



From Pandemic To Progress: Understanding The Transgender Community's Challenges In West Bengal, India

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Abstract

This research focuses on the persistent struggles of the transgender community in West Bengal against societal oppression. Examining diverse districts, the study aims to unravel the multifaceted challenges faced by transgender individuals. Socio-economic obstacles and limited healthcare accessibility intensify the difficulties, especially for marginalized professions like hijra. Earning a livelihood becomes daunting, leading some to halt hormone therapy due to medication scarcity or financial constraints. Beyond gender dysphoria, the community endures discomfort in medical settings, enduring prejudice from healthcare professionals and peers. Against the backdrop of amplified challenges amid the COVID-19 pandemic, this paper extensively explores the broader spectrum of issues encountered by the transgender community of West Bengal in India.

Keywords: Transman, Transwoman, Social Discrimination, COVID 19, Challenges, Gender

INTRODUCTION

Across all nations and within various societies, the characterization of male and female individuals is predetermined by the processes of socialization and the constructs of culture. Men frequently carry an image of ruggedness, whereas women commonly display qualities associated with gentleness and nurturance. A transgender individual, often referred to as the third gender in the context of India, is someone whose individual and communal identity and gender orientation do not align with their assigned sex at birth. In modern-day India, despite efforts to raise awareness and combat homophobia and transphobia, the broader Indian society

continues to engage in behaviours that degrade transgender individuals, frequently subjecting them to abusive treatment that complicates their lives and existence. In this context, with the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the implementation of lockdowns and social distancing measures further exacerbated the challenges faced by transgender individuals, impacting their access to healthcare services as well as their financial and social resources. Individuals undergoing sex reassignment therapy, dealing with physical and mental abuse, or contending with sexually transmitted diseases require specialized medical attention within their community. During the period of lockdown, many transgender individuals found themselves confined to their homes with their families, where they encountered instances of violence compounded by a lack of support systems. Transgender individuals in India frequently encounter body dysphoria, feeling a disconnection between their physical bodies and the gender roles that society assigns to them. This personal struggle is exacerbated by societal unawareness, leading to discrimination across various aspects such as employment, healthcare, and the legal system. The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic and the abrupt imposition of lockdown measures in India from March 2020 placed the transgender community in a position of great hardship. This predicament is partly attributed to their lack of savings and is compounded by the fact that many transgender individuals from economically disadvantaged backgrounds engage in sex work. The introduction of social distancing measures resulted in unemployment for these sex workers, and even those involved in formal employment were affected as the market experienced a downturn, causing them to lose their jobs. In this context, where financial stability was a challenge, the transgender community faced difficulties in accessing healthcare, social justice, human rights, and other essential resources. The combination of social isolation and pre-existing discrimination, along with the additional burden of lost livelihoods, intensified the struggle for survival within the transgender community amidst the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Objectives of the Study

The research will involve an exploratory approach aimed at comprehending how the transgender community's experience of social exclusion has been influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic, in conjunction with their existing vulnerabilities. The study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- To assess the socio-economic difficulties and limitations in accessing healthcare encountered by the community.
- To gain insight into the distinct challenges that the transgender community faces, independent of the COVID-19 situation.

Materials and Methods

To engage with the transgender population, the researcher employed a combination of personal networking and collaboration with LGBTQ-focused NGOs to identify key primary respondents. Subsequently, a combination of snowball and purposive sampling methods was utilized to pinpoint secondary respondents, with references provided by the primary respondents.

The selection of respondents for this study was based on the following criteria:

- Individuals who self-identify as transgender
- Individuals who openly acknowledge their transgender identity to society
- Individuals who reside in West Bengal, India

A total of 20 respondents were targeted for the research, with the point of data saturation being applied. Although no novel insights were gained after the 12th interview, the researcher still conducted three additional interviews. Among the 15 interviewees, there were 7 transmen, 6 transwomen, 1 kothi, and 1 non-binary transgender individual. To facilitate this study, an interview schedule (enclosed in the annexure) was developed in consultation with a transman and a transwoman. The aim was to comprehend the various vulnerabilities they face and gather information about the lives of transgender individuals in the aftermath of COVID-19. Each interview was conducted individually by the researcher through phone calls, with prior consent obtained to record the conversations. The interviews spanned over an hour each. The interviewees played a vital role in helping the researcher grasp colloquial codes, their meanings, and the overarching themes tied to the emerging data.

Demographic Details of Research Participants

The research encompassed participants falling within the age bracket of 17 to 32 years, primarily engaging with the youthful segment of the transgender community. To comprehensively grasp the diverse social perceptions and challenges encountered by transgender individuals, the study strategically selected multiple locations representing urban, rural, and semi-urban viewpoints. The participants were primarily drawn from various districts of West Bengal, including Malda, Sundarban, Jalpaiguri, Kolkata, Nadia, North 24 Parganas, South 24 Parganas, and Midnapur. Most of the participants had completed their education at the graduation level, with the exception of two transwomen who were only able to sign their names. Out of the 15 respondents, there were one transman and one transwoman who were married, one transwoman who was separated, four participants in relationships, and the remaining were single. The research sample exhibited a broad spectrum of professions, ranging from students and individuals actively seeking employment to NGO workers, dancers, activists, government employees, members of the West Bengal Transgender Development Board (WBTDB),

private sector employees, coaching teachers, businessmen, nurses, OT Technicians, and municipal solid waste recyclers. Consequently, the monthly income of the participants varied significantly, spanning from no income to earning Rs 50,000 per month, depending on their respective professions. The predominant sexual orientation observed among the participants was heterosexual. However, three respondents indicated their willingness to engage in romantic relationships with transgender individuals, while the remaining nine participants expressed sexual attraction solely to individuals of biological male or female genders. Notably, one non-binary transgender respondent in the study identified themselves as trans-gay, signifying that as a transman, they experience sexual attraction towards biological males. Another participant described their sexual orientation as polyromantic asexual, denoting a romantic attraction to multiple genders but without sexual inclinations towards them. A distinct conflict regarding gender identity was evident among the respondents. The majority expressed a preference to identify as a woman or man rather than using the terms "transwoman" or "transman." This inclination was particularly pronounced among transmen. When delving into this identity struggle, it was revealed that online searches for "transgender" primarily yield results related to transwomen or Hijra, leading transmen to feel discomfort in aligning themselves with such an identity. In contrast, research participants who were actively engaged in activism expressed a desire to emphasize their transgender identity to enhance the community's visibility.

Results and Discussion

Throughout history, the transgender community has faced profound vulnerability, regardless of prevailing societal norms and conditions. Despite the progress made in terms of legal and social provisions for LGBTQ+ individuals, the transgender population continues to experience susceptibility, a reality that becomes especially evident during times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns. In addition to health-related risks, the transgender community confronts heightened financial insecurities, increased threats to their safety, and intensified feelings of social isolation. Each of these dimensions of the threats faced by the transgender community during times of such societal upheaval warrants further exploration.

Social discrimination faced before and after COVID

The transgender community has long been subjected to discrimination based on their affirmed gender identity, facing challenges from family members, peers, and even within institutions or organizations. Interviews conducted during this research revealed that while a few families were supportive, this was not the case for most respondents. Support from family members, particularly mothers, often stemmed from observing gender dysphoria symptoms in individuals. However, the role of fathers as supportive parents remained questionable in many instances. Some respondents shared their fathers' unwillingness to acknowledge them as their own children and refusal to provide financial assistance. The situation was exacerbated in joint family setups, leading many transgender individuals to turn to precarious professions like sex work or launda dance.

Transgender individuals encountered a range of challenges, from being labelled as abnormal to enduring hurtful comments such as "how are you a boy if your breasts are still growing and you are having periods?" (as one neighbor commented to a transman). They faced physical, verbal, and emotional abuse. Societal perceptions further intensified the traumatic experiences for all participants in this study. For transmen, the blatant stares directed at their breasts heightened their body dysphoria. Transphobic behaviours, purposeful misgendering, and mockery were common occurrences from society members. In fact, one participant received threats from local boys, including the terrifying threat of sexual assault. For those hailing from rural and suburban backgrounds, schools became sites of judgment and harassment. Many transgender individuals struggled with wearing school uniforms that conflicted with their true gender identity. This was particularly pronounced for transmen attending Bengali medium schools, where they were required to wear sarees as uniforms in higher classes, exacerbating their discomfort. Insensitive behaviour from teachers and classmates contributed to high dropout rates. Some transwomen even experienced sexual assault by school clerks or staff members. Explaining one's gender and the transition process to colleagues proved to be a formidable challenge at workplaces, often demoralizing respondents to the point where they questioned its worth. Apart from societal challenges, discrimination was also rampant while attempting to update official documents like voter's cards or Aadhar cards. While provisions existed for gender identity change for transgender individuals, lack of awareness among government officials about the relevant rules and procedures hindered smooth transitions. One respondent intentionally identified as male on official documents to avoid potential threats and denial of access to hotels and other social institutions due to their transgender identity. Repeated discrimination had severe consequences, leading many individuals to experience deep trauma, depression, and even consider suicide. It also hindered career progress and education, resulting in job losses or academic setbacks. LGBTQ+ community support often played a crucial role, but the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted such support networks. However, increased literacy about transgender issues driven by social media and web series has led to shifting attitudes among some segments of the population.

Access to healthcare facilities without judgement

The exclusion of the vulnerable transgender community from accessing healthcare is a result of complex barriers across multiple dimensions. A significant issue arises from the attitudes of other patients, who often mock and behave disrespectfully, especially within government hospitals. Doctors sometimes feel uncertain about prescribing gender-specific medications to transgender individuals, as the concept of transgender treatment was introduced later in Indian medical science. Rural doctors may even feel uncomfortable examining transgender patients, and there are instances of intentional humiliation and assault of trans patients by doctors in rural areas. In Kolkata, Peerless Hospital has introduced a Transgender Clinic that provides free treatment to trans people. Private hospitals offer unisex care rooms, but in government hospitals, if a transwoman is dressed in male clothing or a transman is dressed in female clothing, they

might be denied access to their preferred gender ward. Transgender individuals undergoing transition also feel insecure about visiting hospitals or diagnostic centers due to concerns about their bodily changes during the process. Akash (name changed), a transman, aptly expressed this fear: "What if the doctor has to undress me and look at my breasts and penis? How will the doctor and health staff react?" The COVID-19 pandemic particularly affected those who were in the midst of their transition due to disruptions in medication availability, doctor visits, postponed surgeries, and a lack of mental support. Many were hesitant to visit doctors or had to halt their medication due to the additional health risks posed by comorbidities during the pandemic. For most transgender individuals, their interaction with counselling is primarily limited to obtaining a Gender Identity Dysphoria (GID) certificate during the initial stages of their gender transition process. During the pandemic, some engaged in peer counselling to cope with their situations, especially those who were confined at home and couldn't progress with their transition or meet their partners. However, a challenge arose in accessing counselling resources due to COVID-19 protocols like mask-wearing and social distancing, which disrupted the physical proximity between counsellors and clients. Some respondents, particularly from lower socio-economic backgrounds, refrained from seeking counselling, doubting its efficacy in resolving their issues. During this period, the Bengal Transman Community, established by Kaunish Deysagar, a member of the West Bengal Transgender Development Board, initiated a helpline to assist individuals in need. This community emerged during the pandemic to prevent unsafe and illegal transition surgeries and offer organizational support to transmen in Bengal.

Abuses faced at home during lockdown

As reported by the interviewees, enduring the lockdown while staying within their homes and engaging in cross dressing posed considerable challenges. Some individuals who had previously left their homes were compelled to return due to the lockdown, leading to a resurgence of issues like teasing, scolding, and physical abuse within the household. Transwomen faced heightened challenges concerning domestic violence, often opting to remain indoors to evade societal criticisms. This predicament was further complicated for individuals adhering to religions like Islam or Christianity, as well as those living in rural areas where local village council members held sway over their life decisions, rendering them more vulnerable. Additionally, many of the transmen respondents felt the pressure to conform to societal norms by entering into marriages.

Financial threats

Transgender individuals who live alone and lack financial support from their families have faced significant hardships during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in comparison to those who reside with their families. This is exacerbated by the pre-existing problem of job loss due to discrimination, which was further exacerbated by the pandemic. A considerable number of individuals experienced job loss during this period. Anusha (name changed), a transwoman, highlighted, "Even though the family does not accept us, they are very

keen to take money from us which is coming through sex work." The hijra community, which often relied on begging for money at railway stations and through transportation, faced severe threats to their profession due to lockdown measures that halted these activities. Sex work and launda dance were similarly affected, as physical interactions were constrained by social distancing measures. While mobile-based sex chats continued, the earnings from such endeavours significantly dwindled. The reduced income flow also impacted budgets for weddings, resulting in smaller ceremonies with restricted guest lists, thereby eliminating a source of income for dancers. Various professions like BPO workers and gym trainers experienced job losses during the initial lockdown, exacerbating the issue of unemployment. Many individuals couldn't sustain hormone treatments due to financial instability during this period. Some transgender individuals are still awaiting financial independence before embarking on their sex reassignment surgery (SRS) procedure.

Additional challenges encountered by the transgender community include:

Lack of dedicated transgender restroom facilities - The respondents held differing viewpoints regarding the necessity of separate transgender restrooms. Some individuals believed that having distinct restrooms for transgender individuals could potentially lead to increased social discrimination and bullying. Instead, they argued for the implementation of gender-neutral restrooms. Conversely, a majority of respondents were in agreement that there should be designated restrooms for individuals undergoing the transition process, where fellow users could be more empathetic and understanding. Transwomen generally felt comfortable using female restrooms. However, the situation is more complex for transmen. If they have undergone top surgery, they may feel hesitant to enter women's restrooms, while simultaneously not being able to use men's urinals during the ongoing transition process. In many instances, respondents reported avoiding the use of public restrooms altogether when nature called due to these challenges.

Challenges of menstruation within different transgender categories - Menstruation remains a topic of unease for both binary genders within the transgender community. For transmen, menstruation instigates fear, anxiety, and physical discomfort, serving as a reminder of their female body history. There's often a prevailing sense of disconnect from their bodies, particularly during this phase of the month. Some individuals even experienced thoughts of suicide during their menstruating days. In contrast, the situation is markedly different for transwomen, particularly those who have undergone hormone treatment. Some individuals have reported experiencing cramps for a few days each month. Notably, one transwoman mentioned experiencing some vaginal discharge, a result of surgical procedures. Additionally, one transwoman expressed that beyond the pain of not menstruating, the inability to conceive a child distresses her even more.

Navigating Gender/Body Dysphoria - In conventional social contexts, the distinct categorization of male and female roles often leads to a profound sense of bewilderment and diminished self-worth within the transgender community. According to a considerable number of respondents, society substantially contributes to the

development of body dysphoria among transgender individuals through acts of derision and taunting. Transwomen frequently reported grappling with top dysphoria, especially during the pre-transition phase. Numerous individuals attributed their body dysphoria to the broader societal perspective and the insensitive remarks aimed at the trans community. This societal-induced gender dysphoria instilled a deep aversion towards their own bodies. Notably, two transwomen expressed their desire for gender reassignment surgery, which was thwarted due to their partners' lack of approval. Some transmen disclosed their utilization of chest binding to conceal the appearance of breasts, coupled with the use of packers or stand-to-pee devices to bolster their self-assurance. It's crucial to underscore that, despite the potential medical repercussions of prolonged chest binding, participants regarded these health concerns as relatively trivial when compared to the overwhelming impact of body dysphoria. Several well-informed transmen shared their aspirations to incorporate prosthetic penises in the future. A significant number of respondents noted a resurgence of lost self-confidence subsequent to commencing hormone treatments.

Challenges Faced by Partners in Relationships with Trans Individuals - It's not uncommon for partners of transgender individuals to encounter instances of domestic violence due to their relationship with a trans person. In situations requiring assistance, the police often decline to provide security. Female partners frequently endure physical abuse from their own family members and are coerced into arranged marriages against their wishes, facing social ostracization as well. Concerning transwomen, there were noteworthy instances of deception where partners were comfortable maintaining the relationship privately but hesitated to introduce them to their families. Among the seven transwomen respondents, only two were introduced to their partners' families. In various cases, local young men engaged in flirtation and exploitation without any intent for commitment. For married transwomen, adhering to traditional symbols of marriage such as wearing "sankha-pola" and applying vermillion became problematic as their families did not endorse their marital relationships.

Unavailability of Government Scheme Benefits - The study unequivocally highlights that members of the transgender community face persistent challenges in asserting their gender identity, diverting their focus from education. This in turn limits their employment opportunities, resulting in lower socio-economic standing. This cascading effect made the community particularly vulnerable during the lockdown, requiring support to access essential life-sustaining services. While the government offered limited aid through ration provision, it often fell short of fulfilling a month's requirements and was sporadically distributed. Moreover, this service primarily reached areas with geographic prominence and individuals connected to activist networks, excluding many grassroots-level trans individuals. Although NGOs intervened to bridge this gap, complete closure of the gap remained elusive. Some respondents received monetary assistance and food rations, but others received neither. As confirmed by the respondents, the transgender community rarely benefits from governmental schemes, with the exception of the Garima Greh Scheme. This initiative provides secure living spaces and care for transgender individuals. The Central government extended full financial support to establish such shelters in 12 states,

including West Bengal. The government actively works to enhance transgender visibility by featuring the community in advertisements and awareness campaigns, as observed in HIV/AIDS awareness programs. However, it's worth noting that government officials often conflate the transgender community with sex worker communities and generally lack awareness about the transmen population.

Conclusion

Impact of Colonialism and Struggle for Recognition of the Transgender Community in India - The status of the transgender community in Indian culture underwent a significant decline during the colonial era. The enactment of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code was a manifestation of the transphobia and homophobia that had permeated society, thereby normalizing mistreatment of transgender community members. This led to the marginalization and alienation of the transgender population from mainstream society. Although post-independence, the Indian Constitution emphasized equality, liberty, and fundamental rights for all citizens, unfortunately, this was not the reality experienced by the transgender community. The turning point arrived with the National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) v. Union of India verdict in 2014, which recognized the right to self-determination of gender, granted official recognition of a third gender status, and culminated in the decriminalization of Section 377 in 2018. This victory, after years of activism and struggle, offered a glimmer of hope. Despite these milestones, however, members of the transgender community continue to grapple with human rights violations, stigmatization, and discrimination. The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, remains a subject of debate as it falls short of fully endorsing the NALSA v. Union of India judgment regarding the right of transgender individuals to assert their self-identified gender without mandatory Sex Reassignment Surgery. Nevertheless, despite the legal advancements, many transgender individuals still confront daily discrimination and social exclusion, a situation that has been further exacerbated by the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. One crucial factor impeding broader recognition lies within the internal divisions among transgender communities. During the interviews, it became evident that numerous respondents sought distance from the trans community due to existing factionalism and power centralization among educated trans activists. The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified these pre-existing challenges, imposing severe obstacles on community members' efforts to maintain social and financial equilibrium in their lives. Considering this backdrop, the government should extend essential support to the transgender community through mechanisms that effectively reach grassroots populations, rather than remaining confined to the realm of activists and those who are already self-aware within the transgender community.

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