

Global Perspectives on Social Challenges and Mental Health Issues Faced by Transgender Individuals

• Meena Kumari¹

• Santosh Meena²

Abstract

Transgender individuals represent one of the most marginalized segments of society. Their journey begins with challenges from birth, especially for those born intersex, who face discrimination and familial rejection due to ambiguous genitalia. Even for those not born intersex, transgender individuals encounter difficulties as they enter adolescence, where their transgender identity becomes more apparent, leading to social and mental health struggles. While their childhood may seem relatively benign, marked by their transgender identity being dismissed as mere childish behaviour, the onset of puberty intensifies their challenges as their behaviour appears peculiar to their families. During this period, their transgender identity becomes conspicuous, inviting ostracization from family, bullying in educational institutions, and a lack of support from teachers and staff. When it comes to earning a living, transgender individuals face sheer discrimination in employment, sexual harassment in the workplace, and prejudice that makes it difficult to survive in such an environment. These challenges not only manifest socially but also take a toll on their mental well-being, with gender dysphoria being a prominent, albeit often inconspicuous, issue leading to stress, anxiety, and depression. Discrimination from society exacerbates these mental health problems, making transgender individuals more susceptible to depression, with the highest rates of suicide among this community compared to other marginalized groups facing similar issues.

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¹Ph.D. Scholar, Department of Psychology, Banasthali Vidyapith, Tonk, Rajasthan.

✉ minarawat@gmail.com

²Associate Professor (Educational Psychology), Department of Educational Psychology and Foundations of Education, NIE, NCERT, New Delhi. ✉ santoshajaymeena@gmail.com

Introduction

Transgender individuals, those whose gender identity does not align with the sex assigned at birth, have historically faced significant challenges and discrimination, often being misunderstood as mentally ill. The diagnostic criteria for transgender individuals have evolved, transitioning from categories like *Transsexualism* in ICD-10 (1990) to *Gender Identity Disorder* and later *Gender Incongruence* in ICD-11 (2022), reflecting a shift away from pathologizing transgender identities. The new diagnostic criteria took thirty-two years to accurately perceive the concept of gender identity and introduced significant changes to the previous criteria. These changes involved removing the condition from the category of “Disorder” and replacing it with “Incongruence.” Earlier in the DSM-IV, transgender individuals were classified under *Gender Identity Disorder*, a term that was later replaced with *Gender Dysphoria* in the DSM-5 (2013), and then refined again in the DSM-5-TR (2023).

Despite these changes, transgender people continue to be one of the most marginalized communities globally, facing adversity in various aspects of life and societal settings. They encounter widespread rejection and discrimination, reflecting a long-standing struggle for acceptance. While transgender individuals have existed throughout history and were once accepted in Indian society, societal attitudes have shifted, leading to their marginalization and even criminalization, relegating them to the lowest rungs of the social hierarchy. Their challenges encompass social, economic, mental, and physical aspects, particularly during the transition process itself, highlighting the multifaceted nature of their struggles.

Challenges Faced by Transgender People

The initial hurdle faced by transgender individuals is predominantly social, encompassing their interactions within family, community, school, workplace, and public spaces. The family dynamic poses the first and often most formidable challenge. Frequently, families struggle to acknowledge and accept the gender identity of their transgender relatives, presenting a profound setback. As the primary support system for individuals, familial rejection leaves transgender individuals with a deep sense of isolation. Studies by Khullar and Riggs (2018) highlight that transgender individuals receive the lowest level of familial support compared to the general population. Research by Chatterjee (2018) further underscores the ramifications of familial non-acceptance, revealing that transgender children may feel compelled to leave their homes due to their families’ refusal to recognize their gender identity. Alternatively, if they choose to remain with their parents, societal pressures often dictate that they

conform to traditional gender norms, including marrying a partner of the opposite sex who shares their gender identity.

Moreover, investigations conducted by Mohammadi et al. (2023) in Iran shed light on the extreme measures taken by families to conceal the transgender identities of their children, driven by the fear of religious persecution and penalties, including death by stoning as dictated by Sharia law. Consequently, the fear of reprisal and the religious implications prompt both families and transgender individuals to conceal their true identities.

The majority of transgender individuals face significant educational challenges, often stemming from an education system that fails to accommodate their needs. This lack of inclusivity not only affects transgender children within their families but also extends to their experiences within schools, which serve as a secondary source of trauma characterized by discrimination and prejudice. Traditional Indian educational institutions typically adhere to binary gender norms, overlooking the existence and needs of transgender individuals, leading to widespread bullying and a pervasive atmosphere of fear and misunderstanding. Research conducted by Barman (2024) reveals that the literacy rate among transgender individuals stands at 56.1%, significantly lower than the national average of 74.04%, despite recent improvements to approximately 85%. The primary barriers to accessing education for transgender individuals include rejection, bullying, and the conspicuous effects of gender dysphoria, which often lead to dropout rates. Furthermore, the school environment and culture may not be conducive to their well-being, contributing to their decision to leave. Rajkumar (2016) identifies a critical gap in the Indian education system, emphasizing the absence of sensitization programs for both staff and students, along with a lack of structural changes aimed at fostering inclusivity.

Notably, the New Education Policy (NEP) of 2020 in India marks a significant milestone by acknowledging transgender children as a socially and economically marginalized group for the first time in educational history. Under the NEP 2020, transgender students are categorized as part of the Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SDGs), with provisions such as the Gender Inclusion Fund (GIF) aimed at providing equitable education opportunities for transgender students alongside their peers. However, despite these advancements, dropout rates remain high among transgender individuals, underscoring the need for comprehensive support systems within educational settings beyond mere access to education. Addressing the multifaceted social issues facing transgender students requires a holistic approach that extends beyond the realm of education alone.

In India, transphobia is rampant in mainstream society, often refusing to accept individuals with transgender identities. Derogatory labels such as “Halwa,” “Meetha,” and “Chhakka” are commonly used, exacerbating feelings of alienation and hostility. Consequently, transgender individuals often struggle to form meaningful connections and friendships within mainstream society, as their gender identity does not align with societal expectations. Fear of rejection, humiliation, and bullying further compounds the reluctance to disclose one’s true gender identity, hindering social integration and exacerbating feelings of isolation. Education and employment opportunities are severely limited due to systemic discrimination and prejudice. Transgender individuals lack confidence due to a lack of education, as most children drop out because of gender dysphoria and the stigma associated with their gender identity (More, 2021). Despite completing their education, transgender individuals often face discrimination in employment, regardless of meeting the necessary criteria. Furthermore, gender dysphoria and educational barriers impede professional growth, contributing to a lack of confidence among transgender individuals.

In Islamic countries, adherence to traditional gender norms dictated by Sharia law exacerbates the oppression and persecution faced by transgender individuals. Deviation from assigned gender roles is considered sinful, leading to severe social and legal consequences (Zaharin and Chiarolli, 2020). Even in Westernized nations like Canada and the USA, transgender individuals continue to encounter unequal treatment and opportunities. Despite the principles of equality, transgender individuals are often marginalized and excluded from mainstream society due to their failure to conform to binary gender norms. Ultimately, transgender individuals confront significant challenges to survival and social inclusion, transcending geographical and cultural boundaries because they do not fit within the male-female binary (Fish, 2020). Addressing these systemic inequalities requires concerted efforts to promote acceptance, equality, and inclusivity across all societies.

Employment Opportunities and Challenges at Workplace

Employment opportunities for transgender individuals are marred by pervasive discrimination and transphobia, presenting formidable challenges in securing stable employment. According to research conducted by the National Human Rights Commission, an alarming 90% of transgender individuals face outright denial of employment opportunities, regardless of their qualifications or merit. Cultural norms and societal practices further perpetuate this discrimination, with transgender individuals often subjected to ridicule and ostracization within their communities. As a result, a staggering 96% of transgender individuals are compelled to resort to low

paying jobs or even engage in professions such as begging or prostitution to sustain themselves. Even highly educated transgender individuals encounter significant barriers in securing employment, with a considerable portion—approximately 27%—resorting to prostitution due to a lack of viable job opportunities, thereby exposing themselves to numerous health risks (Chauhan, 2020). However, it is imperative to recognize the potential and capabilities of transgender individuals. With proper education and guidance, they possess the capacity to contribute meaningfully to society and economic progress, as evidenced by studies conducted by David & Yeung (2022).

Despite these merits, discrimination and stigma persist as significant obstacles, undermining their acceptance and integration into the workforce. Even if they are selected for a job, they are less likely to receive rewards for their performance or experience further career growth (Elk & Boehmer, 2015). American research reveals that transgender people face such challenges in the workplace because 40% of respondents are in favor of transgender rights, while 55% lack knowledge of gender, particularly about transgender individuals and their gender issues (Johnsons, 2011). While the challenges faced by transgender individuals may be more pronounced in countries like India compared to more progressive nations like the US, the pervasive nature of discrimination transcends geographical boundaries. Even in developed countries, transgender individuals encounter significant hurdles in accessing employment opportunities and experiencing career advancement. Research from the United States indicates that a substantial portion of the population lacks an understanding of transgender issues, further exacerbating workplace discrimination and hindering the recognition of their rights. In essence, the challenges faced by transgender individuals in securing employment are universal, underscoring the urgent need for concerted efforts to address discrimination and promote inclusivity in all societies, irrespective of their level of development.

Gender Dysphoria

Gender dysphoria is a condition characterized by significant discomfort experienced by transgender individuals due to a misalignment between their gender identity and the sex assigned to them at birth. Defined by the diagnostic criteria outlined in the DSM-V, gender dysphoria manifests as a persistent incongruence between one's experienced gender and biological sex, lasting for a minimum of six months. Individuals affected by gender dysphoria often experience a profound desire to live as and be recognized as the gender opposite to that assigned at birth. Studies have highlighted the detrimental effects of gender identity change efforts (GICE) on

transgender individuals, including heightened levels of alcohol consumption, psychological distress, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts, as evidenced by research conducted by Rootes, McGeorge, Salas, and Levine (2021). In the Netherlands, research by Kuypers and Wijzen (2013) identified three primary aspects of gender dysphoria: dissatisfaction with one's assigned sex at birth, a strong identification with a gender different from that assigned at birth, and a desire for hormone therapy and sex reassignment surgery (SRS). The majority of respondents expressed a desire to align their physical bodies with their experienced gender identity, highlighting the importance of access to medical interventions such as hormone therapy and SRS in alleviating gender dysphoria (Kuypers & Wijzen, 2013).

Mental Health Issues and Suicide among Transgender Persons

Transgender individuals are disproportionately affected by mental health challenges compared to the general population, reflecting their status as one of the most suppressed, oppressed, marginalized, and discriminated groups worldwide. While legal persecution may vary across different regions, transgender individuals face significant social discrimination and rejection in societies such as India, Nepal, and Myanmar, particularly in Islamic-majority countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan, where transgender identity is viewed as a religious sin. Transgender individuals suffer not only in Islamic or closed societies in the Indian Subcontinent but also face challenges in progressive and modern societies like the USA, Canada, and Germany.

Research indicates that transgender individuals encounter numerous obstacles to mental well-being, including higher rates of depression, stress, anxiety, and overall psychological distress. These negative mental health outcomes often lead to elevated suicide rates, the highest among any demographic globally. Substance abuse is also prevalent among transgender individuals, often serving as a coping mechanism to manage stress levels (Handricks & Testa, 2012). Moreover, transgender individuals experience physical health disparities, such as higher rates of somatization, including conditions like high blood pressure and cardiovascular diseases, compared to non-transgender populations in countries like the USA. These health disparities are exacerbated by factors such as anticipated negative self-evaluation and low self-esteem, which initiate stress (Mayor, 2003). Their exposure to abuse leads to conditions like Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Warren et al., 2022).

Suicide rates are also reported to be high among transgender individuals. Reports suggest that suicidal ideation and suicide attempts are 61% and 31%, respectively,

compared to 20% and 7% among non-transgender persons (Eisenberg et al., 2017). Additionally, individuals suffering from depression are more likely to experience conditions such as arthritis, cardiac disease, cancer, and lung disease (Bisschop et al., 2016). Studies have shown that transgender people start experiencing stress as soon as they realize they will be judged during the interview, selection process, or in the workplace or school, especially when fellow students, teachers, and non-teaching staff are not sensitized to their gender, social, and mental issues.

Studies also highlight the profound impact of discrimination and lack of awareness about transgender issues in various societal contexts, including educational and workplace settings. Transgender individuals often face stress and judgment during interviews, selection processes, and workplace interactions, compounded by the lack of sensitivity and awareness among peers, educators, and staff. Overall, transgender individuals endure significant mental and physical health challenges stemming from societal discrimination, lack of acceptance, and systemic barriers to equality. Addressing these issues requires comprehensive efforts to promote awareness, sensitivity, and inclusivity across all sectors of society.

Discussion

Transgender individuals represent one of the most vulnerable and marginalized populations worldwide. They face social, economic, and health challenges in all societies, whether conservative/closed, moderate, or developed and progressive. Discrimination and non-acceptance often begin in childhood, within the family. Families are frequently unwilling to acknowledge and accept their children's gender identity due to a lack of awareness and societal pressure, as being transgender is often seen as a shameful status for the family. The next significant challenges come from schools and neighbourhoods, where transgender individuals face bullying, shame, discrimination, and violence.

This suffering intensifies in conservative Islamic countries such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iran, and Iraq, where transgender individuals are penalized and subjected to severe punishments for their gender identity, including flogging, stoning to death, or being thrown from heights.

In moderate countries like India, Nepal, and Japan, transgender individuals are not criminalized as in conservative Islamic nations, but social acceptance remains a distant goal. They still struggle to achieve equal status and human rights in these societies, facing prejudice and discrimination at every level. Transgender individuals

also face struggles in modern and progressive societies like the UK, USA, Canada, Germany, and France. In these developed societies, although legal protections may exist, transgender individuals often experience workplace discrimination, particularly regarding career rewards and growth. They are judged during performance appraisals and often denied the same opportunities as cisgender employees.

The mental health of transgender individuals is severely affected by the societal attitudes they face and the gender dysphoria they have endured, often since childhood. They feel constant stress when interacting with cisgender individuals, who typically harbor negative attitudes toward them. Anxiety and depression rates are higher among transgender individuals than among cisgender individuals. Studies worldwide have shown that suicide rates are also higher among transgender individuals. Transgender people often suffer from low self-esteem and lack of confidence, which contributes to depression. Their constant mental health struggles make them more susceptible to conditions such as cancer, cardiovascular disease, hypertension, and arthritis. Employment opportunities and career growth are limited for transgender individuals when compared to cisgender people.

Conclusion

Transgender individuals face significant challenges in both social and economic spheres, making them one of the most marginalized and vulnerable populations globally. These challenges are exacerbated by the prevalence of mental health issues among transgender individuals, which surpass those experienced by cisgender individuals. Discrimination, lack of acceptance, prejudice, and violence are pervasive in their daily lives, further entrenching their marginalized status. Economically, transgender individuals are often relegated to low-paying jobs due to employment discrimination and may be forced into prostitution as a means of survival, exposing them to numerous health risks.

The combination of these economic struggles and the inherent challenges of gender dysphoria contribute to heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and depression among transgender individuals, leading to somatization. The intersection of social, economic, and health challenges faced by transgender individuals underscores the urgent need for comprehensive efforts to address discrimination, promote acceptance, and improve access to resources and support services for this marginalized population.

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