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Challenges Faced by Transgender Persons in Accessing Employment in Galle District, Sri Lanka: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract: Background: Transgender persons may encounter significant barriers to employment arising from social stigma, discrimination, educational disruption, inadequate organisational policies, and difficulties related to gender identity documentation. These barriers can restrict access to job opportunities, career development, and sustainable employment.
Objective: This study explores the challenges faced by transgender persons in accessing employment in Galle District, Sri Lanka, with particular attention to social, educational, legal, organisational, and health-related factors.
Methods: The study adopts a qualitative exploratory research design involving 25 transgender persons selected through purposive sampling. Data are collected through individual, semi-structured, in-depth interviews and analysed thematically. Ethical considerations include informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, and secure data handling.
Results: The manuscript identifies six key themes concerning employment barriers: transphobia and social stigma, educational barriers, inadequate workplace policies, difficulties with legal documentation, pressure to conceal gender identity, and physical and mental health challenges. These issues may affect the ability of transgender persons to apply for jobs, participate in recruitment processes, obtain suitable employment, and maintain job security. The discussion also highlights the importance of gender-sensitive recruitment practices, supportive organisational policies, and inclusive workplace environments.
Conclusion: Addressing employment barriers requires more than formal recognition of transgender rights. Employers, policymakers, and educational institutions should strengthen anti-discrimination measures, improve awareness of gender diversity, establish inclusive recruitment procedures, and provide appropriate workplace support. Such measures may help promote equitable employment opportunities and greater economic and social inclusion for transgender persons in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: *Transgender persons, employment barriers, workplace discrimination, gender identity, inclusive employment, Sri Lanka.*

1. Introduction

Employment is an important component of social and economic participation. Access to decent and secure work can contribute to financial independence, dignity, social integration and quality of life. However, transgender persons may experience discrimination and exclusion in education, employment, healthcare and other areas of social life. Transgender persons constitute a socially marginalized population who frequently experience discrimination across education, employment, healthcare, family and community settings. Although legal and policy developments in India have increasingly recognized the rights of transgender persons, the existence of legal protection does not necessarily ensure equality in everyday social and economic life. Employment is particularly

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important because access to decent and secure work influences economic independence, social participation, dignity and overall quality of life.

Transgender people have experienced ridicule, exclusion and social marginalization for many years. These experiences can limit opportunities for education, employment and participation in wider society. With appropriate educational opportunities, encouragement and equitable access to employment, transgender people can make an important contribution to both the economy and society (Dr. K. Leelavathy, 2012).

The difficulties faced by transgender people are not limited to employment. Experiences of prejudice and intolerance within families, educational institutions, workplaces and the wider community can create continuing social stress. Such minority stress may affect psychological well-being and can be associated with anxiety, trauma-related stress and the internalization of negative social attitudes (Bhattacharya & Ghosh, 2020; Meyer, 2003).

Research has also begun to highlight the effects of everyday microaggressions on transgender and non-binary people. Repeated experiences of misgendering and other forms of subtle discrimination can have consequences for physical and mental well-being (Chang & Chung, 2015). Access to appropriate healthcare remains another concern, and difficulties obtaining healthcare may affect a person's capacity to maintain employment (Pandya & Redcay, 2020).

Although stigma, discrimination and other social difficulties have received increasing scholarly attention, employment experiences following the implementation of India's Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019 remain comparatively underexplored. Transgender people are also sometimes treated only as a minor part of broader studies on sexual orientation and gender diversity.

Legal recognition is an important step, but recognition alone does not automatically produce social inclusion. Genuine workplace inclusion involves fair access to recruitment, career development, incentives and everyday workplace participation. Previous research has identified inconsistent organizational cultures and inadequate non-discrimination practices as important barriers to workplace equality (Davis & Yeung, 2022).

Research has further examined employer stereotypes, concerns surrounding disclosure and the difficulties associated with transitioning while employed. Maintaining employment and financial security during transition is particularly important, yet this aspect has not always received sufficient attention (Pepper & Lorah, 2008; Scott et al., 2011).

Career counselling and human resource development have addressed the needs of several minority groups, but transgender people's employment experiences remain comparatively underrepresented. Further research is therefore needed to understand how organizations can create workplaces that are genuinely inclusive of transgender employees (McFadden, 2015; Rumens, 2016).

The relationship between education and employment is particularly important. Experiences of stigma and harassment during schooling can contribute to educational discontinuation, subsequently limiting access to formal employment. Research among transgender women in India has similarly identified non-acceptance by families and harassment in educational settings, with educational disruption making subsequent employment more difficult.

Therefore, employment inclusion should not be understood simply as the formal recruitment of transgender persons. Genuine inclusion requires changes throughout the employment process, including recruitment, workplace culture, promotion, benefits, organizational policies, grievance mechanisms and protection of confidentiality. The present study consequently explores the lived experiences of transgender persons in relation to employment and identifies the social and organizational barriers that influence their ability to obtain and retain employment.

Employment barriers may occur before recruitment, during selection, and after appointment. These barriers can include limited educational opportunities, family rejection, social stigma, discriminatory attitudes, inappropriate workplace practices and inadequate organizational support. Sri Lankan research has identified employment-related discrimination, underemployment, workplace harassment and barriers to career progression among transgender persons (Vinayagam and others, 2023).

The present study focuses specifically on Galle District. A district-level qualitative approach can provide an opportunity to understand how broader social attitudes and structural conditions are experienced within a particular local context.

2. Methodology.

Research design

A qualitative exploratory research design will be used to understand the lived experiences of transgender persons in relation to employment.

Study setting

The study will be conducted in Galle District, Sri Lanka.

Study population and sample

The study will include 25 transgender persons who meet the eligibility criteria and have relevant experiences of seeking or participating in employment.

Sampling technique

Purposive sampling will be used to recruit participants who can provide information relevant to the research objectives.

Data collection

Data will be collected through individual in-depth interviews using a semi-structured interview guide. Interviews will explore employment-seeking experiences, discrimination, family and educational influences,

workplace experiences and perceptions of organisational inclusion.

Data analysis

Interview data will be transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis. The researcher will become familiar with the transcripts, generate initial codes, group related codes into potential themes, review and refine themes, and develop a final thematic interpretation.

Trustworthiness

Credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability will be addressed through systematic coding, careful documentation of analytical decisions, use of verbatim participant quotations where appropriate, and reflexive consideration of researcher influence.

Ethical considerations Participants should provide informed consent and should be informed that participation is voluntary and that they may withdraw without penalty. Participant identities should be protected through anonymisation and secure data handling.

3. Results

The final Results section must be based on the actual interviews conducted with the 25 participants. The preliminary thematic structure can include:

Theme 1: Transphobia

Theme 2: Educational barriers

Theme 3: Policies dearth

Theme 4: Legal documentation

Theme 5: Pressure to Hide Gender Identity

Theme 6: Physical and Mental Health Challenges

3.1 Transphobia

It is transphobic to refer to non-binary persons as "men" or "women," or trans women as "men" or trans men as "women." It is misgendering to use incorrect pronouns, such as "she" for transgender males and "he" for transgender women. It is transphobic to refer to non-binary individuals without using "they/them" (or similar pronouns) or to refer to binary trans people with these terms. From vacancy and job opening communication, the content will speak volumes about the companies hiring, whether it is inclusive or not. While the job descriptions not fail to express inclusive hiring practices, Transgender community members will not apply for such company openings. The hiring personnel lacking sensitivity, awareness and expressing Transphobia explicitly or implicitly will also stop transgender people from applying for jobs.

Thematic Statements on Transphobia

- "People lack understanding of what gender identity is and what is sexual orientation? They are not sensitive enough to even ask what our preferred pronoun is"
- "Some people fear transgender people due to bad experiences with transgender people in signals, some have experienced curses as well, this creates transphobia among people"
- "With fake transgender people, their misbehavior and nuances created by Transgender people there are many fears and misconceptions about Transgender people"

3.2 Educational Barriers

- Most participants shared the experience of changing career paths due to discontinuing education after coming out about their gender identity. Lack of support from family is a main reason for break in education which is further worsened by lack of shelter and protection. Due to educational gaps and lack of qualifications, finding jobs in organized sectors is a challenge for Transgender Community members.
- Thematic Statements on Educational Barriers
- "I was thrown out of my house during my first year of medicine after coming out, I was begging on the streets before working in a hotel"
- "The minute I told my parents about my gender identity, I was forced to go for counseling, I was not comfortable in attending college and I eventually stopped going to college"
- "There was a skill gap which I found to be a major difficulty in obtaining a job, I was not a graduate which was a major requirement for most jobs"

3.3 Policies dearth

Although discrimination against Transgender people is a violation against right to equality and right to employment. Transgender people at Workplaces are still discriminated against and harassed. While participants opine that the discrimination is hidden and not explicit, the policies seem to be a beginner to prevent explicit discrimination and harassment. Transgender people need policies that promote sensitization and normalization. Health related policies, bathroom access, dress code policy, pronoun usage, fair promotions etc. are areas where inclusion needs to be focused on more explicitly.

Thematic Statements on Policies dearth

- "Rainbow washing has become the norm in companies"
- "Just celebrating pride month, that's what most companies think of as inclusivity and diversity"
- "Just having inclusion, diversity and equity policies without actually hiring diverse people does not validate inclusion, in most places where my friends work"
- "Companies don't even respond to our job applications, very rarely I have heard transgender friends say that they have gotten back prompt response from HR"

4 Legal documentation

Personal identification documents with gender identity cause a conflict while verifying documents during the hiring process. Gender identity according to the individual might not match the gender identity on the document. Post transition Transgender people's gender identity is different from the identity assigned at birth. The challenges in changing the sex in the documents is a difficult process.

Differences between a person's gender identity and the information recorded on official documents can create difficulties during recruitment and document verification. Participants described the process of changing gender information on identification documents as complicated.

These documentation issues can become particularly significant when employers rely on official documents during recruitment. Participants also reported situations in which their preferred pronouns were not respected because employers relied on the gender recorded in their documents.

3.5 Pressure to Hide Gender Identity

Not every transgender person feels safe or comfortable disclosing their gender identity in public or during recruitment. Participants described situations in which questions about gender identity were experienced as uncomfortable, particularly when privacy and personal boundaries were not respected.

Some participants reported being encouraged to conceal their transgender identity in order to obtain or retain employment. Others described leaving previous jobs because they feared discrimination or harassment if they disclosed their identity. Such experiences can create additional emotional pressure and contribute to interruptions in employment.

3.6 Physical and Mental Health Challenges

Participants also described physical and emotional challenges associated with gender transition. Hormone therapy and other aspects of transition can involve periods of physical and psychological adjustment. Participants emphasized the importance of adequate leave, healthcare support and insurance coverage so that they can manage these changes without putting their employment at risk.

Several participants felt that a limited amount of appropriate leave would allow them to return to work more effectively and maintain productivity. The findings therefore point to the importance of workplace health policies that recognize the specific needs of transgender employees.

4. Discussion

The thematic analysis shows that transgender people's employment experiences are shaped by several overlapping forms of social and organizational disadvantage. The main themes were transphobia, educational barriers, inadequate policies, documentation problems, pressure surrounding disclosure, and physical and mental health challenges.

Discrimination and stigma can reinforce negative beliefs about transgender people and make integration into the workforce more difficult (Aguirre-Sánchez-Beato, 2020; McLemore, 2018). Participants' experiences also indicate that legal recognition does not necessarily remove practical barriers. Difficulties with identity documentation can affect both job applications and employment verification.

Policy deficiencies were another important issue. Organizations may publicly communicate support for LGBTQ+ equality while making fewer practical changes to recruitment and workplace procedures. The concept of rainbow washing captures situations in which visible symbols of support are not accompanied by meaningful organizational action (Rusch, 2023).

The findings further demonstrate the importance of education. Family rejection and interruptions to education can reduce qualifications and skills, narrowing employment opportunities. Support systems that help transgender people remain in education and develop employable skills may therefore have long-term effects on economic independence.

Finally, pressure to hide gender identity can create a difficult choice between authenticity and employment security. Participants' accounts suggest that inclusive recruitment, respectful workplace communication and appropriate health-related support are necessary if organizations are to create sustainable employment opportunities for transgender people.

5. Conclusion

The findings indicate that transgender people continue to encounter multiple barriers when seeking and maintaining employment. These barriers extend beyond direct discrimination and include educational disruption, inadequate workplace policies, documentation difficulties, pressure to conceal gender identity, and physical and mental health needs.

Legal protection is important, but effective inclusion also requires changes in everyday organizational practice. Recruitment systems should recognize gender diversity, staff should receive appropriate sensitization and training, and workplace policies should provide fair and practical support to transgender employees.

The study therefore highlights the need for stronger implementation of anti-discrimination measures and greater awareness among employers and employees. Meaningful inclusion will depend on moving beyond symbolic support towards consistent practices that allow transgender people to obtain, retain and progress in employment.

6. Implications

For employers: Develop inclusive recruitment procedures, anti-discrimination policies, staff awareness programmes and confidential grievance mechanisms.

For policymakers: Strengthen implementation and monitoring of equality and non-discrimination measures.

For educational institutions: Promote safe and inclusive educational environments and prevent discrimination based on gender identity.

For sociology and nursing: Professionals working with transgender communities should understand the effects of stigma, discrimination and social exclusion and promote respectful, person-centred and inclusive practice.

7. Recommendations

1. Strengthen transgender-inclusive employment policies.

2. Provide gender-sensitivity and diversity training for employers and staff.

3. Ensure fair and inclusive recruitment procedures.

4. Establish confidential mechanisms for reporting workplace discrimination.

5. Improve educational and vocational opportunities for transgender persons.

6. Strengthen community and family awareness programmes.

7. Conduct further research involving larger and geographically diverse samples.

8. Evaluate organisational inclusion through actual workplace practices rather than symbolic activities alone.

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