

REPORT FROM FIELD

The Stories Untold – Third Genders Navigating the Health Care System

Leena Chandran¹, Suja Molelimattathil Kuttappan²

¹PhD Scholar, Department of Social Work, Amrita School of Engineering, Coimbatore, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, India; ²Associate Professor, Department of Social Work, Amrita School of Engineering, Coimbatore, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, India.

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Corresponding Author

Corresponding Author: Leena Chandran, PhD Scholar, Department of Social Work, Amrita School of Engineering, Coimbatore, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, India.

E Mail ID: leenachandran123@gmail.com



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Abstract

Background: The third genders are said to be the vulnerable and most marginalized group in the society and their health care needs should be addressed with priority, since they are under high pressure of social stigmatization. This paper is based on the discussion the researcher had with the transgender community on their access of health care system and how they define health in their own terms and experiences. **Aims & Objective:** To find the issues they face while navigating through the health care system. Their expectations from the health care system and their opinion on the current scenario is also reflected in the study. **Material & Methods:** This is a qualitative study using focus group discussion as the method adopted for collecting the data. Three focus group discussions were carried out with 8 respondents each. Hence the total number of respondents for the case study was 24 in number. Their collective opinion is also reviewed. **Result and conclusion:** The experience of the transgender community is appalling that they are not satisfied with the health care facilities provided. Preference should be given to them because the physical agony along with mental stress and stigma from the society is such a pathetic situation.

Keywords

Healthcare; Third Gender; Health; Emotional health; Stigma

Introduction

Health can be defined as the ability of the body to adapt to new threats and infirmities.(1) Mental and physical health are the most commonly used terms when we say of health, but social, economical ,spiritual and emotional health can be linked to the term "health" because all of these contribute to the overall health status of an individual.

Right to equality is one of the six and of course the most important fundamental rights that the Indian constitution guarantees to its citizens. It clearly says

that all are equal in front of the law irrespective of the religion, gender, caste, birthplace, race, employment etc. "Gender equality" is a wide spread idea and terminology where most consider gender means only two a) Male and b) Female. But there is a wide range of population that comes under the term Third Gender or Transgender. Transgender is the term that incorporates differences in gender identity wherein one's assigned biological sex doesn't match their felt identity. This umbrella term includes persons who do not feel they fit into a

dichotomous sex structure through which they are identified as male or female.(2) It is said that there are almost 40 types of gender diversities seen and out of which only one-third is visible to naked eye according to the Intersex Society of North America.(3) Trans-woman people are born as a man with male genitals and later they began to show feminine characters and also dress themselves as a female. Transmen on the other hand is people born with female genitals and the assigned sex during birth is female but they find themselves as men and exhibit manly characters. (4)

Indian law gives privileges and rights to transgenders in all walks of life as the minority and marginalized vulnerable group. Their right in terms of medical institutions is also well defined in the law. "The court order gives legal sanctity to the third gender. The judges said the government must make sure that they have access to medical care and other facilities like separate wards in hospitals and separate toilets," - Anita Shenoy, lawyer for the petitioner National Legal Services Authority (Nalsa).(5) But the medical or health related issues faced by the transgenders are so miserable that they are always subjected to suffer mental pain along with physical illness when they approach a medical centre for healthcare needs. They become the centre of attraction and a matter of rude discussion and often they have to push back themselves to a safer zone till the crowd in front of the doctor is reduced.

From the words of Bhavana (name changed) "When we enter a hospital, we are looked as if we are some ugly creature and the nursing staff and other patients talk about us in front of us. It is quite embarrassing when doctor also gives least priority to us and ignore us saying that 'that is a transgender. Let them wait for some more time'. People should understand that we are also human beings in flesh and blood. We are not a subject matter of discussion. During earlier times the nurses were reluctant of touching us, but now a small change is there." Even though educated and holding many medical degrees health care professionals think that transgender people are much stigmatized even when delivering health care needs. This stigma from the educated and cultured group of the society was a great pain which made them resort to traditional treatment methods earlier.

"I was once admitted in a medical college hospital and the nurses gave me bed in female ward. The female patients and other bystanders made

comments at me and were staring at me. No nursing staff or doctor was there to have a follow up or for the rounds to see what is happening to me in the ward. I left the hospital without informing anyone. There was no enquiry from them as a patient was absconding from the ward. This might be because I, am a transgender. From that incident I hesitate to go to hospitals and even if I go I never wanted to get admitted anywhere." – Said Thushara (Name changed for privacy).

They said that the medical follow up and facilities and importance given to transgenders is very negligible and no one is cared about them. They prefer Hospitals where there is a special clinic for them and most of the doctors and nurses of such hospitals is much familiar, but it is not widely seen in Kerala and only a few government hospitals have this facility. They prefer to go to neighbouring districts where their acceptance or 'least bothered nature' of the public is seen the most. In other hospitals they have to wait in the queue for hours to see the doctor. The negative comments and eagles eye of the patients, bystanders and other hospital staff makes them so uncomfortable that they don't even take treatment from hospitals unknown to them. This also results in going to far known hospitals even though it is an emergency which results in worsening the condition. During the discussion they said that the Private hospitals do not have any kind of facility for the transgenders and many of the doctors are still confused of treating them. Many of them goes to the doctor in the Kerala State AIDS Control society (KSACS) where the doctors, nurses, counsellors and social workers does not have any stigma towards them and always behave in a friendly manner.

"Many of them think that we are born for doing sex work. Whenever we goes to a hospital people or the staff have a feeling that our disease is related to the sex work that we have done. I have once heard two nursing staff saying 'That is a transgender. We don't know after what work she came here. She might be going for some sex work after this hospital visit'. These words of professionals keeps us always away from the most wanted healthcare needs "– Said Mansiya (name changed for privacy). The real scenario of these people are pathetic that they understand that people sees them as an object doing sex work. They often hear these kinds of comments by the society and they are forced to cry deep in the heart because they are unable to prove themselves. A few of them says that "already society is seeing us

with the eye of a sex worker, then what is the problem in doing so”.

Results

The transgender's main need in a hospital is a transgender friendly clinic where they can enter without any stigma or hesitation. If a hospital cannot provide such a clinic they should be given priority and importance that they should not be kept in queue for long hours. It is not because they want to invade the space of a patient in front of them, but they don't want to be exposed as a matter of discussion while waiting for the doctor. The health care professionals should be given awareness and knowledge on transgender including doctors and nurses. Due to the difficulties faced most of the Transgenders are going to Mysore (city in the neighbouring state of Karnataka) for their cosmetic surgeries, hormonal treatments Sex Reassignment surgeries and other periodical checkups.

“It is after great fight and discussions and continuous follow ups a transgender friendly clinic was opened in Beach hospital (Government Hospital, Kozhikode, and Kerala). Earlier times I had to wait for more than 3 hours to see a doctor. Now I have empowered myself and at anytime I will take the outpatient card and will enter without waiting in the queue. I am a transgender and when I am made to wait in a queue with others, they get a chance to make fun of me. If they consider me as one among them then it is OK that I can maintain the queue system. It is my right to be treated equal or with priority and I work to protect the rights of my community. Such TG friendly clinics should be there in all hospitals and we should have a point of contact where we get proper advise and care in each hospitals “– words of transgender Activist Simi (Name changed).

The clinic in Beach Hospital, Calicut opens only once a week and many of them wait till that week day if they have any disease. A few dare to go to medical colleges or private hospitals in case of an emergency. Since no special ward is there for the transgenders, they are admitted along with other patients either in the male side or the female side which gives them mental pressure. The patient and bystanders of the same ward also don't accept them in their area. During the conversations it was found that the health care people are also confused a lot regarding 'how to treat them, how to behave with them, how to address them and fear of specific diseases that may be contacted through them'. The transgender

community is a population group that has experienced an increase in visibility, with only a small, concomitant increase in understanding. Transgendered and transsexual persons frequently encounter providers who will not treat them and blatantly say so. There is a need for education and a change in anti-discrimination law needed to change this.(6)

Discussion

It is very clear that Transgender persons suffer significant health disparities and they require medical intervention as part of their care. Counselling should be a part of their medical treatment. The biggest barrier to health care reported by transgender individuals is lack of access due to lack of providers who are sufficiently knowledgeable on the topic. Studies should include determination of the knowledge and biases of the existing medical work force – medical students, physician trainees, physicians in practice and other health care workers across the spectrum of training; the adequacy of sufficient providers for the care required, and the status of a framework to pay for appropriate care. There is a specific need to determine if providers receive adequate training in transgender medicine.(7-12) The actual awareness, motivation and equality of rights etc should not be necessarily given to them but the awareness should be given to the genders who even though hold high degree or social status shows such a big stigma and discrimination towards the transgenders. It is also noticed that there is great amount of disrespect shown towards them and the healthcare professionals are not using the pronouns to address them. Many of them lack the knowledge of continuity of care that should be provided to them, counseling aspects, and follow up patterns. The physical illness is always addressed in many cases but the real health (mental and physical) is often denied to them because there is a wide gap between the perceived physical health and what these transgenders really want. It was also found that they are in need of great mental healing than physical and if a healthcare professional is ready to hear them half of their illness is treated where the need of counseling and special TG cells in healthcare institutions find its value. Substance abuse, alcoholics also need a different kind of approach and treatment that pertains in depth to their actual problems and situations where the the healthcare

professionals need extensive training. The scenario in most of the healthcare institutions is different that these people always end up in distress situation.

If the society changes and if acceptance level is more and equality in terms of practice is more than in books 'normal' healthcare access will never be a dream for them.

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