

“Chaos and dilemmas of survival” Issues and challenges faced by transgenders in Kerala - a qualitative inquiry.

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Abstract: Gender variants exists from ancient time itself under various colloquial nomenclatures. Over the years, though transgenders become more socially visible, they are ostracised in many aspects. Though Kerala has made many remarkable initiatives in this regard, the social sphere still demonstrates an awkward attitude towards gender minorities. In order to explore the issues and challenges faced by transgenders in Kerala, a qualitative grounded theory approach was used. Qualitative data were explored through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions among 21 transgender and five stakeholders as with the attainment of theoretical saturation. A theoretical framework was formulated and the data were arranged under 8 themes. Our evolved model conveyed remedies at various levels to tackle major issues experienced by them.

Key words: Transgenders, Kerala, issues, challenges.

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I. Introduction

Generally, our society tends to view everything through its preoccupied status quo frame. It is out of a basic human instinct that where we always try to fit everything around into the typical normality box. So as a result of this classification and categorisation, people largely perceive things out of familiarity as bizarre or abnormal. More or less this notion is noteworthy in the case of sexual minorities also.

Transgender is a blanket term which encompasses the broad spectrum of individuals who identify with a gender, which is different from their assigned gender. The term trans-man or a trans-woman is used if the person undergone a sex re-assignment surgery (SRS) to change his/her assigned gender(1). Globally these persons have been known with different names in each country and region. In India many cultural and mythological tinges were also attributed to them.

Over the years transgenders have been a part of this society but they were harassed in the home and schools and often become a target for bantering. Naturally they were side-lined, invisible in the society and forced to earn livelihood through begging and sex work. But through the landmark Supreme Court NALSA judgement in 2014 transgenders were acknowledged as the third gender in Indian society(2). Last national sample survey documented around 4.9 lakh transgenders in India, but the exact figures may be much higher(3).

Kerala is the first state in India who framed a transgender policy in 2015 in par with the judgement of honourable Supreme Court(4). The state has been instrumental in the efforts targeted at the social inclusiveness of transgenders like literacy programmes, first school for continuing education and the conduct of beauty pageant or sports meets. Members from the transgender community are working in various walks of Kerala's social life. Government has constituted a transgender justice board by appointing members from the transgender community, govt. officials and members from NGOs. A survey conducted by social welfare department revealed there are around 40,000 transgenders in Kerala(5).

In spite of many progressive changes happening in this regard, still Kerala society views them as strange or abnormal which may be due to the prevailing rigid stereotypical binary gender orientation. A recent study has shown 92% of transgenders are deprived of any form of economic activity, forcing them to do sex work and begging. Because of family exclusion and social isolation only 2% of the transgenders are living with their own family(6). Not much research efforts have been made in Kerala to address these issues. We intended to do a qualitative inquiry based on grounded theory approach to address the concerns among transgenders with an aim to explore the issues and challenges faced by them in leading a dignified life so as to synthesise a model which highlights the multifactorial approaches and interventions to tackle the issue.

II. Methods

The construct under study was dilemmas of transgender lives in Kerala. We opted a grounded theory design to draw the concepts and to integrate it into a theory. Grounded theory is basically a deliberate mechanism whereby a theoretical model is emerged through rigorous concurrent process of data collection and analysis. This synchronized work continued till we intuited a data saturation.

Target population

In order to elicit a comprehensive view on the topic we included samples from both transgenders and other stakeholders who are directly involved in transgender lives.

Eligibility criteria

Samples included both transgenders and stakeholders. To be eligible to become a study participant, people should complete 18 years of age, be able to speak and understand Malayalam, and be willing to sign an informed consent.

Transgenders: As study participants we selected persons who themselves identified as transgenders, trans-man or trans-woman.

Stake holders: People who are directly involved with transgenders as part of various initiatives like NGOs, media persons, social scientists, doctors running TG clinic and psychologists.

Sampling

Initially we started with purposive sampling, then expanded through snow balling, allowing for transgender participants to refer other transgenders whom they felt were suitable and could provide more perceptivity into the study. Later we used theoretical sampling as it facilitates the researcher to have a better insight into the attribute under consideration and eventually this will corroborate the study findings.

Participant Recruitment

As transgenders belongs to a particular circle in the Kerala's social fabric, initially we could find it difficult to access them. We reached them through the stake holders. In the transgender community we could meet many transgenders but few of them were reluctant to open up. So later we used snow ball sampling with the help of an active NGO volunteer. He provided the contact information. Once contact established with the prospective study participant, we communicated the study purpose and fixed a direct meeting with each one of them. Transgenders reside as a group or community mostly away from their own home. So most of the interviews with transgenders conducted at their residences and stakeholders at their respective offices.

Data collection

The participants were informed about the purpose, scope and process of the study and their rights as participants. We ensured that participation is voluntary and confidentiality is protected. Written informed consent taken. Each participant was given a specific identification code to preserve confidentiality. Participant's permission also took for audio recording and photography. Based on the area of interest, we developed a structured set of probes dealing with the following topics. What are the challenges you are experiencing? What may be the factors involved? What all are the specific issues like housing or employment? What all may be the possible solutions to address these issues? Probes prepared in English translated into Malayalam. Each interview lasted for around 45 minutes to one hour. This tool again reviewed by people who are familiar with transgender issues to ensure that the probes are appropriate.

Between July 2017 and November 2017 in-depth interview done among fifteen transgenders (eight trans female, three trans male and four transgenders) at their residences and five stakeholders [a female public health personnel (telephonic) and a female advocate who possess extensive experience in the field of gender minority, a male doctor who is running a transgender clinic, a male social activist, a male academician who is involved with transgenders' issues] at their offices. Two FGDs also conducted among transgender community.

During our data collection, we could access the transgender activists and transgenders in limelight without much difficulties. But in order to get the cross section of ground reality we went to their residences, where group of transgenders live as a community under a step-mother who is usually a senior transgender, there we conducted FGDs lasted for 1 hour which reaped much nascent observations. To abide with the methodological integrity, initial snow bowling method of sampling turned to theoretical sampling later.

All the interviews were audiotaped with permission. Initially we found it difficult to get into skin as we too had many misconceptions and doubts about transgender lives. So we consulted and talked in detail with the NGO workers and transgender activists. Both researchers written down memos during and after interview and discussed about our own interpretations, conclusions and planned further. This helped us to tap the nuances in the lives of this multifarious group. Data collection completed when we felt a data saturation.

Data analysis

Each interview verbatim was transcribed and areas of further exploration and gaps were noted. Manual coding was adopted. This was done by both the researchers independently. Later a series of sequential phases of coding done - open, axial and selective. Repeatedly read each interview line by line and codes were identified. Data collection and analysis were done simultaneously. Later sub categories and crême category were identified.

Research findings

We could evolve eight sub themes under four major categories which clearly throws light into the complex intricate life situations transgenders are facing in Kerala society. The major categories are ‘Disarrayed upbringing’, ‘Hassles of getting proofs of identity’, ‘Issues with the new trans role’, ‘Struggles of survival’, and sub themes are “Rearing make it worse”, “Ingrained ‘binary’”, “In ‘no man’s land’”, “Litmus gender test”, “Third vs. first in gender order”, “Human vs. Alien?”, “TG = Sex work?”, and “Imposed masculinity”.

1. Disarrayed upbringing.

a) Rearing make it worse:

Most of the transgenders expressed that they were threatened and coerced by the family members to behave in the ‘normal’ way. Childhood was often troubling and dreaded for them. Whenever they tried to express a change happening in their thought process, parents and siblings curtailed their liberty. Schools also were a dreaded place.

“Childhood was terrible...Issues started from family itself. They used to abuse me physically and mentally. But now I know it is due to their lack of awareness. Siblings always cursed me...nobody asked about my feelings. Even my mom...” (crying).

(26yr.old TG-unemployed)

The traditional Indian concept of family is that it is the first school and schools as the “SaraswathyKshethra” (the abode of Saraswathy- the goddess of knowledge) but for us both those places were hell.

b) Ingrained ‘binary’:

While asking about the challenges study participants highlighted that the society’s deep rooted notion about gender is the sole reason behind this stigma. Still now society is not aware about the third gender and it will take decades for it to generate awareness among public in a society like us. A 25yrs. old. TG who is a postgraduate, anchor and columnist commented,

*“For you. May be an exaggeration... but we have to....**The long tradition of proclaiming sex soon after birth (a baby boy or a baby girl) should be stopped. Should eradicate the concept of uthamanayapurushan (an ideal man) ...uthamayasthree... (an ideal woman)**”*

Along with transgenders, stake holders were also had the same opinion. Public health personnel who possess around two decades of experience with the issues of gender minorities in Kerala stated:

“There is a “pathological gender orientation- where you could not find any scope for a third gender. Our society even the health personnel won’t have that attitude. Stereotyped notion of society in this issue again ostracise transgenders and frames a stigmatized outlook towards them.”

2. Hassles of getting proofs of identity.

c) In ‘no-man’s land’:

One of the participants addressed the concern that even though they were born in family with high profile, good financial background, there occurred a dramatic change in the way they were treated in the family. Literally they were thrown out of the family, not safe in home as well as in the society. A 26 yrs. old trans male, post graduate, activist & columnist pointed out:

“For the last one year I have been struggling to acquire an ID proof. I have all the documents. Series of complex cumbersome procedures... A train of futile questions and doubts. and after all there is no proof of citizenship. What to do?”

d) ‘Litmus gender test’:

Again the society’s binary orientation and lack of an attitude of inclusiveness may be the major reason behind. This get reflected in many aspects. Most of the transgenders expressed about the usual harassment and abusive words they receive from the society especially from the responsible authorities like police. A 29 yrs. old trans female who is a famous theatre artist who travels a lot as part of her profession stated:

“Everywhere...whether in train or in road we are supposed to prove our gender just by exposing our private parts... Whether they will put up these queries to a male and female in this society?”

3. Issues with the new ‘trans’ role.

e) Imposed Masculinity:

“This is very special to female to male transgenders.... once we announce the transition people will start testing our masculinity. In order to face this ‘agnipareeksha’ & to become the so called normal man these guys slowly turn to substance abuse...in fact we can very well break the roots of patriarchy but these issues make things worst...”

(26 yr. old trans male, post graduate, activist & columnist)

f) Third vs. first in gender order:

Most of them have the opinion that they have to be called as “Transgender” and since they own both the qualities of a male and female, they claim for the first order in gender. And moreover they highly condemn the use of Malayalam synonyms of the word transgender like ‘bhinnalingam’ in media especially newspapers.

“How come we the third gender? Then who is first? Who? Male? Female? If so we should be the first... Because we have both male and female elements”.

(33 yrs. old TG activist)

“For many of the terms we haven’t found any apt Malayalam words. Then why it is a necessity in our case? Though we have expressed our objection none of the mainstream media are receptive in this regard”.

4. Struggles of survival

Participants were asked to discuss the struggles in their personal life. Most of the responses were reflections of the terrible realities from day to day life. Nearly every participant expressed their bitter experiences in daily travel, working place, and place of stay.

g) Human vs. alien:

Most of the explored verbatim supported the “alien” concept and the attitude of the public towards transgenders.

“If we go to a hotel... people will start stare at us. Many heads pop up from every nook and corner... as if they just saw some alien...” *“Once I was at a bus stop....the moment I landed...people move away and start staring at me as if I am a criminal. I thought... Oh... God... if I could just vanish from here...”*

(24 yrs. old transgender, TV artist)

h) TG = Sex work?

One of the social activist reported that many of the TG’s were forced to become sex workers to earn money for livelihood. The scenario has changed a lot with govt. policies, involvement of NGO’s and other professional bodies. But many of the general public irrespective of their social status or strata still keep a strange and often uncivilized outlook towards transgenders. A 26 yr. old Trans woman a post graduate, activist, PhD scholar and a columnist mentioned her pathetic experience during an interview for a school teacher job.

“When I attended an interview one of the PSC board members sarcastically said me that there is no job here which can be done with the sex organ. Nothing is going to change in near future.No boy in this society wants to become a girl or vice versa just out of fascination. It’s a very critical decision.So our society should understand this truth.”

Through rigorous conceptualisation, we could emerge a theory on effectuating a living space without any discrimination, harassment and exploitation.The emerging modelrevealed that the current TG welfare initiatives need to be augmented through constitution or statutory channels, conventional social institutions like family or school and influential social establishments like media. This requires rigorous planning, collaborations and discussions.

III. Discussion

In this study we intended to explore the issues and challenges faced by the transgenders of Kerala in their day to day life. Our study participants portrayed the same through a rigorous recollection through their various life events. We could evolve four major categories such as ‘Disarrayed upbringing’, ‘Hassles of getting proofs of identity’, ‘Issues with the new trans role’ and ‘Struggles of survival’. Most of the studies from the literature also described the societies ruthlessattitude on gender-variant people(7)(8)(9). Leading a transgender life in Indian society is often challenging(10). These survival tussles sometimes may lead to anxiety disorders, depression and other psychological ailments(11).

Our first category based on the issues of upbringing. Transgender children may be subjected to abuse at home, at school or in their communities. Both parents and teachers have a major role in the healthy upbringing and socialisation of children. But our study findings revealed theaversion of transgenders towards these social establishments because of the negative experiences they have gone through. This is interesting to note the outright differences. This finding is in congruence with the study results by Lennings et al(12).

Most of the study participants unanimously opined the atrocities from authority like police most often in the label of identity issues. A study by national institute of epidemiology revealed that the biggest offenders of violence against transgender people were police and law-enforcing authorities(13). This itself shows that the remedial actions should go beyond legal framework and this study endorse our findings.

In general, our study participantsfound it hard to go along with the sex they were born, and were not able to find out the financial support to undergo treatment. Similar findings were explained by American Psychological Association in a report (14). We could not find any supporting evidence in literature to the imposed masculinity factor after the SRS.

Our theoretical framework focused mainly on remedial measures through institutional, constitutional and influential arms (Figure 1). There are a lot of statutory, organizational and individual efforts in this direction. But these handfuls of activities are not sufficient to fightagainst the widespread parochial outlook of

the society. Honourable Supreme court has acknowledged sexual orientation of each citizen and their protection without any discrimination(15).

IV. Conclusion

Kerala is witnessing many new rays of hope and progressive policies in the arena of gender minorities. In spite of all these legal back-up, our findings exposed the crippling status of transgenders in Kerala. Multiple interventions towards transgender welfare are warranted. Transgenders too have the right to lead a dignified life in our society, as envisaged by the Indian constitution.

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Table 1 Sample characteristics.

Participants	Gender	Mean age	Education	Occupation
TG (Sample size:21)	Trans Female: 8 Trans Male: 4 TGs : 9	29	PG : 2 Up to 12 th : 4 10 th / <10 th : 15	MNC : 1 Self-employed: 6 Nil : 14
Stakeholders (Sample size:5)	2 females (a public health personnel & an advocate), 3 males (a psychiatrist, a social activist, and an academician)			

Figure 1: Model of multilevel remedial measures.

