

Dissemination meeting on

IDENTIFYING ETHICAL ISSUES IN CONDUCTING RESEARCH WITH TRANSWOMEN IN INDIA

30th January 2023, Lalit Great Eastern Kolkata Hotel



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BACKGROUND

Research on transwomen in India is limited; previous researchers have focused on understanding the problems transwomen face and the various forms of discriminations that they are subjected to. Studies have shown that social stigmatization against transgender people is pervasive in India, and they are subjected to prejudice, social exclusion, violence, and hatred. Transgender persons face physical, verbal, and sexual abuse that results in mental health issues and lower mental wellbeing among them. Studies have also shown that transgender people have high suicide rates (31%), suffer from moderate/severe depression (42.7%), struggle with alcohol abuse (37.3%) and suffer from psychiatric disorders (48%).

However, there are no studies that have focused on understanding and exploring the ethical dimension of conducting research among transwomen. This kind of research is important and is only possible when cisgender researchers, engage with transgender persons in meaningful ways. This requires a process that is not just participatory but also includes transgender persons right from the inception of the research study.

The George Institute for Global Health, India conducted an exploratory study using qualitative methods to identify ethical issues of conducting research with transgender women in the city of Kolkata,

India in collaboration with **Kolkata Rista**, a transgender community-based organization that has, over the last 16 years, worked in the states of West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand, and Uttar Pradesh, for the protection of rights and welfare of various groups of non-normative sexual orientation and gender identity.

The aim of the study was to identify the ethical challenges of research on mental health of transgender women and articulate requirements to ensure their inclusion in research; to map the ethical issues of involving transgender women in mental health research, and finally to identify the research needs of the transgender community.

A dissemination meeting was organised to share the findings of the research study. This event was attended by a diverse group of people including study participants, researchers and representatives of civil society organisations working with transgender people. In order to set the context of the dissemination meeting, two presentations were made to report the research findings. The first was done by Dr. Y.K.Sandhya, Senior Research Fellow, George Institute for Global Health, India; and Dr Ankita Mukherjee, Qualitative Researcher, George Institute for Global Health, India.



KEY MESSAGES FROM THE STUDY WERE

- **Relevance of research:** Research among transgender persons is much needed to spread awareness about the trans way of life, identify problems and possible solutions. However before starting any research with transgender persons, it is important to carefully examine questions related to who benefits from the proposed research, whether the proposed study is meaningful to the transgender community, whether it address their immediate and pressing needs and finally whether it furthers the stigma that transgender persons are subjected to.
- **Establishing meaningful collaborations:** It is important to establish trust through meaningful collaborations with the transgender community. Research planned in collaboration with transgender persons will help to ensure that it is inclusive and meaningful to the transgender community. Researchers must collaborate with transgender persons to ensure that the research planned is inclusive, meaningful, and ethical
- **Responsibility of researchers:** Researchers should ensure privacy and confidentiality of the transgender research participant and remind participants of their rights not just during the consent process but also during the research process, and especially before asking sensitive questions. Researchers should establish rapport before commencing the research, treat transgender research participants with dignity and respect, and familiarize themselves with the basics of gender affirming interactions.
- **Reimbursement of transwomen research participants:** Since many transgender persons work on a daily wage basis they lose out on wages if they participate in research activities.
- **Challenges faced by transgender women:** It has been difficult for many transwomen to obtain formal identity documents, despite having visited various government departments multiple times.
- **Poor recognition of needs of transgender persons:** Most government and private institutions do not have provisions for separate toilets or separate queues for transgender persons, neither are there dedicated hospitals beds for transgender persons
- **Limited livelihood opportunities:** Many transgender persons have limited education; they are often forced to drop out of school due to lack of family support and discriminatory experience in schools that affects their chances of finding employment in the formal sector. Those who manage to secure jobs are discouraged from displaying feminine traits and dress. Often transgender women are left with no choice but to engage in begging, sex work or join Hijra gharanas and earn through badhai (customary blessings).
- **Facing abuse and violence:** Transgender persons face verbal, sexual and physical abuse from a young age. They face abuse in neighbourhoods, schools, public transport, on the street and at work.
- **Interaction with the police:** Most transgender women reported negative experiences in their interaction with the police. The police evinced prejudices against transgender persons and often did not perceive transgender persons as victims of abuse because of their identity.
- **Stress and mental health needs:** Transgender women reported many stressors which led to poor mental health and suicide. Poor support from family or discord with romantic partners, discriminatory attitude that they were routinely subjected to and the pressure of earning money and following rules in Hijra Gharanas were identified as key stressors. However, help seeking for mental health problems was poor.



DISCUSSION POINTS

A number of the points below allude to issues faced by transgender communities in their daily lives. These have a bearing on not only what to research and identifying what things are more relevant to the community but also to understand the context in which research needs to be conducted which in turn will influence ethical principles of conducting research in those circumstances.

Recognising the fluidity of sexuality:

Gender identity and the constructs of 'man', 'woman' and 'transgender' are all patriarchal constructs, which try to categorise people into boxes. However, in reality, sexuality was fluid and could change the way it manifested itself over the life span of an individual. For instance, a man may initially identify as heterosexual, marry and even have children from the marriage; however, it is possible that after a few decades, the man may find the need to be with another man. In such cases, the mental stress that the man goes through is tremendous and affects his mental health and wellbeing. Further it is important to recognise that sex, sexuality, gender identity and sexual orientation are all different concepts; there was considerable confusion between sexuality and the act of sex, which were often conflated. This was the reason why the introduction of sexuality education in schools was met with stiff resistance.

Implication for research – A clearer understanding of these concepts amongst researchers themselves or exploring these areas through future research could be the first steps that one needs to focus on while contemplating ethical research with transgender communities.

Experience of self-stigma:

Transgender persons take a long time to understand and accept themselves and to come to terms with their trans identity. This leads to stress and insecurity. But the presence of support groups (community), builds a sense of confidence and empowerment which has enabled many transgender women to discover themselves, stand up for their rights and protest against the discrimination and abuse that they are routinely subjected to.

Implication for research – Self-stigma by itself can affect the way transgender respondents openly discuss issues with researchers. Researchers should

acknowledge potential biases in responses because of this and try and alleviate self-stigma and make the respondent comfortable enough to elicit responses to questions that are then perceived as less stigmatizing.

Importance of working with parents and families:

The need to work with parents and families was highlighted by participants. For good mental health family support and acceptance were vital. The absence of such support was a major stressor for transgender persons that deeply affected their mental wellbeing. It was important for families to be made aware this and support their transgender members. Parents of gender non-conforming children found it difficult to accept their transgender child which led to rejection, turning the transgender child out of the house or making efforts to 'cure' the child by taking them to counsellors. Parents of gender non-conforming children are often subjected to tremendous pressure from society and relatives. Providing counselling to parents to deal with these pressures and to accept their gender non-conforming children was necessary. Integrating counselling during antenatal visits could also help prospective parents to be prepared to accept their child irrespective of the gender to which the child subscribes.

Implication for research – This highlights the importance of researchers to provide adequate support services and building their research on a bedrock of sound principles of awareness raising in the community and following good ethical research guidelines. If any respondent needs more clinical support to overcome stress related to lack of community or family support, the research team should have the capacity to address such appropriately and in time-bound manner.

Working with educational institutions and teachers:

Training teachers on how to deal with gender non-conforming children was essential. Gender nonconforming children experience confusion when at school; especially around the time s/he either tries to change or thinks that there is something wrong with him/her. Experiences in school tends to reinforce their difference from cisgender children which creates pressures on the transgender child to conform to their biological sex. The treatment meted out to the transgender children in school by the school administration, teachers and students was a major

reason why many of the transgender people felt forced to drop out of school. As a result, most transgender persons were not able to complete their formal education which affected their employability.

Building a good environment in school is important for things to improve and change. One of the ways in which this could be done was by providing support to gender non-conforming students in school to promote their mental wellbeing, by appointing a mental health professional who could cover all the schools in a specified area. This professional could provide much needed support to gender non-conforming children and help them to come to terms with their sexuality and deal with the stress that they experienced.

It was essential to run programmes in schools to sensitise cisgender children that there might be children who are gender non-conforming and that is perfectly fine. If schools have such an environment, then children who feel differently will have the safe space to express this difference. The problem starts when a child feels he/she is different. Often schools are reluctant to discuss issues of sexuality because they confuse it with sexual intercourse and by extension all discussions around Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Intersex, Queer (LGBTIQ) identity are thought to be about sexual intercourse.

However, a few positive developments such as the implementation of the School Health Programme which had modules on life skills that covers different aspects including sexuality, was a step to promote inclusiveness and acceptance of gender non-conforming persons. The programme has 10 modules in which gender is being explored and in many states the implementation has taken off with teachers being trained. Under this programme classes are to be conducted twice a month by the trained teachers. Besides a box is to be installed where children could write down their problems and anonymously drop it off in the box. Training of teachers had also started in nine blocks of West Bengal. Another encouraging development was that some private schools were beginning to become more inclusive and were no longer tolerating the bullying of gender non-conforming students.

Implications for research – One's sexual orientation starts crystalizing very early and adequate school-based programmes and research are needed to address some of the dilemmas that teachers often face while talking about sexual orientation in their classes.

The programmes or interventions should involve both ways by which school curriculums can discuss cis- and transgender topics, discuss stigma and ways to reduce such stigma from an early age, manage stressors more effectively, and develop a more informed citizen for the global community. Researchers should be aware of these issues and actively develop research programmes keeping the needs of transgender students in mind.

Status of government programmes:

A positive move by the Supreme Court was its judgement on Article 377 that decriminalised what was earlier termed as unnatural sex. Following this the National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) judgement and transgender protection law were progressive steps taken by the government but the implementation of these on ground was minimal. Many of the measures that the government is introducing needs to be thought through more and enriched. For example, in West Bengal, a transgender board has been formed, but by and large the transgender community is unaware of its existence; the board does not have any transgender representation from the community. Further, there are programmes that the government has purported to design for transgender people, but there is hardly any implementation of these programmes on the ground. These systemic issues increase the stress that transgender persons' face.

Implications for research – Policy research on topics relevant to transgender communities is a big gap that needs to be bridged in the country. Researchers should focus on policies using a lens that keeps the needs of transgender persons in perspective, and helps the government formulate policies that are ethically sound for transgender communities. A critical appraisal of existing laws of the country to identify the gaps where the rights of transgender persons are not adequately addressed is a much-needed focus of future research.

Tackling structural stigma:

Structural stigma is pervasive and affects the mental wellbeing of transgender person. The stigma manifests itself in many ways such as lack of basic facilities for transgender persons in public places (example separate toilets, dedicated beds in hospitals). It also manifests itself in the way in which the people working in public

institutions responded to transgender persons. For instance, the police are a critical institution but there was a clear difference in the way transgender persons were treated vis-à-vis gender conforming individuals by police personnel. Another instance of such discrimination is manifested in the absence of a transgender counsellors in anti-retroviral therapy (ART) centres. Even the Transgender Welfare Board that was constituted in West Bengal 2018 does not have a single transgender person on it. There were many places where employment is not open to transgender persons and it is a struggle finding jobs.

It was noted that structural stigma also manifests itself in the terminology that is used. For example, in HIV projects running in the country one of the high-risk groups identified were female sex workers. But when it came to gender non-conforming persons, the term used was transgenders, as if to imply that all transgenders were sex workers. The better term to use would be transgender sex workers, just as female sex workers was the term use and not just females. This insensitivity in terminology was also a source of mental stress for the transgender community.

Transwomen had to face discrimination from the state government, which had instituted many schemes for cisgender women but none for transgender women. The discrimination between cisgender women and transgender women was substantial and kept surfacing in everyday life. For instance, cisgender women could beg on trains without being harassed by the police, but transgender women begging on trains were often detained by the police. Further when a cis-gender woman reported a rape, the possibility of a FIR being registered was much higher than when a transgender woman reported rape.

Implications for research – To address structural stigma often one needs clearly outlined guidelines and appropriate execution of those guidelines. Often the framework is just a document which is never implemented adequately. Researchers should not only identify where and how structural stigma is affecting transgender persons in their daily lives but also conduct research to overcome such stigma wherever apparent. While some of this research may be at policy or programme level, others may be at a more fundamental level of identifying structural stigma at an institution, developing awareness campaigns to address that stigma

using evidence-based interventions and evaluating such programmes over time.

Inclusion of transgender persons in policy formulation and representation in government committees:

It was felt that the transgender community was not able to influence policy makers which was why things on the ground took time to get implemented. It was therefore important that transgenders representatives be part of the process of policy formulation, so that their concerns are included when policies are designed. An example of this was the Child Welfare Committee (CWC) which could have a transgender person on the committee; such inclusion was critical since transgender persons would be able to better understand and help a gender non-conforming child whose case might be referred to the CWC. Similarly, Rogi Kalyan Samitis (RKS, hospital management committees) should have transgender representation. There was a recognition that it was time for the transgender community to start talking about rights and reservations in jobs across all sectors - government, private and non-governmental.

Implications for research – As is the practice of sound ethical research principles nowadays, involvement of the direct beneficiaries of a research need to be involved in the conceptualization and implementation of the research. The same holds true for any research or policy development involving transgender communities. Ownership of the research is important from the outset and with that comes a product which is more likely to be successful over time.



Creation of safe spaces:

it was important to create safe spaces for transgender persons, to be able to discuss their problems and interact with each other freely without any fear. Most of the non-governmental organizations that worked for transgender persons were clustered in larger cities, and through their initiatives there was some degree of understanding and acceptance of transgender persons. However, nothing was being done in villages and small towns. Transgenders from such places faced many challenges, as they were expected to be gender conforming and displaying their trans identity was not acceptable. Hence it was necessary to run awareness campaigns or small meetings in villages and towns also to discuss and normalise gender non-conformity.

Implications for research – This underlines the fact that even among transgender communities there are some who are even more marginalized. Communities at large and researchers specifically need to be aware of this divide and develop research that addresses this gap in knowledge. While developing interventions or programmes one should be cognizant of the specific needs of the community even though they may seem a homogeneous population involving transgender communities.

Differences driven by geographical regions, urban-rural societies, socioeconomic gradient, or gender preferences are all key factors to consider while planning research or programme delivery.

Sensitization of stakeholders:

A whole range of stakeholders needed to be sensitized to make them empathic towards transgender persons. This was important to overcome preconceived notions and biases. Counsellors, government representatives, teachers, police and health providers were identified as important stakeholders who needed to undergo sensitization training.

Implications for research – In order to address the gaps in knowledge, any community-based research involving transgender communities should try to take a more holistic approach and while doing so identify key stakeholders and involve them in the programme. A multisectoral approach may be needed to address some of the issues affecting the lives of transgender communities and researchers should be aware of the larger implications of their research while planning.



CONCLUSION

This research study conducted by The George Institute for Global Health in collaboration with Kolkata Rista focused on the ethics of doing research with the transgender community with a more critical lens. It reiterated the importance of partnering with the transgender communities at all stages of the research process, design research programmes that keep the needs of the transgender community in mind and ensured that there is ownership of the research from the outset. This study also raised many implications for future research such as developing a clearer understanding of the concepts such as sex, sexuality, gender identity and sexual orientation, amongst researchers themselves or exploring these areas through future research. It also pointed out the importance of acknowledging potential biases resulting from self-stigma among transgender respondents and to alleviate this. The research team must have the capacity to address social support issues timely and appropriately, undertake a critical appraisal of existing laws of the country to identify the gaps where the rights of transgender persons are not adequately addressed. Another implication of the study was the need to identify structural stigma at institutions also highlight the need to develop awareness campaigns to address

such stigma by using evidence-based interventions and evaluate these programmes over time. Researchers and policy makers must recognise the fact that the transgender community is not a homogeneous population and there are differences among them based on different geographical regions, urban-rural societies, socioeconomic gradient, or gender preferences are key factors that must be considered while planning research or programme delivery. Therefore, a multisectoral approach is needed to address the issues affecting the mental wellbeing and lives of the transgender communities which should be recognised by researchers while planning their research.



COLLABORATING PARTNERS:



Kolkata Rista is a transgender community-based organization that has, over the last 16 years, worked in the states of West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand, and Uttar Pradesh, for the protection of rights and welfare of various groups of non-normative sexual orientation and gender identity. Kolkata Rista is run by members of these communities themselves and represents an approach sensitive to the experiences of exclusion and marginalization faced by working class trans persons.



The George Institute for Global Health India is a research organisation that has offices in New Delhi and Hyderabad. Our mission is to improve the health of millions of people worldwide by focusing on better treatments, better care and healthier societies. The George is guided by the values of humanitarian commitment, focus on excellence, creativity, integrity, 'can do' approach and emphasis on impact.





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