Diaspora of Social Exclusion: Exploring Transgender Realities in the Context of Kerala

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ABSTRACT: Inclusion, exclusion, discrimination and oppression of vulnerable communities and target groups have been in the discourses for decades. Social exclusion is a multi-dimensional concept that comprises Economic, Structural, and Societal Exclusion (G. Jehoel-Gijsbers & Vrooman, 2007). Most of the studies recognize that Transgender Communities are under social exclusion. Lack of family and community support in the name of gender identity maneuvered them into social marginalization and isolation (Ayyavoo, 2022). The amendments to the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act of India enacted in 2019 address non-binary persons' constitutional rights, recognition of their gender identity, and non-discrimination laws across institutional spaces. However, the community faces exclusion that intersects with social and economic wellbeing domains. Sporadic efforts to mainstream have not yet converged to achieve a realistic goal. The inclusion of these minority groups and reduction in inequalities, envisaged in the country's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), proffers the importance of understanding and describing the phenomenon of social exclusion as perceived by them subjectively. The current study is a qualitative examination of the social exclusion phenomenon experienced by the transgender community in Kerala. The study explored Social Exclusion from three dimensions – resource insecurity, structural exclusion and lack of social integration. The study utilized a case study method to illustrate a picture of exclusion experienced by transgender people. The descriptions of the themes advocate for transformative paradigms in knowledge and practice.

Keywords: transgender, resource insecurity, structural, social exclusion, integration

Social exclusion has been defined as 'the process through which individuals or groups are wholly or partially excluded from full participation in the society within which they live' (Haan, 2000). It contrasts with social integration, emphasizing the significance of remaining within society's bounds. The social exclusion phenomenon is devised with multi-dimensional aspects, extrapolated with economic, structural and societal aspects of life, elucidating that social exclusion is decisive for reducing inequality, discrimination, and poverty among excluded groups (Thorat, 2008). Transgender people are one of the groups or communities inferred to be socially excluded

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in India, along with Dalits, Other Backward Castes (OBCs), religious minorities, women, Scheduled Tribes (STs), semi-nomadic tribes, and individuals facing exclusion based on caste, ethnicity, religion (Konduru & Hangsing, 2018).

In the 2011 census, authorities categorized around 488,000 individuals as 'transgender.' The literacy rate for this group stands at 56.07%, effectively highlighting their status as a gender minority (*TransGender/Others - Census 2011 India*, 2011.). Gurvinder Kalra, in his work, validated that hijra individuals are an integral part of Indian society, which has a well-established socio-cultural structure. In the emerging minority queer culture in the country, these individuals form a sub-minority and are likely to be further marginalized in various issues (Kalra, 2012).

The British rule in India criminalized homosexual acts with laws such as Section 377 IPC while imposing Victorian morality and Western gender norms, and they introduced a legal framework that did not accommodate or recognize transgender identity. These laws led to exclusion from society or a group and then became a subject of everyday abuse and discrimination even after the collapse of British rule in India. Decriminalizing Section 377 IPC in 2018 paved a milestone for the momentum and visibility of the queer movement in India. The case of National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) v/s Union of India in 2014. This judgment was a significant milestone for the rights of the transgender community; Recognition of Gender Identity, Protection from Discrimination, Legal Recognition and Rights and Welfare Measures were the key highlights.

Viji Athreye, in his article "The Life of Transgender in India," emphasizes that despite constitutional guarantees, transgender individuals continue to be marginalized and excluded from society (Athreye, 2015). Konduru and Hangsing (2018), in a research article titled "Socio-Cultural Exclusion and Inclusion of Trans-genders in India," made the inference that transgender individuals possess identities that deviate from conventional gender norms. In a patriarchal society like India, where nonconformity is perceived as a curse and taboo within cultural norms, this presents a significant challenge. The article from the UAB Institute for Human Rights critiqued the economic status of transgender people. They explained that socioeconomic exclusion prevails in the life of trans people through Government Policies, Workplace Inequality, Informal Employment And Employment Discrimination (*The Economic Status of Transgender People in India – UAB Institute for Human Rights Blog*, 2022). The researcher's field experience and the extant literature have nuances of resource insecurities faced by Transgender community, be it education, employment or livelihood(Gomes et al., 2023).

Kerala upholds minority rights to mark its historical transformation as a state. However,

due to the deep-rooted structural inequalities, the transgender community was less accepted and acknowledged in Kerala society. Sexuality and gender were seldom discoursed; rather, they were considered stigmatized subjects. The transgender community fled to other states in search of identity, approval, and acceptance. This community experiences oppression, discrimination, and exclusion in multifaceted ways. Thus, it is imperative to discuss the structural exclusions as well as the lack of social integration faced by the transgender community in Kerala, recognizing healthy and unhealthy coping mechanisms to sustain their lives. They risk their lives for suicide, HIV/STIs, and other mental health issues and interpersonal problems. This study attempts to unravel the untold stories of exclusion experienced by trans people in Kerala.

The Sustainable Development Goals aim to leave no one behind and endorse inclusivity, which could potentially embrace transgender individuals. Gender equality (Goal 5) and reducing inequalities (Goal 10) are the goals which recognize and address the inclusivity of transgender people. By recognizing and addressing the specific issues transgender people face, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can contribute to creating a more inclusive and equitable society for all (Matthyse, 2020).

The current study is a qualitative examination of the social exclusion phenomenon experienced by Transgender community in Kerala. The researchers have explored the phenomenon of social exclusion in three dimensions – Resource Insecurity (Wutich & Brewis, 2014), Structural Exclusion and Social Integration (G.Jehoel-Gijsbers & Vrooman, 2007).

Approach and Methods

The study employed a qualitative approach to understand the concept of social exclusion as experienced by transgender people. The participants of the study included three transmen and five transwomen who live in the state of Kerala. The study utilized the case study method to understand the meaning of social exclusion as depicted in Transgender lives. Data were collected using in-depth interviews.

Discussion

The concept is explored in three dimensions: resource insecurity, structural exclusion, and lack of social integration. Below are descriptions of the dimensions.

Resource insecurity

Social exclusion perceives resource insecurity as a dimension. It refers to the lack of access to essential resources, including material goods, which can lead to social suffering and emotional distress (Ravenhill, 2013). Inclusively, it is manifested in the events of material

deprivation in Transgender lives. Material deprivation is the deficiencies in basic needs and goods (G. Jehoel-Gijsbers & Vrooman, 2007). It refers to the lack of financial resources or opportunities that individuals or communities face, leading to economic disadvantage and limited access to necessities and opportunities for growth and development (Khatak, 2020). It encompasses a need for more access to food, clothing, shelter, education, healthcare and fundamental resources required to participate in society. This deprivation is deduced from Low Income, Unemployment, Economic Hardship, or Systemic. It is evident that transgender people, as individuals or as a community, face economic hardships compiled through unemployment.

> *I was evicted from my house when they came to know about my gender identity.*
>
> *However, I cannot let them live alone in their older days. Though I am not recognized as a son/daughter, I run Uber and help them pay their debts and other needs.*

According to Naran (pseudonym), a transman based in Ernakulam, they are forced to flee from their house because of not getting familial and societal acceptance.

According to Kalpana:

> *Financially, transgender people are not secure even today and in other sectors. Employment opportunities are not there. Even though there are reservations, it has not been fully implemented. The reservation is still only in documents and not in practice. I think there is one percentage reservation for transgender people in the OBC category. When I contacted the district social justice board as a query for my friend, they replied that there are orders for reservation, but it has not been implemented.*

Gender categorization practises in housing programs have a big impact on resource access for transgender individuals. Kalpana pointed out that financial security for transgender people is under discourse; though reservations exist, they are not implemented. Sethulakshmi reported that:

> *One day, I visited the panchayat and inquired, ' Sir, I had filed an application for a house; could you provide the status? Can you show me the paper?' But he replied that they had lost the paper. Later, I saw the file, but it had everything except the application letter, which was not signed by the secretary and president. I gave the application on May 9, 2016, but they kept it without signing until 2022.*

Sethu Lekshmi, a 29-year-old transwoman, expressed this gendered discrimination. When they visited the panchayat to inquire about an application regarding their shelter, they were informed that they had lost the paper. The application was not signed and was kept without signature until 2022.

A careful examination of the lower tail of the income distribution among the transgender community is necessary, as the level of material deprivation is often not the highest in this segment. A common methodology for treating outliers, especially negative income components, should be taken care of by the government and non-government organizations. Exploration to better understand the accumulation or erosion of resources should be done to get valuable insights into the dynamics of income poverty and material deprivation over time in the community. Lack of resources and opportunities due to material deprivation can hinder social mobility and limit forthcoming prospects (Access to Education, n.d.). This leads to social exclusion and limits social networks, financial support, and social capital (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018).

Chains of structures: unraveling structural exclusion

The gender binary is a social system whereby people are thought to have either two genders: men or women. Society has constructed gender as binary, which neglects the presence of gender beyond binary. Due to the advent of Victorian morality and Western gender norms, they introduced a legal framework that did not accommodate or recognize transgender identity. This legal framework led to exclusion from society or a group. Then, it became a subject of everyday abuse and discrimination even after the collapse of British rule in India. The exclusion experienced by transgender individuals suggests a lack of acceptance and recognition of gender identities beyond the binary. It is quantified that the transgender community is a gender-minority community that faces obstacles in health care, education, and housing. Though they are a gender minority, they are not considered to be a part of government and semi-governmental provisions. It took more than sixty years for the judiciary to pass a judgment to recognize the rights of the transgender community.

Adityan (Pseudonym) is a 32-year-old trans man working in a Major Multinational Company based in Cochin. His native place is Kottayam district of Kerala. He narrates his childhood as:

> *I was born in 1992 in an extended Hindu family based in the Kottayam district of Kerala. I was the youngest 'female' child in the family after my elder sister. I remember awfully the orthodox society of those days. People were very stereotyped, and society was male-centred.*

Adityan observes that patriarchal societies seem to have flourished in the past. Growing up in a joint Hindu family as a trans boy is difficult; he questioned himself for not being able to adjust like all other girl children used to. He pointed out the presence of strong informal social control as a

force that prevented her from becoming the real him. It points out the prevalence of an orthodox-patriarchal-stereotypical society. Due to societal prejudices and transphobic attitudes, the need for a legal framework in the country is evident. The case of the National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) v. Union of India in 2014 This judgement is a significant milestone for the rights of the transgender community. Recognition of gender identity, protection from discrimination, legal recognition and rights, and welfare measures are the key highlights.

> *I began to visit two counselling centers by myself after talking with teachers who have taught me in school. These counsellors have also identified me as a lesbian. What they told me at that time was, 'This is bad,' being lesbian is bad, according to them. Later, I went to counselling with a sister; maybe because she is a sister, I do not know why she said, 'This is bad.' At that time, homosexual union was not legalized in that sense. It is correct. I had a feeling that I should change my thinking and lead a good life. That is how I began going to a counsellor.*

From this statement, it is evident that the social stereotypes about sexuality infused erroneous information to the generations. That affected their mental wellbeing. The statement proves the legal system that prevailed in his generation has dampened the idea of sexual liberalism and the proclamation of individual-sexual identity.

Adityan also expressed his experience with the teachers misunderstanding him as a lesbian at an adolescent age and trying to criminalize his behaviour.

> *The teachers called me to the staffroom; they harassed me and talked dreadfully to my father and mother. They informed students not to speak to me, so they stopped speaking to me from that day.*

The teacher harassed the student, causing distress to the parents and other students. This obtuse information resulted from a lack of revision in education and teaching methods, which changed Aditya's life.

Adityan reported that hiring agencies often reject transgender individuals due to their formality and expressed concern about a friend who lost his job after surgery and recovery.

> *The hiring agencies will reject the application when they know about the identity. One of my friends, experienced and talented and used to work in a private bank as an assistant manager, lost his job when he went for surgery and rest for recovery. Even some job applications have an option for transgender people, but they will not select; it is for formality.*

This questions the fact that the provisions for medical leave were not even provisioned for trans people at the time of their SRS surgery. This results from the deprivation of recognition from officials and the legal system.

In Kerala, there are many programmes for each group of society. In the case of transgender people, government policies are one of the reasons for the increase in sex work among transgender people. They are forced to do sex work to collect money for their surgery and their survival. These surgeries are now exorbitantly costly and out of reach for many people who desire to have them. In the absence of law, few government hospitals provided the choice. The Union government announced that transgender people will receive Rs 5 lakh in annual health insurance under the Ayushman Bharat initiative. The insurance coverage will also cover sex reassignment operations. However, the government will reimburse the amount only after the surgery. So, they are forced to do sex work and beg for mustering amounts. The LGBTQ community in Kerala protested after Ananya Kumari Alex, the state's first transgender RJ and activist, committed suicide, claiming that gender affirmation surgery had gone wrong. This discussion sparked questions about the regularities and lack of protocols for performing these procedures in specialty hospitals.

It is evident that transgender community is a gender minor community; structural inequalities can also be seen in this community, as with other communities. They face triple discrimination in this society in terms of colour, gender, class and caste. Intersectionality is evident among transgender people.

Pressedha (Pseudonym), a transwoman, acknowledges:

> *I like to study but as a trans person. It is not easy to manage my finances and studies. I asked many government officials to arrange a seat to learn. However, no one cares.*

The person needs help managing finances and studies despite seeking assistance from government authorities to secure a seat for their studies.

Social Integration:

Social integration is a process unfolding over time through which individuals exercise their capacities for connectedness and citizenship in society (Stewart et al., 2018). Transgender individuals face barriers to social integration in various sectors of their lives, including gender transition, healthcare, leisure and work, relationships, and self-isolation. These challenges contribute to their experiences of social exclusion and poor wellbeing. These individuals often

encounter significant challenges and barriers even before embracing and living their lives in terms of their true gender identity. From the beginning of their adolescent age, they face a lack of integration.

Thanu (Pseudonym), the trans man, expresses that:

> *I was the only girl in my village who was so freaky at the time. People used to evaluate me very badly. Whenever I got off the motorbike, people would ask what was happening with the boys. Practically, that is how it was in my village. My mother used to warn me not to get off here with boys on bikes. Hearing that, I used to become angry. I would be angry with my mother, asking, 'I do not have freedom to live in my home'? I am not getting pauses from the bike in front of other houses, but in front of our own house, so there are rumours about me in my village.*

Thanu describes being the only bizarre girl in her village, often criticized for riding motorcycles with boys. Her mother warned her against doing so, leading to rumours about her freedom to stay in her home. These experiences significantly portray the social norms in society that question an individual's freedom of expression. Personality development of any individual needs family support. Lack of contact and support with their original families leads to many psychological and social problems (Rehan et al., 2009).

Films reflect experiences and imaginations from their creators' minds. They present different things from various perspectives to the world, often aiming to entertain through humour or storytelling. Movies wield significant influence over individuals, shaping perceptions and behaviours. In 2005, the release of the film 'Chandupottu' marked a significant change in the lives of transgender persons, as people began referring to them as 'Chandupottu.' This illustrates how the influence of films on society can alter the meaning of life in negative ways. The after-effects of the Malayalam film 'Chandupottu' exemplify this phenomenon. One of the trans woman from Chegannur says that:

> *Gujarat and Kerala are different. I do not like the culture and customs. I do not even see myself as a Malayali, so my friends are Gujarati. When my father made that decision, it made me heartbroken that I was leaving my friends and hometown. I have allergies to this soil; I cannot walk without stopping. It becomes like pain in my leg, sneezing and rashes in my body. My face is the same as this. Only my body hair has changed, and my dress code has changed, too. Here, the people are not able to accept me like this. At that time, the film 'Chandupottu' was released for my bad time. I studied here at Devasom Board*

School, and everyone was like Dey Chandupottu Pokkune. In north India, no one cares or bothers about others. However, everyone knows that I have female taste and like feministic. So, my friends do make-up and mehndi for me.

The participant describes her experiences in Gujarat and Kerala, describing their dislike for the culture and customs, allergies, and lack of acceptance. They describe their experiences at Devasom Board School, where female and male peers surrounded them. She was bullied by name-calling. Despite their differences, they are known for their feminist tendencies, leading to their friends dressing up and wearing mehndi.

A variety of factors, including cultural, religious, and historical considerations, can influence societal attitudes toward transgender individuals. Here, she observes that culture is important to one's identity. She steers to the conclusion that Guajaratis are more welcoming than Keralites. Even these traumas made them live in isolation. Many ran away from their communities and families to other states, which ensured safety and recognition. Another trans woman says that:

After 8 to 9 days of the first days of my eighth standard, I noticed that some boys sat in the eighth standard without going to the ninth standard. A boy who always teases me because they can understand suddenly. At that time, the film "Chandupottu" was released. Then, it became easier for them to call names. Till that time, we were flowing through the side silently, and after that, others started to notice me. Even if they did not say anything or tease me, their looking towards me made me feel insulted. Only the older boys studying in our class teased me. I was really afraid to leave the class.

I used to sit with girls, no matter whether there was a space on the bench or not. Seeing this, the boys used to make fun of me. The boys would say, 'Ayye,' 'Pennan,' 'penkonthan naanamile njagalde koode erikanda,' 'njagal kootula'(we do not befriend you, we will not take you in): A transwoman named Kalpana (Pseudonym)

It is evident that from childhood itself, these individuals pass through traumas and negligence from society, which plunges societal integration. The purge in the support from families and communities can be one of the reasons why transgender people are propelled into the depth of social exclusion, leading to risky behaviours (Abdullah et al., 2012).

Conclusion

The exclusion of minority groups has been widely discussed, and suggestions to promote conducive and inclusive spaces or environments, reducing gender-based stigma and discrimination in all spheres, are on the agenda of voluntary and advocacy initiatives. Taking into consideration the structural inequalities, specifically referring to the gendered division of societal structure, gender-based violence, the class/caste divide, the gap between the rich and the poor, and power imbalances in society, the present paper reckons the readers to view exclusion from a critical social work theoretical lens. The emergence of Socialism, Marxism, Liberalism, and Conservatism exclusively shaped the emerging 'social' professions at the turn of the twentieth century. It reshaped how life was perceived and understood. How social, political, and economic factors shaped reality became fundamental to conceptualizing reality and the way humans reacted to the world around them.

To a great extent, social reform movements helped radically restructure society, yet the structural inequalities and problems aroused continued to pathologize the individual. Intervention without challenging social exclusion, inequality, and poverty has proved insufficient, yet traditional social work practices the problem-solving model (Morley, 2003). The key strategy to challenge these inequalities is empowerment. One of the key components of socioeconomic empowerment is sustainable livelihood. Sustainable livelihood opportunities equip them with self-confidence, a positive self-concept, self-reliance, and the ability to build resilience in challenging situations. This paper calls for an action-oriented agenda to bring sustainability to their lives through sustainable livelihood initiatives.

Acknowledgement

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