



Life in a Metro: The Challenges and Hardships Faced by Transgender Persons in Kochi

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Abstract: *Transgender is an umbrella term that describes people whose gender identity or expression does not match the sex they were assigned at birth. They feel like their body is not their own, a feeling of misfit. The life before and after revealing the identity is entirely different for a transgender person. There are some needs or requirements arise when transgender persons start life anew. Kochi, the most densely populated metro city of Kerala, is one of the favorite places where transgender people want to work and live. More than half of the transgender persons appointed at the Kochi Metro Rail Service were left the job due to various reasons. Due to the transphobia of the public, transgender persons do not get better jobs and they suffer a lot to make a living. They get more income from sex work than doing other odd jobs and it is the only means for them to live without resorting to begging. And the savings from this work is kept by them for fulfilling their dream, i.e., the Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS). Kochi was in news in connection with the death of transgender activist and Kerala's first transwoman radio jockey Ananyah Kumari Alex which addressed issues related with SRS. Harassment created by transphobia and outing makes their life stressful. The women who attend various trainings on gender and related matters are now getting freed from transphobia. The challenges and hardships faced by the transgender community can only be solved through social interventions. The gender awareness programme, role of the teachers and counsellors, interventions by the government in SRS and providing subsidy for their entrepreneurship, etc., can help a lot to eradicate transphobia and other related issues of transgender community and to let them live their life fully without any harm.*

Keywords: *Transgender, Revealing, Gender Identity, Identity Crisis, SRS, Transphobia, Outing, PTSD, OCD, MDE, Intersex, MTF, FTM, Mastectomy, Hysterectomy.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Transgender is an umbrella term that describes people whose gender identity or expression does not match the sex they were assigned at birth. For example, a transgender person may identify as a man despite having been born with female genitalia or vice versa. A person's internal sense of being male, female or something else is their gender identity. For cisgender, or non-transgender people, their gender identity matches their sex at birth. For transgender people, the two do not match. They commence to feel the gender identity crisis from the very



day they find disparity in their own gender. Their issues start from that moment of their self-revelation. They feel like their body is not their own, a feeling of misfit. From this point their life becomes stressful with full of challenges and hardships. The first concern before them is whether they have to reveal their identity to family and society or not. If so what will be the aftermath of revealing the identity, how the family members and others will respond, will they accept it or not, questions will begin to torment them. Many leave their home and migrate into cities or some find solace in death at this juncture. It happens due to the fear of facing others or finding it difficult to bear the hostile nature from the family and society after revealing their identity.

The life after revealing the identity is entirely different for a transgender person. The stress that existed before the revelation is no more now, but new challenges and hardships appear as the new life opens. There are some needs or requirements arise when transgender persons start life anew. The requirements are of two types: essential or basic and gradual. Essential requirement consists of food, shelter, job, etc. The gradual requirements include finding a partner, doing Sex Reassignment Surgery, etc. However, it is evident that the challenges and hardships that faced by a transgender person is somewhat similar or uniform in nature everywhere.

Kerala and the Transgender Community

It was in April 15th, 2014, the Judgement of the Hon. Supreme Court of India firmly established the right to equality and equal protection for transgender and intersex persons(TGIs) under Article 14, 15 and 16 by prohibiting discrimination on the ground of gender identity. Kerala had taken a progressive stance and initiated a survey to better understand the needs, priorities and aspects of social, economic and personal life of Transgender persons in the state. The survey revealed that Transgender and Intersex persons are not few in number; they are actually a much bigger group, i.e., more than 25000 in number. But they are forced into silence because of widespread trans- and homophobia. In pursuance of this, the State Policy for Transgenders in Kerala was introduced by the Kerala Government in 2015. Its objective was to attain a just society where transgender persons have equal rights to: 1. Equality 2. Access development opportunities, resources and benefits 3. Freedom of expression 4. Live with dignity and enjoy life free from violence 5. Equal participation in key development decisions influencing their life and liberty. As a result, in the guidelines of preparing annual plan for the local bodies of Kerala, transgender is included along with the marginalized sector of children and old age people for whom 5% of the plan fund is earmarked.

Kochi, the Transgender Hub

Kochi, the most densely populated metro city of Kerala, is one of the favorite places where transgender people want to work and live. Film industry, stage shows, cultural events, tourism, etc., open good opportunity for those concerned. The hospitals with Sex Reassignment Surgery facility also makes Kochi a transgender hub. It was in 2017 when Kochi Metro Train Service started, 23 transgender people were appointed by the Kochi Metro Rail Limited for various departments ranging from ticketing to housekeeping through the Kudumbashree Mission. It was the first of this kind, a transgender-friendly movement, in India. “KMRL employs over 700 women staff. Of the 23 transgender persons hired in the first phase, only six are working now,” said Ragaranjini, a transgender person who is still working with KMRL. The major factor working against the transgender employees was the lack of inexpensive accommodation



in the city. Coupled with the hardly considerable hike in salary over the years, this factor took a toll on them. “At present, we are getting 14,000 per month in hand. Of this, a major chunk is spent on, leaving us with barely enough. However, since our contract gets renewed this year, we are hopeful of getting better pay,” said Ragaranjini. A former transgender employee of KMRL said he has been able to earn more from working in Uber Eats. “Since we were hired on contract, the salary was less. Our salary was `13,000, which reduced to `9,000 after all the deductions, including Provident Fund. It is difficult to meet our monthly expenses with the amount. This was one of the reasons why most of us quit,” he said. It is seen that main reason behind their leaving was the accommodation issue. As the cost of living is high in Kochi City, many find it difficult to manage a living here without good salary. However, a discussion of such challenges and hardships faced by transgender persons in Kochi will be helpful to transgender community as well as the authorities for tackling the issues.

Job Opportunities

City like Kochi is full of job opportunities as it's the industrial capital of Kerala. Malls, jewellery shops, markets, wholesale and retail textile shops, hotels and restaurants, electronics and mobile shops, corporate offices and other offices, business and trade centres, educational and training institutions and much more provide employment for the job seekers. But these opportunities are not open to the transgender persons. The job providers do not wish to appoint a transgender in their firm normally. They give importance to the transphobic nature of the public and think that the reputation of their firm will be lost if transgender persons are hired. Hence for the sake of getting jobs, transgender persons have to hide their identities. Thus many who are highly or professionally qualified do not get the job they deserve and they have to do whatever job they get in order to make a living. One of the professions where they get acceptance is the film industry. Some of them work here as independent make-up artists, hair-stylists, actors and dancers. At the same time some others do jobs like cooking and selling of food items like pickles, fries, biriyani, chapatti, etc. Some who prefer sex work have already registered in Kochi based websites which publish the details of the sex workers and make them avail at the spots requested by the customers through online service. The other sex workers who are not equipped with online services choose the street walking. Chittoor Road in the heart of Kochi city that lies parallel to MG Road is the hotspot of transgender sex workers at night. They walk through streets in colourful dresses and heavy make-ups inviting customers. Many of them hail from Coimbatore and Koovagam in Tamil Nadu and Telangana and are here so that they could make money for fulfilling their dream, i.e., Sex Reassignment Surgery(SRS). “In cities like Bengaluru, Chennai and Hyderabad the market for transgender persons is saturated. Kochi is a city that is slowly accepting third gender and to be honest the business here is good”, says a transgender woman from Coimbatore. They have their own reasons for opting sex work as their profession. As they do not get better jobs, they suffer a lot to make a living. They get more income from sex work than doing other odd jobs and it is the only means for them to live without resorting to begging.

Gender Confirmation with Medical Assistance

While surveys show most who identify as transgender would like to have surgery, many are unable to obtain it due to the high cost, and the fact that many health insurers do not provide coverage for such procedures on the grounds that they are "cosmetic" and/or "elective." Transgender activists are pushing to overcome such barriers by having these procedures declared "medically necessary." Sex Reassignment Surgery refers to procedures that help



people transition to their self-identified gender. Nowadays many people prefer to use the terms gender affirmation or confirmation surgery as it is the confirmation of a person's own gender identity. People who choose it do so because they experience gender dysphoria, i.e., the distress that occurs when your sex assigned at birth does not match your gender identity. Both the males and females can undergo sex reassignment surgery. For males, the process is known as male-to-female (MTF) reassignment and usually involves the removal of the penis and testicles and the construction of an artificial vagina. For female to male (FTM) reassignment, mastectomy, hysterectomy and construction of artificial penis are the procedures included. Mastectomy is the surgical removal of breasts and hysterectomy is the surgical removal of uterus for avoiding the possibility of pregnancy.

Recently Kochi was in news related to the death of transgender activist and Kerala's first transwoman radio jockey Anannayah Kumari Alex. It was on 20th July 2021, she was found dead in her apartment in Kochi. She had undergone sex reassignment surgery in a hospital in Kochi one year ago and she had complaints about the surgery. Before committing suicide, she had publicly revealed that she was a victim of gross medical negligence. This created a storm among the transgender community members as they started protest against the hospital and demanded the government for establishing a medical board for supervising the activities of hospitals conducting sex reassignment surgery. According to experts, the emotional trauma caused by the post-surgery complications definitely played a role in her case. The persons undergo SRS starts the procedure with counselling. But along with that it should be ensured that such persons get psycho-social support and mental health support at all levels during the surgery period. However, this issue revealed that the existing demand for SRS and the transgender persons' desire to achieve their dream of gender confirmation are high.

Transphobia and Outing

Transphobia is the worst thing that makes the life of transgender persons into pathetic state and prevent them from living full lives free from harm. Transphobia is the fear, hatred, disbelief, or mistrust of people who are transgender, thought to be transgender, or whose gender expression doesn't conform to traditional gender roles. Outing is the revealing of someone's gender identity or sexual orientation to others without the consent of that person. It may be accidental or intentional but revealing one's gender secret to others can be considered as transphobia. Transphobia is the negative attitudes and beliefs against transgender persons. As a part of this there are actions like using derogatory language, name calling, bullying, abusing and violence against LGBTIQ+ community. The nature of such harassment includes verbal, physical and sexual abuse which has serious impact on the mental health as well. The mental health issues include Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), Major Depressive Episode (MDE), suicidal tendencies and Panic Disorders. Kochi is also not spared from the clutches of transphobia. There is no difference in people whether educated or illiterate in the case of transphobia. A soothing fact is that mostly women who attend various trainings on gender and related matters are getting freed from transphobia. They accept transgender persons and consider their issues as similar to their own gender issues.

2. CONCLUSION

The issues related with gender identity, job opportunities, accommodation, SRS and transphobia are not belonged to the transgender persons in Kochi or Kerala alone but are



universal problems. These challenges and hardships faced by the transgender community can only be solved through the social interventions starting from the bottom level. The requirement of integrated programs in health, mental health, case-management, family, legal, education and employment, and housing services is also evident from the studies. The gender awareness programme which begin from the school level can help a lot to eradicate transphobia. Teachers and counsellors can mentally support the children with gender crisis issues to overcome their stress they feel. If the transphobia is lost, the job providers will have no inhibition towards transgender persons. Thirty-six-year-old Adhidhi Achyuth of Kochi was struggling to secure a job due to her transgender identity, but now her dreams have been fulfilled as the Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute (CMFRI) offered her a modernised vending stall with the facility to sell live fish. She offers home delivery of cleaned and sealed packets of fish at the doorsteps of pre-booked customers, besides direct sale. Such interventions done by the government institutions avail public acceptance to the transgender community. The initiative steps taken by the governments to provide priority in sanctioning the subsidy for entrepreneurs or start-ups by the transgender persons will be a great help for them. Along with this the governments have to establish a system to monitor hospitals which conduct SRS and to ensure that counselling and psycho-social and mental supporting systems are available for those who undergo SRS. Such social interventions will definitely help them live their life fully without any harm.

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