

Gender-Based Violence in Sexual Minority Relationships: Cognitive Thresholds and Support Systems

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Abstract. Gender-based violence (GBV) in sexual minority relationships remains underexplored because dominant cultural scripts still frame abuse through a heterosexual male-female lens. This paper analyzes the cognitive logic that shapes how such violence is recognized, tolerated, or ignored across two socio-cultural settings. Drawing on minority stress theory, the power and control model, and heteronormativity, the study adopts a qualitative comparative approach based on discourse analysis of legal texts, media narratives, and secondary data from community support organizations. It compares Region A, a socially liberal urban context with visible legal protections, and Region B, a conservative setting where traditional family values and institutional silence shape sexual minority life. The analysis shows that the definition of violence is culturally contingent. Verbal humiliation, coercive concealment, and forced outing operate as powerful tactics of control, but their social legibility differs significantly across regions. Region B raises the threshold for help-seeking through stigma and legal silence, whereas Region A benefits from stronger informal support and media representation. The paper argues for culture-sensitive support systems that recognize identity-based abuse and make invisible victims more visible.

Keywords: gender-based violence, sexual minorities, cognitive thresholds, intimate partner violence, support systems

1. Introduction

Minority stress theory and the Power and Control Wheel provide a useful starting point for analyzing how structural stigma and coercive control shape violence in sexual minority relationships [1, 2]. Heteronormative assumptions further explain why abuse outside heterosexual couples is often difficult for legal systems, service providers, and victims themselves to recognize. Research on forced outing shows that identity exposure can function as a distinct tactic of intimate control, while empirical studies of same-sex and sexual minority intimate partner violence confirm that the problem is not exceptional or marginal. Work on access to domestic abuse services and multiple minority stress also shows that formal help-seeking is shaped by the intersection of stigma, race, sexuality, and institutional trust. Comparative research from conservative cultural contexts demonstrates that social norms can strongly influence whether violence is named, minimized, or silently endured.

For decades, global conversations about gender-based violence (GBV) have been anchored in a cisgender and heterosexual framework [3]. The central narrative has, understandably, been one of male violence against female victims within a patriarchal order [2]. This lens has been indispensable, yet it has also cast a long shadow, leaving the experiences of sexual and gender minorities largely unrecognized [3]. The domestic violence movement, born out of urgent feminist advocacy, was effective at exposing the systemic nature of male dominance [2]. However, a consequence of that success was the marginalization of victims whose relationships do not fit the male-female script [3]. As a result, the ways intimate partner violence (IPV) unfolds, is perceived, and is addressed in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, and other sexual minority relationships remain insufficiently understood [4-8].

The issue is not merely a gap in empirical data [6]. It is also a gap in collective cognition [3]. Society lacks a ready-made schema for recognizing abuse when it unfolds outside the familiar choreography of male breadwinner and female homemaker [2, 3]. This cognitive blind spot is made worse by the absence of culturally specific analysis [1, 9]. Existing research has not sufficiently explained how regional values, local norms, and community histories shape the boundaries of what counts as violence [7, 10]. Western-centered studies have identified forced outing as a distinct and devastating form of abuse [7]. Nevertheless, whether that act is taken seriously, or is even seen as violence at all, depends heavily on local attitudes toward sexuality, privacy, and family honor [3, 7, 10]. The interplay between external legal frameworks and internal community dynamics creates a particular ecosystem of tolerance and silence that requires careful cross-regional scrutiny [1, 3, 9].

This study addresses one core question: how socio-cultural contexts shape the cognitive logic that sexual minorities use to recognize and tolerate gender-based violence in intimate relationships [1, 3, 9]. To analyze this logic, the paper proposes the concept of a cognitive threshold. This concept refers to the socially constructed boundary that separates behavior perceived as a normal, if painful, relational conflict from behavior that is finally named as violence [3, 7, 8].

Methodologically, the paper takes a qualitative comparative approach and focuses on two anonymized but culturally distinct settings [7, 10]. Region A stands for an urban environment with progressive legal protections and relatively high visibility of sexual minorities in mainstream media [3]. Region B represents a conservative social context in which traditional family values carry significant weight and the law remains silent or ambiguous about non-heterosexual identities [1, 9, 10]. The analysis draws on the Power and Control Wheel adapted to sexual minority dynamics, Minority Stress Theory, and the broader critique of heteronormativity [7, 8]. It relies on critical discourse analysis of legal texts, media representations, and secondary data from community organization reports [1-3, 9].

The primary objective is to trace the mechanisms through which cultural narratives either raise or lower the cognitive threshold for recognizing violence [7, 8]. The paper identifies control tactics that carry particular force in sexual minority relationships, especially the weaponization of identity concealment, and shows how their social salience shifts from one region to another [3, 7, 10]. The significance of this work lies in its potential to inform interventions that are genuinely culture-sensitive [1, 3, 7, 8]. By clarifying how victims internalize violence differently depending on the cultural environment, the study offers a foundation for moving beyond one-size-fits-all support models and toward a more inclusive understanding of GBV [3].

2. Sociological explanations of gender-based violence

2.1. The power and control wheel: re-tooling the model

The Duluth Model's Power and Control Wheel has long served as a touchstone for illustrating how physical and sexual violence are sustained by a scaffolding of non-physical coercion, including emotional abuse, isolation, intimidation, and economic control [2]. In its classic form, the model is strongly gendered [2]. It assumes a male perpetrator who draws on systemic male privilege to dominate a female victim. When this model is applied to sexual minority relationships, careful recalibration is necessary [2, 3]. In these relationships, violence often functions not to reinforce patriarchal gender roles in a simple way, but to enforce a private hierarchy within the relationship that feeds on the shared experience of marginalization [1, 2, 9].

The mechanism of control shifts from leveraging external patriarchy to exploiting internal vulnerabilities [1, 9]. The perpetrator may not rely primarily on social male dominance, but on social homophobia, transphobia, and the fear of exposure that can be activated at any time [1, 3, 9]. Examples include threats to disclose a partner's health status, strategic misgendering, or repeated messages suggesting that no one else will accept the victim [1, 7, 9]. This reframing turns violence into a parasitic form of control: it feeds on public discrimination. Control is maintained by persuading the victim that the abusive relationship is the only safe harbor in an otherwise hostile world [1, 9]. The individual remains in the relationship not because the harm is invisible, but because the external world appears even more threatening [1, 3, 9].

2.2. Minority stress theory: the internalization of external discrimination

Minority Stress Theory gives language to a familiar experience for many sexual minorities: living in a hostile cultural environment creates chronic and identity-specific stressors that do not map neatly onto ordinary life stress [1, 9]. The theory distinguishes between distal stressors, meaning external acts of discrimination, and proximal stressors, meaning the internal expectation of rejection, the labor of concealment, and internalized stigma [1, 9]. This framework is essential for understanding the psychological architecture of tolerance [1, 9]. External discrimination does not merely exist alongside intimate partner violence; it is internalized and can distort how victims assess risk [1, 9].

A victim who has absorbed years of social stigma may carry a deep and often unspoken belief that mistreatment is somehow deserved [1, 9]. This is especially acute for individuals whose identities have been invalidated by family or community [1, 3, 9]. The chronic expectation of rejection weakens the capacity to imagine alternatives, and the abusive relationship may come to feel like the only viable form of intimacy [1, 9]. Concealment also creates a specific vulnerability [7, 10]. The perpetrator can weaponize the closet itself by threatening exposure [7, 10]. The cognitive threshold rises accordingly: the victim weighs the harm of the abuse against the anticipated harm of public exposure and judgment, and may conclude that enduring private violence is safer than inviting public violence [1, 7, 9, 10].

2.3. Heteronormativity: the architecture of invisibility

Heteronormativity is the pervasive assumption that heterosexuality is natural, normal, and preferred [3]. This assumption is embedded in law, medicine, education, and cultural narratives [3]. It does not merely exclude sexual minorities; it actively builds the cognitive scaffolding through which intimate relationships are interpreted. The default script of a male perpetrator and female victim makes it

conceptually difficult for many people, including police officers and service providers, to recognize abuse when it occurs between two men, two women, or gender-diverse partners [2, 3]. A violent encounter may be misread as a mutual fight or ordinary conflict, categories that lack the seriousness associated with domestic abuse [3].

This invisibility reaches deeply into the self-perception of victims [3]. Without public narratives or legal categories that affirm the reality of their experience, victims may lack the words necessary to describe what is happening [3, 7, 8]. Heteronormative social scripts teach that violence arises from male physical strength and female economic dependency [2, 3]. When that neat gendered differential is absent, identity-based coercive control can disappear from view [3]. This systemic erasure means that sexual minority victims must first break through a barrier of social unrecognizability before their experience can be named as violence. The cognitive threshold is not merely high; it is reinforced by the broader normative architecture of social understanding [3].

3. Cognitive thresholds: a cross-cultural comparison of Region A and Region B

3.1. Defining the boundaries of violence: verbal abuse

The way people process verbal abuse offers a clear window into the cultural contingency of violence definitions [7, 10]. In Region A, progressive psychological and therapeutic ideas have entered public life to a considerable degree [3]. Violence is widely understood to include psychological harm [7, 8]. Verbal humiliation, degrading a partner's sexual performance, mocking gender expression, or gaslighting a partner about identity are broadly recognized within community support circles as warning signs [7, 10]. The dominant cultural narrative, reinforced by educational programs and mental health advocacy, treats psychological integrity as something close to a right [3]. Persistent verbal degradation therefore crosses a relatively clear cognitive threshold and is socially signaled as unacceptable violence [7, 8].

Region B operates according to a different logic rooted in material pragmatism and the valorization of emotional endurance [7, 10]. Violence is more often defined by visible injury or severe economic deprivation [3, 8]. Verbal abuse, especially within the private setting of a relationship, tends to be coded as domestic conflict rather than serious harm [7, 10]. Persistent shaming and the steady erosion of a partner's sense of self are often minimized as something one simply tolerates in intimate life [3, 10]. For sexual minorities living in Region B, the cognitive threshold for naming verbal abuse as violence is considerably higher, partly because the baseline stress of managing a stigmatized identity has already normalized psychological distress [1, 7, 9]. The victim's internal calculus may rate such abuse as less threatening than the structural violence of social ostracism [1, 9]. As a result, this control tactic can slip beneath the cognitive radar and remain effectively invisible [7, 10].

3.2. Forced outing as a weapon of control

Forced outing, meaning the threat or act of revealing a partner's sexual orientation or gender identity without consent, is a paradigmatic form of GBV that belongs uniquely to sexual minority relationships [7, 10]. Its power is drawn from the surrounding social world, and the cognitive weight it carries directly reflects regional sensitivity [7, 10]. In Region A, where identity authenticity enjoys some cultural recognition and legal protections against discrimination exist, forced outing is conceptually legible as a serious form of psychological abuse [3, 7, 10]. The available safety nets, though imperfect, lower the stakes of exposure [7, 8]. As a result, the community's cognitive

threshold identifies forced outing not merely as a breach of trust, but as a deliberate act of violence aimed at dismantling autonomy [7, 10].

Region B presents a very different risk calculus [7, 10]. There, the family unit remains a central economic and social institution and is often built on an unspoken expectation of heterosexual continuity [3]. Sexual identity is frequently managed through careful and strategic concealment [1, 9]. In this world, forced outing functions as an ultimate control weapon because it can threaten a person's entire social existence [7, 10]. It may trigger job loss, family disownment, and, in extreme cases, exposure to corrective violence [7, 8, 10]. The perpetrator wields the weight of a conservative society against the victim [3, 10]. Paradoxically, this catastrophic potential can numb the cognitive threshold [7, 10]. Because the consequences are so severe, victims may be less likely to report or externally acknowledge the threat as abuse [1, 7, 9, 10]. Instead, they may internalize it as an existential crisis to be managed in silence [1, 3, 9, 10].

3.3. The role of media narratives

Media representation operates as a powerful epistemic force, quietly shaping the social imaginaries that set cognitive thresholds [3, 7]. In Region A, the past decade has seen a notable shift from tragic or sensationalized portrayals of queer lives toward more ordinary and therefore more meaningful representation [3]. Television series and social media content increasingly feature diverse couples navigating everyday relationship conflict, including storylines about intimate partner violence in same-sex partnerships [7, 8]. This steady saturation of normalized imagery does more than entertain. It builds a cognitive repertoire [3]. When abuse in a same-sex relationship appears on a mainstream platform, viewers receive a script for recognition [7]. The cognitive threshold drops because abuse becomes legible outside the heterosexual model [3, 7].

Region B, by contrast, operates largely under a regime of omission and stereotype [3, 10]. Sexual minority characters, when they appear at all, tend to be relegated to comic relief or isolated tragedy [3, 10]. Narratives that center healthy and long-term queer relationships are rare, and depictions of conflict within those relationships are almost nonexistent because of both formal censorship and social pressure [3, 7, 10]. The absence of representation leaves a vacuum, and heteronormative scripts rush into that vacuum [3]. Social media offers some counter-narrative spaces, but much of this discourse remains underground in coded and closed groups [7, 8]. Without accessible and affirmative public narratives, victims in Region B lack the mirror images needed to reflect on their own experience [3, 10]. The cognitive threshold remains high not because suffering is absent, but because there is insufficient cultural language to separate the ambient pain of stigmatized life from the preventable harm of an abusive partner [1, 3, 7, 9, 10].

4. Help-seeking barriers and social support systems

4.1. Identity stigma and the willingness to seek help

The decision to seek help passes through a thick filter of identity stigma, and fear of secondary victimization often looms larger than the primary abuse itself [1, 3, 8]. Sexual minority victims can be caught in a double bind [1, 8]. To disclose abuse is often to disclose sexual orientation or gender identity [3, 8]. In Region B especially, that disclosure can trigger immediate discrimination from institutions that are supposed to offer protection. The fear that a police officer, counselor, or shelter worker will respond with contempt or refusal is not hypothetical [3, 7, 8]. It is a powerful and experience-based deterrent [7, 8].

There is also a quieter pressure of community loyalty [1, 9]. Many victims carry a heavy sense of responsibility, worrying that exposing violence within an already marginalized community will reinforce prejudiced stereotypes [1, 3, 9]. This logic twists silence into a distorted form of community protection [1, 9]. Suffering quietly becomes a way to avoid giving ammunition to hostile outsiders [3, 8]. In Region A, institutional sensitivity training has reduced but not eliminated this fear; victims may still worry about encountering untrained staff who do not understand queer relational dynamics [7, 8]. In Region B, where formal institutions are often seen as extensions of a hostile social order, the threshold becomes almost insurmountable [3, 8]. The victim may calculate that the institutional cure, including exposure and humiliation, is worse than the private harm [1, 7-9].

4.2. Informal support networks: the community as a double-edged sword

When formal institutions feel inaccessible or dangerous, informal networks such as friends and chosen family become the primary places where abuse is processed [7, 8]. In Region A, robust LGBTQ+ community centers and peer support groups offer a structured counter-narrative to the invisibility imposed by heteronormativity [3, 7, 8]. These spaces actively disseminate knowledge that lowers the cognitive threshold. They teach members, explicitly and implicitly, to identify tactics such as forced outing or financial exploitation as forms of violence [7, 8]. In effect, they function as a form of lay sociological education, translating abstract ideas about power and control into the lived texture of relationships [2, 7].

In Region B, informal networks operate on a smaller and more clandestine scale, but their intensity can be extraordinary [7, 10]. Friendship groups often become the sole lifeline. Yet their effectiveness is limited by their own internalized stigmas [1, 9]. A well-meaning friend may be just as unprepared as the victim to recognize non-physical abuse, and may inadvertently reinforce minimization by advising the victim to endure the relationship quietly to avoid scandal [3, 7, 10]. The support is emotionally genuine, but it can remain cognitively aligned with the high-threshold logic of the surrounding culture [1, 9, 10]. Without the mediating influence of formal advocacy frameworks, informal networks in Region B can absorb trauma without transforming the victim's understanding of it, thereby perpetuating a cycle of private suffering managed within a tight but constrained circle of care [7, 8, 10].

4.3. The suggestive role of the institutional environment

Laws and policies do more than regulate behavior; they send symbolic messages that reach deeply into self-perception [3]. Legal silence regarding sexual minority relationships is itself a form of institutional communication [3, 8]. In Region A, the explicit inclusion of same-sex partnerships in domestic violence legislation and anti-discrimination statutes performs two kinds of work [6]. Practically, it opens a pathway for redress. Symbolically, it tells victims that the state sees their relationships as real and worthy of protection [3]. This institutional recognition cuts through the cognitive threshold by affirming the victim's reality at a societal level and pushing back against the heteronormative script that would dismiss abuse as trivial [3, 6].

Region B tells the opposite story [3, 8]. Where laws refuse to recognize same-sex partnerships, or where they actively criminalize dimensions of queer life, the state codifies the non-existence of the victim's relationship [3, 6, 8]. This is not a neutral gap; it is a powerful negative suggestion [3, 8]. When the law will not name a relationship, it strips victims of the standing to claim safety [6, 8]. The victim's self-identity fractures under this pressure and may internalize the state's logic [1, 9]. If

the relationship lacks legal ontology, the violence inside it seems to lack social reality [3, 8]. This can be described as a form of institutional gaslighting, and it dramatically raises the cognitive threshold [3, 8]. Seeking protection from the state no longer feels like a right. It feels like a plea to recognize harm in a relationship that the law treats as invisible [3, 6, 8].

5. Comprehensive analysis: cognitive transformation and cultural breakthrough

5.1. Lowering the threshold: cultural education and narrative contestation

Changing the cognitive logic around GBV in sexual minority communities requires a deliberate and culturally attuned effort to lower the threshold of recognition [1, 3, 8]. The core mechanism is cultural education, but not a shallow version limited to slogans about tolerance [7]. What is needed is an active dismantling of heteronormative violence scripts and a replacement of the monolithic male-female abuse model with a pluralistic understanding of power and control [2, 3]. In practice, this means integrating specific modules on queer relationship dynamics into school-based education and professional training for police, judges, and healthcare workers [7, 8]. Such education must name identity-based abuse tactics, including forced outing and strategic misgendering, clearly and directly, treating them as violence rather than private quarrels [7, 10].

Media production also has a strategic role to play [3, 7]. By commissioning and circulating stories that show sexual minority characters experiencing, surviving, and escaping abusive relationships, cultural producers can help create new social scripts [3, 7, 8]. This is a kind of cognitive priming: it gives viewers pre-formed patterns of recognition that are currently missing [7]. The abstract becomes tangible when a viewer in Region B watches a character navigate the threat of forced outing and name it as abuse [7, 10]. In that moment, a cognitive tool for self-diagnosis is acquired. Lowering the threshold is therefore a semiotic project, a systematic effort to give the experience a public language that can cut through the normalization of suffering [3, 7, 8].

5.2. Economic independence and the architecture of escape

The material conditions of a victim's life are closely connected to the cognitive process of moving from victim to survivor [1, 7, 8]. Economic vulnerability does not merely limit options; it concretizes a high cognitive threshold [7, 8]. Even when a victim begins to name an experience as abuse, the material impossibility of picturing a viable escape route can reinforce the psychological reflex to minimize harm [1, 9]. The cognitive process cannot complete its movement toward action without a material foundation of genuine possibility [7, 8]. The path from identity reconstruction to physical liberation runs in large part through economic independence [6, 8].

Economic empowerment initiatives designed with sexual minority victims in mind operate on two levels [7, 8]. On the practical level, they supply resources for exit, including shelter access, job training, and financial assistance, without forcing people through heteronormative intake procedures [3, 8]. On the cognitive level, economic participation rebuilds a self-identity that abuse has systematically eroded [1, 9]. Meaningful work and financial self-sufficiency push back against the perpetrator's narrative that the victim is worthless or incapable of surviving alone [7, 8]. This economic re-subjectification is a form of identity repair [1, 9]. In Region A, targeted scholarship and employment programs have shown that economic stability can lower the threshold for leaving abusive relationships [7, 8]. In Region B, where economic systems are often intertwined with family structures hostile to non-conforming identities, informal community-based economic collectives have emerged as vital sites of both material survival and cognitive liberation [3, 7, 8, 10]. The ability

to afford an exit is both the material and psychological condition for renaming an experience as unacceptably violent [1, 7-9].

6. Conclusion

This study analyzed the cognitive logic underpinning the recognition and non-recognition of gender-based violence among sexual minorities through a cross-regional comparative lens. The central finding is that the perception and tolerance of intimate partner violence are not universal givens. They are governed by a culturally constructed cognitive threshold shaped by minority stress, heteronormative assumptions, and the weaponization of identity-specific vulnerabilities, especially forced outing. The comparison between Region A and Region B shows that verbal abuse and psychological control can register with strikingly different levels of severity depending on local definitions of harm. In conservative contexts, high levels of psychological distress are often normalized as part of living a stigmatized life.

The significance of this research lies in its challenge to universalist assumptions that still dominate mainstream domestic violence paradigms. Institutional silence is not a passive gap. It is an active cognitive force that raises the threshold of tolerance by withholding from victims the standing needed to claim their experience. By contrast, accessible public narratives and affirmative legal frameworks lower that threshold by supplying cognitive scripts required for recognition. The study also underscores that reconstructing a victim's identity is not a purely psychological journey. It is a socio-material process dependent on institutional validation and the material possibility of escape.

Future research should move beyond static comparative snapshots toward longitudinal work that tracks how cognitive thresholds shift as laws and media landscapes change. Ethnographic research is also needed to capture the lived and moment-by-moment negotiation of thresholds, including how individuals reinterpret the same conduct before, during, and after leaving abusive relationships. Further comparative analysis could examine additional regions with different legal traditions, family structures, and media systems. Such work would support more precise legal reforms, more inclusive service design, and better public education. Ultimately, protecting sexual minority victims requires not only adding them to existing domestic violence frameworks, but also reconstructing the cultural and institutional conditions that determine whether their suffering is recognized as violence at all.

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