

A Reason to Rejoice – The Empowerment of Transgender Women in Kerala

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Transgender women have always been considered as the third gender and are often marginalized in society. They are deprived of dignity and not given fair treatment by mainstream society because they cannot identify themselves in terms of gender. Gender non-confirmed persons or people who identify their gender role other than male or female have experienced many difficulties from times past and their social acceptance, status in the society and role has varied from one place to another and from one culture to another. The social stigma associated with them leads to a vicious circle of emotional and economic stress, as they are rejected by society and are unable to get a decent education or proper job. Several of these transgender individuals have managed to fight the challenges of society and have made a mark for themselves, inspiring the community as a whole. Such individuals have become the inspiration for others in their community and have made phenomenal achievements for the community by excelling in their respective careers. This paper deals with the challenges that these transgender women have faced, and how some of them have been able to overcome it.

Keywords: *Transgender women, LGBTQ, Self-empowerment, Social exclusion, Transgender policy*

I. INTRODUCTION

The term empowerment refers to self-strength and the inner power to overcome socio-cultural and political issues that an individual has to deal with. Empowerment is relevant both at the individual and group level. Thus empowerment can be simply defined as the expansion of an individual's freedom, choice, and action. However, the process of empowerment has been changing from one institution to another; in fact, processes are totally different at the individual and at the institutional levels. Economically backward individuals/groups who experience problems relating to health and education are identified to help them in overcoming their issues by getting connected through collective participation. But empowerment at the institutional level is difficult because members have to abide by certain rules and regulations. The element of empowerment has been broadly divided into four types: access to

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information, inclusion and participation, accountability, and local organizational capacity (Abhyankar, Sham, & Iyer, 2001: 1-12). Self-empowerment is different from collective action and the general meaning of self-empowerment deals with enhancing an individual's own life and setting goals with a view to achieving positive changes and making positive choices; and this simply means an understanding of one's strengths and weaknesses. A clear understanding about the process can help them to fight the negatives from society and fulfill their personal goals, thus empowering them in a positive way. Sexual minorities are empowered mainly through personal experiences and individual courage because they are usually victimized by mainstream society.

The term LGBTQ+ refers to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Queer and is considered as an umbrella term for representing the whole population of the so-called transgender. The common perception about sexual orientation, however, is totally different and most of the time it is seen as a mental issue. The term 'transgender' means a person who has a gender identity and expression totally different from their birth sex and so they try to live like the opposite gender. The transgender community is also known as the gender non-conforming group. Transgender is mainly divided into two types -male to female which means they are born as a male and but they like to live as a female, and vice versa. Some of the other terms are also interconnected and it is universally known as transsexual, cross-dresser, gender queer, femme queen, and Two Spirit (Herman, 2009 as cited in Sevelius et al., 2016: 1060-1075). Society is not ready to accept them as normal sexual orientation and considers it as against nature. The year 1974 has been remarkable for sexual minorities because the DSM-II (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) removed it from the list of mental health disorders. The studies started many years earlier to identify the causes of transgender identity and they are also trying to study the biological causes, especially the brain structure. Studies prove that the brain structure is similar in a transgender woman and a cisgender woman. However, some of the limitations of these studies are that they analyze a smaller population and then try to generalize the results (Saraswat, Weinand, & Safer, 2015: 199-204). A study was done in the field of identical and non-identical twins to follow if the chances of sexual orientation are similar. The researcher selects the respondents from the particular group based on the sexual orientation and included the minimum on twin respondents has the homosexual orientation. and the result found that 30% of identical twins are transgender people and they try to live with their own orientation (Diamond, 2013: 24-38).

The transgender community has been victimized in different ways and because of such issues, they try to hide their identity and also resort to committing suicide. The suicide rate among the transgender community is higher than the normal population. The National Transgender Discrimination Survey (NTDS, 2008) conducted by the

United States in the year 2008 included 6,450 transgender residents and dealt with their experiences of discrimination in different areas of their life such as employment, housing, health care, and education. It also addressed the issue of suicide attempts and other issues among the transgender women and gender nonconforming populations in the specified country. According to the report, the younger population has a higher rate of suicide and there is more victimization of transgender men than transgender women. The suicide rate is also very high among transgender men. The study also found that the community has faced victimization in schools (78%) and experienced rejection (57%) from parents and siblings. Such rejection and victimization are the leading causes of suicide. McIntosh and Drapeau, (2014), also confirmed that it is the youth that has been more victimized and 16.3% of the deaths among the population are within the age group of 15 to 24 years. Studies report that transgender persons experience multiple suicidal attempts in their life span. Goldblum et al., (2012: 468–475) in their comparative study on transgender men and transgender women in the United States have proved that transgender men experience more issues and are victimized through different forms of violence than transgender women.

A transgender woman or a male to female transgender is defined as an individual born as a male but whose self-identity is as female and who desires to live like a woman. Studies from different countries suggest that a majority of transgenders are engaged in sex work and begging because of social stigma and employment discrimination. This discrimination limits the opportunities for income generation and they face various challenges while surviving in the hetero-normative society, while also being denied of basic needs (Nemoto et al., 2006: 183-201; Sausa, Keatley, & Operario, 2007: 768-777). Mental health issues are very common in their life, and as a result of social stigma, exclusion, social isolation and alienation from the families, some transgenders face psychological issues relating to anxiety, depression and suicidal tendencies (Herbst et al., 2008: 1-17). Stigma and violence can lead to the transgender community becoming more vulnerable to discontinuing their education and ending up homeless at a younger age. Dropping out of school can negatively influence their employment and career, and most of the time they are rejected from the workplace. After this rejection, some of the transgenders turn to sex work for fulfilling their primary needs and some of them are dependent on substances to overcome or cope up with the issues experienced from the society and their own family (Bockting & Avery, 2006, as cited in Mayer, Grinsztejn, & El-Sadr, 2016: 207). Gender non-confirmed persons or people who identify their gender role other than male or female have experienced many difficulties from times past and their social acceptance, status in the society and role has varied from one place to another and from one culture to another (Gainor, 2000 as cited in Nemoto, Bodeker, & Iwamoto, 2011: 1980-1988).

Violence and attacks on transgenders are very common and a study in the US demonstrates that approximately two or more transgender individuals are murdered every month because they belong to the transgender community or they look like a transgender person (Jauk, 2013: 807-825). Compared to the victimization of violence of the general population, the violence against the transgender community is far more and the victimizing very brutal. A study of Grant et al., (2011) mention that most of the transgender respondents have been victimized in terms of verbal harassment in public places like restaurants, buses, hotels and government agencies.

In India, women have been fighting for equal rights in society through various movements, but society is still highly patriarchal. Even in recent times, the society considers women as secondary while the transgender community is considered as the third gender. Transgender women are also not free from issues in India and most of the time they are victimized because of their gender identity, in terms of physical and sexual attacks from the mainstream society, especially from heterosexual people. The situation is similar in most of the states, but Kerala has been the first state to introduce the transgender policy for the welfare of community members. However, they continue to face problems. There are theories connected to sexual minorities that try to prove the development of sexual identity and the other aspects connected to them. The field of LGBT psychology is a rapidly developing area and they follow different areas related to them like lifespan, experiences, and other connected factors. Richardson and Hart's (1981: 73-92) theory states that the development and maintenance of homosexual identity is the personal preference of the individuals and they follow their own choices.

Studies prove that transgender people have experienced exclusion from various institutional, social and political fields (Namaste, 2000; Chakrapani et al., 2007: 346-364). The traditional occupation prescribed for the transgender community in India (hijra) is also begging and sex work (Aaron, 2004: 41-67; NTDS, 2009; Chettiar, 2015: 752-759). They live in slums and feel insecure in the hetero-normative society (NTDS, 2009). This happens to be the common living conditions of the hijra community. There are very limited facilities available for the betterment of the transgender community, especially with regard to their psychological situation. The government has taken more initiatives for improving their situation but they are still in a marginalized position.

A recent report has highlighted that more than four transgender women had been brutally killed (The New Indian Express, 2019, April 2). Transgender youth face several psychological issues because they are in a confused stage and have gone through what is known as the 'coming out' process. The coming out process is a very complex and difficult time for an individual because they disclose their sexual identity in public and this leads to problems like rejection and violence from the mainstream society.

This rejection leads to less support and social stigma among the people and negatively influences their mental health situations (Chakrapani, 2010: 1-16). Most of the families are not ready to accept the gender identity of their children, especially when male children behave in what they consider a feminine manner. Sometimes the child or teenage transgender runs away from the home because of problems from the family itself. They also experience exclusion from health care providers in terms of denial of treatment being registered as male, usage of derogatory words, and passing of negative comments. The main cause of discrimination is because health care providers are not trained to handle sensitive issues and provide care for sexual minorities (Chakrapani, 2010: 1-16).

In Kerala, after the implementation of the Transgender Policy, the living conditions of the transgender community are undergoing changes and they are now getting more opportunities to live life on their own terms (Sheethal Syam, personal communication, August 15, 2019). In fact, many institutions try to include them in their programmes, but this attitude is not completely suitable for them. The transgender community in Kerala have never followed the lifestyle of the hijra community elsewhere in the state, but some of them try to follow the hierarchical order as it exists, such as a mother-daughter relationship and some rituals related to sex reassignment surgery, etc. (Syama S Prabha, personal communication, 20th September 2018). Transgenders in Kerala have also seen similar situations but the situation is changing because of the implications of the transgender policy and the transgender cell. It is a first time initiative by the Government of Kerala, under the social justice department to establish the transgender cell for the welfare of transgender persons. The positions are handled by the transgender community members and they have been trying to identify the beneficiaries in the community and introducing the welfare programmes for the transgender community.

II. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Sexual minorities are never free from problems, largely due to unawareness or minimal awareness about the community and a negative attitude from the general public. The available studies are very limited when it comes to the transgender community in Kerala and there are very minimal studies in the Indian context. Unawareness leads to different forms of physical and emotional attacks and this makes their life more vulnerable. Most of the studies in the area have predominantly focused on the common problems of transgender persons and these studies tend to focus only on psychological issues. But very few studies suggest practical implications for overcoming psychological issues in a transphobic society (Chakrapani, 2010:1-16; Chakrapani et al., 2017: 250-265; Ganju & Saggurti, 2017: 903-917; Jayadeva, 2017: 7-9).

The policies and other documents in Kerala have mentioned that the lack of health care facilities is an important issue experienced by transgender persons, especially when it comes to gender sensitive health care (Transgender Policy, 2015). Studies have proven the same findings; the unavailability of gender sensitive healthcare centres happens to be one of the main issues. Moreover, transgender persons experience transphobic attacks from health care practitioners and other supporting staff (Herbst et al., 2008: 1-17; Nemoto et al., 2006: 183-201). Further, they also experience physical, sexual and verbal violence from different agents like partners, family members, the police and strangers (Lombardi et al., 2002: 89-101; Clements-Nolle, Marx & Katz, 2006: 53-69; Burdge, 2007: 243-250).

The present study is an attempt to focus on the process of self-empowerment among successful transgenders in Kerala. Being a 'successful' transgender implies that they have achieved their goals in their field and that they contribute to the community in a positive way. A positive impact helps to improve the life of other community members and also helps to construct their own life in a way leading to success. The present paper tries to explain the process of empowerment through life experiences and the contributions of the transgender community.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study is qualitative in nature and the data is collected through an in-depth personal interview using an interview guide. The present study examines the experiences of select transgenders in Kerala, especially personal experiences from childhood up to the present, while also looking at the process of empowerment and the struggle and strategies applied in overcoming the issues experienced by mainstream society. The interviews were conducted among ten successful transgenders in Kerala. The researcher identified the respondents through the snowball sampling technique and has included respondents from all regions (Northern, Central and Southern) of Kerala state. The following inclusion criteria were followed (a) successful transgenders in their own field and whole-time residents of the state, (b) contribution to the LGBT community (c) readiness to participate in the study and disclose their identity, and (d) readiness to work for the betterment of their community. The study mainly focused on self-empowered and successful persons who have come up because of their own hard work. The interview was semi-structured in nature and provided more freedom to the respondents to discuss their ideas. The respondents participated voluntarily and no financial assistance was offered.

The collected data was analysed thematically and the researcher prepared a code book after the data collection. This helped the researcher to easily identify the experiences of transgender people with the mainstream society and to know more

about the process of empowerment. The study mainly focused on a limited number of respondents, most of whom live in different areas in Kerala and follow different ideologies. Therefore, the uniformity of the data is relatively less and the sample size is very small.

IV. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The present study has tried to understand the issues and the process of self-empowerment among transgenders in Kerala, India. The researcher presents the data under these themes and it emerged through the analysis process. The themes are (a) experience from social institutions (b) process of empowerment (c) strategies applied to overcome the issues (d) contribution to the transgender community.

The socio-demographic profile focuses on basic details of the respondents like age, educational qualification, and monthly income. A majority of the transgenders included in the study are from the age group of 30-40 and the education level varies from high school to post-graduation. All the transgender respondents are members of community based organizations in different places in Kerala. They try to connect with other community members and are attempting to reduce the issues experienced from the mainstream society. A majority of them earn between Rs.10000 and 20000 per month.

Experiences from Social Institutions

Most of the transgenders have spoken about their experiences in social institutions especially from childhood onwards. Based on the interview, the researcher identified the following institutions such as the family, educational institutions and the workplace. The experience is totally different from one institution to another and the depth of the impact also varies among the different institutions. As stated by a 22-year-old transgender in the southern part of Kerala, "the transgender community is experiencing different types of issues from all institutions mainly from the family and mainstream society. Most of the issues have very negatively influenced their mental health condition and victimizes them through physical and sexual violence too". The impact of the issues is totally different from one region to another because some of the districts have strong support groups and they help in overcoming issues connected to sexual orientation. A 35-year-old transgender in north Kerala says that she often faces issues from older community leaders in her region because of their fear of losing opportunities and she fights for "equality in our group".

Family

The family is the first institution that provides basic support to an individual. But transgender women have been experiencing several issues from within the family

itself. Right from the beginning, most of the family members are totally against them. At present, however, some of the families are accepting their children with their own orientation. Unawareness happens to be one of the major reasons why issues are created as most of the families have some false beliefs related to the transgender community. "The awareness about my community is very less and they think that homosexuality is a mental health issue and some of the religious institutions also promote the negative information", says a 22-year-old transgender from south Kerala. In the analysis, the researcher tries to know more about the issues arising within the family and relatives. The first sexual experience may be from the family members and most of the respondents also experience sexual attacks from family members. For instance,

"The first sexual abuse occurred at home at a very young age, it caused a lot of mental pain" (24-year-old transgender from south Kerala).

"Most of the time my uncle is forcing to touch his penis and...." (36-year-old transgender from central Kerala).

Right from childhood, transgender people experience physical and verbal violence from family members because of their gender identity and physical features. They wear female clothes (the society mentions the dress code of females) to fulfill their emotions. Most of them wear these clothes confidentially or in the absence of family members.

A 22-year-old transgender woman in south Kerala says that she *"found happiness when I took my sister's dress when no one was at home, dressed like a woman and stood in front of the mirror"*.

The family members are totally against a transgender wearing female clothes. During childhood, the family supports it because they think that it is a 'funny' activity of the child. As the age increases, issues begin to emerge and most of the family members coerce these individuals to change their interest and to consult mental health professionals. According to one transgender, "When I was fourteen, my brother's friend commented that my physical features were like that of a female and I was more feminine. It negatively influenced my family and they forced me to consult a mental health professional".

Some of the religious institutions also give false promises and negative information about the LGBT community. Most of the families believe that homosexual orientation is totally against nature and they force their children to follow a heterosexual relationship. The attitude has been slowly changing and some of the families are ready to accept them with their own gender identity. "Now, I live with my family as their daughter", says a 36-year-old transgender woman from central Kerala.

Educational Institutions

While the identity crisis starts from childhood itself, it continues in educational institutions because transgender individuals are faced with people avoiding them as well as having to listen to negative comments at the institution. Most of the time they act like a male in front of the friends circle as a coping strategy to overcome issues.

A 37-year-old transgender woman from south Kerala says that they often break away from school groups in order to forget their own femininity, but as they grow up, the playing field increases. Teachers and other officials in educational institutions create a lot of problems, often making fun of them and using them to satisfy their sexual needs. The depth of these issues increases from high school onwards because sexual attraction starts from this time and sexual education begins during adolescence. A 34-year-old transgender woman in central Kerala says that she had to give up studies at a young age as the experience at school was very bad.

Based on the issues, most of the transgender community members discontinue their education during high school or even before that. The transgender policy of Kerala (2015) has also confirmed that most transgender women have experienced these issues in educational institutions and it has negatively influenced their mental health, often forcing them to discontinue their education even before high school. Very few of them continued their education and have often been victimized on issues like negligence and sexual exploitation. A 24-year-old transgender woman in south Kerala said that "...Until the 10th standard, there were no problems in life, but after that, from 12th standard she suffered because from negligence, oppression, and sexual exploitation".

But the present society is trying to accept transgender women and provide more chances to improve their education. The government has also been providing more opportunities like seat reservation in all arts and science colleges at the graduation level. The Saksharatha Mission (Literacy Campaign) has provided the opportunity to continue their education and provides separate batches for transgender people. Some believe that the education system has not provided enough information about sexual minorities and most of the time they gather negative responses from these places. According to a 36-year-old transgender woman in southern Kerala, she "*studied in a boys school, and most of the time they used abusive words to represent her feminine attire and make more negative comments*".

Workplace

The workplace is the second home of an individual because they spend most of the time in their workplace. The transgender community is also not free from exploitation at the workplace and most of them get victimized. But in the present study, most of

the respondents have received positive responses from their workplace. A 32-year-old transgender woman in south Kerala talks about her experience working at a fancy shop where she worked for the first time. She said, “I considered myself as a girl and behaved like that. That was the first place in my life where I got positive support”.

Transgender individuals also go through negative experiences when it comes to work. Some years back, they were never able to get any job and most of them were begging or engaging in sex work for fulfilling their daily needs. A 24-year-old transgender woman in southern Kerala stated that she “became a woman at the age of 20. And for that I have done almost everything including sex work and begging”. But the situation is changing drastically now, as more and more industries have opened their doors to provide better placement for transgenders.

Social Factors

The current social situation is not very favorable for the survival and development of the transgender community, but a gradual positive change can be witnessed. Society is not ready to accept them as normal people because of societal norms established long ago, according to which there are only two possibilities - male or female. The transgender is always absent, and only heterosexual relationships and partners are accepted. Though the transgender community has all the rights to lead a normal life in society, they have to fight constantly to overcome social stigma and discrimination. A study conducted by the HRC Foundation in 2012 shows that 10% of the respondents belong to the transgender community and some of them have mentioned that they are genderqueer or gender fluid.

Society has an important role to play when it comes to dealing with different issues in the life of transgender people. The attitude towards the community is changing gradually because the government has implemented many programmes for improving their life. The major challenges they come across are:

Lack of Legal Protection– The community members who have been victimized have no non-discrimination laws to overcome or reduce these issues. The education and other departments have been offering them support and trying to provide them with better opportunities to continue their education with the common people. In Kerala, the transgender cell has initiated the process of providing more services for this community by implementing new programmes like safe shelter, scholarship for students, and other skill developments.

Anti-Transgender Violence– Based on the recent crime reports from Kerala, transgenders are being brutally killed because of their gender identity and they have to face the physical and mental harassment from mainstream society on a daily basis. According to National Transgender Discrimination Survey (2011) report, 22% of

transgender people have experienced violence and harassment from police officers, 20% of them had been denied service equal to the common people and 2% of them had been victimized by sexual assault. The survey report clearly indicates that 50% of the transgender people are not satisfied with the service support that they get from of police department.

Barriers to Access the Public Places– The community has been denied access to certain public areas because of the negative attitude towards it, and the general public are not ready to accept them as normal people. A majority of the public places are not transgender-friendly, and usually, toilets and other public assets are not usable for them. They also experience discrimination at hospitals and community health centers. Most of the time, they face verbal harassment from health care practitioners and supporting staff due to a lack of awareness about the community. But the situation is changing, and the Government has started transgender clinics for improving their health condition. A 30-year-old transgender woman respondent stated that she was victimized through “verbal harassment from police officers and they have tried to create many issues in my life. That has negatively influenced my psychological condition”.

This is not a single incident but something that most of the transgender community has gone through because of the common attitude of the people who think that they are sex workers or are responsible for creating anti-social issues. This has a serious impact on their psychological as well as physical conditions.

A 35-year-old transgender woman stated that “one day I went to town from my sister’s home, three men followed me on a bike and forced me to have sex with them. Suddenly, I showed them my media person ID card. That affected my mind very negatively”. This common attitude of the general public is totally against the community and has been adding further trouble to their daily life.

Process of Empowerment

Empowerment is a very long process, especially for a person who belongs to the LGBT community. But at present, there are many successful transgender women in Kerala who have fought for their rights and achieved it. The process of self-empowerment is very difficult because most of the time they are denied their basic rights with respect to gender identity. Some of these transgender women achieved their goals in their own field and this has helped them to empower the community members and overcome issues. Some of the transgender women have waited for years to achieve their goals or for gaining acceptance.

The process of empowerment has been classified into three subcategories namely, the beginning stage, the learning stage, and the action stage. In the beginning stage,

these people try to identify their gender identity and work on confirming the process; in the learning stage, they try to accept their identity and try to learn more about their profession. In the action phase (which is the final stage), they achieve their dreams and make their name in the profession. The respondents are from different fields like education, media, modelling, film field, activism, politics, and other similar areas.

Beginning

The beginning stage is the most difficult and most crucial stage for sexual minorities because they are not very aware of their community or even their own identity. Most of the time it becomes challenging, especially because of a non-readiness to accept their feminine attires. According to a respondent, a 22-year-old transgender woman in south Kerala, "At the beginning, my identity had hurt me, but my life's success has been to fully understand it". The beginning stage is a stage of identity crisis and simply known as 'coming out'. Most transgender persons are discontinue their education and they are not very aware of the importance of education. A 32-year-old transgender woman in north Kerala feels that education will help the community to live in society without violence because they respect the position of these individuals and help to improve the acceptance level.

Political participation started only a few years back and the representation for transgenders has been very minimal because identity-related harassment from political leaders and members is very high. Now political leaders are ready to accept the transgender community and provide them with a membership with their own identity. Some transgender women are totally confused when they disclose their identity and most of the time they keep it very confidential. This identity confirmation process is a sign that the self-empowerment process has started. Transgender women have experienced issues from outside and inside the community because the visibility among the community started only very recently.

A 36-year-old transgender woman respondent in central Kerala states that "when my partner and I appeared in TV shows, most of the people who stood against it were those who belonged to my community. They discriminated against me claiming that I have destroyed their freedom." Such an attitude shows that these transgender individuals are growing in a transphobic society where there is both victimizing of and violence on these individuals from the mainstream society in terms of physical and sexual harassment. Society considers homosexual orientation as a mental health disorder and thus such people experience more attacks from society.

A 32-year-old transgender woman from north Kerala says that there have been times when she was unable to find a home to live in or to find a job because of her identity and that she had even been harassed in front of the public several times.

Physical attacks are experienced many times; however, both the media and the police do not address these issues and most of the time the community members get caught in these allegations. The older transgender people also have been victimized because of these issues, but the condition is slowly changing. A 32-year-old transgender woman in north Kerala also speaks of the challenge of having to *“open my identity in a society that saw homosexuality as a mental illness.”* She adds that many times, *“I experienced a physical attack from the general public very brutally and I ran away to Bangalore along with my partner”*. In the beginning phase, these people try to find out ways to survive in a hetero-normative society. Based on that, some of them choose begging, sex work, or some other skilled jobs. Very few of the transgender women continue their life this way along with education. Another 24-year-old transgender woman in south Kerala says she believes that education has helped her to improve her life situation. But at the same time, she is forced to go begging and do other things to survive in society.

Learning

The learning phase is an advanced stage because these individuals face more issues in the beginning phase and try to adopt better-coping strategies to overcome the issues. Most of them are confirmed with their gender identity and decided to continue life with a transgender identity. A 30-year-old transgender respondent from the central part of Kerala says that speaking on behalf of the community at many venues has helped to increase the visibility of the transgender community to some extent.

After the confirmation, transgendered people struggle to survive because most of the time they experience rejection from educational institutions, workplaces and other areas in mainstream society. This experience has helped the individuals to fight for and achieve their primary goals. But according to a 24-year-old transgender woman in south Kerala, the general public still has the perception that transgenders are sex workers, and this attitude works detrimentally for them. Some of the respondents continue their education and some of them concentrate on their work. A 22-year-old transgender woman in south Kerala who has just been admitted to a government institution for continuing her post-graduation feels that it would help her to improve her confidence level and fight for her future. The learning phase also helps them to identify their field of interest and try to achieve the goals. At the same time, they have more opportunities to interact with the general public and learn new things from that group, which could help to identify the personal difficulties and strengths through personal interactions.

Action

The action phase in the self-empowered phase implies that they have to achieve their goal in their own field of interest. Some of the respondents have achieved their goal in

the political field and made several changes in it. A 22-year-old transgender woman in the southern part of Kerala says that she is a member of the State Committee of a major party and the first transgender member in India. This has helped provide more visibility to the community and inspired others to join together in accepting them without any differences. In fact, most of them have achieved their best and are role models for the whole community.

A 36-year-old transgender woman in south Kerala says that she was the first legally married transgender woman in India. After that, more than 10 marriages have been registered. "I was the one who started that also", she says. Another 36-year-old respondent says that she was the first person to vote with a transgender identity in Kerala. Since then, more than 2000 transgender members have voted in the recent parliament election with their own identity. Some of them regularly speak about the issues of the community for better acceptance and it gives them more confidence in terms of being more visible in the community and trying to achieve their goals.

Visibility can be increased with team based activities of the community members and some of the Community Based Organizations are trying to improve the life of community members as a whole, while the Government has simultaneously implemented many programmes for the transgender community to live without any issues from mainstream society. They received this benefit through the constant and collective effort of the community leaders.

V. CONTRIBUTION TO TRANSGENDER COMMUNITY

There are a very limited number of role models in the transgender community, but in spite of this, some of them have been successful in their career. The successful transgender community members have contributed remarkably to different services and have gained more acceptance in the whole community through their systematic efforts.

A 38-year-old transgender woman in central Kerala proudly states: "...I am the one who formed a first Community Based Organization in Kerala. Now I am so proud of it because many community members are following it and have formed new organizations in different parts of Kerala. I'm happy that there are more people coming from inside and outside the group to support the community". This respondent has further stated that other than the transgender communities, a lot of girls say that they are following in her footsteps. This respondent's empowerment initiative has helped them to address the issues. Visibility is another important change happening in the life of the community and some of them are trying to wear female clothes and talking about their basic rights. This respondent is happy that she has been able to find her own space in society through her efforts and that almost everyone in Kerala recognises

her. And that means a lot to the transgender community. The initiative can contribute more opportunities to live without exclusion from the general public while also trying to remove the stigma related to that. In Kerala, the transgender theatre group was also established with an initiative of a transgender woman and she is trying to empower other community members through practical level programmes.

CONCLUSION

Self-empowerment is a continuous and difficult process for transgender women because of low acceptance and visibility in the past, but the situation has been changing positively. The empowerment process needs to be started from childhood as the issues begin from there. A change in the negative attitude of society can help them in improving their decision making and also help them adopt better strategies to cope up with the negative circumstances experienced by a heteronormative society. The social environment is the most important cause of their life being so vulnerable. While some have overcome these circumstances, most of them are living in a situation where they have to hide their gender identity. Social situations are changing, with the acceptance of the transgender community and a higher number of initiatives and policies being available for them. Successful transgender respondents experience both situations, one which is transphobic and the other which is acceptance. Based on the situations, they try to empower themselves. The life stories and experiences of these individuals are more helpful to the community in overcoming their issues and in guiding their life in a successful way. In the present times, the acceptance of transgenders is increasing and more members are openly revealing their gender identity and living life on their own interests and terms. Let us open the doors and stand with them for a better future. The recent Transgender Act, 2019 is expected to bring about an enabling environment for transgender persons in Indian society. It is an act to protect the rights of transgender persons and their welfare in our country. The bill was passed on 5th August 2019 by the Lok Sabha and it is also sanctioned by the Rajya Sabha on 26th November 2019. The LGBT community is considered a minority group and experiences different forms of issues connected to their sexual orientation. The Act defines a Transgender as “a person whose gender does not match with the gender assigned at birth and includes trans-men/women, person with intersex variations, genderqueer and person having socio-cultural identities such as *kinner*, *hijra*, *aravani* and *jogta*”. The Act recognises the identity of transgender persons and the scope for application and issue of certificates for their identity. The community welcomed the measures introduced in the act - welfare measures to protect the right and interests of Transgender, the introduction of welfare schemes which are transgender sensitive, non-stigmatising, and non-sensitive. To address the rescue, protection and rehabilitation needs of transgenders, appropriate government authorities are assigned. Moreover, the act also includes

welfare measures to promote and protect the rights of Transgenders to participate in cultural and recreational activities. Provisions regarding education, security, and health care of Transgenders, and formation of national council for Transgenders, to advise, monitor and evaluate, review and coordinate activities and welfare programmes for the transgenders are also inculcated in the landmark act.

Acknowledgement

The researcher has special thanks to the respondents of transgender women in Kerala.

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