

Understanding Life of Transgender and their Challenges in Educational Institutions: Evidences from a Small Indian Town

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Abstract

Gender is one of the major aspects that represent an individual's personal choice of identity. We are all aware of the existence of diverse gender identities in our society, which shows that gender is not limited to a binary identity. The perception of gender identities and their societal positions has evolved significantly. Transgender individuals are an integral part of our society. The journey from criminalising to legalising gender identity has not been easy. Still, after 2014, they have been excluded from various domains of life (socio-cultural spaces), especially in educational institutions, due to systems of domination and subjugation. Bullying, detrimental behaviour and stigma often lead to self-harm. The main objective of this article is to explore the lived experience of transgender individuals and the challenges they face in educational institutions in Balurghat, a small Indian town. For this purpose, the phenomenological case study research approach was used, where, using snowball sampling, two trans participants were chosen to conduct semi-structured interviews to discuss their experiences in educational institutions and other spaces. A thematic analysis was conducted for this study to reveal the struggles of two small-town trans individuals in their daily lives, especially in educational institutional settings.

Keywords: *Life of transgender, educational institutions, challenges, mental health.*

Introduction

In India, the concept of transgender exists today but was somewhat different a decade ago. The omission of trans narratives from mainstream society has functioned as an act of silencing non-conforming genders. The term *transgender*, first used in

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psychology by John F. Oliven and later popularized by activist Virginia Prince in the 1960s, expanded in the 1990s to include gender non-binary and non-conforming individuals (Baruah, 2021). Although transgender people have existed across communities for centuries, they have established a particularly robust history of visibility in the South Asian subcontinent. Indian mythology, dating back to the Vedic Age, depicts the merging of the two sexes in different incarnations, such as Lord Vishnu as Mohini, Ardhanarishwara, and Aravan in South India (Mondal et al., 2020; Mishra, 2021). The *Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019* defines a transgender person as a trans man or trans woman (whether or not such a person has undergone sex reassignment surgery, hormone therapy, laser therapy, or any other therapy), a person with intersex variations, gender queer individuals and persons with socio-cultural identities such as kinner, hijra, aravani and jogta. Intersex people are those whose sexual and reproductive anatomy does not fit typical definitions of female or male (WHO, 2016; GSRC). People whose gender identity does not match their sex assigned at birth are known as transgender (APA, 2015; Price et al., 2017; Kersey, 2018). People are often confused between transgender identity and sexuality. Transgender people, like non-transgender people, may be straight, lesbian, gay, bisexual, or asexual (APA, 2023).

The downfall in their status was systematically induced through punishment and their categorisation as a criminal tribe under the *Criminal Tribes Act, 1871*. After a long struggle, on 15 April 2014, the Supreme Court of India recognised transgender persons as the 'third gender,' thereby increasing the visibility of these identities. However, the term *third gender* itself is discriminatory, as it implies a hierarchy by labelling one gender as the 'first,' another as the 'second,' and relegating others as the 'third.' In the Indian social structure, gender inequality is deeply entrenched, and biases against non-binary persons have been perpetuated through institutional and structural forms (Kushwaha, 2017). The low visibility of transgender persons remains common (Singh & Rajesh, 2024). Across the globe, transgender students are alienated from educational institutions. They experience multiple forms of bullying - verbal, non-verbal, physical, and sexual abuse - not only from cisgender students but also from some teachers and administrative staff (Jones et al., 2015; Mohammadi et al., 2023; Mondal et al., 2020). They are bullied in various settings, including classrooms, playgrounds, sports teams, toilets, hostels, and on social media (Aslam et al., 2022). According to the 2011 Census, among 4.88 lakh transgender persons, only 56.1% are literate. Many trans students avoid schools because they cannot conform to gender stereotypes. The lack of structural support and the exclusion of sexuality and puberty education make the environment even more hostile (Jones et al., 2015). When they do pursue education, they often prefer open and distance learning due to

fear of bullying and limited financial assistance (Singh & Rajesh, 2024). The existing literature is devoid of in-depth qualitative information. Therefore, this study is designed to provide first-hand insights into the lived experiences of transgender individuals.

Objective

The purpose of this research is to explore the lived experiences of transgender individuals and the challenges they face in educational institutions in Balurghat, a small Indian town.

Methods

This study used the hermeneutic phenomenological case study method to investigate the cases. The hermeneutic phenomenological design was deemed appropriate as it reflected personal experiences and perceptions, thereby providing a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Aslam et al., 2022). Using snowball sampling, two participants (TG1 and TG2) were chosen from Balurghat town in the Dakshin, Dinajpur district of West Bengal. Semi-structured interviews were conducted separately with each respondent. The interviews, held at locations preferred by the respondents, took place in a one-on-one setting and lasted approximately 30 to 40 minutes. During the discussions, the respondents shared their life experiences and the challenges they encountered in educational institutions, including schools and colleges. The interviews were conducted in Bangla, the mother tongue of both the respondents and the researcher, who shared the same language identity. Both participants were adults aged 24 and 29, respectively, and identified themselves as transgender. The interviews were recorded with the participants' consent. The interview data was first transcribed by the interviewer and then translated into English from Bangla. Following translation, data visualization was carried out, and codes were generated from the initial data set. The codes were primarily descriptive and in vivo in nature (Saldana, 2013). For the thematic analysis, Clarke and Braun's (2006) six-step framework was applied.

Reflexivity and Ethical Considerations

The first author is a researcher, social activist, and cis woman from a lower-middle-class family in West Bengal, while the second author is a researcher, senior teacher educator and cis woman from Uttar Pradesh. Both authors have previously worked on gender issues and share a common ideology. Throughout the research process, we consciously attempted to 'bracket' our presumptions (Patton, 2015)

and maintained continuous awareness of our own experiences - both positive and negative - to minimize their impact on the study (Kwok et al., 2021). Prior to conducting the interviews, the objectives of the research were explained, and consent forms were completed by the participants. To enhance the trustworthiness, credibility, and accuracy of the data, prolonged engagement with the participants, member checking and peer checking were undertaken (Mohammadi et al., 2022). To ensure confidentiality and protect participants' anonymity, pseudonyms were used.

Result and Discussion

Identification of Femininity

The journeys of TG1 and TG2 shed light on their early recognition of gender identity, the challenges they faced, and their eventual assertion of femininity. TG1, a 24-year-old from a lower middle-class Brahmin family, discovered her true self during adolescence. While studying in the 7th or 8th grade at the government boys' school, she realized she was different from others. Her attraction towards boys and her love for traditionally feminine activities such as playing with cooking pots and dolls helped her realize the identity of her gender. 'When everyone was playing with cars or bat balls, that time I loved to play with cooking pots and dolls,' she recollected about her childhood. Born in a male body, she always felt an intense sense of womanhood. She is now doing her graduation in Sanskrit honours after completing D.El.Ed. and looks forward to becoming a complete woman once she is financially independent. TG1 is also an excellent makeup and craft artist, using her creativity to embrace and express her femininity.

TG2 is a 29-year-old transwoman belonging to a middle-class Brahmin family. She has also followed the same path in the journey of self-discovery. She too was in a government boys' school and completed a postgraduate in Sanskrit literature. Nowadays, she is an independent dance teacher and makeup artist at Balurghat and expresses her femininity through her artistic skills. 'While I was promoted from class 5 to class 6, I observed a distinct difference between myself and others. While a masculine demeanour was emerging in others, a delicate feminine elegance began to emerge within me, which I express through my dance.' The delicate elegance took the ground of her persona and through her performances, she expressed her true self and by the makeup in which she applied. Through transition surgery and an ID card, TG2 also has completed one of her important steps toward transformation.

The stories of TG1 and TG2 depict when their consciousness regarding femininity started during their adolescence period. Both were very clear that they didn't share

the characteristics as defined and expected by the society concerning gender roles. Their personalities were influenced by the tendency to show their femininity, their attractions towards like-minded persons, and their modes of expression. The stories of these two trans individuals show how they were able to manoeuvre in a world that imposed such rigid gender norms and where self-awareness, creativity and financial independence played important roles in forming their identity.

Parental Acceptance and Social Stigma

Parental support plays a crucial role in helping children to navigate the challenges of social stigma, particularly for those whose identities do not conform to societal norms. In the cases of TG1 and TG2, their experiences with family acceptance reveal contrasting journeys shaped by social and economic factors. TG1's family struggled to accept her true identity, reacting with chaos and disapproval when she first revealed herself. She felt pressured to adopt gender roles assigned to her based on her birth sex, making her feel like an outcast and dehumanized. Constant societal interrogation made her feel like an 'animal from a different planet.' Initially, her family dismissed her appearance, believing the situation would eventually resolve itself. However, over time, as nothing changed, her father started pulling away from her. As she said, 'Over time, as my father began to realise that no change was happening within me, he started to distance himself.'

TG2, unlike TG1, got a better environment within her family, although acceptance wasn't instantaneous. Her parents, though they did not understand her identity at first, later accepted her for who she was. She said, 'Though I got support from my parents and cousins, some family members and neighbours were not okay with that. My father, being a purohit, faced a lot of criticism: Why is his son like this?' This situation clearly highlights that when we step outside the patriarchal norms of society, it inevitably subjects both the financially affluent class and the lower middle class to scrutiny. Another point worth mentioning here is that when someone belongs to a lower-income group, they find it far harder to overlook such social stigma compared to those who are financially well-off. These experiences make it evident that while TG2's siblings and family members accepted her for who she was, TG1's family could not extend the same acceptance to her in the same way.

Meagre Support at Educational Institutions

The meagre support and pervasive exploitation that transgender students experience in educational institutions are brought out through participants' experiences.

Both participants faced constant bullying, including verbal and non-verbal abusive behaviour, teasing and mockery by making derogatory comments like 'hijra, chakka, gay'. TG1 expressed that her school life was more stressful than college. Beyond verbal humiliation, other students from the class imitated her walk, mocked her expressions and even made her uncomfortable by touching her inappropriately. Sometimes, to protect herself, she did not showcase her true self. She said, 'Few parents were there who strictly told their children not to interact with me; if they did this, they would behave like her.' Although her experience in college was not pleasant, there were times when some students would write offensive words on paper, roll them into balls and throw them at her. After these incidents, she thought of quitting college. But later, she realised that doing so would only empower the bully further, and with that thought, she decided not to stop going to college. While elaborating on the scenario in college, she mentioned that: 'Sometimes in my college classroom, there may be empty space next to me, but they tried to avoid that place. They are saying nothing, but their actions are speaking.'

TG2's story was not any different. Before her transition, she pretended to be a girl, enduring mockery and ridicule. Initially, the hostility drove her to consider self-harm, but with time, she grew stronger. While female friends provided her with a circle of acceptance, male classmates and some teachers continued to ignore her existence. She mentioned how some teachers, not comfortable with her association with dance, avoided her in the classroom. Both participants acknowledged the glaring lack of inclusivity in educational institutions, with teachers often confused about how to involve transgender students in gender-segregated activities. Their stories underscore the urgent need for systemic changes. An inclusive curriculum, gender-neutral facilities, and sensitization programmes for teachers and students form the critical steps toward the formation of a trans-friendly environment. As TG1 aptly said, 'Education related to gender is crucial from childhood. If teachers and students are sensitised appropriately, a trans-friendly environment can be built. Only then can harassment and bullying be effectively mitigated.' These changes are necessary not only to protect transgender students but also to affirm their right to exist and thrive in educational spaces.

Inner Turmoil, Conflict and Unavailability of Information

TG1 often found it incredibly hard to express her thoughts to others. Being in a boys' school with her identity felt even more challenging, particularly because of the bullying she endured. Reflecting on her experience, she said, 'I was so young, and I didn't know how to respond to what was happening. There were countless times I

thought about never leaving my house again.’ She was constantly torn between inner conflict, as the expectations of society clashed with the desires of her heart, making it nearly impossible to know what was right or wrong. The scarcity of information left her no choice but to turn to YouTube, social media, and Shree Ghatak’s interview in ‘Ananda Bazar Patrika’ for insights into her gender dysphoria. She often expressed frustration with how society, whether through ignorance or misinformation, looked at her with distorted views. Meanwhile, TG2 found solace and inspiration in the life and work of the renowned Bengali artist Rituporno Ghosh, whose courage and authenticity helped her navigate her own journey.

Mental Health

TG1’s family had never been supportive; instead, they believed that she was mentally ill. She recalled, ‘My mother even took me to a government hospital to figure out what was “wrong” with me.’ When suicidal thoughts came into her mind, her other trans friend always tried to console her by telling her it also happened to them. In contrast, TG2 received some support and acceptance from her family, but she still faced significant challenges, particularly because of her relationship with a cisgender man. The dynamics of this relationship, filled with a lack of acceptance and uncertainty, often led to feelings of self-doubt and self-destructive behaviour. The strain of the relationship, combined with the toll of hormonal therapy, began to affect her mental health, leading to deep trauma and stress.

Conclusion

Transgender students encounter various forms of bullying throughout their educational journey, encompassing both verbal and non-verbal. Both individuals faced on-campus bullying, occurring in classrooms and educational institution premises. The consequences were severe, leading to depression, class absenteeism, dropping out, demotivation and suicidal tendencies (Tabassum, 2014; Afrasiabi, 2019). Life is not easy when people perform something that goes beyond social norms. These two trans participants have faced constant social scrutiny, gaze, and objectification like other transgender participants faced, i.e., bullying, exclusion, and sexual harassment. The feminine representation of these two participants’ lives adversely affected them and built a dislike towards educational institutions. It is evident that there is a paucity of an inclusive environment, advocating for imparting knowledge about various aspects of gender among students and educators (Pedro et al., 2016). Over time, it becomes evident that they transcend all adversities, fortifying their resilience and systematically disregarding impediments to forge ahead. In a society where members of the

transgender community are often pictured or symbolised as either clapping on the streets or being confined to sex work, these two individuals have set an exemplary precedent. They have defied adversity and showcased their uniqueness through their remarkable contributions, be it through crafting or offering dance training selflessly, without any monetary expectation and shaping their own worldview.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this work.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the two trans participants for their contribution to this study.

Funding

This work has been funded by the National Council of Research and Training; however, the researcher has received no additional funding for publication purposes.

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