the Malayalam movie industry. Even though, Sancharam (Pullappally, 2004) inaugurated the radical sexual politics within the Malayalam cinema, Deshadana Kili Karayarilla (Padmarajan, 1986) was the first Malayalam movie to talk about the complexities of sexual desire within the modern Kerala. The latter was released in 1986 challenging the construction of heterosexual couples, even though it was not circulated as a queer or lesbian movie. The former movie provides a cinematic space that affirms lesbian desire openly. It responds to the contemporary events by suicide threat of the characters. Both these movies represent the sexual spaces and sexual places as reconnected to travel and movement. Movement in a space is enabled through travel. This is depicted by the titles of the movies. Sanccharram means travel in Malayalam and in the second one the word deshadanam represents travelling. Thus, both these films provide a queer subject position and a sense of support for the term queer itself (Mokkil, 2009). One of the major issues 19th and 20th century had to deal with which still have the same relevance is the issue of suicides due to the societal unacceptance of certain gender and sexualities. These movies also touch the issue of same-sex couple suicide in Kerala.

2.4 Sahayatrika as Queer Women's fellow traveller

A project named Sahayatrika by Deepa Vasudevan which took a statistic on the same-sex suicides in Kerala through oral histories and newspaper reports, which was the only reports available in the 2000s, to develop a support for sexual minorities in Kerala, especially for women in same-sex relationships. The reports showed in the within a period of seven years (1995 January – 2001 August), 21 women in Kerala committed suicide as they could not maintain a same-sex relationship. There were fewer reports by press on suicides by queer people. However, there were four gay men reported to be committed suicide between 1993 and 2001. These suicides are one indicator of the condition of sexual minorities. In August 2001, two Adivasi women were found dead together outside their homes after they sort help from their societies to get married. However, majority of these suicides were portrayed as coming from working class or "lower middle class" backgrounds. The Sahayatrika project aims to verify and document these reports in the long term. These newspaper reports have no mention of celebrations. Women who live together as sexual partners are forced to suppress their sexual identity. Women who live together happily are invisible in this news. A promotion of the idea that if a woman loves a woman, she will be isolated or left behind to die (Vasudevan, 2001). Later in 2003, this project evolved into a non-governmental organization (NGO) that was woken up by the news of suicide pacts among women in same-sex relationships (Agaja, 2018).

Sahayatrika started post-box and helpline facilities for sexual minorities to be vocal about their experiences and help them through their struggles. When we are in Kerala, we have cultural constraints that makes Malayalis to be overwhelmingly heterosexual. This organization noticed a need to bring sexuality-related concerns within feminist discussions which led to the fact-finding investigation based on the newspaper reports on lesbian suicide between 2001 and 2002. This encouraged their purpose to reach out to the women with non-normative desires. A large population of female-born sexual minorities used the facilities provided by Sahayatrika as a chance

to express their sexual identity and their struggles related to it (Agaja, 2018). Thus, by providing a formal and public platform for sexual minorities, establishment of Sahayatrika is seen as a relevant landmark in the history of Queer Movements in Kerala.

Even though Sahayatrika was started as an independent organization, it was later supported their parent organisation, FIRM (Foundation for Integrated Research in Mental Health). With the help of FIRM, Sahayatrika was able to avail funds for the fact-finding investigation. This investigation disapproved the myth of lesbian invisibility in Kerala. The suicide of Ammini and Meera by consuming pesticides after the police arrested and sent them into mental hospital was later connected to their identity as tribes. The people interviewed during the investigation claimed that these women were scared they might not find good grooms for them due their tribal identity, so they found solution by being with each other. Similarly, Mini, a Dalit student from Thrissur was harassed by her hostel authorities for having romantic relationship with a friend. She was expelled and later called by the police after the same authorities filed a complaint against her. Instead on turning up in the police station, after leaving from her partner's place, Mini decided to end her complicated life by jumping into a dam. Even in this instance, the hostel authorities attributed her lesbian nature to her Dalit identity. The suicides of other lesbian women like Beena, Meena, Rajilya and Riya were also connected, by the people in their surroundings, to their marginalized social background as a reason for their sexuality. Beena and Meena who jumped into a granite quarry to end their lives were from lower-middle class families. The commonality that all women in these incidents belonged to the marginalized backgrounds sheds light on the fact that sexuality is more important than poverty and deprivation. However, socio-economic backwardness should not be blamed for their alternative sexual orientation. It is possible that women from privileged backgrounds may have good education or job skills which helps them to move out of Kerala and live in other parts of the country (Agaja, 2018). This will also provide an explanation for why malayalees leave Kerala and suddenly become gay, lesbian, bisexual and hijras (Vasudevan, 2001). Apart from the other privileges, these women's command over other languages other than Malayalam helps them to survive in other places in India (Agaja, 2018). In the first case described of Ammini, the family was influenced by the Karayogam that adviced them to take them to the police. Certain religion and caste have communities of local people belonging to their class. Karayogam belongs to the Hindu Nair community. Karayogam members informs how community control body, desire, and sexuality of their women (Agaja, 2018). As result of this, the women commit suicide out of their inability to resist the violence and unacceptance. These incidents sheds light on how the gender and sexual identity of a queer individual is controlled and suppressed by society through various methods of policing. This is the prime focus of this paper. The concepts and the framework used for the study is explained in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3
The Conceptual Structure and Analysis Journey

The historical context of queer visibility in India, specifically Kerala, in the previous chapter provided an understanding of the root and the contemporary context of this paper. Chapter 3 explains the use of queer feminist perspective to analyse the data. It is important to understand how these concepts were recognised as relevant to this study. This chapter also includes the conceptual framework followed in this study. Exploring the data analysis procedure and thematic analysis, this chapter helps to connect them with the findings in the fourth chapter.

3.1 Conceptual Framework

The choice of a conceptual or theoretical framework shapes the lens through which the researcher analyses and interprets the data. A queer feminist perspective is adopted for this study. This perspective centralizes the experiences of people marginalized under racist, sexist, heterosexist, patriarchy, and imperialist conditions (Cuklanz & Erol, 2020). A research following feminist perspective focuses on women's voices, experiences, and their contributions. A feminist perspective emphasises a diversity of human experiences on their gender in relation to race or sexuality or other identities by raising critical consciousness and encouraging social change. On the other hand, a queer perspective resists the binary way of thinking and opens the possibility of 'disruptive' gender identities. It challenges the gender hierarchies that sustains the male-female dualism and connects peace with femininity and 'weakness' while conflicting the idea of manliness and 'strength' (Otto, 2020). These two perspectives combined as queer feminist perspective recognizes gender and sexuality as central to the understanding of a wider social and political processes. By recognizing the interconnectedness of gender, sexuality, and social structure, it brings forth the complex intersection of gender and sexuality with other social inequalities and conditions.

Heteropatriarchy: As this study is focused on the experiences of gender policing of queer women in Kerala, a queer feminist lens provides a critical base to analyse and critique societal norms which promotes heteronormativity and gender binary system. Heteropatriarchy is a combination of the heteronormativity and patriarchy in a society. Heteronormativity refers to the 'normal' & preferred sexual orientation like sexual relation ought to be made between male and female (Debnath, 2017). This in result is based on the assumption that there is a gender binary system that categorizes gender into two different, opposite and separate forms: male and female. Each gender is assigned to perform certain gender roles, such as a man is supposed to be the breadwinner of a family, or it is a woman's responsibility to take care of her family. There is no possibility of diverse expression of gender and sexuality in the gender binary system. A gender being subject to certain roles and expectations which assumes certain attributes to be appropriate to each individual based on their gender identity, is referred to as gender norms. Questions raised towards women such as "how will you survive without getting married to a man?" or "why are you dressed like a boy?" are examples of gender policing rooted from the gender norms which states a woman needs man to support her existence or how a woman is expected to dress herself.

The gender binary system brings a hierarchy among the gender giving a dominance to masculinity over femininity, which is characterized in a gender hegemony. Gender hegemony paves way to patriarchy. Patriarchy provides primary power to men and dominance in the role of leadership, household authority, social privilege, etc… This is the foundation of gender hegemony which theorizes gender relations as operating through the interconnected subordination of femininity that simultaneously upholds hegemonic masculinity (Hoskin, 2019). This is even

reflected in the family system in many societies. A society following patriarchy not only provides dominance to men over women, but also follows a patrilineal inheritance, where the family properties and assets including the family name is passed through male lineage. One relevant example is the right to abortion. The control of reproductive rights and decisions influencing policies related to reproduction will be in the hands of the patriarchal system rather than with the person whose body it is concerned with.

Gender Performativity: Judith Butler argues that bodies are understood by society through our ideas about sex and gender (Jolly, 2000). She states that gender is performative. She believes that gender identity is formed through a set of acts. Butler gives reference to gender performativity by saying that nobody is a gender prior to doing gendered acts and the stabilizing concepts of gender, sex, and sexuality assures the identity of each gender (Butler, 2009) Gender is regulatory, it is done by individuals through repeated actions. Butler's "Undoing Gender" mentions various ways in which gender is regulated (Butler, 2004). Gender being regulatory contributes to the reinforcement of gender regulations by reestablishing gender norms. another way of regulating gender is by maintaining heteronormativity which prescribes and normalizes heterosexual relationships while suppressing the existence of individuals outside the gender binary system.

The role of language in regulating gender is stated as crucial by Butler. This is also relevant in this paper. The influence of colloquial languages to address a 'third gender' is relevant in the Kerala context because of the use of derogatory terms to address an individual who do not conform to the gender binary system. In Malayalam language, 'Kundan' (one who is homosexual and unacceptable in the society) is used to mention gays and 'Shikandi' (a person who is not completely male or female) is used to mention transgender people. The identity as a queer person sheds the necessity to address them by their specified pronouns and gendered terms. While describing gender performativity, Butler mentions that institutions such as family, religion, law or even educational institutions play a crucial role in regulating gender. These institutions discriminate against individuals on the basis of what they do with their body, who they love or how they move or how they look (Butler, 2023). Butler is committed to the idea where the society do not challenge how others define themselves. She suggests the idea of undoing gender by challenging the gender normative performances and opening the world for everyone without discrimination (Butler, 2004).

Transfeminism: Transfeminism primarily was a movement by and for transwomen with the view that their liberation is essentially connected to the liberation of all women and beyond. This concept does not confine to just transwomen. It extends to other queer, intersex people, trans and non-transmen, and non-transwomen (Koyama, 2003). Instead of taking over the existing institutions of feminism, transfeminism extends and leads feminism through this liberation thought on working in alliance with all others. Similar to how Butler explained the right of each individual to define their own identity, transfeminism supports the principle that believes that this right on how each person define their identity or express their gender is expected to be respected by the society without any kinds of discrimination or violence. This form of feminism tries to bridge the gap between feminism and transgender advocacy. it challenges all women, including transwomen, to examine how they absorb heterosexist and patriarchal authority of genders and what consequences makes it clear that it is not a woman's responsibility to get rid of any resemblance to the patriarchal definition of femininity in her actions. Transfeminism states that certain personal decisions may comply with certain gender roles, but that should not turn out as an accusation over reinforcing gender norms. rather than denying the 'male privilege' that are said to be privileging transwomen, transfeminism believes that women come from various backgrounds; hence, it is important to honor these differences as well as similarities among us, women.

The impossibility to view gender as separate from cultural context which produces and maintains gender brought the question whether gender is socially constructed or not. Transfeminism claims that both sex and gender is socially constructed. Trans-feminists also holds

that the distinction between sex and gender is just a matter of convenience and is artificial. This concept of gender as a social construct is a powerful tool in deconstructing the conservative and traditional attitudes towards women's capabilities. However, this concept failed to address the experiences of transwomen in relation to their biological sex being given more relevance than their inner sense of who they really are. In conclusion, transfeminism believes that gender is a social construct. Hence, transfeminism believes that each individual should have the freedom to construct their own gender identity based on how they feel inside their body and mind. Transfeminism takes apart the essentialists' assumption of normativity on sex and gender. The issue of body image is also addressed in the transfeminism manifesto (Koyama, 2003) This issue collides with our needs for comfort and safety within our own bodies. The gender norms prevailing in our society defines how 'a perfect body' should look like. The need to be 'skinny' or to keep a certain standard of appearance is one of the society's enforcement mechanisms of dichotomous gender roles. These dichotomous gender roles force trans people to modify their bodies to fit into these genders. Transfeminism challenges the way in which social or political factors interrupting any individual own decisions and demands for a society that respects any decision on an individual's own body and gender expression. It calls for sexual liberation in a gender binary system.

Sexual Liberation: The concept of sexual liberation is unavoidable in this study that follows a queer feminist perspective. The relevance of sexual liberation was focused by the fourth wave feminism in the 1970s. however, when we speak of the reality, sexual liberation is not truly visible with the heteronormative norms especially when even the right to self-determination is under pressure. Sexual liberation is characterized by the relaxation and deconstruction of strict social values and rules surrounding sex and sexuality. It involves the acceptance of premarital sex, homosexuality, exploring queer identities, masturbation, and the use of contraceptives. This concept of sexual liberation suggests the exploration of sexuality outside the traditional and conservative context. It involves expansion of sexual morals, practices, and identities throughout a society. By challenging restrictive sexual norms, sexual liberation advocates for the autonomy of an individual over their body and desires. Sexual liberation recognizes the diverse expression of sexualities.

Sexual liberation movements flourished between 1960 and 1980 which came to be known as sexual revolution. These movements composed of intense change in the attitudes, values, knowledge, and behavior of the societies towards a more positive and open view on sexuality. It also acknowledges sexual pleasure as a source of fulfillment instead of seeing it only as a source of reproducing. This optimistic conception of sexuality derives as a response to the suppression of homosexuality. Thus, sexual liberation is based on the notion that it is a powerful political push towards social liberation itself.

Gender policing: gender policing is visible in Kerala society with the prevalence of heteropatriarchy in various forms. A set of laws, formal institutions, and policies implying a gendered and heterosexist component is referred to as gender policing. It also refers to the ways in which the contemporary policing and prisons' organizations maintains a heterosexual, cisgendered notion of social order (Bohrer, 2021). A necessary term that needs to be discussed in this context is "gendering scan". Gendering scan is when adults, questions the gender of children. These questions can be from teachers, doctors, family members or even random passersby. Gendering scan is implemented through micro punishments, which includes disapproving nods, questioning looks or even dismissive or hostile comments. Through gendering scan, the idea of gender and sexuality normativity is conveyed. This is also associated with a lack of empathy from the adults surrounding the child or even isolation from other children (Bohrer, 2021).

Arvind Narrain talks about the experiences of lawyers in Banglore. Certain cases of lesbians who run away with their partners mostly end with them being separated by their families. In some cases, a case of kidnapping is filed against the older woman by the other woman's family with the police. Narrain describes these kinds of gender policing as the "violent face" of family as an

institution (Narrain, 2007). This is similar to how Budhiraja describes the system of force, constraint and punishments used in service of social and cultural norms to regulate sexuality (Budhiraja, Fried and Teixeira, 2010). In the context of Kerala, a series of suicide pacts of young same-sex couples were reported during the 1990s (Tharayil, 2014). Most of the suicides took place after the imposition of a heterosexual arranged marriage on one of the couples by their families. Even though, many of these women tried to survive at first, by moving into a different place, eventually they gave up. However, joint suicides in Kerala signifies powerful protests against the heterosexual arranged marriages and nuclear family system that acts as an oppressive social institution in Kerala (Tharayil, 2014).

3.2 Data Coding and Analysis

All participants' responses were recorded as mentioned in the first chapter and translated into English. These transcripts constitute the main body for analysis. Analysing interview data is a "multistep 'sense-making' endeavour (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2011). For interview data to make sense, this data needs to be coded. The process of coding data is the initial process in data analysis procedure. Creating codes needs a balance between rigor, logic, and creativity, in order to build a frugal and operational system of categories (Costa *et al.*, 2016). Interview data translated and transcribed were entered in ATLAS.ti software in a common and anonymous format. Open, axial, and selective coding were applied for the coding process following the progressive coding technique of Strauss and Corbin. Using open coding, initial concepts were generated from data to identify their properties and dimensions. Whereas using axial coding, they were refined to form more precise explanations and divide the codes into categories and their related subcategories. Using selective coding, a larger theoretical scheme was formed after integrating and refining these categories (Corbin and Strauss, 1998). The interview data was first subjected to open and axial coding processes, developing a series of themes, sub-themes, and main themes. Then, the data sets went through the process of selective coding to create final theoretical integration. From exploring ideas and concepts embedded in the interview data through open coding, the connections between the codes were identified following a spiral process of coding.

Qualitative interview data was analysed through thematic analysis for this study. This analysis involved identifying and analysing patterns within the interview data. Thematic analysis helped in organising and interpreting the interview data to capture the key pattern to derive themes from. Through this, five major themes and 14 sub-themes were derived. The first theme, identity crisis, includes the experiences of gender policing raised due to the individual's gender or sexual or any other identity they conform to. Societal expectations as a theme involves how the social, gender and sexual norms defines the gender policing experienced by the queer women who participated in the interview. Third theme focuses on the consequences of these gender policing. The consequences of not conforming to the societal expectations majorly ended on facing discrimination or being isolated or receiving homophobic reactions. The factors contributing to the experiences of gender policing is not confined to the social norms or expectations. There are other factors that emerged during the study such as the religious background, family background or even an individual's economic status. This paper is not just about the struggles or victimhood of queer women, it also includes the stories of contribution, resistance, and celebrations. The last theme that emerged consists of these experiences. It includes the current visible changes in the society in relation to the acceptance of diverse identities. This social change creates a hope in the community. This theme also involves the stories of acceptance from the society and family shared by the interview participants.

CHAPTER 4
The Discovered Threads: Disclosing the Findings

This chapter discusses the findings on whether gender expression plays a role in the gender policing experiences of queer women in Kerala. Findings are divided into five sections according to the themes derived from the interview data that was coded. This chapter reveals how gender expression becomes one of the major factors behind gender policing experiences of these women.

4.1 Theme 1: Identity Crisis

Gender identity is a component of gender which describes a person's psychological or inner sense of their gender. This can vary from being a boy or a girl, a man, or a woman, or even a non-binary gender that may or may not conform to a person's sex assigned at birth (American Psychological Association, 2019). However, non-binary genders are still subjected to gender policing and discrimination is followed. Each of the interview questions focused on the interactions of the queer women with the society resulting in the experiencing of gender policing. A recurring theme that emerged was the individual's gender identity. participants shared multiple experiences of gender policing in response to their gender identity. Archana and Arathi, who identify as transwomen, had to face discrimination because of two identities; firstly, being a transwoman and secondly, being in a relationship with another transwomen.

> *"As two transwomen in relationship, me and my partner had to face questions such as 'how are you fulfilling each other without penetrative sex?', 'why did you transition from being a man if you wanted to be with a woman?', 'Why couldn't you stay as men and stay with women?'" (Archana, August 2023).*

This is one form of gender policing which states that it is not normal for a woman to be with another woman. Through this, a gender binary society states heteronormativity. The sexual liberty is restricted by mentioning penetrative sex as the only way of being fulfilled sexually. This completely closes the possibilities of homosexual relationships. These kinds of experiences reinforce the gender binary system, strengthening the heteronormativity. By questioning the togetherness of two transwomen in a sexual and romantic relationship and relating their gender transition to the preferred sexual orientation (that is, between a man and a woman, heterosexual), a cis-normative pattern is reflected. This invalidates trans identities. Archana also brought up the cyber bullying she and her partner had to face.

> *"Starting from homosexual relation to transgender persons in a same-sex relationship, it is unacceptable for the majority in our society. There are articles and comments on social media about my personal relationships that has hurt me and my partner and even our family. It gets too personal sometimes, involving our family into these. This is seen by all our dearest ones" (Archana, August 2023).*

Another respondent recalled an incident where her decision to forgo from marriage triggered suspicion on her gender identity.

> *"One incident I remember is that when I refused to get married, my mom asked me whether I am transgender and whether I am planning to change my gender. This was triggered by another incident that happened in our neighbourhood. One of our neighbours became a transman and got married to a woman. This created a lot of hustles in the neighbourhood. People were talking about his life and discussing about this. This was the reason why my mother asked me whether I am a trans person" (Sreelakshmi, July 2023).*

This experience explains the external pressure faced by a queer woman who deviated from the conventional gender norm of getting married to a man. A basic act of choosing not to get married, completely unrelated to the gender identity, became a subject of suspicion. This instance reflects the broader aspect of societal influence on gender policing which interprets the individual through the lens of existing gender norms. Thus, it can be understood that sex and gender binaries are the

foundation for how society orients to and organizes people in institutions and in social interactions (Hollander, 2013).

"One time this guy had a crush on me. When I revealed my sexual identity, he said that I will wait until these changes. Let me know when this phase passes" (Sreelakshmi, July 2023).

By dismissing her sexual identity as 'a phase', this incident represents the tendency of the society to interrogate and overrule sexual identities that are non-heteronormative. This reflects on the societal attitude on individuals who do not follow the conventional norms. This dismissing response sheds light on the lack of understanding of diverse sexual identities, contributing to the policing of these identities and orientations. The respondents mentioned various experiences of gender policing similar to this faced due to their identities, in some cases it is gender identity whereas in some other the 'problem' is their sexual identity.

"When I was a kid, I was feminine, and everyone used to make fun of me. I didn't know why it was wrong. No one ever had a definition other than that men are supposed to be masculine. These comments and advice always made me feel comfortable about who I really was" (Archana, August 2023).

Archana, a transwoman, shared her experience as a boy where she was advised to not be feminine as it does not suit a man. From childhood itself, each individual is taught to behave according to their assigned sex at birth. These defines how as an individual you identify and express yourself. However, this gender or sexual identity and expression is defined by certain roles and behaviour attributed to each gender, which is reinforced by means of gender policing. These experiences of gender policing which resulted from expressing their gender in a non-conforming manner to the gender binary society are also examples how such incidents bring a conflict between the outside world and one's inner self. Coming out of such circumstances takes courage and a lot of internal struggle for most of these queer women.

4.2 Theme 2: Societal expectations

The stories shared by the respondents emphasized the extensive influence of societal expectations on their experiences on gender policing. These expectations arise from the social and gender norms, unravels the impact on one's sense of self, their relationships and even their autonomy.

"Public spaces are conditionally subjected to gender policing. Our society already have this conventional thoughts and rules about how a man and a woman should behave according to their gender. If a woman is a bit extroverted, when she hangs out with men or behave with a bold character, there arises the concerns especially from our older generation that "are you a man? You shouldn't do this; it is supposed to be a 'man's job'." this shows us that inbuilt conception where only men are supposed to do certain things or take initiatives as a bold move. So even in public spaces we are restricted to behave as ourselves" (Ayisha, September 2023).

Ayisha explains her understanding of societal expectations over individuals. She mentioned instances where she was told to "behave like a woman". Archana shares a similar remark.

"I was very feminine in my childhood. When a girl acts masculine, they are called strong up to a point. But when a boy is effeminate, it is a thing to be ashamed of. This is because of how femininity is seen inferior in our society. Masculinity is a privilege and men are not supposed to lose that" (Archana, August 2023).

By deriving masculinity as supposed to be a trait of a man and femininity as a trait of a woman, gender norms establish a hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is understood as the dominance of men over women. As a transwoman, Archana struggled to keep her femininity to herself in her childhood as a boy, which called for terrifying gender policing experiences. This experience is derived from her gender expression different from other boys. Femininity being the inferior in a gender hegemonic society, women are not usually expected to make a first move or take initiatives or 'bold moves' as mentioned by Ayisha. Both these examples point out the

statement of certain gender norms assigned to each gender. Ayisha goes into more similar experiences from her school time.

"During schooling, we used to have these sessions on menstrual health. It used to be 1 hour or less than that. But the thing is, these sessions are taken separately girls. My question has always been 'why do they separate us for these sessions? Why shouldn't boys need to learn these things?' Whoever it is, they are dealing with woman all around them. So, in such scenarios, why shouldn't they know about these? One time or the other, each man will come across a moment where a woman is on her menstrual cycle. These kinds of avoidance, makes them incapable in situations of need. In these sessions, we were taught about menstrual health. But apart from that, we were also told that you are not supposed to talk about this with boys, go near them after you hit puberty. They even claimed that boys only have one intention and that is sex. These are toxic advice given to the girls who attended the sessions. On the other hand, boys enjoy their free time then. They have no intention of teaching the boys about this." (Ayisha, September 2023).

I recollected the memories of such classes in my school when Ayisha mentioned this. Most of the schools in Kerala conduct these classes to educate the children. However, this segregation of boys from not attending the class is a drawback in all these schools. The relevance of sex education can be seen here. As Ayisha mentions, every man or boy interactions with woman in every stage of their life. It is important for all genders to understand the other gender. This experience serves as a poignant example of gender policing from an early age. By advising to stay away from boys after reaching puberty, girls are taught to behave a certain way or express their gender in a specific manner. Without including boys in discussions and classes which emphasises menstrual health, they are indirectly taught that these things do not concern them from a young age itself. As a matter of fact, these instances show how gender roles are reproduced and reinforced within the society. Certain matters related to sexuality are still treated as a shame. Talking about menstruation in public is still a taboo in many places in Kerala, especially discussing them when a man is present.

4.3 Theme 3: Consequences

The participants expressed their concern on the exceeding experiences of gender policing which has negative consequences. Similar consequences followed by the gender policing and non-conformity to the gender norms were discrimination, homophobia, and isolation from communities.

"I also have had interactions with very toxic people. These people who react in this way have been educated and is not unknown about the reality of the world. However, when I say that I am a queer woman or I am in a relationship with a woman, even though these people are intellectually capable, I have experienced a tension between them, and it is very easy to pick up from their body language and even facial expressions. Even though, I didn't have such experiences from my close circle, initially after coming out I did face a lot of circumstances like these" (Ayisha, September 2023).

The mentality or attitude of people in the society cannot be determined by whether they are educated or not. From this example, it is clear that education background or even having knowledge about the diverse identities, some people choose to judge others and demean them. This can be related to the social norms that defines who an individual should have a sexual relationship with, which will be based on their sex and gender assigned at birth. Ayisha recalled her first experience of coming out and losing a best friend because of her gender expression.

"Starting from when I first came out to my best friend, I have had a lot of problems from then. I tried coming out for the first time when I was in my higher secondary education. I told her about my sexual identity. I couldn't say it to my whole circle of friends at that time, because I had a big circle of friends and I never felt like all of them are going to understand who I really am. We have that dynamics where you are not supposed to talk about certain things to certain people or where you talk to certain topic to a particular person. Among all of them, I could only find courage to reveal this to only one person. My guards were already up. When I told it to her, her response was very

unsupportive. She was intimidated and disgusted of me after that. She couldn't keep a contact with me the same way as before, things changed. I can say that she cut off our friendship after that" (Ayisha, September 2023).

After trying to open about her sexuality to her best friend and being completely dismissed, Ayisha found it difficult to share her sexual identity with anyone for the next five years. She also shared that if that person was at least slightly supportive, she would have felt comfortable about herself. This one incident had made her question her own identity. It also restrained her from revealing her sexuality to some other friends in person. Because the thought of having a physical contact with that person while revealing this news intimidated her due to her past experiences and reactions she received. The participants shared other homophobic experiences similar to this.

> *"Recently I got my scooter's tire punctured and I managed to take it to a nearby repair shop. The person in the shop was a middle-aged man, he looked very closely at me top to bottom and responded, 'We don't fix tire puncture for you'. He responded as if I came begging there. I don't know why he responded so. But I think his reaction was like that because he thought I was a trans person and he have a disgusting attitude towards them"* (Amy, July 2023).

Amy explained that she had received these kinds of responses from many people, especially old age people after she cut her hair short. Since she mostly wears comfortable clothes which are non-conforming to the definition of a woman, people don't accept her as a woman. Amy was advised to grow her hair by her doctor who also advised her to bring her father in rather than her same-sex partner to consult the doctor next time. He was completely in denial of her partner. These kinds of homophobic experiences are undergone by the queer women in Kerala due to how they live their life, present their body or even how they sit or talk.

4.4 Theme 4: Other contributing factors

The findings from this study showed other factors contributing to the experiences of gender policing because of gender expression. Religious background played an important role in this.

> *"I revealed my sexuality while I was in college. My professor told me that 'This is a sin'. I studied in a Christian women's college. In the hostel, we were not even allowed to sleep by putting our beds closer or in the same bed. They claim that if we do it then we have diseases which can't be shared openly"* (Amy, July 2023).

While Amy was told that homosexuality is a sin during her college period, Ayisha talked about how it is inbuilt within their muslim community that homosexuality is a sin from very young age.

> *"Conventionally, we are taught that homosexuality is a sin, and it is inbuilt in us from our childhood. But we were not taught why this is a sin. We were taught a conditional thing about our sexuality without any further explanation. So, this forces us not to accommodate any kind of feelings that are away from heteronormativity. That's why it took me three to four years to accept myself"* (Ayisha, September 2023).

These examples reveal the influence of religious teachings on the perception of an individual's own identity that contributes to the extended process of self-acceptance. The complexity of religious teachings like this, conditioning received during childhood acts as a tool to suppress the individual's feelings that deviates from the preferred heteronormative route. Similarly, Nimisha shared her experience with her Christian community as follows.

> *"When I went back to church in the first year of my college, the priest was so concerned that my hair is short. He told me that women are supposed to have long hair. I am not able to reveal my identity to them. But when I was in 5th, I was too closed to this girl. I used to write a lot and I shared my poems with this girl. They even took me for counselling at that age because they thought I will become a lesbian otherwise. I only saw her as a friend. But he questioned me for writing poems. He told me you only need God as a friend. I didn't even know what a lesbian was then"* (Nimisha, August 2023).

Priest explaining that 'women are supposed to have long hair' is another gender expectation. Other than that, imposing a heteronormativity on a child is on the extreme side of gender policing. These

policing starts from very early stage for many women just like Nimisha. The deep impact of religious background on gender policing is evident from these narratives. Religion for these respondents, shaped the assumption on how they are expected to express or identify their gender. Such experiences and teachings with an unreasonable discourse maintains an atmosphere of silence and conformity, leaving the individuals struggle with internal guilt and shame about themselves.

"I have never addressed this directly to my family. However, my family know that I am not heterosexual, but there had never been a direct conversation with them about this. My family came to know that I am queer from somewhere else, but they are ignorant about that. They believe that this is a phase, and it is better to not address it, it will go away by its own. They are of the attitude that these things will happen, it will change once I get married to "a man". In short, they are not supportive of my sexual identity" (Ayisha, September 2023).

This narration by Ayisha explains the different mechanism by which her family chose to ignore her homosexual identity. The belief that it is a phase, and everything will change once a man come, is rooted from the gender hegemonic and binary system which assumes that woman cannot survive without a man. One of the similar mentions from all the respondents were related to how families claim that 'a woman is not complete without a man and her womanhood is fulfilled only if she becomes a mother'. Here, not only that the possibilities of homosexual relationships are completely ignored, but gender roles also defined here assigns an ultimate goal for women, that is, becoming a mother. Some families choose to ignore the existence of such identities, whereas some other families choose violence or abuse to suppress them.

"My partner's brother called me one day, when she opened about her sexuality leading to a big chaos in the family and told me that there is no need to take her to the doctor, she just needs a break from home. He tried convincing us that he was on our side. But then the next day I found that he had sent contact numbers of psychologists from amrita hospital who will help her to 'get over this lesbian phase'. In these hospitals, they will suggest you for convention therapy if your kids are lesbian or gay" (Sreelakshmi, July 2023).

Sreelakshmi recollects her partner Amy's experience of her family trying to take her for conversion therapy. Narrain explained these gender policing mechanisms as "if the surface of the family as a benevolent institution is scratched, and if ever the ability of the family to reproduce itself is threatened, violence becomes the face of an otherwise seemingly benign institution" (Narrain, 2007) Arathi shared that in the name of conversion therapies, queer women are abused and forced to confine to the heteronormative rules of the society. Another factor contributing to the experiences of gender policing for these women is their family's mentality.

"My partner's brother called me one day and talked very calmly. But he was trying to point out that if she lives her life as a queer woman in a same-sex relationship, it will affect our life too. It will affect their image in the society" (Sreelakshmi, July 2023).

Sreelakshmi explained that her partner's family was more concerned about what other people in the society will think of them if they come to know her identity. the role of "image" for a family in Kerala society is very relevant. When a marriage takes place in Kerala, the amount of gold the bride wears depend on how the family want to represent their wealth to their neighbors. It is all about "what will others think?" or "what will others do?"

4.5 Theme 5: Stories to Celebrate

Even though, there had been struggles and resistance against these forms of gender policing, Kerala society has witnessed stories of queer women that needs celebration. This theme involves not just the stories of celebration but gives a deep analysis on the social change, acceptance and hope narrated by the participants of the interview.

"I strongly believe that there had been positive changes in our society. It is very different from how it was when I was in school. Unlike previous times, currently we have organizations and support groups like vanaja collective and

sahayathrika that welcomes women and queer people and ensure to provide them a support. But 3-5 years back, we didn't even have an establishment like this. We had no option at all to fall back to. But now there are institutions and collectives that are ready to provide us with the support we need. That is a really big improvement for me. I guess women are the biggest contributors for these changes. We are getting educated, we are gaining knowledge from different perspectives. There are women who are putting in a lot of energies into these stuffs. Even when we look at movies such as moothon (directed by a woman), ardhanaari, njan marykuty and so on, represents women and queer identities in a positive manner" (Shifa, September 2023).

Shifa shared that she believes in the social change that are visible in the Kerala society today. Organizations that advocate for the queer rights are budding out nowadays in Kerala. Vanaja Collective and Sahayathrika are the best examples for this. By representing women and queer identities in relevant roles, Malayalam movie industry is also evolving. A common answer received from all the participants in the interview is that Kochi (Ernakulam) District is the most queer-friendly city in Kerala.

"Better communities are growing, there are awareness programs happening over gender and development. We can find queer affirmative therapists and doctors in Kochi. Their presence is even available inside the healthcare institutions. You can see a representation even in the educational institutions in Kochi. Even though it is not visible enough or loud enough, minimal things are happening in support of us. Even if the same-sex relationships are closeted, there is a possibility of being yourself in Kochi. So, I feel like Kochi is welcoming for any type of people" (Ayisha, September 2023).

When Ayisha chose to talk about Kochi from this view, Sreelakshmi and Amy who live together in Kochi also agreed that Kochi is more progressive than any other cities in Kerala. However, they also said that they won't be able to find a place to stay together, if they revealed the owners that they are sexual partners. Other than this, one of the participants shared that even though it was difficult in the beginning for my family to accept the same-sex relationship I had, now they have changed.

"My family even invite my girlfriend for family functions now. I see this as a progress from a time where the possibility of homosexual relationship seems unnatural, we have reached at this level of acceptance. I strongly believe that if a person takes a stand on how to live their life and fight for it, there will be ways to make changes in our society and people's mind" (Archana, August 2023).

These changes in a social and personal level, creates a hope for the queer community. Shifa shared an experience which created a hope for social change in her mind.

"A cousin of my mine who was raised in a very conventional way. She is currently studying in Kochi, and I saw her for the pride march. She had drawn pride flag on her face and seems very proud of it. I never expected such an acceptance for queer people from her. But when she got the space to express, she did it right. For me, people like her are not provided with enough opportunities to be supportive of our communities. But watching her in her hijab with those pride flag on her face, I felt like there is hope for us. People will evolve." (Shifa, September 2023).

Shifa shared that even being raised in a conventional way following the rigid gender norms and staying within the binary system of gender, her cousin found way out of it to accept the diverse identities and sexualities. She believes that if this change can happen, more changes will take place in the society as people evolve. In response to the battle on making same-sex marriages legal in India, Ruth Vanita responded with optimism that decriminalizing homosexuality in the past years has started to change the attitude of the society towards the same. Such that, in the coming future, Indians will find their chance to celebrate this change too (Vanita, 2017).

CHAPTER 5
Beyond the Binaries: A Conclusion

This chapter summarizes the whole research paper and describes the research result. This chapter answers how the gender expression of queer women in Kerala shapes the experiences of gender policing faced by them. This chapter helps to look back at the first chapter with a concluding argument that discusses the relation between the research findings and the research objective. As the final chapter, a critical reflection on the strengths and weakness of this study is also provided along with recommendations for future study.

5.1 A Short Summary

This research paper is a study on the experiences of gender policing on queer women in Kerala. It focused on the central question "how does the gender expression of queer women in Kerala shape the experiences of gender policing faced by them?" A qualitative approach was adopted for the study which involved in-depth semi-structured interview. After interviewing ten queer women from Kerala, the data analysis came up with five major themes. The first theme identity crisis related the experiences of gender policing to the gender and sexual identity expressed by these women. Second theme derived from the gender policing experiences as a result of gender expectations. The gender and social norms and expectations in the society assumes certain gender to express their gender in a certain way and it is unacceptable to live outside that thinking. The third theme revealed the consequences of these experiences. Due to the societal expectations and defining of a gender to behave a certain way, queer women who did not conform to these rules were discriminated and isolated for expressing their gender. Apart from the gender norms or societal expectations, gender expression is suppressed through gender policing by institutions such as religion, family, or even educational institutions. The findings shed light on the restrictive and heteronormative ideologies passed down to each generation in a religious setting. Even though religion, family background or even economic status influenced the experiences of gender policing, the ultimate reason behind experiencing gender policing is the gender expression of the individual. In the instances explained in the previous chapter, the findings showed that what disturbs a heteronormative society is when an individual is non-conforming to the gender norms of the society. So, in summary, gender expression of queer women shapes their experiences of gender policing in Kerala, due to the gender norms, cultural or traditional expectations, gender stereotypes, factors like religion, education family background, etc…

5.2 Conclusion

The research objective was to understand the experiences of gender policing and its impact on queer women in Kerala. The findings concludes that the different forms of gender policing experienced by the queer women in Kerala is derived from the gender expression. The rigid gender norms enforced under a heteropatriarchal society is causes these women to face discrimination, isolation, and homophobic experiences. Even though, these experiences come from every corner of the society, such as from religious, family or even educational institutions, these women challenged the binary system and resisted against those powers suppressing them. In the context of Kerala, the role of queer feminist theories and movements play an important role. It can be concluded that the change is visible, and it provides us hope for an inclusive society for every diverse identity. As a conclusion note, it can be said that the research problem which set the exploration of queer women's experiences of gender policing, navigated a dimension towards the cultural, traditional, and living realities. The research objective and the central question provided a map for inquiry. The conceptual framework which followed a queer feminist perspective provided

a foundation for the study along with its theoretical framework. The research results unfolded the influence of cultural narratives, religious background, and family background on these experiences, amplifying the need for a change. This study in conclusion amplifies the voices, challenges the social and gender norms, and calls for an inclusive society. Even though, organizations like Vanaja Collective and Sahayatrika actively promotes queer rights and conducts awareness to improve the inclusivity, the need for a positive change through a change in the mentality and public opinion is necessary. The government could focus more on the queer community and address their problems. As Ruth Vanita puts it. mere bringing of laws is not going to bring a change, a change in the society comes from what people do (Vanita, 2017).

Appendices

Appendix A: Informed Consent Form

Purpose of Study	The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of gender policing and its impact on the community of queer women in Kerala. The term gender policing used for this study relate to the implicit and explicit rules or guidelines on how to present oneself to others.
Name of Interviewer	Radha Sivasankaran
Affiliated University	International Institute of Social Studies
Inclusion Criteria	- The participant must be 18 years old or older. - The participant must be available to meet in person in Kerala or over a video/audio call. - The participant must be identified as a queer woman.
Procedure	- The time for the interview will be approximately between thirty minutes to 2 hours. - Participation in the interview is completely voluntary and the participant may express the desire to end the interview at any point of the research. - The participant may choose to have the audio record deleted at any point.
Confidentiality	- All personal information will be kept confidential. - Pseudonyms will be used, and anonymity will be maintained to any detail that might reveal the participant's identity. - Recordings and hardcopies of the interview will be used only for academic purpose and will be stored in a secure location.
Audio Recording	I agree and give permission to have my responses audio recorded. ☐ Yes ☐ No
Use of data	I agree and give permission to use the anonymized data for the research purpose. ☐ Yes ☐ No
Participant Name & Signature	
Place & Date	

Appendix B: Interview Guide

These points and questions were used as a reference. However, the questions were modified and adapted according to the context.

SECTION 1: Introduction
1. Introduction & background of the researcher & research paper
2. Explanation of confidentiality and anonymity
3. Detailing of informed consent form
4. Gathering basic details
   - Name
   - Gender
   - Sexuality
   - Age
   - Race
   - Caste/religion
   - Occupation
   - Educational background
   - Are you openly lesbian? If yes, when did you come out?
   - Location and time of interview

SECTION 2: Being a lesbian in Kerala.
1. Experiences specifically due to your sexual orientation
2. Reactions from your family – supportive or not
3. How has your sexual orientation affected your:
   - Personal life
   - Social life
   - Occupation
   - Political scenario

SECTION 3: Experiences of gender policing
1. What according to you is gender policing?
2. Instances/experiences of gender policing
3. How do you perceive society's expectations of gender roles and gender enforcement?
4. Do you think it intersects with your identity as a lesbian in Kerala?
   - If yes, can you describe how and why?
5. Were there any institutional barriers or discrimination you had to face due to being a Queer woman?
   - Here by institutional barriers, I mean, schooling, healthcare, workplace.
6. Do you think gender policing has an impact on your mental health and well-being?

SECTION 4: Impact of gender policing
1. Career opportunities
2. Public services
3. Are public spaces more vulnerable to gender policing?
4. Does it affect your sense of safety and freedom?

SECTION 5: Perception and attitudes
1. Media representation & cultural narratives shaping societal attitudes towards lesbian community.

2. Have you experienced any changes in how society perceives and treats the lesbian community in Kerala over the years? If so, what factors contributed to these changes?
3. Are there any prevailing myths or misconceptions about lesbians in Kerala, and how do they impact your daily life?
4. Have you encountered any positive or negative experiences with religious or community leaders regarding your sexual orientation?
5. How do you handle situations when individuals hold prejudiced views about your sexual orientation?

SECTION 6: Cultural Identity & Intersectionality
1. How do you navigate the intersectionality of your identity as a lesbian along with other aspects of your identity, such as caste, religion, or class?
2. Are there any cultural traditions or customs in Kerala that either challenge or support the acceptance of diverse sexual orientations?
3. How do you see the role of language and local dialects in shaping conversations around gender and sexual diversity in Kerala?
4. Have you experienced any unique challenges or advantages related to your sexual orientation based on the region or area within Kerala where you reside?
5. How has your family's cultural background influenced their reactions or responses to your sexual orientation?

SECTION 7: Social Support & Coping Mechanisms
1. Have you been able to find supportive social circles or community spaces within Kerala where you can freely express your sexual orientation without fear of judgment or discrimination?
2. Can you share any positive experiences of support from family members or friends regarding your sexual orientation?
3. How do you cope with the stress or challenges that arise from experiencing gender policing?
4. Are there any local or regional organizations that provide support services for the lesbian community in Kerala?
5. What role does online support or engagement with online LGBTQ+ communities play in your life?

SECTION 8: Conclusion
1. Involvement of International community
2. Recommendations for the future
3. Changes you wish for
4. Closing: Thanking the interviewee for their time, insights and willingness to share their experience for the research.

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NOTES

1. Heteronormativity assumes sexual relationship between male and female to be the normal and preferred sexual orientation (Debnath, 2017).
2. Hegemonic masculinity is the institutional maintenance of male dominance over women (Laurel, 2013).
3. In snowball sampling, the researcher uses the initial few interviewees (often recruited opportunistically) to recommend other potential participants who fit the inclusion criteria for the study. They in turn will be asked to suggest further contacts, and so the sample builds up.
4. Malayalam is the native language spoken by people in Kerala. However, the terms and slangs vary according to each location.
5. T h e r e are two kinds of eunuchs,those that are disguised as males, and those that are disguised as females. Eunuchs disguised as females imitate their dress, speech, gestures, tenderness, timidity, simplicity, softness and bashfulness. The acts that are done on the jaghana or middle parts of women, are done in the mouths of these eunuchs,and this is called Auparishtaka.
6. An ancient Indian scripture.