

## Domestic Violence and its Associated Factors among LGBTQIA+ Communities in Urban Myanmar

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**Abstract: Background:** Domestic violence can be defined as a range of harmful behaviors that occur in any relationship regardless of their race, age, sexual orientation, religion, gender identity, socioeconomic backgrounds and educational level when someone is exerting power and control over the others. Although the prevalence of domestic violence against women was expressed in Myanmar Demographic and Health Survey, the data on violence against LGBTQIA+ people was limited in Myanmar context. Moreover, Penal Code 377 prohibited unnatural sex including sodomy and it can sentence to prison up to 20 years in Myanmar and violence against LGBTQIA+ people are unacknowledged and underreported. **Objectives:** This study aimed to identify the period prevalence of domestic violence against LGBTQIA+ people in Myanmar and to explore associated factors. **Methods:** Cross-sectional data from 322 LGBTQIA+ people living in two big cities in Myanmar-Yangon and Mandalay were collected in June 2023, through an online platform. Association between domestic violence in LGBTQIA+ people and potential factors were analyzed using chi-square statistics and multivariable binary logistic regression models. **Results:** The period prevalence of domestic violence among LGBTQIA+ in the past 12 months was 30.49%. Gender identity, homophobic expression of family members and experienced stigma were significantly associated with ever-experienced domestic violence. Compared to cisgender, transgender and queer participants were more exposed to domestic violence, showing 2.97 (95% CI: 1.29, 6.94) and 2.80 times (95% CI: 1.09: 7.43) respectively. Participants whose family members expressed homophobia were 2.38 times (95% CI: 1.24, 4.64) more likely to experience domestic violence. Respondents with experienced-stigma had a 5.24 time (95% CI: 2.49, 11.70) of higher risk to domestic violence. **Conclusion:** The study revealed that laws and policy should be strengthened to protect LGBTQIA+ rights, and more support services should be available for the victims of domestic violence in Myanmar.

**Keywords:** LGBTQIA+, Domestic Violence, Homophobic Expression, Experienced-stigma

## Introduction

Domestic violence can be defined as any abusive behaviors towards a person by abusing the power and control over the victim in a dating or family relationship regardless of race, religion, gender and social class<sup>[1]</sup>. Although violence against women and girl is often reported, little is shown and reported about violence against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and/or questioning, intersex and asexual and other ways chosen to self-identified (LGBTQIA+) people. Violence against LGBTQIA+ people were not lower in the frequency and severity compared to violence in the heterosexual community<sup>[2]</sup>. Moreover, the findings for heterosexual relationships could not cover the prevalence of domestic violence among LGBTQIA+ people<sup>[3]</sup>. This is because violence against LGBTQIA+ people mainly happened due to the social stigma, discrimination and unique power dynamic within LGBTQIA+ individual.

Consequently, domestic violence become a public health concern among gender and sexual minorities through stigmatization and marginalization which can put them at more risk of violence and sexual assaults all over the world<sup>[4]</sup>. Howbeit, lack of population data regarding LGBTQIA+ people, lack of representative sampling and other resources like funding can make difficult to gather data of violence against LGBTQIA+ people. One of the studies conducted in Columbia presented that 60.9% of men who have sex with men (MSM) and transgender women had experienced one type of violence in their lifetime<sup>[5]</sup>. Transgender people experienced more violence than other sexual and gender minorities whereas 31.1% of transgender people were victims of various forms of violence<sup>[2]</sup>.

In Myanmar, based on the Buddhist religious point of view, the belief that being LGBTQIA+ people are the consequence of evil in their past life is common<sup>[6]</sup> and that other can try to change the sexual orientation or gender identity of LGBTQIA+ people to heterosexual are deemed acceptable. Myanmar is predominantly a heteronormative and patriarchal society and as a result, for gay men and boys to be beaten by their parents and for wives to be beaten by their husbands is common and is often perceived as 'normal' behavior. Consequently, LGBTQIA+ people in Myanmar experienced violence and discrimination based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. Additionally, Section 377 of the British colonial penal code has been used to criminalize all sexual acts "against the order of nature" which criminalized third gender people such as the apwint (a culturally specific term to Myanmar which is used to refer to individuals assigned male at birth who openly identify as women and are attracted to men).

It is likely therefore that LGBTQIA+ people in Myanmar would keep their sexual orientation and gender identity a secret and therefore it becomes taboo in society. There is very limited research focusing on this vulnerable population especially on experiences of violence in Myanmar. This study aimed to determine the prevalence of domestic violence in the past 12 months in Myanmar LGBTQIA+ people and its associated factors.

## Methods

### (a) Data collection and sample selection

Cross-sectional data were collected in June 2023 through an online structured questionnaire from LGBTQIA+ people residing in two major cities of Myanmar, Yangon and Mandalay. To reach out the LGBTQIA+ individuals who are the hidden population in the context of Myanmar, purposive sampling was initially applied to connect to LGBTQIA+ communities or organizations by posting the link of online survey on different social media platforms. Thereafter, a snowball sampling method was employed to reach out more participants through referrals. A total of 322 LGBTQIA+ participants, 237 from Yangon and 85 from Mandalay was recruited in this study. The sample size was calculated to detect the period prevalence of domestic violence in LGBTQIA+ using the prevalence of domestic violence of the study conducted in China<sup>[7]</sup>. The pilot test was conducted before starting the data collection and 18 years and above LGBTQIA+ people in cities was eligible to participate in this study. The consent was granted by all the participants. This study received an ethical clearance from the Institutional Review Board of Institute for Population and Social Research, Mahidol University in Thailand (COA No. 2023/05-113).

### (b) Conceptual framework

Adopting the social-ecological model of Bronfenbrenner,<sup>[8]</sup>a research framework was developed in this study to understand the extent of personal as well as different environmental factors on domestic violence experienced by Myanmar LGBTQIA+. Based on the social-ecological model, the studied factors were divided into three tiers. The most inner tier, referred to as the individual level involves with socio demographic characteristics as well as activities and behaviors decided to perform by individuals such as, substance abuse, sexual orientation and gender identity. The second tier, referred to as the interpersonal level, composed of attitude and reactions undertaken by people close to LGBTQIA+ such as homophobic and transphobic attitude of family members and friends, living arrangement and numbers of people lived in the same household. The community level which is the third tier reflects upon social norms of the community towards LGBTQIA+. Experienced-stigma and felt-discrimination were selected to be the factors in the third tier.

### (c) Measurement tools

The question items used to measure domestic violence as well as majority of studied factors were adopted from those developed by European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights<sup>[9]</sup>. The survey questions were designed to be culturally appropriate and sensitive to the experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals in Myanmar. A full list of question items measuring factors associated with domestic violence is presented in Supplemental Table S1. The dependent variable, domestic violence against LGBTQIA+ people by family members was determined by question item, "During your time at home, in the past 12 months, have any of these occurred to you

because you are LGBTQIA+ individual?”. These actions included (a) physical violence, (b) threats of violence or harm, (c) sexual violence, (d) made offensive or threatening comments, (e) emotional or psychological abuse, (f) stalking or harassment, (g) forced isolation, (h) economic abuse.

It was noted as domestic violence if the participants encountered at least one kind of those actions. To determine the period prevalence of domestic violence in Myanmar LGBTQIA+ people, the experience of domestic violence within past 12 months was accounted. The experiences of domestic violence in past 12 months and that of more than 12 months were combined as “ever-experienced” domestic violence to explore the associated factors of domestic violence in Myanmar LGBTQIA+ people.

#### **(d) Statistical analysis**

A total of 17 respondents were excluded because of incomplete answers. Consequently, total of 305 participants were included in calculating period prevalence of domestic violence. Univariate analysis was used to describe all the variables studied. A binary logistic regression model was constructed to investigate multiple factors associated with domestic violence against LGBTQIA+ people. Due to missing values of independent variables, only data from 249 participants were included in the regression analysis. Constructing and selecting independent variables included in multiple regression analysis was based on the result of bivariate analysis. The model assumptions for binary logistic regression were checked to ensure the validity of regression results. The significant level for the regression analysis was considered at  $p$ -value  $\leq 0.05$ . R software version 4.2.3 was used to perform statistical analysis for this study.

### **Results**

Based on the calculation from 305 participants excluding 17 from total participants because of missingness, the prevalence of domestic violence in Myanmar LGBTQIA+ was 30.49% (Figure 1). Most of the participants, 60.98% never experienced domestic violence. By combining experience of domestic violence in past 12 months and that of more than 12 months, 39.02% of LGBTQIA+ people in this study ever experienced domestic violence.

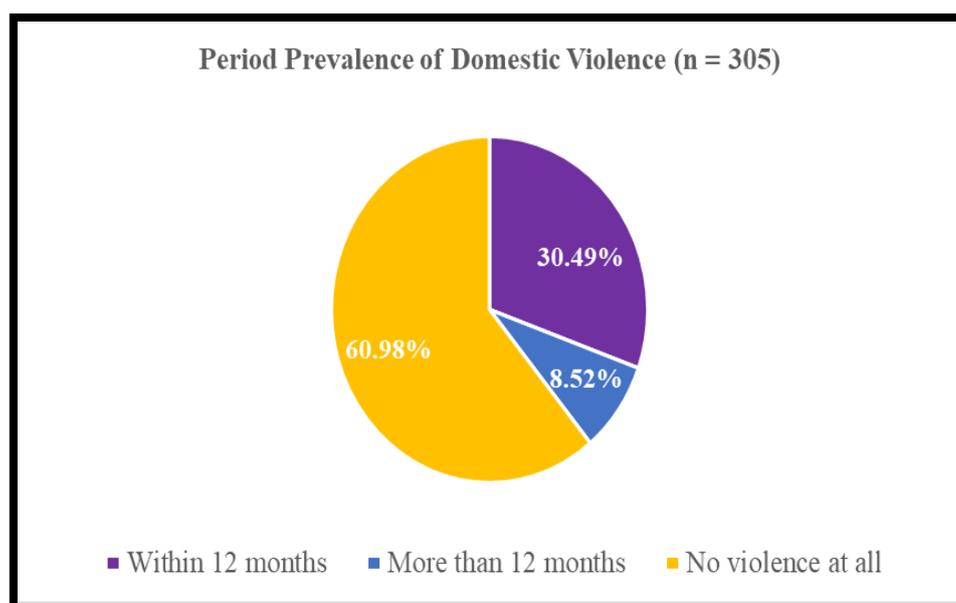


Figure 1. Prevalence of Domestic Violence

Among 322 participants, there was no participant who have no formal education of Myanmar and total of 47.19% had an undergraduate degree and or above. Among 297 participants excluding 25 participants who did not want to express their employment status, nearly half of them, 49.49% had a paid job. For sexual orientation of the participants, total of 31.37% was lesbian women, 41.30% as gay men and 27.33% (n=322) as bisexual and others. In case of gender identity among 322 participants, 46.58% of participants identified themselves as cisgender, 18.94% as transgender, 14.91% as gender queer, 7.76% as non-binary and demigender and 11.80% as agender. Based on 307 respondents, total of 61.57% ever have experienced-stigma in their life.

**Table 1 Descriptive statistics and results of Chi-square or Fisher's exact test for the studied factors (n = 305)**

Variables	Total Participants n (%)	Domestic Violence		p-value
		Ever experienced	Never experienced	
		n (%)	n (%)	
Age				
≤ 20 years	70 (22.95)	26 (37.14)	44 (62.86)	0.31
21 – 30 years	194 (63.61)	81 (41.75)	113 (58.25)	
> 30 years	41 (13.44)	12 (29.27)	29 (70.70)	
Ethnicity				
Bamar	218 (71.48)	83 (38.07)	135 (61.93)	0.69
Others	87 (28.52)	36 (41.38)	51 (58.62)	
Religion				
Buddhist	279 (91.48)	107 (38.35)	172 (61.65)	0.57
Others	26 (8.52)	12 (46.15)	14 (53.85)	
Educational level (n = 304)				
Below graduate degree	161 (52.96)	63 (39.13)	98 (60.87)	0.99

Graduated	101 (33.23)	40 (39.60)	61 (60.40)	
Above graduate degree	42 (13.81)	16 (38.10)	26 (61.90)	
Employment status (n = 282)				
Paid work	140 (49.65)	52 (37.14)	88 (62.86)	0.34
Student	60 (21.28)	23 (38.33)	37 (61.67)	
Unemployed	27 (9.57)	15 (55.56)	12 (44.44)	
Self-employed, voluntary work and others	55 (19.50)	23 (41.82)	32 (58.18)	
Sexual Orientation				
Lesbian	97 (31.80)	35 (36.08)	62 (63.92)	0.59
Gay	125 (40.98)	53 (48.40)	72 (57.60)	
Bisexual and others	83 (27.21)	31 (37.35)	52 (62.65)	
Gender Identity				
Cisgender	141 (46.23)	43 (30.50)	98 (69.50)	<0.001
Transgender	58 (19.02)	34 (58.62)	24 (41.38)	
Gender queer	46 (15.08)	26 (56.52)	20 (43.48)	
Agender, non-binary and others	60 (19.67)	16 (26.67)	44 (73.33)	
Disclosure of sexual orientation to family members (n = 295*)				
Yes	250 (84.75)	100 (40.00)	150 (60.00)	0.33
No	45 (15.25)	14 (31.11)	31 (68.89)	
Presence of an intimate partner (n = 291*)				
Never have	51 (17.53)	23 (45.10)	28 (54.90)	0.54 (Fisher Exact)
Ever have	231 (79.38)	87 (37.66)	144 (62.34)	
Presently have	9 (3.09)	4 (44.44)	5 (55.56)	
Substance abuse (n = 295*)				
Never used	217 (73.56)	74 (34.10)	143 (65.90)	0.05
Ever used	49 (16.61)	24 (48.98)	25 (51.02)	
Presently used	29 (9.83)	15 (51.72)	14 (48.28)	
Homophobic expression by family members (n = 286*)				
Yes	123 (43.00)	67 (54.47)	56 (45.53)	<0.001
Yes, more than 12 months	35 (12.24)	15 (42.86)	20 (57.14)	
No	128 (44.76)	34 (26.56)	94 (73.44)	
Numbers of LGBTQ+ friends				
None	22 (7.21)	4 (18.18)	18 (81.81)	0.11 (Fisher Exact)
1 - 5	173 (56.72)	70 (40.46)	103 (59.54)	
> 5	110 (36.07)	45 (40.91)	65 (59.10)	
Numbers of LGBTQ+ friends from whom you can get support				
None	43 (14.10)	13 (30.23)	30 (69.77)	0.18

1 - 5	233 (72.38)	94 (42.15)	129 (57.85)	
> 5	39 (12.79)	12 (30.77)	27 (69.23)	
Experienced-stigma (n = 294*)				
Yes	140 (47.62)	77 (55.00)	63 (45.00)	<0.001
Yes, more than 12 months	37 (12.59)	19 (51.35)	18 (48.65)	
No	117 (39.80)	19 (16.24)	98 (83.76)	
Felt-discrimination				
Yes	109 (35.74)	62 (56.88)	47 (43.12)	<0.001
No	196 (64.26)	57 (29.08)	139 (70.92)	

According to the results of Chi-square test shown in Table 1, gender identity of the participants, substance abuse status, homophobic expression by family members, experienced-stigma on LGBTQIA+ people and felt-discrimination were associated to domestic violence. Those significant variables were selected for main effect variables in multiple logistic regression models. An additional set of independent variables was selected based on cut of p-value lower than 0.5 in Chi-square or Fisher Exact test and single logistic regression model.

**Table 2 Results from Multiple Binary Logistic Regression for Domestic Violence with Predictor Variables (n = 249)**

Determinants	Odd Ratio (95% CI)
Constant	0.05 (0.01, 0.27) **
Gender identity (ref = cisgender)	
Transgender	2.97 (1.29, 6.94) *
Gender queer	2.80 (1.09, 7.43) *
Agender, non-binary and other	0.68 (0.28, 1.62)
Disclosure of sexual orientation (ref = No)	
Yes	1.51 (0.57, 4.24)
Presence of partner (ref = never have)	
Ever have	0.89 (0.21, 3.63)
Presently have	1.87 (0.78, 4.49)
Substance abuse (ref = never used)	
Ever used	1.81 (0.87, 3.85)
Presently used	1.15 (0.57, 2.35)
Homophobic expression by family members (ref = Never experienced)	
Ever experienced	2.38 (1.24, 4.64) *
LGBT friends in real life (ref = None)	
1 - 5	1.57 (0.33, 8.32)
> 5	1.85 (0.35, 10.71)
LGBT friends who you can get support (ref = None)	
1 - 5	1.38 (0.45, 4.51)
> 5	0.55 (0.12, 2.54)

Experienced-stigma (ref = Never experienced) Ever experienced	5.24 (2.49, 11.70) ***
Felt discriminated (ref = No) Yes	1.71 (0.87, 3.36)
Numbers of observations	249
Log-likelihood	-122.27
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.26

p-value '\*\*\*', 0.001, '\*\*', 0.01, '\*', 0.05

Results from multiple logistic regression models in Table 2 suggest that gender identity, homophobic expressions by family members and experienced-stigma from the community were significant predictors of domestic violence. Keeping other independent variables constant, transgender and queer individuals have 2.97 times (95% CI: 1.29, 6.94) and 2.80 times (95% CI: 1.09, 7.43) have respectively to be exposed to domestic violence than cisgender individuals. The likelihood of domestic violence among the respondents who ever experienced homophobic expression by family member was 2.38 times (95% CI: 1.24, 4.64) higher than those who had never experienced those expression if all the independent variables were constant. The odd of exposing domestic violence was 5.24 times (95% CI: 2.49, 11.70) higher in LGBTQIA+ people who ever encountered experienced-stigma than those who never encountered experienced stigma when all variables were constant.

## Discussion

The prevalence of domestic violence against LGBTQIA+ people was 30.49%. Gender identity of the respondents, homophobic expression by family members, experienced-stigma from the community were the major driven factors of domestic violence against LGBTQIA+ people in Myanmar.

The prevalence of domestic violence was more than a study conducted in China, 27.4%<sup>[7]</sup> and United States, 12.6%<sup>[10]</sup> which were conducted during COVID-19 lockdown period. However, the finding of the study conducted among MSM and transgender women in Columbia, 60.9%<sup>[5]</sup> which was more than the finding of this study. The results showed differently because of sociocultural differences between the countries, acceptance of LGBTQIA+ people, differences in sociopolitical situations, presence of laws and policies which protect LGBTQIA+ people, situations of human rights violation in each country and accessibility and affordability of support services after experiencing domestic violence<sup>[11]</sup>. In Myanmar, traditional taboos, religious belief and some laws make LGBTQIA+ people more vulnerable, being discriminated and violented.

Although some studies mentioned that the chance of exposing domestic violence is more frequent in lower educational level<sup>[12]</sup>, educational level of the participants was not related to domestic violence in this study. Financial hardship and unemployment can increase domestic violence in a study carried out in

Michigan<sup>[13]</sup> but the current study did not show any association between employment status and domestic violence.

Transgender individual had higher risk of experiencing domestic violence in this study which is like the finding of the studies conducted in United States<sup>[5,14]</sup>. It is culturally hard for the society to accept the external appearance of transgender individuals who look different from cis gender people. This un acceptance can lead to transphobic attitudes and behaviors which can lead to violence against LGBTQIA+ people. Emotional or verbal abuse, sexual assault, school violence, family violence was noticed among the transgender<sup>[15]</sup>.

In case of sexual orientation, it did not show any association with domestic violence against LGBTQIA+ people. This may be because sexual orientation is not physically prominent unless this information was shared to others. Additionally, this study was conducted in two big cities of Myanmar and the people from these cities were aware of diversity of sexual orientation through continuous education and influence of soft power such as movies, videos and songs.

LGBTQIA+ individuals often experience discrimination, rejection, or stigma. This chronic stress can contribute to substance use as a coping mechanism. Lesbian, gay and bisexual adolescents used substances like injection drug, cigarettes nearly three times higher than heterosexual youth<sup>[16]</sup>. Drugs and alcohol may be used to escape from negative belief about their identity. Higher rates of depression and anxiety in the LGBTQIA+ community often lead to self-medication with drugs or alcohol<sup>[17]</sup>. Substance abuse status of the participants was associated with experiencing domestic violence. Substance abuse and domestic violence were bidirectional, and they have a complex interrelationship. A person with a substance use disorder was more likely to commit acts of violence against his partner or family member. On the other hand, those who experienced violence were more liable to use drugs or alcohol<sup>[18]</sup>.

Homophobia and discrimination towards LGBTQIA+ could lead to workplace harassments and bullying. This type of belief can create power imbalances within families, allowing an abuser to gain and sustain control over LGBTQIA+ individuals<sup>[1,19,20]</sup>. Many religious Myanmar showed rejection to LGBTQIA+ community because they believed that being LGBTQIA+ people in this life is due to the adultery in their past life<sup>[6]</sup>. Many LGBTQIA+ people kept their identity as secret to avoid discrimination and this negative social attitude can affect their mental health. Lack of support for LGBTQIA+ is another major issue in Myanmar. Because of social and religious barriers, there were not many formal organizations that can fight for their rights<sup>[6]</sup>.

Homophobic expressions of family members were significantly associated with exposing domestic violence. Verbal abuse, physical attacks, sexual harassment and murdering LGBTQIA+ people were based on the homophobic and transphobic attitudes of the individuals<sup>[20]</sup>. Many religious Myanmar showed rejection to

LGBTQIA+ community because they believed that being LGBTQIA+ people in this life is due to the adultery in their past life<sup>[6]</sup>.

The likelihood of experiencing domestic violence was 5.24 times higher in those LGBTQIA+ people who encountered experienced-stigma. It was reported that the rate of domestic violence and family violence were noticeably increased during COVID-19 pandemic. Not only verbal and physical assault from the supervisor and co-workers, LGBTQIA+ people did not get equal rights and opportunities in economic sector in Myanmar. These stigmas are based on the lack of understanding on diversity of sexual orientation and gender identity, heteronormative societies, religious belief, homophobic and transphobic attitudes. Many of them were treated as inferior sub-humans and some religious extremists forced them to convert to a state of heterosexuality<sup>[6]</sup>. Feeling discriminated against in the community was another associated factor to the domestic violence.

The findings of this study alarmed in its identification of the number of LGBTQIA+ people in Myanmar reporting violence because of their sexual orientation or identified gender. Additionally, the findings of this study will be useful in amending certain laws such as Panel Code 377 which discriminates against LGBTQIA+ people in Myanmar. More qualitative research on violence and discrimination against LGBTQIA+ individuals is needed to better understand this issue within the context of rigid gender norms, socio cultural factors, and religious beliefs. There may be recall and non-response bias in this study, as domestic violence is a sensitive and taboo topic in the Myanmar context, leading to potential underreporting of domestic violence against LGBTQIA+ individuals.

## Conclusion

The prevalence of domestic violence in LGBTQIA+ in Myanmar was 30.94% and the prevalence of ever experienced domestic violence was 39.01% in this study. Major contributing factors of domestic violence in this study were gender identity of the respondents, homophobic expression of the family members and experienced-stigma against LGBTQIA+ people. The findings of this study can help inform policies, including the use of gender-sensitive language and communication in Myanmar, amendments to certain laws, and the creation of LGBTQIA+-inclusive spaces. Further research can be conducted by including LGBTQIA+ individuals from rural areas to better understand the differences in the prevalence of domestic violence between LGBTQIA+ communities in rural and urban settings.

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